Dao De Jing

Previous (Dao) Next (Daoguang Emperor)

The **Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)** (Chinese: 道德經; Pinyin Romanization: Dào Dé Jīng; meaning "The Classic on the Way and its Power or Virtue") is a famous Chinese philosophical text attributed to the authorship of Laozi (Lao Tzu) (sixth century B.C.E.), and highly influential in the religion of Daoism (Taoism). Renowned as the second-most widely translated text in the world after the *Holy Bible,* the *Dao De Jing's* influence on Asian thought, literature and art has been substantial. A small text consisting of a mere five thousand words and divided into 81 chapters, it is written in a pithy style (a set of concise, cryptic aphorisms) and often employs ambiguous and paradoxical language to present profound philosophical teachings. As such, it is open to a variety of interpretations and has generated a substantial corpus of commentaries and translations.

Contents

Origin of the *Dao De Jing*

According to legend, Laozi, the ostensible founder of Daoism, became disgusted with iniquities of life in feudal China and decided to leave his home in the state of Zhou for an unfettered life in the wilderness. When he reached the Western Pass (the border between civilized China and the barbarian wilds), a guard petitioned him to record his teachings for the edification of future generations. The elder sage complied, descended from his donkey and proceeded to write the entirety of the *Dao De Jing* in one sitting. When finished, and without a backward glance, Laozi departed through the gate, never to be seen again.

Though modern scholars have contested this story (and even the very existence of Laozi), the text attributed to him remains one of the most renowned of Chinese philosophical writings. Throughout Chinese history, the *Dao De Jing* has received constant commentarial attention, and it has been continually translated since the earliest Western contact.

For many scholars, the *Dao De Jing*—rather than being the product of a single sagely author—is a gradual accretion of centuries of wisdom; it is a compendium of epigrams forwarding a particularly mystical (or at least contemplative) worldview. This point of view is supported by a number of historical facts including the paucity of historical evidence for the existence of Laozi, the failure of (supposedly) contemporaneous documents to mention the text (especially the *Zhuangzi*), and the presence of multiple editorial hands visible in the work (attested to by repetition, confusing passages and other textual problems that should not have arisen if the text was written by a single author). For these scholars, the *Dao De Jing* is a text whose final redaction likely occurred in the middle of the third century B.C.E. (nearly three centuries later than the traditionally accepted date) (Pas 1998).

Textual and stylistic issues

In terms of style, the *Dao De Jing* is a set of concise, cryptic aphorisms. The difficulties inherent in apprehending the meaning behind these statements are only deepened by evident textual problems and incoherencies often arising from transmission errors. This "transmission error" hypothesis was verified in 1973, when an archaeological excavation at Mawangdui unearthed two separate versions of the text, each dating from approximately 200 B.C.E. While this find proved the existence of some significant errors in the then-most-current Wang Bi edition of the text, further problematic passages within those texts have caused experts to theorize that, even at this point, some textual corruption had occurred. As a result of these issues, Chinese thinkers have often resorted to commentaries for explicating these difficult passages (Graham 1989). Such difficulties are exacerbated when attempting to translate the text from its original idiom, as classical Chinese is a language that is noted for its ability to traffic in fruitful ambiguities (Rosemont 1974). For an example of these translation difficulties, one can turn to Michael LaFargue and Julian Pas (1998, 290):

Note: Each of the names preceding a quotation represents an English-language

edition of the text. These all represent different translations of Dao De Jing 4:1.

Addiss: Tao is empty / Its use never exhausted.

Brynner: Existence, by nothing bred, / Breeds everything.

Ch'u: Tao is a whirling emptiness / Yet in use it is inexhaustible.

Duyvendak: The Way is like an empty vessel which, in spite of being used, is never filled.

Lau (1963): The way is empty, yet use will not drain it.

Lau (1982): The way is empty, yet when used there is something that does not make it full.

Though their text contains numerous other examples, the above is sufficient to indicate the difficulties that the style of the text creates, even for the most careful translator.

Philosophy of the *Dao De Jing*

Cosmology and the *Dao*

The first major philosophical achievement of the *Dao De Jing* is the elucidation of the concept of *Dao*. While the term *Dao* can be found throughout the writings of classical Chinese philosophers, its meaning was rather amorphous—though it typically was tied to the notion of a "path" (usually in a moral context). It was not until the *Dao De Jing* (and the *Zhuangzi*) that the notion was extended into its modern, cosmological form. Specifically, the text "offers us two basic meanings of the *Dao*: The *Dao* is the universal necessity underlying all things and controlling their existence, and the *Dao* is the very beginning of all things" (Xie 2000, 470). Though this statement perhaps implies too great a philosophical systematicity (drawing, as it seems to, from the Wang Bi commentary), it does summarize two trends within the *Dao De Jing's* cosmological depiction of the *Dao*.

The depiction of *Dao* as (cosmologically) creative force can be seen in chapter 25:

There is a thing confusedly formed,

Born before heaven and earth.

Silent and void

It stands alone and does not change,

Goes round and does not weary.

It is capable of being the mother of the world.

I know not its name

So I style it "the way" [*Dao*].

This depiction of *Dao* as the ultimate source of the cosmos is also echoed in the first chapter of the text, where "the Way" is described as the union between the named ("the mother of the myriad creatures") and the nameless ("the beginning of heaven and earth") (*Dao De Jing* or *Tao Te Ching,* TTC, 1:2).

In addition to this understanding of *Dao* as a cosmological creation point, the text also describes it in more "verbal" terms—as the mode of action by which the world operates. One of the clearest depictions of this unique conception is found in chapter 34:

The way is broad, reaching left as well as right.

The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority

It accomplishes its task yet lays claim for no merit

It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no claim to being their master.

Forever free of desire, it can be called small; yet, as it lays no claim to being

master when the myriad creatures turn to it, it can be called great. It is because it

never attempts to be great that it succeeds in becoming great.

This operational depiction of *Dao* can also be seen in the most common metaphors used to describe it—namely, water (which effortlessly finds the lowest ground (see TTC 8, 28) and uncarved wood (which simply is as it is (TTC 32). This mode of action—acting without desire, in the most natural way possible—is called *wu-wei*. Numerous passages in the text develop the idea that this is, in fact, the way that the manner in which the *Dao* acts in the world (TTC 37).

Developing these two notions (of *Dao* as cosmological originator and as worldly operational principle) is one of the elements of creative genius visible in the text. The second is its attempt to then unite this cosmological and metaphysical understanding with a practicable system of behavioral ethics.

Ethics, proper governance, and *De*

According to the *Dao De Jing,* the *Dao's* mode of action in the world is *wu-wei* and proper human action is, accordingly, understood in the same manner. Of the sage (an ideal human), the text suggests that "because he does nothing, [he] never ruins anything; and, because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing" (TTC 64; cf. 43, 63). In a more explicit manner, the text states:

Know the male

But keep to the role of the female

And be a ravine to the empire.

If you are a ravine to the empire,

Then constant virtue will not desert you

...

Know honor

But keep to the role of the disgraced

And be a valley to the empire.

If you are a valley to the empire,

Then the constant virtue will be self-sufficient

And you will return to being the uncarved block (TTC 28).

The above passage, in addition to advocating behavioral *wu-wei,* also seems to be addressing a ruler. This theme is developed more explicitly in the context of proper governance. For example, chapter 17 suggests that:

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects.

...

Hesitant, he does not utter words lightly.

When his task is accomplished and his work done

The people all say, "It happened to us naturally" (see also TTC 29, 60, 61, 80).

In this way, the classical Chinese model of "virtue" (*De*), a notion having more to do with efficacy and charisma than ethics (Slingerland 2000) becomes reinterpreted within the Daoist framework.

Significance

Why has such a small text commanded such a place of primacy in history of world religions and philosophy? It seems that part of the appeal of the text is derived from its succinctness. While it does not investigate the variety of philosophical issues tackled in the *Zhuangzi,* the *Dao De Jing* instead focuses with razor-like precision upon two related themes: the development a unique cosmology (focusing on the relationship between the Dao and the world), and the explication of an ethic of virtuous, non-attached action *(wu-wei)* corresponding to that cosmological understanding. This division is echoed in the name of the text itself, which can be translated as "The Classic of the Way *(Dao)* and [its] Virtue *(De)*." Given the extent to which the text successfully develops these themes, it is perhaps not surprising that the Han dynasty historiographers retroactively deemed the *Dao De Jing* to be the quintessential Daoist document—despite the possible philosophical and historical primacy of the Zhuangzi (Fowler 2005).

In addition to its relevance as a philosophical text in the classical Chinese corpus, the *Dao De Jing* has also been influential in the development of various indigenous Chinese religious traditions. For example, an early commentary written by Ho-Shang Kung, which reinterprets the text as an instruction manual for "prolonging life," was instrumental to the development of Daoist alchemy (with its goal of fostering immortality). Also, the Heavenly Masters (and other Daoist religious sects), used the text as a primary scripture. For these reasons, the text remains a significant component of the Chinese philosophical and religious landscape (Pas 1998).

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