

Frank Podgorski

Seton Hall University

READING THE HOLY BOOKS OF CHINA

Part of the uniqueness of Man is his struggle to understand; indefatigably he attempts to master the art of reading. The Book of Nature is the first text to be deciphered. Although all are heirs to this rich legacy, not all learn to read adequately. Both by extending outwardly and by probing inwardly, Man exerts his energies to discover who he is, where he is, and in what direction he and his world are heading. Man's ability to read this Book depends to a large extent on his talents, his proximate environment, and his dedicated use of these. All men of all cultures share this Book of Nature; some learn to read it better than others. Yet this Book of Nature is the initial revelation which is the common heritage of all. Characteristic of the human endeavour are efforts to read this Book with understanding, to fathom its deepest meaning.

There are, in addition, a host of writings from a variety of cultures which claim the special status of Books of Revelation; often they are referred to as Scriptures. Although Scriptures record particular understandings, they also proclaim insights which are thought to be universally valid.¹ How are these Scriptures to be read? What, in fact, is revelation?

Revelation literally means "to remove a cloak or veil." If the external cloak of Man's immediate surroundings be removed, the light of deeper understanding may prevail. That which was previously hidden or covered, now unveiled, becomes more fully understood. In the words of the Confucian *Analects*, man becomes "illuminated"² this illumination enables him to see the whole picture.

1. H. H. Rowley, *Prophecy and Religion in Ancient China and Israel* (London: The Athlone Press, 1956), pp. 25-26.

2. *Lun Yu* 12:6 *Ming* translates as clarity, brightness, or illumination; it is that which enables one to see clearly. The text literally uses "far" which therefore suggests that the "illuminated" is one who is "far-seeing."

Such "illumination" or "clear-vision" is a reader's goal in approaching any Book of Revelation. To read properly either the Book of Nature or a Book of Scripture means to master this profound art of reading with a depth of understanding, of seeing the whole picture.

A help in reading Scriptures is an awareness of the models or paradigms which underlie the various texts. For example, models of communication are thought to be at the foundation of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. These Scriptures represent attempts by the Prophets, the Psalmists, the Evangelists and others to record and report precisely what they felt God was revealing through them to and for the sake of Mankind. Accordingly, the Judaeo-Christian Bible literally claims to be the Word of God. Yet, on the other hand, the model of intuition or self-discovery is the paradigm preferred by the *Sruti* tradition of Hinduism. In these texts, the *rishis* and the *acharyas* set down those paths of self-discovery which they found to be both true and helpful. Therefore the reader appropriately searches the *Sruti* in the hope of finding a path suitable for his particular needs. A simple awareness of these two different thrusts of Scriptural orientation enables one to approach and interpret the Gospels and the Upanisads with greater intelligence and understanding. Reflecting on this from a Christian theological perspective, the recent Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures held at Bangalore, India, stated that although the Hindu concept of "inspiration" does differ from the traditional concept developed by Christian theology, nevertheless "it must be affirmed that the religious experience of the Sages and *rishis* is guided and directed by the Holy Spirit."³

The Confucian Sage

As we turn to the Confucian texts, we meet with an ancient Wisdom tradition. The Confucian Canon⁴ consists of a precise list

3. D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore, India: National Biblical, Catechetical, and Liturgical Centre Press, 1974), p. 131. This 707 page collection of the papers and resolutions of the Research Seminar is an excellent source for those wishing to explore current Christian assessments of non-Biblical Scriptures.

4. The Confucian Canon came to be specified as the *Five Classics* and the *Four Books*. The *Five Classics* are: (1) *Ch'un Chiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), (2) *I Ching* (Book of Changes), (3) *Shu Ching* (Book of History), (4) *Shih Ching*

of orthodox texts accompanied by appropriate commentaries. Not only do these texts preserve the accumulated wisdom of the past, they also contribute to the future by suggesting specific norms of conduct. The Confucian texts present exact models of human conduct. "The Superior Man honours his virtuous nature and maintains constant inquiry and study, seeking to carry it out to its breadth and greatness."⁵ "The Superior Man has a dignified ease without pride. The mean man has pride without a dignified ease."⁶ "A man who has encompassed himself with profits, a lean year may not harm, but a man who has encompassed himself with virtue, a corrupt age cannot confound."⁷ Yet the ruler or king is singled out as that unique individual whose every act has a gestalt-like influence on every member of society. By his conduct and by his actions, the ruler reveals what society and the human community should be. The *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chung Yung*) and the *Great Learning* (*Ta Hsueh*) emphasize this unique role of the ruler in the development of human society. "By the ruler's cultivation of his own character, the duties of universal obligations are set forth."⁸ Should, however, the actions of the ruler fail, the Confucian vision has a built-in corrective. Should the actions of the king not be kingly, Heaven (*T'ien*) expresses its disfavour by a variety of extraordinary phenomena; famines, droughts, earthquakes, or the rebellion of the people may become the means of expressing Heaven's displeasure. Nature and society become agents of Heaven in correcting the ruler. This is the celebrated Confucian doctrine of "*T'ien Ming*." Although the king or ruler reveals the ways of Heaven (*T'ien Tao*), nature, society, and the human community are normative signs of verification. They become the agents which testify whether or not the king is authentically revealing. The ruler, nature, and the human community thus cooperate and interact in an on-going dialogue which results in the unveiling of revelation. This is the special Confucian frame for revelation.

Throughout the Confucian Scriptures, the Sage is described as a perfect model worthy of both emulation and imitation; he

(1) *Book of Poetry*, and (5) *Li Chi* (*Records of Ceremonial*). The *Four Books* are: (1) *Lun Yu* (*Analects*), (2) *Ta Hsueh* (*The Great Learning*), (3) *Chung Yung* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), and (4) *Meng tzu shu* (*Book of Mencius*).

5. *Chung Yung* XXVII: 6.

6. *Lun Yu* XIII: 26.

7. *Mencius* 7B: 10.

8. *Ta Hsueh* XX: 13.

is the one who has attained "clear-vision" or "illumination" (*ming*). Confucius and Mencius narrate many stories and give numerous examples of the Sage's special intelligence or enlightenment. Specific Sagely acts of conduct are recommended and prescribed for certain fixed circumstances. The acts of the Sage are always pictured as noble and inspiring. Because a Sage has uncovered true wisdom, his every act reflects this more profound level of reality. Thus the Sage both inspires and challenges man to a deeper level; his very actions are revelatory; he is, in fact, a personification of revelation.

Yet the Sage is met in circumstances that are distinctively "this-worldly." "If a man is not humane (*jen*), what has he to do with ceremonies (*li*)?"⁹ Confucians do not distinguish between a sacred and secular realm; rather, all of life and all of existence is but "one vast spontaneous and holy rite."¹⁰ A Sage is a man of *jen*; he has discovered the multiple dimensions of his "identity" within this sacred "oneness"; he clearly understands all of what it means to be fully a man.

Yet, how can a reader ever hope to approach this idealistic model of the Sage? The answer, according to the Confucians, is "sincerity" or "authenticity" (*ch'eng*), an all-encompassing meta-virtue.

Sincerity (*ch'eng*) is the way of Heaven (*T'ien ching Tao*). The attainment of sincerity is the way of man. He who possesses sincerity is he who without effort hits what is right and apprehends without the exercise of thought. He is the Sage who naturally and easily embodies the right way. He who attains to sincerity is he who chooses what is good and firmly holds it fast.¹¹

The Sage has been described as that perfect model so finely attuned and so perfectly aware that his every act overflows into "one vast spontaneous and holy rite." *Ch'eng* challenges each individual to imitate the Sage by uncovering and acknowledging all the dimensions of his own identity. Perfect *ch'eng* bids the searcher proclaim his proper identity as: (a) an individual with unique

9. *Lun Yu*: 3:8.

10. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular As Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 17.

11. *Chung Yung*: XX: 18.

meaning, (b) a member of society related to the human community, and (c) an integral component of the cosmic or divine order. Each of these dimensions imply specific obligations and responsibilities, viz., that of the individual to himself, to his family and community, and even to the total order. Only one who fulfils each of these "identities" is an authentic man; to fail to realize even one of these dimensions is to be less than authentic less than human, less than a man of *jen*. As the Sage perfectly responds to all these challenges, so also must the seeker of *jen*. *Ch'eng* (authenticity, sincerity) is the virtue which leads to this Sage-like wisdom; it can even result in a profound penetration of the revelation proclaimed and epitomized by the Sage Himself. As the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chung Yung*) explains: "Only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity can give full development to his own nature."¹²

However, neither individual man nor society nor this 'oneness' is complete; rather, all are self-perfecting and oriented in the direction of growth and development. Within this orientation, man need only respond to his innermost drives or promptings, his nature (*hsing*); his greatest need is sensitivity to these dynamic inner promptings as inspirations to be cultivated and tested and tried in "acts." Through acts and actions, man discovers the layers of his identity. Consciousness of the multiple dimensions of his identity and the spontaneous appropriate response to them provide the key to "self-cultivation". Development of authenticity (*ch'eng*) demands that man pass through a dialectical process of growing self-realization or deepening consciousness; gradually initial naive Ego-identity yields to deeper and more elevating identifications. Slowly, man discovers the richness of his individual, social, and transphenomenal dimensions. This total process of growth and development is referred to by the Confucians as "self-cultivation"; the example of the Sage consistently inspires and challenges one to this "self-cultivation."

So powerful is the influence of the Sage that the Classics even attribute to him magnetic powers of transforming; he is regarded as vital to the very creative dynamics of heaven and earth. Simultaneously his example is an invitation for others to share in this same creative process.

Only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity... can give full development to his own nature. Able to give its

12. *Chung Yung* XXII.

full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the natures of other men he can give full development to the natures of creatures and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a trinity.¹³

Dynamic creativity thus characterizes the Confucian Sage. Having discovered his authentic centre, his every act is simultaneously world-transforming. Not only do such "acts" fulfil his own nature; they also "perfect the natures of other men" thereby building and developing human community. Perfecting society, the Sage is thus able to participate in the very "transformation of heaven and earth." Thus every act of the Sage flows as "one vast spontaneous and holy rite"; whatever proceeds from the Sage contributes to the dynamics of "spiritual cultivation", to the continuing process of developing and transforming this "sacred oneness."

The reader approaching the Confucian Classics then meets with prophets and Sages who are convinced that they must share this more profound level of truth and reality. "Was not this truth lodged here within me?" Confucius asked.¹⁴ "I am compelled to do this," Mencius explained.¹⁵ The Confucian Sage is depicted as the very epitome and personification of revelation; he is the living witness to the total picture. This Sage is primarily a man of wisdom (*chih*) and enlightenment (*ming*). The Sage's "this-worldly thrust," his challenge to transform man, society, and the cosmos, is an explicit invitation for others to participate in the creative dynamics of the deepest realms of reality, a reality grounded in the observable but yet moving in the direction of unseen depths. As the Sage testifies that this highest truth can be fathomed and penetrated by man, his very actions invite to this realm. He is a model who invites and inspires. To approach the Confucian Classics with this awareness of the central function of the Sage is to be helped immeasurably.

13. *Chung Yung* XXIII.

14. *Lun Yu* 9: 5.

15. *Mencius* 3B: 9.

The Taoist Sage

If the key to the Confucian Scriptures be the Sage, so also is the role of the Sage critical for understanding the Taoist Scriptures. Yet the Taoist Sage differs dramatically from the Confucian Sage. Whereas the thrust of the Confucian Sage has been described as "this-worldly", the entire concern of the Taoist Sage is to focus completely on what is called "*Tao*", a name for that which has "no-name". Mysteriously, the *Tao Te Ching* begins by stating that "the *Tao* which can be talked about is not the Eternal *Tao*".¹⁶ In order, therefore, to attest to *Tao*, the Sage goes about doing nothing and teaching no-talking.¹⁷ *Wu wei* (doing nothing, creative non-doing), the Taoist mode of action, recommends that the Sage be a "teacher without words, a doer without actions."¹⁸ Chuang-tzu describes the Sage as one who "amidst all the confusion and distractions of life, simply remains one with *Tao*."¹⁹

If this be so, how then are the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Book of Chuang-tzu* to be read? Translations and texts of these Taoist Classics abound in many languages, especially English. Thomas Merton once described the *Book of Chuang-tzu* as the most profound of the Asian Classics. And yet one may wonder whether Lao Tzu or Chuang-tzu would have recommended the reading of any of the Taoist texts. After all, Chuang-tzu repeatedly pointed out that analysis is mere opinion, logic simply how one man views things, and the words of men but sounds similar to the chirping of birds. Of what use could these writings and texts possibly be? The *Chi Wu Lun*, the celebrated second chapter of the *Book of Chuang-tzu*, is an explicit attempt to jolt the reader out of "little knowledge" or "small thinking." Logic and illogic, sense and nonsense, right and wrong, good and bad, are deliberately juxtaposed, fused, and confused to suggest that *all* are but "partial views" or "small learning." All are equally true and equally false; all are equally useful and equally useless. "Little knowledge is not knowledge," says the Taoist Sage. "What is the use of knowledge?"

Chuang-tzu has been aptly called a "Tao-drunk man." So caught up, so intoxicated with *Tao* is Chuang-tzu that he dares to project from the transphenomenal perspective of *Tao*. No limited, finite view could ever suffice for Chuang-tzu. "The Sage simply leans on the sun and moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, and leaves the confusion and muddle as it is."²¹ This realm of *Tao* is far beyond concepts, words, language, writings, or any form of "small knowledge." This *Tao* of "great knowledge" is the habitat claimed by the Taoist Sage; it is the home of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu.

How can one ever hope to reach this exalted realm of *Tao*? Although both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu incessantly preach transphenomenal *Tao*, these Sages nevertheless do recognize the presence of *Tao* within the phenomenal world. Unnamable and unspeakable in its essence, *Tao* is called by many different names in the world. Although *Tao* in itself infinitely transcends all concepts, words, language, and writings, such concepts, words, language, and writings may, however, become tools or instruments capable of pointing to transphenomenal *Tao*. Like an extended finger, like the reflection of the moon on a lake, these tools of human knowledge, these instruments of "small learning," these Scriptural texts, may point to a realm beyond right and wrong, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsehood. It is only within this special frame or context that Chuang-tzu or Lao-tzu would recommend the Taoist Classics. Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu dare to project and speak from the axis of transphenomenal *Tao*; their Scriptures attempt to draw attention to this realm. These Sages invite the reader to awaken to *Tao*.

Perhaps the Taoist Scriptures ought best be approached in the way one approaches a Ch'an koan. "All know the sound of two hands clapping. What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The Ch'an Master assigns the novice a seemingly unsolvable puzzle or riddle. The novice is to thoroughly exhaust his logic, his reason, his "small knowledge" struggling to find the correct answer. Finally, the futility of all logic, all reason, and all "small knowledge" dawns; the novice then abandons all "small learning" and opens to a more profound wisdom. In a similar manner, the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Book of Chuang-tzu* present paradoxes or puzzles which

seek to jolt the reader from "small knowledge" to *Tao*, the realm of "great knowledge." Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu invite the reader to awaken to *Tao*.

Conclusion

We have tried to approach revelation in terms of fathoming and penetrating all of reality. Our goal was to glimpse the whole picture, to remove the external cloak which masks total reality. China has contributed a rich Scriptural legacy to mankind, a legacy which dates back to the very dawn of recorded history. To read these texts is to meet the Sage. The Sage repeatedly expresses himself in a variety of forms and shapes throughout both the Confucian and Taoist Classics. To understand the function of the Sage helps us to read the Classics with intelligence and understanding, to penetrate the revelation proclaimed by these texts. The Confucian Sage invites one to "self-cultivation"; he challenges man to uncover the full dimensions of himself as (a) an individual, (b) a member of human society, and (c) an integral part of the cosmic order. While awakening man, the Confucian Sage invites him to cultivate all these levels of reality. All the fields of this "sacred oneness" are to be cultivated. On the other hand, the Taoist Sages have been described as "Tao-intoxicated prophets." Lao Tzu and Chuang-tzu entice, shock, jolt, and invite the reader to *Tao*. Lao Tzu and Chuang-tzu dare to project from the axis of transphenomenal *Tao*. To read the Taoist Scriptures is to be challenged by *Tao*. A reader who has been introduced to both the Confucian and Taoist Sages is better able to penetrate the rich revelation found throughout the Chinese Scriptures.

21. Burton Watson. *The Complete Works of Chuang-Tzu* (New-York: Columbia University press, 1968), p. 47.