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The *Dao De Jing* Minus Ninety-six Percent:
A Troubled Text Relieved of Its Politics and Bloat;
and
Another Look at the Indic Influence Puzzle

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The *Dao De Jing* Minus Ninety-six Percent:
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by Conal Boyce
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In even the most naïve or cursory reading of the *Dao De Jing*, one can scarcely avoid sensing that key elements of its timeless spiritual message have been entangled somehow with the politics of the day. So I should not need to comment immediately on the word ‘politics’ in my title. But who ever said the text is bloated — what do I mean by that? Here is the problem. One has been conditioned to regard the *Dao De Jing* as a marvel of distilled wisdom. Typically it is introduced in this fashion: “The *Dao De Jing*, containing only 5467 characters, has exerted a disproportionate influence on Chinese thought and world religions” (generic quote, not citing anyone in particular). Now 5467 may seem like nothing when juxtaposed with the writings of Kierkegaard or Schopenhauer. But that’s not where the comparison should be made. The comparison should be made against the body of (Classical) *Chinese* writings. Thus, before entering the strange world of the *Dao De Jing* text (hereafter *DDJ*), it would be well to remind ourselves what *genuinely* terse, *well-formed* Classical Chinese looks like. Here, for example, is a poem by Lǐ Bó:

輕兩千朝
舟岸里辭
已猿江白
過聲陵帝
萬啼一彩
重不日雲
山住還間

Those scant *twenty-eight* characters alone would have made Lǐ Bó famous, even if he wrote nothing else. Here, as a second example, is the beginning of the story of Féng Xuān and Mèng Chángjūn; these *fifty-three* characters already hint at a story that ought to be (and has been) canonized:

齊人有馮諼者、貧乏不能自存、使人屬孟嘗君、願寄食門下。孟嘗君曰：客何好？
曰：客無好也。曰：客何能？曰：客無能也。孟嘗君笑而受之、曰：諾。

(For sources and translations, please refer to Appendix A.) Everything we need to know about the unique power of Chinese terseness we may infer from the two items just quoted. Juxtaposed with such examples, the *DDJ* shows its true colors as a textual chimera, neither prolix nor terse, just strange, in a rather unpleasant way. When first encountered, the *DDJ* may *seem* terse only because we presume it to be so: certain expectations may have been set up by exposure to the distantly related *kōan* literature of Zen Buddhism, for instance.

My aim here will be to perform a kind of “chemical analysis” on the *DDJ* text to see what its true ingredients are. The results I’ll present first, followed by some details of how I performed the analysis. The results are given in Table I, where 5467 characters have been distilled to 233 characters. Thus, 96% of the text has been jettisoned, as promised in the title of this paper. Because it is so amusing/chagrining in this context, a certain passage in the work of Victor Mair must be mentioned now even at the expense of an anachronism. (I drafted the body of this article in 2009. It was only in 2010 that I became aware of Mair’s important 1990 publications, by the tortuous path retraced in Appendix C. Thus, the Mair references here and elsewhere in the main body of the article are — for lack of a better term — anachronistic, out of step with my own narrative.)

The *Tao Te Ching* is also known popularly as the *Classic of Five Thousand Characters*, but the number five thousand is entirely whimsical. Extant versions actually range from 5,227 to 5,722 characters in length. *The repeated attempts to prune the classic down to exactly five thousand characters are but another*

example of the impulse to shape the thinker and his book *into a neat, preconceived package*. — Mair 1990a, p. 131, my italics

By comparison with a passion for rounding down to 5000, my own effort to throw out 96% of the characters must look severe indeed, if not demented. But I hope it will become clear that my work is not driven by a preconceived concept, rather the opposite: a desire to cut through the underbrush and see what the bedrock looks like, whether good, bad or indifferent.

From a distance, Table I may bear some resemblance to a concordance (e.g., it enumerates the three instances of *qi* 氣), but it is not nearly so fine-grained and meticulous as an actual concordance. Rather, its intent is to provide a rough-and-ready thematic index only.

Table I

Theme	Representative words or phrases	Chapter No. in <i>DDJ</i>
Simplicity, (the) uncarved block	樸 (occurs also as 朴)	15, [19], 28, 32, 37, [57]
Quietude, calm	靜	16, 37, 45, [57], 61
The dark, abstruse, metaphysical and mystical	玄之又玄, 眾妙之門 玄德, 玄同, 惟恍惟惚, 眇玄	1 10, 15, 21, 51, 56, [65]
The valley spirit, female, mother, vulva, door, Yin	谷神不死, 玄牝之門... 綿綿呵若存, 用之不勤(盡) 雌, 母, 陰, 閉其門	6 1, 10, 28, 41, 42, 52, 55, 61
Valley, river, ocean, water	百谷, 下流, 江海, 上善似水, 莫柔弱於水	8, 32, 61, [66], 78
<i>Qi</i> 氣, Breath(-control)	萬物負陰而抱陽, 中氣以為和	10, 42, 55

<p>Complementary pairs: soft/hard, beauty/ugliness, the good and the bad, etc. (Possible Indic flavor in 1, 2 and 13? See App. C.)</p>	<p>卅輻同一轂,當其無,有車之用也 柔強, 柔剛, 柔堅, 弱固 天下皆知美之為美,斯惡已 無有, 無身,成缺,盈盅</p>	<p>11 36, 40, 43, 52, 55, 76, 78 2 1, 13, 23, 45</p>
<p>More opposites, now formed by negation, using 無 (without, nonexistent). (Again, re possible Indic flavor, see App. C.)</p>	<p>無為,為無為 橐籥...虛而不屈, 其後...其首, 虛極, 有...無..., 不出於戶</p>	<p>2, [3], 37, 48, 63, 64 [5], 14, 16, 27, 40, 41 43, 47, [57]</p>
<p>The negatives 不, 非 and 弗 are used to create still more opposites (also 未 ‘not yet’ for a special effect noted below). In general, all this negation creates a Yoda-like effect (as in the film <i>Star Wars</i>): that special flavor of fey demurring pontification. (Compare Ames & Hall, pp. 112–113, re “sustained suspicion of language” and Chad Hansen’s notion of the <i>DDJ</i> as anti-language. Also, the <i>DDJ</i> is “full of gnomic wisdom that is vague enough to be applied in a wide variety of different contexts, yet specific enough to afford practical guidance” [Victor Mair in his interview by Sonshi, commenting on his <i>Sun Zi</i> translation, 2007]). From Ch. 25, here is one of the most beautiful passages in the <i>DDJ</i> (吾...道), where the tone manages to rise briefly</p>	<p>道可道非...道 隨而不見其後,迎而不見其首 知之者弗言,言之者弗知 (Ch. 56) 大而不肖;知不知...不知知; 正言若反 淡...無味,味無味 (35),進道如退 (41) 不自視故章 玄德 吾未知其名,字之曰道 “Not knowing its name, / I style it ‘the Way.’” — Mair 1990a, p. 90</p>	<p>1, 4, 7 14 24, [34], 56, 67, 71, 78 35, 41, 63 22 [65] 25</p>

<p>above Yoda-ism. (But Ch. 25 is marred slightly by kowtowing to various “kings” in the abstract: my minority opinion.)</p>		
<p>Integrity, <i>ātmā</i>, Virtue, Power, Character (The first two glosses for Dé are an acknowledgment of Mair [1990a], p. 135. The latter three are more traditional glosses.)</p> <p>Beyond the chapters listed, Chapters 49, 54, 68 & 79 also involve 德, but those I exclude as non-mystical. (In connection with Chapter 54 especially, it is worth noting that “Much of the confusion surrounding the term <i>te</i> stems from its appropriation by Confucian moralists”; Mair 1990a, p. 134.)</p>	<p>上德不德 (at beginning of Dé book)</p> <p>報怨以德 (this is a <i>chéngyǔ</i>, from Ch. 63)</p>	<p>23, 28, [38], 41, 51, 55, 59, [60], 63, [65]</p>
<p>Newborn babe [the clear vision of].</p> <p>An infant’s member [naïvely] aroused. (For those who are interested in such esoterica as the rare character 媮, keys to the puzzle can be found in the <i>Gwoyeu Tsyrdéan</i>, pp. 2010 & 4106; see 陰 definition #8.</p> <p>Such challenges to the reader or translator are rampant in the ancient texts. To understand their general nature, one should read Mair 1990b, pp. 10–12.)</p>	<p>恆德不離,復歸嬰兒 (28)</p> <p>赤子...媮怒</p>	<p>10, 20, 28</p> <p>55</p>

<p>“efforts on behalf of the abdomen rather than the eye” (Ames and Hall, p. 92) [Avoidance of] the five colors, five flavors, and five sounds that dull the eyes, tongue and ears.</p>	<p>為腹而不為目(12) 五色,五味,五音(12) This theme is especially interesting: It is advocated as a political tool for quelling the masses, <i>and</i> the first-person voice (“I”) of the mystical chapters likewise advocates it. For more about “stupefying the masses” [in Ch. 65], see Mair (2007) p. 157n18, also the general discussion of Mair (2007) in App. C below.</p>	<p>[3], [12]*</p>
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* Regarding chapter numbers in the *DDJ*, and details of the character count, 5467, please refer to Appendix B.

Steps leading to Table I: In the first stage of analysis, I tried to eliminate any chapter that seemed primarily political, in the sense noted by Ames and Hall in their commentary on Chapter 29, for instance: “the patterns of nature ... taken as counsel for political order in the empire” (Ames and Hall, p. 123). Looking at the residue from that process, I created some smaller classification buckets to handle a minority of chapters containing phrases that one might characterize as Confucian (e.g., 子孫以祭祀); Anti-Confucian (signaled by negation of a Confucian buzz word, e.g., 不仁); Warfare Tips (e.g., 善戰者不怒); or Miscellaneous Sayings. By those two filtering processes, I was able to remove the following 28 chapters from the picture at the outset: 9, 17, 18, 26, 29, 30, 31, 33, 39, 44, 46, 49, 50, 53, 54, 58, 62, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 77, 79, 80, and 81. This left 53 chapters for representation in Table I, namely those chapters that feel purely (or primarily) mystical in nature.

Ambiguous cases and judgment calls: Certain chapters start out feeling mystical and suddenly go political toward the end; others exhibit the opposite pattern. Chapters 3 and 12 provide the touchstone to this difficulty. At first glance, Chapter 3 is mainly political, but it also has some mystical flavor at the end. Conversely, Chapter 12 seems to be mystical at first, but is

actually political. For cases like these, I place the chapter number in Table I in **square brackets**. I count ten such cases. Ironically, it is the term *shèng* 聖 ‘sage’ that often flags the encroachment of politics on an otherwise mystical chapter. (Ironically, but not too surprisingly, since in that era *shèng* was just as likely to connote ‘sage–ruler’ as to mean simply ‘sage.’) In Chapters 3, 5, 57 and 66, I regard *shèng* as this kind of red flag, but not in Chapters 7, 27, 28, 47, 63 or 64, all of which I would classify as essentially mystical. Admittedly, many judgment calls are involved in this process. Italicized chapter numbers: certain chapter numbers occur more than once in Table I, since more than one “theme” may occur in a given chapter. I use italicization to flag a reiterated chapter number.

In the second stage of analysis, I dealt with the bloat issue. That meant selecting single characters (such as 樸) and expressions (such as 百谷) and phrases (such as 為腹而不為目) to populate the middle column of Table I. The character count for that column is 233. Thus, $233/5467 = 4\%$, the reciprocal of 96%, the figure mentioned earlier. (There is a certain degree of “verbosity” in my own selections, as when the character 玄 appears five times in row 3, for instance. I tally each such repeated character individually.) The 233 characters of Table I may be further distilled to the following thirteen iconic notions that encapsulate the *DDJ*:

樸	the uncarved block (朴)
靜	quietude
玄	the dark, abstruse, metaphysical and mystical
陰	Yin
水	water
氣	breath
柔	softness
無	nonexistence
非	negation
道	Dao
德	De
嬰	newborn babe
腹	[full] stomach [and avoidance of the five senses]

Even more distractions? My title cites two major distractions from the essence of the *DDJ*: politics and verbosity. After constructing Table I, then catching up belatedly on Mair (1990a, 1990b) as related in Appendix C, I became aware of a third kind of problem in the text: gibberish and obscurity (1990a, pp. 124 and 146). There is also a fourth kind that Mair calls “editorial intervention” (1990a, p. 123, and 1990b, p. 15). With my own “chemical analysis,” I believe that I’ve covered much of this territory indirectly, although I admit that #3 and #4 had not yet registered with me as separate problems in the early stages of this manuscript. As for my “verbosity” complaint versus Mair’s observation of “repetition”: Technically, it may be that the *DDJ*’s repetitions are only an innocent vestige of oral tradition, as proposed in Mair 1990a, pp. 120–122. But as a *reader*, as a “consumer of the *DDJ*,” I am not much mollified by such explanations. I’m looking at scripture that has been touted as a marvel of compression and terseness, when in fact it is flabby and verbose. (The Emperor has no clothes, if you like.) Hence my distillation down to a handful of characters, in an attempt to deliver finally what has been promised for two thousand years. The question of Indic influence is addressed in Appendix C below.

Appendix A: Fool’s Errand

Moving from the sublime (the two Chinese works cited near the beginning of this paper) to the absurd, here I will attempt to “translate” Lǐ Bó’s masterpiece and (the start of) the Mèng Chángjūn story. This task seems especially thankless since the whole point of those citations was to remind the reader of what (real) terseness looks like, whereas their English “equivalents” are bound to look lax and chatty. But I’m not the first or the last to attempt such foolishness, so here goes:

In colored dawn clouds I made my departure from White Emperor City,
And the thousand *li* to Jiang-ling I’ll retrace in a single day.
Urged on by the incessant cry of apes on both banks of the Yangtze,
Already my paper-thin boat has flown past a myriad stacked mountains.

Source: See the 七言絕句 section of 唐詩三百首; if your edition is numbered, this is poem 266

in the series of 317 poems. The poem is called *Zǎofā Bódichéng* 早發白帝城 or *Xià Jiānglíng* 下江陵. For full effect, it needs to be written vertically, as shown on the first page of this paper. Note: The place where the journey began is referred to nowadays as Báidichéng, a name that is searchable on the internet, with rather sad results, however. For further discussion of Chinese terseness and the monosyllabic myth (or “myth”), see Boyce, pp. 9, 14, and 183–185.

A certain Féng Xuān of Qí [Kingdom], impoverished and unable to make ends meet, sent feelers out to Mèng Chángjūn to see if [this wealthy feudal lord] would take him under his wing. Mèng Chángjūn asked, “What aptitudes [does this prospective] guest [possess]?” [The go-between] said: “The guest has no aptitudes.” Mèng Chángjūn said: “What skill does the guest possess?” [The go-between] said: “The guest has no skill.” Mèng Chángjūn smiled and accepted him, saying: “Sure.”

Source: The *Zhàn Guó Cè* 戰國策, as given in 王力主編, 古代漢語, 上冊 (第一分冊), 中華書局, 北京 (1962) p. 89. (The rest of the story relates how the magnanimous lord is rewarded for his good-natured curiosity about this apparently useless guest.)

Appendix B: Chapter Numbers and Character Count in the *Dao De Jing* (or *De Dao Jing*)

When citing *DDJ* chapter numbers, I refer to the traditional scheme that predates the Mǎ-Wáng-Duī (MWD) excavation of 1973. Since the MWD discovery, the consensus has been that the original sequence must have been: Dé 德 book followed by Dào 道 book (thus the proper title for the work is *De Dao Jing*). This in turn implies that new chapter numbers might be used by translators, as seen in Mair 1990a, for instance. For continuity and for the reader’s convenience, Ames and Hall (2003) stick with the traditional numbering, where the Dào book precedes the Dé book, even though their actual point of reference is, naturally, the MWD text. I follow their example. It is an acknowledged fact that the content *within* each book — Dào or Dé — is heterogeneous, jumbled and repetitive. (See Mair 1990b, p. 13, for example.) This greatly weakens any argument that would present the *De Dao Jing* chapter sequence as “correct” and the

Dao De Jing chapter sequence as “wrong.” The chapter numbers are just arbitrary tags, so let’s make them work for us, not against us. My two cents.

Character count: My figure 5467 is the sum of 2426 and 3041 (as found in Ames & Hall, pp. 134 and 199, for example). How this works in the context of the MWD text is explained in their note on p. 223. Sometimes the character count is rounded to 5000. For more about the character count, please refer to the Mair passage quoted earlier in my preamble to Table I.

Appendix C: How Indic Is the *Dao De Jing* — and Is That by Design or Happenstance?

Here I present materials that some will find tangential, even tedious, while for others they will help provide additional answers to our original (implicit) question: What, after all, *is* the *Dao De Jing*? In particular, how strongly might it have been influenced by the *Bhagavad-gītā*? I’ll present these supplementary materials as a story that begins in 1960 and ends in 2010:

1960

While attending Berkeley High School, I obtained a copy of the Yang Jialuo edition (1949) of the *Lǎo Zǐ* (i.e., the *Tao Tê Ching*), with a preface in Chinese by Yang and an introduction in English by Cheng Lin (1957). For other bibliographic details, please refer to the ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY below.

1971

While attending graduate school at Harvard, I met Victor Mair, a classmate, circa 1971. I don’t really know Victor Mair. Nevertheless, we would “meet again” nearly four decades later, as related below.

2009

At age sixty-six, in typical old-man-recalling-his-youth fashion, I became curious once again about the *Tao Tê Ching* (or *Dao De Jing* as it is usually romanized these days). After all, on paper at least, I was now a Harvard-trained sinologist (as of 1975). Surely the text would look different to me from when I first grappled with it in 1960. As a start toward becoming reacquainted with the field of *DDJ* studies, I purchased Ames and Hall’s dual-language edition (Ballantine, 2003) and began taking notes for my “chemical analysis” as presented in the main body of this paper. In the process, I compared Ames

and Hall’s chosen text (the 1982 critical text prepared by D. C. Lau) against the text in my tattered old copy of Yang’s edition. Yang’s 1949 effort had likewise been conceived as a “critical edition,” but for my purpose it simply represented a convenient window on the received text of Wáng Bì, this being Yang’s primary point of reference. But all that is beside the point for this story. The salient point here is that in revisiting Yang, I also re-read Cheng Lin’s 1957 [English language] introduction to that volume, noticing for the first time the following passage (which I probably only glanced at dazedly back in 1960):

The philosophy of the Taoist School is so opposite to the Chinese mind that its indigenous origin is doubted. At any rate, it bears a close resemblance to Brahmanism. Considering the fact that centuries before the establishment of Chyn Dynasty [221–206 B.C.] there had been frequent intercourse between China and India by land as well as by sea, it is not impossible that Hindu proselytes had reached China. According to the author of *Faa-Yuann-Ju-Lin*, as early as 217 B.C., Hindu Buddhist monks were found and persecuted [in China]. According to Sy-Maa Chian, the First Emperor of Chyn Dynasty in 214 B.C. ordered the wholesale destruction of Buddhist temples throughout the country. These two records indicate that the [Hindu] influence must have been alarmingly widespread to have necessitated the adoption of such drastic measures.

— Cheng Lin, 1957 Introduction to Yang (1949), pp. 5–6

Hold that thought for a moment, please. If you don’t already perceive how remarkable Cheng Lin’s words are, especially the offhand tone of his first sentence, I promise that you shall, within a page or two. Not only did Mr. Lin’s words amaze me, but I found myself agreeing with them. Why? My rationale at the time (we’re still in 2009) would have gone something like this: Any way you slice it, the *DDJ* text is a very strange animal. It seems to need some kind of extraordinary treatment to break through its pervasive quality of “This does not compute.” So, as a first step toward unraveling it, why *not* say it was largely inspired by foreign ideas, the wisdom of ancient India?

Having thus hopped (for a time) on that bandwagon, I felt that the next obvious question

was this one: Who *else* has been pursuing this line of reasoning in the intervening fifty-odd years since Cheng Lin wrote his introduction? Surely a whole raft of scholars must have been pursuing this intriguing question. However, an internet search on the string “daodejing India” led me to an article by one Dennis Grafflin, and to little else (at first): It turns out that many have done comparative studies of the abstract *parallels* between the *DDJ* and *BG*, but almost no one has looked at the possible concrete *influences* of one upon the other. In fact, developments on the latter front seem so quiet to Grafflin that he kicks off his article with this wry comment on the [1990] efforts of one Victor Mair, my old acquaintance from Harvard:

It was proposed several years ago, to a resounding silence, that ... [and the sentence concludes by citing key passages from Mair 1990a, pp. 156–157]

Thus, Victor and I met again, so to say, after a thirty-eight year interval. Reading Grafflin’s comment in isolation, one might think, “Here is a person [Mair] who did reams of meticulous research and spoke the truth, laid out in what might even be his magnum opus (1990b: a 68-page treatise replete with specific pointed references to the *Bhagavad-gītā*), but the truth was too awkward and nobody wanted to hear it. Perhaps in raising the issue of ‘Indian priority’ he stepped on too many Chinese toes — about twelve billion of them.” Also, getting slightly ahead of myself again, I will point out that Mair himself might be said inadvertently to strengthen the effect of Grafflin (1998) in the following passage:

It is commonly held that China was virtually cut off from the rest of humanity until about the middle of the second century B.C. This is simply wrong.... As more thorough archaeological and anthropological studies are carried out on the periphery of China and as more unrestricted philological studies are undertaken on early Chinese texts, it becomes increasingly apparent that Chinese civilization is an integral part of the development of world civilization. Those who attempt to seal it off hermetically from the rest of mankind, for whatever purpose, not only distort Chinese history but fail to comprehend the true nature of human history outside of China.

— Mair 1990a, pp. 147–148

(Now, have another look at the Cheng Lin passage quoted earlier, and I think it will be clear why I find it so remarkable. While we are all familiar with the influx of and attacks upon Buddhism during the Tang dynasty, how often do we hear — especially in a work of 1957 vintage — anything about a similar drama having already played out in pre-Han China?)

Next, I began to read Mair myself, and soon realized that several clarifications to Grafflin 1998 are in order: [1] Mair’s translation [1990a] was a success: It has a dozen reviews on amazon.com, all favorable. No “resounding silence” there. Grafflin’s wry comment refers to Mair 1990b (and to the afterword in Mair 1990a). [2] Given Cheng Lin’s Introduction, quoted above, we see that the real situation must be more complex and nuanced than Grafflin 1998 (or Mair 1990a, pp. 147–148) might lead one to believe. Ignored or not, we can no longer view Mair’s work as being out-and-out *outré*. Along the same lines, we must pause to take note of August Conrady’s 1906 (!) paper on “Indian Influence in China in the Fourth Century B.C.” (This is my ad hoc translation of the German title; I have not seen the journal itself.) [3] Most importantly, Mair’s own view is considerably more nuanced than one might think at first. A crucial but easily missed page in his writings contains the following high-level summary of the situation:

By no means am I implying that the “author” of the *Tao Te Ching* sat down with a copy of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in hand and proceeded to translate it into Chinese. The fact that both texts evolved from oral traditions precludes such a simplistic scenario. Moreover, *the sayings of the Old Master have a style and socioreligious character all their own*. The *Tao Te Ching* was as much, if not far more, the product of internal sociopolitical conditions as it was the reaction to radically new religious and philosophical stimuli from without.... The Chinese classic emphasizes political skills and social harmony in preference to the theistic orientation of the Indian scripture. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is essentially a manual of spiritual discipline that has applications in the real world; the *Tao Te Ching* is *basically a handbook for the ruler with mystical overtones*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* advocates control of the mind and ultimate liberation; adherents of the *Tao Te*

Ching espouse the indefinite protraction of the physical body. Yet it remains that there are many remarkable correspondences.... — Mair 1990a, p. 145, my italics

If one happened first to notice the term “Indian priority” (as it occurs directly on pp. xvi and 146, and obliquely on p. 145 [“precedence of Yoga”] and on p. 155 [“question of priority”]), before one had given due attention to the particular passage quoted immediately above, one would have a very wrong notion of what Mair was up to.

Results of two quick searches on baidu.com, as of December 2010: [1] Using the string 薄伽梵歌 影响 道德经 one finds articles that take the following general approach: “Although there is not yet proof of influence, there are conspicuous similarities between the *BG* and *DDJ*” (my paraphrase). [2] Less fruitful is the following search string: 道德經印度. This one yields several dozen references to Osho (aka Chandra Mohan Jain, 1931–1990), whose interpretations of the *DDJ*, among other sacred scrolls, earned him a collection of Rolls Royces on his commune in Oregon; then come numerous articles about Lǎo Zǐ’s supposed disappearance in the direction of India toward the end of his quasi-phantom life; that sort of thing.

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Here is my own fresh start, from “first principles.” Not to say that I have the credentials for participating directly in *DDG/BG* scholarship. (Now that I have an inkling of the breadth and depth of Mair’s work over the decades, I have a feeling of Fools Rush In Where Angels Fear To Tread. But it is too late for me to back out. This manuscript was prepared in a kind of hermetic isolation, written from an “outsider” viewpoint, and it would be both impractical and disingenuous if I were to scramble to reshape every line of it after the fact.) Let’s say I have enough familiarity with the two texts that I can offer something in the spirit of Occam’s razor, at least. Specifically, suppose we make another list of key concepts, similar to Table I and the list of 13 characters, but pertaining now to the *BG* instead. What would such a list look like, and how often would it intersect with our skeletal view of the *DDJ*? Please refer to Table II below. Page references are to the “As It Is” edition of the *BG*. (Pronunciation suggestion: To my ear, the name of the Indian classic would be ‘bug-vud ghee-taa’ if spelled phonetically for an English speaker. In

other words, the first ‘a’ and third ‘a’ are *schwas*, while the second ‘a’ is silent; only the fourth ‘a’ is long. Whereas, in a misguided effort to sound non-American, the untutored English speaker is likely to employ the long ‘a’ in all four positions. As indicated in connection with the search string earlier, if you wish to mention the *BG* in a Chinese context, then it is the *Bóqiéfàn-Gē* 薄伽梵歌.)

Preface to Table II

Before looking at specific terms in Table II, there is a high-level issue that needs to be addressed and removed from consideration. When the *DDJ* and *BG* are viewed from a great distance and at a high level of abstraction, one may note the following (specious) “parallel”: In both works, the core mystical message is muddled by or buried beneath elements that possess a political/military flavor. In the *BG*, the battlefield aspect may indeed be off-putting (I know it kept me from even cracking the covers of the *BG* for exactly fifty years) but at least there is nothing accidental or haphazard about it. Rather, it is part of a meticulously designed narrative. By contrast, the political/military threads of the *DDJ* feel random and intrusive, even cynical, to me at least. (After the fact, I learned that in the Introduction to his *Sūn Zǐ* translation, Dr. Mair may have been “almost subconsciously trying to point out that the *DDJ* is essentially more military/political than it is mystical, that the mystical part of it has been subverted for some darker purpose”; private communication with Dr. Mair. Here are the pages to which he alludes: Mair (2007) pp. 31–33, 47–49; note especially p. 157n.18, re stupefying the masses. Even more potentially supportive of my argument is Mair (2007) p. xix, where Arthur Waldron, in his foreword, writes: “The centrality of the concept [of *dao*] in general political thought means that its manipulation must also be central. To twist the *dao* itself and create a deceptive *dao* is to subvert the foundation upon which all society and human activity is believed, by Chinese philosophers [of the time], to rest. Doing so is therefore far more grave and potentially far more powerful than any mere ‘deception’ [à la Machiavelli] would be in the West.” And my contention is that the *DDJ* itself is heavily colored by this “dark” *Sun Zi* ethos, hence my interest in carving so much of its fat away to isolate its religious bones.) At any rate, my only message *here* is to be cautious about drawing a “parallel” between the *BG* and *DDJ* just because both have heavy

involvement with warfare. The resemblance on *that* point is superficial, and one’s hunt for genuine parallelism or influence should be confined to the mystical side.

Table II: Selected Terms from the *BG* with remarks in Column 2 re possible *DDJ* linkage

<p>akarma: inaction or nonaction</p>	<p>I agree with Mair that the parallel between <i>karmani akarma</i> कर्मण्यकर्म (in action, inaction) and <i>wéi-wúwéi</i> 為無為 (do without doing) is noteworthy. However, there is a caveat, raised in the Summary section that follows this table.</p>
<p>ātmā (ātman)</p>	<p>Please refer to the entry for <i>brahman</i> below.</p>
<p>avatāra, as in <i>purusa-avatāras</i> = “the primary expansions of Lord Vishnu who effect the creation, maintenance and destruction of the material universes” (Glossary, p. 775)</p>	<p>No match. In the <i>DDJ</i>, there is nothing even remotely like the flamboyant Indic notion of an avatar. See also the entry for Vishnu below.</p>
<p>brahman <i>Brahman</i> has the following four definitions, ostensibly in “conflict” with one another: (1) the <i>individual</i> soul; (2) the <i>impersonal</i>, all-pervasive aspect of the Supreme; (3) the Supreme <i>Personality</i> of Godhead; (4) the <i>mahat-tattva</i>, or total material substance (Source: <i>BG</i>, Glossary, p. 771, my italics).</p>	<p>From a distance, at least, Mair’s proposed <i>dào : dé :: brahman : ātmā</i> correspondence seems reasonable (1990a, p. 135). But “up close,” the <i>dào/brahman</i> piece of the puzzle I find slightly problematic. To a Westerner, Daoist thought may seem relatively nuanced and paradoxical, but Hinduism goes to the nth degree with nuance and paradox. (In this connection, see also my aside regarding <i>māyā</i> below.) Thus, as indicated at the left, <i>brahman</i> has four definitions, only two of which would be helpful in making the case for close linkage to the <i>DDJ</i>. Meanwhile, <i>dào</i> has a distinctly monolithic flavor. So I’m not entirely comfortable with the proposed scheme.</p>

<p>dhyāna: meditation (Glossary, p. 772)</p>	<p>Eventually, the term <i>dhyāna</i> emerges in China as <i>chán-nà</i> 禪那, later simply as <i>chán</i>, which in turn becomes Japanese <i>zen</i>. But it is nowhere to be found, whether as a term or as a concept, in the <i>DDJ</i> itself. For more about this long complex process, see Mair 1990a, p. 146. The term <i>yoga</i>, as in <i>dhyāna-yoga</i> and <i>karma-yoga</i>, is even more problematic; see separate entry for <i>yoga</i> below.</p>
<p>guṇas: the “three modes”: <i>Sattva-guṇa</i> (Goodness), <i>Rajo-guṇa</i> (Passion), <i>Tamo-guṇa</i> (Ignorance)</p>	<p>No match. This concept is pervasive in the <i>BG</i> but it has zero representation in the <i>DDJ</i> nor to my knowledge does it surface in later Daoism, e.g., in the <i>Zhuāng Zǐ</i>.</p>
<p><i>kartāham iti manyate कर्तहमिति मन्यतेमन्यते:</i> [The false ego] thinks himself the doer. In context: “The spirit soul bewildered by the influence of false ego thinks himself the doer of activities that are in actuality carried out by the three modes of material nature,” pp. 173–174 (<i>BG</i> 3.27).</p>	<p>No match. Again, this is quintessential <i>BG</i> thinking, not the faintest reflection of which can be found anywhere in the <i>DDJ</i>.</p> <p>(The “three modes” here are the guṇas of the preceding row.)</p>
<p>karma: action</p>	<p>See discussion of <i>akarma/karma</i> above; also the entry for <i>yoga</i> below. (An aside: Contrary to the popular western notion, the term ‘karma’ in the <i>BG</i> is often matter-of-fact and neutral, not positive/pejorative as in ‘good karma/bad karma’.)</p>

<p>kṣetra: field. “I wish to know about ... the field and the knower of the field,” p. 564 (<i>BG</i> 13.1).</p>	<p>No match. (An aside: Note that this term occurs in the very first sentence of the <i>BG</i>, embedded in the name Kuruksetra, Field of the Kurus, i.e., the battleground where the narrative begins. Only much later does the term appear on its own, now [in 13.1] with its astonishingly abstract meaning that foreshadows twentieth-century particle physics.)</p>
<p>māyā: “illusion; the energy of the Supreme Lord that deludes living entities into forgetfulness of their spiritual nature and of God,” Glossary, p. 774.</p>	<p>No direct match springs to mind. The word <i>yǒu</i> 有 may seem an unlikely candidate at first, but understood as one side of the <i>wúyǒu</i> 無有 dichotomy, it actually works rather well. Note that these two terms together “constitute the ontological ground upon which the phenomenal world is played out” (Mair, 1990a, p. 138). Intellectually at least, this provides a <i>wú</i> : <i>yǒu</i> :: <i>brahman</i> : <i>māyā</i> correspondence, similar to the <i>dào</i> : <i>dé</i> :: <i>brahman</i> : <i>ātmā</i> correspondence discussed above. Also, we should note in passing Yang’s interpretation of the terms <i>wú</i> and <i>yǒu</i> as they occur (separated) in Chapter 1 of the <i>DDJ</i>: In conventional readings of Chapter 1, <i>wúmíng</i> is taken to mean ‘the nameless’ and <i>yǒumíng</i> is ‘that which is named’ (e.g., in Ames and Hall, p. 77, which is similar to Mair 1990a, p. 59, and others). By contrast, Yang marks <i>wú-míng</i> and <i>yǒu-míng</i> as subject–verb constructs. Thus, 「無」名萬物之始也, 「有」名萬物之母也 “Nothingness is used to denote the state that existed before the birth of heaven and earth. Reality is used to denote the state where the multitude of things begins to have a separate existence” (Yang pp. 1–3,</p>

	<p>repeated in Yang pp. 69–70; his brackets, my italics). Is Yang’s unusual interpretation reasonable? I think it is. In fact, now that I have become (more) aware of his reading, the conventional one seems doubtful to me. And, as it happens, the text when read Yang’s way feels all the more Indic.</p> <p>An aside: Standing in direct opposition to the popular western notion of what the term <i>māyā</i> means, <i>in the BG</i> itself its primary meaning is ‘<i>me</i>, the Supreme Lord,’ with its secondary meaning of ‘the veil of illusion’ only implied. Compare the term <i>brahman</i> above with its <i>four</i> “conflicting” definitions.</p>
nirvāna	No match.
om	No match.
prānāyāma : “breath control, as a means of advancement in <i>yoga</i> ,” Glossary, p. 774.	The term <i>qi</i> 氣 figures prominently in Chapter 10 of the <i>DDJ</i> : “In concentrating your <i>qi</i> and making it pliant, / Are you able to become the newborn babe?” (Ames and Hall, p. 90). The term occurs also in Chapters 42 and 55. Here we have a small but potentially important candidate for linkage; it is discussed in this role in Mair 1990a, pp. 137–138 and 145.
samsāra : “the cycle of repeated birth and death in the material world,” Glossary, p. 775.	No match. (This would clash horribly with Chinese ancestor worship.)
viṣṇu (Vishnu): “the Personality of Godhead,” Glossary, p. 777.	No match, of course, for this markedly <i>personal</i> notion of ‘Godhead’ that permeates Hinduism. Compare the entry for <i>avatāra</i> above.

<p>yoga: “spiritual discipline to link oneself with the Supreme,” Glossary, p. 777.</p>	<p>No match, in my opinion, except indirectly via the akarma/karma parallel, which in turn may be associated with the term karma-yoga, pervasive in the <i>BG</i>. (Note in passing the cognate relation with English ‘yoke’.) Mair devotes considerable attention to the question of yoga and Daoism, which I think needs to be delineated more clearly from the rather small topic of yoga and the <i>DDJ</i>. This discussion is continued in the text following this table.</p>
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Yoga and Daoism — continuation of the discussion begun in the final row of Table II: In Mair 1990a, the yoga/Daoism topic is introduced on p. xv, then taken up seriously on pp. 145–146 (“I must now address the sensitive issue of the precedence of Yoga versus that of Taoism”), and on pp. 155–161 (the Appendix, which is devoted to this topic). I find these passages troublesome because of the mixed signals they send. As the author himself points out (1990a, p. 146), the closely related topic of *chán* comes into its own long after the *DDJ*. His book and article are, after all, ostensibly about the *DDJ*, not Daoism in the larger sense, yet the foray into yoga can be sustained only by stepping back to look at Daoism over a stretch of several dynasties, not by scrutinizing the *DDJ* itself. So this shift in scope is potentially confusing to the reader. Also, as indicated in the passage quoted near the beginning of this paragraph, the author seems at times to equate *all* of Daoism *with* yoga. I doubt he means this literally, but again the language is confusing. Finally, I must also take exception to the “third source” argument that occurs on pp. xv and again on p. 146: “the only other logical explanation is that both were molded by a third source.” No, before considering a third source, I think the next logical scenario to consider would be the following: A combination involving some independent parallel development and some degree of mutual or one-way influence. (This scenario I owe to a recent conversation with Christopher Hileman. For that matter, it is hinted at elsewhere by Mair himself.)

Perspective: Here it may seem that I am taking Mair to task, but my focus for the moment is on the yoga topic only. I hope it is clear that on balance I admire his work. As for the big picture, I’m not so much “for his theories” or “against his theories” as I am intrigued by the many bold new ideas he presents for consideration.

Summary: To my eye, the only immediately persuasive case in Table II is the alignment of *karmani akarma* with *wéi-wúwéi*, as presented in the first row. Looking at those terms in juxtaposition, I find it easy enough to agree with Mair (1990a, pp. 142, 146) that such an odd and abstract notion would [probably] not be dreamt up independently by the two civilizations in parallel. (Compare *BG* 4.18 with the *DDJ*, Chapter 3, e.g., as translated in Ames and Hall, pp. 81–82.) However, there is a caveat: One is obliged to point out that there are plenty of examples in intellectual history where an abstruse idea *does* pop up in two places independently, when the time is right, e.g., the lyrically beautiful calculus of Leibniz in Germany and the grotesque narcissistic calculus of Newton in Britain (which, indirectly, crippled mathematical development there for a century, thanks to British chauvinism, i.e., refusal to abandon Newton’s fluxion notation; the sad story is detailed in Jourdain, pp. 57–59). Subjectively, those were two very different animals, although objectively, in retrospect, they were *both* simply the “discovery of calculus by humans.” In view of this caveat, I think the argument for linkage of *karmani akarma* with *wéi-wúwéi* should rely chiefly on our knowledge that proselytizing did occur back then (i.e., surely *some* of the *BG* made its way across the Himalayas into the *DDJ*), and not so heavily on the notion that the idea could not possibly have occurred twice in two separate civilizations.

By way of rounding up other points that support *DDJ/BG* linkage, recall the pairings such as ‘beauty/ugliness’ that occur in Chapters 2, 13, 23, and 45 of the *DDJ* (as summarized already in Table I), e.g., “As soon as the world regards some thing as beautiful, forthwith also appears ugliness. As soon as the world regards some deed as good, forthwith also appears evil” (Yang, p. 69, Chapter 2). My personal feeling is that such passages possess a plausibly Indic flavor. These should be considered along with Table II above.

Finally, a “challenge” of sorts: Revisit the list of thirteen characters that follows Table I and tell me where you feel a *visceral* connection with anything in Table II. Personally, I feel no such visceral connection until I reach *wú* 無, as shorthand for *wéi-wúwéi*, which in turn may be associated with *karmani akarma*. (And yes, the term *qì* 氣 works after a fashion, if we jump forward in time and think about Daoism in general rather than the *DDJ* specifically.) Approached this way, in a search for links that feel visceral and immediate, my (admittedly subjective)

impression is that Hinduism and Daoism are more dissimilar than similar, putting one in mind of the proverb about oil and water not mixing.

Expanding on the contrast pointed out in Mair 1990a, p. 145 (already quoted), I would characterize the "personalities" of Hinduism and Daoism as follows: Hinduism is loud, colorful, sharp, and forthright with its "paradoxes," which are really just labyrinthine *complexities* not readily fathomed by the impatient foreign neophyte. (As an example of the problem, see my 'Aside' for the *māyā* entry in Table II.) By contrast, the personality of Daoism is coy and Yodaesque, reveling in its mysteries, around which one is meant to whisper and tiptoe respectfully *forever* in a monochrome twilight mist. Together these two comprise the day and night (or *yang* and *yin*, or oil and water?) of mysticism.

Annotated Bibliography

Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. *Daodejing “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation* (Ballantine Books, 2003) xiii + 241 pp.

This dual-language edition is a handy source for the post-Mǎ-Wáng-Duī text: It interleaves translation and commentary with D. C. Lau’s 1982 Chinese critical edition (and also takes into account the archeological finds at Guodian, 1993). Comment on the translation style: I have no quarrel with Ames and Hall’s point that missionaries and sinologists have had their turn, and now it is time for philosophers to have a try at it (pp. x–xi). But it seems to me that they may have “missed the memo” in which Mair (1990b, p. 124) issues a crucial and long overdue warning to translators to stop seeing “a single guiding intelligence” behind the text when there is none. (Compare Mair 1990b, p. 13: “I have striven to recreate in my own rendition the various voices [we hear] out of the past — the Taoist mystic, the political strategist, the utopian architect, the anti-Confucian philosopher, the prescient poet, the meditative yogin.”) Nonetheless, Ames and Hall have their moments of inspiration, e.g., their translation and commentary on pp. 126–128 where they provide what I regard as the correct (if rare) interpretation of the *jiānghǎi* 江海 analogy in Chapter 32 (not to be confused with the *jiānghǎi* imagery in Chapter 66).

Bhagavad-gītā As It Is (The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972, 1986) xx + 924 pp.

In this edition of the *Bhagavad-gītā* (or *Gītāpanishad*), given to us by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, each verse contains the following five layers: Sanskrit text, transliteration, literal word-by-word translation, literary translation, and an [Elaborate] Purport. Except for the occasional typo in a transliterated Sanskrit word, I find the first four layers quite reliable; however, the fifth layer — the Purport — will sometimes indulge in wild-eyed Hare-Krishna hocus-pocus,

thus casting doubt on the sincerity of “As It Is” in the book’s title. This problem is most conspicuous in 8.13, where even the fourth layer (the literary translation) is permitted to go New Age for a moment with “reach the spiritual planets” (where the text says “supreme destination” or “supreme state”), and the Purport claims that the sound ‘Hare-Krishna’ contains the sound ‘Om.’ Its occasional lapse into such nonsense notwithstanding, this edition of *BG* is very useful (a) because of its wide availability (due to the frantic and very un-Indian proselytizing efforts of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness); (b) because of its juxtaposition of Sanskrit text, transliteration and literal translation, such that the reader can see immediately where the literary translation and/or the Purport goes off the rails; (c) because of its exemplary glossary and index (the latter spanning pp. 798–920!) The 4K’s edition: I also consulted the dual-language pocket edition of the *BG*, distributed by 4K’s Publications, no date or translator credited, ISBN 81–88892–56–4, 315 pp.

Boyce, Conal. *Chinese As It Is: A 3D Sound Atlas with First 1000 Characters* (Dogear Publishing, 2010) xviii + 190 pp.

Conrady, A. “Indischer Einfluss in China im 4-Jahrhundert v. Chr.” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 60 (1906), 335–351. This item I copied in from Mair 1990a, p. 164. I discuss it in Appendix C.

Grafflin, Dennis. “A Southwest Asian Voice in the *Daodejing*?” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 79 (March 1998), 1–7.

Jourdain, Philip E. B. [1879–1919] “The Nature of Mathematics” [circa 1914] in: James R. Newman, ed. *The World of Mathematics* (1956) Volume I, pp. 4–7.2

Lin, Cheng: see entry below for Yáng Jiāluò.

Mair, Victor H. *The Art of War: Sun Zi’s Military Methods (Translations from the Asian Classics)* (Columbia University Press, 2007 [paperback 2009]) LII + 189 pp. foreword by Arthur Waldron.

_____, trans. and comm. **1990a.** *Tao Te Ching* (Bantam, September 1990) xvi + 168 pp.

_____, **1990b** “[The] **File** [on the Cosmic] **Track** [and Individual] **Dough**[tiness]: Introduction and Notes for a Translation of the Ma-wang-tui Manuscripts of the *Lao Tzu* [Old Master],” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 20 (October 1990) 1–68.

At first glance, the afterword to the book (Mair 1990a, pp. 119–153) may appear to be the same as Mair 1990b. However, the two differ enough that Mair describes the afterword as a “pale reflection of what I had originally written” (Mair 1990b, p. 8), the difference having arisen due to editorial pressure at Bantam. Note that in both of the Mair publications cited immediately above, two issues are raised, each of which is problematic or controversial in its own way. In Appendix C, I touched on the Indian priority issue (Mair 1990a, pp. xvi, 146 and 155), pointing out that it is defused considerably by the passage I quoted from p. 145. The other idea, even more startling, is that of linkage at “the next tier up” (my words) from where the Indo-European languages find their ancestral node (already an extremely high abstraction) and where the Old Sinitic languages find their ancestral node (ditto). Again, Mair’s actual stance on this issue is more prudent than it might appear at first. In Mair 1990a, evidence is accumulated on pp. 132–136 until this remarkable statement can be made at the climax: “Therefore, in strictly etymological terms, *Tao Te Ching* means ‘track-doughtiness-file’ ” (1990a, p. 136; and thus, the odd look of his 1990b title is explained). To me, the overall effect is rather like hearing this said: “If only one has the proper training and erudition and imagination he/she will realize that Chinese and English are really the same thing — distant cousins within the same language family, that is to say.” However, if we back up a few pages, we find this important prefatory passage: “Tsung-tung Chang, a Chinese scholar who has lived in Germany for three decades, recently published over two hundred proposed equivalences and is preparing a common lexicon for Old Chinese and Indo-European that will include more than fifteen hundred basic words. Since the work of Chang and others is still in its infancy, *we do not yet know the exact nature of the relationship* (that is, whether it is due to

extensive borrowing, to some more fundamental kind of kinship, or a combination of the two)” (Mair 1990a, p. 131, my italics). But I say we *should* know the exact nature of the relationship already, otherwise Chang’s compilation is dubious. I admit that I find the idea of IE/OS linkage exhilarating, even giddy-making, but there are red flags that pop up: it seems that certain kinds of theory are so far up in the clouds that they can neither be proved nor disproved, only batted back and forth endlessly as interesting ideas.

Yang Jialuo, ed. and tr. 楊家駱 編譯, 古籍新編 老子(道德經新編本,道德經河上公本,道德經王弼本)英漢對照,(香港)國際書店,華東印書館 (1957) xxiv + 8 + 142 pp.

Bibliographical notes: The xxiv–page Chinese preface is by editor and translator Yang Jialuo, dated 1949, in Shanghai. The 8-page English introduction is by Cheng Lin, undated, so one assumes 1957. In the 142-page body of the book, there are only *two* editions of the *DDJ*, not the three promised by the Table of Contents; this odd circumstance is acknowledged on page xxiv, in connection with disruptions resulting from the “Shanghai War,” i.e., the War of Liberation aka the Chinese Civil War, which led to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The intent was to make the volume whole in a subsequent edition.

Personal note: As though it were yesterday, I can remember riding the F train back to Berkeley in 1960, ecstatic about a copy of this dual-language edition of the *Lǎo Zǐ* that I had just bought in San Francisco Chinatown for \$1.75. That “ride on the F train” has been a long one, though: fifty years to distill 142 pages down to 233 characters. And only recently did I actually *read* Mr. Lin’s amazing Introduction. For a discussion of his view of the Indic influence question, see Appendix C above.

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