

Review Essay: Many Ways to the Way: *Teaching the Daode Jing*¹

Teaching the Daode Jing. Ed. Gary D. DeAngelis and Warren G. Frisina. New York: Oxford University Press. 2008. 206 pp. ISBN 978-0-533270-4

Keywords Philosophy; Religious Studies; Asian Studies

Teaching the Daode Jing is edited by Gary D. DeAngelis and Warren G. Frisina and is part of the *Teaching of Religious Studies* Series presented by the American Academy of Religion and Oxford University Press. The series editor is Susan Henking. Of additional interest to *ASIANetwork* readers is that the series has other titles in religion and philosophy such as *Teaching Confucianism* (Jeffrey L. Richey, editor), *Teaching Islam* (Brannon M. Wheeler, editor), *Teaching African American Religions* (Carolyn M. Jones and Theodore Louis Trost, editors), *Teaching Religion and Healing* (Linda L. Barnes and Inés Talamantez, editors), *Teaching Ritual* (Catherine Bell, editor), and *Teaching New Religious Movements* (David G. Bomley, editor). The series also includes some edited volumes on individual figures such as Levi-Strauss, Freud, and Durkheim.

Given the other titles in the series, readers may be surprised to discover an entire book devoted to just a single text. Such an allocation seems to indicate that there is something more special about this text than, say, the *Lunyu (Analects)* of Confucius. The sense in which the *Daode Jing*, or *Laozi* (the name of its purported author), is a special text comes out very clearly in a number of the essays about why this volume is devoted exclusively to this one Daoist text and not to the range of other Daoist texts (such as the *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*). In part, the reason for this is that many of the authors wish to make a distinction between Daoism and Laoism. For a variety of reasons, this is a helpful distinction, since the project of *Zhuangzi* (the other favorite choice of those who teach Daoist texts) is sometimes considered by scholars to have a much different agenda from *Laozi*'s. The *Daode Jing* is written in large part to the ruler while the *Zhuangzi* is directed more to the natural world, but still has advice for the ruler as well.

There are certainly good reasons to coin the term Laoism *vis-à-vis* Daoism as some of the authors in the book do, but such a move may not be particularly important to non-specialists teaching Chinese religion or philosophy and may, in fact, even fog the landscape for introducing Chinese religion (or philosophy) to undergraduates. Such a distinction may be even less helpful for those wishing to give students some general sense of Chinese culture, social organization, and an appreciation for Chinese religious sensibilities. None of these possibilities should deter readers, though, since all of the book's authors approach this very special text with justified enthusiasm, passion, and respect. Moreover, the neologism of Laoism is not without its academic purpose, and its repeated use will one day make it accepted practice, a good idea for many reasons.

Laozi (also known as Lao Tan or Old Tan) is the legendary author of the *Daode Jing*. His name, meaning "Old Master," is a result of his rather mythic birth. Legend has it that *Laozi*'s mother's pregnancy lasted some 62 years, with *Laozi* being born an already white-haired

man. Such a birth supports his possession of innate natural wisdom. Sadly for the rest of us, this wisdom can only be attained through cultivated and practiced innocence. This sense of the type of wisdom expressed in the *Daode Jing* comes out in a number of essays which college and university non-specialists with purely pedagogical concerns may find especially helpful, depending on their specific interests. “Imagine *Teaching the Daode Jing!*” features helpful suggestions from such noted scholars as Judith Berling, Geoffrey Foy, and John Thompson. Readers are offered a series of more “nuts and bolts” classroom scenarios in “Letting the *Daode Jing* Teach,” “Gender and the *Daode Jing*,” and “The *Dao De Jing*: An Exercise in How Interpretations Change.” Although all these sections of the essay are worthwhile, Judith Berling’s is the most rewarding.

This collection includes some established scholars such as Livia Kohn, Harold Roth, Robert G. Henricks, David L. Hall, Norman J. Girardot, and Michael LaFargue. As one might expect, the book traverses the terrain from the scholarly to the practical with some mixing of what might be viewed as both extremes of this range. The book cannot be faulted on this score since the dichotomy between the scholarly and practical has often caused deleterious consequences in education, especially in higher education. This divide is not as wide as is often suggested, but in order to shorten it even more some interfusion between the two is helpful, and this combination is sometimes absent in *Teaching the Daode Jing*. In fairness, organizing chapters and guiding authors *vis-à-vis* other authors and still letting them have their own voices is understandably a difficult task. But if there is a criticism to be found, and this would be a slight one, it would be that this book tries to do too much in its attempt to include both ends of the scholarly/practical spectrum. In his “Third-Person and First-Person Approaches to the *Laozi*,” Harold Roth strikes a compromise between attention to what he calls “third person learning” versus “first person learning.” The former represents the dominant approach in education, where we “observe, analyze, record, and discuss ... subjects at a distance ... as if ... our own subjectivity that is viewing them doesn’t exist” (15). This approach is contrasted with “first person learning,” where students are provided opportunities to experience practices such as meditation and adherence to rituals within their own secular contexts. Roth’s complement to “third person learning” is to bring students into a more experiential mode of learning about the *Daode Jing* through a series of breathing exercises based on textual references. This approach is what he calls “reconstructive meditation,” and it represents a “critical first-person” way of understanding some of the passages in the *Daode Jing*. A possible problem is that there are only a small number of passages directly germane to breathing and meditating. Nevertheless, these passages may serve as gateways for deeper understandings of the text, making the practice of “first person learning” possible in reaching the contemplative educational practice Roth encourages. Surely, this is a worthy goal. This essay is one of the best in the volume for bridging the gap between the scholarly and practical.

In her “The Reception of *Laozi*,” Livia Kohn argues that Daoism is primarily a religion, and as such the philosophical dimensions of the *Laozi* are of lower priority than the religious ones. This is the case, according to Kohn, even though the ideas that emerge in the text have some role in our understanding of what constitutes Daoism as a religion. For those who approach all texts, religious or otherwise, with a certain philosophical acuity and interest, this approach may appear a bit narrow. But Kohn convincingly argues her point that the *Daode Jing* had for centuries been used for both meditation and liturgy, ordinations of priests, and advancement of lay followers (137). Whereas what Kohn writes is true, many will still wish to continue reading the text in a more widely construed formulation of what constitutes philosophy; the inherent philosophical richness of the text’s insights into

the natural world and human beings' place within that world are most profound. Of course, all of this philosophical richness has religious dimensions as well, and many philosophers might find themselves in agreement with Kohn. In the origins of Western philosophy, especially stemming from Socrates and Plato, the discipline saw living in the world as primary even when metaphysical speculation was engaged. Even Plato's metaphysical speculations were ultimately anchored and connected to living in the *polis*. Some comparative thinkers often overlook this aspect of Plato in their attempts to set up straw man arguments that advance Asian thinking over the Western variety. It is unlikely Kohn would disagree, since from her perspective, as is the case of most other authors in this collection, it is clear "There is no single *Daode Jing* ... [and] we should realize that it is exactly this multifaceted richness of the text ... that attracts us ..." (142). Her introductory remarks about the textual history of the *Laozi* are an excellent synopsis and will be very useful to readers in situating the text and understanding its evolution and that it "was a text in flux, consisting of miscellaneous sayings in various stages of coherent collation that were changed, rearranged, and reinterpreted many times" (133). Kohn's discussion on the "historical reality surrounding the text's creation" (from 133 onwards) will also be most useful in helping deliver an understanding of the text to students.

Another interesting and strong chapter in the book is Russell Kirkland's ambitious "Hermeneutics and Pedagogy." Kirkland insists on keeping the *Daode Jing* in its historical and cultural context by reminding students that the text was not written for them, but for another people. His pedagogical strategy is "to induce productive shock ... by teaching them these facts and urging them not to colonize the *Daode Jing*." Situating the text in this way, where hermeneutics and pedagogy can come together, is an indisputably effective and fruitful approach. Still, not every university or college professor will have the requisite training to deliver the text in this manner. Clearly, historical context is a significant aspect in understanding any text (as Kohn has also demonstrated), and a measure of preventing colonization, but one would never wish to merely study texts, such as the *Daode Jing*, as historical responses or curiosities originating from some ancient and exotic culture. Kirkland is, of course, aware of this: "In teaching the *Daode Jing*, I challenge students to question cherished beliefs—Confucian, modernist, and post modernist alike" (158). Students will always bring their beliefs, cultural presuppositions, and senses of self forward when they engage any text, especially if there is a fundamental difference between what the texts say and their own religious and cultural moorings. These preconceived notions can be put to good service in the classroom, and ideas lifted from their historical contexts for present day creative philosophizing. Such an approach might even contribute to developing a new and deeper religious understanding. As Kirkland suggests, weeding out "... invalid approaches to the *Daode Jing* and ... work[ing] within the remaining possibilities" (159) will not necessarily be an easy task.

A very helpful chapter for those teaching the *Daode Jing* can be found in the "The *Dao* and the Field" by Robert G. Henricks. Before moving on to his analogy of *Dao* as a field of wild flowers, Henricks briefly explores some of the important images and metaphors *Laozi* uses to depict *dao*. He focuses on the three different but intimately related images or metaphors of *dao*: *dao* as mother, *dao* as womblike or vagina-like, and the maternal nature of *dao* (33-34). With this focus, he provides some relevant passages and references for readers. Henricks picks up his analogy of *dao* through the "model of a *field of wildflowers passing through the seasons*" [his italics] because we can grasp "the nature of *Dao* in its totality [because] we can see it, as it were, prior to, during, and after creation" (35). Winter in the field would reveal a "still, silent void, with nothing for the senses to grasp," and in mid-June

“the most marvelous of transformations” would occur with “ten thousand different forms of life” (35). Henricks goes into some detail about this image of *dao* by explaining that in winter there is no indication of the fecundity of the field’s soil even if we were to dig down into it; all we would find is its stillness, silence, and emptiness in the “one, undifferentiated, homogeneous earth” (36). The cycles present in the field continue and the flowers will be replaced by other flowers. This process goes on indefinitely. Flowers seem to “know” about this ongoing process in which they are involved. Along with *Laozi*, Henricks cautions his readers that this analogy may break down, for “this is precisely what most people do not do. In contrast to flowers in the field, people can and do go against the natural way of things [by turning] their backs on the mother and becom[ing] uprooted” (37). Although this analogy will be a most helpful one to employ in the classroom, the question will still remain: how is one to keep on the way and not “delight in bypaths”? Some suggestions are indeed provided in the essay, but it is the question of death that provides the biggest challenge to the analogy of the field. In explaining “death as just a stage in the [on-going process of life and material change]” (43), Henricks realizes the analogy’s lack of satisfactoriness as far as giving the possibility of some physical immortality. He offers, instead, the interpretation of *dao* as a “storehouse of matter and vitality ... [where we] ... as matter and energy ... are constantly recycled, reemerging in new forms of life, forms other than human...” (43).

Another, somewhat less convincing, suggestion arising from the death in the field of wildflowers analogy is that immortality can be addressed by some kind of theory of the transmigration of souls. Henricks admits that the transmigration theory was not used by Daoists, but rather to convert Daoists to Buddhism; this is, however, another matter. In any event, this seems to be the least convincing part of the analogy’s application, and it is here that a philosophical explanation, and not a religious one, might serve us better. Surely immortality was a topic of interest for Daoist practitioners, but what is meant by immortality in the tradition is a complex matter. The idea expressed at the chapter’s end that “death is final, and that the best one can hope for is a long life of health, natural growth, and a natural end” hints at a resolution (44).

Norman J. Girardot and Michael LaFargue both offer some enjoyable reads in their contributions. Girardot, in his thoughtful and entertaining “My Way: *Teaching the Daode Jing*,” takes up the popular cultural expressions of *dao* and their tendencies to be “*Dao-Lite*” (107). This somewhat autobiographical account of teaching Daoism over the years includes interesting, insightful, and amusing anecdotes about politics, the counterculture, and economics (108). For those new to teaching the *Daode Jing* it is inevitable that this “New Age Daoism,” which is criticized by Girardot, will arise in students’ minds and require correction. Girardot’s essay, as well as Berling’s, Foy’s, and Thompson’s, will help in this regard. Michael LaFargue’s “Hermeneutics and Pedagogy: Gimme That Old-Time Historicism” is given the notable position of having the last word, and with reason. The gulf between contemporary America and ancient China is taken up with the question of audience, that is, what the *Daode Jing* meant to its intended original audience and what it can mean to contemporary readers.

Following the lead of work done in biblical hermeneutics, LaFargue argues that understanding a text in its otherness is an appropriate place from which to begin an encounter with the *Daode Jing*. In this way readers empower themselves to challenge the message that texts such as the *Daode Jing* have to offer. In the essay’s section titled “Method in Reading,” strategies are offered that teach students how to become competent readers. These strategies include assigning topical glossary essays that accompany his own translation of the *Daode Jing* and the proverb-like aphorisms found in the text that include hints on how to detect

the hidden textual polemics. For example, what does *ren* (often translated as benevolence) really mean (is it a “code word for Confucianism” as LaFargue suggests?) when it is being used in the *Daode Jing*? Another suggested strategy to teach students to become more competent readers is to help them develop a contextual understanding of aphorisms that avoid literal interpretations (175-176) that occlude understanding. Readers will find this section very helpful. Along with other authors in this volume, LaFargue points out the political dimensions of the *Daode Jing* and how the text is about rulership, which is likened to a branch; the *Daode Jing* proposes that rulers should demonstrate deference to the branch’s root, that is, to *dao*. Other sections of this essay include “Mysticism, Philosophy, Metaphysics, Cosmology” and “Meditation.” The last section concludes with a discussion on self-cultivation and the cultivated self’s relation to society. It is here LaFargue rescues Laoists (or Daoists) from the misinterpretation that they are opposed to society and fail at being good members within the societal context. In fact, according to LaFargue, the “Laoists were interested in making society a better place for the masses of the people outside ruling circles” by infusing “social leadership with Laoist values, both by elevating good Laoists to influential middle-level administrative positions, and by acting as counselors to higher level princes and kings” (189).

Some of these themes are also found in Eva Wong’s “The *Daode Jing* in Practice” and Gary D. DeAngelis’ “Mysticism in the *Daode Jing*.” In the latter essay, DeAngelis offers a fairly standard definition of mysticism as a direct experience of union or oneness that is perceived as being ultimately real. This reality is often seen as “transcendent, the sacred, the holy, the divine” (64). This idea of transcendence is taken issue with in David L. Hall’s “The *Daode Jing* and Comparative Philosophy” (49), in which Hall argues against this vertical dimension of interpreting (or translating) the *Daode Jing* by asserting that it has been responsible for wrong thinking about *dao* (and Daoism) in metaphysical terms, which for a philosopher may mean something different from the way religious thinkers use the term. Hall counter-poses the move to the transcendent by discussing the *wu* forms of Daoism: *wuwei* (nonassertive action), *wuzhi* (knowing without principles), and *wuyu* (objectless desire). For DeAngelis, seeing and teaching the *Daode Jing* as a mystical text provides him the opportunity to discuss and address more epistemological issues with his students, but it is not exactly clear why this text would represent a better way of raising these same issues as compared to other mystical texts. Nevertheless, the *Laozi* can certainly accomplish what DeAngelis is suggesting. Moreover, DeAngelis’ essay will be of good use to readers because of its focus on teaching the *Daode Jing*.

Another essay beneficial to readers for similar reasons will be Eva Wong’s “The *Daode Jing* in Practice,” which offers a more practical way of reaching the experience DeAngelis and others write about. Wong reminds readers that the texts of Daoism are not merely intellectual exercises or inquiries into the nature of things, but are guidelines for practice (78). Engaging in practice and accepting Daoism as a practice is “to learn to accept the natural course of things,” writes Wong, reminding readers that the value of a text lies in its use (88).

All of the authors of *Teaching the Daode Jing* use this timeless text in their own ways and, in the spirit of the text, provide a number of means to walk the way. The book’s fine introduction by Hans-Georg Moeller skillfully pulls together the book’s diverse voices into a coherent singularity. One conclusion to be derived from this collection of essays is that all of its authors, despite their different approaches, share a real passion for this magnificent text. Teaching faculty at all levels, whether seasoned sinologists or newcomers to the *Daode Jing*, will benefit by being shown the many paths of *dao* through *Teaching the Daode Jing*. The book’s target audience will especially benefit from this volume. *Teaching the Daode Jing* is a

useful resource book replete with insights throughout for understanding and teaching the Old Master's text.

David Jones, Visiting Scholar, Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Science, National Taiwan University

NOTES

1. A far briefer version of this review appeared in *Education About Asia Online*, Volume 17, Number 1 Spring 2012.