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REVIEW ARTICLE

In Search of the Tao in Taoism: New Questions of Unity and Multiplicity

Histoire du taoïsme des origines au XIVe siècle. By Isabelle Robinet. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991. Pp. 274. 147 F.

Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension. By Livia Kohn. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991. Pp. 345+xvi. $59.50 (cloth); $19.95 (paper).

> "Dans le Mystère, il est un autre Mystère", dit Lao zi, maintes fois cité par les maîtres qui ajoutent: "Dans le souffle il est un autre Souffle", "Dans le corps il est un autre corps." Plus on extrait l'intérieur de l'intérieur, plus on obtient un élément "pur", "réel." [Isabelle Robinet]

Lao-tzu's sense of the mystery within the mystery, or the theory of a truer reality within the real that was elaborated by later Taoists, is an idea not all that far removed from the analytical quest to identify an essential unity underlying some tantalizing set of diverse phenomena. Of course, no Taoist master has clarified how to determine whether the inner mystery or reality one has glimpsed is *the* mystery or *the* reality. Rather, they imply that yet another mystery always lurks within the ever-retreating heart of things. One might idly wonder whether this is the principle behind all nature, behind the processes of human perception, or just behind the social dynamics of creating knowledge. This ethos—and its attendant dilemmas—inform the two books under review here, Isabelle Robinet's *Histoire du taoïsme des origines au XIVe siècle* and Livia Kohn's *Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension.*

Certainly scholars in Taoist studies have worked hard to penetrate the obvious and outermost layers of mystery. In the last few years alone there have been a number of major efforts to define, organize, and communicate the many developments in research. The late Anna Seidel's comprehensive survey, "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West 1950–1990," is an impressive and

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moving act of service to the field.[1] The *Journal of Chinese Religions* has also published a lengthy report by John R. McRae and others on the 1988 workshop on Chinese religion held at Harvard University, where Taoist scholars joined their colleagues to explore a number of major issues and to report on work in progress.[2] A panel entitled "Chinese Religions: The State of the Field," presented at the 1992 Association for Asian Studies meeting, sponsored a comprehensive report on Taoist Studies by Franciscus Verellen.[3] There has also been a recent survey of Chinese scholarship by Man-Kam Leung.[4] Although more than a few journals are either devoted to Chinese religion or publish articles regularly in this area, several scholars have also managed to keep afloat a small journal devoted exclusively to Taoism, *Taoist Resources.*[5]

These activities may well signal something of a new stage in Taoist studies, a field in which generational and methodological stages have been particularly well marked—some with the help of this very journal.[6] It is noteworthy that several of these surveys have been accompanied by calls for even greater synthetic efforts (e.g., Seidel, Julian Pas, and, elsewhere, T. H. Barrett), especially the call for comprehensive histories of Taoism and Chinese religion. Judith Boltz has suggested that the completion of two major textual projects—the *Handbook of the Taoist Canon* under the direction of Kristofer Schipper (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press) and the *Tao-tsang t'i-yao* from the Department of Taoist Studies at the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing—will usher in a fresh stage of Taoist study, perhaps one that can build more boldly on the very focused textual work that has been so important during the last twenty years.[7] This textual research has opened up many of the mysteries of the long-misunderstood and neglected history of Taoism with major ramifications for all the other elements that make up the warp and woof of Chinese religious life. Hence, now that our understanding of what constitutes Taoism has been stretched to accommodate unexpected heterogeneity—that is, when chaos is reaching its peak—there is a

[1] Anna Seidel, "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West 1950–1990," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 5 (1989–90): 223–347.

[2] John R. McRae, Jackie Armijo-Hussein, Stella Kao, Neil Katkov, Kathy Lowry, Tom Selover, and Catherine Wong, "Special Report: The Historical Legacy of Religion in China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 17 (Fall 1989): 61–116.

[3] Daniel L. Overmyer, Donald Harper, John R. McRae, Stephen F. Teiser, and Franciscus Verellen, "Chinese Religions: The State of the Field," panel presented at the annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington, D.C., 1992.

[4] Man-Kam Leung, "The Study of Religious Taoism in the People's Republic of China (1949–90): A Bibliographical Survey," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 19 (Fall 1991): 113–26.

[5] The current editor is Stephen R. Bokenkamp and the associate editor is Livia Kohn, with editorial offices at the East Asian Studies Center, Indiana University, Memorial West 207, Bloomington, Indiana 47405.

[6] See the special issues on Taoism, *History of Religions* 9, nos. 2 and 3 (November 1969–February 1970), and on Chinese religions, *History of Religions* 17, nos. 3 and 4 (February–May 1978).

[7] Judith M. Boltz, "Review of William Y. Chen, *A Guide to Cheng-t'ung Tao-tsang,*" *Journal of Chinese Religion* 18 (Fall 1990): 195–97.

move toward order and putting all the pieces together into some meaningful whole.

Among these developments and attitudes, the two books under review here distinguish themselves in several ways. First, both suggest that they are writing somewhat comprehensively about Taoism for a general audience as well as specialists. Despite the complexities of Taoist ideas and practices, the difficulties of tracing its history, and the sheer alien quality of most of the tradition for a general Western audience, Robinet and Kohn have attempted to make the main themes of their research accessible to readers interested in broader religious themes. Second, both works are the product of close textual studies that, nonetheless, avow the primacy in Taoism of practice—ritual, meditation, and a variety of techniques for pursuing longevity or immortality—over systematic doctrine or conceptual formulations. Third, and most central to this review, both works suggest a reappraisal of recent perspectives on the very nature of the Taoist tradition in Chinese history. Although Robinet and Kohn differ to some extent on what has been the problem and what should be the solution, they both attempt to define Taoism in terms of some principle of inner coherence that underlies the bewildering multiplicity of its social and historical forms.

I

Isabelle Robinet's *Histoire du taoïsme* is a lovely book. It is balanced in tone, rich in detail, and well rounded in its evocation of larger issues and themes. Although full of many specific new connections and insights, its major contributions lie primarily in the thoughtful synthesis of its formulations, contextualizations, and emphases. As such, *Histoire du taoïsme* is clearly a mature distillation of Robinet's previous work.[8] A forthcoming translation by Stanford University Press will ensure that it gets the breadth of audience it deserves.

The opening section lays out Robinet's major concern, one that attends any attempt to write comprehensively about Taoism—how best to characterize the complex nature of the beast, what it is that holds the whole together. While one cannot speak of Taoism as a single entity, she writes, neither is it correct to argue that there is no unity to what has been considered Taoist. Two dates have been invoked in defining Taoism—215 C.E., the year in which the Han general Ts'ao-ts'ao encountered the religio-political organization known as the Way of the Celestial Masters, and the years 365–70 C.E., when the Supreme Clarity (*Shang-ch'ing*) revelations were recorded. For Robinet, these dates correlate with two complementary tendencies in approaching the definition and history of Taoism, the tendency to look to the emergence of institutions and the tendency to focus on the decisive synthesis of key ideas. She is critical of the severity of these positions for which the importance of only formal, empirical criteria means that "Taoism" cannot be defined or said to exist prior to these

[8] These include *Les commentaires du Tao-tö king jusqu'au VIIe siècle*, Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, no. 4 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), *Méditation taoïste* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1979), *La révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme*, 2 vols. (Paris: Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), and numerous articles, including two in Livia Kohn and Yoshinobu Sakade, eds., *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Teachings* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1989).

dates. This approach, she suggests, is a truncation and even a betrayal of the religion; it is absolutely indispensable to clarify the roots, without which the structures and underlying meanings of Taoist organizational and conceptual systems are incomprehensible.

Robinet cites Kohn: "le taoïsme n'a jamais été une religion unifiée et a constamment été une combinaison d'enseignements fondés sur des révélations originelles diverses" (p. 9).[9] If there is a thread that runs through the combinations and recombinations of ideas and practices, she continues, it is a "genealogical" thread formed by the very process through which Taoism has appropriated and integrated new ideas by "recovering" its more ancient teachings. These processes constitute the identity and the evolution of Taoism. Hence, in contrast to the more common position, most recently affirmed by Seidel, Robinet argues that Taoism has neither a date nor a place of birth.[10] It has constantly continued on its way by transforming itself and absorbing other things; it has proceeded by means of "recursive loops," variously reappropriating its past in order to make its way into the future. In this manner Taoism has become a precious depository for the whole cultural past of China, a past that continues to live within it, preserved there when officially rejected in almost every other form.

While Robinet's descriptions of this genealogical method of recursive construction remain primarily suggestive, she details those common elements among the currents of Taoism that can be considered its underlying "cement." They are familiar from other attempts to formulate what it is that makes Taoism Taoist. First, there is the cosmology of yin and yang and the five agents, dynamically constituted as a transforming unity by breath (*ch'i*), which entails an anthropology whereby the body, linked by correspondences to heaven and earth, is both an analogue of the state and a microcosm of the universe. Second, Taoism posits a cosmological center, the primordial origin and point of return for all things, creating a closed cosmos animated by circular processes of transformation and progression that serve as the basis for the relation of unity to multiplicity. Third, through his or her ritual position in the cosmos, the Taoist gives it meaning not by interfering in it but by integration with it, making it into both a framework for and instrument of thought; this ritual position establishes a center, it mediates high and low, and it ultimately recovers the principle and order of the world. Fourth, there is the pantheon, which for the most part is composed of impersonal functional incarnations, all progressive differentiations of the one Tao, including the gods of the body, the gods of ritual, and the supreme triad, the Three Pure Ones. The Taoist ritualist commands one set like an emperor but petitions the others like a enfeoffed minister.

[9] Robinet cites *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* here (no page, noted as forthcoming). Although I am unable to locate this exact line in the published form of Kohn's work, it is very close to a statement on p. 10.

[10] Seidel states (p. 237): "This religion became Taoism when the deified sage Lao-tzu revealed himself to the Celestial Master Chang Tao-ling (trad. date 142 CE) proclaiming a new cosmic dispensation, and when the text ascribed to Lao-tzu, the *Tao-te-ching*, became a sacred scripture religiously recited and interpreted."

Finally, more than a belief or a doctrine, Taoism is a practice: it is always somewhat elitist and marginal, witnessing to another world that surpasses this one, even while the analogy it establishes between the person and the state—"order one's person and govern the empire" (*chih-shen chih-kuo*)—creates a direct affinity between the Taoist and the emperor.

Robinet's purpose is to show how the main developmental line of Taoist doctrine, constantly encountering heterogeneous factors across discontinuous historical eras, as she puts it, maintained a fundamental coherence by virtue of the way in which it kept recovering the elements listed above and using them to appropriate and elaborate the new. Robinet acknowledges that she is retracing the main lines of Taoism's doctrinal or intellectual evolution, not recovering the facts for an "event history" that still needs to be written. In contrast to the calls mentioned above for just such a history, in fact, Robinet holds that our current state of knowledge of Taoism is insufficient to the task.

Histoire du taoïsme addresses the unity or discontinuity of the tradition in another form when it regularly evokes the question of the relationship between so-called philosophical Taoism and so-called religious Taoism. Admitting that too much ink has been spilled on this issue (again, a fair amount of it in this journal alone), Robinet insists that it must be clarified once again for the general reader. She attempts to do this by analogizing the philosophy-religion distinction with the distinction found in all religions between the contemplative dimension and the purposive or operational dimension. Yet all these distinctions, she notes, are really misleading, born of an "apparent" difference between "ascesis," that is, rigorous or ascetic processes of training and self-discipline, on the one hand, and the results of such processes, namely, the speculations that accompany or crown them, on the other hand. In practice the philosophical and the operational are inseparably linked.

The first chapter, which opens with a discussion of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, concludes with the four elements that signal the birth of Taoism, namely, Lao-Chuang philosophical Taoism, the techniques of ecstatic wandering seen in the *Songs of Ch'u* and the *Chuang-tzu,* techniques for longevity and physical immortality, and traditional exorcistic practices. In the second chapter on Han dynasty developments, Robinet sketches out how Taoism went on to inherit various currents of ideas and practices bundled together at this time, particularly Huang-Lao ideas, the *Huai-nan tzu,* the speculations of the Han magicians (*fang-shih*) in quest of immortality, respect for nonaction, and much of popular religion itself. In describing the Way of the Celestial Masters, chapter 3 discusses the sect's inclusion of both popular and aristocratic social groups and its implementation of the utopian ideal expounded in the *Book of Chou* that also inspired Wang Mang. Excellent attention also is given to the variety of ritual forms (kitchen feasts, sexual rites, oratory rites, etc.) that led to the development of Taoist liturgy. Ko Hung and the southern traditions of Chiang-nan are presented in chapter 4, with the Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao revelations discussed in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. Chapter 7 describes developments during the T'ang dynasty, namely, forms of consolidation, integration with Buddhism, the classification of schools and texts, and the emergence of internal

alchemy (*nei-kuan*). The last historical chapter, on the Sung and Yüan dynasties, describes the emergence of a new ethos in Taoism, particularly seen in the importance of internal alchemy and new forms of sectarian organizations. Robinet concludes that the identity and continuity of Taoism throughout the "long centuries" of its history were rooted in its cosmological discourse, which was not designed or invoked with any regard for rational coherence, solely with regard to its ritual efficacy.

The decision to disavow even an attempt at providing the social history behind the intellectual history of Taoist revelations, textual works, and ritual-meditative practices may have left Robinet's project particularly vulnerable to the seductive tones of Taoism as a type of perennial philosophy and transcultural mysticism. Often the voice of the author abandons its position of historical distance and becomes a voice for the tradition itself, explaining itself to the reader. This is, of course, an interpretive choice not at all uncommon in books for the general reader. Indeed, the complexities of Taoism, so many of which Robinet has faithfully and quite deftly included, probably demand some such consolidation of voices. Still, I was left wishing for more of the creative tension that Robinet occasionally evokes between the cultural boundedness of the material on the one hand and its compelling relevance to even the most general reader on the other.

The tone of a nearly ahistorical transcultural perennial philosophy may also be fostered by the spirit if not the letter of Robinet's basic argument for an underlying unity or continuity of Taoism. The attempt to identify this unity as rooted in the manner in which a complex set of cosmological ideas are recursively developed in history clearly aims to balance the tendency of recent scholarship to define Taoism in terms of its overt institutional history, although, in actual fact, the institutional approach has not excluded discussion of the roots of these institutional developments in earlier texts, systems, practices, and social worlds. Certainly Robinet is justified in suggesting that questions concerning the intellectual or practical continuity of a more embracing notion of Taoism should not be lost. Moreover, the attempt to formulate a method or style by which ideas and practices, and even institutions, remake themselves as Taoist by reappropriating selected cosmological-ritual features of the past is a creative and timely endeavor. Yet, when developed within the constraints of an intellectual history for the general reader, the results often threaten to fall into a type of essentialism. One wants a clearer formulation of how and why evolving practices and recursive appropriations are developed that define practices as Taoist vis-à-vis the other socioreligious options of the day. Toward this end, Robinet does give more than a few hints at how a coherence of form and content could be continually reasserted *within the social dynamics* among Taoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and popular religious practices.

The bibliographies at the end of each chapter are very modest, content to suggest further reading for a few specific areas. No Asian language works are cited, which is not surprising in a book for the general reader. A general bibliography at the end notes only a handful of works dealing with the modern period that were not previously cited. A few of these bibliographic listings are marred by confusions in which some works are listed under the wrong author.

II

Livia Kohn's book is bolder, more focused, and unsettling.[11] It is organized in three parts and ten chapters, eight of which are primarily background on the text of the *Hsi-sheng ching,* the "Scripture of Western Ascension," and include discussions of various editions, the mystical worldview, major commentators, and a section-by-section summary. A complete translation of the text, followed by the Chinese original, is included in the appendices, along with translations of citations from the *Hsi-sheng ching* found in other texts, a glossary, and a bibliography. Actually, the reader might well skip the summary (pp. 42–55) and read the full translation instead (pp. 235–56), which is a few pages longer but much richer and more stimulating.

The first chapter is a discussion of Kohn's understanding of Taoist mysticism, which she begins to describe by invoking the "two strands of the Taoist tradition," the philosophical and the religious. Like nearly every other scholar for the last twenty years, Kohn expresses dissatisfaction with this distinction, but she maintains the existence of important differences between religious Taoism and philosophical Taoism, while appreciating how a "philosophical" text can emerge from a "religious" background and a "religious" text can make use of "philosophical" ideas. Not unlike Robinet's usage (see above), for Kohn, "religious" appears to mean the achievement of material goals such as longevity or immortality, and the employment of various disciplines and a fair degree of human effort in realizing them. "Philosophical" appears to mean a less tangible pursuit of less materialistic goals and perhaps little soteriology at all. More central to Kohn's perspective is the way certain works are seen to "bridge" these two traditions. The emphatic formulation of a "third strand" of Taoism, essentially an extrapolation of Fukunaga Mitsuji's position on the importance of the teachings of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, roots the unity and continuity of Taoism in a mystical tradition that bridges the philosophical and the religious by synthesizing them in soteriological practices that are more spiritual than material. While many scholars talk about Taoist meditation and even Taoist mysticism in a general way, Kohn's terminology for indicating an autonomous third tradition seems to be a dubious way of formulating and explicating the various conundrums of Taoist history, thought, and practice.

The *Hsi-sheng ching,* a fifth-century text the author and date of which cannot be precisely determined, claims to be the words that Lao-tzu spoke to Yin Hsi, the famous keeper of the mountain pass to the West, after already transmitting the *Tao-te ching* to him. Thus, it claims to be a second and even culminating teaching from the great sage. Lao-tzu's decision to set out for India and his meeting with Yin Hsi are familiar elements in the mythology of Lao-tzu and in the Taoist-Buddhist polemics of the period. In the *Hsi-sheng ching* story, however, the familiar beginning merely sets the scene for new teachings. Each of

[11] In addition to a number of articles, Kohn's previous work includes *Seven Steps to the Tao: Sima Chengzhen's "Zuowang lun"* (Netteeal: Steyler, 1987), with a preface by Isabelle Robinet, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Kohn and Sakade, eds. (see n. 8 above).

the thirty-eight sections that follow begins with "Lao-tzu said . . . " What he transmits to Yin Hsi and then urges him to practice is a set of not terribly well organized precepts and injunctions primarily evocative of the *Tao-te ching,* with various references to the goals of longevity and immortality, the recitation of scriptures, and some Confucian-style social virtues. In the end Lao-tzu announces that he is going "back to the nameless," that is, leaving the world and returning "to the one source" (39.4). And suddenly he is gone. Yin Hsi, however, begs him to reappear once more: "Give me one more rule so that I can guard the primordial source of it all" (39.7). Lao-tzu obliges and reappears as a golden form hovering in midair (Kohn has "he looked like a statue," which seems less likely [39.8]). "I will give you one more admonition," he announces. "Get rid of all impurity and stop your thoughts, calm your mind and guard the One. When all impurities are gone, the myriad affairs are done. These are the essentials of my Tao" (39.9–12). When he vanishes, Yin Hsi briefly breaks down weeping, but then retires from his job, stops all thinking, preserves the One, and the myriad affairs quickly come to an end—as does the text.

The *Hsi-sheng ching* reflects an integration of the ideas of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu on the nature of the sage, nonaction, emptying the self, and returning to the Tao, with references to meditative techniques, particularly breath control and the use of a meditation chamber, for which various terms are used. There are only two explicit references to visualization techniques (12.1, 17.9). Yet a fair amount is said about purification (mostly mental but also ritual), loss of the self, which is the source of desire and greed, and the obstacle of conscious thinking (31.1), which involves distinctions as to what is good and what is evil (37.4–5). There are interesting references to the somewhat limited or provisional usefulness of scriptures. As Kohn points out, the *Hsi-sheng ching* expresses some support for social values: "When kindness, social responsibility, ceremony, and faith are lost, the Tao and the virtue are also discarded" (10.7). But elsewhere one finds, "Never imitate the kind of goodness practiced by the common folk. Never behave according to benevolence and righteousness, loyalty and faith. Never behave with reverence and respect or act according to petty loves and desires. Then the myriad beings will all come to profit" (26.4).

Statements about the body can also sound a bit contradictory: "The untrue Tao teaches you to nourish the body; the true Tao teaches you to nourish the spirit" (7.4) and "I am a prisoner of my personal body: thus I know the self is great suffering" (7.9). Yet it is also said that "body and spirit join in harmony: they give life to each other, they complete each other" (22.3). When immortality is mentioned it is frequently referred to as the state of the spirit immortal, or *shen-hsien* (4.9, 7.13a). But physical immortality is not absent: one passage contrasts the ignorance of people who indulge themselves, only to realize eventually that the body cannot live forever, with the eternal life or preservation (*yung-ts'un*) that can be had when such indulgence is shunned (6.22–23). Also, "if people want to live long, they must cut off their emotions and get rid of their desires. Mind and intention are bondage to life, it is necessary to return [to purity]. Body and spirit joined in harmony means eternal life (*ch'ang-chiu*)" (29.4).

While earlier texts have represented Lao-tzu as a master of the arts of longevity, the *Hsi-sheng ching,* according to Kohn, represents a critical synthesis and turning point in Taoist thinking. First, it is an answer to the question of what happened to Lao-tzu after he left the keeper of the pass. Whether or not he went off to convert the barbarians in the guise of the Buddha was a point of contention among quarreling Buddhists and Taoists, and Kohn provides an interesting overview of the various "conversion of the barbarians" (*hua-hu*) stories. For the *Hsi-sheng ching,* however, Lao-tzu returned to the Tao in a dramatic apotheosis. Second, and more important, in the *Hsi-sheng ching* Lao-tzu exemplifies the "new goal" of Taoist practice: his exemplary return to the Tao is presented as the more purely mystical goal that should crown the practical efforts of those like Yin Hsi. For Kohn this is the contribution of the text to Taoist mystical philosophy: it "bridged" the differences between the philosophers and the religious practitioners by uniting the philosophical goal of Lao-tzu, oneness with the Tao, with the practice of religious techniques, in this case those taught by Lao-tzu himself to the earnest Yin Hsi.

Kohn goes on to argue that the distinction between philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism is also a distinction between the passive mysticism of the *Tao-te ching,* where one unlearns, returns, yields, and so on, and the positive, active, even aggressive methods of self-cultivation found in religious Taoism and in Lao-tzu's second transmission to Yin Hsi in the *Hsi-sheng ching:* "Where before mystical practice had consisted of 'returning' to the Tao and 'forgetting' one's acquired personality and discriminating consciousness, now it became an active pursuit" (p. 18). Elsewhere, the same distinction is also drawn between spiritual and physical techniques (p. 211). It is surprising in a study of Taoism, but less surprising in the context of Kohn's mobilized oppositions, that religious Taoism is also described as based on a dualistic worldview in which the purity of the Tao contrasts starkly with the impure or defiled state of humankind (pp. 4, 217, 220). The importance of the *Hsi-sheng ching* for Kohn lies in how it bridged philosophy and religion, the passive and active, the spiritual and physical, realization and knowledge, teaching and practice, and so on. This is also, of course, how she characterizes the mystical tradition of which the *Hsi-sheng ching* is the earliest, "full-fledged" mystical scripture. This tradition is "a bridge between strands" (p. 3), a "fruitful merging of all traditions" (i.e., the Lao-Chuang tradition, shamanism, and Buddhism) (p. 7), and also that which joins the roles of the ruler, shaman, and sage "into one" (p. 9).

The material in the *Hsi-sheng ching* on practicing physical techniques for immortality or return to the Tao is actually rather modest, although the later commentaries on the text appear to have added much more discussion of these things. As mentioned above, there are a couple of references to visualization, several to controlled breathing and use of a quiet place, a few to dispelling impurities, and some on the role of scripture. More compelling, the language is consistently passive. In the beginning, Yin Hsi is said to have recited Lao-tzu's written teachings (*wen*) ten thousand times—which certainly is active religious practice—but there are few other references that could be similarly construed as particularly active if not strenuous in nature. Instead the text faithfully echoes the *Tao-te ching* in advocating return, emptying, withdrawing the senses,

nonaction, abandoning, simplicity, and so on. Indeed, one passage states: "Those who acted with the Tao in the days of old all based themselves on nature. Thus their Tao was permanent. But when you try to force it, it will not come about. Why is this so? Because trying involves having yearnings and thoughts. This goes against the Tao" (18.1–3, pp. 246–47). Hence, the evidence for a synthesis of active religious disciplines with more subtle soteriological goals does not appear conclusive.

Kohn is certainly correct in pointing to the integration of Lao-Chuang ideas with later practices, including such Buddhist ideas and imagery as the concept of "no mind" and the suffering of human existence. Yet Kohn's concern with how the text bridges various polarized aspects of Taoism may have kept her from developing more fully a discussion of the curious way in which the text appears to give general acknowledgement to all sorts of practices while quietly drawing together some basic Buddhist and Taoist ideas and images. The interesting accounts of the two most important commentators on the *Hsi-sheng ching,* Wei Chieh (sixth century) and Li Jung (seventh century), illustrate the diverse and complex currents feeding Taoist ideas and influencing interpretations of the text. Kohn finds evidence in Wei Chieh's appropriation of the text that sixth-century Taoism was not a unified or standardized set of practices but a "smorgasbord," particularly in the north, and despite the slight dominance exercised by Ling-pao practices. Li Jung, a representative of one of the leading schools of *Tao-te ching* interpretation in the early T'ang, the Twofold Mystery School (*ch'ung-hsüan*), invoked Lao-tzu's teaching on the mystery within the mystery in terms of Buddhist Madhyamika notions of two levels of truth and, by analogy, two levels of "discarding" (first discard desire, then discard "no desire"; first discard ignorance, then discard wisdom). This direction is developed more fully by Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen several decades later, by which time the *Hsi-sheng ching* is "a major document in the mystical tradition," representing "in its essence and development" a tradition of mystical philosophy that "is a dynamic and active part of Chinese intellectual history" (pp. 211, 226). In light of such claims, it seems oddly abrupt to be reminded that the *Hsi-sheng ching* was soon displaced and rendered a fossilized relic by the "internal alchemy" school of the Sung (p. 226–27).

Kohn is also undoubtedly correct in pointing out the text's reworking of the meaning of Lao-tzu's "ascent" to the western mountains. Yet in the end it is not clear how the *Hsi-sheng ching* was meant to be a contribution to the Taoist-Buddhist debate on the "conversion of the barbarians." Kohn does not smooth over problems within the text. On the contrary, she points out several key puzzles that raise questions about the text's author, purpose, compilation, and audience. Yet in proposing possible answers, she is somewhat less clear in acknowledging what is left unresolved. Minor points add to the reader's confusion, as in the emphasis placed on the notion of "ascension" (*sheng*). In one instance, Kohn notes that ascension, meaning the attainment of an official position in the heavens, a connotation established in the Shang-ch'ing scriptures that predate this text, becomes "the key idea of all mystical literature of later ages, beginning with the *Hsi-sheng ching*" (p. 17). Yet the ascension of Lao-tzu, which is so central to Kohn's argument about the mystical synthesis of philosophy and religion, as well as Yin Hsi's successful cessation of the myriad affairs,

is not linked in any way in the text to attaining a position in a heavenly bureaucracy of immortals. In fact, this text is interesting in how it seems to undermine most of the Shang-ch'ing vision. Kohn makes this last point, of course, in arguing for the substitution of more spiritual goals for material ones, but the scattered and varied emphases on "ascension" are not clear. A major theme for Kohn is that the *Hsi-sheng ching,* which opens with Lao-tzu traveling West intent on India and ends with his spiritual apotheosis, is "itself a living image of the mystic's ascent to oneness with the Tao and ascension into heaven" (p. 211). In other words, one of the more awkward discrepancies within the text—that Lao-tzu abandons the journey to India—is actually a deliberate depiction of the mystical path: beginning with worldly and physical goals, it culminates in purely spiritual ones. As an analysis of literary form the idea is not without merit, but the arguments seem to rest less on evidence from within the text and more on Kohn's repetition of the ascension theme is various ways. In the end this argument seems primarily to serve Kohn's larger agenda about the nature of the mystical tradition and the critical contribution of this text to it.

As a welcomed and useful rendering of the *Hsi-sheng ching* and its background, Kohn's *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* is highly recommended to scholars working in Chinese religion. It would not seem to lend itself readily to undergraduate classroom use: while many sections, especially the beginning and end, seem written down for a popular readership, such readers would get quite lost in other sections and have little use for the textual paraphernalia that the specialist so appreciates. It is also likely that the student would emerge with a particularly narrow, even contrived, view of Taoism. In terms of general readers, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* would seem best suited to only the more mystically resolute.

III

While Robinet's *Histoire* may be the work of a more judicious scholar, Kohn's book is clearly more enthusiastic in its approach and most of its shortcomings are probably best understood in that light. Aside from such differences in style, however, Robinet and Kohn are similarly concerned to uncover the source of the coherence underlying the multiplicity of Taoism. In their own ways, they both "guard the one" and "preserve the center" amid analytic processes that seem to delight in discontinuity and heterogeneity. They identify a Taoism within Taoism, a Tao within the Tao.

It is interesting to note, first of all, that their arguments represent some shifts in the old debate about philosophical versus religious Taoism. Initially, as implied above, Taoist studies was divided over the question of the continuity or discontinuity of the philosophical Taoism of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu with the religious Taoism of various cults for immortality, longevity techniques, and other practices rooted in shamanism, alchemy, and popular religion.[12] As Norman

[12] The use of the distinction between philosophical and religious Taoism has long been thought to rest, to some degree at least, on a Chinese distinction between the two, *tao-chia* and *tao-chiao,* respectively. Seidel (pp. 228–29) has argued, however, that the Chinese distinction between *tao-chia* and *tao-chiao* was used differently (and somewhat inconsistently) from the way in which its supposed translation in English has been used.

Girardot laid out these positions over twenty years ago, the "more orthodox position" denied any "essential unity" between these two phenomena and doubted that both should be called Taoism.[13] In this view, held in various ways by E. Chavannes, H. G. Creel, H. Welch, and Fung Yu-lan, philosophy was often conceived to be a purer thing than religious practices, regardless of whether the Taoist philosophical and religious traditions were seen to coexist, compete, or degenerate from the former into the latter. The more radical position at that time, however, held that just such an essential unity did exist and was usually identified in terms of a coherent structure of cosmological assumptions and goals. From this perspective, supported by H. Maspero, M. Granet, M. Kaltenmark, A. Seidel, K. Schipper, J. Needham, and N. Sivin, philosophical Taoism was not nearly so pure or religious Taoism so materialistic and magical.

In the last twenty years the positions and tensions have shifted a bit to reflect the impact of new scholarship, especially new work in the textual sources of the Taoist Canon and in the field with the living ritual tradition; but these have not yielded any greater consensus on the definition of Taoism. While the argument for fundamental differences between philosophical and religious Taoism has dropped out as such, another position has been defined to take its place in challenging an essential unity to the full sweep of Taoism—namely, that religious Taoism should be treated as most religions are and defined in terms of its formal institutional emergence. This stance implies a fundamental institutional difference between the first formally organized Taoist sect, the Way of the Celestial Masters, and earlier forms of Taoist thinking and practice whether they were metaphysical or soteriological. Hence, the various options for defining Taoism now come down to the two tendencies described by Robinet: the broader view that focuses on a set of ideas or the narrower view that focuses on the emergence of particular institutions. While some have taken strong positions in favor of one or the other, many have not felt compelled to make an either-or choice. Some, like Sivin, think it best to avoid a "single operational definition" for Taoism—and for Confucianism, Buddhism, and popular religion as well.[14] Why should our categories for the study of Chinese religion be more fixed than they ever were in Chinese practice? And yet if our categories are not efficient "reductions," are we not left trying to draw a map that grows to be as large as the country? Perhaps, as in map making, all depends on the type of map needed: a local street map that carefully conveys every twist and turn and dead end or a comprehensive map to orient one to the gross features of the whole terrain.

Robinet and Kohn opt for the most inclusive understanding of Taoism and then face the recurring problem of determining how the multiplicity holds together. Robinet appeals to a two-part answer: Taoism rests on a set of cosmological ideas embodied in ritual practices, which have been constantly reappropriated in history in order to link newer developments to perceptions of the older tradition. Kohn's position, on the contrary, often reads like an odd throw-

[13] Norman Girardot, "Part of the Way: Four Studies on Taoism," *History of Religions* 11 (1972): 319–37.

[14] N. Sivin, "On the Word 'Taoist' as a Source of Perplexity," *History of Religions* 17 (1978): 327.

back to the views of Chavannes and Creel, in which philosophy and religion are self-evident and appropriate categories for fundamentally different orientations. Yet Kohn also evokes the spirit of the "essential unity" position by using these polarized categories to argue for a third phenomenon, a mystical tradition, that mediates and ultimately synthesizes their differences. Hence, the unity of Taoism for Kohn lies in this third tradition, which, significantly, is given little institutional analysis. There are various mystical schools, but for the most part the unity of Taoism is based on the coherence of recurring ideas: "Taoist mystical philosophy has . . . an integrated and typologically identifiable worldview that remains the same" (p. 227).

> The ancient philosophers and the mystical thinkers unquestionably belong to one tradition. They subscribe to the same terminology and accept the same basic dichotomy between the purity of the Tao and its distortion in human life and mind. . . . They subscribe to an integrated worldview of the Tao and join hands in their visions of an ideal world. [P. 227][15]

The debate about philosophical and religious Taoism can sound like an outdated issue. Few scholars today are so inflexible or dogmatic as to want to undermine the institutional definition of Taoism or the importance in Taoism of fundamental conceptual schemes. Most scholars recognize underlying coherence, expedient appropriation, and significant differences—conceptually, institutionally, and attitudinally. That said, it is also clear that not everyone balances things the same way. Despite their virtues, these two books do appear weakened by their rejection of the institutional definition of Taoism; while self-definition is not the whole picture, it is a starting point and it may introduce less distortion than the identification of some general essence or common thread. Robinet's *Histoire du taoïsme,* which is the more convincing delineation of an underlying coherence within Taoism, downplays the social dynamics in which such coherence was purposeful and defining. The result is a lovely portrayal of an exotic way of being human in the world. It is a sophisticated and sympathetic survey, a twentieth-century model of liberal scholarship in which Taoism—as the only great and truly indigenous religion of China, at once the rich treasury and the living witness of the real spirit of Chinese culture—emerges as the essence of China, the "other" of the "other"—not static and ahistorical, but not real and bounded either. In Kohn's *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* a disregard for nuance and situation in the use of terms like *philosophical, religious,* and *mystical* abets the attempt to concretize "Taoism" as a coherent and unified entity in terms of a "mystical tradition" and as "the valid higher religion of all China" (p. 6). In other words, the essence of Taoist philosophy, Taoist religious life, the interaction of these two spheres, their differentiation, and all religion in China is this mystical tradition identified for what it really is only by Kohn and a few others. Whatever the reasons for this construction, at times it pulls Kohn into formulations of a

[15] One of the weaknesses of this inclusive, noninstitutional approach turns up in Kohn's casual references to dating this mystical tradition: on the one hand she affirms that it goes back to Lao-Tzu, on the other hand she argues that its key ideas only come together in the fifth-century *Hsi-sheng ching.*

simplistic evolutionism—philosophy to religion to mysticism—ignoring a more complex history, one in which "religious" uses of the *Tao-te ching* predated its excessively metaphysical interpretation at the hands of Wang Pi. At other times, she is drawn into further simplifications of her own categories, whereby the philosophical is spiritual, the religious is material, and the mystical is a material search (= religious) for spiritual goals (= philosophical). The distinction between philosophy and religion taken for granted by the cultural heirs of the Greeks (*logos* vs. *mythos*) and the early church fathers ("What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?") is hardly so appropriate for most of Asia, as scholars of India and China pointed out long ago. The usually preferred terminology of "self-cultivation" in the Chinese case, while far from perfect, has allowed for much more social and situational nuancing. Indeed, while mysticism has a long history in the West and in Western scholarship, use of the term today is also much more likely to rest on social criteria (forms of community, gender roles, disciplines of the body, constructions of authority) than simply on distinctions between the physical and the spiritual, the active and the passive.

Finally, there are some relatively new issues at work in the arguments of these two books. For example, how do we talk about a "tradition" without implying and imposing more coherence and continuity than there actually has been or without ignoring the self-understanding of those who have seen themselves as bearers of a transmitted inheritance? How do we get an appropriate analytic handle on the internal dynamics that create and recreate traditions, the dynamics—simultaneously doctrinal, organizational, and attitudinal—by which people and movements configure their identity, construct their pasts, and determine their alliances and oppositions? When does a self-consciousness about the past together with a set of internal dynamics for interpreting it become a tradition, something that exists as an independent subculture that shapes as much as it is shaped?[16] It is useful to see these questions as distinct from and more complicated than older ones concerned with the relationship of philosophical or religious Taoism. It is also useful to separate the issue of unity and coherence within a tradition from the tendency to seek some retreating essential identity. Both books claim to leave behind any attempt at finding an essential unity to Taoism: they recognize that what holds it all together is the way in which various practices reappropriate ideas and create connections. Robinet follows through on this best. She realizes what needs to be done—how the intellectual-conceptual dimension of practice ultimately need to be situated within the total social and institutional milieu in which such practices were deployed, interpreted, and continually modified—even as she admits that she is not doing it. If this could be done, one would be right to challenge the constraints of the institutional approach to defining Taoism; yet such an analysis could never be launched without full attention to those institutional self-definitions.

Lao-tzu's admonition that there is another mystery within the mystery provides no support for essentialism or for seeking any closure on the ultimate re-

[16] A recent engagement of these issues is Bernard Faure's *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

ality within observable phenomena. Yet like the Taoist notion of a spiritual essence (*ling*) within an earthly receptacle (*pao*) or the Greco-Christian notion of a soul within the corporal form, we instinctively seek the truer nature of things as a latent presence or inner structure. So far we have very few concepts and methods with which to articulate our own emerging historical experience in which meaning is not a matter of the unity within the multiplicity or the truth beneath the phenomenal, but the pragmatic and creative construction of historical connections, metaphysical levels, and social identities. Until we do work out surer methods for analyzing such processes, we may be best advised, as the T'ang twofold mystery advocates suggested, to let go of whatever unities we think we have stumbled into, that is, to discard the many and then also the one, to discard the mystery and then the mystery within the mystery as well.

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