

BOOK REVIEW

Livia Kohn. *The Taoist Experience*. State University of New York Press, 1993. pp. 391.

Once again David Hall and Roger Ames, the SUNY Asian Philosophy editors, have provided students of Chinese philosophy and religion with a significant text. Livia Kohn has recently produced a number of texts, presenting her translations and analysis of Taoist literature. *The Taoist Experience* is the first attempt, in English translation, to produce an anthology of diverse Taoist literature spanning nearly two-thousand years, and it will undoubtedly serve many students of Taoism before it is replaced by more comprehensive studies.

In this work Livia Kohn set out to fill a gap in Taoist scholarship by providing “. . . an easy and yet thorough introduction to the major concepts, doctrines, and practices of Taoism, presenting the philosophy of the ancients as much as the practices and ideas of Taoists today” (p. 2). In Taoist style, as with Chuang Tzu’s “goblet words,” once the cup is filled, it must flip over and become empty; I can only hope that Livia Kohn’s attainment recognizes the importance of this emptying process for that will be the focus of my review.

The book is divided into four parts, consisting of three chapters each; each of which is subdivided into four, totaling forty-eight sections. Each part, chapter and subsection begins with a brief introduction which discusses, sometimes analyzes, the passages to follow. The introductory comments before the respective passages also contain suggestions for further readings. Although the text is neatly divided in numerical symmetry, the logic of the content of the chapters is not at all clear. In addition to the twelve chapters, the work contains a seven page introduction to the history of Taoism, a list of the Chinese works translated in the text, a thirteen page bibliography, and a six page index. The list of

Journal of Chinese Philosophy 22 (1995) 239-244

Copyright ©1995 by Dialogue Publishing Company, Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A.

Chinese texts translated contains fifty-one titles; some of these have more than one passage so that there are sixty-three total passages presented. The book is enhanced by forty figures mostly copies of wood block prints of Taoist diagrams or pictures of the immortals and masters extracted from the original sources, regrettably there is no list of these figures. A major shortcoming of this work is that there is no glossary of Chinese terms, and there are no notes. The lack of notes clearly gives one the impression that the text is not meant for scholarly study. Without explanation Pinyin transliteration is used except for "Tao," "Taoist," and "Taoism," however, without consistency, e.g. *Daode jing* and other titles containing the term Tao are given in Pinyin.

The first part provides translations of Taoist literature on "The Tao," but in fact it is only the first two sections, "The Tao That Can't be Told" and "The Tao in the World," which are dedicated to that topic. The other two sections, "Pure and Tranquil" and "Ineffable Knowledge," discuss one's relationship to the Tao. Chapter two titled "Creation," presents four sections only loosely related to the topic. The third chapter entitled "The Teachings" is a pastiche of disconnected material on "The Three Caverns," "The Transformations of Laozi," "The Path," and "The Way to Complete Perfection."

Part two is dedicated to the topic of "Long Life." Chapter four, entitled "Discipline," contains another set of disjointed themes, e.g. "Precepts and Prescriptions," "Protective Measures," "How To Be Taught," and "Passing the Test." While Chapter five "Physical Practices" actually does relate to the practices of attaining long life; it discusses such topics as breath control, gymnastics, drugs and diets, and sexual techniques. Chapter six, having little to do with long life discusses the topic of "The Cosmic Body." The four sections of chapter six do elaborate the theme of the Taoist body.

Part Three, "Eternal Vision," has three rather disconnected chapters on "the One," "Insight Practice" and "Ecstatic Excursions." The subsections again present a disconnected array of materials.

Part Four on "Immortality" contains three chapters directly related

to that theme, namely, the "Immortal Personality," "Ascension," and the "Immortal Life." The subsections of these chapters relate closely to those themes.

Allow me to confine my critique to the philosophical passages in the text. Two major problems immediately leap from the pages when Kohn translates the *Laozi: Daode jing (Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching)*—ineffability, and transcendental externalism.

The primary danger that Kohn must inevitably encounter by way of criticism is that the attempts to translate a wide range of material over an 1800 year time span. There is a strong inverse relationship between the readability of the book and its accuracy in translation. That is, the more coherent the translations and especially the more commonalities in translation of such historically diverse materials, then the less likely the translation is accurate.

Kohn begins the study with the old "parting of the way" distinction that early (Lao-Zhuang) Taoism is philosophy, and later Celestial Master and other teachings constitute Taoist religion. She does not really establish this as a fact but assumes it.¹ If there is such a marked distinction to be drawn, then why does she translate the ancient philosophical material in the same voice as the later religious doctrine? What I am proposing is that Kohn has either conveniently and anachronistically read the concept of "eternal" from later "Taoist" sources backward into the *Daode jing* or more likely she has imported "externalism" from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sources. In this way she paraphrases that text as saying: "'Long life and eternal vision' is the way in which the *Daode jing* already describes the central concern for the Tao" (p. 2). Then concept of "eternal" especially as a philosophical term carries with it the connotation of unchanging and everlasting. Such expressions as eternal, especially in the sense of unchanging and everlasting, might have some application in translating Tang dynasty texts after Buddhist Heterodox teachings of externalism had entered China. Before the philosophical concepts of "eternal" and "transcendence" enter China from South and West Asia, those terms are inappropriate.

In introducing the concept of the Tao, Kohn makes a number of claims:

The Tao is ineffable and beyond human comprehension. . . . The Tao . . . can be described as the organic order underlying and structuring and pervading all existence. . . . The Tao cannot be described in ordinary language, since language by its very nature is part of the realm of discrimination and knowledge that the Tao transcends. . . . The Tao is transcendent and yet immanent" (p. 11).

These characteristics (eternal, transcendent, underlying structure, ineffable and beyond human knowledge) are commonplace in Babylonian, Persian, Hebrew, and Hindu traditions, but they do not properly describe the Tao. Kohn has fallen into an old trap of explaining Tao as if it were a Persian high god. In the *Daode jing*, Tao is often described as process, especially that of returning. The character *chang* (*ch'ang*) which Kohn translates as "eternal" would be better rendered as "constant" in the sense of regularity. Oddly enough, when the character *chang* appears in texts of a later period, such as the *Qingjing jing* (The Scripture of Purity and Tranquility), which exhibit evidence of Buddhist influence and the concept of "eternal" might have some bearing. Kohn does not translate it as eternal but as "always" or "permanence." This is another point — the reader must take note that expressions and terminology are not rendered consistently. Although it is surely a misunderstanding that each occurrence of an expression or term must always be rendered in the same fashion (for surely the context will vary the meaning of an expression), nevertheless a good translation should strive for some degree of precision. When context warrants a variant translation, then the reader should be informed; if not with a note, at least with a parenthetical transliteration.

In addition to taking a great deal of poetic license with the translation, Kohn omits material intentionally and unintentionally. For example, I compared her translation of the *Qingjing jing* with the Chinese

text. The Chinese text is believed to be a revealed scripture and begins "Lord Lao said" (Lao Chun *yüeth*) and that expression appears again about three quarters of the way through that short text; it should open the fourth stanza on page 28. Kohn did not translate that expression. In what Kohn renders as the third stanza of the *Qingjing jing*, the fourth line ("The male is pure, the female is turbid.") is missing (p. 25). The sixty stanza should begin "People are able . . ." (*jen neng*), but this has been omitted. The last stanza on page 27 begins "In true tranquility, . . .", but the Chinese reads "in true permanence" (*zhen chang*) which she does properly render in the next line. The expression *zhong sheng* (literally the various forms of life) is rendered first as "myriad beings" and then as "people" (p. 28). The expression *bu ming dao de* (literally "cannot be called Tao and virtue") is rendered as "[h]ave nothing to do with the Tao and the Virtue" (p. 28). The character *de* ("to obtain, to realize") and the binome *zi de* (self-realize) have a technical meaning in Taoist literature. The binome *zi de* appears in the last stanza of the *Qingjing jing*, but Kohn translates it as "naturally" (p. 29) which is the way she rendered *zi ran* (p. 27). After finding so many errors and discrepancies in her translation of such a short and simple text as the *Qingjing jing*, I am leery of her translations of the complex and abstruse alchemical and meditative texts. Although readers interested in Taoist literature have few choices and will have to read Kohn's work, they should be cautious in forming opinions based on her translations alone. It is only natural that errors will abound in such an ambitious project as the *Taoist Experience*. Read with caution, this work is of great value.

JAMES SELLMANN

UNIVERSITY OF GUAM

NOTES

1. I prefer to argue against the parting of the way proposal and would cite the "spiritual" nature of the Lao-Zhuang texts and the use of them by the Celestial Masters in introducing the initiate to "Taoism" as evidence that both early and later Taoism are religio-philosophical in nature. Kohn overlooks the chanting of the *Daode jing* at Han Wu Di's court long before the Heavenly Masters, and the relationship between alchemy and Lao-Zhuang at the court of Huainan.