



10-1-2009

Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior*

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Recommended Citation

Andregg, Michael (2009) "Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 61 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol61/iss61/12>

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Books Reviews

Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior*, SUNY Oneonta Press, 2006.

The Tao Te Ching has been translated and republished many times since Wang Bi compiled his version in 249 CE, many years after its appearance in Chinese culture. The meanings of much of the original text are at least somewhat mysterious, which leads to considerable variation among these translations.

The distinguishing characteristics of Ashok Malhotra's "transcreation" of this Chinese classic are clarity and accessibility. Like some of his other transcreations of classic philosophical works, Malhotra does his best to convey essential meaning with a minimum of arcane or obscure passages.

For those qualities alone this book can be highly recommended for students who should learn philosophy but are not especially eager to. And even advanced students can benefit from such a sharp review of ancient concepts. Profundity appeals to scholars, but that is not always best for students, and as the sages say it is better to read a good book 100 times than to read 100 bad books, or even 50 bad ones! To be republished over thousands of years, a work of philosophy must be profound. Yet profound philosophy is sometimes inscrutable, opaque, confusing or completely incomprehensible to ordinary students.

For them Professor Malhotra has chosen as his prime goals accessibility and clarity rather than, for example, literal translation of ancient Chinese (with attendant problems familiar to every Chinese linguist) or lengthy digressions into the mysteries of the original author or authors that remain in dispute to this day. Such discussions occupy a lot of space in many other works, but not in this one.

Prefaces by the series editor Douglas Schrader, himself a Distinguished Teaching Professor and Chair of Philosophy at SUNY, and Ronnie Littlejohn at Belmont University, provide

essential historical context. They illuminate the mysteries of who Lao Tzu really was and why his (or their) work became one of the three prime classics of Chinese thought.

This frees Malhotra to concentrate on what the Chinese words most likely mean, and how to express those meanings in simple English. Those who have read multiple translations of this classic work are keenly aware that they can differ enormously. Clarity of philosophy is difficult under any circumstance; doubly so when able translators differ in their interpretations of ancient text. These two tasks of clarity and accessibility are huge challenges that Malhotra completes gracefully and well.

The result is 81 chapters covered in 81 pages, many quite short, with forewords, prefaces, afterwords, bibliographies and such extending the total text to 133 pages complete. The core chapters are truly boiled down to their essence and bereft of windy commentary to “explain” things.

Therefore, it can be read by a good student in an hour, which is no way to read philosophy, of course, unless you simply won’t devote more time to it—which is all too common during these stressful days of modern multi-tasking. Thus even the poor student has no excuse of being unable to find the time to read this text that was conformed for him.

Those students who do make the effort will encounter hundreds of philosophical insights compiled by the ancient sages and passed down through centuries precisely because they were recognized by many other thinkers as profound and useful as well. If students are struck by even a few of these hundreds of insights, in an hour or even four hours, doors of inquiry may open for years to come. Even if uninterested in philosophy *per se*, the reader cannot leave without a deeper understanding and, one hopes, appreciation for one of the three great pillars of Chinese thought.

A “transcreation” is more risky than literal translation, of course, because the goals of clarity and accessibility require not explaining a lot, which can be painful for professional

philosophers. There is also a constant risk of infusing one's own philosophy into cracks (and occasional chasms) of ambiguity left by the sages. Malhotra has been faithful to the delivered text of Wang Bi and to other translations of scholars I have read, like Roger Ames—who concurs in this assessment.

Lao Tzu is revered by some far beyond his time and culture because of his (or her!) reverence for nature as the ultimate educator, and because of his ever-restraining advice to governments intended to temper the more dangerous ambitions of rulers. It bears remembering that all these words we read about Lao Tzu were also screened by Confucian filters, which were generally far more authoritarian in spirit, and suspicious of Taoist (Daoist) criticisms of the assumptions of elites.

Those cautionary passages of authentic Taoism ring crystal clear in Malhotra's text. They contain integral aspects of the solutions to crises that endanger every civilization on earth today. Therefore, making them more accessible in clearer language to a broader range of students, readers and leaders is a service to us all as well as to the sages of the past.

Michael Andregg