Tao and Zen in Early Twentieth-Century Britain: An Inauthentic Religion?*

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Abstract: In April 2024 I was asked to provide a short account of the *Daode jing* in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain to complement a workshop concerning the influence of Daoist texts in Germany at that time. I was not surprised to discover that several translations (or perhaps better, representations) of the *Daode jing* during this period were strongly influenced by Theosophist ideas, since this is now becoming well known. But I also noted that those who represented Japanese or pan-Asian thought in English also made frequent reference to Daoist texts and sought to discover why this might be. One longer term outcome of this association seems to have been that in the mid-twentieth century Anglophone world at least Zen and Daoist classics were frequently both mentioned by the same writers. The understanding of Zen Buddhism in the English-speaking world was therefore skewed towards a comparatively recent Japanese interest in Daoist texts that may not have accurately reflected earlier Japanese or Chinese views.

Keywords: Laozi, Zhuangzi, D. T. Suzuki, Shiga Shigetaka, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac

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1. Awakening to a Diffused Creed

In 1967 I arrived in Cambridge to undertake a degree course in Chinese Studies, part of an undergraduate intake of unprecedented size, almost reaching double figures, no doubt because of the attention garnered for China by the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. We were encouraged to explore the Chinese heritage through reading, so I soon made the acquaintance of Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子, initially through Arthur Waley's (1889–1966) survey of ancient Chinese thought.[1] Only in our final year was our command of ancient Chinese good enough to go through an actual chapter of Zhuangzi. 'Autumn Floods' ('Qiushui' 秋水), with Piet van der Loon, was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the course. We also needed to know about Buddhism in China, and David McMullen certainly encouraged us, though he disclaimed any expertise in the field. But in this case, there was one book that tended to adorn the bookshelves of a few of our more forward-thinking fellow students, even if they were not doing our degree course.

This was *The Way of Zen*, by Alan Watts (1915–1973), who was British by origin, but had been living in the San Francisco area since the early 1950s. As the only readily available paperback in the field, I had nothing to compare it with, and so at the time thought nothing of the fact that it begins with a chapter on 'The Philosophy of the Tao'.[2] I take therefore from this work my title of 'Tao and Zen' instead of the current pinyin transcription of the former term to indicate that my concern is with the knowledge formerly circulated in wider Anglophone society rather than what is taught in universities. Only later, moreover, when I went to graduate school in America, and started to read Japanese accounts of the development of the antecedents of the Zen school in China, was I situated in a position to observe that East Asian historians of Chan and Zen did not invariably open their narrative with a description of early Chinese

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[1] Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*.

[2] Watts, *The Way of Zen*, 23–48. Watts had first published this book in the USA in 1957.

thought.[3] Meanwhile however I had begun to notice that despite the very limited opportunities for studying early Chinese thought in British universities, with minuscule numbers of students attending a mere half dozen degree courses, some awareness of the content of the works ascribed to Laozi and Zhuangzi did seem to be known to various literary figures.

Just after I graduated, for example, I attended a performance of Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and was surprised to hear a reference to Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly, or perhaps a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi.[4] At some point round about this time I also saw on television an interview with the writer Lawrence Durrell (1912–1990) which went along the lines of Lawrence saying 'Do you know Chuang tzu?' 'Oh no, who was he?' 'He was a Chinese philosopher.' 'How interesting!'. It seems that this same televisual moment was also witnessed by the Canadian Chinese sexologist Jolan Chang (Zhang Zhonglan 張忠蘭, 1917–2002), whose consequent visit to stay with him Durrell commemorated in a slim volume published in 1980. From this, as far as one can see, Durrell's interest in Daoist thought was not triggered by any specific reading that he could recollect but started in Greece in about 1935.[5] Chan or Zen he seems to be aware of as well, and there is the occasional touch in his testimony at this date that is reminiscent of Alan Watts: 'of course Taoism is part of Mahayana Buddhism', he states.[6]

There is besides this retrospective some published documentary evidence for an earlier phase in Durrell's engagement with the Tao and Zen, in his correspondence with Henry Miller (1891–1980) from 1935 onward. For the most part Durrell seems to be educating

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[3] The earliest such survey I encountered was Yanagida and Umehara, *Bukkyō no shisō 7*, where on page 39 Yanagida does mention a couple of chapters of *Zhuangzi*, but only as a factor enabling the absorption of earlier Indian Buddhist ideas.

[4] Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 44; the reference is, however, misattributed to a 'Chinaman of the T'ang Dynasty'.

[5] Durrell, *A Smile*, 1. Zhang's awareness of the television interview is noted on 2.

[6] Ibid., 2.

Miller, rather confirming that his interests indeed did date back to a point shortly before the two were in contact, though Miller seems an apt pupil, often encouraging his younger friend to extend his reading in the area. In 1936 Miller is given a *Daode jing* 道德經 translation for the first time and enthuses about it; in 1937 he acquires the Herbert Giles translation of Zhuangzi, *Musings of a Chinese Mystic*; in 1939 he declares himself a Zen addict and urges Durrell to read D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), of whom we shall learn a great deal more in due course, and Alan Watts.[7] But later, in retrospect, he credits Durrell with introducing him to Alan Watts in the first place, in 1935 or 1936.[8]

As for an appreciation of the Tao, he names the writer John Cowper Powys (1872–1973) as an early influence, apparently during the period of the First World War, and notes his predilection for Zhuangzi.[9] Powys tends to be remembered as a regional writer, but he did publish broadly on a variety of topics, and in 1923 while living in America he contributed an essay to *The Dial*, then the leading literary journal for Modernist writing, based on his reading of the James Legge (1815–1897) translations of *The Texts of Taoism* in the famous *Sacred Books of the East* series, in which he heaps praise in particular on 'Kwang-tze' (Zhuangzi). The essay shows no sign at all of influence from Japanese Buddhist promoters of the Tao, nor yet of the example of Oscar Wilde, who had already singled out Zhuangzi for commendation, drawing on the earlier Herbert Giles translation. Later, in a study of solitude published in 1933, Powys again refers to 'the Tao' and to 'Kwang-Tze' multiple times, against only a couple of passing references to the Buddha, and but one to a Japanese, Kagawa Toyohiko 賀川豊彦 (1888–1960), a Christian.[10] In fact, the

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7 MacNiven, ed., *The Durrell-Miller Letters*, 16, 87, 122, 125.

8 Ibid., 364.

9 Ibid., 250, 316.

10 Powys, 'The Philosopher Kwang'; *idem*, *A Philosophy of Solitude*. Were it not for his explicit remarks about his sources in *The Dial* one might have suspected the influence of Oscar Wilde, whose 1890 review of the Herbert Giles translation was so enthusiastic that it has been republished as a separate pamphlet: Wilde, *A Chinese Sage*. But Durrell, *A Smile*, 32, records that he only came

full quadruple gospel of Laozi, Zhuangzi, Suzuki, and Watts only emerged in 1935 with the publication of the teenage masterpiece of Alan Watts entitled *The Spirit of Zen*.[11] In this book the two Chinese sages are quoted with some frequency, but it is Suzuki's essays, plus one or two glancing references to Arthur Waley, that provide most of the content. Independently, it seems, well before the British author had in his eventful life reached the West Coast of North America, the same combination of influences made itself felt on that far shore of the English-speaking world as well, for in 1945 the poet Kenneth Rexroth writes to his publisher from San Francisco that he is reading Suzuki, and by 1950 he is commending the combination of Laozi, Zhuangzi and Suzuki to his readers.[12] It is Suzuki who thus seems to have been the prime mover in the forms of Buddhism that were to appear in the 1950s among the 'Beat Poets' of San Francisco, though here the influence of radio broadcasts in the area by Watts at this time must also be noted as a more elusive factor.[13] But Suzuki was certainly not the sole source of East Asian wisdom, considered more broadly: the key figure of Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), though he had surmised from the radio broadcasts that Watts was 'a bit of a fop', in announcing his creed in 1959, declared like Rexroth 'for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out, for D. T. Suzuki I speak out'.[14] Precisely the same holy trinity seems to have become well known in Europe too by

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across this review by accident, and his recollections of it are not entirely accurate, suggesting that it was not well known.

11 Furlong, *Zen Effects*, 57, gives the background to Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*. In an added note to the American edition of Durrell's *A Smile* the source for a reference to the famous Zen text *Ten Oxherding Pictures* is given as *The Spirit of Zen* (in fact pages 65–66 in the John Murray edition) which in turn credits two translations by Suzuki: cf. Durrell, *A Smile* (1982), 94, though here he misremembers seeing reproductions of the pictures in the Watts book.

12 Bartlett, ed., *Kenneth Rexroth*, 47, 48.

13 See e.g. Tonkinson, ed., *Big Sky Mind*, 93, 194, 223, 275, and for Watts on the radio, 277, and Bartlett, ed., *Kenneth Rexroth*, 211.

14 Charters, ed., *Selected Letters of Jack Kerouac*, 569; Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 71.

this point.[15] Obviously, there is much more that might be said about all these literary threads, but at this point the question is already plainly raised: where did this marvellous synthetic creed, so influential in the Anglophone world, come from?

2. Tracing the Sources of the Tao

Recent publications make elements of the answer to this question a little easier to grasp than hitherto. We now have a bibliography of *Daode jing* translations of unprecedented scope, and this allows us to track the early days of its appearance in English.[16] The record indicates that the first translations of fragments of the text occurred as the result of the rendering into English in 1704 of writings stemming from the early Catholic missions to China, in this case not a Jesuit work but one by a rival and critic of their efforts, the formidable Domingo Navarrete (1618–1686).[17] But these beginnings have to be read against the overall background of the involvement of the early missionaries with China. The Catholic missions to East Asia from the late sixteenth century onward had soon become aware of a religious tradition that traced its origins back to Laozi and beyond that in China at the time received considerable support from the reigning Ming dynasty, even if from the mid-seventeenth century their Qing successors were more inclined to Buddhism.[18] The missionaries, how-

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[15] To judge from Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 115.

[16] Tai, *Laozi yiben zongmu*. This remarkable effort does leave a little room for improvement: had I produced a translation myself in 1993, as reported on page 71, I think I would have remembered it; to the best of my recollection, I only provided some prefatory words to a selection of translated Daoist wisdom made by someone else.

[17] Tai, *Laozi yiben zongmu*, 98–99. For the translation by an author unknown, included in the *Collection of Voyages and Travels* of Awnsham and John Churchill in both its first edition and subsequent reprints, see Cummins, *The Travels and Controversies*, ccxv–cxviii.

[18] Wang, *The Ming Prince and Daoism*.

ever, seem from the start to treat the priesthood of these Daoists as degenerate, perhaps because—like the Lutheran clergy that was then making inroads into the Catholic flock in Europe—they were not necessarily expected to be celibate.

Even so, missionary reports of Daoism are largely accurate, except that they are framed by a false assumption that Daoists were alas the unworthy latter-day proponents of what had originally been a purer and loftier way of thinking. But in this context, we should recall that for Westerners of the sixteenth century and indeed for some time thereafter human history was much shorter than that which we now assume. Laozi, Confucius, and the like were therefore in their eyes—even though heathens—closer to the imagined common legacy of all early denizens of our planet. They, it was believed, had from the time of the Garden of Eden to the catastrophe of Noah's flood and the subsequent repeopling of the earth possessed a primal awareness of God, and even—before the erection of the Tower of Babel—a shared language.

Under these circumstances missionary probing of the roots of Chinese civilisation was primarily aimed at locating those elements in this ancient heritage that might serve to reconcile their own beliefs with those of the educated Confucians whom they saw as dominating the intellectual world of the time. But by the eighteenth century some passages in the *Daode jing* had been identified as reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with the result that partial and eventually complete translations of the text into Latin were carried out, though they remained in manuscript.[19] One commentary from a thousand years earlier that enunciated the then established Daoist conception of three in one was also identified for its apparent Trinitarian overtones.[20] Such re-readings of the Chinese text in specifically

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[19] von Collani, 'The Manuscript of the *Daodejing* in the British Library'.

[20] Wei, *Chinese Theology and Translation*, 41–42. Cf. Andersen, *The Method of Holding the Three Ones*, which places the concept of the Daoist Three Ones well before the age of contacts with Christianity. Dr. Wei has pointed out to me that the missionaries probably were aware of the Tang commentary only through quotations in a Ming work.

Christian ways persisted into the nineteenth century, but in France by the middle of that period the secular sinology of the post-Revolution period had initiated the reading and translation of the text as far as possible according to the Chinese understanding of the work, as exhibited through its commentaries, and this breakthrough by Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) was eventually followed by others, writing in English and often consulting his work.[21]

In this way it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that complete translations directly into the English language appear, and even then there is a clear awareness among these pioneers that they had been anticipated by French sinology.[22] The Protestant missionary interest was served by John Chalmers (1825–1899) already in 1868, followed by James Legge (1815–1897) in 1891, who published his version together with the *Zhuangzi*. This dual achievement was preceded, however, both by that of Frederic H. Balfour (1846–1909), who translated both texts after his own fashion in 1884, and by the 1889 translation of Zhuangzi by Herbert Giles (1845–1935), following the publication of his views on Laozi in 1886. The achievement of Chalmers was also somewhat eclipsed by the greater fame of the later three, though Balfour had not quite the standing of Legge and Giles, who ended up as professors at Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Balfour by contrast is last heard of in old age in Florence, apparently convinced by this point that he was receiving messages from the moon in bamboo tubes.[23]

But in Britain Legge and Giles were the exceptions, and no academic profession of sinology developed at this time. Up until at least the period after the First World War there were professors of Chinese at three or four universities, but these posts were occupied by retired missionaries or consular officials who knew Chinese and could teach it if required to do so but had been given no academic mission to engage with Chinese civilisation at all. The mission of the former

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[21] On Julien, see Zhang and Xie, 'Challenge and Revolution'.

[22] Tai, *Laozi yiben zongmu*, 56.

[23] Acton, *More Memoirs of an Aesthete*, 23. Though Acton was brought up in Florence, his information clearly depends on hearsay from older contemporaries.

group was not to understand China but to change it; the latter were merely expected to assist British business interests, something that they were, as it happens, ill prepared to do as graduates with no training in economics or business. By 1899 the situation for Sino-British trade was so unsatisfactory that the first of what—as of a couple of years ago—is now nine despairing reports on British education concerning China was published. This pioneering effort suggested remedies such as sending fledgling consular officials back home to study not economics but the more gentlemanly subject of law, and of course not Chinese law, which no one was teaching anyhow.[24]

So these were the circumstances in which the diligent and pious professor James Legge, after rendering much of the early Confucian textual heritage into English, turned his attention to the texts of Daoism, including the *Daode jing*, thereby provoking his eventual Cambridge opposite number, Herbert Giles, to suggest that most of the *Daode jing* was unlikely to be genuine.[25] Giles, the former consular official, was a temperamental contrarian consistently critical of other translators, especially if they were from the missionary fraternity, a man who over the years came to see himself by default as the chief interpreter of Chinese culture in Britain. Consequently, he tended to couch his translations in the sort of late Victorian literary style that now seems much more dated than the sober, pedestrian, Presbyterian prose of Legge. Given his scepticism about the dates of early Chinese texts Giles tended to defer much in the way of translation of Daoist materials to his less combative librarian son, Lionel Giles (1875–1958), who was, however, a great believer in rearranging translated texts thematically, at times rendering them slightly inscrutable to any reader of Chinese seeking to trace his originals.[26]

While the three names mentioned are three more than may be found translating early Chinese texts in the UK academic establish-

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[24] Barrett, 'China in British Education'.

[25] For a summary, see Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China*, 427–47. For this dispute and for the whole history of the Anglophone *Daode jing*, Carmichael, 'The *Daode jing* as American Scripture', is also very helpful.

[26] Tai, *Laozi yiben zongmu*, 58.

ment today, it must be admitted that the University of London, though two of its colleges had sporadically offered teaching in Chinese for about two thirds of the nineteenth century, in this field did not pull its weight at all. A School of Practical Chinese, founded in 1900 to consolidate such teaching in the university, achieve nothing scholarly, and at the time that its Chair of Chinese, then based at King's College pending the creation of SOAS, fell vacant in 1914 the post seems to have been offered to Sir Edmund Backhouse (1873–1944), the individual exposed in the late twentieth century as a fantasist and pornographer. Perhaps it was for the best that, with his sights set on a professorship at Oxford, Backhouse never showed up for the job; only in 1923 did SOAS find a missionary replacement.[27] Missionary scholars were even then probably no great source of education concerning the *Daode jing*: we have no curriculum that I know of from King's or SOAS, but do possess a record of Legge's teaching, from which it would seem that he at any rate only lectured on the text a couple of times, in 1882 and 1889, spending most of his time on other materials, usually Confucian but including one Buddhist critique of other traditions.[28]

3. The Way Beyond Academe

The shortcomings of university education in the UK concerning the Chinese intellectual heritage therefore allowed, and today still allow plenty of scope for free agents of the spirit to publish on the matter, and they did not hesitate to do so. Of the two dozen or so translations of the *Daode jing* that antedate Arthur Waley's historical and history-making translation of 1934, at least half a dozen were published by presses that were self-declaredly Theosophist, followers of the remarkable Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). Even

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[27] The history of Chinese Studies in London is contained in Twitchett, *Land Tenure and the Social Order*, 1–13; for Backhouse and the London Chair of Chinese, see Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking*, 125–33.

[28] Girardot, *Victorian Translation*, 540–44.

one series inspired by the work of Herbert and Lionel Giles, the long-established publishing firm John Murray's Wisdom of the East series, edited by Lancelot Cranmer-Byng (1872–1945), included authors of a Theosophist bent.[29] Though best known for their support of Indian religion, providing for example a tenacious influence on the development of British Buddhism, Theosophists also had an interest in China, though I do not know if they gained adherents there, as they did in Japan, where their presence has been connected with a late nineteenth century search in that country for universal values.[30] Not all the free agents signed up as followers of Blavatsky: the German American Paul Carus (1852–1919), to whom we must return shortly, propounded a 'religion of science', while the group known as the 'Shrine of Wisdom', due to whose kindness I have been able to study archives on Buddhist translation from Chinese, and who produced a *Daode jing* in 1924, as I understand it align themselves more straightforwardly with a tradition of Anglophone Neo-Platonism stretching back at least to Thomas Taylor (1758–1835).[31]

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[29] The fullest account that I know of the China-related material in this series is in 301–10 of Wu, 'Duoyuan zongjiao de duihua'; see also note 5 on 310 for one theosophist whose *Book of Changes* proved too bulky to include in the series.

[30] On British Buddhism and Theosophy, see e.g. the remarks of Carmen Blacker (1924–2009) on Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983), in Cortazzi, ed., *Carmen Blacker: Scholar of Religion, Myth and Folklore*, 253. For Theosophy and Japan, plus much more on the search for universal values, see Mohr, *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*, 9–10, 238–40. The Chinese American activist Wong Chin Foo (1847–1898) was taken up by Blavatsky in New York in 1877 but does not seem to have become an adherent: see Seligman, *The First Chinese American*, xxii.

[31] On the Shrine of Wisdom and translation, I hope that my lectures in Hong Kong touching on this topic available online at the Centre of Buddhist Studies of the University of Hong Kong under the title *A Monkey Jumps and Britain Awakens to Mahayana: Aspects of the Westward Spread of Chinese Buddhism*, 54–57, illuminate the position of at least one of their publications within the history of Anglophone Buddhism. Carmichael somehow misconstrues the authorship of their *Daode jing* translation, which might repay further investigation.

Those theosophists who undertook the translations had at best varying levels of competence in Chinese, with most of them less competent than the Oxbridge worthies already mentioned, but rather, in the light of important recent scholarship, often all too willing to adapt existing translations to their own ends.[32] They did furthermore tend to take a common approach that simplified matters for them in that it radically downplayed the importance of any Chinese commentary on the text. In their eyes the *Daode jing* formed, as it had for the Catholic missionaries, part of a common heritage of ancient wisdom, though one that the developments of the nineteenth century had opened to fresh interpretations other than the Judaeo-Christian ones that had been read into the words of Laozi in the past. Confident in their new familiarity or at least acquaintance with a range of ancient materials, not just Hebrew and Greek but also, given their presence in India, a smattering of tongues such as Sanskrit, and even perhaps Tibetan, and confident too that the workings of the spirit embodied in all their sources of all periods in history were one and the same, they felt no need to be constrained by what they understood to be the partial knowledge preserved by the Chinese. Rather, they launched themselves upon a venture in retrieving the true meaning of the classic from its unworthy Chinese inheritors.

Perhaps this approach is more often implicit rather than blatantly 'Orientalist' in the fashion that I describe, and to be fair the theosophists of those days did much to promote not simply the religious traditions but also the political aspirations of their South Asian contemporaries. But consider this, from 1912: 'These chapters were originally lectures to a small but select company. They are now revised and published for a larger world. They claim not to be exhaustive, but only an attempt in direction of a mystic interpretation of the Tao-Teh-King, a manner of reading that famous book but little practiced and less understood. The only proper way of reading that book is in the light of mysticism.'[33]

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[32] I defer any remarks on this matter to the excellent research collected in Pokorny and Winter, eds., *Appropriating the Dao*.

[33] Bjerregaard, *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*, v.

To me this is a first step towards downgrading any Chinese stake in reading the text, a process that we find by 1935 had resulted in the following assertion concerning the Chinese reading of the text by a contemporary writer on comparative religion, Joseph Gaer (1897–1969): 'That which is good and beautiful in the *Tao-Teh-King* they forgot, and those parts that made almost no meaning, the abracadabra parts, they remembered.' And after a couple more paragraphs on this theme he concludes describing the culmination of this process: 'Until, after two or three hundred years, the followers of Taoism did not study the work of Lao-tze, but spent much time and energy studying the explanations that explained the explanations of the explainers who explained the first explanations of the *Tao-Teh-King*.'[34] This is mere fiction, for while it is true that sub-commentary on the text was indeed written, about a thousand years after the original, in the early eighth century, still the plain text, and texts with but one layer of commentary, circulated without cease before and after that point.

It is possible to find in English Chinese voices speaking up against this type of nonsense, most poignantly the first translator of Lu Xun into French, J. B. Kyn Yyn Yu (Jing Yinyu 敬隐渔, 1901–1931?), writing in Lyon in January 1929, not long before his descent into syphilitic madness and suicide: 'After vainly trying the remedies of Europe, which do not suit her disease, China, after a vast detour, will return to plunge into the depths of the Tao. I fear that the silent and mysterious Tao may ever escape the restless dreams of the black eyes.'[35] But besides this lone voice crying in the wilderness we also

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[34] Gaer, *How the Great Religions Began*, 160; this work had first been issued in 1929, and in 1956 went into an immensely popular paperback edition, as the study of comparative religion made increasing strides on American campuses. Gaer was not as far as I have been able to discover a theosophist; he seems to have been on the left politically and may himself have been an atheist concerned to provide a politically neutral survey of all religions.

[35] Kyn and Mills, trans., *The Tragedy of Ah Qui, and Other Modern Chinese Stories*, xi. For some recent work on the ill-fated Jing, see Magagnin, 'Agents of May Fourth'.

must recognise that in East Asia a familiarity with the *Daode jing* was not confined to China. By this I do not refer to the alleged Vietnamese sources of some French occultist assertions concerning the Way, recently reconsidered by Davide Marino.[36] There was certainly some influence too on the literary men considered in my opening remarks from followers of Blavatsky: Miller, for example, read in his teens a work by A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921).[37] But as he, Durrell, Rexroth, Ginsberg and Kerouac all make clear, it was Japan that provided their main source of inspiration, and soon after the beginning of the Indian-inspired era of Theosophy, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 marked a shift towards a new phase of the emergence not only of the Tao but also of Zen, beyond the narrow confines of academic life.

4. The New Japan and the New East

The *Daode jing* had, of course, been known for centuries in Japan, and was certainly an influence, for example, on haiku writers of the seventeenth century.[38] It must be admitted however that in the new era of Meiji Japan after 1868 it was initially the dominant intellectual force of Japanese Confucianism that seemed to Buddhists the main obstacle to their rejuvenation: the traditional Zen master who first taught D. T. Suzuki, Imakita Kōsen 今北洪川 (1816–1892), was fully engaged in this confrontation, and his work was even rather frequently reprinted after his death.[39] The subsequent course of Japanese modernity did however prompt a wider and quite complex re-evaluation of Japan's continental heritage.[40] This undoubtedly involved a certain amount of distancing from former attitudes that had treated the sages of China as models for Japan also. But at the same time the reconsideration at this time of how the natural world was

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[36] Marino, 'The Daoist Who Wasn't'.

[37] MacNiven, ed., *The Durrell-Miller Letters*, 361, 363–64.

[38] Qiu, *Bashō and the Dao*, 56, 141.

[39] Barrett, 'Posthumous Conversions of Confucians'.

[40] This has been examined for example in Tanaka, *Japan's Orient*.

valued in the Chinese literary tradition served as a source of inspiration even to Japanese of the Meiji period who today are generally seen as embodying a shift to Western modes of thought: the novelist Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867–1916) provides but one very interesting example.[41] The broader environment indeed encompassed a very wide search in Japan for transnational values for their new age, embracing such novel hybrid tendencies as the encounter of Unitarianism and Buddhism.[42]

But also at the same time, in the background to Suzuki's intellectual formation, as well as the influence of traditional Zen masters such as Imakita, I believe that we should particularly note the impact of one of the great best sellers of his younger days. In 1894 a book was published in Japan that proved to be a sensational success, the *Nihon fūkei ron* 日本風景論 of Shiga Shigetaka 志賀重昂 (1863–1927), a geographer whose description of the Japanese natural environment combined scientific information with a literary commentary rallying his people with an assertion of their unique love of nature.[43] And as it happens, the word he uses for 'nature' is not one of the Chinese translations common at the time, such as *tiandi* 天地, 'Heaven and Earth', but the term *shizen*, equivalent to the Chinese *ziran* 自然, the very term that occurs several times as a key term in the *Daode jing*, but significantly not in the classics of the Confucian tradition.[44] How to understand the expression in that ancient work I do not know. Arthur Waley translates literally, 'the Self-So', but when I try to do this, copyeditors tell me I am writing nonsense, though I suppose in any contest between Laozi and the *Chicago Manual of*

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[41] Taguchi, 'Inside Soseki's Spiritual Land'.

[42] Mohr, *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*, gives one cogent illustration of this milieu.

[43] Gavin, *Shiga Shigetaka*, 36. See also Hackner, 'Shiga Shigetaka's *Nihon fūkei ron* and Meiji Literature'.

[44] I hope to be able to explore the question of Meiji Japanese influence and translating *ziran* into European languages more fully on another occasion. For some initial remarks on the Japanese situation, see Tellenbach and Kimura, 'The Japanese Concept of "Nature"'.

Style the sage is bound to come out the loser.

Now as we shall see there is no dispute that the natural world does figure prominently in Japanese literature—frogs jump into ponds, and so forth—and there are ways in which this may be traced to Japan's religious history. But Shiga's achievement was to raise this to a level of national concern, identifying some unity called nature that was to attract the loyalty of all Japanese, above and beyond any of the multitude of sacred spaces and shrines that dotted their pre-modern landscape. Sensitivity towards nature now became a matter of international competition, in which the Japanese, especially when they were able to call upon their deeper East Asian roots in ancient China, could perhaps in their view easily outclass Romantics like Wordsworth or Transcendentalists like Emerson. It is against this background, I believe, that we must understand the enlightenment, two years after Shiga's publication, of that soon to become great evangelist of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki, who deliberately delayed his initial departure from Japan for America until he had achieved precisely that goal.

Suzuki's biography has been recently re-examined by James Dobbins, who finds that he had certainly written about Emerson in 1896 as an unconscious American practitioner of what amounted to Zen before he ever turned to the translation of any actual Chinese or Japanese Zen literature.[45] James Dobbins further describes, based on an early letter written to one of Suzuki's friends, how one moonlit night in December 1896, while Suzuki was walking back from the Zen temple meditation hall where he had been training 'he suddenly lost any sense of difference between his own shadow and those of the trees all around, and he felt himself identical to them, and them to him'; on this experience he comments 'This realization—which is faintly reminiscent of both Zen naturalism and Emerson's nature mysticism—became embedded in Suzuki's mind as a pivotal moment in his life'. It was in the wake of this event that Suzuki headed off to Illinois, to translate the *Daode jing* for Paul Carus, a translation that appeared in 1898, though bearing the name of his employer, rather

[45] Dobbins, 'D. T. Suzuki', 8.

than his own.[46] The most recent republication I have seen of a later revision of this 'Carus' version does have the decency to mention Suzuki's name in a way somewhat obliquely connecting him with the undertaking, but this only appeared over a century later, in 1999.[47] The translation does not always use the same words to render *ziran* in any of the passages in which it occurs, but it does in one case use the expression 'natural development'.[48]

The seed planted during Suzuki's moonlit walk took a while to flower, but when one looks through his works one finds a quite striking number of references to nature, and not a few to Laozi. One of his later Japanese followers even translated the *Daode jing in toto* as part of an Anglophone presentation of Zen, and this translates *ziran* at one point as 'law of Nature', besides again speaking of 'natural development'.[49] As for Alan Watts, the most influential presentation of Laozi to the sixties generation has been laid at the door of his articulation of Suzuki's Zen.[50] To what extent this late Meiji synthesis of Zen and Laozi, construed as a form of naturalism, is an accurate representation of the Zen tradition may be open to question, but for now we defer further consideration of this point for later discussion. What is clear is that, thanks to Shiga's work, Suzuki's preoccupations were far from unique, and from 1902 onwards in Britain Japanese Anglophone writers and British Japanophiles regularly linked Daoism and Zen especially when dealing with the interpretation of East Asian art and its relation to 'nature'.

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[46] Dobbins, 'D. T. Suzuki', 10, 11.

[47] See the 'Publisher's Note' in Carus, The Teachings of Lao-tzu, 7.

[48] Ibid., 123.

[49] Ogata, *Zen for the West*, 145, 160. I am grateful to Vivienne Lynn Tribbeck for the gift of this book.

[50] See Pohl, 'Play-Thing of the Times: Critical Review of the Reception of Daoism in the West', 476–77; this rather overlooks the earlier Zen and Dao links in the Anglophone world that I am bringing forward here.

5. The New Japan in Old England

The writings in which this trend emerges to my eye would in fact seem to be the same ones that in due course were to produce a notion in Britain of something termed 'Zen Art', a development that I have already commented on elsewhere, though a more diligent and less cursory survey of the sources might well turn up a broader spread of evidence.[51] As it happens, at the turn of the twentieth century, Suzuki was in the United States, establishing himself through essays and translations, but including at least one that he seems later to have regretted, and another unconnected with Buddhism, so his later profile as a proponent of Zen is at this point not immediately apparent.[52] Instead it fell to one of the great cross-cultural interpreters of the age, the remarkable Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覺三 (1863–1913), to introduce the elements of the Tao and Zen synthesis to the Anglophone reading public.[53]

His first publication to familiarize a British readership with these two elements is his 1903 *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. In this rapid gallop through East Asian civilisation, we are soon introduced to Laozi and Zhuangzi.[54] Love of nature, too, emerges as a constant theme.[55] But the Chinese antecedents of Zen are scarcely mentioned, save to say that there Zen had absorbed 'Laoist' ideas.[56] Nevertheless he returned to this same nexus of ideas in a more detailed way in a further short work published in London and New York in 1906, his much-reprinted *Book of Tea*.

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[51] Barrett, 'Arthur Waley, Xu Zhimo, and the Reception of Buddhist Art in Europe'.

[52] For the regretted translation, see Barrett, *A Monkey Jumps*, 49–50, 53; note also Suzuki and Carus, trans., *T'ai-Shang Kan-Ying P'ien*.

[53] Okakura played a very significant part in several contexts such as Pan-Asianism and the introduction of Japanese art to North America; he is mentioned therefore by Tanaka, *Japan's Orient*, 13, and elsewhere.

[54] Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 44–45.

[55] Ibid., 44, 49, 50, 55, 60, 167, etc.

[56] Ibid., 159, 171.

Once more references to nature abound, but of particular interest is the suggestion that Nature and the Tao might be synonyms.[57] This occurs in his third chapter, which is entirely devoted to an exposition of what he terms 'Taoism and Zennism'. Here we learn, for example, that the Carus translation of Laozi is especially to be commended and that 'If we now turn our attention to the teachings of Zennism we shall find that it emphasises the teachings of Taoism'.[58] Okakura, it should perhaps be added, does not seem to have undergone any sort of Zen training himself.

Even so, the mention of Carus, Suzuki's employer, strongly suggests that Okakura's writings would have swiftly become known to Suzuki, a possibility reinforced by the one extended piece of writing on Zen that he was able to put into print during this North American phase of his career. In the *Journal of the Pâli Text Society* for 1906 to 1907 he provided a lengthy account of the Zen school, starting with an outline of its history.[59] Next, however, under the heading of 'Zen and General Culture', after a brief reference to its compatibility with Confucianism that would no doubt have gladdened the heart of his master Imakita, he continues: 'Again, the Zen had something in it which savoured of Taoism, as it taught non-attachment to things worldly and a mystic appreciation of Nature, and this must have satisfied the Laotzean elements of the country.'[60] So if Okakura had started this bandwagon rolling, Suzuki had soon jumped on board.

And where Suzuki jumped, others were not slow to follow. In 1911, for example, the British Museum assistant keeper and poet Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) published a popular presentation of the values embodied in East Asian art containing a passage linking poetry in Britain with Zen and the doctrines of Laozi, and then continuing 'For to the Zen votaries the contemplation of the life of nature was, above all, an effort towards the re-evaluation of the self'; the likelihood is that this represents the influence of Okakura,

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57 Okakura-Kakuzo [*sic*], *The Book of Tea*, 49.

58 Ibid., 48, 62.

59 Suzuki, 'The Zen Sect of Buddhism'.

60 Ibid., 32.

whose *Book of Tea* he cites at one point.[61] In 1913 the rhapsodies of the American art historian Ernest F. Fenollosa on Zen awareness of nature under the Song dynasty (960–1279), which he imaginatively traces back to contact with Taoism in the fifth century, provoke his editor, Raphael Petrucci (1872–1917), to complain that his approach to the meaning of Chinese poetry suggests influence from 'certain so-called translations of the *Tao-tê king* by heterodox sinologists', by which he means, I imagine, theosophists.[62]

By contrast, the first book in English by a competent scholar that is completely devoted to Zen, *The Religion of the Samurai*, by Nukariya Kaiten 忽滑谷開天 (1867–1934), which appeared in 1913, does try to counteract some of the more facile statements of the age assimilating Tao to Zen, and actually translates a ninth-century Chinese document that insists on their incompatibility in the matter of *ziran*—a polemic somewhat disguised in his translation by the word 'naturally' and 'natural', so that the argument is not immediately easy to follow.[63] Given moreover that throughout the book there are plenty of passages suggesting that Zen is linked to an awareness of Nature, this will have done little to halt the onward progress of the earlier trend.[64] Careful scholarship can only make a convincing case when it has the opportunity to present evidence in a more critical and dispassionate academic environment, and that as we have already noted simply did not exist in the early twentieth century Britain where Nukariya was trying to seek a readership.

The younger Arthur Waley, later a careful and critical reader of what was published in English on Zen Buddhism, in his initial 1922 foray into this area, *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art*, shows himself just as much convinced as his immediate predecessors con-

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[61] Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 37, and for Okakura, 32. Cf. Hatcher, *Laurence Binyon*, 165, and for some discussion of the passage in question, 185.

[62] Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, vol. 2, 215, commenting on page 6, and for the fifth century, page 2, which misconstrues the date of Bodhidharma. For Petrucci, see Hatcher, *Laurence Binyon*, 169–70.

[63] Nukariya, *The Religion of the Samurai*, 225, 252, for example.

[64] Note for example ibid., 72–74, especially the concluding paragraph.

cerning the significance of the Zen understanding of nature as the key to the matter. But for him this is a question not of the Tao but of Buddhist belief, namely the supposed distinctly Zen doctrine of the potential Buddhahood of plants and trees.[65] Unfortunately while it is undeniable that this doctrine exerted some influence of Japanese literature, it is simply wrong to attribute it to the Zen school.[66] Rather, the key developments there in regard to the imported Chinese ideas on the topic, which could indeed be seen as involving Daoist influences, are now seen as having taken place in the ninth century Tendai school long before the arrival of Zen in Japan.[67] Waley's grasp of Japanese Buddhism at this point, as is quite evident from his remarks in 1921 on the Nō drama, was rudimentary, not to say on occasion simply wrong.[68] It is perhaps fortunate that he included nothing of his extended musings of Zen, which feature such jarring terms as 'self-hypnosis' as a description of Zen meditation, in his book of later that year on Chinese art.[69]

The trend to link Zen and Nature, however, if anything strengthened in the 1920s when the establishment of the periodical *The*

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[65] Waley, *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art*, 24.

[66] A more accurate account of this development in terms of Japanese Buddhism and literature was eventually provided by William LaFleur (1936–2010), most succinctly in 'Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature'.

[67] Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500-1600*, 167. For an initial exploration of the question of Daoist influence, see Barrett, 'From Devil's Valley to Omega Point', 1–12; the development of the doctrine has now been more comprehensively studied in Tseng, 'A Comparison of the Concepts of Buddha-Nature and Dao-Nature of Medieval China'.

[68] Waley, *The Nō Plays of Japan*, 58–59, shows that he had no idea of the influence of Tendai in medieval Japan.

[69] Cf. Waley, *Zen Buddhism*, 24, 25, and 26, where he looks forward to being able to achieve for all in sundry the results of such activity more effortlessly by means of mechanical aids. Waley's *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting* includes some unsourced translation and summary relating to China from the earlier publication, but mercifully his thoughts about Zen insofar as they relate to Japan are omitted.

Eastern Buddhist afforded an opportunity for Suzuki to advance the advocacy of Zen at greater length, culminating in his publication of the three volumes of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* between 1927 and 1934. Some of the more grandiose pronouncements of the first decade of the century may have become harder to find, but the presentation remains in some ways quite unchanged, and still to my eye demonstrates the continuing legacy of Shiga Shigetaka.[70] In this way we find in one of the essays in the third volume the assertion 'In spite of its matter-of-factness, there is an air of mystery and spirituality in Zen, which has later on developed into a form of nature-mysticism'.[71] In Britain, meanwhile, the Zen and nature link first established in art historical circles in Edwardian times remained firmly entrenched in the 1930s too, as may be seen from the 1935 writings of Basil Gray on Song period Chinese painting in relation to Buddhism. 'The most popular form was the Zen creed, a meditative philosophy of Pantheism, practised by an intellectual game of questions and answer', he explains, and regarding a depiction of a bird on a bough, 'once again in this naturalistic painting we find the attitude of the artist influenced by Zen thought'.[72]

6. Authentic Zen?

So, this was the 'Tao and Zen' picked up by Alan Watts and further disseminated to Miller, Durrell, Rexroth, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. To what extent did this presentation convey a true image of East Asian thought, and of Zen in particular?

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[70] Which certainly sounded a note in harmony with long term cultural values, but not necessarily Zen ones: see for instance Harada, *A Glimpse of Japanese Ideals*, 11: 'We have a strong love of nature. This we could not help having, for we live in beautiful natural surroundings. This love is deeply founded in the Shinto cult...'—it goes without saying that 'the Shinto cult' had by this time been suborned to serve the purposes of Japanese imperialism.

[71] Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (Third Series)*, 74.

[72] Ashton and Gray, *Chinese Art*, 165, 171.

It must be admitted that Suzuki was not formally enrolled in the Zen tradition as a qualified teacher: in Zen terms, he was never given *inka* 印可 or formal recognition, nor for that matter was he ever ordained, so he was in no sense a Zen master.[73] It has also been established that his foregrounding of the notion of experience in his description of Zen owed more to his familiarity with American thought and a desire to shape a response to Protestant Christian missionary activity in Japan rather than anything in the Zen tradition.[74] But his reference to how Zen (meaning the Buddhist tradition known as Zen) 'later on developed' its love of nature perhaps signals the fact that he was himself quite well aware that this tendency did not lie at the core of the Zen school. And whatever one makes of the mention of mysticism—which suggests that at this point he was up against the contemporary limitations on careful yet succinct translation that defeated Nukariya—it is certainly true that landscape poetry played an important role in the literary production of Southern Song Chan that was to provide the main model for later Japanese developments.[75]

To demonstrate this shift from the original preoccupations of Chan Buddhists towards the culture of those masters who many centuries later established the influence of the school in Japan would require a considerable discussion of writings in Chinese over a lengthy span of time. But some idea of the problem can be gained from noting how the key term 'mountain', *shan* 山, appears in religious and secular verse during the early days of the Chan movement, since it serves as some sort of index of an interest in nature, or at least landscape. In the collected Chan verse of those days the word occurs rather infrequently, once proper nouns are excluded.[76] Among lay poets, by contrast, whether inclined towards Buddhism or not, it is

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[73] Dobbins, 'D. T. Suzuki', 19.

[74] Sharf, 'The Zen of Japanese Nationalism'. One wonders, however, about the category of experience or its equivalent in the Neo-Confucian strain in Meiji thought.

[75] Note for example Heller, *Illusory Abiding*, 162–63.

[76] App, *Zenshishū*, 42.

consistently one of the most frequently used words in their poems, usually in the top five most frequent and occasionally the most frequent of all.[77] The predominant interest of the Chan verses is in mental discipline, not landscape, though it is possible to point to areas where the two preoccupations seem in the course of time to have come into contact.[78] It is also possible to point to Buddhist poets who were not Chan masters who over the course of time could have influenced the way that the masters wrote about nature.[79]

Of course, the full story of the developments from the mid-Tang to the thirteenth century Chan culture that influenced Japan from Ashikaga times onwards even after its eclipse in China remains to be told, at least for the Anglophone world. Yet even the barest outline of the issue would have been hidden from Watts and his readers, since he did not learn any Chinese at all till quite late in life, and of the other Tao and Zen enthusiasts I have named only Rexroth seems to have followed suit. With the possible exception of the maturer Arthur Waley, the capacity to conduct independent critical research into the relevant sources simply did not exist in the Anglophone world until well after the Second World War, and then almost exclusively in North America. So, what Watts the teenager saw was very different from what we see today. True, according to Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983), the theosophist who ran the London Buddhist Society, even on his arrival there 'The boy didn't just talk *about* Zen...he *talked* Zen'.[80] But this was a literary, perhaps solely a rhetorical performance, of 'Tao and Zen' only as presented by early translations of Laozi and Zhuangzi plus the writings of Suzuki.

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[77] See for example Chen et al., comp., *Quan Tang shi suoyin: Wang Wei juan*, 426, where it ranks second; *idem*, comp., *Quan Tang shi suoyin: Meng Haoran juan*, 282, where it ranks first; Luan et al., eds., *Quan Tang shi suoyin: Du Mu juan*, 506, where it ranks fourth.

[78] Barrett, 'Zen and the "Image" in Tang Poetry'.

[79] Barrett, 'Hanshan's Place in History', 132–33, and 136. Paul, 'Wandering Saints', 202, correctly points out that this quick survey underestimates the available evidence for the influence of the poet Hanshan 寒山 throughout the Song.

[80] Furlong, *Zen Effects*, 44.

Suzuki for better or worse was a man of his times, and his formative years can only be understood in a Meiji Japanese context. The two ancient sages, for their part, once transmogrified into their various European guises, including the more scholarly ones, did not necessarily reflect a Chinese point of view either.[81] And only in the 1990s did full monographs appear explaining that what one reads in Zen texts is rhetoric rather than reportage, and what one experiences in a Zen monastery is not necessarily the company of perpetually Zen-talking enlightened beings.[82] There was even a meticulously annotated and explicated translation of the text first rendered into English by Nukariya.[83]

One hesitates to write all this Early English Tao and Zen off as inauthentic. The devotees of the cult themselves generally seem to have been reasonably wholehearted, though the appeal of their Christian roots seems often to have reasserted itself, especially in old age.[84] It is still at least conceivable that, as Julia M. Harvey argues, 'bad scholarship' might have produced 'good religion'.[85] But it was originally

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[81] Haffenden, *William Empson*, 499, shows that to at least one Chinese patriot in 1947 Waley's 'mystical and quietist version of the Lao Tzu had in fact travestied the essential realism of the philosophy'. In the 1960s Japanese likewise cautioned against what they saw as the French scholar Henri Maspero's (1883–1945) mystical interpretation of early sources: Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, xxiii–xxiv.

[82] Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*; Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience*.

[83] Gregory, *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity*.

[84] Kerouac in his later years identified as Catholic rather than Buddhist; Watts, at one time an Anglican minister, appears to have maintained a close though not unproblematic relationship with Anglicanism in his final years, to judge from Furlong, *Zen Effects*, 202–03; Rexroth at the end of his life died a Catholic: see Bartlett, *Kenneth Rexroth*, 263–66. The Trappist Thomas Merton (1915–1968) is but one example of an inveterate explorer of Asian religion who never abandoned his initial calling throughout, while he too seems to have accepted Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Suzuki as constituting Zen as he knew it: see Burton, Hart, and Laughlin, eds., *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*, 244, note 25.

[85] See the conclusions of Hardy, 'Influential Western Interpretations of the

a religion constructed out of a very narrow range of sources: even later, by 1960, only about a score of Zen texts, Chinese and Japanese, were available in translations, of rather varying quality, in Western languages.[86] All I hope to have shown in the foregoing sketch is that the matter is a complex one worthy of further study.[87] Any other conclusion would to my mind at this point be premature. I do hope that the topic commends itself to future researchers.

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Tao-te-ching', 165–88.

[86] Fuller Sasaki, 'A Bibliography of Translations of Zen (Ch'an) Works', 149–66. This does not include the text translated by Nukariya, which though produced by a master of the Chan school, was the outcome of his activities in another role.

[87] As indicated above, I do hope to return to the question of the history of translating *ziran*; I also have in hand a study of the early career of Arthur Waley. But it will be seen that the topics touched upon here have any number of ramifications that still need to be explored.

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