

Dàodé jīng 道德經 Crib Sheet

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The *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzǔ*; Book of Venerable Masters), more commonly known by its honorific title of *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), is one of the most influential and most misunderstood Daoist classics. The present “crib sheet” is intended to provide concise guidance and to remedy common misconceptions. It should be noted that the latter are often perpetuated by non-specialist scholars and educators.

Inaccurate & Received View	Informed & Revisionist View
Lǎozǐ 老子 (<i>Lǎo-tzǔ</i> ; “Master Lao”) was a historical figure	<i>lǎozǐ</i> 老子 (lit., “old master[s]”) is not a personal name and “Lǎozǐ” is a legendary and composite figure
Lǎozǐ was Lǎo Dān 老聃/老僮 (Elder Dan)	Lǎo Dān 老聃, the “Archivist of Zhōu,” was only one mytho-historical stream that flowed into the formation of the “legend of Lǎozǐ.” Under the most generous and sympathetic reading, Lǎo Dān was an elder of classical Daoism, and some attributed teachings may have been collected in the received <i>Lǎozǐ</i>
Lǎozǐ wrote the <i>Dàodé jīng</i>	The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is an anonymous, multivocal anthology consisting of historical and textual material dating from the fourth to second century BCE and containing teachings and practices associated with various anonymous elders of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism
The <i>Lǎozǐ</i> is the “Book of Master Lao” (singular)	The <i>Lǎozǐ</i> is best understood as the “Book of Venerable Masters” (plural)
The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> refers to a single text	There are many manuscripts, redactions, and editions of the text that became known as the <i>Dàodé jīng</i> , with the Wáng Bì edition (DZ 690) generally engaged as the “standard received text” (RT). The text was originally untitled, but early on became referred to as the <i>Lǎozǐ</i> 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters)
The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is associated with “philosophical Daoism”	The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a key work of the inner cultivation lineages (ICL) of classical Daoism, which is the beginning of the religious tradition <i>which is Daoism</i> . “Philosophical Daoism” is a modern Western fiction rooted in colonialist, missionary, and Orientalist legacies

<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is philosophy</p>	<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is best understood as a Daoist contemplative and mystical work, emphasizing apophatic and quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation. Unless one is willing to re-envision and revitalize philosophy (lit., “love of wisdom”) along the lines of Pierre Hadot (“spiritual exercises”) and the later Michel Foucault (“techniques of self”), “philosophy” (<i>zhéxué</i> 哲學) is a miscategorization and mischaracterization. It is often rooted in academic careerism, internalized colonialism (e.g., “Chinese philosophy”), and magical thinking, and is further used as a legitimizing factor (cf. “science”)</p>
<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a “spiritual classic,” “Tao book,” and/or “wisdom literature”</p>	<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a key work of classical Daoism that became highly revered in the later Daoist tradition. It established some of the foundational Daoist commitments, practices, principles, values, and views. From a Daoist perspective, it is a <i>jīng</i> 經, a Daoist scripture (sacred text)</p>
<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a resource for spiritual seekers, as well as spiritual colonialists and spiritual capitalists, with any personal (secular Protestant) appropriation being valid</p>	<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a <i>Daoist</i> text, associated with the indigenous Chinese and now global religious tradition. There are distinctively Daoist ways of reading, applying, and interpreting the <i>Dàodé jīng</i>, including in the form of a robust Daoist commentary literature. Tradition-based Daoists tend to read the text as a practice manual</p>
<p>All of the contemplative, mystical, and religious technical terminology may be ignored and/or purged from the text</p>	<p>The technical terminology must be understood in a bilingual and comprehensive manner. A close reading of the <i>Dàodé jīng</i> reveals strong contemplative, mystical, soteriological (ultimate purpose), and theological (sacred) concerns and dimensions. In fact, the text is informed by and possibly assumes classical Daoist apophatic and quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation</p>
<p>Translations of the <i>Dàodé jīng</i> are the <i>Dàodé jīng</i> itself, and any translation provides access to the primary text</p>	<p>The <i>Dàodé jīng</i> is a Chinese Daoist source-text written in classical Chinese using traditional Chinese characters. Deeper engagement with the primary text requires an accurate and reliable translation (lit., “carrying over”), one in which a given translator’s training, skills, motivations, and so forth are considered. The majority of associated publications involve misrepresentation, including in the form of versions and adaptations by individuals who do not know Chinese</p>