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Chapter One

Laozi before Kongzi

Laozi as Kongzi's Teacher

Laozi 老子, a respectful title for the historical figure Lao Dan 老聃, emerged as China's first philosopher, with Kongzi following as second. The questions Kongzi deliberates focus mainly on culture and cultural history, leaving his philosophical development quite weak. Lao Dan, on the other hand, authored the *Laozi* (i.e., *Daode jing* 道德经)—the first text in China to demonstrate a complete philosophical theory. This text, accordingly, predates Kongzi's *Lunyu*. Unfortunately, the dating of these two great thinkers and their works has been plagued by inaccuracy and subversion.

In the words of Luo Genze, “Unless all pre-Qin texts are to be ignored, the problem of when Laozi lived needs to be solved. If this issue is not resolved, it creates huge obstacles for reading all pre-Qin books” (1982, vol. 6). This view is absolutely correct. The academic world in China has been tackling this issue since the 1920s, and the specter of misdating survives to this day.

In the *Shiji* 史记 (Records of the Grand Historian), Sima Qian 司马迁 refers to Laozi's life numerous times. He records Laozi's birth in Ku County in the state of Chu, part of present day Henan province, as well as his engagement as royal historian to the state of Zhou. The *Shiji* also attests that Lao Dan authored the *Laozi*, a book that addresses the issues of Dao 道 (way) and *de* 德 (virtuosity) in just over five thousand words. Finally, Sima Qian and others wrote accounts of Kongzi asking Laozi about rites (*li* 礼). 20th-century philosophers such as Liang Qichao 梁启超 and Feng Youlan (aka Fung Yu-lan), however, suggest that both Laozi and his text postdate Kongzi. Today, scholars believe that multiple distinct voices and ideas exist in the *Laozi*, and argue that it was compiled after Kongzi died. These various accounts are clearly mistaken, but their

profusion and pervasiveness allow this fallacious view to dominate current intellectual discourse. The result is that all publications in China on the history of Chinese philosophy assume that Kongzi predates Lao Dan and the *Laozi*.¹ A thorough examination of the dating of Kongzi, Lao Dan, and the *Laozi* is clearly necessary.

Laozi's Life

Kongzi is said to have been born in the state of Lu 魯 about 551 BCE and died there around 479 BCE—dates that are probably quite accurate. The years of Laozi's birth and death have unfortunately proven harder to pin down definitively. The best research shows that Laozi was probably born around 570 BCE, about twenty years before Kongzi. As for his death, the *Shiji* records that Laozi lived a very long life—an idea accepted by many scholars and schools of thought, although the exact number of years is widely disputed.

Laozi's name, literally “old master,” also encourages speculation as to whether or not he actually existed. In the *Shiji*, Sima Qian records, “Laozi, a native of Ku county in the state of Chu, had the surname Li 李, first name Er 耳, and style name Dan 聃” (ch. 63). Since the pre-Qin classics left no documentation on Laozi, this biographical sketch draws solely on Han dynasty sources. Closer analysis of Spring and Autumn period texts, however, shows that the surname Li did not exist when Laozi was alive, whereas the family name Lao 老 did. This complication arose from the changing pronunciation of the characters. The pronunciation of the surname Lao at the time was very close to or the same as that of the character *li*, which led to their later confusion (Gao 2011: 135). Laozi's style name, Dan, fell subject to a comparable issue in which the characters *er* 耳 and *dan* 聃 were mistaken or substituted for one another due to their similar or equivalent meanings (Li 1958: 3). Clearly, any pre-Qin mention of Lao Dan or Laozi refers to a single person.

In *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1997), Feng supposes that Lao Dan and Li Er are two separate people. He envisions Lao Dan as a

¹ Despite the majority of recent Chinese scholarship having shifted the dating of Laozi to follow Kongzi and sometimes even Mengzi, our first history of Chinese philosophy, authored by Hu Shi in 1919, places Laozi as first among the great pre-Qin thinkers. Additionally, Guo Moruo has Laozi preceding Kongzi in his 1935 treatment of the development of pre-Qin cosmology. These two preeminent modern intellectuals insisted on the correct ordering of Laozi and Kongzi.

legendary ancient sage and Li Er as a Warring States period (475-221 BCE) scholar. However, these two descriptions are completely fabricated and without concrete textual evidence. Reading the two figures as a single person is a far more convincing interpretation for the reasons given above.

Also addressing this problem, Liang Qichao argues that Laozi appears in the *Shiji* as “one individual whose story has different embodiments: firstly as Lao Dan, who Kongzi questioned about the rites; secondly as Lao Laizi 老萊子, a hermit figure who also appears in the *Shiji*; and lastly as the imperial historian Dan 太史儋” (2009: 13). This argument results from an improper understanding of the premise and approach Sima Qian takes with the *Shiji*,² which records everything from hearsay and legends to actual facts and often appends stories of additional personages to its major biographies.

Understood properly, the Grand Historian’s confused and cryptic distinctions between these figures become quite clear. He writes, “Lao Laizi is also from the state of Chu, and wrote fifteen chapters.” The “also” here signals a distinct separation between Lao Laizi and Laozi. As just before this passage, Sima Qian notes that Laozi wrote a book with two parts, his mention here that Lao Laizi’s book has fifteen chapters further distinguishes the two from each other. Sima Qian brings up Lao Laizi within his biography of Laozi not because the two are a single person, but as an appended biography—one of the author’s characteristic stylistic practices. In addition to this, Sima Qian lists Laozi and Lao Laizi separately and as from different locations when he catalogues Kongzi’s teachers. Liang Qichao has erroneously combined two persons into one.

The imperial historian Dan, whom Sima Qian also mentions in Laozi’s biography, is said to have met Duke Xian of Qin 秦獻公 “129 years after Kongzi died.” Therefore, according to the *Shiji*, the imperial historian Dan and Laozi clearly did not live in the same time period. The *Shiji* also presents the imperial historian Dan as a sort of popular diviner in his dialogues with Duke Xian, which is clearly at odds with Laozi’s identity as a “hidden sage” (*junzi* 隱君子), showing quite definitively that they are not the same person (Zhan 1982: 42-43). Sima Qian here places the two figures side by side and explicitly contrasts them in order

² Xu Fuguan agrees that, “From his *Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa* 中国历史研究法 (Methods of Researching Chinese History), we see that Liang Qichao really does not understand the *Shiji* very well, and of course this misunderstanding includes the *Shiji*’s biography of Laozi” (1963: 483-88).

to establish them as separate characters. Liang Qichao's theory relies on a misinterpretation of the *Shiji* that completely misses Sima Qian's intended meaning.

Kongzi Asks Laozi about the Rites

Sima Qian writes in the *Shiji*,

Kongzi wanted to emulate the Zhou dynasty, and so he asked Laozi about the rites.

Laozi replied, "The people you are talking about are all dead, their bones turned to ash and their words all that is left. The sage that goes along with the times can control things, whereas one who does not harness the times moves aimlessly without purpose.

"I have inquired into this and found that the sage keeps what is truly worthwhile hidden, as if it is empty. The sage's virtuosity is overflowing, although he appears to be an idiot. He rids himself of arrogance and excessive desires, expelling arrogance and wanton ambition. None of these things benefit the body of the sage." (ch. 63)

For the most part, the *Shiji* is consistent and accurate. Sima Qian's description of Laozi's comments, especially the section on keeping valuable things hidden and dispelling excessive desires, are completely in line with the content of the *Laozi*. It is therefore highly likely that the discussion the *Shiji* relates between Kongzi and Laozi regarding the rites actually happened.

Furthermore, Sima Qian was not the only person to record this event. Other pre-Qin texts, such as the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi* 庄子 (Book of Master Zhuang), the Confucian record of official Zhou ritual, the *Liji* 礼记 (Book of Rites), and the *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü), a text influenced by many different schools, all include this exchange.

Laozi appears sixteen times in the *Zhuangzi*, eight of which describe the relationship between Laozi and Kongzi. In the "Tiandi" 天地 chapter (ch. 12), Laozi and Kongzi discuss "the utmost way" (*zhidao* 至道). In the "Tindal" 天道 chapter (ch. 13), the two discourse on the ancient classics of the *Shijing* 诗经 (Book of Songs), *Shangshu* 尚书 (Book of History), *Yijing* 易经 (Book of Changes), and *Liji*, as well as debate the central Confucian virtues humanness (*ren* 仁) and responsibility (*yi* 义). In the "Tianyun" 天运 chapter (ch. 14), they again discuss these along with Dao and the Six Classics.

The “Tianzifang” 田子方 chapter (ch. 21) tells of Laozi and Kongzi philosophizing about cosmology, literally, “heavenly Dao” (*tiandao* 天道). They talk about all phenomena (*tiandi wanwu* 天地万物) and autopoietic generation or spontaneity (*zifa xing* 自发性) in the “Zhibeiyou” 知北游 chapter (ch. 22). As Xu Fuguan notes, within the *Zhuangzi*, “other than those who are completely fabricated, the relationships of seniority between historical figures are always well ordered” (1963: 78). The *Zhuangzi* mentions relationships and interactions between various characters: Kongzi and his followers, Huishi 惠施 (Huizi) and Zhuangzi, Gongsun Long 公孙龙 and Wei Mou 魏牟, etc. Examining them closely, seventy-nine prove to be distinctly possible and in accord with what is known of historical circumstances; only two are ruled out (Huang 1941: 1239). In other words, the *Zhuangzi*’s tales about Kongzi meeting Laozi, and the conversations they had, should not be taken as completely fictitious.

The *Lüshi chunqiu* combines the Daoist, Confucian, Legalist, and Yin-Yang schools of thought. It mentions Laozi in five places. First, the “Jiugong” 贵公 chapter calls Lao Dan “the utmost minister” (*zhigong* 至公) (1.4). The “Dangran” 当染 chapter records that “Kong studied with Lao Dan” (2.4); the “Quyong” 去冗 chapter states, “Lao Dan was independent, and never simply went along with common customs” (16.7). Laozi and Kongzi are differentiated in “Buer” 不二: “Lao Dan believed in being soft or gentle, whereas Kongzi advocated humaneness” (17.7). Finally, the “Zhongyan” 重言 chapter states, “The sage listens to silence and sees the formless. . . . This is Lao Dan” (18.2). These records, in addition to confirming aspects of Laozi’s thought, also evidence the fact that “Laozi and Kongzi lived at the same time, and that Laozi was older,” which scholars of the *Lüshi chunqiu* consider “beyond any doubt” (see Guo 1945).

The Confucian *Liji* also contains records of Laozi and Kongzi. The “Zengzi Wen” 曾子问 chapter includes four events involving Laozi, three of which feature Kongzi asking for the latter’s explication (Kongzi stating, “I asked Lao Dan. . .”), while the other one relates Laozi guiding Kongzi in how to bury someone. These citations all show Kongzi seeking Laozi’s direction in difficult situations. Xu Fuguan argues that these stories from the *Liji* “are different in content from their counterparts in the *Zhuangzi* and other early sources. The legends in the *Liji* are Confucian, and part of an entirely different tradition. Nevertheless, they generally coincide with each other in terms of the relationship between Kongzi and Laozi, suggesting that these stories are true.” He also declares, “The *Liji* was probably compiled during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), when the opposition between Confucianism and Daoism was quite palpable. If the four

stories of the “Zengzi Wen” chapter about Laozi and Kongzi were from contemporary early Han Confucian scholars rather than pre-Qin sources, [they are unlikely to have been included]” (Xu 1963: 27)

We have now established that the three major pre-Qin schools of thought all record instances of Kongzi asking Laozi about the rites. Even texts biased toward Confucianism and critical of other schools, such as the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韩诗外传 (Mr. Han [Ying]’s Comments on the Book of Songs), recognize that “Kongzi studied from Lao Dan.” The *Kongzi jiyu* 孔子家语 (Kongzi’s Regulations on Family Relations) adds, “Kongzi asked Laozi about Dao.” Evidence is found in all of these ancient texts that Kongzi and Laozi interacted, with Laozi being the elder master and Kongzi the student seeking the former’s advice. There is no room to harbor any suspicion about this historical fact.

When, Where, and What Did He Ask?

Now that we have established that Kongzi asked Laozi about the rites, we should further investigate when and where this took place, and ask what actually happened and was said during these exchanges.

A range of possibilities has been asserted in response to the question of when Kongzi sought Laozi’s advice. Some, like Gao Heng, believe that Kongzi was seventeen at the time. Gao argues that, according to both, Bian Shao’s 边韶 *Laozi ming* 老子铭 (Inscription for Laozi) and Li Daoyuan’s 郦道元 *Shuijing zhu* 水经注 (Commentary on the Waterways Classic; ch. 19), “Kongzi was seventeen when he asked Laozi about the rites.” The *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annuals) records a solar eclipse that supports this account (Gao 1979: 13).

A second answer is that Kongzi was thirty-four when he spoke with Laozi, which comes from the Qing-dynasty scholar Yan Ruoju 阎若璩. He calculated this by cross-dating the mention of an eclipse around the time Kongzi and Laozi met according to the *Liji* (“Zengzi Wen”) with that recorded in the *Chunqiu*. Another answer comes from the *Zhuangzi*’s “Tianyun” chapter, which states, “Kongzi was fifty and still had not understood Dao, so he went south to Pei 沛 to consult Laozi.”

Huang Fanggang 黄方刚 argues, “Laozi lived in Pei, as Zhuangzi states repeatedly. Pei was in the state of Song, which Kongzi visited often, making it quite plausible that he met with Laozi many times” (1941: 381). He therefore further asserts the possibility that Kongzi was fifty-seven when he met Laozi. In consideration of the mentions of eclipse in the *Liji* and *Zuozhuan* 左传 (Commentary of Zuo), he believes it would fit that

“Kongzi met with Laozi twice, first when he was fifty-one and again when he was fifty-seven” (Gu 1941, 381).

There are also four separate accounts about the location where Kongzi and Laozi met. Multiple passages in the *Shiji* state that Kongzi and Laozi met in the state of Zhou (near present-day Luoyang, Henan). The *Liji* places them in Xiangdang, which may have been in the state of Lu, i.e., Kongzi’s home state (Gu 1941, 452). The “Tianyun” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* has Kongzi going south to Pei (near present-day Pei county, Jiangsu) to meet Laozi. Finally, the *Shiji* proposes that Kongzi lived in Chen 陈 for three years, and since Laozi was from Chen (the original state of Ku county), it is likely that they met there (Zhan 1982: 52)

These possibilities seem contradictory, and add to the suspicion some hold as to whether Kongzi and Laozi actually met. There is, however, no reason to believe that they only met once. It is quite possible that they met a number of times, and that several, not just one, of these accounts is correct. One could imagine, for example, that the meeting recorded in the *Liji*, when Kongzi is seventeen, happened when Laozi visited the state of Lu as a government official.³ The *Shiji*’s record that “Kongzi tried to emulate the ways of the Zhou dynasty” and “Kongzi lived in Chen for three years,” along with the *Zhuangzi*’s “Kongzi went south to Pei,” present possibilities of the two meeting during Kongzi’s travels in the middle and latter half of his life. Kongzi traveled to many different states looking for people to follow his teachings, and during these years, he very easily could have visited both Pei and Chen, meeting Laozi in either or both places. At that time, travel and communication were very difficult, which explains why different schools of thought would be familiar with only one or two occasions on which the two great thinkers met. The Zengzi school of thought (as recorded in the *Liji*), for instance, only mentions them meeting in the state of Lu, whereas the *Zhuangzi* only mentions them meeting in Pei. Thus, these different texts came to have stories that appear to conflict with one another, although in reality they may not.

Therefore, we find that at different times and places Kongzi received guidance on various topics from Laozi. The idea that there could only have been a single time and place where teaching regarding *li* was imparted appears fundamentally mistaken. Part of the reason so many

³ Gao Heng (1979) believes that, when Laozi was around thirty-seven years old, he fled to the state of Lu to escape persecution by a local duke, where Kongzi had an opportunity to talk to him in 535 BCE.

scholars have assumed the two met only once is the consistent mention of the rites throughout multiple accounts. There is again no reason to assume, however, that they would have conversed over this topic on only one occasion.

The word for “rites” (*li*) can indicate formality in the narrow sense of a wedding, funeral, or graduation ceremony, but it also denotes something broader. A younger Kongzi seems to have been more focused on a narrower and more pragmatic understanding, inquiring about regulations, decrees, systems, and institutional policies. These included the placement of certain flags or memorials honoring the emperor during an army’s march; funerals conducted on days of a solar eclipse; and how the burial of a small child ought to differ from that of an adult. These issues are all regulated by the rites, and therefore the scope of Kongzi’s inquiry in his discussions with Laozi would not have been limited to a single conversation.

The *Liji* records Kongzi conversing with Laozi about the rites with regard to more mundane or pragmatic everyday occurrences. Other texts record Kongzi in the latter half of his life learning broader ritual principles from Laozi, including concepts such as the Dao of a full vessel (*teying zhidao* 持盈之道), which refers to the innate tendencies of all beings to reach extremes and then return.⁴

Most important in this regard is that Kongzi and Laozi possibly discussed the *Shijing*, *Shangshu*, *Yijing*, and other classical texts, which explore broad facets of culture and daily life, as well as specific and special situations. There is also the story of Hanxuanzi 韩宣子, who traveled to Kongzi’s home state of Lu and, after reading the *Yijing* and *Chunqiu*, commented that these great texts fully embody the rites of the Zhou dynasty. This clearly shows that the content of the *Yijing* falls under the jurisdiction of the rites (see Liu 1986). The *Zhuangzi* goes on to state, “When Kongzi was fifty-one, he went to the southern city of Pei to ask Laozi about the rites. He asked about calculations [*dushu* 度数] and inquired about yin and yang” — the main topics of the *Yijing*. Kongzi’s affinity for the *Yijing* in his later years, therefore, may have been inspired by Laozi, who had a much greater influence on later interpretation of the *Yijing* than Kongzi and who also greatly developed the *Yijing*’s cosmological aspects — an area that Kongzi seldom commented on.

⁴ The texts even engage wording from the ninth chapter of the *Laozi* in so doing. See *Huainanzi* 12 and *Kongzi jiayu*.

Laozi before Lunyu

The major activities of Kongzi's life were his teachings and traveling in search of a government to utilize his ideas. He never wrote anything by his own hand, himself asserting, "I transmit, but do not invent." The most reliable source of Kongzi's thought, then, is the *Lunyu*, in which his followers wrote down his teachings. It is likely that the text "was recorded by Kongzi's disciples within decades of his death and compiled into a cohesive text by later Confucian scholars—not written [by Kongzi's own hand] as his followers claimed" (Cui 1983: 321). This sits in contrast to the *Laozi*, which is Laozi's own work, and was written significantly earlier than the *Lunyu*.

Of the pre-Qin records that cite Kongzi, none references the *Lunyu*; later, the *Liji* does, but that text was not compiled until the beginning of the Han dynasty. According to Yan Lingfeng, the *Lunyu* "was put together sometime in the beginning of the Han dynasty, just before the Wen emperor set up scholarly titles [*boshi* 博士]" (Yan 1969: 523). Thus, the *Laozi* came much earlier, having been completed sometime before the end of the Spring and Autumn period. Zhang Dainian writes, "The *Sunzi bingfa* 孙子兵法 (Sunzi's Art of War) and the *Laozi* are stylistically similar. Since we can be sure that the *Sunzi bingfa* was written in the final years of the Spring and Autumn period, the *Laozi* may have been, as well" (Zhang 1979: 138). Yan Lingfeng further found marks of influence from the *Laozi* on the *Sunzi bingfa* (Yan 1969: 54).

The citations of the *Laozi* in various pre-Qin texts are further evidence that the text was already in circulation before the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE). The *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi* 荀子 (Book of Master Xun), *Lüshi chunqiu*, and *Hanfeizi* 韩非子 (Book of Master Han Fei) all cite the *Laozi* and comment on its ideas. Other classics also mention the *Laozi*, including the *Shuoyuan* 说苑 (Garden of Stories), *Taiping yulan* 太平御览 (Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era), *Zhanguo ce* 战国策 (Strategies of the Warring States) and the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean).

In the *Shuoyuan* we find, "Shuxiang 叔向 said, 'Lao Dan has a saying, "The softest in the world overcomes the hardest in the world." He also says, "People's lives are soft and gentle, but their deaths hard and stern. The lives of grass and trees are soft and crisp, but their deaths withered and tattered.'" These sentences can be found in *Laozi* 43 and 67, respectively. Shuxiang lived during the rule of Duke Ping of Jin 晋平公, making him a contemporary of Kongzi. Thus, it is clear that the *Laozi* was already

well known during Kongzi's time.

Taiping yulan 322 records, "Mozi 墨子 said, 'My defense proved effective against Gongshu Pan 公输盘,⁵ because those who excel at conquering others make their strong points appear weak. This is why Laozi says, "Dao is like an empty vessel, and we must be sure to keep it from getting filled."'" Mozi here cites *Laozi* 4, so either he or his disciples must have read that text. Unfortunately, this section of the *Taiping yulan* also misquotes the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, making it less than completely reliable.

A citation from *Laozi* 39 appears in the *Zhanguo*: "Although honorable or expensive, one must keep the petty and cheap as one's root. Although high [in position], one must fix one's foundation in the low. That is why kings and rulers refer to themselves as poor orphans or widows."

Finally, the Confucian classic *Zhongyong* reports, "Zilu 子路 [one of Kongzi's disciples] asked about strength. Kongzi said, 'Do you mean the strength of the South, North, or your own idea of strength? To be tolerant and gentle in teaching while refraining from taking revenge on others in ways that are not in line with Dao is the strength of the South.'" Laozi was considered the master of the "southern school of thought." The citation above, with its emphasis on being lenient and soft, is also exactly the rhetoric used throughout the *Laozi*, making it highly likely that Kongzi is referring directly to Laozi (Zhan 1979: 67).

⁵ Translator's Note: Gongshu Pan, also known as Lu Ban 鲁班, was a renowned inventor of the state of Chu. He was convinced by Mozi not to attack the state of Song when Mozi was able to successfully ward off his attacks in mock situations.

