

New Translations of the Old Master(s)

Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts. Translated, with an Introduction and Commentary, by Robert G. Henricks. New York: Balantine, 1989. Pp. xxxi + 282.

The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation with Commentary. By Ellen M. Chen. New York: Paragon House, 1989. Pp. xi + 274.

Tao Te Ching; "The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way," Lao Tzu: An Entirely New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Manuscripts. Translated, annotated, and with Afterword by Victor H. Mair. Woodcuts by Dan Heitkamp. New York: Bantam Books, 1990. Pp. xvi + 168.

Almost twenty years ago, near the village of Ma-wang-tui in Hunan province, archaeologists began to excavate the tomb of the son of the Prime Minister of Changsha, who lived in the early years of the former Han dynasty. In terms of the Western calendar, he was buried on the fourth of April in the year 168 B.C.E. An inventory slip found in the tomb lists, among other funerary items, fifty-one ancient Chinese texts. Most of the texts, now known as the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts, are written on silk scrolls, although a few are recorded on strips of bamboo or wood.

The Ma-wang-tui manuscripts include a score of previously unknown texts on political philosophy, medicine, and astronomy. Early copies of familiar texts were also discovered. Among them was a copy of an invaluable historical narrative known to all students of Chinese history as the Chan-kuo Ts'e or Intrigues of the Warring States. Included in this copy are sixteen chapters previously unknown to scholars! The earliest extant copy of the I Ching or Book of Changes was uncovered as well. It is accompanied by four commentaries also unmentioned, so far as modern scholars know, by any source in China's vast textual tradition. Finally, hidden within this cache of textual treasures, for lovers of the path of virtue, were two separate manuscripts of the Lao Tzu or, as it later came to be known, the Tao Te Ching.

The first manuscript contains what scholars now call the "A" text. It is written in an ancient style of Chinese calligraphy known as "small seal." Small-seal script was commonly written with a brush on strips of bamboo. These could be bound together with a leather thong like keys on a ring. Each strip of bamboo was like a page in a prototype of what we now call a book. The second manuscript, containing the "B" text, is written in the more modern "clerical" script which superseded small-seal script in the early years of the Han. (See Table 1.) Both texts were copied out on silk scrolls rather than bamboo strips. Except for occasional lacunae in the texts where the silk had deteriorated, the manuscripts were in surprisingly good condition.

Because the A text does not avoid the taboo against using the personal name "Pang" of the Han dynasty's first emperor, Liu Pang, there is little doubt that it was copied prior to his rise to power in 206 B.C.E. The B text, on the other hand, avoids the use of "Pang" but observes no taboo against using "Ying" and "Heng." Thus it must have been written after the death of Liu Pang (r. 206-194 B.C.E.) but before the rise to power of the second and third emperors: Liu Ying (r. 194-187 B.C.E.) and Liu Heng (r. 179-156

B.C.E.). Because the date of these two texts can be determined so precisely, some Sinologists have concluded that they date back at least five hundred years earlier than the so-called "received" text of the Lao Tzu.

The received text is the one on which the commentaries of Hsiangerh, Wang Pi, and Ho-shang Kung were based in the third century. The Wang Pi (d. 249 C.E.) version of the received text came to be favored by most scholars even though it differs only slightly from the other two. Almost all previous translations into Western languages have been based on the Wang Pi version of the received text. But since it was subject to almost two millennia of commentary and interpretation--some would add, distortion and obfuscation--a new translation of the Ma-wang-tui texts into English seemed necessary to Sinologists who wanted to take a fresh look at things.

The first to appear in English was Robert G. Henricks' *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*. Because of its systematic presentation it is likely to be the touchstone for scholars of Chinese thought and language for years to come. The work has two parts. The first consists of Henricks' translation alone. The second reprints the A and B texts side by side on the right-hand page facing Henricks' translation, notes, and commentary, which are on the left. The translation is based on the B text for all except seventeen chapters, where the A text is more complete. Henricks fills any lacunae in a given text by referring to the appropriate place in its counterpart. If the counterpart text fills the gap at that place, the translation appears in boldface type. If both are blank, Henricks bases his translation on the corresponding place in the received text, and the translation appears in italics.

In his introduction, Henricks claims that the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts "do not differ in any radical way" from the received text. There are no extra or missing chapters. In some cases a different word or phrase is used, but their sense is usually the same. In other places a word, phrase, or even a whole line is missing from a passage, but the gap is usually not enough to change dramatically its sense. The texts also differ with regard to chapter divisions as well as their order. According to Henricks, overall the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts are more grammatical and precise than the received version. But in the final analysis, he concedes, ". . . there is nothing in the Ma-wang-tui texts that would lead us to understand the philosophy of the text in a radically new way" (p. xv). This is disappointing. If there is nothing new in the Ma-wang-tui texts, why bother to translate them?

In the introduction to her own new translation, Ellen M. Chen denies the need for a new translation of the Tao Te Ching based on the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts. She conjectures that Wang Pi ". . . could have been using a text version older than the Ma-wang-tui texts" (p. 44). Unfortunately, Chen says little to support her implication that the received text is older than the Ma-wang-tui text. Yet despite the lack of evidence, she proceeds as if it were older. For she ranks the importance of the extant versions of Lao Tzu, including the Ma-wang-tui texts, in an order which reverses Henricks'.

Henricks consults the received text only where there are lacunae at identical places in both Ma-wang-tui manuscripts. His reasons are archaeological. We know the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts were copied some time prior to 196 B.C.E. Chen, on the contrary, relies mostly on the Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung versions of the received text. Only where there are "textual uncertainties" in it does she turn to the Ma-wang-tui

manuscripts. Unfortunately, her reasons are less cogent. We do not know when the received text on which Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung based their commentaries was copied. But, of course, it would amount to an argumentum ad ignorantiam to conclude that the received text was copied prior to the Ma-wang-tui texts.

Chen's translation is guided by her conviction that the Tao Te Ching is "fundamentally a religious text." Whether or not this is so, however, depends in large measure on how the concept of a religious text is cashed out. In a rambling introductory essay she tries to pin down themes which, in her opinion, make a text religious. Among them are the preservation of life, spiritual transcendence, and the promise of salvation. The preservation of life is said to be the goal of archaic "animistic" religions while transcendence is the aim of "high religions" like Christianity and Hinduism.

Chen admits that there are mystical themes in the Tao Te Ching, but she thinks that ". . . its ultimate reality, Tao, is not posited as transcending the physical world" (p. 40). Rather, she claims that the work is religious in the archaic animistic sense. For it contains themes which view the natural world as the seat of sacred and mysterious forces: "The Tao Te Ching, not religious in the commonly accepted meaning of religion as human transcendence of the world, as a work of fundamental ontology calling humans back to the remembrance of the ground for the peace and harmony of all beings, furnishes us with a profound religious vision" (p. 24). Although Western religions emphasize the transcendence of the sacred, according to Chen the religious vision of the Tao Te Ching is that "the divine" is immanent in nature.

No one could deny that there are religious themes in the Tao Te Ching. But some of them are religious in precisely the sense that Chen disputes, namely: they affirm some "ultimate reality" which transcends both heaven and earth. Consider, for example, Chen's translation of the first stanza of chapter twenty-five:

There was something nebulous existing,

Born before heaven and earth.

Silent, empty,

Standing alone, altering not,

Moving cyclically without becoming exhausted,

Which may be called the mother of all under heaven. (P. 116)

Here the received text inserts a line that does not appear in the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts. Line five above is problematic. It is absent from both the A and the B texts. Henricks bases his translation on the B text of the manuscripts:

It stands on its own and doesn't change,

It can be regarded as the mother of Heaven and Earth. (P. 77)

Without the problematic line inserted between them, these two lines clearly suggest a single, invariant, transcendent reality prior to heaven and earth yet out of whose matrix both heaven and earth are born. Henricks comments, "The Way in a sense is like a great womb: it is empty and devoid in itself of differentiation, one in essence; yet somehow it contains all things in seedlike or embryo form, and all things 'emerge' from the Tao in Creation as babies emerge from their mothers" (pp. xvii-xviii).

In the received text the problematic line is ambiguous, since the character "chou" can mean "all around," "everywhere," on the one hand, or "to go around," "to encircle," on the other. Wing-tsit Chan translates the passage: "It operates everywhere and is free from damage." [1] D.C. Lau, however, renders the passage: "Goes round and does not weary." [2] It is hard to say who is right on this matter. Lau's "Goes round and does not weary" is more elegant than Chen's "Moving cyclically without becoming exhausted." Both, in any case, express the same idea, and that idea renders the entire passage inconsistent!

In her commentary on this passage, Chen argues that her translation "altering not" in line four cannot be interpreted as "changeless stasis." She bases her argument on the problematic line. The Tao cannot be static since, based on her reading of this line, it is "cyclical." She further claims that the phases of that cycle are indicated in the very next stanza:

I know not its name,

I give its alias, Tao.

If forced to picture it,

I say it is "great."

To say it is "great" is to say it is "moving away,"

To say it is "moving away" is to say it is "far away,"

To say it is "far away" is to say it is "returning." (P. 116)

Chen further conjectures that there are four phases of the cycle of the Way; they are "great," "moving away," "far away," and "returning." She then interprets these phases as the seasons and, finally, given all these assumptions, concludes, "This chapter's most important contribution is in clearly delineating Tao's life as a four-state cyclical movement corresponding to the four seasons of the year, again confirming Taoism as a nature mysticism, and the life of the divine in Taoism as the life and death of the divine in nature" (p. 117; my emphasis).

Clearly Chen is reaching for her favored interpretation here. She ignores an obvious question. If Tao "stands alone" and "alters not," how can it "move cyclically" through the seasons or, for that matter, any other cycle of phases? To preserve the consistency of this passage in the received text it appears necessary to render the problematic line in a way that is closer to Chan's translation. From a stricter

methodological point of view, however, it would be preferable to ignore the problematic line completely. After all, it is missing in the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts!

Because Chen ignores the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts, she actually misses opportunities to bolster her case that the Tao Te Ching lacks passages which suggest transcendent religious themes. For example, she translates the last line of chapter thirty-three as follows: "One who dies without perishing has longevity" (p. 135). The paradoxical character of this translation is striking. In the preface to his translation of the Ma-wang-tui texts Victor Mair points out that to translate this line as Chen does, ". . . does not really make sense even in a religious Taoist context" (p. xii). If Chen is right, if the Tao Te Ching lacks transcendent religious themes, this passage cannot be given a "higher" Platonic reading. It cannot be construed, for example, as suggesting that there is a soul which never perishes although the flesh soon decays, and so on. Yet Chen's translation, if it is to make any sense at all, must be amenable to some such account.

The problem with Chen's translation of this passage is that it rests on a mistaken character. The character in the received text, namely, "wang," although correctly translated by Chen as "to perish," is different from another character "wang" which occurs in the same place in the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts. The character which occurs in the latter should be translated "to forget." In modern Mandarin, both characters are pronounced "wang," and they were probably homophonous in classical Chinese as well. Since both characters are also written similarly, it is likely that a scribe confused the former for the latter. Somehow that confusion found its way into the canonical received text.

Based on the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts, Mair translates the line: "To die but not be forgotten is longevity" (p. 100; my emphasis). Henricks is close to Mair: "To die but not be forgotten--that's [true] longevity" (Henricks, p. 85). Unlike Chen's translation, Mair's and Henricks' can be accommodated by a naturalistic philosophy which requires no reference to anything transcendental.

It cannot be denied that religious sentiment is expressed in the Tao Te Ching and that some passages even reach for obscure transcendental themes. Yet these themes are but a fraction of the work's overall philosophical richness. Most passages are concerned with ethical, political, and aesthetic matters. Some are anti-Confucian. Others warn against too much ambition. A few counsel people to be simple rather than sophisticated, rural instead of urbane. A preference is expressed for bumpkin wisdom rather than crafted intellection. People are encouraged to be without desire, to weaken their aversions, to control their aggressive instincts, and to let their lives follow a course that is more in harmony with nature than with the laws and ambitions of civil society.

Other passages may be understood as advice to the ruler. Not only must he know how to advance, but he needs to learn when and how to yield. In fighting an offensive battle, knowing when to stop and how to withdraw is crucial. In ruling a state, too much control only backfires. Thus the ruler must minimize his own sense of self-importance. He must learn how to let go, and not over-manage. For only when affairs are allowed to take their course will there be tranquility, harmony, simplicity, and longevity in the lives of the people. Peace is superior to war. And although the state has weapons adequate for its own defence, they are never used.

Do these themes add up to a "religious vision?" Do they even amount, as Chen further claims, to a single, unified, "internally consistent" vision? By insisting on "the internal consistency of the text and the organic connection of its various chapters" (p. ix), Chen intends to sharpen the old saw that the Tao Te Ching sprang from the hand of a single author but not from the hands or mouths of many. She conjectures that "the thought contained in it [the Lao Tzu] has such unity that it certainly is not merely a loose collection of ancient sayings culled from pre-Ch'in texts" (p. 19). Is Chen suggesting that Lao Tzu was a historical figure?

The biography of Lao Tzu is recorded in the Records of the Historian, by Ssu-Ma Ch'ien (1357-937 B.C.E.). There, Lao Tzu, the "Old Boy" or "Old Master," is said to have been one Lao Tan, the chief archivist for the imperial court of the Chou dynasty. Confucius is said to have consulted him about the rites. As an old man he left Chou to find seclusion. Before wandering off never again to be seen, the guard at the gate asked him to write down his thoughts. He complied, leaving behind the Tao Te Ching.

Chen rejects the historicity of Ssu Ma-ch'ien's account on the grounds that the Tao Te Ching is anti-Confucian and thus could not have been written prior to the rise of the Confucian school. She even admits, "we may not be able to determine with complete certainty who Lao Tzu was and when he lived" (p. 5). Why, then, does she insist that a single individual was the work's author? She says precious little to substantiate this claim except to conjecture that if the work had more than one author it would lack thematic unity. But could an editor not compile the works of different poets with an eye toward consistency? Moreover, are all the chapters of the Tao Te Ching, chapters five and eighty-one, for example, consistent?

Chen's most persuasive appeal for the single-author thesis amounts to an argumentum ad verecundiam. At her side stands the great Sinologist Bernhard Karlgren, who, in a study of the work's poetical parts in the early 1930s, reached the conclusion that it is "mainly the work of one person" (Chen, p. 19). In the years since the discovery of the Ma-wang-tui texts, however, Sinologists of equal stature have contradicted these claims for reasons that are both cogent and persuasive.

Victor Mair, for example, remarks, "I view the core of the Tao Te Ching as having derived from oral tradition rather than from a single author" (Mair, p. xii). It is Mair's view that the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts of the Lao Tzu, "preserve more faithfully many features of the oral wisdom on which it was based" (p. xiii). Indeed, he tells us, this is the reason why he undertook to translate them in the first place. In the afterward to his translation, Mair concurs with Chen's judgment that there is no reliable evidence for the identity of Lao Tzu. But instead of a single unknown author, he concludes that there were many unknown authors. Some of them may have lived as long ago as the seventh century B.C.E. Some, he suggests, might even have lived in India. But their thoughts could have found their way into China through traders, wandering mendicants, and professional storytellers. Mair estimates the period of oral composition of the Lao Tzu to be around 650 to 350 B.C.E. Around the end of the third century B.C.E., these sayings were collected and compiled into a work very similar in content to the Ma-wang-tui texts of the Lao Tzu.[3]

It is precisely because Mair is aware that much of the poetry of the Lao Tzu originated during a period of oral composition that his translations work so well. He manages to sort out the essence from the dross. The very format of his translations keeps the editorial insertions and pedestrian commentary of the text's compilers separate from its poetic core.

From a poetic point of view most of Mair's translations are superior to Henricks'. Many flow like the Tao itself. "Rippling is the Way, flowing left and right!" translates Mair (p. 101). But Henricks manages only: "The Way floats and drifts; It can go left and right" (Henricks, p. 86).

Particularly insightful are Mair's translations of passages written, it would seem, to encourage stoic indifference in the practice of Yogic concentration:

Stopple the orifices of your heart,

Close your doors;

your whole life will not suffer.

Open the gate of your heart,

Meddle with affairs:

your whole life you will be beyond salvation. (P. 21)

Because Henricks misses the reference to Yoga, his translation is obscure, leaving the reader to grope for its significance:

Block up the holes;

Close the doors;

And till the end of your life you'll not labor.

Open the holes;

Meddle in affairs;

And till the end of your life you'll not be saved. (P. 21)

All three of the works considered here are accompanied by useful notes, bibliographies, and propaedeutic essays. Chen's introduction, for example, weaves together a panoply of classical scholarship, including material from the Records of the Historian, the Book of Rites, the I Ching, and so on. Her commentary on the individual chapters, although ponderous at points, includes useful discussions of problematic Chinese characters, insightful intratextual comparisons and contrasts, and copious references to classical as well as modern Chinese and Western sources, in addition to a useful Chinese glossary.

Henricks' "Comments and Notes" on the individual chapters are terse but well written and insightful. He cites, analyzes, and evaluates important variations of the A, B, and received (standard) texts. References to the important findings and opinions of other Sinologists and classical scholars are also discussed. Henricks' introductory essay, "The Philosophy of Lao-Tzu," is also insightful. In it he elegantly explains a number of fundamental themes. We must, for example, all take our places on the field of adult endeavor. Yet, as we do so, we leave behind innocence, spontaneous sincerity, and a feeling of mystical encompassment. "Returning to the Way," he rightly points out, paradoxically requires returning to childhood.

The most provocative claims, yet promising directions, for future scholastic endeavor on the Tao Te Ching are issued by Mair in the afterward to his translation. There he contends, "all of mankind--including China--has been continuously interacting across the face of the globe since the origin of the species" (p. 147). In particular, he maintains that there is evidence that many sea and overland trade routes flourished between India and China well before the sayings of the old masters were ever written down. If this is so, then in addition to silk, tea, or precious metals, an exchange of music, verse, and ideas also occurred.

In the notes to his translation, Mair meticulously documents a number of parallels between Yoga and Taoism, and in his Afterword he devotes a short essay to the subject. Consider the very concept of the Tao. It is that about which, strictly speaking, nothing can be said. It is everywhere, yet nowhere. It is self-creating, yet it is the matrix of all that ever is. It transcends both heaven and earth, yet it is immanent in all things. This description of Tao could just as well be a description for Brahman, the central principle of Indian philosophy and religion. There is no room to comment here on the many points of connection that Mair notes between the Tao Te Ching and the Upanishads. Yet it is appropriate to suggest that by his scholarship he has opened up new territory in the field of Asian studies that scholars will be pursuing for years to come.

Notes

1 - Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 152.

2 - D.C. Lau, trans. and comment., *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 82.

3 - For a more thorough discussion of Mair's theories about the Tao Te Ching, see his monograph "[The] File [on the Cosmic] Track [and Individual] Dough[tiness]: Introduction and Notes for a Translation of the Ma-wang-tui Manuscripts of the Lao Tzu [Old Master]," in *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 20 (October 1990). Available through the Department of Oriental Studies, The University of Pennsylvania.

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