

Introduction

The **aim** of this book is to translate and explain the *Laozi* 老子 to a college undergraduate or general audience. The method used is more philosophical than historical, by which I mean I have analyzed the text for those interested in it as a narrative in a “living” tradition that can have meaning for them now, rather than primarily as a historical document to be solely, or even primarily, situated and understood within its own historical context. This approach is rather easy to do with a text like the *Laozi*, since it makes no reference to any historical people or places; thus, it is not *obviously* situated anywhere (though, of course, like all texts, it must have been at one time). No one knows for certain who the original intended **audience** was, but there are two likely candidates: either it was written to persuade contemporaneous rulers to be less aggressive, or it was written to poetically describe to individuals how to situate oneself within the cosmological paradigm presented by the author. (Or both or, perhaps, neither.) Since I suspect my audience will include relatively few aggressive rulers, and since I am not writing this primarily for history students, I focus on the situating of oneself within the cosmological paradigm presented in these pages. This kind of “situating” was called, in early China, “self-cultivation” (修身).

No one has established a firm **date** for the *Laozi*, but my guess is about 400 BCE. Because of the Guodian 郭店 manuscript finds of 1993, we can be certain that at least parts of the *Laozi* were written down by 300 BCE. Maybe those “parts” were added to over time to create our current eighty-one-chapter version, or maybe those parts were extracted from an extant eighty-one-chapter version. Tradition holds that the author was an older contemporary of Kongzi 孔子 (551–479; aka Confucius), so that gives us a traditional date of about 500 BCE. One could do worse than split the difference at 400 BCE (but if you are interested in dating ancient texts, by

all means, look into it).¹ The most important archeologically recovered *Laozi* manuscripts discovered in recent decades are the three Guodian manuscripts, the two Mawangdui 馬王堆 manuscripts (excavated in 1973 and dated to pre-168 BCE), and the Beijing University manuscript (purchased in 2009 and dated to ca. 100 BCE). Though I do not focus on most of the textual variations contained in these manuscripts, they and several other *Laozi* exemplars have informed this translation, and thus I will refer to them, when relevant, in the footnotes. The appendix details these texts, along with other sources used in deriving the Chinese text translated herein, for the interested reader.

There are two primary ways of **contextualizing** the *Laozi*: as a “religious” text among other religious texts, assessed from a modern point of view (perhaps for a comparative religion course in college), or as a “Scholars text” (子書), which is to say, a “philosophical” or “intellectual history” text, as considered from (at the latest) a ca. 100 BCE royal librarian’s point of view (perhaps for a philosophy or history course in college). Within the context of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and many other “world religions”—or, to be more precise, the more traditional, conservative, and literal iterations of those religions—the *Laozi* stands out for promulgating a very different cosmic paradigm. Whereas these other traditions posit anthropomorphic deities amenable to prayer, heaven(s) and hell(s), and an immortal soul that will come to reside, for eternity (in Christianity and Islam), in one of these cosmic destinations, the *Laozi* has no deities, no inhabitable heaven (explained later), no hell, and no immortal soul. For this reason, some students will see this text as, *prima facie*, more “philosophical” than “religious” and, in fact, it is so categorized and taught in East Asian universities.² Nevertheless, for comparing different cosmological paradigms, the *Laozi* provides an excellent counterpoint to those found in the world’s major religions.

A more historical way to contextualize the *Laozi* is not with Christianity and the others (religions that the *Laozi* author had certainly never heard of), but as Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE) did. Sima Tan is the first royal

1. One good place to start with the question of dating is Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams, eds., *The Guodian Laozi* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 2000).

2. However, a third way of contextualizing the *Laozi* is as a religious text within the tradition of “religious Daoism,” a tradition that began several centuries after the heyday of “Scholars texts,” and that appropriated the *Laozi* for its own, decidedly supernatural, ends. I address the difference between “philosophical Daoism” and “religious Daoism” in Paul Fischer, “The Creation of Daoism,” *Journal of Daoist Studies* 8 (2015): 1–23.

historian that we know of in East Asia. He described six traditions that we might call “schools of thought.”³ They are: Yin-Yang (i.e., cosmology), Ruism (aka Confucianism), Mohism, Rhetoric, Legalism, and Daoism. In describing Daoism he cites, without attribution, two brief phrases that are now found in the *Laozi*.⁴ A century later, the royal librarian Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) listed the *Laozi* under the “Daoist” heading in his library catalog.⁵ I won’t take the time to describe these six schools of thought here, but they offer a much more historically accurate way of contextualizing the *Laozi*.⁶

The two earliest descriptions of the *Laozi* come in the form of descriptions of its eponymous **author**, Laozi, that is, Scholar Lao or, if one thinks that “Lao” was not an ancient Chinese surname, the Old Scholar(s).⁷ In any case, tradition holds that Laozi’s real name was Li Er 李耳, as we shall see later. Whether or not Laozi really was the author of the *Laozi* is hard to say. It’s like asking if Abraham, Moses, or Jesus were real, historical figures: if you ask an American (about 70 percent of whom are Christian), they will probably say, “Yes, of course.” But if you ask a Chinese person (about 3 percent of whom are Christian), they will likely say, “I don’t know; given that their stories involve miracles, probably not.” And, I suspect, if you asked the same question about Laozi in those two locations, you might get the same answers in reverse proportions. By and large, people tend to

3. Some scholars object to the “schools of thought” nomenclature because they think it implies physical school buildings or articulated teacher-student lineages. I imply neither of these and use the term loosely.

4. His opening two sentences appear to include paraphrases of *Laozi* chapters 37 (or 48) and 70. For a translation of this part of Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145–86) *Shi ji* 史記 (Scribal records; 91 BCE), see William Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, vol. 11 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 320.

5. Liu Xiang’s library catalog is preserved in Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92 CE) *Han shu* 漢書 (Han history; 92 CE) chapter 30 “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 (Literature record), but it remains untranslated. The *Laozi*, or rather four different annotated *Laozis* (all lost, unfortunately), appears in the standard Chinese edition on page 1729.

6. For more on five of these six schools (minus the Rhetorists), see Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985).

7. 子 means “scholar,” “master,” or “teacher.” *Lao* 老 means “old” or “experienced.” One might transcribe the Chinese as “Lao Zi” rather than “Laozi” to show that the last two letters are in fact an honorific, but convention, and a desire to not give the impression that Zi is a surname, conspire to put them together. This is the case with the names of all early Chinese scholars, like Kongzi, Zhuangzi, and Mozi, whose names end with *zi*.

believe that their own ancient cultural heroes are real, while other people's ancient cultural heroes are mythological (at least when miraculous events are involved). And the further back in time you go, the harder it is to find corroborating evidence to support the narratives about the people in question. There are no miraculous events in the *Laozi* (as I read it; however, some bits, read literally rather than metaphorically, can be construed as describing the miraculous), but Laozi's earliest biography (which we will look at shortly) says he *may have* lived to 160 or even 200 years of age. So, while there is nothing necessarily "mythological" in the *Laozi*, the biography of Laozi is a little suspect, by modern standards of historicity.

Aside from the potentially miraculous part of a biography of Laozi written centuries after his death, some scholars assess the eighty-one chapters as "reading like" an anthology written by different authors. I might agree with the "anthology" description, since the ca. 300 BCE Guodian manuscripts order their chapters differently from the received version, and the 168 BCE Mawangdui manuscripts reverse the two halves of the text (but otherwise mostly keep the same chapter order).⁸ But since the text reads quite coherently to me, philosophically speaking, I remain unpersuaded by the "several different authors" claim. Nevertheless, if the *Laozi* has taught me anything, it is the wisdom of fallibilism (discussed later), so maybe there was no historical Laozi, and maybe the *Laozi* was written by many authors and redacted into a single text by a later editor or several editors. It doesn't really matter to a philosophical appreciation of the book. In any case, I shall refer to "Laozi" as the author, even while not claiming that an individual named "Li Er" wrote the book. One thing is certain: given all the *variora* among exemplars, the exact wording of the text has certainly changed over time. I address authorship further in the appendix.

The two earliest **descriptions** of Laozi come from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and from Sima Tan (or his son, Sima Qian). The *Zhuangzi* also has an eponymous author, Zhuangzi, Scholar Zhuang, and was also categorized as a Daoist text by Liu Xiang. The first chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are often dated to about 300 BCE, but it is the last chapter that has the description of Laozi that we are interested in. This chapter also has a description of Zhuangzi himself, which suggests that he did not write it. So just *when* it was written is unclear; sometime between 300 and 8 BCE, when Liu Xiang noted it in his library catalog. I'll tentatively date it to 250 BCE,

8. The first "half" is constituted (in the standard, received version) by chapters 1–37, and the second "half" by chapters 38–81.

since it shows no indication of the 221 BCE Qin unification of China, a unification that changed the tone of scholars who succeeded the scholars in pre-Qin schools of thought.

Zhuangzi chapter 33 refers to Laozi as Lao Dan (we'll find out why later).

Lao Dan said: "Know the male, but preserve the female: be a 'mountain stream' for the world; know the white, but preserve the black: be a 'valley' for the world."⁹ And: "People all choose to be in the lead, while I alone choose to follow: this is called accepting the misfortunes of the world. People all choose fullness, while I alone choose emptiness: I do not hoard, therefore there is more than enough, manifestly more than enough!" He (i.e., Laozi) carried himself calmly yet efficiently, uncontrivedly yet with cheerful skillfulness:¹⁰ "People all seek wealth, while I alone am 'bent, then whole': this is called 'carefree avoidance of ruin.'" Using depth as his root and moderation as his standard, he said: "Rigid, then ruined; sharp, then blunted." Abidingly tolerant toward all things, without thereby reducing humans, he may be said to have reached the zenith.¹¹

9. This is almost identical to a quote from *Laozi* chapter 28, except in the received text there is an explanatory sentence between the two halves marked by the semicolon, and the received text has "model" (式) instead of "valley" (谷), though "valley" is used in the next line in the received version. Thus, the *Zhuangzi* chapter 33 author could have been paraphrasing the *Laozi*, or they could have been quoting a different version.

10. Most scholars read "uncontrivedly yet with cheerful skillfulness" as "uncontrivedly and laughed at cleverness." The difference results from how to parse the grammar: I read the sentence as "topic (其行身) + adjectives X而Y + adjectives X而Y," while other scholars read it as "topic (其行身) + adjectives X而Y" then "topic (無為) + verb-object." Both readings are possible. Moreover, "skillful / clever" (巧) is used negatively in *Laozi* chapters 19 and 57, but it is also used positively in chapter 45. And *Zhuangzi* chapter 19 describes Woodworker Qing as "skillful" in a positive sense, so it seems plausible that the author of *Zhuangzi* chapter 33 would also use it positively here.

11. The first three sentences, as well as the second half of the fifth and sixth sentences, all seem to be quotes from Laozi, but only the first matches an existing passage, so it seems likely that the author of *Zhuangzi* chapter 33 had access to sayings of Laozi that did not make it into the final, received version of the text. Or perhaps this author was paraphrasing the *Laozi*, insofar as most of these sayings *do* have echoes in the received *Laozi*. For example, for the second sentence, see chapters 7, 66, and 78; for the third sentence, see chapters 3, 38, and 44; for the fourth sentence, see chapters 20, 22, and 9; and for the fifth sentence, see chapters 59, 4, and 6.

老聃曰：「知其雄，守其雌，為天下谿；知其白，守其辱，為天下谷。」「人皆取先，己獨取後，曰受天下之垢。人皆取實，己獨取虛：無藏也故有餘，巋然而有餘。」其行身也，徐而不費，無為也而笑巧：「人皆求福，己獨曲全，曰苟免於咎。」以深為根，以約為紀，曰「堅則毀矣，銳則挫矣」。常寬容於物，不削於人，可謂至極。

This description, however, does not really tell us much about the text that we would not have learned from reading it. The second description, however, from Sima Qian, does. Remember that if we date the *Laozi* to ca. 400 BCE, and Sima Qian finished his (and his father's) work ca. 91 BCE, three centuries had elapsed.

Laozi was from Churen village in the Li district of the Hu province of the state of Chu. He was surnamed Mr. Li, given-named Er, and style-named Dan. He was a scribe in the Zhou archives. When Kongzi went to the state of Zhou to ask Laozi about protocol, Laozi said: “The people of whom you speak, both their persons and their bones, have all already withered away: only their words still remain. Moreover, when noble people meet with the right time, then they ride in a carriage, but when they do not meet with the right time, then they move like tumbleweeds piling up. I have heard that the full storerooms of clever merchants appear empty, and that the countenances of noble people who are full of virtuosity appear stupid. Be rid of your arrogant manner and many desires, your proud demeanor and excessive willfulness: these are all of no benefit to your person. That is all I have to tell you.”¹²

老子者，楚苦縣厲鄉曲仁里人也。姓李氏，名耳，字聃。周守藏室之史也。孔子適周，將問禮於老子，老子曰：「子所言者，其人與骨皆已朽矣，獨其言在耳。且君子得其時則駕，不得其時則蓬累而行。吾聞之，良賈深藏若虛，君子盛德容貌若愚。去子之驕氣與多欲，態色與淫志：是皆無益於子之身。吾所以告子，若是而已。」

12. To “ride in a carriage” implies having a job in government, which was socially esteemed, well paying, and provided an opportunity to help the community; while to “move like tumbleweeds” is to wander around, presumably without stable employment.

Here we learn that Laozi's "style name," or "pen name," is Lao Dan and three things about him that are relevant to our reading of the *Laozi*. First, despite being literate and aware of history, he thought—as Kongzi himself did—that when it comes to protocol, how it is *practiced* is more important than how it is *articulated*.¹³ Or, as we might put it now, "the spirit of the law" is more important than "the letter of the law." Second, timeliness matters.¹⁴ The question of whether one should involve oneself in community improvement when the current community leaders are pursuing strategies and goals that are incompatible with one's own was a key question for Kongzi. If Kongzi can be construed as advocating "strive for change from within," Laozi is here advocating "biding one's time until the moment is conducive." It is an interesting question that remains valid for us even today. Third, Laozi, like any fallibilist, is suspicious of overconfidence. One may be confident in what one knows, but this should always be tempered with the humility of knowing that there is still much that we do *not* know. This too is an issue that remains valid for us even today. In Sima Qian's narrative, Kongzi then goes on to compare Laozi to a dragon, remarking that he "cannot understand how he rides the winds and clouds up to Heaven" (不能知其乘風雲而上天). The narrative then continues:

Laozi cultivated the Way and virtuosity, and his teachings used self-concealment and a low profile to do things. Having lived in the state of Zhou for a long while, he saw its decline, and consequently left. Arriving at the border, the border guard Yin Xi said, "Since you are going into retirement, might I bother you to write a text for me?" So Laozi consequently wrote a text in two sections, articulating the meaning of the Way and virtuosity in just over five thousand words, and then departed. No one knows where he ended up.

老子脩道德，其學以自隱無名為務。居周久之，見周之衰，迺遂去。至關，關令尹喜曰：「子將隱矣，彊為我著書？」於是老子迺著書上下篇，言道德之意五千餘言而去。莫知其所終。

13. "Protocol" (禮) is often translated as "ritual," but I prefer "protocol" because I find it applicable to a wider range of activities than is implied by the more formal English word "ritual." In fact, the Chinese word certainly has implications broader than either of these two options. I use "ritual" (儀) to translate a different Chinese word, one with a narrower semantic range, more formal and ceremonial, but it does not occur in the *Laozi*.

14. For passages on timeliness, see *Laozi* chapters 8, 9, 63, and 64.

Here we learn of a fourth item relevant to understanding the text: the importance of humility and keeping a low profile. This brief biography continues on with speculation about other names Laozi might have gone by, his possibly living to 160 or 200 years of age, and his lineage, but none of this matters to our understanding of the text.¹⁵

Early Chinese “Scholars texts,”¹⁶ like the *Laozi*, often circulated—quite possibly in piecemeal form—for centuries without a formal title. Sima Qian, who died around 86 BCE, refers to “Laozi’s words / sayings” (老子言) and “Laozi’s text / writings / book” (老子書), but there was no shorthand way to denote titles, as we now do with italics. The *Laozi* was the title used by Liu Xiang, the royal librarian, before his death in 8 BCE, but Han Emperor Jing 漢景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE) is traditionally thought to have accorded the text the honorific title *Daodejing* 道德經 (The classic of the Way and virtuosity).¹⁷ Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE) called his commentary the *Daode zhenjing zhu* 道德真經注 (Commentary on the true classic of the Way and virtuosity), so the *Daodejing* title was presumably known by then.¹⁸ So, which title—the *Laozi* or the *Daodejing*—is older? I cannot say with great confidence, but I’ve chosen to use the *Laozi*, for two reasons. One, Liu Xiang was a librarian, and had he thought that Han Emperor Jing’s putative christening of the text as the *Daodejing* was “official,” I think he would have used it. Also, Ban Gu, in his *Han shu* 漢書 (Han history; 92 CE), when listing a number of old books reportedly found sometime before 155 BCE, uses *Laozi* and not *Daodejing*.¹⁹ Second, using *Laozi* reminds us to contextualize it with other

15. For the rest of Sima Qian’s brief biography of Laozi, see William Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, vol. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22–23.

16. That is, generally speaking, those whose author’s names and eponymous titles end in *zi* (子).

17. That is, Jiao Hong 焦贛 (1540–1620), in his *Laozi Yi* 老子翼 (Supplement to the *Laozi*), said “the *Laozi* began to be called a ‘classic’ starting from the time of Han Emperor Jing” (老子之稱經，自漢景帝始也). This claim, made a *millennium and a half* after the fact, is not supported by the *Shiji* or *Hanshu*, but is partially supported by the Beijing University *Laozi* manuscript, obtained in 2009 and dated to ca. 100 BCE, insofar as this manuscript has titles for the two parts of the text, “Laozi Classic Part I” (老子上經) and “Laozi Classic Part II” (老子下經).

18. Or not. Victor Mair, in his translation of the Mawangdui *Laozi*, says that “the first explicit mention of the classic by this title” (i.e., the *Daodejing*) was “probably” by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321–379). Victor Mair, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 131.

19. See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, chapter 53.

Scholars texts, like the *Sunzi* 孫子, *Mozi* 墨子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Mengzi* 孟子, *Guanzi* 管子, and *Xunzi* 荀子, among others. Such contextualization, which is certainly crucial to a historical understanding of the *Laozi*, and is probably also important to a philosophical understanding of it, is a little beyond the scope of the present translation.