

Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: *Daoism I*

Daodejing



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Lee Wilson, 2020



Summary

I. *Daodejing*

- Laozi the Person?
- The Text
- Concepts

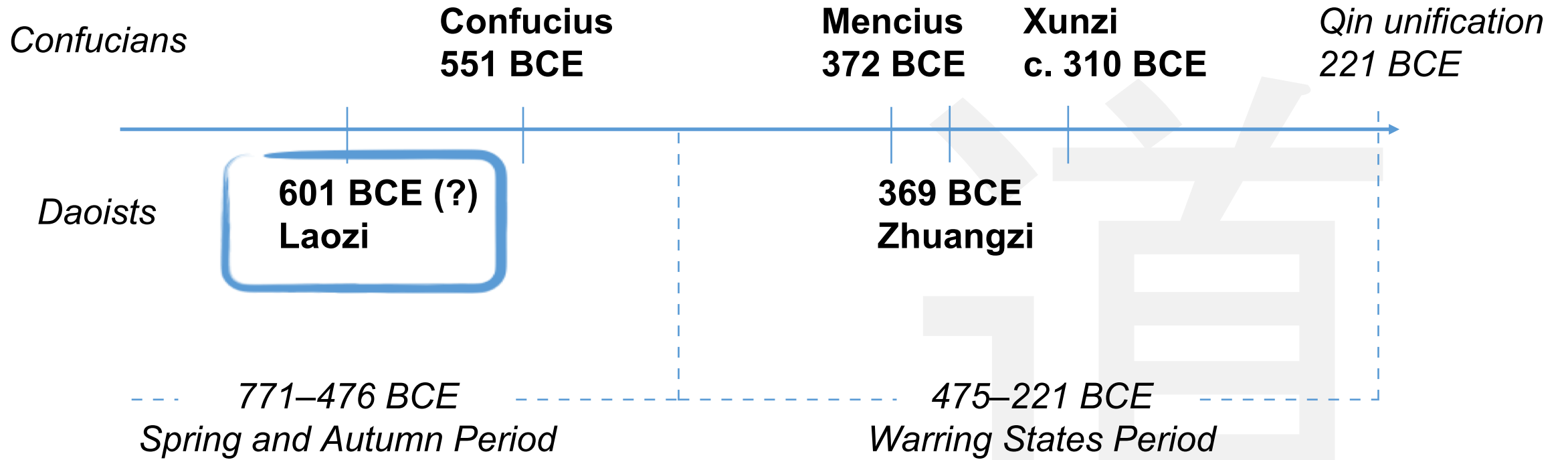
II. Discussion on Selected Extracts

- *Daodejing*

III. Daoism vs Confucianism

- Laozi contra the Confucians







The Way [*dao* 道]

noun (or sometimes *verb*)

- a. *A physical road/path*
- b. *A mode of conducting affairs, living one's life, or organising of the state*
- c. *The appropriate mode of conducting affairs, living one's life, or organising the state*
- d. *A linguistic account of b/c*
- e. ***The course of the natural or cosmic order***

**Way or
Truth?**



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Where Is the Human in Nature?

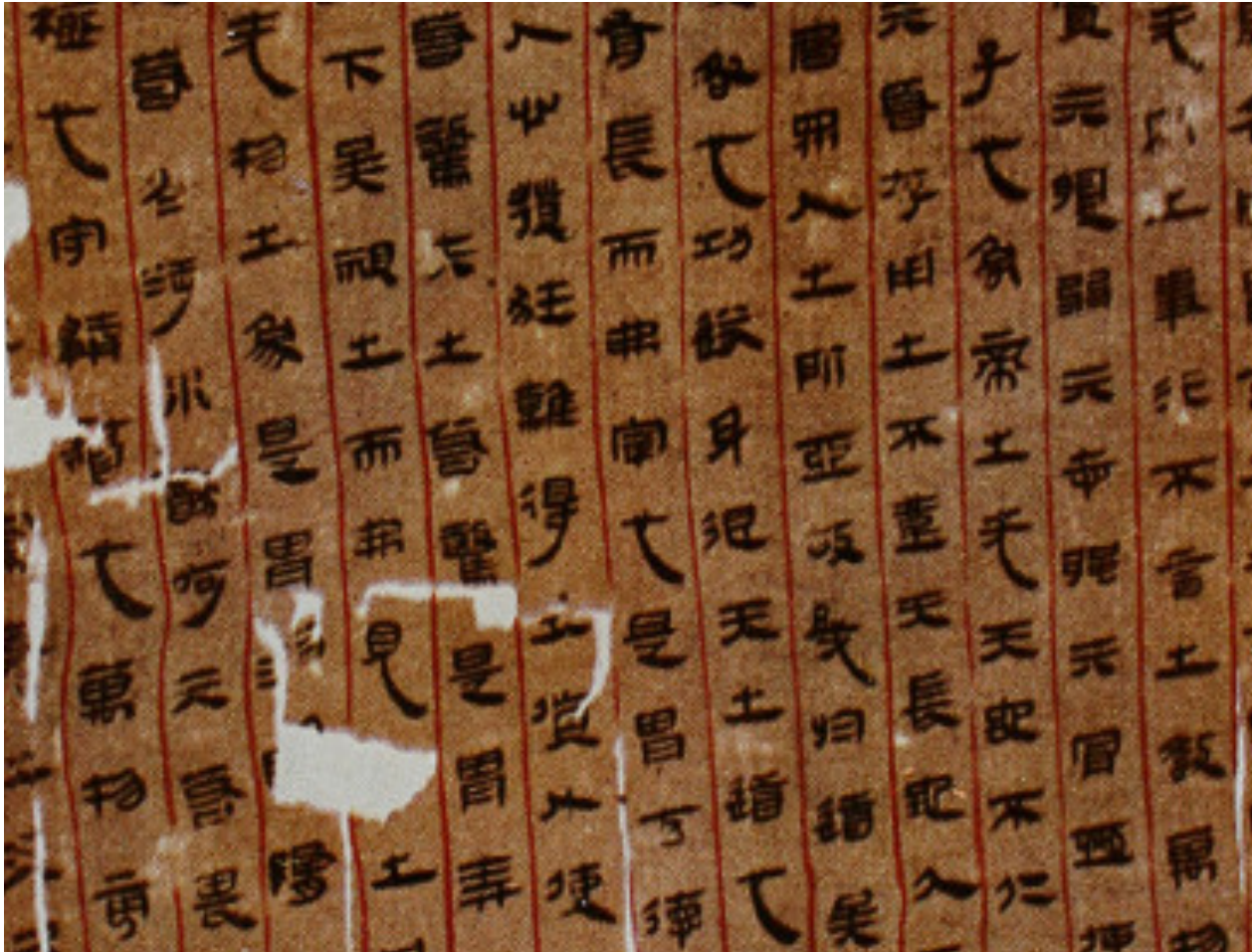




painting [cropped], "Laozi Riding an Ox," by Zhang Lu, in Taipei National Palace Museum¹

Laozi the Person?

- Li Er/Dan (李耳/聃) trad., 601–531 BCE
 - Keeper of archival records for Zhou court
 - Consulted by Confucius on ritual matters
- Departed westwards from China after decline of Zhou dynasty
 - Persuaded to record his teachings by a border guard
- Intellectual tradition
 - Intellectual currents rather than a formal school
 - Huang-Lao vs Lao-Zhuang



photograph [cropped] of Mawangdui Silk Manuscript Volume First²

The *Daodejing*

- (Unlikely) traditional dating to 6th century BCE
 - Probably bodies of saying that coalesced from late-5th century to 3rd century BCE with multiple authorship
 - Ministerial readership
- Comprised of 81 chapters
 - The Way (Chs. 1–37)
 - Power/Virtue (Chs. 38–81)
- Poetic
 - Wordplay
 - Paradoxes and contradictions



Key Concepts from the *Daodejing*

- (1) *Dao*
- (3) Uncarved wood
- (5) Non-Action





(1) *Dao*

- **The dao that becomes a dao is not the Constant [Eternal] Dao**
the name that becomes a name
is not the Constant [Eternal] Name
the maiden of Heaven and Earth
has no name
the mother of all things has a name
thus in innocence we see the beginning
in passion we see the end
two different names
for one and the same
the one we call dark
the dark beyond dark
the door to all beginnings (*Daodejing*, Ch. 1)

- **The Dao gives birth to one
one gives birth to two
two gives birth to three
three gives birth to ten thousand things**
ten thousand things with *yin* at their backs
and *yang* in their embrace
and breath between for harmony
what the world hates
to be orphaned widowed or destitute
kings use for their titles
thus some gain by losing
others lose by gaining
thus what people teach
I teach too
tyrants never choose their deaths
this becomes my teacher (Ch. 42)



(1) *Dao*

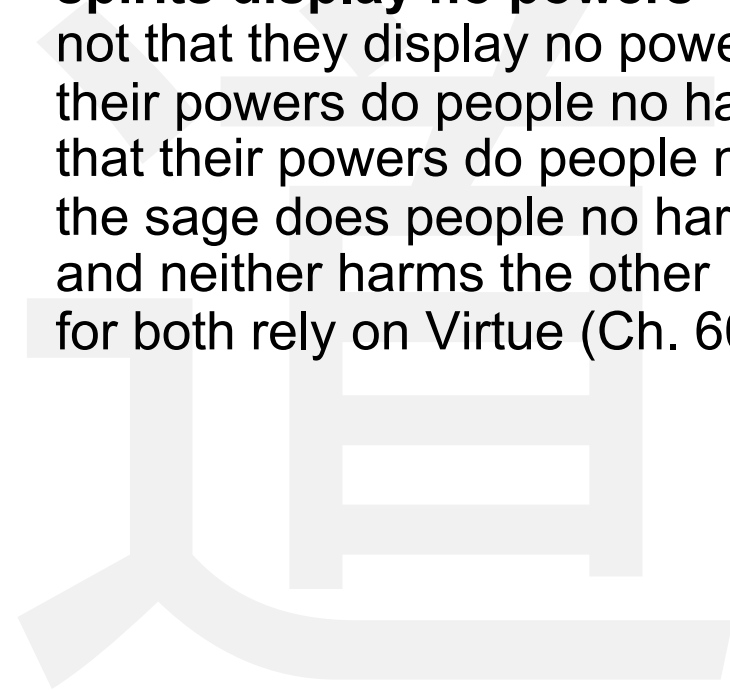
- **The Dao moves the other dao**
the Dao works through weakness
the things of this world come from
something
something comes from nothing (Ch. 40)
- Imagine a nebulous thing
here before Heaven and Earth
silent and elusive
it stands alone not wavering
it travels everywhere unharmed
it could be the mother of us all
not knowing its name
I call it the Dao

forced to name it
I name it Great
great means ever-flowing
ever-flowing means far-reaching
far-reaching means returning
the Dao is great
Heaven is great
Earth is great
the king is also great
the realm contains four greats
of these the king is one
Man imitates Earth
Earth imitates Heaven
Heaven imitates the Dao
the Dao imitates itself (Ch. 25)



(1) *Dao*

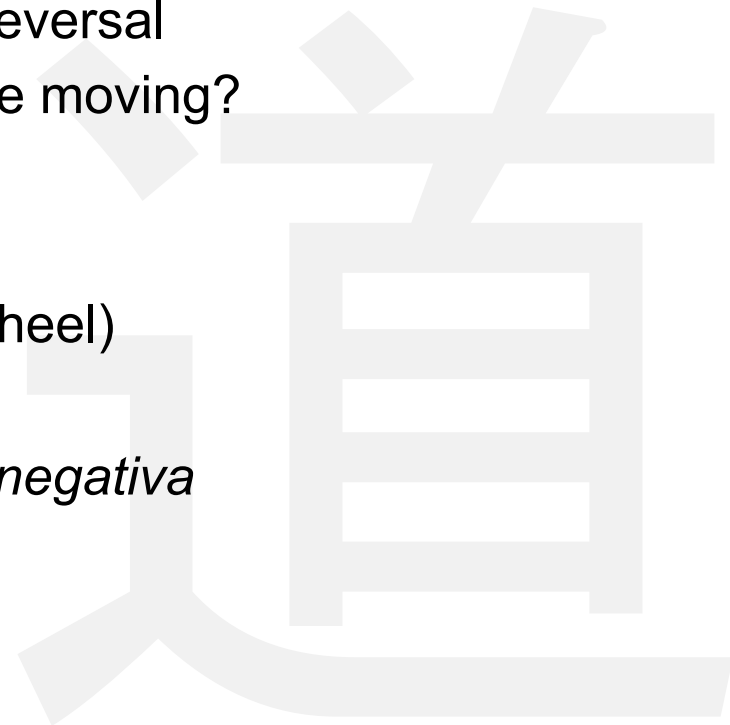
- Were I sufficiently wise
I would **follow the Great Dao**
and only fear going astray
the Great Dao is smooth
but people love byways
their palaces are spotless
their fields are overgrown
and their granaries are empty
they wear fine clothes
they carry sharp swords
they tire of food and drink
and possess more than they need
this is called robbery
and robbery is not the Dao (Ch. 53)
- Ruling a great state
is like cooking a small fish
when you govern the world with the
Dao
spirits display no powers
not that they display no powers
their powers do people no harm not
that their powers do people no harm
the sage does people no harm
and neither harms the other
for both rely on Virtue (Ch. 60)





(1) *Dao*

- The *Dao* [道]
 - Prior to Heaven and Earth, Nature
 - Characterised by constancy and reversal
 - How can something constant be moving?
 - Non-being [*wu* 無] vs Being [*you* 有]
 - a. Everyday absences (e.g. hub of wheel)
 - b. Ordinary non-being
 - c. Our understanding of the *Dao via negativa*
 - Normative
 - Model for governance





(2) Uncarved Wood

- Get rid of wisdom and reason
and people will live a hundred times
better
get rid of kindness and justice
and people once more will love and
obey
get rid of cleverness and profit
and thieves will cease to exist
but these three sayings are not
enough hence let this be added
wear the undyed and **hold the
uncarved** reduce self-interest and limit
desires
get rid of learning and problems will
vanish (Ch. 19)
- The ancient masters of the Way
aimed at the indiscernible
and penetrated the dark
you would never know them

and because you wouldn't know them
I describe them with reluctance
they were careful as if crossing a river
in winter
cautious as if worried about neighbors
reserved like guests
ephemeral like melting ice
simple like uncarved wood open like
valleys
and murky like puddles
but a puddle becomes clear when it's
still
and stillness becomes alive when it's
roused those who treasure this Way
don't try to be full
not trying to be full
they can hide and stay hidden (Ch. 15)



(2) Uncarved Wood

- Recognize the male
but hold onto the female
and be the world's maid
being the world's maid
don't lose your ancient virtue
not losing your ancient virtue
be a newborn child again
recognize the pure
but hold onto the defiled
and be the world's valley
being the world's valley
be filled with ancient virtue
being filled with ancient virtue
be uncarved wood again
recognize the white
but hold onto the black
and be the world's guide
being the world's guide

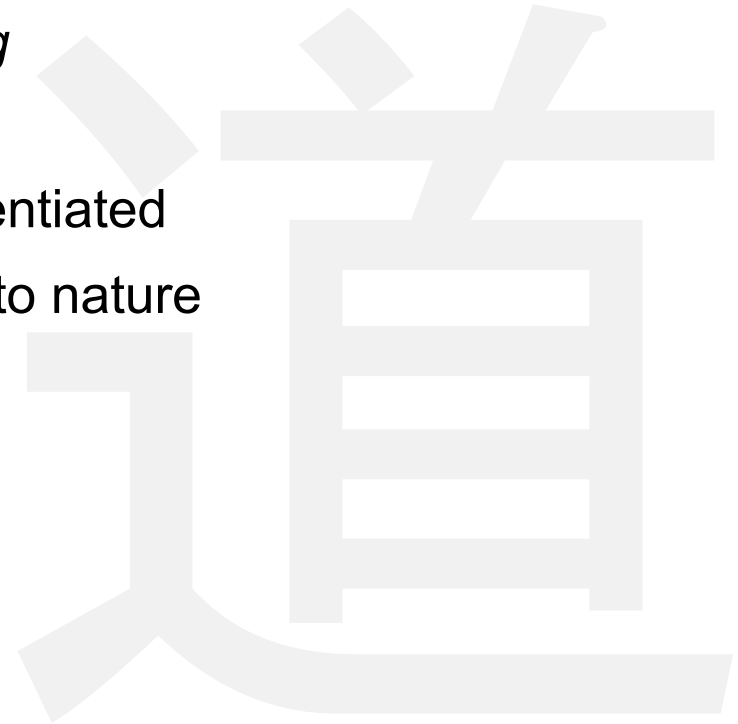
don't stray from ancient virtue
not straying from ancient virtue
be without limits again
**uncarved wood can be split to make
tools**
the sage makes it his chief official
a master tailor doesn't cut (Ch. 28)





(2) Uncarved Wood

- Uncarved wood [*pu* 樸]
 - Self-so, spontaneous [*ziran* 自然]
 - Positive thrust of the *Daodejing*
 - Original state of nature as undifferentiated
 - Names as bringing multiplicity to nature
 - Humanity as artifice





(3) *Wuwei*

- The Tao **never does a thing**
[wuwei]
yet there is nothing it doesn't do
if a ruler could uphold it
people by themselves would change
and changing if their desires stirred
he could make them still
with simplicity that has no name
stilled by nameless simplicity
they would not desire
and not desiring be at peace
the world would fix itself (Ch. 37)
- Use direction to govern a country
use indirection to fight a war
use inaction [wuwei] to rule the world
how do we know this works

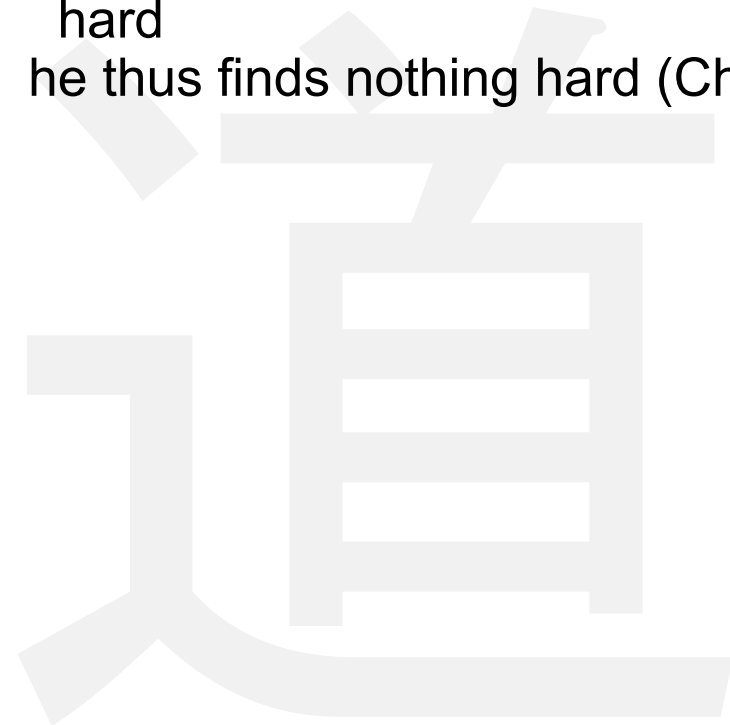
the greater the prohibitions
the poorer the people
the sharper the weapons
the darker the realm
the smarter the scheme
the stranger the outcome
the finer the treasure
the thicker the thieves
thus the sage declares
I change nothing
and the people transform themselves
I stay still
and the people adjust themselves
I do nothing
and the people enrich themselves
I want nothing
and the people simplify themselves
(Ch. 57)



(3) *Wuwei*

- **Act without acting [*wuwei*]**
work without working
taste without tasting
great or small many or few
repay each wrong with virtue
plan for the hard while it's easy
work on the great while it's small
the hardest task in the world begins
easy
the greatest goal in the world begins
small
therefore the sage never acts great

he thus achieves great things
who quickly agrees is seldom trusted
who makes it all easy finds it all hard
therefore the sage makes everything
hard
he thus finds nothing hard (Ch. 63)





(3) *Wuwei*

- Non-action [*wuwei* 無爲]
 - Two possible disambiguations:
 - a. Those who seek learning gain every day / those who seek the Way lose every day / they lose and they lose / until they find nothing to do [*wuwei*] / nothing to do [*wuwei*] means nothing not done (Ch. 48)
 - Literal not-doing-anything
 - b. Higher Virtue is not virtuous / thus it possesses virtue / Lower Virtue is not without virtue thus it possesses no virtue / Higher Virtue lacks effort / and the thought of effort / [Lower Virtue is not without effort / and the thought of effort] (Ch. 38)
 - Special kind of doing
 - Without deliberation or intention, or being consciously guided by some normative standard
- Natural action
 - Precursors in the *Analects* (17.9) and the *Mencius* (5A6)



Discussion Questions

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 1, 20, 21, 25, 32, 34, 41, 80,

- 1. What is the point of reading the *Daodejing* if the *Dao* cannot be put into way? And what is the text saying at all if language cannot be used?**

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 2, 3, 16, 17, 18, 25, 37, 54,

- 2. How is the human distinct from nature if it is just another part of nature? Why does it get negatively evaluated?**

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 2, 8, 18, 38, 41, 45, 48, 56, 65,

- 3. How do the paradoxes of language, ontology, and *wuwei* relate to each other?**



Laozi contra the Confucians

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 1, 5, 25, 40, 42; *Analects* 2.23, 3.14, 8.18–19, 12.1, 15.11,

A. How does the natural history in the *Daodejing* compare with the Confucians' preference for historical antiquity?

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 18, 51, 81; *Mencius* 3A5, *Xunzi* Chs. 5f, 19f, 27f,

B. How does the account of the origins of human virtue in the *Daodejing* compare with the *Mencius*' and *Xunzi*'s?

Referring to *Daodejing* Chs. 17, 19, 25; *Analects* 2.1, 2.4, 15.5, 17.9; *Mencius* 5A6, *Xunzi* Chs. 19f, 23f,

C. How does the account of the cultivation of what it means to be human in the *Daodejing* compare with the Confucians'?



References

Primary Texts

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- Chin, Annping, trans. 2014. *The Analects*. New York: Penguin.
- Hutton, Eric L., trans. 2014. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Pine, Red, trans. 2009. *Tao Te Ching*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.





Recommended Secondary Texts and Further Readings

- Lai, Karyn L. 2008. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 2011. *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
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