

**VARIETIES OF TAOISM IN ANCIENT CHINA:
A PRELIMINARY COMPARISON OF THEMES IN THE NEI YEH
AND OTHER TAOIST CLASSICS¹**

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This discussion of "Taoism" in classical China will begin with the observation that there was actually no such thing, at least not in the sense that is commonly accepted among non-specialists. Both in Asia and in the West, many scholars, and their students, have ignored the many advances in Taoist studies since the 1970s, and have continued to cling to outdated stereotypes of what Taoism was/is. In particular, they often cling to simplistic notions about "philosophical Taoism" that now seem unable to withstand critical analysis, in light of recent advances in textual and historical research. The concept of "philosophical Taoism" is, to a large extent, a modern fiction, which has been developed and embraced by people around the world for specific and identifiable social, intellectual, and historical reasons.²

Current research reveals that the so-called "Taoist school" of classical times was actually "a retrospective creation": it began as the reification of a Han-dynasty bibliographic classification, and it took its present form in post-Han times, i.e., in the third century CE.³

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, St. Louis, 1995.

² See, e.g., Kirkland, "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (1992), 77-90; and Steve Bradbury, "The American Conquest of Philosophical Taoism," in *Translation East and West: A Cross-Cultural Approach*, ed. by Cornelia N. Moore and Lucy Lower (Honolulu: University of Hawaii College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature & East-West Center, 1992), 29-41. The complete social and intellectual history of the Western concept of "Taoism" has yet to be written. The same is true of the Japanese concept of *Dokyo*, and for modern Chinese concepts of *Tao-chiao*.

³ See, e.g., A. C. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu* (1960; rept. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. xii. As Harold D. Roth has put it, "the 'Lao-Zhuang' tradition...is actually a Wei-Jin literati reconstruction, albeit a powerful and enduring one." Harold Roth, "Some Issues in the Study of

The importance of these facts is that we need to press non-specialists to re-evaluate their commonly accepted ideas of what "Taoism" is. For most of this century, there has been nearly universal agreement among philosophers, historians, and the general public — in Asia and in the West — that "Taoism" could simply be equated with a set of ideas that are embodied (or are perceived to be embodied) in the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu*. Current research has begun to demonstrate that that common understanding is far too simplistic.

To begin with, it is now clear to most specialists that those two texts were not, in fact, the expositions of two great philosophers, but rather the product of a prolonged period of accretion. That is, each contains ideas from a variety of minds generations or even centuries apart, not to mention different geographical regions. The *Chuang-tzu* probably originated in scattered jottings of a man named Chuang Chou ca. 320 BCE, and was developed into its present form over the following 500 years.⁴ The earlier layers of the *Chuang-tzu* were apparently composed by someone who had never seen the *Tao te ching*. For its part, the *Tao te ching* dates only to around the beginning of the third century BCE, i.e., to several decades after the *Chuang-tzu* began to be compiled.⁵ But once again, there is no evidence that the *Tao te ching's* compilers were aware either of the ideas of the fourth-century writer Chuang Chou or of the text that eventually came to bear his name. Though the provenance of the *Tao te ching* is still the subject of debate, one

Chinese Mysticism: A Review Essay," *China Review International* 2 no. 1 (Spring 1995), p. 157. The origins of the concept of a *tao-chia* in Han historiography is discussed in Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 170-71.

⁴ See, e.g., Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 172-73. One might argue that the *Chuang-tzu* is — in its present form — actually of post-Han date, since the 52-chapter edition that existed in Han times was cut down to the present 33 chapters by Kuo Hsiang (died ca. 312 CE). See, for instance, Livia Knaul (Kohn), "Some Lost *Chuang-tzu* Passages," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 10 (1982), 53-79.

⁵ As reported by Donald Harper at the 1997 meeting of the Society for the Study of Early China, 1993 excavations in Ching-men, Hupei, unearthed texts "identified with *Laozi*" from a Ch'u tomb that has been attributed to the late 4th century BCE. The texts remain unpublished, and their identification as copies of the *Tao te ching* remains unsubstantiated. The dating of the Kuo-tien tomb also remains unconfirmed.

current line of research suggests that it may have emerged from the re-working of oral traditions of a community in the southern state of Ch'u.⁶ So far, research has been unable to shed virtually any light upon the identity of its compiler or redactor. And I certainly do not expect to establish that identity here. But what is, in fact, possible is to examine possible evidence of that redactor's familiarity with another ancient text, a text of which few today — even among scholars of Chinese thought or religion — have ever heard. That text is a brief work, about one-half the length of the *Tao te ching*, entitled the *Nei yeh* (or "Inner Cultivation").⁷

There is little doubt that the *Nei yeh* is several generations older than the *Tao te ching*. It seems to date to some time in the second half of the fourth century BCE. That is, it may have been compiled by a contemporary of Chuang Chou, though again there is virtually no data as to the compiler's identity.⁸ The *Nei yeh* fell out of general circulation when it became incorporated into a larger collection, the *Kuan-tzu*, sometime before the middle of the second century BCE. After that, it was seldom noted by Chinese scholars or philosophers until the 20th century, and even today its thought and significance have barely begun to be explored.

For instance, though it has never, to my knowledge, hitherto been noticed, the influence of

⁶ On these matters, see Kirkland, "The Book of the Way," in Ian P. McGreal, ed., *Great Literature of the Eastern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 24-29.

⁷ Very little has been written on the *Nei Yeh*, in any language. To date, the only complete English translation is in W. Allyn Rickett, *Kuan-tzu: A Repository of Early Chinese Thought* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965), I, 151-79. While Rickett's scholarship is impeccable, his renderings are sometimes infelicitous. There is a brief discussion of the *Nei Yeh* in Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 100-105, though Graham's interpretations of the text's ideas are sometimes questionable. A much better introduction to the text is Harold D. Roth, "The Inner Cultivation Tradition of Early Daoism," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 123-38. Roth is currently completing a full translation of the text.

⁸ Rickett dated the *Nei Yeh* to the late 4th or early 3rd century; Graham to the 4th; and Roth to the mid-4th. There is evidence to suspect a direct connection with teachings attributed to the Confucian thinker Mencius (Mengzi, d. ca. 308 BCE); see below, note 22. Since the ideas in question seem more integral to the thought-system of the *Nei Yeh*, it is logical to conclude that the ideas in this text, if not the text itself, may have been known to Mencius or at least to the parties who compiled sections of the text attributed to him. If Mencius did indeed know the *Nei Yeh*, its date would certainly be well before the end of the 4th century.

the *Nei yeh* on Chinese thought was profound and extensive. For example, it is here that one first encounters comprehensible references to the personal cultivation of such forces as *ch'i* ("life-energy"), *ching* ("vital essence"), and *shen* ("spiritual consciousness"). The cultivation of such forces became a central theme in certain versions of modern Taoism, as well as in Chinese medicine.⁹ But there is also evidence that the *Nei yeh* may have profoundly influenced the *Tao te ching*. In this essay, I attempt to identify basic thematic differences between the *Nei yeh*, the *Chuang-tzu*, and the *Tao te ching*, and to suggest certain interpretive strategies for understanding the relationship among them.

The primary difference between the *Nei Yeh* and the *Tao te ching* is signalled by the title of the former. *Nei* means "internal," and in ancient times *yeh* meant in one sense "cultivation/production" and in another sense "what one studies." Thus the work's title refers directly to "Inner Cultivation" or "Inner Development." Its contents provide the reader with instruction and advice for applying oneself to a task involving what is inside oneself. That is, it teaches the

⁹ They play a prominent role, for instance, in the teachings and practices of Ch'üan-chen ("Integral Perfection") Taoism. Ch'üan-chen originated in the teachings of Wang Che (Wang Ch'ung-yang), a twelfth-century scholar who taught that immortality can be attained in this life by entering seclusion, cultivating one's internal spiritual realities (*hsing*), and harmonizing them with one's external life (*ming*). Ch'üan-chen Taoism apparently drew upon the presentation of *ching*, *ch'i*, and *shen* in the *Huai-nan-tzu*, a Han-dynasty text that drew directly from the *Nei yeh*. (On the *Huai-nan-tzu*'s use of these concepts, see Harold D. Roth, "Psychology and Self-Cultivation in Early Taoistic Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51 [1991]: 599-650.) But this facet of Chinese intellectual and religious history remains completely untouched in Western scholarship, for though Ch'üan-chen Taoism endures today, both intellectually and institutionally, though it is largely unknown to Westerners, and has attracted little attention from Western scholars, especially in North America. German studies of Ch'üan-chen Taoism include Günther Endres, *Die Sieben Meister des Volkommenen Verwirklichung* (Frankfurt, 1985); Herbert Franke, "Der Tempel der Reinen Vollendung (Ch'ing-chen kuan) in Hsiu-wu: Ein Beitrag zum Ch'üan-chen-Taoismus der Chin-Zeit," *Monumenta Serica* 42 (1994), 275-293; and several works by Florian Reiter, of which the most important are *Grundelemente und Tendenzen des Religiösen Taoismus* (Stuttgart, 1988), and "Ch'ung-yang Sets Forth his Teachings in Fifteen Discourses," *Monumenta Serica* 36 (1984-85), 33-54. In North America, the only comparable scholarship is that of Yao Tao-chung, in "Ch'üan-chen: A New Taoist Sect in North China during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1980).

The enduring importance of *ching*, *ch'i*, and *shen* in the Chinese medical tradition may be seen, for instance, in their inclusion as "basic principles" in Warner J.-W. Fan, *A Manual of Chinese Herbal Medicine* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996), 29-30: Dr. Fan's explanation of *ching*, *ch'i*, and *shen* are in close harmony with the explanations seen in the *Nei-yeh* and the *Huai-nan-tzu*.

reader how and why to practice certain specific forms of biospiritual cultivation. In fact, unlike the *Tao te ching*, the *Nei Yeh* is concerned with virtually nothing else besides biospiritual cultivation.

The Teachings of the Nei Yeh

The teachings of the *Nei Yeh* are quite distinct from the ideas that most non-specialists associate with "philosophical Taoism." Its teachings will sound more familiar to people acquainted with the traditions of modern Taoism that focus on the cultivation of *ch'i*.¹⁰ The *Nei Yeh* indeed begins with the assumption of a powerful salubrious reality called *ch'i*, "life-energy." In the *Nei Yeh*, *ch'i* is present both within all things and all around them. Within each being, *ch'i* is centered in the "essence," *ching* — which Roth describes as "the source of the vital energy in human beings [and] the basis of our health, vitality, and psychological well-being."¹¹ But the central focus of the *Nei Yeh's* teachings have to do more with how the individual manages his/her *hsin*, the "heart/mind."¹² The "heart/mind" is the ruling agency in the individual's biospiritual

¹⁰ Some Westerners have begun to learn about Taoism at a number of "Taoist centers" that have been established in North America during the last twenty years. There are two distinct traditions involved. One was founded by a Chinese Taoist named Ni Hua-ching, who immigrated to Southern California in 1976 and established centers in Malibu, Los Angeles, and more recently, suburban Atlanta. Ni claims affiliation with certain Taoists of the Six Dynasties and T'ang (such as Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen), though his lineage seems rather dubious. Another set of Taoist centers are affiliated with the Fung Loy Kok Taoist Temple, founded in Hong Kong in 1968. It "traces its lineage from the Hsin T'ien Wu-chi sect of the Huashan system." It now operates temples in Denver, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, and Tallahassee. The idea that Taoist practice basically involves "the cultivation of *ch'i*" is common to both of these organizations, despite the fact that many Taoists through Chinese history may have been unacquainted with such ideas.

¹¹ Roth, "The Inner Cultivation Tradition of Early Daoism," p. 126. It should be clearly noted that there is no trace in the *Nei Yeh* of the much later Chinese idea that *ching* ought to be identified with some sexual force or substance. It should also be noted that such later ideas are fundamentally non-Taoist, as explained in my review of Douglas Wile's *Art of the Bedchamber*, in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 16 (1994), 161-66.

¹² Though I use both pronouns here, it is important to beware assuming that any text or thinker of ancient China taught ideas that would, at that time, have necessarily been considered applicable to women's lives as well as to men's. In the case of Confucius, for instance, that assumption would be highly unwarranted. In the case of Taoist texts, however, the situation is much more ambiguous. Since there is little evidence as to the intended audience of the *Nei Yeh*, and since it is difficult to

nexus, i.e., in the entire personal complex of body/mind/heart/spirit).¹³ The *Nei Yeh's* principal teaching is that one should make sure that one's "heart/mind" is balanced and tranquil, without excessive cogitation or emotion. If one can maintain a tranquil "heart/mind," then one will become a receptor of life's salubrious energies, and will be able to retain them; without tranquility, those healthful energies will leave, and one's health, and very life, will become threatened.

In the *Nei Yeh*, the specific nature and identity of life's desirable energies are still somewhat vague. One key term that it uses is *shen*, "spirit" or "spiritual consciousness." "Spirit" involves perception and comprehension: it is the basis for all higher forms of awareness. According to the *Nei Yeh*, the practitioner must align his/her biospiritual nexus with the unseen forces of the world in order to attract "spirit" and receive it into one's quietened "heart/mind." One's ability to succeed in this endeavor is called *te*. *Te* has often been dubbed a key concept in "philosophical Taoism," but the meaning of the term in the *Nei Yeh* hardly resembles any of the common descriptions of the term as it is used in the more familiar Taoist texts.¹⁴ In the *Nei Yeh*, the term *te* does retain the generic meaning of "the inner moral power of an individual," and even the archaic (Shang-dynasty) concept of *te* as "a proper disposition toward the unseen forces." But here, *te* is clearly not a force that is intrinsic to our natures, as many modern descriptions of *Te* in "philosophical Taoism" would have us believe. Rather, *te*, like "spirit," is something that we *acquire* when all elements of the body/heart/mind are completely peaceful and properly aligned. Here we can discern the full meaning of the traditional Chinese explanation that the word *te* meaning "inner power" may be understood in terms of the homophone *te* which is the common

see anything in its teachings that could be readily construed as gender-specific, I shall write as though the practitioner of its teachings could theoretically be either male or female. One should bear in mind, however, that there is little evidence that anyone in ancient China ever gave thought to these issues.

¹³ The term *hsin* occurs some 25 times in the brief text, compared to 17 uses of the term *ch'i* and 12 uses of the term *ching*.

¹⁴ An interesting study of the term *te* and of related themes in the *Tao te ching* is John Emerson, "The Highest Virtue is Like the Valley," *Taoist Resources* 3 no. 2 (May 1992), 47-61.

verb in both classical and modern Chinese for getting or acquiring. In the *Nei Yeh*, *te* may be termed "the acquisitional agency," for it is not just *what* we attract and receive, but *that whereby* we attract and receive the higher forces of life (e.g., *ch'i* and *shen*). What is more, in the *Nei Yeh* one is told that one's *te* is something that one must work on each and every day. (Once again, such teachings vary widely from the concept of what *Te* means in common notions of "philosophical Taoism.") The practitioner builds up his/her *te* by practicing daily self-control over his/her thought, emotion, and action. One who succeeds at these practices can become a *sheng-jen*, a "sage." The "sage" is described as being "full of spirit" and "complete in heart/mind and in body."

One might well ask what role the concept of *tao* plays in the *Nei Yeh*. The way the term is used in the *Nei Yeh* does not always coincide with the way it is used in the more familiar texts. In the *Nei Yeh*, the term *tao* is actually quite vague: it is sometimes used rather indiscriminately to refer to the salubrious forces of life that the practitioner is working to cultivate. For instance, one passage reads as follows:

The Way is what infuses the structures [of the mind] yet men are unable to secure it.

It goes forth but does not return, it comes back but does not stay.

Silent! none can hear its sound.

Sudden! so it rests in the mind.

Obscure! one cannot see its form.

Surging! it arises along with me.

We cannot see its form, we cannot hear its sound, yet we can put a sequence to its development.

Call it "Way."¹⁵

One also encounters a line that is virtually identical to passages in the *Tao te ching*: "What gives

¹⁵ Translation from Roth, p. 130. Cf. Rickett, p. 159.

life to all things and brings them to perfection is called the Way." But otherwise, the term *tao* is seldom identified in the terms that are familiar to readers the *Tao te ching* or the *Chuang-tzu*. In the *Nei Yeh*, the term is generally used as an equivalent of its technical terms for the spiritual realities that the practitioner is being instructed to attract and retain by means of tranquillizing the heart/mind.

Thematic Contrasts between the Nei Yeh and the Familiar "Taoist Classics"

Clearly, the *Nei Yeh* has a specific and identifiable focus, articulated in terms comprehensible to the careful reader. But it is also clear that if we are intellectually honest, the teachings of this text are quite distinguishable from those of the more familiar texts of classical Taoism. For instance, while terms like *te* and *tao* appear frequently in all the texts, they are used in different senses in different texts, as well as in different passages of the same text. *Neither term is thus a "basic concept" of some general philosophical system: each term carried a variety of meanings among the people who developed "Taoist" ideas across ancient China.* We should thus beware the common tendency of assuming that certain teachings of the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang-tzu* were in any sense representative of a coherent ancient Chinese school of thought, much less normative for identifying "Taoist" beliefs and values in general.

Secondly, it should be noticed that the portrait of the Taoist life in the *Nei Yeh* is in some ways quite dissimilar to that which we generally encounter in the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang-tzu*. For instance, the key to life in the *Nei Yeh* is one's diligent effort to attract and retain spiritual forces named *ch'i*, *ching* and *shen*. While each of those terms does occur here and there in both the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu*, seldom in those texts do we find the specific teachings that are so basic to the *Nei Yeh*.¹⁶ In particular, it is hard to think of passages from either of the more

¹⁶ The terms *ching* and *shen* are both used in the *Tao te ching*, but never together, and never clearly referring to spiritual forces or processes within a person. *Ching* appears in *Tao te ching* 21. *Shen* is used in ch. 39 to refer to spiritual beings; in ch. 29 as a modifier of *t'ien-hsia* ("the world"); and in chs. 6 and 60 — where it is usually understood as referring to spiritual beings, but might

familiar texts that suggest that the thing called *tao* is a force that can come into or go out of a person, or that one it is necessary to engage in specific practices to get the *tao* to come or to keep it from going away.¹⁷ In the more familiar texts, the term *tao* generally seems to suggest a universal reality from which one can never really be ontologically separated.¹⁸

In addition, the practices commended in the *Nei Yeh* are much more clearly physiological in nature than we are accustomed of thinking of Taoist practice as being. Indeed, one of the reasons that some of the teachings of the *Tao te ching* have become domesticated in Western culture is that the public believes those teachings to involve no regular, definable practices that involve one's physical existence. According to such beliefs, the Taoist life is essentially stative: it never involves specific practices that carry historical or cultural baggage, and certainly never involves any work.

It should also be noted that the *Nei Yeh* never presents the spiritual life in terms of "practicing *wu-wei*." Here, the Taoist life is not a stative life of "just being," or of "being spontaneous," but rather a very active life of specific practices, practices that must be carefully learned and properly performed if one is ever to come into possession of such elusive forces as *tao*. In this framework, *the Taoist life involves personal responsibility, dedication to a life of constant*

conceivably refer to spiritual forces within a person. In the "inner chapters" of the *Chuang-tzu*, the term *ching* appears but twice. It appears much more frequently (30 times) in the "outer" and "mixed" chapters, where the compound term *ching-shen* appears 8 times.

¹⁷ Harold Roth (private communication) has noted that the "Syncretist" 15th chapter of the *Chuang-tzu* contains ideas akin to those found in the *Nei yeh*. Graham has included that chapter in his translation, *Chuang-tzu* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 264-67.

¹⁸ A religious comparison may be in order here. In many religious contexts (e.g., in Shinto), people engage in ritual worship in the devout expectation that a certain divinity will approach the place of worship and stay for the period of worship. In other contexts (e.g., in Christianity and Judaism), believers generally assume that God is always present in some meaningful sense. In a Christian cathedral, God is never truly absent: worship does not cause God to come hither from some other place, and the conclusion of worship is not experienced as God leaving to go elsewhere. The former scenario is reminiscent of the spiritual practices described in the *Nei Yeh*, while the latter is more reminiscent of the worldview envisaged in the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu*.

self-discipline, and conscientious daily practice. Moreover, this practice involves the purification and proper ordering of one's body as well as one's "heart/mind." It would be excessive to say that the *Nei Yeh* teaches a "Taoist yoga," but it clearly does assume that the *spiritual* life involves practices that also have *physical* components, even extending to moderation in eating. I thus refer to such activities more broadly as "biospiritual practices."

Neither the *Tao te ching* nor the *Chuang-tzu* are so clearly focussed upon biospiritual practices. While they do contain passages that allude to such practices, their writers (or at least the editors) have many other teachings to convey, teachings that are generally absent from the *Nei Yeh*. For instance, as Rickett observed long ago, the concepts of *yin* and *yang* are nowhere seen in the *Nei Yeh*.¹⁹ Modern beliefs egregiously exaggerate the centrality of those concepts in the Taoist tradition. In reality, the concepts of *yin* and *yang* were never specifically Taoist. The terms do appear in the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu*, though in quite minor roles. But the world of the *Nei Yeh* is a world quite devoid of *yin* and *yang*.

Other differences between the *Nei Yeh* and the more familiar texts seem not to have been remarked upon by other readers. For instance, there are few teachings in the *Nei Yeh* involving issues of government. Though modern conceptions commonly associate Taoism with the life of the individual rather than with social or political concerns, such was never really the case. Social and political concerns always played an important role in Taoism, from classical times into the later imperial period.²⁰ The *Tao te ching*, for its part, contains dozens of passages discussing the problems involved with ruling a state. Indeed, some respected scholars have long characterized the *Tao te ching* as "a handbook for rulers." Such a characterization is actually something of an exaggeration, but the point here is that the *Nei Yeh* displays little interest in issues of govern-

¹⁹ Rickett, p. 155.

²⁰ See, for instance, Kirkland, "The Roots of Altruism in the Taoist Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986), 59-77; and "Taoism," in *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 5: 2463-2469.

ment.²¹

In addition, the *Nei Yeh* differs from both the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* in that it never critiques or ridicules the beliefs or practices of Confucians. Once again, there is a common misconception that "Taoism" arose as a reaction against Confucianism, and that Taoists always clearly differentiated their teachings from those of the Confucians. However, there is nothing in the *Nei Yeh* that criticizes Confucian teachings. In fact, there are clear and unmistakable continuities between the teachings of the *Nei Yeh* and certain elements of the teachings of the 4th-century Confucian known as Mencius.²² What is missing from the *Nei Yeh* is the Confucian emphasis upon saving society by reviving within one's personal life the principles of proper

²¹ Pace Graham, who issues the unsubstantiated assertion that the *Nei Yeh* is "as usual addressed primarily to the ruler" (104). There is only a single passage the entire text of the *Nei Yeh* that suggests a political framework:

To transform without altering the *ch'i*,
To change without altering the awareness,
Only the gentleman (*chün-tzu*) who clings to oneness is able to do this!
If one can cling to oneness and not lose it, one can master (*chün*) the myriad things.
The gentleman acts on things; he is not acted on by things.
From the orderliness of having attained oneness
He has a well-governed heart/mind within himself.
(Consequently,) well-governed words issue from his mouth,
And well-governed activity is extended to others.
In this way, he governs the world.
When a single word is obtained, the world submits;
When a single word is fixed, the world heeds.
This is what is called "public rightness" (*kung*).

(translation mine; cf. Rickett, 161; Roth does not translate this passage.) Note, however, that this passage does not assume that the reader is already a ruler. Rather than assuming that the reader has been born into the position of ruler, or has maneuvered himself into political power, the passage teaches that a highly adept practitioner can, by meditational practice, achieve the ability to exert influence over the world. There seems to be no other passage in the text that assumes a political interest on the part of the reader. Generally, the *Nei Yeh* instructs the individual in the performance of certain practices, and its intended readership was either a small group of students practicing in a specific lineage (as Roth suggests) or, like perhaps the readership of *Chuang-tzu*, a fairly general audience of thoughtful people who are willing to do what is necessary to live wisely.

²² On the commonalities in the use of the term *ch'i* in the two texts, see Rickett, 155-56. We may also note that both Mencius and the *Nei-yeh* seem to assume (1) that one is born with a heart/mind that is inherently pure or perfected; (2) that we lost those qualities and became confused, and (3) that by returning to the original purity of our heart/mind, we allow an inherent harmony to take the place of unnatural confusion. When one reads in the *Nei Yeh* that "the emotions of the heart are benefited by rest and quiet" (Rickett, 159), one cannot but think of Mencius' comments about Ox Mountain in *Meng-tzu* 6A8.

moral/social behavior known as *li*. The reader of the *Nei Yeh* is taught how to align him/herself with the forces at work in the world, because doing so is necessary for one's personal well-being. There is little trace of a belief that one is responsible for changing *society*. On the other hand, those who held such beliefs are neither faulted nor mocked. So while sections of both the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* were composed by opponents of Confucianism, such sentiments are not found in the *Nei Yeh*.

Another theme conspicuously absent is the idea that the ideal society is a small-scale community without civilized technology or complex socio-political institutions. That idea is most familiar to the modern audience from the 80th chapter of the *Tao te ching*, though there are other examples in the *Chuang-tzu*. Several scholars have recently begun referring to such ideals as a distinct "phase" or "voice" of early Taoism, to which they refer as "Primitivist."²³ But as some of those scholars have already noted, the *Nei Yeh* is completely devoid of such ideals. Thus, the Rousseau-esque idea that Taoism consists of a rejection of civilization in favor of simpler ways of living is inaccurate. It would seem that a person could follow the teachings of the *Nei Yeh* within nearly any social context, and that it never occurred to the text's compilers that any one type of social setting might be preferable to any other. The *Nei Yeh* does not, therefore, provide the antidote to the Industrial Revolution that Westerners have sometimes claimed to find in "philosophical Taoism."

So if we have here a form of Taoism that is fundamentally disinterested in social issues, would it be correct to say that it is basically more concerned with our place in the universe? Well, in a certain sense, yes, but it is important to note that the *Nei Yeh* is also unconcerned with many of the cosmological issues with which modern readers are often so fascinated. For example, there is no real discussion of cosmogony in the *Nei Yeh*. Other Taoist texts sometimes discuss

²³ See Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 306-11; and Roth, 123.

the origin of the world, in terms that sometimes seem to combine poetry with philosophy.²⁴ But the *Nei Yeh* contains no such passages. It alludes to no "Non-Being" from which "Being" comes, and it posits no eternal reality ontologically prior to, or separate from, the present world — no "noumenon" to contrast with the "phenomena" of life as we know it. The closest thing to a cosmogonic passage in the *Nei Yeh* would seem to be its opening lines:

The vital essence (*ching*) of all things —
This is what makes life come into being:
Below, it generates the five grains,
Above, it brings about the constellated stars.
When it flows in the interstices of Heaven and Earth,
It is called "spiritual beings";
When it is stored up inside [a person's] chest,
He is called "a sage."²⁵

But here we are clearly dealing with a life-force that operates within the world, a force of generation that is spiritual in nature, and can be localized either within independent spiritual beings or within a person who successfully collects and stores it. But there is no suggestion here of any noumenal reality that has an ontological existence separate from the reality of which we are all a part. "Being" does not come from "Non-Being," and the composers show no interest in constructing any cosmological theories. These facts are brought home most clearly when we encounter the term *tao* in the text, for as noted earlier, in the *Nei Yeh* the term *tao* clearly refers to a transient reality that a person needs to attract and to retain. It is not some universal transcendent that one attains by developing some "mystical gnosis" qualitatively distinct from normal

²⁴ One thinks most readily of chapters 1 and 25 of the *Tao te ching*, and of the opening chapter of the *Huai-nan-tzu*. The cosmogonic chapters of the *Tao te ching* are examined in Norman J. Girardot, "Myth and Meaning in the *Tao te ching*," *History of Religions* 16 (1976-77), 294-328.

²⁵ Translation mine; cf. Roth, p. 129.

experience.²⁶

Nor is there any discussion in the *Nei Yeh* of the theme of "change." There is little trace, for instance, of the notion that there is an unchanging cosmic force beyond the world of change. Nor is there a poetic image of a sagely person who blissfully flows or drifts along with life's ongoing processes. The latter idea may be present in passages of the *Chuang-tzu*, but there is nothing like it in the *Nei Yeh*, any more than there is in the *Tao te ching*. In the *Nei Yeh*, one neither transcends change nor adapts to it: there is, in fact, no mention of life as a process of change or flux. Rather, the *Nei Yeh* teaches that there is a salubrious natural force, or set of forces, that are elusive: they are not ephemeral — they are enduring — but they do not stay in one place unless a person has transformed him/herself into an efficient receiver and receptacle for those forces. A good analogy for them might be radio waves, which are constantly flowing around and through us, but can only be held and put to use by a device that is properly tuned. To extend this metaphor a bit more, the *Nei Yeh* seems to suggest that we are radios that were all properly designed, and were originally fully functional; but now we experience interference in the form of excessive activity in the heart/mind, and we need to re-tune ourselves to eliminate that interference and begin functioning properly again. For these reasons, it would be correct to say that the *Nei Yeh* requires self-corrective activity, just as the other Taoist texts do, but that the *Nei Yeh's* model for understanding and practicing self-correction is fairly unique.

The *Nei Yeh* also gives the lie to yet other misconceptions of Taoism, including some held by thoughtful philosophers. One such misconception is that Taoist teachings are deeply iconoclastic, antinomian, even revolutionary. According to this view, the basic thrust of Taoism is to jolt the individual into a realization that he/she should reject traditional beliefs and values,

²⁶ Chad Hansen has argued persuasively that the common belief that the more familiar Taoist texts present "the Tao" as a Parmenidean "unchanging, abstract one behind the many" is deeply mistaken, and explains the mistake as having originated among the Neo-Confucians. See his *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 27.

condemning them as the artificial constructs of an oppressive society. This interpretation of classical Taoism is not just the conceit of 1960s Hippies who saw it as a condemnation of "establishment culture." Generations of Westerners — Americans in particular, perhaps — have read the *Tao te ching*, and parts of the *Chuang-tzu*, as a post-Enlightenment gospel of individual freedom, freedom from the uncomfortable aspects of "Society" in general, and of Western culture in particular.

One version of this modern concept of Taoism can be seen in certain recent analyses by the respected philosopher Chad Hansen. Hansen seems to perpetuate the notion that Taoism is essentially an attempt to undermine acceptance of "convention." He argues that the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang-tzu* both begin from a "linguistic skepticism (which) arises against a background assumption that language is a social mechanism for regulating people's behavior." Speaking of the composer of the *Tao te ching*, Hansen says, "His political and practical advice is almost invariably the reversal of *conventional* political and moral attitudes. He reverses conventional values, preferences, or desires..." Why? "All learning of distinctions comes with dispositions to prefer one or the other... (But) trained discriminations are not a constantly reliable guide to behavior. Culturally motivated preferences based on those distinctions are, on the whole, unreliable. And they control us in insidious, unnatural ways."²⁷ While Hansen may be partly or wholly correct in his assessment of the role of culture in forming individuals' dispositions, it is dubious whether that assessment was present in the minds of the Taoists of classical China, particularly in the mind in the compiler of the *Tao te ching*. Most of Hansen's "Daoist theory of knowledge" is woven from certain themes in *Chuang-tzu*, where such issues do indeed seem to be addressed. But such intricate treatment of "knowledge," "language," "convention," etc., are not found in the *Tao te ching*, which addresses concerns that are quite distinguishable from those of the compiler(s) of the *Chuang-tzu*, especially a variety of moral and political concerns. And in

²⁷ Hansen, pp. 223-24.

the *Nei Yeh*, there is no trace of any critique of the relationship between culture and knowledge or desire. The *Nei Yeh* does not critique "conventional society" and urge us to reject it, nor does it critique language, nor does it urge us to beware socially-inculcated valuations.

There are yet other distinctive features to the teachings of the *Nei Yeh*. For instance, unlike the *Tao te ching*, it has nothing to say about issues of gender. There are several passages in the *Tao te ching* that commend a "feminine" attitude or behavior, such as humility or yielding. Such passages appear to imply that what is wrong with our normal attitudes and behavior is that they are excessively "masculine." Such ideas, however, are seldom seen in texts like the *Chuang-tzu*, and they are likewise absent from the *Nei Yeh*. The compilers of the *Nei Yeh* do teach that there are attitudes and behaviors that we should forego, but there is no gender imagery associated with them.

In this connection, one might ask whether the three texts share the same intended audience. Were any or all of them intended specifically for men? Well, one may infer that when the reader is given advice presumed useful for achieving political goals, the reader was presumed to be male, since, in ancient China, political participation by women was not an option (except for a spouse or immediate family member of a man who held a position of authority). As mentioned earlier, the *Nei Yeh* is comparable to most sections of the *Chuang-tzu* in that the reader is seldom assumed to be someone attempting to engage in political rule. It is also true that in ancient China women seldom achieved literacy, so one could argue that any written text was intended only for men. But such reasoning ignores other possibilities, such as that of a family or group that included both men and women, all interested in learning how to live from a text that few of them could actually read themselves. One should also note that the *Nei Yeh* (like much of the *Tao te ching*) is composed largely in verse, and that some scholars believe that certain sections "may have been borrowed from some early Taoist hymn."²⁸ We must bear in mind that though ancient

²⁸ Rickett, 154.

China did produce some written texts, it was still largely an oral society, in which most people of either gender acquired and dispensed information and advice primarily, if not exclusively, by word of mouth. The *Nei Yeh* is almost certainly a text containing teachings that originated in an oral tradition. And there is little in the content of those teachings that would seem to be either more or less practiceable by members of either gender.

Another distinctive feature of the *Nei Yeh* is that it seems to lack the idea of "Heaven" (T'ien) as a benign guiding force in life. Both the Confucians and the Mohists shared some version of that idea, reflecting more generally held beliefs that dated back to at least the end of the second millennium BCE. Today such ideas are not generally associated with Taoism, for Taoists, by modern definition, believe in an impersonal reality called "Tao" that transcends all other realities, including "Heaven." Such is not entirely the case, of course. Several chapters of the *Tao te ching* speak of "the Way of Heaven" (*T'ien-tao* or *T'ien-chih-tao*), a beneficent force that seems to have will as well as agency.²⁹ But there is little trace of such ideas in the *Nei Yeh*.³⁰

Finally, we should address the issue of morality. Are the teachings of the *Nei Yeh* concerned solely with internal self-cultivation? Is there any evidence that the practitioner is ever to give any thought to anyone other than him- or herself? This is a key question, because virtually all modern interpreters, Chinese and Western alike, have accused Taoism of being inimical to the idea that a person should be concerned about others:

Taoism pictures the person as a wanderer in the void, and perceives his happiness to lie in drifting with the stream, unanchored by the network of demands and responsibilities....[In Taoism, the] happiness one is concerned with is one's own,

²⁹ See *Tao te ching* 47, 73, 77, 79, 81.

³⁰ The character *T'ien* appears in a number of passages of the *Nei Yeh*, but usually as part of the compound *T'ien-Ti* ("Heaven and Earth"). There is one passage stating that if one practices properly, one's will or intention will proceed in a Heavenly fashion (cf. Rickett, p. 167). So if the compilers believed in Heaven as an active agency that makes choices about life's events and intervenes to guide those events in a certain direction, there is little indication of it in the text.

logically independent of the happiness of others....[The] follower of the Way is necessarily a loner....³¹

Elsewhere I have attempted to demonstrate that such accusations are wholly inaccurate, at least in regard to the *Tao te ching*. That text enjoins the reader to practice "goodness" (*shan*), which involves extending oneself toward others impartially so as to benefit them. In the *Tao te ching*, the Taoist life is one in which one achieves self-fulfillment as one is selflessly benefitting the lives of others.³² Do we find such ideals in the *Nei Yeh*? I can find little evidence of them. There are a few passages for which one might be able to make an argument that the reader is to think of providing benefits to others, but none that seems clearly to express such ideals.³³ Certainly, as compared to the *Tao te ching*, the *Nei Yeh* lacks any clear moral concern, and does in fact give the overall impression that "the happiness one is concerned with is one's own."

Conclusion

It is clear that the *Nei Yeh* is quite distinct in content from either the *Tao te ching* or the *Chuang-tzu*, despite the texts' many similarities. The *Nei Yeh*, we should recall, was earlier than the *Tao te ching*, and could even be interpreted as an example of "the earliest Taoist teachings." The *Tao te ching* shows clear evidence that its compilers were deeply concerned with the social

³¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (1972; rpt. Columbia University Press, 1988), 114-17.

³² See Kirkland, "Selflessness and Self-Fulfillment: The Moral Teachings of the *Daode Jing*," in Michael G. Barnhart, ed., *Varieties of Ethical Reflection* (in progress).

³³ The most likely possibility would seem to be a line that, in Ricketts' translation, says that when one has brought the *ch'i* to rest by means of one's *te*, "all things obtain their fulfillment" (Rickett, 158). But the original text is actually far less clear. It reads *wan-wu pi te*, which Roth translates more literally as, "the myriad things will to the last one be grasped" (Roth, 129). Rickett's reading feels more comfortable in light of the overall tenor of classical Chinese thought, but Roth's seems more in line with the tenor of the *Nei Yeh*. The commentator clearly shares Rickett's interpretation, for he says concerning this line, "if one uses one's awareness to bring peace to things, things all obtain benefit." But there is no reason a priori to assume that the commentator understood the original sense of the line. Most other passages that might seem to suggest moral teachings are equally debatable.

and political issues that concerned members of other schools of thought, particularly the Mohists and Confucians. One could thus reasonably even characterize the teachings of the *Nei Yeh* as "original Taoism," and the teachings of the *Tao te ching* as "applied Taoism." Though the *Tao te ching* may have, in some sense, emerged from the same general tradition that produced the *Nei Yeh*, its compilers were interested in the issues of living in human society as much as, if not more than, they were interested in the practice of "inner cultivation." Further attention to the differences among the assumptions and concerns of all these texts should provide greater insight into the divergent communities that produced such materials, and of the divergent models of the Taoist life that they envision.