

# Laozi

A contemporary to Confucius was a teacher named Laozi. Most of what we know about Laozi is so heavily mixed with legend that it is difficult to know what is true and what is myth.



The teachings of Laozi were recorded in writings called the *Dao De Jing*. Laozi taught that a force known as the *Dao* permeated all living things. He told his followers that the most important thing an individual could do is to reject the world and their desires for worldly possessions and power, and commune with nature, bringing

oneself into a state of oneness with the *Dao*.

Many individuals in China practice both Confucianism and Daoism.

Confucianism taught them how to behave towards one another, while Daoism taught them how to behave towards the natural world and with themselves personally.

<http://www.kidspast.com/world-history/0140-daoism.php>

In the mid-twentieth century, a consensus emerged among scholars that the historicity of the person known as Laozi is doubtful and that the *Tao Te Ching* was "a compilation of Taoist sayings by many hands." Alan Watts urged more caution, holding that this view was part of an academic fashion for skepticism about historical spiritual and religious figures and stating that not enough would be known for years – or possibly ever – to make a firm

judgment. Ursula K. Le Guin maintains that the style is consistent with a single author with a few additions by later Taoists.

The earliest certain reference to the present figure of Laozi is found in the 1st-century BCE *Records of the Grand Historian* collected by the historian Sima Qian from earlier accounts. In one account, Laozi was said to be a contemporary of Confucius during the 6th or 5th century BCE. His surname was Li and his personal name was Er or Dan. He was an official in the imperial archives and wrote a book in two parts before departing to the west. In another, Laozi was a different contemporary of Confucius titled Lao Laizi (老萊子) and wrote a book in 15 parts. In a third, he was the court astrologer Lao Dan who lived during the 4th-century BCE reign of Duke Xianof Qin. The oldest text of the *Tao Te Ching* so far recovered was written on bamboo slips and dates to the late 4th century BCE.

According to traditional accounts, Laozi was a scholar who worked as the Keeper of the Archives for the royal court of Zhou. This reportedly allowed him broad access to the works of the Yellow Emperor and other classics of the time. The stories assert that Laozi never opened a formal school but nonetheless attracted a large number of students and loyal disciples. There are many variations of a story retelling his encounter with Confucius, most famously in the *Zhuangzi*.

According to Chinese legend, Laozi left China for the west on a water buffalo.



He was sometimes held to have come from the village of Chu Jen in Chu. In accounts where Laozi married, he was said to have had a son named Zong who became a celebrated soldier. Many clans of the Li family trace their descent to Laozi, including the emperors of the Tang dynasty.<sup>[28]</sup> According to the Simpkinses, while many (if not all) of these lineages are questionable, they provide a testament to Laozi's impact on Chinese culture.

Laozi meets Yinxi



The third story in Sima Qian states that Laozi grew weary of the moral decay of life in Chengzhou and noted the kingdom's decline. He ventured west to live as a hermit in the unsettled frontier at the age of 160. At the western gate of the city (or kingdom), he was recognized by the guard Yinxi. The sentry asked the old master to record his wisdom for the good of the country before he would be permitted to pass. The text Laozi wrote was said to be the *Tao Te Ching*, although the

present version of the text includes additions from later periods. In some versions of the tale, the sentry was so touched by the work that he became a disciple and left with Laozi, never to be seen again. In others, the "Old Master" journeyed all the way to India and was the teacher of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Others claim he was the Buddha himself.

Depiction of Laozi in E.T.C. Werner's  
*Myths and Legends of China*.

A seventh-century work, the *Sandong Zhunang* ("Pearly Bag of the Three Caverns"), embellished the relationship between Laozi and Yinxi. Laozi pretended to be a farmer when reaching the western gate, but was recognized by Yinxi, who asked to be taught by the great master.



Laozi was not satisfied by simply being noticed by the guard and demanded an explanation. Yinxi expressed his deep desire to find the Tao and explained that his long study of astrology allowed him to recognize Laozi's approach. Yinxi was accepted by Laozi as a disciple. This is considered an exemplary interaction between Daoist master and disciple, reflecting the testing a seeker must undergo before being accepted. A would-be adherent is expected to prove his determination and talent, clearly expressing his wishes and showing that he had made progress on his own towards realizing the Tao.

The *Pearly Bag of the Three Caverns* continues the parallel of an adherent's quest. Yinxi received his ordination when Laozi transmitted the Daodejing, along with other texts and precepts, just as Taoist adherents receive a number of methods, teachings and scriptures at ordination. This is only an initial ordination and Yinxi still needed an additional period to perfect his virtue, thus Laozi gave him three years to perfect his Dao. Yinxi gave himself over to a full-time devotional life. After the appointed time, Yinxi again demonstrates determination and perfect trust, sending out a black sheep to market as the agreed sign. He eventually meets again with Laozi, who announces that Yinxi's immortal name is listed in the heavens and calls down a heavenly procession to clothe Yinxi in the garb of immortals. The story continues that Laozi bestowed a number of titles upon Yinxi and took him on a journey throughout the universe, even into the nine heavens. After this fantastic journey, the two sages set out to western lands of the barbarians. The training period, reuniting and travels represent the attainment of the highest religious rank in medieval Taoism called "Preceptor of the Three Caverns". In this legend, Laozi is the perfect Daoist master and Yinxi is the ideal Taoist student. Laozi is presented as the Tao personified, giving his teaching to humanity for their salvation. Yinxi follows the formal sequence of preparation, testing, training and attainment.

The story of Laozi has taken on strong religious overtones since the Han dynasty. As Taoism took root, Laozi was worshipped as a god. Belief in the revelation of the Tao from the divine Laozi resulted in the formation of the Way of the Celestial Master, the first organized religious Taoist sect. In later mature Taoist tradition, Laozi came to be seen as a personification of the

Tao. He is said to have undergone numerous "transformations" and taken on various guises in various incarnations throughout history to initiate the faithful in the Way. Religious Taoism often holds that the "Old Master" did not disappear after writing the *Tao Te Ching* but rather spent his life traveling and revealing the Tao.

Taoist myths state that Laozi was conceived when his mother gazed upon a falling star. He supposedly remained in her womb for 62 years before being born while his mother was leaning against a plum tree. (The Chinese surname [Li](#) shares its character with "plum".) Laozi was said to have emerged as a grown man with a full grey beard and long earlobes, both symbols of wisdom and long life. Other myths claim that he was reborn 13 times after his first life during the days of Fuxi. In his last incarnation as Laozi, he lived nine hundred and ninety years and spent his life traveling to reveal the Tao.

## **Tao Te Ching**

Laozi is traditionally regarded as the author of the *Daodejing* (Tao Te Ching), though the identity of its author(s) and/or compiler(s) has been debated throughout history. It is one of the most significant treatises in Chinese cosmogony. As with most other ancient Chinese philosophers, Laozi often explains his ideas by way of paradox, analogy, appropriation of ancient sayings, repetition, symmetry, rhyme, and rhythm. In fact, the whole book can be read as an analogy – the ruler is the awareness, or self, in meditation and the myriad creatures or empire is the experience of the body, senses and desires.

**The *Tao Te Ching***, often called simply ***Laozi*** after its reputed author, describes the Dao (or 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 Dao. The *Daodejing* intends to lead students to a "return" to their natural state, in harmony with Dao. Language and conventional wisdom are critically assessed. Taoism views them as inherently biased and artificial, widely using paradoxes to sharpen the point.

Livia Kohn provides an example of how Laozi encouraged a change in approach, or return to "nature", rather than action. Technology may bring about a false sense of progress. The answer provided by Laozi is not the rejection of technology, but instead seeking the calm state of *wu wei*, free from desires. This relates to many statements by Laozi encouraging rulers to keep their people in "ignorance", or "simple-minded". Some scholars insist this explanation ignores the religious context, and others question it as an apologetic of the philosophical coherence of the text. It would not be unusual political advice if Laozi literally intended to tell rulers to keep their people ignorant. However, some terms in the text, such as "valley spirit" (*gushen*) and "soul" (*po*), bear a metaphysical context and cannot be easily reconciled with a purely ethical reading of the work.

*Wu wei* (無爲), literally "non-action" or "not acting", is a central concept of the *Daodejing*. 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."

It is a concept used to explain *ziran* (自然), or harmony with the Dao. It includes the concepts that value distinctions are ideological and seeing ambition of all sorts as originating from the same source. Laozi 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.

Some of Laozi's famous sayings include:

"When goodness is lost, it is replaced by morality."

"The usefulness of a pot comes from its emptiness."

"The best people are like water, which benefits all things and does not compete with them. It stays in lowly places that others reject. This is why it is so similar to the Way."

"When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly.  
When people see some things as good, other things become bad."

"Try to change it and you will ruin it. Try to hold it and you will lose it."

"Those who know do not say. Those who say do not know."

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."



"The more that laws and regulations are given prominence, the more thieves and robbers there will be."

—Laozi, Tao Te Ching

## **Taoism**

Laozi is traditionally regarded as the founder of Taoism, intimately connected with the *Daodejing* and "primordial" (or "original") Taoism. Popular ("religious") Taoism typically presents the Jade Emperor as the official head deity. Intellectual ("elite") Taoists, such as the Celestial Masters sect, usually present Laozi (*Laojun*, "Lord Lao") and the Three Pure Ones at the top of the pantheon of deities.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi>