

The European Translation History of the Secret of the Golden Flower

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Abstract: The Secret of the Golden Flower (Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi) is a foundational Taoist text emphasizing self-cultivation through meditative techniques and metaphysical insight. Emerging during the Ming and Qing dynasties, it reflects a unique fusion of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist thought, aiming to purify the mind, reduce desires, and achieve spiritual illumination. This study explores the European translation history of the text, with particular focus on Richard Wilhelm's influential 1929 German version, *Das Geheimnis der Goldenen Blüte*, and its psychological reinterpretation by Carl Gustav Jung. Employing a historical-comparative methodology, the paper traces the text's trajectory from esoteric Chinese circles to Western academic, philosophical, and psychological discourse. It examines the linguistic and cultural transformations involved in cross-cultural translation, analyzes the text's reception in Europe, and evaluates its role in shaping modern understandings of Taoist philosophy. The study also considers how these translations contributed to the construction of China's international cultural image. By situating The Secret of the Golden Flower within a broader context of East-West intellectual exchange, this paper offers insight into the challenges and possibilities of translating spiritual traditions across cultural boundaries.

1. Introduction

The Secret of the Golden Flower (hereafter Golden Flower) is a Taoist scripture that circulated during the Qing dynasty, with origins possibly tracing back to the Kangxi era. Monica Esposito identified six extant versions of the text, the earliest being found in Shao Zhilin's Complete Works of Master Lü (1775). Since then, it has been published under multiple titles and has served as a central meditation manual in Taoist traditions such as Jingming and Quanzhen.

In the late 19th century, Christian missionary Richard Wilhelm encountered the text at the ancestral temple of the Longmen sect on Mount Lao. Upon returning to Germany, he translated the work into German and published it as *Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte*. His translation garnered the attention of Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung and played a significant role in the development of Jungian psychology. Subsequently, the text was translated into various European

languages and gained prominence across the Western world.

This article traces the European translation history of Golden Flower, analyses its interpretations across linguistic and disciplinary contexts, and discusses its broader cultural and academic implications.

2. Richard Wilhelm and the First German Translation

Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), one of the most influential European sinologists of the 20th century, came to China in 1899. During his 21 years in the country, he developed a deep interest in Taoist thought, particularly the meditative and metaphysical teachings in Golden Flower.

In 1929, Wilhelm published his German translation titled *Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte: Ein Chinesisches Lebensbuch* with Diederichs Verlag in Munich. The version was based on a text printed by Zhanran Huizhenzi titled *Longevity Techniques: Methods of Prolonging Life*, reflecting Longmen sect teachings.[1] Wilhelm's translation was not merely linguistic—it aimed to present Taoist inner alchemy as an Eastern “philosophy of life.”

Psychologist Carl Jung contributed a psychological commentary to Wilhelm's translation, offering a Western analytical framework. Wilhelm recounted obtaining the 1920 edition, which combined Golden Flower and Huiming Jing, and was limited to a small circle of initiated readers. [2]He also found a 17th-century woodblock edition in Beijing and used a friend's manuscript to fill in gaps.[3]

Wilhelm's work introduced Golden Flower to European readers, making it the most widely known Taoist text in the West and a key reference for intercultural philosophical engagement.

3. Jung's Psychological Commentary

Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung was a close friend of Richard Wilhelm and a key figure in promoting *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. In his psychological research, Jung proposed the theory of the “collective unconscious,” which coincidentally aligns with the cultivation method of “turning the light around” described in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. [4]

In the 1929 edition of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Jung wrote an extensive commentary on Wilhelm's translation, offering a detailed psychological analysis of the scripture. He pointed out that the internal alchemical practices described in *The Secret of the Golden Flower* were not only a form of religious practice but also tools for self-awareness and spiritual growth. Jung frequently borrowed ideas from the scripture in his mandala drawings, treating it as an important guide for exploring the depths of the human psyche.

Jung once mentioned a turning point in his life, which stemmed from his break with Freud. The split was due to differing interpretations of the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, as well as divergent views on dream analysis. After the breakdown of their relationship, Jung went through a long period of solitude, but it was during this time that he freed himself from Freud's shadow and began to develop his own personalized psychoanalytic theories. Around 1918, Jung began creating mandala drawings— “small circular images”—as a means of observing the changes in his own psychological state.

Wilhelm and Jung met in the early 1920s. In 1920, German philosopher Hermann Graf von Keyserling established the “School of Wisdom” (*Schule der Weisheit*) in Darmstadt, where he often invited intellectuals from various fields to give lectures. Both Wilhelm and Jung were invited, and they soon became close friends. In 1923, Jung invited Wilhelm to speak on the I Ching at the Psychological Club in Zurich (*Der Psychologische Club*). [5] Wilhelm's psychological reading of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* was likely influenced by Jung. After completing his translation, Wilhelm sent the manuscript to Jung and asked him to write a commentary. Upon finishing it, Jung

wrote back to Wilhelm, suggesting he write a preface discussing the “philosophical and religious-historical background” of the scripture.

However, in the final published version of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, after Wilhelm discussed “The Origin of the Book,” he devoted an entire chapter to its “Psychological and Cosmological Premises,” in which he pointed out that the connection between psyche and cosmos (Psyche und Kosmos) was the foundation upon which the cultivation methods described in the scripture were based.[6] It is evident that aside from the scripture’s return to Laozi’s teachings, its integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and its fusion of Eastern and Western thought, the psychological value of the text was also a key reason motivating Wilhelm to translate it.

In 1926, Jung produced a mandala drawing centred on a “heavily guarded golden castle,” and he strongly felt it had a distinct Chinese flavor. Around this time, Wilhelm happened to send Jung a Chinese article that, in some mysterious way, echoed the themes of his mandala drawing—what Jung called a “synchronicity.” [7] Jung wrote in his autobiography:

“I received a letter from Richard Wilhelm, which enclosed an article discussing Daoist alchemy. It was also labelled *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. I immediately devoured the manuscript with great hunger, for what it described confirmed, in a way I had never imagined possible, my ideas about mandalas and the circling around a centre. It was the first thing that broke my isolation.”[8]

Jung’s commentary had a profound influence on the reception of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in the Western psychological community and became a model for interdisciplinary research. He also referenced its content in many of his essays, comparing it with Western philosophical and psychological traditions, thus deepening the Western understanding of Chinese philosophy.[9]

4. Academic Influence and Theoretical Debates

Jung’s commentary gave *Golden Flower* academic legitimacy beyond sinology. [9] In philosophy, religious studies, and comparative literature, scholars analysed Taoist cosmology, life theories, and meditative practices through this lens.

In Germany, France, Switzerland, and the UK, it became a case study in comparative thought. [10] Some scholars critiqued Wilhelm’s Christian background as potentially leading to selective translation, yet many valued his role in bridging cultural divides.

The concept of “reversing the light” (hui guang fan zhao) was interpreted in psychological terms as a reversal of psychic energy. Jung used this idea in therapy to describe introspective healing. His student von Franz connected Taoist visual meditations with mandala studies, expanding the theory of collective unconscious.

However, some scholars like Mircea Eliade criticized Jung’s overly psychological reading, arguing it ignored Taoism’s religious context.[11] Livia Kohn noted that Wilhelm’s translation, though profound, was shaped by his Christian background and German philosophical trends, possibly misrepresenting Taoist religious practice. [12]

Though some scholars, like Livia Kohn, noted the influence of Wilhelm’s religious background and the possible omission of Taoist ritual contexts, the translation opened the door to deeper East-West philosophical dialogue.

5. Multilingual Dissemination

5.1. German Translation by Richard Wilhelm (1929)

Richard Wilhelm, a distinguished German sinologist, introduced *The Secret of the Golden Flower* to Western audiences through his German translation titled *Das Geheimnis der Goldenen Blüte: Ein Chinesisches Lebensbuch*, published in 1929. Wilhelm’s translation was based on a 1921

Chinese edition edited by Dan Ranhui, which he discovered in Beijing's Liulichang district, renowned for its antique bookshops.

Wilhelm's rendition was accompanied by a profound psychological commentary from his close associate, Carl Gustav Jung. Jung's insights bridged Eastern meditative practices with Western analytical psychology, marking a pivotal moment in cross-cultural intellectual exchange. This German edition became the cornerstone for subsequent translations and played a crucial role in introducing Taoist inner alchemy concepts to the Western world.

5.2. English Translations

1) Cary F. Baynes (1931)

In 1931, Cary F. Baynes translated Wilhelm's German version into English, resulting in *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*. [13] This edition included Jung's original commentary, making it the first comprehensive English-language presentation of the text. Baynes' translation significantly influenced Western interpretations of Eastern spirituality and psychology, particularly within Jungian circles.

2) Thomas Cleary (1991)

Thomas Cleary, a renowned translator of Eastern texts, offered a fresh English translation in 1991. Unlike Baynes, Cleary translated directly from Chinese sources, aiming to preserve the text's original Taoist and Buddhist nuances. His version emphasized the spiritual and meditative aspects of the work, providing readers with a perspective rooted in Eastern philosophical traditions.

5.3. Japanese Translation by Yasuo Yuasa and Akio Sadakata (1980)

In 1980, Japanese scholars Yasuo Yuasa and Akio Sadakata translated *The Secret of the Golden Flower* into Japanese. Their work introduced the text to a Japanese audience, fostering academic and spiritual interest in Taoist inner alchemy within Japan. [14] This translation contributed to a broader understanding and appreciation of the text in East Asian contexts.

5.4. Translations into Other Languages

Following Wilhelm's influential German edition, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* has been translated into multiple languages, including French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Many of these versions are based on Wilhelm's translation, underscoring its foundational role in disseminating the text globally. These translations have expanded the reach of the text, allowing diverse audiences to engage with its teachings on meditation and inner transformation.

6. Cultural Significance of Translation

Taoism advocates natural harmony and the principle of wu wei (non-action). Translating *Golden Flower* helps international audiences understand Taoist perspectives on the cosmos, self-cultivation, and spiritual health.

Its Western reception through Wilhelm and Jung initiated a rare philosophical synthesis. Jung saw Taoist meditation as psychological therapy, paralleling Eastern spiritual discipline with Western mental health strategies. This interpretation persists today in mindfulness and integrative psychology.

At the same time, the text's translation raises questions about cultural adaptation. How much Taoism is preserved in Western versions? How does framing Taoist meditation as therapy affect its religious depth? These questions continue to inspire intercultural inquiry.

7. Conclusion

The translation history of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* marks a major milestone in East-West intellectual exchange. From Wilhelm's German edition to its global dissemination, the text has shaped international dialogues in psychology, philosophy, and comparative religion.

Its journey from esoteric Taoist scripture to a globally studied spiritual classic illustrates the enduring power of translation. Through efforts by Wilhelm, Jung, and later scholars, *Golden Flower* has become a cultural ambassador of Chinese thought. Future research should continue to balance fidelity to Taoist traditions with innovative cross-cultural interpretations.

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