Bibliography


Laozi (Lao Tzu, c. sixth century B.C.E.) seems to be the Chinese philosopher best-known to the western world, through his short treatise the Laozi or Daodejing, consisting of some 5,000 Chinese characters. Beginning with its Sanskrit translation in 661 C.E., it has been the most frequently translated Chinese book; indeed, it may be the second most frequently translated of all books, after the Bible. In a very limited space, and in very profound and appealing words, similar to but more systematic than the pre-Socratic fragments, the Laozi or Daodejing offers the best summing-up of a deep-layered way of thinking in traditional Chinese culture. As Wing-tsit Chan has put it:

No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, medicine—or even cooking—without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book. (1963b, 136)

In fact, the name Laozi refers to one or a few questionable historical figures and a group of texts. First, as a historical figure, Laozi was the founder of Daoism, although much about him remains unknown, and the historical accounts we have are not very certain about his identity and life. According to Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian*, Laozi was a curator in the royal archive in the capital of Zhou, and Confucius once visited him to ask about problems of *li* (rites). Sima Qian also narrates the legend that after retirement, Laozi, on the demand of the barrier keeper Yin Si (Guan Yin), wrote a work of more than 5,000 words. This story might have been told by the school of Guan Yin, which interpreted Laozi. In any case, Sima Qian writes quite hesitantly and mentions other related figures, such as “Lao Lai Zi” and “Taishi Dan,” without seeming very sure of their identity.

Yet even in the absence of any complete historical reconstruction of the author and his life (or the authors and their lives), the texts attributed to Laozi show the reader their own philosophical meaning. Therefore, for the purposes of philosophy, it is more important to consider “Laozi” as referring to a group of texts. In this respect, we have traditional texts in the commentaries by Yan Zun (53–24 B.C.E.), Wang Bi (226–249 C.E.), and Heshang Gong (probably third–fourth century C.E.), and Fu Yi’s version from the Tang dynasty. Apart from all these, we have texts of Laozi discovered recently, including the silk texts found at Mawangdui in 1973, whose transcription might date from a bit before the Han dynasty (version A) or during the early Han (version B); and the three Guodian bamboo slip texts discovered in 1993. The Guodian texts were transcribed before 300 B.C.E.—this is the latest possible date of their burial, and the transcription must have been earlier than the burial itself. Because of the discovery of the Guodian texts, it could be assumed that Laozi’s texts must be earlier than works bearing the names of Zhuangzi, Mencius, and Xunzi, contrary to the claim of some scholars, such as Qian Mu, that Laozi came later than Zhuangzi. It should also be mentioned that version C of the Guodian bamboo slips...
includes a text, *The Great One Gave Birth to Water (Taiyi sheng shui)*, that had never been included in any of the traditional texts.

In the Guodian versions, Laozi’s texts were read together with Confucian texts; this suggests that Daoism and Confucianism were not then considered antagonistic schools of thought. In particular, the vehemently critical words referring to basic Confucian concepts such as *ren* (humanness) and *yi* (righteousness)—for example, in Chapters 19 and 20 of the traditional versions—are minimized in the Guodian version. It could be said that the Mawangdui silk texts show an intermingling of Daoist and legalist thought, especially in the case of *Huanglao boshu*, whereas the Guodian texts show a certain intermingling, or at least a peaceful coexistence, of Daoist and Confucian thought.

In the two Mawangdui silk versions of the *Laozi*, both version A and version B consist of a first part on *de* (virtue) and a second part on the *dao*, an order that is just the reverse of existing versions such as Wang Bi’s, Heshang Gong’s, and Fu Yi’s. This fact has led to many historical hypotheses and arguments. But in the earlier Guodian *Laozi*, there is no order of this kind. It does not have divisions into chapters, and sometimes even the order of sentences is quite different from either the silk *Laozi* or other traditional versions.

**Dao, Its Attributes, and the Great Categories**

Laozi posits *dao* as the most important concept in his system of thought, replacing heaven in ancient Chinese thought as representing the ultimate reality. Etymologically, the Chinese word *dao* means a way on which one could work out a direction and a way out. It could also mean “to say,” “to speak,” or “to discourse,” though this aspect is generally denied by Laozi, for whom the function of discourse is always taken in its negative sense.

Philosophically, the following meanings of *dao* are the most important:

- **First**, *dao* as laws of becoming or laws of nature, especially when combined with heaven or heaven and earth, as in *tian dao* (heavenly *dao*) or *tiandi zhi dao* (the *dao* of heaven and earth).
- **Second**, *dao* as the origin that gives birth to all things, as in Laozi’s saying, “The *dao* gave birth to one. One gave birth to two. Two gave birth to three. Three gave birth to all things.”
- **Third**, the *dao* as the always self-manifesting ultimate reality. The self-manifesting *dao* is “reality itself,” whereas all we say about the *dao* is but “constructed reality,” which is not and never could it be reality itself. This is as shown by Laozi’s saying “The *dao* that could be said is not the constant *dao*, which can be found in all the texts except the Guodian bamboo slips.

In *Laozi*, the *dao*, as the ultimate reality, is said to be an undifferentiated whole, either as a “state of undifferentiated whole” (*you zhuang hun cheng*) in Guodian text A, or as a “thing of undifferentiated whole” (*you wu hun cheng*) in Chapter 25 of all the other texts. Since the *dao* is that which makes all things as beings, and that which make all things as beings is not itself a thing, the Guodian text seems to be better in this sense. In any case, the *dao* is seen as the undifferentiated whole existing before heaven and earth. It is very much like the Heideggerian *Il y a*.

In Chapter 25 of all versions and its corresponding part in the Guodian text, the *dao* is said to be inaudible, invisible, independent of all beings, and self-sustaining. The Guodian text uses “boundless,” which is a better term than the traditional “changeless” because it avoids a possible contradiction between the *dao* as changeless and the *dao* as the original dynamism pushing all things into an unending process of change. Also, the Guodian text corresponds better with the following passage: “If I am forced to name it, then, reluctantly I will call it ‘the great.’ ‘Great’ means departing from all boundaries, which means being far off; and being far off means turning back.” Here we have other attributes of *dao*, such as “great,” “departing from all boundaries,” “far off,” and “turning back,” indicating a circular cosmic process quite different from the linear cosmic process in modern western science. Laozi made it clear that these were not ostensive or real attributes, but rather fictitious or figurative attributes constructed for the understanding of human beings.

Concerning the “great categories” of existence, we find an interesting consensus among all versions in Chapter 25, the text that reads: “Man models himself upon earth. Earth models itself upon heaven. Heaven models itself upon *dao*. *Dao* models itself upon what is of itself.” Apart from its decentralizing progression from man to earth, and then from earth to heaven, and then from heaven to the *dao* itself, we can see an ontological categorization into four realms: man, earth, heaven, and the *dao*. In these four interrelated categories, man models himself on the earth, say, the environment; and earth, the environment, should follow the laws of nature or the cosmic process. And the whole cosmic process, being itself produced by the *dao*, should model itself on the dynamism of the *dao*, which has no other model than that coming from itself.

Since these sentences are the same in all versions, we can take the categories for granted and check re-
lated texts thereby. In all versions except Fu Yi’s, we read:

Heaven is great, earth is great, the dao is great, and the king is also great. There exist four great categories in the kingdom, the king is one among them.

But the king, even if he is the greatest political power within one kingdom, is not as great as humankind and should not be treated as one of the four great categories of existence. In making the king one of the four categories of existence, the text has committed an error, misplacing a category and politicizing ontological thinking. Also, how can one put the dao, earth, heaven, and humankind into the realm of a kingdom and change the status of these categories of existence into categories of the political? Here we can see a human-centered way of thinking and a politicization of ontology. Only Fu Yi’s version reads more reasonably:

Heaven is great, earth is great, the way is great, and man is also great. There are four great categories in beings; the king is the noblest among one.

Here we have the four great categories of existence—man, earth, heaven, and the dao—which correspond exactly to the consensus. Also, the king is seen here merely as the noblest in one category, that is, humankind; and there is no mistaking of the ontological category as a political category to which the political framework of the kingdom belongs. We can see from this how valuable Fu Yi’s version is.

The Cosmic Process: “Giving Birth” and “Returning”

Laozi conceives the cosmic process as constituted of, first, the process of giving birth of all things by the dao and, then, the process of all things returning to the dao. Nonbeing (wu) and being (you) can be seen as the two ontological moments through which the dao manifests itself. The dao first manifests itself into nonbeing, as the realm of possibilities. When compared with actuality these are nonbeing, but in themselves they are marvelous possibilities. From this realm of nonbeing some possibilities are realized in the realm of being, and to become being is to take the form of body. That is why the realm of being is rare and the realm of nonbeing is much richer. One important insight of Laozi’s is that human beings should cherish what they have as actuality but always be open to the unfathomable possibilities.

After the realm of being is realized, all beings are structurally constituted of opposites such as you and wu, yin and yang, movement and rest. Dynamically, when one state of affairs is fully realized to the degree of being exhausted, it goes to the opposite state of affairs. Notice that here the opposites include “disaster and fortune,” “correct and deviant,” “good and evil” (ch. 58); “beauty and ugliness,” “good and not good,” “being and nonbeing,” “difficult and easy,” “long and short,” “high and low,” “front and back” (ch. 2); “the twisted and the upright,” “the hollow and the full,” “the worn out and the renewed,” “little and much” (ch. 22); “heavy and light,” “tranquillity and agitation” (ch. 26).

You and wu, the most important concepts besides the dao and the de, can be analyzed on three levels of meaning. First, ontologically, you means being, the real, the actual; wu means nonbeing, the possible, the potential. Second, spiritually, you means fulfillment and constraint whereas wu means transcendence and freedom. Third, ontically, you means full, presence, whereas wu means void, absence.

In Chapter 42 of Wang Bi’s version, the Mawangdui silk version, and other traditional texts, the cosmic process of giving birth to all things is expressed in this way:

The dao gave birth to the one, the one gave birth to the two, and the two gave birth to the three, and the three gave birth to ten thousand things. Ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of qi (vital force), they achieve harmony.

Here “the one” (or “the One”) should be understood minimally as the beginning of being, and not necessarily as the qi as some scholars have suggested, since in the Guodian version “the great one gave birth to water,” where water, as an archaic mediating material, is more original than the qi. “The two,” not necessarily limited to the yin and the yang, are better understood as different pairs of opposites such as being and nonbeing, yin and yang, movement and rest. “The three” can be understood as their interactive and dialectic interplay.

But in the Guodian texts, version C, this is replaced by a text later given the title The Great One Gave Birth to Water:

The great one gave birth to water. Water returned to assist the great one, so as to form heaven. Heaven returned to assist the great one so as to form earth. Heaven and earth (again assisted one another) so as to form divinities. Divinities assisted one another so as to form yin and yang. Yin and yang again assisted one another so as to form four seasons. Four seasons assisted one another so as to form cold and heat. Cold and heat assisted one another so as to form damp and dry. Damp and dry assisted mutually so as to complete the year and there halted.

This text shows the great one giving birth to two opposing yet interacting elements such as heaven and earth.
and *yin* and *yang*, through a mediator, water. Also, it is remarkable that divine intellects intervened after the formation of heaven and earth, to further the formation of *yin* and *yang*, cold and heat, damp and dry, etc. In short, this text makes concrete the process of cosmo-genesis explained in the Chapter 42 of all the other versions, but with the specific aim of explaining the emergence of physical and temporal order.

The Great One Gave Birth to Water in version C of the Guodian *Laozi* is unique in the sense that it is not found in other versions of *Laozi* or any Daoist texts. The concept of the great one can be found in the chapter “Under Heaven” of the *Zhuangzi*, which mentions that the barrier keeper Yin (Guan Yin) and Lao Dan “headed their doctrine with the concept of the great one.” It could therefore be said that the doctrine of the great one belongs to the school of Guan Yin and his interpretation of Laozi; in the school of Guan Yin, the great one represents the *dao*. In The Great One Gave Birth to Water, the great one gives birth to all things through step-by-step materialization and ordering. In pre-Socratic philosophy, Thales took water to be the *arché* of all things; similarly, in the Guodian *Laozi*, water—which is different from the water of wet and damp material that comes into being much later, after cold and heat—should be considered the primary material medium, with all Daoist characteristics: it is tender and soft, penetrates everything, is beneficial and good to all things.

Ontologically and cosmologically, therefore, water is much higher even than *qi*, a concept which becomes more important in the work of *Zhuangzi*, for whom all things are penetrated by one *qi*. In the Guodian text, *qi* appears later with heaven, whereas water comes into being before heaven, and therefore before *qi*, to serve as the medium favorable to the productivity of all things, although water is not itself among the productive causes such as the great one, heaven and earth, divinities, and *yin* and *yang*. Water seems to be only a mediating material principle with all the favorable qualities of productivity.

We should notice that in all versions of *Laozi*, divinities came on the scene much later. In the Guodian texts, divine intellects come to be after the formation of heaven and earth and before that of *yin* and *yang*. And in Wang Bi’s version and the Mawangdui version, the *dao* “seems to have preceded the supreme deity.” *di* (ch. 4). The supreme deity was produced by the ever-creative self-manifesting *dao*, which is nonsubstantial in itself. In this way, Laozi seems to avoid the ontological, theological metaphysics that we find in western philosophy.

Concerning the cosmic process of returning to the *dao*, we read:

Reversal (return) is the movement of *dao*, weakness is the function of *dao*, all things under heaven are produced from being, and (being) from nonbeing. (ch. 40)

The term “reversal,” meaning both “opposition” and “return” in all other versions, gives a more complete vision of cosmo-genesis and the finality of cosmic process. In the Guodian text, read as “return,” it emphasizes merely the process of returning to the *dao*. When interpreted as “opposition” (*xiangfan*), it would mean that the *dao* manifests itself and moves itself through the interactions of pairs of opposites such as being and nonbeing, *yin* and *yang*, movement and rest. When interpreted as return—and this is the transcription of the Guodian texts—the whole process of becoming of all beings leads finally back to the *dao*, that is, to return to the *dao* itself.

When read together with “*dao* gave birth to one, one gave birth to two, two gave birth to three, and three gave birth to all things,” where we see a process of differentiation and increasing complexity, these texts reveal a cosmological vision in which the origin of existence is also the finality of becoming. We may say that this process is brought about by the *de* (virtue), inherent in all things after their coming into being. *De* could be seen as the *dao* inside all things after their being created. It begins to function when the thing in question is in a state of weakness. This is the meaning of the saying, “Weakness is the function of the *dao*.” In *Laozi*, both weakness and strength are to be interpreted with reference to subjectivity or enclosure within empirical individuality. Weakness means passivity in following the way of *dao* rather than subjectivity, letting things be themselves rather than seeking domination over things. Thus the *dao* begins to function in all things and bring them back to *dao* itself. This returning, as led by the *dao* in each and every thing, can therefore be seen as an operation of virtue, *de*.

The Concept of *de*: Virtue

The concept of *de* in *Laozi* replaces the Confucian concept of *xing*, meaning the nature of each and every thing, including human beings. In Confucianism, there is a tendency to humanize nature, or to use the concept “nature” (*xing*) for human nature. But in all the versions of *Laozi*, we cannot find a single instance of *xing*. Instead we find the concept of *de* (virtue, power). In *Laozi*, unlike Confucianism, *de* has no ethical connotation of moral virtue. Rather, *de* means the spontaneous creative capacity inside all things after they were produced by the *dao* and leading everything to return to the *dao* in their process of becoming. The *dao* gives birth to all things in the process of differentiation and increasing complexity; after that, it remains in every-
thing, serving as spontaneous creativity. The de is therefore that which both human and natural beings inherit from the dao, or the presence of the dao in everything, not as a cause is present in its effect but rather as the whole is present in its parts. Everything—including every human being—has its own de. Therefore Laozi’s concept of de deconstructs the Confucian view of humans as the center of the universe. Because everything has its own center, Laozi does not need a doctrine of anthropocentrism.

Any human being, through effort and praxis in the dao, can attain the highest levels of virtue, expressed in terms such as xuan-de (supreme virtue), chang-de (constant virtue), shang-de (upper virtue), kong-de (large virtue), guang-de (expansive virtue), jian-de (firm virtue), and zhi-de (authentic virtue). Yet in the Guodian texts, we find only those virtues that human beings can attain through “life praxis,” and so the concept of virtue (de) loses its ontological and cosmological meaning. For example, “supreme virtue is like a valley” means that the sage, after industrious praxis, attains supreme virtue—as if he had climbed the highest mountain—but still comports himself humbly. Then, “expansive virtue seems to be insufficient, firm virtue is like being indolent, and authentic virtue is like being whimsical or capricious.” All these de become human virtue, though still keeping the sense of Daoist dialectics, and therefore differ from Confucian virtues, which are merely moral and ethical achievements.

A Problem of Methodology: The Retracing Regard, Guan

For Laozi, knowledge is a mode of being, and his method of knowing is a kind of praxis—that is, practical. Generally speaking, the “retracing regard” (guan) is the most important method of knowing and can be applied to all things, including nature and human affairs. Guan can be seen as a method similar to intuition of essence in phenomenology—not in the form of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, which presumes a transcendental ego grasping the essence of things, but rather more like Heidegger’s Seinslassen, letting things be themselves. The “tracing regard” or guan is an intuition of essences of things in letting things be themselves. In all the texts of Laozi except the Guodian, this method is applicable to both natural phenomena and human affairs.

But the term guan as found in the corresponding passages of all other versions disappears from the following Guodian text:

> Reaching the supreme emptiness, keeping to the firm vacuity, ten thousand things start to emerge, and exist in a way so as to return. Heaven’s way is circular; each thing returns to its root.

This text says that supreme emptiness and firm vacuity are the original state of the dao, whence all things emerge. And all things, after having emerged, are waiting to return to it. Here, waiting is not a passive kind of existence; rather, all things exist positively as waiting for a return to the dao. “Ten thousand things start to emerge, and exist in a way so as to return” is purely cosmological. It is quite different from all the other versions, which read, “Ten thousand things start to emerge, and I grasp their return by a retracing regard.” The other texts posit a retracing regard (guan) as a method for intuiting the essence of all things. The Guodian text, lacking the word guan, transforms a passage with both cosmological and methodological meaning into a purely cosmological passage.

We find also the term guan in Chapter 54:

> Regard body (or self) in letting body (or self) (be) as it is. Regard the household in letting the household (be) as it is. Regard the community in letting the community (be) as it is. Regard the state in letting the state (be) as it is. Regard the all under heaven in letting all under heaven (be) as they are.

Here we can see that the method of guan was used at all levels of human affairs from the body to social organizations. The sentence “regard body (self) in letting body (self) (be) as it is” can be found in all versions except the Guodian text. The entire passage means that we can have an intuition of the essence of all things, including the human body and all levels of human social groupings—such as family, community, state, and all under heaven—by letting them be themselves: we have the an intuition of the essence of body by letting body be body; we can have an intuition of the essence of family in letting family be family; and so on. But in the Guodian texts this sentence has been dropped, and the method of guan is not applicable to the human body; it applies only to human social organizations.

Political Philosophy

Laozi’s political philosophy concerns mostly the art of governing, which, for him, should refer to the dao, follow the dao, and unfold the de of all people and all things. An ideal state is, negatively, a state with no political domination and, positively, a place where people and things can spontaneously unfold their own virtue. The unfolding of the creative abilities or spontaneous virtues of the people is therefore the greatest wealth of a state. In order to attain this, the ruler should adopt a politics of nonaction (wuwei). This does not mean ruling without any action; rather, it means ruling
according to the *dao*—that is, no particular action or no action of particular interest but universal action, acting for all things; no artificial action but spontaneous action. The politics of nonintervention, of letting everyone be himself or herself. This kind of politics, not necessarily limited to a small country, embodies an ideal unit of political construction, exemplified in the famous Chapter 80:

> Let there be a small country with few people. Let there be ten times and a hundred times as many powerful utensils. But let them not be used. Let the people value their lives highly and not migrate far. Even if there are ships and carriages, none will ride in them. Even if there are armor and weapons, none will display them. Let the people again knot cords and use them in place of writing. Let them relish their food, beautify their clothing, be content with their homes, and delight in their customs. Though neighboring communities overlook one another and the crowing of cocks and barking of dogs can be heard. Yet the people there may grow old and die without ever interacting one with another.

Many scholars maintain that, for Laozi, a small country with few people constitutes the best social and political environment. This view is based on an isolated reading of the chapter. Some even say that Laozi’s position is very similar to what E. F. Schumacher calls “small is beautiful.” Yet under scrutiny terms like “small” and “few” mean nothing quantitative. Laozi does not have any intention. On the contrary, a contextualist reading renders implausible the idea of returning to an ancient tribal society. Laozi has talked much about the art of governing a large state. Consider the following:

> Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish. If the *dao* is employed to rule the empire, . . . not only will the supernatural power not harm people, the sage also will not harm people . . ., and virtue will be accumulated. (ch. 60)

A big country may be compared to the lower part of a river. It is the converging point of the world. (ch. 61)

From these texts, it is clear then Laozi does not exclude the possibility of governing a large state. The question for him is whether one can apply the *dao* to rule the empire and both supernatural beings and the sage so as not to harm the spontaneous creativity of the people but let the country become a place for accumulating *de*.

Therefore the most important question for Laozi is how one can establish a social political order by referring to the *dao* and the spontaneous virtue of people. Chapter 59 answers this most clearly:

> In ruling the people and in serving heaven it is best to be sparing. It is because one is sparing, that one may be said to follow the way from the start. Following the way from the start he may be said to accumulate an abundance of virtue. Accumulating an abundance of virtue, there is nothing he cannot overcome. When there is nothing he cannot overcome, no one knows the limit of his capacity. When no one knows the limit of his capacity, he is fit to rule a state. He who possesses the mother (*dao*) of the state will last long.

Moreover, Laozi has taught many lessons about attaining the large from the small and overcoming the difficult from the easier:

> Make the small big and the few many, . . . prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small. Difficult undertakings have always started with what is easy. And great undertakings have always started with what is small. (ch. 63)

Deal with things before they appear. Put things in order before disorder arises. A tree as big as a man’s embrace grows from a tiny shoot. A tower of nine stories begins with a heap of earth. The journey of a thousand li starts from where one stands. (ch. 64)

It is possible then, for Laozi, to govern a large state if we begin by building up ideal political units.

Laozi considers the *dao*, virtue, and wisdom the three preconditions of establishing an ideal social and political order. Only when there are virtues and wisdom corresponding to the levels of body (self), family, community, country, and world, resulting from an authentic conversion to the *dao*, can a social and political order with intense spiritual communication be established. An ideal social and political order must begin with the self and progress through family, community, and larger units to the establishment of a large-scale political environment. For Laozi, political praxis is based on the praxis of virtue and wisdom, and the praxis of virtue and wisdom is based on the praxis of conversion to the *dao*.

What Laozi envisages is therefore an ideal social and political environment emancipated from all political domination. In this ideal state, men can communicate freely and are responsible for one another. But this cannot be realized without acquiring virtue and wisdom by communicating with the *dao*.

**Conclusion**

Since the discovery of the Guodian texts we have been able to assume, with a great degree of certainty, that Laozi came much earlier than Zhuangzi. Laozi, then, was the real founder of Daoism, which, together with Confucianism and Buddhism, is one of the most important schools in Chinese philosophy. Laozi is also seen as the divine founder of religious Daoism, which appeared in the Han dynasty. Philosophically, both Confucianism and Buddhism, in the long history of their development, have been influenced by Daoism. Today,
Laozi’s philosophy is significant especially in that it considers human beings in relation to their environment, to the cosmos, and to dao itself and considers the meaning of human life in the context of nature. We need to resituate the human in the natural and reestablish an optimal harmony with it. This is a lesson that we can continue to learn from Laozi’s philosophy.

See also Confucianism: Ethics; Daoism: Classical; Daoism: Texts in Guodian Bamboo Slips; Daoism: Neo-Daoism.

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