

Introduction

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THE POEMS AND SAYINGS of the mysterious book of wisdom called *Dao De Jing* have powerfully affected many aspects of Chinese philosophy, culture, and society. In the realm of aesthetics the idea of *Dao*, or the Way, a transcendent natural principle working through all things, has inspired artists and poets who have sought to represent nature in its raw wholeness or have depicted vast landscapes within which human structures and pathways, overwhelmed by mists, mountain faces, and water vistas, hold a tiny and precarious place. With regard to personal spiritual cultivation Daoism offers techniques of concentration and self-control, while in the realm of physiology the Daoist theory of natural cycles points toward systems of internal circulation and techniques of rejuvenation.¹ In its ethical application Daoism teaches self-subordination and frugality and warns of the self-defeating consequences of assertiveness and aggrandizement, whether political, military, or personal.

In the realm of governance political theorists influenced by Laozi have advocated humility in leadership and a restrained and concessive approach to statecraft, either for ethical and pacifist reasons or for tactical ends. The well-known line that opens stanza 60, “Rule a great state as you cook a small fish,” has been used in China and in the West as an argument for a “light touch” in governing: the Way creates sufficient order. In a different political context, one mediated by legalist theories of government, a transcendent Way has served to legitimate state builders in constructing impersonal institutions and formulating

all-powerful laws. Indeed the marriage of the Way with law (*fa*) is one of the earliest transformations and adaptations of Laozi's thought.² On the popular level, by contrast, various anti-authoritarian movements have embraced the *Dao De Jing's* teachings on the power of the weak.

Thus the *Dao De Jing*, in the world of philosophy a small kingdom in its own right, has spawned diverse schools of thought, and these have elaborated upon and spread widely the original teachings—often in ways that might have surprised or distressed their creator.

The *Dao De Jing* has so wide a compass that it is difficult to think of a comparable work in the Western canon. Passages on nature's patterns of motion and their indifference to man's purposes may evoke for a Western reader themes and language found in Lucretius and his model, Epicurus. If some stanzas concerning statecraft and tactical maneuver suggest Machiavelli, others suggest Gandhi, who personified in his leadership principled humility, minimal struggle, and simplicity of lifestyle. For some readers Laozi's aphorisms and resigned reflections on human life may evoke lines in Ecclesiastes or Proverbs. Comparisons have also been made with Thoreau's warnings about economic overdevelopment and government.

With so many English versions of the *Dao De Jing*, why another? There is much of value in most of the English translations, but each is only partially successful. The synergy of the work's themes as well as the concision of its phrasing make many of its stanzas so ambiguous and suggestive that definitive interpretation, much less translation, has often proved unattainable. Rendering in another language a work that says so much in so few words, and about whose meanings scholars differ greatly, can only be problematic. Even in Chinese, many *Dao De Jing* passages seem like paintings of striking detail that compel the gaze but always remain partly out of focus. Each translator tries to refine the images or to find fresh language to capture the power of Laozi's gnomic lines. In the end, however, the only justification I can offer for a new attempt is that it is meant not only to improve but also to be improved upon. The cumulative effect of multiple translations contributes to the understanding of the *Laozi*, just as the ongoing performance tradition of musical works yields new possibilities of expression and appreciation.

What this version seeks is, first, to bring out the *Dao De Jing's* political and polemical purposes by situating it in the context of the philo-

sophical debates that raged from the time of Confucius down to the unification of the empire in 221 B.C. Second, it attempts to reproduce the condensed aphoristic force of Laozi's style, the appeal of his intriguing and often indeterminate syntax, and the prevalence of rhymed verse in his original. Unlike most translators, I have avoided relying on prose. Third, in the comments and notes to the stanzas I have included material from recently discovered texts—the two Mawangdui versions, which were published in 1973, and the Guodian version, published in 1998. In this way the reader can learn something about the differences between versions of the text and weigh for himself or herself the significance of the variations in wording and, perhaps more importantly, the differences in the actual number and sequence of the stanzas.³

For example, according to the research of one of the leading contemporary Laozi scholars, Yin Zhenhuan, it is likely that the true number of individual stanzas is not eighty-one but as many as 112, some of which, like passages in the *Analects*, are only four or eight words long.⁴ For convenience of reference and for the sake of continuity, however, the traditional order of eighty-one is followed in this translation. Ornaments indicate probable stanza divisions within a conventional stanza.

TITLES AND TEXTS

The title *Dao De Jing* may be translated “Canonical text (*jing*) on the Way (*Dao*) and virtue (*de*).” But this now-universal title did not become widely used until the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–905), when Laozi was officially regarded as a divine guardian of the dynasty. *Laozi* is the older title, going back almost to the creation of the text. Although scholars now generally use the two titles interchangeably, *Dao De Jing* suggests an established classic in the Chinese philosophical tradition, while *Laozi* is more modest—“the words of Master Lao,” perhaps. Like the *Mozi*, the *Guanzi*, the *Mencius*, and other titles for writings and records collected under the name of a central figure, *Laozi* suggests a historical document and its original context rather than a canonical work. To reflect the difference between the two titles, in the present work *Dao De Jing* is more frequently, albeit not exclusively, used in the introduction, and *Laozi* in the comments. It is an open question how

pleased the self-effacing Laozi would have been to see his little book classified as a *jing*—or for that matter himself as a divinity.

The *Dao De Jing* has come down to us in eighty-one stanzas, a form set slightly before the Christian era began; stanzas 1–37 constitute the first half, stanzas 38–81 the second. Although there are several versions, they are not dramatically different from one another. Two of the versions are named after their scholarly annotators, the Heshang gong *Laozi* and the Wang Bi *Laozi*. A third, the Fu Yi *Laozi*, is named for the Tang-dynasty Daoist scholar who published a text unearthed in A.D. 574 from a Han tomb dating from about 200 B.C.⁵ Present-day scholars usually call the current common text the “received text” to distinguish it from recently discovered manuscripts.

The first of these new discoveries was made in 1973 at Mawangdui in the tomb of an official’s son; that tomb has been dated to 168 B.C. The Mawangdui *Laozi* was published in 1976. Inscribed on silk, it consists of two texts, A and B, the former dating from about 205–190 B.C., the latter slightly later. These two texts differ from the received version in significant details, but the only major structural difference is that they begin with chapter 38 and end with chapter 37. In other words, the second half of the text comes before the first. Found together with *Laozi* A and B was a rich trove of political and cosmological documents that have been called the *Huangdi sijing*, or the *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*.⁶

The Guodian *Laozi*, inscribed on bamboo slips, was found in 1993 and published in 1998.⁷ The text was unearthed from a royal tutor’s tomb at Guodian, near the city of Ying, the capital of the southern kingdom of Chu. This area contains many graves, and fresh discoveries can be expected. Like the Mawangdui *Laozi*, the Guodian *Laozi* was found as part of a trove of related works of politics and cosmology. All of them are works of established importance and so were probably written well before the time of their burial, approximately 300 B.C. (No complete translation of the accompanying documents has appeared so far.)

The Guodian *Laozi* consists of only about two thousand characters, or 40 percent of the received version, covering in their entirety or in part only thirty-one of the received text’s stanzas. The order of the stanzas is utterly different from any later versions. Moreover, it is yet to be determined whether the Guodian *Laozi* represents a sample taken from a larger *Laozi* or is the nucleus of a later five-thousand-

character *Laozi*. A current working hypothesis is that the Guodian *Laozi* should be attributed to Laozi, also called Lao Dan, a contemporary of Confucius who may have outlived him, and that the remainder, the non-Guodian text, was the work of an archivist and dates from around 375 B.C.⁸

Let us leave the recent manuscript discoveries and turn to information on the *Dao De Jing* in texts long available. Most traditional Chinese scholars (and a number of modern ones as well) have held that the *Laozi* reflects substantially the time of Confucius, that is, the late sixth or early fifth century B.C., acknowledging occasional interpolations to account for anachronistic language suggesting a somewhat later period. Before the Guodian finds, many modern Chinese and Western scholars argued for a date ranging from the early fourth to the late third century B.C. because sightings of a *Laozi* in Chinese works of the third century B.C. are so fragmentary. One finds lines or partial stanzas, the authorship of which either is not indicated or is attributed to someone named Lao or Lao Dan; but this attribution is not systematic. The *Zhuangzi*, for example, is a Daoist text of the late fourth to early third century B.C. collected under the name of the philosophical recluse Zhuangzi. This work contains several *Dao De Jing* lines or partial stanzas. Sometimes these are attributed to Lao Dan, yet sometimes these quotations from Lao Dan say things that are not in the *Laozi*, though they are compatible with its ideas.

In the *Zhuangzi* and other contemporary texts we find references to the *Shi*, the Odes (later the *Shijing*), and the *Shu*, the Documents (later the *Shujing*), suggesting that these are titles for bodies of shorter works. But it is only in the *Han Feizi*, a compilation of writings on law and statecraft attributed to diplomat and strategist Han Feizi of the late third century B.C., that references to Laozi's work suggest a substantial text; that is, the *Han Feizi* includes some *Dao De Jing* stanzas that are more or less complete. Han Feizi was influenced by Laozi, and he analyzes a number of stanzas in two of his chapters, "Jie Lao" and "Yu Lao." Han Feizi's discussion of stanza 38, for example, opens the "Jie Lao." It was the absence of references to a recognizable oeuvre, *Dao De Jing*, prior to the *Han Feizi* that led many modern scholars, Chinese and Western, to conclude that the work took shape closer to the time of Han Feizi than to the time of Confucius. The Guodian finds of course suggest the opposite.

In the Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) the writings attributed to Laozi were referred to as the *Daode*, the *Laozi*, or the *Laozi jing*. *Dao* and *de* refer of course to two of the work's primary philosophical terms, the former belonging to the cosmic realm, the latter to the human. But *Dao* and *de* also refer to the two roughly equal sections of the text as it has come down to us: the *Dao* stanzas and the *de* stanzas. The first part of this text (stanzas 1–37) begins with a stanza devoted to *Dao*; the second part (stanzas 38–81) begins with a stanza devoted to *de*. According to one recent study, “the present eighty-one chapters were determined around 50 B.C.” in order to make a “perfect number” of nine times nine.⁹ The oldest complete *Laozi*, the two Mawangdui texts, dating from about 200 B.C., closely resemble the received version, though neither one has numbered stanzas and both start with the *de*, or second, half (stanzas 38–81).¹⁰ Either this was the original order, or the *de* part became a text before the *Dao* part. The priority of the *de* stanzas had been suspected because the “Jie Lao” begins with stanza 38, and also because Wang Bi's (A.D. 226–249) edition appends to stanza 38 a lengthy annotation that is virtually an introduction. Against this hypothesis stands the fact that about half of the Guodian *Laozi* consists of *Dao* stanzas, half of *de* stanzas.

It is not possible to say when the *Dao* section was placed before the *de* section. In his joint biography of Laozi and Han Feizi in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*, a general history completed about 90 B.C.), renowned Han historian Sima Qian (145–86? B.C.) refers to a five-thousand-word text devoted to the theme of *Daode*. But did Sima Qian see a text with the *Dao* stanzas coming first, or is he using the terms *Dao* and *de* in the order of their importance? *Dao* is of course the leading term and *de* must follow in its path; the words are not found transposed. The political philosopher Yan Zun (fl. 53–24 B.C.) used *Daode* in the title of his commentary *Daode zhigui*, of which only the *de* section survives. The philosopher Ho Yan (d. 249 A.D.) wrote a *Daode lun*. So the phrase *Daode* (still today a common term for “morality”) had title status for the text.

The present form of the Heshang gong commentary has the *Dao* stanzas first and seems to have been divided into a *Daojing* and a *Dejing*, but conjectures on the date of this important early commentary range from the reign of Emperor Wen of the Han (179–156 B.C.) to the fifth century A.D.¹¹ The equally important Wang Bi (A.D. 226–249)

version, *Laozi zhu* (*zhu* means annotations), dominant since the Song dynasty, also begins with the *Dao* stanzas. These two major commentaries, by Heshang gong and by Wang Bi, were attached to *Dao De Jing* texts and were the principal vehicles for the *Dao De Jing*'s dissemination in China. There are, however, no editions of either commentary early enough to establish the original order of the two parts.

It is almost as difficult to say when *jing* became part of the title. According to a citation in the *Fayuan zhulin*, an early Tang dynasty work, *jing* (canon, or classic) was probably not added to the title of the *Laozi* until the reign of the fourth Han emperor, Jing (r. 156–140 B.C.).¹² This source says, with reference to the *Laozi*, simply that a *zi* (philosophical) text was elevated to *jing* (canonical) status. It does not mention the title *Dao De Jing*. In Han bibliographies the work is referred to as the *Laozi*; variants on the title *Laozi jing* also occur. The title *Dao De Jing* is said to have been spoken by the third Han emperor, Wen (r. 179–156 B.C.). The source is Ge Hong's (d. A.D. 341) biography of Heshang gong in the *Shenxian zhuan*. Although probably anachronistic with respect to Emperor Wen, this quote may be the first instance of this form of the title.

Mention should be made of two important compendia of Daoist thought that contain many *Dao De Jing* passages. First is the *Wenzi*, a late Warring States (or possible early Han) text that contains lengthy essays built around formulas of the *Dao De Jing*; the essays often synthesize Confucian and Daoist terms and concepts. Second is the *Huainanzi*, a collection of essays called *xun* (teachings) that were profoundly informed by the *Dao De Jing*. These essays cover a wide variety of subjects. This work was sponsored and guided by the prince of Huainan, Liu An (179–122 B.C.).

CONFUCIUS AND LAOZI

The *Dao De Jing* is the philosophical counterpart—the rival and the complement—to the *Analects* of Confucius. These two classics are the foundational works of their respective traditions, Daoism and Confucianism, which may be said to constitute the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese culture. The *Dao De Jing* is primarily reflective in nature, while the *Analects* is more activist. Both works consist of pithy lines mixed in with longer passages, but the *Analects* is rooted in concrete historical

settings and deals with specific persons and problems. In contrast, the *Dao De Jing* is without obvious historical markers and gives the impression of timeless universality. Beyond saying that these works have been traditionally associated with Confucius and Laozi, and that both works address central themes of a dramatic period of Chinese history (ca. 500–350 B.C.), there has been no scholarly consensus on how to date or even define either one.¹³

The *Dao De Jing* emphasizes the forces of nature and human interaction with them; the *Analects* emphasizes the social realm alone—human relationships, ethics, and political organization. The former stresses the relation of a transcendent *Dao* with the totality of its creation; the latter stresses hierarchical relations centering on the parent-child model and the particular obligations within clan and kingdom that are required of each person. For the former the highest authority is a maternal force that creates a gamut of ten thousand phenomena, humans but one among them; the latter honors an ancestral heaven that sanctions patriarchal dominion and elite lineage. The former idealizes the self-effacing leadership of the wise man or sage (*shengren*), who governs himself and others by keeping to the Way; the latter idealizes the superior man (*junzi*), a public role model who may advise the patriarch or even serve as a potential ruler in place of an unfit heir. As for religion in the sense of a deity interactive with humans, Laozi ascribes no consciousness to the Way, while Confucius, committed to an exclusive focus on human relations, cautiously advises a follower to respect the gods but keep them at a distance (*Analects* 6.20), a judicious compromise that the Chinese have by and large adhered to over the millennia.

In the West the influence of the *Analects* has been comparatively weak outside of academic circles, while the *Dao De Jing* enjoys a considerable public. It is the most popular and most frequently translated work of Chinese thought, with more than forty versions in English alone. This level of foreign interest reflects more than the text's importance in China. Its themes seem to speak aptly to the modern era, to problems that have festered for generations: economic overdevelopment and war led by those who crave power. But the work also speaks to those searching for a code of life conduct in a society where fundamental values have been degraded. For some, the *Dao De Jing* has become a cry of reason for our own war-divided world of master build-

ers, militarists, and modernizers. For others, it is a manual for mastering one's own life by accommodating oneself not to wielded power but to nature or to force of circumstance in the broadest sense. Laozi's modern appeal may in part explain why the *Dao De Jing* has become separated from its native contexts and has perhaps been overappropriated by Western readers. And yet, as we proceed to consider its themes and historical setting, we shall see how Western apprehensions of the *Dao De Jing* have captured elements of its original significance.¹⁴

The Western reading public's resistance to the *Analects* may be explained by that text's emphasis on authority and discipline in its exhortations both regarding the observance of the formalities of speech, dress, and conduct, and regarding the pursuit of learning and self-cultivation for the purpose of public service. The undeniable virtues of Confucian correctness notwithstanding, there is hardly a student of Chinese culture who has not found relief in turning from the *Analects*' stern tone to the unpredictable stanzas of the *Dao De Jing* and exploring their varied themes, their ironic, almost modern, inversions, and their imaginative turns of phrase. The *Dao De Jing* presents a universal cosmic mother to replace the dead hand of paternal ancestral direction. For Laozi the social sphere is a small part of reality. Human authority accordingly is limited and must find its proper—that is, diminished—place in a far vaster context: one he calls the ten thousand things (*wanwu*), which are subject to the authority of the Way, an authority that subsumes heaven and ancestors.

CHINA IN LAOZI'S TIME

The China of the *Dao De Jing* was not the single nation we know today. There was no unified territory called China until the last twenty years of the third century B.C. Before Confucius's time, scores of small and medium-sized kingdoms were spread along the middle and eastern stretches of the Yellow and Huai river valleys. The two greatest of these kingdoms, Chu under the hegemony of Duke Zhuang and Qi under the hegemony of Duke Huan, annexed smaller kingdoms by the score and opened new land to cultivation, a process of expansion and amalgamation that continued down to the unification in 221 B.C.¹⁵ These kingdoms of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. recognized diplomatic and ritual obligations to a small kingdom called Zhou, situated near

present-day Luoyang, which purported to be the heir of the great Zhou dynasty, founded in the mid-eleventh century B.C. The socket of the wheel, so to speak—the empty center—was the royal Zhou ruler, the son of heaven (*tianzi*; *tian* meaning heaven), who conferred legitimacy on regional princes, kings, and lords and their acts, including their choice of heir, but who was rarely able to impose his will on their kingdoms unless a stronger kingdom was backing him. He stood for a symbolic rather than an actual unity of the *tianxia*, the realm under heaven.

Above the son of heaven stood (or rather, walked) heaven itself, a kind of paternal oversoul whose mandate (*ming*) legitimated the rule of its “son” over the realm. Heaven comprised ancestral authority of three kinds: the immediate ancestors of the son of heaven, the founders of earlier ruling lineages, and the even more remote culture heroes (or founding fathers) of the entire civilization, such as Shen Nong, Yao, Shun, and the Yellow Emperor.

By the time of Confucius the various kingdoms had been waging many-sided wars for generations, one kingdom devouring and then absorbing another only to be itself devoured by a third power. In the period after Confucius’s death in 479 B.C. new concepts and patterns of organization slowly formed and the Zhou order continued to weaken. During the decades preceding the era of Mencius (372?–289? B.C.), the philosopher who sought Confucius’s mantle, the ongoing process of conquest and absorption had reduced the overall number of kingdoms, while the size and economic power of the surviving kingdoms increased. Traditionally, the era of Confucius has been called the last phase of the Spring and Autumn period, referring to the ceremonial (calendrical) authority of the royal Zhou house, while the subsequent era, the period after Confucius, has been called the Warring States period, indicating that the remaining kingdoms were increasingly independent of the Zhou son of heaven. Yet the aspiration for some unifying principle higher than the individual kingdoms remained. None of the powerful kingdoms lost sight of the goal of bringing the entire *tianxia*, the realm under heaven, under its rule. The *Dao De Jing*, some of whose stanzas speak of “capturing” the realm under heaven, has traditionally been dated to the transition from the Spring and Autumn period to the Warring States period.¹⁶

The period between Confucius and Mencius was a time marked by round-robin crises driven by three salient factors: serial inter-kingdom

wars; accelerating economic, commercial, and technological development based on improved farming and the expansion of arable land; and political instability inside the kingdoms due to succession struggles and rising non-noble factions. These developments produced new theories of governing and state organization. Confucians, Daoists, Mohists, and Legalists—to name the principal schools—struggled to answer the problems forced into the open as the rule of Zhou weakened and the warring kingdoms grew to maturity. Initially in competition with each other, these schools increasingly tended to borrow from and even combine with one another as the process of territorial amalgamation went on and the prospect of unification loomed on the horizon.

In the philosophical competition among rival schools the *Dao De Jing* was a pivotal work of criticism and creativity. It rejected key Confucian and Mohist doctrines and at the same time opened the way for new philosophical syntheses. Penetrating and unsparing, the *Dao De Jing* transformed the terms of debate and inspired a spectrum of new ethical, political, and cosmological formulations. Its ideas could be opposed or co-opted, but they could not be ignored. To give a single example, when Laozi developed the concept of the ten thousand things, he endowed each of them with an independent identity and life momentum and freed them from any identity other than their common parentage in the Way. Guided only by their own inner momentum, the ten thousand things exist outside of the conventional network of social relationships and responsibilities, the sphere that the key Confucian terms *li*, ritual, and *yi*, obligation, roughly cover.¹⁷ The ten thousand are not even beholden to the Way, the mother that gave them life (stanza 2), for what mother could properly attend to so vast a brood? Cast into life, any one of the ten thousand is as good as any other. There is no elite component. The indifferent Way has no career ambition for any of them. Human beings are among them, but are not preeminent. Having pursued their own natures (*ziran*, self-becoming, or what is so of itself), their seasonal cycle of life complete, they return to the Way. They do not exist to serve human ends or the developing economies of the expanding states.

The independence of the phenomena is expressed through the word *zi*, self, a term that figures in the *Analects* in only a minor way. *Zi* may be thought of as the “self” of an objective entity (see the motif word “themselves” in stanza 57). It is quite different from the Confucian term

for self, *shen*, which in addition to the physical self existing in space and time also means character and social identity, thus a purely subjective kind of force to be exerted on others or on things. For Laozi, *zi* is the self as an individuated, objective other: to be viewed but not altered (stanzas 1 and 14). For the Confucians, *shen* is the self as a social instrument for molding the other in order to suit itself. In the fourth century B.C. the Confucians added the word *xing* (human nature common to all) to their lexicon to counter the concept of *wanwu* because they needed to make their concept of the self universal and objective while keeping it distinct from the more biological ten thousand things.

By making the self of all things objective and independent Laozi broke through the confining categories of Confucian thought: paternal authority, ancestor worship, and inherited privilege—categories that created a nexus of social roles and rules on which depended each person's being and consciousness. Subordinating these categories to the Way, Laozi dramatically widened the view and prepared the way for other transcendent concepts. One such concept was law (*fa*), to which was subordinated the clan as well as the subjective judgment of its patriarch; another was receptivity or emptiness (*xu*), which suggests open-mindedness, receptivity to differing or conflicting views. Receptivity is how the Daoists view (*guan*) the ten thousand without discrimination, with an emphasis on their collective welfare, not their usefulness to human beings. The oft-quoted summary of Laozi's thought found in the second Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*, says, "Gentle and yielding, modest and deferential—this was what he stood for; and with his openness and receptivity he never injured the ten thousand things—this was his actual practice."¹⁸

In the view of the *Dao De Jing* the wise have *ming* (insight or clarity of vision), which makes possible their appreciation of *Dao* and how it moves the ten thousand things (stanza 16). Laozi values *ming* but rejects *zhi*, a word covering intellect, knowledge, expertise, and sophistry. To Daoists *ming* is the power of the natural mind, while *zhi* refers to educated and hence artificial judgment (stanza 33). Confucians, however, value *zhi* over *ming*. In the *Analects*, *zhi* is an all-important term, *ming* an unimportant one. In the Guodian Confucian text *Wuxing* (Five categories of conduct) clarity of vision (*ming*) is a lesser faculty that leads to educated judgment (*zhi*) concerning men and affairs.

Opposed to favoritism in political practice and subjectivism in human thought, Laozi's liberating, all-inclusive vision also facilitated the development of philosophical tolerance and syncretism. In the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we find the concept of *qiwu*, treating all things equally by acknowledging the relativity of their qualities. Using *qi* to develop the idea of receptivity, Zhuangists advocated impartiality among diverse schools of thought, stressing the limitations of each and looking toward the accommodation of antithetical doctrines in a comprehensive argument. This same *Zhuangzi* chapter uses *ming* to denote a perspective from which opposites are reconciled and transcended. This tendency to embrace all sides became common in the philosophy of the late Warring States period (late fourth to late third centuries B.C.), as more complex governing systems promoted inclusive philosophical syntheses. Thus Laozi's critique of state development ideology paradoxically led to a higher stage of state development ideology. Put another way, the *Dao De Jing* exposed the limitations of Confucian and Mohist formulations but at the same time served as a bridge to various recombinations of the elements of Confucian, Daoist, and Legalist thought.¹⁹ The creative application of Daoist thought to questions of law, institutional governance, and statecraft is a prominent feature of the writings collected under the names Guanzi (late fourth to early third centuries B.C.), Xunzi (mid third century B.C.), and Han Feizi (mid to late third century B.C.).

Laozi might have despaired over history's cunning, but he would have understood it. Legalism and unification were not the future he envisioned for the kingdoms of the Chinese cultural area. Perhaps the most telling revision of Laozi's thought may be the phrase "All ten thousand things take the number one as their ancestor." This formulation from the *Guanzi* chapter "Zheng" (Correct rule) reestablishes patriarchal (and masculine) authority over the ten thousand but on an abstract level and with a clear reference to law: Legalists used the number one (*yi*) to underline the idea of law's uniform application to all social strata.

CONFUCIANS, DAOISTS, AND HEREDITY

Conflict over succession was the driving force of the many-sided trans-generational civil wars of the late Spring and Autumn and the Warring

States eras. Unstable inheritance patterns—who rules after the king dies?—was the critical problem that no Warring States thinker was able to master. Nearly every death of a ruler ignited a power struggle among the sons of his principal and secondary wives, and often among his brothers or even his nephews. A contender in one kingdom might seek support in a neighboring kingdom, whose intervention usually only widened the crisis. In other cases the pattern was reversed: the ruler of one kingdom, in expectation of future favors, might support a contender in a neighboring kingdom, thus instigating or intensifying the internal conflict there. The spiraling conflicts spread destruction down to the time of unification. The people of China have accepted unification (and often its counterpart, conformism) and have cherished unity ever since, in large part because of their anxiety over a divided territory and the concomitant experience of civil war. Stable central authority, when local officers answered to the center and not to the local clans, meant stable regions. But that was a China yet to come.

The Confucians recognized the seriousness of the succession problem, but they tolerated it. Hostile to law as the source of governmental authority lest it challenge the hereditary structure of noble rule itself, they strove only to convince the hereditary rulers to recruit fresh talent without consideration of birth, that is, to open family-based government to outsiders whom Confucius and his disciples were educating (precisely) for state service. They believed that an elite thus reformed and invigorated would enable the nobles to rule rightly as well as rightfully and would enable them to ensure the continuity of their rule and the attendant values of filial piety and generational continuity.

The Confucians called the new elites they were cultivating *junzi*, royal sons or true princes—men fit to succeed a king because their learning (*xue*) and virtue (*de*), if not their birth, qualified them to serve as role models for other officials and members of society. This artificial creation of ideal noblemen to fill the many new functions in the developing kingdoms was the goal of Confucius's education program. However, Confucius was conservative, in that for him the technological and bureaucratic issues were always subordinate to the social and ethical ones.²⁰ He meant for his students to serve the ruler filially and to urge the ruler to treat the people as if they were his own children, avoiding war and economic disruption and educating them

morally and technically. He also placed the burden of ensuring social order on the rulers, as if they were the fathers of their kingdoms.

Confucius intended to use the family as the vital core of a meta-family of *junzi* serving the new expanding state. This is why he sought to preserve filial piety and hereditary succession within the kingdoms as the keys to political order.²¹ The choice of the term *junzi* for the new elite shows that Confucius was intent on remedying the problem of the defective heir and protecting the throne from the contest among the heirs to succeed the king.

The Mohists boldly veered away from the Confucians. Making an argument Socrates might have approved of, they held that ruling family interests hampered the development of the objective independent state, and so they cut the Gordian knot to separate *guo* from *jia*—state from family, kingdom from clan. One of their main slogans, “promote the worthy,” was in effect a call for a ban on family preference in appointments to office. Mohists demanded that only the worthy and able should assume official position. Laozi probably knew of the Mohist critique, since he quotes the slogan in stanza 3.²²

Both the Confucians and the Mohists were progressive state builders. Through practical and moral education they sought to develop a cadre of administrative and technical experts qualified to serve in an increasingly complex state. Laozi opposed both the Confucians and the Mohists. He looked upon economic development, new inventions, increased commerce, state building, and the recruitment of experts as destructive progress. He saw the close connection between modernization and war. He sought to return to an ancient era of content and to guide people toward a life of extreme simplicity: “Plain appearance, humble habits, / Owing little, craving less” (stanza 19). This autarkic utopia is described in some detail in stanza 80: let the kingdom be small and its people few.

Perhaps the “small kingdom stanza” affords a glimpse of the imperiled world to which Laozi belonged and in which he played an important part. According to Laozi’s biography in the *Shiji*, he served in the royal court of the Zhou son of heaven as an archivist and historian. And the Zhou, itself a small kingdom—a sort of Vatican perhaps—may have been looked to by other threatened kingdoms as the last hope for protection from the aggressions of the greater kingdoms. “The greater kingdoms loathe having a son of heaven” the Han king