

An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages

*By Jean C. Cooper, Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald,
Foreword by William Stoddart
Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010*

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“Tao is primordial; it is Absolute. In its descent it begets one. When one is begotten, Tao becomes relative and two comes into existence. When two things are compared there is their opposite and three is begotten.”¹

Yen Fu



Of all of the world’s religions, or more specifically the three religions of the Chinese civilization, Taoism is least known. While Buddhism and Confucianism are commonly known, why is it that Taoism, one of the great religious and philosophical movements in Chinese thought, remains relatively unknown? One clue might be that Taoism belongs to pure metaphysics as Chuang Tzu alludes to in the following, “It cannot be conveyed either by words or by silence. In that state which is neither speech nor silence its transcendental nature may be apprehended.” (p. 5) While each religion has an outer (exoteric or formal) and inner (esoteric or mystical) dimension, it is said that “Taoism is a purely metaphysical and mystical religion. Other religions have their mystical aspects; Taoism *is* mysticism.” (p. 5) Even though this work articulates the spiritual landscape of Taoism, its author also makes “points of contact

¹ Yen Fu, quoted in J.C. Cooper, *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981), p. 71.

with the perennial philosophy in other major religions...illustrating how, in many essential ways, they speak with one voice.”²

The author of this book, Jean Campbell Cooper (1905-1999), was born in Chefoo, in Northern China where she spent her formative years in the Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian cultures of China. Cooper wrote and lectured extensively on themes of philosophy, comparative religion, and symbolism. She was a regular contributor to the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*. The contents of the book under review incorporate sections from three of J.C. Cooper's works which continue to be among the most reliable introductions to Taoism. The three works are: *Taoism: The Way of the Mystic* (1972); *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (1981); and *Chinese Alchemy: The Taoist Quest for Immortality* (1984). This edited edition of selected chapters from Cooper's writings on Taoism contains 118 stunning color illustrations and includes an index. Cooper recalls her upbringing within Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian culture of China:

I was born in China and spent my early formative years there, my father having been in the consular service and later a director of one of the missions then operating in the county, so I was brought up by Christian parents and Taoist-Buddhist amahs [nurses], seeing more of the latter than the former. Thus, if one follows the Jesuit adage “give me a child for the first seven years”, it is easy to see why those years were more influenced by Eastern than Western thought and attitudes. I also grew up with the vivid contrasts between the imported Western opulence and the squalor of the city back streets, and, against these, the breathtaking and magical beauty of the mountain county where I was sent to boarding school at an early age. Overall, too, I learned the charm of the Chinese character, with its balance between Confucian social decorum and Taoist gamin individuality as well as the beauty of the arts and crafts with which one was surrounded. (p. vii)

Whereas Buddhism originated in India, both Taoism and Confucianism, derive from the primordial hyperborean shamanism attributed to the legendary first Chinese emperor Fu-Hsi (2852-2738). It was Fu-Hsi who authored the *I Ching* or “Book of Changes”. Lao Tzu and Confucius were in fact contemporaries. When the two masters met, Confucius is

² J.C. Cooper, “Introduction,” to *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981), p. 11. “There are basic similarities in the perennial philosophy of all religions and, of necessity, they interact with one another, but similarities are not to be confused with identity; outwardly they are not one, they are many; it is the Power within them that is One.” (J.C. Cooper, “Taoism and Hinduism,” in *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* [Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981], p. 90).

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