and the *Tao-te-ching*

Edited by
Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue

Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching

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State University of New York Press

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Preface

The idea of this book arose when the two editors first met at a lecture organized by Boston University's Institute for Philosophy and Religion. Finding our differing perspectives and areas of expertise in regard to Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te-ching* highly complementary, we decided to put them to good use and create an integrated volume that focused equally on the text and the thinker and provided helpful guidance for teachers and students alike.

Inquiring among specialists in the field, we selected a number of relevant topics and asked scholars to contribute. Our foremost thanks at this time therefore go to our authors, who have been serious in their efforts and unstinting in their support, replying promptly to the many queries and agreeing cheerfully to necessary editorial changes. Whether writing completely new articles, rewriting existing work, allowing the translation of a previous piece, or permitting its republication, all contributors gave freely of their time and effort to make this volume possible.

We are also grateful to Harvard University Press for granting permission to reprint from Benjanmin Schwartz's *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, and to Henry Rosemont and Judy Graham for graciously allowing the renewed publication of A. C. Graham's "The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan."

In organizing the volume and writing the introduction, moreover, we were fortunate to have the help of friends and colleagues. First and foremost, Clifton Karhu agreed to create the delightful ink painting that graces the cover. Next, Yoshiko Kamitsuka provided information on recent manuscript finds, Liu Xiaogan and Gerd Waedow informed us about the Xi'an conference, Gary Arbuckle distributed new translations of related texts over the Internet, and Russell Kirkland sent us a list of *Tao-te-ching* translations—while at the same time numerous scholars, by speaking and writing about the *Tao-te-ching*, contributed to our account of current research and created a relevant environment for this volume.

We are further indebted to our home institutions, Boston University and University of Massachusetts, Boston, for providing a fruitful and stimulating atmosphere of research. Last, and certainly not least,

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we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to James Miller, who spent many hardworking hours in proofreading, editing, and xeroxing the manuscript.

A brief note on transcription. The method adopted here is the Wade-Giles system, with few exceptions, such as *yuan* and *hsuan*. Since in these cases diacritics are not necessary to avoid mispronunciation, we have opted for more simplicity. In addition, we have changed the simple *i* to *yi* because it is less confusing to English readers.

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Editors' Introduction

Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue

> Lao-tzu cultivated Tao and its virtue. He taught that one should efface oneself and be without fame in the world. He lived under the Chou dynasty. After a long time he realized that the dynasty was declining. He decided to leave. When he reached the western frontier, Yin Hsi, the guardian of the pass, said : "You want to withdraw forever. Please write down your thoughts for me." Thereupon Lao-tzu wrote a book in two sections dealing with the Tao and its virtue [the *Tao-te-ching*]. It had more than five thousand words. The he left, and nobody knows what became of him.
>
> —(*Shih-chi*, ch. 63)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Historical Unfolding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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