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LAOZI

Daodejing

Translated with Notes by
EDMUND RYDEN

With an Introduction by
BENJAMIN PENNY

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INTRODUCTION

> How easily we can find our own image in the *Daodejing*! It is a magic mirror, always found to reflect our concept of the truth.[1]

The *Daodejing* is one of the foundational texts of Chinese thought. Its fortunes have risen and fallen with different dynasties and regimes, with influential scholars and writers acclaiming it as a pre-eminent work of the Chinese tradition or damning it as metaphysical nonsense. Nonetheless, it has been a feature on the landscape of learned Chinese people for more than two millennia. In more recent times the *Daodejing* has become known and been celebrated beyond the Chinese world. First translated into French in 1841, and into English in 1868, it has been re-translated numerous times, with ever more versions appearing today in electronic form. Some of these versions are serious attempts at making sense of a famously difficult text, but many more have little to do with the original; as little, perhaps, as that stream of books whose titles begin with 'The Tao of...'.

As interest in the *Daodejing* has become more widespread and as its popularity as a text for translation has grown, it has sometimes been considered as a philosophical gem suspended in a historical and cultural void, removed from its ancient Chinese context. Without this context, some translators and writers on the *Daodejing* have dressed it in clothes of their own choosing, often inappropriately. Strangely, this process has taken place at the same time as our knowledge of the origins of the text has increased immeasurably. In the west, as Sinology developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as our familiarity with the wealth of literature from ancient China grew, so our knowledge of the conceptual world of that time and place broadened and became more nuanced. Indeed, from the 1970s remarkable

[1] Holmes Welch, *The Parting of the Way: Lao-tzu and the Taoist Movement* (London: Methuen and Co., 1957), 13.

archaeological discoveries—particularly the texts on silk and bamboo strips unearthed from Mawangdui near Changsha in Hunan in 1972–4 and Guodian near Jingmen in Hubei in 1993—have caused our ideas about the origins and composition of the *Daodejing* to be revised in fundamental ways. We are, therefore, in the extraordinary position of being more informed about the original *Daodejing* now than any reader for the last 1,500 years or more. This new translation takes these discoveries into full account, restoring the context in which the *Daodejing* came into being.

Reading the Daodejing

The *Daodejing* is traditionally ascribed to Laozi, a title that simply means 'the old master'. Who this 'old master' was, or if there really was such a person, has been a subject of discussion since at least the first century before the Common Era. Similarly, when he lived—and therefore when the *Daodejing* was written—has long been a matter of dispute. The version of the *Daodejing* that has been handed down to us—known as the 'Wang Bi edition'—probably derives from the third century CE, although it is clear that versions of the text much like it were circulating some 500 years earlier. The Wang Bi edition is also the text most familiar to western readers as, until the 1980s, it formed the basis for all the translations into European languages. It has eighty-one short chapters divided into two sections. The first section consists of thirty-seven chapters and goes under the name of the *Daojing*, since its opening chapter focuses on the *Dao*, or Way. The second section has forty-four chapters and is known as the *Dejing*, as Chapter 38, the first in this section, concentrates on the *De*—Life Force or Vitality. Thus the *Daojing* and the *Dejing* together form the *Daodejing*, the name by which the text is often known today.

One reason why the *Daodejing* has generated so many studies and translations is that the text itself can be read in a multiplicity of ways, both in a strictly grammatical sense, and in terms of its content. Chinese texts from before the twentieth century are

written in a language that is usually called literary Chinese. Terse and economical in expression, literary Chinese can be technically precise as well as capable of great beauty, happily rendering both dry bureaucratic instructions and delicately evocative poetry and prose. Some writers, in fact, composed fine examples of official documents in their role as government functionaries while also exchanging verse with their friends. Literary Chinese is notable, however, for its lack of punctuation: it has no commas and full stops, no paragraph markings, no fixed parts of speech, and, of course, no capital letters. Deciding where one sentence ends and the next begins, for instance, might seem like a challenge (and it sometimes is), but usually texts in literary Chinese are clear, as particular characters often act as grammatical markers, doing the work of punctuation and spacing in western texts. One of the problems with the Wang Bi edition, discussed at greater length below, is that its use of such particles, as these characters are called, is rather limited. In other words, a reader does not have the benefit of many of the grammatical markers we might expect, and do indeed find, in other ancient Chinese texts. Even for skilled Chinese readers of literary Chinese, therefore, there are important points of genuine ambiguity in the *Daodejing*, where two or more readings of certain passages are equally possible.

In addition to these grammatical considerations, the *Daodejing* also has a particular mode of expression: aphoristic, sometimes enigmatic, and often counter-intuitive. The Way, as readers will note almost as soon as they encounter the text, is not easily characterized. We encounter this difficulty in the opening chapter of the book, where the Way is described in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is:

> Of ways you may speak,
> but not the Perennial Way;
> By names you may name,
> but not the Perennial Name.

Here, the Way is represented in its most general aspect as, perhaps, befits the opening lines of the text—although, as we will see, the position that these lines occupied in the *Daodejing* may

not always have been the same. One of the reasons why the Way is described in negative terms is that it cannot be adequately defined by making positive statements about it, even knowing what to call it. The *Daodejing* addresses this issue explicitly in Chapter 25:

> I do not know her name; I entitle her the Way;
> I force myself to name her Great.

For the same reasons, the Way is also sometimes defined paradoxically, thus:

> Looking at her, you will not see her;
> Listening to her, you will not hear her,
> Yet she cannot be used up.
>
> (Ch. 35)

However, the most pervasive manner in which the Way is characterized in the *Daodejing* is by using metaphor—the Way is like a gully, a mother, the course of a river, or a path or road. In fact, the word *dao* is not exclusive to the *Daodejing* but is used by many Chinese philosophical texts to describe their teachings. A 'Way' is put into practice by walking a particular road, and someone who does this is, therefore, a 'Way-farer' in this translation. However, readers expecting to find easy or direct insight into how to become such a Way-farer, according to the *Daodejing*—in contrast with other, more straightforward, philosophical texts of ancient China—may struggle to find instruction: these Way-farers are 'unseen, mysterious, communing with the abstruse, deep so they could not be fathomed' (Ch. 15).

Thus, to define the nature of the Way, it is necessary to place these metaphors in the foreground, to begin with the images used in the *Daodejing* to clarify how the Way is characterized.[2] Metaphor, here, is understood to be much more than a literary decoration; it is a way of writing that reveals meaningful relationships between objects and processes and is crucial to an understanding of the text. However, before discussing the use of metaphor in the

[2] This approach follows that of Sarah Allan, especially as demonstrated in her book *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

Daodejing in detail, it is important to give some background into one specific aspect of ancient Chinese thought.

In ancient China, the workings of the cosmos were often understood in terms of 'correlative cosmology' by authors across a range of philosophical schools. This was a way of thinking in which features of the natural world and the changes that transformed them were grouped in sets—notably of two, where the core structuring pair was *yin* and *yang*, but also of five in the form of the elemental phases of wood, earth, fire, water, and metal, and sixty-four in the hexagrams of the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*. Countless aspects of the world formed pairs in parallel to the *yang* and *yin*—heaven/earth, male/female, ruler/minister, summer/winter, stretching/contracting, above/below, father/son, and so on. Thus, heaven, male, and ruler were correlated with *yang*, and earth, female, and minister were correlated with *yin*. It is important to remember that these pairs refer to complementary relationships rather than to intrinsic features: in ancient China, a minister (*yin*), for instance, would certainly have been male (*yang*), and be both a father (*yang*) and a son (*yin*).[3]

The terms *yin* and *yang* appear only once in the *Daodejing* (in Chapter 42), but the use of complementary pairs that pervades *yin-yang* thinking is a recurrent feature in the text. Furthermore, the Way is consistently compared with characteristics that are correlated with *yin*. It is 'the mother of the myriad things' (Ch. 1) and 'the mother of the world' (Chs. 25, 52), 'the gully's spirit' and 'the mysterious cleft' (Ch. 6), it is like water that floods (Chs. 8, 34), it is characterized by reversal and weakness (Ch. 40). One of the most notable features of this translation is that it takes these characterizations seriously, by rendering the Way as female. In literary Chinese gender is not marked, so the translator must decide on the most appropriate English word to use when a pronoun is required: in this translation the pronoun chosen for the Way is 'she'. It should be emphasized that this femaleness of the

[3] On correlative cosmology, see A. C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986).

Way is derived from the images used to describe it rather than female gender being marked in the language of the text.

A similar pattern of imagery is used to describe the figure of the Sage in the *Daodejing*. Generally taken to be the person who epitomizes the teachings of a particular school of philosophy, how he should behave depends, of course, on the nature of the teachings concerned. Indeed, in one of the few references in the *Daodejing* to other philosophical schools of ancient China, it says that the figure of the Sage is 'not benevolent' (Ch. 5), a statement in direct opposition to Confucian teachings where benevolence is a key virtue. Since the Sage is the one who embodies the Way, he takes on her typically *yin* characteristics. He 'holds himself back' (Ch. 7); he is like 'a baby that has not yet smiled' who appreciates sucking milk from its mother, who as we have seen is the Way herself (Ch. 20); he does not compete but, rather, bends (Ch. 22); he does not act and does not grasp (Ch. 64); he is compared to the hen, the 'valley of the world', and reverts to the state of an infant (Ch. 28). In fact, it is in the Sage's not acting that one of the most characteristic ideas of the *Daodejing* is revealed, namely, that precisely by not acting, everything can be accomplished:

> A person given to the Way makes daily regress.
> Regress and again regress, until coming to not acting.
> When not acting then there is nothing not done.
>
> (Ch. 48)

Like the Sage, the state that embodies the Way acts by not acting. This might appear counter-intuitive, especially in the China of the period when the *Daodejing* was composed, aptly described in Chinese history as the 'Warring States'. During the roughly two centuries prior to the unification of China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, seven quasi-independent states fought to conquer each other in a drive for supremacy. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this is the period in which the classic text of military strategy, Sunzi's *Art of War*, was written. What must have appeared surprising for a contemporary reader, however, was how the *Daodejing* recommended that a great state behave:

> A great state is like a river's lower course,
> She is the feminine aspect of the world.
> In the mating of the world:
> The feminine always conquers the masculine by stillness.
> It is because of her stillness that she is apt to take the lower position.
>
> (Ch. 61)

The great state follows the lowest course as water flows downward, it is still rather than active, and adopts the feminine as its model—yet this is precisely how it conquers.

Some passages such as these in the *Daodejing* that concern political entities have given rise to the idea that it is essentially a book about statecraft and government. This is hinted at in other sections where advice is given to a ruler, or to a ruler's counsellors:

> One who helps the lord of men according to the Way,
> Does not use arms to subdue the world since such actions easily rebound.
>
> (Ch. 30)

Or:

> Of old, those who fared by the Way
> Did not use her to enlighten the people, rather to fool them.
>
> Difficulty in governing people comes from their knowing too much.
>
> (Ch. 65)

Another perspective sees the *Daodejing* as primarily interested in self-cultivation. Traditions of 'nourishing life', as it was known in ancient times, have existed since records began in China. These methods involved physical or mental meditations, special diets or sexual practices, and prescriptions for both moral behaviour and for medicines. Those who pursued such activities were aiming to lengthen their lives, ideally to the ultimate condition of immortality. At the time the *Daodejing* was composed adepts practised various methods of self-cultivation, and there are passages in the text where we can see references to breathing exercises involving particular forms of inhalation and exhalation, such as in the use of the metaphor of the bellows and the blowtube in Chapter 5.

However, if the *Daodejing* was originally intended as a manual for self-cultivation, it could not serve that purpose today. In fact, even when it was composed it is hard to imagine how its enigmatic aphorisms could have been used to convey specific instructions.

It may be best to think of the *Daodejing*—or parts of it—as a kind of pedagogical tool or mnemonic device that would have been used as a starting-point in discussion or practice between a master and a pupil. If some of the sayings of the *Daodejing* were used as prompts for more extensive explanations in the context of teaching, we have lost the elaborations that a teacher might have used in their instruction.

The Text of the Daodejing

Another layer of complexity is added to how we view the *Daodejing* and its interpretation when we consider fundamental questions related to the actual text itself.[4] It is to be expected that books from ancient times will have suffered as they were passed down from generation to generation. Especially in the days before printing and mass publication, mistakes were made in copying, parts of books could be destroyed by fire or flood or mould, books would pass out of favour for a period and be lost or forgotten, the comments of commentators could be absorbed into the main text, misguided editors could excise passages they thought were late additions or change some words they did not understand. The *Daodejing* was no more immune from these tribulations than any other ancient book. In addition, though, aspects of the early history of the *Daodejing* that have been revealed to us through archaeology have complicated our understanding of the nature of the original text.

For many centuries, until modern times, the picture was relatively simple. The *Daodejing* came down to us in various editions to which were typically attached commentaries of various kinds. As noted above, the most commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing* (also known as the 'classical' or received version) is associated with the name of Wang Bi (226–49 CE), a scholar who lived under the State of Wei during the period of the Three Kingdoms.

[4] For a brief overview of textual matters related to the *Daodejing*, see William G. Boltz, 'Lao tzu Tao te ching', in Michael Loewe (ed.), *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), 269–92.

Wang is best known for his commentaries to the *Daodejing* and the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*. The version of the *Daodejing* that goes under his name may not, in fact, have been exactly the version he used, and this edition itself probably belongs to a textual tradition associated with the other major early commentary, that goes under the name of Heshanggong (the 'master who lives by the river'). The date of the Heshanggong commentary, and therefore the text it is attached to, is also uncertain, but clearly this line of texts goes back to early medieval times, not long after the fall of the Han dynasty in the early third century. There are minor differences in the texts associated with the Wang Bi and Heshanggong commentaries (and some others in this line of transmission), but none of them affects the meaning of any passages.

The first major challenge to this way of viewing the text of the *Daodejing* came in the early 1970s, when three tombs were opened at a site at Mawangdui in the suburbs of the city of Changsha in southern China.[5] These three tombs belonged to Li Cang, marquis of Dai, who died in 186 BCE, his wife, known as Lady Dai, who died after 168 BCE, and a second man, in all probability their son, who predeceased his mother in 168 BCE. The tombs contained an extraordinary collection of artefacts, including two magnificent painted silk banners, lacquerware, musical instruments, and much else. The tomb of the son also contained the texts of books written on silk; some of these were extant, some were of books whose titles were known from ancient bibliographies but had been lost, and some were previously unknown. Two of the texts were versions of the *Daodejing* that have become known as Mawangdui A and Mawangdui B. Since they were found in the tomb of the son of the marquis, we know that both were inscribed before 168 BCE. However, by examining the style in which the characters were written, and observing which particular characters in the text were replaced by others of similar meaning or shape—characters were tabooed if they occurred in the personal names of

[5] On the Mawangdui texts, see Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).

emperors—we can be more specific and say that the 'A' text probably dates from about 200 BCE, and the 'B' text from about twenty years later.

The Mawangdui texts are intriguing for a number of reasons. First, while the Wang Bi edition divides the *Daodejing* into eighty-one chapters, the Mawangdui 'A' text—where new chapters often look to be marked with black dots—appears to have some chapter divisions where the Wang Bi edition has none, and has no division where the Wang Bi edition marks them. In a book where so much of the text is comprised of short aphorisms, context is particularly important; thus, the grouping of passages into chapters can be an important influence on how certain sections of the book are read. Secondly, while the Mawangdui texts divide the eighty-one chapters of the *Daodejing* into two sections like the Wang Bi edition, both of them reverse the order of the two parts. That is, the Mawangdui texts begin with what we have come to know as Chapter 38, and the famous opening chapter of the Wang Bi edition ('Of ways you may speak/but not the Perennial Way, etc.') comes at the beginning of the second section. Thus, since it was the order of the two sections of the book that gave it the traditional title of *Daodejing*, perhaps the Mawangdui texts should reverse the order of the two terms and be known as the *Dedaojing*, or the *Laozi Dedaojing*, as one translator has entitled his book.[6] The third major difference between the Wang Bi family of editions and the Mawangdui texts relates to the classic observation (made in this Introduction as elsewhere) that the *Daodejing* is notoriously ambiguous. One of the greatest differences between the Mawangdui texts and the Wang Bi edition is that they often include the grammatical particles that the latter edition lacks. By doing so, the Mawangdui texts have clarified many of the grammatical conundrums long considered to be characteristic of the *Daodejing*. It has also meant that some of the age-old arguments over which of two possible readings of some passages in the text was correct have now been settled. Not all the puzzles have been solved, but readers of the text are now in a much better position

[6] Ibid.

to know whether what seemed like intentional ambiguity was actually caused simply by the vicissitudes of transmission.

As the scholarly community digested the importance of the Mawangdui texts, argued over their relevance, and recast their views of the original *Daodejing*, in 1993 another excavation a few hundred kilometres north of Mawangdui produced another, even earlier, version of the book.[7] This excavation was at Guodian, near the modern city of Jingmen, a little to the north of the Yangtse River, from a group of tombs close to the ancient capital of the state of Chu. Chu ruled the southern part of China during the period before China was unified by the state of Qin. The tomb from which this *Daodejing* came was sealed between the mid-fourth and early third centuries BCE, and is, thus, possibly 150 years earlier than the tomb at Mawangdui which held the *Daodejing* texts. It probably belonged to the teacher of a royal prince. Rather than being inscribed on silk, these texts were written on the much more common material of bamboo strips. Ancient Chinese books written in this manner were made from many of these strips tied together with string and rolled up—the standard Chinese word for a book chapter actually means 'to roll up'. Over time, the string in these rolls would rot and the strips would be detached from each other. When caches of such strips are found in tombs, they are commonly mixed up in a heap. The first task is, therefore, to work out how they should be reassembled. As at Mawangdui, the *Daodejing* was not the only text found in this cache, which also included other known and unknown writings. Of the 800 strips found at Guodian, some 721 had writing on them, and of these about seventy-one had material associated with the *Daodejing*.

When the strips had been reassembled, the text of this *Daodejing* was different from any extant version.[8] Since the strips

[7] On the Guodian finds, see Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams (eds.), *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000).

[8] The following discussion is based on Harold D. Roth, 'Some Methodological Issues in the Study of the Guodian *Laozi* Parallels', in ibid. 71–88.

themselves are of various sizes, and there are marks on them from where the string had bound them together, it appears that the Guodian material was originally in three separate bundles. Comparing the Guodian text with that of the Wang Bi and Mawangdui versions, there is material in the strips from thirty-one of the eighty-one chapters as they appear in later editions. However, the order in which they are found does not correspond with any other version of the text. Only sixteen of these chapters appear 'complete', with some lacking major parts of what we are familiar with from other editions. In total, the Guodian text has only about 40 per cent of the material of the Wang Bi edition. Importantly, if we compare the three bundles, only one section that corresponds to nine lines of the Wang Bi edition is duplicated (in bundles 'A' and 'C').

What, then, is the Guodian material? Is it three parts of the same text or three different texts? Is it—or are they—versions of the *Daodejing*? Or should they be seen as artefacts of textual streams that led, after the intervention of an editor or editors, to the book we know today? If we were to reject the idea that the three bundles make up one complete text, should each of the bundles even be seen as representing something 'whole'?

One possibility is that the three bundles together constitute a selection of passages from an already extant *Daodejing*; in other words, the *Daodejing* as it came to be known later already existed in something like the form we know it in today, and somebody selected the parts they found valuable from it to produce the Guodian material. Arguing against this position is evidence from the lines that are duplicated in bundles 'A' and 'C'. In the nine lines concerned—from what we have come to know as Chapter 64—there are no fewer than thirty-three variations in the texts, including whole lines being transposed. This would indicate strongly that the two versions of this passage could not have been copied from the same source text.

This leaves two other possibilities. The first is that the Guodian material formed one of the sources for the text that eventually became the *Daodejing* as we know it—bearing in mind that we do not know how many or what other sources there might

have been. The second is that the sources that led to the *Daodejing* that resembles the Mawangdui or Wang Bi versions also led, in some way, to the Guodian material. If this were true, then the Guodian material and the other extant versions of the *Daodejing* do not exist in any direct ancestral relationship with each other. Without more evidence, it is impossible to decide whether either of these possibilities is likely, but in the light of this discussion we should also bear in mind another consideration. In what we might think of as the 'early days' of the *Daodejing*, passages may not, in fact, have been written down. There is evidence in the various texts that have survived not only of the kind of aphoristic style that might lend itself to memorization, but also of rhyme. That is, the '*Daodejing*'—or the early constituent parts or it, or parts of variants of it—might best be understood as originally existing in oral form, passed between master and student without ever being written down. If this were the case, there almost certainly would have been different sets of passages recited and committed to memory in different contexts; and when it came to writing these passages down, different sets of passages (or selections of passages) would be inscribed on to strips in different sequences by different hands.

Possibly, then, one useful way of seeing the Guodian material is not as a single, unified version of the *Daodejing* but rather as several selections of sayings that may have existed independently from each other, and which came from the circles around different teachers from related schools. Thus, when it comes to relating this material to later versions of the *Daodejing*, comparison is probably best made on a passage-by-passage basis, as this translation does. This is not to say that the Guodian texts do not tell fascinating stories about philosophical ideas circulating in the fourth and third centuries BCE, about the relationship of the *Daodejing* to other texts of the period, including ones that we know about and ones that are new to scholarship, and about the various topics these 'alternate' *Daodejing*s give more or less weight to, but these discussions are best suited to another place.

It will be clear, then, that the question of when the *Daodejing* was written may not be answerable. This is not so much for lack

of evidence, but rather because in the very nature of the composition of the book there does not appear to be a single point at which the *Daodejing* could be said to have been completed. The *Daodejing* was almost certainly compiled over a considerable period of time, entering into text (or even texts) at some point long after its aphorisms and verses had circulated orally. The text as we have it today (or something very like it) was, however, clearly established by the late third or early second centuries BCE, as we can see from the Mawangdui texts, as well as from other evidence.

Laozi

The name attached to the *Daodejing* has traditionally been Laozi, literally 'the old master', as was noted above. However, the earliest record we have of him does not appear until about the turn of the first century BCE, in Sima Qian's (?145–?90 BCE) *Historical Records* (*Shiji*). This biography places Laozi as a senior contemporary of Confucius, who himself lived about 400 years earlier than Sima Qian. This span of time has led to doubt being cast on the veracity of the biography. In this record, to add to the confusion, Sima actually identifies Laozi with three different people: one Li Er, known as Li Dan after his death, who was a scribe in the archives of the state of Zhou; a certain Laolaizi who also lived at the time of Confucius; and another man called 'Dan'—written with a different character—who was the grand scribe of Zhou and who was alive in the middle of the fourth century BCE. As Sima himself notes: 'Some say that Dan was Laozi. Others say he was not. Our generation does not know the truth of the matter.'[9]

What is clear is that certain of the features of this biography formed the basis of later stories that grew up around the figure of Laozi. Two of the most important are the interview he had with Confucius and the record of the way the *Daodejing* came into being.

[9] William H. Nienhauser, Jr, *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China by Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, vol. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 23.

In the first, Confucius is said to have gone to Laozi to ask him about the codes of proper behaviour known as the 'rites'. Laozi replied by instructing his visitor that nothing Confucius cared about really mattered and that he should rid himself of his 'arrogant airs', 'many desires', 'contrived posturing', and 'overweening ambition'. Confucius famously observed in response that: 'As for the dragon, I can never know how it mounts the wind and clouds and ascends into the sky. Today I have seen Laozi; is he perhaps like the dragon?'[10] The second element of the biography that proved influential told how Laozi, seeing the decline of the Zhou, decided to depart and headed west. At the pass that led out of the state, the Prefect of the Pass, Yin Xi, asked Laozi to write down his teachings—and this was the *Daodejing*.

As the *Daodejing* became more widely circulated and was taken up by the Daoist religion or the religious movements that were precursors to it in the early centuries of the Common Era, the figure of Laozi became elevated to the status of a deity, as an embodiment of the Way itself, an immortal, or a messiah who would usher in an era of Great Peace. In the second century CE the pivotal text *The Scripture on the Transformations of Laozi* (*Laozi bianhua jing*) proclaimed that Laozi is, himself, 'the root of the Way' and existed before the cosmos came into being.[11] He is a great creator god who became present in the world successively in the form of various sages of antiquity—the teachers of emperors—and who also made appearances in more recent generations. One of the most intriguing aspects of this text is the possibility that it refers to the so-called 'conversion of the barbarians' theory, not long after the introduction of Buddhism to China. This theory has it that when Laozi left through the passes and went west, he continued on until he reached India. There he tried to teach his doctrine to the inhabitants of that land, but they were too slow to grasp it; as a result he taught them an 'easy' version.

[10] Ibid. 22.

[11] On the *Laozi bianhua jing*, see Anna Seidel, *La Divinisation du Lao-tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969). It should be noted that there is a minority opinion that this dating of the text may not be correct.

Those easy teachings are nothing else but Buddhism, and the figure known as the Buddha was none other than one of Laozi's transformations. This theory was not, of course, accepted by Buddhists, and later texts that refer to it much more explicitly than *The Scripture on the Transformations of Laozi* were declared illegal and destroyed under dynasties that were sympathetic to Buddhism.

Not long before *The Scripture on the Transformations of Laozi* was written, we find Laozi deified in early Daoism under the title Lord Lao, the Most High. He was the god who gave revelations to Zhang Daoling, the founder of what became the Celestial Masters sect, in 142 CE granting a new religious dispensation. The Celestial Masters sect is generally regarded as the first organized Daoist Church, in other words, the beginning of the Daoist religion. Under the influence of the various new streams of Daoism in the medieval period, the biography of this, now cosmic and divine, Laozi became much larger and more intricate, and his status in the culture grew in parallel. In the seventh century the Li clan came to power as the Tang dynasty. Since they shared the family name of Li with Laozi—at least according to Sima Qian's biography—they claimed descent from him. Laozi and the *Daodejing*, along with Daoism in general, came to occupy an important place under the Tang, with the *Daodejing* being declared a compulsory text in the official examinations for aspirants to the bureaucracy. The entire text was also inscribed on pillars and stelae in the capital by imperial order, lectures on it were given at court, and in 733 the emperor decreed that a copy of the *Daodejing* should be kept in every home.[12]

The Commentarial Tradition

With the elevation of Laozi into their sponsoring deity, the Celestial Masters also accorded the *Daodejing* a position of honour. A major element in this process was the determination of their own explanation of the book's meaning, known as the *Xiang'er* commentary, which will be discussed below. Commentaries are a

[12] See T. H. Barrett, *Taoism Under the T'ang: Religion and Empire During the Golden Age of Chinese History* (London: Wellsweep Books, 1996).

pervasive feature of Chinese scholarly practice. Sometimes explaining the meaning of passages in a text, sometimes providing extracts from other texts that illuminate or are parallel to the passage under examination, sometimes giving information on matters of pronunciation, sometimes noting textual variations in different editions, several commentaries are often found appended to the major works—and occasionally the minor ones—of the Chinese philosophical, historical, and literary traditions. Typically, they are written as interlinear comments: in a traditionally printed Chinese book they appear as half-sized characters interrupting the main text at appropriate points. Some commentaries have become so famous in their own right that other scholars from pre-modern times have written commentaries on them, known as sub-commentaries. Commentaries and sub-commentaries in the Chinese scholarly tradition were not like the notes to an old novel or play we might consult today if we come across a piece of terminology with which we are unfamiliar; rather, they were typically read as an intrinsic part of the text, providing a running interpretation, as well as pointing out references and glossing difficult words.

The *Daodejing*, according to Isabelle Robinet, has been the subject of about 700 commentaries from the third century BCE until the present, by Buddhists and Confucians as well as Daoists—including those of more philosophical bent and those of religious inclination.[13] The fact that the *Daodejing* was not the sole preserve of Daoists is illustrated by the fact that its earliest surviving commentary is found in the book known as *Hanfeizi*, after its author who died in 233 BCE. The *Hanfeizi* is associated with the so-called Legalist school, which was concerned with the preservation of the power of the state through adherence to law and political expediency—yet, perhaps surprisingly to a modern audience, it devotes two chapters to explaining the *Daodejing*.

The three main early commentaries to the *Daodejing* have already been mentioned in this introduction: Heshanggong,

[13] Isabelle Robinet, 'Later Commentaries: Textual Polysemy and Syncretistic Interpretations', in Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (eds.), *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 119–42, at 119.

Wang Bi, and the *Xiang'er*.[14] In broad terms, Heshanggong, who was probably writing at about the end of the Han dynasty—that is, the late second or early third centuries CE—sees the *Daodejing* in terms of self-cultivation and the need to reduce desires and create harmony and longevity in both the body and the state. In common with much scholarly discussion in his time, Heshanggong is committed to an explanation of the *Daodejing* based on the principles of *yin* and *yang*, and the pervasiveness of *qi* or vital energy in the cosmos. Wang Bi, on the other hand, is generally seen as the main representative of the movement known as Dark Learning, and his reading of the *Daodejing* is focused on philosophical speculations rather than any attempt to find practical instructions in it. For Wang, the Way is not personified, or deified, or capable of intentional action; it is, rather, radically transcendent, the ultimate non-being, the first cause. The third of these commentaries, the *Xiang'er*, was rediscovered only in the twentieth century in a cache of manuscripts found in Dunhuang in the far north-west of China, a stopover on the Silk Route and site of a major Buddhist settlement in medieval times. The part of the commentary that survives—now in the collection of the British Library—only runs from halfway through Chapter 3 to Chapter 37. The meaning of the title *Xiang'er* and when this commentary was written have both been subjects of scholarly discussion and dispute since its discovery. The consensus that seems to be emerging—although there are notable learned dissenters—is that the title means something like 'Thinking of You', which refers to the concern for humanity of the Way, here understood to be essentially identical with the deified Laozi, Lord Lao. The *Xiang'er* belongs to the Celestial Masters tradition that began in the mid-second century CE, and quite possibly derives from the hand of its founder Zhang Daoling's grandson, and great organizer of the movement, Zhang Lu (d. 216).

To better illustrate how very different these three commentaries are, we can compare their interpretations of a certain

[14] For an overview of the Heshanggong and Wang Bi commentaries, see Alan K. L. Chan, 'A Tale of Two Commentaries', in ibid. 89–117. The best treatment of the *Xiang'er* is in Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 29–148.

passage in the *Daodejing*, in this case the opening lines of Chapter 6: 'The gully's spirit does not die; She is called "the mysterious cleft".'[15] For Heshanggong, the character 'gully' should be read as 'nourish', and 'spirit' refers to the spirits of the five internal organs; thus, Heshanggong rereads the first line as: 'if you nourish the spirits of the five internal organs you will not die.' He further understands Laozi to mean that the key to not dying lies in the mysterious cleft, with 'mysterious' referring to heaven, and 'cleft' referring to earth. Finally, by relating the cosmos to the human body as macrocosm and microcosm (a standard trope in this period), 'mysterious', which is heaven, refers to the nose, while 'cleft', which is earth, refers to the mouth.

For Wang Bi on the other hand, the spirit of the gully 'is the non-gully within the gully'. He claims that it has no shape and no shadow and it neither opposes anything nor moves around anything. It occupies the lowest position and therefore it is the highest of all things. Nonetheless, since it is so low, Wang says it cannot be given a proper designation: so when Laozi says he 'calls' it the 'mysterious cleft', part of the emphasis is on the verb: as he is unable to define it, he simply gives it a convenient label.

Xiang'er is different again. For its author, the word *gu* that we read as 'gully' should be replaced by a similar character pronounced *yu* that means 'to desire'. Thus, he rereads the first line as meaning 'if you desire that your spirits do not die', and proceeds to give instruction on how to do this. For him, the 'cleft' refers to earth, as it does for Heshanggong, and, by the logic of *yin* and *yang* theory, it is feminine. Man, he says, should follow the feminine and not give himself priority if he wishes to engender internal spirits and keep them alive.

These three readings of the same pair of lines have little in common. Indeed, it would almost appear that the commentators

[15] Discussion of these commentaries is based on the following sources: Heshanggong: Alan K. L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-tzu* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 139–40; Wang Bi: Rudolph G. Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 139–40; *Xiang'er*: Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 83.

have come to the *Daodejing* with their interpretations already formed, or that, at least with a little tweaking of the text, they are able to make the words of the *Daodejing* act as a skeleton on which they can place the flesh of their choice. This pattern continued through the history of Chinese commentary on the *Daodejing*, with new interpretations of it appearing in concert with changes in the intellectual and religious climate of the times. Indeed, as Du Daojian observed in the fourteenth century, in an intriguing echo of the passage from Holmes Welch quoted as the epigraph to this Introduction: 'Each time the Way has descended to the earth, it has been different . . . Thus, Han dynasty commentators produced a Han *Laozi*, Jin commentators produced a Jin *Laozi*, and Tang and Song commentators produced Tang and Song *Laozis*.'[16]

Chinese commentaries on the *Daodejing* did not stop in medieval times. Indeed, a particularly intriguing example was written by Yan Fu (1854–1921), one of the greatest transmitters of western thought to China, and translator of Thomas Huxley, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Montesquieu, and Herbert Spencer, the Social Darwinist who coined the term 'survival of the fittest'.[17] In his marginal notes to the *Daodejing*, Yan found parallels to aspects of the writings of the authors he was reading in western languages, in particular to certain elements of Spencer's philosophy. He also noted echoes of Montesquieu's prescriptions for a democratic state in the descriptions of Laozi's ideal society in Chapter 80 of the *Daodejing*, and of Darwinism in these lines from Chapter 5:

> Heaven and earth are not benevolent:
> They treat the myriad things as a straw dog.

More than a hundred years before Yan Fu had found elements of western thought in the *Daodejing*, the text had been discovered by Europeans: several translations into Latin were apparently made by Jesuits in China during the eighteenth century, one of

[16] Chan, *Two Visions of the Way*, 4.
[17] See Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

which was presented to the Royal Society in 1788. The first complete translation into French appeared in 1841 under the name of Stanislaus Julien, and the first into English in 1868 by the Revd John Chalmers, who worked for the London Missionary Society in Hong Kong. Since then translations have appeared regularly—according to Holmes Welch's estimate, between 1934, when Arthur Waley's *The Way and Its Power* appeared, and 1957, when Welch's own *The Parting of the Way* was published, a new translation was produced every sixteen months.[18] After 1957, of course, the *Daodejing* acquired new audiences as one of the required texts of the hippy counter-culture, but this was also the period of increased activity in Chinese Studies in universities across the western world (a still very useful concordance to the text from 1968 is rumoured to have been produced to while away the hours during a student occupation in Munich). As a result, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s the rate of production of *Daodejing* translations undoubtedly increased—and since the occurrence of the Internet, growth in this industry has accelerated.

Tracing the contours of *Daodejing* translation is a mammoth task, and not one that will be attempted here, but some broad outlines can be noted. One of the motivations for the study of the Chinese classics, including the *Daodejing*, in the early period was the attempt to find traces of monotheism in Chinese culture. Some western scholars of China, themselves men of religion, considered that the world had been populated by the scattering of nations after the destruction of the Tower of Babel, as the Jewish Bible narrates. Since this was the case, all peoples at one time must have believed in a single god. If traces of that belief could be found in ancient works from around the world, it would both prove the veracity of Scripture and assist in contemporary missionizing. Even though the word *dao* was rarely actually translated as 'god'—although there are examples of this—the idea that it was singular, was present before the cosmos was formed, and generated all that existed must surely have been persuasive evidence of an ancient Chinese monotheism for people inclined to find it.

[18] Welch, *The Parting of the Way*, 14.

Another frequently encountered motivation for translators of the *Daodejing* is almost the opposite of the first; that is, rather than looking for something familiar in the text, it has been seen as the epitome of the exotic, the storehouse of a wisdom that is radically different from the traditions of the west. These translators proceeded from a position that western culture is, if not moribund, then seriously flawed or corrupt, certainly lacking in a complete understanding of the nature of the cosmos and spirituality. The apparent ambiguity of the *Daodejing* argued, for them, for a stance towards the world in which not all knowledge could be derived with the tools of rationality. Of course, the danger with such a position is that, in the act of translating, either much of this ambiguity disappears or else the text simply becomes incoherent. Ironically, such an anti-rationalist position stood in direct opposition to other western interpretations that maintained that Daoism represented precisely a rationalist position in Chinese philosophy—one well-known translation from 1913 actually translated *dao* as 'reason'.[19]

A third group of *Daodejing* translations finds people approaching the text from already well-established spiritual or religious positions. For them, the *Daodejing* reinforces what they know to be true already. Apart from those people who simply discussed the *Daodejing* in terms of their own philosophy, like Madame Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, and the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, later known as Osho (the last building he lived in at his ashram in Pune was called Lao Tsu House), a prime example of a 'translation' based on this approach is one by Aleister Crowley, proponent of 'magick' and once called 'the wickedest man in the world'.[20] Writing under the name Ko Hsüan, actually a Daoist immortal of the third century CE, Crowley's 'translation' was first

[19] D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus, *The Canon of Reason and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court, 1913). This translation of the title was actually suggested some decades earlier by Samuel Wells Williams, the American missionary, scholar, and diplomat, in volume 2 of his *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Art and History of the Chinese Empire and its Inhabitants* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1848; rev. edn. 1883), in his chapter on the 'Religion of the Chinese'.

[20] Ko Hsüan [Aleister Crowley], *Tao Te Ching* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1995).

published posthumously in 1971. In it, he blends Hermetic Qabalah with a pre-existing English version of the text. Like many others claiming to have translated the *Daodejing*, Crowley had no knowledge of Chinese, relying instead on the Revd James Legge's version of 1891.[21]

The final category of translations that deserves to be mentioned is, of course, that produced by scholars. These are not limited to works of our time—Legge's, for instance, is most certainly scholarly—but it is true that with the growth in Chinese Studies, and the greater knowledge that has been gained of the nature of ancient China through historical research and philology as well as archaeology, many very fine studies and translations of the *Daodejing* have appeared. This new translation is a case in point. By incorporating insights from the discoveries at Mawangdui and Guodian, and the work of contemporary scholars on many technical questions, Edmund Ryden has produced a *Daodejing* that is not only as learned as any in circulation but also fresh, and sometimes startling, in its rendering.

B. P.

[21] James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism*, Sacred Books of the East (ed. Max Müller), vols. 39 and 40 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891).