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An Analysis of the Annotative Methods of the *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong Zhangju*

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Abstract

The line-by-line interpretation of the *Laozi* contained in the *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju* preserves the original *Laozi* text in its entirety, and holds significant textual value. The book's annotations of the *Laozi*, both in content and methodology, were determined by its intended readers. The author, known as "Heshang Gong," concealed his identity and assumed the name of a Taoist immortal to lend greater authority to his annotations. His exegesis stresses the mutually reinforcing nature of governing one's self and the state (*shenguo tongzhi*). By redefining the previously esoteric "*Dao* of natural longevity" (*ziran changsheng zhi dao*) as the constant *Dao*, the author breaks through the boundaries of the original text and opens new horizons that gave rise to the Daoist religion. On the surface, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* appears to be little more than an annotation of the *Laozi* whose academic value is contingent on its interpretation of that text. However, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* possesses a value all its own, making this commentary on a classic text a classic in its own right.

Keywords

Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju – governing one's self and the state – the *Dao* of natural longevity – annotative methods – Laozi

Although the *Laozi* 老子 had already been the subject of commentaries since the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), large-scale exegetical efforts did not appear until the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). It was during that dynasty that the *Laozi* came to be known as a "classic" (*jing* 經) with the appearance of many commentarial works dedicated to it. The "Yiwen zhi" 藝文志 chapter of the *Hanshu* 漢書 records four annotated versions of the *Laozi*, all of which have been lost.[1] The only surviving Han dynasty commentaries on the *Laozi* are the *Daode zhenjing zhigui* 道德真經指歸, the *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句, and the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注. Of these commentaries, the only one that remains complete is the *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju* (hereafter the *Heshang Gong zhangju*). Although the *Heshang Gong zhangju* follows the *Laozi* closely, it adopts the *zhangju* 章句 format—dividing the text into sections and explicating it line by line to address a specific readership. It builds upon elements latent in the *Laozi* text (ideas alluded to but not fully articulated) through methods such as multiple interpretations. It transforms the obscure into the explicit, and the abstract to the specific. In doing so, it extends beyond the boundaries of the original text, and opens new horizons that gave rise to Daoism as a religion.

1 Division of Chapters, Parsing of Sentences, and Multiple Interpretations

The *Heshang Gong zhangju* adopts the *zhangju* format to annotate the *Laozi*. *Zhangju* may be understood as a genre of commentary on ancient texts. Prior to the Western Han period (202 BCE–8 CE), *zhuan* 傳 and *jie* 解 were the primary styles of annotating the classics, and the *zhangju* designation was yet unused. During the Han dynasty, the philological study of ancient texts (*zhangju zhi xue* 章句之學) gained popularity alongside the rise of the study of the Confucian classics. In terms of style and format, *zhangju* is concerned with the division of chapters, the parsing of sentences, lexical exegesis, and the elucidation of the ideas within the classical texts.[2] The *Heshang Gong zhangju* is based

1 These are the four chapters of *Laozi Linshi jingzhuan* 老子鄰氏經傳, the 37 chapters of *Laozi Fushi jingshuo* 老子傅氏經說, the six chapters of *Laozi Xushi jingshuo* 老子徐氏經說, and the four chapters of *Shuo Laozi* 說老子 by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE). *Hanshu* 漢書 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2008), 685–86.

2 Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 97) of the Eastern Han period (25–220) explains *zhangju* as follows: "The classics contain chapters, just as they contain sections of text, sentences, and phrases. They contain sentences and phrases, just as they contain words. Words hold meaning and constitute sentences. Sentences, given a sufficient quantity, connect to form sections

strictly on the *zhangju* form. It adheres closely to the object of its inquiry, the *Laozi*. It analyzes sections of text, sentences, and phrases, interprets the original text sentence by sentence and chapter by chapter, explains the meaning of terms, and provides a connected exposition of the classical text. With reference to examples from chapter six of the *Laozi*, below is a reading of the original text followed by the annotations. Heshang Gong 河上公 (ca. 2nd BCE) used the term "forming images" (*chengxiang* 成象) to capture the essence of that chapter.

> The valley spirit does not die 谷神不死.[3]
>
> *Gu* 谷 means "to nourish." If one can nourish the spirit, one will not die. Here, *shen* 神 refers to the five "spirits" of the five internal organs. The liver stores the *hun* 魂, the lungs store the *po* 魄, the heart stores the *shen*, the kidneys store the *jing* 精, and the spleen stores the *zhi* 志. If the five internal organs are damaged, then these five "spirits" depart.[4]
>
> This is called the mysterious female 是謂玄牝.[5]
>
> The key to the way of not dying lies in the "mysterious female" [*xuan pin* 玄牝]. *Xuan* means "heaven." In the human body, this corresponds to "the nose." *Pin* means "the earth." In the human body, this corresponds to "the mouth." Heaven nourishes the human body with its pure and bright energy. After inhalation through the nasal cavity, this is stored in the heart. This pure and light essence is transformed into spiritual wisdom, voice and speech, and emotional expression. Its subtle energy is known as *hun* 魂 [belonging to *yang* 陽]. It directs the energy transfer between the nasal cavity and the way of heaven. Therefore, the nasal cavity is referred to as *xuan* 玄.[6]
>
> The earth nourishes the human body with food and drink of all flavors. After passing through the oral cavity and being absorbed, these are stored

of text, which have a literary form that constitutes chapters. A chapter is the largest unit formed by sections of text, sentences, and phrases." Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 1129.

3 Wang Ka 王卡, coll., *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 21–22.

4 Ibid., 21–22.

5 Ibid., 21–22.

6 Ibid., 21–22.

> in the stomach. These heavy, turbid substances are transformed into flesh and bones, blood vessels, and the six emotions. Its subtle energy is known as *po* 魄 [belonging to *yin* 陰]. It directs the energy transfer between the oral cavity and mother earth. Therefore, the oral cavity is referred to as *pin* 牝.[7]
>
> The gate of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth 玄牝之門，是謂天地根.[8]
>
> "Root" [*gen* 根] means "primal beginning."[9]
>
> This means that the gate formed by the nose and mouth connects to the primal *qi* of heaven and earth. This is where such energies are exchanged and communicated between heaven and earth.[10]
>
> Continuously, as though it exists 綿綿若存.[11]
>
> While inhaling and exhaling, one's breath ought to be soft and continuous, so that it is barely discernible.[12]
>
> It is inexhaustible in its use 用之不勤.[13]
>
> One should breathe in a way that is relaxed and comfortable, and not hurried or sharp, or with too much force.[14]

If we only take this chapter of the original *Laozi* as an example, we can observe the wholeness of Heshang Gong's hermeneutical structure. The term "forming images" captures the essence of the chapter. His commentary is inserted directly in between phrases, intentionally breaking up the text, showing the reader when one sentence or phrase ends and the next one begins. This method was novel and significant at a time when Chinese texts lacked punctuation and

7 Ibid., 21–22.
8 Ibid., 21–22.
9 Ibid., 21–22.
10 Ibid., 21–22.
11 Ibid., 21–22.
12 Ibid., 21–22.
13 Ibid., 21–22.
14 Ibid., 21–22.

logical line breaks. It contains lexical exegesis and also provides multiple interpretations of ambiguous terms.

An analysis in the *zhangju* tradition requires a word-for-word annotation of the original text, an approach that Heshang Gong adopts to preserve the original *Laozi* text in its entirety. Some introductions to historical texts, as well as archaeological discoveries related to the *Heshang Gong zhangju*, contain only the original *Laozi* text and no commentary. The *Laozi* version used by Heshang Gong, and the annotations he made, are relatively archaic in style. It is one of the earliest versions still extant from that period. It became a foundation for textual analysis and criticism led by later generations, and has been favored by commentators throughout the ages. The Jinglong stele edition, Yizhou stele edition, Dunhuang edition, and Guangming edition of the *Laozi* all transmit the text of the Heshang Gong edition.[15] It is easy to see that the significance of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* primarily lies in the *Laozi* text itself that was being annotated. The adoption of the *zhangju* approach was of major significance in enabling the *Heshang Gong zhangju* to preserve the original *Laozi* text.

1.1 *From Metaphor to Ostensive Reference*

In the process of adopting the *zhangju* format, with its lexical exegesis and elucidation of the principal meaning, Heshang Gong interprets metaphors in the *Laozi* as actual phenomena, raising their concrete actionability and diminishing their philosophical abstractness.

As an example, let us examine the statement "The valley spirit does not die," as noted above in chapter six of the *Laozi*. The author begins by interpreting the text, word by word, noting that "*Gu* means 'to nourish'," then explains "The valley spirit does not die" as meaning that "If one can nourish the spirit, one will not die." With respect to the word *shen*, the author observes that it refers to "the five 'spirits' of the five internal organs," then notes specifically that "the liver stores the *hun*, the lungs store the *po*, the heart stores the *shen*, the kidneys store the *jing*, and the spleen stores the *zhi*." Finally, the author notes that "If the five internal organs are damaged, then these five 'spirits' depart." The "valley spirit" of the *Laozi* is transformed here into "the five 'spirits' stored within the five internal organs."

15 Sun Wenli 孫文禮, "*Laozi Heshang Gong zhangju* quanshi tantao" "老子河上公章句" 詮釋探討 (Master's thesis, Central China Normal University, 2004), 17.

In the *Laozi*, *gu* 谷 indicates the noun "the void." Wang Bi's 王弼 (227–249) interpretation is that *gu* is "the state in which the center is devoid of substance."[16] Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) noted that "*Gu* is characterized by its emptiness, which can hold all things, while *shen* indicates that there is nothing to which the *Dao* cannot respond." Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) explained that "Because the *Dao* is characterized by emptiness, it is known as *gu*. Because the *Dao* can adapt to all things, and is without end, it is known as *shen*."[17] The direct image associated with the word *gu* is that of the depth and empty solitude of a mountain valley.[18] Because only the emptiness of a mountain valley can accept all things, such acceptance becomes a response to the infinite, and its workings are mysterious beyond comprehension. *Shen* primarily means "mysterious, ever-changing and unpredictable." However, the author of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* deliberately misinterprets *gu* as "to nourish," turning a noun into a verb, and interprets *shen* as the "spirits" of the internal organs, which is far removed from the original intent of the source text.

In its analysis of sections of text, sentences, and phrases in the *zhangju* style, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* takes the philosophical proposition that "The valley spirit does not die," with its use of metaphor signifying the *Dao*'s emptiness containing all things, its endless ability to sustain life, its unpredictability and boundlessness, and reimagines it specifically as nourishing the liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, spleen, and other internal organs with the effect that "If one can nourish the spirit, one will not die." It transforms the *Laozi*'s rhetorical language of "the valley spirit" and the *Dao*, with its hollow resemblances and metaphorical uses, into specific objects. It is only with this major change that the author can logically explicate "The valley spirit does not die" as referring to the nourishment of the five spirits of the five internal organs in the service of immortality.

1.2 *From the Abstract to the Specific*

The *Dao*, as put forward in the *Laozi*, created all things. The *Dao* is the reason behind all things, but it itself is not subject to reason. The *Dao*, as the reason for all reasons that is itself nonetheless without reason, is difficult to recognize and grasp. The *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s commentary renders the *Laozi*'s abstract

16 Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, *Laozi Dao De Jing zhu jiaoshi* 老子道德經注校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 16.

17 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, Laozi *jin zhu jin yi* 老子今註今譯 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2003), 98.

18 Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, *Laozi gu jin: wu zhong duikan yu xiping yinlun* 老子古今一五種對勘與析評引論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 1: 136.

philosophical concepts more specific. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* inherits the generative meaning behind statements such as "The *Dao* was before heaven and earth" and "The *Dao* gives birth to them; virtue nourishes them." It similarly holds that the *Dao* is the origin of all things in the cosmos, stating that "The *Dao* has no form; in its state of undivided chaos it gives rise to all things."[19] However, Heshang Gong does not stop there, using these statements as a foundation with which to expand the meaning of the *Dao* to include *qi*, or "vital energy," stating that "Primordial *qi* generates all things yet does not possess them."[20] It also states that "'One' is what the *Dao* first produced; it is the refined *qi* of supreme harmony"[21] and "All things now obtain the *Dao*'s refined *qi* and thereby come into being."[22] Furthermore, regarding the passage "The Tao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three," the commentary states: "What the *Dao* first produced was 'One.' 'One' gives rise to *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* generate the three *qi* of harmony (*he* 和), clarity (*qing* 清), and torbidity (*zhuo* 濁)."[23] From "One," *yin* and *yang* are generated, and from these are derived the three *qi* of *he*, *qing*, and *zhuo*. First is the refined *qi* of supreme harmony; second are the dual *qi* of *yin* and *yang*; and third are the three *qi* of harmony, clarity, and turbidity.

To say that "The *Dao* gives birth to One" means that the first differentiation from the *Dao* is "One." In comparison to "One," the most significant feature of "Two" is that it carries an additional layer of meaning related to "opposites." Therefore, as a result of "One giving birth to Two," the *Dao* is differentiated into two initial opposing forms. "Three" evolves as a unity of opposites based on the principle that "The *Dao* gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, and Two gives birth to Three." "Three gives birth to all things" is a rational and speculative philosophical understanding, and a natural philosophy of a relatively high degree of abstraction. However, in the *Heshang Gong zhangju*, the *Laozi*'s highly abstract "One," "Two," and "Three" are all *qi* (vital energies), but they are different in kind. Thus, it renders the abstract *Dao* more specific and concrete, and establishes a model of cosmic genesis based on *qi*.

The *Laozi* text is characterized by concision, obscurantism, and a high degree of abstraction. In contrast, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* turns metaphors into comprehensible references, and abstraction into concreteness. This type of commentary renders meaning more complete. Each word and each

19 Chapter 25, "Xiang yuan" 象元. Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 101.
20 Chapter 2, "Yang shen" 養身. Ibid., 7.
21 Chapter 10, "Neng wei" 能為. Ibid., 34.
22 Chapter 21, "Xu xin" 虛心. Ibid., 87.
23 Chapter 42, "Dao hua" 道化. Ibid., 168–69.

sentence generally acquire a clear reference point. Yet during this process of developing ostensive references, and of clarifying and specifying, the meaning of the original text is at the discretion of the annotator, and undergoes a subtle shift.

2 Transcending Textual Constraints, and Leading toward Religious Interpretation

The influence of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* on Chinese intellectual history has not been as great as that of Wang Bi's *Laozi zhu* 老子注. However, its influence in Daoist circles has been immense, and has been widely used by the Daoist priesthood. Its readers are primarily Daoist priests, and Daoist scholars generally regard it as a fundamental text. The Tang dynasty (618–907) Daoist classic *Chuanshou jing jie yi zhu jue* 傳授經戒儀注訣 states that it is an indispensable work of the Daoist canon, second only to the *Laozi* itself.[24]

2.1 *Promoting "the* Dao *of Natural Longevity" as the Constant* Dao*—Opening New Horizons*

The first chapter of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* states its purpose and theme from the outset: "'The *Dao* that can be expressed through words' refers to the *Dao* of learning, governance, and education. 'It is not the constant *Dao*' means that it is not the *Dao* of natural longevity."[25] The *Dao* in the opening sentence of the *Laozi* is divided by the author of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* into "the *Dao* of natural longevity" and the "*Dao* of learning, governance, and education" (*Jingshu zhengjiao zhi dao* 經術政教之道). The quotation above is generally interpreted as meaning that "the *Dao* that can be expressed through words is not 'the constant *Dao*'; the name that can be spoken is not 'the constant name.'"[26] The *Heshang Gong zhangju* forges a unique path with a powerful

24 The *Chuanshou jing jie yi zhu jue* places the *Heshang Gong zhangju* in volumes 3 and 4 of the *Tai xuan bu* 太玄部, while volumes 1 and 2 contain the *Laozi*, and volumes 5 and 6 contain the *Xiang'er zhu* 想爾註. *Chuanshou jing jie yi zhu jue* 傳授經戒儀注訣, in vol. 32 of *Dao zang* 道藏 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1988), 170; Yu Ping 餘平, "Han Wei Jin shenxian xinyang de xianxiang xue quanshi: dui ji bu zaoqi zhongyao daojing de zongshen jiedu" 漢魏晉神仙信仰的現象學詮釋—對幾部早期重要道經的縱深解讀 (PhD diss., Sichuan University, 2006), 35.

25 Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 1.

26 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Laozi quanshi ji pingjia* 老子詮釋及評價 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 62.

new idea that promotes "the *Dao* of natural longevity" as the constant *Dao*. It reduces the *Dao* of learning, governance, and education with the Confucian classics at their core to "the *Dao* that can be expressed through words," thereby elevating "the *Dao* of natural longevity" to a more important position than the "*Dao* of learning, governance, and education" that can be "expressed through words."[27] This was the first time that "the *Dao* that can be expressed through words" and "the constant *Dao*" were articulated as "the *Dao* of learning, governance, and education" and "the *Dao* of natural longevity."[28] To "attain the *Dao*," one must transcend "the *Dao* of learning, governance, and education" "expressed through words," and pursue the more worthy aim of "the *Dao* of natural longevity," which "contains radiance yet conceals its brilliance, leaves no trace yet hides its signs, and cannot be named." Death is an essential aspect of being human. Human beings cannot embody an essence that is contrary to their own nature; that is, immortality. Only the *Dao* of natural longevity can overcome humanity's most fundamental condition as finite beings, and lead toward "immortality."

In privileging the "*Dao* of natural longevity" over the "*Dao* of learning, governance, and education," the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations break new ground in a way that is truly creative. Against this backdrop, its other interpretations of the *Laozi* revolve around a similar proposition, foregrounding the preservation of health, longevity, and immortality. This was crucial to the subsequent development of Daoism as a religion.

2.2 *Transition to Daoist Religion*

Once it had elevated "the *Dao* of natural longevity" as the constant *Dao*, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* and the "realm of hermeneutics" to which it belonged was no longer constrained by the *Laozi* text, a work that it annotated and developed further. It had crossed into new territory. For instance, although the *Laozi* notes that "The valley spirit does not die," the *Heshang Gong zhangju* discusses at great length the preservation of health, longevity (both as *changsheng* 長生

27 "Simply in terms of the depth of philosophical inquiry into this sentence from the *Laozi*, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* is unremarkable. What makes it unique is its demarcation of 'the constant *Dao*.'" Yu Ping, "Han Wei Jin shenxian xinyang de xianxiang xue quanshi," 28.

28 Qing Xitai 卿希泰, ed., *Zhongguo Daojiao shi* 中國道教史 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1996), 1: 93.

and *jiushou* 久壽), and immortality.[29] It may be said that "the *Dao* of immortality" pervades the entire *Heshang Gong zhangju*.[30]

The annotations are interspersed with observations such as:

> "Maintaining inner peace" means returning to life's real state, thus enabling life to endure.[31]
>
> When virtue is unwavering, longevity endures.[32]
>
> If the eyes do not wander, the ears listen with care, and the mouth speaks with care, you will not invite resentment from the world, and will thus be able to live long.[33]
>
> If descendants can cultivate the Great *Dao* in this manner, they will attain eternal life and endure for generations to come.[34]
>
> Cultivating the Great *Dao* can allow you to cast off the shackles of mortality, and deliver you from many perils.[35]

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29 Wang Ming 王明 (1911–1992) considered the book as one that "treats governing one's self as a doctrine," and that "it is abundantly clear that Heshang Gong's teachings emphasize self-cultivation more than governance." Wang Ming 王明, *Daojiao he Daojia sixiang yanjiu* 道教和道家思想研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984), 304, 306. Wang Ka also believes that "although [the *Heshang Gong zhangju*] discourses upon both governing the state and governing one's self as aspects of the Dao, its priority is governing one's self and maintaining one's health" and that the author's intellectual leaning is to "de-emphasize governance of the state while emphasizing governance of one's self." Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 11.

30 It is important to note that while the *Heshang Gong zhangju* discusses longevity and immortality, it does so as an embodiment of humanity's yearning for eternal life. What it explores is the question of how people living real lives can live long. Nowhere does the book use terms such as "immortals" (*xian* 仙) or "immortal life" (*xianshou* 仙壽). Moreover, "It is unlike the [work of] alchemists of the Warring States and Western Han periods who sought celestial beings and the elixir of life. Rather, it advocates 'embracing the Dao and cherishing the One,' breathing exercises and regulating the flow of *qi*, and focusing on self-cultivation." Qing Xitai, *Zhongguo Daojiao shi*, 1: 91, 98. Therefore, it still possesses only a "transitional" quality from Daoism as a philosophy to Daoism as a religion.

31 Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 63.

32 Ibid., 235.

33 Ibid., 134.

34 Ibid., 207.

35 Ibid., 242.

Daoism is a religion that pursues immortality, a subject on which Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145 or 135–90 BCE) makes the following comment:

> The alchemists made offerings to the gods and ventured out to sea in search of the mythical Mount Penglai 蓬萊, but their quest was never fulfilled. Meanwhile, Gongsun Qing 公孫卿 and other alchemists tasked with awaiting the gods continued to interpret the "giants' footprints," but their efforts were also fruitless. The emperor grew increasingly weary of these alchemists' bizarre and pedantic utterances, yet was relentless in courting them in the hope of truly encountering the immortals. Thereafter, the alchemists spoke more often of a divine shrine, yet the outcome became all too evident.[36]

The quest for so-called "fulfilment" and "fruitfulness" here constitute an argument for faith from the perspective of the empirical world, which represents a category error. Although alchemists during the reign of Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 247–210 BCE) and Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) never managed to encounter immortals, they were aware that "the effects were evident," and "still longed for an encounter with the genuine article." "Longing for an encounter" is a form of aspiration, and human beings survive by such aspirations, even if they cannot be fulfilled.[37] This is an unconditional belief, one that provides people with hope.

The *Heshang Gong zhangju* interprets the *Laozi*'s observation, based on a philosophy of eternal life, that "Heaven and earth are able to endure long because they do not live for themselves; thus they can be long-lived," as an exposition on how to achieve immortality. The text does so elaborately, repeatedly, and extensively. This is indeed a creative interpretation, and became "an important marker of the transition from Daoist philosophy to Daoist religious theory."[38]

36 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 28.1355.

37 Yu Ping 餘平, "'Ziran changsheng zhi dao' de xinyang xing dianji: *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju* jiedu" "自然長生之道"的信仰性奠基—"老子道德經河上公章句"讀解, *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 7 (2013): 45.

38 Qing Xitai, *Zhongguo Daojiao shi*, 1: 91. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* "built upon the Huang-Lao philosophy of the Han dynasty, and paved the way for the Daoist immortality traditions of the Wei and Jin periods." Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 14. Heshang Gong's annotations are "the theoretical source of early Daoist religion." Hu Xingrong 胡興榮, *Laozi si jia zhu yanjiu* 老子四家注研究 (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 5.

3 Putting Classical Knowledge into Practice, and Reflecting History

The traditional focus of scholarship on the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations has been historical textual criticism and citation. Yet the system of thought embodied by the annotations themselves is worthy of greater attention. Although the *Heshang Gong zhangju* is simply an interpretation of the *Laozi*, it nonetheless serves as a complete annotative text. It is the result of conscious choices, and gives expression to the author's intentions as a commentator. It is from this perspective that we should seek to understand the content and methodology underpinning the text's annotations.

3.1 *Attributing Authorship to a Divine Being*

In *Laozi Dao De Jing yinyi* 老子道德經音義, Lu Deming 陸德明 (ca. 550–630) explains the purpose behind the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations:

> Emperor Wen of Han 漢文帝 and Empress Dou 竇皇后 were very fond of the Huang-Lao 黃老 doctrine. At the time, there was a man named Heshang Gong who lived by the river, having put up a thatched hut as his residence. He dedicated himself to teaching the *Laozi*. When Emperor Wen learned of this, he summoned him to court, but Heshang Gong did not respond. So, the emperor went to the riverside personally to hold him to account. He never imagined that Heshang Gong would actually be able to leap into the sky. Upon seeing this, Emperor Wen immediately had a change of heart, and apologized. Afterwards, Heshang Gong wrote four chapters of his *Laozi zhangju* and passed on the knowledge therein to Emperor Wen. Among the chapters were the essentials of cultivating one's character and governing the state.[39]

Lu Deming states here that Heshang Gong authored the book. Heshang Gong was also known by the name of Heshang Zhangren 河上丈人.[40] "Heshang

39 Lu Deming 陸德明, *Jingdian shiwen xu lu shu zheng* 經典釋文序錄疏證, comm. Wu Chengshi 吳承仕 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 136.

40 The earliest record of the name Heshang Zhangren comes via Sima Qian. In the "Yue Yi lie zhuan" 樂毅列傳 chapter of the *Shiji* 史記, he states: "Yuechen Gong 樂臣公 studied the Huang-Lao doctrine, whose founding master was known as Heshang Zhangren. This founder's origins remain unknown. Heshang Zhangren imparted his knowledge to Anqi Sheng 安期生, who passed them on to Maoxi Gong 毛翕公. Maoxi Gong then taught Yuexia Gong 樂瑕公, who instructed Yuechen Gong. Yuechen Gong then instructed Ge Gong 蓋公. Ge Gong lectured in the Gaomi and Jiaoxi regions of the state of Qi, and served as teacher to Chancellor of State Cao Can 曹參."

Gong" was a hermit of the Warring States period, but the work known as the *Heshang Gong zhangju* did not exist at that time. Lu Deming, however, mentions a "Heshang Gongzhe" 河上公者 from the time of Emperor Wen of Han (r. 180–157 BCE).[41] It is clear that this Han dynasty commentator borrowed the name Heshang Gong from a hermit from an even earlier time in order to conceal his identity.

Who is the commentary intended for? In the paragraph quoted above, Lu Deming mentions Emperor Wen of Han and Empress Dou (d. 135 BCE), noting that they "were very fond of the Huang-Lao doctrine," held the *Laozi* in high esteem, and that having heard of a Daoist sage named Heshang Gong, hoped to summon him to court, sooner or later, to seek his advice on the *Laozi*. Yet Heshang Gong refused to come, and the emperor was forced to pay a formal visit. Heshang Gong then performed a range of miracles before Emperor Wen of Han's eyes,[42] such as "leaping into the sky." When Emperor Wen saw this divine being for who he was, he "immediately had a change of heart, and apologized." Once the Emperor had humbled himself, Heshang Gong began interpreting the *Laozi* for him.

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41 Currently, most scholars believe that the *Heshang Gong zhangju* appeared in book form during the Western Han period. Huang Zhao 黃釗, "*Laozi Heshang Gong zhangju* chengshu shixian kaolun"《老子河上公章句》成書時限考論, *Zhongzhou xuekan* 中州學刊, no. 2 (2001): 72.

42 Ge Xuan 葛玄 (164–244) of the Three Kingdoms period (220–280) presents Heshang Gong as follows: "Heshang Gong then promptly jumped with clapped hands, and slowly rose into the air. He rose as if on a cloud, hundreds of feet into the air, and soared to great heights. Long afterwards, he lowered his head in response to Emperor Wen, saying: 'I cannot reach the heavens, nor mingle with mortals below, nor dwell upon the earth. What common people are in need of governance? How could Your Majesty allow me to be bound by wealth and poverty?' Only then did Emperor Wen finally realize that Heshang Gong was an immortal. He immediately prostrated himself in deep reverence to offer an apology … 'Since I began annotating this scripture over 1,700 years ago, I have passed it on to only three people. With you, that makes four. Do not pass it on to people who are not fit for reading it!' Emperor Wen received the scripture on his knees. Once Heshang Gong had finished speaking, he disappeared without a trace. Commentators believe that Emperor Wen favored Laozi's Great *Dao*, that ordinary people could not fully comprehend the meaning behind it, and that he pondered deeply with profound insight. He was moved and thereby ascended to communicate with the Supreme Lord of the *Dao*, who then dispatched an immortal to descend specially and instruct him before departing. Fearing that Emperor Wen was not yet fully convinced, the immortal therefore displayed transformations to enlighten him, seeking to fulfill the true essence of his Daoist teachings. The people of that time thus called him 'Heshang Gong.'" See Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, 314. In this passage from Ge Xuan, Heshang Gong is described as being just like an immortal. Later, he was indeed presented as a supernatural being of the Daoist religion.

As a series of annotations and commentaries on the *Laozi*, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* was written for emperors such Wen of Han to read. This point can also be illustrated by the book's interpretation of other sections of the original text. For instance, chapter 30 of the *Laozi* refers to "those who assist the sovereign with the *Dao*." The subjects referred to so broadly in the *Laozi* are all interpreted in the *Heshang Gong zhangju* as "the ruler." There are more than 26 such interpretations. In another instance, chapter 43 states that "there are very few people under heaven who can attain the *Dao*"—the "under heaven" here is interpreted as "the ruler."[43] The "people" (*ren* 人) in "If people become more cunning" from chapter 57 is instead interpreted as "A feudal lord [*renjun* 人君] refers to a ruler who possesses a fiefdom spanning a hundred square *li*."[44] "In ancient times, those skilled in the *Dao*" from chapter 15 of the *Laozi* is explained as "a ruler who has attained the *Dao*."[45] There are further references to "the *Dao*" (in *Dao De* 道德 [virtue]) and "the ruler" in the same sentences, such as "a ruler of supreme virtue," "a ruler whose virtue is full to overflowing," and "a ruler who follows the *Dao*." These examples all demonstrate how Heshang Gong's intended readers were rulers.

Because the book's intended readers were monarchs pursuing the *Dao*, assuming the name of a divine being and a recluse aimed to lend greater mystery, authority, and validity to its annotations. The annotator predetermined his readership, with the annotative content necessarily having a particular focus. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* was specifically intended for monarchs, imparting the strategies and methods for a ruler to govern.

3.2 *"On the Essentials of Governing One's Self and the State"—the Object Determines the Content*

A large portion of the 81 chapters of the *Laozi* relates to governance. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* inherits this content, and summarizes the philosophy of the *Laozi* as "the essentials of cultivating one's self and managing state affairs." The *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s logical reasoning extends from "governing one's self" to "governing the state," with the ultimate aim of realizing peace and tranquility throughout the land.[46] The author advances the idea that "A ruler

43 Ibid., 173.

44 Ibid., 221.

45 Ibid., 57.

46 It repeatedly emphasizes that the governance of the state must be dedicated to achieving peace and prosperity. For instance, "Upon hearing the principles of the *Dao*, those of average talent will use them to cultivate themselves so as to preserve their longevity, and govern their states so as to bring about peace" (chapter 41, "Tong yi" 同異), and "When all things return to and rely upon the state and remain unharmed, the state will enjoy peace

cherishes his own life not for selfish reasons, but to become a parent to all his people,"[47] which foregrounds the belief that a ruler should cherish himself and cultivate his vitality for the sake of all the people under heaven, emphasizing that the purpose of "governing one's self" is to serve the goal of "governing the state."

The *Laozi* text contains a progressive structure of "self-family-hometown-state-world." Chapter 54 states:

> Cultivate one's self, and one's virtue will be authentic and unwavering. Cultivate one's family, and one's virtue will extend its blessings far and wide. Cultivate one's hometown, and one's virtue will keep growing. Cultivate one's state, and one's virtue will lead to abundance. Cultivate the world, and one's virtue will spread far and wide. Therefore, use one's own self-cultivation to observe self-cultivation among others. Use the governance of one's own family to observe the governance of other families. Use the customs of one's own hometown to observe the customs of other towns. Use the political affairs of one's own state to observe the political affairs of other states, and use the perspective of the world to observe the universal principles of the world.[48]

Chapter 13 of the *Laozi* states: "Therefore, only those who value themselves above the world can be entrusted with the world. Only those who cherish all people as they cherish themselves can shoulder the burden of governing the world."[49] Here, the interrelation between "cherishing one's self," "valuing one's self," and "the world" is affirmed. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* builds upon this foundation with creative elaboration. It frequently and extensively emphasizes the unity of one's self and the state, and the mutually reinforcing nature of governing one's self and the state. This is the most prominent theme to emerge from the entire text, and constitutes one of its defining features.

First and foremost, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* explicitly and directly explains the concept of "the unity of one's self and the state" (*shenguo tongyi* 身國同一). The *Laozi* includes this idea, but does not express it in such terms. "The unity of one's self and the state" was a new wording. Chapter three of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* ("An min" 安民) interprets the phrase "therefore,

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and tranquility, thereby achieving an era of prosperity and harmony" (chapter 35, "Ren de" 仁德). Ibid., 163, 139.

47 Ibid., 49.

48 Ibid., 207–8.

49 Ibid., 49.

the governance principles of the ruler who follows the *Dao*" from the *Laozi* as inferring that "the sage governs both the state and one's self." Chapter 59's ("Shou dao" 守道) annotation of "if one can grasp the fundamental principles of governing a state, then one may realize its lasting peace and stability" is "the state and one's self are one." "One's self and the state" are mentioned in the *Heshang Gong zhangju* with great frequency. Chapter 29 ("Wu wei" 無為), for instance, discusses "governing both the state and one's self," chapter 51 ("Yang de" 養德) mentions "governing the state and one's self," and chapter 64 ("Shou wei" 守微) discusses "governing one's self and the state." These annotations affirm the commonality between "one's self" and "the state."

Second, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* repeatedly compares "governing one's self" with "governing the state," explaining that their underlying principles are the same. For example:

> People who cultivate their character and cherish their vitality can maintain good health; people who govern a state and love the common people can ensure national stability.[50]
>
> Use of the *Dao* to govern the state will ensure national stability, and the common people will flourish. Use the *Dao* to cultivate one's character, and add years to one's life.[51]
>
> [If one knows when to stop and one can be content] then, when applied to one's self, the spirit will remain untroubled by fatigue. When applied to the state, the populace will remain undisturbed.[52]
>
> If a government's decrees are too numerous and diverse, then the common people will fall into confusion; if one's mind is restless while caring for one's health, then vital energy will dissipate.[53]

The *Heshang Gong zhangju* indeed, as Lu Deming puts it, emphasizes "the essentials of governing one's self and the state." The annotations reiterate that "If one wants to cherish one's life, then one must treasure one's vital energy," "If one cherishes one's vital energy, and exercises restraint over one's desires, the bone marrow can be enriched and the bones strengthened," "Remove

50 Ibid., 35.
51 Ibid., 140.
52 Ibid., 176.
53 Ibid., 235.

excess emotion and desire," and so forth. From the perspective of these annotations, the so-called "essentials of governing one's self and the state" lie in "cultivating the spirit through tranquility and non-action," "maintaining the peace among ordinary people via the political principles of quietude and non-intervention," and "nourishing the essence, cherishing vital energy, and cultivating the spirit."[54] It does not involve breathing exercises (as *daoyin* 導引 or *huxi tuna* 呼吸吐納), internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), external alchemy (*waidan* 外丹), or sexual practices (*fangzhong* 房中).

The principles of governing one's self and governing the state are interconnected because both adhere to the *Dao*.[55] To govern one's self through non-action involves cherishing one's essence and vital energy, and eliminating passions and desires. Extending these principles to governing the state means allowing the people to rest and recover, and imposing light corvées and minimal taxes, ultimately achieving the dual governance of both one's self and the state. Heshang Gong offers counsel to sovereigns from both the perspectives of one's self and of the state. The mutually reinforcing nature of governing one's self and the state is the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s most prominent idea. The lasting prosperity of the state, health, and longevity are the pursuits of emperors. If a mentor who instructs emperors on how to govern one's self and their state is a deity higher than the emperor himself, his authority will be enhanced. To achieve this aim, the text deifies its author to bolster his authority, and emphasizes the mutually reinforcing nature of governing one's self and the state to strengthen the book's appeal. By rendering the *Laozi*'s extensive philosophical system specifically as "the essentials of governing one's self and the state," the text ultimately yields to its interpreter, for it is the object that determines the content and method of its interpretation.

3.3 *Generating History*

Having emerged during the Han dynasty, the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations of the *Laozi* bear distinct traces of Han dynasty thought. During the Han dynasty, Confucianism was uniquely dominant, while Daoism gradually saw a waning of its political influence as its focus shifted toward self-cultivation and longevity. The pursuit of immortality became particularly prevalent during this era. The *Shiji* 史記 records that Li Shaojun 李少君 (dates unknown)

54 Wang Ka summarizes the three major techniques for maintaining health as promoting the circulation of *qi*, consolidating the essence, and nourishing the spirit. Ibid., 12–14.

55 Li Gang 李剛, "Yi min wei ben, shenguo tongzhi: 'Xi sheng jing' de shenti zhengzhi guan" 以民為本，身國同治—"西升經"的身體政治觀, *Sichuan daxue xuebao* 四川大學學報, no. 1 (2012): 88–95.

"used supernatural arts and sorcery, and gained an audience with Emperor Wu of Han … Emperor Wu appointed him as a 'general of literary achievement,' bestowed numerous rewards upon him, and treated him with honors reserved for distinguished guests."[56] Gongsun Qing (dates unknown) advised Emperor Wu of Han to perform the Sacrificial ceremony, while alchemists proposed venturing into the sea to seek immortals and elixirs, and the construction of pavilions to await divine beings and welcome immortals—all of which were adopted by the emperor. The *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 records the fact that numerous Han emperors sought immortals. For instance, "Following the precedent set by Emperor Wu," Emperor Xuan of Han 漢宣帝 (r. 74–48 BCE) "reverently observed the rites of fasting and sacrifice, and at the advice of the alchemists, had additional shrines built."[57] "In his later years," Emperor Cheng of Han 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE) "developed a fascination for matters concerning spirits and deities. Due to his lack of heirs, memorials discussing sacrificial rites and esoteric arts were submitted by numerous individuals, all of whom were summoned and waited to be officially appointed."[58] Emperor Ai of Han 漢哀帝 (r. 7–1 BCE), moreover, "ascended the throne while ill. He thus recruited alchemists and sorcerers extensively, appointing ritual envoys in the capital and all subordinate counties. He also fully reinstated the various divine shrines and government offices that had been perpetually maintained in previous dynasties—over seven hundred in total—with annual sacrificial rites totalling about thirty-seven thousand ceremonies."[59] These emperors were so obsessed with seeking divine guidance that "Along the coast of the Bohai 渤海 Sea and the regions of Yan 燕 and Qi 齊, there was scarcely a soul who did not passionately claim to possess a secret formula capable of attaining immortality."[60] In such an atmosphere, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* frequently discusses methods for maintaining one's health and achieving immortality, elevating the path to longevity above the principles of classical studies, governance, and education. This emphasis reflects the zeitgeist of the Han era.

While the *Heshang Gong zhangju* discusses health at great length, that is not its sole focus. Rather, it establishes a link between health and state governance, endowing its ideas on health with a strong political character, which is characteristic of the philological study of ancient texts during the Han dynasty. During the Han, the philological study of ancient texts was an official doctrine

56 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 12.459.
57 *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 18.840.
58 *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 25.1260.
59 Ibid., 25.1264.
60 *Shiji*, 28.1392.

that reflected official ideology and possessed a strong political dimension.[61] The *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations clearly also aspire to address issues of governance. Its annotations of the *Laozi* are driven by practical considerations. It attempts to undertake a political mission to provide support for political legitimacy, provide a theoretical underpinning for Han dynasty political realities, and link classical annotations to Han dynasty social demands. The annotator exercises agency between objective texts and subjective interpretations. For these reasons, the annotations elaborate on and extend the ideas that are hinted at but not explicitly stated in the original text. This application of classical theory to practice is present not only in Han dynasty philological studies of ancient texts, but also in the long-standing history of commentary in which "the six classics are interpreted through me." As Pan Derong 潘德榮 has remarked, "China's tradition of commentary has always been imbued with a strong pragmatic streak."[62]

The *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations of the *Laozi* reflect a preoccupation with health and immortality in Han dynasty society. They give expression to the practical application of theories of governance, a distinct feature of Han dynasty philological studies of ancient texts. They reflect the history that unfolded during that era, and what unfolded is itself what constitutes historical facts.

4 Conclusion

As a commentary on the *Laozi*, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* has been subject to extensive inquiry and criticism from the scholarly class. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) of the Tang dynasty went so far as to submit a memorial to the imperial court to abolish the use of Heshang Gong's commentary and retain Wang Bi's. Liu states that:

> The version of the *Laozi* that is widely circulated today is the annotated edition by Heshang Gong. Its preface states that Heshang Gong lived

61 Zhang Rongming 張榮明 states that "The *zhangju* genre is both a system of argumentation and interpretation. It is a modern interpretation of classical teachings, furnishing them with contemporary relevance." See Zhang Rongming 張榮明, *Zhongguo de guojiao: cong Shanggu dao Donghan* 中國的國教：從上古到東漢 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 286.

62 Pan Derong 潘德榮, *Wenzi, quanshi, chuantong: Zhongguo quanshi chuantong de xiandai zhuanhua* 文字・詮釋・傳統：中國詮釋傳統的現代轉化 (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2003), 104.

> during the reign of Emperor Wen of Han. He built a thatched hut in a bend in the Yellow River, from which he adopted his name. He passed on his annotations of the *Laozi* to Emperor Wen, then soared into the heavens. This is truly absurd and shallow rhetoric, the vain and illusory notions of the common crowd. According to the "Yiwen zhi" chapter of the *Hanshu*, there are three commentaries on the *Laozi*, and not one mentions the commentary by Heshang Gong. Isn't it the case that the commentator, seeking to mythologize this event, is deliberately fabricating a claim? His words are crude and shallow, and the principles he expounds are contrary to the truth. Even those who merely wish to distinguish between right and wrong and grasp basic principles will mock the book's errors and fallacies. How much more so those with insight? Who compares to Wang Bi's outstanding talent and exceptional insight, capable of probing profound and hidden principles? An examination of his commentary reveals the superiority of its reasoning. That is why we must demote Heshang Gong's commentary, and hold that of Wang Bi (whose style name was Fusi 輔嗣) in high esteem. As far as knowledge seekers are concerned, this is the correct approach.[63]

Huang Zhen 黃震 (1212 or 1213–1280) of the Song dynasty (960–1279) offered the following critique of Heshang Gong's commentary:

> As for the annotations of the 81 chapters of the *Laozi*, it is said that Heshang Gong sat in the void imparting its teachings to Emperor Wen of Han. This version of events originated with Pei Kai 裴楷. Little was it known that during Emperor Wen's 23-year reign, he did visit the army to offer his encouragement and travel to Yong to perform sacrificial rites at the altars to heaven and earth, but never once did he set foot on the banks of the Yellow River. Pei Kai, moreover, lived during the Jin dynasty, not during the Han dynasty. Furthermore, historical records state that Heshang Zhangren was the teacher of Anqi Sheng, and the teachings were passed down six generations to Ge Gong, who lived before Emperor Wen of Han. So how could Heshang Gong have been active during Emperor Wen's reign? The claim is utterly preposterous, resembling nothing more

63 Li Fang 李昉 et al., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 766.4034.

> than a street-corner novel. It reveals a complete ignorance of ancient and modern events, and its dishonor of the *Laozi* is even more egregious.[64]

From the modern era, Lao Jianzhang 劳健章 (also known as Lao Jian 劳健, 1894–1951) also believed that "the current version of the *Dao De Jing* 道德經, divided into chapters with section headings, originates with Heshang Gong's commentary. The Heshang Gong commentary currently in circulation bears chapter titles such as 'Ti dao' 體道 [Embodying the Dao] and 'Yangsheng' 養生 [Maintaining One's Health]. The setting of titles such as these is inappropriate and unreasonable, and was likely fabricated by the common crowd in the same way as those spurious annotations."[65]

The critiques noted above focus on several aspects. The first is the attribution of authorship of the *Heshang Gong zhangju* to Heshang Gong, and the miracles he performed when he met Emperor Wen, are such that "to make everything seem extraordinary, stories were concocted." Liu Zhiji and Huang Zhen both refute this version of events with reference to historical facts. The second is the belief that "[the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s] words are crude and shallow, and its reasoning defies common sense and is utterly confused and absurd. Even those who merely wish to distinguish between right and wrong [where purple and crimson represent good and evil, truth and falsehood] or barely grasp basic principles [where beans and wheat represent subtle distinctions] would mock its errors and fallacies," and it "has sullied this classic work, the *Laozi*"—that is, the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations themselves are vulgar and absurd. The third is the criticism that the book's chapter titles such as "Ti dao" and "Yangsheng" are "spurious annotations" made by "the common crowd." One may well be thoroughly convinced by the criticisms leveled at the *Heshang Gong zhangju* for its attribution of authorship to an immortal, and its content and chapter titles emphasizing the maintenance of health, embodying the *Dao*, and immortality. Yet, its "vulgarity" and "commonness" are precisely what allow the text to stand apart, and are key to its content. Therefore, although it has been sharply rebuked, as outlined above, the *Heshang Gong zhangju* has also been widely praised within Daoism.

From the perspective of hermeneutics, the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s significant number of unreasonable statements lacking a basis in fact can be

64 He Zhongli 何忠禮 and Zhang Wei 張偉, ed., *Huang Zhen quanji* 黃震全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2013), 1736.

65 Lao Jian 劳健, *Laozi guben kao* 老子古本考, reproduced with permission from Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, *Laozi gujin: wu zhong dui kan yu xiping yinlun* 老子古今—五種對勘與析評引論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 1: 92.

accounted for. No interpretive text can escape the historical condition in which the interpreter finds themselves. In the *Xuan jing yuan zhi fahui* 玄經原旨發揮, the late Song dynasty, early Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) Daoist priest Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318) states that: "Interpretations of the *Dao* follow changes from one era to the next, and gradually evolve. The circumstances of each era are all different. Commentators largely follow the prevailing trends of their respective eras, and bring their own subjectivities to bear in their study and interpretation of the *Laozi*. Consequently, when it was annotated during the Han dynasty, it became the 'Han dynasty *Laozi*.' When it was annotated during the Jin dynasty, it became the 'Jin dynasty *Laozi*.' When it was annotated during the Tang and Song dynasties, it became the Tang *Laozi* and Song *Laozi*."[66] Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857) once noted ruefully that: "Commentators on the *Laozi* have numbered in the many thousands since Han Fei 韓非. Yet Laozi himself cannot come back to life. Who then can judge the validity of all these annotations?"[67] A lack of fixed criteria will produce differences, variations, and ambiguities between the original text and its commentaries. Some variations have, in the course of historical evolution, been recognized and elaborated on, and evolved into new fields. "The predecessors lay the groundwork, and the successors carry it forward," as the expression puts it. Traditional Chinese textual annotations are inherently concerned with "elaboration," "expounding and propagating," and "elucidation." Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) once stated that: "The meaning of a text surpasses its author. This is not just temporary, but will always be so. Understanding does not merely replicate behavior; it will always be its own form of creative behavior."[68] No philologist can overcome the historical limitation that "Wherever there is an exegesis, there will be a misreading of a text."[69] From a hermeneutical point of view, some of the *Heshang Gong zhangju*'s annotations accord with the original meaning of the *Laozi*, while it preserves the original text through its line-by-line commentary, endowing the *Heshang Gong zhangju* with great textual value. In order to exert an influence on the book's intended readers—monarchs—the author concealed his identity and assumed the name of an ancient immortal and hermit.

66 Du Daojian 杜道堅, *Zhonghua Daozang* 中華道藏 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004), 2: 714.

67 Wei Yuan 魏源, *Wei Yuan ji* 魏源集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 255.

68 Hansi Geaoerge Jiadamoer 漢斯-格奧爾格・加達默爾 [Hans-Georg Gadamer], *Zhenli yu fangfa: zhexue quanshi xue de jiben tezheng* 真理與方法—哲學詮釋學的基本特徵, trans. Hong Handing 洪漢鼎 (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 1999), 380.

69 Yang Naiqiao 楊乃橋, *Beilun yu zhenghe: Dongfang Ru Dao shixue yu Xifang shixue de benti lun, yuyan xue bijiao* 悖論與整合：東方儒道詩學與西方詩學的本體論、語言學比較 (Beijing: Beijing wenhua chubanshe, 1998), 351.

His commentary concentrates on the mutually reinforcing nature of governing one's self and the state, which is a defining feature of the text. Furthermore, the author forges a unique path by promoting "the *Dao* of natural longevity" as the constant *Dao*, opening a new theoretical domain for pursuing immortality through health practices and furnishing the establishment of Daoism with a foundation of faith. Such commentaries have been roundly criticized as preposterous, yet they possess a certain historical rationality. The *Heshang Gong zhangju* does not merely uncover the meaning of the *Laozi*, it invents it. It articulates its own ideas through the annotations. It uses a new narrative approach to express those ideas in a new context. Using this approach, Daoist thought was now able to innovate. Therefore, although the *Heshang Gong zhangju* appears on the surface to be little more than an annotation of the *Laozi* whose academic value is contingent on its interpretation of that text, it possesses a value all its own, making this commentary on a classic a classic in its own right.[70]

Translated by Damien Kinney

70 Among the numerous annotations of the *Dao De Jing*, those by Heshang Gong and Wang Bi are the most widely circulated. Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之 (1899–1972) believed that Wang Bi's commentary belongs to the literati system, and was generally held in high scholarly regard, while Heshang Gong's commentary, with its laconic and archaic language, belongs to the folk system. He believed that in a comparison of the two, Heshang Gong's work is preferable. See Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 1. Wang Ka states that "Heshang Gong's commentary explicates the *Laozi* primarily through the Han dynasty's Huang-Lao school of thought, which differs from the practitioners of the metaphysical school [*xuan xue* 玄學] of the Wei and Jin periods, who interpreted the *Laozi* through philosophical ontology." The book contains many profound insights, and can be used alongside Wang's commentary, with one supplementing the other. See Wang Ka, *Laozi Dao De Jing Heshang Gong zhangju*, preface, 3.