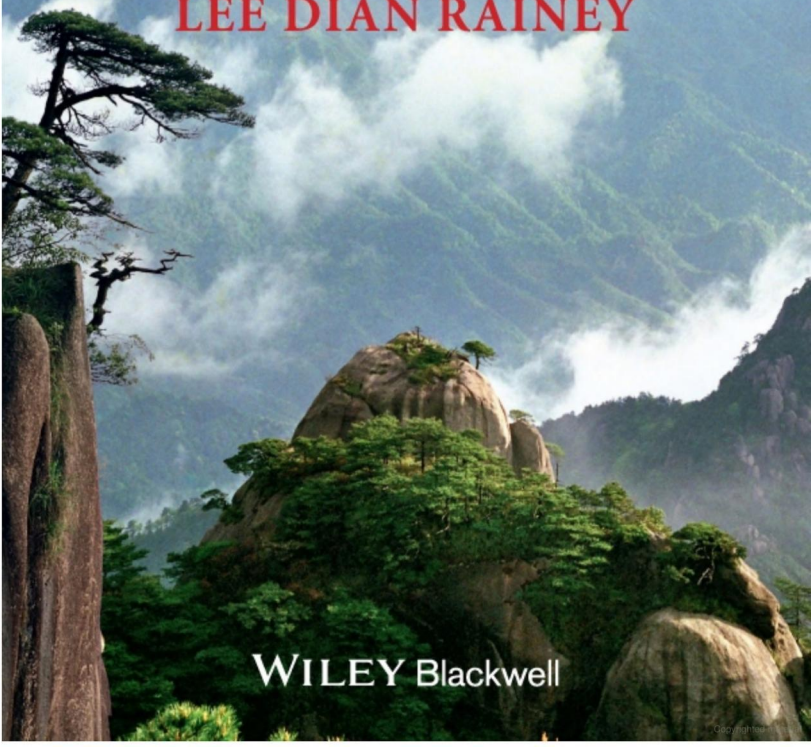
Decoding Dao

Reading the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi

LEE DIAN RAINEY



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上士聞道動而行之.中士聞道若存若亡.

When the best scholars hear about *dao*, they practice it energetically; when middling scholars hear about *dao*, *dao* seems to be there one moment and gone the next.

Dao De Jing, chapter 41

Book Notes

Before we begin, we need to know that Chinese words and names are transliterated into English using the Pinyin system. The Pinyin system is often not very helpful for English-speaking people, so I will give pronunciation aids in brackets when the word or name first appears. For example, *Dao De Jing*, ("Dao" rhymes with "how"; "De" is pronounced as "duh" or as "dey"; "jing" is the "jing" of "jingle"). *Zhuangzi*, (Zhuang is pronounced as "Juh-wahng," "zi" is the end of the word "ads" without the "a," and means "teacher" or "master"). There is also a Glossary of Pronunciation at the end.

Scholars in the area should know that this is meant to be an introductory text, and many of the complex issues involved have had to be conflated or relegated to endnotes. Readers should know that there is a great deal more information and discussion available and they can find this in the Further Reading section.

Chronology

16th to 11th century BCE	Shang dynasty
11th century to 256 BCE	Zhou dynasty
11th century to 771 BCE	Western Zhou dynasty
771–256 BCE	Eastern Zhou dynasty
722–481 BCE	Spring and Autumn era
403–256 BCE	Warring States era
221–207 BCE	Qin dynasty
206 BCE–220 CE	Han dynasty
206 BCE–25 CE	Western or Former Han
25–220 CE	Eastern or Later Han
220–280	Three Kingdoms period
220–589	Period of Disunity
581–618	Sui dynasty
618–906	Tang dynasty
907–960	Five Dynasties
960–1125	Northern Song dynasty
1127–1279	Southern Song dynasty
1279–1368	Yuan (Mongol) dynasty
1368–1644	Ming dynasty
1644–1912	Qing (Manchu) dynasty
1911	Republic of China established
1949	People's Republic of China

Section One

THE CONTEXT

Chapter One

Chapter Contents

When you begin to read the *Dao De Jing*, you will find passages like: "Great completion seems not complete, but its usefulness cannot be emptied; great fullness seems empty, but its usefulness cannot be used up" (45).[1] Turning to the *Zhuangzi*, you will find things like: "To use a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse … everything in the world is one horse."[2] And you may, as some of my students have admitted, throw the books across the room. Scholarly books are written by scholars mostly for other scholars and, without a good background in the texts, are very difficult for the beginner. What this book is meant to do is to give you something to hold on to while the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* are busy digging the ground out from beneath you. It is important to read these texts because they are written to help us survive bad times and to understand what is going on in the world. But these are difficult texts and beginning readers should not go into them unarmed or alone.

The Social and Political Background

If we are to understand the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, we need to know what was going on when they were composed. The period of Chinese history that gave birth to these texts was a time of fierce arguments, social and political upheaval, and war.

The China of the time was not the China we know now. It was centered around the Yellow River basin, stretching south to just beyond the Yangzi River. It had been ruled by single families for over 1000 years. The Xia (She-aw) dynasty (circa 2183–1500 BCE) was replaced by the Shang dynasty (circa 1500–1100 BCE), which was replaced by the Zhou (Joe) dynasty in 1027 BCE. One dynasty might fall, but another took its place. These dynasties developed a complex government structure. Government ministers administered transportation, the army, roads and bridges, and law. Government bureaucrats supervised everything from irrigation projects to preparations for war to a music conservatory.

Chinese society was very sophisticated. There was a writing system that was already very old and there were books, histories, and poetry. Metal work was carried out on an industrial level. Money was used along with barter in the

marketplaces. International trade flourished. A population of about 50 million people lived on farms and in big towns and traveled on roads and canals. They were already using the decimal system.

At the pinnacle of this society were the noble families living on great estates. They venerated their ancestors and intermarried with other noble families. They were the warrior elite, ready to fight for their king when called on. Their pastimes included hunting and partying. The elite saw themselves as distinct because of their noble family lineages.

Ancestors and ancestral veneration was the central religious duty of these nobles, but they, like the commoners around them, believed in the powers of the gods and spirits and made offerings to them as well. They employed shamans to predict the future, to ward off all evil spirits, and to speak to the gods on their behalf.

By 771 BCE, royal dominance began to fade as the Zhou dynasty kings began to lose power and influence. Having lost their capital city in the northwest of China, the Zhou kings retreated to central China and their lords took notice. If a king could not protect his own capital, clearly that king was weak. So, during the next century, local lords began to pay less attention – and taxes – to the Zhou king and began gradually to set up their own little states. The Zhou king became unimportant in the political contests that followed, where one local lord would attack another and, defeating that small state, enlarge his own. This process continued: when it began there were about 120 small states, by about 500 BCE, there were 40; by about 250 BCE, there were seven. This era, for obvious reasons, is called the Warring States period, and lasted to 221 BCE.

The rulers of these small states lived in a precarious political position. Externally, they were likely to be attacked by neighboring states. Rulers tried to be cunning in making alliances with one state to attack another only to find they had been betrayed and both states were attacking them. Each of these rulers saw himself as the one who would defeat all the others and unify China under his rule. Warfare was continuous.

Rulers of these small states also faced major threats at home. After all, none of them were legitimate rulers, even though they called themselves “lord” or “duke” or “king.” Their status was based on being the largest and strongest landowner in the area and thus able to call on the most soldiers, the commoners who worked on the estate. But inside his state, there were other noble families who saw no reason why the ruler's family should rule when their claim to rulership was just as strong. Noble families constantly struggled over who should rule that particular state.

Inside his family, the ruler also faced threats. He wanted his sons to be strong so that he could pass on his rule to them, but if they became too strong, the ruler would begin to suspect that they wanted to rebel against him. Many rulers ended up exiling or killing their sons. Other family members, uncles, cousins, the wife's family, all might be plotting to assassinate the ruler and take over themselves, so everyone had to be watched and was under suspicion.

This complex situation meant that executions and assassinations were common: the ruler executed family members and people from other noble

families, suspecting them of treason; family members and other noble families, either plotting to kill the ruler or knowing they were suspected of plotting, would try and assassinate him.

It is no surprise that the culture of this time talked a lot about power, aggressiveness, strength, and honor. Books such as the *Art of War* were popular because they spoke directly to this kind of dog-eat-dog situation. Rulers were advised to use spies and deceit. Treachery increased.

Given the dangers at the courts of these small rulers, you would think that rulers would be careful in how much money they spent and how they spent their time. They were not. Rulers and their courtiers lived extravagant lives, dressed in the finest fashion. They banqueted and had their own orchestras and dancers for entertainment. Ordinary people in their state might be starving, but those at court either did not see or did not care. The *Dao De Jing*, writing about this situation, says,

> Those at court are corrupt:
>
> While the fields are full of weeds,
>
> And the granaries are empty;
>
> Still they are dressed in fine clothes,
>
> Equipped with swords at their sides,
>
> Stuffed with food and drink,
>
> And with far too much money.
>
> This is called being the leading robbers,
>
> And has nothing at all to do with *dao*.[3]

As we will see, the *Dao De Jing* is a severe critic of the political and social corruption of the time.

Gradually, the older noble families were killed off or lost money and power. As time went on, a new merchant class tried to replace them. This merchant class was based in a growing money economy, where loyalty and family ties were being replaced by money.

You might expect that with constant warfare, the economy would not be doing well. But a couple of factors came into play that made the economy richer. The use of iron tools and new technology in farming meant that more land could be farmed and the crop yields were bigger. Market towns expanded into cities as trade increased. Many people were making a lot of money. The situation for ordinary people was not always so rosy. Taxes were high, men could be conscripted into an army, and warfare brought destruction to homes and farms. But even ordinary people saw changes as more and more they were paid for their work either as farmers or as soldiers and the old feudal ties died away.

Government officials changed too. Once they had been the family members of

the ruler or members of noble families related to the ruler. This got them a job in government automatically. With the breakdown of the Zhou kings' rule, opportunities increased. Each small court copied the governmental organization of the Zhou court and needed trained bureaucrats to be able to run it. While the bureaucrats were still members of the nobility, they were no longer tied by blood to a ruler and would work for any ruler who would employ them. These bureaucrats needed education and training and would study with scholars like Confucius. Rulers invited famous scholar-bureaucrats to come to their court and to debate with each other – not that the ruler had any intention of following their good advice – this was just a way to show off. Some rulers set up academies where scholar-bureaucrats came to live, to study, to teach, and to debate with one another. The most famous of these was the Jixia (gee-she-ah) Academy, set up in the state of Qi (chee). The rulers there were thought of as the nastiest of the ruling families and they wanted to redeem their reputation, so they set up a very comfortable academy. Eventually, most of the big names in Warring States scholarship made their way there as either students or teachers.

Once their education was done, scholar-bureaucrats would travel to one of the small courts, audition for a job, and, with luck, be hired. A few of these scholar-bureaucrats could not find a job, and so they began to teach students and began to write books about government. Some of their students would carry on their teachings and pass them along to a new generation of students. Both teachers and students were upper-class men. It was only the upper class that had access to education, to reading and writing, and to the books of the time. It is these people who make up the traditions we will look at below and who wrote the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Scholar-bureaucrats got an education and may have gotten a job in a small state's court. That did not necessarily mean they were safe. In those courts, as we have seen, there were plots, executions, and assassinations. Even if the bureaucrat did not become involved in a plot to kill a ruler, he might still lose his life for being close to one of the plotters. In Warring States China, these small courts were very dangerous places, and the phrase “knife in the back” was not just a figure of speech.

These scholar-bureaucrats all agreed on one thing: the Chinese civilization that had existed for thousands of years was about to crash. The stability and predictability that China had known in the past was long gone. What faced them was continuous bloody warfare and treachery. Rulers and many of their advisors were looking for ways to increase their power and wealth; they were not looking at how to save China. So the question for the scholar-bureaucrats was, “what can be done to fix this?” While they came up with radically different answers to this question, they all agreed on the problem.

Confucianism

Probably the first of these scholar-bureaucrats to train students was Confucius (551–479 BCE). While he taught them the gentlemanly pursuits of his time, he also

taught them the ancient books of poetry and history. He saw the early Zhou dynasty time as a time of peace, unity, and prosperity, so the obvious thing was to return to the ways of that time. The stability of the early Zhou dynasty served as a model for what China should look like. Many writers, including the authors of the Daoist texts, will look back to the past as a golden time.

His idealized picture of the early Zhou included an emphasis on the practice of filial piety, respect for, and obedience to, one's parents. Children should serve their parents, provide for a funeral, and venerate their parents' spirits after death. Confucius believed that the practice of filial piety was central to developing later human relationships, and it was the first, and most natural, moral attitude.

Confucius said that once we understand and practice filial piety, we learn to do our duty, first at home, then in the world. We learn to put ourselves and our desires second and deal with the responsibilities we have first. Other virtues must also be developed. We must be honest and tell the truth. We must be sincere and do what we say we will do. We need moral courage to give us the strength to act in a virtuous manner. None of this happens overnight, but a virtuous attitude can be developed over time by cultivating the virtues within us.

Through this self-cultivation, we will finally arrive at the highest Confucian virtue, humanity (also translated as “benevolence”). Humanity means to act with all the moral virtues while putting ourselves in the other person's place. We must behave well, but always take into account the person we are dealing with and the situation. “Do not do to others,” said Confucius, “what you do not want them to do to you.”[4]

All of this has to do with developing the inner person, but for Confucius what was important was the way we act out in the world. For this, we need to know and understand ritual. Ritual may be religious ritual – a funeral, for example; ritual may be etiquette, serving the guest first. But Confucius had an insight about ritual: it is the foundation of a civilized society. We do rituals all the time: we say hello, we hold the door open for someone else, and we say “sorry” when we bump into someone. Ritual is the way we interact with others in the world and through it we show each other respect.

Ritual can be empty: we do things because we know we should, not because we mean it. Confucius recognized this and insisted that an inner moral attitude was required to go along with the ritual before you could say you were acting morally. If you could do all of this, you had become what Confucius called “a gentleman.” A gentleman is the model of proper behavior, combining knowledge of the right ritual with an inner moral attitude. We can become gentlemen by becoming educated. We study history, for example, to see the good and bad of the past. A gentleman had two roles in the world. The first was to become a government minister, one of the scholar-bureaucrats, and to work advising a ruler. With a Confucian gentleman as an advisor, a ruler would be swayed toward good behavior. The gentleman in government also provided an excellent model for his peers and for the common people. The gentleman's second role was as a teacher. If, as was often the case, rulers were not willing to listen to the gentleman's good advice, he should resign and go to teach others how to become gentlemen.

Daoists will argue that all of these nice Confucian virtues are artificial and imposed on us. The *Dao De Jing* says,

> So, after *dao* is lost, there is virtue,
>
> After virtue is lost, there is humanity,
>
> After humanity is lost, there is rightness,
>
> After rightness is lost, there is ritual.
>
> And ritual is the thinning out of duty and reliability that is the beginning of chaos. (38)

Confucius came up with all these virtues only when things began to fall apart. They are not the real virtues of *dao*.

Confucius had a political agenda as well. He believed that the foundation of any change for the better was "setting words right." He meant two things by this. First, we should call things what they are. Using jargon and misdirection is not right: "enhanced interrogation" is torture and that is what it must be called. We need to use the proper word or words, not some misdirection. The second thing he meant by "setting words right" is that there are expectations of behavior around some words. Parents are supposed to care for their children; if they do not, they do not deserve to be called "mother" and "father." When society and government speak clearly, we can all understand what is going on; when people in positions of responsibility live up to their titles, society benefits.

Central to Confucius' political views is the astonishing assertion that government exists for the benefit of the people. He saw society and government not as a democracy, but as a system where the ruler and his ministers cared for the common people just as a father cares for his son. Only the educated elite can direct government properly and care for the ordinary and uneducated. People would trust a government made up of Confucian gentlemen who were not following their own self-interest but were trying to be good and moral people.

Moral self-cultivation in the individual has social and political consequences. We become educated people, moral people, and active in government. This is what will fix the problems of the time. Practicing humanity and ritual, acting out in the world will change everything and change things dramatically. We can reform ourselves and our nations. The Confucian *dao* (rhymes with "how"), way, is a civilized, orderly, moral society with a government that cares for its people. The word "*dao*" is not exclusive to Daoists. Almost every thinker used the term, but the word meant different things for different people.

Confucius taught a number of students and they, in turn, taught others. This developed into a school of thought that continued long after Confucius' death. The first great interpreter of Confucius was Mencius (371–289 BCE). Like Confucius, Mencius argued that moral behavior begins with a person and then is acted out in the family, society, and government. Mencius stretched Confucius' ideas by arguing that moral behavior is innate to us. We are born with the seeds, the potential, for moral behavior embedded in our human nature. If we develop this potential through education and self-cultivation, we can become the gentlemen

that Confucius described. Human beings are the only ones who can reflect Heaven, and Heaven is a moral force in the universe (for a description of views of Heaven, see below).

Daoists argue that the Confucian enterprise imposes artificial values on us. Becoming a Confucian gentleman means we must remake ourselves into unnatural forms. It is the second great interpreter of Confucius, Xunzi (circa 310–210 BCE, Shun-ds), who makes the violent and artificial process of Confucian morality clear.

Xunzi defended Confucius, but disagreed with Mencius. Human nature, Xunzi said, was evil and selfish. Left to our own devices, we would live barbaric lives trying to snatch things from everyone else. We need a form of education that straightens us out and Xunzi really means this. A person who learns an artificially imposed morality is like a warped piece of wood that has to be steamed, put in a press, and forced to bend its shape before it can be straight,

> So it is that a warped piece of wood must first be pressed in a frame and then steamed in order to soften it. This allows its shape to be bent before it can become straight. A dull piece of metal must first be whetted on a grindstone before it can be made sharp.[5]

We need to be forcibly remade in order to become good. Daoists argue that underneath the nice Confucian agenda is coercion and violence: we must be forced to be re-formed in artificial ways. As well, anyone not agreeing to this is automatically labeled as a bad person and outside of social norms.

While the two great interpreters of Confucius disagreed on some points, they both agreed that what Confucius had to say would fix the problems of the time. They both were engaged in debate with people with radically different views. We will look at the problems associated with grouping people together in "schools" later in the chapter, but there was something like a Confucian school, or rather more than one Confucian school.

The authors of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* are having none of anything Confucians say. They point to the crushing amount of individual repression one would have to go through to pour oneself into the Confucian mold. Social oppression on a massive scale is needed as well for any Confucian system to work. We would have to control ourselves, control others, and play out our social roles in a totally artificial way. This is internal and external oppression of the worst kind. If there was a Daoist motto, it would be "Scratch a Confucian, find a fascist." As well, as we shall see, Daoists disagree with Confucians profoundly: Confucians argue that civilization can be fixed; Daoists argue that civilization is the problem.

Mozi and Mohism (Moe-ds) and (Moe-ism)

Mozi (circa 480 BCE) was not interested in the "frills" Confucius talked about. He

wanted us to look at the bottom line and deal with the necessities of life. Food, shelter, and clothing should be provided for everyone. Any activity that does not provide these things is useless. Mozi developed a system of thought based on usefulness and profit. If something is profitable, it is useful and it is good; conversely, if anything is useless, it is not profitable, and it is bad. All the things that help toward the essentials of life are good and useful; those that do not are useless and must be discarded. Everything can be measured and everything can be quantified in terms of money.

Mozi had a list of useless things: war, funerals, music, and extravagance of any kind. All of these things waste time and money and ought to be completely abolished. If we do that and go back to the basics, everyone will benefit, society will be better, and we can fix the problems of Warring States China.

As well, Mozi argued that it is in our self-interest to love others. This is not an emotional, romantic, or spiritual love. This is the love of neighbor in purely self-interested terms. If we love and help our neighbor, our neighbor will love and help us back. This will get rid of the war and aggressiveness of the times.

Mozi also believed that all the conflict around him, whether military or social, could be ended if only we all learned to obey our superiors and do what they say. And if we do all of these things, Heaven, the gods, and the spirits will bless us. For Mozi, there are clear standards of behavior and of truth. All we need to do is follow them.

Mozi's followers became the largest school in the Warring States period, and they were strictly organized, obeying their superior. While the school had little success in influencing the politics of the time and died out by about 200 BCE, they did do one important thing. Mohists developed rules of argument and proof. They discussed what made for a valid argument, what was illogical and why, and what proofs one could offer to defend an argument. This influenced almost every writer throughout the Warring States period – even the Daoists. Mozi and his followers believed that we could be persuaded by argument and they presented arguments at length, often at laborious length.

Daoists were not buying Mozi's arguments either. Zhuangzi will make fun of them by showing that being useless is better than being useful.[6] Useful things are used up or killed. To live out our natural lifespan, one of the aims of our texts, it is better to be useless. As well, Zhuangzi will argue that what we consider “useful” is just a matter of our point of view and not based on any solid truth. Nevertheless, Daoists were influenced by the rules of argument and logic that the Mohists set out.

Some have argued that the structure of the *Dao De Jing* is a rejection of Mohist rules of logic (see Chapter Two). Both the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* argue that the standards of truth are not as clear as Mohist logic makes them out to be. We get into trouble thinking, like the Mohists, that we have thought our way to the truth. Zhuangzi twists the Mohist rules of logic to parody them and is able to use logical rules to make entirely illogical arguments.

Yang Zhu and Shen Dao (Ya-ahng, Jew)

There are two other figures who may have had an influence on the authors of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. The first, Yang Zhu (circa 370–319 BCE), we know about mostly from the nasty criticisms from Confucians who said that Yang Zhu would not sacrifice a hair on his body to save the world. Actually, what Yang Zhu seems to have argued was that we should value our lives over the fame and influence of important government offices. We should keep what we have, live out our natural lifespans, and not get involved in all the intrigue and treachery of the politics of the time. If we all took care of ourselves, Yang Zhu argued, the world would be better off. Certainly, there are reflections of this kind of thought in the *Dao De Jing*, and the "Miscellaneous Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi* (see Chapter Two) contain Yang Zhu's thought.[7]

The second influence is from Shen Dao (circa 395–315 BCE), also called Shenzi, Master Shen.[8] He argued that *dao* is amoral, and there is nothing in the universe that leads us to moral behavior. Shen Dao rejects the idea of a Heaven that rewards the good and punishes the bad in this world. Language, he also argued, is incapable of conveying real meaning and so should be abandoned as well.

It may be that Shen Dao reflected what others had already seen, that society was so corrupt and artificial that it could not be fixed. Some of these people withdrew from society to become hermits, giving up their social status to live a simpler life. We will see the influence of thinkers such as Shen Dao in the *Dao De Jing* especially.

Language and Logicians

Mozi may not have converted everyone in Warring States China to his views, but he did convert most people to seeing the need for arguments and proofs. Tied to this was the growing understanding throughout the period that language and the words we use have to be clear because so many disputes centered on them. If one person argues that a government bureaucrat must do his duty, another might counter by asking if that duty includes blind obedience. If your superior tells you to kill someone, is it your duty to do that? What does the word "duty" mean? How can we define "duty" so that when we speak to one another, we can agree on what it means, what it encompasses, and what it does not.

Language and the meaning of words are not normally that much of an issue in everyday life: if someone asks you to "hold the elevator," you know that they really mean to hold the elevator door open for them. You are probably not going to get into a debate with them by saying that you are simply not strong enough to "hold the elevator."

It is in issues of morality and discussions of society that the definition of words

often becomes an issue. We debate whether the word “murder” applies to killing someone in a war, legal executions, abortion, or killing someone while defending your property. Often these debates depend on what one person defines as murder and what another does not.

In Chinese, the word “*ming*” (名, rhymes with “cling”) means both “word” and “name.” The issue for people in Warring States China was how to know what word, what name, to properly apply to a thing or situation. This is just the same as the debate as to whether or not capital punishment is murder. Is the word “murder” applicable to capital punishment? How can we define the word “murder” properly and define it so that we can all agree on it? Most texts from this period ended up having to discuss language and how it works.

The Mohists led the way in these discussions. They talked about “discriminations,” that is, how to distinguish one thing from another, how to define something. If we can establish a proper definition or discrimination then we can distinguish one thing from another and we can establish what is, what is right and proper from what is not, what is false and improper. We will know what is right and wrong. But what makes one discrimination or definition better than another? After all, your definition of murder is just as good as mine. The Mohists said that things can be defined by what is inherent to them, the way things are. There are real differences among things in the world and by seeing that reality, we can discriminate/define the thing and give it a name. They developed rules to sort this out. These rules were generally based on similarity and difference. So we name something “wood” whether it is wood in a living tree, wood in a desk, wood in a pencil. The “wood” is similar in each case and so we can name it “wood.” By extension, a “tree” can be a living tree, but the word can also be properly used as “family tree.”

Definitions or discriminations give us a way to encapsulate a thing or event and a way to close off any other view of the thing or event. While definitions aim to bring clarity, they also end debate over what a thing is. If a thing is called a gourd, then it is a plant from the Cucurbitaceae family. After it grows, it can be dried and hollowed out to make musical instruments, small bowls, or used simply for decoration. That is what a gourd is. The definition of gourd has not allowed for any other approach. It would not be, as Zhuangzi will suggest, a boat one can take on a pleasure cruise.

There are a couple of things to note from this. First, these discussions demand both logic and coherence. Second, this enterprise is based in reality, the real similarities and differences among things. And that is the problem – this sort of thinking is fine for classifying things or setting up the genus and species of animals, but does not necessarily solve the problems with debates about morality or our difficulty in defining the word “murder.”

However, the Mohists were able to establish some ground rules. They not only discussed how to properly name things by distinguishing them, they also investigated the nature of logic and what made for logical and illogical statements. One of their rules that will have an impact on the Daoist texts is the Mohist position that language must say something. Those who say language is incapable of conveying meaning, say the Mohists, are contradicting themselves. You have made the statement in language, so saying language cannot convey meaning

while saying it in language is a contradictory statement. If it were possible to mime the idea that language cannot convey meaning, you would, according to Mohist rules, be all right.[9]

The Logician Gongsun Long[10] (gung, s-wun, lung) looked more closely at the relationship between words/names and the thing itself. He noted that concrete things were named according to custom, but when it comes to abstract things it becomes more complicated. His most famous argument is that "a white horse is not a horse." This argument sounds absurd at first, but when we look at what is going on in terms of concrete and abstract, it makes more sense. Both the word "white" and the word "horse" are abstract: you cannot show me "white," you can only show me white things; "horse" is an abstract word referring to genus and species. A "white horse" is a real, concrete, animal and not the abstract "horse." So who cares? Well, many do not, and did not in the Warring States era. Gongsun Long began to deal with the ways in which words/names differ and how we can know them and apply them. Zhuangzi will argue against Gongsun Long, particularly taking on his "white horse is not a horse" argument.

One of the other Logicians we know about by name is Hui Shi (h-way, sure).[11] He is portrayed in the Zhuangzi as one of Zhuangzi's friends and someone who argued with Zhuangzi frequently. Hui Shi's positions are set out in a series of paradoxes: the sun at noon is declining; the grass is as tall as the mountains. They seem to revolve around point of view issues. The sun reaches its height at noon and can only decline from there; grass is tall to a bug and mountains tiny if seen from outer space. Things are different depending on one's point of view. So, if no discrimination, no definition, will stand as true for all people or all situations, then we cannot divide things at all.[12]

Trends During the Warring States Era

All of these thinkers were focused on the problem of restoring the civilization that was in danger of being lost. As they wrote, taught, and debated, new ideas and new terms arose. People had to sharpen their arguments and provide proofs instead of just statements. Most thinkers had to take all the discussions of language into account as well. Over time, one issue came to the forefront. How can we ensure that language, naming, defining words, and so on is based on some unchanging and logical system of definition-making? What is the way to do that? Can it be done at all? Is there a definition for murder that both satisfy all of us and that is based on some unchanging and self-evident principle? Once we know how to base the way we make definitions, then we can clearly define even slippery terms such as right and wrong.

A second broad issue is related to the first. How do we establish a certain and unshakeable foundation among all the conflicting solutions proposed by Confucians, Mohists, and others? It became more and more clear to the people of the Warring States era that what an individual does and thinks is profoundly influenced by culture, how can we be sure that we have arrived at the right way and are not simply echoing what our culture has taught us? How can we

distinguish right and wrong? Where, among the many conflicting views, conflicting *dao*s, does one find *dao*? As Angus Graham says,

> If we ourselves would prefer to think of it [*dao*] as absolute Reality that is because our philosophy in general has been a search for being, reality, truth, while for the Chinese the question was always 'Where is the Way [*dao*]?' Chinese thinkers want to know how to live, how to organize community and, at the very end of the pre-Han period, how to relate community to cosmos … the purpose of seeking the one behind the many is to find, not something more than what appears to the senses, but a constant Way [*dao*] behind the changing and conflicting ways of life and government claimed by the competing schools as the Way [*dao*] of the sage kings.[13]

The Daoist texts we are looking at will talk about how we should live in order to be successful and how we should live together as a society. Their answers to "where is *dao*?" are startling.

Cultural Heroes and Concepts

People in Warring States China believed that, even before the first dynasties of China, there had been a succession of sage-kings, great rulers who brought the arts of civilization. Sage-kings like Yao (rhymes with "how") and Shun taught people everything from irrigation to filial piety. One sage-king found in the Daoist tradition is Huang Di (黃帝, h-wahng, dee), the Yellow Emperor, who is said to have ruled in 2704 BCE. Tradition says that he showed people how to make houses and boats, and how to write. His wife is said to have taught people how to make silk. Later stories say he became immortal, rising, with his household, to the heavens. While we now know these stories are myths, many people of the time believed them.

There were many gods and spirits too that most people believed in. The central deity was *Tian* (天, tee-yen), Heaven. Be careful, this is not heaven as a place where one goes after death; this Heaven was seen as the chief god, a moral judge of human actions that rewarded the good and punished the bad in this life, not the next. If you behaved badly, especially if you were a ruler, Heaven would send drought, pestilence or misfortune. As time went on, the notion of *Tian*, Heaven, began to include an understanding of Heaven as the workings of nature, an impersonal force. We begin to see the use of the phrase *tian-di* (tee-yen, dee), heaven-earth, to mean the world or the universe. It was seen as impersonal, not a creator of the world, and is often translated as "nature."[14]

Another term found in many Warring States texts is *qi* (氣, chee). Originally, it was used to talk about emotions or character or as the atmosphere of a place. Later, more complex theories of *qi* were created. In these theories, *qi* makes up all things and can be heavy or light, making a solid, a liquid, or a gas. *Qi* in human beings is heavy, like bones, liquid like blood, gaseous like breath, and is also the animating energy that makes us alive. *Qi* transforms from one form to another constantly in all the things and events of the universe.

One term that also causes a lot of difficulty in translation is *de* (德, duh or dey). It has been translated as “ethical nature,” “spiritual power,” “power,” “potency,” and “virtue.” The usual translations are “virtue” and “power.” Like *qi*, *de* is one of those concepts that is specific to the Chinese language and does not translate to a single word in English. It can be used to mean virtue in the sense of moral virtue, an ethical person. This is often the Confucian sense of the word, where a person with *de* controls others because he is morally superior and his charisma attracts others to him.

De may also be used to talk about virtue as power. This is based on older ideas of *de*, where the *de* of a person or a thing was the special thing it could do. So the *de*, virtue, of the plant foxglove is that it produces digitalis for heart problems. Foxglove does this naturally, and the power to do this is inherent to the plant. This led to the idea of virtue as power, potency, the energy, the charisma, of a special kind of person. This *de* attracts and influences others. It is this sense of *de* that is most often, although not exclusively, used in the Daoist texts.[15]

Chinese texts talk a lot about *xin* (心, shin), the mind/heart. For some thinkers, it was a rational faculty; for others it contained both thought and emotions. The character is a stylized picture of a heart and as a radical, the basis of character, you can find *xin* in characters expressing thought and rationality and also emotions. Translating *xin* as “mind/heart” is an attempt to convey both parts of this term.

Another phrase that can be misleading is “the ten thousand things” (*wan wu* 萬物, wan woo) also translated as “the myriad things.” While the early Chinese knew that there were more than ten thousand things in the world, it became an accepted phrase, just as we say “I called you dozens of times” when we do not actually mean multiples of 12. The biggest problem with the phrase “ten thousand things” is the word “things.” While the phrase is meant to include all the objects of the universe, it also includes all events of the universe from supernovas to the white blood cell your body just made. So it is not just things that are referred to, but processes and actions as well.

Summary

While the social and political world of Warring States China was a mess, scholar-bureaucrats scrambled to find ways out of the crisis. Confucius and his followers developed a complex approach that included filial piety, moral behavior, humaneness, and proper ritual from the individual. In the government, the ruler was to care for the people as a father for his children. Rulers and administrators would be models of good behavior, and this would trickle down to the population. Things would return to the standards of the past if only we all behaved better.

Mozi, on the other hand, argued that too much of our money and attention were on the frills of life. We must be concerned with the essentials, the useful, and get rid of everything else. Standards of acting, knowing, and being are perfectly clear when we look at what is useful and what is not. Mozi's followers were challenged over the idea that standards are perfectly clear and so had to try

to find ways to establish how we can know that things are right and wrong. While ultimately unsuccessful in establishing an absolute standard for right and wrong, the Mohists opened up the discussion to others and the authors of our Daoist texts jumped in. As well, later Logicians like Gongsun Long and Hui Shi, developed rules of logic and argument and this too affected our authors. The debate became about how to find an absolute standard of truth from which we can know right and wrong and build a system to deal with moral and political issues. Authors of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* will argue there is no such standard and, if it does exist, we could not possibly know it.

There are people from the culture mentioned in our texts, such as the sage-kings and in particular the Yellow Emperor. Our texts also use certain terms, such as *qi* and *de*, and use them as the culture at large did, but develop them to suit their own approaches.

All of this is background to the production of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. How these texts were actually put together is the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

1 The translations here are all mine unless noted. For quotations from the *Dao De Jing*, I will put the standard chapter number in brackets after the quotation. For other texts, I will cite a comparable translation.

2 I will cite quotations from the *Zhuangzi* by giving the page number of a comparable translation. Here, Victor Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist [Daoist] Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi]* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 16.

3 *Dao De Jing*, chapter 53.

4 *Analects*, 4.15.

5 *Xunzi*, “Human Nature Is Evil”; compare John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Study and Translation of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 3 vols. 3, 151.

6 In one passage, Zhuangzi says that Mozi does not want us to sing when we are happy or cry when we are sad, but surely that runs counter to “the hearts of the world,” what is natural to human beings. *Zhuangzi*, Section Thirty-Three, “The World.” Compare Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi]* (Columbia University Press, 1964), 365–6.

7 Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 120, lists the sources for Yang Zhu's thought.

8 Shen Dao's thought is referred to in the *Zhuangzi* and *Han Feizi*. See Paul Thompson, *The Shen Tzu [Zi] Fragments*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1979). In 2007, the Shanghai Museum published a set of bamboo slips that included sayings from Shen Dao.

9 Mohists were convinced that if we do not know something, we can investigate the thing and come to learn about it through observation and thought. For a

Chapter Two

Chapter Contents

The *Dao De Jing*

Today, when we read a book, a magazine article, or a blog, we assume that most of the time, it is written by a single person, and it is this person's voice we are hearing. When it comes to writing books, some people also think that authors begin on page one and work their way through. That is not the case, even for modern books: authors begin with a broad idea of the text, organize it into chapters, organize these chapters in a coherent order, and then begin to write.

In ancient times, texts were not produced like this at all. There was often more than one author of a text and texts were fluid. This means there were different parts and different versions circulating. People read and recited them, added to them, deleted sections, changed around the order of the sections, and copied the text by hand. Gradually, these pieces were brought together as a whole, and it is these final, multiauthored and multilayered texts that were passed on as a single text to us. This is the case with the Daoist texts.

Why Does the *Dao De Jing*/*Tao Te Ching*/*Laozi*/*Lao Tzu* Have So Many Names?

The version we usually read today is a translation of the Wang Bi version (see later in the chapter). This version has 81 chapters and is divided into two sections. The first section consists of chapters 1–37 and the first word of the first chapter is "*dao*." The second section consists of chapters 38–81 and the first word of that section is "*de*." The text then came to be called the *Dao De Jing* (道德經, *jing*, a classic).

Dao De Jing is the Pinyin version of the Chinese. Pinyin is the transliteration system begun by the Chinese government in the 1950s. *Tao Te Ching*,

pronounced in the same way as *Dao De Jing*, is in the older Wade–Giles system of transliteration begun in the 1920s. In this system, a “t” is not pronounced, as you might expect as a “t.” It is pronounced as a “d.” If you want a “t” sound, you write “t” with an apostrophe, “t'.” This means that “tofu” in the Wade–Giles system is “dofu” in the Pinyin system and pronounced with an initial “d” in both cases.

About 300 years after the text was “written,” the name Laozi (老子, “lao,” rhymes with “how,” ds) was associated with the text. This remains the case today, and people who study the text will refer to it as the *Laozi* (*Lao Tzu*) or as the *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*) interchangeably. Lao Tzu is the Wade–Giles version of Laozi.

Dao De Jing, The Author

If we knew something about the author, would that give us some insight into the text? Normally that would be the case, but there is a problem here: Laozi is not, strictly speaking, a person's name. “Lao” (老) means “old” or “venerable,” the “zi” (子) means “teacher” or “master.” Laozi then means “the venerable teacher” or “the old master.” This is not a name in the sense of a surname or given name.[1]

About 300 years after the text was put together, a court historian in the Han dynasty, Sima Qian (circa 145 or 135–86 BC; suh-ma, chee-en), had the difficult task of identifying this Laozi and giving him a biography.

Sima Qian identifies the “Old Master” as a Lao Dan or, more properly, Li Er (lee, are). This man, who later came to be called the “Old Master,” was born in the state of Chu (jew) in the southeast of the China of the time, prefecture Ku (coo), Li district, in the small town of Quren (chew-ren). His name was Li Er and he took the literary name of Dan. He then came to be called “Lao Dan,” Venerable Dan. He worked as either a librarian or historian in the archives of the royal state of Zhou.

There are problems with Sima Qian's identification of Laozi as Li Er, later Lao Dan. There was a noble family of the time that claimed descent from Laozi. This family conveniently placed Laozi's birthplace in the same place as the Han dynasty ruling family's home in order to gain favor with the royal family.[2]

So where did the noble family get this Laozi–Li Er–Lao Dan connection? This comes from a story about Lao Dan meeting with Confucius. According to the story, Confucius visited Lao Dan, a librarian for the Zhou dynasty, and asked quite humbly for instruction. Lao Dan did not think much of Confucius' talents, but did teach him something. Versions of this story are found in both Confucian and Daoist texts. If this story is true, it would mean that Laozi/Lao Dan was a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and give us an approximate date for his life.

The name Lao Dan also shows up in the other early Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*. In it, Lao Dan is shown as a severe critic of Confucius. Lao Dan is also described as going on a journey to the state of Qin (chin) in the northwest. Based on this flimsy evidence, it was said that Lao Dan-Laozi was the Grand Astrologer Dan of

Zhou who visited Qin in 374 BCE and predicted the Qin victory and empire. This surely would have pleased the Qin emperor. The fact that this Lao Dan-Laozi would have had to have been anywhere from 160 to 200 years old to have both met Confucius and gone to Qin in 374 BCE gives us reason to think these stories are nonsense.[3] But at this time, all sorts of claims were being made that some people had found the secret to living a very long time or indeed to becoming immortal. The immense age of Lao Dan-Laozi would have been a selling point for this story – especially to an emperor seeking immortality – not a drawback.

Sima Qian's biography continues with the story of Lao Dan-Laozi leaving China because he was fed up with the ignorance around him. When he came to the border, the officer in charge of the border pass demanded that Laozi write down his wisdom before leaving the country. With no good grace, Laozi wrote a two-part book of his teachings. Then he left China, heading west.

This part of the story helps with the claim that Lao Dan-Laozi lived to a very long age or was immortal. When asked for proof that Lao-Dan Laozi was an immortal, his supporters could simply say that he had left the country and so could not be produced for proof. The story also helps explain why the text was "written." If an "author" writes that language is inadequate, he is bound to be asked, "Well, in that case, why did you write a book?" The response his followers can now give is that Laozi was forced to write it and had no choice.

Sima Qian finishes by acknowledging that Laozi might also be identified with two other people: Lao Laizi (lie-ds) or Taishi Dan (tie-sure). In the end, Sima Qian throws up his hands and writes that Laozi was an enigmatic sage so it is hard to find out anything reliable.[4] It is now generally accepted that Laozi is not the single author of the *Dao De Jing*, and that the name "Laozi" is not a reference to any known single historical person.

Dao De Jing, the Text

If we cannot find out anything reliable about the author, does the text itself help us by giving us clues about the author or authors and the times they wrote in?

There are three versions of the *Dao De Jing*. The first is the version that has been known and used for centuries and is associated with a man named Wang Bi (226–249 CE, w-ahng, bee). Wang Bi was a brilliant thinker who lived at the time of another collapse of centralized rule at the end of the Han dynasty, about 500 years after the *Dao De Jing* was produced. He was a minor bureaucrat and died at the age of 24. Despite his youth, he wrote a respected commentary, that is, a book about a book, on the *Dao De Jing*. His aim, which sounds odd to us today, was to reconcile Confucian and Daoist thought. In his commentary, he argues that *dao* is the ultimate principle behind all things and that *dao* is nothingness, non-being (see Chapter Three).[5] The version of the *Dao De Jing* he used is the one used throughout history, and the one most often translated today. It has what we have come to consider the standard 81 chapters, divided into two sections. If you have read a translation of the *Dao De Jing*, it is likely that it is the Wang Bi version

that you read.[6]

The second version is the Mawangdui (MWD ma, w-ahng, d-way) version dated to 168 BCE. It was found in 1973 buried in a noble's tomb dated to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Actually, two texts were found, now called Mawangdui A and B. Both seem to have been copied from the same original, although at different times: Mawangdui A was copied sometime after the death of the first Qin emperor in 195 BCE; the B version copied sometime before 180 BCE. The Mawangdui versions differ from the standard Wang Bi version by having more grammatical particles and by switching the two sections of the text so that the "*de*" section is before the "*dao*" section. Both versions follow the same breaks but without formal chapter divisions.[7]

The third version is the Guodian (g-woe, dee-an) version. Guodian is a village just north of the ancient capital of the state of Chu in modern Hubei (who-bay) province. Texts written on bamboo strips and on silk were found by archeologists excavating a tomb. Three bundles of bamboo strips contain 31 of the present 81 chapters of the *Dao De Jing*. These bundles are now the oldest version of the *Dao De Jing* that we have because the tomb has been dated to 300 BCE.[8] Even though the Guodian version has fewer chapters than the present version, curiously it contains punctuation, something not found in the Mawangdui version. The other peculiarity of the Guodian version is that the anti-Confucian material in the *Dao De Jing* is missing. Scholars now debate what this means: given that the tomb was for a Confucian scholar and tutor, was the anti-Confucian material discarded, or was anti-Confucian material added to the *Dao De Jing* later?

So, if the oldest version is the Guodian version, must it be the proper one? Well, not necessarily. We have the *Dao De Jing* only once in that version; we have many copies of it in the Wang Bi version. The major differences among the versions are in the order of the chapters and what is included. The Wang Bi, Mawangdui, and Guodian versions are remarkably alike, and this makes scholars think that the written text was already in circulation in some form by 300 BCE, and that there were a number of versions of it then. All the versions we have now have been edited, and that process likely continued in the next century or centuries to give us the text we know today.

Other scholars use linguistic tools along with the archeological record. Much of the text may be from an oral tradition, using rhyme as a memory trigger as some other ancient texts do. The rhetorical patterns and rhyme pronunciation in the *Dao De Jing* place it at 400 BCE. The general thinking now is that the text, or parts of it, was probably produced by 400 BCE and reached its present form somewhere between 400 and 300 BCE.[9]

These archeological finds also tell us that the *Dao De Jing*, like other early texts, was built of small "building blocks" of pieces arranged in different ways. This is a long way from the single voice, single author works we are used to today. The *Dao De Jing* we have now is the result of a long process of collection and editing.[10]

This method of composition also tells us that there was more than one author for the *Dao De Jing*. Laozi, the Venerable Teacher, was Laozi, the Venerable

Teachers. Just who these teachers were is a much debated subject.

One view is that the text was a product of a community. This community was not involved in the debates of the Warring States period, but lived in the state of Chu and passed their wisdom down so that they became the "elders," the *lao*. This community was focused on self-cultivation through *qi* (see Chapter Ten).[11] The authors of the *Dao De Jing* were alienated idealists – that is, nobles, possibly dispossessed of power or wealth, who had become scholars. They were critical of the society and politics of their times and looked to self-cultivation for meaning. Their motives in composing the text were "celebratory not instructional, that is, to celebrate *dao* as experienced in the self cultivation of the individual and the way in which 'knowing' it transforms the world."[12] This argument holds that the text was produced by a circle or community of believers while others strongly disagree (see Chapter Ten).

Another view is that the authors of the *Dao De Jing* were scholar-bureaucrats, the kind of people described in Chapter One. These people put together various sayings and passages over time to reflect their views. Like all scholar-bureaucrats, their main interest was in running the state and advising a ruler. That is why there is so much discussion of ruling and politics in the text. In addition, they included advice to other scholar-bureaucrats on how to succeed, or indeed how to survive. Those attracted to this text, in whatever version they saw it, were also convinced that it was *dao*, not the gods or spirits, that runs everything. They also seem to have agreed that human beings, especially when acting through ego, caused most of the misfortunes of the time.

Debates about the authors of the *Dao De Jing* continue, but is there anything we can know for sure about them? They were almost certainly upper class, because they had the education to be able to write and the leisure time to do it. Many of them were, at least from time to time, involved in government. They were likely all male, given their education and social status. To what extent these people formed a community or school is still debated. Why does all of this matter? With a text as terse as the *Dao De Jing*, if we know when it was written and who wrote it, it would be easier to see who the authors were arguing against and who they were influenced by.

The *Dao De Jing*, the Style of the Text

The *Dao De Jing* is surely one of the strangest texts ever produced, whether in classical or modern times. It has no beginning and no conclusion; it has no plot and does not develop an argument. It refers to not even one person by name. It refers to no time and no place. There is nothing in the text that says anything about the historical period it exists in. There is only one brief reference to Chinese political hierarchy, but other than that there is no reference to China.[13] The *Dao De Jing* was one of the first Chinese texts to be translated into Sanskrit in the seventh century CE. Had we found the only version of the text in that Sanskrit translation, we might have assumed it was a classical Indian text.[14]