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Chapter 9: The Doctrines and Transformation of the Huang-Lao Tradition

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[DRAFT]

Introduction

Huang-Lao 黃老 Daoism is claimed to have emerged in middle Warring States period and to have remained popular among intellectuals and statesmen into the early Han period, until the reign of Emperor Wu. In the later Han, it is associated with religious beliefs and practices that culminated in the emergence of the Celestial Masters tradition of Daoism. Huang-Lao is commonly understood as a branch of Daoism that applied Daoist doctrines to the socio-political world. Still, there has been no widespread agreement on the precise definition of Huang-Lao. The term is not defined in any of the classical texts, and contemporary scholars in general are quite reluctant to supply a definition of their own. One of the major difficulties with studying Huang-Lao lies in the lack of a definitive or authoritative source text. In order to address this problem, scholars have endeavored to glean a more comprehensive picture of the tradition from relevant historical and philosophical texts that seem to have been influenced by Huang-Lao ideas. SIMA Qian in his *Shiji*, for example, identifies the characteristics, as well as a series of adherents, of the Huang-Lao tradition that he traced back from his father, SIMA Tan, to Warring States masters.¹ It is by tracing the works of these figures and subsequently detecting in them consistent themes that we hope to gain a more comprehensive view of

¹ It is also possible that the claim that there was a long master-disciple tradition is a post-facto assertion designed to assert legitimacy and authority for a contemporary philosophical position. See Van Ess 1993 and also Puett 2001, Chapter 5, for his argument that the *Shiji* was written with a specific political agenda in mind.

Huang-Lao. In this chapter, we will survey the textual sources of Huang-Lao and use them as a guide to our discussion of this tradition's philosophical features.²

It is commonly agreed among scholars that the term “Huang-Lao” is a reference to ideas drawing from the legendary Huangdi 黃帝 (Yellow Emperor) and Laozi 老子. Many scholars are also quick to note that the Huang-Lao tradition is not the mere amalgam of Huangdi's and Laozi's teachings (see Tu 1979: 102 and Csikszentmihalyi 1994: 7-14). Since none of the transmitted Warring States texts, nor any of the excavated documents, mention the names of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi together, it is unlikely that Huangdi and Laozi were intellectually related in any significant way. Besides, the connotations of the “Huang” portion of the term have always been ambiguous. Unlike the “Lao” portion, which has the *Laozi* (or *Daodejing*) as a source of Laozi's thought, there is no defining text for Huangdi. Although a number of pseudonymous books attributed to Huangdi and his ministers are recorded in the “Yiwen zhi” (Record of Literary Works) chapter of the *Hanshu*, these books cover a wide range of intellectual and esoteric traditions, such as “Daoism,” “yin and yang,” “warfare based on physical circumstances,” “astronomy,” “calendrical charts,” “miscellaneous divination,” “medical scriptures,” “bedroom arts,” and “immortality techniques”.³ It could well be the case that no definite central teaching of “Huangdi” ever existed, and therefore the name could have been easily borrowed for diverse purposes. Besides, as Wu Guang aptly notes, not everyone who mentions the name of Huangdi is necessarily a Huang-Lao follower (Wu 1985).

² It should be noted that although such a source text may once have existed, it is possible that, in fact, there has never been one.

³ See Liu Xiaogan's *Laozi gu jin* for a table of Huangdi books (Liu 2006: 367); see also Zhang Weihua 2003: 70-74.

These inconsistencies involving the usages of Huangdi have prompted scholars like GU Jiegang to conclude that Huangdi is simply used as a symbol in the Huang-Lao tradition to facilitate the political propagation of Daoist ideas (Gu 1972).

Such intellectual ambiguities and complexities surrounding Huang-Lao thought have led to concerns at the overstretched use of the term “Huang-Lao.” Did a philosophical school called Huang-Lao, with developed doctrines, disciples, and texts, actually exist? GUO Moruo thinks that Huang-Lao did exist as an identifiable school at the Jixia Academy (Guo 1982a: 155-187). GUO Zhanbo also refers to a “Huang-Lao school” when discussing Huang-Lao thought (Guo 2003). Mark Csikszentmihalyi, however, argues that it is a mistake to assume “a definite phenomenon called Huang-Lao” because such an assumption fails to capture the different dimensions of Huang-Lao writings. For Csikszentmihalyi, Huang-Lao would be more suitably defined as “a complex or group of traditions” that had different dimensions (Csikszentmihalyi 1994: 9, 53). Reinhard Emmerich further observes that the term “Huang-Lao” is used in different senses by different ancient writers, sometimes even within the same text, highlighting again the difficulty with treating Huang-Lao as a coherent philosophical school (Emmerich 1995).⁴

The term “Huang-Lao” first appeared in the Former Han period in SIMA Qian’s *Shiji* (Records of the Historian) around 100 BCE. This was followed by BAN Gu’s *Hanshu* (History of the Former Han), composed around 54-92 CE. These two texts have long been considered the major sources of Huang-Lao thought. Although they provide no definition of Huang-Lao, they outline its doctrines and assign this label to masters who apparently studied them (*Shiji* 63, 74). With regard to the characteristics of Huang-Lao

⁴ The authors are grateful to an anonymous referee for this helpful reference and comment.

thought, a cursory examination of relevant passages shows that the tradition is one that emphasized Daoist ideals such as emptiness, inaction, and softness (*Shiji* 54; *Hanshu* 30). This arguably puts Huang-Lao into the Daoist camp. In the *Shiji*, “Huang-Lao” is apparently used interchangeably with *Daojia* 道家 (school of the Way) and *Dao De jia* 道德家 (school of the Way and Virtue).⁵ Specialists have pointed out that the referent of *Daojia* in the *Shiji* should be the Huang-Lao tradition rather than Laozi and Zhuangzi Daoism (the Lao-Zhuang tradition) to which modern scholarship usually refers. This is so because Huang-Lao may well have been a prominent intellectual and political ideology in the early Han period just prior to the time when the *Shiji* was composed (Hsiao 1979: 552-6). Moreover, since SIMA Tan studied with a Huang-Lao master, it is reasonable to presume that his description of the *Daojia* was informed by his Huang-Lao background.⁶ Hence, the descriptions of *Daojia* in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* have been closely consulted for understanding the features of Huang-Lao thought in many studies.⁷

⁵ As mentioned above, there is some controversy over whether Huang-Lao existed as a “school.” For this reason, we will leave the term “*Daojia*” untranslated in this chapter.

⁶ Scholars have agreed with almost unanimity that the referent of the terms “*Daojia*” or “*Dao de jia*” in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* is Huang-Lao. See, for example, Schwartz 1985: 237-54 and Roth 1991b: 38. HE Qimin notes that the term “Lao-Zhuang” was first used during the Wei and Qin period (He 1967: 103-15). LIU Xiaogan, however, points out that the term “Lao-Zhuang” first appeared in the “*Yaolue* 要略” (Essentials) section of the *Huainanzi* in early Han dynasty (Liu 1987: 299-300 and 2006: 368). For the study of “*Yaolue*”, see Judson Murray 2004.

⁷ While there are good reasons to believe that SIMA Tan’s description of the *Daojia* refers to the Huang-Lao tradition, one should be aware that Sima mentions only “*Daojia*” but never “Huang-Lao *jia*”.

While historians have generally associated Huang-Lao thought with the Daoist camp, the major philosophical figures identified as having studied Huang-Lao are not paradigmatic Daoists. They include SONG Xing 宋鉞, TIAN Pian 田駢, SHEN Dao 慎到, SHEN Buhai 申不害, and HAN Fei 韓非. With the exception of SONG Xing, who is usually considered a Mohist, the rest are renowned for their close associations with the Legalist tradition. If we pay attention to how SIMA Qian and BAN Gu describe Huang-Lao features in terms of a technique of governing, this linkage of Huang-Lao to the Legalists is actually not too surprising. As later discussion will show, it is likely that the Huang-Lao tradition arose a need to apply Laozi's philosophy to political ends during the Warring States period. Although the Huang-Lao thinkers also upheld certain key Daoist concepts such as that of *dao*, *de*, and *wuwei*, their goal is noticeably more concerned with effective governmental administration. For this reason, scholars have almost unanimously stressed the importance of differentiating Huang-Lao from Lao-Zhuang Daoism. Herrlee Creel and Benjamin Schwartz have respectively identified Huang-Lao as "purposive" or "instrumental" Daoism.⁸ REN Jiyu asserts that Huang-Lao is not a continuation of Lao-Zhuang philosophy (Ren 1966: 43). In mainland China, the tendency has been to go so far as to identify Huang-Lao with Legalism rather than Lao-Zhuang Daoism. FENG

⁸ Herrlee Creel understands "purposive" Daoism as the aspect that originates from "the attempt to utilize an essentially mystical doctrine for the furtherment of personal ambitions and political purposes." Although Creel does not explicitly apply the term "purposive" to Huang-Lao, his identification of Huang-Lao as the "purposive" aspect of Daoism is evident in his discussion on *wuwei* in Chapter 4. Creel thinks that "purposive" Daoists were those who developed SHEN Buhai's concept of *wuwei* (Creel 1970: 46-78). See Schwartz's discussion on Huang-Lao as instrumental Daoism in Schwartz 1985: 237 et seq.

Youlan, for example, regards Huang-Lao as a “unification” of Daoism and Legalism (Feng 1982 v.3: 195). The following discussion will bring to light the relationship between Huang-Lao and other strands of thought. Since most of these intellectual associations occurred in the Jixia 稷下 Academy, it is important to have an overview of the historical context wherein the interactions of ideas began.

Historical Context

The conventional view on the origin of Huang-Lao is that this tradition originated in the northeastern state of Qi 齊 in the Warring States period. According to this view, the propagation of Huang-Lao thought probably began with the Tian 田 ruling house. In 379BCE the Tian (originally from the state of Chen) usurped the throne from the native Jiang 姜 house and established a new regime. Having offended the surrounding dukes and lords, the newly installed ruler was keen to shake off his image as a usurper, and he devised a variety of intellectual, religious, and political means to assert his legitimacy. One bronze inscription cast for King Wei of Qi (357-320 BCE) refers to Huangdi as the “ancestor on high” of the royal house of Tian. Since Huangdi was the most celebrated of ancestral icons, a link with an origin of high antiquity may have considerably repaired the damage done to Tian’s reputation by his usurpation. Beyond establishing an ancestral icon, Tian also wanted to establish an academy that would facilitate interstate intellectual

exchange. Hence, the Jixia Academy was founded to attract great minds.⁹ The ruling house particularly favored the thought of Laozi because Qi had long followed a course of governance that emphasized practicality and centralization of power. With regard to practicality, Laozi's concepts of inaction (*wuwei*), quiescence (*jing*), and spontaneity (*ziran*) are easy to apply as administrative concepts.¹⁰ Concerning the Tian need to centralize and solidify their grip on power, the *Laozi* text is often believed to have contained cryptic messages about the art of rulership. As Schwartz puts it, it is sometimes read as "an esoteric handbook of wily statecraft" (Schwartz 1985: 213). Hence, Laozi's thought also served the Tian need for political consolidation. With the expansion of scholarly exchange at the Jixia Academy, the teachings of Huang-Lao spread to different states and became an intellectual vogue of the time. It is no surprise then that all the figures in the *Shiji* said to have Huang-Lao allegiances were in some way associated with the Jixia Academy.¹¹

⁹ For a detailed survey of scholars who visited the Jixia Academy, see Jin 1930. There are also scholarly doubts concerning the history of the Jixia Academy. Nathan Sivin, for example, argued that a Jixia Academy never existed. see Sivin 1995.

¹⁰ Since the nature of present discussion does not require an in-depth examination of the textual terms, we will rely on commonly accepted English translations to facilitate discussion, unless noted otherwise.

¹¹ Another less popular account of the origins of Huang-Lao, that posed by DING Yuanming, says that another branch of Huang-Lao Daoism began back in the 5th-4th century BCE in the southern state of Chu. Ding claims that this was the earlier branch. The main support for this view comes from taking the Huang-Lao silk manuscripts as the earliest Huang-Lao texts, completed around 400 BCE, which is earlier than the bronze inscription cited above, and earlier than the founding of the Jixia Academy in Qi. Besides

Textual Sources and Intellectual Associations

One of the major difficulties in studying Huang-Lao is the lack of a definitive source text for the tradition. But as we have also seen, substantial connections existed between the Huang-Lao tradition and other schools of thought. This opens up the possibility of looking for sources of Huang-Lao philosophy in texts of other traditions. Since the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* mentioned some specifics of Huang-Lao doctrines and the names of masters associated with it, an examination of common themes across related texts will help us more fully understand the distinguishing features of Huang-Lao philosophy.

The excavation of the *Boshu* 帛書 (*Silk Manuscripts*) at Mawangdui in 1973 is an exciting find for scholars.¹² According to the *Hanshu* (“Yiwen zhi”), the long-lost *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 (Four Canons of Huangdi) had four volumes (*juan* 卷). Coincidentally, the Mawangdui manuscripts included “lost texts” written consecutively on a single piece of silk, which also consists of four parts, two of them using the word “canon” (*jing* 經) in their titles: *Jing Fa* 經法 (The Canon: Law), *Jing* 經 (The Canon), *Cheng* 誠 (Designations), and *Daoyuan* 道源 (Dao the Origin) (Yates, 1997). These

the silk manuscripts, sections of the Outer Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* and of the *Guanzi* also seem to form a continuation of Huang-Lao thought.

¹² Since it is disputable whether the *Boshu* texts are the “Four Canons of Huangdi” works mentioned in *Hanshu*, the present discussion simply use the term “Boshu” for purposes of clarity and convenience.

similarities prompted TANG Lan to identify the *Boshu* as the “Four Canons of Huangdi” mentioned in the *Hanshu* (Tang 1975: 7-38).¹³ But many scholars have remained skeptical about this identification. The major criticism was launched by QIU Xigui in 1993. According to Qiu, the name “Huangdi” is mentioned in only one of the four. In addition, the four manuscripts do not correspond with early records of Yellow Emperor books in other texts (Qiu 1993). LIU Xiaogan has also raised concern over how the overtly legalistic tone of the *Boshu* may be reckoned compatible with other features of Huang-Lao thought (Liu 1987). In light of these controversies, we should be cautious and perhaps regard the *Boshu* as one important source instead of the definitive source of the Huang-Lao tradition.¹⁴

Part of the *Guanzi* 管子 has long been recognized as an important source for Huang-Lao ideas. This is primarily because the *Hanshu* identifies SONG Xing 宋鉞 (371-289 BCE) and YIN Wen 尹文 (350-285 BCE) as the key Huang-Lao thinkers at the Jixia Academy.¹⁵ One influential argument expressed by GUO Moruo (KUO Mo-jo 郭沫若) identifies SONG Xing and YIN Wen as the authors of the four core chapters of the *Guanzi*—“Bai xin 白心,” “Nei ye 內業,” “Xinshu shang 心術上,” and “Xinshu xia 心術下.”¹⁶ Recent scholarship has disputed this reading primarily on the grounds that the texts

¹³ See also Leo S. Chang and YU Feng for a tabulation of works relevant to Huangdi in the “Yiwen zhi” chapter of the *Hanshu* (Chang and Feng 1998: 201-4).

¹⁴ Chapter 12 of this volume is a detailed discussion of the *Boshu* or silk Manuscripts.

¹⁵ CHEN Ligui provides a list of studies on the relationship between the *Guanzi*, the Jixia Academy, and Huang-Lao in Chen 1998.

¹⁶ Guo argues that “Bai xin” chapter was written by Yin while the two “Xin shu” chapters and “Nei ye” were written by Song (Guo 1982b). In DU Guoxiang’s analysis of the

are not consistent with the known teachings of Song and Yin.¹⁷ In spite of their disagreement with Guo's account of authorship, most scholars nevertheless believe that authors of a Huang-Lao persuasion wrote a substantial part of the *Guanzi*. FENG Youlan, for instance, understands four key chapters of the *Guanzi* as constituting a "system" of Huang-Lao thought (Feng 1982 vol. 2: 198-99).¹⁸ Feng's claim is further substantiated by recent studies that find a close intellectual compatibility between the *Boshu* and these four chapters of the *Guanzi*.¹⁹ Their common themes and ideas include the practices of ordering the heart/mind (*xin* 心) for ordering a country; the extension of natural Dao to political Dao; emphasis on the superiority of the ruler, law (*fa* 法), and forms and names (*xingming* 刑名); promotion of personal cultivation techniques as governing techniques; amalgamation of the concepts Dao, virtue (*de* 德), principle (*li* 理), and law (*fa*). Not only

influence of Huang-Lao on Xunzi, he also associates Song and Yin with the *Guanzi* (Du 1962). Other scholars who follow Guo's account include LIU Jie, PAN Fu'en and SHI Changdong (Liu 1958: 238-42, and Pan and Shi 1980: 51). LIU Jie even regards these four chapters of the *Guanzi* to be the origin of Daoist thought, composed prior to the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* (Liu 1958: 244, 258).

¹⁷ See the important interpretations of the *Guanzi* advanced by Machida, Rickett, and Roth (Machida 1985, Rickett 1965, and Roth 1999).

¹⁸ Roth also finds it plausible that TIAN Pian was the author of the "Nei ye," who is one of the figures identified in the *Shiji* as having studied Huang-Lao and hence he argues that the "Nei ye" is the earliest representative of the Huang-Lao tradition (Roth 1999: 23-30).

¹⁹ Basing himself on the Huang-Lao *Boshu*, CHEN Ligui investigated the Huang-Lao ideas in the *Guanzi* (Chen 1991: 109-48). See also a tabulation of the parallels between the *Boshu* and the *Guanzi* in Chang and Feng 1998: 208-11.

do these themes run across both the *Boshu* and the *Guanzi*, they also correlate with the basic features of Huang-Lao thought described in the *Shiji*.²⁰

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is another text that contains strands of Huang-Lao thought.

Early in the Qing dynasty, WANG Fuzhi made the observation that the “Tian dao” chapter was composed sometime “between the Qin and the Han by those who studied the methods of Huang-Lao” (Liu 1994: 48). Schwartz claims that the “syncretistic” chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (chs. 12 to 14, parts of chs. 11, 15, and 33, according to Angus Graham’s classification) are Huang-Lao sections (Schwartz 1985: 216). Unfortunately, Schwartz has not provided any reasons for such identification. It is only quite recently that the linkage of the *Zhuangzi* to Huang-Lao thought has been thoroughly investigated by LIU Xiaogan. In a major textual study of the *Zhuangzi*, Liu classifies chapters 12 to 16, 33, and part of 11 as written by the Huang-Lao masters.²¹ According to Liu, the ideas expressed in these chapters are notably different from those in the seven Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*; instead they are consistent with SIMA Tan’s description of the Huang-Lao tradition in the *Shiji* (Liu 1994: 121-34, 1987: 299-317). In light of this textual evidence, it is important to consult the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* when studying Huang-Lao thought.

Legalist texts also supplement our understanding of Huang-Lao. According to the *Shiji*, the leading legalist philosophers—SHEN Buhai 申不害, SHEN Dao 慎到, and HAN

²⁰ For further discussion about *Guanzi*, please see Chapter 10 of this volume.

²¹ For a brief discussion of the thought of these chapters, see part III of Chapter 8 in this volume.

Fei 韓非—were all said to have studied Huang-Lao doctrines (*Shiji* 63, 74).²² The Huang-Lao link with SHEN Buhai is examined in a detailed study conducted by JIN Jiande, who has compared various of Shen’s statements with the *Laozi* and confirmed Sima’s account of Shen (Jin 1962).²³ In more recent literature, scholars have also made note of ideas in the *Shenzi* 申子 that are consistent with political thought found in the *Jing Fa* of the *Boshu* and the four core chapters of the *Guanzi* (Chen 1991: 180-94). With regard to SHEN Dao, the “Tian xia” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* describes him as a Daoist, whereas in the “Yiwen zhi” he is classified as a Legalist. In reconciling these divergent records, FENG Youlan takes the middle ground. According to Feng, SHEN Dao represents the move of Daoist thought toward Legalist thought, a move that characterizes Huang-Lao. Feng therefore regards SHEN Dao as the founder of the Huang-Lao tradition (Feng 1982 v.2: 195). In this regard, CHEN Ligui has conducted detailed analyses of sections in the *Shenzi* 慎子 (SHEN Dao) that conform to Huang-Lao concepts (Chen 1991: 154-180). The *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 is in large part a fusion of three Legalist traditions, that of SHEN Buhai, SHEN Dao, and SHANG Yang. Since SHEN Buhai and SHEN Dao are influenced by

²² Creel believes that the Legalist school arose from two schools of thought, one led by SHEN Buhai and the other by SHANG Yang (Creel 1970: 92-120). KANAYA Osamu divides Legalist thought into two lines. One line was formed by LI Kui, SHANG Yang, and HAN Fei and the other line was formed by SHEN Dao, SHEN Buhai, sections of the *Guanzi* and the *Hanfeizi*, and Huang-Lao (Kanaya 1982). It is worth noting that Robin Yates (2009) doubts, in the light of newly discovered legal texts, that there could have been any influence of HAN Fei or SHEN Buhai’s ideas on the legal system of the state and empire of Qin.

²³ For a complete reconstruction of the fragments of SHEN Buhai’s writings, see Thompson 1970 and Creel 1974 and the relevant information to the bibliography.

Huang-Lao, it is reasonable to presume that the *Hanfeizi* contains resources for Huang-Lao thought. The fact that the *Hanfeizi* comments on and interprets the *Laozi* further reinforces this perceived connection with Huang-Lao.²⁴ Schwartz, and many other scholars, considers these commentaries on the *Laozi* as adhering to the spirit of Huang-Lao (Schwartz 1985: 343). Besides, the *Hanfeizi* also expounds on conceptions of Dao, of personal cultivation techniques, and of law (*fa*), and theorizes the proper relationship between ruler and minister, in a somewhat similar fashion to those found in the *Boshu* and the *Guanzi* (Chen 1998: 194-234). Ideas pertinent to Huang-Lao thought can be found in the “Zhu dao,” “Yang quan,” “Jie Lao,” “Yu Lao,” “Er bing,” and “Nan shi” chapters of the *Hanfeizi*. Recent scholarship, however, has been increasingly mindful of the limitations and problems of understanding Huang-Lao solely in terms of Legalist thought. XIA Zengyou, for example, points out that the content of the “Jie Lao” and “Yu Lao” chapters are unrelated to Huangdi, thereby giving pause to the hasty identification of these two chapters as Huang-Lao sections (Xia 1955: 338). That said, one still has to acknowledge the significance of these Legalist texts in enriching our understanding of Huang-Lao.

Another important source for Huang-Lao thought is the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, which was composed during the Former Han. Since Huang-Lao was the most prominent ideology in the early Han dynasty, much of its teachings were absorbed into the *Huainanzi*.²⁵ Moreover, the *Huainanzi* is an eclectic text, and the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, the *Guanzi*, and the *Hanfeizi* all exerted strong influence on its composition (Roth 1991a: 93-

²⁴ See, for example, “Jie Lao” and “Yu Lao” chapters of the *Hanfeizi*.

²⁵ See Queen 1996 for an insightful discussion of the possible influence of Huang-Lao ideas in DONG Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露.

99; Rickett 1965: 23). Since these texts also contain Huang-Lao doctrines, it is reasonable to expect traces of Huang-Lao thought in the *Huainanzi*, which is known for its syncretism. K.C. Hsiao claims that the *Huainanzi* is “the principal representative of [Daoism] during Han,” an identification that is widely endorsed (Hsiao 1979: 572-7).²⁶ However, Roger Ames and Angus Graham have both raised doubts about its specific linkage to Huang-Lao thought. They identify an anti-authoritarian tendency in the *Huainanzi* that is incompatible with Huang-Lao political percepts.²⁷ John Major, however, does not think this anti-authoritarian tendency is problematic. In Major’s view, Huang-Lao philosophy featured prominently in chapters 3 to 5 is indeed an anti-authoritarian one (Major 1993: 12-14).²⁸ More recently, Sarah Queen argues that the authors of the *Huainanzi* have never affiliated with the Huang-Lao tradition nor interested in defending any of the Huang-Lao doctrines (Queen 2001).

The above list is by no means exhaustive. It only provides a sketch of the major philosophical texts closely associated with Huang-Lao. *Wenzi* 文子, *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, and Parts of *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei*) for

²⁶ Scholars who endorse this view include Roth and Major (Roth 1991a: 606, and Major: 1993: 8).

²⁷ The important “Zhu shu” chapter, for example, mentions only Shennong, the rival of Huangdi who embodies decentralization (Graham 1991). Roger Ames discusses the anti-authoritarian tendency in the *Huainanzi* (Ames 1994).

²⁸ See Chapter 14 of this volume for further discussion of the *Huainanzi*. See also Major, Queen, Meyere, and Roth (2010) for a recently published complete English translation of the *Huainanzi*.

example, are other relevant sources for elements of Huang-Lao thought.²⁹ In what follows, we will examine certain key features of this thought by drawing on these texts.³⁰

Key Concepts of Huang-Lao Philosophy

The *Shiji* contains two passages that describe the Huang-Lao philosophy. One discusses Huang-Lao in relation to other traditions of thought:

The [*Daojia*] makes intelligence quintessential and daimonic, concentrated and unified, every prompting in accord with the formless, in tranquility bringing the myriad things to sufficiency. As for the [technique (*shu* 術)] which is theirs, it is grounded in the overall harmonies of the Yin-Yang school, selects the best from the [Ru] and Mohists, picks out the essentials of the Schools of Names and Law. It shifts with the times and changes in response to other things; in establishing as custom and applying in practice there is nothing to which it is inappropriate; its point is condensed but easy to hold on to, the effort is little but to much effect. (*Shiji* 130; trans. Graham 1989: 378)³¹

Another passage identifies the characteristics of Huang-Lao philosophy:

²⁹ See Chapters 11 and 13 of this volume for discussion of *Wenzi* and *Heguanzi*.

³⁰ Because of the nature of the present essay, we will not be able to discuss why certain chapters are taken as Huang-Lao here. In matters related to classifying the source texts as Huang-Lao, we will refer to previous textual studies.

³¹ Graham translates *jia* as “school.” But as mentioned above, it is unlikely that Huang-Lao existed as a school with developed doctrines, disciples, and texts.

The [*Daojia*] is inaction [*wuwei* 無為], but it also says that nothing is left undone. Its essentials are easy to practice, but its speech is difficult to understand. Its techniques are based on emptiness and non-existence; its usage is based on following and compliance [*yin xun* 因循]; it has no complete tendency, no constant form. Therefore, it is capable of investigating the facts of all things. It does not put itself ahead of things; it does not place itself behind things; that is why it can be the master of things. (*Shiji* 130)

These two passages are extremely important in the sense that not only do they highlight the main features of Huang-Lao thought, they also provide key leads that enable scholars to trace and identify Huang-Lao thought in other source texts.

Wuwei

One of the main concepts highlighted in the passage above is *wuwei* 無為 (inaction). Indeed, the compound expression “*qingjing wuwei* 清靜無為” (quiescence and inaction) is conventionally regarded as one of the hallmarks of Huang-Lao philosophy (Feng 1982 v.3: 10-19; Ren 1966: 37). In the *Shiji*, the *Daojia* (referring to Huang-Lao) is characterized by *wuwei*. It is also said that CAO Can 曹參 used Huang-Lao techniques as the essentials of his governing style; this is described as combining “quiescence” (*qingjing*) and “inaction” (*wuwei*) (*Shiji* 54). Although both Laozi and Huang-Lao advocate *wuwei*, the connotations of the term differ substantially for each. For Laozi, *wuwei* pertains primarily to general principle and self-cultivation. For one to be without *wei* means giving up conventional pursuits and purposeful behaviors and encouraging

more natural responses. Since *wuwei* requires a good understanding of the philosophy of reversal, namely, that all things eventually revert to their opposites, it does not come easily. To properly perceive the natural workings of things, one must be divested of acquired common knowledge, wisdom, and norms. Hence, only sages are capable of mastering this high level of spiritual attainment (Liu, 1999). Although some interpreters have proposed a political understanding of Laozi's *wuwei*, in the text itself, there is minimal explicit discussion about how *wuwei* should be adopted as a means or device for political control.

Compared with the *Laozi*, the discussions of how *wuwei* can be concretely applied in governance are far more extensive and explicit in Huang-Lao. Two significant changes are the politicization of *wuwei* and the integration of *wuwei* and *youwei*. These changes can be readily observed in the "Tian dao" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, which says:

The man above must do nothing [*wuwei*] and be the employer of the empire, the men below must do something [*youwei*] and be employed by the empire; this is the irreplaceable [Dao]. (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham 2001: 261)

Related to this is another passage in the *Zhuangzi*'s "Zai you" chapter, which expresses again the idea that *wuwei* pertains only to the ruler:

To be exalted by Doing Nothing [*wuwei*] is the [Dao] of Heaven, to be tied by doing something is the [Dao] of Man. The sovereign's is the [Dao] of Heaven, the

minister's is the [Dao] of Man. That the [Dao] of Heaven and of Man are far apart is not to be overlooked." (*Zhuangzi* 11; trans. Graham 2001: 265)

A similar understanding is also found in the *Shenzi* (SHEN Dao):

The [Dao] of ruler and ministers is that the ministers labour themselves with tasks while the ruler has nothing to do. The ruler is relaxed and happy while the ministers bear responsibility for tasks. The ministers use all their intelligence and strength to better the things they are doing, in which the ruler takes no part but merely looks upward and [all] is accomplished. (*Shenzi* 3)

As we see from the Huang-Lao accounts of *wuwei*, both the scope and subject of *wuwei* have significantly changed from what we find in the *Laozi*. The idea that features prominently in the Huang-Lao conception is that in governing, the lines of demarcation between ruler and subjects must be clearly drawn. The focus of *wuwei* has shifted from Laozi's general principle and spiritual matters to operational political affairs. In other words, *wuwei* has become a political policy. Moreover, *wuwei* and *youwei*, two opposite normative concepts in the *Laozi*, are no longer oppositional in Huang-Lao thought. Instead, *wuwei* pertains to the ruler while *youwei* pertains to the ruled. It is not only acceptable but even necessary for the ministers to be *youwei* because the ruler needs the labor of these "vassals" to remain idle himself and observe the unfolding of things. In this sense, political *wuwei* is complemented or even made possible by *youwei*.

Fa and Xingming

In light of the Huang-Lao understanding of Dao, we can now examine the distinctive usage of *fa* 法 (law) in the Huang-Lao tradition. *Fa* is also the cardinal concept in Legalist thought, but a sharp distinction must be drawn between the two traditions' different conceptions of *fa*.³² The very opening of “Dao *fa*” treatise in the *Jing Fa* writes:

It is out of Dao that [*fa*] comes into being. These [*fa*], prescribed according to the calculus of gains and losses, are yardsticks to measure and to distinguish what is correct from what is incorrect. Therefore, he who has mastered Dao formulates [*fa*] but dares not violate them. Once the [*fa*] have been formulated, he dares not ignore them. [Therefore,] only after one is able to keep oneself (conscientiously) within the bounds of [*fa*], will one see and know (things) All-under-Heaven without being misled. (*Jing Fa* 1; trans. Chang and Feng 1998: 100)

The idea that “*Dao* gives birth to (*sheng* 生) *fa*” is what significantly differentiates Huang-Lao *fa* from Legalist *fa*. Tu Weiming published an influential article not long after the excavation of the *Boshu* and made the critical observation that Huang-Lao thought in the *Boshu* is not legalistic (Tu 1979: 104). According to Tu, while Legalist *fa* is concerned only with the imposition with positive law, Huang-Lao *fa* demands from the ruler an understanding of Dao. Randall Peerenboom further strengthens this argument.

³² It is controversial as to whether a Legalist “school” actually existed in the Warring States period. We will not deal with that problem here, but instead use the term “legalism” to refer to legalistic ideas in general.

Based on theories of law, Peerenboom contrasts Huang-Lao *fa* with the Legalists' positive law and argues that the teachings of the *Boshu* support natural law (Peerenboom 1990). In other words, Huang-Lao *fa* cannot be the arbitrary rule of men or any law that rules. Instead, it has to be grounded in a moral foundation—*Dao*.³³ John Major finds further support for this legal naturalism reading in *Huainanzi* 3-5, which express the idea that human activities are determined by cosmological principles (Major 1993: 11). Echoes of this view can also be found in the *Guanzi*, which says:

Affairs are supervised by [*fa*]. [*Fa* is] derived from authority [*quan*] and authority is derived from the [*Dao*].” (*Guanzi* 36; trans. Rickett 1965: 175)

Hanfeizi 29 also shows *fa* as conforming to *Dao*:

If in accordance with [*Dao*, *fa*] is successfully enforced, the superior man will rejoice and the great culprit will give way. (*Hanfeizi* 29; trans. Liao 1959, vol.1: 280)

Common across these texts is the idea that *fa* is grounded in *Dao*. *Dao* is the ultimate source for the legitimacy and execution of *fa*. For this reason, the ruler has no prerogative

³³ The main difference between positivists and naturalists are their view on the connection between law and morality. The former claims that there is no necessary connection between law and morality but the latter argues that there is. We should be mindful that this distinction is drawn from the Western tradition and therefore it might have limitations for explaining early Chinese philosophical concepts.

to change the law. It is said in the *Guanzi* that the ruler has to first observe the law himself:

...the enlightened prince, knowing the people must take the superior as their heart, establishes laws [*fa*] for his own good order and institutes ceremonies for his own rectification. (*Guanzi* 16; trans. Rickett 1965: 102)

The idea that a ruler is subject to *fa* and therefore bound by it is distinctive in Huang-Lao. This substantially differentiates Huang-Lao *fa* from San Jin Qin legalism. In the latter, a ruler was not regarded as bound by *fa* and was therefore beyond its control.

Any discussion of the Huang-Lao concept *fa* is not complete without mentioning its correlated concept, *xingming* (forms and names). In the *Boshu*, it is said that the content of *fa* is *xingming*. The character *xing*^a 刑, when considered in isolation, is frequently rendered as “punishments” or “penal law” in English. Due to this notion of punishment in *xing*^a, *xingming* is sometimes taken to mean criminal law or punishments (Giles 1912: 577). But it should be noted that, in classical Chinese, *xing*^a is synonymous and used interchangeably with its homonym *xing*^b 形, which means “form” or “shape”. When paired with *ming*, *xing* is usually used in the second sense. The “Tian dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, for instance, explicitly uses the character “*xing*^b” instead of “*xing*^a” when it talks about *xingming*. Creel carefully examines the usages of “*xingming*” during the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods and concludes that *xingming* should be most appropriately translated as “official title and the performance which is the real manifestation of what it implies” (Creel 1970: 84). He points out that the term is first

used meaningfully by SHEN Buhai to denote a technique of bureaucratic management. In this light, the emphasis of *xingming* is not on punishments but on the correspondence between job title and actual performance. If the title is well defined, the correct or desired performance of the minister ensues and hence, there will be no need for a ruler to actively take part in governance. When considering Creel's argument one should note that the concept he attributed to SHEN Buhai does not actually occur in any of the surviving *Shenzi* fragments; furthermore, his argument was made before the discovery of the *Boshu*. In the *Boshu* the emphasis of *xingming* is on Dao as the source of authority and justification for proper definitions of job titles. Just as *fa* is grounded in Dao, so is *xingming*: It is said in the *Jing Fa* that:

The right way to understand all these is to remain in a state of [vacuity,] formlessness and non-being. Only if one remains in such a state, may he thereby know that (all things) necessarily possess their forms and names as soon as they come into existence, even though they are as small as autumn down. As soon as forms and names are established, the distinction between black and white becomes manifest...there will be no way to escape from them without a trace or to hide from regulation...[all things] will correct themselves. (*Jing Fa* 1; trans. Chang and Feng 1998, modified: 101-4)

As Robin Yates points out, this passage shows that the forms and names of all things emanate from Dao. In other words, they cannot be issued as arbitrary, authoritative commands. And to be able to categorize these forms and shapes and institutionalize

xingming, the ruler himself has to be in Dao (Yates 1997: 24). For Yates, *xingming* has to do with ontology, not with the bureaucratic procedure Creel asserts. The connection between Dao and *xingming* is also highlighted in the “Tian dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*,

Therefore, when the book says “There is [form (*xing*)], there is name (*ming*),” though [*xingming*] did not exist among the men of old; they are not what they put first. When the men of old expounded the great [Dao], at the fifth of the stages [*xingming*] deserved a mention, by the ninth it was time to talk about reward and punishment. (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham 2001, modified: 262)

In view of Huang-Lao concepts of *fa* and *xingming*, we can now better understand what it meant for the ruler to be *wuwei*. If the ruler has discerned the pattern (*li*) of Dao, he will be able to assign the proper names and roles to his subjects accordingly. Subsequently, the subjects will carry out all of their tasks orderly and leave nothing undone for the ruler (*Zhuangzi* 12). The implication of this is that the ruler needs to have a good understanding of Dao before he can introduce *fa* and *xingming* and thus manifest *wuwei*.

Dao

The concept of Dao 道 (The Way) is the anchor of Laozi’s philosophy—and indeed, of the different strands of thought classified as *Daojia* in the *Shiji*. According to Laozi’s descriptions, Dao is the origin of the world but it is not part of the world. It is beyond sensible representation and conceptual representation, an undifferentiated state that unifies all oppositions but transcends all things (*Laozi* ch. 14, 21, 25, 34, 39, 39, 42). For

the Huang-Lao, Dao also has the characteristic of being vacuous, spontaneous, and all-encompassing. Nonetheless, it does not transcend the natural world; it is still the origin of life;. The *Daoyuan* section of the *Boshu* describes Dao as “*wu* 無 (non-existing)” and “*xu* 虛 (empty, vacuous)” but also “*shishi mengmeng* 濕濕夢夢 (misty and blurred).”³⁴ The “Ming li” treatise of the *Jing Fa* states:

There is a thing which comes into...[Dao] is based on earth and at the same time transcends heaven. Yet no one has ever seen its form. Everything between heaven and earth is entirely filled with [Dao]. Yet no one knows its name. (*Jing Fa* 9; trans. Chang and Feng 1998: 141)

The expression of metaphysical realism is evident—Dao is no longer the unfathomable and undifferentiating state but has become concretized as some tangible substance in the world. Although Dao for Huang-Lao is also held to be the highest state of existence and also regarded as beyond sensible representation, the realm it covers has clearly shifted from that which is beyond the world to what is in the world. In “Xin shu I” of the *Guanzi*, Dao is defined as that which “lies between Heaven and earth” and “fills the world and exists everywhere people are ...and all around fills the nine regions” (*Guanzi* ch.49; trans. Rickett 1965: 162, 173). This shows that although Dao is still all-encompassing, it has also become part of the natural world in Huang-Lao thought. It is not regarded as

³⁴ Yates’s translation of *shi* as “misty” is more capable of capturing the concreteness and metaphysical realism of Dao in Huang-Lao than Chang’s and Feng’s translation (Yates trans. 1997: 173).

mysterious, but as embodying a certain order and hierarchy. In the “Tian dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, it is said that Dao “observes the proper placement of age and seniority” (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham: 261). Due to this concretization, Dao and practical daily-life matters are inevitably intimately connected. For this reason, the Huang-Lao Dao is usually discussed in terms of “the *dao* of the emperor,” the *dao* of the sage,” the *dao* to make proper use of people” in Huang-Lao texts (see for example, *Zhuangzi* 12, 13).

Another significant point of difference is the superiority of Heaven over Dao. According to LIU Xiaogan’s analysis of the Huang-Lao chapters in the *Zhuangzi*, Heaven seems to have taken a superior position to Dao in the Huang-Lao chapters. There we find the following statements:

De [is completed] in Dao, and Dao in Heaven. (*Zhuangzi* 12, author’s trans.)

And,

The power [*de*] which is in the emperor or king has heaven and earth for its ancestors, [Dao] and [*de*] as its masters, Doing Nothing [*wuwei*] as its norm.

(*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham 2001, modified: 260)

The compelling idea is that Heaven, instead of Dao, is the progenitor. Here, Dao seems to be what connects Heaven and the human. This further shows that Dao, in Huang-Lao thought, is not an absolute existence independent of Heaven and Earth. The implication of the superiority of Heaven is that it accentuates the importance of humans being in

harmony or resonating with Heaven. This is reflected in the new emphasis on the concept of yin-yang. As earlier discussed, SIMA Tan describes the teachings of Huang-Lao tradition as “grounded in the overall harmonies of the Yin-Yang school.” In the *Boshu* there are discussions about distinctions between opposites, such as Heaven and Earth, male and female, the four seasons, ruler and ministers, big and small, in terms of yin and yang.³⁵ In the *Guanzi*, discussions of the Five Phases touch on an array of different topics, ranging from seasonal change, political and military strategies, to mundane everyday affairs. When it comes to the *Huainanzi*, discussions of yin-yang have become even more elaborate and refined. *Huainanzi* 5, for example, gives vivid illustrations of the need for rulers to make political decisions in conformity to actual external circumstances.

Because of its conception of Dao as a concretized lived Dao, the focus of Huang-Lao philosophy is on the practical realm. Since Dao, Heaven, and humanity are seen as a unity, the political blueprint of Huang-Lao must be one that encourages compliance with Dao and correspondence between Heaven and humanity. This is reflected in the concept of *shu*.

Shu

Shu is another important concept in Huang-Lao thought. Ames translates *shu* as “techniques of rulership” (Ames 1994: 10). Although this term is yet another cardinal Legalist concept, its connotation and application is very different in Huang-Lao tradition. As we saw earlier, SIMA Tan described the teachings of the *Daojia* as a kind of *shu*. In

³⁵ Robin Yates brings to light the influence of the Yin-Yang school on the development of Huang-Lao thought (Yates 1997: 10-16).

the *Shiji*, it is also said that SHEN Dao and TIAN Bian studied “the techniques (*shu*) of *Dao* and *de*” in the Huang-Lao tradition (*Shiji* 74). In the *Hanshu* we find reference to Huang-Lao teachings as *shu* expressed in even stronger terms. According to BAN Gu, the teachings of the *Daojia* are “techniques (*shu*) of the ruler who faces South,” a expression that usually bears a rather derogatory connotation and refers to techniques that disregard moral concerns and aim only at controlling or winning over adversaries (*Hanshu* 30).³⁶ In the *Boshu*, there are also explicit endorsements of *wang shu* 王術 (techniques of the king).³⁷ It is against this background that some scholars think that Huang-Lao teaching was not concerned with personal cultivation and therefore link it definitely with the Legalist tradition.³⁸

Even so, there are good reasons to think there is more to Huang-Lao thought than mere political technique. The four chapters of *Guanzi*, for example, clearly take clarity, orderliness, impartiality, and fairness to be political ideals, rather than gaining power or scheming.

When we look more closely at how the *shu* of Huang-Lao is understood in the *Shiji*, we find that it is understood in terms of timeliness and compliance:

As for the [technique (*shu*)] which is theirs...it shifts with the times and changes in response to other things. (*Shiji* 130; trans. Graham 1989: 378)

³⁶ See also Leo S. Chang and YU Feng for a more detailed discussion on “techniques of the ruler who faces South” (Chang and Feng 1998: 22).

³⁷ “Da fen” chapter of *Jing Fa*, for instance, discusses *wang shu* extensively.

³⁸ GUO Moruo even called the Daoist *shu* of Huang-Lao a “big devil” (Guo 1982a: 187).

Its techniques are based on emptiness and non-existence; its usage is based on following and compliance [*yin xun* 因循]. (*Shiji* 130)

In both passages, *shu* is defined in terms of complying (*yin*) with a given context.³⁹

Crucial to our understanding of Huang-Lao's *shu*, then, is the idea of being attentive to and complying with changing external circumstances. This is underscored by a passage that discusses the difference between boat and cart in "Tian yun" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

On water it is convenient to travel by boat, on dry land in a carriage; if you were to try to push a boat on land because it goes so well on water, you could last out the age without travelling an inch... At the present day, to have an urge to get the institutions of Chou running in Lu is like pushing a boat on dry land, there is no result for all your labour, you're certain to bring disaster on yourself. He has never known about the turns which have no fixed direction, about being unrestricted in responding to things. (*Zhuangzi* 14; trans. Graham 2001: 192)

We further find in the *Huainanzi* that *wuwei* is defined in terms of (*yin*):

Wuwei means that one should take no action ahead of things; what the so-called "nothing is left undone" means is that one should take action in a way that complies with (*yin*) what is done by things. (*Huainanzi* 14)

³⁹ Timeliness (*shi* 時) and compliance (*yin* 因) are two important concepts in the *Guanzi* and the *Shenzi*.

The connection between *shu* and *wuwei* illustrates the outcome of complying with external circumstances. Since these circumstances are beyond one's control, one should comply in the most optimal way so as to maximize the situation for oneself, which also means that futile efforts will be minimized. This explains why *wei*, in the *Huainanzi*, is taken to only refer to actions that are contrary to nature, such as irrigating a mountain from a lowland river. Actions that require minimal effort, such as taking a boat on water or an adapted cart across the desert, are called *wuwei* because they are in compliance with the nature of things (*Huainanzi* 19).

What significantly sets Huang-Lao thought apart from the Legalist is its justification of *shu*. The emphasis of the Legalist *shu* is on power acquisition and political manipulation. The core of the Huang-Lao concept of *shu*, on the other hand, is grounded in Dao, which determines the circumstances from which *shu* is derived. This is so because Dao possesses certain regularities. In the "Tian di" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, it is said Dao is what makes distinctions possible:

Use [Dao] to examine words, and names throughout the empire will be correct;
use [Dao] to examine portions, and the duties of ruler and minister will be clear;
use [Dao] to examine abilities, and the offices of the empire will be ordered; use
[Dao] to examine no matter what, and the responses of the myriad things will be
at your disposal. (*Zhuangzi* 12; trans. Graham 2001: 269)

Since Dao can be a reference for making distinctions, it must have a certain order or regularity. The Huang-Lao concept of *shu* underscores this order in Dao. For one to comply with the circumstances of nature, one must first acquire a comprehensive understanding of Dao. In this sense, the Huang-Lao *shu* and the Legalist *shu* can be differentiated in two ways. The first difference is straightforward: the Huang-Lao *shu* has *Dao* as the basis of its validation. The second is more implicit. From the preceding discussion, we see how one cannot arbitrarily carry out just any *shu* but needs to act in accordance with Dao. Achieving this condition depends on one's penetrating insight into Dao, which is to be achieved through personal cultivation, an element that is passed over by the Legalists.

Personal Cultivation

Two concepts that epitomize the Huang-Lao conception of personal cultivation are *xu* 虛 (emptiness, vacuity) and *jing* 靜 (stillness, quiescence). As a noun, *xu* refers to the state of being empty or vacuous; as a verb, it refers to the act of emptying oneself of certain things. *Jing* denotes a state of stillness when used as a noun and to the act of stilling disturbances as a verb. The states of *xu* and *jing* are desirable for Huang-Lao thinkers because it is in these conditions that one may gain penetrating insights into Dao. Just as water reflects things when it is still and clear, a heart/mind that is still and free of impurities functions as “the reflector of heaven and earth, the mirror of myriad things” (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham 2001: 259). Without this comprehensive understanding of things, a ruler will not be able to discern the patterns of Dao and subsequently assign the proper tasks. Hence, the embodiment of *wuwei* comes through the practice of *xu* and *jing*:

Emptiness [*xu*] and stillness [*jing*]... [and] doing nothing [*wuwei*], are the even levels of heaven and earth, the utmost reach of [Dao] and the Power [*de*]; therefore emperor, king or sage finds rest in them. Emptying [*xu*] he is still [*jing*], in stillness he is moved, and when he moves he succeeds. In stillness he does nothing [*wuwei*]; and if he does nothing, those charged with affairs are put to the test. (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham 2001: 259).

The *Guanzi* is a major source for Huang-Lao concepts of personal cultivation. Harold Roth observes that the vital essence (*jing* 精), which is a concentrated form of vital energies (*qi* 氣), is understood as an aspect of Dao in the “Nei ye” chapter of the *Guanzi*.⁴⁰ The filling of vital essence in one’s heart/mind indicates the obtainment of Dao (*Guanzi* 49). But if the heart/mind is disturbed or full of impurities, the vital essence will leave the mind. In order to provide “a lodging place for the vital essence,” the heart/mind needs to be tranquil and spacious (*Guanzi* 49; trans. Roth 1991a: 614). In order for the heart/mind to be undisturbed (*jing*), one needs to first empty (*xu*) the impurities in the heart/mind. *Xu*, in this sense, is the process of ridding the heart/mind of desires and prejudices so as to make room for the vital energies to move in it. Eventually, the vital essence will concentrate to a point that gives rise to an enlightened knowledge of Dao. It

⁴⁰ Roth conducted a detailed analysis of the psychological component in early Daoistic conceptions of self-cultivation in thought. For Roth, early Daoistic thought should be those of Huang-Lao instead of Lao-Zhuang. Roth first examines the psychological basis of self-cultivation in the “Nei ye” of the *Guanzi* and moves on to examine the extension of self-cultivation to the political in the two “Xin shu” chapters and the *Huainanzi* (Roth 1991a). See also a discussion on SONG Xing’s emphasis on inner equanimity in Schwartz 1985: 237- 42.

is by this enlightened knowledge that appropriate responses to external circumstances (*shu*) can be made (*Guanzi* 49). Schwartz succinctly summarizes this cultivation process as follows:

Here we have something that might be called a mystical “cosmorphism” in which a finite human being comes to embody the essence of nonbeing and is able to use his gnosis to establish the [Dao-*shu*], “the methods of the *dao*,” which control the human world (Schwartz 1985: 249).

If we bracket Schwartz’s usages of metaphysical terms, the central idea is that the connection between humans and Dao is integral to Huang-Lao thought. Not only should human affairs correspond to Dao, they are actually grounded in Dao.⁴¹

The importance of personal cultivation is also reflected in the emphasis on ethical attributes for the Huang-Lao thinkers. In the Huang-Lao chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, matters of governance are frequently discussed alongside Confucian virtues (*Zhuangzi* 12, 15). The “Tian dao” chapter, for example, says:

Therefore the men of old who made clear the great [Dao] first made Heaven clear, and the [Dao] and the Power were next: and when the [Dao] and Power were clear, Goodwill [*ren*] and Duty [*yi*] were next...portions and responsibilities were next...forms and names [*xingming*] were next... putting the suitable man in

⁴¹ Similar ideas about the association between personal cultivation and an understanding of Dao is also found in the *Huainanzi*. As Michael Puett has argued, the “Jingshen xun” chapter of the *Huainanzi* identifies a cultivated person as someone who is in tune with natural patterns (Puett, 2004).

charge was next, inquiry and inspection were next...judging right or wrong was next, and when judging right or wrong was clear, reward and punishment [*shang-fa*] were next. (*Zhuangzi* 13; trans. Graham, 2001: 261-62)

Interestingly, we see the two paramount Confucian ethical attributes *ren* and *yi* in the above passage. This demonstrates how Huang-Lao thinkers regarded *xingming* and rewards and punishments should be derived from certain ethical attributes. This is also evident in the *Guanzi*, there are notable attempts to ground *fa* in Confucian ethical attributes. Rites (*li* 禮), propriety (*yi* 義), uprightness (*lian* 廉), and disgrace (*chi* 恥) are identified as the “four safeguards” of a state.⁴² According to “Xin shu Part I”, *li* is the guided expression of appropriate feelings, *yi* is appropriateness, *fa* is the last resort to reinforce rules.⁴³ It is clear that, for Huang-Lao thinkers, legal measures should only be introduced by those who have ethical attributes.

Let us now revisit the claim that Huang-Lao philosophy is about operational politics. At first glance, the Huang-Lao concepts *wuwei*, *fa*, *xing*, might suggest that Huang-Lao philosophy is only concerned about political regulation but not personal cultivation. This speculation is not entirely far-fetched because there is an obvious increase in the discussions of operational politics in Huang-Lao literature. In the *Laozi*,

⁴² Compare the discussion on *si wei* (four safeguards) in *Guanzi* 1 with, for example, *Analects* 1.13 and 17.16.

⁴³ “The rules for ascending or descending to [the hall], of bowing and yielding [to others], of having degrees of honored and lowly, and the distinctions of near and distant kin, we call [*li*]...Relations between prince and minister, father and son, and man and man we call [*yi*]... [*fa*] is the means by which uniformity is produced so men will have to act as they should” (*Guanzi* 36; trans. Rickett 1965: 175).

concepts such as *wuwei*, *ziran* (spontaneity), *xu* (emptiness, vacuity), *jing* (quiescence, purity) are often discussed in terms of regulating one's own body. There is no assertion in the *Laozi* that the goal is to triumph over others; but in the *Boshu*, these concepts are discussed in terms of regulating government with no mention of nurturing the individual. For instance, in the "Shun dao" (Following Dao) treatise of *Jing* we find the reason one preserves the soft is to wait for the extremity of male that may then be taken advantage of. In the "Ci xiong" treatise, it is said that: "gains garnered through masculine conduct should not be considered good fortune, and the losses suffered due to feminine conduct should result in future rewards."⁴⁴ This textual evidence seems to suggest that the concepts of "softness" or "femininity" are transformed in Huang-Lao thought into a technique for controlling or winning over others.

Nonetheless, as the above analysis shows, Dao is the ultimate justification for all of these concepts in Huang-Lao tradition. Its practical aspect not only requires one to acknowledge this authority of Dao, it also requires the ruler to internalize and apply Dao in practice. For this reason, self-cultivation is also indispensable in the Huang-Lao tradition.

Conclusion

We have provided here a cursory examination of Huang-Lao thought and reflected on its syncretic nature. We have seen how key concepts in Daoism, Legalism, and Confucianism remerge in the Huang-Lao tradition with different meanings and implications. *Wuwei*, being a major Daoist concept, has gone through substantial

⁴⁴ "Ci xiong (Male and Female)" of *Jing*; trans. Chang and Feng 1998: 104.

renovations. Although *wuwei* pertains only to the ruler, it is only possible with an understanding of Dao. This is so because the Huang-Lao Dao is a concretized Dao that embodies order and hierarchy. To perceive the pattern(s) of Dao, one has to first cultivate the heart/mind to be *xu* (empty, vacuous) and *jing* (still, quiet). This means that the seemingly Legalist concepts *shu* (technique), *fa* (law), and *xingming* (forms and names) are all intimately connected with personal cultivation and possession of Confucian ethical attributes—*ren* and *yi*. In this light, the Huang-Lao tradition can be viewed as having incorporated elements from different strands of thought and developed a system of thought with its own distinctive features. Although there remain many controversies and uncertainties surrounding the Huang-Lao tradition, we hope to have at least sketched out the major issues into which future research can extend its investigations. These issues are critical to our understanding not only of the philosophy of Huang-Lao but also of Daoism and the development of early Chinese thought in general.

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