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Lao Tzu

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Chapter One

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第一章 五千言

CHAPTER 1

Five Thousand Characters

A Book Smaller Than Its Shadow

There are books whose importance is obvious from their size. The great histories, the encyclopedias, the systematic works of philosophy announce their ambition on the shelf. The Lao Tzu (Laozi) is not one of them. Printed in Chinese, it fills a slim pamphlet. Its eighty-one chapters average about sixty characters each; some are barely two lines long. A monk in a Daoist monastery can chant the whole of it in well under an hour.

And yet the shadow this small book casts across human history is enormous. In China it stands with the Analects of Confucius and the Book of Changes as one of the three or four texts that every educated person was expected to know. It was the founding scripture of the Daoist religion, one of the great religious traditions of humankind. It was memorized by emperors and cited in the civil service examinations. Its vocabulary shaped how Chinese thinkers received Buddhism from India, and so, indirectly, it helped to shape Zen. Beyond China it has been translated hundreds of times, into nearly every written language, and its sayings have passed into ordinary speech in places where few people could name its author. When an American says that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, he is quoting the sixty-fourth chapter of the Lao Tzu, whether he knows it or not.

This chapter asks a simple question that turns out to have a complicated answer: what kind of book is this, and why has it mattered so much?

The Shape of the Text

Let us start with the physical facts.

The text as it has been transmitted for most of the last two thousand years is divided into two parts. The first part, chapters 1 through 37, is traditionally called the Dao jing, the Classic of the Way, because its first chapter begins with the word dao. The second part, chapters 38 through 81, is called the De jing, the Classic of Virtue or Power, because its first chapter begins with the word de. Put the two together and you have the Daodejing, the Classic of the Way and Its Power. The older title, the one used in the earliest sources, is simply Lao Tzu, the name of its supposed author. Chinese books were often known by the name of the master to whom their teachings were attributed, just as we speak of reading Plato or Augustine.

The division into eighty-one chapters is traditional rather than original. Eighty-one is nine times nine, a number with cosmological significance in Chinese numerology, and the arrangement seems to have been fixed by the Han dynasty or shortly after. Some ancient editions divided the material differently. One manuscript recovered in our own time, held at Peking University, divides the text into seventy-seven chapters. The silk manuscripts from Mawangdui, which we will meet in Chapter 4, place the second part first: in them the book is a Dedaojing rather than a Daodejing, beginning with power and only then turning to the Way.

Within each chapter, the language is compressed, rhythmic, and often rhymed. Much of the Lao Tzu is verse, or something close to it. Lines tend to come in parallel pairs, each echoing and modifying the other. Particles that in ordinary prose would make the grammar explicit are often omitted. The result is a text that can be memorized easily and interpreted endlessly.

Here, for instance, is the whole of chapter 11, one of the most famous in the book:

Thirty spokes share one hub.

It is where there is nothing that the cart has its use.

Clay is shaped into a vessel.

It is where there is nothing that the vessel has its use.

Doors and windows are cut to make a room.

It is where there is nothing that the room has its use.

Therefore, what is there makes for benefit;

what is not there makes for use.

Three images, each in two lines; then a conclusion, also in two lines. There is no argument in the ordinary sense, no defining of terms, no consideration of objections. And yet anyone who has read it once will never look at a cup or a window quite the same way again. The wheel turns because the hub is hollow. The bowl holds soup because it is empty in the middle. The house shelters us because of the space inside the walls. The text asks us to notice what we always overlook: that absence is not merely the lack of something, but a condition of everything being useful at all.

This is the characteristic method of the Lao Tzu. It thinks in images, and the images are drawn from ordinary life: water, valleys, infants, mothers, uncarved wood, bellows, bows, carts, kitchen pots, small fish. It does not ask us to leave the everyday world for some higher realm. It asks us to look at the everyday world more carefully, until we see what has been hiding in plain sight.

A Book That Argues With Its Age

To call the Lao Tzu a book of images is not to say it has no argument. It has a very strong argument, and a very specific target.

The text took shape in the period Chinese historians call the Warring States, roughly 475 to 221 BCE, an era of almost constant conflict among rival kingdoms that would end only with the brutal unification of China under the First Emperor of Qin. Chapter 2 will describe this world in detail. For now it is enough to say that it was an age of ambition, innovation, and violence, in which rulers competed to make their states richer and their armies larger, and in which a new class of professional advisers traveled from court to court offering techniques for doing so.

Many of these advisers had a great deal to say about how to make people good, how to make governments efficient, how to make armies win. The followers of Confucius urged rulers to cultivate virtue and restore the rituals of the early Zhou kings. The followers of Mozi urged impartial care for all and the elimination of waste. The thinkers later called Legalists urged clear laws, strict punishments, and the concentration of power in the ruler's hands. Each school had its program. Each believed that the troubles of the age could be cured by doing something more, or doing it better.

The Lao Tzu stands against all of them, not by offering a rival program but by questioning the very idea that more doing is the cure. Its diagnosis is that the effort to fix things is often what breaks them. Consider chapter 57:

> The more prohibitions and taboos there are under heaven,
>
> the poorer the people become.
>
> The more sharp tools the people have,
>
> the more the state falls into confusion.
>
> The more cleverness and skill people have,
>
> the more strange things arise.
>
> The more laws and orders are made prominent,

the more thieves and robbers there will be.

This is not the complaint of a hermit who knows nothing about government. It is the observation of someone who has watched governments at work and noticed a pattern. Every new law creates a new category of offender. Every display of rare treasure creates a new temptation to theft. Every celebrated virtue creates a new occasion for hypocrisy. The machinery of control generates the disorders it was built to suppress.

Readers today, living in societies of immense administrative complexity, often find this observation uncomfortably familiar. It is one reason the Lao Tzu has never seemed merely ancient.

A Book That Speaks to the Heart

But if the Lao Tzu were only a critique of Warring States politics, it would interest historians and political theorists and very few others. What has made it beloved, rather than merely important, is that the same insight it applies to kingdoms it also applies to the individual human life.

The ruler who governs best, the text says, is the one who interferes least. In the same way, the person who lives best is the one who has stopped forcing. The striving, grasping, comparing self, always anxious to be seen and praised, always measuring itself against others, always reaching for more, is caught in exactly the same trap as the overbearing state. It creates its own unhappiness by the very effort it makes to escape unhappiness.

There is no calamity greater than not knowing what is enough.

There is no fault greater than the desire to acquire.

So the contentment of knowing what is enough

is a lasting contentment.

These lines from chapter 46 have been written on scrolls, carved into stones, and hung on the walls of homes and offices for centuries. They are not a philosophical proof. They are something more like a reminder, the kind of thing a wise grandparent might say, which we know to be true and continually forget.

The Lao Tzu is full of such reminders. It tells us that the person who knows others is clever, but the one who knows himself is enlightened. It tells us that those who stand on tiptoe cannot stand firm, and those who take long strides cannot keep walking. It tells us that what is bent will be made whole, what is hollow will be filled, what is worn out will be renewed. It tells us that the softest thing in the world overcomes the hardest. It tells us to plan for the difficult while it is still easy, and to do the great while it is still small.

Each of these sayings can be read as political advice, as cosmology, as a guide to self-cultivation, or simply as a word of comfort. The text does not force a choice. That openness is one secret of its endurance.

A Voice Without a Face

One of the strangest features of the Lao Tzu, for readers who come to it from other ancient classics, is how little it tells us about anyone. The Analects is full of named disciples, rulers, and places; we hear Confucius scolding, joking, grieving, and we come to know him as a man. The Zhuangzi is crowded with characters, real and invented. The Bible is a great web of stories about named people. The Lao Tzu names no one. It mentions no places, no dates, no rulers, no events. It quotes a few old sayings, and once or twice it refers to the ancients. Otherwise it speaks entirely in general terms, about the sage, the people, heaven and earth, the ten thousand things.

And yet it is not impersonal. Running through it is a voice that says I. I do not know its name. I have three treasures. I alone am different. My words are very easy to understand. This voice is never described; we do not know whether it is old or young, a man or a woman, an official

or a hermit. But it is unmistakably someone, speaking to us with a quiet intimacy that no other ancient Chinese text quite matches.

This combination of anonymity and intimacy is part of the book's power. Because the voice has no face, every reader can hear it as speaking directly to them. It does not belong to a particular time and place in a way that would keep us at a distance. It is like a voice heard in a dark room, close and clear, belonging to someone we cannot see. Generations of readers have felt that the book knew them. That feeling is possible partly because the book never insists on being known.

Many Readers, Many Books

Because the Lao Tzu is so brief and so open, every generation has found in it a somewhat different book.

To the Han dynasty statesmen who governed China in the second century BCE, it was a manual of light-handed rule, recommending low taxes, few wars, and patient non-interference. To the young philosopher Wang Bi in the third century CE, it was a profound treatise on the relation between being and nonbeing, the most important metaphysical work in the Chinese language. To the Celestial Masters, the first organized Daoist church, it was a revealed scripture dictated by a god, to be recited for protection and observed as a code of moral precepts. To the Tang emperors, who claimed Lao Tzu as their ancestor, it was a dynastic charter. To Buddhist monks, it was a native echo of the teaching of emptiness. To the European Jesuits who first encountered it in the seventeenth century, it seemed to contain hints of the Christian Trinity. To Leo Tolstoy, it was a gospel of nonviolence. To Martin Heidegger, it was a rare voice from outside the Western metaphysical tradition. To environmentalists of the late twentieth century, it was an ecological manifesto. To business consultants, it has become a handbook of leadership.

Some of these readings are more faithful than others. Part of the work of this book will be to sort them out, to say which interpretations rest on solid ground and which project modern concerns onto an ancient text. But part of the work will also be to understand why the Lao Tzu lends itself so readily to such different uses. The answer, I will argue, is that the text does not offer doctrines so much as it offers tensions. It sets the nameless against the named, the empty against the full, the soft against the hard, the still against the moving, and it asks us to hold these pairs together rather than choosing one side. Different communities have resolved these tensions in different ways. But the tensions themselves remain, unchanged, at the heart of the book, and that is why every new reader can find in it something both familiar and strange.

Why Reread

A book like the Lao Tzu is not read once. It is reread, and rereading changes it.

Most of us first encounter the text as young people, and we tend to hear its rebellious note: the mockery of convention, the suspicion of authority, the delight in paradox. Later, if we have careers and families and responsibilities, we may hear its practical wisdom: the advice to act before problems grow large, to lead without dominating, to know when to stop. Later still, after losses and disappointments, we may hear its consolation: the reminder that the soft endures, that what falls returns to its root, that stillness is not death but the condition of renewal.

> Attain the utmost emptiness.
>
> Hold fast to stillness.
>
> The ten thousand things rise together,
>
> and I watch them return.

> Things flourish, each one,
>
> and each returns to its root.
>
> Returning to the root is called stillness.
>
> Stillness is called returning to one's destiny.

There is a version of this passage, from chapter 16, for every season of life. To the young it may sound like advice about meditation. To someone who has sat at a deathbed it may sound like a description of what they witnessed. To someone who has watched a garden through many years it may simply sound accurate.

This book is written in the hope that it will be reread as well, not because every page will reward the effort, but because the subject deserves a return. The chapters ahead will tell a long history, full of scholars and emperors and priests. But at the center of that history is a small book that keeps asking the same quiet questions. What can be named, and what cannot? What happens when we stop forcing? Where does real strength come from? What does it mean to return to the root?

We will not answer those questions once and for all. The Lao Tzu itself does not. But we can learn to hear them more clearly. And that, as the old man at the pass seems to have understood, may be the beginning of wisdom.

The Method of This Book

A word, finally, about how the chapters ahead approach their subject.

First, they take history seriously. The Lao Tzu did not fall from the sky. It emerged in a particular time and place, among particular debates, and its words carried meanings that its first readers would have recognized. Understanding that context protects us from the temptation to make the book say whatever we want.

Second, they take the manuscripts seriously. The discovery of ancient copies of the Lao Tzu in Chinese tombs during the last half century has transformed scholarship on the text. These finds tell us that the book circulated in several forms, that it changed over time, and that some of its most famous lines once read differently. They also tell us, reassuringly, that its core vision has been remarkably stable.

Third, they take the commentators seriously. For most of its history, the Lao Tzu was never read alone. It was read alongside commentaries that explained, expanded, and sometimes transformed its meaning. To understand what the book has meant to the people who loved it, we must read it as they did, with Wang Bi or Heshang Gong at our elbow.

Fourth, they take religion seriously. Modern Western readers often treat the Lao Tzu as philosophy and ignore its role as sacred scripture. But for most of the people who have read and recited it over two thousand years, it was holy. Any honest account must reckon with that.

Fifth and finally, they take the reader seriously. You did not pick up this book only to learn facts about an ancient text. You picked it up, I suspect, because something in the Lao Tzu has spoken to you, or because you have heard that it might. That hope is not unscholarly. It is the very reason the book has survived. The old man wrote, the story says, because someone asked. We read, in the end, because we are still asking.

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