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Variated Cultural Imagery of the *Daodejing* in the German-Speaking World Based on “Foreignization”: The Case of *Dao* and *De*

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Abstract: “Foreignization” (*taguohua*, 他国化) is an important concept in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. Through the collision, fusion and heterogeneous absorption of cross- heterogeneous cultural exchanges, the culture and discourse principles of one country are adapted through localization by the receiving country, resulting in what this theory calls “foreignization”. Global Laozegetics continues its traditional interpretive-oriented stance by examining translations of the *Daodejing* from a Laozegetics perspective, demonstrating a new development in the study of Laozi’s doctrine. Thus, there is a need to explore new perspectives in the research on the German translations of the *Daodejing*. Taking the cultural imagery *Dao* and *De* as examples, this paper explores the background and causes of “foreignization” in German translations of the *Daodejing* and its impact on the dissemination of Laozi’s doctrine in the German-speaking world, summarizing its formation path and possible problems, with the goal of shedding light on the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics represented by the *Daodejing*.

Keywords: foreignization; German translations; *Daodejing*; German-speaking world; overseas dissemination



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1. Introduction

The Chinese classics are an important part of Chinese culture and directly reflect the origin and construction of different cultural and discourse principles between China and the West. Because of the huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of traditions, concepts and aesthetics, Chinese scholarship has continued to explore the overseas dissemination of Chinese canonical texts, the core of which lies in the consideration of mutual transmissions and influences across heterogeneous cultures. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature holds that the different cultural and discourse principles between China and the West require not only “seeking common ground”, but also “keeping differences” in communication, so its doctrine is based on the study of heterogeneity.

The concept of “foreignization” was first introduced as a theory of translation by Lawrence Venuti in 1995 in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*, as opposed to “domestication”. Venuti’s theory was influenced by the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher; he pointed out that Schleiermacher, in his lecture *On the Different Methods of Translating* in 1813, distinguishes two different ways of translation: “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (Venuti 1995, pp. 19–20).

Although the translation of the concept of *taguohua* (他国化) in the the book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, published in 2013, is borrowed from the term “foreignization,” in this usage, there is a significant difference from the “foreignization” described by Venuti. The former, from the perspective of the target language, “is rather to develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (Venuti 1995,

p. 23). But the “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, as opposed to “Chinization” (*zhongguohua*, 中国化), describes the phenomenon of literary variation in heterogeneous cultural exchanges from the standpoint of the transmitting country, i.e., the “foreignization” of local literature, and its connotation is not limited to research on interlingual translation. “Both culture and literary theories can be ‘converted’ under certain historical and cultural circumstances. Such ‘conversion’ is also known as ‘foreignization’ . . . ” (Cao 2013, p. 240); in other words, this “foreignization” is based on the premise of heterogeneity in the transmitting and receiving countries, in which the cultural and discourse principles of the transmitting country are variably absorbed by the receiving country, which is the “mature form” or “ultimate form” of variation (Cao and Tang 2015, p. 38). Therefore, the exchanges between heterogeneous cultures are always accompanied by this type of “foreignization”.

Cultural imagery involves combinations of historical deposits and national wisdom in different cultures, and has relatively fixed and unique cultural connotations. The transmission of cultural imagery across heterogeneous cultures is a deep form of communication based on translation and interpretation. The great differences between cultures can lead to cultural misalignment, i.e., differences or even inversions in transmitting cultural imagery, resulting in “foreignization”. The “foreignization” of cultural imagery is inextricably linked to the receiving background. If the culture of the receiving country is in a strong position, it will lead to the “foreignization” of the cultural imagery of the transmitting country and vice versa. To cater to cultural traditions in receiving countries, Chinese classics are often culturally mismatched during overseas transmission, thus giving rise to cultural imagery that fits the background of the receiving countries.

The *Daodejing* (also known as the *Laozi*), the most important text of Daoism, is full of wisdom and demonstrates Laozi’s philosophical thought. It is one of the earliest systematic Chinese philosophical works and one of the most widely disseminated and influential Chinese classics in the German-speaking world. Since the first full translation into German was published in 1870, the *Daodejing* has been translated and published in the German-speaking world for 150 years: the latest statistics in 2022 show that there are 178 German translations of the *Daodejing* in total (Tadd 2022, p. 145). This Chinese classic is inevitably subject to “foreignization” in different ways; as a result, much of the cultural imagery in the *Daodejing* has been “Germanized” in the German-speaking world and has gradually been divorced from its original cultural connotations. Thus, it is typical and instructive to explore variations in “foreignization” in terms of the reception of Chinese classics in the German-speaking world by taking the *Daodejing* as an example. In view of the above, this paper intends to proceed from cultural imagery under the concept of “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, specifically by taking the transliterations and interpretation of *Dao* and *De* as research objects, and then to preliminarily conduct a dynamic investigation of the “foreignization” of Chinese classics in the German-speaking world, exploring the reasons for this phenomenon. At the same time, it will reflect on research by scholars in the German-speaking world within the context of Global Laozegetics to explore the implications and inspirations of “foreignization” (*taguohua*) in the study of the German translations of the *Daodejing*.

2. “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of *Dao*

“*Dao* is the core concept of Laozi’s philosophy, and his entire philosophical system is carried out by his presupposed ‘*Dao*’” (Chen 2003, p. 23). Thus, in studying Laozi, *Dao* has always been the focus of German researchers. Because of the indescribable nature of *Dao*, their initial interpretations of the concept were not uniform, but at the beginning of the *Daodejing*’s dissemination, understandings of the book were based on a close relationship with Christianity, and the explanation of *Dao* as *Gott* (God) was a dominant interpretation. This is a continuation of the European tradition of theological interpretation of the *Daodejing*. Firstly, the reception of Daoism and Laozi’s doctrine in the West began in the late 16th century. At that time, the Jesuits entering China with the intent to learn Chinese to

understand the country in order to promote Christian doctrine believed that “Daoism had a place here at most as a popular religious ‘superstition’” (Grasmück 2004, p. 21). Reports and religious texts on China summarized and translated by the Jesuits became the only way to receive Daoist thoughts in the West, and the earliest translations of the *Daodejing* were introduced to Europe in the 17th century (Grasmück 2004, pp. 39–40). The Jesuit Figurists, such as Joachim Bouvet and Joseph de Prémare, tried to prove that Christianity was already contained in classical Chinese texts and that “the Chinese texts were to complement the Christian canon in their new interpretation” (Grasmück 2004, p. 37). Against this background, their studies of Laozi and translations of the *Daodejing* were naturally deeply influenced by theological thought, thus building a bridge between Christianity and the *Daodejing* and playing a key role in promoting its spread in Europe. Secondly, the translation by French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat brought the *Daodejing* to a European readership. In his article “The Life and Opinions of Lao-tzu” (*Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu*), published in 1823, Rémusat partly inherited and developed the Jesuits’ thoughts about the “Trinity” in the *Daodejing*, suggesting that the “夷” (Yi), “希” (Xi) and “微” (Wei) of chapter 14 include the Hebrew name of God (Abel-Rémusat 1823, pp. 44–45).

For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner and the theologian Victor von Strauss, who published the first and second full German translations, both identified *Dao* with “God” and based their translations on this understanding. In his foreword, Reinhold von Plaenckner identified with the dogmas of apostolic faith found in the *Daodejing* by Joseph-Marie Amiot, Joseph de Prémare and others, and with the idea of the “trinity of God” by Antonio Montucci (Plaenckner 1870, p. XIII). Victor von Strauss, however, spent a lot of time listing the main meanings of this concept in different chapters of the original text, but after summarizing, he finally concluded by suggesting that if one German word could be found to convey all of the above meanings, *Dao* is “God, and only God” (Strauss 1870, p. XXXV).

This tradition of theological interpretation took on a new dimension in the early twentieth century with the protestant theologian Julius Grill’s translation, *Lao-tsze’s Book of the Highest Being and the Highest Good* (*Lao-tsches Buch vom höchsten Wesen und vom höchsten Gut*), published in 1910, which reflected on the tradition of theological interpretation. Grill suggested that there is a “miraculous similarity” between the philosophical thought of Laozi and the religious thought of Jesus (Grill 1910, p. VI). But he did not agree with Strauss’s understanding of *Dao* as equivalent to God because *Dao* is not a religious concept or a personalized principle; rather, it is a purely philosophical concept (Grill 1910, p. 12). He believed that Strauss’s tendency toward mystical and theosophical directions continually led him astray (Grill 1910, p. 52). Grill suggested that the parallels between the *Daodejing* and the *New Testament* should be studied in the context of a general history of religion. This would result in less prejudice than a purely theological interpretation (Grill 1910, p. VI). Thus, Grill proposed that Jesus and Laozi shared the same basic moral views and principles, but that they were formed in different ways. Christ acquired them in his historically based concept of God and his belief in an absolute personality, whereas Laozi obtained them from the concept of the “World Soul,” i.e., from the concept of “the general Absolute”. Therefore, Laozi’s *Dao* is involuntarily more or less personified, and is, therefore, close to the concept of God in its spiritual effect (Grill 1910, p. VII). To confirm his idea of the parallels between Laozi’s thoughts and those of Jesus, Grill summarized the corresponding chapters of the *Daodejing* and the *New Testament* in a list in the “Biblical parallels to the Tao-tê-king” appendix of his translation. According to his summary, there are 81 parallel passages between the two. Of these, Chapter 70 of the *Daodejing* has the most connections to the New Testament, with a total of 17. Furthermore, in his comments on the last sentence of chapter 70, he quoted Strauss’ interpretation of this sentence, showing that it depicts the wise men as humble in appearance and rich in heart. Grill pointed out that this is obviously contradictory with the high estimation of duty and power by the wise men, and suggested that reference could be made to the sentences in the New Testament: “Do not give what is holy to dogs” and “Let your light shine before men” (Grill 1910, p. 192). However, Grill did not elaborate on each of the parallels in his list, as detailed in his trans-

lation, comments or appendix. He merely suggested at the end of the appendix that the list of parallels in the New Testament could still be increased without any need to be explicitly noted, and that the scope of comparison could be narrowed or expanded (Grill 1910, p. 204).

Secondly, *Dao* is interpreted from a Western philosophical perspective as reason, *logos*, sense or related Western concepts. The aforementioned French sinologist Abel-Rémusat, an important pioneer of this tradition, compared the doctrine of Laozi with ancient Greek philosophy and, in particular, found the source of the *Daodejing* in the Pythagorean school, such that he understood *Dao* as the Greek word “λόγος”. He thus proposed three meanings of *Dao*: reason (*raison*), words (*parole*) and the universal cause (*cause universelle*) (Abel-Rémusat 1823, pp. 23–24), which he translated via “raison” (reason), and this became the popular interpretation in Europe afterward. Richard Wilhelm, the most famous sinologist in the German-speaking world, published the most famous German translation of the *Daodejing* and was known as “a spiritual mediator between China and Europe” (Walravens 2008, p. 7). Although Richard Wilhelm was a missionary, he did not start from a theological perspective, instead proposing that Chinese references be used for translation and explanation because it seemed more desirable to learn from Chinese literature; while not wanting to ignore European literature, he felt it was better to take it into considerations secondarily (Wilhelm 1911, p. II). Thus, this Western philosophical interpretation method continued. Wilhelm compared the essential differences between Laozi’s metaphysics and ancient Greek philosophy from a metaphysical perspective. He suggested that the viewpoint of the ancient Greek philosophers was turned outward, in that they searched for a principle to explain the world, whereas Laozi never left the field of anthropology. In Laozi’s philosophy, human beings form a coherent unit whose activities are carried out spontaneously. *Dao* is also spontaneous in the world (Wilhelm 1911, pp. XVI–XX), and, ontologically considered, is the root of all existence (Wilhelm 1911, p. XXII).

In addition to sinologists, many important philosophers in the German-speaking world have offered their own understanding of Laozi’s doctrine. For example, Kant identified Laozi with the moral-aesthetic category of the “grotesque” (Nelson 2017, p. 112). Hegel, influenced by Abel-Rémusat, translated *Dao* as “reason” (*Vernunft*) (Elberfeld 2000, p. 146). Schelling interpreted *Dao* as “gateway” (*Pforte*), that is, “a gateway between the unknowing of finite being and the genuine knowing of actual being” (Nelson 2017, p. 113). But in the early stage, the reception of Daoism in German philosophy was much less significant than the reception of Confucianism and Buddhism (Nelson 2017, p. 112). However, since the beginning of the 20th century, German philosophy has paid more attention to Laozi’s doctrine; in particular, Martin Heidegger’s philosophical interpretation of *Dao* expanded the influence of Laozi’s doctrine on Western philosophy. Martin Heidegger translated *Dao* as the “way,” writing the following in his essay “The Nature of Language”: “The key word in Lao-tze’s poetic thinking is Tao, which ‘properly speaking’ means way” (Heidegger 1971, p. 92). However, the word *Dao* is often translated in German as “reason,” “mind,” “raison,” “meaning” or “logos,” and Heidegger explains that this is because “we are prone to think of ‘way’ superficially, as a stretch connecting two places, our word ‘way’ has all too rashly been considered unfit to name what Tao says” (Heidegger 1971, p. 92). It can be seen that Heidegger suggests that *Dao* is better translated as the “way” than “reason”, “sense” or other concepts because this translation no longer places the word directly under the constraints imposed by the core concepts of European metaphysical thought.

However, the enormous differences between the Chinese and German languages make the translation difficult. Thus, even though Victor von Strauss explicitly interprets *Dao* as “God,” he leaves it untranslated in his translation because “as the matter stands, we find no necessity, hardly any justification to translate the word at all where it is used in this sense” (Strauss 1870, p. XXXVI). In addition to his aforementioned rejection of the translation of *Dao* as “God,” Grill suggested that the translation as *Weg* (way), from a philosophical perspective, would “disturb the impression of the uniformity of the world view of our philosopher sensitively,” so *Dao* is untranslatable in its philosophical sense (Grill

1910, p. 12). In conclusion, it cannot be translated either theologically or philosophically, so he advocated for keeping it untranslated.

As a carrier of Chinese culture, the Chinese character itself has the duality of original meaning and cultural significance, so many German translators are aware of the need to interpret *Dao* on different levels of meaning. There are many scholars who have discussed the multiple meanings and philosophical nature of *Dao* in detail: Victor von Strauss explored the interpretation of this Chinese character from *Guangyun* (广韵), *Shuowen* (说文), “Xici” chapter of the *Yijing* (易经·系辞) and Confucianism. Richard Wilhelm points out that there was a significant amount of confusion about the translation of *Dao* at the early stage of translation: “‘God,’ ‘Way,’ ‘Reason,’ ‘Word,’ ‘λόγος’ are only a few of the suggested translations, while some of the translators simply take the ‘Dao’ untranslated into the European languages”. He proposes that *Dao* takes “way” as its basic meaning and extends it to signify “direction” (*Richtung*); “state” (*Zustand*); and, finally, “reason” (*Vernunft*) and “truth” (*Wahrheit*). *Dao* as a verb is “to speak” (*reden*) and “to say” (*sagen*), which can also be translated as “to guide” (*leiten*) (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV). With such linguistic differences, choosing a translation for the word *Dao* undoubtedly adds difficulties for translators who use “Germanization” as an important translation strategy. As Richard Wilhelm explains, the *Dao* has a very wide range of connotations and is a basic “Intuition” that is difficult to fix conceptually; there is no word that completely corresponds to it in German. However, he insisted on translating *Dao* into German for aesthetic reasons, and finally chose “sense” (*SINN*), which is closest to *Dao* at every level of meaning (Wilhelm 1911, p. XV).

Dao, as Chinese cultural imagery, basically completed its “foreignization” at the earliest stage of translation in the German-speaking world. German scholars analyzed *Dao* according to Western cultural principles by “interpreting Chinese classics in a Western way,” so it gradually became a concept with Western cultural elements. This process enabled the rapid integration of this important Chinese philosophical concept into the German-speaking world, and translations of the *Daodejing* were able to widely spread through it in the early 20th century. This development was facilitated by “the first Dao-Fever” (Grasmück 2004, p. 60). As European society was in turmoil at the time, the young generation, “which suffers from the spiritual problems of their time” (Reichwein 1923, p. 9), turned to Eastern wisdom to find inner peace. Laozi’s thought perfectly matched their “often eschatological longing for internalization” (Reichwein 1923, p. 9); thus, the *Daodejing* became “the bridge to the East” (Reichwein 1923, p. 10) for them. Against this background, German translations of the *Daodejing* began to be widely disseminated in academic circles: the German educator and economist Adolf Reichwein pointed out that “since the beginning of the century” and up to 1923, when his book *China and Europe* (*China und Europa*) was published, “it has undergone no less than eight transmissions in Germany” (Reichwein 1923, p. 10), especially during the Weimar Republic: in the period between 1918 and 1927, the book market showed clear growth in *Daodejing* translations for the first time (Grasmück 2004, p. 26).

“The significance of the comparison of heterogeneity lies in its complementarity” (Cao 2011, p. 221). The “foreignization” of *Dao* reflects the catering of cultural imagery to the culture of the receiving country in the process of dissemination. In addition to the academic background of the interpreters, the historical background also plays an important role, and the “foreignization” of cultural imagery also confirms the importance that German-speaking scholars attach to Chinese culture as represented by the doctrine of Laozi. Reinhold von Plaenckner criticized the neglect or belittling of Chinese culture in late nineteenth-century Europe in his foreword, proposing that he “wrote it also for those who criticize and ridicule China, the Chinese and everything that comes from China, to show them that even there and in the oldest, most distant times, wise men of a healthy, noble way of thinking have lived . . . ” (Plaenckner 1870, p. XV). Strauss also criticized frequent in the neglect of Chinese philosophy at the time; he pointed out, for example, the complete absence of references to ancient Chinese philosophy and culture in the *Textbook of universal history* (*Lehrbuch der Universalgeschichte*) published in 1840. Another philosophy history book also

ignored Chinese philosophy, noting that the Chinese wise men had only established rules of decency and external morality, and only the Greek heard the “γνώθισεαυτόν” (know thyself). Strauss’s translation and interpretation of the *Daodejing* refuted this disregard and neglect (Strauss 1870, pp. VIII–IX). Forty years later, Julius Grill still endorsed this kind of critique and repeated Strauss’s examples. Against the background of these times, it is not surprising that translators of the time needed to interpret and translate the *Daodejing* using interpretive models and concepts familiar to readers in their receiving countries. However, it is notable that in this process, German scholars have gradually deviated from *Dao* as the core concept of ancient Chinese philosophy in their interpretations. The “foreignization” caused by directly interpreting Chinese cultural images through a Western mode causes Chinese classics to gradually lose some of their unique statuses in overseas dissemination.

Since the reconstruction of sinology around the 1950s, the *Daodejing* has become an important sinological research object in German-speaking countries, and its translations and studies have become more diversified and academic. The translations of the *Daodejing* in the German-speaking world came to a standstill in the later years of the Weimar Republic through to 1945, and “almost no translations of the *Daodejing* were published after 1927” (Grasmück 2004, p. 61). However, after nearly a century, 53 German translations were published by 1970, of which 17 were published after 1945. The *Daodejing* has become the most translated Chinese classic in the German-speaking world, and its dissemination has taken on a relatively considerable dimension. Against this background, the number of translators who wish to restore *Dao* to the Chinese cultural context is increasing. Ernst Schwarz, an Austrian sinologist and translator, is an important representative of this view; his translation, published in 1970, interprets *Dao* from the perspective of Chinese language, philosophy and religion.

First, Schwarz pointed out that *Dao* was an important philosophical concept in ancient China and is not only found in the *Daodejing*, and by exploring the definition of *Dao* in *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经), he showed that *Dao* is the basis for the creation and development of all things in ancient Chinese philosophy. Second, Schwarz did not ignore the religious connotation of this Chinese character. However, unlike other translators who made a direct comparison between Chinese and Western religions, which are not historically related, he, based on the records in *The Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记), explained that *Dao* is related to ancient Chinese rituals, and appears as a sacrifice to the god of ways and roads. He argued that the religious connotation of *Dao* has existed since the Shang and Zhou periods and has had a long history of influence (Schwarz 1980, pp. 8–9).

Finally, Schwarz focused on the basic meaning of *Dao* in the *Daodejing*, suggesting that many translators have elaborated on *Dao* as a noun for “road” and as a verb meaning “to walk along the road,” but few have focused on or explored the meaning of *Dao* as a verb for “to say” or “to talk about”. The main interpretations of *Dao* as “road” and “walking along the road” are in accordance with the definition of the Chinese character “*Dao*,” which is written in the *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字): “the road one walks along” (所行道也) and “a road that has only one direction is called *Dao*” (一达谓之道) (Xu 2013, p. 36). The early Jesuits followed the above interpretations. According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字) and *Guangyun* (广韵), Abel-Rémusat also proposed that *Dao* means a road, that is, a means of communication from one place to another (Abel-Rémusat 1823, p. 18). As described previously, the important translators in the early stages, such as Victor von Strauss and Richard Wilhelm, also explained the above two original meanings of *Dao*, and this became the main interpretation of German translations. Schwartz argued that 首 (*shou*) is more important in the composition of the Chinese character for *Dao* (道). According to Chapter 37 of *The Book of Rites*, the word 首 (*shou*) can be used to “give expression,” so the word *Dao* has been used for thousands of years in Chinese to mean “expression”. He speculated that the emphasis of *Dao* was originally on the character 首 (*shou*), and that the radical of “go” (*chuo*, 辵) was added only after a corresponding change in meaning (Schwarz 1980, p. 10).

Schwarz’s method of researching *Dao* in the context of ancient Chinese language, philosophy and religion is relatively rare in the German-speaking world. This interpretive

method attempts to use the mode of “interpreting Chinese classics in a Chinese way” to allow German readers to more intuitively understand *Dao*, which is the core concept and most important piece of Chinese cultural imagery in the *Daodejing*. It also provides new perspectives and possibilities for exploring other meanings of *Dao*, which can promote the mutual acknowledgment, mutual understanding and complementary interaction of Chinese and German cultures.

3. “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of *De*

In contrast to the significant differences in the interpretations of *Dao* by scholars in the German-speaking world, the translations of *De*, another important cultural image, are relatively fixed. Most translators choose *Tugend* (virtue) as their basic translation. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner and Victor von Strauss both translated *De* as *Tugend* (virtue). Reinhold von Plaenckner directly suggests in his “Introduction” that “the meaning of *tě* is virtue,” and he did not list other meanings of *De* there “because without doubt they cannot be considered” (Plaenckner 1870, p. IX).

Other translations of *De* are sometimes used, although the number of translation types is significantly fewer than for *Dao*. This is because, firstly, the German word *Tugend* is closer to the basic meaning of the Chinese character “De”. *Tugend*, in the tenth century AD, meant “proficiency, strength, usefulness”. It developed under the influence of Ecclesiastical Latin’s *virtūs* (*mōrālis*), meaning “moral (religious) perfection,” whereas now it is externalized to “abstinence, moral conduct, moral purity, chastity” (Pfeifer 1993). And secondly, influenced by the way *De* was translated in Confucian texts, the Confucian canon gained attention in the European academic community, including the German-speaking world, earlier and more extensively than Daoist classics. Thus, *De* was translated as *Tugend*, following its meaning in Confucianism, and was widely disseminated and accepted in the German-speaking world.

Despite these two factors, there are also some important alternative translations. This is because, from the early twentieth century with the wide dissemination of the *Daodejing*, scholars began to reflect on the reception of Laozi’s doctrine in the West. For example, Alexander Ular questioned the Europeans’ “scientific analysis” of it, which led to Laozi “being dissected incorrectly by philologists” and “reassembled by so-called philosophers”, even though they did not understand anything about the philologists’ work (Ular 1903, p. 61). Ular, therefore, advocated for a return to the cultural context of ancient China to understand Laozi. His translation, *The Path and the Right Way of Lao-Tse* (*Die Bahn und der rechte Weg des Lao-Tse*), like that of Richard Wilhelm’s, had a great impact at the beginning of the classic’s German translation history. He translated *De* as “the right way” (*der rechte Weg*). Against this historical background, the translators have adopted other terms in order to translate *De* to conform to the overall thought of their translations and to reflect their understanding of Laozi’s doctrine, such as Richard Wilhelm’s translation of *De* as *LEBEN*. This word means “life” in German, but the translator here uses the capitalized form in a proprietary way to distinguish it from the German word *das Leben*. Some other translators chose “Power” (*Kraft*) or “Primordial Power” (*Urkraft*) as the translation. The sinologist Erwin Rousselle was Richard Wilhelm’s successor, who took over the directorship of the China Institute at the University of Frankfurt. In his translation, published in 1941, he considered *De* to be spiritual ability, pointing out that *De* originally means “the radiating magical power, then mystical elemental power, further in general: power, fitness, finally: virtue” (Rousselle 1985, p. 107). Hans-Georg Möller, who published the first full German translation of the excavated edition of Mawangdui in 1995, also translated *De* as “Power” (*Kraft*) (Möller 1995, p. 31).

However, the relative consistency of these translations does not mean that the cultural image of *De* has not been “foreignized” in the German-speaking world. In fact, its variation is more complex than that of *Dao*. This is because many translators, under the influence of Logos-centrism, treat *Dao* as the core term, valuing it at the expense of *De*. This unbalanced relationship between *Dao* and *De* diminishes the uniqueness of the cultural image of *De* in

the *Daodejing*. This is reflected in the view that *De* is not an independent concept, but, rather, dependent on *Dao*.

We see this view held by three major early translators. Reinhold von Plaenckner suggests in his introduction that although “grammatically *táo* and *tě* can be placed next to each other and independently,” “this is untenable,” because both parts of the *Daodejing* “speak of the *Táo*,” and “the *Táo-tě*” (Plaenckner 1870, pp. IX–X). It can be observed that Plaenckner equated the word “*Táo*” with “*Táo-tě*,” and *De* naturally did not have independence in his translation. Victor von Strauss even translated the phrase “*Dao sheng zhi, De xu zhi*” (道生之，德畜之) as “*Taò erzeugt sie, seine Macht erhält sie*” (*Dao* creates them, his power maintains them) (Strauss 1870, p. 226). Thus, the cultural image of *De* completely loses its independence and is described as the power of the *Dao*. Strauss described *De* as the good beneficent power of *Dao*, “from which the preservation or nourishment of all beings is derived here,” which is why he directly translates that the *Dao* “maintains them”. He argues that, because of the non-designation of the possessive, there is, therefore, no reason at all, like the Chinese interpreters, to hypostatize this *De* as “power” or “virtue” and to put it next to *Dao* (Strauss 1870, p. 227). Lastly, Julius Grill suggests in his translation that *Dao* is repeatedly implied in *De*, in the sense that the power of *De* is attached to *Dao* (Grill 1910, p. 14).

The three translators listed above are all important representatives of early German translations of the *Daodejing*. Their translations are influenced by their theological backgrounds, equating or analogizing the *Dao* with the supreme being of Christianity, so it is not surprising that they understood the *De* as a subsidiary of the *Dao*. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner proposes that *De* comes from the *Dao*, the heavenly virtue received through faith in God. Thus, the *Daodejing* leads people to acquire virtue through faith in God (Plaenckner 1870, p. X). Victor von Strauss believes that, according to Laozi, “the basis for the knowledge and behavior of people is *Taò*, and the ethical and ethico-political behavior determined by this principle is virtue, *tě*” (Strauss 1870, p. LXIX). Julius Grill also suggested that “the *Tao* is the highest good as the cause, as the maintaining and perfecting principle of that moral rightness and of the corresponding moral achievement” (Grill 1910, p. 14).

In the context of dichotomy, *De* is placed in a secondary position. Compared with the previous case, these translators did not explicitly define *De* as simply subordinate to *Dao*, but instead attached much less importance to *De* than to *Dao*. It can be said that they place the relationship between *Dao* and *De* under a dichotomous model, with *Dao* as primary and *De* as secondary. For one, there are differences in the translations of *Dao* and *De*, with many translators choosing not to translate *Dao* in order to reflect its uniqueness and exclusivity. This method has existed since the first German translation of the *Daodejing*: for example, the aforementioned Reinhold von Plaenckner, Victor von Strauss and Julius Grill translations kept only *Dao* untranslated. This method of translation has had a lasting impact, as the sinologist Wolfgang Kubin, who published the first German translation of the excavated bamboo edition of *Guodian* in 2011, also keeps the word *Dao* untranslated. He translates the *Daodejing* as *The classic of the Tao and the effective power* (*Der Klassiker vom Tao und von der Wirkkraft*) (Kubin 2011, p. 14), leaving *Dao* untranslated and *De* translated as “effective power” (*Wirkkraft*).

In addition, many translators provide only a brief explanation of *De*. Some, such as Erwin Rousselle, leave the explanation of *De* only as a footnote. Ernst Schwarz, in his account of *Dao* and *De* in his introduction, suggests that “the term *De*, as used by the Daoists and other schools, is relatively easy to explain, but can only be properly understood if we have already gained some insight into the conceptual layers of the word *Dao*” (Schwarz 1980, p. 7). He then discusses *Dao* in detail and at great length, but unfortunately, he never elaborates on *De* separately or in more detail. In the annotation of chapter 51, he analogizes *Dao* to *Causa sui*, *De* to *causa formalis* and the “thing-world” to *causa materialis*, thus equating the three with European philosophical concepts. He proposes that the *Dao*, as potentiality,

becomes actuality through the *De*, around which the substance of the thing-world gathers (Schwarz 1980, p. 183).

Still, translators have not completely ignored the uniqueness of the word *De* in the *Daodejing*. On the contrary, many translators of the *Daodejing* have attached great importance to how the text employs *De* to mean something different than it does in other works, especially the aforementioned Confucian one. Reinhold von Plaenckner suggests that *De* derived from faith in *Dao* is higher than *De* in “the earthly sense” (Plaenckner 1870, p. X). Richard Wilhelm points out that *De* can also be translated as “nature” (*Natur*), “essence” (*Wesen*), “spirit” (*Geist*) or “power” (*Kraft*), which are often used in the *Confucian Analects* and are avoided here to prevent conflicts with other terms. *De* is usually translated as *Tugend*, but this translation is more applicable to some of the later moral treatises and is actually more appropriate for Confucius than for Laozi (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVI). The famous German sinologist Günther Debon, professor at the University of Heidelberg, was the representative translator of the *Daodejing* in the mid-twentieth century; his translation was praised by the contemporary sinologist Wolfgang Kubin as the “most linguistically beautiful translation of our subject matter according to the standard version” (Kubin 2011, p. 15). According to Günther Debon, the Chinese character *De* gradually became a purely moral concept because of the influence of Confucianism (Debon 1961, p. 4). Ansgar Gerstner, in his doctoral dissertation “A synopsis and commented Translation of the Laozi and an evaluation of its socially critical attitude” (Eine Synopse und kommentierte Übersetzung des Buches Laozi sowie eine Auswertung seiner gesellschaftskritischen Grundhaltung), completed in 2004, explains that although he translates *De* as *Tugend* as other translators do, the concept of *De* in the Daoist sense does not “refer to moral thoughts and actions, as in Confucianism, but refers to the ways in which nature functions, such as plant and animal life” (Gerstner 2004, p. 68).

However, as mentioned above, whether from a religious or philosophical perspective, the vast majority of German-speaking scholars understand *Dao* as the supreme being in Laozi’s philosophy, and either equate it directly with God, leave it untranslated or use a proper name to emphasize its uniqueness. Thus, the specificity of *De* has to give way to *Dao*, and its translation cannot be treated in the same way as *Dao*. Therefore, the word *De* is still translated as *Tugend* in most translations. However, the basic meaning of *Tugend* is closer to the sense of ethics and morality. As a consequence, the important concept of *De* in Laozi’s philosophy has been greatly reduced in its philosophical scope in the process of “Germanization,” and its connotation is mainly limited to the ethical, moral and socio-political aspects of the human world.

It is impossible to completely dissolve the cultural differences between original and translated texts across heterogeneous cultures. Different cultures communicate and collide with each other in the translation process, resulting in the filtering, misinterpretation and re-creation of the original text, thus producing a translation with a certain degree of “foreignization” (Cao 2016, p. 127). This “foreignization” has led to the widespread acceptance of the cultural image of *De* in the German-speaking world as *Tugend*, greatly reducing its cultural connotation. The problem that ensues from this is the confusion of transliterated words. The contradiction between the breadth of the connotation and the singularity of the translation has made it impossible for some translators to use the same word to translate *De*. For example, Reinhold von Plaenckner, Victor von Strauss and Julius Grill all used *Tugend* as their basic word, but Strauss translated the word *De* in the chapter 21 passage “The form of the Great De” (孔容之德) as *Vermögen* (ability) (Strauss 1870, p. 107); Reinhold von Plaenckner as “Nature and its creation and action” (*Natur und ihr Schaffen und Wirken*) (Plaenckner 1870, p. 91); and Grill as *Kraft* (power) (Grill 1910, p. 85). Differing translations of the same concept in the same chapter and sentence produce such a large gap that one would not know that it is the same concept without knowledge of the original text. This is also a great challenge for the translators.

Of course, there are some translators who attempt to return the *De* of the *Daodejing* to the cultural context of ancient China and study it from a different perspective. For example,

Alexander Ular explains the composition of the Chinese character *De* in order to criticize its simple translation as *Tugend* (virtue). Ular suggests that the hieroglyph *De* has never meant virtue, “as which it is translated persistently”. He further explains the structure of the Chinese character *De*: “it is composed of the image of going straight out and the image of the heart, so it means the spiritual going straight ahead, the right way of life, or in a more limited sense at most the straightness”. Thus, it has absolutely nothing to do with “all reason” (*Allvernunft*), “virtue” (*Tugend*) or even “God” (*Gott*) and “purity of morals” (*Sittenreinheit*), as it is usually understood (Ular 1903, p. 63).

Others list the different interpretations of *De* in the *Daodejing* and its connections in various chapters to demonstrate its rich connotations to the readers. For example, after tracing the composition and basic meaning of the Chinese character “De,” the Czech orientalist Rudolf Dvořák, writing in German, summarized and explained the meaning of *De* in different chapters. He suggested that Laozi may have used *De* in the ordinary sense as virtue (chapter 38) and discussed the virtue of non-contention (chapter 68), although Laozi usually interprets it in a higher sense, especially in the sense found in chapters 21 (Dvořák 1903, p. 54).

In addition, other translators have interpreted *De* from the perspective of comparative Chinese and Western philosophy. For example, Richard Wilhelm defined *De* as a metaphysical principle in his translation. He believed that Laozi established his metaphysical theory, and, thus, Laozi’s pursuit of cognitive issues involuntarily created a metaphysical principle in *De*. Richard Wilhelm first defined *De* as follows: “What the beings receive to emerge is called *De*” (Wilhelm 1911, p. XVI). He translated it as *LEBEN* in accordance with the Gospel of John: “in him was life, and that life was the light of men”. Although Wilhelm’s interpretation of *De* is still framed in the context of the human world, he placed *De* and *Dao* on an equal footing. By comparing the ancient Chinese and Western philosophical roots and using the Bible as the basis for translation, he highlighted the special connotation of the cultural meaning of *De* and, at the same time, provided a sense of familiarity to German readers unfamiliar with Laozi’s doctrine.

4. Rethinking the “Foreignization” (*taguohua*) of Cultural Imagery in the Context of Global Laozegetics

The process of “foreignization” is a fundamental localization of works from the transmitting country by adopting the thinking and cultural rules of the receiving country (Cao and Wang 2020, p. 2). This is a process of filtering, misinterpretation and variant absorption between heterogeneous cultures, which finally creates new cultural achievements by colliding and fusing the different sides.

“Foreignization” reveals the diversity of the Global Laozegetics. Global Laozegetics continues the interpretive stance of traditional Laozegetics, focusing on the study of the translation of the *Daodejing*; thus, it “is the continuation and development of traditional Laozegetics” (Tadd 2022, p. 18). “Interpreting while translating” is an important feature of German translations of the *Daodejing*, with many researchers acting as both translators and interpreters. The German translations are an important part of Global Laozegetics in terms of the number of translations, translation history and the dissemination dimension. Therefore, studying the “foreignization” of German translations of the *Daodejing* in the context of Global Laozegetics allows for an exploration of their interpretive paradigm, which demonstrates the interpretive pluralism of Global Laozegetics and reflects the cultural dialog between East and West, as well as the characteristics of Laozegetics in the German-speaking world.

A detailed analysis of the cases of *Dao* and *De* shows that the extent of “foreignization” in cultural imagery differs. First, there is a complete extent of “foreignization;” for example, *Dao* is interpreted as “God,” and *De* is understood as a subsidiary of *Dao*. The translations and interpretations of the *Daodejing* by scholars in the German-speaking world are based primarily on principles of Western culture, with many scholars expecting to find resonance in ancient Chinese wisdom to support their own views. This kind of “foreigniza-

tion" places the cultural imagery of *Dao* and *De* squarely under the cultural traditions and discourse principles of the German-speaking world, thus making these two fundamental concepts of classical Chinese philosophy exclusive terms that are integrated into a Western context.

Second, there is a partial degree of "foreignization," such as interpreting *Dao* and *De* from a metaphysical perspective or returning them to the Chinese cultural context for interpretation. In the former case, by bringing German readers into the familiar rules of Western discourse to compare and interpret the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western philosophy, the universal nature of Chinese philosophy can be revealed. However, although the latter places the interpretation in the context of Chinese culture, the interpreters are themselves the "other", and their understanding of the *Dao* and *De* cannot be completely divorced from their native culture, thus creating a new perspective in interpreting of the *Daodejing* and confirming the complementarity between Eastern and Western cultures.

On the whole, "foreignization" has a positive effect in terms of the dissemination of Chinese classics, such as the *Daodejing*, abroad. First, it constructs a bridge for cultural exchange between the East and West, and has had an important influence on Chinese culture. Scholars from German-speaking countries overcame the great linguistic and cultural differences between East and West to learn and spread Chinese culture, such that Chinese classics, represented by the *Daodejing*, could be spread to the German-speaking world, and so that cultural imagery such as *Dao* and *De* could be integrated into a German cultural context while retaining their cultural specificity to a certain extent.

Second, "foreignization" provides new perspectives and methods of studying Laozi. Whether it was the early theological studies of religious connotations in the *Daodejing* that contributed to the comparative cultural studies of China and Germany; the literary works based on the *Daodejing* created by German writers such as *Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration* (Legend of the origin of the book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tzu's road into exile) by Bertolt Brecht; or, as in the case of the philosopher Heidegger, who directly related the sentences of the *Daodejing* to his own thought, establishing a "free relationship, without claim to correctness" (Elberfeld 2000, p. 154) with Laozi from a philosophical perspective, these "foreignization" variations have opened up new perspectives on the study of Laozi in China and promoted interest in issues such as comparative religion between East and West, Daoist thoughts in German literature and Heidegger and the *Daodejing*.

Third, "foreignization" can contribute to the development of research on German translations of the *Daodejing*. Traditional German translation research has focused on semantic transmissions of the original text by analyzing the original text in comparison with its translation to explore translation strategies, to compare the different versions or to explore the possibility of identifying a "correct" translation. From the perspective of "foreignization," the study of translations diminishes the centrality of the "original meaning" of the text; places it on an equal footing with the translated text; and analyzes variations that occur in the process of intercultural translation between heterogeneous cultures, such as China and the German-speaking world. The analysis of the preceding cases shows that, firstly, the multiplicity of Chinese characters, the simplicity of ancient Chinese expressions and the profundity of philosophies create many difficulties for translators. They may treat the same translation subject differently according to their understanding of the original text and their choice of words. Secondly, the cultural differences between the author and the translators across time and space and the academic and contemporary background of the translators—as well as their overall understanding of the original text and their expectations of the translations presented to the reader—are important factors in producing the "foreignization" of cultural imagery. Therefore, the "foreignization" in German translations cannot be simply dismissed as a "mistranslation".

Although the "foreignization" of cultural imagery has greatly facilitated the spread of Laozi's doctrine, making the *Daodejing* of the most important Chinese classics in the

German-speaking world, this also inevitably overemphasizes commonalities and obscures or ignores the particularities of Chinese culture to a certain extent. Thus, a certain degree of unique cultural values has been missing.

5. Conclusions

In recent years, Chinese scholars have discussed the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics. But, because Eastern thought and Western thought have their own ways of thinking, cultural exchanges across these heterogeneous cultures can present more difficulty than homogeneity. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature focuses on the phenomenon of variation in cross-heterogeneous cultural exchanges, neither seeking commonality alone nor blindly preserving differences. Rather, from the perspective of heterogeneity and complementarity, this theory places Eastern and Western cultures on equal footing and seeks to explore a path of cultural exchange that involves “mutual clarity and understanding”. This undoubtedly provides a new perspective on the study of the overseas dissemination of Chinese classics.

This paper presents a preliminary study of the cultural imagery *Dao* and *De* in the *Daodejing* based on the concept of “foreignization” in the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. It shows that *Dao* and *De* were converted into concepts with German cultural connotations in a certain historical and cultural context, which reflects the “Germanization” of translations and interpretations of the *Daodejing*. However, the “Germanization” of these two concepts is not identical. On the one hand, since the *Dao* is the cornerstone of Laozi’s doctrine, its interpretations and translations can better represent the translators’ overall understandings of the *Daodejing*. To achieve their interpretative and translational purposes, scholars have integrated the cultural image of *Dao* into the German cultural context and interpreted it according to concepts similar to Western religious and philosophical thought, such as “God,” “sense” and “way,” which, in a sense, increases the cultural connotation of *Dao* but, at the same time, somewhat weakens its uniqueness as an ancient Chinese philosophical concept. On the other hand, the cultural image of *De* has been relegated to a position below *Dao*, which is far less frequently interpreted and researched than *Dao* and whose translations show a kind of conventional commonality, resulting in *De* being simply accepted as the equivalent of the German *Tugend*.

“Foreignization” emphasizes the differences between Chinese and German culture while at the same time confirming their complementarity; i.e., through the collision and fusion of heterogeneous Chinese and German cultures, new cultural achievements are eventually created. For example, the core concepts of *Dao* and *De* in Laozi’s doctrine have been integrated into the German-speaking world and have become concepts with characteristics of Western cultural discourse. This is an important insight for the study of German translations of Chinese classics such as the *Daodejing*. In the context of Global Laozegetics, the study of *Daodejing* translations from the perspective of “foreignization” reflects the interpretation-oriented position of Laozegetics, and this is more conducive to grasping the characteristics of Laozegetics in different cultures around the world (Tadd 2022, p. 19). Based on the “interpretation while translating” feature of German translations of the *Daodejing*, its study can develop from the traditional perspective of “how translators translated” to “how translators interpreted;” for instance, the focus of translation studies can be changed from exploring the transmission of the original text and translation strategies to exploring the process of interpretations and causes of variations in the translations of the *Daodejing* across heterogeneous contexts. Secondly, by studying the “foreignization” of cultural imagery, it is possible to explore the path of classicization in German translations. It took more than 150 years for the *Daodejing* to become the most influential Chinese classic in the German-speaking world, with many German translations becoming classics and continuing to serve as references for translations into other languages. Scholars in the German-speaking world have never ceased to interpret the *Daodejing* in a variety of ways, whether in an interpretive mode that is entirely grounded in Western cultural principles; through a comparative perspective between China and the West; or in an attempt to re-

store a Chinese cultural context for the reader. Their research continues to enrich Global Laozegetics, which is an important source of inspiration for other scholars, especially those in China.

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