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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover picture G. E. Morrison with his two 'adopted' children, sons of his head servant, photographed in 1905 in the front courtyard of his house at 98 Wang-fu-ching Ta-chieh, Peking

## ON THE ART OF RULING A BIG COUNTRY —VIEWS OF THREE CHINESE EMPERORS \*

史 Liu Ts'un-yan 柳存仁

I feel deeply honoured to have been elected to deliver the Morrison Lecture this year, for Dr George Morrison was an outstanding man and a good friend of the Chinese people. Born in Geelong in 1862, he went to China for the first time in 1894, and a few years later became the China Correspondent of the London *Times*, a post which he held for fifteen years until his resignation in 1912. The most remarkable feature of Morrison's career in China was his passionate devotion to the cause of Chinese independence and freedom. He wielded his pen to fight against chauvinism, aggression and injustice, and is remembered for many of his despatches from Peking by the peace-loving Australians and Chinese.

During the early days of the Republic, Morrison was an adviser or *Ku-wên* 顧問 to the Chinese president. *Ku-wên* is a very interesting compound in the Chinese language. It is said that some six years after Morrison's death in England in 1920, a certain Russian was appointed as an adviser or *Ku-wên* to a Chinese general, known as the Christian general. When this general found that his *Ku-wên's* advice was frivolous and interfering, he decided to teach him some etymology. "The compound '*Ku-wên*', said the general, means in Chinese 'to turn one's head to ask'. You had better shut up, Sir, since I haven't turned to you and asked my questions."<sup>1</sup>

Morrison, of course, fared in this capacity much better. However, to be an adviser to a Chinese president on how to rule a big country must have been an arduous task. Even the most powerful emperors in Chinese history hesitated to rule without taking some lessons. A Chinese textbook, entitled the *Lao-tzū* 老子, or the *Tao-tê ching* 道德經, consisting of 5,722 words and translated into more than forty versions in English alone, was prepared for this purpose more than two thousand years ago.

As the Dutch scholar Professor Duyvendak tells us in his English

\* The 34th George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology delivered on 13 November 1973 and first published by the University in 1974. Liu Ts'un-yan was, at the time, Professor of Chinese in the Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University. [—Ed.]

<sup>1</sup> This was Wusmanoff (Sangurskii), an adviser to General Fêng Yü-hsiang 馮玉祥. See Ta-hua Lieh-shih (Jen Yu-wen), *Hsi-peitung-nan-jêng* (Shanghai, 1935), p.21; James E. Sheridan, *Chinese warlord, the career of Feng Yü-hsiang* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), p.201.

<sup>2</sup> J. J. L. Duyvendak, *Tao-te ching, the Book of the Way and its virtues* (London: Murray, 1954), p.1.

<sup>3</sup> See Liu Ts'un-yan, "A Comparative study of the Three Imperial Commentaries on the *Lao-tzū*," *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong*, 4.2 (1971): 287-342; 5.1 (1972): 9-74.

<sup>4</sup> All three commentaries are found in the *Tao-tsang*, 355, 359 and 354 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Wang Ying-lin, *Yü-hai*, edition 1338, 53/11b; vol. 2 (Taiwan, 1967), p.1050.

translation of the work: "The *Tao-tê ching* is one of those great books which, through the passing of the centuries, always retain their value.<sup>2</sup> I cannot say at the moment how many commentaries have been produced on this philosophical text, but I think it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that in order to extract from the text a more comprehensive interpretation of its philosophy to a modern mind, some forty to fifty selected works composed by Chinese scholars from the third to the fourteenth century should be studied.<sup>3</sup> Among them there are full commentaries written by three well-known emperors. The first was Emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗 of the T'ang who reigned from 713 and abdicated in 755 rather reluctantly after his flight to Szechwan when the rebellion of An Lu-shan 安祿山 had broken out. The second was Emperor Hui-tsung 徽宗 of the Northern Sung (r.1101-25) who also gave up his throne in 1125 under the increasing menace of the Juchen Tartars. They eventually occupied the Chinese capital Pien-liang 汴梁 (K'ai-fêng 開封) in the following year, took the emperor and his successor captive, and carried them off to the north. The third was Emperor T'ai-tsu 太祖 of the Ming (r.1368-98) who, being the luckiest of the three, became the founder of a new dynasty in 1368 after the organised, if not entirely unified, Chinese forces had fought and driven the Mongols beyond the Great Wall and rescued China from about one hundred years of foreign rule. Although these three emperors were very important historical figures, the commentaries they compiled on the *Tao-tê ching* have so far attracted less attention than is their due.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the commentary produced by Ming T'ai-tsu, the two earlier ones are beautifully written in classical language. Emperor Hsüan-tsung's shows influence of some Buddhist treatises: as a writer he was quite at home with the abstruse and esoteric style. The writings of Emperor Hui-tsung reflect obviously the greater influence of the thought of Chuang-tzū and the age-honoured ancient book of divination, the *I-ching* 易經 (Book of Changes). But, as stated already, the three imperial commentaries have never gained a proper place in the orthodox school of study even in the eighteenth century, the heyday of classical research, and, except for the occasional textual comparison, they are equally ignored by modern scholarship. Probably scholars throughout the ages may have thought that their authors, being masters of royal houses accustomed to the enjoyment and luxury of court life, were incapable of serious thinking, let alone writing, and that, if there was anything published by them, it would have been done by proxy.<sup>5</sup> However, we should not forget that Emperor Hsüan-tsung was an acknowledged great musician, and Emperor Hui-tsung was a most outstanding painter, calligrapher and connoisseur of art. It would be very inconsiderate, if not cruel, of us to deny them the ability of passing judgments on philosophical texts, especially on such a dynamic work on both personal conduct and the art of governing as the *Lao-tzū*. Granted that they might have enlisted some of their courtiers for assistance in the course of compilation, the emperors themselves were still the active cardinal members behind the scene, and in offering some uncalled-for changes in the readings of the text, such as in the case of Hsüan-

tsung's commentary, I do not think a literary attendant or even a minister would have been audacious enough to make the daring alterations without first having obtained approval from his master.<sup>6</sup> Besides, as is universally acknowledged, the philosophy of Lao-tzū is characteristic for advocating abstention from all government interference. Ironically enough, it is at the same time a first-class textbook for a brilliant ruler to learn how to bring things under his control without his confidential ministers ever being aware of such measures. In the text, Lao-tzū incessantly teaches us to be lenient, to be sparing, and in wartime not to exult in the killing of men. But he is also known to have said: "There is no disaster greater than taking on an enemy too easily" (LXIX), and "If you would have a thing shrink, you must first stretch it: if you would have a thing weakened, you must first strengthen it" (XXXVI).<sup>7</sup> All of these witty and paradoxical remarks are supposed to have come from the same sage, the old rogue cloaked in the long robe of a national librarian. The study of his thought would interest more a ruler than an ordinary scholar. While the study of Confucian teachings on social morals and state institutions would help a scholar to serve his prince and through him also his people, the study of the *Tao-tê ching* or the *Lao-tzū* by a calculating Taoist strategist would definitely help him to become a highly honoured adviser to his lord. In case he is a lord himself, he would be in a legitimate position to aspire to the Taoist ideal of a sage-king who rules the empire and is capable of responding to anything, while practically clinging to nothing. We would be sadly biased if we allowed ourselves to ignore the responses to the thinking of Lao-tzū by the three emperors as reflected in their commentaries .

There was a great upsurge of religious Taoism during the T'ang, and its alleged spiritual leader Lao-tzū became an object of unprecedented worship. Professor Duyvendak says:

It is only due to a historical accident that, when in the eighth century the T'ang dynasty claimed to be descended from Lao-tzū, who had been deified, for a short time Taoism was recognized as the state religion and that the *Tao-tê ching* was admitted as one of the classical books to be studied for the state examinations.<sup>8</sup>

To my mind, this 'accident' was one of great significance for the ruling family Li 李 of the T'ang. They were of a Sino-Turkish descent through inter-marriage, and the identification of their ancestors with the much revered Lao-tzū, allegedly also surnamed Li, greatly enhanced their prestige. However, the glorification of Lao-tzū did not begin with Emperor Hsüan-tsung. In the year 666, T'ang Emperor Kao-tsung 高宗, having favoured the Temple of Lao-tzū at Po-chou 亳州 with a visit, issued an edict proclaiming Lao-tzū posthumously the Supreme-High Emperor of Mystery 玄元皇帝.<sup>9</sup> By 'mystery' here is meant 'ineffable glory' or 'power'. In 682, Kao-tsung also ordered that a new reign-title Hung-tao 弘道 (propagating the *Tao*) be ushered in the next year and Taoist monasteries be built throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> This happened only a few months before his demise, and the proclaimed reign-title was discontinued upon the ascension of his son Chung-tsung 中宗. The new

<sup>6</sup> *Tao-tsang*, 355/2/3b.

<sup>7</sup> D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzū* (Harmondsworth, Mddlx.: Penguin, 1968), pp.131, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Duyvendak, *Tao-te ching*, p.14.

<sup>9</sup> Tu Kuang-t'ing, *Tao-tê chên-ching kuang-shêng-yi*, *Tao-tsang*, 440/2/24b-25b.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2/27a.

<sup>11</sup> Tu Kuang-t'ing, *Kuang-shêng-yi*, 1/8b.

<sup>12</sup> Ho Shih-chi, *Ku-pên Tao-tê ching chiaok'an*, *K'ao-ku hsüeh-pao* 1.2 (Peiping, n.d.).

**Figure 1**

*Emperor Hui-tsung of the Northern Sung (reprinted from Chung-kuo shu-hua, ed. Chu Hsing-chai 朱省齋, vol.1, p.18)*



emperor was soon dethroned and exiled by his own mother, the famous Empress Wu 武后. After twenty years of suffering in seclusion he was enthroned again, only to be poisoned by his own wife five years later. Despite his short reign Chung-tsung did not fail in 708 to order the engraving of the

whole text of the *Tao-tê ching* on a specially erected stone monument. This set an example for Hsüan-tsung who had the full text of his own commentary inscribed on four lofty pillars in two magnificent Taoist monasteries in Ch'ang-an 長安. He also issued orders to the military governors and prefects of the state that tablet inscriptions of the new text as well as commemorating platforms be erected in the leading monasteries and scenic spots within their jurisdiction so that the memory of the great sage would live forever.<sup>11</sup> A few such stelae dated 738 and 739 are still extant.<sup>12</sup>

From the start of his political career, Prince Lin-tzū 臨淄, the future Emperor Hsüan-tsung, showed himself as a very brilliant, strong-willed yet astute leader. A fifth-generation scion of the royal house, he, during the last years of Empress Wu's reign, skilfully evaded direct involvement in the many-sided political conflicts and palace intrigues which often ended up in open revolts, executions and vendettas. In 710, five years after the death of Empress Wu, when the throne was in danger of usurpation by another empress, the wife and adulterous murderess of the unfortunate Emperor Chung-tsung, his nephew, the future Emperor Hsüan-tsung, then twenty-five years old, staged a rapid palace *coup d'état*. Under his able command the unfaithful empress and her adherents were killed, order was restored overnight, and power regained for his father, Jui-tsung 睿宗. In 712, Jui-tsung abdicated in his son's favour, and from 713 on until the rebellion of An Lu-shan in 755, China again enjoyed peace and order for more than four decades. There is no doubt at all that Emperor Hsüan-tsung was very fond of discussing with his courtiers abstruse metaphysical topics, and already in the first years of his reign he ordered the Grand Secretary Chang Yüeh 張說 (667-730) to recommend to the court scholars well versed in Taoism.<sup>13</sup> He also showed special favours to Li Po's 李白 friend, the Taoist priest and distinguished hermit-



poet Wu Yün 吳筠.<sup>14</sup> Later, having finished his commentary, Hsüan-tsung ordered Ssü-ma Ch'êng-chên 司馬承禎, another Taoist priest, to copy the slightly edited text of the *Lao-tzū* in three different styles of calligraphy.<sup>15</sup> In 733 he ordered that a copy of the *Lao-tzū* be kept in every household and that in the state examinations two of the questions testing students' knowledge of the *Sbu-ching* 書經 (Book of History) and *Lun-yü* 論語 (Confucian Analects) be drawn thereafter from the *Lao-tzū*.<sup>16</sup> Having personally altered some of the lines in the original text of the *Lao-tzū* he proffered the following explanation:

In elucidating the principle we of course cannot alter the meaning [of the text], but in writing we have to ponder [more] over the words and make our careful selection. To strike a balance between the antiquated and the modern may be the required criterion (*Tao-tsang* 355, 2/3b).

Emperor Hui-tsung of the Northern Sung, though he styled himself 'Tao-chün' 道君 or the Taoist Ruler, was not the first Sung ruler to promulgate religious Taoism throughout China, nor was he the first to launch a campaign for the veneration of Lao-tzū's writings from a political, and especially from a ruler's, point of view. A hundred years before him, Emperor Chên-tsung 真宗 (r. 998–1022) had greatly encouraged the introduction of Taoist rites into the traditional state sacrifices offered to Heaven and Earth, and had also been a passionate upholder of the religious Taoist tenet. In commenting on the study of the *Lao-tzū* Chên-tsung had once said that "the *Tao-tê ching* of Lao-tzū was an indispensable work to a ruler. The commentary by Emperor Hsüan-tsung [of the T'ang] was brilliant while that by Wang Pi 王弼 [of the third century], with its succinct style bringing out the deep meaning of the text, had really grasped the idea of simplicity in the *Lao-tzū*."<sup>17</sup> But Chên-tsung still was not the only precursor to Emperor Hui-tsung.

Since the founding of the Sung dynasty in 960, enthusiasm for bringing into practical administration the spirit of some of the ancient sages, Confucian and Taoist alike, had never waned. Thus the Prime Minister Chao P'u 趙普 (921–91), in giving advice to the founder of the empire Emperor T'ai-tsu (r. 960–75), suggested that "by putting to use half of the ideas of the *Confucian Analects* the world would be at peace."<sup>18</sup> Emperor T'ai-tsung 太宗 (r. 976–97), a successor to and a co-ordinator in the many campaigns of pacification of his elder brother T'ai-tsu, also had a philosophical bent and was known to have been very fond of reading the *Lao-tzū*. Several anecdotes about him in this connection are found in the chronological histories. It is said that in the tenth month of the seventh year of T'ai-p'ing hsing-kuo 太平興國 (982), he told his intimate attendants at the palace that the chapter beginning with "Arms are instruments of ill omen" (XXXI) had stirred his mind.<sup>19</sup> In the intercalary month of the fourth year of Ch'un-hua 淳化 (933), the Emperor held court with his ministers. During the course of discussions, Lü Mêng-chêng 呂蒙正, the Prime Minister, quoted off-the-cuff a parable from the *Lao-tzū* that "governing a large state was like cooking a small fish" (LX).<sup>20</sup> When

<sup>13</sup> *Hsin T'ang-shu*, Biography of K'ang Tzū-yüan 康子元, *Erb-shih-wu shih* edition (K'ai-ming), 200/4096.

<sup>14</sup> *T'ang-shu*, Biography of Wu Yün, 192/3594.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Biography of Ssu-ma Ch'êng-chên, 192/3594.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Basic Annals of Emperor Hsüan-tsung, 8/3084.

<sup>17</sup> "Hsien-p'ing (998–1003) shêng-yü," quoted by Hsiung K'o 熊克 in his Colophon (dated 1170) to the Sung edition of Wang Pi's Commentary on the *Lao-tzū*, *Tao-tsang* 373/4/*chi* 記 2a.

<sup>18</sup> See Lo Ta-ching, *Ho-lin yü-lu* under *Lun-yü*; also *Sung-shih*, Biography of Chao P'u, 256/5191.

<sup>19</sup> Li T'ao, *Hsü Tzū-chih t'ung-chien ch'ang-p'ien*, *chüan* 1.

<sup>20</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> Li T'ao, *Ch'ang-p'ien*.

<sup>22</sup> *Kuo-ch'ao shih-shih* quoted in P'eng Ssü, *Tao-têchen-ching chi-chu*, "Tsa-shuo," *Tao-tsang*, 403/shang 上/8b-9a.

<sup>23</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.110; see also P'eng Ssü, *Chi-chu*, "Shuo-hsü," *Tao-tsang*, 398/5a.

<sup>24</sup> P'eng Ssü, *Chi-chu*, "Tsa-shuo," *Tao-tsang*, 403/shang/12b-13a.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 12b; see also *Sung-shih*, Biography of Wang An-li 王安禮, 327/5358.

<sup>26</sup> See Chao Hsi-pien, *Chün-chai tu-shu fu-chih*, in *Chao-te hsien-sheng chün-chai tu-shu chih*, SPTK ed.

<sup>27</sup> See Ts'ao Yüan-chung's Colophon to the Chêng-ho revised version (1118) of the Ching-yu edition (1034-7) of the *Shih-chi* [Records of the Grand Historian], photolithographic reprint (Taipei, 1955).

urged for an explanation, Lü added: "A small fish can be spoiled just by handling, and people likewise can be hurt and disturbed [through administrative measures and frequent changes]." He continued to use this parable to remonstrate with the emperor against lending an ear to those courtiers and officials who persevered with sending in memorials and suggesting new measures. T'ai-tsung, himself an admirer of the *Lao-tzū*, immediately saw the point and endorsed his views.<sup>21</sup> Another little story illustrates the point. In T'ai-tsung's time grain transports from the south to the capital K'ai-fêng sailed up the River Pien 汧河. Officers and soldiers whose regular duty it was to escort the transport combined it with smuggling. When this was made known, T'ai-tsung merely said: "The gates for adventurers may be likened to the holes [in a wall] for mice. It would be a pity if the holes were blocked." And no drastic measures were introduced to prevent the recurrence of smuggling.<sup>22</sup> On another occasion T'ai-tsung is reported to have said: "Those who are good I treat as good, those who are no good I also treat as good"—another quotation from the sacred book (XLIX).<sup>23</sup>

The lenient T'ai-tsung was succeeded by his son Chên-tsung, the Taoist emperor already mentioned. His excessive show of enthusiasm for Taoism and eagerness for dramatic performances emphasising his connection with the Mandate of Heaven might, I suspect, have been aimed at distracting his people from their concern with the humiliation that China had suffered from the Liao Tartars on the frontier. When it came to the reign of Shên-tsung (r.1068-85), the anecdote about the cooking of a small fish was repeated to him by his ministers.<sup>24</sup> His rule was said to have been so uncomplicated and free from disturbances that at one time, during the Yüan-feng 元豐 period (1078-85), the metropolitan prison stood empty for want of qualified detainees. History records that because of this unusual occurrence, the prefect of K'ai-fêng was immediately rewarded by the Emperor and promoted to the post of vice-minister.<sup>25</sup>

It was against this intellectual background and under these historical circumstances that Emperor Hui-tsung ascended the throne. He had a decided bent for Taoism, for besides all the religious sacrifices and grandiose monasteries built during his reign, he also wrote commentaries on quite a few Taoist works other than the *Tao-tê ching*. Following Hsüan-tsung's example, he also ordered that his own commentary on the *Lao-tzū* be inscribed on stone tablets.<sup>26</sup> To show his high regard for the ancient sage, already honoured posthumously with the highest possible monarchical title, Hui-tsung ordered that the 63rd chapter of the *Records of the Grand Historian* containing the Biography of Lao-tzū, should be singled out and placed first in the section of biographies in this monumental work when new woodblocks were to be cut.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately for him, Hui-tsung had more works to consult when writing his commentary than his predecessors. Besides, he could handle many important ones already in woodblock editions. All the pre-T'ang and T'ang commentaries were available in his imperial libraries, and

the most outstanding works written by the Sung scholars and statesmen, such as Ssü-ma Kuang 司馬光 (1019–86), Wang An-shih 王安石 (1021–86) and his son Wang Pang 王雱 (1044–76), Su Ch'ê 蘇轍 (1039–1112), the younger brother of Su Tung-po 蘇東坡 (Su Shih 蘇軾, 1036–1101), had all been published before his time. It would be interesting indeed to find out how Hui-tsung stood as a Taoist ruler, and how similar or otherwise were his opinions in some cases to those of the earlier commentators. Wang An-shih is said to have appeased barbarian aggressors on the pretext that Lao-tzū had once said: "If you would take from a thing, you must first give to it" (XXXVI).<sup>28</sup> The state of military unpreparedness at the time saved Wang from being made a laughing stock on that score. Would Hui-tsung, writing his commentary when China was suffering even worse from the foreign invaders, have approved of the same practice? Could he have been really unperturbed by the existing situation and an impending national crisis at the time? Could he have remained calm and unaware of the multifarious demands on him? Perhaps historians and psychoanalysts are able to, and will, make good use of his commentary and reveal to us the emotional aspirations of a man who might have been so tortured by his mundane and spiritual duties that he could find solace only in the mild teachings of the *Tao-tê ching*.

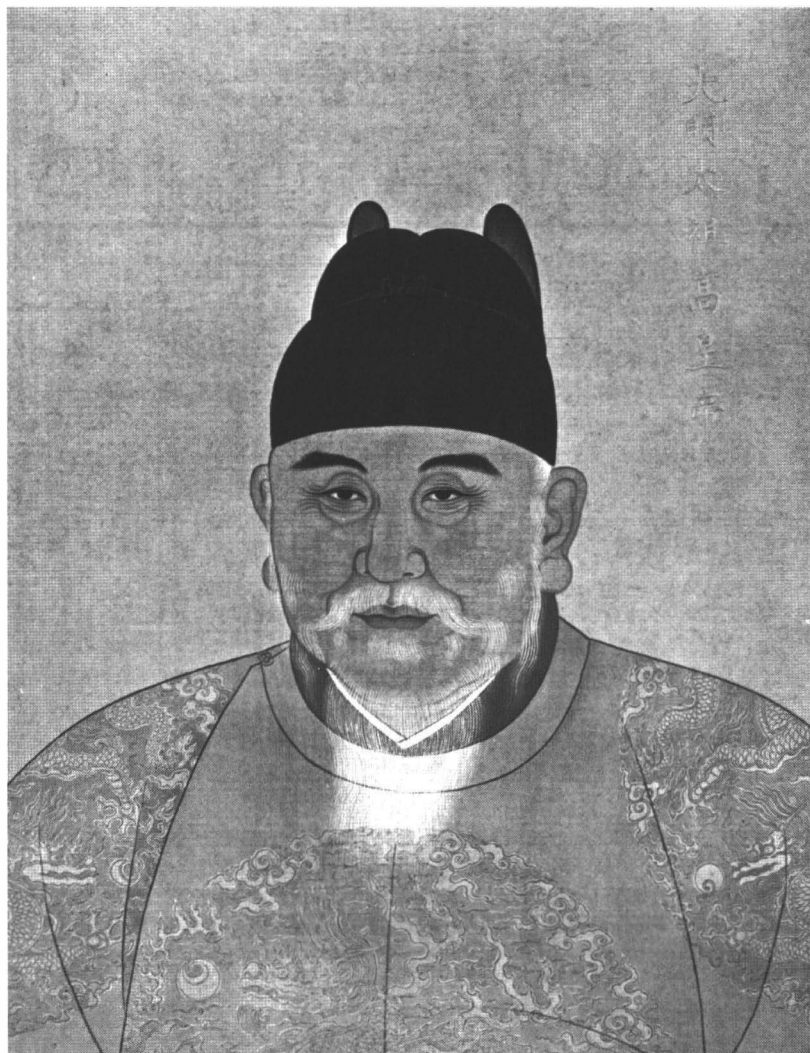
Unlike the other two imperial commentators, Emperor T'ai-tsu, the founder of the Ming empire, was not a learned man. Indeed he received no education at all in his childhood. When he had been compelled to leave his native town Chung-li 鍾離 before he was sixteen to try his luck elsewhere during the great famine, he could neither read nor write.<sup>29</sup> A soft-hearted old monk, who lived alone in a desolate Buddhist monastery of a neighbouring district, took pity on the young starving orphan and allowed him to stay with him as a novice and share his meagre supply of hidden grain. The chanting of Buddhist *sūtras* and an outline of Buddhist attitudes towards life which could have been expounded to him by the same monk during the short stay at the temple, may have comprised the whole course of T'ai-tsu's early education before he joined one of the rebellious armies.<sup>30</sup> Later on, when he had gathered many Confucian scholars and military advisers around him to help him build an empire, his knowledge of the world and of Chinese history would have increased considerably, and his constant contact with the intellectuals must have revived his earlier dream of becoming a well-educated man. Throughout the years he tried hard to improve his knowledge of the written classical language, and the compilation of the commentary on the *Lao-tzū* in 1374, only six years after his enthronement in Nanking, proves beyond doubt that he had been able to realise his dream to a certain extent. It is interesting too that T'ai-tsu wrote his commentary entirely by himself—in many places of the text there is much room for stylistic improvements, and one can also find many grammatical errors and vulgarisms. All this could have been easily improved upon by either his secretaries or his literary attendants had T'ai-tsu cared to seek their advice. But he was a conceited man, and his

<sup>28</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.95; cf. Ch'en Pang-chan, *Sung-shih chi-shih pên-mo, chüan 22*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ming-shih*, Basic Annals of Emperor T'ai-tsu, 1/7098; T'an Ch'ien, *Kuo-ch'üeh*, 1/259.

<sup>30</sup> In 1352; see *Ming-shih*, Biography of Kuo Tzū-hsing 郭子興, 122/7388.

over-developed sense of self-esteem restrained him from doing so. He is also known to have been very suspicious. Although he had become the head of the state, he nevertheless was a victim of an inferiority complex, and his humble origin haunted him all the time. It is known that during his reign of thirty-one years, many of his former intimate friends and ministers of meritorious deeds were killed or banished for alleged high treason, and their friends and relatives indiscriminately punished. In most cases they were greatly wronged. A very unfortunate example may be cited here to illustrate this point. In those days priests were not enjoying very high prestige among the people and, because temples and monasteries in the impoverished parts of the country were very much isolated and there were many mendicant



**Figure 2**

*Emperor T'ai-tsu of the Ming dynasty  
(from the album of Portraits of the  
Ming Emperors and Empresses,  
Imperial Palace Museum)*

monks, people even despised them, referring to them derisively as *kuang-t'ou* 光頭 or the 'bald-headed ones'. T'ai-tsu himself had been such a 'bald-headed one' before and hence had developed a sort of maniacal abhorrence of the word *kuang* (bald) which unhappily also means 'light' in Chinese. Now, it was customary for the ministers and officials in China to present congratulatory memorials to the emperor on New Year's Day. On one such occasion, T'ai-tsu received a memorial containing the entirely harmless remark "kuang-t'ien chih-hsia" 光天之下 (thou art the light of the universe) quoted from the *Book of History*.<sup>31</sup> He was so enraged that he ordered the well-meaning but unfortunate author of the memorial to be immediately executed, for he suspected that the man was ridiculing him, taking advantage of his insufficient knowledge of the classics. Cases like this occurred frequently and, I think, owing to the additional discretion on their part, the ministers at the court would have taken the greatest care not to offend the Emperor even had he sought their opinion with regard to his compilation. Ironically, it was T'ai-tsu himself who found a single line from the *Lao-tzū* which aroused his interest in this work. He reveals it to us in his preface to the commentary (2a–b): "When the people are not afraid of death, wherefore frighten them with death?" (LXXIV).<sup>32</sup>

Although T'ai-tsu had made little effort to consult his advisers about his own commentary, he did not entirely neglect other commentaries. In this connection he mentions especially a certain Wu Ch'êng 吳澄 (1249–1333), alias Wu Ts'ao-lu 吳草廬 (literally, The Scholar Who Lives under a Thatched Roof), whose work he quoted at length. Wu Ch'êng lived at the end of the Southern Sung and well into the later days of the Mongols. Since he was a Confucian scholar, even despite his dynamic personality, his commentary on the *Tao-tê ching* could never have been expected to deviate very much from the beaten track.<sup>33</sup> This is also reflected in Ming T'ai-tsu's work in which the Taoist attitude is seldom upheld, and Lao-tzū's philosophy is treated mainly as the mature wisdom of an old man experienced in the struggles of life.

About one in four of T'ai-tsu's opinions in the commentary are in accord with Wu Ch'êng's writings, but in many other places he expresses his own views. While some of his ludicrous comments were sometimes made out of sheer carelessness, most of them stemmed from his lack of education and lack of understanding. For instance, the proper meaning of the character *hsi* 希 in the context *hsi-yen tzū-jan* 希言自然 ('To use words but rarely—is to be natural', XXIII)<sup>34</sup> is 'rarity', while T'ai-tsu boldly interprets it as 'expectation' (from *hsi-wang* 希望) with the following distorted effect:

The meaning of *hsi-yen* (literally 'expecting words') is to expect grateful acknowledgment from others ... [Lao-tzū takes notice of the practice of many people. When] a new policy is being introduced, its administrators expect immediately gratitude and praise [from the people], hence he makes this remark (*shang* /23a).

T'ai-tsu no doubt misunderstood the commentary of one of his forerunners,

<sup>31</sup> In *Shang-shu*, "Yi Chi"; cf. James Legge, *The Chinese classics*, 3 vols (Peking, 1940): 3, pt 1, p.83. Legge's translation reads, "Let your light, O emperor, shine all through the empire."

<sup>32</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.136.

<sup>33</sup> *Tao-tsang*, 392–3.

<sup>34</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.80.

<sup>35</sup> *Tao-tsang*, 363/2/5b; cf. Eduard Erkes (transl.), *Ho-Shang Kung's commentary on Lao-tse* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1958).

<sup>36</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.67.

<sup>37</sup> *Tao-tsang*, 355/1/12a; 356/2/1b.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 392/1/14b-15a.

<sup>39</sup> For an early Taoist illustration of the observation of the *chi*, see *Chuang-tzū*, chapter 7, "Ying ti-wang" [Fit to be emperor or king]; cf. James R. Ware, *The sayings of Chuang Chou* (New York, 1963), pp.56-7.

Ho-shang Kung 河上公, who said that *hsi-yen* was *ai-yen* 愛言.<sup>35</sup> Though under ordinary circumstances the character *ai* means 'to love' or 'to be fond of', in this context it means 'to be sparing'. Had T'ai-tsu ever known this, he would have thought all the more that classical Chinese was treacherous.

The following chapter which I quote in full is a famous one in the *Lao-tzū*:

Thirty spokes  
Share one hub.

Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room. Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing, that this can be put to use (XI).<sup>36</sup>

The key-line here, "Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of [something]" can also be rendered as "the utility of [the same thing] lies in what is not there." However, for the actual meaning of the nothingness, there have been two different schools of interpretation since T'ang times. Emperor Hsüang-tsung thought that it was the empty space inside the carriage that counted.<sup>37</sup> Wu Ch'êng, following Sung scholars, suggested that it was the hollow axle which really mattered.<sup>38</sup> In either case the idea is that it is the nothingness which is more important than 'the purpose in hand'. Disregarding the above-mentioned two theories, Ming T'ai-tsu fancifully writes:

"Thirty spokes share one hub," this is a wheel, a spare one. For those who can afford to have their own carriage, when one of its wheels is worn out, with the spare one the carriage can still go on. Thus the text says: "You will have the use of the cart." "Knead clay in order to make a vessel," this vessel is an earthenware. Those who keep vessels [for sacrificial purposes] usually keep some spare ones for exigency, thus the text says: "You will have the use of the vessel." "Cutting out doors and windows" is necessary for building a house. When they are ready, the owner of the house, taking into consideration the possibility that these doors and windows may be broken or become decayed, will also make some spare ones. So the classic says: "Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use." This shows that the teaching of a sage lies in ever-readiness. If for everything there is a spare, [for every job there is an understudy], things can never be upset. No matter whether one is a king, a minister or even a commoner, this is for the practice of all people (*shang*, 10b-11b).

His comments remind one of an agent from the Sydney Tyre Exchange! I need not say they are again misdirected, but at the same time they do reveal his practical nature. And just because he was a practical man, he understood perfectly well what the Taoists called the use of 'scheming methods' and the observation of the *chi* 機 (a clue to the unseen).<sup>39</sup> He never failed to utilise

or even twist Lao-tzū's words to the best of his advantage, especially those which could bear some witness to his possession of the Mandate of Heaven. In his commentary he repeats and interprets enthusiastically the following line from the *Lao-tzū*: "The empire is a sacred vessel" (XXIX); by "sacred vessel" he means the empire which is to be taken hold of only by the one who has the Mandate.<sup>40</sup> However, when several contenders for the empire are engaged in a show of strength, as described in XXX, T'ai-tsu advises one to send his forces without hesitation.<sup>41</sup> On other occasions he repeatedly points out that although rash action is to be discouraged, irresolution is the danger that one should guard against.<sup>42</sup>

Compared with his commentary on the *Lao-tzū* the two other imperial commentaries should, of course, be placed on a much higher intellectual plane and could be read with more sustained interest. When I said that Ming T'ai-tsu was a worldly man, I would not deny that Emperor Hsüan-tsung of the T'ang and Emperor Hui-tsung of the Northern Sung were equally mundanely minded. However, while T'ai-tsu rose from the lowest social stratum, the other two emperors were of royal birth and used to the luxuries of the court. They were also certainly more romantic than T'ai-tsu. Having gone through the vicissitudes of life from mendicant to emperor, he never changed his wife, a former slave kitchen-maid whose 'unbound big feet' were laughed at even by the scamps in the market-place.<sup>43</sup> Emperor Hsüan-tsung sent the wife of one of his sons, the Lady Yang 楊妃, into a nunnery, and some ten years later made her his royal consort. In further defiance of all proper convention, an oath of eternal love was sworn by these two lovers on the seventh night of the seventh month, and yet it became an unforgettable symbol of tenderness for generations of lovers.<sup>44</sup> It was for the same Lady Yang that Hsüan-tsung built the imperial hot springs in which the chairman of this gathering and several of his colleagues bathed some time last month!<sup>45</sup> Hui-tsung's love for the famous courtesan Li Shih-shih 李師師 was notorious. According to a well-known story, a poet visiting the courtesan had to hide himself under her bed when the emperor paid her an unexpected call for a stay overnight. This gave the poet an opportunity to play the eaves-dropper and was also the inspiration for a new poem. The outwardly innocent verse provided a great deal of amusement for those familiar with the source of inspiration.<sup>46</sup> And both these emperors were known to be great patrons of art, music and poetry. Therefore, their commentaries on the *Lao-tzū* do not always show the down-to-earth attitude of Ming T'ai-tsu. They were capable of digesting the more subtle texture of the ancient thinker's philosophy, even if their interpretations were not always dissociated from worldly ideas.

Emperor Hsüan-tsung's commentary is technically divided into two works, the commentary proper (*chu* 注) and the sub-commentary (*shu* 疏), which was composed a few years later and contains amendments of some of the errors found in the *chu*. Interestingly enough, there are items in Hsüan-tsung's commentary which reflect vividly the political and social situation of

<sup>40</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.87; *Tao-tsang*, 354/*shang*/30b.

<sup>41</sup> *Tao-tsang*, 354/*shang*/31b.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 26a; 32a-b.

<sup>43</sup> See Hsü Chên-ch'ing, *Chien-shêng yeh-wên*, *Chi-tu hui-p'ien* edition.

<sup>44</sup> Read, for instance, Po Chu-i's 白居易 (772-846) "Ch'ang-hên ko" [Lament everlasting], which has been translated more than once into the English language; cf. Howard S. Levy, *Lament everlasting* (Tokyo, 1962), pp.7-23.

<sup>45</sup> Professor D. A. Low, the Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, visited China in October 1973.

<sup>46</sup> Chou Pang-yen's 周邦彥 (1057-1121) *t'zu* 詞 poem "Shao-nien yu" [A young man's pleasure visit]; for an English translation of the verse see Liu Wu-chi, *An introduction to Chinese literature* (Indiana, 1966), p.114. Some modern researchers suggest that this story could be a fabrication; read, for instance, Lo K'ang-lieh (Lo Hong-kit), Chou Pang-yen Ch'ing-chen chi chien (Hong Kong: San-lien, 1985), vol.1, pp.3-8.

<sup>47</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzŭ*, p.57.

his time and his own attitude towards it according to circumstances. The following passage will reveal how acute was his observation and what would have been in his mind as a person who had once himself staged a palace *coup d'état* and now an emperor, if the same thing were to happen during his reign:

To be a ruler it is one's duty to stop disorder and restore peace in the state, and to keep the inheritance received from one's ancestry with all its refinement, aiming at illustrating the virtue of the government, pacifying the recalcitrant, finding out the hidden cause of people's distress, and maintaining a sympathetic attitude towards them. If, having possessed this high position, one indulges oneself to the extent of provoking the Lord of Heaven and gives no sign of peace to the state, then the anger of Heaven will be aroused and the grumbling of the people will be heard. The Way of Heaven dislikes and will punish a lascivious person. When catastrophe befalls, there will be disturbances and separation, and none of the people will serve him any more. Surely one will then be found to lose his throne (*Tao-tsang* 356/*shu*/ 4/8a).

It is indeed a tragedy that an emperor with such an insight into political affairs should have become a victim of corruption, maladministration and power struggle, should have been forced to flee from the capital, to order the execution of his beloved consort and finally to abdicate. What an irony it was that he of all people should have been confronted by soldier riots, for long before the rebellion he had been aware of the sufferings of the soldiers dispatched mainly to the frontiers, and had pointed it out in his sub-commentary: "The profit gained [by those avaricious military commanders] is enormous: they not only monopolize and squeeze, but also take unfair advantage [of the dead]" (3/1b). Apparently he was unable to save the deteriorating situation.

Many parts of the *Lao-tzŭ* are known to allude to the excellence of a Taoist schemer who contrives things behind the scene and is able to cover up all the traces. In explaining the last two lines in Chapter I of the classic: "Mystery upon mystery—the gateway of the manifold secrets,"<sup>47</sup> Hsüan-tsung writes in his sub-commentary:

To be able to collect all the traces left behind and return to one's root is called the abstruse secret. But if one sticks to this secret, one is again bound to leave [a new] trace and will become no different from the manifold forms (1/3b).

Hence he argues that if the term 'mystery upon mystery' or 'the mystery of mysteries' is not established, then the word 'mystery' is merely an ordinary term and can only enjoy the same treatment as the manifold things. "Therefore," he says, "the term 'mystery upon mystery' has been invented so that the word 'mystery' [at a lower level] can be forgotten, and one would never get stuck to one's pursuit of mystery. The root and the traces are thus both forgotten, and this is to be called 'not taking up one's abode (*wu-chu* 無住)" (1/3b). *Wu-chu* (or *aniketa*) is a Buddhist term.

At times Hsüan-tsung himself becomes so bogged down in Buddhist nomenclature, if not in Buddhist thought, that he is unable to disentangle



himself from its complexities and identify himself as a true disciple of the *Tao*.<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.84.  
Let us take Chapter XXVII in the *Lao-tzŭ*:

One who excels in travelling leaves no wheel tracks;  
One who excels in speech makes no slips;  
One who excels in reckoning uses no counting rods;  
One who excels in shutting uses no bolts  
    yet what he has shut cannot be opened;  
One who excels in tying uses no cords  
    yet what he has tied cannot be undone.  
Therefore the sage always excels in saving people,  
    and so abandons no one; always excels in saving things,  
    and so abandons nothing.  
This is called following one's discernment.<sup>48</sup>

From a strictly Taoist point of view, all the tracks that may lead to the detection that someone has been saved, must be covered up, and the multitude should never suspect such a thing. Although Hsüan-tsung in his commentary also says something along this line, he nevertheless expounds these lines in his characteristically ostentatious and high-flown Buddhist manner. He most certainly showed some recognition of scheming in secrecy, but he could not appreciate it. His understanding, as a matter of fact, had transcended the Taoist one, and he could not see any point in practising such contrivances. His ideal mind was a mind of transcendent wisdom (*hui-hsin* 慧心) which clings to nothing and to which nothing can cling. In explaining what is the transcendent wisdom that an ideal man should possess, Hsüan-tsung writes in his sub-commentary:

A good man is one who keeps away from love, desire or pollution. His mind is clear and clean. He clings to nothing in the world of phenomena, hence his instructions are not bound by prejudice. His mind may be likened to water: it reflects when there is an object. The object reflected on the water produces an image, but the water which is able to reflect the image of the object does not take it in (4/3b).

History has proved that Hsüan-tsung, with all his intelligence and understanding of the transcendent wisdom in the Buddho-Taoist context and in spite of some of his sagacious and even portentous notes of admonition to kings and princes in his commentary, was himself not a very successful ruler. Another emperor whose understanding of the *Tao* in the true spirit of Taoist philosophy might have been deeper than Hsüan-tsung's, met with an even more tragic end. Emperor Hui-tsung wrote not only the best imperial commentary of the three, but also a unique commentary on the *Lao-tzŭ*. As a ruler, he had far better opportunities of viewing political affairs at a close range than many learned commentators who, at their best, held only the position of counsellors.

Hui-tsung in his commentary uses few Buddhist terms, if any at all, and relies exclusively on the indigenous sources, substantiating thus his observ-

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>50</sup> Ware, *Chuang Chou*, p.39.

<sup>51</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.82.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.87.

ations from the *Book of Changes* and the Confucian classics. He was also a great admirer of the *Chuang-tzū*. In fact he cites it so frequently that the quotations from it have become mixed up with his own comments to such an extent that it is difficult for scholars to single them out without first familiarising themselves with the *Chuang-tzū*. Thus, commenting on the line “I alone am foolish and uncouth”(XX) from the *Lao-tzū*,<sup>49</sup> he remarked that it indicated the “usefulness of the useless,” and continued: “The cinnamon tree is edible, so it is cut down. The lacquer tree is useful, so it is slashed. Everybody knows about the usefulness of the useful, but nobody knows about the usefulness of the useless” (1/41a).<sup>50</sup> These few lines he quoted from the fourth chapter of the *Chuang-tzū* without indicating the source. And dozens of similar uses can be found throughout his commentary. Another passage in the *Lao-tzū* reads:

Man models himself on earth,  
Earth on heaven,  
Heaven on the way,  
And the way on that which is naturally so (XXV).<sup>51</sup>

Hui-tsung pointed out that “man” in the first line is to be identified with the ruler. Thus he says:

“Man” here is the ruler of the state. Heaven makes no effort to produce, but the myriad creatures are thus evolved; Earth makes no effort to nourish, but the myriad creatures are thus fostered. [Likewise] a ruler does not act, but his achievements are acknowledged throughout the empire. What a ruler should take for his model is the artlessness of the Way. The Way models on that which is naturally so, because it [does not act but] responds to [the myriad] things. Nature (in the sense of artlessness) cannot represent the completeness of the Way, but only the state when the Way tends to lower itself and give response as if it were modelling itself on [something for its] spontaneity (*Tao-tsang* 359/2/8a).

Many other instances prove that Hui-tsung was capable of contemplating things deeply and appreciated the analytical point of view. His responsibility, as a ruler of the state, was to handle national affairs wisely and in the best interests of the ruling class as well as the people. No matter how non-interfering he was, he had to act, he had to take things into his own hands and push them on. He might not have to attend to every detail of the mechanism of administration, but he had to choose his men to work them out for him. He also had to maintain a sort of supervision over the men, mete out punishment and give rewards. In a nutshell, he could not have been entirely non-active (*wu-wei* 無為). In Lao-tzū’s words, his position was that of one who had to do something to “the sacred vessel,” and the “sacred vessel,” again according to Lao-tzū, is something to which “nothing should be done” (XXIX).<sup>52</sup> As Hui-tsung was the emperor who gave himself the abstruse title of the ‘Taoist Ruler’, it may be of some interest to us to see how he reconciled politics with Taoism in the first place.

In expounding the line “Exterminate learning and there will no longer be worries” (XX),<sup>53</sup> Hui-tsung was clever enough to divide learning into two kinds: learning for practical reasoning, such as the study of past events, causes and effects in dynastic history which had direct bearing on current administration; and learning for the understanding of the *Tao*. According to him, it was only the learning of the second category which would give one no worries, though he had no contempt for practical learning. In another part of his commentary relevant to this chapter he says:

There may be little distinction between ‘yea’ and ‘nay’, and little difference between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, for such discriminations are found only in the mind of a selfish, bigoted person, while in the vista of a broad-minded gentleman they merge into one. However, a sage in looking after worldly affairs, discusses and argues with [his] ministers at the court with such vehemence that, in stamping out the evil and praising the good, he spares no effort to assure that what is right is being done. [For Lao-tzū said,] “What others fear, one must also fear” (XX) (1/39a).

As the term ‘sage’ in Taoist phraseology is another name for the ruler, Hui-tsung undoubtedly had put himself in the position of an active ruler in every sense of the word, Taoist or non-Taoist.

Strictly speaking, a real Taoist ruler should not be as active as just described. Lao-tzū once said, “Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do something to it, I see will have no respite” (XXIX).<sup>54</sup> Commenting on another two lines from the *Lao-tzū*, he observed:

Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the empire can be entrusted with the empire. He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire (XIII).<sup>55</sup>

Hui-tsung immediately endorses this view. He cites a few lines from the *Chuang-tzū* to praise this idea, saying: “Wherefore it has been said that the best part of the *Tao* is for self-culture, the surplus for governing a state, and the dregs for governing the empire ... . Yet the superior men of today endanger their bodies and throw away their lives in their greed for the things of this world. Is this not lamentable?”<sup>56</sup> Thus in Hui-tsung’s mind there seems to have been perennial strife between a spiritual leader and a political sovereign. For on one occasion, he maintains that “the sage, having understood the *Tao*, stands over and above the myriad creatures, combining things into one accord and administering them in an orderly way. When one thing tends to move, he lets it go and watches its return. When another thing tends to be evolved, he follows it up and sees to its completion” (1/8a). To his mind, the sage above, although he may not be active, is nevertheless the transfiguration of the almighty authority of a ruler overseeing his ministers and their subordinates. Distinguishing himself from a team of successful Taoist counsellors to the state in Chinese history, Hui-tsung makes it clear to his readers that he himself is not only the Taoist counsellor, but also the Taoist ruler who combines in one person the sage and the adviser. Although he was

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.87.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>56</sup> See Chapter XXVIII; H. A. Giles (transl.), *Chuang Tzū*, reprint ed. (London, 1889; 2nd rev. ed., London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1961), p.274.

<sup>57</sup> Giles, *Chuang-tzū*, chapter 13; cf. Ware, *Chuang Chou*, p.89.

<sup>58</sup> Lau, *Lao Tzū*, p.117.

quite capable of understanding political theory in a Taoist context, in practice he must have had a very confused mind whenever the desires of the almighty ruler and the objectivity of a shrewd political adviser were competing with one another in himself. The following quotation from the *Chuang-tzū* may serve to illustrate Hui-tsung's conception of an ideal ruler in philosophical if not in strategical Taoist terms:

Those who ruled the world in times past did not concern themselves about it, though their knowledge embraced all nature. They were not self-satisfied, though their dialectic graced all creation. And they did not act in personal interest, though their power was as vast as the universe.

As all creation undergoes change without Heaven personally giving birth to anything, and is nourished without Earth personally doing any growing, so the world was a success while the emperors and kings resorted to no action.<sup>57</sup>

Hui-tsung never quoted the above passage in full, but he certainly nursed this idea of Chuang-tzū when he was pondering worldly affairs. As a ruler, however, he was too noble to appreciate that in practice the best part of Lao-tzū's teaching was scheming and trickery, and too freedom-loving to realise that political games are a life-long tug of war, in which it is the victor who always has to be on the alert. Therefore, although Hui-tsung's commentary on the *Lao-tzū* might be the most sophisticated of the three imperial works, his own fate was to be doomed, nevertheless. When Ming T'ai-tsu, the least learned commentator of the three, came to the few lines in the *Lao-tzū* I quoted before: "If you would have a thing shrink, you must first stretch it; if you would have a thing weakened, you must first strengthen it ...," unlike Hui-tsung and Hsüan-tsung, he immediately understood the gist of the thing. Thus in his commentary he makes the shortest remark in the whole work concerning this passage: "This is supple and simple but a secret weapon for a clever one. I should not venture to comment on it any more" (*shang* /38a). While writing this, yet another line from the *Lao-tzū* might have occurred to him: "One who knows does not speak" (LV).<sup>58</sup>

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