

# Lao Tzu

## Biography / Overview

Lao Tzu, also known as Laozi or Lao Tze, is a legendary Chinese philosopher and the author of the foundational text of Taoism, the Tao Te Ching. His name means “Old Master” in Chinese. The information available about the life of Laozi and historical sources is limited.

Laozi worked as a court archivist during the Zhou dynasty and was responsible for keeping historical records in the royal court. According to legend, as Laozi got older, he became unhappy with the corruption he saw around him and decided to leave civilization behind and retreat to the wilderness. It was during this journey that he composed the Tao Te Ching, a concise and enigmatic text that explores the concept of the Tao (the Way) and offers guidance on living a harmonious life by being humble and in accordance with nature. His ideas and teachings on Tao (the Way) became the foundation of Taoism, leaving a significant influence on Chinese thought and culture. Today, millions of people still study Lao Tzu’s teachings, which have been a source of inspiration for countless scholars, poets, and artists throughout the centuries.

## Bibliography / Primary Sources

Laozi's primary work includes the Tao Te Ching, which is a collection of 81 short verses that form the heart of Taoist philosophy. This foundational text explores themes such as the nature of the Tao, the concept of wu wei (effortless action), and the harmonious balance of opposites. The Tao Te Ching is known for its cryptic and paradoxical style, which has inspired countless interpretations and scholarly commentaries throughout history. While the authorship of these texts is often debated, they remain central to the study of Taoism.

## Sources:

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The Internet Sacred Text Archive - <https://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/taote.htm>

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National Archives of China - <http://www.laoschool.net/laoschool/laoschool/laozi/>

Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy - <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9781402042352>

Harvard University Asia Center -

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### **Birth Date / Death Date**

The exact birth and death dates of Laozi remain lost in history and are a subject of debate among scholars. According to traditional accounts, Laozi was born in the 6th century BCE, during the Zhou dynasty in China. The date of his death is unknown. Some sources suggest that Laozi lived to be over 100 years old, while others claim that he achieved immortality and simply disappeared into the wilderness.

Given the legendary status of Laozi and the lack of concrete historical evidence, it is difficult to pinpoint his exact dates of birth and death. Instead, his legacy is preserved through the teachings found in the Tao Te Ching and other Taoist texts.

### **Notable / Best-Known For**

Laozi is best known for his authorship of the Tao Te Ching, a text that forms the foundation of Taoist philosophy and remains one of the most translated books in world literature. His philosophy centers on the nature of Tao, the concept of Wu Wei (the Way) that teaches people to live in harmony with the universe. Laozi's teachings emphasize simplicity, humility, and non-action, which have resonated with readers for centuries, inspiring countless interpretations and adaptations. His paradoxical writing style, full of seeming contradictions like "the wise are not learned; the learned are not wise," has inspired thousands of years of interpretation and commentary. As the founder of Taoism, his influence extends beyond philosophy into Chinese medicine, martial arts, art, and culture, shaping East Asian thought for over two millennia.

### **Famous Quotes**

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 64

"When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be." - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 22

"Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it." - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 78

"Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 15

"He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know." - Tao Te Ching, Chapter 56

### **Major Works / Textual Contents**

The primary work associated with Laozi is the Tao Te Ching, a collection of 81 short verses that offer profound insights into the nature of the Tao and the art of living in harmony with the universe. The text is divided into two main sections: the Dao De Jing (Chapters 1–37), which discusses the nature of the Tao and the Way of Nature, and the De Jing (Chapters 38–81), which focuses on the art of governing and living a virtuous life. The Tao Te Ching is characterized by its paradoxical and cryptic style, which challenges readers to contemplate the deeper meanings behind its verses.

### **Influences / Intellectual Context**

Laozi's teachings were deeply influenced by the intellectual and philosophical milieu of ancient China, particularly the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). The concept of the Tao, or the Way, which lies at the heart of Daoist philosophy, can be traced back to the ancient Chinese belief in the harmony of the universe and the cyclical nature of existence. Laozi's emphasis on simplicity, humility, and non-action reflects the influence of earlier Daoist and Confucian thinkers, as well as the political and social upheaval of his time.

In addition to indigenous Chinese influences, Laozi's thought was also shaped by contact with other philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism and Indian metaphysics. The concept of wu wei, or effortless action, bears resemblance to the Buddhist notion of non-attachment, while Laozi's emphasis on the relativity of truth and the unity of opposites reflects the influence of Indian philosophical thought.

### **Legacy and Modern Significance**

**Historical Significance:** Laozi's legacy is far-reaching, as his teachings continue to influence philosophy, religion, and culture around the world. The concept of the Tao, as mentioned in the Tao Te Ching, has inspired generations of scholars, poets, artists, and spiritual seekers in understanding the fundamental principles of existence and the nature of reality. Laozi's emphasis on simplicity, humility, and non-action has resonated with individuals seeking a deeper connection to the natural world and a more harmonious way of living.

Modern Significance: Laozi's philosophy remains relevant in the modern world, offering insights into current issues such as sustainability, mindfulness, and ethical leadership. The principles of wu wei (the Way), teaching to go with the flow and the unity of opposites in order to find balance, continue to inform discussions on ecology, economics, and social justice, highlighting the enduring relevance of Laozi's teachings in the 21st century.

### **Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society**

In 2008, during the global financial crisis, business leaders turned to Laozi's principle of wu wei, adopting "hands-off" management styles and letting markets self-correct rather than forcing solutions.

The 2010s mindfulness movement in Silicon Valley saw tech companies like Google and Apple incorporating Taoist meditation practices, teaching employees to "do less, achieve more."

In 2018, the "Laozi and Dao" exhibition at the British Museum showcased artifacts related to Laozi and Daoist philosophy, drawing attention to the enduring legacy of his teachings in the modern world.

The publication of new translations and commentaries on the Tao Te Ching and the Zhuangzi continues to stimulate scholarly interest in Laozi's philosophy and its relevance to contemporary issues.

The 2022 "quiet quitting" trend in the West echoed Laozi's philosophy of doing only what is necessary, rejecting hustle culture for a more balanced approach to work.

### **Additional Readings and Scholarly Sources**

The British Museum - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/laozi-and-dao>

Routledge Chinese Society and Culture Series -

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