

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-3b Daoism  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 5-3b Daoism

**Daoism** ((DOW-ism) A nature-oriented philosophy/religion of China; also called Taoism.) (DOW-ism; also called Taoism) is a philosophy centered on nature and following the “Way” (Dao: “dauw”). It was supposedly the product of the teacher-sage **Laozi** ((lauw-tsu) Mythical author of the *Dao de Jing*, or *The Classic of Virtues and the Way*, which has served as the text for various versions of Daoist folklore and philosophy for many centuries in China.) (lauw-tsu), who was purportedly a near contemporary and rival of Confucius but may be entirely legendary. **Dao de Jing (The Way of the Dao)** ((DOW deh CHING) (*Book of Changes*) Daoism’s major scripture; attributed to Laozi.), was probably written by his followers much later.

If Confucius stood for the active principle in Chinese philosophy, Daoism is more passive, with a skeptical attitude toward knowledge that meant it was often best to do nothing rather than act on the basis of limited information, and seeing the best government as the least government—providing only a minimum of correction and guidance for those who are inherently unable and unwilling to govern themselves. In so doing the rulers should follow the Way of Nature as it is perceived through meditation and observation. An intelligent man seeks a lifestyle that is in tune with the natural world, a harmony of parts in a serene whole. The excerpt from the *Dao de Jing* in the **Framing History: Patterns of Belief** feature shows this harmony through paradoxical examples drawn from everyday life. All extremes should be avoided, even those meant to be benevolent. A truly good ruler does little except be; excessive action is as bad as no corrective action at all.

### Framing History

#### Patterns of Belief: Dao de Jing of Laozi

Confucian philosophy was by no means universally accepted in ancient China. It had to overcome several rival points of view among the educated class and was only partly successful in doing so. Among the ordinary people, Daoism was always stronger because it lent itself more readily to personal interpretation and to the rampant superstitions of the illiterate populace. It drew many of its principles from close observation of nature, emphasizing the necessity of bringing one’s life into harmony with nature. Rather than the illusions of well-bred Confucians or the brutality of the Legalists, the followers of the Way sought serenity through acceptance of what is.

The *Dao de Jing*, or *The Way of the Dao*, is a collection of sayings attributed to Laozi, who supposedly lived in the sixth century B.C.E. Like much Chinese philosophy, the essence of the *Dao de Jing* is the search for balance between

opposites, between the yin and yang principles. Unlike Confucianism, Daoism puts little faith in reason and foresight as the way to happiness. Instead, it urges its followers to accept the mystery of life and stop striving for a false mastery. It delights in formulating its truths as paradoxes.

## Chapter II

It is because everyone under Heaven recognizes beauty as beauty that the idea of ugliness exists.

And equally, if everyone recognized virtue as virtue, this would create fresh conceptions of wickedness.

For truly Being and Non-Being grow out of one another; Difficult and Easy complete one another; Long and Short test one another; High and Low determine one another.

The sounds of instruments and voice give harmony to one another.

Front and Back give sequence to one another.

Therefore the Sage relies on actionless activity, Carries on wordless teaching....

## Chapter IV

The Way is like an empty vessel, That yet may be drawn from Without ever needing to be filled.

It is bottomless; the very progenitor of all things in the world.

In it is all sharpness blunted, All tangles untied, All glare tempered, All dust smoothed.

It is like a deep pool that never dries.

Was it, too, the child of something else? We cannot tell.

## Chapter IX

Stretch a bow to the very full, And you will wish you had stopped in time; Temper a sword edge to its very sharpest, And you will find that it soon grows dull.

When bronze and jade fill your halls It can no longer be guarded.

Wealth and position breed insolence That brings ruin in its train.

When your work is done, then withdraw!

Such is Heaven's Way.

## Chapter XI

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the utility of the wheel depends.

We turn clay to make a vessel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the utility of the vessel depends.

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

Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the utility of what is not.

### Analyze and Interpret

What application of Daoist thought can you find in your own experiences?  
Does the paradox of saying that doors and windows can be appreciated only if one keeps in mind the walls of the house strike you as truthful? As memorable?

Source: *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Dao de Qing*, ed. and trans. A. Waley. © 1934.

Daoism has taken so many forms through the centuries that it is almost impossible to provide a single description of it. Originally, it was a philosophy of the educated classes, but it eventually also developed as a popular religion with an emphasis on the quest for immortality. Yet for many centuries it was a serious rival of Confucius's ideas and was often adopted by Chinese seeking harmony with the natural world and escape from earthly conflicts. This dichotomy is summed up in the saying that the educated classes were "Confucian in office, Daoist at home." In their rational, public lives they abided by practical Confucian principles of conduct, but in the quiet of their homes, they sought immersion in mysterious, suprarational nature.

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