

## **The *Tao Te Ching***

**Introduction to an Exhibition by Peggy Kwong-Gordon  
Olin Gallery  
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The *Tao Te Ching*, or the *Scripture of the Way and its Power*, is one of the foundational texts of Chinese civilization – in particular of the religious and intellectual tradition of Taoism.

Taoism is one of the two main streams of Chinese thought, along with Confucianism. They took shape at roughly the same time, from the 5<sup>th</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE, at a time when China was in a long period of civil war, aptly named the “Warring States” period.

Taoism and Confucianism both attempted to provide a new philosophical underpinning for government and society. Confucius’ theory was that a well-ordered and harmonious society could only be brought about when the ruling classes (the aristocracy and government officials) were composed of virtuous people. Their virtue, he said, would then spread throughout society like a wind rippling through a field of grain, mediated by able officials actively managing society through rational and benevolent means.

The Taoist approach focused not on society and conventional morality but on the individual’s relationship with the natural world. The Taoists had a *laissez faire* theory of government, although they too said that having a good ruler at the top was crucial. The difference was that for them, the ideal “sage-king” was one who did as little as possible to interfere with the people’s natural wants and needs. Their ideal form of action in the world, for both the ruler and the ordinary person, was called *wu-wei*, or “actingless action” – i.e. a form of natural action that reacts spontaneously to the flow of events and changing circumstances. The sage-ruler, they said, understands that governing a large kingdom is like “cooking a small fish.” How do you cook a small fish? As lightly as possible. (Incidentally, Ronald Reagan quoted that

line in one of his inaugural addresses. Indeed, the Confucians and Taoists, in their basic attitudes towards government, were the Democrats and Republicans, respectively, of ancient China.)

Taoist tradition claims that the *Tao Te Ching* was written by a shadowy figure called Lao Tzu in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. But “Lao Tzu” just means “Old Master,” and in fact there is no historical information whatsoever about the author or authors of the *Tao Te Ching*, which is also simply called the *Laozi*, after its reputed author. Historians now think that the text was compiled from multiple earlier sources in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. Despite its mysterious origins, this little text (only about 5,000 Chinese characters) has exerted tremendous influence on Chinese thought for over two millennia, and in just the past 40 years or so has been translated into English over 100 times.

The central concept of the *Tao Te Ching* is the *tao*, or Way/Path. The *tao* is both the Way of nature – the fundamental principle underlying the natural world – and the way of life that human beings should follow in order to lead a fulfilled life in harmony with the natural world. One of the claims made by the *Tao Te Ching* is that human intellect and language are inadequate by themselves to comprehend and express the true nature of the *tao*. Using language the *tao* can only be suggested by means of metaphor and paradox. And so the *Tao Te Ching* is full of metaphorical and paradoxical language. The *tao* is described as a nameless, shadowy principle lying behind or within all that we know:

There is a thing confusedly formed, born before Heaven and Earth.  
 Silent and void it stands alone and does not change,  
 Goes round and does not weary.  
 It is capable of being the mother of the world.  
 I know not its name so I style it “the Way” (25).

The *tao* is also described as being *empty*, yet full of potential:

Between Heaven and Earth – it is like a bellows,  
 empty but inexhaustible...(5).

Because of this inexhaustible power it is called the “Uncarved Block” – simple, whole, and unmanipulated by human action, yet with unlimited potential. And like a newborn baby, its potential or power lies in its softness and suppleness. One of the paradoxical claims of the *Tao Te Ching* is that what appears hard and strong is, in the long run, not as good as the soft and weak in overcoming difficulties and achieving long-lasting results. The *tao* is like water that, by softly dripping or insinuating itself into the minutest cracks and crevices, eventually wears away rock. This is the power (*te*) of water, which derives from the power of the Way (*tao te*). Thus, things are not what they seem:

The way that is bright seems dull;  
 The way that leads forward seems to lead backward;  
 The way that is even seems rough (41).

Whoever does anything to it will ruin it;  
 whoever lays hold of it will lose it (64).

For this reason, the wise person does not desire things that appear to be attractive and does not strive to achieve conventional goals. For things have a habit of turning into their opposites, and what was sought for may turn out to be counter-productive. Therefore the text counsels us:

Be bent so as to become whole,  
 Be crooked so as to become straight,  
 Be empty so as to become full,  
 Be worn so as to become new;  
 Possess little so as to acquire (22).

What is honored is rooted in the humble;  
 And what is exalted is founded in the lowly (39).

This kind of paradoxical language illustrates the limitations of logical, discursive thought. Since reality does not exactly fit our neat conceptual and linguistic categories, we must use

language creatively – metaphor, paradox, etc. – to state what is true.

The exhibit of Peggy Kwong-Gordon's art that we are about to see brilliantly expresses the substantiality of emptiness and the power of metaphor to convey meaning. Chapter 11 of the *Tao Te Ching* – one of the chapters included in the exhibit – says:

Thirty spokes conjoin in one hub;  
because there is nothing in between, the cart is useful.  
Clay is molded to form a vessel;  
because there is nothing inside, the vessel is useful.  
...  
Thus, with something one gets advantage,  
But with nothing one gets usefulness (11).

As you will see, the technique she has devised uses emptiness both to create elegant Chinese calligraphy (from a distance) and to suggest that things are not what they seem (close-up). It reminds me of the Taoist-influenced Chinese paintings that use emptiness – blank, unpainted silk or paper – as a positive, substantial element in their design; the fullness of emptiness. I think you will agree that, in this case at least, the medium certainly is the message.