Contents

INTRODUCTION

1. Mystical Philosophy in the Daoist Tradition 3

PART I: THE TEXT

2. Versions of the *Xisheng Jing* 27
3. Structure and Contents of the Text 46
4. The Mythological Framework 62

PART II: THE WORLDVIEW

5. The Physical Universe 85
6. Mind, Knowledge, Language 105
7. The Way of the Sage 135

PART III: THE THINKERS

8. The Life and Thought of Wei Jie 161
9. Li Rong and the Chongxuan School 181

CONCLUSION

10. Daoist Mystical Philosophy 207

Translation of the *Xisheng Jing* 223
Bibliography 261
Index 279

Chapter One

Mystical Philosophy in the Daoist Tradition

Scholars used to divide the Daoist tradition into the two major types of "philosophical" and "religious": one was based on the works associated with the ancient thinkers Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 and appealed mainly to a well-educated elite; the other arose first with the millennial movements of Dao of Great Peace (Taiping 太平) and the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師) in the second century C.E. and served as the arena for ritual, worship, and various kinds of magic and superstition. The two types, moreover, were seen as fundamentally opposed to each other and believed to have very little in common. [1]

More recently academics have come to see the Daoist tradition in terms of three major strands of organization and practice which, in addition, have closely worked together from the beginning: literati, communal, and self-cultivation Daoism.

According to this understanding, literati Daoists are members of the educated elite who focus on Daoist ideas as expressed by the ancient thinkers; they use these concepts to create meaning in their world and hope to exert some influence on the political and social situation of their time, contributing to greater universal harmony. Communal Daoists are members of organized Daoist groups that have priestly hierarchies, formal initiations, regular rituals, and prayers to the gods; they focus on religious practice and the establishment of harmonious communities. Self-cultivation Daoists, third, are known as practitioners of *yangsheng* 養生 or "nurturing life;" they strive to attain personal health, longevity, peace

[1] For histories of Daoism, see Robinet 1997. For the periodization of Daoism, see Kirkland 1997; Schipper and Verellen 2004. For a critical discussion of the various misunderstandings of Daoist history, see Kirkland 2004.

of mind, and spiritual immortality with the help of various methods such as exercises, diets, and meditations, and may or may not be formally organized (see Kohn 2001; 2002).

Interconnected from the beginning, these three types of Daoism share the same fundamental worldview and are often joined in practice. Contemporary practitioners as much as historical figures realize that to be a complete Daoist one must follow all three: studying philosophy and being socially responsible, performing rituals and praying to the gods, and undertaking self-cultivation for health and spiritual advancement. How, then, did the thinkers of the Daoist religion historically work with these three strands of the tradition? What did they believe in? Where did they come from? How did they understand their world? What did the ancient philosophers mean to them? How did they develop the ancient concepts and ideas? What kind of organizational and ritual system did they use? What practices of long life and self-cultivation?

The text studied in the following pages offers some insight into the workings of Daoist thought and longevity practice in a religious environment. Called *Xisheng jing* 西昇經 or "Scripture of Western Ascension," it goes back to the late fifth century, to the environment of the Northern Celestial Masters at Louguan, the first formal monastery of medieval Daoism and a major center for the advancement and integration of the religion (see Chan 1993).

Claiming to document the exact words Laozi spoke in explanation when he transmitted the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of Dao and Its Virtue) to Yin Xi 尹喜, the Guardian of the Pass, the *Xisheng jing* is the first Daoist philosophical text written from an organized religious background and advocating practical ways to salvation. It is unique in that it arose at a time when communal Daoism had first successfully transited from either millenarian cults or small self-cultivation groups into major organized religious structures and had, in fact, served as the ruling doctrine and administration under the Northern Wei dynasty (see Mather 1979).

It differs from earlier materials in that it is primarily a religious text which yet integrates the ancient philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi into its fundamental belief in immortality and ascension into Heaven. More than that, it shows a pervading Buddhist influence, another characteristic of organized communal Daoism from the middle ages onward. Its numerous commentaries, moreover, help delineate the development of its outlook over several centuries. In addition, the lives of the two commentators about whom some historical data are available show the kind of people religious Daoist thinkers were and the environment in which they thought.

Louguan

Louguan 樓觀 is a major Daoist institution in the Zhongnan mountains, about forty miles southwest of the capital of Chang'an, modern Xi'an. In the fifth century, Yin Tong 尹通 (ca. 388-499), an alleged descendant of Yin Xi, established his ancestral homestead here. He called it Louguan, the "Lookout Tower," thus creating the first Daoist establishment called *guan* 觀, "belvedere" or "monastery" (Schipper 1984, 212; Kohn 2004a, 41). According to Yin Tong's account, Louguan had been the old home of Yin Xi, given to him as a reward for official service by King Kang of the Zhou. Having espied the telltale energies of the emigrating Laozi, Yin Xi left this place—which served as his astronomical observatory, hence the name—and had himself stationed at the Hangu Pass 函谷關, traditionally located in Taolin, east of Mount Hua 華山. There he became Laozi's disciple and then invited the sage to his home where the *Daode jing* was finally transmitted (Zhang 1991; Kohn 1997,. 87-89; 1998, 257-58).

Coming to the fore in the late fifth century, Louguan benefited from the end of the Daoist theocracy under Kou Quanzhi 寇謙之 (365–448) in 351, serving as a refuge and new home for numerous Daoist administrators that had served in the capital and regional centers. It became a major Daoist center, further enhanced by followers from the south where Daoism was proscribed under the Liang dynasty in the early sixth century (see Strickmann 1978b). Many new Daoist scriptures were collected here, and a great impulse developed to create a new, integrated version of the Daoist teaching. This vision of a new Daoism centered around the key belief of the Celestial Masters that Lord Lao was the creator and savior of the universe, and was the source of sacred scriptures, practical teachings, and organizational rules. Lord Lao existed prior to Heaven and Earth, made order out of chaos, created and formed the world, never tired of descending to reveal scriptures and teach rulers, and brought forth all different Daoist teachings.

Northern Practice

Louguan Daoists lived in monastic seclusion and followed the five precepts of Buddhism (against killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication) which they linked with Chinese traditional cosmology in a scripture claimed to be Lord Lao's direct revelation. Thus their main precepts scripture, the *Taishang Laojun jiejing* 太上老君戒經 (Scripture of Precepts of the Highest Lord Lao, DZ 784, fasc. 562), says:

> Lord Lao said: The precepts in Heaven are represented by the five planets [Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Mercury, and Saturn]. They rule the energies of the five directions, making sure they remain in harmony and maintain their constancy. As soon as the Dao of Heaven loses its precepts, there are natural catastrophes.
>
> On earth, they are represented by the five sacred mountains [Mts. Tai, Heng, Hua, Heng, and Song]. They govern the energies of Earth and rule the weather, gathering and dispelling the clouds. As soon as the Dao of Earth loses its precepts, the hundred grains can no longer grow.
>
> Among the seasonal patterns, they are represented by the five phases. As soon as the cycles lose their precepts, fire and water fight each other, and metal and wood do each other harm.
>
> In government, the five precepts are represented by the five emperors. As soon as rulers lose their precepts, dynasties topple and rulers perish.
>
> In human beings, they are represented by the five inner organs. As soon as people lose their precepts, their health and inner nature goes astray. (Kohn 1994, 203-4)

Followers would take these five precepts in connection with formal ordination into the Daoist rank of Preceptor of Eminent Mystery (Gaoxuan fashi 高玄法師) while receiving a total of ten scrolls of scriptures connected to the *Daode jing*. As outlined in the *Chuanshou jingjie yi zhujue* 傳授經戒儀註訣 (Annotated Explanation of the Transmission Formalities of Scriptures and Precepts, DZ 1238, fasc. 989), key scriptures included also a formal set of precepts as well as the Heshang gong and *Xiang'er zhu* 想爾注 commentaries, a Laozi visualization manual, and instructions for audience and purgation rituals.

The text further contains a survey of things necessary for ordination, including a quorum of thirty-eight participants, or a minimum of six—one master and five witnesses—a set of gifts to be made to the institution as pledges of sincerity, and various rites to be performed. The overall pattern of ordination matches that known from other sources and schools, as it developed under the influence of both ancient pledges used for warrior covenants and membership ceremonies of the Buddhist sangha. Like the former, it was essentially a rite of cosmic empowerment and change in social status; like the latter, it required a set number of masters and witnesses, involved the chanting of various ritual formulas, and was formalized in the transference of a new title and a set of religious robes (see Kohn 2003a).

After ordination, it seems that Louguan Daoists engaged in traditional practices, following a dietetic regimen of various immortality drugs and engaging in visualizations and ecstatic excursions. Their ultimate goal was mystical oneness with the Dao, as described in the *Xisheng jing*.

Taking their place among the religious leaders of the country, moreover, Louguan Daoists, like later commentators of the *Xisheng jing* under the Tang, also actively participated in the debates among Buddhists and Daoists under the northern dynasties. These were forums at which the court examined which tradition might be best suited to furnish socio-political stability in the realm and to lead to the unification of the country. Two major sets of debates have been recorded, one in 520 under the Northern Wei, the other in 570 under the Northern Zhou, and especially in the former Louguan monks played an important role (Kohn 1995, 71). They also made a major contribution to the compilation of the Daoist encyclopedia *Wushang biyao* 無上秘要 (Secret Essentials of On-High, DZ 1138, fasc. 768-79; see Lagerwey 1981), sponsored by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou, which created a vision of integrated Daoism under the auspices of Lord Lao.

Beyond the Six Dynasties, Louguan continued to be prominent in Daoist history. As documented in an early Tang inscription, the *Zongsheng guan ji* 宗聖觀記 (Record of the Monastery of the Ancestral Sage), dated to 625, the institution was rewarded for its early support of the Tang conquest and renamed after Laozi, then recognized as the "ancestral sage" of the dynasty. Shortly after this the *Louguan benji* 樓觀本紀 (Original Record of Louguan) was written, which is lost today but, based on extensive citations in Tang and later works, seems to have been a comprehensive history of the institution and contained its fully formulated legend and extensive patriarchal lineage (Kohn 1997, 92).

In the Yuan dynasty, finally, a late descendant of the Yin family by the name of Yin Zhiping 尹志平, patriarch of the newly rising school of Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection), took a renewed interest in the place. Louguan's buildings and grounds were refurbished and the institution rose to some prominence, again documented in various inscriptions.[2] This late offshoot of the tradition, moreover, is responsible for

[2] The inscriptions form the foundation of two epigraphic anthologies on Louguan by Zhu Xiangxian 朱象先 (ca. 1279-1308), his *Zbongnan shan sbuojing tai lidai zbenxian beiji* 終南山說經臺歷代真仙碑記 (Epigraphic Record of the Successive Generations of Realized Immortals at the Terrace of Scripture Revelation in the Zhongnan Mountains, DZ 956, fasc. 605) and his *Gu Louguan ztyun yanqing ji* 古樓觀紫雲衍慶集 (Anthology from the Abundant Felicity of Purple Clouds at

another text of Daoist mystical philosophy, the complex inner alchemical treatise *Wenshi zhenjing* 文始真經 (Perfect Scripture of the Master at the Beginning of the Scripture, DZ 667, fasc. 347), a rewriting of the ancient *Guanyinzi* 關尹子 (Book of Yin, the Guardian of the Pass), purported to contain Yin Xi's personal philosophy (see Kohn 1997).

Mystical Philosophy

Within this institutional and organizational setting, then, what worldview system did Louguan Daoists subscribe to? What were the major terms and concepts of their philosophy? How did they interpret the ideas of the ancients and of their contemporaries? How did they relate to the other traditions of medieval China, to Confucianism and Buddhism? What, moreover, were their aims and how did they go about attaining them?

In the most general manner, the aim of Daoist religious thinkers is to show people a way to Dao. They wish to make people overcome the narrow confines of ordinary life, to attain longevity and immortality. Structurally, their views can be described as reflecting the so-called perennial philosophy. First coined by Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and developed by Aldous Huxley (1946), the perennial philosophy can be said to represent a general idealized abstract of the conceptualizations presented by the various mystical traditions of the world. F. C. Happold summarizes its fundamental worldview in four statements.

1. The phenomenal world of matter is only a partial reality. It is actually the manifestation of an underlying, more real ground.

2. Human beings by nature cannot only know the underlying ground by reasoning but also by direct intuition. This intuition serves in some way to unite the knower and the known.

3. The nature of human beings is structured dualistically. Human beings consist of a phenomenal ego of which they are conscious in everyday reality, on the one hand, and of a nonphenomenal, eternal self by which they partake in the underlying ground, on the other. More than that, it is

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the Look-out Tower of Antiquity, DZ 957, fasc. 605). For details on these two texts, see Boltz 1987, 124-26.

possible for human beings to overcome duality, to identify with the underlying ground and to become fully one with it, i.e., to develop a cosmic sense of self.

4. It is the chief end of human existence in the world to discover and become the cosmic truth of the self. The ultimate aim of human life is to realize the underlying ground intuitively and become fully one with it. Thereby humanity can realize the truth of the individual as well as that of the entire world. (Happold 1970, 20)

Daoist thought as it grows from the religious tradition agrees largely with the worldview system presented in these four statements. It is highly dualistic and distinguishes the purity of the underlying Dao from the distorted and estranged lives of ordinary people. Dao is beyond yet always present; subtle and fine, it is impossible to grasp with common human means, the senses and the intellect.

Yet there is a path to oneness with Dao. To approach the Dao, human beings have to completely reorganize their personalities and perception of the world. The mind has to become subtler; the gross apparatus first of the senses, then of the intellect has to be refined and cleansed. The more the senses and the intellect are refined to higher degrees of subtlety, the less impact any acquired conscious and emotional personality has on the true self of Dao within. Becoming outwardly selfless, decreasing in egotistic pursuits, Dao within begins to shine forth. An inner awareness of the underlying potency of Dao that pervades everything buds and flourishes.

Daoist religious thought can therefore be classified as mystical philosophy. It is a system of thought that claims to relate directly to the personal experience of oneness with Dao. For the Daoist mystic, a life in Dao is the only true way of being in the world. Dao is everything, all beings live only with Dao. Daoist mystical philosophy neither justifies nor explains the religious truth of the Daoist believer. Rather, it proceeds to outline the consequences of this religious truth for the understanding of reality, religious practice, and life in society. Daoist mystical philosophy describes the path, in theory and practice, that leads to salvation, liberation, immortality.

Despite its overall transcendent orientation, the texts of Daoist mystical philosophy are written in human language and apply such human ideas and systems as are valid at the time of their writing. They appear in rather systematized literary forms. They present speculative systems describing the structure and purpose of the universe and give theoretical interpretations of human life. Often they are discourses that encourage

people to embark on the route to Dao and contain detailed practical instructions on how to go about attaining the cosmic state. In all cases, the texts of Daoist mystical philosophy can be studied as literary documents that show a specific Daoist way of making sense of the world. Generally speaking, they share the influence of various textual traditions and agree on certain basic assumptions and concepts.

Daoist Mystical Philosophy

Daoist mystical philosophy is a form of discourse distinct from the ancient philosophers, revealed scriptures, communal precepts, and longevity manuals, but it reflects the same three textual traditions as organized Daoism in general:

1. The philosophical texts going back to Laozi and Zhuangzi, together with their later commentaries. The commentaries integrate the ancient philosophers with Han-dynasty correlative thinking and the worldview of Chinese long-life cultivation as well as with certain basic doctrines of Confucianism.

2. The ecstatic experiences described by Han dynasty and later poets and religious seekers. These find their religious continuation in the scriptures of the 上清 Shangqing (Highest Clarity) school, revealed in the fourth century. Texts of this type represent both personal experiences and more general instructions and principles of salvation.

3. The steadily inflowing translations of Buddhist sutras, beginning in the second and standardized in the fifth century. The organization of Daoism as a valid higher religion of all China owes much to the Buddhist impact (see Ofuchi 1979), as do its textual and conceptual development.

These three kinds of sources, moreover, correspond to the three main lineages of early Chinese mysticism.

1. The quietist, naturalistic tradition that developed in the wake of the philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi;

2. the ecstatic, shamanistic visions of southern China obvious in poetic songs, from the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of the South) to Han-dynasty and later rhapsodies, and formed the backbone of Shangqing ecstatic meditations;

3. the analytical and insight-oriented systems of Buddhism with their emphasis on truly understanding the workings of one's own body and mind. (see Kohn 1992)

The former two, the philosophical tradition and shamanism, merged comparatively early. Even in the early Han, the *Chuci* shows how closely the ecstatic tradition relied on expressions and metaphors of the philosophers. Similarly, Buddhism was first introduced to the Chinese elite through the medium of Daoist thought, borrowing expressions and concepts according to the practice of "matching the meanings," popular in the fourth century. However, the full impact of Buddhist ideas and practices on Daoist mystical philosophy and practice did not emerge until the Six Dynasties. The fruitful merging of all three traditions is first evident in the *Xisheng jing*.

Reflecting these traditions, in terms of content Daoist mystical philosophy centers on its Dao, an organic order that includes and embraces everything (Schwartz 1998). Dao is the one power underlying the universe; it makes things be what they are; it causes the world to come into being and to decay again. It is the foundation of all, the source of life and being, from which we all come and to which we all return.

Dao is organic in that it is not willful, it is not a conscious active creator, and it is not personal. Dao is nature, yet it is more than mere nature, it is the essence of nature, the inner quality of naturalness that makes things what they are. Dao is governed by the laws of nature, yet it is also these very laws itself. Inherently Dao is order; like nature it is rhythmic in its changes and predictable in its developments. People can analyze and describe its ordered patterns—but these patterns are only its periphery, its outside, not its central essence.

The Daoist mystic aspires to both: to order and to organic living, both harmonious and joined into one. Depending on the background, he will emphasize different aspects of the order of the Dao: the seasons, the interchange of yin and yang, the harmony of society, the movement of the stars and planets, or just the personal needs for food and sleep. But the aim is to reach through order to the inner organism of the world, to its hub, its empty and vague center, which is Dao in its essence.

Dao thus manifests itself in a pattern of outer and inner, yin and yang, dark and light. It is the most within and at the same time the most without. Human beings are within Dao because Dao is the enveloping order of the whole universe. But Dao is also within every human being inasmuch as she needs it to be alive, to be herself. Since, however, Dao is not just one possible mode of consciousness but ultimately encompasses all

ways of thinking, the mystical evaluation of the human mind reflects a complex structure of more and less accordance with Dao.

Human discriminating consciousness is the factor that keeps people from realizing their oneness with Dao. Yet this is also part of Dao because it comes with the basic human endowment in this life. At the same time, consciousness stands outside of Dao because it opposes it, is separated from it and does not share Dao as fully. In the center of the human mind resides spirit or virtue that represents the spark of pure Dao. On the periphery of the mind is the active, scheming consciousness with its various functions, all basically enemies of Dao.

Especially the intention and the will arise only because of classifications and value judgments relative to outer reality. Entirely artificial and humanly constructed, these judgments cause people to develop a sense of identity, a so-called personal body or self, which then gives rise to worries and fears, hopes and delights. The will and the intention are the conscious expression of these emotions— all equally separated from Dao.

To attain oneness with the Dao, one has to abandon all ego personality, blot out the intention and silence the will, go back to the center of the mind, isolate the spirit and make it stable and suffused with Dao. This leads to a reversal of the inward and darkening movement and allows Dao to radiate its brilliance to the outside. Intention and become the servants of a higher function, one attains unity in thinking and feeling. The inner spark of the mind joins with the pure cosmic energy (*qi*) of Dao and human beings not only intuit the divine reality within and without but join it with their entire being.

Unlike in most other mystical traditions, in China the physical body, as opposed to the "personal body" or self, the individual's sense of ego-identity, is not the part that has to be suppressed and overcome. Rather, one's physical so-being is a positive basis for mystical attainments (Kohn 2006, 3). It is fundamentally part of the Dao, not only because it is the most natural aspect of human existence but also because it is a replica of the cosmos. In all it does, the body follows the cosmic rhythm spontaneously. It does so the more, the we limit it through culture and consciousness. The physical body is therefore where mystical practice starts. Without physical being, a vessel of the spirit, there can be no foundation of Dao. To attain perfect oneness, one must first reach perfect health. Only by fulfilling one's life-span and living to an eminent old age can one properly prepare for the higher stages.

Daoist mystical practice begins therefore by becoming physically healthy. For this one resorts to the help of various medical and physiological techniques: healing exercises (*daoyin* 導引, also called "gymnastics"),

breathing techniques, dietetics, drugs, and many more (see Kohn 1989; 2006). Only when the physical body is ready should one proceed to practice more specifically meditational techniques. However, as the healthy body becomes the foundation of the spirit-pervaded mind, mystical practices often bridge the physical and the psychological. Nourishing the body on the pure *qi* of the five directions, for example, and meditating on them by means of visualization are one and the same process. The result of the practice affects both body and mind: the body no longer feels hungry and the mind perceives Dao throughout the world.

Meditation techniques, furthermore, go back to all three major traditions. Quietist, concentrative exercises in the wake of the *Daode jing* tradition seamlessly join with Shangqing ecstatic excursions to the higher and lower Heavens, trips already made by the shamans of old. Both then combine with Buddhist insight meditation, analyses of the structure of one's self, leading to the reinterpretation of oneself as a cosmic being.

The fully realized sage, the unified cosmic being, in Daoist mystical philosophy is the great man. His appearance in the world has an immediate impact on the harmony of the universe at large and of the country in particular. Since Dao is universal order, the person who realizes it not only embodies order but brings it to those around him, to the family, the village, the state, and the empire. The idea of the great man goes back far in history. Even in ancient Shang times the king was at the hub of the universe, the main communicant between the heavens above and the earth below, the head priest of the state cult and the leading shaman of the country. It was the domain of the priest-king to ensure that the will of the ancestors was duly known and respected, to see to the proper information and placation of the powers-that-be.[3]

The great man as much as the Shang king combines the ancient figures of ruler, recluse, shaman, and sage. Later the roles were separated: the ruler remained at the hub of a strongly ritualized universe that was patterned after the natural cosmic order as much as one was able to understand and arrange it; recluses gave up society in favor of a life of personal integrity, moral sophistication, and oneness with cosmic principles (Vervoorn 1984; Berkowitz 1989); shamans became self-employed, freelance communicators with various gods and spirits, servants to the populace often without a specifically defined standing in any community or religious organization (see Schafer 1951); the sage, finally, was what one became through cultivation, be it cultivation of learning as the Confucian tradition has it or be it cultivation of oneself in purity and simplicity as

[3] On the ruler of the Shang kingdom and his ritual activities, see Keightley 1978; Chang 1980. For a study of the great man in literature, see Holzman 1976.

the *Daode jing* suggests. All these figures had in common that they represented the apex of human life. They all had free access to the otherworld and served as communicants of a higher level of order and knowledge to the realm of humanity.

In the mystical tradition, the roles again join into one. The accomplished mystic is ruler, recluse, shaman, and sage. He is a true human being, a perfected or realized one, who is whole within himself, easily communicates with the world above, and has an enormous impact on the political and social order of his time.