

KARL-HEINZ POHL

PLAY-THING OF THE TIMES:  
CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE RECEPTION  
OF DAOISM IN THE WEST<sup>1</sup>

The Euro-Dao that can be spoken of is not the true Euro-Dao, etc.

—Peter Sloterdijk

As valid as the first sentence of the *Daodejing* may be to any follower of the *Dao*—the *Dao* that can be spoken of is not an eternal truth but always mere interpretation—as meaningful seems to be Sloterdijk's pun on this Daoist key notion to the chronicler of the *Dao* reception in the West. For about 200 years, interpreters from the European cultural background have appropriated the Far Eastern import in amazingly different ways, following, on the one hand, and as was to be expected, mostly the prevailing *zeitgeist*. On the other hand, the reception, of course, was also influenced by the continuously developing knowledge in this field through translations and scholarly research by Sinologists. As will be shown below, an increase in knowledge about Daoism, however, did not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding of the matter. Yet this intellectual pitfall is built into the Daoist system of thought: Those who too cleverly try to probe into its teaching will be caught in the “fish trap” of words (Zhuangzi), the only “way” to the true *Dao* probably being silence.

Hence, the unearthing of the true “Euro-Daoism” shall not and cannot be the object of this study. The point is rather to follow—somewhat in the vein of a “Derri-Daoism”—the “trace” that Daoism has left in Europe and in North America during the past 200 years. This might contribute to the understanding of the *Dao* at least inasmuch as to explain—especially regarding some striking cases—what Daoism is not. In the following, I shall first deal with the different waves and phases of the reception of Daoism in the West, taking into consideration the fields of literature, philosophy, and New Age thought. Finally, the reasons for the attractiveness of Daoism in the West shall be examined.

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KARL-HEINZ POHL, professor, Department of Chinese Studies, Trier University. Specialties: aesthetics and ethics of modern and pre-modern China, history of Chinese thought, cross-cultural dialogue. E-mail: pohlk@uni-trier.de

The reception of Daoism began much later than that of Confucianism, though it turned out to be much more animated and diverse. The Jesuit missionaries brought the Confucian teachings, which they themselves greatly valued, to Europe, where they had a great impact on the thinkers of the Enlightenment. The Jesuits, however, did not pay much attention to Daoism (or Buddhism). They were too much influenced by the prejudice of the Chinese scholars they associated with, and thus were more impressed by Confucian ethics. Daoism, therefore, especially in its religious form, was perceived by the Jesuits to be an occult teaching. Nevertheless, the first translation of the *Daodejing* into a European language was the accomplishment of Jesuits. In this (not yet printed) Latin translation that came to London in 1788 as a present to the “Royal Society” (Legge: 12), the *Dao* was translated as *ratio* in the sense of the highest reason of the divine being.

It was not until new research was published by the first European professor for Sinology at the Collège de France, J. P. Abel Rémusat (the chair had been established in 1814), that European intellectuals became aware of the *Dao*. After attempting to translate some extracts of the *Daodejing* and discussing the text, Rémusat characterized the concept of the *Dao* as being difficult to translate and suggested *logos*, a term which implied for him the threefold meaning of absolute being (*souverain Être*), reason (*raison*), and word (*parole*) as a possible, albeit not ideal, equivalent (Rémusat; Legge: 12). While his translation of *Dao* must have been triggered by the opening sentence in the Gospel of St. John with its notion of a primordial *logos*, other conjectures about the nature of the *Dao* were apparently influenced by Jesuit figurists (who saw Christian ideas and symbols “pre-figured” in the ancient Chinese classics, see Collani), notably his idea that in the phonetic transcription of three key words in chapter 14 of the *Daodejing*, there was a hidden hint to the Hebrew “tetragramme” of Jehovah (JHVH) (*Philosophes taoïstes*: XXIX–XXX; Elberfeld: 144). Due to its “antiquated brevity,” the consequent darkness of the work and lack of commentary, Rémusat refrained from a complete translation of the *Daodejing* (Grill: 50).

The first comprehensive and annotated translation (published together with the original text) was completed in 1842 by Stanislas Julien, the pupil and successor of Rémusat. With his translation closely following the *Heshanggong* commentary (the only available Chinese commentary to him), it can be considered an excellent pioneer work in the field of Sinology. Julien also corrected some of Rémusat’s figurist-inspired interpretations. His version in which *Dao* is translated as “way” (*voie*) and—in accord with the first chapter of the *Daodejing*—interpreted as “gate” (*porte*) had a great influence on

the educated elite of the time (Grill: 12). F. W. J. Schelling for instance writes in his *Philosophy of Mythology* with reference to Rémusat and Julien:

Tao does not mean reason, as which it had been translated hitherto, and the learning of Tao does not mean learning of reason. Tao means gate, the learning of Tao is the learning of the great gate that leads into being, from non-existence, from mere potential existence through which finally all existence enters into real existence. The entire Tao-te-King aims at nothing else but to show through a great diversion of most meaningful expressions the great and insurmountable power of the non-existent. (Hsia 1985: 237)

From the sixties of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, a sheer flood of *Laozi* translations was published: John Chalmers (English, 1868), Reinhold v. Plänckner (German, 1870), Victor v. Strauss (German, 1870), F. H. Balfour (English, 1844), C. de Harlez (French, 1891), James Legge (English, 1891), Paul Carus (English, 1898), Joseph Kohler (German, 1908), Lionel Giles (English, 1909), Julius Grill (German, 1910), and Richard Wilhelm (German, 1911).

During this period the first *Zhuangzi* translations were also published. A study of the language of *Zhuangzi* by Georg v. d. Gabelentz (1888), the first German linguist in the field of Sinology, marks the beginning of scientific research on this important Daoist classic. Giles' translation appeared in 1889 and Legge's in 1891. A work of great impact in the German-speaking countries was a selection of Giles' edition in German by Martin Buber, which included a profound epilogue and was published in 1910. Richard Wilhelm's partial translation into German appeared in 1912.

The first wave of the reception of Daoism occurred contemporaneously with the imperialistic penetration of China by the powerful European countries—from the First Opium War (1840–42) to the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1900)—a time in which the image of China in Europe fell to an all time low (“sick man of Asia,” “yellow peril”). As the semi-colonization of China paved the way for the Christian mission, it is not surprising that it was again mainly missionaries (though now mostly Protestants) who paid special attention to the spiritual bases of China, often drawing comparisons between Christian and Daoist thought. Translations like Julius Grill's (Professor for Theology in Tübingen) with the revealing subtitle *The Book of the Highest Being and of the Highest Good* show the nature of these comparative endeavors. Grill not only finds several parallels between the *Daodejing* and the *New Testament*, mainly in St. John's Gospel as he explicitly points out (Grill: 203–4) but also sees a spiritual affinity between Laozi and Jesus as both are creators of “ethical worldviews”:

The matching of Lao-tsze and Jesus can be justified by the very peculiar affinity between these two men, a wondrous correspondence between the philosophical spirit of the one with the religious spirit of the other which has its roots in a similar emotional disposition. (Grill: VI-VII)

In Grill's view, *Dao* is an ultimate, impersonal cause of all things that, in addition, not only possesses an all-penetrating power but is also to be considered a moral principle (Grill: 13).

Although Christianity was exported fervently to all parts of the world during that era, the 19th century in Europe itself was a time of radical ideological change. Around the turn of the century the firmly rooted Christian world-view as well as its morality and rules were severely shattered, creating a longing for religious experiences in other spheres. A movement that articulated this need very strongly was the Theosophical Society (founded by Madame Blavatsky), the members of which tried to find their religious fulfillment in a combination of Indian mysticism and Western occultism. At the end of the 19th century, the reception of Daoism was much influenced by the Theosophical Society (Walf 1989: 13). Remarkable for this period is also Oscar Wilde's adoption of Daoist critique of civilization in the essay "The Critic as Artist" (with the Daoist subtitle "With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing") published in 1890, where he refers to *Zhuangzi* in the following way:

Chuang Tsu the wise [...] has proved that such well meaning and offensive busy-bodies have destroyed the simple and spontaneous virtue that there is in man. (Debon: 12)

The most important and most widely read translations of the Daoist classics had already been published when the First World War marked a new turning point in the reception of Daoism. The orgy of self-destruction of the Occident as manifested in this devastating war revealed to the intellectuals of the time the dubiousness of the claimed superiority of European civilization that had been commonly accepted during the age of imperialism; it consequently created the greatest intellectual crisis of the modern Western world. Tendencies of cultural pessimism that had already been voiced at the end of the 19th century, especially by Nietzsche, now increasingly unfolded and culminated in premonitions such as Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West" in 1919. The melancholic trait of the time—the parting from the belief in an essentially good world as God's own creation—was perhaps most magnificently expressed in Gustav Mahler's "*Das Lied von der Erde*" composed in 1908, which is based on very much distorted and thus almost unrecognizable free renderings of Chinese poems by Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Meng Haoran—poets who have been

influenced mainly by Daoist (and Chan/Zen-Buddhist) thought. The already awoken interest in non-European, especially in Far Eastern thought, was now more and more frequently articulated.

After the war, an internal and external restoration of the Occident seemed to be necessary, the only question was which direction this renewal should take. The rather combative social innovators under the banner of Marxism were not only opposed by nationalist “custodians” during the first two decades of the 20th century but also, and especially so, by thinkers who envisaged a pacifistic and spiritual reorientation. The reception of Chinese thought at this time appears to be similar to the first phase of reception during the age of Enlightenment when after the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War, Western thinkers favored the morally well-ordered and peace-loving Chinese state as an alternative to the European barbarity they had witnessed. Hence, after the First World War, people again started to place their hope on the “Light from the East” (*ex oriente lux*: the title of a lecture held by Richard Wilhelm). The wisdom of the Daoists, which aimed at balance and non-action (*wuwei*), became a model especially for the pacifist thinkers. In his essay “Listen, Germans,” the poet Klabund appealed to his countrymen to live according to the “holy spirit of the Tao” and to become the “Chinese of Europe” (Bauer: 184). Irony of history: At the same time, that is, after the disintegration of imperial China (1911) and after the national humiliation caused by the transfer of the former German colonies to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles, the efforts of the Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement (1919) were directed to a renewal of China in the vein of a “total Westernization.”

The translations of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* by Richard Wilhelm published in 1911 and 1912 as well as Martin Buber’s selection of *Zhuangzi* (1910) created the basis of a *Dao* fever in Germany, which during the first two decades was widely spread among the literati and artists such as Alfred Döblin, Hermann Hesse, and Bertold Brecht, only to mention a few. Alfred Döblin’s novel *The Three Leaps of Wang-Lun* (*Die Drei Sprünge des Wang-Lun*), which was published in 1915, was essentially inspired by the author’s encounter with Wilhelm’s translations of the Daoist classics. Later, Döblin declared: “I had begun writing 50 years ago when I came across the Wu-Wei, the old Chinese notion of non-resistance” (Fang: 248). The novel deals with the transformation of an unwilling leader of a rebellious movement into someone who renounces the world and values “non-resistance.” Hermann Hesse’s and Bertold Brecht’s interest in Daoism is not as specific but rather part of a general interest in Chinese culture that is reflected in their works in very different ways. While Hesse’s work is imbued with “the mildness of Daoist and

Buddhist thought” (Bauer: 184), Brecht saw in Daoism a philosophy of survival that helped him to weather the difficult time of Nazi Germany (see, for example, his famous ballad “Legend About the Origin of the Book ‘Taoteking’ During Laotse’s Way into Emigration,” which he wrote in 1938 during his exile in Denmark).

During this phase, Daoist thought was also absorbed into the fields of psychology and philosophy. C. G. Jung obtained lasting stimulation for the development of his psychological theories from Daoist readings, especially from his friend Richard Wilhelm’s translations of such books as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (*Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte*—an introduction into Daoist meditation) and the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*). Jung wrote prefaces to both of these texts and thus stressed the importance of the translations; his foreword to the English edition of the *Book of Changes* contributed to the fame of this work in the United States. In his book *Creativity and Taoism. A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (1963)—a work which is itself important for the reception of Daoism—Chang Chung-yuan acknowledges C. G. Jung’s comments to the *Secret of the Golden Flower* with the following words:

Never before has Chinese Taoism been so well explained in the light of modern psychology and sincerely pursued as a way to elevate man’s mental activities and alleviate his sufferings. (Chang: 6)

In the field of philosophy, the reception of Daoism—maybe due to the nature of Daoism itself—was less spectacular, yet, seen from today’s point of view it had a lasting impact. Hermann Graf Keyserling, a philosopher of noble descent who was exceptionally popular in the twenties but has fallen into oblivion today, went on a journey around the world in 1911/12—believed to be “the shortest way to his own self” as he put it in a key-note at the beginning of his *Diary of a Philosopher* (*Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen*), published in 1918. Due to its broad scope of cross-cultural meditations, the book, which still merits reading today, was as popular as Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*. Keyserling found China particularly stimulating, giving high value not only to Confucian morality but also to Daoism:

Yet, it cannot be denied that the works of the Taoist classics actually contain the perhaps most profound maxims that we possess, and this even from the vantage point of our own ideal, that of creative autonomy. (Keyserling: 403)

In the twenties he founded a “School of Wisdom,” which was mocked by critical and rather politically minded contemporaries as “Quixotry of the spirit” (Fang: 253).

The reception of Daoism by Martin Heidegger, the most important philosopher of the century, did not cause much attention then but is



today regarded as all the more important. As a host of specialists on Heidegger's philosophy have stressed (particularly his Japanese and Chinese students), Heidegger had been quite familiar with Daoist texts through Wilhelm's and Buber's translations, and some of the formulations in his groundbreaking thought may very well have been inspired by these readings. The attraction that his thought exerts until today—its strangeness or unusualness—is possibly due to a processing of Daoist or Chan-Buddhist contents into his own system of thought (Chan/Zen-Buddhism in this context basically being nothing but Daoist ideas in a Buddhist cloak), for example his non-nihilistic conception of Nothing as "Fullness" (*Fülle*) (May 1989: 73). Later (1948), he also attempted together with Paul Shih-Yi Hsiao, a Chinese scholar, to translate basic parts from the *Daodejing*. The academic quarrel, as to whether we have here a case of influence or parallels in thought, a "pre-established harmony" (Parkes 1984: 353–374), has not yet come to a decisive end—if it ever will (Parkes 1987; Elberfeld: 152f; Wohlfart 2003).

Also the other great German philosopher of existentialism in this century, Karl Jaspers, has devoted a treatise, *Lao-tse and Nagarjuna—Two Asian Mystics* (1957), to the understanding of Daoism. Jaspers, dealing with Laozi (whose historicity he stresses), ends with the following contemplation on comparative aspects of culture and religion:

From the viewpoint of world history the greatness of Lao-tse is closely connected to the Chinese spirit. Lao-tse's limits are the limits of this spirit: Lao-tse's disposition remains serene despite all kinds of suffering. It does not know the threat of Buddhist rebirth and the urge to break free from the cycle of suffering. Neither does it know the Christian cross, the fear of inevitable sin, the dependence on the mercy of salvation made possible through the surrogate sacrifice of the God who became a man. [. . .] To the Chinese spirit, the whole world is a natural event, a lively cycle, the quietly moving universe. All deviations from the Tao as a whole are merely casual and temporary as, fundamentally, they cannot stray from the imperishable Tao. To us Westerners, the world is not closed in itself, but related to something which, from the (viewpoint of the) world, is not understandable as natural event. The world and our spirit live under the tension of struggling with itself and the other, they mark a decisive event in the struggle and possess a unique historical content. Lao-tse does not know the cipher of the imperious, angry and struggling God, of a God who wants struggle. (Jaspers: 58f.)

We can see here once again a general tendency in the reception of Daoist thought in the West to juxtapose Daoism—and not Confucianism—as the quintessential representative of Chinese thought to Western philosophy, a view which, of course, does not reflect the actual priorities in China but rather corresponds to a Western preference.

Also Ernst Bloch in his central work *The Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*) of 1959 proceeds on the assumption of the historicity of an author Laozi (“Generally, Laotse lived, no doubt, as an older contemporary of Confucius in the 6th century B.C., a lonely man” [Bloch: 1444]) and arrives at the following terse view:

To find European equivalents for Laotse’s Tao proves to be more difficult than for any other basic category of East Asian thought; and yet, unspoken, it is the easiest to comprehend. As the religious category of wisdom, of harmony, of deep tranquility which, in forgetting all desires, fulfills them. (Bloch: 1445)

These limited views on Daoism also reflect that sinological scholarship in the early and middle 20th century—such as by Marcel Granet, Henri Maspero, Joseph Needham, Herrlee Creel, Max Kaltenmark, Holmes Welch etc. (for their view on Daoism see Hardy: 165–188)—did not have a great impact on the thinkers of this period. Instead they apparently relied in their interpretations mostly on early translations with their specific introductions.

After the Second World War (during the fifties) much of the reception of Daoism in the West occurred through the reception of its main offspring: Chan/Zen-Buddhism, which in those days was imported from Japan. First discovered by rebellious poets and artists of the American Beat Generation who—not least—used Zen as a means to “glorify their own anarchical individualism” (Eco: 215), Zen, starting out from California, soon went on to conquer the Western world, this time as a cult, that is not as “beat” but as “square Zen.” Thus Zen appeared to be popularized in a twofold sense, on the one hand as an exotically dressed up life-style that seemed to correspond to Western individualism, and on the other as an East-Asian religious substitute in a West that increasingly was losing its Christian bearings. In this double popularity of Zen-Buddhism we can see already the way in which Daoism was going to be received in the West beginning in the seventies. A representative example for the processing of Zen Buddhist (or Daoist) ideas in the fifties and sixties was Jack Kerouac’s novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958). Its main character was formed after Gary Snyder, an American poet much influenced by Japanese Zen and also acclaimed translator of the poetry of the Chinese Zen poet-monk Hanshan (8<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.).

It should prove to be important for the reception of Daoism by the New Age movement (beginning in the late sixties, following the Beat Generation and Hippies) that Daoism was recognized to be the main origin of Zen, for example in Allan Watts’ influential introduction *The Way of Zen* (1957). In the sixties and early seventies, Allen Watts became one of the leading gurus of the New Age movement in



California; with his numerous activities and many publications, particularly with his 1975 posthumously published book *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, he became somewhat of a founding figure of a so-called Americo-Daoism (he died in 1973 just before he was about to commit the folly of founding his own religion). Allen Watts' well written and as a non-specialist (he was an Anglican theologian by trade) quite knowledgeable introductions into East Asian thought found an audience that, through the Hippie movement, was already sensitized for alternative religions and life-styles, and thus paved the way for a second *Dao* fever in the West, this time starting from the United States. Just as in the twenties, the *Dao* again was seen as a panacea for the allegedly materially over-saturated but spiritually emaciated Western civilization. A trivialized Daoism, not so much oriented along Laozi and Zhuangzi but rather along *Yin-Yang* thought (taken from the *Book of Changes*, which by then had achieved cult book status), became the core "philosophy" of the New Age movement.

Beginning with Fridjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (first published in 1975), we can see an uninterrupted row of books appearing that all recommended a Daoist attitude or "enlightenment" for all spheres of life, for example *The Tao of Trance*, *Tao of Psychology*, *The Tao of Love*, *Easy Tao* (sic!), *The Tao Yoga of Healing Love*, *The Tao Cookbook*, *Tao Management*, *The Tao of Self-Healing*, *The Tao of Leadership*, *The Tao of Politics*, *The Tao of Money*, *The Tao of Sex*, etc. Capra's book, which offers a lot of insight into the mysteries of modern physics, is representative of the sort of treatment Daoism received in this period. Starting at the physical notion of quantum field, in which the difference between the single elementary particle and its surrounding space is transcended, Capra arrives at an interpretation of the *Dao* as a "unified field"—the field that all great physicists of the modern era, Einstein and such, were searching for. The book ends on a note of a Daoist eschatology. Referring to *Yin-Yang* thought, particularly the Daoist stress on *Yin*, the gentle, female, or dark force, he develops the idea that our present age is too much determined by *Yang* forces (too rational, male, and aggressive). And thus, very much like in Chinese medicine, he orders the world a good dose of *Yin* medicine, maintaining that the survival of our civilization will be dependent on our ability to manage such a change in the future—in a New Age to come.

This kind of Americo-Daoism that "responds to the 'crisis of the West' by importing holistic fast-food from the Far East" was mocked by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Euro-Daoism*:

This quick lunch cuisine is, of course, dressed up as *nouvelle cuisine*; it bets on New Thinking as an irresistible concept, it serves planetary paradigm shifts like courses in a historical menu, and it promises us

sincerely that after a raw-fish Pisces dish we should be getting a tender Aquarius Chop Suey. But the reliability of this kind of New Thinking exhausts itself, as was to be feared, in the suggestion to eat in future our ideas with chopsticks—man is what he eats. (Sloterdijk: 9)

By now, mainly through the increasing popularity of New Age thought, Americo- and Euro-Daoism have become integrated elements of Western “lifeworlds” (Husserl). Although masqueraded in an almost unrecognizable way, even a certain element of the religious variant of Daoism can be found there: the quest for immortality. In all the different forms of allegedly “Daoist” psycho-, physio- or sex-therapy offered now by almost any community college (not to mention the popularity of Daoist-inspired *Taijiquan*, *Qigong*, “*Kung fu*,” or *feng shui*) there seems to be the hidden message that what is to be found is nothing but the elixir of life which today—corresponding with the *zeitgeist*—is conceived in a unity of meditative and quasi-sporty (alternatively sexual) activity.

Worth mentioning, finally, are also some more amusing sides of the *Dao* fever, such as David Payne’s *Confessions of a Taoist on Wall Street* (1984), a “painful and punful effort to merge Tao and Dow [Jones]” (Schenkel: 428) or Benjamin Hoff’s *The Tao of Pooh* (1982) and *The Te of Piglet* (1992) in which the rational simplicity of A. A. Milne’s charming and indeed Daoist-inspired bear “with little brains” is seen as the quintessential example of practical yet not too serious wisdom. Pooh, the bear without intentions, thus incorporates the Daoist qualities of “non action” (*wuwei*), “simplicity” (*pu* = Pooh) and “self-so-being” (*ziran*):

While Eeyore frets . . .  
and Piglet hesitates . . .  
and Owl pontificates . . .  
Pooh just is. (Back cover of Hoff 1982)

What are the reasons for such an eager welcoming and spread of Daoism in the West? Here we have to differentiate between *zeitgeist*-related aspects that paved the ground for its reception, on the one hand, and qualities of Daoism that proved to be favorable for its spreading in the West, on the other.

First of all, at the beginning of the 20th century, Max Weber, the founder of modernization theory, singled out “disenchantment of the world” and “instrumental rationality” as the main driving forces leading to our modern societies. This disenchantment led to a growing abandonment of religious commitment and orientation, that is, in the case of the Western societies, of Christianity. Yet it also seems to be responsible for a renewed interest in religion, as the need for religious

experience and symbolic interpretations of the world—despite Weber, Marx, or Nietzsche—appears to be unbroken. But since the West's own religion for many people is tied up too much with traditional structures, its symbolism, its anthropomorphic images of God and its stress on faith, moreover, being difficult to convey in a secular and "enlightened" world, many people began to search for religious answers to the existential questions of life and death in other regions—and at other religions—of the world. Harvey Cox put it this way: "Perhaps the Orient began to exert a spell on Western minds when God died over here" (Schenkel: 430).

Secondly, in the pluralistic societies of the postmodern period the prevailing attitude is that "anything goes," also in terms of religion. Religion and corresponding identities are something we can choose or shop for—just like a commodity on a global ideological market. Religion thus has become something like an identity tag indicating an individual life-style preference. In his essay "Zen in the West," Umberto Eco characterized the attitude of the Beat Generation artists, who justified their intoxicated, ecstatic, and untrammelled life-style with reference to Zen-Buddhism, as "sacral immoderateness" (Eco: 217). In the recent reception of Daoism, this neo-Nietzschean trait does not appear to be dominant; today we rather find a moderate, health-oriented sensitivity imbued with a New Age kind of rapture as the prevailing characteristics of Western "Neo-Daoists."

Thirdly, modern Western philosophy has arrived at insights that are strikingly similar to Daoist thought. Heidegger's affinity to and possible influence through Daoism has already been mentioned. There are two more modern Western philosophers in whose works we can find parallels to Daoist thought, Wittgenstein and Derrida. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* of 1918 contains, particularly toward the end, passages that could have been written just as well by Zhuangzi:

We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer. (Wittgenstein 1997a: 85, No. 6.52)

This also holds true for the late Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, when he, for example, answers the question about the ultimate goal of philosophy as "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (Wittgenstein 1997a: 378; PI 309). What is fascinating about Wittgenstein is that, proceeding along an explicitly Western method of logical positivism, he approaches a philosophical silence, such as in his last sentence of the *Tractatus*: "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 1997a: 85, No. 7). Also

the following remark from a letter to Ludwig Ficker of 1919, characterizing his own work, reveals this tendency toward Daoist non-speaking:

What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And *it is precisely this second part that is the important one.* (Canfield: 407)

Such utterances show him belonging, on the one hand, to the tradition of European mysticism; on the other hand, they reveal a definite affinity to Daoism and Buddhism.

Derrida's philosophy, finally, with its assault on an alleged occidental logocentrism and its rejection of a metaphysically founded "presence" has likewise been compared to Zhuangzi's thought, particularly to the latter's second chapter "On the Equality of Things" (Yeh; Fu). This has even led to a mild flourishing of a special variant of Euro-Daoism, called "Derri-Daoism" (Schenkel: 422).

Fourthly, the alleged parallels between modern physics and Daoism have already been mentioned in the context of the discussion of Capra's work. It is interesting that another new branch of the natural sciences, chaos theory, likewise is seen in the philosophical vicinity of Daoism (Izutsu: 310f; Briggs and Peat). Apart from that, modern physics seems to be less and less determined by a fixed causal order of the universe but by indeterminacy, acausality, contingency, and probability. Here we see also a joining of modern physics with philosophy as in Wittgenstein's note from his "Mixed Remarks" of 1948: "If you want to philosophize, you have to step into the original chaos and have to feel at home there" (Wittgenstein 1997b: 542). If Daoism and Zen-Buddhism do proceed from the assumption that "the eternal order of the world consists in its creative disorder" (Eco: 235), then it should not be surprising that affinities are seen here which make Daoism attractive for modern man.

What are the characteristics of Daoism itself that helped its reception in the West? First of all it is its critique of civilization that seems most attractive today. It has already been mentioned that, since Nietzsche and Spengler, critique of the occidental civilization has become a constant element of the modern Western consciousness. First of all, this manifests itself in a central theme of the ecological movement, that is, the contemporary version of Rousseau's call "Back to nature!" If Daoists thus advocate a unity of man with nature, they find Western doors widely open. The "malaise of modernity" (Charles Taylor, Peter L. Berger), however, seems to spread into far more aspects of our contemporary "lifeworlds," such as the increasing emphasis on technical and economical efficiency, keeping modern man in an "iron cage" (Max Weber) of instrumental rationality. Here

Daoist critique of civilization can unfold all its force for a Western audience that shows definite signs of civilizationary fatigue.

As Eco pointed out already with regards to Zen-Buddhism, its attractiveness lay to a great extent in its anti-intellectualism. This also holds true for Daoism. Daoist maxims, such as that ultimate reality (the *Dao*) cannot be spoken of, find more and more adherents in the West who complain about an increasing head-heaviness of life in general. In this context, it is also interesting that Daoism does not seem to give ethically relevant answers. Similarly to (yet also differently from) Nietzsche, it advocates an attitude “beyond good and bad.” For this reason, Eco’s explanation of the appeal of Zen, that it does not serve to “justify an ethical attitude but furthers stylistic strategies” (Eco: 219) also makes sense with regard to Daoism.

Last but not least, it seems to be the paradoxical mixture of arcane mysticism and natural simplicity of the Daoist classics that largely make up the popularity of Daoist teachings. Maxims of wisdom and ultimate truths—if they can be put in words at all—are usually simple but often also paradoxical, running counter to the everyday perception of reality. If such features are matched by a mysterious ambiguity and openness of the texts, then we get the appeal that made Daoism today to such an attractive philosophy and substitute religion. The openness and ambiguity of the Chinese originals has certainly attracted translators all over the world. The *Daodejing* is not only the most widely translated Chinese work, but, after the Holy Bible it is the most widely translated book worldwide.

What conclusions can be drawn from this cursory glance at the history of Daoism in the West? First, since its introduction to the West, Daoism has proved to be extraordinarily adaptable. It contains elements that make it acceptable from many different points of view. For the feminists (and their male supporters), numerous passages of the *Daodejing* express the confirmation of the greater (i.e., gentle) strength of the female principle (*Yin*) (Johanson and Kurtz), whereas theorists of chaos or deconstructionists find philosophical analogies in Daoism or confirmations for their seemingly paradoxical theories. These multifarious applications—largely due to its openness—add to its attraction, though this characteristic also encourages its abuse as a play-thing of the times. Regarding this problem, Sloterdijk observes:

Is the *Dao* in the mouth of Western authors not like a wild card which is played when one has the intention of promising more than one can keep? Ah, Daoism! Magical formula for fast holisms and for security form the nuclear physical laboratory. The enigmatic syllable *Dao* has recently entered into the zone of kitsch, and those who still want to stand up for its clear magic spell have to live with the suspicion that they might want to join in the chorus singing the totality-couplets of new religion. (Sloterdijk: 9)

Secondly, the broad reception of Daoism seems not to be based on a thorough knowledge of the subject matter. A scrupulous research of Daoism in the field of Sinology has only begun three to four decades ago, such as the international project on the collection of Daoist canonical scriptures (*Daozang*) of the EACS (European Association of Chinese Studies) under the leadership of K. Schipper. This project also comprehensively probed into the *Dao*—religion, which, for a long time had been neglected by Western Sinology (having inherited the already mentioned Jesuit prejudice). Recently, findings of the differently organized silk manuscripts of the *Daodejing* from the Mawangdui grave or the Guodian bamboo slips have received due attention, as they are dated several centuries earlier than the previous *textus receptus* and its commentary by Wang Bi (226–249). Other new milestones of Daoist scholarship by sinological experts worth noting are Livia Kohn's *Daoism Handbook* (2000) or Michael LaFargue's book—its title reminiscent of Gadamer—*Tao and Method* (1994) in which he does not choose the common subjectivistic approach but rather advocates an “objective hermeneutics.” This means that we first have to acquire a certain competence, that is, linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge, suitable (if not necessary) for the understanding of the text. Thus, he calls his own method of interpretation “disciplined imagination.”

But considering the fact that the present state of research is hardly known to anyone who is not an expert and that we only have a very restricted knowledge about the cultural and historical context, the reception of Daoism altogether can be regarded as quite a creative misunderstanding. Richard Wilhelm already realized this when he observed: “Much from the East that is now fashionable in Europe owes its popularity to a fundamental misunderstanding” (Fang 1992: 312). Hence, among those non-experts (i.e., Non-Sinologists) who venture to interpret Daoism for Westerners, only very few try to explain it with reference to its cultural and historical background. One of the exceptions worth mentioning is the American Benedictine monk Thomas Merton who published a poetical translation of *Zhuangzi* passages in 1965 and who in a foreword well worth reading tries to show that Daoism—contrary to the popular Western belief—does not advocate moral arbitrariness, that is, the transcending of moral standards does not imply an abandonment of these standards but rather their unintentional and intuitive realization. Interestingly, serious endeavors to understand Daoism in a differentiated way—doing justice to its philosophical and historical context—can often be ascribed to interpreters with theological training. However—despite Thomas Merton's affirmation of the opposite—there still remains a residue of doubt whether the results of his effort are nothing but



“Christian rabbits” that are being conjured out of a “Daoist hat” (Merton: 10). Considering the general ignorance of Western philosophy toward Eastern thought, worth mentioning as an exception in this context is also Guenter Wohlfart. As a student of Adorno and steeped in the Western philosophical tradition, he has endeavored in numerous publications and seminars—in which he brings together sinological specialists and non-experts—to understand Daoism better both philologically and philosophically and to thus overcome culturally conditioned philosophical biases (Wohlfart 1999).

Creative misunderstandings are in themselves nothing to be principally disapproved of. The reception of Daoism in China during the past 2000 years is—as interpretation—in a certain sense also nothing but a creative misunderstanding. In fact, this has always been the way in which we appropriated elements of foreign cultures (e.g., the Judaic-Christian religion in Northern Europe via the Roman culture). A cultural adaptation, in this sense, is something neutral and ambivalent. It is only the blindness in the process of intercultural borrowing that sometimes may give cause for concern. Chinese intellectuals, for example (not only those of the May 4th Movement) liked (and still like) to arbitrarily choose dishes from the menu of Western thought that suited them best without taking into consideration historical developments and cultural contexts. Daoism, in the West, seems to be treated the same way. Finally, people fail to notice that in the West, beginning with the Pre-Socratics, continuing with the negative theology of medieval mysticism up until modern Existentialism there is a philosophical tradition very similar in spirit to Daoism. A blend of selected passages by Heraclitus (Wohlfart 1998), the New-Pythagoreans, the Gnosis, Dionysios Areopagita, Nicolas of Cusa (Pohl 2003), Master Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and others would result in a volume with a message not so very different from the one of the *Daodejing*.

A third and last aspect is that Daoism during its reception in the West underwent a change similar to the one we can notice in China, that is, from elitist philosophy and wisdom to popular religion and cult or magic, respectively. Daoism in the West has become a mass-produced article, but the contents it stands for still remain obscure. At the same time Messianic ideas are associated with Daoism, namely the expectation of the salvation of the world in a New Age. As far as this aspect is concerned, Heidegger, in an interview given to the German weekly *Der Spiegel* of 1966 (published posthumously in No. 23/1976), despite his relatedness and spiritual affinity to Daoism, held the opinion that a spiritual renewal of the West can hardly be realized by imported ideas—regardless if philosophical or religious—from the Far East but must be initiated from the Western tradition:

I'm convinced that a turnabout can emerge only from the very place in the world that produced the modern technical world; it cannot happen through the adoption of Zen-Buddhism or any other Eastern religion. The change of thinking needs the help of the European tradition and its new appropriation. (May: 22)

If we can agree with Sloterdijk that one has to be a Daoist in order to "bear the idea that Daoism cannot help us either" (Sloterdijk: 10), then Heidegger with this insight can safely be ranked as one of the great Euro-Daoists of our time.

TRIER UNIVERSITY  
Trier, Germany

#### ENDNOTE

1. This is an updated and enlarged version of an article that first appeared both in German in the journal *minima sinica* 1 (1998): 1–23 and in Chinese in *Zhexue yanjiu* (*Philosophical Research*) 7 (1998): 36–46. I am grateful to my research assistant Philippe Brunozzi for helping me in the updating and locating of resources. In the same year as this article appeared in German, Julia M. Hardy published a similar overview, entitled "Influential Western Interpretations of the Tao-te-ching." This impressive piece of scholarship is much broader in scope than my own article, but as she focuses more on the review of the sinological tradition (with the conclusion that Western interpretations of the *Daodejing* may often be based on "bad scholarship," however frequently making "good religion," pp. 184–185), it might not make the present study completely superfluous.

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*JOCP*

Volume 30, 2003

article no: 132

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