

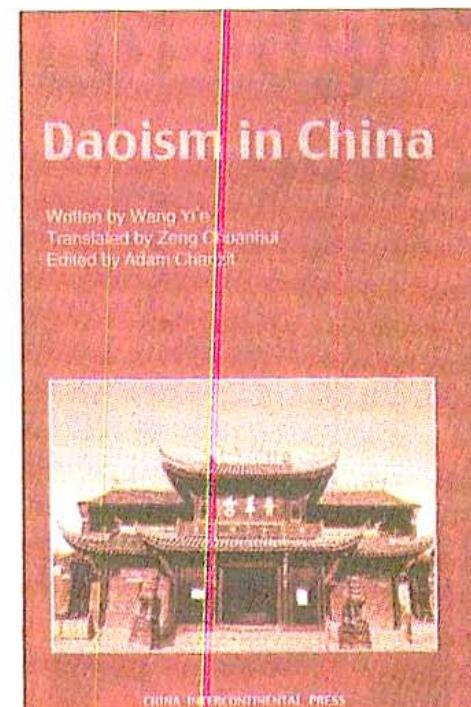
In quest of immortality, peace and happiness

Binoy Barman studies an ancient philosophy and finds it valuable

DAOISM (or Taoism) is one of the most ancient philosophical and religious doctrines in China. Institutionally, it is about two thousand years old, but out of institution, it is as old as Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions and older than the Greek and Roman ones. Daoism developed through a natural course of events from the practices of life of the common people. So it is naturalistic and simplistic in its outlook, which reflects the profound human aspirations in a balance of pragmatism and spiritualism. Daoism has incorporated all the essential elements of traditional cultures of China deep-rooted in its soil patterning localised socio-psychological traits. That is why it is said, "If you want to know China you must know Daoism."

Wang Yi'e informs us that Daoism was officially established as a religion through the unification of the Five Bushels Sect and the Supreme Peace Sect in the period of the Han Dynasty in the second century AD. Earlier it represented some cultural practices indigenous to China, stretching back more than ten millennia before the birth of Jesus Christ. The early Daoist spiritualism ensued from animism and totemism. Later spiritual thoughts developed and matured with the introduction of agriculture and feudal system of governance, which gave rise to polytheism. Daoism is still a polytheistic religion endorsing the existence of many gods and goddesses along with deep mysticism, although it has several divisions varying in beliefs and customs.

In its historical development, Daoism has come in contact with Buddhism and Confucianism, with whom it has largely integrated. It is curious that the three great traditions did not come to confront each other in the Huntington sense of 'clash of civilisations'. Rather they embraced each other with open mind and got intermingled in the most amicable way. Such kinds of integration without bloodshed are rare in world history. Many Chinese now read 'the Dao de Jing' of Daoism, 'the Heart Sutra' of Buddhism and 'the Filial Classic' of Confucianism together. The triangle of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism now form the mainstream of Chinese life; in a true sense they form the ideological pillars of China. Three great sages of the first millennium BC Laozi, Buddha and Confucius have found a common niche in the Chinese mind with the highest order of veneration. The tripartite relationship is beautifully



depicted in an old saying: A Chinese wears a Confucian crown, a Daoist robe and a pair of Buddhist sandals.

To understand Daoism, one has to know what 'Dao' is. Literally 'Dao' (or 'Tao') means 'the way' the way the universe exists and functions. Dao is the root and essence of all existence. It permeates everything and every time it is permanent and infinite. (Notice, with this definition, Dao bears a similarity with the Western idea of 'God' and the Hindu idea of 'Ishwar'). The ultimate goal of a human being is to establish unity with this Dao. Dao is nature's way expressed in effortless action comparable with the flow of water in the river. That is why Daoists suggests effortless and simple life in the lap of nature. Any kind of intervention with nature must be avoided. The more we intervene with environmental nature the more it becomes polluted; just look around for evidence air pollution, water pollution and ozone layer depletion. Again, with the inter-

vention of human nature, the mind is distorted and the body diseased. Daoism believes in action but without any effort. For a Daoist monk, acquiring knowledge is acquiring it without any effort at all. Understanding of Dao will come from a direct observation of nature, rather than scholastic theological studies. According to Daoism, the life of human beings comes from the harmonious co-existence of 'shen' (spirit) and 'qi' (energy). And hence people must live in harmony in society and natural environment. A Daoist will live in meditational tranquillity and refrain from violating the peace of nature.

The ancient Daoists wanted to be immortal, to be uplifted to the status of gods, by cultivating Dao. For this they exploited both external and internal ways. The two-way mystic search is called 'Dan Dao' which subsumes 'Wai Dan' and 'Nei Dan'. Externally, the Daoists attempted to prepare 'elixir' and internally, they improved the condition of their body and mind. Though they failed in meeting immortality, it inspired people to attain good health, physically and mentally. The human search for immortality is not over. One day men will find the desired elixir and become gods themselves. With the tremendous development of medical science, they will solve the puzzle of life and death, thereby stopping the process of ageing. Breakthroughs in genetics and pharmacy may lead us to the shores of immortality in the far future.

The frantic search of the Daoists for elixir had some direct contributions to medical science, chemistry and metallurgy. The elixir-hunters developed alchemy just like the medieval Muslims who wanted to transform all metals into gold. In the process they developed herbs and other ways of treatment, for example, acupuncture. 'Qi gong', the Daoist way to keep in good health by deep breathing exercises, is widely practised today all over the world. The technique bears a similarity with the Indian breathing practice of 'Pranayam'. The Daoists had their own 'Kamasutra' of various sexual techniques aimed at nourishing life through the promotion of inter nal actions of 'yin' and 'yang'. They also discovered gunpowder while experimenting with different substances in search of elixir. What a paradoxical accident! The destructive gunpowder is the outcome of the search for ways of defying death.

Daoists aspire to peace and happiness. They seek personal as well as societal peace. Whenever they gather in temples, they pray for the

wellbeing of mankind and for world peace. According to Daoism, if one has to be happy, he/she should have lack of effort, lack of desire and lack of partiality. One has to act naturally ('wuwei') rather than in a contrived way. Daoism discourages killing, stealing, immorality, bragging and drug addiction. People are advised to perform more benefactions, as it is said longevity is the reward for virtues and death is the punishment for crimes. Daoism ensures equal status for men and women in temples and families. They eat together, work together, exercise together and worship together. Unlike all other established religions, male domination is absent from Daoism.

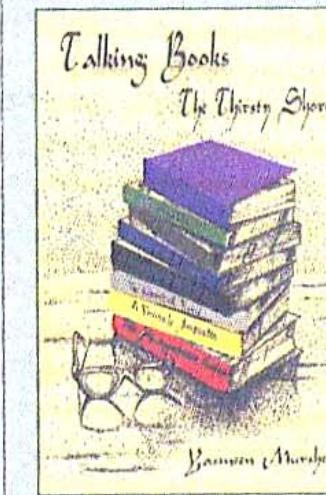
Daoists believe in many gods and goddesses, like polytheistic Indians. All of their deities live on mountains as the Greek deities used to live on Olympus and the Hindu pantheon on Kailash. However, the Daoist deities do not like to concentrate on one mountain; they are rather dispersed on many mountains. Some important mountains are Mount Tai, Mount Heng, Mount Hua, Mount Song, Mount Mao, Mount Qingcheng and Mount Wudang. The famous Azure Cloud Temple is located on Mount Tai and Emerald Cloud Temple on Lotus Peak. The naming of Daoist temples is full of aesthetics. Feel the beauty of other names White Cloud Temple, Eternal Spring Temple, Eternal Happiness Temple, Supreme Clarity Temple, Supreme Harmony Temple, Temple of Ecstasy, Temple of Emptiness, Temple of Original Sublimity and Temple of Accumulated Blessings.

Daoism is the root of Chinese culture and its study is an excellent way to penetrate the depths of Chinese civilisation. Daoism has contributed significantly to the compendium of human knowledge in medicine, biology, chemistry, physics, literature, music, art, culture, architecture, sculpture, philosophy, mathematics, geography, geology and astronomy. Daoist practices are an integral part of world cultural heritage invaluable wealth of human antiquity.

Daoism in China helps us enrich our knowledge of some ancient beliefs of immense anthropological value. Familiarising the readers with Daoist rituals, culture, canons, organisations, architecture and mythology, it offers them a Daoist sense of transcendentalism.

Dr Binoy Barman is a writer and Assistant Professor at Bangladesh University.

At a glance

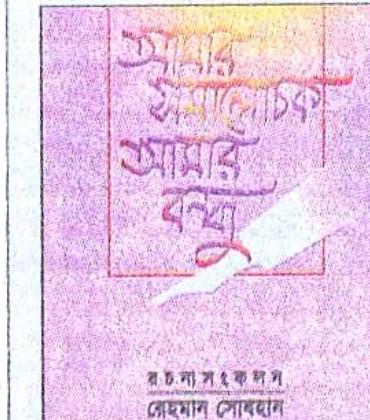


Talking Books
The Thirsty Shore
Yasmeen Murshed
PrinterCraft Company Ltd.



Shurjaster Kanna
Mumtaz Wadud
Banglaprakash

This work is actually a play, in that very modern sense of the meaning. The playwright, also known for her fiction, presents an image of society that is both contemporary in its theme and traditional in the ideas it espouses. It comes in highly readable language, testimony to Wadud's wide experience of words and images.



Amar Shomalochok Amar Bondhu
Rehman Sobhan
Centre for Policy Dialogue



Confessions of an Indian Woman Eater,
Sasti Brata
Penguin Books

Rehman Sobhan's place in Bangladeshi's history is assured, owing specifically for the role he played as a young economist putting up the argument for Bengali autonomy in Pakistan in the 1960s. In 1971 he travelled throughout the globe soliciting support for the national movement for freedom. And since the emergence of Bangladesh, he has been a foremost thinker and maker of policy. This work gives us a hint of the way his mind works.

How travellers can enjoy more

Mohammad Shahidul Islam explores the changes that have come into tourism

LONELY Planet is a name of the biggest institution in the world travel industry. It has acquired much reputation worldwide for promoting and boosting the industry, basically through travel service publications. From its publication house, every year serious, dedicated travellers get a chance to enjoy many classical books on the travel industry and thus they find their travel easy and comfortable beforehand. Last year Lonely Planet published *Code Green* which has already been reputed as a guide to ecologically responsible world travel. It is a significant addition to its sizeable collections of travel service literature for which it remains unparalleled round the world.

Code Green, compiled by Kerry Lorimer, contains 100 write-ups from 100 global spots. They range across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Europe, and North, Central and South America. All these write-ups speak of environmentally sustainable travel experiences. The one-page accounts of each of these destinations put together from independent travellers, incorporate "Responsible Travel Credentials" for the locale that is, details of how both hosts and visitors are admiring of the health of specific ecological and human communities and, in many ways, keenly working to bring back habitats, ecological veracity, and community verve.

Apart from these write-ups, beautified by dazzling photographs, *Code Green* offers common counsel that relates to many places and modes of travel. For instance, readers are offered tips on how to tread lightly in flimsy ecosystems, hunt for alternatives to fossil-fuel-reliant transportation, and differentiate authentic ecotourism from "greenwash" companies employing the "eco" tag to make a dollar.

The reader may be predominantly overwhelmed with Lorimer's stress on the complicated, holistic nature of "green" travel. *Code Green* makes it lucid that the environment includes not just flora and fauna but also living human communities facing real social and economic challenges. For instance, Lorimer confronts the ongoing quandary of how to reply to begging, rightly placing the question within the larger issue of sustainability and responsibility. Many of the contributors to *Code Green* encourage travellers to eat local food, stay in locally-owned accommodations, and buy responsibly produced local products. Frequently, travellers are urged to use their dollars in ways that nurture communities. The reader may recall, in particular, the feature encouraging travellers to take

drumming lessons in Senegal in doing so they would not only be choosing low-impact travel but also spending time with locals and supporting them in the maintenance of their conventional skills and ways of life.

Code Green will definitely lend a hand to travellers in enriching their world whilst elevating their life. Sustainable travel and responsible tourism are practices that are achieving esteem around the globe as people distinguish the frailty, as well as the wonders, of our planet. *Code Green* can be for sure a knowledgeable guide that identifies the questions we all should be asking, regardless of whether we travel or not. What are the consequences of our choices and purchases? Who benefits and who loses? How might our actions change a place? In short, how should we live? Representing the values that *Lonely Planet* has all the time authorised and conveyed in its publications, *Code Green* offers a guide for people who are looking for exclusive and culturally authentic travel experiences that shield and preserve the ecological and cultural environment. *Code Green* is arranged with a bounty of humour in order to stir the reader to awareness of the challenges the world comes across.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam, a travel writer and UNESCO heritage guide trainer, works for Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.



Code Green
Experiences of a Lifetime
Compiled by Kerry Lorimer
Lonely Planet

When serious thoughts come in easy language

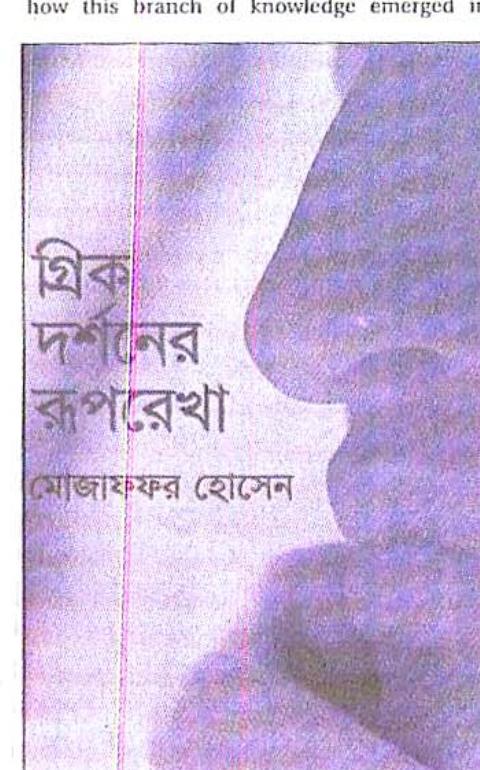
Subrata Kumar Das appreciates a translation on Greek philosophy

PHILOSOPHY, in our country, has always meant something of accessibility either only to the intellectual class or to people who study it as a course subject. We never thought that it should be studied in class, or be mandatory. Yet it has always been an inseparable part of our life. Prof Mozaffar Hossain has done a creditable job in encouraging us to read something on philosophy at a leisurely pace. More credit goes to him as he has done that difficult job particularly on the school of Greek philosophy.

It is not only that. Books, quality books, on philosophy written in Bangla are very rare. Of course one can cite the huge production of such books in the book bazaars even of Dhaka, not to mention those of Kolkata. But the point that always draws one's attention relates to their readability. Almost all those books, written and published on philosophy in Bangla, are very tough nuts to crack. Indeed, they actually keep readers away from readings on philosophies by diverting their attention to other, easier to read subjects. In the present circumstances, it is clear that owing to his forty years of experience in teaching philosophy at different colleges, Prof Mozaffar Hossain has felt the craving in him to write a book that could generate interest among students and teachers in this outwardly difficult subject.

The book opens with an introduction that clearly focuses on the different facets of Greek philosophy. The writer begins with a definition of philosophy and gradually has pointed out

how this branch of knowledge emerged in



Greek Dorshoner Ruporekha
Prof Mozaffar Hossain
Agami Prokashoni

Greece and flourished so encouragingly. In this small chapter, he has shown the timeline. The phases are: Pre- Socratic Age (600 BC- 430 BC), Socratic Age (430 BC- 320 BC), Age of Decadence (320 BC- AD 529). Moreover, the writer has pointed out how mythology developed in that earlier society and where the similarities between the gods and goddesses of their myths and that of ours lie.

To speak the truth, the book does not have chapters as we generally notice in books of this genre. It has rather been written as a compilation of entries. The major entry, though given with a very short and simple note, in the book is 'Ionic school of philosophers'. After this gradually come Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Eleatic Philosophy, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, Gorgias, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Leucippus, Democritus, Protagoras and Socrates. After looking into the less significant ones, when Socrates appears, the reader feels a jerk and to satiate the reader's thirst the writer has rightly made the entry much bigger so that it can provide essential information on the wisest philosophers of all ages.

Then comes a long entry under 'Plato'. It is worth noticing that the subsequent eight entries, to a great extent, contribute to the entry on Plato, the great philosopher who is remembered even after twenty two hundred years of his death. The main entry on Plato provides biographical information on the great philosopher who wrote about thirty six books in the form of dialogues among which the *Republic* is the most

widely read. The other entries which, this way or that, help one know more about Plato include Theory of Knowledge, Ideas, Classification of Ideas and its Hierarchy, Evaluation, the society in which Plato lived and his political theories, Philosophy of Education, Immortality of the Soul, the Mystery of Creation, etcetera.

A similar major entry is on Aristotle, the great disciple of Plato. To illustrate Aristotle's thoughts and ideas, the writer has included some more entries like 'Logic', 'Metaphysics', etc, al for the readers.

The post-Aristotle philosophers have been packed in afterwards: Epicurus, Lucretius, Arcesilaus, Pyrrho, Aenesidemus, Agrippa, Cicero, Seneca, etc. The last entry tells us about the fall of the worldwide acclaimed philosophical trend of the world.

Greek Dorshoner Ruporekha can easily function as a very helpful handbook to people who wish to have a very clear conception about this particular area of philosophical thinking. The Bangla language readership of philosophy will surely be grateful to the writer of the book for presenting the most difficult thoughts of the world in easily readable language.

We must thank the publishing house for taking necessary initiatives to invest in such a book, one that does not belong to the popular genre. And yet more care could have been given to it in certain areas.

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher, is the author of the website on Bangladeshi Literature www.bangladeshinovels.com