

# Decoding Dao

Reading the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi

LEE DIAN RAINEY

WILEY Blackwell



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(*Tao Te Ching*) and  
the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang Tzu*)

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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





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# 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

The Social and Political Background—Confucianism—Mozi and Mohism (Moe-ds) and (Moe-ism)—Yang Zhu and Shen Dao (Ya-ahng, Jew)—Language and Logicians—Trends During the Warring States Era—Cultural Heroes and Concepts—Summary

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).<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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,