

Laotzu Commentaries

by Zhang Mosheng*, translated by Chu Qian

Preface

Chinese Taoism, according to many, took its onset from the Yellow Emperor and was fully realized under Laotzu. Therefore, such school of thoughts or practices were duly named “Huang-lao” (“Yellow Emperor-Laotzu”), a genre that had been around since historical times. Articles allegedly written by Yellow Emperor, such as the *Lingshu* and *Suwen* of the *Inner Canons* employed a far-from-archaic style and presented a sophisticated argument, highly unlikely to be a product of such time immemorial as Yellow Emperor’s. The de facto author should be of later generations and he took on Yellow Emperor’s name to lend credibility. Yellow Emperor is no doubt the forefather of Chinese culture, yet his literary influence remains questionable as philosophies developed rather gradually. What is referred to as the scholarship of “Huang-lao” in fact pertains to Laotzu alone, but since *Tao Te Ching* in many occasions referenced the legendary Yellow Emperor, it is taken for granted that Laotzu must have carried his baton, which explains why their names always appear together. Philosophers near the end of the Zhou period liked to borrow the names of ancient sages to lend authenticity and credibility to their treatises, such as adopting Emperor Yao and Shun to Confucianism, Yu to Mohism, Shennong to agriculture schools and so forth. Similarly, as Taoism was founded it must have borrowed from Yellow Emperor for scholarly convenience.

In the past, politics and religions were intertwined. Scholarship in the royal court witnessed no personal expressions or deviations, and it was an activity of the mass just like politics, with which it evolved across dynasties. Far from the work of any particular individual, literary habituation reflects the life of all citizens and the need of the environment. Six Arts¹ in particular, condensed political and religious pursuits that developed in tandem, and marked the spiritual routine for the period before Zhou was lost. As the court order fell loose and finally subverted, politic separated from religion, and the schism between governing parties fueled literary antagonism, leading to the period of Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring and Autumn (771-476BC) and Warring States (475-221BC).

Nevertheless, no school of thought was born from thin air. To establish itself as a legitimate “school”, there has to be a legitimate inception as well as creative evolution. Confucius, a stern follower of the dogma and Six Arts of former dynasties remarked, “I expound on the knowledge imparted by forerunners whom I took refuge in without having to create a separate school,” in making himself erudite rather than unique, having an “inception” but exercised no “creativity”. Other schools possess both, if not a higher degree of “creativity”. Treatise of Literature (yi-wen-zhi) in the *Book of Han* commented that, “Schools took their origin from court philosophies”, a product of “legitimacy”. *Huainantzu* in contrast believes that schools came from the environment, a product of “creativity”. Yet neither of them spoke the whole picture. An exception is *Zhuangtzu* chapter “The World” (Tian-xia) in which the discussion of every school of thoughts begins with “ancient practitioners- pertaining to this

¹ Refers to the art of Rites, Music, Archery, Equestrian Techniques, Calligraphy and Mathematics.

school heard of it and were deeply moved,” before analyzing the uniqueness. Such is the principle of having both “legitimacy” and “creativity”. In his discussion, Confucianism (Confucius and Mencius) wasn’t treated as a stand-alone school of thought, perhaps due to its “legitimacy but not creativity” that set it apart from other schools. However, Confucianism “expounds as a way to create,” and allows traditional wisdom to extend to the modern age. To sum up, “legitimacy” and “creativity” are two pillars necessary to founding any philosophical school.

Taoism, although not the child of Yellow Emperor, has its legitimacy and creativity. Classics such as the *Book of Change (I-Ching)* on which Taoism was founded were written generations ago, and their creativity hinged on the author’s reflection towards his environment. Arguments in *Tao Te Ching* had already existed before Laotzu, who then drew personal insights from contemporary events. It isn’t difficult to see its legitimacy and creativity upon close examination. Also, according to historic records, Laotzu served Zhou as Curator of Royal Archives (Zhu-xia-shi), so he certainly had access to books and classics in the court’s library. His knowledge of the merits and wrong-doings of various dynasties, and the cyclic nature of the universe enabled him to condense “laws”, or the “inception of things”. Near the end of Zhou, as the recessed politics, over-burdened rituals, continuous warfare and institutional flaws forced common people out of livelihoods, an attentive observer as he was, Laotzu developed unique perspectives and created his own school, and its influence was felt. From his philosophy stemmed Yangtzu and Zhuangtzu, applying creativity to different degrees to complement the field. On the other hand, the term “Taoism” did not exist in Qin Dynasty; it started in Han when Sima Tan (司马谈) discussed the essentials of the Six Schools and first treated Taoism as a “school” alongside Confucianism, Mohism, Logic, Legalism and Yin-yang, none of which were regarded as a “school” before early Qin; it was the later generation who adopted this concept to group similar thoughts into one umbrella for the ease of research.

Taoism brought unique hues to Chinese philosophy. For instance, Confucianism in tracing the path of Emperor Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang of Shang, King Wen and Wu of Zhou as well as Duke of Zhou, sought to unravel the Golden Mean (Zhong-yong) as the ultimate way to navigate worldly activities (ru-shi). Mohism, Legalism and Logician schools, though not outward patrons of the Golden Mean, placed emphasis on the effortful pursuit of worldly achievements (you-wei) similar to Confucius. On the contrary, Taoist thinkers, whether it’s Laotzu, Yangtzu or Zhuangtzu, sought independence from the system (chu-shi) to live an effortless life (wu-wei). By denouncing interventions and materialism, some of them strive for rustic, primitive lifestyles, some hedonistic individualism and others a surreal freedom land beyond this world. At its face value, Taoism is useless if not a deterrent to social progress, but it questions the validity of mainstream beliefs and addresses humanity’s blind spots through insightful discoveries. Of all the schools, Taoism takes a special angle; it pushes the limit of understanding to allow more holistic truths. It is invaluable to the history of mankind.

This book is compiled around Laotzu’s philosophy, applying Yangtzu and Zhuangtzu as supplement to discuss his life, work, ideas and lasting impact; it then goes into each chapter in detail. Let us begin with no further due.

Chapter 1

Lingering Questions on the Biography and Work of Laotzu

The only historic mentioning that we could rely on to study the life and work of Laotzu is Chapter 63 “Biographies of Laotzu, Han Fei and etc” in Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian (Shi-ji, the Records)*, the credibility of which, however, had been challenged by scholars since Song Dynasty. Such skepticism lingered in Qing Dynasty and surged during the Republic. Articles written on historic evidence to validate the years of Laotzu’s birth and death were copious, concerning a handful of domestic researchers. They made cross references and reasonable conjectures. So, to study Laotzu one must dive into their work and it is not enough to merely adhere to traditions. Here I attach the paragraph on Laotzu from the *Records of the Grand Historian*; then, I will cite and comment on studies done by these contemporary scholars to reach a verdict on the actual chronology of Laotzu as a person. It reads,

“Laotzu, a native of the Quren neighborhood in Li Village, Chuku County had surname Li, first-name Er, courtesy name Boyang and a posthumous title ‘Dan’. He was a curator of the Royal Archives for Zhou court. When Confucius went to Zhou he asked rites from Laotzu...”

老子者，楚苦县厉乡曲仁里人也，姓李氏，名耳，字伯阳，谥曰聃，周守藏室之史也。孔子适周，将问礼于老子。老子曰：“子所言者，其人与骨皆已朽矣，独其言在耳。且君子得其时则驾，不得其时则蓬累而行。吾闻之，良贾深藏若虚，君子盛德容貌若愚。去子之骄气与多欲，态色与淫志，是皆无益于子之身。吾所以告子，若是而已。”孔子去，谓弟子曰：“鸟，吾知其能飞；鱼，吾知其能游；兽，吾知其能走。走者可以为罔，游者可以为纶，飞者可以为矰。至于龙，吾不能知其乘风云而上天。吾今日见老子，其犹龙邪！”

老子修道德，其学以自隐无名为务。居周久之，见周之衰，乃遂去。至关，关令尹喜曰：“子将隐矣，强为我著书。”于是老子乃著书上下篇，言道德之意五千馀言而去，莫知其所终。或曰：老莱子亦楚人也，著书十五篇，言道家之用，与孔子同时云。盖老子百有六十馀岁，或言二百馀岁，以其修道而养寿也。

自孔子死之后百二十九年，而史记周太史儋见秦献公曰：“始秦与周合而离，离五百岁而复合，合七十岁而霸王者出焉。”或曰儋即老子，或曰非也，世莫知其然否。老子，隐君子也。老子之子名宗，宗为魏将，封于段干。宗子注，注子宫，宫玄孙假，假仕于汉孝文帝。而假之子解为胶西王卬太傅，因家于齐焉。世之学老子者则绌儒学，儒学亦绌老子。“道不同不相为谋”，岂谓是邪？李耳无为自化，清静自正。

Yan Ruoqu (閻若璩) of Qing Dynasty, referenced Chapter 47 “House of Confucius” of the *Records*, “Confucius and Nangong Jingshu went to Zhou together,” *Commentary of Zuo (Zuo-zhuan)*, “Meng Xi-tzu at his deathbed, summoned his son Yi and Nangong Jingshu to learn rites from Confucius,” and the *Book of Rites* Chapter “Questions of Zengzi”, “Confucius followed Laotzu in conducting a village funeral; on the way, they witnessed a solar eclipse,” and deduced based on these three pieces of evidence that Laotzu met Confucius, 34 at that time, on the 24th year of the Duke Zhao of Lu.

Hu Shi (胡适), a contemporary scholar made a few amendments to Yan’s statement as follows:

“Yan concluded that it was in the 24th year of the Duke Zhao that 34-year-old Confucius went to Zhou to meet Laotzu. Although it sounds credible, several questions remain: 1. Is Chapter “Questions of Zengtzu” reliable? 2. Was it ritually acceptable for Nangong to follow Confucius to Zhou within three months of his father’s death? 3. Could the solar eclipse mentioned be the one occurred in the 31st year of Duke Zhou? Nevertheless, when Confucius went to Zhou he must be older than 34, or 518 BC, mostly likely between 34 to 41 years old and Laotzu was twenty years his senior maximum.”

Yan Ruoqu and Hu Shi shared many ideas, especially the belief that Laotzu was Confucius’ senior and that Confucius once learned rites from him. This old belief was self-validating. But considering *Tao Te Ching*’s content, does it make chronological sense? Was it written by the Laotzu from whom Confucius learned rites? Did Confucius really visit the author of *Tao Te Ching* to learn rites? These questions stirred controversies in many. Of the earliest skeptics were Zhang Zai (张载), Zhu Xi (朱熹) and Ye Shi (叶适) of Song Dynasty. They believed:

“Laotzu, the author of *Tao Te Ching* was not the same person who taught Confucius rites, nor whom the ritual school referred to as Lao Dan (老聃). This was a misinformation propagated by irresponsible scholars who mixed up the two.”

Of the Qing Dynasty, Cui Dongbi (崔东壁) and Wang Zhong (汪中) also harbored doubts about Laotzu and the book. Wang Zhong in particular devoted a chapter to Laotzu’s identity; he concluded that the Laotzu who wrote the five-thousand-character *Tao Te Ching*, or Dan, the Royal Historian(太史儋) as mentioned in Laotzu’s biography in the *Records*, is not the one who taught Confucius rites. In short, he believed they were two different people. Such theory however, did not receive much attention until around the 10th year of the Republic, when Liang Qichao (梁启超) lashed his attack on Hu Shi’s history of Chinese philosophy, and declared that Laotzu was a man in the Warring States period rather than the Spring and Autumn. He gathered evidence from *Tao Te Ching* and reasoned that such school of thought wouldn’t have risen during the Spring and Autumn, plus that idioms and official titles in *Tao Te Ching* did not correspond to that era. Here I made a list of Liang’s points:

1. According to the *Records*, Laotzu as Confucius’ senior, his son Zong wouldn’t have become a general for Wei (as Wei was only enlisted as one of the warring states six or seven decades after Confucius’ death). Similarly, under Emperor Jing of Han (汉景帝), his 8th generation descendants wouldn’t have lived in the same era as Confucius’ 13th generation.
2. Confucius, Motzu and Mencius never mentioned Laotzu.
3. As for the episode of Confucius asking rites from Lao Dan, *Rites* portrayed a conservative man adhering to traditions, quite the contrary to the type of person who would write *Tao Te Ching*.
4. *Records*’s description of Laotzu most likely came from an amalgam of the three chapters of *Zhuangtzu* (Tian-dao, Tian-yun, Wai-wu). Some of the stories were attributed to Lao Dan, some to Lao Lai-tzu. It is not known who the subjects are.
5. Sections such as
 - a. “As men possess sharper weapons, the nation sees more trouble. As men grew

ingenuous, strange objects are continuously invented. With increasing rules and regulations, there occur more thieves and robbers. (民多利器，國家滋昏；人多伎巧，奇物滋起；法令滋彰，盜賊多有)”

- b. “When there is no peace within the family, the filial stands out. When the country is in chaos, loyal ministers arise. (六亲不和有孝慈，國家混亂有忠臣) ”

are too harsh and aggressive to be spoken by a man from the Spring and Autumn period.

6. Titles such as 侯王，王侯，王公，万乘之君，取天下 did not correspond to Spring and Autumn. And the use of 仁、义(compassion vs. justice) in parallel was a feature unique to Mencius. Whereas

“Thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed. Years of disaster follow in the wake of a great war. (師之所處，荊棘生焉。大軍之後，必有凶年) ”

sounds as if spoken by someone who had been through the battles of Maling (馬陵) and Changping (長平) . And in

“The deputy commander stands on the left, the commander-in-chief on the right. (偏將軍居左，上將軍居右)”

the official titles pertain to the Warring States period.

In Liang’s later discussion of pre-Qin political thoughts, he added that somehow,

“Therefore, when Tao is lost, there is virtue. When virtue is lost, there is compassion. When compassion is lost, there is justice. When justice is lost, there is ritual. (失道而后德，失德而后仁，失仁而后义，失义而后礼)”

attacks Confucianism. And

“Not exalting the gifted prevents competition among the people. (不尚賢使民不爭)”

attacks Mohism. And

“If men are not afraid to die, it is no avail to threaten them with death. (民不畏死，奈何以死惧之?)”

attacks Legalism. With such detailed exposition, Liang brings forward Laotzu and *Tao Te Ching*'s era to the Warring States.

Since Liang published his thought, few scholars including Zhang Xu (张煦) stood to defend, while countless many agreed in unison with Liang. Their studies found different years for Laotzu but very similar, all in the Warring States p rather than Spring and Autumn. Feng Youlan (冯友兰) later in his discussion of the history of Chinese philosophies reached the same conclusion that Laotzu's book was born during the Warring States, by its description of the prehistoric literary world. Feng reads,

"First, before Confucius the act of compiling one's thought into a book was unheard of, therefore Laotzu cannot predate Confucius. Second, the book was not written in a Question-Answer format so it must be after Confucius and Mencius. Third, it follows a concise "jing/sutra" style writing ("经" 体), evident of a Warring States origin. Although any one out of the above leads to the so-called begging-the-question fallacy, overall, Laotzu's format and thesis show proof that it was a product of the Warring States. This must not be a coincidence."

Feng's departure point, this evolutionary history of classics serves a poignant angle. Many others conducting their studies also found *Tao Te Ching* to be an unlikely child of the Spring and Autumn. This I won't go into details.

In addition, Feng Youlan agreed with Liu Rulin (刘汝霖) that Lao Dan isn't *Tao Te Ching*'s author, but Li Er (李耳) of the Warring States. They believed that Lao Dan was a fictional figure who did not exist, and Sima Qian mistakenly took Li Er for Lao Dan, thus an amalgam in Laotzu's biography in the *Records*. Replacing "Laotzu" with "Li Er" would render it likely for his son Zong to become a Wei general, and his 8th generation descendants in the same time as Confucius' 13th.

These above commentaries by contemporary scholars offered various hypothesis: 1. Lao Dan had surname Li and first-name Er; 2. Lao Dan is different from Li Er; 3. Lao Dan, Lao Laotzu and the Royal Historian Dan were the same person. No matter the case, it would be preposterous to pass judgement without referencing back to the masterpiece that earned him lasting reputation. The author of *Tao Te Ching* must be a philosopher himself. Disciples of every school of thought in China were influenced by this book, therefore it would be curious to know why his name or work hadn't been mentioned once before Mencius' time.

As we already know that the first person to call his name out "Laotzu" or "Lao Dan" was Zhuangtzu. In his Chapter "The World", Lao Dan and Guan Yin (关尹) were in the same category "the true great men since the prehistoric". Zhuangtzu also showcases a good command of Laotzu's thoughts. Thus it is evident that by the time Zhuangtzu completed his book ("The World" was Zhuangtzu's endnote to the entire book, and it was his work without question. I talked about this in detail in another article), *Tao Te Ching* had already been popular among the parent school. To call Laotzu "the true great men since the prehistoric" also suggests that he wasn't temporally close to Zhuangtzu. It is also frequently mentioned that Yangtzu sought teachings from Laotzu, so Yangtzu could be Laotzu's formal disciple; as for Zhuangtzu, he was Laotzu's informal adherent. As a result, Warring States would be far too late a time for the birth of Laotzu and his book. In the past, to carve and trace characters on bamboo slips to make a book was by no means a hassle-free process, so a classic like *Tao Te Ching* could only be read within

the same school, if not a secret keepsake of which only insiders have access to. This explains why Yangtzu and Zhuangtzu did but not Mencius, who therefore could not comment on Laotzu. Hence to say Mencius preceded Laotzu because his book had no mention of Laotzu is precocious. As for titles and phrases unique to Warring States in *Tao Te Ching*, they could be a result of corruptions, a common destiny befalling ancient classics as they transcended through time; a few phrasing issues are therefore not enough to overturn the temporality. Indeed, Confucius' visit of Lao Dan begs the question. Since *Book of Rites* contains amalgamated fabrications by later-generation scholars, its stories warrant scrutiny. Compared with the *Rites*, I would rather use for reference *The Analects*, an actual record of Confucius' spoken words and life events. To visit Lao Dan in Zhou was a big event, how come *The Analects* mentioned no such things? If, the impressionable Confucius did commend Lao Dan as a "dragon-like" man as in the *Records*, how come *The Analects* mentioned no such person? As a result, to say Confucius had consulted Lao Dan was preposterous.

In my opinion, the majority of the biography of Laotzu in the *Records* was taken from *Zhuangtzu*, the rest from legends, thus the repetition "or"(或曰), and "no one knows his whereabouts", "the world knows nothing of his current state", etc. And the information on Laotzu's descendants must be from reliable historic sources. In eulogizing Laotzu it also derided Confucius, as Han Yu (韩愈) uncovered long ago:

... the *Records*' mentioning of Confucius' praise of Laotzu shared similar tone as *Zhuangtzu*. This was Zhuangtzu's trick, and Sima Qian fell for it. Perhaps due to Sima clan's Taoism-oriented culture, Sima Tan promoted Tao to a higher place when talking about the six schools. However, *Zhuangtzu* Chapter "Essentials for Nurturing Life" (Yang-sheng-zhu) clearly mentioned Lao Dan's death: it is not that "no one knows his whereabouts". Hence the *Records* borrowed from folklores to give Laotzu an image of "a god-like sage".

To conclude, the most influential thinker in Chinese history is Confucius (551-479BC), followed by Motzu (470-391BC), followed by Laotzu and Yangtzu (440-360BC), and lastly Mencius (372-289BC) and Zhuangtzu (369-286BC). In Mencius' time, Yangtzu, Motzu and Confucius were three equally important pillars of thought; in Zhuangtzu's time, Laotzu and Guan Yin were referred to as "the true great men since the prehistoric". From there, it wouldn't be too difficult to deduce Laotzu's chronology.

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