

Tao Te Ching



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The *Tao Te Ching*,* [Note 1] *Daodejing*, *Dao De Jing*, or *Daode jing* (simplified Chinese: 道德经; traditional Chinese: 道德經; pinyin: *Dàodéjīng*), also simply referred to as the *Laozi* (Chinese: 老子; pinyin: *Lǎozǐ*),* [1]* [2]* [Note 2] is a Chinese classic text. The text's true authorship and date of composition or compilation are still debated.* [3] The oldest excavated portion dates back to the late 4th century BC,* [1] but modern scholarship dates the bulk of the text as having been written, or at least compiled later than the earliest portions of the *Zhuangzi*.* [4]

The *Tao Te Ching*, along with the *Zhuangzi*, is a fundamental text for both philosophical and religious Taoism, and strongly influenced other schools, such as Legalism, Confucianism, and Chinese Buddhism, which when first introduced into China was largely interpreted through the use of Daoist words and concepts. Many Chinese artists, including poets, painters, calligraphers, and even gardeners, have used the *Daodejing* as a source of inspiration. Its influence has also spread widely outside East Asia, and it is among the most translated works in world literature.* [1]

The Wade–Giles romanization "*Tao Te Ching*" dates back to early English transliterations in the late 19th century; its influence can be seen in words and phrases that have become well established in English. "*Daodejing*" is the pinyin romanization.

1 Text

The *Tao Te Ching* has a long and complex textual history. Known versions and commentaries date back two

millennia, including ancient bamboo, silk, and paper manuscripts discovered in the twentieth century.

1.1 Title

There are many possible translations of the book's title:

Dào/tao literally means “way,” or one of its synonyms, but was extended to mean “the Way.” This term, which was variously used by other Chinese philosophers (including Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, and Hanfeizi), has special meaning within the context of Taoism, where it implies the essential, unnamable process of the universe.

Dé/te means “virtue,” “personal character,” “inner strength” (virtuosity), or “integrity.” The semantics of this Chinese word resemble English *virtue*, which developed from the Italian *virtù*, a now-archaic sense of “inner potency” or “divine power” (as in “healing virtue of a drug”) to the modern meaning of “moral excellence” or “goodness.” Compare the compound word *taote* (Chinese: 道德; pinyin: *Dàodé*; literally: “ethics,” “ethical principles,” “morals,” or “morality”).

Jīng/chīng as it is used here means “canon,” “great book,” or “classic.”

Thus, *Tao Te Ching* can be translated as “The Classic of the Way's Virtues” or “The Book of the Way of Virtue.”

The title *Daodejing* is an honorific given by posterity, other titles include the amalgam *Lǎozǐ Dàodéjīng* (老子道德經), the honorific *Daode Zhen Jing* (道德真經 “True Classic of the Way and the Power”), and the *Wuqian wen* (五千文 “Five thousand character [classic]”).

1.2 Internal structure

The received *Tao Te Ching* is a short text of around 5,000 Chinese characters in 81 brief chapters or sections (章). There is some evidence that the chapter divisions were later additions—for commentary, or as aids to rote memorization—and that the original text was more fluidly organized. It has two parts, the *Tao Ching* (道經; chaps. 1–37) and the *Te Ching* (德經; chaps. 38–81), which may have been edited together into the received text, possibly reversed from an original “Te Tao Ching.” The written style is laconic, has few grammatical particles, and encourages varied, even contradictory interpretations. The ideas are singular; the style poetic. The rhetorical style

combines two major strategies: short, declarative statements and intentional contradictions. The first of these strategies creates memorable phrases, while the second forces us to create our own reconciliations of the supposed contradictions.*[5]

The Chinese characters in the original versions were probably written in *zhuànshū* (篆書 seal script), while later versions were written in *lishū* (隸書 clerical script) and *kǎishū* (楷書 regular script) styles. Daoist Chinese Characters contains a good summary of these different calligraphies.

1.3 Historical authenticity of the author

The *Tao Te Ching* is ascribed to Lao Tzu, whose historical existence has been a matter of scholastic debate. His name, which means “Old Master,” has only fueled controversy on this issue. (Kaltenmark 1969:10).



Lao Tzu

The first reliable reference to Laozi is his “biography” in *Shiji* (63, tr. Chan 1963:35–37), by Chinese historian Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BC), which combines three stories. First, Lao Tzu was a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BC). His surname was Li (李 “plum”), and his personal name was Er (耳 “ear”) or Dan (聃 “long ear”). He was an official in the imperial archives, and wrote a book in two parts before departing to the West. Second, Laozi was Lao Laizi (老來子 “Old Come Master”), also a contemporary of Confucius, who wrote a book in 15 parts. Third, Laozi was the Grand Historian and astrologer Lao Dan (老聃 “Old Long-ears”), who

lived during the reign (384–362 BC) of Duke Xian (獻公) of Qin).

Generations of scholars have debated the historicity of Laozi and the dating of the *Tao Te Ching*. Linguistic studies of the text’s vocabulary and rhyme scheme point to a date of composition after the *Shi Jing* yet before the *Zhuangzi*. Legends claim variously that Laozi was “born old”; that he lived for 996 years, with twelve previous incarnations starting around the time of the Three Sovereigns before the thirteenth as Laozi. Some Western scholars have expressed doubts over Lao Tzu’s historical existence, claiming that the *Tao Te Ching* is actually a collection of the work of various authors.

Many Taoists venerate Lao Tzu as *Daotsu* the founder of the school of Dao, the *Daode Tianjun* in the Three Pure Ones, one of the eight elders transformed from Taiji in the Chinese creation myth.

1.4 Principal versions

Among the many transmitted editions of the *Tao Te Ching* text, the three primary ones are named after early commentaries. The “Yan Zun Version,” which is only extant for the *Te Ching*, derives from a commentary attributed to Han Dynasty scholar Yan Zun (嚴遵, fl. 80 BC–10 CE). The “Heshang Gong Version” is named after the legendary Heshang Gong (河上公 “Riverside Sage”) who supposedly lived during the reign (180–157 BC) of Emperor Wen of Han. This commentary (tr. Erkes 1950, and Reid 2015) has a preface written by Ge Xuan (葛玄, 164–244 CE), granduncle of Ge Hong, and scholarship dates this version to around the 3rd century CE. The “Wang Bi Version” has more verifiable origins than either of the above. Wang Bi (王弼, 226–249 CE) was a famous Three Kingdoms period philosopher and commentator on the *Tao Te Ching* (tr. Lin 1977, Rump and Chan 1979) and the *I Ching*.

Tao Te Ching scholarship has lately advanced from archeological discoveries of manuscripts, some of which are older than any of the received texts. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, Marc Aurel Stein and others found thousands of scrolls in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang. They included more than 50 partial and complete “Tao Te Ching” manuscripts. One written by the scribe So/Su Dan (素統) is dated 270 AD and corresponds closely with the Heshang Gong version. Another partial manuscript has the Xiang'er (想爾) commentary, which had previously been lost.

1.5 Mawangdui and Guodian texts

In 1973, archeologists discovered copies of early Chinese books, known as the Mawangdui Silk Texts, in a tomb dating from 168 BC.*[1] They included two nearly complete copies of the text, referred to as Text A (甲) and

Text B (乙), both of which reverse the traditional ordering and put the *Te Ching* section before the *Tao Ching*, which is why the Henricks translation of them is named “Te-Tao Ching”. Based on calligraphic styles and imperial naming taboo avoidances, scholars believe that Text A can be dated to about the first decade and Text B to about the third decade of the 2nd century BC.* [6]

In 1993, the oldest known version of the text, written on bamboo tablets, was found in a tomb near the town of Guodian (郭店) in Jingmen, Hubei, and dated prior to 300 BC.* [1] The *Guodian Chu Slips* comprise about 800 slips of bamboo with a total of over 13,000 characters, about 2,000 of which correspond with the *Tao Te Ching*, including 14 previously unknown verses.

Both the Mawangdui and Guodian versions are generally consistent with the received texts, excepting differences in chapter sequence and graphic variants. Several recent *Tao Te Ching* translations (e.g., Lau 1989, Henricks 1989, Mair 1990, Henricks 2000, Allan and Williams 2000, and Roberts 2004) utilize these two versions, sometimes with the verses reordered to synthesize the new finds.

1.6 Written style

The *Tao Te Ching* was originally written in *zhuànshū* calligraphy style. It is difficult to obtain modern replicas of these styles except through specialty stores. Most modern versions use the newspaper print style *kǎishū*.

2 Interpretation and themes

The passages are ambiguous, and topics range from political advice for rulers to practical wisdom for people. Because the variety of interpretation is virtually limitless, not only for different people but for the same person over time, readers do well to avoid making claims of objectivity or superiority. Also, since the book is 81 short poems, there is little need for an abridgement.

2.1 Ineffability of genesis

The Way that can be told of is not an unvarying way;

The names that can be named are not unvarying names.

It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang;

The named is but the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind. (chap. 1, tr. Waley)

These famous first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* state that the Tao is ineffable, i.e., the Tao is nameless, goes beyond

distinctions, and transcends language. However this first verse does not occur in the earliest known version from the *Guodian Chu Slips* and there is speculation that it may have been added by later commentators.* [7] In Laozi's *Qingjing Jing* (verse 1-8) he clarified the term Tao was nominated as he was trying to describe a state of existence before it happened and before time or space. *Way* or *path* happened to be the side meaning of Tao, ineffability would be just poetic. This is the *Chinese creation myth* from the primordial Tao.

2.2 Mysterious female

The Valley Spirit never dies

It is named the Mysterious Female.

And the doorway of the Mysterious Female

Is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.

It is there within us all the while;

Draw upon it as you will; it never runs dry. (chap. 6, tr. Waley)

Like the above description of the ineffable Tao as “the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures”, the *Tao Te Ching* advocates “female” (or *Yin*) values, emphasizing the passive, solid, and quiescent qualities of nature (which is opposed to the active and energetic), and “having without possessing”. Waley's translation can also be understood as the *Esoteric Feminine* in that it can be known intuitively, that must be complemented by the masculine, “male” (or *Yang*), again amplified in *Qingjing Jing* (verse 9-13). Yin and Yang should be balanced, “Know masculinity, Maintain femininity, and be a ravine for all under heaven.” (chap. 28, tr. Mair)

2.3 Returning (union with the Primordial)

In Tao the only motion is returning.

The only useful quality, weakness.

For though all creatures under heaven are the products of Being,

Being itself is the product of Not-being. " (chap. 40, tr. Waley)

Another theme is the *eternal return*, or what Mair (1990:139) calls “the continual return of the myriad creatures to the cosmic principle from which they arose.”

There is a contrast between the rigidity of death and the weakness of life: “When he is born, man is soft and weak; in death he becomes stiff and hard. The ten thousand creatures and all plants and trees while they are alive are supple and soft, but when dead they become brittle and dry.” (chap. 76, tr. Waley). This is returning to the beginning of things, or to one's own childhood.

The *Tao Te Ching* focuses upon the beginnings of society, and describes a golden age in the past, comparable with the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Human problems arose from the “invention” of culture and civilization. In this idealized past, “the people should have no use for any form of writing save knotted ropes, should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, should take pleasure in their rustic tasks.” (chap. 80, tr. Waley)

2.4 Emptiness

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;

But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.

We turn clay to make a vessel;

But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.

We pierce doors and windows to make a house; And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.

Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not. (chap. 11, tr. Waley)

Philosophical vacuity is a common theme among Asian philosophical traditions including Taoism (especially *Wu wei* “effortless action”), Buddhism, and some aspects of Confucianism. One could interpret the *Tao Te Ching* as a suite of variations on the “Powers of Nothingness”. This predates the Buddhist *Shunyata* philosophy of “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” by half a millennium. Emptiness can mean having no fixed preconceptions, preferences, intentions, or agenda. Since “The Sage has no heart of his own; He uses the heart of the people as his heart.” (chap. 49, tr. Waley). From a ruler’s point of view, it is a *laissez-faire* approach:

So a wise leader may say:

“I practice inaction, and the people look after themselves.”

But from the Sage it is so hard at any price to get a single word

That when his task is accomplished, his work done,

Throughout the country every one says: “It happened of its own accord”. (chap. 17, tr. Waley)

2.5 Knowledge and humility

Knowing others is wisdom;

Knowing the self is enlightenment.

Mastering others requires force;

Mastering the self requires strength;

He who knows he has enough is rich.

Perseverance is a sign of will power.

He who stays where he is endures.

To die but not to perish is to be eternally present. (chap. 33, tr. Feng and English)

The *Tao Te Ching* praises self-gained knowledge with emphasis on that knowledge being gained with humility. When what one person has experienced is put into words and transmitted to others, so doing risks giving unwarranted status to what inevitably must have had a subjective tinge. Moreover, it will be subjected to another layer of interpretation and subjectivity when read and learned by others. This kind of knowledge (or “book learning”), like desire, should be diminished. “It was when intelligence and knowledge appeared that the Great Artifice began.” (chap. 18, tr. Waley) And so, “The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of Tao is to decrease the doing of the self day after day.” (chap. 48, tr. W. T. Chan)

3 Translations

The *Tao Te Ching* has been translated into Western languages over 250 times, mostly to English, German, and French.*[8] According to Holmes Welch, “It is a famous puzzle which everyone would like to feel he had solved.”*[9] The first known English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* was produced in 1868 by a Scottish Protestant missionary named John Chalmers, entitled *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity and Morality of The Old Philosopher Lau Tsze*. Other notable English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* are those produced by Chinese scholars and teachers: a 1948 translation by linguist Lin Yutang, a 1961 translation by author John Ching Hsiung Wu, a 1963 translation by sinologist Din Cheuk Lau, another 1963 translation by professor Wing-tsit Chan, and a 1972 translation by Taoist teacher Gia-Fu Feng together with his wife Jane English.

Many translations are written by people with a foundation in Chinese language and philosophy who are trying to render the original meaning of the text as faithfully as possible into English. Some of the more popular translations are written from a less scholarly perspective, giving an individual author’s interpretation. Critics of these versions, such as Taoism scholar Eugene Eoyang, claim that translators like Stephen Mitchell (who states explicitly that his version is not a translation) produce readings of the *Tao Te Ching* that deviate from the text and are incompatible with the history of Chinese thought.*[10] Russell Kirkland goes further to argue that these versions

are based on Western **Orientalist** fantasies, and represent the colonial appropriation of Chinese culture.* [11]* [12] In contrast, **Huston Smith**, scholar of world religions, said of the Mitchell version, “This translation comes as close to being definitive for our time as any I can imagine. It embodies the virtues its translator credits to the Chinese original: a gemlike lucidity that is radiant with humor, grace, largeheartedness, and deep wisdom.” Other Taoism scholars, such as Michael LaFargue* [13] and Jonathan Herman,* [14] argue that while they don't pretend to scholarship, they meet a real spiritual need in the West. These Westernized versions aim to make the wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching* more accessible to modern English-speaking readers by, typically, employing more familiar cultural and temporal references.

3.1 Translational difficulties

The *Tao Te Ching* is written in **Classical Chinese**, which can be difficult to understand completely. Classical Chinese relies heavily on allusion to a corpus of standard literary works to convey **semantic meaning**, nuance, and **subtext**. This corpus was memorized by highly educated people in Laozi's time, and the allusions were reinforced through common use in writing, but few people today have this type of deep acquaintance with ancient Chinese literature. Thus, many levels of subtext are potentially lost on modern translators. Furthermore, many of the words that the *Tao Te Ching* uses are deliberately vague and ambiguous.

Since there are no punctuation marks in Classical Chinese, it can be difficult to conclusively determine where one sentence ends and the next begins. Moving a full-stop a few words forward or back or inserting a comma can profoundly alter the meaning of many passages, and such divisions and meanings must be determined by the translator. Some editors and translators argue that the received text is so corrupted (from originally being written on one-line bamboo strips linked with silk threads) that it is impossible to understand some chapters without moving sequences of characters from one place to another.

4 See also

- Eastern philosophy
- Huahujing
- Huainanzi
- Liezi
- Qingjing Jing
- Xishengjing
- *Zhuangzi* (book)

5 Notes

- [1] /ˈdɑːs dɛ ˈdʒɪŋ/ — “Tao Te Ching” . *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*.
- [2] Ancient Chinese books were commonly named after their real or supposed author, in this case Laozi meaning “Master Lao” .

6 References

6.1 Citations

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- Tao Te Ching at DMOZ
- Daode jing (Isabelle Robinet), entry in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*

7.1 Online English translations

- Legge, Suzuki, and Goddard's translations side-by-side, along with the original text
- Lǎozǐ Dàodéjīng verbatim + analogous + poetic; Chinese + English + German
- Tao Te Ching | Multiple Translations by various authors
- Tao Teh King, Charles Johnston
- Tao Te Ching Daily
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- The Living Dao: The Art and Way of Living A Rich & Truthful Life, Lok Sang Ho, Lingnan University
- "The Tao Teh King, or The Tao and its characteristics", English translation by James Legge. Scalable text on white, grey or black background. Downloadable as a .txt file.

7 External links

- First Line of Tao Te Ching
- Daode jing entry from the Center for Daoist Studies
- Daodejing Wang Bi edition with English translation, Guodian text, and Mawangdui text – Chinese Text Project
- The Authorship of the Tao Te Ching, John J. Emerson

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