

66 RECORD OF THE
HISTORIAN AND
LAOZI

THE WAY

LAOZI

TIME TO MOVE ON

The *Record of the Historian* tells us that Laozi “observed the decline of the Zhou and left.” At that time, large states were attacking and sometimes destroying smaller ones, and no one paid much attention to the Zhou king.

Imagine if a reporter wrote down a soccer coach’s pregame pep talk without mentioning that this was advice given at a particular game. Someone reading the coach’s speech centuries later might think that the coach was just talking in general, giving advice to people in any situation of life. Parts of the pep talk would actually make sense that way. “Work together as a team,” “Plan ahead,” and “Keep your eye on the goal” are good pieces of advice in many areas of life, not just in soccer. But the future reader might be confused by statements like “Keep fighting until the whistle blows.” Is this speech written for warriors about to fight? the reader might wonder. If so, what does a whistle have to do with it? And “This is our last chance against the Tornados this season”—does that mean that everybody gets a limited number of chances against violent storms every season?

It’s possible that something similar is going on with the sayings in the book called the *Classic Text of the Way and Virtue* (also sometimes called the *Laozi*, after its supposed author). The statements in this text may be intended to apply not to life in general, but to a specific situation.

Scholars have a lot of questions about the *Classic Text of the Way and Virtue*. One central question is, who wrote it? A legend says that an old man named Laozi was disgusted with China and decided to leave. A border guard stopped him and found out that the old man was a famous thinker who wasn’t planning to return from his journey. The guard begged Laozi to leave behind his teachings for his countrymen. The old man complied, writing his ideas about *dao* or *tao* (the Way) and *de* or *te* (virtue) in a book that became known as the **Daodejing**, which can be translated as *Classic Text of the Way and Virtue*. Then the old man left, and “nobody knows what has become of him.”

道德經

dao + *de* + *jing* = “the way” + “virtue” + “scripture,” “classic”

66 Sima Qian, *Biography of Laozi, Record of the Historian*, about 100 BCE



People have wondered for a long time whether Laozi ever existed or if he was invented to provide the name of an author for the *Daodejing*. The *Record of the Historian*, a history book written in about 100 BCE, says that Laozi was an archivist (someone who took care of official records). The teacher Confucius went to Laozi to ask a question about rituals. Laozi dismissed the philosopher's concern with the rites and his interest in dead ancestors, saying, "Those of whom you speak have all already rotted away, both the men and their bones." Confucius, horrified at the man's lack of respect, reported to his friends, "Today I have seen Laozi; he is like a dragon!"

The author of that biography says that he tried to find out the true identity of Laozi. After getting three different responses, he gave up, saying he didn't know which to believe.

Modern scholars, like that ancient historian, also have questions about the author of this text. They agree that the Confucians made up the figure of Laozi in the Confucius story. Many historians think that in the original version, Confucius consulted the archivist, who should have known

This border guard is asking Laozi for a copy of his book. He kneels on a mat to show his respect for the great teacher and makes offerings to Laozi to thank him for the book.

“Sima Qian, “Biography of Laozi,” *Record of the Historian*, about 100 BCE

GAIN A THRONE, LOSE A NAME

In China it was, and still is, disrespectful to call anyone by his or her name unless you are above that person in rank or age. You call your younger siblings by name, but your elders are “Older Sister” or “Older Brother.”

Because no one was above the emperor, no one (except perhaps his mother) could call him by name. Once he came to the throne, nobody would use his name anymore. Instead, he would be referred to as “the current ruler” or “below the stairs”—his guards kept watch below the stairs, and everyone would pretend to communicate through them rather than directly with the emperor. If writings use the characters in an emperor’s name, you know that they were written before he became emperor.

better than anyone else how to perform rituals. In this way, the story makes Confucius look like a responsible person who took religion seriously. But as time went on, people who followed the teachings in the *Classic Text* gave a new twist to the story when they retold it. In the version in the *Record of the Historian*, the way the archivist scoffed at the rituals made the old traditions (and Confucius, who followed them) look silly.

Scholars also question whether the advice in the book was intended for life in general, or whether it was meant for a specific situation, like a coach’s pep talk. So many of the statements in it look like criticisms of other philosophers of the time that some scholars think that at least some of it was written for a particular occasion or against a particular person.

Yet another mystery about the *Daodejing* is exactly when it was composed. Some of the confusion on this point was cleared up when Chinese archaeologists unearthed a tomb in south-central China in 1973. The archaeologists were able to date the tomb to no later than 168 BCE by looking at documents found in the tomb. These documents avoided using characters that are part of the emperor’s name. The archaeologists were excited to find two silk scrolls on which the *Daodejing* was written. Until those scrolls were found, the earliest copy of this text known to modern scholars dated from about 500 CE. This one was far more ancient, which means that it might be closer to the original than the other versions known to scholars. Although the two parts of the book were reversed from the usual order (meaning that it should be called the *Dedaojing* instead of *Daodejing*), it agrees almost completely with the version that we have today.

In 1993 archaeologists found an even older copy, in a tomb from about 300 BCE. The text, written on three bundles of bamboo, is identical in many places with the commonly accepted version of the *Daodejing*. The portions of the book found on these bamboo slips may have been a kind of “greatest” hits of the *Daodejing*, with only highlights copied from the full text that is known today. But it could also be that this shorter work, which makes up about three-

fifths of the standard text, was the complete original book, and that the rest was added later.

The text that scholars usually accept as the complete work today is divided into 81 chapters. Each has a few stanzas of lines that sometimes rhyme. Altogether, there are about 5,000 words in the entire book, which is a fairly short space into which the author packed a lot of wisdom—only about 20 typed pages, double-spaced, in English.

The *Daodejing* is made up mostly of short, catchy phrases that sound like proverbs. Several scholars have speculated that the book is based on popular sayings, and that some of

BEST-SELLER

Some people claim that the *Classic Text of the Way and Virtue* is the second-most commonly translated book in the world, after the Bible.



This rubbing from a Daoist sculpture shows the philosopher Laozi as a god. Rubbings are a way to see details that are hard to pick out on a worn, ancient stone. To make a rubbing, lay a piece of paper on top of a carving and rub a dark piece of charcoal or a crayon over the stone. The ancient Chinese used a soft bag dipped in ink.



MEANWHILE IN GREECE . . .

The philosopher Empedocles from the fifth century BCE said that combinations of four elements were the building blocks of everything on earth. Fire, in this system, was hot and dry, and was associated with males. Water was wet and cold, and associated with women. The other two elements were earth and air.

these sayings were common folk wisdom collected by whoever wrote the book. But the sayings strongly reflect the times, and they are negative about beliefs held by the Confucians (followers of the philosopher Confucius), Mohists (followers of the later philosopher Mozi), and Legalists (who believed in using harsh laws to control the people).

Of course, a book that exists just to put down its enemies will not last long once the enemies are no longer alive. The *Daodejing* contains more than that, and people continue to be inspired by such statements as:

- If you don't value rare goods, people won't become thieves.
- The world is a sacred vessel and cannot be controlled. If you try to control it, you will ruin it; if you try to seize it, you will lose it.
- Ruling a large state is like cooking a small fish [meaning you must do it carefully to avoid ruining it].
- I have three constant treasures which I embrace and treasure: The first is compassion, the second is frugality, the third is not putting myself ahead of the world.
- Sincere words are not beautiful and beautiful words are not sincere.

Many of the sayings have to do with the Dao—the Way. The author of the book admits that the Dao is impossible to define: “Those who know don't talk about it; those who talk don't know it.” Even after centuries of discussion, there is little agreement on exactly what it means. It can be seen as a pattern or plan to the universe, or as a force midway between God and Nature. It is the mother of all things, and “the beginning of Heaven and Earth.” The Way is even more important than the ruler, who comes fourth in a list: “The Way is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; and the king is also great. In the country there are four greats, and the king occupies one place among them.” The Way brings peace: “When the world has the Way, racehorses are retired to fertilize fields. When the world lacks the Way, war horses

66 Anonymous, *Laozi*, third century BCE

are born in the suburbs.” Even demons lose their ability to terrorize humanity: “If you rule the world through the Way, demons will have no magical power. It isn’t really that they will have no magical power, but their magical power won’t be able to harm people.”

The reason the Way is so powerful, according to the *Daodejing*, is that it never acts for a purpose. It behaves so naturally that it is even called “nonaction.” The great thing about nonaction is that you can “do nothing and yet everything will be done.” Even a ruler should behave so that nobody feels his rule too heavily: “The subjects of the best kind of ruler only know there is such a person; those of the



The gods of Blessing, Success, and Long Life look at a painting of the Daoist symbol for Yin and Yang, the two opposite but complementary forces at work in the universe.

next best kind of ruler love and praise him; those of the next best fear him; and the subjects of the worst despise him.” So the *second*-best kind of ruler is loved. The best is one that might as well not be there.

What kind of state would this ideal ruler govern? There would be no war, and each state would be self-sufficient. Some of the *Daodejing's* political thinking can be disturbing to modern people. In the state run by someone who rules with the Way, people are not supposed to think for themselves; instead, the king should “empty the minds and fill the bellies” of the people because “the reason why people are difficult to rule is because of their knowledge.”

Another thought that may seem odd to modern and non-Chinese minds is the way the *Daodejing* praises weakness. According to this way of thinking, the weaker element (*yin*) is often preferable to the stronger (*yang*). This is especially strange because almost everybody in China at that time assumed that women were weaker than men outside the home (women were the bosses in the family). So by praising *yin*, some of the book's statements praise women—a highly unusual situation for the time. “The female [weaker side] constantly overcomes the male [stronger side] with tranquility.” “When you know the male yet remember the female,” runs the advice, “you'll be the ravine of the country.” (A ravine is strong since it's a deep valley where rivers collect, making it more powerful than the imposing-looking mountain.) Everything is made up of two forces, the active, male *yang* and the passive, female *yin*. When one of them grows stronger, the other weakens, until they switch places.

The Dao is a way of peace, of finding balance, not only between *yin* and *yang*, but in all areas of life. But peace was a rare occurrence in ancient China. For most of its history, the land was at war, and much of China's wealth and energy was spent on keeping out invaders and defending the throne from would-be rulers.

66 Anonymous, *Laozi*, third century BCE

66 Anonymous, *Laozi*, third century BCE