The Four Taoist Classics - Daodejing, Huahujing, Zhuangzi, and Liezi

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Preface

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is an indigenous Chinese religion often associated with the Daodejing (Tao Te Ching), a philosophical and political text purportedly written by Laozi (Lao Tzu, Lao Tse) sometime in the 3rd or 4th centuries B.C.E. The Daodejing focuses on dao as a "way" or "path" — that is, the appropriate way to behave and to lead others — but the Daodejing also refers to Tao as something that existed "before Heaven and Earth," a primal and chaotic matrix from which all forms emerged. Taoism did not exist as an organized religion until the Way of the Celestial Masters sect was founded in 142 C.E. by Zhang Daoling, who based the sect on spiritual communications from the deified Laozi. The Way of the Celestial Masters and other later sects of Taoism engaged in complex ritual practices, including devotion to a wide range of celestial divinities and immortals, and thousands of Taoist religious texts were produced over the centuries. Taoists also engaged with Chinese politics in a variety of ways throughout Chinese history. At one time, scholars in both China and the West distinguished philosophical from religious Taoism, but more recently a continuity of belief and practice between these has been recognized. In both, a harmonious relationship between nature, humanity, and the divine is emphasized, and both are concerned with appropriate behavior and ways of leading and governing others. The term "Tao" has a number of meanings. Taoist religious sects were persecuted in China during the 19th and 20th centuries, but are currently undergoing a revival. Western

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interest in Taoism has, for the most part, been confined to the Daodejing, but in both the West and in the East, there is considerable interest in practices which, while not "Taoist" per se, are often associated with Taoism, ranging from fengshui to taiji quan to acupuncture and herbal medicine.

As with many ancient religious traditions, an exact date is impossible to determine. Taoist ideas and early writings long precede any organizational structure. The date given here (c. 550 B.C.E.) is generally the time period when a variety of spiritual thinkers were putting their ideas into writing. These writings were not collected as a composite teaching of the "Tao" until the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E.

While Taoists recognize a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses, they do not acknowledge any that are omnipotent or eternal. All the gods, including Laozi, are divine emanations of celestial energy.

Taoism has no centralized authority and different sects have different headquarters. However, the White Cloud Temple in Beijing is a key center for training for priests and for administration.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism commonly name the three main pillars of traditional Chinese thought, although it should be obvious that like any “ism,” they are abstractions — what they name are not monolithic but multifaceted traditions with fuzzy boundaries and complex histories and internal divisions. “Taoism,” in particular, needs to be handled with care, for it designates both a philosophical tradition and an organized religion, which in modern Chinese are identified separately as Taojia and Taojiao, respectively.

Philosophical Taoism traces its origins to Laozi (or Lao-tzu, in

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the “Wade-Giles” system of transliteration), who flourished during the sixth century B.C.E., according to Chinese tradition. According to some modern scholars, however, Laozi is entirely legendary; there was never an historical Laozi. In religious Taoism, Laozi is revered as a supreme deity. The name “Laozi” is best taken to mean “Old (lao) Master (zi),” and Laozi the ancient philosopher is said to have written a short book, which has come to be called simply the Laozi. When the Laozi was recognized as a “classic”(jing) — that is, accorded “canonical” status, so to speak, on account of its profound insight and significance — it acquired a more exalted and hermeneutically instructive title, Daodejing, commonly translated as the “Classic of the Way and Virtue.” Its influence on Chinese culture is pervasive, and it reaches beyond China. Next to the Bible, the Daodejing is the most translated work in world literature. It is concerned with the Dao or “Way” and how it finds expression in “virtue” (de), especially through what the text calls “naturalness” (ziran) and “nonaction” (wuwei). These concepts, however, are open to interpretation. While some see them as proof that the Laozi is a deeply “mystical” work, others emphasize their contribution to ethics and/or political philosophy. Interpreting the Laozi demands careful hermeneutic reconstruction, which requires both analytic rigor and an informed historical imagination.

Laozi Biography

The first known attempt to write a biography of Laozi is in the Shi ji (Records of the Historian, c. 90-104 BCE) by Sima Qian (145-89

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BCE). According to this text, Laozi's surname was Li, and his personal name was Er. The narrative does not use the name Lao Tan, only Laozi. However, Qian reports that a historiographer named Tan did advise one of the Dukes of Qin, and that he indeed predicted the Zhou and Qin would split and a new empire would emerge. Then he says, "Some say Tan was Laozi, some say not. No one in our time knows whether or not it is so." (translations from Sima Qian done by A.C. Graham) In yet a further effort to narrow down the identification of Laozi, Qian mentions the Lao Laizi of the Zhuangzi and acknowledges that he came from the same state as Laozi, and that he authored a work of 15 sections on Taoist practice. Qian says Lao Laizi was a contemporary of Confucius, but clearly he seems to make a distinction between Lao Laizi and Laozi. Finally, there is the end of the biography in which Qian talks about Laozi's son's fortunes and ties them to the area from which the Han ruling family came.

Qian's biographical account follows the Zhuangzi in stating Laozi's occupation as an archivist for the state of Zhou. Like the Zhuangzi it also reports exchanges between Laozi and Confucius. Two dialogues are briefly reported. In one, Laozi tells Confucius to give up his stiff deportment and prideful airs. It is very similar to Zhuangzi Mixed Chapter 26. In the other passage, Confucius is reported to have praised Laozi's wisdom and to have compared him to a dragon in a way virtually identical to Zhuangzi Outer Chapter 14.

Sima Qian says, "Laozi cultivated the dao and its virtue." We recognize of course that "dao and its virtue" is Dao de, and that this is a reference to Laozi's association with the Daodejing. What the Zhuangzi

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only alluded to by putting near quotes from the DDJ in the mouth of Laozi, Sima Qian makes explicit. He tells us that when the Zhou kingdom began to decline, Laozi decided to leave China and head into the West. When he reached the mountain pass, the keeper of the pass (Yin Xi, also called Kuan-yin) insisted that he write down his teachings, so that the people would have them after he left. So, “Laozi wrote a book in two parts, discussing the ideas of the Way and of Virtue in some 5,000 words, and departed. No one knows where he ended his life.”

A.C. Graham has made a study of Sima Qian’s account and the other origins of the Lao Tan (Laozi) legend. Graham believes that the oldest stratum of the stories about Lao Tan is actually a Confucian tale relating how Confucius sought instruction in the rites from Lao Tan, who was known as an archivist of Zhou. Graham dates this part of the legend as far back as the 4th Cent. BCE. What we do not know is whether this account actually preserves some factual historical reminiscence, or simply an exemplary story designed to show that Confucius sought learning anywhere and was humbly willing to be taught by anyone. But then what happened was that Lao Tan was adopted in the “Inner Chapters” of the Zhuangzi (before 300 BCE) as a spokesmen for Zhuang Zhou’s views and an instructor of Confucius.

The next stage in the development of Laozi’s biography was the appearance of Laozi under the name Lao Tan, thereby appropriating the place Tan had occupied as a teacher of Confucius. We cannot be certain whether this identification of the two figures was actually done by Zhuang Zhou or was a later redaction of Inner Ch. 3. But certainly Lao Tan and Laozi are used interchangeably in Outer Ch.14, Turning of

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Heaven and Mixed Ch. 27, Imputed Words. From this point on, Laozi is offered as a figure representing a definite philosophical trend.

Another movement in the evolution of the Laozi story was completed by about 240 BCE. This was necessitated by Lao Tan's association with the grand historiographer Tan during the Zhou, who predicted the rise of the Qin state. This information, along with that of Laozi's journey to the West, and of the writing of the book for Yin Xi (Kuan-yin) won the favor for Laozi from the Qin. And the association of Laozi with a text (the DDJ) that was becoming increasingly significant was important. However, with the demise of the Qin state, some realignment of Laozi's connection with them was needed. So, Qian's final remarks about Laozi's son helped to associate the philosopher's lineage with the new Han ruling family. The journey to the West component now also had a new force. It explained why Laozi was not presently advising the Han rulers.

Sima Qian classified the Six Schools as Yin-Yang, Confucian, Mohist, Legalists, School of Names, and Taoists. Since his biography located Laozi earlier than Zhuangzi, and the passages in the Zhuangzi seemed to be about a person who lived before the text (and not to be simply a literary or traditional invention), then Laozi became established as the founder of the Taoist school.

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Laozi and Lao Tan

Zhuangzi gives the following, probably fictional, account of Confucius's impression of Laozi:

"Master, you've seen Lao Tan—what estimation would you make of him?" Confucius said, "At last I may say that I have seen a dragon—a dragon that coils to show his body at its best, that sprawls out to display his patterns at their best, riding on the breath of the clouds, feeding on the yin and yang. My mouth feel open and I couldn't close it; my tongue flew up and I couldn't even stammer. How could I possibly make any estimation of Lao Tan!" Zhuangzi, Ch. 14

According to The Book of Rites (Li ji), a master known as Lao Tan was an expert on mourning rituals. On four occasions, Confucius (kongzi, Master Kong) is reported to have responded to questions by appealing to answers given by Lao Tan. The records say that Confucius once assisted him in a burial service.

In the Zhuangzi (late 4th century BCE), Lao Tan is usually a critic of Confucius. This is the first text to use Laozi as a personal name and to identify Laozi and Lao tan. The Zhuangzi contains materials from a teacher known as Zhuang Zhou who lived between 370-300 BCE, according to Sima Qian. Chapters 1-7 of the present 33 are those most often ascribed to Zhuangzi (meaning Master Zhuang). Guo Xiang edited the text in the first half of the 3rd Cent. CE. He had 52 sections handed down to him. He rejected the material he thought was inferior and spurious, keeping 33 chapters which he divided into the "inner chapters"

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(chs. 1-7), “outer chapters” (chs. 8-22) and “mixed chapters,” (chs. 23-33). Aside from chs. 1-7, the remaining 26 had origins other than Zhuang Zhou and they sometimes take different points of view. In the citations below, I have followed the practice of prefacing the chapter with its literary critical designation (that is, inner, outer, mixed). These designations are oversimplified textually and arguable, but at least some acknowledgment of where they are located in this textual system may help one understand that some of the passages come from different time periods and have specific polemical agendas.

Assuming that Lao Tan and Laozi are the same figure and counting the one dialogue in Mixed Ch. 27 attributed to Lao Laizi as Laozi, then there are eighteen (18) passages in which Laozi plays a role in the Zhuangzi. It is on the basis on Inner Chapter 3, The Secret of Caring for Life that we identify Lao Tan and Laozi. The passage begins “When Lao Tan died” but then when his disciple Ch’in Shih is attacked by his fellow students for only making three cries and then leaving the funeral hall, the text calls them “Laozi’s disciples.” Ch’in Shih’s defense is “Your master happened to come because it was his time, and he happened to leave because things follow along. If you are content with the time and willing to follow along, then grief and joy have no way to enter.” His association of the dead master with the students who are Laozi’s disciples, and the opening of the chapter makes the identification of Lao Tan and Laozi pretty clear. Then, there are dialogues in which Lao Tan and Laozi are used interchangeably (see Outer Ch.14, Turning of Heaven and Mixed Ch. 27, Imputed Words). Other biographically significant material includes a reference to Laozi’s being the keeper of

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the Royal Archives of the house of Zhou in Outer Ch. 13, The Way of Heaven.

Laozi's relationship to Confucius is also a major part of the Zhuangzi's picture of the philosopher. Of the eighteen passages mentioning Laozi, Confucius figures as a dialogical partner or subject in nine (9). While it is clear that Confucius is thought to have a long way to go to become a zhen ren (the Zhuangzi's way of speaking about the true man), Lao Tan seems to feel sorry for Confucius in his reply to "No-Toes" in Inner Chapter 5, The Sign of Virtue Complete. He recommends seeking to release Confucius from the fetters of his tendency to make rules and human discriminations (e.g., right/wrong; beautiful/ugly).

Lao Tan addresses Confucius by his personal name "Ch'iu" in three passages. Since such a liberty is one that only a person with seniority and authority would take, this style invites us to believe that Confucius was a student of Lao Tan's and acknowledged him as an authority. However, continuing the theme that Laozi taught Confucius, who was confused and having no success, we should note that the point of the story that mentions Laozi's occupation as an archivist is that Confucius' writings, offered to Laozi by Confucius himself, are simply not worthy to be put into the library. And on another occasion, Confucius claims that he knows the "six classics" thoroughly and that he has tried to persuade 72 kings to their truth, but they have been unmoved. Laozi's reply is, "Good!" He tells Confucius not to occupy himself with such worn out ways, and to live the dao himself (Outer Ch.14, Turning of Heaven).

Another important set of exchanges occurs between Laozi and

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Confucius over the latter’s principal ideas of benevolence (ren) and righteousness (yi). Laozi tells Confucius to forget this teaching and be natural: “Why these flags of benevolence and righteousness so bravely upraised, as though you were beating a drum and searching for a lost child? Ah, you will bring confusion to the nature of man!” (Outer Ch. 13, The Way of Heaven)

Finally, in Outer Ch.14, Turning of Heaven, Lao Tan makes a direct attack not only on the rules and regulations of Confucius, but also the teachings of the Mohists, and the veneration of the ancient emperors and legendary sages of the past.

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Laozi Mythology

Livia Kohn has written a historical account of the development of the Laozi myth from the Han through the Six Dynasties period (200 BCE to 600 CE). In The Lives of the Immortals by Liu Xiang (Lie xuan zhuan, 77-6 BCE) there are separate entries for Laozi and Yin Xi (Kuan-yin). According to the story, Yin became a disciple and begged Laozi to allow him to go to the West as well. Laozi told him that he could come along, but only after he cultivated the dao. Laozi instructed Yin to study hard and await a summons which would be delivered to him in the marketplace in Chengdu. There is now a shrine at the putative location of this site dedicated to "ideal discipleship." More importantly, in this text it is clear that practitioners of immortality regarded Laozi as a superior daoshi (fangshi) who had achieved immortality through wisdom and the practice of techniques for longevity.

Emperor Huan (r. 147-167 CE) built a palace on the traditional site of Laozi's birthplace and authorized veneration and sacrifice to Laozi. The Laozi ming (Inscription on Laozi) written by Pien Shao in c. 166 CE as a commemorative marker for the site goes well beyond Sima Qian's biography. It makes the first apotheosis of Laozi into a deity. The text makes reference to the many cosmic metamorphoses of Laozi, allowing him portraying him as having been counselor to the Glorious sage kings of China. The elite at the imperial court divinized Laozi and regarded him as an embodiment of the dao, a kind of cosmic emperor who knew how to rule things in perfect harmony and bring peace.

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During the reign of Emperor Huidi of the Western Jin dynasty (290-306 CE), Wang Fu, a libationer of the Celestial Masters Tradition often debated with the Buddhist monk Bo Yuan about philosophical beliefs. The result was that Fu wrote a one volume work entitled Book of Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians (Laozi huahu jing) designed to put forward the view that Laozi went to India, changed into Buddha, and converted the barbarians. The basic thrust of the book was that Buddhism was a form of Daoism. Later, the work was gradually enlarged and adapted into ten volumes and it became a repository for Taoist polemic against Buddhism. Both Emperor Gaozong and Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang dynasty gave orders to prohibit its distribution. In the Yuan dynasty (1285 CE), Emperor Shizu ordered the burning of the Taoist canon of texts, and the first one destroyed was the Book of the Conversion of Barbarians.

The Taoist cosmological belief in the transformation of beings was greatly strengthened by the text Scripture on the Transformations of Laozi (The Laozi Bianhua Wuji Jing, late 100s CE). This work reflects some of the ideas in Pien Shao's inscription, but takes them much further. It tells how Laozi transformed into his own mother and gave birth to himself, taking quite literally comments in the DDJ where the dao is portrayed as the mother of all things. The work associates Laozi with the manifestations or incarnations of the dao itself. The final passage is an address given by Laozi predicting his reappearance and promising liberation from trouble and the overthrow of the Han dynasty! The millennial cults of the second century believed Laozi was a messianic figure who appeared to their leaders and gave them

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instructions and revelations.

The period of the Celestial Masters (c. 142-260 CE) produced documents enhancing the myth of Laozi. Laozi was now called Lao jun (Lord Lao) or Tai Shang Lao Jun (Lord Lao Most High). Lao jun could manifest himself in any time of unrest and bring Glorious peace (tai ping). Yet, the Celestial Masters never claimed that Lao jun had done so in their day. Instead of such a direct manifestation, the Celestial Masters practitioners taught that Lao jun transmitted to them talismans, registers, and new scriptures in the form of texts.

Most later writings about Laozi continued to base their appeals to Laozi's authority on his ongoing transmigrations, but they give evidence of the growing tension between Daoism and Buddhism. The first mythological account of Laozi's birth is in the Scripture of the Inner Explanation of the Three Heavens, a Celestial Master work dated about 420 CE. In this text, Laozi has three births: as the manifestation of the dao from pure energy to become a deity in heaven; in human form as the ancient philosopher of the Daodejing; and as the Buddha after his journey to the West. In the first birth, his mother is known as The Jade Maiden of Mystery and Wonder. In his second, he is born to a human woman known as Mother Li. This was an eighty-one year pregnancy, after which he was born from her left armpit (there is a tradition that Buddha had been born from his mother's right arm pit). At birth he had white hair and so he was called Laozi (Old Child). This birth is set in the time of the Shang dynasty, several centuries before the date Sima Qian reports. But the purpose of such a move is to allow him time to travel to the West and then become the Buddha. The third birth takes place in

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India as the Buddha. For details of this birth we turn to Esoteric Record of Mystery and Wonder, another fifth century document of the Celestial Masters. According to this text, Laozi entered into the body of the wife of the king of India through her mouth. Later he was born through her left arm pit. He walked immediately after his birth, and “from then on Buddhist teaching came to flourish.” (quoted in Kohn)

Ge Hong‘s (283-343 CE) The Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi neipian) is the most important Taoist philosophical work of that period. Ge Hong said that in a state of visualization he saw Laozi, seven feet tall, with cloudlike garments of five colors, wearing a multi-tiered cap and carrying a sharp sword. According to Ge, Laozi had a prominent nose, long eyebrows, and an elongated head. This physiological type was template for portraying immortals in Taoist art.

Authority for Celestial Masters practices and beliefs was usually backed up by some new account of Laozi. In the 500s CE the Scripture on Opening the Cosmos had Laozi teach the sage-king who developed agriculture about the grains, so that the people would not have to kill birds and beasts for food. And he taught another sage-king how to make fire.

The hagiography of Laozi has continued to develop, down to the present day. There are even traditions that various natural geographic landmarks and features are the enduring imprint of Lord Lao on China and his face can be seen in them. It is more likely, of course, that Laozi’s immortality is in the mark made by the philosophical movement he has come to represent and the culture it created.

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Why Write At All: Fact or Fable?

Laozi had grown old – really old. He was in his nineties. And yet not many people knew of him, unlike his younger contemporary Confucius, whom everybody knew. But those who knew him knew he was the Greatest. Men like him are born once in many centuries. Confucius himself said of Laozi: I have known the way of the mighty elephants that walk on the earth, I have known the way of the whales that swim in the high seas, and I have known the way of the mighty birds that fly in the boundless skies. But this man is neither of the earth, nor of the seas, nor of the skies; he is a dragon that moves about in limitless space.

Knowing his Greatness, and realizing that he might soon leave the world, the Chinese emperor requested him to put down his thoughts on paper for the guidance of future generations. Laozi refused, saying that the Tao that can be spoken about is not the real Tao, the Tao that can be written about is not the real Tao. But the emperor would not listen to him. And when the emperor's insistence grew, one night Laozi ran away from the hut in which he was living under the cover of darkness. He wanted to cross the Himalayas and reach India, where he knew he would be able to live the rest of his days in peace, free from the emperor's demands.

But when he reached the western borders of China, he found the emperor waiting for him there. And the emperor said: "If you want to cross the borders, pay the toll." And when Laozi asked what the toll was, the emperor told him: "Write a book."

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Dating the Work

The date of composition refers to the time when the Laozi reached more or less its final form; it does not rule out later interpolations or corruptions. Generally, three positions can be distinguished. First, some scholars maintain that we should accept on the whole Sima Qian's account that the Laozi was written by Lao Dan in the sixth or early fifth century B.C.E. A second and more widely held view traces the Laozi to the fourth century, while a third argues for an even later date, not earlier than the mid-third century B.C.E. Although recent archaeological discoveries may seem to rule out the last, the issue is complex because the Laozi may turn out to be a composite work involving a long process of textual formation.

Both external and internal considerations play a role in determining the date of the Laozi. Quotations from the Laozi in other classical works are often cited as evidence. For example, if the Mozi quotes explicitly from the Laozi, and if the Mozi can be dated to the fifth century, then the Laozi would have been current by that time. There is in fact one such quotation preserved in the Song dynasty encyclopedic work, Taiping yulan (322.5b), although it is not found in the present Mozi. Until new archaeological evidence comes to light, the available external evidence can only confirm that parts of the current Laozi were available around 300 B.C.E. (see further discussion in the next section) and that the work became widely recognized by the middle of the third century B.C.E., when it was quoted extensively in such works as the

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Hanfeizi and the "outer" and "miscellaneous" chapters of the Zhuangzi.

The language of the Laozi provides important clues. Much of the text is rhymed. Focusing on rhyme patterns, Liu Xiaogan (1994 and 1997) concludes that the poetic structure of the Laozi is closer to that of the Shijing (Classic of Poetry) than that of the later Chuci (Songs of Chu). Although the dating of the Shijing and the Chuci itself is by no means precise, generally the poems collected in the former should not be later than the early fifth century B.C.E., before the close of the "Spring and Autumn" period (770-481 B.C.E.), whereas those collected in the latter can be traced to no earlier than the middle of the Warring States period, around 300 B.C.E. (There are different ways to date the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, but they do not affect the argument here.) For this reason, Liu Xiaogan argues, the traditional view first articulated by Sima Qian should be upheld. Examining a wider range of linguistic evidence, William Baxter agrees that the Laozi should be dated earlier than the Zhuangzi and the Chuci, but he traces "the bulk of the Lao-tzu to the mid or early fourth century" (1998, 249). Both Liu and Baxter provide a concise analysis of the different theories of the date of the Laozi.

It is possible that the Laozi has "preserved" the ideas of Lao Dan. W. T. Chan, for example, believes that the text "embodied" the teachings of Laozi, although it was not written until the fourth century (1963, 74). According to A. C. Graham, the Laozi was ascribed to Lao Dan around 250 B.C.E. by the text's author or "publiciser," capitalizing on Lao Dan's reputation (1986, 119; also see Graham 1989). This leaves open the possibility that the book or parts of it existed before the middle of the

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third century. It also raises the question whether the Laozi was the work of a single author.

Conceivably, an editor or compiler, or a group or succession of them, could have brought together diverse sources. D. C. Lau, for example, is of the view that the Laozi is an “anthology” (1963, 14). According to Bruce Brooks and Taeko Brooks, the Laozi contains different layers of material spanning the period between 340 and 249 B.C.E. — “its long timespan precludes a single author” (1998, 151). Indeed, Chad Hansen describes the “dominant current textual theory” of the Daodejing as one which “treats the text as an edited accumulation of fragments and bits drawn from a wide variety of sources … there was no single author, no Laozi” (1992, 201). In contrast, Rudolf Wagner (1984 and 2000) asserts that the Laozi has a consistent “rhetorical structure,” characterized by an intricate “interlocking parallel style,” which would cast doubt on the “anthology” thesis.

The idea of an oral tradition that preceded the writing of the Laozi has gained wide acceptance in recent years. However, it is not always clear what that entails. On the one hand, it could lend support to W. T. Chan's view cited above, that Lao Dan's disciples had kept alive the teachings of the master orally before some later student(s) committed them to writing. On the other hand, it could also mean that the editor(s) or compiler(s) had access to disparate sayings originated from and circulated in different contexts. As Michael LaFargue emphasizes, oral tradition need not refer to the sayings of one person; it functions rather as a reservoir of “aphorisms,” which were circulated among like-minded “Laoist” scholars and formed the basis of the Daodejing (1992, 197).

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This does not prejudge whether the final product contains sayings that were put together at random, or reflects a careful distillation on the part of the compiler(s) who arranged and/or altered the material at their disposal. LaFargue appears to favor the latter view, but other scholars (e.g., Lau 1963 and Mair 1990) see little sign of tight editorial control.

Much remains uncertain, although I will venture an opinion in the next section. It may be argued that date and authorship are immaterial to and may detract from interpretation. The "truth" of the Laozi is "timeless," according to this view, transcending historical and cultural specificities. Issues of provenance are important, however, if context has any role to play in the production of meaning. Polemics among different schools of thought, for example, were far more pronounced during the Warring States period than in the earlier Spring and Autumn period. The Zhou government had been in decline; warfare among the "feudal" states intensified both in scale and frequency from the fourth century onward. As the political conditions deteriorated, philosophers and strategists vied to convince the rulers of the various states of their program to bring order to the land. At the same time, perhaps with the increased displacement and disillusionment of intellectuals, a stronger eremitic tradition also emerged. If the Laozi had originated from the fourth century, it might reflect some of these concerns. From this perspective, the origin of the Laozi is as much a hermeneutical issue as it is an historical one.

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Multiple Texts

The discovery of two Laozi silk manuscripts at Mawangdui, near Changsha, Hunan province in 1973 marks an important milestone in modern Laozi research. The manuscripts, identified simply as “A” (jia) and “B” (yi), were found in a tomb that was sealed in 168 B.C.E. The texts themselves can be dated earlier, the “A” manuscript being the older of the two, copied in all likelihood before 195 B.C.E. (see Lau 1982, Boltz 1984, and Henricks 1989).

Before this find, access to the Laozi was mainly through the received text of Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.) and Heshanggong, a legendary figure depicted as a teacher to the Han Emperor Wen (r. 179-157 B.C.E.). There are other manuscript versions, but by and large they play a secondary role in the history of the classic. A more recent archaeological find in Guodian, the so-called “Bamboo-slip Laozi,” which predates the Mawangdui manuscripts, has rekindled debates on the origin and composition of the Laozi. But first a note on the title and structure of the Daodejing.

The Laozi did not acquire its “classic” status until the Han dynasty. According to the Shiji (49.5b), the Empress Dowager Dou — wife of Emperor Wen and mother of Emperor Jing (r. 156-141) — was a dedicated student of the Laozi. Later sources add that it was Emperor Jing who established the text officially as a classic. However, the title Daodejing appears not to have been widely used until later, toward the close of the Han era.

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The Daodejing is also referred to as the Daode zhenjing (True Classic of the Way and Virtue), the Taishang xuanyuan Daodejing (Classic of the Way and Virtue of the Highest Primordial Mystery), and less formally the “five-thousand character” text, on account of its approximate length. Most versions exceed five thousand characters by about five to ten percent, but it is interesting to note that numerological considerations later became an integral part of the history of the work. According to the seventh-century Taoist master Cheng Xuanying, Ge Xuan (fl. 200 C.E.) shortened the text that accompanied the Heshanggong commentary to fit the magical number of five thousand. This claim cannot be verified, but a number of Laozi manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang contain 4,999 characters.

The current Daodejing is divided into two parts (pian) and 81 chapters or sections (zhang). Part one, comprising chapters 1-37, has come to be known as the Daojing (Classic of Dao), while chapters 38-81 make up the Dejing (Classic of Virtue). This is understood to be a thematic division — chapter 1 begins with the word Dao, while chapter 38 begins with the phrase “superior virtue” — although the concepts of Dao and virtue (de) feature in both parts. As a rough heuristic guide, some commentators have suggested that the Daojing is more “metaphysical,” whereas the Dejing focuses more on sociopolitical issues.

In this context, it is easy to appreciate the tremendous interest occasioned by the discovery of the Mawangdui Laozi manuscripts. The two manuscripts contain all the chapters that are found in the current Laozi, although the chapters follow a different order in a few places. For

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example, in both manuscripts, the sections that appear as chapters 80 and 81 in the current Laozi come immediately after a section that corresponds with chapter 66 of the present text.

Both manuscripts are similarly divided into two parts, but in contrast with the current version, in reverse order; i.e., both manuscripts begin with the Dejing, corresponding to chapter 38 of the received text. "Part one" of the "B" manuscript ends with the editorial notation, "Virtue, 3,041 [characters]," while the last line of "Part two" reads: "Dao, 2,426." Does this mean that the classic should be renamed? One scholar, in fact, has adopted the title Dedaojing for his translation of the Mawangdui Laozi (Henricks 1989). It seems unlikely that the Mawangdui arrangement stems simply from scribal idiosyncrasy or happenstance — e.g., that the copyist, in writing out the Laozi on silk, had made use of an original text in bamboo slips and just happened to start with a bundle of slips containing the Dejing (Yan 1976, 12, explains how this is possible). If the order is deliberate, does it imply that the "original" Laozi gives priority to sociopolitical issues? This raises important questions for interpretation.

The division into 81 chapters reflects numerological interest and is associated particularly with the Heshanggong version, which also carries chapter titles. It was not universally accepted until much later, perhaps the Tang period, when the text was standardized under the patronage of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-755). Traditional sources report that some versions were divided into 64, 68, or 72 chapters; and some did not have chapter divisions (Henricks 1982).

The Mawangdui "A" manuscript contains in some places a dot or

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“period” that appears to signal the beginning of a chapter. The earlier Guodian texts are not divided into two parts, but in many places they employ a black square mark to indicate the end of a section. The sections or chapters so marked generally agree with the division in the present Laozi. Thus, although the 81-chapter formation may be relatively late, some attempt at chapter division seems evident from an early stage of the textual history of the Daodejing.

Until recently, the Mawangdui manuscripts have held the pride of place as the oldest extant manuscripts of the Laozi. In late 1993, the excavation of a tomb (identified as M1) in Guodian, Jingmen city, Hubei province, has yielded among other things some 800 bamboo slips, of which 730 are inscribed, containing over 13,000 Chinese characters. Some of these, amounting to about 2,000 characters, match the Laozi (see Allan and Williams 2000, and Henricks 2000). The tomb is located near the old capital of the state of Chu and is dated around 300 B.C.E. Robbers entered the tomb before it was excavated, although the extent of the damage is uncertain.

The bamboo texts, written in a Chu script, have been transcribed into standard Chinese and published under the title Guodian Chumu zhujian (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), which on the basis of the size and shape of the slips, calligraphy, and other factors divides the Laozi material into three groups. Group A contains thirty-nine bamboo slips, which correspond in whole or in part to the following chapters of the present text: 19, 66, 46, 30, 15, 64, 37, 63, 2, 32, 25, 5, 16, 64, 56, 57, 55, 44, 40 and 9. Groups B and C are smaller, with eighteen (chs. 59, 48, 20, 13, 41, 52, 45, 54) and fourteen slips (chs. 17, 18, 35, 31, 64), respectively.

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On the whole, the Guodian "bamboo-slip Laozi" is consistent with the received text, although the placement or sequence of the chapters is different and there are numerous variant and/or archaic characters. Particularly, whereas chapter 19 of the current Laozi contains what appears to be a strong attack on Confucian ideals — "Cut off benevolence (ren), discard rightness (yi)" — the Guodian "A" text directs its readers to "cut off artificiality, discard deceit." This has been taken to suggest that in the course of its transmission, the Laozi has taken on a more "polemical" outlook. However, the Guodian "C" text indicates that ren and yi arose only after the "Glorious Dao" had gone into decline, which agrees with chapter 18 of the current Laozi. In other words, it should not be assumed that the Guodian texts do not engage in a critique of Confucian philosophy.

It is not clear whether the Guodian bamboo manuscripts were copied from one source and were meant to be read as one text divided into three parts, whether they were "selections" from a longer original, or whether they were three different texts copied from different sources at different times. There is one important clue, however. The "A" and "C" texts give two different versions of what is now part of chapter 64 of the Laozi, which suggests that they came from different sources. One scholar at least has suggested a chronology to the making of the Guodian Laozi bamboo slips, with the "A" group being the oldest of the three, copied around 400 B.C.E. (Ding 2000, 7-9).

It is possible that the Guodian texts only furnished some of the textual "raw material" or "building blocks" that were used later to create the Laozi (Boltz 1999). In other words, they were independent writings

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and not versions of or excerpts from a text called Laozi, which in this scenario did not yet exist when the Guodian texts were made. Nevertheless, taking into account all the available evidence, it seems likely that a body or bodies of sayings attributed to Laozi gained currency during the fourth century B.C.E. They may have been derived from earlier, oral or written sources. By the mid-third century if not earlier, the Laozi then reached more or less its final form and began to attract commentarial attention.

Two approaches to the making of the Laozi warrant consideration, for they bear directly on interpretation. A linear "evolutionary" model of textual formation would suggest that there was an original Laozi, by Lao Dan or of unknown authorship, and that the Guodian Laozi was close to or were abridged versions of this original text. Concerned with the decline of Zhou rule, the original Laozi addressed above all issues of governance. During the third century B.C.E., the Laozi had undergone substantial change and grown into a longer and more complex work, becoming in this process more polemical against the Confucian and other schools of thought, and acquiring new material of stronger metaphysical or cosmological interest. The Mawangdui manuscripts were based on this mature version of the Laozi; the original emphasis on politics, however, can still be detected in the placement of the Dejing before the Daojing. Later versions reversed this order and in so doing subsumed politics under a broader philosophical vision of Dao as the beginning and end of all beings.

The Guodian and Mawangdui manuscripts are certainly older

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than the received text of the Laozi, but this does not necessarily mean that they are therefore closer to the “original,” if there was an original. As opposed to a linear evolutionary model, it is conceivable that there were several overlapping collections of sayings attributed to Laozi from the start, each inhabiting a particular interpretive context, from which different versions of the Laozi were derived.

Although some key chapters in the current Laozi that deal with the nature of Dao (e.g., chs. 1, 14) are not found in the Guodian corpus, the idea that the Dao is “born before heaven and earth,” for example, which is found in chapter 25 of the received text is already present. The critical claim that “being [you] is born of nonbeing [wu]” in chapter 40 also figures in the Guodian “A” text. This seems to argue against any suggestion that the Laozi, and for that matter ancient Chinese philosophical works in general were not interested or lacked the ability to engage in abstract philosophic thought, an assumption that sometimes appears to underlie evolutionary approaches to the development of Chinese philosophy.

The Guodian and Mawangdui finds are extremely valuable. They are syntactically clearer than the received text in some instances, thanks to the larger number of grammatical particles they employ. However, they cannot resolve all the controversies and uncertainties surrounding the Laozi. Perhaps the two approaches identified above are not mutually exclusive; it may be best to envisage a process of textual evolution without assuming a single original.

More specifically, different written collections of Laozi sayings, leaving open the time and the way in which they were first formed,

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circulated among the educated elite during the fourth century B.C.E. The Guodian texts would be examples of these, and I see no reason not to believe that there were others, perhaps even longer collections. Overlapping in some cases and with varying emphases in others, they address both the nature of Dao and Taoist government. These were then developed in several ways — e.g., some collections were combined; new sayings were added; and explanatory comments, illustrations, and elaboration on individual sayings were integrated into the text. The demand for textual uniformity rose when the Laozi gained recognition, and consequently the different textual traditions eventually gave way to the received text of the Laozi.

As mentioned, the current Laozi on which most reprints, studies and translations are based is the version that comes down to us along with the commentaries by Wang Bi and Heshanggong. Three points need to be made in this regard. First, technically there are multiple versions of the Wang Bi and Heshanggong Laozi — over thirty Heshanggong versions are extant — but the differences are on the whole minor. Second, the Wang Bi and Heshanggong versions are not the same, but they are sufficiently similar to be classified as belonging to the same line of textual transmission. Third, the Wang Bi and Heshanggong versions that we see today have suffered change. Prior to the invention of printing, when each manuscript had to be copied by hand, editorial changes and scribal errors are to be expected. In particular, the Laozi text that now accompanies Wang Bi's commentary bears the imprint of later alteration, mainly under the influence of the Heshanggong version, and cannot be regarded as the Laozi that Wang Bi himself had seen and commented on.

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Boltz (1985) and Wagner (1989) have examined this question in some detail.

The “current” version refers to the Sibu beiyao and the Sibu congkan editions of the Daodejing. The former contains the Wang Bi version and commentary, together with a colophon by the Song scholar Chao Yuezhi (1059-1129), a second note by Xiong Ke (ca. 1111-1184)), and the Tang scholar Lu Deming's (556-627) Laozi yinyi (Glosses on the Meaning and Pronunciation of the Laozi). It is a reproduction of the Qing dynasty “Wuying Palace” edition, which in turn is based on a Ming edition (see especially Hatano 1979). The Heshanggong version preserved in the Sibu congkan series is taken from the library of the famous bibliophile Qu Yong (fl. 1850). According to Qu's own catalogue, this is a Song dynasty version, published probably after the reign of the emperor Xiaozong (r. 1163-1189). Older extant Heshanggong versions include two incomplete Tang versions and fragments found in Dunhuang.

Besides the Guodian bamboo texts, the Mawangdui manuscripts, and the received text of Wang Bi and Heshanggong, there is an “ancient version” (guben) edited by the early Tang scholar Fu Yi (fl. 600). Reportedly, this version was recovered from a tomb in 574 C.E., whose occupant was a consort of the Chu general Xiang Yu (d. 202 B.C.E.), the rival of Liu Bang before the latter emerged victorious and founded the Han dynasty. A later redaction of the “ancient version” was made by Fan Yingyuan in the Song dynasty. There are some differences, but these two can be regarded as having stemmed from the same textual tradition.

Manuscript fragments discovered in the Dunhuang caves form

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another important source in Laozi research. Among them are several Heshanggong fragments (especially S. 477 and S. 3926 in the Stein collection, and P. 2639 in the Pelliot collection) and the important Xiang'er Laozi with commentary. Another Dunhuang manuscript that merits attention is the Suo Tan fragment, now at the University Art Museum, Princeton University, which contains the last thirty-one chapters of the Daodejing beginning with chapter 51 of the modern text. It is signed and dated at the end, bearing the name of the third-century scholar and diviner Suo Tan, who is said to have made the copy, written in ink on paper, in 270 C.E. According to Rao Zongyi (1955), the Suo Tan version belongs to the Heshanggong line of the Laozi text. A more recent study by William Boltz (1996) questions its third-century date and argues that the fragment in many instances also agrees with the Fu Yi "ancient version."

While manuscript versions inform textual criticism of the Laozi, stone inscriptions provide further collaborating support. Over twenty steles, mainly of Tang and Song origins, are available to textual critics, although some are in poor condition (Yan 1957). Students of the Laozi today can work with several Chinese and Japanese studies that make use of a large number of manuscript versions and stone inscriptions (notably Ma 1965, Jiang 1980, Zhu 1980, and Shima 1973). Boltz (1993) offers an excellent introduction to the manuscript traditions of the Laozi. Wagner (2003) attempts to reconstruct the original face of Wang Bi's Laozi (cf. Lou 1980 and Lynn 1999). A recent major contribution to Laozi studies in Chinese in Liu Xiaogan 2006, which compares the Guodian, Mawangdui, Fu Yi, Wang Bi, and Heshanggong versions of

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the Laozi and provides detailed textual and interpretive analysis for each chapter. In an article in English, Liu (2003) sets out some of his main findings.

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Fundamental Concepts

The term Dao means a road, and is often translated as "the Way". This is because sometimes dao is used as a nominative (that is, "the dao") and other times as a verb (i.e. daoing). Dao is the process of reality itself, the way things come together, while still transforming. All this reflects the deep seated Chinese belief that change is the most basic character of things. In the Yi jing (Classic of Change) the patterns of this change are symbolized by figures standing for 64 relations of correlative forces and known as the hexagrams. Dao is the alteration of these forces, most often simply stated as yin and yang. The Xici is a commentary on the Yi jing formed in about the same period as the DDJ. It takes the taiji (Glorious Ultimate) as the source of correlative change and associates it with the dao. The contrast is not between what things are or that something is or is not, but between chaos (hundun) and the way reality is ordering (de). Yet, reality is not ordering into one unified whole. It is the 10,000 things (wanwu). There is the dao but not "the World" or "the cosmos" in a Western sense.

The Daodejing teaches that humans cannot fathom the Dao, because any name we give to it cannot capture it. It is beyond what we can conceive (ch.1). Those who wu wei may become one with it and thus obtain the dao. Wu wei is a difficult notion to translate. Yet, it is generally agreed that the traditional rendering of it as "nonaction" or "no action" is incorrect. Those who wu wei do act. Daoism is not a philosophy of "doing nothing." Wu wei means something like "act

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naturally," "effortless action," or "nonwillful action." The point is that there is no need for human tampering with the flow of reality. Wu wei should be our way of life, because the dao always benefits, it does not harm (ch. 81) The way of heaven (dao of tian) is always on the side of good (ch. 79) and virtue (de) comes forth from the dao alone (ch. 21). What causes this natural embedding of good and benefit in the dao is vague and elusive (ch. 35), not even the sages understand it (ch. 76). But the world is a reality that is filled with spiritual force, just as a sacred image used in religious ritual might be (ch. 29). The dao occupies the place in reality that is analogous to the part of a family's house set aside for the altar for venerating the ancestors and gods (the ao of the house, ch. 62). When we think that life's occurrences seem unfair (a human discrimination), we should remember that heaven's (tian) net misses nothing, it leaves nothing undone (ch. 37)

A central theme of the Daodejing is that correlatives are the expressions of the movement of dao. Correlatives in Chinese philosophy are not opposites, mutually excluding each other. They represent the ebb and flow of the forces of reality: yin/yang, male/female; excess/defect; leading/following; active/passive. As one approaches the fullness of yin, yang begins to horizon and emerge. Its teachings on correlation often suggest to interpreters that the DDJ is filled with paradoxes. For example, ch. 22 says, "Those who are crooked will be perfected. Those who are bent will be straight. Those who are empty will be full." While these appear paradoxical, they are probably better understood as correlational in meaning. The DDJ says, "straightforward words seem paradoxical," implying, however, that they are not (ch. 78).

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What is the image of the ideal person, the sage (sheng ren), the real person (zhen ren) in the DDJ? Well, sages wu wei (chs. 2, 63). In this respect, they are like newborn infants, who move naturally, without planning and reliance on the structures given to them by others (ch. 15). The DDJ tells us that sages empty themselves, becoming void of pretense. Sages concentrate their internal energies (qi). They clean their vision (ch. 10). They manifest plainness and become like uncarved wood (pu) (ch. 19). They live naturally and free from desires given by men (ch. 37) They settle themselves and know how to be content (ch. 46). The DDJ makes use of some very famous analogies to drive home its point. Sages know the value of emptiness as illustrated by how emptiness is used in a bowl, door, window, valley or canyon (ch. 11). They preserve the female (yin), meaning that they know how to be receptive and are not unbalanced favoring assertion and action (yang) (ch. 28). They shoulder yin and embrace yang, blend internal energies (qi) and thereby attain harmony (he) (ch. 42). Those following the dao do not strive, tamper, or seek control (ch. 64). They do not endeavor to help life along (ch. 55), or use their heart-mind (xin) to "solve" or "figure out" life's apparent knots and entanglements (ch. 55). Indeed, the DDJ cautions that those who would try to do something with the world will fail, they will actually ruin it (ch. 29). Sages do not engage in disputes and arguing, or try to prove their point (chs. 22, 81). They are pliable and supple, not rigid and resistive (chs. 76, 78). They are like water (ch. 8), finding their own place, overcoming the hard and strong by suppleness (ch. 36). Sages act with no expectation of reward (chs. 2, 51). They put themselves last and yet come first (ch. 7). They never make a display of themselves, (chs. 72,

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22). They do not brag or boast, (chs. 22, 24) and they do not linger after their work is done (ch. 77). They leave no trace (ch. 27). Because they embody dao in practice, they have longevity (ch. 16). They create peace (ch. 32). Creatures do not harm them (chs. 50, 55). Soldiers do not kill them (ch. 50). Heaven (tian) protects the sage and the sage becomes invincible (ch. 67).

Among the most controversial of the teachings in the DDJ are those directly associated with rulers. Recent scholarship is moving toward a consensus that the persons who developed and collected the teachings of the DDJ played some role in civil administration, but they may also have been practitioners of ritual arts and what we would call religious rites. Be that as it may, many of the aphorisms directed toward rulers seem puzzling at first sight. According to the DDJ, the proper ruler keeps the people without knowledge, (ch. 65), fills their bellies, opens their hearts and empties them of desires (ch. 3). A sagely ruler reduces the size of the state and keeps the population small. Even though the ruler possesses weapons, they are not used (ch. 80). The ruler does not seek prominence. The ruler is a shadowy presence (chs. 17, 66). When the ruler's work is done, the people say they are content (ch. 17). This is all the more interesting when we remember that the philosopher and legalist political theorist named Han Feizi used the DDJ as a guide for the unification of China. Han Feizi was the foremost counselor of the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuangdi (r. 221-206 BCE). It is a pity that the emperor used the DDJ's admonitions to "fill the bellies and empty the minds" to justify his program of destroying all books not related to medicine, astronomy or agriculture.

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Approaches to the Work

Is the Laozi a manual of self-cultivation and government? Is it a metaphysical treatise, or does it harbor deep mystical insights? Chapter 1 of the current Laozi begins with the famous words: “The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.” Chapter 10 speaks of nourishing one's “soul” and embracing the “One.” Chapter 80 depicts the ideal polity as a small country with few inhabitants. The Laozi is a difficult text. Its language is often cryptic; the sense or reference of the many symbols it employs remains unclear, and there seems to be conceptual inconsistencies. For example, whereas chapter 2 refers to the “mutual production of being and nonbeing,” chapter 40 declares, “Being originates in nonbeing” (Henricks, trans. 1989). Is it more meaningful to speak of the “worldviews” of the Daodejing, instead of a unified vision? If the Laozi were an “anthology” put together at random by different compilers over a long period of time, coherence need not be an issue. Traditionally, however, this was never a serious option. Most modern studies are equally concerned to disclose the “deeper” unity and meaning of the classic. While some seek to recover the “original” meaning of the Laozi, others celebrate its contemporary relevance. Consider, first of all, some of the main modern approaches to the Daodejing (cf. Hardy 1998).

One view is that the Laozi reflects a deep mythological consciousness at its core. The myth of “chaos,” in particular, helps shape the Taoist understanding of the cosmos and the place of human beings in it (Girardot 1983). Chapter 25, for example, likens the Dao to an

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undifferentiated unicity. The myth of a Glorious mother earth goddess may also have informed the worldview of the Laozi (Erkes 1935; Chen 1969), which explains its emphasis on nature and the feminine (Chen 1989). Chapter 6, for example, refers to the “spirit of the valley,” which is also called the “mysterious female.”

A second view is that the Laozi gives voice to a profound mysticism. According to Victor Mair (1990), it is indebted to Indian mysticism (see also Waley 1958). According to Benjamin Schwartz (1985), the mysticism of the Daodejing is sui generis, uniquely Chinese and has nothing to do with India. Indeed, as one scholar suggests, it is unlike other mystical writings in that ecstatic vision does not play a role in the ascent of the Taoist sage (Welch 1965, 60). According to another interpretation, however, there is every indication that ecstasy forms a part of the world of the Laozi, although it is difficult to gauge the “degree” of its mystical leanings (Kaltenmark 1969, 65). A more recent champion of the mystical view is Harold Roth, who argues that Taoist “inner cultivation” and Indian yoga may be similar, but “they are parallel developments in different cultures at different times.” (Roth 1999, 137). It is possible to combine the mystical and mythological approaches to yield a third view. Although the presence of ancient religious beliefs can still be detected, they have been raised to a “higher” mystical plane in the Laozi (e.g., Ching 1997).

A fourth view sees the Laozi mainly as a work of philosophy, which gives a metaphysical account of reality and insight into Taoist self-cultivation and government; but fundamentally it is not a work of mysticism (W. T. Chan 1963). The strong practical interest of the Laozi

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distinguishes it from any mystical doctrine that eschews worldly involvement. It is, in Creel's (1977) words, “purposive” and not “contemplative.” Fifth, to many readers the Laozi offers essentially a philosophy of life. Remnants of an older religious thinking may have found their way into the text, but they have been transformed into a naturalistic philosophy. The emphasis on naturalness translates into a way of life characterized by simplicity, calmness, and freedom from the tyranny of desire (e.g., Liu Xiaogan 1997). For Roger Ames and David Hall (2003), indeed, the essence of the Laozi is “making this life significant.” Unlike the claim that the Laozi espouses a mystical or esoteric teaching directed at a restricted audience, this view tends to highlight its universal appeal and contemporary relevance.

A sixth and influential view is that the Laozi is above all concerned with realizing peace and sociopolitical order. It is an ethical and political masterpiece intended for the ruling class, with concrete strategic suggestions aimed at remedying the moral and political turmoil engulfing late Zhou China. Self-cultivation is important, but the ultimate goal extends beyond personal fulfillment (Lau 1963, LaFargue 1992, Moeller 2006). The Laozi criticizes the Confucian school not only for being ineffectual in restoring order but more damagingly as a culprit in worsening the ills of society at that time. The ideal seems to be a kind of “primitive” society, where people would dwell in harmony and contentment, not fettered by ambition or desire (Needham 1956).

This list is far from exhaustive; there are other views of the Laozi. Chad Hansen (1992), for example, focuses on the “anti-language” philosophy of the text. Different combinations are also possible. A. C.

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Graham, for example, emphasizes both the mystical and political elements, arguing that the Laozi was probably targeted at the ruler of a small state (1989, 234). For Hans-Georg Moeller (2006), though a work of political philosophy in its original context, the Laozi offers a powerful critique of "humanism" that is ethically as relevant then as it is now. The Laozi could be seen as encompassing all of the above — such categories as the metaphysical, ethical, political, mystical, and religious form a unified whole in Taoist thinking and are deemed separate and distinct only in modern Western thought. Alternatively, coming back to the question of multiple authorship and coherence, it could be argued that the Laozi contains "layers" of material put together by different people at different times (Emerson 1995).

Is it fair to say that the Laozi is inherently "polysemic" (Robinet 1998), open to diverse interpretations? This concerns not only the difficulty of the Laozi but also the interplay between reader and text in any act of interpretation. Polysemy challenges the assertion that the "intended" meaning of the Laozi can be recovered fully. But, it is important to emphasize, it does not follow that context is unimportant, that parameters do not exist, or that there are no checks against particular interpretations. While hermeneutic reconstruction remains an open process, it cannot disregard the rules of evidence. Questions of provenance, textual variants, as well as the entire tradition of commentaries and modern scholarship are important for this reason. The following presents some of the main concepts and symbols in the Laozi based on the current text, focusing on the key conceptual cluster of Dao, de (virtue), ziran (naturalness), and wuwei (nonaction), in a way that

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highlights their philosophical significance and suggests a degree of coherence.

To begin with Dao, the etymology of the Chinese graph or character suggests a pathway, or heading in a certain direction along a path. Most commentators agree in translating dao as “way.” As a verb, perhaps on account of the directionality involved, dao also conveys the sense of “speaking.” Thus, the opening phrase of chapter 1, dao ke dao, literally “Dao that can be dao-ed,” is often rendered, “The Way that can be spoken of.” In most cases, the capitalized form — “Way” or “Dao” — is used, to distinguish it from other usages of the term.

The concept of dao figures centrally also in Confucian writings, and as mentioned some parts of the current Laozi represent a critique of the Confucian school (especially chs. 18 and 19). In general, whereas dao signifies a means to a higher end in other schools of Chinese philosophy, the Laozi sees it as an end in itself. This distinction is captured in the Oxford English Dictionary (online edition), which defines “Dao” as follows: “In Taoism, an absolute entity which is the source of the universe; the way in which this absolute entity functions.” “In Confucianism and in extended uses,” however, the term means “the way to be followed, the right conduct; doctrine or method.”

The Laozi underscores both the ineffability and creative power of Dao. Chapter 1 states that the “constant” (chang, also translated as “eternal” — e.g., W. T. Chan 1963) Dao cannot be described; it is “nameless.” Chapter 14 brings out clearly that Dao transcends sensory perception; it has no shape or form. Nameless and formless, Dao can only be described as “dark” or “mysterious” (xuan) or wu, literally “not

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having" any name, form, or other characteristics of things (see also chs. 21 and 32). Indeed, though suggestive, the term "Dao" itself is no more than a symbol — as the Laozi makes clear, "I do not know its name; I style it Dao" (ch. 25; see also ch. 34). This suggests a sense of radical transcendence, which may explain why the Laozi has been approached so often as a mystical text.

The concept of wu is difficult and has been translated variously as "nothing," "nothingness," "negativity," or "nonbeing." It marks not only the mystery of Dao but also its limitlessness or inexhaustibility (e.g., ch. 4). Names serve to delimit, to set boundaries; in contrast, Dao is without limits and therefore cannot be captured fully by language. This suggests a positive dimension to transcendence, which brings into view the creative power of Dao: "All things under heaven are born of being (you); being is born of wu" (ch. 40). What does this mean?

Elsewhere in the Laozi, Dao is said to be the "beginning" of all things (chs. 1, 25). Taoist creation involves a process of differentiation from unity to multiplicity: "Dao gives birth to One; One gives birth to Two; Two gives birth to Three; Three gives birth to the ten thousand things" (ch. 42). The text does not indicate tense or spell out what the numbers refer to — is it saying that something called the "One" produced or produces the "Two" in the sense of two other things?

The "nothingness" of Dao helps impose certain constraints on interpretation. Specifically, the idea of a creator god with attributes, like the "Lord on High" (Shangdi) in ancient Chinese religion, does not seem to fit with the emphasis on transcendence.

The dominant interpretation in traditional China is that Dao

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represents the source of the original, undifferentiated, essential qi-energy, the "One," which in turn produces the yin and yang cosmic forces. While the yang energy rises to form heaven, yin solidifies to become earth. A further "blending" of the two generates a "harmonious" qi-energy that informs human beings.

This is essentially the reading of the Heshanggong commentary. Although the Laozi may not have entertained a fully developed yin-yang cosmological theory, which took shape during the Han period, it does suggest at one point that natural phenomena are constituted by yin and yang (ch. 42). That which gave rise to the original qi-energy is indescribable. The Laozi calls it Dao, or perhaps more appropriately in this context, "the Dao," with the definite article, to signal its presence as the source of the created order. In modern terms, minus the language of yin-yang cosmology, this translates into an understanding of the Dao as "an absolute entity which is the source of the universe" (see the Oxford definition cited above). Not being anything in particular, the Dao may be described as "nothing" (wu). However, on this reading, wu does not mean "nothingness," "negativity" or absence in the nihilistic sense, in view of the creative power of the Dao.

Alternatively, one could argue that Dao signifies a conceptually necessary ontological ground; it does not refer to any indescribable original substance or energy. "Beginning" is not a term of temporal reference but suggests ontological priority in the Laozi. The process of creation does proceed from unity to multiplicity, but the Laozi is only concerned to show that "two" would be impossible without the idea of "one." The assertion "One gives birth to Two" affirms that duality

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presupposes unity; to render it as “The One gave birth to the Two” is to turn what is essentially a logical relation into a cosmological event.

As the source of being, Dao cannot be itself a being, no matter how powerful or perfect; otherwise, the problem of infinite regress cannot be overcome. For this reason, the Laozi makes use of the concept of wu, “nonbeing,” not to suggest a substance or something of which nothing can be said, but to signify the conceptual “otherness” and radical transcendence of the ground of being.

This agrees with Wang Bi's interpretation. If wu points to a necessary ontological foundation, the distinction between “Dao” and “One” seems redundant. Commenting on chapter 42 of the Laozi, Wang Bi writes, “One can be said to be wu”; “One is the beginning of numbers and the ultimate of things” (commentary on ch. 39; see also Wang's commentary on the Yijing, trans. in Lynn 1994, 60). The concept of “One” and the concept of wu thus complement each other in disclosing different aspects of the logic of creation — both unity and nonbeing are necessary for understanding the generation of beings.

Comparing the two interpretations, whereas the first, “cosmological” reading has to explain the sense in which the Dao can be said to be “nothing,” the second emphasizes the centrality of wu, for which “Dao” is but one designation. Depending on the interpretation, wu may be translated as “nothing” or “nonbeing” accordingly. The metaphor of “Dao” is apt. It shows that all things are derived ultimately from an absolute “beginning,” in either sense of the word, like the start of a pathway. It also suggests a direction to be followed, which brings out the ethical interest of the Laozi.

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The Daodejing is concerned with both Dao and de. The graph de has also made it into the Oxford: “In Taoism, the essence of Tao inherent in all beings”; “in Confucianism and in extended use, moral virtue.” De has been translated variously as virtue, potency, efficacy, integrity, or power (for an etymological study, see Nivison 1978-79, and Hall and Ames 1987, 216). The Confucian usage is quite clear; virtue is a matter of moral character and presupposes self-cultivation. The Laozi seems to be suggesting a “higher” de against any moral achievement attained through repeated effort (e.g., ch. 38). The different translations aim at bringing out the uniquely Taoist sense of the term. In Latin, as many scholars have noted, “virtue” has to do with strength and capacity. Though ambiguous, “virtue” reminds us that the Laozi is giving new meaning to an established concept, as opposed to introducing a new concept not found in other schools of Chinese philosophy.

The marriage of Dao and de effectively bridges the gap between transcendence and immanence. Traditional commentaries beginning with the Hanfeizi often play on the homonymic relation between de (virtue) and another graph also pronounced de, which means to “acquire” or “obtain” something. De is thus what one has “obtained” from (the) Dao, a “latent power” by “virtue” of which any being becomes what it is (Waley 1958, 32). In this sense, the Laozi speaks of de as that which nourishes all beings (e.g., ch. 51).

Within these parameters, interpretations of de follow from the understanding of Dao and wu. On the one hand, for Heshanggong and other proponents of the cosmological view, what one has obtained from the Dao refers specifically to one's qi-endowment, which determines

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one's physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacity. Read this way, the Daodejing should be translated as the “Classic of the Way and Its Virtue,” given that de is understood to have emanated from the Dao.

On the other hand, for Wang Bi and others who do not subscribe to a substantive view of Dao, de represents what is “genuine” or “authentic” (zhen) in human beings (e.g., see Wang Bi's commentary on Laozi chs. 3, 5, 16, 51). Because wu does not refer to any substance or cosmological power, what the Laozi means by de, the “virtue” that one has “obtained” from Dao, can only be understood as what is originally, naturally present in human beings.

In either case, the concept of de emerges as a Taoist response to the question of human nature, which was one of the most contested issues in early Chinese philosophy. The two readings of the Laozi, despite their differences, agree that there is a prescriptive side to de. The empowerment enables a person to conform to the way in which Dao operates. When realized, “virtue” signifies the full embodiment of the Dao or the flourishing of authenticity. As such, Dao points not only to the “beginning” but also through de to the “end” of all things.

The Laozi makes use of the concept of ziran, literally what is “self (zi) so (ran),” to describe the workings of Dao. As an abstract concept, it gives no specific information, except to say that Dao does not “model” after anything (ch. 25). However, since “heaven and earth” — interpreted as nature in most modern studies — are said to be born of Dao and come to be in virtue of their de, the Laozi is in effect saying that the ways of nature reflect the function of Dao. In a cosmological reading, this suggests an understanding of nature as governed by the operation of

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qi-energies in an ideal yin-yang system characterized by harmony and fecundity. As interpreted by Wang Bi, the Laozi means more generally that there are "principles" (li) inherent in nature.

Human beings are, in turn, born of heaven and earth and so are "modeled" after them, either in terms of their qi-constitution or in the sense that they are governed also by the same basic principles. Usually translated as "naturalness" or "spontaneity," ziran thus builds on the concept of de in suggesting not only that the power of Dao finds expression in nature but also at the practical level a mode of being and way of action in accordance with the ways of nature.

Nature in the Taoist sense, it is important to note, need not exclude the spiritual and the social. The existence of gods and spirits was hardly questioned in early China. The Laozi makes clear that they, too, stem from Dao and form a part of the order of ziran (e.g., chs. 39, 60). Further, "nature" encompasses not only natural phenomena but also sociopolitical institutions. The king clearly occupies a central place in the realm of Dao (chs. 16, 25); the family also should be regarded as a "natural" institution (chs. 18, 54). As an ethical concept, ziran thus extends beyond the personal to the sociopolitical level. It is worth mentioning that ziran remains an influential idea today, especially in conceptions of romantic love and beauty in Chinese thinking.

The concept of wuwei, "nonaction," serves to explain naturalness in practice. "Nonaction" is awkward, and some translators prefer "non-assertive action," "non-coercive action" or "effortless action," but it identifies wuwei as a technical term. It does not mean total inaction. Later Taoists may see a close connection between wuwei and techniques

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of spiritual cultivation — the practice of “sitting in forgetfulness” (zuowang) discussed in the Zhuangzi is often mentioned in this regard. In the Laozi, the concept seems to be used more broadly as a contrast against any form of action characterized especially by self-serving desire (e.g., chs. 3, 37).

It is useful to recall the late Zhou context, where disorder marched on every front. The Laozi, one assumes, is not indifferent to the forces of disintegration tearing the country asunder, although the remedy it proposes is subject to interpretation. The problems of political decline are traced to excessive desire, a violation of ziran. Nonaction entails at the personal level simplicity and quietude, which naturally follow from having few desires. At the political level, the Laozi condemns aggressive measures such as war (ch. 30), cruel punishment (ch. 74), and heavy taxation (ch. 75), which reflect but the ruler's own desire for wealth and power. If the ruler could rid himself of desire, according to the Laozi, the world would be at peace of its own accord (chs. 37, 57).

In this sense, the Laozi describes the ideal sage-ruler as someone who understands and follows ziran (e.g., chs. 2, 17, 64). In this same sense, it also opposes the Confucian program of benevolent intervention, which as the Laozi understands it, addresses at best the symptoms but not the root cause of the disease. The Confucian project is in fact symptomatic of the decline of the rule of Dao. Conscious efforts at cultivating moral virtues only accentuate the loss of natural goodness, which in its original state would have been entirely commonplace and would not have warranted distinction or special attention (chs. 18, 38). Worse, Confucian ethics assumes that learning and moral self-cultivation

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can bring about personal and social improvement. From the Taoist perspective, artificial effort to “improve” things or to correct the order of ziran only fuels a false sense of self that alienates human beings from their inherent “virtue.”

The concept of nonaction is exceedingly rich. It brings into play a cutting discernment that value distinctions are ideological, that human striving and competitive strife spring from the same source. Nonaction entails also a critique of language and conventional knowledge, which to the Taoist sage has become impregnated with ideological contaminants.

The use of paradoxes in the Laozi especially heightens this point. For example, the person of Dao is depicted as “witless” or “dumb,” whereas people driven by desire appear intelligent and can scheme with cunning (ch. 20). The way of learning, as one would normally understand it,“increases” the store of knowledge and adds value to goods and services; in contrast, questioning the very meaning of such “knowledge” and “value,” the Laozi describes the pursuit of Dao as constantly “decreasing” or chipping away at the artifice built by desire (ch. 48). Driving home the same point, to cite but one more example, the Laozi states, “The highest virtue is not virtuous; therefore it has virtue” (ch. 38). In other words, those who fully realize “virtue” in the Taoist sense do not act in the way that men and women of conventional morality typically act or are expected to act. Paradoxes of this kind function as a powerful rhetorical device, which forces the reader, so to speak, to move out of his or her “comfort zone” and to take note of the proposed higher truth of Dao (see also, e.g., chs. 41, 45, 56). In this context, one can also understand some of the provocative statements in the Laozi telling the

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ruler, for example, to keep the people in a state of “ignorance” (ch. 65).

Some scholars would object that this interpretation misses the religious import of the Daodejing, while others would question whether it is too eager to defend the philosophical coherence of the classic. Perhaps the Laozi in chapter 65 of the current text did mean to tell the ruler literally to keep the people ignorant or stupid for better control, which as a piece of political advice is not exactly extraordinary. The remarks offered here take nonaction as central to the Taoist view of life, taking into account that the concept of wuwei does not only initiate a critique of value but also points to a higher mode of knowledge, action, and being.

At the critical level, the Laozi emphasizes the relativity of knowledge and value. Things appear big or small only in relation to other things; knowledge and ignorance are meaningful only in relation to each other. Good and bad, being and nonbeing, and other opposites should be understood in the same light (ch. 2). Distinctions as such are not necessarily problematic; for example, an object can be described as rare or difficult to find as compared with other objects. Problems arise, however, when objects that are rare are deemed more valuable than commonplace objects, when “big” is deemed superior to “small,” or in general terms when distinctions become a basis for value discrimination. When certain things or features (e.g., precious stones, reputation, being slim, skin color) are regarded as “beautiful” or “worthy” — i.e., desirable — other things will inevitably be deemed “ugly” and “unworthy,” with serious social, economic, and political consequences (ch. 3).

The recognition of the relativity of value does not end in a kind of

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ethical paralysis. The Laozi also does not appear to be advocating the obliteration of all distinctions, and by extension civilization as a whole, in a state of mystical unicity. For example, while there is some concern that technology may bring a false sense of progress, the antidote does not lie in a deliberate rejection of technology but rather in a life of natural simplicity and contentment that stems from having few desires (ch. 80).

The critique of value demonstrates the way in which desire (yu), as distinguished from basic needs, perverts the mind — xin, literally, “heart” — and colors our judgment and experience of reality. Nonaction contrasts sharply, according to the Laozi, with the way people typically act, with profit motives, calculated steps, expectations, longings, regrets, and other expressions of desire. In this way, the Laozi aims at making us understand why we do what we do.

As a philosophical concept, wuwei intimates a mode of being that governs existential engagement at all levels, transforming the way in which we think, feel, and experience the world. It does not stipulate what one ought to do or ought not to do in particular cases. Terms such as quietude, emptiness, and simplicity favored by the Laozi describe a general ethical orientation rather than specific practices. Although in following wuwei there are things that a person of Dao naturally would not do (e.g., wage a war of aggression), and there is a sense in which doing less may be more productive than self-conscious over-exertion, philosophically wuwei is not about not doing certain things (thus, military engagement is not ruled out entirely — e.g., see chs. 67, 68, 69) but suggests a reorientation of perception and value that ideally would bring an end to the dominance of desire and a return to the order of ziran.

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Nonaction need not exclude meditation or other forms of spiritual practice; the point is rather that once realized, the transformative power of nonaction would ensure not only personal fulfillment but also sociopolitical order. This seems to weigh against a mystical reading of the Laozi, if mysticism is understood to entail a kind of personal union with the Dao transcending all political interests. The concept of “virtue,” whether interpreted in terms of authenticity or the purity and fullness of qi-energy, depicts a pristine natural and sociopolitical order in which naturalness and nonaction are the norm. The ethics of wuwei rests on this insight.

In this interpretive framework, a number of symbols which both delight and puzzle readers of the Laozi can be highlighted. Suggestive of its creativity and nurturance, Dao is likened to a mother (e.g., chs. 1, 25). This complements the paradigm of the feminine (e.g., chs. 6, 28), whose “virtue” is seen to yield fecundity and to find expression in yieldingness and non-contention. The infant (e.g., chs. 52, 55) serves as a fitting symbol on two counts. First, it brings out the relationship between Dao and world; second, the kind of innocence and wholesome spontaneity represented by the infant exemplifies the pristine fullness of de in the ideal Taoist world.

Natural symbols such as water (e.g., chs. 8, 78) further reinforce the sense of yielding and deep strength that characterizes nonaction. The low-lying and fertile valley (e.g., chs. 28, 39) accentuates both the creative fecundity of Dao and the gentle nurturance of its power. Carefully crafted and ornately decorated objects are treasured by the world, and as such can be used as a powerful symbol for it. In contrast,

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the utterly simple, unaffected, and seemingly valueless pu, a plain uncarved block of wood, brings into sharp relief the integrity of Taoist virtue and of the person who embodies it (e.g., chs. 28, 32). Finally, one may mention the notion of reversal (e.g., chs. 40, 65), which suggests not only the need to "return" to Dao, but also that the Taoist way of life would inevitably appear the very opposite of "normal" existence, and that it involves a complete revaluation of values.

In sum, any interpretation of the current Laozi as a whole must take into account the way in which wuwei and ziran provide a guide to the good life. Specifically, two related issues need to be addressed. First, naturalness and nonaction are seen to reflect the function of the nameless and formless Dao. As such, ethical ideals are anchored in a non-empirical view of nature, which raises the concept of de to a higher level than "virtues" in the sense of moral attainments.

The understanding of de, however, is dependent on that of Dao, which in turn hinges on the interpretation of wu as either original substance or nonbeing. Both readings are plausible, although I am more inclined toward the former. A cosmological reading is attractive also because it aligns the Laozi more closely with other early Chinese philosophical texts. However, an ontological reading emphasizing the conceptual nature of wu has the advantage of allowing the reader to draw out more readily the philosophical implications of the Laozi; it cannot be ruled out, especially if the only appeal is to a perceived evolutionary development in Chinese philosophy.

The second issue concerns the ethics of the Laozi. As mentioned, one main approach to the classic stresses its political orientation. In many

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chapters, the text seems to be addressing the ruler or the ruling elite, explaining to them the ideal government of the Taoist sage. This is not surprising given the Zhou context and given that the production of written documents and the access to them were generally the preserve of the ruling class in ancient China. But this need not restrict interpretation to politics in the narrow sense of statecraft or political strategies. In the light of the emphasis on ziran and wuwei, there is sufficient evidence that the Laozi views politics in a larger ethical context. The more difficult question is whether wuwei suggests a kind of moral relativism that would render any suggestion of a "higher" Taoist truth problematic.

If things are relative, they should be regarded as being of equal value. There are no objective criteria beyond relative utility for specific purposes in favoring, for example, what is "soft" over something "hard." Yet, as D. C. Lau (1963) has pointed out, at the ethical level the Laozi seems to favor the "lower" term — for example, the "weakness" or "yieldingness" of water is singled out as a metaphor for ideal ethical conduct (ch. 78). We have suggested that the Laozi makes use of a critical mode to deconstruct conventional knowledge and value. The sense of moral relativity, however, gives way to a "higher" ethical mode based on insight into the order of ziran derived from an idealized view of nature. In this sense, the Laozi thus also makes use of such expressions as the "highest good" (ch. 8) and "highest virtue" (ch. 38). Wuwei ultimately derives its meaning from wu, which as an ethical orientation privileges "not having" over the constant strivings of the mundane world. This constitutes a powerful critique of a world given to the pursuit of wealth and power. More important, in being "empty," the person of Dao

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is said to be “full”; without desire, he or (s)he is able to rediscover the riches of ziran and finds fulfillment. This invites reflection and continuing dialogue with the Laozi.

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Daodejing

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1. The Way

The Way that can be experienced is not true;

The world that can be constructed is not true.

The Way manifests all that happens and may happen;

The world represents all that exists and may exist.

To experience without intention is to sense the world;

To experience with intention is to anticipate the world.

These two experiences are indistinguishable;

Their construction differs but their effect is the same.

Beyond the gate of experience flows the Way,

Which is ever Greater and more subtle than the world.

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2. Abstraction

When beauty is abstracted

Then ugliness has been implied;

When good is abstracted

Then evil has been implied.

So alive and dead are abstracted from nature,

Difficult and easy abstracted from progress,

Long and short abstracted from contrast,

High and low abstracted from depth,

Song and speech abstracted from melody,

After and before abstracted from sequence.

The sage experiences without abstraction,

And accomplishes without action;

He accepts the ebb and flow of things,

Nurtures them, but does not own them,

And lives, but does not dwell.

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3. Without Action

Not praising the worthy prevents contention,

Not esteeming the valuable prevents theft,

Not displaying the beautiful prevents desire.

In this manner the sage governs people:

Emptying their minds,

Filling their bellies,

Weakening their ambitions,

And strengthening their bones.

If people lack knowledge and desire

Then they can not act;

If no action is taken

Harmony remains.

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4. Limitless

The Way is a limitless vessel;

Used by the self, it is not filled by the world;

It cannot be cut, knotted, dimmed or stilled;

Its depths are hidden, ubiquitous and eternal;

I don't know where it comes from;

It comes before nature.

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5. Nature

Nature is not kind;

It treats all things impartially.

The Sage is not kind,

And treats all people impartially.

Nature is like a bellows,

Empty, yet never ceasing its supply.

The more it moves, the more it yields;

So the sage draws upon experience

And cannot be exhausted.

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6. Experience

Experience is a riverbed,

Its source hidden, forever flowing:

Its entrance, the root of the world,

The Way moves within it:

Draw upon it; it will not run dry.

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7. Complete

Nature is complete because it does not serve itself.

The sage places himself after and finds himself before,

Ignores his desire and finds himself content.

He is complete because he does not serve himself.

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8. Water

The best of man is like water,

Which benefits all things, and does not contend with them,

Which flows in places that others disdain,

Where it is in harmony with the Way.

So the sage:

Lives within nature,

Thinks within the deep,

Gives within impartiality,

Speaks within trust,

Governs within order,

Crafts within ability,

Acts within opportunity.

He does not contend, and none contend against him.

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9. Retire

Fill a cup to its brim and it is easily spilled;

Temper a sword to its hardest and it is easily broken;

Amass the Greatest treasure and it is easily stolen;

Claim credit and honour and you easily fall;

Retire once your purpose is achieved - this is natural.

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10. Harmony

Embracing the Way, you become embraced;

Breathing gently, you become newborn;

Clearing your mind, you become clear;

Nurturing your children, you become impartial;

Opening your heart, you become accepted;

Accepting the world, you embrace the Way.

Bearing and nurturing,

Creating but not owning,

Giving without demanding,

This is harmony.

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11. Tools

Thirty spokes meet at a nave;

Because of the hole we may use the wheel.

Clay is moulded into a vessel;

Because of the hollow we may use the cup.

Walls are built around a hearth;

Because of the doors we may use the house.

Thus tools come from what exists,

But use from what does not.

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12. Substance

Too much colour blinds the eye,

Too much music deafens the ear,

Too much taste dulls the palate,

Too much play maddens the mind,

Too much desire tears the heart.

In this manner the sage cares for people:

He provides for the belly, not for the senses;

He ignores abstraction and holds fast to substance.

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13. Self

Both praise and blame cause concern,

For they bring people hope and fear.

The object of hope and fear is the self -

For, without self, to whom may fortune and disaster occur?

Therefore,

Who distinguishes himself from the world may be given the world,

But who regards himself as the world may accept the world.

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14. Mystery

Looked at but cannot be seen - it is beneath form;

Listened to but cannot be heard - it is beneath sound;

Held but cannot be touched - it is beneath feeling;

These depthless things evade definition,

And blend into a single mystery.

In its rising there is no light,

In its falling there is no darkness,

A continuous thread beyond description,

Lining what can not occur;

Its form formless,

Its image nothing,

Its name silence;

Follow it, it has no back,

Meet it, it has no face.

Attend the present to deal with the past;

Thus you grasp the continuity of the Way,

Which is its essence.

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15. Enlightenment

The enlightened possess understanding

So profound they can not be understood.

Because they cannot be understood

I can only describe their appearance:

Cautious as one crossing thin ice,

Undecided as one surrounded by danger,

Modest as one who is a guest,

Unbounded as melting ice,

Genuine as unshaped wood,

Broad as a valley,

Seamless as muddy water.

Who stills the water that the mud may settle,

Who seeks to stop that he may travel on,

Who desires less than may transpire,

Decays, but will not renew.

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16. Decay and Renewal

Empty the self completely;

Embrace perfect peace.

The world will rise and move;

Watch it return to rest.

All the flourishing things

Will return to their source.

This return is peaceful;

It is the flow of nature,

An eternal decay and renewal.

Accepting this brings enlightenment,

Ignoring this brings misery.

Who accepts nature's flow becomes all-cherishing;

Being all-cherishing he becomes impartial;

Being impartial he becomes magnanimous;

Being magnanimous he becomes natural;

Being natural he becomes one with the Way;

Being one with the Way he becomes immortal:

Though his body will decay, the Way will not.

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17. Rulers

The best rulers are scarcely known by their subjects;

The next best are loved and praised;

The next are feared;

The next despised:

They have no faith in their people,

And their people become unfaithful to them.

When the best rulers achieve their purpose

Their subjects claim the achievement as their own.

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18. Hypocrisy

When the Way is forgotten

Duty and justice appear;

Then knowledge and wisdom are born

Along with hypocrisy.

When harmonious relationships dissolve

Then respect and devotion arise;

When a nation falls to chaos

Then loyalty and patriotism are born.

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19. Simplify

If we could abolish knowledge and wisdom

Then people would profit a hundredfold;

If we could abolish duty and justice

Then harmonious relationships would form;

If we could abolish artifice and profit

Then waste and theft would disappear.

Yet such remedies treat only symptoms

And so they are inadequate.

People need personal remedies:

Reveal your naked self and embrace your original nature;

Bind your self-interest and control your ambition;

Forget your habits and simplify your affairs.

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20. Wandering

What is the difference between assent and denial?

What is the difference between beautiful and ugly?

What is the difference between fearsome and afraid?

The people are merry as if at a magnificent party

Or playing in the park at springtime,

But I am tranquil and wandering,

Like a newborn before it learns to smile,

Alone, with no true home.

The people have enough and to spare,

Where I have nothing,

And my heart is foolish,

Muddled and cloudy.

The people are bright and certain,

Where I am dim and confused;

The people are clever and wise,

Where I am dull and ignorant;

Aimless as a wave drifting over the sea,

Attached to nothing.

The people are busy with purpose,

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Where I am impractical and rough;

I do not share the peoples' cares

But I am fed at nature's breast.

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21. Accept

Harmony is only in following the Way.

The Way is without form or quality,

But expresses all forms and qualities;

The Way is hidden and implicate,

But expresses all of nature;

The Way is unchanging,

But expresses all motion.

Beneath sensation and memory

The Way is the source of all the world.

How can I understand the source of the world?

By accepting.

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22. Home

Accept and you become whole,

Bend and you straighten,

Empty and you fill,

Decay and you renew,

Want and you acquire,

Fulfill and you become confused.

The sage accepts the world

As the world accepts the Way;

He does not display himself, so is clearly seen,

Does not justify himself, so is recognized,

Does not boast, so is credited,

Does not pride himself, so endures,

Does not contend, so none contend against him.

The ancients said, "Accept and you become whole",

Once whole, the world is as your home.

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23. Words

Nature says only a few words:

High wind does not last long,

Nor does heavy rain.

If nature's words do not last

Why should those of man?

Who accepts harmony, becomes harmonious.

Who accepts loss, becomes lost.

For who accepts harmony, the Way harmonizes with him,

And who accepts loss, the Way cannot find.

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24. Indulgence

Straighten yourself and you will not stand steady;

Display yourself and you will not be clearly seen;

Justify yourself and you will not be respected;

Promote yourself and you will not be believed;

Pride yourself and you will not endure.

These behaviours are wasteful, indulgent,

And so they attract disfavour;

Harmony avoids them.

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25. Beneath Abstraction

There is a mystery,

Beneath abstraction,

Silent, depthless,

Alone, unchanging,

Ubiquitous and liquid,

The mother of nature.

It has no name, but I call it "the Way";

It has no limit, but I call it "limitless".

Being limitless, it flows away forever;

Flowing away forever, it returns to my self:

The Way is limitless,

So nature is limitless,

So the world is limitless,

And so I am limitless.

For I am abstracted from the world,

The world from nature,

Nature from the Way,

And the Way from what is beneath abstraction.

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26. Calm

Gravity is the source of lightness,

Calm, the master of haste.

A lone traveller will journey all day, watching over his belongings;

Yet once safe in his bed he will lose them in sleep.

The captain of a Great vessel will not act lightly or hastily.

Acting lightly, he loses sight of the world,

Acting hastily, he loses control of himself.

A captain can not treat his Great ship as a small boat;

Rather than glitter like jade

He must stand like stone.

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27. Perfection

The perfect traveller leaves no trail to be followed;

The perfect speaker leaves no question to be answered;

The perfect accountant leaves no working to be completed;

The perfect container leaves no lock to be closed;

The perfect knot leaves no end to be ravelled.

So the sage nurtures all men

And abandons no one.

He accepts everything

And rejects nothing.

He attends to the smallest details.

So the strong must guide the weak,

For the weak are raw material to the strong.

If the guide is not respected,

Or the material is not cared for,

Confusion will result, no matter how clever one is.

This is the secret of perfection:

When raw wood is carved, it becomes a tool;

When a man is employed, he becomes a tool;

The perfect carpenter leaves no wood to be carved.

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28. Becoming

Using the male, being female,

Being the entrance of the world,

You embrace harmony

And become as a newborn.

Using strength, being weak,

Being the root of the world,

You complete harmony

And become as unshaped wood.

Using the light, being dark,

Being the world,

You perfect harmony

And return to the Way.

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29. Ambition

Those who wish to change the world

According with their desire

Cannot succeed.

The world is shaped by the Way;

It cannot be shaped by the self.

Trying to change it, you damage it;

Trying to possess it, you lose it.

So some will lead, while others follow.

Some will be warm, others cold

Some will be strong, others weak.

Some will get where they are going

While others fall by the side of the road.

So the sage will be neither wasteful nor violent.

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30. Violence

Powerful men are well advised not to use violence,

For violence has a habit of returning;

Thorns and weeds grow wherever an army goes,

And lean years follow a Great war.

A general is well advised

To achieve nothing more than his orders:

Not to take advantage of his victory.

Nor to glory, boast or pride himself;

To do what is dictated by necessity,

But not by choice.

For even the strongest force will weaken with time,

And then its violence will return, and kill it.

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31. Armies

Armies are tools of violence;

They cause men to hate and fear.

The sage will not join them.

His purpose is creation;

Their purpose is destruction.

Weapons are tools of violence,

Not of the sage;

He uses them only when there is no choice,

And then calmly, and with tact,

For he finds no beauty in them.

Whoever finds beauty in weapons

Delights in the slaughter of men;

And who delights in slaughter

Cannot content himself with peace.

So slaughters must be mourned

And conquest celebrated with a funeral.

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32. Shapes

The Way has no true shape,

And therefore none can control it.

If a ruler could control the Way

All things would follow

In harmony with his desire,

And sweet rain would fall,

Effortlessly slaking every thirst.

The Way is shaped by use,

But then the shape is lost.

Do not hold fast to shapes

But let sensation flow into the world

As a river courses down to the sea.

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33. Virtues

Who understands the world is learned;

Who understands the self is enlightened.

Who conquers the world has strength;

Who conquers the self has harmony.

Who is determined has purpose;

Who is contented has wealth.

Who defends his home may long endure;

Who surrenders his home may long survive it.

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34. Control

The Way flows and ebbs, creating and destroying,

Implementing all the world, attending to the tiniest details,

Claiming nothing in return.

It nurtures all things,

Though it does not control them;

It has no intention,

So it seems inconsequential.

It is the substance of all things;

Though it does not control them;

It has no exception,

So it seems all-important.

The sage would not control the world;

He is in harmony with the world.

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35. Peace

If you offer music and food

Strangers may stop with you;

But if you accord with the Way

All the people of the world will keep you

In safety, health, community, and peace.

The Way lacks art and flavour;

It can neither be seen nor heard,

But its benefit cannot be exhausted.

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36. Opposition

To reduce someone's influence, first expand it;

To reduce someone's force, first increase it;

To overthrow someone, first exalt them;

To take from someone, first give to them.

This is the subtlety by which the weak overcome the strong:

Fish should not leave their depths,

And swords should not leave their scabbards.

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37. Tranquillity

The Way takes no action, but leaves nothing undone.

When you accept this

The world will flourish,

In harmony with nature.

Nature does not possess desire;

Without desire, the heart becomes quiet;

In this manner the whole world is made tranquil.

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38. Ritual

Well established hierarchies are not easily uprooted;

Closely held beliefs are not easily released;

So ritual enthralls generation after generation.

Harmony does not care for harmony, and so is naturally attained;

But ritual is intent upon harmony, and so can not attain it.

Harmony neither acts nor reasons;

Love acts, but without reason;

Justice acts to serve reason;

But ritual acts to enforce reason.

When the Way is lost, there remains harmony;

When harmony is lost, there remains love;

When love is lost, there remains justice;

But when justice is lost, there remains ritual.

Ritual is the end of compassion and honesty,

The beginning of confusion;

Belief is a colourful hope or fear,

The beginning of folly.

The sage goes by harmony, not by hope;

He dwells in the fruit, not the flower;

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He accepts substance, and ignores abstraction.

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39. Support

In mythical times all things were whole:

All the sky was clear,

All the earth was stable,

All the mountains were firm,

All the riverbeds were full,

All of nature was fertile,

And all the rulers were supported.

But, losing clarity, the sky tore;

Losing stability, the earth split;

Losing strength, the mountains sank;

Losing water, the riverbeds cracked;

Losing fertility, nature disappeared;

And losing support, the rulers fell.

Rulers depend upon their subjects,

The noble depend upon the humble;

So rulers call themselves orphaned, hungry and alone,

To win the people's support.

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40. Motion and Use

The motion of the Way is to return;

The use of the Way is to accept;

All things come from the Way,

And the Way comes from nothing.

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41. Following

When the Great man learns the Way, he follows it with diligence;

When the common man learns the Way, he follows it on occasion;

When the mean man learns the Way, he laughs out loud;

Those who do not laugh, do not learn at all.

Therefore it is said:

Who understands the Way seems foolish;

Who progresses on the Way seems to fail;

Who follows the Way seems to wander.

For the finest harmony appears plain;

The brightest truth appears coloured;

The richest character appears incomplete;

The bravest heart appears meek;

The simplest nature appears inconstant.

The square, perfected, has no corner;

Music, perfected, has no melody;

Love, perfected, has no climax;

Art, perfected, has no meaning.

The Way can be neither sensed nor known:

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It transmits sensation and transcends knowledge.

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42. Mind

The Way bears sensation,

Sensation bears memory,

Sensation and memory bear abstraction,

And abstraction bears all the world;

Each thing in the world bears feeling and doing,

And, imbued with mind, harmony with the Way.

As others have taught, so do I teach,

"Who loses harmony opposes nature";

This is the root of my teaching.

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43. Overcoming

Water overcomes the stone;

Without substance it requires no opening;

This is the benefit of taking no action.

Yet benefit without action,

And experience without abstraction,

Are practiced by very few.

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44. Contentment

Health or reputation: which is held dearer?

Health or possessions: which has more worth?

Profit or loss: which is more troublesome?

Great love incurs Great expense,

And Great riches incur Great fear,

But contentment comes at no cost;

Who knows when to stop

Does not continue into danger,

And so may long endure.

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45. Quiet

Great perfection seems incomplete,

But does not decay;

Great abundance seems empty,

But does not fail.

Great truth seems contradictory;

Great cleverness seems stupid;

Great eloquence seems awkward.

As spring overcomes the cold,

And autumn overcomes the heat,

So calm and quiet overcome the world.

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