

# Laozi, Heshang Gong, Guanzi and Early Chinese Self Cultivation

# *Laozi and the Daode Jing*

- Lǎozi (老子), aka Lǐ Dān (李聃), is said to have been a Zhou Dynasty imperial librarian around 600 BC and an elder teacher to Confucius.
- Was asked by a border guard to share his wisdom before leaving behind the chaos of a falling dynasty. Wrote the *Dàodé Jīng* and then continued on his journey.
- Deified in the Daoist religion as *Dàodé Tiānzūn* 道德天尊, essentially primordial wisdom incarnated to write scripture and teach humanity.
- Possibly a personage created to represent the wisdom and teachings of many healers, advisors, and mystics.

# Central values of the Daode Jing (道德經)

- Effortlessness 無為 *wúwéi*, (related to 無偽 *wúwěi*, without deception, seen in Confucian Guodian texts)
- Spontaneous authenticity 自然 *zìrán*
- Harmonious (和 *hé*), soft (柔 *róu*), humble (謙 *qiān*), yielding (讓 *ràng*),
- Frugality, mastery over desires/passions, tranquil contentment, generosity
- Kindness, meet hardness with softness
- Leadership is the humblest service, govern like raising children to be independent, self-reliant, self-sufficient, let them think they did it themselves, permaculture approach

# Heshang Gong 河上公

- Interpreted the *Dàodé Jīng* as sharing macrocosmic truths with three major areas of applicability: 1) Governing and leading others, 2) governing/cultivating oneself, 3) the patterns of Dao manifest in all of nature (*tiāndì*/heaven and earth)
- Most Daoist religious traditions consider Héshàng Gōng's commentary (老子河上公章句, *Lǎozǐ héshàng gōng zhāngjù*) as the primary commentary and essential interpretation of the *Daode Jing*.
- A story first written by either Gé Xuán (葛玄, 164–244 AD) or Gé Hóng (葛洪, 283–343 AD) states that Héshàng Gōng gave his commentary to Emperor Wen of Han (202–157 BC) in 160 BC. Some linguistic evidence suggests it was written or expanded after 100AD.

# *Guanzi* 管子 aka *Guan Zhong* 管仲

- Prime Minister to Duke Huán (齊桓公). Duke Huán ruled Qi State from 685-643 BC and was the Hegemon during this time of the Zhou Dynasty.
- Guǎnzi became an archetype of genius, considered a benevolent political genius and polymath.
- Writings attributed to Guǎnzi were compiled into an encyclopedia of 86 books that was named after him circa 26 BC. Its chapters cover a wide variety of subjects including government policy, economics, war, agriculture, wisdom and virtues, and three chapters referred to as the *Xīnshù* (心術), or “Art of the Heart-mind,” chapters.

# *Guanzi's Art of the Heart-Mind*

- Purifying the Heart-Mind (*Báixīn*, 白心), Art of the Heart-Mind (*Xīnshù*, 心術), and Internal Cultivation (*Nèiyè*, 內業). See my book *The Thread of Dao: Unraveling Early Daoist Oral Traditions in Guanzi*.
- Modern sinologists date the *Xīnshù* chapters to 400-350 BC, the earliest chapters of the *Dàodé Jīng* to circa 300 BC (Guodian), and the complete *Dàodé Jīng* to circa 200 BC (Mawangdui, sealed 168 BC). So the *Xīnshù* chapters may have deeply influenced the *Dàodé Jīng*.
- The *Xīnshù* chapters prove that China had a longstanding indigenous tradition of internal cultivation and meditation well before the arrival of Buddhism in 80 AD. Much of what people call Buddhist influence on Daoist practices is actually from *xīnshù*, for example stillness meditation practices that seek spiritual transcendence. *Xīnshù* likely influenced Chinese interpretations of Buddhism before getting filtered back into Daoism and Chinese culture through Buddhism.
- Before the *Dàodé Jīng*, and before Héshàng Gōng interpreted the *Dàodé Jīng*'s political advice as metaphors for self cultivation, the *Guānzi* already provided clear metaphorical parallels between state governance and self cultivation.

# Cross pollination of thought

- I speculate that the *Xīnshù* tradition may have developed from ruist ritual self-purification practices that ritual masters would undergo for weeks to cleanse the heart-mind before performing certain ceremonies.
- The early Ruist texts found at Guodian, for example the *Xīngzì Mìngchū* (性自命出 *Natural Dispositions Come from Endowment*) could easily pass as Daoist philosophy. People were simply exploring the human experience in search of ways to improve it both internally and externally. Though divisions between schools of thought existed, there was a great deal of cross pollination such as at Jixia Academy.
- Jixia Academy was started by Duke Huán of Qi (ruled 685-643 BC) surely with help from Guǎnzi. It was later revitalized by King Xuan, ruler of Qi from 319-301 BC. Most of the *Guǎnzi* books on varied subjects are believed to have come from Jixia Academy scholars.
- Liu Xin, the Xin Dynasty (9-23 AD) imperial librarian who completed the *Guǎnzi* around 6 AD, had initially categorized it as part of the Daoist school of thought. The *Guǎnzi* was later categorized as a Legalist text in the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD), and is generally categorized as such to this day.

# Guanzi's influence

- The *Xīnshù* texts are the earliest example and likely earliest textual influence of the spiritual cultivation later found in Daoist internal elixir (*neidan*) traditions. They describe a path to overcoming internal obstacles and reaching a clear mind, a path that eventually gives rise to spiritual insight (神明), spiritual power (靈氣), and physical longevity through *jing*, *qi* and *shen* cultivation.
- An earlier example of this influence can be seen in the *Guiguzi* (Warring States & c. 500 AD). Guiguzi taught diplomatic strategy but also had seven chapters on internal cultivation. His “Seven Techniques of Yin Talisman” closely match the teachings of Guanzi’s *Xinshu*. For example, Guiguzi writes in the chapter *Broadening the Spirit in Accordance with the Five Dragons*:

“Categories are known through the orifices. If they cause doubt and confusion, this can be transcended with the art of the heart-mind (*xin shu*). If the heart-mind is without this technique, it will not transcend (doubt and confusion). If it transcends (doubt and confusion), the five (organ) energies are successfully nurtured. The objective is housing spirit. This is called transformation.



# *Xinshu techniques*

- First lines of the upper *Xīnshù* (心術上) concern the mind:  
“In the body, the heart-mind holds the throne of the ruler.  
The nine apertures hold offices of various public servants.  
When the heart-mind remains with Dao,  
The nine apertures act reasonably;  
When desires and euphoric feelings are plentiful,  
The eyes don’t see appearances  
And the ears don’t hear sounds.  
Thus it is said: When those above lose the Way,  
Those below neglect their duties.
- When scattered, it is as though a rebellion rises up within you.  
When calm and still, order naturally arrives.  
Force cannot widely establish such order.  
Wisdom cannot formulate all strategies.

- First lines of the lower *Xīnshù* (心術下) concern the body:

When the bodily form is not aligned, Virtue does not approach;

When the center is not pure and clear, the heart-mind is not stable.

An aligned bodily form is adorned with Virtue;

The myriad things (thereby) attain completion.

When these wings (of Virtue and the heart-mind) naturally come together,

The spirit knows no limits.

Illuminated, it's comprehension of the world spans throughout the four directions.

Therefore it is said: “When things do not confuse the senses,

And the senses do not confuse the heart-mind –

This is called ‘inner Virtue’.”

Thereby, the energy of intention is settled;

Having (settled), it returns to alignment.

Energy-breath then fills the body,

And one's conduct is righteous and upright.

If this fullness (of energy-breath) is not pleasant, the heart-mind does not benefit.

If one's conduct is not upright, the people will not be provided for.

Therefore, sages resemble Heaven during such times: They are without thought of self when sitting above all.

They resemble Earth during such times: They are without thought of self when supporting all.

As for thought of self, it puts the world in chaos....

# Neiye techniques

- If you can be aligned and you can be silent, then you can be settled

When the heart-mind settles in its very center,  
The ears and eyes become acute and perceptive  
And the four limbs become solid and stable.  
You can thereby house the pure and vital essence.  
This pure essence is the pure essence of energy-breath.  
The way of energy-breath is to flourish

- There is a spirit that alights in the body.  
One moment it leaves, and one moment it arrives.  
No one can comprehend it.  
Losing it assures disorder;  
Obtaining it assures order;  
Respectfully purify its dwelling place,  
And the pure and vital essence will naturally return.  
If planning and thinking about vital essence,  
Calm any thoughts about governing it.  
Straightening your form, revere and honour it.  
Essence will then become settled.

## *Neiye on the arts*

- Invariably, people's lives require balance and alignment.

What causes them to lose this is surely euphoria, anger, sadness, and worry.

To put an end to anger, nothing compares to poetry;

To dispel sadness, nothing compares to music;

To moderate music, nothing compares to courtesy;

To maintain courtesy, nothing compares to respect;

To maintain respect, nothing compares to silence.

Internally silent, and externally respectful, one can return to their pure nature.

Pure nature is thereby greatly established.

# *Baixin as precursor to Daode Jing*

- BX27-29:

Therefore, the Sage's (method of) government is to still the body and wait. Things then arrive at their names and naturally fall into place."

DDJ3:

... Therefore, the Sage's government / Empties the heart-mind and enriches the stomach / Softens the will and strengthens the bones / People then remain uncontrived and without desires / While the scheming do not dare to act / Act by not acting / And everything will fall into place

- DDJ1:

The Dao that can be spoken is not the Eternal Dao / The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name / The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth / The Named is the mother of the myriad things...

BX15-20:

The true primordial strategy is the root from which life springs. Knowing its image, one apprehends its form. Reaching to its principles, one knows its nature. Seeking its end, one knows its name. Thus, for producing many flourishing things, nothing is greater than Heaven and Earth. For transforming many things, nothing can transform so many things as the sun and moon.

# *Heshang Gong on governing the embodied self*

DDJ3

是以聖人之治，說聖人治國與治身同也。

“Therefore, the Sage’s government”

The Sage governs the nation in the same way that he governs his body.

虛其心，除嗜欲，去亂煩。

“Empties the heart”

By eliminating cravings and desires, he banishes chaos and trouble.

實其腹，懷道抱一守，五神也。

“And enriches the stomach”

He carries Dao in his heart, embraces Oneness, and protects the five spirits.

[Referring here to the spirits of the organs (hun, po, yi, zhi, shen)]

弱其志，和柔謙讓，不處權也。

“Softens the will”

Harmonious and soft, humble, modest, and accommodating, the Sage does not linger in positions of authority.

強其骨。愛精重施，髓滿骨堅。

“And strengthens the bones”

He cherishes his vital essence and takes seriously what was bestowed upon him (by Heaven, Earth, and his parents). Thus, his bone marrow is full, and his bones are strong. [Kidney essence relates to the bones and reproductive organs]

# Heshang Gong continued 1

DDJ29

或強或羸，有所強大，必有所羸弱也。

“Sometimes strong, and sometimes weak”

When there is strength and greatness, there must also be weakness and adaptability.

或挫或隳。載，安也。隳，危也。有所安必有所危，明人君不可以有為治國與治身也。

“Sometimes chopping down, sometimes being destroyed”

There is both support of peace, and destruction and danger. If there is peace, there must be danger. Enlightened rulers do not try to forcibly control the nation but follow the way of governing the body.

- HSG shows that governing the nation is a metaphor for governing the body because governing the body provides an ideal model and window to observe the truths of governing the nation. This may have been Laozi's inspiration, to show that the way to govern the nation can be found by observing the nature of longevity in the body/self.

# Heshang Gong continued 2

- DDJ60

治大國者若烹小鮮。鮮，魚。烹小魚不去腸、不去鱗、不敢撓，恐其糜也。治國煩則下亂，治身煩則精散。

“Govern a large state as though boiling a small fish”

When boiling a small fish, the intestines are not removed, the scales are not removed, and you shouldn't dare touch it for fear that it will become mashed. Governing the state with vexation brings chaos to those below. Governing the body with vexation causes the spiritual vitality to scatter.

- DDJ28

為天下谷，常德乃足，足，止也。人能為天下谷，則德乃常止於己。

“Being a valley under Heaven, Virtue will always fulfill you”

To be fulfilled is to come to rest. To people who can be (humble, empty, open, and nourishing like) a valley to all under Heaven, Virtue will always come to rest.

復歸於樸。復當歸身於質樸，不復為文飾。

“Return to your unaltered substance”

Return yourself to the unaltered state. Do not go on covering yourself with ornamentation.



# Heshang Gong continued 3

樸散則為器，器，用也。萬物之樸散則為器用也。若道散則為神明，流為日月，分為五行也。

“Unaltered wood is shaped into vessels”

Vessels are useful. The simplicity of the myriad things is altered to make useful tools. Similarly, the Dao makes alterations in order to create spiritual intelligence, the alterations of day and night, and the separation of the five elemental phases.

聖人用之則為官長。聖人升用則為百官之元長也

“Sages make use of this model when acting in positions of leadership”

Using only a few ounces of leadership, the Sage plays the role of one hundred leaders.

故大制不割。聖人用之則以大道制御天下，無所傷割，治身則以大道制御情欲，不害精神也。

“Thereby, the greatest establishment is undivided”

The Sage uses (leaders). Thereby, the Great Dao is established in managing all under Heaven without causing harm or division. In governing the body, when the Great Dao is established it drives out desires and strong emotions (so that they) do not injure the spiritual vitality.

## Heshang Gong continued 4

- HSG says that desires and strong emotions divide the self from the unaltered state of an infant which he describes in chapter 10: “Have the power of an infant. Be, internally, without a thought or worry, and externally, without official duties. Then the spiritual vitality will not leave.” One could interpret this as returning to the body wisdom when mind and body fit together “like a perfect pair of shoes.”
- “Using only a few ounces of leadership, the Sage plays the role of one hundred leaders.” similar to the phrase *sì liǎng bō qiān jīn* 四两拨千斤, “4 liang (2 ounces) to move 1000 jin/pounds.” The sage knows where to apply the minimal effort for maximum effect. This execute this skill requires a clear and sharp mind as cultivated through *xinshu*, and the sage’s relaxed confidence comes largely from knowing their capacity for effortless effect.

# Daode Jing and Guqin

- The ideal composure of a guqin player is like the valley: open, calm, clear in mind, natural, humble and without a pretense of superiority.
- Guqin playing also reflects Laozi's ideals of effortless simplicity, peacefulness. The listener is nourished in the simple and peaceful silence like in the quiet natural surroundings of a valley. The long silence is the valley of sound. The softness of the instrument exemplifies the ideal that softness overcomes rigidity.
- DDJ78: "In all under Heaven, nothing is softer or more adaptable than water; yet, for attacking that which is hard and strong, nothing is more capable of victory... Weakness overcomes strength, softness overcomes rigidity. In all under Heaven, none are ignorant of this, yet none put it into practice."
- An important note is that Laozi warns against obsession with virtue, and prioritizes naturalness and being oneself. So, it's worth remembering that you are not obligated to achieve these ideals, though you may find the path enjoyable.