

Editors' Introduction

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Lao-tzu cultivated Tao and its virtue. He taught that one should efface oneself and be without fame in the world. He lived under the Chou dynasty. After a long time he realized that the dynasty was declining. He decided to leave. When he reached the western frontier, Yin Hsi, the guardian of the pass, said : "You want to withdraw forever. Please write down your thoughts for me." Thereupon Lao-tzu wrote a book in two sections dealing with the Tao and its virtue [the *Tao-te-ching*]. It had more than five thousand words. Then he left, and nobody knows what became of him.

—(*Shih-chi*, ch. 63)

Thus runs Ssu-ma Ch'ien's description of Lao-tzu writing the *Tao-te-ching*, a text so closely associated with him that it has been called the *Lao-tzu* for much of Chinese history. The old man, wise and retiring, feels the situation in his land decline and decides to leave. At the western border, a customs officer stops them, then asks about his teachings, upon which Lao-tzu writes down his ideas in a book, which came to about five thousand words, and was arranged in two volumes and eighty-one sections. In fact, the exact character count varies among editions between 5,748, 5,722, 5,630, 5,386, and 5,610 words (Giles 1914, 70), and the order of the two volumes—the part on the Tao (Way) and that on the Te (Virtue)—were reversed in a manuscript found in 1973 at Ma-wang-tui, where it had been buried with the Marchioness of Tai in 168 B.C.E. But the eighty-one sections have remained constant, with only little variation in order and cut-off points, even though their formal definition, with headings, was only added by commentators of the early Common Era.

Both the *Tao-te-ching* and the figure of Lao-tzu have been a source of fascination for the Chinese imagination and, more recently, for the

imagination of people in the West and all over the world. The current volume too follows this fascination, describing the development of the Lao-tzu legend and of *Tao-te-ching* interpretation in China and the West, and presenting modern attempts at translating and interpreting the *Tao-te-ching* in the light of recent academic standards.

Several of the accounts given here may come as a surprise to Western fans of Taoism and the *Tao-te-ching*. The associations Westerners have with Taoism most often derive from popular presentations such as Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* (1991), Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh* (1982), or another of the almost one hundred books now in print beginning with "The Tao of . . ." The image one gets from such books seems shaped to a large degree by feelings of alienation from Western culture, and in this light the teaching of the *Tao-te-ching* is construed as a simple inversion of some prominent elements of the modern sociocultural scene.

Those alienated from Western intellectualism, for example, find in the *Tao-te-ching* a rejection of analytical reason and an emphasis on following unreflective spontaneous impulse. Others, hampered by the moral strictures of conventional society, see in it a liberating radical criticism that undermines all social conventions and value judgments, a rejection of civilization in the name of a return to nature. Similarly, for Westerners alienated from government, the *Tao-te-ching* represents a populist anarchist's dream—a liberation from all government power and forms of elitism. For those, moreover, dissatisfied with authoritarian church Christianity, the text contains a substitute religionless religion or philosophy, an individual mysticism focused on an impersonal Tao, which each person can have access to within herself, the very opposite of organized religion. In short, what we basically have in the *Tao-te-ching* is a radical romantic rejection of modern social values and constrictions, the individualism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau two millennia earlier.

While this westernized vision of Taoism has become widely familiar in our society, many readers are unaware that it represents only one of the most recent examples of a continuous line of *Tao-te-ching* interpretations. From the beginning around 250 B.C.E. and over the last two millennia, the text has undergone numerous reinterpretations, each of which has reshaped its message to fit the needs and dreams of a new generation. Modern Western visions of the text and its ideas are thus widely different from the reinterpretations that many earlier Tao devotees in China have provided and which are described in this volume. One will find here, for example, that the most common and influential Taoism in traditional China was in fact that nemesis of most Western Taoists—an organized religion: a hierarchy of priests headed by a pope-like Celestial Master; a deified Lao-tzu coming from heaven to give divine revelations to the church's founder and worshiped in Taoist temple ritual

as a god with the title Highest Venerable Lord; the *Tao-te-ching* used as a magical chant to secure supernatural blessings, and used also (the final insult!) as the source of a detailed list of rules to be followed by all members of the Taoist church. Those turned off by this may want to take refuge in the still common view that this, after all, is just "religious Taoism," which as everyone knows is merely a corruption of original and pure "philosophical Taoism." Yet even here one will be amazed to find that venerated philosophical Taoists in China were usually not the reclusive dropouts they are made out to be but members of the educated and elitist upper classes, who saw Taoist teachings as a foundation for the monarchical rule of an emperor and a guide to paternalist governmental policy, not as an inspiration to social withdrawal.

Thus, in traditional China each generation fascinated by Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te-ching* has reshaped the vision of thinker and text in accord with its own needs and dreams. Focusing entirely on ancient China, the contributions in the first half of this volume discuss these in historical studies, unmasking the polemical moves that contributed to the first Lao-tzu biography, showing his evolution to devotional deity of the Tao, and discussing the varying concepts associated with the text in early and later commentaries. As both Lao-tzu legends and *Tao-te-ching* interpretations are of central importance in traditional Chinese culture, these articles trace the cultural contexts and forces that were responsible for their development and multiplicity. The second half of the book, parts III and IV, then describes Western approaches to the text, looking both at the various ways its ideas have been interpreted and at the methodological issues involved in understanding and translating it. The studies trace the work from its first reception in the nineteenth century to contemporary scholarship, place its ideas both in a general Western and highly up-to-date Chinese context, study possibilities of recovering its original meaning, and critically examine some of its most frequently used English translations.

Taken together, the collection is intended to serve as an introductory survey of current scholarship on Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te-ching*, both historical and hermeneutic, that covers the ancient Chinese and Taoist traditions as much as the contemporary scholarly and philosophical.

Historical Unfolding

The *Tao-te-ching* first emerged in a period of Chinese history called the Warring States (479–221 B.C.E.). Although formally a single kingdom, the central power of the royal house of Chou was failing, and about sixteen bigger and smaller states engaged in an all-out fight for supremacy and territorial expansion. There was no one single political ideology

at the time; instead, a large number of informally organized groups, the so-called hundred schools, gathered around respected teachers and traveled about to various states to advocate their moral and political teachings as solutions to the problems of the time (see Hsu 1965). The *Tao-te-ching's* teachings of moderation, simplicity, and tranquility were thus intended as a remedy for a society deeply troubled by war and collapsing order.

Also a time of transition between a predominantly oral tradition and the growing book culture of the elite, the period saw the first philosophical compilations, representing the traditions of various schools. Rather than the product of a single author, these works were collections of material assembled over several generations—a factor that accounts for the disjointed nature of much of the writings, including also the *Tao-te-ching* (see Mair 1990). In addition, the biographies of most thinkers remain rather hazy, so that little reliable information is found about them and legends abound, those around Lao-tzu gathering particular strength.

The Warring States period came to an end in 221 B.C.E. when the western state of Ch'in defeated its competitors and united China under the first imperial dynasty. A strict military dictatorship, Ch'in rule was unpopular and short-lived. However, it created a unified empire, so that the succeeding Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) under its 400-year rule could consolidate a unified Chinese culture and political structure. Thinkers then competed for influence at the court of a single emperor and often joined together for greater political influence. As a result, Confucianism, increasingly a recruiting and training ground for government administrators, merged with traditional cosmology and adopted certain Taoist teachings. Similarly, the teaching of the *Tao-te-ching*, by then closely associated with Lao-tzu, was merged with traditional yin-yang cosmology (the teaching of the Yellow Emperor) and certain Confucian administrative ideas into the philosophy of Huang-Lao.

Huang-Lao followers believed in the intimate link between cosmology, personal cultivation, and good government. Unlike Confucians and Legalists who favored a more active regulation of society, they wanted to instruct rulers in self-cultivation that would align them with the cosmic powers and allow them to rule through nonaction, that is, by staying in the background while steering the natural flow of events with inner purity and ritual activities. They venerated the *Tao-te-ching* as an inspiration for personal purity, which would sensitize them to the cosmic flow and allow them a life of personal peace and social stability. To this end, they memorized and recited the text on a daily basis and honored its author as a sage.

The Han dynasty also saw a great development in book culture, especially after paper was invented in the first century C.E. Thus, writing,

collecting, and studying books became a preoccupation of the elite, now aptly described as literati. The *Tao-te-ching* in this environment was read and recited, and received major new interpretations in commentaries, notably that of Ho-shang-kung, which reflected the thinking of Huang-Lao. At the same time Lao-tzu, credited with the text's wondrous teaching, was more closely associated with the powers of the Tao and began to receive veneration as a god.

The gradual disintegration of the Han dynasty in the second century C.E. went hand in hand with the emergence of the first religious Taoist movements, the Celestial Masters and Great Peace. Their members, hoping for a millenarian revival of the world, honored Lao-tzu as a divine manifestation of the Tao, who would appear to selected mediums and dispense instructions and revelations. The *Tao-te-ching* in this context became a sacred text, the mere chanting of which could grant long life and magical powers.

After the fall of the Han, the text rose to new prominence among the literati, especially those deprived of political office who devoted themselves to intellectual and aesthetic pursuits. Known as devotees of Pure Conversation (*ch'ing-t'an*) and Profound Learning (*hsuan-hsueh*), they wrote commentaries to many Taoist texts. Among them Wang Pi's interpretation of the *Tao-te-ching* is outstanding, providing an interpretation that, although not without political concerns, focused largely on what Western philosophers call metaphysical questions. Both his understanding and edition of the *Tao-te-ching* became standard later on.

In the following three centuries (317–589 C.E.), China was divided into a northern, Hun-ruled state and a southern Chinese dynasty, both wrecked by instabilities and frequent changes in rulership. The political insecurities together with the increased influx of Buddhism caused a major rise in Taoist activity, both religious and philosophical. New commentaries to the *Tao-te-ching* appeared, and Lao-tzu became a popular savior god, depicted prominently in religious art. While religion in the north was largely state-sponsored and Lao-tzu venerated for his gift of social peace, the south saw the rise of several new Taoist schools, each using text and god in a different way. Highest Clarity (Shang-ch'ing), for example, first founded through a revelation to the medium Yang Hsi in 364, was highly individual and aimed at conveying the practitioner into the realms of the immortals. Lao-tzu here was a god residing in the body whose vision increased the adept's immortal powers, while the *Tao-te-ching* was a magical mantra that bestowed access to heaven. Numinous Treasure (Ling-pao), on the other hand, begun by Ko Ch'ao-fu in the 390s, was a more communal form of Taoism which heavily integrated Buddhist ideas and practices. Lao-tzu here, like the Mahāyāna Buddha,

was a symbol of the universe, whose powers were both prayed to and visualized in meditation. The southern Celestial Masters, finally, continued the Han vision of the god Laozi, venerating him as their central key deity, the world's creator and savior of humankind.

The T'ang dynasty, ruling the reunified empire for the next three centuries (618–906 C.E.), inherited and continued the medieval mixture of Buddho-Taoist thought and devotional practice, giving rise to new heights of *Tao-te-ching* interpretation in the school of Twofold Mystery (Ch'ung-hsuan) and raising Lao-tzu to the position of senior state-protecting deity. The succeeding Sung dynasty (960–1260), on the other hand, saw a reduction of Lao-tzu worship on the devotional level and a strong revival of Confucianism philosophically. Joining ancient Confucian moral values with the soteriological ideas of Taoism and Buddhism, the Neo-Confucian synthesis grew intellectually while denigrating the more popular practice of the organized religions. In this environment, commentaries to the *Tao-te-ching*, both philological and philosophical, abounded, reading it technically in the light of Taoist inner alchemy and morally in relation to Neo-Confucian doctrine.

Rising to state orthodoxy under the following dynasties (Yuan, 1260–1368; Ming, 1368–1644; and Ch'ing, 1644–1911), Neo-Confucianism increasingly included Taoist ideas and practices while keeping popular cults at a safe distance—an overall attitude inherited also by the Chinese communists when they came to power in 1949. Until very recently, popular religious Taoism was therefore not classed a proper religion but persecuted as “feudalistic, shamanistic, and superstitious.” Taoist thought as represented by the *Tao-te-ching*, on the contrary, was tolerated and is just coming back to the foreground as a possible worldview to fill the vacuum in Chinese ideology left by the demise of communism. A conference in Xi'an in the fall of 1995 points vigorously in this direction.

In the West, the *Tao-te-ching* was first translated into French in the early nineteenth century C.E., with English renditions following in the 1860s. Soon a critical note about its authorship crept into the overall appreciation of the text, following an ancient Chinese tradition of textual criticism. Even as early as the third century, the text *Lao-tzu* was considered a forgery, a later work that had little to do with the actual ideas of the sage Lao-tzu, who—it was then believed—had been divinely inspired and indeed lived around the time of Confucius. About Ts'ui Hao (381–450), for example, a medieval statesman of north China, the dynastic history says:

He was not fond of the writings of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Whenever he read either of them, he did not get through many pages

before he threw the book aside and cried out: "These willful and false statements, altogether out of keeping with human nature, were certainly never made by Lao-tzu!" (*Wei-shu* 35; Giles 1914, 77)

A more common argument against the authenticity of the *Tao-te-ching* as Lao-tzu's original work was the fact that none of the contemporaneous Confucian writers mentioned it. Typically people would say, "If this book was written by Lao-tzu, which would make it anterior to Mencius, how is it that Mencius, who would necessarily have denounced it, never mentioned it?" (Giles 1914, 77).

This position, already solidly established among textual critics in traditional China, came to the fore in the text's Western reception around the turn of the century, at which time the *Tao-te-ching* had already seen a number of translations: into French in parts by J. P. Abel-Rémusat in 1823, and complete by Stanislas Julien in 1842; into English by Chalmers in 1868; and into German by Victor von Strauss in 1870 (Seidel 1969, 8n2). Especially Herbert A. Giles in his essay "Lao Tzu and the *Tao te ching*," whose title we gratefully imitate in this volume, responds to James Legge by presenting a list of eighteen arguments why the *Tao-te-ching* could not possibly be a work of the sixth century: it was not mentioned in early histories or philosophers; ideas associated with Lao-tzu in the *Chuang-tzu* and *Han-fei-tzu* had little to do with the text; and even in Han-dynasty sources, statements made by Lao-tzu were usually not found in the text associated with his name (Giles 1914).

The argument has proven sound and laid the foundation for an academic tradition that divided the study of the text from that of its alleged author, analyzing its sayings and textual patterns, studying its commentaries, and producing ever greater numbers of translations, while leaving the sage aside as a semilegendary and ultimately unimportant figure. In fact, while both text and author had their distinct histories, they also went together in praise and decline and are intimately related in the very mystique that surrounds the biography and the obscurity of the text's origins. This volume therefore puts the two back together again, presenting the sage's legends together with the text's linguistic, philosophical, and interpretative dimensions.

Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te-ching* in China

The first source that connects the thinker and the text is Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih-chi* (Records of the Historian), dated to 90 B.C.E. Admitting uncertainty and referring to several figures who might have been Lao-tzu, he focuses predominantly on an archivist at the royal Chou court

by the name of Lao Tan. A contemporary of Confucius, Lao Tan lectured the latter in the rites and recommended that he give up all pride and desires. Later, finding the dynasty declining, Lao Tan emigrated across the pass to the west and transmitted his teaching on the Tao and its virtue.

A. C. Graham, analyzing this first biography of Lao-tzu, locates its source among originally Confucian stories, which were written to provide Confucius with a respected archivist as teacher and show his unwavering eagerness to learn. Following this, several polemical moves led to the composite legend of Lao-tzu. First, the sage was linked to the growing *Tao-te-ching* collection around 250 B.C.E., which elevated him to a senior "Taoist" thinker. Next, after the Ch'in rise in 256, he was identified with the Grand Astrologer Tan of Chou, who in 374 had predicted its supremacy—an identification that recommended Taoist advisers to the Ch'in ruler. It also established a claim of extended longevity for Lao-tzu, useful in view of the First Emperor's immortality aspirations (see Yü 1964). The story about Lao-tzu's departure for the west was then added to explain why the Old Master, although long-lived, was no longer around to advise the Ch'in emperor in person. Under the Han, finally, when the Taoists' link with the toppled Ch'in became a liability, Lao-tzu was not given up but resettled, his birthplace now near the Han rulers' place of origin in P'ei (southern Ho-nan) and his descendants of the Li clan loyal subjects to the house of Han.

Taking up where A. C. Graham leaves off, Livia Kohn's study of "The Lao-tzu Myth" gives a historical account of the process, from the Han through the Six Dynasties (200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.), by which the figure of Lao-tzu became an immortal and divine personage venerated among both literati and peasants. Lao-tzu was adopted by various groups as an ideal representative and unifying symbol. First, practitioners of immortality stylized him as a superior magician who had achieved eternal life through wisdom and the practice of longevity techniques. Second, the elite at the imperial court divinized him as an embodiment of the transcendent Tao, a supernatural emperor who ruled the cosmos in perfect harmony and served as the source of great peace for the Chinese empire. Third, the millenaristic cults of the second century found in him the savior of the masses and inspired messiah, who appeared to their leaders in trance to dispense instructions and revelations. Finally, under the growing influence of Buddhism, the divine Lao-tzu assembled a full hagiography, being born of the virgin Jade Maiden of Mystery and Wonder, descending to create the world and support its development under the great Chinese culture heroes, and appearing in India as the Buddha to teach the values of Chinese civilization to the Indian "barbarians."

This divinized Lao-tzu of the middle ages is further evident in statues, as described by Yoshiko Kamitsuka. Found mainly in northern China under the Wei dynasty (386–534 c.e.), they are indicative of the wide popularity and complex interaction of Taoism and Buddhism, with Taoism opening the way for the early Chinese appropriation of Buddhism, and Buddhism supplying numerous doctrines and practices for Taoism—including the very idea of making statues of gods. Often Lao-tzu and the Buddha, bodhisattvas and immortals appear on the same object, jointly placed on open mountain sides to serve as mediators between heaven and earth. Prayers found in inscriptions, moreover, beg Lao-tzu and the other gods to bring good fortune to the living and help the ancestors on their journey through the otherworld. They express hopes for personal prosperity, ancestral happiness, social harmony, imperial well-being, and peace in the world—showing not only the all-inclusive powers attributed to the god but also the continued political concerns of Buddho-Taoist followers.

While the figure of Lao-tzu was divinized and venerated, the text of the *Tao-te-ching* was recited and interpreted. Discussing the two earliest and most influential commentaries of the text, by Ho-shang-kung and Wang Pi, Alan Chan places the former in the context of Huang-Lao thought, showing how it connects ideas about self-cultivation and nourishing life with cosmological speculation about *ch'i*-energy, and also with a political philosophy centered on the sage king. He then shows how the commentary by Wang Pi represents a reaction against this cosmological thought from the viewpoint of a sophisticated intellectual with philosophical or metaphysical leanings. Highly valued by the literati, Wang Pi's commentary established both the standard edition of the text and the mainstream interpretation of its ideas.

The interpretive tradition continues with numerous works written in later dynasties. As Isabelle Robinet's analysis of about thirty commentaries shows, the *Tao-te-ching* under the T'ang, Sung, and Yuan dynasties was interpreted both philologically and philosophically, scholars collecting glosses and repunctuating the text to find new meanings. In terms of general outlook, Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian tendencies can be distinguished: Taoists read the text as a manual for self-cultivation, nourishing life, or the practice of inner alchemy; Buddhists found philosophical statements about emptiness and nonbeing in its verses; and Confucians saw state-supporting virtues and advice for self-improvement contained in its lines.

The study of the Chinese tradition concludes with a second contribution by Livia Kohn that focuses on the ritual and liturgical uses of the *Tao-te-ching*. It was applied as a source of codified guidelines and rules

for the faithful, a magical chant to bring benefits to believers, and as a manual of meditation instruction. In addition, the *Tao-te-ching* was used in rituals undertaken to communicate with the immortals and became one of the key texts to be transmitted at Taoist ordination.

From the first traces of the Lao-tzu legend to Neo-Confucian commentaries and Taoist ritual, the multiplicity of interpretations and visions of both text and thinker document their richness and importance in traditional Chinese culture. Highly controversial and multifaceted from the beginning, both man and book unfolded gradually and to ever higher ranges of sophistication and cultural complexity. It is no wonder, then, that the Western reception of the text has also been complex and led to manifold speculations and renditions.

The *Tao-te-ching* in the West

The *Tao-te-ching* made its Western debut in the late eighteenth century and has been vigorously used and adapted ever since. As Julia Hardy describes it, in every generation the dominant concerns of Western readers have determined their understanding and interpretation of the text. Thus the first interpreters, as Christian missionaries, were preoccupied with questions about similarities and differences to Christian doctrine. Later came discussions of religion versus philosophy, of whether the ideas of the *Tao-te-ching* represented a rational and this-worldly philosophy or a quasi-religious mysticism centered on a world-transcending absolute. Finally, Westerners found in the text solutions to modern problems, adapting the text to their own cultural environment. While such reception led occasionally to "Orientalist" interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching* that were shaped more by the needs and dreams of interpreters than by the text itself, they also contributed to its Western adaptation, continuing the very same processes that had made the book so important in traditional China. The kind of alternative religion developed by this type of interpretation may even have much to offer in the context of America's problems today, "bad scholarship" ultimately leading to "good religion."

The multivalence of *Tao-te-ching* visions becomes clear in the work of Benjamin Schwartz, reprinted here from his *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (1985). The *Tao-te-ching* can be read as a religious, political, military, or naturalistic treatise, dealing with psychology, the natural world, or society. And even if one decides on one particular reading, contradictions abound. Thus, while there is an obvious relation of the "ineffable Tao" to the absolute of mystics, it is not clear whether the Tao is immanent or transcendent. While there also seems to be a naturalistic philosophy in the text that could be linked with modern Western science,

it yet shows a high concern for government policy and advice on human activity. Similarly, the text contains both a strong rejection of all value-judgments and clear preferences for one member of the opposite pairs that it poses (softness over hardness, femininity over masculinity, etc.). Sorting out these various positions and their interrelation, Schwartz illuminates the complexity of *Tao-te-ching* thought as seen by Western scholars.

In modern China, on the other hand, the text's complexity is taken in stride and streamlined to offer a practical philosophy one can hold on to in one's daily life. Foremost here are the value of naturalness (*tzu-jan*) and its practical application in nonaction (*wu-wei*). Focusing on these two concepts, Liu Xiaogan demonstrates how the *Tao-te-ching* can still be relevant for people in China today, especially now when the traditional values of Confucianism have been badly battered and communism is not a valid alternative any more. Such a practical relevance of the text does not have to ignore its history either. Aware of the vast cultural gap that separates us from the world in which the *Tao-te-ching* was originally composed, Liu does not simply read preconceived ideas into the text but presents a historical analysis of several passages on naturalness and nonaction. Only after that does he point out ways of applying the two concepts today, showing how a "natural" life could improve people's lot so that they can make valid decisions that encourage modernity and change but do not force life along through abrupt transitions. Thus in accordance with naturalness, people can live in a harmony that grows from the inside and is not imposed by domineering governments.

Focusing away from the various philosophical readings of the *Tao-te-ching*, critical Western scholarship is also looking back at the text itself. William Baxter, in a linguistic analysis, shows how the rhyme structure and the rhetorical characteristics of the text, such as rhythm, repetition of words, and the use of paradoxes, go back to a period of about 350 B.C.E., being similar to certain patterns found in the *Shih-ching* (Book of Odes) and the *Ch'u-tz'u* (Songs of Ch'u), but neither consonant with nor contemporaneous with them. He documents the importance of recovering the actual words of the text and not losing sight of the root from which the philosophy ultimately stems.

A similar concern with the text is found in Michael LaFargue's work on historical hermeneutics, the attempt to recover the original meaning of the text in its sociocultural context through careful analysis of its sayings and proverbs as understood in the society of the time. Unlike Isabelle Robinet, who takes the inherent polysemy of the text for granted, LaFargue does not believe that the *Tao-te-ching* is originally or by nature polysemic. It had some definite meaning for its original authors and

audience, and only became polysemic when it was read outside of its original context, in the light of alien assumptions and concerns. The fact that this definite message cannot be directly conveyed in straightforward speech is due to the limitations of language, not to the vagueness and indeterminate character of the meaning itself. At the same time, a traditional “scriptural” reading of the *Tao-te-ching*, which uses it to reconfirm previously held views, does not constitute an “illegitimate misuse” of the text. Scriptural reading is just one kind of reading, different from a reading informed by historical research. These two ways of reading have different aims, which must be kept separate. The original meaning of the *Tao-te-ching*, then, can be elucidated by studying its proverb-like aphorisms, seen no longer as statements of general laws or philosophical first principles, but as sayings with specific meanings relevant to the ancient Chinese.

The position of the Western scholar as determined by training in linguistic, hermeneutic, and historical disciplines becomes highly relevant when it comes to translating the *Tao-te-ching*. As Michael LaFargue and Julian Pas show in the last chapter of the volume, there are serious problems anyone encounters in rendering this difficult classic into English. Beginning with questions of edition—should one use the transmitted version of Wang Pi or the earlier Ma-wang-tui manuscript?—any translator has to deal with details of the language: the use of “loan characters” in ancient Chinese, the wide range of meaning of some words, and the vagaries of the syntax of an uninflected language. Once the edition is settled and the meaning of the words clarified, further decisions have to be made: How literal should one be? How much should one paraphrase? Should one translate for anyone, taking the text out of its historical context? Or should one prepare a rendition that requires background knowledge about ancient China? Should one pay more attention to getting ideas across or try to stick as closely to the style of the original as possible? Every translator deals with these problems differently, which partly accounts for the sometimes startling discrepancies among *Tao-te-ching* translations. Clarifying the issues and comparing seventeen of the most influential English translations (with detailed samples), the contribution provides a guideline for nonspecialist readers on how to select a suitable *Tao-te-ching* translation.

Current Trends

Neither study nor translation or interpretation of the *Tao-te-ching* are anywhere near complete. The text continues to furnish scholars with new materials, there still appear several new translations every year (e.g.,

Möller 1995), and its meaning is seen in ever new relevance both in the West and in China. One clear indication of the Chinese revival of Lao-tzu's thought is a conference held in Xi'an, October 23-27, 1995, which focused entirely on the text and had the title "Lao-tzu— Interpretation and Impact" (Hoster and Waedow 1995, 156). Sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, and the provincial government of Shensi in cooperation with the German Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation and the academic journal *Monumenta Serica*, it assembled sixty-five scholars from China and Germany to speak about nothing but the *Tao-te-ching*, its inherent ideas and potential for stimulating social change today. The expressed purpose of the meeting, aside from improving current understanding of the ancient text, was to "offer a perspective to the younger Chinese generation in its search for a meaningful way of life in a society that is increasingly characterized by a capitalist strife for profit, social hardship, self-alienation, and insecure future for the individual" (Hoster and Waedow 1995, 156). The ancient *Tao-te-ching*, in a mode closely resembling its uses in the West, is thus called upon to support China in her search for a new cultural identity and a way to modernization, providing contemporary inspiration on the basis of ancient tradition.

Following various addresses of welcome and presidential greetings, about forty presentations were given, nine of them by German scholars, who often focused on the text's reception in Western thought (e.g., "Lao-tzu Reception in the Thought of Martin Heidegger"). The remainder were by Chinese scholars, who in some cases dealt with general or programmatic points ("Suggestions for a History of Lao-tzu Studies") or with the overall metaphysical interpretation of the text ("The World of the Tao in Lao-tzu's Thought"). Many of them also concentrated on bringing out the relevance of the book in contemporary China. Topics here included "The Meaning of Lao-tzu's Philosophy Today," "Ethical Thinking in Lao-tzu," "Taoist Thought and Social Change," "Lao-tzu's Reflections about the Dignity of Human Life," and "The Importance of Taoist Thought for the Modern Transformation of Chinese Culture" (Hoster and Waedow 1995, 157).

In addition, six Chinese presentations specifically discussed naturalness and nonaction, as also treated by Liu Xiaogan in this volume, reflecting the contemporary importance of these concepts. Overall, so the reports, the discussion was engaged yet disciplined and wishes were expressed for an increased exchange with Western thinkers and *Tao-te-ching* interpreters. Despite an overall emphasis on the philosophical doctrines of the book, moreover, the devotional aspect was not entirely neglected, so that on the last day of the meeting participants had the

opportunity to visit Lou-kuan-t'ai, the Taoist monastery in the Chung-nan mountains where, according to the legend, Lao-tzu transmitted the *Tao-te-ching* to the border guard Yin Hsi (Hoster and Waedow 1995, 158).

A similar trend of keeping the text's message alive was also seen at the Ninth International Congress in Chinese Philosophy, held in Boston in August 1995, where six presentations focused on the book. Ellen-Marie Chen spoke about the "Key Metaphysical Idea in Taoism" and compared it to ancient Greek thought, finding that the *Tao-te-ching* emphasizes nonbeing and change, where the Greeks focus on being and stability. Similarly, Taoist thought is immanent, where Western thinking strives for transcendence; the mind is seen as an obstacle in China but features as the key means to realization in Greece. Overall, these differences reflect a shift away from the feminine matrix to masculine predominance in the West, a shift that had not yet taken place in the *Tao-te-ching*, which consequently "is perhaps the world's oldest functioning feminist metaphysics" (Chen 1995).

Also a comparative approach was taken by Wang Qingjie in his work on the term *heng* or "constancy." Expressing a vision of the Tao as in constant flux, like water, the term is linked with ideas of return (*fan*) and permanence (*chiu*), and compares to the ancient Greek understanding of constant motion, relating it further to concepts like *logos*, *physis*, Heidegger's *Ereignis*, and Derrida's *différance* (Wang 1995). Similarly applying Western analysis to Taoist philosophical method, Xiao Jinfu described the aim of Taoist thought as transcending the limitations of the visible world and attain the universe's origin. To reach this aim, Taoist thinkers move from relativism to dialectics, recognizing the interdependence of opposites and using this recognition as a basis to equalize and transcend them. Reaching a point where only Tao as Tao or Tao as not-Tao remain, they move beyond all limitations of conscious knowledge. This process of ancient Chinese thought as manifested in the *Tao-te-ching*, according to Wang, can help Western philosophy to reach new positions (Wang 1995).

Moving further in the same direction, Cristal Nuang related Lao-tzu's dialectical methodology of confronting opposites to Derrida's deconstructionist hermeneutics. She documented the text's high awareness of the hermeneutic process, which in all cases works through a dialectic relation between the interpreting subject and the interpreted object, moving to ever new understandings of meaning. The *Tao-te-ching* in particular proceeds in continuous hermeneutic circles to ever subtler ranges of deconstruction, always raising the awareness of the interpreting subject in relation to the interpreted object (Nuang 1995). In addition, there were two presentations specifically on naturalness and nonaction

in contemporary society, emphasizing the need to adapt to the ongoing flux of natural processes without giving up scientific knowledge and technology (Liu 1995; Zhang 1995).

Taken together, the two conferences with their many contributions on the *Tao-te-ching* and its thought show the increased relevance of the text in the modern world. It plays a key role in scholarship as it helps to elucidate fundamental similarities and differences between ancient Chinese and Western modes of thought. It is also highly relevant to formulating a new Chinese awareness of subjectivity, dignity, and human rights, thus participating actively in the new philosophical climate in mainland China (see Li, Hargett, and Ames 1995). However abstruse and difficult the text itself, its message, in historically researched form or modern interpretation, continues to provide inspiration for thought and practical living.

New Studies

Academic analysis of the text outside of philosophy, too, has not ceased. A recent Western study by John Emerson, for example, proposes a detailed analysis of the various layers that make up the *Tao-te-ching*, distinguishing four strata: an early layer that focuses on themes of mother, child, chaos, namelessness, and return, and that is more introverted and "mystical" in nature; a medium layer that retains the return theme without the mother/child image and adds paradox sequences of reversal, focusing more on abstract, intellectual arguments; an added layer—the odd one out—that deals with endurance, longevity, and promises of success; and a later layer that is more outward and politically oriented, "the locus of the sly political devices that gave Laozi a bad name with the Confucians" (Emerson 1995, 8).

Another recent work, by the Japanese scholar Mukai Tetsuo that picks up on an earlier study by Wang Ming (1984), looks at the relation of the *Tao-te-ching* to the *Liu-t'ao* or "Six Tactics," a pre-Han military treatise ascribed to the founding saint of the Chou dynasty and military genius T'ai-kung Wang (see Allan 1972). It was thought a later reconstitution until a manuscript was found in 1972 at Lin-yi (Shan-tung) that could be dated to the second century B.C.E. Not only rather close to a number of passages in various pre-Han philosophers, the work shows a close connection to the *Tao-te-ching* and can be ranked among its immediate precursors, thus placing it in a more political and military context rather removed from metaphysics and mysticism (Mukai 1994).

The dating of the *Tao-te-ching*, apparently settled on at about 250 B.C.E., too, has come under new scrutiny, both from linguistic studies and from

new manuscript finds. Liu Xiaogan in particular argues that after a long period of grave doubts about their authenticity and reliability, Chinese scholars are recovering trust in traditional sources. In a recent book he writes extensively in favor of an early date of the *Chuang-tzu*, which, he says, was complete in much of its present form before unification in 221 B.C.E. (Liu 1994a). Along the same lines, and supported by extensive comparisons of rhymes in the *Tao-te-ching* with those in the *Shih-ching* (Book of Songs), he argues for an early date of the text, placing it around the lifetime of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). He thereby rehabilitates the ancient story of the *Shih-chi*, so strongly criticized by A. C. Graham.

Unresolvable by mere textual analysis, the fires of this debate are further stoked by archaeology. Opening a tomb of the southern Ch'ü culture in Ching-men township (Hu-pei) in August 1993, the local archaeological team unearthed 804 bamboo slips containing roughly 16,000 characters of text. The materials, dated to the mid-Warring States period or fourth century B.C.E., are as yet unpublished but said to contain parts of five ancient philosophical works, including the *Tao-te-ching*. First claimed an entirely new version of the book, shorter and written in dialogue format (*Chung-kuo wen-wu pao*, March 19, 1995), the so-called "Bamboo Lao-tzu" was later recognized as yet another variant of the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts already translated. It was buried together with other philosophical works, which were indeed written in dialogue (*Chung-kuo wen-wu pao*, August 20, 1995). Still, even without shocking surprises, the discovery of this bamboo manuscript throws new light on the origins and antiquity of the text, making it clear that it existed well before 250 B.C.E. There is no telling what this and future archaeological finds will yet uncover to revise and extend our knowledge of the ancient classic.

Along slightly different lines, the tradition of the *Tao-te-ching* in China receives further elucidation by the study of related later works, some of which are discussed avidly on Internet forums. An example here is Gary Arbuckle's presentation and partial translation of the "Sixteen Canons," a manuscript discovered in Ma-wang-tui. "Holding on to the female," an obscure phrase in the *Tao-te-ching* is thus clarified to mean following the guidance of the Empress who calculates cosmic tendencies by examining the proportion of disastrous male influence—expressed in "arrogance, excess, love of strife, and plotting in secret"—and beneficent female influence, described as being "compliant and good, respectful and frugal, humble and restrained" (Internet communication, 1995).

Texts in the Taoist canon are another source for the increased interpretation of the *Tao-te-ching*. To give just one example, the late T'ang *Ch'ing-ching-ching* (Scripture of Purity and Tranquility) is notable for its

combination of *Tao-te-ching* ideas with the practice of religious Taoist meditations and the structure of the Buddhist *Heart Sūtra*, a collection of essential ("heart") passages and spells from a longer scripture used for inspiration, meditation, and ritual (Nattier 1992, 175). Not only an adaptation of the *Tao-te-ching* in a completely different religious environment, the text later became the central scripture of the monastic school of Complete Perfection (Ch'üan-chen), where it is recited daily to the present day. The text has two recently English translations (Kohn 1993, 24–29; Wong 1992) and is increasingly studied, for instance by Mitamura Keiko in a critical examination of its earliest commentary by the later T'ang Taoist Tu Kuang-t'ing (Mitamura 1994).

Last but not least, the god Lao-tzu has moved back into the scholarly limelight. In China he features prominently in the recently published series on "Taoism and Chinese Culture" (Zhu 1992, 5–15; Li 1993, 19–41), and has even merited a detailed journalistic account of his myths and history (Wang 1991). In the West, after the pathbreaking work of Anna Seidel on his divinization under the Han (1969) and Florian Reiter's translation of his illustrated Yuan-dynasty hagiography (1990), he plays an important role in Kristofer Schipper's work (1994) and has a lengthy entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Boltz 1987).

All this shows that, as over the millennia so today, Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te-ching* play a continuous role in Chinese culture, being ever newly appropriated and reinterpreted. In all cases, the text and its author have never stood alone but were presented in the changing light of the ages, interpreted by new readers, and connected with various contemporaneous contexts. The ancient legend of the text's transmission for this reason has never lost its relevance but continues to demonstrate in a mythological way that the sage never stands alone and formulates his ideas only in active cultural context and for the sake of a specific audience. Just as Yin Hsi thus extracted the *Tao-te-ching* from the emigrating Lao-tzu, so hundreds of generations have distilled their particular vision of the world from its words, and are still doing so. Reception and interpretation are therefore as much part of the work as its words and sentences and must not be relegated to an inferior position.

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