CHAPTER ONE

LAOZI AND THE DAO DE JING

The earliest thinker venerated in the Daoist religion, and the best known of all Daoist texts are known by the name of Laozi, which literally means "Old Master" or "Old Child." Both the person and the text arose around 500 B.C.E. in a period of great change not only in China but the world over. Indeed, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called this period the "axial age" in his seminal work *The Origin and Goal of History* (1953). The term refers to the fact that at this time in many different cultures new thinkers and religious leaders arose who, for the first time, placed great emphasis on the individual as opposed to the community of the clan or tribe. Examples include the Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Persia, Socrates in ancient Greece, and Confucius in China. The ideas proposed by these thinkers and religious leaders had a strong and pervasive impact on the thinking of humanity in general, contributing significantly to our thinking even today.

China at this time was undergoing tremendous economic and political changes. The arrival of iron-age technology, and with it better plough-shares, wagon axles, and weapons, had caused an increase in food production and massive population growth, as well as greater mobility and wealth among the people. This in turn led to a heightened hunger for power among local lords, who began to wage wars in order to expand their lands and increase their influence, setting large infantry armies against each other. While the central king of the Zhou dynasty (1122-221 B.C.E.) was still officially in charge of the entire country, there were in fact many independent states in a more-or-less constant state of conflict. The period is thus appropriately named the Warring States (zhanguo). It was a time of unrest and transition which left many people yearning for the peace and stability of old, and ended only with the violent conquest of all other states and establishment of the Chinese empire by the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C.E.
Most Chinese philosophers of the Warring States, in accordance with the situation they faced, were concerned with the proper "way" or "method" (dao) leading to the recovery of the harmony and social manageability of an earlier, golden age. Their works tend to be characterized by a strong backward focus and feudalistic vision. Although Western scholars usually characterize them as "philosophers," they always placed a strong emphasis on the practical dimensions of their teachings, both in regard to the individual's social behavior and to his or her personal self-cultivation. In fact, at the core of most ancient Chinese thought are practices of social discipline and the transformation of individuals and communities. Followers often congregated in small, almost sectarian groups rather than in what we think of as "philosophical schools."

The earliest text later to be revered in Daoism, and by extension its entire "philosophical" tradition, is no exception to this. It must always be considered as just one expression of a tradition that in essence focused on practical and social transformation, and can therefore be best understood within the wider context of the thought at the time. Later historians writing about the Warring States period after the fact, around 100 B.C.E., distinguished six major philosophical schools, each of which proposed one particular area as being most responsible for the state of social and cosmic disharmony, and offered remedies accordingly: the Confucians focused on social etiquette and proper ritual; the Mohists emphasized the natural flow of things; the Mohists (named after the philosopher Mozi) saw the solution to all problems in universal love; the Legalists thought that a set of strict laws and punishments was necessary to return order to the world; the Logicians found the key flaw in the inaccurate use of language and the resulting confusion in people's minds; and the Yin-Yang cosmologists understood social and personal harmony to depend on the cycles of the seasons, the movements of the stars, and other macrocosmic phenomena. Of these six schools the most important to understanding Daoism are the Confucians, who will be discussed first, and the Yin-Yang Cosmologists, who will be examined in Chapter 3.

**Early Confucianism**

Confucianism goes back to the thinker Confucius, Kongfuzi or "Master Kong" (551-479 B.C.E.), the illegitimate son of the ruler of Lu, a small state in eastern China (modern Shandong). Trained in elementary feudal arts as well as to read and write, he became a minor functionary in the state's administration, then developed certain ideas of his own as to the causes of his country's problems and their remedy. In an effort to see his ideas put into practice, he left his employment and traveled through China, presenting himself as a potential prime minister to many local rulers—as did numerous lesser nobles at the time who had either technical skills, military expertise, or advice on government. However, no ruler decided to employ Confucius, and so he returned home and began to teach interested disciples in private, soon establishing a name for himself and his ideas. The disciples later collected his sayings into a volume known as the *Lunyu* (Analects), which today has twenty chapters, of which the first nine are believed to be historically closer to Confucius himself.

The main concept of early Confucianism as presented in this text is the idea of ritual formality or etiquette (li). The character represents the image of a ritual vessel—an object claimed to have been Confucius's favorite toy as a child—and indicates the proper behavior in all social situations. It can be interpreted on three levels: in society, government, and religious ritual. Socially, li means proper behavior among people of different rank and status, defined through the five relationships: ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger brother, friend-friend. In each case, there is a senior and a junior, and each has obligations toward the other, expressed in the so-called Confucian virtues.

Among these, "mutuality" (shu) is most important. This means that the senior partner always should treat the junior with care and concern, while the junior owes the senior obedience and respect. One should never inflict on others what one is not willing to receive oneself, or as the text says: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (12.2; 14.15). Other, more specific virtues include benevolence or humanity (ren) toward one's fellow human beings, righteousness or social responsibility (yi) toward social organizations and groups of people, especially if one is in a senior position, as well as, if a junior, filial piety or obedience (xiao) toward one's parents, and loyalty (zhong) toward the ruler or state. Naturally nobody, not even the ruler of the country, is ever always in a senior or junior position, but different social contexts require different forms of behavior, degrees of formality, and structures of command. According to Confucius and his followers, if everyone knew his or her standing at any given moment and acted fully in accordance with
Learning here is considered not a burden but a pleasure, an exciting adventure of becoming increasingly aware of oneself and the social intricacies in one’s surroundings. Thus the very first line of the *Lunyu*: “The Master said: is it not a pleasure to learn and to practice from time to time what one has learned?” (1.1). Learning will eventually make one the ideal Confucian, a superior person or gentleman (*junzi*) who follows his parents and leaders in all respects and honors the social conventions to the best of his ability. A gentleman then creates further goodness by radiating friendliness and harmony throughout, from his family to his neighborhood, village, county, state, and into the greater universe at large. Society and the state will be well ordered and benefits will reach to all.

In contrast to this vision of a completely organized and well-oiled social system, the proponents of the cosmic “Way” proposed a return to naturalness and the spontaneity of organic so-being. Their ideas were first represented by the thinker Laozi, who unlike Confucius is an historically elusive figure. Frequently called Lao Dan or “Old Dan” in the early texts, he was allegedly a learned and somewhat elusive official at the royal Zhou court, where he served as an archivist. That is to say—that he was literate and of lesser aristocratic standing, and worked in one of the many offices of the ruling dynasty as a copyist and administrator of written documents. The *Zhuangzi* tells that his call to fame came when Confucius, eager to expand his knowledge of the ancient rites, went to the Zhou capital to consult him. Lao, Dan, instead of imparting his knowledge, rebuked Confucius, advising him to forget all about things to cram into his head and instead let go of everything and follow the natural Way. Confucius, stunned for several days, finally emerged with the verdict that he had met many impressive people in his day but none like Lao Dan who was “truly like a dragon,” free from all constraints and powerfully soaring in the sky.

This is all that is known about Laozi before the Han dynasty, when his first official biography appears in the *Shiji* (Record of the Historian, dat. 104 B.C.E.) by Sima Qian, a collection of facts and hearsay. Scholars today are divided concerning Laozi’s historicity. Many accept the ancient information and take him to be a historical person who served as a minor
official under the Zhou dynasty and wrote the book named after him. Others see him more as a legendary figure who may or may not have existed at any one time, but who certainly did not do all the things told about him, and who was not the sole author of the Laozi, which they see as a conglomerate of sayings that grew over the centuries. Devout religious Daoists of later centuries and today, in contrast, have a completely different understanding. They see Laozi as a historical manifestation of the divinity of the Dao and the book associated with him as a revealed text of celestial origins.

The most radical modern, scholarly reading of Laozi's biography is by A. C. Graham (repr. in Kohn and LaFargue 1998). According to him, even the earliest story about his meeting with Confucius was not based on historical fact but was originally a legend concocted by the Confucians who wished to document their leader's intense search for knowledge. The tale duly became common knowledge, and around 300 B.C.E. was adopted into the Zhuangzi and became part of the lore of “Daoists.” At this time they did not yet exist under this name, but they can be described as a group of people who practiced self-cultivation and longevity, advised the return to a natural way of life and government, and were loosely connected by a set of sayings that documented their ideas and practices. As China moved closer to unification under the Qin dynasty, all philosophical schools geared up to make their pitch for political influence, and the “Daoists” too got a bit better organized and arranged their inherited sayings into a set text. This text they then linked with the alleged teacher of Confucius, the “Old Master,” and called it the Laozi.

To enhance their claim for longevity, Graham claims, they not only insisted that Laozi was a contemporary of Confucius, who died in 479 B.C.E., but that he was also identical with a historiographer by the name of Dan (a different Chinese character), who predicted the rise of the Qin in 374 B.C.E. This made Lao Dan a man who lived for about two centuries and laid the foundation of an important feature of later beliefs, the so-called transformations of Laozi. According to this, he was of supernatural stature, resided originally in the heavens, and appeared at regular intervals in the world to advise rulers and give revelations to deserving seekers. Having set up this claim of Laozi's longevity, the “Daoists” were a conglomerate of sayings that grew over the centuries. Devout religious Daoists of later centuries and today, in contrast, have a completely different understanding. They see Laozi as a historical manifestation of the divinity of the Dao and the book associated with him as a revealed text of celestial origins.

This explained, in one swoop, why Laozi was no longer there and how the text Laozi came into existence. It also set the stage for the two other main appellations of the text, Wuguan wen (Text in Five Thousand Words) and Daode jing (Book of the Dao and Its Virtue). In later developments of the story, Laozi is further said to have crossed into Central Asia and even reached India, where he continued to spread his teachings and became the teacher of the western people, known to the Chinese as hu or “barbarians.” They in turn called him “buddha” and made his teaching known as “Buddhism.” This story of the “conversion of the barbarians” appears first in the second century C.E. to explain the growing influx of Buddhism into China, and was later—with further mythical developments and alterations—turned into a highly polemical and anti-Buddhist story, which claimed that all the basic rules of Buddhism (celibacy, shaved head, vegetarianism) were imposed by Laozi only to curb the violent, beastly, and filthy tendencies of the “barbarians.”

In the early stages, however, the “Daoists” with their story succeeded in attracting the attention of several rulers and, in the early Han dynasty, Laozi became a highly venerated figure, while his text grew into a semi-sacred book widely recited and venerated among the upper classes. His fame in turn led an up-and-coming family named Li to claim him as their ancestor. In this they were following common practice at the time, when many local clans reached for success at the central court. They also gave him a formal first name, Er, and set him up with a birthplace—a village called Bozhou near the city of Luyi in modern Henan, located (not surprisingly) rather close to the district where the Han rulers themselves came from. All this information is found already in the Shi ji, showing that even in the first century B.C.E. Laozi was an honored sage with a firm place in the pantheon of the Han aristocracy. Later he would be further venerated and mythologized, and the Daode jing would officially...
be recognized as a "classic" (in 737 C.E.), to play an important role both in religion and literati culture.

The *Daode jing*

The *Laozi* or *Daode jing* is a short text in about five thousand characters—the actual count varies among editions—that is commonly divided into eighty-one chapters and two parts, one on Dao (1-37), and one on De (38-81). It is written in verse—not a rhyming, steady rhythmic kind of verse, but a stylized prose that has strong parallels and regular patterns—and contains sections of description contrasted with tight punchlines. The text has been transmitted in several different editions, three of which are most important today. The first is the so-called standard edition, also known as the transmitted edition. Handed down by Chinese copyists over the ages, it is at the root of almost all translations of the text. It goes back to the third century C.E., to the erudite Wang Bi (226-249) who edited the text and wrote a commentary on it that Chinese since then have considered inspired. It has shaped the reception of the text’s worldview until today.

The second edition is called the Mawangdui edition, so named after a place in south China (Hunan) where a tomb was excavated in 1973 that dated from 168 B.C.E. It contained an undisturbed coffin surrounded by numerous artifacts and several manuscripts written on silk, mostly dealing with cosmology and longevity techniques, such as gymnastics and sexual practices. Among them were two copies of the *Daode jing*. The Mawangdui version differs little from the transmitted edition: there are some character variants which have helped clarify some interpretive points, and the two parts are in reversed order, i.e., the text begins with the section on De, then adds the section on Dao. The manuscripts are important because they show that the *Daode jing* existed in its complete form in the early Han dynasty, and that it was considered essential enough to be placed in someone’s grave.

The third edition was discovered in 1993 in a place called Guodian (Hubei). Written on bamboo slips and dated to about 300 B.C.E., the find presents a collection of various philosophical works of the time, including fragments of Confucian and other texts. Among them are thirty-three passages that can be matched with thirty-one chapters of the *Daode jing*, but with lines in different places, and considerable variation in characters. Generally, they are concerned with self-cultivation and its application to questions of rulership and the pacification of the state. Polemical attacks against Confucian virtues, such as those describing them as useless or even harmful (chs. 18-19), are not found; instead negative attitudes and emotions are criticized. This Guodian find of this so-called "Bamboo Laozi" tells us that in the late fourth century B.C.E. the text existed in rudimentary form, and consisted of a collection of sayings not yet edited into a coherent presentation. Another text found at Guodian, the *Taiyi sheng shui* (Great Unity Creates Water), gives further insights into the growing and possibly even "Daoist" cosmology of the time, as does a contemporaneous work on self-cultivation, the "Inward Training" (Neiye) chapter of the *Guanzi*. It appears that, gradually, a set of ideas and practices was growing that would eventually develop into something specifically and more religiously Daoist.

**Dao and Nonaction**

The *Daode jing* has often been hailed as representing the core of the Daoist worldview and the root of Daoist mysticism. But it is in fact a multifaceted work that can, and has been, interpreted in many different ways, not least as a manual of strategy, a political treatise on the recovery of the golden age, a guide to underlying principles, and a metalinguistic inquiry into forms of prescriptive discourse. It can be read in two fundamentally different ways: as a document of early Chinese culture or as a scripture of universal significance. Looked at in terms of Chinese culture, concepts of statesmanship, political principles, military strategy, and royal virtues become essential, and the focus is on understanding the text in the context of contemporaneous works and the social and political situation of the time. Seen as a scripture of universal significance, ideas of personal cultivation, freedom of mind, and the attainment of spontaneity and naturalness take center stage—the text’s main appeal is its timeless characterization and alleviation of the human condition. Both approaches are equally important and have been proposed by readers and scholars over the centuries; both are also evident in numerous traditional commentaries and the uses of the text throughout Chinese history.

The basic concept in the text is the Dao or the Way. It can be understood either metaphysically as the underlying source and power of the uni-
verse, practically as the way in which the world functions, or analytically as the way in which people can (or cannot) speak about reality. The text does not make its understanding easy. Rather, the first chapter of the standard edition begins by saying that Dao cannot be named or known with ordinary human senses. It may be described as lying at the root of creation and the cycles of nature, the "mother" of all that keeps nature and society in harmony.

In religious terms the Dao is seen as a mystical power of universal oneness; more metaphysically, it is a fundamental ontological entity or absolute truth. Some scholars have also read it in terms of relativist thinking, as a universal way that can never be approached or described, while others see it as a supreme principle that is too deep to be properly expressed in words. The intellectual historian Benjamin Schwartz describes it as "organic order"—"organic" in the sense that it is part of the world and not a transcendent other as in Western religion, "order" because it can be felt in the rhythms of the world, in the manifestation of organized patterns.

Another way to think of Dao, which appears in later religious literature, is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is Dao at the root of creation—tight, concentrated, intense, and ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment (chs. 6, 14, 25). The looser, larger circle at the periphery is Dao as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here we can see Dao as it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens—the ever-changing yet everlasting alteration of natural patterns, yin and yang, life and death. This Dao is what people and rulers need to adapt to; they should go along with it to create harmony and be at ease with it to find fulfillment. As the text says:

The Dao remains in spontaneous nonaction.
If rulers and kings can maintain it,
The myriad beings will transform by themselves.
Once transformed, should desires arise,
Quell them with nameless simplicity
And teach them to know when to stop.
Knowing when to stop creates tranquility,
And the myriad beings will rest firmly in themselves.
(ch. 37; Henricks, Guidoim, A:7)

The inner, central Dao at the root of creation, on the other hand, is there as an ultimate to relate to beyond the activities of daily existence; it maintains the outer circle but does not actually do anything in itself. Finding intuitive access to this inner Dao will help in creating harmony with its outer ring and sensing universal harmony on a deeper level. Aligning oneself with the root of all will create an empowerment for oneself and a perfect society of great peace.

Dao is always good (chs. 4, 8, 34). Bad times, bad things, bad people, all forms of evil happen when things move against the flow of Dao. That does not mean that there is no room for recession, decline, or death. All these things are there, but not considered evil (ch. 5). Rather, they are a necessary part in the ongoing flux of life in which everything is relative and related to everything else. Yin and yang are interdependent and relative forces that always move together and in alteration, and neither of them is evil. Evil occurs when violent decline is forced upon nature or society at a time of growth, or when massive expansion is pushed forward at a time of rest or reduction. It is essential, therefore, to know the patterns of Dao—either personally or politically—and learn to adapt to its rhythms.

It is important to understand that although religious Daoist texts from many ages note this distinction between the ineffable, creative Dao at the center and the manifest, patterned Dao at the periphery—they also never tire of insisting that there is always only one Dao. The two are not essentially different, but are the same inherent and integrated entity. This notion of the underlying unity of existence pervades Chinese thought, so that medical texts, for example, express it in the notion of qi, cosmic or vital energy, which is only one at all times but can move at different speeds of vibration or oscillation. Thicker, slow moving qi is considered gross and appears as the body; finer, fast moving qi is subtle and appears as the mind. But as there is only one qi, body and mind are made up of the same basic material. In the same way, Dao at the root of creation is never separate or essentially different from Dao in the human and natural world, and the cultivation of the self has an immediate impact on the harmony of the cosmos.

The way to be with Dao is through nonaction (wuwei) and naturalness (zen; chs. 16, 21, 32). This does not mean doing nothing, becoming like a vegetable, or being totally spontaneous without any planning whatsoever. Rather, it means letting go of egotistic concerns and passions and desires on the personal level, finding a sense of where life, nature, and
Practitioners thus reach a state of pervasive tranquility and equanimity and attain a mind that is stable, ordered, and fully concentrated in a state of “maintaining the One.” Free from the distractions of the world, such a mind is eager to delve into the depths of Dao and spontaneously reaches naturalness and nonaction.

The Daode jing does not spell out any meditative or self-cultivation techniques and contains no claim about physical immortality. But it portrays the sage (shengren) as one who has realized this mind and transformed into a person of Dao: socially responsible, unassuming and nondescript in his person, yet entirely benevolent and helpful in all situations (chs. 2, 27). He does not speak or preach but acts appropriately at all times; he may have a high position in society—and ideally is even the ruler (and thus, in ancient China, usually male)—but he will not think of himself as “possessing” anything, nor will he insist on his position, his way, or his personal wishes (chs. 3, 64). On the contrary, his mind will be full of Dao, seeing the inherent patterns of nature and the world and thinking of the greater good of all (chs. 22, 80). He is a representative of universal virtue, embracing all beings and developing peace within and goodness without. The text has:

The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people will be.
The more sharp weapons the people have, the more troubled the state will be.
The more cunning and skill man possesses, the more vicious things will appear.
The more laws and rules are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers there will be.
Therefore the sage says:

I take no action, and the people transform naturally.
I love tranquility, and the people become naturally upright.
I engage in no activity, and the people prosper naturally.
I have no desires, and the people become naturally simple. (ch. 57)

Thus, more than just a good person in himself, the sage is a catalyst of goodness in the society around him. He filters the benevolent and creative powers of Dao into the world and by his very being makes the world a better place, one where Dao is heard more fully and can aid in the realization of universal goodness. The sage in the Daode jing is accordingly also a master of military strategy, because he will know at all times how the pattern of the world is moving and which military action will be most successful at what times—successful in the sense of creating peace and stability and putting an end to hostilities. The ideal Daoist, in this early stage of the tradition, is thus far from a world-denying hermit. Rather, he has a great deal of social responsibility, intuiting Dao not merely for himself but for everyone, and giving maximum help and support to all beings, society, and the cosmos. Following this tradition, certain strands of later Daoism have exhibited a strong social dimension, focusing on the creation of an ideal society as their central concern. They support periods of withdrawal for the sake of practicing simplicity and attaining an attunement with Dao. But ultimately Daoists of such strands are socially responsible and encourage their followers to work actively and even politically for the greater goodness of all.

The contrast with Confucianism diminishes at this point, and the old juxtaposition of Confucians as socially active and Daoists as withdrawing and focused on self-cultivation turns out to be a fallacy in the common Western conception of Daoism. Confucians differ from Daoists, but the disagreement is not about whether or not to be socially active and whether or not to give in to personal greed and passions. Rather, the dividing issue is how to achieve social harmony and how to behave in society. Daode jing-type Daoists reject the establishment of formal administrative structures, complex hierarchies, social rituals, and sophisticated systems of morals and virtues. They prefer to be simple and unassuming, unencumbered by high positions and heavy administrative duties; they rely on cultivating the inherent goodness in people, their sense of rightness that comes forth through nonaction and naturalness, to create a harmonious world. The sage, then, is the master of this pure social behavior, one who will never assume or possess but who aids the world in creating itself in its most harmonious form.
Further Readings


Original Sources in Translation


Daode jing, standard edition, appears in numerous translations; for guidance, see the article by LaFargue and Pas in Kohn and LaFargue 1998.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ZHUANGZI

The question of the goodness in people and of their original, natural mind rises to the forefront in succeeding generations. The two major leaders of Confucianism and Daoism after the hoary masters, Mencius (c. 371–289 B.C.E.) and Zhuangzi (c. 370–290 B.C.E.), both place the mind at the center of their speculations, moving towards an internalization in their understanding of the world. This can be seen as the logical next step following the overall tendencies of the axial age, or again as a general tendency in the development of the world’s religions. As Paul Ricoeur has found in a study of Western religions called The Symbolism of Evil (1967), humanity has tended to see the world first as cosmic, then social, and finally in personal or psychological terms. Evil accordingly was understood first as defilement, incurred through the violation of a taboo, then as social infringement or shame (sin), and eventually located in the individual and experienced as guilt. This transition is most visible in Western religions, but it also applies to China—although the latter never developed a guilt culture to the same degree as the West, since it always placed a higher emphasis on the community than on the individual.

Ancient Chinese thought of the third century B.C.E. can in this overall context be seen as an effort to grapple with the mind, or consciousness, as the key factor in shaping human society and the world. The need to find remedies for the social tensions of the time is never ignored, but the emphasis shifts markedly to an even more internal, psychological understanding. Before, then, examining the vision of the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, let us look briefly at the ideas of his Confucian contemporary.