

**SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING):
ON GOVERNMENT**

Introduction

The book that we know as the *Daodejing* is traditionally ascribed to a mysterious character called Laozi (“the old master”). As best as we can tell, the text was written by several authors over a period of time roughly around the third century BCE. The authors of the *Daodejing* lived at a time when China consisted of a number of feudal states nominally under the leadership of the Zhou Dynasty kings, but actually independent. The feudal states fought with each other regularly and engaged in shifting patterns of alliances. When addressing issues of government, the authors of the *Daodejing* were concerned with the problem of how to restore peace, order, and tranquility to the world.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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... Therefore the ordering of the sage
empties their minds,
fills their bellies,
weakens their ambitions,
strengthens their bones.
He always causes the people to be without knowledge,
without desire,
And causes the wise ones not to dare to act. ...

57

... The more sharp weapons the people have,
The more disorder is fomented in the family and state.
The more adroit and clever men are,
The more deceptive things are brought forth.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING): ON GOVERNMENT**

The more laws and ordinances are promulgated,
The more thieves and robbers there are.

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Let the state be small and the people few.

...

Let the people ...

... savor their food and find beauty in their clothing,
peace in their dwellings, and joy in their customs.

Though neighboring states are within sight of one another,

And the sound of cocks and dogs is audible

from one to the other,

People will reach old age and death

and yet not visit one another.¹

Questions:

1. From reading these documents, how do you think that a Daoist ruler would manage his state? What would it look like?
2. What attitude does the author have toward the common people?
3. Think about the times in which the document was produced -- why might the authors have written the way they did about the way in which they think a state should be run? How does it contrast to the way China was during the time when they were writing?
4. Compare the authors' vision of government to those of Confucius and of the Legalists. How does the vision of the *Daodejing* differ from those of the other texts? Are there any similarities?

Longer Selection

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Do not exalt the worthy,
and the people will not compete.

¹ According to commentary by Wang Bi, this is because there is nothing they want to acquire.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
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Do not value goods that are hard to come by,
and the people will not steal.
Do not display objects of desire,
And the people's minds will not be disturbed.
Therefore the ordering of the sage
empties their minds,
fills their bellies,
weakens their ambitions,
strengthens their bones.
He always causes the people to be without knowledge,
without desire,
And causes the wise ones not to dare to act.
He does nothing (*wuwei*), and there is nothing that is
not brought to order.

57

Govern the state by correctness;
Deploy the army by deception;
Acquire the empire by taking no action (*wushi*).
How do I know this is so?
By this.²
The more prohibitions there are in the world,
The poorer are the people.
The more sharp weapons the people have,
The more disorder is fomented in the family and state.
The more adroit and clever men are,
The more deceptive things are brought forth.
The more laws and ordinances are promulgated,
The more thieves and robbers there are.
Therefore the sage says:
I do nothing (*wuwei*),
And the people are transformed by themselves.
I value tranquility,
And the people become correct by themselves.
I take no action (*wushi*),
And the people become prosperous by themselves.
I have no desires,
And the people of themselves become like uncarved wood.

² Through looking within oneself.

80

Let the state be small and the people few.
There may be ten or even a hundred times as many implements,
But they should not be used.
Let the people, regarding death as a weighty matter,
not travel far.
Though they have boats and carriages, none shall ride in them.
Though they have armor and weapons, none shall display them.
Let the people return once more to the use of knotted ropes.³
Let them savor their food and find beauty in their clothing,
peace in their dwellings, and joy in their customs.
Though neighboring states are within sight of one another,
And the sound of cocks and dogs is audible
from one to the other,
People will reach old age and death
and yet not visit one another.⁴

³ Tradition has it that knotted ropes were used for record-keeping before the invention of writing.

⁴ See footnote 1, above.