

Article

What Is Global Laozegetics?: Origins, Contents, and Significance

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Abstract: Mainstream scholarship on the *Laozi* or *Daodejing* generally focuses on the “original” text and its “original” meaning. However, the Chinese study of *Laoxue* 老學 (translated here with the author’s neologism “Laozegetics”) offers a valuable alternative, as it shifts focus to the hermeneutical and historical value of the 2185 Chinese, 430 Japanese, and 91 Korean relevant interpretations and commentaries on the classic. The inclusive perspective of Laozegetics has further inspired the author’s creation of the term “Global Laozegetics.” This even broader topic assumes both *Laozi* commentaries and translations (all 2051 in 97 languages) belong within a single field of research. To better introduce the study of Global Laozegetics to an English-language readership, this article will explore the history of the term *Laoxue*, review contemporary related research, and present the content and significance of applying the notion of Laozegetics to the globalized *Laozi*.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; global philosophy; *Laozi*; *Daodejing*; exegetics; translation; commentary



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1. Introduction

The Daoist classic *Laozi* or *Daodejing* is written in a pithy, confounding, and abstract style. This type of language, along with the text’s broad cosmological, political, and self-cultivational content, makes it especially open to dynamic exegesis and interpretation. As a result, throughout Chinese history it has accrued a massive assortment of commentaries. Additionally, the *Laozi* has been translated over two thousand times, a phenomenon which reveals an even greater variety of ways to understand this classic.

Scholarship on the *Laozi* is plentiful as well. Yet, mainstream research generally focuses on identifying the one “correct” understanding of this work, with little recognition of its rich exegetical history. All that matters is the “original” text and its “original” meaning. However, the Chinese study of *Laoxue* 老學 (translated here with the author’s neologism “Laozegetics”) offers a valuable alternative, as it shifts focus to the hermeneutical and historical value of the numerous commentaries on the classic. The inclusive perspective of Laozegetics has further inspired the author’s creation of the term “Global Laozegetics” (Tadd 2022). This even broader topic situates all ways of interpreting the *Laozi* in Chinese and in translation as a single research object. To better introduce the study of Global Laozegetics to the Anglophone reader, this article will explore the history of the term *Laoxue*, review contemporary related research, and present the content and significance of applying the notion of Laozegetics to the globalized *Laozi*.

2. What Is Laozegetics?

To understand Laozegetics, we must offer the first general investigation of the history and usage of *Laoxue*. This is particularly needed, as this Chinese original has been barely discussed by English-language scholars. Basically, there was once a brief mention by Alan Chan (1998, p. 105), and more recently Thomas Michael has used it as a tool to incorporate the realms of philosophy and sinology (2021). Linguistic nuance in this account is especially required, as *Laoxue*’s meaning can be ambiguous. “*Lao*” might refer to Laozi the person or the *Laozi* text, while the particularly challenging word *xue* 學 has been glossed in this

compound by Chinese scholars variously as *xuexi* 學習 (study), *xueshuo* 學說 (doctrine), *xuepai* 學派 (school of thought), *xuewen* 學問 (knowledge, learning, scholarship), or *xueke* 學科 (discipline, field of study). So, theoretically, *Laoxue* could mean the study of, doctrine of, school of, knowledge of, or field of study of Laozi the person or *Laozi* the text. To clarify the usage of this term, the following will review the assorted ways *Laoxue* has been employed in Chinese during its two main periods of popularity. This will then lead to a discussion of why I translate it as Laozegetics.

2.1. Early Ideas of *Laoxue*

The first tentative discussions on *Laoxue* appeared in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Alan Chan has suggested that the earliest instance originated with Yang Shuda 楊樹達 in 1924 (Chan 1998, p. 105), but there are some complications to this attribution. Yang's *Laozi guyi* 老子古義 (The Ancient Meaning of the *Laozi*) includes a chapter "Handai Lao xuezhe kao" 漢代老學者考 (An Examination of Han Dynasty Scholars of Laozi). It is important to note that the title could also be translated as "An Examination of Han Dynasty *Laoxue* Figures," if one instead parses the characters as "Handai *Laoxue* zhe kao." Chan, I assume, follows this latter reading because nowhere else in the chapter does the compound *Laoxue* appear.

Yang's very terse introduction provides hints to his intended meaning. There, he notes that "In the Han era, the study/knowledge of Laozi (*Laozi zhi xue* 老子之學) flourished," and he further explains that his list contains the Han people mentioned in the histories who "study the *Laozi*" (*xi Laozi* 習老子) or are "fans of its techniques" (*hao qi shu* 好其術) (Yang [1924] 1991, p. 104).¹ These two statements offer different solutions to the troublesome word *xue* in the expressions *Lao xue zhe* and *Laozi zhi xue*. "Study (*xi*) the *Laozi*" suggests that *xue* should be understood as *xuexi* (study), while "fans of its techniques" implies the *xue* of Laozi might also be a kind to *xuewen* (knowledge). So, which is it? Depending on the answer, one can parse Yang's title as *Laoxue zhe* or *Lao xuezhe*. If it is the former, he is the first to use the compound *Laoxue* and conceives of it as the knowledge of Laozi; if it is the latter, he cannot be properly credited with the term but at least initiates the investigation into the history of the study of the *Laozi*.

Chen Zhu 陳柱, a few years later, liberally and unambiguously employs the compound *Laoxue* in his 1928 book *Laoxue bapian* 老學八篇 (Eight Essays on *Laoxue*). His preface specifies his topic as *Laozi zhi xue*. Here, the expression, in contrast to Yang's uncertain usage, is introduced in parallel to *ziyou pingdeng zhi xueshuo* 自由平等之學說 (the doctrine of liberty and equality), thereby confirming *Laoxue* as *Laozi xueshuo* 老子學說 (the doctrine of Laozi) (Chen 1928, p. 1). While Chen takes the troublesome *xue* as *xueshuo* (doctrine) instead of *xuexi* (study) or *xuewen* (learning), it is important to further identify his sense of "doctrine." In his book, Chen first explains the *Laoxue* of Laozi but then expands his scope in three essays on the *Laoxue* of Zhuangzi, the *Laoxue* of Hanfeizi, and a comparison of these two. What does it mean for other pre-Qin "Masters" to have their own *Laoxue*? Surely, the term in this context cannot simply mean "the doctrines of Laozi."

Chen presents the *Laoxue* of these two later pre-Qin masters quite differently. In his view, Zhuangzi's *Laoxue* did not overturn Laozi's theories but filled in their blanks (Chen 1928, p. 88). To achieve this, Zhuangzi used many literary techniques engaging both Laozi the person and Laozi's ideas to develop and adapt a related cosmology, politics, and life philosophy (ibid., pp. 81–88). The result was that "[Zhuangzi] unleashed the doctrines of Laozi incisively at many points . . . exceeding Laozi." From Chen's perspective, Zhuangzi's *Laoxue* stayed close to its origins, while expanding and expressing the ideas in new ways.

Hanfeizi's *Laoxue* manifested quite differently, though more explicitly in his "Jie Lao" 解老 and "Yu Lao" 喻老 chapters. Chen asserts that Hanfeizi did not just simply build on Laozi's ideas but, due to various historical and environmental factors, instead employed them in a cruel fashion "contrary to Laozi's compassion." Chen explains, "In regard to Hanfeizi's *Laoxue*, although he was certainly able to realize its essence, he was born at the end of the Warring States . . . He observed that the survival of a state completely relies on

power” (1928, p. 92). Hanfeizi’s *Laoxue* was a product of its time, a new theory that both emerged from and in opposition to the *Laozi*.

These two contrasting approaches, one developing Laozi’s philosophy and one contorting it, are both called *Laoxue*. Chen clarifies this possible contradiction by saying:

Concerning Laozi’s theories, the two thinkers Zhuangzi and Hanfeizi each upholds a general understanding of one extreme. Thus, they both attack benevolence and righteousness. Zhuangzi only desires to achieve doing nothing, while Hanfeizi only desires to achieve [the state of having] nothing that he will not do. Both abandon sageliness and discard wisdom. (ibid., p. 117)

Chen’s work inaugurates a more developed concept of *Laoxue* that does not merely signify the “doctrines of Laozi,” “the study of the *Laozi*,” or “knowledge of the *Laozi*” but relates to the historical development of and engagement with the person Laozi and his doctrines by later thinkers.

Following two similar works by Chen Zhu and Liu Qixuan 劉其宣 in the early 1930s,² few mentions of *Laoxue* appeared during the mid-twentieth century, with the main exception being Wang Ming’s 王明 1948 *Laozi Heshanggong zhangju kao* 老子河上公章句考 (An Examination of *Heshanggong’s Commentary on the Laozi*). Wang describes the early *Laozi* commentarial tradition by explaining, “From the beginning the commentaries each followed the prevailing trend of their age, transmitting the words of one school” (Wang 1948, p. 1). With this in mind, he proposes that “three phases of *Laoxue*” (*Laoxue sanbian* 老學三變) occurred during the Two Han dynasties and the Three Kingdoms and employs this framework to place *Heshanggong* in the Eastern Han cultural context. Wang’s use of *Laoxue* comes closer to its contemporary sense, as a shorthand for the transformation of the “doctrine of Laozi” by commentarial authors. Wang Ming’s work was a rare engagement with *Laoxue* in this period, and it took almost forty years for *Laoxue* to reenter academic discussion.

2.2. Recent Conceptions of *Laoxue*

The second period of *Laoxue* research started in the late 1980s and early 1990s and continues into the present. With this resurgence, *Laoxue* became further developed and focused. It started with simple articulations such as Zhang Yunyi’s 张允熠 discussion of the place of *Laoxue* (meaning Laozi’s doctrine) in Chinese history (Zhang 1985) and Zhang Zhiyan’s 张智彦 examination of the original *Laoxue* (Zhang 1987). Zhang Zhiyan especially stresses the benefits of using the term *Laoxue* instead of the more common *Daojia* 道家 (Daoism) by saying, “Actually, *Daojia* is a name that emerges in the Western Han dynasty, and its meaning is much broader than *Laoxue*. When one researches the thought of Laozi the person and *Laozi* the book, calling it *Laoxue* seems more precise” (1987, p. 36). Zhang is basically proposing *Laoxue* as a term for what some in English call “Laoism” (See Graham 1990, pp. 118, 124; LaFargue 1992). Both Zhang Yunyi’s and Zhang Zhiyan’s visions of *Laoxue* remain more limited than Yang Shuda’s, Chen Zhu’s, or Wang Ming’s, as the earlier scholars imagine *Laoxue* relating to later transformations of or engagements with the doctrines of Laozi instead of simply an original philosophy.

In the mid-1980s, one other study by Qing Xitai 卿希泰 and Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗³ engaged *Laoxue* in a fashion that presaged important developments in the 1990s when a group of scholars including Zhu Bokun 朱伯崑, Tang Yijie 汤一介, Zhong Zhaopeng 钟肇鹏, and Xiong Tieji 熊铁基 started developing the topic at conferences (Liu 2015, p. 126). In Qing’s and Zhan’s article, they discuss the *Laoxue* of the priest Li Daochun 李道纯 (fl. 1280–1290), portraying it as a meaningful component of religious Daoist philosophy that emerged from his interpretation of the *Laozi*. In addition, they mention the *Laoxue* of commentaries such as Bai Yuchan’s 白玉蟾 *Daode baozhang* 道德寶章 (Precious Chapters on Dao and De) (Qing and Zhan 1986, pp. 111–112). Throughout the article, they never define *Laoxue*, which they place in scare quotes, but one can surmise their vague sense of *Laoxue* extends beyond *xueshuo* (doctrine) towards the broader sense of *xuepai* (tradition).

A clearer articulation of *Laoxue*, closer to the form and meaning commonly seen today, finally comes from Zhu Bokun. In his 1993 article “Chongxin pinggu Laoxue” 重新评估老学 (Reevaluating *Laoxue*), he pointedly redefines the term:

If we can say that historical research on the doctrine of Confucius is called *Ruxue* 儒學, then we similarly have reason to say that historical research on the doctrine of Laozi can be called *Laoxue*. As with the transmission of the Confucian *jingxue* 經學 (exegetics of the classics), [*Laoxue*] has already become a form of specialized knowledge (*xuewen*) and an independent field of study (*xueke*). The commentaries and analyses of historical scholars concerning the *Laozi* each reveal characteristics of their historical periods. They reflect [both] how the people of their age understood Laozi and the spiritual outlook of that age. (Zhu 1993, p. 16)

By situating *Laoxue* as equivalent to *Ruxue* and *jingxue*, Zhu accomplishes two goals. First, he elevates *Laoxue* to equal its Confucian equivalent as a core Chinese tradition of research. Second, he confirms it as both *xuewen* (knowledge) and *xueke* (a field of study). Together these two moves present a valuable vision of *Laoxue*.

Zhu elsewhere articulates the significance of studying *Laoxue*, here understood as the inclusive corpus of commentaries on the *Laozi*:

There are two reasons to summarize [historical interpretations]. The first is to identify the historical and logical development process of *Laoxue* so that we can understand the historical status of *Laoxue* and its impact on Chinese culture. The second is to assist in understanding the original thought of the *Laozi*. By clearing away the later interpretations of Laozi, we can correct its form and purify its origins. In conclusion, we cannot solely study Laozi or take Laozi’s book to study Laozi. We should position Laozi’s thought within the historical process of its formation and development to understand Laozi’s value. Even if later commentaries do not accord with Laozi’s original meaning, we should not reject them because they have their own value in that they reflect different periods in the development of *Laoxue*. (Zhu 1993, p. 16)

Both of Zhu’s points are valid, though the first especially deserves praise. Too often scholars seek the essence of Chinese culture in classics such as the *Laozi*, believing that to understand the original meaning of such a work will unlock its mysteries. Aside from the immense challenge of reaching the true historical object, after peeling away the layers of interpretation as Zhu suggests, any supposed original meaning tells us little about the actual impact a classic has made. To understand the *Laozi* and its significance in Chinese culture, one must study how the classic has been understood and reimagined throughout its history. And to be clear, the history of *Laozi* exegesis reveals interpretations far beyond any narrow meaning the text might have had in the pre-Qin period.

In the conclusion to his article, Zhu expresses his hope that someone will write the history of *Laoxue*, it being at that time a major lacuna in contrast to the well-studied history of *Ruxue* 儒學 (Zhu 1993, pp. 16–17). Just two years later, Zhu’s wish was fulfilled when *Zhongguo Laoxue shi* 中国老学史 (The History of Chinese *Laoxue*) was published. That project, headed by Xiong Tieji 熊铁基 and supported by Lianghuai 马良怀 and Liu Shaojun 刘韶军, can be credited with formally establishing the current field of *Laoxue* studies that has grown in the last few decades.

At various points in that work, Xiong provides different glimpses of his multifaceted definition of *Laoxue*. In the intro, he notes the lack of “a monograph describing the history of the development of Laozi’s doctrine (*xueshuo*)” (Xiong et al. 1995, p. 1), implying that this is the gap the book will fill. He further describes his topic, saying: “People have investigated, researched, written commentaries, and elucidated [the *Laozi*] from different perspectives. In this way, they have formed a vast and long-lasting academic school (*liupai*), and simultaneously have created part of the history of Laozi’s doctrine (*xueshuo*)” (ibid.). The start of chapter two “The Early Beginnings of *Laoxue*” also includes the statement, “Research conducted on the *Laozi* first began during the Warring States” (ibid., p. 63). This

suggests that *Laoxue* is equivalent to research on the *Laozi*. Lastly, in the “Conclusion,” Xiong presents the term more broadly, “*Laoxue* is a thought system (*sixiang tixi* 思想體系) built on the foundation of Laozi’s thought. Its content is very rich, including views on topics such as philosophy, politics, human life, nature, and society” (ibid., p. 518). To summarize, Xiong’s *Laoxue* is a doctrine, the study of that doctrine, a school of thought based on the study of that doctrine, and the resulting wide-ranging system of thought.

Though this polysemous understanding might leave some uncertainty about the concrete meaning of *Laoxue*, the content of the book affirms *Laoxue* as the totality of commentaries on the *Laozi*. It is an inclusive vision that does not favor one meaning for the classic. To support this idea of a pluralistic *Laozi* tradition, Xiong cites the Daoist priest Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318):

The Way descends into each age and varies with the times. Commentators mostly follow what is fashionable in their era with each master teaching from their own perspective. Thus, the Han dynasty commentators produced the Han *Laozi*, the Jin dynasty commentators produced the Jin *Laozi*, and the Tang and Song dynasty commentators produced the Tang *Laozi* and Song *Laozi*.

道與世降，時有不同，注者多隨時代所尚，各子其成心而師之。故漢人注者為漢老子，晉人注者為晉老子，唐人宋人注者為唐老子宋老子。(Xiong et al. 1995, p. 1)⁴

This quote depicts the fundamental view of *Laoxue*. Moreover, it confirms that the Chinese traditionally celebrated the plurality of *Laozi*’s meaning in contrast to contemporary fixations on the true “original.” Even for a Daoist devotee such as Du Daojian, the *Laozi* does not exist in eternal unchanging perfection but adapts to the ever-transforming needs of the people. As a result, no singular “authentic” Chinese *Laozi* exists.

The History of Chinese Laoxue represents the proper emergence of *Laoxue* as a topic of study in contemporary Chinese scholarship, and the term *Laoxue* has become common in academic usage. It is even to where Xiong’s student Liu Gusheng 劉固盛 could write a reflection on the state of the field in 2015. In his “Zhongguo Laoxue yanjiu de huigu yu zhanwang” 中国老学研究的回顾与展望 (Reflections on the Past and Future of Chinese *Laoxue* Research), Liu offers one of the clearest definitions of the term: “In this article, what we mean by *Laoxue* is the knowledge (*xuewen*) formed by historical persons’ interpretations and developments of the *Laozi*” (2015, p. 126). For Liu, *Laoxue* is a scholarly object, a historically constructed body of knowledge that emerges from different ways of interpreting the *Laozi*. He further explains that “*Laoxue* concerns all major academic disciplines, such as philosophy, history, literature, and religious studies. Not only does it form an extremely complex and broad academic system, but it also is closely related to the history of Chinese culture and Chinese thought” (ibid., p. 126).

The development of the term *Laoxue* reveals both its potential range of meaning and its current core definition as the totality of traditional *Laozi* interpretations. It reminds us that the historical usages and reconceptualizations of a text such as the *Laozi* are at least as worthy of attention as the original moment of the text’s emergence. Due to this crucial perspective, actually rooted in Chinese tradition, *Laoxue* deserves to be a respected term and topic of study among English-language scholars of Chinese philosophy and intellectual history.

2.3. Translating *Laoxue* as *Laozegetics*

The term *Laoxue* has yet to be popularized in English-language scholarship. A main impediment to this development is the challenge of its translation. The following reflects on various possibilities before arguing for the neologism “*Laozegetics*.”

The greatest obstacle to translating *Laoxue* again emerges from the uncertain polysemy of *xue* 學, as its various interpretations inform possible translations. First, I might consider it equivalent to “ism” that turns *Laoxue* into “*Laoism*,” a concept referenced above as an equivalent for Zhang Zhiyan’s sense of *Laoxue*. However, Zhang’s extremely narrow

definition makes *Laoxue* merely equivalent to a term such as Kantianism, as the philosophy of Laozi (*zhexue* or *xueshuo*) or the philosophical school of Laozi (*xuepai*). Neither of these senses are appropriate to the current Chinese usages of *Laoxue*. Second, “Laology” or just “Laozi Studies,” as the field of study (*xueke*) concerning Laozi, the *Laozi*, and its philosophy are similarly unsuitable.⁵ *Laoxue* is primarily an object of study and not an activity or field, and this object concerns the development and interpretation of the text and philosophy instead of the *Laozi* text itself. These two possible translations are furthermore ambiguous because as one researches the history or philosophy of *Laoxue*, it would be unclear to say that one studies Laology or Laozi Studies, when one actually studies the research of others on that topic. Lastly, Alan Chan suggests translating the compound as “Laozi learning,” which implies taking *xue* as *xuewen* (學問). This has the advantage of allowing for the historical development of the interpretive tradition, a point Chan makes himself (Chan 1998, pp. 105–106), but it remains an odd way to use “learning” in English. No one would ever call the teachings and traditions of other classics “learning.” It would be strange to have *Republic* learning, *City of God* learning, or *Phenomenology of Spirit* learning.

I propose translating *Laoxue* with the portmanteau “Laozegetics,” thereby highlighting the unique and valuable aspect of *Laoxue* as a topic for research.⁶ Unlike the vague “Laology” or “Laozi Studies,” “Laozegetics” specifies its content directly: the exegesis or even eisegesis of the *Laozi*. The construction of this term conveniently obscures the Greek prefixes of these two opposites—“ex-” (out of) or “eis-” (into)—as Laozegetics incorporates these two contrasting hermeneutics or what Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193) and modern Chinese scholars call *liujing zhu wo*, *wo zhu liujing* 六經注我, 我注六經 (the six classics explain my [thoughts] and I explain the six classics). Translating *Laoxue* as “Laozegetics” means the term cannot be reduced to the doctrine (*xueshuo*) of the *Laozi* but must indicate both a broad ranging tradition of interpretation and a topic of research that appreciates the text as the locus of a living and metamorphosing philosophy.

Another value to the “Laozegetics” translation relates to how it shifts focus away from questions of Laozi the person, which sometimes can be implied in older usages of the original Chinese or in other possible translations. One great benefit of Laozegetics research as an approach is that the unresolvable issues of the text’s author or its earliest content and meaning can be bracketed in favor of the more attainable subject of how the text—once it was formed or even canonized—was read and thus how it impacted individuals, communities, and cultures.

One final point about my term Laozegetics. Though generally a topic of study, I suggest one can also *do* Laozegetics, as the practice of interpreting the *Laozi* text.⁷ This, in fact, includes the mainstream historical-critical approach to reading the *Laozi*. However, I especially encourage researching Laozegetics, studying how others interpret the *Laozi*. This meta-level perspective, focused not on the text but on interpretations of the text, reminds us that the philological or historical methods so often employed to do Laozegetics are both one among many hermeneutics that each has its own context. They lack the ultimate value they claim in the face of the Laozegetics phenomenon that comprises two thousand years of diverse exegesis. Zhu Bokun explains that Laozegetics (*Laoxue*) helps reveal the historical transformations of the *Laozi* and thus enables us to peel away received biases to aim for the original. I agree with this logic in principle, except that this process should not simply generate self-reflection in the researcher but also a deeper contemplation on why the historically informed philologist cannot claim ultimate meaning for the text. Philology is but one way of extracting meaning, being just a small part of the richness that is Laozegetics.

3. Modern Research on Traditional Laozegetics?

Having traced the Chinese usage of *Laoxue* and argued for its translation as Laozegetics, it is beneficial to look closer at previous research on this topic. This work on “Traditional Laozegetics,” a more specific term useful to differentiate “Laozegetics” from “Global Laozegetics,” is not solely Chinese, as it also includes all Korean and Japanese commentaries

written in classical Chinese on the *Laozi*. According to Ding Wei's 丁巍 calculations, there are 2185 historical Chinese works, 430 in Japanese, and 91 in Korean, with many within the latter two collections being in classical Chinese (Ding 2004). Furthermore, I must stress this Traditional Laozegetics is not exclusively Daoist but incorporates many different East Asian philosophical and religious perspectives—including the three teachings and nine schools—that have engaged the *Laozi* in dialogue. Traditional Laozegetics represents the totality of all types of readings of the *Laozi*, and so no one “native” classical Chinese or East Asian reading exists.

3.1. Traditional Laozegetics Research in Chinese

The study of Traditional Laozegetics has grown during the last few decades, though the focus on the original text continues to vastly overshadow it. In China, Traditional Laozegetics research's expansion especially followed the publication of Xiong's *The History of Chinese Laoxue*. Xiong further advanced this trend by co-editing the *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 (Complete Collection of the *Laozi*) (Xiong and Chen 2011) in fifteen volumes, a massive work that essentially includes all preserved Chinese *Laozi* commentaries and is a precious resource for scholars of Laozegetics.

Many other Chinese researchers have contributed to developing Laozegetics as a topic. Particularly vital to this is Xiong's student Liu Gusheng, who has written a voluminous quantity of articles on different commentaries, along with his *Daojiao Laoxue shi* 道教老学史 (A History of Religious Daoist Laozegetics) (Liu 2008), and his forthcoming five volume *Zhongguo Laoxue tongshi* 中国老学通史 (A Complete History of Chinese Laozegetics) (Liu 2022). One also encounters other important contributions, such as Yin Zhihua's 尹志华 (Yin 2004) *Bei Song Laozi zhu yanjiu* 北宋老子注研究 (A Study of Northern Song *Laozi* Commentaries), and Liu Sihe's 刘思禾 (Liu 2017) *Qingdai Laoxue shigao* 清代老学史稿 (A Preliminary History of Qing Dynasty Laozegetics).

At present, there are 256 articles in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database with *Laoxue* specifically mentioned as a topic. For example, consider the studies on Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 Laozegetics (Yang 2021) or on Lin Xiyi's 林希逸 highly influential but under-researched commentary *Laozi Yanzhai kouyi* 老子鬳齋口義 (Yanzhai's Oral Explanations of the *Laozi*) (Zheng 2020). This topic now even has a dedicated periodical called *Zhonghua Laoxue* 中华老学 (Chinese Laozegetics) edited by Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗 and Xie Qingguo 谢清果.

To be clear, Chinese research on the topic that I term Laozegetics does not always adopt the language of *Laoxue*, as it has not become a universally accepted framework for research on traditional commentaries. If one includes all work done in Chinese on *Laozi* commentaries, the field becomes significantly larger. Unsurprisingly, Wang Bi's 王弼 philosophy and *Laozi* commentary have been heavily studied (Wang 1996; Zhou 1998; Han 2001; Wang 2002; Jiang 2012). However, there are likewise many rarer topics that have received attention. For example, Satō Rentarō 佐藤鍊太郎 has compared Song Confucian Su Zhe's 蘇轍 commentary and that by the Ming iconoclast Li Zhi 李贽 (Satō 2002), Huang Xi 黄熹 has studied the relationship between Dao 道 and *xing* 性 (nature) in Jiao Hong's 焦竑 *Laoziyi* 老子翼 (*Laozi's* Wings) (Huang 2011), Chiang Shu-Chun's 江淑君 has examined the art of war commentary by the Tang dynasty general Wang Zhen 王真 (Chiang 2015), and Han Huanzhong 韩焕忠 has analyzed a Yuan dynasty commentary by Buddhist Mengshan Deyi 蒙山德異 (Han 2017). Lastly, I must note a few rare investigations classifiable as research on Traditional Laozegetics from the greater Sinographic Sphere: a study on Yulguk's Korean Confucian commentary (Kim 1999), a short summary on the Japanese reception of the *Laozi* (Wang 2019), and a detailed analysis of the popularization of Lin Xiyi's commentary in Japan (Wang 2000). Whether or not employing the language of *Laoxue*, related research in Chinese has become fairly developed. Nonetheless, many commentaries still lack preliminary studies let alone in-depth investigations.

3.2. Traditional Laozegetics Research in English

Scholars outside of China engage the contents of Laozegetics (*Laouxue*), i.e., traditional *Laozi* commentaries, without the use of the term itself. Yet, as in China, such research is growing. The most widely discussed commentary remains that of Wang Bi. It has been translated or been the topic of major studies multiple times (Lin 1977; Rump 1979; Chan 1991; Lynn 1999; Wagner 2000, 2003). *Heshanggong zhangju* 河上公章句 is another historically significant commentary that has begun to gain more attention (Erkes 1958; Chan 1991; Tadd 2013, 2018, 2019; Michael 2022).

Beyond these two, a range of other rarer interpretations have also been studied. For example, there are two works on Hanfeizi's earliest preserved commentaries "Jie Lao" 解老 (Explaining *Laozi*) and "Yu Lao" 喻老 (Illustrating *Laozi*) (Queen 2013; Di Fiori 2018). Yan Zun's 嚴遵 Han dynasty *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸 (The Essential Meaning of the *Laozi*) (Vertoorn 1988; Chan 1998) and Zhong Hui's 鍾會 Wei dynasty commentary (Chan 2003) both have preliminary studies. Commentaries emerging from religious or organized Daoism are also topics of interest, including the *Xiang'er* 想爾 (Bokenkamp 1997; Puett 2004), those by Tang dynasty Chongxuan experts Cheng Xuanying and Li Rong 李榮 (Assandri 2019, 2021), and even those that reveal the text as a manual for inner alchemy (Pregadio 2018). Chinese Buddhist commentaries have received some attention with both a general review (Wagner 1999) and a couple special investigations of the wonderful commentary by Ming dynasty monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (Hsu 1975; Yen 2004). Even general Wang Zhen's 王真 commentary has been translated and analyzed (Sawyer 2000). Lastly, Isabelle Robinet once summarized multiple *Laozi* commentaries in a preliminary account of the whole phenomenon (Robinet 1999).⁸

Traditional Laozegetics includes all *Laozi* commentaries and interpretations written in classical Chinese, and English-language scholarship has also engaged a smattering of works from the greater Sinographic Sphere. For example, there are a few articles on Korean Confucian readings of the classic (Kim 2007; Glomb 2016; Glomb 2020), while Mark Teeuwen has written a fascinating piece on how the *Laozi* and its commentaries were repurposed to help construct Japanese Shinto as a unique religion (Teeuwen 2015). One might even include Thomas Cleary's popular translation of Japanese Zen master Takuan Sōhō's 澤庵宗彭 (1573–1646) commentary *Rōshi kōwa* 老子講話 (Discourse on the *Laozi*) within this category of Traditional Laozegetics research (Cleary 2011).

While the increase attention on Traditional Laozegetics in both Chinese and English is promising, there remains a vast catalogue of unstudied and understudied commentaries. Scholars continue to prefer debating the pre-Qin context of the *Laozi* rather than the life of the classic that came after. Regardless of what remains to be researched, I can unequivocally state that within Traditional Laozegetics a great range of native Chinese or East Asian readings of the *Laozi* exists. There is no true or correct understanding of the classic because the varied traditions, even including "foreign" Buddhism, of each interpreter and commentator inevitably inform their encounter with the classic.

4. Laozegetics Globalized

Having described the history of the topic *Laouxue*, its translation as Laozegetics, and its contemporary study, let us now turn to the core of this paper—Global Laozegetics. The vision of Global Laozegetics emerges from the reality that Chinese or Traditional Laozegetics is fundamentally pluralistic, including countless voices regardless of their varied philosophical or religious backgrounds. What does it mean for Laozegetics to become global? It expands an already inclusive concept to incorporate the proliferation of all new interpretations of the *Laozi* as it has traversed the globe and encountered a wide array of non-Chinese traditions and languages.

4.1. The Global Laozegetics Perspective

Global Laozegetics assumes a basic continuity between traditional Chinese-language *Laozi* commentaries and the 2051 *Laozi* translations in 97 languages (author's count). For

more on this, see Tadd 2022). This view rests on the argument that interpretation undergirds all such translations, and that these translations continue the age-old phenomenon of reimagining the *Laozi* in countless ways regardless of their presentation in different languages. This enables Global Laozegetics to encompass both Chinese-language commentaries and non-Chinese-language translations within a single historical and exegetical (or eisegetical) framework. Its perspective further rejects the idolization of the “original meaning” of the text, reframing the significance of the translated forms of the classic by elevating them from flawed approximations to valued representatives in the grand tradition of Laozegetics.

Making this shift requires acknowledging the active role of the translators, thereby identifying them as a type of commentator. Consider how the early French sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat translates the word Dao 道 as “*la raison*” to represent his assumption that Dao is comparable to the mind of God (Abel-Rémusat 1823, p. 23), or how Roger Ames’ and David Hall’s translation of Dao as “Way-making” explicitly conveys their philosophical stance that prioritizes process over static ontology (Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 57–59). In both cases, one might critique these translations as projections of Catholic theology or process philosophy onto Chinese thought, and that may be a debate worth having, but from the perspective of Global Laozegetics the conspicuousness of interpretation in these translations simply confirms that these distinctive and thoughtful readings of the classic deserve study as unique creations.

While Traditional Laozegetics includes *Laozi* from different dynasties or sinographic traditions, Global Laozegetics extends its inclusive frame across any linguistic, cultural, philosophical, and religious boundaries. As such, it incorporates a large range of transformations that at least include the Catholic *Laozi* (Wieger 1906), the Protestant *Laozi* (Breed 2014), the Islamic *Laozi* (Nasr and Izutsu 2021), the Jewish *Laozi* (Buber 1942), the Buddhist *Laozi* (Hutanuwat 2005), the Hindu *Laozi* (Aggarwal 2018), the Theosophical *Laozi* (Ervast 1925), the mystical *Laozi* (Mitchell 1988), the naturalist *Laozi* (Chan 1963), the feminist *Laozi* (Anderson 2021), the anarchist *Laozi* (Yamaga 1962), the communist *Laozi* (Ân 1950), the fascist *Laozi* (Evola 1923), and the liberalist *Laozi* (Chung 2013). Each *Laozi* interpreted and translated in light of these different “foreign” viewpoints belongs to the same phenomenon as the diverse commentaries in the Chinese tradition. Furthermore, this very interaction between the text and this broad spectrum of philosophies is what produces the global reality of Laozegetics.

4.2. Chinese-Language Research on the International Side of Global Laozegetics

The concept of Global Laozegetics (*Quanqiu Laoxue* 全球老學) has not been widely accepted in China. However, as with the study of *Laozi* commentaries, research on its non-Chinese-language side—*Laozi* translations—has been increasing. In fact, this topic has already developed into an academic cottage industry. The following will offer a simple overview of these works so to consider the benefits of reconceptualizing them within the framework of Global Laozegetics.

In Chinese, there already are over a thousand articles with *Daodejing* or *Laozi* and *fanyi* 翻译 (translation) in the title. While many of these merely summarize certain translations and add little to the discussion, some studies are quite valuable. Especially noteworthy are major works on English *Laozi* translations, such as the pioneering 2008 monograph *Daodejing zai yingyujie: Wenben xinglü yu shijie xiangxiang* 《道德经》在英语界：文本行旅与世界想象 (The *Daodejing* in the Anglophone World: A Traveling Text and World Imagination) by Xin Hongjuan 辛红娟 (Xin 2008). Yang Yuying 杨玉英 (Yang 2013), Wu Xuemeng 吴雪萌 (Wu 2016), and Zhang Yuan 章媛 (Zhang 2021b) similarly provide broad discussions of the English *Laozi*. There are many other more focused investigations as well, such as Yao Dadui’s 姚达兑 study and transcription of the earliest English *Laozi* that he discovered in the Yale University Library (Yao 2016) or Cai Juemin’s 蔡觉敏 work on the relationship of popular translations by Stephen Mitchell and Wayne Dyer to American Daoism (Cai and Qin 2012; Cai Juemin 2014).

Research on non-English translations exists as well, such as the monograph on Thai translations by Chen Li 陈利 (Chen 2021) or articles on topics such as the Tang dynasty Sanskrit translation (Yang 2011), Latin missionary translations (Xiao 2018), early French translations (Yao and Chen 2018), early German translations (Tang 2019), and Spanish translations (Zhao 2020). Due to the growing popularity of the topic, China East Normal University initiated a 1.5-million-dollar study of the *Laozi* in the world, and Professor Deng Lianhe 邓联合 of Sun Yat-sen University (Zhuhai) is soon to inaugurate a new journal called *Guoji Laoxue* 国际老学 (International Laozegetics) that specializes in *Laozi* translations and their international reception. Clearly, the future for this subject in China is bright.

4.3. English-Language Research on the International Side of Global Laozegetics

English-language scholarship on *Laozi* translations is also on the rise. This trend partially originated with criticisms of how translations diverge from the “real” original *Laozi*, a view promoted by scholars such as Russell Kirkland in his broad critique of Western “imagined” Daoism (Kirkland 1997) or Paul Goldin in his essay “Those Who Don’t Know Speak” that specifically maligns amateur *Laozi* translations (Goldin 2002). However, these positions have become much less representative as the topic has developed and intersected fields such as translation studies, history of sinology, transcultural philosophy, religious studies, and world literature.

For example, there are general studies concerning English translations, such as Julia M. Hardy’s classic essay on Western readings of the text (Hardy 1998), Hsiu-Chen Chang’s analysis of the topic from the perspective of comparative philosophy (Chang 1998), Owen Aldridge’s overview of American *Laozi* translations (Aldridge 1994), Damian J. Bebell’s and Shannon M. Fera’s comparative study of different translations (Bebell and Fera 2000), and Lucas Carmichael’s dissertation on the *Laozi* as American scripture (Carmichael 2017). Overviews concerning the reception or translation tactics of the *Laozi* in other languages similarly exist, for example, Florian C. Reiter’s discussion of the text in Germany (Reiter 1996), or Pauw Budianto’s look at translations in Indonesian (Budianto 2019).

Scholars also have investigated single translations. The earliest Latin translation has both been approached as part of missionary history (Von Collani 2015) and as an example for translation studies (Wei 2018). Two Czech translations have also merited individual articles: Marián Gálik analyzed Berta Krebsová’s translation (Gálik 1994), and Lomová Olga addressed that by Rudolf Dvořák (Olga 2018). Admittedly, this type of scholarship remains limited.

More popular than directly analyzing translations is the examination of the *Laozi*’s impact on literary and philosophical greats. We have studies on the historical and artistic connections between *Laozi* and Tennyson (Benton 1962), Kafka (Zhang 2021a), and Benjamin (Hashimoto 2016), as well as analysis of Tolstoy’s translation and philosophical uses of the Daoist classic (Chu 2021). Kwok-Kui Wong has considered Hegel’s (Wong 2011) and Schelling’s (Wong 2017) encounters with the *Laozi*. Additionally, much has been written on Heidegger’s connection to Daoism, with Lin Ma providing a detailed account of Heidegger’s translation of the *Laozi* (Ma 2006). English-language scholars are clearly discovering the historical and philosophical value of the *Laozi* in translation, yet I argue that the understanding of the impact and significance of this phenomenon remains limited without a broader view.

4.4. Benefits of the Global Laozegetics Perspective

As confirmed above, scholarship on both *Laozi* commentaries and translations already exists in Chinese and English. So why should we frame these as one topic called Global Laozegetics? What does this add to our research? The key value of Global Laozegetics lies in revealing connections only visible when the entire phenomenon of *Laozi* interpretation and reception is viewed together.

For example, previous engagements with the topic of *Laozi* translations have focused on only one or two languages, especially English or German, resulting in a limited com-

prehension of how these translations may have inspired retranslations and thus readers in other languages such as Persian or Thai. Likewise, without a detailed foundation in Chinese commentaries—a topic still understudied—one cannot unpack where certain modern readings emerge. Situating Global Laozegetics as a single phenomenon also underscores the plurality of the *Laozi* throughout its entire history and calls us to explore the many intricate interconnections between different commentaries and translations. If one truly wishes to understand the *Laozi*'s place in world history or in the history of philosophy, one must trace which conceptions of the text have been transmitted by whom and to whom.

The links unearthed by viewing all forms of Global Laozegetics together are not minor but often form broad networks of what I call interpretive lineages. These are sometimes heavily ideological, and they can cross both linguistic and cultural boundaries. My notion of interpretive lineages recognizes that although every commentary or translation epitomizes a unique exegetical stance, many draw inspiration from others' commentaries or translations (Tadd 2022, pp. 99–108). Thus, each Chinese or Non-Chinese interpretation forms a node within one or more lineage transmitting particular conceptions of the text.

The Global Laozegetics framework further assists in shifting from an essentialized East-West view to a nuanced global one. This broader vantage point is crucial for understanding the elaborate networks of influence between different types of *Laozi* commentaries and translations. The *Laozi* did not just travel in a single direction from a single origin. For example, consider Mohammad Tabatabai's Persian retranslation of Hans-Georg Moeller's English (Tabatabai 2015), Hiroshi Aramata's 荒俣宏 Japanese retranslation of Marce de Smedt's French (Hiroshi 1996), Serge Mairret's French retranslation of Tam C. Gibb's English rendering of the famous Taiji master Cheng Man-ch'ing's 鄭曼青 *Laozi yizhi jie* 老子易知解 (*Laozi* is Easy to Understand) (Mairret 1998), Alfredo Cadonna's Italian translation of Bai Yuchan's 白玉蟾 commentary (Cadonna 2001), Alejandro Pareja Rodríguez's Spanish (Rodríguez 2000) and Zdzisław Płoski's Polish (Płoski 2009) retranslations of Ralph D. Sawyer's English rendition of general Wang Zhen's "art of war" commentary, or Wang Qiang's 王强 and Liu Sa's 刘飒 Chinese back-translation of Wayne W. Dyer's English self-help *Laozi* (Wang and Liu 2009). These are just a few cases among hundreds that particularly highlight the unexpected travels of various *Laozi* interpretations.

The study of Global Laozegetics affirms the inherent plurality of the *Laozi* in the world, and this comprehensive perspective enables a full appreciation of the way the text's interpretations and translations have spread and interacted.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, the author has explored the history and usage of the term *Laosue*, argued for its translation as Laozegetics, expanded the concept to include *Laozi* in all languages, given an overview of Chinese and English scholarship on commentaries and translations, and explained the significance of the inclusive topic Global Laozegetics.

The coining of "Global Laozegetics" aims to encourage more expansive scholarship on the *Laozi* text by asserting the value of its commentaries and translations. This both results from engaging *Laosue* studies in China and broadly critiquing the limits of the dominant hermeneutic that searches for the *Laozi*'s "original" text and its "original" meaning. Identifying the diversity and impact of its commentators and translators reveals the *Laozi* as a pluralistic and globalized nexus of philosophical debate instead of being merely a record of pre-Qin ideas. Realizing the full history and development of this Chinese classic expands our understanding of what Chinese philosophy encompasses, what Daoism encompasses, and what the philosophy of the *Laozi* encompasses, thereby demonstrating how the text becomes unbound to time, place, language, or culture, belonging instead to a complex network of interpretations that span the globe.

Lastly, the Global Laozegetics framework does not just offer a broad perspective on the phenomenon of the *Laozi* in the world. It also functions as a foundation for building an inclusive and collaborative community of scholars who study all the manifestations of the

text around the world. This is not merely an abstract ideal, as the author is establishing a Global Laozegetics research center this fall at Nankai University to help fulfill this aim.

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Notes

- ¹ Yang includes a few other relevant notes, but none of them resolve this ambiguity (Yang [1924] 1991, pp. 106, 111, 112).
- ² Chen Zhu's work on Laozi and Zhuangzi (Chen 1931) repeats his sense of *Laosue*, while Liu Qixuan uses it to simply mean *Laozi xueshuo* 老子學說 (Laozi's doctrine) (Liu 1934).
- ³ Note that in this article Zhan Shichuang's name is written with an older simplified form: 占石窗.
- ⁴ For this quote's original context, see *Xuanjing yuanzhi fahui* 玄經原旨發揮 DZ 703, 12:773a.
- ⁵ Thomas Michael translates *Laosue* as "Laozi Studies" and understands it as "the study of the social, political, philosophical, and religious history of the *Daodejing*" (2022, p. 126). This interpretation and translation emphasize the *xueke* (field of study) meaning of the term; however, that is not suitable for the most popular usage in China or the author's personal definition, as what he describes would more accurately be called *Laosue* Studies or *Laozi* Studies.
- ⁶ One might wonder why I do not use "Laozigeitics" instead to more clearly preserve the title *Laozi*. This choice results from etymological concerns. Exegetics and eisegetics both have the Greek root ἡγεόμαι (*hēgéomai*) "to guide," as one either guides meaning out of (ex-) or into (eis-) a text. Therefore, breaking the word at "getics" contradicts logic. Another option, Laoziegetics, is also just too unwieldy.
- ⁷ In this regard my understanding diverges from Liu Gusheng. He, as mentioned above, depicts *Laosue* as only including historical interpretations, implying that it precludes contemporary efforts.
- ⁸ Robinet also published, in French, the most comprehensive discussion of *Laozi* commentaries in a European language (Robinet 1977).

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