
THE BOOK

The Tao Te Ching Tao Te Ching, Daodejing, Dao De Jing, or Daode jing, also simply referred to as the Lao Tzu, is a Chinese classic text.

According to tradition, it was written around 6th century BC by the sage Lao Tzu, a record-keeper at the Zhou dynasty court, by whose name the text is known in China. The text's true authorship and date of composition or compilation are still debated, although the oldest excavated text dates back to the late 4th century BC.

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 is among the most translated works in world literature.

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.

Text

The Tao Te Ching has a long and complex textual history. Tao Te Ching On one hand, there are transmitted versions and commentaries that date back two millennia; on the other, there are ancient bamboo, silk, and paper manuscripts that archeologists discovered in the last century.

Title

There Tao Te Ching 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 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 (pinyin: Dàodé; literally: "ethics", "ethical principles," "morals," or "morality").

J?ng/ching as it is used here means "canon," "great book," or "classic."

Thus, Tao Te Ching can be translated as "The Tao Te Ching Classic of the Way's Tao Te Ching Virtues."

The title Daodejing is an honorific given by posterity, other titles include the amalgam L?oz? Dàodéj?ng, the honorific Daode Zhen Jing, and the Wuqian wen.

Internal Tao Te Ching structure

The received Tao Te Ching is a short text of around 5,000 Chinese characters in 81 brief chapters or sections. 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 and the Te Ching, which may have been edited together into the received text, possibly reversed from an original "Te Tao Ching." The written style is laconic, Tao Te Ching 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.

The Chinese characters in the original versions were probably written in zhuànsh?, while later versions were written in lìsh? and k?ish? styles. Daoist Chinese Characters contains a good summary of these different calligraphies.

Historical authenticity of the author

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

The first reliable reference to Lao Tzu is his "biography" in Shiji (63, Tao Te Ching 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, and his personal name was Er or Dan. He was an official in the imperial archives, and Tao Te Ching

wrote a book in two parts before departing to the West. Second, Lao Tzu was Lao Laizi, also a contemporary of Confucius, who wrote a book in 15 parts. Third, Lao Tao Te Ching Tzu was the Grand Historian and astrologer Lao Dan, who lived during the Tao Te Ching reign (384–362 BC) of Duke Xian of Tao Te Ching Qin.

Generations of scholars have debated Tao Te Ching the historicity of Lao Tzu 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 Tao Te Ching yet before the Zhuangzi. Legends claim variously that Lao Tzu 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 Lao Tzu. 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.

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 (fl. 80 BC-10 AD). The "Heshang Gong Version" is named after the legendary Heshang Gong who supposedly lived during the reign (202–157 BC) of Emperor Wen of Han. This commentary (tr. Erkes 1950, and Reid 2015) has a preface written by Ge Xuan (164–244 AD), granduncle of Ge Hong, and scholarship dates this version to around the 3rd century AD. The "Wang Bi Version" has more verifiable origins than either of the above. Wang Bi (226–249 AD) was a famous Three Kingdoms Tao Te Ching 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, Tao Te Ching 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 Tao Te Ching by the scribe So/Su Dan is dated 270 AD and corresponds closely with the Heshang Gong version. Another partial manuscript has the Tao Te Ching Xiang'er commentary, which had previously been lost.

Mawangdui and Guodian texts

In 1973, archeologists discovered copies of early Chinese books, known as the Mawangdui Silk Texts, in a tomb dating Tao Te Ching from 168 BC. They included two nearly complete copies

of the text, referred to as Text A and Text B, 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.

In 1993, the oldest known version of the text, written on bamboo tablets, was found in a tomb near the town Tao Te Ching of Guodian in Jingmen, Hubei, and dated prior to 300 BC. The Guodian Chu Slips comprise about 800 slips of bamboo with a total of over 13,000 characters, about 2,000 of which Tao Te Ching 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.

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.

Translations

The Tao Te Ching has been translated into Western languages over 250 times, mostly to English, German, and French. According to Holmes Welch, "It is a famous puzzle which everyone would like to feel he had solved."

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. Russell Kirkland goes further to argue that these versions are based on Western Orientalist fantasies, and represent the colonial appropriation of Tao Te Ching Chinese culture. 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 and Jonathan Herman, argue that while they don't pretend Tao Te Ching 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.

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 Lao Tzu'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.

(source wikipedia.org)

THE AUTHOR

Lao Tzu was a philosopher and poet of ancient China. He is known as the reputed author of the Tao Te Ching and the founder of philosophical Taoism, and as a deity in religious Taoism and traditional Chinese religions. Although a legendary figure, he is usually

dated to around the 6th century BCE and reckoned a contemporary of Confucius, but some historians contend that he actually lived during the Warring States period of the 5th or 4th century BCE. A central figure in Chinese culture, Lao Tao Te Ching Tzu is claimed by both the emperors of the Tang dynasty and modern people of the Li surname as a founder of their lineage. Throughout history, Lao Tzu's work has been embraced by various anti-authoritarian movements.

In traditional accounts, Lao Tzu's personal name is usually given as Li Er and his courtesy name as Boyang. A prominent posthumous name was Li Dan.

Lao Tzu itself is an honorific title. It has been romanized numerous ways, sometimes leading to confusion. The most common present form is Lao Tzu or L'oz?, based on the Hanyu Pinyin system adopted by Mainland China in 1958 and Taiwan in 2009. During the 20th Tao Te Ching century, Lao-tzu was more common, based on the formerly prevalent Wade–Giles system. In the 19th century, the title was usually romanized as Lao-tse. Other forms include the Tao Te Ching variants Lao-tze and Lao-tsu.

As a religious figure, he is worshipped under the name "Supreme Old Lord" and as one of the "Three Pure Ones". During the Tang, he was granted the title "Supremely Mysterious and Primordial Emperor".

In the mid-twentieth century, a consensus emerged among scholars that the historicity of the person known as Lao Tzu is doubtful and that the Tao Te Ching was "a compilation of Taoist sayings by many hands." Alan Watts urged more caution, holding that this view was part of an academic fashion for skepticism about historical spiritual and religious figures and stating that not enough would be known for years – or possibly ever – to make a firm judgment.

Tao Te Ching

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