LAO-TZU's TAOTECHING

translated by

RED PINE

with selected commentaries
from the past 2,000 years

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Revised Edition

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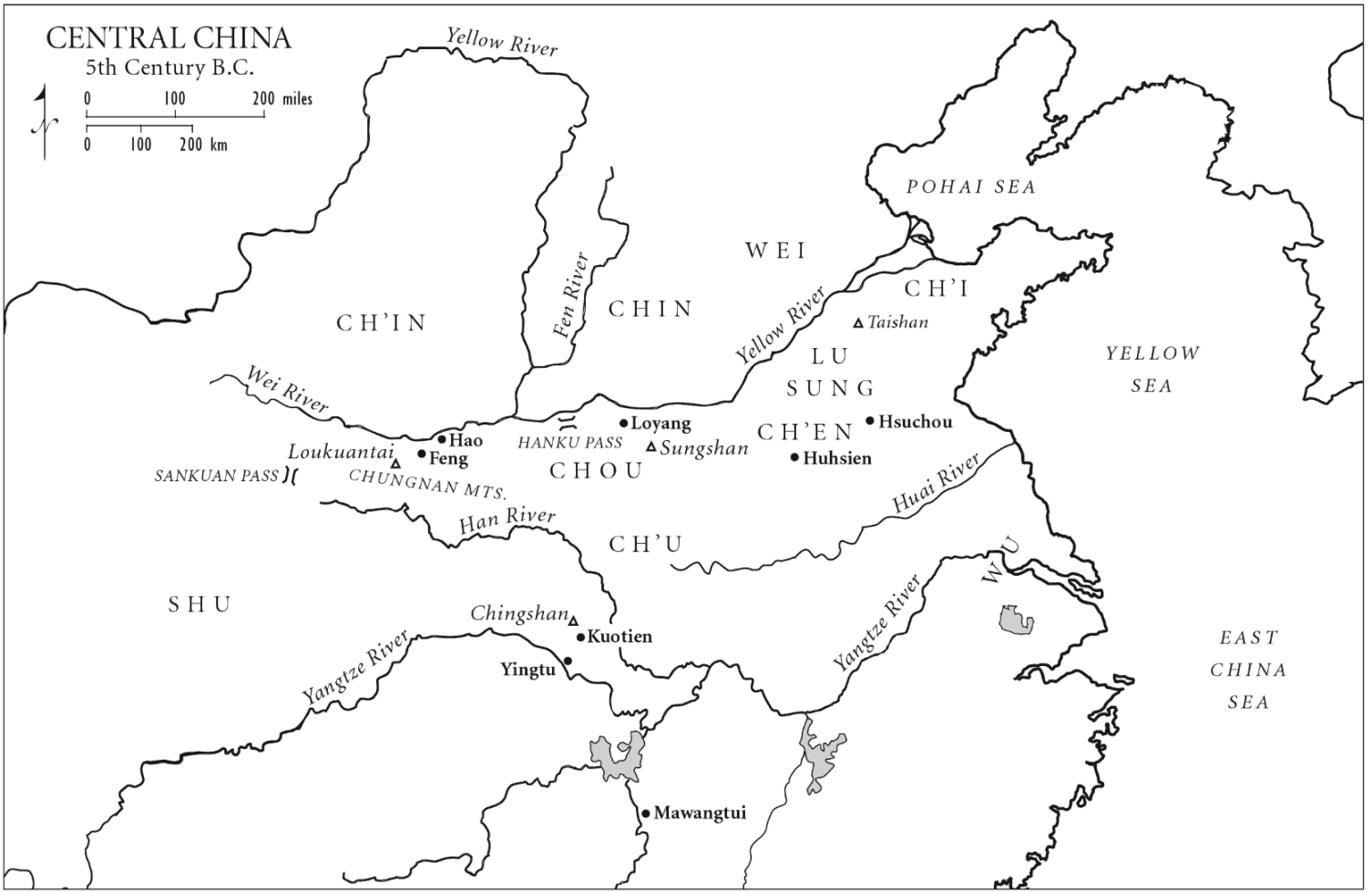


PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Since my translation of the *Taoteching* was first published in 1996, I have looked at it from time to time, and not only to track down a reference. Sometimes I have wondered why I translated something a certain way and if another rendering would not have been better. I am glad for any opportunity to revisit an earlier effort. In this case, the opportunity was provided by the discovery of another set of early copies of the text.

In 1993, three bundles of thin bamboo slats containing selections of *Taoteching* verses were unearthed in a tomb near the village of Kuotien/Guodian in Hupei province. The tomb belonged to the tutor of the crown prince of the ancient state of Ch'u, and the bundles were probably used for different levels of instruction. Since these newly discovered copies have been dated to 300 B.C., give or take a decade or two, they constitute by far our earliest version of the *Taoteching,* a hundred years earlier than those found at Mawangtui. However, unlike the Mawangtui copies, the Kuotien copies only include selections. They don't include the entire eighty-one-verse text, and they rarely include the entire text of the verses they quote. Sometimes, they quote no more than a line or two. Of course, it remains a point of contention, which I prefer not to address, whether they were part of a proto-*Taoteching* or whether they were merely selections from an already complete text. Still, their discovery has given us a whole new set of variants to consider. And they have given me the excuse to review what I liked about my previous translation and what I didn't like. No doubt, I will be just as ready to revisit this work again the next time another early copy is unearthed.

Red Pine
Autumn at the Gate, Year of the Ox
Port Townsend, Washington

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

The *Taoteching* is at heart a simple book. Written at the end of the sixth century B.C. by a man called Lao-tzu, it's a vision of what our lives would be like if we were more like the dark, new moon.

Lao-tzu teaches us that the dark can always become light and contains within itself the potential for growth and long life, while the light can only become dark and brings with it decay and early death. Lao-tzu chose long life. Thus, he chose the dark.

The word that Lao-tzu chose to represent this vision was *Tao,* 道. But *tao* means "road" or "way" and doesn't appear to have anything to do with darkness. The character is made up of two graphs: 首 (head) and 辶 (go). To make sense of how the character came to be constructed, early Chinese philologists concluded that "head" must mean the start of something and that the two graphs together show someone starting on a trip. But I find the explanation of a modern scholar of comparative religion, Tu Er-wei, more convincing. Professor Tu says the "head" in the character *tao* is the face of the moon. And the meaning of "road" comes from watching this disembodied face as it moves across the sky.

Professor Tu also notes that *tao* shares a common linguistic heritage with words that mean "moon" or "new moon" in other cultures: Tibetans call the moon *da-ua;* the Miao, who now live in southwest China but who lived in the same state as Lao-tzu when he was alive, call it *tao-tie;* the ancient Egyptians called it *thoth.* Tu Er-wei could have added *dar-sha,* which means "new moon" in Sanskrit.

However, the heart of Tu's thesis is not linguistic but textual, and based on references within the *Taoteching.* Lao-tzu says the Tao is between Heaven and Earth, it's Heaven's Gate, it's empty but inexhaustible, it doesn't die, it waxes and wanes, it's distant and dark, it doesn't try to be full, it's the light that doesn't blind, it has thirty spokes and two thirteen-day (visible) phases, it can be strung like

a bow or expand and contract like a bellows, it moves the other way (relative to the sun, it appears/rises later and later), it's the great image, the hidden immortal, the crescent soul, the dark union, the dark womb, the dark beyond dark. If this isn't the moon, what is it?

Tu Er-wei has, I think, uncovered a deep and primitive layer of the *Taoteching* that has escaped the attention of other scholars. Of course, we cannot say for certain that Lao-tzu was consciously aware of the Tao's association with the moon. But we have his images, and they are too often lunar to dismiss as accidental.

In associating the Tao with the moon, Lao-tzu was not alone. The symbol Taoists have used since ancient times to represent the Tao, ☯, shows the two conjoined phases of the moon. And how could they ignore such an obvious connection between its cycle of change and our own? Every month we watch the moon grow from nothing to a luminous disk that scatters the stars and pulls the tides within us all. The oceans feel it. The earth feels it. Plants and animals feel it. Humans also feel it, though it is women who seem to be most aware of it. In the *Huangti Neiching,* or *Yellow Emperor's Internal Book of Medicine,* Ch'i Po explained this to the Yellow Emperor, "When the moon begins to grow, blood and breath begin to surge. When the moon is completely full, blood and breath are at their fullest, tendons and muscles are at their strongest. When the moon is completely empty, tendons and muscles are at their weakest" (8.26).

The advance of civilization has separated us from this easy lunar awareness. We call people affected by the moon "lunatics," making clear our disdain for its power. Lao-tzu redirects our vision to this ancient mirror. But instead of pointing to its light, he points to its darkness. Every month the moon effortlessly shows us that something comes from nothing. Lao-tzu asks us to emulate this aspect of the moon—not the full moon, which is destined to wane, but the new moon, which holds the promise of rebirth. And while he has us gazing at the moon's dark mirror, he asks why we don't live longer than we do. After all, don't we share the same nature as the moon? And isn't the moon immortal?

Scholars tend to ignore Lao-tzu's emphasis on darkness and immortality, for it takes the book beyond the reach of academic analysis. For scholars, darkness is just a more poetic way of describing the mysterious. And immortality is a euphemism for long life. Over the years, they have distilled what they call Lao-tzu's "Taoist philosophy" from the later developments of "Taoist religion." They call the *Taoteching* a treatise on political or military strategy, or they see it as primitive scientific naturalism or utopianism—or just a bunch of sayings.

But trying to force the *Taoteching* into the categories of modern discourse not only distorts the *Taoteching* but also treats the traditions that later Taoists have associated with the text as irrelevant and misguided. Meanwhile, the *Taoteching* continues to inspire millions of Chinese as a spiritual text. And I have tried to present it in that dark light. The words of philosophers fail here. If words are of any use at all, they are the words of the poet. For poetry has the ability to point us toward the truth then stand aside, while prose stands in the doorway relating all the wonders on the other side but rarely lets us pass.

In this respect, the *Taoteching* is unique among the great literary works of the Chou dynasty (1122–221 B.C.). Aside from the anonymous poems and folksongs of the *Shihching,* or *Book of Odes,* we have no other poetic work from this early period of Chinese history. The wisdom of other sages was conveyed in prose. Although I haven't attempted to reproduce Lao-tzu's poetic devices (Hsu Yung-chang identifies twenty-eight different kinds of rhyme), I have tried to convey the poetic feel with which he strings together images for our breath and spirit, but not necessarily our minds. For the *Taoteching* is one long poem written in praise of something we cannot name, much less imagine.

Despite the elusiveness and namelessness of the Tao, Lao-tzu tells us we can approach it through *Te. Te* means "virtue," in the sense of "moral character" as well as "power to act." Yen Ling-feng says, "Virtue is the manifestation of the Way. The Way is what Virtue contains. Without the Way, Virtue would have no power. Without Virtue, the Way would have no appearance." (See his commentary to verse 21.) Han Fei put it more simply: "Te is the Tao at work." (See his commentary to verse 38.) Te is our entrance to the Tao. Te is what we cultivate. Lao-tzu's Virtue, however, isn't the virtue of adhering to a moral code but action that involves no moral code, no self, no other—no action.

These are the two poles around which the *Taoteching* turns: the Tao, the dark, the body, the essence, the Way; and Te, the light, the function, the spirit, Virtue. In terms of origin, the Tao comes first. In terms of practice, Te comes first. The dark gives the light a place to shine. The light allows us to see the dark. But too much light blinds. Lao-tzu saw people chasing the light and hastening their own destruction. He encouraged them to choose the dark instead of the light, less instead of more, weakness instead of strength, inaction instead of action. What could be simpler?

Lao-tzu's preference for darkness extended to himself as well. For the past 2,500 years, the Chinese have revered the *Taoteching* as they have no other text, and yet they know next to nothing about its author. What they do know, or

think they know, is contained in a brief biographical sketch included by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in a history of ancient China he completed around 100 B.C. Although we don't know what Ssu-ma Ch'ien's sources were, we do know he was considered the most widely traveled man of his age, and he went to great lengths to verify the information he used. Of late it has become popular, if not *de rigueur*, to debunk his account of Lao-tzu. But it remains the earliest one we have and is worth repeating.

According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Lao-tzu was a native of Huhsien prefecture in the state of Ch'u. Nowadays, Huhsien is called Luyi. If you are traveling in China, or simply want to find it on a map, look for the town of Shangchiu/Shangqiu on the train line that runs between the city of Chengchou/Zhengzhou, the capital of Honan province, and the Grand Canal town of Hsuchou/Xuzhou to the east. Luyi is about seventy kilometers to the south of Shangchiu. The series of shrines that mark the site of Lao-tzu's former home is just east of town.

The region is known as the Huang-Huai Plain. As its name suggests, it is the result of the regular flooding of the Huangho, or Yellow River, to the north, and the Huaiho, or Huai River, to the south. The Chinese have been growing wheat and millet here since Neolithic times, and more recently cotton and tobacco. It remains one of the more productive agricultural areas of China, and it was a rich prize over which many ancient states fought.

Lao-tzu was born here in 604 B.C., or 571 B.C., depending on which account of later historians we accept. Ssu-ma Ch'ien doesn't give us a date. But he does say that Huhsien was part of the great state of Ch'u. Officially, Huhsien belonged to the small state of Ch'en until 479 B.C., when Ch'u eliminated Ch'en as a state once and for all. Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that either Huhsien did not belong to Ch'u when Lao-tzu was alive or that he must have been born there after 479 B.C. But we need not accept either conclusion. Ssu-ma Ch'ien would have been aware that Ch'u controlled the fortunes of Ch'en as early as 598 B.C., when Ch'u briefly annexed Ch'en then changed its mind and allowed Ch'en to exist as a "neighbor state."

Whether or not Huhsien was actually part of Ch'u is not important. What is important is that during the sixth century B.C., Ch'u controlled the region of which Huhsien was a part. This is significant not for verifying the accuracy of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's account but for directing our attention to the cultural influence that Ch'u represented.

Ch'u was not like the other states in the Central Plains. Although the rulers of Ch'u traced their ancestry to a grandson of the Yellow Emperor, the patriarch of

Chinese culture, they represented its shamanistic periphery. From their ancestral home in the Sungshan area, just south of the Yellow River, they moved, or were pushed, steadily southwest, eventually ending up in the Chingshan area, just north of the Yangtze. Over the centuries they mixed with other tribal groups, such as the Miao, and incorporated elements of their shamanistic cultures. The Ch'u rulers took for their surname the word *hsiung*, meaning "bear," and they called themselves Man or Yi, which the Chinese in the central states interpreted to mean "barbarians."

The influence of Ch'u's culture on Lao-tzu is impossible to determine, but it does help us better understand the *Taoteching,* knowing that it was written by a man who was no stranger to shamanistic conceptions of the sacred world. Certainly as Taoism developed in later centuries, it remained heavily indebted to shamanism, and some scholars even see evidence of the Ch'u dialect in the *Taoteching* itself.

This, then, was the region where Lao-tzu grew up. But his name was not Lao-tzu, which means "Old Master." Ssu-ma Ch'ien says his family name was Li, his personal name was Erh (meaning "ear," hence, learned), and his posthumous name was Tan (meaning "long-eared," hence, wise). In addition to providing us with a complete set of names, Ssu-ma Ch'ien also tells us that Lao-tzu, or Li Erh, served as keeper of the Chou dynasty's Royal Archives.

Before continuing, I should note that some scholars reject Ssu-ma Ch'ien's Li Erh or Li Tan and suggest instead a man named Lao Tan, who also served as keeper of the Royal Archives, but in the fourth century B.C. rather than the sixth. Some find this later date more acceptable in explaining Lao-tzu's innovative literary style as well as in explaining why Chuang-tzu (369–286 B.C.) attributes passages of the *Taoteching* to Lao Tan but not Li Tan. For his part, Ssu-ma Ch'ien was certainly familiar with Chuang-tzu's writings, and he was not unaware of the fourth-century historian Lao Tan. In fact, he admits that some people thought that Lao Tan was Lao-tzu. But Ssu-ma Ch'ien was not convinced that the two were the same man. After all, if Tan was Lao-tzu's posthumous name, why shouldn't Chuang-tzu and other later writers call him "Old Tan"? And why couldn't there be two record keepers with the same personal name in the course of two centuries? If China's Grand Historian was not convinced that the fourth-century historian was the author of the *Taoteching*—certainly he had more documents at his disposal than we now possess—I see no reason to decide in favor of a man whose only claim to fame was to prophesy the ascendancy of the state of Ch'in, which was to bring the Chou dynasty to an end in 221 B.C.

Meanwhile, back at the archives, I think I hear Lao-tzu laughing. The archives were kept at the Chou dynasty capital of Loyang. Loyang was a Neolithic campsite as early as 3000 B.C. and a military garrison during the first dynasties: the Hsia and the Shang. When the state of Chou overthrew the Shang in 1122 B.C., the Duke of Chou built a new, subsidiary capital around the old garrison. He dubbed it Wangcheng: City of the King. Usually, though, the Chou dynasty king lived in one of the new dynasty's two western capitals of Feng and Hao, both of which were just west of the modern city of Sian/Xian. But when these were destroyed in 771 B.C., Wangcheng became the sole royal residence. And this was where Lao-tzu spent his time recording the events at court.

And Lao-tzu must have been busy. When King Ching died in 520 B.C., two of his sons, Prince Chao and Prince Ching, declared themselves his successor. At first Prince Chao gained the upper hand, and Prince Ching was forced to leave the capital. But with the help of other nobles, Prince Ching soon returned and established another capital fifteen kilometers to the east of Wangcheng, which he dubbed Chengchou: Glory of Chou. And in 516 B.C., Prince Ching finally succeeded in driving his brother from the old capital.

In the same year, the keeper of the Royal Archives, which were still in Wangcheng, received a visitor from the state of Lu. The visitor was a young man named K'ung Fu-tzu, or Confucius. Confucius was interested in ritual and asked Lao-tzu about the ceremonies of the ancient kings.

According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Lao-tzu responded with this advice: "The ancients you admire have been in the ground a long time. Their bones have turned to dust. Only their words remain. Those among them who were wise rode in carriages when times were good and slipped quietly away when times were bad. I have heard that the clever merchant hides his wealth so his store looks empty and that the superior person acts dumb so he can avoid calling attention to himself. I advise you to get rid of your excessive pride and ambition. They won't do you any good. This is all I have to say to you." Afterward, Confucius told his disciples, "Today when I met Lao-tzu, it was like meeting a dragon."

The story of this meeting appears in a sufficient number of ancient texts to make it unlikely that it was invented by Taoists. Confucian records also report it taking place. According to the traditional account, Lao-tzu was eighty-eight years old when he met Confucius. If so, and if he was born in 604 B.C., the two sages would have met in 516 B.C., when Confucius would have been thirty-five. So it is possible.

Following his meeting with Confucius, Lao-tzu decided to take his own

HANKU PASS. Midway between the Chou dynasty's eastern and western capitals and situated between the Yellow River and the Chungnan Mountains. This is where Lao-tzu met Yin Hsi, Warden of the Pass. Photo by Bill Porter.

advice, and he left the capital by oxcart. And he had good reason to leave. For when Prince Chao was driven out of Wangcheng by his brother, he took with him the royal archives, the same archives of which Lao-tzu was in charge. If Lao-tzu needed a reason to leave, he certainly had one in 516 B.C.

With the loss of the archives, Lao-tzu was out of a job. He was also, no doubt, fed up with the prospects for enlightened rule in the Middle Kingdom. Hence, he headed not for his hometown of Huhsien, 300 kilometers to the east, but for the Hanku Pass, which was 150 kilometers west of Loyang, and which served as the border between the Chou dynasty's central states and the semibarbarian state of Ch'in, which controlled the area surrounding the dynasty's former western capitals.

As keeper of the Royal Archives, Lao-tzu no doubt supplied himself with the necessary documents to get through what was the most strategic pass in all of China. Hardly wide enough for two carts, it forms a seventeen-kilometer-long defile through a plateau of loess that has blown down from North China and accumulated between the Chungnan Mountains and the Yellow River over the past million years. In ancient times, the Chinese said that whoever controlled

Artist's depiction of Loukuantai on tiles. Photo by Bill Porter.

Hanku Pass controlled China. It was so easy to defend that during the Second World War the Japanese army failed to break through it, despite finding no difficulty in sweeping Chinese forces from the plains to the east.

Lao-tzu was expected. According to Taoist records, Master Yin Hsi was studying the heavens far to the west at the royal observatory of the state of Ch'in at a place called Loukuantai. One evening he noticed a purple vapor drifting from the east and deduced that a sage would soon be passing through the area. Since he knew that anyone traveling west would have to come through Hanku Pass, he proceeded to the pass.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien, however, says Yin Hsi was the Warden of the Pass and makes no mention of his association with Loukuantai. The connection with Loukuantai is based on later, Taoist records. In any case, when Lao-tzu appeared, Yin Hsi recognized the sage and asked for instruction. According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Lao-tzu then gave Yin Hsi the *Taoteching* and continued on to other, unknown realms.

Taoists, on the other hand, agree that Lao-tzu continued on from Hanku Pass, but in the company of Yin Hsi, who invited the sage to his observatory 250 kilometers to the west. Taoists also say Lao-tzu stopped long enough at Loukuantai to convey the teachings that make up his *Taoteching* and then traveled on through the Sankuan Pass, another 150 kilometers to the west, and into the state of Shu. Shu was founded by a branch of the same lineage that founded the state

of Ch'u, although its rulers revered the cuckoo rather than the bear. And in the land of the cuckoo, Lao-tzu finally achieved anonymity as well as immortality.

Curiously, about six kilometers west of Loukuantai, there's a tombstone with Lao-tzu's name on it. The Red Guards knocked it down in the 1960s, and when I first visited Loukuantai, in 1989, it was still down. It has since been propped back up, and a small shrine built to protect it. On that first visit, I asked Loukuantai's abbot, Jen Fa-jung, what happened to Lao-tzu. Did he continue on through Sankuan Pass, or was he buried at Loukuantai? Master Jen suggested both stories were true. As Confucius noted, Lao-tzu was a dragon among men. And being a member of the serpent family, why should we wonder at his ability to leave his skin behind and continue on through cloud-barred passes?

And so Lao-tzu, whoever he was and whenever he lived, disappeared and left behind his small book. The book at first didn't have a title. When writers like Mo-tzu and Wen-tzu quoted from it in the fifth century B.C., or Chuang-tzu and Lieh-tzu in the fourth century B.C., or when Han Fei explained passages in the third century B.C. and Huai-nan-tzu in the second century B.C., they simply said, "Lao-tzu says this" or "Lao Tan says that." And so people started calling the source of all these quotes *Laotzu.*

Ssu-ma Ch'ien also mentioned no title. He said only that Lao-tzu wrote a book, and it was divided into two parts. About that same time, people started calling these two parts *The Way* and *Virtue,* after the first lines of verses 1 and 38. And to these were added the honorific *ching,* meaning "ancient text." And so Lao-tzu's book was called the *Tao-te-ching,* the *Book of Tao and Te.*

In addition to its two parts, it was also divided into separate verses. But, as with other ancient texts, the punctuation and enumeration of passages were left up to the reader. About the same time that Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote his biography of Lao-tzu and people started calling the book the *Taoteching,* Yen Tsun produced a commentary in the first century B.C. that divided the text into seventy-two verses. A century earlier, or a couple of centuries later, no one knows which, Ho-shang Kung divided the same basic text into eighty-one verses. And a thousand years later, Wu Ch'eng tried a sixty-eight-verse division. But the system that has persisted through the centuries has been that of Ho-shang Kung.

The text itself has seen dozens of editions containing anywhere from five to six thousand characters. The numerical discrepancy is not as significant as it might seem, as it is largely the result of adding certain grammatical particles for clarity or omitting them for brevity. The greatest difference among editions centers not on the number of characters but on the rendering of certain phrases and the presence or absence of certain lines.

MAWANGTUI TEXT A. Written on silk shortly before 206 B.C., the text here shows verse 1 following verse 79, an arrangement unique to the Mawangtui texts. Photo by Steven R. Johnson.

Over the centuries, several emperors have even taken it upon themselves to resolve disputes concerning the choice among these variants. And the creation of standard editions resulted from their efforts. However, the standard editions were still open to revision, and every student seeking to understand the *Taoteching* repeats the process of choosing among variants.

In this regard, *Taoteching* studies were blessed in late 1973 with the discovery of two copies of the text in an ancient tomb. The tomb was located in the village of Mawangtui, a suburb of Changsha, the provincial capital of Hunan, and was sealed in 168 B.C. Despite the lapse of over 2,100 years, the copies, both written on silk, were in remarkably good condition.

Kao Chih-hsi, who supervised their removal and who directed the Mawangtui Museum for many years, attributes their preservation to layers of clay and charcoal that covered the tomb. At least this is his official explanation. In private, he says their preservation might have also been due to the presence of an unknown gas created by the decomposition of certain substances inside the tomb. He tried to take a sample of the gas, but the discovery was made in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, and he spent two days peddling his bicycle around Changsha before he found anyone who would loan him the necessary equipment. By then the gas was gone.

The books, though, made up for his disappointment. Along with the *Taoteching,* there were several hitherto unknown commentaries on the *Yiching* as well as a number of lost texts attributed to the Yellow Emperor. The Chinese Academy of Sciences immediately convened a committee of scholars to examine these texts and decipher illegible sections.

In the years since their discovery, the two Mawangtui copies of the *Taoteching* have contributed greatly to the elucidation of a number of difficult and previously misunderstood passages. Without them, I would have been forced to choose among unsatisfactory variants on too many occasions. Still, the Mawangtui texts contain numerous omissions and errors and need to be used with great care.

Fortunately, we have another text that dates from the same period. Like the Mawangtui texts, it was discovered in a tomb that was sealed shortly after 200 B.C. This tomb was located near the Grand Canal town of Hsuchou and was opened in A.D. 574. Not long afterward, the court astrologer, Fu Yi, published an edition of the copy of the *Taoteching* found inside.

In addition to the Mawangtui and Fuyi texts, we also have more than sixty copies that were found shortly after 1900 in the Silk Road oasis of Tunhuang. Most of these date from the eighth and ninth centuries. However, one of them

was written by a man named Suo Tan in A.D. 270, giving us yet another early handwritten edition to consider.

We also have a copy of the *Taoteching* written by the great fourth-century calligrapher Wang Hsi-chih, as well as a dozen or so steles on which various emperors had the text carved. Finally, we have the text as it appears in such early commentaries as those of Yen Tsun, Ho-shang Kung, and Wang Pi, not to mention numerous passages quoted in the ancient works of Mo-tzu, Wen-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Lieh-tzu, Han Fei, Huai-nan-tzu, and others.

In undertaking this translation, I have consulted nearly all of these editions and have produced a new recension incorporating my choices among the different readings. For the benefit of those able to read Chinese, I have included the resulting text with my translation. I have also added a number of commentaries.

Over the centuries, some of China's greatest thinkers have devoted themselves to explaining the *Taoteching,* and no Chinese would consider reading the text without the help of at least one of these line-by-line or verse-by-verse explanations. When I first decided to translate the *Taoteching,* it occurred to me that Western readers are at a great disadvantage without the help of such materials. To remedy this, I have collected several dozen of the better-known commentaries, along with a few that are more obscure. And from these I have selected passages that provide important background information or insights.

Among the commentaries consulted, the majority of my selections come from a group of eleven men and one woman. In order of frequency of appearance, they include Su Ch'e, Ho-shang Kung, Wu Ch'eng, Wang Pi, Te-ch'ing, Sung Ch'ang-hsing, Li Hsi-chai, Lu Hui-ch'ing, Wang P'ang, Ch'eng Hsuan-ying, the Taoist nun Ts'ao Tao-ch'ung, and Wang An-shih. For the dates and a minimal amount of biographical information on these and other commentators, readers are directed to the glossary at the back of the book.

Readers will notice that I have restricted the comments to what could fit on facing pages. The reason for this is that I envisioned this book as a conversation between Lao-tzu and a group of people who have thought deeply about his text. And I wanted to have everyone, including the reader, in the same room, rather than in adjoining suites.

I have also added a few remarks of my own, though I have usually limited these to textual issues. In this regard, I have tried to restrict myself to those lines where my choice among variants may have resulted in a departure from other translations that readers might have in their possession. The *Taoteching* is, after all, one of the most translated books in the world, exceeded in this regard only by the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita.

The text was first translated into a Western language by the Jesuit missionary Joseph de Grammont, who rendered it into Latin shortly before 1788. Since then, more than a hundred translations have been published in Western languages alone (and no doubt hundreds more distributed privately among friends). Thus, readers could not be blamed for wondering if there isn't something inherent in the text that infects Westerners who know Chinese, and even those who don't, with the thought that the world needs yet another translation, especially one that gets it right.

My own attempt to add to this ever-growing number dates back nearly twenty-five years to when I attended a course in Taiwan given by John C.H. Wu. Professor Wu had himself produced an excellent English translation of the *Taoteching,* and he offered a course on the subject to graduate students in the philosophy department of the College of Chinese Culture, which I was attending between stays at Buddhist monasteries.

Once a week, six of us filed past the guards at the stately Chungshanlou on Yangmingshan, where the government held its most important meetings and where Professor Wu lived in a bungalow provided to him in recognition of his long and distinguished service to the country. In addition to translating the *Taoteching*, Professor Wu also translated the New Testament, drafted his country's constitution, and served as China's ambassador to the Vatican and its chief representative to the Hague.

One afternoon every week, we sipped tea, ate his wife's cookies, and discussed a verse or two of Lao-tzu's text. Between classes, I tried translating the odd line in the margins of Professor Wu's bilingual edition, but I did not get far. The course lasted only one semester, after which I moved to a Buddhist monastery in the hills south of Taipei and put aside Lao-tzu's text in favor of Buddhist sutras and poetry. But ever since then, I have been waiting for an opportunity to dust off this thinnest of ancient texts and resume my earlier attempt at translation.

The opportunity finally presented itself in 1993, when I returned to America after more than twenty years in Taiwan and Hong Kong. One day in the early seventies, when I was attending graduate school at Columbia University, Professor Bielenstein quoted W.A.C.H. Dobson, who said it was time for a Sinologist to retire when he announced he was working on a new translation of the *Taoteching.* Having joined the ranks of those who spend their days at home, I figured I now qualified. Dobson's remarks, I suspect, were intended more as friendly criticism of the presumption that translating the *Taoteching* entails. Though relatively brief, it's a difficult text. But it's also a transparent one.

For the past two years, ever since I began working on my own presumptive addition to the world's *Taoteching* supply, one image that has repeatedly come to mind is skating on a newly frozen lake near my home in Idaho when I was a boy. Sometimes the ice was so clear, I felt like I was skating across the night sky. And the only sounds I could hear were the cracks that echoed through the dark, transparent depths. I thought if the ice ever gave way I would find myself on the other side of the universe. And I carried ice picks just in case I had to pull myself out. The ice never broke. But I've been hearing those cracks again.

Red Pine
First Quarter, Last Moon, Year of the Pig
Port Townsend, Washington

LAO-TZU'S TAOTECHING

1

道可道。非恆道。名可名。非恆名。
無名天地之始。有名萬物之母。
故恆無欲以觀其眇。恆有欲以觀其徼。
此兩者同。出而異名。同謂之玄。
玄之又玄。眾眇之門。

The way that becomes a way
is not the Immortal Way
the name that becomes a name
is not the Immortal Name
no-name is the maiden of Heaven and Earth
name is the mother of all things
thus in innocence we see the beginning
in passion we see the end
two different names
for one and the same
the one we call dark
the dark beyond dark
the door to all beginnings

TU ER-WEI says, "*Tao* originally meant 'moon.' The *Yiching* [see hexagrams 42 and 52] stresses the bright moon, while Lao-tzu stresses the dark moon" (*Lao-tzu-te yueh-shen tsung-chiao*, pp. ii–iii).

CONFUCIUS says, "The Tao is what we can never leave. What we can leave isn't the Tao" (*Chungyung:* 1).

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "What we call a way is a moral or political code, while the Immortal Way takes care of the spirit without effort and brings peace to the world without struggle. It conceals its light and hides its tracks and can't be called a way. As for the Immortal Name, it's like a pearl inside an oyster, a piece of jade inside a rock: shiny on the inside, dull on the outside."

CH'ENG CHU says, "Sages don't reveal the Way because they keep it secret, but because it can't be revealed. Thus their words are like footsteps that leave no tracks."

LI HSI-CHAI says, "Things change but not the Tao. The Tao is immortal. It arrives without moving and comes without being called."

SU CH'E says, "The ways of kindness and justice change but not the way of the Tao.

No-name is its body. Name is its function. Sages embody the Tao and use it in the world. But while entering the myriad states of being, they remain in nonbeing."

WANG PI says, "From the infinitesimal all things develop. From nothing all things are born. When we are free of desire, we can see the infinitesimal where things begin. When we are subject to desire, we can see where things end. 'Two' refers to 'maiden' and 'mother.'"

TS'AO TAO-CH'UNG says, "'Two' refers to 'innocence' and 'passion,' or in other words, stillness and movement. Stillness corresponds to nonexistence. Movement corresponds to existence. Provisionally different, they are ultimately the same. Both meet in darkness."

THE *SHUOWEN* says, "*Hsuan* [dark] means 'black with a dot of red in it.'" This is how the darker half of the *yin-yang* symbol was traditionally represented. In Shensi province, where the *Taoteching* was first written, doors were, until recently, painted black with a thin line of red trim. And every road begins with a door.

TE-CH'ING says, "Lao-tzu's philosophy is all here. The remaining five thousand words only expand on this first verse."

During Lao-tzu's day, philosophers were concerned with the correspondence, or lack of it, between name and reality. The things we distinguish as real change, while their names do not. How then can reality be known through names? In lines two and four, I've used the Mawangtui *heng* (immortal) over the standard *ch'ang* (eternal), which was introduced to avoid an emperor's personal name. *Heng* also means "crescent moon," a not accidental usage in light of Lao-tzu's emphasis on lunar images when talking about the Tao. Around 1070 A.D. Ssu-ma Kuang and Wang An-shih punctuated lines five through eight in a way that made their subject *wu* (nonbeing) and *yu* (being). (Nonbeing is the name of the maiden of Heaven and Earth / being is the name of the mother of all things, and so on.) However, the grammatical particles in the Mawangtui texts make such a reading impossible. In line five, *shih* normally means "beginning." But China's earliest dictionary, the *Shuowen*, says, "*Shih* means 'a virgin.'" Ma Hsu-lun suggests *shih* in this case might also be a loan word for the nearly identical *t'ai*. While *t'ai* normally means "fetus," the *Shuowen* says it means "a woman in her third month of pregnancy." Note, too, that a woman did not receive her public name until after marriage. In lines seven and thirteen, most editions have *miao* (mysterious). But according to Pi Yuan, "In ancient times there was no *miao* [mysterious], only *miao* [small/beginning]," which is what we find in the Mawangtui texts. This verse is not present in the Kuotien texts.

2

天下皆知美。之為美。斯惡已。皆知善。之為善。斯不善已。有無相生。難易相成。長短相形。高下相盈。音聲相和。先後相隨。是以聖人處無為之事。行不言之教。萬物作焉而不辭。為而不恃。功成而不居。夫唯不居。是以不去。

All the world knows beauty
but if that becomes beautiful
this becomes ugly
all the world knows good
but if that becomes good
this becomes bad
have and have not create each other
hard and easy produce each other
long and short shape each other
high and low complete each other
note and noise accompany each other
first and last follow each other
sages therefore perform effortless deeds
and teach wordless lessons
they don't look after all the things that arise
or depend on them as they develop
or claim them when they reach perfection
and because they don't claim them
they are never without them

LU HSI-SHENG says, "What we call beautiful or ugly depends on our feelings. Nothing is necessarily beautiful or ugly until feelings make it so. But while feelings differ, they all come from our nature, and we all have the same nature. Hence, sages transform their feelings and return to their nature and thus become one again."

WU CH'ENG says, "The existence of things, the difficulty of affairs, the size of forms, the magnitude of power, the pitch and clarity of sound, the sequence of position, all involve contrasting pairs. When one is present, both are present. When one is absent, both are absent."

LU HUI-CH'ING says, "These six pairs all depend on time and occasion. None of them is eternal. Sages, however, act according to the Immortal Tao. Hence, they act without effort. And because they teach according to the Immortal Name, they teach without words. Beautiful and ugly, good and bad don't enter their minds."

WANG WU-CHIU says, "Sages are not interested in deeds or words. They simply follow the natural pattern of things. Things rise, develop, and reach perfection. This is their order."

WANG AN-SHIH says, "Sages create but do not possess what they create. They act but do not depend on what they do. They succeed but do not claim success. These all result from selflessness. Because sages are selfless, they do not lose themselves. Because they do not lose themselves, they do not lose others."

SU CH'E says, "Losing something is the result of possessing something. How can people lose what they don't possess?"

LI HSI-CHAI says, "Lao-tzu's 5,000-word text clarifies what is mysterious as well as what is obvious. It can be used to attain the Tao, to order a country, or to cultivate the body."

HO-SHANG KUNG titles this verse: "Cultivating the Body."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "Those who practice the Way put an end to distinctions, get rid of name and form, and make of themselves a home for the Way and Virtue."

I have used the wording of the Mawangtui and Kuotien texts for lines seven through twelve but have omitted the Mawangtui insertion of *heng* (is endless) after line twelve. In line fifteen, I have followed the Kuotien wording: *ssu* (look after) in place of the usual *shih* (begin). Between lines fifteen and sixteen, neither the Mawangtui nor Kuotien copies include the line *sheng-er-pu-yu,* "or possess what they beget," which appears in the Wangpi and Fuyi editions and which was apparently interpolated from a similar sequence that appears in verse 51. The last two lines also appear in verse 77.

3

不上賢。使民不爭。不貴難得之貨。
使民不為盜。不見可欲。使民不亂。
是以聖人之治。虛其心。實其腹。
弱其志。強其骨。恆使民無知無欲。
使夫知者不敢為。則無不治。

Bestowing no honors
keeps people from fighting
prizing no treasures
keeps people from stealing
displaying no attractions
keeps people from making trouble
thus the rule of the sage
empties the mind
but fills the stomach
weakens the will
but strengthens the bones
by keeping the people from knowing or wanting
and those who know from daring to act
the sage governs them all

SU CH'E says, "Bestowing honors embarrasses those who don't receive them to the point where they fight for them. Prizing treasures pains those who don't possess them to the point where they steal them. Displaying attractions distresses those who don't enjoy them to the point where they cause trouble. If people aren't shown these things, they won't know what to want and will cease wanting."

WANG CHEN says, "Sages empty the mind of reasoning and delusion, they fill the stomach with loyalty and honesty, they weaken the will with humility and compliance, and they strengthen the bones with what people already have within themselves."

WANG PI says, "Bones don't know how to make trouble. It's the will that creates disorder. When the mind is empty, the will is weak."

WANG P'ANG says, "An empty mind means no distinctions. A full stomach means no desires. A weak will means no external plans. Strong bones mean standing on one's own and remaining unmoved by outside forces. By bestowing

no honors, sages keep people from knowing. Prizing no treasures, they keep people from wanting."

LU NUNG-SHIH says, "The mind knows and chooses, while the stomach doesn't know but simply contains. The will wants and moves, while bones don't want but simply stand there. Sages empty what knows and fill what doesn't know. They weaken what wants and strengthen what doesn't want."

YEN TSUN says, "They empty their mind and calm their breath. They concentrate their essence and strengthen their spirit."

HUANG YUAN-CHI says, "Sages purify their ears and eyes, put an end to dissipation and selfishness, embrace the one, and empty their mind. An empty mind forms the basis for transmuting cinnabar by enabling us to use our *yang* breath to transform our *yin* essence. A full stomach represents our final form, in which our *yang* breath gradually and completely replaces our *yin* essence."

WEI YUAN says, "The reason the world is in disorder is because of action. Action comes from desire. And desire comes from knowledge. Sages don't talk about things that can be known or display things that can be desired. This is how they bring order to the world."

LIU CHING says, "This verse describes how sages cultivate themselves in order to transform others."

Between the penultimate and final lines, the Fuyi edition and Tunhuang copy s.477 insert *wei-wu-wei,* "they act by not acting," while Mawangtui B has *wu-wei-er-yi,* "by simply not acting." Commentators who accept such versions often quote Confucius: "To govern without effort, that was Shun. And what did he do? He simply faced south and bowed" (*Lunyu*: 15.4). But such an emendation, however Taoist, is superfluous here, and was probably interpolated from elsewhere in the text. This verse is absent in the Kuotien texts.

4

道沖。而用之。又不盈。淵兮。
似萬物之宗。挫其銳。解其紛。
和其光。同其塵。湛兮。似或存。
吾不知其誰之子。象帝之先。

The Tao is so empty
those who use it
never become full again
and so deep
as if it were the ancestor of us all
it dulls our edges
unties our tangles
softens our light
and merges our dust
it's so clear
as if it were present
I wonder whose child it is
it seems it was here before Ti

WANG AN-SHIH says, "The Tao possesses form and function. Its form is the original breath that doesn't move. Its function is the empty breath that alternates between Heaven and Earth."

WU CH'ENG says, "'Empty' means 'empty like a bowl.' The Tao is essentially empty, and people who use it should be empty, too. To be full is contrary to the Tao. 'Deep' means 'what cannot be measured.' 'Ancestor' means 'one who unites a lineage,' just as the Tao unites all things. 'As if' suggests a reluctance to compare."

LI HSI-CHAI says, "The ancient masters of the Way had no ambition. Hence, they dulled their edges and did not insist on anything. They had no fear. Hence, they untied every tangle and avoided nothing. They did not care about beauty. Hence, they softened their light and forgot about themselves. They did not hate ugliness. Hence, they merged with the dust and did not abandon others."

WEI YUAN says, "By taking advantage of edges, we create conflicts with others. By shining bright lights, we illuminate their dust. Grinding down edges makes conflicts disappear. Dimming the light merges dust with dust and with darkness."

HUANG YUAN-CHI says, "A person who can adjust their light to that of the crowd and merge with the dust of the world is like a magic mushroom among ordinary plants. You can't see it, but it makes everything smell better."

HSI T'UNG says, "The Tao is invisible. Hence, Lao-tzu calls it 'clear.'"

THE *SHUOWEN* says, "*Chan* [clear] means 'unseen.'"

LU NUNG-SHIH says, "'Clear' describes what is deep, what seems to be present and yet not present, what seems to be not-present and yet not not-present."

LIU CHING says, "If it's empty, it's deep. If it's deep, it's clear. The Tao comes from nothing. Hence, the Tao is the child of nothing."

LI YUEH says, "Ti is the Lord of Creation. All of creation comes after Ti, except the Tao, which comes before it. But the nature of the Tao is to yield. Hence, Lao-tzu does not insist it came before. Thus, he says, 'it seems.'"

JEN CHI-YU says, "In ancient times no one denied the existence of Ti, and no one called his supremacy into doubt. Lao-tzu, however, says the Tao is 'the ancestor of us all,' which presumably included Ti as well" (*Lao-tzu che-hsueh t'ao-lun-chi*, p. 34).

For such an enigmatic verse, there are surprisingly few variants. In line three, I have gone along with the Fuyi edition, Tunhuang copy P.2584, and Mawangtui B in reading *yu-pu-ying,* "again not full," in place of *huo-pu-ying,* "seems not full." Because of problems resulting from their interpretation of the first four lines, some commentators think lines six through eight don't belong here. They do, in fact, also occur in verse 56, and could have been interpolated. However, I've read them as an explanation of the Tao's ancestral status, which makes kin of us all. This verse is absent in the Kuotien texts.

5

天地不仁。以萬物為芻狗。
聖人不仁。以百姓為芻狗。
天地之間。其猶橐籥乎。
虛而不屈。動而愈出。
多言數窮。不如守中。

Heaven and Earth are heartless
treating creatures like straw dogs
sages are heartless too
they treat people like straw dogs
between Heaven and Earth
how like a bellows
empty but inexhaustible
each stroke produces more
talking only wastes it
better to protect what's inside

HU SHIH says, "Lao-tzu's statement that Heaven and Earth are heartless undercuts the ancient belief that Heaven and Humankind were of the same lineage and thereby created the basis for natural philosophy" (*Chung-kuo-che-hsueh-shih ta-kang*, p. 56).

SU CH'E says, "Heaven and Earth aren't partial. They don't kill living things out of cruelty or give them birth out of kindness. We do the same when we make straw dogs to use in sacrifices. We dress them up and put them on the altar, but not because we love them. And when the ceremony is over, we throw them into the street, but not because we hate them. This is how sages treat the people."

HUAI-NAN-TZU says, "When we make straw dogs or clay dragons, we paint them yellow and blue, decorate them with brocade, and tie red ribbons around them. The shaman puts on his black robe, and the lord puts on his ceremonial hat to usher them in and to see them off. But once they've been used, they're nothing but clay and straw." A similar description appears in *Chuangtzu:* 14.4.

WU CH'ENG says, "Straw dogs were used in praying for rain, and these particular bellows were used in metallurgy."

WANG P'ANG says, "A bellows is empty so that it can respond. Something moves, and it responds. It responds but retains nothing. Like Heaven and Earth in regard to the ten thousand things or sages in regard to the people, it responds with what fits. It isn't tied to the present or attached to the past."

WANG AN-SHIH says, "The Tao has no substance or dimension, yet it works the breath of emptiness between Heaven and Earth and gives birth to the ten thousand things."

WANG TAO says, "The Tao cannot be talked about, yet we dismiss it as heartless. It cannot be named, yet we liken it to a bellows. Those who understand get the meaning and forget the words. Those who don't understand fail to see the truth and chatter away in vain."

HSIN TU-TZU says, "When the main path has many side trails, sheep lose their way. When learning leads in many directions, students waste their lives in study" (*Liehtzu:* 8.25).

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "Whenever the mouth opens and the tongue moves, disaster is close behind. Better to guard your inner virtue, nurture your vital essence, protect your spirit, treasure your breath, and avoid talking too much."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "If our mouth doesn't talk too much, our spirit stays in our heart. If our ears don't hear too much, our essence stays in our genitals. In the course of time, essence becomes breath, breath becomes spirit, and spirit returns to emptiness."

Cultivating the heartless center between Heaven and Earth, sages delight in the endless creation of something out of nothing without becoming attached to anything. The Chinese phrase *pu-jen* (no heart) not only means "unkind" but also refers to any fruit that has no seed or kernel in its center. The straw dogs used in ceremonies in ancient China were much like Christmas trees in the West — used for a day, a week, a month, but not for long. The only textual variation of note involves the appearance in both Mawangtui texts of *wen* (hear) in place of *yen* (talk) in line nine. But since *wen* (hear) was often used for *wen* (ask), the meaning would not be significantly different whichever reading one prefers. I've retained the standard version. Lines five through eight are also present in the Kuotien texts.

6

谷神不死。是謂玄牝。
玄牝之門。是謂天地之根。
綿綿兮若存。用之不勤。

The valley spirit that doesn't die
we call the dark womb
the dark womb's mouth
we call the source of Heaven and Earth
as elusive as gossamer silk
and yet it can't be exhausted

THE *SHANHAICHING* says, "The Valley Spirit of the Morning Light is a black and yellow, eight-footed, eight-tailed, eight-headed animal with a human face" (9). The *Shanhaiching*'s "valley spirit" is the moon, which runs ahead of the sun during the last eight days of its thirty-day cycle, lags behind during the first eight days, and faces the sun during its eight days of glory. For the remaining days of the month, it's too close to the sun to be visible. Like many other cultures, the ancient Chinese viewed the moon as the embodiment of the female element of creation.

WANG PI says, "The valley is what is in the middle, what contains nothing, no form, no shadow, no obstruction. It occupies the lowest point, remains motionless, and does not decay. All things depend on it for their development, but no one sees its shape."

YEN FU says, "Because it is empty, we call it a 'valley.' Because there is no limit to its responsiveness, we call it a 'spirit.' Because it is inexhaustible, we say 'it doesn't die.' These three are the virtues of the Tao."

SU CH'E says, "A valley is empty but has form. A valley spirit is empty but has no form. What is empty and has no form is not alive. So how can it die? 'Valley spirit' refers to its virtue. 'Dark womb' refers to its capacity. This womb gives birth to the ten thousand things, and we call it 'dark' because we see it give birth but not how it gives birth."

HSUEH HUI says, "The words Lao-tzu chooses are often determined by the demands of rhyme and should not be restricted to their primary meaning. Thus, *p'in* [female animal] can also be read *p'in* [womb]."

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "The valley is what nourishes. Those able to nourish their spirit do not die. 'Spirit' means the spirits of the five organs: the gall bladder, the heart, the kidneys, and the spleen. When these five are injured, the five spirits leave. 'Dark' refers to Heaven. In a person, this means the nose, which links us with Heaven. 'Womb' refers to Earth. In a person, this means the mouth, which links us with Earth. The breath that passes through our nose and mouth should be finer than gossamer silk and barely noticeable, as if it weren't actually present. It should be relaxed and never strained or exhausted."

WU CH'ENG says, "The empty valley is where spirits dwell, where breath isn't exhausted. Who relaxes their breath increases their vitality. Who strains their breath soon expires."

TE-CH'ING says, "Purposeful action leads to exhaustion. The Tao is empty and acts without purpose. Hence, it can't be exhausted."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "The valley spirit, the dark womb, the source of Heaven and Earth all act without acting. That we don't see them doesn't mean they don't exist."

LIU CHING says, "It's like the silk of a silkworm or the web of a spider: hard to distinguish and hard to grab. But then, it isn't Humankind who uses it. Only the spirit can use it."

TU TAO-CHIEN says, "This verse also appears in *Liehtzu:* 1.1, where it is attributed to the Yellow Emperor instead of Lao-tzu. Lao-tzu frequently incorporates passages from ancient texts. We see their traces in 'thus the sage proclaims' or 'hence the ancients say.' Thus Confucius said, 'I don't create. I only relate' [*Lunyu:* 7.1]".

LIEH-TZU says, "What creates life is not itself alive" (*Liehtzu:* 1.1).

This is one of the few verses for which no significant textual variations exist. It is not present in the Kuotien texts.

7

天長地久。天地之所以能長且久者。
以其不自生。故能長生。
是以聖人退其身。而身先。
外其身。而身存。不以其無私邪。
故能成其私。

Heaven is eternal and Earth is immortal
the reason they're eternal and immortal
is because they don't live for themselves
hence they can live forever
sages therefore pull themselves back
and end up in front
put themselves outside
and end up safe
is it not because of their selflessness
whatever they seek they find

CHU CH'IEN-CHIH says, "The line 'Heaven is eternal and Earth is immortal' was apparently an old saying, which Lao-tzu quotes in order to explain its significance."

CHIANG SSU-CH'I says, "'Heaven' refers to the point between the eyebrows. 'Earth' refers to the point just below the navel."

LU HUI-CH'ING says, "Heaven stands for the movement of time. Earth represents the transformation of form. Heaven and Earth have their origin in the dark womb. And the essence of the dark womb is the valley spirit that doesn't die. Because it doesn't die, it isn't born. Only what isn't born can give birth to the living. And because it doesn't give birth to itself, it can live forever."

TS'AO TAO-CH'UNG says, "What is not alive is the basis for life. By equating life and death, we are no longer burdened by life and death. By abandoning bodily form, we are no longer hindered by bodily form."

WU CH'ENG says, "To pull oneself back means to be humble and not to try to be in front of others. To put oneself outside means to be content and not to try to add to one's life. To find what one seeks means to be in front and safe."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "Heaven and Earth help creatures fulfill their needs by not having any needs of their own. Can sages do otherwise? By following the Way of Heaven and Earth, sages are revered by all and harmed by none. Hence, they, too, live long."

JEN FA-JUNG says, "Sages do not purposely seek long life but achieve it through selflessness."

CH'ENG CHU says, "Heaven, Earth, and Humankind share the same origin. Why doesn't Humankind share their immortality? Because Heaven and Earth are not aware they are Heaven and Earth. Only Humankind is self-aware. And being self-aware, there is nothing humans won't do to stay alive. But the more they care for their life, the more pained their life becomes. The more they nourish their body, the sicker their body becomes. People who have not thought this out say the followers of Lao-tzu are afraid of death and only interested in immortality. But this is getting it backward."

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "The reason Heaven and Earth alone are eternal and immortal is because they are content and give without expecting a reward, unlike Humankind who never stops chasing profit and fighting over possessions."

WANG PI says, "Those who live for themselves fight with others. Those who don't live for themselves are the refuge of others."

SU CH'E says, "If Heaven and Earth fought with others over life, they would be the same as others. And if sages fought with others over profit, they would be the same as them. Would that not be a great shame?"

WANG P'ANG says, "Although sages are sages, they look the same as others. But because they embody the Way of Heaven and don't fight, they alone differ from everyone else. Sages are selfless because they no longer have a self."

LU TUNG-PIN says, "The only thing sages seek is Virtue."

Another verse with no major textual variations. It is also absent from the Kuo-tien texts.

8

上善若水。水善利萬物。而不爭。
處眾人之所惡。故幾於道。居善地。
心善淵。與善仁。言善信。政善治。
事善能。動善時。夫唯不爭。故無尤。

The best are like water
bringing help to all
without competing
choosing what others avoid
they thus approach the Tao
dwelling with earth
thinking with depth
helping with kindness
speaking with honesty
governing with peace
working with skill
and moving with time
and because they don't compete
they aren't maligned

WU CH'ENG says, "Among those who follow the Tao, the best are like water: content to be lower and, thus, free of blame. Most people hate being lower and compete to be higher. But when people compete, someone is maligned."

LI HUNG-FU says, "How do we know the best don't compete? Everyone else chooses nobility. They alone choose humility. Everyone else chooses the pure. They alone choose the base. What they choose is what everyone else hates. Who is going to compete with them?"

KUAN-TZU says, "Water is the source of creation, the ancestor of all living things. It's the bloodstream of Earth" (*Kuantzu:* 39).

HUANG YUAN-CHI says, "Mencius says, 'People cannot live without water and fire' [*Mencius:* 7A.23]. In terms of cultivation, when fire warms water, 'pure yang' arises. When water cools fire, 'sweet dew' appears."

WANG P'ANG says, "Water is the chief of the five elements [see verse 12]. It comes from space, which is not that far from the Tao."

WANG PI says, "The Tao does not exist, but water does. Hence, it only approaches the Tao."

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "The best people have a nature like that of water. They're like mist or dew in the sky, like a stream or a spring on land. Most people hate moist or muddy places, places where water alone dwells. The nature of water is like the Tao: empty, clear, and deep. As water empties, it gives life to others. It reflects without becoming impure, and there is nothing it cannot wash clean. Water can take any shape, and it is never out of touch with the seasons. How could anyone malign something with such qualities as this?"

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "Those who free themselves from care stay low and avoid heights. Those whose minds are empty can plumb the depths. Those who help others without expecting any reward are truly kind. Those whose mouths agree with their minds speak the truth. Those who make demands of themselves as well as others establish peace. Those who can change as conditions change work with skill. Those who act when it is time to act and rest when it is time to rest move with time."

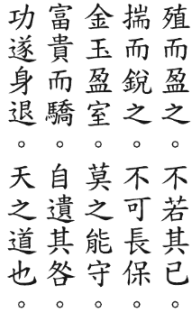
LI JUNG says, "Water has no purpose of its own. Those who can remain empty and not compete with others follow the natural Way."

YEN TSUN says, "If a ruler embodies this and uses this in his government, his virtue is most wonderful. How could he be maligned?"

HAN FEI says, "If a drowning man drinks it, he dies. If a thirsty man drinks it, he lives."

Given Lao-tzu's usual disdain for social virtues, some commentators have trouble accepting the standard reading of *jen* (kindness) in line eight. For those in search of an alternative, the Fuyi and Chinglung editions have *jen* (others), while Mawangtui B has *t'ien* (heaven), and Mawangtui A compresses lines eight and nine: "helping with honesty." This in not present in the Kuotien texts, yet it remains one of the *Taoteching*'s most quoted verses.

9



Instead of pouring in more
better stop while you can
making it sharper
won't help it last longer
rooms full of treasure
can never be safe
the vanity of success
invites its own failure
when your work is done retire
this is the Way of Heaven

THE *HOUHANSHU* says, "What Lao-tzu warns against is 'pouring in more'" (see the *Houhanshu*'s Lao-tzu biography).

HSUN-TZU says, "In the ancestral hall of Duke Huan, Confucius reports watching an attendant pour water into a container that hung at an angle. As the water level approached the midpoint, the container became upright. But when the attendant went beyond the midpoint, it tipped over, the water poured out, and only after it was empty did it resume its former position. Seeing this, Confucius sighed, 'Alas! Whatever becomes full becomes empty'" (*Hsuntzu:* 28).

LU TUNG-PIN says, "This verse is about the basics of cultivation. These are the obstacles when you first enter the gate."

LIU SHIH-LI says, "Since fullness always leads to emptiness, avoid satisfaction. Since sharpness always leads to dullness, avoid zeal. Since gold and jade always lead to worry, avoid greed. Since wealth and honor encourage excess, avoid pride. Since success and fame bring danger, know when to stop and where lies the mean. You don't have to live in the mountains and forests or cut yourself off from human affairs to enter the Way. Success and fame, wealth and honor are all encouragements to practice."

YEN TSUN says, "To succeed without being vain is easy to say but hard to practice. When success is combined with pride, it's like lighting a torch. The brighter it burns, the quicker it burns out."

WANG CHEN says, "To retire doesn't mean to abdicate your position. Rather, when your task is done, treat it as though it were nothing."

SSU-MA CH'IEN says, "When Confucius asked about the ceremonies of the ancients, Lao-tzu said, 'I have heard that the clever merchant hides his wealth so his store looks empty and that the superior man acts dumb to avoid calling attention to himself. I advise you to get rid of your excessive pride and ambition. They won't do you any good. This is all I have to say to you'" (*Shihchi:* 63).

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "Excessive wealth and desire wearies and harms the spirit. The rich should help the poor, and the powerful should aid the oppressed. If, instead, they flaunt their riches and power, they are sure to suffer disaster. Once the sun reaches the zenith, it descends. Once the moon becomes full, it wanes. Creatures flourish then wither. Joy turns to sorrow. When your work is done, if you do not step down, you will meet with harm. This is the Way of Heaven."

HUANG YUAN-CHI says, "You need a raft to cross a river. But once across, you can forget the raft. You need to study rules to learn how to do something. But once you know how, you can forget the rules."

This recipe for long life has been repeated in every civilized culture, and yet it has forever fallen on deaf ears. In the first line, the Kuotien texts have *chih* (amass) in place of the standard *ch'ih* (hold). Both Mawangtui texts have a similar character, also pronounced *chih*, which scholars consider to be a substitute for either *chih* (amass) or *ch'ih* (hold). I've sided with the Kuotien texts. Either way, the meaning amounts to the same thing. In line three, the Kuotien texts have *tuan-er-ch'un-chih,* "when floodwaters rise," which is clearly an anomaly, as it does not encourage a change in behavior but merely reflects a natural phenomenon.

10

載營魄抱一能無離。
專氣致柔能嬰兒。滌除玄鑒能如疵。
愛民治國能無為。天門開闔能為雌。
明白四達能無知。生之畜之。
生而不有。長而不宰。是謂玄德。

Can you keep your crescent soul from wandering
can you make your breath as soft as a baby's
can you wipe your dark mirror free of dust
can you serve and govern without effort
can you be the female at Heaven's Gate
can you light the world without knowledge
can you give birth and nurture
but give birth without possessing
raise without controlling
this is Dark Virtue

The Chinese say that the *hun,* or bright, ethereal, *yang* soul, governs the upper body and the *p'o,* or dark, earthly, *yin* soul, concerns itself with the lower body. Here, Lao-tzu mentions only the darker soul. But the word *p'o* also refers to the dark of the moon, and the opening phrase can also be read as referring to the first day of the new moon. Either way, dark of the soul or dark of the moon, Taoist commentators say the first line refers to the protection of our vital essence, of which semen and vaginal fluid, sweat and saliva are the most common examples, and the depletion of which injures the health and leads to early death.

HSUAN-TSUNG says, "The first transformation of life is called *p'o.* When the *p'o* becomes active and bright, it's called *hun.*"

WANG P'ANG says, "Life requires three things: vital essence, breath, and spirit."

CHIAO HUNG says, "The mind knows right and wrong. Breath makes no distinction. If we concentrate our breath and don't let the mind interfere with it, it remains soft and pure. Who else but a child can do this?"

CHUANG-TZU says, "The sage's mind is so still, it can mirror Heaven and Earth and reflect the ten thousand things" (*Chuangtzu:* 13.1).

WU CH'ENG says, "Our spirit dwells in our eyes. When the eyes see something, the spirit chases it. When we close our eyes and look within, everything is dark. But within the dark, we still see something. There is still dust. Only by putting an end to delusions can we get rid of the dust."

WANG AN-SHIH says, "The best way to serve is by not serving. The best way to govern is by not governing. Hence, Lao-tzu says, 'without effort.' Those who act without effort make use of the efforts of others. As for Heaven's Gate, this is the gate through which all creatures enter and leave. When it is open, it is active. When it is closed, it is still. Activity and stillness represent the male and the female. Just as stillness overcomes activity, the female overcomes the male." (The images of young women were often carved on either side of the entrance to ancient, subterranean tombs.)

SU CH'E says, "What lights up the world is the mind. There is nothing the mind does not know. And yet no one can know the mind. The mind is one. If someone knew it, there would be two. Going from one to two is the origin of all delusion."

LAO-TZU says, "The Way begets them / Virtue keeps them" (*Taoteching:* 51).

WANG PI says, "If we don't obstruct their source, things come into existence on their own. If we don't suppress their nature, things mature by themselves. Virtue is present, but its owner is unknown. It comes from the mysterious depths. Hence, we call it 'dark.'"

The first line has had numerous interpretations, to which I have added yet another. Most commentators agree that the character *tsai* should be placed at the beginning of this verse, instead of at the end of the previous verse, where it would function as equivalent to a punctuation mark indicating a rhetorical question. *Tsai* normally means "carry," but it can also mean "newly," as in the phrase *tsai-sheng-p'o,* "newly born dark moon/soul," or as Lao-tzu uses it here, *tsai-ying-p'o,* "newly lit dark moon/soul." In lines four and six, a number of editions invert "effort" and "knowledge." I have followed the edition of Ho-shang Kung and the arguments of Lo Chen-yu and Kao Heng in preferring the arrangement here. After line eight, most editions add *wei-er-pu-shih,* "develop without depending," which also appears in a similar sequence in verses 2 and 51 in some editions. I have followed the Mawangtui texts in omitting this line. This verse, which expresses Lao-tzu's yogic regimen more than any other in the *Taoteching*, is absent from the Kuotien texts.

11

卅輻共一轂。當其無。有車之用。
埏埴以為器。當其無。有器之用。
鑿戶牖以為室。當其無。有室之用。
故有之以為利。無之以為用。

Thirty spokes converge on a hub
but it's the emptiness
that makes a wheel work
pots are fashioned from clay
but it's the hollow
that makes a pot work
windows and doors are carved for a house
but it's the spaces
that make a house work
existence makes a thing useful
but nonexistence makes it work

HSUAN-TSUNG says, "Thirty spokes converging on a hub demonstrates that less is the ancestor of more."

HO-SHANG KUNG says, "Ancient carts had thirty spokes in imitation of the lunar number."

LI JUNG says, "It's because the hub is empty that spokes converge on it. Likewise, it's because the minds of sages are empty that the people turn to them for help."

CH'ENG HSUAN-YING says, "A cart, a pot, and a house can hold things because they are empty. How much more those who empty their mind."

WU CH'ENG says, "All of these things are useful. But without an empty place for an axle, a cart can't move. Without a hollow place in the middle, a pot can't hold things. Without spaces for doors and windows, a room can't admit people or light. But these three examples are only metaphors. What keeps our body alive is the existence of breath within us. And it is our empty, nonexistent mind that produces breath."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "In this verse the Great Sage teaches us to understand the source by using what we find at hand. Doors refer to a person's mouth and nose. Windows refer to their ears and eyes."

CHANG TAO-LING says, "When ordinary people see these things, they only think about how they might employ them for their own advantage. When sages see them, they see in them the Tao and are careful in their use."

TE-CH'ING says, "Heaven and Earth have form, and everyone knows that Heaven and Earth are useful. But they don't know that their usefulness depends on the emptiness of the Great Way. Likewise, we all have form and think ourselves useful but remain unaware that our usefulness depends on our empty, shapeless mind. Thus, existence may have its uses, but real usefulness depends on nonexistence. Nonexistence, though, doesn't work by itself. It needs the help of existence."

HUANG YUAN-CHI says, "What is beyond form is the Tao. What has form are tools. Without tools we have no means to apprehend the Tao. And without the Tao there is no place for tools."

HSUEH HUI says, "At the end of this verse, Lao-tzu mentions both existence and nonexistence, but his intent is to use existence to show that nonexistence is more valuable. Everyone knows existence is useful, but no one pays attention to the usefulness of nonexistence."

Lao-tzu's "existence" and "nonexistence" are tantamount to *yang* and *yin*. There is no Kuotien text for this verse, and there are no significant textual variations, other than the omission in line seven of *yi-wei-shih,* "carved for a house," in both Mawangtui texts. Such an omission was, no doubt, a copyist error and suggests that neither text was actually used before it was placed in the tomb in which it was found, or it would have been corrected. Until recently, the people who lived in the middle reaches of the Yellow River watershed, where the *Taoteching* was composed, carved their houses out of the loess hillsides. As long as the ceilings of the rooms were carved in an arch, the compactness of the soil made support beams unnecessary. Thus, the only building materials needed were for doors and windows.

12

五色使人目盲。五音使人耳聾。
五味使人口爽。馳騁田獵使人心發狂。
難得之貨使人行妨。
是以聖人之治。為腹而不為目。
故去彼而取此。

The five colors make our eyes blind
the five tones make our ears deaf
the five flavors make our mouths numb
riding and hunting make our minds wild
hard-to-get goods make us commit crimes
thus the rule of the sages
favors the stomach over the eyes
thus they pick this over that

The early Chinese liked to divide everything into five basic states of existence. They distinguished things as made up of varying amounts of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. And each of these came with its corresponding color: blue, red, black, white, and yellow; its corresponding flavor: salty, bitter, sour, pungent, and sweet; and its corresponding tone: la, sol, mi, re, and do.

YEN TSUN says, "Color is like an awl in the eye. Sound is like a stick in the ear. Flavor is like an ax through the tongue."

TE-CH'ING says, "When the eyes are given free rein in the realm of form, they no longer see what is real. When the ears are given free rein in the realm of sound, they no longer hear what is real. When the tongue is given free rein in the realm of flavor, it no longer tastes what is real. When the mind is given free rein in the realm of thought, it no longer knows what is real. When our actions are given free rein in the realm of possession and profit, we no longer do what is right. Like Chuang-tzu's tapir [*Chuangtzu:* 1.4], sages drink from the river, but only enough to fill their stomachs."

WU CH'ENG says, "Desiring external things harms our bodies. Sages nourish their breath by filling their stomach, not by chasing material objects to please their eyes. Hence, they choose internal reality over external illusion. But the eyes can't help seeing, and the ears can't help hearing, and the mouth can't help tasting, and the mind can't help thinking, and the body can't help acting. They can't stay still. But if we let them move without leaving stillness behind, nothing can harm us. Those who are buried by the dust of the senses or who crave sensory stimulation lose their way. And the main villain in this is the eyes. Thus, the first of Confucius' four warnings concerned vision [*Lunyu:* 12.1: not to look except with propriety], and the first of the Buddha's six sources of delusion was also the eyes."

LI YUEH says, "The eyes are never satisfied. The stomach knows when it is full."

SUNG CH'ANG-HSING says, "The main purpose of cultivation is to oppose the world of the senses. What the world loves, the Taoist hates. What the world wants, the Taoist rejects. Even though color, sound, material goods, wealth, and beauty might benefit a person's body, in the end they harm a person's mind. And once the mind wants, the body suffers. If we can ignore external temptations and be satisfied with the way we are, if we can cultivate our mind and not chase material things, this is the way of long life. All the treasures of the world are no match for this."

HSUAN-TSUNG says, "'Hard-to-get goods' refer to things that we don't possess by nature but that require effort to obtain. When we are not content with our lot and allow ourselves to be ruled by conceit, we turn our backs on Heaven and lose the Way."

CH'ENG HSUAN-YING says, "'That' refers to the blindness and delusion of the eyes. 'This' refers to the fullness and wisdom of the stomach."

I would add that "this" also refers to what is within easy reach, while "that" refers to what can be obtained only with effort. The Mawangtui texts present lines two through five in a different order: 4, 5, 3, 2. However, no other edition follows suit. Until as late as the early twentieth century, vast tracts of land in northern China were set aside for the exclusive use of the nobility and the military for conducting group hunts to practice their riding and archery. In line six, the standard editions do not include *chih-chih,* "the rule of." But it is present in both Mawangtui texts, and I have incorporated this variation in my translation. There is no Kuo-tien text for this verse.