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# Addressing Fundamental Issues in Huang-Lao Daoism Studies

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## Abstract

Several fundamental issues in the study of Huang-Lao Daoism require clarification. Terms like “Huang-Lao thought” and the “Huang-Lao Daoism School” are worthwhile as they both represent genuine intellectual phenomena and a generalization of shared intellectual tendencies. The references to “Huang-Lao” in the *Shiji* can be divided into five themes: “quietude and non-action,” “the supremacy of the *Dao* of the ruler,” “Huang-Lao *xingming*,” “Huang-Lao *daode*,” and “cultivating immortality through *yangsheng*.” Exploring these themes can help us trace the origins of Huang-Lao thought and understand its subsequent development. The syncretism of *daofa* (law of *Dao*, or *Dao* as law) should not be regarded as the sole criterion for defining Huang-Lao Daoism: the philosophy of *yangsheng* too is an underlying theme throughout its emergence, development, and transformation. Within Huang-Lao Daoism, the philosophical systems of the “Yellow Emperor” and Laozi complement each other. Huang-Lao thought should not be viewed solely as a variation on Laozi’s thought. Rather, it was through the figure of the Yellow Emperor that universally observed rules and taboos of society were introduced to Huang-Lao Daoism, imbuing it with practicality and authority.

## Keywords

Huang-Lao Daoism – Laozi – Yellow Emperor – *yangsheng* – *daofa*

Since the discovery of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts in the 1970s, including the *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 and the *Jiuzhu* 九主, research on Huang-Lao 黃老 (Yellow Emperor-Laozi) Daoism has emerged as a prominent field of study, attracting widespread academic attention and yielding a wealth of scholarly works.<sup>1</sup> More recently, excavated Daoist texts from the Chu bamboo slips of Guodian, the Shanghai Museum Chu bamboo slips, the Peking University Han bamboo slips, and the Tsinghua University bamboo slips have been deemed by scholars to align more closely with Huang-Lao Daoism than with Lao-Zhuang 老莊 (Laozi-Zhuangzi) Daoism. As relevant excavated texts such as these have emerged, the materials on Huang-Lao Daoism have become increasingly rich and pertinent information has become more readily discernible.

In my view, Huang-Lao Daoism in its ideal form possessed four characteristics. First, it emphasized the relationship between the *Dao* of heaven and the *Dao* of human affairs. That is, the *Dao* of human affairs and the *Dao* of heaven must be in one-to-one correspondence: all human actions, especially political activities, must accord with the laws of the *Dao* of heaven. Thus, Huang-Lao Daoism established specific and clear guidelines for individual actions, with the most direct and effective means of governing being conforming to the *Dao* of heaven. Second, it inferred methods of good governance from methods of cultivating well-being, namely *yangsheng* 養生. As Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE) emphasized in his famous treatise “Lun liujia yaozhi” 論六家要旨, “The spirit is the foundation of life, and the body is the vessel of life. Without first addressing one’s spirit and body, how can one claim to have the means to govern the domain?”<sup>2</sup> The adherents of Huang-Lao Daoism believed that without understanding *yangsheng*, one would not only fail to achieve longevity but would also be unable to effectively navigate political affairs. Third, it proceeded from Daoist theory to political discourse. As I have previously noted, being a philosophical doctrine that combined theory with practice, Huang-Lao Daoism integrated Daoist theory with political theory, both in the thought system attributed to the Yellow Emperor and in its counterpart thought system that creatively drew on Laozi’s teachings. In other words, Huang-Lao Daoism emphasized in particular that human behavior must find its legitimacy in transcendent principles.<sup>3</sup> Fourth is the grounding of “adapting and following” (*yinxun* 因循) in emptiness (*xu* 虛) and nothingness (*wu* 無). This point

1 For a review of research on Huang-Lao Daoism, see Yuan Qing 袁青, “20 shiji yilai Huang-Lao xue yanjiu de huigu yu fansi” 20世紀以來黃老學研究的回顧與反思, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊, no. 1 (2018): 119–32.

2 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 3292.

3 Cao Feng 曹峰, “Chutu wenxian shiye xia de Huang-Lao Daojia yanjiu” 出土文獻視野下的黃老道家研究, in *Jinnian Huang-Lao sixiang wenxian yanjiu* 近年黃老思想文獻研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2014), 1: 23–36.

is also summarized by Sima Tan in “Lun liujia yaozhi” when it is stated that one should “take emptiness and nothingness as the foundation for action” (*xuwu weiben* 虛無為本) and “take adapting and following as the method” (*yinxun weiyong* 因循為用).<sup>4</sup> A person who can handle external matters with composure must possess the highest openness of mind and spirit, and will therefore best understand how to follow the *Dao* of heaven and the *Dao* of human affairs.

These four characteristics demonstrate that Huang-Lao Daoism was the natural synthesis of the contemporaneous “hundred schools of thought.” Indeed, in keeping with this conclusion, Sima Tan’s “Lun liujia yaozhi” was based on both a critique of the shortcomings of the Yin-Yang (*yingyangjia* 陰陽家), Confucian (*rujia* 儒家), Mohism (*mojia* 墨家), School of Names (*mingjia* 名家), and Legalism (*fajia* 法家) schools and the recognition of their respective strengths, and it was on this basis that he championed Daoism, which was precisely the “Huang-Lao School.”<sup>5</sup>

Although the field of research on Huang-Lao Daoism has received much recognition of late and has gradually become richer and better defined thanks to excavated texts, Huang-Lao Daoism as an object of research still has many issues that need to be resolved. These issues are due to its broad scope, long time span, complex themes, and diverse content. Some fundamental issues remain unresolved to this day. If the nature and boundaries of the subject of study cannot be clearly defined, it will negatively influence the direction and progress of all subsequent discussion. As such, several foundational and critical questions must first be clarified. In my opinion, the most crucial of these are, did Huang-Lao thought and the Huang-Lao Daoism School actually exist? How should we characterize the term “Huang-Lao” as it appears in the *Shiji* 史記? What is the role of *yangsheng* within Huang-Lao Daoism? Is the syncretism of *daofa* 道法 (law of *Dao*, or *Dao* as law) the sole criterion for defining Huang-Lao Daoism? And what is the precise relationship between the Yellow Emperor and Laozi?

## 1 “Huang-Lao Thought” and the “Huang-Lao Daoism School”

The first question that researchers of Huang-Lao Daoism must resolve is whether the Huang-Lao Daoism School and Huang-Lao thought actually existed. If this fundamental issue remains unanswered, the entire field will have

4 *Shiji*, 3292.

5 Translator’s note: *xue* 學 here connotes Daoist philosophy, rather than Daoism as religion (*jiao* 教). In English-language scholarship, the term “Daoism” covers both aspects, and in the interests of readability this translation also follows this practice at many points.

no solid ground to stand on. Despite the wealth of scholarly achievements in Huang-Lao studies, this remains a topic of ongoing debate. Was the Huang-Lao Daoism School a loose intellectual community characterized by shared tendencies yet divergent discourses that Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 or 135–90 BCE) nonetheless identified, grouped together, and named? Or was it an academic community like the Confucian School and the Mohist School, with a clear lineage, a core ideology, and its own hermeneutics system, that ultimately guided Huang-Lao thought into Daoism as religion? These questions remain largely unresolved, leading to significant variations in the foci of Huang-Lao studies research. Some scholars even question whether the Huang-Lao Daoism School ever truly existed, suggesting that it may have merely been a form of the “Syncretic School” (*zajia* 雜家) of thought.<sup>6</sup>

In my view, Huang-Lao thought and the Huang-Lao Daoism School meet the fundamental criteria for being considered objects of scholarly inquiry. The six major schools of thought identified by Sima Tan—the Yin-Yang School, Confucian School, Mohism School, School of Names, Legalism School, and Daoism School—are widely accepted in academic circles. However, these six schools exhibit significant inconsistencies. Confucian, Mohism, and Daoism (of the Lao-Zhuang tradition) were schools of thought with identifiable historical founders and distinct pathways of intellectual transmission. In contrast, the schools of Yin-Yang, Names, and Legalism lacked clear founders and discernible pathways of transmission. Indeed, there may not have been any mutual influence within these schools. For example, Hui Shi 惠施 (ca. 370–310 BCE) and Gongsun Long 公孫龍 (ca. 320–250 BCE) addressed similar topics, yet their direct intellectual exchange remains unverifiable. Nevertheless, they are both taken as representatives of the School of Names. Furthermore, works such as the *Yinwenzi* 尹文子 diverge significantly from the intellectual content of Hui Shi and Gongsun Long and represent a political and ethical approach to the School of Names.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, this does not prevent all three from being grouped under the same school. Thus, the determination of the Yin-Yang, Names, and Legalism schools primarily relied on the question

6 For instance, Li Rui argues that aside from the Huang-Lao lineage described in “Yue Yi liezhuan” 樂毅列傳 from *Shiji*, the other references to “Huang-Lao” mentioned by Sima Qian are merely a biased classification he made in the early Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) based on his own preferences and inclinations. Li Rui 李銳, “Daojia yu Huang-Lao” 道家與黃老, in *Zhanguo Qinhan shiqi de xuepai wenti yanjiu* 戰國秦漢時期的學派問題研究 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011).

7 In terms of the School of Names considered within the domains of political and ethical thought, the author has produced a specialized treatise. See Cao Feng 曹峰, *Zhongguo gudai “ming” de zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu* 中國古代“名”的政治思想研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017).

of common intellectual objectives. Evidently, the naming of pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) schools could be based on a combination of actual academic lineage and shared intellectual tendencies in some cases, or in other cases solely on common intellectual tendencies.

Although Sima Tan and Sima Qian did not use the term “Huang-Lao Daoism School” (*Huang Lao daojia* 黃老道家) alongside the other six schools discussed above, this does not invalidate our use of the concept, for several reasons. First, the “Yue Yi liezhuan” 樂毅列傳 chapter in the *Shiji* clearly traces a lineage of Huang-Lao scholarship, whose adherents exerted a tangible influence on early Han political practice. Second, Sima Qian frequently uses the term “Huang-Lao” in the *Shiji*. Passages such as “studying the Yellow Emperor and Laozi,” “cultivating the teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi” in the “Yue Yi liezhuan” chapter,<sup>8</sup> and “favoring the arts of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi”<sup>9</sup> in the “Chen chengxiang shijia” 陳丞相世家 chapter of the *Shiji* confirm the existence of Huang-Lao theory and practice. Phrases such as “rooted in Huang-Lao” and “studied Huang-Lao” acknowledge the Huang-Lao theoretical origins of thinkers like Hanfeizi 韓非子 (ca. 280–233 BCE), Shen Buhai 申不害 (d. 338 BCE), Shen Dao 慎到 (ca. 390–315 BCE), and Tian Pian 田駢 (ca. 370–291 BCE). These texts confirm the existence of a group of statesmen and thinkers in the pre-Qin intellectual sphere and the early Han dynasty whose thinking was grounded in “Huang-Lao.” In works such as the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* 漢書, the term “Huang-Lao” is repeatedly used in relation to figures from the middle period of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) onwards.<sup>10</sup> Thus, “Huang-Lao” does not merely capture an ideological phenomenon specific to pre-Qin and early Han China; it has an actual lineage of transmission. Consequently, Huang-Lao thought and the Huang-Lao Daoism School can be regarded as being both an intellectual phenomenon as well as a generalization of common intellectual tendencies, much as in the case of the Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism schools.

Furthermore, the references to the “Daoism School” in “Lun liujia yaozhi” sometimes referred to as the “Daode School” (*daodejia* 道德家), are notably not reflective of the Lao-Zhuang tradition’s distancing of itself from practical politics. Rather, the Daoism School here more closely accords with Huang-Lao Daoism’s striving to provide theoretical foundations and practical

8 *Shiji*, 2436.

9 *Ibid.*, 2062.

10 Ren Jiyu 任繼愈, ed., *Zhongguo zhexue fazhanshi: Qinhanjuan* 中國哲學發展史秦漢卷 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985), 125, 129. Section “Hanchu Huang-Lao xuepai” 漢初黃老學派 lists many Huang-Lao figures in the Han dynasty in tabular form.

methods for real-world governance. Indeed, I would even argue that the entire “Lun liujia yaozhi” can be considered a “manifesto of the Huang-Lao Daoism School.”<sup>11</sup> Textually speaking, excavated works such as the *Huangdi sijing* and *Jiuzhu* in the Mawangdui silk manuscripts as well as certain chapters and sections of transmitted texts like the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, *Wenzi* 文子, *Guanzi* 管子, *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *Xinyu* 新語, *Xinshu* 新書, and *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 all exhibit these characteristics. This mode of thought and action, which widely flourished during the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Qin-Han periods (221 BCE–220 CE), sought to integrate the relationships between heaven, earth, and humanity, and played a significant role in both the personal (i.e., *yangsheng*) and public (statecraft) spheres. Along with its inheritors, it is justified to designate this mode of thought and action as “Huang-Lao thought” or “Huang-Lao Daoism.”

## 2 References to “Huang-Lao” in the *Shiji*

Huang-Lao thought flourished during the early Han dynasty; as such, it is the period of Huang-Lao thought that has been most extensively studied to date. Yet this does not mean there are not unresolved issues. For instance, how should we interpret the Huang-Lao elements found in the *Shiji*? How should we classify the individuals, narratives, and doctrines associated with Huang-Lao that are contained in the *Shiji*? These questions are crucial for tracing the trajectory of Huang-Lao thought both upstream to the pre-Qin era and downstream to the mid-Han period and beyond.

The *Shiji* contains extensive documentation on personages associated with Huang-Lao thought and thus it is our most crucial resource for studying the Huang-Lao tradition. These accounts provide key information about the initial formation of the concept of “Huang-Lao” during the early Han dynasty. However, a careful analysis of the relevant materials reveals significant variations in portrayal. The “Daoism School” described in “Lun liujia yaozhi” is Sima Tan’s idealized vision of Huang-Lao Daoism—a goal to aspire to, but not necessarily an accurate real-world representation. Whether the Huang-Lao lineage in the “Yue Yi liezhuan” is an imagined fabrication or factual remains controversial due to insufficient evidence. Importantly, the text only presents the lineage itself and does not detail its academic or ideological content. Therefore, since it cannot be verified that the figure of Heshang Zhangren 河上丈人

11 Cao Feng, Introduction to *Jinnian Huang-Lao sixiang wenxian yanjiu*, 3.

(the “Riverside Elder”), whom the “Yue Yi liezhuan” identifies as the first node of the Huang-Lao lineage, was in fact the author of the Heshang Gong 河上公 commentary of the *Laozi*, the ideas in that edition cannot be attributed to the Huang-Lao lineage depicted in the “Yue Yi liezhuan.”

Does the *Shiji* contain interpretable Huang-Lao thought? I believe that it does and that this can be broadly categorized into five categories: “quietude and non-action” (*qingjing wuwei* 清靜無為), “the supremacy of the *Dao* of the ruler” (*jundao zhishang* 君道至上), “Huang-Lao *xingming* (forms and names)” 黃老刑名, “Huang-Lao *daode* (the virtue of *Dao*)” 黃老道德, and “cultivating immortality through *yangsheng*” (*yangsheng chengxian* 養生成仙).

The principle of “quietude and non-action” is generally understood in relation to the ideological inclinations and political behaviors of rulers like Empress Dowager Dou 竇太后 (d. 135 BCE), Emperor Wen of Han 漢文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE), Emperor Jing of Han 漢景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE), Cao Can 曹參 (d. 189 BCE), and Chen Ping 陳平 (d. 179 BCE). These individuals adhered to the political philosophy that Cao Can learned from Lord Ge 蓋公 (dates unknown): “When governing the domain, value tranquility and inaction, and the people will naturally settle themselves,” a principle which they put into political practice.<sup>12</sup> “Quietude and non-action” was an aspect of Huang-Lao political philosophy. “When governing the domain, value tranquility and inaction, and the people will naturally settle themselves” is a principle that continues and adapts a crucial thread from Laozi’s political philosophy: “The sage acts without action, and the people follow naturally.” Laozi believed that the ideal government does not provide the people with everything they need but rather grants them sufficient space to develop freely. This requires the sage’s “non-action,” as this ultimately leads to the people’s “naturalness.” In other words, the sage’s lack of awareness, purpose, intervention, and coercion will inevitably foster the people’s spontaneity, initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity.

The concept of the “supremacy of the *Dao* of the ruler” aimed to protect and uphold the monarch’s autocratic position. This concept too is connected to Laozi’s political philosophy. The fundamental structural dichotomy of Laozi’s teachings is that between *Dao* and “the myriad things” (*wu* 物). From this dichotomy derived the parallel relationships between the ruler and the ruled, the root and the branches, the one and the many, the limited and the unlimited, and the whole and the parts. Transposing this dichotomy into the political sphere provided the theoretical foundation for a centralized

12 *Shiji*, 2029.

political system in which one ruler governs all the people. Specifically, those who “attain *Dao*” ascend to positions of sovereignty, or the Son of Heaven, by virtue of the omnipotent power of this acquired *Dao*. All subjects must unconditionally submit to their rule, thereby establishing a stable political structure. The debate recorded in the “Rulin liezhuan” 儒林列傳 chapter in the *Shiji* between Huang Sheng 黃生 (dates unknown), representing Huang-Lao Daoism, and Yuan Gusheng 轅固生 (fl. 140 BCE), representing the Confucian School, concerning the “mandate received by Tang 湯 and Wu 武<sup>13</sup> to overthrow their predecessors,” exemplifies the Huang-Lao Daoists’ steadfast belief in upholding the centralized monarchical system. This conviction is closely tied to the political design of “unifying the myriad things through the one” in Huang-Lao thought.

The term “Huang-Lao *xingming*” comes from the *Shiji*, where it was used to describe the academic tradition of Shen Buhai, Hanfeizi, and others. According to the “Lao Zhuang Shen Han liezhuan” 老莊申韓列傳 chapter in the *Shiji*, “Hanfeizi ... was fond of the study of *xingming* and techniques of governance, yet his fundamental principles were rooted in Huang-Lao”<sup>14</sup> and “The teachings of Shenzi 申子 stemmed from Huang-Lao, yet emphasized the importance of *xingming*.”<sup>15</sup> Both Shenzi and Hanfeizi upheld the fundamental stance of Daoism while valuing the practical functions of *xingming* in verifying reality, establishing norms, defining roles, distinguishing suspicions, and clarifying right and wrong. In this, they shared an inherent connection with Legalism but rejected its “compassionless rigidity” and “reliance solely on the law” (as described in “Lun liujia yaozhi”).<sup>16</sup> They emphasized *Dao* as the source of all things, thereby upholding the absolute supremacy of the sovereign. They employed the method of holding names accountable to reality. Tracing back to pre-Qin Daoism, the chapters “Zhudao” 主道 and “Yangquan” 揚權 in the *Hanfeizi* exhibit the integration of Daoist theory and Legalist *xingming* principles. This theoretical approach was later adopted by texts such as “Zhushu” 主術 in the *Huainanzi*. Other Huang-Lao texts exhibit similar tendencies, though with varying emphases. For example, the four chapters of the *Guanzi* focus on “adapting and following” while addressing Legalist principles. The *Huangdi sijing* emphasizes *xingming* yet also contains numerous arguments advocating

13 Translator’s note: “Tang and Wu” here refer to the overthrow of the Xia dynasty (ca. 2070–1600 BCE) by King Tang of the Shang 商湯 (r. ca. 1600–1588 BCE), and the overthrow of the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) founder, King Wu 周武王 (r. 1056–1043 BCE).

14 *Shiji*, 2146.

15 *Ibid.*, 2146.

16 *Ibid.*, 3291.

“adapting and following.”<sup>17</sup> The chapters “Yinxun” 因循 in the *Shenzi* 慎子, “Ziran” 自然 in the *Wenzi*, and “Qisu” 齊俗 in the *Huainanzi* also clearly lean more toward “adapting and following.”

“Huang-Lao *daode*” is a term used in the *Shiji* to trace the origins of the Daoist School to the Jixia 稷下 Academy during the state of Qi. In the “Mengzi Xun Qing liezhuan” 孟子荀卿列傳 chapter in the *Shiji*, Sima Qian notes that Shen Dao, Tian Pian, Jiezi 接子, Huan Yuan 環淵, and so on, “all studied the methods of Huang-Lao *daode*.”<sup>18</sup> However, the specifics of these “methods” and how they differed from “Huang-Lao *xingming*” are unclear. Sima Qian believed these distinctions were well understood by his contemporaries and thus required no explanation. Today, however, they require clarification.

In the *Shiji*, references to *daode* appear in three additional locations beyond the aforementioned comment that Shen Dao and others “all studied the methods of Huang-Lao *daode*.” First, in “Lun liujia yaozhi,” the Daode School is in some cases listed alongside the schools of Yin-Yang, Confucianism, Mohism, Names, and Legalism.<sup>19</sup> Second, in the “Mengzi Xun Qing liezhuan” it is recorded that Xunzi “examined the successes and failures of the Confucian, Mohism, and Daode schools, writing tens of thousands of words before passing away.”<sup>20</sup> Third, in the “Laozi liezhuan” 老子列傳 it is recorded that

Laozi cultivated the way of *daode*; his philosophy focused on concealing one’s traces and avoiding notoriety. ... Thus, Laozi composed the upper and lower volumes [of the *Laozi*], expounding on the meaning of *daode* in over five thousand words before departing to who-knows-where.<sup>21</sup>

I, the Grand Scribe [Sima Qian], say: “What Laozi cherished in the *Dao* was emptiness and nothingness, responding to change through non-action. Thus, his writings employed subtle and elusive language. Zhuangzi expanded on *daode*, yet his core principles returned to nature. Shenzi applied himself diligently to practical matters, implementing a

17 However, the theory of “*xingming*” 形名 as seen in *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 is not the narrow doctrine of “following names to verify congruence” confined to the context of the monarch-minister relationship, but a more expansive theory of “examining names and inspecting forms.” Cao Feng 曹峰, “Ming’ shi *Huangdi sijing* zui zhongyao de gainian zhi yi” “名”是《黃帝四經》最重要的概念之一, in *Jinnian Huang-Lao sixiang wenxian yanjiu*.

18 *Shiji*, 2347.

19 *Ibid.*, 3288.

20 *Ibid.*, 2348.

21 *Ibid.*, 2141.

path of accountability based on names and realities. Hanfeizi invoked legal principles, acted decisively, and clarified right from wrong; however, his path became harsh and lacking in compassion. All of these men based their philosophy on *daode*, but Laozi's was the most profound."<sup>22</sup>

In "Lun liujia yaozhi," the term *daode* is abbreviated as *Dao*; hence, the "Daode School" is given only as the "Dao(ism) School." This confirms that the Confucian, Mohism, and Daode schools mentioned in the "Mengzi Xun Qing liezhuan" correspond to the three schools of Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism. Notably, the "Laozi liezhuan" states that Laozi "cultivated *daode*," and that the *Laozi* "expounded on the meaning of *daode*." This shows that the concept of *daode* was broader than, or even conceptually prior to, Laozi's teachings, even if it was the *Laozi* that gave a clear voice to the concept. Sima Qian further describes Zhuangzi as one who "elaborated on *daode*," meaning he developed its principles. Laozi, Zhuangzi, Shenzi, and Hanfeizi, he states, were all "grounded in the idea of *daode*," though Laozi's teachings were more "profound." Thus we can imagine that during the pre-Qin period some early figures of the Daoism School were renowned for expounding on *daode*, but they were not collectively termed the Daoism School until the early Han dynasty. However, we cannot assume that Laozi was exclusively responsible for *daode* merely because the *Laozi* later became known as the *Dao De Jing*. Furthermore, the Guodian Chu bamboo slips from the mid-Warring States period do not divide the *Laozi* into chapters or sections. Therefore, the practice of dividing the *Laozi* into "De" and "Dao" or "Dao" and "De" sections likely resulted from later generations evaluating the text through the lens of "the meaning of *daode*."

Therefore, the phrase "all studied the methods of *daode*" suggests that the members of the Daoism School of the Jixia Academy, including Shen Dao, Tian Pian, Jiezi, and Huan Yuan, learned and developed the methods of *daode* associated with the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. The methods of *daode* were not the sole preserve of Laozi, nor can they be equated simplistically with his teachings. Some texts from the Yellow Emperor tradition may have emphasized *daode*, but these have since been lost to time. The limited number of excavated Huang-Lao texts discovered to date, such as the *Huangdi sijing*, lack instances where *Dao* and *De* are explicitly paired.<sup>23</sup> Characterizing Huang-Lao Daoism as

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2156.

<sup>23</sup> In the chapter "Yiwenzhi" 藝文志 of *Hanshu* 漢書 that records the book *Huangdi junchen* 黃帝君臣, there is a commentary by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92): "It originated during the Warring States Period and is similar to the works of Laozi." This shows that it is possible that

primarily an inheritance and transformation of Laozi's thought while treating the Yellow Emperor as marginal or dispensable clearly contradicts the early Han practice of equating the two. This point will be elaborated on further below. Unfortunately, this problematic view remains widely prevalent today.

Evidently, the methods of Huang-Lao *daode* prevalent at Jixia represented the mid-Warring States period's manifestation of Huang-Lao Daoism. Their core tenets likely resembled the form found in the four chapters of the *Guanzi* or the bamboo-slip version of the *Wenzi*. While not rejecting or opposing the study of *xingming*, it likewise had not yet reached a stage of heavy reliance on it. That is, the integration of *Dao* with *xingming* and "law, strategy, and power" (*fa* 法, *shu* 術, *shi* 勢) had not yet evolved into a purely governance-oriented doctrine. By the late Warring States period, as described in the "Lao Zhuang Shen Han liezhuan," the Huang-Lao Daoism School represented by Hanfeizi had both inherited the meaning of *daode*<sup>24</sup> and, in response to the demands of the era, had also begun to incorporate the Legalist thought of *xingming fashu* 刑名法術 (matching names with results). In Sima Qian's view, tracing the origins of this ideology inevitably leads back to Shen Buhai's "primacy of form and name" (*zhu xingming* 主刑名). Thus, Huang-Lao *daode* appears to predate Huang-Lao *xingming*, with the two having a sequential relationship. Overall, Huang-Lao *daode* encompasses a broader scope, while Huang-Lao *xingming* was more limited in scope and emerged later. As mentioned earlier, the *Huangdi sijing* also emphasizes Legalism: not in the sense of the art of harmonizing form and name in the context of sovereign–minister relations, but rather in the broader sense of investigating names and forms. Sima Qian's reference to Huang-Lao *xingming* citing only Shen Buhai and Hanfeizi as examples indicates he was discussing *xingming* in its narrow sense. However, the fact that the Mawangdui silk manuscripts include both the *Huangdi sijing* and the *Laozi* suggests that this broader conception of *xingming* was also widely recognized at the time.

Finally, let us examine "cultivating immortality through *yangsheng*." In "Lun liujia yaozhi," Sima Tan emphasizes the political utility and functionality of the School of Daoism in its capacity to encompass all schools of thought, its timeless and universal applicability, its simplicity, and its

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there existed Huangdi-related books whose core ideological tenets were similar to those of *Laozi*. In addition, it has been verified that there are multiple passages in *Huangdi sijing* that are similar to those in *Shenzi* 慎子. Regardless of whether one copied the other, or both copied from a common original text, this at least proves that *Huangdi sijing* shares common ground with the theory of *Shen Dao*, who "studied the doctrines of Huang-Lao on *daode* 道德."

24 *Shiji*, 2156.

ability to achieve much with little effort. However, while his use of the phrase “these methods” suggests that these were not considered as anything more than methods of governance, his statement that “the School of Daoism enables one to focus the spirit; [in terms of outward appearance] it moves in harmony and is formless, and [yet] it nourishes all things”<sup>25</sup> situates the fundamental principles and premise of Huang-Lao in aspects like focusing the spirit, moving in formless harmony, and nourishing all things that are closely related to *yangsheng* or are outcomes of it. Without the foundation of nurturing life, political substance and efficacy become meaningless—hence the concluding section of “Lun liujia yaozhi” returns to this theme. Furthermore, its designation as the “essence of the great *Dao*” signifies its paramount importance within the theory of the School of Daoism: “The essence of the great *Dao* lies in abandoning vigor and ambition, discarding cleverness and wisdom.”<sup>26</sup> “When the spirit is overused, it becomes exhausted; when the body is overworked, it becomes worn out.”<sup>27</sup> Only by having the ruler rest and the subjects labor can one “govern the domain.”<sup>28</sup> “Disturbing the body and spirit yet aspiring to endure as long as heaven and earth is unheard of” (that is, neglecting to nurture both body and spirit while dreaming of cosmic longevity is fantasy, and impractical governance).<sup>29</sup>

The ruling class represented by Emperor Wen, Emperor Jing, Empress Dowager Dou, Cao Can, and others achieved great political success on the basis of the Huang-Lao philosophy of “quietude and non-action”; while the non-ruling elites represented by Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 186 BCE) and Chen Ping leveraged the same philosophy to move toward the path of “preserving life and safeguarding self” (*quansheng baoshen* 全生保身). For instance, after the founding of the Han dynasty, Zhang Liang, who understood the ways of fortune and misfortune, as well as fullness and emptiness (*huofu yingxu zhi dao* 禍福盈虛之道) of the School of Daoism, retreated from the political arena to immerse himself in fasting and *daoyin* 導引 (a system of exercise and breathing techniques). Even when Empress Lü 呂后 (d. 180 BCE) sought his counsel to assist Crown Prince Liu Ying 太子劉盈 (211–188 BCE), he steadfastly declined, interceding only to summon the Four Sages of Shangshan (white-haired elders living in reclusion in Shangshan 商山). These choices appear diametrically opposed, yet they share the same philosophical foundation and underlying

25 Ibid., 3289.

26 Ibid., 3289.

27 Ibid., 3289.

28 Ibid., 3292.

29 Ibid., 3289.

principles. As “Lun liujia yaozhi” conveys, governing the state is merely a consequence, while *yangsheng* is the foundation. *Yangsheng* could lead to personal “wholeness and self-preservation” and to political success. Therefore, in Sima Qian’s view, *yangsheng* was the fundamental essence and foundation of Huang-Lao thought.

After the mid-Han period, Huang-Lao figures dedicated to *yangsheng* began to exert greater influence than those engaged in political practice. For instance, in the “Xiaowu benji” 孝武本紀 chapter in the *Shiji* it is recorded that Gongsun Qing 公孫卿 (dates unknown) of Qi said that his teacher, Shen Gong 申公 (also referred to as Shen Gong 申公 in the “Fengshan shu” 封禪書 section), “was acquainted with An Qisheng and received teachings from the Yellow Emperor.”<sup>30</sup> An Qisheng 安期生 (dates unknown) is one of the figures listed in the Huang-Lao lineage in the “Yue Yi liezhuan.” The “Fengshan shu,” also in the *Shiji*, describes An Qisheng as an immortal who resides in Penglai 蓬萊. The “Xiaowu benji” recounts how Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) longed to meet this immortal. He was repeatedly deceived by the alchemist Li Shaojun 李少君 (dates unknown), who claimed to be An Qisheng’s disciple. However, Emperor Wu remained unaware of the deception. During the Jin (265–420) dynasty, the *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳 by Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (215–282) portrays An Qisheng as an immortal whom even Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (r. 247–210 BCE) sought to befriend.<sup>31</sup> The chapter “Mingben” 明本 in the Inner Chapters of the *Baopuzi* states: “Those who embodied *Dao* to shape all things and treasured virtue to attain longevity are the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. The Yellow Emperor governed the kingdom to achieve great peace and then ascended to immortality; thus, he cannot be said to have been in any way inferior to Yao and Shun.”<sup>32</sup> This likely was the image of the Yellow Emperor held by the Huang-Lao Daoists of the Han dynasty who devoted themselves to “cultivating immortality through *yangsheng*.”

### 3 *Yangsheng* as the Foundation of Huang-Lao Thought

Previous research on Huang-Lao Daoism has focused primarily on the “*Dao* of heaven” system of thought and the system of creative transformation of Laozi’s

30 Ibid., 467.

31 Meng Wentong has discussed the cultivation methods of *xiandao* 仙道 (path of immortality) during the Pre-Qin and Han dynasties. See Meng Wentong 蒙文通, “Wan Zhou xiandao fen san pai kao” 晚周仙道分三派考, in *Xianqin zhuzi yu lixue* 先秦諸子與理學 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006).

32 Zhang Songhui 張松輝, annot., *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 331.

teachings, while paying insufficient attention to the *yangsheng* system. At the same time, studies on *yangsheng* thought have concentrated on the pre-Qin period with little exploration of the Han, Wei (220–265), and Jin dynasties.

As previously mentioned, Sima Qian, writing during the early Han dynasty, viewed *yangsheng* as the fundamental essence and foundation of Huang-Lao thought. This was not a phenomenon unique to the early Han period but rather a principle that permeated all stages of the development of Huang-Lao thought. The integrity and cultivation of life and spirit formed the bedrock of Huang-Lao philosophy, and indeed its foremost priority. Thus another crucial question arises here: is *daofa* truly the defining characteristic of Huang-Lao Daoism? In my view, even from the perspective of the evolution of Huang-Lao thought, the integration of *daofa* was merely a focal point during a specific period in the history of Huang-Lao Daoism, not a consistent theme throughout. On the contrary, *yangsheng* was the enduring concern of Huang-Lao Daoism. Indeed, the concerns with law and statecraft were largely derived from it.

When it comes to texts belonging to the *yangsheng* system of thought in the Huang-Lao tradition, the transmitted texts include the four chapters of the *Guanzi*, the *Lüshi chunqiu*, the *Wenzi*, the *Huainanzi*, and selected sections of the *Huangdi neijing*. The excavated texts include the *Fanwu liuxing* 凡物流形 and the *Pengzu* 彭祖 from the Shanghai Museum Chu bamboo slips; the *Tang chuyu Tangqiu* 湯處於湯丘 from Tsinghua University's Warring States bamboo slips; and the *Tianxia zhidao tan* 天下至道談 and *Shiwen* 十問 from the Mawangdui medical bamboo slips. Even before these texts were discovered, a number of scholars, of whom Meng Wentong 蒙文通 (1894–1968) was the most prominent, had already traced the lineage of *yangsheng* literature and its transmission within the School of Daoism back to Yang Zhu 楊朱 (ca. 395–335 BCE). The transmitted texts record a range of figures, such as Yang Zhu, Zhan He 詹何 (ca. 350–270 BCE), Zi Hua 子華 (ca. d. 342 BCE), Ta Xiao 它囂 (dates unknown), Wei Mou 魏牟 (dates unknown), and Chen Zhong 陳仲 (ca. 347–262 BCE), as advocating “cherishing [one's own] life while disregarding benefitting [other beings]” (*zhongsheng er qingli* 重生而輕利) and related concepts such as “preserving health and nurturing vitality,” “preserving life and extending years,” and “preserving one's true nature.” Though not directly discussing *yangsheng*, figures like Peng Meng 彭蒙 (ca. 370–310 BCE), Tian Pian, and Shen Dao shared close ideological ties to Yang Zhu's school. As Meng Wentong contended, “By the time of Tian and Shen, Yang Zhu's teachings had grown ever more profound in meaning and ever broader in application. The Huang-Lao School emerged from this lineage and maintained a close

affinity with Legalism.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Meng Wentong regarded Yang Zhu as the originator of the Huang-Lao School, meaning the Huang-Lao tradition stemmed from Yang Zhu, the advocate of *yangsheng*.

In his “*luelun Huanglao xue*” 略論黃老學, Meng Wentong proposed dividing the Daoism School into northern and southern schools, with Zhuangzi representing the southern school and Yang Zhu, Tian Pian, Shen Dao, and others representing the northern school. Yang Zhu’s philosophy centered on “preserving one’s nature and authenticity.” His disciples, including Zhan He, Zi Hua, Ta Xiao, Wei Mou, Chen Zhong, Shi You 史鱗 (dates unknown), Tian Pian, and Shen Dao, all advocated theories that emphasized preserving, revering, valuing, and respecting life. These doctrines are expressed most clearly in the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi*.

Those who advocated “preserving what is natural and defending the true” (*quanxing baozhen* 全性保真) occupied a position between the Lao-Zhuang and Huang-Lao schools of Daoism. They had the potential to develop in either direction. Setting aside the Zhuangzi lineage for now, this Daoist tradition, led by Yang Zhu and centered on *yangsheng*, produced numerous figures who proposed concepts considered fundamental to Huang-Lao Daoism today. Meng Wentong argued that, although both the northern and southern schools took “emptiness and nothingness” as their foundation, the northern school (primarily represented by the members of the Jixia Academy) diverged by embracing the path of “adapting to circumstances for practical use.” For example, in the “Zhiyi” 執一 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, Tian Pian advocated “following what is natural and yielding to the myriad things” (i.e., adapting to the inherent nature of all things and conforming to their transformations). The “Xinshu” 心術 chapter of the *Guanzi* specifically expounds on the “*Dao* of quiet adaptation” (i.e., the path of tranquil, adaptive following). Shen Dao authored a treatise titled “Yinxun” (included in *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要), and the “Guiyin” 貴因 chapter in the *Lüshi chunqiu* also draws from his writings. The concept of “adapting law to the times” (*yinshi bianfa* 因時變法) in the “Chajin” 察今 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu* also originates from Shen Dao’s work. As previously noted, “adapting and following” is one of the core tenets of Huang-Lao Daoism. This is reflected in Meng Wentong’s observation that Huang-Lao thought was also “well suited to the societal need for recuperation and restoration in the early Han dynasty, manifested in concepts like ‘adapting to the times’ (*yinshi* 因時) and ‘adapting to the myriad things’ (*yinwu* 因物). However, the Lao-Zhuang wing of the School of Daoism not only failed to synthesize the strengths of the hundred schools, it also proved incapable of adapting to

33 Meng Wentong, “Yang Zhu xuepai kao” 楊朱學派考, in *Xianqin Zhuzi yu lixue*, 128.

the times or circumstances.”<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, these northern Daoists prioritized law over virtue, advocating monarchical centralization and legal governance. In this sense, Huang-Lao Daoism, which fused Daoist and Legalist principles, originated from a tradition that emphasized nurturing life.

After Confucianism became predominant during the mid-Han period, although Huang-Lao thought did not vanish, its political significance greatly diminished. During the Eastern Han dynasty in particular, Huang-Lao adherents increasingly emphasized “quietude and frugality” (*qingjing guayu* 清靜寡欲). Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (679–732) quotes the following from Liu Bozhuang’s 劉伯莊 Tang dynasty (618–907) text *Shiji yinyi* 史記音義 in his “Suoyin” 索隱 commentary on the *Shiji*: “The principles of Huang-Lao did not value extravagance. Through quietude and non-action, rulers and ministers were in harmony ... [However, although Hanfeizi’s arguments] claimed to ‘return to Huang-Lao,’ he failed to grasp its fundamental meaning.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, Liu Bozhuang believed that although Hanfeizi could be classified under Huang-Lao thought, he did not understand its core essence. What, then, was this core essence? It was “not valuing extravagance and pursuing quietude and non-action.” This does not contradict the aforementioned “methods of Huang-Lao *daode*.”

The “Yimin liezhuan” 逸民列傳 chapter in the *Houhanshu* 後漢書 states: “Jiao Shen 矯慎, whose courtesy name was Zhongyan 仲彥, was a native of Maoling 茂陵 in Fufeng 扶風. From a young age, he was fond of the teachings of Huang-Lao. He retreated to live in the mountains and valleys, dwelling in caves and admiring the *daoyin* techniques of the immortals Chisongzi 赤松子 and Wang Ziqiao 王子喬.”<sup>36</sup> His friend Wu Cang 吳蒼 disapproved of Jiao Shen’s identification of Huang-Lao philosophy with the path of immortality. He pointed out:

It is said that the teachings of Huang-Lao teach entering the void and retreating into obscurity, hiding oneself and withdrawing far from the world. Yet, they also discuss governing the state and nurturing the people by applying these principles to governance. As for ascending mountains and erasing one’s traces, the spirit finds no proof in such actions, and people see no evidence of their efficacy. I wish for you, sir, to follow what is feasible. What do you think?<sup>37</sup>

34 Meng Wentong 蒙文通, “Luelun Huang-Lao xue” 略論黃老學, in *Xianqin Zhuzi yu lixue*, 192.

35 *Shiji*, 2147.

36 *Houhanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 2771.

37 *Ibid.*, 2771.

From this we can observe that by the Han dynasty, the Huang-Lao tradition had diverged into two distinct paths. One strand centered on quietude, non-action, self-cultivation, and preserving life. However, it was still held that, when necessary, one could “bring order to the domain and nurture the people and apply oneself to governance.”<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the Huang-Lao faction represented by Jiao Shen had transformed the tradition into a method for cultivating immortality and attaining enlightenment. These adherents were the inheritors of the Huang-Lao Daoism School discussed earlier, which was dedicated to “immortality through *yangsheng*.” Indeed, it was this faction that established Huang-Lao Daoism as a core part of the evolution and development of Daoism writ large.<sup>39</sup>

In the “Dingxian” 定賢 chapter in Wang Chong’s 王充 (27–97) *Lunheng* 論衡, it states,

Is someone who is tranquil and free from desire, who does not seek office but merely wants to preserve their body and cultivate their nature, truly virtuous? Such a person belongs to the school of Laozi and his followers. The Daoist and the sage are of different types. The sage worries about the world and strives to save people from hardship. This is why Confucius was constantly on the move and Mozi rushed about without respite. If one does not advance to join Confucius and Mencius in their endeavors but instead retreats to share the same practices as Huang-Lao, that is not the way of the virtuous.<sup>40</sup>

Wang Chong’s view that Huang-Lao had become synonymous with being “tranquil and free from desire,” “not seeking office,” and “seeking only to preserve one’s body and cultivate one’s nature” indicates that Huang-Lao Daoism had gradually distanced itself from politics and drawn closer to Zhuangzi.

38 Then, are there any documents that can represent the Huang-Lao Daoists of the Han dynasty of the type of Wu Cang who sought to integrate “bring order to the domain and nurture the people”? I believe there are, and that is the *Laozi* with annotations by Heshang Gong 河上公. This book not only embodies a strong political vision but also contains theories of health preservation and undertones of *xiandao*.

39 Guo Wu has conducted in-depth research on how Huang-Lao Thought evolved into Huang-Lao Daoism, and how the Huang-Lao Daoism School shifted its focus from “governing the state” to “governing the body.” Guo Wu 郭武, “Cong ‘Huang-Lao xue’ dao ‘Huang-Lao dao’: guanyu qizhong yixie wenti de zai taolun” 從“黃老學”到“黃老道”:關於其中一些問題的再討論, *Sichuan daxue xuebao* 四川大學學報, no. 6 (2020): 71–78.

40 Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 113.

This pursuit of immortality and distancing oneself from politics is also described in the “Shen wei” 慎微 chapter of Lu Jia’s 陸賈 (ca. 240–170 BCE) *Xinyu* 新語, which criticizes those who “subject themselves to hardship and toil, venture deep into the mountains, seek immortals, abandon their parents, and forsake their kin. They abstain from grains, neglect poetry and the Classics, turn their backs on the treasures of heaven and earth, and pursue immortality.”<sup>41</sup> These ascetics stood in stark contrast to the Huang-Lao Daoists of the early Han dynasty, who actively engaged in politics. Yet it was precisely such figures who later became known by the same name. Huang-Lao Daoism encompassed health cultivation and statecraft. When engaged in the world, these two aspects could be integrated, but withdrawing to focusing solely on health cultivation did not preclude retaining the essence of Huang-Lao Daoism. This point that has been made elsewhere: “[Huang-Lao] was most likely a development of the seekers of immortality, who sought profound thought; also, it was likely a development of the Daoist philosophy of personal well-being and self-preservation.”<sup>42</sup>

In summary, although Huang-Lao Daoism’s philosophical emphasis has waxed and waned with the changing times, the philosophy of *yangsheng*, expressed in tenets such as preserving life, safeguarding the body, and cultivating one’s nature have remained constant throughout its evolution. These tenets form the tradition’s fundamental stance, core essence, and primary thread. They embody the principle that the “essence remains unchanged despite all variations.” Understanding this concept of *yangsheng* allows one to connect and make sense of the historical figures, doctrines, and texts that are considered representative of Huang-Lao thought. It also explains why individuals who are actively engaged in the world and those who are passively withdrawing from it can both be considered Huang-Lao adherents.

#### 4 The Relationship between “Huang” and “Lao”

A distinct intellectual movement emerged during the pre-Qin and early Han periods that must be acknowledged. Drawing upon the Yellow Emperor and Laozi as foundational pillars, this movement integrated the concepts of the *Dao* of heaven, *yangsheng*, Daoist philosophy, and political theory. The movement

41 Wang Liqi 王利器, *Xinyu jiaozhu* 新語校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 106.

42 Kanaya Osamu 金谷治, “Han chu Daojia sichao de paibie” 漢初道家思潮的派別, in *Riben xuezhe yanjiu Zhongguoshi lunzhu xuanyi* 日本學者研究中國史論著選譯, ed. Liu Junwen 劉俊文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 7: 33.

sought to synthesize diverse schools of thought to provide a legitimate basis and practical political wisdom for an ideal autocratic monarchy, public legal order, and rational framework for human existence. If we label this intellectual current “Huang-Lao Daoism,” several questions arise. First, why was this school of thought named “Huang-Lao”? What was the relationship between these two figures? Were the Yellow Emperor and Laozi on an equal footing, or was there a hierarchical relationship between them? Did distinct schools of thought named after the Yellow Emperor and Laozi actually exist? Which came first—Yellow Emperor thought or that of Laozi? Did the Yellow Emperor inspire Laozi, or did Laozi give rise to the concept of Huang-Lao? When and where did the Yellow Emperor first appear in connection with Daoism? When did the association between Huang and Lao begin? When did they first begin to be referred to together as “Huang-Lao”?

Past research has largely overlooked these issues. Currently, academic attention is focused on identifying and compiling excavated Huang-Lao texts, as well as fully exploring and analyzing transmitted Huang-Lao texts and associated figures, with an emphasis on the thought structure of Huang-Lao Daoism, its political influence, and its relationship with other schools of thought. In contrast, the relationship between Huang and Lao has received insufficient attention, with the two facets of the whole often being studied separately. Considerable scholarly effort has been devoted to collecting and organizing materials related to the Yellow Emperor. The role of the Jixia Academy in elevating his status is a focal point for many scholars. Regarding why it was that the two became intertwined, most scholars dismiss the question as moot, arguing that most texts attributed to the Yellow Emperor are apocryphal and that Yellow Emperor thought lacks a distinct theoretical system.<sup>43</sup> Some scholars, however, propose radically different views. For example, Yu Mingguang 余明光 contends that the *Huangdi sijing* represents the quintessence of Yellow Emperor thought. He asserts that Yellow Emperor thought and Laozi thought are fundamentally two distinct intellectual strands that should not be conflated.<sup>44</sup> Thus, existing research on the relationship between the Yellow Emperor and Laozi reveals two opposing tendencies. Some argue that the

43 As Ding Yuanming points out: “In this objective structure of Huang-Lao thought, ‘Huang’ is the form, while ‘Lao’ is the content; ‘Huang’ is the phenomenon, while ‘Lao’ is the essence. They represent the unity of form and content, as well as that of phenomenon and essence.” Ding Yuanming 丁原明, *Huang-Lao xue lungang* 黃老學論綱 (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 1997), 24.

44 Yu Mingguang 余明光, *Dongfang wenhua de aomi* 東方文化的奧秘 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2013), 1.

elements of Yellow Emperor thought carry less weight than those of Laozi thought, while others maintain the opposite.

I believe that viewing Huang-Lao thought as merely a variation on Laozi thought could cause one to overlook valuable information and fail to adequately explain why, in the early Han dynasty, Sima Qian chose “Huang-Lao” as the term for the prevailing political ideology of his time. In Huang-Lao Daoism, the elements of Huang and Lao each constitute one half of a whole; they are complementary and indispensable to each other. As previously mentioned, the transition “from *yangsheng* to statecraft” and the shift “from the *Dao* of heaven to the *Dao* of human affairs” are central tenets of Huang-Lao Daoism. However, these two lines of thought were not always pursued in parallel by different Huang-Lao groups; rather, each group often had its own emphasis. Therefore, it is necessary to examine them separately. “From *yangsheng* to statecraft” emphasized the importance of emptiness, tranquility, and non-action in understanding, grasping, and managing all things; “from the *Dao* of heaven to the *Dao* of human affairs” emphasized that human activities must accord with the laws of heaven and earth, and that natural laws provide for human politics a model to emulate and a basis for legitimacy.

Through an extensive study of excavated texts, supplemented by the existing literature, we have discerned that a system of socially accepted norms and taboos was integrated into the theoretical framework of Huang-Lao Daoism through the figure of the Yellow Emperor, thereby gaining practical applicability, credibility, and authority. Understanding the Yellow Emperor’s role and status in theories of the *Dao* of heaven and *yangsheng* provides a rational explanation for the Huang-Lao designation’s formation and subsequent incorporation into Daoist health practices. Theories of the *Dao* of heaven are exemplified by the *Huangdi sijing* of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts and the “Twelve Chronicles” (*Shier ji* 十二紀) section of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, while theories of health preservation are represented by the medical texts found among the Mawangdui bamboo slips and the transmitted *Huangdi neijing*, which is permeated with Huang-Lao thought. In a sense, the health preservation system is also part of the *Dao* of heaven system. It is closely related to early Daoist knowledge and practices, as exemplified by the Yellow Emperor. Health preservation must be based on the *Dao* of heaven; its ultimate purpose is a return to the *Dao* of heaven.

From the perspective of knowledge accumulation and the development of civilization, the systems of knowledge concerning the *Dao* of heaven and *yangsheng* predate the *Laozi*. These systems began entering the discourse of statecraft as early as the Warring States period. While these systems share conceptual similarities with the *Laozi*, they are not identical, and each has

a distinct lineage of transmission. After the mid-Han dynasty, both systems detached from practical politics, reverting to knowledge transmission and health cultivation practices. They became integral components of the way of Huang-Lao (*Huang-Lao dao* 黃老道) within religious Daoism. Theoretically, however, they incorporated Daoist philosophies from the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and other texts, thereby becoming more comprehensive and enriched, and acquiring greater intellectual and scholarly depth.

In short, the Huang-Lao tradition cannot be defined simply as the inheritance and transformation of the school of thought surrounding Laozi. In reality, this Laozi school itself was undergoing change. The intellectual origins of Laozi thought likely included elements that overlapped with or were inherited from the Yellow Emperor thought system. The author has previously examined this from the perspective of the *Dao* of heaven, discussing Laozi's inheritance and transcendence of the ancient cosmological system represented by the Yellow Emperor.<sup>45</sup> Sima Qian's recourse to the concept of "heaven as law, earth as principle" (*fatian zedi* 法天則地) to describe the Yellow Emperor was no coincidence.

In reality, prior to the *Laozi* a more primordial intellectual tradition existed that regarded the principles of heaven and earth as the supreme law and principle guiding human affairs. This tradition was later collectively referred to as Yellow Emperor thought. Through the knowledge, skills, prohibitions, and regulations disseminated via the words of the Yellow Emperor, the *Dao* of heaven could be applied to human affairs, crystallizing into general principles. Huang-Lao thought relied on the words of the Yellow Emperor to establish a practical and effective system of political authority and praxis. Without clarifying the origin, content, function, and value of these words, one cannot truly comprehend Huang-Lao thought. The Yellow Emperor's theory of the *Dao* of heaven, epitomized by "heaven as law, earth as principle," held significant status and practical value within the later Huang-Lao Daoist tradition. It was a consistent ideological thread, not an intermittent one. To fully grasp the thought of the *Laozi* and reveal the reasons why the path from Laozi led to Huang-Lao, we must reflect on both *Dao* and the *Dao* of heaven simultaneously.

The process of the evolution of Laozi thought is also the process of its reinterpretation by Huang-Lao thought. During this process, Hanfeizi explained Laozi thought through the philosophy of *daoli* 道理 (principles of *Dao*) and enriched it with *xingming*. The *Wenzi* established the theory of the "four

45 Cao Feng 曹峰, "Huangdi de 'fatian zedi' yu Laozi de 'ren fadi, di fatian'" 黃帝的 "法天則地" 與《老子》的 "人法地、地法天", in *Laozi yongyuan bulao* 老子永遠不老 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2018).

Canons” (*sijing* 四經)—morality, benevolence, righteousness, and ritual—to reconcile conflicts and contradictions between them and *daode*. The structure of the text and ideas in the *Lüshi chunqiu* largely align with “Lun liujia yaozhi.” Beyond synthesizing Confucian and Daoist elements, the Daoist aspects of the *Huainanzi* exhibit signs of shifting away from Huang-Lao and toward Lao-Zhuang. But these are established academic topics. What I wish to emphasize is this: we should not place Laozi thought on a pedestal and declare it to be unparalleled; in fact, by the mid-Warring States period, there was likely no longer such a thing as an independent school of Laozi thought.

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*Translated by Tom Marling*