

汉英对照
老子道德经

许渊冲 译

Chinese-English Edition
The Old Master Modernized
Laws Divine and Human

Translated by X.Y.Z.



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序

老子姓李名耳，公元前6世纪人(571—500BC)，大约比孔子(551—479BC)早生二十年，是古代中国伟大的哲学家。他的《道德经》五千言，八十一章，是世界上影响巨大的哲学经典。这部书中外译文很多，我只见到英国韦理的译本，国内则有北京大学出版社1995年的《老子道德经》，辽宁大学出版社1996年的《英译老子》，外文出版社1998年的《老子思想新释》等。这些译本多是逐字直译，各有独到之处；但除韦理把“道”解释为“道路”外，其他译本的“道”都是音译。在我看来，“道”字是本书的关键词，如果音译，则本书的精义损失太大，应该用现代人理解的词语来翻译，才能使老子的思想在全世界流传。其实，“道”是天道，道理，真理，自然规律的意思。《老子》第一章开宗明义就说：“道可道，非常道。”第一个“道”字指天道或自然规律，第三

个“道”字却指人间正道或社会规律。自然规律不依人的主观意志为转移，而社会规律，伦理道德却是根据人的需要来确定的。因此老子说：道非常道。意思就是：天道有常，不为尧存，不为桀亡。自然规律不会因为人的好坏而改变。根据这种解释，我把老子《道德经》重新译成现代读者更容易理解的英文。

如何理解“道”呢？《老子》第四章说：“道冲，而用之或不盈；渊兮，似万物之宗。”这四句话包括了“渊冲”两个字在内。“冲”者虚也，就是空虚无物，无形无影，却又用之不尽，取之不竭。“渊”者深也，就是广博深奥，包罗万象，所以像是万物的根源。这两个字说明了“道”的内涵和外表。

《老子》第三十七章说：“道常无为，而无不为。”“无为”不是无所作为，而是不干涉万物的作为，让万物自由发展的意思。所以“道”常无为而万物有为，万物有为是道无为的结果。道无为是万物有为的条件。说“道”无不为，是

说万物的作为都是“道”的体现：“道”是抽象的，万物是具体的，万物的所作所为都是“道”的具体化。这是老子重要的哲学思想。第二章中说得更加具体：“是以圣人处无为之事，行不言之教，万物作而弗始，生而弗有，为而不恃，功成而弗居。”这就是说，圣人做事，从不干涉别人；他不说话，却能教育别人。万物不用圣人启动，自然会有所作为；万物生长发展，并不属于圣人所有。万物有所作为，圣人并不居功。所以第五十七章总结说：“故圣人云：我无为，而民自化。”这就是说：只要圣人不犯错误，不横加干涉，人民自然会走上正确的道路。无为而治，是老子重要的政治思想。

因为无为，所以不争。《老子》第八章说：“上善若水，水善利万物而不争，处众人之所恶，故几于道。”这里把最高的善德比作水，水对万物有利，而不和万物争利；水往低处流，处在众人不喜欢的地位，而不和万物争夺上方。这种不争的善德，就接近于无为的天道了。第二十二章又说：“不自见，故明；不自是，故彰；不自伐，故有功；不自矜，故

长。夫惟不争，故天下莫能与之争。”这就更进一步，说不表现自己，所以看得清楚，别人也能看得明白；不自以为是，反能为人理解；不吹嘘自己，反而能够成功；不居功自傲，反而能够领导别人。如果你不争名夺利，争功夺位，天下还有谁能和你争呢？不争利是老子重要的经济思想。如果国家都像水一样，不和别国争高低；如果人不争夺私利，只利万物，那天下就可以太平了。

如何才能做到不争呢？老子又提出了寡欲的思想。第十九章说：“少私寡欲，”可见老子所说的欲，指的是自私自利的欲望，不是利人利己的思想。所以第一章才说：“故常无欲，以观其妙；常有欲，以观其缴。”因为没有私心和偏见，才能理解“道”内在的奥妙；只有无私的欲望，才能观察“道”外在的表现。

如何才能做到寡欲呢？老子又提出了知足的理论。第三十三章说：“知人者智，自知者明；胜人者有力，自胜者强。知足者富。”为什么要知足呢？因为知道自己比知道别人更

难，战胜自己也比战胜别人更难，在心理上了解自己，战胜自己的欲望，那所得到的满足，可以算是精神上的智者，强者，富者了。第四十六章又说：“祸莫大于不知足，咎莫大于欲得。故知足之足，常足矣。”这是从反面来说，若不知足，贪得无厌，反而会引起祸事。所以知道应该满足，不该贪得，那反而是富足的。

无为，不争，寡欲，知足，是老子的人生观。客观上说来，老子却具有辩证统一的世界观。如第二章说：“有无相生，难易相成，长短相形，高下相倾。”说的就是：有无，难易，长短，高下，都是相对的，没有难就无所谓易，没有长就无所谓短，没有高就无所谓下。所以第二十二章又说：“曲则全，枉则直，洼则盈，弊则新，少则得，多则惑。”这就是说：委屈才能求全，矫枉才能得正，空洼才能盈满，破旧才能革新，太少才会增加，太多反会损失。这种相反相成的观点，使老子得出了刚柔相济的结论。

第四十三章说：“天下之至柔驰骋天下之至坚。”这是老

子以柔克刚的军事思想。第七十八章又说：“天下莫柔弱于水，而攻坚强者莫之能胜，其无以易之。弱之胜强，柔之胜刚，天下莫不知，莫能行。”这更用水滴石穿的具体例子，说明柔能胜刚，弱能胜强的道理。这个道理无人不知，但是统治者却无人能行。这话即使到了今天，还有现实意义。例如有的霸权主义国家要用武力统治世界，却失掉了人心，结果到处碰壁。这就是不知道柔能胜刚的缘故。

据说孔子问礼于老子，老子张口不答。孔子看到老子口中有舌无牙，恍然大悟，知道了柔能胜刚的道理。后来宋人辛弃疾写了一首《西江月》，前四句是：

刚者不坚牢，
柔者难摧挫。
不信张开口角看，
舌在牙先堕。

说的就是这个故事。

据《中国图书商报》1999年9月7日《书评周刊》中说：1988年有七十五位荣获诺贝尔奖的科学家在巴黎聚会，发表

了一个宣言，说21世纪的人类如果要过和平幸福的生活，应该回到二千五百年前的孔子那里去寻找智慧。在我看来，孔子的智慧包括他问礼于老子所得的以柔济刚的道理，还有无为而治，与世无争，清心寡欲，知足常乐的思想。因此，在全球化的新世纪，出版这本现代化的《老子》新译本，也许可以让古老的中国传统文化焕发出新的光辉，对爱好和平的人类做出新的贡献。

许渊冲

2003年11月1日

PREFACE

Li Er, the Old Master (571-500 BC), twenty years older than Confucius(551-479 BC), was a great philosopher of ancient China. His *Laws Divine and Human* of 5000 words in 81 chapters is an influential philosophical work in the world. This book has many English translations. So far I have read four different versions, namely, *The Way and Its Power* by Arthur Waley published in 1934, *Lao Zi the Book of Tao and Teh* published by Peking University Press in 1995, *Tao Te Ching* published by Liaoning University Press in 1996, and *the Classic of the Dao, A New Investigation* published by Foreign Languages Press in 1998. All these versions are literal translations, and the key word is phonetically transcribed as “tao”or “dao”, except for Waley who translates it as “the way”. This cannot be easily understood by the modern reader. In reality, the key word means law, divine law, natural law or truth. In the very beginning of the first chapter of his book, Lao Zi says: “The divine law may be spoken of, but it is not the common law.” By common law Lao Zi means those

enforced by human beings. So we may see the difference between divine and human laws. The divine law is objective truth which does not depend on human will for its existence, while human laws do. The former may be called natural philosophy, while the latter social philosophy. The former will not change when the latter does. That is the reason why the Old Master says that the divine law is not the common law. Based on such interpretation, I have translated the Old Master's *Laws Divine and Human* as I understand it, so that it may be easily understood by the modern reader.

What is the divine law? The Old Master says in Chapter 4 that the divine law is formless, its use is inexhaustible; it is endless, whence come all things. That is to say, the divine law is abstract, empty and formless, but it can be embodied in concrete things, so its use is inexhaustible like an unfulfillable abyss, for it is deep, bottomless, endless, boundless, whence come all concrete things. Thus we see the divine law inwardly and outwardly.

In Chapter 37 the Old Master says that the divine law will not interfere, so there is nothing it cannot do. Non-interference is an important principle of the Old Master's philosophy. Only when

the law does not interfere can all things develop freely. So the law should always be inactive so as to let all things be active. The activity of all things is the result of the law's inaction or non-interference. The law's inaction provides the condition for the activity of all things. When we say there is nothing the law cannot do, we mean that the activity of all things are the embodiment of the divine law. In Chapter 2 the Old Master says more concretely, "Therefore the sage does everything without interference, teaches everyone without persuasion, and lets everything begin uninitiated and grow unpossessed. Everything is done without being his deed, and succeeds without being his success." And the Old Master sums up in Chapter 57: "Therefore the sage says, 'If I do nothing wrong, the people will go the right way.'" Thus we see "to rule by inaction or non-interference" is an important principle of the Old Master's political philosophy.

As a result of inaction, the Old Master advocates non-contention. In Chapter 8 he says, "The highest good (virtue) is like water. Water benefits everything by giving without taking or contending. It likes the low place others dislike, so it follows closely the divine law." Here virtue is compared to water which

flows to a low place without contending for a high position. Thus the virtue of non-contention conforms to the divine law. In Chapter 22 the Old Master says, “He who does not show himself is seen everywhere. He who does not assert himself is well-known. He who does not boast wins success. He who is not proud can lead. As he contends for nothing, none in the world could contend with him.” This further illustrates his principle of non-contention or his economic philosophy. If nobody should contend for personal gain or selfish profit, then there would be a lasting peace in the world.

How can the principle of non-contention be carried out? The Old Master puts forward the rules to be observed in Chapter 19: “Be simple and plain, selfless and desireless.” If you can control or subdue your desire, of course you will not contend for personal profit. That is the reason why the Old Master says in Chapter 1, “So we should be free from desire in order to understand the internal mystery of the divine law, and we should have desire in order to observe the external manifestations.” Only when you understand the divine law inwardly and outwardly can you be selfless and desireless.

How can we control or subdue our desire? The Old Master puts forward his principle of contentment in Chapter 33: "It needs observation to know others but reflection to know oneself. Physically strong, one can conquer others; mentally strong, one can conquer oneself. Content, one is rich." That is to say, if you know yourself through reflection, you will become mentally strong and conquer yourself. Content, you can control your desire. In Chapter 46, he further says, "No crime is greater than insatiable desire, no woe is greater than covetise. If you know contentment comes from being content, you will always have enough." That is to say, if you are mentally content, then you will have enough materially.

Non-interference, non-contention, desire-control and contentment are the four important principles of the Old Master's philosophy. Objectively, the Old Master is a dialectic relativist. For instance, he says in Chapter 2, "For 'to be' and 'not to be' co-exist, there cannot be one without the other: without 'difficult' there cannot be 'easy'; without 'long' there cannot be 'short'; without 'high' there cannot be 'low'.....The contrary completement each other". Here we see his theory of relativism.

In Chapter 22 he further says, “Stooping, you will be preserved; wronged, you will be righted. Hollow, you will be filled; worn out, you will be renewed. Having little, you may gain; having much, you may be at a loss.” Hence his theory on the soft and the hard.

In Chapter 43 the Old Master says, “The softest thing in the world can penetrate the hardest.” This is the basis of his military philosophy. In chapter 78 he further says, “Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, but nothing is better to win over the hard and the strong, for it cannot be replaced. The weak may surpass the strong and the soft may surpass the hard. It is wellknown to the world, but none can put it into practice.” This is true even today. For instance, some hegemonic power tries in vain to conquer the world by force, because it does not know the reason why the weak may surpass the strong.

It was said that once Confucius asked the Old Master for advice, who opened his toothless mouth without saying anything, but Confucius understood that he meant the soft outlasts the hard. Hearing of this story, Xin Qiji (1140 - 1207) wrote the following stanza:

The hard may not be strong,
While the soft may last long.
See into my open mouth if you think me wrong:
The teeth are lost before the tongue.

According to the *Weekly Book Review* (September 7, 1999), 75 Nobel Prize winners who gathered together at Paris in 1988 made a statement to the effect that mankind should seek wisdom from Confucius if they wish to live a peaceful happy life in the 21st century. In my opinion, the wisdom of Confucius may include the advice he got from the Old Master, that is, the supremacy of the soft over the hard and the principles of non-interference, non-contention, desire-control and contentment. Therefore, the publication of this modernized version of the Old Master in this new era of globalization may bring a new light from old Chinese culture and make a new contribution to the peace-loving mankind.

X.Y.Z.

Peking University, Beijing, China

November 1, 2003

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