

a space to which these essays make this reader want to return again soon.
(SUSAN RUDY)

John Z. Ming Chen. *The Influence of Daoism on
Asian-Canadian Writers*

Edwin Mellen. xxiv, 272. US\$109.95

The Chinese philosophy of Daoism has a 2500-year history, beginning with the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*, or Book of Changes), which influenced centuries of Chinese literature and culture. John Z. Ming Chen argues that the heritage of Daoism, with its emphasis on harmony and balance and its 'holistic view of the world as a living system,' can be found as well in contemporary Canada, in the work of writers of Chinese descent. Chinese-Canadian writing, in Chen's view, extends the Daoist strain in Chinese culture, adapting it to the situation of the Chinese in Canada and employing Daoist ideas to critique Canada's politics, its aesthetics, and its history of racism.

Chen traces the presence of 'Daoist' motifs in a wide range of Chinese-Canadian authors, including SKY Lee, Fred Wah, Larissa Lai, Wayson Choy, and Jim Wong-Chu. Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* combines a searing portrait of the overwhelmingly male 'bachelor society' created by discriminatory immigration laws with a feminist focus on the stories of Chinese-Canadian women. Chen reads this text as an illustration of the Daoist principle of yin and yang, which seeks balance between male and female. The prevalence of moon imagery in the work of Choy and others is read by Chen as another gesture of balance, 'a celebration of the hidden, of the dark . . . and of the less visible and hence marginalized and trivialized in dominant culture and/or discourse.' Images of mountains, water, gardens, and fields are evidence of a Daoist concern with harmony with the natural world. Finally, Chen identifies circular and repetitive motifs in the work of Wah, Lai, and Wong-Chu with the Daoist idea that 'circles and cycles lead to positivity, productivity, and creativity,' in contrast to Western notions of progress.

Chen offers a useful explication of Daoist concepts that enriches the cultural context for reading Chinese-Canadian writing. Nonetheless, *The Influence of Daoism* displays the shortcomings common to many thematic studies. By choosing a motif such as moon or water imagery and then offering a catalog of works that display such imagery, Chen gives a tautological quality to his analysis. More seriously, Chen leaves unanswered the question of why themes such as male/female relations or repetition should be considered distinctively 'Daoist.' Chen occasionally advances useful evidence that his authors possess knowledge of Daoism or of Chinese literature and philosophy. But more often he adopts the essentializing position that Daoism is 'born and bred in

[the authors'] Chinese Canadian upbringing and culture,' viewing Chinese-Canadian culture as unproblematically continuous with Chinese culture and positing Daoism as the essence of Chinese thought. This overlooks the pressures of immigration, assimilation, and hybridity that have been the subject of much work in the field of Asian North American studies. And at times Chen's Daoist framework leads to rather puzzling interpretations of texts. Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* is a scathing indictment of Canadian racism, showing how the policy of Chinese exclusion created an isolated community with few women that was 'ripe for incest.' To assert, as Chen does, that Lee's larger point is to illustrate 'the fundamental importance of yin/yang balance' might seem to undermine the historical specificity that gives Lee's work its power.

The book is described as a study of 'Asian-Canadian writers,' but, curiously, only writers of Chinese descent are discussed. Chen also adopts the label 'Chinadian' for Chinese-Canadian writing, borrowing the title of *Chinada: Memoirs of the Gang of Seven*, a text by Gary Geddes and other white Canadian writers who travelled to China in the 1980s. However, the label 'Chinadian' is not generally used by Chinese-Canadian authors to describe their own work, and Chen's adoption of the term risks absorbing the distinctive perspectives of Chinese-Canadian authors into a more generalized image of China produced by Western scholarship and the Canadian mainstream. The case for a Chinese-Canadian literary Daoism might be more persuasive were this book to have linked more closely the useful cultural contexts it identifies to the unique history of the Chinese in Canada. (TIMOTHY YU)

Erika Gottlieb. *Becoming My Mother's Daughter:
A Story of Survival and Renewal*
Wilfrid Laurier University Press. x, 166. \$24.95

Wilfrid Laurier University Press's Life Writing Series has become one of the most important venues for publishing original works of autobiography and memoir. The books are often about Canadian experiences written by Canadian authors, but many recount stories that also take place elsewhere. Holocaust memoirs are an especially important feature of the Life Writing Series, and Erika Gottlieb's *Becoming My Mother's Daughter* is a superb addition. Gottlieb was an established author, literary critic, and visual artist whose education and career traversed Hungary, Austria, and Canada. *Becoming My Mother's Daughter* tells of her experiences as a member of a Jewish family in wartime Hungary and her eventual emigration to Canada. At its heart is the account of the final months of the war told from the perspective of six-year-old 'Eva,' the author's literary alter ego. It is winter 1944, and