

DYNAMIC MAPPING OF LAOZI STUDIES HOTSPOTS: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

YUNXIN SONG & HUICHAN REN

Aba Teachers University, Wenchuan 623002, Sichuan, China

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.8329>

ABSTRACT

This study employs bibliometric analysis to systematically examine 759 research articles on Laozi published in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and Peking University Core Journals from 2020 to 2025. Using VOSviewer 1.6.20, the research maps academic landscapes, identifies hotspots, and forecasts trends related to Laozi studies. Key findings reveal a declining publication trajectory over the five-year period, with notable contributions from prolific authors such as Wang Shaojun and Zhan Shichuang. Leading institutions, including Renmin University of China and East China Normal University, and core journals like Religious Studies and History of Chinese Philosophy are highlighted as pivotal contributors. Research clusters emphasize the intersections between Confucian and Daoist thought, the exegesis of the Tao Te Ching, and ecological studies philosophy. Emerging trends suggest a growing focus on Dao, Zhuangzi, and classical interpretations. However, collaboration among Chinese scholars remains underdeveloped, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary partnerships. By integrating keyword co-occurrence, this study provides a forward-looking framework for future research, advocating for global perspectives to enhance cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Laozi, bibliometric analysis, visualization, research hotspots, Daoist

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Laozi, a renowned Chinese philosopher and thinker, is recognized as the founder of Daoism and the originator of the Daoist school—a philosophical tradition fundamental to China's indigenous religion—due to his profound contributions (Zhao, 2025; Shi, 2024). As an outstanding representative of traditional Chinese culture, Laozi's thought combines profound metaphysical depth with enduring philosophical resonance, epitomizing the essence of Chinese culture and exemplifying quintessential Eastern wisdom (Zhong, 2023; Zhang, 2013). Laozi's thought has profoundly influenced the development of Chinese philosophy and continues to provide valuable insights and practical relevance for contemporary society (Chen, 2022). Laozi's thought, as a vital component of Chinese traditional philosophy with its dialectical perspective exemplifying Daoist core principles, highlights through modern applications and cultural adaptation the enduring value of its living principles—encompassing self-cultivation, governance, and statecraft—for Chinese cultural transmission and development (Wang, 2023; Tang, 2024). In the face of acute ecological crises, Laozi's natural philosophy—exemplified by "Dao generates all things"—informs harmonious human-nature coexistence, with its promotion and study fostering systematic natural philosophy and ecological awareness (Jiang, 2021; Chen, 2019).

As a tool for identifying research trends and hot topics, VOSviewer provides the creation of knowledge maps that visualize author collaborations, keyword co-occurrences, and clusters to explore frontiers in Chinese scholarship (Ren & Song, 2024; Yang & Qiao, 2025).

This research provides a comprehensive review of existing literature on Laozi, highlighting five key dimensions: annual publication trends, highly productive authors, leading institutions, core journals, and keyword co-occurrence patterns. By examining these five dimensions, this study enhances scholars' understanding of the academic landscape in Laozi research, thereby providing critical insights that advance the comprehensive development of this field.

2.0 DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

This study precisely limited its data sources to CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) and Peking University Core Journals indexed in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Research data were filtered according to the following criteria: topic (Laozi) and publication years (2020–2025). Following a rigorous screening process, researchers selected 759 documents as the research data sample, which underwent comprehensive visualization and in-depth analysis.

Figure 1 illustrates CNKI subject categories with publications exceeding 20 articles. Philosophy accounts for 459 published documents, surpassing all other subject areas. Documents in this field comprise approximately 60% of all published literature. Religion ranks second in publication quantity with 73 articles, which accounts for roughly 9.6% of the total documents across all fields. Chinese ancient history ranks third in publication quantity with 60 articles, representing about 7.9% of the total. Chinese literature ranks fourth in publication quantity with 31 articles, constituting around 4% of the total.

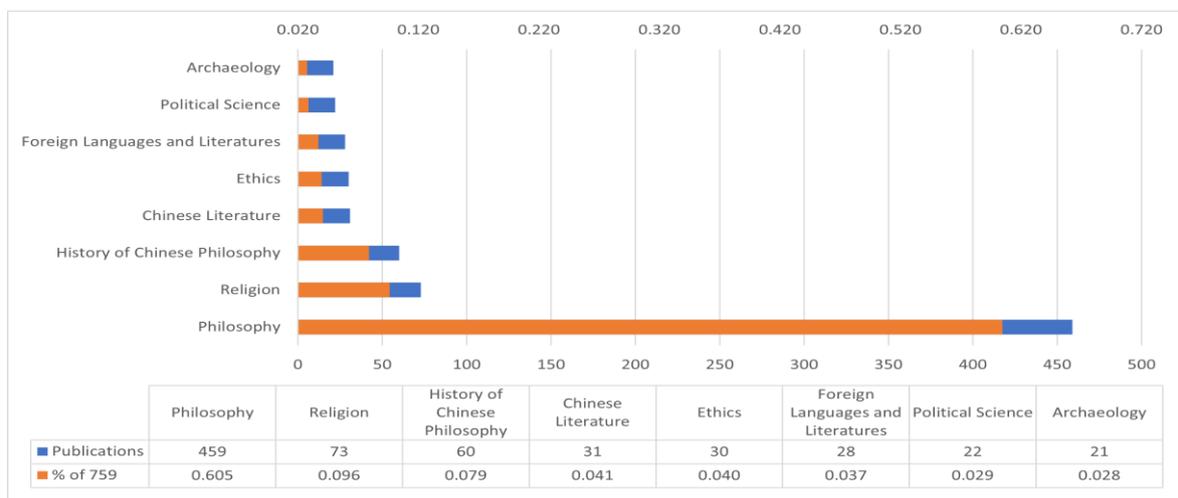


Figure 1: High-contribution subject

VOSviewer, a visual clustering analysis tool specialized in the quantitative analysis of cross-disciplinary literature, enables the visualization of literature keywords, author collaboration networks, and research institution distributions through intuitive charts such as cluster and density views, demonstrating significant advantages in cluster analysis (Hassan-Montero et al., 2022; Vasudevan et al., 2016; Ren & Abdullah, 2024; Yang, 2025). Excel, a powerful

visualization tool, not only generates maps from input data instantly but also transforms datasets into intuitive, readable formats through its sophisticated charting capabilities (Au & Rischpater, 2015; Ren & Abdullah, 2024; John, 2016; Zheng et al., 2022).

This study employed VOSviewer 1.6.20 and Excel software to conduct a bibliometric analysis. By utilizing these tools, in-depth processing and analysis of relevant data produce knowledge maps that visually represent the knowledge structure and developmental trajectories of the research field.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Annual Publication Trends

As shown in Figure 2, the publication volume of Laozi research has exhibited a significant downward trend over the past five years. Publication volume decreased slightly from 191 articles in 2020 to 187 in 2021, before sharply dropping to 133 in 2022. This downward trend continued with 130 articles published in 2023, further declining to 106 in 2024. Overall, the sustained contraction in Laozi research output suggests both periodic adjustments in research interest and necessitates an in-depth exploration of underlying academic ecological impact mechanisms, including disciplinary development dynamics and changes in literature databases coverage.

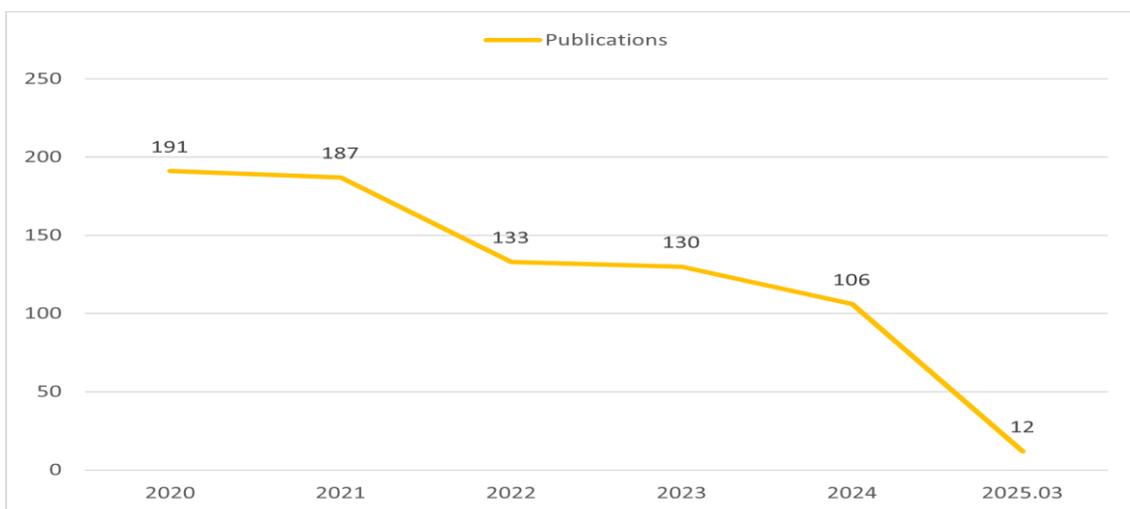


Figure 2: The trend of the annual publication volume of Laozi research

3.2 Prolific Authors Analysis

Figure 3 illustrates the authors who have published six or more papers in the Laozi research field, all of whom have

made significant academic contributions in the discipline. Among them, Wang Shaojun has published nine Laozi-related papers, Zhan Shichuang seven, and Chen Wei, Wang Zhongjiang, and Ye Shuxun each six. The prolific output of Wang Shaojun and Zhan Shichuang in Laozi

research reflects their deep engagement and enthusiasm for the subject, significantly demonstrating their solid expertise and extensive research experience in the field.

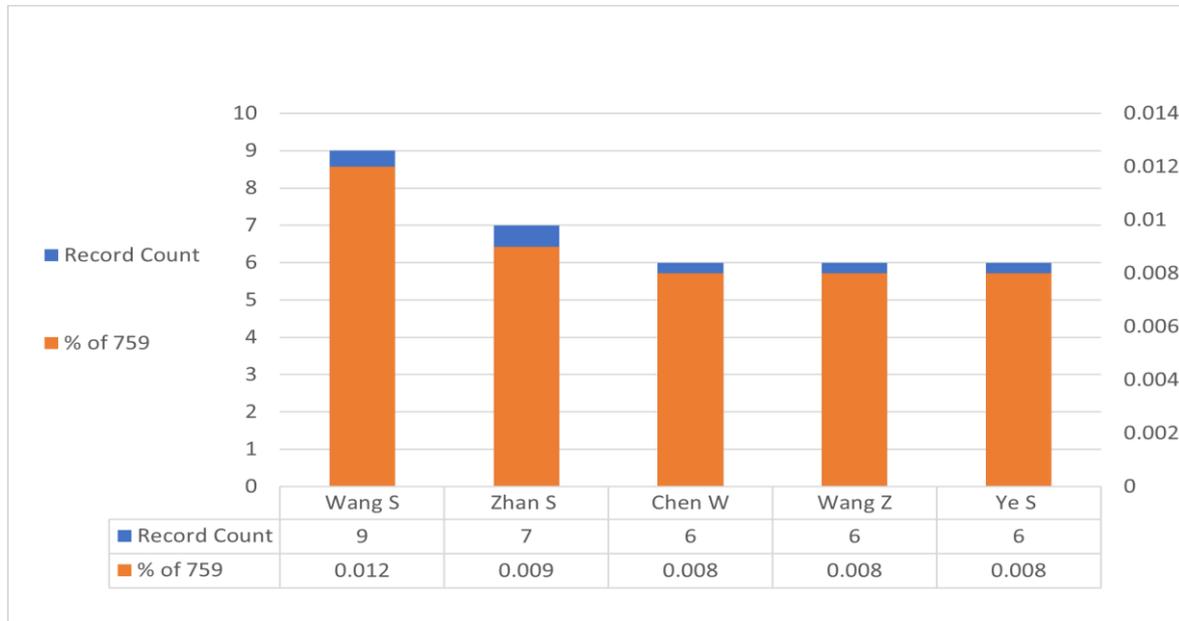


Figure 3: Authors and Contributions to Laozi Study

3.3 Co-occurrence Author

Figure 4 illustrates that collaboration connections among Chinese authors in Laozi studies exhibit a relatively loose structure. This phenomenon may stem from the perception among Chinese authors that only single-authored publications reflect academic value and status, a practice that has become ingrained among some Chinese scholars to a certain degree. From the perspective of academic development, this practice is detrimental to the diversification and in-depth advancement of academic achievements. It promotes collaborative research among multidisciplinary and cross-field authors.

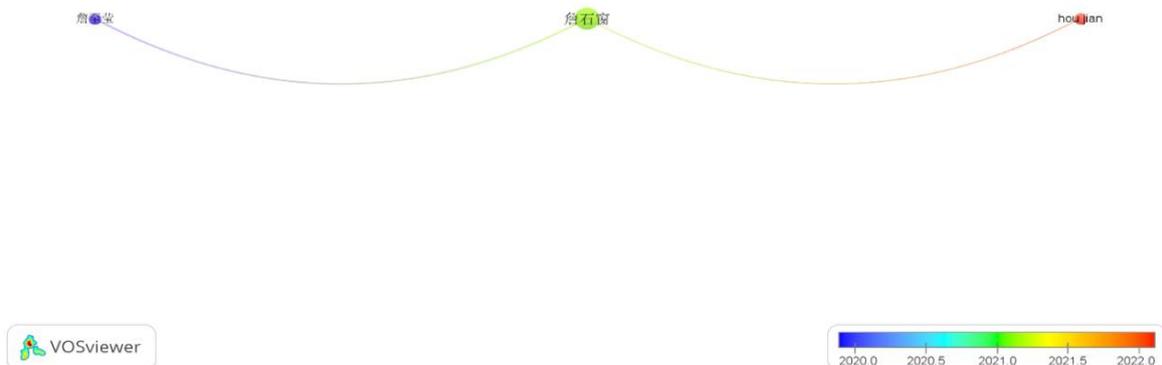


Figure 4: Author co-occurrence in the research network of Laozi

3.4 Highly Contributing Institutions

Figure 5 shows high-contributing institutions in Laozi research with publication output exceeding 20 articles, whose research output has significantly supported academic development in the field. Data indicate that Renmin University of China has produced 34 articles on Laozi research, East China Normal University 31, Sichuan University 28, and both Peking University and Beijing Normal University 27. Renmin University of China, East China Normal University, and Sichuan University have demonstrated substantial academic influence in Laozi research through their high publication output, while also reflecting these institutions' sustained in-depth focus and academic research enthusiasm for the subject.



Figure 5: Analysis of High-Contributing Institutions in the Research Network of Laozi

3.5 Highly Contributing Journals

Table 1 presents journals with publication output exceeding 15 articles in Laozi research, where Studies in Religion leads with 29 articles (8.12%), making it the top contributor with significant scholarly impact. History of Chinese Philosophy published 26 articles (7.28%), while both Philosophical Research and Zhongzhou Academic Journal contributed 18 articles each (5.04%), demonstrating significant output in Laozi research. These journals demonstrate their strong commitment to the field and provide crucial platforms for academic exchange.

Table 1 Analysis of Journals with High - Contribution to Laozi Research

Journal	Record Count	% of 759
Studies in Religion	29	8.12
History of Chinese Philosophy	26	7.28

Journal of Humanities	18	5.04
Philosophical Researches	18	5.04
Academic Journal of Zhongzhou	17	4.76
Philosophical Trends	16	4.48

3.6 Co-occurrence Keyword

Figure 6 illustrates the keyword co-occurrence network in Laozi research, where the minimum co-occurrence threshold was set at 4, resulting in 47 eligible keywords after removing 14 duplicates. Figure 6 illustrates nine color-coded clusters: The first red-coded cluster contains nine keywords, with "virtue" (total line strength =13, occurrences =12), "xuan de (玄德)" (total line strength =6, occurrences =7), and "Daoist thought" (total line strength =5, occurrences =9) as core terms; The second green-coded cluster contains seven keywords, with Dao De Jing (total line strength =11, occurrences =30), "name" (total line strength =11, occurrences =10), and "Dao follows nature" (total line strength =4, occurrences =7) as core terms; The third blue-coded cluster contains seven keywords, with "Confucius" (total line strength =8, occurrences =17) and "Heidegger" (total line strength =3, occurrences =4) as core terms; The fourth yellow-coded cluster contains six keywords, with "Wang Bi" (total line strength =7, occurrences =12) and "Laozhuang (老庄)" (total line strength =4, occurrences =8) as core terms; The fifth purple-coded cluster contains six keywords, with "Daoism" (total line strength =5, occurrences =12) and "Laozi Xiang'er Zhu(老子想尔注)" (total line strength =4, occurrences =6) as core terms; The sixth teal-coded cluster contains four keywords, with "Zhuangzi" (total line strength =20, occurrences =31) as the core term; The seventh orange-coded cluster contains three keywords, with "tianxia (天下)" (total line strength =6, occurrences =4) as the core term; the eighth brown-coded cluster includes three keywords, led by "Dao (道)" (total line strength =48, occurrences =67); and the ninth pink-coded cluster consists of three keywords, centered around "wu (无)" (total line strength =8, occurrences =5).

Analysis of core terms in each cluster reveals that the first cluster focuses on the intersection of Confucian and Daoist thought while also exploring Daoist core concepts; The second cluster centers on Dao De Jing's core themes and philosophical ideas; the third highlights the integration of Taoism and Legalist thought and its implications for modern political philosophy; The fourth cluster focuses on Chinese traditional philosophical thought and its representative figures; the fifth centers on Daoist classics, their interpretations, and philosophical reflections on all things; The sixth cluster examines Daoist ontology represented by Zhuangzi and Huang-Lao Daoism, along with the concept of "qi (气)"; the seventh explores ideal personality, social governance, and individual self-related issues in ancient philosophy and political ethics; The eighth cluster focuses on the core concept of "Dao (道)" and the idea of "wu bu wei (无不为)" in pre-Qin philosophical thought; the ninth examines interpretations and discussions of "yi (一)" and "wu (无)" within the Huang-Lao Daoist school framework.

Figure 7: Keyword Co-occurrence in the Overlay Network of Laozi Studies

4.0 CONCLUSION

This study employs bibliometric visualization analysis to examine 759 Laozi research articles from CNKI published between 2020 and 2025, presenting the academic landscape of the field. Laozi research has seen a decline in momentum over the past five years, with underlying causes such as research impetus and academic orientations warranting further investigation. While scholars such as Wang Shaojun have made significant contributions, there remains insufficient collaboration among Chinese authors. To address this, cross-institutional and interdisciplinary partnerships should be enhanced to expand research depth and breadth. Institutions such as Renmin University of China exhibit robust research capabilities, significantly supporting the development of this field. The diverse range of research topics includes comparative studies of Confucian and Daoist thought, interpretations of the core tenets of the Dao De Jing, and more. Dao (道), Zhuangzi, and Dao De Jing remain core themes that will continue to dominate research in the field, potentially spurring interdisciplinary innovative outcomes. Prestigious journals such as *Philosophical Trends*, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, and *Journal of Laozi Studies* have published numerous high-quality papers, providing academic exchange platforms for Laozi research and promoting scholarly advancement.

This study's reliance solely on CNKI as the data source presents limitations. Future research should broaden data collection to integrate domestic and international findings, promoting the in-depth development of Laozi studies within a global academic context and fostering cross-cultural exchanges in philosophy and related disciplines.

Acknowledgements

The researchers thank Dong Zhongshu and the Traditional Culture Research Center at Hengshui University for their assistance.

REFERENCES

- Chen, F. J. (2019). On Laozi's Environmental Ethical Thoughts and Their Contemporary Value. *Journal of Anhui University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 43(5), 10-17. doi: 10.13796/j.cnki.1001-5019.2019.05.002
- Chen, Y. L. (2022). The Philosophical Thoughts of Laozi and Their Contemporary Value. *Qinzhi*, 5, 13-15.
- Jiang, Q. X. (2021). Research on Laozi's View of Nature and Its Contemporary Value [Master's thesis, Northeast Normal University]. doi: 10.27011/d.cnki.gdbsu.2021.000850
- Ren, H., & Song, L. Q. (2025). Research Progress and Hotspot Analysis of Pension Plans: A Visualization Study Based on VosViewer. *Journal of Changchun University*, 35(3), 6-11.

- Ren, H., & Abdullah, S. (2024). Mapping leadership dynamics in 2023: A comprehensive visualization analysis of BRICS+ nations. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 14(1), 2556-2566.
- Shi, X. W. (2024). The Ecological Ethics Thought of Laozi and Its Contemporary Value. *Journal of Culture*, 2(2), 126-129.
- Tang, X. (2024). Acceptance and Tolerance: An Analysis of the Guiding Role of Laozi's Dialectical Thinking in Philosophy on the Acquisition of Contemporary College Students' Psychological Self-healing Ability. *Journal of Taiyuan Urban Vocational College*, 1, 158-160. doi: 10.16227/j.cnki.tyycs.2024.0034
- Wang, C. H. (2023). The Modern Expression of Laozi's Way of Conducting Oneself. *Couplets*, 24, 43-45.
- Walkenbach, J. (2015). *Microsoft Excel 2016 Bible* (1st ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Yang, J., & Qiao, A. L. (2025). A Visual Analysis of Research in the Field of Learning Analytics in China Since 2011. *China Educational Technology & Equipment*, 2, 1-6, 11.
- Yang, M. H. (2025). Knowledge Graph Analysis Based on VOSviewer: Taking Intelligent Lighting Design as an Example. *China Light & Lighting*, 2, 7-11, 25.
- Zhang, C. C. (2013). The Contemporary Value of Laozi's Thoughts. *Journal of Tianshui Normal University*, 33(3), 24-28.
- Zhao, Z. M. (2025). The "Tao" in Laozi. *Chinese Character Culture*, 3(3), 194-195. doi: 10.14014/j.cnki.cn11-2597/g2.2025.03.043
- Zheng, W. Q., Liu, X. L., & Luo, G. D. (2022). Automation of Excel Charts Based on VB.Net. *Computer Programming Skills & Maintenance*, 11, 138-142. doi: 10.16184/j.cnki.comprg.2022.11.038
- Zhong, S. D. (2023). The Main Moral Education Thoughts of Laozi and Their Contemporary Educational Value. *Technology Wind*, 27, 56-58. doi: 10.19392/j.cnki.1671-7341.202327019