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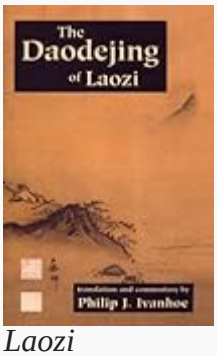
The uses of quietism

by *John Derbyshire*

A review of *The Daodejing of Laozi (Hackett Classics)* by Laozi

A review of Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way, by Laozi, translated and with commentary by Moss Roberts.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Laozi

The Daodejing of Laozi (Hackett Classics)

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 160 pages, $27.00

The connection between simple-life quietism and the political left has often been noted. Orwell, in his diatribes against the armchair progressives he so despised, never failed to include, along with Trotskyite poets, pamphleteering pacifists, and "pink" sodomites, the legions of sandal-wearing, vegetarian, teetotaling tree-huggers he knew so well from Independent Labour Party summer schools. Among my own acquaintances are two dear old friends in England, a married couple, who are left as left can be: keen readers of the *Guardian* (Britain's furthest-left broadsheet newspaper), hostile to nuclear weapons and nuclear power, anti-American and, while the u.s.s.r. existed, pro-Soviet, convinced that the troubles of the Middle East all result from the machinations of the oil companies, and so on. The wife was in fact a red-diaper baby: her parents were principals in the postwar Austrian Communist Party. They are both simple-lifers, who owned no television or car until well into their forties; he briefly ran a self-sufficient craft commune in rural Lincolnshire.

Homemade furniture and worship of state power; nutburgers and anti-Americanism: why this persistent connection? I think we all have a sketchy idea of how it hangs together. For deeper understanding, though, you could do worse than pick up the *Tao Te Ching*. A new annotated translation of this classic text of ancient Chinese quietism has just been produced by Moss Roberts, professor of Chinese at New York University.[1] Roberts's version of the *Tao Te Ching* raises the political issue with unusual clarity. Why this is so, and where, if anywhere, the trail leads, are matters I shall return to presently. First, some background on the *Tao Te Ching*.

I imagine the one thing that everyone knows about the *Tao Te Ching* is that it was written by a sage named Lao Tzu. This is, in point of fact, the thing least worth knowing. Lao Tzu may or may not have existed; and, supposing he existed, he may or may not have written the *Tao Te Ching*. We simply have no idea, nor any way to pursue the matter. We have no accounts of Lao Tzu by people who knew him, nor any knowledge of his relationships with other writers of his time (most likely the later fifth or early fourth century b.c., if he existed). There are some stories about him, but they all have an apocryphal quality to them. There is even a thumbnail biography by the historian Sima Qian, "the Chinese Herodotus," but it was written at least two centuries, and a huge national convulsion, after the latest date at which Lao Tzu could have lived, if he lived, and is not supported by any other evidence. Lao Tzu is a blank, a mystery.

Which is entirely fitting, because the *Tao Te Ching* is fundamentally a work of mysticism. Organized as eighty-one stanzas of mixed verse and prose, it includes material on several different topics: self-cultivation, statecraft, military science, health. All this, however, is set in a metaphysical framework, and the metaphysics is of the mystical type, with principal elements that accord with the mystical truths revealed in other times and places, and that will be familiar to anyone who has looked into mysticism of any school. We are given to understand that there is an all-embracing law or spirit called the Tao (that is, the Way), which is supreme in the universe and governs the workings of nature. There is a corresponding spirit moving human beings, named Te (that is, Virtue—this word is pronounced "duh"). Tao and Te work together in one of those dualities the ancient Chinese thinkers were so fond of, like Heaven and Earth, *yin* and *yang*, gods and demons, *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness), or the prince and the minister—those last two dualities much worked over by Confucius. The interaction of these dualities generates all the phenomena of the so-called "real world." Both Tao and Te are essentially ineffable, but by certain spiritual exercises we can attain enough acquaintance with them to improve our lives, our government, our military prowess, and even apparently our health. These exercises center on the cultivation of something called *wu-wei*, which translators have variously rendered as "non-action," "unattached action," "Non-Ado," "not-doing," and so on. Here are the first lines of Stanza 48 in Moss Roberts's translation:

> To pursue learning, learn more day by day;
> To pursue the Way, unlearn it day by day:
> Unlearn and then unlearn again

> Until there is nothing to pursue;
> No end pursued, no end ungained.

These precepts are explicitly enjoined upon the rulers of states, who are assured that if they practice *wu-wei* on their subjects' behalf, then tranquility, harmony, and sufficiency will result. Dr. Johnson said that George the First "knew nothing, and desired to know nothing; did nothing, and desired to do nothing." This, apparently, would be the ideal Taoist ruler.

The political "tendency" of the *Tao Te Ching* at first looks to be reactionary in the extreme. Boats, carriages, and mechanical contrivances of all kinds are condemned as deplorably new-fangled, hindrances to the peace of mind of the common people. Even writing is objected to:

> Guide them back to early times,
> When knotted chords served for signs.
> [Stanza 80]

The people are, in fact, to be kept as ignorant as possible:

> Thus under a wise man's rule Blank are their minds But full their bellies. [Stanza 3]

Talk about the simple life!

These lines are uncharacteristically explicit, though. Most of the *Tao Te Ching* is written in an enigmatic style that occasionally defies translation altogether, even by experts. "There is no consensus on the first two lines of this stanza," Roberts admits in his annotation of Stanza 10. For another instance, consider the famous couplet that opens Stanza 38. In Chinese: *Shang de bu de, Shi-yi you de*—literally "Upper virtue not virtue, Therefore has virtue." Say what? (Roberts: "High virtue by obliging not/ Acquires moral force.")

Part of the problem is in the nature of the classical Chinese language. In its earliest form—the form employed in the *Tao Te Ching*, and by all the other great philosophers—written Chinese was extremely abbreviated in its syntax. Even modern Chinese people cannot read the language of the classics easily without special training. The purpose of early written Chinese was really mnemonic—to help one recall matter acquired by oral transmission, not to tell you something you didn't know before.

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This makes for an extremely short-winded form of presentation. In book one, chapter nine of the *Analects* of Confucius, for example, we read the four-character injunction: *Shen zhong zhui yuan*. Legge translates this as: "Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice"—a syllable-to-syllable ratio of very nearly one to ten. (It would be about one to six in modern colloquial Chinese.) Burton Watson, in the introduction to his invaluable handbook *Early Chinese Literature*, emits the following sigh of exasperation: "Is it too much to ask that the writer indicate at least the subject of the sentence? . . . In the case of classical Chinese the answer is usually, yes."

One consequence of all this minimalism is that translators can "color" their work in many different ways. Dr. Ching-Hsiung Wu, for example, who was a Catholic (he served as Minister Plenipotentiary to the Holy See under Chiang Kai-shek's government on Taiwan), produced a version of the *Tao Te Ching* in 1961 that has been very popular with Christians:

> . . . only he who is willing to give his body
> for the sake of the world is fit to be
>
> entrusted with the world.
> Only he who can do it with love is worthy of
>
> being the steward of the world.
> [Stanza 13]

Similarly, Witter Bynner's *The Way of Life According to Laotzu* (1944) reflects his own pacifism, the more strongly felt because his country was at war: "the way for a vital man to go is not the way of a soldier" (Stanza 31).

Moss Roberts's view is that the book should be taken mainly as a treatise on statecraft. Thus where, in the first line of Stanza 41, other translators render *shang shi* as "scholars of the highest class" (Legge), "men of stamina" (Bynner), "a wise scholar" (Wu) or "superior students" (Muller), Roberts says: "men of service." Similarly with the passage "Block all exchanges, shut all doors" in Stanza 52. Other translators take this as a command to withdraw from social intercourse, the better to cultivate oneself, but Roberts sees it as in line with other instructions to the ruler to keep his people ignorant.

This business of keeping the people ignorant has now turned up twice in this piece, and is critical to an understanding of Taoism's political consequences. At first sight it is difficult to fathom how a doctrine so mystical, quietist, and extremely reactionary could have any political consequences at all. In ancient China, though, wellnigh the only available employment for men of letters was as advisors to the princes who ruled the petty kingdoms of that time, and who were engaged in a

constant and unblinking struggle for mastery over each other. A philosopher who had nothing to say about statecraft could get no hearing, and so all the schools had political consequences. Those that flowed from the *Tao Te Ching* were of particular importance, and the most important of them all was the development of Legalism.

Legalism is traditionally supposed to have been thought up by a gentleman with the title Lord of Shang, who lived 390–338 b.c. and served as an advisor to Count Xiao, ruler of the state of Qin in northwest China. To place the origins of Legalism with this person, though, is certainly an over-simplification, and the so-called *Book of Lord Shang* (there is an English translation, originally published in 1928, by J. J. L.Duyvendak) is for the most part a later forgery. There are, however, good reasons to think that it offers a fairly true picture of the means by which Lord Shang reformed Qin and set it on the path that led its rulers to the conquest of all China, the last of those rulers styling himself "First Emperor" in 221 b.c. The *Book of Lord Shang* preaches totalitarianism with breathtaking frankness. One of its sections has the title "Weakening the People." In another place it lists ten evils the wise ruler should shun: they include virtue, integrity, and music. It was, beyond any doubt, by dint of these odious doctrines that China was first united on roughly the scale that is familiar to us today.

And yet, if you read the *Book of Lord Shang*, you see showing clearly through its harsh precepts the quietism and restraint of the *Tao Te Ching*. "Weakening the People," for example, sounds dreadful to modern man—to "we, the people"—but is a fair extension of the meaning of *rou*, one of the key terms in the *Tao Te Ching*, which can mean "meek," "gentle," or "restrained" as well as "weak." It is as if, starting from the proposition that "the meek shall inherit the earth," one were to argue that a state under a strong central leader, whose people were kept meek and submissive, could conquer a mighty empire. Which, in fact, is what the book does argue, and what in fact happened! And how are the people to be kept in that meek, submissive state? By an inflexible system of rewards and punishments, explicitly endorsed in Stanza 74 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

> If they are in constant fear of death
> And we seize and put to death
> Committers of crimes, then who would dare?

The horrid doctrines of Legalism attained their finished form in the teaching of Han Fei Tzu (280–233 b.c.). In opposition to Confucius's yearning for traditional hierarchies and to the more meritocratic schemes of post-Confucian thinkers like Mo Tzu, Han Fei Tzu proposed a state organized around a system of laws so all-embracing and correct that it required no elites at all to administer, nor even a very active monarch—*wu-wei* enthroned, or, to recast it in terms of a somewhat later thinker, the state withered away. Henri Maspero, in his survey of the period titled *China in Antiquity* (1978), discusses Legalism in a chapter headed "Schools Derived from Taoism," and concludes his account of Han Fei Tzu as follows:

> The doctrine of Han Fei, and that of the Legalists in general, tended to lower still further the position of the individual life, so little developed in ancient China and so constantly sacrificed to the life of society. . . . The theories of the Legalists, applied by the [Qin] dynasty to the government of the empire, had a great influence . . . upon the formation of the modern Chinese mind.

The *Tao Te Ching* has been a great favorite with translators. Witter Bynner, living in a provincial Mexican town during World War ii, seems to have had no difficulty acquiring fourteen different English translations, to which he then added his own version. Fourteen, though of course a different fourteen, was also the count on the shelves at my local Barnes & Noble, a perfectly humdrum suburban chain bookstore, last weekend. The only attempt at a methodical tally of English translations that I have been able to locate is one performed in the early 1980s by Clark Melling, a scholar at the University of New Mexico. He listed forty-two, but I feel sure that is an undercount. In any case, there are certainly many more than that now. A quick trawl through book sites on the internet suggests sixty as a lower bound, but more diligent inquiry might come up with a larger number. Some of these are high-, if not best-, sellers: my copy of the aforementioned Dr. Wu's translation is in the tenth printing by its second publisher; the version put out by its first publisher went to at least eighteen printings. That internet search also revealed a wide variety of "spin-off" books, applying themes from the *Tao Te Ching* to subjects as disparate as child-raising, cooking, drumming, sex, and nuclear physics. Plainly there is a huge market for Taoism among Americans of our time.

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The reason for this probably lies in the obscurity of the language, which allows the *Tao Te Ching* to serve its readers as a "mirror" text—one into which they can project their own hopes and fears, rather like a newspaper horoscope. The psychological processes involved here were drawn very well by Tom Wolfe in his 1998 novel *A Man in Full*. One of Wolfe's characters is Conrad Hensley, a thoughtfull but ill-educated and unformed young man who by chance encounters the works of Epictetus and soon becomes a proselytizing Stoic. In an age like ours, when many people—probably most people—reach adulthood without ever having passed through any strict moral education deeper than the vapidities of "political correctness," there is bound to be a demand for such products. Given that demand, it is not very surprising that few of those who have been visited by the temptation to make a translation of the *Tao Te Ching* seem to have been able to restrain themselves, to practice *wu-wei*. The nature of the book itself strengthens the temptation. For one thing, it is not very long—only five-thousand characters. Suppose you didn't know any Chinese, but knew how to use a Chinese dictionary (an impossible state of affairs, as it happens, but let's suppose); if you spent five minutes looking up and figuring out the syntactical significance of every single character, you could get the whole job done in three months of forty-hour weeks. Bynner, who could not read Chinese at all, in fact took an even more audacious approach, simply "distilling" the essence of as

many other translations as he could find. If you do actually know Chinese, translating the *Tao Te Ching* is a fairly minor undertaking. Moss Roberts has previously published a translation of the fourteenth-century novel *Three Kingdoms*, at 650,000 characters a task 130 times more daunting.

The pity of all these translations is, of course, that none of them can convey the poetry of the *Tao Te Ching*. There is no way that I can do this, either. I can only suggest that you find a Chinese speaker with a good stage voice and have him or her declaim one of the more sonorous passages to give you some flavor of the book as it has appealed to a hundred generations of Chinese enthusiasts. The tremendous, high-soaring and deep-diving Stanza 21 would be a good choice:

> Boundless virtue all-accepting
> Attends the Way, the Way alone.
> Assuming form, the Way reveals
> Shapes half-seen and then half-hid.
> In dark half-hid, a likening;
> In light half-dark, forms visible . . .

It is melancholy, and slightly disturbing, to realize that these passive, mystical doctrines, expressed with such beauty and vigor, helped set in motion a system of despotism that lasted almost unchanged for two-thousand years, and of which the Chinese people have not been able to rid themselves to this day. Yet after all, is it not in the Great Harmony, the universal City of the Sun, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, where all are uniform and all submissive, where all votes are unanimous and all controversy stilled, that "non-action" finds its truest fulfillment? Strange are the uses of quietism.

Notes
Go to the top of the document.

1. Professor Roberts has used the most popular current method for transliterating Chinese, in which an unapostrophized "t" becomes a "d" and an unapostrophized "ch" often becomes a "j." Go back to the text.

John Derbyshire's most recent book is *We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism* (Crown Forum).

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