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BOOK REVIEW

Laozi. Dao De Jing

Illustrated by C. C. Tsai. Foreword by Pico Iyer

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020,
xvi + 167 pp.

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Following his *Confucius, The Analects* and *Sunzi, The Art of War* published in 2018, and his *Zhuangzi, The Way of Nature* published in 2019 (reviewed in *JEACS*, vol. 1, 2020), the *Dao De Jing* is the fourth of C. C. Tsai's cartoon versions of one of China's philosophical classics, provided with a contemporary English translation and published in the series *The Illustrated Library of Chinese Classics* of Princeton University Press (his fifth, *The Ways of Zen*, was published in July 2021).

The *Dao De Jing*, a text of 81 short chapters, is the Chinese classic of which the most translations into other languages have been made. Within this multitude of over 250 different translations, C. C. Tsai's 'translation' takes a unique position, as it juxtaposes the original Chinese texts with cartoons that excel in "daoist" simplicity and persuasiveness – and in some way resemble the famous *bianwen* genre of pre-modern Chinese literature. In the present edition, the original layout of C. C. Tsai's timeless cartoons has been kept intact: the original classical Chinese text is placed in the margins of each page, and the cartoons take center stage. C. C. Tsai's colloquial Chinese (*baihua*) in the text balloons has been replaced with Brian Bruya's translation into contemporary English. The cartoon version of the *Dao De Jing* is preceded by a biography of Laozi (pp. 7-12), based on the text in Sima Qian's *Shi ji (Laozi Han Fei liezhuan, lxiii)*.

In his Introduction to the work (pp. xi-xv), Brian Bruya briefly mentions the problems surrounding the person of Laozi and the original version of the text. In-depth knowledge of these two points that are, indeed, the subject of academic research and discussion may not be the primary concern of the lay reader; however, the brevity with which these issues are treated here leaves unused the possibility of exploring the myth-building around the person of Laozi and the importance this may have had for the appeal of his text. But, on the other hand, leaving out the mythical aspect of the work may precisely be conducive to interpreting the text for its contemporary value, an aspect that is touched upon in the Foreword by Pico Iyer (pp. ix-x).

In the same way as C. C. Tsai became one of Asia's most famous cartoonists with his editions of the Chinese classics, this Princeton University Press series also has the potential to become a point of reference for contemporary philosophical cartoons.