



CHINA STUDIES

THE CLASSIC
OF THE *DAO*
A NEW
INVESTIGATION

Wang Keping



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

老子思想新释: 英文 / 王柯平 著.
—北京: 外文出版社, 2010 (学术中国)

ISBN 978-7-119-06539-7

I. ①老… II. ①王… III. ①老子—哲学思想—研究—英文 IV. ①B223.15

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2010) 第 131166 号

项目策划: 胡开敏

责任编辑: 杨春燕 李建安

内文制版: 杰瑞腾达

装帧设计: 维诺传媒

印刷监制: 韩少乙

老子思想新释

王柯平 著

© 2010 外文出版社

出 版 人: 呼宝民

总 编 辑: 李振国

出版发行:

外文出版社 (中国北京百万庄大街 24 号)

邮政编码 100037

网址: <http://www.flp.com.cn>

电话: 008610-68320579 (总编室)

008610-68995852 (发行部)

008610-68327750 (版权部)

制版:

北京杰瑞腾达科技发展有限公司

印刷:

北京外文印刷厂

开本: 787mm × 1092mm 1/16 印张: 21

2010年9月第1版第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-06539-7

(精)

08000

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Reference Key

DDJ = *The Dao De Jing of Lao Zi (Tao-Te Ching of Lao-tzu)*

* This is a newly revised edition based on recent philological studies of the *Dao De Jing* made by Chinese scholars since the discovery in 1973 of the Mawangdui versions on silk. See Appendices 1 and 2.

PREFACE

Lao Zi (c. 580-500 B.C.) and Confucius (551-479 B.C.) have traditionally been regarded as the two most celebrated thinkers in the history of Chinese philosophy. The former is considered the founder of Daoism (i.e. Taoism), and is studied worldwide, mostly by scholars, whereas the latter, the founder of Confucianism, is venerated by people of all walks of life and all over the world. As has been observed by both oriental and occidental readers (including Hegel), the ideas of Lao Zi tend to be more philosophical in the pure sense of this term when compared with those of Confucius. It is commonly acknowledged that Lao Zi's philosophizing underlies the structure or formation of the overall psychology of the Chinese people.

The Book of Lao Zi is usually divided into two parts, known as the “*Dao Jing*” (On *Dao*) and “*De Jing*” (On *De*). Hence it is also titled the “*Dao De Jing*,” with such English renderings as *The Way and Its Power* or *Tao-Te Ching* (as a transliteration of its non-standard Chinese pronunciation). This book, the major Daoist classic, is composed of 81 chapters as arranged by the Daoist scholar Heshang Gong (c. 179-159 B.C.). The classification itself has all along been controversial, even though it was once officially approved by an emperor of the Tang Dynasty in 8th century. The compilation of the *Dao De Jing* by Heshang Gong features an additional subtitle for each chapter to help the reader approach the book in a more convenient and rewarding manner. This arrangement is the basis of my own methodology of re-arranging all the texts thematically in order to facilitate, I hope, a more practical and fruitful reading today. This has in turn given birth to this new edition, in which philosophical and philological perspectives predominate, with particular reference to the recent findings by Chinese scholars since the discovery of

the Mawangdui texts of the *Dao De Jing*. According to relevant archaeological studies, one of the Mawangdui versions may date back at least to the third century B.C., and is therefore regarded as the oldest edition found so far.

Lao Zi, as a Daoist (i.e. Taoist) philosopher, is attracting more and more attention and interest both in the East and the West. Accordingly his book enjoys a rapidly increasing number of readers today. There are, consequently, more than 20 English versions of the *Dao De Jing* (*The Book of Lao Zi*) available published in various countries. The reason why we felt it important to add one more lies in the following considerations:

(1) Lao Zi wrote the book in a poetic style based on metaphors and an expressive form of aphorisms such that many of his ideas appear to be engagingly suggestive, polysemous and somewhat ambiguous rather than articulate. Thus elaborate annotation and extended commentary are necessary for the reader to attain a justified comprehension and interpretation. As regards the straightforward translation of the book, as many English renderings are, it seems to me as though a glass of fine wine has been mixed with water, reducing it to a less tasteful cocktail.

(2) It is largely due to the favorable cultural policy introduced since China embarked on the reform policy that the studies of Lao Zi and his like have made far more progress than ever before. But most of the latest achievements in this field are missing from the versions of the *Dao De Jing* available in English and other Western languages. This edition is intended to fill this gap.

(3) Most English versions tend to employ ready-made terms to translate the ideas of Lao Zi, which I find most likely to lead the reader onto the beaten track of the occidental cultural background when it comes to cognizing what the author is supposed to say. In this case I have ventured to translate the key concepts with newly coined terminology, followed by relevant explanation. I sincerely hope that this approach will help the reader better identify what is really meant, in line with textual and contextual analysis.

(4) Previously mentioned, this version of the *Dao De Jing* is

thematically re-arranged in an attempt to facilitate a practical and fruitful reading today. The thematic arrangement as such is based not merely on the scrutiny of Lao Zi's philosophizing as a systematic whole, but also on considerations of the reading habits of the English reader. The overall aim is to obtain a more relevant understanding and effective communication with regard to the text.

(5) As can be discerned in the annotations and comments provided in the current book, what we are trying to do in most cases is to attempt to gain new insights through reviewing the old text, say, to enable the reader to rediscover the relevance and significance of Lao Zi's way of thought in view of the contemporary socio-cultural context.

(6) The present approach to the *Dao De Jing* is largely grounded on the conviction that it will be of more advantage to the reader to be directly involved in textual reading and analysis rather than to take a detour by tackling merely second-hand interpretation or reinterpretation. For it is often the case that an idiosyncratic interpreter, conceived of his own authority, gallops ahead while neglecting the reader's initiative and observation.

I must confess that whatever efforts I have to tackle this formidable project, it seems to me that I cannot hope to have succeeded completely. All too often the revision alone puts me under the impression that it is extremely difficult to transfer the thought of so lucid and poetic a writer as Lao Zi from one language into another without some damage occurring in the process. I found that the rhyming system, for instance, was almost untransferable no matter how hard I tried.

This book consists of four main parts to be dealt with by virtue of scrutinized reading, contextual analysis and systematic consideration of the *Dao De Jing* and Lao Zi's philosophizing. Part I is concerned with "The *Dao* as the Origin of All," subdivided into five topics. Part II is intended to justify "*De* as a Manifestation of the *Dao*," and subdivided into two mini-themes. Part III is designed to expose "The Human Condition in Perspective," classified into 17 sub-topics. Part V aims to illustrate "The Daoist Path to Personal Cultivation" that is, as an approach to

attaining the *Dao* and *De*, categorized into four essential constituents.

In contemplating this research, I am indebted in different but important ways to ancient scholars like Heshang Gong, Wang Bi and Wang Anshi, and especially to contemporary scholars of Daoism such as Gu Di, Chen Guying, Gao Heng, Ren Jiyu, Zhang Songru, Sha Shaohai, Ai Qi and many others. Their respective approaches to the *Dao De Jing* and recent findings were of enormous help to me in my task. With regard to the English translation, my thanks are particularly due to Chan Wing-tsit, Robert G. Henricks, He Guanghu and Gao Shining.

In carrying out the actual work I have been very fortunate to receive equally generous support from Professor Herbert Mainusch of Münster University in Germany, who has all along encouraged me to complete the task. His passionate interest in the study of Chinese culture has commenced to bear noticeable fruit as is reflected in the Chinese version of his book titled *Dialogue and Distance* and in his rediscovery of Oscar Wilde against the background of early Daoism, the school of philosophy founded by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi.

Finally, I wish to extend my sincere thanks and heartfelt admiration to my publisher and editor for their unflagging assistance.

Wang Keping
Beijing, China

First Edition 2010

ISBN 978-7-119-06539-7

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2010

Published by

Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Lao Zi and His Doctrine of the *Dao*

Underlying the Chinese cultural heritage are about a dozen schools of thought dating from as early as the 7th century B.C., when Guan Zhong (?-645 B.C.) and his ideas (cf. *The Book of Guan Zi*) emerged in relation to the later development of the Legalist School (*Fa Jia*).^[1] The most important of these schools are known as Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism) in terms of their historical continuity and influence. The founder of Confucianism is naturally identified with Confucius, as the latinized name for Kong Fu Zi or Kong Zi (551-479 B.C.). As regards Daoism, Lao Zi (Lao Tzu) is mostly recognized as its founder despite the fact that the details of his life and work remain controversial. Here we will give a brief account of Lao Zi and his doctrine of the *Dao*.

I. Lao Zi's Life and Work

Almost all the different opinions about Lao Zi's life and work appear to focus on the dispute as to whether Confucius was preceded by Lao Zi or vice versa. They can thus be generalized into two main tendencies as follows: One holds that Lao Zi was an older contemporary of Confucius, who lived in the latter part of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) and his doctrines are presented in his book titled the *Dao De Jing* (i.e. *The Book of Lao Zi*); the other argues that Lao Zi was born after Confucius and lived during the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), as there are indications in the *Dao De Jing* that was compiled in that era.

According to the biography of Lao Zi as given by Sima Qian (c. 145-86 B.C.) in his *Historical Records*,^[2] "Lao Zi was a native

of Qurenli Village, in Lixiang community, Kuxian district, in the State of Chu.^[3] His family name was Li, his given name Er and style Dan. He once served as the head of the national library during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.). Confucius visited the capital of the dynasty (modern Luoyang City in Henan Province), where he asked Lao Zi about the rites....” On that occasion he was advised by Lao Zi to abandon his air of pride, desire and arrogance for the sake of self-preservation. “Lao Zi practiced *Dao* and *De*,” continues Sima Qian in his account, “and hence his doctrine was aimed at self-effacement and namelessness. Having resided in the capital for a long time and observed the decline of the dynasty, he resigned his office and went away westward. Upon arrival at Hanguguan Pass he was welcomed by Guan Yi, who greeted him with joy: “Write me a book, as you are going to become a recluse!” he cried. It was there that Lao Zi wrote a book in two parts and composed of over 5000 words about the meaning of *Dao* and *De*. Afterwards he left and disappeared. No one knows what became of him in the end.... Lao Zi was a gentleman recluse.”^[4]

Sima Qian, as a historian, adopted an individual approach intended to “convey what is authentic and to record what is doubtful.” He therefore preserved two pieces of uncertain information: “Some say that a certain Lao Lai Zi was also a man of the State of Chu who produced a book in 15 chapters on the usefulness of the *Dao*, and seems to have lived at the same time as Confucius,” and “Some 129 years after the death of Confucius the histories record that the historian Dan of the Zhou Dynasty had an interview with Duke Xian of Qin (384-362 B.C.).... Some say that this Dan was in fact Lao Zi, while others say he was not.”^[5] Many scholars agree that the opening and closing portions of Lao Zi’s biography are fact, whereas the middle part is unreliable. But there is enough reliable evidence to upset this argument.

First and foremost, the fact that Confucius went to the capital of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty and asked Lao Zi about the rites is reconfirmed in the biography of Confucius according to Sima Qian in his *Historical Records*.^[6] It is recorded that Confucius was

seen off after the interview and advised by Lao Zi to forget himself (i.e. be selfless). On his return to his own State of Lu his immediate disciples benefitted from what he had learned from Lao Zi in the realm of the rites of the Zhou Dynasty. This is corroborated in *Zeng Zi's Questions on the Rites* (*Zeng Zi Wen*), a chapter of *The Book of Rites* (*Li Ji*), which is known as one of the Confucianist 'Five Classics' (*Wu Jing*). It is therein stated that Confucius told his student Zeng Zi (505-436 B.C.) about how to conduct certain rites properly as guided by Lao Dan (i.e. Lao Zi, whose name is repeated in the passage as many as seven times). Moreover, in his book (i.e. *The Complete Works of Zhuang Zi*), Zhuang Zi (who is known in Western literature as Chuang Tzu, c. 369-286 B.C.) describes Lao Zi and cites his sayings 16 times, half of which concern the relationship between Lao Zi and Confucius. The similar view that Confucius learned about the rites from Lao Dan can also be found in the *Dang Ran Chapter* of the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* edited by Lu Buwei (?-235 B.C.), and in the brick carvings of Confucius' life as displayed in the Confucian Temple (Kong Miao) located in his hometown of Qufu in modern Shandong Province. It is worthy of notice that Confucius was influenced by Lao Zi to a certain extent. Some of Lao Zi's ideas can be found in the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lun Yu*), for example, "It was, perhaps, only Emperor Shun (i.e. one of the sage rulers extolled by Confucius himself) who governed peacefully without taking any action against the natural order" (*Lun Yu*, 15:5; cf. Lao Zi's notion of "take-no-action" or "nonaction," DDJ, Ch. 48.); "A gentleman is to be grave and solemn but not to be contentious or competitive" (Ibid, 15:22; cf. Lao Zi's idea that "the *Dao* of sage is to act for others but not to compete with them," DDJ, Ch. 77.); "A benevolent man is surely courageous" (Ibid, 14:4; cf. Lao Zi's assertion that "With kindness one can become courageous," DDJ, Ch. 67.); and "What do you think of repaying resentment with virtue?" (Ibid, 14:34; cf. Lao Zi's proposed solution to "return good for evil," DDJ, Ch. 79.). It is even more interesting to point out that Confucius himself claimed to be a transmitter of the classics instead of an originator. Furthermore, he said, "I am so faithful to and so fond of ancient

culture that privately I compare myself to Lao Dan (i.e. Lao Zi) and Peng Zu (i.e. a legendary figure)." (Ibid., 7:1)

Secondly, according to the *Historical Records*,^[7] when confronting something confusing, Confucius would go to the capital of Zhou for Lao Zi's opinion; ...and to the State of Chu for Lao Lai Zi's opinion; ... Thus it is self-evident that Lao Zi and Lao Lai Zi were two distinct figures of Confucius' era. Hence it is fanciful to assume that they are the same person, as some scholars have insisted.

Thirdly, it is a historical fact that Confucius visited Lao Zi to clarify some of his queries related to the rites of the Zhou Dynasty as encountered in his studies and teaching practice. It was obviously impossible for Confucius to have consulted the historian Dan, who was born many years after Confucius' death. So, based on historical facts and documentary evidence, it can be safely affirmed that Lao Zi was a native of modern Luyi in Henan Province, which was part of the State of Chu in antiquity. His family name was Li, his given name Er and his style Dan. He was an older contemporary of Confucius, who once visited to ask about the rites. The tradition that he was the head of the national library of the Zhou Dynasty and that he was born about 20 to 30 years before Confucius has been widely supported by celebrated modern scholars, including Guo Moruo, Ma Shulun, Ren Jiyu, Zhan Jianfeng, Gu Di, Zhou Ying, Yan Lingfeng, Tang Yijie, Chen Guying, Ye Lang and Min Ze. As a "gentleman recluse" more than 2,500 years ago, Lao Zi's birth and death can not be pinpointed now, as is often the case with many ancient figures. However, Ren Jiyu inferred from his historical research his assumption that Lao Zi was born in approximately 580 B.C. (i.e. the 6th year of King Jian of the Zhou Dynasty) and died in 500 B.C. (i.e. the 20th year of King Jing of the Zhou Dynasty).^[8] According to Zhan Jianfeng, Lao Zi was probably born around 576 B.C. and died after 478 B.C.^[9] These inferences are supplied here for reference only.

As to the *Dao De Jing*, there are correspondingly distinct opinions about its emergence in view of its style and authorship. Generally speaking, some believe that it was written by Lao Zi in

the late stage of the Spring and Autumn Period, whereas others maintain that it was compiled by the historian Dan in the middle of the Warring States Period; others go so far as to assume that it was based on quotations selected from such classics as *The Book of Zhuang Zi*, *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, *The Book of Han Fei Zi* and *The Book of Yi Wen Zi*. Recent research by contemporary Lao Zi scholars stresses the following points: (1) The *Dao De Jing* possesses an intrinsic structure and rigorous logic of its own, and therefore it is unlikely that it is merely a compilation of diverse sources. In addition, most of the authors of the abovementioned works acknowledge their debt to Lao Zi. (2) Lao Zi was not the historian Dan, as the *Dao De Jing* is a product of the late Spring and Autumn Period, as testified by its terminology and rhyming system, even though a few expressions used in it did not come into being until the Warring States Period (e.g. "ten thousand chariots"). (3) The writing style of the *Dao De Jing* as philosophical discourse features a poetic touch which corresponds to that of the *Book of Poetry (Shi Jing)*, allegedly edited by Confucius. The former is thus considered to be a continuation and development of the latter.^[10] Apart from that, its style is quite similar to that of *The Art of War (Sun Zi Bing Fa)* written by Sun Zi in the Spring and Autumn Period. "If *The Art of War* is affirmed to be written in that period," as Zhang Dainian states, "it is not unreasonable to assume that the *Dao De Jing* was produced at the same time."^[11]

In short, we conclude that the *Dao De Jing* was completed in the late Spring and Autumn Period. Nevertheless, its original text was slightly different from what it looks like today. That is owing to certain modifications and additions it underwent in the course of its history, during the Warring States Period in particular. We must keep in mind the fact that it was originally written on bamboo slips, which are notorious for a tendency to fall apart and be put back in the wrong order by careless readers. This position is even more understandable when we see with our own eyes the minor changes in wording in the two Mawangdui silk copies of the *Dao De Jing* unearthed from the same tomb and at the same time in 1973. I personally appreciate the argument that it is far

more significant to read and study the book as it is.

II. Lao Zi's Doctrine of the *Dao*

As has been noted, Lao Zi is depicted in his biography quoted above as a man who “practiced *Dao* and *De*.” His doctrine was then generalized into something that “aimed at self-effacement and namelessness” on the one hand, and, on the other, into something that advised people to “take no action and thus become self-transformed, and love tranquility and thus become righteous.” Although it definitely gets to the point, a generalization of this kind over-simplifies what Lao Zi intended to express in over 5,000 words. Widely recognized as the founder of Daoism, Lao Zi constructs a philosophy of fertility and individuality that unfolds by virtue of his preoccupation with and formulation of the *Dao*.

Lao Zi was the first to form the special concept of the *Dao*, which in turn works as the keystone of Daoism as a philosophy.^[12] The Chinese term *Dao* literally means “way” or “road.” Based on this primary meaning, it assumed in ancient times a metaphorical sense, such as “the way of man,” signifying human morality, code of conduct or essence of life, etc. But in Lao Zi's terminology the meaning of the *Dao* transcends social and ethical domains. It is then found ascribed to certain metaphysically extended implications relating to the origin of the universe, the root of all things, the law of natural change and social development, the principle of political and military affairs, and above all, the truth of human existence. The *Dao* as such can be conceived of as the constellation of Lao Zi's philosophizing. The most complicated but most fascinating of all its aspects lies, however, in the fact that its connotations vary with the different contexts in which it is used. So long as one sticks to both textual scrutiny and contextual analysis, one will be able to approach what the term *Dao* really suggests in a more justifiable fashion. Offered here is a brief discussion of the term from eight dimensions:

1. The *Dao* of the Universe

The *Dao* is looked upon as the highest category of Lao Zi's