A Visual Analysis of Research Hotspots and Trends in Zhuangzi's Thought from 2020 to 2025

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Abstract

This study analyzes the research hotspots and trends in Zhuangzi's thought from 2020 to 2025 by employing bibliometric analysis and visualization techniques. The findings reveal a steady decline in the number of publications. The field of philosophy has the highest document count. Scholars Chen Yun and Sun Mingjun have made significant contributions. However, their collaborative network is rather loose. The journal History of Chinese Philosophy has significantly contributed to the field. Current research hotspots include core concepts such as Xiaoyao You, Ziran, and Ziyou, alongside emerging themes like Xuanxue and Pre-Qin Daoism. This study offers a clear and comprehensive overview of the knowledge structure and evolving trends in the research of Zhuangzi's thought through visualization analysis. It offers valuable insights for optimizing research directions, integrating academic resources, and fostering greater academic collaboration. Moreover, this research supports the creative transformation and innovative development of China's rich traditional culture.

1. Introduction

As globalization continues to advance, the diversity and intermingling of cultures have become increasingly prominent. Against this backdrop, China's rich traditional culture has shown immense contemporary value. It is crucial for preserving national heritage and offers vital resources to maintain our cultural foundations and draw wisdom for modern society (Wei & Lai, 2024). Sages like Laozi, Confucius, Zhuangzi, and Mencius, as outstanding representatives of Chinese civilization, have developed philosophical systems rich in wisdom, providing unique theoretical resources for the advancement of human civilization. As a central figure in Daoist thought, Zhuangzi's philosophy has profoundly influenced ancient China and remains uniquely relevant today. His views on nature and freedom share many similarities with the explorations of modern thinkers, offering valuable insights into contemporary ecological ethics, mental health, and social governance. However, current research on Zhuangzi's thought still leaves many gaps unfilled, particularly regarding its interplay with contemporary society, which urgently needs further investigation. Therefore, a systematic review of research trends and hotspots in the study of Zhuangzi's thought facilitates the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional culture, lays a solid theoretical foundation for building cultural confidence, and contributes Chinese wisdom to global cultural dialogue. Using visualization techniques to analyze complex data is both an effective and efficient research methodology. Visual analysis not only encourages the development of novel ideas but also provides readers with a foundation for objective observation and assessment (van Wijk, 2005). Meanwhile,

acknowledging the contributions of particular authors on a certain subject might aid in identifying experts in that field and establishing the basis for academic cooperation (Akbari et al., 2020). Highly cited publications hold significant academic value and impact on specific subjects. Examining such texts provides a deeper comprehension of the evolutionary trajectories and fundamental principles of the academic region (Chander et al., 2022). Co-occurrence keyword analysis is a commonly used technique in bibliometric analysis (Gorzeń-Mitka et al., 2020). Using this approach, researchers can analyze the structure and patterns of the specified study dataset, resulting in a thorough understanding (Ren & Abdullah, 2024a; Ren & Abdullah, 2024b).

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the research on Zhuangzi's thought from 2020 to 2025, covering the temporal variation in the number of publications, the distribution of disciplines, high-contribution authors and co-authorship networks, the distribution of leading journals, co-occurrence analysis of keywords, and an examination of highly cited papers. These analyses provide important references for optimizing research directions and integrating academic resources.

2. Research Methods and Data Collection

2.1 Research Methods

VOSviewer is a tool for the comprehensive examination of clustering solutions utilizing visualization (Hassan-Montero et al., 2022; Vasudevan et al., 2016), and Excel software is a robust visualization tool that can immediately create maps from input data (Au & Rischpater, 2015). In this study, we primarily utilized VOSviewer 1.6.18 and Excel software to generate bibliometric knowledge maps from the relevant literature data on the study of Zhuangzi's thoughts. Through visualization techniques, we revealed the hotspots, trends, and potential academic connections within the research domain.

2.2 Data Collection

The research data in this study are collected from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. The screening criteria for the research data are as follows: The subject terms include "Zhuangzi" and "Zhuangzi's thought," with the research scope limited to China in the past five years. The primary type of document is journal articles, and the source categories include the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) and Peking University Core Journals. After a rigorous screening process, the researchers retrieved 801 relevant documents from the database. A further 12 documents with incomplete information were excluded, resulting in a final selection of 789 documents that met the criteria for high relevance and significance. These documents will be utilized explicitly for in-depth visualization analysis to reveal the hotspots and trends in the study of Zhuangzi's thoughts.

3. Result and Disscusion

3.1 Annual Distribution of research on Zhuangzi's Thought

The number of academic papers published over time serves as a crucial metric for gauging the developmental trajectory of a specific academic field. Conducting a comprehensive historical statistical analysis of the distribution of these papers and plotting the corresponding distribution curves are essential for evaluating the current stage of the field and predicting its developmental trends and dynamics (Qiu et al., 2012). Figure 1 shows that the number of publications on Zhuangzi's thought decreased annually from 2020 to 2025, reducing from 174 to 19. This trend suggests that the field may be facing challenges that warrant attention. The decline was gradual from 2019 to 2023 but became more pronounced from 2023 to 2025. This change indicates that relevant research areas need to analyze the reasons and take measures to promote the sustainable development of the field.
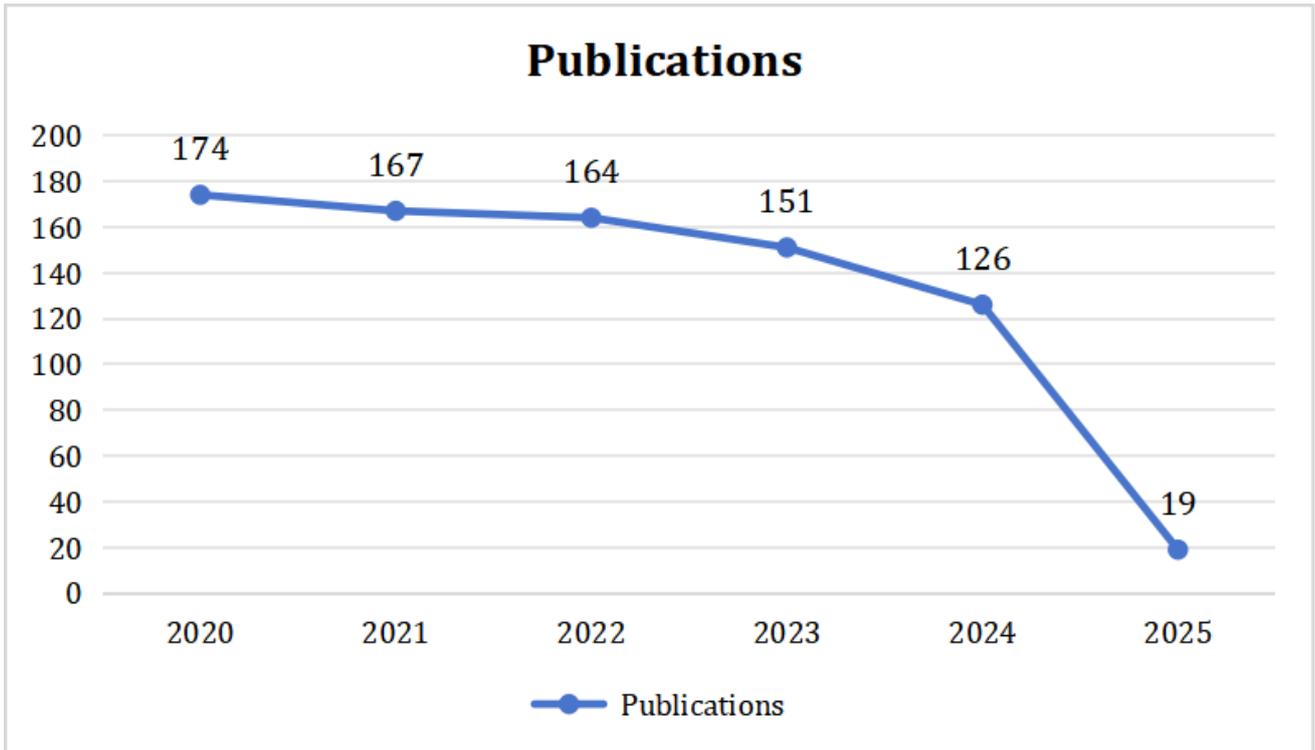
Fig. 1 *Annual Distribution of Zhuangzi's Thought Research*

3.2 Subject Distribution

Figure 2 indicates that within the academic study of Zhuangzi's thoughts in China, the philosophy field has the highest number of publications, totaling 508 articles. The field of Chinese philosophy follows, with 79 articles. The field of religion has 36 articles. Other fields have relatively fewer publications. Overall, the study of Zhuangzi's thought is marked by multidisciplinary intersections, while remaining focused on philosophy. Research from other fields enhances the understanding and application of Zhuangzi's thought from diverse perspectives.

Fig. 2 *Distribution of Disciplines in Zhuangzi's Thought Research*
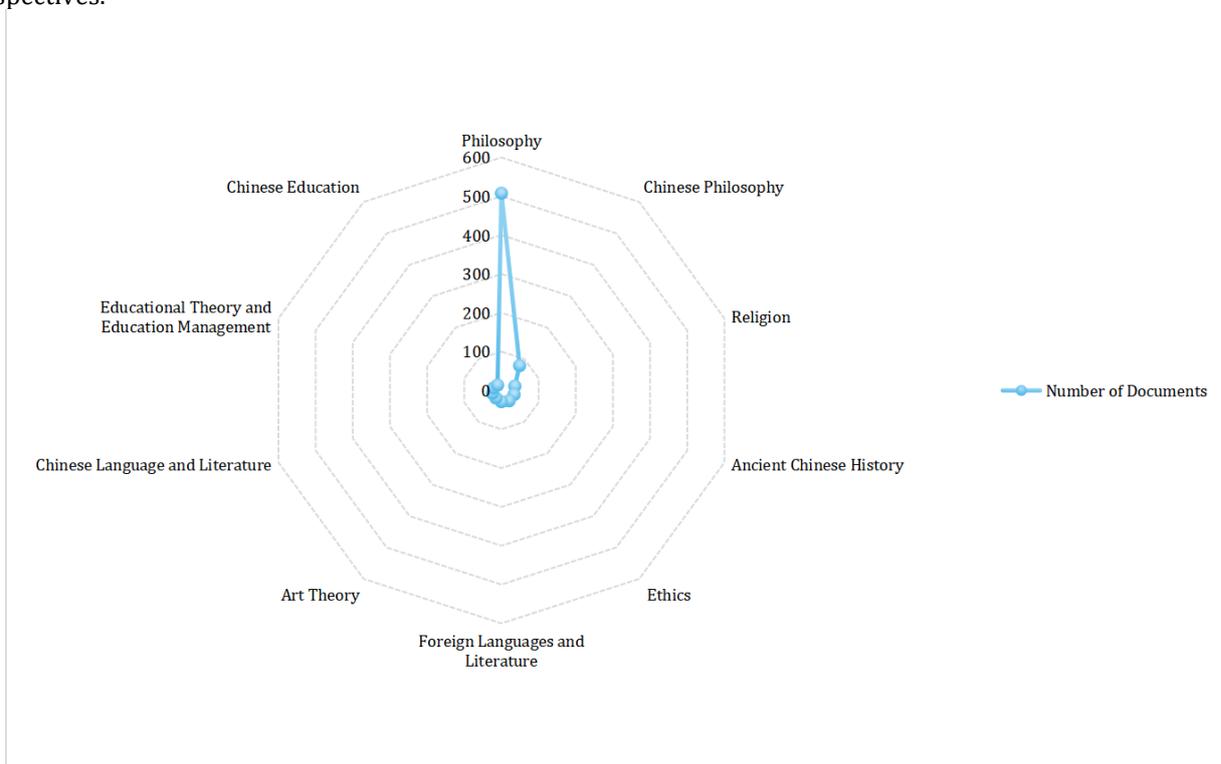
3.3 High-Contribution Authors Analysis

Figure 3 shows the top 10 authors with four or more publications. Scholar Chen Wei has published 13 papers on Zhuangzi's thought, making her the most prolific author in this field. Sun Mingjun and Liu Guomin each published 10 and 9 relevant publications, respectively, closely following behind. Hence, Chen Wei, Sun Mingjun, and Liu Guomin have a strong interest in the study of Zhuangzi's thoughts and likely possess specialized knowledge in this research area.

Figure 4 illustrates that a co-authorship network comprising 49 authors with three or more publications indicates that the research field of Zhuangzi's thought has yet to establish a distinct core group of authors. While there are some collaborations among authors, the overall co-authorship network remains relatively sparse. Therefore, research in this field has not yet achieved a significant level of concentration and collaboration, and there may be inadequate academic communication and cooperation among researchers. To foster the in-depth development of research on Zhuangzi's thought, it is advisable to enhance collaboration among authors and promote   knowledge exchange.

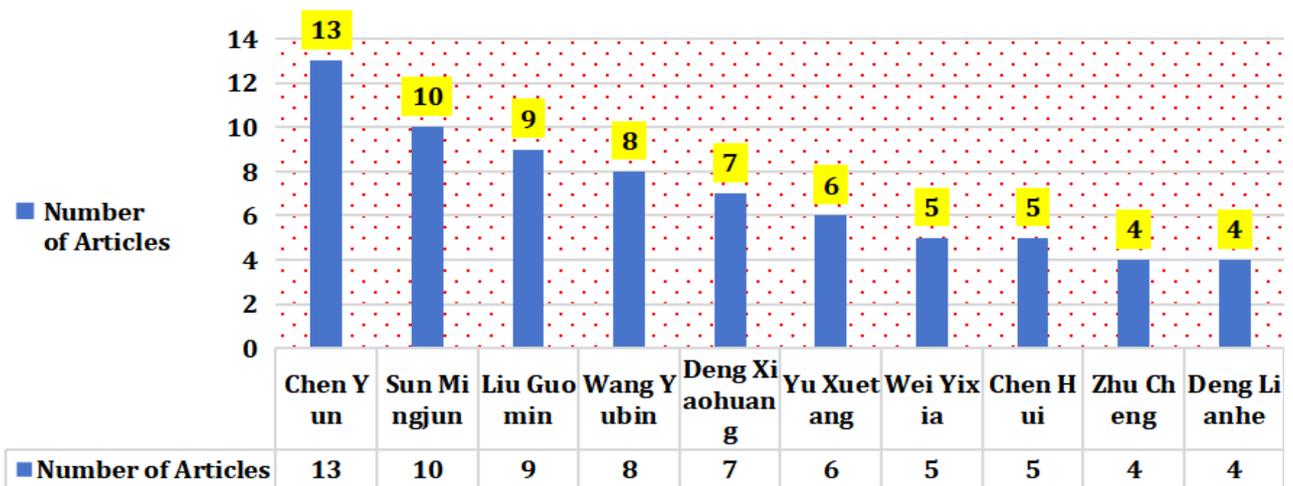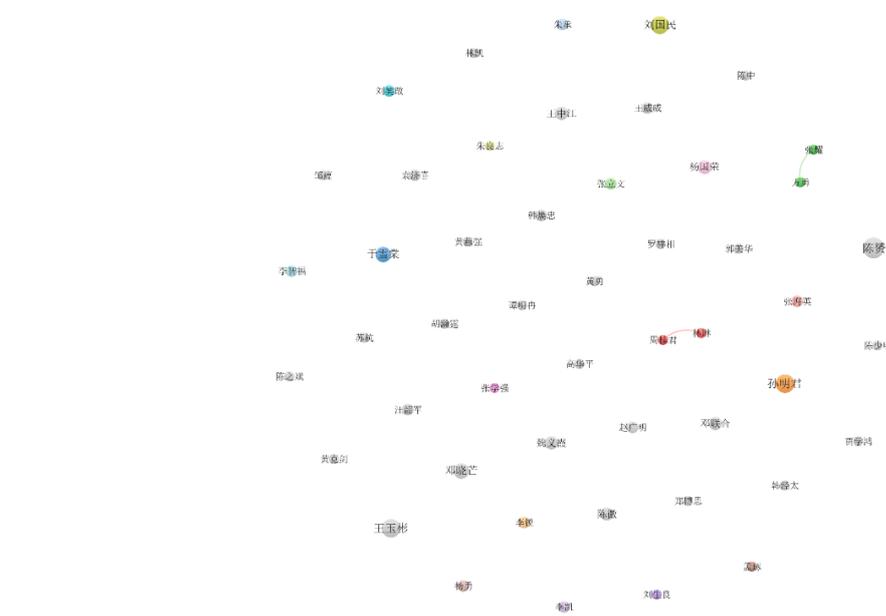|	Chen Yun	Sun Mingjun	Liu Guomin	Wang Yubin	Deng Xiaohuang	Yu Xuetang	Wei Yixia	Chen Hui	Zhu Cheng	Deng Lianhe
Number of Articles	13	10	9	8	7	6	5	5	4	4

Fig. 3 *Authors and Contributions to Zhuangzi's Thought Research*

Fig. 4 *Author Collaboration Network in Zhuangzi's Thought Research*

3.4 High-Contributing Journals Analysis

Academic papers on Zhuangzi's thought are primarily concentrated in higher education and cover journals from various disciplines. Table 1 illustrates that the journal History of Chinese Philosophy has published the highest number of relevant papers, totaling 40 articles, which accounts for 21.86% of the total publications. This highlights its central role in the research area. Closely following are the journals Philosophical Research and Philosophical Trends, each having published 23 papers, accounting for 12.57% of the total, which reflects the in-depth exploration of Zhuangzi's thought within philosophy. Therefore, research on Zhuangzi's thought is not only widely recognized in philosophy but also demonstrates its influence and research value across multiple disciplines, including language teaching and social sciences.

Table 1 The 5 Most-Cited Papers on Zhuangzi's Philosophy

Journal	Number of Articles	Article Proportion
History of Chinese Philosophy	40	0.2186
Philosophical Research	23	0.1257
Philosophical Trends	23	0.1257
Journal of Humanities	18	0.0984
Modern Philosophy	15	0.082
Zhongzhou Academic Journal	14	0.0765
Philosophical Analysis	13	0.071
Chinese Language Teaching	13	0.071
Confucius Studies	12	0.0656
Hubei Social Sciences	12	0.0656

3.5 Keywords Co-occurrence Analysis

Figure 5 illustrates the co-occurrence network of keywords in the study of Zhuangzi's thought. Researchers set the minimum co-occurrence threshold for keywords at 5 in VOSviewer, identifying 48 keywords that met the criteria. The network is divided into 10 clusters distinguished by different colors. Cluster 1 (red) contains 7 nodes and primarily focuses on Zhuangzi's philosophical thoughts and core concepts. The most important keywords are Zhuangzi (total link strength = 145, occurrence = 200), Free and Easy Wandering (total link strength = 15, occurrence = 12), and True Person (total link strength = 15, occurrence = 6). Cluster 2 (green) is represented by 7 nodes and mainly concentrates on Zhuangzi and Daoist philosophy. The most important keyword here is Nature (total link strength = 27, occurrence = 16). Next is Free and Easy Wandering (total link strength = 13, occurrence = 13), followed by Guo Xiang (total link strength = 12, occurrence = 11). Cluster 3 (blue) contains 6 nodes and primarily focuses on Zhuangzi's theory of human nature and his views on freedom. The keywords include Freedom (total link strength = 17, occurrence = 12) and Paradoxical Speech (total link strength = 10, occurrence = 9), with Qi (total link strength = 10, occurrence = 5) as the third most important term. Cluster 4 (yellow) consists of 6 nodes and centers on Zhuangzi's ethical and moral thought. The most important keywords are Qi Wu Lun (total link strength = 17, occurrence = 15), Virtue (total link strength = 15, occurrence = 9), and the concept of Qi Wu (total link strength = 12, occurrence = 11). Cluster 5 (purple) consists of 5 nodes and primarily explores Zhuangzi's ontology and epistemology. Key terms include Zhuangzi (total link strength = 37, occurrence = 71), the concept of Transformation of Things (total link strength = 16, occurrence = 10), and Distinction of Right and Wrong (total link strength = 10, occurrence = 6). Cluster 6 (light blue) consists of 5 nodes and primarily focuses on Zhuangzi and Pre-Qin Daoist thought. Key terms include Laozi (total link strength = 33, occurrence = 18), the concept of Qi Wu (total link strength = 18, occurrence = 14), and Confucius (total link strength = 7, occurrence = 8). Cluster 7 (orange) consists of 4 nodes and primarily centers on the comparative study between Daoism and Confucianism. Key terms include Daoism (total link strength = 53, occurrence = 44), Confucianism (total link strength = 21, occurrence = 14), and the concept of Names (total link strength = 10, occurrence = 6). Cluster 8 (brown) consists of 4 nodes and primarily centers on the theme of constructing Zhuangzi's philosophy of Wu Wei (non-action) and naturalism. Key terms include Wu Wei (total link strength = 9, occurrence = 8), Allegory (total link strength = 9, occurrence = 7), and Xiaoyao You (total link
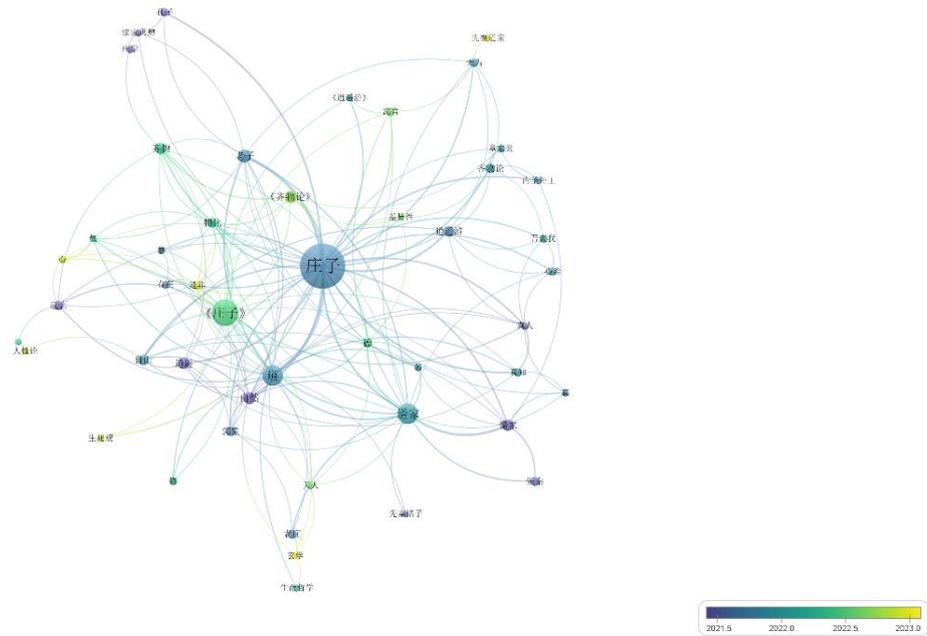
strength = 5, occurrence = 5). Cluster 9 (lavender) consists of 3 nodes and primarily focuses on Zhuangzi's theories of things (物论) and the Dao (道论). Key terms include Dao (total link strength = 61, occurrence = 42), Things (total link strength = 5, occurrence = 6), and Pre-Qin Philosophers (total link strength = 2, occurrence = 5). Cluster 10 (grapefruit pink) consists of 1 node and primarily explores Zhuangzi's views on life and death. The key term is Views on Life and Death (total link strength = 4, occurrence = 5). These color-coded clusters vividly illustrate the diverse themes and research directions within the field of Zhuangzi's thought research. These research directions provide a coherent and systematic framework that helps to understand the unique contributions of each cluster within the field of Zhuangzi's thought research. By analyzing the core keywords in each cluster, it can be observed that: The first cluster focuses on core concepts of Zhuangzi's philosophy, such as "Xiaoyao You"; the second cluster explores the relationship between Zhuangzi and Daoism, with the keyword "Nature" highlighting his philosophy of naturalism. The third cluster pays attention to Zhuangzi's theory of human nature and his views on freedom, emphasizing the philosophical significance of "Freedom". These research directions provide a clear analytical framework for the study of Zhuangzi's thought, facilitating a deeper understanding of its philosophical connotations. They offer a well-organized and systematic analytical framework for understanding the unique contributions of each cluster within the field of Zhuangzi's thought research, thereby promoting a more profound comprehension.

Fig. 5 *Keyword Co-occurrence in the Network of Zhuangzi's Thought Research*

Figure 6 presents Keyword Co-occurrence in the Overlay Network of Zhuangzi's Thought Research. Figure 6 identified five recently popular terms: Mysticism (occurrences = 5, Avg. pub. year: 2023.20), Pre-Qin Daoism (occurrences = 40, Avg. pub. year: 2023.00), Distinctions of Right and Wrong (occurrences = 6, pub. year: 2022.83), Mind (occurrences = 6, pub. year: 2022.83), and View of Life and Death (occurrences = 5, pub. year: 2022.80). The frequency of occurrence and pub. years of these terms suggest that researchers have a keen interest in the mystical elements of Zhuangzi's philosophy, its role in Pre-Qin Daoist thought, Zhuangzi's unique insights into the distinctions between right and wrong, the theory of human nature and mind, as well as philosophical reflections on life and death.

Fig.6 *Keyword Co-occurrence in the Overlay Network of Zhuangzi's Thought Research*

3.6 Analysis of Highly Cited Papers

As shown in Table 2, the high citation frequency of academic papers on Zhuangzi's philosophy underscores the influence and significance of this research area within the academic community. The co-authored work by Wang Jiayi and Lu Zixiao, titled "Avoiding Ethical Risks: The Chinese Wisdom for Education to Return to Its Origin in the Intelligent Age," leads the list with 94 citations. This paper examines strategies for avoiding ethical risks in education within the context of the intelligent age and offers significant guiding implications for current educational practice. The paper by Lin Jiaxin and Xu Kunpei, titled "Paratextual Strategies and Image Reconstruction: A Study on the Deep Translation Strategies of Burton Watson's English Translation of Zhuangzi," ranks second with 53 citations. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the translation strategies used in the English translation of Zhuangzi, emphasizing their importance in promoting the international dissemination of Zhuangzi's philosophy and cultural exchange. Xu Jilin's papers titled "Lying Low: The 'Post-Wave' Culture in Intergenerational Conflict" and "The Chinese Gene of Craftsmanship and Innovation" occupy third and fourth places, with 50 and 47 citations, respectively. These two papers delve into the phenomenon of "lying low" and the inheritance and innovation of the spirit of craftsmanship in contemporary Chinese society, respectively. They illustrate the relevance and impact of Zhuangzi's philosophy in addressing modern social issues.

The high citation counts of these papers may be attributed to several factors: the research topics closely align with current hot issues in academia and the education field; publication in prestigious academic journals enhances the credibility and influence of the papers; the authors possess prominent academic status in their respective fields; and the research methods employed are scientific and rigorous.

Table 2 *The 5 Most-Cited Papers on Zhuangzi's Philosophy*

Author(s)	Title	Source	Year of Publication	Institution	Type of Paper	Citation Count
Wang Jiayi; Lu Zixiao	Avoiding Ethical Risks: The Chinese Wisdom for Education to Return to Its Origin in the Intelligent Age	Educational Research	2020	Northwest Normal University	Journal Article	94
Lin Jiaxin; Xu Kunpei	Paratextual Strategies and	Journal of Foreign	2022	Guangdong University	Journal Article	53

	Image Reconstruction: A Study on the Deep Translation Strategies of Burton Watson's English Translation of Zhuangzi	Languages		of Finance and Economics		
Xu Jilin	Lying Low: The "Post-Wave" Culture in Intergenerational Conflict	Exploration and Contention	2021	East China Normal University	Journal Article	50
Xu Yanqiu	The Chinese Gene of Craftsmanship and Innovation	Nanjing Social Sciences	2020	Nanjing University of Science and Technology	Journal Article	47
Ding Sixin	The Three Major Origins of Zhuangzi's Thought and Their Natural Meaning	Meaning Humanities Journal	2020	Tsinghua University	Journal Article	23

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Conflict of Interest

The authors (s) declare no conflict of interest regarding the paper's publication.

Author Contribution

Xiao Xuelan, as the primary author, conceptualised and designed the research. She acquired, analysed, and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. Huichan Ren, as a co-author, critically reviewed the entire article to ensure its important intellectual content. She also serves as the corresponding author, responsible for liaising with the journal throughout the manuscript submission, peer-review, and publication phases.Both authors gave final approval for the version of the work to be published. They agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, taking responsibility for investigating and resolving questions related to its accuracy and integrity.

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