

## Reading the *Daodejing* Synthetically



### Orientations

In this work, I offer a new hermeneutical reading of the *Daodejing* 道德經 with an eye to how it could be read for a tradition of early Daoism and how that might contribute to the long line of previous English-language readings and translations that began in earnest with James Legge in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The present reading significantly differs from previous readings primarily in that I do not take a predetermined point of view that depends on the *Analects* 論語 or the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. I take this position despite the fact that the *Analects*, circulating contemporaneously with the *Daodejing*, remains my preferred talking partner, especially in my attempts to highlight the differences between the two works and not the derivation of one from the other. I take this position also despite the fact that the *Zhuangzi*, first circulating possibly more than two centuries after the first appearance of the *Daodejing*, has more to say about a specifically early Daoist reading of the *Daodejing* than any other writings until Ge Hong 葛洪 in the fourth century CE.

I also do not take a predetermined point of view that depends on the Wang Bi 弼注 commentary, the Xiang'er 想爾 commentary, or even the Heshang Gong 河上公 commentary, all of which were written some five hundred years after those first circulations of the *Daodejing*. That is a very long time, and there is very little by way of previous Western-language translations and readings of the *Daodejing* that can be said to approach it in this manner. Specifically, I take very seriously those aspects of the *Daodejing* not commonly recognized in previous readings,

namely the early Daoist emphasis on *yangsheng* 養生 (“the nurture of life”), a term referring to a specific regimen of bodily techniques of cultivation. I have a lot more to say about *yangsheng* in the pages that follow.

If we take the arguments of Bruce Brooks and Taeko Brooks seriously (and I examine them more closely in chapter 5), then we need to stop talking about absolute dates in terms of a onetime composition for the *Daodejing* and the *Analects*. According to them, both of these writings absorbed textual accumulations, or at least underwent various redactions and editions, over time until 249 BC, the date of the Lü conquest, and I have no reason to argue with them on this point.<sup>2</sup> This is important to note, because neither text is systematic in chronologically or thematically ordering their sections or chapters—there is little rhyme or reason in their continuities and progressions, as every reader of them quickly realizes.

These two texts did, however, provide the raw material that later writings would systematize, as the Mencius 孟子 did with the *Analects* by providing a fleshed-out theory of the historical cycle of Sage-Kings, and as the Zhuangzi did with the *Daodejing* by providing a fleshed-out theory of the historical breakdown of the world and the concomitant loss of the Dao. My project here, however, is not to provide this kind of textual history; although I affirm that the *Daodejing* is an accumulated text, I do not take early and separate accumulations, redactions, editions, or versions (as, for example, found in the *Guodian* 郭店, the *Mawangdui* 馬王堆, the *Beida* 北大, the *Yan Zun* 嚴遵, and the *Heshang Gong* versions) as being radically different in thought or spirit from each other.

What this means most importantly is that my reading radically differs from that of, for example, Michael La Fargue, who argues that the *Daodejing* is a collection of aphorisms culled from various and multiple voices (and I return to his ideas on the dating and content of the *Daodejing* soon enough), or, in the words of D. C. Lau, “the *Daodejing* is an anthology in which are to be found passages representing the views of various schools.”<sup>3</sup> I take the text synthetically, not atomically, and I hold to the view that the ideas from one section or chapter are deeply involved with all other ideas in every other section or chapter. To read the text otherwise is to be handcuffed from the start: if the sections and chapters are not inherently inter-referential, then each section and chapter must be taken by itself on its own terms, and the way they are to be read in this approach is always already established beforehand by any philosophical Confucian or religious Daoist reading, either chronologically or thematically.

My approach to the *Daodejing* is somewhat similar to some parallel contemporary approaches to the Bible that attempt to steer between the Scylla of traditional interpretation (either philosophical or religious), with its false hope of continuity, and the Charybdis of historical-critical methods, with its destructive path of atomization.<sup>4</sup> Even if there are redactors or editors of originally disparate accumulations, redactions, editions, or versions, the redactors or editors

have brought the disparate components together in a way that sees a coherent unity in the whole. Although the synthetic reading I espouse will certainly do some degree of injustice to the “original” *Daodejing*, what I receive in return is the authority provided by the early Daoist tradition of *yangsheng* cultivation for a possible third reading, which I call the early Daoist reading. This authority is very hard to downplay in the modern quest for some elusive (and atomic) original text.

To treat the *Daodejing* synthetically (albeit with a bias toward *yangsheng* cultivation) also means that I strive to remain open to it as a poetic, mythic, philosophical, political, religious, and imaginative work. Even if the *Daodejing* at the time of its first circulation was not completed in anything like its present form as we have come to know it, it did at some point come to that completion, and certainly by the time of the *Mawangdui* editions, from which point onward it was more or less the full, received text that we have today. It is this synthetic reading of the *Daodejing* that I here espouse, a reading that is deeply informed by the experience of it as a specifically Daoist writing most immediately owned by the tradition of early Daoism with its strong emphasis on *yangsheng* practice.

### Conventions

I give my translation of the *Daodejing* in the Appendix, and in this study it is to this translation that all of my references, discussions, and analyses of the text refer. I announce the specific passage or chapter under discussion as *DDJ* followed by the chapter number; for example, *DDJ* 7 refers to *Daodejing*, chapter 7. In the translation, I have relied on the format structure uncovered by Rudolf Wagner that he calls “the interlocking parallel style” (IPS).<sup>5</sup> This structure provides for a non-linear way to read certain sections or chapters of the *Daodejing*, but by no means every section or chapter, that clearly were not meant to be read in the typical linear fashion. In the IPS structure, for example, two consecutive sentences, *A* and *B*, are not to be read *A* on top followed by *B* underneath, familiar as we are with this structure from most printed verse; instead, *A* is to be read on a left-hand column and *B* on a right-hand column directly next to it; thus, *A* and *B* are *parallel* with each other. The main thematic content of *A* is, typically but not always, contrastive, complementary, or connective with *B*; thus, the thematic content *interlocks*. Furthermore, there is often a middle column that progresses, contains, or links the *AB* parallel. I have not adopted each and every IPS structure designated by Wagner, and I have tended to simplify those I have adopted with the aim of ease of reading. A straightforward instance of the IPS is found in *DDJ* 7:

Heaven is long.

Earth is lasting.

The reason why

Heaven is long

and

Earth is lasting

is that they do not live for themselves.

This is why they are able to be

long

and

lasting.

Because of this, the Sage

marginalizes his body but  
his body is first,

and

disregards his body yet his  
body lasts.

Is it not because he has no self-interest  
that he is able to realize his self-interest?

I take the *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋, based on the *Longxing guan* 龍興觀 stele, as my base text of the *Daodejing*. All of my amendments to it have textual support in the various other versions and editions that I have consulted as well as in the commentaries and notes to them. These other versions of the *Daodejing* include the *Guodian Laozi* 郭店老子, the *Mawangdui Laozi* 馬王堆老子, the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句, Wagner's critical text of the *Laozi Daodejing Wang Bi zhu* 老子道德經王弼注, the *Laozi Zhushi ji pingjie* 老子註釋及評介, and the *Laozi duben* 老子讀本. My amendments to the *Laozi jiaoshi* are for the most part relatively minor. The largest amendment is from *DDJ* 23; in this chapter, all versions other than the *Laozi jiaoshi* include an average of an additional twenty-seven characters, which I have kept in the translation. By far the greatest number of my amendments to the *Laozi jiaoshi* concerns particles, either adding them or subtracting them, again based on variations from these other Chinese versions that greatly assist in the clarification of discrete sentences.

Speaking of the various editions of the *Daodejing*, Wagner writes, "Most differences are in particles, where textual variations usually are largest but meaning is least likely to be influenced."<sup>6</sup> I have also amended many adverbs and transitions such as *shigu* 是故 ("therefore") and *shiyi* 是以 ("for this reason"), again only so far as the separate versions I consulted assist in clarifying specific passages. It is not my intention to document each and every instance of this; on the other hand, I make no claim to provide yet another critical or "authentic" edition of

the *Daodejing*. In the end, my most important hermeneutical claim is simply that I take the *Daodejing* as a synthetic, self-referential text.

I have put all Chinese transliterations from primary sources into pinyin, as well as all quotations from Western scholarship that employ the Wade-Giles system; for example, I have changed all Wade-Giles transliterations of *tao-chia* to *daoia*. I have kept the original Wade-Giles only for citational and bibliographical purposes. I have also changed all quoted references that name “the *Laozi*” to “the *Daodejing*,” as most modern Chinese scholars and some Western scholars are wont to use that writing’s alternative title; I have done this, again, for continuity and ease of reading. Additionally, I have changed all quotations from Western sources that use BCE (or B.C. or B.C.E.) to BC, and A.D. to CE.

I have adopted two further conventions that I need to clarify here. First, all of my translations from the *Analects* are taken directly from the *Shisan jing* 十三經, and they are easy enough to locate in any number of the English translations to that text; therefore, I do not give specific citations for the translated passages, only the chapter and verse. I use the version of the *Sunzi Bingfa* from the Chinese Text Project,<sup>7</sup> and I also do not give specific citations for the translated passages from it, only the chapter. I do, however, provide specific page citations for all other passages translated from all other primary Chinese sources.

Second, I use the capitalized and non-italicized form with a determinative for the term *dao* 道 as “the Dao” in most cases when I discuss it as a foundational concept; in other cases, I keep the term in its non-capitalized and italicized form without a determinative as *dao* when I discuss or employ it in its archaic uses before it became a foundational concept, and also when the term is coupled with other limiting terms, as for example in the phrase *daoia*. I also keep two further terms which will be found to play a central role in the following pages in their transliterated, non-capitalized, and italicized forms, namely *de* 德 and *qi* 氣, because the meanings of these terms change in accord with their use in any specific textual context; their multivalency makes any single and direct translation into English unworkable.

If I am to be pressed into giving a precise date for the *Daodejing*, my immediate response is to ask if that concerns its first circulations (already unleashed by the mid-fourth century BC, the common date for the closing of the Guodian tomb) or its received version(s); the first dates for each are likely separated by centuries. I am not, however, overly concerned with either date, but I am deeply concerned with the original environment from which the writing emerged. I can accept any date from the sixth century BC (in conformity with the traditional Chinese dates for Laozi) to the mid-second century BC (the general date most closely aligned with the closing of the Mawangdui tomb). My reading of the *Daodejing* does not depend on any particular date within these general parameters, but it does depend on establishing its earliest circulation within an environment oriented around physical cultivation and not political persuasion.

That said, I prefer to keep an early date for the *Daodejing*. Although I would like to argue for a sixth-century date, I refuse to get bogged down in such arguments; modern scholars have been arguing its date for a very long time, and I certainly will not solve the riddle here. To avoid such entanglements, I can simply accept a fifth-century BC date relying on William Baxter's arguments. Among all of the scholarship that argues for either an early or a late date, I find his to be the most persuasive (but then I also choose to rely on his arguments because they bolster my own, despite the fact that I find even his date a bit conservative); he writes, "[I] will conclude that the *Daodejing* was probably composed around 400 BC—that is, after Confucius but before Zhuangzi."<sup>8</sup>

Corresponding to the period of the closing of the Guodian tomb, which has not yet been definitively dated but is generally reckoned to have occurred around the mid-fourth century BC, I believe that holding to at least a fifth-century BC date for the *Daodejing* (and realizing that many readers will certainly challenge even this, claiming that it is either too early or too late) will not have any seismic consequences for the synthetic reading to which I adhere. On the other hand, every date for the *Daodejing* put forth by scholars has been and will continue to be challenged; there is no scholarly consensus.

Dating the *Daodejing* should not be feared, however, because this is one of the more exciting debates going on in the modern academy, and it is anything but sterile. Generally speaking, scholars who date the *Daodejing* to the fourth century BC or earlier share certain ideas about the text, primarily that it centers on physical cultivation and targets the hidden Sage, while those who date it to the third century BC or later also share certain ideas about it, primarily that it centers on philosophy and targets the public King. Although I present this in an either/or way (either early or late), Baxter is much more nuanced, and he looks a bit more closely at traditional arguments than I have:

There have been three main theories . . . One traditional view attributes the *Daodejing* text to a certain person called Laozi who is recorded as having had conversations with Confucius. Since Confucius's dates are 551–479 BC or thereabouts, the theory dates the *Daodejing* at somewhere around 500 BC. A second traditional view dates the *Daodejing* considerably after the time of Confucius, but before the philosopher Zhuangzi, whose dates are approximately 365–285 BC. In this view, the *Daodejing* is generally attributed to a figure named Lao Dan who is said to have been the Grand Historiographer of Zhou. This theory, then, dates the *Daodejing* in the early fourth century BC—let us say, at about 375 BC. In the twentieth century, there has been considerable support for dating the *Daodejing* text (at least in its final version) much later, well after the lifetime of Zhuangzi: probably in the late third century, say about 225 BC.<sup>9</sup>

Commenting on this specific passage, Alan Chan offers a breath of fresh air for those of us who look for an earlier date; he writes:

An interesting development in contemporary sinological scholarship is that traditional accounts are increasingly coming back into favor. This stems in some cases from recent archaeological discoveries; but more generally the trend may be seen as a reaction against the radical distrust of tradition that characterizes much of 20th-century sinological research . . . Admittedly, this represents a minority view at present. However, there are reasons why the claim of an early date may enjoy a sunnier scholarly fortune in future.<sup>10</sup>

To round off this very brief foray into the importance of dates, Brian Cook writes:

Prior to the Guodian discovery, however, the dating of this text has been a matter of great controversy . . . There has been little agreement as to precisely where to place the temporal origins of the text, with some even going so far as to date the work, counter-intuitively, to after the time of Zhuangzi . . . But now with the discovery at Guodian of three separate “Laozi” bundles containing material which, added together, equates to roughly a third of the received *Daodejing*, we may now ascertain that at least a substantial *portion* of the latter almost certainly predated the composition of even the earliest *Zhuangzi* chapters . . . Needless to say, this still leaves open the possibility that the text (in some form) or the ideas behind it could have originated with a “Lao Dan” or some other person roughly contemporary with Confucius.<sup>11</sup>

Despite any and all of these arguments, the *Daodejing* remains a cumulative text, which means that the search for a onetime composition of it on any specific date is a futile endeavor; as Robert Henricks writes, “The traditional Chinese position on this—which remains a popular view in the West—is that the entire book was written by a single person called the ‘Old Master’ (Laozi), who lived at the time of Confucius, that is, around 500 BC.”<sup>12</sup> So what does this mean for the *Guodian Laozi*, which, as Henricks comments, “contains material from only thirty-one of the present eighty-one chapters”?<sup>13</sup> Does this mean that the portions of the received text that are not present in the *Guodian Laozi* were later additions, which would mean that the *Guodian Laozi* is a proto version that developed over time into the *Daodejing*, or that the *Guodian Laozi*, for whatever reason we can imagine, simply did not include them?

As an aside, I would like to point out Chen Guying’s position on this very question. Chen stands as one of contemporary China’s foremost and most

respected scholars on Daoism, so his ideas, while they mirror those of traditional China, are not to be taken lightly; he writes:

We can, therefore, understand the partial completeness of the Guodian Laozi versions as having two causes. First, the difficulties of copying texts in those times made complete works rare; second, transcribers chose texts, or portions of texts, that suited their particular interests and intentions . . . Comparing these three copies of the *Laozi* with the later Mawangdui version and the transmitted *Daodejing*, we find that little more than the order has changed. The content remains fundamentally the same.<sup>14</sup>

Either position, namely seeing the *Guodian Laozi* as a proto version or as a partial version of a complete text, continues to measure the *Guodian Laozi* against the more or less complete version recovered from Mawangdui, which itself is not exactly the same as the *Heshang Gong* version that is recognized as the “standard” text, or at least as close to one as we will ever get. These questions are tricky, but they also matter a lot for how we read the *Daodejing*. The easy answer is that future excavated versions of the *Daodejing*, if any more are forthcoming, should go a long way toward clarifying this, but we do not have them at the moment, and there is no guarantee that we ever will. But hope remains eternal.

Relying on at least some scholarly support in positioning the first circulations of the *Daodejing* somewhere between the sixth and fifth centuries BC immediately relieves me of the major burden of situating its ideas in relation to such texts as the *Mencius* and the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋, as well as the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 and the *Wu xing* 五行, the last two of which were excavated together with the *Guodian Laozi*. I realize that even if the first circulations of the *Daodejing* predate all of these texts, it still does not mean that it was the complete text as we know and have received it, or even that its original core was self-cultivation and not politics. If the earliest circulations of the *Daodejing* predate all of them, then, for better or worse, I do not have to explore the ways in which its earliest writers and editors and redactors were or were not engaging in the various philosophical debates visible in the received writings from the period of the Warring States. In other words, the *Daodejing* (originally a text of early Daoism) served to set in motion many of the debates that were the subject of dispute among the later philosophers, but it was not an active participant in them; it predated them all.

The early situation of the *Daodejing* is very much like that of the *Analects*: not only were they circulating before the various debates and disputes were taken up by later Warring States philosophers, but they also set the table for them. This is why I find the *Analects*, more or less contemporaneous with the *Daodejing* in their earliest circulations, the best speaking partner in approaching the *Daodejing*. At the same time, I also find very little benefit in looking to various later texts



for understanding its original environment of physical cultivation, whether this be the *Xing zi ming chu* and *Wu xing slips* or the earliest commentaries to the *Daodejing* found in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. They are all already later than the earliest circulations of the *Daodejing*, based on the date of the Guodian tomb, and even more force is given to this view if the *Guodian Laozi* is a partial version of a fuller *Daodejing* in circulation at the time that has not yet been excavated, although probably not fully developed into the full version that we have today.<sup>15</sup>

As a final nail in the coffin of the argument that the *Guodian Laozi* is best seen as a proto version of the received *Daodejing*, it has become clear that the *Guodian Laozi* itself already calls upon three separate and already existing versions of the *Daodejing*, named “Laozi” Jia 甲, Yi 乙, and Bing 丙, or, as they are known in Western languages, “Laozi” A, B, and C.<sup>16</sup>

### Shadows

In concluding this chapter, I would like to say a few words about the title of this study, *In the Shadows of the Dao: The Daodejing, Laozi, and the Sage*. All three members named in the subtitle inhabit the shadows, and each of them can be seen only in the same way that one can see stars—by not looking at them directly.

The meanings, ideas, symbols, and images that fill the *Daodejing* waft in the ebbs and flows of shadow; as soon as we are confident of nailing down the concrete sense of any one of them, it fades and loses itself in a different level of signification. The various conditions and entities targeted by the *Daodejing* never attain constant levels of stability; instead, they remain in flux: names have no constancy, long gives way to short, life gives way to death, virtue turns into vice, and this is all due to the shadowy realm of the Dao itself, in which the constant interplay of Being 無 (*wu*) and Non-being 有 (*you*) can never once and for all be made to pose.

Laozi also exists in the realm of shadows; in fact, his actual life, if there even was a Laozi, is lost in the shadows of the interplay between myth and history. In the numerous recorded biographies and episodes about him, he jumps into and out of the shadows, at times giving audience to Confucius, at times burrowing away in the libraries, and once or twice just packing off altogether. And this is only and already according to the biographies that predate his divinization in the latter Han, because from those that postdate it, he is said to have stayed in his mother’s womb for eighty-one years before being born (interestingly, the *Daodejing* also has eighty-one chapters), jumping out of his mother’s womb only in the shadowy night to pass time with other mysterious sages who also inhabited the shadows. Laozi is also said to transform his appearance eighty-one times in the course of a single day, a shadowy figure indeed.<sup>17</sup>

The Sage, that most mysterious and anonymous figure who has the leading role throughout every page of the *Daodejing*, also lives in the shadows (the

gender of the Sage is never announced, and throughout this study I refer to the Sage in the masculine singular for no other reason than the fact that English has no gender-neutral third-person pronoun). The *Daodejing's* many announcements and proclamations about the Sage provide the essential skeleton upon which the flesh of the text depends for life. The Sage makes everything in the text *matter*, but his direct words are only displayed in a few passages. He appears, directly or indirectly, in nearly half of the text's eighty-one chapters, but we never actually see him because he is, as *DDJ* 15 says, "Fading, like melting ice. Vacant, like a valley. Undifferentiated, like muddy water" 涣兮若冰之將釋曠兮其若谷混兮其若濁 (*huan xi ruo shui zhi jiang shi kuang xi qi ruo gu hun xi qi ruo zhuo*).

Perhaps the most shadowy region into which the present work steps is that of early Daoism itself with its fundamental and foundational emphasis on *yangsheng* cultivation believed to lead the adept to sagehood. This is an early Daoism that also provides powerful indications that masters and disciples of *yangsheng* had a strong attraction for the natural environments of mountains and forests 山林 (*shanlin*) for their practice, what the *Daodejing* calls "the natural world" 自然 (*ziran*).

I might be accused of using the early Daoism label as if the existence and significance of what it intends to designate were intuitively obvious, but in fact it is anything but that. How could I or anyone go about establishing the empirical or historical foundation for such a label, particularly when not a single participant of early Daoism ever referred to him- or herself by such a term? I am not entirely sure, even at this point, but I nevertheless hold to the claim that the *Daodejing* was written (or recited, as the case may be) by masters of *yangsheng* cultivation and their disciples. Further, I argue that the original environment of the *Daodejing* had a lot to do with mountains and forests, and closely associated with this type of environment is the concomitant notion of hiddenness; early Daoism is a hidden tradition. Because of this, the best I can do is to provide certain indications, and some of them are simply of a logical sort. I put forth my understanding of early Daoism with the intention of opening new ways of approaching the *Daodejing* as a writing that has *yangsheng* cultivation at its core, and I hope to spur future scholars to a deeper engagement with the avenues opened by such a perspective.

My positing of an original environment of the natural world of mountains and forests for at least some practitioners of early Daoist *yangsheng* is not set in stone, but all signs point to precisely that. Choosing to live outside of society was not unheard of in early China, and that was most commonly done for periods of time rather than permanently. When modern scholars have looked into this phenomenon (most notably Michel Strickmann, Aat Vervoorn, and Alan Berkowitz<sup>18</sup>), they have focused their attention on any number of Confucians who did just that, which is not surprising because they were pretty much the only ones to have substantial records written about them. These Confucians left society deliberately and with some amount of fanfare, primarily to make a political statement about

the government authority under which they lived, which they felt was not up to standard. But most of those men did not move into the mountains; they chose to live in their country estates; for them, that was far enough away.

The common verb applied in the early and traditional sources for such a move was *yinju* 隱居, and one who made such a move was called *yinshi* 隱士. Both Vervoorn and Berkowitz, among others, demonstrate some degree of fluidity in using various terms directly signifying or closely related to “recluse” and “reclusion” to translate *yinshi* and *yinju*.<sup>19</sup> This fluidity might be fine for discussing Confucianism, but it is certainly not in order for discussing early Daoism. These terms come with far too much baggage from the Christian tradition of renunciation in which *religiosi* devoted themselves to religious practices often of the extremely ascetic sort. This does not apply to early Daoism.

I refrain from applying the reclusive label to early Daoism, particularly because of the complex issues surrounding the phenomenon of reclusion itself. The term “reclusion” derives from the Latin *recludere*, which has the meaning of “to shut up in seclusion.”<sup>20</sup> The early Daoist urge to inhabit the natural world is less about shutting oneself up and off from society and much more about simply going into the mountains and forests where the *qi*, the primary ingredient of *yangsheng*, is fresh, pure, and pristine. None of those English translations of *yinju* and *yinshi* brings out the quality of going into the mountains and forests to be in harmony with the natural world.<sup>21</sup>

The early Daoism that I explore directs itself to the exact opposite of shutting oneself up; it directs the adept to open up, specifically to open up the body to the energies of the Dao and its *qi*. *DDJ* 48, for example, speaks of relinquishing the products of human socialization to open oneself up to the energies of the natural world: “Those who pursue study increase daily. Those who pursue the Dao decrease daily. They decrease and decrease until they reach a point where they act non-intentionally” 為學日益為道日損損之又損以至於無為 (*wei xue ri yi wei dao ri sun sun zhi you sun yi zhi yu wuwei*).

For early Daoism, going into the mountains and forests of the natural world for either longer or shorter periods of time did not require complete and permanent removal from the social world in accord with some form of institutionalized reclusion on a par with the cloistered Essenes of ancient Israel.<sup>22</sup> I would like to point out one story from the *Zhuangzi*,<sup>23</sup> about a certain Gengsang Chu 庚桑楚: he moved into the mountains to practice the *yangsheng* teachings of his master, Laozi, and he took his wife and certain selected members of his household retinue with him. No, early Daoism was not of the type represented by the cloistered Essenes of ancient Israel; according to the *Zhuangzi*, these mountain-dwellers were often married and had children whom they did not abandon (neither did they relinquish their possessions) when moving into such mountain communities to pursue their *yangsheng*. There are more such stories in the *Zhuangzi* of masters and disciples who go into the mountains to pursue their *yangsheng* cultivation practices,

to which I return in chapter 5, but they were not alone: they participated in communities that eschewed the light of public recognition and political office to pursue a hidden lifestyle where they, too, inhabited the shadows of the Dao.

But let's return to the original phrases, *yinju* and *yinshi*, both of which are built on the term *yin* 隱, which literally means "to hide" or, adjectively, "hidden." Accordingly for early Daoism, the phrase *yinju* means "to live hiddenly," and *yinshi* refers to "one who is hidden." There is still a danger that even these English translations can be taken too far because I venture to say that the early Daoist Sage was not "hiding from"; he was not hiding from society or anybody or anything in it; he was just hidden, like a hidden treasure.

The early Daoist Sage was likely hidden away in the mountains and forests, but he could also be hidden away even in the towns and cities of the urban world; as the Sage says in *DDJ* 70, "Because those who know me are few, I'm of great value" 知我者希則我者貴 (*zhi wo zhe xi ze wo zhe gui*). Not only is the Sage hidden, but he also hides great treasures within, as *DDJ* 70 states: "This is why the Sage wears coarse cloth, but inside it he embraces jade" 是以聖人被褐懷玉 (*shi yi shengren bei he huai yu*). Hidden, certainly, but if one wanted to find a Sage badly enough, he could still be found, even in the mountains, and if he was willing, he would become your master and you his disciple. He was, after all, a willing teacher.

My preferred term for naming this tradition is early Daoism, and my primary characterization of it is that it was a hidden tradition that flourished in the natural world of mountains and forests. My translation of *yin* in this way is not without textual support, and this support comes from the *Daodejing* itself: *DDJ* 41 cuts right to the chase where it states, "The Dao is hidden and nameless" 道隱無名 (*dao yin wu ming*). Hidden and nameless, the Dao is itself the world of the shadows.

### On the Early Daoism Label

One of the biggest debates informing the contemporary field of Daoist studies is the question of early Daoism, and I present a lot of what modern scholars, both Western and Eastern, say on this subject in chapter 2. Although there is at present a definite trend among some modern Western scholars, particularly those with a tendency to historical anthropology, to argue that Daoism first originated in the second century CE, there are still a good number of stalwarts who continue to argue for a tradition or movement of Daoism (philosophical or otherwise) stretching back to the period of the Warring States, roughly spanning the fifth to third centuries BC. This is not even to mention an even fewer number of scholars who would push the first emergence of a possible early Daoist movement back even further to the period of the Spring and Autumn; I count myself among them.

On the one hand, scholars who hold for a late second-century CE origin for Daoism have a solid point, namely that there are no records of anybody who

either called themselves or others Daoist, at least until the Han Dynasty, and even that designation by Sima Tan 司馬談 in the *Shiji* 史記 has come under fire for not exactly referring to any actual, sociological tradition; it was a bibliographic label.<sup>24</sup>

Here I want to present a few ideas of what is entailed by my use of the early Daoism label. To start, I see two strands of early Daoism, one taking form around the sixth or fifth century BC and associated with the *Daodejing* that I call early *yangsheng* Daoism, and the other taking form around the third century BC and associated with the *Zhuangzi* that I call early *zuowang* 坐忘 (“to sit and forget”) Daoism.<sup>25</sup> In the present work, I am exclusively concerned with the former (reserving my study of the latter for a future work), although from time to time I call upon indications from the *Zhuangzi* that speak to the first strand.

Although the participants of each strand did not call them Daoist as such, both strands separately contain the core elements of what will later explicitly be called Daoism, at least by the time of Ge Hong. The possession of these core elements is exclusive and unique to each strand; in other words, no other group, movement, or tradition incorporated them in their own writings (and, we can surmise, they therefore did not practice them). We do not know of any other label they used to describe what it was that they were doing, at least in terms of self-identifying their tradition or movement, but this is not unusual for the period at hand, as very few other groups had explicit labels. The shamans stand out by having their own explicit label, *wu* 巫, as do priests 祝 (*zhu*) and scribes 史 (*shi*), yet these are more or less government positions, not autonomous groups.

Because of the absence or hiddenness of an irrefutable sociological group clearly recognized and designated as Daoist in the historical records of the Warring States, scholars such as Nathan Sivin and Michel Strickmann, who have put forth the most influential arguments against calling anything Daoist until the formation of the Celestial Masters in the second century CE, are right, in a way. But there was something there, something central to later Daoism: namely, the initial genesis of the earliest transmissions of those core elements that would later become the defining features of Daoism as it was practiced at the time of Ge Hong and as it is still practiced by Daoists today.<sup>26</sup> This primarily refers to the transmission of *yangsheng*, which began long before the origin of the Celestial Masters (the singular event that Sivin and Strickmann use to date the birth of Daoism). But this relates to that first strand of early Daoism.

The core elements of early *yangsheng* Daoism cohere around the complex of notions about the pristine Dao, *yangsheng*, mountains, and *wuwei* 無為. In this complex, the pristine Dao provides the “stuff” of *yangsheng*, primarily the “original *qi*” 元氣 (*yuanci*) that the practitioner intends to circulate throughout the body, resulting in its transformation. This original *qi* is found, in its purest and most vital form, in mountains (I have more to say about mountains in chapter 5 because they represent, at least symbolically if not ecologically, the hiddenness of early Daoism<sup>27</sup>). *Wuwei*, then, is the type of bodily behavior that comes as

a consequence of mastering *yangsheng*, in which the adept acts in spontaneous accord with the Dao.

The core elements of early *zuowang* Daoism cohere around a slightly different complex of notions. These are the pristine Dao, *zuowang*, and *wuwei*. Like the first strand, this one also starts from the notion of the pristine Dao, but here it serves as the ground of unbounded existence. Instead of the physical techniques of *yangsheng*, this strand focuses on the spiritual techniques which, as many of the works of Harold Roth and Livia Kohn cogently point out, are best recognized as a type of apophatic meditation in which the contents of consciousness, but especially notions of self, are emptied out. The successful practice of such then leads to *wuwei*, which, for the *Zhuangzi*, does not necessarily refer to a mode of spontaneous or non-intentional behavior as it does for the *Daodejing*, but rather to a spiritual or mental freedom called *xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊 (often translated and “free and easy wandering”).

In all likelihood an originally oral phenomenon, the *Daodejing* is a much earlier, much shorter, and very different kind of text compared with the *Zhuangzi*, which was put together as a collection of relatively independent and self-contained essays. The *Daodejing* differs from this first of all in that it is self-contained as a whole, at least in the synthetic reading I offer. It accumulated, we can be sure, by way of discrete additions measured in sections and inter-referential chapters, whereas the *Zhuangzi* accumulated by the addition of entirely self-contained chapters which may or may not be entirely in keeping, in some cases, with all or even any of its other chapters.<sup>28</sup>

From time to time in the present study I call upon what the *Zhuangzi* says about Laozi, the *Daodejing*, and the Sage, but my inquiry here is predominantly directed to a sustained study of an early *yangsheng* Daoist reading of the *Daodejing*, and I reserve further explorations into the similarities and differences between these two strands of early Daoism associated with the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* for a later study.

So let's see how much of this hidden Dao can be spoken . . .