

Reconstructing the English Translation Network of the Tao Te Ching: An SNA-Based Study of Indirect Translation

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Abstract: This study investigates indirect translation in the English history of the *Tao Te Ching* through Social Network Analysis (SNA). Based on a self-constructed corpus of 254 English translations, of which 40 exhibit clear indirect translation practices, translators are modeled as nodes and source-text dependencies as directed ties inferred from paratextual evidence. The network analysis reveals a pronounced core - periphery structure in which a small number of translations—most notably those by Witter Bynner, Paul Carus and Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English—function as central hubs, while academically authoritative translations remain relatively peripheral. Further analysis shows that translational influence is shaped less by linguistic competence than by readability, publisher mediation, and market circulation. By conceptualizing indirect translation as a relational system, this study challenges source-centered models of translational authority and argues for a decentered approach to the global translation history of Chinese classical texts.

Key Words: *Tao Te Ching*, Social Network Analysis (SNA), indirect translation, translation authority

1 Introduction

No other book except *the Bible* has been translated into English as often as *Tao Te Ching*'s (Lionel Giles, 1937, pp.vii-viii; Holmes Welch, 1957, p.4). The discoverable appearance in print reveals the unshakable influence of *Tao Te Ching* in its reception, interpretation, and transformation journey in the West: as Misha Tadd (2019) points out, more than 20 percent of all existing translations are indirect translation, among which English renditions constituting 52 percent of this category (Xu & Zhu, 2024). A defining feature of this translational landscape lies in the proliferation of English renditions crafted by scholars without direct access to classical Chinese, who instead draw heavily on the legacy of prior translations—whether to align with or subvert established interpretations. As new English versions continue to multiply, the cumulative weight of this translational heritage inescapably shapes every fresh engagement with the text: even the most purportedly original translation is framed against the backdrop of its predecessors. This chain of derivative adaptation has so deeply conditioned mainstream perceptions of the *Tao Te Ching* that the majority of its bestselling English editions are, in fact, constructed entirely from earlier translations, with no direct engagement with the original Chinese text whatsoever.

Against the entrenched indirect translation practices, a set of interrelated questions arise: How are base-text lineages formed and reproduced within indirect translation chains? Which translations function as relay hubs, and why do certain versions become repeatedly cited, adapted, and re-translated? To address this gap, this study adopts Social Network Analysis (SNA) as its core methodology to unpack the relational dynamics of the *Tao Te Ching*'s Anglophone indirect translation landscape. SNA will map connections between precursor and derivative translations, identifying central source texts and bridge mediators in the transmission chain.

Combined with qualitative analysis, preliminary observation suggests a counter-intuitive pattern: translators widely regarded as authoritative within Chinese contexts (e.g., Arthur Waley, Lin Yutang) often occupy peripheral positions in indirect translation chains, whereas popular or literary renditions by figures such as Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, Stephen Mitchell and Witter Bynner emerge as central nodes. These versions—frequently characterized by spiritual, or self-cultivational readings—serve as primary relay texts, shaping subsequent translations far more decisively than philologically rigorous works. This study also advocates for a decentered perspective in Chinese classical translation studies—one that moves beyond the inherent Sinocentric bias of assuming Chinese translators’ interpretations as the sole “authentic” benchmark, thereby fostering a more open and inclusive framework for examining the text’s global translational legacy.

Methodologically, the study is based on a self-constructed database of 254 accessible English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, drawn from an estimated total of over 500 extant versions. Source-text dependencies are identified primarily through paratextual analysis rather than formal bibliographic citation, a choice that inevitably introduces interpretive bias. Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the study’s contribution. By foregrounding indirect translation as a structured and influential practice, the analysis illuminates its long-term impact on translational norms, cross-culture transmission, and the global afterlife of Chinese classical texts.

2 The indirect translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and Social Network Analysis

2.1 Indirect translations of the *Tao Te Ching*

Indirect translation, also termed re-translation or secondary translation, was first proposed by Toury (1995, p.129) in his seminal work *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Traditionally regarded as an expedient measure when direct translation is unfeasible, indirect translation has long been marginalized in both academic and professional contexts. Prior to recent decades, discussions of the indirect translation in *Tao Te Ching* studies remained fragmented, descriptive and case-driven, with limited attention to its structural role in shaping the text’s global reception. This gap began to be addressed with empirical studies documenting its prevalence: Tadd (2019) identified 452 English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* by 2019, noting that a significant proportion were produced by translators without proficiency in Chinese. Xu (2024) further quantified English as the dominant intermediary language, accounting for 69.3% of global indirect translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, highlighting its pivotal role in the transnational circulation network. These studies collectively establish indirect translation not as an occasional workaround, but as a recurrent and normalized mode of transmission.

Scholarly attention has increasingly been drawn to the prominence of indirect translation within popular and commercial contexts. Surveys of best-selling English editions reveal that indirect translations dominate the contemporary market: among the top ten best-selling versions on Amazon, seven rely explicitly on intermediary texts¹. Stephen Mitchell (1988, p.ix) openly acknowledged that his version was constructed through the consultation of “dozens of translations into English, German, and French,” and drew on his “14-year Zen training, which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciples and heirs, the early

¹ The author retrieved the top 10 best-selling English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* by sales rank on Amazon.com and found that seven of them involve the indirect translation phenomenon. The translators of these top 10 best-selling versions are: Stephen Mitchell, Benjamin Hoff, D.C. Lau, Ursula K. Le Guin, Wayne W. Dyer, Alan Watts, John H. Macdonald, Sam Torode, David Hinton, and Gia-Fu Feng et al. https://www.amazon.com/s?k=tao+te+ching&i=stripbooks&crd=27C09ULN5C1JK&srefix=Tao+%2Cstripbooks%2C879&ref=nb_sb_ss_p13n-expert-pd-ops-ranker_2_4.

Chinese Zen Masters”. Wayne W. Dyer (2007, p. xii) similarly describes his best-selling rendition as a synthesis of “what I personally felt were the most useful aspects of those ten different translations I studied.” Notably, indirect translation in this context has extended beyond translators to editor’s practices. In the widely cited translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, editor Tionette Lippe played a decisive role by “studying how each of the twelve translators had rendered a particular sentence and then returning to Feng’s translation to see what he thought it meant. Then I would find a way to express his understandings in a simple natural way and in words that had not been used by other translators” (Feng, English and Lippe, 2011, p.vi).

The legitimacy of such practices has been actively debated within translation studies. Defenders of indirect translation emphasize the mediated nature of all access to classical texts. Douglas Allchin (2002) contended that “no one living has read the original. The earliest known copies are themselves centuries old. They, in turn, likely derive from of an oral tradition. Every version of the text reflects an act of recreating”. Witter Bynner (1944, p.14) criticized existing scholarly translations as “dry and stiff”, advocating instead for renderings that bring Laozi “closer to people in their own idiom, as a being beyond race or age”. Experimental projects such as Tim Chilcott’s (2011) further test the limits of indirect translation by proposing “indirect translational reading” as a creative methodology. Drawing inspiration from Christopher Logue’s adaptation of the *Iliad*, Chilcott emphasized that understanding can sometimes compensate for the proximity to the source language. Though unable to grasp ancient Chinese phonetics and character metaphors, he avoided the religious connotations of “sage” by translating it as “those who have attained enlightenment,” framing his work as a creative experiment in structural understanding rather than linguistic reproduction. Critics, however, caution that extended chains of indirect translation risk cumulative semantic drift, ideological domestication, and the erosion of philosophical complexity (Mair, 1990).

Despite existing scholarship on indirect translations of the *Tao Te Ching* has primarily concentrated on three interrelated dimensions: the documentation of translation proliferation, the normative debate over legitimacy, and case-based analyses of influential translators and editions, what is still lacking is a systematic account of how indirect translations relate to one another as a network: how relay texts emerge and distributed, and how interpretive norms are stabilized through repeated citation and adaptation. Addressing this relational blind spot requires moving beyond case studies toward a methodological framework capable of modeling influence, mediation, and textual genealogy - an analytical gap that Social Network Analysis is uniquely positioned to fill.

2.2 Social Network Analysis in translation studies

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a methodology from the social sciences designed to systematically examine the pattern of a social network, which is represented by nodes tied by various types of relations (Martin & Wellman, 2014, pp.11-25). In translation studies, SNA has been increasingly adopted to move beyond descriptive case studies and aggregate statistics toward visualizing and quantifying the complex, often obscured relationships among translation agents, texts, and institutions (Li et al., 2024). Its application spans several subfields, including translation historiography, translation economy, scientometrics, education, and online collaborative translation. In translation historiography, SNA has proven particularly valuable for uncovering hidden networks of textual circulation, mediator influence, and decentralized agency. Gürçağlar (2007), focusing on the major publishing house Altın Kitaplar, mapped the multi-stakeholder networks of

Turkey's popular translated literature in the 1960s and 2000s, and revealed its cross-domain linkages with canonical translation spheres—such as translators' dual engagement and publishers' implicit academic collaborations—to eschew a simplistic binary opposition between the two. While Pym (2007) demonstrated that translation flows between France and Germany were mediated not by a dominant culture but by peripheral sub-networks in Belgium and Switzerland. SNA also effectively visualizes the co-evolution of translation networks and socio-political contexts. Ashrafi et al. (2019) tracked Iran's literary translation network across political epochs, noting network density rising from 0.23 to 0.37 during ideologically relaxed periods—quantifying how macro-context shapes network structure.

Beyond historiography, SNA applications in related areas reinforce its versatility. In the translation economy, it identifies key hubs like translation firms that control dissemination through “structural holes”(Abdallah & Koskinen, 2007). Xu and Li (2017) showed in analyzing Chinese interpreting communities, high-centrality clusters form around shared research interests rather than geographic proximity—an insight applicable to identifying core academic circles in *Tao Te Ching* translation studies. In educational and collaborative settings, online collaborative networks exhibit strong hierarchies where newcomer position depends on ties to core members (Risku et al., 2016; Yang, 2020).

Despite its growing application, SNA remains underutilized in research on indirect translation. Existing studies have largely focused on typologies, motivations, or ethical debates, without systematically modeling how relay texts emerge, circulate, and stabilize within broader translation systems. Applying SNA to the Anglophone translation history of the *Tao Te Ching* addresses this gap by treating translators and translations as nodes connected by directed ties of source-text dependence inferred from paratextual evidence. This relational framework enables the identification of core relay texts, peripheral translations, and intermediary agents bridging distinct interpretive communities, making it possible to test claims that cannot be substantiated through individual case studies alone. In this sense, SNA functions not merely as a visualization tool, but as an analytical framework for examining how translation authority is produced relationally through patterns of adoption, repetition, and mediation, rather than through linguistic competence alone.

3 Research Design

3.1 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

The dataset covers English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* published between 1868 and 2025. Data were collected from a range of academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, Web of Science), book platforms (Amazon, Goodreads, Terebess Online), and digital or physical library collections, including the Internet Archive and major university libraries. Given that *Tao Te Ching* is a classical Chinese text and the language background of the author, Chinese-language scholarly sources were consulted via CNKI and Wan Fang to supplement bibliographic information and contextual analysis.

Although bibliographic records suggest the existence of over 500 English versions, this study incorporates 254 translations for which full texts or physical copies were accessible. To ensure analytical consistency, translations produced by Chinese authors or ethnic Chinese translators were excluded, as were versions with unverifiable translator identities. Following this screening process, 102 translations remained. Close examination of textual and paratextual materials further identified 40 translations that clearly exhibit indirect

translation practices, forming the final analytical corpus.

3.2 Network Construction and Coding

In the constructed network, translators (or collaborative translation teams) are treated as nodes. Key attributes of these nodes are systematically enumerated in Table 1. This node dataset was formatted into a Gephi-compatible structure, with unique node IDs assigned to ensure accurate mapping between textual metadata and network visualization elements.

TABLE 1 Examples of Node Attributes in the Translation Network

Type	Year	Translator Role	Nationality	Publisher Type	Know Chinese
Aleister Crowley	1976	occultist	British	Specialty/Subject press	No
Thomas Cleary	1991	scholar	American	Trade Publisher	Yes

Directed edges represent source-text dependence, indicating that one translation explicitly or implicitly draws upon another. Unlike bibliographic citation analysis, source-text relationships were inferred primarily from paratextual evidence, including prefaces, introductions, acknowledgements, and editorial commentary. Edges were weighted to reflect the strength of source-text dependence: non-elaborative mention (weight=1), systematic comparison or annotated engagement (weight=2), and explicit designation of a prior translation as a primary source (weight=3). For the practical application of these weight values, see Table 2: Weight Grading Criteria. Table 3 further incorporates the weighting criteria specified in Table 2 into a structured edge dataset that conforms to Gephi's input requirements.

TABLE 2 Edge Weight Grading Criteria with Paratextual Examples

Source	Target	Examples	weight
Aleister Crowley	James Legge	"I was able to divine without hesitation or doubt the precise manner in which Legge had been deceived... I has merely to paraphrase his translation in the light of actual knowledge of the true significance of the terms employed."	2
Paul Carus	Stephen Mitchell	"As to method: I work from Paul Carus's literal translation, which provides English equivalents (often very quaint ones) alongside each of the Chinese ideograms."	3
Stephen Mitchell	Wayne W. Dyer	"I thank the translators and authors of the following ten books:...Tao Te Ching: A New English Version, by Stephen Mitchell."	1

TABLE 3 Sample Edge Data Structure for Network Analysis

Source	Target	Type	Weight
Aleister Crowley	James Legge	directed	2
Paul Carus	Stephen Mitchell	directed	3
Stephen Mitchell	Wayne W. Dyer	directed	1

This coding strategy allows for differentiation between incidental influence and sustained reliance, enabling more precise modeling of relay relationships.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

Network analysis proceeds in two complementary stages (Coleman, 1996): First, macro-structural properties of the network are examined, including size, density, and average path length, to assess overall connectivity and cohesion. Second, micro-structural analysis focuses on identifying influential relay texts and intermediary agents.

Given the directed nature of source-text relationships, in-degree centrality is used as the primary indicator to identify translations most frequently adopted as relay texts. To further delineate the network's hierarchical structure, k-core decomposition is applied in 4.2 to isolate densely interconnected sub-networks that constitute the backbone of indirect translation. Community detection in 4.4 is employed to identify modular clusters corresponding to distinct interpretive or ideological traditions.

These analytical procedures enable a systematic examination of how indirect translation operates as a relational system, revealing the mechanisms through which translational authority and interpretive norms are produced and sustained.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Overall analysis of source text reference: centered on In-Degree Centrality

Based on the corpus of 254 accessible English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, an initial network was constructed to examine the overall distribution of source-text reference across the Anglophone translation landscape (Figure 1). In this network, nodes represent individual translators, while directed edges indicate identifiable source-text dependence. A substantial proportion of nodes appear as isolates, exhibiting no discernible engagement in indirect translation. These isolated nodes primarily correspond to translations produced directly from the Chinese text or versions that provide insufficient paratextual information to establish source-text lineage. Their presence underscores the heterogeneity of the Anglophone translation field and confirms that indirect translation, while prominent, is not universal.

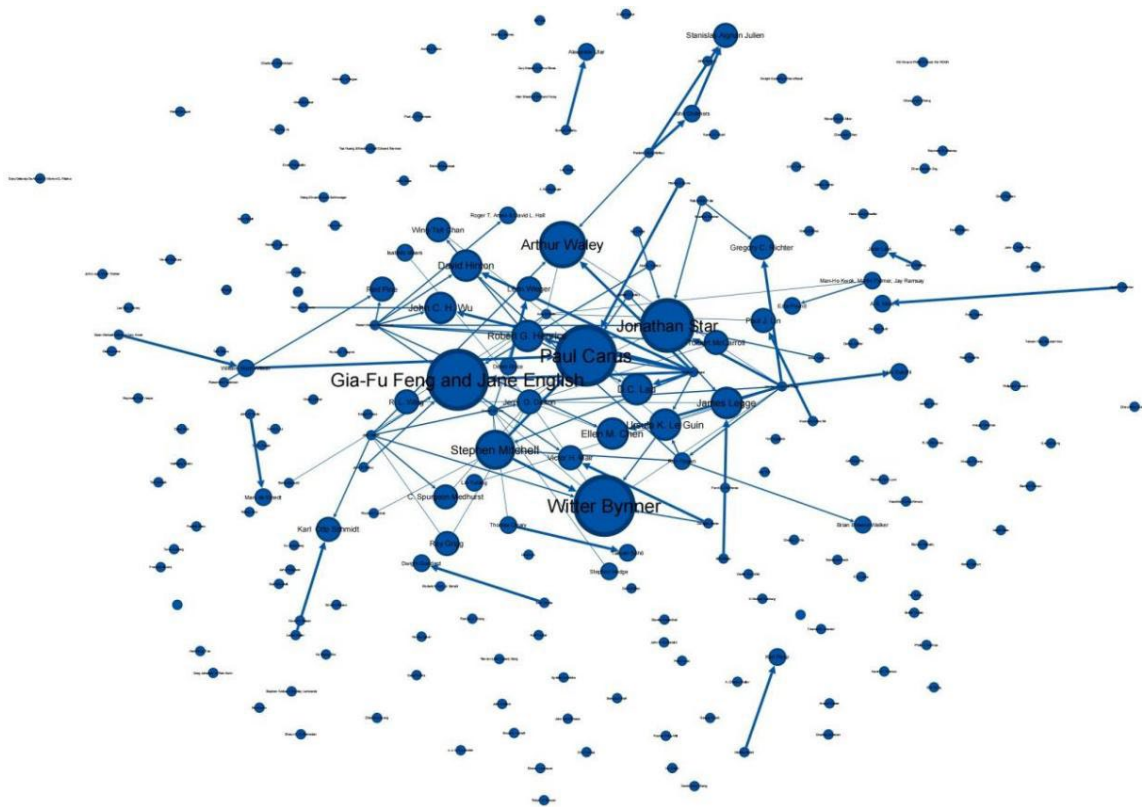


Figure 1 The Overall Source-Text Reference Network of English *Tao Te Ching* Translations

At the macro level, the network exhibits a clear core-periphery configuration. Table 4 presents the information of translator nodes with top-ranked in-degree centrality in the source text reference network. Combined with the visual features of Figure 1, it directly challenges the conventional assumption that academically authoritative translations dominate the reference lineage. Instead of Sinological giants like James Legge, the top nodes with the highest in-degree centrality are Paul Carus (1898), Witter Bynner (1944), and Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English (1972), each with an in-degree of 7. They are followed by Jonathan Star (in-degree 6), Arthur Waley (in-degree 5), and Stephen Mitchell (in-degree 4). Established scholarly figures such as James Legge, D. C. Lau, and Arthur Waley appear with moderate in-degree values (3 to 5), positioning them as secondary rather than primary hubs.

TABLE 4 Translators Ranked by In-Degree Centrality in the Source-Text Reference Network

Lable	In-Degree	Lable	In-Degree
Witter Bynner	7	James Legge	3
Paul Carus	7	Robert G.Henrics	3
Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English	7	C. Lau	3
Jonathan Star	6	Ursula K. Le Guin	3
Arthur Waley	5	David Hinton	3
Stephen Mitchell	4	John C. H. Wu	3
		Ellen M. Chen	3

This pattern suggests that translation centrality is not evenly distributed across the corpus, nor does it correlate directly with the sheer number of available translations. The ascendancy of Carus, Bynner, and Feng & English as core hubs stems from their perceived utility: Carus’s literal, ideogram-aligned rendition offered terminological precision that became a trusted anchor for non-Chinese-speaking translators, as evidenced by Stephen Mitchell’s explicit note². Bynner’s idiomatic, culturally localized adaptation explicitly rejected the “dry and stiff” style of scholarly translations, resonating deeply with Feng & English’s collaborative work—refined by non-Chinese speaking editor Tionette Lippe through synthesizing twelve prior translations—struck a balance between linguistic fluidity and cultural authenticity, solidifying its status as a go-to base text for contemporary translators.

Thus, the network map and centrality metrics collectively reveal an alternative ecosystem of influence, one where pragmatic accessibility, cultural mediation, and editorial synthesis often outweigh scholarly authority in shaping the textual genealogy of English *Tao Te Ching* translations. This macro-level, centrality-based analysis of the unconventional hierarchy sets the stage for deeper contextual inquiry. To understand the mechanisms that produced this network, the following sections will investigate: the professional identities and Chinese-language proficiency of the key translators; the publisher types associated with these core source texts; and the network’s modular communities and their role in shaping interpretive lineages.

4.2 Translator Profiles: linguistic competence and identity effects in the network

Following the identification of structurally central translators in the overall network, this section employs ego-network analysis to examine how indirect translation operates at the level of individual influence, with particular attention to translators’ Chinese-language proficiency and professional identity. Figure 2 visualizes the source-text reference network after excluding isolated nodes, with blue nodes indicating competence in Chinese. It could be concluded that indirect translation is not confined to non-Chinese-speaking translators, nor does linguistic competence guarantee centrality. Some of the most influential relay texts—most notably Witter Bynner—were produced without direct access to the source language. This pattern suggests that indirect translation in the Anglophone *Tao Te Ching* tradition functions as a normalized practice embedded in a cumulative translational system, rather than as a compensatory strategy driven solely by linguistic limitation.

² Mitchell, S. (1988). *Tao Te Ching: A new English version*(p,x). Harper & Row. “As to method: I worked from Paul Carus’s literal version, which provides English equivalents (often very quaint ones) alongside each of the Chinese ideograms”.

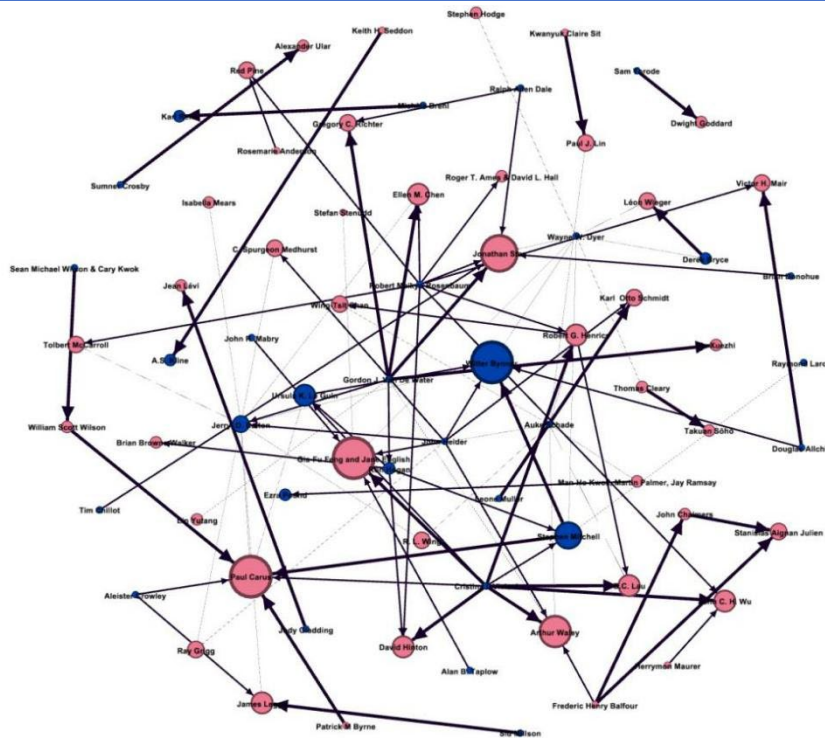


Figure 2 The Core Translation Network Color-Coded by Translators' Chinese Proficiency

While this normalized practice has formed a transmissive lineage rooted in the cumulative translational system—with Witter Bynner acting as a structurally pivotal figure whose translation has exerted a profound influence on the creation of a series of best-selling versions by translators including Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen Mitchell and Wayne Dyer—such transmissive influence can also generate a countervailing effect, potentially leading subsequent translations to gradually deviate from or even distort the original meanings of the *Tao Te Ching*.

The ego-network centered on Ursula K. Le Guin (Figure 3) provides a particularly illustrative case. Le Guin acknowledged that “this is true of Bynner’s very free, poetic ‘American version’, and its truth helped give me the courage to work on my own American version fifty years later”(1997, p,x). Despite the absence of direct engagement with the Chinese text, her translation achieved wide circulation and functioned as a source for subsequent versions, including Ron Hogan’s adaptation. Ironically, Hogan’s (2004) stated aim to “take out as much of the ‘poetry’ as possible, to make the text sound like dialogue” led to radical departures. In Chapter 20, for instance, he inserts the colloquial phrase: “Don’t spend too much time thinking about stupid shit”—a move that many scholars regard as a flattening, if not a profanation, of the original’s contemplative tone. Subsequent translators such as Gordon J. Van de Water, though avoids Hogan’s most jarring colloquialisms, still suffers from significant conceptual dilution. In the rendering of Chapter 6 “谷神不死，是为玄牝。玄牝之门，是谓天地根。绵绵若存，用之不勤”， he translated as “Mother Nature surrounds us; As Heaven and Earth, And is immortal” (2011, p.18), which flattens the profound procreative and cosmological metaphors of “the Mystic Female”(玄牝) and “the root of Heaven and Earth”(天地根) into the generic and diluted concept of “Mother Nature,” thereby dissipating the metaphysical nuance of the original into a vague naturalistic theism.

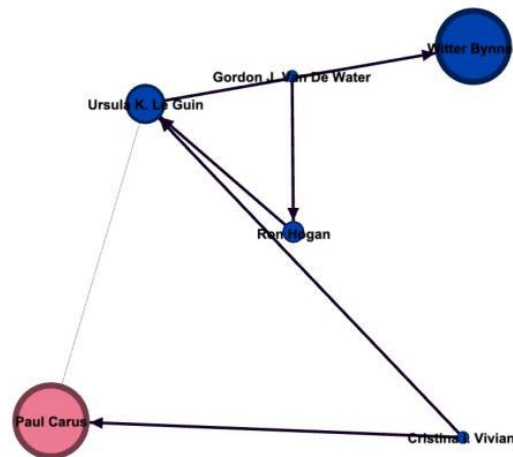


Figure 3 Ego-network of Ursula K. Le Guin

Beyond linguistic competence, analysis shows that translator identity emerges as a critical factor—the most frequently cited influential relay texts are produced by writers, poets, or cultural commentators rather than academically trained sinologists. This shared identity shapes a distinct translational “vision,” one that prioritizes rhythmic cadence and poetic re-imagination over strict philological fidelity. As Jonathan Star notes (2001, pp.vii-viii), “While they used the English lexicon to accomplish their purpose (which was to make a scholarly translation), and while it left the text correct in a literal sense, it deprived the verses of their sheer beauty and poetic power.” However, when such versions become primary reference within the network, their interpretive emphases—particularly the framing of the *Tao Te Ching* as a guide to personal cultivation or spiritual self-help—are repeatedly reinforced, often at the expense of philosophical complexity.

4.3 Publisher Dynamics: the commercial architecture of indirect translation

While indirect translation of the *Tao Te Ching* partly stems from translators’ lack of Chinese proficiency, and poetic reinterpretations have lowered barriers to engaging with the text, the proliferation of such translations—despite varying quality—cannot be divorced from the dynamics of the publishing industry. This section, combined k-core analysis with publisher distribution data from the full corpus of 254 translations, examines how publishers act as key intermediaries in the indirect translation network, driving the production and dissemination of derivative versions through commercial logic and market positioning.

To isolate the most influential publishing actors, k-core decomposition ($k=3$) was applied to the network (see Figure 4). Figure 4 (k -value of 3) is color-coded by publisher type: green for trade publishers, blue for academic press, pink for subject/speciality presses, and orange for self-publishing platforms. Translations located within higher-order k-cores are disproportionately published by a limited set of presses, including but not limited to big publishing houses such as Penguin Publishing Group, Random House Publishing Group and HarperCollins, as well as Shambhala etc.,. These translations, however, achieve high in-degree centrality not through textual authority (combined with figure 2), but through institutional visibility and market-driven dissemination. In this sense, publishers function as powerful mediating agents that transform certain translations into relay texts, amplifying their influence within the indirect translation network.

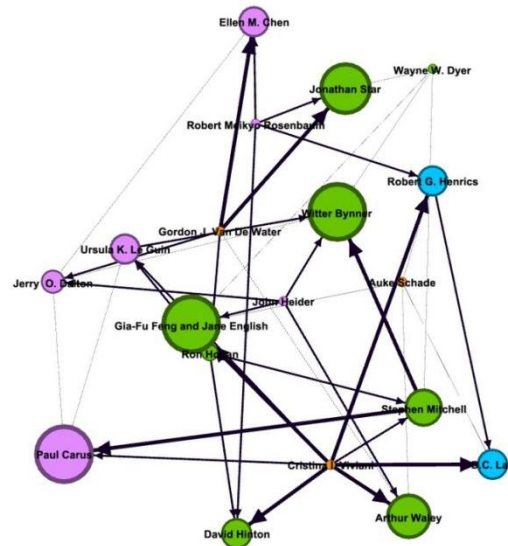


Figure 4 K-Core Sub-network (k=3) colored by Publisher Type

Arthur Waley's (1958, p.13) dual categorization of *Tao Te Ching* translations—"historical" and "scriptural"—has evolved to reflect a market-driven shift toward modern life guides. This transformation is intertwined with the rise of counterculture in late 20th-century Western societies, where the text was repackaged as a pragmatic resource for personal growth, leadership, and well-being. "The end result of decades of anti-consumerist, anti-establishment, and anti-corporate activism has been not merely an increase in material prosperity, but a stunning intensification of the very consumerist tide that it was supposed to resist" (Heath & Potter, 2004, p.2). As counter-cultural enthusiasm for Taoist thought was co-opted by consumerism, publishers capitalized on this demand by framing the *Tao Te Ching* as a "commodified wisdom product," aligning it with the booming self-help book market (valued at \$800 million in the U.S. in 2020, with a 15% annual growth rate; Worldmetrics). A broader quantitative overview of the 254-translation corpus further contextualizes these findings (see Figure 5). A striking proportion of English translations (up to 25%) are issued through self-published editions, a trend that becomes especially pronounced from the late 1970s onward and continues into the present.

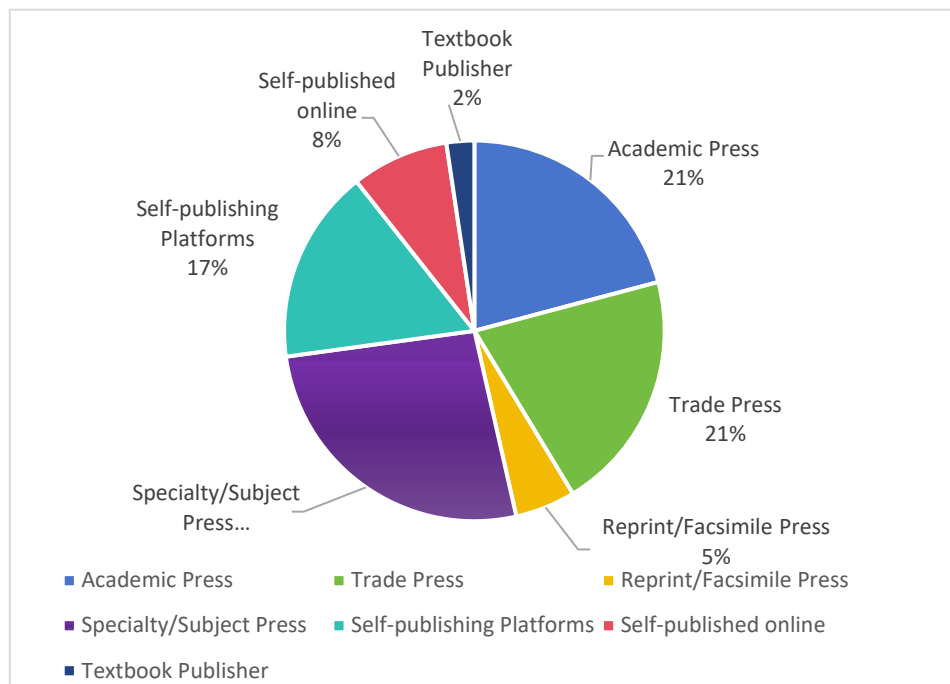


Figure 5 Distribution of Publisher Types Across 254 Translation Corpus

Lacking academic peer-review systems, self-help platforms (e.g.: Xlibris, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, iUniverse) directly facilitated the production of derivative *Tao Te Ching* editions. Following John Heider's 1984 hybrid work *The Tao of Leadership*, at least 18 English translations explicitly framed as self-help guides have entered the U.S. market. As scholar Lucas Carmichael (2017, pp.6-7) observes, this phenomenon is self-reinforcing: translators' heavy "reliance on previous popular texts" and the "popular successes of their efforts on the translation market" incentivize the continuous production of similar indirect translations, thereby embedding the practice firmly within a commercial cycle of spiritual consumerism.

From a publishing perspective, indirect translation represents a secure investment strategy. Widely embraced by general readers, Wayne Dyer's work underwent multiple reprints, after which his contracted publisher, Hay House, expanded the translation into a diversified product line, including paperback and hardcover editions as well as audiobooks. Hay House further extended this model by releasing Spanish-language relay translations based on the English version, illustrating a commercially integrated mode of production in which direct and indirect translations form a continuous chain. This model shortens the production cycle of indirect translations and enhances investment efficiency. As Pieta (2019, pp.27–28) observes, relay translation is primarily motivated by cost-effectiveness and risk mitigation. Translating via an intermediary language is typically less expensive than translating directly from a less widely taught source language, while intermediary languages often carry greater symbolic prestige and market familiarity. As a result, translations filtered through such languages are more likely to align with audience expectations and face a lower risk of rejection.

The findings of this section demonstrate that indirect translation represents a strategic extension of profit-generating and serves as a concrete manifestation of publishers' commercially driven investment logic. This model shortens production cycles, reduces the direct costs of translation, and effectively lowers the

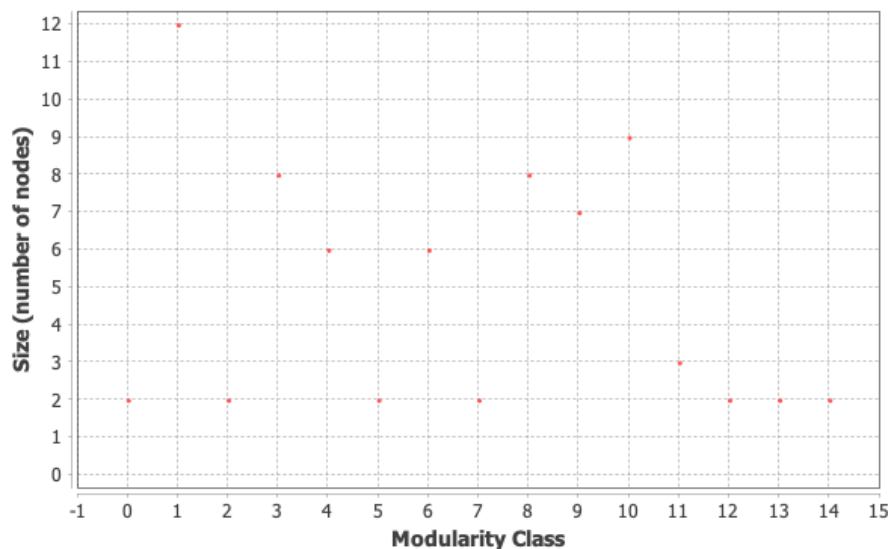
comprehensive costs of publishing. However, the standardized and popularized interpretations provided by intermediary translators are not only a direct catalyst for a text to become a source for further indirect translation but also a crucial guarantee for publishers to mitigate market risks.

4.4 Modularity Communities: divergent interpretive pathways within the network

To further examine the internal heterogeneity of the indirect translation network, this section adopts modularity analysis in Gephi. Unlike classifications based on predefined attributes—such as translators’ linguistic competence, professional identity, or publication period—which fall into the category of official criteria in Bourdieu’s terms, which “in fact serve as a mask for hidden criteria” (1984, p.96), modularity identifies clusters inductively, grouping nodes according to dense patterns of mutual connectivity. This approach allows communities to emerge from actual source-text reference behavior, rather than from externally imposed categories.

The modularity analysis reveals that the Anglophone indirect translation network of the *Tao Te Ching* is composed of several distinct communities. The modularity class visualization (Figure 6) and its corresponding size distribution (Table 5) plot are presented herein. The plots show that Classes 1, 3, 8 and 9 rank among the top with at least 8 nodes each, and thus these classes are selected as the focus of subsequent analysis.

TABLE 5 Size Distribution of Modularity Classes Identified in the Network
Size Distribution



The largest modularity class (purple nodes) in the network corresponds to a literary and interpretive translation community, characterized by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English in the centre. With dense internal connectivity and frequent mutual referencing, it indicates a shared orientation toward readability, philosophical resonance, and aesthetic reformulation. However, a critical distinction emerges when examining Feng’s interpretive approach, which stands apart from that of his peers who adopt rigorously academic and textually grounded interpretive strategies. Feng’s interpretation is deeply shaped by the infusion of Taoist thought, which was revitalized under a confluence of personal adversity and the American counterculture movement: “by chance I met Alan Watts, and Kerouac, and North Beach San Francisco

crowd. I really, then, started to wake up, started to feel the essence of our purpose of living. So I kind of became pursued in the field of spiritual values, and that opened up my new path of searching for the Daoism, again (Feng, 1977). His interpretation catalyzed by Western cultural contexts, coupled with line-by-line revisions by the editor to meet the expectations of readers and publishers collectively established him as the most cited central figure within this interpretive community. Moreover, the marginal but visible presence of Ezra Pound further illustrates the nature of this community. While Pound's translation exerted considerable cultural influence, its weak integration into the core of the module suggests that its impact is inspirational rather than genealogical.

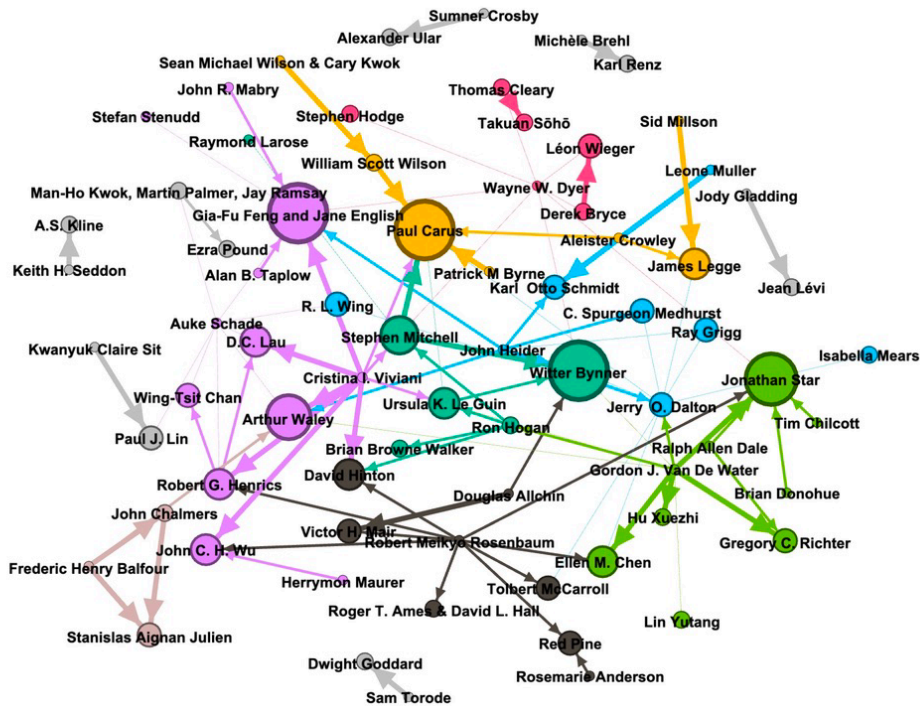


Figure 6 Modularity Analysis Revealing Interpretive Communities

Another major modularity class (green nodes) includes translators such as Jonathan Star, Gregory C. Richter and Ellen M. Chen. Compared with the literary-oriented community, this cluster is more compact and relatively insulated from other modules. The network structure of this module suggests a translation oriented toward conceptual clarification and philosophical interpretative. As Jonathan star (2001, p.5) in his translation of chapter 5 “天地不仁，以万物为刍狗” illustrated, the original translation of “Heaven and Earth are not humane, and regard the people as straw dogs” is an accurate one that might be intellectually correct, but his rendering of “Heaven and Earth have no preference. A man may choose one over another but to Heaven and Earth all are the same” adheres closely to the original text as well, far more profound because of its ability to be immediately grasped and applied to one’s life. Moreover, given the anxiety about the world’s ecology, particularly in the face of possible nuclear conflict, Ellen M. Chen (1989, p.xi) “hopes to help lay the foundation for a new religious-philosophical consciousness conducive to establishing peace on earth among all creatures through *Tao Te Ching*”. Translations within this cluster tend to emphasize terminological precision and philosophical dimension that can be systematically interpreted and discussed in practical life. Despite addressing the same source text with the literary interpretive community, the two communities remain structurally distinct. This separation shows that these two clusters operate under different evaluative norms and circulate within largely non-overlapping readerships.

Modularity Class 3 (blue nodes) is composed primarily of twentieth-century and contemporary translators such as C. Spurgeon Medhurst, Ray Grigg and Jerry O. Dalton. Their translations are indirectly grounded in earlier missionary and sinological base texts, representing a secondary interpretive layer, in which classical translations are re-mediated and reformulated for new readerships. This is evidenced by the directional flow of influence from earlier modules, coupled with relatively dense internal connections among its members. Modularity Class 8 (brown nodes), which is comparable in size to Class 3, does not exhibit dense internal cohesion, but instead maintains multiple connections across different clusters. More of a theoretical reflection line, this class contributes conceptual frameworks that reshape translation norms across communities. As evidenced by the work from Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (2003), whose coinage of the dynamic term “道” into “way-being” and the promotion of a comparative philosophical interpretive path have exerted great influence on subsequent scholars including Robert G. Henrics, Michael Puett and Chinese scholar Liu Xiaogan. Thus, translators in this class are less frequently adopted as direct base texts, but their interpretive models inform how Tao is conceptualized, translated, and contextualized elsewhere in the network.

The section demonstrates that indirect translation of the *Tao Te Ching* unfolds along multiple, structurally distinct trajectories rather than a single linear path. Each modularity constitutes a localized interpretive community shaped by shared relay practices, internal cohesion, and degrees of openness to external influence. While some classes amplify literary or spiritual reinterpretations, others maintain tighter conceptual boundaries or function as mediating zones between traditions. These findings suggest that interpretive drift is not uniform across the network, but contingent upon the relational architecture of specific translational communities.

5 Conclusion

By applying SNA to the English translation history of the *Tao Te Ching*, this study demonstrates that indirect translation operates as a structured and influential system rather than a marginal or deficient practice. The findings reveal that translational authority is produced relationally through relay texts, publishing infrastructures, and repeated mediation, rather than through philological proximity to the Chinese source alone. The dominance of poetic and reader-oriented translations as network hubs, alongside the peripheral position of scholarly versions, underscores the need to move beyond Sinocentric and source-oriented evaluative frameworks. More broadly, this study highlights the value of network-based approaches in translation historiography and calls for a decentered understanding of how classical texts acquire meaning and authority through transnational circulation.

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