

Tao te ching

Sociology



Interspersed in the manuscript are various lines pertaining more to governance than politics, and more to non-conflict than war.

On politics as the conduct of governing, Section 17 of the Tao Te Ching provides a pointed observation: " When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists." This can be interpreted to mean that in a state of benevolent governance, well being of the people, even prosperity, is assumed as a natural occurrence that people become less conscious of the governing authority. Then he proceeds, " Next best is a leader who is loved. Next, one who is feared. The worst is one who is despised." And we can not argue with that. Section 57 also provides the wisdom that people who govern can reflect upon: " The more prohibitions you have, the less virtuous people will be. The more weapons you have, the less secure people will be. The more subsidies you have, the less self-reliant people will be."

The concept of war as armed conflict, however, does not appear to conform with the principles Lao Tzu espoused. Section 31 begins, " Whoever relies on the Tao in governing men doesn't try to force issues or defeat enemies by force of arms. For every force, there is a counterforce. Violence, even well-intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself." Further, in Section 31, he continues, " Weapons are the tools of violence; all decent men detest them." In the same section, he proceeds to extol peace and places it as a precondition to contentment, " Peace is his highest value. If the peace has been shattered, how can he be content" Chapter 46 is even more explicit: " When a country is in harmony with the Tao, the factories make trucks and tractors. When a country goes counter to the Tao, warheads are stockpiled outside the cities. There is no greater illusion than fear, no greater wrong

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than preparing to defend yourself, no greater misfortune than having an enemy." He, however, did not deny the reality of war as he also included strategic concepts in Tao Te Ching. Section 68 contains, "The best general enters the mind of his enemy."

Practical wisdom

Lao Tzu likes to write in paradoxes which make his readers ponder: "I let go of the law, and people become honest. I let go of economics, and people become prosperous. I let go of religion, and people become serene. I let go of all desire for the common good, and the good becomes common as grass." (Section 57) I have a feeling that these were the lines that inspired John Lennon to write his hit song Imagine. Another paradoxical passage that elicits second thinking without having to engage the rigors of theology and philosophy is Section 9: "Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill. Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt. Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench. Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner." While the idea is over two thousand years old, the practical wisdom it carries is refreshing and adaptable.