

Tao Te Ching

The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao

Review by Lisa Murray-Roselli | Book by Lao-Tzu/Translation and Commentary by John Minford

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The Ancient Chinese Book of the Tao has been published in various languages over 250 times, so why do we need another translation? Written in the 4th century BC, what could the *Tao Te Ching* have to teach us in the 21st century? John Minford's rich, articulate translation proves that there is still plenty to glean from Lao-Tzu's teachings, regardless of your profession, political views, or interest in Chinese classics.

John Minford has taken an ancient text and regenerated it for our everyday use. The power of the *Tao Te Ching* is that it is applicable to all areas of life. It is always fresh and always available to help us sort out priorities—to bring the deepest philosophical beliefs to the most mundane tasks. The business world may seem like a strange arena in which to apply the teachings of the Tao, but it couldn't be more fitting. From politics to war to relationships, the *Tao Te Ching* has something to offer.

Minford is a sinologist and literary translator, primarily known for his translations of Chinese classics. He, along with a carefully curated selection of scholars, brings profound expertise to this translation.

Readers will

- explore concepts of the Tao
- grapple with oppositional views
- find guidance for living a compassionate life

INITIAL INSIGHTS

Much like other ancient texts—the Bible, the Koran, the Tanakh, and the books of Confucianism—the *Tao Te Ching* has been published and retranslated hundreds of times, in many languages. These texts endure because their teachings are valuable in any age. Therefore, this new translation by John Minford can be examined as a text itself and for the new manner in which it is presented. The concept of Not-Contending or Non-Action is at the heart of the *Tao Te Ching*. However, almost universally, cultures expect action in the face of difficulties, which can make understanding the Tao perplexing. Reading the *Tao Te Ching* allows one to re-examine nearly every aspect of daily life.

CONCEPTS OF THE TAO TE CHING

The *Tao Te Ching* is divided into 81 parts, or chapters. Each chapter contains the poetic writings of Lao-Tzu, followed by commentary from a selection of scholars, both ancient and modern, including translator Minford. This structure provides an array of insights and perspectives, which is extremely helpful, as the content can, at times, be quite nebulous.

Compounding the challenges of interpreting the *Tao Te Ching* is the overarching assertion that the Tao cannot be told or taught, that words cannot fully represent the Tao. However, despite that assertion, the *Tao Te Ching* has been translated and studied over thousands of years and is believed to be a means to divine the truth of the Tao. Translated literally, “Tao” can mean “way,” “road,” “tell,” or “say.” It is the path to Inner Knowledge, the origin of everything, and one can come to understand it through Observation and Contemplation, by communing with Nature. Throughout the text, there is imagery of Taoist men finding solace in the natural world: living simple lives in small huts with very little other than a beautiful view of mountains and streams; the Tao has called them to Self-Cultivation rather than participation in the larger community.

Minford’s view is that the Tao is to be shared with everyone, including those who do not have the opportunity or desire to isolate themselves from society. The *Tao Te Ching* is to be used as a source of meditative reading and as a guide to everyday living. His translation is mainly informed by two

scholars: Heshang Gong (the River Master), born in 200 BC, and Liu Yiming (Magister Liu), born in 1734, further demonstrating that the *Tao Te Ching* is an ancient text that can be meaningful for its readers at any time, in any era.

Fundamental terms used in the *Tao Te Ching* are capitalized, indicating that there is a whole teaching or philosophy behind them. The last section of the book is called, “A Taoist Florilegium,” which provides readers with symbols and explanations of these capitalized words and phrases. A “florilegium” is literally “a gathering of flowers.” Minford weaves these flowers together to help those new to Taoist concepts understand key insights at the core of the *Tao Te Ching*.

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VIEWS IN OPPOSITION

The primary tenet of the Tao is Not-Contending or Non-Action. Right from the start, the *Tao Te Ching* presents readers with an enigma to solve: how can one live without activity? The 81 chapters of the text comprise many examples of the oppositional dynamics of the Tao: beautiful things are ugly, hard things and easy things complete each other, and without focusing on Achievement, one can achieve everything. In the *Tao Te Ching*, ideas may appear to be in opposition, both to themselves and to the way the world works, yet somehow they find their way to a more complete Truth.

An image that illustrates this concept in a visual and concrete way is Emptiness. The concept of Emptiness is often viewed in a negative way: people are described as being “glass half-empty” or “empty-headed.” An empty lot is a blight on a neighborhood—a symbol of decay. The Tao, on the other hand, finds Emptiness useful. Magister Liu, for instance, makes the point that the Seven Apertures or Orifices of the body (ears, mouth, eyes, etc.) are areas of Emptiness, but, more importantly, they are areas of openness—portals that allow people to Resonate with the world. In a

similar way, the windows, doors, and empty spaces in a house are the most useful elements of a dwelling place. Another scholar selected by Minford, Duyvendak, submits that the empty space of a clay pot is what we find useful and is the very purpose of the design.

The concept of Emptiness can be put to use in many industries, particularly those involving design. For example, architects and marketing/advertising professionals need to use empty or negative space to create effective and useful products. People move around, live, and work in the empty spaces of a building. These spaces have to feel comfortable, practical, and, ideally, stimulate a positive emotional response. In much the same way, the negative spaces of a visual design work in harmony with text and imagery in creating an overall impact. Messages can get lost in a whirl of content and illustrations; the negative spaces highlight and direct the viewer toward what is important.

It is possible to imagine a more abstract usage of Emptiness as well. In the business world, office life does not encourage quiet contemplation—employees must always seem busy and “productive.” However, empty space in one’s daily schedule is a type of useful freedom: it allows room for mental processing, exploration, creativity, and space for new ideas to roam around. Scientists, artists, economists, software designers, and business strategists, to name a few, spend a lot of time in quiet contemplation, experimenting with ideas, allowing inspiration to take them in directions that may fail to accomplish their immediate goals, but in that failure—and in true Taoist form—brings them closer to success.

The Usefulness of Emptiness provides a constructive introduction to the more complex notion of Eternal Cycles, of things reverting to their opposites. Nature exemplifies this and perfectly illustrates the concept of Not-Contending. The life cycle of a tree is a good example: a tree grows from a germinated seed, matures, produces seeds that will drop to the ground to grow new trees, and eventually dies, falling to the ground to enrich the soil that will help to cultivate those new trees. Likewise, the water cycle is representative of an Eternal Cycle: water from the earth evaporates into the air, cools and condenses, then falls back to the earth as precipitation. All of the water that is on and above the earth has been with us since the creation of the planet. These cycles serve as a reminder that there is a kind of perfection in Nature, a Usefulness that followers of the Tao should seek to emulate. The Tao is Nature and Nature is the Tao.

Modeling one's life after the paradigm of Nature can be tricky, but the *Tao Te Ching* shows us that the way to achieve this is through Not-Contending. Essentially, Nature is incapable of Contending; it just Is. All of the things that live and grow in the wild are subject to elements that either promote growth or bring death closer. A tree cannot make the sun shine or the rain fall, nor can it protect itself from hurricanes or fire; it simply does what it innately is meant to do and is incapable of controlling its environment. This brings us to the most complex aspect of transposing the concept of Not-Contending into daily life: how does a person who does not or cannot choose the life of a hermit in the woods, practice Not-Contending? If Usefulness is a core directive of the Tao, how does one put Not-Contending to use?

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LIVING A COMPASSIONATE LIFE

John Minford believes that everyone who reads the *Tao Te Ching* absorbs some of its Energy and Power. The Tao becomes a Source of Strength for those seeking Self-Cultivation and living a compassionate life. His translation attempts to keep this mystical text grounded in the practical. As with any vital and compelling work of art, the *Tao Te Ching* survives because it always has something new to give its readers. The practice of Not-Contending is at the heart of cultivating a compassionate life and Minford uses both the text and the wisdom of scholars to illuminate this belief.

Not-Contending means staying in the flow of life no matter what outside forces may bring—things may be sailing along smoothly or we may be in the rapids with seemingly endless clusters of dangerous rocks. The point is to stay in the river, to expect the Eternal Cycle of obstacles and growth, and to avoid trying to manipulate things beyond our control. This mindset may compete with our instincts or cultural norms when we are confronted with illness or stress at work or broken toilets. Does the Tao instruct us to just sit back and let it flow? Fortunately, there is practicality within the teachings as well.

Employing the concept of Acceptance is fundamental to the Taoist's approach to life. There is a vast difference, in terms of Self-Cultivation, between attending to a problem with Acceptance in one's heart and pushing against its existence. When faced with illness, Acceptance allows the mind to give and receive information with Clarity and Calm. To be in Harmony with the Tao means that one understands the Eternal Cycles and accepts them. However, it doesn't mean that one cannot take action to preserve the flourishing part of the life cycle.

Similarly, stress in the workplace can be all-consuming. The source of the stress may be myriad things: a miserable boss, being overworked and underpaid, or a culture that favors bravado over accomplishment. Even if you are primarily a caregiver and have no outside employment, the strain of your work can leak out into all areas of life. This is what the Tao seeks to prevent with Not-Contending and Acceptance. Acceptance lets the air out of the stress balloon; it allows you to focus on the work-at-hand with Clarity and Calm. As the tree is powerless to stop the hurricane, you may be powerless to correct your boss's behavior, but you can still carry on, doing your job, remaining true to your values.

It is possible to use this disposition when confronted by life's smaller challenges as well. Let's take the broken toilet. One could easily spiral down into a spirit-crushing tirade about faulty plumbing or poor manufacturing or perhaps the damaging curiosity of a toddler with a small toy. This wrath might spread out in all directions, wreaking havoc on many innocents. However, if one remains Constant with the teachings of the Tao, the situation becomes an opportunity to practice Non-Contending: to release the problem from emotional attachment and get to the business of fixing the toilet.

The *Tao Te Ching* offers many avenues to explore on the way to Not-Contending. Each chapter provides a slightly different view into the prism. The Three Treasures of the Tao—Compassion, Frugality, and Self-Effacement—speak most directly to living a compassionate life. The Tao maintains that Compassion will lead to Courage, Frugality to Generosity, and Self-Effacement to the ability to lead. True Compassion sees the Other as oneself and reminds us that we are all part of the Tao.

The practice of Not-Contending is at the heart of cultivating a compassionate life and Minford uses both the text and the wisdom of scholars to illuminate this belief.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here are some strategies you can apply to help bring the Tao into your daily life.

Read the *Tao Te Ching* as a Meditative Practice

The 81 chapters of the text are easy to read as individual meditations. Whether at work or at home, it only takes a few minutes to read a chapter and gain a different perspective on the present situation. Every day, our lives are new, and we will find something different every time we read and meditate on the Tao.

Look for Oppositional Truths in Daily Life

The *Tao Te Ching* shows us that the Eternal Cycles exist in everything and that ideas in opposition often belong together, forming a more complete Truth. In business, one often hears the refrain, “because we’ve always done it this way.” Use the teachings of the Tao to consider the opposite point-of-view, keeping in mind that there may be Usefulness in what appears to be Useless.

Seek to Live a Compassionate Life

Not-Contending is at the heart of living a compassionate life. There is a lot of contending in our world, especially in business where the struggle for power goes on at all levels. People become stuck in an immovable posture, lashing out at those who challenge their worldview or position. This is the source of all violence. Seeking to live a compassionate life means that we must see all people as being One with the Tao.

FOR ADDITIONAL READING [AUTHOR INSTRUCTIONS 4.0]

- 1 *The Tao of Microservices* by Richard Rogers, Manning Publications, © 2018, ISBN 9781617293146.
- 2 *The Tao of Coaching: Boost Your Effectiveness at Work by Inspiring and Developing Those Around You* by Max Landsberg, Skillsoft, © 2017, ISBN 9781781253328.
- 3 *The Tao of Open Source Intelligence* by Stewart K. Bertram, IT Governance, © 2015, ISBN 9781849287289.

PARTING THOUGHTS

The Tao cannot be Told; it is a Wordless Teaching. And yet, for thousands of years, scholars have been teaching the *Tao Te Ching* and other Taoist literature, and people have been reading those words. Somehow, the wisdom of the Tao is accessible, even though these methods of transmission are imperfect. John Minford has created a beautiful translation, incorporating Commentaries from a carefully curated selection of scholars and a Florilegium comprising images and explanations of key concepts of the Tao. He intends this translation to be a guide for everyday living, as a meditative text, not an exercise in intellectualism. Every aspect of our daily lives can be viewed through the lens of the Tao, with the goal of Self-Cultivation, leading to a more compassionate life.

*The Great Tao is complete.
With Good Faith and
Kindness, one sees the
Myriad Things as one
great entity; one sees Self
and Other as one great
Family. It is like the Wind
blowing ... Everything
dances before it.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN MINFORD is a sinologist and literary translator. He is primarily known for his translations of Chinese classics such as *The Story of the Stone* and the acclaimed Viking Penguin edition of *The Art of War*. John's recent work includes a translation of the famous Chinese divination text, the *I Ching*, for which he won the Australian Academy of the Humanities Medal for Excellence in Translation, and this new version of the *Tao Te Ching*.

Minford was educated at Winchester College and Balliol College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1968 with a First Class Honours degree in Chinese Studies. He is an emeritus professor of Chinese at the Australian National University.

ALSO BY JOHN MINFORD

- 1 *I Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Oracle and Book of Wisdom*, Penguin Classics, © 2015, ISBN 978-0143106920.
- 2 *The Art of War: The Essential Translation of the Classic Book of Life*, Penguin Classics, © 2009], ISBN 978-014310575613.
- 3 *The Story of the Stone, or The Dream of the Red Chamber, Vol. 4: The Debt of Tears*, Penguin Classics, © 1982, ISBN 978-0140443714.

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