

# Explanation of the Title of Laozi's *Daode jing*

A Preface to the *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*

by Cheng Xuanying

**Note:** This Preface was found among the Dunhuang manuscripts collected by Paul Pelliot (P 2353), and it has previously been translated into French by Isabelle Robinet (1977, 227–260).

This new English translation accompanies the translation of the *Expository Commentary*.

I thank Eric Hutton, who has kindly read through the translation of this “Explanation of the Title of Laozi's *Daode jing*” and offered detailed and precise feedback, corrections, and many suggestions for improvements. Remaining mistakes and oversights are mine, of course.

Since this Preface is being presented on a website, references to high-quality internet publications of the primary sources cited are offered wherever possible.

As in the translation of the *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*, additional information to make the text understandable for today's readers is added in footnotes. Furthermore, the conciseness of the Chinese language necessitates occasional additions in the translation, which are implicit but not explicit in the text. Such additions are added in square brackets in the text and should be read as an integral part of the text. Different from the print translation of the *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*, here there are no endnotes with text-critical remarks. For text-critical remarks, I advise the interested reader to consult the edition in Meng Wentong 2001, 544–552 and the Zhonghua Daozang edition (ZD, vol. 9, no. 14, 228a–232c), available online here: <http://www.daorenjia.com/web/viewer.html?file=%2Fpdf/9-14.pdf>.

And lastly, here is a link to a beautiful facsimile copy of the Dunhuang manuscript P 2353, held in the National Library of France in Paris: Gallica Bibliotheque nationale de France Pelliot ms 2353 (preface). URL <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b83031626?rk=21459;2>.

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# *Explanation of the Title of Laozi's Daode jing*

[**Dunhuang manuscript P 2353.** The first part of the text, including the title and the first section heading and its first subtitle, is missing in the manuscript. The title has been added here.

We may reasonably assume that the first section heading indicated that the section deals with Laozi, and the first subtitle might have referred to his appellation “Laozi.”]

## [Part 1]

....within the beginning there is the end. [If] within the beginning there is the end, then the end does not constitute the end. [If] within the end there is the beginning,<sup>1</sup> then the beginning does not constitute a beginning. The beginning does not constitute a beginning, therefore there is no beginning. The end does not constitute an end, therefore there is no end. Therefore, the *Xuanmiao neipian* (*The Inner Chapters of Mystery and Wonder*)<sup>2</sup> says: “Laozi was not born and did not perish, [he has] no beginning and no end.”

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<sup>1</sup> See ZD vol. 9, no. 14, 232 note 4: these characters were missing in the fragment, and were added according to the meaning by the compilers of the ZD.

<sup>2</sup> *Xuanmiao neipian* 玄妙內篇. This text is lost today, but it is cited in some Buddhist and Daoist texts of the fifth century. Cf. Kohn 1995, 219 for a detailed discussion of the extant fragments. She argues that the text most probably presented a hagiography of Laozi focusing on his mother, who is sometimes called Jade Maiden of Mystery and Wonder (*xuanmiao yunü* 玄妙玉女).

The *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*)<sup>3</sup> says: “[He is given] the appellation<sup>4</sup> ‘Laozi’ because he emerged from the mysterious, before Heaven and earth. He has no time of feeble old age; therefore, he is called ‘Old Child.’”<sup>5</sup>

Speaking according to the teaching, there are these three explanations;<sup>6</sup> if we discuss it according to the principle, then naturally this is one.

To accord with the teaching [means] precisely adapting to the capacities [of the students], therefore the *Scripture of Western Ascension* (*Xisheng jing*) says: “Even wisdom does not arise by itself; in all cases it must be in response to causes and conditions.”<sup>7</sup> As for the referents of the “[causes and] conditions” that are responded to—how could these be only three? [We say three here because in terms of] modes of existence there are three kinds of [beings with different] inclinations [relating to attainment],<sup>8</sup> and [therefore] he made three interpretations. If one obtains

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<sup>3</sup> *Xujue* refers to the *Preface to the Daode jing* (老子道德經序訣) attributed to Ge Xuan (葛玄, 164–244), which seems to have been transmitted together with Cheng Xuanying’s preface and his *Expository Commentary*. It has survived in Dunhuang manuscripts (S 75 and P 2370), and was published in Ōfuchi 1979, 509–11; ZD vol. 9, no. 9; Yan Lingfeng 1983, 265–273. See also Kohn 1995, 202–203 for a discussion.

<sup>4</sup> *Hao* 號, here translated “appellation,” designated a nickname (Wilkinson 1998, 99) or a style name.

<sup>5</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD vol. 9, no. 9, 185b. The designation “Laozi” combines the words old (*lao* 老) and child (*zi* 子). Of course, *zi* 子 can be interpreted also as the honorific title “Master,” which would then make for a reading “Old Master”—however, Cheng Xuanying obviously opts against this reading, preferring the “Old Child” interpretation, which fits with the concept of overcoming dichotomies since it combines two oppositional terms into one name. This argument seems to parallel the passage in *Daode jing* chapter 25 (25.2.A), where the thing that emerges before Heaven and Earth is given a style-name (*zi* 字), which is Dao (道).

<sup>6</sup> The first part of the manuscript was missing, and therefore we are missing the first of the three explanations. The second explanation is the one supported by the citation of the *Xuanmiao neipian*, and the third explanation is the one proposed by the *Xujue*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Xisheng jing jizhu* DZ 726, 2, 15b and *Xisheng jing* DZ 666, 1, 20b. Cf. Kohn 1991, 241. I have modified the second half of the sentence from her translation to fit Cheng Xuanying’s reading here. The *Xisheng jing* was a popular Daoist scripture in early medieval China. It has survived in two commented versions: *Xisheng jing*, DZ 666, and *Xisheng jing jizhu*, DZ 726. Livia Kohn (1991) has presented a monograph with a study and an English translation of the complete text.

<sup>8</sup> The term *sanji* 三機 is a Buddhist term; it is synonymous with *sanju* 三聚, “The three classes of sentient beings, in terms of their determination toward enlightenment” (Muller DDB *sanju* 三聚).

the principle, then one is not obstructed by attachment to the three, and [therefore] one does not cling to the one, either.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. His Personal Name and Family Name

According to the *Wenshi neizhuan (Inner Biography of Master Wenshi)*,<sup>10</sup> it is said: “Yin Xi kowtowed [and said] ‘May I ask you, Great Man, about your family name and style name?’ Laozi answered: ‘My family name and style names are subtle, I cannot explain them completely. Today my family name is Li 李 and my personal name is Er 耳. My style name is Boyang 伯陽, and my other style name is Lao Dan 老聃.’”

That the family name is Li is because the Jade Maiden of Mystery and Wonder (*xuanmiao yunü* 玄妙玉女, Laozi’s mother) had been pregnant with him for 81 years,<sup>11</sup> and once when she was wandering under a plum (Li 李) tree, she thought she felt a light breeze that carried away worldly dust and delusions. Then her left armpit split open and she gave birth to Laozi.<sup>12</sup> Immortal

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<sup>9</sup> Cheng uses the three explanations of the teaching and the one principle (underlying the teachings) as a dyadic pair in a variation of the process of logical negations: The argument here says: 1. There are three explanations. 2. There is one principle. 3. There are not actually three explanations; the expression “three explanations” is only heuristically employed because the argument here depends on the assumption that there are three types of different capacities of the people. (This negates statement 1.) 4. Once one has realized the principle (that is ultimate truth), one does not make any distinctions between the oneness of the principle and the diversity of the teachings anymore. (This negates statement 2.)

<sup>10</sup> *Wenshi zhuan* refers to *Wenshi neizhuan (Inner Biography of Master Wenshi)*. For this text see Kohn 1995, 214–216. It is a sixth-century text lost today but cited in many texts. Kohn (1995, 214) assumes that it was a text possibly authored and certainly popularized by Louguan Daoists. The passage here is cited in *Hunyuan shengji* (DZ 770, 3, 9a) and in *Yiqie daojing yinyi miaoqi* (DZ 1123, 16b–17a).

<sup>11</sup> The number 81 is a magic number for Daoists, as it is related to nine, not only as nine times nine, but also as the sum of the digits. Nine in Daoist cosmology is related to heaven and to cosmogenesis (Robinet 1994, 120). For a detailed discussion of the meanings of the number nine in Daoism, see Robinet 1994. See also below, page 36, where the number 81, as number of the chapters of the *Daode jing* is said to be the number of Great Yang.

<sup>12</sup> The legend of the birth of Laozi from the left armpit of his mother is certainly inspired from the Buddhist legend, which claims Buddha was born from the right side (or armpit) of his mother. The presumed reason for this in Buddhism is that Buddha should not be associated with the impurities of the womb and vaginal birth. Furthermore, in India there was an assumption that regular birth related to the lack of awareness of human beings. Being born painlessly from the right side of his mother, Buddha was born with awareness and purity. See Langenberg 2017, 97–98 and 101–106 for a discussion of the Buddhist view of Buddha’s birth, which inspired the Daoist legend. We should note that Buddha

jade maidens were holding incense and flowers in their hands protecting and guarding him on the left and right; the [Jade] Maiden of Mystery and Wonder pointed at the tree and said, “This can be your name.” The *Shenxian zhuan* (*Biographies of Divine Transcendents*)<sup>13</sup> says: “Laozi was born and was [immediately] able to speak, and he himself pointed to the plum tree as his name.” The *Shangyuan jing* (*Scripture of the Upper Prime*)<sup>14</sup> says: “Mother Li was resting in daytime. She saw a five-colored pearl the size of a slingshot-bullet coming down from heaven, and she swallowed it and upon this she got pregnant.”<sup>15</sup> Mr. Lu [Xiuji] said: “When Laozi was born, he immediately walked nine steps and then he was able to speak.”<sup>16</sup>

However, what the inner [Daoist] and the outer [non-Daoist] scriptures say is not the same. I will not write it all down here.

That his personal name was Er 耳<sup>17</sup> is because Laozi’s ears had no outer frame, and he thus presented the extraordinary signs [of the looks of a saint or holy man]. Therefore this was taken as

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was said to be born from the right side, but Laozi was said to be born from the left side of his mother. This is because in Daoist apologetic discourse, which tried to position Daoism as superior to Buddhism, it was said that Daoism was the teaching of life, and therefore associated with the left, which symbolizes life. Buddhism instead was associated with death, which was associated with the right side. We find this theory for example in the fifth-century Daoist *Santian neijie jing* (DZ 1205, 1, 9b-10a); see Bokenkamp 1997, 222 for an English translation.

<sup>13</sup> The *Shenxian zhuan* is ascribed to Ge Hong. It is transmitted in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, compiled between 977 and 981 CE by Li fang 李昉 and others. See *Taiping guangji*, 1, 1. Cf. Ctext: <https://ctext.org/taiping-guangji/1/laozi/ens> (§6). Compare also the English translation of Laozi’s biography in the *Shenxian zhuan* in Campamy 2002, 194–211.

<sup>14</sup> The *Shangyuan jing* 上元經 was a scripture from the Six Dynasties period; only one small fragment of it has survived among the Dunhuang manuscripts (S 4753). The passage cited here is not contained in the fragment. Robinet (1977, 229 note 4) points out that a similar passage is cited in *Sandong zhunang* DZ 1139, 8, 4a.

<sup>15</sup> This story of the conception of Laozi, just like the legend of Laozi’s birth cited above, is inspired from Buddhist legends of how Buddha was conceived. See Langenberg 2017, 97 and Kohn 1998, 235f and Campamy 2002, 209.

<sup>16</sup> I assume that “Mr. Lu” refers to Lu Xiuji (陸修靜, 406–477 CE), a prolific and well-known Daoist author. Cf. also Robinet 1977, 230, note 1. However, I could not find the quoted remark in any of his writings. A somewhat similar citation (行九步因即能言自指李樹爲姓) can be found in the commentary to the *Taishang dongxuan lingbao sanyuan yujing xuandu daxianjing* (DZ 370, 21b), a text from the Six Dynasties period, which however is not ascribed to Lu Xiuji. About parallels of Laozi’s birth and his first post-natal actions with those of the Buddha, see Kohn 1998, 239–245, and Campamy 2002, 209.

<sup>17</sup> The literal meaning of the character *er* 耳 is “ear.”

his personal name. As for his style name Boyang 伯陽, *bo* 伯 means “elder” [and also “to grow”],<sup>18</sup> and *yang* 陽 means “life.” This means that when the sage responds to the world, the benefits are enormous and manifold. He just wants to raise the common people and give life and rear the multitudes. Therefore the scripture [i.e., the *Daode jing*] says: “[Dao] generates them and raises them, grows them and rears them.”<sup>19</sup>

That the other style name<sup>20</sup> is Dan 聃 is referring to his tongue being large (*dandan* 聃聃). It was long and broad, and therefore he took the style name Dan.

The *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*) says: “Laozi’s son was called Zong (宗). He held an official’s position in the state of Wei<sup>21</sup> and was enfeoffed Duangan. Zong’s son was Wang (汪), Wang’s son was Gong (宮), and Gong’s great-great-son was Xia (瑕). The son of Xia was Jie (解), who served the Han dynasty as Grand Mentor (太傅) of the king of Jiaoxi [in Shandong].”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This passage is hard to translate because there is a wordplay in the Chinese. *Bo* 伯 means “uncle” or “elder.” In this meaning the word is synonymous with *zhang* 長. *Zhang*, however, also means “to grow,” and in the following explanation Cheng Xuanying explains the term as *zhangyang* 長養, which means “to raise or bring up” someone.

<sup>19</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 51 (51.3.A–B).

<sup>20</sup> The edition in ZD vol. 9, no. 14, 228 note 5 states that 外自 should rather read 外字. *Wai* in this context might refer to a sobriquet or nickname (like in the term *waihao* 外號), or else to a style name used by non-Daoists. Robinet (1977, 230) translates the term as “public name” (“nom public”).

<sup>21</sup> This refers to the state of Wei 魏 (403–230 BCE) of the Warring States period, in the region of Shanxi.

<sup>22</sup> See *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*) 63. Cf. Ctext: <https://ctext.org/shiji/lao-zi-han-fei-lie-zhuan> §7. That account is not completely identical. Compare also Laozi’s biography in Ge Hong’s *Shenxian zhuan*, translated in Campy 2002, 197.

### 3. The Dharma-body<sup>23</sup>

According to the *Jiutian sheng shen jing* (*Scripture of the Stanzas of the Life Spirits of the Nine Heavens*)<sup>24</sup> it is said: “The sage took the three kinds of *qi* (氣)—the mysterious, the original, and the inaugural—as his body-substance (*ti* 體)”; this says that he is the same as the wondrous *qi* of the Three Heavens.<sup>25</sup> Zang Zongdao<sup>26</sup> also used the Three One as the response body of the sage. What is referred to as Three One is: first, essence; second, spirit; and third, *qi*. Essence refers to the mind that has numinous wisdom and astute reflection. Spirit refers to the unlimited, immeasurable function. *Qi* refers to the dharmas constituted by form, image, shape and appearance.

The scripture<sup>27</sup> says: “Looking at it, one cannot see it. This is called elusive”—this is the essence. [When it says,] “Listening for it, one cannot hear it. This is called imperceptible”—this is the spirit. [And when it says,] “Feeling for it, one cannot grasp it. This is called subtle”—this is *qi*. Uniting these three dharmas makes the body-substance of the one sage.

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<sup>23</sup> The term *fati* 法體, literally means “the substance or essence of the dharmas.” However, it seems that Cheng Xuanying uses the term here synonymously with *fashen* 法身, *dharmakaya*. For this originally Buddhist term, see Muller (DDB, 法身): “In general Mahāyāna teaching, the Dharma-body is a name for absolute existence, the manifestation of all existences—the true body of reality, or Buddha as eternal principle; the body of essence that is pure, possesses no marks of distinction, and is the same as emptiness (Skt. *dharmakāya*).” We find the expression *fati* used in this sense in Daoist texts, see e.g., Qiang Siqi’s compilation of *Daode jing* commentaries *Daode zhenjing xuande zuanshu* (DZ 711, 1, 2b), citing the sub-commentary by emperor Xuanzong (r. 713–756 CE), also with a reference to Zang Xuanjing’s (cf. below, note 21) theory of the Three One as the body of the sage, speaking of the *fati* of Lord Lao: 但老君法體以三一爲身 “But the dharma body of Lord Lao takes the Three One as [his] body.”

<sup>24</sup> This refers to the *Dongxuan lingbao jiutian shengshen zhang jing*, DZ 318, to which Cheng Xuanying is said to have composed a commentary. However, the passage quoted here is not contained in today’s version of the text.

<sup>25</sup> The Three Heavens appear first in the *Taishang Lingbao Wufu xu*, DZ 388. The theory of the Three Heavens in relation to the three kinds of *qi* appears in the *Santian neijie jing*, DZ 1205, translated in Bokenkamp 1997, 186–229.

<sup>26</sup> This refers to Zang Xuanjing 臧玄靜, a Daoist active in the environment of the court during the Chen dynasty (557–589 CE). He was a disciple of Meng Zhizhou 孟智周 and he is said to have taught Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 and also Wang Yuanzhi 王遠志, the famous patriarch of the Maoshan school. Cf. Assandri 2009, 37.

<sup>27</sup> This refers to *Daode jing*, chapter 14 (14.1.A–C).



The scripture<sup>28</sup> says, “These three, because they cannot be grasped through scrutinizing, blend into one.” But Lord Lao takes the Three One as his body (*shen* 身); his body has the differentiation of true and response [body], and there are three [different] explanations of the meaning:<sup>29</sup>

The first says: To disperse the one in order to make three: this is the response [body] of the sage. To blend the three in order to return to the one: this is the truth [body] of the sage.

The second says: The three and the one together both are the response [body]. Not three and not one: this is the truth [body]. This is so because three as well as one are both [part of the realm of] names and numbers.<sup>30</sup>

The third says: Outside of what is beyond names and numbers—how could there be something else that is true and has name or number? It is just this: Three-in-one [and at the same time] not three-in-one: that is the truth. Not three-in-one yet [at the same time] three-in-one: that is the response. The response of not three-in-one and also three-in-one: that response is the true response. The truth of three-in-one and yet not three-in-one: that truth is the response truth.

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<sup>28</sup> This refers to the *Daode jing*, chapter 14 (14.2.A).

<sup>29</sup> After having presented the dialectics of three and one, Cheng announces now that they have to be seen in relation to another set of dyadic concepts, namely that of the response body and the truth body. While the former conception, that of three and one uniting or separating, exists verbatim in the text of the *Daode jing*, the latter concepts, those of response and truth body, have been introduced presumably much later, as they are reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of the bodies of the Buddha.

<sup>30</sup> Ultimate truth is conceived of as all-embracing totality, which must necessarily be beyond any kind of characteristics, because any specific characteristic, like a number or a name, when used to describe this ultimate truth would exclude its opposite or others, and thus the truth would be not all-embracing anymore. Therefore, the only logical solution is to state that there are no characteristics, names, or numbers that can describe or designate this ultimate truth.

The truth, which is response truth, cannot be defined as truth. The response, which is true response, cannot be defined as response. Therefore it is not truth and not response, yet also response and truth.<sup>31</sup>

But the sage accords with the stimuli [from the beings] and adapts himself to [their] capacities and responds to the beings. Whether he sojourns among humans or is born in the heavens, he manifests himself in accordance with the situation and his marks and characteristics are not always the same.

This is why the *Shengxuan [neijiao] jing*<sup>32</sup> says: “When he sojourns in that Pure Land, his marks and characteristics are majestic and fine looking. When he dwells in this [world] of many fires, he assumes forms that are the same as those below.”

One who originally is able to be both heavenly and human—how would that be something a heavenly or a human being could be capable of? It must be [a being] neither heavenly nor human, and only because of this it is able to be both heavenly and human. Furthermore, he wondrously embodies the “imperceptible and elusive;”<sup>33</sup> he is extremely hard to scrutinize in detail.

Now I will simply take up the one response [body of the sage] of Zhou times. Among those who discuss this aspect of Lord Lao, Ge Hong cites the *Zhutao yuzha*<sup>34</sup> in his *Baopuzi (Master who Embraces Simplicity)*: “Laozi was of a yellow color, he had beautiful eyebrows, a large

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Assandri 2009, 183–186, for an analysis of the logic employed here. The third explanation, which is presumably the latest and also the one Cheng himself endorses—or better, offers to his readers—works with a Mādhyamika-style series of negations, which then transcend the two former propositions.

<sup>32</sup> *Taishang lingbao shengxuan neijiao jing* 太上靈寶昇玄內教經 (*Scripture of [the Inner Teaching of] Ascending to the Mystery*). This text was very popular in the early Tang. However, it has survived only partially in Dunhuang manuscripts (P 2750, P 2430). I was unable to locate the material quoted here in the fragments.

<sup>33</sup> This refers again to *Daode jing*, chapter 14.

<sup>34</sup> The citation appears in Ge Hong’s Laozi biography in the *Shenxian zhuan*. See Cf. Robinet 1977, 233 note 1; cf. Campamy 2002, 198–99. The text of the *Zhutao yuzha* 朱籙玉劄 is not extant.

[forehead],<sup>35</sup> long ears, big eyes, widely spaced teeth, a square mouth, and thick lips. On his forehead there were three crisscrossing lines,<sup>36</sup> and a “sun horn” and a “moon crescent”<sup>37</sup> and two nose-bridges; his ears had three entrances, and the soles of his feet had [marks of] the two [principles of yin and yang] and the five [primary elements] (i.e., metal, wood, water, fire, and earth),<sup>38</sup> and the palms of his hands appeared a pattern in the form of [the character for] “ten” (*shi* 十) [representing the ten heavenly stems].<sup>39</sup> These are the marks of [Lord Lao, when he] entrusted his spirit to Mother Li and incarnated as the teacher of the Zhou.

Although again the truth[-body] and the response[-body] are not the same, yet both take the “self-so” as their substance. This is why *Zhuangzi* says: “[Such a man] always relies on the self-

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<sup>35</sup> Emended following Robinet 1977, 233.

<sup>36</sup> I follow the reading of the ZD edition (vol. 9, no. 14, 229a): 叁午達理. Robinet (1977, 233) reads instead 三五達理: “a forehead marked by lines of three and five.”

<sup>37</sup> See Kohn 1996, 200: “the Sun Horn and Moon crescent refer to two bones above the eyebrows”; and *ibid*, 204: “these signs were first associated with Fu Xi.” Cf. also Kohn 1986, 252. Cf. “Mouzi Lihuo lun” in *Hongmingji*, T 2102, 1, 2c: 問曰。云佛有三十二相八十種好。何其異於人之甚也。殆富耳之語。非實之云也。牟子曰。諺云少所見多所怪。視駝言馬腫背。堯眉八彩。舜目重瞳。臯陶鳥喙。文王四乳。禹耳參漏。周公背僂。伏羲龍鼻。仲尼反宇。老子日角月玄鼻有雙柱。手把十文足蹈二五。此非異於人乎。佛之相好奚足疑哉。

See the translation in Ziegler 2015, 13: “A person asked, ‘It is said that the Buddha has thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of physical excellence. Why is he so different from [ordinary] people? I am afraid that this is an extravagant expression and a description of unreality.’ Mouzi replied, ‘As the saying goes, “The fewer chances to see, the more suspicious [one is].” . . . Laozi had a sun-shaped lump and the mark of a moon on his forehead, and two nose bridges. He held the Chinese characters of the Ten [Celestial Stems] in his hands, and treaded upon the two [principles of yin and yang] and the five [primary elements] (i.e., metal, wood, water, fire, and earth). These men are not different from [normal] people, are they? How worthwhile is it to be doubtful of the Buddha’s marks of physical excellence?’”

The features of the sun horn and the moon crest (日角月玄) are also mentioned in an extant version of the *Scripture of the Conversion of the Barbarians*, *Laozi Huahu jing*, T 2139, 1, 1266b.

<sup>38</sup> My translation follows Campany 2002, 199. Compare also Ziegler 2015 (cited in the preceding note). Robinet 1977, 233 interprets this as “his feet carried two characters for five, and his hands carried a ten (a cross shape).”

<sup>39</sup> Compare Campany 2002, 199, who relates that it seems plausible that “ten” here refers to the ten heavenly stems known from the ancient system of time notation called the *gan* 干支 or *ji* 甲子 system, where the signs for ten heavenly stems and the twelve earthly branches are combined in sixty possible designations.

so and doesn't help life along."<sup>40</sup> The *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: "Laozi embodied that which is by itself so. He was born before the Great Nonbeing."<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. The Dates

According to Ge Hong's *Shenxian zhuan* (*Biographies of Divine Transcendents*) it is said: "During the time of [the mythical emperor] Fuxi, Laozi was Yu Hua,<sup>42</sup> during the time of [the mythical emperor] Shennong he was Yuan Yin,<sup>43</sup> during the time of the [mythical emperor] Zhu Rong he was Fu Yu,<sup>44</sup> and during the time of the Yellow Emperor he was Guang Cheng Zi."<sup>45</sup> And [in all these cases] he took the occasion and responded to stimuli, transforming and changing

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<sup>40</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6 (HY 6/15/2). Compare Watson 2013, 40–41: "Huizi said to Zhuangzi, 'Can a man really be without feelings?' Zhuangzi: 'Yes.' Huizi: 'But a man who has no feelings—how can you call him a man?' Zhuangzi: 'The Way gave him a face; Heaven gave him a form—why can't you call him a man?' Huizi: 'But if you've already called him a man, how can he be without feelings?' Zhuangzi: 'That's not what I mean by feelings. When I talk about having no feelings, I mean that a man doesn't allow likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm. He just lets things be the way they are and doesn't try to help life along. . . .'" My translation differs from Watson's because I have adapted it to the context of the preceding and succeeding statements here.

<sup>41</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD vol. 9, no. 9, 185a.

<sup>42</sup> Yu Hua refers to Yu Hua Zi 鬱華子, a mythical transcendent/immortal who is said to have appeared during the time the emperor Fuxi ruled and transmitted the [now lost] *Inner Scripture of the Heavenly Emperor* (*Tianhuang neiwen* 天皇內文) and the *Hetu* 河圖. He also is considered as the author of a *Scripture of Primordial Yang* (*Yuanyang jing* 元陽經). Cf. *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*, DZ 296, 2, 1b. The *Yuanyang jing* according to this citation had 34 chapters. Today's Daozang contains a title called *Taishang lingbao Yuanyang miaojing* (DZ 334) in 100 chapters, dated to the Six Dynasties period.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Robinet 1977, 235–236, note (2). Robinet assumes that Yuanyin 緣因 might be a copyist error for Lu tu 綠圖, or Lu Tu Zi 綠圖子, who is listed in various texts as a manifestation of Laozi (cf. Kohn 1998, 218, where the name is transcribed as Lutuzi). The Buddhist text *Bianzheng lun* T 2110, 6, 528a lists a manifestation of Laozi called Lu Hui Zi 錄回子, which again might be a variant or copyist error for Lu Tu Zi. The *Shenxian zhuan* as reported in *Taiping guangji* (1, 1) relates that Laozi at the time of [the mythical emperor] Shennong was Jiuling Laozi (九靈老子), and at the time of [the mythical emperor] Zhu Rong became Guang Shou Zi (廣壽子). However, there are various lists of Laozi's manifestations in the world. Cf. Kohn 1998, 2018 for a list with textual references.

<sup>44</sup> Fu Yu is not listed in the *Shenxian zhuan* as we have it today, however. Kohn 1998, 218, notes that the name Fu Yu Zi is listed in the *Huahu jing* (*Conversion Scripture*, cited in *Sandong zhunang* DZ 1139, 9, 6b–7b.) as a manifestation of Laozi in the time of Zhu Rong. For the mythical emperor Zhu Rong cf. Theobald 2000ff, <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Myth/personszhurong.html>.

<sup>45</sup> See *Bianzheng lun* T 2110, 6, 528a, where we find a list of manifestations of Laozi which includes Yu Hua Zi 鬱華子, Lu Hui Zi 錄回子, and Fu Yu Zi 傅豫子.

according to [the needs of] the times, manifest and obscured [in turn], without limits; I will not explain all this in detail now.

Therefore, the *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: “The people in the world say that Laozi must have first appeared in the Zhou dynasty, [but] the names of Laozi began innumerable world ages ago, [Laozi’s origin is] really very remote and obscure, vague and long ago.”<sup>46</sup>

[The *Xujue*] also says: “Before the beginning [of this world],<sup>47</sup> he [already] descended to be Master of the State, generation for generation without ever ceasing, [but] nobody could recognize him.”<sup>48</sup>

By this we understand how clear it is that Laozi’s coming to the world was not only during the Zhou dynasty. But because these previous world-ages are too far away, we will save [these topics for another time] and not discuss them [here]. Now, we will base [our discussion] on the times that he manifested himself during the Zhou dynasty. Liu Xiang, Xi Kang, and Huangfu Mi<sup>49</sup> all say: “He was born at the end of the Yin dynasty<sup>50</sup> and he was the teacher of King Wen, [the founder of the Zhou dynasty].”

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<sup>46</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 185b. The idea of past appearances, avatars, or incarnations of Laozi matches the concept of the past Buddhas. Compare, however, Assandri 2021, 167–168, arguing that the avatars of Laozi might also be explained by his association with Heaven and heavenly time, which is characterized by recurrent phenomena. Textual evidence of the concept of Laozi’s avatars or reincarnations goes back to the second century CE.

<sup>47</sup> I assume that this sentence refers to the theory of several world-ages, Skt. *kalpa*. A world-age is a very long time, and upon the end of a world-age the world is destroyed and then begins anew. The concept originated in India, came to China with Buddhism, and was co-opted by the Daoists. Laozi, being born “before Heaven and Earth,” would in this perspective have existed also in previous world-ages, and thus before this world came to being (開辟以前).

<sup>48</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 185b.

<sup>49</sup> Liu Xiang (78–8 BCE, see Emmerich 2016, 135) is considered author of the *Liexian zhuan* (DZ 294); see *ibid*, 1, 4b. Xi Kang (223–262 CE) authored a now-lost text called *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳, and Huangfu mi (215–282 CE) also wrote a *Gaoshi zhuan*. The former has survived in some fragments only, while the latter has survived in an edition that does not seem to be the original version but a later compilation. See Robinet 1977, 237.

<sup>50</sup> “Yin dynasty” is another name for the Shang dynasty, which is traditionally assumed to have ended in the eleventh century BCE; it was conquered by the Zhou dynasty.

The *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: “Laozi descended in the first year of the reign era Shanghuang 上皇<sup>51</sup> in the Jupiter-year *dingmao*<sup>52</sup> on the twelfth day of the first month, which was a *bingwu* day [according to the traditional sexagenarian counting] to become the teacher of the Zhou dynasty.”<sup>53</sup> Since he became a teacher of King Wen, [the founder of the Zhou dynasty], in principle he must have been born at the end of the Yin dynasty. Therefore his descent to become the teacher of the Zhou must have been the *dingmao* year of the Yin dynasty.

The *Wenshi neizhuan* (*Inner Biography of Master Wenshi*)<sup>54</sup> and the *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) by the Transcendent Duke [Ge Xuan] both say: “Laozi left the Zhou in the first year of the Wuji 無極 reign period in the *guichou* year in the fifth month on a *renwu* day to go west [to cross the pass].”<sup>55</sup>

But many exegetes say that [Laozi] left [the country], crossing the [Hangu] pass in the time of King You [of the Zhou dynasty, said to have reigned 781–771 BCE]. This is not reliable. Why? Now, [if we] inspect this, King You ascended the throne in the *gengjia* year. After he had been on the throne for eleven years, he was vanquished by the [Western] Quanrong [people]. Within these eleven years there is ultimately no *guichou* year; seven years earlier there was a *gengchou* year, but that was then during the time of King Xuan (said to have reigned 827–781 BCE).

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<sup>51</sup> This reign period, as well as Wuji in the following sentence, are fictional reign titles.

<sup>52</sup> This and several following Chinese terms composed of two characters (*dingmao* 丁卯, *bingwu* 丙午, *guichou* 癸丑, *renwu* 壬午) refer to the traditional Chinese sexagenary cycle, which was one of several ways used to denote time. See Needham and Wang 1959, 396–400. For an easily accessible survey of this system see e.g. Theobald 2000ff, <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Terms/calendar.html>.

<sup>53</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 186a.

<sup>54</sup> For the *Wenshi neizhuan* see above, footnote 10.

<sup>55</sup> See *Laozi Daode jing Xujue*, ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 186a. For the *Wenshi neizhuan* quotation, see *Sandong zhunang* (DZ 1139, 8, 28b), which cites this now-lost text.

Furthermore, the *Guoyu* (*Discourses of the States*) says: “In the second year of King You, the Three Rivers quaked and Mount Qi collapsed. Father Boyang said: The Zhou dynasty will perish in less than ten years.”<sup>56</sup> If Laozi had left and crossed the Pass in the time of King Xuan, then he could not have witnessed the Three Rivers quaking and Mount Qi collapsing. Shortly after, King Ping, named Yi Jiu (r. 770–720 BCE), moved the capital eastwards to Luo. He ascended the throne in a *xinwei* year, and it was after forty-three years that he was on the throne that there was a *guichou* year. According to the *Yuwei* [*Catalogue*]<sup>57</sup> it says: “At this time he left [China] through the pass.”

Zang Xuanjing<sup>58</sup> said: “In the West he left, crossing the Long pass,” as if this was during the years that King You was in Chang’an, [but] I am afraid this is wrong. Since he left during the time of King Ping, crossing the pass, then it must be that he left westwards through the Hangu pass.<sup>59</sup> Therefore the *Chusai ji* (*Record of [Laozi] Travelling beyond the Borders*)<sup>60</sup> says: “He left, crossing the Hangu pass westwards.” The Hangu pass is ten miles south of today’s Taolin district in Shanzhou, where there is the old pass gate, which is it.

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<sup>56</sup> See *Guoyu* 1, §10. The same story is also related in the *Shiji*, Zhou Benji, §36.

<sup>57</sup> This refers to the *Yuwei jingshu mu* 玉緯經書目, a catalogue from the fifth century, where the Daoist scriptures are ordered in seven categories. It is ascribed to “Master Meng,” which—according to Chen Guofu 1963, vol. 1, 4, and Lu Guolong 1993, 37f—refers to the Daoist Meng Zhizhou 孟智周. Qing Xitai 1988, vol. 1, 545–546, instead assumes the title “Master Meng” as author of the *Yuwei* might refer to the Daoist Meng Jingyi 孟景翼. Cf. Assandri 2004, 560–564 about this catalogue and the two Masters Meng. Meng Zhizhou 孟智周 was from Danyang 丹陽, near the southern Capital of Nanjing. Danyang had been, at the end of the fourth and in the beginning of the fifth century, the birthplace of the *Shangqing* and the *Lingbao* scriptures. Meng Zhizhou taught around the end of the fifth and the first third of the sixth century CE in the capital Jiankang (Nanjing) at the Chongxu guan 崇虛觀, a temple that had been founded by the emperor Song Wendi for the famous Daoist master Lu Xiujing 陸修靜. Meng Jingyi was probably slightly older than Meng Zhizhou, and he hailed from Shandong, but was active in the south at the end of the fifth century CE. See Bumbacher 2000, 221. Schipper and Verellen (2004, 20) note that “Master Meng,” to whom the Catalogue is attributed, is in one instance also identified as Meng Anpai 孟安排, author of the *Daojiao yishu* (DZ 1129). This attribution seems less convincing because Meng Anpai lived rather late; he was active around 700 CE.

<sup>58</sup> For Zang Xuanjing 臧玄靜, see above, note 26.

<sup>59</sup> I assume that Hangu 函穀 is a copyist error or an alternative writing for Hangu 函谷, which is the name of the pass Laozi is said to have crossed when he left China.

<sup>60</sup> *Chusai ji* 出塞記 refers to *Laojun chusai ji* 老君出塞記, a now-lost account of Laozi travelling westward, which according to Robinet 1977, 238 note 5, was proscribed in 1281 CE because it was part of the conversion (*huahu*) literature.

If we investigate this further, then before Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty (r. 179–156 BCE) [the counting of years of the reign periods of emperors] simply said “first year,” “second year,” [etc.], but there were no other reign titles. Only since the time of Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 140–87 BCE) are there reign titles like Yuanding (reign title for 116–110 BCE) or Yuanshuo (reign title for 128–122 BCE).

When now the *Xujue (Preface to the Daode jing)* says that Laozi came down [to this world] in the first year of the Shanghuang 上皇 reign to become the teacher of the Zhou [dynasty rulers], and in the first year of the Wuji 無極 reign he left the Zhou to go west, then this is taking human times and attributing to them a heavenly reign title. The principle is not something that the common people can understand, just like the reign titles Zhuling 朱靈 or Kaihuang 開皇 which [we find] in the scriptures.<sup>61</sup>

The *Chusai ji (Record of [Laozi] Travelling beyond the Borders)*, the *Xuanmiao neipian (The Inner Chapters of Mystery and Wonder)*<sup>62</sup> and the *Wenshi neizhuan (Inner Biography of Master Wenshi)* all say that the guardian of the pass, Yin Xi, foresaw a purple cloud moving westward, and thereby knew that a Man of Dao would be passing by. And indeed in the same year on the twentieth-fifth day of the twelfth month Laozi, riding in a cart made of thin boards and pulled by a greenish ox, driven by his servant Xu Jia, arrived at the pass. On the twenty-eighth day at noon he transmitted the two scrolls of the *Daode jing* to Yin Xi. When he was about to leave, he also orally

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<sup>61</sup> Fictitious ‘reign titles’ or rather names of world-ages (*kalpas*) called Zhuling 朱靈 and Kaihuang 開皇 can be found in several Daoist texts. The concept of *kalpas* or world-ages, which will last for a very long time but eventually will be destroyed and then give way to a new world-age, was adopted in Daoism from its Buddhist precursor model. Cf. Bokenkamp 2008, 545 and Kohn 1995, 124f and 222. The designations of the *kalpas* vary between texts; Zhuling is not mentioned in Kohn 1995 or Bokenkamp 2008, but it appears among others in *Sandong zhunang* DZ 1139, 8, 28a.

<sup>62</sup> About this text, see footnote 2 above.



transmitted the *Xisheng [jing]* (*Scripture of Western Ascension*).<sup>63</sup> After he finished this, he manifested his supernatural power and levitated in the air several tens of feet high, appearing and disappearing, indefinable, old and young always changing. Thereupon he went to Kashmir, where he adapted his teaching to the capacities [of the local people] and went to convert [them]. This is why Huangfu Mi (215–282 CE) says: “Laozi went west to the desert and wrote a ‘Buddha scripture’ to change the customs of the Rong people.”<sup>64</sup> The *Wenshi neizhuan* (*Inner Biography of Master Wenshi*) also says: “Laozi left, crossing the pass. He travelled to eighty-one states, and after he reached Kashmir he converted the barbarians.”

From the time when the purple cloud floated over the pass, and the green oxen went west, Lord Lao returned altogether three times to be born in China again.

The first time: If we investigate Confucius, he was born in the twenty-first year of King Ling of the Zhou dynasty (551 BCE), which was a *gengxu* year, in the tenth month on a *gengzi* day at night, and he treated Lord Lao as his teacher and asked him to study the Dao from him. Therefore, the *Shiji* [*Records of the Historian*] quotes him as saying: “I saw Laozi today. He is really a dragon!”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the [*Kongzi*] *Jiayu* [*Family Instructions of Confucius*] says: “Lao Dan from Zhou is my teacher.”<sup>66</sup>

The second time: In the time of King Nan [the last ruler of the Zhou dynasty (r. 315–256 BCE)], he transmitted to Gan Shi the *Taiping jing* and the eighty-one precepts, as the

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<sup>63</sup> About the *Xisheng jing*, see above, note 7.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Robinet 1977, 240, note 2. She points out that a similar sentence is also cited in Falin’s *Bianzheng lun* (T 2110, 5, 522b) but neither does figure in our transmitted version of Huangfu Mi’s *Gaoshi zhuan*.

<sup>65</sup> See *Shiji*, 63: “Biography of Laozi and Han Feizi” (老子韓非列傳), §2.

<sup>66</sup> *Jiayu* refers to the *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 by Wang Su 王肅 (195–256 CE), a collection of statements by Confucius intended to serve as a supplement to the *Analects* (*Lunyu*). The passage is quoted in an abbreviated form; see *Kongzi jiayu*, 3, “Guan zhou” (觀周), 1a. Cf. ctext, *Kongzi jiayu*, 11, 1.

essential guideline for ordering the country, ordering the self, and nourishing and cultivating [oneself].<sup>67</sup>

The third time was in Sichuan during the Han'an reign period (142–144 CE) [of the Han dynasty], when he transmitted the awe-inspiring teaching of the Orthodox One to the Heavenly Master. At that time he descended on a cloud chariot floating in the air among the sounds of flutes and drums. He called himself the Archivist of the Zhou dynasty, sent by Taishang.<sup>68</sup>

But his miraculous power is immeasurable, and he responds to stimuli limitlessly, sometimes manifesting the appearance of a sage, and sometimes showing the trace-manifestation of a commoner. His thousand changes and ten thousand transformations are beyond conceptualization—how could one with the perspective of the short life of the morning mushroom speak about the long life of the great rose of Sharon (*da chun* 大椿)!<sup>69</sup>

If we investigate the inner [Daoist] and the outer [secular] scriptures, then there are extremely numerous proofs. They all say he converted the Rong and Yi [people] in the west, and ultimately there is no [concrete] manifest trace of his death. Only Zhuang Zhou (i.e., Zhuangzi) said that “when Lao Dan died, Qin Shi went to mourn him.”<sup>70</sup> This seems to be just hypothetical talk, [because Zhuangzi] wants to explain that [for Laozi] the ways of life and death are equal for all,

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<sup>67</sup> According to Robinet 1977, 241 note 3, Gan Shi refers to Gan Ji 干吉, possibly also called Yu Ji 于吉, who has been named as the recipient of the *Taiping jing* at the end of Han dynasty in several Daoist texts. Cf. Penny (2008, 433) for a concise discussion.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Robinet 1977, 241, who assumes Taishang refers to Taishang Daojun.

<sup>69</sup> This refers to the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (HY 1/1/10 and HY 1/1/12). Cf. Watson (2013, 2): “The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. They are the short-lived. South of Chu there is a caterpillar which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. Long, long ago there was a great rose of Sharon that counted eight thousand years as one spring and eight thousand years as one autumn.”

<sup>70</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 3 (HY 8/3/14); cf. Watson 2013, 20.

and the principle of the sage and commoner vanish into unity. Just like the talk of Hong Meng (Great Concealment) and Yun Jiang (Cloud Chief),<sup>71</sup> this passage [of the *Zhuangzi*] must be “imputed words.”<sup>72</sup>

Today, in the Zhouzhi District in Yongzhou [in Shaanxi province] there is the Louguan [temple], which is the old residence of the Perfected Yin [i.e., Yin Xi, the guardian of the pass]. South of this residence there is a tomb mound, which is called tomb-mound of Laozi. The common people’s tradition says this is the tomb of Lord Lao<sup>73</sup>—that is the pinnacle of lies! It is the case that a tomb is a place of burial. Since there are no manifest traces of the death of Lord Lao, how would there be a tomb? It must be that it is from this mountain that he levitated westwards, and later generations in praising the sage’s Virtue called the place Laozi’s tomb-mound. Furthermore, during the Zhou dynasty Lord Lao was living in disguise in a humble position. Even if he would have had a tomb, it could reasonably not have been tall. Now if we look today at this tomb-mound, it is several thousand feet tall and has a perimeter of several hundred feet, even if one had the state resources of an emperor or king, I am afraid one still could not make it like that. From this we can conclude that certainly [this mound] is clearly not a tomb.

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<sup>71</sup> This refers to a passage in *Zhuangzi* chapter 11 (HY 27/11/44); cf. Watson 2013, 79–81.

<sup>72</sup> “Imputed Words” is the title of chapter 27 of the *Zhuangzi*. Cf. Watson (2013, 234): “Imputed words make up nine tenths of it; repeated words make up seven tenths of it; goblet words come forth day after day, harmonizing things in the Heavenly Equality. These imputed words which make up nine tenths of it are like persons brought in from outside for the purpose of exposition. A father does not act as go-between for his own son because the praises of the father would not be as effective as the praises of an outsider. It is the fault of other men, not mine [that I must resort to such a device, for if I were to speak in my own words], then men would respond only to what agrees with their own views and reject what does not, would pronounce ‘right’ what agrees with their own views and ‘wrong’ what does not.”

I assume that Cheng argues here that Qin Shi, and the whole story about mourning Laozi, is being brought up by *Zhuangzi* only for the purpose of making a point on the question of the unity of the ways of life and death and the conceptions of commoner and sage. In this, it is comparable to the other rather fantastic story of Hong Meng and Yu Jiang. Therefore, being brought up only for the purpose of explicating an argument, it should be clear that there is no historical reality to the story, and thus it cannot serve as an argument to prove that Laozi died within the territory of the Zhou (or China).

<sup>73</sup> This tomb is mentioned in Dao Xuan’s *Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng* T 2104, 4, 391c12. See also Zürcher 1959, 290 and 428, note 12 referring to *Shuijing zhu* 19, 1b, where this is mentioned as well.

## 5. His Place of Origin

According to the *Xuanmiao neipian* (*The Inner Chapters of Mystery and Wonder*) and the *Chusai ji* (*Record of [Laozi] Travelling beyond the Borders*), Ge Zhichuan (i.e., Ge Hong, 283–343 CE) and Huangfu Mi (215–282 CE) both say that Lord Lao was born in the village Quren 曲仁 of the township Lai 瀨 in the district Ku 苦 in the state of Chen 陳, on the southern side<sup>74</sup> of the river Wo 渦. But among those who speak about this, there are some who say [he was born] in the state of Chu 楚, some say in the district of Chu 楚, some say in the prefecture Chen 陳, and some say in province of Yu (Yuzhou 豫州).<sup>75</sup>

Examining it, Chu 楚 was first given as a fief to Xiong Yi.<sup>76</sup> His lands then were turned over to Chu, therefore it is called the state of Chu. Furthermore, in the days of the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), a district was a large unit, and a prefecture was a small unit; so a prefecture would be part of a district; therefore [the texts] say the district of Chu.

Chen 陳 simply refers to what was once the territory of [the legendary emperor] Taihao.<sup>77</sup> The capital was near Wanqiu [in today's Zhoukou in Henan]. According to the nine provinces which

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<sup>74</sup> The term *yin* 陰 refers according to HYDCD to the northern side of a mountain or the southern side of a river.

<sup>75</sup> Yuzhou was in ancient times the name of the province south of the Yellow river.

<sup>76</sup> Xiong Yi was the regional ruler of the state of Chu during the time of King Cheng of the Zhou dynasty (trad. r. 1116–1079 BCE). See *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*) 40, Chu shijia 楚世家, 3. Cf. Theobald 2000ff *Chinaknowledge* (URL: <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Zhou/rulers-chu.html>): “In the early decades of the Zhou period, King Cheng of Zhou 周成王 (r. 1116–1079 BCE) made the family Mi regional rulers over the country of Chu in the middle Yangtze valley. From that time on they adopted the family name Mi, yet the rulers retained the surname Xiong. Xiong might also be a prefix of the personal name worn by all members of the family. In the late 11th century King Zhao of Zhou 周昭王 undertook several military campaigns against Chu during one of which he died, while his own army drowned in the River Han. The rulers of Chu called themselves ‘king’ (*wang* 王) and therefore demonstrated that they were actually not part of the system of regional states of the Zhou empire. Yu Xiong's great-grandson Xiong Yi 熊繹 settled near Mt. Jingshan 荆山 (modern Nanzhang 南漳, Hubei) and, after being appointed regional ruler (*zhuhou* 諸侯) by King Cheng of Zhou, moved to Danyang 丹陽 (modern Zigui 秭歸, Hubei).”

<sup>77</sup> Taihao 太皞 is identified with the legendary emperor Fuxi (see Robinet 1977, 243).

[the legendary emperor] Yu [established by] dividing [the land after the great flood], this is in the part of Yuzhou (Yu Province), and therefore [some] say [Laozi's birthplace] is in Yuzhou. And furthermore, after King Wu [of the Zhou dynasty] launched his punitive expedition [and overthrew] King Zhou [the last king of the Shang dynasty], he gave Chen as a fief to Hu Gongman, the descendant of [the legendary emperor] Shun, in order to adhere completely to the *sanke* [regulation].<sup>78</sup> Therefore it is called the state of Chen.

When emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty (r. 206–194 BCE) vanquished the Qin dynasty, he changed [the name of] the state of Chen to Huaiyang 淮陽 prefecture. At that time, the prefecture was a large unit, and the district was a smaller unit. Therefore, there were the four districts Yangxia 陽夏, Ningping 寧平, Ku 苦, and Zhe 柘,<sup>79</sup> which all belonged to Huaiyang [prefecture]. Later, in the time of emperor Zhang of the Han (r. 76–89 CE), Huaiyang was again named Chen prefecture. Thus even though due to changes over time the names are not the same, the place to which they refer is just this one.

Emperor Huan of the Han dynasty (r. 147–168 CE) saw Laozi in his dream, so he ordered the minister of Chen, Bian Shao (ca. 100 – ca. 170 CE) to erect a memorial stele and establish a temple in the place where Lord Lao was born.<sup>80</sup> Next to the temple there is the Temple for Mother Li, and the Hall of Empty Nonbeing. To the left there is the rivulet Ling, and on the right meanders the Wo river. Front and back, in both its prominent and secluded parts, it is a uniquely wonderful place.

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<sup>78</sup> The *sanke* 三恪 regulation was instated by the Zhou dynasty and it required giving fiefs to the descendants of the three previous kings. This refers to a passage in the *Zuo zhuan*, 25th year of Lord Xiang (襄公二十五年), §2.

<sup>79</sup> Robinet (1977, 244 note 1) says she reads Tuo 托 instead of 拓. However, the *Zhonghua Daozang* edition (vol. 9, no. 14, 230b) reads Zhe 柘, not Tuo 拓. The *Hanshu*, 地理志, 下, (56–57) lists nine districts (*xian* 縣) as belonging to the state Huaiyang: 淮陽國: Chen 陳, Ku 苦, Yangxia 陽夏, Ningping 寧平, Fugou 扶溝, Gushi 固始, Yu 圉, Xiping 新平, and Zhe 柘. Therefore I assume *tu* 拓 should read Zhe 柘.

<sup>80</sup> This refers to the well-known stele inscription *Laozi ming* 老子銘 dated to 166 CE, discussed in Raz (2012, 86) and Kohn (1998, 39f). A translation of the stele inscription can be found in Csikszentmihalyi 2006, 105–112.

In the eleventh year of the Zhenguan period of the Tang dynasty (637 CE), an imperial edict stated that because the ancestral lineage of the imperial family is descended from Lord Lao, the temple should be given twenty households<sup>81</sup> in charge of repairing the temple premises.

When Huangfu Mi said that Laozi was “a Xiang (相) person” in the state of Chu, this refers to the town of Xiang to the north of today’s temple. Therefore we know that this Xiang is used as a geographical name, and not as an official title [i.e., the rank of Xiang, which is typically rendered in English as “Prime Minister”].

## [Part 2]

After this, now I will show the correct teaching he has taught [in the *Daode jing*].

I will again [like in the first part above] explain this in five separate parts:

1. Dao and Virtue
2. Explaining [the Term] *Jing* (Scripture)
3. The Principle and the Substance
4. The Number of Characters
5. The Divisions in Chapters and Scrolls

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<sup>81</sup> Just like Buddhist temples, Daoist temples could be given “temple households”—households who would not pay taxes to the state but offer maintenance and a workforce for the temple.

## 1. Dao and Virtue

Dao (道) is the perfectly penetrating wondrous object, and Virtue (*de* 德) is the sage wisdom<sup>82</sup> of ultimate forgetting. If there were no object, there would be nothing to guide the cognition (*zhi* 智). If there were no [subjective] cognition, there would be nothing to illuminate [and understand] the object. Object and [subjective] cognition meet each other,<sup>83</sup> therefore [the text] is called “Dao and Virtue” (*Daode*). So the object is what is cognized, and cognition is [cognition of] the object. They are not one and not different, yet different and yet one. Therefore the *Xisheng jing* [*Scripture of Western Ascension*] says: “Dao and Virtue are mixed [as primordial chaos]. They are the same in terms of mystery and wondrousness.”<sup>84</sup>

In addition, since ancient times there are extremely different explanations of Dao. Now I will present a general outline, and explain the meaning in five separate parts. These five are:

First, an explanation regarding the interpretation of the words [of the terms “Dao” and “Virtue”].

Second, an explanation of the meaning [of the terms “Dao” and “Virtue”].

Third, an explanation of the relationship [of Dao and Virtue].

Fourth, an explanation of what is signified [by the terms “Dao” and “Virtue”].

Fifth, an explanation of their limitlessness.

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<sup>82</sup> The term *zhi* 智, literally “wisdom,” refers in many places to “cognition” rather than to wisdom.

<sup>83</sup> The expression *jingzhi xianghui* 境智相會 is a citation from the *Commentary to the Zhaolun*, *Zhaolunshu* (X 866, 2, 64b).

<sup>84</sup> See *Xisheng jing jizhu* DZ 726, 4, 10a.

First, an explanation regarding the interpretation of the words:

Dao is nonbeing, Virtue is being. Therefore Wang Bi said: “Dao is nonbeing.”<sup>85</sup> Other exegetes say: “Dao is Dao, and Virtue is Virtue.”<sup>86</sup> Now as for how I explain Dao as a name, it [i.e., “Dao”] “completely elucidates the principle and fully explains the nature [of all being].”<sup>87</sup> One cannot add anything to it, and therefore it is not something that can be exhaustively explained by an explanation of the words of the teaching. I only posit that Dao has Dao as a meaning, and the meaning has many contents, I do not complicate it with trifles and I do not add other explanations.<sup>88</sup> For such a reason Confucius<sup>89</sup> explains the two hexagrams *Xu* (no. 5) and *Jin* (no. 35) in the *Book of Changes*: *Xu* is *Xu* and *Jin* is *Jin*.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Wang Bi, *Daode jing zhu*, chapter 8, 4 (道無水有故曰幾也); cf. Ctext edition: <https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu>.

<sup>86</sup> This sentence is difficult to understand. Isabelle Robinet (1977, 247 note 1) assumes that this is a word-play with the nominal and verbal senses of “Dao” and “Virtue” respectively. It is not clear who the exegetes quoted here are.

<sup>87</sup> *Qiongli jinxing* 窮理盡性 is a citation from the *Book of Changes* (Shuogua 1): “窮理盡性以至於命” (*Zhouyi Zhengyi*, 9, 81c, ed. SSJZS 93c). Cf. Lynn (1994, 120): “He exhausted principles to the utmost and dealt thoroughly with human nature, and in doing so he arrived at the way of fate.” Cf. Ctext: <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/shuogua>. The term appears also in the preface and in chapters 1 (1.4.D), 37 (37.2.C) and 64 (64.4.E) of Cheng Xuanying’s *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*.

<sup>88</sup> It seems to me that Cheng Xuanying is pointing out here that “Dao” is too big and all-embracing a word to be explained in small details. In other words, the referent of the word “Dao” is not clearly defined—and not definable—because it is beyond words and names, as the text of the *Daode jing* itself claims. It can be thus thought of as something like a “label” (I thank Eric Hutton for providing this analogy). We might consider here also that in some Western literature the term “Dao” is not translated but left in its *pinyin* transliteration.

<sup>89</sup> Xuan Ni 宣尼 is a name for Confucius derived from the honorific title Xuan Ni Gong 宣尼公, which emperor Ping of Han dynasty conferred upon him in the first year of his reign (1 CE). Cf. *Han shu*, 12, 平帝紀, §10 (<https://ctext.org/han-shu/ping-di-ji>).

<sup>90</sup> It is difficult to understand what Cheng Xuanying is trying to say. Robinet (1977, 245, note 2) assumes that his intention is to point out that an explanation can be a homophonous character. In fact, the “Tuan Zhuan” explanation for Hexagram no. 5, line 1, says 需, 須也. And the “Tuan Zhuan” explanation for Hexagram no. 35, line 1, says 晉, 進也. We should note that while in both cases the characters are homophones (according to Baxter (2000) this was the case also in Middle Chinese) and synonyms, they are not identical as in the text here, which posits identical characters as explanations (須, 須也; 晉, 晉也). So, it seems that Cheng Xuanying might be forcing his argument a bit by changing the characters from the “Tuan Zhuan” explanations of the *Book of Changes*. However, we do not know to what extent it might have been common in Tang times to use different characters of the same meaning and pronunciation—also because, as explained in the introduction of the book, the preface and the expository commentary might have started out as oral presentations. It seems that he quotes Confucius here to give authority to a practice of



Second, an explanation of the meaning:

Dao takes emptiness and pervasiveness as its meaning. Virtue received its name because of its [power to] attain and obtain. This is because Dao can pervade the things, and the things can obtain Dao. Discussing [the relation of] Dao and the things in an appropriate manner, they are also not one and not different.

Therefore the scripture says: “Dao as a thing is indistinct and elusive.”<sup>91</sup> And furthermore, *Zhuangzi* says: “If you talk in a worthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to the Dao. But if you talk in an unworthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to mere things.”<sup>92</sup>

Third, an explanation of the relationship:

Dao takes Virtue as its meaning, and Virtue takes Dao as its meaning. This is because if there is no Dao then there is nothing to reach Virtue, and if there is no Virtue then there is nothing to manifest Dao.

There is another explanation: Dao takes the beings (*wu* 物) as its meaning and Virtue takes loss [through death] as its meaning. This is because they manifest mutual dependency.<sup>93</sup>

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explaining one term with a synonymous and homophonous term or—in the case of “Dao” and “Virtue”—a simply identical term.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. *Daode jing*, chapter 21 (21.2.A). The sentence is ambiguous, because it means at the same time “Dao as a thing” and “Dao in relation to the things.” Both meanings seem to be implied as the commentary in 21.2.A indicates. However, I was unable to find a way to render this ambiguity in one English expression.

<sup>92</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 25 (HY 73/25/80–82); cf. Watson 2013, 226. The passage continues: “The perfection of Dao and things—neither words nor silence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent—this is the highest form of debate.” I slightly modified Watson’s translation, exchanging “Way” for “Dao” in the quotation above and the one here.

<sup>93</sup> Here I follow Meng Wentong (2001, 549), who suspects that *dui* 對 might be a copyist error for *dai* 待, and the sentence should be “This is because they manifest mutual dependency.” This correction seems plausible in terms of the content of the passage. While the first part of the argument, which describes how Dao and De take each other as their meanings because their relationship is one of mutual dependency, seems rather straightforward, the second explanation is more enigmatic. I assume that he claims the equivalence of the relation (which is the main theme of the

Fourth, an explanation of what is signified:

Dao takes ‘not-Dao’ as its meaning, and Virtue takes ‘not-Virtue’ as its meaning. The reason why [the scripture] speaks of Dao is to reveal ‘not-Dao,’ and the reason why it speaks of Virtue is to signify ‘not-Virtue.’

Therefore the scripture says: “[The person of] superior Virtue does not attain Virtue, and therefore he has Virtue.”<sup>94</sup> And *Zhuangzi* says: “Discriminations that are not spoken and the Dao that is not Dao—if he can understand this, he may be called the Reservoir of Heaven.”<sup>95</sup> Yan Junping<sup>96</sup> said: “The Dao that is not Dao and the Virtue that is not Virtue are the correct nonbeing.”<sup>97</sup> From this we know that [the scripture] speaks of Dao and speaks of Virtue in order to signify ‘not-Dao’ and ‘not-Virtue.’

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section) of Dao and Virtue to that of beings and loss through death. That is, things or beings necessarily will die, but if there are no beings, there will be no death. Therefore, beings and loss through death are mutually constitutive, and in this sense their relationship is analogous to that of Dao and Virtue.

<sup>94</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 38 (38.1.A).

<sup>95</sup> See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2 (HY 5/2/61). Cf. Watson 2013, 14: “The Great Dao is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken; Great Benevolence is not benevolent; Great Modesty is not humble; Great Daring does not attack. If the Dao is made clear, it is not the Dao. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice. If benevolence has a constant object, it cannot be universal. If modesty is fastidious, it cannot be trusted. If daring attacks, it cannot be complete. These five are all round, but they tend toward the square. Therefore understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest. Who can understand discriminations that are not spoken, the Dao that is not a Dao? If he can understand this, he may be called the Reservoir of Heaven.” (Translation slightly modified by replacing “way” by Dao.)

<sup>96</sup> Yan Junping refers to Yan Zun 嚴尊 (ca. 83 BCE – ca. 6 CE). He is known as an *Yijing* scholar and author of the commentary *Daode jing zhigui*, DZ 693.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Meng 2001, 124-144, for a compilation of surviving passages of Yan Zun’s *Daode zhigui lun* 道德指歸論. Meng lists the line as 不道之道，不德之德，政之元也, presumably following *Yunji qi qian* (DZ 1032, 1, 1b). Du Guangting in his *Daode zhenjing guang shengyi* (DZ 725, 3, 1a) cites the sentence as 不道之道不德之德正之元也. We should note that the characters  *yuan* 元 and  *wu* 无 might be easily confused by a copyist.

Fifth, an explanation of their limitlessness:

The heretical teachings<sup>98</sup> and the correct words all correspond to the self-so. [Even among] panic grass or tiles and shards, there is nothing that is not [a manifestation of] the highest Dao.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, there is nothing where Dao does not exist; it penetrates all that exists. According to the things, it can be round or square, and has never been clinging to anything. Therefore *Zhuangzi* says: “The Dao has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy.”<sup>100</sup>

## 2. Explaining [the Term] *Jing* (Scripture)<sup>101</sup>

If we investigate the honored scriptures of the Three Caverns<sup>102</sup> and the mysterious teaching of the seven sections, and inspect their titles, then they all are designated *jing* 經 (scripture). From this we know that *jing* (scripture) is the general name for the teachings of the dharma,<sup>103</sup> the great

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<sup>98</sup> I assume, following Robinet (1977, 251), that *yejiao* 耶教 is a copyist mistake for *xiejiao* 邪教

<sup>99</sup> This alludes to a passage in *Zhuangzi*, chapter 22 (HY 59/22/45); cf. Watson 2013, 182: “Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, ‘This thing called Dao—where does it exist?’ Zhuangzi said, ‘There’s no place it doesn’t exist.’ ‘Come,’ said Master Dongguo, ‘you must be more specific!’ ‘It is in the ant.’ ‘As low a thing as that?’ ‘It is in the panic grass.’ ‘But that’s lower still!’ ‘It is in the tiles and shards.’ ‘How can it be so low?’ ‘It is in the piss and shit!’ Master Dongguo made no reply. Zhuangzi said, ‘Sir, your questions simply don’t get at the substance of the matter. When Inspector Huo asked the superintendent of the market how to test the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth. But you must not expect to find Dao in any particular place—there is no thing that escapes its presence! Such is the Perfect Way, and so too are the truly great words. ‘Complete,’ ‘universal,’ ‘all-inclusive’—these three are different words with the same meaning. All point to a single reality.’” Translation slightly modified by exchanging “the Way” for “Dao.”

<sup>100</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2 (HY 5/2/55); cf. Watson 2013, 13.

<sup>101</sup> In the Chinese tradition the term *jing* 經, here translated as “scripture,” refers also, and primarily, to the Confucian classics. Etymologically, the term denotes the warp of a loom, which serves as a metaphor for the teachings of the classics. Daoists, and also Buddhists, took the title *jing* for their scriptures, based on the great prestige the title had traditionally.

<sup>102</sup> “Three Caverns” refers to the Daoist canon, which was organized already in the Tang dynasty into a system of seven parts called “Three Caverns and Four Supplements.” For a discussion of the development and structure of the Daoist canon, see Schipper and Verellen 2004, 14f.

<sup>103</sup> The term *fajiao* 法教 is better known as a designation of the Buddhist teachings. However, here it clearly refers to the Daoist teachings.

law from the highest man.<sup>104</sup> The meaning of *jing* (scripture) is great indeed! It is the raft for all the beings.

But there are many different kinds of *jing* (scripture). Overall, there are three:

First, there are the scripts of wondrous *qi* of the Five Virtuous [elements]<sup>105</sup> and the Three Primes,<sup>106</sup> [which formed] cloud seal script congealed in emptiness, and suspended brilliant rays of light in eight directions.

Second are the jade characters on golden slips written with the purple brush in the Forest of Emptiness,<sup>107</sup> wrapped in a cover [decorated] with phoenix script, hidden in the

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<sup>104</sup> *Hongfan* 洪範, “great law,” is also the title of an important chapter of the *Book of History* (*Shujing*). However, here it refers to the great laws or regulations of the Daoist scriptures—written by Lord Lao, who might be intended by the phrase “highest man.”

<sup>105</sup> *Wude* 五德, literally “five Virtues,” refers here to the five elements or “movers” (*wuxing* 五行), namely metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. To keep the word and meaning together I translate “Virtuous [elements].” “Virtuous” is to be understood here as efficacious power, like Virtue.

<sup>106</sup> For “Three Primes” (*sanyuan* 三元) see Robinet (2008, 856): “The Three Primes refer to the original, precosmic pneumas of the world that prefigure its tripartition and also exist on the theological and human levels. In their most fundamental role they represent the three modes of emptiness . . . . These are transformed into divinities (also called *sanyuan*) that rule over the Three Caverns.” See also *Yunji qiqian* (DZ 1032, 7, 1a–b). In the section on the teachings of the *jing* (scriptures) of the Three Caverns, it cites the *Daomen dalun* 道門大論 with an explanation of the origin of these heavenly scriptures: 一者陰陽初分有三元五德八會之氣以成飛天之書後撰爲八龍雲篆明光之章陸先生解三才謂之三元三元既立五行咸具以五行爲五位三五和合謂之八會爲衆書之文又有八龍雲篆明光之章自然飛玄之氣結空成文字方一丈肇於諸天之內生立一切也。

“When the One first split into *yin* and *yang*, there was the pneuma (*qi*) of the Three Primes and the five Virtuous [elements] coming together as eight [i.e., three plus five] to form books that flew in the sky. After, the chapters of the bright light of the cloud script of eight dragons [i.e., the eight directions] were composed. Lu Xiujing [406–477 CE] explained that the three powers [i.e., man, heaven and earth] are called Three Primes. Once the Three Primes were established, the five elements all were completed. Taking the five elements as five positions, three and five were united and this was called the coming together of eight. This formed the characters of all the scriptures. Furthermore, the chapters of the bright lights of the cloud script of the eight dragons by themselves flew up in dark mystery (*xuan*) *qi*, and coagulating in emptiness they formed text characters of the size of a *zhang* (ten feet). Written inside all the heavens, they generated and established everything.” Compare Bokenkamp (1997, 422) for a translation of the *Scripture of Salvation* (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing* DZ 1) with a description of the origin of the *Lingbao* scriptures that contains many of the elements described here. The text in *Yunji qiqian* continues to list other, more or less similar explanations of the terms. *Dongxuan lingbao xuanmen dayi* 洞玄靈寶玄門大義 (DZ 1124, 7a–b) relates the same passage.

<sup>107</sup> The “Forest of Emptiness,” *konglin* 空林, figures in *Dongxuan lingbao xuanmen dayi* 洞玄靈寶玄門大義 (DZ 1124, 12b) as one place where the sacred charts, *lingtu* 靈圖, one type of Daoist scriptures, are stored. Robinet (1977, 253 note 1) assumes that Cheng might refer here to *kongqing* 空情, a forest in the highest Heaven of Jade Clarity (*yuqing* 玉清), mentioned in *Yunji qiqian* (DZ 1032, 8, 3a) and in *Hunyuan shengji* (DZ 770, 2, 10a), where it is said that in the *kongqing* forest, purple characters appear and form texts.

mysterious dark terrace of the seven treasures, or else in mountain caves, or else above all the heavens.

Third are the scriptures written on bamboo slips or sheets of fine silk in seal script or in clerical script,<sup>108</sup> depending on the times; these are transmitted everywhere, and can be seen in circulation in [this] world.

Even though there are these three different trace-manifestations, whose coarseness or subtlety is not the same, however, they are all words of sages and they equally testify to the highest principle. They all can heal diseases, and they all can be said to be good medicines.

But for the semantic explanation of [the term] *jing* (scripture), there are also many ways. Presenting its principles, there are in short four explanations.

These said four [explanations] are: 1. Source; 2. Path; 3. Dharma; and 4. Constancy.

The first explanation [for the term *jing* (scripture)] is “source.” This means that among the Heavenly Worthies of the three worlds, and the Highest of the ten directions, there was never one who did not attain to complete Dao using these *jing* (scriptures) as one’s source.

The second explanation [for the term *jing* (scripture)] is “path.” This says that [the scripture] can open up to and penetrate the ten thousand things, guide the four kinds of

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<sup>108</sup> “Seal script” refers to the style of writing that was used for inscriptions when the first emperor Qin Shihuangdi, who united China in 221 BCE, unified the script of the territories under his control. The designation “seal script” was used probably in retrospective, because this type of script was used mainly for inscriptions, like seals and other artefacts. It is also called “smaller seal script,” to differentiate it from the various regional styles of writing current before then, which are sometimes called “large seal script.” “Clerical script” refers to a kind of more cursive—and thus easier to write—form of calligraphy, which was used in every-day communications and written with a brush since the time of the Qin dynasty as well.

living things<sup>109</sup> to reach perfection and serve as a ferry for the practitioners; this is the essential path for cultivating the true.

The third explanation [for the term *jing* (scripture)] is “dharma-law.” This means that the purport [of the scripture] is mysterious and marvelous. Subject and object<sup>110</sup> are both subtle; [and therefore, such a *jing* (scripture)] can serve as regulation for all the beings, and as a model for all the sages.

The fourth explanation [for the term *jing* (scripture)] is “constancy.” This says it is not only that the principle is profound and remote, still and towering tall, but it is also an art [of governing] which ten thousand generations and hundred [successive] kings cannot alter.

[The text of the *Daode jing*] possesses all these four meanings, therefore it is called *jing* (scripture).

And speaking about the *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*), a *xu* (introduction) is an explanation (*shu* 述), and a *jue* (instruction) is a cutting off (*jue* 絕) [of alternatives]. The *xu* (introduction) explains the intentions of the sage and the *jue* (instruction) cuts off the doubts of the students. The *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) says: “The ones who create it may be called sages; the ones who transmit it may be called intelligent.”<sup>111</sup> The Transcendent Duke [Ge Xuan] has the Virtue of

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<sup>109</sup> The four kinds of beings are (1) the viviparous, like mammals, (2) the oviparous, like birds; (3) the water-born, fish, and (4) the metamorphic, like silk moths.

<sup>110</sup> “Subject and object” translates *neng suo* 能所, which refers here presumably to the cognizing subject and the object of the cognition, which in this case is Dao. I assume that the idea of this paragraph is that the person who reaches Dao—by means of the scripture—reaches all-embracing “mysterious and marvelous” mystic unity, which implies also the unity of subject and object.

<sup>111</sup> *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) 19, “Yue ji,” §13. Cf. Ctext: <https://ctext.org/liji/yue-ji>. Translations of the terms *zuo* (“make,” “create”) and *shu* (“transmit,” “explain”) vary. In the *Liji* the verbs refer to music. However, the same wording appears in reference to texts in the famous saying of Confucius in the *Analects*, chapter 7 “Shu er” (cf. Ctext: <https://ctext.org/analects/shu-er>): 述而不作, “I transmit but do not create.” The reference is quite apt, because it seems that the *Preface* of Ge Xuan served as a text that played a role in the transmission of the *Daode jing* from Daoist masters to their disciples.

sageliness and intelligence, and therefore he created the *Xu[jue]* (*Preface to the Daode jing*)<sup>112</sup> in order to transmit [and explain]<sup>113</sup> the gist of the *jing* (scripture).

### 3. The Principle and the Substance<sup>114</sup>

With regard to explaining the meaning and interpreting the scripture [i.e., the *Daode jing*], one should know about the guiding principles. However, the commentaries and sub-commentaries of past and present are all different in spirit.

Thus, Yan Junping's 嚴君平<sup>115</sup> [*Daode jing*] *Zhigui* (*Pointers to the Daode jing*) took mysterious emptiness (*xuanxu* 玄虛) as the principle. Gu Zhengjun's 顧徵君<sup>116</sup> *Tanggao* 堂誥<sup>117</sup> [commentary to the *Daode jing*] took non-action (*wuwei* 無為) as the principle. Meng Zhizhou 孟智周<sup>118</sup> and Zang Xuanjing 臧玄靜<sup>119</sup> took Dao and Virtue as the principle. Emperor Wu of Liang

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<sup>112</sup> I follow Meng Wentong (2001, 550), who suspects that the character *jue* 訣 is missing after *xu* 序, and the reference should be to the *Xujue* 序訣.

<sup>113</sup> I translate the term *shu* 述 as “transmit” in keeping with the citations from the *Liji* and the *Analects*. However, *shu* can also mean “explain,” which seems to be foregrounded here. Therefore, I add “[explain].”

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Robinet (1977, 255). She interprets the title *zongti* 宗體 as “the schools,” reading *zongti* as a subordinated compound (“the substance of the principle”), like in the Buddhist interpretation of the term “the essence of the doctrine” (DDB Muller, *zongti*). While this makes sense here, we should note that in the last paragraph Cheng Xuanying pulls the term apart into two terms, which would suggest the relation between *zong* and *ti* rather to be one of coordination (“principle and substance”) than one of subordination. Therefore, I read *zong* as “principle” and *ti* as “substance” [of a teaching]. We should also keep in mind that the different authors listed seem to be rather proponents of different approaches to the text than representatives of different schools of thought.

<sup>115</sup> For Yan Junping, also called Yan Zun 嚴尊 (ca. 83 BCE – ca. 6 CE), see above, note 96.

<sup>116</sup> Gu Zhengjun refers to Gu Huan 顧歡 (420/428–483/491). There is a compilation of *Daode jing* commentaries ascribed to Gu Huan, titled *Daode zhenjing zhushu* (DZ 710). However, since it cites also Cheng Xuanying's and the Tang Emperor Xuanzong's commentaries, it must be a later compilation.

<sup>117</sup> Lu Deming (ca. 550–630), in his *Jingdian shiwen*, 1, 65, lists also among the commentaries to the *Daode jing* a *Tanggao* in four scrolls by Gu Huan and adds that it is also called *Laozi yishu* 老子義疏.

<sup>118</sup> For Meng Zhizhou see above, note 57.

<sup>119</sup> For Zang Xuanjing see above, note 26.

dynasty (r. 502–549 CE) took ‘not being and not nonbeing’ as the principle. Sun Deng 孫登 of the Jin dynasty (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) said that one should rely on Twofold Mystery (*chongxuan* 重玄) for the principle. Although all these commentators are different, today, I consider Mister Sun as correct. It is appropriate to take Twofold Mystery as the principle (*zong* 宗), and non-action (*wuwei* 無為) as the substance (*ti* 體).

What is meant in saying “mystery” (*xuan* 玄) is a designation of the profound and remote, and it also means not hindered by attachments.<sup>120</sup> [Mystery] is exceedingly profound and exceedingly remote, not hindered by attachments and not clinging. [It refers to a state of] non-attachment to being and non-attachment to nonbeing. How could it be only no attachment to attachment? It means also no attachment to non-attachment! The hundred negations and the four statements<sup>121</sup>—there is nothing to be attached to. This then is called Twofold Mystery. Therefore the scripture says: “Mysterious and mysterious again, this is the door to all marvels.”<sup>122</sup> The *Yinjue song* (*Hymn of the Secret Oral Instructions*)<sup>123</sup> says: “Mysterious and mysterious is the principle of the highest Dao. The substance of superior Virtue is the great beginning.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> The term *buzhi* 不滯 means both “not hindered” and “not having attachments.”

<sup>121</sup> *Baifei* 百非, “the hundred negations,” and *siju* 四句, “the four statements” (*tetralemma*), are technical terms used in Buddhist Madhyamika thought to describe the process of continued negation, which leads arguments of opponents ad absurdum, and the practicing adept to the realization of ultimate emptiness. See p. 14–20 of the Introduction to the translation of *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying* (Assandri 2021), and the commentaries to the chapters 32 (32.1.A) and 79 (79.2.A). See also Assandri (2009, 92–93).

<sup>122</sup> See *Daode jing*, chapter 1 (1.4.C–D).

<sup>123</sup> This refers to the hymn which is part of the *Taiji yinjue* 太極隱訣 appended at the end of the *Xujue*. See Yan Lingfeng 1983, 279, and the edition of the *Xujue* in ZD vol. 9, no. 9, 186c.

<sup>124</sup> The “great beginning” (*hongyuan* 洪元) refers in Daoism to the time before Heaven and Earth separated, when all was primeval chaos.



But that I say non-action (*wuwei*) [should be taken as the substance] is because [one should] be a mirror of the sentient beings, and “treat the ten thousand things like straw dogs.”<sup>125</sup> Even though one “rambles to the end of the eight directions, yet one’s spirit and bearing undergo no change.”<sup>126</sup> Therefore the action is then non-action, and non-action is then action—how could non-action (*wuwei*) mean just cupping one’s hands in front of one’s breast and being silent?

Therefore the scripture says: “One decreases it and decreases it again, in order to reach the state of non-action.”<sup>127</sup> And it also says: “Dao is constantly without action (*wuwei*), and yet nothing remains undone.”<sup>128</sup> The *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: “The text of non-action [i.e., the *Daode jing*] is such that sullyng it<sup>129</sup> will not make it disgraced, and embellishing it will not make it glorious.”<sup>130</sup>

#### 4. The Number of Characters

Having investigated when the greenish ox [pulling the cart] began the travels and the purple cloud floated over the pass, and the Perfected Yin Xi [the guardian of the pass] personally received the sage’s legacy, it must be that on that day he received only five thousand characters.

[It is] for this reason that the *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: “Upon this [request from Yin Xi], he wrote the two volumes of ‘Dao and Virtue,’ the scripture in five thousand characters

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<sup>125</sup> For this reference, see *Daode jing*, chapter 5 (5.1.A and 5.1.B).

<sup>126</sup> This is a citation from *Zhuangzi*, chapter 21 (HY 57/21/61). Cf. Watson (2013, 174): “The Perfect Man may stare at the blue heavens above, dive into the Yellow Springs below, ramble to the end of the eight directions, yet his spirit and bearing undergo no change.”

<sup>127</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 48 (48.2.A).

<sup>128</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 37 (37.1.A).

<sup>129</sup> I follow Robinet (1977, 257), Meng (2001, 551), and a manuscript fragment of the text (S 1585) here reading *wu* 汙, “stagnant water, mud, impurities,” instead of *han* 汗, “sweat.” See ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 187a, note 7.

<sup>130</sup> *Xujue*, see ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 185c.

in two parts.”<sup>131</sup> From this we know that the five thousand characters were first a fixed number. When later people transmitted [the text], time and again alterations occurred.

I note that the Heshang gong edition has 540 more characters, which are mostly exclamatory words like *xi* 兮 (“ah”) or *hu* 乎 (“oh”). It must be that in according to the circumstances and responding to the beings, [Heshang gong] therefore embellished the words [of the original *Daode jing*]. But [also] eminent scholars and retired gentlemen praised his work a lot, and [together with] people who like the unusual, they all added and mixed [words into the text], such that subsequently a fish-eye would be confounded with a precious pearl, and jade and [ordinary] stone could not be distinguished.

The Transcendent Duke of Highest Ultimate [i.e., Ge Xuan] wanted to revere the root and restrain [the uncontrolled growth of] the branches,<sup>132</sup> and so he showed that the original text had only five thousand characters. Therefore the *Xujue* (*Preface to the Daode jing*) says: “I personally have examined and corrected [the text] in all the heavens, and have obtained the original text of the sage [Lord Lao].”<sup>133</sup>

The text which we preach and recite today relies in large part on the version of Ge [Xuan]. But the characters of this version of Ge [Xuan] also have errors and oversights. These must in reality be copyist mistakes—how could they have been done by the Transcendent Duke [Ge Xuan]!

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<sup>131</sup> *Xujue*, see ZD, vol. 9, no. 9, 185b.

<sup>132</sup> “Revere the root and restrain the branches” (*chong ben yi mo* 崇本抑末) implies here that Ge Xuan wanted to emphasize the original text of the *Daode jing* (the “root”) and censor or remove the more recent additions of extra words (the “branches”).

<sup>133</sup> See Yan Lingfeng 1983, 277, ZD vol. 9, no. 9, 186b. The *Xujue* has here a longer expression: 吾已於諸天神仙大王校定 (“I have examined and corrected [the text] with the divine transcendentals and great kings of all the heavens”).

When it comes to [errors] like *yu* 愚 (“stupid”) instead of *yu* 娛 (“amusement”),<sup>134</sup> or *qi* 企 (“standing on tiptoe”) instead of *chuan* 喘 (“panting”),<sup>135</sup> what stupid people do not understand about texts of this kind is that one should just study and investigate the mysterious intent, choose the best [explanation], and follow it. One should not “glue [the strings to] the pegs [and then try to play the lute]”<sup>136</sup> or “carve a mark inside the boat [to find a sword that fell into the water],”<sup>137</sup> and limit the mind to obstinate clinging. At present, all the scholars examine the bamboo slips in order to fix the number [of characters] and they all say there is one character missing—there are not 5000 characters. The explanations for this are divergent, and rarely do they succeed in hitting the mark. Some say that the one missing character [represents] the use of the image of nonbeing of the Great One. Others say that this missing character serves to illuminate the principle beyond words. This is all carelessly creating heresy, delusorily producing forced reckonings, and arbitrarily investigating the meaning of the scripture—how could it be so [as they say]?

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<sup>134</sup> This refers to *Daode jing*, chapter 65. The *5000 Word Edition* of the *Daode jing* (ZD vol. 9, no. 3, 34a) reads here 古之善為道者，非以明民，將以娛之，where in fact all received versions read 古之善為道者，非以明民，將以愚之。

<sup>135</sup> The text here (ZD vol. 9, no. 9, 232a, and Meng 2001, 551) reads *xian* 仝 (“high-flying”). However, the character *xian* 仝 seems to be a copyist error here, and it should be *qi* 企 instead. This refers to *Daode jing*, chapter 24, where the received versions read 企者不立；跨者不行，while the *5000 Word Edition* (ZD, vol. 9, no.3, 30a) reads 喘者不久；跨者不行。So does the *Xiang'er commentary* (see Rao Zongyi 1956, 33). However, Cheng Xuanying in his commentary to chapter 24 (24.1.A) reads 跂者不久。We should also note that the Dunhuang manuscript P 2353 clearly reads 仝 and not 企，which is then repeated in the ZD edition (ZD vol. 9, no. 14, 232a).

<sup>136</sup> *Jiaozhu* 膠柱 alludes to the expressions *jiaozhu [er] tiaose* or 膠柱[而]調瑟 *jiaozhu [er] guse* 膠柱[而]鼓瑟，which occur in several Han dynasty texts, among them *jiaozhu [er] tiaose* in *Wenzi* 文子 3 (“Jiushou” 九守, “Daode” 道德 §12) and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 11 (“Qi su xun” 齊俗訓, §15), and *jiaozhu [er] guse* in the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) 81, §14.

<sup>137</sup> It is not quite clear to me whence originates the expression *kechuan* 刻船，which seems to be short for *kechuan qiujian* 刻船求劍。Sengyou (445–518 CE) employs the metaphor in his *Hongmingji* T 2102, 7, 45a; cf. Ziegler 2015, vol. 1. 270, 277. It seems that in the Tang dynasty the expression “to glue the pegs and mark the boat” was used by Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721 CE), author of the *Shitong* 史通 (1, 4a), and in the *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要, compiled by Wu Jing 吳兢 (670–749 CE), both slightly later than our text at hand.

[The fact that our text is one character short of 5000] is only because of [the expression] “thirty spokes” in the scripture.<sup>138</sup> In ancient times [the written form of] “30” was divided into two characters [i.e., 三十 “three” and “ten”]. Nowadays they are shortened to one character [i.e., 卅 “thirty”]. Because of this combining of what was [originally] separate there is one character missing [to complete 5000].

## 5. Scrolls and Chapters

This wondrous scripture in one volume, [consists of] five thousand profound words [in] two scrolls, [with altogether] eighty-one chapters. Each [of these numbers of chapters, scrolls, etc.] discloses a [special meaning] and draws on a [specific] symbol and model. How could [these numbers] be meaningless? There is good reason for them to be there.

Thus the eighty-one chapters symbolize the highest number of the Great Yang,<sup>139</sup> and the two scrolls imitate the model of the generation of the two primordial powers (Heaven and Earth, or Yin and Yang). Therefore, the first scripture elucidates Dao in order to imitate the model of Heaven, and the second scripture elucidates Virtue in order to imitate Earth. Now, the number of Heaven is odd, and therefore the first scripture has thirty-seven chapters. The number of Earth is even, and therefore the second scripture has forty-four chapters.

The scripture says: “There is a thing, undefined and complete, born before Heaven and Earth.”<sup>140</sup> *Zhuangzi* says: “[Dao] gave spirituality to the spirits and to the Heavenly Emperor; it

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<sup>138</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 11 (11.1.A).

<sup>139</sup> *Tai yang* 太陽, here translated literally as “Great Yang” because of its cosmological meaning, also refers to the sun.

<sup>140</sup> *Daode jing*, chapter 25 (25.1.A).

gave birth to Heaven and to Earth.”<sup>141</sup> The *Xisheng jing* (*Scripture of Western Ascension*) says:  
“The great Dao is vast and open; there is nothing not structured or surrounded by it.”<sup>142</sup>

From this we know that the highest Dao is empty and [all]-pervading, “a tied-up bag”<sup>143</sup> with nothing outside it—how would this only comprise Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth? Now I explain that for establishing the teaching in order to benefit the beings, [Laozi] relied on two.....

[The manuscript P 2353 as of this point is damaged and the rest of the text is missing.]

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<sup>141</sup> *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6 (HY 16/6/31); see the note in chapter 4 (4.4.A, note 8).

<sup>142</sup> Kohn 1991, 244. Cf. *Xisheng jing jizhu* DZ 726, 3, 16a.

<sup>143</sup> *Kuonang* 括囊, “a tied-up bag,” alludes to a sentence in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), Hexagram no. 2, *Kun*, fourth line, §5.

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HY: Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

SSJZS: *Shisan jing zhushu*. 十三經注疏. 2 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980.

T: *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*. 大正新修大藏經. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankō kai, 1929–1934.

X: *Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō* 卍新纂大日本續藏經, 90 vols. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989.

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*Daojiao yishu* 道教義樞 (Meng Anpai 孟安排). DZ 1129.

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