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Wisdom

Laozi and the Daodejing: the wisdom of water that does not fight

A short Chinese book of 81 chapters, the questions about its author and the idea of wu wei: acting without forcing the flow of things

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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The *Daodejing*, "The Book of the Way and of Virtue", is a Chinese text of about five thousand characters, usually divided into 81 short chapters. Tradition attributes it to **Laozi**, "the old master", who according to some accounts was an older contemporary of Confucius.

Who was Laozi?

The honest answer is: we do not know for certain. The Chinese historian Sima Qian, around 100 BCE, wrote a short biography of him, but he himself admitted that there were different accounts. Many scholars today think the text, in the form we know, took shape gradually, perhaps during the fourth and third centuries BCE. In 1993, in a tomb at Guodian in China, bamboo slips from about 300 BCE were found containing parts of the text. This shows that the book already existed in an early form.

Dao and wu wei

Dao means "way". In this book it is the source of everything, something that cannot be fully described in words. The first chapter says that the dao that can be named is not the eternal dao.

Wu wei is often translated "non-action", but the meaning is subtler: acting without forcing, without needless struggle, in harmony with the nature of the situation. A good ruler, according to the book, does not oppress the people with orders and punishments; he creates conditions in which things set themselves right.

> *"The highest good is like water. Water benefits all things and does not contend." (Daodejing, chapter 8)*

The image of water

Water is soft and humble: it goes to the lowest places. Yet over time it wears away stone. For Laozi this is a lesson about the strength of gentleness, patience and persistence. He also writes that one who knows others is clever, but one who knows himself is enlightened (chapter 33).

The Mawangdui manuscripts

The Guodian discovery was not the only one. In 1973, in the tombs of Mawangdui in Hunan province, archaeologists found two copies of the text written on silk, dating from around the second century BCE. They were about five centuries older than the complete copies known until then. One surprise was that in these copies the section on "virtue" (de) came before the section on "the way" (dao), in the reverse of the traditional order. Robert Henricks translated these texts into English in 1989 and the Guodian manuscripts in 2000.

The legend of the pass

According to the story Sima Qian included in his biography, Laozi worked as an archivist at the court of the Zhou dynasty. When he saw its decline, he set off towards the west. At the border pass, the guardian asked him to write down his teachings before leaving, and so the book of five thousand characters was born. Then Laozi departed and no one knows where he ended up. Sima Qian himself presented this as one of several different accounts, and modern scholars see it more as legend than as history.

Zhuangzi and the butcher

The second foundational text of the Daoist tradition is the book bearing the name of Zhuangzi, a thinker of the fourth century BCE. One of its best-known stories tells of a butcher who explains to his ruler why his knife has stayed sharp for nineteen years: he does not hack through bones by force, but lets the knife pass through the natural spaces between the joints. The story is a beautiful illustration of wu wei: true skill comes not from force but from a deep knowledge of the nature of what you work with.

The soft and the hard

In chapter 76, the *Daodejing* observes that people are born soft and supple, while in death they become stiff; plants too are tender when alive and dry when dead. So, according to the text, the hard and rigid are companions of death, while the soft and supple are companions of life. In chapter 17, the text says that the best rulers are those whose existence the people barely know, and when the work is done, the people say they did it themselves. These ideas have inspired many thinkers on leadership.

Translations and rewritings

The *Daodejing* is among the most translated books in the world. But not every popular version is a translation in the strict sense. Some well-known authors do not read classical Chinese and have rewritten the text by relying on other people's translations, adding their own interpretations. These versions may be beautiful to read, but they should not be used to quote what the text says exactly. For study, it is better to compare two or three translations by scholars who know the original language.

Practical lessons

1. **Not every problem is solved with more force.** Sometimes waiting and observing is a wise action.
2. **Simplicity.** The book praises a life with few desires and without excessive

ornament.

3. **The first step.** One of the best-known sayings comes from chapter 64: a journey of a thousand li begins beneath our feet.
4. **Humility.** One who boasts of his achievements, according to the book, does not endure.

A small warning: many "Laozi quotes" circulate on the internet that are not found in the text. If you want to read it, choose a well-known translation and compare, because ancient Chinese allows different interpretations.

Sources

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