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The *Laozi* and the Cosmogonic Turn in Classical Chinese Philosophy
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This is a draft of the article that is forthcoming in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. It may contain some differences from the final version, maybe even some errors.

In the past several decades, our understanding of the *Laozi* has been revolutionized by the discovery of new textual materials. While research has focused on relationships among the various manuscript copies of the *Laozi*, the discovery of other cosmogonic texts dated to the late fourth century BCE indicates that the *Laozi* was not as unique as it once seemed. So far, three relevant texts have been published. One of these texts is known as the *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水 (Great One Generates Water) [TYSS].¹ It was found with bundle C of the Guodian *Laozi* materials, showing that it existed within the same milieu (whatever that milieu may have been). The other two texts are unprovenanced, so their precise date and location are unknown. Based on similarities with the Guodian bamboo strips, there is a consensus that they are from roughly the same period and place.² Both were purchased by the Shanghai Museum in 1994. The *Heng xian* 恆先 (Constancy First) [HX] was first edited by Li Ling 李零 and published in volume III (Ma Chengyuan

¹ The Guodian texts were published in Jingmenshi Bowuguan 1998. Unless otherwise noted, I follow the reconstruction of the texts in Cook 2012. Throughout this essay, excavated bamboo texts are cited by strip number. *Laozi* passages are cited by bundle (A, B, or C) and strip number. All translations are my own.

² For a thorough discussion of the provenance of the texts, see Richter 2013, 21-24.

2004).³ The *Fanwu liuxing* 凡物流形 (All Things Flow into Form) [FWLX] was edited by Cao Jinyan 曹錦炎 and published in volume VII (Ma Chengyuan 2008).⁴

Taken together, these texts show a radical shift in philosophical orientation occurring by the late 4th century BCE. The goal of this paper is to analyze the various elements of that shift, relying only on materials that were buried before (approximately) 300 BCE. That is, I use the three texts mentioned above along with the *Laozi* bamboo strips found at Guodian (which include materials from 31 chapters of the received text). My primary goal is to highlight the diversity of cosmogonic views in the late fourth century BCE, rather than assimilating those views into either the *Laozi* or a generalized “Daoist” position.⁵ To that end, I do not read these four texts together as much as side-by-side, since using one to interpret the others would beg the question in favor of their similarity.⁶ In this approach, I follow Matthias Richter’s methodological strategy of ranking internal criteria over external criteria.⁷ For the same reason, I have provisionally set aside other materials that might assist in interpreting the excavated texts. I do not address received texts that may date to this same time period and same shift (such as the

³ Unless otherwise noted, I follow the reconstruction of the text in Ji Xusheng 2005. For an English translation, see Brindley et al. 2013.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, I follow the reconstruction of the text in Gu Shikao 顧史考 [Scott Cook] 2009a and 2009b.

⁵ On this point, this essay aligns with but goes beyond the recent work of Thomas Michael 2005 and Wang Zhongjiang 2015. Michael notes diversity in early cosmogonic views and he does not assimilate TYSS into the philosophy of the *Laozi*, but he ultimately reads all of this diversity as expressing or pointing toward a coherent and unified position he calls “early Daoist cosmogony.” Wang discusses the same excavated texts considered here and he sometimes takes their differences seriously, but he interprets that diversity as derivative of the unified position of the *Laozi*. As he says of HX: “it inherits the overall thrust of the *Laozi*, yet it also develops its thought, proposing unique concepts that are yet based on Laozi . . .” (Wang 2015, 61).

⁶ Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide a systematic, detailed account of each text and to compare and contrast them in the scope of one paper. For a fuller account of my interpretation of HX, see Perkins 2013. For an account of FWLX and its relations with the *Laozi*, see Perkins 2015. For a more detailed discussion of each of the texts, see Wang 2015.

⁷ Richter writes: “If we hope to learn something new about the past, we need to allow the new sources to speak for themselves and only then relate the information they yield to our previous knowledge” (Richter 2013, 70).

remainder of the *Laozi*, some chapters of the *Guanzi*, or some strata of the *Zhouyi*) nor do I rely on later cosmogonic texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Huainanzi*, or the Mawangdui texts taken as representing Huang-Lao thought. I also refrain from appealing to the sociological conditions around these texts or their users. The reason for these limits is not so much based on priority of evidence but the fact that all of these sources of evidence are themselves deeply uncertain and radically underdetermined. Even if we could come up with a conclusive date of origin for the texts that might be contemporaneous with the excavated materials, they have surely been modified over millennia of transmission and we have little ability to determine what is original and what might have been added. As for later cosmogonic texts, we cannot even be sure if they represent a process of diversification from a single source or of consolidation from multiple sources. Finally, we know almost nothing about the users of the texts or the reasons why they were produced. To point out the limits of these sources is not to deny that they must be considered in the process of interpreting the excavated texts, but – and this is the crucial point – how we interpret the excavated texts is also a factor in how we interpret these other sources of evidence. Manuscripts known to have existed at the end of the fourth century BCE are a crucial resource for determining the dating and transmission of texts traditionally seen as earlier or contemporaneous. How we sort out the development of cosmogonic thought in the *Zhuangzi* or in Huang-Lao depends on the state of earlier cosmogonic debates, and these excavated texts are the least unreliable evidence for that. Finally, one key element in grasping the sociological context of these texts is how we understand what they say. Beginning by reading each excavated text on its own does escape this hermeneutic circle but it allows us to enter it from a different starting point.

The four texts differ from each other to such a degree that they cannot be taken as representing a single philosophy or even a common school of thought. The most obvious divergence is that each text uses a different term for the ultimate. The “great one” (*taiyi* 太一) is used only in TYSS. The “one” (*yi* 一) appears only in FWLX, although it also appears in five passages of the *Laozi* that are absent in the Guodian materials. Only HX labels the origin as “constancy” (*heng* 恆). The Guodian *Laozi* materials primarily use *dao* 道, the way, but one passage says that all things ultimately arise from *wu* 無, non-being. The differences are not just in terms, though, since each text gives a different number and arrangement of stages by which the concrete world arises. Another indication of the distance between the texts appears in the ways they use concepts that later became fundamental for Chinese cosmological thinking. For example, *qi* 氣, vital energy, appears in each text, but only HX explicitly presents a cosmology in which all things are formed from *qi*. *Qi* exists before there are things (strips 1-2), and heaven and earth are analyzed as either clear or turbid *qi* (4). In contrast, TYSS explains heaven as *qi* but earth as soil, *tu* 土 (10). *Qi* is not the fundamental stuff of the world but merely one of several elements.⁸ *Yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 appear in FWLX (2) and in TYSS (1-2), but in the latter they are produced after the pairs of heaven and earth and the numinous and luminescent (*shenming* 神明). FWLX gives some prominence to groupings of five, which may link to

⁸ I follow Scott Cook (Cook 2012, Vol. I, 323-354) and the majority of scholars in taking these lines as forming a single text that is TYSS. The most thorough argument for this position is Meyer 2012, 209-226. For an alternate view, see Allan 2003.

the theory of five phases, but the number five plays no role in the other texts.⁹ Only the Guodian *Laozi* materials mention the role of *de* 德 (potency/virtue).¹⁰

These differences in basic terms and concepts indicate that each text represents a distinct position, but their commonalities are significant enough that they could not have existed in isolation. Perhaps the best way to capture this mix of similarity and difference is to take them as representing a “turn” toward cosmogonic thinking. A “turn” can encompass diverse positions (as the “linguistic turn” includes both Heidegger and Russell). It also suggests a fundamental shift in the philosophical terrain. While questions of cosmogony first appear from within the particular configuration of concerns described below, they ultimately become a central issue for Chinese philosophers of any orientation. This paper lays out the basic features of this “cosmogonic turn.” The first section examines the commonalities between the various cosmogonies. The second section places this interest in cosmogony in the context of other distinctive concerns that the texts share, turning toward the implications of the cosmogonies for human action. The final section will examine one of the fundamental points on which the texts disagree, shedding some light on the issues around which cosmogonic debates unfolded.

I. Cosmogonies

The FWLX begins:

Regarding things flowing into form, what do they attain to become complete?

In flowing into form and completing their bodies, what do they attain to not die?

Once they are completed, once they are born, how do they look around and call out?

Once they are plucked, once they are rooted, what should be put last, what is first?

⁹ Groupings of five are used in *Laozi* chapter 12, but that passage is not in the Guodian materials.

¹⁰ For a somewhat expanded discussion of these differences, see Perking 2015, 3-4.

In the dwelling of *yin* and *yang*, what do they attain to be steady?
In the harmony of fire and water, what do they attain to not deviate? (1-2)
凡物流形，奚得而成？
流形成體，奚得而不死？
既成既生，奚寡（顧）而鳴？
既拔既根，奚後【簡 1】之奚先？
陰陽之尻（處），奚得而固？
水火之和，奚得而不座（危[詭]）？

It continues with more questions, including the following:

Who is higher than heaven? Who is vaster than earth? Who made heaven?
Who made earth? (11)
天孰高歟？地孰遠歟？孰爲天？孰爲地？

What does soil attain to become level? What does water attain to become
clear? What do grasses and trees attain to live and grow? What do birds
and beasts attain to call out? (12A, 13B)
土奚得而平？水奚得而清？卉（草）木奚得而生【簡 12A】？禽獸奚
得而鳴【簡 13B】？

While such questions would seem natural among the *physikoi* of the ancient Mediterranean, these bamboo strips are the earliest evidence of directly metaphysical or cosmogonic concerns in China, and they defy the stereotype that Chinese philosophers had no interest in such questions. All four texts attempt to explain how the concrete world of experience arises and is grounded. This orientation marks a radical departure from the concerns of the Ru or the Mo, whose only interest was in the origins of *human* culture or civilization.¹¹ Regarding cosmogony, all we have are a few passing references to heaven making things, as the *Yu Cong* 語叢 I Guodian text says: “Heaven generates the hundreds of things, and human beings are most noble [天生百物，人爲貴]” (strip 18), and one

¹¹ *Mengzi* 6B9 discusses how the sages brought order and culture out of a chaotic natural world. The *Mozi* explains the origins of food, clothing, weapons, and buildings in the “Restraining Expenses” chapters, and the beginning of political hierarchy in the “Conforming Upward” chapters.

passage in the *Mozi* claims that heaven made (*wei* 為) the things of the world for the sake of human beings (Sun Yirang 2001, 202-204).

The alignment of these texts goes beyond a mere interest in cosmogony, as the cosmogonies themselves share a number of distinctive features, even if each text uses a distinct vocabulary to fill in the details. The most fundamental common point is that they all derive a concrete multiplicity from a single ultimate source. This link between unity and diversity should not be taken for granted. One might, for example, explain multiplicity only in terms of prior multiplicities, allowing for a world that is diverse all the way down. HX suggests such a possibility, which runs in parallel to the creativity of the ultimate source:

Difference generates difference, returning generates returning, deviation generates opposition, opposition generates deviation, dependence generates dependence.¹² (3)
異生異，歸生歸，違生非，非生違，依生依。

Another alternative would be to explain the diversity of things by appeal to an ultimate duality such *yin* and *yang*, form and matter, or good and evil. It is easy to see how the mixing of two different forces can generate infinite diversity. It is less easy to see how such diversity can result from *one* source. Given the importance of binary interactions in Chinese cosmology and natural philosophy, it is striking that all of these texts take a position that is ultimately monistic. There are philosophical reasons for taking a single source as the more satisfying explanation. With anything more diverse, it would be difficult to resist seeking further explanations, such as why there were precisely two ultimate elements, or how those elements can interact without themselves belonging to a

¹² I here follow Cao 2006 in taking this character as *yi* 依, to rely or depend on. Ji Xusheng has *xi* 襲 rather than *yi* 依, but glosses the phrase in terms of mutual dependence (*xiangyi* 相依).

common medium. The turn to one ultimate source, though, may derive not so much from pursuing a single *cause* as seeking to explain what all the diverse things of the world share *in common*. From the context of European philosophy, it is natural to take the point of discussing origins as seeking a first cause, but the concern here may rather be understanding the relationships among things.

A second commonality in these cosmogonies is that none of the texts give any role to intentionality or design in the emergence of things. The texts all use *sheng* 生, to generate, give birth to, or grow, rather than words for making or doing, like *wei* 為 or *zao* 造. In fact, the texts may be deliberately rejecting appeals to intentional creation. Both HX and the *Laozi* use *zi* 自 phrases, claiming that things are so of themselves (*ziran* 自然) or are self-generated (*zisheng* 自生). Opposition to any element of intentionality is suggested by one of the most radical points all of the texts share – all four seem to deliberately displace heaven, *tian* 天. At that time, *tian* would have had anthropomorphic connotations, even if it were not taken as a deliberate and conscious god (as it clearly was for the Mohists). This displacement is seen in their consistently pairing heaven with earth, *di* 地, so that heaven becomes incomplete on its own. Beyond this rhetorical shift, each text contains explicit claims that heaven is derived from something more fundamental. For example, what became chapter 25 of the *Laozi* says:

There is a shape that took form in the undifferentiated, generated before heaven and earth.

Remote and silent, standing alone and unaltered, it can be considered the mother of the world. (A: 21)

有狀混成，先天地生，
脫寥穆，獨立而不改，可以為天下母。

The most radical claims occur in TYSS and HX:

Turbid *qi* [vital energy] generates the earth; clear *qi* generates heaven.
(HX, 4)
濁氣生地，清氣生天

Below is soil, but it is called the earth; above is *qi* but it is called heaven.
(TYSS, 10)
下，土也，而謂之地。上，氣也，而謂之天

In these cases, heaven is not an entity at all, let alone a god. It is simply the name for a certain configuration of vital energy, *qi* 氣. The radicality of this claim should not be underestimated. It is comparable to Anaxagoras's claim that the sun is not a divine being but just a red-hot stone, something for which, in the less tolerant climate of ancient Athens, he was condemned.

The third striking commonality in these cosmogonies is that none of them allow for a direct movement from the single source to the myriad things. All posit intermediary stages. TYSS provides the longest set of links:

The great one generates water, water returns to assist¹³ the great one, and by this heaven is formed. Heaven returns to assist the great one and by this earth is formed. Heaven and earth further assist each other, and by this the numinous and luminescent are formed. The numinous and luminescent further assist each other, and by this *yin* and *yang* are formed. *Yin* and *yang* further assist each other, and by this the four seasons are formed. The four seasons further assist each other, and by this cold and hot are formed. Cold and hot further assist each other and by this dryness and moisture are formed. Dryness and moisture further assist each other, and years [harvests] are formed. And then it stops. (1-4)

太一生水，水反輔太一，是以成天。天反輔太一，是以成地。天地復相輔也，是以成神明。神明復相輔也，是以成陰陽。陰陽復相輔也，是以成四時。四時復相輔也，是以成滄熱。滄熱復相輔也，是以成濕燥。濕燥復相輔也，成歲而止。

The shortest progression appears in what became chapter 40 of the *Laozi*, which moves from an undifferentiated state of non-being (*wu* 無) to being (*you* 有) to the things of

¹³ I read 輔 as *fu* 輔, to assist. Cook suggests it might instead be read as *bo* 薄, which he translates as “join with” (Cook 2012, Vol. I, 344n6).

world (*tianxia zhi wu* 天下之物). The assumption of intermediary stages provides a more detailed explanation for how things actually arise and requires less of a leap between stages. Moreover, if the drive toward a single source came from a wish to explain the common grounding of diverse things, then the stages offer a more specific account of the commonality and divergences among things. In TYSS, things have more in common than their abstract connection to the great one. All things form through the interplay of *yin* and *yang*, and all things live and die according to the alternations of the seasons. These stages provide a common ground in which differences can be situated. *Qi* plays a similar intermediary role in HX, providing a more determinate form of causality or relation: it is not just that all things emerge from an original constancy but that they are all composed of the same basic stuff, a stuff that can be differentiated by degrees of clarity and turbidity. Ultimately, the intermediary stages allow for an explanation of both individual things and nature as a coherent system, thus linking cosmogony, cosmology, and natural philosophy.

The number and arrangement of stages varies widely across the texts, showing little agreement, but two stages are particularly common and central. One is a stage in which two opposite forces interact. The generative function of interactions between opposites is most detailed in TYSS. It begins with a single force *taiyi*, the great one, which first generates water. These two together generate heaven, which turns back to help generate earth. At this point, the progression continues through the interaction of complementary pairs: heaven and earth assist each other to produce the numinous and luminescent, which interact to generate *yin* and *yang*, which interact to create the four seasons. The FWLX mentions concrete pairs like *yin* and *yang* and fire and water (2), and

it also formulates the progression in more abstract terms: the one generates a two, which then produces further diversity (21). A similar line appears in *Laozi* chapter 42, although that is missing in the Guodian materials. Neither the Guodian *Laozi* materials nor the HX give an explicit role to the interaction of pairs in the generation of the world, although they both contain remarks about the interdependence of opposites.

Another stage that recurs across texts is a place for cycles or returning. Both TYSS and FWLX emphasize the cycles of the natural world. FWLX says:

For this reason, arrangements become new, people die and return as people, water returns to the heavens. In general, the hundred things do not die: like the moon they come out and then enter again, come to an end and begin again, reach all the way and then return again. (24-25)
是故陳爲新，人死復爲人，水復於天。凡百物不死，如月出則又入，終則又始，至則又反。

The cosmogony of TYSS begins with stages in which one element returns (*fan* 反) to assist the other, and it culminates in the cycles of the seasons or the harvests. While the cyclicity of nature may have been a default view derived from observing the changes of the seasons and rotation of the stars, it serves an important philosophical function in providing an end point to the process of generation. This function appears most clearly in the quotation from TYSS above, which says explicitly that the generation of interacting pairs culminates and ends with the production of the harvest. Cycles explain the sustainability and inexhaustibility of nature, and they generate the regularity of natural patterns. TYSS says of this cycle:

Sometimes waning, sometimes waxing, by this weaving the warp for the myriad things. This is what heaven cannot kill, what earth cannot bury over, what *yin* and *yang* cannot complete. (7-8)
一缺一盈，以紀為萬物經。此天之所不能殺，地之所不能埋，陰陽之所不能成。

If we take the intermediary stages of generation as outlining the progressively differentiated structure of the natural world, then cycles play a key role in that structure. It is the constancy of these cycles that provide guidance for human action. The Laozi and HX also speak of return, but perhaps not in the same sense. Chapter 40 of the *Laozi* says simply:

Returning is the movement of the way; weakness is the function of the way. (A: 37)
返也者，道動也。弱也者，道之用也。

This first line could mean that dao generates cyclical patterns in nature, but it might rather (or also) be an ontological claim about how things emerge from and ultimately return to the ultimate source. HX says that returning or reproducing (*fu* 復) is the course of life (*sheng zhi shengxing* 生之生行) (3-4). The meaning of *fu* here is difficult to determine with certainty, but it seems to refer not to cyclical patterns but rather the way in which types of things reproduce themselves.¹⁴ While the nature and function of return may vary across these texts, all of them link it to the sustainability of natural patterns.

The final common point in these cosmogonies is that the ultimate source remains immanent in the world. As others have noted, the lack of tenses in classical Chinese language introduces a fundamental ambiguity into stories of generation – while they could be read as describing something that happened once in the past, they could just as well describe an ongoing process with no end or beginning. That is, the progressions they describe may be ontological rather than chronological. TYSS is most explicit in claiming that the source remains ever present:

¹⁴ Thus Brindley et. al. 2013 translate *fu* here as “reproduce.” For a more extensive discussion of the term in HX, see Klein 2013.

Thus the great one is contained in water and acts through the seasons, circulating and [beginning] again.

是故太一藏於水，行於時，周而又 [始]

The immanence of the source is shown most of all by the fact that it remains accessible to cultivated people. In FWLX, the one is the origin of things but it also can be used to achieve success:

If you can grasp the one, then the hundred things are not lost; if you cannot grasp the one, then the hundred things are all lost. (22-23)

能執一，則百物不失；如不能執一，則【簡 22】百物具失。

Similarly, in the *Laozi*, *dao* is both the ultimate source and something one can use in the world:

Dao is constantly without name. Although in its unhewn simplicity it is minute, heaven and earth do not dare subordinate it. If princes and kings can preserve it, the ten thousand things will make themselves guests. (A: 18-19, ch. 32)

道恆亡名、樸雖細，天地弗敢臣。侯王如能 18 守之，萬物將自賓

These claims show that even if the cosmogonic passages depict a chronological progression, the ultimate origin is never left behind. The immanence and accessibility of the ultimate source has fundamental consequences for how we can act in the world.

II. The Cosmogonic Turn and Chinese Naturalism

While the most striking feature of these texts is their cosmogonies, the interest in cosmogony appears within a constellation of related concerns. Most of all, the cosmogonic turn went hand in hand with a portrait of human beings as merely one part of a broader natural system. Thus it could just as well be described as a “Naturalistic Turn” or turn away from anthropocentrism.¹⁵ This de-centering of human beings follows from

¹⁵ Calling it a “Naturalistic Turn” might better capture all of its dimensions, but it would imply that earlier Chinese views were non-naturalistic. Even the most theistic views, though, took heaven to be an integral part of the natural world. Nonetheless, this turn accentuated many of the elements associated with

the nature of the cosmogonies the texts give. On one side, they eliminate any traces of anthropomorphism, not just in rejecting appeals to an anthropomorphic creator or demiurge but by eliminating any sense that concepts, intentions, or values play a role in the generation of the world. They thus eliminate teleology. The displacement of *tian* is a key move in this break from anthropocentrism. On the other side, they give an account of generation that applies equally to all things. The outcome of generation is not human beings (*ren* 人) but the ten-thousand things, *wanwu* 萬物. Human beings are just one of them. The centrality of the phrase *wanwu* marks an important shift in vocabulary. The phrase appears seven times in the Guodian *Laozi* materials and twice in TYSS. FWLX instead uses the “hundred things” (*baiwu* 百物), three times. In contrast, the phrase *wanwu* does not appear in the *Lun Yu*, *Zuo Zhuan*, or *Mengzi*, and hardly at all in the *Mozi*.¹⁶

It would be misleading, though, to say that these texts break entirely from anthropocentrism. They are written by human beings as guides for human life. While they advise taking human beings as one of the myriad things, they also admit – either implicitly or explicitly – that there is something peculiar about human beings and those things that appear uniquely human, like language and political institutions. If human beings are special, though, it is not for the better. As HX explains:

naturalism in the West, particularly a turn away from divine intentions and toward natural patterns as a guide for action, and a vision of human beings as just one of the myriad things.

¹⁶ It is used twice in in the “Gong Meng” chapter of the *Mozi* and the line “Now heaven is inclusive toward [the people of] the world and cares for them, bringing to fruition the ten thousand things in order to benefit them” (天兼天下而愛之，攬遂萬物以利之), is repeated twice in one passage of the “Will of Heaven II” chapter (Sun Yirang 2001, 203-204). That passage is missing in the other versions of the chapter. The *Lun Yu* and the *Zuo Zhuan* each use “the hundred things” (*baiwu* 百物) once, as does the *Yu Cong* I Guodian text (strip 18).

At first there is good, there is order, and there is no chaos. When there are human beings, then there is what not good. Chaos comes out from human beings. (8)

先者有善，有治，無亂。有人焉有不善，亂出於人。

While all of the texts include worries about the potential for human beings to deviate from nature in destructive ways, the status of language and human culture seems to have been one of the points that remained unsettled.

Since human beings are part of nature, human action should be guided by the same forces as the rest of the natural world. As chapter 25 of the *Laozi* says:

Human beings follow earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows the way, the way follows what is so of itself [*ziran*]. (A: 22-23)

人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然

Decentering the human also decenters humanistic morality, leading to an approach that is completely different from the moralistic orientation of the Ru and Mo. It is striking that their two key value terms, benevolence (*ren* 仁) and rightness (*yi* 義) appear only in one passage, in a line that became part of chapter 18 of the *Laozi*:

Thus when the great way is abandoned, then there is benevolence and rightness.

When the six relations are out of harmony, then there is filial piety and nurturing care.

When the state is in chaos, then there are correct ministers. (C: 2-3)

故大道廢，焉有仁義。

六親不和，焉有孝慈。

邦家昏亂，焉有正臣。

Humanistic values matter only when we are alienated from the ultimate source or way.

The other three texts entirely ignore *ren* and *yi* (as well as the Ru virtue of *li* 禮, ritual propriety), suggesting that they were articulating a discourse that was not fundamentally

concerned with opposing the Ru or Mo.¹⁷ Instead of moralizing language, the texts use more neutral value terms. They take *zhi* 治 (order) as positive and *luan* 亂 (chaos) as bad. They generally use *shan* 善, good or excellent, as a positive term, although the *Laozi* materials undermine that by saying that once people recognize goodness, this is already not good (2). Perhaps the central value in these texts is attaining a long life and avoiding harm, which are presented as explicit goals in all of the texts but HX. This view is strongest in the *Laozi*, as in chapter 13:

Treat favor and disgrace with alarm; value great trouble like one's body.
What does favor and grace refer to?
Favor puts one below – attaining it is alarming, losing it is alarming. So it is said that favor and disgrace are alarming.
What does value great trouble like one's body refer to?
That by which I can have great trouble is my having a body.
If I had no body, what trouble could be had?
Thus those who value acting for their bodies more than acting for the world can be entrusted with the world.
Those who begrudge using their bodies for the sake of the world can relinquish the world. (B: 5-8)
寵辱若驚，貴大患若身。
何謂寵辱？
寵為下也。得之若驚，失之若驚，是謂寵辱若驚。
[何謂貴大患]6 若身？
吾所以有大患者，為吾有身。
及吾亡身，有何[患]？
故貴為身於[7] 為天下，若可以託天下矣。
愛以身為天下，若可以寄天下矣。 8

While avoiding death seems like an obvious goal, it would have been secondary in the more moralistic discourses of the Ru and Mo. This concern with life, health, and prosperity may suggest some continuity with the discourses of medicine or

¹⁷ In strip 8, HX uses three phrases next to each other: *xiangyi* 祥宜, *liqiao* 利巧 and *caiwu* 彩物. Cao Feng 2006 and Ji Xusheng 2005 both read *yi* 宜 (appropriateness) as *yi* 義 (rightness). There is little justification for this change, though, and the meaning of the phrases is impossible to determine with much certainty. Brindley, Klein, and Goldin read *yi* 宜 as is and translated the series: “Auspicious appropriateness, beneficial craft, and diverse things” (Brindley et al. 2013).

prognostication, but it also follows from the broader cosmogonic perspective, as life is what all things have in common.

Beyond the elevation of more naturalistic values, these texts shift focus away from *what* one does toward *how* one does it. The issue is less the goal or content of our actions and more their modality. This orientation is again clearest in the *Laozi*, which introduces the phrase of *wuwei* 無為, non-action or not-doing:

One who does it defeats it. One who grasps it loses it. Sagely people do not do [*wuwei*] and thus are not defeated, do not grasp and thus do not lose. (C: 11; ch. 64)
為之者敗之，執之者失之。聖人無為故無敗也，無執故[無失也]。

Many philosophers in early China placed value on actions that were spontaneous and unforced, but for the Ru, that modality would be secondary to the content of the action. The *Laozi* reverses this priority, such that the content of the action is itself determined through not doing and letting things be so of themselves. The precise nature of this middle ground between acting and doing nothing is articulated differently in different texts and may have been another point of disagreement, but they all include some concern with not doing too much or being too active. The HX says: “Regarding actions in the world, do not abandon them or add to them, and then they can be done of themselves [*ziwei* 自為]” (11) (舉天下之為也，無舍也，無與也，而能自為也). FWLX says a ruler should not come down from his mat or contribute to affairs (14, 16). The shift toward acting less follows from one aspect of the cosmogonic turn itself: since the ultimate source remains immanent in the world, part of our task is to simply let natural generative processes continue.

The final element is a concern with new kinds of internal cultivation. In fact, this kind of cultivation is not mentioned in TYSS or HX, and thus it may not have been

integral to the turn itself. Nonetheless, the goal of not doing naturally points to reducing or restraining desires. Once again, this concern is new, as far as we know. The Mo show little interest in cultivating emotions or desires. The Ru have such a concern, but it is with having the correct emotions in the proper circumstances. The idea of reducing or eliminating desires (*yu* 欲) appears in four chapters of the *Laozi* that were found at Guodian (chapters 19, 46, 57 and 64). The *Laozi* also introduces a number of terms describing the state of mind that should be cultivated: knowing satisfaction (*zhizu* 知足) (37/A: 14, 44/A: 36, 46/A: 6), stillness or quietude (*jing* 靜) (15/A: 9, 37/A: 14, 45/B: 15, 57/A: 32), emptiness (*xu* 虛) (5/A: 23, 16/A: 24), and unhewn simplicity (*pu* 樸) (15/A: 8, 19/A: 2, 37/A: 13, 57/A: 32). This reduction of desires follows if the goal is no longer to impose oneself on the world but rather to empty the self and let the generative forces of nature act on their own. FWLX also promotes a kind of internal cultivation. One passage, which contains several mysterious phrases that are difficult to interpret, says:

If the heart does not overcome the heart, then great disorder will arise.
 If the heart can overcome the heart, this is called penetrating the essentials.
 What is it that is called penetrating the essentials?
 The white of human beings must be grasped.
 How does one know the white?
 To the end of one's life, being spontaneously at ease.
 Can you have few words?
 Can you be one?
 Now this is called subtle accomplishment. (26, 18, 28)
 心不勝心，大亂乃作；
 心如能勝心，【簡 26】是謂少徹。
 奚謂少徹？
 人白爲執。
 奚以知其白？
 終身自若。
 能寡言乎？
 能一【簡 18】乎？
 夫此之謂諄成。

This process of the heart overcoming the heart is ultimately grounded in the one:

It is said that:

What those of the hundred surnames value is none other than the sovereign,

What the sovereign values is none other than the heart,

What the heart values is none other than the one. (28)

曰：

百姓之所貴唯君，

君之所貴唯心，

心之所貴唯一。【簡 28】

It is striking that the programs for internal cultivation in FWLX and the *Laozi* materials found at Guodian have little in common. Although the *Laozi* mentions embracing the one (*baoyi* 抱一) in chapter 10, that passage is missing in Guodian.

FWLX makes no mention of desires, stillness, emptiness, or simplicity.

Conversely, the heart plays no role in self-cultivation in the Guodian *Laozi* materials, which mention the heart only once, in a passage that seems to present its action as negative: “the heart compelling the vital energy is called strength” (心使氣曰強) (A: 35; ch. 55). Neither HX nor TYSS mention the heart or reducing desires.

These concerns together outline a coherent position. The most obvious feature of these texts is their orientation toward explaining how the patterns of nature and the myriad things within the world arise. That orientation itself undermines anthropocentrism, by placing human beings on the same ontological plane as the myriad things and by deriving human beings from a source that is in no way human-like. This naturalistic view of human beings entails an ethics based on natural values. Furthermore, since the ultimate source remains constantly active and immanent in the world, not

everything depends on our individual effort. We can let these generative forces play out on their own, engaging in something like non-action, *wuwei*. Avoiding imposing our desires on the world, though, is not easy. It requires a process of self-cultivation in which we restrain the heart, reduce desires, develop stillness, and so on. We can see, then, that this “cosmogonic turn” involved a number of related positions, all of which would have been quite radical. Cosmogony is just the most obvious feature of this change.

My derivation of normative practices from metaphysical assumptions betrays a philosopher’s bias, and the actual development of these positions need not have followed that order. Since the main points are mutually implicated, it is impossible to determine which had priority. There are at least four possibilities. First, the whole system could derive from the attempt to answer certain metaphysical questions. Second, the cosmogonies could have been motivated by a rejection of anthropocentrism. That might have come from an awareness that we live in a world that seems indifferent to our specific concerns, a point that would have been hard to ignore in the horrific world of Warring States China.¹⁸ It could also have originated from critiquing values like benevolence and rightness as artificial, advocating instead values that seem to be more in line with the natural tendencies of things. Third, the cosmogony and conception of the human could have developed as a way to rationalize minimal action. While that might seem like a strange starting point, the extreme chaos and destruction caused by active striving at the time could easily lead to the view that the solution was to do less, whether on a political or personal level. Finally, the root could have been in practices of self-cultivation, although that seems less likely, given that there is no program of internal cultivation shared by the texts.

¹⁸ On this point, see Perkins 2014a.

III. Debates and Divergences

I have focused on commonalities between these texts while also noting some of their points of disagreement, such as the precise status of human actions or the number and arrangement of stages between the single origin and the myriad things. A full analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of a single article, but I will sketch what I take to be the main issue. The key question is on the nature of the ultimate. Is the ultimate the *one*, or something even more primordial? While each text is different, it is possible to designate two distinct models. The first begins with the one, which produces a duality whose interaction then generates the myriad things. The second moves from non-being or a state of no-beings (*wu* 無) to concrete things (as *you* 有 or *wu* 物). This difference around cosmogony is then intertwined with differences on how the ultimate origin can be grasped and used. The differences between the two models are clearest in the contrast between FWLX and the *Laozi*.

FWLX centers on the one, saying that the one is what enables plants to grow and animals to live, and that by grasping the one a ruler can succeed with ease. Its cosmogony expresses the first model in the simplest and most abstract form:

One generates two, two generates three, three generates the feminine, the feminine completes bonds. (21)

一生兩，兩生三，三生女，女成結。

In the process of generating the concrete world, the original unity first produces a duality, which then generates further diversity. While TYSS is more concrete and detailed, its basic structure is similar, moving from an original one (*taiyi*, the great one) to a series of dualities. In FWLX, the one is presented as easily graspable:

If you wish to grasp the one: look up and see it, look down and examine it.
Do not seek the measure in the distance, but examine it in yourself. (23)

如欲執一，仰而視之，俯而揆之，毋遠求度，於身稽之。

The passage goes on to claim that the one is even accessible to the senses – it can be seen all around us. Grasping the one then tell us how to act in the world. In this context, knowledge and values are unproblematic, as they follow from the one.

The contrasting position appears most clearly in *Laozi* 40:

The things of the world are born from being, [being is] born from non-being. (A: 37)
天下之物生於有，[有]生於無。

The ultimate source is not *one*, or any *thing* at all, but rather *wu* 無, non-being or an undifferentiated state of no-beings. That this is meant as an alternative to the position appearing in FWLX is supported by *Laozi* 42, which critically incorporates lines found in FWLX:¹⁹

Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, three generates the ten thousand things.²⁰
道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

The *Laozi* admits a crucial role for the one but posits something even more primordial, labeled as *dao*, which is a tentative way of referring to a source that is not really a being or a thing. This chapter was not found in the Guodian *Laozi* materials and it may be a later attempt to incorporate (and subordinate) an alternative cosmogonic model.²¹ While the cosmogony in HX differs from the *Laozi* in many ways, it follows the same basic model. In fact, HX can be seen as an attempt to explain in more detail how non-being could give rise to beings. In this explanation, it offers a crucial clarification to the concept

¹⁹ My claim is not that the author of this *Laozi* passage had access to FWLX. That is possible, but it is also possible that both texts draw on some other source. For a discussion of this point, see Perkins 2015, 7-8.

²⁰ This line is lost in the Mawangdui A manuscript, and the last two characters are damaged in Mawangdui B. All versions of the received text have those characters as the ten thousand things (*wanwu* 萬物). For the Mawangdui texts, I rely on Gao Ming 1996.

²¹ For an extensive argument in support of this claim, see Perkins 2015.

of *wu*. Since beings (*you*) arise only after there is constancy, a vague something (*huo* 或), and vital energy (*qi*), it is clear that *wu* does not mean simple non-existence. *Qi* and *huo* exist, but not as *you* (beings) (1-3). Several points follow. If the ultimate is not a being, then it cannot be grasped or observed, and if the origin exceeds all labels, then it cannot generate unambiguous standards. Any standard we use ends up being one-sided, requiring its opposite. This view appears in several places within the Guodian *Laozi* materials, most centrally in chapter 2, which begins:

When all the world knows beauty as beauty, this is already repulsive.
When they all know good, this is already not good. (A: 15)
天下皆知美之為美也，惡已；
皆知善，此其不善已。

Any norm that we hold up as an ideal will bring its opposite with it, making it impossible to promote any exclusive value. HX similarly points out the ways in which one side always creates its opposite: first there is the center, then the external, the small and then the great, the soft and then the hard, and so on (9). This point does not arise in either FWLX or TYSS.

Whatever the reason for the split between these two cosmogonic models, they involve different philosophical problems. The accounts in FWLX and TYSS explain how diversity can come from unity. The single source divides into two elements, whose interactions then generate all things. The division into pairs grounds the sustainability of the system, which can alternate endlessly between poles. The dyadic structure also allows for explanations of specific events, as became common with the use of *yin* and *yang* to explain everything from landscaping to medicine. There are also several problems or gaps in this account, though. One is how the process gets going, and in particular, how to avoid an infinite regress. That is, why do we not need a source for the one itself? How

does the one get started? That links to a second problem – is the one itself a thing? If so, what gives it priority over other things? If not, what justifies even calling it “one”?

In contrast, the shift from the one or great one to a form of non-being eases the problem of infinite regress. While we might ask about the origins of the one, it makes less sense to seek an origin for non-being. The problem of getting a multiplicity from unity shifts to the problem of getting something from nothing, or more precisely, getting individuated beings from what is undifferentiated. Moreover, if the ultimate source is not a *thing*, then it cannot *act* in any meaningful sense. Things must arise of themselves. This leads to another general difference between FWLX and TYSS on one side and the *Laozi* and HX on the other. The former two give no significant role to phrases using the reflexive pronoun *zi* 自, while the latter texts do. Because the origin is not a thing or an agent or even a cause properly speaking, differentiation must generate itself, *zisheng* (in HX), or be so of itself, *ziran* (in *Laozi*).

IV. Conclusion

I began by explaining that the purpose of considering these excavated texts in isolation from other texts or speculations on their historical context was not ultimately to escape the hermeneutic circle but rather to ground one position from which that circle might be entered. In conclusion, I will suggest some of the implications of this analysis for other areas of evidence. Given the differences between these texts, there is no justification for assuming the dominance of the views and terms found in the *Laozi* (either the text as a whole or the Guodian materials). There is no textual evidence to suggest that these differences are established against the background of the *Laozi*, either as attempts to extend it or to revise it. This point alone suffices to show why we must avoid the

common tendency to assume that anything sounding vaguely like the *Laozi* must be saying the same thing in different words. Moreover, the fact that even those concerned with cosmogony in the late fourth century BCE reveal no awareness of the specific position of the *Laozi* provides some evidence against dating the *Laozi* to a much earlier period.

If the cosmogonic positions in circulation in the late 4th century BCE were as diverse as this evidence suggests, then we must reconsider the dominance of the *Laozi* in our approach to received texts as well, particularly if those texts have origins that are not so distant from 300 BCE. These excavated texts show no sign of originating from a single source, which suggests that the development of cosmogony in early China was not a process of diversification from a single position but rather one of integrating diverse sources in different ways. For example, the “*Nei ye*” chapter of the *Guanzi* is striking in combining the reduction of desires and cultivation of stillness found in the *Laozi* with a language of the heart overcoming the heart that is much closer to FWLX. In fact, the “*Nei ye*” also has similarities to HX, and it reads quite naturally as an attempt to systematically integrate elements drawn from various cosmogonic traditions. It may be that the *Laozi* as a whole was similarly meant to assimilate other positions into a loose system centered on the doctrines found in the Guodian materials. The passages that mention the “one” – none of which are included in Guodian – seem to be an attempt to incorporate and subordinate a position like that appearing in FWLX, and, as I have argued elsewhere, the last fifteen chapters of the received *Laozi* seem to express a distinct perspective centering on heaven rather than *dao*.²² In contrast, Huang-Lao thought might be seen as an attempt to assimilate elements of the *Laozi* into a position that ultimately is much closer to FWLX.

²² For an argument for the first point, see Perkins 2015. For the second point, see Perkins 2014b.

These suggestions are speculative and preliminary, but they represent the new lines of inquiry opened up by taking seriously the diversity of cosmogonic thought in early China.

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