

Article

In the Beginning Was the Tao: Interreligious Paths Based on a Chinese Translation of John 1:1

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Abstract: There are two main options for translating λόγος *Logos* in Chinese versions of John 1:1. One is to use 道 *Táo*, which in this context means Wisdom and Creative Principle; the other is to use 言 *Yán*, which in this context means Holy Word. Our goal is to (1) give a historical overview of the first uses of 道 *Táo* in the Protestant Bible and 言 *Yán* in the Catholic Bible and (2) discuss what has been lost, modified, or acquired by using *Táo*, both for Christianity and Taoism.

Keywords: Logos; Tao; Taoism; New Testament; Christianity; interreligious dialogue

1. Introduction

The history of the translation of λόγος *Logos* with 道 *Dào/Tào*, in the Chinese version of John 1:1, has a turning point in 1836, when the 新遺詔書 (*Xīn yí zhào shū*, New Testament) was published. This text was edited by Karl Gützlaff, Elijah Coleman Bridgman, and Walter Henry Medhurst, with the cooperation of John Robert Morrison: from here on, in most Protestant Bibles, *Logos* was translated as *Tao*, whereas in the Catholic Bible the prominent translation would be 言 (*yán*, Word) or 聖言 (*shèng yán*, Holy Word).

Recently, the scholar Elsie Ge-Shan Zhou revisited the history of this translation, reconstructing the debate and proposals prior to 1836 (Zhou 2024). Following this study, the picture becomes more multifaceted. Already in 1819, Morrison wondered what the best Chinese translation was to convey the meaning of *Logos* in the Prologue of John. In the letter “On the Logos”, published in the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, after a theoretical and theological premise, he mentioned that the possibility of using *Tao* was first suggested to him by a Catholic missionary:

“Mr. Editor,

We Christians acknowledge that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, contain a Revelation of the Divine will, so far as it is useful for human creatures, in the present state, to be made acquainted with it. This being acknowledged, the course, as pointed out by plain good sense, or which is the same, by sound philosophy, is to use all appropriate means to ascertain for ourselves the precise import of every part of Revelation; and further, as depositories of the oracles of the living God, to endeavour to make them known to every rational creature. [...]

I wish, Sir, to take your opinion, and that of any of your correspondents, who may have attended to Chinese, on the religious sense of the word 道, *Tao* or *Taou* in that language.

A Missionary of the Romish Church has given it as his opinion, that it corresponds to the λόγος, of St. John; which is יהוה דבר (*davar Yahweh*), The Word of Jehovah, in the Hebrew Scriptures.



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Mr.—has rendered the Logos in the first verse of St. John, by the Chinese 言 Yen, ‘A Word, to speak’, and so on. Whether in that instance 道 Taou would be better, is what I wish to ascertain. Dr. A. Clarke, in his Commentary gives it as his opinion that Logos should be considered a proper name and left untranslated. Untranslated terms are uncouth in any language and are exceedingly abhorrent to the genius of the Chinese language. And on the other hand, there is a difficulty in employing long received technical terms; because the use of them, revives, by association, all the systematic pagan errors hitherto connected with them. On this principle, 陰 Yin e 陽 Yang, for ‘Darkness and Light’ in the 1st chapter of Genesis, seem exceedingly objectionable. However, I shall be glad to hear the opinions of other students on this subject” (Milne 1819, pp. 82–83).

We do not know who that “Missionary of the Romish Church” was—although we can hypothesize that he was a Jesuit, following Matteo Ricci’s tradition and insights—nor can we know who the one who had already rendered *Logos* by 言 (*yán*) was; nevertheless, we can find in this letter almost all the fundamental elements on which this essay will focus:

1. How *Tao* became the preferred translation for *Logos* for Protestant Bibles.
2. The potential impact of using *Tao* for both Christianity and Taoism.

Under the heading of how *Tao* became the preferred translation, we will discuss as subsections:

1. Logos, *yán*, and/or *Tào*;
2. Logos, *davar*, and *Tào*;
3. Logos as an untranslated proper name.

Under the heading of the potential positive and negative impacts of the use of *Tao* on both Christianity and Taoism, we will discuss the following:

1. The impact on Taoism;
2. The impact on Christianity.

2. How Tao Became the Preferred Translation for Logos for Protestant Bibles

2.1. Logos, *Yán*, and/or *Tào*

In the letter of 1819 by Morrison, we can identify two main options for translating Logos and the birth of two trends that would then persist in the following centuries: 言 *yán* for Catholic translations and 道 *Tao* for Protestant ones. Between that letter and the 新遺詔書 Chinese New Testament of 1836, we know at least two other documents where the Christian Logos is translated as 道 *Tao*. The first is a collection of Christian teachings, doctrines, and liturgies edited by Morrison himself and published in 1832 with the title 古聖奉神天啟示道家訓 (*Gǔ shèng fèng Shén tiān qǐ shì Dào jiāxùn*), which can be translated as “Divinely inspired home teachings from ancient saints”. Note that here 道 *Tao* is already part of the title, meaning something like a “revealed wisdom”. Within the text—which is not a proper Bible translation, rather an informal commentative paraphrase—the Greek Logos is often translated as 道 *Tao*, sometimes as 言 *yán*; but, regarding John 1:1, 道 *Tao* was explicitly chosen as bearing a broader meaning closer to the original. As Morrison states in the first book of the work:

“Saint John said: ‘In the beginning was the Word (道/言), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through it, and without it, nothing was made that has been made’. The text uses Logos (羅閣士—transcribed phonetically), to represent what all creation originates from. Everything that exists was made through it. The meaning implies that the ‘Word’ (言), the ‘Tao’ (道), and the ‘Word of God’ all refer to the Savior Jesus. A single character for ‘Word’ (言) in this text seems to carry a meaning like that of ‘Tao’ (道)” (see Zhou 2024, p. 19).

The second text which attests the translation of Logos with Tao for John 1:1 is 福音调和 (*Fú yīn tiáo hé, The Harmony of the Gospels*) published in 1834 by W. H. Medhurst. The book is a synopsis of the four Gospels, written with the purpose of making the New Testament comprehensible (“intelligible”) to Chinese people, compared to the overly technical, literal translations linked to Hebrew terms that were made in the past. *The Harmony of the Gospels* begins with the prologue of the Gospel of Luke and continues by discussing the events preceding the birth of Jesus, introducing the discussion of the “original glory of Jesus”. Here, the quotation from John 1:1 appears, with a specification about the first referent of Logos/Tao: “In the beginning was the Tao (道)—and Tao refers to Jesus—; the Tao was with God, and the Tao was God ... (Gospel of John) (see [Zhou 2024](#), pp. 11–12).

Through these two texts, we can see a shift from a mixed instrumental use of 道/言 (Tao/yán) towards a conscious choice of 道 Tao as the best possible notion to make understandable in Chinese what John meant with the Greek term Logos. After the 1836 New Testament translation, this choice became classic for Protestant bibles, while in Catholic ones 言 yán was used.

2.2. Logos, Davar, and Tao

As we saw in his 1819 letter, Morrison was already aware that *Logos*, in John 1:1, is already a sort of translation of the Old Testament Hebrew term דָּבָר (*davar/dabar*)—which means ‘word’ but also ‘event’ or ‘thing’—for a Greek-speaking audience. There are numerous passages from the Gospel of John where the author—probably a Jew aware of Judeo-Hellenistic doctrines—takes care to translate and explain traditional Jewish figures, concepts, and customs to make them comprehensible to Greeks. For example, in John 1:38, the disciples call Jesus Rabbi, and the evangelist adds ὁ λέγεται μεθερμηνευόμενον Διδάσκαλε (“which, when translated, means ‘Teacher’”); a few verses later (1:41–42), he does the same by translating Messiah as Χριστός (Christ) and Cephas as Πέτρος (Peter). In John 4:9, to explain the Samaritan woman’s astonishment when Jesus speaks to her, he notes that “Jews do not associate with Samaritans”. In John 6:4 and 7:2, he explains that Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles are “Jewish festivals”. In John 9:7, he translates the name of the Pool of Siloam as Ἀπεσταλμένος (Sent). In John 19:13 and 19:17, he clarifies that the two places he calls Λιθόστρωτον (The Stone Pavement) and Κρανίου Τόπον (The Place of the Skull) are called “Gabbatha” and “Golgotha” in Hebrew. Finally, regarding the choice of *Logos* in the Prologue, a remark by the Anglican theologian William Temple seems particularly fruitful for our analysis:

“This term Logos again combines two meanings. It is the Word of the Lord by which the heavens were made, and which came to the Prophets. It is also the Rational Principle which gives unity and significance to all existing things. In this sense it had been used by Heraclitus of Ephesus in the sixth century before Christ. [...] This conception of the Logos, the principle of Law or Reason, was taken up by the Stoics and handed on from them to Philo, the Platonising Jew of Alexandria. [...] The term ‘Logos’ was in general use in the Hellenistic world; among Hellenised Jews the intellectual currents represented by Philo inevitably exerted an influence. *The Evangelist is not here proclaiming unfamiliar truth; rather he is seeking common ground with his readers.* [...] The Jew will remember that ‘by the Word of the Lord were the heavens made’; the Greek will think of the rational principle of which all natural laws are particular expressions. Both will agree that this Logos is the starting-point of all things. It exists as it always did ἐν ἀρχῇ—in the beginning, at the root of the universe”. ([Temple \[1939\] 1963](#), pp. 3–4)

This effort to “seek common ground with readers” was also the task of people like Matteo Ricci, J. R. Morrison, and all the others who were committed to translating the Bible

into Chinese. For some of them, *Tao* was the best choice: a Chinese reader would have immediately thought of the principle of everything that exists, according to the chapter 51 of 道德经 *Tao Te Ching*:

“The Tao produces (all things);

Virtue nourishes them;

The things give them form;

The circumstances complete them.

Therefore all things without exception honour the Tao, and exalt its virtue” (Laozi 1891)

Obviously, when semantically rich and culturally marked notions, such as דבר *davar*, λόγος *Logos*, and 道 *Tao*, are used to mutually translate each other, something of the meaning(s) of the original term is lost, something else changes, something else is acquired. λόγος *Logos* is not equivalent to דבר *davar*: the performative and active/concrete value of the Hebrew term (whose meaning is also ‘action’) is lost with the Greek one—as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and other twentieth-century Jewish philosophers have critically noted. On the other hand, the ‘rationalization’ due to the embracement of the Greek term λόγος *Logos* has allowed Christianity to better dialogue with non-Jewish culture and to spread throughout the world... even as far as China.

We must now see what has been lost by translating λόγος *Logos* with 道 *Tao*; what has been modified; and what, if anything, has been acquired.

2.3. *Logos as un Translated Proper Name*

Before seeing what has been lost by translating λόγος *Logos* with 道 *Tao*, what has been modified, and what (if anything) has been acquired, let us examine briefly a radical solution—annihilation of the problem of the translation of *Logos*: as Morrison says, we could take *Logos* as a “proper name” and not translate it at all. Apart from the fact that *Logos*, in John 1:1, is already a kind of translation of a Hebrew concept (as we have seen in the previous section), we agree with Morrison in identifying two critical issues concerning this apparently simple solution.

1. First, “untranslated terms are uncouth in any language”. Of course, Morrison himself was writing in English—his native language—which has today become the common standard for the globalized world and also for international scientific debate (we ourselves are using it, even though we are not English). Today English terms are often untranslated, and they do not sound “uncouth” at all: on the contrary, they are fashionable and sound updated. But this is not true of other languages in our current context, and it certainly was not true of Greek in the context of mid-nineteenth-century China. Usually, untranslated terms from other languages require too much effort on the part of the reader, with the risk of making a concept utterly incomprehensible. Transforming concepts into proper names, moreover, carries with it the risk of unduly hypostatizing them: this, in the case we are examining, is connected to the problem of generating “pagan errors”, which we will see better in the next section.

2. Second, untranslated terms “are exceedingly abhorrent to the genius of the Chinese language”. In the nineteenth century, exoticism and orientalism were in fashion in Europe, but Morrison (who lived in China) warned against an unconscious and paradoxical Westernism, that of believing that the Chinese people, mirroring the Europeans, were fascinated by Western culture, traditions, and languages. Even today, while in Europe people appreciate untranslated Eastern traditional concepts, such as *Tao*, the same does not automatically apply to Western concepts in China. Chinese people often transliterate, at least, foreign terms to incorporate them into their own linguistic system. Furthermore, speaking about proper names, many Chinese people who are in contact with Western cul-

tures choose to give themselves Western names, especially English ones (often chosen for phonetic affinity). Despite the Chinese-rooted culture of the meaning of one's name, this process does not seem excessively problematic (see Jing Xuan [Teng 2019](#)).

For these and other reasons, it was finally rightly chosen not to understand *Logos* as a proper name but to translate it, trying as much as possible to mitigate the risk of producing misconceptions or theological errors. Let us delve deeper into this point.

3. The Potential Impact of Using *Tao* for Both Christianity and Taoism

3.1. The Impact on Taoism

As we have seen, Morrison was concerned not to generate “pagan errors”, i.e., in our case, to lose the novelty of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation by interpreting John's *Logos* only based on what 道 *Tao* means in the Chinese tradition.

One of the most significant risks would be equating the supreme principle of Chinese religion with the God of Christianity, thereby losing the primary reference of John's *Logos*, which is Christ. To mitigate this risk, Morrison often integrated *Logos/Tao* with the expression 神之道 (*Shén zhī dào*, Tao/Logos of God) or 神天之道 (*Shén tiān zhī dào*, Tao/Logos of the Heavenly God) in order to clarify that 道 *Tao*—whether understood as a spiritual principle according to Chinese tradition or as the second Person of the Christian Trinity—does not encompass the fullness of God.

In general, the translation of *Logos* as *Tao* in the Chinese versions of the Gospel of John provides a significant entry point for Taoism to engage with Christian theology. This choice, which was not merely linguistic but deeply interpretive, introduces Taoism to new theological dimensions of *Tao* through the Christian lens of *Logos*. Significantly, the enrichment that the notion of *Tao* receives through its use to translate the Christian *Logos* is like the conceptual challenge and change that the Greek notion *Logos* underwent when it was used in the prologue of the Gospel of John to refer to Christ. Let us see four main points.

1. In Taoist philosophy, 道 *Tao* is traditionally understood as the eternal, formless principle that governs the cosmos, existing beyond human comprehension. The Christian understanding of *Logos*, however, adds a relational dimension to this concept. In John 1:1, *Logos* (translated as *Tao*) is described as both “with God” and “being God”. This relationality challenges Taoist thought to reflect on the possibility of *Tao* not only as an abstract principle but also as an active, engaging presence that participates in human existence. While maintaining its metaphysical core, Taoism might enrich its understanding of *Tao* by considering how relationality shapes its interaction with the world and humanity.

2. Building on this relational perspective, one of the most profound challenges for Taoism in receiving Christianity through the translation of *Logos* as 道 *Tao* lies in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. In John 1:14, it is stated that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”, introducing a radical notion that *Logos/Tao* became tangible, embodied, and directly accessible to humanity through Jesus Christ. This contrasts with the Taoist view of *Tao* as formless and never confined to a specific entity. However, Taoist texts, such as the *Tao Te Ching*, do acknowledge the nourishing and sustaining role of *Tao* in the material world (see *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 51). The Christian narrative of the Incarnation goes further by suggesting that *Tao* might also manifest uniquely and transformatively in history. This perspective invites Taoism to reflect on how 道 *Tao* could engage with creation in more immediate and tangible ways, expanding its understanding of *Tao*'s role in the material and human realms (see [Harrison 2015](#)).

3. The ethical implications of translating *Logos* as 道 *Tao* also create opportunities for Taoist thought to evolve. In Taoism, 德 *Te*, often understood as virtue or the manifestation of *Tao* in the world, emphasizes living in harmony with the natural flow of 道 *Tao*. The Christian *Logos*, on the other hand, is the source of divine truth, justice, and love, embodied in

the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus emphasizes proactive virtue in Matthew 5:6: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”. This encounter suggests that virtue, as understood through *Te*, could include not only harmony with nature but also active engagement with societal and communal challenges. Christianity’s emphasis on intentional action to address human suffering and injustice offers a dynamic complement to Taoism’s focus on balance and inner harmony. This interaction encourages Taoist thought to consider how *Te* might inspire not only personal alignment with 道 *Tao* but also a proactive approach to transforming the world for the better (see Wong 2003).

4. The concept of 無為 *Wu Wei*, or effortless action in harmony with 道 *Tao*, gains new depth when viewed through the lens of the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit. In Taoism, *Wu Wei* emphasizes yielding to the natural flow of 道 *Tao*, acting without force or resistance. In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit similarly guides believers to act in alignment with God’s will, often inspiring purposeful action that transcends human effort (Galatians 5:22–23). This dialogue invites Taoism to reinterpret *Wu Wei* as a dynamic interplay between harmony and intentionality, expanding its application beyond passive alignment to include active, responsive engagement with 道 *Tao*’s flow. This perspective enriches the Taoist understanding of *Wu Wei* by suggesting that harmony and purpose can coexist in spiritual and ethical practice.

Through the translation of *Logos* as 道 *Tao*, Taoism is introduced to new perspectives on relationality, incarnation, and ethics. While these ideas may challenge Taoism’s traditional frameworks, they also provide opportunities for reflection and growth. Taoism might gain a deeper appreciation of 道 *Tao* as a relational and transformative presence, an expanded understanding of *Te* as a proactive force for virtue, and a reinterpretation of *Wu Wei* as harmonizing both action and non-action. Rather than diminishing Taoist thought, this engagement with Christianity fosters a mutual enrichment that respects the unique identity of each tradition while opening new pathways for theological exploration. By engaging deeply with the Christian *Logos* through the lens of 道 *Tao*, Taoism participates in a dynamic dialogue that enhances its spiritual and philosophical richness.

3.2. The Impact on Christianity: A Hermeneutic Interreligious Proposal for “Those of the Way”

Having explored what it might mean for a Chinese person, culturally shaped by Taoism, to encounter 道 *Tao* in the Prologue of the Gospel of John, let us now reverse the terms of this relationship. An authentic interreligious and intercultural dialogue should enable the welcome and reception of the precious things that other traditions can offer and that perhaps one’s own lacks. Therefore, among the treasures of Taoism, are there some which can help to better understand and illuminate some aspects of Christianity?

Here, we propose an example of this type of interreligious path, based on a quite underrated expression from the Acts of the Apostles 9:2 (see also Acts 16:17; 18:25–26; 19,9–23; 22:4; and 24:14–22 for similar terms). It is one of the earliest self-definitions that Christians give themselves: οἱ τῆς οδοῦ, literally τινὰς...τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας, which means “Those of the Way” and can be also translated as “Followers of the Way”.

Usually, this passage is interpreted in relation to what Jesus says about himself according to the Gospel of John 14:6: Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life”. This means that the first followers of Christ perceived themselves (and perhaps were seen) as those who pursued the salvation announced by Christ and which is achievable through Him. Entering the Way was already a way to be safe, since it meant entering the Truth of Christ. The Christian “way of life” is, first, a “Way in Life”: by entering the Way-Christ you begin a path of conversion that changes all other aspects of your life.

Significantly, all Chinese translations of John 14:6 and Acts 9:2 use the term 道 *Tao*. Regarding John 14:6, “the Way” is translated by all versions as 道路 *Dàolù* (which means “Way” concretely as “road”, “street”, or “path”).

Regarding Acts 9:2, “Those of the Way” is translated in different ways, but most versions use 道 *Tao*.

For instance, the Global Bible Initiative (CSB 2019) says “人属于这道” (*Rén shǔyú zhè Dào*, “Those who belongs to this Way/Tao”), then specifies in a note that “道—或译作《路》” (*Dào—huò yìzuò “lù”, Tao is also translated as 路 *Lù*, “road”*).

The Bible League International (BLI n.d.) says “道的門徒” (*Dào de ménú*, Disciples of the Way/Tao), while the Revised Chinese Union Version (RCUV 2010) proposes 这道的人 (*Zhè dào de rén*, People of this Way/Tao).

Historically, as we have noted, Catholic Chinese translations of the Bible have shown some mistrust in using 道 *Tao*. It is used to translate Act 9:2, even if through the expression 道門 (*Dàomén/Tàomén*): the first Christians are “这道門的人” (*Zhè Tàomén de rén*), which can be translated as “People who enter through this door/gate”. 道門 *Dàomén*, in fact, is an “entrance door”, both in a physical and metaphorical sense. In some Taoist religious texts, 道門 *Dàomén* is used to indicate schools, doctrines, and symbolic accesses to the spiritual path. For example, in the 道藏 *Dàozàng* (a sort of “Taoist Canon”, composed starting from the 400 DC, which collects thousands of texts), 道門 *Dàomén* is often used to indicate the Taoist community or the access to ritual and philosophical practice. Additionally, in some Taoist rituals, 道門 *Dàomén* can describe accessing the divine realm through prayers or meditations.

Our theoretical interdisciplinary proposal consists in taking some of the traditional Taoist meaning of 道 *Tao* and related expressions, such as 道門 *Dàomén*, as a theological opportunity to enrich our understanding of some Christian notions. It is a similar proposal to what happened with the Greek concept of λόγος *Logos* in relation to its Hebrew “relative” דבר *davar*.

Thus, in this case, how can the meaning of 道 *Tao* give us a deeper understanding of the Christian formula “Those of the Way”? We think there are three possible directions to be followed here.

1. Ecclesiology

If Christians are “Those of the Way/Tao”, it is the Way/Tao that keeps them together, unifying them as a community. This means that the Christian Church identifies with those who pursue a path of salvation in Christ: the Church is the 道 *Tao* of Christ.

2. Sacramental Theology

We said that the Way is also a “Way of Life”. An important part of this renewed way of life are rituals, especially those that allow you to enter the 道門 *Dàomén*, the gate to the path of salvation. The Christian sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist) are thus seen as the first steps to orient your life’s path towards Christ and God, together with the other Christian walkers. Christian ethics, in general, is a lifestyle practice and can be seen as a sort of “walking training”.

3. Wisdom Theology

道 *Tao* is the Way but also the *Logos*: this finds correspondence in the Christian revelation, in which Christ says he is the Way and is said to be the *Logos* of God. This means not only that the Christian person must conform to Christ by following his path of salvation, but also that this path is not only an ethical-practical question. It is also a matter of converting thoughts and words, *Logos*, toward their origin and end, thus acquiring a new Wisdom given by God.

These are just three examples of how a story of translation and encounter between cultures can offer real interreligious insights.

4. Conclusions

Moving from an apparently technical problem, how to translate into Chinese the Prologue of the Gospel of John and especially the term *Logos*, we have brought to light and discussed some serious interreligious issues. Retracing the history of the translation of *Logos* with 道 *Tao*, we faced the theological concern to not create misconceptions, the awareness of the need to be understood as much as possible by people with different religious and cultural backgrounds, and the challenges and opportunities that this “necessary” dialogue can offer on both sides.

Our first thesis is that the example of *Logos/Tao* shows us that being aware of these issues helps to better address them and to build an authentic interreligious dialogue. Our second thesis is that 道 *Tao* can be a good translation of *Logos* in John 1:1, for the several reasons we discussed. Our third thesis is that, on the one hand, Taoism, meeting Christianity, can gain new perspectives on relationality and fresh ways of engaging with spiritual transformation, while, on the other hand, Christianity, meeting Taoism, can gain the possibility of investigating and better understanding some notions and truths of faith that have perhaps remained secondary in the history of Western Christianity, for example, the self-definitions of the first Christians as “Those of the Way” (Acts of Apostle 9:2).

Christianity, engaging with Taoist wisdom, may reimagine the notion of *Logos* as both a metaphysical principle and an ethical imperative. This dual focus might foster interpretations of Christ as both the Way to salvation and the Wisdom that pervades all creation, offering a model for interfaith dialogue grounded in mutual enrichment rather than theological compromise.

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