

THUS SPOKE LAOZI

DAO DE JING

A NEW TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARIES

《道德经》新注新译

吴千之 Charles Q. Wu 著

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inspiring as his academic works are richly informative and creatively conceived.

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Introduction

With so many English versions of the *Dao De Jing*, why another?

— Moss Roberts (2001), *Laozi: Dao De Jing — The Book of the Way*, p.2.

The *Daodejing* has probably been translated into the English language more often than any other piece of world literature. Why translate it again?

— Roger Ames (2003), *Dao De Jing: “Making This Life Significant”
— A Philosophical Translation* p.ix.

If eminent sinologists like Professors Ames and Roberts have to provide a “reasonable answer” to the same “reasonable question” for their translations, there is no excuse for this much belated attempt to be exempted from the same password test. I don’t have a newly-discovered manuscript to justify my new translation. Nor do I claim a fresh angle from a specific discipline. But the infinite profundity and consequently the infinite translatability of Laozi’s immortal work always make it possible to bring the readers yet another step closer to what Laozi actually says and how he says it through still another translation aided by commentaries. That is why I call my book *Thus Spoke Laozi*, not that I am taking Laozi to be another Zarathustra or Nietzsche. Arguably what Laozi actually says is very much a matter of interpretation, but equipped with

my line-by-line bilingual text and commentaries, the readers will be able to have the aha! moment to say, “Now I know what Laozi is saying.” In this introduction I would like to lay out my approach to some of the perennial issues that all translators have to face.

Authorship

To understand Laozi and the book he is believed to have authored in historical context, we face the biggest challenge which lies in the scantiness of verifiable information about the dates and life of the author. Without getting into the ramifications of the subject, I rely, as many scholars do, mainly on the biographical account in the monumental *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian (c.145-90? BCE), the Han-dynasty historian. According to this account, Laozi’s name was Li Er or 李耳, styled Dan or 聃. He was a native of Quren Village, Lai Township, Ku County of the Kingdom of Chu, and a keeper of the royal archives of the Zhou Dynasty. Laozi was around twenty years older than Confucius (551-479 BCE) and the two met when Confucius was about thirty years old. So Laozi must have lived, like Confucius, at the junction of two historical periods in Chinese history known as the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE). Those were the turbulent times when feudal states were at war with one another and the Zhou Dynasty was in decline. Diverse concerned thinkers came forth with remedies of all stripes for the troubles of the time, thus creating the golden age of “polemics among a hundred schools of thought” in the intellectual history of China. Among these different schools of thought, two stood out to be the most influential, the one led by Confucius and the other by Laozi. As Sima Qian puts it at the end of his biographical notes on Laozi, “Those who learn from Laozi put down the teachings of Confucius and those who follow Confucius also put down Laozi.”

As a serious historian, Sima Qian does not exclude the possibility of other candidates for the mysterious Laozi. But he makes it clear that these versions are

mere hearsay by inserting the phrase 或曰 (huò yuē) meaning “some say” or “it is said” in his narrative. For instance he says, “It is said that Laozi lived over a hundred and sixty years. Some say he lived over two hundred.” “Some say Dan or 儋 was Laozi; some say not.” By contrast, Sima has no such reservations when telling the story of Li Er. He even lists the names of the descendants in Laozi’s lineage all the way down to his own time. He concludes his biography of Laozi by reaffirming, “Li Er practiced Non-doing and let people transform themselves. He remained tranquil and let people find the right course.”

As for Laozi’s authorship of the book by his name, Sima Qian seems to have no qualms including in his official biography about the legend that when Laozi was on his way to seclusion through the Hangu Pass, the Pass Keeper Yin Xi persuaded him to leave behind his teachings in writing, which came to be the immortal five-thousand-character classic known first as *Laozi* and later as *Dao De Jing* (henceforward as *Daodejing*).

In insisting on the historicity of Laozi, I try my best to resist the temptation of using mythical material that had been grafted onto his little known life after he had attained the posthumous status of deity. At the same time I try to develop through my translation and commentaries a persona that voices all the beliefs and concerns in the five-thousand-word text. There is no denying the universal value of Laozi’s teachings that transcends space and time. I especially value their applicability to our own life experience in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, I try my best not to use anachronistic examples to illustrate Laozi’s teachings or use his teachings to analyze modern-day events. While acknowledging the inevitable subjectivity of interpretation or translation, I believe it is only appropriate to leave it to the readers to relate the ancient teachings to their own experience.

Editions

The version of *Daodejing* in wide currency to this day consists of eighty-

one chapters divided into two parts, with the first thirty-seven chapters as Part One, *Dao*, and the rest as Part Two, *De*. This basic structure, with all its slight variations, may be traced back to two major compilers-commentators, one under the pseudonym “He Shang Gong” (Lord of the River), dated around 200 CE, and the other, the infant prodigy Wang Bi (226-249). While the Lord of the River’s line-by-line commentaries place equal importance on governance of the state and cultivation of the individual, Wang Bi’s metaphysical interpretation helped establish his edition as the master text as well as the **received version** of *Daodejing*, on the basis from which numerous variations and commentaries have stemmed down the centuries.

However, no manuscripts of this classic were known to be extant until 1973 when a much earlier pair of transcripts of *Daodejing* on silk was unearthed in an ancient tomb at Mawangdui near Changsha, capital of Hunan Province. The silk script had two slightly different versions: Text A may have been copied anywhere between c.206 BCE and 195 BCE, and Text B copied c.194-180 BCE. Despite many errors of the copyists and the corruptions of the material, these are the earliest complete manuscripts seen by modern readers. They not only confirmed the existence of the Daoist classic but solved some of the textual issues in Daoist studies. One striking difference between the Mawangdui version and the received version is the reverse order of the two parts, with the *De* part placed before the *Dao* part in both versions of the Mawangdui text. This discovery led to the publication of a new translation titled *Lao-tzu: Te-Tao Ching—A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*, by Robert Henricks (1989). Nonetheless, the received version continues to prevail as the source of new translations while the Mawangdui manuscripts are often referenced as a significant place to go for textual and interpretative verification.

Twenty years after the Mawangdui trove was excavated, an even earlier, though excerpted, version of *Daodejing* inscribed on bamboo strips was found in 1993

in the ancient tomb at Guodian near the city of Jingmen, Hubei Province. This discovery placed the date of the earliest script around 300 BCE. What especially intrigued scholars in the field was a new text, beginning with the sentence, “太一生水 (Tài Yī Shēng Shuǐ),” or “The Great One Gives Birth to Water,” included in the last of the three bundles of strips that recorded excerpts from *Daodejing*. However, while this new document deserves renewed attention and may indeed throw new light on the classic itself, the value of the Guodian *Daodejing* is limited by its fragmentary nature. Nonetheless, it is an eloquent validation of the proximity of the classic to the supposed date of creation by its supposed author. It has also served as another good source of reference when an ambiguity or debate occurs.

Without claiming originality, I use the Wang Bi edition of 81 chapters with its numerous commentaries as the basis of my translation and interpretation. For textual verification I also consulted the Mawangdui and Guodian scripts and other variations. For interpretation I checked He Shang Gong’s line-by-line commentaries, among others. But my main source of information is Professor Chen Guying’s revised edition of *Laozi* with notes and commentaries (Beijing, 2009). In fact I followed his redaction quite closely and benefited immensely from the many historical commentaries he cites. The choice of any specific interpretation or editorial decision is mine. I cite other reliable sources selectively, but since my target audience is non-academic and non-Chinese readers, I would rather not bother them with all the ramifications of textual preferences.

Getting It

Throughout its history *Daodejing* has been read variously as a book on philosophy and metaphysics, a religious scripture, a classic on self-cultivation, an advisory on governance, a foundational text on military strategy, an encyclopedia of practical wisdom, a pre-Christian prophecy, and so forth. While all these

readings are possible, their validity depends on the basic understanding of three key concepts, i.e., *Dao* or 道, *De* or 德, and *wuwei* or 無爲.

If the whole text of *Daodejing* may be divided into two parts, as has been verified by the Mawangdui silk scripts, albeit in reverse order of the received version, it is amazing that the *Dao* part and the *De* part both begin with a negative definition, namely, what is NOT (the eternal) *Dao* and what is NOT (the superior) *De*. This fact suggests that the terms *Dao* and *De* were already in currency in Laozi's time and that he wanted to make sure from the outset that the way he used these terms would not be confused with the common usage. But nowhere in the text does Laozi attempt to give a comprehensive, abstract definition of either concept. His is the strategy of a fiction writer giving an incremental description of the different aspects of the protagonist's character as the story unfolds. This is especially true of his characterization of *Dao*.

The word *Dao* appears in at least thirty-six chapters of *Daodejing*, often more than once in one chapter. Among these, Chapters 1, 21, 25 and 42 are perhaps the most crucial in that they directly address the large issues of *Dao* as the ultimate source and motive force of the universe, of its infinity and mobility, its intangibility and ineffability, and above all its relevance to us, the "ten thousand things." If you have a good grasp of the essence of these chapters, the rest of the book will make good sense.

Sinologists and translators have to this day tried hard to find an equivalent in English for *Dao*. The first success they had, or came close to, was the biblical "Way." It is true that the literal meaning of "*Dao*" is "way," or "road." But when Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," he proclaims, "No one comes to the Father except through me." On the other hand, *Dao*, according to Laozi, is the ultimate Almighty, the Mother of all things and not just the "way" to something else. The solution of this discrepancy has led to one of the greatest contributions to the English language, i.e., the addition

of the word “Tao,” now spelled “Dao,” from which are derived “Taoism” and “Taoist,” to the English vocabulary. I readily accept this “translation” as many of my predecessors have done, reserving, however, the leverage of the literal alternative, “way.”

The next key word in *Daodejing* is of course *De*. Although there are sixteen chapters in which the word appears, its configuration is much less clear than that of *Dao*. This vagueness is not without good reason because *De* is simply the emanation or realization of *Dao*. As Laozi puts it at the beginning of Chapter 21, “The behavior of the Great *De* follows that of *Dao* and *Dao* alone.” All that one has to do is follow the ways of *Dao*, and there is *De*. In that sense, the word should not be interpreted, or limited in its interpretation, only as “moral integrity” or “virtue,” a usage that was already prevalent in Laozi’s time. However, many translators still use the word “virtue.” Arthur Waley calls it “Power,” perhaps in the etymological sense of “virtue” as “virility.” “*De*” was also a eulogistic term to refer to the meritorious governance of a feudal ruler. To avoid such conceptual ambiguities, I decided to use the transliteration “*De*” the way we have accepted “*Dao*.” But I keep the word “virtue” where Laozi critiques the popular use of the word. In grappling with the meaning of *De*, one needs to be aware that the character *De* or 德 is homonymous and, indeed, interchangeable with, the character *de* or 得, meaning “get,” “receive,” “obtain,” or “attain.” Laozi must have this other *de* in mind when he talks about *De* in reference to attaining the *Dao*, or simply, “getting it.” For evidence of the interconnectedness between the two *de*’s, one may take a close look at Chapter 38 where the character 德 appears in nine lines and then at Chapter 39 where 得 is the key word in seven lines.

When Laozi was exploring the different dimensions of *Dao* and ways to attain it, he was not merely engaging in some idle metaphysical discourse. The times he lived in did not allow such luxury. What he was looking for was an infallible model by which all human troubles, be they social, political, or personal, could

be resolved. He found this model in *Dao* itself, or, if you like, in Nature, or the Universe, which *Dao* mothers. The benchmark of this model is not proactive, not aggressive, not the silver bullet but, on the contrary, non-active and non-contentious. In the words of the English romantic poet William Wordsworth, it is “wise passivity.” In Laozi’s vocabulary it is *wuwei* or 無為 or “not doing” or “Non-doing.” The term was not Laozi’s patent but had been around in his time like *Dao* and *De*, though not as widespread. The expression appears only once in the Confucian *Analects* but in at least ten chapters of *Daodejing*. Pay special attention to Chapters 48 and 63. The idea of *wuwei* is central to Laozi’s philosophy because it embodies his practical wisdom based on his vision of the workings of *Dao* as the source of all power and wisdom.

“Not doing” is a state of “being” as well as a way of getting things done. Put briefly, it means freeing oneself from one’s self-will and following the natural ways of *Dao*; it means getting everything done with the best effect and least effort and cost. Translators have tried to incorporate the rich meaning of *wuwei* in their quest for equivalents, resulting in such renditions as “do nothing coercively,” “no conscious action,” “non-action,” “inactivity,” “(act) without effort,” etc. I have tried to find a one-size-fits-all solution, but like attempts by other translators, the “one size” is too limiting and does not always fit well. I also want to avoid using modifiers that are not in the original phrasing. After much experimentation, I came to the conclusion that the best way is, in Daoist fashion, to go back to the crude, unmodified, paradoxical “not-doing” and, with a little tweak, “Non-doing,” as a parallel to “Non-being.” Sometimes I switch to the verb phrase “do nothing” where the context permits.

Style

One of the hallmarks of Laozi’s rhetoric is the frequent use of paradoxes. It is a feature that is deeply embedded in Laozi’s incisive discernment of the ironies of the world. He describes this feature as “a truthful statement that sounds like

its opposite.” It reveals a universal phenomenon that what seems absurd may very well be true. Examples are galore, such as “Great music has little sound,” “Great image has no form,” “The sage puts himself in the rear and finds himself in front.”

Just as frequently as he uses paradoxes, Laozi often resorts to commonsensical analogies drawn from his thoughtful observations of natural phenomena. For instance he compares the “highest Good” to water “because water brings good to all things and does not contend.” He likens the art of governing a large state to “cooking a small fish” because the fish, being small and delicate, has to be treated tenderly and not stirred too much. These analogies are very convincing and serve as important supplements to the intellectually more challenging paradoxes.

Another manifestation of Laozi’s literary genius is his poetry. By poetry I do not just mean verse, but also his succinct prose style. In fact it is not always easy to tell apart his prose from his verse. Many of his prose statements, such as “The journey of a thousand *li* begins under your feet,” have become immortal mottoes for posterity. But the verse makes his teachings especially memorable, and the rhymes help readers determine where a sentence ends and where a line belongs. This is particularly important because in classical Chinese there is usually no punctuation to facilitate the reading process. Part of Laozi’s poetics is parallelism or repetition whereby either a syntactical pattern or a word is repeated throughout a stanza. Such repetitions accentuate the poet’s emphasis and make indelible impressions on the reader’s memory.

Translation and Commentaries

All translators struggle for a balance between fidelity to the spirit and letter of the original text on the one hand and readability of the translation to native speakers of the target language on the other. This balance is

especially challenging when it comes to translating a classic like Laozi's *Daodejing*, for what we see here is not only a book of ideas but a book of poetry, a work of literary art. My strategy is to retain as much as possible the original literariness so that the readers can hear, as it were, through my translation, what Laozi sounds like as if they were reading him in Chinese. The beauty of Laozi's language, defining as well as reflecting the beauty of his thinking, would be lost if what the English readers have access to is merely a prosaic paraphrase. Of course, much of the original beauty is doomed to be lost in translation, particularly the rhymes. I don't even attempt to mimic any of those because, as I have seen in some of the translations of Chinese poetry, such attempts can only result in a bunch of clever jingles. The one thing I do not want to do and, fortunately, not in a position to do, is to produce a translation that sounds more like Elizabethan poetry than an authentic translation. I urge my readers to step a little bit out of their comfort zone to appreciate the unfamiliar cadence of a different literature, albeit still through a readable translation. The good news is that there is such a thing as poetic license, even in one's native literature.

As a supplement to the translation, I have attached a commentary to each chapter whereby I explain textual and interpretive issues, especially those that involve some key Chinese characters that have multiple meanings or are homonymous with other characters. The task I set myself is to provide the historical and linguistic contexts for a proper understanding of some of the knotty points. In doing so I may serve as a tour guide but claim no finality. Instead of presenting my readers with a ready-made, well-packaged product and claiming that is what Laozi says and that is all you need to know, I invite my readers to participate in the translation and interpretation as an open-door, open-ended process. At the same time I try my best to avoid letting my words overshadow those of Laozi. Listen to what Laozi has to say first, mull over it, and then read the commentary in case you need some aid or clue, with which you may or may not have to agree. Hopefully this process will also yield the byproduct of providing the readers

with some exposure to the Chinese written language both through the bilingual text proper and the presence of Chinese characters in the commentaries.

Simplified vs. Traditional Characters

Chinese characters have gone through millennia of evolution. The form known as the simplified characters was adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1956 and has become the standard in the mainland of China and Singapore. The form which was the norm prior to that has been dubbed the complex or traditional characters. This form is still the standard in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and widely used in the Chinese diaspora. Chinese classics are still printed in traditional characters in the mainland of China but there is a growing trend to use simplified characters. The *Daodejing* text in this book is printed in both forms.

Pinyin

All the characters that appear in the commentaries as well as in this introduction are accompanied with their phonetic spelling known as Pinyin. A Romanization system for Chinese characters known as the Wade-Giles system has been in service for over a century. It is a phonetically based system with its own rationale and has served the English publishing world well. It was under this system that the word "Tao" came into the English language, following the rule that the letter *t* before a vowel letter stands for the unaspirated "t" as the *t* in "style," as opposed to the *t* followed by an apostrophe (*t'*ao), which should be pronounced like the English consonant "t" as in "tower." Likewise, the apostrophe is used to distinguish aspirants like *p'* and *k'* from their unaspirated counterparts as in "spell" and "skill." By this rule, the character 德 should be spelled as *te* in Wade-Giles because the "t" is unaspirated. In 1958, the People's Republic of China published a new Romanization system known as Pinyin, literally "phonetic spelling." Actually the new system is structured quite closely according to the old Wade-Giles, but with at least two major differences.

One is the sweeping elimination of the apostrophe to let *p, t, k* instead of *p', t', k'* be pronounced as aspirants while the Roman letters *b, d, g* are admitted into the system for the unaspirated *p, t, k* in the old system. Thus *Tao* became *Dao* and *Te* became *De*. The pronunciation has not changed. It's the spelling.

The second major change is the use of *c, ch, q, x, z* and *zh* to represent Chinese phonemes unfamiliar to English speakers. The letter *c* is pronounced like the sound “ts”; *ch* is pronounced like a thick “ch” sound with the tongue curled up; *q* like a thin “ch” sound as in “cheek”; *x* like a thin “sh” sound as in “sheep”; *z* like the sound “ds” or “dz”; and *zh* like a thick “dr” sound with the tongue curled up. Related is the letter *i* after *c, ch, q, x, z* and *zh*, representing the prolongation of the consonant that precedes it. Thus the sound *zi* in the name “Laozi” is pronounced like “dzzzz.”

A lesser but important change is the replacement of the Wade-Giles *j* with the letter *r*. Thus the Confucian value 仁 (humaneness, or benevolence) should be spelled as *ren* instead of *jen*. At the same time, the letter *j* is restored to its regular role of phonetic representation in English such that people now know “Beijing” should sound like “beidging” and not “beizhing.” That also explains the spelling of “Jing” in *Daodejing*.

Despite some early resistance due to force of habit and political divisiveness, after the PRC resumed its seat in the U.N. in the 1970s as a permanent member of the Security Council, the adoption of Pinyin became inevitable. Today the Pinyin system is internationally in use to the extent that the Library of Congress and well-established sinologists have switched to it, although a reluctant few, along with the older publications, still stay with the old Wade-Giles. Hopefully this dual existence will phase out.