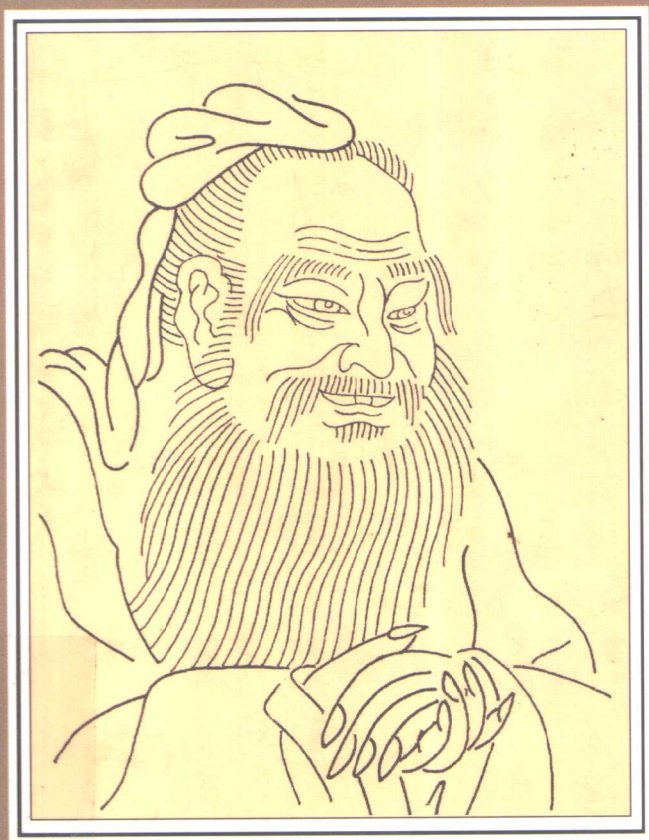


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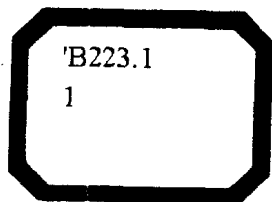


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# INTRODUCTION

To sum up, there are three different opinions about Lao Zi (Lao Tzu) as a historical figure and *The Book of Lao Zi* (also known as *Dao De Jing/Tao Te Ching* or *The Way and Its Virtue*) which he allegedly wrote.

The first one is that *The Book of Lao Zi* elaborates and explains the teachings left behind by Lao Zi, and that Lao Zi was actually born before Confucius (551-479 B.C.). Those who first supported this opinion include Ma Xulun, Zhang Xu, Tang Lan, Guo Moruo, Lu Zhenyu, Gao Heng, and the Russian Sinologist with the Chinese name Yang Xingshun.

The second opinion is that Lao Zi lived during the Warring States Period (403-221 B.C.) and *The Book of Lao Zi* was compiled then. Those who first put forward this opinion are Wang Zhong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), modern scholars Liang Qichao, Feng Youlan, Fan Wenlan, Luo Gengze, Hou Wailu and Yang Rongguo.

The third opinion is that *Dao De Jing* was compiled during the times between the Qin Dynasty and the Han (221 B.C.-A.D.220), the advocates of which include Gu Jiegang and Liu Jie.

I would basically assent to the arguments set forth by the advocates of the first opinion, and my reasons are as follows. First, before the Qin Dynasty, historical documents like *The Book of Zhuang Zi* (English edition published in 1989 by the Foreign Languages Press under the title *Chuang-tzu*), *The Book of Xun Zi*, *The Book of Han Fei Zi*, *Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* and *The Book of Mo Zi*, never questioned in any way the relation of Lao Zi to his doctrines.

All authors of these books have a roughly identical description of Lao Zi. Their description of Lao Zi's doctrine is in accord with the central thought of *The Book of Lao Zi*. After the mid-Warring States Period, various schools were profoundly in-

fluenced by Lao Zi. In philosophical thought up to the early years of the Han Dynasty, the relationship among Lao Dan, Li Er and Taishi Dan was confused so that there was a period of more than two hundred years when dating Lao Zi, and even Lao Zi as an historical figure, became uncertain.

Secondly, the compilation of *The Book of Lao Zi* lasted a considerable length of time. The texts and records before the Qin Dynasty were hardly written by a few individuals independently, and only through a long period of elaboration and supplementation by disciples of the schools concerned, did they assume their final editions. Such a period was as long as one or two centuries or more. For example, the compilation of *The Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*, also known as *I Ching*, author unknown) lasted at least five centuries or more; Mo Zi's text, *Mo Jing*, appeared more than one century after Mo Zi died; *The Book of Guan Zi* covered various schools of thought popularized from the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) to the early Han period; the compilation of *Sun Zi's Art of War* went through a long period of collection. Additionally, *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Xun Zi* and *The Book of Han Fei Zi*, whose authenticity was scarcely suspected, were mixed up with the materials added later by Confucian scholars in the Han Dynasty. But we have no reason, because of this, to doubt that Confucius, Mo Zi, Han Fei Zi and Xun Zi were founders of the basic concepts contained in these books. *The Book of Lao Zi* is no exception, and it cannot postdated merely because evidence of certain ideas emerging in the time of the Warring States Period was found.

Thirdly, some concepts in *The Book of Lao Zi* were already popular prior to Lao Zi, such as "nonaction," "valuing tenderness" and disbelieving in the "will of Heaven," which had appeared in embryonic form as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, although they were not generalized as universal philosophical principles.

Therefore, I think that the ideas in *The Book of Lao Zi* which oppose "humanity and righteousness" and laws might appear after Lao Zi himself; Lao Zi's concept of Heaven's Tao (the fundamental part of Lao Zi's philosophy) belongs to Lao Zi's own system of thought, and so do his high valuation of tenderness,

opposition to war and dialectical theory; the political ideal of “a small state with a sparse population” is close to his own. The remarks above are derived from my summing-up of the descriptions of Lao Zi’s thinking by exponents of various pre-Qin schools of thought from their respective points of view.

The social change of the destruction of slavery occurred when Lao Zi’s thought appeared at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period. Tax reforms marked a transition from the slave-owning system to the feudal system, and a new power structure was formed with the emergence of a class that was rich, but not aristocratic. Accordingly, the law which represented the interest of the ruling class was changed, e.g. penal codes appeared on books and bronze vessels. Out-of-date social ideas and norms were changed, and the relationship between ministers and monarchs and father and son broke down. Monarchs were murdered by their ministers and fathers by their sons. The concept of providence altered, and people began to resent Heaven to an unbri-dled degree. All these changes reveal the breakdown of the slave-owning system and the rise of the feudal system. In the face of these great changes, a number of outstanding thinkers put forth their ideas.

Of all four changes mentioned above, the debate over the concept of providence (Heaven’s Way or Heaven’s Tao) is a central issue in the history of pre-Qin philosophy. The concept of Heaven’s Way was not put forward by a few people merely at the whim of the moment, but was closely linked to the class struggle, political life and scientific development of that time. During pre-Qin times, the essential issue concerning cosmic origin, development and change is the concept of “Heaven’s Way,” while the essential issue concerning social and political affairs is “ritual” and “law.” The concept of “Heaven’s Way” became an issue that required all pre-Qin philosophers to state their opinions on it. In addition to *The Book of Lao Zi*, Confucius, Mo Zi, Mencius, Zhuang Zi, Xun Zi and Han Fei (or Han Fei Zi) all addressed the concept of “Heaven’s Way.” Chinese philosophy has evolved along a line similar to that of ancient Western philosophy. Western philosophers also began their thinking with their concept of providence. Classical Greek philosophers probed into the cause of



becoming, evolution and development of things and thus set forth various interpretations and conclusions; thereby philosophers were divided into two different camps—materialism and idealism. That case is not only applicable to the West; the same holds true for India, in which the first important issue the ancient philosophers faced was the concept of providence. To note “the things outside the body” at first, then to understand oneself, is a necessary process for man’s knowledge of the world. Ancient philosophy corresponds to man’s childhood in his understanding of the world. A child always understands the outside world, then understands himself. At the beginning he becomes aware of his caretakers, parents or others, then aware of the environment he lives in, finally aware of himself, namely, his ego.

If viewed in light of his “Heaven’s Way” concept alone, Lao Zi’s doctrine is progressive, for it strikes a blow against the religious and superstitious idea of “Heaven’s Will.” That Heaven can reward or punish people is a privilege, attributed to Heaven by religions in class society. In primitive society, God was responsible only for people’s welfare, not for reward or punishment. Reward for contributions and punishment for crimes embodied the will of the ruling class after emergence of the state. In Lao Zi’s philosophy, Heaven has no personality, and it is a sort of natural state and stands among all other things; it is none other than a most comprehensive and objective being, a most fundamental being, the proto-matter that forms all things, which is “Tao” as Lao Zi called it. The word “Tao” is mentioned in the 5,000-word *Book of Lao Zi* seventy-four times.

Reading through *The Book of Lao Zi*, we find that Tao has five distinct meanings:

1) The undifferentiated primitive state (chaos): “There was something undifferentiated and yet complete” (ch. 25); “The thing that is called Tao has no definite form” (ch. 21); “Tao gives birth to the unified thing (One), the One splits itself into two opposite aspects (Two), the Two gives birth to another (Three), the newborn Third produces a myriad of things.” (ch. 42)

2) The motion of nature: “It depends upon nothing external, operating in a circular motion ceaselessly....” “The Great moves on, the moving-on becomes remote, the remote returns to the

original point.” (ch. 25)

3) Tao is the proto-material: “Tao has no name forever. Though the simplicity seems small, it may be subordinated to nothing under Heaven.” (ch. 32)

4) Tao is invisible to man’s eyes, and imperceptible to man’s sense organ: “You look at it and it is not seen, it is called the Formless. You listen to it and it is not heard, it is called the Soundless. You grasp it and it is not to be held, it is called the Intangible.” (ch. 14)

5) Tao means the law of things: “The Way (Tao) of Heaven ... the Way (Tao) of man.” (ch. 77)

Those who think Lao Zi’s philosophy is materialistic interpret his “Tao” as “The substance of matter and its law,” and generalize “Tao” as matter in general. In fact, the naive materialism of ancient times had not reached such a high level of abstract thinking. At that time there was no concept analogous to “matter.” It is incorrect to antedate the modern concept of matter from the late years of the Spring and Autumn Period.

Lao Zi’s Tao is merely a preliminary supposition about the proto-material that forms all things, and Lao Zi himself had not yet a capacity to understand matter in general. Therefore, he puts forward the concept of undifferentiated (chaos) in his philosophical conception. The undifferentiated cannot be named: it is called “the nameless” or “simplicity”:

The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth. (ch.1)

Tao has no name forever. (ch. 32)

The nameless simplicity....(ch. 37)

Though the simplicity seems small, it may be subordinated to nothing under Heaven. (ch. 32). When the simplicity is broken up, it is turned into concrete vessels. (ch. 28) I should subdue them with the nameless simplicity. (ch. 37)

Lao Zi described Tao to some degree, but failed to explain its character exactly; hence his description of Tao usually relies on some negative terms, such as “nonexistence,” “the Formless,” “nothing,” “the Shapeless,” etc. The appearance of the category “nonexistence” which was first treated as the negative concept of the root of all things in the history of Chinese philosophy, marks great progress in cognition.

It returns to a state with no shape or image. This is called the shapeless shape, the bodiless image. (ch. 14)

He returns to the ultimate truths. (ch. 28)

All beings come into being from invisible nonexistence (Tao). (ch. 40)

The greatest form looks formless. (ch. 41)

Here, this invisible “nonexistence,” “Tao,” is the general root of Heaven, Earth and all things; and it is also called “the Great.”

Inadequately giving it another name, I call it the Great. (ch. 25)

Whoever holds fast to the great image will become that one to whom all people under Heaven will come. (ch. 35)

Just because it is great, it is not like anything concrete. (ch. 67)

The “Tao” is a new ground on which Lao Zi attempted to break away from the domination of traditional religion; it is more authoritative than God. Lao Zi did not make clear whether the Tao which he put forward in order to replace God’s supreme right to speak was the spirit or the matter. Actually, he was incapable of explaining this problem in the light of the level of knowledge then. The issue over the relation between thought and being existed in ancient times, but had not been as clearly discerned as it is now. Ancient advanced thinkers had to grope their way. Thought and being, which was primary? The answer was not evident until modern times.

Lao Zi himself did not explain precisely certain unclear aspects of his own philosophical thought. When we evaluate his thought, the social and political conditions and the level of intellectual and philosophical development of that time should also be taken into account.

Because there is ambiguity in Lao Zi’s philosophy, the understanding of it by later generations follow two lines: Han Fei, the unknown authors of *The Book of Huai Nan Zi*, Xun Zi and Wang Cong follow one line, while the “Inner Chapters” (*Nei-bian*) of *The Book of Zhuang Zi*, Wang Bi and others follow another line. As Aristotle swings between idealism and materialism in philosophy, Lao Zi seems to do the same.

Lao Zi’s philosophy attempts to free the people from the

fetters of religion and theology. His theory that Heaven follows the way of nature and of "nonaction" contributes to the development of materialism, despite certain obscurities contained in it.

Lao Zi neglected the sense experience, and thought that not only could it not help man, but that it was also harmful to man's cognition. He said, "The farther one goes, the less one knows. Therefore the sage knows without going through" (ch. 47), thus blocking the way to understand the outside world. Lao Zi advocated, "The pursuit of learning is to increase (knowledge) day after day. The pursuit of Tao is to decrease (knowledge) day after day. Decreasing and decreasing again, till one has reached non-action" (ch. 48); that is to say, to know Tao and to seek learning follow two contrasting roads. The self-cultivation method of injuring one's body and eliminating wisdom, which was preached later by the Zhuang Zi school, was directly derived from this aspect of Lao Zi's thought.

Lao Zi sometimes interpreted Tao as "simplicity"; the simplicity is like a rough diamond to be cut and polished, and Lao Zi's philosophy is also a sort of simplicity to be further elaborated upon by later generations. Later on, Lao Zi's philosophy branched into two main schools, materialism and idealism. Both have their foundations in Lao Zi, but both added their elaboration and revision. Neither school can be judged as distortions of Lao Zi's original meaning. Among our researchers on the history of philosophy, some hold that Han Fei inherited Lao Zi's thought and that Wang Bi and Zhuang Zi misinterpreted and distorted it, while the others hold that Zhuang Zi and Wang Bi inherited it and that Han Fei and Wang Cong transformed it. These inherent contradictions in Lao Zi's philosophy are not a rare example in pre-Qin philosophical history. There are also inherent contradictions in Mo Zi's philosophy.

The same holds true for *The Book of Changes* and Confucius' concept of *ren* (benevolence). Confucius himself did not give a clear explanation of it, and thus offered the later Confucian schools opportunities of developing their own leanings which they claimed to be orthodox Confucian doctrines. The formation of Lao Zi's thought was related to the eventful and varied society of that time; to the developing natural science; to Lao Zi and his

followers' daily life which was integrated with productive labour; even to the culture of the Jing-Chu region in the south of the middle-lower reaches of the Yangtze River, which may have influenced Lao Zi, especially since he makes so many references to water.

During the late Spring and Autumn Period, the transformation in ownership led to a great social change: states rising or falling, and people changing their social positions, up or down. As an official historian, Lao Zi witnessed a lot of events that "the states have no eternal sovereignty and the monarch and ministers have no eternal status." (*Zuo Qiuming's Chronicles*, "The 32nd Year of Duke Zhao.") On the other hand, he derived from the knowledge of natural science in his time an idea that nature was in constant motion, independent of man's will, and that the general root of the world was the omnipresent Tao, which "operates in a circular motion ceaselessly," and "depends upon nothing external." For him Heaven, Earth and all things that originate from Tao are changeable; "If the fierce force of Heaven and Earth cannot last long," he asked, "how much less man?" (ch. 23) Thus, Lao Zi's dialectical thought is the reflection of the objective dialectics of the great social change in his time.

Lao Zi systematically says that all things in existence are interdependent, not isolated from each other. For instance, beauty and ugliness, difficult and easy, long and short, high and low, front and back, existence and nonexistence, decrease and increase, hard and soft, strong and weak, misfortune and fortune, disgrace and honour, wisdom and foolishness, cleverness and awkwardness, large and small, birth and death, success and failure, offensive and defensive, advance and retreat, silence and loudness, light and heavy, etc., are all of a unity. Each of the opposites cannot exist without the other. Therefore Lao Zi said, "By opposing each other, existence and nonexistence come into being, difficult and easy form themselves, long and short are distinct, high and low contrast, sound and voice harmonize, front and back emerge." (ch. 2) The fact that the concept of the unity of opposites is explained further exhibits the deepening of man's understanding of the world.

Lao Zi summed up the natural and social changes in his time,

pointing out that all things would change into the reverse. "The normal can at anytime become the abnormal," he said, "the good can at anytime become the evil," "O Misery! Happiness lies by its side; O Happiness! Misery lurks beneath it." (ch. 58) He found the fundamental law that none of all things do not turn into their opposites: "Reversion is the movement of Tao." (ch. 40) According to this principle, Lao Zi adopted his own attitude towards the world and life: valuing softness and weakness, adhering to the feminine position, objecting to hardness and strength, denying ambition.

Through the practice of farming Lao Zi found that though the seedling of a plant is weak and tender, it is able to grow up out of its weakness and tenderness; and that it will come to its end as soon as it becomes strong and large. Said he: "All things, grasses and trees have tender twigs and branches when they are alive, whereas they become dry and withered when they are dead." (ch. 76) It seems to him that the same case holds true for life: "Things must grow old after reaching their prime, which is contrary to Tao. Whatever is contrary to Tao will soon perish." (ch. 30) That is to say, things will become old and fragile once they grow strong, and therefore, it will be contrary to the principle of Tao if someone renders things strong and powerful, since it will lead to their earlier death. Lao Zi said, "The violent and strong does not die his natural death" (ch. 42); for him the best way of escaping from death as a final fate is to keep standing in the weak and tender state, and not to be strong and powerful. "Thus the armed forces will be shattered when they become strong," he declared, "and trees will be broken when they grow strong." (ch. 76) "The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong." (ch. 36) Hence he insisted that "To yield is yet to be preserved wholly, to be bent is yet to become straight, to be hollow is yet to be filled up, to be worn out is yet to be renewed, to have little (knowledge) is yet to gain, to have much (knowledge) is yet to be perplexed." (ch. 22) He said, "Nothing under Heaven is softer and weaker than water, but in attacking the hard and strong, no force can compare with it." (ch. 78) He taught people to learn from the soft and weak quality of water, for though water looks soft and weak, it can burst whatever is harder

and stronger than itself. Therefore Lao Zi said, "The highest good is like water. Water is apt to benefit all things and does not compete with them." (ch. 8) Because water is not competitive, nothing under Heaven can compete with it. (cf. ch. 66) Here Lao Zi applied the principle of overcoming the hard with the weak to daily life. He said: "He who knows the masculine but keeps to the feminine.... He who knows the white but keeps to the black.... He who knows glory but keeps to disgrace."

Lao Zi's attitude towards weakness and tenderness is closely related to the social and economic situation of small proprietors during the late Spring and Autumn Period. In both economic and political spheres, small proprietors were weak and feeble, without authority and influence, enjoying no privilege and suffering from exploitation and oppression under the feudal system; therefore, Lao Zi's dialectics represent the small proprietors' will to maintain their own interest, overcome the hard with the soft, and use retreat as an advance. In dealing with the enemy, Lao Zi advocated that certain conditions disadvantageous to the enemy should be created: "In order to weaken it, it is necessary to strengthen it for the time being. In order to destroy it, it is necessary to promote it for the time being. In order to grasp it, it is necessary to give to it for the time being." (ch. 36) This set of tactics has been adopted by the rulers of all periods in China in schemes and intrigues against the people. On the other hand, the leaders of revolutionary wars and national liberation movements in Chinese history always adopted these concepts to use against their enemy.

Lao Zi discovered the law of transformation and used it to challenge God or Heaven having a purpose and will.

He merely noted the fact that things transform themselves into their opposites, but neglected the important role of the given conditions in the transformation; therefore he was overcautious in the face of misery and happiness, of loss and gain, and felt helpless about change and transformation. For him taking action will necessarily result in failures; whatever is gained must be lost; for this reason he hoped to use the negative means of "nonaction" to abstain from dangers created by transformation. He said, "The sage does not fail in anything since he does nothing; does not lose

anything since he holds nothing." (ch. 64) Because "rich hoarding" must induce "serious loss," the best way of avoiding "serious loss" is not to hoard up too much; because strength and power must induce death, the best way of avoiding death is not to be too strong and powerful. Finding that the hard and strong must lead to setbacks, Lao Zi preferred to be content with being weak and tender; that precursors must fall behind, he preferred to be a follower; that the pursuer of honour must incur humiliation on himself, he preferred to give up any honour. He found it necessary to "discard the extremes, the extravagant and the excessive." (ch. 29) Lao Zi had political experience and was directly influenced by the fact that the elite in power suffered serious losses due to their excessive desires and insatiable greed. However, he conceived the strength of transformation, but felt alarmed about its coming, and consequently, his dialectic lacks the ambitious spirit of struggle.

With respect to the principle of overcoming the hard and strong with the soft and weak, Lao Zi neglected the given conditions, thus abstracting and absolutizing this principle. Noting that some things that were soft and weak at the start finally overcame their enemy, he said, "The hard and strong belong to death, whereas the soft and weak belong to life." (ch. 76) Nevertheless, he did not in essence distinguish the weakness of dying and decaying things from that of newly emerging things. Only newly emerging things can transform themselves from softness and weakness. Dying things can never be turned into strength and power; their final fate must be death. However Lao Zi failed to understand the difference between them, regarding mutual transformation between strength and weakness, success and failure, as a cyclical and endless process, showing indifference towards newly emerging things, assuming a conservative attitude of "not daring to go ahead of all the people under Heaven." (cf. ch. 67) Lao Zi thought that success must be followed by failure. Limited by the level of scientific development at that time, Lao Zi's dialectics was incapable of going beyond the limitation of the scientific level of his time. Small owner-peasants, who owned their plots of land and enjoyed a self-sufficient life, were apt to be satisfied with the existing state and wanted to keep their own



small plots. Accordingly, Lao Zi said, "There is no calamity greater than discontentment.... Therefore the contentment with knowing contentment is always contented." (ch. 46)

Though not able to correctly understand the dialectical relation between quality and quantity, Lao Zi's dialectics hinted that quantitative accumulation of things would cause a qualitative change. "A huge tree which fills one's arms grows from a tiny seedling," Lao Zi said, "A high terrace which has nine storeys rises from a small heap of earth." (ch. 64) He also said, "Prepare for a difficult problem while it is easy, enter on a great task while it is small." (ch. 63) There is a qualitative difference between "difficult" and "easy," "great" and "small," but a difficult problem can be resolved and a great task can be finished if one makes consistent efforts bit by bit. This is Lao Zi's preliminary understanding of the fact that the given quantitative accumulation can cause a qualitative change. He applied this principle to daily life, and said, "The stability of things is easy to hold while they are stable; things are easy to deal with while they show no sign of change; things are easily broken while they are fragile; things are easily dispersed while they are minute." (ch. 64) He said again, "Thinking things easy leads to difficulties." (ch. 63) Lao Zi's writing was profound for his time and some of his ideas are still applicable today.

There is no notion of development from lower stages to higher stages in Lao Zi's dialectics, but he did touch on the issue. He pointed out that the thing which had passed through previous stages of development was apparently like what it was before, but it was essentially improved in comparison with before. He said, "What is most perfect seems to be incomplete, but its utility cannot be impaired. What is most full seems to be empty, but its utility cannot be exhausted. The most straight seems to be crooked, the greatest skill seems to be clumsy, the greatest eloquence seems to stammer." (ch. 45) For him the greatest skill which seems to be clumsy is not really clumsy, and the fullness which seems to be empty is not really empty; both of them are a new quality created by improving the original quality. He said again, "The Tao that is bright seems to be dark; the Tao that goes forward seems to retreat; the Tao that is level seems to be uneven;