

## Notes on Popular Versions of the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經

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There are various problematic and deficient “popular translations” of the classical Daoist *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power). These tend to be published by individuals, including self-identified Daoist adherents or sympathizers, with little to no knowledge of classical/literary Chinese, ancient Chinese culture, and/or Daoism. Most popular “translations” are thus better understood as “versions” (compositions based on other translations) or “adaptations” (modern reconceptualized cultural productions); they lack the necessary knowledge-base, including language, and are intended for mass consumption. They are usually rooted in colonialist, missionary, and Orientalist legacies and represent exercises and opportunities to fulfill a given individual’s or group’s various fantasies. They tend to domesticate the radical challenges of the text and to purge its religious dimensions. Thus, it is no coincidence that they present the resultant English composition as independent of the Chinese Daoist source-text. In such modern decontextualizations and reconceptualizations, the *Dàodé jīng* becomes something like a “spiritual classic,” “wisdom literature,” or even “Tao book.” Some of the most popular, in every sense of the word, are those by Wayne Dyer, Benjamin Hoff, Ursula Le Guin, and Stephen Mitchell, with the latter having received a six-figure advance for his hybrid spiritualist rendering. Such publications are embedded in and perpetuate what I refer to as the “*Tao Te Ching* Translation Industry” (TTCTI) and “Popular Western Taoism” (PWT) by extension. There is a conspiracy of ignorance involved, further rooted in corporate and political concerns. For serious students and readers of the text, popular publications should be avoided and unreferenced, except as modern Western cultural artifacts. Here I provide some additional information.

**Wayne Dyer** (1940-2015). *Change Your Thoughts—Change Your Life* (2007) and *Living the Wisdom of the Tao* (2008). Ed.D. in guidance and counseling from Wayne State University (1970). American self-help guru and motivational speaker. Following his spiritual capitalist and careerist profiteering off the *Dàodé jīng*, Dyer quickly shifted to the next installment of his hybrid spiritualist pyramid scheme. Nonetheless, perhaps helped enable his permanent relocation from Detroit, Michigan to Maui, Hawaii and support of his eight children. Diagnosed with Leukemia in 2009. In 2010, Stephen Mitchell (see below) filed a lawsuit against Dyer and his publisher, Hay House, for copyright infringement for taking 200 lines, without permission, from his *version* of the *Dàodé jīng* (*Hollywood Reporter*, December 21, 2010). The suit was dismissed in 2011 after Dyer and Mitchell agreed to a settlement (California Central District Court, Case No. 2:10-cv-03891). One cannot make this up—one Orientalist and Neo-colonialist suing another without any actual ethical repercussions for the original and underlying offense. It is thus no coincidence that Dyer’s name invokes “dire” (disastrous/imperiled). Wayne Dyer died of a heart attack in 2015.

**Benjamin Hoff** (b. 1946). *The Tao of Pooh* (1982) and *The Te of Piglet* (1992). B.A. in Asian Art from Evergreen State College (1973). American popular writer. Also practitioner of Qìgōng (Ch’ì-kūng) and Tàijí quán (T’ài-chí ch’üán), which like other popularizers he misidentifies as “Daoist.” In 2006, Hoff published an essay on his website (www.benjaminhoffauthor.com) titled “Farewell to Authorship” in which he denounced the publishing industry and announced his resignation from book-writing. Failed to learn the lesson of counter-virtue and doubled-down on his cultural

Posted on the Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy ([www.louiskomjathy.com](http://www.louiskomjathy.com)). May 5, 2023.

appropriation, publishing *The Eternal Tao Te Ching* (2021), a “new translation of the Chinese philosophical classic” [*sic*], complete with a nature photograph as the cover.

**Ursula Le Guin** (née Kroeber; 1929-2018). *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (1997). MA in French from Columbia University (1952). American science fiction writer. *Science fiction writer*. Claimed by her devotees to combine environmentalism, feminism, Daoism, and Jungian psychology into visionary writing. Thus sometimes presented (constructed) as a “feminist Daoist environmentalist,” or some such amalgam. Actually expresses a Neo-colonialist view of Daoism based on the fiction of so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~. Her version absurdly has some 1,400+ customer reviews on Amazon, averaging to 4.6 out of 5 stars.

**Stephen Mitchell** (b. 1943). *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version* (1988). A “new English version.” Self-professed as *not a translation*, although the masses do not know the difference. Apparently received some formal education from Amherst College, Université de Paris, and Yale University. American quasi-translator and popularizer. Apparently has some language facility with French, German\*, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, *not* Chinese. Nonetheless, received a \$130,000 advance in 1988, the equivalent of about \$340,000 today, for his version of the *Dàodé jīng* (*New York Times*, February 16, 1988). Also a practitioner of Zen Buddhist meditation, having studied under the Korean Son Buddhist teacher Seung Sahn (1927-2004) and the American Zen Buddhist Robert Aitken (1917-2010). Also married to the American hybrid spiritualist teacher and self-help guru Bryon Katie (b. 1942), adding yet another layer of confusion. Based his version of the *Dàodé jīng* on other actual translations, with particular indebtedness to Paul Carus and D.T. Suzuki’s (1913) literal rendering (Mitchell 1988, x). As expressed in his own absurd construction, “But the most essential preparation for my work was a fourteen-year-long course of Zen training, which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciples and heirs, the early Chinese Zen [*sic*] Masters....If I haven’t always translated Lao-tzu’s words, my intention has always been to translate his mind” (Mitchell 1988, x). As Lǎozǐ is a legendary figure and did not write the *Dàodé jīng*, Mitchell, like other Orientalist connoisseurs of “Daoism,” begins with a twofold fiction. Perhaps, following his own rhetorical strategy, one might say, if Mitchell has not always (almost never) given readers access to the classical Chinese Daoist source-text, he has given them a reflection of their own Orientalist mind and spiritual confusion. His version absurdly has some 2,400+ customer reviews on Amazon, averaging to 4.7 out of 5 stars.