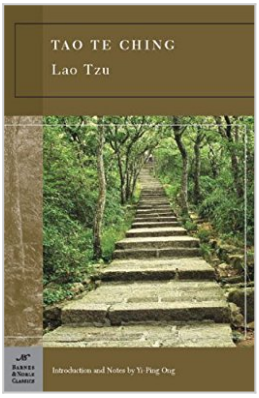


# Tao Te Ching (Barnes & Noble Classics)

*By Lao Tzu*



**Tao Te Ching (Barnes & Noble Classics)** By Lao Tzu

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Epigrammatic, enigmatic, intensely poetic, the *Tao Te Ching* is the mystical, spiritual soul of Taoism, one of the three great religions (along with Confucianism and Buddhism) of ancient China. The Tao is usually translated as “the way” or “the path,” but it is better understood as a universal life force that flows around and through all things. The *Tao Te Ching* teaches us that happiness is found in becoming one with the Tao, which enables us to live in harmony, balance, and peace and to develop the virtues of humility, moderation, and compassion.

Taoism emphasizes “non-dualistic” thinking and the interconnectedness of all life. The “dualistic thinker” looks at the world and sees differences, comparisons, and contrasts. The Taoist sage knows that all such judgments depend on the person making them, not on the reality of what is being judged. Unlike theistic (God-centered) religions, Taoism does not involve prayer to a deity. Instead, Taoists meditate on the wisdom in the *Tao Te Ching*, seeking to unravel the paradoxes and understand the complexities that lie within its simple language.

**Yi-Ping Ong**
graduated with a B.A. in Philosophy from Columbia University and a second B.A. in Philosophy and Theology from Oxford University. She is currently completing her Ph.D. in Philosophy at Harvard.

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## Editorial Review



**From Yi-Ping Ong's Introduction to *Tao Te Ching***

The *Tao Te Ching* is one of the most widely translated classics of all time and is without doubt the most widely translated work in Chinese. From East to West, generations of readers have marveled at its mystical yet simple profundity. It is considered to be the single most important text of Taoism. However, the question of how exactly it should be classified does not admit of a clear answer. Is the *Tao Te Ching* a book of ethics? Is it a religious text? Is it philosophical, especially given its focus on the deepest and truest way of seeing reality? Or is it, in fact, a work of literary genius—playful, poetic, paradoxical? No doubt the text has aspects of each and can be enjoyed for its poetry no less than for its reflections on human affairs, life, the universe, and the nature of the good. Nevertheless, one might wonder if there is an essential message to the *Tao Te Ching* and whether, as a consequence, there is a genre to which this message belongs.

Many have called it a book of wisdom, part of the so-called "wisdom tradition" that predates any single religion and that finds expression in texts as disparate as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Socratic dialogues, and the biblical book of Proverbs. These works typically extol the study of both virtue and the obstacles to virtue; they attempt to reveal the path to right relations between humans, and to right relations between humans and the universe. Like the *Tao Te Ching*, these texts often focus on two primary methods by which one can acquire a deeper knowledge of virtue: gaining self-knowledge and rejecting worldly aims and standards. However, if the *Tao Te Ching* is to be thought of as a book of wisdom, what sense can be made of its attacks on wisdom and virtue? "Get rid of 'holiness' and abandon 'wisdom' and the people will benefit a hundredfold," it proclaims (chapter 19). And in another passage, on the incommensurability of the Tao and virtue, we are told: "True virtue is not virtuous / Therefore it has virtue. / Superficial virtue never fails to be virtuous / Therefore it has no virtue" (chapter 38).

Upon encountering passages such as these, even the most dedicated reader may feel a temptation to reinterpret or simplify away the ensuing confusion. However, before dismissing these paradoxes as senseless, or relegating them to the level of mere word play, we must go back to the beginning—the beginning of the text, that is. There we are told, "The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao. / The name that can be named is not the eternal name" (chapter 1). The internal resistance of the text itself to categorization, especially as a work that attempts to teach the nature of virtue in a way that can be "named" or "followed," is no accident.

As with most texts that are as ancient as the *Tao Te Ching*, there remains some controversy over both the historical dating of the work and the biographical details of its author, Lao Tzu. The traditional view dates the text back to the sixth century B.C., largely on the basis of accounts describing a meeting between Confucius and Lao Tzu. These accounts describe Lao Tzu as an older man who is a contemporary of the younger Confucius (551–479 B.C.). However, reports of the supposed meeting were not accepted as tradition until the middle of the third century B.C., thus rendering their authority somewhat doubtful. Most modern scholars agree that the *Tao Te Ching* emerged in the late fourth century or early third century, about 2,500 years ago. In fact, stone tablets dated to around 300 B.C. have been found engraved with recognizable fragments of the text. Such a date would place the writing of the text at the height of one of the most intellectually productive times in Chinese history, known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought." During this time a multitude of philosophies were developed and a rich culture of intellectual debate flourished. Besides Taoism, other schools such as Confucianism, Legalism, and Mohism gave rise to the central classical texts

that were to exert a great influence on Chinese thought over the next two millennia.

The name “Lao Tzu” was not the personal name of the author, but one bestowed upon him out of respect: “Lao” means “old” or “venerable,” and “Tzu” is an honorific term attached to the names of scholars that can be roughly translated as “master.” Very little was recorded about the actual life of Lao Tzu, and consequently there is much disagreement regarding his historical existence. Although he is mentioned on scrolls dating as far back as 400 B.C., many have attributed this appearance in the historical record to mere legend. Indeed, the legends surrounding the life of Lao Tzu are truly fantastic. The historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien, author of the *Shih chi* (*Records of the Historian*), reports claims that Lao Tzu lived to more than two hundred years of age! Other legends maintain that he was born with white hair. According to Taoist tradition, he was an archivist who worked in the imperial library of the Zhou Dynasty court. It was there that he supposedly met Confucius, who had come to inquire about propriety and rites. Lao Tzu proceeded to dazzle him with his deep insight into the meaninglessness of these basic tenets of Confucian morality. According to this same story, Lao Tzu later resigned from his post in the Zhou court, then traveled west on a water buffalo to reach the great desert. He was stopped by a guard at the westernmost gate. This guard demanded that Lao Tzu—who had never, until this point, written down a word of his teachings—leave a record of his wisdom before he departed forever into the desert. The result of this request was the *Tao Te Ching*.

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