

Lao-tzu, A Study in Chinese Philosophy

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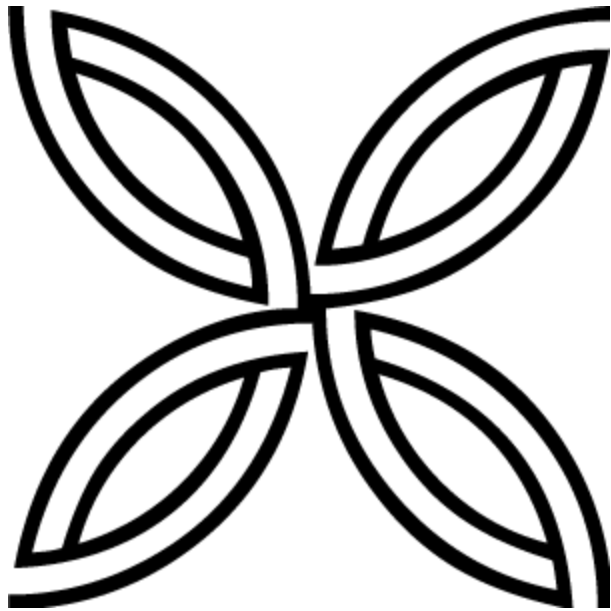
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTORY.

One of the most remarkable men in the history of China, as also in the history of philosophy, is Lao-tzŭ, the author of the *Tao-tê Ching* (道德經). This book deserves, and has obtained with those who know it, a high place among philosophical works, and the posthumous fortunes of its author have very rarely been surpassed. That his own followers—or at least those who professed to be and probably believed that they were his followers—should magnify his name was only what we would have expected. They have raised him from the rank of ordinary mortals, and represented him as an incarnation of deity, showing himself on this earth at sundry times and in various manners. His conception and birth, his personal appearance, and everything about him have been represented by them as supernatural; and the philosophic little treatise which he composed is regarded as a sacred book. Much of this has arisen from a spirit of rivalry with Buddhism. The Taoists did not wish to be behind the Buddhists in the amount of glory and mystery attaching to the reputed originator of their religion; and they accordingly tried to make the fortunes of Lao-tzŭ like those of Shâkyamuni, the Buddha of the Present. Both Confucianists and Buddhists, however, also regard the *Tao-tê Ching* as a book of deep mysteries, and admit the supernatural, or at least marvellous, character of its author, though, as will be seen, many censure him for teaching doctrines either in themselves mischievous or leading to evil results when fully developed. At several periods of Chinese history Lao-tzŭ has enjoyed the patronage of government, and almost supplanted Confucius. Indeed, during several of the dynasties which reigned within the first few centuries of our era, there seems to have been a

constant struggle for ascendancy between the followers of these two philosophic chiefs. Emperors have done honour to Lao-tzŭ in his temple, and the sovereigns of the great T'ang dynasty were proud to deem him their lineal ancestor. One emperor has even written an excellent commentary on his book; and one of the best editions of the *Tao-tê Ching* as regards textual excellence is that by a Confucian mandarin under the present dynasty. Buddhist monks also have edited the book with annotations, and many of them regard it and its author with a reverence second only to that with which the Taoists regard them. It is not only, however, his own countrymen who have given honour to this prophet. By Western writers also great and mysterious things have been attributed to him. Some have found in his book an enunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The illustrious Rémusat discovered in it the sacred name Jehovah, and many curious analogies with the best philosophic writings of ancient times, and more especially with those of Greece. Pauthier, who has read and written largely about Lao-tzŭ, finds in his teachings the triple Brahma of the ancient Hindoos, the Adibuddha of the Northern Buddhists, and an anticipated Christianity. The *Tao* (道) of which Lao-tzŭ speaks so much has been likened to God, to the Logos of Plato and the Neoplatonists, to “the nonentity of some German philosophers,” and to many other things. Pauthier says:—“Le dieu invoque et décrit par *Lao-tseu* est la *Grande Voie* du monde, la *Raison suprême universelle* (道) matériellement identique avec le mot qui sert à désigner Dieu dans les langues grecque (*θεός*) latine (Deus) et leurs dérivées modernes; mais les attributs qu’il lui donne ne sont point ceux qu’ont données à l’Être suprême toutes les doctrines spiritualistes de l’Orient, transmises à l’Occident par une voie juive et grecque; par les thérapeutes et les esséniens, dont Jésus, le fils de l’homme, fut le révélateur et le représentant à l’état philosophique.”

1

Our missionaries have used this word *Tao* to represent *λόγος* in their translation of the New Testament, and the first five verses of St. John's Gospel are nearly as much Taoist as Christian in the Chinese text.

Some writers on the other hand, such as Gutzlaff, have represented Lao-tzŭ as writing nonsense, and they seem to insinuate that he did not even know the meaning of what he was writing. Others, as Voltaire, have charged on him all the follies and superstitions practised by the Taoists, and have consequently decried him and his teachings. This is just about as wise and just a proceeding as to reproach the Apostle Paul on account of the sayings and doings of sects like Muckers, and Mormons, and Muggletonians. Many also regard Lao-tzŭ as a mere speculative recluse, shutting himself up from the turmoils and miseries of social life, and publishing theories in politics and morals of no practical tendency whatever. In these respects he is constantly contrasted with Confucius, who is looked upon as an eminently practical man, teaching to the people only things which they could easily understand, and ever refusing to wander into the regions of uncertainty and mystery.

There are, so far as I know, very few translations of the *Tao-tê Ching* in western languages. According to Sir J. F. Davis, a manuscript copy of a Latin translation is preserved in the Library of the Royal Society of England. Pauthier has translated part of the book into French, and has announced his determination, to complete the work. Julien, however, perhaps the best and soberest of Lao-tzŭ's expounders, has translated into French the entire book, along with many Chinese notes and fragments illustrating the life and teachings of its author. Hegel says there is at Vienna a translation of the *Tao-tê Ching*, or as he calls it *Tao-king*, which he himself had seen.

2

He does not, however, mention the name of the translator or the language of the translation, but I think we are justified in inferring that it is German. In English we have the recent work of the Rev. Mr. Chalmers, a missionary and scholar of no ordinary attainments. He has some excellent remarks in his Introduction, but the translation itself, being almost unaccompanied with note or comment, and being apparently made from a bad text, is rather disappointing. Ritter, Cousin, Hardwicke, Edkins, and many others have given short accounts of Taoism; but few of these have clearly separated Lao-tzŭ and his doctrines from the later Taoists and their doctrines. The “extravagant vagaries” of the latter may have arisen often from misinterpreted or misapplied statements of Lao-tzŭ, but they are not to be imputed to him.

3

We must ascribe to Lao-tzŭ only the things which are his—the merits and defects of his own direct teachings.

1 *Chine*, p. 114.

2 *Geschichte der Philosophie*, B. 1. p. 142.

3 Compare Rémusat, *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-tseu*, &c., p. 20.

CHAPTER II. THE LIFE OF LAO-TZŪ.

The life of Lao-tzŭ, like the book which he wrote, is enveloped in mystery; and one might almost be excused for doubting whether such a person ever actually existed. One author, indeed, has even gone the length of saying that Lao-tzŭ was made out of space or vacuity (hung 洪).

1

The most reliable account of him which has come down to us is that by Szŭ Ma-chien, or Sze-ma-thsien (司馬遷), in the Shi-chi (史記), and this is very brief and unsatisfactory. We have also occasional notices of him in other old books, but the stories told about him in the Records of Spirits and Fairies and works of a like nature are, as Julien observes, only a tissue of falsehoods which all sensible men reject.

Szŭ Ma-chien says

2

Lao-tzŭ was a native of the hamlet Ch`ü-jen (曲仁) of the parish Lai or Li (厲) in the district K`u (苦), a town of the state Chu (楚): his surname was Li (李), his name Erh (耳), his style Po-yang (伯陽) and his posthumous designation Tan (聃).

3

He was in office at the court of Chou 周 as Shou-tsang-shĭ-chĭ-shĭ (守藏室之史), which Julien translates "gardien des archives."

I have been unable to obtain from Chinese sources any reliable statement as to the date of Lao-tzŭ's birth; though Pauthier

4

asserts positively that he was born on the 14th day of the 9th moon, in the year B.C. 604. In this he is followed by

Julien, who, however, says candidly—“cette date (the 3rd year of king Ting 定 of the Chou dynasty, corresponding to B.C. 604) que nous inserons ici, est conforme a la tradition historique la mieux établie mais elle ne se trouve point dans la notice du Sze-ma-thsien dont nous donnons la traduction.”

5

There is nothing improbable in this date, as we know from other sources that Lao-tzŭ was a contemporary of Confucius, though very much his senior; and as Confucius was born about B.C. 550, Lao-tzŭ must apparently have been born about the beginning of the sixth century B.C. The latter sage indeed, is usually represented as having attained to a very great age, and as having been alive much more than fifty years before the birth of Confucius. Ch'ao, a well known author, quoted by Ma Tuan-lin, says that it was in the forty-second year of the reign of king P'ing (平王) that Lao-tzŭ gave his book to the keeper of the Pass.

6

This-would carry him up to the eighth century B.C., king P'ing having commenced to reign about the year B.C. 770. Others

7

mention two teachers of Tao (道) as having lived during the Chou dynasty, one Lao-tan (老聃) and another named Lao-lai-tzŭ (老萊子). It is by the name Lao-tan that Confucius usually refers to Lao-tzŭ, while later authors often use his surname Li or his name Êrh. It must be remembered also that the Lao-tan mentioned by Confucius is regarded by a few commentators as a different person from the author of the Tao-tê Ching .

Nearly all authorities seem to agree with Szŭ Ma-chien as to the place of Lao-tzŭ's birth in the feudal dependency Ch'u (楚). Under this word Biot has the following remarks —“Nom d'un ancien royaume de la Chine centrale, a l'époque du Tchun-thsieou. Le centre etait dans

l'arrondissement de Tchi-kiang; la limite nord etait entre le Kiang et le Hoang-ho; la limite sud etait au midi du Kiang, mais non bien determinée."

8

The district city K'u is also said to have belonged to the principality of Ch'ên , It stood near the present Kwei-tê-foo, the most easterly of the cities of Honan; and the present K'u-yang (苦陽) preserves the house of Lao-tzŭ and a temple dedicated to his memory.

9

Another account, however, represents him as having been born in the district city Po (毫) in the province of Honan.

10

The chief of Ch'u, like the chiefs of many other states, was at the time of Lao-tzŭ and Confucius only nominally a feudal dependent of the king. He was originally a Tzŭ (子) or Viscount, but the title Wang (王) or king was now usurped in the degenerate days of the Chou rulers who were unable to maintain a strong government.

Of the parents of Lao-tzŭ and of his early years I have not found any record in Chinese books; but Pauthier says that according to historic data his father was a poor peasant who had remained a bachelor up to his seventieth year, when he married a peasant woman of the unromantic age of forty years.

11

Whatever were his circumstances, however, I think we may conclude that Lao-tzŭ was in early life a diligent student of the past history and the institutions of the country, and his obtaining office at the court of Chou was probably a consequence of his learning and abilities.

As to the nature of this office I cannot agree with Pauthier and Julien in calling it that of historiographer, or keeper of the State Archives. The word tsang (藏) means a granary or storehouse, and in a note to a passage in the Li-chi, or

Record of Ceremonies, it is explained as the Imperial or National Museum.

12

The Shou-tsang-shǐ (守藏史) would accordingly be the officer in charge of the Museum, and we must remember that when Confucius went to the Capital of Chou to Lao-tzǔ, he saw in the palace the portraits of the early kings, along with many other relics of antiquity, which possessed him strongly with an idea of the magnificence of the first princes of the dynasty.

13

Dr. Legge also, I find, translates the expression by "Treasury-keeper."

14

The legend in the Records of Spirits and Fairies states that Lao-tzǔ was in the time of king Wên a Shou-tsang-shǐ and under king Wu a Chu-hsia-shi (柱下史),

15

this latter term meaning assistant historiographer; and it is not improbable that he may have actually held both these offices in succession under king Ting (定) or king Chien (簡), who reigned in the 6th century B.C.

During the time of Lao-tzǔ's residence at the court of Chou, he was visited by two young gentlemen who had come in a carriage and pair from the distant state of Lu (魯). Their names were Ching-shu (敬叔) and K'ung chiu (孔丘) or Confucius, and they had come to learn from the venerable sage the rites and manners of the olden times. The latter of the two, namely, Confucius, had already been a pupil of Lao-tzǔ, and still remembered his former master with affection and respect. According to Chwang-tzu,

16

however, it was not until he was fifty-one years old that Confucius went to see Lao-tzǔ. He himself when little more than a youth had set out on a converting tour, thinking to induce rulers and people throughout the kingdom to cease