

4.5 HUANG-LAO IDEOLOGY

When Sima Qian and other early historians discuss the intellectual trends of the early Han, they frequently refer to a school of thought known as “Huang-Lao.” Never is this term systematically explained, and for many centuries scholars have puzzled over its meaning. It was understood from early times that “Huang” referred to Huang-di, that is, the Yellow Emperor. “Lao” was short for Laozi. Interpreters reasoned that this was probably an alternative name for Taoism, but no one was sure.

In 1973, archaeologists working near the city of Changsha in southern China uncovered a tomb that held the bones and the goods of the ruler of one of the early Han kingdoms that had been located in that area. The date of the tomb has been determined to be in the 180s B.C., or during the reigns of Hui-di or Empress Lü.

Among the grave goods were found a set of silk scrolls and bamboo slips with texts written on them. Among these texts were two different copies of the *Dao de jing*. The other texts were previously unknown. All the texts were in legible condition, but the characters were not always of standard form, and over the years, the materials had rotted in places, leaving gaps large and small.

One of the previously unknown texts, which was actually a collection of four smaller texts written together on the same scroll as the *Dao de jing*, attracted a great deal of attention. It was given the unofficial title, *The Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*, the name of a lost text recorded in the bibliography monograph of the *Han shu* (History of the Former Han). It does indeed appear to be a collection of Huang-Lao texts, combining texts concerning Huang-di – the Yellow Emperor – with text resonant with Daoist ideas, all appended to the canon attributed to Laozi. Whether these chapters represent set listed in the *Han shu* is a matter of speculation, but interpreters have legitimately attempted to reconstruct the ideology of Huang-Lao on the basis of them.

As any quick survey of the texts will indicate, these documents are deeply syncretic, that is to say they draw together selected ideas from many different schools and attempt to present them in a harmonious arrangement. Among these schools, Laozi-style Daoism is clearly foremost. However, Legalism and certain militarist schools contribute a very significant portion of these ideas as well. Mohist and Confucian influences can also be detected, but their contributions are generally scattered and do not shape the overall structure of the texts.

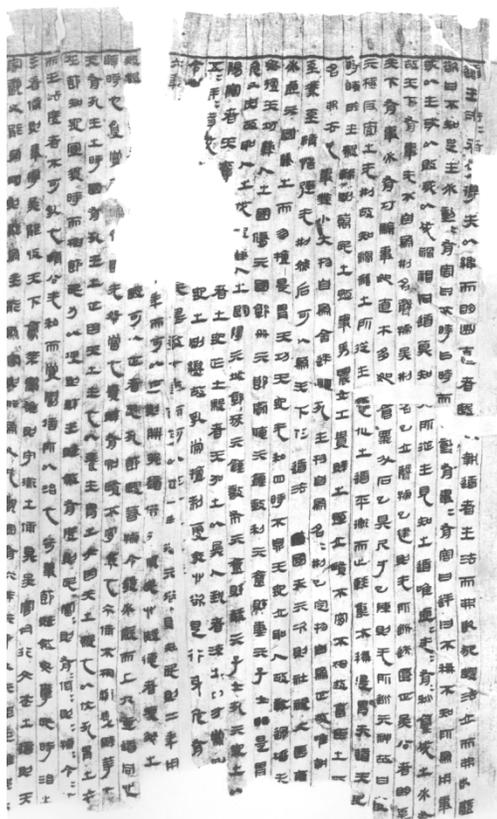
In addition to bringing together these schools of thought, one of the four texts casts its ideas as the teachings of the Yellow Emperor or of his advisors. It is this that has led scholars to identify the texts as products of the Huang-Lao School.

In this section, we will look at a selection of passages from each of the four texts. As you read them, ask yourself how the ideology represented by such texts would have shaped government during the early Han. The historical texts assure us that from the time of Hui-di

through the reign of Jing-di, the Han court was dominated by policy-makers who regarded these texts as the best available guides for government. How could they have influenced actual practice?

As mentioned above, the manuscripts are difficult to read. Chinese editors have transcribed the written characters into printed forms and done much work to explain the possible meanings of unusual or unexpected characters, but their readings are often difficult to accept. Moreover there remain many gaps in the texts – they always seem to obliterate the key word in a passage!

In the translations which follow, each missing character is represented by the sign \ . Where characters are missing, the translation may be rough or grammatically incomplete, and you may find awkward or puzzling passages, indicating that the text's meaning is unclear (at least to me – unlike all our classical texts, this one comes without traditional commentary explanations). The way that the phrases are arranged typographically in verse-like style is governed solely by considerations about how this difficult text may be rendered more understandable; the texts are *not* generally in poetic form. In addition to a few footnotes explaining certain terms used in the text, I have also added marginal notes to draw your attention to some of the “syncretic” features of the text – passages that suggest that its ideas represent a melding of the ideas of many different schools.



Section of the *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*, as preserved in the Mawangdui tomb.

some living thereby,
 some defeated thereby,
 some completed thereby.

- iii Fortune and calamity share one Dao,
 none knows whence it is born.
 The Dao of knowing is merely void with nothing.
 Void with nothing, the smallest thing complete within it
 must have form and name.*
 When form and name are set up
 then the distinction of black and white is complete.
 Hence he who holds to the Dao, as he observes the world,
 has nothing to which he holds,
 has no place at which he dwells,
 has no action,
 has no partiality.
 Hence, when there are affairs in the world
 none do not spontaneously exhibit form, name, sound, and title.
 Form and name being already set up, sound and title being already established,
 then the traces cannot be escaped, the norm cannot be hidden.

*The issues of the Dao &
 the “rectification of
 names” are linked here.*

- iv The impartial is luminous,
 the fully luminous has accomplishment;
 the fully normed is tranquil,
 the fully tranquil is sagely.
 Those without partiality are wise,
 the fully wise are the standard of the world.
 Balance with the scales of discretion,
 triangulate with the mark of Heaven,
 and when there are affairs in the world
 there must be skillful confirmation.
 In affairs like a straight piece of wood,
 though affairs be numerous like rice kernels in a granary,
 the *dou* and *dan* measures being complete
 and foot and inch measures being laid out,
 then there can be no escape from the sage’s spirit-knowing.
 Hence it is said:
 “The measures being already complete,
 then order by regulating it.”
 Cut off, but again attached,
 passed away but again abiding,
 who knows its spirit-knowing?
 Dead but again living,

*“Balance” & “triangulation” are
 technical terms of the Confucians
 Mencius & Xunzi.*

*This sees Qin standards
 as aids to sagehood.*

*Form and name are the two components that the Legalist version of the “rectification of names” theory requires to be matched.

taking calamity as fortune,
 who knows its pole-limit?*

Turn and seek it in the formless and you will thus know whence are born
 calamity and fortune.

The Dao of responding to transformation is to level evenly and stop.
 When the light and heavy are not balanced, this is called losing the Dao.

- v Heaven and earth have unchanging constants,
 the myriad people have unchanging affairs, *The role of Nature as standard in
 this section resembles pre-Qin
 Naturalism.*
 high and low status have unchanging positions,
 nurturing ministers there is an unchanging Dao,
 administering the people there are unchanging measures.
 The unchanging constants of heaven and earth are
 the four seasons,
 the darkness of the new moon and brightness,
 giving birth and killing,
 softness and hardness.
 The unchanging affairs of the myriad people are: *Note the traditionalism
 of this passage.*
 males farm, females craft.
 The unchanging positions of high and low status are
 the worthy and unworthy do not obstruct one another.
 The unchanging Dao of nurturing ministers is
 in employing the able, do not stray from their strengths.
 The unchanging measures of administering the people are
 eliminate partiality and set up impartiality.
 To change the unchanging and stray from the measures
 is to allow the abnormal to be in control.
 When the norms and the abnormal are set up,
 names are not eliminated.
- vi In all matters whether great or small,
 things spontaneously make their abodes;
 contrariety, accordance, death, life,
 things spontaneously make their names;
 when names and forms are already settled,
 things spontaneously make their norms.
 Hence only one who holds to the Dao can upwardly be illumined about the
 reversals of Heaven;
 medially attain to the half-shares of lord and minister;
 investigate with abundant intensity the ends and beginnings of
 the world of things;
 and not be ruler.
 Hence only after one can be fully plain,
 fully pure,

**The term "pole-limit" denotes any bipolar extreme, such as all-yin or all-yang.

Text II The Sixteen Regularities

The Sixteen Regularities is a text with fifteen sections (too late to add one now!) that includes a great deal of material concerning Huang-di: the “Yellow Emperor” of traditional legend. Of all of the texts, this is the hardest to understand. One of the sections is translated below.

The Five Norms (Section 3)

- i Huang-di asked of Yan Ran saying:
 “I wish to implement the Five Governances:
 wherein should I stop, wherein start?”
 Yan Ran responded:
 “The beginning lies in the person:
 when within there is normed measure
 it will afterwards reach others without.
 Inner and outer intertwining,
 one will be correct in the completion of affairs.”
- This doctrine linking “sageliness within” to “kingliness without” was shared by Confucianism and Daoism, but not Legalism.*
- ii Huang-di said: “I am both correct and tranquil,
 yet my state is becoming more unsettled:
 what shall I do?”
 Yan Ran responded: “When you, the ruler, are substantial within
 the outer will be according to norm;
 \ \ unsettled.
 In your left hand hold the compass;
 in your right hand hold the square:
 what worries of the world will you have?
 Male and female finally together –
 how would this disturb the state?
 When the Five Governances are already employed
 use them to supervise the Five Lights.
 Hold the compass to left and right to await contrary armies.”
- iii Huang-di said: “I do not myself yet know myself: what shall I do?”
 Yan Ran responded: “If you do not yet know yourself,
 then deeply conceal yourself in the abyss to seek out
 internal punishment;
 once internal punishment has been gained,
 you will \ know to bend your person.”
- We see traces of the eremitic values that lay behind pre-Qin Daoist texts.*
- Huang-di said: “I desire to bend my person; how do I bend my person?”
 Yan Ran responded: “Those whose *daos* are the same have the same affairs;
 those with different *daos* have different affairs.
 Now the time of the world being in great strife is arrived:
 can you take care not to engage in strife?”
 Huang-di said: “How does one not engage in strife?”
 Yan Ran responded: “Anger is a matter of the blood *qi*;
- Here we see influence*

strife is the outer skin and fat;
 if anger is not emitted, it collects and forms a tumor;
 later, if one must remove all four,
 how can one's brittle bones engage in strife?"

*of pre-Qin "qi
 philosophies" and
 hygiene cults.*

iv Thereupon, Huang-di bade goodbye to his state grandees and climbed
 to the mountain of Broad Gazing
 and reclined for three years to seek himself.

Shan Cai and Yan Ran then climbed up to alert Huang-di, saying:

"Good enough! Those who engage in strife are inauspicious, but those
 who do not engage in strife also complete no accomplishments –
 how could this not be good enough?"

Thereupon, Huang-di brought out his great axe,
 bestirred his armed soldiers,
 raised himself the drum and baton,
 went to meet Chi You, and captured him.

The Emperor authored a covenant, which said:

"He who reverses righteousness and acts contrary to the times,
 shall be punished as Chi You;
 reversing right and turning one's back on the exalted,
 the law for him shall be to perish and die exhausted."

*These words are fully
 Confucian.*

Text III Quotations

This text consists of a string of aphoristic passages of widely varying lengths, fifty-six in all. A brief selection is translated here.

- i. The Dao has no beginning, but has a responding:
 what has not yet come, be without it;
 what has already come, be like it.
 When a thing is about to come, its form precedes it:
 establish it with its form;
 name it with its name.
 What words describe it?
- ii. The Dao of change: if it does not add it detracts, if it does not
 advance it retreats.
 He who is the leader of change is inauspicious.
- iii. There are three deaths in the world:
 he who in fury does not measure strength dies;
 he whose desires are endless dies;
 he who is few and does not avoid the many dies.
- iv. When two tigers fight, weak dogs control the residue.
- v. All ordering must take yin and yang \ great righteousness:
 Heaven is yang, earth is yin; spring is yang, autumn is yin;
 summer is yang, winter is yin; day is yang, night is yin;
 great states are yang, small states are yin; heavy states are
 yang, light states are yin;
 to have affairs is yang, to have no affairs is yin; those
 who expand are yang, those who bend are yin;
 the ruler is yang, the minister is yin; superiors are yang,
 inferiors are yin;
 male is yang, female is yin; the father is yang, the son is yin;
 the elder brother is yang, the younger brother is yin;
 elder is yang, younger is yin;
 high status is yang, low status is yin; attaining [position] is
 yang, having no means [to position] is yin;
 taking a wife and giving birth to a child is yang, having a
 family death is yin;
 those who regulate others are yang, those who are regulated by
 others are yin;
 the guest is yang, the host is yin; military service is yang,
 corvée labor is yin;
 speech is yang, silence is yin; bestowing is yang, receiving is yin.
 All yang things emulate Heaven;
 Heaven values the norm; straying from the norm is called \ \

☷ sacrifice thereupon reverses.

All yin things emulate the earth:

the gift-power of earth is to be easy and slow,

normed and tranquil;

the code of pliancy is first settled,

it approves of bestowing and does not contend:

these are the measures of earth and the code of the female.

Text IV The Source of the Dao

This final text is a short, coherent essay. Its opening lines are translated here.

At the start of what is eternally prior,
 is the penetrating identity and the great void;
 when void and identity are one,
 eternally they remain one and cease.

Moist and indistinct, as yet without light or darkness;
 spirit-like in subtlety, filling up in circuit,
 essence and tranquility not bright.

Originally not yet having use,
 none in the world of things used it;
 originally without form,
 joining with the nameless.

Heaven could not cover it,
 earth could not carry it;
 small to create the small,
 large to create the large;
 filling all within the Four Seas,
 and embracing all without as well;
 as yin not decaying,
 as yang not burning;
 altogether unchanging,
 it was able to reach things that wriggle and crawl.

Birds gained it and flew,
 fish gained it and swam;
 beasts gained it and ran;
 the world of things gained it and were born;
 the hundred affairs gained it and were complete.

Men all gained it,
 none knew its name;
 men all used it,
 none saw its form.

Its title is the One;
 its dwelling is the void;
 non-action is its plainness;
 harmony is its operation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate the degree to which the different pre-Qin schools of thought influence these Huang-Lao teachings. Are they really “syncretic,” or are the ideas thematically coherent with just a few incidental borrowings?
2. What types of government might result from the adoption of texts such as these as state orthodoxy? How might such governments differ from Confucian or Qin-style Legalist ones?
3. How does the text present the Yellow Emperor so that he serves to exemplify its ideals?

Sources

The texts translated here are based on transcriptions published in *Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書 (vol. 1, Beijing: 1980). Two scholarly translations of the full text have been published. Robin Yates’s *Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huang-Lao, and Yin-Yang in Han China* (N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1997) reads these texts as more cosmological in their principal interests, while Leo S. Chang and Yu Feng, *The Four Political Treatises of the Yellow Emperor* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998) read the text as more politically oriented.