

DAODE JING (TAO TE CHING)

Russell Kirkland, "The Book of the Way." *Copyright:* Ian P. McGreal, ed., *Great Literature of the Eastern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 24-29. *Used by permission*

Alternate Title: *Laozi (Lao-tzu)*

Date: ca. 300 BCE

Major Themes:

There is an enduring natural reality known as the Tao, which gives life to all things.

The Tao exemplifies wu-wei ("non-action"), a behavior characterizable as benign non-involvement, illustrated through images of unassuming life-giving forces like water and the mother.

Humans have digressed from the Tao, and need to return to it, thereby attaining individual success and socio-cosmic harmony.

One returns to the Tao by foregoing foolish interventional schemes (like those of the Confucians), practicing instead the behaviors exemplified by the Tao.

The *Daode jing* is an ancient Chinese example of wisdom literature. It is the most well-known work of Chinese literature, and possibly the most well-known work of any non-Western civilization. It is known throughout the world, for it has been translated into every major language on earth, and into many minor ones. There are over a hundred versions in English alone. In fact, the *Daode jing* has been translated more often into more languages than any other work in history except the Bible. And like the Bible, it was the product of a complex compositional process, the unravelling of which is still ongoing among scholars.

The Nature of the Daode jing

The *Daode jing* is a relatively brief text, just over five thousand characters long. Its form is part poetry, part prose. At the opening of the Han dynasty at the end of the third century BCE, the text was commonly circulated in two sections, one labelled *Dao* and the other labelled *De*; some scholars believe that those divisions were just a matter of convenience in storage. In the Mawangdui manuscripts (discovered by archaeologists in the 1970s), the *De* chapters precede the *Dao* chapters; in the more familiar edition of Wang Bi (a commentator of the 3rd century CE), the two sections are reversed (chapters 1-37 being *Dao* and 38-81 being *De*). Since the first century BCE, the text has generally been divided into eighty-one chapters. Today's readers should bear in mind that these divisions may not have been present in the "original" text, and it is by no means clear that any real meaning should be read into them.

At first glance, the *Daode jing* is a jumble of unrelated sayings. Some have concluded that the unknown person(s) who collected the sayings imposed no structure upon the resulting text. Others have argued that no one would have been likely to have composed so formless a text, so we should conclude that it did in fact once possess a coherent structure, which was subsequently lost. A few scholars have speculated that the text once became deranged when the strings binding the ancient bamboo strips came undone, but such imaginings do not withstand critical analysis. A number of twentieth-century scholars, Chinese and Western alike, have taken the peculiar liberty of reorganizing the text itself. Such rearrangements are often little more than an arbitrary imposition of the interpreter's own perspective onto the text, and they sometimes destroy subtle vestiges of meaningful order already present within it. Much more misleading to readers, however, is the unending flow of pseudo-translations by fatuous dilettantes, who delude themselves and the public into a false belief that they have a true understanding of the text.

The "Authorship" of the Daode jing

Until recent centuries, the *Daode jing* was almost universally accepted as the creation of an ancient Chinese wise man known as Laozi (whence the other name by which it is commonly known). That attribution gradually came to be challenged by Chinese scholars, and in the 20th century it became subjected to increasing criticism by Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars alike. The traditional attribution rests ultimately upon the reports of the historian Sima Qian (Ssu-ma Ch'ien) in his *Shiji* (*Shih-chi*), composed ca. 100 BCE. By ancient standards, Sima was a conscientious historian, and his annals are generally trustworthy. But when he attempted to sketch the lives of the great thinkers of ancient China, he ran across a problem: there was no trustworthy data in his day regarding the identity of the author of the *Daode jing*. Consequently, he provided several conflicting identifications, admitting ultimately that he had no way to decide among them. According to the most famous account, "Laozi" had been a man named Lao Dan, an archivist for the Zhou ruling house from whom Confucius had sought advice about propriety (*li*). Other sources indicate that Confucius may indeed have met someone named Lao Dan, but the evidence suggests that that person had nothing to do with "Taoist thought," much less with the *Daode jing* itself. The most recent scholarship suggests that someone of the 3rd century concocted the fiction of Lao Dan as the *Daode jing's* "author" in an effort to lend it the lustre of a learned man in royal service, whom even Confucius had respected and sought to learn from. Yet, the mistaken belief that the *Daode jing* was written by a wise man named "Laozi" endures. Readers should bear firmly in mind that in reality such notions rank with the attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses or the book of *Proverbs* to Solomon.

It is possible that some of the ideas found in the *Daode jing* may have begun to take form sometime during the general period in which Confucius lived. But scholars today, in the West and in Asia alike, generally agree that the actual text of the *Daode jing* is a much later product. In actuality, the *Daode jing* first appeared sometime during the early 3rd century BCE. In fact, it was certainly later than the writings of Zhuang Zhou (Chuang Chou), the 4th-century author of the earliest sections of the "Taoist" work named for him, the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-tzu*).

The Teachings of the *Daode jing*

The focus of the *Daode jing* is something called "the Tao (or Dao)," a term that cannot adequately be translated. The text says that the Tao is "vague and subtle," and it never provides definitions. Instead, it employs metaphors to suggest the nature of the Tao, and to describe behaviors that are similar to its way of working. Most basically, the term Tao seems to denote a natural force that runs through all things and guides them through their natural course of development. It is an inexhaustible source of life and power, and is constantly at work in the world in subtle and imperceptible ways. Both its reality and its nature can be perceived by observing the world around us. However, most people have lost sight of the Tao, and have given way to unnatural behaviors that go contrary to it. The goal of the *Daode jing* is to persuade the reader to abandon those behaviors, and to learn once again how to live in accord with the true course of life. One can achieve those goals by appreciating the true nature of life, and modifying one's behavior to be more like that of the Tao.

Specifically, the Tao is humble, yielding, and non-assertive. Like a mother, it benefits others selflessly: it gives us all life and guides us safely through it, asking nothing in return. This altruistic emphasis of the *Daode jing* has seldom been noticed, but it is one of the most important lessons that it draws from the observation of the natural world. Water, for instance, is the gentlest and most yielding of all things, yet it can overcome the strongest substances, and cannot itself be destroyed. More importantly, however, water lives for others: it provides the basis of life for all things, and asks nothing in return. If we learn to live like water does, we will be living in accord with the Tao, and its Power (*De*) will carry us safely through life. Such a way of life is called *wuwei*, usually translated as "non-action." *Wuwei* means foregoing all activity intended to effect desired ends. Instead, one should follow one's natural course and allow all other things to do likewise, lest our willful interference disrupt things' proper flow. Few modern readers have ever grasped the full radicality of the ideal of *wuwei*. Many of us today (like the ancient Chinese Confucians and Mohists) look at the world and see things that we think need correcting. The *Daode jing* would actually have us do nothing whatsoever about them. The repeated phrase "do nothing, and nothing will be undone" admonishes us to trust the Tao -- the natural working of things -- and never to do anything about anything. Actually, such is the most that anyone can do, because the Tao -- as imperceptible as it is -- is the most powerful force in existence, and nothing can thwart its unceasing operation.

The Origins of the *Daode jing*

Probably the most common mistake people make when trying to understand the *Daode jing* is that of assuming that it represents a uniform system of thought that evolved in the mind of a single person. In reality, the *Daode jing* is unquestionably the result of a long process of development, the contours of which can be reasonably deduced by combining analysis of the work's form and contents with a knowledge of the social and intellectual history of ancient China. Only by understanding how the *Daode jing* evolved can one truly understand its contents. The *Daode jing* can best be compared to works of "wisdom literature" like the Biblical book of *Proverbs*. In other words, its primary purpose is to provide the reader with profound advice about how to live his life. Oddly, this simple fact is seldom appreciated. Many have misinterpreted the *Daode jing* as a philosophical treatise, or as just another manifestation of a universal mystical wisdom. Such interpretations misconstrue the fundamental nature of the work. The key to understanding the *Daode jing* is that it had a unique textual history: current research suggests that it originated in the real-life oral wisdom teachings of a local community, and was then transformed by anonymous editors into an expression of sociopolitical principles designed to compete with those of the Confucians and Legalists.

Some scholars today continue to read the *Daode jing* as the product of ancient Chinese intellectuals, members of the same social elite that produced the Confucians and many of the leading spokesmen for other schools of thought. Just as texts like the *Mozi*, for instance, show dissatisfaction with the Confucian perspective, so does the *Daode jing*. So, the reasoning of some scholars goes, it too must have been the work of "alienated idealists" trying to critique existing social and political conditions. But such sociopolitical positions, though clearly present in the *Daode jing*, really seem to have little to do with its most basic themes, such as the reality of the force called "the Tao." Nor does the text's sociopolitical slant seem to harmonize well with its most emphasized lesson for human life -- that one should emulate the Tao by playing no active role in human affairs. If one were really to practice *wuwei*, as the *Daode jing* says a true Sage does, wouldn't one just live one's own life, in accord with the natural order, completely ignoring the social and political "issues" of the day? Yet, the *Daode jing* contains

many chapters dedicated to demonstrating how a Sage can rule a nation or even fight a war. That irony actually gives us clear indication of the *Daode jing's* textual history: once a collection of teachings for personal life in accord with the deepest order of reality, the collection was transformed into a tract designed to have a sociopolitical relevance.

The best explanation for those facts seems to be as follows. At some point prior to 300 BCE there was a community somewhere in ancient China (quite possibly in the southern state of Chu) that passed down a tradition of homespun wisdom. Originally, that wisdom consisted of such "real-life" advice as parents and other elders in any culture normally provide orally to young people: behave in a wise and healthy way, and you'll have a full and comfortable life, free from conflict or unexpected suffering. Here we can appreciate why neither Sima Qian nor anyone else in 3rd-2nd century China could identify the wise man supposedly designated by the term *laozi*. Far from having been a personal name, the term *lao* here has its usual, everyday meaning of "aged." It was a Japanese scholar, Kimura Eiichi, who first argued that *laozi* was not originally a title for some wise "Master Lao," but rather a generic reference to "the old ones" from whom anyone in any culture receives one's earliest and most important lessons in life. What set this particular tradition apart from the normal wisdom of any other community was that some of its participants had evidently meditated upon the world's workings to the point of perceiving a universal force, which could be experienced by deep introspection. Thus, the key to the oral tradition that constituted the wisdom of "the old ones" (*laozi*) was that we should learn to perceive that reality and, by focussing upon it, to return to our "natural" behaviors, living a quiet life of humble beneficence, giving selflessly to others, as a mother does. This tradition, one should note, was not the product of any social or intellectual elite: it was the accumulated wisdom of generations of old folk (probably women and men alike), passed down to each generation in a small-scale rural community. For convenience, we may refer to that tradition as the teachings of "the Laoist community."

But ancient China had been undergoing radical sociocultural changes since the 7th century BCE, and by the 4th century those changes were accelerating ever more rapidly: political disintegration was accompanied by rapid economic change and the decay of certain social values and traditions. In certain locales, especially around political centers in the north, members of the emerging *shi* class began formulating new analyses of what was going wrong with society, and recommendations for rectifying the

wretched state of affairs. That class included such 5th-century teachers as Confucius and his critic Mozi (Mo-tzu), and Confucius' 4th-century defender Mencius (Mengzi). Each of those men argued that the state of the world could be rectified by the activity of a self-selecting elite of wise and dedicated individuals: they would learn to exemplify a proper set of virtues, to lead the world back to the sociopolitical harmony that it had supposedly enjoyed in the days of the ancient sage-kings.

Circumstantial evidence suggests toward the end of the 4th century, young people from the Laoist community arrived in one of the newly emerging political centers, and became interested in the debates that were raging among the *shi* intellectuals around the rulers' courts. They compared the intellectuals' sociopolitical arguments with the teachings of their own traditional heritage, and developed the radical idea that the "old folks'" teachings about *wuwei* and the natural order could be applied to the problems with which the intellectuals were so concerned. They then wrote down the memorable lessons of the "old ones" and added passages to explain how *wuwei* could enable a ruler to bring peace and order to his land. Other passages were added to address other issues current among the "intellectual elite" of the day, such as warfare. The resulting text -- a combination of traditional oral wisdom and unprecedented sociopolitical doctrines -- was then promulgated among intellectuals, identified only as the teachings of *laozi* -- "the venerable elders." The intellectuals failed to understand that term, and assumed that the text must have been the name of some thinker, just like *Mozi* or *Mengzi*. By the middle of the 3rd century, the ideas found in it came to fascinate a large segment of the intelligentsia, and thinkers of every stripe, including Confucians and even Legalists, began to incorporate those ideas into their own teachings.

Later, in Han times, librarians who faced the need to catalogue the multifarious pre-Han texts grouped together certain works that seemed to share similar themes. Thus the text called *Laozi* came to be classed together with writings like those of Zhuang Zhou and his followers under the rubric of *daoia*. Later generations reified that library classification into a "school of thought," now familiar to Asians and Westerners alike as "the Taoists." Admiring Han emperors dignified the text then known as *Laozi* with the honorific title *jing*, "classic," which in earlier times had been reserved for the early Zhou texts that the Confucians promoted. Since the text in those days was kept in two sections, *Dao* and *De*, the resulting "classic" was denominated *Daode jing* (or, in the Mawangdui versions, *Dedao jing*).

The Relationship of Form and Contents in the *Daode jing*

The *Daode jing* as we have it today is not like any of the classical Chinese works with which people are generally familiar. It is not a collection of dialogues and pronouncements, like *Mencius* or the *Analects* of Confucius. Nor is it a set of reasoned arguments, like portions of the *Mozi* or *Xunzi*. The text that it most resembles is a little-known work of the same period called the *Neiyeh*, a text of some 1600 characters. The *Neiyeh* teaches the individual how to attract and internalize spiritual forces -- including forces called *dao* and *de* -- by means of a meditative process of quiescence and purification. The *Neiyeh* was influential in early Han times, but lost its prominence when it was incorporated into a collection called the *Guanzi* (*Kuan-tzu*) and ceased to circulate independently. The similarities of form and content between the *Neiyeh* and the *Daode jing* lead scholars today to believe that the editors of the *Daode jing* drew inspiration from the *Neiyeh*.

A notable feature of both texts is an absence of proper names and references to specific locations or events, whether historic or fictitious. Most other classical Chinese texts contain at least some traces of the compilers' own lives and the milieu in which they lived. Even the *Zhuangzi*, which shares a similar understanding of life, is radically different in style and structure: it records the profound and whimsical reflections of a brilliant mind upon problems of human life, but it also tells stories, in which real or fictive characters wrestle with life's mysteries. The *Daode jing* tells no stories and mentions no characters. It contains only vague references to "the Sage," "the ancients," or "the lord of ten thousand chariots." It thus seems that its editors deliberately constructed a text that could never be connected to any specific place or person, or to any identifiable intellectual tradition. One could infer that they intended to obscure the origins of the collected material. But more likely, they were employing a literary device to have a specific effect upon the reader: because one is confronted directly and immediately with provocative and cryptic sayings, and never distracted by references to what anyone else has ever thought or done, one's focus is always upon oneself, and upon the world in general. This focus induces the reader not only to cultivate the desired values and behaviors, but to perceive his true reality to be grounded in the natural order and in the cosmos as a whole, rather than in any historical particularities.

Clearly, part of the final editor's goal was very much like that of Zhuang Zhou's school -- to force the reader to come to terms with a startling new perception of his own reality. For instance, ancient proverbs (from the "Laoist" tradition and possibly elsewhere) were cast in an unexpected new context, twisting the reader's frame of reference in order to stimulate a radically new perspective upon reality. In part, this device was a deliberate exploitation of the fact that the reader of the text was ignorant of the oral tradition of the ancient "Laoist" community: aphorisms the meaning of which may have once been explained in person by local elders were now context-free. The editor sometimes provided a new context by "explaining" the adage. But he often left meaningful gaps, juxtaposing passages that had no readily apparent connection. He thus requires the reader to make leaps of comprehension. The result is a text the "meaning" of which was designed to be a *process*: coming to understand it takes many re-readings, in which one comes to perceive entire new levels of meaning. The *Daode jing's* method of teaching thus parallels and reinforces its content, and understanding one sheds light upon the other. In addition, by leaving the reader to make his own connection, the *Daode jing* appeals to readers on different levels: no matter the reader's level of sensitivity or understanding, he is drawn in, receiving a challenge that is suited to his present state of awareness, yet being led ever further into new levels of understanding. It is these qualities as much as the *Daode jing's* ideas about life that enthralled centuries of Chinese readers, and continues to have the same effect on readers throughout the world today.

Further Reading

- Boltz, Judith Magee, "Lao-tzu." In *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 8:454-59. A thorough critical exploration of the figure "Laozi" throughout Chinese history, by a reliable, well-informed specialist.
- Chan, Wing-tsit, trans., *The Way of Lao Tzu*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963. A substantial presentation of the text, with copious notes from both traditional commentaries and modern

studies by Asian and Western scholars. The translation is occasionally skewed by Chan's Neo-Confucian bent, but his examination of the text's traditional attribution is of lasting value.

Graham, A. C., "The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan." In his *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 111-24.

Henricks, Robert G., trans., *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989. The new standard by one of the West's foremost authorities on the Mawangdui editions of the text.

LaFargue, Michael, *The Tao of the Tao te ching: A Translation and Commentary*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. An intriguing analysis by a non-sinologist who specializes in hermeneutic theory. While some of LaFargue's provocative ideas (like his rearrangement of the text) are debatable, his interpretive models are a significant contribution to our understanding of the text.

Lau, D. C., trans., *Chinese Classics: Tao Te Ching*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982. A revised edition of the most sober and substantial study of the *Daode jing* in the English language.

Waley, Arthur, trans., *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934. A influential study that served as the standard for thirty years.