Gateways to China: Taoism, Painting, Poetry & Music

Living in this world is a great dream, Why exert oneself to shorten one's life? That is why I'm rapt with wine all day And lie happily by the front pillars of the hall. Waking up, I look at the courtyard: A single bird is singing among the flowers. Pray tell me, bird, what day is this? –The oriole keeps singing in the spring breeze. Moved by this scene, I wish to sigh, But pour out another cup of wine instead. I sing aloud to wait for the bright moon; My song over, all my feelings are gone.	"Life in the World is but a big dream; I will not spoil it by any labour or care." So saying, I was drunk all day, Lying helpless at the porch in front of my door. When I woke up, I blinked at the garden-lawn; A lonely bird was singing amid the flowers. I asked myself, had the day been Wet or fine? The Spring wind was telling the mango-bird. Moved by his song I soon began to sigh, And as wine was there I filled my own cup. Wildly singing I waited for the moon to rise; When My song was over, all my senses had gone.

Li Po's seeming celebration of a hangover was set to music centuries later by a composer inspired by nature, haunted by his own mortality and grieving over the death of his 4-year-old daughter. Nothing could be more "Western" or European than Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" (The Song of the Earth) despite its Chinese poetry and pentatonic melody lines. One can hardly imagine the amazement Li Po might feel on being told that this tonal and emotional rollercoaster ride was his poem set to music. In all fairness, of course, what Mahler used was not Li Po's poem but an altered version of a German translation of a French translation of his poem. The first translation quoted above is James J. Y. Liu's translation, offered as evidence that the inebriation so often celebrated in Chinese poetry may be something other than what Western readers normally associate with being drunk. The differences between Mahler's text and Liu's version are a nice introduction to what happens in the act of translation and to how problematic access to a "non-Western" culture can be. The fact that I need to work from an English translation of Mahler's German text adds a nice touch of spice to the recipe.

Wann nur ein Traum das Leben is, Warum den Müh und Plag? Ich trinke, bis ich nicht mehr kann,	If life is only a dream, Why then the misery and torment? I drink until I can drink no more,

Den ganzen, lieben Tag!	The whole, dear day!
Und wenn ich nicht mehr trinken kann, Weil Kehl and Seele voll, So tauml' ich bis zu meiner Tür Und schlafe wundervoll!	And when I can drink no more, Because my stomach and soul are full, I stagger to my door And sleep very well!
Was hör ich beim Erwachen? Horch! Ein Vogel singt im Baum. Ich frag ihn, ob schon Frühling sei, Mir ist als wie im Traum.	What do I hear when I awake? Listen! A bird singing in the tree. I ask him whether it is spring – It's like a dream to me.
Der Vogel zwitschert: "Ja! Der Lenz Ist da, sei kommen über Nacht!" Aus tiefstem Schauen lausch ich aur, Der Vogel singt and lacht!	The bird twitters, "Yes! Spring Is here, it has come over night!" With deep concentration I listen, And the bird sings and laughs!
Ich fülle mir den Becher neu Und leer ihn bis zum Grund Und singe, bis der Mond erglänzt Am schwarzen Firmament!	I fill my goblet afresh And drain it to the bottom And sing, until the moon shines In the dark firmament!
Und wenn ich nicht mehr singen kann, So schlaf ich wieder ein, Was geht mich denn der Frühling an!? Laßt mich betrunken sein!	And when I can sing no more, I fall asleep again, For what does Spring mean to me? Let me be drunk!

The first thing one notices is that the number of lines in the poem has doubled. This is a free translation which attempts to convey the essence of the poem rather than reproduce its formal structure. Chinese is apparently a very concise language, and the meaning of each word seems to be much more a function of its context than is true in English,French or German. Unfortunately Liu did not offer the kind of literal translation and transliteration of this poem (60) in the way he did of others in his book, but the alternate translation above (Li Po) gives an idea of some of the interpretation required.

The German translation of the poem that inspired Mahler seems to be infused with a *fin-de-siecle* world-weariness or melancholy. Mahler was clearly not celebrating ordinary drunkeness anymore than Liu supposes Li Po was. Space does not permit an attempt to do justice to the tone of the translation or the way in which Mahler used it. Suffice it to say that the poem was interpreted in a way that says as much or more about 19th century Europe as it does

about the Tang dynasty. And that is, for me, the Great Wall of China. How can one know whether an interpretation is valid?

Rowley wrestled with this issue in his own way in his attempt to interpret the cultural orientations embodied in Chinese painting. "Comparisons with western attitudes are apt to be more misleading than helpful, and yet the Chinese approaches to experience defy our understanding unless we relate them to western orientations." (Preface) Attempting to understand or assimilate Chinese art or thought is a classic example of the "hermeneutic circle." Contemporary authorities seem to be unanimous in warning that one should not equate the Taoist attitude towards Nature with that of a 19th century English Romantic poet, even though Wordsworth's "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey" can easily be used to explicate some commentaries on Taoist texts if not the texts themselves. Should the same caution be exercised when Chang Chung-yuan says, "Heidegger is the only Western philosopher who not only intellectually understands *Tao*, but has intuitively experienced the essence of it as well?" (Chang Tao ix)

Having acknowledged this difficulty, I can only forge ahead and knock on the doors available to me in hope of gaining access to a uniquely Chinese mind or worldview. Perhaps the best place to start is with supposedly universal language of music. From the various traditions in Chinese music one seems particularly relevant to my quest. The Ch'in or Qin is a string instrument which is probably over 2700 years old and contemporary musicians are still playing compositions from as early as the 5th century B.C. Tang dynasty poets like Li-Po would certainly have been familiar with music of the Ch'in, and it has a very strong association with both Taoism and Confucianism. It is a fretless instrument with silk strings which can be seen in many Chinese paintings. The most common version has 7 strings, although a 10 string version

was found in a tomb from the Warring States Period (~5th century B.C.) and a 5-string version is traditionally regarded as the original design. There are over a hundred different fingering techniques, and the insturment is capable of extremely subtle modulations of its sound.

There are theories associated with Ch'in music having to do with the relationship between music and cosmic harmony, and many regard Ch'in music as a sacred and even esoteric tradition aimed at the cultivation of a mystical harmony with the cosmos. The question inevitably occurs as to whether listening to Ch'in music may be one way for a Westerner to appreciate a uniquely Chinese experience of reality. Can a Westerner gain legitimate insight into the culture of Taosim by simply listening to the music without first understanding the theories associated with it, not to mention actually trying to play the instrument? While readily conceding that it must surely depend on which Westerner is undertaking this project, I can only report on my own limited efforts in this regard relying on recordings of performances of "Yearning on River Shiang" and "The Flowing Streams," the latter piece being one attributed to Yu Po-Ya.

The first thing that strikes me about the music is how much I like the sheer sound of the instrument – or at least how much I like the sound of its lower registers. The upper registers, especially in certain types of passages, sound more like a harp and have less immediate appeal to me than the lower registers. Who knows what this means? I tend to prefer the lower registers of the violin and clarinet, so perhaps I am just a "lower-registers" kind of guy. Certainly the Ch'in can have a very smooth, mellow tone.

The second aspect of the music which immediately struck me is the subtle ways in which the tone can be modulated – the type of vibrato or glissando of which it is capable, as well as the variations in the tonal quality caused by different techniques of plucking or stroking the strings.

Along with this comes what I might call the tonal instability of the music. A note seems to be more a range of frequencies rather than a fixed one.

"Yearning on River Shiang" is a short piece that sounds to me as though it has a structure similar to that of a song. I have seen enough Chinese movies that I can imagine this piece being sung by a female vocalist, although my imagination does not immediately conjure up any type of mood or story to be conveyed by its lyrics. At any rate I feel as though I can hear a musical structure in the piece. There are melodic patterns which are repeated in a way that makes sense to my ear or my musical expectations. While I would describe the piece as quiet or calm, I cannot say that I associate any more specific mood or emotion with it. I certainly do not hear it as an expression of yearning. I might be tempted to say that there is something about the way in which the melody seems "unresolved" which could suggest an analogous emotional state, but to be honest I would have to admit that the melody probably sounds "unresolved" to me because of my Western musical expectations. So I am left with the feeling that this could be a folk melody played on an "interesting" instrument with an "exotic" appeal.

"The Flowing Streams" is an altogether different matter. It seems to be a much more complex piece, and I have to confess I don't "get" it. I had two initial reactions which may be worth exploring. One is that it sounds like a stoned jazz musician noodling on his instrument while he waits for the rest of the combo to arrive. The other was that as soon as I felt there was a moment which seemed to have some musical coherence, it seemed to take off in a completely different direction and abandons whatever temporary structure it had set up. In other words I felt that the structure of the piece is filled with arbitrary discontinuities so that it was doing something I could only describe as wandering around. While neither of these reactions seem to offer any substantial insight into the music, they are perhaps indicative of something more than

just my own insensitivity. A stoned jazz musician noodling on his instrument is exploring the nature of his instrument and hearing it in a way that a totally sober listener might not. This does suggest two things: Appreciation of the music may require a state of mind which is different from a normal, everyday consciousness; and there is a relationship between the player, his instrument and the potential of music which is open minded and wonderous and even perhaps devoted.

In considering what type of Western music to use as a basis for comparison, after I got past the perverse thought of comparing Ch'in music to Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner," I settled on a performance of a Bach cello suite. A Bach suite seems to my ear to be a very sophisticated exploration of a musical instrument and of the harmonic potential of a given key. Sometimes the exploration can sound to my ear like a wrestling match, and certainly a Bach cello suite is frenetic and intense in comparison to "The Flowing Streams." It is also highly structured in a way that bears no resemblance to Ch'in music. Finally a Bach cello suite does not typically provoke reflections on the nature of the cosmos, except perhaps when it is used as the sound track for a Bergman film.

There is clearly something very different behind the structure of a piece of Ch'in music. The fact that Yu Po-Ya's piece has a title like "The Flowing Streams" may suggest that the musical structure is programmatic or impressionistic in a way more comparable to the music of Debussey or Delius rather than Bach. At one point it did occur to me that "wandering around" might be an appropriate structure for a Taoist piece called "The Flowing Streams."

> …Zhuangzi employs the metaphor of a totally free and purposeless journey, using the word *you* (to wander, or a wondering) to designate the way in which the enlightened man wanders through all of creation, enjoying its delights without ever becoming attached to any one part of it. (Zhuangzi 6)

To my ear though the twists and turns in the music seem so arbitrary to me that I do not have any sense of coherence. I am forced to conclude that only an intuition of the mental state behind the composition can enable the music to be heard properly, and I do not feel as though a conceptual framework of ideas about Taoism can make the music "understandable." There is no point in "understanding" it, if one cannot "hear" it. Of course it may be that enough time spent listening to a wide enough variety of Ch'in pieces would result in learning the vocabulary of Ch'in music by osmosis, i.e. acquiring a taste for it. This would imply some kind of intuitive grasp of the creative instincts embodied in the music, which might presumably be expressed in terms of Taoist concepts or metaphors.

For now, however, I must try a different door. Still hoping to avoid the difficulties posed by the nature of the Chinese language, I turn to landscape painting as a means of accessing a uniquely Chinese way of being in the world. I like Chinese landscape painting. I am not a connoisseur by any stretch of the imagination, but I have some connection that may enable me to understand how it is a "vehicle for Taoist thought." (Course Notes) I shall focus on three paintings: "Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams" by Fan K'uan, "On a Mountain Path in Spring" by Ma Yuan and "Remote View of Streams and Hills" by Hsia Kuei.

Fan K'uan's "Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams" is a hanging scroll of ink on silk from the Northern Sung period that has been described as "an eternal magnum opus unparalleled in the history of Chinese painting." (Chinese Art Net) Perhaps the most striking feature of the piece is its non-human scale. The height of the travelers of the title is about 1/100th the height of the

painting. The mountain which comprises the top two-thirds of the composition seems to be looming over the world of the travelers, and there is something in the rendering of the rocks and trees that make it seem alive. A contemporary eye accustomed to visual effects in movies may almost expect this mountain to morph slightly and speak using some rock crevice as a mouth. It does not seem threatening, however. One would expect it to express a kind and gentle, if somewhat condescending, wisdom.

The second most striking feature of the painting is the separation between the foreground world of the traveler and the mountain in the background. While it is difficult to tell in most reproductions of the painting, the mist separating the foreground hills from the background appears to be a very light wash which at its extremes leaves the bare silk exposed.

The bottom third of the painting seems almost self-contained and might easily be extracted as a scene which stands on its own. It is filled with detail whose irregular shapes create an energy which contrasts with the calmer, flowing contours of the distant mountain. Even in this extracted detail the human figures still seem dwarfed by their surroundings, but they do not seem out of place in this world. So far as one can tell they appear to be contendedly going their way probably focussed on the goal of their journey but perhaps enjoying the scenery along the way.

One must be very cautious in making a leap from aesthetic choices to metaphysical implications, but it is easy to read this painting as a statement about the human condition. Life is a journey. Man in not a static center of the universe; humanity is a group of individuals travelling together through an immense, varied and seemingly benign world. The natural world

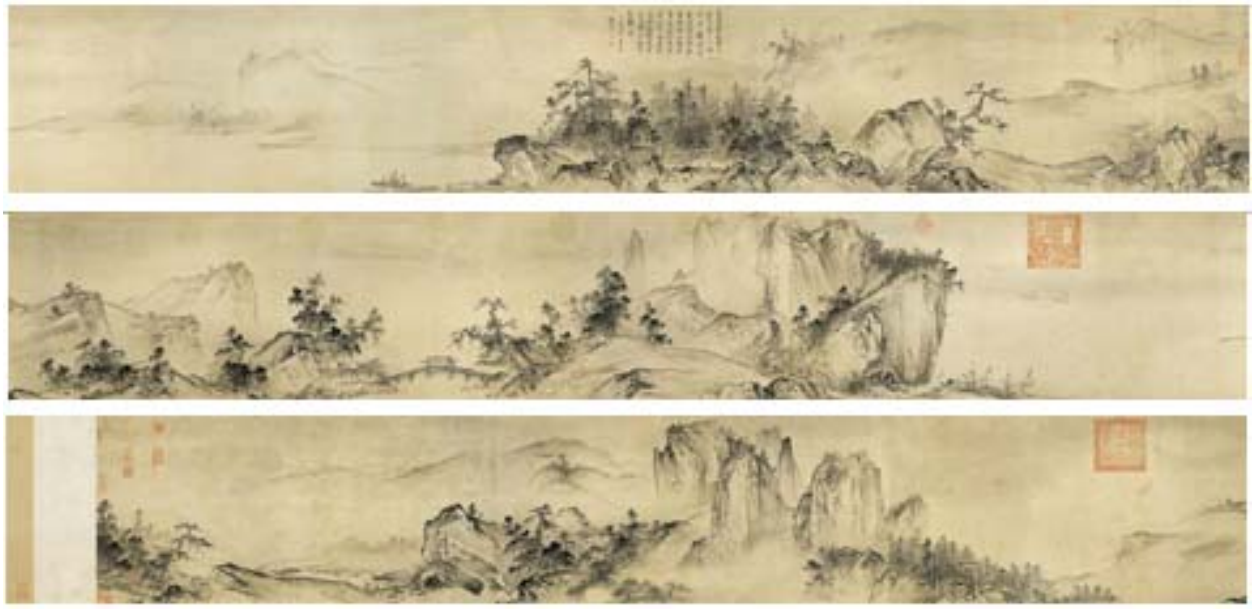
we know is only the foreground behind which looms a much larger reality separated from us by a veil, a “cloud of unknowing,” which presumably could be penetrated if the mind of man were able to achieve a perspective sufficiently elevated above the road on which he travels.

It would not be difficult to recast such a reading using terms derived from Western explications of Taoist thought. The question is whether such a reading enhances ones appreciation of the painting, not to mention whether it provides one with a fuller understanding of Taoist thought. I am not inclined to believe it does much of either. I even suspect that it may be a dangerous game that satisfies a need to categorize and actually cuts one off from the painting and any access to the experience informing it. Certainly directing ones attention to compositional features, painting techniques and implied narratives is a fruitful approach to seeing and experiencing the painting aesthetically and emotionally. The problem arises with the attempt to interpret this experience with abstract philosophical concepts – espeically when one purports to be relating the painting to a mode of thought that insists repeatedly on the danger of attachment to abstract concepts.

Clearly the Chinese experience of the natural world over the last millenium differs from the Dutch or French or English experience. Part of the reason for this is surely that the natural world in China differs from that of England, France or Holland. How much does a Chinese landscape painting tell us about Chinese landscapes as opposed to Chinese painters? Consider, for example, the differences found between Southern Sung and Northern Sung landscape paintings, which are often interpreted in terms of some kind of shift in philsophical perspective. Han Cho, a painter of the Sung dynasty, said, “Southern mountains are low and small but with lots of water and the apperance of the rivers and lakes is fair and beautiful, while the northern

mountains are vast with many low hills and the trees and woods are abundant but the waters are narrow." (Rowley 21)

Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei are generally regarded as being among the pre-eminent Southern Sung landscape painters and as the founders of the a Ma-Hsia school of "Lyrical" landscape



painting. Hsia Kuei's "Remote View of Streams and Hills" is an ink painting on a a 29 foot long handscroll constructed from ten pieces of paper. It is clearly not meant to be viewed all at once and may be considered an early example of interactive art. There are three sections of foreground separated from the distant backround by an extreme kind of atmospheric persepective. The light wash and empty canvas which evokes the mist is a much more prominent element in the composition than is the case in Fan K'uans painting.

The human presence in the scene is established mainly by buildings which may be glimpsed among the trees and a bridge, although some figures are visible in boats. The effect of the

human scale is similar to that of Fan K'uan's painting, even though the immesity of nature is established more by a sense of breadth or depth rather than height. The human figures and their boats or buildings blend in with their natural surroundings in a way that gives an impression of "belonging." They are a small part of this world, not something opposed to it.

There is an intricate and varied rhythmic energy in the foreground elements created by the brush strokes and variation in the shades of ink which seems to me a visual equivalent of percussive music. This energy is set off against the much more subtle and subdued background elements which might be compared to a "basso continuo" behind the foreground. The appeal of the painting can probably be attributed to a variety of things and probably varies with the viewer. It is "picturesque" and has to a Western eye an exotic or "quaint" charm. It is also delightful in the virtuosity of its brush technique and its ability to suggest via minimal monochromatic detail. Surely the act of scrolling through it would yield a pleasure of discovery and delight in the way it can progress seamlessly from one scene to another. Whether or not it can also communicate a profound vision of reality or what Chang Chung-yuan would call an "ontological experience" or "state of tranquility" is something I do not feel qualified to judge. I can easily imagine that someone who had achieved the state of being one with the Tao would see a reflection of that experience in the painting, but I am not yet fortunate enough to have received access to that state by contemplating a small reproducion of the painting.

In comparison to the other two paintings the first thing one sees in Ma Yuan's "On A Mountain Path In Spring" is the difference in the human scale. The principal figure in the work is probably about a third the height of the painting.

The painting itself is also much more intimate, being less that 6% the size of Fan K'uan's painting. A Western eye may also be struck by the apparent discrepancy in the scale of the second figure in the painting, who seems too small unless one fills in missing depth clues to imply that he is much further away. Even though there is solidity and space represented in the painting, there are clearly other graphic or iconographic factors determining the composition besides spatial perspective.

The second striking feature is the amount of empty space in the painting. It is easy to see from this example why Ma Yuan was called "One-cornered Ma." The use of "white space" in graphic design is obviously nothing new, and this painting can appeal immediately to a modern eye for its use of suggestive detail and compositional elegance.

The third thing one must acknowledge is the text in the upper corner, which apparently reads, "Brushed by his sleeves, wild flowers dance in the wind; fleeing from him, the hidden birds cut short their songs." This is presumably a seven-syllabic poetic couplet in the traditional Ancient Verse style. (Liu 24) It underscores a quality of the painting which I suspect is Taoist and which is very difficult to verbalize. There is a delicate and evanescent quality in the work. One feels that it has captured a fleeting moment. The bird flying away seems almost like a high speed photograph which can catch a hummingbird's wings. There is no clear indication of movement in the branches, but one can easily sense a light breeze stirring them slightly. The moment is not frozen and made static; it is captured in a way that conveys its passing. Implicit in all this is some sense of time, a heightened appreciation of a present moment which has nothing dramatic to offer but which is infinitely valuable nonetheless. What I am trying to describe may be the quality indicated by the label "lyrical." It is also related to the suggestive detail evident in all these paintings. Something minimal and very specific suggests more than it is.

Living with Chinese landscape paintings may be a way to enhance ones ability to "live in the moment." Whether the sensitivity imbibed from the art is uniquely Taoist and easily distinguished from any number of other cultural reminders to "stop and smell the roses" is, for me, problematic. The issue may involve the question of whether the experience at the root of Taoism is subject to degrees of intensity and endurance. Taoism often seems to be associated with a kind of laid back, Californian surfer-dude, go-with-the-flow attitude towards life. While I easily imagined in my youth that catching and riding a wave could be a religious experience, especially for someone who had ingested enough LSD; I do suspect (and hope) that what Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu had in mind was something more complex or profound than a lazy willingnesss to abandon all ambition or existential commitment and enjoy whatever simple pleasures life might care to offer.

Inebriation may be for some one of life's simple pleasures. Alan Watts apparently shared Li Po's enthusiasm for alcohol-induced altered states. His summary explanation of his fondness for vodka – "But I don't like myself when I am sober." (Watts 125) – indicates a seemingly un-Taoist struggle with a demon; but the history of Taoism is filled with adventures of those in search of the Elixir of Immortality. These elixirs traditionally contained cinnabar, which which Livia Kohn describes as "a mercury-sulfite that dissolves into its parts when heated, then reconstitutes itself back into cinnabar (i.e., 'reverted cinnabar'). Mercury, of course, is highly poisonous; taken in small amounts it causes delusions and brain damage and in massive doses it is fatal." (86) At least two emperors are reported to have died from poisonous elixirs taken in a quest for immortality. Other recipes for elixirs may have contained varieties of fungi (Blofeld Taoism 123), and it is not hard to imagine that many ancient Chinese seekers found

hallucinogenic concoctions to put them on the fast track to enlightenment or a state they describe as immortality.

The question is whether Taoism is an all or nothing proposition, whether the "true" Taoist is someone whose attitude towards life has been radically altered by an experience of union with the Tao. As Livia Kohn makes abundantly clear, Taoism as a cultural phenomenon is a vast array of beliefs, rituals, health practices, social hierarchies, and modes of creative expression spanning 2500 years. Most Western interpreters like John Blofeld focus on the religious and mystical aspects of the tradition and dismiss many others as degradations or superstitious misconceptions. To his credit Blofeld is open-minded towards the traditions of alchemy associated with Taoism, including the sexual yogic practices designed to transform bodily functions into spiritual processes for achieving union with the Tao. He is willing to concede that drugs and somewhat bizarre sexual practices can aid in progress on the way, but he clearly prefers the "purer" approach through educated contemplation.

Blofeld's perspective on Taosim is rooted in his motives for immigrating from England to Asia. He, like Alan Watts, was seeking a cure for the spiritual ailments from which he felt he suffered as a Westerner. In perhaps an even more dramatic sense the same thing can be said for Heidegger's interest in Lao Tzu, which blossomed while he was recovering from a breakdown suffered during his de-Nazification proceedings. (Parkes 51) A Westerner looking eastward in the hope of finding salvation will inevitably see Taoism differently from an aesthete seeking the exotic or a scholar attempting to analyze and categorize. Kahn's descriptions of Taoism seem at times almost disconcertingly nonjudgmental. Even though she will make a reference to "the higher spheres" and distinguish "escapist" from religious practices (82), she can also say things like "…mastery over one's *qi* can also lead to supernatural powers, such as the ability to see

through walls, read other people's thoughts, bend metal objects, or secure good fortune." (194) Since she is describing contemporary practices, one has the impression that she is simply stating facts, not relating beliefs.

I personally am less interested in whether someone can see through a wall than I am in whether there is a way of being in the world which makes everyday living profoundly satisfying and offers hope for more joy than suffering in the world at large. If there is something which can restore relevance to words like holy or sacred, I want to know how to access it. I can believe that Taoism may offer such access, but I sense that it will more likely be by means of verbal communcation rather than aesthetic experience. In other words unless I choose to pursue mind-altering practices involving yoga or elixirs, there is no avoiding the language barrier. Poetry and philosophy seem to offer the greatest hope for understanding Taoism. Moreover it appears that poetry and philosophy in Taoism coalesce as they often do when thinking seeks the ultimate.

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao itself. The name that can be given is not the name itself. The unnameable is the source of the universe. The nameable is the orignator of all things. Therefore, oftentimes without intention I see the wonder of Tao. Oftentimes with intention I see its manifestations. Its wonder and its manifestations are one and the same. Since their emergence, they have been called by different names. Their identity is called the mysery. From mystery to further mystery: The entry of all wonders! (Trans. by Chang Chuang-yuan)	The way that can be told Is not the constant way; The name that can be neamed Is tno the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad creatures. Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its manifestations. These two are the same But diverge in name as they issue foerth. Being the same they are called mysteries, Mystery upon mystery – The gateway of the manifold secrets. (Trans. by D.C.Lau)
Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself. Even the finest name is insufficient to define it. Without words, the Tao can be experienced, and without a name, it can be known. To conduct one's life according to the Tao, is to conduct one's life without regrets; to realize that potential within oneself which is of benefit to all. Though words or names are not required to live one's life this way,	To guide what can be guided is not constant guiding. To name what can be named is not constant naming. 'Not-exist' names the beginning (boundary) of the cosmos (Heaven and earth) 'Exists' names the mother of the ten-thousand natural kinds . Thus, to treat 'not-exist' as constant is desiring to use it to view its mysteries. To treat 'exists' as constant is desiring to use it to view its manifestations. These two emerge together yet have different names. 'Together'--call that 'obscure. ' 'Obscure' it and it is more

to describe it, words and names are used, that we might better clarify the way of which we speak, without confusing it with other ways in which an individual might choose to live. Through knowledge, intellectual thought and words, the manifestations of the Tao are known, but without such intellectual intent we might experience the Tao itself. Both knowledge and experience are real, but reality has many forms, which seem to cause complexity. By using the means appropriate, we extend ourselves beyond the barriers of such complexity, and so experience the Tao. (Trans. by Stan Rosenthal)	obscure. . . . the gateway of a crowd of mysteries. (Uncredited translation on http://www.hku.hk/philodep/courses/EWEthics/ttc.htm) … Voidness is the name for that in which the universe had its origin; actuality is the name for the mother of the myriad oabjects. Therefore, empty your minds to view the secret source; and observe actuality in order to view its manifestations. These two arise together, though separate in name. Both are mysterious – mystery upon mystery! Such is the gateway of all secrets! Trans. by John Blofeld Without a name *Tao* is the beginning of Heaven and Earth, and with a name she is the Mother of the Universe. It is only in her imperfect state that she is considered with affection; who desires to know her must be devoid of passions. Hegel [TNWT – viii]

In the preface to his translation of the Tao Tê Ching, Stan Rosenthal mentions that there are already 42 other English translations of the work, each of which is inevitably colored by a "hidden curriculum." (Rosenthal) Alan Watts comments on various translations of the opening line and points out that most conceal the fact that the Chinese word translated as " be spoken of" is actually the same ideogram as what is generally translated at "the way" or simply left as "the Tao." (39)

The root meaning of *tao* appears to be something akin to path or road. The oldest form of the ideogram was a combination of three elements: one signifying a road, one a human head and the third a human foot. (Chang Creativity 24) Chang Chung-yan offers the following explication:

> "The manner in which the hair on the head is arranged indicates that it is the hair of a leader. The foot suggests a follower. It would be incorrect, in my view, to interpret the head and foot together as a symbol for an individual man, since the very simple character still used for man…appears on the oracle bones that long antedate the bronzes. Rather, we may reasonably interpret this symbol as signifying a leader and a follwer united in finding their path together." (Creativity 24)

Alan Watts has a slightly different reading:

> In an early form, the ideogram for *tao* shows the moving sign (the crossroads) enclosing a head, though the radical in later times became *cho*, moving step by step, rather than *hsing*, to walk or march. We should probably think of *cho* as "going and pausing… and thus as "rhythmic movement," where going is *yang* and pausing is *yin*. Thus in the ideogram for Tao *cho* is combined with *shou*, the head, and thus Wieger…gives Tao the basic meaning of "to go ahead.' One could also think of it as intelligent rhythm. Various tranlators have called it the Way, Reason, Providence, the Logos, and even God, as in Ware (1), although he is careful to say in his introduction that God = Life and that the word is to be understood in the widest sense. (39f)

The English term "way" has a host of connotations which may or may not be relevant to a reading of Taoism: the way things are, the way to wisdom, the way of the world, a direction, a method, a path, a manner of acting or speaking, a desire or desired outcome (to get one's way), etc. It is a particularly rich and perhaps appropriately ambiguous term. Heidegger uses a German term which is translated "way" in a way (!) which may have been influenced by his reading of Lao Tzu:

> *Being and Time* is a *way* and not a shelter. Whoever cannot walk should not take refuge in it. *A* way, not "the" way, which never exists in philosophy.
> Heidegger, *Schelling* (1936) (Parkes 106)

> Thinking is perhaps, after all, an unavoidable path, which refuses to be a path of salvation and brings no new wisdom. The path is at most a field path, a path across fields, which does not just speak of renunciation but already has renounced, namely, renounced the claim to a binding doctrine and a valid cultural achievement or a deed of the spirit. (Heidegger 184)

Chuang-Tzu offers a comment in much the same spirit:

> The Way comes about as we walk it; as for a thing, call it something and that's so. Why so? By being so. Why not so? By being not so. (Zhuangzi 53)

He also makes a connection between speaking and the Way which also resembles Heidegger in a more humorous vein:

> Saying is not just blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think it different from the twitter of fledgelings, is there proof

> of the distinction? Or isn't there any proof? By what is the Way hidden, that there should be a genuine or a false? By what is saying darkened, that sometimes, 'That's it' and sometimes 'That's not'? Wherever we walk how can the Way be absent? Whatever the standpoint how can saying be unallowable? The Way is hidden by the formation of the lesser, saying is darkened by its foliage and flowers… (Zhuangzi 52)

Most English commentaries on Taoism seem content to summarize it as a way of being in harmony with the natural world, of living in the present moment with a kind of naturalness and spontaneity. The emphasis is on harmony, generally with ecological vs technological overtones. The mystical identity achieved in the more exalted states enables one to feel that the "flow" with which one is "going" is not just the prevailing cultural trend but a cosmic process which cannot be avoided in any case. Resisting it only results in needless misery. Ride the wave or drown.

For a Westerner the image of the Taoist recluse living in total harmony with his enviornment seems to carry with it overtones of resignation and renunciation of things all-too-human. He may be a colorful eccentric, completely free from social convention and spontaneously creating poetry or painting; but there is a lingering, perhaps wistful, suspicion that he has sacrificed something to achieve his tranquility. In the background there is an old fashioned European interpretation of Buddhism in terms of simple emotional logic: If you don't want to suffer, just stop caring. Absence of passion equals equanimity. Most Westerners are inclined to diagnose this as apathy or depression. At the very least it seems to be a retreat from life for anyone haunted by the image of Christ on the cross or Prometheus bound to his rock. In the Western imagination life is a passionate affair, and passion means suffering. Hence the appeal of Mahler's overwhelming embrace of life in all its diversity even in the face of death – both his own death and that of his beloved four-year-old daughter.

How does the Taoist assimilate the death of a loved one?

> When Chuang-Tzu's wife died, Hui Shih came to condole. As for Chuang-tzu, he was squatting with his knees out, drumming on a pot and singing.
>
> 'When you have lived with someone', said HuiShsi, "and brought up children, and grown old together, to refuse to bewail her death would be bad enough, but to drum on a pot and sing – could there be anything more shameful?'
>
> 'Not so. When she first died, do you suppose that I was able not to feel the loss? I peered back into her beginnings; there was a time before there was a life. Not only was there no life, there was a time before there was a shape. Not only was there no shape, there was a time before there was energy. Mingled together in the amorphous, something altered, and there was the energy; by alteration in the energy there was the shape, by alteration of the shape there was the life. Now once more altered she has gone over to death. This is to be companion with spring and autumn, summer and winter, in the procession of the four seasons. When someone was about to lie down and sleep in the greatest of mansions, I with my sobbing knew no better than to bewail her . The thought came to me that I was being uncomprehending towards destiny, so I stopped.' (Zhuangzi 123f)

This explication of the Way by itself is not sufficient to enable me to accept cheerfully the loss of someone I love, but it does tell me that walking the Way involves a profound alteration of one's soul as well as one's conception of reality. It is not just a matter of staying on the sunny side of life and whistling a happy tune. It is tantamount to becoming immortal, and it is no wonder than an emperor might risk everything in order to achieve it.

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