

Structuring The Cosmogenetic Model of The Daodejing in Three Annotated Vietnamese Translations

Focusing on the Sequence 'Non-being – Being – One – the Ten Thousand Things'

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Abstract

This article examines how the cosmogenetic model of the Daodejing is structured in three annotated Vietnamese translations by Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Nguyễn Duy Cần, and Lý Minh Tuấn, focusing on Chapters 1, 25, 40, 42, and 51. By distinguishing the Chinese source text, the Vietnamese translation, additions in brackets, and commentary, the study treats 'Non-being – Being – One – the ten thousand things' as an analytical axis rather than a linear cosmogonic formula already complete in the source. The main translations of Chapter 42 are nearly identical; most differences emerge in the accompanying exegesis. Nguyễn Hiến Lê retains several interpretive possibilities, Nguyễn Duy Cần organizes the sequence through substance, manifestation, and a harmonizing principle, whereas Lý Minh Tuấn maps it onto Taiji, the Two Modes, and the Four Images. The choices between Không/Có and Vô/Hữu, the capitalization of numbers, and the renderings of the terms for 'thing' and 'configuration' in Chapter 51 further show that translation itself participates in this structuring. The appropriate unit of analysis is therefore the complete translation–commentary configuration rather than the translated sentence alone.

Keywords: Daodejing; cosmogenesis; Non-being and Being; Dao generates One; annotated translation; Vietnamese

Date of Submission: 15-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 27-09-2026

I. Introduction

The Daodejing does not present the origin of the world as a continuous creation narrative with a chronological beginning, an agent, and an outcome. Relevant statements are dispersed across several chapters: Chapter 1 places 'nameless and named' beside 'beginning and mother'; Chapter 25 speaks of something that precedes Heaven and Earth; Chapter 40 relates Non-being, Being, and the ten thousand things; Chapter 42 gives the sequence 'Dao – One – Two – Three – the ten thousand things'; and Chapter 51 expands generation into birth, nurture, formation, and completion. Connecting these fragments into a coherent model is already an interpretive act.

Vietnamese can retain many Sino-Vietnamese terms, including Đạo, Vô, Hữu, âm, dương, khí, and vạn vật, in forms close to the Chinese. Yet correspondence at the nominal level does not ensure correspondence at the relational level. Apparently minor choices such as 'generated from,' 'generated in,' 'harmonized by,' or 'interact,' the capitalization of One/Two/Three, and explanatory additions in brackets may redefine cause, intermediary, and result. This article therefore shifts attention from isolated words to the relations organized in translation and commentary.

Studies of Laozi have extensively discussed textual variants, the relationship between cosmogenesis and ontology, and the polysemy of Non-being, Being, One, and qi. In translation studies, Appiah's (1993) concept of 'thick translation' describes translations situated in a rich cultural and linguistic context through explanations and annotations; Lefevere (1992) treats translation as rewriting, through which a text is repositioned in a receiving system. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese versions by Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Nguyễn Duy Cần, and Lý Minh Tuấn have rarely been compared in a way that systematically distinguishes what belongs to the translated sentence from what is produced by accompanying exegesis. This is the gap addressed here.

The article asks three questions: (1) to what extent can 'Non-being – Being – One – the ten thousand things' serve as an axis for describing cosmogenesis; (2) whether structuring occurs in the translation, additions, or commentary; and (3) how the translators differ in semantic closure, philosophical frame of reference, and the location of interpretation. 'Structuring' here denotes making explicit, arranging, or stabilizing relations left open

by the source; it does not assume that the original already contains a complete model that translation merely reconstructs.

II. Corpus, Analytical Framework, and Scope

The corpus consists of Nguyễn Hiến Lê's annotated translation, Thu Giang Nguyễn Duy Cần's translation with commentary, and Lý Minh Tuấn's interpretive edition. Four textual layers are distinguished: the Chinese source text; the Vietnamese translation; additions made in brackets; and separate commentary or interpretation. This distinction is especially important in Chapter 42, where the translated sentences are nearly identical while different models of 'One' and 'Three' emerge primarily in the commentaries.

Chapters 1, 25, 40, 42, and 51 were selected because they directly constitute an axis of origin, differentiation, and formation. Chapter 39 contains the formula 昔之得一者 and describes Heaven, Earth, spirits, valleys, and the ten thousand things as 'obtaining One' in order to maintain their states. It is important for the meaning of One, but does not directly present the generative sequence 道生一; it is therefore used as a point of comparison rather than as an independent case study.

Textual layer	Identifying feature	Analytical function
Source text	Chinese wording and textual variants	Establishes syntactic, lexical, and textual openness
Translation	Corresponding Vietnamese sentence	Records lexical, syntactic, and relational choices
Bracketed addition	Square brackets or explanation inserted into the translation	Shows relations made explicit within the translation
Commentary	Explanation separated from the translated sentence	Identifies the frame of reference and degree of semantic closure

'Thick translation' is used descriptively to identify the role of annotation, without equating every commentary with Appiah's ethical and cultural model. Likewise, 'rewriting' helps explain how translation and commentary direct reception, but does not presume that all interpretation is distortion. The concepts provide a framework for distinguishing translated content from secondary exegesis.

III. Textual Foundations and the Limits of a Linear Sequence

3.1. The Chapter 40 Variant

反者道之動；弱者道之用。天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

The received text is commonly read as 'the ten thousand things are generated from Being; Being is generated from Non-being,' which readily supports the sequence Non-being → Being → the ten thousand things. The Guodian text, however, reads 天下之物生於有，生於無 and does not repeat 有 as the subject of the second clause (Jingmen Shi Bowuguan, 1998; Liu Xiaogan, 2006). It may therefore be understood as 'the things under Heaven are generated from Being and generated from Non-being,' with both participating in generation rather than necessarily constituting successive stages. The variant does not determine the correct reading, but shows that linearity depends on a particular textual form and syntactic segmentation.

3.2. The Chapter 51 Variant

道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之。

At the point where the Vietnamese versions render the received term shi as 'circumstances' or 'opportunity,' the Mawangdui silk text instead uses qi: things give form, while a vessel or configuration brings completion (Gao Ming, 1996). This variant shifts the semantic field from force, situation, and circumstances toward implement, structure, or completion as a formed entity. Differences among the Vietnamese versions cannot therefore be reduced to personal style; some also reflect the Chinese textual base and exegetical traditions received by each translator.

These variants establish a methodological limit: 'Non-being – Being – One – the ten thousand things' is an analytical axis connecting dispersed statements, not the single immutable formula of the Daodejing. The received text remains the principal basis because the three translators largely follow that textual tradition, while Guodian and Mawangdui reveal relations that the received text makes appear more stable than they are in textual history.

IV. From Nameless and Named to Non-being and Being

4.1. Two Modes of Punctuation

無名，天地之始；有名，萬物之母。

無，名天地之始；有，名萬物之母。

The first punctuation treats 無名 and 有名 as two phrases: ‘nameless’ is associated with the beginning of Heaven and Earth, and ‘named’ with the mother of the ten thousand things. The second separates 無 and 有 as categories and reads 名 as the verb ‘to designate’: ‘Non-being is designated the beginning of Heaven and Earth; Being is designated the mother of the ten thousand things.’ The alternatives shift the focus from naming to two modes of existence and may thus produce different translations and ontological orientations.

4.2. Three Translational and Exegetical Choices

Nguyễn Hiến Lê: “‘Không’, là gọi cái bản thủy của trời đất; ‘Có’ là gọi mẹ sinh ra muôn vật.” (‘Non-being’ designates the primal beginning of Heaven and Earth; ‘Being’ designates the mother that gives birth to the ten thousand things.) (Chapter 1)

Nguyễn Hiến Lê favors the Non-being/Being reading and uses the ordinary Vietnamese words Không/Có. For 故常無，欲以觀其妙；常有，欲以觀其微, he inserts ‘substance’ and ‘[function]’: ‘tự thường đặt vào chỗ “không” là để xét cái thể vi diệu của nó [đạo]; tự thường đặt vào chỗ “có” là để xét cái [dụng] vô biên của nó’ (‘one should ordinarily place oneself in “Non-being” to contemplate its [Dao’s] subtle substance, and in “Being” to contemplate its boundless [function]’). Yet his commentary openly presents alternative punctuations and interpretations. He explains extensively while allowing readers to see the process of selection.

Nguyễn Duy Cần: “Không tên, là gốc của Trời Đất; Có tên, là mẹ của vạn vật.” (The nameless is the root of Heaven and Earth; the named is the mother of the ten thousand things.) (Chapter 1)

Nguyễn Duy Cần’s translation retains the nameless/named construction, while his commentary defines ‘the nameless’ as substance and ‘the named’ as manifestation and relates them to the pre-celestial and post-celestial. He also states that Non-being and Being do not precede one another and are mutually conditioning. The temporal language of successive periods is thus qualified by their status as two aspects of one reality.

Lý Minh Tuấn: “Không tên là khởi đầu của trời đất. Có tên là mẹ của vạn vật.” (The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth. The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.) (2019, p. 15)

Lý Minh Tuấn’s sentence also follows the nameless/named construction, but his commentary shifts toward ontology by rendering Dao as ‘ultimate Reality.’ In Chapter 40, he identifies ‘Being’ as the ‘great energy of Taiji’ and ‘Non-being’ as Dao or ultimate Reality. The move from naming to levels of existence therefore occurs mainly in the commentary rather than entirely within the translation of Chapter 1.

4.3. Sino-Vietnamese Labels, Vernacular Words, and Capitalization

A distinctive feature of Vietnamese reception is the coexistence of the Sino-Vietnamese labels Vô/Hữu and the vernacular Không/Có. The translators commonly use Không/Có in their translations, whereas research and commentary readily shift to Vô/Hữu. Không/Có is closer to ordinary speech and may evoke negation or possession; Vô/Hữu more clearly resembles a philosophical pair. The present article’s adoption of ‘Vô – Hữu’ as an analytical axis is itself an act of conceptualization rather than an absolutely neutral label.

Similarly, ‘one, two, three’ are ordinary numerals, while capitalization turns ‘One, Two, Three’ into names for cosmological stages. Nguyễn Hiến Lê uses lower case in his translation; Nguyễn Duy Cần and Lý Minh Tuấn tend to capitalize the numbers or explain them as categories. Typography therefore participates, alongside vocabulary and commentary, in transforming numbers into entities or principles.

V. Structuring in Translation and Commentary

5.1. Chapter 25 From an Undifferentiated Thing to an Entity

有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。

Nguyễn Hiến Lê translates the opening as ‘có một vật hỗn độn mà thành’ (‘there is a thing formed in undifferentiated confusion’) and then emphasizes that Dao has neither image nor attributes. Nguyễn Duy Cần writes ‘có một cái tự nó sanh ra, trước Trời Đất’ (‘there is something self-generated, prior to Heaven and Earth’), reducing the material connotation of 物. Lý Minh Tuấn chooses ‘có thực thể tự thành không phân chia, sống trước trời đất’ (‘there is a self-formed, undivided entity existing before Heaven and Earth’) and rejects ‘chaotic’ as suggesting a disorderly aggregation of matter. All three place the referent before Heaven and Earth, but the words ‘thing,’ ‘something,’ and ‘entity’ represent different degrees of reification.

For 道法自然, Lý Minh Tuấn writes ‘Đạo noi theo năng lực tự mình’ (‘Dao follows its own inherent capacity’) and interprets ziran as Dao’s intrinsic capacity (2019, pp. 139–144). Here structuring occurs within the translation itself: ‘self-so’ or spontaneity becomes a type of power. Unlike Chapter 42, where divergence lies mainly in commentary, Chapter 25 shows how the translated sentence can strongly orient an ontological model.

5.2. Chapter 40 Generative and Reversive Relations

Nguyễn Hiến Lê: “Vạn vật trong thiên hạ từ ‘có’ mà sinh ra; ‘có’ lại từ ‘không’ mà sinh ra.” (The ten thousand things under Heaven are generated from ‘Being’; ‘Being,’ in turn, is generated from ‘Non-being’.) (Chapter 40)

Nguyễn Duy Cần: “Vạn vật dưới trời, sanh nơi Có; Có sanh nơi Không.” (The ten thousand things under Heaven are generated in Being; Being is generated in Non-being.) (Chapter 40)

Lý Minh Tuấn: “Muôn vật trong thiên hạ sinh ra ở Có; Có sinh ra ở Không.” (The ten thousand things under Heaven are born in Being; Being is born in Non-being.) (2019, p. 220)

All three preserve the two stages of Being and Non-being. Nevertheless, Vietnamese từ (‘from’) emphasizes origin, whereas nơi/ở (‘in’ or ‘at’) may suggest an environment or plane of existence. Nguyễn Duy Cần identifies Being with what has form and Non-being with formless Dao; Lý Minh Tuấn defines Being as Taiji and Non-being as ultimate Reality. Nguyễn Hiến Lê’s sentence occurs after the source propositions on reversal and weakness, but this order belongs to the Chinese text rather than to the translator. The present author may infer that generation should be read together with return and reversal; that inference should not be directly attributed to Nguyễn Hiến Lê.

5.3. Chapter 42 Similar Translations and Divergent Commentaries

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

The three versions translate the first clause in almost the same structure: ‘Dao generates One; One generates Two; Two generates Three; Three generates the ten thousand things.’ The translations alone therefore provide insufficient grounds for claiming that the translators create three distinct cosmological models. Their divergence emerges primarily in commentary.

Nguyễn Hiến Lê lists several possibilities: One may be Being, Taiji, or qì; Two is generally yin and yang; Three may be the qì produced through their conjunction, a harmonizing principle, or simply the number three. He does not choose conclusively. Nguyễn Duy Cần identifies One as the unique Substance of Dao, Two as the conflicting principles of yin and yang, and Three as ‘a third principle, the function of Dao’ that harmonizes them. Lý Minh Tuấn identifies One with Taiji, Two with the Two Modes, and Three with a ‘third stage of unfolding,’ namely the Four Images (2019, pp. 228–230).

Lý Minh Tuấn’s interpretation contains a notable numerical tension. Three is not equated with three entities but converted into the ordinal position of a stage whose result is the Four Images. This move resolves the discrepancy between three and four, but imports the Yijing sequence of Taiji, the Two Modes, and the Four Images into the Daodejing. It is a powerful intertextual systematization, not the explicit meaning of 道生一.

For 沖氣以為和, Nguyễn Hiến Lê writes ‘điều hòa bằng khí trùng hư’ (‘harmonized by the qì of the central void’), Nguyễn Duy Cần ‘nhân chỗ xung nhau mà hòa với nhau’ (‘through their mutual opposition, they come into harmony’), and Lý Minh Tuấn ‘những khí ấy tác động vào nhau để nên hòa hợp’ (‘those forms of qì interact and thereby become harmonious’). The relational syntax produces three mechanisms: a harmonizing medium, movement from opposition to harmony, and interaction among forms of qì. Here the translation itself, not commentary alone, creates different images of cosmological process.

5.4. Chapter 51 Thing, Configuration, Circumstances, and Opportunity

Nguyễn Hiến Lê: “Đạo sinh ra vạn vật [vì là tổng nguyên lý], đức bao bọc mỗi vật [vì là nguyên lý của mỗi vật], vật chất khiến cho mỗi vật hình thành, hoàn cảnh [khí hậu, thủy thổ] hoàn thành mỗi vật.” (Dao generates the ten thousand things [because it is the general principle]; De envelops each thing [because it is the principle of each individual thing]; matter causes each thing to take form; and the environment [climate, water, and soil] completes each thing.) (Chapter 51)

Nguyễn Duy Cần: “Đạo sanh đó, Đức nuôi đó, Chung loại tạo hình đó, Hoàn cảnh liễu kết đó.” (Dao generates it; De nurtures it; its type gives it form; circumstances bring it to completion.) (Chapter 51)

Lý Minh Tuấn: “Đạo sinh ra, Đức nuôi nấng, vật tạo hình, cơ hội hoàn thành.” (Dao generates; De nurtures; things give form; opportunity completes.) (2019, pp. 263–264)

Here structuring is clearly visible in the translated sentences. Nguyễn Hiến Lê renders 物 as ‘matter’ and concretizes 勢 through climate, water, and soil; Nguyễn Duy Cần chooses ‘type’ and ‘circumstances’; Lý Minh Tuấn uses ‘thing’ and ‘opportunity.’ These choices respectively suggest matter–environment, type–conditions, and thing–timing relations. Nguyễn Hiến Lê’s bracketed additions further turn the sentence into a sequence of general principle, particular principle, matter, and environment.

The Mawangdui variant 器成之 reminds us that ‘circumstances’ and ‘opportunity’ are not the only possibilities in textual history. Since all three translators examined here interpret the received reading 勢, their differences remain valid evidence of Vietnamese lexical selection. What must be avoided is treating one reading of the received text as the sole structure of the Daodejing.

VI. Three Consistent Axes of Comparison

Instead of assigning each translator a label drawn from a different criterion, all three may be located on the same axes: degree of semantic closure, philosophical frame of reference, and principal location of interpretation. This separates the intensity of intervention from its content.

Axis	Nguyễn Hiến Lê	Nguyễn Duy Cần	Lý Minh Tuấn
Semantic closure	Low to moderate; often presents competing possibilities	High; constructs a relatively stable monistic system	Very high; maps the numbers onto a determinate scheme
Main frame	Substance–function, principle, matter, and environment	Substance–manifestation, pre-/post-celestial, harmonizing principle	Ultimate Reality, Taiji–Two Modes–Four Images, process language
Main location of interpretation	Bracketed additions and commentary	Commentary; translation often retains Sino-Vietnamese cadence	Both lexical choices in translation and interpretive commentary
Reception effect	Readers encounter both an interpretation and its alternatives	Produces a tightly integrated philosophical system	Produces a modern, accessible scheme but strongly fixes meaning

Nguyễn Hiến Lê is not simply ‘literal’ or ‘free’: he explains extensively while often retaining competing possibilities. Nguyễn Duy Cần keeps the translation relatively close to the source but strongly directs interpretation through commentary. Lý Minh Tuấn intervenes at both levels, employing modern vocabulary in the translation and Yijing associations in the exegesis. These configurations support the relevance of thick translation: commentary is not a detachable supplement but directly participates in the meaning received by readers.

VII. Conclusion

‘Non-being – Being – One – the ten thousand things’ is useful as an analytical axis, but it is not an invariant linear cosmogonic formula already present in the source. Chapter 1 permits movement between nameless/named and Non-being/Being; the Guodian version of Chapter 40 weakens the reading of Being as a mandatory intermediate stage; Chapter 42 leaves the referents of One, Two, and Three open; and the Mawangdui variant of Chapter 51 reopens the relation between 勢 and 器. Cosmogenetic models in reception therefore result from connecting chapters, choosing a text, punctuating syntax, selecting vocabulary, and interpreting.

The three Vietnamese translations are highly similar in ‘Dao generates One’ but differ sharply in their commentaries. Nguyễn Hiến Lê retains multiple hypotheses; Nguyễn Duy Cần constructs a sequence of Substance, polar opposition, and harmonizing principle; Lý Minh Tuấn transforms the sequence into Taiji, the Two Modes, and the Four Images. In Chapters 25, 40, and 51, differences also occur within translation through such choices as ‘thing/something/entity,’ ‘from/in,’ ‘matter/type/thing,’ and ‘circumstances/opportunity.’ The appropriate unit of analysis is thus the translation–commentary configuration rather than an isolated translated sentence.

Apparently minor features of Vietnamese also have theoretical significance: Không/Có differs in register from Vô/Hữu; capitalization turns one/two/three into One/Two/Three; and prepositions or instrumental constructions can alter causal models. Evaluating translations of classical texts should therefore consider both how much openness is preserved and how transparently translators mark their interpretive additions. Future research may incorporate Chapter 39, undertake a more systematic comparison with the Guodian and Mawangdui texts, and examine how Vietnamese readers respond differently to translations read alone and translations read with commentary.

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