

LAO TSE AND LAOISM

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THE school of thought which is usually designated as “Philosophic Taoism” is referred to in this study as Laoism, for reasons stated in Chapter III. Of all the nuances of ancient Chinese thought, it is the one best calculated to catch the attention of the Occidental philosopher. A detailed study of this philosophy, by itself, is fascinating. The present purpose is, however, to orient it with regard to ancient Chinese thought as a whole.

From this point of view, Laoism is of the greatest interest. The central thesis of this system²⁵⁷ is easily grasped. We have seen that the position of Confucius was that the universe is naturally good, but that for some reason it has been perverted from that state. His technique for restoring the original perfection is to find the rules by which men acted in the “Golden Age,” and then to apply them as closely as “common sense” and “humanity” would allow. This certainly has a logical appeal; Lao Tse used the same premise to draw an equally logical, but very different, conclusion. If the world has within itself this natural tendency to perfection, then why tamper with it? asked Lao Tse. Instead of trying to find a set of rules to apply, should we not rather abstain from applying any rules at all, and merely let the natural perfection assert itself? Is not any attempt artificially to regulate the universe a movement away from the better to the worse?

As expounded by their defenders, these philosophies are equally logical. But men everywhere have seldom, if ever, espoused a philosophy *solely* because of its appeal to reason. This is always

²⁵⁷ From this point on the word “system” is much more properly to be used, for the thinkers we now treat had to construct their ideas so as to withstand the most constant criticism from every hand.

a factor, but men's philosophies are primarily rational bases which justify them in doing that which they wish to do; they are formulas for solving practical situations (however impractical those situations may seem to us) and allowing action to proceed along a line which promises satisfactions. Islam, Christian Protestantism, "absolute idealism," "pragmatism," the belief in immortality, "neo-humanism," and in fact, every religious and philosophical belief has arisen because of a practical situation which demanded it or something like it. This is by no means to say that all or any one of them has been a mere "rationalization" in the derogatory sense of the term; it is only to apply to the history of thought the modern insight concerning the secondary and instrumental nature of intellect. We may not, then, believe that Laoism came into existence merely because it was "logical." We must look for the situation which brought this one, of many possible "logical" philosophies, into existence.

We shall consider briefly three theories of its origin, that of Wieger, that of Wilhelm, and one which has not, to my knowledge, been previously advanced.

Wieger declares that Laoism shows an "indentité complète" with the Indian philosophy of the *Upanishads*.^{257a} In China, Laoism, he says, is an evident innovation. Further, he declares that Chinese critics, beginning with the bibliographic index of the former Han dynasty (202 B. C.—8 A. D.) are unanimous in declaring that Laoism did not grow out of China's past, but was elaborated by the custodians of national and foreign records. Wieger believes, then, that Lao Tse, who was a keeper of the archives, got his philosophy from a document which at least reflected Indian thought.

The position merits thorough study, and lacking this may not be utterly rejected nor dogmatically accepted. But certain weaknesses are evident. In the first place, Wieger himself dates the earliest *Upanishads* from the eighth and the seventh centuries B. C.,²⁵⁸ a scant one hundred fifty years before Lao Tse (570-490 B. C.) flourished in China. This must certainly have been a remarkably rapid case of diffusion. In the second place, scrutiny of Fr. Wieger's own account of the *Upanishads* fails to show that "complete identity" which he alleges. To be sure, there is something like that flying through the air which was one of the accom-

^{257a} Wieger, *Taoisme* p. 9.

²⁵⁸ Wieger, *Bouddhisme Chinois* (hereafter cited as *Bouddhisme*) p. 40.

plishments of the Taoist genii;²⁵⁹ there is breath control; there is the concept of Brahman which shows some resemblances to one aspect of the *tao*. But all of these may well be what Goldenweiser calls "convergences," similarities traceable to like conditions of origin rather than to diffusion. Further, certain cardinal principles of Laoism, such as *yin-yang* duality, are utterly foreign to the *Upanishads*. But the chief reason for believing Laoism to be a Chinese rather than a Hindu product is that it can be traced as a natural development out of the Chinese past. Wieger's Chinese testimony on this point, while important, can not be admitted to be infallible.

Wilhelm agrees with the position that the fundamental postulate of cosmic harmony as the normal state is common to Confucius and to Lao Tse. He believes, however, that Lao Tse obtained the idea from the *Yi King*, or *Book of Changes*,²⁶⁰ and that it was he who gave the idea to Confucius.^{260a}

In the first place, Lao Tse must certainly have possessed unusually keen powers of penetration to obtain his ideas from this source. In the second place, if the reader is not by this time convinced that the idea of the cosmic *tao*, the universal harmony, was in existence long before Confucius, and had a prominent place in Chinese tradition and in the documents of which the *Shu* and the *Shi* were composed, then it is impossible to convince him here.

The explanation of Lao Tse to be put forward in this study lies along very different lines. He was only one example of a type of men who had appeared in China, from time to time, long before his day. Education in China, from ancient times until very recently, has meant, almost entirely, education for governmental office. The ambition, even of peasant families, has been to produce a member who would fill such a place. But offices were limited. The result has been a great over-supply of men trained only to govern, able to do little else, but "out of work." Chinese literature is filled with their laments. Their ranks were swelled with men discharged because they had offended their superiors and others who had resigned as a protest against the manner in which affairs were conducted. This was occurring at least two centuries before Lao

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁶⁰ This, one of the classics, is usually interpreted as a book of divination, but has also been explained in a bewildering variety of other ways. It is an enigma. See Legge's preface, vol. XVI, *Sacred Books of the East*.

^{260a} Wilhelm, *Lao-tse und der Taoismus*, p. 56.

Tse.²⁶¹ The only proper and dignified course for such a scholar was to retire from the world, and to live a life bordering on that of a recluse, if he did not, in fact (as many did), become a veritable hermit.

Here we have all of the conditions for the rise of a new philosophy. The old philosophy of Sinism depended on the exercise of the technique of government, but that door was closed to these men. Could they admit themselves of no value in the world? Certainly not, if they were men! They *had* to rationalize their position. Several such rationalizations occur in the *Classics*. It is related that after Confucius had resigned his position in Lu, while he was travelling in search of another place, one of his disciples accosted a man working in a field, asking directions. The old man countered by asking who he was. Then he said:

"Disorder, like a swelling flood, spreads over the whole empire, and who is he that will change it *for you*? Than follow one who merely withdraws from this one and that one, had you not better follow those who have withdrawn from the world altogether?" *With this* he fell to covering up the seed. . . ²⁶²

Here is an embryonic philosophy performing a function similar to that of Lao Tse's system. But the example cited, and the others which occur in the *Classics*, are merely expressions of resignation, which leave the individual, after all, admitting failure and impotence. But it was the glory of Lao Tse to have the supreme intellectual daring to turn this debit into an asset. He had the genius to declare not only that inaction was the only proper course for the disappointed man, but that it was the only proper course for every person whatsoever—indeed, the recluse, apparently impotent, was actually the most effective man in the empire. Though seemingly obscure, the man living in retirement was really the greatest and most important man in the world. It must certainly be admitted that he accomplished a magnificent stroke when he succeeded, not merely in conceiving so novel an idea, but in actually causing it, eventually, to be accepted by a very considerable portion of the Chinese world.

Of course, the matter was not stated so plainly as it is here set forth. It was developed, in true philosophical style, through a long and most intricate train of hypotheses. But certain passages of the *Tao Tê King* reveal Lao Tse's purpose of self-justification to have been central in his thinking. It will be recalled that he was keeper

²⁶¹ Cf. *Shi* p. 324-25; p. 229. *An.* 18,5-6-7-8-9-10; 14,39.

²⁶² *An.* 18,6,3.

of the imperial archives. This was a position which gave him little, if any, opportunity to have a hand in the control of affairs. He was, however, a man of the keenest intellect, deeply concerned, as we know, with the evils of his day, and especially abhorrent of the wars of extermination which were going on between the Chinese themselves at the time. His impotence to alter the situation must have hurt him keenly. Finally, according to tradition, he decided that the only thing for him to do was to leave the world altogether. As he was on his way to retirement, he was asked to write down his wisdom as a heritage to the world. He wrote the *Tao Tê King*.

In this book he tells us that the Sages of old (of whom he considers himself a modern representative) were subtle, abstruse, and profound to a degree which language is powerless to describe.²⁶³ Those who follow the way which Lao Tse prescribes are always successful, even if they seem otherwise.²⁶⁴ To know oneself able to accomplish anything, but to hold oneself down to an inferior place, voluntarily to seem, indeed, the least important being in the empire—this proves that one really preserves within himself the primary virtue of the totality of the universe.²⁶⁵

Very few, Lao Tse declares, recognize his worth, and few understand him. Therein lies his glory. He is mistreated because he is a sage, and misunderstood by the rabble who can not see through his unpolished manner to the precious stones which fill his bosom.²⁶⁶ Other passages could be cited, but these will be sufficient evidence for anyone familiar with the psychological concepts of the "defense mechanism" and "compensation." Yet, while we may be convinced that Lao Tse received the first impulse to his system from such a source, that is no reason for undervaluing his philosophy. This psychological motive does not negate the intellectual brilliance with which he worked out his ideas, nor does it lessen their importance in Chinese history. Lao Tse is supremely significant for the reason that his thinking, in many ways antagonistic to traditional thought, broke up the rigid hold of the *old* Sinism on the intellectuals, and made possible a rethinking of problems which had been considered settled for all time. This led directly to many of the most important developments in Chinese thought.

²⁶³ *Tao Tê King* (hereafter *T.T.K.*) 15. My treatment of this work is based chiefly on Wiegner's translation in his *Taoisme*.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 28.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 70.

Lao Tse's chief concept was that of the *tao*, a familiar word which now has its meaning expanded somewhat. According to ancient Chinese ideas, all things were composed of *yin* and *yang*. When one pondered on the origin of things, what was more natural than to postulate a single source from which these two came? This is what Lao Tse did.²⁶⁷ He called this primeval existence "the *tao*." From this single substance, all things emanated. Yet they are still in contact with it, and, indeed, projections of it, like the tributaries of a river.²⁶⁸ Within this emanation there are centers of particular importance, such as certain powerful stars, mountains, etc. These are to be considered good if they are in proper relation to the whole, bad if out of harmony with it.²⁶⁹ This, it will be noted, differs little in its fundamental thought patterns from that philosophy of Sinism which we constructed without reference to Lao Tse.

But the concept of "the *tao*," as used by Lao Tse, has been adjudged an innovation in Chinese thought, something that must have come from the outside. We have seen that the idea of "the *tao*" or "the *tao* of Heaven," as a cosmically sanctioned plan of action, dates far back of Lao Tse. Further, there are places in the *Classics* where this concept seems already to be treated as if it were a substance.²⁷⁰ But what was the Chinese idea of substance? Have we not seen that the very "material" "five elements" were more nearly localizations of action-patterns than anything which the West would call "substance."^{270a}

Furthermore, the character *hsing*, "element," means "to walk, to move," and *tao* is literally a road or a path. In Watters' *Essays on the Chinese Language*, p. 155, he says, "In this sense (meaning "a highway") *tao* is sometimes replaced by *hsing*." An archaic form of the character *tao* was composed of *hsing* and another character (*Cf. ibid*, p. 153). Do not these ideas fit well together? Was not Lao Tse following the main stream of Chinese thought when he considered the *tao* to be the source from which the *yang* and the *yin*, the five *hsing*, and all other things had sprung?

It is probable that Lao Tse's profession as keeper of the archives had a strong influence on his conception of the *tao*. He had charge of the books of divination, and it was part of his duty to record

²⁶⁷ Granet, *Religion*, p. 143.

²⁶⁸ *T.T.K.*, 32.

²⁶⁹ Wieger, *Taoisme*, p. 10.

²⁷⁰ *Shu*, p. 261.

^{270a} *Cf. Men.* 4(2), 25-26; *Shu* pp. 70-71.

natural and celestial phenomena of any unusual character. It has been suggested by Prof. A. E. Haydon that this would inevitably have caused the processes of the cosmos to assume, in his thinking, an importance even greater than that which they possessed for every Chinese thinker. For Confucius, the statesman, the *tao* was, of course, primarily a political entity. For Lao Tse, the student of natural phenomena and divination, it was in the very nature of the case a cosmic concept.

This *tao* is described by a series of paradoxes. Doing nothing it accomplishes everything; without consciousness, it is the seat of the highest intelligence; exercising no forethought whatsoever, it governs all things. Much ingenuity has been, in my judgment, misused by some Western scholars who try to read into Lao Tse's words bits of abstruse profundity which never occurred to the Sage himself. Much of the *Tao Tê King* is so involved as to be scarcely translatable. We need not judge a philosopher to be wise in direct proportion to the degree in which he is impossible to understand.²⁷¹ The fact is that Lao Tse, in many places, deals with matter of which he himself (as he admits) has no clear conception.²⁷² It is a weakness, rather than a strength, in a philosophy, that its ultimate statement is a paradox; but the fatal fascination of the paradox for many minds is well known.

The first object of Lao Tse, as has been said, was to win distinction for the man who had renounced the world. He was to conform himself entirely to the *tao*, imitating it in every way.²⁷³ By this action, he appropriated to himself the prestige, the greatness, and the glory of the very source and being of the universe. Thus to imitate the *tao* would have meant, according to Lao Tse's own logic, to do nothing (*wu wei* 無爲). But every man who advocates a return to the natural demands for himself the right to define the "state of nature." Lao Tse's program for "doing nothing" is an exacting one. One must have few interests and few desires; he must shun luxury; he must be guided by charity, simplicity, humility; he must be equally benevolent to the good and to the bad, and must trust the insincere as implicitly as he trusts those who have proved faithful.²⁷⁴ One must wish for nothing, for then

²⁷¹ Cf. Wilhelm, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁷² *T.T.K.* 54.

²⁷³ *T.T.K.* 54.

²⁷⁴ *T.T.K.* 19; 53; 67; 8; 49.

he will not be disappointed; he must strive for nothing, for then all things will spontaneously come to him.²⁷⁵ (I suggest in passing that this idea, that self-abasement is the road to fame and neglect of profit is the road to riches, may be traceable in part to what Granet has indicated as the "potlatch" idea in China,²⁷⁶ and to that idea if "reciprocity" as a cosmic and ethical necessity, which pervades old Sinism).²⁷⁷

Lao Tse sets himself in absolute opposition to Confucius' recommendation that the person seeking understanding should study; study, he asserts, is worse than a waste of time, for it multiplies harmful notions. The proper way is to meditate on the *tao*.²⁷⁸ This Laoist meditation may have been a genuine mystic trance, although this has not been proved, and is certainly not clear on the basis of the *Tao Tê King*.

It is evident that the techniques of Lao Tse and of Confucius were very different. The similarity of their basic metaphysic has been obscured as a result of the opposition of their practical teachings. The disciples of the two men were constantly at war, if only with words. Even in the *Tao Tê King* and in the *Analects* we find barbed shafts which, though they did not name each other, Confucius and Lao Tse certainly intended to exchange. Lao Tse declares that virtue and righteousness, filial piety and paternal affection (all dear to the heart of Confucius), were never heard of until after the world had fallen into disorder; the way to regain that natural harmony which is the only hope of the world is to dispense with all of these artificial, and therefore vain, attempts to win felicity.²⁷⁹ The Confucian politician, Lao Tse says, deems himself the born master and the professional saviour of all things.²⁸⁰ Confucius returns his fire no less shrewdly.²⁸¹

On the other hand, the similarity of the two philosophies stands out in bold relief when we take up Lao Tse's technique for political control. To be sure, his dictum to "empty the minds and fill the stomachs, enfeeble the initiative and strengthen the backs" of men,

²⁷⁵ *T.T.K.* 7; 9; 13; 15.

²⁷⁶ Granet, *Dances*, p. 135, pp. 583-85.

²⁷⁷ *An.* 15,23; *Li Ki* (in *S.B.E.*) p. 65.

²⁷⁸ *T.T.K.* 48; 1.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 18; 19.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁸¹ *An.* 9,26; 14,46; 15,30; 17,1,2; 17,22; 17,8,3. Cf. also *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 11,1; 13,1.

and to keep the people in "ignorance and apathy"²⁸² conflicts with Confucius. In similar opposition stands his statement that the (Laoist) sage is not beneficent to the people whom he governs, but treats them as mere pawns, since the sage must imitate destiny, and destiny shows not the slightest regard for human concerns.²⁸³ This last is a heroic bit of philosophizing which seems to have been thrown in "for good measure," since it stands in direct contradiction to other portions of the document.²⁸⁴

Lao Tse gives several formulas for government in various chapters. Let us start with those which seem least like that of Confucius. We are told that the empire is an extremely delicate mechanism, with which one has no business to meddle. The emperor and his ministers and assistants in the government were not put in their places to interfere; their duty is to meditate on the *tao*.²⁸⁵ The Laoist sage must occupy no position in the government save that of chief of all the officers, exercising a general supervision over them all but not bothering about any details.²⁸⁶ This supports my hypothesis that Lao Tse's aim was rather to exalt the members of a very small group, than to save men in general, since the number who could occupy such a position was strictly limited. In his position as chief of the officers, the sage is to allow all beings to function according to their nature, without restraint, *except* that he is to repress such harmful excesses as power, wealth, and ambition!²⁸⁷

But the *reductio ad absurdum* comes when Lao Tse tells us, in Chapter 80, what he would do "if he were king." He would be very careful indeed to keep capable men out of office (since they would try to use their intelligence, and spoil things). He would prevent his subjects from travelling, and make them so afraid of accidents and death that they would not dare set foot on a boat, nor even mount a carriage. He would forbid all use of arms. He would force them to give up all learning, to forget how to write, and to return to the ancient system of knotting cords for what few records they wished to keep. He would sever all communications, so that while his people could hear the crowing of the

²⁸² *T.T.K.* 3; 65.

²⁸³ *Ibid.* 5.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 8; 49; 60; 67.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 29; 2; 62.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 28.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 29.

cocks and the barking of the dogs of neighboring villages, they would die without knowing anything more about them. Thus he would make them healthy, agreeable, and peaceful. The chief difference between the avowed regulation of Confucius, and the policy of allowing utter freedom which Lao Tse preached, is that the latter eventuates in a much more rigid despotism. The practical meaning of Lao Tse's commandment to "do nothing" (contrary to nature) is identical with that of Confucius' maxim "Follow the *tao* of Heaven."

It is fruitless to attempt to account for Chapter 80 of the *Tao Tê King*, just outlined, as the outcome of any system of metaphysics. It is the result, rather, of the complete disgust with the civilization of his day, and the great abhorrence of war and bloodshed, which Lao Tse had come to acquire. Similarly, it was not his metaphysics primarily, but his fear of death and his desire to live, which account for the techniques for great prolongation of life which we find elaborated even in Lao Tse's own writing. This is the background of the Laoist *hsien* (geni or "immortal") concept, and the Laoist alchemy which were elaborated in great detail in later books, and soon came to occupy the center of the stage in connection with the Laoist doctrines. But these things are peripheral to Sinism, and we must come back to the main line.

As a final statement, let it be said that the difference between Confucius and Lao Tse was not chiefly one of world-view, nor even, if we look closely, of technique;²⁸⁸ the difference was, rather, that Confucius was, first of all, a practical statesman seeking to save the world, while Lao Tse was a disheartened philosopher, despairing of the world and fleeing from it, yet driven by the imperative necessity of vindicating the worth of his own personality; in the process of rehabilitating the latter, he achieved a technique for overcoming his despair of the world.

Yang Chu was a personal disciple of Lao Tse. Wilhelm²⁸⁹ opines that he did not understand the Sage very well. On the contrary, I think he understood the logical outcome of Lao Tse's position better than did Lao Tse himself. If the universe was a mechanism so ordered as best to run itself without interference, then why bother with it in any way? And if the thing to do was to be natural, then why not satisfy one's desires, and live as happily as possible,

²⁸⁸ Compare *T.T.K.* 17; *An.* 13,6; *Men.* 7(1),5.

²⁸⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

without regret? Yang Chu is usually described as a fatalist, an "Epicurean," and an egoist.²⁹⁰ He has been represented more harshly than justly by some writers to whom these points of view are scandalous.

The life of Chuang Tse, the most famous of Lao Tse's successors as champion of Laoism, is little known, probably because of his deliberate and successful attempt to live in that obscurity which the Master had preached. An amusing story is related concerning the reply which he gave to emissaries sent to ask him to become a minister at the court of the king of Ch'ou. They found him fishing, and when they had delivered their message, he replied, without turning his head: "I have heard that there is, at your court, a tortoise, sacrificed three thousand years ago, and used for divination. Do you think that tortoise would prefer to be at the court, or to be here, wagging his tail in the mud?" The emissaries said that, of course, he would prefer to be wagging his tail in the mud. "So would I," replied Chuang Tse.²⁹¹

Himself apparently a younger contemporary of Mencius, Chuang Tse devoted himself to the task of expanding and systematising the philosophy of the *Tao Tê King*, and to refuting the teachings of the members of the Confucian school. He did this with great keenness, and a wealth of clever anecdote. He expressed the greatest admiration for Confucius himself, whom he held to have been converted to Laoism in his sixtieth year. This story seems highly dubious, but it was a master stroke on Chuang Tse's part, whether or not he executed it with conscious guile. Chuang Tse is credited with having performed for Laoism the same service of wide dissemination which Mencius did for the teachings of Confucius.

Lieh Tse is the name given to a book of Laoist writings, of importance and size second only to that bearing the name of Chuang Tse. *Lieh Tse* has also been considered to be the name of an early Laoist, whom Wiegner believes was born in the latter half of the fifth century B. C. The existence of such a figure is in very great doubt, however, and a prevalent opinion is that the name was used to cover a compilation of Laoist writings of various dates, some of them early. Wilhelm says that the redaction of the book can not be placed earlier than the fourth century A.D.²⁹² It will be

²⁹⁰ The sources for Yang Chu are *Lieh Tse*, chaps. 6-7 (see Wiegner's *Taoisme*, v. II), and *Men.* 3(2),9; 7(1),26; 7(2),26.

²⁹¹ *Chuang Tse*, Chap. 17 (see Wiegner, *Taoisme*, v. II, p. 347).

²⁹² Wilhelm, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-3.

noted that Buddhism had been in China, at that time, for more than two centuries. Wilhelm says:

Charakteristisch ist, dass in Form von Gleichnissen manche Geschichten erzählt werden, die z.T. ins Wunderbare spielen und die Kraft einer auf Vereinheitlichung gerichteten Yoga-praxis zeigen sollen.²⁹³

We are now in position to return to the consideration of Wieger's contention that Laoism must have resulted from a knowledge by Lao Tse of the philosophy of the Indian *Upanishads*. But in his reconstruction of early Laoism, Wieger has used both *Lieh Tse* and *Chuang Tse* along with, and on the same basis as the writings of Lao Tse. On this basis, he makes a picture which does, indeed, show great similarities to India. I am willing to admit that some Indian influences *might* have reached Chuang Tse, and, on Wilhelm's dating of *Lieh Tse*, it is certain that that book must have been influenced by Indian thought, and especially Buddhism. But the problem of Laoism is fundamentally a problem of origin, and must be solved on the basis of Lao Tse. He does not show any clear signs of Indian influence; his thought is a logical development of old Sinism. Laoism must, therefore, be considered a development, chiefly and probably entirely, of indigenous Chinese thought.

²⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 103.