

A Taste of the Dao De Jing

English Reading Group
Cambridge Chinese Classics Society

Introduction

The Dao De Jing(道德經) or Laozi (老子), is a fundamental Taoism classic text, written at around 6 century BC. Its author is traditionally ascribed to Laozi, a contemporary of Confucius and an official in the imperial archives of Zhou Dynasty. The received text has around 5000 Chinese characters in 81 chapters, covering topics like Dao (道), Wu Wei (無為) or noninterference, De (德) and so on. Through the reading of the following selection, we will try to have a taste of the Dao De Jing.

道 Dao (the Way)

1 道可道，非常「道」。名可名，非常「名」。「無」名天地之始；「有」名萬物之母。故常「無」，欲以觀其妙；常「有」，欲以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

1 The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The Named is the mother of all things. Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety; And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome. The two are the same, but after they are produced, they have different names. They both may be called deep and profound. Deeper and more profound, the door to all subtleties! (Chan)

無為 Wu Wei (Noninterference)

2 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已；皆知善之為善，斯不善已。有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相盈，音聲相和，前後相隨，恆也。是以聖人處「無為」之事，行「不言」之教；萬物作而弗始，生而弗有。為而弗恃，功成而弗居。夫唯弗居，是以不去。

2 When all the people of the world know beauty as beauty, there arises the recognition of ugliness. When they all know the good as good, there arises the recognition of evil. Therefore: Being and non-being produce each other; Difficult and easy complete each other; Long and short contrast each other; High and low distinguish each other; Sound and voice harmonize each other; Front and behind accompany each other. Therefore the sage manages affairs without action, and spreads doctrines without words. All things arise, and he does not turn away from them. He produces them but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him. (Chan)

11 三十輻，共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。

11. Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends. Clay is moulded to form a utensil, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends. Doors and windows are cut out to make a

room, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends. Therefore, we regard having something as beneficial; But having nothing as useful. (Chan & Henricks)

40 反者「道」之動；弱者「道」之用。天下萬物生於「有」，有生於「無」。

40. "Reversal" is the movement of the Dao; "Weakness" is the function of the Dao. All things in the world come from being; And being comes from non-being. (Henricks & Chan)

78 天下莫柔弱於水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝，其無以易之。弱之勝強，柔之勝剛，天下莫不知，莫能行。

78 There is nothing softer and weaker than water, And yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things. For this reason there is no substitute for it. All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard. But none can practice it.

德 De (Virtue)

38 上「德」不德，是以有「德」；下「德」不失德，是以无無「德」。上「德」無爲而無以爲；下「德」爲之而有以爲。上仁爲之而無以爲；上義爲之而有以爲。上禮爲之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。故失「道」而後「德」，失「德」而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。夫禮者，忠信之薄，而亂之首。

38 The man of superior virtue is not (conscious of) his virtue; And in this way he really possesses virtue. The man of inferior virtue never loses (sight of) his virtue; And in this way he loses his virtue. The man of superior virtue takes no action, but has no ulterior motive to do so. The man of inferior virtue takes action, and has an ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior humanity takes action, but has no ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior righteousness takes action, and has an ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior propriety takes action, And when people do not respond to it, he will stretch his arms and force it on them. Therefore when Tao is lost, only then does the doctrine of virtue arise. When virtue is lost, only then does the doctrine of humanity arise. When humanity is lost, only then does the doctrine of righteousness arise. When righteousness is lost, only then does the doctrine of propriety arise. Now, propriety is a superficial expression of loyalty and faithfulness, and the beginning of disorder. (Chan)

55 含「德」之厚，比於赤子。毒蟲不螫，猛獸不據，攫鳥不搏。骨弱筋柔而握固。未知牝牡之合而媵作，精之至也。終日號而不嘎，和之至也。

55 He who possesses virtue in abundance may be compared to an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him. Fierce beasts will not seize him. Birds of prey will not strike him. His bones are weak, his sinews tender, but his grasp is firm. He does not yet know the union of male and female, but his organ is aroused, this means that his essence is at its height. He may cry all day without becoming hoarse, This means that his (natural) harmony is perfect. (Chan)

Main reference: *Lao Tzu's Tao-Teh-Ching. A Parallel Translation Collection.* Compiled by B. Boisen. GNOMAD Publishing. Boston, Massachusetts. 1996.

English translations: Wing-Tsit Chan and Robert G. Henricks.