

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

LAO TZU

TAO TE CHING



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LAO TZU
TAO TE CHING

TRANSLATED
WITH AN
INTRODUCTION
BY
D. C. LAU

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
LAO TZU	
BOOK ONE	55
BOOK TWO	97
LIST OF PASSAGES FOR COMPARISON	145
APPENDICES	
1 THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORSHIP	147
2 THE NATURE OF THE WORK	163
CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE	175
GLOSSARY	176
NOTES	187

INTRODUCTION

The *Lao tzu* has had an influence on Chinese thought through the ages out of all proportion to its length. It is often referred to as 'the book of five thousand characters', though, in fact, in most versions it is slightly longer than that. It is a short work even allowing for the fact that ancient Chinese was a very concise language and that the particular style in which it was written is more often than not succinct to the point of obscurity. If the *Lao tzu* is widely read in China as *the* classic in the thought of Taoism,* it is no less well known to the West through a long line of translators. In English alone there are well over thirty translations. The *Lao tzu* is, without a doubt, by far the most frequently translated work in Chinese, but unfortunately it cannot be said that it has been best served by its numerous translators, as the nature of the work attracted many whose enthusiasm for Eastern mysticism far outstripped their acquaintance with Chinese thought or even with the Chinese language.

The text of the *Lao tzu* is divided into two books. This was done probably simply to conform to the statement in the biography of Lao Tzu that he wrote a work *in two books* at the request of the Keeper of the Pass. At any rate, the division into two books goes at least as far back as the first century A.D. We have reason to believe that the present division into eighty-one chapters – thirty-seven in Book I and forty-four in Book II – also goes back to that time. By the end of the second century A.D., the work was also known by the alternative title of the *Tao te ching*. More specifically, Book I was known as the *Tao ching*, and Book II the *Te ching*. This practice seems to have

* For Chinese terms, proper names, and titles of books, see Glossary.

no more foundation than the mere fact that the first word in Book I is *tao* while in Book II the first word (discounting the adjective *shang* which has no special significance) is *te*.

The traditional view is that the *Lao tzu* was written by a man named Lao Tzu who was an older contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). The *locus classicus* of this tradition is the biography of Lao Tzu in the *Shih chi* (*Records of the Historian*), the earliest general history of China, written at the beginning of the first century B.C. by Ssu-ma Ch'ien:

Lao Tzu was a native of the Ch'ü Jen Hamlet in the Li Village of Hu Hsien in the State of Ch'u. His surname was Li, his personal name was Erh and he was styled Tan. He was the Historian in charge of the archives in Chou.

When Confucius went to Chou to ask to be instructed in the rites by him, Lao Tzu said, 'What you are talking about concerns merely the words left by people who have rotted along with their bones. Furthermore, when a gentleman is in sympathy with the times he goes out in a carriage, but drifts with the wind when the times are against him. I have heard it said that a good merchant hides his store in a safe place and appears to be devoid of possessions, while a gentleman, though endowed with great virtue, wears a foolish countenance. Rid yourself of your arrogance and your lustfulness, your ingratiating manners and your excessive ambition. These are all detrimental to your person. This is all I have to say to you.'

On leaving, Confucius told his disciples, 'I know a bird can fly, a fish can swim, and an animal can run. For that which runs a net can be made; for that which swims a line can be made; for that which flies a corded arrow can be made. But the dragon's ascent into heaven on the wind and the clouds is something which is beyond my knowledge. Today I have seen Lao Tzu who is perhaps like a dragon.'

Lao Tzu cultivated the way and virtue, and his teachings aimed at self-effacement. He lived in Chou for a long time, but seeing its decline he departed; when he reached the Pass, the Keeper there was pleased and said to him, 'As you are about to leave the world behind, could you write a book for my sake?' As a result, Lao Tzu wrote a work in two books, setting out the meaning of the way and virtue in some five thousand characters, and then departed. None knew where he went to in the end.

According to one tradition, Lao Lai Tzu was also a native of the State of Ch'u. He wrote a book in fifteen *p'ien*, setting forth the applications of the teachings of the Taoist school, and was contemporary with Confucius. Lao Tzu probably lived to over a hundred and sixty years of age – some even say over two hundred – as he cultivated the way and was able to live to a great age.

A hundred and twenty nine years after the death of Confucius, it was recorded by a historian that Tan the Historian of Chou had an audience with Duke Hsien of Ch'in during which he said, 'In the first instance, Ch'in and Chou were united, and after being united for five hundred years they separated, but seventy years after the separation a great feudal lord is going to be born.' According to some, Tan was none other than Lao Tzu, but according to others this was not so. The world is unable to know where the truth lay. Lao Tzu was a gentleman who lived in retirement from the world.

The son of Lao Tzu was one by the name of Tsung, who served as general in the army of the state of Wei and was given the fief of Tuan Kan. Tsung's son was Chu, Chu's son was Kung, and Kung's great-great-grandson was Chia. Chia was an official in the time of Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty. His son Chieh was Tutor to Ang, Prince of Chiao Hsi, and as a result made his home in Ch'i.

The followers of Lao Tzu try to belittle the Confucianists, and the Confucianists likewise belittle the followers of Lao Tzu. This may

be what is meant when it is said that 'people who follow different ways never have anything helpful to say to one another'.

Li Erh 'does nothing and the people are transformed of their own accord'; 'remains limpid and still and the people are rectified of themselves.'

In the biography of Confucius in the same work, there is another version of his meeting with Lao Tzu:

Nan-kung Ching-shu of Lu said to the king of Lu, 'May your servant be granted permission to go to Chou with Confucius.' The king of Lu gave him a carriage and two horses, together with one servant, and he went [with Confucius] to Chou to ask about the rites. It was probably then that they met Lao Tzu.

When they departed, Lao Tzu saw them off and said, 'I have heard that men of wealth and rank make gifts of money while benevolent men make gifts of words. I have not been able to win either wealth or rank, but I have been undeservedly accorded the name of a benevolent man. These words are my parting gift: "There are men with clever and penetrating minds who are never far from death. This is because they are fond of criticizing others. There are men of wide learning and great eloquence who put themselves in peril. This is because they expose the evil deeds of others. Neither a son nor a subject should look upon his person as his own."' "

When Ssu-ma Ch'ien came to write the biography of Lao Tzu, he found so few facts that all he could do was to collect together traditions about the man current in his time. He had difficulty even with Lao Tzu's identity. He explicitly suggests that he was probably the same person as Tan the Historian, though the latter lived more than a century after the death of Confucius. He also implied that there was a possibility that Lao Tzu was Lao Lai Tzu because the latter was also a native of

Ch'u and the author of a Taoist work. Finally, he identifies Lao Tzu as the father of one Tuan-kan Tsung whose descendants were still living in his own time. He expresses his own doubts and misgivings when he says, 'Lao Tzu probably lived to over a hundred and sixty years of age – some even say over two hundred – as he cultivated the way and was able to live to a great age.' He is half-hearted in his identification of Lao Tzu with Tan the Historian as he adds, 'The world is unable to know where the truth lay.' When he goes on to say, 'Lao Tzu was a gentleman who lived in retirement from the world,' he is tacitly offering an explanation for the lack of reliable information in this biography.

Apart from the statement that Lao Tzu's name was Tan and that his native state was Ch'u, there are only two purported facts in the whole biography. The first is the meeting between Lao Tzu and Confucius at which Confucius asked to be instructed in the rites. The second is Lao Tzu's westward journey through the Pass and the writing of a book at the request of the Keeper of the Pass.

Neither of these two purported facts is recorded in any extant work whose date is indubitably early. In my view both traditions did not become widely known or accepted until the period between 280 and 240 B.C., and there are no strong reasons to believe that they were founded on fact. In all probability Lao Tzu was not a historical figure at all. Once we cease to look at Lao Tzu as a historical personage and the *Lao tzu* as written by him, we begin to see certain features concerning both which point to a more reasonable view.

At a very early stage Confucius came to be known as a sage and naturally stories came to be told about him some of which

no doubt originated from hostile circles. Of these there was a particular genre which was popular. This consists of stories about Confucius's encounters with hermits who made fun of him. The Lao Tzu story is only one such story and Lao Tzu was only one among a number of such hermits. Since such stories cannot be taken seriously as historical evidence, we have no reason to believe that Lao Tzu was a real person.

Moreover, in the period covering the second half of the fourth and the first half of the third century B.C. there were at least two works with titles which mean 'elder' and 'old man of mature wisdom'. It cannot be accidental that 'Lao Tzu' also has the meaning of 'old man'. There seems to be a genre of literature in this period to which such titles were given. This is probably because these works consist of sayings which embody a kind of wisdom that is associated with old age. There is no reason to suppose that the titles imply that these works were written by individuals. They are best looked upon as anthologies which were compiled from short passages by an editor or a series of editors. Most of these short passages reflect the doctrines of the time but some represent sayings of considerable antiquity.

It is probably because 'Lao Tzu' happened to be the name of one of the hermits in the Confucian stories and also figured as the title of one of these anthologies of wise sayings that the *Lao tzu* alone has survived and is attributed to a man who instructed Confucius in the rites.*

The period in which the *Lao tzu* and other works of the same kind were produced was certainly a golden age of Chinese thought. Schools of thought mushroomed, so much so that

* For a detailed discussion of the *Lao tzu* and its author see Appendices 1 and 2.

they are often referred to as 'the hundred schools'. Scholars and philosophers who could lay claim to any originality in ideas won preferment as well as prestige. This can be seen from the gathering of brilliant minds at Chi Hsia under the patronage of King Wei (356-320 B.C.) and King Hsüan (319-301 B.C.) of the state of Ch'i. As we shall see, in the *Lao tzu* are to be found many ideas which were associated with one or other of the thinkers of this period.

At this time the schools of thought founded by Confucius, Mo Tzu (*fl.* fifth century B.C.) and Yang Chu (*fl.* fourth century B.C.) were the 'prominent schools'. Confucius taught a way of life in which morality occupies a supreme position. Morality is shown to have no connexion whatsoever with self-interest. In fact the demands of morality on a man are categorical. If need be, he has to sacrifice even his life in doing what is right. Confucius's view concerning the actual duties a man has was traditional. A man is born into certain relationships and as a result has certain duties. For instance, he has a duty of loyalty to his lord, a filial duty to his parents, a duty to help his friends, and a duty of common humanity towards his fellow beings. These duties are not of equal stringency. A man's duty to his lord and parents comes before his duty to his friends and fellow human beings. It was Confucius's belief that if everyone lived up to his duties according to his station political order would prevail.

Mo Tzu probably started life as a Confucian but gradually became dissatisfied with some of the tenets of Confucianism. He saw that so long as there were duties varying in stringency there was bound to be discrimination, and conflict could not be completely avoided. It may happen that a man has to do something harmful to another because his duty towards his

parents demands it. To prevent this kind of situation from arising, Mo Tzu advocated 'love without discrimination'. A man should love others as himself and also their parents as his own. Mo Tzu also placed greater emphasis than later Confucianists on the doctrine that men of worth should be in authority.

Confucius was also traditional in his attitude to *t'ien* (heaven). Heaven was for him vaguely a divine presence, whose decree it was that men should be moral. Mo Tzu was of a much more religious turn of mind. His conception of heaven was the closest to a personal God that is to be met with in ancient Chinese thought. For him it is the will of heaven that men should love one another without discrimination, and those who fail to do so will be punished. The attitude of Confucius and Mo Tzu to heaven is something we shall have to bear in mind when we come to examine the concept of the *tao* (way) in the *Lao tzu*.

In the case of Yang Chu unfortunately we have no extant work representing his school. According to the writings of other thinkers, some of whom were certainly not sympathetic, Yang Chu advocated a thoroughgoing egoism. We shall have occasion to return to this topic and discuss the precise nature of this egoism. All we need to say here is that it has been suggested that the *Lao tzu* represents a development of the school of Yang Chu. Whether this is altogether justified or not, there certainly are passages in the *Lao tzu* which are best understood in the spirit of Yang Chu's egoism. Such is the background against which the *Lao tzu* is to be understood.

In my view not only is the *Lao tzu* an anthology but even individual chapters are usually made up of shorter passages whose connexion with one another is at best tenuous; to deal then with the thought contained in the work it is necessary to

take these short sections rather than the chapters as units, as the work in its present form must have been compiled by a series of editors out of these short sections. It also follows from our view of the work as an anthology that we cannot expect the thought contained in it to be a closely knit system, though the greater part of the work may show some common tendency of thought which can be described as Taoist in the broad sense of the term. Since we cannot expect a high degree of cohesion in the thought, the most sensible way of giving an account of it is to deal with the various key concepts, and to relate them wherever possible, but also to point out inconsistencies when these are obstinately irreconcilable.

A good way of starting this account is to select those concepts that were, from early times, associated with Lao Tzu or the *Lao tzu* (in Chinese there is no linguistic distinction between the two and so it is impossible to know whether it is the man or the book that is referred to when the name 'Lao Tzu' occurs).

From the fact that the school of thought supposed to have been founded by Lao Tzu is known as Taoism (*tao chia*, the school of the way), it can be seen that the *tao* was considered the central concept in the thought contained in the *Lao tzu*. The opening chapter of the *Lao tzu* begins with an important characterization of the *tao*:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way. (1)

In other words, the *tao* that can be described, cited as authority, and praised is not the immutable way. This point is repeated in chapter XXXII:

The way is for ever nameless (72).

and again in chapter XLI,

The way conceals itself in being nameless. (92)

There is no name that is applicable to the *tao* because language is totally inadequate for such a purpose. And yet if the *tao* is to be taught at all, some means, no matter how inadequate, must be found to give an idea of what it is like. This is a difficult task, for even the term '*tao*' is not its proper name but a name we use for want of something better, and if we insist on characterizing it in some manner we can only describe it, not altogether appropriately, as 'great' (XXV, 56a).

The difficulty of finding appropriate language to describe the *tao* lies in the fact that although the *tao* is conceived of as that which is responsible for the creation as well as the support of the universe, yet the description the Taoist aimed at was a description in terms of tangible qualities as though the *tao* were a concrete thing.

In chapter XLII, it is said

The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures. (93)

Although here it is said that 'the way begets one', 'the One' is, in fact, very often used as another name for the '*tao*'. Understood in this way, we can see that it is 'the One' or the '*tao*' which is responsible for creating as well as supporting the universe.

Of old, these came to be in possession of the One:
 Heaven in virtue of the One is limpid;
 Earth in virtue of the One is settled;
 Gods in virtue of the One have their potencies;