CHAPTER ONE

THE *DAODE JING* AND ITS TRADITION

ALAN K. L. CHAN

DESCRIPTION

The *Daode jing* 道德經, commonly translated the "Classic of the Way and Virtue," must be ranked as one of the most important classics in world literature. It also poses a strong challenge to interpreters, past and present, in China and beyond. Known also as the *Laozi* 老子, on account of its reputed author, the *Daode jing* is the foundational classic of Daoism, taken broadly to include all forms of Daoist thought and practice. Inasmuch as Daoism forms a pillar of Chinese culture, the influence of the *Daode jing* is pervasive. The sheer number of commentaries devoted to the classic—some 700, according to one count, of which about 350 are extant (W. T. Chan 1963, 77)—is itself a telling indication of its enduring popularity and hermeneutical openness.

The influence of the *Daode jing* extends beyond China; in Japan, approximately 250 commentaries have been identified. The first translation of the *Laozi* seems to have been into Sanskrit dating to the seventh century (Pelliot 1912). During the 18th century, a Latin translation was brought to England (Legge 1891, xii), after which a steady stream of translations into Western languages has appeared, totaling some 250 to date (LaFargue and Pas 1998, 277). This makes the *Daode jing* the most translated work in world literature, next to the Bible (see also Mair 1990, xi).

The *Daode jing* has been a chief source of inspiration for Chinese intellectuals and in the modern period for lovers of wisdom and spirituality in the West as well. In pre-modern China, emperors, high officials and other personages of note—as even a cursory reading of the standard dynastic histories testifies—were fond of citing the *Daode jing*. Followers of the Daoist faith revered it as a revealed scripture. On politics, literature, art, religion, philosophy and other domains, the *Laozi* has left a mark that is both deep and far-reaching. In the West, while other sources of influence are at work, the contribution of the classic to such best-selling works as *The Tao of Physics* (Capra 1975) and *The Tao of Pooh* (Hoff 1982) is considerable. Regardless of what the scholarly community may think of these works, they play a role in

what some have called the movement of "new-age" spirituality that has claimed a substantial following in recent decades. Overall the work has had a long history and widespread influence and has also been surrounded by many controversies. All this renders mapping "the *Daode jing* and its tradition" in a short essay a hazardous undertaking.

History

THE LEGEND OF LAOZI. Few scholars today would subscribe fully to the traditional view that Laozi, the "Old Master," wrote the *Daode jing* before he left China on a westward journey. However, scholarly consensus on such basic issues as authorship and date of composition remains elusive. The official "biography" of Laozi offered by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145-86 B.C.E.) in the ***Shiji*** 史記 (Records of the Historian), on which the traditional view is based, provides a point of departure for debate.

The current (*Sibu beiyao* 四部備要) version of the biography begins: "Laozi was a man of Chu 楚. . . . His surname was Li 李; given name, Er 耳; *zi* Boyang 伯陽; he was called posthumously Dan 耽" (*Shiji* 63). Unambiguous as they may seem, even these details have given rise to intense disagreement. Since the Tang dynasty, for example, scholars have pointed out that the "original" *Shiji* version gives Laozi's style-name as Dan, and that the name Boyang derives from a later source. Early sources such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Writings of Master Zhuang) and *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü) refer to Lao Dan consistently. It has also been suggested that the word Lao is a surname, although the majority view remains that "Lao Dan" should be rendered simply "Old Dan." These examples give an indication of one kind of debates with which students of the *Laozi* have been preoccupied. Sima Qian goes on to relate that Laozi was a historiographer or archivist at the court of Zhou, and how Confucius consulted him on the rites (possibly funeral rites). This establishes the traditional claim that Laozi was a senior contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.). In this story, which also appears in *Zhuangzi*, ch. 14, Laozi instructed Confucius in a tone that clearly affirms his superiority, chiding the latter for his pride and ambition. Confucius was full of admiration for the Old Master, likening him to a "dragon," which further reinforces Laozi's standing.

"Laozi cultivated Dao and virtue," Sima Qian adds, and "his learning was devoted to self-effacement and not having fame. He lived in Zhou for a long time; witnessing the decline of Zhou, he departed." When he reached the northwest border separating China from the outside world, the official in charge of the border pass, Yin Xi 尹喜, pressed Laozi to commit his thoughts to writing. The result was a book in some five thousand char-

acters, divided into two parts, which discusses "the meaning of Dao and virtue." Thereafter, Laozi left; no one knew where he spent the rest of his days. There is some disagreement about the name Yin Xi, but this completes the main part of Sima Qian's account. The remainder seeks to match the legendary Laozi with known historical individuals, including a list of Laozi's purported descendants.

In an influential paper entitled "The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan [Dan]," **A.C. Graham** (1986) argues that the story of Laozi reflects a conflation of different legends. The earliest stratum, which came from a Confucian source and was current by the fourth century B.C.E., revolves around the meeting of Lao Dan with Confucius. Subsequently, Laozi was made a champion of Zhuangzi's philosophy. During the first half of the third century B.C.E., Lao Dan was recognized as a great thinker in his own right, the founder of the Daoist—or more precisely, as Graham suggests, "Laoist"—school. Only during the Han dynasty, when the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi were seen to share certain insights centering on the concept of Dao, were they classified together under the rubric of the "Daoist school" (*daojia* 道家).

It could well be the case that the meeting between Confucius and Lao Dan had a basis in fact. Various dates have been suggested—for example, 501 B.C.E., following the account in the *Zhuangzi* (ch. 14). Nevertheless, the meager evidence at our disposal cannot confirm the historicity of the encounter or that Lao Dan was more than a fictional construct. Sima Qian's account, as William Boltz writes, reflecting a widely held view among Western scholars, "contains virtually nothing that is demonstrably factual; we are left no choice but to acknowledge the likely fictional nature of the traditional Lao tzu [Laozi] figure" (1993, 270). According to Fung Yulan (1983, 171), Sima Qian had "confused" the legendary Lao Dan with Li Er, who flourished during the Warring States period and was the "real" founder of the Daoist school. According to D. C. Lau (1963, 148), there were probably two versions of the meeting between Laozi and Confucius—a Confucian one highlighting Confucius's humility and eagerness to learn, and a Daoist one which emphasized Laozi's critique of Confucian values (see also W. T. Chan 1963).

The story of Laozi takes on a religious turn since the Han period. Anna Seidel (1969) and Livia Kohn (1998a) offer an indispensable guide to this development. Simply put, the divinity of Laozi was recognized as the Daoist tradition took root. In the eyes of the faithful, a new revelation of the Dao by the divine Laozi, traditionally dated 142 C.E., resulted in the formation of the "Way of the Celestial Master" (*Tianshi dao* 天師道), the first organized religious Daoist establishment.

In the mature Daoist tradition, Laozi is seen as the personification of the Dao. He is thought to have undergone a series of "transformations" (*bianhua*

變化 ; some texts speak of the eighty-one transformations of "Lord Lao"); that means, throughout history he appeared in different guises to selected individuals to initiate them into the mysteries of the Dao, to secure cosmic harmony and sociopolitical order. Lao Dan here is but one manifestation of the divine Laozi. Also, to the religious Daoist imagination, it is not true that no one knew where he went after he left Zhou China. He journeyed to India to "transform the barbarians" (*huahu* 化胡), Daoist sources claim, to convert them to the truth of the Dao (Kohn 1991). During the Tang dynasty, the imperial Li family traced its ancestry to Laozi. In 666 B.C.E., Emperor Gaozong officially bestowed the title Taishang xuanyuan huangdi 太上玄元皇帝 (Most High August Sovereign of Profound Primordiality) on him (Barrett 1996, 32). In this context, the writing of the *Daode jing* was no ordinary event, but marked the arrival of a profound scripture that promised not only wisdom but to those who submit to its power, immortality and salvation.

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE OF COMPOSITION. With both imperial and popular support, the story of Laozi contributes significantly to the *Daode jing* and its tradition. As scripture, moreover, the text commands a particular kind of response from its readers and shapes religious practices. The full story thus warrants careful attention, although it does not help resolve the question of the actual authorship and date of composition of the *Daode jing*, of which only a structural navigation map can be provided here.

The **date** of composition refers to the time when the *Laozi* reached more or less its final form; it does not rule out later interpolation or corruption that crept into the text over its long course of transmission. An interesting development in contemporary sinological scholarship is that traditional accounts are increasingly coming back into favor. This stems in some cases from recent archaeological discoveries; but more generally the trend may be seen as a reaction against the radical distrust of tradition that characterizes much of 20th-century sinological research. In the present case, there have been calls to redress the common verdict that the *Laozi* was a "forgery" of the late Warring States period. Liu Xiaogan, for example, has argued that we should on the whole accept Sima Qian's account; that is to say, the *Laozi* was written by Lao Dan towards the end of the Spring and Autumn period, in the sixth or early fifth century B.C.E. (1997, 65). Admittedly, this represents a minority view at present. However, there are reasons why the claim of an early date—although not necessarily Lao Dan's authorship—may enjoy a sunnier scholarly fortune in future.

A second and more popular view traces the *Laozi* to the early fourth century, before the time of Zhuangzi (see Baxter 1998), while a third would argue for an even later date, not earlier than the third century B.C.E. These are general markers. The situation is far more complex, for the composition

of the *Daode jing* does not necessarily follow the idea that one author (A1) wrote the book at one time (T1).

One variation is that the *Laozi* can be seen to have preserved the ideas of Lao Dan. W. T. Chan, for example, believes that the text "embodies" the teachings of Laozi, although it was not written until the fourth century (1963, 74). According to Graham, the *Laozi* was ascribed to Lao Dan around 250 B.C.E. by the text's author or "publisher," capitalizing on Lao Dan's reputation (1986; 1989). This may appear a variation of the basic "A1/T1" model, but it leaves open the possibility that the book existed before the middle of the third century. It also raises the question whether the *Daode jing* was the work of a single author. Conceivably, the publisher or final redactor could have brought together diverse sources. Chad Hansen, for example, describes the "dominant current textual theory" as one which "treats the text as an edited accumulation of fragments and bits drawn from a wide variety of sources ... there was no single author, no Laozi" (1992, 201). If the *Laozi* were a composite work—an "anthology," as D.C. Lau (1963) puts it—then the further question would be whether there was more than one editor, compiler, or redactor who put the material together.

The idea of an **oral tradition** that preceded the writing of the *Daode jing* has gained wide acceptance in recent years; yet it is not always clear what that entails. On the one hand, it could lend support to W. T. Chan's view cited above, that Lao Dan's disciples kept alive the teachings of the master orally before some later student(s) committed them to writing. On the other hand, it could also mean that the redactor(s) or compiler(s) had access to disparate sayings originated from and circulated in different contexts. As Ellen Chen has it, although the book may not have been written until the fourth century, the "predominant theme ... reaches back to the primordial consciousness of the Chinese" (1989, 21).

The various permutations are too numerous to mention. Mair (1990) and LaFargue (1992) give a strong account of the "oral tradition" thesis. LaFargue, in particular, is careful to point out that oral tradition need not refer to the sayings of one person; it functions rather as a reservoir of "aphorisms," which were circulated among like-minded "Laoist" scholars and formed the basis of the *Daode jing* (1992, 197; see also Kimura 1959; Hurvitz 1961). This does not prejudge whether the final product contains sayings that were put together at random, or reflects a careful distillation on the part of the redactor(s) who arranged and/or altered the material at their disposal. LaFargue appears to favor the latter view; other scholars (e.g., Lau and Mair), however, see little sign of tight editorial control.

Both external and internal clues have been employed in determining the date of the *Daode jing*. Quotations from the *Laozi* in other classical works are often cited as evidence. For example, if the *Mozi* 墨子 quotes from the *Laozi*, and if the *Mozi* can be dated to the fifth century B.C.E., then the

Laozi would have been current by that time. There is in fact one such quotation preserved in the *Taiping yulan* (322.5b), although this is not found in the present *Mozi*. Unless new archaeological evidence comes to light, the available external evidence can only confirm that the *Laozi* was widely recognized by the middle of the third century, when it was quoted extensively in such works as the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (Writings of Master Han Fei), *Lüshi chunqiu*, and the "outer" and "miscellaneous" chapters of the *Zhuangzi*.

The language of the *Daode jing* also proves fertile ground for debate. Much of the text is rhymed. Focusing on rhyme patterns, Liu Xiaogan concludes that the poetic structure of the *Laozi* is much closer to that of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs) than that of the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu; see Liu 1994; 1997). For this reason, the traditional view should be upheld. Examining the wider linguistic evidence, while disagreeing with Liu on some points, William Baxter also believes that the *Laozi* should be dated earlier than the *Zhuangzi* and *Chuci*, "to the mid or early fourth century" (1998, 249). Both Liu and Baxter provide a concise analysis of the different theories of the date of the *Daode jing*.

In view of the above, beginning students may find it intimidating to venture into the maze of Laozi studies, but one can expect some help from recent archaeological discoveries. The difference between 500 B.C.E. and 250 B.C.E. may seem insignificant and it may appear immaterial to interpretation whether the text is the work of one author or reflects multiple interests. This need not be disputed, if the goal is only to catch a glimpse of the Dao or be illuminated by its power as it transcends historical or cultural specificity. Traditional commentaries have operated largely on this premise; and a number of modern interpretations insist on the "timeless" nature of the *Daode jing*. The question of date and authorship is important, however, if context has any role to play in the production of meaning. Different methodological assumptions underlie these approaches, which should be distinguished and made to work together in understanding the *Daode jing*.

The Text

The discovery of the two *Laozi* silk **manuscripts** at Mawangdui 馬王堆, near Changsha, Hunan province, in 1973 has spurred a fresh wave of interest in the Daoist classic. Before this, access to the *Daode jing* was mainly through the received text of Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249 C.E.) and Heshang gong 河上公, a legendary figure depicted as a teacher to the Han Emperor Wen (r. 179-157 B.C.E.). There are other manuscript fragments and versions preserved in commentaries, but by and large they play a secondary role in the history of the *Daode jing*. A recent archaeological find in Guodian

郭店, the so-called "Bamboo *Laozi*," promises to bring further excitement to *Laozi* studies. But first a note on the title and structure of the *Daode jing*.

The *Laozi* did not acquire its canonical status until the Han dynasty. According to the *Shiji* (49.5b), the Empress Dowager Dou—wife of Emperor Wen and mother of Emperor Jing (r. 156-141)—was a dedicated student of the text. Later sources relate further that it was Emperor Jing who established the text officially as a "classic" (*jing* 經). Nevertheless, the title *Daode jing* appears not to have been widely recognized until later, towards the close of the Han period. Wang Bi's commentary in the third century, indeed, is still called simply the *Laozi zhu* 老子注.

The *Laozi* is also referred to as the "five-thousand character" text, on account of its approximate length. Most versions exceed five thousand characters by about five to ten percent, but it is interesting to note that numerological considerations later forged their way into the history of the *Daode jing*. According to the seventh-century Daoist master Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, Ge Xuan 葛玄 (fl. 200 C.E.) shortened the text that accompanied the Heshang gong commentary to fit the magical number of five thousand. The claim cannot be verified, but a number of *Laozi* manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang contain 4,999 characters.

The current *Daode jing* is divided into **two parts** and 81 chapters. Part one, comprising chapters 1-37, has come to be known as the *Daojing*, while chapters 38-81 form the *Dejing*. The division into two parts was established since the early Han dynasty, if not earlier. It is understood to be a thematic division—chapter 1 begins with the word Dao, while chapter 38 begins with the expression "superior virtue"—although the concepts of Dao and virtue (*de* 德) feature in both parts. Still, one can say that the *Daojing* is sometimes more "metaphysical," while the *Dejing* focuses more on sociopolitical issues.

In this context, it is easy to appreciate the tremendous interest occasioned by the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts. Identified simply as "A" (*jia* 甲) and "B" (*yi* 乙), the two manuscripts are similarly divided into two parts, but in contrast with the current version, in reverse order; i.e., both manuscripts begin with the *Dejing*, corresponding to chapter 38 of the received text. "Part one" of the "B" manuscript ends with the editorial notation, "Virtue, 3,041 [characters]," while the last line of "Part two" reads: "Dao, 2,426." Does this mean that the classic should be renamed? One scholar, in fact, has adopted the title *Dedao jing* in a recent translation (Henricks 1989)—with important implications for interpretation.

The division into **81 chapters** is associated particularly with the Heshang gong version, which also has chapter titles, and reflects numerological interest. It was not universally accepted until much later, perhaps the Tang period, when the text was standardized under the patronage of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-755). Traditional sources report that some versions were divided into 64, 68 or 72 chapters; some did not have chapter division

at all (see Henricks 1982). The precise course of textual transmission can no longer be reconstructed. I suspect that there were a number of manuscript traditions circulating from an early time. The two Mawangdui manuscripts were found in a tomb sealed in 168 B.C.E. The texts themselves can be dated earlier, the "A" manuscript being the older of the two, copied in all likelihood before 195 B.C.E. (Lau 1982; see also Boltz 1984).

Until recently, the Mawangdui manuscripts have held the pride of place as the oldest extant manuscripts of the *Daode jing*. In late 1993, the excavation of a tomb (identified as M1) in **Guodian**, Jingmen city, Hubei province, has yielded 804 inscribed bamboo strips, containing over 13,000 characters. Some of these, amounting to about 2,000 characters, match the *Laozi* (see *Wenwu* 1997.7, 35-48). The tomb is located near the old capital of the state of Chu and is dated to around 300 B.C.E. Unfortunately it suffered considerable damage as a result of two robberies in 1993, so that some bamboo strips may have been stolen. A transcribed version was recently published under the title *Guodian chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), which divides the text into three groups.

Group A contains thirty-nine bamboo slips, which correspond in whole or in part to the following chapters of the present text: 19, 66, 46, 30, 15, 64, 37, 63, 2, 32, 25, 5, 16, 64, 56, 57, 55, 44, 40 and 9. Groups B and C are smaller, with eighteen (chs. 59, 48, 20, 13, 41, 52, 45, 54) and fourteen slips (chs. 17, 18, 35, 31, 64), respectively. The arrangement of the text differs significantly from the received version, and there are numerous variant and/or archaic characters. Details concerning both the structure and content of the Guodian *Laozi* and how it compares with the Mawangdui manuscripts and the received text still await careful study, but preliminary results generally support the authenticity of the find. This makes the Guodian text the oldest extant *Laozi* fragment and speaks strongly for an early date of the classic.

The new discovery will give fresh impetus to *Laozi* research but it is unlikely that it will bring forth a definitive rendition of the "original" text. When the Mawangdui manuscripts were found, there were great expectations as well, but conflicts of interpretation continue to plague or, to the more sanguine, enrich the field. For example, the opening word of chapter 10 of the current *Laozi* has long puzzled scholars. The character *zai* 載 seems out of place, and since the Tang dynasty has sometimes been emended or moved to the end of the previous chapter. The Mawangdui B manuscript gives the variant *dai* 戴, which has led D.C. Lau to conclude that *dai*, to "carry," should be the correct wording. Henricks, however, believes that the Mawangdui evidence supports the view that the character serves as an exclamation particle ending the previous sentence.

The fact that the Mawangdui manuscripts differ from the current text points to the existence of different lines of transmission. The two Mawangdui manuscripts quite clearly belong to the same textual family (see Xu 1985 for a dissenting opinion). But it is an altogether different claim that because they are older than the other extant versions, they are therefore "truer" to the "original" *Laozi*.

TEXTUAL RECENSION involves an interpretive process. The Mawangdui manuscripts make use of a far larger number of grammatical particles when compared with the received text of Wang Bi and Heshang gong. They do clarify the meaning in many instances. But the question is precisely whether they do not reflect an interpretive stance. For example, the phrase *guchang wuyu yiguan qimiao* 故常無欲以觀其妙 in the current Wang Bi text (ch. 1) is clearly marked by grammatical particles in both Mawangdui versions so as to leave no mistake that *wuyu* 無欲 is to be read together, meaning "not having desires." This seems to rule out the alternative reading, found in both traditional and modern studies, that the line should break after the character *wu*, yielding a different interpretation centering on the concept of "nonbeing."

Does this mean that the "original" *Laozi* had *wuyu*, or that the line was read in a particular way in the Mawangdui manuscripts? There is no question that the Mawangdui evidence is extremely valuable, but prudence dictates that we do not inflate it. In the same way, the reversal of the order or placement of the *Daojing* and *Dejing* may reflect an interpretive context, in which the *Laozi* is seen to have a special contribution to make towards governance. The same arrangement is reflected in the *Hanfeizi* and in the Yan Zun version.

As mentioned, the current *Laozi*, on which most reprints, studies and translations are based, is the version that comes down to us along with the commentaries by Wang Bi and Heshang gong. Three points need to be made in this regard. First, technically there are multiple versions of the Wang Bi and Heshang gong *Laozi*—there are over thirty Heshang gong versions at present—but the differences are on the whole minor. Second, the Wang Bi and Heshang gong versions are not the same, but are sufficiently similar to be classified as belonging to the same line of textual transmission. Third, the Wang Bi and Heshang gong versions that we see today have suffered change. In particular, the *Laozi* text that now accompanies Wang Bi's commentary bears the imprint of later editorial alteration, mainly under the influence of the Heshang gong version, and cannot be regarded as the *Laozi* that Wang Bi himself had seen and commented on. Boltz (1985) and Wagner (1989) have examined this question in some detail.

The "current" version refers to the *Sibu beiyao* and the *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 editions of the *Daode jing*. The former contains the Wang Bi version and commentary, together with a colophon by the Song scholar

Chao Yuezhi 晁說之 (1059-1129), a second note by Xiong Ke 熊克 (c. 1111-1184) and Lu Deming's 陸德明 (556-627) *Laozi yinyi* 老子音義 (Glosses on the Meaning and Pronunciation of the *Laozi*). It is a reproduction of the Qing dynasty "Wuying Palace" edition, which in turn is based on a Ming edition. The most detailed textual study of Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary is Hatano 1979.

The Heshang gong version preserved in the *Sibu congkan* series is taken from the library of the famous bibliophile Qu Yong 瞿鏞 (fl. 1850). According to Qu's own catalogue, this is a Song version, probably published after the reign of the emperor Xiaozong (r. 1163-1189). Older extant versions include two incomplete Tang versions and fragments found in Dunhuang. Interestingly, the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321-379) is reported to have made a copy of the Heshang gong *Laozi* for a certain village Daoist in exchange for a herd of geese, to which Wang as a gourmet was apparently partial. A work that claims to be Wang's copy of the *Daode jing* exists, although most scholars hesitate to accept it as genuine.

Besides the Mawangdui texts and the received text of Wang Bi and Heshang gong, there is an "ancient version" (*guben* 古本) edited by the early Tang scholar Fu Yi 傅奕 (fl. 600). Reportedly, this version was recovered from a tomb in 574 C.E., whose occupant was a consort of the Chu general Xiang Yu 項羽 (d. 202 B.C.E.), the rival of Liu Bang 劉邦 before the founding of the Han dynasty. A later redaction of the "ancient version" was made by Fan Yingyuan 范應元 in the Song dynasty. There are some differences, but these two can be regarded as having stemmed from the same textual tradition. According to Wagner (1989), judging from Wang Bi's commentary, the *Laozi* text that Wang had worked on was similar to the "ancient version."

Manuscript fragments discovered in the **Dunhuang** caves form another important source in *Laozi* studies. Among them are several Heshang gong fragments (S. 477, S. 3926, P. 2639) and the important *Xiang'er Laozi* 想爾老子 with commentary. Another Dunhuang manuscript that merits mention is the Suo Dan fragment, now at the University Art Museum, Princeton University, which contains the last thirty-one chapters of the *Daode jing* beginning with chapter 51 of the modern text. It is signed and dated at the end, bearing the name of the third-century scholar and diviner Suo Dan 索紞, who is said to have made the copy, written in ink on paper, in 270 C.E. According to Rao Zongyi (1955), the Suo Dan version belongs to the Heshang gong line of the *Laozi* text. A more recent study by Boltz (1996) questions its third-century date and argues that the fragment in many instances also agrees with the Fu Yi "ancient version."

While manuscript versions inform textual criticism of the *Laozi*, stone inscriptions provide further ammunition. Over twenty steles, mainly of Tang and Song origins, are available to textual critics, although some are in poor

condition (Yan 1957). Students of the *Laozi* now have the luxury of working with several important Chinese and Japanese studies which make use of a large number of manuscript versions and stone inscriptions (Ma 1965; Jiang 1980; Zhu 1980; Shima 1973; see also Boltz 1993).

In general, the various different versions of the *Laozi* do not yield differences so radical as to lift the interpretive veil that continues to resist and attract critical advances. For this reason, and for their intrinsic value, the study of the *Daode jing* and its tradition cannot afford to ignore the many commentaries that seek to lay bare the meaning of the classic. A considerable number has been preserved in the Daoist canon. In an effort that can only be described as Herculean, Yan Lingfeng has published two massive collections of the available commentaries on the *Daode jing* (1965a, 1965b).

COMMENTARIES. Two chapters in the *Hanfeizi* (chs. 21-22) are entitled *Jie Lao* 解老 (Explaining the *Laozi*) and *Yu Lao* 喻老 (Illustrating the *Laozi*). These can be regarded as the earliest commentaries to the classic. The "bibliographical" section of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han) lists four commentaries to the *Laozi*, which have not survived. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that *Laozi* learning flourished during the Han period, only to grow in the succeeding dynasties (see Robinet 1977; 1998).

Traditionally, the **Heshang Gong commentary** is regarded a product of the early Han dynasty. The name Heshang gong means an old man who dwells by the side of the river; some have identified the river in question to be the Yellow River. An expert on the *Laozi*, he caught the attention of Emperor Wen, who went personally to consult him. Heshang gong revealed to the emperor his true identity as a divine emissary sent by the "Highest Lord of the Dao"—i.e., the divine Laozi—specifically to teach him. The emperor proves a humble student, as the legend concludes, worthy of receiving the *Daode jing* with Heshang gong's commentary (Chan 1991a).

Recent Chinese studies generally place the commentary towards the end of the Han period, although some Japanese scholars would date it as late as the sixth century C.E. I see no compelling reason not to accept it as a second-century work (Chan 1991b). Called in early sources the *Laozi zhangju* 老子章句, it belongs to the genre of *zhangju* literature, prevalent in Han times, which one may paraphrase as commentary "by chapter and verse." Its language is simple; its imagination, down-to-earth. The Heshang gong commentary shares with other Han works the cosmological belief that the universe is constituted by vital *qi*-energy 氣. On this basis, interpreting the text in terms of yin-yang theory, the *Laozi* is seen to disclose not only the mystery of the origin of the universe, but more importantly the secret to personal well being and sociopolitical order.

What the *Laozi* calls the "One," according to Heshang gong, refers to the purest and most potent form of *qi*-energy that brings forth and continues to nourish all beings. This is the meaning of *de*, the "virtue" or power with

which the "ten thousand things" have been endowed and without which life would cease. The maintenance of "virtue," which the commentary also described as "guarding the One" (*shouyi* 守一), is thus crucial to self-cultivation. A careful diet, exercise and some form of meditation are implied, but generally the commentary focuses on the diminishing of selfish desires. The government of the "sage"—a term common to all schools of Chinese thought, but which is given a distinctive Daoist meaning in the commentary—rests on the same premise. Aggressive policies such as heavy taxation and severe punishment are to be avoided, but the most fundamental point remains that the ruler himself must cherish what the *Laozi* calls "emptiness" and "nonaction." Disorder stems from the dominance of desire, which reflects the unruly presence of confused and agitated *qi*-energy. In this way, self-cultivation and government are shown to form an integral whole. I have argued elsewhere that the Heshang gong commentary reflects the influence of the "Huang-Lao" school, which flourished during the early Han dynasty (Chan 1991b, 1998a).

A second major commentary is the *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸 (The Essential Meaning of the *Laozi*) attributed to the Han dynasty scholar **Yan Zun** 嚴遵 (fl. 83 B.C.E.-10 C.E.). Styled Junping 君平, Yan's surname was originally Zhuang 莊; it was changed in later written records to the semantically similar Yan to comply with the legal restriction not to use the name Zhuang, which was the personal name of Emperor Ming (r. 57-75) of the Later Han dynasty. Yan Zun is well remembered in traditional sources as a recluse of great learning and integrity, a diviner of legendary ability and an author of exceptional talent. The famous Han poet and philosopher Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.E.-18 C.E.) studied under Yan and spoke glowingly of him. In later religious sources, Yan is remembered as an "immortal." During the Song dynasty, he was officially endowed with the title "Perfected of Wonder and Penetration" (Miaotong zhenren 妙通真人).

The *Laozi zhigui*, as it now stands, is incomplete; only the commentary to the *Dejing*, chapters 38-81 of the current *Laozi*, remains. The best edition of the *Laozi zhigui* is that contained in the Daoist canon (CT 693), which clearly indicates that the work had originally thirteen *juan*, the first six of which have been lost. Judging from the available evidence, it can be accepted as a Han product (Chan 1998b). The *Laozi* text that accompanies Yan Zun's commentary agrees in many instances with the wording of the Mawangdui manuscripts.

In some places, the *Laozi zhigui* exhibits a strong philosophical interest. In particular, the Dao is said to be the "emptiness of emptiness" and the "nonbeing of nonbeing" (8.1b; 11.4b). This seems to suggest that the Dao in itself transcends even the duality of having and not having any determination. In this respect, as we shall see, the *Laozi zhigui* may have a role to play in shaping later interpretations. Viewed as a whole, however, Yan Zun's

commentary is clearly concerned with the more practical issues of self-cultivation and government.

Like Heshang gong, Yan Zun also subscribes to the yin-yang cosmological theory characteristic of Han thought. Unlike Heshang gong's commentary, however, the *Laozi zhigui* does not prescribe a positive program of nourishing one's *qi*-energy or actively cultivating "long life." This does not mean that it rejects the ideal of longevity. On the contrary, it recognizes that the Dao "lives forever and does not die" (8.9b), and that the man of Dao, correspondingly, "enjoys long life" (7.2a). There is little question that valuing one's spirit and vital energy is important, but the *Laozi zhigui* is concerned that self-cultivation must not violate the principle of nonaction. Any effort contrary to what the *Laozi* has termed "naturalness" (*ziran* 自然) is counter-productive and doomed to failure.

The concept of *ziran* occupies a pivotal position in Yan Zun's commentary. It describes the nature of the Dao and its manifestation in the world. It also points to an ethical ideal. The way in which natural phenomena operate reflects the workings of the Dao. The "sage" follows the Dao in that he, too, abides by naturalness. In practice this means attending to one's heart-mind so that it will not be enslaved by desire. Simplicity is singled out as a key expression of *ziran*. Significantly, the *Laozi zhigui* suggests that just as the sage "responds" to the Dao in being simple and empty of desire, the common people would in turn respond to the sage and entrust the empire to him.

The concept of "response" (*ying* 應), a common Han idea which articulates the perceived reciprocal relationship between the "way of heaven" and human affairs, figures prominently in Yan Zun's commentary. The important point is that the essentially cosmological insight is applied directly to the art of rulership. The *Laozi zhigui* does not question the hierarchical structure of society; Daoist naturalness has little to do with social or political anarchy. What the commentary is concerned to show is that the *Laozi* offers a comprehensive guide to order and harmony at all levels. My view is that Yan Zun's commentary, like Heshang gong's, reflects the influence of the Huang-Lao school. Yan Zun flourished during the reign of Emperor Cheng (r. 33-7 B.C.E.), who undertook to reform the Han imperial cultic practices. At one point, the emperor admonished the officials for having neglected the doctrine of yin-yang. The *Laozi zhigui* seems to fit this context. The Heshang gong commentary, though equally concerned with realizing the rule of the Dao in both self-cultivation and government, perhaps stems from a slightly later period when religious ideas and practices associated with nourishing one's vital energy became more fully integrated into the Daoist vision.

An early commentary which maximizes the religious import of the *Laozi* is the ***Xiang'er zhu***. Although it is mentioned in catalogues of Daoist works, there was no real knowledge of it until a copy was discovered among

the Dunhuang manuscripts (S. 6825). The manuscript copy, now housed in the British Library, was probably made around 500 C.E. The original text, disagreement notwithstanding, is generally traced to around 200 C.E. It is closely linked to the Celestial Masters and has been ascribed to Zhang Daoling 張道陵 or his grandson Zhang Lu 張魯 (see Bokenkamp 1993; 1997).

The *Xiang'er* manuscript is unfortunately incomplete; only the first part has survived, beginning with the middle of chapter 3 and ending with chapter 37. It is not clear what the title, *Xiang'er*, means. Following Rao Zongyi and Ôfuchi Ninji, Stephen Bokenkamp suggests that it is best understood in the literal sense that the Dao "thinks (*xiang* 想) of you (*er* 爾)" (1997, 61). This underscores the central thesis of the commentary, that devotion to the Dao in terms of self-cultivation and compliance with its precepts would assure boundless blessing in this life and beyond.

The *Xiang'er* commentary accepts without question the divine status of Laozi, which distinguishes it from the commentaries discussed earlier. In addition, it seems to have been influenced by the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace), one of the earliest scriptures in the Daoist religion, and one particularly concerned with the establishment of universal, political harmony. But just as the Heshang gong commentary reflects a keener religious sense when compared with Yan Zun's, there is an even more pronounced religious focus in the *Xiang'er*. The man of Dao "wishes only long life" (Rao 1991, 36); attaining the "life-span of an undefiled, godlike being" (*xianshou* 仙壽), as the commentary repeatedly emphasizes, forms the highest goal. While Yan Zun and Heshang gong direct their insight primarily to those in a position to effect political change, the *Xiang'er* invites a larger audience to participate in the quest for the Dao, to achieve union with the Dao through spiritual and moral discipline.

In terms of self-cultivation, the *Xiang'er* is keen to dispel false practices. Nourishing one's vital *qi*-energy remains the key to liberation, to attaining "long life" and ultimately forming a spiritual body devoid of the blemishes of mundane existence. The commentary alludes to proper meditation and sexual arts in this regard, which are crucial to purifying and preserving one's vital energy. It criticizes those who believe that "immortality" is an inborn gift and not the result of constant effort.

Spiritual discipline, however, is not sufficient; equally important is the accumulation of moral merit. Later Daoist sources refer to the "nine practices" or "nine precepts" of the *Xiang'er*. There is also a longer set known as the "twenty-seven precepts" of the *Xiang'er*. These include general positive steps such as being tranquil and yielding, as well as specific injunctions against any action that may injure one's vital energy—envy, killing, and other evil acts. Likening the human body to the walls of a pond, the essential *qi*-energy to the water in it, and good deeds the source of the water, the

Xiang'er commentary makes clear that deficiency in any one would lead to disastrous consequences (see Bokenkamp 1993).

Compared with the *Xiang'er*, **Wang Bi's commentary**, the *Laozi zhu*, could not be more different. There is no reference to "immortals"; there is no deified Laozi or any other understanding of the Dao as a divine being. The *Daode jing*, as Wang Bi sees it, is fundamentally not concerned with the art of "long life" but offers profound insights into the radical otherness of the Dao as the source of being, and the practical implications that follow from it. Styled Fusi 輔嗣, Wang Bi was one of the acknowledged leaders of the movement of *Xuanxue* 玄學 (Profound Learning), a revival of Daoist philosophy which came into prominence during the Wei period (220-265) and dominated the Chinese intellectual scene well into the sixth century. The word *xuan*, which also means "dark" or "mysterious" when used as an adjective, derives from the *Laozi*; as such, Profound Learning should also be reckoned a part of the tradition of the *Daode jing*.

The movement, often identified as "Neo-Daoism" in earlier Western sources, signifies a broad philosophical front united in its attempt to discern the "true" meaning of the Dao, but is not a homogeneous, sectarian school. Alarmed by what they saw as the decline of the Dao, influential intellectuals of the day initiated a radical reinterpretation of the classical heritage. They did not neglect the Confucian classics, but drew inspiration from the *Yijing*, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, which were then referred to as the "three profound treatises" (*sanxuan* 三玄).

According to Wang Bi, the Dao is the "beginning" of the "ten thousand things." Unlike Heshang gong or the *Xiang'er*, however, he did not pursue a cosmological or religious interpretation of the process of creation. Rather, Wang seems more concerned with what may be called the logic of creation. The Dao constitutes the absolute "beginning" in that all beings have causes and conditions that derive logically from a necessary foundation. The ground of being, however, cannot be itself a being; otherwise, infinite regress would render the logic of the *Laozi* suspect. For this reason, the *Laozi* would only speak of the Dao as "nonbeing" (*wu* 無).

The transcendence of the Dao must not be compromised. To do justice to the *Laozi*, it is also important to show how the functions of the Dao translate into basic "principles" (*li* 理) governing the universe. The regularity of the seasons, the plenitude of nature, and other expressions of "heaven and earth" all attest to the presence of the Dao. Human beings also conform to these principles, and so are "modeled" ultimately after Dao.

Wang Bi is often praised in later sources for having given the concept of "principle" its first extended philosophical treatment. In the realm of the Dao, principles are characterized by "naturalness" and "nonaction" (*wuwei* 無為). Wang Bi defines *ziran* as "an expression of the ultimate." In this regard, attention has been drawn to Yan Zun's influence. Nonaction helps

explain the practical meaning of naturalness. In ethical terms, Wang Bi takes nonaction to mean freedom from the dictates of desire. This defines not only the goal of self-cultivation but also that of government. The philosophical acumen and literary elegance of Wang Bi's commentary has won much acclaim in the modern period, although it did not always enjoy the same respect in traditional China. In English, there are three translations available (Lin 1977; Rump 1979; Lynn 1999).

Among these four commentaries, Heshang gong's *Laozi zhangju* occupied the position of preeminence in traditional China, at least until the Song. For a long period, Wang Bi's work was relatively neglected, which explains the many textual difficulties confronting its students today. The authority of the Heshang gong commentary can be traced to its place in the Daoist religion, where it ranks second only to the *Daode jing* itself. Besides Heshang gong's work and the *Xiang'er*, there are two other commentaries entitled the *Laozi jiejie* 老子節解(Sectional Explanation) and the *Laozi neijie* 老子內解 (Inner Explanation) closely associated with religious Daoism. Both have been ascribed to Yin Xi, the keeper of the pass who "persuaded" Laozi to write the *Daode jing* and who, according to Daoist hagiographic records, later studied under the divine Laozi and became an "immortal." These texts, however, only survive in citations (see Kusuyama 1979).

From the Tang period, one begins to find serious attempts to collect and classify the growing number of *Laozi* commentaries. An early pioneer is the eighth-century Daoist master Zhang Junxiang 張君相, who cited some thirty commentaries in his study of the *Daode jing* (Wang 1981). Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933) provided an even larger collection, involving some 60 commentaries (*Guangsheng yi* 廣聖義 , CT 725). According to Du, there were those who saw the *Laozi* as a political text, while others focused on spiritual self-cultivation. There were Buddhist interpreters (e.g., Kumârajîva and Sengzhao 僧肇), and there were those who explained the Dao of **Chongxuan** 重玄 (Twofold Mystery)—an important development in the tradition of the *Daode jing*.

The term "Twofold Mystery" comes from chapter 1 of the *Laozi*, where the Dao is said to be "mysterious and again mysterious." As a school of Daoist learning, Twofold Mystery seizes this to be the key to understanding the *Daode jing*. Daoist sources relate that the school goes back to the fourth-century master Sun Deng 孫登 . Through Gu Huan 顧歡 (5th c.) and others, the school reached its height during the Tang period, represented by such thinkers as Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 and Li Rong 李榮 in the seventh century.

The school reflects the growing interaction between Daoist and Buddhist thought, in particular, the influence of Mâdhyamika philosophy. Unlike Wang Bi, it sees nonbeing as equally one-sided as being when applied to the transcendence of the Dao. Nonbeing may highlight the profundity or mys-

tery of the Dao, but it does not yet reach the highest truth, which according to Cheng Xuanying can be called "the Dao of Middle Oneness" (Kohn 1992, 144). Like other polar opposites, the distinction between being and nonbeing must also be "forgotten" before one can achieve union with the Dao. This last point is important, because it shows that "Twofold Mystery," like other approaches to the *Daode jing*, is ultimately concerned with the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Later proponents of the school were to develop this further, linking it to the practice of "internal alchemy" (*neidan* 內丹).

The **diversity of interpretation** is truly remarkable (see Robinet 1998). The *Daode jing* has also been viewed in other ways. For example, a Tang commentary by Wang Zhen 王真, the *Daode jing lunbing yaoyi shu* 論兵要義述 (CT 713), presented to Emperor Xianzong in 809, highlights the text as a treatise on military strategy (Rand 1979-80; see also Wang Ming 1984, Mukai 1994). The *Daode jing* has received considerable imperial attention, with no fewer than eight emperors having composed or at least commissioned a commentary on the work. These include Emperor Wu and Emperor Jianwen of the Liang, Xuanzong of the Tang, Huizong of the Song and Taizu of the Ming (see Liu C. 1969).

By the thirteenth century, students of the *Daode jing* were already blessed, as it were, with an embarrassment of riches, so much so that Du Daojian 杜道堅(1237-1318) could not but observe that the coming of the Dao to the world takes on different forms each time. That is to say, different commentators were shaped by the spirit of their age in their approach to the classic, so that it would be appropriate to speak of a "Han *Laozi*," "Tang *Laozi*," or "Song *Laozi*," each with its own different agenda (*Xuanjing yuanzhi fahui* 玄經原旨發揮, CT 703). While some would purposely ignore the tradition of commentaries so as not to be influenced by them in their own reading of the text, others find them an indispensable aid to understanding. This applies to both traditional commentaries and modern studies.

WORLDVIEW

Is the *Daode jing* a manual of self-cultivation and government? Is it a metaphysical treatise, or does it harbor deep mystical insights? There is no question that the *Laozi* is an extremely difficult text. The language is often cryptic, the sense or reference of the many symbols it employs remains unclear, and there seem to be conceptual inconsistencies. Is it more meaningful to speak of the "worldviews" of the *Daode jing*, instead of a unified vision? If the *Laozi* were an "anthology" put together at random by different compilers over a long period of time, coherence need not be an issue. Traditionally, however, this was never a serious option. Most modern studies are equally

concerned to disclose the "deeper" unity and meaning of the classic. While some seek to recover the "original" meaning of the *Laozi*, others celebrate its contemporary relevance. Consider, first of all, some of the main modern approaches to the *Daode jing* (see Hardy 1998).

According to some, the *Laozi* reflects a deep mythological consciousness at its core. The myth of "chaos," in particular, helps shape the Daoist understanding of the cosmos and the place of human beings in it (Girardot 1983). The myth of a great mother earth goddess may also have informed the worldview of the *Daode jing* (Erkes 1935; Chen 1969), which explains its emphasis on nature and the feminine (Chen 1989). For others, the *Daode jing* gives voice to a profound mysticism. According to Mair (1990), it is indebted to Indian mysticism (see also Waley 1958). According to Schwartz (1985), the mysticism of the *Daode jing* is *sui generis*, uniquely Chinese and has nothing to do with India. It is possible to combine the mystical and mythological approaches—although the presence of ancient religious beliefs can still be detected, they have been raised to a higher mystical plane in the *Daode jing* (Ching 1997).

Yet others see the *Daode jing* mainly as a work of **philosophy**, which gives a metaphysical account of reality, and does not neglect the importance of ethics, but cannot ultimately be seen as a work of mysticism (W. T. Chan 1963). Even if one admits that there is a mystical dimension to the *Laozi*, it is unlike the mystical writings of other traditions. For example, there is no indication that ecstatic vision plays a role in the ascent of the Daoist sage (Welch 1965, 60). According to another view, however, there is every indication that ecstasy forms a part of the world of the *Laozi*, although it is difficult to gauge the "degree" of its mystical leanings (Kaltenmark 1969, 65). In either case, the strong practical interest of the *Daode jing* distinguishes it from any mystical doctrine that eschews worldly involvement. It is "purposive" and not "contemplative" (Creel 1977).

To numerous people, moreover, the *Laozi* offers essentially a philosophy of life. Remnants of an older religious thinking may have found their way into the text, but they have been transformed into a naturalistic philosophy. The emphasis on naturalness and spontaneity translates into a way of life characterized by simplicity, calmness and freedom from the tyranny of desire (see Liu 1997). Unlike the claim that the *Laozi* espouses a mystical or esoteric teaching directed at a restricted audience, this view tends to highlight its universal appeal and contemporary relevance.

Many also agree that the *Daode jing* is above all concerned with realizing the reign of great peace. It is an ethical and political masterpiece intended for the ruling class, with concrete strategic suggestions aimed at remedying the moral and political turmoil engulfing late Zhou China. Self-cultivation is important, but the ultimate goal extends beyond personal fulfillment (Lau 1963; LaFargue 1992). The *Laozi* criticizes the Confucian school as not only

ineffectual in restoring order, but also as a culprit in worsening the ills of society at that time. The ideal seems to be a kind of "primitive" society, where people would dwell in harmony and contentment, not fettered by ambition or desire (Needham 1956).

This list of alternative views of the text is far from exhaustive, and different combinations are also possible. Hansen, for example, focuses on the "anti-language" philosophy of the *Laozi* (1992), and Graham has emphasized both the mystical and political elements, arguing that the *Laozi* was probably targeted at the ruler of a small state (1989, 234). The *Laozi* could be seen as encompassing all of the above; such categories as the metaphysical, ethical, political, mystical and religious form a unified whole in Daoist thinking and are deemed separate and distinct only in Western thought. Alternatively, coming back to the question of multiple authorship and coherence, it could be argued that the *Laozi* comprises different "layers" of material put together by different people at different times (see Emerson 1995).

Is it fair to say that the *Laozi* is inherently "polysemic" (Robinet 1998), open to diverse interpretations? Interpretation involves both reader and text. Hermeneutical reception is never rigid. It varies among readers; to the same reader, the text may also disclose different meanings under different circumstances. Indeed, it is often said, the power of the *Laozi* is precisely that it gives new insights every time a reader engages it.

This challenges the claim that the original, "intended" meaning of the *Laozi* can be reconstructed. The question is whether any **hermeneutic reconstruction** does not depend, in addition to the object of interpretation, on the interpreter's own worldview. I am inclined to recognize the hermeneutical openness of the *Daode jing*. This does not mean that context is not important to the production of meaning. It is also not the case that parameters do not exist, or that there are no checks against particular interpretations. On the contrary, there is every need to be historically informed and critically vigilant. Questions of date and authorship, textual variants, as well as the entire tradition of commentaries and modern scholarship are important. Nevertheless, any attempt to reconstruct the original context or meaning of the *Laozi* can hardly claim a privileged vantage untouched by individual or social influences. The task of reconstruction, in other words, must be given full attention, but it remains an open process, drawing every new generation of students into the world of the *Daode jing* and its tradition. There is little doubt that the debate will continue. The following presents some of the main concepts and symbols in the *Laozi*, in a way that highlights their ethical significance and suggests a degree of coherence.

DAO. The etymology of the word suggests a pathway, or heading in a certain direction along a path. There is no disagreement in translating the word *dao* 道 as "way." As a verb, perhaps on account of the directionality

involved, the word also conveys the sense of "speaking." Thus, the opening phrase of chapter 1, *dao ke dao* 道可道, is often rendered "The Dao that can be spoken of"; in most cases, the capitalized form—"Way" or "Dao"—is used, to distinguish it from other usages of the term. The concept of *dao* figures centrally also in Confucian writings, and most scholars agree that some parts of the *Laozi* represent a strong critique of the Confucian school (chs. 18, 19). In general, while the term *dao* signifies a means to a higher end in other schools of Chinese philosophy, the *Laozi* considers it an end in itself. The word *dao* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is defined as follows: "In Taoism, an absolute entity which is the source of the universe; the way in which this absolute entity functions." "In Confucianism and in extended uses," however, the term means "the way to be followed, the right conduct; doctrine or method."

The *Daodejing* (ch. 1) underscores both the ineffability and creative power of the Dao. Whereas the former suggests radical transcendence, the latter depicts the Dao as the origin of the "ten thousand things." The *Laozi* also specifies that the Dao nourishes all beings (ch. 51). The *Oxford* definition thus reflects the emphasis on the creative and sustaining power of the Dao. In this sense, the word *dao* is often translated as "the Way," with the definite article. Daoist creation involves a process of differentiation from unity to multiplicity (ch. 42). This has been read cosmologically, for instance, by the Heshang gong commentary, which sees the Dao as the original vital energy. Formless and indescribable, it can therefore only be called "nonbeing" or "no-thing" (ch. 40).

Read metaphysically, however, the Dao signifies a conceptually necessary ontological ground. As nonbeing, the Dao is not a something of which nothing can be said; otherwise, the problem of infinite regress cannot be overcome. As the source of being, the Dao cannot be itself a being, no matter how powerful or perfect. This seems to be Wang Bi's point. Historically, the cosmological reading enjoys near universal acceptance. Support for the metaphysical interpretation did not gain momentum until the rise of Neo-Confucianism, which integrates the two readings in its reformulation of the learning of the Dao.

DE. The character *de* 德 has also made it into the *Oxford Dictionary*: "In Taoism, the essence of Tao inherent in all beings"; "in Confucianism and in extended use, moral virtue." *De* has been translated variously as virtue, potency, integrity, or power (for an etymological study, see Nivison 1978-79; Hall and Ames 1987, 216). The Confucian usage is quite clear; virtue is a matter of moral character and presupposes self-cultivation. The *Laozi* seems to suggest a "higher" *de* against any moral achievement attained through hard effort (ch. 38). The different translations aim at bringing out the uniquely Daoist sense of the term.

Traditional commentaries beginning with the *Hanfeizi* often play on the homonymic relation between *de* and *de* 得, "to obtain." *De* is thus what one has "obtained" from the Dao, a "latent power" by "virtue" of which any being becomes what it is (Waley 1958, 32). Heshang gong and other commentaries are quick to relate this to one's *qi*-endowment. This is a "descriptive" definition, but there is also a "prescriptive" dimension to the concept of *de*. The empowerment enables a person to conform to the way in which the Dao operates, but "virtue" must be allowed to flourish. When realized, "virtue" signifies the full embodiment of the Dao. As such, the Dao does not only point to the "beginning," but through *de* also suggests the "end" of all things.

The marriage of Dao and *de* effectively bridges the gap between transcendence and immanence, and brings into view the ethical interest of the *Daode jing*. It is useful to recall the late Zhou context, where disorder marched on every front. The *Laozi*, one assumes, is not indifferent to the forces of disintegration tearing the country asunder. In other words, I am suggesting that a "nihilistic" reading of the classic should be ruled out, nor does escapism do justice to the text. The metaphysical or religious import of the Dao may remain a point of contention, but few would dispute that the *Laozi* is keenly concerned with arresting the decline of the country.

ZIRAN 自然. The *Laozi* makes use of the concept of *ziran*, literally what is "self so," to describe the workings of the Dao. As an abstract concept, it gives no specific information, except to say that the Dao does not "model" after anything but itself (ch. 25). This is the way Wang Bi understands it. However, since "heaven and earth" are born of the Dao and come to be in virtue of their *de*, the *Laozi* seems to be saying that the ways of heaven and earth reflect the Dao's function. Human beings are born of heaven and earth. At the practical level, *ziran*—translated "naturalness" or "spontaneity"—thus suggests a mode of being and way of action in accordance with the ways of "nature" (see Liu 1998). The question is, what does "nature" mean?

Modern commentators tend to equate "heaven and earth" with "nature." This is convenient, but one should bear in mind that "nature" in the "Laoist" sense need not exclude the spiritual and the social. The existence of gods and spirits was hardly questioned in ancient China. The *Laozi* makes clear that they, too, stem from the Dao (chs. 39, 60). Further, "nature" encompasses not only natural phenomena, but also sociopolitical institutions. The "king" clearly occupies a central place in the realm of the Dao (chs. 16, 25); the family should also be regarded a "natural" institution (chs. 18, 54). This means that as an ethical concept *ziran* extends beyond the personal to the political level. Commentators are generally in agreement on this point, leaving aside whether *ziran* does not also translate into a form of spiritual discipline.

WUWEI 無為. The concept of nonaction serves to explain *ziran* in practice. It does not mean total inaction. Later Daoists may see a close connection between *wuwei* and techniques of spiritual cultivation. The practice of "sitting in oblivion" (*zuowang* 坐忘) described in the *Zhuangzi* is often mentioned in this regard. In the *Laozi*, the concept seems to be used more generally as a contrast against any form of action characterized especially by self-serving desire (chs. 3, 37). Nonaction entails at the personal level simplicity and quietude. At the political level, the *Laozi* cites a number of "troublesome" policies that the ruler must avoid. These include war (ch. 30), stiff punishment (ch. 74) and heavy taxation (ch. 75). In this sense, it also opposes the Confucian program of benevolent intervention, which as the *Laozi* understands it, addresses the symptoms but not the root cause of the disease.

The concept of nonaction is exceedingly rich (see Liu 1991). It brings into play a cutting discernment that value distinctions are ideological, that human striving and competitive strife spring from the same source. Nonaction entails also a critique of language and conventional knowledge, which to the Daoist sage has become impregnated with ideological contaminants. The use of paradoxes—the man of Dao is depicted as "witless" or "dumb," while the common people can show off their intelligence and scheme cleverly (ch. 20)—especially heightens this point. But rather than stipulating what one ought to or ought not to do, the *Laozi* seems more concerned with transforming the way in which one does anything at all. Thus, while there is some concern that technology may bring a false sense of progress, the antidote does not lie in rejecting technology altogether but rather in a calmness of mind that would ensure freedom from desire (ch. 80). From this perspective one can understand some of the provocative statements in the *Laozi* telling the ruler, for example, to keep the people in a state of "ignorance" (ch. 65).

These remarks are not acceptable to all scholars. Some would say that they miss the religious import of the *Daode jing*, while others would question whether they are too eager to defend the philosophical coherence of the classic. Perhaps the *Laozi* in chapter 65 of the current text did mean to tell the ruler literally to keep the people ignorant or stupid, which as a piece of political advice is not that extraordinary. Certain terms such as the "valley spirit" (*gushen* 谷神; ch. 6) and the "soul" (*po* 魄; ch. 10) seem to have a religious reference, and these cannot be reconciled easily with an ethical reading of the *Laozi*. The remarks offered here take nonaction as pointing to a higher mode of knowledge, action, and being; once realized, the transformative power of nonaction would ensure wellbeing at both the personal and sociopolitical levels. The concept of "virtue," in other words, seems to depict a pristine state of affairs, in which naturalness and nonaction are the norm. The ethics of *wuwei* rests on this insight.

In this interpretive framework, a number of symbols which both delight and puzzle readers of the *Daode jing* can be highlighted. Suggestive of its creativity and nurturance, the Dao is likened to a mother (chs. 1, 25). This complements the paradigm of the feminine (chs. 6, 28), whose "virtue" yields fecundity and finds expression in yieldingness and non-contention. The infant (chs. 52, 55) serves as a fitting symbol on two counts. First, it brings out the relationship between Dao and world; second, the kind of innocence and wholesome spontaneity represented by the infant exemplifies the pristine fullness of *de* in the ideal Daoist world.

Natural symbols such as water (chs. 8, 78) further reinforce the sense of yielding and deep strength that characterizes nonaction. The low-lying and fertile valley (chs. 15, 28) accentuates both the creative fecundity of the Dao and the gentle nurturance of its power. Carefully crafted and ornately decorated objects are treasured by the world, and as such can be used as a powerful symbol for it. In contrast, the utterly simple, unaffected, and seemingly valueless *pu* 樸, a plain uncarved block of wood, brings into sharp relief the integrity of Daoist virtue and the person who embodies it (chs. 28, 32). Finally, one may mention the notion of reversal (chs. 40, 65), which suggests not only the need to "return" to the Dao, but also that the Daoist way of life would inevitably appear the very opposite of "normal" existence, and that it involves a complete revaluation of values.

Practice

Once the *Laozi* gained canonical status, it began to impact on Chinese culture with sustained force. Later sources credit Emperor Jing of Han for having decreed that all officials at court and the people at large should recite the *Daode jing* (Ma 1965, 7). This may be open to doubt, but without question the classic has secured its place in Chinese tradition since the Han dynasty. Under imperial patronage scholar-officials paid close attention to it, and during the Wei-Jin period after the Han, no one could claim to be a member of the intellectual elite who did not know the *Daode jing*. In 731 C.E., Xuanzong decreed that all officials should keep a copy of the *Daode jing* at home and placed the classic on the list of texts to be examined for the civil service examinations.

In this context, commentaries on the classic began to appear in great numbers. This helped bring the classic to a wider audience and shape the very course of Chinese intellectual history. In terms of setting policies, the political impact of the *Daode jing* was probably slight, but philosophic and religious interest was evidently strong and readily spilt over into the cultural arena. On the aesthetic front, the *Daode jing* and its tradition provided an alternative to the dominant Confucian theories. From the martial to the

medical arts, the *Daode jing* has also been cited as a source of influence. More generally, it is worth mentioning that the concept of *ziran* continues to inform conceptions of beauty and romantic love in Chinese thinking. These broad indications serve to remind us of the tremendous reach of the *Daode jing* and its tradition. As a religious scripture, the *Daode jing* plays a particularly important role in Daoist practice (see Kohn 1998b).

As scripture, the *Daode jing* commands constant devotion. One principal feature of early Daoist worship is the recitation of the *Daode jing*, or more formally the *Taishang xuanyuan Daode jing* 太上玄元道德经 (Scripture of the Dao and Virtue of the Highest Primordial Mystery), as the work was called in recognition of its scriptural status since the Tang period. This helps bring the devotee closer to the divine Dao. It also facilitates petition, especially the asking for forgiveness and blessing. In the hands of the religious expert, the efficacy of the scripture extends to healing and exorcism. The *Daode jing* has been set to music from an early time. In the mature Daoist tradition, recitation of the *Daode jing* involves proper training and figures centrally in ritual performance.

The scripture is also used as a moral guide. As mentioned, associated with the *Xiang'er* commentary are the "Nine Practices" and the "Twenty-seven Precepts." The "Nine Practices" refer directly to ethical precepts—nonaction, being yielding and not having desires—derived from the *Daode jing* (see Bokenkamp 1989). Ethical practice purifies and prepares the individual for higher spiritual pursuits. It is also closely related to the idea of accumulating merit, the benefit of which extends beyond the individual to the family, clan and country at large. As an instrument of the divine, the moral and religious application of the *Daode jing* thus proves decisive to individual well being, social harmony, a healthy environment, and harmony between the human and the sacred. Because of the sense of completeness that the number signifies, Daoist sources often recommend reciting the *Daode jing* ten thousand times.

Recitation of the scripture can be performed in conjunction with meditation as well. One form of Daoist meditation concentrates on inwardly directed "visualization" techniques, through which the presence of divine beings can be secured within one's body. A second aspires to an "ecstatic" vision in which the devotee merges with the divine Daoist reality. In both instances, the recitation of the *Daode jing* is much more than an aid to spiritual discipline; it is a necessary and even sufficient condition for the highest form of religious experience. For those who devote their lives to serving the Dao, training in the *Daode jing*, both doctrinally and in terms of ritual performance, can be an arduous process marked by different stages. Basic training involving recitation and other techniques must be completed, before the adept could be initiated into the higher mysteries of the *Daode*

jing. An ordination rite would mark the adept's progress, but the study and practice of the *Daode jing*, in the final analysis, remains a lifelong task.

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