



Tao Te Ching

The ***Tao Te Ching***^[note 1] (traditional Chinese: 道德經; simplified Chinese: 道德经) or ***Laozi*** is a Chinese classic text and foundational work of Taoism traditionally credited to the sage Laozi, though the text's authorship, date of composition and date of compilation are debated.^[7] The oldest excavated portion dates to the late 4th century BC.^[8]

The *Tao Te Ching* is central to both philosophical and religious Taoism, and has been highly influential to Chinese philosophy and religious practice in general. It is generally taken as preceding the *Zhuangzi*, the other core Taoist text,^[8] as claimed within the text itself.^[9] Terminology originating within the text has been reinterpreted and elaborated upon by Legalist thinkers, Confucianists, and particularly Chinese Buddhists, which had been introduced to China significantly after the initial solidification of Taoist thought. The text is well known in the West, and is one of the most translated texts in world literature.^[8]

Title

In English, the title is commonly rendered *Tao Te Ching*, following the Wade–Giles romanisation, or as *Daodejing*, following pinyin. It can be translated as *The Classic of the Way and its Power*,^[10] *The Book of the Tao and Its Virtue*,^[11] *The Book of the Way and of Virtue*,^{[12][13]} *The Tao and its Characteristics*,^[5] *The Canon of Reason and Virtue*,^[6] *The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*,^[14] or *A Treatise on the Principle and Its Action*.^{[15][16]}

Ancient Chinese books were commonly referenced by the name of their real or supposed author, in this case the "Old Master",^[17] Laozi. As such, the *Tao Te Ching* is also sometimes referred to as the *Laozi*, especially in Chinese sources.^[8]

Tao Te Ching



Ink on silk manuscript of the *Tao Te Ching* – from Mawangdui (2nd century BC)

Author	Laozi (trad.) ^[1]
Language	Classical Chinese
Subject	Philosophy
Publication date	4th century BC
Publication place	China
Published in English	1868
Original text	Tao Te Ching at Chinese Wikisource
Translation	Tao Te Ching at Wikisource

Chinese name	
Traditional Chinese	道德經
Simplified Chinese	道德经
Literal meaning	"Classic of the Way and Virtue"
Transcriptions	
Standard Mandarin	

The title *Tao Te Ching*, designating the work's status as a classic, was only first applied during the reign of Emperor Jing of Han (157–141 BC).^[18] Other titles for the work include the honorific *Sutra of the Way and Its Power* (道德真經; *Dàodé zhēnjīng*) and the descriptive *Five Thousand Character Classic* (五千文; *Wǔqiān wén*).

Text

The *Tao Te Ching* has a long and complex textual history. Known versions and commentaries date back two millennia, including ancient bamboo, silk, and paper manuscripts discovered in the twentieth century.

Theoretical dating

The *Tao Te Ching* would generally be taken as preceding the *Zhuangzi*, the other core Daoist text.^[8] Sinologist Herrlee G. Creel proposed that Shen Buhai and the earlier part of the *Zhuangzi* preceded the *Tao Te Ching*;^[19] following Creel, Benjamin I. Schwartz and contemporaries discussed Shen Dao as a Daoistic predecessor. A member of the *Jixia Academy*, Shen Dao is listed in the *Outer Zhuangzi* before Laozi and *Zhuangzi*, and shares content with the *Inner Zhuangzi*,^[20] which still does not appear to be familiar with the *Tao Te Ching*.

Although debated more in early scholarship, early modern scholars like Feng Youlan and Creel still considered the work to be a compilation,^[21] and modern scholarship predominantly holds the text to be a compilation or anthology representing multiple authors, as typical for long-form early Chinese texts.^[22] The current text might have been compiled c. 250 BCE, drawn from a wide range of versions dating back a century or two,^[23] essentially the dating of A.C. Graham. Schwartz still considered it to have been remarkably unified by the time of the *Mawangdui silk texts*, even if these versions swap the two halves of the text.^[24]

Sinologist Hansen does not consider the *Outer Zhuangzi* entirely accurate chronologically, but still discusses Shen Dao as part of the theoretical

<u>Hanyu Pinyin</u>	Dào Dé Jīng
<u>Bopomofo</u>	ㄉㄠˋ ㄉㄜˊ ㄐㄩㄥ 一
<u>Wade–Giles</u>	Tao ⁴ Tê ² Ching ¹
<u>Yale Romanization</u>	Dàu Dé Jīng
<u>IPA</u>	[t̪ɑu̯ t̪ɤ́ t͡ɕiŋ]
Wu	
<u>Romanization</u>	Dau Teh Cin
Hakka	
<u>Romanization</u>	Tau4 Dêd5 Gin1
Yue: Cantonese	
<u>Yale Romanization</u>	Douh Dāk Gīng
<u>Jyutping</u>	Dou6 Dak1 Ging1
<u>IPA</u>	[t̪ɔw˧ tɛk˧ kɪŋ˧]
Southern Min	
<u>Hokkien POJ</u>	Tō Tek Keng
<u>Tâi-lô</u>	Tō Tik King
Middle Chinese	
<u>Middle Chinese</u>	Dau ^X Tək ¹ Keŋ
Old Chinese	
<u>Baxter (1992)</u>	*luʔ tik keng
<u>Baxter–Sagart (2014)</u>	*[kə.ɭ]ʰuʔ tʰək k-lʰeŋ
Alternative Chinese name	
<u>Chinese</u>	老子
<u>Literal meaning</u>	"The Old Master"
Transcriptions	
Standard Mandarin	
<u>Hanyu Pinyin</u>	Lǎozǐ
<u>Bopomofo</u>	ㄌㄠˇ ㄗˇ
<u>Wade–Giles</u>	Lao3 Tzŭ3
<u>Yale Romanization</u>	Lǎudź
<u>IPA</u>	[lǎʊ tsɿ]
Wu	
<u>Suzhounese</u>	Lâ-tsz̩
Yue: Cantonese	
<u>Yale Romanization</u>	Lóuhjǐ
<u>Jyutping</u>	Lou5zi2
<u>IPA</u>	[lɔw˧.tsi˧]
Southern Min	
<u>Hokkien POJ</u>	Ló-chú

Internal structure

The written style is laconic, and has few grammatical particles. While the ideas are singular, the style is poetic, combining two major strategies: short, declarative statements, and intentional contradictions, encouraging varied, contradictory interpretations. The first of these strategies creates memorable phrases, while the second forces the reader to reconcile supposed contradictions.^[28] With a partial reconstruction of the pronunciation of Old Chinese spoken during the *Tao Te Ching*'s composition, approximately three-quarters rhymed in the original language.^[29]

The Chinese characters in the earliest versions were written in seal script, while later versions were written in clerical script and regular script styles.^[30]

Authorship

The *Tao Te Ching* is ascribed to Laozi, whose historical existence has been a matter of scholarly debate. His name, which means "Old Master", has only fuelled controversy on this issue.^[31]

The first biographical reference to Laozi is in the *Records of the Grand Historian*,^[32] by Chinese historian Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BC), which combines three stories.^[33] In the first, Laozi was a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BC). His surname was Li (李), and his personal name was Er (耳) or Dan (聃). He was an official in the imperial archives, and wrote a book in two parts before departing to the West; at the request of the keeper of the Han-ku Pass, Yinxi, Laozi composed the *Tao Te Ching*. In the second story, Laozi, also a contemporary of Confucius, was Lao Laizi (老萊子), who wrote a book in 15 parts. Third, Laozi was the grand historian and astrologer Lao Dan (老聃), who lived during the reign of Duke Xian of Qin (c. 384–362 BC).^[34]

<u>Tâi-lô</u>	Ló-tsú
<u>Old Chinese</u>	
Baxter–Sagart (2014)	*C.r̥uʔ tsəʔ
Second alternative Chinese name	
<u>Traditional Chinese</u>	道德真經
<u>Simplified Chinese</u>	道德真经
<u>Literal meaning</u>	" <u>Sutra</u> of the Way and Its Power"
Transcriptions	
<u>Standard Mandarin</u>	
<u>Hanyu Pinyin</u>	Dàodé Zhēnjīng
<u>Bopomofo</u>	ㄉㄠˊ ㄉㄜˊ ㄓㄣˊ ㄓㄩㄥ ㄓㄩㄥ
<u>Wade–Giles</u>	Tao4> Tê2 Chên1 Ching1
<u>Yale Romanization</u>	Dàudé Jēnjīng
<u>IPA</u>	[t̪ɑu̯ t͡ɕʰɛ̃ t͡ɕʰɛ̃ŋ]
<u>Old Chinese</u>	
<u>Baxter–Sagart</u> (2014)	*[kə.l̥]ʔuʔ t͡ɕʰək t͡ɕʰi[n] k-lʰen

Generations of scholars have debated the historicity of Laozi and dating of the *Tao Te Ching*. Linguistic studies of the text's vocabulary and rhyme scheme point to a date of composition after the *Classic of Poetry*, yet before the *Zhuangzi*. Legends claim variously that Laozi was "born old" and that he lived for 996 years, with twelve previous incarnations starting around the time of the Three Sovereigns before the thirteenth as Laozi. Some scholars have expressed doubts over Laozi's historicity.^[35]



Laozi riding a water buffalo

Many Taoists venerate Laozi as the founder of the school of Tao, the *Daode Tianzun* in the Three Pure Ones, and one of the eight elders transformed from Taiji in the Chinese creation myth.

Principal versions

Among the many transmitted editions of the *Tao Te Ching* text, the three primary ones are named after early commentaries. The "Yan Zun Version", which is only extant for the *Te Ching*, derives from a commentary attributed to Han dynasty scholar Yan Zun (嚴遵, fl. 80 BC – 10 AD). The "Heshang Gong" version is named after the legendary Heshang Gong ('legendary sage'), who supposedly lived during the reign of Emperor Wen of Han (180–157 BC). This commentary has a preface written by Ge Xuan (164–244 AD), granduncle of Ge Hong, and scholarship dates this version to c. the 3rd century AD. The origins of the "Wang Bi" version have greater verification than either of the above. Wang Bi (226–249 AD) was a Three Kingdoms-period philosopher and commentator on the *Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching*.^[36]

Tao Te Ching scholarship has advanced from archaeological discoveries of manuscripts, some of which are older than any of the received texts. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, Marc Aurel Stein and others found thousands of scrolls in the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang. They included more than 50 partial and complete manuscripts. One written by the scribe So/Su Dan (素統) is dated to 270 AD and corresponds closely with the Heshang Gong version. Another partial manuscript has the Xiang'er commentary, which had previously been lost.^{[37]:95ff}^[38]

Mawangdui and Guodian texts

In 1973, archaeologists discovered copies of early Chinese books, known as the Mawangdui Silk Texts, in a tomb dated to 168 BC.^[8] They included two nearly complete copies of the text, referred to as Text A (甲) and Text B (乙), both of which reverse the traditional ordering and put the *Te Ching* section before the *Tao Ching*, which is why the Henricks translation of them is named "Te-Tao Ching". Based on calligraphic styles and imperial naming taboo avoidances, scholars believe that Text A can be dated to about the first decade and Text B to about the third decade of the 2nd century BC.^[39]

In 1993, the oldest known version of the text, written on bamboo slips, was found in a tomb near the town of Guodian (郭店) in Jingmen, Hubei, and dated prior to 300 BC.^[8] The Guodian Chu Slips comprise around 800 slips of bamboo with a total of over 13,000 characters, about 2,000 of which correspond with the *Tao Te Ching*.^[8]

Both the Mawangdui and Guodian versions are generally consistent with the received texts, excepting differences in chapter sequence and graphic variants. Several recent *Tao Te Ching* translations utilise these two versions, sometimes with the verses reordered to synthesize the new finds.^[40]

Themes

The *Tao Te Ching* describes the Tao as the source and ideal of all existence: it is unseen, but not transcendent, immensely powerful yet supremely humble, being the root of all things. People have desires and free will (and thus are able to alter their own nature). Many act "unnaturally", upsetting the natural balance of the Tao. The *Tao Te Ching* intends to lead students to a "return" to their natural state, in harmony with Tao.^[41] Language and conventional wisdom are critically assessed. Taoism views them as inherently biased and artificial, widely using paradoxes to sharpen the point.^[42]

Wu wei, literally 'non-action' or 'not acting', is a central concept of the *Tao Te Ching*. The concept of *wu wei* is multifaceted, and reflected in the words' multiple meanings, even in English translation; it can mean "not doing anything", "not forcing", "not acting" in the theatrical sense, "creating nothingness", "acting spontaneously", and "flowing with the moment".^[43]

This concept is used to explain *ziran*, or harmony with the Tao. It includes the concepts that value distinctions are ideological and seeing ambition of all sorts as originating from the same source. *Tao Te Ching* used the term broadly with simplicity and humility as key virtues, often in contrast to selfish action. On a political level, it means avoiding such circumstances as war, harsh laws and heavy taxes. Some Taoists see a connection between *wu wei* and esoteric practices, such as *zuowang* ('sitting in oblivion': emptying the mind of bodily awareness and thought) found in the *Zhuangzi*.^[42]

Versions and translations

The *Tao Te Ching* has been translated into Western languages over 250 times, mostly to English, German, and French.^[44] According to Holmes Welch, "It is a famous puzzle which everyone would like to feel he had solved."^[45] The first English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* was produced in 1868 by the Scottish Protestant missionary John Chalmers, entitled *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity, and Morality of the "Old Philosopher" Lau-tsze*.^[46] It was heavily indebted^[47] to Julien's French translation^[12] and dedicated to James Legge,^[4] who later produced his own translation for Oxford's *Sacred Books of the East*.^[5]

Other notable English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* are those produced by Chinese scholars and teachers: a 1948 translation by linguist Lin Yutang, a 1961 translation by author John Ching Hsiung Wu, a 1963 translation by sinologist Din Cheuk Lau, another 1963 translation by professor Wing-tsit Chan, and a 1972 translation by Taoist teacher Gia-Fu Feng together with his wife Jane English.

Many translations are written by people with a foundation in Chinese language and philosophy who are trying to render the original meaning of the text as faithfully as possible into English. Some of the more popular translations are written from a less scholarly perspective, giving an individual author's interpretation. Critics of these versions claim that their translators deviate from the text and are incompatible with the history of Chinese thought.^[48] Russell Kirkland goes further to argue that these versions are based on Western Orientalist fantasies and represent the colonial appropriation of Chinese culture.^{[49][50]} Other Taoism scholars, such as Michael LaFargue^[51] and Jonathan Herman,^[52] argue that

while they do not pretend to scholarship, they meet a real spiritual need in the West. These Westernized versions aim to make the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching more accessible to modern English-speaking readers by, typically, employing more familiar cultural and temporal references.

Challenges in translation

The *Tao Te Ching* is written in Classical Chinese, which generally poses a number of challenges for interpreters and translators. As Holmes Welch notes, the written language "has no active or passive, no singular or plural, no case, no person, no tense, no mood."^[53] Moreover, the received text lacks many grammatical particles which are preserved in the older *Mawangdui* and *Beida* texts, which permit the text to be more precise.^[54] Lastly, many passages of the *Tao Te Ching* are deliberately ambiguous.^{[55][56]}

Since there is very little punctuation in Classical Chinese, determining the precise boundaries between words and sentences is not always trivial. Deciding where these phrasal boundaries are must be done by the interpreter.^[55] Some translators have argued that the received text is so corrupted due to its original medium being bamboo strips^[57] linked with silk threads—that it is impossible to understand some passages without some transposition of characters.

Notable translations

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- *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity, and Morality of the "Old Philosopher" Lau-tsze* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=yxFBAAAAYAAJ>), translated by Chalmers, John, London: Trübner, 1868, ISBN 978-0-524-07788-7
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See also

- Bogar
- Ecclesiastes
- Huahujiing
- Huainanzi
- Huangdi Yinfujing
- Qingjing Jing
- Sanhuangjing
- Straw dog
- Taiping Jing
- Xishengjing
- Four Books and Five Classics

Notes

1. Standard Chinese: [tāu tʃ tʃíŋ] ; in English often UK: /ˈtaʊ tiː ˈtʃɪŋ/ *TOW tee CHING*, US: /ˌdaʊ deɪ ˈdʒɪŋ/ *DOW deh JING*;^[2]

Less common romanisations include *Tao-te-king*,^[3] *Tau Těh King*^[4] and *Tao Teh King*.^{[5][6]}

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- Legge, Suzuki, and Goddard's translations side-by-side, along with the original text (<http://www.yellowbridge.com/onlinelit/daodejing.php>)

