

THE "LAOIST" COMMUNITY AND THE CREATION OF "LAO-TZU'S" THOUGHT

Presented at the 1994 Annual Meeting of
The Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy
(American Philosophical Association, Central Region, 1994)

Not for Citation

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The most widely known work of the Taoist tradition is the ancient text known as the *Daode jing*. Until recent centuries, it was regarded as the creation of an ancient Chinese thinker known as Laozi. According to the most famous story of its origin, "Laozi" had been a man named Lao Dan, an archivist from whom Confucius had sought advice about "propriety" (*li*). But that attribution gradually came to be challenged by Chinese scholars, and in the 20th century it became subjected to increasing criticism by Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars alike. Most scholars today, in the West and in Asia alike, agree that the text of the *Daode jing* first appeared sometime during the early 3rd century BCE. The most recent scholarship suggests that someone of that period concocted the fiction of Lao Dan as the *Daode jing's* alleged author in an effort to lend it the lustre of a learned man in royal service, whom even Confucius had respected and sought to learn from. Yet, the belief that the *Daode jing* was written by a thinker named "Laozi" endures. That belief, I propose, profoundly interferes with any efforts to work out the thought system present in the text. Any interpretive effort will be invalid if it succumbs to the false assumption that the *Daode jing* represents a uniform system of thought that evolved in the mind of a single person.

In reality, the *Daode jing* is unquestionably the result of a long process of development, the contours of which can be deduced by combining analysis of the work's form and contents with a knowledge of the social and intellectual history of ancient China. Only by understanding how the *Daode jing* evolved can one truly understand its contents. The text can best be compared to works of "wisdom literature" like the Biblical book of *Proverbs*. But many continue to misinterpret it as a philosophical treatise. Such interpretations misconstrue the fundamental nature of the work. Most Asian and Western scholars today agree that the material

now found in the *Daode jing* actually originated in an oral tradition. But the precise nature of that tradition has yet to be fully illuminated. I shall propose today that the key to understanding the *Daode jing* is that it had a unique textual history: that is, it originated in the oral wisdom teachings of a local community somewhere in ancient China, and was then transformed by anonymous redactors into an expression of sociopolitical principles, designed to compete with those of the Confucians, Mohists and Legalists.

Most scholars continue to regard the *Daode jing* as the product of ancient Chinese intellectuals, members of the same social elite that produced the Confucians and many of the leading spokesmen for other schools of thought. Just as texts like the *Mozi*, for instance, show dissatisfaction with the Confucian perspective, so does the *Daode jing*. Hence some scholars reason that it, too, must have been the work of "alienated idealists" trying to critique existing social and political conditions. But there is a major problem with such interpretations: that is, the sociopolitical stances presented in the *Daode jing* rarely seem to have much to do with the work's most fundamental themes, particularly with the proposition that there is a primary natural force running through the natural and human world, a force to which it refers as "the Tao." Nor does the *Daode jing*'s sociopolitical slant seem to harmonize well with the text's most emphasized lesson for human life -- that one should emulate the Tao by playing no active role in human affairs. If one were really to practice *wuwei* ("non-action"), as the *Daode jing* says a true Sage does, wouldn't one just live one's own life, in accord with the natural order, completely ignoring the social and political "issues" of the day? Yet, the *Daode jing* contains many chapters dedicated to demonstrating how a Sage can rule a nation, or even fight a war. That irony actually gives us clear indication of the *Daode jing*'s textual history: once a collection of oral traditions designed as advice for living one's life wisely, the collection was radically transformed into a sociopolitical tract.

The best explanation for those facts seems to be as follows. At some point prior to 300 BCE there was a community somewhere in ancient China that passed down a tradition of homespun wisdom. Originally, that wisdom consisted of such "real-life" advice as parents and other elders in any culture normally provide orally to their young people: behave in a wise and healthy way, and you'll have a full and comfortable life, free from conflict or unexpected suffering. Here we can appreciate why neither the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian nor anyone else in ancient China could really identify the thinker supposedly designated by the term *laozi*.

Far from having been a personal name, the term *lao* here actually has its usual, everyday meaning of "aged." It was a Japanese scholar, Kimura Eiichi, who first argued that *laozi* was originally not a title for some wise "Master Lao," but rather a generic reference to "the old ones" from whom anyone in any culture receives one's earliest and most important lessons in life. What set this particular tradition apart from the normal wisdom of any other human community was that some of its participants had apparently meditated upon the world's workings to the point of perceiving a universal force underlying them. Thus, the key to the oral tradition that constituted the wisdom of "the old ones" (*laozi*) was that we should learn to perceive that force and, by focussing upon it, to return to our "natural" behaviors, living a quiet life of humble beneficence, giving selflessly to others, as a mother does. This tradition, I should emphasize, was not the product of any social or intellectual elite: it was the accumulated wisdom of generations of old folk (probably women and men alike), passed down to from generation to generation. For convenience, I shall refer to that tradition as the teachings of "the Laoist community."

This interpretation seems to allow a more natural explanation of certain elements of the *Daode jing's* social and ethical thought than does the more traditional interpretation. For instance, the *Daode jing* strongly advises foregoing reputation in favor of anonymity. While it is certainly possible to posit the existence of some intellectual who held such a view, the position seems much more easily explained in terms of the values of a traditional small-scale community, in which wisdom is dispensed orally without claims of authorship, and assertive individuals are often regarded as troublemakers. In a traditional small-scale community, found in all nonliterate societies as well as in rural components of literate cultures, there is often little use for powerful personalities, and "individualism" in any modern sense is actually discouraged. In such a society, the common good always lies in humble acquiescence to traditional social and cultural patterns, never in individual innovation. Such societies strive to preserve those traditional patterns because those patterns have withstood the test of time. Rather than being driven by some notion of "progress," they are generally informed by mythic traditions, models from the past, in terms of which people of each succeeding generation are taught to understand their lives. Those models are generally presented as being grounded in profound divine realities. Hence such models are held to be not merely authoritative, but actually as socially binding upon all, and it is assumed that any conscious attempt to follow a different course constitutes a dangerous

deviance, dangerous not only to the initiator of the innovation, but to the entire society. In fact, it is in such a society's interest to persuade those in each generation to forego individual desires and ambitions, eschew assertive interpersonal behavior, and seek personal fulfillment in the profound realities in which the society's traditions were always said to be grounded.

Within such a context, the social and ethical values of the *Daode jing* seem entirely at home. The ideal for a member of such a society is a person who forgoes the temptation to seek individual aggrandizement, the temptation to fiddle around with traditional ways, the temptation to innovate or assert oneself in any way. Just so, the ideal in the *Daode jing* is a self-effacing person who practices *wuwei*, foregoing all activity intended to effect desired ends (*wei*). Such a person simply follows his or her natural course and allow all others to do likewise, lest willful interference disrupt things' proper flow. The *Daode jing* reifies such behavioral ideals as characteristics of a natural force called the Tao.

But the *Daode jing* also presents noteworthy extensions of these ideas, in the form of suggestions for wielding political and military power, and in the form of denunciations of the social and ethical teachings of the Confucians. Such prescriptions can clearly not be explained as natural extensions of the social and cultural values of a conservative small-scale community. But then again, ancient China had been undergoing radical sociocultural changes since the 7th century BCE, and by the 4th century those changes were accelerating ever more rapidly: the political disintegration of the Zhou ruling house was accompanied by rapid economic change as well as by the decay of certain social values and traditions. In certain locales, especially around political centers, members of the emerging *shi* class began formulating new analyses of what was going wrong with society, and recommendations for rectifying the wretched state of affairs. That class included Confucius, his critic Mozi (Mo-tzu), and his defender Mencius.

I propose to explain the evolution of the *Daode jing* as follows. Toward the end of the 4th century, one or more young men from the Laoist community arrived in one of the newly emerging political centers, and became interested in the debates that were raging there among the intellectuals around the rulers' courts. These newcomers from a small-scale rural community compared the intellectuals' sociopolitical arguments with the teachings of their own traditional heritage, and developed the radical idea that the "old folks'" teachings about *wuwei* and the natural order could be applied to the problems with which the intellectuals were so concerned. Some of the newcomers thereupon wrote down the memorable lessons of their "old

ones" and elaborated upon them, adding numerous passages to explain how *wuwei* could enable a ruler to bring peace and order to his land. Other passages were added to address other issues current among "the intellectual elite" of the day, such as the moral problem of warfare, and the Confucians' contention that all the problems of the age could be resolved through the cultivation of the virtues of "benevolence" and "righteousness" (*ren* and *yi*). The resulting text -- a combination of traditional oral wisdom and unprecedented sociopolitical doctrines -- was then promulgated among intellectuals, identified simply as the teachings of *laozi* -- "the venerable elders." The intellectuals who encountered this text failed to appreciate the meaning of that term, and falsely assumed that it must have been the name of some great thinker, just like the texts associated with the names *Mozi* and *Mencius*. Perhaps when the text's redactors realized that such misconceptions were occurring, some of them actually encouraged such beliefs, since the intellectuals gave greater respect to teachings believed to represent the wisdom of some great man of the past. It may have been in this way that the term *laozi* was transformed -- accidentally or intentionally -- into the name of a fictional thinker, as has been suggested, for instance, by the late A. C. Graham.

For these reasons, I propose that we should be wary of efforts to interpret the *Daode jing* as a coherent philosophical text, at least not in the customary sense. In actuality, it most likely represents the efforts of a small group of people to square the teachings of their traditional community with the new social and intellectual debates that they encountered when they left the countryside for a new life in one of the cities of a rapidly changing China.