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TAI ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY: *tau tae tching* or *lao-tse* (The Right Path)

Abstract

In this essay, ancient Tai philosophy (way of life; perception of the world) is approached in a specific way.

Following more than 20 years of his comparative and interdisciplinary study in the ancient philosophy expressed in the *tau tae tching* text on the one hand and the world view, way of life and practical behavior of the Tai peoples on the other hand, the author has been developing the firm belief that the ancient philosophical text *tau tae tching* - which is found in old written exemplars in the Chinese language and attributed to Laotse - is most probably rooted in the ancient traditions and philosophy of the Tai peoples whose forefathers settled in historical times in what is today South China.

In the opinion of the author, the written philosophical text *tau tae tching* was created as a mirror, as a secondary image, of an existing culture, namely, the world view, way of life, and practical rules of behavior of the Tai peoples. Compared to the concrete behavioural rules, traditional laws, etc., of the Tai peoples, the *tau tae tching* is a philosophical condensation and abstraction. It is something like a bible of behavioural norms and was used not only for worshipping the holy “right path” of behaviour, but in fact represents a complete value system which reinforced the social order. As such, it was also the source for intellectuals to compete with other value systems (e.g., that of Confucius) which was followed by other ethnic groups, namely the Han-Chinese.

In my formerly proposed scheme on the “Complex Tai Culture System”, the philosophical expressions and teachings of the *tau tae tching* fit very well in the central place (central sub-system) which is concerned with traditional law, social values, and behavioural rules.¹

To view the *tau tae tching* in connection with the Tai peoples might contribute to a better understanding of Asian philosophies.

Basic Working Definitions

The *tau* was and still is a whole set of philosophical ideas. Concretely, the *tau tae tching* is a written version expressing the Tai world view and its accompanied social values and typical ideal behavior, whose formerly orally transmitted contents have been translated into the Han Chinese language and written down using Hieroglyphs around 2500 years ago. Other than often wrongly assumed it was still not a religion at that time.

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¹ Cf. Special volume of TAI CULTURE, VI 1&2, 2001. The mentioned diagram is also included in this essay.

The world views, and especially the social values and practical behavioral norms expressed herein are not compatible with other value systems which are applied in North China. A step towards compatibility was done only through the translation into Han Chinese language using typical philosophical terms and concepts used in the Chinese empire and its philosophical system during that time.

Researchers on the *tau* cannot find any traces in Han society, and even in the latest western publications on the *tau tae tching* it is stated that the *tau* would rather be a mere idealized conception and must have died out for a long time. This is obviously not true, as I have found the *tau* philosophy, the social values and the typical behavior described in this text living on in all Tai peoples in “Greater Southeast Asia”² (including Southern China and Assam).

For many centuries now, some peoples (among them some Tai peoples) have been developing a “Taoist” religion. This religion is only in parts congruent with the elder *tau* philosophy, with many additions. Some priests cannot clearly separate between philosophy and religion, which I found to be an important precondition for an accurate analysis and understanding.

Only a detachment from the generally agreed upon ownership of the *tau tae tching* as attributed to the Han Chinese people and their culture can lead to a totally new, deeper and meaningful understanding in the history and practical implications of this philosophical text on the theoretical and practical levels. The Han-centered view has ever led to all the same misleading and non-satisfying answers.

With “traditions” in this text are meant “traditional law”, or indigenous customary behavior. Philosophy in this text is understood as “mode of understanding the world” and “(a typical) way of life”.

lao-tse and *tau tae tching* are used in this essay as synonyms naming the philosophical text, and especially, the contents referred to herein.³

Historical Setting

Concerning the historical setting I refer to the publication of Schwarz who - applying a Marxist approach - provides meaningful insights into the economic, political and philosophical backgrounds in (South) China of that time.

It was ever generally accepted that the *lao-tse* has its roots in South China, but it was ever and by every researcher connected with the Han people and their culture. The history of South China deserves to be updated indeed.

My findings on the philosophical wisdom of the Tai peoples (which is still a living tradition among them) are connected with history, as these findings are true for a specific historical time (the core time could date 2000-2500 years back). Going much further back in history, a complex comparison would reveal that this kind of wisdom and philosophy (way of life) is incredibly older, and many more peoples are involved. My conclusion is: The more millennia in time one goes back, the more peoples are

² Term introduced by me some 10 years ago, referring to similar cultural traditions (Tai), including in South China and NE India (Assam).

³ Recently, more researchers (e.g., Möller) come to the same conclusion, namely that the text underwent a very long creation process. He also put *lao-tse* and *tau-tae tching* as synonyms.

involved here, including peoples who have migrated very far. So, the Tai were not the only owners of a similar tradition. We are reaching here pre-historical times which can only be studied outside the well established “written history”, namely through an interdisciplinary study of linguistics, archeology, oral traditions, belief systems, value systems, customary behavior, and many other fields of knowledge, with an additional comparative approach which includes various relevant ethnic groups.

What is the *lao-tse* text? (Tai tradition – traditional law of the Tai)

The *lao-tse* text and the *tau tae tching* text can well be thought as synonyms, as Laotse might not have been a historical person, but a mere mythos.⁴ Please remember that the Taoist tradition is originally one of namelessness: “There was no name in the beginning ...; names are harmful...; allocating a name to things was the starting point for differentiation and thus for a bad condition of the society”, etc.

The question of authorship is of total unimportance, and – as in Tai cultures in general - it was even not the tradition to provide the original authorship of texts; what really counts in our case are the tremendous meanings of the text’s contents. I rather tend to credit the origin of the text whose creation process probably lasted over centuries to a successive elite of a specific ethnic group (the Tai), melting together in philosophical abstractions all the intellectual observations on nature and human society for millennia. I put this highly abstracted philosophical text in this specific ethnic context because it has all the contents and ways of thinking of a typical kind, compatible even today with these ethnic Tai groups.

Described in the text *lao-tse* or *tau tae tching* is the Tai tradition, wisdoms and ways of ideal behavior for elites as well as for commoners⁵ of this ethnic group or community of Tai peoples. There are obvious similarities between the *tau tae tching* and the different *hiit-khoong* (traditional law) of the Tai. Here, one has to see that the mighty and invasive neighbors were the Han-Chinese to the North who had their own philosophical tradition, a kind of state philosophy which was extremely directed on enlargement, occupying neighboring territories and rule the inhabitants there by military force followed by cultural hegemony⁶.

This neighbouring, upcoming Han-Chinese power with its own philosophical system, had this Tai philosophy translated or described and philosophically condensed what they learned about the living tradition among the people in the occupied territories, using standard Chinese linguistic and philosophical categories. The number of 81 chapters may also well be credited to the Chinese. Nevertheless, because of the otherness of the expressed philosophical thoughts and especially the prescribed code of behaviour, the Han Chinese people never incorporated it for their own use. In the contrary, there emerged a kind of philosophical struggle among the Confucius school

⁴ If this historical person lived, I would of course pay full respect. A historical Laotse is told to have worked as an official/advisor at the court of Tschou state which territory covered Hunan, Hube, Kiangsi.

⁵ Beside to my assigning the roots of the text to the culture of the Tai people, this estimation is one of the main differences between me and other researchers (for example, Möller), who unanimously declare the text was only for rulers, and wise men. My position arose from the comparison to the Tai traditional law which EVER is for both strata of society (the rulers and the ruled), except to specific sections.

⁶ Some even say, this is a mild description, as the Han had actually the plan to extinct the other peoples in their periphery, but failed to do so.

Lao-Tse, Müang-Tse, Zhuang-Tse, etc. □ are these names by good chance?

For 25 years, I've found a specific correspondence of "South Chinese" philosophers' names with their works. The contents, which for me were obviously Tai tradition, and the corresponding names of the authors, enforced in me the thought that this was not Chinese philosophy, but the philosophical abstraction and description of ways of living of the Lao, the Zhuang, etc., i.e., the Tai peoples. Names of such philosophers are Lao-tse, Zhuang-tse, Müang-tse, etc. (One has to do further research whether the Müang people in Vietnam who are in close contact with the Tai peoples in Northern Vietnam and prefer a similar living style can also be included here).

After the Han-Chinese conquered the Tai territories in the South, the Han Culture with Confucianism as its state doctrine became the official, upper norm, and a (scholarly) contact between the two contradictory philosophical systems became possible in terms of translated determination of the Tai terms and concepts into the typical Han conception of philosophy, language and script, thus being written down possibly for the first time after having been practiced among the Tai peoples for millennia (in oral form).

The philosophers who wrote down these Tai traditions may well have been of Han ethnicity. As I noted before this matter is not of urgent importance.

One could regard the *lao-tse* as a description of a Tai style in Han language, and the *zhuang-tse* as a similar description of a Tai style. Lao ("the ancient") and Zhuang ("the fiercely fighting") are examples of designations for ethnic Tai groups provided by the Han.

The language and behavioral patterns of those two groups (mere examples of the Tai peoples only) resemble very much; they have more or less changed only slightly through external influences over the past 2000 years, and even farther back. One should also see that all the Tai peoples were exposed to different cultural influences over the time which created a secondary layer of culture, but their elementary core culture is still the same among all. It is very much corresponding with the maxims in the *tau tae tching*. Whether these Tai peoples themselves or researchers about their culture have ever reflected or not⁸, the concepts described in the *lao-tse*, *zhuang-tse*, etc., philosophical texts objectively are exactly what makes up the core of their Tai culture.

These philosophical texts are the abstract version (abstracted by whatever Han philosopher) of the typical Tai ways of behavior and ways of conceiving the world (nature and society). I found this approved again after doing in-depth studies about Tai traditional law.⁹

The Thai of Thailand who are exposed to modern views of philosophy call *tau-ism* as *lathi tau*, and they like the concept "because it is all about balance between two extreme

⁸ I doubt that anybody did. Nevertheless, during my last field research among Tai peoples, this time among the Ahom of Assam, India, a ritual master there told upon my question, they revered the *tau*, which is "the right path". Though they have forgotten the Tai language in everyday life, some remnants are left in their ritual language. They are still aware that they have migrated from Burma, and before that from South China.

I found that the Ahom still have the typical Tai way of behavior and are worth to be studied as an ancient Tai group who have maintained quite a number of ancient Tai practices abandoned already by the other Tai who came under different influence.

⁹ Published in TAI CULTURE *baan-müang* section starting from 1998; and a special volume of TC on the theme "Traditional Law and Social Values in Tai Societies" in 2001.

poles”, actually known as “typical Thai or Lao... ways”. Nevertheless, I think, they are not consciously aware in their everyday life and behavior that they are just acting according to these prescriptions, and that both are just identical.

***Tau tae tching* vs. Buddhism (traditional behavior vs. religion)**

It is interesting to say here that I have seen from Tai peoples who quite recently migrated from China via North Thailand and Burma to Assam, that they have all adopted Buddhism whereas I have seen their respective forefathers (Tai groups) in China who still revere the ancient Tai religion. In the new homelands, the new Buddhism and their old Tai religion have virtually merged into one (in the form of syncretism). Both are fitting quite well together, and I have remarked that also their traditional way of life is quite well embedded in Buddhism. Buddhism fits so well in the Tai traditional way of life and also in their old indigenous religion that one could think, if it was not the Tai who have invented Buddhism, it was at least determined for them to follow (which turns out to be true).

Best hitherto interpretations of the *tau tae tching* by Sinologists cannot go beyond the borders of their discipline

As my main text resources (translation from Chinese, and commentaries) I have used two incredible German publications:

- Ernst Schwarz: **Laudse – Daudedsching**. Philipp Reclam jr. Leipzig 1978
- Hans-Georg Möller: **Laozi**. Herder Freiburg 2003

Quite recently, I have found this new booklet on the *tau tae tching* by a German philosopher and Sinologist, Hans-Georg Möller. He applied a quite unconventional method for analyzing the contents of the text. Many ideas which I had been developing for many years for my own understanding and which I discussed only with some friends, I have seen published in his book for the first time. It is a very impressive intellectual work, giving also new inputs to my own ideas.

Nevertheless, I will show why I think Möller, as all other researchers before him, was not able to go beyond the boundaries of their discipline, Sinology, which has the Han people and their culture at the center of its study.

Möller states¹⁰, the *lao-tse* as a strictly non-humanistic, non-moralistic, non-causalistic philosophy may count as a great liberation from great errors (according to F. Nietzsche). Here, one should see the date of emergence of the text *tau tae tching*. Possibly, what is meant is that it could be beneficial for individuals or the whole society in modern times to reflect on those ancient wisdoms. I agree with Möller that the text and its concepts may well be a challenge of thought (and a way out of mess – O.R.) for mankind today.

Möller writes, the *tau tae tching* provides important prescriptions for

- the ruling of the state
- the cultivation of body and person
- subordinating into the world and nature

¹⁰ Möller's as well the book by Schwarz are written in German language, and captions in English throughout the text are my own translations which hopefully represent their intended ideas.

The poetic form of the text is normal for the Tai tradition (though here we have the Han-Chinese version).¹¹

Möller tries to give the important concepts and advices for the right behavior a sense, but of course as a plain sinologist he cannot go beyond these specific limitations of his discipline (sinology), as no-one else was able to do before. Möller always talks about Han-Chinese society, not giving respect to the fact that the totally different and even opposing Confucianism was the ideology and typical way of behavior of the Han people in the North, and still is until today.

At no place there is reference to the (in Raendchen's abstraction) "two parts of China, the North which is Han people and culture, and the South which is Tai people and culture". In fact, there have not been dramatic changes in this duality until today, though the borders of influence have ever shifted further southwards.

It is the result of the well-known extreme Han-centeredness and cultural hegemony that was ruling from the time of emergence of the expanding Han state until today. It is interesting that even Western scholars cannot go across these borders of thought.¹²

Möller states that views and prescriptions in the *tau tae tching* "belonged to the core of the basic orientation patterns, with which in old-Chinese society the mighty tried to understand and to explain their actions/behavior and their position in the cosmos and state. They had the function to give social life a sense." I see this is partly true, but not for the Han people (only for Taiized Han). I would rather say, it explained the sense of social life; not only for the ruling, but for all members of society, and this society was ancient Tai society.

Möller writes that today's society is totally different, and the text *tau tae tching* in printed form is not any more the same as before, so nobody can understand it (anymore). Here I agree only as far that no Han nor Sino-Vietnamese, for example, can identify with or even understand the *lao-tse* text, because of a different (Confucian) socialization.

Otherwise, in another aspect, I have to strongly oppose to the above statement. Human society is human society. As there is a natural law of nature, there is a natural law of human society. I think, it principally functioned and will function according to the provisions provided by the *lao-tse* text, although this is not so easy to be found out.¹³ Contrary to what Möller states, the book or the text is definitely still the same, and there are millions of people, even in the southern part of China, who can understand every passage of the text. These Tai peoples still lead a life according to the concepts described in the text, although they probably do not know this scholarly abstracted text.

¹¹ A recent initial comparative research on basic Chinese vocabulary in the *tau tae tching* and Thai and Vietnamese words brought to light some obvious inter-linkages, which have been interpreted in that work as Thai borrowings from the Chinese. In the contrary, I would rather see this as an approval of my thesis that the text *tau tae tching* or its contents were translated from Tai into Chinese. (Wilaiwan Khanittanan: Taoist Theocracy and the Tai origins.) This researcher concluded from the small comparison (using a Vietnamese dictionary), that the original settlement of the Tai was between these 3 countries. Concerning the Vietnamese language, which has borrowed from the Chinese all scientific and religious words (together around 70% of the total language), I have already stated in footnotes in TC in 1996 that there are massive borrowings from the Tai languages, especially in rice agriculture, irrigation, etc., whereupon a large study in this field was initiated by John Hartmann (NIU).

¹² It is normal for every science that a view from the more objective outside is predestined for the finding of new facts and cohesions. This means, Western Sinologists, who solely concentrate on Han studies, are not far away enough for those more objective findings.

¹³ Cf. the cycles of economic growth, and crises. Compare the recent financial crisis.

The explanation is that the primary element is the Tai society with its behavioral rules, whereas the text originated from these traditions and is only secondary.

These prescribed understandings and rules have changed only in nuances among the various Tai peoples who have migrated to many places of “Greater Southeast Asia”. There exists a common Tai sense and a mainly identical “grammar of behavior”¹⁴, a rather exceptional “Tai way of life”¹⁵.

Möller rightly states that this text represents a general order, not any subjective opinion. He even compares the text form to a hypertext, given there is no beginning and no end, no logical line of argument to follow. Accessibility to the text is given at any place, using the reference of many keywords and core concepts which re-occur at many other places in the text.

Möller: “Other than in Confucius (Lunyu), there is not the form of dialogue, no answer-question, and no obvious logical chain. At reading the text, one remarks that this philosophy contains meaningful sayings (maxims), but one does not realize what concretely the sense in them would be.” Here, I suppose “one” is Möller himself or Han-Chinese people whom he might have interviewed. Contrary, I asked so many Tai people¹⁶ about all these manifold sayings, and they ever had readily to give their own answers. Many times, the answers were far from what I expected. Nevertheless, this shows clearly, the Tai are familiar with this kind of meaningful sayings (maxims) and such contents. More, the Tai would automatically understand and accept each of these sayings, because their life, their socialized morality, which is fundamentally different from that of the Han Chinese, runs along these lines.

The Interlinkage of “pictures” in the *tau tae tching* text

I agree with Möller (p.14), that the experienced user of the hypertext *lao-tse* knew what was told about, at least he/she knew the theme. That is why further explanations were not necessary. Links (rhetoric signals) allow the user to shift from one space in the text to another. Every chapter in the text refers to other chapters through the repeated usage of specific metaphors.

I agree fully, that for the Tai the metaphors in the text referred to well-known and widely accepted concepts as a conglomerate of pictures and action patterns which were interconnected. I would like to add my thought, that these well-known metaphors and contents are interlinked in the text as a system.¹⁷

¹⁴ People will not know about the sameness after they visit each other. After visiting they know they are basically same, but there are all the subjective differences. Researchers could possibly abstract. The most potential findings will come from objective sources.

For the findings on “A Typical Tai Grammar of Behavior”, compare Oliver Raendchen, in TAI CULTURE, Vol. VI, 1&2; 2001; Traditional Law and Values in Tai Societies. Interestingly, now I newly found that the *tau tae tching* text is the “bible of the Tai philosophy and Tai way of life”.

¹⁵ I think it should actually be needless to mention it again and again, that all the Lao, Thai, Shan, Ahom, Zhuang, Puyei, Kam, Mulao, Gelao, Dai, and all other Tai peoples are included here.

¹⁶ During my many field research trips to Laos, Thailand, Burma, South China, North Vietnam, Assam which covered all the Tai peoples living there as the majority people, or as ethnic minorities. Additional findings I have constantly from my garden neighbor in Berlin who is a Tai Dam from Vietnam.

¹⁷ It is clear that it is definitely not the Han people who were or are closely linked to the text or knew its contents by heart. Contrary to the Tai peoples, the Han people generally downgrade these descriptions on rest, piece, harmony, and inactivity as mere nonsense. The contents of the *tau tae tching* are contradictory to the traditions of the Han people.

The *tau tae tching* is a living practice among the Tai

I do not agree when Möller states (like all other researchers who are mostly Sinologists) that these *tau tae tching* traditions of living and of perceiving the world have died out. For me it is clear that many rules of behavior expressed in the *tau tae tching* cannot be understood nor be accepted by the Han people¹⁸, but they are all understood and accepted by all the Tai peoples, and this is the core what made up all the differences and well documented disputes between the two opposing schools of thought (Confucius and Laotse) from 2500 years until today.

It is the indigenous Tai philosophy which delivers an impressive figurativeness, in a highest stage of abstraction, far from simplistic. Interestingly, Möller writes that the *lao-tse* text is quite close to traditional, not more existing, modes of western thought.

The text which supposedly did not exist in a written form before the first written version translated into Han language was not for reading. As is practice until today among Tai, ritual and religious written texts are a precious gift to be handed over in the burial, enlarging the merits of the dead person as well as of the donator.

The text existed in its primary form as an oral tradition for millennia, and every Tai knew the contents, the ideas and concepts by heart, as wisdoms of this kind are cited in fitting circumstances. I think the concepts as such were a well-known knowledge set in Tai society in general, as they are still today. Other than Möller I think that the text was thought not only for the privileged, educated rulers, but it formed a moral concept to be known and to be followed by everyone in Tai society. Sayings and wisdoms in the *tau tae tching* tradition were told to young children by their parents, grand-parents and grant-grant-parents. It is the same as the still living tradition of *puu soon laan*, *lung soon laan*, or *intinjaan soon luuk* of Lao, Phuan and Tai Dam, for example. One will easily see the congruence of concepts between these teachings for children and the far more abstracted *tau tae tching*.

The oral texts providing more concrete specifications and explanations on behavioral norms and guidelines for a good and peaceful life in society are plentiful in every Tai society, as described formerly in the theme of “Traditional law of the Tai peoples”.¹⁹

Interpretation of Some Core Terms and Concepts in the *tau tae tching*

Some of the following assumptions and thoughts are taken from the above mentioned two publications. Presentations of their ideas are referred to as (Möller) or (Schwarz).²⁰

It strikes me, how newer research (even from neighboring disciplines) seems to must come close to my interdisciplinary *baan-müang* complex culture concept. The system I proposed here is at the same time the central sub-system “Traditional Law of the Tai” in my model on the “Complex System of the Tai Cultures”. (Cf. the supplemented diagram in this essay which was formerly published on various occasions).

¹⁸ My own field research on this subject among Chinese and Vietnamese.

¹⁹ TAI CULTURE, Vol.: VI-1&2; 2001; Special volume on „Traditional Law and Social Values in Tai Societies”

²⁰ These contents by those authors are loosely rendered into English by Raendchen, without any warranty.

The term *tau*

There is a meaning of this word in old Chinese, like “to talk, to say, to name”, and more recent “to go”. It is rather fixed through the hieroglyphs. (Schwarz)

The meaning of the term in various Tai dialects is „to go“, “tortoise”, “female sexual organ”, “holy bottle gourd” *naam tau*.²¹ I feel that “water” is somehow implicated in the term *tau*.

It is interesting that the title is unanimously translated and understood as “the right path”, as would be understood in Lao or Thai, though “*tae tching*” (te jing) in Chinese means a “philosophical pamphlet”, then: a text on the *tau*, “text about speaking”, etc.²²

Meaning of Water

Schwarz states that it was not by good chance that the Taoists chose water as a symbol for the *tau*, or *tao*. Water is seen as an ideal, it sinks down, and is lying on the ground. The necessity of large systems for irrigation and river regulation served in the process of putting all the ritual, economic, and political power into the hands of a single person, or an administration under this single person.

Nevertheless, rice consumption and rice growing technique with extended irrigation networks are well associated with the Tai culture which spread as far north as to the Yangtze (*naam kham*), not with the Han culture at that time.

Bruce Lee, who in my view must have been influenced by *tau tae tching* thoughts, recommended: „Be water!“, as an ideal Kungfu-fighter feels and behaves like water.

The traditional dances of the Tai peoples consist of the same typical movements required for effective fighting. Tai people practice this quite often, including the women.²³ Such movements have already been depicted on large bronze drums which creation reaches back as far as 2500 years, and which are still worshipped to date by the Zhuang in South China (a branch of the Tai peoples). [cf. part “On war and peace” in this essay].

On the Concepts of Femininity, Futility, Valley, Emptiness, Root

One main hyperlink, meaning a concept constantly being repeated, is FEMININITY, called as *tau* among Tai peoples (some Tai “bosom”, some Tai “female sexual organ”, etc.).

²¹ These are words with differing sounds, but sounds also differ in various dialects. Additionally, linguists have already seen that in many cases, terms with very similar sounds often have a co-related meaning (words derived, meaning change, etc.).

²² The Tai Ahom in Assam who settled there for more than 800 years, told me their “religion” is the *tau tae tching*, and they translated it with “the right way”, though they do not know Tai language any more. Here, I saw that they mingled up “religion” with “way of life = philosophy” or “tradition = traditional law”. It is just, they brought it with them at the time when they lived in South China, and they still follow many of its principles.

Besides to this “tradition”, they have their typical ancient Tai religion with gods like water serpent, etc. (my personal field data, Assam 2007). To avoid mingling things up it is important to have in mind, Taoism as a religion emerged historically quite late. In the case of Ahom it is not yet clear to what extent the former plain philosophy, tradition, way of life, have been transformed to religion.

²³ In Siipo (Hsipaw), Shan state, Tai people told me that it is mostly in the dark hours of the evening that the Tai practice their martial arts which at the same time is a kind of joyous dancing, without being recognized by their enemies.

In the bipolarity, this femininity is the inactive, grave, down-to-earth, ruling, element: the valley, which is superior against the moving, upper part, the male, who is considered as dependent.²⁴

This femininity, door of conception and birth, this river valley is mostly suitable to nourish all life, the futile river valley is suitable for rice growing, and it is the typical living environment of the Tai peoples.

Möller goes in the right direction to see the connection between

valley – river valley – emptiness – futility – femininity – (cyclically giving birth).

Emptiness is the desired quality for some kinds of usefulness, as the spokes for the wheel, the empty space in a jug, the windows and doors as “empty walls”.

These are practical examples, but they are at the same time a parable for individual and societal conditions. It also shows the great meaning of the “nothing” in a philosophical sense. “There is wealth for the purpose, and is emptiness for the usefulness.” Both are necessary states which periodically interchange.

Empty River Valley

That a valley must be empty could possibly be understood in a different way as Möller who connects emptiness to a negative aspect. I would rather see this as a prerequisite for the Tai peoples in their usual settlement/migration mode. This mode has been applied until recently (some Tai peoples in Vietnam, Laos, Assam, etc.) who have moved their new communities *müang* to empty, suitable river valleys. Emptiness is another important concept in the tau tae tching which also makes sense for the practice of the Tai peoples: empty – not occupied – valleys are important.

A valley consists of the river and a small flat land, and surrounding mountains. What is of interest for the Tai is only the flat land and the river which comes down from the mountains, with an optimal flow of water.

“The spirit of the valley does not die”. Möller found out (p.24) that this principle can be thought throughout the whole text of the *tau tae tching*, and I agree with him, but adding that it is the Tai culture, directly linked to the river valley, to the femininity...

“Be the river (water) current of the world, and the everlasting power will be with you!” Bruce Lee, the famous Kungfu master, had adopted quite similar thoughts.

The talk is about oceans which are situated at a lower level than rivers, are more down to earth, are the more powerful. I see this also as a comparison to the Tai politics *müang*: from the small *müang* at the upper small streams down to the greater, mighty *müang* in great river valleys.

“Water is the all-nourishing goodness. Water flows without obstruction, but it can conquer all hardest things.” I am sure this can be thought also in interpersonal relations and in human society.

Möller states (p.26) that, pictures, structures and strategies in the *lao-tse* text are all interlinked: water is one central element (fertility, female). Water is omnipresent

²⁴ Please remember the traditional matri-linear inheritance schemes of the Tai, bride price, etc. (the superior role of women in general).

throughout the text, though at some text parts not explicitly spoken out. About water, femininity, and root, Möller gives the translations from chapter 6:

The spirit of the valley does not die,
this is the meaning of hidden femininity.

and chapter 61:

A large state
is a water lying down to earth,
is the femininity of the world,
is the connection of the world.

Möller (p.26) holds that in a circle of eternal reversals, the female conceives the life giving power of the male and creates life. Water and femininity are the futile “connections” (control elements) in the permanent process of taking and giving in life. It is an eternal process, and its organs are ceaseless in their use. They are continuously in motion, which also means there is constant procreation.

When Möller talks about a large state on the political level, I must think about all the Tai *müang* states in valleys which differ in their might, according to natural surroundings and situations. Anyway, they are thought for and used to bring together the resources, so that they can nourish mankind... (Möller p.27).

I agree with Möller (p.28) that “the door of hidden femininity” may be seen as synonym to “valley” = “femininity” = “hidden” (connecting depth and height). Further down - this is a positive aspect - is the “root”. Creation happens in darkness, in the non-viewable, in the shapeless. Femininity is in fact a hidden transition or handling point. The door of femininity is also shapeless.”

The door of femininity is a shapeless emptiness surrounded by wealth. It is called in some Tai dialects colloquially as *tau* (the female sexual organ).

Chapter 10 puts the question, “when the door of heaven opens, can you then be the feminine part?” In my view, in Tai societies, the fixing of the gender is determined by heaven. There is a certain priority for the femininity. Females are the resting, still masters, whereas the male has to serve with action and movement. I have seen several parts of the *tau tae tching* expressing that it may be strategic behavior to imitate the female behavior (for saving energy, etc.).

See why Wushu master Bruce Lee gives the maxim “Be feminine!” which goes along with the thoughts in the *tau tae tching*. This imperative means, following this advice one will acquire power from the natural forces, will be the one who is determining the action.

On p. 30, Möller states: “The door of hidden femininity is equivalent to the root” (as a concept). I would like to interpret the root as primeval mass, primeval condition, primeval silence (rest, piece, tranquility). The root is (considered) the part of bodies from which it stems and to which all will return.

In my view, the “dark root” (Möller p. 39) comprises the unknown, the inexplicable in its hugeness and extension. If Möller speaks of “root of heaven and earth”, I call it the “total mass”.

Möller (p.32) holds that valley, door, and root are permeable; they are absent and present at the same moment. Here, I would add that *tau* is the valley which is optimally filled with water flowing through it. This means consequently, that the river valley has

to be relatively empty. When Möller states “the *tau* is empty, and even in use it will not fill up”, this might be a hint that huge dams in river valleys for water reservoirs are against the nature. Of course, the Tai are famous for their irrigation dams and networks to spread an optimal amount of water in the whole valley.

On War and Peace

if the heart compels the chi-energy, this means: violence

In the Taoist work on the *chi* (“*chi-kong*”), body cultivation and world cultivation are not enforced, but, in the contrary, are received through “not getting involved”. (cf. Möller, p.59) For the imagination of several concepts, the *tau tae tching* recommends the imitation of a small child, as it is innocent and perfectly manages its energy balance.

The favorable personal character qualities prescribed in the traditional Tai law, which are very similar to the descriptions in the *tau tae tching* include coolness, indifference, quietness, peacefulness, modesty, humbleness, contentment, respectfulness towards fellow human beings and animals, subdue to or not to be harmful to nature, to long for harmony, not to apply violence, not to envy others, not to compel people, to instruct others only by positive examples, accept one’s designated place in society, to follow the “traditions” (traditional law).²⁵

In the *tau tae tching* it is said that, if people in the state are greedy and take large parts of the wealth for their own purpose this will lead to the fall of the state, even without foreign forces.

Modesty and humbleness are considered as keys to societal harmony. If these are not followed, the results will be as described in chapter 46 of the *lao-tse* (cf. Möller, p.98):

<i>the most serious crime is</i>	<i>to let the desires spread</i>
<i>the most serious disaster is</i>	<i>not to know when it is enough</i>
<i>the most painful evil is</i>	<i>the longing for properties</i>

The trickiest devices that are constructed as a result of increasing knowledge are fighting machines. The possession of such newly created fighting devices may help to enforce against others one’s new desires. Excessive emotions and greed are often followed by war.

Immoderation of motions, zeal, humiliation of others as well as disorder, any kind of war or force are horrific imaginations and taboos for Taoists (as well as for Tai). The following excerpt is from chapters 57 and 80 of the *lao-tse*:

*a good person does not like weapons of all kinds...
one tries to avoid confrontation...
only in the exceptional situation of need might the weapons be applied...
by way of enjoying to kill humans one’s goals cannot be achieved...
if any person is killed in war, it will cause a big pain and grievance among all...*

²⁵ Some of the examples might be exaggerated. In fact, they are idealized, and especially in recent times values seem to change in some Tai societies, nevertheless I think that partly other ethnic groups have the say there in ongoing socio-economic processes or changes.

In my view, the Tai peoples do not only traditionally dislike weapons²⁶, but the essential criterion is that they are fundamentally peace-loving.

A section of historic annals of the Vietnamese Hue court in the medieval ages came to my knowledge, which was a typical approval of my thoughts. It reads (in summary):

A Vietnamese court delegation crossed the mountain range to pay a visit to the neighboring Lao state. They came across traditions different from theirs and were particularly amazed by the lack of a standing army. They thought, why don't we get our army here and just occupy this territory? And so they did. – However, they did not understand how it could have happened that their strong army was defeated and wiped out of that country.

The answer is that their army had been defeated by joint efforts of the local Tai people, who actually master the arts of war very well, but normally do not show or apply them.

Compare here the seemingly soft movements in the energy practice of Tai-chi, were the same “soft” movements may push away or even smash the enemy if they are carried out with this intention. Tai-chi clearly follows and is even based on the principles of the *tau tae tching* in theory and practice. I would not hesitate a moment to connect the roots of this martial and body art to the Tai tradition.

Congruence of Behavioural Patterns

Some general remarks on behaviour, as in chapter 22 of the *tau tae tching* (Schwarz, p.62) show a striking resemblance of what Tai-Lao-Thai people are taught, and what has become their general approach to understanding and behaviour:

- *bowed things will be straight;*
- *empty things will be full;*
- *old things will be new;*
- *a few will be much;*
- *many things make crazy;*

- *so a wise person only concentrates on the one thing²⁷
thus becoming a good example to the other people;*
- *a wise person does not show up
thus being recognized by all;*
- *a wise person does not insist on his being right
thus showing that he is right;*
- *a wise person does not insist on his merits
thus achieving merits;*
- *a wise person does not push himself forward
thus he will automatically be rewarded the leadership.*

²⁶ This is a philosophical abstraction, in practice the Tai peoples have a profound knowledge of and even artistry in the martial arts and warfare, which are essential for their defense. Weapons are used for ritual purposes, like sword dance. Force is applied according to an understanding of life in nature, e.g. for hunting.

²⁷ In my view, it is the “one and all (and nothing?)” in a totally holistic approach.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In my view, all the above explanations and descriptions express the real *understanding* of the Yin-Yang²⁸ dualistic principle, in nature as well as in human society.

I would like to conclude that, after I compared in-depth both the *tau tae tching* concepts and those of the traditional law of the Tai peoples, that both are very similar.

According to my findings, the *tau tae tching* is the philosophically utmost condensed and abstracted text version of the Tai way of life. I suppose that, in historical times, it must have been translated from Tai into Chinese (probably by Han Chinese translators, scribes, or philosophers who did not fully understand all contents of the original Tai text, i.e., the lived traditions of the Tai). The real creators of these *tau tae tching* thoughts and bearers of this tradition have ever since been forgotten.

The contents of this philosophical text (which in fact describes the Tai tradition) brought about a millennia-lasting, constant dispute with North Chinese traditions. I view this struggle of the two main philosophical schools in China - the incompatibility of the ways of life of North and South Chinese people - as one proof for my hypothesis.

The *tau tae tching* is still a living tradition in the form of behavioral rules and patterns and philosophical ways of perceiving the world of many Tai peoples, who settle in many countries of Greater Southeast Asia, including many places of South China and Assam (India).

Many more concepts and practical parts not mentioned in this introductory essay have still to be studied in detail. I will myself do more research on this theme to get further knowledge and to further proof my hypotheses established in this essay. I hope that many researchers from neighboring disciplines will join in this undertaking as it for sure needs the collaboration and criticism of many.

To view the *tau tae tching* in connection with the Tai peoples might contribute to a new and better understanding of Asian philosophies.

The contents of the *tau tae tching* are thought to have been written down in a very condensed form (only 81 short chapters), but they still offer the opportunity of unconventional, unveiling philosophical interpretation/exploration.

More, many of the thoughts expressed more or less openly in the *tau tae tching* may count as a challenge to interpretations of our world's life and dangers to human life today.

²⁸ The terms *yin-yang* are explained in the *tau tae tching* only a single time, namely in chapter 42. Nevertheless, the whole text deals about this dualistic and holistic concept. This is understood by every Tai. A Tai Dam told me last week, he understands the term as “ying-yang”, where “ying” is the female, down, dark, and “yang” the male component.