

Introduction

The third century B.C.E. Daoist classic known to many in the West as the *Tao-te ching* 道德經 (but here called the *Laozi* 老子)¹ is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the religious and philosophical traditions of East Asia. A remarkably terse text, consisting of a mere five thousand or so characters in the original Chinese, the *Laozi* has generated a vast literature of commentary and exegesis throughout East Asia and well beyond. It has exerted a profound, pervasive, and persistent influence on world thought, literature, and art and remains the most often translated Asian work in Western languages. And yet, despite its undisputed significance throughout East Asian cultures and the broad and sustained interest it has generated in the West, there have been few serious studies concerning the religious and philosophical thought of the text. Secondary articles focused on such issues appear rarely, scattered throughout various professional journals, and are not easily available to the nonspecialist. Almost none of these articles take into account recent archaeological discoveries and many do not reflect contemporary advances in our general understanding of early Chinese thought and culture. As a result, this important text remains on the periphery of scholarly conversations in which it might, and, in some cases, rightfully should take center stage. The present volume is offered as a first step toward rectifying this state of affairs.²

The Origins of the Text

For more than two thousand years those engaged in reading and explicating the *Laozi* have scrutinized the small amount of information regarding its composition in the hope that an understanding of the circumstances and context of its origin would resolve some of its ambiguities. Although recent discoveries (to be examined in the following section) have shed some light on its historical origins, the traditional understanding of the text has always been inextricably intertwined with stories surrounding Laozi or the “Old Master,” the putative author of the text.³ While the traditions surrounding the figure of Laozi seem largely to have been derived by inferring personal characteristics from the contents of the *Laozi*, the paucity of reliable evidence makes any definitive statement regarding his historicity impossible. Despite modern skepticism about the existence of a person named Laozi, the authorship of the text has consistently been an important topic for commentators, and specific constructions of the character Laozi have influenced many a reader’s understanding of the text.

Many of the traditions surrounding Laozi may be traced to the biography included in Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145–90 B.C.E.) archetypal historical work, the *Shiji* 史記. Sima’s account may be divided into several different segments. He begins with the standard data for a *Shiji* portrait: place of birth, names (with varying degrees of formality), and the office in which the subject served. Sima Qian identifies Laozi as a native of the state of Chu 楚, the prefecture of Ku 苦 (“Bitter”), the district of Li 厲 (“Cruel”), and the hamlet of Quren 曲仁 (“Bent benevolence”).⁴ His name was Li Er 李耳, and he styled himself Dan 聃. He was a historiographer in the Zhou 周 archives. The uniform connotations of the geographical names in the biography might suggest that their origin was somewhat fanciful, but by Sima Qian’s time these details appear to have been taken seriously. Following the presentation of the standard biographical information, Sima Qian relates the story of Laozi’s meeting with Confucius. This is only one of several different accounts of this encounter, and both Anna Seidel and A. C. Graham have suggested that it forms the original core of the Laozi tradition.⁵ In this version of their meeting, Confucius seeks Laozi’s advice on ritual protocol, an idea that may surprise those familiar with the *Laozi*. One reason this episode has been especially significant is that

it has been used as the basis for the traditional dating of Laozi to the age of Confucius, the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.E.). The next item in the biography describes Laozi's journey to an unnamed mountain pass and the subsequent writing of his book. This story has Laozi leaving a declining state of Zhou, writing a two-section work at the request of a keeper of the pass, and then disappearing into the west. This episode has proven significant as the origin of later traditions that have Laozi journeying to India to found Buddhism. Following these two narratives, Sima Qian examines the tentative identifications of Laozi with historical figures named Lao Laizi 老萊子 and Taishi Dan 太史儋. Finally, Sima traces Laozi's descendants to a living contemporary, and ends with an appeal for intellectual pluralism.

An extremely significant aspect of the *Shiji* account is that it is clearly a composite of different traditions, since Sima Qian uses phrases such as: "some say . . .," "in general . . .," "it is said . . .," and "no one of this generation knows whether or not this is true." Treatments of this chapter by later critics tend to overlook these caveats and attempt either to amend the text in order to make it internally consistent or to reject it on the basis of its inconsistencies. But appeals for strict consistency overlook the nature of Sima Qian's historical method. The form of the *Shiji* account of Laozi shows that Sima Qian's method of compilation was broadly inclusive. He was careful to qualify his use of sources and expressed doubts about the reliability of certain information. It is surprising that it took more than a millennium for the composite nature of this biography to be adequately appreciated. And it is more surprising that in this century there are sinologists in both China and the United States who are still struggling to find readings of the biography that render it internally consistent.⁶

Doubts about the *Shiji* biography and its implicit Spring and Autumn period dating of the *Laozi* first surfaced in the Song dynasty (960–1279), and were advanced more forcefully during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) by Wang Zhong 汪中 (1744–1794) and Cui Shu 崔述 (1740–1816). Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) used his considerable influence to promote the idea that the text of the *Laozi* actually dated to the late Warring States period (475–221 B.C.E.), and specifically to the third century B.C.E. With the benefit of the advances of the last century, it has become apparent that many of Liang's arguments are flawed. However, Liang made the crucial

observation that the *Laozi* is nowhere quoted by any important Spring and Autumn or early Warring States period thinkers, e.g., Confucius, Mozi 墨子, or Mencius. Liang's acceptance of the thesis that there were fundamental inconsistencies in the *Shiji* account also changed the course of research on Laozi. Once the figure of Laozi and the text of the *Laozi* were separated, research into their respective origins became more fruitful.

Other traditions accrued around Laozi after the *Shiji* biography, often closely tied to the dominant interpretation of the text during subsequent historical periods. During the Han, when the text was associated with techniques involving the suppression of desires in an effort to attain longevity, the practice of special concentration designed to lead to preternatural perception, and the cultivation of a state of spontaneity that surpassed the mundane rules provided by ritual texts, narratives emerged crediting Laozi with just such techniques.⁷ During this period, other texts and inscriptions, such as the *Wenzi* 文子, drew on the authority of the figure of Laozi. Anna Seidel's examination of the 166 C.E. *Laozi Inscription* [*Laozi ming* 老子銘] reveals that during the Eastern Han there was a tradition claiming that Laozi "transformed" himself nine times, and later traditions had him undergoing even more transformations.⁸ Elaborations of the story of Laozi's journey to India became a centerpiece of both debates between the Daoists and Buddhists as well as an important point for those who sought to reconcile the two religions.

If the figure Laozi is in part a projection of attributes derived from readings of the text of the *Laozi*, then where did the text come from? A growing consensus, based on archaeological data and textual analysis, sees the *Laozi* as fundamentally composite, assembled from existing writings or sayings. This was the conclusion of such scholars as Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866–1934) and Kimura Eiichi 木村英一 earlier in this century, and increasing attention to hermeneutical method has brought recent translators like Victor Mair and Michael LaFargue to the same conclusion.⁹ Recent archaeological evidence seems to support this idea (see the following section). While this conclusion is significant, it should not be construed to mean that there is no organizing principle or set of principles that might play the same role that authorial intent has played for those interpreting the text over the last two millennia.

The idea that the text may be composite does, however, mean

that it is difficult to speak of a single date of composition. If the text was circulating in an oral tradition or accrued gradually, establishing a *terminus a quo* or point of origin of the text may be impossible. However, it is easy to come up with a *terminus ad quem* or limiting point in time for the text. The earliest extant copy of the text, roughly as we know it, was interred in 168 B.C.E. It is also fairly certain that some parts of the text existed in 240 B.C.E., because they are quoted and sometimes attributed in works like the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 and *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. As Wing-tsit Chan has demonstrated, many of the ideas in the text were circulating at the Jixia Academy around 300 or 280 B.C.E.,¹⁰ and recent archaeological evidence (see below) indicates that selected sections of the text were in circulation at that time. However, many scholars find it doubtful that the language and terms in the text predate the *Mencius* (c. 300 B.C.E.) or the Warring States period. Arthur Waley, the British translator, using Karlgren's criteria for the dating of particles and pronouns, concluded that the *Laozi* was a third century B.C.E. text, a conclusion reached earlier by Gu Jiegang 顧頌剛 on the basis of a comparison with texts of that period.¹¹ These considerations strongly imply that the majority of the source material accrued between 300 and 240 B.C.E., that some version of the text existed by 240 B.C.E., and that the version we have today existed by 168 B.C.E.

Recent Advances and Discoveries

Three recent archaeological discoveries have shed significant light on the nature of the composition and arrangement of the *Laozi*, and the circumstances and dating of its early circulation in China. The first two finds both date to 1973. One consists of two silk manuscripts of the *Laozi* buried in a Western Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–9 C.E.) tomb under a hill that later became known as Mawangdui 馬王堆 near the modern city of Changsha 長沙 in Hunan province. The second is a set of bamboo slips similar to the *Wenzi*, found in Ding 定 county in Hebei province. The third find, from 1993, consists of sets of bamboo slips containing material from 31 of the 81 chapters of the *Laozi*, and was discovered at a village named Guodian 郭店, near Jingmen 荊門 in Hubei province.

The Mawangdui *Laozi* texts, as noted earlier, have proven that

the *Laozi* existed in a form very similar to the received text as early as the closing of the tomb in 168 B.C.E. The two silk manuscripts in question, now labeled A (*jia* 甲) and B (*yi* 乙), are the earliest known copies of the complete text. The taboo against using the character of an Emperor's given name, which seems to be followed in one of the manuscripts, has suggested to some that the A manuscript was copied even earlier, at the latest before the death of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty in 195 B.C.E.¹² Before the Mawangdui discovery, the earliest mention of the text was dated decades later, when a regional ruler died in 131 B.C.E. and King Xian 獻 of Hejian 河間 received a copy. The copy is described in the standard history of the Han dynasty, the *Hanshu* 漢書, as an "old text (*guwen* 古文)" from before the Qin Dynasty.¹³ The existence of a text extremely close to the received version, copied before 168 B.C.E., thus moves the verifiable age of the text back almost forty years.

In addition, the Mawangdui texts do differ in some significant ways from the received copies of the *Laozi*. The texts are not attributed, and instead of having the chapter divisions (*zhang* 章) common since at least the time of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), they are simply divided into two parts, *de* 德 and *dao* 道. This division is common to most received versions of the text, with the important distinction that in all such complete versions these two parts are in the reverse order (hence the name *Daodejing*, "Classic of *dao* and *de*"). The Mawangdui texts, (sometimes called the *Dedaojing*) begin with the *de* half of the text, and the traditional eighty-one chapters appear in the following order: 38, 39, 41, 40, 42–66, 80, 81, 67–79, 1–21, 24, 22, 23, 25–37. Additionally, there are important textual variants in the Mawangdui texts, but while these change the understanding of some individual sections of the text, they are not generally seen to indicate major changes in our understanding of the themes of the texts.¹⁴ Finally, the two silk scrolls on which the *Laozi* was written contain other texts. The A text is followed by four texts often characterized as "Confucian-influenced," and the B text is preceded by four texts seen as "Daoist" or "HuangLao" 黃老 in orientation. This says something important about the syncretic character of the period during which these scrolls were copied, and perhaps also about the time in which the text was created. There have been several new English translations based on the Mawangdui texts, notably by Robert Henricks, D. C. Lau, and Victor Mair.¹⁵

The second discovery has implications for the attribution of the *Laozi* to a particular historical figure. The Ding county slips contain fragments not from the *Laozi* but from the *Wenzi*, a text whose received version contains many dialogues between Laozi and his disciple Wenzi. It is worth noting that in the newly discovered version, some of the same dialogues are instead between Wenzi and others.¹⁶ This might indicate that Laozi was only one of several early sages who over time eclipsed the others, and to whom the collective body of their wisdom came to be attributed. Although some passages in the *Laozi* might be difficult to imagine existing in an earlier dialogue format, others, such as chapter 75, appear to have originally been cast as a dialogue.

The newest discovery consists of 730 inscribed bamboo slips found in 1993 near the village of Guodian in Hubei province. Written in a script characteristic of the ancient Chu state, this find includes 71 slips with material that is also found in 31 of the 81 chapters that comprise the transmitted *Laozi*. As with the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, the Guodian slips were buried with a number of other texts, in this case texts primarily concerned with a discussion of various ethical virtues now associated with Confucius. The recently looted tomb containing all these texts has been estimated, on the basis of the tomb's formal features and the style of its artifacts, to have been originally interred at the beginning of the third century B.C.E.¹⁷ In terms of dating the composition of parts of the text, this most recent find moves back the *terminus ad quem* of much of the current text of the *Laozi*.

Aside from the implications these slips have for the dating of the text, the discoveries at Guodian also raise some fascinating questions regarding its composition. In the first publication of the facsimilies of the Guodian *Laozi* slips (1998), the editors arrange them into three groups according to their dimensions and shape. Each group may be further divided into a several self-contained segments, running from the top of one slip through several others and ending with blank space at the bottom of the last slip, that contain passages from between one and ten chapters of the *Laozi*. These passages are arranged in a completely different order than in the Mawangdui and transmitted versions of the *Laozi*. In terms of the traditional chapter numbering, the content of these segments is as follows (an * indicates that the text does not include the whole chapter):

Group A (39 slips, 32.3 cm long)

19, 66, 46*, 30*, 15*, 64*, 37, 63*, 2, 32
 25, 5*
 16*
 64*, 56, 57
 55*, 44, 40, 9

Group B (18 slips, 30.6 cm long)

59, 48*, 20*, 13
 41*
 52*, 45, 54

Group C (14 slips, 26.5 cm long)

17, 18
 35
 31
 64*

The formal aspects of the Guodian texts are notable in several respects. First, it appears that the current chapter divisions were either disregarded or did not exist at the time these texts were copied. While punctuation marks separate what are now known as chapters in some cases, in others (chapters 32 and 45) they appear in the middle of the chapter. On the whole, the arrangement of interspersed partial and full chapters in the Guodian texts matches more closely with the divisions between the conceptually independent “sections” that D. C. Lau presented as an alternative to chapters and that he felt “need not originally have belonged together.”¹⁸ Another difference is stylistic. The Guodian texts contain more significant textual variants than in the Mawangdui versions of the *Laozi*, but their frequency varies from segment to segment. There are few major deviations in content from those parts of the *Laozi* that are mirrored in this find. Among the omissions are the last lines of chapters 15 and 55, and the famous section of chapter 30; “Where troops have camped/Brambles will grow.” Another point that is sure to be the subject of controversy is whether the order of the Guodian slips is clearer than the transmitted or the Mawangdui versions. Patterns like the common references to non-action (*wuwei* 無為) in the four consecutive chapters 64, 37, 63, and 2 might be taken to argue for the internal coherence of the Guodian order. The repetition of the last part of chapter 64 in two very different forms,

however, might be seen to indicate that the Guodian texts were drawn from different sources, and as such might represent variable rather than fixed texts.

Finally, the Guodian texts' intriguing variation on chapter 19 will certainly elicit much comment. In the received text, that chapter contains one of several attacks on two important virtues associated with Confucius, benevolence and righteousness: "Eliminate benevolence and discard righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and compassion (*jue ren qi yi, min fu xiaoci* 絕仁棄義民復孝慈). The Guodian slips have instead "Eliminate artifice and discard falsehood, and the people will return to being filial sons" (*jue wei qi cha, min fu xiaozi* 絕偽棄詐民復孝子). For whatever reason, this oldest version of this chapter of the *Laozi* does not include explicit criticisms of the virtues extolled in the other texts next to which it was buried.¹⁹ The relationship of the three Guodian texts to the *Laozi* as it has been transmitted over the last two millennia is surely going to be a major issue in studies of the composition of the *Laozi* for decades to come.

The Text in the Chinese Tradition

Since at least the second century B.C.E., the honorific term "classic (*jing* 經)" has been attached to the *Laozi*, a sign of the important influence it would come to have on many different aspects of Chinese culture. The *Laozi* has been read by philosophers and political theorists, alchemists and seekers of immortality, members of Daoist religious traditions ranging from the second century C.E. messianic communities to the denizens of modern day temples, Buddhists and Confucians, military strategists, poets, recluses, and casual readers. Not only has the understanding of the *Laozi* varied according to the group reading the text, but it has also changed along with the intellectual and religious context against which it was read. The Yuan dynasty (1264–1368) scholar Du Daojian 杜道堅 observed that most commentators have followed the particular values of their age: "In the Jin dynasty the commentators created a Jin *Laozi*, and in the Tang and Song dynasties they created a Tang *Laozi* and a Song *Laozi*."²⁰ The hundreds of commentaries written through the dynasties have provided the backdrop against which modern readings of the *Laozi* take place.

The earliest commentators on the *Laozi* appear to have read the

text alongside others produced by the “various masters” (*zhuzi* 諸子) of the Warring States period. These works constitute what is sometimes called the “Golden Age” of Chinese philosophy and include the writings of Confucius and Mozi among others. The earliest partial commentary to the text is the “Explaining the *Laozi*” (“*JieLao*” 解老) chapter of the *Han Feizi*, in which selections are used to support a Legalist theory of statecraft. The earliest references to full commentaries are three entries in the “*dao*” subsection of the “various masters” section in the bibliographic chapter of the *Hanshu*. Two of these entries are commentaries that are formally similar to commentaries on other “various masters” texts, and the third is an expository essay by the scholar-official Liu Xiang 劉向 *Exposition of the Laozi* [*Shuo Laozi* 說老子].²¹ The majority of early commentaries on the *Laozi* appear not to have been written by members of a specific philosophical school of Daoists, and the text appears to have been part of the “various masters” corpus.

Commentaries dating to the second century C.E. begin to explicitly associate the text with ritual practice or other techniques. Much of the Heshangong 河上公 (“the old man by the river”) commentary to the *Laozi*, with its numerous references to longevity techniques, may date to the Han, although other parts may be as late as the third century C.E.²² According to Pei Songzhi 裴松之, the *Laozi* was recited alongside ritual offerings of wine in the Five Bushels of Rice Movement during the late second century C.E.²³ This movement formed the basis for the Celestial Masters tradition, for whom Laozi was known as “Taishang Laojun” 太上老君, “Lord Lao, Most High.”

These developments occurred at about the same time as the arrival of Buddhism in China, a development that was to have a profound impact on the way that the *Laozi* was read. Buddhist influence may be seen in the widely read and highly regarded third-century Wang Bi commentary, which emphasizes the concepts of *li* 理, “principle,” and *wu* 無 “nothingness.” This period also saw a renewal of interest in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, influencing the reading of the *Laozi* and resulting in the amalgam known as LaoZhuang 老莊 thought.

By the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), in groups like the Chongxuan 重玄 school of interpretation, led by Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 and Li Rong 李榮, the use of Buddhist terminology in commentaries on the *Laozi* was well established. Although an occasional commentator like the twelfth-century Kou Caizhi 寇才質 objected to

the appropriation of Buddhist concepts like *sūnyatā*, the Buddhist influence on commentaries after Wang Bi cannot be underestimated.²⁴ During this period, the text was also read in more straightforward and practical ways. Since the Tang ruling house traced its descent to Laozi, the *Laozi* gained even more importance. In it were found lessons in diverse fields, including statecraft, as with the 735 commentary attributed to Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗, and even principles of military strategy.

From the Song dynasty (960–1127) onward, the *Laozi* was also increasingly interpreted in light of the Confucian tradition. Many Song commentators relied heavily on the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*) to explain the text, and the Yuan dynasty commentator Du Daojian drew parallels with the writings of Confucius. The intellectual dominance of Neo-Confucianism further assured that commentaries following the Song incorporated the views and terminology of this type of Confucianism. This continued into the Qing (1644–1912), at which time the prevailing emphasis on textual research began to have a strong influence on commentarial writing.

The importance of the text in traditional China is attested by the many attempts by writers, of every persuasion and period, to appropriate the meaning of the text for their own purposes. This is a significant fact for the modern reader of the text, who should know that contemporary translations almost all draw on layers of competing intellectual influences.

Individual Contributions

The first contribution, “Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse in the *Laozi*,” by Mark Csikszentmihalyi, challenges the widely held view that the *Laozi* is a mystical text. Csikszentmihalyi argues that whatever else mysticism might be, it is a form of religious experience that has as one of its defining characteristics a fundamental ineffability. Those who claim that the *Laozi* is a mystical text either insist that it describes mystical experience or practice, or hold that its apophatic or self-negating language creates an irresolvable tension that points beyond normal experience and helps evoke such experience in the reader. But through a careful analysis of the *Laozi*, Csikszentmihalyi shows that there is very little textual support for these kinds of claims. First of all, there simply are very few

passages that reasonably can be interpreted as references to mystical experience. This of course does not mean that the text necessarily denies the possibility of a mystical *Dao*. Quite the contrary, as Csikszentmihalyi says, “the text advocates the *theoretical* possibility of the existence of a mystical *Dao* but it is not an *experiential* description of mystical union.”

Csikszentmihalyi presents a sympathetic and careful discussion of contemporary interpretations of the text that advocate the mystical reading he opposes. Such interpretations rest on the view that takes “union with the *Dao* to be the text’s definitive mystical aspect.” Csikszentmihalyi shows that such interpretations have become increasingly suspect as the study of different forms of mysticism has undermined confidence in the idea that mystical experience is a universal, natural kind of religious experience. He argues that none of the more recent attempts to read the text as a report of even a distinctively “Eastern” form of mysticism are plausible.

Csikszentmihalyi also argues against those who reason that because the text contains some of the special terminology from traditions of medical and meditational practice, it in fact is a medical or meditational manual. This simply does not follow: “The similarity between the vocabulary of the *Laozi* and early medical or meditation texts . . . does not make the *Laozi* one of these texts.” As further evidence for his view, Csikszentmihalyi presents a review of early commentators, specifically those who wrote before Buddhism became a dominant force within Chinese intellectual life, and argues that Chinese commentators did not understand the apophatic language of the text as pointing to some ineffable mystical experience. Quite the contrary, these early commentators offered a variety of explanations to resolve what they regarded as only the *apparent* contradictions within the text. When properly viewed, such passages were thought to be quite accessible and did not require or appeal to ineffable mystical states of consciousness.

In his concluding remarks, Csikszentmihalyi presents an alternative understanding of the nature of this remarkable text. He notes that the early historian Sima Tan associated the *Laozi* with a group of thinkers who believed that there was a set of deeper principles—the *Dao* 道—informing the various specialized traditions of learning at the time. On such a view, the individual disciplines were simply different manifestations of this underlying *Dao*. Thus, rather than being some transcendent and ineffable entity, the

Dao was thought to be a set of principles that are manifested throughout our everyday experience and readily accessible to anyone who takes the time to pay attention to the world around them. Thus, the *Laozi* is more a collection of different descriptions of these underlying principles than a report of mystical contact with the transcendent. Drawing a contemporary analogy, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the text might have more in common with scholars of religion attempting to describe phenomena like the “numinous” than religious practitioners seeking to embrace or evoke such experiences. Seen in this way, “the *Laozi* has more in common with Rudolf Otto’s discussion of Meister Eckhart than with Eckhart’s writing itself.”

Hal Roth has contributed our second essay, “The *Laozi* in the Context of Early Daoist Mystical Praxis.” Roth’s central argument is that mystical praxis is at the heart of the *Laozi* and the political, social, and ethical philosophy one finds in the text are derived from experiences that arise out of such practice. He begins by offering a summary of his recent work on the history of early Daoist mysticism in order to provide a sketch of the beliefs and practices that formed the historical context from which the *Laozi* emerged. Next he presents a critical discussion of those aspects of mysticism theory that he has found most insightful and productive in his study of early Daoist beliefs and practices. Roth then proceeds to explain and analyze passages in the *Laozi* that provide evidence for his claim concerning the centrality of mystical praxis.

In his description of the historical context of the *Laozi* Roth claims that, “. . . particularly in the case of Daoism, the foundational texts of the tradition were produced within one or more closely related master-disciple lineages whose principle focus was on learning and practicing specific techniques.” Thus, instead of being products of speculative philosophizing, Roth sees works such as the *Laozi* more as deriving from a meditation practice involving guiding and refining the flow of vital energy or vital breath. He goes on to argue that there are two distinct though possibly complementary forms of meditation within the early Daoist communities that produced these texts. The first is a more dynamic, moving form of meditation, “whose postures resembled modern positions in *taiji* 太極 and *qigong* 氣功.” The second is a kind of seated meditation which involves regulation of and concentration on breathing. In other published work, Roth identifies this second form of meditation as “inner cultivation.” According to Roth, the practice of such inner

cultivation lies at the heart of the *Laozi* and shares its distinctive and characteristic features with other early seminal texts of Daoism and in particular with the *Neiye* 內業 (“Inward Training”) essay of the *Guanzi* 管子

From among the different approaches and conceptual resources of mysticism theory, Roth singles out Walter Stace’s distinction between “extrovertive” and “introvertive” forms of mystical experience as particularly useful. Roth adapts this distinction to describe what he calls a “bimodal” form of mysticism and claims that this is the best way to describe the type of mysticism one finds in texts like the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*. The first mode of bimodal mysticism concerns attaining a “unitive consciousness in which the adept achieves complete union with the *Dao*.” This is roughly equivalent to Stace’s “introvertive” form of mysticism. Stace’s “extrovertive” mysticism represents the second of Roth’s two poles. In such experiences, the practitioner “returns to the world and retains, amidst the flow of daily life, a profound sense of the unity.” Another of the resources of mysticism theory that Roth singles out is recent work on the technical terminology employed by mystical practitioners. Special terms of art that have application only within the practice of meditation, e.g., those that refer to extraordinary states of minds, constitute the esoteric argot of meditation communities and are important keys for identifying and understanding these communities and their practices.

In the remaining sections of his essay, Roth draws upon his sketch of the historical context that gave rise to the *Laozi* and applies the various conceptual resources and approaches of mysticism theory he has described and developed in order to explicate a number of critical passages in the text. He argues that these show that the *Laozi* is centered on specific techniques of mystical praxis which are part of “a greater tradition of lineages that shared a common meditative practice as their basis.” Roth provides a table in the appendix to his essay in which he illustrates some of the important similarities he has found among the various mystical practices and experiences described in different Daoist source texts. He concludes by noting that the practices and experiences he has identified in early Daoism also share remarkable similarities to mystical practices and experiences in many other cultural and religious traditions.

Our third essay, “Qian Zhongshu on Philosophical and Mystical

Paradoxes in the *Laozi*," by Zhang Longxi, is a lucid and informative presentation of the views of this important contemporary Chinese scholar. Qian's work unfortunately does not appear in translation and so has not received the attention it so richly deserves outside of China. But because of its form, content and, methodology, his work is not easily accessible even for the well-trained and determined Chinese scholar. Qian writes in elegant but difficult classical Chinese and often employs the terse style of traditional commentary. Moreover, as Zhang explains, his work is "deeply personal and related to his deep suspicion of systems and systematic argument." All of Qian's work is focused on ancient Chinese texts, which means that the content of his writings will not be widely familiar to those outside this specialty, and he employs a profoundly sophisticated intertextual approach that demands familiarity with not only the Chinese and Western traditions but contemporary literary theory as well. Despite these formidable obstacles, Qian's work represents some of the most insightful and impressive contemporary scholarship done on early Chinese literature and thought. Mastering his writings is not unlike climbing a mountain: a task that requires great skill, effort, and considerable courage but repays one with breathtaking views and deeper understanding. We should be thankful that Zhang has scaled this edifice for us and presented such an elegant and insightful account of his explorations.

Qian's work crosses a wide range of academic disciplines. For example, in arguing that the Wang Bi text of the *Laozi* is to be preferred over the Longxing Guan stone tablet version, he deploys philological, textual, philosophical, and sociocultural arguments to refute the claims of Qing Dynasty scholars regarding the latter's authenticity. A quite different example of Qian's intellectual range and depth is his discussion of the opening lines of the *Laozi*. He begins by challenging the Qing dynasty scholar Yu Zhengxie's 俞正燮 interpretation as anachronistic but then quickly moves from this point to a discussion of the philosophy of language represented by these lines. Zhang describes Qian as arguing that the real issue is distinguishing "naming as the act of signification from words as signifiers." The often poor fit between the words we use and the sense we are trying to express is used by Laozi to illustrate "the inadequacy of all verbal expression." Thus, these opening lines point toward the mystical philosophy that lies at the heart of the text. But Qian does not rest there, he goes on to relate the general theme of

the inadequacy of language to a variety of traditional Chinese philosophers and literary figures. In so doing, he explicates this ancient text, relates it to other traditional texts, both Chinese and Western, and shows how their problems remain problems for us, in both contemporary philosophy and literary theory.

One of the many intriguing issues Qian explores is the way that mystics, poets, and other thinkers accommodate the challenge of talking about the ineffable. This is an issue Zhang himself has explored in some of his own work.²⁵ Qian introduces and explains various strategies, drawn from a wide range of thinkers both East and West and representing many distinct traditions and disciplines, for “circling around the inexpressible” and “speaking in non-words.” Again he displays a stunning command of diverse traditions and a masterful control of a variety of scholarly disciplines and approaches.

Qian also offers an interesting discussion of Laozi’s conception of sagehood. In particular, he examines the sense in which the sage is to “imitate heaven and earth in putting his body last” and how this in fact proves beneficial and leads to its being preserved. Qian is critical of what he sees as the later appropriation of this notion by “popular religion” in the form of longevity practices. He believes that the true import of this teaching is to advocate asceticism and he offers several examples, again from a range of traditions and times, that show that mystics display a general tendency to turn away from and even mortify the body.

His final major topic is a discussion of Laozi’s teachings regarding the dialectical movement of things and events. Qian draws a number of interesting parallels between Laozi’s dialectical views and those of Hegel. Hegel criticized Chinese language as an unsuitable medium for philosophizing because it could not accommodate dialectical movement. Qian disagrees; he argues that in the *Laozi* we see several concepts that simultaneously express opposite meanings, “just like Hegel’s favorite term, the much-vaunted *Aufhebung*.” Qian then goes on to discuss, in greater detail, the senses of Laozi’s dialectic and its relationship to other philosophical, literary, and mystical writings.

Zhang closes with some fascinating thoughts on how Qian’s methodology itself manifests the dialectical nature he so admires in Laozi’s thought. The very project of understanding the *Laozi* through a comparative study in the context of Eastern and Western philosophy and mysticism, as Qian says, “not to reconcile differ-

ences, nor to claim false kinship relations." It is rather to note differences within the similarities and similarities within the differences. But to note the differences between things, they must be conceived as being in some way similar enough to be compared. And if one feels a need to point out the similarities between two things, one must already regard them as being different. As Zhang says, these concepts are "mutually defined and mutually implicated." In the hands of a master like Qian Zhongshu, this dialectical process of mutual contrast and comparison leads to a deeper understanding not only of the thinkers and texts being studied but of their significance for us in our own time and place. As Zhang concludes, "Once Qian Zhongshu has disclosed those connections and similarities, we can read the *Laozi* as we have never read it before. . . . It is hard to imagine a better way to introduce us to that little ancient book."

Isabelle Robinet's essay, "The Diverse Interpretations of the *Laozi*," explores a number of interesting issues surrounding the concept of *Dao*. She begins with a critical review of four contemporary scholars: Benjamin I. Schwartz, Angus C. Graham, Chad Hansen, and Michael LaFargue. Robinet explains the disagreements among these different interpreters of the *Laozi*. For example, she shows that Schwartz sees the text as representing a mystical attitude concerned with an eternal and unchanging "principle of organization" which underlies the apparent and accessible natural world. Since language arises in and concerns this latter, limited, and impermanent natural order, it proves almost wholly ineffective in describing the underlying *Dao*. This interpretation is quite different from what Graham offers. Graham sees language not so much as in principle inapplicable but as simply inadequate to the task of describing the *Dao*. Since it is the very nature of language to discriminate among things, the more successful it is the more it distorts and undermines the fundamental unity of the *Dao*. Graham sees Laozi as trying to defuse this harmful effect of language by advocating that we recognize the mutual interdependence of dichotomies, embrace these and thereby return to the unity of the *Dao*. Chad Hansen agrees with Graham in rejecting views that take the *Dao* to be some metaphysical entity. For Hansen, *Dao* means a prescriptive discourse, a way of carving up the world that serves to guide human activity. But Hansen parts company with Graham in holding that the text is primarily concerned with making the metalinguistic point that *all* such *Daos* (and any we might propose) are equally ad hoc. None captures the true nature of reality better

than any other and all drag us into greater, social purposes that often generate considerable trouble for us. For Hansen, the *Laozi* is not about THE *Dao*, but about the ways in which various *daos*, i.e., different discourses, guide thought and behavior. Michael LaFargue joins Graham and Hansen in rejecting the metaphysical reading but he sees the text as a kind of manual on the arts of governing and prolonging life. Thus, he sees the text as representative of what is generally regarded as the core of the HuangLao movement. Since LaFargue believes the text to be a kind of manual for those within such a movement, he argues that it presupposes a general familiarity with the concepts and practices of such an informed audience.

Robinet then seeks to distill a general understanding of the term *Dao* by reviewing and relating a variety of traditional Chinese commentaries. She makes use of the work of more than twenty commentators and augments their opinions with references to Han apocrypha and works such as the *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *Liezi* 列子, and the *Yijing*. Robinet examines eleven related issues concerning the nature of the *Dao*: the degree to which it is amenable to human understanding, its relationship to things, the sense in which it is one, its concrete and ephemeral modes, its role as source or seed of the world, its named and nameless aspects, its characteristic spontaneity, its tendency toward reversal or turning back, its constancy, its role as the cause of order in Nature and its mystical character. In the course of her examination she often extends the analysis of traditional commentators in interesting and revealing ways and occasionally voices her disagreement with the modern Western interpreters mentioned above. Robinet argues that there is in fact a respectable degree of consensus among traditional commentators on most of the issues she explores. And while Robinet acknowledges that by its very nature the text lends itself and even encourages a multiplicity of interpretations, she argues for “a certain coherence in the general trend of interpretations” among Chinese commentators and cautions that a principled insistence on the validity of all interpretations leads to the absurd conclusion that, “the text itself signifies nothing.”

In his intriguing meditation, “Re-exploring the Analogy of the *Dao* and the Field,” Robert Henricks describes a memorable and instructive way to imagine and convey the nature of Laozi’s *Dao*. Henricks begins by identifying three central and related characteristics of the *Dao*. First, the *Dao* is a “cosmic reality” in the sense that

it is what existed before and gave rise to the various living things within the world, what the Chinese call “the ten thousand things.” But the *Dao* is also a “personal reality” in that it remains present within each of the ten thousand things and plays a significant role informing their development and inclining them in certain directions. And so the *Dao* also describes a “way of life” for each of the ten thousand things, a way they will tend to go in the absence of interference. In this respect, the *Dao* describes a way that is in some sense normative.

Henricks goes on to describe a number of characteristic features of the *Dao* based on the content of the *Laozi*’s individual chapters. The *Dao* is a single, undifferentiated, and intangible reality. By this he seems to mean that because it is the all-encompassing pattern underlying and informing all phenomena, the *Dao* itself lacks any specific form. The *Dao* is also “still, tranquil, and empty” but within it are the “seeds” or “beginnings/essences of the ten thousand things.” This set of features connotes not only the ideas that the *Dao* is the origin and source of order for all things in the world but also, in its stillness and tranquility, it displays no inclination for or against, no prejudice toward or favor for any particular part of the world. We are also told that the *Dao* is “inexhaustible.” While the *Dao* itself is empty and intangible it works like a “bellows” breathing life and form into each of the ten thousand things. These various characteristics of the *Dao* are part of why the text often describes it as “feminine” in nature. For the *Dao* gives birth to, nourishes, and protects all of the ten thousand things; it shows each the unqualified love thought to be characteristic of a mother.

With this description of the *Dao* in hand, Henricks then draws an analogy between this cluster of characteristics and a field. He has in mind “an untended field, one that is left to grow on its own.” This is an important point. For the Daoists employ such natural vegetative metaphors to convey their ideal state of being and this distinguishes them from the Confucians who use *agricultural* metaphors—i.e., carefully cultivated and tended fields—as symbols for their ideal. The riot of grasses and wildflowers that sprout up and bloom in this field are then, by analogy, the “ten thousand things.” Unpacking this analogy, Henricks leads us to see that the field, in winter, appears to be “undifferentiated” and “empty” like the *Dao*. But this same field gives birth to the “ten thousand things” that grow out of it and supports each of them, showing favoritism to none.

Throughout this process, the field is largely “invisible”; it makes no show and claims no credit for its remarkable achievements. The process that unfolds upon the field occurs without purposive effort, i.e., through *wuwei* 無為 (“non-action”), and is so of itself, i.e., *ziran* 自然 (“naturally”). In these ways, again it is like the *Dao*. Henricks goes on to discuss some of the apparent limitations of his proposed analogy and some of the ways it captures other important features of Laozi’s thought. He concludes his essay with a description of how he first developed this analogy, which reveals itself to be yet another example of the marvelous workings of the *Dao*.

Tateno Masami’s essay, “A Philosophical Analysis of the *Laozi* from an Ontological Perspective,” is not concerned with how the text was understood by early Chinese commentators but seeks to explicate a novel and intriguing interpretation of its own. In certain respects, Tateno’s reading of the text bears some likeness to that of Csikszentmihalyi. He argues against those who understand the *Dao* as an abstract entity, something wholly beyond our everyday experience. While the *Dao* clearly cannot be adequately explained, it is something that can and must be experienced. In fact, the *Dao* can only be understood through a specific regimen of spiritual practice. Such practice begins with a kind of cognitive therapy. Confronting and contemplating the inescapably relativistic framework of human understanding is to lead to the realization that any purely rational approach cannot possibly yield absolute knowledge concerning the nature of the world and our proper place within it. This recognition of the limitations of rational thought purportedly marks the beginning of an enhanced understanding, for it encourages one to seek understanding through the alternative means of spiritual training.

This regimen of training begins with an active withdrawal of the senses, which are seen as a source of distraction and diversion, and an inward turn toward meditative cultivation. Such cultivation consists in “concentrating one’s spirit,” and this allows one to directly embody the “oneness” that is the defining characteristic underlying all of reality. This personal experience of oneness is in principle inexpressible since words rely on the very distinction between subject and object and the framework of time and space which such a state is thought to overcome. The experience of oneness facilitates a direct grasp of the true nature of the world. Tateno emphasizes that this state of consciousness in no way represents or advocates a rejection of the world. For as one experiences the oneness underlying the world one realizes that there is no real distinction between

self and world. From an epistemological point of view, this means that the world is “nothing” in the sense that it is not an object distinct from the self that presents itself to understanding. At the same time, from an ontological perspective, we *are* the world and if we are to live in light of this truth we must live our lives in the world as embodiments of its underlying unity.

Tateno goes on to explore the relationship between the *Dao* 道 (“Way”) and *de* 德 (“virtue”). Invoking an explanation with a long history in Chinese thought, he describes virtue as the phenomenal “manifestation of the *Dao*.” In other words, virtue is what each actual thing receives from the *Dao* and this determines what kind of thing it is and what kinds of activities and powers it displays. While the *Dao* itself remains beyond description, the *de* of each thing presents it in various palpable and accessible forms. When one engages in the spiritual practice described above, one comes to appreciate the ways in which the *de* of each thing points to the underlying *Dao* which it represents. And through the completion or perfection of one’s own virtue, one comes to see and embody the *Dao* in the actual world. As Tateno says, “In other words, through *practice* of the *Dao*, we can pass beyond the world of our ordinary relativistic way of thinking and directly embody the true nature of the world. When, in our own being, we exist as *de*, each of us is the *Dao*, and this *Dao*, just as it is, is the entire world.”

In his essay, “Method in the Madness of the *Laozi*,” Bryan W. Van Norden offers a philosophical critique and critical evaluation of the “core vision” of the *Laozi* and the ways in which this core vision informs the mystical, cosmological, and ethical views of the text. Van Norden argues that the core vision of the *Laozi* is motivated by a reaction to the corrupt and dangerous times in which it was written. This leads to a call for a return “to a kinder, gentler, and simpler era, before the corrupting influences of new ideas and new choices” could undermine the pristine nature of early society. Unlike some who advocate similar views, Laozi does not believe that “the corrupt state of society” to which we have fallen is “natural or inevitable.” And so the text offers not only a diagnosis of society’s ills but a prescription designed to restore it to health. The cure will take us back to a “primitive agrarian utopia” characterized by “a lack of curiosity, envy, reflection, higher culture, and self-consciousness,” in which people will lead “simple but admirably contented lives.” With a clear view of this core political vision in place, Van Norden then proceeds to relate it to Laozi’s views on cosmology, mysticism, and ethics.

Since the *Laozi* insists that its ideal society requires the undoing and elimination of active and reflective efforts to improve people and their lot in life, Van Norden argues that it “owes us an explanation of how the universe is structured such that nonintervention will result in a well-ordered society.” By way of example, he notes that Social Darwinists presuppose that survival of the fittest explains *why* the absence of governmental interference actually works for the long-range good of society. We should expect that there are similar beliefs underlying and justifying the Daoist political vision. Van Norden argues that Laozi’s concept of the *Dao* (“Way”) plays just such a role. He explains how the *Dao* is both “causally” and “normatively transcendent” and therefore how it serves as “a paradigm for the human sage.”

Van Norden then turns to a discussion of how the core vision is related to mysticism in the *Laozi*. His goal is not to offer an account of the nature of Laozi’s particular form of mysticism (for that, readers can turn to several of the other essays in this collection) but rather to show how this aspect of the work is informed by and related to some of the other important teachings one finds within it. So Van Norden employs a low-flying and uncontroversial definition of mysticism: “I shall mean by ‘mysticism’ the position that there is a kind of important, action-guiding ‘knowledge’ (in some broad sense of that term) of the nature of the universe that cannot adequately be expressed in words.” Van Norden first notes that the *Laozi* advocates the view that most of society’s problems arise from over-intellectualization and that therefore the learned intellectuals should be cast out of the Daoist utopia. And yet, at the same time the text espouses the need for Daoist sage rulers. We must therefore infer that there is a special, nonstandard and ineffable kind of knowledge that is needed, especially by those who would rule. Thus, in order to bring about the core political vision that is the ultimate goal of the *Laozi*, we need people with this special kind of mystical knowledge. Van Norden goes on to suggest that only those who possess such knowledge can both themselves be and bring the world into the particular state of unity represented by this core vision. Only they can bring about the perfect “harmonious whole” that it describes. Anything other than this ideal is something less and results in the disunity, alienation, contention, and conflict that mark contemporary society.

The core vision results in what Van Norden describes as “the

ethics of paradox,” which in turn is directly related to both the cosmology and mysticism of the text. The core vision asserts that “contemporary society is upside down.” This leads to a paradoxical state of affairs in which most people regard as good what is actually bad and where their efforts to make things better inevitably produce the opposite effect of making things worse. This situation results in a paradox that Van Norden defines in terms of three essential features: *wuwei* (“non-action”), embracing the *yin* 陰, and reversal. *Wuwei* is the ideal Daoist mode of activity. It is “unpremeditated, nondeliberative, noncalculating, nonpurposive action.” Thus the best action is paradoxically non-action. Embracing the *yin* is to prefer a soft, yielding “feminine” disposition and approach over one that is hard, assertive, “masculine.” Again, paradoxically, the approach that appears to be weaker and less effective is the only sure way to assure strength and success. Embracing the *yin* is related to the third feature of the ethics of paradox, reversal. This is the view that over time, things and situations tend to change into their opposites. For example, something that is assertive and strong tends over time to become passive and weak. The idea here is again the paradoxical claim that straining to gain some fixed personal goal inevitably leads to one losing it and worse still injuring oneself in the bargain. Van Norden argues for the asymmetrical nature of reversal; this dynamic only operates in cases of characteristically *yang* 陽 activity. Those who embrace the *yin* do not end up reversing and undermining themselves, for they are acting according to the *Dao* and not for themselves. Thus, they are working within the harmonious mystical unity of the Way.

In our next contribution, “An Inquiry into the Core Value of Laozi’s Philosophy,” Liu Xiaogan argues that the concept of *ziran* (“naturalness”) is the foundation of Laozi’s ethical philosophy. This notion of “acting naturally” or “letting things happen of themselves” informs other central teachings in Laozi’s philosophy such as *wuwei* (“non-action”) and the *Dao* (“Way”) and provides the underlying justification for them.

Liu begins with a discussion of *ziran* and *wuwei* by pointing out that both notions “cross into all of the various divisions of philosophy” (e.g., ontology, epistemology, and historiography) and also find more practical applications in fields such as “politics, military science, and self-cultivation.” These notions have no clear correlates in Western philosophy and this, together with their protean nature

and wide application, make them difficult to describe and analyze within the traditional framework of philosophy. These observations inform Liu's own study, which relies on a careful analysis of many different examples of the use of these terms. But he also presents his own interpretation of the meaning and significance of these concepts by offering a critique and critical assessment of both traditional and contemporary scholarship.

One common misunderstanding Liu identifies is the view that treats *ziran* and *wuwei* as two terms for a "single concept." Liu points out that though consistent, they are quite different concepts and *ziran* is the more basic ethical notion. Among the points he makes is that naturalness is a positive term used to describe "the progression of a certain state of affairs" while *wuwei* is a negative term which places "restrictions upon human activity." Moreover, naturalness can describe a larger class of phenomena; specifically, it can apply to both the human and nonhuman realm. Non-action, though, only restricts the proper range of *human* action. Summing up Liu's view on the relationship between these two concepts, we can say that *ziran* is "the central value in Laozi's philosophical system, while *wuwei* is the basic method or principle for action he recommends to realize or pursue this value."

Liu then proceeds to offer a careful explication and analysis of the notion of naturalness as found in the *Laozi*. Relying on a remarkable command of traditional and contemporary scholarship, Liu discusses a range of knotty interpretive problems. For example, there is a debate about how much if any "force" the ideal Daoist ruler can employ in governing his people. When is he acting to maintain a natural state of affairs? When do his actions cross the line and become interference in the natural life of his people? And how is one to make such judgments? Liu goes on to explore the notion of naturalness in regard to the relationship between the sage and the myriad things and the way in which it is to govern the interactions between humans, heaven, and earth. In each of these cases, he demonstrates how naturalness provides the guide and justification for how all things are to function.

Liu provides an illuminating discussion of other ways the ideal of naturalness is expressed in the *Laozi*. For example, *zihua* 自化 ("transforming of one's own accord") clearly is another way of expressing this normative ideal for how things and affairs are to progress. Things that are allowed to function naturally return to what is "normal" or "proper" for them. They are then *zheng* 正

("rectified") and this is another way of expressing the ideal of naturalness. Similarly, the word *chang* 常 ("constant"), which describes the enduring, regular, and proper state of things, the state to which they will tend in the absence of artificial interference, "also signifies naturalness." These are but a few of the many compelling examples Liu presents.

In another section of his essay, Liu explores the basis of Laozi's regard for the value of naturalness. He argues that it is easy to see why naturalness, particularly when understood as the absence of governmental interference, would have great appeal, especially in a largely agrarian society. The elimination of oppressive taxes, coercive regulations, and aggressive warfare would readily be appreciated as positive goods by those suffering such difficulties. Moreover, these afflictions could easily be understood as imposed, artificial interferences, the removal of which allows a return to a natural, constant, and proper state of affairs.

Liu also defends the *Laozi* against certain criticisms levelled by a number of different interpreters, e.g., that the text urges rulers to "keep the people in ignorance" or that it advocates "historical retrogression." He argues that such criticisms rest upon anachronistic or misguided understandings of the text and that these can be rectified by a proper understanding of the role of naturalness. Liu also offers his own thoughts on some ways we might reinterpret and modify Laozi's notion of naturalness so that it can contribute to contemporary ethical debates.

The final essay, "The Concept of *de* ('Virtue') in the *Laozi*," by Philip J. Ivanhoe, offers an ethical interpretation of Laozi's notion of "virtue." Ivanhoe argues that like his Confucian predecessors, Laozi used the word *de* ("virtue") to mean not a particular excellence of character, e.g., as we might say "prudence is a virtue," but rather, like the Latin *virtus*, to describe the natural activity and power of a given thing (hence Arthur Waley's translation of *daode* in *Daodejing* as "The Way and Its Power," emphasis added). When used to describe the characteristic activity and power of ideal human beings, this early sense of *de*, for both the Confucians and the Daoists, is defined by three features: its attractive power, its ability to affect others in distinctive ways and its relationship with *wuwei* ("non-action").

In other work, Ivanhoe has argued that among early Confucians, *de* had the sense of "moral charisma." This notion was often, though not exclusively, a quality associated with good rulers. *De*

was the quality of character that enabled such rulers to attract and retain worthy ministers and subjects around them. Thus, it displays the first of Ivanhoe's three characteristics. In one memorable passage, Confucius remarks that "One who rules through *de* ('moral charisma') is like the Pole Star, which remains in its place while all the myriad stars pay homage to it." In addition to the ability to attract people, those with moral charisma influence others in distinctive ways. They move others to yield to and support them and they inspire others to emulate their virtuous example. The Confucian sage attracts and uplifts those who come under his influence. These first two features explain the relationship between *de* and *wuwei* ("non-action"). For those with virtue, and especially rulers, are able to carry out their work without having to coerce others. By drawing the people to him and inspiring them to higher levels of ethical development, he is able to reign—not rule—over his people.

Ivanhoe goes on to argue that one can find a related but distinct notion of *de*, displaying each of his three characteristic features, in the *Laozi*. Like his Confucian counterpart, Laozi's sage attracts others to him but in a different way. Instead of drawing people *upward* through the excellence of his moral charisma, he draws people to him and wins their allegiance by placing himself in the *lowest*, most humble position. Instead of being like the Pole Star, Laozi's sage is a valley, welcoming, accommodating, and nourishing all, according to their individual needs. Those who are drawn within the orbit of such an individual are affected in profound ways. Unlike the Confucian sage who inspires people to strive to emulate him and develop themselves ethically, the influence of the Daoist sage works to "empty, unravel, and settle" people. The natural ease of the Daoist sage has a "therapeutic effect" on those around him. It helps them to realize the harmful influences of socialization and over-intellectualization and allows them to slough off the social posturing and outright self-deception that plagues most people. This in turn allows them to better hear and heed their spontaneous tendencies and inclinations, which leads them to live in greater harmony and peace. Thus, those who develop this Daoist form of *de* not only are at peace and in harmony with the world, they settle others down as well and turn them away from the greedy and competitive activities that give rise to all the worst disasters a state might suffer. Thus, such individuals make ideal rulers. Like their Confucian counter-

parts, they too rule through *wuwei* but their “non-action” works in a different way. The Confucian sage-ruler reigns through the authority of his moral charisma, inspiring others to pursue their various functions and work on moral self-improvement. The Daoist sage-ruler influences people to “turn back” to a simpler, less centralized form of life, the “agrarian utopia” described throughout the text.

Ivanhoe supplements his study of *de* in the *Laozi* with a brief exploration of the concept of *de* in the other early Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*. He notes some of the distinctive features of Zhuangzi’s notion of virtue and suggests that this concept deserves much greater attention in this and other texts of the period. Ivanhoe also argues that these different conceptions of *de* reflect deep and important differences between Confucian and Daoist views of human nature and its flourishing. In the remaining parts of his essay he suggests ways that each of these views can contribute to the contemporary understanding of “interpersonal moral psychology.”

The variety of perspectives represented by the articles in this volume underscores the diverse ways in which the *Laozi* has been and may be read. Some may be disappointed that this collection does not present a unified view of the provenance or meaning of the text. But this diversity is an accurate reflection of the ambiguous history and polysemantic nature of the text. The origins and uses of the *Laozi* are simply not yet clear—and they may never be. One of the few approaches to the text that can with confidence be rejected as implausible is that which maintains there is but one way to read it. As the *Laozi* itself warns, “those who hold onto it, lose it” (chapter 64).

The range of different yet plausible approaches to and interpretations of the *Laozi* is a manifestation of its distinctive nature and an indication of the scope of its relevance. This remarkable text can and should play a much more prominent role in future conversations about such issues as the character of mystical experience, texts and praxis, the theory of interpretation, and the nature of paradox. The *Laozi* also has much to teach us about Chinese conceptions of reality, beliefs about human nature, and aspirations for utopia, as well as such basic philosophical concepts as *Dao*, *de*, *ziran*, and *wuwei*.

The contributions included in this volume not only offer diverse interpretations of the *Laozi*, they themselves represent a wide range of scholarly traditions and a variety of ways to engage, ponder and,

evaluate the text. This shows that the *Laozi*, whether originally intended as a classic, scripture, poem, polemic, or manual, has become all of these things and more to an audience whose number must far exceed the expectations of those responsible for its creation. By collecting some of the finest contemporary scholarship on this important and fascinating text, we hope not only to enrich and challenge the understanding of specialists but also to invite and interest nonspecialists to join this ever-expanding hermeneutical circle and come to appreciate the text in new and edifying ways.

Mark Csikszentmihalyi
Philip J. Ivanhoe

NOTES

This collection contains translations of three essays originally written in languages other than English but which have not been published in any form prior to the present volume. Tateno Masami's essay, "A Philosophical Analysis of the *Laozi* from an Ontological Perspective," was translated from a Japanese version entitled "*Rōshi ni okeru sonzaironteki kanten kara no tetsugakuteki bunseki* 老子における存在論的観点からの哲学的分析," by Philip J. Ivanhoe. Mark Csikszentmihalyi translated Isabelle Robinet's article "The Diverse Interpretations of the *Laozi*" from a French original by the title of "*Les diverses interprétations du Laozi*," with help from Amelia Dockery. Liu Xiaogan's contribution, "An Inquiry into the Core Value of Laozi's Philosophy," was translated by Edward Gilman Slingerland III from an original essay in Chinese called, "Shilun Laozi zhexuede zhongxin jiazhi 試論老子哲學的中心價值."

1. The text is commonly referred to as the *Daodejing* (in the *pinyin* romanization used in mainland China), the *Tao-te ching* (in the Wade-Giles romanization still used in some academic circles), the *Laozi* or *Lao-tzu* (using the putative name of the author in each romanization, respectively), or even as the *Dedaojing* or *Te-tao ching* (reversing the traditional order of its two sections, again in each romanization). Because of the disagreement over the original order of the two sections, the title *Laozi* is used here. For the sake of consistency, the *pinyin* system is used exclusively in this volume. Chinese words in quotations have been converted into *pinyin*. A conversion table between *pinyin* and Wade-Giles is provided in the frontmatter to this volume.

2. While this manuscript was in press, Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue's *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-te-ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) was published. This new collection contains excellent essays on the myth and interpretation of the text and of the figure Laozi. It also explores a variety of different methodological approaches. We see the present volume, focused on the thought of the *Laozi*, as complimenting this new and important publication.

3. "Old Master" is only one of several ways that the characters *lao* and *zi* have been understood. One tradition, attested first in the third century C.E., reads the character *zi* as "child," citing the legend that Laozi's mother was pregnant for eighty-one years and the sage was born with white hair (see the preface *Laozi Daodejing xu* 老子道德經序 attributed to Ge Xuan 葛玄, *Sibu congkan* edition, 1b.) A Qing dynasty commentator has proposed that *lao* does not mean "old" but is instead a surname (Wei Yuan 魏源, *Laozi benyi* 老子本義, *Zhuzi jicheng* edition, 5).

4. See chapter 63 of the *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 2139 ff.

5. These modern scholars suggest that an existing tradition surrounding a teacher of Confucius named Laozi was utilized by the compilers or transmitters of the *Laozi* in order to privilege their text over those associated with Confucius. Anna K. Seidel makes this suggestion in *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969), 12, and it is developed in more detail by A. C. Graham in "The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan," in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 111–124. On the authorship of the text, see also the appendix "The Problem of Authorship" by D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 147–162.

6. A notorious iteration in the series of debates surrounding this issue was carried out in the United States in the 1940s by the eminent sinologists Homer H. Dubs and Derk Bodde. Dubs's main thesis is that Laozi can be dated to 300 B.C.E., a point that hinges on the identification of two historical figures with similar names. See H. H. Dubs, "The Date and Circumstances of the Philosopher Lao-dz," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (1941): 215–221, and "The Identification of the Lao-dz," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 300. Bodde's responses are "The New Identification of Lao Tzu," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 8–13, and "Further Remarks on the Identification of Lao Tzu," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 64 (1944): 24–27. The possibility of rectifying the inconsistencies in Sima Qian's account of Laozi will likely remain a grail pursued by some sinologists, but the import of the very existence of such profound inconsistencies should not be overlooked.

7. For Han traditions surrounding the figure of Laozi see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "The Tradition of Laozi," in "Emulating the Yellow Emperor: The Theory and Practice of HuangLao, 180–141 B.C.E." (Ph.D. Diss., Stanford University, 1994): 96–143.

8. Seidel, 92–102. Such transformations marked increasingly advanced states of spiritual achievement and were thought to entail profound physical as well as psychological transformations.

9. Victor Mair, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Bantam, 1990); Michael LaFargue, *Tao and Method* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

10. Chan's valuable introduction to the antecedents of the *Laozi* may be found in his translation *The Way of Lao Tzu* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 61–71.

11. See Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958): 127, and Gu Jiegang "Lüshi chunqiu tuice Laozi zhi chengshu niandai 呂氏春秋推測老子之成書年代," in *Gushibian* 古史辨, ed. Gu, et al., v. 4 (Shanghai: Kaiming, 1941): 462–520.

12. The fact that the character *bang* 邦 is systematically avoided and replaced with the synonym *guo* 國 in the Mawangdui *Laozi* B text indicates it was copied after Liu Bang's 劉邦 (the first emperor of the Han dynasty) reign began in 207 B.C.E. The *Laozi* A text has no such substitution, a fact taken by Tang Lan 唐蘭 to mean that it was copied in the late years of his reign or just after Liu Bang's death in 195 B.C.E. (Tang Lan, "Mawangdui chutu *Laozi* yiben juanqian guyishude yanjiu 馬王堆出土老子乙本卷前古逸書的研究," *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報 (April 1975): 7). However, the practice of avoiding names does not appear to have been used consistently at this early date.

13. See chapter 53 of the *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2410.

14. Many of the changes are discussed in William G. Boltz, "Textual criticism and the Ma wang tui *Lao tzu*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, no. 1 (June 1984): 185–224.

15. Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching* (New York: Ballantine, 1989); D. C. Lau, *Chinese Classics, Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982); Mair, *Tao Te Ching*. On this spate of translations, see also Stephen Durrant, "Packaging the *Tao*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 45, no. 1–2 (1991): 75–84.

16. Guojia wenwuju guwenxian yanjiushi 國家文物局古文獻研究室, "Dingxian 40 hao Hanmu chutu zhujian jianjie 定縣40號漢墓出土竹簡簡介," *Wenwu* (August 1981): 11–12.

17. See Cui Renyi 崔仁義, "Jingmen Chumu chutude zhujian Laozi chutan 荊門楚墓出土的竹簡老子初探" in *Jingmen shehui kexue* 荊門社會科學 (May 1997): 31–35, and Jingmenshi bowuguan 荊門市博物館, *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998).

18. D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 51.

19. See slip 1 on p. 3, the transcription on p. 111, and Qiu Xigui's 裘錫圭 note 3 on p. 113 of *Jingmenshi bowuguan, Guodian Chumu zhujian*.

20. Du Daojian (fl. 1264–1306), *Xuanjing yuanzhi fahui* 玄經原旨發揮, 2.1a.

21. See chapter 30 of *Hanshu*, 1729.

22. For a detailed treatment of the Heshanggong and Wang Bi commentaries see Alan K. L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

23. Chapter 8 of *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 264, n.1.

24. See Judith Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1987), 216–217.

25. See Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).