

外教社中国文化汉外对照丛书

英译

老子

陈乃扬◎译

LAOZI (DAO DE JING)

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序 言

《老子》是一部很独特的著作，成书于两千多年前，全书五千余言，内容涵盖天地、宇宙、哲理、人生、政治、道德等多个方面。《老子》一书的文字非常淡雅，如诗一般行云流水；其中的道理似乎很深奥，也像是很浅明，意简言赅，使人读起来爱不释手，禁不住对浩瀚的宇宙和充满奥秘的人生产生无尽的遐想。

《老子》一书极富哲理，意境深远；它词句简练，并富有诗意，是理想的翻译对象。然而，将《老子》翻译成外语是有一定困难的。首先是文本中古字、僻字、假借字不少，而句子又极其精短，翻译起来往往令人拿捏不准，颇费思量，译时在词义贴切和句子顺畅两方面也难以做到兼顾；二是《老子》的文体为半诗、半对白式散文，意境优美，论述雄辩，翻译时比较难处理。对于一个译者来说，这些技术性的问题总是可以克服的，最终结果无非是翻译得比较好或是比较差而已。真正的困难在于老子的思想太过飘逸和超脱了，他那哲学上的、形而上的“道”与人间的、理想上的“德”结合得近乎完美，让人一方面赞叹不已，另一方面又觉得很难掌握他挥笔行文时那深奥的思维和意念。

在中国，《老子》一书经历过两千多年各代不少名家的解释和注疏，人们对《老子》的认识仍存有不少差异。中国学术界在20世纪初曾掀起了一场大规模的老子研究热潮，知名学者如梁启超、胡适、钱穆、冯友兰等都曾参与其中的探讨和辩论，但他们也始终未达成统一的见解，甚至对老子其人、其书，还存有不少争议。直到今天，老子的神秘面纱始终未能全部揭开。

《老子》的作者，一般公认为是春秋末年周朝掌管图书的一位官员，姓李，名耳，又称老聃或老子，和孔子是同时代的人；孔子的年纪比老子小二十岁，曾经问礼于老子。关于老子的记载，先秦不少著作均有提及，但多是极其简单的片言只语，整合起来也只能为后世提供一个老子的轮廓而已。最早为他立传的人是太史公司马迁，其时已是汉武帝时期，离老子在世相距约三百年，因此在司马迁笔下的《史记·老庄申韩列传》中，对于老子是否李耳的问题，也不敢百分之百地加以确定，还提出了另外有两个可能的人选，一个是老莱子，另一个则是太史儋。在没有充分的证据之下，自司马迁迄今两千年以来，经过历代的考诂，主流意见始终认定老子就是李耳。

1973年在长沙马王堆汉墓出土了两卷帛书《老子》，内容基本一致，经专家鉴定，一是汉初抄本，另一可能是战国末期的抄本。它们与今天坊间流行的版本比较起来，除了一些避讳字、假借字、通用字和虚字之外，文字和内容高度一致，与今本几乎一模一样。1993年在湖北荆门郭店村楚墓出土了竹简本《老子》三组，这三组竹简合起来是《老子》一书迄今所知的最早一个版本，全文只有两千多字，但它全部的文字以及分章都可在马王堆帛书《老子》中找到相应对照，除了分章次序有异之外，就有如帛书《老子》的浓缩本或节录本一样；反过来也可以说，帛书《老子》的内容好像是根据与楚简《老子》同期或类似版本为基础而发挥增添的。两者重叠的地方高度一致，有力地说明《老子》一书在战国末期已经定型，后人所添加的只不过是枝叶而已。上述两个重大的考古发现，引起了学术界很大的研究热情；希望今后有更多发现，使两千年来有关老子的谜团，终能水落石出。无论如何，我们今天可以放心地说，对于老子的身份以及《老子》成书的大约年份，基本上可以达成共识了，那就是老子的确是春秋末年的李耳，他就是《老子》的原作者，后人有可能对这本书的内容作了一些增添，但基本上并没有篡改他的思想内容。

作为译者，上述发现使我心中踏实多了。原作者既然是那洒脱的骑青牛过函谷关的李耳，译文中的意境就应切合这位逍遥隐士的语气。他说过的话让后人有所争议的，译者最好避免自己介入，因此在翻译中尽量采取直译的方法，译者最好少说话，而让老子本人自己说话，由读者自己去意会。译者的工作，就是在翻译上力求能做到文同其意，声如其调，貌似其人。

然而，要求译者完全不介入那也是不可能的，譬如文中最关键的一些概念如“无”、“有”、“为”、“无为”等，译者就不得不在词语上和概念上做出选择，并且要按照同样的词语在不同的文络中所表达的不同意象作出不同的翻译选择，以求符合老子的行文和思路。我只希望做到：第一，没有扭曲老子本来的意思；第二，所作的选择能够使东方人和西方人都可以理解和共鸣。我大胆地采用这两条原则，是因为我有这个信念：在真实和真理面前，无论是东方的文明之眼，或是西方的文明之眼，大家所见的、所感受的，尽管表面上好像有些差异，其实应该是共通的。老子的哲理乍看似飘无缥缈，其实含有深刻的真理，因此就应该是世界共通和共同的真理。

我的翻译和一些学术界前辈们的翻译，假如有不同之处，那仅是因为他们解说得比较详尽，意思有时会超出原文的范围，而我说得比较含蓄，力求不离开老子原来的语气，用字也尽量不超过老子的遣词方式，希望能够尽到一个译者的本分，那就是：可直译则直译，不可直译才意译，意译不了则求变通。此外，有一个人是我必须提名道谢的，那就是1997年出版《老子原文与译文》的作者远志明，本书的英译从他那里得益良多。他从信仰的角度出发，找到了一条认识和解释《老子》的新路，很值得参考。

Introduction

Laozi is a Chinese classic written about twenty-four to twenty-five hundred years ago. Its authorship, with little or no dispute, belongs to Laozi (or Lao Tzu), a contemporary of Confucius. Laozi served as an archive keeper for the royal court toward the end of the Zhou Dynasty and legend has it that one day he just rode off China's Hangu Pass on an ox and was never seen again. At the insistence of a frontier official at the pass, however, Laozi wrote on the night before departure and finished a book of five thousand Chinese characters, which comes to be known today as *Dao De Jing* or simply *Laozi*.

The word "Dao", with older spelling "Tao", means "the Way" and the word "De" means virtue and integrity, while the word "Jing" means classics or scripture. The book deals with fundamental issues of life, from cosmological, ontological, ethical, dialectical, political, and aesthetical perspectives, in a way that is intuitive yet nevertheless very profound. Its style is laconic yet verse-like, full of parables and imageries, easy to read but hard to understand. For almost two and a half millennia, it has made a deep imprint in the Chinese consciousness. As a matter of fact, it is the origin of the Taoist philosophy and some time later the Taoist religion.

What is the Way? It appears to be a body of precepts or instructions for men to follow, to live a good and simple life, a virtuous and peaceful life, a life that returns to eternity. It is not ineffable, as some high-minded philosophers and scholars would claim. Rather, it is quite easy to understand, though it may be hard to put into practice. The Way appears to be celestial: it has a life of its own, it is totally independent on others, it is trinity, and it had created Heaven and Earth and all things. It comes in the personification of one Sage, who is

meek and despised, who is servant, and who is king. For too long, *Laozi* has been thought to represent purely oriental philosophy, that it is, but the Western readers should be able to find much common ground in this unique book of five thousand Chinese characters.

The original copy of *Laozi*, like all ancient classics, has been long lost. Even extant copies of the nearly original manuscripts (hand-written on bamboo tablets or silk cloths) are also rare to non-existent. This unfortunate state of affair has a lot to do with China's first emperor Qin Shi Huang who was so determined to remove all political opposition from the old guards that he ordered in the year 213 BC all history books and classics not in government archives to be burnt. To show that he really meant business, he, in the following year, put over four hundred vehemently protesting scholars to death by actually burying them all, alive.

Well, *Laozi* has survived, just as practically all the other Chinese classics managed to have survived. The traditional Chinese scholars have proved themselves to be a tenacious lot. It was their customary practice to commit to memory, at least as much as their scholastic heads could hold, all the classics they studied. So what was burned to ashes by the Qin emperor "miraculously" resurfaced in later years. All good, but it is not without a steep price to pay.

To reconstruct a classic purely from memory, a master scholar would read out aloud from his head what he had learned in the yesteryears. His disciples would listen intently and write down word for word onto a piece of bamboo tablet held in the left hand. The writing was from top to bottom and each bamboo tablet would hold one vertical line of writing. When one line was completed, the bamboo tablet would then be pushed to the right side to join the previously written tablets, while the scribe would pick up a new bamboo tablet from the left side with his left hand to start writing again. (This perhaps helps to explain why ancient Chinese was read from top to bottom and right to left.)

There were two kinds of problems associated with this process of classics

reconstruction. An obvious one is the varying degrees of reliability of the memories of the different master scholars. It would be next to impossible for the human mind to remember everything flawlessly. In the case of *Laozi*, just like in the case of other ancient classics, different versions and inconsistencies started to multiply. A second problem was the process of dictation itself. Chinese language is a difficult language, and it proves to be no exception even for the ancient masters and their disciples. Appearances of homonymic and semantic hieroglyphic variants soon started to obscure the text itself. In the same time, the Chinese language was, of course, changing and evolving, making it more difficult to decipher older texts even while the arts of exegetics had developed very strongly in the next few hundred years. In each epoch of Chinese history we find scholars meticulously examining, interpreting and updating the many successive versions of *Laozi*.

That is why we cannot speak of an original version of *Laozi* today, or even any close copies of it. Rather, we must look at what the collective efforts in the restoration of Laozi's work throughout the centuries have brought us. We should have faith that generations upon generations of scholars have done their full due diligence in keeping this book as accurately as possible. As a matter of fact, what have remained today as popular versions of *Laozi* number in the dozens and they are practically identical to one another in form and body. Minor differences may arise from the use of ancient variants of certain Chinese characters and from occasional words or phrases out of sequence. Their outward differences are mainly due to different annotations and interpretations made by different schools of thoughts, while the literal differences actually amount to no more than five to ten percent of the entire book. Recent archaeological finds of older extant copies of *Laozi* have largely confirmed this point. In 1973, two distinct silk copies of *Laozi* were unearthed from a Han Dynasty tomb at Mawangdui in Changsha, Hunan Province. To the delight of the archaeological researchers, these two copies were dated to

the first and third decade of the 2nd century BC. Though somewhat damaged by tomb water, they have been determined to be basically not much different from the existing popular versions today. A bigger find was made in 1993 at Guodian, Hubei Province, where a Chu tomb in the Warring States Period (475 – 221 BC) was unearthed to yield a copy of *Laozi* in the form of three groups of bamboo tablets. Dating of the bamboo tablets has determined that they were entombed prior to 300 BC. That makes the Guodian Chu Jian (bamboo tablets of the Chu tomb) the oldest extant *Laozi*. It consists of two thousand Chinese characters instead of the five thousand as commonly known. Allowing for some Chinese character graphic variants, and ignoring the fact that most of the chapters are not kept in proper order, the Chu Jian text finds almost exact correspondence with the existing popular copies today.

There is, after all, one difference that may be significant. One chapter regarding knowledge and ritual rites seems to be oddly out of place with the Taoist philosophy, which believes they are only hypocritical substitutes of the all good and all natural Tao (the Way). From this, one might conjecture that earliest Taoism could be much closer in thoughts with Confucianism than we have generally believed. In this light, the Chu Jian text with two thousand Chinese characters could be a reliable copy of the original *Laozi* and the additional three thousand Chinese characters could be simply fabricated by later Taoists. On the other hand, the Chu tomb master is known to be a Confucian scholar and Chu Jian *Laozi* might just be preferential excerpts that he had collected and perhaps even edited in favor of Confucianism. Well, what are we to believe?

Chu Jian *Laozi* is undoubtedly an exciting archaeological find. However, it remains one single piece of evidence that stands apart from the bulk and the norm. Even so, with its limited two thousand Chinese characters, it has lent credence and support to the existing popular versions of *Laozi* because of the high congruence of the texts. Unless future evidence indicate otherwise, we

are safe to say that Laozi is the author of the book *Laozi*, in which he penned down two thousand to five thousand Chinese characters. Later Taoists might have embellished on his work somewhat, but they had not deviated from his main theme and the book itself has withstood the scrutiny of scholars and exegetes for the past two thousand years.

There are today many existing English translated versions of *Laozi*, perhaps in the dozens to a hundred or more. There are also a countless number of Chinese translations and interpretations of Laozi's ancient text. These works have provided the foundation as well as inspiration for my efforts to further understand and reveal Laozi's thoughts. Through this translation, I hope to present a more holistic picture of Laozi's outlook and worldview while keeping his very terse yet free-flowing style. This calls for more direct and sometimes nearly literal translation. I cannot claim to be very successful in doing so, perhaps far from it; but I do believe it is well worth the effort of portraying a real-life Laozi. Along the way, it is hoped that some existing erroneous interpretations have been corrected and some new insights added.

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232 附言

Background Notes

第一章

道可道，非常道¹；名可名，非常名。

无，名天地之始；有，名万物之母。

故常无，欲以观其妙；常有，欲以观其徼²。

此两者，同出而异名，同谓之玄。

玄之又玄，众妙之门。

1 【常】(cháng): 此处作普通 (ordinary) 解，“非常道”意为不是那种一般、普通的道。“常”字固然也可解作永恒 (eternal)，因而“常道”可以理解为永恒的道。对以上两种不同的解释，自古以来多有争辩。但是，如果将“常”字解释为永恒的话，“常名”便需要被解释为永恒不变的名了。然而，在中国人的思想里，自孔子正名之说，到战国中期名实之辩以降，只有“名是否副实”的考虑，而“常名”或“恒名”这个概念基本上是不重要的。1973年马王堆汉墓出土的帛书《老子》出现有“道可道也，非恒道也；名可名也，非恒名也”之句，多被引用来敲定“常”即“恒”乃永恒之意。事实上，“恒”字亦可解释为普通、寻常、经常的意思，而且这个字的含义随着时间演变，被赋予永恒这个内涵，恐怕还是后来的事。

2 【徼】(jiào): 边境，边界 (boundary, border)

Chapter 1

The Way (Tao) can be told, yet

it's not an ordinary way¹.

It can be given a name, but

not an ordinary one².

It is Nothingness – a name for the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

It is Real³ – a name for the Mother of all things.

It always is Nothingness⁴ – how I wish to see its subtleties.

It always is Real – how I desire to observe its boundaries.

The two are of one origin, though with different names.

They are one great mystery –

the mystery of all mysteries, and

the doorway to all subtle wonders.

1, 2 【常】(cháng) may mean ordinary or constant (eternal). Numerous translations render these two lines as: A way that can be told (or trodden) is not the eternal way. A name that can be given is not an everlasting name.

3 【有】(yǒu) means there is, have or exist. Here it may be construed as Existence, Being, Entity, or Real (a physical entity).

4 【无】(wú) means nothing or nothingness. It may also be taken to mean the great void.

第二章

天下皆知美之为美，斯恶已¹；皆知善之为善，斯不善已。

故有无相生，难易相成，长短相形，高下相倾，音声相和，前后相随。

是以圣人处无为之事，行不言之教，万物作焉而不辞。

生而不有，为而不恃，功成而弗居。

夫唯弗居，是以不去。

1 【斯】(sī) (代词) 此，这 (this)；(连词) 则 (then)

Chapter 2

Every one under Heaven beholds beauty as beauty;
there is ugliness already.

Likewise, every one perceives goodness as goodness;
there is evil already.

Being and non-being beget each other;
Difficult and easy become each other;
Long and short measure each other;
High and low lean towards each other;
Sound and tone blend with each other;
Fore and rear follow each other.

Wherefore, the Sage conducts his affairs not by interference¹.
He teaches not with words.
No words, yet all things grow and thrive.

He raises them but he owns them not.
He acts on their behalf with no presumptions.
He accomplishes much but makes no claims.
By not making claims, all credits due him remain forever.

1 【无为】(wúwéi): Some renditions may have translated this Chinese expression as inaction, without action, or without unnatural action. The translator believes that the word "noninterference" is better understood and actually more appropriate because Laozi's main concern throughout his writing was about governance.