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On the Fiercely Debated Questions of a Chinese Metaphysics and a Tradition of Early Daoism: Western and Chinese Perspectives on the *Daodejing* and Huang-Lao Daoism

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Abstract: Two long-standing and fiercely debated issues remain central to contemporary studies on Chinese philosophy. The first concerns whether there was an early tradition of metaphysics, and the second concerns whether there was an early tradition of Daoism. This study engages with both issues simultaneously, since if there was a tradition of early Chinese metaphysics, then it is identifiable with Huang-Lao Daoism, and if Huang-Lao Daoism constituted an early Chinese tradition, then it is identifiable with the tradition of Chinese metaphysics. This study engages with these issues in two parts. The first part examines Western and Chinese perspectives concerning what is entailed by claims that there was or was not an early tradition of Chinese metaphysics and that there was or was not an early tradition identifiable as Huang-Lao Daoism. The second part is an analysis of contemporary Chinese scholarship that, deeply grounded in the growing collection of early Chinese excavated manuscripts, both affirms the dynamic existence of early Chinese metaphysics and the vibrant existence of an early tradition identifiable with Huang-Lao Daoism. Throughout, this study attempts to concurrently build on the work of contemporary Chinese scholars for reading certain early Chinese writings often held as Daoist, but instead of agreeing with them that Laozi's *Daodejing* represents an early blossoming of metaphysics, it argues that his work is grounded in an originally non-metaphysical philosophy of the Dao that Huang-Lao Daoism transformed into a metaphysics, thereby originating the tradition of early Chinese metaphysics.

Keywords: Daoism; Laozi *Daodejing*; Huang-Lao Daoism; Chinese metaphysics

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1. Enter the Early Chinese Excavated Manuscripts

This paper engages with two fiercely debated questions in the modern study of the early history of Chinese thought: (1) Was there a philosophical Daoist textual tradition prior to and during the Western Han era? (2) Was there a tradition of Chinese metaphysics during the same period?

With some exceptions, Western scholarship has not adequately come to terms with the importance of a collection of early Chinese manuscripts discovered in the latter parts of the twentieth century that are generally recognized as having an affinity with Daoist thought. The tomb at Mawangdui, dated to the early Han and excavated in 1972, gave us two complete but not yet stabilized editions of the *Daodejing* 道德經, called the Mawangdui *Laozi* 馬王堆老子,[1] as well as the *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經.[2] The tomb at Guodian, dated to the middle of the fourth century BCE and excavated in 1992, gave us three partial editions of the *Daodejing* 道德經, called the Guodian *Laozi* 郭店老子, as well as the *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水. The following years saw the discovery of the *Hengxian* 恒先 and the *Fanwu liuxing* 凡物流行, both dated to the middle years of the Warring States.[3]

Either because these excavated manuscripts were not yet available or just ignored, the trend of recent Western scholarship is to negate both questions, while, again with some exceptions, the trend of recent Chinese scholarship[4] tends to affirm them, largely due to its attention to those excavated texts. Specifically, it recognizes an early Daoist tradition called Huang-Lao 黃老 and an early metaphysical tradition called *xingershangxue* 形而上學.

Given this new hermeneutical context incepted by the discoveries of these manuscripts, this study engages with contemporary trends in Western and Chinese scholarship by examining the reasons that the former tends to negate the questions of an early tradition of Daoism and an early tradition of Chinese metaphysics and the latter affirms them. Because the major works of three leading Chinese scholars of Daoist philosophy, namely Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 and Zheng Kai 郑开 from Peking University and Cao Feng 曹峰 from Renmin University,[5] have recently been translated and published in English and are thus readily available to an English-speaking readership, this study takes their perspectives as representative of contemporary Chinese perspectives.

The Chinese scholars identify these excavated texts with Huang-Lao Daoism due to their conceptual overlap with other transmitted texts generally recognized as Huang-Lao, and they identify their philosophy as metaphysical because they regularly posit a permanent entity, usually called the Constant Dao, that directs the formations of the empirical world. Given that these perspectives are not alien to Western scholars who regularly contest them, my intent in engaging with both is to offer a differently configured and forward-looking synthesis for alternative ways of reading certain early Chinese writings that combine excavated and transmitted texts.

Although I favor the Chinese perspective, I endorse the Western view that rejects its claim that Laozi initially established a transcendent status to the Dao, which Huang-Lao absorbed and took to new levels of sophistication, thereby grounding their pragmatic political philosophy on it and the transcendent principles it produced. My own position is that Laozi's philosophy is non-metaphysical and that Chinese metaphysics originates with Huang-Lao. Huang-Lao thinkers accomplished this by adapting and reconfiguring the original text of the *Daodejing* to establish the Constant Dao as an independent metaphysical entity. This view, however, is not in accord with Western perspectives that neither recognize the tradition of Huang-Lao nor its metaphysics.

Reading between some of these lines, it may be reasonably surmised that what is at stake is less a question of offsetting two "combatants," e.g., China and the West, than it is a question of dominant methodologies among two sometimes competing and sometimes complementary perspectives, namely Sinology and Chinese Philosophy. Although Sinology is ostensibly more interested in textual criticism than Chinese Philosophy, that might be the wrong benchmark because Sinology is, after all, rooted in philology and not in philosophy. Western "philosophers" dealing with Chinese texts (to which some of the scholars cited throughout this study are counted), on the other hand, frequently demonstrate a content-focused approach similar to that of the Chinese scholars cited herein. The point of contention between these two groups indeed tends to be which concepts of Western philosophy can or cannot be employed to describe Chinese thought, for which those of "metaphysics" and "traditions" or "schools" are most fiercely debated. Nevertheless, when the two sides of demarcation are addressed in a non-general fashion, namely by reference to specific works of specific authors, their perspectives self-announce in ways that cohere to what is here confidently taken as representing a Western and a Chinese perspective. This study applies this methodology first to the issue of Chinese metaphysics and then to the issue of an early tradition of Daoism.

2. Western Perspectives on Chinese Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a term from Aristotle that does not translate well into early Chinese philosophy, and it is important to understand why. It is used in three ways: as a general category for describing views of the fundamental nature of the world or *Weltanschauung*; as a comparative category for specific descriptions of the world, for example: "Western, Greek, Christian, European, American, Cartesian, Kantian, Indian, perhaps Buddhist, etc." (Weber 2013, p. 3); and as a specific category in the Western philosophical tradition that concerns "the study of being qua being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature," where the meaning of being implies its own substance whose attributes correspond to "primary causes (*aitia*) and starting-points (or principles, *archai*)" (*Metaphysics*

981[b]28). Marc Cohen and C. D. C. Reeve write that Aristotle's description of metaphysics "involves three things: (1) a study, (2) a subject matter (being), and (3) a manner in which the subject matter is studied (qua being)" (Cohen and Reeve 2021).

Metaphysics as the study of being qua being is the starting point for my inquiry into Chinese metaphysics. Ralph Weber writes,

> If it makes sense to talk about "Chinese" metaphysics, however, then there are at least two presuppositions on a conceptual level that go with it: (1) the adjective introduces a dividing line emphasizing that "Chinese" metaphysics is different from non-Chinese metaphysics (…); (2) yet calling both "metaphysics," the dividing line also *relates* what is differentiated as "Chinese" and "non-Chinese." There can be no difference without at least one *commonality* in the respect of which the differentiated is what it purports to be, different. The first presupposition is that which most scholars who use the expression wish to emphasize, i.e., the distinctiveness of "Chinese metaphysics." But the second presupposition, i.e., the commonality shared with other metaphysics, is almost systematically ignored. (Weber 2013, p. 3)

Agreeing with Webber, a few words about "commonality" are in order, and in introducing it, I can do no better than to quote the words of Brook Ziporyn, which he writes with the express purpose of denying them to Chinese philosophy, but which I will argue capture the character of Huang-Lao metaphysics:

> Where is "The Dao"? Where is "The One"? What we experience is manifestly multiple, changing, multidirectional; so this One must be an invisible reality beyond our perceptual reach—accessible only to some special faculty like speculative reason, dialectic, or, alternately, mystical intuition or religious experience—or something that happened back at the beginning of time when everything was being "produced." It sounds immediately as if all this is something that happened or happens behind the curtain, the deep intelligible structure of the world, the source or underlying principle that directs, controls or commands the empirical world. (Ziporyn 2018, p. 112)

Ziporyn writes this in support of the arguments of Roger Ames and David Hall concerning the "absence of the 'One behind the many' metaphysics" in the *Daodejing*, where they assert that "the Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum, some essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change" (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 14).[6] However, this is precisely the commonality that the Chinese perspective affirms about Huang-Lao texts. Among many solid discussions of the difference of Chinese metaphysics, Zhao Dunhua's is valuable for its simple clarity:

> What is the subject matter of metaphysics? Can the subject matter of Chinese metaphysics be totally different from that of Western? If not, as some have insisted, then, the proper subject matter, as the term "ontology" itself implies, can only be being and its equivalents in the Indio-European languages (*to on* in Greek, *esse* in Latin, and Sein, être, etc. in modern Western languages). The challenge to the Chinese is that since there was no term equivalent to "being" in ancient Chinese, there could consequently not be "a science of being" in ancient China. (Zhao 2006, pp. 22–23)

Zhao succinctly expresses the main reason for the Western denial of metaphysics to Chinese philosophy, which Jiyuan Yu confirms in writing that for Chinese philosophy, "the question of being has never been the subject of philosophical reflection" (Yu 2011, p. 145). Relevant to this discussion are two Chinese terms, *you* 有 and *wu* 無, which sometimes tempt scholars to translate as being and non-being but which, according to A. C. Graham, refer to concrete things, where the primary meaning of *wu* is "have not" or "there is not (X)," and the primary meaning of *you* is "have" or "there is (X)." He writes that "this is the source of one of the most striking differences between Chinese thinking about *you*

and *wu* and Western thinking about Being" (Graham 1990, p. 98). He continues: "The English word 'Nothing' implies the absence of any 'entity,' the Chinese *wu* only the absence of concrete things. Daoists agree with Western idealists in exalting the immaterial, but cannot like them identify it with pure Being; for Daoists, all that lacks material form is by definition *wu*" (Graham 1990, p. 100).

Ames builds on this understanding by writing that, for the Daoist:

> "Only becoming is." "Being" and "not-being" are not available as possibilities that would occur to these early thinkers. Said another way around, because the determinate and indeterminate—*youwu* 有無—are always mutually entailing correlatives, there is no such thing as "not-being" as a gaping void or an absolute nothingness, and no such thing as "being" as something that is independently permanent and unchanging. *Wu* is aspectual language that describes an emptiness within the bounds of determinate yet changing form captured in the term "empty" (*zhong* 盅) as in an empty vessel and describes an undulating, inchoate state of indeterminacy reflected in the term "surging" (*chong* 沖)—*wu* as the as yet unformed penumbra that honeycombs each of the myriad things and that explains the emergence of novel determinacy in the ceaseless process of transformation. And *you* describes a persistent yet always changing determinate pattern within the flux and flow of experience. (Ames 2015, p. 88)

Because metaphysics includes the study of changeless *aitia* and *archai*, Ames contrasts what he calls a Western-style metaphysical cosmogony with a Chinese-style genealogical cosmogony:

> A distinct difference between a genealogical and a metaphysical cosmogony is that where the latter entails the intervention of some external creative source that establishes a "One-behind-the-Many" idealistic and teleologically driven metaphysics, the genealogical cosmogony always entails two elements in the creative process that needs must collaborate in conception and procreation without appeal to some external source. A second fundamental difference is that whereas metaphysical cosmogonies promise increased illumination as we trace back to and understand the ultimate source, a genealogical cosmogony describes a birthing from an inchoate, incipient life form that presupposes genealogy and progenitors rather than originative principles or divine design, and a pattern of always-situated and cultivated growth in significance rather than the linear actualization of some predetermined potential. Hence, unlike some traditional Western cosmogonies that usher us back to the source of an intelligibility that has deliberately overcome chaos and has established order, Chinese natural cosmogonies direct us back to what, from our present perspective, is a world wherein the further back we go in the birthing canal, the more dark, amorphous, and remote it becomes for us. (Ames 2015, p. 89)

The "it" to which Ames refers is the Dao, which the *Daodejing* sometimes envisages as a mother that "gives birth to" (生 *sheng*) the world. Because the Dao is also commonly identified with *wu* in Daoist writings in the sense of a chaotic formlessness suffused with primordial *qi* 氣, the stuff that will later manifest the myriad forms of and in the world, it can never once and for all be grasped or cognized: there is no-thing there, only the interactive processes of *wu* and *you*. While this may properly describe Laozi's philosophy of the Dao, it does not describe Huang-Lao conceptions of the Constant Dao as "the One behind the Many."

3. Chinese Perspectives on Huang-Lao Metaphysics

Huang-Lao Daoism has two distinct centers of gravity: a cosmogony that seamlessly morphs into a political philosophy that remains determined by its cosmogony. Its cosmogony describes the genesis of transcendent principles from the Dao, for example Law (法 *fa*) and Name (名 *ming*), while its political philosophy explains how the ruler translates

and enacts those principles in his government of the empire. Although Cao Feng writes that Huang-Lao is predominantly "a tradition focused on utilitarian principles, dedicated to making practical political use of all kinds of thought, but primarily focused on Daoist ideas" (Cao 2017, p. 122), this study emphasizes the ways that the Chinese scholars engage with the metaphysics that grounds its cosmogony.[7] R. J. Peerenboom is unusual in championing a minority Western view that affirms an early Chinese metaphysics (*xingershangxue*). Because it is important to be clear on this, I provide an extended quotation from his study of the *Huangdi sijing*, completed before the excavation of the Guodian tomb made the subsequently discovered manuscripts available:

> As defined, the Judeo-Christian conception of God, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, and Plato's Forms as well as the Huang-Lao conception of the natural order are all transcendent. But clearly Dao is not God, and Huang-Lao is not Plato. A further distinction needs to be drawn between transcendence in a strong sense (*chaojue* 超绝) and a weak sense (*chaoyue* 超越). The former suggests a radical ontological disparity or separation. The *creatio ex nihilo* cosmogonic paradigm of Genesis, in which God, ontologically distinct and temporally prior to the world, creates the world out of nothing is perhaps the clearest example. The interpretation of Plato's Forms as external, existing in some ontologically independent realm, would be another instance of the strong sense, whereas the reading of Aristotle's universals as indwelling, internal to phenomena, though still teleologically predetermining, would be an example of the weak sense. Huang-Lao advances transcendence of the weak sense (in) that it does not, therefore, entail a radical ontological separation between the source of the determining order and the human realm that complies with this order. (Peerenboom 1993, pp. 37–38)

On similar lines, Joshua Brown and Alexus McLeod draw a distinction between radical transcendence and typological transcendence. The former describes a strictly dualistic worldview where the transcendent realm of absolute principles, primary of which is "Being," is ontologically distinct from the contingent realm of phenomena or "beings." Next to this, the latter is "typologically distinct from non-transcendent reality, but not ontologically distinct—transcendence and non-transcendence are two mutually exclusive species of an ontological genus" (Brown and McLeod, p. 35). Referred to as either "weak transcendence" or "typological transcendence," it best characterizes early Daoist metaphysics, which is built on notions of typologically transcendent *wu* often identifiable with the Dao as emptiness or nothingness next to the contingent realm of *you* as fullness or somethingness.

As a species of typological transcendence, Chinese scholars widely credit Laozi with the discovery of *wu* 無, which he often coupled with *you* 有; Wang Bo, for example, writes: "The main reason Laozi is generally believed to be the founder of the Chinese metaphysical tradition is that through his search for and thinking regarding origins, he guides people from the world of things to the world of the Dao and from the world of *you* to the world of *wu*" (B. Wang 2011, p. 10).

Laozi used *wu* in three important ways.[8] First, as a nominal entity or condition, as in *Daodejing* Chapter 11: "Thus, it might be *you* that provides the value, but it is *wu* that provides the utility"; second, as a negative prefix, as in Chapter 1: "The Nameless (無名 *wuming*) gives birth to Heaven and Earth, the Named (有名 *youming*) gives birth to the myriad beings"; and third, as an aspect of the Dao usually identified with a negative *wu*-prefixed term, as in Chapter 32: "The Dao is constant and Nameless," and Chapter 37: "The Dao is constant and does nothing (無為 *wuwei*)."

Huang-Lao thinkers inherited and expanded these uses of *wu* in constructing their metaphysics. Notably, they emphasized its complex relationship with the Dao as the typologically transcendent source of the world next to *you* as its phenomenal source. Zheng Kai writes that "*wu* constitutes a necessary foundation for understanding the Dao, and the cluster of *wu*-related concepts, including formlessness [無形], imagelessness [無象], objectlessness [無物], namelessness [無名], non-obsessive desire [無欲], and non-purposive

action [無為], are used to adumbrate the almost inexpressible qualities of the Dao" (Zheng 2021, p. 20).

For early Daoist metaphysics, *wu* cannot be identified with non-being because it is anything but nothing; although it is commonly interpreted as emptiness or nothingness, it yet remains filled with primordial *qi*, the elemental stuff existing in a state of formlessness called "beyond form" (形而上 *xingershang*). This *qi* subsequently manifests the phenomenal forms of the world and the myriad beings, moving from the *wu*-realm of formlessness into the *you*-realm of forms. The charter for this conception is *Daodejing* Chapter 40, which states: "The myriad beings of the world are born from *you*, and *you* is born from *wu*" (天下萬物生於有，有生於無). For Huang-Lao, the process is directed by the Constant Dao and its coordinating principles such as Law and Name.[9]

Zheng Kai, who writes that "the chief and foremost meaning of Laozi's Dao is *wu*" (Zheng 2021, p. 12), provides valuable insights into this Huang-Lao *xingershangxue* metaphysics centered on the Dao and its related concept of De 德,[10] a term that refers to the localization of the Dao within the world; he writes:

> First and most importantly, the meaning of Dao and De, which is at the core of philosophical Daoism, is consistent with "the study of the beyond form" (*xingershang*) in the ancient Chinese sense, as it is told in the "Xici" commentary on the *Book of Change* (易經·系辭): "That which goes beyond form is termed Dao (形而上者謂之道)." This is because philosophical Daoism is a philosophical system that goes beyond *you* (having form and name) and focuses on *wu* (formless and nameless). From a philosophical point of view, the theory of Dao and the theory of De in Daoist texts are metaphysical theories in the ancient Chinese sense, that is, the "study of what is beyond form." In fact, there is no other theory that befits the name. (Zheng 2021, p. 72)

> In summary, our consideration of the nature of philosophical Daoism references the study of metaphysics, i.e., theories of being qua being in ancient Greece. There are aspects of Daoist philosophy that are similar to the metaphysics of the ancient Greeks, but it also departs from the study of physical objects more radically, as Dao is not delimited by form or defined by words. This is the most important interpretive key for understanding philosophical Daoism. (Zheng 2021, p. 84)

Zheng Kai's comments focus on the centrality of *wu* and its relation to the Dao. However, different from Laozi, the Huang-Lao conception of *wu* was equally representative of a metaphysical condition that closely resembled the unbounded "emptiness" (虛 *xu*) of space itself, within which was contained formless primordial *qi* as well as something else that was also formless, chaotic, and unbounded by time or space, which guided and directed the formation of beings in the empirical world: the typologically transcendent entity alternatively called the Dao or the One (一 *yi*), as explained by Wang Zhongjiang:

> A central factor in all Huang-Lao and early Daoist thinking is the notion of oneness—also called Great Oneness or Dao—as representative of the highest ultimate of the universe and the most fundamental principle of the world. One is not only the original number that gives meaning to all objects, but also the original cosmic state at the beginning of time. And just as "one" is closely related to all other numbers and the many, so original oneness remains forever connected to the multiplicity of the world and the myriad beings. This understanding in due course leads to the apperception of oneness as a central metaphysical concept, a highly abstract notion, an absolute value that provides an inherent commonality and universality among the unlimited multitude of existence. The relation of the one to the many, then, is the core model of Huang-Lao thinking in its effort at comprehending the world and its beings." (Z. Wang 2015, p. 110)

Wang goes on to ask, "Why is oneness or Dao sufficient as the root and foundation of the existence and activities of the myriad beings? Simply put, it is because of its

transcendence and infinity. Huang-Lao works often use negative expressions to describe this: nameless, imageless, soundless, flavorless, unmoved, untouched, etc" (Z. Wang 2015, p. 97). It is this Dao, this One, that would, according to Huang-Lao thought, go on to produce, within the unbounded spatial condition of *wu*, a plethora of typologically transcendent metaphysical principles by which the world is organized.

4. Modern Perspectives on Huang-Lao Daoism

Western sinological approaches to early Chinese philosophy prioritize methodologies that emphasize processes of textual production that span decades or even centuries carried out by anonymous editors unaffiliated with philosophical schools. Chinese approaches prioritizing textual content over production normally regard early Chinese texts as composed by the thinkers after whom the texts were commonly named or by their immediate disciples, each of whom are regarded as either participant in or representative of distinct philosophical schools.

Both share roughly the same understanding of "philosophical school," namely multigenerational lineages populated with acknowledged masters concerned with ritual transmissions of authoritative texts and their associated teachings to disciples concentrated in demarcated geographical locations. However, Western scholars often deny the early Chinese existence of such schools, whereas the Chinese scholars affirm them. Mark Csikszentmihalyi, an authoritative Western voice in the field, writes, "One major obstacle to understanding the early history of China is the still prevalent notion that discrete schools of thought contended in the Warring States and Han periods, and that these schools of thought were text-centered" (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003, p. 59), and also that "the ascription of philosophical 'schools' is an anachronistic imposition of a set of Eastern Han and post-Han concerns onto earlier periods" (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003, p. 99).

The decisive factor for this Western position is the absence of contemporaneous references to the kinds of categorical labels that would distinguish one school from another, for example, Daoism, Confucianism, Legalism, etc. They also often insist that the Daoism label in particular was the creative product of two Han Dynasty intellectuals, namely Sima Tan 司馬談, who primarily saw Daoism as a philosophical attitude of Han political administration, and Sima Qian 司馬遷, who primarily saw it as a Han political faction, both of whose writings, found in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Historical Annals*), are held to have retrospectively applied the Daoism label in ways that distorted the actual historical situation.

Sima Tan is noted for his original uses of the term *jia* 家 in reference to Yinyang 阴阳家, Confucianism 儒家, Mohism 墨家, Legalism 法家, Nominalism 名家, and Daoism 道家 or 道德家. Kidder Smith writes, "Sima Tan's six configurations had become the 'schools' of Warring States thought, with texts, authors, affiliations, and a history" (Smith 2003, p. 131), but he also notes that his "configurations are novel, synthetic, free of texts, men, and lineages" (Smith 2003, p. 142). Chinese scholars, on the other hand, more invested in content than production, heavily rely on these labels to organize the texts, the masters, and, more importantly, the philosophical ideas that give identity to them.

Smith (2003, p. 151) writes that there were plenty of master-disciple filiations that comprised thousands of students with hundreds of texts, with those of the Confucians and Mohists most broadly identifiable, but, because there was no word for "lineage," they could not have constituted philosophical schools as such. Although his argument pertains to all Warring States thinkers, he is not alone in allowing more leeway with Confucianism and Mohism, and his argument is pointedly directed at Daoism, which has long been the object of a Western deconstructivism that can be traced back to Nathan Sivin and Michel Strickmann. Sivin wrote that "… 'philosophical Daoism' has no sociological meaning… The philosophical Daoists were not a group, but a handful of authors scattered through history" (Sivin 1978, p. 305), and Strickmann wrote that "the *Daodejing* should simply be referred to as the *Daodejing*, and the *Zhuangzi* as the *Zhuangzi*…there is no intrinsic justification for creating a 'Daoism' on the basis of these two texts" (Strickmann 1979, p. 167).

Modern studies of early Chinese Daoism mostly focused on the philosophy of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 until the Mawangdui discovery. At that time, it provided the two earliest known editions of the *Daodejing* that evinced provocatively different renderings of many passages compared to the received edition, as well as the *Huangdi sijing* that seemed to fit the Huang-Lao Daoism described by Sima Tan that was distinct from the Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi. This was also the same Daoism discussed by Sima Qian that he characterized as an early Han political faction that revered the *Daodejing* and that he often positioned in opposition to the Confucians.

According to Paul van Els, "Although the term Huang-Lao was coined more than two millennia ago, it went largely unnoticed until the 1973 excavation of the Mawangdui manuscripts" (Els 2002, p. 5), and since the *Shiji* discussions of Huang-Lao were "mainly concerned with who used Huang-Lao and how this affected the state, therefore, pre-1973 articles shed little light on the philosophical content of Huang-Lao" (Els 2002, p. 7).

Over the course of the next twenty years, studies of Huang-Lao Daoism took shape around three research areas (Els 2002, p. 4): the early philosophical movement (Schwartz 1985), the Western Han political faction (Ess 1993), and the Eastern Han and post-Han spiritual and religious movements (Seidel 1992). However, those who attended to the early philosophical movement remained handicapped because all they had to work with was the *Shiji* discussions together with the *Huangdi sijing*, in addition to some fragmentary records that were vaguely identified with the origins of Huang-Lao Daoism at the Jixia Academy (Meyer 2010–2011), although a few intrepid scholars expanded its scope to include other received texts that they identified with Huang-Lao, like the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Major 1993).

The 1993 discovery of the Guodian manuscripts provided three even earlier, albeit partial editions of the *Daodejing* as well as the *Taiyi shengshui*, sometimes recognized as the earliest representative Huang-Lao text (if in fact the *Daodejing* itself is not counted as such). These discoveries were supplemented over the following years by the subsequent discoveries of the *Hengxian* and the *Fanwu liuxing*.

These excavated texts offer privileged insights into Huang-Lao Daoism that were unimaginable before their discoveries, and they compel us to reconsider several issues, including the notion of early Chinese philosophical schools, the relation of the *Daodejing* to Huang-Lao Daoism, and the origin of Chinese metaphysics. Nonetheless, Western scholarship on Huang-Lao Daoism has been hampered by two theoretical commitments. The first is its enthusiasm not only to let its approach to Huang-Lao be conditioned by the guidance provided by the Simas together with a fascination for thinkers associated with the Jixia Academy but also by its reliance on post-modernist reading strategies to deconstruct anything that could be considered an early Daoist identity. The second is the widespread belief that early Chinese philosophy is devoid of metaphysics.

A striking feature of contemporary Western studies on early Daoism is the hesitation to reckon with these excavated manuscripts as the initial and vital records that introduced Huang-Lao Daoism on the historical stage. Their approaches to Huang-Lao thought remain hampered by their strict adherence to the terms superimposed over the tradition by the *Shiji* discussions, and few are the studies that explore the complex relationship of these manuscripts to the *Daodejing*. Both published in 2003, already ten years after the Guodian excavation, the important Western studies by Csikszentmihalyi and Smith did not even mention the manuscripts; rather, they were geared toward deconstructing the notion of early Chinese philosophical schools, with special attention to Daoism. Csikszentmihalyi writes, for example, that "the *Shiji*'s employment of the Huang-Lao category is a retrospective imposition on a handful of figures [and] need not suggest their adherence to a body of internally coherent 'Huang-Lao' thought" (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003, p. 81).

Notwithstanding such claims, Sima Qian himself gave depiction, whether historically valid, to what, for all intents, appears as an actual Huang-Lao school:

> Yue Chenggong studied the teachings of Huangdi and Laozi [i.e., Huang-Lao], and his important teacher was called Heshang Zhangren, but it is unknown from where he came. Heshang Zhangren was the teacher of An Qisheng, An Qisheng

> was the teacher of Maoxi Gong, Maoxi Gong was the teacher of Yuexia Gong, Yuexia Gong was the teacher of Yue Chengong, Yue Chengong was the teacher of Gao Gong. Gao Gong taught in the regions of Gaomi and Jiaoxi in the state of Qi, and he was the teacher of Cao of the state of Xiang. (*Shiji* 80.2427–2437)

This depiction portrays a lineage of Huang-Lao masters transmitting the teachings of "Huangdi and Laozi" (we assume that this includes the *Daodejing*) to disciples, and it specifies the tradition's concentration in a geographical location, "the state of Qi." Csikszentmihalyi sees this passage not as describing a school or tradition but as a didactic device employed by Sima Qian, who preferred the political faction of Huang-Lao, to criticize the Confucian faction by showing these above-named figures as "a group less prey to the temptations of wealth and power" (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003, p. 85). He continues: "The content of Huang-Lao thought (if such a thing existed) may be less important than the construction of the group so labeled by the *Shiji* and the motives behind that construction" (Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003, p. 81).

Smith is somewhat more lenient with the Huang-Lao category but still rejects its identification with a school or tradition; he writes of the category that "it seems to have been highly elastic, an attitude of administration, not locatable in a single text nor any bounded set of texts, an intellectual tendency or group of tendencies rather than a single doctrine" (Smith 2003, p. 146).

With the exception of the work by J. R. Peerenboom to which I later return, other Western scholars are somewhat less dogmatic in their refusal to recognize Huang-Lao Daoism as a school or tradition, but because they also do not reckon with the excavated manuscripts, their contributions cannot but obfuscate it. A small sampling of representative examples includes Mark Lewis' comments about Huang-Lao:

> This term, which first appears in the *Shiji* but is never defined therein, has become a philosophical football in which modern scholars invent their own traditions by combining whatever texts meet their chosen criteria. Setting aside the question of whether there was a philosophical tradition known as Huang-Lao, and not just a set of diffuse and ill-defined tendencies, it is significant that the majority of the figures to whom Sima Qian applies the term were not scholars at all but political figures. (Lewis 1999, p. 340)

Joshua Brown and Alexus McLeod echo this where they write:

> There are many points of controversy surrounding Huang-Lao, not least of which concern the identity and integrity of the school (along with the issue of just which texts should be attributed to it). Huang-Lao, like "Daoism" in early China, is a difficult idea to trace. There are no texts that refer to themselves as Huang-Lao texts, and our only references in early texts to the existence of Huang-Lao as a school are in the *Shiji*…It is far from clear whether Huang-Lao was ever a coherent school, trend, or other associative category (such as the *Ru* or Confucians), and most of the texts associated with Huang-Lao today gained this association due to later and contemporary scholars categorizing them as Huang-Lao. Given the difficulties and controversy surrounding the vague notion of Huang-Lao, the category as a whole is not terribly helpful for many purposes. (Brown and McLeod 2021, p. 54)

A more recent yet rather cursory study of Huang-Lao Daoism by L. K. Chen and Hiu Chuk Winnie Sung (Chen and Sung 2015) is a good example of what Lewis means by "combining whatever texts meet their chosen criteria," but their criteria are again strictly and explicitly that proposed by the *Shiji*. They first note that there is no agreed upon definition of the category, which they attribute to the absence of any single source text. They then discuss how a variety of ideas associated with Huang-Lao from the *Shiji*, namely 無為 *wuwei*, 刑名 *xing/ming*, 法 *fa* and 道 *dao*, can be found in a variety of Warring States writings, many of which they try to match with names associated with the Jixia Academy. In addition to many fragmentary texts next to several received ones, including the *Zhuangzi*

and the *Guanzi* 管子, they pay only cursory attention to the *Huangdi sijing* while nowhere mentioning the more recently excavated Huang-Lao manuscripts.

This is not to say that there are no Western studies of these Huang-Lao manuscripts, and there is in fact a healthy and growing body of work that is being done on them.[11] However, they make little effort to situate them within their historical context, an effect that may be due to the anxiety of presenting Huang-Lao Daoism, or even early Daoism more generally, in terms of a tradition or school. One exception to this is seen in the work of Harold Roth that frequently refers to Huang-Lao Daoism where he uses the label to gather together a nebulous range of concerns consisting of cosmology, self-cultivation, and political thought that is primarily culled from the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Guanzi* without distinguishing the Daoism of one text from the others. Roth attempts to benefit from the modern Western uncertainty surrounding Huang-Lao, as if it can contain all early Daoism in ways less contested than the more familiar Lao-Zhuang 老莊 label; he writes that "what I am suggesting here is that Daoist philosophy is more accurately categorized as 'Huang-Lao' than 'Lao-Zhuang'" (Roth 2021, p. 25). Although this specific claim resonates with a lot of the Chinese scholarship, his own version of it remains vacuous since it too never takes account of the excavated Huang-Lao texts.

In contrast, the understanding held by the Chinese scholars of an early Daoism category hardly attends to the writings of the Simas, focusing instead on textual content; as Wang Zhongjiang writes, "It is reasonable to suggest that in the pre-Qin period, the term Daoism [道家 *daojia*] did not yet exist, but this lack of a name does not necessarily indicate that there was no Daoist thought" (Z. Wang 2016, p. 81). Cao Feng similarly writes, "Huang-Lao Daoism should be categorized according to the similarity and cohesiveness of its content, rather than an academic assessment of lineage" (Cao 2017, p. 51).

The Chinese scholars locate the origins of Daoism with the *Daodejing*, which is a complex text for them not, as it is for Western sinology, because of its unclear date or authorship since they roundly maintain that Laozi personally composed it a generation or so before Confucius, around 500 BCE. Rather, it is because it stands at the origin of two lines of early Daoism: Lao-Zhuang or Daojia centered on the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, and Huang-Lao centered, at least in terms of its label, on Huangdi and the *Daodejing*. Thus, while conceding that the Daoism described by the Simas most appropriately corresponds to Huang-Lao Daoism, they maintain that the label also encompasses Lao-Zhuang Daoism. Wang Zhongjiang writes:

> In the pre-Qin period, the term "Daoism" [i.e., Lao-Zhuang] did not yet exist, but this lack of a name does not necessarily indicate that there was no Daoist thought. The same point can be made for Huang-Lao as well. The "Under Heaven" (天下) chapter in the *Zhuangzi* and the "Against the Twelve Masters" (非十二子) chapter in the *Xunzi* both explicitly summarize various intellectual lineages without identifying them by name. Sima Qian first identifies the schools of both Daoism [Lao-Zhuang] and Huang-Lao." (Z. Wang 2016, p. 81)

With the Simas in mind, Zheng Kai writes that "the predominant impression of Daoism in the minds of Han dynasty intellectuals derives mostly from Huang-Lao Daoism. In fact, Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism are not frequently distinguished in writings from that period…The interrelation of Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism must not obscure an inherent disparity" (Zheng 2021, p. 10). Or, as Wang Zhongjiang writes, "Laozi's philosophy originally combined the regulation of the state and the regulation of the body, though these later developed along two different paths. One became the 'individualist' trend represented by Zhuangzi's emphasis on individual life, spiritual freedom, and transcendence. The other became the Huang-Lao 'political' trend" (Z. Wang 2016, p. 131).

Cao Feng points out the main difference between Lao-Zhuang and Huang-Lao: "Although the tradition of [Lao-Zhuang] Daoism based primarily on studies of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* had offered profound philosophical principles, it had failed to offer approaches aimed at the real world. Huang-Lao Daoism had its eye on establishing realistic

values and order, realizing a revitalization of Daoist ideas, and transforming them into a feasible system of political philosophy" (Cao 2017, p. 29). He also writes, "With Sima Qian establishing the practice of using a later term to retrospectively categorize previous subjects, we too may conclude that even those texts that make no explicit reference to either Laozi or the Yellow Emperor can be judged to be documents related to Huang-Lao according to their characteristics" (Cao 2017, p. 18).

Because of this approach taken by the Chinese scholars that emphasizes textual content rather than production and that is supported by the more expansive views on the Daoism label made available by the excavated manuscripts, the number of writings that they recognize as Huang-Lao is larger than what many Western scholars are comfortable endorsing, given the continuing uncertainties that they harbor about the label itself. In addition to the *Daodejing* and the excavated texts, the Chinese scholars also include the four "Xinshu" 心術 ("Arts of the Mind") chapters from the *Guanzi*, numerous sections and chapters from the *Zhuangzi*, four chapters from the *Hanfeizi* 韩非子 including the "Jie Lao" 解老 and "Yu Lao" 喻老, the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, the *Wenzi* 文字, and the *Huainanzi* (Z. Wang 2016, p. 80; Cao 2017, pp. 9–10).

Above, I quoted Lewis lamenting that regarding whatever is "Huang-Lao," "modern scholars invent their own traditions by combining whatever texts meet their chosen criteria." However, if the criteria are texts that show clear affinities with Laozi, the *Daodejing*, and/or Huangdi, texts that are found to be in close proximity with each other, and texts that share certain terminology and ideologies, and we make these texts fit the narrative of a Chinese metaphysics that developed via a presupposed Huang-Lao tradition as catalyst, then how can the Chinese scholars not be seen as also following this pattern?

Nevertheless, it is hard not to deny that most, if not all, of the excavated manuscripts in question are, if one insists on this type of labelling, best subsumed under the Huang-Lao umbrella, but given the negative judgement of the Western perspective on the early Daoist tradition of Huang-Lao, one might expect a more detailed analysis and justification by the Chinese scholars about why all these texts unequivocally manifest the output of a single, clearly defined "tradition." My understanding of this issue is colored by the fact that most scholars who doubt the existence of such a tradition either did not have the excavated manuscripts at hand or willingly ignored them, however, this cannot be said about other received texts, such as the *Guanzi* and *Wenzi*, which the Chinese authors recognize as Huang-Lao works also without hesitation or further discussion.[12] The gist of their argument is still that these texts share some ideological overlaps with the *Daodejing*, which is an intuitive pronouncement based on informed opinion rather than a justified argument based on textual evidence, and it is certainly not the sort of thing that will, by itself, debunk Lewis' "football" analogy and the many Western contestations of just what counts as Huang-Lao writings.

That the Chinese scholars share a consensus on this issue is not sufficient reason to expect that Western scholars will be swayed by it, which is not a problem *per se*, but it is important to keep in mind the distinction between the Chinese and Western perspectives upon which this study is structured as it moves into a more direct engagement with the excavated manuscripts.

5. A Brief Excursus on Peerenboom and Defoort

The work of J. R. Peerenboom (1993) represents the notable exception to the Western scholarship on Huang-Lao Daoism that does not let itself be conditioned by the guidance of the Simas while also affirming it both as a textual tradition of early Daoism and as a philosophical tradition of metaphysics. Interestingly, he reached both conclusions based solely on the *Huangdi sijing*, since the excavated texts were not yet available. His characterizations of early Daoism not only contrast with Western ones that tend to deny the label wholesale but, in partial alignment with the Chinese scholars, he also distinguishes two lines of it, Lao-Zhuang and Huang-Lao. However, his view differs from theirs primarily

in that he takes the philosophy of the *Daodejing* as non-metaphysical, a point with which I am in full agreement; equating "foundational naturalism" with metaphysics, he writes:

> Foundational naturalism coupled with a natural law theory differentiates Huang-Lao thought from that of other ancient schools, including classical Daoism [Lao-Zhuang]. Ironically, however, the standard practice has been to read Laozi and Zhuangzi as if they were Huang-Lao Daoists, attributing to them the metaphysical view of a single, predetermined natural order to be followed by humans. The view I explicate as that of the *Huangdi sijing* will therefore seem familiar to those acquainted with the standard [Chinese] reading, or misreading, as I argue, of Laozi and Zhuangzi. One of the main objectives of this work is then to challenge the traditional account of classical Daoism and demonstrate that the differences between classical Daoism and Huang-Lao thought go well beyond the latter's adoption of a rule of law rejected by the former. (Peerenboom 1993, p. 4)

Since its appearance, Peerenboom's work has generated much controversy for its direct countering of denials of Daoism as either a textual or a metaphysical tradition. Western scholars often base their denials of a Chinese metaphysics on what they perceive as an absence of transcendence; in its place, they see what can be called a non-foundational naturalism that informs Chinese *qi* cosmology[13] Much of this debate, spearheaded by its major spokespeople including David Hall and Roger Ames (Hall and Ames 1987, 1997) and Jeeloo Liu (2014a, 2014b, 2015),[14] among others,[15] derives from the status of the *Daodejing*'s notion of the Constant Dao and its relationship with *wu*, namely whether they represent foundational metaphysical entities or principles, or naturalistic and emergent conditions.

Proponents of the emergent-process or naturalism view argue that *wu* primarily signifies the state of formless *qi* 氣 that, when manifesting worldly forms collectively grouped into the category of *you*, spontaneously produces the myriad beings; that the term "Dao" is not more than a linguistic device used to conceive of these processes; and that we all too easily reify that linguistic device into a metaphysical entity, as explained by Chad Hansen, "The standard translation of the first line [of the *Daodejing*] is 'The *Dao* that can be told is not the constant *Dao*.' Translators usually capitalize *dao*—as they would *God*. Note first that nothing in the Chinese corresponds to the definite article *the*… Thus they presume in translation what they cannot find in the original: assertion of the existence of a single, ineffable *dao*" (Hansen 1992, p. 215).

Against these views, Peerenboom, in sync with the Chinese scholars, sees Huang-Lao in "stark contrast" (Peerenboom 1993, p. 40) with all other classical Chinese philosophers since it posits the Dao as an actual metaphysical entity that directs the processes of *qi* manifesting the forms of the empirical world. He writes, "Huang-Lao developed a unique philosophy in response to the shortcomings of existing philosophies. In doing so, the author of the *Huangdi sijing* created a new kind of philosophy that, at least with respect to the issue of transcendence, differed in kind from Chinese philosophies that existed at the time" (Peerenboom 1994, p. 373). He continues: "It is a commonplace that Chinese philosophy is predominantly social and political philosophy: rather than being preoccupied with metaphysical quandaries, Chinese thinkers tend to center their aim on the Socratic question of how we as individuals and as a society (ought to) live… The author of the *Huangdi sijing* is one of those more inclined toward metaphysical musing. Indeed, his social and political views are grounded in his metaphysics" (Peerenboom 1993, p. 19).

Carine Defoort published an important review of Peerenboom's work that led to a series of rejoinders between them. She contested both his affirmation of a tradition of Daoism by pointing out his "serious simplifications assuming that Huang-Lao is a 'school'" (Defoort 1994a, p. 380), as well as his affirmation that its philosophy was metaphysical. She accused him of importing the language of Western metaphysics into his interpretations of its conception of the Dao as "an absolute, predetermined metaphysical entity or order" (Peerenboom 1993, pp. 188–89), and she writes, "My disagreement with Peerenboom is therefore infinitesimal but important: for me, Huang-Lao still falls within the parameters of mainstream Chinese thought. It is given its best argument if read as one more,

admittedly marginal, expression of 'immanent' order, a nonfoundational naturalism. For Peerenboom, the 'transcendent' reading is most coherent, which relegates Huang-Lao, in textbook divisions, to the Western camp" (Defoort 1994b, p. 352). Against Peerenboom's demonstration that Huang-Lao also posits numerous other metaphysical principles produced by the Dao, such as *fa* 法, which he interprets as "Law" or "natural law" rather than as the more common and non-metaphysical notion of "model" (for human behavior), Defoort writes that "not only is the dualistic worldview that goes with the dichotomy that Peerenboom introduces absent from the *Huangdi sijing*, but also are its Western implications: laws of nature and natural law" (Defoort 1994b, p. 362).

This debate between Defoort and Peerenboom challenges the reader to decide which view is correct: either Huang-Lao's conception of the Constant Dao represents a metaphysical order, or it is a linguistic expedient employed to encapsulate naturalistic processes. The charges of cultural imperialism that are levelled at Peerenboom and other like-minded Western scholars accused of importing the language of Western metaphysics into their readings of some early Chinese writings are deflated by the recognition that the studies of the Chinese scholars abundantly attest to their widely shared consensus on the metaphysical foundations of Huang-Lao thought.

Peerenboom's recognition of the metaphysics at the heart of Huang-Lao Daoism was entirely due to the excavated *Huangdi sijing*, which only gave tantalizing glimpses into their fuller philosophical visions. Today, we are much better equipped with a substantial collection of excavated manuscripts that give more than mere glimpses into the origins of Chinese metaphysics, and to date, it is the Chinese scholars who have made the greatest strides into this previously unimagined realm. As Peerenboom wrote with near prophetic clarity: "I would think a better explanation for the lack of understanding that has surrounded Huang-Lao is that all texts from the school were lost for most of the last two millennia" (Peerenboom 1994, p. 372).

6. The Excavated Manuscripts and the Chinese Perspectives on Huang-Lao Daoism

The early Chinese excavated manuscripts at issue in this study can be separated into two sorts: *Laozi* manuscripts, including those of Guodian and Mawangdui,[16] and Huang-Lao manuscripts, including the *Taiyi shengshui*, *Hengxian*, *Fanwu liuxing*, and *Huangdi sijing*. The Chinese scholars do not make this separation because their habit of reading metaphysics into the *Daodejing* itself erases a major line of demarcation that would distinguish it from Huang-Lao writings per se, thus allowing them to argue for a fundamental continuity between them. The non-*Laozi* manuscripts revolve around two centers, cosmogony and governance, but since Huang-Lao conceptions of proper governance (not accommodated in this study) emerge from and are dependent on its cosmogony, when the Chinese scholars turn to the manuscripts, their analyses invariably start from the cosmogony of the *Daodejing*, for which Chapter 25 is exemplary, the relevant portion of which states:

> There is a thing that developed from primordial chaos,
>
> Born before Heaven and Earth.
>
> Silent and still, it stands on its own and does not change.
>
> It can be regarded as the Mother of the World.
>
> Not yet knowing its name,
>
> I give it the character "Dao."
>
> Forcing a name on it, I call it the Great.

This passage establishes two staple foundations upon which Huang-Lao metaphysics developed: they understood "there is a thing" (有物 *you wu*)[17] as referring to the Constant Dao as the creative and autonomous metaphysical entity that directed the formation of the empirical world, and "developed in chaos" (混成 *hun cheng*) as referring to *wu* as the eternally existing unbounded spatial condition within which the Constant Dao exists.

The passage then describes the Dao as "silent and still" (寂兮寥兮 *ji xi liao xi*) and indicates its independent, long-lasting, and unchanging existence (獨立不改 *du li bu gai*). The text likens it to the Mother of the World (天下母 *tianxia mu*), because it is seen as pregnant with formless *qi* as the genetic stuff of life, which *Daodejing* Chapter 21 refers to as "images" (象 *xiang*), "entities" (物 *wu*), and "vitalities" (精 *jing*). Recognizing the namelessness of this autonomous entity, the author gives it the "character" (字 *zi*) for Dao before giving it yet another designation, the "Great" (大 *da* or *tai*), which in other passages is also called the One.

Wang Zhongjiang writes:

> Daoist descriptions of the original state thus do not make use of concrete terms but speak of it as being without name, without form, without image, greatly empty, merged in chaos. Yet the state also contains the potentiality of all and is the greatest font of all existence. Still, we have to take this a step further and realize that the original creative state of the universe is real, it is something: Dao, oneness, Great Oneness, or Constancy Before. These are highly abstract concepts, despite the fact that they are also expressed in metaphors such as the "mysterious female" [玄牝 *xuanpin*] or the "spirit of the valley" [谷神 *gushen*] [from Chapter 6]. Although Daoist thinkers often use the negative "non" [無] to describe the original nature of the pre-creation state, yet—as is well known—they do not mean 'pure empty nonbeing' but rather 'ultimate being'." (Z. Wang 2015, p. 8)

The cosmogonic depiction from *Daodejing* Chapter 42 supplements that from Chapter 25, but its importance for Huang-Lao was that it organized the progression of the cosmogony into discrete stages (where its reference to the One in this instance is not synonymous with the Dao); it states:

> Dao gave birth to One.
>
> One gave birth to Two.
>
> Two gave birth to Three.
>
> Three gave birth to the myriad beings.

Absorbed into Huang-Lao cosmogonies, what each numeral in this progression represents is less important than the sequence itself, which initiates with the Dao that leads from the one to the many and from simplicity to complexity, itself a fundamental feature of their cosmogonies, as explained by Wang Zhongjiang:

> All early cosmologists believed that the universe took its beginning from a foundational natural entity and created life in a particular order, but they had a hard time determining what exactly that central pivot or foundation was. In addition, while they all insisted that simpler factors generated more complex structures (e.g., wood being shaped into different types of furniture), the more concrete entity they proposed at the origin, the harder it was for them to see it evolve into complexity (e.g., once wood is shaped into a chair, it is hard to transform into a table). The Daoist vision of universal emergence and cosmic structure always moves from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from simplicity to complexity, from the one to the many. Within this, it proposes various abstract or figurative (concrete) factors to outline levels and goals, increasingly differentiating beings from chaos in the process of arising. (Z. Wang 2015, p. 10)

These *Daodejing* passages together with Wang's comments serve as a point of entry into the Huang-Lao cosmogonies found in the four excavated manuscripts.[18] I give Wang Zhongjiang's translations of their initial lines with only minimal modification for readability.

The *Taiyi sheng shui* states:

> The Great One gave birth to water. Water returned and assisted Taiyi, in this way developing heaven. Heaven returned and assisted Taiyi, in this way developing earth. Heaven and earth [repeatedly assisted each other], in this way developing

> the gods above and below. The gods above and below repeatedly assisted each other, in this way developing Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang repeatedly assisted each other, in this way developing the four seasons. The four seasons repeatedly assisted each other, in this way developing cold and hot. Cold and hot repeatedly assisted each other, in this way developing moist and dry. Moist and dry repeatedly assisted each other; they developed the year, and the process came to an end. (Z. Wang 2016, p. 165)

The *Hengxian* states:

> In Constancy Before, there is no material existence [有 *you*]. There is simplicity, stillness, and emptiness. Simplicity is Great Simplicity; stillness is Great Stillness; emptiness is Great Emptiness. It fulfills itself without repressing itself. Space works. Once there is space, there is energy; once there is energy, there is material existence; once there is material existence, there is a beginning; once there is a beginning, there is the passage of time. There is not yet heaven and earth; there is not yet working, progression, emergence, or birth. Empty, still, and as though one. Muddled and murky! All is still and homogeneous. There is not yet light, not yet teeming life. (Z. Wang 2015, pp. 31–36)

The *Fanwu liuxing* states:

> The One birthed the Two.
>
> The Two birthed the Three.
>
> The Three birthed the Mother.
>
> The Mother formed the Congelations (結 *jie*). (Z. Wang 2016, p. 171)

The "Daoyuan" 道原 from the *Huangdi sijing* states in part:

> At the beginning of constant nonbeing [恒無 *hengwu*],
>
> All was merged in great emptiness.
>
> Empty and same, all was in oneness,
>
> Constant oneness, nothing more…
>
> Therefore, it never depends on existence [有 *you*].
>
> Never relies on any of the myriad beings…
>
> Therefore, it does not possess form.
>
> It is immensely pervasive yet nameless…
>
> Oneness is its appellation.
>
> Emptiness is its dwelling.
>
> Nonaction is its element.
>
> Harmony is its function.
>
> For this reason, the highest Dao is:
>
> So lofty it cannot be scrutinized,
>
> So deep it cannot be fathomed.
>
> Clear and bright, no one can name it.
>
> Vast and large, no one can give it form.
>
> It stands alone and is not paired with anything else. (Z. Wang 2015, pp. 8, 39)

Placed next to each other in this way, the initial passages of these cosmogonies demonstrate their influence from the *Daodejing*. Each is situated in the unbounded spatial condition of *wu* that long preceded *you* (translated above as "material existence" in *Hengxian* and as "non-being" and "existence" in the "Daoyuan"); each is structured in terms of rigorous yet abstract sequences; each designate an original source variously named, with only the "Daoyuan" explicitly using the monikers Dao and the One. Each depiction is also far more detailed than those of the *Daodejing* (although that of the *Fanwu liuxing* is dispersed

throughout its separate sections not given here), and the "Daoyuan," being the latest, gives the most detailed depiction.

The Chinese scholars pay a lot of attention to the different names for the original metaphysical entity, which is important to consider because the *Daodejing* had already named it as the Dao: why did the Huang-Lao thinkers feel the need devise new names for it? While they were influenced by Laozi's cosmogony, were these alternative names for the metaphysical entity simply a demonstration of their desire to distance their own views from his, and if that is the case, was it because they rejected or intended to supersede certain aspects of his thought, possibly to turn Laozi's pre-metaphysical philosophy to one grounded in metaphysics? The Chinese scholars do not pursue these questions in detail, opting instead to position the alternative names within the total field of early Chinese textual discourse to uncover their linguistic valences and philosophical significances.

Wang Zhongjiang discusses these alternative names for the metaphysical entity in the Huang-Lao cosmogonies, which he refers to as "early Chinese nature cosmology," and he writes:

> The Daoist tradition is thus at the center of the development of early Chinese nature cosmology. As clearly expressed in *Daodejing* Chapter 25, they defined Dao as the underlying force of the universe. Under its influence, the three early manuscripts developed the concepts of Oneness (一 *yi*) [*Fanwu liuxing*], Great Oneness (太一 *taiyi*) [*Taiyi sheng shui*], and Constancy Before (恒先 *hengxian*) [*Hengxian*] in an effort to describe the origin of the myriad beings. The "Daoyuan", too, uses Dao to speak of the root of all beings and identifies it with oneness…All these are ways in which early Daoist cosmology developed during the Eastern Zhou. (Z. Wang 2015, p. 5)

Given the twenty-year head start of the *Huangdi sijing* next to the other three excavated manuscripts, over the last decade, the *Hengxian* has received the lion's share of Chinese scholarly attention, and there are good reasons for this. The first is because it begins with the term *heng* 恒 "Constancy," the original term used by Laozi (according to the Guodian and Mawangdui *Laozi*s) to characterize the Dao. The use of *heng* in the *Hengxian* to refer to the metaphysical entity that directed the processes of the cosmogony (rather than the more familiar Dao) marks its first known appearance as an independent noun. This transformation, or metaphysicalization, of *heng* represents the Huang-Lao breakthrough that opened the way into their own metaphysics (either as a development from or in distinction to the *Daodejing*). The earlier use of "Taiyi" in the *Taiyi sheng shui* did not take root in later Huang-Lao writings (possibly because other early Chinese writings used it as the name of a deity; see Li 1995–1996), although it likely pushed the author of the *Hengxian* to think in more metaphysical terms in distinction from Laozi. This is to say that the adjective *heng* was wrenched apart from the Dao to stand alone as an independent, autonomous metaphysical entity, thus representing the original and uniquely Huang-Lao articulation that opened the metaphysical paths into to their later cosmogonies.[19] The second reason for the recent attention paid to the *Hengxian* is because it was the first cosmogonic account to designate specific metaphysical principles never recognized by Laozi that would play a dominant role in later Huang-Lao thought.[20]

The Chinese scholars closely attend to each of these issues in their work on the *Hengxian*, and in the following, Wang Zhongjiang gives insight into the importance of *heng* as an independent term distinct from the Dao; he writes:

> "Constant" here means "eternal" and signifies the ongoing course of the heavenly bodies and natural cycles. Both "constant" [*heng*] and "before" [先 *xian*] refer to temporal phenomena, but "before" here is not an ordinary ranking in a sequence; rather, it indicates the eternal or primordial state before creation, the starting point and initial glimmer of the entire universe… In this sense, Constancy Before [*hengxian*] matches Great Oneness [太一 *taiyi*] in the *Taiyi shengshui*, the "initiation of constant nonbeing" [恒無之初 *heng wu zhi chu*] in the

> "Daoyuan," and even the Great Initiation [泰初 *taichu*] of *Zhuangzi* Chapter 12. It is, moreover, the point or origin where, as the *Hengxian* says, "there is no material existence" [無有 *wuyou*], when all is still nameless and formless. (Z. Wang 2015, p. 33)

According to Wang, the use of "before" (*xian*) refers to "the eternal or primordial state before creation" as the typologically transcendent spatial condition of *wu*, within which Constancy as a metaphysical entity (and not the Dao) is located. This "before," understood as synonymous with the unbounded spatiality of *wu*, is further described as containing the qualities of "simplicity" (樸 *pu*), "stillness" (靜 *jing*), and "emptiness" (虛 *xu*), which are exact terms taken from the *Daodejing*, but then the *Hengxian* does something to them that Laozi never did: it turns them into metaphysical principles by prefixing them with the word "Great" (大 *da* or *tai*), which is the same word Laozi used in *Daodejing* 25 ("forcing a name on it, I call it the 'Great'"), thus textually generating the typologically transcendent principles of "Great Simplicity" (大樸 *taipu*), "Great Stillness" (大靜 *taijing*), and "Great Emptiness" (大虛 *taixu*). Since the *Daodejing* nowhere posits such metaphysical principles, this marks a second breakthrough for Huang-Lao metaphysics in what can be called the formation of their "Da" ("Great") or "Tai" (" Supreme") cosmogony. However, the Chinese scholars roundly hold that this positing of metaphysical principles represents an extension and expansion of Laozi's metaphysics, rather than the origin of Huang-Lao metaphysics.

Granting that the following comments are supported by informed opinion more than proper argument, Wang Zhongjiang addresses these issues that collectively pertain to the relationship of the *Hengxian* to the *Daodejing*. In the first, he writes:

> We can conclude that the *Hengxian* comes after the *Daodejing* for two reasons. One, it stands in the tradition of Daoism founded by Laozi; two, it is contemporaneous with the Guodian *Laozi*, which is neither the first nor the original version of the text. While the *Hengxian* does not make use of Laozi's central concepts of Dao and De, it has quite a few central concepts in common with the text: constancy, simplicity, stillness, emptiness, energy, space, oneness, return, self-generation, names, and more. In many ways, it inherits the overall philosophical thrust of the *Daodejing*, yet it also develops its thought, proposing unique concepts that are yet based on Laozi, such as Constancy Before, Great Simplicity, Great Stillness, Great Emptiness, heavenly workings, muddy and clear energy, self-working, self-acting, and the like. More specifically, it adopts Laozi's notions of simplicity, stillness, and emptiness, then expands them in its own way, making this by adding the prefix "great" to each of them. It uses the idea of constancy, already found in *Daodejing* Chapter 1, using the word *heng* rather than the transmitted *chang*. In Chapters 4 and 25, Laozi describes Dao as "before images and gods" [象帝之先] and as "born before heaven and earth" [先天地 生], using the word "before" to indicate a very long, infinite, cosmic time span. Adapting the two terms "constancy" and "before" from the *Daodejing*, the *Hengxian* creates its own unique concept of Constancy Before to express the starting point and original state of the universe. All this strongly indicates that the text came after the *Daodejing* and inherited and developed its ideas. (Z. Wang 2015, p. 61)

In the second passage, he more succinctly writes:

> Both the *Hengxian* and the *Huangdi sijing* develop Laozi's basic notions. The *Hengxian* begins by speaking of the state before being (*wuyou* 无有), describing it in terms of simplicity (*pu* 朴), stillness (*jing* 静), and emptiness (*xu* 虚), emphasizing each by adding the epithet "great" (*tai* 太), meaning to the highest degree, ultimate, utmost… Based on this, it becomes clear that the original state of the universe was long-lasting, "a constant and permanent state." (Z. Wang 2015, p. 8)

Beginning from the newly discovered and unchartered metaphysical expanse of unbounded *wu* within which the Dao (or Heng or the One) existed, the Huang-Lao thinkers developed their metaphysics by populating it with a plethora of typologically transcendent

principles, some of which had been previously mentioned only as qualities in the *Daodejing*. Later, Huang-Lao thinkers fully exploited this strategy of transforming verbs, nouns, and adjectives taken from the *Daodejing* into the foundational principles that anchored their metaphysics, two of the most important being Name (名 *ming*) and Law (法 *fa*), and in fact the opening passage of the "Jing Fa" 經法 from the *Huangdi sijing* states, "The Dao produced Law" (道生法 *dao sheng fa*). In another related example, the Huang-Lao "Xin-shu shang" from the *Guanzi* inserted an additional principle between the Dao and Law and writes: "Affairs are directed by Law, Law is derived from Authority, and Authority is derived from the Dao" (故事督乎法，法出乎權，權出乎道).

These and legions of other typologically transcendent principles represent the core features of Huang-Lao writings, and they further include those of Principle (则 *ze*) itself, as well as Order (理 *li*), Measure (度 *du*), Extreme (極 *ji*), Punishment (刑 *xing*), Yin and Yang (阴阳 *yin yang*), and Brightness (明 *ming*). However, all of them rest on the metaphysical possibilities initially developed from Laozi's original philosophy, primarily including the Dao, the One, and *wu* itself.

It is not out of place here to revisit the disparity between the claim of many Western scholars that early Chinese philosophy is devoid of metaphysical thought and the enthusiasm of the Chinese scholars to focus their attention on the metaphysics of Huang-Lao Daoism. Three factors may help make sense of this disparity. The first concerns how each understands metaphysics, and while Zheng Kai has drawn comparisons between Western and Chinese versions of it, it may be easier to grasp by seeing the former as grounded in a radical transcendence centered on the distinction between Being and beings and the latter as grounded in a typological transcendence centered on the distinction between the formlessness of *wu* and the forms of *you*. The second concerns the nuanced philosophy of the *Daodejing* that never outright declares nor denies a metaphysical essence to the Dao: Western scholars often deny it, while the Chinese scholars affirm it. Whatever the actual case, the Huang-Lao writings systematically conceived of their own versions of the Dao (or Constancy or the One) as thoroughly metaphysical, which leads to the third reason for the disparity, and I can do no better than to repeat the words of Peerenboom: "I would think a better explanation for the lack of understanding that has surrounded Huang-Lao is that all texts from the school were lost for most of the last two millennia" (Peerenboom 1994, p. 372).

7. Concluding with the *Daodejing*

If the excavated manuscripts provide adequate support for the claims by the Chinese scholars that Huang-Lao represents a textual tradition of early Daoism and that its philosophy is grounded in metaphysics, then this may compel a thoughtful reconsideration of these two fiercely debated issues that could open the way for overcoming many of the self-imposed limitations that have hampered many previous studies. At a certain point, however, such reconsiderations will inexorably direct us back to the *Daodejing* because what the Huang-Lao thinkers did to that key text holds the secrets to the future history of Daoist philosophy.

Daodejing studies have been inhibited by seeing the text as archetypally unchanging, as harboring a pristine clarity that would be unmistakably recognizable once we can hit on the right calibration, honed by hundreds of generations of previous calibrations, that would, like the hidden writing made visible by ultraviolet rays, reveal its eternal truths. Scholars have relied on different editions (or recensions or versions; see Michael 2022b concerning these distinctions) of the *Daodejing* moving along different lines of historical transmission in the attempt to trace back to and forensically reconstruct either a philosophically-sound "authentic text" or a sinologically-sound "original text." But two points call for recognition: the Huang-Lao version of the *Daodejing* significantly differs from Laozi's version (as reflected in the Guodian *Laozi*), and no one over the last two thousand years has ever directly encountered Laozi's original philosophy. These points raise a host of questions that in many ways go beyond those of metaphysics and textual tradi-

tions. This concluding section intends to clarify some of them while also pointing out some possible routes of deeper inquiry.

Let me begin by posing some of these questions. Why is it so difficult to compose a list of Daoist philosophers that would substantially extend beyond Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Liezi 列子 and be comparable to any Who's Who list of Confucian philosophers? Why have so many of the most eminent scholars of the *Daodejing* read it through the lens of Confucian philosophy without adopting, like the Chinese scholars discussed in this study, a specifically Daoist hermeneutics (Girardot 1988 is an exception proving the rule)? Why have so many traditional Chinese commentaries to the *Daodejing*, as well as other traditional Chinese philosophical works that were inspired by it, not been composed by Daoists (as demonstrated by Robinet 1981)? If the Huang-Lao version of the *Daodejing* really is grounded in metaphysics, then why, in the long period of modern scholarship on Chinese philosophy pre-dating the discoveries of the excavated manuscripts, has that not been clear to the scores of scholars of the text, both Chinese and Western, who have long been cognizant of the general outlines of metaphysics?

Some of the answers to some of these questions are fairly straightforward. For the last posed question, one major reason that the metaphysics of Huang-Lao has been misrecognized is because the earliest texts that can be identified with it, namely the recently excavated manuscripts, are very new additions to the corpus of early Chinese writings. They reveal the specific outlines of their own style of metaphysics, namely that of typological transcendence in contrast to the more familiar style of radical transcendence, which serves as template for recognizing the metaphysics at core in their writings. Without having this template on hand, the Huang-Lao contributions to, for example, the eclectic and encyclopedic *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋, put together around 239 BCE under the patronage of Lü Buwei 呂不韋, was not easily distinguishable from the decidedly non-metaphysical contributions of other lines of philosophical thought, with the result that the presence of Huang-Lao metaphysics in the text was unable to be independently announced and became lost in the mix. Seeing this metaphysics "in stark contrast" to other lines of early Chinese thought, however, makes it easier to recognize in their later writings, especially including the *Huainanzi*.

Some of the answers to some of these other questions, however, are more complex. It seems that Sima Tan and Sima Qian were not wrong to describe Huang-Lao as both a philosophical attitude and a political faction of Han political administration, but it lost its footing when Emperor Wu adopted the Han Confucian ideology represented by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 and the text associated with his name, the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, even as he executed the Prince of Huainan, the philosophical champion of Huang-Lao thought at the time, thus marking a tidal change in Han governing policy. Still, the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (an official history of the Eastern Han) gives biographies of more than fifteen figures typically described as being "fond of Huang-Lao from their youth" (少好黃老 *shao hao Huang-Lao*). Despite this, the only Huang-Lao texts that survive from the period are the commentaries to the *Daodejing* by Yan Zun 嚴遵 and Heshang Gong 河上公, both of whom were far removed from the centers of power and had no effect on Han policy.

Also during this time was produced an odd genre of writings called "weft" (緯 *wei*, sometimes translated as "apocrypha"), which, according to Robert Kramers, "indicated a literature containing esoteric explanations of the *jing* 經 or Classics. *Jing* originally meant the warp of a loom, and *wei* meant its woof" (Kramers 1986, p. 759). Without getting into the details of this genre, I here only mention the *Zhouyi qian zuo du* 周易乾鑿度, which, because it shares much overlap with the *Daodejing*, may somehow be associated or aligned with Huang-Lao thought. More specifically, it also offers a metaphysical perspective on the "Supreme" (太 *tai*) cosmogony far more elaborate than most of the excavated manuscripts and received texts recognized by the Chinese scholars as Huang-Lao.[21] Is this "weft" from the Han era then also a Huang-Lao text, or is it the next step on the way in Chinese metaphysical speculation? Might the "weft" text indeed have had more impact on this development than the Huang-Lao texts, which completely disappeared from the records for two

millennia? At the very least, this "weft" found its way into the Wei-Jin period Xuanxue literature, most notably in the *Liezi*,[22] and was echoed in Daoist commentaries far into the Song era.

Next to this is the wide array of other Xuanxue writings, for which Wang Bi's 王弼 edition of and commentary to the *Daodejing* stands out for its success in establishing a metaphysics of pure nothingness, and it was, at the beginning of the Song, imperially recognized as the orthodox Confucian version, even as religious Daoism maintained a position of primacy for Heshang Gong's edition of and commentary to the text.[23] Beginning with the establishment of imperial China, the mantle of typological metaphysics was apparently taken over by the Neo-Confucians, where it enjoyed a rich and vibrant existence. As Jeeloo Liu writes, "The early Daoist conception of *wu* as signifying the origin of the universe depicts *formlessness* rather than *nothingness*. The positing of a primordial *nothingness* became the standard interpretation of Daoist cosmogony since Neo-Confucianism" (Liu 2014b, p. 182).

Although each of the writings here mentioned indeed played a part in the further development of Daoist philosophical thought, modern scholars continue to largely rely on the earliest or latest "Confucian" commentaries to the *Daodejing*; however, this does not mean that Daoist readings never existed or that there was never developed a specifically Daoist hermeneutics, it is simply that they are just not well researched. In the end, I am aware that most of these issues cannot be resolved within this paper, at least not without starting even more fundamental debates about certain trends in academia. But these are nonetheless the expansive vistas opened by the excavated manuscripts together with the painstaking and invaluable work done on them by the Chinese scholars.

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Notes

1 The title "*Daodejing*" generally refers to the text that was canonized in two parts, Dao and De, in the course of the Western Han Dynasty, whereas the title "*Laozi*" is used for the pre-canonized and excavated editions of the text, as with the Guodian *Laozi* and the Mawangdui *Laozi*, that had not yet become stabilized into what we familiarly call the received edition.

2 Yates (1997, pp. 193–94) summarizes current debates about the title, with some calling it the *Boshu* or *Silk Manuscripts*, like Yates (1997) and Peerenboom (1993), some calling it the *Four Texts of the Yellow Emperor*, like Chang and Feng (1998), and some calling it *Huangdi sijing* (Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor), including the Chinese scholars at issue in this study; I follow them and have changed all alternative references to the *Huangdi sijing*.

3 Because the current study is focused on issues in the modern study of Huang-Lao Daoism, it spends little time analyzing the manuscripts themselves. Next to readily available English translations of the Guodian and Mawangdui *Laozi*s, English translations of the other manuscripts are taken from the works of Wang Zhongjiang, to which readers who wish to consult them are referred. Editions of other early Chinese texts discussed herein are taken from the Chinese Text Project website (https://ctext.org/), accessed on 24 September 2023, as consistent with contemporary practice.

4 I use the terms "Chinese scholarship" and "Chinese scholars" in a geographical and not an ethnic sense to refer to mainland Chinese scholars trained in the Chinese academy. The phrase does not necessarily refer to the growing number of Chinese scholars trained in the Western academy, nor to the growing number of Western scholars trained in the Chinese academy. For example, I do not consider the eminent Chinese scholar of Chinese philosophy, Cheng Chung-ying, who received his M.A. from the University of Washington and his Ph.D. from Harvard and who spent much of his career at the University of Hawai'i, as representative of "Chinese scholarship," especially since his views (Cheng 1990, pp. 167–68) about "Chinese Metaphysics as Non-metaphysics," which holds that it is not concerned with the "separation of the sensible from the nonsensible, the practical from the transcendental," are not representative of "Chinese scholarship."

5 The most important work is Wang Zhongjiang's 简帛文明与古代思想世界 (translated as *Civilization of Bamboo-Silk and the World of Ancient Thought*) published in 2011 (Z. Wang 2011). Its twenty chapters in nearly 600 pages devoted to fifteen excavated texts widely supplemented with attention to the *Daodejing*, given the word space disparity between Chinese and English, marks

it as a massive work by any measure. Many of its chapters have been revised and translated into English for publication in the two books, *Daoism Excavated: Cosmos and Humanity in Early Manuscripts* (2015) and *Order in Early Chinese Excavated Texts: Natural, Supernatural, and Legal Approaches* (2016). The work of Zheng Kai is 道家政治哲学发微, published in 2019 (Zheng 2019); translated into English as *The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism*, it was published in 2021. The work of Cao Feng is 近年出土黄老思想文獻研究, published in 2015 (Cao 2015); translated into English as *Daoism in Early China: Huang-Lao Thought in Light of Excavated Texts*, it was published in 2021.

6 To counter potential claims that I am setting up a straw man argument, I point out that some eminent Western scholars hold the opposite position. Benjamin Schwartz (1985, pp. 186–254) and Harold Roth (2021), for example, both argue that the Dao is an ineffable metaphysical reality that can be encountered by way of a Chinese style of mysticism.

7 The work of Zheng Kai is especially insightful with respect to Huang-Lao political philosophy.

8 A more detailed account of Huang-Lao uses of *wu* and *you* is found in Michael (2023).

9 The emergent naturalism that scholars such as Ames, Liu, and Defoort see in the formations of primordial *qi* largely proceeds along the same course but without the direction of the Dao and its principles.

10 I do not provide further analysis of De, often translated as "Virtue," because it has only a minimal role in the arguments with which this study engages, centered as they are on cosmogony. It does, however, play an important role in Huang-Lao political philosophy, which this study does not accommodate.

11 This body of work begins with the two complete English translations of the *Huangdi sijing*, the first by Yates (1997) and the second by Chang and Feng (1998). The introductory materials of each are concerned with positioning the writings in the context of early Chinese political thought as a whole and offer little for Daoist studies. Yates recognizes that the writings "are composed of two types of texts: some belong to what has been identified as the Huang-Lao Daoist tradition, others belong to this more esoteric, lesser-known Yin-Yang tradition" (1997, p. 16), but he does not go into detail. Chang and Feng recognize that "Laozi's philosophy of Dao may have influenced the *Huangdi sijing*" (Chang and Feng 1998, p. 17), but they anyway read the text as companion to the Confucian tradition because the Confucian gentleman "ideally personifies the cardinal Confucian moral virtues and thereby become legitimate exemplars for others to follow. Hence, we may characterize this mode of governing as *yang ru* 阳儒 or 'overt Confucianism.' In contrast to *yang ru*, the *Huangdi sijing* will be characterized as *yin* 隐 or 'covert' (because it) is clearly written for the ruler and the ruling elites as an 'internal document' of 'the art of governing,' obviously not intended for public consumption" (Chang and Feng 1998, p. 76). Given that both were published in the late 1990s, they oddly never mention the more recently excavated Huang-Lao manuscripts. More recent work added to this body of scholarship worthy of note includes Perkins (2013, 2016), Brindley (2013), Brindley et al. (2013), and Gomouline (2013).

12 The same could be said for other received texts like the *Hanfeizi*, *Wenzi*, *Heguanzi*, and *Huainanzi*, all of which strive to subordinate an earlier anarchic strain of Daoist ideas to the needs of the state and all of which also post-date 221 BCE when Qinshi Huangdi became the emperor of a unified Chinese realm, which raises the possibility that Huang-Lao just might refer to him. I refrain from discussing these texts, as well as other Han-era apocrypha (緯 *wei*), for that matter, since I preserve them for a future study of the political aspects of Huang-Lao.

13 Brown and McLeod (2021, pp. 15–32) give an insightful discussion of Western notions of naturalism and metaphysics and how they have impacted Western studies of Chinese thought.

14 Liu (2014a, p. 63) argues that "Chinese *qi*-cosmology falls into the category of naturalism because the operations of *qi* do not violate the laws of nature… In Chinese *qi*-cosmology, the universe is seen as self-existent and self-sufficient. There is no supernatural entity that operates in any way on things in the natural world."

15 Perkins (2015) and Li and Perkins (2015) provide good overviews.

16 There are a handful more of early Chinese *Laozi* manuscripts, a discussion of which can be found in Michael (2023).

17 Since the Chinese scholars primarily rely on the Huang-Lao version of the *Daodejing*, which is more or less what we recognize as the received version, I refrain from complicating matters by bringing the Guodian *Laozi* into discussion unless specifically noted, in this case by refraining from discussion of the import of its use of "form" (狀 *zhuang*) that the Huang-Lao thinkers changed to "thing" (物 *wu*), which by itself gives evidence of the distinction between Laozi's pre-metaphysical philosophy and Huang-Lao's metaphysical philosophy.

18 Not all Huang-Lao texts present cosmogonies, even as many later Huang-Lao texts, such as the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*, provide even more sophisticated versions.

19 By the early Han, Huang-Lao had resolved on the Dao as the formal and standard title of the metaphysical entity, *heng* was no longer used due to its taboo, and other appellations for it, although still used (such as the One, etc.), became relegated to secondary status as primary attributes of the Dao. For a detailed analysis of *heng* and *chang*, see Michael (2022a).

20 There is a third reason, not examined here, for the recent attention paid to the *Hengxian* and its profound influence over the later Huang-Lao tradition, namely its explicit connecting of the cosmogony to governance (not accommodated in this study). This in fact can be argued to be the true raison d'etre of Huang-Lao Daoism, which appears most fully developed in the *Huangdi sijing*, in the *Huainanzi*, and in Heshang Gong's *Daodejing*.

[21] *Zhouyi qian zuo du* (1994, p. 46) states: "The Supreme Origin is the beginning of *qi*, the Supreme Beginning is the beginning of form, and the Supreme Elemental is the beginning of substance" (太初者氣之始也，太始者形之始也，太素者質也). Weishu Jicheng (Shanghai 1994, p. 46).

[22] *Liezi* Chapter 1 states: "There is Supreme Simplicity, there is Supreme Origin, there is Supreme Beginning, and there is Supreme Elemental" (有太易，有太初，有太始，有太素). For this discussion, see Michael (2011, pp. 118–21).

[23] For more on the changing fates of the Heshang Gong and Wang Bi editions and commentaries to the *Daodejing*, see Wagner (2003) and Chan (1991).

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