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Hua Hu Ching: The Teachings of Lao Tzu

Brian Walker

Livingston, Montana: Clark City Press, 1992.

\$17.00; cloth.

Reviewed by B.J. Buckley

Most readers will be familiar at least with Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, or the Book of the Way/Path, which is a collection of brief, eloquent and succinct lessons in the art of living in harmony with the whole of creation and the whole of oneself. This small companion volume, the *Hua Hu Ching*, is a further collection of these elegant teachings, preserved throughout the years of repression and destruction of books in China by the Taoist tradition of passing teachings orally from one generation to another. These eighty-one sets of instructions were intended by Lao Tzu to be a guide toward the attainment of enlightenment and mastery of the illusory conflicts of this existence and toward "...the beginning of immortality"; they serve equally well as wise guidance for those of us still much mired in the difficulties of the commonplace and the struggle to find a good way, a right way, to live and be in the world.

In the thirtieth lesson, Brian Walker's translation begins, "Words can never convey the beauty of a tree...Language cannot capture the melody of a song." But Walker comes very close to capturing the bright notes and cadences in these poems; he allows Lao Tzu to speak to us. As we wander from the discussions of the Oneness of the universe, to lessons on the joys and limits of the senses, to instructions on gaining fame and worldly admiration ("...amass a great fortune and then give it away. The world will respond with admiration in proportion to the size of the treasure. Of course this is meaningless"), we find ourselves feeling that we are in conversation with someone; that as we form ideas and arguments, these are anticipated and countered, not by judgment, but with wit and compassion. There is a great deal of humor, as when Walker places the lesson on

"a person's approach to sexuality" under number sixty-nine. There's also a rare sense in the text that all humans are being addressed—Walker uses "she" as the personal pronoun interchangeably with, and a little more often, than "he," and many examples begin, "When a man and/or woman..."

Walker greatly admires and acknowledges the translation of the *Tao Te Ching* by Stephen Mitchell, who has also received much praise for his new translations of the Book of Job and the poems of the German poet Rilke. Walker does his mentor honor in his renderings of these "lost" teachings of Lao Tzu. His language possesses a clarity and a simplicity without being simplistic, and his translations of the most complex ideas never slip into the jargon of the academic. In his introduction, Walker mentions that he has come to think of Lao Tzu "...less as a man who once lived and more as a song who plays, eternal and abiding." Walker has brought these teachings across as a melody that is distinctly his own, yet not at all in discord with the eternal one he so reveres; we are lucky Clark City Press has been so kind as to play the song for us. The deep black *sumi-e* (Japanese ink painting) illustrations of insects and animals which are sprinkled here and there throughout the text—and which we assume to also be Walker's—are possessed of the same brevity, wit, and profound simplicity as the text, and they form an elegant descant.