

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN EARLY CHINA: CONFUCIANISM AND DAOISM

China's oldest and most influential system of thought is called Confucianism, after its founder, Confucius (Kong Qiu, 551-479 B.C.). The most sustained and influential response to Confucianism was the system of thought known as Daoism. These two schools of thought are so central to Chinese culture and history that we need to spend some focused time discussing each.

CONFUCIANISM

The political background of Confucianism

We saw in our discussion of the Eastern Zhou period that during those five centuries, the hold of the privileged elite on power and prestige gradually began to decline. During this long period, two central intellectual questions arose in response to the social change that undermined the monopoly on social advantage that hereditary status had enjoyed. 1) *How should the privileges of hereditary status be balanced against the merits of personal talent and accomplishment?* 2) *What sorts of talents and accomplishments should be considered to be meritorious?* It is against the background of these two questions that the ideology of Confucianism arose. Confucianism answered these questions in a way different from society at large.

Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.; the Chinese form of his name is Kong Qiu), lived during this transition of Chinese society. He saw, as did everyone else of his day, how the demand for talent was undercutting the exclusive privileges of heredity. Confucius was a strong advocate of the priority of merit over birth – he and his followers were all members of the *shi* class. But he was dismayed by many aspects the changes he observed. The types of “merit” that received the greatest rewards seemed to include ruthlessness in battle, glib dishonesty in speech, cold-hearted disregard for the suffering of the people during these times of disruption, and a willingness to win the favor of men in power by demonstrating that there was no speech too coarse and no act too brutal to say or do. The winners in the competition for wealth and rank were those willing to practice an absolutely self-serving amorality, constrained only by the need to demonstrate absolute loyalty to any lord who would bestow his favors upon them.

For Confucius and his followers, who promoted the *aristocracy of merit* over the aristocracy of birth, the key issue was to reform the way in which society at large evaluated merit, substituting a type of *moral merit*, modeled on Confucius's picture of the sages of the distant past and the early years of the Zhou, for the warrior ethic of the day.

Confucius believed that the principal task for all people during his era was to find a way out of the chaos of the times so that China could return to its “original” order. Confucius, like most people of his day, believed that the orderly state of the early Zhou had been ordained by a benevolent deity called “Tian,” or “Heaven.” The Zhou ruling house had received Heaven's “mandate” to rule because the Zhou founders possessed a special set of virtues that prompted them to create a uniquely patterned social order in China--an order that Tian desired all mankind to emulate. The philosophy of Confucius was a portrait of the fundamental elements of that order. Confucius preached that if individuals could recapture that order in their own personal attitudes and conduct, others would be drawn towards that order and seek to accord with it. In this way, society could gradually return to the perfect state of the past, which was also the heavenly model for all time. Confucius's own teachings, built on these precedents from the past, he called his “Dao,” or Way.

The following ideas are basic to the structure of early Confucianism:

1. People are only fully “human” to the degree that they are as sensitive to others' needs and human feelings as they are to their own. The perfectly human person Confucius called “humane,” using a word, “*ren*,” which was almost identical to the word for “person.”
2. The patterns of perfect humanity had been embroidered in the past by successive great Sages, inspired by Heaven, of whom the latest were the Zhou Dynasty founders. These heaven-ordained patterns constituted a complex set of social, political, and religious conventions and ceremonies known as “ritual,” or “*li*.” These rituals of everyday and ceremonial conduct were no longer properly practiced in chaotic Eastern Zhou society--restoring these patterns of Chinese civilization was the practical path back to the ideal society.
3. Individuals should seek to recapture the patterns of *li* in their own conduct. The best place to begin was in one's conduct towards one's parents. *Li* were not isolated ceremonies to be practiced alone, but expressed the norms that were meant to govern all human relationships. Of these, the parent-child relationship was most basic; therefore, the first duty of every person was to act towards his or her parents in a perfectly **filial** manner.
4. Once a person had mastered the patterns of filial *li* in the role of the child, he or she would discover that the key to “humanity” (the virtue of *ren*) was the mastery of all the **social roles** that the human community needed him or her to play in a lifetime. The most basic of these roles were expressed as a set of **Five Relationships**: *parent/child; elder/younger; ruler/subordinate; husband/wife; friend/friend*. Once everyone understood and acted out the proper *li* for each social role they occupied, the world would be returned to order.

5. The person who had fully embodied *li* and *ren* would represent a superior type of ideal person--the fully human being. Confucius referred to such a person by a special term: *junzi*. This term originally had meant a “prince,” or man of high birth. For Confucius “princeliness” was a matter of moral skills not of birth, and he pictured his perfected people as a new type of ethical aristocracy.

As you can see from these core ideas, Confucian thought pictured the perfection of the individual person in terms of his or her mastery of conventional social conduct. Although this has appeared to generations of Western observers to have been a very constraining, or even robotic, ideal for human conduct and personality, in practice Confucian principles were much more flexible and dynamic, and left plenty of room for creativity. A good analogy would be between the Confucian demand that everyone master the single system of *li* conduct and most societies' demand that everyone master the grammar of a single national language. While it is certainly very constraining to learn a language perfectly (and often requires that the learner be coerced into mastery at some points), it is also true that being able to communicate through a mastered language feels very liberating, and that it is hard to picture us achieving any goals of “individual self-realization” unless we first learn to abide by the thousands of syntactical and lexical rules that make up our native language. In a similar way, Confucius seems to have viewed the common mastery of a single corpus of *li* (a type of artistic body-language) as the key to unlocking the deep shared humanity among society's members.

Confucius during his life was only a private tutor in the small feudal state of Lu in eastern China, and his influence was small. Although he attempted to persuade many feudal leaders of his time to adopt his ideas and institute a ritualized form of government and state education, his teachings were largely ignored. Most of Confucius's later life was occupied in training a group of dedicated disciples in the arts of *li*, which included many dimensions of inherently rewarding aesthetic practice: learning the poetry, music, and dance of the former Sages, as well as the intensely choreographed ceremonies of ancestor worship and other religious rituals. Confucius's students were among the most literate and artistically accomplished men of their time. But to Confucius's great chagrin, none of these great ritual achievements seemed to move China any closer to an escape from the chaos of the feudal age.

However, Confucius's claim that he had discovered the true Dao (Way) of the former sage kings inspired his students, and their students, to persevere in spreading his ideas for generations. Within a century or two of his death, Confucius's ideas had become well known and influenced the thinking of people all over China. Ultimately, later Chinese governments found it useful to proclaim their loyalty to Confucius's ideas, to sponsor state schools to educate Chinese youth in

Confucian values, and to appoint to high office people who had demonstrated mastery of Confucian texts. Such sponsorship gave Confucian ideas prestige beyond all others, and Confucius himself was treated as a kind of demi-god, worshipped at great temples constructed by the Chinese imperial state.

Still, many would argue that much of this devotion to Confucian ethics was actually a way for Chinese rulers to cover up their special brand of absolute power and institutionalized oppression of the mass of Chinese people. The fact that the current rulers of the communist People's Republic of China, now that the power of communist ideology is virtually exhausted in China, have indicated an excited interest in reviving Confucianism as a new ideology for their “socialist” state suggests that the exploitation of Confucius's ideas by China's leaders is far from over.

On the pages that follow is a short selection of passages from *The Analects of Confucius*, the oldest and most famous collection of sayings attributed to Confucius. In this text, divided into twenty books and over 500 individual passages, Confucius is sometimes pictured in conversation with various powerful patricians in his home state of Lu and elsewhere, but most often with his students, who are generally believed to have begun to compile this collection soon after the Master's death. Among the most famous of these disciples are the humble but brilliant Yan Yuan (or Yan Hui), the impetuous Zilu, the diplomat Zigong, and the scholarly Zixia.

The passages selected here are arranged according to the key concepts discussed above: *li* (ritual), *ren* (humanity), filiality, social roles, government, the *Dao* (Way) of the ancient Sages, Heaven, the *junzi*, and Confucius himself. These aphorisms and snippets of conversation reflect the fresh but unsystematic teachings of the earliest Confucians.

Selections from *The Analects of Confucius*

On li (ritual)

1. The disciple Yan Yuan asked the Master about humanity (*ren*). The Master said, “Conquer yourself and return to *li*: that is goodness. If one could for a single day conquer oneself and return to *li*, the entire world would respond to him with goodness. . . . If it is not *li*, don't look at it; if it is not *li*, don't listen to it; if it is not *li*, don't say it; if it is not *li*, don't do it.”
2. The Master said, “When a ruler loves *li*, the people are easy to rule.”
3. The Master said, “Can ritual *li* and deference be employed to rule a state? Why, there is nothing to it!”

On ren (humanity)

4. The disciple Zhonggong asked about *ren*. The Master said, “Whenever you go out your front gate continue to treat all you encounter as if they were great guests in your home. Whenever you direct the actions of others, do so as though you were officiating at a great sacrifice. And never act towards others in a way that you would not wish others to act towards you.”
5. Is *ren* distant? If I wish to be *ren* then *ren* is at hand.

On filiality

6. The disciple Master You said, “The man who is filial and obedient to his elders will rarely be insubordinate to his superiors, and never has a man who was not insubordinate brought chaos to his state. The *junzi* applies himself to the roots of things, for once the roots are firm, the Way can grow. Filiality and obedience to elders are the roots of *ren*, are they not?”
7. The Lord of She spoke to Confucius saying, “In my precincts there is an upright man. When his father stole a sheep, this man gave evidence against him.” “In my precinct the upright are different,” Confucius replied. “Fathers cover up for their sons and sons for their fathers. Uprightness lies therein.”
8. The disciple Ziyou asked about filiality. The Master said, “Those who speak of filiality nowadays mean by it merely supplying food and shelter to aged parents. Even dogs and horses receive as much. Without attentive respect, where is the difference?”
9. The disciple Zixia asked about filiality. The Master said, “It is the outward demeanor that it difficult to maintain! That the youngest shall bear the burden at work or that the elders shall be served first of food and drink, is this all that filiality means?”

On government

10. The Master said, “Governing by means of virtue one is like the North Star: it sits in its place and the other stars do reverence to it.”
11. The Master said, “Virtue is never lonely; it always attracts neighbors.”
12. The patrician Ji Kangzi was troubled by banditry and asked Confucius about it. Confucius replied, “If you yourself were without desires others would not steal though you paid them to.”

On social roles

13. Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let rulers be rulers, ministers ministers, fathers fathers, sons sons.”

On the Dao (Way) of the Sages

14. The Master said, “How grand was the rule of the [Sage King] Yao! Towering is the grandeur of Heaven; only Yao could emulate it. So grand that the people could find no words to describe it. Towering were his achievements! Glimmering, they formed a paradigm of pattern.”
15. The Master said to Zeng Shen, “Shen! My Dao links all on a single thread.” Master Zeng replied, “So it does.” When the Master had gone, the other followers asked, “What did he mean?” Master Zeng replied, “The Master's Dao is simply loyalty and reciprocity.”
16. The Master said, “A person can enlarge the Dao; the Dao does not enlarge a person.”
17. The Master said, “In the morning hear the Dao; in the evening die content.”

On Heaven (Tian)

18. [The Zhou Dynasty founder] King Wen is dead, but his patterns live on here in me, do they not? If Heaven wished these patterns to perish, I would not have been able to partake of them!
19. The disciple Zilu asked about serving ghosts and spirits. “You do not yet know how to serve people,” replied the Master. “Why ask about serving the ghosts?”
20. Zilu asked about death. The Master said, “When you do not yet know life, why seek to know death?”
21. The Master said, “I wish never to speak!” The disciple Zigong said, “If you were never to speak, what would we have to pass on?” The Master said, “Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons turn and the things of the world grow. Does Heaven speak?”
22. The Master fell ill and Zilu asked leave to offer prayers. The Master said, “Is this permitted?” “Yes,” replied Zilu. “The liturgy in one place reads, ‘You may pray to the spirits above and below.’” The Master said, “I have been praying for a very long time.”

On the junzi (princely man)

23. If one removes *ren* from a *junzi*, then wherein is he worthy of the name? The *junzi* does not deviate from *ren* for an instant. Though he may be hurried or in dire straits, he always cleaves to *ren*.
24. The *junzi* values virtue; a small man values land. The *junzi* values the example men set; a small man values the favors they grant.
25. The *junzi* understands according to righteousness; a small man understands according to profit.
26. The Master said, “To study and at due times to practice what one has studied, is this not pleasure! To have friends like oneself come from afar, is this not joy! To be unknown and remain unsoured, is this not a *junzi*!”

On Confucius

27. The Master said, “To eat coarse greens and drink water, to crook one's elbow for a pillow, joy also lies therein. If they are not got by righteous means, wealth and rank are to me like the floating clouds.”
28. The Master said, “I have never refused to teach any who offered as much as a bundle of dried sausages.”
29. The Master said, “I have spent whole days without eating, whole nights without sleeping in order to ponder. It was useless B not like study!”
30. The Master ruled out four things: Have no set ideas, no absolute demands, no stubbornness, no self.
31. The Master said, “I am not a man who was born with knowledge; I am one who loves what is old and is quick in pursuing it.”
32. The Master said, “At fifteen I set my heart on study. At thirty I took my stand. At forty I was free from confusion. At fifty I learned the decree of Heaven. At sixty I heard it with a compliant ear. At seventy I can follow the desires of my heart and never cross beyond the proper bounds.”

DAOISM

Confucianism ultimately became the most influential school of thought in China, and its basic ideas, much altered by the interpretations of later scholars and power holders, became the core of China's official "state ideology." Throughout the Imperial period of China, beginning with the second century B.C. and ending only in 1905, generation after generation of young and ambitious men competed for jobs and recognition by taking state-wide examinations that tested their grasp of Confucian principles. Although Confucianism seemed to prevail as state ideology, its down-to-earth teachings, rather rigid ideas, and relentlessly idealistic moral goods often strained the patience of the very people who most endorsed Confucian points of view. In time, another intellectual tradition born during the chaos of the late Zhou Dynasty, Daoism, came to be highly influential as a type of counterbalance to Confucianism. The mainstream intellectual tradition of China's educated elite may sometimes be pictured as a confluence of Confucian and Daoist tributaries. For this reason, it is important to explore the ideas of the original Daoist texts. There is another reason: they're more fun.

When we speak of "Daoism" in the late Zhou period, we generally mean by the term the ideas of two rather mysterious texts. They are the *Dao de jing* (Classic of the Way and of Virtue) by "Laozi" (or, "The Old Master"), and the works of the quirky recluse Zhuangzi, which appear in a book that takes his name as its title.

Daoism appears to have begun as an escapist movement during the chaotic late Zhou, and in some ways it makes sense to see it as an outgrowth of Confucianism, which had preached a special doctrine called "timeliness," that rationalized the urge to withdraw from the troubled society of the age. The doctrine of "timeliness" originated with Confucius's motto: "When the Dao prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide!" Even in the Confucian *Analects*, we see signs of a Confucian trend towards absolute withdrawal. The character and comportment of Confucius's best disciple, Yan Yuan, who lived in obscurity in an impoverished lane yet "did not alter his joy," suggest this early tendency towards eremitism (the "hermit" lifestyle). And the following tale from the *Analects* shows very clearly a certain longing for withdrawal that the compilers of that text even project into Confucius's own words.

Chang Ju and Jie Ni were ploughing the fields in harness together. Confucius passed by and sent his disciple Zilu over to ask directions.

"Who's that holding the carriage reins?" asked Chang Ju.

"That is Kong Qiu," replied Zilu.

"Kong Qiu of the state of Lu?"

"Yes!" said Zilu.

"Why, then," said Chang Ju, "he knows where he can go!"

Zilu then asked Jie Ni.

“And who are you?” asked Jie Ni.

“I am Zilu.”

“Are you the Zilu who is a disciple of Kong Qiu of Lu?”

“I am,” said Zilu.

Jie Ni said, “The world is inundated now. Who can change it? Would you not be better off joining those who have fled from the world altogether, instead of following someone who flees from this man to that one?” Then the two of them went on with their ploughing.

Zilu returned to report to Confucius.

The Master’s brow furrowed. “I cannot flock together with the birds and beasts!” he cried. “If I am not a fellow traveler with men such as these, then with whom? If only the Dao prevailed in the world I would not have to try to change it!”

Righteous hermits were much admired in Classical China, and men who withdrew from society to live in poverty “in the cliffs and caves” paradoxically often enjoyed a type of celebrity status. Our Daoist texts seem to be a product of the teachings of such men. Their ideas include appreciation for the majestic rhythms of the natural world apart from human society and a celebration of the isolated individual whose lonely stance signaled a unique power of enlightenment.

The *Dao de jing*

The *Dao de jing* (often called the *Laozi*) as we have it today appears to be a composite text which reached something like its final form during the third century B.C., but portions of the text may have been composed much earlier. Despite the fact that we have a great deal of very specific biographical information about Laozi, including accounts of how Confucius studied with him, it is very unlikely that there ever was any one person known by such a name or title who authored the book we now possess. Instead, the power of the book itself has attracted a collection of legends which coalesced into the image of the Old Master, an elusive and transcendent sage of the greatest mystery.

The text takes its name from two key concepts within it: *Dao* and *de*. In Confucianism, the “Dao” (or the “Way”) refers to the teachings and institutions of sages from the past. In the *Dao de jing* it refers to a cosmic force governing all Nature. The essence of this force cannot be captured in words; in fact, human language, with its narrow definitions, hides rather than reveals the Truth of the universe--therefore, Daoism tends to see speech as the enemy of knowledge. Because the word *dao* also means “to speak,” Daoists sometimes refer to the Dao as a Word beyond the realm of human words.

The term “*de*” refers to a type of charismatic virtue or earned social leverage that individuals were thought sometimes to possess. Confucians used the term to denote the sort of inner moral virtue that they believed spontaneously attracted people and led them towards ethical improvement. In certain religious contexts, *de* referred to mysterious powers that individuals might possess, and various types of ancient self-cultivation schools referred to accomplishments engendered by their training regimens as *de*.

The *Dao de jing* is a mix of poetry and prose that conveys a deep sense of mystery and awe. In it, two very different types of ideas are combined. The first expresses the anti-social voice of the hermit who has found in his retreat to Nature an order and beauty utterly lacking in the chaotic and sordid world of the late Zhou. The second is a political voice that claims that the lessons learned from a renunciation of the world of human values and an immersion in the world of Nature may be used to obtain the greatest of all human prizes – the kingship of China!

As we read the text, we cannot help but be struck by the awe-inspiring isolation of the secluded hermit and the intimate and original vision of nature that he presents. The “*Dao*,” which in these portions of the text seems to be something close to the inexplicable rhythms of the natural world perceived through wordless experience, is a compelling concept. It combines religious awe, philosophical sophistication, and a deep sense of aesthetic fulfillment. The text links this understanding of nature to an absolute valuation of selflessness and the renunciation of all goal-directed action. Man’s project becomes the emulation of nature’s spontaneous operation, a return to spontaneous action from instinct alone. This is referred to in the text by the term *wuwei*, which is often translated “non-action,” but really means non-*striving*: the absence of all motivation in one’s action, apart from the satisfaction of those needs which humans possess in their most basic, pre-verbal stages. At the same time, it is disconcerting to find this call for non-striving and renunciation of the self linked to the crassest of political motives: the attainment of the highest political position – to rule the empire.

The following selections from the text have been chosen to suggest the range of themes with which it deals. The text itself is very short, a bit over five thousand words divided into eighty-one chapters in the traditional edition (the numbers of these chapters appear after each entry). Note how deeply different from the Confucian *Analects* this Daoist text is.

On the Dao

A Dao that may be spoken is not the enduring Dao.* A name that may be named is not an enduring name.

No names – this is the beginning of Heaven and earth. Having names – this is the mother of the things of the world.

Make freedom from desire your constant norm; thereby you will see what is subtle. Make having desires your constant norm; thereby you will see what is manifest. These two arise from the same source but have different names. Together they may be termed ‘the mysterious’. Mystery and more mystery: the gate of all that is subtle. (1)

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Reversal is the motion of the Dao. Weakness is the method of the Dao. The things of the world are born from being, and being is born of nothing. (40)

*

The Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the ten thousand things. . . . (42)

*

There is a thing formed from confusion and born before heaven and earth. Silent, solitary, alone and unchanging. It revolves everywhere and is never in danger. It can be the mother of all under heaven. I do not know its name, but I style it “the Dao.”

If forced to give it a name, I call it “the Great.” The Great I call “Receding.” Receding I call “Distant.” Distant I call “Reversing.”

Thus the Dao is great, heaven is great, earth is great, and the king is great as well. Within the realm there are four great ones, and the king sits as one among them.

Men emulate earth; earth emulates heaven; heaven emulates the Dao; the Dao emulates spontaneity.** (25)

Concerning the world of human values

The five colors blind men’s eyes,
The five tones deafen men’s ears,

* The first sentence is the most famous pun in Chinese. The word *Dao* possesses a variety of early meanings, and among them are the verb meaning “to speak,” and two nominal meanings: “a teaching,” and “the transcendent order of the universe.” The initial six characters of the *Dao de jing* include three *Daos* (in Chinese it reads: “*Dao ke Dao fei chang Dao*”). They may be taken to mean, respectively, “teaching,” “to speak,” and “transcendent order.”

** The term “spontaneity” translates a key Daoist term which at root means “self-so,” signifying that something is a certain way by virtue of its own properties or spontaneous action. The term came to mean “Nature,” in the Western sense of that part of the universe that governs itself without interference by man. The relation between man and Nature, or man and spontaneity, is a central issue for Daoism.

The five flavors numb men's mouths,
 Racing at a gallop in pursuit of the hunt
 maddens men's minds.

Rare objects obstruct men's conduct.

Therefore the sage is for the belly and not for the eye. Therefore he discards the one and selects the other. (12)

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Heaven and earth are not *ren*: they treat the things of the world as straw dogs.* The sage is not *ren*: he treats the people as straw dogs.

All between heaven and earth is like a great bellows –

Empty, yet it does not collapse,
 Breathing out more with every move.
 Many words are much exhausted;
 Better to cleave to the center. (5)

*

When the Dao prevails in the world, fast horses are corralled for manure; when the Dao does not prevail in the world, steeds of war are born in the city pastures.

There is no calamity greater than not knowing what is sufficient; there is no fault greater than wishing to acquire. Thus the sufficiency of knowing what is sufficient is eternal sufficiency. (46)

On the art of rulership

Do not honor the worthy. This will keep the people from contention. Do not prize rare things. This will keep the people from becoming thieves. Do not display the desirable. The hearts of the people will not be turbulent.

Hence the rule of the sage:

Empty their minds and fill their bellies,
 Weaken their wills and strengthen their bones.

Always render the people free of knowledge and desire. Ensure that the clever dare not act. Act only with non-action and nothing will go unruly. (3)

*

Cut off sagehood! Cast out wisdom! The people will benefit a hundredfold.

Cut off *ren*! Cast out right! The people will return to filiality and parental kindness.

Cut off cleverness! Cast out profit! Brigands and thieves will nowhere be found.

As patterns, these three are insufficient and only make the people seek to add to them.

*“Straw dog” refers to a ritual object which, prior to its use in sacrificial ceremony, was treated with reverence, and afterwards was ceremonially trampled.

Exhibit the plainness of undyed cloth; embrace the uncarved block.
Be little self-regarding and make your desires few. (19)

*

Make the state small and the people few. Let there be arms for troops in tens and hundreds, but unused. Make the people treat death seriously and not move to distant places.

Though there be boats and carriages, they shall not be ridden. Though there be armor and weaponry, they shall not be deployed.

Let the people return to keeping records by knotted rope – their food sweet to them, their clothes beautiful to them, their homes comfortable to them, their customs joyful to them.

Though neighboring states be in sight of one another and the sounds of the cocks and dogs heard from one to the other, the people of one will never visit the other, even as they grow old and die. (80)

On the person of the sage

Heaven endures; earth long abides. Heaven endures and earth long abides because they do not give birth to themselves. Hence they are long lived.

Hence the sage places his person last, and it comes first; he treats it as something external to him and it endures.

Does he not employ selflessness? Hence he attains his self-regarding ends. (7)

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As you carry your bodily soul embracing one-ness, can you never depart from it?

As you concentrate your breath and extend your suppleness, can you be as a new born babe?

As you polish the dust from your mysterious mirror, can you render it free of all blemishes?

As you cherish the people and order the state, can you do so without awareness? As heaven's gate swings open and shut can you keep to the female?

As your brilliant awareness penetrates everywhere can you refrain from employing it in action?

You give birth to it, you nurture it – yet in giving birth you do not possess it, in doing it you do not retain it, in leading it you employ no authority: this is called mysterious power (*de*). (10)

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Without going out your door, know the world; without looking out the window, know the Dao of Heaven.

The further you travel, the less you know.

Hence the sage knows without going to it, names it without seeing, does nothing and it is achieved. (47)

On Nature

Reaching the ultimate of emptiness, deeply guarding stillness, the things of the world arise together; thereby do I watch their return.

The things of the world burst out everywhere, and each returns to its own root.

Returning to the root is called stillness; this is called returning to destiny; returning to destiny is called constant; knowing the constant is called enlightenment.

Not knowing the constant one acts blindly and ill-omened.

Knowing the constant one can accommodate; accommodation leads to impartiality; impartiality leads to kingliness; kingliness leads to Heaven; Heaven leads to the Dao.

With the Dao one may endure, and to the end of life one will not be in danger. (16)

Nothingness

Thirty spokes share a single hub; grasp the nothingness at its center to get the use of the wheel.

Clay is fashioned to make a vessel; grasp the nothingness at the center to get the use of the vessel.

Bore windows and doors to create a room; grasp the nothingness of the interior to get the use of the room.

Thus that which is constitutes what is valuable, but that which is not constitutes what is of use. (11)

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The Zhuangzi

The *Zhuangzi* is the most entertaining of all early Chinese texts. It combines a splendid philosophical intelligence with a brilliant literary imagination and humor. Although generally linked to the *Dao de jing* as the second of the two original Daoist texts, it may be that the *Zhuangzi* was the earlier of the two, and that the man whose ideas fill the book aligned himself with no established viewpoint.

The tone of the *Zhuangzi* is very different from the obscurity of the *Dao de jing*, though the text is difficult enough to understand. The structure of the *Zhuangzi* is a series of loosely ordered anecdotes and brief essays. The tales are outlandish, and record straight-faced “facts” that no sane Classical reader could have ever mistaken for anything but intellectual playfulness.

Zhuangzi probably lived during the fourth century B.C. His chief rhetorical strategy is to undermine our ordinary notions of value by claiming a very radical form of “relativity.” Zhuangzi believed along with Laozi that our human values are entirely dependent upon our human point of view--they don’t exist in Nature. But even more than that, Zhuangzi creates a world in his book in

which we're entirely unsure about the reality of anything. We never know when to take him seriously.

If there is a central argument in the *Zhuangzi*, it is that the distinctions that human beings make among different things in the world are all illusory. The world as it is, the Dao, possesses no sort of boundaries, it is a unified whole. The fine lines that we draw as we give things names and use words to make claims about what is so and what is not – these distinctions simply blind us to what is really there. We become able to see only a human world, constructed from language, rather than the real world, which is pre-verbal, or at least prior to any assertions that create in our minds the false notion of a “that which is not.”

To lead us towards erasing these boundaries, the *Zhuangzi* makes us look at things differently. In Zhuangzi's world vision, the impossible becomes possible, the moral becomes merely puffed up, the ugly becomes beautiful, and the distinction between death and life is erased.

The following excerpts from the *Zhuangzi* illustrate the broad range of ideas and literary devices that Zhuangzi skillfully employed. The power of his writing to delight is so great that it is probably correct to say that much of the text's later cultural influence was due to the fact that people simply *enjoyed* reading it. A genuine work of art itself, one great area of the *Zhuangzi*'s impact was upon traditional Chinese artistic practice. The *Zhuangzi* is also often seen as the ultimate source of the most distinctively Chinese school of Buddhist practice, Chan or Zen Buddhism, which emerged about 1000 years later.

Nine Tales from the *Zhuangzi*

1. The Tale of the Peng Bird

In the dark sea of the north there is a fish; it is named the Kun.* The Kun is so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Changing, it becomes a bird; it is named the Peng, so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Aroused, it soars aloft, its wings like clouds hung from the sky. As the sea shifts, it turns to set its course toward the dark sea of the south, the Pool of Heaven.

The *Riddles of Qi* is a record of strange marvels.** It tells us, “When the Peng sets its course toward the dark sea of the south, the beating of its wings roils the waters for three thousand *li*. It rises ninety thousand *li* stirring the wind into a gale that does not subside for sixth months.” Shimmering vapors, hovering dust, small breathing creatures blown to and fro in the wind – the

* The Chinese name for the Kun fish means “roe,” or fish-egg, the tiniest form of fish. This sentence, which opens the *Zhuangzi*, is typical of the paradoxes that fill the text.

** The *Universal Harmony* seems to be a carefully cited imaginary book.

blight blue of the sky: is that its true color, or merely the appearance of limitless distance? When the Peng looks down from above, is this what he sees as well?

Now, when water is not deep it lacks the strength to bear a big boat. Pour a cup of water into a hollow on the ground and a twig floats there like a boat, but if you set the cup down there it will sink to rest on the ground – the water is shallow so the boat's too big. Just so, when air is not deep it lacks the strength to bear up great wings, and thus the Peng must soar upwards until, at ninety thousand *li*, the wind beneath is deep enough to bear it. Only then, bearing on its back the azure sky and free of all obstacles before it, and it can at last set its course toward the south.

The cicada and the dove laugh at the Peng, saying, “When we take off with all our might we may reach the limb of an elm or a *fang* tree, or sometimes we'll short and land back on the ground. What's the point of soaring up ninety thousand *li* to fly south!” If you're just hiking out as far as the green wilds beyond the fields, you can carry food for your three meals and return in the evening with a full stomach. If you're going a hundred *li*, you'll need a night's worth of grinding to prepare your grain. If you're going a thousand *li*, you'll be storing up provisions three months in advance. What do these two creatures understand?

Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived. How can we know this is so? The morning mushroom can understand nothing of the alternation of night and day; the summer cicada can understand nothing of the progress of the seasons. Such are the short-lived. South of Chu one finds a lizard called the Dimspirit which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. In high antiquity there grew a great rose that counted eight thousand years as one spring and eight thousand years as one autumn. Such are the long-lived – yet today Pengzu is the best known exemplar of longevity, whom crowds of men wish to equal. How pitiful!

The Questions of Tang to Ji records this as well. Tang questioned Ji saying, “Is there a limit to height or depth or to the four directions?”

Ji replied, “Beyond the limits of the limitless lies a further limitlessness. In the bald and barren north there is a dark sea. This is the Pool of Heaven. There is a fish there that is thousands of *li* wide – none has ever discovered its length. Its name is Kun. A bird lives there; its name is Peng. Its back is like Mount Tai and its wings are like clouds hung from the sky. It spirals upward ninety thousand *li*, stirring the wind into a gale. Breaking through the clouds and bearing on its back the azure sky, and it can at last set its course toward the south. Breaking through the clouds and mist, bearing on its back the azure sky, it sets its course for the south and heads for the dark sea of the south.”

The quail laughs at it saying, “Just where does he think he’s going? I bound with a leap and fly up – perhaps twenty feet, never higher – but then I come down to flap around among the bushes and brambles. That’s the epitome of flying, yes indeed! Now, where does he think he’s going?”

Such is the difference between big and small.

A man who knows enough to fill some office, or whose conduct is the standard in some village, or whose talents match the taste of some lord whose domain he is called upon to manage, sees himself as the measure precisely like the quail. How heartily Song Rongzi would laugh at such a one! *** Song Rongzi could not be persuaded by the whole world’s approval nor deterred by the whole world’s objection. To him, the line between the internal and external was set, and the distinction between noble and shameful conduct was simply clear as could be. Nothing in the world could stir anxiety within him. And yet there were levels he did not reach.

Now Liezi, he mounted the wind as his chariot and drove it with skill for fifteen days before returning. No matter of fortune could stir anxiety within him. But still, although he escaped the trouble of walking, he was still dependent on something.

He who mounts the balance of Heaven and Earth, rides on the changes of the six *qi*, and wander the inexhaustible – what would such a man be dependent on? Thus it is said: the Perfect Person lacks all self; the Spirit-like Person lacks all merit; the Sage lacks all fame.

2. *The Immortal on the Mountaintop*

Jian Wu questioned Lian Shu saying, “I’ve been talking to Jie Yu, and he speaks nothing but tall tales that go on and on without making sense or coming to a point. I found it most alarming – his nonsense stretched on endless as the Milky Way, veering every which way, completely at odds with human commonsense!”

“Why, what did he say?” asked Lian Shu.

“He says that far way on Guyi Mountain there dwells a spirit-like man with skin like icy snow, lovely and chaste as a virgin. He eats no grain, but sucks the wind and drinks the dew. He mounts the *qi* of the clouds and wanders beyond the four seas riding a flying dragon. By concentrating his spirit he protects things from illness and damage, and ripens the fall harvest. So I refuse to believe the crazy things he says.”

Lian Shu replied, “Just so. They say a blind man just can’t take in beautiful patterns, nor a deaf man the music of bell and drum. And it’s not only the physical body that suffers from blindness and deafness – understanding may as well. That perfectly characterizes a man such as you! But a man such as he, with virtue such as his, can roll the world of things into one. Though all

*** Both Song Rongzi and Liezi (who appears below) are names associated with thinkers of the Warring States era in China. However, these descriptions do not resemble the way they are portrayed in other texts.

in the world seek a way out of its chaos, what business is it of his that he should wear himself down with responsibility for the world? Nothing can harm such a man. Though flood waters rise to the sky, he will not drown. Though a great drought melt metal and stone and scorch the soil and the mountains, he will not be burned. From the mere dirt and dust his body sheds you could mold a Yao or a Shun! Why should he agree to take on responsibility for the world?"

3. The Pipes of Earth and Heaven

Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing – sprawled in a daze, as though he'd lost his own double. Yan Cheng Ziyou stood in attendance. "What is this?" he said. "Can you make a body seem like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!"

Ziqi said, "You do well to ask such a question! It's that I have lost myself, do you understand? You hear the piping of men, but you haven't heard the piping of earth. Or if you've heard the piping of earth, you haven't heard the piping of Heaven!"

Ziyou said, "May I venture to ask what you mean?"

Ziqi said, "The Great Clod belches out *qi* and it is called by the name of wind. Nothing happens before it has arisen, but once it does, the myriad hollows set up a furious cry. Don't you hear their drawn out wail? From the mountain forest precipice, huge trees a hundred spans round, with hollows like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like gullies, like pools, roar and whistle, screech and hiss, cry and wail, moan and howl, those in the lead calling out *woooo*, those behind calling out *ooooh*! In a gentle breeze they sing in faint harmony, but in a full gale the chorus is huge. Once the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again. Haven't you seen them all waving and swaying?"

Ziyou said, "By the piping of the earth, then, you must mean the sound of these hollows, and by the piping of man the sound of flutes. May I ask about the piping of Heaven?"

Ziqi said, "Blowing on the myriad things in a different way, so that each can be itself – each takes what is natural to each, but who sets them to their cry?"

4. The Butterfly Dream

Once Zhuang Zhou* dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about, simply happy and doing as it pleased. He knew no Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and surprisingly, he was Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhou.

*Zhou was Zhuangzi's name.

Between Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! Such we call “the transformation of things.”

5. *The Tale of Cook Ding*

Cook Ding was carving an ox carcass for Lord Wenhui. With each touch of his hand, heave of his shoulder, step of his feet, thrust of his knee – whop! wish! – he wielded his knife with a whoosh, and every move was in rhythm. It was as though he were performing the Dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping to the beat of the Constant Source music.

“Ah, marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Surely this is the acme of skill!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What your servant loves, my lord, is the Dao, and that is a step beyond skill.

“At the beginning, when I first began carving up oxen, all I could see was the whole carcass. After three years I could no longer see the carcass whole, and now I meet it with my spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding cease and spirit moves as it will. I follow the natural form: slicing the major joints I guide the knife through the big hollows, and by conforming to the inherent contours, no vessels or tendons or tangles of sinews – much less the big bones – block my blade in the least.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year, but this is mere slicing. An ordinary cook changes his knife once a month, because he hacks. I’ve been using this knife now for nineteen years; it has carved thousands of oxen, yet the blade is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone. You see, there are gaps between these joints, but the blade edge has no thickness. If a knife with no thickness moves into a gap, then it’s wide as need be and the blade wanders freely with plenty of leeway. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone.

“But nevertheless, whenever a tangled knot lies ahead, I spot the challenge and on the alert I focus my sight and slow down my hand – then I flick the blade with the slightest of moves, and before you know it the carcass has fallen apart like earth crumbling to the ground. I stand with knife raised and face all four directions in turn, prancing in place with complete satisfaction. Then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“How fine!” said Lord Wenhui. “Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned how to nurture life!”*

* The tale of Cook Ding is in some ways the central tale of the *Zhuangzi*. It belongs to a set of stories that are sometimes referred to as the “knack passages” of the text. In these tales, individuals penetrate to a state of some sort of unity with the Dao by means of the performance of some thoroughly mastered skill, which they have acquired through long practice of an art (which may be called a Dao, as in “the Dao of archery,” and so forth). The passages celebrate the power of spontaneously performed skill mastery to provide communion with the spontaneous processes of Nature.

6. *Crippled Shu*

Shu the Deformed – his cheeks are in the shadow of his belly, his shoulders rise above his head, his pigtail points up at the sky, his five viscera are top-wards and his thighs hug his ribs. But by sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten. When the ruler calls up the troops, he stands in the crowd and waves good-bye; when they draft workers for state projects, they pass him over because he’s a chronic invalid. But when they are doling out grain to the disabled, he gets three measures and ten bundles of firewood. Those with deformed bodies are thus able to care for themselves and finish out the years Heaven gave them. And how much better to possess deformed virtue!

7. *The Four Friends*

Master Si, Master Yu, Master Li, and Master Lai were talking together. “Who can look upon Nothing as his head, upon life as his back, upon death as his rump? Whoever knows that life and death, existence and annihilation are all a single body, I will be his friend.”

The four men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and the four of them became friends.

Soon, Master Yu fell ill. Master Si went to see how he was. “How remarkable!” said Master Yu. “The Creator of Things is making me into this hooked shape. A hump has thrust up from my back, my five viscera are top-wards, my cheeks are in the shadow of my belly, my shoulders rise above my head, and my pigtail is pointing at the sky! It must be some dislocation of my yin and yang *qi*.” Yet he was calm at heart and unconcerned. Crawling to the well, he looked in at his reflection. “Oh, my! The Creator’s made me even more crooked!”

“Do you resent it?” asked Master Si.

“Why, no! What is there to resent? If this goes on perhaps he’ll turn my left arm into a rooster and I’ll keep watch over the night. Or perhaps in time he’ll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I’ll shoot down an owl to roast. Or perhaps he’ll turn my buttocks into cartwheels and I’ll ascend into the sky with my spirit as my horse! Why would I ever want a new carriage again?”

“I received life because the season had come. I will lose it in the flow of time. Content with the seasons and dwelling in the flow of time, neither sorrow nor joy can get within me. In ancient

times this was called ‘untying the bonds.’ There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things. Besides, no thing can ever prevail over Heaven – that’s the way it has always been. What would I have to resent?”

Then suddenly, Master Lai grew ill and lay gasping at the point of death. His wife and children had gathered round in a circle wailing when Master Li came to call. “Shoo!” he shouted. “Stand back! Don’t disturb the process of change!”

Then he leaned against the doorway and spoke to Master Lai. “How marvelous is the Creator of Change! What is he going to make out of you next? Where will he send you? Will he make you into a rat’s liver? Will he make you into a bug’s arm?”

Master Lai said, “A child obeys his father and mother and goes wherever he’s told, east or west, north or south. And the yin and yang – they are no less to a person than father and mother! Now that they have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I would be! What fault is it of theirs?”

“The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death. Were a skilled smith casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, ‘I insist on becoming a Moye-type sword!’ the smith would regard it as most inauspicious metal indeed. Now having had the audacity to have once taken on human form, I should now say, ‘I won’t be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!’ the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious person.

“So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace and the Creator as a great smith. Where could he send me that would not be acceptable? My life complete, I will fall asleep, and then suddenly, I will wake up.”

8. The Hunchback and the Cicadas

Confucius was on the road to Chu when, emerging from a wood, he saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as if he were plucking them down with his hand.

“How skillful you are!” said Confucius. “Is there a Dao for this?”

“Yes, I have a Dao,” said the hunchback. “For five or six months I practiced balancing balls on top of each other on the end of my pole. Once I could balance two balls without them falling, I knew I would miss very few cicadas. Then I balanced three balls and, when they didn’t fall off, I knew I’d miss only one cicada in ten. Then I balanced five balls – once they didn’t fall off, I knew it would be easy as grabbing them with my hand. I hold my body like a twisted tree and raise my arm like a withered limb. No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the myriad things, I perceive nothing but cicada wings. Never stumbling, never tilting, letting nothing else in the world of things take the place of those cicada wings – how could I fail to catch them?”

Confucius turned to his disciples and said. “‘His will undivided, his spirit coalesced’ – would that not describe this venerable hunchback?”

9. Zhuangzi Receives a Job Offer

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the River Pu, the king of Chu sent two officials to appear before him and convey these words: “I would like to burden you with the administration of my realm.”

Zhuangzi held on his fishing pole and, without looking round, he said, “I have heard that Chu possesses a sacred turtle, dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. This turtle, now, would it prefer to be dead with its bones preserved and honored, or to be alive with its tail dragging in the mud?”

“Alive with its tail dragging in the mud,” answered the two officials.

“Then go away,” said Zhuangzi. “I mean to drag my tail in the mud!”