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Tracks of the Tao, Semantics of Zen

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Tracks of the Tao, Semantics of Zen

Victor H. Mair

In the counter-culture that flowered during the sixties, withered during the seventies, and almost died during the eighties, two of the most ubiquitous rallying cries were Tao and Zen. The latter, indeed, had become enormously popular even earlier with the Beat Generation who were influenced by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki. The former, of course, was well known to Sinologues and Sinophiles for at least a century before their time.

Zen and Tao epitomize the quest for an intuitive approach to life that stands in opposition (or perhaps, to make the point more nicely, as a complement) to traditional Western rationality. A trip to the library reveals that Zen can be applied fruitfully to the following areas of human endeavor: running, jogging, archery, baseball, martial arts, motorcycle maintenance, photography, assembly language, tea drinking, pottery making, writing, painting, poetry, dancing, flower arrangement, photography, and helping(!). Apparently, even the reclusive J. D. Salinger relied upon Zen in crafting his inimitable fiction without being wholly aware of its capacity to transform our vision.

Recently, it would seem that Tao has surpassed Zen in the number of activities that have been identified as benefiting from its illuminating powers. Whole tomes have been written on the Tao as it pertains to cricket, architecture, management, power, voice, Pooh, sailing, science, relationships, health, sex, longevity, leadership, meditation, onliness(?), freedom, sage religion, nutrition, being, Mao Tse-tung, psychology, medicine, organization, love, communication, programming, the species(?), balanced diet, physics, acupuncture, cooking, symbols, water, T'ai-chi (shadow boxing), and health. I have listed these subjects in no particular order to show how Tao reaches into every nook and cranny of our existence.

Of late, still another triliteral talisman has been actively encroaching upon various fields of endeavor. This is pert, little Joy which began inconspicuously in the kitchen with cooking (and eating), moved quickly into the bedroom as a guide for sex, then shifted to the study as a stimulation for lex. In the meantime, Joy has infused sports such as running

and flying with newfound pleasure and (a)vocations such as building, gardening, hand weaving, cataloguing, and computing with untold zest, but it remains far behind Tao and Zen in the quest for committed adherents, doubtless because it makes no pretense at being mysterious or awesome. Joy is but a poor country cousin of Tao and Zen.

The canonical formulations of books and articles illustrating the intrincacies of these two elusive New Age shibboleths are *The Tao of...* and *Zen in...* or *Zen and....* This may indicate why Tao has recently been more successful than Zen in annexing various spheres of our lives. Tao is thought of as subsuming entire fields, whereas Zen merely informs or parallels them. Be that as it may, the combined range of Tao and Zen as we near the beginning of the third millennium is absolutely astonishing.

Two tiny words of three letters each! These terms from East Asian religions are now part of the daily discourse of midwestern quilters, California surfers, and Maine fishermen. Together, they have partially displaced another three letter word of universal import that is now usually uttered only as an oath or perfunctorily in prayers. How did Tao and Zen enter our vocabulary? And what do these two extraordinarily powerful words really mean? This will require a somewhat lengthy excursion into the neglected realm of philology, but I shall try to make it as painless and entertaining as possible.

While doing background research for my recent translation of the *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (New York: Bantam, 1990), I stumbled upon a phenomenal discovery: Tao (normally translated as "the Way") appears ultimately to be related to our English word "track." Since this equivalence is not immediately obvious from the current pronunciation of the two words in Modern Standard Mandarin and in Modern English, it will be necessary to reconstruct earlier forms and to point out various cognates.

Everyone is aware that Sinitic languages, dialects, and topolects (if recorded at all) are usually written with Chinese characters (also called "tetragraphs" [*fangkuaizi*] because of their squareness, or "sinographs" [*hanzi*] because of their ethnic affiliation). What is not so well known is the fact that the shapes of the characters have changed radically since their emergence around 1200 B.C.E. More importantly, the sounds of Sinitic words have altered tremendously since that group of languages split off from the parent Sino-Tibetan stock during the period from about 7000 to 3500 B.C.E. Furthermore, we must keep in

mind that the tetragraphic system is only one of numerous possible scripts that might be used to write Sinitic languages. For example, romanization has been used effectively in China since the days of the great Jesuit father, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and is now, in fact, the first script that all Chinese school children learn in the People's Republic. For those who are interested in pursuing these topics, I recommend three marvelous books by John DeFrancis: *Nationalism and Language Reform in China, The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy,* and *Visible Speech.* Also highly informative and reliable are S. Robert Ramsey's *Chinese Languages* and Jerry Norman's *Chinese.* The key points to make here are simply that Sinitic languages existed long before the Sinographs were invented and that their phonological evolution was independent of the script.

The basic meaning of Tao is "way" or "road." By extension, it comes to mean "method" and, by still further extension, the cosmic principle underlying the universe. We need not be detained by a separate Sinitic word, used only in Classical Chinese, that was written with the same character but that meant "say, speak." A fuller form of Tao in its original signification is an ancient bisyllabic word that is pronounced *tao-lu* (i.e., dow-loo) in Modern Standard Mandarin but may be roughly reconstructed for Old Sinitic as *duh(g)-ra(gh).* Old Sinitic is dated to approximately the sixth century B.C.E., about the same time as various Chinese philosophical schools which took Tao as their foundation began to coalesce.

The ancient sound of Tao in its fuller form immediately calls to mind Hebrew *derekh* ("way, path, principle"), Arabic *dra*ğ*a* or *durū*ğ (*"to go, walk, follow a course") and *tariq* ("a religiophilosophical method"), Akkadian *daraggu* ("path"), and Jibbāli *darag* ("to become used to walking"). Could it be just a mere coincidence that these words in Sinitic and Semitic both sound alike and share virtually the same range of meaning?

Due caution would prompt one to avoid seduction by such beguiling similarities were it not for the fact that the same combination of sound and meaning shows up in dozens of other languages from different families. Thus from Dravidian we have Tamil *tāri* ("way, road, path, right mode") and *tarai* ("way, path"), Kota *adary* ("road, path"), Kannada and Tulu *dāri* ("way, road, path"), Telegu *dāri* ("way, road, path, manner, mode"), Tamil *atar* ("way, path, public road, rule"), and Baḍaga *dāri*, Kuṛumba *dari*, Irula *daḍḍa*, and Malayalam *theru*', all of which mean "road." Finnish *tola* means "track, path, way, (right) course." Japanese *dōro*, borrowed from Sinitic *tao-lu*, is a common term for

road, and the native Japanese word *tōri* means "road, street, way, manner." In Thai, *dtrong* signifies "direct" or "straight" like a road, and *trug* is a "lane" or "alley." Bouton, a Malay language, has *dara* for "road" and Indonesian has *tjara* for "manner, way." The Australian aborigines speak of paths as *turi(n)gas* and use *thoorgool* to express the sense of "straight, direct." The Umaon, an aboriginal people of Central India, have *dāhāri* as their word for road.

One of the most interesting words I encountered in my researches is Manchu *doro* which has the full range of meaning that *tao(-lu)* does in Sinitic: "[correct] way, cosmic principle, ceremony," etc. Indeed, *doro* was used as an extremely precise translation of Tao in Sino-Manchu texts. Conversely, *doro* was treated as a native Manchu word by Chinese scholars and its two syllables were transcribed into Sinitic with tetragraphs used for their sound rather than for their meaning. The usages of the two words *doro* and *tao(-lu)* are so uncannily identical that one is tempted to believe they have a common source, for neither is considered to be a borrowing of the other. Since both words are very old in their respective languages, their presumed common ancestor must be more ancient than the language families in which they are embedded. Manchu *doro*, incidentally, is identical with the word for "way" in Jurchen and is echoed by *tergheghur* ("road") in Mongolian, sister Altaic languages.

Moving closer to home, the Russian and Ukrainian word for road is *doroga*, Polish has *droga* (compare *tor* meaning "course, track"), and Czech *taraha.* Bohemian has *draha* for "way, track" and in Old Bohemian the same word signified "lane between fields." It is clear that all of these Slavic terms are cognate with Serbo-Croatian *draga* ("valley"); in my Bantam book and in a separate Sinologically oriented monograph, I have much more to say about the archetypal path of human self-discovery that follows the bottom of a valley.

Rumanian *drum* and Modern Greek *dromos*, both of which mean "road," bear some resemblance to the other words I have been discussing, but should be set aside because they derive from an Ancient Greek word meaning "run." The same goes for Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian *drum* which signifies "highway." Gaelic *turus* ("journey"), however, probably belongs with the whole complex of words cited above.

By now, the reader is certainly wondering whether all of these seemingly related words have a common root. A close examination of the English word "track" may help to

reveal what it might be. "Track" entered the English language sometime before 1470. It appears in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and was undoubtedly borrowed from Middle French *trac* ("track of horses, trace"). The latter was itself borrowed from some Germanic source such as Middle Dutch *treck* ("pull, haul, draw") which is related to Middle Dutch and Middle High German *trecken* ("to draw, to pull") and Old High German *trehhan* or *trechan* ("to draw, pull, shove"). The same etymon shows up in a slightly different guise as "trek" which we borrowed into English sometime around 1850 from Afrikaans. The Afrikaans word, which originally meant "to travel or migrate slowly (by ox wagon) [a hallowed Indo-European custom!]" is derived from Dutch *trekken* ("to march, journey") and this, in turn, takes us right back to Middle Dutch *trecken* and Old High German *trechan*. The question, then, becomes one of seeking the Germanic root for these predecessors of "track" and "trek."

When we pursue *trecken* and *trechan* to their earliest antecedents, we arrive at Indo-European **dh(e)rāgh* ("to draw, drag on the ground"). This is reassuring, for the same root lies behind all of the Slavic words such as Russian *doroga* ("road") that we met previously. We are reminded, furthermore, of the old colloquial English expression (Cockney and other low forms) "drag" in the sense of "street" or "road." This usage is still current in America in the phrase "main drag," i.e., main street.

There is, however, a whole series of other English words that seem related but need to be traced back separately. "Trace" itself is one of the more obvious candidates to begin with. We find it already in early Middle English with the meaning of "path" or "course." This is another word that we borrowed from French, Old French to be more precise, but this time the trail leads us not through Germanic ways but along Romantic routes through Vulgar Latin *tractiāre* ("to drag," unattested) and Latin *tractus* ("a dragging"). Huge vistas of meaning unfold from these humble Latin origins, yielding in English "tract, tractable, traction, tractor, train, trait, trail, trawl, treat," and, with prepositions, "abstract, attract, contract, detract, distract, entreat, extract, portray, protract, retract, retreat, subtract, subtrahend, " and so forth.

Latin *tractus* also has its Indo-European root and it is **tragh* ("to draw, pull"). This is interesting, because it is very close both in meaning and sound to **dh(e)rāgh*, the Indo-European root for Germanic *trechan*. As a matter of fact, these two roots are considered to be rhyming variants of each other. For fear of inundating my reader with a flood of

completely unfamiliar words, I have not mentioned cognates and reflexes in Sanskrit, Avestan, Lithuanian, Old Norse, Gothic, Spanish, Italian, and other Indo-European languages that stem from **tragh* and **dh(e)rāgh*.

Suffice it to say that there are whole galaxies of wonderful lexical items related to these Indo-European roots just waiting to be explored by the curious verbophile. There is, for example, little doubt that Polish *droga* and English "track" share a fundamental relationship. But are we justified in linking them to Old Sinitic *duh(g)-ra(gh)*, Tamil *tāri*, Manchu *doro*, and all the dozens of other words from different language families that resemble them in both sound and meaning?

It would seem reasonable that a portion of these words approximate each other only through sheer coincidence. On the other hand, the mathematical probablility that all of these correspondences of sound and meaning would have developed purely by chance is incalculably small. This is particularly the case since we are dealing with a number of polysyllabic words which are much harder to match up than monosyllables. There is good reason to believe, moreover, that many of them share a more basic kinship. Since the mid-1960s, a small group of brilliant Soviet scholars headed by V. Illič-Svityč and A. Dolgopolsky has been delineating with increasing precision several groups of proto-proto-language families (or simply "macro-families"). The best known of these is Nostratic which brings together Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic (=Hamito-Semitic), Kartvelian (South Caucasian), Uralic, Altaic, and Dravidian. It is quite likely, therefore, that many of the *t/d•r(•g)* words for "way, road" I have given above belonging to these families may actually derive from a period before they split off from Nostratic.

What, then, of those words from languages that belong to other macro-families such as Dene-Caucasian (North Caucasian, Sino-Tibetan, Yeniseian, and Eyak-Athapascan) that were current from about 15,000-8,000 B.C.E.? If we assume that at least some of them are related to Nostratic *t/d•r(•g)* by something other than utter happenstance, there are only two possible explanations for this phenomenon: 1) they were already in the parent macro-macro-language family (sometimes called Proto-World -- roughly 25,000 B.C.E.) before it (d)evolved into Nostratic, Dene-Caucasian, Amerind, and so forth, or 2) they were borrowed from Nostratic or its daughter languages into the other languages where they are found. We now know that the words for "bovine," "chariot," "wheel," "horse," "dog," "honey," "bee," "magic," "belt-hook," and hundreds of other important

ideas, animals, and objects were transferred from Indo-European languages into Sinitic already by the first millennium B.C.E. In many cases, these correspondences can be demonstrated both archeologically and phonologically.

Ways, roads, paths, trails, and tracks would have been useful words for speakers of Nostratic, Dene-Caucasian, and the other macro-families, so it is possible that they may have shared the *t/d•r(•g)* etymon for "drag, draw, track" before they proliferated into a veritable Babel of tongues. But I rather doubt that these paleolithic ancestors of ours would have abstracted from that etymon the notion of a cosmic principle. Consequently, I am much more inclined to believe that *t/d•r(•g)* in the sense of cosmic principle was at best a very late Nostratic development, most likely having arisen when several of the daughter languages had already separated off from the mother tongue. Or perhaps it was first conceived only among Semitic languages since we do find it in Hebrew and in Arabic. Subsequently, it may have spread to individual languages of other families, some of which quite likely already had in their vocabularies a *t/d•r(•g)* word signifying "track." Sino-Tibetan appears not to have had such a word because it does not show up in old Tibetan and other early members of the family.

Regardless of who devised it or when, the concept of a universal way is a singularly fitting and useful tool for thinking about fundamental philosophical matters. Given that we lack this notion in Indo-European languages, it is appropriate that we have adopted it from Sinitic (which seems, as we have seen, to have taken it from Semitic). Our appreciation of Tao is enhanced, however, when we realize that its primary signification is "track" and that it may well be related to the English word in the distant past.

To demonstrate how naturally productive Tao/track is as a vehicle for abstract thought, I shall mention only one instance from contemporary philososphy. In his explanation of ethics, Robert Nozick, the conservative (libertarian?) Harvard thinker, has adumbrated the notion of **tracking value**. It is intriguing that Chad Hansen, an historian of Chinese philosophy, has been inspired by Nozick to declare that "To follow Tao is to track value." This is an extremely apt formulation, far more so than Hansen himself could have imagined.

Because its history is much more specific and its time depth is much shorter, we will be able to dispose of Zen more quickly than we did with Tao. Zen is the Japanese

pronunciation of the Sinograph that is pronounced Ch'an in Modern Standard Mandarin. The current Japanese pronunciation is much closer than Modern Standard Mandarin to that of Middle Sinitic, *zʸän*, when the term was first imported from India along with Buddhism by the Chinese over a thousand years ago. Actually, both Zen and Ch'an are abbreviated versions of the full expression which, in Middle Sinitic, would have been *zʸän-na*. Just as Tao is short for *tao-lu*, so are Zen and Ch'an short for Zenna and Ch'an-na.

Zʸän-na was intended to serve as a Middle Sinitic transcription of Sanskrit *dhyāna* (Pali [the scriptural language of the early Indian Buddhists] *jhāna*) which means "meditation, thought, reflection." Thus, when we say Zen or Ch'an, what we really are expressing is the idea of meditation and the insight that it presumably affords. The cognate third-person singular present in Sanskrit was *dhyāti* ("he thinks, meditates, fancies, imagines") and the Indic verbal root was *dhyai* ("to think, imagine, contemplate, meditate, call to mind, recollect"). All of these meanings derive from the notion of "seeing" or "observing" as is obvious by comparing the Sanskrit base *dhī* or *dhyā* ("think" [<"observe"]) with the cognate *dī* ("look at, observe") in Avestan, the ancient Iranian language used by Zoroaster (Zarathustra).

We may reconstruct the Indo-European root for Zen (more properly *dhyāna*) as **dheye* ("to see, look"). Lengthening this root yields a hypothetical **dhyā* and suffixing of the latter gives us **dhyā-mn̥*. In accordance with a regularly expected sound change from Indo-European *dh-* to Greek *s-*, this is recognized by historical linguists as the predecessor of Doric *sāma* and Greek *sēma* ("sign" or, more literally, "thing seen") and is undoubtedly cognate with the Khotanese (Middle Iranian) *śśāma* ("sign"). Nothing extraordinary happened with the potent Greek *sēma* until about the seventeenth century when European physicians created a branch of medicine called semeiotics which dealt with the interpretation of symptoms of disease. Already by 1641 Bishop John Wilkins, the first secretary of the Royal Society, had enlarged the usage of the term "semeiotics" in such a fashion that it was applied to the study of meaning as conveyed by signs. By the nineteenth century, this had developed into semiotics, the science of signs and symbols in the broadest sense, particularly as described by the American polymath Charles Peirce (1839-1914). The etymological heritage of semiotics may be most efficiently recorded as follows: < Greek *sēmeiotikós* ("observant of signs") < *sēmeiōsis* ("indication," from a hypothetical earlier **sēmeiōtis*) < *sēmeioūn* ("to signal") < *sēmeîon* ("sign") < *sēma* ("thing seen") < Indo-European **dhyā-mn̥* ("what is seen") < Indo-European **dheye* ("to see, look").

The Greek word *sēma* also took another trip that resulted in our word "semantics" ("the study or science of linguistic meaning"). Following its trail backward in time, we first borrowed the French adjective *sémantique* which had been coined in 1883 by the linguist Michel Bréal from Greek *sēmantikós* ("significant, having meaning"). This, in turn, came from *sēmaínein* ("to show, indicate by a sign") which naturally derived from our old friend *sēma*. By 1893 an *-s* was added to "semantic" to create an English noun, and the science of which former senator S. I. Hayakawa became one of the foremost practitioners was born.

A forerunner of semantics was semasiology. This was borrowed in 1847 from German *Semasiologie* which had been coined by the philologist Christian Karl Reisig (1792-1829). Other English words deriving from Greek *sēma* are "semanteme," "semaphore," "sematic," "semene," "diseme," "triseme," and "semiology." When we wish to express the idea of the representation of meaning, we instinctively turn to this handy Hellenic etymon. There can be no more intellectually stimulating and challenging experience than grappling with the idea of meaning and its manipulation through signs and symbols. Yet it is sobering to realize that, when we do so, we are basically speaking about **things seen.**

Like Greek *sēma*, in the final analysis Japanese Zen goes back to the innocent Indo-European root **dheye* ("to see, look"). Zen, then, is a kind of profound inner seeing or vision. The human mind has constructed an elaborate edifice of discourse that permits us to talk with facility about such rarefied subjects as meditational insight and a cosmic principle. Lest we become arrogant and pompous in our attempts to extract significance from and impose order on the universe, we would do well to recall that even such abstruse notions as Tao and Zen are linguistic constructs whose beginnings are as humble as our own.

Please turn to the following page for a postscript.

Postscript (January 1, 1991; the first draft of the paper itself was completed on July 4, 1990):

There is in Anglo-Indian usage the curious word *daróga*, probably adopted from Persian into Hindi, which has the meaning "local (native) Chief of Police." The most likely derivation of the word is from Mongol *doroga*, in which language it signified the governor of a province or city, a much more exalted position than what it became under the Raj. Spread all the way across the Eurasian continent to Byzantium and Moscow by the conquering Mongol hordes, the origins of the word became lost in obscurity.

What is most fascinating is that the Sinitic word *tao* (i.e., Old Sinitic *duh[g]-ra[gh]*) from ancient times also had this same exact meaning. *Tao*, as Charles O. Hucker informs us in his magisterial *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, means "a path, a way, hence the rather loosely delineated jurisdiction of an itinerant supervisory official," i.e., a circuit. The same usage passed into both Korean and Japanese (*dō*) with the meaning of "district" or "province."

This suggests, among a mountain of other data that might be adduced, that Sinitic and Altaic (not to mention Indo-European) have had a closely intertwined relationship for millennia.

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