

Article

The Original Text of the *Daodejing*: Disentangling Versions and Recensions

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Abstract: The *Daodejing* is counted among the greatest works of world philosophy and literature, but it is a short work that is exceedingly difficult to comprehend. Among several reasons for this is that no one knows the actual words and form of its original text. Assessing the differences between any two editions of it is a simple task when they are laid next to each other, but it is not possible to lay any edition of the *Daodejing* next to its original text to assess their differences, because no one has ever seen the original text of the *Daodejing*, and no one knows its actual words and form. Approaching the original text is only made possible through its representations and reflections in later editions that we do possess, some of them transmitted and others excavated. Any possible access to the original text, to any degree whatsoever, is dependent on how these later editions are managed. Sinology manages them with the recension category whereas *Laozi* Studies manages them with the version category. This study examines, disentangles, and assesses the different ways that these two categories are used with the intended effect of approaching the original text of the *Daodejing*.

Keywords: Laozi *Daodejing*; Laozi Studies; Chinese Philosophy; textual history



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1. Introduction

This paper examines the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, paying particular attention to its original text; it is an appropriate contribution to this special issue of *Religions*, called “Global Laozegetics: Engaging the Multiplicity of Laozi Interpretations and Translations.” The term “Laozegetics” is one rendering of the Chinese phrase *Laoxue* 老, which this paper renders as “Laozi Studies”.¹ Approaching the early history of the *Daodejing* with a Laozi Studies perspective and methodology, this study contrasts its characteristic features with those of sinology and philosophy at various points. The emphasis on these contrasts is a feature, not a bug of this study, because what is at issue in approaching the early history of the *Daodejing*, is a matter of understanding the nature of the work’s original orality, so it is important to understand why Laozi Studies is capable of approaching the original text in ways that sinology and philosophy are not.²

This study is particularly focused on the question of the original text of the *Daodejing*, which refers to the state of the text in its first transmission (i.e., its first edition), thereby acquiring its status as a text, as far as we understand the term. To recognize the original text of the *Daodejing* in this way does not mean to imply that it was the complete text that we have today, and three points are worth noting up front. First, although this study supports notions of an original orality for the *Daodejing* and its continuing oral transmission throughout the Warring States, there may have been many more written editions of it than we are presently aware of, and Laozi himself might even be personally responsible for composing the first one, but if so, those written editions were only incidental, and left no mark on its early textual history. Second, of the 81 chapters of the received text, it seems likely that the last fifteen were not part of the original text but were later additions (Perkins 2014). Third, any examination of the excavated manuscript editions reveals the text’s fluidity both in form and content, at least until its canonization in the mid-Western Han by Emperor Jing, which served as a kind of template for the received text as we have

it (Ding 2017). These considerations do not affect our understanding of the original text as such, but they serve as a temper for our understanding of its form and content.

Sinology also searches for the original text of the *Daodejing*, but it is restricted to written editions, of which the earliest complete ones date only as far back as the early Han dynasty. Its consensus view is that the original *Daodejing* is dated to just before then, at the end of the Warring States period, since there are no earlier textual records attesting to it. This study analyzes sinology's basic methodological category, namely the recension, and it shows how it is employed with the intent to either uncover the original text of the *Daodejing*, or to produce a critical edition of it by connecting or separating different historical editions.

For its part, philosophy is less interested in the original text, largely because the earliest manuscript editions demonstrate a dizzying array of textual variants, in addition to a plethora of other uncertainties concerning its form and content. Instead, philosophy is interested in the philosophically authentic text that is understood in terms of textual intent (see Jiang 2016).³ The authentic text refers to the text of the *Daodejing*, in which the philosophical and other linguistic weaknesses found in earlier editions have been repaired, or even, from philosophy's point of view, restored; an example of this is seen in Liu Xiaogan's suggestion that Wang Bi brought the thought of the *Daodejing* to its "logical completion" (Liu 2014, p. 158).

Different from sinology in that it seeks the original written text and what it linguistically says, and different from philosophy in that it seeks the authentic text and what it philosophically means, *Laozi Studies* is interested in how the text was interpreted by different groups; more specifically, it is interested in the hermeneutical horizons from which sinology's "original text" and philosophy's "authentic text" both emerged. Thus, the final parts of this study attempt to display the interpretive value of approaching the early textual history of the *Daodejing* through a different category, that of the version.

Whereas the recension category relied on by sinology identifies the various editions of the *Daodejing* based on their textual lineages, the version category relied on by *Laozi Studies* identifies the various early editions through their alignments and associations with their own separate interpretive communities, of which this study recognizes three: the Yangsheng version of the *Daodejing*, the Huang-Lao version, and the Tianshi version. This study demonstrates that the earliest version of the *Daodejing*, the Yangsheng version, was originally an oral text that circulated as such throughout most of its early history up to the end of the Warring States, and it is this version that is most proximate to the original text of the *Daodejing*. The concluding section of this study discusses the hermeneutic value of recognizing the unique features of each of these three versions in terms of how they complement and serve as counterpoints to each other, thereby shedding light on the early history, not just of the *Daodejing*, but of Daoism itself.

2. Laozi Studies

The *Daodejing* is a worldwide phenomenon, and it has been translated into most of the world's languages that are in use today. Quite short and devoid of ornate language, it is among the simplest of early Chinese texts to read and translate. Generations of its translators throughout the world's history have an agreed upon form of the *Daodejing* as a text; in 81 chapters and a bit over 5000 words, new translations are often motivated by the simplicity of its language in conjunction with the abstruseness of its thought.

Many people through the ages have asked what the *Daodejing* is about, but this paper raises a different question: what is the text of the *Daodejing*? We can turn to Merriam-Webster for a working definition of the text as "the original words and form of a written or printed work" or "an edited or emended copy of an original work". This definition, however, is based on a traditional understanding of a text, which regards it as a specifically written artefact, but there are reasons to consider the *Daodejing* as an originally oral text. This leads me to adopt a simpler understanding of a text, as not more than the actual words of an authoritative source that may or may not be considered an "author". Nevertheless, directing the question of what a text is specifically to the *Daodejing*, more precise informa-

tion is needed pertaining to its “original words and original form”. Moreover, of equal importance for understanding the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, is understanding the interpretive communities that formed around the presence of the authoritative source that “authored” the “original text”.

There are different ways to go about trying to approach the original text of the *Daodejing*, and most of them employ the tools and methods of sinology. For them to be effective in uncovering the original text, there must be a solid understanding of its words and its forms. Modern understandings invariably conceive it as written—or inscribed or brushed or chiseled—onto physical objects—paper or bamboo or silk or stone, although there is no certainty even on these points.

There is every reason to question the sinological assumption that the original text of the *Daodejing* was in fact written. One way to do so is to turn to a somewhat different methodological approach, *Laozi Studies* (*Laosue* 老學), which can be considered a subfield of Daoist Studies that is exclusively committed to the *Daodejing*, and that does not parse the text into “Daoist religion” (*daojiao* 道教) and “Daoist philosophy” (*daojia* 道家).

Although the origins of the *Daodejing* are shrouded in ancient mystery, by the end of the Warring States it had become widely popular, and by the beginning of the Han dynasty, its ideas were dominating political and philosophical discourse. As thinkers began to contemplate the meanings of the text, they also began to comment on and write about them; this marks the beginning of *Laozi Studies*.

Yang (1936) identified his research with *Laozi Studies*, and his article on the Han dynasty *Daodejing* exegesis and interpretation refers to some fifty notable Han period experts, and a dozen lost works on it. Referring to it, Alan Chan notes, “[b]efore the Han dynasty, references to the *Laozi* were already found in such works as *Zhuangzi* and *Hanfeizi*; but complete commentaries did not appear until the Han period. In this respect, certainly not all of the fifty or so figures identified by Yang Shuda as *Laozi* experts had actually written on the subject; but the list does attest to the rapid growth of ‘*Laozi* learning’ [‘*Laozi Studies*’] in the Han dynasty” (Chan 1998, p. 106).

In Chinese scholarship, *Laozi Studies* generally refers to the study of historical interpretations of, and commentaries on, the *Daodejing*. Following the publication in China of a profusion of twentieth-century *Laozi Studies* scholarship, Chan’s article introduced the term to a Western audience, where it even appears in the title. The term lay dormant in Western scholarship until Misha Tadd revived it with his translation of *Laosue* as “*Laozegetics*”, a kind of play on “*Laozi*” and “*exegetics*”. Tadd writes:

“*Laozegetics*”, as a framework and methodology, offers a valuable path to studying the *Daodejing* that redirects attention from the endless debates about the classic’s “original” meaning toward the plurality of ways it has been understood throughout Chinese history . . . Prioritizing this abundance of interpretation shifts scholarly focus away from the supposed original or “true” text and allows for an analysis of the text in the world . . . [*Laozegetics*] both describes the tradition of *Laozi* and the interpretation of his text by many different types of people, including those far outside the bounds of “*Daoism*”. (Tadd 2021, pp. 71–72)

I have adopted the term for my own work on the *Daodejing*, where I highlight its methodological relationship to sinology and philosophy.

To discuss the *Daodejing* more clearly in the context of what in Chinese is called “*Laozi Studies*” 老學, this study relies on a set of conventions differently tailored from other scholarly works, and their application throughout represents one effort to bring sinology and philosophy closer . . . It is a challenging label for Western scholars because it does not necessarily distinguish between the values of what philosophy and sinology separately contribute, and it approaches the *Daodejing* as a cultural phenomenon more than a historical artefact. (Michael 2021, p. 4)

Where Yang and Chan's perspective primarily centers on the Chinese dimensions of *Laozi* Studies, and Tadd's emphasizes its global dimensions, mine intends to recognize a space for it that is next to, but separate from, sinology and philosophy. Tao Jiang points out the differences between sinology and textual history on one hand, and philosophy and exegesis on the other, and discusses "the two sets of scholarly objects operative" in each: the former has insight on the "original text ... historical author ... and authorial intent", while the latter has the "inherited text ... textual author ... (and) textual intent" (Jiang 2016, p. 35).

We can gain a perspective on the difference between sinology and *Laozi* Studies from two telling claims, the first of which comes from Harold Roth in an article that will be discussed more in a later section; he writes, "[i]t is the stated goal of textual criticism [i.e., sinology] to locate—in the unlikely event it still survives intact—or to re-establish, if it does not, this original text. This is indeed the commonly accepted goal of textual criticism" (Roth 1993, p. 225). The second claim comes from Wang Bo, who identifies his work on the *Daodejing* with "the history of thought" or intellectual history, which is perfectly congruent with *Laozi* Studies; he writes, "[t]he mainstream approach of the previous century—that of debating the authenticity of texts—is currently on the wane, while the perspectives of hermeneutics and the history of thought have become increasingly important" (Wang 2017, p. 115).

Sinology seeks the "original text" to tell us what it says, and philosophy seeks the "authentic text" to tell us what it means, but *Laozi* Studies explores the hermeneutical horizons from which both emerged. Although heavily informed by both, *Laozi* Studies is closely aligned with intellectual history and comparative and cultural approaches to the *Daodejing*, whether in the Chinese context pace Yang and Chan, or the modern global context pace Tadd. Relying on both sinology and philosophy in its commitment to the *Daodejing*, *Laozi* Studies focuses on the text "in the world" by examining its role in religion, science and medicine, and culture and the arts. It equally explores Han dynasty understandings of the *Daodejing*, as well as contemporary global ones, whether in temples on Mount Wudang or in *taiji* studios in San Francisco.

Laozi Studies does not judge any particular version of the *Daodejing* as more faithful to the original text than others, nor any particular interpretation of the authentic text as more correct than others. This realization informs the claim by Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318), a noted Song dynasty commentator of the *Daodejing*: "[t]he Dao descends into each age and varies with the times. Commentators mostly follow what is fashionable in their historical period with each master teaching from their own perspective. Thus, the Han dynasty commentators produced the Han *Laozi*, the Jin dynasty commentators produced the Jin *Laozi*, and the Tang and Song dynasty commentators produced the Tang and Song *Laozi*" (Du n.d.).

The continuing cultural significance of the *Daodejing* is borne out by the profusion of its editions and commentaries which are available in most world languages. *Laozi* Studies approaches this profusion with an awareness of the diverse cultural forces, beginning thousands of years ago, that have conditioned its transmissions, receptions, and interpretations.

It is these diverse cultural forces that were primarily responsible for the changes to the text of the *Daodejing*. Although it is a singular work, its many editions and commentaries have given birth to very different philosophies. These different philosophies formed around innovative changes to the text that were crystallized in their respective commentaries. These commentaries reflect the powerful presence of the interpretive communities behind them, and the different philosophies that those interpretive communities generated from the text are inseparable from the distinct textual changes that differentiate one version of the *Daodejing* from another. Sinology and *Laozi* Studies both focus on these textual changes. In his important (Liu 2003) study, Liu Xiaogan gives representation to the former, where he analyzes three sources of textual alteration, namely "scribal error" (Liu 2003, p. 338), "linguistic assimilation" (Liu 2003, p. 351) that seeks textual uniformity, and "conceptual focusing" (Liu 2003, p. 363) that seeks to highlight philosophical points. The resulting

textual alterations can be documented and explained by comparing different editions of the *Daodejing*.

Wang Bo distinguishes Liu Xiaogan's "textual alterations", that prioritize text over interpretive community, from the "interpretative alterations", that prioritize interpretive community over text; nonetheless, *Laozi Studies* values both explanations equally. We see this in Wang's discussion of two early and variant interpretations of the *Daodejing*: "the life of the hermit" paradigm adopted by Zhuangzi and "the political philosophy" paradigm adopted by Han Feizi, and he writes, "[t]his divergence directly led to the formation of different paradigms of understanding Laozi's thought in the Han dynasty" (Wang 2017, p. 116). Wang means that the former paradigm became associated with the Xiang'er edition and commentary to the *Daodejing*, whereas the latter was associated with the Heshang Gong edition and commentary. His following comments demonstrate how this can lead to a "textual transformation":

[i]n Section 7, the *Daodejing* states: "Isn't it simply because he is impartial (*wusi* 無私) that he can satisfy his own partiality (*si* 私: partial, selfish)?" The Xiang'er commentary renders *si* twice as body (*shi* 尸), which more naturally brings the *dao* of longevity into play. There are many such cases, which can be rationally understood from the perspective of the history of thought. (Wang 2017, p. 116)

Is the *Daodejing* text that was read by the political philosopher Heshang Gong and the hermit ecclesiast Xiang'er the same or different?⁴ This question gains more immediacy when surveying the early Chinese field which reveals around a dozen different editions of the *Daodejing* that often demonstrate important differences among them. Feng Youlan's modern distinction between a "philosophical" and a "religious" Daoism is incapable of containing these differences, and such distinctions serve to muddle the early history of the *Daodejing*. Furthermore, although Wang Bo's distinction between a "hermit" Xiang'er *Daodejing* and a "political" Heshang Gong *Daodejing* is generally inarguable, it too is incapable of containing the multiple other early *Daodejing* editions with their fluid contents and profusion of forms that were repeatedly subjected to persistent "textual transformation" and "interpretive transformation".

There is just one "original text" of the *Daodejing*, the source text that stands behind all of these multiple editions. Different communities, for example hermits or politicians, altered it according to their own interpretive tastes, as if that source text equally but murkily contained the religious, the political, and the philosophical that each interpretive community emphasized differently. Consensus states that any given edition of the *Daodejing* is, to one degree or another, reflective of that original text, and editions that are deemed more faithful to it are accorded higher value than those deemed more divergent. However, as every known edition of the *Daodejing* demonstrates that it has already deviated from the original text, the only way to reliably gauge the extent of its deviation is to compare the edition against the original, and yet Liu Xiaogan and Wang Bo, who discussed the reasons for such textual alterations, have never seen the original text that was only subsequently altered.

Laozi Studies, however, makes no judgments about the authenticity of any historically circulating edition of the *Daodejing*—they each have their own individual stories to tell, and this is the hermeneutical horizon inhabited by *Laozi Studies*. Understanding that horizon begins with the earliest editions of the text.

3. The Earliest Editions of the *Daodejing*

There are two general accounts for the origins of the *Daodejing*, and the line separating them is 280 BC, the approximate date of the closing of the Guodian tomb by which the Guodian *Laozi* acquires its terminus ante quem. The first is the synthetic account that sees the *Daodejing* as, more or less, an already complete text before 280 BCE, and it takes the Guodian *Laozi* as a partial transcription of it; it would be many more decades before the earliest complete transcriptions began to publicly circulate. The synthetic account is generally held by people who believe Laozi himself composed the whole thing in the Spring and Autumn periods, and although it is quite possible that he did, it is also quite

possible that the *Daodejing* is no more than the record of his oral teachings; in addition, even the received text of the *Daodejing* cannot hide the overwhelming evidence of its long history of oral transmission.

The second is the syncretic account that sees the *Daodejing* becoming a text only after 280 BCE, and the Guodian *Laozi* is taken as one early batch, among other collected sayings, that would later be compiled into the complete text. In the following sections, I first discuss the syncretic account that relies on the notion of a *recension* to make sense of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, and then I discuss the synthetic account that relies on the notion of a *version* to make sense of its early history.

However incompatible these two accounts are, they dovetail in seeing the initial production of the first publicly circulating written editions of the *Daodejing* in the last years of the Warring States. In 249 BCE, the scholar-statesman Lü Buwei gathered the important spokespeople of the various philosophical trends of the time at his court, including some who were familiar with Laozi's philosophy of the Dao and who publicly announced and articulated it there. This philosophy attracted like-minded thinkers who formed a philosophical school known as Huang-Lao, and they took essential possession of the *Daodejing* as their own. No matter if, according to the synthetic account, they heard the oral text of the *Daodejing* and then transcribed it, or if, according to the syncretic account, they gathered its various pieces and compiled it, it is precisely here that the original written text of the *Daodejing* is to be found.

From the moment that original written edition first circulated, it was subjected to manifold changes and transformations, visible in its dozen or so early physical records in our possession. Sinology relies heavily, almost exclusively, on these records for understanding the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, so it is necessary to consider what they are and how sinology manages them.

The first six early physical records of the *Daodejing* appear as stand-alone manuscript editions:

Physical Records 1–3: the three editions of the Guodian *Laozi* excavated in 1993 from a tomb that was sealed around 280 BC. These records were written on bamboo slips, which appear in three separate groups standardly recognized as Guodian *Laozi* "A", Guodian *Laozi* "B", and Guodian *Laozi* "C", and they contain around 40% of the received edition.

Physical Records 4–5: the two editions of the Mawangdui *Laozi* excavated from a tomb in 1973 that was sealed in 168 BC. These records were written on silk manuscripts, which appear in two complete editions called Mawangdui *Laozi* "A", composed prior to 200 BC, and Mawangdui *Laozi* "B", composed after that but prior to 180 BCE.

Physical Record 6: the Beida *Laozi* edition donated to Peking University in 2009 that, because it was not archaeologically excavated, can only be roughly dated to around 100 BCE. It was written on bamboo slips.

The next physical record appears as a stand-alone redacted edition.

Physical Record 7: the Fu Yi edition that was recovered and subsequently edited by Fu Yi in 574 CE, from a tomb whose female occupant was a consort of Xiang Yu (d. 202 BC), the general who battled Liu Bang before the latter founded the Han dynasty. During the Song dynasty, Fan Yingyuan produced a redaction of this record, which is known as the Fu Yi *Laozi* or the *Guben Laozi*.

The next three records of the *Daodejing* appear as stand-alone redacted editions with appended commentaries. The question of their textual authenticity, stability, and reliability is minimized because they were transmitted together with their commentaries, guaranteeing, for the most part, their resistance to alteration.

Physical Record 8: the Yan Zun 嚴尊 edition, called *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸, written at the end of the Western Han, for which only the “De” section and commentary survive, namely chapters 38–81.

Physical Record 9: the Heshang Gong edition, called *Laozi Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子河上公章句, likely composed in the first half of the Eastern Han, for which both the text and the commentary are complete.

Physical Record 10: the Xiang'er edition, called *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注, likely composed in the second half of the Eastern Han and recovered from Dunhuang in the early twentieth century, for which only the text and commentary to chapters 3–37 survive.

In addition to these early stand-alone *Daodejing* records, large parts of the text are displayed in other independent works.

Physical Record 11–12: the “Jie Lao” 解老 and “Yu Lao” 喻老 chapters of the *Hanfeizi*. Despite attribution to Hanfeizi, the two chapters were written by different people and are datable to the early Western Han.

Physical Record 13–15: the *Heguanzi* and the *Wenzi*, large portions of which are datable to the end of the Warring States, and the *Huainanzi*, written in the middle of the Western Han, judiciously quote content from the *Daodejing*.

Each of these records point to the original text of the *Daodejing*, but none are identifiable with it. Generations of scholars who worked before the discoveries of the manuscript editions have tried their luck at producing a critical edition of the original text, but they were severely limited by the comparative lateness of the earliest editions upon which they primarily relied, namely the Fu Yi, the Heshang Gong, and the Wang Bi, and they often debated which of them was the earliest, and which was the most authentic. Thus, William Boltz, writing after the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* but before the discovery of the Guodian *Laozi*, says:

“[a]lthough the Mawangdui manuscripts, either individually or taken together, cannot be said to represent the “original” *Laozi*, the *editio princeps*, so to speak, they cannot but be regarded as having more authority to approximate the original than any other known version of the text. They are, by a period of more than four centuries, our oldest witnesses, and can therefore be regarded as the most faithful extant representative of the original *Laozi* text.” (Boltz 1982, p. 99)

It is worth noting here that, in terms of “our oldest witness”, the Guodian *Laozi* is itself substantially older than the Mawangdui *Laozi*.

Nonetheless, because of the absence of the original text and the large number of textual variations seen in all later editions of the *Daodejing*, it was convenient to consider the movement from the original text to the later editions as one from clarity and coherence to dissonance and variation. Adhering to the sinological tenet that later editions invariably mystify the clarity of the original text, Roth writes that “the later an edition appears within a lineage, the greater is the number of textual variants not present in the original edition of that lineage but rather the result of emendation, conflation, poor editing, and so on” (Roth 1993, p. 225). Oddly, however, neither the Mawangdui nor the Guodian *Laozi* brought us any closer to the original text; Liu Xiaogan writes:

[s]cholars, as well as ancient editors, tend to believe that [. . .] the original or earliest text should be the most logical and coherent in style and wording. One may think that that the editors and collators believed that their alterations were restoring the original version and improving on the extant versions. However, the bamboo [Guodian] and silk [Mawangdui] versions give evidence that the earliest versions were not as logical and coherent as later scholars thought and wished. (Liu 2003, p. 382)

As Liu recognized, the excavated manuscripts are rife with variations, even when just compared to each other. The strikingness of some of these variations compel reconsideration of many of the most fundamental notions established in the transmitted editions of the *Daodejing*.

One such fundamental notion is from *Daodejing* chapter 25, that the constant Dao “does not change” (*bugai* 不改). Its earliest rendition is found in the Guodian *Laozi*; it states that the Dao “stands on its own and does not *hai*” 獨立不亥. The primary reference of *hai* is to one of the twelve Terrestrial Branches, but as Scott Cook notes, the Mawangdui *Laozi* writes *hai* with the jade radical, the Beida *Laozi* writes it with the dog radical, Ding Yuanzhi interprets it with the earth radical in the sense of “limitless”, Liu Xinfang interprets it with the speech radical in the sense of “dual”, and Donald Harper interprets it with the sun radical in the sense of “unique” (Cook 2012, p. 46). The meaning of *hai* here is anything but decided.

The Fu Yi, Heshang Gong, and Wang Bi editions, among others, in fact do write “does not change” (*bugai* 不改), but this interpretation is already permeated with the metaphysics that follows from identifying the Dao as an “unchanging” substantive entity to begin with; its use demonstrates a textual transformation that reflects a Huang-Lao metaphysical philosophy of the Dao that is in many ways antithetical to Laozi’s earlier phenomenological philosophy of the Dao. Recognizing the difficulty of reading *buhai*, as a quality of the constant Dao, to mean *bugai* 不改 (“not changing”), Roger Ames and David Hall write: “[w]hile ‘does not change’ [*bugai*] might fall within the semantic tolerance of *gai* [改], this translation is hard to square generally and not insignificantly with everything else that is said about *dao* in the literature”. (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 210). They consider two variants of *hai*, one with the jade radical, meaning “without counterpart”, as seen in the Mawangdui *Laozi*, and the other with the sun radical, meaning “never complete”, and they write that “perhaps the text is making both of these points—*dao* has no counterpart and is never complete—at the same time” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 210).

The excavated manuscripts demonstrate the unsustainability of the notion that the Dao “does not change”, but this is just one textual instance among many that seriously challenge sinology’s hope for producing a critical edition of the original text of the *Daodejing*, as well as philosophy’s hope for producing an authentic one. Nevertheless, sinology manages these dozen or so early *Daodejing* records in terms of literary theory and historical sequence, and it is important to see how it does so before turning to the somewhat different methods of *Laozi* Studies.

4. Sinology and the Recension Category

Sinological tools and methods employed in the production of textual histories of early Chinese works are already complex, but their application to the early editions of the *Daodejing* is particularly fraught since none of them are identifiable with the original text. The findings of Harold Roth’s (1993) essay, written after the discovery of the Mawangdui *Laozi* but before the discoveries of the Guodian and the Beida *Laozis*, continue to provide standard understandings of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*. This sinological understanding is worth discussing because it can be taken as both complement and counterpoint to that of *Laozi* Studies.

Roth discusses a set of basic sinological categories applied to Chinese writings that begins with the *text*, which he defines as “the unique complex and expression of ideas of an author or authors” (Roth 1993, p. 225). This definition only slightly diverges from Merriam-Webster’s noted above, which more clearly identifies a text with “a written work”, seemingly excluding oral texts, and the reference in Roth’s definition to “an author” also directly implies that the text is a written artefact; thus, sinology has some difficulty accounting for originally oral texts such as the *Daodejing*, which are, by definition, not written.

In the best-case scenario, the text is directly present in the words and form of the *original text* written by a specific author(s) at a specific time(s). The complications in the case of the *Daodejing* are multiplied, not only because there is no original text available,

but also because scholars have no clear idea about its words and form. Looking just at their forms, we can note that the Mawangdui *Laozi* in 81 chapters, and the Beida *Laozi* in 77 chapters place the *De* section first, as does Yan Zun's edition. The Xiang'er edition places the Dao section first, but it is without chapter divisions. The editions by Heshang Gong and Wang Bi, which also place the Dao section first, have the standard division of 81 chapters, but some of their chapter divisions and sequences differ from the Mawangdui *Laozi*. Finally, only Heshang Gong's edition has chapter titles (although they were likely added after the Song dynasty).

No matter its words and form, the existence of the original text is guaranteed by the *textual records* that reflect it, which Roth defines as "the actual physical objects in which the forms of the message or states of the text are embodied" (Roth 1993, p. 215), which in this case, are the early *Daodejing* records introduced above. Stand-alone records of the *Daodejing* constitute an *edition* of the text, defined by Roth as "the actual physical record of a particular state of a text" (Roth 1993, p. 221) and as "a distinct record containing a unique state of a text" (Roth 1993, p. 227).

Much like the term *physical record*, the term *edition* is value-neutral and here refers to stand-alone written records of the *Daodejing*, but it is not used for classifying different editions. For that, sinology uses a different category, *recension*, which is a notably literary notion that groups together similar editions and separates dissimilar ones based on their textual features; Roth defines it as "a foundational version of a text that exhibits a distinctive pattern of textual variants and sometimes a unique textual organization and which is often associated with a particular ancient commentary on the text" (Roth 1993, p. 223).

As "revised foundational versions of canonical works" (Roth 1993, p. 222), recensions are not identifiable with the original text, since once it is revised it is no longer original. Standing between an original text and its recensions are redactions, a category that refers to the first or founding written edition of a new recension, and "each recension of a text began as a distinct redaction" (Roth 1993, p. 224). Roth makes an interesting observation: "[i]n the vast majority of cases in early Chinese philosophical literature, the redaction that contained the very first record of a recension is no longer extant. Although I have not been able to examine this question in detail, one possible exception might be the case of the Mawangdui recension of the *Laozi*" (Roth 1993, p. 225).

As a "canonical work", the different recensions of the *Daodejing* are primarily distinguished by their "textual variants [and] textual organization". Sinologists use the recension category to group or separate the various editions, without that recension being defined or identified by any edition; Roth writes that "a recension is a foundational state of a text, but it is not a 'record', that is, an actual physical object" (Roth 1993, p. 224). He explains this by writing that a recension "is a version of a text that can persist through many generations of editions [but] a recension itself is not an edition: it is . . . a foundational state of a text that is contained in its many different records. Hence the Mawangdui recension of the *Laozi* is contained in both manuscripts A and B" (Roth 1993, p. 224).

Roth recognizes four distinct early *Daodejing* recensions: the Mawangdui recension that contains the two Mawangdui editions, the Fu Yi recension that contains the much later Fu Yi and Fan Yingyuan editions, the Heshang Gong recension that contains the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, Wang Bi, and the much later Su Tan editions, and the Xiang'er recension that contains the Xiang'er edition. In this way, sinology relies on the recension as its principal category that organizes and accounts for these several editions based on strictly textual features, which ought to be sufficient for producing a reasonable textual history of the *Daodejing*, if only we had a clearer idea of the words and form of its original text.

There is only one text of any given work, such that any two texts, no matter how similar, represent two different works. The textual history of a work becomes an object of research only when the text itself is written or otherwise recorded; especially in the modern age, an author's original text is transmitted through reproductions of its first or revised critical editions. Transmitted editions of early Chinese texts dating from the early Western Han and before are normally revised redactions initially produced in close

relationship with their original texts. Based on “a distinctive pattern of textual variants and sometimes a unique textual organization”, as judged in comparative relation to other editions, occasionally there appears a new edition of a text whose words and forms are so distanced from previous existing editions that sinology distinguishes them according to their recension.

First there is the original text, and it transmits through different recensions. A recension can be populated by any number of editions that share the same variants and organization. When a new and different edition appears or is produced, sinology calls it a redaction, “a synonym for edition”, that Roth defines as “a new edition, created from one or more ancestors, that exhibits a unique format, a unique arrangement of text and commentary, and certain characteristic textual variations . . . Remembering that a recension is a foundational state of a text, but that it is not a ‘record’, that is, an actual physical object, we can say that each recension of a text began as a distinct redaction” (Roth 1993, p. 224).

The characteristic features of a new redaction, its unique textual variations, can establish a new recension if they remain consistent in succeeding editions. Nevertheless, grouping similar editions according to the recension category reveals the contours of a work’s textual history, but it does not reveal the different interpretations of it that are inseparable, as both cause and effect, from the production of new redactions that establish new recensions.

Redactions are also often further distinguished by signature commentaries, which, taken by themselves, are already virtually sufficient for distinguishing, for example, the Xiang’er recension from the Heshang Gong. Such commentaries, when they exist, invariably display the textual interpretations standing behind new redactions, in two ways. First, they provide concise definitions or explanations for discrete terms in the text as the author of the commentary would like them to be understood, and second, they also provide the writer’s total interpretation of the text as a whole; they are a central component of the hermeneutical horizon, which is the primary concern of *Laozi* Studies. Its focus is on the hermeneutical horizon, which makes it complementary and counterpoint to sinology, since, next to being limited to written editions, sinology’s recension category neither accounts for how the text was interpreted nor who was doing the interpretation.

5. The Original Text of the *Daodejing*

The text itself, understood as “the unique complex and expression of ideas of an author”, is the foundation of sinological studies. The best demonstration of a text is the original text, but if it is either absent or unclear, then sinology turns to revised critical editions as the “best approximation of the authorial original by careful analysis of the extant testimony to that text” (Roth 1993, p. 215). However, the words and forms of the early *Daodejing* editions are not neatly identifiable with those of the original text, and without it, sinology’s ability to manage the text is made exponentially more complicated. If the origins of an oral text are proximate to its earliest transcriptions, then the complications are minor, but if there is a long separation between them, as with the *Daodejing*, then they are major.

These issues make us question the text itself: what kind of a thing is it? Roth notes that “[t]he Mawangdui manuscripts are, at the very least, editions of the *Laozi*; they are not texts [. . .] There is only one ‘text.’ It may—and invariably does—change over time; it is transformed into the many states contained in the records that are its editions” (Roth 1993, p. 221). A text is not a physical object, it only becomes one upon being recorded, and there are two senses to its non-physicality: one is as the original text, the other is as the “one text” that changes over time, in other words, the received text or *textus receptus*. Both senses refer to the same text but from different perspectives, and when the original text is virtually identical to the received text, they are indistinguishable. However, this is not the case with the *Daodejing*. Many visible features of the original text, as far as we can tell, starkly differ from the received text, the most important of which is the excavated manuscripts’ use of *heng* 恒 to describe the Dao in contrast to all later editions that uniformly use *chang*

常 to describe it, showing both the identification of the original with the received text, as well as the differences between them. The political reason for this substitution was that the term *heng* became taboo when Emperor Wen, whose name was Liu Heng 劉恆, ascended the throne in 180 BCE, but it also reflected a philosophical shift from the original phenomenology of the Yangsheng *Daodejing* to the derived metaphysics of the Huang-Lao *Daodejing* (this is a central topic of analysis in [Michael 2021](#)).

The category of received text refers to the text as we have inherited it through its recensions, and more specifically to “the authoritative source that only bold scholars dared to question”, Bedier’s “best-text”, and LeBlanc’s “best ancient edition” ([Roth 1993](#), pp. 223–24). The notion of the received text as “the best text” directs our attention to certain privileged editions, for example, the Xiang’er edition that represents the received text of the Xiang’er recension, and the Heshang Gong edition that represents the received text of Heshang Gong recension.

Despite the *Daodejing*’s representation in physical records, its text remains a non-physical object, and because there is no clear idea about it, modern studies do not clearly discuss it. Still, the syncretic account locates the original text after the Guodian *Laozi* and at the end of the Warring States, when its collection of sayings was initially compiled by community-less editors, significantly different from an author’s individual composition, whereas the synthetic account locates the original text before the Guodian *Laozi* and at the end of the Spring and Autumn, when its body of sage teachings initially began to orally circulate within an interpretive community before they were first transcribed into a complete written edition centuries later.

Although the stubborn differences of these two accounts make consensus on the original text contentious, thirty years of continuing research on the Guodian *Laozi* is finding that the original text of the *Daodejing* almost certainly predates it. Among the first Western scholars to address its ancient orality, Kristofer Schipper wrote that “a good part of the *Daodejing* comes from an ancient oral tradition” ([Schipper 1993](#), p. 185). Alan Chan makes the interesting observation that, just on its own, recognition of the text’s original orality is already sufficient to debunk the syncretic account; he writes:

[t]he idea of an oral tradition that preceded the writing of the *Daodejing* has gained wide acceptance in recent years; yet it is not always clear what that entails. On the one hand, it could lend support to W. C. Chan’s view that Laozi’s disciples kept alive the teachings of the master orally before some later student(s) committed them to writing. On the other hand, it could also mean that redactor(s) or compiler(s) had access to disparate sayings originated from and circulated in different contexts. ([Chan 2002](#), p. 5)

Nevertheless, it is contemporary research on the Guodian *Laozi* that dictates the terms of what we can know of the ancient orality surrounding the *Daodejing* approached within the totality of its early textual history. To investigate the text in the period before its first written editions is to analyze the prominent features of the ancient orality from which it emerged, and this begins with the recognition of its particular oral features that remain visible even in the received text, whose condensed points include the following:

1. Interlocking Parallel Style.
2. Rhymed passages integrated with unrhymed portions of text.
3. Absence of narration in relation to persons, places, or times.
4. Restricted vocabulary.
5. Generalized present except for depictions of cosmogony.
6. Introductions, transitions, or summaries that frame units of verse, often in tetrasyllables.
7. Rhythm of rhymed tetrasyllabic lines.
8. Literary gestures of questioning and exclamation and use of the first person.
9. Semantic parallelism and/or antithesis with corresponding words in adjacent lines.
10. Patterns of repetition of individual words or chains of words in consecutive lines.
11. Foregrounding of dichotomies.

12. Paradox.
13. Binomes that are mostly limited to descriptions of cosmic and natural phenomena.

Each of these features of the original orality of the Laozi *Daodejing* is already present in the Guodian *Laozi*. Although they mostly concern the words of the text, of equal importance for understanding the ancient orality of the *Daodejing* is the form it took. Thus, next to demonstrating the stability of the internal content of the *Daodejing*, its early records also demonstrate their structural fluidity, seen in the order of the *Dao* and *De* sections, the sequence of chapters, and where they begin and end. These differences imply that the early *Daodejing* consisted of different and movable pieces that had become mostly stabilized by the time of the Mawangdui *Laozi* when they were recognized as independent “chapters” (*zhang* 章).

Laozi Studies recognizes an authoritative source that initially articulated, or otherwise produced, separate pieces of the text; the tradition identifies this source with Laozi, a title that can refer either to a single individual (Old Master) or a collective (Old Masters). The text’s initial production likely did not occur at a single time, and its content needed to be gathered and synthesized into a manageable form, able to be regularly reproduced in its oral transmissions, regardless of whether the order of the *Dao* and *De* sections or the order of chapters had yet been stabilized.

The Guodian *Laozi* clarifies that the different pieces of the *Daodejing* text, consisting primarily of numerous discrete units of thought, are the vehicle through which the text presents its ideas. In his study of the Guodian manuscripts, Dirk Meyer recognized two main types of early Chinese philosophical writings. The first he calls “authority-based texts”, which present their arguments in progressive step-by-step fashion where particular ideas serve as building blocks in the construction of relatively complete philosophical positions concerning, for example, virtue or ritual. The second he calls “context-dependent texts”, in which the discrete units of thought “put forward one isolated concern [and] every new unit reflects a different concern . . . ” (Meyer 2009, p. 836). The *Daodejing* falls into the latter category because it does not attempt to produce a complete argument on any single theme, but rather weaves a vast tapestry of individual units of thought together, from which emerges a canvas of total meaning.

The discrete units of thought, orally transmitted in the form of what Meyer calls “movable modules”, or manageably transmissible forms of the units of thought, were packaged and polished by the interpretive community. An important element of this was the incorporation of introductions, transitions, or summaries often in tetrasyllabic forms of four characters (points 6 and 7 above) that framed the units of thought contained in the modules. As modules do not link as progressive steps in a formal argument, they remained formally separate from each other, thus there could be no ordained sequence from one module to the next. They represent the basic measure of the original text of the *Daodejing* in terms of both words (the unit of thought) and form (the movable module), and they supplied the basis for the later organization of the received text into 81 “chapters” (*zhang*).

Early Chinese texts predominantly circulated in the form of *pian* 篇 (section, book, volume); Liao Mingchun and Li Cheng write, “[i]n comparison with the works of other pre-Qin masters such as the 71 *pian* of the *Mozi*, the 52 *pian* of the *Zhuangzi*, and the 55 *pian* of the *Han Feizi*, the *Daodejing* is much shorter with only two *pian* and 5000 words. Thus compiling it was the easiest and the time of compilation was the earliest” (Liao and Cheng 2017, p. 153). Explaining the *pian* sequence of the Mawangdui *Laozi* that differs from the received text, they write, “[t]he *Daodejing* at its earliest was not an integrated monograph, not a work written at one time and place, but rather a collection of Laozi’s sayings. The two *pian*, “*Dao*” and “*De*”, were originally two independent parts that Laozi wrote at different times, and that circulated separately. There was originally no fixed order between them” (Liao and Cheng 2017, p. 151).

Between the *Daodejing*’s oral origins and its transmission in the form of a full-fledged oral text in two sections, there stands the question of the text’s authority. Its original authority originated with “Laozi”, the masters or master who initially articulated the

separate units of thought, deemed worthy of monumentalization by those to whom they were addressed, namely the interpretive community. Once the units of thought were packaged, bundled, and embedded in movable modules, and thus separated from the original source, the authority transferred to the units of thought themselves, whereas the masters from that point forward acquired a different authority based not on their articulations of additional units of thought, but on their position as teachers and interpreters of those already existing ones.

In addition to being movable and without fixed sequence, the modules containing the units of thought were subject to the sorts of textual changes examined above by Liu Xiaogan and Wang Bo, but the high number of textual “variants” found in the Guodian *Laozi* (in comparison to later editions) were the result of the oral nature of the text, in which accurate spelling was of less import than accurate pronunciation: a good number of the Guodian *Laozi* “variants” do not concern variant words with different meanings, but rather the same base character with variant radicals, which could only be recognizable when the oral text was being transcribed into written editions. In addition, the Guodian *Laozi* is written in an ancient script, which itself is not fully understood by modern readers. So “textual variants” is not the right phrase for this earliest known *Daodejing* record, because there is nothing contemporaneous to compare it against. If not for these considerations, then the Guodian *Laozi* could nicely serve as the base text against which later texts diverged.

In the movement from the oral text to its first transcriptions to its canonization, the continuity of meanings in the *Daodejing* was not disrupted but remained consistent: virtually nothing seen in the Guodian *Laozi* is not seen in later editions, and the portions of the received text not seen in the Guodian *Laozi* also did not challenge its overall canvas of coherency, as judged by the standards of its context-dependent teachings. This speaks to the integrity of the early interpretive community that kept the oral transmission of the text relatively stable until written editions superseded oral transmissions.

If the origins of the *Daodejing* are placed at the end of the Spring and Autumn, it means that the text orally circulated for several centuries before its first surviving written records in the Guodian *Laozi*. During that long timespan, it is certainly possible that the text may have otherwise been incidentally transcribed, but if so, those transcriptions played no apparent role in the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, and there are no records attesting to them. Either way, it took yet another long span of time, from the Guodian *Laozi* to the court of Lü Buwei around 249 BCE, for the teachings of Laozi to be recorded into written editions that were thereupon publicly circulated.

From its origins in the Spring and Autumn to Lü Buwei, the original interpretive community maintained primary control of the content and interpretation of the oral text until it was introduced into the public domain, the result of Lü Buwei’s conferences. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* is the massive work that resulted from those conferences, and it is the first written text that mentions Laozi and discusses his philosophy. However, it oddly does so without directly quoting anything from the *Daodejing*, which strongly implies that even at that time, the text of the *Daodejing* had not yet been recorded into a written edition.

By the time that the *Daodejing* first began to circulate in written editions at the end of the Warring States, it had already been in oral circulation for many centuries. This places a very long gap between its origins and the Mawangdui *Laozi*, which currently stands as the earliest complete edition of the *Daodejing*. Therefore, we might now be in a position to ask two poignant questions: once the textual history of the *Daodejing* reaches Mawangdui, can its further textual history be safely placed in the care of sinology and managed with the recension category? Does understanding that textual history not urge a deeper exploration of the role and identity of the interpretive community(s) through categories other than those of literary criticism?

6. Laozi Studies and the Version Category

Sinology understands the early textual history of the *Daodejing* in terms of redactions and recensions, but because it remains within the text, uncovering lines of relationships

between the different recensions does not come naturally to it. For example, the Mawangdui recension was born, and it died with the two editions of the Mawangdui *Laozi*; about four hundred years later, there separately appeared the Xiang'er recension that was also born, but died with the Xiang'er edition; but then the Heshang Gong recension, with its Heshang Gong edition, survived by acquiring the status of *textus receptus* ("best ancient text"). Sinologically understanding the relations between them is a textual affair that is not by itself compelled to consider other extra-textual social and cultural trends which are able to uncover the hermeneutical horizons within which those recensions moved; this is the domain of *Laozi* Studies.

The redaction category used for analyzing lines of textual transmission, which the *Daodejing* has undergone, can only apply once the text has been committed to written editions, but the earlier oral *Daodejing* is not so easily contained within them. Sinology excels at comparing textual variations between recensions, but it is less effective at analyzing them in relation to the interpretive communities that made the variations, because such connections are extra-textual. Sinology looks upon textual alterations in later editions as either improving or worsening the text, but the editions that were produced cannot be separated from the interpretive communities that produced them.

Laozi Studies gives as much attention to historical interpretations of the *Daodejing* as it does to the text itself. Instead of approaching editions in terms of recensions, it relies on a different category to group or separate different ones, namely the version, because this label identifies an edition by referencing it with its interpretive community in the first instance, rather than to its textual recension. *Laozi* Studies seeks to uncover the particular hermeneutical principles that undergird a community's textual interpretation, the analysis of which is greatly facilitated by commentaries appended to the edition, as with the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, and Xiang'er commentaries (the excavated manuscripts are without commentary).

When used to characterize any given community, the Daoism label proves tricky and contentious, but a less ambitious framing of the historical field under consideration can be more simply described as "*Daodejing* communities", for which I recognize three important ones: Yangsheng, Huang-Lao, and Tianshi. Although they can be and often are tagged with the Daoism label, as in "Yangsheng Daoism", "Huang-Lao Daoism", and "Tianshi Daoism" ("Celestial Master Daoism"), they do not share a common Daoist identity but a common *Daodejing* identity, related by nothing more than a shared commitment to the text. Nevertheless, this commitment to the text necessarily entails a commitment to its philosophy, for which the term "philosophy of the Dao" seems most appropriate (Michael 2005). Each community interpreted that philosophy differently, as can be determined through analysis of their editions with guidance from their commentaries, when available.

There is just one text of the *Daodejing* that comes to us in three early versions that are recognizable by their editions: the Yangsheng Daoist version reflected in the Guodian and Mawangdui editions, the Huang-Lao Daoist version represented by the Mawangdui, Yan Zun, and Heshang Gong editions, and the Tianshi Daoist version represented by the Xiang'er edition.⁵ None of these texts are particularly controversial, since the Guodian and Mawangdui *Laozis* come to us as excavated manuscripts and the Yan Zun, Heshang Gong, and Xiang'er editions were transmitted together with their appended commentaries serving as a check against scribal error and other kinds of textual alteration.

The *Daodejing*'s philosophy of the Dao presents a Dao-centered worldview, but the different versions interpret it differently, and this provides a comparative baseline against which to distinguish them. The Yangsheng version concerns the hermit-sage and his/her *yangsheng* bodily cultivation, and it was directed to other specialists in bodily techniques, primarily masters and disciples. The Huang-Lao version concerns the sage-ruler and his governing policies, and it was directed to other specialists in government, primarily statesmen and philosophers. The Tianshi version concerns the Celestial Master and his religious policies, and it was directed to specialists in religion, primarily priests and congregants.

Each version of the *Daodejing* sees the world as generated from the Dao, but their understandings of it are different. The Yangsheng version only celebrates the temporalizing Dao (*heng dao* 恆道), which the sage embodies by successful *yangsheng* bodily cultivation, thereby assisting the transformation of the world into a natural harmony (Michael 2015). In the Huang-Lao version, nothingness is identified with the constant Dao (*chang dao* 常道, which reflects a metaphysical connotation of *chang*); it does not speak but can be known through its natural ordering principles, which the sage-ruler is to implement in the political realm, thereby assisting in the transformation of the world into in political harmony. In the Tianshi version, Lord Lao 老君, who is the deified form of Laozi himself, is identified with the eternal Dao (*chang dao* 常道, which reflects a different, theological connotation of *chang*), who will save the congregants from the conflagrations soon to engulf the world, and the Celestial Master is responsible for guiding the people to that end.

Sinology discusses “patterns of textual variants” that are easily documented by comparing their editions, but understanding their deeper significance requires an understanding of the underlying hermeneutical principles that motivated them. The commentaries make such understandings much easier, so that when the Xiang’er edition says that the Dao speaks, the Xiang’er commentary explains why, and when the Heshang Gong edition says that the Dao cannot be spoken, the Heshang Gong commentary also explains why. In other words, the Xiang’er edition and commentary systematically announce the “religious” meanings of its Tianshi version, and the Heshang Gong edition and commentary systematically announce the “political” meanings of its Huang-Lao version; being an oral text without a complete written edition or commentary, the Yangsheng version has less opportunity to demonstrate its “bodily” meanings, but in any case, the task is not impossible.

Approaching the early editions of the *Daodejing* in terms of their version opens up several additional dimensions to its textual history. The perspective of the recension category is exclusively directed to written editions, whereas the version category allows multiple other perspectives on the *Daodejing*’s textual history to come forth, the most important of which concern the interpretive communities.

Since a text does not interpret itself, the different versions are primarily distinguished by their identification with an interpretive community that possesses the authority to either alter or interpret it in the best way that they see fit. We can assess these versions according to the terms of their hermeneutical principles: those of Yangsheng Daoism center on the bodily cultivation of the sage; those of Huang-Lao Daoism center on the political governance of the state; and those of Tianshi Daoism center on the religious orthodoxy of the church. One text in three versions.

7. Conclusions: The *Daodejing* and Early Daoism

The Laozi Studies approach adopted here supports the main elements of the synthetic account of the original text of the *Daodejing*, namely its oral antiquity, its philosophical coherence, and the presence of an interpretive community standing behind it. We refer to that community as Yangsheng Daoism: “Yangsheng” because *yangsheng* bodily cultivation appears as its primary concern, and “Daoism” because of its profound connection to the *Daodejing*. This paper has discussed two other Daoist communities, Huang-Lao Daoism and Tianshi Daoism, both of which also acquire their “Daoism” label by way of their direct connection to the *Daodejing*.

These three early Chinese communities are immediately distinguished based on the version of the *Daodejing* that they produced; furthermore, the Yan Zun and Heshang Gong commentaries to the Huang-Lao version and the Xiang’er commentary to Tianshi versions reinforce those distinctions, and the absence of a commentary to the Yangsheng version does not mean there are not other ways to distinguish it from those two.

The single-most important distinguishing feature of the Yangsheng version is its use of the term *heng*, whose ancient meaning coheres around “temporalization”, rather than *chang*, to characterize the Dao. This significantly differs from the Huang-Lao and Tianshi versions, both of which use the term *chang*, whose meaning by the Han dynasty had

come to coalesce around “constancy/permanence/eternity”, to characterize the Dao. The Huang-Lao version interprets *chang dao* in terms of “constancy” in the sense of constant laws, and the Tianshi version interprets *chang dao* in terms of “eternity” in the sense of divinity. These recognitions allow us to characterize the Yangsheng version of the *Daodejing* as a phenomenology, the Huang-Lao version as a metaphysics, and the Tianshi version as a theology.

There is another important participant in the field of early Daoism, namely the *Zhuangzi*, which deserves mention. The thought of the work, or at least the “Inner Chapters” and other sections directly related to them, is both an expression and an extension of Laozi’s philosophy of the Dao, specifically the philosophy of the temporalizing Dao; however, it replaces *yangsheng* bodily cultivation with *zuowang* spirit cultivation, and we distinguish it from Yangsheng Daoism by referring to it as Zuowang Daoism.

Approaching the *Daodejing* through the version category rather than the recension category helps to clarify our understanding of the early textual history of the *Daodejing*, but more than that, it also provides a kind of map for understanding the many different forms of early Daoism seen in historical relation to each other, and also for understanding the central position, in relational and comparative context, of the *Daodejing* for all of them: Yangsheng Daoism, Zuowang Daoism, Huang-Lao Daoism, and Tianshi Daoism.

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Notes

- ¹ The term “Lao” in the phrase “Laozi Studies” refers not to the man but to the text, which is also called the *Daodejing*, for which the full Chinese title is *Laozi Daodejing*. Accordingly, in the Chinese academy, there is no difference between calling it the *Laozi* or the *Daodejing*, but referring to it as the *Laozi* is more common. In the Western academy, on the other hand, referring to it as the *Laozi* is relatively more common among sinologists, who are, in any case, more focused on the “original” text, and referring to it as the *Daodejing* is relatively more common among philosophers, who are, in any case, more focused on the “authentic” text (the difference is explained in a later section of this paper). There is an important historical point that can clarify the distinction: the title *Daodejing* explicitly recognizes the text as a *jing* 經, a “classic”, a status it acquired during the reign of Han dynasty Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BCE), and it was the imperial librarian, Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE), who edited and arranged the first-known canonized edition that received the imperial imprimatur, thereby laying the basis for what is often called the received text. Although this canonized edition was still open to textual changes in terms of its words and its organization, for the most part, transmitted editions from that time on had much less wriggle room. Before that canonization, what we have are a number of excavated manuscripts that are often distinguished by their place of excavation, but nowhere in the Chinese or the Western academy are any of these excavated manuscripts recognized as a “classic”: they are systematically referred to with the title *Laozi*, as with the Guodian *Laozi* or the Mawangdui *Laozi*. This paper supports and recommends maintaining this distinction between referring to the pre-canonized, excavated editions with the title *Laozi*, and referring to the post-canonized, transmitted editions with the title *Daodejing*. Nevertheless, when referring to the text globally, without distinguishing excavated from transmitted editions, I use the title *Daodejing*, as for example in the phrase “the textual history of the *Daodejing*”.
- ² Introducing the *Daodejing* as the product of an initially oral tradition may appear to doom, once again, the quest for the original text for two reasons: first, there is no record of that oral text, and second, there is no way to gauge its identity with or proximity to the original text, for which there is also no record. Nevertheless, the goal of this study is not to definitively locate that original text, but rather how to forge a viable approach to it.
- ³ Although it should be noted that philosophical approaches may be more pluralistic than described, Jiang’s study remains an authoritative source. Many philosophers do acknowledge the historical and archaeological complications of deciphering a singular, “authentic” *Daodejing*, but this is just one philosophical project among others, albeit perhaps a common one. Philosophers are, certainly, as interested as sinologists in finding ways to interpret the *Daodejing* that are more or less viable. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
- ⁴ Heshang Gong did not compose the Heshang edition and commentary to the *Daodejing*, and the term *xiang’er* does not refer to a person (it means that the Dao is “thinking of you”), but I use them in this way for reading convenience.

- ⁵ This refers only to early versions; recalling the comments of Du Daojian quoted above, there were many more versions to come, beginning with the Xuanxue version of the *Daodejing* that is most famously represented by the Wang Bi edition.

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