

Interpreting the Tao Te Ching

Overview





Book case containing a **TTC scroll**
in River House, Lan Ting in Gold Beach, OR



2 styles of response to changing times

◆ **Confucius** (551-479BCE)

Urban

Ritual (family, community)

Social

Conduct

Moral

Codes, systems

Prescriptive, proscriptive

◆ **Lao Tzu** (604-531BCE)

Rural

Mystical

Individual

Attitude

Spiritual

Observation, advice

Descriptive



Confucius & Lao Tzu:

6thC. BCE north-central China expanding from feudalism to nationalism; customs, norms, & ideals shifting, blending...

- ◆ Both influenced by the ancient *Book of Odes (or Poetry or Songs)*, revered text of poems, songs, commentaries on politics & gov't, personal reflections on society...
- ◆ Both quote from & make reference to its teachings; both hearken back to an **idealized time** when the **wisdom of the divine sages** prevailed...

Confucius & Lao Tzu

- ◆ "The purely moral proposal is most probable where people press together & life requires general agreement on its conduct. The mystic view becomes probable where individuals confront the universe alone. In China, the masses of people have always been pressed together. So they are moral, & Confucius has been their representative man. Mysticism still survives in China but rather on the periphery of life, where there is room" (Blakney 17).



Tao Te Ching or Dao De Jing Translations of title

- ◆ The way of life
- ◆ The way of power
- ◆ The book of the way
- ◆ The way & the virtue of the way
- ◆ The way & its power
- ◆ The way & its virtue



Romanization

Wade-Giles vs. Pin yin

Tao (way)

Dao (way)

Te (virtue)

De (virtue)

Ching (sacred book)

Jing (sacred book)

themes

Tao is unknowable but attempts can be made toward knowing it.

Language is only a tool towards this understanding; it is insufficient for describing the Tao, but attempts can and should be made.

(Lao Tzu attempts 81 times!)

Te puts one in accord with Tao.

Everyone is called. Some are prepared; some are clueless. Sage is model.

The sage often does things counter to our (cultural) thinking. Wisdom is often the reverse of conventional thought.



more themes

Reject worldly aims and standards.

Gain self-knowledge.

Action in no-action (*wu-wei*); no interference

Opposites are related (paradox)

“An understanding of the profound relationship between seemingly disparate things is developed with the practice of *wu-wei*” (Yi-Ping in Muller xxii).

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始，有名萬物之母。故常無欲以觀其妙，常有欲以觀其徼。此兩者同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

一章

1

TAO can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao.
Names can be named, but not the Eternal Name.

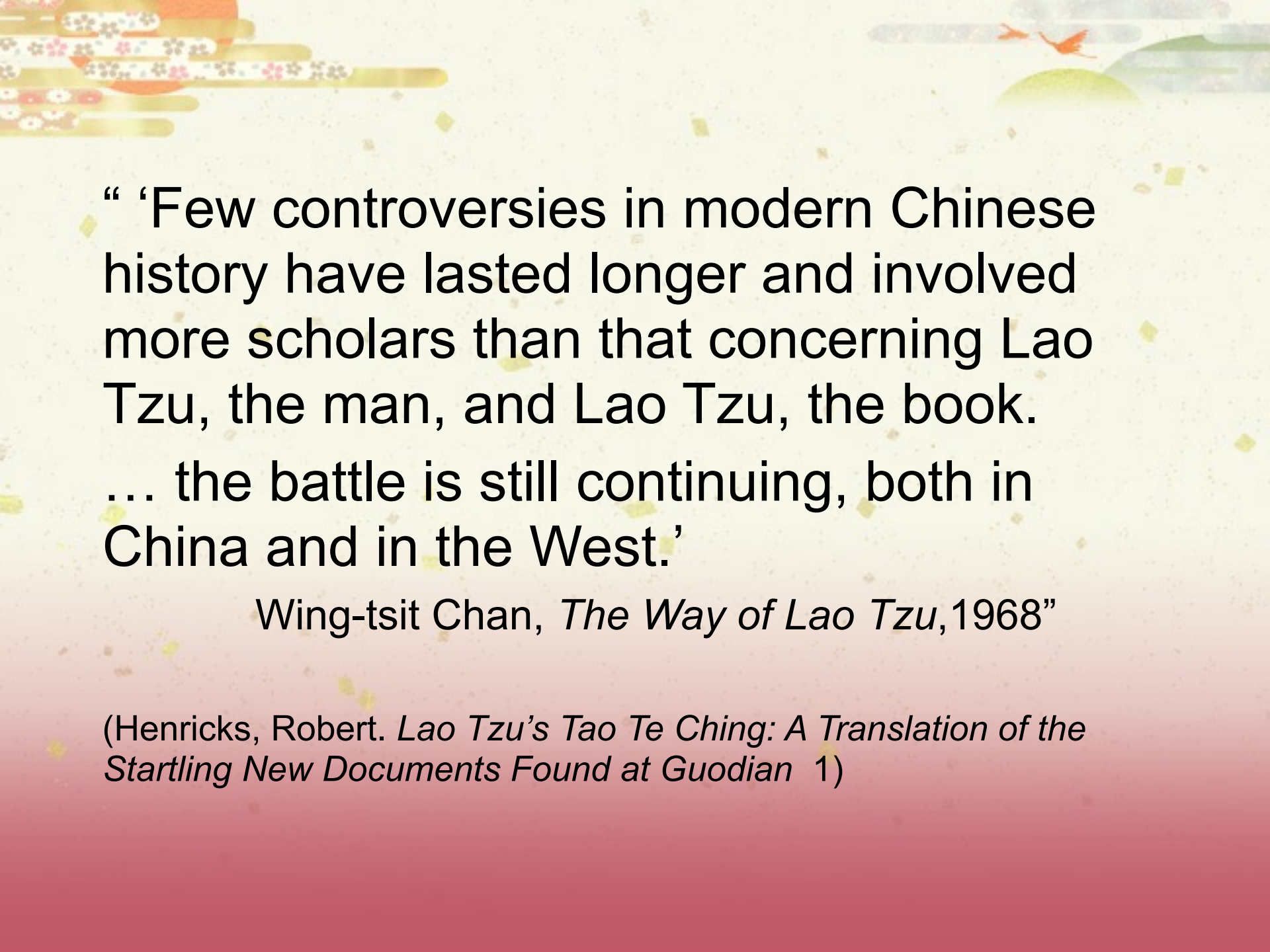
As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless:
As "the Mother" of all things, it is nameable.

So, as ever hidden, we should look at its inner essence:
As always manifest, we should look at its outer aspects.

These two flow from the same source, though differently
named;
And both are called mysteries.

The Mystery of mysteries is the Door of all essence.

from John C. H. Wu



“ ‘Few controversies in modern Chinese history have lasted longer and involved more scholars than that concerning Lao Tzu, the man, and Lao Tzu, the book. ... the battle is still continuing, both in China and in the West.’

Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu*, 1968”

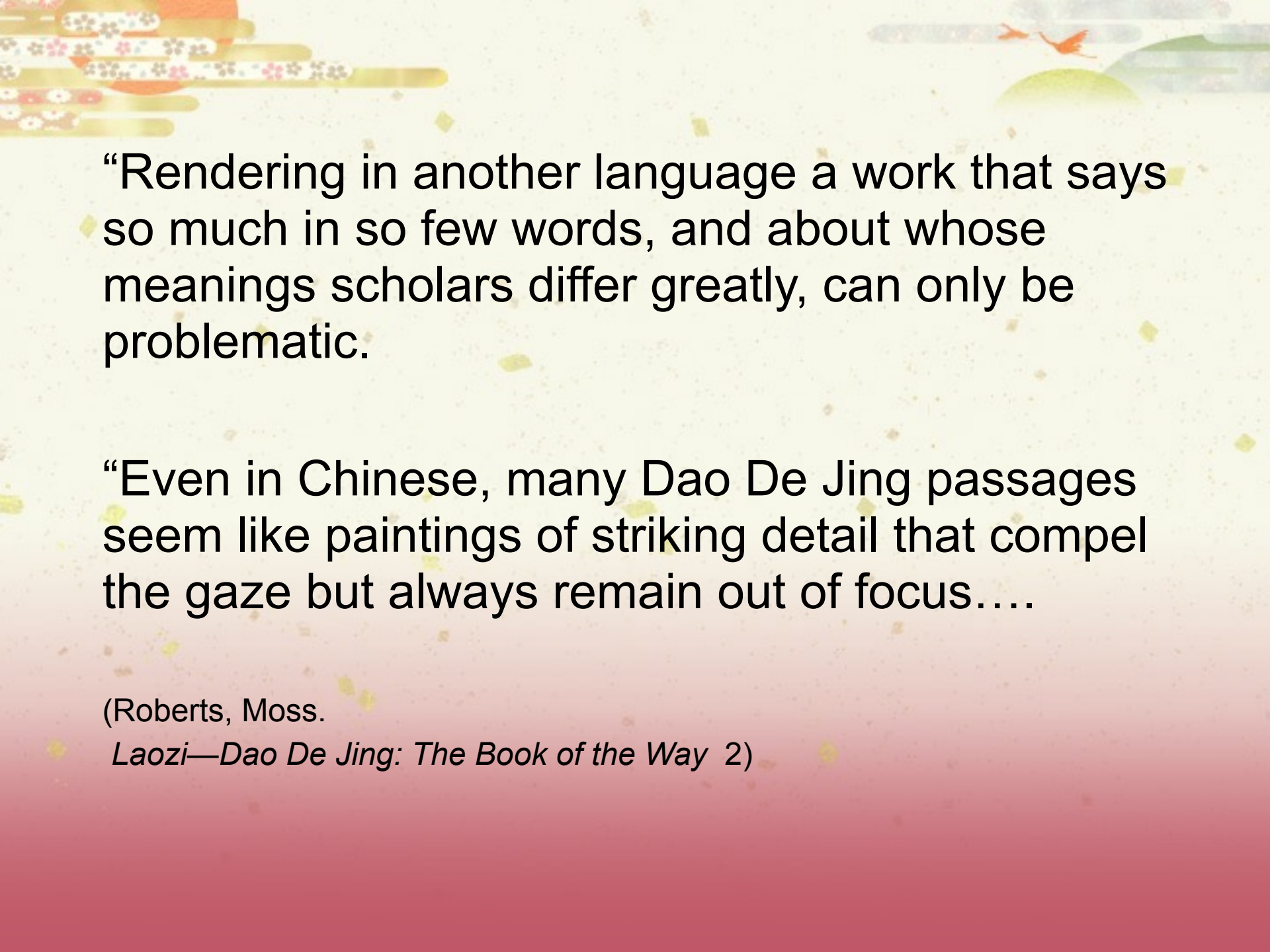
(Henricks, Robert. *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* 1)

“The synergy of the work’s themes as well as the concision of its phrasing make its stanzas so ambiguous and suggestive that definitive interpretation, much less translation, has often proved unattainable.

(Roberts, Moss.

Laozi—Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way 2)



The background features a light, textured surface with scattered yellow and brown specks. In the top left corner, there are horizontal bands of yellow and orange with small floral motifs. In the top right corner, there are stylized green hills and two orange birds in flight.

“Rendering in another language a work that says so much in so few words, and about whose meanings scholars differ greatly, can only be problematic.

“Even in Chinese, many Dao De Jing passages seem like paintings of striking detail that compel the gaze but always remain out of focus....

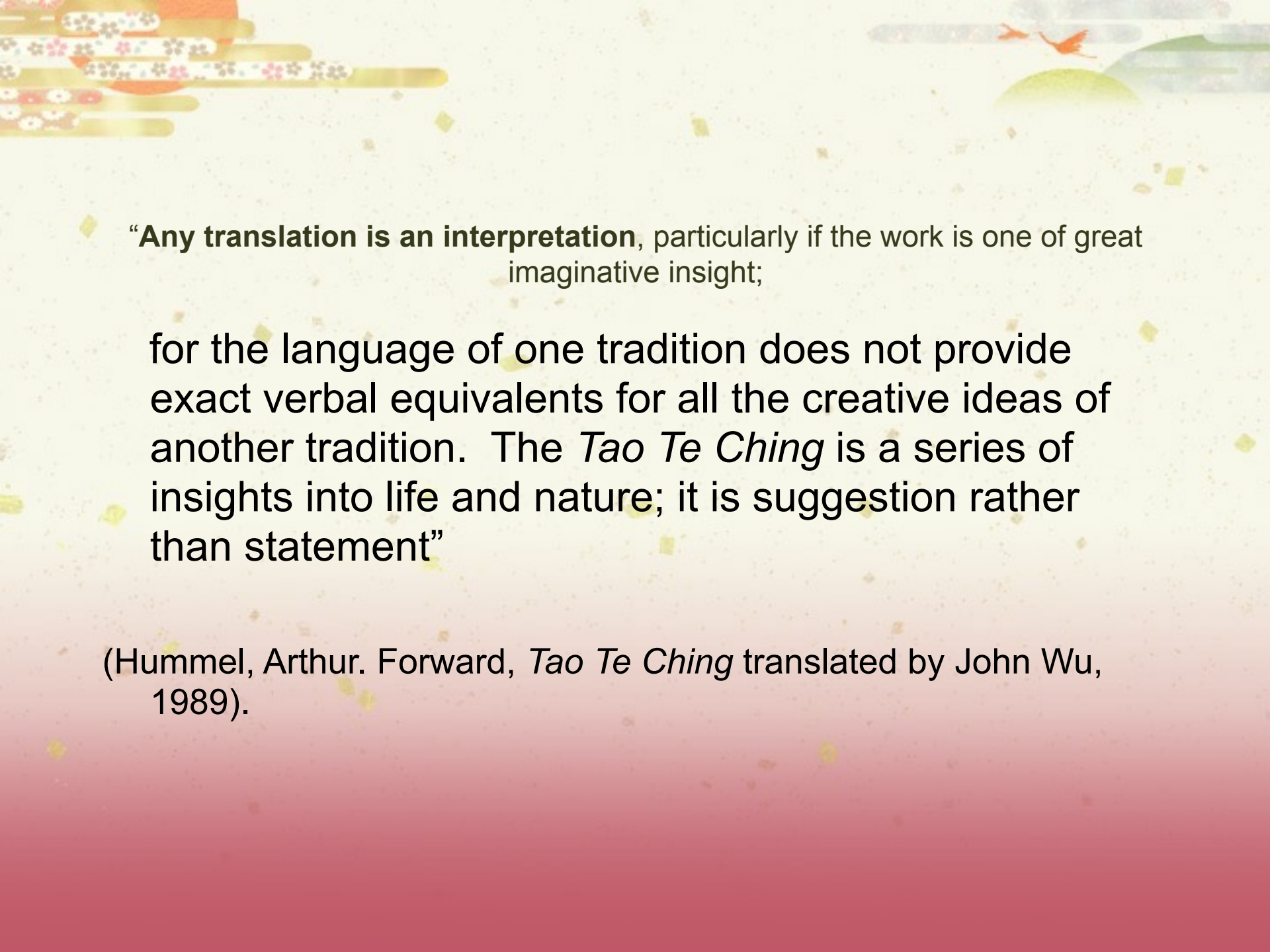
(Roberts, Moss.

Laozi—Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way 2)

“The cumulative effect of multiple translations contribute to the understanding of the *Laozi*....”

(Roberts, Moss.
Laozi—Dao De Jing:
The Book of the Way 2)





“**Any translation is an interpretation**, particularly if the work is one of great imaginative insight;

for the language of one tradition does not provide exact verbal equivalents for all the creative ideas of another tradition. The *Tao Te Ching* is a series of insights into life and nature; it is suggestion rather than statement”

(Hummel, Arthur. Forward, *Tao Te Ching* translated by John Wu, 1989).



**What the text is:
81 brief chapters or poems**

- ◆ A collection of instructive utterances, observations, advice, proverbs.
- ◆ They appear simple; however, an attentive look reveals their complexity



How to

- ◆ be in accord with existence


Mystical, metaphysical

- ◆ lead a good life
(content, balanced, centered,
in harmony)

Psychological

- ◆ be a proper leader, a
proper citizen

Socio-political

The background features a light yellow-to-pink gradient with scattered gold and yellow speckles. In the top left corner, there are horizontal bands with floral patterns in shades of pink, orange, and white. In the top right corner, there are stylized green hills and two orange birds in flight.

Composed approx. 500 – 200 BCE
in north-western China

Traditionally ascribed to Lao Tzu

(more on both of these later)

Daoist sages crossing the sea





Traditionally divided into 2 parts

- ◆ 1 – 37 “Tao ching” (or canon of tao)

 - Emphasis on Ultimate Is-ness

- ◆ 38 – 81 “Te ching” (or canon of te)

 - Emphasis on ethics, politics, virtue

The latter [te] are always products of former [tao].

“Te is the outworking of the Tao...” (Freke 11).

To be in accord with the Great-All is to act from that accord.



Attention to form

-- poetry or philosophical poetry --

general characteristics of poetry :

1. Compression of thought
2. Economy of expression
3. Use of imagery
(similie, metaphor, symbol, paradox...)
4. Attention to diction (word choice)
5. Interest in sound & rhyme



Comment (mine)

- ◆ While all translation is challenging, poetry is especially challenging because of the heightened language.
- ◆ Philosophical poetry is even more challenging because the poetics are entwined with principles of thought.
- ◆ Add to this, the facts of time, over 2500 years; culture; and the nature of the Chinese language, pictographic. **It is no wonder that this little volume remains one of the three most translated books of all time across the whole world!**

Who was Lao Tzu ?

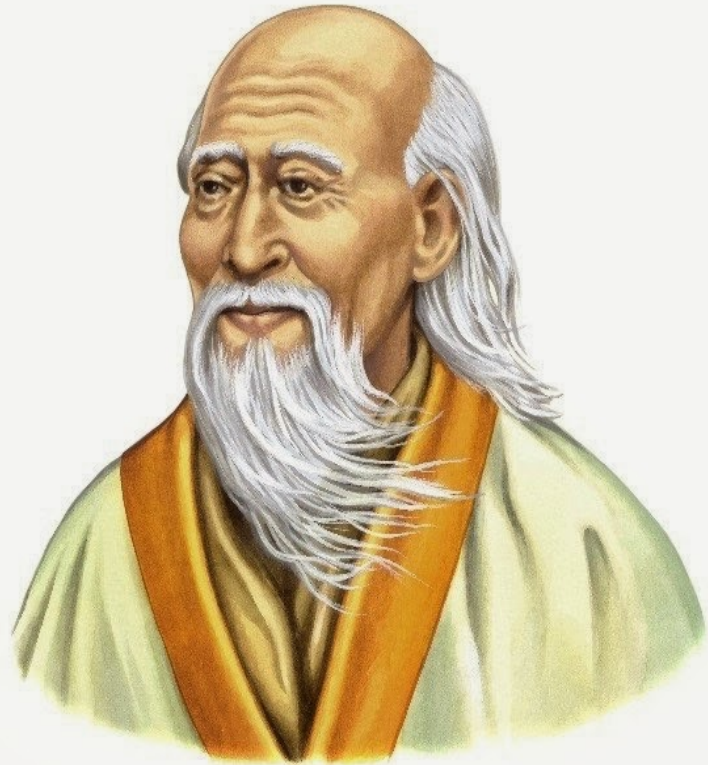


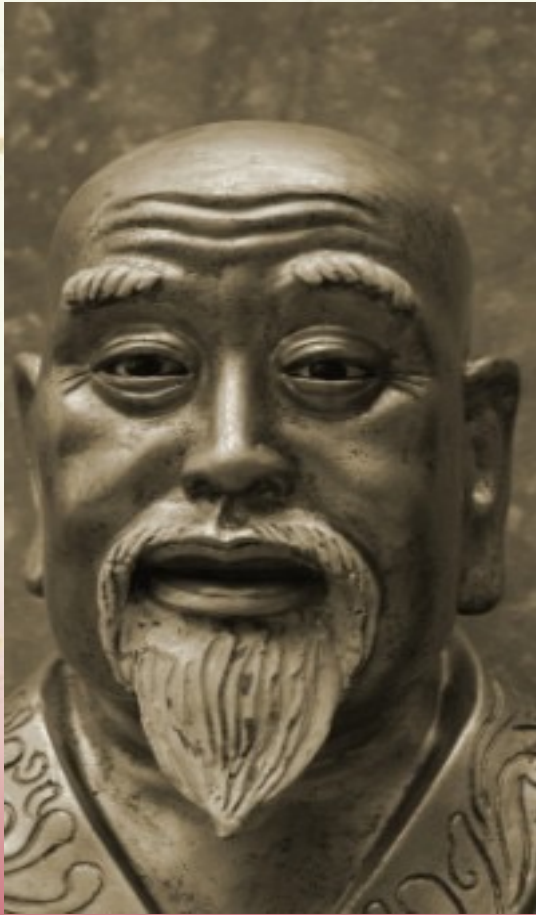


Lao Tzu /Laozi (trad. 604 – 531 BCE)
“Master Lao,” “Old Master,” “Old One”

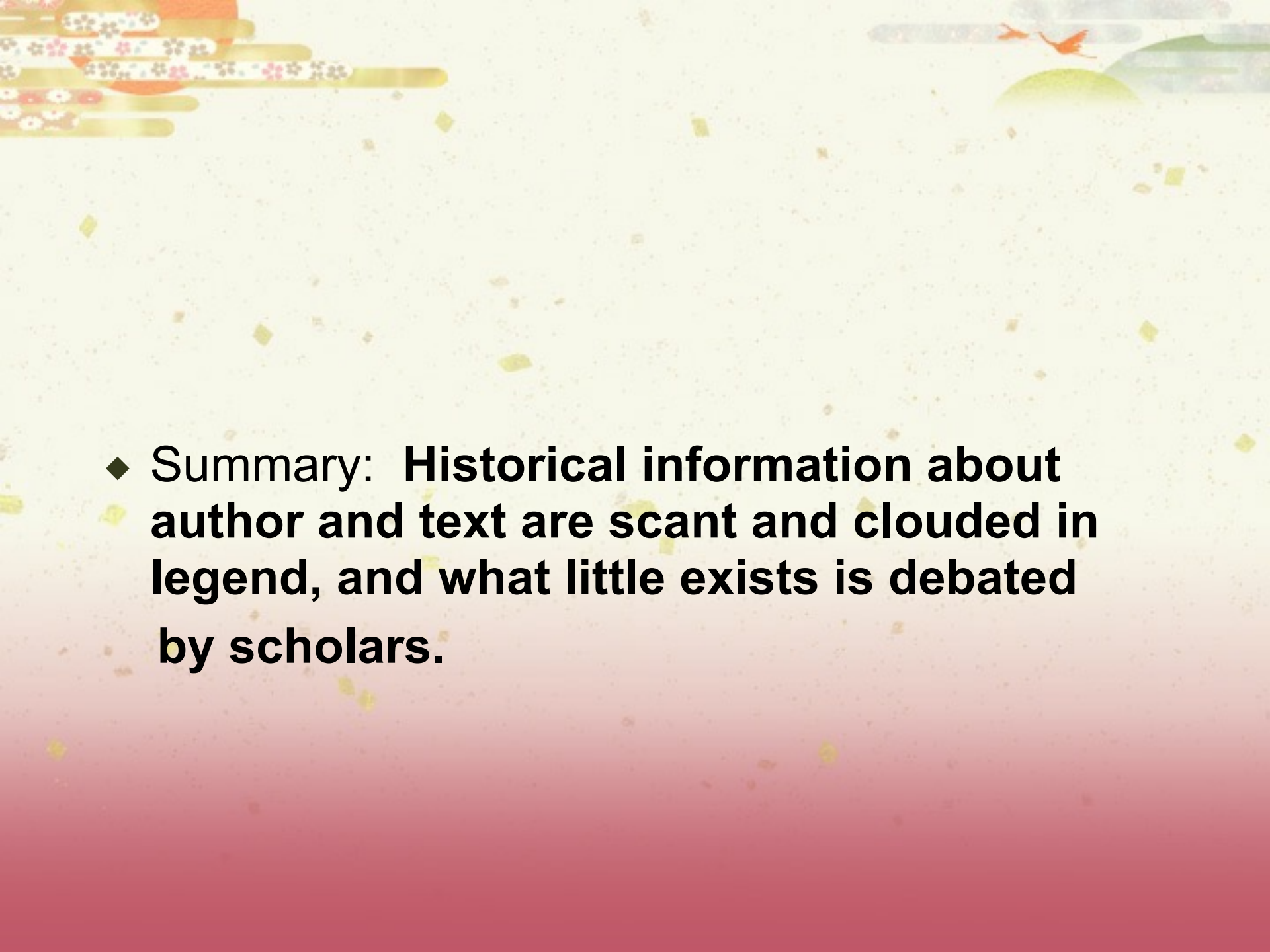
- ◆ Throughout the world, Lao Tzu is commonly placed among the great spiritual figures, along side Moses, The Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed
- ◆ Legendary figure – (most common legend) **court archivist** who gave up urban life, disappointed w/ direction his society was going; gate keeper asked him to leave behind his wisdom...

Most scholars today believe he is the mythic incorporation of several sages who contributed to the development and dissemination of the teachings that became the basis for Taoist thought; an epitome of the "valley sage"





"... mysticism is often given anonymously, by principle. All we can guess about the authorship of these poems is that the main threads of their argument originated among recluses in remote valleys before Confucius' time and that the results took form late in the 3rd C. BC." (Blakney 27)

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- ◆ **Summary: Historical information about author and text are scant and clouded in legend, and what little exists is debated by scholars.**

Terms & Concepts

the essentials!



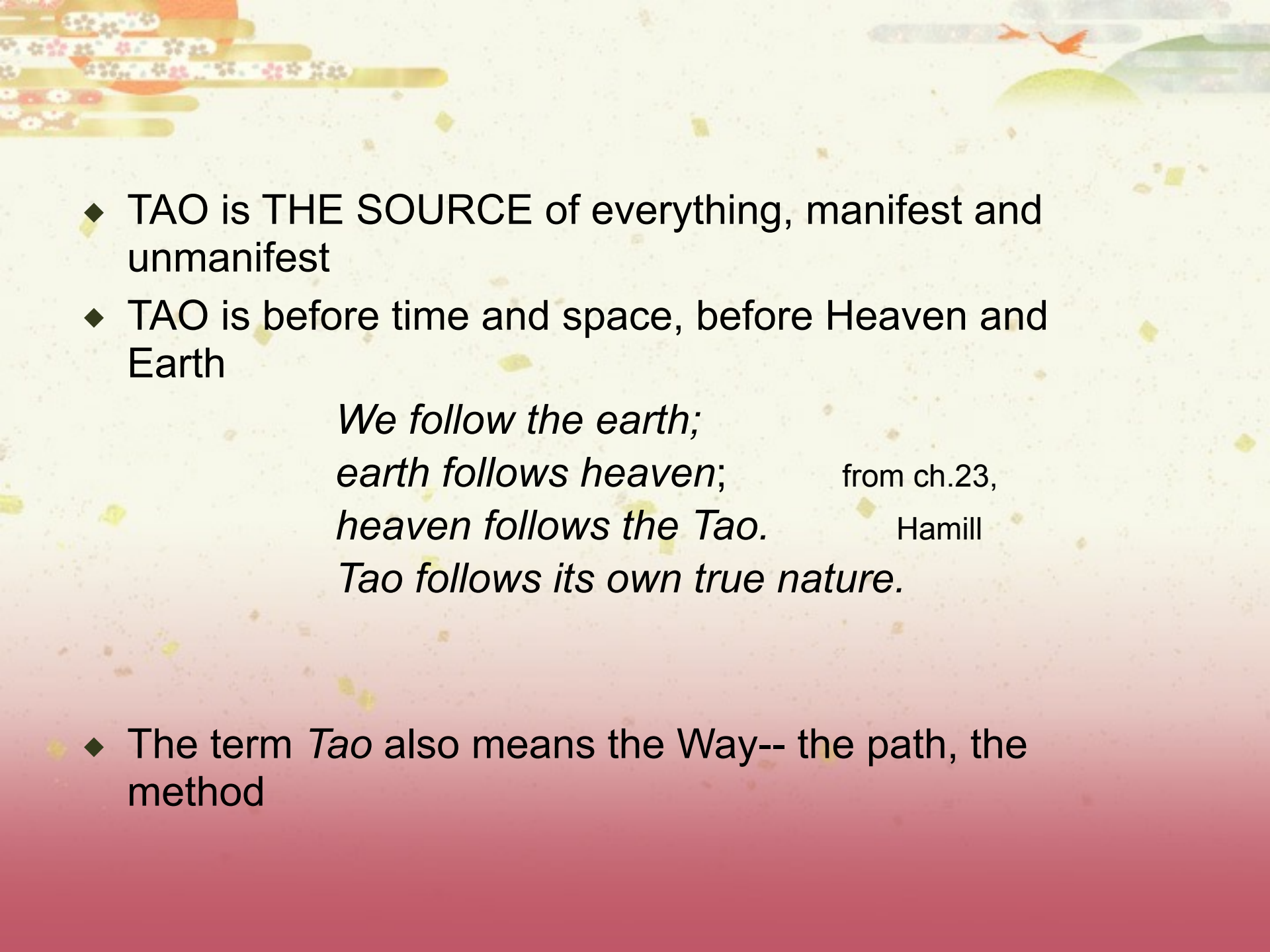
Tao

TAO -- Ultimate Principle, Ultimate Is-ness...

Nameless; a unique Something apprehended, for which language is entirely inadequate; world is its by-product; nothing exists separate from it; there can be no good government & no personal well-being apart from it...

The Tao is the unfathomable ALL

All that comes into being comes from it; what goes out of being returns to it.

- 
- ◆ TAO is THE SOURCE of everything, manifest and unmanifest
 - ◆ TAO is before time and space, before Heaven and Earth

*We follow the earth;
earth follows heaven; from ch.23,
heaven follows the Tao. Hamill
Tao follows its own true nature.*

- ◆ The term *Tao* also means the Way-- the path, the method

Te

Te -- virtue, power, integrity

- ◆ Te is tao manifested, the Way embodied
- ◆ Te is the art of living in the world yet in accord with Ultimate...
(includes the art of leadership and citizenship; duty)
- ◆ Weight of character... full personhood ...

- ◆ “...the Tao is...balanced by the **Te**, as yin balances yang...”
- ◆ **Te** is the outworking of the **Tao**....
- ◆ [**Te** is] the moral behavior that should flow from following the Tao.”

(Palmer, Intro., Freke 11-12)





ten thousand things

idiom: all this; after creation

The named is the mother of ten thousand things.

from ch. 1, Feng & English

The Tao is an empty vessel; it is used but never filled.

Oh, unfathomable source of ten thousand things!

from ch. 4, Feng & English

cycle of return

*Returning is the motion of the
Tao.*

*Yielding is the way of the
Tao.*

All things are born of being.

Being is born of non-being.

from ch.40, Mitchell

- ◆ non-being into being; being into non-being...

Chi / Qi - universal breath, vital energy



“...the idea that the world and its phenomena...emerge out of and fall back into a vital energizing field called **qi** was already widely held in the late fourth and early third centuries BCE...”

(Ames & Hall 63)

Heaven, heaven & earth (*t'ian*)

heaven—an impersonal concept secularized by the early Taoists for whom it meant a natural process, the constant unfolding of the cosmology

heaven & earth—often meant creative force (heaven) & created objects (earth)

“One reason why our understanding of *tian* [**heaven**] is painfully vague is that the term is vague within the Chinese tradition itself. The question posed by the tradition has not so much been ‘What is *tian*?’ as it has been ‘What is the most productive relationship between human beings and their environment?’”

(Ames & Hall 63)

simplicity, restraint, contentment

"...devoted to a denial of selfishness and self-seeking and to a mystical union with the ultimate"

(Hung, *Forward* in Blakney).

Self is realized through selflessness.

from ch. 7, Hamill

I take no action and people are reformed.

I enjoy peace and people become honest.

I do nothing and people become rich.

I have no desires and people return to the good and simple life.

from ch. 57, Feng & English

The background features a light yellow and white gradient with scattered small yellow and brown specks. In the top left corner, there are decorative horizontal bands with floral patterns in shades of pink, orange, and yellow. In the top right corner, there are stylized green hills and two orange birds in flight.

unlearning and emptiness

“The process of unlearning becomes more important than learning; emptying is given precedence over filling. Then, without apparent effort or struggle, without apparent thought or knowing, the unlearning somehow engenders insight, and the emptiness is filled” (Grigg 187).

reverting to a simple clarity

The background features a light, textured surface with a subtle gradient from yellow at the top to pink at the bottom. In the upper left corner, there are decorative horizontal bands with floral patterns in shades of pink, orange, and yellow. In the upper right corner, there are stylized green hills and two orange birds in flight.

Empty yourself of everything.

Let the mind become still.

The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.

They grow and flourish then return to the source.

Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

from ch. 16, Feng & English

uncarved block

symbol: before creation; what Daoists are trying to get back to

“The uncarved block...represents a mind that is one with the undifferentiated Tao” (Ong Intro. Muller xxiii).

The ancient masters were subtle...

Yielding like ice about to melt.

Simple, like uncarved blocks of wood.

Hollow, like caves.

Opaque, like muddy pools.



from ch. 15, Feng & English

water

The highest good is like water.

Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.

It flows in places men reject and so it is like the Tao.

Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water.

But, for attacking the hard and strong, there is nothing like it !

from ch. 78, Wu

from ch. 8, Feng & English

wu-wei

- ◆ Non-action
- ◆ Non-doing
- ◆ Non-interference
- ◆ Natural, receptive
- ◆ Accomplishing without trying

*You do nothing and
Nothing's not done.*

from ch. 48, Leguin

*The Tao never does anything,
yet through it all things are done*

from ch.37, Mitchell

*Teaching without words,
Performing without actions:
That is the Master's way.*

from ch.43, Mitchell



◆ **Poem or chapter 1**

- ◆ *The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in
name; this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.*

Poem or chapter 2

*Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only
because there is ugliness.*

All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.

Difficult and easy complement each other.

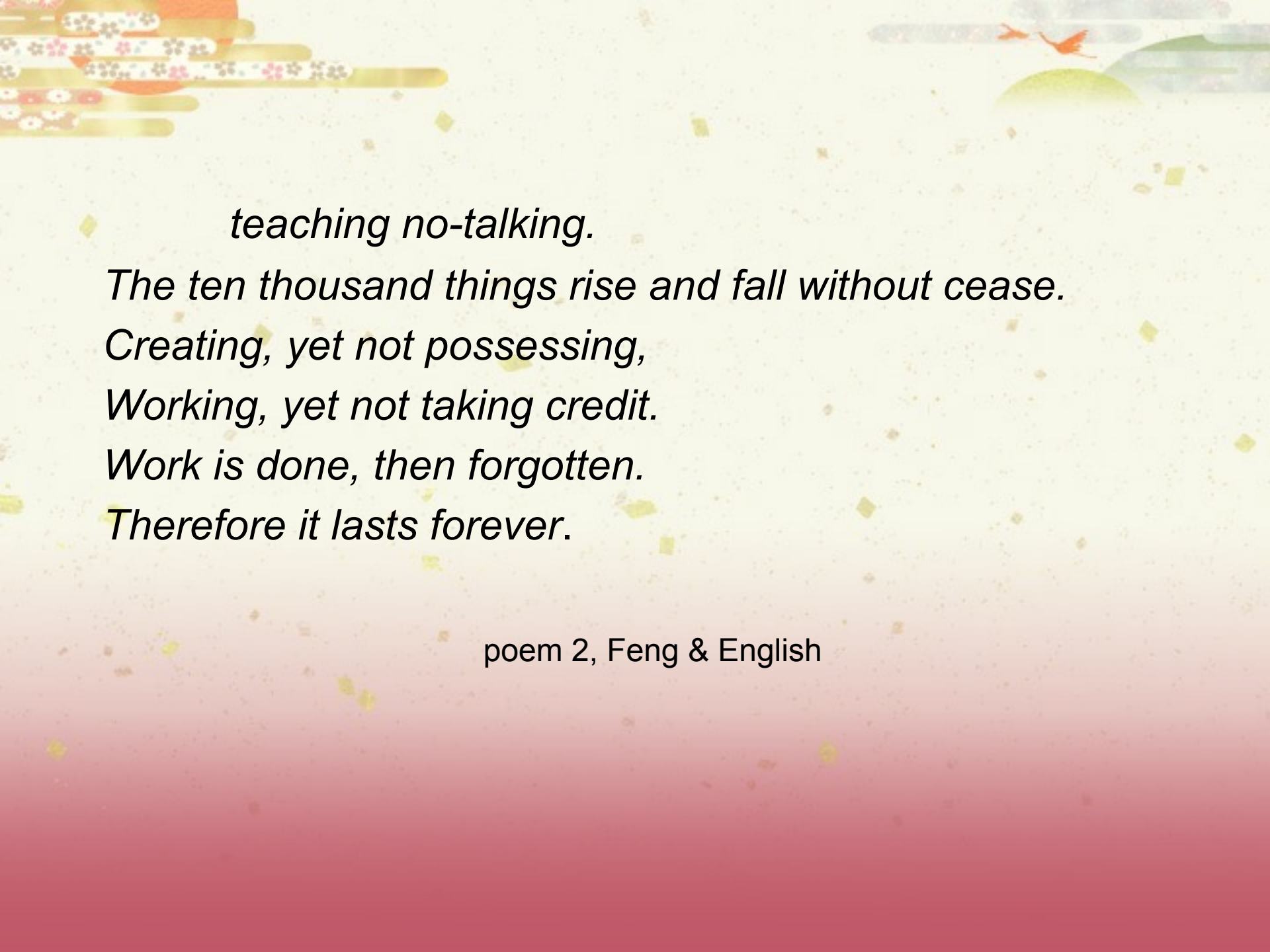
Long and short contrast each other.

High and low rest upon each other.

Voice and sound harmonize each other.

Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing,

The background features a light yellow-to-pink gradient with scattered gold and yellow specks. In the top left, there are horizontal bands with floral patterns in pink, white, and orange. In the top right, there are stylized green hills and two orange birds in flight.

teaching no-talking.

The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease.

Creating, yet not possessing,

Working, yet not taking credit.

Work is done, then forgotten.

Therefore it lasts forever.

poem 2, Feng & English



Relationship between text and its reader is collaborative

- ◆ “This inescapable process in which students through many readings of the text acquire their own unique understanding of its insights informed by their own life experiences....
- ◆ The changing coherence of the text is brought into sharpening focus as its readers in different times and places continue to make it their own.”

(Ames and Hall 8)

A stone sculpture of Laozi, located north of Quanzhou
at the foot of Mount Qingyuan





Image credits

Slide 12	Laozi - Wikipedia
Slide 14	Images of LaoTzu, pbase.com
Slide 19	daoist sages crossing sea – metmuseum.org
Slide 23	Images of LaoTzu, thebookfile.org
Slide 25	Images of LaoTzuzen-mama.com
Slide 26	Images of LaoTzujashreeyoga.com
Slide 28	Loazi - Wikipedia
Slide 32	landscape – lacma.org
Slide 35	dragon + phoenix – lacma.org
Slide 40	nothingjustis.wordpress.com
Slide 47,48	Laozi - Wikipedia