

**Keping Wang**

*Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry.*

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The *Dao De Jing* is often described as one of the most enigmatic works in Chinese philosophy. This is due, in part, to its length—a mere 5000 Chinese characters long—which leaves much of it open to numerous interpretations. Its influence throughout East Asian history is tremendous, spawning endless commentaries, and it has been translated into Western languages hundreds of times. Matters have been further complicated by the discovery of new versions, most notably in 1973 and in 1993, which required new translations of certain passages and updated interpretations of the text as a whole. Difficult as the *Dao De Jing* and Daoism may be, instructors still need to teach it, and general readers need an exploratory book that is simple to read yet maintains fidelity to Daoism's rich complexity.

In this slim but robust volume, the author attempts to tease out major themes within the *Dao De Jing* and use them as framework for helping explain basic Daoist concepts to non-specialists. Wang has a difficult task ahead of him: how to explain a complex philosophical text from an unfamiliar culture to a non-specialist audience, while keeping it short. The format for *Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry* is ideal for college students: twenty-eight short chapters, often no longer than five pages of selected text from the *Dao De Jing*, followed by a one- or two-page commentary. These 140 pages of content are followed by a full-translation of the *Dao De Jing* in the appendix.

Wang foregrounds the most difficult and important themes within the *Dao De Jing*, first defining the Dao and its essence, features, and 'movement'. Then he moves onto well known concepts such as *wu-wei* (take-no-action) and *de* (virtue), terms that appear in other Chinese philosophies and resonate with thinkers throughout Korean and Japanese history as well. Wang has a good sense of pace. He reinforces his explanations of the Dao covered in the beginning chapters with reiterations throughout the less dense chapters in the latter half of the book. After an intense ten chapters or so, he discusses how the fundamental notions of the Dao noted in the first half are articulated in more general topics such as life, death, warfare, peace, and leadership. The thematic approach is not entirely unique; for example, Hans-Georg Moeller follows a similar approach in his recent, more specialized work, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*. (Moeller's text compliments Wang's book well in an advanced course). The last few chapters explain how Daoist followers employ these concepts through, for example, self-cultivation.

What I found particularly helpful is Wang's ability to touch upon points of controversy regarding translation and interpretation within the *Dao De Jing*, without becoming side-tracked by long scholarly discourse or being weighed down by excessive footnotes. For example, Wang takes a sentence that he translates as 'The highest honor

needs no flattering'. It seems simple enough, but he offers the alternate renderings by other Daoist scholars: 'supreme praise is no praise', and 'therefore to seek too much honor means to lose honor wholly'. They seem similar, but then he includes older well-known translations by Arthur Waley and Wing-tsit Chan. Waley's version of this passage is, 'Enumerate the parts of a carriage, and you still have not explained what a carriage is' while Chan translates it as 'Therefore enumerate all the parts of a chariot as you may, and you still have no chariot' (26-7). These two sets of the same sentence seem irreconcilable. The difference arises from two Chinese characters which can be easily confused, one of which means 'chariot', the other 'honor'. Following recent Chinese scholarship, Wang bases his translation on the assumption that a scribe misspelled the word when the text was copied from one piece of bamboo slip to another. Ancient texts in other philosophical traditions face similar issues, and could be an interesting launching point for discussion in a comparative philosophy course.

The clarity of the translations, especially of key terms, is a testament to the author's knowledge of the subject. He brings in other Daoist texts to help explain core term in the *Dao De Jing*, and makes brief but appropriate comparisons with Buddhism and Confucianism. However, there are some small, but non-trivial points for concern when using Wang's book. The first concerns the *Dao De Jing*'s authorship: nowhere does Wang discuss the historical Laozi, or even if others might, in fact, have added to the *Dao De Jing* over time. This omission becomes more glaring when Wang himself correctly notes the obvious authorship issues in Confucian texts. When attacking the claim that Confucius precedes Laozi, Wang employs the argument that Kongzi, 'Confucius' in Latin, simply means 'Master Kong'. He implies, quite correctly, that we should not accept the putative authorship of Confucian texts at face value. Would it not, then, be fair to point out that Laozi—'old master'—is an even more ambiguous term? Likewise, at least a cursory discussion of the difference between his use of the terms 'philosophical' versus 'religious' Daoism (6) would have been helpful.

More problematic, however, is Wang's tendency to connect Daoism to a putative, monolithic Chinese mentality. Repeatedly, Wang tells the reader that some aspect of Daoism is 'deeply-set in the mentality of the Chinese people' (21), 'deeply rooted in the mentality of the Chinese people' (29), 'internalized in the psychology of Chinese nationals in the main' (72), and that 'Daoism as a philosophy is often reckoned to be the wellspring of the psychology of the Chinese people in general' (119). China is a diverse place with a long history, too complex to warrant the Orientalist claim that all Chinese are of one mind. It also plays into the Chinese state's desire to downplay disharmony and encourage homogeneity. Nonetheless, these flaws can be put to good use in a college course—as an example of how even excellent texts can sometimes slip into uncritical generalizations. I would recommend this book as both an introduction to Daoism and as a resource for teaching critical thinking skills.

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