

The Contemplative Foundations of Classical Daoism. By Harold D. Roth. NY: State University of New York, 2021. Pp. xiv + 558. \$95.00 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

In his well-known commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005, Steve Jobs tells the story of connecting the dots. Some isolated decisions in his youth made clear sense to him retrospectively, when looking backward on his life. I had a similar feeling going through this collected volume of Harold Roth, Professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies and Founder of the Contemplative Studies Program at Brown University. The thirteen republished papers in the volume are like dots that not only give clear evidence of his major insights in the field of classical Daoism, but also bear testimony to the evolution of more than twenty-five years of scholarship: the growing connections made with recent scientific discoveries, his swelling impatience with academic prejudices, and the increasingly promising application of contemplative practices in college education.

The Contemplative Foundations of Classical Daoism is divided into two parts. Part I, “Textual Methods” (chapters 1–7), applies “form criticism,” “redaction criticism,” “composition criticism,” and “narrative criticism” to pre-Han and Han sources in order to identify a set of classical Daoist texts. Part II, “Philosophical Contexts” (chapters 8–13), connects the contemplative techniques described in these sources to various strands and stages of early Daoist thought. I will try to unravel and highlight three core claims that represent the author’s most influential contributions to the field.

One of Roth’s deepest convictions is that early Daoism was not primarily a matter of abstract philosophy but rather of contemplative practices and mystical experiences leading to specific insights into the self, the world, rulership, or the human mind. Taught in master-disciples lineages, these practices consisted of meditation in the form of emptying the mind by concentrating on one’s breath or visualizations. Those practices tended to be “bimodal” in the sense that the inward focus on cleansing the mind was accompanied by a transformed and flexible relation to the outward world, a “cognitive attunement” or “flowing cognition,” eventually leading to sagely rulership or a personally meaningful life.

A second conviction is the warning against the imposition of European (or Western) categories onto the Chinese material. This imposition began most forcefully about one century ago with the adoption of Western academic institutions and their distinct disciplines, such as philosophy, religion, psychology, or politics. Roth’s alternative approach actively resists this imposition of unquestioned categories that have caused blind spots in the interpretation of early Chinese texts. Scholars in philosophy departments tend to focus upon theoretical speculation

and exclude mystical experiences, those in religious studies departments restrict their attention to expressions of belief in supernatural beings, the psychology department relegates experiences of self-transcendence to religious studies, etc. According to Roth, by sticking to these presumably universal paradigms, the study of early China has missed out on potentially valuable information that defies these divisions. Hence, inspired by phenomenology and recent scientific research (“Task-Irrelevant Perceptual Learning” and “tacit knowledge”), Roth challenges some ingrained prejudices and fixed meanings by appealing to a rich non-Western tradition, such as early Daoism.

A third core portion of his research is the identification of at least three stages or strands in early Daoism: “Individualists” focusing on personal cultivation with a cosmological vision on the Way (*Dao* 道) and its Potency (*De* 德), followed by “Primitivists” applying self-cultivation strategies to rulership, and ultimately by “Syncretists” amplifying their views with knowledge from other lineages, also in the service of government. These stages are associated with specific texts, such as the *Guanzi*’s 管子 “*Nei Ye*” 內業 (Inward training) and the *Zhuangzi*’s 莊子 Inner Chapters (1–7) representing the first stage, the *Laozi* 老子 (*Daodejing* 道德經) and some later *Zhuangzi* chapters (8–11) representing the second stage, and the so-called *Huangdi sijing* 皇帝四經 (Four canons of the Yellow Thearch) and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 representing the last one. Underlying this reconstruction of classical Daoism is Roth’s rejection of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as the foundational sources of Daoist thought. He identifies the agelong priority given to these two texts as a heritage from neo-Daoist scholarship in the fourth century C.E. with its mystical and cosmological interests, at the expense of original political and psychological content. Roth’s alternative is a portrayal of Daoism based on Sima Tan’s 司馬談 description of “*Daojia*” 道家 around 100 B.C.E. That category fits the Syncretic stage and what may also have been called Huang Lao 黃老 in the Han dynasty. As a result of this broadened focus, Roth has been able to contribute to the disclosure of sources that were generally not (or not always, or not consistently) considered Daoist, such as a selection of chapters from the *Guanzi*, *Liushi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, or *Huainanzi*.

The volume contains a wealth of scholarship surrounding these three core convictions. By liberating the texts from the boundaries of modern academia, Roth has generated valuable insights into the undeniably important and understudied practices of self-cultivation, going from various descriptions of techniques to reflections on their beneficial effects. A second and corollary advantage is that this portrayal of early Daoism helps dissolve the supposed gap between pre-Qin philosophical Daoism and later Han religious practices. Roth’s broad vision of classical Daoism, moreover, guides the reader through a wealth of early sources

aside from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. More generally, his caution against ethnocentric prejudices and his endeavors to introduce self-cultivation practices into academia are signs of promising evolutions in Western thought and education.

Despite my appreciation for all these features of Roth's research, I do not share all his convictions. The arguments brought forward for his reconstruction of classical Daoism are based on careful textual research, identification of philosophical evolutions, critical reasoning, and a cautious use of imagination. Yet, as he points out more than once, there exists extremely little evidence for the reconstruction of specifically Daoist instruction lineages or practitioners' communities. More importantly, I would not insist on giving pre-Han texts a label that neither they nor their contemporaries nor even Han sources attribute to them. On the other hand, I would expect sources that are categorized as "*Daojia*" in the Han, such as *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, to be taken into consideration for such a reconstruction. And, finally, I am less convinced of the reliability of some important building blocks of Roth's reconstruction, such as "Yangism," "Legalism," or "Huang Lao." Rather than declaring Roth's claims mistaken, I would opt for a larger acceptance of ignorance. Following the spirit of *Zhuangzi*, I find this portrayal of classical Daoism a bit too much forced into a "shape" 形, thus failing to cherish the potential of remaining "tenuous" 虛. Even though not totally convinced by the core argument of this volume, I have learned a lot about early Chinese texts, self-cultivation, and the force of cultural prejudices. Occasional disagreement hence does not prevent the reader from being inspired and enlightened by Roth's lifelong research. I, therefore, warmly recommend this book to scholars of early Chinese thought and its contemporary relevance.

CARINE DEFOORT

KU Leuven

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202207_(75).0020