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Tao Te Ching

by Laozi



EASTERN  TREASURES

The Tao Te Ching of

LAOZI

(fl. 6th-5th century BC)



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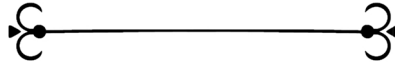
TAO TE CHING



By Delphi Classics, 2025

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Tao Te Ching by Laozi



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The Translations



Xichuan County, southwest of Henan province, China, bordering the provinces of Hubei to the south and Shaanxi to the northwest. For more than 400 years, the Chu capital Danyang was located at the junction of the Dan and Xi Rivers, near present-day Xichuan County. Laozi's birthplace is traditionally identified as being in the state of Chu.



Chinese polities in the late 5th century BC, before the breakup of Jin and the Qin move into Sichuan

John Chalmers Translation (1868)



Laozi, traditionally known as ‘Lao Tzu’ in the West, was a legendary Chinese philosopher and author of the *Tao Te Ching*, one of the foundational texts of Taoism, alongside the *Zhuangzi*. The name of the text, literally meaning ‘Old Master’, was likely intended to give an archaic anonymity that could converse with Confucianism. Modern scholarship generally regards Laozi’s biographical details as later inventions and his text in its current form is generally regarded as a collaboration built up over time by numerous scribes and editors. Traditional accounts record him as being born in the sixth century BC state of Chu, during China’s Spring and Autumn period (c. 770 – c. 481 BC). Serving as the royal archivist for the Zhou court at Wangcheng (modern Luoyang), he met and impressed Confucius (c. 551-c. 479 BC) on one occasion. A legend tells that he composed the *Tao Te Ching* in a single session before retiring into the western wilderness.

A central figure of Chinese culture, Laozi is generally considered the founder of Taoism. This ancient philosophical and religious tradition emphasises the importance of living in harmony with the *Tao*, the fundamental, impersonal principle that underlies the universe. Taoism promotes concepts like *Yin* and *Yang* — complementary opposing forces — and *Wu Wei* — action without excessive effort or resistance — to achieve balance and the success of a contented life. Laozi was also claimed and revered as the ancestor of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and is similarly honoured in modern China as the progenitor of the popular surname Li. In some sects of Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism and Chinese folk religion, it is held that he became an immortal hermit. Some Taoist devotees regard the *Tao Te Ching* as the avatar — embodied as a book — of the god Laojun, one of the Three Pure Ones of the Taoist pantheon, though few philosophers believe this.

The *Tao Te Ching* enjoyed a profound influence on Chinese religious movements and on subsequent Chinese philosophers, who annotated, commended and criticised the texts extensively. In the twentieth century, textual criticism by historians led to theories questioning Laozi’s timing or even existence, positing that the received text of the *Tao Te Ching* was not composed until the Warring States period (c. 475-221 BC), being the product of multiple authors. While tradition places Laozi earlier, modern editors of the text estimate his dates to the late Warring States period (475 – 221 BC).

Among the many transmitted editions of the *Tao Te Ching*, the three primary texts are named after early commentaries. The “Yan Zun Version”, which is only extant for the *Te Ching* part, 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 (legendary sage), who supposedly lived during the reign of Emperor Wen of Han (180-157 BC). This commentary features a preface by Ge Xuan (164-244 AD), granduncle of Ge Hong, and scholarship dates this version to c. the third century AD. The origins of the “Wang Bi” version have greater verification than either of the above. Wang Bi (226-249 AD) was a Three Kingdoms-period philosopher and commentator on the *Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching*.

Taoist scholarship has advanced from archaeological 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 discovered thousands of scrolls in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang. They included more than 50 partial and complete manuscripts.

Another partial manuscript includes the Xiang'er commentary, which had previously been lost. In 1973 archaeologists discovered copies of early Chinese books, known as the *Mawangdui Silk Texts*, in a tomb dated to 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*. 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 second century BC. In 1993 the oldest known version of the text, written on bamboo slips, was found in a tomb near the town of Guodian in Jingmen, Hubei, and dated prior to 300 BC. The Guodian Chu Slips comprise around 800 slips of bamboo with a total of over 13,000 characters, about 2,000 of which correspond with the *Tao Te Ching*.

The *Tao Te Ching* describes the *Tao* as the source and ideal of all existence: it is unseen, but not transcendent, immensely powerful yet supremely humble, being the root of all things. It is argued that people have desires and free will and so are able to alter their own nature. Many act unnaturally, upsetting the natural balance of the *Tao*. The *Tao Te Ching* intends to lead students to a “return” of their natural state, in harmony with *Tao*. In Taoism, language and conventional wisdom are critically assessed. It views them as inherently biased and artificial, widely using paradoxes to sharpen the point. *Wu wei*, literally ‘non-action’ or ‘not acting’, is a central concept of the text. It is multifaceted, as reflected in the concept’s multiple meanings, even in English translation; it can mean “not doing anything”, “not forcing”, “not acting” in the physical sense, “creating nothingness”, “acting spontaneously” and “flowing with the moment”. This concept is used to explain *ziran*, or harmony with the *Tao*. It includes the concepts that value distinctions are ideological and seeing ambition of all sorts as originating from the same source. *Tao Te Ching* employs the term broadly with simplicity and humility as key virtues, often in contrast to selfish action. On a political level, it means avoiding such circumstances as war, harsh laws and heavy taxes.

The text of *Tao Te Ching* comprises around 5,450 Chinese characters in 81 brief chapters or sections. There is evidence that the chapter divisions were later additions — for commentary, or as aids to rote memorisation — and that the original text was more fluidly organised. The text has two parts, the *Tao Ching* (chapters 1-37) and the *Te Ching* (chapters 38-81), which may have been edited together into the received text, possibly reversed from an original *Te Tao Ching*.

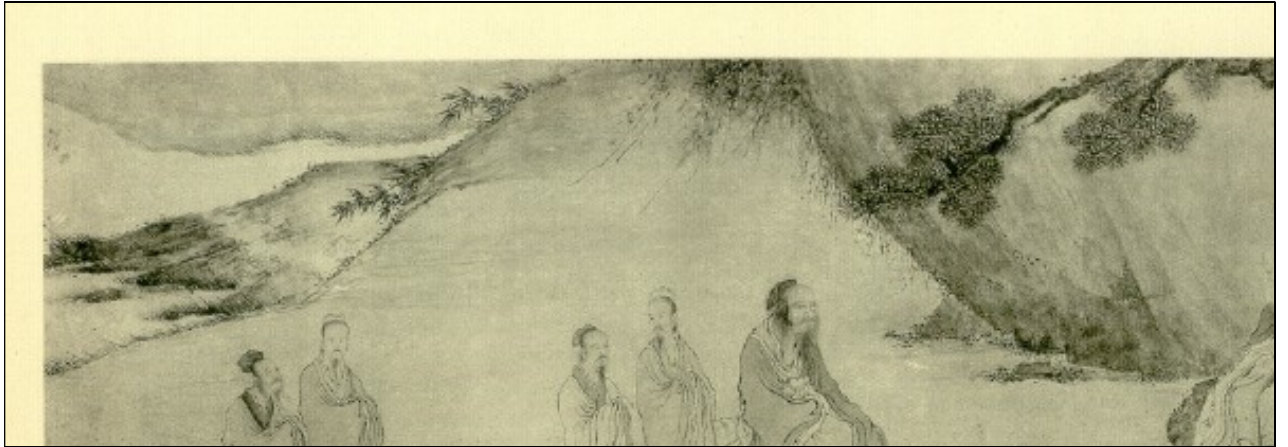
Contrasting with Confucianism, its general statements are free of narration or reference to any particular persons, times or places. The written style is laconic, with few grammatical particles. While the ideas are singular, the style is poetic, combining two major features: short, declarative statements and intentional contradictions, encouraging ambiguous interpretations. The first of these features creates memorable phrases, while the second forces the reader to reflect on supposed contradictions. With a partial reconstruction of the pronunciation of Old Chinese spoken during the composition of the *Tao Te Ching*, approximately three-quarters rhymed in the original language. The Chinese characters in the earliest versions were written in seal script, while later versions were written in clerical script and regular script styles.

The *Tao Te Ching* has been translated into Western languages over 250 times, mostly to English, German and French. The first English translation was completed in 1868 by the Scottish Protestant missionary John Chalmers, entitled *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity, and Morality of the “Old Philosopher” Lau-tsze*. It was

heavily indebted to Stanislas Julien's 1835 French translation and dedicated to James Legge, who later produced his own translation for Oxford's *Sacred Books of the East*.



Laozi Riding an Ox by Zhang Lu, c. 1528



Confucius meets Laozi, Shi Gang, Yuan dynasty

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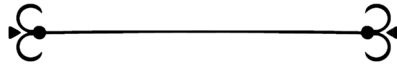
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Ink on silk manuscript of the 'Tao Te Ching', Mawangdui, second century BC

INTRODUCTION.



I VENTURE TO call Lau-tsze *the* philosopher of China, because, while Confucius has obtained the greater name, he is indebted for it more to circumstances than to deep thinking. Confucius no doubt excelled all his contemporaries as a casuist, a ritualist, and a *littérateur*, but not more than Lau-tsze excelled him in depth and independence of thought. That Lau-tsze went further astray than his more cautious rival is only what might have been expected from his independence. He soared away into regions and heights, where others could neither follow him nor see him; and, while he sometimes lost himself in wandering mazes, it must be confessed that, at other times, he had better success, and came back with a “jewel in his bosom.”

How much Lau-tsze owed to his predecessors we have no means of knowing, beyond the very few instances in which he seems to quote a current maxim, or a traditional saying. That he was familiar with the fragmentary histories, and the ballads of his time, on which Confucius bestowed so much attention, we can hardly doubt; but, as far as we know, his inspiration was not there. If there was really any writer on *Tau*, before Lau-tsze, his work and his name seem to have perished. On this question, and on the other very interesting one — whether the Chinese and Hindu minds came in contact at this early period — we may hope for further light when the subject receives the attention which it deserves.

As a matter of fact, Lau-tsze stands the acknowledged head of the *Tauist* sect; and his followers have scarcely added anything valuable to what he left them in this little book. Speculation there has been, and wild dreaming — superstition and blasphemy too in abundance; but scarcely aught that is worth the knowing.

Then, as to the author of the book himself, we can scarcely be said to know anything of his life. It extended probably over the greater part of the sixth century B.C. But if he really devoted himself to the benefit of others, according to his principles, the memory of his good deeds has perished. Even his name, Lau-tsze — the Old Philosopher, or the Philosopher Lau — is probably nothing more than a title of respect. Sze-ma Tsien, who lived more than four hundred years after, gives him another name and surname. He also tells us a few things about him, which are of little importance, even if true. The following account, however, of an interview between Confucius and Lau-tsze, is very characteristic of the two. Lau-tsze was treasury-keeper to the Court of Chow, and Confucius went there to make enquiry about the ceremonies and maxims of the founders of the dynasty. They met and freely interchanged their views, when Lau-tsze said to Confucius:— “Those whom you talk about are dead, and their bones are mouldered to dust; only their words remain. When the superior man gets his opportunity, he mounts aloft; but when the time is against him he moves as if his feet were entangled. I have heard that a good merchant, though he has rich treasures deeply stored, appears as if he were poor, and that the superior man, whose virtue is complete, is yet, to outward seeming, stupid. Put away your proud air and many desires, your insinuating habit and wild will. These are of no advantage to you. This is what I have to tell you.” Confucius, when he left him, said to his disciples, “I know how birds can fly, how fishes can swim, and how beasts can run. And the runner may be snared, the swimmer may be hooked, and the flyer may be shot by the arrow. But there is the dragon. I cannot tell how he mounts on the wind

through the clouds, and rises to heaven. Today I have seen Lau-tsze, and can only compare him to the dragon.” One can easily conceive how the practical, worldly mind of Confucius would be shocked and repelled by some of Lau-tsze’s bold paradoxes; and how he would cry Danger! A dragon must be an ugly customer to meet in a strange place in the dark.

I have thought it better to leave the word *Tau* untranslated, both because it has given the name to the sect — the *Tauists* — and because no English word is its exact equivalent. Three terms suggest themselves — the Way, Reason, and the Word; but they are all liable to objection. Were we guided by etymology, “the Way,” would come nearest to the original, and in one or two passages the idea of a *way* seems to be in the term; but this is too materialistic to serve the purpose of a translation. “Reason” again seems to be more like a quality or attribute of some conscious being than *Tau* is. I would translate it by “the Word,” in the sense of the Logos, but this would be like settling the question which I wish to leave open, viz. — what amount of resemblance there is between the Logos of the New Testament and this *Tau*, which is its nearest representative in Chinese. In our version of the New Testament in Chinese we have in the 1st Chapter of John:— “In the beginning was *Tau*, etc.”

The highest idea of Lau-tsze — that which with him takes the place of Deity or the Absolute — is expressed in his opening chapter by Eternal Tau. He strives to describe his idea as the “sameness” of existence and nonexistence— “the abyss of abysses”— “the gate of all mystery;” and, subsequently, by a combination of negatives, and by an accumulation of contraries (xiv. and xxi.).

When he comes nearest to our idea of a Creator, it is still Tau, often, however, represented under his favourite figure of a Mother (I. VI. XXV. LII. LIX.). Here the idea of existence generally predominates. Existence is, indeed, said to be produced from nonexistence, and Tau is the union of the two; but “the Mother” of all things must be a positive Being. Then existence with Lau-tsze is matter. He knows of no other existence but that which has form, and may have colour, sound, locomotion, etc. In its primordial state it is the “the nameless simplicity” (XXXII. xxxvii.); it is “unity” produced by *Tau* (XLII.). In its first and greatest cognizable form it is heaven and earth. Whatever existence there was before heaven and earth, was the Abyss-Mother (vi.); but even this is a forced name: it has strictly no name, and all names are inadequate to express it (xxv.).

Lau-tsze had no notion of spirit as a substance distinct from matter. It may surprise those who are not acquainted with the history of metaphysics to be told that even John Milton, our great Christian poet, knew nothing of a distinct essence of spirits. But this was the case. Angels and souls of men are all made, according to him, from the same stuff by which our bodies are nourished.

“And from these corporal nutriments perhaps
Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit.”
— *Paradise Lost* (V. 496).

Such also has been the prevailing dogma of the Tauist sect, of which Lau-tsze was the founder; and it has given rise to endless absurd gibberish about the elixir of life, and the different ways by which a man may turn himself “all to spirit and, better still, to the state of emptiness, of which the founder has so much to say.

“Much ado about *nothing*” will almost compel us to believe that it is something. And such would seem to have been the effect of Lau-tsze’s talk about the non-existent. Where we should place the soul of man he places *emptiness*. The space between heaven and earth is *emptiness*. *Emptiness* is useful. It is the womb of the Abyss-mother, from which all things flow out into actual existence. In one place he tells us that there is in the heart of everything “an (immaterial) *breath*” (XLII.); but this is, I suspect, after all, but the non-existent, which enters into all things, without exception, or penetrates the impenetrable (XLIII).

Once, indeed, we read of a Spirit, in the VIth chapter. The original is very obscure, and I am not sure that I have hit on the right interpretation; but it seems to me to contain an acknowledgment, that, after all his speculations about *Tau*, and non-existence, and the Abyss-mother, the source of heaven and earth is a Spirit. Probably most readers will think it would have been well if he had rested more in this truth, and recognized a personal God as the highest existence, instead of placing an indefinite, impersonal, and unconscious *Tau* before Him and above Him (iv.).

But the fact that Lau-tsze in his metaphysics strayed far from truth and from common sense, is no proof of his inferiority in that department. Much of our metaphysics is only poetry ran mad. And Lau-tsze was a poetical, and not a scientific, observer of nature. The water that bubbled up in the spring of the valley came from he knew not where, and so it came from *nowhere* — from *nothing*. That spring flows on for ever; a symbol, thought he, of all existence, which continually flows from nonexistence. And yet Eternal *Tau* is neither the one of these nor the other, “but the slumbering - possibility of both.”

It is a consideration fitted to rebuke and humble the pride of modern intellect, that in the sixth century before the Christian era, a heathen had penetrated about as deeply into the mystery of the Universe as the famous German metaphysician, of whose philosophy the following account is given (SCHELLING, *in Eng. Cyc.*)

“That Absolute which we cognize only through identification with it, and which we name Deity, is to be regarded in its original condition as neither object nor subject, neither nature nor mind, but is the union, the indifference, the slumbering possibility of both. It has *become* all that exists by a process of self-movement continually potentiating itself higher and higher from the lowest manifestations of what is called matter up to organic existence, and the activity of reason itself in the guise of humanity. In this movement of Deity or the Absolute One, which constitutes the life of the universe, there are two modes; first, the expansive movement, or objectivizing tendency by which the Absolute rushes forth, so to speak, into actual existence, and out of the *natura naturans* there comes the whole variety and complexity of the *natura naturata*; and, secondly, the contractive movement, or subjectivizing tendency by which the *natura naturata* falls back on the *natura naturans* and becomes conscious of itself.”

Truly the greatest wisdom of man, when he ventures beyond his depth, seems near akin to folly.

But Lau-tsze derives some beautiful moral lessons from nature. What could be finer, for instance, than the lesson of usefulness combined with lowliness, drawn from water, in the VIIIth chapter? The hard and strong parts of trees stay below to support the weaker parts (LXXVI.); so should it be in human society. The Power which completes all the forms of nature does not shew itself; its beneficent effects alone are seen: so should it be with the good man. A violent wind or a pouring rain cannot last long; therefore be moderate if you wish to last.

There are few Christians who will not sympathize with, and even admire, Lau-tsze's sentiments on war. And perhaps those on capital punishment will not be taken amiss. At all events, the light in which he regards bad men and criminals, in chapters XXVII. and LXXIV. is a most Christian light. The good men have to make, by instruction and example, other good men out of *these materials*, and he is a sorry workman who despises or destroys his materials.

The maxim in chapter LXIII. "Recompense injury with kindness," was once quoted to Confucius for his approbation, but he could not endorse it. "With what then," said he, "will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with, kindness." Lau-tsze occupied here higher ground than Confucius. Confucius always spoke from the stand-point of a schoolmaster or a magistrate. Lau-tsze's fault lay rather the other way. He saw the hollowness of the education and government of his day, and went to the extreme of condemning all systematic education, all legislation, all official rank, and all executive government. It was on these subjects that he drove his theory of non-action and spontaneity beyond all practical bounds. He was one of the people; and if it had been his lot to instruct and govern others he would have done so, he thought, by simply being the best one among them.

But I will here leave Lau-tsze to be judged by his English readers.

The French translation by M. Julien has been very helpful to me, and I have much pleasure in acknowledging my obligations to its author, whose more elaborate work I have no wish or intention to supersede by this attempt to put the thoughts of Lau-tsze into a readable English dress.

**TAU TEH KING; OR, THE CLASSIC OF TAU AND OF
VIRTUE.**



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