

Article

Challenge and Revolution: An Analysis of Stanislas Julien's Translation of the *Daodejing*

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Abstract: Retranslation constitutes a special case, as it involves a double creation of values that are determined not only by the ones inscribed in the source text but also by the ones inscribed in the previous translations. Therefore, retranslations initiate dialogues with and even challenges to the previous versions. This paper, rooted in the concept of retranslation, focuses on the first complete published translation of the *Daodejing* in Europe, the 1842 *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu*, by Stanislas Julien and investigates the revolutionary way Julien interpreted this ancient Chinese classic. Through an analysis of the paratexts and extratexts related to this French version and previous translations, this paper finds that Julien challenged the Christianized and Westernized interpretations of the *Daodejing* by the European missionaries and sinologists before him and proposed a new system of interpretation: to interpret the *Daodejing* from the perspective of Laozi and based on the Daoist classics and commentaries. Julien's translation and interpretations have demonstrated his respect for heterogeneous cultures by acknowledging cultural differences, and he strengthened the authority of his translation by challenging the ideas in previous translations, which makes the retranslation an indispensable reference for the study of Laozi and Daoism.



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1. Introduction

In 1842, the French translation of the *Daodejing* (a fundamental text for both philosophical and religious Daoism) by sinologist Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) was born. This French version, *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (hereafter *Tao Te King*), is remarkable, as it is the first complete translation of *Daodejing* in both French sinology and Western sinology. Upon its publication, it received high praise among European scholars and contributed to the reputation of French sinology. This translation became an important reference for many European scholars who were interested in this ancient Chinese classic. The German philosopher F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) praised Julien for his painstaking efforts and extraordinary intelligence in this translation, saying that he could not have comprehended and appreciated the *Daodejing* without Julien's interpretation (Julien 1842a, p. 42). Charles de Harlez (1832–1899), a Belgian Orientalist, shared the same view that because of Julien's translation, European readers greatly improved their understanding of the *Daodejing* (de Harlez 1891, p. 1). Julien's *Tao Te King* has enjoyed long-lasting popularity and is still reprinted in the twenty-first century.¹ It has been regarded as a classic in the translation history of the *Daodejing* and a must-read referential book for the study of the *Daodejing*.

2. Retranslation, Paratext, and Extratext

Retranslation is the concept that describes the production of multiple translations of the same work. There are two approaches to the study of retranslation (Deane-Cox 2014). The first one is original-text-oriented, arguing for or against the retranslation hypotheses that “the later translations tend to be closer to the source text” (Chesterman 2004, p. 8). The

ontological logic that lies behind his hypotheses is that the previous translations, especially the first translation, are often defective and deficient in displaying the language complexity and cultural difference of the original text (Berman 1990). Bensimon (1990) also attributes the necessity of retranslation to the absence of foreignness and exoticisms at different levels in the first translation. Case studies following this first approach often make comparative textual analyses between retranslation and previous translations, e.g., Wei (2019). The second one is target-text-oriented, considering the relationships and interactions among the existing translations of the same work. There are indeed cases where a retranslation is produced without awareness of the pre-existing translation. Studies in this “passive” retranslation often attribute its production to the evolving social, cultural, or ideological context that “translations are markers in time that update the comprehension of a text with the linguistic sensibilities of an instant in an ever-evolving history” (Stavans and Boucetta 2020, p. 100). However, Pym (1998, p. 83) states that the more active and valuable retranslations are those that challenge the validity of the previous translations. Venuti (2013, p. 96) also implies that more attention needs to be paid to cases that “possess this crucial awareness and justify themselves by establishing their differences from one or more previous versions”. Though the dialogue between a retranslation and previous translations can be reverential or antagonistic, studies of retranslations are more likely to agree with Pym and Venuti, suggesting that “the argument of retranslation as challenge carries considerable weight” (Deane-Cox 2014, p. 15). Though the second approach is often target-text-oriented, there are many occasions where the challenge of previous translations is inextricably linked to the discussion of equivalence between these translations and the original text.

Deane-Cox (2014), in the monograph *Retranslation: Translation, Literature and Reinterpretation*, proposes a methodological approach to the study of retranslation: that is, to analyze the paratextual and extratextual materials of a (re)translation. Paratext is “what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers” in the form of peritext (such as title, book cover, introduction, and preface) and epitext (such as interviews, diary entries, and correspondence) (Genette 1997, p. 3). In the sphere of translation studies, while paratext is the material that is contributed by the translator, publisher, or other agents in the production of a (translation) book, extratext refers to the articles and reviews that are related to the translations, the translators, or other agents (Deane-Cox 2014, p. 29). The former can be used to identify the interactions between the (re)translations and assess the assumption of challenge and rivalry; and the latter can be used to explore the relationship between the work (source work, translations, and retranslations) and target fields (*ibid.*, p. 34), such as the acceptance and influence of a retranslation in the target field. In the eyes of the researchers, these texts can help reconstruct the dialogue between the retranslation (re-translator), the original text (author), the pre-existing translations (previous translators), and even the translations (translators) in later times.

Though what Julien produced is the first complete translation in Europe, there were several selective translations before this French version. Besides, if we adopt the wide sense of translation as understanding, it leads us to the notion that “the process of translation cannot dispense with interpretation” (Ahmed 2009, p. 56); and those interpretations of lines or words in the *Daodejing* before Julien’s version can be regarded as earlier translations in European languages engaged by Julien. Therefore, Julien’s *Tao Te King* is a type of retranslation of the *Daodejing*. This paper, in a diachronic manner, will investigate the differences between Julien’s interpretations of the *Daodejing* with previous translations, particularly Julien’s challenges to previous translations with his retranslation as well as its acceptance by and influence on its readers. Drawing on the methodological approach provided by Deane-Cox, this paper will conduct a textual analysis of the paratexts and extratexts related to Julien’s retranslations of the *Daodejing*. The texts for analysis include paratexts, introduction, notes, and an article (“Observations détachées sur le texte et les différentes éditions de *Lao-tseu*”) in *Lao Tseu Tao Te King: Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (1842) and following extratexts: “Tchong-koué-hio-thang” (中國學堂) (1837) and “Réponse

à la lettre de M. Jaquet” (1838) by Julien, introduction in *Textes taoïstes traduits des originaux chinois et commentés* (1891) by Charles de Harlez, and *Simple exposé d’un fait honorable odieusement dénaturé dans un libelle récent de M. Pauthier* (Julien 1842a) by Julien.

3. Translation and Perception of the *Daodejing* in Europe before Stanislas Julien’s *Tao Te King*

Misha Tadd (2019) has identified 2000 translations of the *Daodejing* in 94 languages; and according to him, the first global expansions of the translations of the *Daodejing* in Europe, “mostly fragmentary”, were contributed by European missionaries “during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries” (from the late Ming dynasty to the middle Qing dynasty) (Tadd 2022a, p. 91). However, in fact, the missionaries at that time paid more attention to Confucianism than Daoism, as they realized that Confucian thoughts occupied the orthodox status in China. This preference can be found in Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), one of the founding figures of the Jesuit China missions. The Italian Jesuit priest dressed in Confucius clothes, built a close relationship with scholar-bureaucrats, and translated many Confucius classics after he began his missionary work in China in 1582. All these behaviors and activities are in line with his program of integrating Christianity with Confucian traditions, which has become a guiding principle for the latter missionaries.

Despite being less valued, the *Daodejing* and other Daoist classics were still explored by the early European missionaries in the Ming dynasty. One of their primary jobs is to build connections between the *Daodejing* and the Christian code, as it was their mission to prove the universal values of the Bible. Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), the leading representative of the Jesuit Figurists, who are also called “*suoyin pai jiaoshi* 索隱派教士 (missionaries who seek the obscure)”, not only believed in the “mystical and hidden messages of God” in *Yijing* (易經) (Wei 2018, pp. 3, 4) but also endeavored to find the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the *Daodejing* (Zhang 2001, p. 327). Bouvet’s assistant Jean-François Foucquet (1663–1739), however, was more focused; he concentrated on Daoism. In his commentary on the *Daodejing*, he demonstrates his ideas through the book title, “*Tao designari Deum Summum, quem nos Christiani colimus*” (Pfister 1932, p. 553).²

Many of these Jesuit Figurists found this association between Daoism and the Trinity in the following two sentences:

Sentence-1 (Chapter 14)

視之不見名曰夷,
聽之不聞名曰希,
搏之不得名曰微,

When you try to see cosmic law, you can’t, so it gets called “invisible;”

When you try to hear it, you can’t, so it gets called “inaudible;”

And when you try to grasp hold of it, you can’t, so it gets called “infinitesimal.”

Sentence-2 (Chapter 42)

道生一,
一生二,
二生三,
三生萬物。

Cosmic law gives birth to One;

This one gives birth to Two;

These two give birth the Three;

And these Three give birth to all.³

Joseph-Henri-Marie de Prémare (1666–1736) claims that the three Chinese characters “*Yi*” (夷), “*Xi*” (希), and “*Wei*” (微) in Sentence-1 produce a similar pronunciation of

"Yahweh" when they are combined, which shows the presence of Jesus in the classic ([Dehergne 1976](#), p. 63). Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793) was also fascinated by the assuming connections that his translation of the *Daodejing* is limited to Sentence-2 and Chapter 14 where Sentence-1 is located. He agrees with the idea that Sentence-2 legitimizes the relationship between Daoism and the Trinity ([Amiot 1776](#), p. 300). Louis Lecomte (1655–1729) argues that Sentence-2, in which the Dao is regarded as the foundation of true wisdom, proves that this ancient philosopher has knowledge of the Trinity ([Lecomte 1696](#), p. 121). The views of these representative figures paint a picture that the Jesuit Figurists aimed to Christianize the *Daodejing* and graft a Chinese version of Jesus into the Chinese classics ([Wei 2020](#)).

While these Jesuit Figurists in China during the Ming and Qing dynasty were inspired to announce that they had found the Trinity in ancient Chinese classic, Jean-Pierre-Abel Rémusat (1788–1832), the first professor of *La Chaire de langues et littératures chinoises et tartares-mandchoues* at the *Collège de France*, reminds us that these Figurists did not provide a solid foundation for the "great discovery" ([Rémusat 1823](#), p. 2). Rémusat firmly believed in the connection and set out to find the proof. To obtain this goal, he investigated Laozi's life and concluded that Laozi traveled to the West.⁴ He also selectively translated Chapter 1, Chapter 14, Chapter 25, Chapter 41, and Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*, with the unconcealed purpose: "We are not investigating whether Laozi was a great metaphysician or not, but we are making sure whether he has taken ideas from the works of some other philosopher" (*ibid.*, p. 21). These other philosophers are disclosed in the subtitle of his biographic study of Laozi, "Chinese philosopher whose ideas commonly attributed to Pythagoras, Plato, and their followers" (*Philosophe chinois qui a professé les opinions communément attribuées à Pythagore, à Platon et à leurs disciples*).

Like his predecessors, Rémusat was attracted to and devoted to the interpretation of Dao and Sentence-1. He argues that there is no ideal equivalence of Dao in Western languages, and it can only be explained with the Greek word λόγος (Logos) and its threefold meanings, namely the absolute being (*souverain être*), reason (*raison*), and word (*parole*) (*ibid.*, p. 24). He also thinks that Chapter 14 is the most suitable material for investigating the source of Laozi's philosophy. Under the guidance of this belief, Rémusat similarly reaches the conclusion that the *Daodejing* conforms to the doctrine of the Trinity, as the three Chinese characters "Yí" (夷), "Xi" (希), "Wei" (微) together produce the same sound as "Yahweh". More than that, he also claims that these characters are meaningless in the Chinese language system, so they must be imported as foreign signs (*ibid.*, p. 48). It is without any surprise that these "foreign signs" were discovered by Rémusat to be imported from the West: "I regard these characters as an indisputable mark that the thoughts of Pythagoras and Plato have been brought to China" though he admits that the Chinese obtain a more accurate and profound understanding of "Yahweh" than the Greeks (*ibid.*).

Rémusat managed to reverse the imbalanced attention the missionaries paid to Confucian and Daoist traditions but also sought to prove their assumptions about the connection between the ancient Chinese classic and the Trinity. Compared with his predecessors, Rémusat's "figurist-inspired interpretations" ([Pohl 2003](#), p. 470) of Sentence-1 go further than Jesuit missionaries (Figurists) on this intellectual trajectory. He does more than the Christianization of Chinese classics; he seeks proof of the Western influences on the Far East. However, these Christianized or Westernized interpretations are questioned by an expert in comparative literature, René Étiemble (1909–2002): "Can we push forward the Judeo-Christian imperialism and Eurocentrism any further?" (*Peut-on pousser plus loin l'impérialisme judéo-chrétien et l'eurocentrisme?*) ([Étiemble 1980](#), p. xxx). Étiemble's remark resonates with many translation scholars of postcolonial theory, such as Lawrence Venuti and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from the late 1980s. However, it also finds its sympathy about 150 years ago by Stanislas Julien, the translator of the first complete published translation of the *Daodejing*.

4. Stanislas Julien's *Tao Te King*: Challenge and Revolution

Since the missionaries during the Ming and Qing dynasty emphasized Confucianism over Daoism, and they studied the *Daodejing* only to find coincidences and connections between the classics and prophetic wisdom, their translations were mostly fragmentary. The British Museum houses a Latin manuscript of the *Daodejing*, which may have been authored by the Belgian Jesuit Jean-François Noëlas (1669–1740) and is so far found to be the earliest known complete Western translation of the *Daodejing*, but this manuscript was not published by then (Tadd 2022a, p. 94) and has a limited impact (Tadd 2022b, p. 5; Pan 2021, p. 252). Rémusat, in the preface of his version of *The Book of Recompense and Punishment* (*Taishang Ganying Pian* 太上感應篇) in 1816, announced a translation project of Chinese philosophical and religious books, among which the first to be translated is the *Daodejing*, “a work as respectable for its antiquity as for the name of its author and the excellence of the maxims it contains”. He regarded a complete translation and clear interpretation of the *Daodejing* as a great contribution to sinology: “it is only when it has been translated that we will be able to pronounce with full knowledge of the facts on the religious doctrine of the Tao-sse” (Rémusat 1816, p. 7). This goal was finally achieved by his student Stanislas Julien with his translation *Tao Te King* in 1842.

However, in 1838, before Julien's publication of *Tao Te King*, Guillaume Pauthier (1801–1873), another student of Rémusat, professed that he had finished a complete translation titled *Le Tao-te-king, ou le Livre révéré de la raison suprême et de la vertu* and that it was the real first complete version in French. After Julien's *Tao Te King* was published in 1842, Pauthier wrote an open letter, “*Vindiciae Sinicae: Dernière réponse à M. Stanislas Julien*”, in which he accused Julien of blocking his translation's application for publication by the Imprimerie Royale in 1834. He also stated that Julien had produced *Tao Te King* based on Pauthier's translation. Julien soon made a serious response to the accusations, “*Simple exposé d'un fait honorable odieusement dénaturé dans un libelle récent de M. Pauthier*”, in which he mocked, “how lunatic it is for someone who is a master of Mandarin to plagiarize the awful draft of a green hand who has never contributed any accurate translations of Chinese works” (Julien 1842a, pp. 9, 12). Though Julien is reluctant to be compared with Pauthier, their different way of interpretation is easy to be identified. Julien is inclined to approach the *Daodejing* in a philological way, capturing the meanings by consulting the relevant Daoist commentaries in Chinese. On the other hand, Pauthier tends to base his philosophical interpretations on the philosophy of religions in other cultures. For example, in his earlier article on the origin of Dao, *Mémoire sur l'origine et la propagation de la doctrine du Tao, fondée par Lao-tseu*, Pauthier (1831, p. 49) argues that Laozi's thoughts belong to the Sāṅkhyā and Vēdānta philosophies of India; and later in his “claimed-to-be” first complete translation, Pauthier (1838, p. 5), in the *Argument* (his introduction) to the first chapter of the *Daodejing*, transliterates the Dao as Tao and interprets it with words from “Christian dictionary”, such as “the supreme and primordial reason”, “the supreme principle”, “the prime cause”, and “the origin of things”.⁵ The controversy between Julien and Pauthier, to some extent, stimulated the interest of more European readers in *Tao Te King*. In the end, current records only can prove that Pauthier translated the first nine chapters of the *Daodejing*, and Julien's translation is the first full French version and is what started an influential revolution in the European study of the *Daodejing*.

As the first complete translation of the *Daodejing* in Europe, it has been appraised for its scientific and objective interpretation, having rebutted some of the ideas in previous interpretations. Though falling in the dispute with Pauthier over the “first man to have provided a complete translation of the *Daodejing* in French”, Julien, in the paratexts and extratexts, gives little space to remark on Pauthier's translation; maybe, as what he suggests in the response that he would be lunatic to plagiarize the awful draft, there is “no need” for him to talk about or challenge this “awful” translation.

4.1. Julien's Interpretation of Dao

Julien spent 16 years translating the *Daodejing*. In 1826, following the suggestion of Victor Cousin (1792–1867), the founder of eclecticism, Julien began to translate the classic and quickly completed half of it due to his talent in language. However, he ceased the work, as there arose much confusion during the effort due to a shortage of referential materials. Only in 1834 did he restart the project after being given *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼), *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* (河上公章句), and other commentaries. After the painstaking efforts of translation, revision, and proofreading, Julien finally presented his rigorous completed French edition, *Lao Tseu Tao Te King, Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (Julien 1842b, p. ii).

During the 16 years of translation, Julien did not stop putting effort into the comprehension of Dao and was never restricted in expressing his ideas about Dao. In July 1837, he published an article “Tchong-koué-hio-thang” in the *Journal asiatique* as a response to Karl Friedrich Neumann’s (1793–1870) translation of *Tchhang-thsing-tsing king* (常清靜經, *The Sutra of Pure and Calm By Lao-Zi*) in 1836. He criticized that Neumann’s translation of this philosophical work was wrong almost from beginning to end (*presque d'un bout à l'autre*); and he also provided his translation, in which he rendered the Chinese character Dao as *la Voie* (or Tao through transliteration) (Julien 1837, p. 85).

In October of the same year, the *Journal asiatique* published a letter, “Lettre à M. le Rédacteur du *Journal asiatique*”, contributed by a reader who used the pseudonym Siao-Tseu.⁶ This Tseu reader notes that Julien translated the philosophical work with great care and provided a profound interpretation of it (Siao-Tseu 1837, pp. 545–46). Nonetheless, he expresses disapproval for some of Julien’s translations, in particular, the rendering of Dao as *la Voie* (road); and he argues that *intelligence* is a much more appropriate translation of the Chinese character. Like what Julien did with his critique of Neumann, the Tseu reader provides his retranslation in the letter.

Four months later, Julien published a long 38-page paper in the *Journal asiatique* in response to the comments. He first discloses the real name of Siao-Tseu, which is Eugène Jaquet, and then criticizes Jaquet’s translation line by line. It is not difficult to grasp the ferocity in this long piece. Julien comments that there are no published articles nor translations to prove Jaquet’s knowledge of Chinese (Julien 1838, p. 259), while there are numerous indisputable translation examples to prove the groundlessness of his revisions (ibid., pp. 260–61). It is in this long article that Julien clearly explains his translation of Dao as *la Voie* for the first time. He implies Jaquet’s mistaken approach to Dao by arguing that the most appropriate route to the understanding of Dao is to consult the author Laozi, as well as other philosophers who lived nearly at the same time as Laozi. Julien also criticizes modern Daoist priests who have misunderstood the founder of Daoism by interpreting Dao as *intelligence*, which only directs us away from the path towards truth (ibid., pp. 262–63); by contrast, rendering Dao as *la Voie* is completely in line with the meaning of the Daoist classics. He then interprets the lines that contain Dao in the *Daodejing* and *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* to prove his ideas. After thoroughly presenting his interpretive defense, Julien reaches the conclusion that the Dao in the thought of Laozi and other oldest Daoist philosophers excludes the meaning of *cause intelligente* and that *la Voie* contributes a more inclusive and sublime connotation to the word. Only *la Voie* “corresponds to the languages of these Daoist philosophers when they speak of the strength of Dao” (ibid., pp. 263–64).

In the introduction of *Tao Te King*, Julien reassures the correctness of *la Voie* and restates the idea that *intelligence* only directs us away from the path toward truth. He proposes that the Dao is the absolute being deprived of actions, thoughts, and desires. Men, according to him, to reach the most sublime state should maintain absolute peace in their minds, having no thoughts, desires, or intelligence (which attributes to the disorder of body and mind). Therefore, Dao in the classic, as interpreted by him, is sometimes “the sublime *Voie* that all creatures have come to life” and sometimes the imitation of Dao “deprived of actions, thoughts, and desires”. Julien also announces his different interpretations of Dao

from that of Rémusat. He disagrees with Rémusat translating Dao as *raison primordiale* and hopes that those European scholars who were influenced by Rémusat should refrain from regarding Daoist priests as *rationalistes*. He reminds professional readers to be cautious when conducting a comparative reading between the *Daodejing* and the classics in the West: “My research only aims to guide readers to the ancient Chinese classic itself . . . I have no intention to draw a parallel between the thoughts of Lao Tzu and that of Plato and his followers” (*ibid.*, p. xv). F.W.J. Schelling, one of the great German philosophers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, agrees with Julien’s translation of this essential concept in his *Philosophy of Mythology*, in which he writes,

Tao does not mean reason, as which it had been translated hitherto, and the learning of Tao does not mean learning of reason. Tao means gate, the learning of Tao is the learning of the great gate that leads into being, from non-existence, from mere potential existence through which finally all existence enters [into] real existence. The entire *Tao-te-King* aims at nothing else but to show through a great diversion of most meaningful expressions the great and insurmountable power of the non-existent. (Pohl 2003, p. 471)

While proposing to translate Dao as *la Voie* in the introduction, Julien also renders it into *Tao* in the translation. A close reading of his translation reveals that he has used *Tao* 77 times, *la voie* 7 times, and *la Voie* 5 times. It is also found that Julien prefers to use *Tao* when the Dao in the original Chinese text appears without any adjuncts or modifiers, and on other occasions, *la Voie* or *la voie* is adopted, for example, “*la voie*”, “*les voies du ciel*”, and “*la voie du Saint*.” As a strategy of conservation, transliteration displays the translator’s “acceptance of the difference by means of the reproduction of the cultural signs in the source text” (Aixela 1996, p. 54). Julien’s interpretation and transliteration of Dao demonstrate the arrangement of arguments in a retranslation: justifying the idea of one’s own by challenging the ideas of others. In deeper thought, however, we will find that Julien not only provides his unique understanding of Dao; he also offers a different way of approaching Dao, which carefully avoids making any random or careless analogies between the *Daodejing* and the classics in the West no matter how surprising and interesting it may sound.

4.2. Julien’s Interpretation of *Yi Xi Wei* (夷希微)

As discussed in the second section, the representatives of European missionaries and sinologists have different purposes and reading methods when interpreting the *Daodejing*. Out of religious motivation, the missionaries only selected the materials (in these classics) that are (thought to be) connected to the dogmas of Christianity. That is why they are so interested in Sentence-1 (in Chapter 14) and Sentence-2 (in Chapter 42), and their translations are most of the time only excerpts from the book. Though not driven by religious zeal, Rémusat also believed in this connection and was more determined in his findings. He claims to have found, through close readings, not only proof of the equivalence between *Yi Xi Wei* (夷希微) and Yahweh but also evidence of the presence of Pythagoras’ and Plato’s thoughts in the *Daodejing*.

While Julien declares his disagreement with those missionaries and early sinologists, he is gentler and more reserved in his tone regarding his teacher. He firstly acknowledges the fame of Rémusat, “the most prestigious sinologist in Europe”, and the significance of his work (*The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu*) before expressing his divergent opinions. He humbly states that “the detailed examinations of the *Tao Te King* and its commentaries does not allow me to admit the curious conclusions” of these representatives (Julien 1842b, p. ii). Not only does Julien point out the bases (detailed examinations) of this statement but also excludes the possibility of bias and subjectivity by placing the non-human agents (examinations and commentaries) in the subject position of this sentence. Julien doubts the supposition that “Laozi had ever traveled to the West”. After investigating the ancient Chinese classics that recorded Laozi’s journey to the West, he finds that all these materials pointed to the same original source, *Bibliographies of Immortals* (*Shenxian Zhuan*, 神仙傳),

which is a collection of hagiographies written by Ge Hong 葛洪 nearly one thousand years after Laozi's death. Thus, he concludes that the story of Laozi's journey to the West was fabricated by people after his death.⁷

Julien comments that ideas about *Yi Xi Wei* are innovative but far from being well-grounded (Julien 1842b, pp. vi–vii). He finds signs in *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* that refute Rémusat's "findings" that the three Chinese characters *Yi Xi Wei* are devoid of meaning and not commonly used. He then presents an inference to us: the Chinese commentators are rigorous in annotating the *Daodejing*, and they highlight words that are not clear and provide interpretations; if the three Chinese characters had been imported words, how could the commentators over generations not have discovered this (ibid., pp. vii–viii)? Moreover, he continues his reasoning by disclosing that the book *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi* already recorded that "Yi means colorless, Xi means soundless, and Wei means shapeless", which proves that these characters were local words in the Chinese language. As to the "ill-grounded" inferences by the representative missionaries and scholars in Europe, Julien also provides his explanations. He states that these misinterpretations may have been caused by the obscurity of the *Daodejing*, but fundamentally, they are the products of the interpretation system (*système d'interprétation*) by these missionaries and scholars: looking for evidence of Christianity in the classic. Therefore, he appeals that "we should explore what is hidden in rather than looking for what we expect from the works of those ancient philosophers" (ibid., p. xiii). Compared with the subjective or overly interpretation of the *Daodejing* by the earlier missionaries and the prestigious Rémusat, Julien's *Tao Te King* is more equivalent and faithful. Scholars judge that this translation "has reversed the trend to interpret the Daoist thoughts in Western discourses" (Lu and Gao 2020, p. 57), "has ended the Christianization of Daoist philosophy since eighteen-century" (Étiemble 1964, p. 96), and "has been an essential and classical work in the challenging studies of the *Daodejing*" (Réville 1889, p. 374).

4.3. Julien's Interpretation System

Julien's revolutionary interpretations in his translation are exemplified in his understanding of Dao and *Yi Xi Wei*, which are attributed to his guiding principle of reading Laozi from the perspective of Laozi and Daoism. This basic principle is based on his extensive readings of the commentaries of the *Daodejing*. As noted in the introduction of *Tao Te King*, Julien has consulted eight commentary books (ranging from Han dynasty to Ming dynasty) by Heshanggong (河上公), Ge Changgeng (葛長庚), Wang Yiqing (王一清), Wang Bi (王弼), Xue Hui (薛蕙), Chunyang zhenren (純陽真人), Jiao Hong (焦竑), and Deqing (德清), among which Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼) and Xue Hui's *Collected annotations on Laozi* (*Laozi Ji Jie* 老子集解) are the main references. According to him, Xue Hui's collected annotations form the basis of his understanding of the *Daodejing*, as it includes the most representative commentaries, while Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* are more helpful in identifying the edition, characters, and layout of the classic, as it is more comprehensive. He has also referenced *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Laozi*.

Though Julien "confesses" in the introduction of his translation that he has consulted eight commentary books, a close and thorough reading will unveil that about twenty famous annotators of Laozi have been quoted in the footnotes, including Han Fei (韓非), Yan Junping (嚴君平), Du Daojian (杜道堅), Wang Yuanze (王元澤), Lu Nongshi (陸農師), Zhao Zhijian (趙志堅), Dong Sijing (董思靖), Lin Xiyi (林希逸), Fu Yi (傅奕), Su Ziyou (蘇子由), Lü Huiqing (呂惠卿), Li Xizhai (李息齋), Chen Jingyuan (陳景元), Li Hongfu (李宏甫), Li Rong (李榮), Li Yue (李約), Wu Youqing (吳幼清), Lu Xisheng (陸希聲), Wang Chunfu (王純甫), and Sima Guang (司馬光). Like many other translations of ancient Chinese classics, Julien's *Tao Te King* consists of translation and annotation. In cases where different interpretations of the same line are found in his referential materials, Julien presents them together in the endnotes, giving no comments and displaying no preferences. This non-interference act adds objectivity to his translation and interpretation as it initiates

dialogues between these annotations and, at the same time, “leaves readers to select the interpretation that they find most appropriate” ([Julien 1842b](#), p. xvii).

It is easy to find that Julien is extremely cautious in selecting referential materials. This prudence can also be found in his categorization of the commentators in his referential materials: commentators of Daoism, commentators of Buddhism, and commentators of men of letters. He proposes to interpret the *Daodejing* based on the commentaries by the two former groups and be alert to the commentaries by the Confucian men of letters. He even criticizes that these Confucian intellectuals often interpret Laozi according to the ideas particular to the school of Confucius, which intends to constrain the development of Daoist philosophy. Therefore, he argues that commentaries of such spirit are of no value to those who want to enter intimately into the thought of Laozi, and it is unnecessary to report their names and the titles of the commentaries that they have published (*ibid.*, p. xxxviii).

Julien’s rigorousness in terms of the referential materials resembles, if not follows, the method of Qian-Jia School (*Qian-Jia xuepai* 乾嘉學派), famous for its textual research, adopting the academic methods of exegesis and examination by Confucian scholars during the Han period (206BC–220AD). However, his disapproval of annotations by Confucian men of letters is to some extent harsh and unfair. Certainly, it is a fact that during the Western Han dynasty (206BC–25AD), the followers of Laozi’s tradition and the followers of the Confucian tradition looked down upon each other.⁸ It is, however, also a fact that Daoism and Confucianism cannot always be clearly differentiated although they have their own belief systems ([Xiong et al. 2005](#), p. 437). After the Wei and Jin dynasties, the two philosophical schools have complemented each other and together formed the foundation of the traditional Chinese culture. Julien has to some extent exaggerated or only focused on the difference and contradiction between the two schools by condemning the annotations provided by the Confucian men of letters. However, whether in the practice of translation or the arrangement of endnotes, Julien still quotes many words from these men of letters. Even Xue Hui and Jiao Hong, whom he regards as important figures for his understanding of the *Daodejing*, are actually Confucian intellectuals.

Though Julien’s translation and interpretations are not free of mistakes,⁹ the introduction and endnotes in his version are as thorough as unprecedented in the French Laozi studies.¹⁰ It shows his good knowledge of bibliography and good mastering of ancient Chinese classics compared to his contemporaries in the West. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when sinology undertaken by researchers in colleges was still influenced by the studies of missionaries, Julien’s interpretive methodology, engaging Laozi from the perspective of Laozi, Daoism, and traditional commentaries, is a revolutionary in its aim to adhere to the original historical understanding of the Chinese classic.

5. Influence and Value of Stanislas Julien’s *Tao Te King*

Researchers regard Julien’s French translation *Tao Te King* as “an excellent pioneer work in the field of Sinology” ([Pohl 2003](#), p. 470), and it has been particularly influential in sinology for a long time ([Xu 2009](#), p. 109). As [Deane-Cox \(2014](#), p. 17) finds, “dialogue [between translations of the same work] can be antagonistic, revelatory or reverential”, and Julien’s translation has been revered by the latter translators who possess the crucial awareness of its existence.

In the late half of the nineteenth century, many of the translations of the *Daodejing* in Europe were translated directly from Julien’s French version. This version even displays its influence in the United States in the same period. According to [Tadd \(2022a](#), p. 100), “Julien’s 1842 French Laozi is the source for the earliest complete but anonymous 1859 English manuscript translation housed at Yale University, the first published English translation by Chalmers, the second German translation by Strauss, and a more recent Romanian work”. This Yale-housed version is a word-by-word (or literal) translation of *Tao Te King* and nearly adds no materials to the English text. It is such a literal translation that some words in Julien’s version are copied without any linguistic transformations. For instance, *wu-wei* (無為) is rendered as *non-agir*, which is borrowed from Julien’s translation

(Yao 2016, p. 54). John Chalmers (1825–1899), who is regarded as the first translator of the *Daodejing* in English, also admits that “The French translation by M. Julien has been very helpful to me, and I have much pleasure in acknowledging my obligations to its author”; he even implies his utmost respect to the French version (like a translator shows the reverence to the author) with the humble gesture that “I have no wish or intention to supersede by this attempt to put the thoughts of Lau-tsze into a readable English dress” (Chalmers 1868, p. xix). James Legge (1815–1897), the famous English sinologist, also adopted Julien’s principle of adhering to the meaning of the text in his translation of the *Daodejing* (Yu 2020, p. 81). Julien’s translation of the essential concept of Dao has also been adopted by these translators. For example, the Yale-housed version translates it as “Way”. Though Victor von Strauss (1808–1899), who contributed the important German version, renders Dao as Taò through transliteration, he still interprets it as “Weg” (way) in the footnotes (Tadd 2018, p. 127).

Being regarded as “the first serious translation” (*la première traduction sérieuse*) (Étiemble 1980, p. xxx) by “the first European scholar to manage to present readers a true the *Daodejing* in the eyes of Chinese” (Yu 2020, p. 36), Julien’s *Tao Te King* has been an important reference for the studies of Daoism in Europe in the late half of the nineteenth century. The French scholar Désiré-Jean-Baptiste Marceron (1823–?) cited substantial materials from Julien’s translation to introduce the *Daodejing* in his important *Bibliographie du Taoïsme* (Marceron 1898, pp. 177–94). The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) also consulted this French version when he began his research on the ancient Chinese classic (Tadd 2022a, p. 101). Many European scholars in the nineteenth century who were not experts in studies of Daoist thoughts, such as F.W.J. Schelling and Charles de Harlez, also admit that their understanding of the *Daodejing* owes much to Julien’s interpretation.

Julien is revolutionary in his interpretation system of the *Daodejing* as well as the de-Eurocentrism of the process. The Jesuit Figurists and the sinologists such as Rémusat often Christianized or Westernized the ancient Chinese classic by selecting (or searching for) the expected words or twisting the meaning of the “appropriate” words in the 5000 characters. This is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to [European] target-language cultural values” (Venuti 2017, p. 15). Differing from the strategy of domestication in the translation or interpretation of the classic prevailed in these European missionaries and intellectuals, Julien turns to the strategy of foreignization which places “an ethnovevant pressure on [European cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (ibid.). This foreignizing strategy involves a deliberate inclusion of foreignizing elements that makes the translator visible and reminds the readers that they are reading a translation of a work from a foreign culture.

The profoundly insightful introduction and the footnotes based on substantial references in Julien’s *Tao Te King* are prominent signs of this foreignizing method. He has set the principle of reading or particularly interpreting ancient or foreign classics: one should look for what is there rather than what is expected in the book. Readers, including both professional and common readers, should make efforts to perceive the linguistic and cultural differences. He also proposed the method of interpreting ancient or foreign classics: not to read the original text as isolated text but instead to create the historical context of interpretation by joining the reading of the original text with other interpretations of the same text. Venuti (2013, p. 97) points out that retranslations have the active force to “maintain and strengthen the authority of a social institution by reaffirming the institutionalized interpretation of a canonical text”. By the same logic, the fact that Julien’s translation principle and system of interpretation have been accepted by the latter translators also infers that a retranslation can serve to maintain and strengthen the authority of a person by reaffirming the rightness (accurate interpretation) and righteousness (respect to the foreign culture) of a canonical text.

It is easy to define Julien’s *Tao Te King* as an academic translation or thick translation since it indeed aims to “locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” with substantial annotations and glosses. Looking over the transmission history of the *Daodejing*

in Europe or even the Anglo-American Word in the nineteenth century, his *Tao Te King* does help to challenge the European and English readers “to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others” through the way of thick translation (Appiah 2012, p. 343). Contrary to his contemporaries and precedents, Julien moves the readers to the writer (foreign culture) rather than sending the writer (foreign culture) abroad. Through this French translation, Julien demonstrates Venuti’s (2013, p. 107) prediction of the translator’s ethical responsibility in the activity of retranslation, which is “to prevent the translating language and culture from effacing the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text, its foreignness”.

6. Conclusions

Julien’s *Tao Te King*, the first complete French translation and a retranslation of the *Daodejing*, is a milestone in the translation history of this ancient text. Through an investigation of the paratexts and extratexts of this retranslation and other related translations, this paper finds that this French version challenged the interpretations of this ancient classic by those European missionaries and intellectuals (Figurist) whose aim is to search for the mysteries of Christianity in the ancient classic and whose conclusion, as a result, is based on assumptions. Julien, however, walks on a different path toward the truth of the classic, that is, to return to the text and the historical context around the text. The value of Julien’s translation can be found in its quality, its challenges to the previous translations, and its influence upon later translations. However, beneath the revolutionary significance of this retranslation is the exegetic-reading method; and beneath the method is the impulse and ethical responsibility to maintain cultural differences. Julien’s (re)translation indeed represents the case in which the challenge of previous translations is inextricably linked to the discussion of equivalence between these translations and the original text. However, what he challenges is not only the interpretations of key concepts in previous translations but also the interpretation system by earlier translators. Naturally, what he aims at is not a different interpretation at the textual level out of his different/restricted interpreting context but a difference that is rooted in another culture and that can only be interpreted in that cultural context.

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Notes

- 1 Scholars find that Julien’s translation has been reprinted 17 times by seven French presses since its first appearance in French in 1842 (Sun 2020), and it has been republished 6 times alone in the twenty-first century (Lu and Gao 2020).
- 2 The English translations of materials in French references, displayed in direct or indirect citations, are provided by the authors of this paper.
- 3 As the two translations are to provide a literal meaning of the original texts, this paper has referenced William Dolby’s *Sir Old: the Chinese classic of Taoism* (which adopts strategy of foreignization to a certain degree and provides no footnotes and illustrations) (Dolby 2003) and modified his translations into the English texts in this part.
- 4 The biographical analysis of Laozi is found in his work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu (The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu)* published in 1823.
- 5 Since the materials of challenge are written out of the (re)translator’s agency (Pym 1998) and awareness (Venuti 2013), this paper will not discuss further the different interpretations of the classic by the two French sinologists, in order to present the challenges in Julien’s translation. There are scholars who have made a comparative study of the translations provided by Julien and Pauthier (See Pan 2021).

- ⁶ Siao-Tseu shares partial pronunciation with Lao-Tseu (Laozi), which may indicate a familyhood relationship between the two. Meanwhile, Siao-Tseu can be 小子 in Chinese characters, which means a young fellow to 老子 (Lao Zi). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that this critic wants to show his identity related to Laozi or Taoism by playing this word game.
- ⁷ In the introduction of this French translation, Julien points out that all the European books about Laozi include the story of Laozi's travelling to the West which finds its prime source in the *Bibliographies of Immortals* (*Shenxian Zhuan*, 神仙傳). Given the influence of this "journey," Julien has translated the story of Laozi in *Bibliographies of Immortals*. For the translation, see (Julien 1842b, pp. xxiii–xxvii).
- ⁸ See the The Biography of Laozi and Hanfei in the *Records of the Grand Historian of China* by Sima Qian (145–86BC).
- ⁹ For instance, Julien has confused Heshanggong (河上公) with Yue Chengong (樂臣公) (Julien 1842b, p. xxxix), Cao Wei (曹魏) with Bei Wei (北魏) (Julien 1842b, p. xl), and has mistaken Zhang Daoling's *Laozi Xiang Er Zhu* 老子想爾注 for a Buddhist commentary (Julien 1842b, p. xxxviii).
- ¹⁰ Julien is not the first sinologist to reference the commentaries of the *Daodejing*. Rémusat has mentioned Sima Guang's perception of Laozi's thoughts in his work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu* published in 1823. Pauthier in his translation *Le Tao-te-king, ou le Livre révéré de la raison suprême et de la vertu* quoted Jiao Hong's *Laozi's Wings* (*Laozi Yi* 老子翼) and Xue Hui's *Collected annotations on Laozi* (*Laozi Ji Jie* 老子集解).

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