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The Translingual *Ziran* of *Laozi* Chapter 25: Global Laozegetics and Meaning Unbound by Language

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Abstract: Many scholars view translations of the Chinese classics as inevitably lacking fidelity to the “original,” asserting language difference as a fundamental impediment to cross-cultural understanding. The present study disputes this viewpoint by employing the perspective of Global Laozegetics. This notion affirms a fundamental continuity between the native *Laozi* or *Daodejing* commentarial tradition and its corresponding foreign translation tradition. Specifically, I will investigate a range of interpretations of the term *ziran* found in *Laozi* Chapter 25, including 16 traditional and modern Chinese readings and 67 translations in 26 languages. My broad investigation of this narrow topic will reveal a rich historical development of interpretation and translation, highlight the philosophical ramifications of different exegetical choices, deepen our understanding of the core Daoist concept *ziran*, and assist in confirming the basic premise of Global Laozegetics that language, even the original language of Chinese, is secondary to interpretive strategy when engaging with classical works.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; *Laozi*; *Daodejing*; *ziran*; translation; commentary; multilingual; hermeneutics



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1. Introduction

Scholars of Chinese philosophy both within and without China often hold a certain level of suspicion concerning translations. Many view translations of the Chinese classics as lacking fidelity to the “original,” that “European languages can only most imperfectly ‘speak’ the world being referenced” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 57). However, these views both misconstrue the nature of the “original” Chinese text and its forms in other languages. Firstly, even if one could determine a true “original meaning” of a single text, it undoubtedly would not represent how the text was read in Chinese throughout Chinese history. That is the realm of commentary and interpretation, which transforms an “original” into a classic. Secondly, translation is not simply a flawed effort at reproducing a pristine text in a target language but a manifestation of the translator’s inevitable interpretation of said text.

This view is supported by the idea of Global Laozegetics (*Quanqiu Laoxue* 全球老學), which affirms a fundamental continuity between the native *Laozi* or *Daodejing* commentarial tradition and its corresponding foreign translation tradition.¹ Said continuity relies on the premise that translation is necessarily an act of interpretation, and that this process does not categorically differ from that of traditional Chinese language commentary regardless of any specific “foreign” readings. This study of the *Laozi* is particularly suitable for investigating translingual questions of interpretation and fidelity due to the astounding quantity of the classic’s commentaries and related works in Chinese—2185 according to Ding Wei (Ding 2004)—and the equally striking volume of its 2049 translations in 97 languages.²

To focus this broad topic, I rely on Henderson and Ng’s (2014, p. 38) principle that “obscurities in the classical text . . . are probably the most common ‘triggers for exegesis’.” One such obscurity is the meaning of *ziran* 自然 in the famous passage at the end of *Laozi* chapter 25: *Dao fa ziran* 道法自然 (Dao models *ziran*/emulates *ziran*/follows the law of *ziran*). While the term *ziran* is generally challenging, this specific instance that appears to elevate it above the Dao has inspired exceptionally rich exegesis. Such interpretations are imbedded within the larger intellectual frameworks of commentaries and translations,

but due to the expansive approach employed in this paper intertextual concerns must be set aside.

I will first discuss six types among 16 divergent ancient and modern Chinese readings of this *ziran* to demonstrate the impressive diversity of “native” conceptions. This will undergird the subsequent historical and philosophical analysis of *ziran* articulations found in 67 translations in 26 languages. Summarized in English in order of first appearance, the most important and widely shared types revealed among these translations are: 1. Being, self-existing; 2. itself; 3. its own nature, what it is in itself, self-so; 4. from itself, spontaneous; 5. natural, naturalness; 6. Nature.³ Because the relations of these six translation types to the six Chinese interpretation types involve important subtle discrepancies, I will address them separately and then explain their connections in the body of the paper.

I must stress that the basic manifestations of *ziran* are not language specific, at least setting aside issues of subtle semantic variations to highlight the translanguing side of interpretation. The shared nature of these readings, sometimes belonging to multilingual “interpretive lineages,” undermines the notion that philosophical concepts necessarily require the unique characteristics of any language to be articulated. Terms and concepts are the most basic units of philosophy. If these can translate, then there are fewer potential impediments to philosophical translation generally.

Our broad investigation of this narrow topic reveals a rich historical development of interpretation and translation, highlights the philosophical ramifications of different exegetical choices, deepens our understanding of the core Daoist concept *ziran*, and assists in confirming the basic premise of Global Laozegetics that language, even the original language of Chinese, is secondary to interpretive strategy when engaging with classical works.⁴

2. Chinese Readings of the Chapter 25 *Ziran*

We must first establish a baseline for possible and diverse readings within Chinese Laozegetics. These comprise a range of pre-modern and modern Chinese conceptions of the *Laozi* chapter 25 *ziran* that come from different Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and secular commentarial sources. This account will clarify how the variety of translation tactics do not simply result from the challenge of conveying *ziran* in a non-Chinese language but primarily emerge from different modes of exegesis. The multiplicity of Chinese approaches to this particular use of *ziran* includes the following clusters of six especially divergent readings: 1. self-existing, non-emulating, non-contingent; 2. universal cosmic nature; 3. emptiness, suchness as the origin of all; 4. self-referential to the Dao as itself; 5. spontaneous or naturalness; 6. the individual natures of all things (Nature).⁵

The earliest and one of the most basic Chinese readings of the last line of chapter 25 comes from the Han dynasty work *Heshanggong's Commentary* (*Laozi Heshanggong zhangju* 老子河上公章句). This commentary presents a type of interpretation where *ziran* signifies the state of not relying on or existing according to anything external. As a detailed analysis of Heshanggong's conception of *ziran* exists elsewhere (Tadd 2019b), I will simply present a summary here.

Heshanggong glosses the whole line as *Dao xing ziran, wu suo fa* 道性自然，無所法 (The nature of the Dao is *ziran*. There is nothing that it emulates)⁶ (Wang 1993, p. 103). This identifies *ziran* as the most basic quality of the Dao and confirms that by emulating *ziran* the Dao emulates nothing outside itself. It is unbounded and contingent on nothing. Thus, the Dao remains in a state distinct from the other three things that precede it in this passage—humanity, Earth, and Heaven—and which emulate something beyond themselves and so do not have pure *ziran* nature. This reading of the text creates a hierarchy of levels of *ziran*, with the Dao existing in a transcendentally perfect state of non-contingent existence, and the other three emulating this self-determined state to increasingly imperfect degrees (Tadd 2019b, pp. 5–6).

Reformulations of this first reading of *ziran* as non-emulation also appear within the later Chinese Laozegetics tradition. It is often seen within the many popular commentaries

from the Song and Ming. For example, Lü Huiqing 吕惠卿 (1032–1111) as quoted by Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1620) says, “The Way takes non-emulation as what it emulates, as that which does not emulate [anything] is just *ziran*. Thus it is said, ‘The Way emulates *ziran*.’”⁷ In this manner, Lü more explicitly confirms that *ziran* equals non-contingency. Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) similarly reformulates this view when he states, “Because Dao is its own root and origin, preceding Heaven and Earth, and unceasingly existing since ancient times, there is nothing that it emulates . . . Now Dao being its own root and origin has no cause and is *ziran*.”⁸ All these three present *ziran* as core qualities of Dao: non-contingent and *causa sui*.

A second reading presents *ziran* not just as the nature or quality of the Dao, but as the cosmic universal nature itself. Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) articulates this saying, “*Ziran* is what is called nature (*xing* 性).” Here this rich philosophical term is used to signify the cosmic sense of the Neo-Confucian universal *xing* “nature.” Thus this *ziran* is not a way to describe the basic quality of the Dao—its own nature—but is itself the shared cosmic good nature (善性 *shanxing*) that sustains the order of existence and is what we must all strive to attain (Wei 2011, p. 22).

A third reading is metaphysical in a different way. Yuan dynasty Buddhist monk Mengshan Deyi 蒙山德異 (1231–1308) asserts his own transcendent conception of *ziran* that situates it above Dao. He says, “The Dao following *ziran* means the one True *qi* is born from within vacuous brilliance, and that the miraculous function of *ziran* is unlimited and inexhaustible.”⁹ Deyi pairs *ziran* with the unlimited creative potential of emptiness, the ground of Being. This more Buddhist notion of the ultimate then becomes the source of Dao as the original substance in the world—the True *qi*.

The fourth approach collapses the conceptual distance between Dao and *ziran*, making *ziran* equal Dao itself. This sense arises from the etymological construction of the expression (*zi* “self,” *ran* “like”) reduced to signify “self” or “Dao itself.” In the context of chapter 25, this means Dao just models “itself.” One early explicit statement of this view comes from Li Zhongqing 李仲卿, who in his 625 debate with the Buddhist monk Huicheng 慧乘 says, “Dao simply is *ziran* and *ziran* is just Dao. As there is nothing else to emulate, it is able to emulate Dao [itself].”¹⁰ Similarly, the famous Song Daoist priest Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1134–1229) interprets the line as *Dao ruci eryi* 道如此而已 (Dao is simply like this) (Bai 2011, p. 531), suggesting once again Dao as *ziran* is just “so,” just “Dao.”

This sense of the Dao emulating itself becomes more explicit in the modern period when one finds Zhang Dainian 张岱年 stating that the chapter 25 conclusion means *Dao yi ziji wei fa* 道以自己为法 (The Dao takes self as the model) (Zhang 1989, p. 79), and Ren Jiyu 任继愈 who interprets it as *Dao xiaofa taziji* 道效法它自己 (The Dao models itself) (Ren 2006, p. 56). In all these ancient and modern cases, *ziran* is reduced to an alternative term for Dao or to the self-reflexive pronoun. Regardless of their specific wording, the interpreters all conclude that Dao emulates or models itself.

The fifth type incorporates two modern Chinese *ziran* interpretations—*ziran er ran* 自然而然 and *zifaxing* 自发性—that resemble the popular foreign readings of “spontaneous” and “naturalness.” For one, Xu Kangsheng 许抗生 considers the whole passage to show that as there is nothing higher than the Way, it “can only emulate its own spontaneous (*ziran er ran* 自然而然) existence” (Xu 1985, p. 114). This draws on Heshanggong’s “non-emulation” theory while emphasizing *ziran* sense of “spontaneous” to highlight the dynamic and creative side of the Way. Liu Xiaogan, a scholar who has operated in both Chinese and English, likewise uses *ziran er ran*, which he translates as “naturalness” (Liu 2006, p. 289). Lastly, Ye Shuxun 叶树勋 analyzes *zi* 自 etymologically. He notes one of its basic meanings as *zifa* 自发 (spontaneous), which can likewise apply to the compound *ziran* (Ye 2020, p. 31). This fifth reading partially encompasses the idea of the way following its own nature, just being itself, but it can also imply the spontaneous emergent activities of all the individual things in the world.

The sixth exegetical approach, first found in the commentary of Wang Bi, emphasizes this individuality and plurality of *ziran* things as exactly what the Way models. Like with

Wei Yuan, it is associated with “nature,” but here it is not the universal cosmic nature. Instead for Wang Bi, the Way following *ziran* means according with the individual natures of all things. As Rudolf G. Wagner somewhat idiosyncratically translates:

The Way not deviating from That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is and consequently achieving their [the ten thousand entities’] nature—this is what “it takes That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is as model” means. Taking That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is as model means taking squareness as a model when among the squares, and roundness when among round ones, and thus nothing deviating in nothing from That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is. “That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is” is a word for the designationless, an expression for getting to the Ultimate. (Wagner 2003, pp. 203–4)¹¹

The key point in Wang’s reading, clarified by Wagner’s amazingly long translation of the two characters *zi* and *ran* as “That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is,” is that *ziran* is the plurality of things being themselves and also the “Ultimate” state of existence.

Variations of this view also appear in other traditional and modern studies. For example, Li Rong 李榮 (c. 650–83) takes the Sage as the subject for the whole sequence of emulation that culminates with *ziran*. He says, “The Sage is desireless . . . he allows things to return to independent transformation (*duhua* 獨化), emulating *ziran*.”¹² This places the Sage in a comparable role to Dao, emulating *ziran* and thus allowing things their own independent processes. The Song Emperor Huizong comes to a similar conclusion saying, “The Dao emulates *ziran* because it responds to things. *Ziran* is not completed (alone) by Dao, as it emerges from responding to things. Thus, the Dao descends and below emulates [things].”¹³ This suggest being *ziran* means that the Dao engages with things so it can properly respond to them. Thus, as for Wang Bi, *ziran* is the dynamic quality of adapting and responding to the diversity of things, allowing them to be themselves. Lastly, the contemporary scholar Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 continues this reading by specifying the Dao in chapter 25 as following or according with the *ziran*, i.e., the *ziji ruci* 自己如此 (self-so), of the myriad things (Wang 2008, p. 42). Wang’s key move is to equate *ziran* to the totality of all individuals (perhaps identifiable with Nature) and elevate them over Dao. This makes the Dao a force that responds to but does not control things, and lets them be self-so. Put another way, Wang’s interpretation implies an anti-authoritarian vision of Dao in contrast to other more hierarchical views like that of Heshanggong.

Chinese Laozegetics proffers abundant possible solutions to this classic four-character puzzle. Notably, these conceptions often have little to do with the unique polysemy of the term *ziran* in the Chinese original, and emerge from a profusion of different Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist intellectual traditions brought to bear on the *Laozi*. As I shall show in the following sections, the non-Chinese interpretations found in the many *Laozi* translations grapple with nearly identical questions about the nature of the text’s cosmology, and their choices further support the primacy of interpretation over the specificity of language—including “native” language—when engaging with a classic text.

3. *Ziran* Translated as “Being” or “Self-Existing”

Turning to non-Chinese understandings, i.e., translations, of the key chapter 25 passage, one encounters new philosophies and religions engaging with the exegetical problem of *ziran*. Despite the dual distances of language and culture, the issues and options that emerge reveal meaningful continuities.

The earliest preserved and basically datable¹⁴ translations of the chapter 25 *ziran* are found in two Latin manuscripts housed in the British Library.¹⁵ One is partial, and one is complete, with both being composed by Figurist Jesuits in the early 18th century. Their conceptions of *ziran* reveal an undeniable exegetical, or perhaps more accurately termed eisegetical, approach. Though these monks had a mission to find hidden Catholic doctrine in the *Laozi*, they took the Chinese tradition quite seriously in this process. Both translations drew on historical commentaries to support their readings, even translating

the relevant comments into Latin. As we will see, their notion that Dao equals God also heavily informed how they interpret and translate *ziran*.

As the complete Latin translation synthesized earlier partial efforts at interpretation and translation, I shall begin with the incomplete text that most likely appeared first (Wei 2018). There the whole line *Dao fa ziran* becomes “Tao Virtutem habet Entis à se” (The Dao possesses the characteristic of self-Being) (Textus quidam ex libro n.d., p. 220). This rendering is further accompanied by the Chinese comment 道又法於自然，是自然又大於道 (Lin 2011, p. 506)¹⁶ and its Latin translation “Tao denique Virtus pervenit ad Ens seu naturam Entis a se, certe inde sequitur quod Natura Entis a se nobilior est Tao” (The character of the Dao ultimately reaches toward “Being” or the nature of self-Being, and so the Nature of self-Being is greater than the Dao) (Textus quidam ex libro n.d., p. 223).

These related translations of original text and commentary must be carefully unpacked. First, one finds the fascinating translation of *ziran* as “Entis à se,” which I retranslate as “self-Being” to highlight how *Entis* indicates “Being” with a capital “B.” However, a more descriptive translation might be “existing from itself” or to use technical Catholic language derived from the very expression *ens a se*—aseity. This Latin translation identifies *ziran* with Being, but more specifically the self-existing characteristic of Being. This is a classic quality of God, but the translator seeks support for this reading and translation in the Chinese tradition. This Chinese comment and its Latin translation simply present a view where *ziran* supersedes the Dao as the highest reality, never explicitly confirming the “self-existence” reading of *ziran*. Of course, within the framework of Greco-Christian cosmology, the logic of this connection emerges from the belief that “Being” remains the ultimate, as the self-existing. Such an elevation of *ziran* in this comment clarifies why *ziran* might be identified with “Being” itself, and even equated with the Catholic God or maybe abstractly in some sense God himself as supreme Being.

Turning to the complete Latin *Laozi* manuscript, one finds the exact same translation, “Tao virtutem habet Entis a se” (Liber Sinicus Táó Tě Kīm n.d., p. 87). This work, however, offers a more revealing explanation for its translator’s choice. The accompanying interpretation says, “Æternam in Divino Vû 無 naturam habens Inscrutabilem. Ipsismet est Ens a se Independens et Absolutissimum” (The Eternal in Divine Wu 無 (Void) possesses an Unknowable nature. Itself is self-Being, Independent, and Most Absolute) (Liber Sinicus Táó Tě Kīm n.d., p. 90). Here *Wu* is not “Non-Being,” as it is sometimes translated, but true “Being,” as understood as the ultimate reality of *ain soph* according to the Christian Cabbala perspective of the Figurists (Von Collani 2000, p. 537).

The Dao is thus identified with the true Being that is an unknowable void. It is self-existing, independent, and absolute. This firmly situates *ziran* as the key quality or nature of the divine. Reading *ziran* as Being or the self-existent nature of Being is quite unusual in the history of its translation; however, even with the radical agenda of the translators, the “self-existent” aspect is quite close to the conception found in *Heshanggong’s Commentary* mentioned above, and the connection to the divine creative void is also reminiscent of Mengshan Deyi’s Buddhist reading. One might conclude that, even given the gulf between a 1st century Daoist or a 13th century Buddhist writing in Classical Chinese and 18th century Catholics writing in Latin, a basic shared sense of *ziran* as a key quality of the absolute persists.

4. *Ziran* Translated as “Itself”

These Latin works were never published and so had limited impact on the global reception of the *Laozi*. In contrast, though not a complete translation, the 1823 work *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu* by the first modern sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat spread widely. It was read by the likes of Hegel ([1833] 1986, p. 146), and its interpretation of *ziran* has been both copied and imitated, as I shall demonstrate below. Rémusat (1823, p. 27) translates, “L’homme a son type et son modèle dans la terre, la terre dans le ciel, le ciel dans la raison, la raison en elle-même” (Man has his type and his model in Earth, Earth in Heaven, Heaven in Reason, Reason in itself). Most notable is the translation of Dao as *la*

raison. This actually continues one of the Latin translators' interpretations of Dao, as they sometimes would also render it as "Ratio" (divine reason) (*Liber Sinicus Táo Tě Kīm n.d.*, p. 1). This choice positions Abel-Rémusat to interpret *ziran* as "elle-même" (itself), instead of following the Latin version focused on the quality of Being. Dao as Reason is just Reason. It needs no other quality, as Reason is its own description and is "herself," if I preserve the grammatical gender that agrees with *la raison*.

While Abel-Rémusat's interpretation of Dao as divine Reason has found few imitators, equivalents of his simple reading of *ziran* appear in numerous other translations and languages. Some of these cases belong to what can be called interpretive lineages, where a translator reads a translation in one language and imports that "interpretation" into a second language (Tadd 2022, pp. 99–108). Abel-Rémusat generates such a lineage, when his interpreting of chapter 25 *ziran* as "itself" becomes standard in a range of languages, even if the term's grammatical gender varies: herself, himself, itself, or self. *sebě*"

In 1870, two German translations of the *Laozi* appeared, with the one by Victor von Strauss (1870, p. 126) clearly following Abel-Rémusat in translating our key concept as "sein Selbst" (himself). One also finds an undated Manchu translation published in transcription in 1901 that uses "ini cisui" (himself) (Von Zach 1901, p. 161).¹⁷ Many others followed this approach, including Tolstoy's ([1884] 1937, p. 535) earliest attempts at a *Laozi* translation that has "sam" *sebě*" (himself), de Harlez's (1891, p. 44) French "lui-même" (himself), Old's (1894, p. 10) English "itself," Ular's (1903, p. 19) German "sich selbst" (itself), Evola's (1923, chp. 25) Italian "se stessa" (herself), Ervast's (1925, p. 22) Finnish "se itse" (itself), and Ágner's (1943, chp. 25) Hungarian "sajátmagában" (itself). Stephen Mitchell's (1988, chp. 25) infamous meta-translation uses "itself," as does its Persian re-translation by Farshīd Qahramānī (2009, p. 25) that has "khud" (self). There is even Sarker Amin's (2008, p. 37) Bengali that glosses *ziran* with "Tāo," i.e., itself, and Alimonak'i's (2013, p. 92) Georgian translation where Dao obeys the "daos k'anons" (the law of Dao), i.e., the law of itself.

All these readings take the passage to basically indicate that what the Dao "models," "is founded on," or "takes as standard" is his-, her-, it-self. That is to say the Dao is just what it is. In some sense, this continues the Catholic reading that makes *ziran* a noun, but in a much gentler form, as the concept of Being is less explicit. Of course, in Tolstoy's case, with the full line rendered as "Borg" *podoben* "sam" *sebě*" (God is like himself), the theological aspect is undeniable (Tolstoy [1884] 1937, p. 535).

Among this list exist both obvious and understated translation lineages. I know that Tolstoy's translation mainly followed von Strauss (Bodde 1950, p. 25), and that both Harlez and Ular most probably read Abel-Rémusat. Furthermore, Evola certainly based his entire Italian translation on Ular's 1903 German translation. Finally, there is the case of August Wesley's (1937) Estonian work based on both Old's English and Ervast's Finnish, and which preserves both their Theosophical readings rooted in mystical perennialism.

The reduction of *ziran* to simply "self" might be critiqued as the loss of nuance and depth of meaning that inevitably occurs during translation into a foreign language. However, once again I can point to the premodern Chinese notions that *ziran* equals Dao and the modern exact equivalents of "ziji" (self) and "taziji" (itself). Thus, it becomes problematic to assert this rendering of *ziran* reflects at all on the specificity of language, a fact further demonstrated by the scope of examples in this section.

5. *Ziran* Translated as "Its Own Nature," "What It Is in Itself," or "Self-So"

The Christian theology-infused readings that focus on *ziran* as self-existing, or divine Reason itself, encountered a strong alternative originating with Abel-Rémusat's student Stanislas Julien. Julien rejected the use of European concepts like Reason or Being to discuss the Dao and delved into the explanations of 30 traditional commentaries that he cites in his over 600 explanatory footnotes. His 1842 French translation was the first complete published *Laozi* in any Western language, and this status, combined with the immense

erudition of the work, made it the base translation or key reference for most other early translations in French, English, German, Czech, and Russian.

Julien translates our key passage as “le Tao imite sa nature” (The Dao imitates its nature), which shifts the sense of *ziran* from Being or itself to “its nature” (Julien 1842, p. 92). This articulation though more awkward than Abel-Rémusat’s translation, may be closer to the Chinese traditional commentaries of which Julien cites and translates four. Interestingly, none of these sources explicitly reveal why *ziran* is taken as “its nature.” Nevertheless, his citation of Heshanggong’s 無所法 as “il n’a rien à imiter en dehors de lui” (it has nothing to imitate apart from itself) may offer a clue (Julien 1842, p. 96). This citation omits the immediately preceding phrase 道性自然 (The Way’s nature is *ziran*), but that seems the most likely source that inspired him. It is known, after all, that Julien first translated the entirety of Heshanggong’s *Commentary* while preparing his final French *Laozi* and may have taken its mention of *daoxing* 道性 (Dao’s nature) as a gloss for *ziran* (Julien 1842, p. xvi).

As with Abel-Rémusat, many translations follow Julien’s equation of “nature” and *ziran*. The earliest full English translation, an 1859 manuscript housed at Yale, is almost a direct retranslation of Julien, and has the passage as “the Taou imitates his own nature” (The Book of the Way and of Virtue 1859, chp. 25). There is also Balfour’s (1884, p. 16) English “its own inherent nature,” Masot’s (1889, p. 112) Spanish “su misma naturaleza” (its very nature), Carus’ (1898, p. 110) “intrinsic,” Allawi’s (1995, p. 82) Arabic “ṭabī‘īyy” (innate), and Róssis’ (2014, p. 29) Greek “fýsi tou” (its nature). As one can see, this interpretation has maintained its popularity for over 150 years. In the few examples, one observes a refining of the way this interpretation is translated, but the point remains the same. *Ziran* is what is inherent or intrinsic; it is something’s “nature.”

The last translation is quite fascinating from a history of philosophy perspective. There *ziran* becomes *fýsi*—the modern form of the ancient *physis*, which means something’s core essence, its nature. This Greek concept is likely what inspired Julien’s translation, with its implied sense of a consistent essence. The modern term *fýsi* is also used as an equivalent of English “Nature,” and this polysemy relates to another interpretation of *ziran* that I shall discuss later.

The first published English *Laozi* translation appeared in 1868 by John Chalmers. He, like the anonymous Yale translator, often relies on Julien’s interpretations in his work. Yet, when translating *ziran*, he chose a different strategy: “Tau takes its law from what it is in itself” (Chalmers 1868, p. 19). Though “what it is in itself” implies Julien’s sense of “nature,” it shifts the focus back to the notion of “itself” and of Being, of what it “is.” This reading impacted the famous but admittedly lackluster translation of James Legge (1891, p. 68), who used “its being what it is.” This departs from the focus on “itself,” emphasizing the continuity of how it exists as it exists by the use of the gerund “being,” or as he clarifies in his notes, it is God being the uncaused cause (ibid., p. 69).

The renowned Arthur Waley (1934, p. 174) translation introduces a new variation on this, “the Self-so.”¹⁸ This makes *ziran* a quality of “being what it is.” It is not “nature” as the basic character of a thing, but it is a quality of just existing in its own way. In line with these two similar interpretations, Heysinger (1903, p. 42) has “the Tao from what it is,” Golden and Presas’ (2000, p. 75) Catalan has “allò que és com és” (what it is as it is), Sehnal’s (2012, p. 129) Czech has “čím je sama od sebe” (what it is by itself). One also observes Jonathan Star (2008, p. 28) presenting a long list of *ziran* translations including Waley’s “self-so,” “But Tao depends on itself alone/Supremely free, self-so, it rests in its own nature.”

In all these cases, the Dao exists as itself, in its own way. *Ziran* is not just “self” but is the state of being itself, being as it is itself, being self-so; it is a quality, not a self-reflexive pronoun. The connection of *ziran* to the Dao’s nature first appears in the beginning of Heshanggong’s comment, though it might be closer to Wei Yuan’s vision of *ziran* as the universal nature being the nature of Dao. The related “self-so” notion similarly resonates with Bai Yuchan’s sense of “ruci eryi” (just being so). Regardless of language, this form

of *ziran* cleaves more closely to a description, though one that designates the cosmic self existing as itself.

6. *Ziran* Translated as “From Itself” and “Spontaneity”

Not long after Chalmers’ English was published, two German translations, as already mentioned, appeared in February and March of 1870. The later one, by von Strauss, belongs in the Abel-Rémusat lineage, while the other, by Reinhold von Plaenckner, initiated its own type of *ziran* translation. Like Abel-Rémusat and von Strauss, the professional sinologist von Plaenckner stressed the “self” aspect of the term; however, he also included a layer of directionality. He presents “Und das Tao stammt ohne Frage allein aus sich selbst” (And the Dao without question comes only from itself) (von Plaenckner 1870, p. 114). Of course, the “from itself” translation relates again to the verb choice, but this sense of manifesting from within itself offers quite a different conception of Dao than if it just models itself or is itself. There is a sense of emergence, and it plays with the polysemy of *zi* 自 as “self/*selbst*,” “from/*aus*,” and “spontaneous.”

Von Plaenckner’s German translation became the foundation of the first Czech *Laozi* by the philosopher, politician, and nationalist Františka Čupr, who hoped to establish Czech as a functional scholarly language and translated many world classics with such an aim. In 1878, he completed his *Laozi* in which he follows von Plaenckner quite closely, stating “A Tao pochází beze vší pochybnosti samo ze sebe” (And the Tao undoubtedly comes only from itself) (Čupr 1878, p. 31).¹⁹ Here *ziran* remains the emergent “from itself” even after being transferred from the Germanic *aus sich selbst* to the Slavic *ze sebe*. In both cases, this reading is heavily reliant on taking *fa* 法 as “comes” (*stammt* or *pochází*), which necessitates including “from” as part of the expression.

A similar Dutch translation by Henri Borel (1898, p. 122), however, demonstrates that this interpretation of *ziran* is not simply a reflection of verb choice. It says, “(Maar) de Wet van Tao is van-zich-zelven” ((But) the law of the Dao is from its own self). Here *Daofa* as a compound becomes the topic and *ziran* becomes the comment. Interestingly, Goddard’s (1919, p. 23) English, certainly aware of Borel’s Dutch states, “Tao is self-derived.” Reichelt’s (1948, p. 73) later Norwegian “Tao stammer fra seg selv” (Tao comes from itself) more exactly returns to von Plaenckner’s approach. Still, regardless of the differences between these few translations, the understanding of *ziran* relates to the question of the origin of the Dao; it is about self-creation.

Lastly, the renowned sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1957, p. 65) reveals a major struggle of the translator to express the richness of *ziran*, though the basic sense aligns with von Plaenckner’s notion of originating in the self, or “self-derived.” He says, “der Sinn richtet sich nach sich selber” (The Meaning models itself after itself). The term he uses for *ziran* is “sich nach sich selber,” a phrase far more complex than any other German translation previously mentioned and which could be literally translated as “itself after it itself.” In this case, the verb takes two objects that are both “self.”²⁰ It is not quite clear where this second self is found in the original Chinese, but this sense of self-modeling, self-creating, and self-emergence represents a dynamic aseity for the Dao being “from itself.”

Ziran as “from itself” supposes a notion of emergent authenticity, a state of being where something unintentionally moves in accordance with its nature. In this “spontaneous” view “nature” becomes implied, while focus shifts to the “self-emergent” mode of action and interaction. This sense of *ziran* translated as “spontaneous” or “spontaneously” can first be dated from Balfour, previously mentioned in regard to the reading of *ziran* as “nature.” Balfour (1884, p. 16) gives a double translation, “Tao regulates itself by its own inherent nature- or, spontaneously.” This translation is influenced by the reading of *fa* 法 as an active verb, as the choice of “regulates” helps shift *ziran* to become an adverb instead of a noun or adjective. It also means that the nature of the Dao is to function spontaneously.

Balfour’s interpretation comes quite early in the history of *Laozi* translations, and one even sees a similar approach in another undated Manchu translation housed in the Saint Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and transcribed by Giovanni Stary. It has

“ini cisui banjinara” (his own self-generating) (Stary 1996, p. 1352), which makes even more explicit the emergent aspect of *ziran*. Like “self-so,” “spontaneous” and its variations have become enshrined as another standard type of translation. For example, its noun form “spontaneity” often appears in English: Maclagan’s (1898, p. 138) “Tao takes as law Spontaneity,” Lionel Giles’ (1904, p. 21) “the law of the Tao is its own spontaneity,” Medhurst’s (1905, p. 44) “The Tao’s standard is spontaneity,” Parker’s (1910, p. 107) “Man looks up to Earth for guidance . . . and Providence to Spontaneity,” and Izutsu’s (2001, p. 73) “(its own) spontaneity.” Of course, one also finds this in other European languages as well, like Parinetto’s (1995, p. 25) Italian “spontaneità” (spontaneity).

This reading of “spontaneity,” a much more dynamic term than just “nature” or “self-so,” further appears in radically different linguistic contexts like Radpour’s (2017, p. 66) Persian translation that reads chapter 25’s *ziran* as “khud-bah-khudi” (spontaneous self). Here the translator reduplicates *khud*, which means both “self” as a noun and “spontaneous” as an adjective, which becomes “self-by-selfness” and generally is equivalent to “spontaneity.” The connection between self and spontaneity is quite fascinating, especially because self-from-selfness resembles some of our previously discussed translations. Of course, the end result emphasizes dynamic self-emergence. The translator, in private correspondence, suggests that his choice was heavily etymological, in that both *khud* and *zi* share the two meanings of “self” and “spontaneity.”

This Persian etymological translation reminds us of a similar reading in modern Chinese. Scholars like Ye Shuxun, who focus on the etymology of *zi* with its meaning of “self,” “from,” and “spontaneous,” likewise articulate the importance of this multi-meaning perspective. Such polysemy does not appear to be particularly relevant in the premodern Chinese commentarial tradition. Nevertheless, it remains an important one that not only has roots in the original language but can also clearly traverse the translational divide.

7. *Ziran* Translated as “Natural” or “Naturalness”

Another prevalent contemporary translation of *ziran*, like the popular “spontaneity,” is “natural” or “naturalness.” This reading evolves out of the idea that *ziran* is something’s “nature,” but again, as with spontaneity, represents something much more dynamic and vital than the essentializing notion of a core “nature.” It first appeared within the 1894 Russian translation produced by D.P. Konissi (小西増太郎 Konishi Masutarō) and edited by Leo Tolstoy. It takes the line as “jestestvennost’ neset” Tao” (Naturalness bears up the Dao) (Konissi and Tolstoy [1894] 1913, p. 17). This novel reading is especially noteworthy, as Tolstoy’s own translation, based on von Strauss and produced ten years earlier, takes *ziran* as “himself” in line with the more Christian reading of the passage. Thus, the credit for this version should likely be Konissi’s alone.

This major shift in interpretation does not list its origin, just as with Julien’s notion of “its nature,” though we do know that Konissi relied on *Laozi* editions found in the Rumiantsev Library in Moscow, now the Russian State Library (Konishi 2013, p. 106). At present that library contains the old woodblock commentarial editions of Heshanggong, Wang Bi, and Bai Yuchan. None of these commentaries readily explain the shift towards “naturalness,” but the translator’s place of origin might offer a clue.

As this work was the first European language *Laozi* produced by a Japanese man, it is worth contemplating the impact modern Japanese language had on Konissi’s reading. In particular, one must note the Japanese effort to translate the Dutch *natuur* or “Nature” with the compound 自然 (jp. *shizen*, ch. *ziran*). While this use of *ziran* to represent the Western concept “Nature” later becomes standard in Modern Chinese, it was a Japanese innovation. Given this context, Konissi’s inventive translation of *Laozi*’s *ziran* appears to project the new *natuur* sense of the term back onto the ancient work. This is especially probable given that Konissi was not a classically trained Japanese scholar but instead a Russian Orthodox priest who became interested in the *Laozi* after traveling to Moscow.

Regardless of the etymological specifics of this reading, Konissi clearly made a turn toward naturalism. According to Sho Konishi, for Konissi “nature served as a focal point

in understanding Lao Tzu” and that the “*Tao te ching* as introduced by [Konissi] reconceptualized Hobbesian nature from segmentation and competition, chaos and disorder, to the unification of all beings as the original state of nature” (Konishi 2013, p. 110). This vision of a Daoist naturalism rooted in the state of *ziran* as true “naturalness” represents an important development in the history of the concept.²¹ If this is accurate, Konissi’s reading of the *Laozi* was revolutionary.²² He is the first to elevate the *ziran* state of nature in the *Laozi* to the level of divinity while removing any metaphysical signification.

The 1950 Russian translation by Yang Xingshun—even though asserting a radically different Soviet Marxist reading of the *Laozi* that completely rejects Konissi and Tolstoy’s perspective as bourgeois idealism—still follows their translation of *ziran* as “jестественность” (naturalness) (Ân 1950, p. 129). Many others use a similar approach: Duyvendak’s (1953, p. 55) French “le Cours Naturel” (the Natural Course), Duyvendak’s (1954, p. 58) self-retranslation into English “the Natural,” Lau’s (1963, p. 30) “naturally so,” Feng and English’s (1972, p. 50) “natural,” Berzinski’s (2013, chp. 25) Latvian translation “Dabisks” (natural), and Roberts’ (2001, p. 82) more euphemistic “self-momentum of all becoming.”

This perspective resembles Wang Bi’s take on *ziran*, with its focus on the cosmic order following the individual natures of all things, everything being natural. However, this is an innovative reading that does not find a perfect analogy in the pre-modern Chinese context as it relies on the post-enlightenment conception of Nature. The logical conclusion of this emergence of a naturalistic *ziran* is discussed in the following section.

8. *Ziran* Translated as “Nature”

While the terms used that mean “natural” often imply a connection to the natural world or Nature, especially in the stronger capitalized translations of Duyvendak, Nature itself as a dominant cosmic aspect of Laozi’s philosophy also finds a place. The first hint comes not from a translation of *ziran*, appearing prior to Konissi’s importation of this modern Japanese sense of the term, but in the 1870 work of Thomas Watters, an American diplomat stationed in Hong Kong. He identifies *ziran* as “spontaneity,” being the primary quality of the Way that he identifies with “Nature,” “Universal Nature,” or the “Law of Nature” (Watters 1870, pp. 40, 51, 61).

However, the leap from this identification of *ziran* as the spontaneity of Nature to Nature itself occurs much later in the mid-twentieth century. First, one finds in a French anthology of Chinese literature by Sung-nien Hsu (1933, p. 394) “le tao imite la nature” (the Dao imitates Nature). Not long after, in an obscure translation that is the first English version produced by a native Chinese hand, Hu Tse Ling states, “Heaven follows the way of the Tao and the Tao follows that of Nature” (Hu 1936, p. 40). A much more influential translation comes from Lin Yutang, who takes the line as “Tao models itself after Nature” (Lin [1942] 1955, p. 597) but adds in a footnote that the term is literally translated as “self-so,” “self-formed,” and “that which is so by itself.” Exactly what prompted this shift to “Nature” is not revealed, though Wing-tsit Chan, who uses a translation identical to Lin’s, “Tao models itself after Nature” (Chan 1963, p. 153), is more explicit in his mission to make the Chinese traditions of thought into types of “philosophy” that might be palatable to Western audiences. He thus frames Confucianism as humanism and Laozi’s Daoism as naturalism, supporting the latter assertion with the “fact” that Nature is the highest order in the cosmos, even above the Way.²³ In Chan’s reading, Laozi’s core concept *wuwei* 無為 (non-action) tellingly becomes “take no action contrary to Nature” (Chan 1963, p. 136).

It is worth reflecting on how the reading of *ziran* as Nature originates with Chinese scholars in the 20th century. One again might posit that this results from the massive impact Japanese understandings of Western learning had on these modern Chinese intellectuals and, similarly to Konissi, they were inspired by the Japanese conflation of *natuur* and *ziran*. Of course, the shift to re-imagining this classical concept coincides with the importation of science and the values that made such a reading appealing to people like Wing-tsit Chan.

Regardless of its complex origins, this naturalistic reading of *ziran* was influential in the latter half of the 20th century and beyond. Jovanovski’s Macedonian “priroda”

(Nature) belongs directly to this interpretive lineage as his work retranslates Wing-tsit Chan's (Jovanovski 1978, p. 22). There are other lineages of this reading as well, like the one beginning with the anarchist Yamaga [1957]'s (Yamaga [1957] 1992, chp. 25) Esperanto "la naturon" (Nature) and continuing when a Spanish anarchist revolutionary Edward Vivancos (1963, chp. 25) retranslated Yamaga into Spanish, rendering the expression as "la Naturaleza" (Nature). This interpretation has traveled far and wide, as it easily crosses linguistic boundaries. Thus, one finds Jagadish Chandra Jain's (1973, chp. 25) Hindi translation "prākrtik kram" (Nature), E. San Juan's (2012, p. 15) Filipino "likas at taal na pagsulong ng kalikasan" (the natural and eternal development of Nature), and Yufei Luo's (2017, p. 83) Khmer "thōəmmēə' ciət" (Nature).

With this articulation of *ziran* as Nature itself, one has moved to the extreme opposite pole from considering this concept as an articulation of transcendent Being suggested by the Figurists. Interestingly, though one might suppose these missionaries were most likely to contort the "original meaning" of the text for their clear ideological aims, it is this reading of "Nature" that especially lacks a traditional Chinese equivalent, being the result of a Western concept mistakenly connected to the Daoist *ziran*. Even so, the union of the Dao and Nature is also not completely unexpected or irrational. The Dao, as conceived by various Chinese thinkers like Guo Xiang, does include an imminent quality, and when understood in the context of modern scientific notions could reasonably be equated to Nature. Thus, to translate *ziran* as Nature does perhaps exceed the bounds of the original language; however, such an exegetical move is not fundamentally more different than the variegated readings I have discussed above.

9. Conclusions

This paper attempts to simultaneously fulfill multiple goals. First, it aims to provide a history of the translation and reception of *Laozi's* chapter 25 *ziran* in the non-Chinese world. Such a history shows the specifics of interaction between different cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions with this difficult passage that bears much of the weight of the metaphysics found in the *Laozi*.

Second, it seeks to address the question of language and translatability. By recounting six types of Chinese interpretations and six types of non-Chinese translations, a richness and expansiveness of Chapter 25 *ziran* exegesis is unearthed that transcends the idolization of the "original" text or even the source language. Furthermore, examples taken from dozens of languages have demonstrated through sheer quantity how individual interpretive approaches remain unbound to any particular language. While some glosses more easily find equivalences trans-lingually, e.g., "Nature" or "itself," major impediments, even while crossing language families, are generally absent for all the various types. It is still possible to critique this analysis due to its crude use of equivalencies, and the importance of linguistic variation is not disallowed. Yet, the reality of shared ideas and shared approaches to exegesis persists nonetheless.

Third, it intends to spur philosophical reflection concerning the coexistence of all these different interpretations and translations of the Chapter 25 *ziran*. Conceptions of this *ziran* in translation, and to a slightly lesser extent in Chinese, appear to exist along two spectrums from the metaphysical to the physical and from the universal to the particular: *ziran* as "Being/God" on one end and *ziran* as "Nature" on the other; *ziran* as universal God/Nature at one end and as individual self-so/spontaneity at the other. These continuums do not simply result from challenges or contortions of linguistic translation, as the native Chinese tradition can attest, and while this might show the inherent emptiness of this term, they ultimately direct us back to a notion of "self." Depending on how a commentator or translator understands "self" and its relation to Dao, *ziran* becomes variously reformulated as cosmic essence, personal essence, cosmic process, or personal process. Explained from the human perspective, this term is imbued with our various possible aspirations: to know our origins, to become one with God, Nature, or our true essential natures, and live authentic spontaneous lives as we are or as we ultimately should be.

Lastly, it hopes to demonstrate the value of Global Laozegetics research. While the vast frame of Global Laozegetics might suggest an abyss of infinite exegesis, its diversity of commentaries and translations not only expands our view but also simultaneously narrows and focuses our philosophical inquiries. For example, given the above analysis, it is now worth reassessing how “self” can be variously understood in the context of this Daoist classic. Thus, a global view on the *Laozi* not only teaches us much about the history of cross-cultural intellectual connection and exchange but also brings us back to the small, bounded world of the text itself.

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Notes

- 1 For more on this concept, see (Tadd 2022).
- 2 This is an expanded count based on Tadd’s (2019a) bibliography of *Laozi* translations.
- 3 This list is by no means exhaustive, being limited to such popular examples for practical reasons.
- 4 Framed more broadly, I assert classical texts like the *Laozi* function not as sources of eternal truth but loci for philosophical debate.
- 5 As with the six types of *ziran* in translation, this set merely provides a representative but not exhaustive range of Chinese approaches to the term.
- 6 All translations are my own.
- 7 道以無法為法者也，無法者，自然而已，故曰道法自然。(Jiao 2009, p. 64).
- 8 道則自本自根，未有天地，自古以固存，所法也... . 夫道者，自本自根，所因而自然也。(Wang 1979, p. 29).
- 9 道法自然者，一真氣生於虛明中，自然妙用無窮無殆也。(Deyi 1287, p. 16b).
- 10 道只是自然，自然即是道。所以更無別法，能法於道者。(Ji gujin fodaolunheng n.d., p. 381b).
- 11 道不違自然，乃得其性，法自然者也。法自然者，在方而法方，在圓而法圓，於自然無所違也。自然者，無稱之言，窮極之辭也。(Lou 1980, p. 65).
- 12 聖人無欲... . 任物義歸於獨化，法自然也。(Li 2011, pp. 362–63).
- 13 道法自然，應物故也。自然非道之全，出而應物，故道降而下法。(Huizong 2011, p. 278).
- 14 There are three undatable Manchu translations that might predate these Latin works, two of which are used as general examples of interpretive strategies below.
- 15 Earlier fragmented Tangut, Spanish, Portuguese, Latin, and French translations of the *Laozi* exist without the key passage. See (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe Bian 1996, pp. 117–32; Cobo 1590; Longobardo 1623, 153v; Martini 1658, p. 117; Couplet 1687, p. xxvi; Comte 1696, p. 149).
- 16 The translator attributes this comment to Mr. Chen, likely Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 but it really comes from Lin Xiyi 林希逸.
- 17 This Manchu term is hard to limit to one meaning because it often functions as a gloss for *ziran*, and includes the meanings “on its own, spontaneously, or naturally.” Still, the etymology is “ini” (his) and “cisui” (self, personal, selfish), so in this case I follow Julius Grill who renders it in German as “von selbst” (itself, by itself) (Grill 1911, p. 769).
- 18 “Self-so” later becomes a overall popular translation for *ziran* in English, though it is strangely rare in this specific chapter 25 passage.
- 19 *Samo ze sebe* can also be read as “itself from itself,” as suggest by L’ubomir Dunaj in private communication, though ultimately the notion of self-emergence remains the same.
- 20 Thanks to Dennis Schilling for explaining the intricacies of this German grammar.
- 21 Léon de Rosny suggested around the same time that Daoism shared an affinity with Rousseau’s conception of nature but did not deeply explore that thought (de Rosny 1892, p. 17).
- 22 It is conceivable there were other earlier sources for this reading, though not in this passage. This possibility is suggested by Carus’ (1898, p. 301) endnotes that say, “The words *tsz’ jan* (12–13), ‘self-like,’ which are commonly translated by ‘natural,’ mean here that ‘reason follows its own nature,’ i.e., its standard is intrinsic.”
- 23 He even entitles his chapter on the *Laozi* as “The Natural Way of Lao Tzu.”

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