

## CHAPTER 5

# Taoism in Bits

### A Bit of Orientation

I would never claim to be an expert on Chinese thought, culture or philosophy. In fact, I would never claim to be an expert on anything. I tend to object to discourses organised by the notion of ‘expertise’. This is because the notion of expertise is often invoked as a way to exclude, subordinate or de-legitimise non-professional voices from discussions. Rather than being an ‘expert’, at best I am a scholar of cultural studies, popular culture and ideology with a life-long interest in martial arts. Almost everything I have learned about Chinese thought, culture or philosophy, I have learned through and in relation to martial arts and popular culture. As such, some may question what I could possibly have to say to anyone about Taoism; they may contest my authority to hold forth on such a complex subject and challenge the legitimacy of any claims I may make. However, any claims I could make in this respect relate to my long-term research interests in ideology and popular culture. In other words, this chapter will principally draw not on my ‘expertise’ but rather on my research (and) experience in these areas.

For this reason, this chapter begins from what might be called two ‘popular’ propositions. First, the proposition that it is widely understood that Taoism is Chinese. Second, the proposition that there was a veritable explosion of interest in Taoism in Western popular culture in the wake of (and arguably in response to) some of the major wars of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War (Watts 1990).

To flesh out the second proposition briefly: In particular, different kinds of Western interest in Taoism can be seen in the interests and orientations of the Beat Generation, the counterculture and, of course, hippies everywhere. It is often said that these interests had much to do with different kinds of rejection of, or protest against, the institutions that carried out the wars. In other

---

#### How to cite this book chapter:

Bowman, P. 2019. *Deconstructing Martial Arts*. Pp. 91–106. Cardiff: Cardiff University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/book1.f>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

words, Western institutions and their ideologies were regarded by the Beats, the counterculture and the hippies in particular as being inhuman and driven by a machine-like rationality involving industrial-scale, exploitative instrumentality, all of which came to be regarded as something to be rejected (Clarke 1997; Heath and Potter 2006). In contrast to the dominant Western religions, philosophies, ideologies and worldviews, Taoism always seemed very different: A philosophy of the moment, the present, the experience, the natural, the ecological, and the ethical relation to the other. So, among other Eastern worldviews and philosophies, Taoism is often regarded as offering a genuine alternative to the outlooks driving the dominant status quo.

As for Taoism *itself*, there are many things to say about it. But these first two points – on the one hand, that Taoism comes from China, and, on the other hand, the Western interest in it – will structure much of what follows. In many respects, this chapter will chiefly be exploring the theme of the interest in Taoism in the West and the connection of this with martial arts. But all of this will be referred back and related to the subject of Taoism in China.

### A Bit of Taoism

Because of the ‘macro’ perspective that my framing has just set up, the coordinates that are already being used in this chapter are the highly problematic notions of the supposed *East* and the supposed *West* (Hall and Gieben 1991). As problematic as these terms have often been shown to be, there is worse to come: Sometimes I am going to talk about China, sometimes East Asia; sometimes I am going to talk about Europe, sometimes America; and other times I am going to talk about some nebulous monster called Euro-America. The reasons for using such shifting and mostly unsatisfactory and imprecise coordinates boil down to familiarity, convenience and the effort to produce an effect of clarity, even at the cost of a huge lack of specificity.

Given the use of such problematic, shape-shifting and crude mirages as East/West coordinates, one might reasonably hope for more precision regarding the object of attention itself, namely ‘Taoism’. However, the problem here is that an implied distinction between ‘Taoism in China’ and ‘Taoism in the West’ has already been generated, as if there were two different things with one name. However, there may be considerably more than one understanding of ‘Taoism’. As this preliminary distinction already suggests, there may be at least one Eastern one and at least one Western one. And these may not be the same. Yet, if such a proposition is unproblematically accepted and assumed, this is going to have consequences. For instance, such a binary may lead us to leap to a predictable conclusion, one that has two faces. First, it will become both possible and likely that we will be inclined to presume that it will obviously be the case that the *Chinese* Taoism is the one that must be regarded as the original and therefore authentic and therefore superior or true Taoism. And second, that

therefore any 'Western Taoism' must necessarily be secondary, derived, inauthentic, ersatz or inferior.

A deconstruction would unpick these assumptions at both ends, in terms of the complexity of the situation 'in the real world' and in terms of an awareness of the fact that this very binary was effectively invented (*constructed*) within this present argument itself. Although the kinds of assumptions that this argument reflects are certainly very familiar, a deconstructive approach would not follow this line of thinking at all. This is because this type of 'binary' thinking is saturated with all sorts of problems and introduces all sorts of prejudices (Chow 1995; Bowman 2010c). So, it is important to deconstruct and avoid them. At the very least, what should be borne in mind throughout is the possibility – or inevitability – that, instead of believing that there is one Chinese Taoism and one Western Taoism, there are inevitably going to be multiple (even myriad) different understandings and interpretations of Taoism in both East and West, including many which totally undercut, eradicate or dissolve the supposed border between East and West.

In other words, this is not going to be a discourse about a true Taoism of China versus a false Taoism of the West. Readers should be aware that there will be intricately sophisticated, nuanced and effectively authentic incarnations of Taoism in the West. Conversely, at the same time, there will be multiple modulations of Taoism in China, some of which may well have been invented recently, perhaps with motivated ideological ends or agendas.

### Taoism's Travels

It is important to reflect on all of this because it is vital to be vigilant against certain types of thinking and the unexamined bias(es) harboured within them. To help with this, there are multiple reasons, at the outset, to dispense with the idea of 'authenticity' (Heath and Potter 2006), as might be implied in an attribution of highest value to some idea of the 'original'. If we try to stop fetishizing ideas of original and authentic (perhaps because we are aware of the extent to which such ideas are themselves so often *contemporary inventions*), however, what might be the alternative?

One option is to replace the overvaluation of ideas of original and most authentic with the premise of any supposedly stable and unitary entity actually being elaborated over time and space in ongoing, open-ended, partial, and always in some sense incomplete iterations. Conversely, the search for authenticity implies a journey 'back to the source', and such thinking can be mired in ideological preconceptions exemplified by the idea of 'the original and best' versus 'most recent and least authentic/most inferior'. As Rey Chow has shown in her analyses of Chinese literary and cultural studies, for instance, the ideological and political effects of such styles of thinking can produce highly exclusionary hierarchies in which, for example, former colonies like Hong Kong are not

regarded within Chinese studies as being ‘properly Chinese’; hence the literature and culture produced in such areas are not deemed worthy of study within Chinese studies and excluded from the curriculum. The net result is a fetishistic fixation on ancient Chinese literature and culture – the older the better.

In this sense, the race to the origin is a race to a kind of mythically-manipulated past, and the search for the ‘most authentic’ can become a project that hierarchizes, orders and excludes many recent and very real forms of practice. Rather than this, cultural studies can be oriented with considerably more diverse and dynamic kinds of questions and perspectives. So, when it comes to questions about Taoism and culture, for example, one might consider beginning from a thoroughgoing questioning of what the ‘it’ is that is being referred to whenever we refer to ‘Taoism’. Which Taoism, where and when? Does ‘it’ stay the same over time? How? Why? Is it the same when it moves? Can such an ‘it’ travel? Can it travel intact? What conditions are required for the smooth transition of something like Taoism from one place to another, one time to another, one linguistic and cultural context to another, without it falling to pieces, breaking up, becoming something else altogether?

As can be seen in the previous paragraph, in challenging simplistic understandings, deconstruction has always tended to complicate things – arguably deconstruction often tends to overcomplicate matters. In this case, in a reflection on Taoism’s travels, we might pause to explore whether the movement of ‘Taoism’ from culture to culture, context to context, is a relatively straightforward or complex case of cultural movement or cross-cultural communication. Any enquiry will be required to address the question of what Taoism ‘is’. Given everything said so far, this may well turn out to be tricky, to say the least. Nonetheless, as with so many things, it is actually quite easy to come up with a rough outline of answer. For instance, as with so many other things, you can start simply by carrying out a cursory internet search.

The first result in the list generated by my Google search was the Wikipedia entry for Taoism. Admittedly, there are many reasons to doubt the reliability of every Wikipedia entry. So, I cross-referenced the Wikipedia entry with the second page listed in my search results, which was the BBC pages on Taoism.

(Many may baulk at my admitting something like this. However, part of the point of this exploration is to examine the general or popular cultural understandings of such a term. To do this requires referring to the main sources of information about it. Wikipedia and the BBC can be regarded as mainstream sources of information. Hence, there are multiple reasons to start from such webpages.)

The first paragraph of the Wikipedia entry on Taoism reads as follows:

Taoism (/ˈdaʊɪzəm/), also known as Daoism, is a religious or philosophical tradition of Chinese origin which emphasizes living in harmony with the *Tao* (道, literally ‘Way’, also romanized as *Dao*). The *Tao* is a fundamental idea in most Chinese philosophical schools; in Taoism,

however, it denotes the principle that is both the source, pattern and substance of everything that exists. Taoism differs from Confucianism by not emphasizing rigid rituals and social order. Taoist ethics vary depending on the particular school, but in general tend to emphasize *wu wei* (effortless action), ‘naturalness’, simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: *jing* (sperm/ovary energy, or the essence of the physical body), *qi* (‘matter-energy’ or ‘life force’, including the thoughts and emotions), and *shén* (spirit or generative power).

Specialist or expert academics could perhaps challenge such accessible characterisations. Nonetheless (and as unreliable as Wikipedia may sometimes be), this entry squares not only with the BBC pages that I cross-referenced it with but also with many other texts that I have read on Taoism before. For instance, as with other things that I have read on the subject, the Wikipedia entry concurs that: Taoism feeds from and back into lots of different kinds of Chinese intellectual and spiritual traditions; that it doesn’t quite fit into Western categories, yet it is not utterly alien to them; that in Western terms it straddles or flows between familiar Western conceptual categories like religion and philosophy; that it has specific theories, specific ideas and specific principles, but that there are different interpretations, different rituals and different obligations in terms of ethics, norms, mores and injunctions, in different approaches to Taoism, even within and across China.

If such a definition refers heavily to China, let’s flip perspective now and consider Europe or America. What does Taoism look like here?

If Taoism has a range of different incarnations in China, it seems fair to say that in the West it is mostly present only in bits. There is not much explicit or highly visible Taoism in the West. Of course, there is *some*. But, as the BBC website notes, the ritualistic and religious dimensions of much Chinese Taoism are almost unheard of in the West.

At the same time, a central symbol of Taoism, the yin-yang (or *taijitu*), is not at all uncommon. It is all over the place. Of course, when yin-yangs occur in the West, their status is unclear. Yin-yangs most commonly occur in what I will call for convenience subcultural contexts, or in the form of tattoos, or on children’s stickers, or in posters for taiji lessons at the local community or sports centre. Books, pictures and paraphernalia can be found on sale in hippy shops, head shops, and alternative lifestyle shops. But Taoism rarely appears in the West as part of a fully formed institutional existence.

Words and phrases involving the yin-yang occur frequently in explanations of how martial arts like taiji or bagua ‘work’ (sometimes also Japanese arts like aikido or even judo), and in relation to the practices of different kinds of qigong. But the Taoism of the West seems to manifest principally in or as *bits* of Taoism.

Indeed, to many, Taoism may still seem exotic or unusual – even though it is far from new to the West. There are several centuries long traditions of Western intellectual engagements with Chinese and other East Asian philosophies and

cosmologies (Said 1978; Clarke 1997; Sedgwick 2003). Many Western philosophers, theologians, theorists and thinkers have had many kinds of interest in many of the texts, traditions and practices of Taoism, along with other notable East Asian ‘things’, like Zen or Chan and other forms of Buddhism, as well as many less well-known shamanic practices, and so on.

### The Circulation of Yin-Yangs

Given this, what is the status of Taoism in the West? As mentioned, in some ways, Taoism – or at least the trappings of Taoism – or at least bits of it – have become familiar in the West. The yin-yang symbol is certainly very well-known, even if an understanding of the logic, argument, principles or cosmology it implies is often absent. It has mostly found its niche in the West on the bodies and clothes and décor of certain ‘types’: Hippies, alternatives, crusties, teens, martial artists, New Agers and so on.

Further empirical cultural or sociological analysis of the contexts in which the images, trappings, paraphernalia and ideas of Taoism have been grafted into the Western world would be rewarding. But my hypothesis is that if we were to do a visual cultural analysis and look to see where we could find visual evidence of the signs and symbols of Taoism in the West, the study would reveal that the signs and signifiers of Taoism are most frequently grafted onto or into contexts that present themselves (or are regarded) as alternative, non-mainstream, often possibly oppositional or quasi-oppositional, frequently martial artsy, as well as New Age and orientalist. In other words: Marginal (Bowman 2017b).

Of course, no visual or material cultural study could tell us everything about the status of Taoism in the West. For instance, a study of visual culture would remain blind to the reach, scope, and influence of Taoism in books – books of Taoism and books about Taoism. Today, a lot of this kind of communication and discourse has moved onto blogs, vlogs, and podcasts. And, while there might be ways to measure the scale of online discourse about Taoism, it would still ultimately be impossible to ascertain the status, reach, influence or place of such discourse in any kind of convincing way. Nonetheless, my hypothesis about its discursive or cultural status in popular culture is that it emerged and exists along with a jumbled and often garbled collection of other often nebulous ideas and associations, many of which are taken also to refer and relate to martial arts. What I mean by this might be illustrated by a brief consideration of an example: The character of Caine (played by David Carradine), the lead protagonist in the early 1970s TV series, *Kung Fu* (1972–1975).

Although the actor who played him was white, Caine was meant to be from China (ethnically half Chinese, to be specific), a martial arts graduate monk of the Shaolin Temple and subsequent wanderer in the American ‘Wild West’. It is a TV series that maps onto and encapsulates the peak of what is known as the ‘kung fu craze’ that swept the US, Europe and much of the rest of the world

in the 1970s (Brown 1997; Prashad 2002, 2003; Bowman 2010d, 2013b; Kato 2012). And I actually think it also illustrates the form of one of the most significant recent bursts of Western interest in Eastern philosophy (Bowman 2010d).

For, Caine is not only invincible, he is also stoic, wise, modest, humble, good (see also Nitta 2010 as well as Iwamura 2005). He is a mishmash of the Confucian gent, the Taoist sage and – as certain commentators have noted – the West Coast/Californian hippy (Preston 2007). In fact, some of the most critical commentators have argued that the supposed Eastern wisdom embodied and mouthed by Caine has much more to do with Californian ideologies of the hippy era than with anything Chinese (Miller 2000).

This raises at least two interesting questions: First, if a major US TV network (along with Hollywood film companies) produces shows that champion Taoist philosophy, might this suggest that Taoism has (or had, or almost had) a larger, less marginal and more mainstream status in the West than we might otherwise have thought? But, second, if the brand of Taoism disseminated by this hugely popular and enduring TV series seems to hail more from California than a mythic Wudang Mountain, does this suggest that Western versions of Taoism will always be warped by or transformed into something else? There are other questions raised by *Kung Fu*, of course (Chong 2012; Bowman 2013b, 2015a), but these are the two that I would like to look at here.

### Eurotaoism

Interestingly, philosophers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek have proposed that, far from being alternative or obscure, what they call ‘Western Taoism’ and ‘Western Buddhism’ are actually the hegemonic ideology of (or at least ideal ideological fit for) postmodern Western liberal consumer society (Žižek 2001b). Žižek’s argument is that in situations of deregulated capital in a consumerist society the ideological imperative becomes one of not clinging and not getting too hung up on things. The first argument here is that things like consumerism and *feng shui* can be brought into alignment quite easily, via ideas like de-cluttering, deep-cleaning, updating, going ‘out with the old, in with the new’, and refreshing and reinvigorating by buying new stuff.

Indeed, Žižek proposes that a hybrid of ersatz Taoist, Buddhist and yogic ideas often blossoms wherever what used to be called yuppie conditions apply. For example, he argues that a chaotic life of stock market speculation or financial trading almost cries out for the calm of *feng shui* décor, early morning yoga, qigong or ‘mindfulness meditation’, as well as things like regular retreats (whether ‘glamping’ or in health spas). Most importantly, in such situations, Žižek argues, the yoga, taiji, qigong or ‘mindfulness’ practices enable the practitioner to console themselves with the belief that their meditative time is where they get in touch with the ‘truth’ of themselves – so that they don’t have to face up to the fact that their work life is their ‘real’ life.



So, for Žižek, Taoism is a kind of ‘spontaneous ideology’ – not imposed from above but arising organically in response to the real conditions of economic life. By the same token (but on the other hand), the uncertainty, chaos and instability generated by deregulated capital is a prime breeding ground for the ethos of ‘not clinging’, of ‘keeping moving’, ‘not stagnating’, ‘moving on’, ‘going with the flow’, and so on. As Žižek puts it, the erosion of traditional rights and erstwhile certainties (such as fixed jobs and guaranteed pensions, etc.) is repackaged not as loss but as opportunity. A lost job is represented as an opportunity to retrain. Having no guarantee of a pension is an opportunity to invest. And so on. Ultimately, Žižek argues (in an almost Taoist move), the very victory of the Western economic global system has produced the emergence of what he calls the West’s ideological opposite. Sloterdijk calls it ‘Eurotaoism’.

Now, I am not at all sure that ‘Western Buddhism’ or ‘Western Taoism’ could be regarded as ‘hegemonic’ in any empirically verifiable sense, but I think the argument is interesting. It is possible to see how it might apply, where it might apply, and why it might apply. But whether, where, when, and to what extent it has been so is another matter altogether. Just because kung fu, yin-yangs, taiji, qigong and feng shui have been popular at different times and in different places, this does not somehow prove that Taoism or Buddhism are hegemonic ideologies.

Of course, establishing the facts of any matter has never stopped Žižek from making a sweeping statement or dramatic argument. And then there is the question of whether Žižek implies that we are supposed to regard this kind of Western Taoism as a *good* thing or a *bad* thing. The implication in the Žižekian argument is that, as an ideology arising within and because of changes in capitalism, this kind of Western Taoism must be a bad thing. But is it?

We could discuss this matter as long as we liked, but it might ultimately have the status of the exercises in which Mediaeval Christian theologians would reputedly debate how many angels could stand on the end of a pin. So, instead of arguing for or against Taoism, let us turn to our second question: The question of whether Western Taoism could ever be the same as Eastern Taoism.

### A Bit of East is East and West is West

On this matter, answers might be divided into two camps. One camp regards the transmission of ideas from East Asian philosophy and thought into the West to be entirely possible. The other regards it as impossible. One great example of a writer who believed the transmission of ideas from East to West to be difficult but possible is Alan Watts. Watts rose to prominence in the decades after the Second World War with writings that tried to explain the spirit of Zen, Buddhism and Taoism to readers in English. Although not everyone has read Watts, one can often find traces of his accounts of East Asian ideas in the words of others. For instance, one of my own first encounters with the notion of the



Tao came via the writings of Bruce Lee, particularly his posthumous book, *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (1975). It was only much later that I read Watts.

As an ethnically Chinese martial artist, Bruce Lee was often called upon, when interacting with his Western students and other audiences, to play the role of the Taoist or Confucian sage. In fact, playing the wise man was a role that he often evidently relished, at least in his daily life (Preston 2007). In terms of his professional life, however, he sometimes complained about having been ethnically stereotyped and typecast in certain TV and film roles. But in books like his *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, we find Lee using his most 'oriental wise man' tone of voice and mode of address. (Ironically, this is so even though what he advocates in that book is actually a totally iconoclastic, non-traditional, deracinated and revolutionary approach to martial arts.)

But, given that Lee was ethnically Chinese, and his first language was Cantonese, we might assume his Eastern philosophy to be authentic, right? The irony here is that recent scholarship and archival work on Lee's own personal library has shown is that he lifted most of his ancient Eastern wisdom straight from the pages of writers like Watts, along with other Western interlocutors (Bishop 2004). Famously, his favourite expression was the very Buddhist or Taoist sounding, 'Walk on'. But this was a phrase that he picked up from an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century English-language book on Buddhism, called *Walk On* (1947), written by the wonderfully named writer Christmas Humphreys (Humphreys 1947; cf. Bowman 2013b). I mention all of this here to give an indication of the complexity of ideas like 'transmission', and also, of course, 'authenticity'. I am not saying that Bruce Lee *only* read Western-authored English-language works on Chinese philosophy. But he certainly *also* did, and these informed his own discourse on Chinese philosophy. Whether such texts are right or wrong is a complex matter.

There are famous cases of radical misunderstandings of Chinese and Japanese history, society and culture – misunderstandings that have made their way into European consciousness as facts and truths. There have been controversies around the interpretations present in works such as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1948), for instance, and in the supposedly authoritative and certainly enormous body of work on history, culture and civilization in China produced by sinologist Joseph Needham (Needham and Wang 1954, 1956, 1959; Needham, Wang, and Lu 1971; Needham and Tsien, n.d.; Needham and Bray 1984; Needham, Harbsmeier, and Robinson 1998; Needham, Robinson, and Huang 2004).

Martial arts historian Stanley Henning, for one, points out that at times Needham regards all Chinese martial arts as associated with Taoist health exercises. Hence – argues Henning – Needham radically misinterprets the complexity of the places of different martial arts in China in different places and different times. The effects of this misclassification of all martial arts as essentially being Taoist, Henning argues, leads Needham to fundamentally misunderstand some key aspects of Chinese culture and society (Henning 1999; Bowman 2015a).

So, there are risks in the face of interpreting across cultures and across times and places. And this leads us to the second camp: The people who do not believe that transparent translation across distant cultures is possible.

One interesting representative of this camp would be the infamous German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Heidegger 1971). Heidegger was very interested in Taoism. Some have even gone so far as to argue that Heidegger's own trailblazing 'Continental' proto-deconstructive philosophy was explicitly indebted to Taoism and other kinds of East Asian philosophy (May 1996). Heidegger even reputedly harboured dreams of producing his own translation of the key text of Taoism, the *Tao te Ching*, or *Dao de Jing*. (This work is sometimes known as the *Lao-Tzu*, after the name of its attributed author – an author who some argue almost certainly did not write it.)

What is perhaps most interesting about Heidegger's interest in Taoism is that he is said to have abandoned his dream of translating the *Lao-Tzu/Tao* because – even though this work is said to be one of the most frequently translated and re-translated texts in the world – some have even claimed that it is *the most translated* text in the world – Heidegger regarded the task of translating it as being too difficult. In fact, in the end, despite all of his interests in Taoism and what he often referred to as 'East Asian thought' (or indeed the 'East Asian lifeworld' *in toto*), Heidegger came to regard the East and the West as fundamentally, constitutively alien to each other. He came to conclude that, on a fundamental and unsurpassable level, 'East is East and West is West and ne'er the twain shall meet' (Heidegger 1971; Sanford 2003).

### A Bit of Difference

Because of this ambivalent relation, what we might see in the case of Heidegger is interesting. In fact, what might be learned from Heidegger's relationship with Taoism is quite possibly exemplary of the matrix of possible relationships that Westerners have had with Taoism. Not just Taoism, of course. What I'm saying about Taoism could stand for Western engagements with a wide range of aspects or essences of Chinese and East Asian thought.

Many have been interested in all of this, and heavily involved in it, precisely because it all seems so different. But, if it is all so profoundly different, then perhaps (as Heidegger thought) it may be just *too* different, meaning that Westerners may never really 'get it'.

To many of us today, this is a familiar but problematic idea which sometimes sounds romantic but which often smells a bit too much of essentialism. Essentialism is one of the dirtiest of dirty academic words, even though essentialism in academia is not unusual. It is possible to find it all over the place, whether just below the surface or luxuriating in plain sight. There are *still*, for instance, academic studies being published that first propose and then explore the idea of the alleged fundamental difference or uniqueness of 'the Chinese mind'.

However, for the rest of us, to propose an essential difference between ethnicities (or ethnonationalities), and to reify or dignify such a proposition through any kind of consideration, is deeply problematic. It just smacks too much of colonialist (or indeed apartheid) anthropology and psychology, approaches that were premised on the belief not only of racial difference but also ('therefore') of racial hierarchy.

To those of us who work in or around cultural studies – with all of the refined (or mandatory) sensitivity to issues of identity that this entails (particularly in terms of class, race, gender, and sexuality) – the proposition of an essential difference (between East and West, or Europe and China) may appear crass to the point of being offensive. It is certainly not an idea we expect to find in our academic field. Here, scholars are more interested in cultural 'crossovers', 'encounters', 'communications' and 'relations' than they are in ideas of 'absolute essences' and 'unbridgeable differences'. Just like food, music, fashion, flu viruses, factories, or films, Taoism should surely be regarded as able to travel.

Can it travel, though? And, if it does travel, will it stay the same? If not, what would any change signify? If Taoism is taken to be a specific example of otherness (or at least a bit of a larger field of otherness), then the question is whether Westerners can really truly 'get' it. Heidegger thought not. He thought it was all just too different.

I'm dwelling on this for a moment because it points to a wider problem. To paraphrase a question once posed by Stuart Hall, if we are dealing with difference, if we are interested in difference, in respecting difference, trading in difference, and so on, then the question is: What do we think difference 'is'? Does difference refer to something *actually* different, or are differences merely garnish to something essentially similar? Do we think cultural or ethnic others are actually significantly different from us, or do we think that we are all actually the same 'deep down'? Does difference mean different, or does difference mean same? What does difference mean? What does difference do?

Many – including many in cultural studies – solve this by imputing a universal value to 'being human', whilst adding that what produces cultural difference is *different cultural contexts*. But, whether difference is essential or entirely contextual, what does it imply for any 'encounter', 'crossover' and 'relation'?

Heidegger thought that there were absolute and unbridgeable differences between what he called the East Asian lifeworld and the Euro-American one. As mentioned, this may sound very bad to our contemporary anti-essentialist ears. In this case, it seems all the worse since many people know that Heidegger was notoriously a fully paid up member of the Nazi party and that he never renounced or even really reflected on this matter publicly after the war.

But, if we bracket off everything we don't like about Heidegger for the moment, it is possible to reformulate his position in apparently much more palatable ways. For instance, in cultural theory it is not uncommon to hear the idea that all translations from one context to another ought to be regarded as *mistranslations*, or at best partial and biased and *incomplete* translations; that all

crossovers should be regarded as transformations and that all encounters are in some sense asymptotic. And so on.

To poststructuralist ears, formulations like this don't sound at all essentialist or fundamentalist. Rather, they sound quite subtle and complex – thoroughly deconstructive, even. It is a tenet of deconstruction that all translation is mistranslation. Similarly, Walter Benjamin argued that the best translations are transformations. And the influential psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan often seemed to regard all of the main kinds of encounters in life as being asymptotic.

Derrida himself was always careful to distance himself from any kind of Heideggerian position vis-à-vis difference as absolute or essential. Indeed, for Derrida, the obligation of the critical thinker was precisely to avoid collapsing difference into opposition. All differences are contextual, contingent effects or institutions. There is no opposition between East and West because these terms and clusters of concepts, notions and ideas are principally the effects of particular ways of thinking more than anything else. So, rather than any kind of retreat from difference, one can find in the work of this father of poststructuralism a principled openness to alterity, difference, encounter and change.

Nonetheless, in one of his earliest and arguably most important works, *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976), Derrida effectively inaugurates deconstruction by drawing a line. This is a line between the kinds of languages that he will deal with and speak about (European languages), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the kinds of language that he will not (surprise, surprise: Chinese). Derrida draws this line because, he proposes, the written Chinese language is just too different to be dealt with in the same kind of way that he is going to deal with European speech and writing.

Much has been written about this undeconstructive inauguration of deconstruction, in which Derrida smoothly slices out a distinction between Europe and China, and in which 'China' stands for that which he cannot and will not try to think, as the outside of the limits of Europe. I mention it here merely to illustrate the ways that even an avowed openness to the ideas of alterity, difference, encounter, crossover, translation, relation, and so on, can be premised on or can flip over into their supposed opposite.

We will soon turn more directly to Taoism. But first I want to emphasise that I have started from such philosophers not out of ignorance or contempt for other kinds of Western engagements – or non-engagements – with either 'Chinese thought' in general or 'Taoism' specifically, but rather, to indicate the complexity of the question of a Western interest in Taoism. Put bluntly: If this kind of thing messes with the heads of both the daddy and the granddaddy of poststructuralism, then what other kinds of mess might we expect?

I'll mention some of these messes. But before we leave Heidegger I want to note the mess as he perceived it. Although he believed in an essential Europe (the pinnacle being, of course, German language philosophy), and although he believed

in an 'East Asian lifeworld' that was essentially inaccessible to Westerners, he also believed that Westernisation was ultimately destroying East Asian alterity.

The effect of Western technology – Heidegger singles out the film camera – was to draw the world into what he called a Europeanised or Americanised 'objectness.' With this, he refers to the growth and spread and effects of Western conceptuality, ways of thinking, ways of relating technically to the world, ways of capturing and manipulating the world, and so on.

Again, this might sound deeply problematic and Eurocentric. It may romanticise the other, as something essentially vanishing. But this kind of argument is not a world away from some of the strongest impulses in postcolonial theory, which regard Euro-American cultural and ideological hegemony as being carried not just by gunboats and unequal trade deals but by everything from film and media to language itself and even – or especially – the most subtle and subterranean aspects of the spread of an originally European educational structure and syllabus. (Along with the obvious examples of the effects of the spread of Western medicine and Western science, Dipesh Chakrabarty famously points to the matter of the teaching of history. Along with the nation, history is a Euro-American concept, Chakrabarty argues. The idea that every nation must be a nation with a history ultimately means that Europe is always shown to be the origin and the destination. History always becomes the history of Europe. Emerging nations follow Europe (Chakrabarty 1992).)

In this kind of perspective, the West arguably always obliterates or transforms that which it encounters. So, in any encounter with Taoism, Taoism is obliterated, or transformed, and hence lost. This is because it must be *translated* into an alien conceptual universe.

Thus, in the West, Taoism has been regarded as *alternative* or even subtly *oppositional* to Judeo-Christian and even Islamic traditions, in that it is not a 'religion of the book'. It has been interpreted as a kind of pantheism, or as a kind of stoic atheism – a kind of religion without religion. It has been regarded as a kind of environmentalism, a kind of green ethos or ideology. It has been regarded as the quintessence of ancient Chinese wisdom. It has also been regarded as a kind of anti-Confucian and hence anti-establishment Chinese philosophy. It has been regarded as involving mystical mumbo-jumbo and bizarre rituals. It has also been regarded as an entirely rational and reasonable laissez-faire individualism, organised by the idea of following the path of least resistance.

There is a lot more that could be said about all of this. Even these many words barely scratch the surface of some of the matters that arise here. But, for now, suffice it to say that the idea that we may be barred access to 'the truth' or 'the reality' of something is very familiar in contemporary cultural theory. And, most importantly, it is not an idea that is reserved for application to texts and phenomena from 'other cultures'. It is an idea that has been applied to texts and phenomena from all cultures, including – especially perhaps – those of our own.

### Getting it, a Bit

I tend to accept the idea that there is no simple or unmediated access to the supposed truth of a text and that interpretations of texts and phenomena are contextual, conditional, changeable, and revisable. But this does not mean that anything can just be anything. Interpretations are fought over, fought for, and often strongly policed. Just think about the violence that has ensued when different sects have emerged within and around Christianity by interpreting key texts, like the Gospels, differently. So, I tend to accept the notion that no one has direct or unmediated access to the truth of anything. But the question is whether certain Western interpretations of Taoism are obliterations of it, or a transformation or warping away from some kind of essence. Is the true essence of Taoism simply foreclosed or barred from access by Westerners?

I can accept the idea that I have been raised in a culture in which I have not on a daily basis been exposed to Taoist figures, rituals, sensibilities, words, phrases, legends, allusions, quotations, architectures, objects, practices and practitioners. So, in this sense of context, habitus, texture of life, structure of feeling, history and cultural literacy, the claim that I'm 'never going to get it' is fine.

But what about the supposed *messages* of Taoism – the lessons to be learned of or from Taoism? (In semiotic terms, the signified content or the final signifiers of Taoism.) Can these not be 'got'?

If the lessons of Taoism are simply or entirely *conceptual* or communicated in language, and if they are only to be accessed via the texts of Taoism, then arguably all of the complications and caveats and problems and aporias of cross-cultural translation that some call the 'hermeneutic circle' will arise here. So, we will definitely face some serious obstacles. Cross-cultural translation across vast distances of place and time is fraught with hurdles, barriers, mirages, dead ends, wrong trees, halls of mirrors and red herrings. This is because we always interpret from where we are and from what we know – which means that a Western discourse about Eastern things may always boil down to an internal Western monologue about a totally invented non-entity (Said 1978; Sandford 2003).

But the *Tao te Ching* seems absolutely clear on one or two key points. The first is that 'the Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.' The second (possibly related point) is that spoken or written language is *neither* the medium of transmission *nor* of knowing either the Tao or Taoism. Perhaps the most famous words in the *Tao te Ching* are 'he who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.'

As Alan Watts himself once noted at the start of one of his early books on the subject, many people have taken these words to mean that the effort of communication is pointless, or ultimately doomed to failure. Watts disagreed with this interpretation and thought that it was worth the effort to try (Watts 1990).

This is not least because it is possible to talk *about* something without falling into the trap of believing that you are thereby doing it, living it, experiencing it, or conjuring it up, in reality. Indeed, perhaps discussing, listening, or even just 'thinking about' may be a precondition of experiencing or doing. Or at least a

supplement. It certainly *seems* that Taoism involves a communicable philosophy or a principled stance in relation to the matter of *doing*. Western authors have tried to express it through all manner of poetic renderings of different topics, subjects and themes, from archery to fighting to flower arranging to motorcycle maintenance and so on.

My own encounter with a practice that conveyed some kind of understanding (through both doing and feeling) of Taoist principles was taijiquan. My own sense over time came to be that the inevitable and necessary lessons to be learned in taiji practice – especially via the interactive partner-work of push-hands practice – offered me a crystal-clear kind of education in Taoism. This is not to say that taijiquan offered me everything. It did not make me an expert on Taoism. But the interaction of hard and soft, positive and negative, fullness and emptiness, the logic of non-clinging, non-ego, non-striving, yielding, and the constant apperception of change and transition all led me to think that after years of taiji practice I really did ‘get’ the principles of Taoism – at least a bit. At least *that* bit.

But further reflection reminds me that I have also rejected other bits. For instance, supplementary parts of the practice of taijiquan involve various standing, breathing, concentration, relaxation and awareness practices, referred to as a number of things, such as qigong, nei-gong, zhang zhuang, and so on. Some of these I have always accepted fully – the stretching-and-relaxing breathing and postural exercises called *ba duan jin* [*pa tuan chin*], for example. I have never had any problem with these. Standing post qigong [zhang zhuang] too – I am fine with that. But the exercises that allegedly circulate qi internally through meridians in the body...I have always found within myself a profound resistance to these. Whenever I do them, I do them somewhat cynically. And, to be honest, I have all but abandoned even thinking about doing them. They seem to rely on a kind of belief that is just too much like religious faith for my liking.

But, like someone who has renounced their religion, I still often worry and wonder: If I have rejected this bit, what does it do to the rest? I know that I only dabble in bits of the entire possible taiji world – I do the solo form, partner-work, any kind of sparring, some stretching exercises and some standing qigong – but I also know that I have abandoned another huge bit.

So, even within the confines of my own limited experience of one syllabus of a more or less Taoist and more or less (once) Chinese practice, I know I don’t have it all. And, what is more, I also know that, besides the ‘all’ that I am aware I do not know, there is a whole lot more out there – many more ‘alls’ and ‘everythings’ – much more than I have ever even imagined. I console myself by telling myself (sometimes in the manner of an old Chinese sage) that this is true of all things. For, could we really ever have it all, or know it all, or get it all? Is the ‘all’, the totality, even a real thing? Or is it not, in fact, just an effect, either of language or of our experience of a certain state of play? The state of play as we perceive it is always determined by the circulation of ideas and practices, which themselves derive from different kinds of institutions and investments.



Institutions and interpretations are variable and contingent, and they produce different effects.

Just as I began with reference to such vague and shifting supposed entities as 'East' and 'West,' so we should be aware of what I characterized in Chapter Two as the shifting and drifting apparent referents of our focus, their different meanings in different times and places, the genetic mutations and quantum leaps that occur in 'cultural translation' from one time to another, one place to another, one language to another, even one utterance or instance to the next, and the rather frustrating fact that, despite our eternal desire to see unity and simplicity, cultures and practices are always 'in bits,' always in process, incomplete, disputed and contested. As I read it, the one always gives birth to the ten thousand things and you can never therefore pin down the one.

So, this means both that no one's ever going to get it but also that anyone can get it – but really only a bit.

The next chapter will consider some of the consequences of this.