

# Dialogue Forms in the *Taiping jing* (Scripture on Great Peace)

BARBARA HENDRISCHKE

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Large parts of the *Taiping jing* from the outgoing Han dynasty are presented as dialogues between a heaven-sent teacher and his disciples or, fewer in number, between a celestial spirit and an eager practitioner of Daoist ways of self-cultivation. It is argued that dialogue forms played a particular role in a text like the *Taiping jing* that is written in non-standard language and was meant to address a wider audience that reached beyond the educated elite. Despite their widespread use in Chinese ancient and medieval philosophical writings, dialogue forms have, with the exception of Michael Nylan's 1997 study, attracted little scholarly attention. According to Charles Kahn's (1996) observation, this is not much different for European antiquity. This paper attempts to show that for the authors of the *Taiping jing*, dialogue forms are an essential tool for expressing their demands for social and political reforms. It is proposed that dialogue forms signify the personal involvement of speakers, facilitate the presentation of alternative positions, and have a proselytizing function, thus improving the text's accessibility, argumentative strength, and intellectual and religious relevance.

The authors of the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Scripture on Great Peace) often present their ideas in the form of a dialogue, in the sense of a "discussion between two or more people or groups, especially one directed towards exploration of a particular subject or resolution of a problem."<sup>1</sup> When used as a literary device, dialogues in the *Taiping jing*, as elsewhere, have several functions. One is to address readers' skills in handling concepts and logical reasoning. Dialogues structure the line of argument; points are divided up among speakers for clarification. The other is to increase the relevance of what is discussed. In the course of a dialogue, teachings and opinions may become enmeshed with the speaker's personal history and characteristics or with individual experiences and expectations. Specific interests shine through a speaker's contribution. This may enhance the subject under discussion with personal relevance for readers. Thereby dialogues address feelings and convey messages that reach beyond the topic under discussion and the openly declared aim of the author's argument. In both respects dialogues are apt to increase the accessibility of what is said and are therefore protreptical, as has been discussed in detail for Plato's dialogues.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, dialogue elements enlarge an author's message beyond what is actually said. They accompany the main line of an argument in commentarial and often also critical fashion. The authors do not theorize this function but it becomes clear to readers when they juxtapose the main content of a dialogue with its introduction and conversational elements or a junior speaker's interjections with the main speaker's line of argument. This paper intends to investigate the role that the authors of the *Taiping jing* attributed to the literary form of dialogue in

1. See Stevenson 1998: 483. Hirzel 1895: 53 arrives at a similar characterization of the dialogue as a literary form. Altogether eighty-nine sections of the received text contain dialogues, and many consist completely of them, as opposed to forty that are without dialogues.

2. See Frede 1992: 201–9 and Gaiser 1959.

developing, formulating, and propagating Great Peace (*taiping* 太平) teachings.<sup>3</sup> At times dialogue elements contain information on the authors' agenda that is not openly expressed in the lectures and essays that make up the bulk of the text. At other times they expressly accentuate aspects of this agenda. This will be documented in three ways. The first concerns the character of the student, who acts as the junior partner in all discussions. Dialogue elements reveal that he has personal interests beyond his role of dutifully learning all that he is taught. Secondly, it will be shown that the multiplicity of speakers allows the presentation and discussion of unorthodox positions. Thereby dialogues become an essential tool for situating Great Peace teachings in their intellectual environment. Lastly, the dialogue form is well adjusted to the missionary project that is thematized at all levels of Great Peace teachings. As the text's interlocutors gain clarity about this project, their attempts become a model of how everyone is expected to gain such clarity. The dialogue form is set up as a token of that general communication which, in the authors' opinion, alone can save the world.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE *TAIPING JING*'S TEXTS AND THEIR DIALOGUE FORMS

To start with, due attention must be given to the history of the materials contained in the *Taiping jing*. It has been transmitted in the Daoist canon and was part of this canon from the late sixth century C.E.<sup>5</sup> The *Taiping jing*'s origins are unclear. Language places it in the neighbourhood of early Buddhist translations from the late second and early third centuries C.E. that are said to be close to the language spoken in the city of Luoyang at that time.<sup>6</sup> When compared to texts from Han dynasty times that were written by educated authors of cultural and social rank, the *Taiping jing* is written in a less elegant style. Sentences are clumsy and verbose; there are many three-character combinations and superfluous particles; there is much repetition. This style of writing has hardly any parallels in transmitted texts from early and medieval China. The text's content makes it Daoist despite considerable points of disagreement with the teachings of the early Daoist congregation that existed in a region of present-day Sichuan towards the end of the second century C.E.<sup>7</sup>

The transmitted text is the product of several editors who were members of Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 (456–536) school and active in the sixth century C.E.<sup>8</sup> At that time a number of Daoists attempted to recover old texts in order to strengthen their own scholastic and social position.<sup>9</sup> For the *Taiping jing*, it is well documented that the transmitted version goes back to the text that originated in the sixth century.<sup>10</sup> The sixth-century editors followed Dao-

3. In the *Taiping jing* dialogue elements also help define the line of argumentation in a formal and more technical respect; see Hendrischke 2002, where the dialogues' protreptical, adhortative, elenctic, and constructive functions are investigated.

4. See Kaltenmark 1979 on the *Taiping jing*'s praise for "general communication."

5. See Schipper and Verellen 2004: 17–20, 277–80 and Hendrischke 2006: 35.

6. See Zürcher 1977 and 1996 and cf. Hendrischke 2006: 43–47.

7. In the early Daoist congregation the title Celestial Master (*tianshi* 天師) referred to the leader of this community (Espeset 2009). In the *Taiping jing* the same title refers to a fictional person whose instructions the authors of the scripture propose to document.

8. See Seidel 1983: 333–40, Mansvelt Beck 1980, Schipper and Verellen 2004.

9. See Strickmann 1977, Bokenkamp 2007: 118–20, Smith 2013: 1–3.

10. About 129 of originally 366 sections (entitled *pian* 篇 in S4226) have been transmitted. See Espeset 2009–2010 and 2007 on early quotations from the sixth-century text and on the full table of contents (S4226) from the seventh century that has been preserved in Dunhuang and roughly agrees with today's text. This evidence is supported by the materials transmitted in the *Taiping jing chao* 太平經鈔, a Tang-dynasty summary of the whole sixth-century text. Nine of its ten chapters have been transmitted in the Daoist canon (Espeset 2013). The *Chao* does not present dialogues in full but contains traces of conversational elements.

ist hagiographical sources and identified their text with a second-century Great Peace text that the prominent local scholar Xiang Kai 襄楷 submitted to the imperial court in 166 C.E.<sup>11</sup> There are no reliable sources that would allow us to establish a link between the Great Peace text from the sixth century and that from the Han dynasty.<sup>12</sup>

The transmitted version of the *Taiping jing* consists of several textual groups.<sup>13</sup> The main group reports how a heaven-sent Celestial Master meets a number of students, who come to beg for instruction. The other major group introduces a practitioner in conversation with spirits, and in particular with someone entitled the Great Spirit (*dashen* 大神). It also depicts spirits talking to each other. It is not accidental that in both groups dialogues take place among speakers who are not equal but who relate to each other as teaching and learning, commanding and obeying, or leading and following. This by Eastern Han dynasty times is the case for most Chinese philosophical dialogues.<sup>14</sup> In earlier times dialogues between philosophers and powerful political figures, as in the *Mengzi*, matched partners that were on more level ground. So did the *Zhuangzi*, with its contempt for social status.<sup>15</sup>

Most sections of the Celestial Master group of texts contain dialogue elements. Often a speaker's utterances are represented as embedded in his general conduct. From this perspective passages that are placed between focused discussions, conversational though they may be, gain importance. They throw some light on the speaker's personality. Such passages often introduce a section, as in the following example. A student greets the Master devotedly and begs to ask a question:

11. When the editors presented the material to Tao Hongjing, his reaction is said to have been: "This is truly an old copy of Lord Gan" 干君古本, that is, of Gan Ji 干吉, an "expert in recipes" (*fangshi* 方士), whom Xiang Kai named as author of the Great Peace text that he submitted to the Han dynasty court (Mansvelt Beck 1980: 163; Bumbacher 2000: 270). This submission was accompanied by memorials that are preserved in the official *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, whose author, Fan Ye 范曄 (d. 445 C.E.), suggests that the leader of the Great Peace movement and Yellow Turban rebellion which erupted in 184 C.E. "to some extent" relied on this text; see *Hou Han shu* 30B.1084 and de Crespigny 1976 and 2007: 238–39.

12. In other words, the origin and early history of the *Taiping jing* remain unclear, despite intensive Japanese and some Taiwanese research in this field (Mansvelt Beck 1980, Maeda 1994, Ofuchi 1997: 507–56, Yamada 1999: 135–65, Lin 1998). Western scholars of Daoism have therefore in the main ignored the text (Bokenkamp 1997, Pregadio 2008, Raz 2012), as have scholars on late Han dynasty thought (Ch'en 1980, Csikszentmihalyi 2006). Exceptions are Kaltenmark (1979: 20–21 and 48–49), who is the author of a thorough analysis of the *Taiping jing*'s content, and Robson (2015: 169), who has included a section of the text in his anthology of Daoism. Without hesitation, Chinese scholars of Daoism and Han dynasty thought treat the *Taiping jing* that is today available in several critical editions and modern Chinese translations as a valuable source (Qing 2006, Li 1995, Jiang 1995). We must assume that their judgment is based on Chinese linguistic studies that analyze the language of the text as an important example of Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.) Chinese (Yu 2000, Wang Ke 2007, Liu Zuguo 2009, Wang Yongyuan 2015).

13. See Espeset 2002 on the *Taiping jing*'s textual groups, and cf. Takahashi 1983 and Hendrichske 2006: 348–62. The received text consists of roughly 129 sections of very different length; 96 of these sections may be attributed to the Celestial Master group and 24 to the Great Spirit group. The Celestial Master group contains 83 sections that consist of dialogues between Master and students. The Great Spirit textual group has six sections that contain dialogues which are usually rather short and are only meant to support or add to what is conveyed in the surrounding essay. The two textual groups differ also in regard to doctrinal content and differ significantly in regard to their use of idioms and vocabulary (Espeset 2002, Hendrichske 2012). Linguistic studies (see above n. 12) disregard that the text is divided into groups and have so far failed to establish criteria that would allow us to put these groups in any chronological order.

14. See Nylan 1997; cf. also Nylan 2015.

15. *Mengzi* is depicted in discussion with the thinker Gaozi 告子, whose social rank is the same as his (Lau 1970: 160–61), and is shown, for instance, to insist on the superiority of his own position as teacher in relation to King Xuan 宣 of Qi 齊 (Lau 1970: 85–87). The *Zhuangzi* contains a dialogue between a convicted criminal ("a man with a chopped-off foot") and the prime minister of the state of Zheng 鄭 (chapter 5, Graham 1986: 77–78).

“I am an ignorant pupil and my great stupidity is getting worse from day to day. I bow twice before you. Now there is another question that I would like to ask the Celestial Master, who is a spirit man of supreme majesty.”

大頑頓(曰)[日]益暗昧之生再拜，今更有疑，乞問天師上皇神人。<sup>16</sup>

It is left unclear whether an individual student speaks for himself or for a group of students. What is clear is the polite distance between speakers. It appears to be bigger than is customary in philosophical dialogues.<sup>17</sup> This may be based on the scripture’s colloquial nature. It may also be grounded in the perception that the Master is indeed heaven’s special envoy and part of a sacred world of spirits. Students beg for permission before speaking, refer to themselves as *yu sheng* 愚生 “foolish pupils,” and continue to be apologetic before raising further questions in the course of a dialogue. The remarks they make are usually followed by the Master’s evaluation, for example, “Good. We may say by the way you ask you show understanding for what majestic heaven thinks” 善哉善哉！子之問事，可謂已得皇天之心矣，or “Yes, you have always been truly foolish and dumb, your vision blurred, and your understanding hampered” 然，真人自若真真愚昧，蒙蔽不解。<sup>18</sup> Distance and hierarchical positions remain the same when the Master initiates the dialogue by raising a question:

“Step forward, Perfected. You have come here to learn. Does it take few items or many to obtain extensive knowledge of what *Dao* means?”

“Well, its prerequisites are many.”

“Oh! Deep down your knowledge of *Dao*’s essential meaning is not yet extensive.”

「真人前，子既來學，當廣知道意，少者可案行耶？多者可案行耶？」「然，備足衆多者，可案行也。」「噫！子內未廣知道要意也。」<sup>19</sup>

The student reacts to this critical remark by a long reflection on the eternal damnation that will await him, as someone who has failed his master.<sup>20</sup> The ending of each dialogue, and in most cases of a section, is initiated by the Master: “All right. Work hard! Our talk is finished. You’d better go.” “Yes, I will.” 「行，子努力，所說竟，當去矣。」「唯唯。」<sup>21</sup>

Within the Celestial Master group of texts there are big differences in the intensity of dialogue elements.<sup>22</sup> Some sections consist of lectures that are surrounded by short greetings and farewells and interspersed with brief standard formulas like “‘You understand, don’t you?’ ‘Yes, we do. Excellent!’ ‘All right, you have grasped it.’” 「子知之邪？」「唯唯。善哉善哉！」「行，子已覺矣。」<sup>23</sup> At other times students have a lot to say and may be

16. Wang Ming 1979: 47.54. Students’ names are not mentioned except for a certain Chun 純. He is a student, together with “perfected from [all] six directions” (六方真人) who appear often in the Celestial Master group of texts; see Hendrichske 2006: 364. Also, the place of meetings is not identified. So, as opposed to the practice in Buddhist dialogues, or the *Zhengao* 真誥, there is no attempt to record meetings as if they were historical events. The quality of being “spirit man” (*shenren* 神人), which is here attributed to the *Taiping jing*’s Celestial Master, may refer to his career as someone who has transcended the world, entered the celestial bureaucracy of spirits, and has now for a limited period returned to earth.

17. This refers in particular to the dialogues analyzed by Nylan 1997 or to a text like the *Baopuzi*, where the teacher who answers a question would not accuse his interlocutor of being completely ignorant. In Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (53 B.C.E.—18 C.E.) *Fa yan* 法言 the main speaker at times suggests that his interlocutor “has not thought things through” 未之思也 (Nylan 2015).

18. Wang Ming 1979: 47.54.

19. Wang Ming 1979: 53.75.

20. This is a common topic, see also Wang Ming 1979: 151.405–6.

21. Wang Ming 1979: 56.91.

22. These differences and a frequent repetition of arguments distinguished by only slight variations make it tempting to see lecture notes as the basis for much of the *Taiping jing* (Hendrichske 2006: 41–42). The Master frequently reminds the students to take notes.

23. Wang Ming 1979: 152.410–11.

responsible for a dialogue's topic and the direction of the argument. Or the dialogue becomes particularly lively because the Master is depicted as enraged with the students' lack of understanding. In general, the amount of space devoted to the interchange between speakers is exceptional when compared to other Han dynasty texts of instruction.<sup>24</sup> In early philosophical texts dialogues may present the full range of the interlocutors' characteristics and intentions.<sup>25</sup> This is not achieved in the *Taiping jing* but its dialogues still work in this direction. The literary quality of the *Taiping jing* has next to nothing in common with the great books of the pre-Qin era, but the role played by dialogue elements hints at these texts rather than at "Han Classicists writing in dialogue," to use Michael Nylan's term.<sup>26</sup> She uses the term in relation to Yang Xiong's *Fa yan* (Model Sayings, ca. 9 C.E.), Wang Chong's 王充 *Lun heng* 論衡 (Balanced Discussions, ca. 80 C.E.), and Ying Shao's 應劭 *Feng su tong yi* 風俗通義 (Comprehensive Discussion of Customs, ca. 200 C.E.). For the purpose of this paper, Xun Yue's 荀悅 *Shen jian* 申鑒 (Extended Reflections, ca. 190 C.E.) should be added to those. The authors of these texts enliven their presentation by proposing to address an imagined audience in direct speech but, with the exception of the *Fa yan*, the interchange that takes place is not between actual speakers. Instead, the main speaker takes clues from the textual passages that he quotes and the anecdotes he tells. Dialogue elements may start a discussion, such as "Someone inquired about the art of [becoming] transcendent."<sup>27</sup> This formula resembles the *Baihu tong*'s 白虎通 (Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall, based on an event of the year 79 C.E.) pattern of starting a section with a question: "What is meant by 'five phases'?"<sup>28</sup> Such introductory questions are followed by short essay-type answers. In the *Shen jian* these answers are occasionally followed by additional questions. For the example here quoted, it is "Are there transcendents?" and a brief answer to this question is followed by an additional question: "Are there any men who have lived for several hundred years?" That is the extent of the dialogue. The identity of the questioner is unclear, but the main speaker is represented as being the same person as the text's author. Only the *Fa yan* is indeed written in dialogues, but interlocutors are not given any personal dimension. As opposed to the information gained in the *Analects* and to some extent even in the *Taiping jing*, we do not learn who they are and what they want, which deprives the dialogues of all existential components.

While the dialogues between the Celestial Master and his students are essential for the *Taiping jing*'s Celestial Master group of texts, dialogue elements play a more curtailed role in the Great Spirit group. Here dialogues are placed within short narratives that are added to explicate thoughts expressed in the form of an essay. One of these narratives concerns a human being who intends to practice *Dao* so that he will live a long life. He may even ascend to heaven and join its bureaucratic apparatus. He is shown in conversation

24. No other materials contain as many conversational and argumentation dialogue elements as does the Celestial Master group of texts.

25. This is, for instance, the case when Mengzi converses with King Hui 惠 of Liang 梁 or King Xuan of Qi (Lau 1970: 49–59 and 61–67) or when Zhuangzi and his friend Huizi 惠子 enter into debates (Graham 1986: 100–102 and 122–24).

26. She briefly points to several characteristics that may be present in a philosophical text written as dialogue and documents their presence in the *Fa yan*. Some of these characteristics can actually be found in the *Taiping jing*, which in many respects reconstructs the situation depicted in the *Analects*. The *Taiping jing* authors seem to agree that "the dialogue form has the potential to pack far more rhetorical punch than the average rhetorical essay" (Nylan 1997: 136).

27. See Sun 2012: 121 and Ch'en 1980: 155.

28. See Chen 1994: 166.

with spirits. The Spirit of the Heart (*xin shen* 心神) tells him that he is under constant surveillance:

The Spirit of the Heart says: “I received the instructions and orders from the Heart of Heaven that put me in charge of following people’s hearts. Should I fail and omit [to report] the slightest bit of good or evil, [another] spirit nearby will quickly replace me and take things up.” After the Spirit of the Heart has spoken the man is even more distressed.

心神言「我受天心教勅，使主隨人心，其不得、有小脫善惡，輒有傍神復得。」心神言，益復悲楚。<sup>29</sup>

The Great Spirit, who is a celestial official of high rank, becomes this practitioner’s personal mentor. The two approach each other in a more reserved manner than do the Celestial Master and his students. Conversational elements are rare. This may reflect the Great Spirit’s rank. It may also be grounded in the interlocutors’ different ways of existence. The practitioner must visualize the Great Spirit in order to meet him, while the talks between the Celestial Master and his students are set up as happening among people living in this world. In the following interchange both the Great Spirit and the practitioner tread with great care. The practitioner desires more detailed instructions, in oral and written form:

The student says: “I myself am unworthy. My conduct is not pure and simple . . . For this reason, I approach you again. I do not know when enough is enough. Heaven has made me so.”

The Great Spirit says: “The life someone has obtains its disposition from what is as it is. Heaven makes you come to raise questions in order to know what is identical and what is not. How can there be any doubt? . . . The life someone has is short. Take care not to be idle.”

The student says: “By nature I comprehend slowly. Once something is settled it is not forgotten but I use texts to guard me. If you would only be so kind!”

生言「自不肖，行不純質，. . . 以故復詣，不知厭足，天使其然。」大神言「是生受自然之姿，天使來問者，知其同不耳，何所嫌疑乎？. . . 是生短也，宜復慎之勿解。」生言「稟性遲鈍，設意不失，但以文自防也，唯哀之不耳。」<sup>30</sup>

Dialogues are between teacher and student, with much mutual respect in both directions. The Great Spirit’s advice is more concerned with the practitioner’s general attitude than any particular topic of instruction. Other dialogues in this textual group are between celestial spirits of different rank and document how the Lord of Heaven’s (*tian jun* 天君) leadership meets with the reserved acceptance of other spirits. Readers or listeners may, on the basis of these dialogues, conclude that there are frictions, as is the case in real-world procedures. This information remains locked into dialogues and the narrative passages that surround them. The following incident is a good example. The practitioner or student has now been turned into a spirit and is about to ascend. The two spirits who have supervised his ascendency talk directly and to the point:

29. Wang Ming 1979: 179.528. The authors of the *Taiping jing* saw the Spirit of the Heart as head of all spirits situated in the internal organs and other parts of the human body; cf. *Huangting waijing jing* 黃庭外景經 (late second or early third century C.E., Schipper and Verellen 2004: 96–97), section 20 (Liu and Gu 2008: 150): “Concentrate on retaining the Spirit of the Heart and [the other spirits] will in turn call each other forth.” These spirits were said to critically observe someone’s conduct and in consequence to support or hinder human endeavors (see Pregadio in Pregadio 2008: 80–84).

30. Wang Ming 1979: 179.539–40. The concept of *ziran* 自然 “spontaneity” is here translated as “what is as it is” to document its cosmogonic function. For its use in the *Taiping jing* see Hendrischke 2006: 117–18. For the translation of the passage as a whole see also Luo 1996: 894.

The Great Spirit says: "I am not sure whether his life span is already fulfilled or not. I ask permission to verify this again."

The Lord of Heaven replies: "Great Spirit, you have been appointed as supervisor but your superintendence is incomplete. You are now saying that you [want to] verify this again?"

The Great Spirit apologizes, pointing to his [many] duties.

The Lord of Heaven says: "Verify things and come back quickly."

大神言「不審年滿未，請還諳案之。」天君謂：「大神安置耳目，而不盡視之，而言還案乎？」大神以職事謝。天君言：「趣案疾還。」<sup>31</sup>

With this brief dialogue the authors deprive spirits, powerful though they may be, of some of their superhuman aura. This may act as a corrective to the fear and awe that must be expected to govern readers, as it seems to govern the practitioner who is here depicted.

#### THE STUDENTS' PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

While the *Taiping jing's* textual groups set up dialogues in different styles, there are important commonalities. Dialogues help to open perspectives that are in conflict with the text's central message, as if the authors were using this literary tool to gain critical distance from the teachings they convey, thereby ensuring that their text does not turn into a sacred testament of eternal truth, despite its many sermons and doctrinal declarations. Instead, they keep what they say within an open, multifaceted environment of debate and what we may describe as philosophical investigation. Throughout, dialogue elements are a corrective to orthodox tendencies that appear in the Celestial Master's lectures. They give room to attitudes that are practical, this-worldly, and skeptical. They help to add question marks. These can originate directly from a student's words and can also appear more indirectly in the reaction readers or listeners must be expected to have after perusing an interchange between interlocutors. This will now first be shown in regard to the image the authors create of the student or practitioner who acts as the junior partner in almost all dialogue sections. Dialogue elements depict him as being closer to real life than is the ideal figure talked about in the Celestial Master's lectures and the essays of Great Spirit texts.

Some dialogue elements focus on the student's motivation. Why does he approach the Celestial Master? Because heaven has installed in him the wish to save the world and has made him seek instruction. That is how the Master puts it. The student does not disagree but he also has other motives. The Celestial Master deems one of them acceptable:

"What do you expect from your present studies, Perfected?"

"I expect to fulfill my years."

"What an excellent aim. We may say that you have grasped what *Dao* means."

「真人今學，以何自期乎？」「以年窮盡為期。」「善哉子志，可謂得道意矣。」<sup>32</sup>

However, there is still another motive, as is shown in the following conversation:

"Celestial Master, you are about to go away. No time has been set for your return. I would like to be permitted to ask another few questions."

"Go ahead! Now speak up quickly. There are still a few days before my departure. What do you wish to ask?"

31. Wang Ming 1979: 198.612. Espeset (2002: 32–33) has translated the whole passage and put it into context. Another point of friction occurs when the student doubts that spirits have indeed done as they had been told to and removed from his person the load of evil that would prevent his ascent to heaven (Wang Ming 1979: 179.534).

32. Wang Ming 1979: 52.73.

“I would like to ask something about the writings on *Dao* that you have previously given to me. I am to put forward something that is immodest and should not be said. But if I don't ask now, I will never find out.”

“Go ahead, don't be shy.”

“If the illustrious teacher would only instruct this foolish pupil.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Now then, what is the worth of the writings that I have received from you over the course of time?”

“Oh, your foolishness is indeed enormous. You are saying that my teachings have a price?”

“Yes, I am.”

“All that I have explained to you in order to enlighten you and give you a profound knowledge of the way of Heaven—how much does it weigh? What is it worth? If I were to bestow on you instead one thousand pounds of gold to give to a country, would that better enable you to make Heaven and Earth happy, harmonize Yin and Yang, let calamities cease, let ruler and sovereign live for a long time and his government achieve supreme peace?”

「天師將去，無有還期，願復乞問一兩結疑。」「行，今疾言之，吾發已有日矣，所問何等事也？」「願乞問明師前所賜弟子道書，欲言甚不謙，大不事，今不問入，猶終古不知之乎？」「行勿諱。」「今唯明師開示下愚弟子。」「諾。」「今師前後所與弟子道書，其價直多少？」「噫！子愚亦大甚哉！迺謂吾道有平耶？」「諾。」「為子具說之，使子覺悟，深知天道輕重，價直多少。然，今且賜子千斤之金，使子以與國家，亦寧能得天地之歡心，以調陰陽，使災異盡除，人君帝王考壽，治致上平耶？」<sup>33</sup>

Here the student's carelessness provides the teacher with an excellent starting point for summarizing his own aims. The student expects to learn secrets about the nourishment of life that are marketable. He is disappointed. Socially, the Celestial Master who figures as the main speaker in the *Tai ping jing* belonged to the “experts in recipes” who lived by selling their expertise in retaining health, vitality, and life.<sup>34</sup> However, the Master's ambitious project of sociocultural reform transcends these forms of expertise.

The Great Spirit textual group introduces a student who is more sophisticated. This is documented by his careful attitude to the offer of longevity:

The Great Spirit says: “The Lord of Heaven calls forth this faithful student.”

The student says: “I would not dare to hope I could reach heaven's left side. I would like to be somewhere without official position and only put my loyalty to full use.”

The Great Spirit says: “All sections must have a head who shows faith and principle.”

The student says: “Should I really be so fortunate, I would familiarize myself with the major points and not dare to admit the slightest incoherence.”

The Great Spirit says: “Since you were transformed to what you are now, you deserve to make even further progress and may reach a state that prevailed in the distant past.”

The student says: “I would not dare make progress in extending longevity. That is what men desire [most].”

The Great Spirit says: “It is heaven's wish.”

The student says: “The root for this lies in the guarantee you are providing. I would not dare ignore your warnings.”

大神言「天君召問是信生。」生言「不敢希望及天左側也，願在無職之處，自力盡忠而已。」大神言「皆當有所部主，乃見信理。」「如是誠僥倖，甚得大分，不敢有小不稱者也。」大神言「是生見化乃如是，宜且復進，可及先古。」生言「不敢進長壽也，其人所貪也。」大神言「是天願。」生言：「是本因大神所保，不敢失大神之戒也。」<sup>35</sup>

33. Wang Ming 1979: 62.126.

34. For these experts see Csikszentmihalyi in Pregadio 2008: 406–9 and cf. Raz 2012: 40–44. For the links that can be established between the authors of the *Tai ping jing* and these experts see Kaltenmark 1979.

35. Wang Ming 1979: 179.530.



The student appears to be disciplined and, most of all, career-oriented. The authors of the Great Spirit group show much enthusiasm for bureaucratic proceedings and depict someone who shares their outlook, as if this were the right thing to do.

The two textual groups introduce students with different characteristics. In both cases students are geared to the task that is envisaged for them. In the Celestial Master group, the student is expected to follow in the footsteps of his teacher, take up teaching, attempt to persuade political leaders to implement reforms, and thus help create Great Peace. Dialogues, however, show him to be keen on personal longevity and personal privilege.<sup>36</sup> The practitioner of the Great Spirit textual group, on the other hand, is held up as an exemplary person who has been transformed to devoting all his energy into serving heaven. However, when speaking directly he shows interest in living longer and becoming a celestial official. He is also pictured as being pedantic. He is naive, but does not have the spontaneous simplicity of the Celestial Master's students. His promise to stick to rules and regulations when in office sounds odd.<sup>37</sup> It again signifies that the *Taiping jing* was written by and for men of less education and sophistication than were authors and audience of texts from the tradition of high culture. This is suggested by both textual groups. Moreover, the student's shortcomings equip him for functioning as a damper. His needs lead to suggestions for shortcuts and compromises. Thereby the figure of the student helps to transform a set of ambitious teachings into a practical agenda. This is the classical role of a junior partner in philosophical dialogues.<sup>38</sup> In the *Taiping jing* his presence is colorful enough to perform this role well.

From what has been said so far we may conclude that the use of dialogues has an effect on how the text's message was understood. What students have to say in response to what they are taught has a direct impact on the reception of these teachings. However, dialogue elements also play a more fundamental role. They are a factor in the formulation of these teachings.

#### DIALOGUES FACILITATE THE PRESENTATION OF ALTERNATIVE POSITIONS

The examples that will now be introduced concern the student as a discussant. His contributions result in an inclusiveness that was the precondition for a text being considered a scripture (*jing* 經) and thus of high value.<sup>39</sup> Here two particular points deserve attention. In the first place, by means of the students' involvement in the argument, the authors use the dialogue form to relate Great Peace teachings to the wider discourse of the outgoing Han dynasty era. This can be done because students are depicted as having participated in this discourse. They come from or still adhere to a range of life styles. They are not, as the Celestial Master is, messengers sent from heaven. They are not responsible for presenting heaven's message in all its purity but are free to touch on other subjects. Hence, they raise topics to test whether Great Peace teachings agree with what they have learned at other times and on other occasions. The questions and opinions they raise help to integrate the Master

36. The students' interest in avoiding death, for instance, is expressed; Wang Ming 1979: 63.138. Their yearning for rank becomes obvious when they suggest that the Master should teach only men of excellence (Wang Ming 1979: 154.430).

37. It is also said about this student that, when meeting spirits, he seeks the company of spirit section heads in order to become familiar with correct procedures (Wang Ming 1979: 179.524).

38. The *Analects* may serve as an example. Throughout the text, the students' queries at times induce the Master to provide concrete details that may facilitate the adherence to behavioral norms, for instance 2.5–8 (Lau 1979: 63–64) regarding filial piety, 12.1–3 (Lau 1979: 112) regarding benevolence, or 13.1–3 (Lau 1979: 118) regarding government.

39. See Henderson 1991 and Lewis 1999: 9 and 299.

and his teachings in the world that the Master intends to address. This is the case mainly for the Celestial Master group of texts. The following list of topics introduced by students is instructive:

1. What is the relationship between the Celestial Master's texts and materials that have been brought forth by Yellow River and Luo (*He tu Luo shu* 河圖洛書)?
2. Men who in this life have committed crimes will, in the bureaucratic manner, be persecuted after death.
3. Men who do well are those who stick to traditional virtues like benevolence (*ren* 仁).
4. Since a situation of Great Peace is about to arrive, what is bad will disappear of its own accord.
5. Certain astronomical observations are disquieting.
6. Local and central administrators can cause damage, as do wolves and tigers.
7. Reliable doctrines are available. Why is it that very few people manage to live long and happy lives?<sup>40</sup>

With students as spokesmen, the authors mention these points with the intention of integrating what they are teaching into the world in general.<sup>41</sup> This becomes evident from the Celestial Master's answers that are to the point but also nuanced and considered. They situate the students' remarks within the parameters of the Great Peace agenda:

1. Prognostic apocrypha in the shape of *He tu* and *Luo shu* are relevant, as are other texts, but no existing text is complete. The students are expected to create such a text by editing their lecture notes and amalgamating Great Peace textbooks and other materials.<sup>42</sup>
2. Knowledge of the underworld is not really within Great Peace teachings that deal with life and are meant for the living. For this reason the students are said to have heard about it elsewhere, from another teacher. But the Celestial Master does take up what they know, explains details, and suggests moral lessons.<sup>43</sup>
3. Traditional virtues like benevolence are of value but do not go far enough in bringing about Great Peace.
4. With the arrival of Great Peace the world will still be in a state that demands attention and preparation.
5. The explanation for certain astronomical phenomena is that political maneuvering at present cuts off communication between different social and political strata so that those at the top do not know what the situation is at the grassroots and do not know of heaven's will that manifests itself in events happening at the grassroots level.
6. The Master fully agrees with this observation but does not repeat the comparison with wolves and tigers.
7. Doctrines must be properly studied before they can become effective.

Such considerations help to make Great Peace teachings compatible. They provide them, and of course the *Tai ping jing*, with an aura of comprehensiveness that was seen to signify reliability and duration.

40. See Wang Ming 1979: 55.85 (1), 151.405–8 (2), 66.157–58 (3), 110.295 (4), 127.312–13 (5), 127.316 (6), 156.438–41.

41. The second point regarding the dead was not a topic to be discussed in written sources. However, the belief is documented in tomb objects in the form of thin lead plaques in human shape that were meant to replace the dead for the punishments they had to expect (Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens 2009: 971–72).

42. See Espeset 2002 for a full discussion of this topic.

43. See Hendrischke 2017: 117.

The authors also use the dialogue form to put in writing something with which they decidedly disagree.<sup>44</sup> The dialogue's junior partner may say something that is deemed completely wrong. He is thereby turned into an adversary who gains considerable constructive impact. He may start to put forth an opinion that is common and conventional, shock the Master, and thus initiate a dialogue that in the end proves the Master right and the student wrong, resulting in the student then promptly changing his mind. Thereby the authors impressively document the difference and, since the student reverses his opinion, the superiority of their own teachings. Examples are:

1. Parents must be served more ardently when they are dead than when they are alive.
2. Chastity is admirable.
3. Severity and deceit may be used as tools to achieve rightness.
4. Extraordinary natural phenomena, for instance eclipses, can be explained by means of the regular rotation of celestial bodies.
5. Important insights such as those arrived at by the Celestial Master must be spread selectively, or else it may come about that sons will know more than their fathers.<sup>45</sup>

In this way a position that is to be falsified is often uttered directly by the disciple, which makes its refutation dynamic and quite personal. This pattern is an important element of the literary structure of the *Taiping jing*.

Although the authors of the *Taiping jing*'s Great Spirit group rely less on the literary form of dialogue, they also turn to this stylistic device to cope with doctrinal controversy. It is used in a conversation between Great Spirit and the student, which contributes greatly to clarifying the particular doctrinal approach of this group of *Taiping jing* texts. As shown above, Great Spirit's pupil likes bureaucratic proceedings and is keen on explicit rules. When told to heed warnings, he insists on details and demands ongoing instruction, claiming his own incompetence. Great Spirit responds:

“We all know the following: What is spread out up in heaven is parallel to what lies in the middle region and below ground. Laws and rules [of the different regions] respond without the slightest aberration. Naturally there is mutual instruction. Just follow this principle and don't go against it, that's all.”

The student says: “For my part, I need warnings. Laws and rules may well be the same [for the different regions] but when I put my mind to it I can hardly grasp what they intend. It is hard to know the secret of heaven's feelings.”

「是語可知，天上之施，與中(知)[和]地下傍行等耳，法律相應，無有差也。自有相教者，且隨其主，勿逆而已。」生言：「自分當戒也，法律雖同，而用心少得其意也，天心難知其訣。」<sup>46</sup>

With this comment the disciple criticizes the functionality of Great Peace teachings that rely on a general parallelism between natural and social processes.<sup>47</sup> For him, this is not

44. In ancient Greece the literary form of the philosophical dialogue originated at the same time as that of dialectics as a philosophical method, as pointed out by Hirzel 1895: 55.

45. Wang Ming 1979: 46.49 (1), 42.37 (2), 64.142 (3), 133.366 (4), 155.435 (5).

46. Wang Ming 1979: 179.537–38. For (知)[和] see Yang 1994: 521 and Yu 2001: 398.

47. These correlations are explained in much detail in Celestial Master texts referring to the correspondence between different cosmic realms (heaven, the middle region where human beings are active, and the netherworld), between natural and social processes and also between different human environments. These different regions are correlated by identical transformations of the five phases and Yin and Yang. Practical decisions are supposed to result from understanding these correlations, for instance the correspondence between the application of punishments and the subsequent arrival of dark Yin forces (in section 60; see Hendrischke 2006: 243–73). In Great Spirit texts these teachings are fully accepted. They are, however, hardly mentioned as the basis for practical decisions.

sufficient. For the Celestial Master he shows that correlative structures are of great social consequence due to their egalitarian bias. In his opinion they are easy to comprehend so that everyone can independently exploit them without further need for the scholarly knowhow of the educated.<sup>48</sup> This allows Great Peace believers and practitioners of *Dao* to understand heaven's feelings without further ado. The disciple's remark as quoted above throws all this into question. He seems to say that the existing correspondence between natural and social realms does not work for him since he cannot transfer rules from one realm to the other.<sup>49</sup> The Great Spirit's answer does not directly respond to the argument but shows general understanding for the student's worries and reminds him of the special relationship that exists between him and the Lord of Heaven:

"All this is true, without the slightest error. But someone who knows in advance what the Lord of Heaven intends to bestow is of the highest rank, is placed to the left of the Lord of Heaven, and is fully rewarded for meritorious service. This he does not dare to accept in full since he is too modest and humble. He exhausts his strength even further and excels at putting his mind to tricky business. Therefore, the Lord of Heaven repeatedly instructs and teaches him in person. This is the good fortune you have ended up with. You are in charge of a lot. Proceed with a calm heart. This is what you yourself can do."

大神言：「是皆實無欺而已，乃豫知天君意所施為者，為上第一之人，可在天君左側。有功勞賜賞，謙遜不敢盡受，益復竭盡筋力，用心乙密為大，故天君重復自面勅教人，是生之福也。所主眾多，平心為行，是自可矣。」<sup>50</sup>

The dialogue allows a glimpse behind the bureaucratic apparatus that guarantees cosmic order. The Great Spirit assures the disciple that he will succeed because of his personal excellence and at the same time asserts that personal relations to someone in power are the way to success. Dialogues in this textual group contain more passages that unveil bureaucratic practices. It is, for instance, suggested that spirit subordinates do not always fulfill their tasks.<sup>51</sup> Such malpractices are only thematized in dialogue elements.

It has been shown that, by means of an interchange between two dialogue partners, the authors widen the spectrum of their discussion. They thereby attempt to prove that the authority of what they teach lies not only in its celestial origins but also in a competitive superiority to other teachings. Thus the literary form of dialogue is meant to document the compatibility and vitality of the message. It must be kept in mind that the authors of the *Taiping jing* do not command or choose to use the elegant prose with which, for instance, Wang Chong manages to untangle complex subjects and balance a number of possible positions. For the writer as well as for readers the dialogue form provides easy access to a multiplicity of positions and thus a chance to depict and understand controversies and participate in a wider discourse.

#### THE PROSELYTIZING FUNCTION OF DIALOGUES

The last point dealt with in this paper concerns the missionary project that is the *Taiping jing*'s main topic. Its authors propose preventing an apocalypse by changing what people believe in. Dialogues suit the propagation of teachings that promise to save the world if the

48. This is documented in section 105, where students are instructed how to predict the arrival of a heaven-sent chance for implementing Great Peace; see Hendrichske 2009: 48 (Wang Ming 1979: 105.262).

49. The difficulty of basing practical decisions on the links that the five phases establish between things is discussed in some detail in sections 67–77 of the Celestial Master textual group. The authors of the Great Spirit group of texts suggest that belief in heaven opens direct access to understanding heaven's will and thus another way of arriving at decisions.

50. Wang Ming 1979: 179.538. This is followed by the student's response.

51. See Wang Ming 1979: 198.611 and Espeset 2002: 45–46. See also Hendrichske 2010.

world were only to listen. It is not accidental that the literary form of dialogue was a crucial element in the spread of Buddhist teachings.<sup>52</sup> Such dialogues are geared to the promulgation of knowledge. They document such promulgation and thus the intention of Great Peace teachings. The text's Celestial Master is shown to ask a wider reading or listening audience to imitate the students and actively engage in learning and then implementing the Master's message. The dialogue thereby becomes a concise and immediate representation of what it intends to achieve in universal and lasting fashion. The following two longish examples are meant to show how the principle of Great Peace teachings is grounded in the situation of teaching and learning that the dialogue form brings to the fore. Both examples concern the fifth of the students' mistaken propositions, that is, the demand to keep the Master's teachings secret. The quotations are rather lengthy in order to allow dialogue elements to play their full role.

In the first example the Celestial Master is depicted as taking his clue from the student's concern for social rank. The student expresses interest in the status of Great Peace teachings and in consequence in his own social position as potential master of these teachings:

"Now being a foolish pupil, when I raise a topic and do not meet the Celestial Master's intentions I always commit a serious crime. [But] if I were not to risk offending you with my question it is as if until the end of my days I would have no way of knowing. I would again like to beg to ask about something else."

"All right, speak up. Why so modest? To ask when one does not know is the norm."

"Now to instruct ordinary men in first-ranking *Dao* and essential virtue definitely adds greatly to their knowledge, doesn't it?"

"Good, what you have said. Why are you saying it? For what reason would you doubt it?"

"I have heard that when the son knows more than the father, the student more than the teacher, the official more than the lord we define this as someone of inferior worth surpassing in knowledge his superior, which is to be considered improper."

"Now what you have said is right, and is also wrong. Now we must call 'someone inferior surpassing in knowledge his superior' wrong conduct only when an inferior's knowledge involves cleverness and falsity . . . Now when men in inferior positions study shrewd, fraudulent and factious teachings they get together to mislead and deceive their superior."

「今愚生舉言，不中天師心，常為重謫過，不冒過問，又到年竟，猶無從得知之。願復請問一言。」「平，道之，何所謙哉？不知而問之，是其數也。」「今以第一上道要德以教凡人，曾不大知乎？」「善哉子言也。何有大知之有乎？子何故疑此哉？」「吾聞子智過其父，弟子智過其師，臣智過其君，則名為下賢智過於其上，以為不宜。」「今子言是也，又非也。今下智過於上者，乃謂不當使下智為巧偽之法。 . . . 夫為人下習知猶偽姦道，則下共還熒惑欺其上矣。」<sup>53</sup>

From this point in the dialogue the students have no further opportunity to participate beyond an occasional "Yes, we have understood." The Master's argument centers on the ideal situation of the past, when inferiors who had been instructed in true *Dao* would, when employed as officials, double as a ruler's teacher and father. The dialogue finishes with a practical warning:

"Perfected, since you raise questions on behalf of heaven you must show respect, day by day, and must not indulge in thoughtless talk. Your words must be a model. Should they be off the

52. Conze (1973: xii) remarks: "The Sutras of the Mahayana are dialogues." In the introduction to his translation of the *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* (in Conze's translation: "The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines") Conze explains that the many speakers participating in this dialogue represent different levels of spiritual awareness and intellectual capability. In 179 C.E. Lokaksema 支婁迦 translated this Sutra into Chinese (Karashima 2011). Thanks are due to Timothy Barrett for pointing me in this direction.

53. Wang Ming 1979: 155.434–35.

mark it were better you kept silent. To raise a topic that is inappropriate is a crime too serious to be condoned.”

“Yes.”

“All right, you may go. Now you know.”

「真人為天問事，宜日謹，不可但恣意妄言，言當成法。言不成經，不若默也。舉言不中，罪深不除。」「唯唯。」「行，去，子已知矣。」<sup>54</sup>

Here, in a free adaptation of Confucius' views, the Master promulgates the classlessness of teaching and learning, or rather the superiority of the relationship between teacher and student over other roles.<sup>55</sup>

Another dialogue on the same topic adds more scope by thematizing communication as such. The students' role is again rather curtailed. They start the section with a proposition that agrees with a piece of conventional wisdom scorned by Zhuangzi and other eccentrics and are then forced into a thoroughly apologetic mode, which only allows them to utter occasional remarks that help structure the Master's lecture:

“We are truly stupid and in the dark, daily more so . . .”

“All right, speak up.”

“This stupid pupil would like to ask about mysterious *Dao* and essential virtue. They are the treasure of heaven and earth and precious to all the world. They are therefore called excellent *Dao*. It is not to be spread, that is, it is not what ordinary men should ask about, talk about, or make use of. But since the Celestial Master opens up the whole road to the study of Great Peace and orders as if by decree that men must produce essential texts on *Dao* and virtue, [mysterious *Dao* and essential virtue] cannot remain hidden. It is generally said that this is disgraceful to heaven. It is a crime one is not acquitted of until death and that is even passed on to later generations. If everyone were to receive true *Dao* and mysterious virtue, that is definitely a lot, isn't it? It would make the distinction between the small man and the gentleman disappear. This stupid pupil is of the opinion that true *Dao* and mysterious virtue are something a small man must not be allowed to hear of, speak about, or make use of.”

“Alas! Oh no! For what you have just said, majestic heaven and august earth will punish you by ten thousand deaths. You cannot be acquitted. Since the separation between heaven and earth, the latter born have held *Dao* more and more in jealous disrespect and small-minded men have intercepted heaven and earth's treasure. Thus errors have increased, until this created [a load of trespasses] that was inherited and passed on and made heaven's disasters occur without end.”

「真真愚暗日益劇 . . .」「行，言之。」「愚生竊聞祕道要德，是乃天地之珍寶，天下之珍奇物也，故名之為至道。不傳，其非凡人所宜聞所宜言所宜用也。而令天師都開太平學之路，悉敕使人為道德要文，不得蔽匿，皆言其有天謫，到死罪尚不除，復流後世，皆授以真道祕德，曾不大哉？令小人與君子不別，愚生以為真道祕德不宜使小人聞小人言小人用之也。」「咄！噫！子今且言，有萬死之責於皇天后土，不復除也。自天地開闢以來，後生日益薄妒道，小人斷絕天地之珍寶，以是為失，積久，故生承負，今天災不絕。」

Here the Master fixes responsibility for the world's decay on a lack of free communication. He repeatedly insists that heaven has sent him among men to mend this situation. This argument relies on the full ontological identity of *Dao* with its cosmic power. When spread in the shape of teachings, this power is replicated in social consequences. In the following this is outlined in some detail:

“What you have just said is exactly what is most hateful to heaven. This is a mistake indeed. It wipes out your merits.”

54. Wang Ming 1979: 155.437.

55. Cf. *Analecets* 7.7 (Lau 1979: 86).

“What do you mean?”

“Now essential *Dao* and eminent virtue are brought forth so that they may help men to transform. When small men obtain them, they safeguard *Dao* and virtue, learn from each other, and do not dare do wrong . . . Now by means of essential, true *Dao*, heaven brings things to life, down to the six domestic animals, wild birds, and beasts . . . They all carry essential *Dao* within them as their nature. Grass and trees grow tall after they have obtained it. If heaven were not to spread true and essential *Dao* among them all, how would they give birth to each other and grow? And yet, you have said that a small man must neither hear of essential *Dao*, nor speak about it or use it. Spirits of heaven and earth protect all sorts of beings. Is man not as good as the six domestic animals, grass, and trees? You know yourself that what you have just said is a crime that deserves ten thousand deaths. You will not be acquitted.”

“I have served you for only a short time. I do not thoroughly understand heaven’s *Dao*. Now that I have heard what you have said I see for myself that the crime is serious . . .”

“. . . You have now said that excellent *Dao* is not to be spread. What is to be spread to men for them to gain knowledge? Excellent *Dao* is not to be spread to all sorts of beings. [But] heaven’s *Dao* is not just for itself. So to whom exclusively should it give life?”

“We pupils are on guard, ill adjusted as we are.”

“Would you like to teach each other, jealous of heaven’s *Dao*, as do vulgar, small-minded men?”

“No, we would not dare.”

子今且語，正與天為重怨，錯哉錯哉！亡子功矣。」「何謂也？」「今要道善德出之以教化，小人得之守道德，更相做學，不敢為非 . . . 夫天以要真道生物，乃下及六畜禽獸 . . . 而真人言，小人不宣聞要道、不宣言、不宣用也。天地之神保終類，人乃不若六畜草木善邪哉？真人自知，今且言有萬死之罪，不復除也。」「愚生事師日少淺，不深知天道，見天師言，乃自知罪重 . . .」「. . . 子今且言至道不傳，人何以傳知之乎？終類至道不可傳，天道無私，但當獨為誰生乎？」「弟子自慎戒事甚無狀。」「子欲若俗夫小人復相教妒天道耶？」「不敢不敢。」<sup>56</sup>

The Master concludes that, to be released from the sin they have committed, students must place themselves at a crossroads and, ceremoniously to all four directions, confess their wrongdoings to heaven. By the literary standards of the *Taiping jing*, the first part of this passage is rather well written. The students express themselves clearly. Their social and cultural concerns are coherent: orderly society is hierarchically structured and all human activity must respect this structure. They even attack the Master directly as someone who opposes heaven’s order. Typically, he does not respond to this affront but moves into a principled defense of his sociopolitical program that, he argues, takes its clues from *Dao*’s general impact on the world.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the fact that it consists mainly of dialogues adds greatly to the *Taiping jing*’s interest, in several respects. In the first respect, the literary form of dialogue allows its authors to express themselves at several levels without stylistic complexity. Spread over utterances by different dialogue partners, the authors can easily make a proposal, question it, add collateral information and other suggestions, raise more questions, and return to what is left of the proposal to view it from another angle. The figures they set up are plausible: there is a responsible teacher and an eager student for whom learning is of existential importance. The authors also manage to assert and maintain their own presence. In the end, readers are convinced that they have listened to a dialogue that is very important for the participants and

56. Wang Ming 1979: 154.429–30. Parts of the translation rely more heavily than usual on translations by Luo (1996: 747) and Long (2000: 886). In the first line Wang Ming, without comment, reads 祕道要意 instead of 祕道要德.

that the authors have a point in presenting it. This is an achievement. It can be argued that the *Taiping jing*'s analytical quality rests on its dialogue elements. The interest in methods of analysis, the evaluation of different options, a controversial discussion, and attempts at persuasion are expressed in dialogues and ascertain the authors' philosophical, rather than dogmatic, outlook.<sup>57</sup>

When discussing Plato's dialogues, Kahn finds it surprising that little work has been done on the interchange between creating a literary form and putting philosophical thought in writing, as happens when a philosophical dialogue is written.<sup>58</sup> His observation holds true beyond the realms of European antiquity, where it originates. Jean Lévi (2002) is rather isolated in his attempt to analyze Confucius' teachings in the *Analects* as resulting from the interchange with students. Yet, this perspective would allow Confucius' teachings to be seen as the product of dialogues, in a concrete as well as a systemic dimension. It would be hard to develop a similar thesis for Celestial Master texts since here students remain anonymous and lack individual characteristics. However, it is still possible to argue that it is essential for the text's message to be composed as it has been, in dialogues. It is the main content of Great Peace teachings that there is a cosmic need for universal social renewal, that this renewal is geared to the extensive spread of knowledge and goods, and that general, classless communication is a precondition. So, in a second respect, the literary form of dialogue is a direct expression of the authors' doctrinal intention. The Master's students are expected to spread teachings, approach political leaders, and convince them to implement reforms. By composing dialogues, the authors depict the first stage of the proselytizing endeavour. The project's dynamism and urgency could hardly be conveyed in plain prose. It has been argued that Socrates, as depicted by Plato, was criminalized and condemned to death at the point at which his attempt to create a dialogue failed and he was forced to give speeches instead.<sup>59</sup> Dialogue is a device that illustrates methods of understanding and instruction while at the same time in exemplary fashion signifying the existential and social impact of philosophical thought. Its presence in the *Taiping jing* is essential in both respects. The Celestial Master develops ideas on Great Peace in dialogue with students whose active presence points to the consequence of these ideas.

57. Wilson Nightingale 1995: 169 arrives at a similar conclusion: "While Plato clearly had positions on the matters he investigates, he adopted the dialogue form precisely because he did not consider his own views as final."

58. Kahn 1996: 1–4.

59. Wilson Nightingale 1995: 80–83.

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The *Taiping jing* is referred to by the page number given in Wang Ming's (1979) representation of the *Daozang* text but with much reliance on punctuation and editorial remarks by Yang 1994 and Yu 2001. The text is quoted in the version here translated. Only corrections in reference to the *Daozang* edition are pointed out.

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