"Dao" and Sign in History: Daoist Arche-Semiotics in Ancient and Medieval China. By Daniel Fried. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 321. $90.00 cloth, $27.95 paper.

It is difficult to consider Daoist philosophy (otherwise known as Lao-Zhuang thought) as an actual, historical tradition since there appear to be only two (or possibly three, if one being Liezi 列子) Daoist philosophers whom we can recognize based on the circulated texts named after them—the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Following their initial circulations down to the present time, it might not be exactly true to say that scholarship has misunderstood Daoist philosophy, but it was nevertheless consistently put into the service of traditional Confucian (and, later, Chinese Buddhist) thought and studies. Modern Western sinology, deeply committed as it has been to the traditional Confucian bias in its approaches to Daoist philosophy, also has struggled to produce viable readings of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. None of this is necessarily the fault of Confucian scholarship, locked into its own ethical judgements that carry with them dominant conceptions of what can count as practical value, nor is it the fault of Western sinology, strongly influenced by the idealist traditions of Western philosophy which has rendered it ill-equipped to deal with the radically non-metaphysical content of Daoist philosophy.

Over the last several decades, a growing consensus among some contemporary scholars points out that the methods of both Chinese Confucianism and Western sinology lack the proper resources to directly engage Daoist philosophy. Spurred on by Martin Heidegger's interest in Daoism, many of these scholars are turning not only to his phenomenology, but also to the methods and resources made available by other continental philosophers, notably Jacques Derrida, in order to come to a better-informed position from which to engage Daoist (Lao-Zhuang) philosophy. For many years, much of this work (already too numerous to cite in this review) primarily focused on the ways in which Heidegger attempted to both understand and appropriate the thought of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* for the purposes of his own philosophical projects. His efforts to come to an understanding of Daoist philosophy were (and for the most part still remain rather) unique in that he took no recourse whatsoever to traditional Confucian readings, and his reliance on modern sinological methodologies also was minimal.

As many scholars gradually turn to the ideas and methodologies of continental philosophy with which to directly engage Lao-Zhuang thought, their marked tendency is to leave aside traditional Chinese and Western sinological methods and assumptions. To date, this new turn is still in its adolescence, in part because it is a big step for scholars of Lao-Zhuang philosophy, whether Chinese or Western, to manage Heidegger and other continental philosophers, while at the same time the reverse holds true for scholars of continental philosophy in their attempts to engage

Lao-Zhuang thought. But with the gradual accumulation of scholarly works exploring the deeper levels of this new-styled and important meeting of "East and West," this turn becomes ever more influential.

It is within this contemporary context that Daniel Fried has produced his *"Dao" and Sign in History*. However, unlike many recently published works exploring the coming together of Daoist and continental philosophy, his does not remain within the arena of early Chinese (Warring States period) Lao-Zhuang philosophy; rather, it tacks a different and more extended course from the Warring States to an analysis of selected writers and texts up to the end of the Six Dynasties period. Also not a straightforward study of Daoist philosophy as such, this work offers a complex exploration of "Daoist arche-semiotics" as Fried finds it present in a selected array of important Chinese writers and their works that evince a deep influence from the Lao-Zhuang mistrust of language's ability to represent the world as it is.

Announced in the subtitle, this work is constructed around this notion of Daoist arche-semiotics. In the Preface and the Introduction, Fried explains that modern semiotics as a discipline established by Pierce and Saussure studies the system of signs and referents in communication that is founded on a Western commitment to logocentrism. He also discusses a postmodern semiotics, intimately associated with Heidegger and Derrida, that seeks to deconstruct this logocentrism. Fried recognizes that inquiries directed to the ways in which signifiers, particularly of the linguistic sort, relate (or do not relate) to signifieds have never been limited to modernity, although they never lead to the construction of a "science of communication" (p. 4). Fried designates these various premodern impulses to explore the workings of linguistic signification by the term "arche-semiotics," and he recognizes a specifically Daoist one that has exerted a dominant influence throughout the course of Chinese thought and culture.

This Daoist arche-semiotics was unleashed in something approaching, but never quite satisfying, the conditions of a systematic science in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*; more particularly, he pinpoints the birth of Daoist arche-semiotics in the opening line of the *Laozi*: "The Dao that can be spoken of is not the constant Dao" 道可道，非常道. The primary import of this sentence is that there exists something important that language is not able to directly and adequately signify. Further developed in other sections of the *Laozi*, these ideas were also soon directly taken up in the *Zhuangzi*, in which such sentiments that "the use of the fish trap lies in the fish; get the fish and forget the trap" 筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌 are found, where the fish trap refers to words, and the fish to the ideas that they attempt to communicate.

Fried convincingly argues that Daoist arche-semiotics is not an anti-semiotics: "Daoists did not necessarily reject language, and did not endorse a simple skepticism, much less a univocal eremitism. But in important ways, they had a deep suspicion

of names, which played out in complex ways, as they employed various strategies that simultaneously delegitimized language and partially redeemed it" (p. 7). Because names and language, or signification more generally, emerge from the Dao as the source of all existence, but particularly from the *wu* 無 (nothing or non-being or, even better, the silence) of the Dao—language is not empty: in speaking, language in fact communicates; but what it says is not fixed, and referentiality remains a fluid, non-stabilizing process.

The Introduction opens with an analysis of the very early Chinese philosopher, Gongsun Long 公孫龍, who argued about the ways in which language ought to match qualities with things. For him, this should be a relatively straightforward process whereby words directly signify referents. With this as its starting point, the book is then presented in two parts. The first orients Daoist arche-semiotics with respect to Laozi and Heidegger (Chapter 1) and Zhuangzi with Derrida and Levinas (Chapter 2). The second part analyses important Chinese writings from the Six Dynasties that demonstrate a clear influence from the arche-semiotic insights of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Fried's method is to uncover both the "subjective" and the "historical" premises from which the writings were produced (pp. 5–6). The former concerns an author's "socially or psychologically deeply rooted impulses" to self-representation, and the latter concerns the historical and political conditions in which any author found himself.

The first sections of Chapter 1 discuss the *Laozi*'s ideas about language and signification. The main points addressed by Fried are the ways in which it dismantles ethical distinctions (in terms of social values and positions) by exposing the false structures upon which they are established by language's use of binary pairs. Fried here presents a quite novel reading of "Laozi" the author, who went to great pains to conceal his own "subjective premise" behind language that obscures his own presence in the work (which does not necessarily mean that Fried assumes a single author for the work). The later sections of the chapter turn to Heidegger's engagement with the *Laozi* and Asian thought more generally. His method here is to display relevant ideas about language from Heidegger before establishing some parallels of them with the *Laozi*. While there is not a lot of constructive thought on Fried's part here that would open new directions for a Heideggerian reading of the *Laozi*, he nonetheless writes that "the gap of history between Laozi and Heidegger can serve as an analogue for the difficulties other readers of Laozi also faced, trying to read his ahistorical, anti-arche-semiotic manifesto into their own intricately constructed historical cages" (p. 55).

The first sections of Chapter 2 provide an analysis of the arche-semiotics of the *Zhuangzi*, followed by a discussion of Derrida's argument with Levinas about the ethics of silence. Pointing out that the ideas of the *Laozi* are "scattered" whereas those of the *Zhuangzi*, particularly in the "Qiwulun" 齊物論 chapter, are given in "a

sustained topical meditation" (p. 66), Fried draws two important parallels between them. First, the putative authors of each (Laozi and Zhuangzi) spent a great deal of effort concealing themselves in their writings, and he has a point: they both are in agreement that words are unreliable signs for authentic representation, signalling their distrust of language; therefore, they both hesitate, if not refuse, to self-represent to any substantial degree. As Fried writes in his discussion of Wheelwright Pian 輪扁 from the *Zhuangzi*, "The subjective premise of arche-semiotics is fully at play: the problems of language help to bifurcate the subject between what he knows he wants to say and what he knows he cannot get across" (p. 61). Second, they both hold that signs, whether linguistic or extra-linguistic, can in fact represent (or else they would never have written anything), but in their minds, external signs (mis)function to conceal either the plenitude of being (particularly for the *Laozi*) or the inner truths of subjective and hardly representable subjectivity (particularly for the *Zhuangzi*). Looking ahead to the discourse of Daoist arche-semiotics in the Six Dynasties, Fried writes that "this Zhuangzian impulse to preserve an authentic self against the danger of too-much and too-precise language will remain a powerful force" (p. 68).

Fried focuses on the ways in which Zhuangzi, much like Laozi but to a heightened degree, "crashes right through the quotidian space of adequate exposition, and invents a new prose of ridiculous superfluity" (p. 68; see also p. 76). Given the *Zhuangzi*'s ability to deconstruct the structures of thought and language, Fried associates it with the deconstructive and poststructuralist style of Derrida. The similarities of both are motivated against, or at least are unconstrained by, a logocentrism that works to structure patterns of thought and thereby thwart and deform pristine signification. Speaking actualized in its actual freedom represents a style of spiritual transcendence of the social significations of the external world that Zhuangzi calls "free and easy wandering" 逍遙遊. But to maintain this style of freedom, one that virtually requires an eremitic withdrawal from the anxieties of social participation, Zhuangzi must, apropos of similar ideas from Derrida, take care to conceal his own traces within a certain style of silence.

The *Zhuangzi*'s silence is not an absolute imperative for existence; rather, as Fried explains, it is a necessary component of maintaining one's life in the starkly and dangerously political world of early China (this responds to Fried's "historical premise"). This recognition allows him to bring Levinas and his "horror of silence" (p. 81) into the discussion of the *Zhuangzi*. In these parts of the chapter, particularly given the radical historical differences between Warring States China and the European Holocaust, I understand Fried's intention to more deeply explore the uses and dangers of silence in confrontation with Levinas, but his discussion here is somewhat overbearing and at times loses track of the main discussion.

The second part of the book examines many Six Dynasties writers who demonstrate clear influence from the Lao-Zhuang arche-semiotics. Chapter 3 first analyses

Wang Bi 王弼, who transformed the "scattered" ideas of the *Laozi* into a "system" (p. 117) of non-representation to serve as an actual theory of governance. Fried then turns to the Obscure Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) poets, Ji Kang 嵇康 and Ruan Ji 阮籍. The former, Fried writes, "posited as parts of the same process . . . the refusal to make distinctions and the desire to withdraw from society" (p. 136), whereas the *Zhuangzi* tended to keep them separate. On the poetry of Ruan Ji, Fried writes, "[c]ommon enough images and turns of phrase are wrested from their typical placings within—and then twisted off, left shivering, resonant" (p. 145). It is his "arche-semiotic reluctance to engage with the world through full self-revelation" (p. 147) that marks Ruan Ji's, as well as in many ways Ji Kang's, poetry.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the ways in which writers and writings often associated with institutionalized Daoism exhibit their own influence from Lao-Zhuang arche-semiotics. It begins with a discussion of the Celestial Masters 天師 movement, examining the *Taiping jing* 太平經, the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary, and the *Scripture of Western Ascension* 西昇經. Fried sums up their position on the unreliability of language and written words, seen as a "pivot point between materiality and immateriality" (p. 172), that was motivated in a large part by the "multiplicity of textuality as a possible distraction from the understanding of truth" that led to their "suspicion of the materiality of the sign" (p. 170). The chapter goes on to discuss the writings of Ge Hong 葛洪, who made important distinctions about written texts as being either "coarse" or "refined" (p. 181), with the best texts conforming to the latter judgement and that were therefore capable of imparting true cosmic secrets to the reader. The chapter closes with a discussion of the Shangqing 上清 tradition, deeply influenced also by Ge Hong, for whom authentically revealed texts themselves became objects of wonder, and for which "[w]riting itself is heavenly; it is the making-public that corrupts" (p. 194).

Chapter 5 explores various pieces of Daoist arche-semiotics in the world of Six Dynasties Chinese Buddhism. This period stands out because it marks the initial formation of the translation industry devoted to rendering Sanskrit texts into a uniquely Chinese Buddhist discourse. The chapter opens and closes with an engagement of Derrida's writings concerning translation and the "ethics of debt" (p. 199), with a series of analyses of several important early Chinese Buddhists and their internal debates about proper translation practices as they attempted to overcome the pull of Daoist terminologies in their maturing translation choices.

One interesting component of these debates concerns the fact that Buddhism, either in its Indian or Chinese guise, maintained a particular set of views concerning the metaphysics of transcendence in ways that Daoism and Confucianism never did until the influence of this Buddhism made its cultural impact felt. In other words, the challenge for the Chinese translators was not simply the forging of an adequate Chinese lexicon to fit the Sanskrit texts, but also how to come to terms with notions

of absolute transcendence central to conceptions of nirvana; Fried writes, "This is a practical literary-critical problem: how does one understand that which lies outside the text (*wen wai*)? But it is also a structuring problem, one cannot separate the arche-semiotic from the ontological, because as soon as one tries, using language, to imitate in the mind the mysteries of being, one must necessarily go astray. Hence, enlightenment is not achieved by the learning of true propositions, but by the shifting of consciousness" (pp. 213–14).

The final chapter opens with a brief discussion of Derrida's further ideas about deconstruction in the interplay of "the textual [and] the social" (p. 245) followed by a brief look at his notion that *il n'y a pas de hors-texts*. This serves to launch its fascinating arche-semiotic analysis of Liu Xie's 劉勰 *Text-Mind Carving Dragons* 文心雕龍, a work of literary-critical first principles that, according to Fried, "is arguably the major work that resists historicization the most" (p. 250). One remarkable feature of this work lies in its conception of a cosmological *wen* 文 (here understood as language or textuality in the widest sense) through which the Dao presents and expresses itself. Because this activity of the Dao makes it quite difficult to separate signs, particularly linguistic ones, Liu Xie evinces a deep suspicion of their ability to directly represent by way of names, and this is fully in keeping with Lao-Zhuang arche-semiotics. Note that all of this, as far as Fried frames it, speaks remarkably well to Heidegger's notion that language is the house of being, and in fact Fried goes so far as to claim that, for Liu, "[*w*]*en* is a Becoming" (p. 269). He writes that for Liu,

> [T]ext is usually treated as one ongoing and undifferentiated "sign" of an equally unarticulated reality. It is not that he proposes a semiotics without structure, but his structures are akin to those described by fluid mechanics, in which meaning is created across a continuum. Surface textuality is treated as a continuous whole, not just gesturing toward an external reality, but actually continuous with it, that portion of reality which self-manifests—not in the case of a divine logos bringing the fullness of meaning into a text, but as a mashup of the universe with its own markings. (pp. 251–52)

"Dao" and Sign in History is a sprawling book that covers a dizzying array of materials and ideas in its efforts to bring Heidegger and Derrida into a sustained conversation with Daoist philosophy. One of the book's great charms is Fried's uncanny ability to open up the remarkable continuities of Daoist thought with continental philosophy, in a way that resembles a type of literary criticism in which literature speaks to philosophy. Littered throughout the work from beginning to end are Fried's incisive articulations of deeply insightful ideas, mostly but not entirely pertaining to Daoist notions of language.

The few shortcomings of the work to which I briefly point are not meant to take anything away from its tremendous value for Daoist as well as contemporary Western

philosophy. Fried takes on a huge amount of materials, as he himself recognizes in the Introduction, and this compels him to explain more about the arche-semiotics of the texts under study than what he can reasonably demonstrate from them. He highlights discrete passages from an immensely large corpus of Six Dynasties writings, which he only sometimes analyses in detail. He spends little time with the original Chinese, preferring to let the texts speak for themselves even as he provides only a bare minimum of characters. I suspect that this illustrates an unwise imperative from book publishers looking to cut down on publication costs that authors should resist. Chinese texts are expected by the academic community, especially in works such as this that deal with many rarely cited works.

In addition, there are many further passages and themes in the texts under scrutiny left undiscussed (due again, I am sure, to length considerations) that speak, according to my own reading of them, just as much to the theme of Daoist arche-semiotics. One example of this would include the reading strategies encouraged by Ge Hong that require in-depth bodily cultivation as well as secret oral teachings from a master in order to circumvent misreadings of divinely transmitted texts caused by the slippage of significations. In this, Ge Hong is not alone in drawing a relation between cultivation and proper representation and referentiality.

Additionally, the chapter on Chinese Buddhism takes, if not Fried himself then at least the reader, out of a Daoist comfort zone, and this is necessarily so given its radically different historical horizons. The reader too easily gets lost in Buddhist modes of historiography, and although Fried intends to present a comprehensive examination of Daoist arche-semiotics in Six Dynasties writings, maybe this chapter could be saved for an independent article. Given his decision to include early Chinese Buddhism, it makes his avoidance of Confucian thought, particularly with respect to Confucian theories of rectifying names, all the more conspicuous, as this would add a deeper dimension by way of contrast to the Daoist arche-semiotics under scrutiny.

I greatly applaud Fried's herculean efforts to engage Heidegger and Derrida in his reading of Chinese texts, even though his uses of their philosophies are mostly limited to the framing of those texts rather than applied in active engagement with them. This is most conspicuous in the final chapter on Liu Xie, which begs a head-on confrontation with Heidegger's thinking about language, but in this, the reader is certainly asking far too much of Fried. What we are left with is a masterful study of Daoist arche-semiotics that will serve to usher a new generation of scholarship into deeper and more direct engagements between Daoist thought and continental philosophy.

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