

## On So-called “Daoist Philosophy”

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So-called “Daoist philosophy” (*zhéxué* 哲學), also discussed in terms of disembodied thought (*sīxiǎng* 思想), is a modern fiction with little to no connection to the Daoist tradition as such. Like attempts to legitimize and draw cultural capital from Daoism as “science” (*kēxué* 科學), so-called “Daoist philosophy,” especially as presented by scholars of so-called Chinese philosophy, Asian philosophy, and comparative philosophy, is rooted in colonialist, missionary and Orientalist legacies, including in the form of “internalized colonialism” and “reverse Orientalism.” It simultaneously disparages the larger Daoist tradition, and in the process disempowers and marginalizes actual Daoists and Daoist communities, often through the promotion of academics as “surrogates of tradition.” There are, in turn, deeply disturbing, accompanying careerist motivations and outcomes.

Scholars and connoisseurs of so-called “Daoist philosophy” utilize a variety of inaccurate, outdated, and uncritical views of Daoism. They reduce the Daoist tradition to classical Daoism (so-called *dàojiā* 道家 [Family of the Dao]), specifically through reference to so-called philosophical Daoism [*sic*] and almost exclusive citation of the *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzǔ*; Book of Venerable Masters; a.k.a. *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 [*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power]) and *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzǔ*; Book of Master Zhuang; a.k.a. *Nánhuá jīng* 南華經 [Scripture of Southern Florescence]), that is, so-called “Lǎo-Zhuāng Daoism.” They present “Daoism” as an intellectual artifact through textual reconstructions, specifically selective and deficient interpretations of the texts (adherents and communities) in question. Such individuals tend to ignore the contemplative and mystical dimensions of the classical Daoist textual corpus and its larger Daoist pedigree and connection. They also utilize and apply Western philosophical categories like “nihilism,” “relativism,” “skepticism,” and so forth. Their readings of classical Daoist texts are most often rooted in early medieval Xuánxué 玄學 (Hsüán-Hsüeh; so-called “Neo-Daoism” [*sic*]), especially the works of Guō Xiàng 郭象 (252-312) and Wáng Bì 王弼 (226-249 CE), possibly the closest that one can get to something like pre-modern Chinese “Daoist philosophers.” It is thus no coincidence that Wáng Bì’s commentary (DZ 690) is the only such work to receive multiple translations (four to be exact), as it gives modern readers what they want: A colonized and domesticated *Dàodé jīng* freed from its lineal and communal context and more easily appropriated by modern intellectualist, spiritualist and metaphysical tastes, including via the “*Tao Te Ching* Translation Industry” (TTCTI).

The most influential Western representative of this trajectory is Roger Ames 安樂哲 (b. 1947; University of Hawaii, Manoa/Peking University), although it has some earlier connections to the work of A.C. Graham 葛瑞漢 (1919-1991; University of London) and Benjamin Schwartz 史華慈 (1916-1999; Harvard University). It is most conspicuously perpetuated in the Ames-controlled academic journal *Philosophy East and West* and the Chinese Philosophy and Culture series through the State University of New York (SUNY) Press. Other key Western representatives include Chad Hansen 陳漢生 (University of Hong Kong), Philip Ivanhoe 艾文賀 (Georgetown University),

Hans-Georg Moeller 梅勒 (University of Macau), and Brook Ziporyn 任博克 (University of Chicago). It also includes the absurd modern Chinese phenomenon of so-called “Xīn Dàojiā 新道家” (New Daojia [‘Philosophical Daoism’ *sic*]), represented by Chinese scholar-philosophers like Liú Xiàogǎn 劉笑敢 (b. 1947; Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Wáng Kǎ 王卡 (b. 1956; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences).

There are a number of potential remedies to mistaken categories like so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ *philosophical Daoism* [*sic*] and mischaracterizations of Daoism as “philosophy” in the conventional Western sense of disembodied ideas and thought. First, in terms of indigenous Chinese *Daoist* views, one may reread the associated texts and contexts through the emic lenses of *dào* 道 (“way/Way”), *jiā* 家 (“family”), *pài* 派 (“lineage”), *shù* 術 (“techniques”), *zǐ* 子 (“master/disciple”), and the like. Then, second, one will discover the central importance of apophatic and quietistic meditation. That is, the “philosophy” in question involves specific views, psychospiritual modes, and ways of being, perceiving, and living *rooted in practice*. This includes a shared, informing theology (sacred) and soteriology (ultimate purpose) centering on the *Dào* 道 as the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. Some indigenous classical and foundational Daoist names for the *assumed and shared meditation practice* include *shǒuyī* 守一 (“guarding the One”), *xīnzhāi* 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”), and *zuòwàng* 坐忘 (“sitting-in-forgetfulness”). These result in a uniquely *Daoist mode of embodied being-in-the-world*, consisting of associated contemplative states and mystical experiences. The latter include *dìng* 定 (“absorption”), *jìng* 靜 (“stillness”), *tóng* 同 (“sameness”), *tōng* 通 (“connection/pervasion”), *wú* 無 (“nonbeing”), *xū* 虛 (“emptiness”), and *yī* 一 (“oneness”), among others. Third, and more in line with, though simultaneously challenging the mainstream ethos and hermeneutic tendencies of Western European and North American philosophy, one might revise said “philosophy” through the revisionist views and approaches of Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) and the later Michel Foucault (1926-1984), specifically their respective emphasis on “spiritual exercises” and “techniques of self.” These involve self-directed transformation via specific training regimens. That is, “transformative praxis” is involved and required.