

DAOIST SELF-STUDY GUIDES #3
Self-Study Guide to *Dàodé jīng* 道德經

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The *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzǔ*), more commonly referred to with its honorific title of *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), is one of the earliest texts and most important scriptures of the Daoist tradition. Although traditionally attributed to the legendary *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzǔ*; “Master Lao”/“Old Master”), the text is actually a multi-vocal anthology containing historical and textual material dating from at least the fourth to second centuries BCE. It includes teachings and practices associated with various anonymous elders of the inner cultivation lineages, the master-disciple communities, of classical Daoism. The earliest title is thus better understood as the *Book of Venerable Masters*, rather than the more conventional *Book of Master Lao*. The standard received text (RT), the Wáng Bì 王弼 redaction, consists of 81 untitled “verse-chapters,” which include at least three distinct types of composition, namely, aphorisms/poetry, parallel prose, and prose. Thus, each chapter should ideally be arranged according to three corresponding layouts.

A. SOME RELIABLE TRANSLATIONS

The majority of translations, including popular versions and adaptations by individuals who do not know classical Chinese, are deficient in various ways. The two dominant approaches treat the text as “literature” and “philosophy,” failing to recognize it as a key text of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism and a central scripture of the Daoist tradition. Specifically, few individuals recognize the core importance of apophatic contemplative practice and mystical experiencing, including the context-specific technical terminology. Unfortunately, there also are few translations rooted in a lived understanding of the associated Daoist views, practices, and experiences. More problematically, the text is a major object of the Orientalist gaze, including in the form of intellectual colonialism and spiritual capitalism that may be referred to as the “*Tao Te Ching* Translation Industry” (TTCTI).

(1) *Addiss, Stephen, and Stanley Lombardo. 1993. *Tao Te Ching*. Indianapolis: Hackett. (Literary)

Probably the best literary and poetic translation of the standard received text. Notable for its concise poetic approximation of the Chinese source-text. Also extremely affordable.

(2) Ames, Roger, and Donald Hall. 2003. *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine. (Philosophical)

Probably the most influential recent philosophical translation of the text. Feeds into other philosophical translations, such as those of Philip Ivanhoe (2002), Hans-Georg Moeller (2007), and Chad Hanson (2009). Contains a helpful thematic index and some important insights about technical terms. Like these types of translations and accompanying approaches as a whole, problematically interprets the *Lǎozǐ* as “philosophy” and lacks attention to the inner cultivation

lineages of classical Daoism, including the contemplative and mystical apophatic praxis at the foundation of the text. Also somewhat connected to the “*Tao Te Ching* Translation Industry.”

(3) Henricks, Robert. 1989. *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*. New York: Ballantine. (Philological/Historical)

Bilingual translation of the Mǎwángdūi 馬王堆 (lit., “Tomb of King Ma”; Chángshā 長沙, Húnán) archaeological manuscripts (dat. ca. 168 BCE; dis. 1973). Often referred to as the “Silk *Lǎozǐ*,” these are the second oldest extant manuscripts. Henricks’ rendering is slightly problematic for combining the two independent manuscripts. Also problematic title.

(4) *Henricks, Robert. 2000. *Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*. New York: Columbia University Press. (Philological/Historical)

Bilingual translation of the Guōdiàn 郭店 (Jīngmén 荊門, Húběi) archaeological materials (dat. ca. 300 BCE; dis. 1993). Often referred to as the “Bamboo *Lǎozǐ*,” this is the oldest extant “manuscript,” actually three sets of bamboo slips. Henricks’ Chinese edition includes both the ancient Chinese characters and the modern equivalents. Helps to reconstruct the composition history of the received *Lǎozǐ*. Problematic title.

(5) *Komjathy, Louis. 2023 (2003). *Handbooks for Daoist Practice* 修道手冊. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. 3 vols. Ravinia, IL: Square Inch Press 方寸書社. (Literary/Practical)

Handbook 2: “The Book of Venerable Masters” is a bilingual partial translation of select chapters, about half of the standard received text, with specific attention to those most relevant for Daoist practice-realization. One of the only reliable “Daoist translations,” rooted in a tradition-based Daoist scholar-practitioner approach (SPA). Includes attentiveness to the specifics of Daoist apophatic practice and associated technical terminology. Recently revised into a complete bilingual Chinese-English translation, but Komjathy also is increasingly dismantling and reorganizing the received text into “thematic units” and “textual sections” only loosely related to the received chapter sequence and arrangements.

(6) *Komjathy, Louis. 2023. *Dàodé jīng* 道德經: *A Contextual, Contemplative, and Annotated Bilingual Translation*. Ravinia, IL: Square Inch Press 方寸書社. (Literary/Scholarly/Practical)

A complete literary and scholarly translation of the standard received text. The first translation and interpretive study to locate the work in the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. Includes robust introductory chapters that discuss the classical Daoist master-disciple communities as well as the central importance of apophatic and quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation. Also includes interpretive notes, which function as a quasi-concordance and quasi-commentary, and various appendices that offer additional forms of engagement. The culmination of some thirty years of sustained inquiry, reflection, and teaching. The standard translation utilized in the Daoist Foundation 道教基金會 community and the recommended translation for Daoists more generally.

(7) *Komjathy, Louis. 2024. *Dàodé jīng 道德經: A Daoist Contemplative Translation*. Ravinia, IL: Square Inch Press 方寸書社. (Literary/Scholarly/Practical)

An abridged edition of #6. Consists of a new concise and framing introduction, the original bilingual translation, three appendices, and suggestions for further reading. Also more accessible and affordable.

(8) *LaFargue, Michael. 1992. *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching*. Albany: State University of New York Press. (Practical)

Prior to Komjathy's Daoist contemplative work, the only reliable complete scholarly translation attentive to the practice-based characteristics of the text, specifically the central importance of stillness. Drawing upon his analysis of the text in terms of "aphorisms" and "saying collages," LaFargue reorganizes the received chapter sequence according to seven major topics. All the more impressive because published before the Guōdiàn discoveries (see A.4 above). Also includes important insights about the application of hermeneutics to text-critical work in Daoist Studies. One deficiency is lack of attention to the technical specifics of Daoist apophatic and quietistic meditation documented in the *Lǎozǐ*.

(9) *Lau, D.C. 1989 (1982). *Chinese Classics: Tao Te Ching*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. (Historical)

Bilingual translation of the standard received text, originally published in 1963, and of the Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 archaeological manuscripts (see A.3 above). Probably the most influential historical translation. In addition to being reliable and foundational, Lau's translation is noteworthy for its historical contextualization. One issue is Lau's lack of recognition of text's association with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism.

(10) Mair, Victor. 1993. *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*. New York: Bantam Books. (Philological/Historical)

Reliable translation of the Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 archaeological manuscripts (see A.3 above). Noteworthy for attentiveness to historical and philological issues, including technical terminology. Also contains some thought-provoking hypotheses about classical Daoist practice.

(11) Red Pine (Bill Porter). 1996. *Lao-tzu's Taoteching*. San Francisco: Mercury House. (Literary/Poetic)

Helpful for including select translations of various traditional Daoist commentaries. The translation itself should be used with caution, as it is idiosyncratic and often unreliable. Also problematic title.

(12) Starr, Jonathan. 2001. *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam. (Philosophical)

Includes bilingual translation of the standard received text with cribs/trots of each character with Pinyin Romanization and single-word English equivalents. Helpful for individuals who do not know classical Chinese to engage the source-text. The translation itself is often inaccurate and unreliable. Also problematic title.

(13) Wu, John C. H. 1990 (1961). *Tao Teh Ching*. Boston: Shambhala. (Literary/Historical)

A literary and poetic translation of the standard received text. Generally reliable and accessible. Also affordable.

(14) *Wu Yi 吳怡. 1989. *The Book of Lao Tzu (The Tao Te Ching)*. San Bruno, CA: Great Learning Publishing Company. (Philological/Historical)

Relatively obscure and under-utilized bilingual translation of the standard received text. Includes Chinese characters with English cribs/trots, but not Pinyin Romanization. Thus the need for Starr or a similar resource for “non-Chinese” readers. Noteworthy for attentiveness to historical and philological issues, including technical terminology. Problematic title.

B. SOME IMPORTANT SECONDARY STUDIES AND COMMENTARIES

Paralleling and informing the dominant translation trajectories, there is little reliable scholarship attentive to the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism and the associated apophatic contemplative practice and mystical experiencing. We also await and are in need of both translations of traditional Daoist commentaries and new interpretive works rooted in Daoist views and practice-realization.

(1) Allan, Sarah, and Crispin Williams, eds. 2000. *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998*. Seattle: Society for the Study of Early China.

Highly historical, and often philological, explorations of the so-called “Guōdiàn *Lǎozǐ*” (see A.4 above). Relevant for individuals interested in the earliest extant archaeological materials. Assists in thinking about the composition history of the received *Lǎozǐ*.

(2) Bokenkamp, Stephen. 1997. *Early Daoist Scriptures*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Annotated translation and study of various early and early medieval Daoist texts. Includes a complete translation of the *Lǎozǐ xiǎng'ěr zhù* 老子想爾注 (Commentary Thinking through the *Lǎozǐ*; DH 55; LZ* 9; S.6825; TK 56; ZH 557; abbrev. XE), one of the seven early Daoist commentaries on the text. A Dūnhuáng 敦煌 manuscript discovered around 1907 and dating to about 500 CE, this is a previously lost early Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters) commentary apparently written by Zhāng Lǔ 張魯 (d. 215 CE), the 3rd Celestial Master. The *Lǎozǐ* translation

itself is somewhat idiosyncratic due to Bokenkamp's translation methodology of treating the commentary as primary and thus rendering the *Lǎozǐ* through that lens.

(3) *Chan, Alan K.L. 1991. *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Study with partial translations of the two most influential of the seven early Daoist commentaries on the text. These are (A) *Dàodé zhēnjīng zhù* 道德真經註 (Commentary on the Perfect Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; DZ 690; LZ* 12; ZH 560; abbrev. WB) by Wáng Bì 王弼 (226-249 CE), a key representative of the Xuánxué 玄學 (Hsüán-hsüéh; Profound Learning; so-called “Neo-Daoism”) Daoist hermeneutical movement and quasi-eremitic salon; and (B) *Lǎozǐ zhāngjù* 老子章句 (Chapter-and-Verse Commentary on the *Lǎozǐ*; DZ 682; LZ* 8; ZH 556; abbrev. HSG), a.k.a. *Dàodé zhēnjīng zhù* 道德真經註 (Commentary on the Perfect Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), attributed to Héshàng gōng 河上公 (Elder Dwelling-by-the-River; ca. 160 CE?), an obscure Daoist recluse and Yǎngshēng 養生 (Nourishing Life) practitioner.

(4) Cook, Scott. 2012. *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation*. 2 vols. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program.

Just what the title says. Includes a philological translation of the so-called “Guōdiàn *Lǎozǐ*” (see A.4 above). Henricks's translation is more readable and accessible.

(5) Csikszentmihalyi, Mark, and Philip Ivanhoe, eds. 1999. *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Important edited collection on the history and influence of the *Lǎozǐ*. Generally overly philosophical interpretations with a particular academic agenda, but the chapters on classical Daoist mystical praxis by Harold Roth (2) and the Daoist commentary tradition by the late Isabelle Robinet (4) are important and helpful.

(6) Erkes, Eduard. 1950. *Ho-shang-kung's Commentary on Lao-tse*. Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae.

Somewhat dated, but only available academic translation of the Héshàng gōng commentary (see B.3 above). This commentary adds individual chapter titles to the *Lǎozǐ*, which provide orientation, guidance, and insight. The latter also are included in an appendix of Komjathy's Daoist contemplative translation (A.6).

(7) *Kohn, Livia, and Michael LaFargue, eds. 1998. *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Best edited volume on the history and influence of the *Lǎozǐ*. Includes important chapters on the mythological identity of *Lǎozǐ* by A.C. Graham (1), the Héshàng gōng and Wáng Bì commentaries by Alan K.L. Chan (4), later Daoist commentaries by the late Isabelle Robinet (5), the *Dàodé jīng* in ritual by Livia Kohn (6), influential Western interpretations by Julia Hardy (7), philological

dating by William Baxter (10), and translation issues by Michael LaFargue and the late Julian Pas (12). Two significant omissions are discussions of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism and the practice of apophatic meditation documented in the text, including associated technical terminology (see A.5, A.6, A.7, A.8, and B.5.2 above).

(8) Liao, W. K. (Wenkui). 1939/1959. *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*. 2 vols. London: Arthur Probsthain.

Somewhat dated, but only readily available translation of the two *Lǎozǐ* commentaries contained in the *Hán Fēizi* 韓非子 (Book of Master Han Fei; DZ 1177; LZ* 6; ZH 972; 55 chapters), which is attributed to Hán Fēi 韓非 (ca. 280-233 BCE), a key Legalist. The two oldest of the seven early Daoist commentaries, these are the “Jiě-Lǎo 解老” (Explaining the *Laozi*; ch. 20) and “Yù-Lǎo 喻老” (Illustrating the *Laozi*; ch. 21).

(9) Lin, Paul J. 1977. *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies/University of Michigan.

Early translation and study of the Wáng Bì commentary (see B.3 above). Problematic title.

(10) *Líu Míng 劉明 (Charles Belyea; 1947-2015). 2015. *Observing Wuwei: The Heart of the Daodejing*. Oakland, CA: Da Yuan Circle.

One of the more interesting applied and lived modern Western Daoist commentaries. Often includes important insights into the *Lǎozǐ* in terms of tradition-based views and quietistic practice. The translation itself is somewhat problematic due Líu Míng's rudimentary understanding of classical Chinese and reliance on other translations. Like his other work, slightly tainted and undermined by the author's accompanying “crazy wisdom” and fabricated Zhèngyī 正一 (Orthodox Unity) Daoist lineage. Also includes some deficient views of wúwéi 無為 (“non-action”) as (unconsciously) reproducing personal habituation.

(11) *Lynn, Richard John. 1999. *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

More recent translation and study of the Wáng Bì commentary (see B.3 above). The most readable and accessible of the four translations (cf. B.9, B.15, and B.16). Problematic title.

(12) Major, John, Sarah Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, and Harold Roth. 2010. *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Complete annotated translation and study of the *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 (Book of the Huainan Masters; DZ 1184; ZH 978; 21 chapters), which is associated with Liú Ān 劉安 (179-122 BCE), the Prince of Huáinán. Includes the “Dàoyīng 道應” (Responding to the Dao; ch. 12) commentary on the *Lǎozǐ*, the second oldest of the seven early Daoist commentaries.

(13) Moeller, Hans-Georg. 2006. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

More systematic academic philosophical interpretation of the text. Coupled with the earlier intellectual histories of Benjamin Schwartz (1985) and A.C. Graham (1989), provides some insights into the larger cultural context of the *Lǎozǐ*. However, once again perpetuates problematic views of and approaches to the text as “philosophy.” Lacks attention to the central importance of apophatic practice and experience in the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, including the associated, germinal technical terminology contained in the *Lǎozǐ*.

(14) *Roth, Harold. 1999. *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Annotated translation and study of the mid-fourth century BCE “Nèiyè 內業” (Inward Training) chapter (ch. 49) of the received *Guǎnzǐ* 管子 (Book of Master Guan), which is traditionally associated with Guǎn Zhōng 管仲, an ancient Chinese philosopher and politician. Part of the so-called “Xīnshù 心術” (Techniques of the Heart-mind; THM) chapters (chs. 36-38 & 49), “Inward Training” may be the oldest extant classical Daoist text. In addition to explicating Daoist contemplative and mystical praxis as documented in “Inward Training,” Roth connects this text to the *Lǎozǐ* and locates both in the larger textual corpus and training regimen associated with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. An essential orientation-point to Roth’s pioneering revisionist scholarship on this earliest period of Daoist history. Also includes some problematic (Buddhist) views about classical Daoism, specifically involving imagined “breath meditation.” See also A.5, A.6, A.7, A.8, and B.5.2 above.

(15) Rump, Ariane, with Wing-tsit Chan. 1979. *Commentary on the Lao-tzu by Wang Pi*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Early translation and study of the Wáng Bì commentary (see B.3 above). Note that the latter is the only Daoist commentary to receive multiple translations, once again revealing the philosophical co-optation of the *Lǎozǐ*. Gives “non-Daoist” readers what they want.

(16) Wagner, Rudolf. 2003. *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi’s Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

The final installment of Wagner’s tripartite text-critical study of the Wáng Bì commentary (see B.3 above), with this book containing the actual translation. Often highly philological and technical.