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LAOZI (LAO-TZU)

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In English, “Venerable Master” or “Old Master”. An honorific title for a mysterious Chinese philosopher and Daoist (Taoist) sage, supposed author of the *Daode Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*), venerated as the deity known as *Taishang laojun* (*Tai-shang Lao-Chün*, in English “Highest Venerable Lord”) or *Huanglao jun* (*Huang Lao-Chün*, in English “Yellow Venerable Lord”) by the adherents of Daoism (Taoism), lived apparently in the period circa 500-400 B.C during the *Zhou* (*Chou*) Dynasty.

Biographical Information. What little is known about his life comes from the account of his supposed life in the *Shiji* (*Shi Chi*, “Records of the Historian”), written by the Chinese historian *Sima Qian* (*Ssu-ma Ch'ien*) around 100 B.C. According to him, *Laozi*'s family name was *Li*, his supposed given name was *Er Dan* (*Erh Tan*, in English “long ears,” probably a reference to the traditional Chinese symbol of wisdom and longevity rather than a reference to the sage's real name). Apparently, he worked as an archivist at the *Zhou* (*Chou*) imperial court, before leaving in disillusionment and making his way westward in search of wisdom. Scholars are divided as to the historicity of *Sima Qian*'s account of the alleged encounter between *Laozi* and CONFUCIUS* at the Zhou court, in which *Laozi* berated Confucius for his arrogance and lack of understanding; many scholars have attributed that account to subsequent anti-Confucian polemics of the Daoists.

Daode Jing (Tao Te Ching). Some scholars have questioned *Sima Qian*'s attribution of the authorship of the *Daode Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*, in English: the Classic of The Way and Virtue) to *Laozi*, as there is no mention of an author in all extant versions of the *Daode Jing*. *Sima Qian* had recounted a legend in which *Laozi*, weary of living and heading westward in search of wisdom, penned down his philosophy in a work that would be later known as the *Daode Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*) at request of the “Keeper of the Pass” (i.e., frontier guard). Contemporary textual analysis of the received text points to the existence of several redactional layers. Although the received text is traditionally divided into 81 chapters of 5,000 characters, the earliest extant manuscripts – the *Guodian* text (circa 300 B.C.) and the *Mawang dui* (*Ma-wang Tui*) texts (168 B.C.), while preserving the contents of the work albeit in an inverted order, suggest that the original was probably a continuous work of some 5,400 characters, in all likelihood written or edited by a single author.

The *Daode Jing* presents the *Dao* (*Tao*) as a nameless, undefinable, spontaneous, eternal, cyclical and ever-changing cosmological essence. It advocates that one engages in “non-action” (*wu-wei*) to be in harmony with the *Dao*. Here, “non-action” is not mere passivity, but rather, taking only those actions that would be in harmony with the cosmological ordering of things in the *Dao*. The utopian society which the *Daode Jing* presents is one of harmony between ruler-and-ruled, in which the Sage-Ruler embodies “*wu-wei*” as a way of governing, viz., governing behind the scenes in a manner that the subjects are not even aware that they are being governed. This philosophy has attracted many adherents both in the Far East and in the Western world, making the *Daode Jing* the most translated ancient Asian treatise in the European languages in the 19th and 20th centuries.

See also: **CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, TAOISM.**

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