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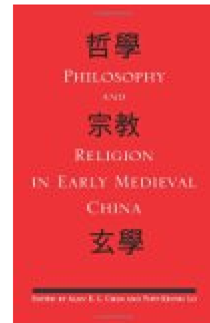

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The Mysterious Dao and Its Legacy

With the collapse of the Han dynasty, which was characterized at its high point by economic prosperity and political reform, the features of its later years–palace intrigue, factional infighting, and subjection to popular rebellion–presaged an immediate post-Han political landscape of warlordism and insecurity. This was the setting against which a period of intellectual ferment erupted that has left a lasting mark of achievement in the history of Chinese thought. Intellectually, there was a search for surer footings on which the Confucian precepts of patriarchal hierarchy as the basis of social order and as a microcosm of imperial rule could remain firm. And in everyday practice and belief, there was the need for a sense of physical security in health and longevity as well as a concern to satisfy the requirements of dissatisfied ancestors, which might influence present wellbeing. The intellectual developments of the period were focused on a new engagement with texts that were originally a challenge to the Confucian thought that they were now mobilized to strengthen; at the level of everyday practice, the popular search for comfort and security was achieved with the intertwined establishment of religious Daoism and the consolidation of Buddhism in China, its sinicization, which became widely acceptable to Chinese adherents after a presence of several centuries. Both of these broad themes are treated in various chapters of *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China.*

As Alan K. L. Chan indicates in the introduction, an earlier commentary saw the new engagement with the *Daodejing* or *Laozi* as generative of a "neo-Daoism": the implication being that these post-Han intellectual developments were designed to displace a discredited Confucianism that had flourished during the Han dynasty. But as Chan shows, such an assessment is flawed, for there was no disagreement among the new generation of thinkers that Confucius was the highest sage and the ultimate purpose of their musings was to correct perceived distortions of his teaching in the continuing quest for an essentially Confucian political order. That the sources of philosophical Daoism were engaged to achieve this indicates the ingenuity of those who made up the *xuanxue* movement. Xuanxue literally means "learning of the mysterious Dao" and in the present context functions as a retrospectively applied name for a focus of concern rather than a school of thought that excavated the earlier text of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and the *Yijing* in order to investigate the means whereby peace and prosperity might be restored. As a number of chapters show, the form of argument often approached the metaphysical but the purpose was almost entirely practical and largely political. The concept of *dao* and its referent, conceived as either substance or method, was the object of investigation directed to uncovering a paradigmatic model of individual and political action.

The texts drawn on by these third-century thinkers, especially the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, were previously marginalized by Confucian adherents. Whereas Confucianism emphasizes ethical teaching, hierarchy, and

order, these texts emphasize spontaneity, paradox, and change; where Confucius sees the dao or way as a notion subject to human elaboration, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* seem, rather, to see the dao as an aspect of a pre-social force to which human action is either subjected or needs to take account of if it is to be effective. Xuanxue may therefore be seen as a reinterpretation of Confucianism through the lens of philosophical Daoism. The leading exponent of xuanxue was undoubtedly Wang Bi (226-249), who exerted an immense influence on subsequent developments of Chinese thought. His contribution is discussed in three of the chapters (chapters 2-4) of *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China*.

The stage is set in the first chapter, by Chan, in a discussion of the concerns of xuanxue regarding the meaning of dao and the prerequisites of political leadership selection or sagehood. In this chapter, the thought of Wang's contemporary, He Yan, is excavated in a way that provides an excellent preparation for appreciating Wang's own contribution, outlined in subsequent chapters. Chan deftly sets out the issues that were part of a broad agenda of concerns: whether dao is a substance or an energy; whether governance is consonant with what is "naturally of itself so" (*ziran*), and therefore whether it requires of politics a particular non-purposiveness of action (*wuwei*); and whether the sage's (internal) emotions constitute an orientation that distracts him from that of (an external) dao, and therefore what type of person is most suited to rule. In consideration of what distinguishes sagehood it is noted that the necessity of political rule derives from the fact that "the common people cannot quite be trusted, because by nature their actions are driven by self interest" (p. 45). Indeed, this is an issue that runs throughout Chinese political thought but seldom is explicitly addressed except in the punishment-centric legalist tradition in which self-interest is the driver of political rule. Here the issue is only touched on but it appears again in the following chapter.

Wang is remembered today principally for his celebrated commentary on the *Laozi* and also the *Yijing*, both known to English readers through the translations of Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Toa-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (1999) and *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (1994). Wang's importance to the period and to Chinese thought in general is given due regard in the fact that the following three chapters of *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China* are devoted to him, treating respectively his theory of names as found in his commentary on *Laozi*; his political philosophy as represented in his interpretation of *Yijing* as a foil for strategic reflection; and finally in consideration of his conception of *li* ("principle," "pattern," "coherence") in comparison with Guo Xiang's, especially as refracted through their considerations of naturalness or self-so (*ziran*) in the *Zhuangzi*. Each of these chapters is full of interest and offer new insights. The chapters complement each other so that their combined contribution to the value of this book is greater than the mere sum of the chapters themselves.

Jude Chua's chapter 2, "Tracing the Dao: Wang Bi's Theory of Names," does an excellent job of showing that rather than engaging in abstract metaphysics Wang was searching for a means to establish moral law and the basis of abiding behavior. Indeed, Chua shows that Wang's apparently metaphysical reading of *Laozi* was achieved by metaphor rather than logic in order to "capture his political doctrine of noninterference," for Wang's dao "refers not to the metaphysical *dao*, but to the 'nameless' and 'formless,' that is, the political strategy of noninterference. At the bottom of it all, Wang Bi's *Laozi* is still in the main a social science" (pp. 65, 68). From Wang's perspective, self-interest, what he called "material advantage," cannot be ignored. Chua quotes Wang's *Introduction to the Laozi* to the effect that a system of moral virtue may paradoxically promote practices of self-interest. A directive preferment of moral conduct may lead one to "cultivate that which can exalt him in hope of the praise involved and cultivate that which can lead to it in the expectation of the material advantage involved." One may be moral because it is right, if others see that it is right then it is in one's self-interest to behave morally: "Because of hope for praise and expectation of material advantage, he will conduct himself with diligence, but the more splendid the praise, the more he will thrust sincerity away, and the greater his material advantage, the more contentious he will be inclined to be" (p. 55). A directive polity does not abate but encourages self-interest, disruptive of political order.

Tactical paradox and strategic acumen, and Wang's apprehension of these in classic sources is the subject of the following chapter, Tze-Ki Hon's "Hexagrams and Politics: Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," in which Wang's reading of *Yijing* is outlined and its characteristic features identified. Hon demonstrates that Wang effectively transformed the meaning of *Yijing* (the *Book of Changes*) by showing that its system of hexagrams may not be a divination device for predicting the future but a "text about the ambiguity of change," which if used creatively and flexibly could stress the importance of "hu-

man agency in initiating and completing changes" (pp. 80, 86). Wang's commentary on *Yijing*, Hon shows, is free of metaphysics, promotes a sense of collaborative even if still centralized government, and provides an enduring interpretation of this continually engaging classic. The conversation regarding Wang's thought continues in the following chapter by Brook Ziporyn, which contrasts the treatment of *li*, and related concepts, in Wang and Guo, who, a generation after Wang wrote an important commentary on the *Zhuangzi*. In this chapter, there is a return to the metaphysical Wang in a discussion that reverses some interpretive conventions and illuminates further the concerns of xuanxue and why they mattered.

But it is not only philosophical Daoism that was important in reforming the post-Han world of thought and concern. The remaining chapters–more than half of the book–are taken up with religious Daoism and Buddhism, and aspects of the relations between them. Religious Daoism arguably has historical origins as an organized form from the second century in the Eastern Han but its dependent relationship with popular and therefore local beliefs and practices means that its clear identification requires the most careful documentation. Chi-Tim Lai's chapter, "The Ideas of Illness, Healing, and Morality in Early Heavenly Master Daoism," shows how ideas of correct ethical behavior on the one hand and infirmity–both physiological and cosmological–on the other are connected, through his detailed and insightful examination of expiationary practices. The following chapter, "Imagining Community: Family Values and Morality in the Lingbao Scriptures" by Stephen Bokenkamp, also considers religious Daoist texts, but from the perspective of Buddhist borrowing. Bokenkamp shows that these Daoist scriptures mobilize a premise of Buddhist doctrine concerning rebirth that is interpreted as a form of Chinese ancestral practice, providing dead ancestors with agentic capacity in the present. These two chapters illuminate ethical issues that affected the development of religious Daoism in its formative period.

Bokenkamp introduces a further perennial theme taken up in the following two chapters, namely, the way in which Buddhist terms and concepts are removed from their original Indian meaning and provided with Chinese form and content, and especially the facility of Daoist notions in sinicizing Buddhism. The importance of both terminological naturalization of Indian Buddhist notions into Chinese idiom, significantly through the prism of Daoist thought and imagery, and also of political sponsorship and patronage, are by now well-known mechanisms that facilitated the development of Buddhism in early medieval China after a gestation period lasting several centuries during which time without these dual assets the work of Indian missionaries and local converts came to little. The case studies that relate to each of these themes respectively, Victor Mair's "What is *Geyi*, After All? " and Kathy Cheng-Mei Ku's "The *Buddharāja* Image of Emperor Wu of Liang," are both innovative and provocative. They will no doubt be seen as important points of departure for future treatments concerning the spread of Buddhism in China.

The book closes with two intriguing, fascinating, and engaging discussions that effectively draw together much of the ambience of the period and its feel by treating practices and notions that are not only intellectual and devotional but also essentially social and political. Alan Berkowitz's "Social and Cultural Dimensions of Reclusion in Early Medieval China" and Yuet-Keung Lo's "Destiny and Retribution in Early Medieval China" are fitting end pieces of *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China* and in their own right add much to the discussion of the preceding chapters. The image of reclusive hiding or withdrawal as a form of engagement provides a practical instance of Daoist concerns with latency and imminence; the concepts of "destiny" and "retribution" are perennial in Chinese thought; Lo's drawing on Daoist and Buddhist sources to illuminate them similarly takes us back to earlier chapters and forward to new insights.

Chan and Lo have compiled a volume of immense wealth and value in which all of the chapters are accessible to nonspecialist readers who through them will have available cutting-edge state of the art studies of Chinese thought and reflective practices in the early medieval period. In addition to the substantive contributions provided by each of the chapters, the book as a whole implicitly dispels the idea that the terms "philosophy" and "religion" have universal meaning. It is important to remember that these terms were unknown in China until recent times. The current Chinese term for religion, *jiao*, is an abbreviation of a word imported at the beginning of the last century from Japanese and sinicized as *zong jiao*. An earlier Chinese term, *san jiao*, used from the ninth century to refer to Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism collectively, means not "three religions" but "three teachings." The Chinese term for philosophy, *zhexue*, is also a Japanese invention, created at the end of the nineteenth century by combining the Chinese characters for wisdom (*zhe*) and study (*xue*). Before this innovation, there was instead only study of the canon or great books (*jing xue*) and of the traditions of the masters (*zi xue*). These remarks are not a criticism of *Philosophy and Reli-*

gion in Early Medieval China; indeed, many of the chapters suggest why the terms "philosophy" and "religion" are inadequate and inappropriate labels for what is discussed in them. Perhaps, then, there is enough acknowledgement of this problem in the book. Indeed, Chan and Lo have provided an excellent volume that is an invaluable resource for understanding important aspects of Chinese thought and culture. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in the history and content of Chinese teachings during the early medieval period.

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