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INTRODUCTION: DAOISM AND HERMENEUTICS

Scholars of Chinese philosophy have shown great interest in philosophical hermeneutics at least since the 1980s.¹ One of the major driving forces of this development was certainly Chung-ying Cheng, upon whose inspiration the articles in this edition, focusing on Daoism, were organized.

There are several ways in which originally European hermeneutics found entrance in the study of Chinese intellectual history. For one, as strategies of reading ancient texts, hermeneutic principles of interpretation provided new perspectives in the interpretation of classical Chinese philosophical texts. Hermeneutical understanding in the Gadamerian sense aims at a fusion of horizons between the reader and the text, thus encompassing history and tradition as *Wirkungsgeschichte* as foundational element for understanding. This enhanced interest in the sociohistorical background of philosophical and religious texts and led, in a classical hermeneutical circle, also to new insights in the sociohistorical “situations” of the texts, which in turn brought new levels and facets of understanding the texts. Because of the pervasive influence of hermeneutics especially in German, but since the 1980s also in American humanities, this approach is present tacitly in many Western studies of Chinese intellectual history.

A more explicit approach to apply hermeneutics to the field of Chinese intellectual history consisted in asking for a “Chinese hermeneutic tradition,” the hermeneutic strategies Chinese employed to explain their own historical and philosophical tradition. Being a culture that laid great emphasis on tradition and the authority of the classics, this question proved a very relevant approach in particular to the study of commentarial literature, which for more than two millennia has been an important medium of expressing philosophy in China.²

Last, and maybe most importantly, Chinese philosophers have also used Chinese philosophy to supply answers to questions and issues that Western hermeneutics have raised but not solved.

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Cheng Chung-ying with his development of onto-hermeneutics has to be mentioned prominently here.³ According to onto-hermeneutics, we need to ask and inquire from a given text what a view of reality is understood, represented, and justified or assessed.

Hermeneutic studies in Chinese intellectual history of all these approaches have addressed predominantly texts of the ancient philosophers and classics, in particular the *Yijing* 《易經》 (Chung-ying Cheng), *Mengzi* 《孟子》 (Huang Junjie), *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》, *Laozi* 《老子》, the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 《論語》), various texts of the “Neo-Confucian” *lixue* 理學 and *xinxue* 心學,⁴ and Buddhist texts.⁵

What has been largely left out in hermeneutic studies, philosophical or traditional, is Daoism in the form that is often called “religious Daoism,” that is Daoism as it developed after Han Dynasty.

This neglect of Daoism in hermeneutical studies is not justifiable on grounds of contents of texts—Daoism since Han Dynasty has developed sophisticated philosophies as well as hermeneutic strategies of interpretation. Instead, most probably the reasons originate in a disciplinary “impasse,” caused by the artificially introduced conceptual separation of a “philosophical Daoism” and a “religious Daoism.”

The term “religious Daoism” was employed to distinguish the different forms of Daoism that had developed since Han Dynasty from the so-called “philosophical Daoism” of the pre-Qin period. The terms paralleled the Chinese terminology of *daojia* 道家 in referring to Laozi, Zhuangzi, and so on, and of *daojiao* 道教 in referring to Daoist “teachings” (*jiao* 教) that was developed after Han Dynasty, often in a religious context and often in dialogue or competition with Buddhist “teachings.” However, the distinction implied in the English terminology is one that involves academic discipline.⁶ This separation of “two Daoisms” has been criticized widely in circles of scholars involved in Daoist studies, and is by now theoretically recognized as a misleading categorization.⁷ Nevertheless, appropriate or not, this distinction and the terminology employed for it has had and continues to have implications for the study of Daoism.

Studies of Daoism after Han Dynasty have been undertaken rather from the perspective of religious studies or cultural and historical anthropology than from a perspective of philosophy.

The situation is acerbated by the fact that the Daoist canon (*Daozang* 《道藏》) remained “a book with seven seals”; only in the past twenty years have large projects like the European Daozang project, and similar Chinese projects resulted in publications,⁸ providing descriptive catalogues to make the Daoist canon more accessible to readers and scholars. These general surveys of the Daozang have done much to open this field of research; yet, detailed studies of most of the texts remain to be done.

Last, many of the texts pertaining to “religious Daoism” pose their own specific obstacles for hermeneutic interpretation. Many Daoist texts are characterized by an esoteric nature and claims to divine revelation and/or celestial origin, claims that seem to defy contextualization, and thereby hermeneutic interpretation—and understanding. Daoism and its texts collected in the Daoist Canon thus remains terra incognita in many ways.

It is here, that the present collection of articles seeks to open “horizons,” exploring hermeneutics in terms of different strategies of reading and writing in early medieval and medieval Daoist texts. The aim of this exploration is twofold. First, it underscores that texts pertaining to “religious Daoism” can offer interesting perspectives on “Chinese hermeneutics.” This is borne out by two articles exploring the hermeneutical strategies of two different thirteenth century commentators of a short but very popular Daoist scripture, the *Qingjing Jing* 《清靜經》. They elucidate two distinct commentarial strategies of creating understanding, namely graphic commentaries in analogy to cosmological diagrams, discussed by Joachim Gentz, and extemporaneous sermonizing, analyzed by Yuet Keung Lo.

Second, the explorations of hermeneutic studies of Daoist texts inquire how hermeneutic approaches could be employed to overcome some of the specific difficulties Daoist texts pose to our attempts at understanding. Discussing a short early medieval text, the *Huming miaojing* 《護命妙經》, together with its Daoist and Buddhist forerunners, Friederike Assandri proposes a strategy of reading to overcome the lack of access to the sociohistorical background, caused by the narrative of celestial origin and the esoteric transmission, which impedes access to the “horizon” of the texts and thereby would make the “fusion of horizons” impossible.

Taken together, the articles hope to open up new perspectives for hermeneutic studies by including medieval Daoist texts in the hermeneutic explorations, and also new perspectives for Daoist studies, by including hermeneutic methodologies in the study of Daoism.

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ENDNOTES

1. For a concise discussion of the reception and development of hermeneutics in modern Chinese philosophy, see Lauren F. Pfister, "Hermeneutics: Philosophical Understanding and Basic Orientations," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy, Journal Supplement* (2006): 3–23. In the first years of the twenty-first century, several major conferences concerning hermeneutics in China were held in China (2002 in Anhui and Shandong, 2004 in Taiwan, [Foguangshan], and 2005 in Shanghai [East China Normal University]—see Pfister, "Hermeneutics," 16, note 9 for a short description).
2. This question was discussed in a series of conferences, beginning with a conference on "Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture," Rutgers University, New Brunswick, United States, October 10–12, 1996, followed by the conference "Canon and Commentary: An International Conference on Chinese Hermeneutics," City University of Hong Kong, October 15–17, 1999 and the conference "Interpretation and Intellectual Change," Rutgers University, New Brunswick, United States, October 4–6, 2001. Also a workshop "Text and Commentary in Imperial China" held at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Heidelberg, Germany, June 14–17, 2000 discussed this issue prominently. The proceedings of the first conference were published in *Classics and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, ed. Ching-I Tu (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000). Much earlier than this, the Conference on Buddhist hermeneutics was held at the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values in Los Angeles, May 31–June 4, 1984; the results were published in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Donald Lopez Jr. (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, University of Hawaii Press, 1988).
In China, Hong Handing in his journal *Zhongguo Quanshixue* 《中國詮釋學》 and Chung-ying Cheng in the journal *Benti yu Quanshi* 《本體與詮釋》 have pursued and stimulated the discussion on Hermeneutics in China. For a short discussion of the differences between the two, see Pfister, "Hermeneutics," 6–7.
3. For a lucid and concise discussion of Chung-ying Cheng's influence on Chinese philosophy and his manifold contributions to the development and promotion of hermeneutic studies in China, see Pfister, "Hermeneutics," 4–9.
4. Compare the Journal Supplement Series to the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2006, *Hermeneutical Thinking in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Lauren F. Pfister, and its sequel in the spring 2007 issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*; see also for example Ching-I Tu, ed., *Classics and Interpretation*; Kai-Wing Chow, On-Cho Ng, and John B. Henderson, ed., *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), and Karl-Heinz Pohl, ed., *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue between Chinese and Western Approaches* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
5. Scholars of Buddhist studies very early discovered the importance of hermeneutics as a methodology and philosophy in their field. See, for example, an article published in 1978, Robert A. F. Thurman, "Buddhist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (1978): 19–39, and the above-mentioned conference proceedings *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Lopez.
6. It can be added that for a long time, this distinction came also with an implicit evaluation, where "philosophical Daoism" was considered superior, because rational, to "religious Daoism" deemed superstitious and irrational, as part of folk belief. Needless to say that what is referred to as "religious Daoism" in this distinction has, like Buddhism and Christianity and any other religions, a whole range of possible responses of human beings to the visible and invisible world, including sophisticated philosophy, rituals and liturgies, devotional beliefs, and so on. Thus, the separation of a "philosophical Daoism" and a "religious Daoism" was not made on the basis of empirical grounds or textual studies, but was an "*a priori*" decision, where traditional Confucian and Buddhist polemical attitudes against a competing teaching, namely that of Daoism, coincided with the remnants of the seventeenth-/eighteenth-century Western idea of China as a cultural alternative of rational philosophy. This Western idea of China had gained strength in the period of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century with thinkers

like Voltaire or Leibnitz, who based their ideas on the reports of the Jesuit missionaries from the seventeenth century onwards. The element of rationality, in contrast to religiosity, became important for the Jesuits in the context of the rites-controversy in the Catholic church; it supported their attitude that Chinese should be allowed to follow their own rites as they were not religious but rational. Thus Confucian scholars, Buddhists, Western philosophers and Jesuit priests—each for their own reasons and “prejudices” coincided in emphasizing a rational, philosophical strain of Chinese thinking, where time-honored texts like *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* found their place, but not a Daoism that had many explicitly religious elements. Later theories, like for example the influential concept of “great tradition” and “little tradition,” which Robert Redfield proposed in his *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), did their part to reinforce the distinction.

7. The relation of the pre-Qin Daoist philosophical texts and the later Daoist movements is complex and is only in the process of being studied. It is a fact, however, that the Daoist philosophers who wrote after Han Dynasty and who have been considered as “religious Daoism” in the scheme, refer consistently back to the “philosophical Daoists” like Laozi. For an interesting if polemical discussion of the construct of this dichotomy, see Russell Kirkland, “The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China: De-colonializing the Exotic Teachings of the East,” Lecture presented at the University of Tennessee, October 20, 1997, available online <http://kirkland.myweb.uga.edu/rk/pdf/pubs/pres/TENN97.pdf>. He proposes the term “post-classical Daoism” for what is usually named “religious Daoism” (Ibid., 4).
8. Ren Jiyu, *Daozang Ti Yao* 《道藏提要》 (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1995). Kristopher Schipper and Franciskus Verellen, ed., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).