

## *The Way: Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu*

It would be far beyond the scope (and the ability of the author) of this book, which is concerned with the Chinese language and its script, to attempt an introduction to ancient Chinese philosophy and religion. Nevertheless a language engenders certain ways of thinking and is in turn engendered by them.

The *Book of Lao Tzu* or the *Tao Tê Ching, Book of the Way and its Virtue*, is in both language and thought the most Chinese of all books and, in relation to its brief length, must be one of the most influential books ever written. And, except insofar as its arguments may reply to various Chinese schools of philosophy contemporary with its writing, it is wholly free from historical or topical references (for instance, unlike any other Chinese philosophical book, it does not contain a single proper name); which helps to give it a remarkable universal and timeless quality.

Though by no means enough to illustrate its thought and its beauty, there are given in this chapter the first two short chapters of it in full; with further quotations both from it and from the dissimilar but complementary other great Taoist works of Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu.

老子 (123B – 110A) 'lǎozǐ', Lao Tzu himself, the man of the clan of Li, 李 (125) 'lǐ', is a shadowy figure traditionally supposed to have been born in 604 BC, half a century Confucius's senior; but whatever his date he survives in history rather as a spiritual tradition than as an historical person like Confucius.

The difficulty, and the lasting interest, of the book named after him (made by a man of genius, whether author or editor) lies in its exploitation of all the resources of the Chinese language for paradox and ambiguity, in order to *stimulate* thought rather than to *express* it. An additional and separate difficulty is that some parts of the text seem to be corrupt; while the whole has probably at sometime been rearranged, and here and there expanded, in order to make eighty-one chapters; that is  $(3^2)^2$ , in order to please later mystical numerologists.

Attempts have been made to restore the original text from such rearrangement and interpolations and so also to make it more coherent, but the game is a dangerous one. It is too easy unconsciously to impose one's own ideas by this means on a book of which the self-declared method is *not* to be explicit; as it is, too, by attempting to translate it into any other language. This is doubtless a reason why it is, next to the Bible, said to be the most translated book in the world!

But another reason is what the book still has to give; so that Dr Needham, in *Science and Civilisation in China* considers that it 'may be regarded as without exception the most profound and beautiful work in the Chinese language'.

For full translations, in which the reader will see considerable difference in interpretation (the reasons for which will soon become clear), Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of Laotse* is the most traditional, to the extent of even insisting on the sixth century origin of the book, whilst it also adds interest by attaching many passages from the *Chuang Tzu*; Arthur Waley's *The Way and its Power* includes a history of the text and background information on contending schools of thought, relating the work very much to an age and place; D.C. Lau's Penguin Classic *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* is perhaps the most straightforward and readily

available translation, also possessing very valuable notes; and J.J.L. Duyvendak's translation into French, *Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu* (Librairie D' Amerique et d' Orient, 1953) results from deep study, giving the complete Chinese text both in its traditional form and as emended and rearranged by this scholar; but in places perhaps too much for safety. There are other honest and respectful interpretations in various languages, though many more that are, alas, merely enthusiastic; but the only language in which the work can really be perceived is the original.

In the title of the book, which is a later addition and not original, 道德經 (125B – 379 – 94E) 'dào dé jīng', the *Tao Tê Ching*, or *Tao Tê King*, 德 (379) 'dé' is a word pronounced the same as 得 (19) 'to get, to attain', but meaning 'virtue' especially in its old Latin sense (related to 'vir', 'a man'): 'power attained' or 'power inherent' in man or magical object.

The two characters 德 and 得 are in fact another instance of a 'flower/flour' distinction; standing for what in origin was the same word. In 得 the part on the right was originally 見 (82) 'to see', with a hand underneath it: 'to see and get'. To this, 彳 for 行 (107A) 'to go' was later added; 見 was later transformed into 貝 for a cowrie-shell, wealth; and then into its present abbreviated form; while the hand became 寸 (278B) a thumb.

In 德 the part on the right was originally 直 (309) 'straight, true' ('shooting straight'), with 心 (80C) 'heart' underneath; to which 彳 was also later added.

Like 英 (188B) 'yīng', 'heroic', for *Eng*(land) and 美 (116L) 'měi', 'beautiful', for '(A)*me*(rica), 德 'dé' is used to transcribe *De*(utschland), Germany: 德國 (... 78B) 'déguó'.

As for whether to translate the title 'The Virtue of the Way' or 'The Way and Virtue (by it)', there is only a grammatical difference absent in the Chinese; and for 'understanding' no cause to choose a link where none exists. But the distinction between the mere mechanics of language and real meaning is not always simple; and there is no better book than the *Tao Tê Ching* for studying its nature. This is no accident but a main part of the author's intention.

老 子 道 德 經  
lǎo zǐ dào dé jīng  
123B 110A 125B 379 94E

From Lao Tzu, *The Way and its Virtue*

一 章  
yī zhāng  
36 316  
Chapter One

道 可 道 非 常 道  
dào kě dào fēi cháng dào  
125B 161A 125B 138 162A 125B

名 可 名 非 常 名  
míng kě míng fēi cháng míng  
140E 161A 140E 138 162A 140E

(379)

德

power, virtue