



73

LAO TZU

fl. 4th c. B.C.

Of the many thousands of books which have been written in China, the one which has perhaps been the most frequently translated and read outside that country is a slender volume written over two thousand years ago and known as the *Lao Tzu*, or the *Tao Te Ching*. The *Tao Te Ching* (*Classic of the Way and its Power*) is the central text in which the philosophy of Taoism is expounded.

It is a subtle book, written in an extraordinary cryptic style and capable of many interpretations. The central idea concerns the *Tao*, which is usually translated "the Way" or "the Road." But the concept is somewhat obscure, since the *Tao Te Ching* itself begins by saying: "The *Tao* which can be told is not the eternal *Tao*; the name which can be named is not the eternal name." Nevertheless, we might say that *Tao* means roughly "Nature" or "the Natural Order."

Taoism takes the view that the individual should not struggle against the *Tao*, but should submit to it and work with it. Actively seeking to gain or exercise power is not so much immoral as it is foolish and futile. The *Tao* cannot be defeated; one should instead try to live in conformity with it. (A Taoist might point

out that water, which is infinitely soft, which flows without protest into the lowest places, and which responds to even the weakest force without resistance, is nevertheless indestructible, whereas the hardest rocks are worn away in time.)

For an individual human being, simplicity and naturalness are usually advisable. Violence should be avoided, as should all striving for money or prestige. One should not seek to reform the world, but rather to respect it. For governments, also, a somewhat inactive policy is usually the wisest course. There are too many statutes already. Passing more laws, or harshly enforcing the old ones, usually makes matters worse. High taxes, ambitious government programs, and making war are all contrary to the spirit of the Taoist philosophy.

According to Chinese tradition, the author of the *Tao Te Ching* was a man called Lao Tzu, who is said to have been an older contemporary of Confucius. But Confucius lived in the sixth century B.C., and both because of its style and its content, few modern scholars believe that the *Tao Te Ching* was written at such an early date. There is considerable dispute as to the book's actual date of composition. (The *Tao Te Ching* itself never mentions a specific person, place, date, or historical event.) However, 320 B.C. is a good estimate—certainly within eighty years of the true date, and probably much closer.

This problem has led to a great deal of dispute concerning the dates—and even the existence—of Lao Tzu himself. Some authorities believe the tradition that Lao Tzu lived in the sixth century B.C., and have therefore concluded that he did not write the *Tao Te Ching*. Other scholars have suggested that he is merely a legendary figure. My viewpoint, accepted only by a minority of scholars, is that: (1) Lao Tzu was a real person, and the author of the *Tao Te Ching*; (2) He lived in the *fourth* century B.C.; and (3) The story that Lao Tzu was an older contemporary of Confucius is fictitious, and was fabricated by later Taoist philosophers in order to lend prestige to the man and his book.

It is worth noting that of the early Chinese writers neither Confucius (551-479 B.C.), nor Mo Ti (fifth century B.C.), nor

Mencius (371-289 B.C.) makes any mention of either Lao Tzu or the *Tao Te Ching*; however, Chuang Tzu, an important Taoist philosopher who flourished about 300 B.C., mentions Lao Tzu repeatedly.

Since even the existence of Lao Tzu is in dispute, we should be skeptical of biographical details. But there are respectable sources for the following statements: Lao Tzu was born and lived in northern China. For part of his life he was an historian or

Taoist family sacrifices to the harvest moon.



curator of official archives, most probably at Loyang, the capital of the Chou dynasty monarchs. Lao Tzu was not his original name, but is rather an honorific title meaning roughly "old master." He was married and had a son named Tsung. Tsung later became a general in the state of Wei.

Although Taoism started as a basically secular philosophy, a religious movement eventually developed out of it. However, while Taoism as a philosophy continued to be based primarily on the ideas expressed in the *Tao Te Ching*, the Taoist religion soon became encrusted with an enormous number of superstitious beliefs and practices that have relatively little to do with the teachings of Lao Tzu.

Assuming that Lao Tzu actually was the author of the *Tao Te Ching*, his influence has been large indeed. The book is very short (less than six thousand characters in Chinese, and therefore small enough to fit on a single sheet of newspaper!), but it contains much food for thought. A whole series of Taoist philosophers have used the book as a starting point for their own ideas.

In the West, the *Tao Te Ching* has been far more popular than the writings of Confucius or of any Confucian philosopher. In fact, at least forty different English translations of the book have been published, a larger number than for any other book except the Bible.

In China itself, Confucianism has generally been the dominant philosophy, and where there is a clear conflict between the ideas of Lao Tzu and those of Confucius, most Chinese have followed the latter. Nevertheless, Lao Tzu has generally been highly respected by the Confucians. Furthermore, in many cases, Taoist ideas have simply been assimilated into Confucian philosophy, and have thereby influenced millions of persons who do not call themselves Taoists. Similarly, Taoism has had a marked influence on the Chinese development of Buddhist philosophy, and in particular on Zen Buddhism. Though few people today call themselves Taoists, there is no Chinese philosopher except Confucius who has had so widespread and enduring an impact on human thought as Lao Tzu.