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Lea Cantor

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LAOZI THROUGH THE LENS OF THE WHITE ROSE: RESONANCE OR DISSONANCE?

LEA CANTOR 

University of Oxford

A surprising feature of the White Rose anti-Nazi resistance pamphlets is their appeal to a foundational classical Chinese text, the Laozi (otherwise known as the Daodejing), to buttress their critique of fascism and authoritarianism. I argue that from the perspective of a 1942 educated readership, the act of quoting the Laozi functioned as a subtle and pointed nod to anti-fascist intellectuals in pre-war Germany, many of whom had interpreted the Laozi as an anti-authoritarian and pacifist text. To a sympathetic reader, the Laozi therefore constituted an apt reference point for critiquing National Socialism. I then introduce a complication for this wartime reading of the Laozi from the perspective of its ambiguous reception in ancient Chinese political thought. I more specifically discuss an ancient line of interpretation of the Laozi that points in the direction of authoritarianism — in stark tension with the White Rose message of passive resistance and popular revolt.

KEYWORDS: White Rose movement, Chinese philosophy, Laozi, Daoism, Authoritarianism, National Socialism

INTRODUCTION

Between 27 June and 12 July 1942, two medical students at the University of Munich, Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorell, began disseminating the first four pamphlets of the White Rose resistance movement, calling on Germans to resist Hitler. A striking feature of these pamphlets is their lengthy quotations of a

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wide range of philosophical and literary texts. Of the passages quoted, the two attributed to Laozi ('Lao-tse') in the second pamphlet stand out as a surprising choice. These quotations are translations of stanzas 58 and 29 of a foundational text of the classical Chinese philosophical tradition, the *Daodejing* 道德經 ('*Classic of the Way and Virtue*'), otherwise known as the *Laozi* 老子, after its legendary author. Exactly how or where the young students first came across this seminal Daoist text is unclear. It may be nothing more than mere coincidence that the amateur *Laozi* enthusiast whose 1927 translation the White Rose students used, John Gustav Weiß (1857–1943), was mayor of a town not far from where Hans Scholl and his sister Sophie grew up.¹ At any rate, we know that the students had opportunities to access several significant library collections,² some of which included volumes pertaining to non-European thought and religions.³

The first of the White Rose pamphlets had called on each individual to fight back against the state 'als Mitglied der christlichen und abendländischen Kultur'.⁴ In light of this, it is striking that the second pamphlet — produced within days of the first — should have included two long quotations from a glaringly non-European and non-Christian text, casting it in a distinctly positive light. Indeed, the quotations of the *Laozi* evidently served to buttress the critique of fascism and dictatorship that is so strongly voiced across the pamphlets.

This article seeks to elucidate the reasons why the *Laozi* might have seemed an attractive choice for inclusion in the second pamphlet, bearing in mind that the first four pamphlets particularly targeted the German educated elite.⁵ The positive appeal to a philosophical text belonging to a culture firmly outside the remit of what the National Socialists called the *Volksgemeinschaft* or 'Aryan' civilization might in itself be seen as a calculated act of subversion, undermining Nazi ethnocentric nationalism.⁶ I suggest that there is more to the story, however. In particular,

¹ Weiß was mayor of Eberbach, a town in Northern Baden-Württemberg, for 34 years (1893–1927). Hans' and Sophie's father, Robert Scholl, was mayor of two different towns, also in Northern Baden-Württemberg, between 1917 and 1930. Unlike Robert Scholl, Weiß was a Nazi sympathizer and held antisemitic views (see John Gustav Weiß, *Lebenserinnerungen eines badischen Kommunalpolitikers* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1981), pp. 20, 173–75).

² See further Jakob Knab, 'Die Weiße Rose: Freedom of Conscience over Totalitarian Conformity', in *The White Rose: Reading, Writing, Resistance*, ed. by Alexandra Lloyd (Oxford: Taylorian Institute Library, 2019), pp. 35–46 (pp. 41–42).

³ Alexander Schmorell owned a 1921 edition of the *Laozi* translated by Richard Wilhelm, given to him by Christoph Probst's sister, and Hans Scholl was familiar with sections of the *Laozi* (certainly stanza 76) beyond those quoted in the second pamphlet (Christiane Moll, 'Alexander Schmorell and Christoph Probst — Eine biographische Einführung', in Alexander Schmorell, Christoph Probst, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. by Christiane Moll (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2011), pp. 23–280 (pp. 155–56, with n. 624)). In addition, Christoph Probst's father, Hermann, had an interest in Eastern religions (see Annette Dumbach and Jud Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), p. 69).

⁴ '[A]s a member of Christian and Western culture', cited in Alexandra Lloyd, *Defying Hitler: The White Rose Pamphlets* (Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing, 2022), p. 92.

⁵ See Ethel Tolansky, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose: Resistance to the Nazis*, trans. by Helena Scott (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2012), pp. 35–36, 42.

⁶ As one German dictionary published at the height of National Socialism famously put it, 'die P. [Philosophie] eine schöpferische Leistung bes. des nordisch-aryschen Geistes ist' ('philosophy is the creative achievement especially of the Nordic-Aryan mind') (Heinrich Schmidt, Joachim Schondorff, and Werner Schingnitz (eds.), *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, 10th edn

the act of quoting the *Laozi* in a 1942 resistance pamphlet can be understood as a subtle and pointed nod to anti-fascist intellectuals who had engaged with the *Laozi* in the early twentieth century. They had turned to the *Laozi* as a basis for denouncing the perceived decadence of European societies and values, often taking the text to offer a model for anti-authoritarianism and pacifism. Moreover, many of these intellectuals had done so through the prism of mysticism and religious existentialism (in both Christian and Jewish variations) — a consideration which might further inform the White Rose students' favourable appraisal of the text.⁷

I then introduce a complication for the second pamphlet's use of the *Laozi* from the perspective of its ambivalent standing in ancient Chinese political thought. The *Laozi* is a notoriously difficult text to translate and interpret; and its political message is, as a result, deeply ambiguous. Complicating matters further, the ancient texts to which it bears conceptual, terminological, and historical links display radically different political visions. Consequently, the question whether the *Laozi* ultimately resonates with the White Rose message of passive resistance and popular revolt, or in fact *undermines* it, is one to which there is no easy answer.

THE WHITE ROSE IN CONTEXT: GERMAN RECEPTIONS OF THE *LAOZI*

Ever since the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries and European thinkers had compared, and even conflated, aspects of the *Laozi* with elements of Christian doctrine — a tendency which would continue to shape the German collective imagination regarding the *Laozi* well into the twentieth century.⁸ An influential 1823 partial translation (in

(Stuttgart: Kröner, 1943), p. 444); cited in Franz Martin Wimmer, 'How are Histories of Non-Western Philosophies Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?', *Confluence. Online Journal of World Philosophies*, 3 (2015), 125–32 (p. 130). Note that Indian and Persian philosophy, unlike Chinese philosophy, could be accommodated within the Nazi discourse of an 'Aryan race'. Walther Wüst, who was Rector of the University of Munich in 1942, was both an Indologist and a fervent Aryanist, as well as an SS colonel; he was directly involved in the Scholls' arrest. See Richard Hanser, *A Noble Treason: The Story of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose Revolt Against Hitler* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), pp. 136, 233.

⁷ For the students' religious convictions and motivations, see for example Paul Shrimpton, 'At the Heart of the White Rose — Cultural and Religious Influences on the Munich Students', in *The White Rose: Reading, Writing, Resistance*, ed. by Alexandra Lloyd (Oxford: Taylorian Institute Library, 2019), pp. 23–33 (pp. 23–33); Dumbach and Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose*, pp. 61–76.

⁸ For the European reception of Daoism, see e.g. J. J. Clarke, 'Cramped Scholars': Western Interpretations of Daoism', in *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000); Julia M. Hardy, 'Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*', in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); Knut Wolf, 'Fascination and Misunderstanding: The Ambivalent Western Reception of Daoism', *Monumenta Serica*, 53 (2005), 273–86 (especially pp. 276–83); Karl-Heinz Pohl, 'Play-thing of the Times: Critical Review of the Reception of Daoism in the West', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 30 (2003 [1998]), 469–86; Elizabeth Harper, 'The Early Modern European (Non) Reception of the Zhuangzi Text', *Journal of East-West Thought*, 9 (2019), 23–37. For the fraught German reception history, see Bettina Brandt and Daniel Leonhard Purdy (eds.), *China in the German Enlightenment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Eric S. Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Rolf Elberfeld, 'Laozi-Rezeption in der deutschen Philosophie — Von der Kenntnisnahme zur "Wiederholung"', in *Philosophieren im Dialog mit China*, ed. by Helmut Schneider (Cologne: Edition Chōra, 2000), pp. 141–65. For the reception of Daoism in Nazi Germany, see Knut Wolf, 'Reading and Meaning of Daoist Texts in Nazi Germany', in *At*

Latin and French) by the Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) advanced the bizarre thesis that the Hebrew consonants signifying the Jewish God [יהוה] are designated by three Chinese characters in the opening lines of stanza 14 (*yi* 夷, *xi* 希, *wei* 微), and compared the Daoist concept of *Dao* to the Christian concept of *Logos*.⁹ Despite being challenged by his more philologically competent student, Stanislas Julien (1797–1873), Abel-Rémusat had a long-lasting influence on German receptions of the *Laozi* throughout the nineteenth century. In a classic 1870 translation of the *Laozi* that would greatly influence the 1927 translation used by the White Rose students, the German poet Victor von Strauss (1809–1899) seriously entertained Abel-Rémusat's thesis, even claiming that Laozi's conception of *Dao* may have been influenced by a notion of the Jewish God — owing to the alleged presence of Jews in China during the Han dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE).¹⁰ The German Sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) — who in 1911 produced one of the most influential translations of the *Laozi* of the twentieth century — similarly interpreted *Dao* as *Logos/Word/Sense (Sinn)*, alluding to the beginning of St John's Gospel.¹¹ A tendency to read the *Laozi* as reflecting a putative Judaeo-Christian influence or as bearing witness to Christian revelation subsided in the first half of the twentieth century, though many prominent European scholars continued to hold that the *Laozi* was a mystical text, offering instruction on how to enter into union with a mysterious entity, *Dao*.¹²

Even so, in the 1920s and 1930s, the text continued to be associated with Christianity in certain intellectual milieus, including that of a core member of the White Rose entourage: Theodor Haecker (1879–1945). The latter acted as a mentor to Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorell between 1941 and 1943, and strongly influenced the religious and existentialist undertones of the first four pamphlets.¹³ He moved in the same intellectual circles as the Austrian philosopher Carl Dallago (1869–1949), who advocated a form of *Lebensphilosophie* predicated on a kind

Home in Many Worlds: Reading, Writing and Translating from Chinese and Jewish Cultures, ed. by Raoul D. Findeisen et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), pp. 149–61 (especially p. 151). Both of Walf's studies mention the White Rose's references to the *Laozi*.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu, philosophe chinois du VI^e siècle avant notre ère, qui a professé les opinions communément attribuées à Pythagore, à Platon et à leurs disciples* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1823). See Hardy, 'Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*', p. 166; Pohl, 'Play-thing of the Times', p. 470; Walf, 'Fascination', p. 278; Misha Tadd, 'Global Laozegetics: A Study in Globalized Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (2022), 87–109 (p. 97).

¹⁰ Victor von Strauss (trans.), *Laò-Tsè's Tao Tè King* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1870), pp. 61–79. Note that von Strauss alluded to eighteenth-century Jesuit accounts claiming Jews had arrived in Kaifeng in the Han Dynasty, on which see Irene Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', *Monumenta Serica*, 42 (1994): 445–64 (p. 461).

¹¹ Richard Wilhelm (trans.), *Tao Te King: das Buch des Alten Vom Sinn und Leben* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1911), pp. XV–XVI. See Walf, 'Fascination', p. 283; Lin Ma, 'Deciphering Heidegger's Connection with the *Daodejing*', *Asian Philosophy*, 16 (2006), 149–71 (p. 152). Wilhelm's translation was reprinted under National Socialism in 1941 (Walf, 'Reading', p. 154).

¹² Scholars who broadly endorsed these modified readings (partly based on a serious reappraisal of religious Daoism) include Henri Maspero (1883–1945) — a French Sinologist who held the Chair of Chinese at the Collège de France from 1919 (and was murdered in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945) — as well as the Franco-Austrian Sinologist Max Kaltenmark (1910–2002).

¹³ Haecker, an outspoken Kierkegaard authority and translator of John Henry Newman, was subject to a speaking and publishing ban from 1935 and 1938 due to his anti-Nazi views. See Helena M. Tomko's article in the present volume.

of anti-ecclesiastical Christianity and centrally drew on both Kierkegaard and Laozi.¹⁴ Dallago's work relating Christian existentialism and mysticism to the *Laozi* was well known to Haecker.¹⁵ In fact, in 1921, they had a falling out over the privileged role which Dallago was prepared to grant Eastern figures like Laozi in his philosophico-religious framework.¹⁶ Significantly, however, in 1932 Haecker was willing to countenance that Laozi might be counted as a natural precursor of Christianity in the 'Morgenland' [Orient].¹⁷

At the same time, in tandem with the growing presence of Chinese Studies in German universities throughout the 1910s and 1920s,¹⁸ amateurish interest in Daoism among artists and philosophers soared. As Knut Walf has put it, echoing Karl-Heinz Pohl, 'A true *Dao*-fever erupted in Germany' in the wake of the ravages and destruction of the First World War.¹⁹ Interest in Daoism often went hand in hand with anti-nationalism and critiques of Eurocentric parochialism,²⁰

¹⁴ See George Pattison and Kate Kirkpatrick, *The Mystical Sources of Existential Thought: Being, Nothingness, Love* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p. 45.

¹⁵ Both Dallago and Haecker were contributors to the Austrian cultural journal *Der Brenner*, and Dallago had written extensive responses to Haecker in the journal in 1914. Martin Buber (discussed below) was also personally acquainted with Dallago; see Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou": The Development of Martin Buber's Thought and His "Religion as Presence" Lectures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), pp. 149, 157.

¹⁶ Unlike Dallago, Haecker was committed to the uniqueness of Christ as a mediator of divine grace to man. See Peter Lincoln, 'Dualism and Mediation: Parallels in German Literature and Theology from 1910 to 1925' (University of Warwick: PhD Thesis, 1979), pp. 72–79.

¹⁷ See Theodor Haecker, 'Betrachtungen über *Vergil, Vater des Abendlands*', *Der Brenner*, 13 (1932), 3–31 (pp. 4–6), as noted by Tomko in the present volume.

¹⁸ The first Chair of Chinese in Germany was established in 1909 in Hamburg, followed by three others before the war: Berlin (1912), Leipzig (1922), and Frankfurt (1925). No professorships were created under National Socialism. See Martin Kern, 'The Emigration of German Sinologists 1933–1945: Notes on the History and Historiography of Chinese Studies', *Journal of The American Oriental Society*, 118 (1998), 507–29 (pp. 507–09); Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', p. 446. Kern and Walf ('Reading', pp. 152–53) note that most German Sinologists left Germany in the 1930s.

¹⁹ Walf, 'Fascination', p. 280; Pohl, 'Play-thing of the Times', p. 473. See also Harper, 'The Early Modern European (Non) Reception of the Zhuangzi Text', p. 34; Clarke, 'Cramped Scholars', pp. 46–47; Weijia Li, 'Braveness in Non-Action: The Taoist Strategy of Survival in Bertolt Brecht's *Schweyk* and Anna Seghers' *Transit*', *The Brecht Yearbook*, 36 (2011), 106–12 (p. 111).

²⁰ A good example is the German Jewish philosopher Georg Misch's (1878–1965) 1926 work *Der Weg in die Philosophie*, which argued against the narrative that philosophy had (exclusively) emerged in Greece, and instead advocated a theory of multiple origins spanning different traditions and periods — drawing inspiration from the 'Autumn Floods' (*qiushui* 秋水) chapter of the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*. See further Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, pp. 141–149. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), whose sympathies for National Socialism and prejudices against Asian philosophies are well-known, is a notable exception to this trend. Paradoxically, he engaged with Daoist texts throughout his career, reading the *Zhuangzi* as early as the 1920s (Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 134; Pohl, 'Play-thing of the Times', p. 475), and first taking an interest in the *Laozi* no later than 1943 (Tadd, 'Global Laozeitics', p. 104; Ma, 'Deciphering Heidegger's Connection with the *Daodejing*', pp. 150, 159–63). In the summer of 1946, he even began co-translating the *Laozi* with a Chinese scholar, Xiao Shiyi 蕭師毅, but soon abandoned the project. According to Xiao, they had first met in Milan in the fateful year of 1942 (Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, 'Heidegger and Our Translation of the *Tao Te Ching*', in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. by Graham Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), pp. 93, 97–98). Interestingly, Xiao agreed to the project in the conviction 'that Lao-tzu's ideas would contribute to the reflections of the German people, and indeed of the Western world, after the disastrous World War' (p. 93).

and informed the works of numerous German-speaking philosophers and writers of the interwar period, many of whom faced persecution under National Socialism on account of their Jewish heritage and/or their hostility to the regime.²¹

Two figures driving the surge in interest in Daoism shortly before, during, and after the First World War are particularly important: Richard Wilhelm, the pioneering Sinologist whom we encountered above, and the Austrian Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965). Their translations of Daoist Classics in the 1910s²² set the stage for Alfred Döblin's (1878–1957) influential 1915 novel, *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun*, which displayed Daoist influences interwoven with themes of pacifism, resistance, and revolution. This novel helped disseminate the highly political reading of the *Laozi* which eventually found its way into the second pamphlet.²³

Crucially, in the aftermath of the First World War, Wilhelm and Buber also jointly paved the way for construing the *Laozi* as a pacifist antidote to the ills of 'Western civilization' in German-speaking circles. Wilhelm, who had been a Protestant missionary in China, founded the China-Institut at the University of Frankfurt in 1925, where he took up the Chair of Chinese. The institute became the focal point of Sino-German activities in the 1920s, attracting international visiting scholars including the Chinese philosopher Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962).²⁴ In his 1925 commentary to the *Laozi*, Wilhelm hinted that Laozi could offer an antidote for a sick 'Western' society — contrasting the 'satanic powers' of Faust to the 'action' of the 'Eastern magician' Laozi.²⁵ Martin Buber, for his part, was markedly influenced by von Strauss's translation and overall approach to the *Laozi*, viewing it throughout the 1920s as religious and monotheistic in nature.²⁶ He also presented the Daoist concept of 'non-action' (*wuwei* 無為, sometimes also rendered as e.g. 'effortless action' or 'non-exertion') — which he associated with what he saw as the messianic, non-coercive figure of the sage (*shengren* 聖人)²⁷ — as a teaching capable of

²¹ These philosophers included Ernst Bloch, Hans Driesch, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Graf Keyserling, Georg Misch (see n. 20 above), and Karl Jaspers. Writers drawn to Daoism included Herman Hesse, Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Döblin, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, Klabund, and Franz Kafka.

²² In 1910, Buber produced the first German (albeit partial) translation of the *Zhuangzi*. For its influence among German intellectuals, see Clarke, 'Cramped Scholars', p. 47; Elberfeld, 'Laozi-Rezeption in der deutschen Philosophie', p. 149; Harper, 'The Early Modern European (Non) Reception of the Zhuangzi Text', p. 25, with n. 5, and p. 34; Pohl, 'Play-thing of the Times', p. 473.

²³ Döblin's novel inspired interest in Daoism among German leftists including Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and Anna Seghers (1900–1983). For the association of Daoist themes with anti-Nazi resistance in Brecht's and Seghers' wartime writings, see Li, 'Braveness in Non-Action'.

²⁴ Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', pp. 448–49.

²⁵ Richard Wilhelm, *Lao-tse und der Taoismus* (Stuttgart: Frommanns Verlag, 1925), pp. 62–63; see Hardy, 'Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*', pp. 171–72.

²⁶ Buber viewed the *Laozi* as a religious text in the spirit of Jewish monotheism, though it is unclear whether he accepted von Strauss's suggestion that the *Laozi*'s concept of *Dao* reflected a historical Jewish influence. See Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', pp. 459, 460–61; Eric S. Nelson, 'Martin Buber's Phenomenological Interpretation of Laozi's *Daodejing*', in *Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology: Thinking Interculturally about Human Existence*, ed. by David Chai (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 107, 112; Elberfeld, 'Laozi-Rezeption in der deutschen Philosophie', pp. 150–51, 164.

²⁷ Nelson, 'Martin Buber's Phenomenological Interpretation of Laozi's *Daodejing*', pp. 111–15. The figure of the sage is mentioned, *inter alia*, in stanza 29 of the *Laozi*, one of the passages cited by the White Rose.

curbing Europe's will to domination over people and things following the First World War. Buber was active in German academic circles throughout the 1920s and 1930s — participating as a discussant in the China-Institut's 1928 fall lectures delivered by Wilhelm. He joined the University of Frankfurt in 1923, and left his post following Hitler's ascent to power in 1933, before escaping to Jerusalem in 1938. Between the 1920s and the 1950s he consistently understood Daoism to offer a communitarian and anarchistic worldview, which could offer a social critique of present suffering and injustices.²⁸

1942: LAOZI AS 'ANTIDOTE' TO HITLER

The *Laozi*, then, was commonly viewed as offering a unique answer to the ills of European societies. It is thus unsurprising that by the start of the Second World War, it would become standard to construe the *Laozi* as providing an antidote to the deteriorating political situation in Europe in the wake of Hitler's ascent to power. Still, it is striking that in 1942 — the same year the first four White Rose pamphlets were disseminated — a Chinese intellectual who had fled to the US, Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), published a book in English, *The Wisdom of China and India*, presenting Laozi as an antidote to Hitler:

[...] if I were asked what antidote could be found in Oriental literature and philosophy to cure this contentious modern world of its inveterate belief in force and struggle for power, I would name this book [Laotse's *Book of Tao*]. [...] [Laotse] has the knack of making Hitler and the other dreamers of world mastery appear foolish and ridiculous.²⁹

The fact that in the very same year the White Rose chose to engage with the *Laozi* as a basis for critiquing Hitler is unlikely to be directly related, but as we saw, the general approach to the *Laozi* as an anti-authoritarian antidote had been in the air in Germany since the 1910s.

There is another relevant connection which captures the evocative power that the *Laozi* possessed in the context of wartime Germany. About a month before the composition and dissemination of the second pamphlet, Martin Buber, now in exile in Jerusalem, published a partial Hebrew translation of the *Laozi* followed by a brief commentary in a newspaper with ties to a socialist political party, *The Young Worker*.³⁰ He gave it the title 'Laozi on government' (*Lao-tsi al hashilton* לאו-טסי על השלטון); of the eight stanzas that he included, two were the very same that the students selected for the second pamphlet.³¹ Among the themes that stand out are the critique of violence, the relationship between the government and its

²⁸ He also consistently championed Daoism over Confucianism, which he took to be authoritarian and elitist. See Nelson, 'Martin Buber's Phenomenological Interpretation of Laozi's *Daodejing*', p. 113.

²⁹ Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of China and India* (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 579; quoted by Hardy, 'Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*', p. 172.

³⁰ Martin Buber, 'Lao-tsi al hashilton לאו-טסי על השלטון', *Hapoel Hatzair*, 35, no. 31–32 (1942), 6–8. The newspaper is dated 20 May 1942. See also Jonathan Herman, 'The One Gave Birth to the Two: Revisiting Martin Buber's Encounters with Chinese Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85 (2017), 381–415 (p. 405).

³¹ The eight stanzas were: 17, 29, 30, 31, 57, 58, 66, 67.

people, and the ruler's unobtrusiveness.³² It is hard to avoid reading this work as a political commentary on the horrors of war and the destructiveness of Nazi dictatorship.³³

That a Chinese intellectual in exile, an Austrian Jewish philosopher in exile, and a group of young German resisters should all have chosen the *Laozi* to criticize Nazi ideology in the very same year (and in three different languages) is quite astonishing. Despite their national, cultural, and religious differences, they evidently converged in reading the text as a counterpoint to authoritarian decadence amid some of the darkest and most divisive times in global history.³⁴

ANCIENT CHINESE RESONANCES AND DISSONANCES

It has emerged that the *Laozi* had a history of being interpreted along the lines of anti-authoritarianism in the wake of the First World War and indeed well into the Second World War. What is less clear, however, is whether the original text, understood in its proper intellectual context in Warring States China (ca. 453–221 BCE),³⁵ lends itself to such a reading. Today, the *Laozi* is one of the most translated works of world literature — according to one recent calculation, a staggering 175 translations have been produced in German alone — second only to the Bible.³⁶ The disparate interpretive possibilities to be gleaned from only a sample of the most authoritative English or German translations speak to the text's sheer openness.³⁷ Most pertinently for our purposes, in recent scholarship the *Laozi's* politics have been associated with anything from anti-authoritarianism and

³² Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', pp. 462–64.

³³ Eber, 'Martin Buber and Taoism', p. 463. Buber was possibly also preoccupied with the political situation in Palestine – see Herman, 'The One Gave Birth to the Two', p. 405; Irene Eber and Kathryn Hellerstein (ed.), *Jews in China: Cultural Conversations, Changing Perceptions* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020), pp. 213–14.

³⁴ Note that Daoist concepts were also occasionally associated with fascism. In a 1934 piece denouncing the complicity of intellectuals with fascism, the Social Democrat Wilhelm Hoegner asserted that 'Das Individuum ist im Faschismus nichts, der Staat ist alles. [...] Der Staat ist das Tao, die Bahn' ('Under Fascism the individual is nothing, the state everything. [...] The state is Dao, the way'), implying that, like *Dao*, the fascist state is 'mystical' and 'irrational' (Landgerichtsdirektor [i.e. Wilhelm Hoegner], *Der Faschismus und die Intellektuellen: Untergang des Deutschen Geistes* (Karlsbad: Verlagsanstalt 'Graphia', 1934), p. 5, see p. 7). Separately, the self-proclaimed 'superfascist' Italian thinker Julius Evola (1898–1974) was particularly drawn to the *Laozi*, producing two Italian translations in 1923 and 1959. As Tadd ('Global Laozegetics', p. 103) remarks, 'That such a person was drawn to the *Laozi* raises questions about the nature of the text, the nature of interpretation, and why the classic would resonate with this notorious man.' I discuss 'darker' readings of the *Laozi* (tracing to antiquity) below.

³⁵ Like most ancient Chinese transmitted texts, the latest material evidence suggests that the *Laozi* was written by several hands over a long period of time. The text is not attested in full (or in *Laozi's* name) before 200–150 BCE. We know that a complete *Laozi* similar to the received text circulated in the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), thanks to the discovery of two *Laozi* manuscripts (entombed in 168 BCE) at Mawangdui 馬王堆 in 1973. Variations between the Mawangdui versions of the *Laozi* and the transmitted text need not concern us here since the latter formed the sole basis of European receptions through to the 1970s.

³⁶ Tadd, 'Global Laozegetics', pp. 87–88, 98–99; see also Harper, 'The Early Modern European (Non) Reception of the Zhuangzi Text', p. 24.

³⁷ For the *Laozi* as a 'context-dependent text', see Dirk Meyer, *Philosophy on Bamboo: Text and the Production of Meaning in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); for its 'polysemy', see Isabelle

anarchism to authoritarianism and totalitarianism.³⁸ In fact, rival readings divided along similar lines can be identified in the text's early reception history. Neo-Daoist interpretations evoking anti-authoritarian and anarchist sensibilities are attested in the Wei-Jin 魏晉 period (ca. 220–420 CE),³⁹ whereas earlier receptions grounded in 'Huang-Lao' (黃老) thought and the *fa* tradition (*fajia* 法家) of classical Chinese political theory incline toward authoritarianism.⁴⁰

Before examining the basis for these competing readings in greater detail, it will be useful to consider relevant interpretive features of John Gustav Weiß's translation of stanzas 58 and 29, used by the White Rose.⁴¹ Below is a table comparing this German translation with an English translation, alongside the original Classical Chinese (transmitted) text, and D.C. Lau's celebrated modern English translation of the Chinese text. To give the reader a sense of the range of interpretive possibilities that stanza 29 of the *Laozi* leaves open, particularly on the issue of rulership, I also

Robinet, 'Later Commentaries: Textual Polysemy and Syncretistic Interpretations', in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 119–42; Clarke, 'Cramped Scholars', pp. 51, 55.

³⁸ Eric S. Nelson, *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 100. In the recent literature, anti-authoritarian readings are vindicated by e.g. Thomas Michael, 'Explorations in Authority in the *Daodejing*: A Daoist Engagement with Hannah Arendt', *Religions*, 9 (2018), 1–26 (pp. 8–15); Mario Wenning, 'Daoism as Critical Theory', *Comparative Philosophy*, 2 (2011), 50–71; Roger T. Ames, 'Is Political Taoism Anarchism?', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 10 (1983), 27–47; Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (trans. and ed.), *Dao De Jing. A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum, scholars who impute authoritarian, autocratic, and/or totalitarian tendencies to the text include Jordan Paper, 'Daoism' and 'Deep Ecology': Fantasy and Potentiality', in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, ed. by N. J. Girardot, Xiaogan Liu, and James Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 3–21 (pp. 4, 9); (in relation to Daoism more generally) Hagop Sarkissian, 'The Darker Side of Daoist Primitivism', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 37 (2010), 312–29; Paul R. Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 129–33; Paul R. Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 124–28. For the 'non-libertine potential' of the *Laozi*, see relatedly Tao Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China: Contestation of Humaneness, Justice, and Personal Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 204.

³⁹ See John A. Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism: Critiques of State Autonomy in Ancient and Modern China* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 35–40 for anarchist readings of the *Laozi* adopted by the poet Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263 CE) and the thinker Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言 (ca. 300 CE). Bao's views are known to us through the writings of his critic, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–ca. 343 CE), who tellingly challenged Bao's *Laozi* as undermining the division between the ruler and the ruled.

⁴⁰ Both the 'Huang-Lao' school and the *fa* tradition blend the concept of *wuwei* 無為 with the ruling strategy of the ruler. In what follows, I focus on the *Laozi*'s reception in the *fa* tradition.

⁴¹ Weiß had previously translated the work into English with a commentary, which is kept as a typescript (dated 1923) at the British Library. His Memoirs (*Lebenserinnerungen*, p. 171) confirm that he never formally published this translation, and instead sent a typed copy to a few (unspecified) British libraries. In both the published German edition and the unpublished English version, Weiß acknowledges that his translation is informed by 'a critical comparison' of German, English, and French translations (John Gustav Weiß (trans.), *Lao-tse, Tao-te-King* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, 1927), p. 3), and refers, *inter alia*, to those of Abel-Rémusat, Stanislas Julien, Victor von Strauss, and Richard Wilhelm. In his Memoirs he also admits that he was particularly influenced by von Strauss' translation (*Lebenserinnerungen*, pp. 54–55), and intimates that he studied the Chinese language during the interwar period (*Lebenserinnerungen*, p. 171).

include Roger Ames' and David Hall's translation of relevant sections — which is informed by their anarchist reading of the text.

White Rose quotations ⁴²	English translation of the White Rose quotations ⁴³	Classical Chinese transmitted text ⁴⁴	Lau's modern English translation ⁴⁵	Ames' & Hall's modern English translation ⁴⁶
<p>1. „Der, des Verwaltung unauffällig ist, des Volk ist froh. Der, des Verwaltung aufdringlich ist, des Volk ist gebrochen.</p> <p>2. Elend, ach, ist es, worauf Glück sich aufbaut. Glück, ach, verschleiert nur Elend. Wo soll das hinaus? Das Ende ist nicht abzusehen.</p> <p>3. Das Geordnete verkehrt sich in Unordnung, das Gute verkehrt sich in Schlechtes. Das Volk gerät in Verwirrung. Ist es nicht so täglich seit langem?</p> <p>4. Daher ist der Hohe Mensch rechteckig, aber er stößt nicht an, er ist kantig, aber verletzt nicht, er ist aufrecht, aber nicht schroff. Er ist klar, aber will nicht glänzen.“ Lao-tse.</p>	<p>1. 'If a regime is unobtrusive, its people are happy. If a regime is oppressive, the people are broken.</p> <p>2. Misery, alas, is what happiness is built upon. Happiness, alas, only veils misery. Where does all this lead? The end is nowhere in sight.</p> <p>3. Order lapses into disorder, good lapses into evil. The people fall into disarray. Has this not long been the case, day in, day out?</p> <p>4. Therefore, the wise man is angular, but does not scrape; he has edges, but does not hurt anyone; he stands strong, but without being harsh. He is bright, but he does not wish to gleam.' Laozi</p>	<p>1. 其政悶悶，其民淳淳；其政察察，其民缺缺。</p> <p>2. 禍兮福之所倚，福兮禍之所伏。孰知其極？其無正？</p> <p>3. 正復為奇，善復為妖，人之迷，其日固久。</p> <p>4. 是以聖人方而不割，廉而不剌，直而不肆，光而不耀。</p>	<p>1. When the government is muddled The people are simple; When the government is alert The people are cunning.</p> <p>2. It is on disaster that good fortune perches; It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches. Who knows the limit? Does not the straightforward exist?</p> <p>3. The straightforward changes again into the crafty, and the good changes again into the monstrous. Indeed, it is long since the people were perplexed.</p> <p>4. Therefore, the sage is square-edged but does not scrape, Has corners but does not jab, Extends himself but not at the expense of others, Shines but does not dazzle. [Laozi ch. 58]</p>	<p>1. If someone wants to rule the world, and goes about trying to do so, I foresee that they simply will not succeed.</p> <p>2. The world is a sacred vessel, And it is not something that can be ruled. Those who would rule it ruin it; Those who would control it lose it.</p>
<p>1. „Wer unternimmt, das Reich zu beherrschen, und es nach seiner Willkür zu gestalten; ich sehe ihn sein Ziel nicht erreichen; das ist alles“.</p> <p>2. „Das Reich ist ein lebendiger Organismus; es kann nicht gemacht werden, wahrlich! Wer daran machen will, verdirbt es, wer sich seiner bemächtigen will, verliert es“.</p> <p>3. Daher: „Von den Wesen gehen manche vorauf, andere folgen ihnen, manche atmen warm, manche kalt, manche sind stark, manche schwach, manche erlangen Fülle, andere unterliegen“.</p> <p>4. „Der hohe Mensch daher läßt ab von Übertriebenheit, läßt ab von Überhebung, läßt ab von Übergriffen“. Lao-tse</p>	<p>1. He who sets out to rule over the empire [<i>Reich</i>] and to shape it as he pleases; I do not see him achieving his aim; that is all.</p> <p>2. The empire is a living organism; in truth, it cannot be constructed! He who seeks to construct it, corrupts it, he who seeks to grasp it, loses it.</p> <p>3. Therefore: 'Some beings go on ahead, others follow them, some have warm breath, others cold, some are strong, others weak, some reach fulfilment, others are overcome.'</p> <p>4. The wise man therefore refrains from exaggeration, from extremes, and from excess. Laozi.</p>	<p>1. 將欲取天下而為之，吾見其不得已。</p> <p>2. 天下神器，不可為也。為者敗之，執者失之。</p> <p>3. 故物或行或隨，或歔或吹，或強或贏，或挫或騖。</p> <p>4. 是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。</p>	<p>1. Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do anything to it I see will have no respite.</p> <p>2. The empire is a sacred vessel and nothing should be done to it. Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.</p> <p>3. Hence some things lead and some follow; Some breathe gently and some breathe hard; Some are strong and some are weak; Some destroy and some are destroyed.</p> <p>4. Therefore the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance. [Laozi ch. 29]</p>	<p>1. If someone wants to rule the world, and goes about trying to do so, I foresee that they simply will not succeed.</p> <p>2. The world is a sacred vessel, And it is not something that can be ruled. Those who would rule it ruin it; Those who would control it lose it.</p>

⁴² 'Flugblätter der Weißen Rose II', <<https://www.weisse-rose-stiftung.de/widerstandsgruppe-weisse-rose/flugblaetter/ii-flugblatt-der-weissen-rose/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. See Weiß, *Lao-tse, Tao-te-King*, pp. 34, 49–50.

⁴³ Trans. cited in Lloyd, *Defying Hitler*, p. 101.

⁴⁴ Yulie Lou (ed.), *laozi daodejing zhu jiaoshi* 老子道德經注校釋 (Beijing: *zhonghua shuju* 中華書局, 2008), pp. 76, 151–2.

⁴⁵ D.C. Lau (trans.), *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (London: Penguin, 1963), pp. 34, 65.

⁴⁶ Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, p. 122. Note that, unlike Lau, Ames and Hall also rely on excavated (especially Mawangdui) versions of the text.

Three interpretive choices stand out from Weiß's rendering of stanzas 58 and 29 of the *Laozi*, and help explain why the White Rose might have taken these passages to lend support to their political message. First, Weiß renders the classical Chinese concept of *tianxia* (天下) as 'das Reich', a politically loaded term which was particularly meaningful to a German audience in 1942. It is worth noting, however, that this was also how von Strauss rendered the term in 1870,⁴⁷ and it was based on this translation that Martin Buber had understood the *Laozi* to leave room for an Abrahamic conception of the 'kingdom [of God]'.⁴⁸ This more positive religious resonance would, perhaps, have pleased Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorell, given their strong Christian identities and the third and fourth pamphlets' suggestion that the state should exist in parallel with a *divine order*.⁴⁹ The rendering of *tianxia* as 'das Reich' or 'empire'/'kingdom' is reasonable, since *tianxia*, literally '[all] under Heaven', very often refers, in Warring States discourse, to the realm *which is to be politically unified*⁵⁰ — as D.C. Lau's translation reflects. However, the Chinese term in this period can also be interpreted as more loosely referring to the *entire known world* and, in the *Laozi* in particular, as carrying a broader cosmic dimension. Thus Richard Wilhelm's translation, for instance, glosses the term simply as 'Die Welt'⁵¹ — an interpretation favoured by Roger Ames and David Hall.

Second, Weiß renders the Chinese term *men men* 悶悶 as 'unauffällig' ('unobtrusive') — a term which might alternatively be translated into English as 'simple' or 'dull'. Third, he translates *cha cha* 察察 using charged political language, 'aufdringlich' ('oppressive'). Other possible translations into English include: 'searching', 'sharp', or 'alert'.⁵² The issue here is not so much with Weiß's translation *per se*, but with the particular interpretation to which it lends itself within the specific political and rhetorical context of the second pamphlet. Indeed, the *Laozi* appears as a text intent on denouncing the excesses of intrusive and oppressive governments with imperialistic aspirations, like Nazi Germany.

I propose to problematize this interpretation of the *Laozi* in light of stanzas not mentioned by the White Rose, drawing on the darker strand of reception history mentioned above. I focus particularly on three central themes that characterize the second pamphlet before the *Laozi* quotations are introduced as its conclusion: the anti-intellectualism of National Socialism and the need to fight it with

⁴⁷ von Strauss, *Laò-Tsè's Tao Tè King*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ In a 1924 discussion of stanza 29 of the *Laozi*, Buber linked the Laozian notion of *tianxia* 'das Reich' with 'Das Gottesreich' — which, rather remarkably, he took to offer a remedy for nationalism ('Nationalismus') and racism ('Rassentheorie'). See Martin Buber, *Schriften zur chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*, ed. by Irene Eber (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2013), pp. 260–61; Nelson, 'Martin Buber's Phenomenological Interpretation of Laozi's *Daodejing*', pp. 111–5.

⁴⁹ See Daniel Lloyd's article this special issue. Note that Weiß (*Lao-tse, Tao-te-King*, p. 64; see pp. 10, 17–18) rejected the suggestion (aired by previous German language interpreters) that the *Laozi* accommodated a mystical, Judeo-Christianizing notion of a 'liebende Vorsehung' ('loving providence').

⁵⁰ See further Yuri Pines, 'Changing views of "tianxia" in pre-imperial discourse', *Oriens Extremus*, 43 (2002), 101–16.

⁵¹ Wilhelm, *Tao Te King*, p. 31.

⁵² Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 65 opts for 'alert'.

intellectual means; the denunciation of Hitler's deceit; and outcry at the Germans' 'blindness' and apathy in the face of atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis, denounced as complicity in guilt.

The opening of the second pamphlet declares: 'Man kann sich mit dem Nationalsozialismus geistig nicht auseinandersetzen, weil er ungeistig ist.'⁵³ This is nevertheless followed by an appeal that each person should enlighten the next, 'bis auch der letzte von der äußersten Notwendigkeit seines Kämpfens wider dieses System überzeugt ist.'⁵⁴ It is suggested that educating one another is the ferment of popular revolt, the catalyst for a 'wave of uproar' to rip across the country and topple the regime.

Now consider *Laozi* 3:

Not to honour men of worth will keep the people from contention; not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep them from theft; not to display what is desirable will keep them from being unsettled of mind.

Therefore, in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones.⁵⁵

Taken at face value, this stanza seems to be in tension with Hans Scholl's rallying call — ostensibly aimed at intellectuals — to educate the masses and foster popular dissent. Scholl and his fellow resisters were evidently still convinced that if professors and thinkers could be reasoned with and won over, they would react. The *Laozi*, by contrast, seems to question the value of instruction and scholarly learning quite broadly. The anti-intellectualist strain of the *Laozi* is also apparent in *Laozi* 65 (with echoes in *Laozi* 10), wherein we find the suggestion that not only the people ought to be kept ignorant, but the ruler himself ought *not* abide by 'wisdom' (*zhi* 智):

Of old those who excelled in the pursuit of the way [*dao* 道] did not use it to enlighten the people but to hoodwink them. The reason why the people are difficult to govern is that they are *too wise* [*zhi duo* 智多].

Hence *to rule a state by wisdom* [*yi zhi zhi guo* 以智治國]

Will be to the detriment of the state;

Not to rule a state by wisdom [*bu yi zhi zhi guo* 不以智治國]

Will be a boon to the state.⁵⁶

⁵³ 'National Socialism cannot be confronted intellectually because it is not intellectual' (cited in Lloyd, *Defying Hitler*, p. 97).

⁵⁴ '[U]ntil every last person is convinced of the dire necessity of fighting against this system' (cited in Lloyd, *Defying Hitler*, p. 98).

⁵⁵ Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 72, modified.

On a rival interpretation, however, one might reasonably object that such passages ought to be interpreted not as *literally* targeting wisdom or knowledge in general, but as merely denouncing the rigidity of *what is conventionally viewed* as wisdom.⁵⁷ This would be consistent with the cultivation of genuine enlightenment, associated with a ‘soft’, life-affirming, and adaptive approach to things (see *Laozi* 36, 43, 52, 76, 78). The process of ‘emptying the mind’ or of becoming ‘without wisdom’ might thus instead be read as an invitation to rid oneself of the restrictive shackles of conventional knowledge,⁵⁸ rather than as a rejection of learning *tout court*.⁵⁹ In contrast to the first reading, this more benign interpretation is broadly in tune with the White Rose’s appeal to enlighten the German people and fight the intellectual degeneracy of the (often highly educated) members of the ruling elite.

The theme of deceit, however, is another possible point of contention overshadowing the White Rose’s use of the *Laozi*. Recall that toward the beginning of the second pamphlet, Hans Scholl deplors the fact that National Socialism, even in its incipience, turned on deceiving the German people.⁶⁰ He then alludes to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, lamenting that Hitler himself affirmed that successful governing requires that the ruler go to great lengths to deceive the people.⁶¹ Yet certain passages of the *Laozi* appear to emphasize precisely the ruler’s adeptness at concealing his nature from the people, skilfully covering his tracks in all that he does. This motif is especially apparent in *Laozi* 17:

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects.

[...] Hesitant, he does not utter words lightly.

When his task is accomplished and his work done

The people all say, ‘It happened to us naturally.’⁶²

In *Laozi* 59, in fact, we find the further suggestion that it is because people are ignorant of the ruler’s ‘limit’ that he takes control of the state: ‘When no one knows his limit | He [the ruler] can possess a state’.⁶³ Passages like these appear to be in tension with Hans’ admonishment of Hitler’s penchant for deception in his drive for domination. Proponents of the more benign interpretation might however insist that these passages gesture not at the sage’s covert manipulation

⁵⁷ It is standardly argued that the *Laozi* targets not learning in general but rather the imposition of specifically *Confucian* commitments and values. For the *Laozi*’s polemic against Confucianism, see for example Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy*, pp. 217–23.

⁵⁸ External support for this kind of non-literal reading might be found in, for example, the *Zhuangzi* (see especially the image of the ‘fasting of the heart-mind’, *xin zhai* 心齋, in chapter 4).

⁵⁹ This would apply as much to the ideal ruler as to the ruled (as suggested by stanzas 10 and 65).

⁶⁰ ‘Flugblätter der Weißen Rose II’, <<https://www.weisse-rose-stiftung.de/widerstandsgruppe-weisse-rose/flugblaetter/ii-flugblatt-der-weissen-rose/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 21.

⁶³ Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 66.

of the people, but rather, quite the contrary, at his selfless *non-interference* (to the greatest degree possible) in the affairs of the people. Support for this kind of reading might be found in *Laozi* 66, wherein the sage-ruler's unassuming humility before the people is brought to the fore.

Finally, there remains the issue of collective apathy. The second part of the second pamphlet, written by Alexander Schmorell, gives specific indications as to the crimes committed by the Nazis in occupied Poland, using first-hand accounts provided by Manfred Eickemeyer, an architect who had lent the students his studio in Schwabing for their underground operations. This part of the pamphlet voices indignant incomprehension at the German people's inaction in the face of the atrocities ordered by Nazi leaders, decrying that 'Die Tatsache wird als solche hingeworfen und ad acta gelegt' and 'wieder schläft das deutsche Volk in seinem stumpfen, blöden Schlaf',⁶⁴ allowing Nazi crimes to continue. Now consider again *Laozi* 3:

in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge (*wu zhi* 無知) and free from desire, and ensures that the wise (*zhi zhe* 智者) never dare to act (*bu gan wei* 不敢為).

Do that which consists in taking no action (*wuwei* 無為), and order will prevail.⁶⁵

It is hard to ignore the quietist undertones of this passage, which sit uneasily with the second pamphlet's rebuke of the German people's apathy. But this passage is crucial in a further respect. It describes what *Laozi*'s notion of *wuwei* 無為 looks like from the *ruler*'s point of view, and helps fill out what an 'unobtrusive' mode of governing amounts to within a Laozian framework. Here the case for the authoritarian reading is very strong indeed. Far from embodying a non-interfering approach to governance, the ruler appears to go to troubling lengths to exercise *covert* control over the affairs of the state and its people. He surreptitiously prevents the wise from taking action, by ensuring that wisdom is eliminated among the people. On this line of interpretation, it is this *pre-emptive* move which allows him not to make active interventions later on.

Consider also *Laozi* 64:

It is easy to maintain a situation while it is still secure;

It is easy to deal with a situation before symptoms develop;

It is easy to break a thing when it is yet brittle;

It is easy to dissolve a thing when it is yet minute.

⁶⁴ 'The fact is accepted as such and filed away'; 'the German people return to their dull, stupid sleep' (cited in Lloyd, *Defying Hitler*, p. 99).

⁶⁵ Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 7, modified.

Deal with a thing while it is still nothing;

Keep a thing in order before disorder sets in.

[...]

Therefore the sage, because he does nothing (*wuwei* 無為), never ruins anything; and, because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing.⁶⁶

Read in tandem with *Laozi* 3, an implication of this passage might seem to be that conflict ought to be stamped out by the sage-ruler *before it has had the chance to emerge*.⁶⁷ Paternalist overtones in several passages of the *Laozi* also reinforce the impression that the text calls for the transformation of the people into compliant subjects, rather than providing a basis for revolt against authoritarian rule.⁶⁸ We are told, for instance, that the sage-ruler cares for his people *as his children*, but does not consult them.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he keeps the people *simple* like ‘uncarved wood’ (*pu* 樸).⁷⁰ It is noteworthy that this ideal is echoed in a core text of the *fa* tradition, the *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shang jun shu* 商君書, 4th/3rd cent BCE),⁷¹ a work whose political worldview is unambiguously authoritarian.

On one possible (though by no means decisive) reading of the first line of stanza 80, the *Laozi* itself prescribes an authoritarian vision of society, urging the sage-ruler to ‘seclude the people in small communities and (thereby) turn them into obedient subjects’.⁷² Among other things, this stanza describes how the people in such a society would refrain from travelling to neighbouring places or leaving the confines of their homes.

It is worth noting that a core text of the *fa* tradition, the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 — named after its putative author, Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) — self-consciously harks back to the *Laozi*, borrowing its ideal of *wuwei* 無為 within a framework of absolute monarchy.⁷³ This text comprises the earliest explicit commentary

⁶⁶ Trans. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 71.

⁶⁷ Notice the echo between stanzas 64 and 29 (i.e. the second *Laozi* passage quoted by the White Rose) concerning the need not to ‘ruin’ or ‘lay hold’ of anything.

⁶⁸ For paternalist (or what they prefer to call ‘maternalist’) features of the *Laozi*, see Sarah Flavel and Brad Hall, ‘State Maternalism: Rethinking Anarchist Readings of the *Daodejing*’, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 19 (2020), 353–69.

⁶⁹ See stanza 49. Note, however, that associations between ideal rulership and infancy (rather than parenthood) can be gleaned from other passages (as at the end of stanza 20), on which see Jingyi Jenny Zhao, ‘Representations of Infancy and Childhood in Laozi and Heraclitus’, in *After Wisdom: Sapiential Traditions and Ancient Scholarship in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Glenn W. Most and Michael Puett (Boston: Brill, 2023), pp. 77–99 (pp. 84–86).

⁷⁰ See especially stanzas 19, 37, and 57.

⁷¹ See Yuri Pines (ed.), *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 91–92, with n. 36.

⁷² This reading presumes taking *xiao* 小 and *gua* 寡 as verbs in the phrase *xiao guo gua min* 小國寡民. The competing reading — which can by contrast be squared with the anti-authoritarian, anarchist interpretation of the *Laozi* — instead takes *xiao* and *gua* as adjectives: ‘You want a *small* state with a *minimal* population’ (as per trans. Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, p. 201).

⁷³ See Yuri Pines, ‘Submerged by Absolute Power: The Ruler’s Predicament in the *Han Feizi*’, in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei*, ed. by Paul R. Goldin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 67–86 (pp. 69–72); Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political*

known to us on the *Laozi*⁷⁴ — including a discussion of *Laozi* 58, one of the two stanzas cited in the second pamphlet — and appropriates key Laozian concepts in its political theory. According to this text, the ruler ought to be secretive and inscrutable (echoing *Laozi* 17). In concealing his plans and refraining from directly implicating himself in everyday affairs, he cultivates the *appearance* of non-action and non-intervention.⁷⁵ A central tenet of the *Han Feizi* is the idea that conflict and dissent ought to be rooted out before they have a chance to blossom, through the strict enforcement of penal law (*fa* 法), systematic surveillance, but also the active suppression of scholars (*shi* 士) and learning.⁷⁶

While one should tread carefully in tracing continuities between the *Laozi* and the *fa* tradition,⁷⁷ one cannot rule out the authoritarian interpretation which the *Laozi* leaves open.⁷⁸ The question of how to lay hold of (and maintain) power and control over the people *surreptitiously* are themes that can plausibly be taken to inform the *Laozi*'s political project. Proponents of this reading might go so far as to say that the text goes in the opposite direction to that advocated by the White Rose: that of an inscrutable sage-ruler, intent on keeping the people in the dark, curtailing their access to learning and exercising control over their minds and wills, removing all germs of dissent in the process.

The rival (and more traditional) interpretive camp would of course object that we are taking *wuwei* 無為 in the *Laozi* in entirely the wrong way. If we recall that 'emptying' the people and the ruler of wisdom can be interpreted, according to the more

Thought of the Warring States Era (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), pp. 36–44; Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 124–26, 224–28. For the connection between absolute monarchy and the Daoist motif of 'non-action' (*wuwei* 無為) found in the *Han Feizi*, see Romain Graziani, 'Monarch and Minister: The Problematic Partnership in the Building of Absolute Monarchy in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子', in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. by Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin and Martin Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 157 (with n. 2), 174; Pines, 'Submerged by Absolute Power', pp. 79–81; Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy*, pp. 230–31, 453.

⁷⁴ These are the chapters 'Explaining Laozi' [*jie lao* 解老] — which explicitly refers to *Laozi* 58 — and 'Illustrating Laozi' [*yu lao* 喻老]. Note that the provenance of these two chapters is contested.

⁷⁵ See especially *Han Feizi* 5. For the paradox that 'the sovereign is at the same time the most inactive and the most active individual in the kingdom', see Graziani, 'Monarch and Minister', p. 174. Indeed, as Graziani argues, a tension underlying the *Han Feizi* lies in its hesitancy between two contradictory models of authoritarian rule, corresponding to two different conceptions of *wuwei*: the one in which the source of absolute power lies with the monarch (secured by his manipulation and deception of his ministers and people, controlling their every move and decision through rewards and punishment, and a system of total surveillance), the other with his ministers (since it is the ministers' *deeds* that ensure the implementation of laws and policies, and the average monarch easily becomes their puppet). In the former scenario, the monarch actively cultivates the *appearance* of inaction or non-interference in the service of absolute power, whereas in the latter case he is *literally* inactive and stripped of his powerbase. On this problem, see also Pines, 'Submerged by Absolute Power', pp. 77–82; Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy*, pp. 453–56.

⁷⁶ See especially *Han Feizi* 5, 8, 20, 48, 49, 50.

⁷⁷ Importantly, the coercive and ruthless model of rule through penal law found in the *Book of Lord Shang* and the *Han Feizi* is explicitly opposed in *Laozi* 57.

⁷⁸ See Goldin's (*After Confucius*, pp. 129–33; *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 124–28) complaint that the political implications of the *Laozi* (as in *Laozi* 65) are too often 'white-washed'.

benign reading, as merely rejecting *conventional* modes of knowing, the emphasis here might be precisely on avoiding those modes of action that are overly *constraining* or *coercive*. Favouring this second line of interpretation is a strong undercurrent in the *Laozi* to the effect that the good ruler should abstain from armed conflict and unnecessary violence, refrain from acting rashly or in anger, and do everything in his power to secure peace.⁷⁹ This would appear to mesh well with the message of the White Rose, and to speak in favour of anti-authoritarianism. But while there is perhaps scope for the people to stand up to a ruler who abuses his power or position (say, in acting in anger, or hastily resorting to military conflict for the sake of conquest, etc.), one wonders how compatible this message really is with the framework of the *Laozi*, which focuses not on how to hold rulers accountable, but rather on how to prevent any sort of troublesome situation from arising in the first place. In short, it is far from obvious that the text lends itself to a message of popular revolt against a ruler, authoritarian or otherwise.⁸⁰ We should also not lose sight of the fact that the *Laozi* is addressed to a ruler, not the people.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

We have seen that well into the early decades of twentieth-century Germany, the *Laozi* carried deeply mystical resonances, and these may in part explain why the religiously inclined members of the White Rose were drawn to the text. Anti-authoritarian interpretations of the *Laozi* were also strikingly common among German-speaking intellectuals from the First World War onwards, prefiguring the young resisters' use of the text in opposition to National Socialism. However, due consideration of the *Laozi* in its own ancient intellectual context has shown that the reading of it as a counterpoint to authoritarianism faces the challenge of a compelling rival interpretation pointing in the opposite direction.

In light of this, should the students have appealed to a different text, less ambiguous and known in Germany at the time, to support their message?⁸² It seems doubtful that this would have better served the students' purpose, since, at the time of the pamphlets' dissemination, the *Laozi* had strongly anti-authoritarian and religious resonances that other texts lacked. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the students adopted the reading of the text that was widely accepted in

⁷⁹ See *Laozi* 31 and 68. Though note that, at stanza 69, what is at issue is merely cultivating the *appearance* of 'pacifism' for the sake of military victory.

⁸⁰ For the controversy as to whether the *Laozi*'s notion of *wuwei* has revolutionary potential, see Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*, pp. 26–28. For the Neo-Daoist Bao Jingyan's anarchist reading of the text as accommodating popular revolt, see Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*, pp. 38–39.

⁸¹ See Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, pp. 36–37; Flavel and Hall, 'State Maternalism', pp. 354, 360; Aleksandar Stamatov, 'The *Laozi* and Anarchism', *Asian Philosophy*, 24 (2014), 260–278 (pp. 273–74).

⁸² The classical Chinese tradition offers ample resources in the spirit of anti-authoritarianism and popular revolt. The Confucian text *Mengzi*, for instance, famously advocates the primacy of the people over the ruler (see Book 7B.14). The Daoist text *Zhuangzi* (which was widely read in Germany at the height of 'Dao-Fever') discusses, in chapter 4, the challenges posed by an oppressive and tyrannical ruler, and here and elsewhere gestures at the scope there might be for disruptive critique and dissent. On the latter point, see Dorothy H. B. Kwek, 'Critique of Imperial Reason: Lessons from the *Zhuangzi*', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 18 (2019), 411–33.

their day even among Sinologists. Indeed, the ‘darker’ potential of the *Laozi* has only recently been brought back into view in contemporary scholarship.

Should the students have avoided citing the text altogether? We know that Manfred Eickemeyer was disappointed that they had wasted a precious few lines citing the *Laozi* rather than providing more specific facts about mass shootings of Jews, which he himself had witnessed in occupied Poland.⁸³ Kurt Huber, a Professor of Philosophy, Psychology, and Musicology at the University of Munich whose help Scholl and Schmorell enlisted for the fifth and sixth pamphlets, also seems to have initially been sceptical about the impact such pamphlets might have on the public.⁸⁴ Yet we should not underestimate the extent to which the *Laozi* could resonate with an educated German readership in 1942, in a way that is largely lost on us as contemporary onlookers. The appeal to Laozi, then widely perceived as a quasi-prophetic and otherworldly symbol of wisdom, might have functioned as a cautionary tale for what happens when authoritarian regimes are left unchallenged, regardless of time or place. From this perspective, the references to the *Laozi* in the second pamphlet were less haphazard and considerably better targeted than they have been given credit for.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Lea Cantor is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at the University of Oxford and a British Society for the History of Philosophy Postgraduate Fellow (2022–2023). Her research interests include classical Chinese philosophy (especially Daoism), early Greek philosophy, the European reception of Chinese and Greek philosophy, and the historiography of philosophy.

ORCID

Lea Cantor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3139-2839>

⁸³ Dumbach and Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose*, p. 92.

⁸⁴ Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, p. 204. Another peripheral member of the movement, Falk Harnack — who in other respects profoundly disagreed with Kurt Huber due to political differences — similarly criticized Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorell in November 1942 for the inaccessibility and intellectualism of the first four pamphlets (Dumbach and Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose*, p. 7).