

THE *DAODEJING* AND MYSTICISM

*Ways can be spoken, but they are not constant Ways.
Names can be named, but they are not constant names.*
—*Daodejing*



Laozi is said to have grown disillusioned with society and left China riding on an ox.

I. Myth and Reality

The *Daodejing*, attributed to Laozi, is one of the most famous classics of world literature. Along with the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita, it is one of the three most widely translated works ever and the extent of its cultural influence is immense. *The Simpsons* has referenced it. Director Sam Peckinpah's controversial, ultraviolent film *Straw Dogs* takes its title from it. Ronald Reagan quoted it in one of his State of the Union Addresses. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright drew inspiration from it. The seminal German philosopher Martin Heidegger collaborated on a translation of it.¹

However, the *Daodejing* is especially prone to misinterpretation and misappropriation. This is due in part to the fact that, although it has been rendered in many languages, the *Daodejing* is often badly mistranslated. Indeed, it is amazingly common for people to "translate" the *Daodejing* without knowing how to read Chinese.² Furthermore, because the *Daodejing* is written in such an enigmatic style, people tend to project onto it whatever meaning they want to find. Even within the Chinese tradition, a considerable body of myth has grown up around both the *Daodejing* and Laozi. So let's begin with some often-overlooked facts about Daoism.

- Daoism did not exist in ancient China.
- Laozi, the author of the *Daodejing*, did not exist either.
- The *Daodejing* is not about being mellow, following your bliss, or just taking life easy. And it has nothing to do with Winnie the Pooh.¹

Let's take these facts in turn. During the period covered in this book, Daoism was not an organized movement (or group of related sects), the way Confucianism and Mohism were. The term "Daoism" was coined much later, during the Han dynasty, as one of several labels to categorize thinkers with similar views. Also during the Han, Daoism became an organized religion, with elaborate rituals, clergy, and scriptures. However, the doctrines of this religion often differed from those of classic "Daoist" texts from the Warring States Period. For example, later Daoism was frequently associated with efforts to achieve physical immortality through the use of elixirs.

Laozi was identified as the founder of this later Daoist religion and the author of the *Daodejing*. However, this story is suspicious for many reasons.

1. *The Tao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff (reprint, New York: Viking Press, 1983) is a charming work that has attained a wide readership. There is nothing wrong with enjoying it for itself. But it reveals much more about how the *Daodejing* has been appropriated to illustrate Western Romanticism than it does about the *Daodejing* itself. (See later in this section for more on Romanticism.)

Though he was supposedly a contemporary of Kongzi (in the Spring and Autumn Period), there are no references to him in any texts until about three centuries later (late in the Warring States Period). Furthermore, the earliest Chinese historian to write a biography of Laozi reports sharply conflicting accounts of his actions, his lifetime, and even his name. "Laozi" really means "Old Master" and does not appear to be an actual name. No wonder this historian sighs, "Our generation does not know the truth of the matter."ⁱⁱⁱ Many modern scholars are drawn to a simple explanation for these discrepancies: stories about several different "old masters" coalesced to form the legend of "Laozi."

Mythical or not, a couple of the stories about Laozi are sufficiently intriguing and influential that they are worth repeating. Laozi was supposedly a scribe in the Zhou dynasty archives. Kongzi went to see him, hoping to learn more about the Zhou rituals. However, Laozi rebuked Kongzi on three grounds. First, Kongzi asked about the mere "words" of those who have "already rotted away." Second, a gentleman simply "moves on like a tumbleweed" if his era is not receptive to his message (instead of trying to obtain an official position as Kongzi did). Third, Kongzi's efforts only show his arrogance. Laozi therefore dismisses Kongzi, saying, "What I have to tell you is this, and nothing more."^{iv} We can see why later Daoists would like this story, because it presents Laozi as having the upper hand in his one exchange with Kongzi.

Seeing that the Zhou dynasty was continuing to decline, Laozi got on an ox and headed off to the "uncivilized" regions to the West. Gentlemen normally traveled in a carriage or chariot, so the image of this sage riding an ox is striking. When he arrived at the pass leading into the mountains, the border guard implored him to write down his teachings before leaving. To satisfy this official, Laozi casually jotted down the *Daodejing* before riding off. This myth helps explain why Laozi—who after all warned Kongzi against mere "words"—bothered to write down any work at all.

If the preceding stories are myths, who *did* write the *Daodejing*? No one wrote it. Philological and historical studies of the *Daodejing* suggest that it is an anthology that records a variety of oral sayings and did not become something like the book we recognize until the third century BCE. In Chinese, this book is most commonly referred to as the *Laozi*, after its supposed author. But in order to emphasize the fact that we have a text without a single creator, I shall refer to it by its alternative title, the *Daodejing*, which means

Myth: "The Great Wall is the only human creation visible from space."

Fact: Although this myth is repeated countless times, even in documentaries and news reports, it is impossible to see the Great Wall from space with the unaided eye. It still is a great wall, though.

the *Classic of the Way and Virtue*. Although the Way and Virtue are important concepts in the work, the title seems to be taken simply from the first words of the first and second books of the text. In recent decades, alternative versions of all or part of the *Daodejing* have been unearthed from ancient tombs (near the villages of Mawangdui and Guodian). But the translation found in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* is based largely on what has been the traditional version of the *Daodejing* in China for two millennia.²

Although it lacks a single author, there do seem to be enough common and interrelated themes in the *Daodejing* that we can treat it as a coherent text. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that it has a very fractured and enigmatic style. Because of this, the *Daodejing* often functions like a Rorschach test, in which readers find what they want to find. Wang Bi, a Han dynasty philosopher who wrote one of the most influential commentaries on the *Daodejing*, noted that some of his contemporaries found Confucian elements in the work and labeled it “Confucian,” while others noted Mohist elements in it and called it “Mohist.” Wang Bi concludes, “They adjust the name they apply to it in accordance with what they find and insist on interpreting it in terms of what they like.”^v

We see a similar trend in the West. In particular, contemporary Westerners often project onto the *Daodejing* the assumptions of Romanticism. In reaction against the emphasis on reason that was characteristic of the Enlightenment, Romanticism championed the importance and wisdom of one’s passions. But the dichotomy of reason and passion is Western, not Chinese, and the individualism characteristic of some forms of Romanticism is quite alien to the *Daodejing*. Consequently, we should be on the lookout for how Romantic preconceptions can distort our appreciation of the text.³

There are five major themes that give coherence to the *Daodejing*. (1) Like most of the other philosophies of this era, the *Daodejing* expresses outrage at the corruption, violence, and suffering of the contemporary world. However, unlike Confucianism and Mohism, the *Daodejing* seeks a return to the primitive society that existed prior to the so-called achievements of civilization. This precivilized time was supposedly a utopia in which people enjoyed a simple, preliterate, honest, contented life. (2) In contrast, contemporary society is marked by hypocrisy and self-aggrandizement. To return to the ancient ideal, rulers and their subjects must practice “nonaction”: acting without self-conscious or self-aggrandizing desires. (3) One of the keys to achieving nonaction is escaping fixation on the often-arbitrary distinctions embodied

2. Citations of the *Daodejing* are by chapters, rather than by page numbers.

3. This is an illustration of the hermeneutic circle between the reader and the text, discussed in Appendix A.

in language. We will cease to covet and contend when we let go of words like "wealth" and "poverty," "success" and "failure." (4) The proper source of guidance for human action is neither self-conscious choice nor the social conventions embodied in language but a transcendent entity that sustains the world. Although this entity is beyond all language, it can be called the "Way" for want of a better term. (5) Since the highest kind of knowledge transcends language, the *Daodejing* advocates a kind of mystical knowledge.

II. Five Themes

1. Social Ills and Their Solution

Many Westerners have a preconception of the *Daodejing* as otherworldly. In reality, the text has an urgent practical concern, rooted in the chaotic situation of the Warring States Period:

The court is resplendent;
 Yet the fields are overgrown.
 The granaries are empty;
 Yet some wear elegant clothes;
 Fine swords dangle at their sides;
 They are stuffed with food and drink;
 And possess wealth in gross abundance.
 This is known as taking pride in robbery.
 Far is this from the Way! (53)

The *Daodejing* is similar to Confucianism and Mohism in that it preaches peace but stops short of endorsing complete pacifism:

Wherever an army resides, thorns and thistles grow.
 . . .
 Weapons are inauspicious instruments, not the instruments of a cultivated person.
 But if given no choice, the cultivated person will use them.
 Peace and quiet are the highest ideals;
 A military victory is not a thing of beauty. (30–31)

The solution the *Daodejing* offers for the corruption and violence of contemporary life is to return to a primitive, agrarian utopia—the human condition before the corrupting influences of culture, literature, urbanization, laws, and advanced technology:

The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people.
 The more sharp implements the people have, the more benighted the state.
 The more clever and skillful the people, the more strange and perverse things arise.
 The more clear the laws and edicts, the more thieves and robbers. (57)

How are we to return to the utopia of the distant past? The *Daodejing* shares with Confucianism a belief in the transformative power of a good ruler's Virtue:

If you deeply accumulate Virtue, nothing can stand in your way.
 If nothing can stand in your way, no one will know your limits.
 If no one knows your limits, you can possess the state. (59)

However, unlike Confucianism, the *Daodejing* rejects the effort to cultivate virtues like benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, and propriety. In fact, it suggests that this effort is one of the sources of social decay. To *try* to be virtuous will lead only to artificiality and hypocrisy:

When the great Way is abandoned, there are benevolence and righteousness.
 When wisdom and intelligence come forth, there is great hypocrisy.
 When the six familial relationships are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children.
 When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers. (18)

The *Daodejing* implicitly criticizes Mohist doctrines as well. The Mohists were brilliant debaters, but the *Daodejing* warns, "The good do not engage in disputation; / Those who engage in disputation are not good" (81). The Mohists championed intelligent rulers who sought to maximize profit, but the *Daodejing* advises, "Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more" (19). For the *Daodejing*, the fundamental problem with both the Confucians and the Mohists is that they engage in action, rather than "nonaction."

2. Nonaction

Nonaction is not the same as not acting. If I slump in my chair listlessly and brood over my problems, I am not acting, but I am doing the very opposite

of nonaction. A professional basketball player, at the top of his game, dribbling down the court, dodging and weaving around his opponents, passing to his teammates, then performing a well-timed jump shot is quite active, yet he is engaging in nonaction. In the former case, brooding in my chair, I am focused on myself; in the latter case, running down the court, the basketball player is focused on the game. Generally speaking, nonaction is action that is non-self-conscious yet perfectly responsive to the situation.

Although the term "nonaction" is new to us, it refers to something we are quite familiar with from everyday life. Consider learning to ride a bicycle. At first, you are very conscious of yourself, the bike, and the various rules and bits of advice that you have been given. Someone who already knows how to ride a bicycle may give you a verbal account of "the Way of the bicycle." But this "Way that can be spoken" is of only limited usefulness:

"How do I ride a bike without falling down?"

"You have to pedal fast enough to maintain balance."

"How fast is that?"

"Uhm, I dunno. Just develop a feel for it."

"How do I corner?"

"Turn the handlebars and lean into the turn."

"How far do I turn the handlebars and how far do I lean?"

"It depends on how sharp you have to corner. The sharper the corner the more you turn and lean."

"But how much?"

"Look, just do it and you'll get it eventually."

What is the "it" that you are trying to "get"? It is "the Way to ride a bike," which is not captured in any set of rules you have memorized. Now, in this case, there is a linguistic account that completely expresses what you are doing when you successfully ride a bicycle. A physicist could tell you precisely how fast you have to go and precisely how far you need to lean in order for the gyroscopic force of the wheels to be in equilibrium with gravity. But this information is not necessary to ride a bike, and knowing it would not be sufficient to ride a bike.

Recent Western philosophers have expressed this point with the distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that." *Knowing that* is a matter of believing in linguistic claims with rational justification. *Knowing how* is a matter of ability. You *know that* Paris is the capital of France, but you *know how* to ride a bicycle.

Throughout most of its history, Western philosophy has emphasized *knowing that*. The *Apology*, one of the foundational texts of Western philosophy,

presents Socrates on a quest to find someone who possesses real knowledge. He interrogates politicians, poets, and craftspeople. In each case, they fail his test for knowledge because they cannot give a linguistic account of why what they say is true. The implicit response of the *Daodejing* to Socrates' challenge would be to agree that no one has the kind of knowledge Socrates seeks, but that he is looking for the wrong kind of knowledge.

Imagine I have lost my wallet and you find it. You will, I hope, return it to me. But why will you do so? It would show no virtue if your only motivation is that you expect some reward for returning my wallet. What would be a virtuous motivation for returning my wallet? Different philosophers will give different answers. For Mengzi, to follow the Way is to return the wallet out of a "feeling of compassion" for my suffering and a "feeling of disdain" to do something shameful like stealing (*Mengzi* 2A6). In sharp contrast, Immanuel Kant would argue that acting out of compassion or ethical disdain is not moral. It is not that such feelings are *immoral*. Kant acknowledges that such emotions are useful and worth cultivating for the assistance they give us in motivating us to do the right thing. But for Kant feelings are morally neutral because we have (he thinks) no control over them. You cannot choose to be sympathetic to my loss, but you can choose to follow the moral law. Consequently, for Kant, returning my wallet has moral value only if it is done out of respect for the moral law. The moral law dictates that we act only on principles that we could consistently will to universalize. Kant would argue that we cannot consistently will that others keep what *we* lose (because that would be to will that our own goals, whatever they are, be frustrated). Consequently, we cannot will that we keep what *others* lose.

The *Daodejing* suggests that both Mengzi and Kant are wrong. You are only genuinely following the Way when you return the wallet because it simply does not cross your mind to keep it; this is nonaction, naturalness, and the simplicity of "unhewn wood" (28). As soon as I label my action as "righteous" or "benevolent," my motivation has become artificial, unnatural, and in violation of the Way. This is what the text means when it says,

Those of highest Virtue do not strive for Virtue and so they have it.
 Those of lowest Virtue never stray from Virtue and so they lack it.
 Those of highest Virtue practice nonaction and never act for ulterior motives.
 Those of lowest Virtue act and always have some ulterior motive.
 Those of highest benevolence act, but without ulterior motives.
 Those of highest righteousness act, but with ulterior motives.
 Those who are ritually correct act, but if others do not respond, they roll up their sleeves and resort to force. (38)

It seems very likely that the *Daodejing* has Confucians in mind as “those of lowest Virtue . . . who are ritually correct.” However, there is an ancient tradition that Confucians agree with Daoists in recognizing nonaction as the highest embodiment of the Way. We do find in the *Analects* a passage in which Kongzi praises Sage-King Shun as “an example of someone who ruled by means of nonaction” (15.5). In addition, although I presented Mengzi above to draw a contrast with the *Daodejing*, it is certainly true that Mengzi advocated developing one’s compassion for suffering and disdain for wrongdoing to the point that they would manifest themselves spontaneously, without premeditation, “like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through” (2A6). Admittedly, the *Analects* and the *Daodejing* do seem to be very different works, but Han-dynasty commentator Wang Bi explained their fundamental agreement by saying, “The Sage [Kongzi] embodied nothingness, so he also knew that it could not be explained in words. Thus he did not talk about it. Master Lao, by contrast, operated on the level of being. This is why he constantly discussed nothingness; he had to, for what he said about it always fell short.”^{vi}

Whatever similarities there may be between some aspects of Confucian thought and the *Daodejing*, there is a clear contrast with Mohist political theory, with its emphasis on praise, prosperity, and promotions as tools by which rulers encourage good behavior. Such methods lead the people away from nonaction and toward artifice:

Not paying honor to the worthy leads the people to avoid contention.
 Not showing reverence for precious goods leads them to not steal.
 Not making a display of what is desirable leads their hearts away from
 chaos. (3)

Nonaction dictates a more subtle approach to governing:

The greatest of rulers is but a shadowy presence;
 Next is the ruler who is loved and praised;
 Next is the one who is feared;
 Next is the one who is reviled.
 . . .
 When their task is done and work complete,
 Their people all say, “This is just how we are naturally.” (17)

The ruler who practices nonaction transforms the people through his Virtue, without the need for manipulative policies.

After they are transformed, should some still desire to act,
 I shall press them down with the weight of nameless unhewn wood.

Nameless unhewn wood is but freedom from desire.
 Without desire and still, the world will settle itself. (37)

“Unhewn wood” is one of the central metaphors of the *Daodejing*. Just as a tree is mutilated by a human’s axe, so is everything natural mutilated by self-conscious human desires.

When unhewn wood is carved up, then there are names.
 Now that there are names, know enough to stop! (32)

But why are “names” so problematic?

3. The Teaching That Is without Words

The *Daodejing* suggests that humans and the languages they use project artificial distinctions onto the world:

To have and to lack generate each other.
 Difficult and easy give form to each other.
 Long and short offset each other.
 High and low incline into each other.
 Note and rhythm harmonize with each other.
 Before and after follow each other.
 This is why sages abide in the business of nonaction,
 and practice the teaching that is without words. (2)

“Have” and “lack,” “difficult” versus “easy,” “long” as opposed to “short”: we think of these as natural distinctions. But if I pride myself on having stylish clothes, it can only be because someone else lacks stylish clothes. I find it onerous to do difficult tasks only because they have been labeled as such, in contrast to those that are easy. Consider how much of our thinking and feeling is artificially produced by society and its linguistic distinctions. Would people crave being thin if our society did not invidiously distinguish it from being fat? Why would anyone worry about the trappings of success (a fancy education, a prestigious job, etc.) unless our language distinguished success from failure? What makes some people beautiful other than the fact that society labels them “beautiful,” as opposed to “ugly”?

For earlier philosophers such as the Confucians and Mohists, one of the key senses of “Way” is a linguistic account of the right way to live and organize society. Consequently, the *Daodejing* opens with what would have seemed a startling paradox: “Ways can be spoken, but they are not constant Ways. / Names

can be named, but they are not constant names" (1*). The paradoxes of the "School of Names" had helped pave the way for this challenge to the "constancy" of language and disputation. How can we take philosophical debate or even words seriously if it is possible to argue successfully that "White horses are not horses" and "I left for Yue yesterday and arrived yesterday"? The *Daodejing* embraces paradox as the best kind of language for getting close to expressing knowledge. This is what accounts for the enigmatic style of the text. However, it stresses that the highest kind of knowledge cannot be fully expressed using words: "Those who know do not talk about it; / Those who talk about it do not know" (56). But if the Way is not a doctrine, what is it?

4. The Way

The *Daodejing* goes beyond earlier philosophers in positing an entity that generates and guides Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures:

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.
 Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
 It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
 One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.
 I do not know its proper name;
 I have given it the style "Way."
 . . .
 People model themselves on the earth.
 The earth models itself on Heaven.
 Heaven models itself on the Way.
 The Way models itself on what is natural. (25)

A "style" is a formal nickname used to respectfully address those with whom one is not intimately familiar. Notice that the text is explicit about the fact that it is appropriating the term "Way" and using it in a new way as a nickname for this thing, "which arose before Heaven and earth." This innovative understanding of the Way, *dao*, is why "Daoists" are given this name.

This Way is not constant, it cannot be captured by any fixed doctrines, because the world is ever changing:

The Way of Heaven, is it not like the stretching of a bow?
 What is high it presses down;
 What is low it lifts up.
 It takes from what has excess;
 It augments what is deficient. (77)

Of course, there is a paradox in using language to talk about the Way, which transcends all language. One technique the *Daodejing* uses to address this paradox is the *via negativa* ("negative way," also referred to as apophatic discourse or apophasis). Found in many forms of Western and Eastern philosophy, the *via negativa* gestures at something by using terms that suggest emptiness and absence, on the grounds that they are less misleading than positive descriptions.

Looked for but not seen, its name is "minute."
 Listened for but not heard, its name is "rarified."
 Grasped for but not gotten, its name is "subtle."
 These three cannot be perfectly explained, and so are confused and
 regarded as one.
 Its top is not clear or bright.
 Its bottom is not obscure or dark.
 Trailing off without end, it cannot be named. (14)

In Chinese as well as English, negative terms often have a connotation that is, well, "negative." But the *Daodejing* points out that emptiness and absence are often valuable or even essential:

Thirty spokes are joined in the hub of a wheel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the
 carriage.
 By adding and removing clay we form a vessel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the
 vessel.
 By carving out doors and windows we make a room.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the
 room. (11)

This passage is a metaphor for how the Way can seem to be nothing yet be essential for everything else to exist. To say that the Way is "empty" or "nothing" is not to suggest that it is absolute nonexistence. The Way is nothing in the sense that it is no particular thing and lacks any particular qualities. According to Wang Bi, it is precisely because the Way is formless and nameless that it "is capable of serving as the progenitor and master of things in all their different categories": "If it were warm, it could not be cold; if it were the note *gong*, it could not be the note *shang*; if it had a form, it would necessarily possess the means of being distinguished from other things."^{vii}

If the Way were "something," it would have some particular content that we should always intentionally adhere to in an inflexible manner. But because

the Way is "nothing," it can only be followed through nonaction, action that is non-self-conscious and infinitely flexible. The Way is itself a paradigm of nonaction. Consequently, descriptions of the Way are often implicit descriptions of the sage:

How expansive is the great Way!
 Flowing to the left and to the right.
 The myriad creatures rely upon it for life, and it turns none of them
 away.
 When its work is done it claims no merit.
 It clothes and nourishes the myriad creatures, but does not lord it over
 them.
 Because it is always without desires, one could consider it insignificant.
 Because the myriad creatures all turn to it and yet it does not lord it over
 them, one could consider it great.
 Because it never considers itself great, it is able to perfect its greatness. (34)

5. Mysticism

Because it emphasizes a kind of knowledge that is nonlinguistic, the *Daodejing* may be classified as a mystical work. Broadly speaking, mysticism is the view that there is

1. a kind of knowledge
2. that cannot be adequately expressed in words
3. but is important to human life in general.^{viii}

Every major religious tradition has mystical strands of thought, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. In addition, many great philosophers have mystical elements in their thought, from Plato, the most seminal thinker in the Western tradition, to Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the two most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Consequently, it would actually be quite surprising if there were *not* a significant mystical element in early Chinese thought. It might seem that, because they deny that the knowledge they seek can be expressed in words, all forms of mysticism are the same. However, traditions assign different roles to mystical experience, depending upon their overall philosophical framework. For example, in the classic Christian tradition (a) mystical knowledge is a sort of spiritual *vision* or *feeling* that (b) reveals a realm of existence (God) that transcends the ordinary world. This experience is intrinsically valuable and it may indirectly support being a good person, because it strengthens the faith, hope, and love needed for true virtue. However, Christian mystics generally insist that (c) the content of the experience neither adds

to nor detracts from ordinary ethics. Part of what is so fascinating about Daoist mysticism (and the Daoist-influenced Buddhism of Zen) is that it denies each of these claims. For Daoists, (a') mystical knowledge is embodied in certain practical activities that are (b') performed in the everyday world. Furthermore, Daoists insist that (c') the manifestation of mystical knowledge in practical action *is* the highest ethical activity.

Try to imagine watching someone who is having a mystical experience. If you have any preconceptions about this at all, you probably are envisioning something like a Christian nun kneeling in prayer or a Buddhist monk sitting cross-legged in the full lotus position. There is some truth to both images. "Quiet sitting" (*zazen*, as it is known in contemporary Zen) is a significant part of East Asian mysticism, and there is some evidence that it was practiced even in the era of the *Daodejing*. However, representative images of a Chinese mystic would include someone collecting kindling and gathering water, engaging in the calisthenics of *tàijíquán* 太極拳 (*t'ai-chi ch'üan*), or engaged in some other practical activity. In short, Daoism is a mysticism not through *vision* but through *action*, not of *transcendence* but of *immanence*.

The *Daodejing* hints at techniques for cultivating oneself; unsurprisingly, these are different from those of the Confucians. Kongzi's key cultivation metaphor is to reshape oneself, "as if cut, as if polished; / as if carved, as if ground" (*Analects* 1.15), similar to the way that a piece of rough jade is made into a beautiful statue. Mengzi's key metaphor is cultivating one's heart as one would cultivate a sprout into a mature plant (*Mengzi* 2A6). This difference is reflected in their respective views on *qi*.⁴ Kongzi warns that

when he is young, and his blood and *qi* are still unstable, [the gentleman] guards against the temptation of female beauty; when he reaches his prime, and his blood and *qi* have become unyielding, he guards against being contentious; when he reaches old age, and his blood and *qi* have begun to decline, he guards against being acquisitive. (*Analects* 16.7)

The *qi* is here presented as something that must be carefully controlled and resisted. Mengzi would acknowledge that this sort of resistance to the *qi* (which he would describe as "maintaining your resolution") is sometimes necessary. However, he would insist that continually doing this would "starve" our *qi*. Instead, Mengzi recommends cultivating the ethical inclinations in

4. *Qi*, as explained in Chapter 6, is the fluid that circulates through humans and their environment, embodying our feelings and motivations.

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when he is young, and his blood and *qi* are still unstable, [the gentleman] guards against the temptation of female beauty; when he reaches his prime, and his blood and *qi* have become unyielding, he guards against being contentious; when he reaches old age, and his blood and *qi* have begun to decline, he guards against being acquisitive. (*Analects* 16.7)

The *qi* is here presented as something that must be carefully controlled and resisted. Mengzi would acknowledge that this sort of resistance to the *qi* (which he would describe as "maintaining your resolution") is sometimes necessary. However, he would insist that continually doing this would "starve" our *qi*. Instead, Mengzi recommends cultivating the ethical inclinations in

4. *Qi*, as explained in Chapter 6, is the fluid that circulates through humans and their environment, embodying our feelings and motivations.

our heart. We can thereby develop a “floodlike *qi*” that will provide us with the strength of character to persevere through any challenge (*Mengzi* 2A2).

The *Daodejing* flips both Kongzi’s image of the laboriously reworked jade and Mengzi’s metaphor of the carefully tended plant, encouraging us to be “Honest, like unhewn wood” (15). Furthermore, the *Daodejing* warns that “When the heart is used to guide the *qi*, this is called ‘forcing things’” (55*). The *Daodejing* encourages us to empty our hearts so that we can accumulate the *qi* within ourselves and be guided by it:

Embracing your soul and holding on to the One, can you keep them
from departing?

Concentrating your *qi* and attaining the utmost suppleness, can you
be a child?

Cleaning and purifying your enigmatic mirror, can you erase every
flaw? (10)

“Concentrating your *qi*” refers to a process of refining the *qi* through guided breathing exercises (a common technique of *zazen* familiar to contemporary Buddhists). The result is a state of equanimity in which one can experience the Way. One’s heart then becomes an “enigmatic mirror” that reflects the world without perturbation. Achieving this state is not a goal in itself, though. The ultimate goal is to model oneself on the Way, “holding on to the One,” while engaging in nonaction in one’s everyday activities:

To produce without possessing;
To act with no expectation of reward;
To lead without lording over;
Such is Enigmatic Virtue! (10)

If one can achieve this state, one’s Virtue will manifest itself, subtly but powerfully, in a wide variety of contexts, whether one is king or commoner.

III. Historical Significance

Ideas from the *Daodejing* have been applied in a wide variety of contexts. When Buddhists came to China in the first century CE, they saw Daoist works as anticipating many of their own philosophical concepts, such as *śūnyatā*, “emptiness.” Some Chinese Daoists even suggested that, when Laozi left China for the Western wilderness, he continued on into India, where he became known as “the Buddha.”⁸ It is a deep and vexing question to what

extent Daoism and Buddhism are really similar in their original formulations. However, it is undeniable that the practice-oriented mysticism and the veneration of naturalness characteristic of Daoism influenced the direction that Chinese Buddhism took, particularly in the case of Chan Buddhism (better known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen). In fact, the metaphor of the mind as mirror from *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, a seminal text of Zen Buddhism, is drawn ultimately from image of the “enigmatic mirror” of *Daodejing* 10.

Another style of interpretation is to read the *Daodejing* as a work of ingenious and subtle strategy. Han Feizi, whom we shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 11, saw the *Daodejing* in these terms:

The Way lies in not being seen, its use lies in not being known. Remain empty, still, and without concern, so that you may secretly observe the defects of others. See others but do not allow yourself to be seen; hear others but do not allow yourself to be heard; know others but do not allow yourself to be known. . . . Cover your tracks, conceal your starting points, and your subordinates will not be able to see where you are coming from. Get rid of wisdom, dispense with ability, and your subordinates will not be able to guess your intentions. (*Han Feizi* 5; *Readings*, p. 315)

Although such a reading is far from the understanding of the text I have presented in this chapter, there is some support for it:

Why was this Way so honored in ancient times?
Did they not say that through it,
“One could get what one seeks and escape punishment for one’s
crimes”? (62)

In a different way, the Japanese martial arts of judō and aikidō also show the influence of strategic ideas gleaned from the *Daodejing*. As the founder of judō, Jigorō Kanō explains,

let us say a man is standing before me whose strength is ten, and that my own strength is but seven. If he pushes me as hard as he can, I am sure to be pushed back or knocked down, even if I resist with all my might. This is opposing strength with strength. But if instead of opposing him I give way to the extent he has pushed, withdrawing my body and maintaining my balance, my opponent will lose his balance. Weakened by his awkward position, he will be unable to use all

his strength. It will have fallen to three. Because I retain my balance, my strength remains at seven. Now I am stronger than my opponent and can defeat him by using only half my strength, keeping the other half available for some other purpose. Even if you are stronger than your opponent, it is better to give way. By doing so you conserve energy while exhausting your opponent.*

This is a practical application of the advice of the *Daodejing*:

In all the world, nothing is more supple or weak than water;
 Yet nothing can surpass it for attacking what is stiff and strong.
 And so nothing can take its place.
 That the weak overcomes the strong and the supple overcomes the
 hard,
 These are things everyone in the world knows but none can practice. (78)

If you watch an Olympic judō match, you will see what Kanō means. The competitors seem to do nothing at first because a judō master can easily exploit any direct lunge by an opponent, pulling the opponent off balance into a decisive takedown. So the judōka wait until they spot a miniscule movement or opening, then take advantage of their opponent's own momentum, typically with explosive consequences.

Judō is a grappling martial art, but the emphasis is on striking with the hands and feet in the Chinese martial art of kung fu; however, here too Daoist ideas have application. In the film *Enter the Dragon*, which established Bruce Lee as an international star, we find the following exchange between Lee's character and his Master:

Master: "What is the highest technique you hope to achieve?"

Lee: "To have no technique."

Master: "Very good. What are your thoughts when facing an opponent?"

Lee: "There is no opponent."

Master: "And why is that?"

Lee: "Because the word 'I' does not exist. . . . A good martial artist does not become tense, but ready; not thinking, yet not dreaming; ready for whatever may come. When the opponent expands, I contract. When he contracts, I expand. And when there is an opportunity, I do not hit. It hits all by itself."

To the uninitiated, this might sound like pseudo-profound gibberish. But Lee was both an outstanding martial artist and a student of philosophy who knew

that the most advanced style was nonaction: perfect responsiveness to one's situation not limited by any narrow technique.

A larger-scale application of Daoist principles is found in guerilla warfare. History has shown again and again that a smaller, less-well-equipped force can defeat a huge, professional army.⁵ Because a guerilla army is small, it is easy to support and easy to hide. "This is called a formation without form" (69). In contrast, the large size of a conventional army means that it always has many fixed vulnerable points (supply lines, barracks, etc.). "A weapon that is too strong will not prove victorious; / A tree that is too strong will break" (76). The guerilla army "wins" as long as it is not eliminated, and it will not be eliminated as long as a significant portion of the populace supports it, allowing it to successfully hide among them. "Sages blend into the world and accord with the people's hearts" (49). It is perhaps not a coincidence that one of the most successful practitioners of guerilla warfare was Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

Although aspects of it have been appropriated in many ways, we must not lose sight of the social concern at the heart of the *Daodejing*. It presents a touching image of the ideal society:

Reduce the size of the state;
 Lessen the population.
 Make sure that even though there are labor-saving tools, they are never used.
 Make sure that the people look upon death as a weighty matter and never move to distant places.
 Even if they were to have ships and carts, they would have no use for them.
 Even if they were to have armor and weapons, they would have no reason to deploy them.
 Make sure that the people return to the use of the knotted cord.
 Make their food savory,
 Their clothes fine,
 Their houses comfortable,
 Their lives happy.
 Then even though neighboring states are within sight of each other,
 Even if they can hear the sounds of each other's dogs and chickens,
 Their people will grow old and die without ever having visited one another. (80)

5. The failure of the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan and of the United States in Vietnam are two recent illustrations.

Only the heartless could fail to be moved by this vision of a simple, happy life in a small community. But does this vision give us practical guidance today? It already seemed quaint in the agrarian society of ancient China. When Wang Bi presented the philosophy of the *Daodejing* to a high government official of his era, the official simply laughed at him.^{xi} Then again, "If they did not laugh at it, it would not really be the Way" (41). It seems even more quixotic to hope for a return to simple agrarian life in the Information Age of the twenty-first century. However, Zhuangzi, a philosopher who has also been labeled a "Daoist," offered a Way not tied to any particular government, economic, or technological system. To him we turn in the next chapter.

Review Questions

1. What are three surprising facts about Daoism, Laozi, and the *Daodejing*?
 2. What is the story of Kongzi's meeting with Laozi?
 3. According to tradition, what did Laozi do when he saw the decline of the Zhou dynasty?
 4. According to the *Daodejing*, how should society change?
 5. What is nonaction and how does it differ from not acting?
 6. Explain the distinction between "knowing how" and "knowing that." Give an example of each.
 7. Why are names potentially problematic?
 8. What is mysticism in general? How does Daoist mysticism differ from classical Christian mysticism?
 9. What distinctive innovation did the *Daodejing* make involving the concept of the Way?
 10. Explain the *via negativa*.
 11. How is the metaphor of "unhewn wood" an implicit criticism of the Confucianism of Kongzi and Mengzi?
 12. Discuss how strategic concepts drawn from the *Daodejing* have been applied in other areas of human experience.
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