

The Untaxonomised Remainder: Daoist Epistemology and Orientalist Containment in Hergé's Tintin in Tibet

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Abstract:

Hergé suffering from documented psychological crisis and the production of *Tintin in Tibet* converges into the dive toward reading and manifesting Taoism. An album that is built on pillars of an unverifiable dream, a vindicated mystical vision, and a creature, the Yeti. This paper reads these narrative devices against primary Daoist sources, the *Daode jing* in D. C. Lau's translation and the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* in Burton Watson's translation. Building upon Saidian account of imaginative geography and on postcolonial children's theory, the paper argues that the album enacts a genuine, biographically grounded suspension of Western rational and taxonomic authority. *Tintin in Tibet* suspends continuously and systematically contains epistemological humility and converts into physical conquest, a rescued character's testimony is deferred until it costs him nothing, and the Yeti's irreducibility is finally redescribed as a pending taxonomy rather than a permanent excess. The paper concludes that *Tintin in Tibet* represents neither an authentic vehicle of Daoist thought nor a generic instance of Western Tibetan fantasy, but a more specific and instructive case whose real philosophical reaching was authentic, and containment of that reaching was equally real, the two facts coexisting rather than cancelling.

Keywords: Daoism, Orientalism, postcolonial theory, xuan, biographical criticism, wu wei, comic studies.

INTRODUCTION

Georges Prosper Remi, famously known as Hergé, was battling with recurring nightmares in which everything around him turned an overwhelming, suffocating white (Assouline, 2009, p. 190). Seeking help from Franz Ricklin, a Swiss psychoanalyst trained under Carl Jung, who advised him to abandon *Tintin* altogether. Hergé refused. Instead, he produced *Tintin in Tibet* (1962), an album he would state as his most favourite *Tintin* work and a statement on "an assertion of the incorruptible value of bonds of friendship" (Farr, 2001, p. 161). During this same period of crisis, Hergé began reading Oriental philosophy as described by his biographer, with the religious texts affecting him morally and philosophically rather than spiritually, and his attention turning toward Taoism and revelations foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition (Assouline, 2009, p. 185). This is not a connection imposed retroactively by a sympathetic critic. It is the documented genesis of the one *Tintin* album in which a Western boy reporter abandons every instrument of rational evidence available to him and acts instead on the strength of a dream.

This convergence of biography and text raises a question that existing scholarship on *Tintin in Tibet* has approached only obliquely. The album stages, with unusual sustained seriousness for a Western children's comic of 1960's, a confrontation between empirical Western knowing and a form of knowledge that arrives unbidden, unprovable, and authoritative. Tintin's insistence that his friend Chang survived a plane crash in the Himalayas rests on nothing but a dream. Captain Haddock calls it nonsense. The Thompson twins are professionally incapable of registering it at all. A Tibetan lama, before Tintin has said a word, reveals that he has already seen Tintin's approach in a vision. And in the high snows, a creature that refuses every category the expedition tries to impose on it, neither beast nor man, neither captured nor named, keeps Chang alive through means the narrative never cares explains and does not ask the reader to explain.

Tintin in Tibet, this paper proposes, enacts a partial and ultimately contained encounter with Daoist epistemology. Read against the *Daode jing*'s insistence that the way which can be told is not the constant way (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 57), and against Zhuangzi's sustained refusal to let human categories settle the question of what a being truly is (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 6, 17), the album's central narrative devices, the dream, the lama's foreknowledge, and above all the Yeti, perform something close to a Daoist suspension of taxonomic and empirical authority. Yet the album does not sustain this suspension to its conclusion. Tintin's intuition is vindicated by a rescue that restores Western heroic agency as the engine of the plot. The Yeti is permitted to weep but never to speak. The political reality of Tibet in 1959, the Chinese annexation and the Dalai Lama's flight into exile, the very crisis that gives the album's invented rescue its real-world urgency, is entirely absent from the narrative. The central question this paper poses is not whether *Tintin in Tibet* is an Orientalist text, which is true of the album by virtue of genre and period and barely needs demonstrating, but whether the documented Daoist turn in Hergé's own life enabled the album to do something most Orientalist children's literature does not even attempt: stage the limits of Western rational authority from the inside, before reasserting that authority at the level of plot. The Yeti, this paper will suggest, is the figure in whom that staging and that reassertion most visibly collide, the untaxonomised remainder left over once the rescue narrative has done its work.

The small existing critical literature on *Tintin in Tibet* itself. Jim Casey's reading of the album draws on Heidegger to frame Tintin's dream and the Yeti's ambiguous ontology as a confrontation with Being and Nothingness, situating the album's mysticism within a Western existentialist idiom (Casey, 2017). This is a sophisticated reading, but it remains, by its own design, internal to a Western philosophical tradition even as it addresses an album whose own genesis Hergé located outside that tradition. Kul Bahadur Rana's social-semiotic analysis applies Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal grammar to the album's binary oppositions, light against dark, civilisation against wilderness (Rana, 2024). This illuminates the album's formal architecture but treats the Yeti as a term within a binary system rather than as a figure that, on a Zhuangzian reading, resists exactly the kind of binary capture such systems presuppose. Neither study brings the *Daode jing* or the Zhuangzi into contact with the album, despite Hergé's own documented engagement with Daoist thought during its composition.

A second strand of scholarship concerns Tibet as a Western fantasy space. Himadri Lahiri's review of Goswami's *Reimagining Tibet* situates *Tintin in Tibet* alongside James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* as instances of a Western imaginative tradition that constructs Tibet as a remote, timeless repository of spiritual wisdom, a tradition Peter Bishop has theorised at length as the Shangri-La myth (Lahiri, 2023). This scholarship is essential to understanding why Hergé's Himalayas look the way they do, but it treats Tibet as an undifferentiated fantasy space and does not distinguish between a generic Orientalist mysticism and a text whose author was, at the moment of composition, engaging in a specific and biographically attested way with a specific philosophical tradition. The distinction matters, because it changes what kind of failure the album's containment of its own Daoist opening represents. Edward Said's account of latent and manifest Orientalism, and in particular his concept of imaginative

geography, the arbitrary but consequential division of the world into ours and theirs that allows Europe to speak for a silenced Orient (Said, 1978, pp. 49–55), underwrites the present reading of how the album narrates Tibet without permitting Tibet to narrate itself. Perry Nodelman's extension of Said's framework to children's literature, in which the child reader occupies a position structurally analogous to Said's Oriental, known, represented, and spoken for by an adult authority that remains hidden from view (Nodelman, 1992), supplies the second half of the apparatus this argument needs, since *Tintin in Tibet* doubles its silencing of Tibet with the ordinary silencing of the child reader that Nodelman identifies as constitutive of the genre. Brown's survey of this debate within children's literature scholarship traces Jacqueline Rose's influential claim that children's fiction is built on an impossibility, since the child reader it addresses is always a figure produced by the adult author rather than a real interlocutor with an independent voice, and the subsequent disagreement among scholars, Nodelman included, over how completely this impossibility forecloses the child reader's agency (Brown, 2017). The present paper does not need to settle that disagreement to make use of it; it needs only the shared premise underlying both sides, that the child reader of *Tintin in Tibet*, like the Tibet the album represents, is a figure constructed by the text rather than a voice the text allows to speak for itself.

The argument draws on four interlocking Daoist concepts, read from primary translations, and one Saidian concept that frames their limits. The first concept is the unnameable character of the dao itself. The *Daode jing* opens by insisting that the way that can be told is not the constant way, and that the named was the mother of the myriad creatures while the nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 57). Knowledge that can be fully articulated, tested, and verified is, on this account, precisely not knowledge of the deepest order; what exceeds language is not therefore unreal but is instead what makes reality possible in the first place. Tintin's dream-knowledge and the lama's vision read against this principle as a narrative enactment of a mode of knowing the text itself cannot fully verbalise or justify, and which it does not ask the reader to demand justification for.

Closely related is *wu wei*, action that does not force or contend. Lau's introduction to his translation glosses *wu wei* as the policy of resorting to no action, on the grounds that to say of the dao that it acts is already to limit its effectiveness by implication, since to do some things is to leave others undone (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 33). The *Daode jing* states plainly that the way never acts yet nothing is left undone (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 33), and elsewhere praises the submissive and the weak as that which overcomes the hard and the strong, not through contention but through its refusal to contend (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, pp. 28–29). Chang's survival in the wilderness, sustained rather than self-sustaining, received rather than achieved, reads as an enactment of this principle, and raises the question of what it means that the album assigns *wu wei* to its rescued Chinese character rather than to its Western hero.

A third concept, *pu*, the uncarved block, names the condition of a thing prior to the imposition of artificial distinction. The *Daode jing* urges its reader to exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 75), and Lau notes that the uncarved block shatters into vessels the moment it is named and put to specialised use, since a vessel, unlike the block, can only be a vessel and nothing else (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 37). The Himalayan landscape of the album, and the Yeti that inhabits it, can be read as a literary figure of *pu*, a space and a being that have not yet been shattered into the vessels of zoological classification, colonial cartography, or narrative resolution; the question this paper pursues is how long the album is willing to let this condition stand before it intervenes.

Most important for what follows is Zhuangzi's non-hierarchical ontology, developed across the inner chapters in a register very different from the *Daode jing*'s aphoristic compression. Chapter 6 describes the True Man of antiquity as one whose knowledge climbed all the way up to the Way, who could enter water without getting wet and fire without being burned, and whose mind forgets the categories by which lesser men sort experience into the loved and the feared (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 6). Chapter 17 stages this refusal of settled category most vividly in the exchange between the Lord of the River and Ruo of the North Sea, in which the Lord of the River, having mistaken the flooded Yellow

River for the whole of beauty, is told that one cannot discuss the sea with a well frog, since he is limited by the space he lives in, nor the Way with a cramped scholar, since he is shackled by his doctrines (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 17). The same chapter closes with Zhuangzi's exchange with Huizi at the Hao River over whether a man bound to human categories of knowing can ever truly say that fish are happy, a debate Zhuangzi resolves not by claiming privileged access to the fish's experience but by exposing the question of access itself as already framed by the categories it pretends to test (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 17). The Yeti reads through this apparatus as a being who, like the True Man, exists prior to the categories of beast and man that the expedition tries to impose on it; whether the album, like Zhuangzi at the Hao River, is willing to let the question of the Yeti's inner life remain open, or resolves the question by force, is the burden of the analysis to come.

These four concepts are brought into critical tension, rather than uncritical alignment, with Karyn Lai's caution that the contemporary appeal to a Daoist environmental ethic risks projecting modern ecological concerns onto a textual tradition that was not, in its own terms, addressed to the natural world for its own sake (Lai, 2008). This caution disciplines the present paper's claims. The argument is not that *Tintin in Tibet* secretly encodes a Daoist ecological philosophy waiting to be decoded. It is that the album's narrative structure, at the level of plot device rather than authorial doctrine, performs gestures that a reader equipped with Daoist philosophical vocabulary can recognise as structurally Daoist, and that the album's documented biographical genesis gives this recognition a warrant that a purely formal or anachronistic comparison would lack.

The final element of the framework is Saidian, and it supplies the paper's critical edge rather than its descriptive vocabulary. Said's concept of imaginative geography describes the process by which a culture draws a line around a familiar space and calls it ours, then draws a second line around an unfamiliar space and calls it theirs, a boundary that is essentially arbitrary but that, once drawn, allows the first culture to speak for the second without the second culture's consent or even its awareness that it has been spoken for (Said, 2003, pp. 54–55). *Tintin in Tibet* draws exactly this line around Tibet, and a second, smaller line around the Yeti, and the album's Daoist gestures operate entirely within the space these lines enclose. The lama may know without empirical evidence; Chang may survive without contending; the Yeti may exceed every taxonomy offered to it. But none of them narrates. The narration belongs to Tintin, and through Tintin, to the European reader Nodelman's hidden adult addresses. The chapters that follow trace this structure through the album's dream sequence, its treatment of the Yeti, Chang's manner of survival, the biographical crisis that produced the album, and finally the points at which the album's Daoist opening closes back into the rescue narrative it never quite escapes.

"I Saw Him in a Dream": Non-Rational Knowing and xuan

The dream arrives without warning, in the middle of a chess game. Tintin sneezes himself awake at the dinner. A sensory dream about Chang, the friend he made in China during his adventure of *The Blue Lotus*, lying hurt and half buried in snow, holding out his hands and calling for help, hinting at the need of his white friend, the white saviour. Haddock's response sets the terms for everything that follows. He tells Tintin to forget it and go to bed, then the next morning offers the standard rationalist deflation: that dreams go by opposites and Tintin should not think about it, this response of Haddock's set the terms for everything that follows in the album. When a letter from Chang arrives the same morning, posted weeks earlier and announcing his flight from Hong Kong, the coincidence unsettles Tintin rather than Haddock, who treats it as a coincidence. It is only the following day's newspaper, reporting the crash of Chang's plane in the Gosain Than massif (also known as Shishapangma) with no survivors, that turns the dream from an unsettling private experience into a claim Tintin is prepared to act on against all available evidence. Tintin's words to Haddock are precise at this point, indicating at Tintin's spiritual or divine connection, dream was not an ordinary dream, but a sort of premonition, telepathy, something like that, and one thing is certain, Chang is alive.

What is being claimed here is not simply that Tintin had a strong feeling but channelled or experienced a special and unnatural channel that provided a specific item of knowledge about a named individual surviving a plane crash in a remote and unreachable place, arrived through a channel that is naturally not comprehended by common people. Haddock's incredulity voices the position any reasonable adult, reasonable reader, or reasonable airport manager in the story will go on to take. When Tintin and Haddock reach Kathmandu, the airport manager warns them that even if Chang survived the crash he would long since have died of hunger and cold and exposure, and Tharkey the sherpa, who had been part of the official search party and seen the wreckage with his own eyes, tells Tintin flatly that no one could have lived through it. Every figure of institutional or experiential authority in the album, the airport manager who has the search reports, the sherpa who has stood at the crash site, Haddock who has known Tintin for years and trusts his judgment in every other matter, agrees that the dream cannot be evidence. Tintin's reply to Tharkey does not contest this on empirical grounds. He says only that he is convinced Chang is alive, that it may be stupid, but there it is, and that because he believes it, he is going to look.

This is a striking place for a 1960's children's adventure comic to plant its narrative engine. The genre convention, established across the preceding twenty-two albums, is that Tintin solves problems by observation, deduction, and physical courage. *Tintin in Tibet* begins by suspending all three. Tintin's quest has no clue to follow, no villain to outwit, no document to decode. It has only a conviction that arrived while he was asleep, and that he refuses to subject to the ordinary tests of verification even when every person he respects asks him to.

The *Daode jing* opens with a claim about exactly this kind of limit. The way that can be told is not the constant way, and the name that can be named is not the constant name (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 57). Lau's translation continues into the chapter's second movement, in which the text counsels the reader to rid himself of desires in order to observe the way's secrets, but always to allow himself desires as well in order to observe its manifestations, since these two are the same but diverge in name as they issue forth, and being the same they are called mysteries, mystery upon mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 57). This is the concept Lau's commentary calls *xuan*, the dark or mysterious, a category of knowing that does not resolve into the articulable without ceasing to be itself. The dao that can be fully stated, tested, and reproduced under controlled conditions is, on this account, already a lesser thing than the dao that exceeds statement. Knowledge that survives translation into evidence is not, for that reason, knowledge of the deepest order; what cannot be brought fully into language is not therefore unreal, but is instead closer to the source from which the nameable world proceeds.

Tintin's dream-knowledge occupies a strikingly similar structural position within the album's own logic, though the album never states this in so many words and certainly never invokes Daoist philosophy by name. The dream cannot be cross-examined. Tintin cannot explain how it reached him, only that it did, and his single articulate attempt to characterise the experience, premonition, telepathy, something like that, is offered with the same shrugging inadequacy that *xuan* assigns to any name applied to the dao. The text he produces in response is not a description of a mechanism but an admission that no mechanism is available, and the album asks its reader to accept the knowledge anyway, on the strength of its consequences rather than its credentials. Tharkey is wrong about the crash site; Chang is alive. The airport manager is wrong about the odds; Chang is found. The single character in the narrative who never doubts the dream's validity, and who in fact appears to have anticipated Tintin's arrival before Tintin set out, is Blessed Lightning, a monk at the monastery of Khor-Biyong, who rises into a trance and reports seeing three men and a small white dog in mortal danger on the mountain, naming Tintin only as Great Heart, a name with no empirical content but considerable narrative authority, since events bear it out exactly. Blessed Lightning's vision functions in the album as Tintin's dream functions for the reader: a second instance of knowledge that arrives by no stated mechanism and is nonetheless, within the story's own terms, simply correct.

It would overstate the case to claim that Hergé is here illustrating a doctrine he had studied. His biographer records that during this same period he had begun reading what is described as Oriental philosophy, the texts affecting him morally and philosophically rather than spiritually, and that his attention had turned specifically toward Taoism (Assouline, 2009, p. 185), but there is no evidence that he set out to dramatise the *Daode jing*'s account of *xuan*, and no textual claim within the album that Tintin's dream is anything other than what Haddock first calls it, a nightmare brought on by an unsettling newspaper story. What can be said is narrower and, for that reason, more defensible. The album's central narrative engine depends on a mode of knowing that the text repeatedly marks as inaccessible to evidence, observation, and the testimony of every competent authority available to its characters, and asks its reader to find this knowing not merely sympathetic but correct. A reader equipped with the *Daode jing*'s vocabulary for the limits of articulable knowledge has a way of naming what the album is doing structurally, where a reader confined to the empiricist standards the album's own characters invoke and then fail to uphold does not. The dream is the first and clearest instance in the album of a pattern that recurs with the lama's vision and, most fully, with the Yeti: a form of knowing the narrative validates completely while declining to explain, justify, or generalise into a method. Whether the album is willing to extend this same validation to the being who receives it least ambiguously, the Yeti himself, is the question the next section takes up.

The Untaxonomised Yeti

The Yeti enters the album three times, and each entry assigns it to a different category, none of which the narrative allows to settle. Tharkey introduces it first as report rather than encounter: he has not seen the creature himself, but knows a sherpa who has, and what that sherpa described was a being very big, very strong, capable of killing a yak with its fist, and given to eating the eyes and hands of the men it kills. This is the Yeti as monster, assembled entirely out of secondhand fear and offered to the reader through the genre conventions of campfire horror. The same night, the creature steals Haddock's whisky, and the register changes completely. Tharkey's explanation, that the Yeti likes alcohol and once got so drunk on a local brew that villagers were able to tie it up before it broke free, converts the monster into a comic drunkard, and Haddock's outraged catalogue of insults, Cro-Magnon, dipsomaniac, body-snatcher, Pithecanthropus, treats the theft as an occasion for slapstick rather than dread. By the time Blessed Lightning's vision names the creature a third time, as the *migou* who has taken Chang prisoner and who the Grand Abbot insists never surrenders his prey, the album has already supplied two incompatible frames, predator and buffoon, neither of which prepares the reader for what Chang's own testimony will reveal: an animal that fed him, sheltered him, carried him bodily away from the search party that would have found and removed him, and wept when the rescue finally succeeded.

No single one of these framings is permitted to stand as the truth of the creature. The album does not correct the monster story with the comic story, or the comic story with Chang's story; it simply accumulates them, and ends without resolving which one was accurate, because none of them was adequate on its own and the narrative never supplies a fourth, final category to replace them. Thierry Groensteen's account of comics narration as a system of iconic solidarity, in which no single panel carries its meaning alone but depends on its correlation with other panels, distinguishes between restrained arthrology, the sequential relation between consecutive panels on a page, and general arthrology, the network of relations a panel can form with others placed at a distance from it across the album (Groensteen, 2007). The three Yeti panels belong to general rather than restrained arthrology: separated by dozens of intervening pages and entirely different narrative registers, horror, slapstick, theology, they nonetheless braid together into a single iconographic thread that the reader is left to reconcile alone, since the album itself never places the panels in sequence with one another. The creature the reader assembles from this braiding is not given by any one panel but produced entirely in the gap between them, a gap the narrative leaves open rather than closing. The Yeti becomes an important character which is being shot at, photographed with a flash that blinds it without producing

a usable image, named in three different registers, and never once permitted to speak, rather get spoken by either Chang or Tintin, becoming a silent companion, devoid of any voice or emotion. Its last appearance is a single farewell cry, transcribed onomatopoeically rather than translated, as the rescue party departs with Chang. The closing exchange of the album puts the creature's irreducibility into Chang's own words: he tells Tintin he hopes no expedition ever succeeds in capturing the Yeti, since they would treat it like a wild animal, and confesses that the way it cared for him left him wondering, deep down, whether it had a human soul. Tintin's reply, the album's final line, is not an answer but the admission that no answer is available: who knows.

Zhuangzi's seventeenth chapter stages a structurally similar refusal at the limit of a very different conversation. The Lord of the River, surveying the Yellow River in full flood and mistaking its breadth for the whole of beauty, travels downstream and is humbled by the sight of the open sea, at which point Ruo of the North Sea tells him that one cannot discuss the sea with a well frog, because he is confined by the space he lives in, nor can one discuss the Way with a cramped scholar, because he is bound by his own doctrines (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 17). The chapter's most celebrated passage follows soon after, when Zhuangzi and Huizi stand on the bridge over the Hao River and Zhuangzi remarks that the fish below are happy. Huizi objects that Zhuangzi, not being a fish, cannot know what makes a fish happy. Zhuangzi's answer does not claim privileged access to the fish's interior life; it turns the objection back on itself, observing that Huizi, not being Zhuangzi, is in no position to know that Zhuangzi does not know, and that the entire dispute proceeds from a question about access to another being's experience that neither party can settle from outside that being's own position (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 17). The point of the exchange is not that fish happiness is knowable after all, but that the demand to certify it according to human categories of evidence is already a kind of category error, a well frog's confidence mistaking its own enclosure for the whole of what can be known.

Chapter 6 supplies the positive complement to this refusal in its account of the True Man of antiquity, who climbed to the Way so completely that he could scale heights without fear, enter water without getting wet, and enter fire without being burned, because his knowledge had ascended to a level prior to the distinctions, hot and cold, safe and dangerous, by which ordinary understanding sorts the world (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 6). The same chapter insists that fish thrive in water while men thrive in the Way, and that pursuing one creature's nature by another creature's standard produces only suffering, since the fish that try to keep each other moist in a dried-up pond would do better simply to forget one another in the rivers and lakes where each can be fully and separately itself (Zhuangzi, trans. 2013, ch. 6). What both passages refuse is the imposition of a single, portable standard of knowing or thriving onto a being whose nature lies outside that standard's reach. The well frog cannot be blamed for its enclosure, but neither can its enclosure be mistaken for the sea.

Read against this apparatus, the Yeti is the album's well frog problem turned inside out. Every human character who encounters it, Tharkey, the Grand Abbot, Haddock, even Tintin, applies a standard of knowing built for human or at most domesticated animal behaviour, predator, thief, captor, categories that Hall and Ames identify as products of a substance-ontological impulse to fix beings into definable essences (Hall & Ames, 1995) and each standard fails to hold for more than a chapter before the narrative quietly abandons it for the next. The creature that emerges from Chang's testimony, foraging through wreckage for food to bring a stranger, carrying him bodily away from the one outcome, rescue, that would have separated them, weeping at a parting it did not choose, behaves according to no standard the album's human characters have available, and the album does not supply one. Graham's reading of Zhuangzi identifies this failure of categories as philosophically precise rather than merely emotive: distinctions always emerge from a particular, limited position, which means no distinction can claim universal validity (Graham, 1989). It supplies instead the two words that close the story. Where Zhuangzi answers Huizi by exposing the question of access as already malformed, Hergé answers Chang by simply declining to answer, and lets the declining stand as the album's last word on the subject.

This is the point at which the comparison must be held to the discipline Lai's caution requires. Nothing in Hergé's documented reading suggests he had encountered the Zhuangzi specifically, as opposed to a more general and, on his biographer's account, morally rather than philosophically absorbed engagement with Taoism (Assouline, 2009, p. 185), and it would be an overreach to claim the Yeti was constructed as an illustration of non-hierarchical ontology. What can be claimed is that the album's narrative structure, independent of whatever doctrine Hergé did or did not hold, performs the same refusal Zhuangzi stages at the Hao River: it raises and then declines to resolve the question of what kind of being this is, and it does so by ending on an admission of unknowing rather than a classification. The difference between the two texts lies less in what each says about the limits of knowing another being's interior than in what each does with that limit once it has been reached. Zhuangzi rests there, content to let the fish remain unspecified and happy. *Tintin in Tibet* does not quite rest. The Yeti is left alone on the mountain, unclaimed by any of the three names the narrative gave it, available, the text notes in its final lines, to whichever future expedition manages to catch him. Whether that closing detail returns the creature to the very taxonomic capture the chapter's best moments had suspended, and what it costs Chang's own subjectivity that his wonder about the Yeti's soul is voiced only after he has been safely extracted from the Yeti's care, are questions the analysis takes up directly once Chang's own manner of survival has been examined on its own terms.

Chang's wu wei

Chang survives the crash that kills every other passenger, and the album is careful to specify that he survives it by doing almost nothing. He wakes alone, his leg injured, in a landscape that offers him no resources he has the strength to gather and no shelter he has the strength to build. The rescue that follows is not self-rescue. It arrives as a sequence of unbidden provisions: biscuits first, salvaged from the wreckage by hands that are not his own, then plants and roots brought from nightly foraging he does not undertake, then small animals he forces himself to eat though the prospect revolts him, because eating what is brought is the only action available to a body too weak to hunt or forage for itself. Chang's own account to Tintin and Haddock names the cause plainly: he took care of me, Chang says of the Yeti, and without him I would have died of cold and hunger. The sentence assigns agency entirely to the Yeti and survival entirely to its consequence. Chang's verbs throughout the account are verbs of reception, not achievement.

This is worth dwelling on because the genre convention runs the other way. Adventure fiction of the kind Hergé had spent three decades perfecting customarily rewards resourcefulness; a stranded character proves himself by improvising shelter, signalling for help, rationing supplies, outwitting the wilderness through ingenuity the narrative invites the reader to admire. Chang is given exactly two moments of this kind of agency, and the album is precise about their limits. He carves his name into the rock face once he has regained enough strength to stand, an act addressed not to his own survival but to the possibility that some future human searcher might read it. Later, when a distant rescue party comes into view, he calls out with what voice he has and, when his voice proves too weak to carry, throws his scarf over the cliff edge in the hope that the bright cloth will catch a searcher's eye. Both acts are gestures toward other humans, attempts to be found, not attempts to escape, outlast, or master the wilderness that holds him. Chang at no point fights the Yeti, flees it once his fear has passed, or attempts to direct its movements. When it gathers him up and carries him bodily away from the very rescue party his scarf was meant to attract, climbing a cliff face the album draws as sheer and to which Chang himself could not have found a hand-hold, he does not resist. He is carried.

The *Daode jing* offers a vocabulary for this kind of passivity that does not collapse it into mere helplessness. Lau's introduction glosses *wu wei* as the considered policy of resorting to no action, on the reasoning that to say of the way that it acts is already to limit it by implication, since whatever acts in one direction necessarily leaves something else undone, while the way achieves everything precisely because it forces nothing (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 33). The text itself states the principle in its most compressed form: the way never acts, yet nothing is left undone (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 33).

Elsewhere the same logic is extended to the relation between the hard and the soft, the strong and the submissive, in the observation that there is nothing in the world more submissive than water, and yet for attacking what is hard and strong nothing can surpass it, precisely because its weakness contains no element that could be used against it (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, pp. 28–29). What *wu wei* names, on this reading, is not the absence of all activity but the absence of contention, a mode of being in the world that accomplishes its end by declining to force an outcome rather than by lacking the capacity to act.

Chang's survival fits this description more precisely than it fits any vocabulary the album's own characters supply. He does not contend with the wilderness and does not contend with the Yeti, and his single sustained activity, eating what is brought, fits Lau's gloss of *wu wei* as resorting to no action better than it fits any ordinary account of resourcefulness, since the action he performs is entirely reactive, sustaining a condition that something other than himself has already established. The chapters of the *Zhuangzi* already invoked for the Yeti supply the complementary image on the human side of this relation. Chapter 6 describes how fish thrive by forgetting one another in the rivers and lakes that are simply given to them, rather than by exerting themselves to keep each other moist in conditions where the water itself has failed (*Zhuangzi*, trans. 2013, ch. 6); Chang's survival has exactly this quality of an organism sustained by a medium it does nothing to produce and need do nothing to deserve.

The reading must stop short of claiming the album endorses passivity as a general human virtue, since nothing in the surrounding narrative suggests this. Tintin's entire quest is built from active, often reckless intervention: he crosses a glacier roped to Haddock against Tharkey's professional advice, climbs to a ledge no sherpa will attempt, and forces the rescue to happen through sustained physical risk that the narrative frames as heroic rather than as a failure to yield. The album does not propose that everyone should behave as Chang behaves. It assigns *wu wei*, specifically, to the one major character in the story who is Chinese, while reserving for its European hero the entire register of effortful, contending, narratively rewarded action. Whether this distribution should be read as the album unconsciously orientalisising passivity itself, ascribing to its Asian character a mode of being that Western adventure fiction has long coded as the East's gift for endurance rather than mastery, or as a genuinely Daoist enactment of *wu wei* that the surrounding rescue narrative simply does not know how to recognise or reward on its own terms, is a question this paper takes up directly in its account of the album's limits. What can be said at this stage is only that the contrast is built into the album's structure rather than incidental to it, and that Chang's survival, examined on its own terms and independent of what Tintin does to find him, answers to *wu wei* more exactly than to any term the narrative's own characters use to describe it.

The Crisis Behind the Page

The dream that opens *Tintin in Tibet* did not begin with Tintin. It began with Hergé. Between 1958–59, he was suffering from recurring nightmares of his own, dreams saturated with an overwhelming, suffocating whiteness that left him unable to work (Assouline, 2009, p. 188–90). Hergé consulted Franz Ricklin, scholar of Carl Jungian ideology and teaching, who connected the nightmares to a crisis that Hergé had been secretly battling, an unhappy marriage with his first wife Germaine and a new and deepening attachment to Fanny Vlamynck, a young colourist at his studio. Ricklin told Hergé that Tintin's character's relentless purity and unblemished heroism, had become harmful to him, a demon of purity. Whereas Hergé's internal dilemmas are no longer in sync with the character, Tintin. Leading to psychological troubles, Ricklin advised him to stop his work to fight his demons (Assouline, 2009, p. 191). Hergé abandoned two other projects he had been developing, a science fiction story and a story set among Native Americans, and turned to the album that would become *Tintin in Tibet* (Assouline, 2009, p. 186–88). This work can also be called his most personal work, and Farr's independent account of the same period confirms both the breakdown and the consultation with Ricklin in essentially the same terms (Farr, 2001, p. 162). While one can assume that Hergé described the album's whiteness, the same whiteness that had haunted his nightmares, as something he needed to draw his way through rather than around.

It is in this period that Hergé's reading turns toward what his biographer calls Oriental philosophy, texts that affected him, the account specifies, morally and philosophically rather than spiritually, with his attention settling in particular on Taoism and on revelations foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition in which he had been raised (Assouline, 2009, p. 185). It does not establish that Hergé read the *Daode jing* or the *Zhuangzi* in any translation. Neither once can claim that he understood or developed *wu wei* or *ziran* as technical terms, that he set out to encode Daoist doctrine into the album he was drawing. The biographical record supports a narrower and more useful claim: that while composing the *Tintin in Tibet* album, which is built around a dream that turns out to be true, a vision that turns out to be accurate, and a creature that doesn't fall into any category, its author was, by his own testimony and his biographer's independent corroboration, in active flight from the rationalist and Judeo-Christian frameworks he had inherited, and reading toward Taoism as part of that flight. The convergence between what Hergé was doing to himself and what Tintin does in the album, are in sync. Both were surrendering a settled, evidence-based relationship with the world in favour of one he cannot fully justify. Such similarities between the creator and the creations is too exact to set aside as coincidence, even though it falls well short of proving direct textual influence.

The album's famous whiteness deserves to be read against this history rather than only against its visual function. The Himalayan snowscape that dominates nearly every page is rendered, panel after panel, in the same unbroken white that had been filling Hergé's nightmares (Assouline, 2009, p. 190). The *ligne claire* visual grammar that renders this snowscape with such affectless clarity is itself, as Beaty notes, an institutionally standardised style designed to make every setting equally legible to a Western child audience (Beaty, 2007). Casey's reading of the album draws on Heidegger and on the art historian McCarthy's account of white mythology to treat this whiteness as a confrontation with nothingness, the blank page and the blank mountain figuring a kind of existential ground zero from which the narrative's meaning has to be built (Casey, 2017). The present argument does not need to adjudicate between a Heideggerian and a Daoist register for this whiteness, since the two are not exclusive; what matters here is that the whiteness was not, for Hergé, primarily a formal or symbolic choice available for any of several readings with equal warrant. It was, in the most literal sense, the medium of his own unresolved crisis, transferred from his dreams directly onto the page, at the exact moment his reading was turning toward a tradition that treats the unnameable and the formless as the condition out of which everything nameable proceeds (Lao Tzu, trans. 1967, p. 57).

During the production of *Tintin in Tibet*, another major event remained excluded entirely from the album, which later became an historical event for Tibet and the world. Farr's account evidently places the album's production directly alongside the 1949 Lhasa uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight into exile in 1959, as the Chinese government's consolidated control over Tibet, events that were unfolding in the international press while Hergé drew (Farr, 2001, p. 162). Hergé's research for the album drew on Alexandra David-Neel's ethnographic writings, depiction of monastery life, the chortens that mark the mountain paths, and the custom of sticking out the tongue to greet visitors, and the album also takes inspiration or source images from Bernard Heuvelmans's cryptozoological research for the Yeti itself (Farr, 2001, pp. 164–165). The Tibet of *Tintin in Tibet* is a landscape of monasteries, sherpas, and Yeti, an unclassifiable creature in the snow. For Hergé *Tintin in Tibet* was still not a country that was in the process of losing its sovereign government to a foreign power, even though that loss was the prevailing Tibetan news story of the exact two years in which Hergé was drawing the album, *Tintin in Tibet*. The album's Daoist opening and its political silence are products of the same act of selection. Hergé reached for Taoism and for David-Neel's monasteries because both served the personal and aesthetic crisis he was experiencing, and the real Tibet of 1959, a Tibet under occupation rather than a Tibet of timeless spiritual authority, served neither.

A documented, biographically attested turn toward Daoist thought genuinely distinguishes this album from the generic Western mysticism Bishop's Shangri-La thesis identifies across a much wider body of Tibetan travel writing (Lahiri, 2023); Hergé's whiteness, his dream, and his refusal of his own

rationalist inheritance were not invented for marketing purposes or borrowed wholesale from prior fantasies of the East, but lived first and drawn second. At the same time, the very personal urgency that gave the album its unusual seriousness is what made the actual political fate of Tibet dispensable to it. Hergé needed a wilderness in which to dramatise his own crisis and a tradition through which to begin imagining his way out of it. He did not need, and the album does not supply, the Tibet that was simultaneously losing its independence in the newspapers he must have read. Whether the album's partial Daoism survives this exclusion, or is itself a symptom of the same selective attention that left the Chinese annexation off the page, is the question the final section of analysis takes up directly.

The Limits of the Album's Daoist Turn

Chang's *wu wei*

Tintin's refusal to subject his conviction to evidence is vindicated completely, but vindication converts immediately into its opposite becomes a clearest case. Once the narrative has granted that Tintin was right to trust an unverifiable intuition, it does not ask him to remain in a posture of receptive trust. It sends him onto a glacier roped to Haddock, up a cliff face no sherpa will attempt, through a blizzard that nearly kills them both. All of it builds into the sequence of escalating physical risk that the genre codes, and rewards, as heroism. The single Daoist gesture at the album's opening, an acceptance of *xuan*, knowledge that exceeds articulation becomes the eternal power that licenses the next ninety pages of the most conventional adventure-comic agency that Hergé created and spent three decades perfecting. Tintin's epistemological humility is real but momentary, a permission slip for the will to act rather than a standing orientation the album asks him to sustain.

The album's most fully Daoist moment on its own terms is the Blessed Lightning's vision. It is superior power that channel knowledge, arriving by no stated mechanism, in a being with no access to the newspaper report or the dream that prompted Tintin's journey. The narrative does not treat the vision as authoritative but treats the vision as confirmation of Tintin's prior conviction, a second witness called to corroborate testimony already given, rather than an independent source the album would have trusted on its own had Tintin never dreamed at all. The monastery validates the Western boy; the structure of validation runs in one direction only, and Said's account of positional superiority, the relation in which the Westerner is always in a relation of strength, never of weakness, with the Oriental he confronts (Said, 1978, p. 7), describes this asymmetry exactly, down to its persistence inside a sequence the album otherwise stages as a Tibetan triumph over Western disbelief.

Chang's case carries the same structure further, because his *wu wei* is reported rather than narrated as it happens. The album does not dramatise Chang's months alone with the Yeti in real time; it withholds that account until Tintin and Haddock find him, and lets Chang deliver it retrospectively, from inside the safety the rescue has already secured. His wondering aloud whether the Yeti has a human soul, the line this paper has treated as the album's closest approach to Zhuangzi's refusal to foreclose another being's interior life, is voiced only once Chang himself has been extracted from any relation to that interior life that might cost him something to maintain. He can afford the wonder because he is already safe, and the narrative builds that cocoon through the dynamic hero, Tintin, so that Chang's one moment of advocacy for the Yeti coincides purely and innocently with the moment he no longer needs the Yeti's protection. Nodelman's thesis of the hidden adult, the hidden puppeteer that narrates a child's experience while remaining unseen and unquestioned (Nodelman, 1992), has an analogue here that exceeds the child-adult relation. Chang is permitted to his retrospective wonder, but the conditions of safety that make the wonder speakable are secured entirely by Tintin's intervention. This highlights that even the album's tenderest gesture toward the Yeti's possible interiority arrives authored by the rescue that ended the relationship it describes.

The Yeti's own narrative fate is the sharpest instance of containment in the album, because it is the point at which the text's own language admits what it is doing. Once Chang has been recovered, the Grand Abbot's earlier judgment that it would be better if your friend were dead, since the *migou* never surrenders his prey, is left unattended and unrevised. Hergé didn't bother to correct the monastery's

monstrous framing with Chang's gentler one, as the two were never brought into the same scene to be reconciled after the rescue. The final pages return the Yeti to the mountain alone, the narrative's closing note observes that he remains there, perhaps fated one day to be caught by some future expedition. This sentence undoes a great deal of what the preceding analysis has credited the album with achieving. The creature that resisted three successive taxonomies across the story, monster, drunkard, captor, is handed, in its very last appearance, a single deferred taxonomy that the narrative treats as merely a matter of time: not a being whose nature exceeds classification, but a specimen not yet classified. The untaxonomised remainder is named as a remainder explicitly, and a remainder, the word itself concedes, is what is left over once the main accounting has been completed, available for whichever future ledger has room for it. Zhuangzi at the Hao River lets the fish's happiness stand unresolved because the question of access was shown to be malformed from the start. Hergé's final line does not show this. It treats the Yeti's nature as a fact still pending discovery, which is a very different thing from a fact permanently beyond the reach of discovery, and the difference is the entire distance between Zhuangzi's ontology and the album's last word on the creature that came closest to enacting it.

This pattern of opening and closure has a counterpart at the level of the album's setting that the preceding section's biographical account makes legible. The Tibet that hosts Tintin's dream, the lama's vision, and the Yeti's irreducibility is available for these gestures precisely because it has been emptied of the political crisis that was unfolding in it as Hergé drew. Goswami's account of the Western literary construction of Tibet identifies precisely this kind of emptying as the genre's recurring procedure, in which Tibet is rendered legible to a Western readership only by being lifted out of the contemporaneous political history that would complicate its function as a site of timeless wisdom (Goswami, 2023, as cited in Lahiri, 2023). Bishop's earlier account of the Shangri-La myth, summarised in Lahiri's review as the Western construction of Tibet as a timeless repository of spiritual wisdom standing outside ordinary history (Bishop, 1989, as cited in Lahiri, 2023), describes exactly the kind of space *Tintin in Tibet* requires for its Daoist gestures to register as mystical rather than as merely strange. Said's imaginative geography, the arbitrary line that divides ours from theirs and licenses the one side to speak for the other (Said, 2003, pp. 54–55), draws this line around the album's Tibet at the level of plot and at the level of history. A Tibet undergoing Chinese annexation, its monasteries facing destruction, its religious leadership in flight, would not easily support a narrative in which a Western boy's dream is vindicated by an ancient and undisturbed spiritual order. Tibet is permitted to validate Tintin's intuition but not to possess a contemporaneous political reality of its own, and the album shows no sign of registering these two silences as connected. The timelessness that makes Blessed Lightning's vision feel authoritative rather than incongruous is the same timelessness that made the Lhasa uprising omittable. The present analysis suggests they are the same silence operating at two different scales.

Tintin in Tibet achieves a Daoist epistemology nor that it is merely one more instance of generic Orientalist mysticism indistinguishable from the Shangri-La tradition Bishop describes. The album does something more specific and more interesting than either alternative. It enacts with seriousness which is traceable to Hergé's own documented crisis and his own documented turn toward Taoism. A genuine suspension of Western rational and taxonomic authority, repeatedly and at real narrative cost, since each suspension requires the album to let its hero, its rescued friend, and its most sympathetic Tibetan authority all be wrong by the standards the story itself has trained its reader to trust. Breaking the pattern, the album closes every suspension it opens in its journey and closes them by the end through adopting exactly the same mechanism each time: by converting epistemological humility into physical conquest, by deferring a character's testimony until it can no longer cost that character anything, and by holding the political reality that would have made its mysticism untenable permanently outside the frame. The Daoist opening is real and the containment is total. These two facts do not cancel each other; they describe an album that came closer than its genre, its period, or its author's own conscious, and stopped exactly where its narrative architecture demanded.

CONCLUSION

What does it change to know that Hergé was reading toward Taoism while he drew the one *Tintin* album built around an unverifiable dream, a vindicated vision, and a creature no taxonomy can hold? The preceding analysis suggests that it changes the kind of failure the album represents, even though it does not rescue the album from failing. A text that arrives at its Orientalist closures by way of borrowed exoticism, the generic Shangri-La furniture Bishop's scholarship finds across a century of Western Tibetan fantasy (Lahiri, 2023), fails in a manner this paper has not needed to argue for at length, since the failure is the genre's own and well documented elsewhere. *Tintin in Tibet* fails differently, and more instructively, because its containments are not the absence of genuine engagement with an alternative epistemology but the limit of that engagement once the engagement was real. Hergé did not need to invent a feeling of mystical otherness to fill out an adventure plot. He brought an actual, biographically documented crisis to the page, read toward an actual philosophical tradition in the course of living that crisis, and produced a narrative that suspends Western rational and taxonomic authority with a seriousness the genre did not require of him. It is not, then, the failure of a writer who only looked within his tradition, that the album should not have made it possible for Tintin to be left in a receptive doubt, instead of leaving him converted into a vindication and a conquest, instead of leaving Chang to wonder at the Yeti's irreducibility, instead of leaving it as a "pending taxonomy", instead of letting the contemporary political catastrophe of Tibet into a story that is set inside of it. It's the failure of one who looked, and took in some of it, and constructed a story line that never could contain what his own crisis had opened.

The difference is important when considering the study of Western cultural documents that assert, either explicitly or as part of their biographical record, some inheritance from Chinese philosophical tradition. In such cases, the temptation is in two directions and this paper has been an effort to stave them off. One temptation is to assume, even if such an assumption is warranted, as is the case here, that the biographical debt itself should be considered sufficient justification for reading the text as an authentic vehicle for transmission of Daoist thought; this temptation should be avoided, as Lai cautions in his cautionary warning against projecting modern concerns onto classical sources (Lai, 2008). The other temptation, which is perhaps more popular in postcolonial criticism, is to assume that any Western text that is in contact with Asian material is necessarily Orientalist, and to assume that the question of how it philosophically engages is closed once it has been called Orientalist. *Tintin in Tibet* demonstrates the folly of either. Tibet is timeless, not just claimed but shown to be so—this paper has said so, and in a manner this chapter has outlined—in the album, without politics; and the Tibetan and Chinese characters validate or are rescued but don't narrate; and at the end of the album, for the chapter's best moments at least, the Yeti is returned to a category that the chapter's worst moments had withheld. But, independently of this discovery, the album is a narrative that was formed by an author who was known to have been fleeing in history from his own rationalist and judeo-Christian roots, moving toward Taoism as an expression of this flight, and this moving narrative rides the danger, albeit fleetingly, of showing this reaching. Neither description is entirely correct or incorrect of the same eighty pages, but the critical task that has been more interesting is the one of holding them together and this paper has attempted to show that this is the critical task.

At the conclusion of the album, the Yeti is found on the mountain, crying at a goodbye that he had not selected, by the last word of the story about him, not as a new kind of being, but as a creature not yet trapped. The rephrased, safe, and delayed question, by Chang, is left unanswered. In the album's answer to Zhuangzi's rejection at the Hao River to have a question about another's inner life answered from outside that other's place, Tintin says, who knows. It is also, on the reading this paper has advanced, the last and smallest of the album's suspensions, offered by a hero who has already secured his friend, already descended the mountain, and already returned to the world that does not require him to keep wondering. The untaxonomised remainder is named, suspended, and then set aside, available, the text itself concedes, for whatever expedition comes next. *Tintin in Tibet* does not resolve what it raises. It is, in this respect, more honest than many Orientalist texts manage to be, and

considerably less honest than the philosophical tradition it gestures toward would have required.

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