

BOOK REVIEW

Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013, 248pp., ISBN: 9780231143394.

Steve Coutinho has provided us with a new introduction to Daoism. The scope of “Daoist Philosophies” covered by this introduction is the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*. The author makes no use of the materials of the Daoist canon, considering them to be “folk beliefs, rituals, spiritual practices, and sacred texts...a pluralistic amalgamation of rival sects and teachings that have developed in lineages over the centuries...” (7). The overriding approach taken in this work is to relate Daoist thought to contemporary philosophical issues, and the author does not hesitate to make use of Western ideas and categories to structure his interpretations. The goal of this introduction is to show how Daoism can be embraced as a living philosophy, rather than to offer the history of the tradition.

In his chapter “Daoist Philosophies,” the author notes the difficulties in identifying what should be treated as “Daoism.” In response to the recent work done in Daoist scholarship on the porous membrane between *dao* and *dao*, the author insists that “it does not follow that there is no way to understand the ancient Daoist texts independently of contemporary religious phenomena” (8). I am guessing that the author means by this the religious practices and phenomena contemporaneous with the creation of the materials that came to compose the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Even quite apart from the last twenty years of sustained scholarship on these texts, a simple reading of *Zhuangzi* or *Liezi* makes it difficult to accept the author’s beginning point. There are dozens of logia in those texts which require understanding what Western scholars call “religious” practice and belief in order to understand why the text argues as it does, as well as many of the assumptions held by the masters who were responsible for the narratives and teachings in the text. Nonetheless, the author’s stress on the literary character of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi* is welcome and a much needed correction to approaching these works in an overly analytical way.

The author devotes a chapter to explaining a number of fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy, and the ones he chooses are indeed those that a reader might need to have ready-at-hand in approaching Daoist texts. But there are some very serious deficiencies in this lexicon. The most obvious of these with respect to Daoist philosophies include *xian*, *zhenren*, and *wu-wei*. While the author includes *wei*, rendering it as “artifice,” and in a later chapter discusses *wu-wei* as “minimal artifice,” the discussion of this concept will leave many scholars thinking it is too thin. For myself, it also suggests why the chapter titled

“Philosophy of Skill in the *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*” seems to consistently miss the point of the logia in the materials in *Zhuangzi* 19 and *Liezi*, which is not at all to “outline some general conditions for the development of a skill” (180), but to illustrate what spontaneous effortlessness and felt lack of intentionality is like in *wu-wei*. This is, of course, my own reading of those texts.

I mention only one other matter in my review of this chapter. In his list of fundamental concepts of Chinese philosophy, the author gives the *pinyin* “ren” and later indicates he means 人, human. This is a little puzzling, and I kept wondering whether the author did not mean 仁 (*ren*, benevolence, compassion, humaneness). Certainly, in terms of its philosophical significance in Chinese philosophy in general, and in the Daoist critique of Confucianism which the author discusses in context of *ren* 人, it is the artifice of *ren* 仁 which is the main target, along with *yi* 義. I am not sure we can say that “human-oriented endeavor” (33) is the real concern Daoist masters sought to correct. It is rather the imposition on life of the descriptions and distinctions of morality and social relations for which the Confucians were so well known that is the problem. The author clearly knows this, but the way in which he enters this discussion through fundamental concepts may be misleading, and his defense of distinctions by saying non-human animals also make distinctions as a critical response to Daoists depends on such examples as this: “a macaque that sits in a hot pool turns it into a bath” (39). I find this attribution of the concept of bath to a macaque rather thin, although I do believe that the general point that animals (or some of them) are also distinction-making creatures may have merit, and may suggest that the characteristic view that Daoism regards animals as spontaneously moving with *dao* may be somewhat shallow.

Generally speaking, the explication of all the terms in the chapter on fundamental concepts, and in the later chapters which approach the material in a lexical way, would be strengthened substantially by frequent citations of specific Daoist texts, so that readers could look at the texts themselves and confirm the author’s explanations. While I realize that such detail may be distracting to the intended audience of this work, which seems to be students and inquiring intelligent readers, it seems, nevertheless, to be quite necessary.

As in his chapter on fundamental concepts, the author’s discussions of Daoist philosophies in the following chapters is undertaken through identifying and explicating concepts one after another. There is a certain merit to this method, although most readers will find one or another place to disagree with something the author says. Be that as it may, what I would have found helpful is a summary at the end of each chapter stating how it is that the author brings into focus the multiplicity of concepts he discusses from each text.

I have one other concern about the use of this lexical method to approach