

TAOISM AND EARLY CHINESE THOUGHT

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The place of Taoism in relation to early Chinese thought must be considered on two levels: (1) the location of the contents of the texts of "classical Taoism" (the *Neiye*, *Daode jing*, and *Zhuangzi*) within the context of pre-Qin intellectual history; and (2) the influence of other aspects of early Chinese thought upon the evolution of later Taoism. The former topic has been widely discussed in both Asia and the West; the latter has barely begun to be explored. Accurate interpretation of early Chinese thought requires undoing centuries of reifications of classical "schools" and even of well-known "thinkers," including the fictitious "Laozi." We must also carefully avoid misunderstandings that have resulted from uncritical acceptance of the biases of late-imperial Confucians.

"Classical Taoism" apparently sprang from ideas of individuals and groups of southerly Chinese states in late Zhou times, when other intellectual traditions were evolving across the Chinese landscape: the Mohist organization, various Confucian schools, several "Legalist" theorists, and the murky groups who produced the ideas known as *yin-yang* and the "Five Phases" (*wuxing*).

"Confucianism" was a humanistic value-system based on the teachings of Kong Qiu (Kongzi, 551-479 BCE), of the northeastern state of Lu. The gaps between Confucian and Taoist values reflect the fact that the two traditions arose in different regions among members of different social classes, and responded to different socio-cultural conditions. The teachers of various Confucian subtraditions idealized the traditional Zhou aristocracy, and idealized its values as means of correcting the problems of their age.

"Mohism" was the only early Chinese value-system actually embodied in a cohesive social organization. Mozi (Mo Di, ca. 470-400 BCE) despised the Zhou aristocracy, and trained his followers as missionaries to recruit a communal society dedicated to carrying out his socio-cultural goals by suasion and armed action. He rationalized his social activism by utilitarian ethics and theistic claims. His organization's authoritarian structure and ideological rigidity gave it coherence, but discouraged many potential participants. Mo's universalistic social vision may have contributed to similar tendencies in post-Han Taoist traditions such as Tianshi and Lingbao.

Mozi, like Confucius, was apparently from Lu, and Confucians and Mohists shared a fundamental focus on active involvement with societal affairs to re-direct the polity, and individual morality, into directions more wholesome than those in which most rulers were leading their lands. These issues were apparently not so compelling to the inhabitants of such southerly lands as Chu. Chu, long a separate country with distinct cultural and political traditions, competed with the northern states of the Zhou confederation, until eventually conquered by Qin in 221 BCE, resulting in China's first unification. Historically, classical "Taoism" seems to have emerged from Chu and its southerly neighbors. While Sima Qian's identification of "Laozi" as a native of Chu is historically dubious, recent research has produced a steady stream of evidence linking the *Daode jing* to that non-Zhou state. The *Neiye*, which influenced the *Daode jing*, shows little trace of the main socio-political issues over which the Confucians and Mohists contended, any more than such issues interested Zhuang Zhou.

Elsewhere, perhaps in the far northeast, other minds were evolving the apolitical explanatory system known as "the *yin-yang* school." No one knows any historical details about its originators. All that we know is that such ideas emerged quite independently of any of the individuals or communities that produced the classical Taoist texts, and had little influence on Taoism

before Han times. During the first century of the Han, the thinkers who contributed to the *Huainanzi* began to integrate such ideas into the Taoist worldview, just as Dong Zhongshu (ca. 195-115 BCE) and later Han Confucians integrated *yin-yang* thought, and later the separate "Five-Phase" explanatory system, into the Confucian worldview. The modern belief that the ideas of *yin* and *yang* were fundamental elements of Taoist thought is quite erroneous.

The main exponents of "Legalist" principles were the Qin official Shang Yang ("Lord Shang"; d. 338 BCE), the Han official Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE), and the Han scion Han Fei (d. 233 BCE). Shen developed the political concept of *wuwei*, and Han Fei, though a student of the Confucian thinker Xunzi, adapted Taoist cosmology for political purposes: to him, the ruler should be thought of as a transcendent being, far above all human concerns. Two chapters of Han Fei's text \subset the *Jie-Lao* (ch. 20) and the *Yu-Lao* (ch. 21) \subset explicate *Daode jing* passages. Other blends of Taoist, Legalist, and *yinyang/wuxing* ideas appear in other texts of late classical and early Han times.

Perhaps what most distinguished Taoists from other early Chinese thinkers was Taoists' faith in nonpersonalized spiritual realities, and in the transformative power of the individual who has fully cultivated them. Confucians, like Mohists, accepted the idea of Tian (AHeaven@), but seldom regarded it as vital to individual self-cultivation, and only Mengzi (Mencius) advocated cultivation of *qi*. Generally, the Confucians argued that one should transform society by cultivating moral virtues and urging rulers to do likewise. Early Taoists were more focussed on bio-spiritual cultivation, and sometimes suggested that such cultivation by rulers would transform the world. The newly-discovered Guodian manuscripts of the *Dao de jing* have little further socio-political program. The notion that Taoism arose as a reaction against Confucianism is erroneous, for those manuscripts lack the condemnation of Confucian ideas found in the received text. Some scholars now believe that the final redactor of the *Dao de jing* was responding to the concerns of intellectuals in the Jixia academy of Qi when he added to the Taoist message a response to other schools. What they shared with Zhuangzi was cynicism regarding the hope that collective individual/societal effort can effect desirable change. They did not distrust "human nature," as Mozi and Xunzi did, but they were often aware of the socially constructed nature of cultural and psychological "realities." They insisted that we should rely instead upon natural realities, the subtle salutary forces that humans neither created nor controlled. Thus, the *Neiye* advocated the cultivation of *qi* ("life-energy"), *jing* ("vital essence"), and *shen* ("spirit"); the *Zhuangzi* advocated reverting to a "heavenly mechanism" (*tianji*) that is independent of psycho-cultural constructs; and the *Dao de jing* advocated abandonment of self-concern and a return to the motherly life-force that is the origin and life-matrix of all things. All three suggest that a properly cultivated person can exert a subtle transformative power, acting as a conduit for the natural salutary forces that should guide and empower peoples' lives.