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Laozi

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A legendary Daoism¹ philosopher called Laozi lived during the time of ancient china. Philosophical Daoism traces its origin to Laozi, an extraordinary thinker who flourish during the sixth century B.C. according to Chinese tradition. In religious Daoism there was never a historical Laozi but revered as a supreme deity.

Laozi was a native of Chu, according to the *shiji*², a southern state in the Zhou dynasty. Laozi served as a keeper of archival records at the court of Zhou. Confucius who was a chinese teacher, editor, politician, philosopher of the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history had consulted Laozi for certain ritual matters. This establishes the traditional claim that Laozi was a senior contemporary of Confucius.

The name “Laozi” is best taken to mean “Old (*lao*) Master (*zi*)”, and Laozi the ancient philosopher is said to have written a short book, which has come to be called simply the *Laozi*. When the *Laozi* was recognized as a classic (*jing*), according to the act of monk in the classification of Chinese literature, on account of its profound insight and significance, it acquired a more exalted and hermeneutically instructive title, *Daodejing* (*Tao-te ching*), as it is commonly translated as the “Classic of the Way

¹ “Daoism” (sometimes called “Taoism”) is one of the two great indigenous philosophical traditions of China

² *Shiji* (Records of the Historian) by the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)

and Virtue”. It is concerned with the Dao(way) and virtue(de). Its influence on Chinese culture is vast, and it reaches far beyond China. The Daodejing (Tao-te ching) is the most translated work in the world of literature after the Bible.

Is the Laozi a manual of self-cultivation and government ? For example : Chapter 1 of the modern Laozi starts with a famous sentence “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way”, Chapter 10 speaks of how to nourish one’s “soul” and embracing the “one”, Chapter 80 show the ideal polity as a small country with few inhabitants. It says that the Laozi is a difficult text and its language is often cryptic. The reference of symbols its holds remain unclear and there also seems to be some inconsistencies in the text. For example : Chapter 2 refers to the “mutual production of being and non-being”.³

Some may wonder if the Laozi were an anthology put together randomly by different people over a long period of time. Even with this, it would never hold a serious issue due to the fact that most of our modern studies are concerned to reveal the deeper meaning of the classic even though some would seek to recover the original meaning of the Laozi.⁴

To begin with Dao, the linguistics of Chinese character that suggest a pathway, to head in a certain direction along the path. Most of the people agreed with the translation of dao as way. In early Chinese literature, dao is generally shows as carriage way or waterways but it is also used to convey what the right is. It is also be the extension of teaching that set forth such method that it would bring about. As a verb, dao

³ (Henricks, trans. 1989)

⁴ (cf. Hardy 1998).

also convey the sense of “speaking”. The opening of chapter 1, dao ke dao (The way that can be spoken of) because dao is paired with ming(name) in the next line ming ke ming(the name that can be named) forming a construction, thus there is a reason to solve the verbal usage in the sense of something verbalized. As opposed to a pathway that is travel on. This is also how most commentators in traditional China have understood it. In most English translations, the form “Way” or “Dao” or “Tao” is used, to distinguish it from other usages of these term.

The concept of dao is not unique to the Laozi. A key term in the philosophical vocabulary, it inform early Chinese philosophy as a whole. It is also interpreted differently, giving a means to a higher end in some writings. The Laozi shows both the ineffability and creative power of dao. This is notable and if one accepts the early root of the text, they could bring a new course in the development of Chinese philosophy.

Dao is also said to be the “beginning” of all things. Daoist creation involves a process from unity to multiplicity. “Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the ten thousand things”. The text does not indicate tense or spell out what the numbers refer to. Is it saying that something called the “one” produced or produces the “two” in the sense of two other things?

The process of creation does proceed from unity to multiplicity, but the Laozi is only concerned to show that “two” would be impossible without the idea of “one.” The assertion in Laozi 42, “One gives birth to two”, confirms that duality

mirrored unity; to render it as “The one gave birth to the two” is to turn what is essentially a logical relation into a cosmological event.

As the source of being, dao cannot be itself a being, no matter how powerful or perfect; otherwise, the problem of infinite regress cannot be overcome. For this reason, the Laozi makes use of the concept of wu, “nonbeing”, not to suggest a substance or something of which nothing can be said, but to signify the conceptual “otherness”.

Similar to Dao, *de*(virtue) is a general concept open to diverse interpretation. The marriage of Dao and *de* effectively bridges the gap between transcendence and immanence. *De* is thus what one has “obtained” from dao, a “latent power” by “virtue” of which any being becomes what it is. In this case, the Laozi speaks of *de* as something which nourishes all beings.