

## 5.4 Introduction to Laozi

### Laozi (老子 Lǎozǐ)



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[Ink on silk manuscript of the \*Daodejing\*, 2nd century B.C., unearthed from Mawangdui.](#)

Our current textual theory of the *Laozi* gives us a problem. Most **Western scholars today doubt there ever was** a single author, a real **Laozi**. Doubts of this kind began in the early 20th century, in what we sometimes call the “doubt antiquity movement.” Chinese scholars discovered many apocryphal texts and forgeries passed off in the traditional orthodoxy as written by famous 子zì (masters) from the classical period. Laozi had come to be thought of as a religious (Buddha-like) figure who taught or inspired Zhuangzi by writing **the beloved classic called the *Daode Jing* (道德經)**. But new evidence hints that this famous text was not completed, maybe even not started, until years after Zhuangzi's death. It was being edited by multiple hands right up until the end of the classical period.

Zhuangzi in the inner chapters referred to someone called “**Lao Dan**” whom Zhuangzi treats as a teacher of *Confucius*. In the writings we attribute to students of Zhuangzi, we find several dialogues between Lao Dan, now sometime called Laozi (Master Lao). In these we see Laozi ridicule Confucius and urge primitivist sounding insights. This invites us to speculate that the same generation of **Zhuangists** were responsible for attributing the still evolving text of the *Daode Jing* to Confucius's proto-Daoist teacher. In this course, we'll continue to talk of Laozi, as before, as author(s) of the *Daode Jing* and of the contents of that iconic text as his teaching. We will also follow the *Zhuangzi* history in placing Laozi's theory between Shen Dao and Zhuangzi but not treat Zhuangzi as Laozi's “follower” but as a more mature version of the philosophy that came to be known as *Daoism*.

We will treat both Laozi and Zhuangzi as endorsing the criticisms we noted of Shen Dao: his advice is “a dao for dead people” that “cannot avoid self-rejection.” **Laozi**, as we'll see, **argues for accepting** Shen Dao's “**abandon knowing,**” **but on different grounds**. He constructs a theory of knowing that makes it as a form of **social domination** of our natural **spontaneity**—of our **freedom**.