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## Confucius and Lao Zi: Their Differing Social Foundations and Cultures

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Confucius and Lao Zi:  
Their Differing Social Foundations and Cultures<sup>1</sup>

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The Origins of the Civilization of the Yellow River, volume III

by  
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**Abstract:** Lao Zi and Confucius are the two great thinkers who have influenced Chinese culture for more than two thousand years, yet the thought of each differs considerably from that of the other. These differences originate in their respective social foundations and the cultures based on those foundations, but the difference in their social backgrounds has been ignored in previous studies. By observing several contrasting phenomena, we discover the different ways of life concealed behind these differing worldviews; this helps to fill in the fragmented history of the Chinese classics. The view of history presented here is also supported by some new findings of contemporary anthropology in the study of prehistoric society.

**Key words:** Lao Zi, Confucius, ways of life, culture

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was presented at the Third International Symposium on Chinese Regional Culture and Language and the Academic Meeting between Hanyang University and Sichuan Normal University, October 2008, Chengdu, China.

## The Separateness of Confucianism and Taoism

Liu Xin (53 B.C.–23 A.D.) tried to conciliate the oppositions as well as the lesser differences between Confucianism and Taoism. Ban Gu (32 B.C.–92 B.C.) took up Liu's idea (from *Qilue* by Liu Xin) in *Yiwenzhi*, *Hanshu* (Accounts of Literature, History of the Former Han Dynasty):<sup>2</sup>

The Taoist school may have originated with the official historians of ancient times. They noted down in an orderly way the changes of society, including its successes and failures, fortunes and disasters. As a result, they came to understand the key to managing a country. The Taoists observed the behavior of "quietness" and "actionlessness," and maintained the attitude of modesty and meekness. This is the way that a monarch governs his nation. These ideas are in accordance with Yao's "humility" and "modesty" in *Yijing* (The Book of Changes). Moreover, one could benefit by adopting the attitude of modesty. These are the advantages of Taoism. If some unrestrained men were to carry out the doctrines of Taoism, they would discard all rites and get rid of benevolence. They would reckon that one could administrate a country well by being quiet and actionless only.

The above sounds very farfetched indeed. According to these ideas, Taoism was actually rooted in the official historians, taking Sima Qian (145 B.C.–90 B.C.) and his father as examples. However, it is very clear that Zuo Qiuming (556 B.C.–451 B.C.) was not a Taoist; he wrote *Zuo Zhuan*<sup>3</sup> and *Guo Yu*.<sup>4</sup> Confucius revised and edited *The Spring and Autumn Annals*; but this is a historical work. *Shang Shu* (The Book of Documents) is something like a historical record; however, it is also a Confucian masterpiece. There is a great deal of counterevidence against the

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<sup>2</sup> *Qilue* (七略) is one of the earliest Chinese ancient bibliographies by Liu Xin (刘歆). The *Yiwenzhi* of *Hanshu* (汉书·艺文志) by Ban Gu (班固) is edited from *Qilue*.

<sup>3</sup> Zuo Qiuming is the author of *Zuo Zhuan*, which is the first historical work in ancient China.

<sup>4</sup> *Guo Yu* is one of the early historical documents of the individual kingdoms in the Spring and Autumn times. It is said that this work was edited by Zuo Qiuming as well.

idea that Taoism might originate with the official historians. As to the words: "This is the way that a monarch governs his nation. These ideas are in accordance with Yao's 'humility' and 'modesty' in *Yijing* (The Book of Changes)," but this is because the rulers in the Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.–8 A.D.) advocated the Huang-Lao theory.<sup>5</sup> However, *Lao Zi* does not mention Yao and Shun, nor does it mention "the Five Classics."<sup>6</sup> The ideas of Liu Xin and Ban Gu were intended to make Taoism seem closer to Confucianism, in order to help the rulers govern the nation. But their ideas actually do not reflect reality. The words following "if some unrestrained men were to carry out the doctrines of Taoism (及放者为之...)" are depreciative remarks by Ban Gu, but that belief actually *is* an essential one in Taoism. Not only did "some unrestrained men" such as Zhuang Zi maintain the idea, but Lao Zi himself had said, "Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, and the people will be benefited a hundredfold. Banish human kindness, discard morality, and the people will be dutiful and compassionate. (绝圣去智, 民利百倍; 绝仁弃义, 民复孝慈)" (Chapter 19, *Lao Zi*). It can be seen that the idea was not from "unrestrained men"; instead, it is the original thought of Lao Zi.

Until the middle period of the Early Han dynasty, the thinking in Confucianism and in Taoism were in opposition. In contradiction to the position taken by Liu Xin and Ban Gu, these two schools of thought were not related to each other. Sima Qian praises the thinking of Taoism but represses Confucian thought, as is noted in the "Biographies of Lao Zi and Han Fei" in *Shi Ji* (Historical Records):

Confucius went to the capital of Zhou, where he wanted to consult Lao Zi on rites. Lao Zi told him: "Concerning what you are saying, these peoples' bodies and their bones have been rotten for a long time. Only their words have been passed down. As a nobleman, you can use your talents when you have the opportunity;

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<sup>5</sup> Huang-Lao was a kind of Daoist theory that was popular in the early period of the Western Han dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> The Five Classics: *Zhou Yi* (The Book of Changes), *Shang Shu* (The Book of Documents), *Shi Jing* (The Book of Songs), *Yi Li* (The Book of Rites), and *Chun Qiu* (The Spring and Autumn Annals). All of these were written before the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.–207 B.C.).

you should be content with being carried along by the tide when you have no opportunity.

By saying "you should be content with being carried along by the tide when you have no opportunity (不得其时则蓬累而行)," Lao Zi wanted to persuade Confucius to discard his ideal of a "ritual society" like the one in the Western Zhou dynasty.

Lao Zi said: I have heard the proverbs: Good merchants look like the poor, virtuous noblemen look like fools. Get rid of your arrogance and excessive desires; get rid of your immoderate expression and exorbitant ambition. All of these are not good for you. That's all I can tell you. ("The Biographies of Lao Zi and Han Fei," *Shi Ji*)

As an official librarian of historical literature, Lao Zi must have known quite a lot about "rites." But, when he is being consulted on "rites," he has not answered specifically about them; instead, he has pointed out that Confucius was ostentatious and filled with desires. He advised the young man to be less ambitious.

The Lao Zi school dismissed Confucianism; and Confucianism also excluded Lao Zi. "No common paths, no counsel to be taken with each other (People who follow different paths do not take counsel with one another)." Is this what this points to? ("The Biographies of Lao Zi and Han Fei," *Shi Ji*)

Obviously, Sima Qian correctly noted the differences between Confucianism and Taoism. But men like Liu Xin and Ban Gu made their interpretations in accordance with the rulers' desire. They wanted to confuse and conceal the differences between Confucianism and Taoism.

## Phenomena of the Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi

By examining the different attitudes held by Lao Zi and Confucius toward the historical events, characters, and cultures of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, we can locate the core of the

opposition between them. The following are the author's observations and enumerations, with examples for each; these examples, however, do not exhaust all the aspects of the differences.

**a. The Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi: Attitudes toward God (Di)**

During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, people worshiped God (Di). The Chinese nation in general accepted this religious belief, including Confucians. Documents of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, including inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells and inscriptions on ancient bronze objects, are evidence for this fact.

Lao Zi, however, did not show the same enthusiasm or respect for God (Di) as Confucius did. In *Lao Zi*, there is only one passage that talks about God (Di):

The way is empty, yet use will not drain it. Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures. Blunt the sharpness; untangle the knots; soften the glare; let your wheels move only along old ruts. Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there. I know not whose son it is. It images the forefather of God. (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 4; translation by D. C. Lau)

In traditional culture during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, God (Di) is always considered to be the very highest god as well as the dominator of heaven and earth. However, Lao Zi objects to this idea. In his opinion, the broad and profound "Way (Tao)" must be the ancestor of God (Di). Does this idea show respect or disregard for God (Di)?

**b. The Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi: Attitudes toward the Five Classics**

Confucius strongly advocated the ancient classics, including the Book of Changes, the Book of Documents, the Book of Poetry, the Book of Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. He made compilations of the Five Classics, constantly promoted them, and taught his disciples with them. There are many quotations from them in *The Analects* and *Mencius*.

But Lao Zi always ignored the Five Classics. He seldom talked about "rites," but when he did, he condemned them:

That is why it is said: "After the Way (Tao) was lost, then came the 'power'; after the 'power' was lost, then came human kindness." After human kindness was lost, then came morality, after morality was lost, then came ritual. Now ritual is the mere husk of loyalty and promise-keeping, and it is indeed the first step towards brawling." (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 38)

### c. The Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi: Attitudes toward the Saints

The Confucians showed great respect for the ancient Chinese saints (the six noblemen: Yao, Shun, Yu, Thang, King Wen, and King Wu).<sup>7</sup> Yao and Shun are praised in *The Analects* and in *Mencius*. The Five Emperors (Huang Ti, Zhuan xu, Yao, Shun, and Yu) are noted in *Kongzi jiyu* (The School Sayings of Confucius).<sup>8</sup>

But Lao Zi is indifferent to the Saints. Zhuang Zi expressed strong criticism of the so-called "Saints" since the Huang Di. This following passage provides an example. The critical words are said by Robber Zhi, a rebel being praised by Zhuang Zi.

Of all great cities there is none so great as the whole country, which was possessed by Yao and Shun, while their descendants (now) have not so much territory as would admit an awl.

Thang and Wu were both set up as the Sons of Heaven, but in after ages (their posterity) were cut off and extinguished; was not this because the gain of their position was so great a prize?

And moreover I have heard that anciently birds and beasts were numerous, and men were few, so that they lived in nests in order to avoid the animals. In the daytime they gathered acorns and chestnuts, and in the night they roosted on the trees; and on account of this they are called the people of the Nest-builder.

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<sup>7</sup> The Six Saints: Yao, Shun, and Yu were the leaders of the Chinese in the prehistoric period; Thang is the founding king of the Shang dynasty; and King Wen and King Wu were the founding kings of the Zhou dynasty.

<sup>8</sup> In the record *Shi Ji*, Huang Ti is the founding father of Chinese people in the historic legend. Zhuan Xu is the third generation descendant and successor of Huang Ti.



Anciently the people did not know the use of clothes. In summer they collected great stores of faggots, and in winter kept themselves warm by means of them; and on account of this they are called the people who knew how to take care of their lives. In the age of Shen-nong, the people lay down in simple innocence, and rose up in quiet security. They knew their mothers, but did not know their fathers. They dwelt along with the elks and deer. They ploughed and ate; they wove and made clothes; they had no idea of injuring one another: this was the grand time of perfect virtue.

Huang Ti, however, was not able to perpetuate this virtuous state. He fought with Chi-you in the wilds of Zhuo-lu till the blood flowed over a hundred *li*. When Yao and Shun arose, they instituted their crowd of ministers. Thang banished his lord. King Wu killed Zhou.<sup>9</sup> Since that time the strong have oppressed the weak, and the many tyrannized over the few. From Thang and Wu downwards, [the rulers] have all been promoters of disorder and confusion. You yourself now cultivate and inculcate the ways of Wen and Wu; you handle whatever subjects are anywhere discussed for the instruction of future ages. With your peculiar robe and narrow girdle, with your deceitful speech and hypocritical conduct, you delude the lords of the different states, and are seeking for riches and honors. There is no greater robber than you are — why does not all the world call you the Robber Qiu, instead of styling me the Robber Zhi? (*Zhuang Zi, Robber Zhi*. Translated from Chinese into English by Lin Yutang)

The above words criticize Huang Ti, Yao, Shun, Tang, and King Wu. The passage posits that the so-called saint worship was built on a foundation of seeking power and plunder. It praises the peaceful society of the Shen-nong period, when people “ploughed and ate; they wove and made clothes.” Some scholars think that the outer chapters of *Zhuang Zi* (to which *Robber Zhi* belongs) were not written by Zhuang Zi himself. Judging from the above words, however,

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<sup>9</sup> Zhou was the last ruler of the Shang dynasty.

the ideas are totally in accord with those of Zhuang Zi, and they are in the intellectual line of Lao Zi.

#### **d. The Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi: The Theme of Shen-nong**

It should be pointed out that the "Shen-nong" mentioned by Mencius and Zhuang Zi is not the same as the one Liu Xin afterward fabricated. (That figure has been very popular as a Confucian saint since the Eastern Han dynasty.)<sup>10</sup> Instead, the "Shen-nong" discussed in this paper is the chieftain in the primitive agricultural society of ancient times.

Referring to the famous "Xu Xing" chapter in the *Teng Wengong, Part I, Mencius*, Mencius criticized Xu Xing, a representative of the disciples of the theory of the Shen-nong and their way of life. *Mencius* comments critically on the way of life practiced by Xu Xing in such phrases as: "[they] weave straw shoes and mats themselves for their food (捆屨织席以为食)." (The intellectuals engaged in productive labor.) "The good ruler ploughed personally with his people, and administrated his own life and his country at the same time (贤者与民并耕而食糗殫而治)." (The ruler and the people were equal and without different privileges. "The price of goods is the same; there is no fraud in the capital city. No one would deceive a boy even though you let him go to market for shopping (市价不貳，国中无伪，虽使五尺之童适市，莫之或欺)." (Technology and trade were undeveloped; society was harmonious and honest.) All of these characteristics are in accord with the way of life and moral concepts of primitive agricultural society. The criticism of them by Mencius shows the conflict between the civilization of the feudal caste system and the culture of the primitive equitable system. Xu Xing comes from the Kingdom of Chu, like Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, and he is also a commoner from the south of China. These persons, therefore, recognize the same culture. Zhao Qi (?–201 A.D.) noted that the understanding of Shen-nong expressed by Xu Xing is against the Confucian tradition:

...Xu Xing criticized the ways of the saint kings Yao and Shun, with the aid of figures in remote ancient times. Xu Xing did not practice benevolence and

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<sup>10</sup> See ZHOU Jixu, Falsehood-Discerning of Opinion about Yandi and Shennong, *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, 2006, No.6, pp. 67–73.

righteousness. He wanted to let the monarch and his subjects plough together. This does harm to morality. Mencius meant that there has been a code of propriety and righteousness for the people and a caste system for the country since the period of the Five Di. This way of life does not go back to the way of Three Emperors in ancient times. Mencius pointed out that Xu Xing did not understand this code of propriety. (*Teng Wengong, Part I, Mencius*; noted by Zhao Qi)

Zhao Qi divides ancient times into two periods: the period of "the Three Emperors" and the period of "the Five Di." Propriety and righteousness did not exist in the first period, while they did in the second. This observation has given the people ever afterwards a clear idea about the difference between these two important periods. It has been said that Zhao Qi made a righteous judgment on this point.

Praise of the period of Shen-nong by Zhuang Zi is mentioned earlier in this paper. The view of Shen-nong (神农之言) expressed by Xu Xing is the same as Shen-nong (神农之世) described by Zhuang Zi, in *Robber Zhi*. Thus the documents of the pre-Qin dynasties concerning the history of the primitive agricultural society before civilization are not an isolated and accidental piece of evidence. (See more evidence in Section 3.)

#### **e. The Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi: Identifying with the Different Cultures**

Confucius considered himself an inheritor of the culture of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, but Lao Zi espoused the opposite. All the themes noted above can be included in this theme.

This appears in "Yiwenzhi," *Hanshu* (Accounts of Literature, History of Former Han Dynasty):

The Confucian school might have originated from the ministers of "Si Tu" in ancient times. They served their monarchs, helping them to rule in accordance with nature and to propagate morality. They delved into the literature of "the Six Classics," and paid great attention to humaneness and righteousness. They followed the way of Yao and Shun in the wellspring, and managed their countries

by the rules of King Wen and King Wu. They enthroned Confucius as the great master. By doing this, they let their doctrines be valued. Confucianism is the most sublime among all the schools. Confucius said: "If something would be praised, it must be put into practice and prove its value." The prosperity of the times of Yao and Shun, the flourishing ages of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, as well as Confucius's career, all of these are the great achievements of the doctrine of Confucianism as it was practiced.

The above words show the authors' very earnest and sincere attitude towards this culture. Although it was articulated by Liu Xin and Ban Gu, it expressed the heartfelt convictions of all contemporary Confucians. They cherished "the Six Classics" and the power of humaneness and righteousness. They praise Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen, and King Wu, and they consider the history of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties as their glory. Similar words can be found extensively in *The Analects* and *Mencius*. Why is the Confucian so admiring of the Six Saints in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties as well as the Six Classics (which are something like the historical records of the Zhou dynasty)? The answer is very simple. It is the culture and history of their nation.<sup>11</sup> Confucians consider themselves to be the inheritors of the culture of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties.

But Lao Zi did not have the same ideals that the Confucians did:

Lao Zi lived in the capital of Zhou for a long time, and saw that the Zhou Dynasty was declining. He left (for his own freedom). ("Biographies of Lao Zi and Han Fei," *Shi Ji*)

Although Lao Zi was a library officer, he departed from the Zhou dynasty when it was in danger. "When the fatherland was dark with strife, the loyal slaves were in evidence" (*Lao Zi*,

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<sup>11</sup> Through the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, the main part of the nation was the Hua Xia nationality. See ZHOU Jixu, On the Shared Origin of the Rong and Han (Xia) Nationalities, *Chinese Culture Research* No. 3, (2008), pp. 123–132.

Chapter 18). Lao Zi did not consider himself a loyal slave to the Zhou dynasty. Instead, he was just a cold onlooker of this "mainstream culture."

## The Reason for the Opposition between Confucius and Lao Zi

The opposition between Confucius (followed by Mencius) and Lao Zi (followed by Zhuang Zi) did not come into being without an underlying reason. Indeed, there was a real social foundation for the opposition that existed. By examining the several characteristics outlined above, we can find different ways of life hiding behind the two disparate worldviews. Moreover, we can better understand the somewhat obscured history expressed in the traditional classics. The key to elucidating this account of their history can be found in recent discoveries of contemporary anthropology regarding ancient times.

According to data from the fieldwork of contemporary anthropology, humans experienced in their pre-history a form of society similar to that described above. At that time (the early Neolithic Age), humans had grasped basic agricultural techniques and lived in a tribal agricultural society, with relatively low productivity from their labor. Family-like tribes formed according to the ties of blood, and people were equal in social position. They shared common resources, worked together, cooperated with one another, and shared their acquisitions equally. People mastered the techniques of pottery making, spinning, weaving, and simple building. There were no superior heroes or rulers; people led harmonious, calm, and contented lives. This pre-civilized society was replaced by agricultural civilization, powered by such new techniques as the making of bronze, wheels, ploughing, and writing, etc. The time at which one replaced the other differs from place to place around the world. Moreover, these two forms of society coexisted for a certain time. (Stavrianos 2005, 1999)

In ancient times, there were two forms of society in the region of the Yellow River valley. One was the relatively primitive tribal agricultural society, which is without a caste system; the other was the civilized agricultural society, class-based and advocating rites and morality. The ways of life of these two societies form the real social basis of the contrasting thought of Lao Zi and Confucius; this is the origin of the differences between Taoism and Confucianism. Since the

Zhou dynasty, the class-based agricultural society and its culture had been the main stream of the civilization of the Yellow River valley. It is the one described in the historical documents that have been passed down without interruption. The tribal agricultural society and its culture have an even longer history in the Yangtze River valley. However, this culture has been swamped by the mainstream civilization and never was formally described in the Chinese ancient historical documents. All that survives of it are a few clues are hidden in the ancient literature. *Lao Zi* is simply a relic of this culture.

As to the social foundation of the thought of Lao Zi, he himself described it in the famous Chapter 80 of *Lao Zi*:

Reduce the size of the population and the state. Ensure that even though there are tools ten times or a hundred times better than those of other men, the people will not use them; ensure also that they will look on death as no light matter and have nothing to do with leaving their homes to settle elsewhere.

They have ships and carts but will not go on them; they have armor and weapons but will have no occasion to make a show of them.

Bring it about that the people will return to the use of the knotted rope,  
Will find relish in their food  
And beauty in their clothes,  
Will be happy in the way they live  
And be content in their abode.

Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another. (Chapter 80, *Lao Zi*; translation by D. C. Lau, 1982)

This is Lao Zi's description of society in ancient times, obviously a vivid picture of life in a tribal agricultural society. Though there are only seventy-three characteristics listed in this

chapter,<sup>12</sup> it has given us a clear idea of the entire social foundation of Lao Zi's thought. With the knowledge of this kind of society, we can understand the source of many concepts in *Lao Zi* such as "nothing-doing," "no-struggling," "nothing-desiring," "favoring calmness," "female-worshipping," "being content with one's lot," "selflessness," "no-worshipping property," and "much hoarding leads to losing," etc. These concepts thoroughly match primitive tribal society and its culture. As to the broad and profound concept of the Way (Tao), it covers the continuous reproduction bred in an endless succession of the myriad creatures in nature, and it covers the life cycle. We cannot take this chapter as Lao Zi's Utopia. The way of life in Lao Zi's description is greatly different from the ordinary person's views. How could such specific and vividly detailed description be imagined? About 2,500 years previously, an agricultural society embracing a caste system had been built up along the Yellow River Valley (Zhou Jixu 2006, 2008). The agricultural civilization gradually arose. But in other areas, especially in southern areas such as the Huaihe River Valley and the Yangtse River Valley, this remote, ancient way of life persisted for quite a long time. The intellectuals born there — those such as Lao Zi, Zhuang Zi, Xu Xing, Zhangju, Jieni, Jieyu and Yufu, etc.<sup>13</sup> — yearned for the "good old days." They praised this "magnificent savage's way of life." Moreover, they realize this idea in their actions, words, and writings.

There are evocative descriptions in *Zhuang Zi*:

Have you never heard of the Age of Perfect Nature? In the days of Rong-cheng, Da-ting, Bo-huang, Zhong-yang, Li-lu, Li-xu, Xuan-yuan, He-xi, Zun-lu, Zhu-rong, Fu-xi, and Shen-nong, the people tied knots for reckoning. They enjoyed their food, beautified their clothing, were satisfied with their homes, and delighted in their customs. Neighboring settlements overlooked one another, so that they could hear the barking of dogs and crowing of cocks of their neighbors, and the

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<sup>12</sup> The translation of the eighty chapters of *Lao Zi* is based on the Ma Wang Dui manuscripts.

<sup>13</sup> The latter four persons appear in *the Analects* and *Zhuang Zi*; they are intellectuals who lived in the south of China. They were discontented with the social reality and so became hermits.

people till the end of their days had never been outside their own country. In those days there was indeed perfect peace. (Qu Qie, *Zhuang Zi*)

The descriptions in *Zhuang Zi* are almost the same as those in *Lao Zi*. The description of the twelve tribes that held to this way of life in ancient times can be compared point-for-point with "the period of Shen-nong (神农之世)" in the Daozhi chapter of *Zhuang Zi*. Moreover, we can employ it to understand better Xu Xing's "theory of Sheng-nong (神农之言)" in *Mencius*.

As if the descriptions by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi were not enough, there is another piece of description that is very popular among the Chinese people in the present day:

Confucius said: "When the Great Way prevailed, and when the Saints of the three dynasties administered the world, I was not caught up with the ages. But the historical records were kept here."

That is, when the Great Way prevailed, public society belonged to everyone. The virtuous and the able were chosen for public office. Fidelity and friendliness were valued by all. People not only loved their own parents and children, but loved the parents and children of others as well. The elderly lived their last years in happiness; able-bodied adults were usefully employed; children were reared properly. Widowers, widows, orphans, the childless aged, the crippled and the ailing were well cared for. All men shared their social responsibilities, and all women performed their domestic duties in married life. Natural resources were fully used for the benefit of all, and not appropriated for selfish ends. People wanted to contribute their strength and ability to society for the public good and not for private gain. Trickery and intrigue could not occur in such a society. Robbery, larceny, rebellion, and murder all disappeared. Doors were toward the outside and not locked. This was the society of the Great Harmony. (Liyun, *Liji*)

This description, usually called "Da Tong," has been noted as being the same form of society described in Chapter 80 of *Lao Zi*. This is also the recording of real history. The notion



that "Da Tong (Great Harmony), it is just an ideal of a utopian society," is discussed by the author of this paper in a thesis (ZHOU Jixu 2002). In that paper, the author pointed out that the word "zhi 志" in the phrase "而有志焉" means "historical records." This sentence means, "Although I (Confucius) did not go through those great periods, the historical literature about these times nevertheless still exists." The "Da Tong," as well as Chapter 80 of *Lao Zi*, both objectively described this tribal agricultural society. Lao Zi and Confucius, however, took opposite positions. Lao Zi praised and identified with this culture; but Confucius just sighed and gave it up. Moved by the peaceful calm and harmony of this primitive society, as well as by his proposed "benevolence," Confucius praised this form of society highly, and named it the "Great Way." However, hidden behind these good words is the idea that this kind of society has gone away irretrievably. We have already stepped into the society of "Xiao Kang," a new, civilized society, though one with many defects. We cannot go back. This is Confucius's historical choice. Excluded as being among the unenlightened by Confucius's mainstream culture, this primitive society nevertheless was greatly praised by Lao Zi. From his point of view, this society makes perfect sense and is desirable. Thus Lao Zi and Confucius, the ancestors of Taoism and Confucianism, are two giant trees that have been planted in two different cultural soils.

*The Book of Changes, Book of Ancestors, Book of Poetics, Book of Rites*, as well as *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, are the historical books of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. These are the so-called "Classics." Confucians are the celebrators of this culture — they worship "the Six Classics" and those "great saints." On the other hand, the figures in another group that includes Shen-nong, Ge-tian, and Wu-huai, etc.,<sup>14</sup> are despised by mainstream civilization. The "noble and elegant" Classics, it is clear, did not have a place for them. *Lao Zi* and *Zhuang Zi* represent a nationality and its culture that have been excluded and repressed.

## Further Discussion

The philosophy of Lao Zi accords with the tribal agricultural culture that existed at the end of the Neolithic Age. Once this point is understood, the content of the abstruse and profound *Dao De*

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<sup>14</sup> Ge Tian and Wu Huai are the chieftains of ancient tribes in the remote antiquity of the legend.

*Jing* becomes much clearer. Lao Zi relied on another archaic way of life and insisted on advocating his philosophic theory. He bewailed the fact that his rustic life had been replaced by the new civilized one. "It was when the Great Way declined, that human kindness and morality arose; it was when intelligence and knowledge appeared, that the Great Artifice began. It was when the six near ones were no longer at peace, that there was talk of 'dutiful sons'; nor, till fatherland was dark with strife, did we hear of 'loyal ministers'" (Chapter 18, *Lao Zi*). This is not an abstract inference from others. It is in fact his painful experience. Lao Zi was born in the Kingdom Chu, which is a country in the south and far from the capital of Zhou dynasty. He must have been very familiar with the tribal, agricultural way of life in the south, even having experienced it himself. He was also an officer in the Zhou dynasty for a long period, and therefore he had the chance to make a comparison between the two ways of life. He highly praises the egalitarian rustic culture but strongly criticizes hierarchical feudal civilization (there are many new techniques and even more defects in this society). Possessed of a very high attainment in philosophy, he summed up his thought in the magnificent and everlasting *Lao Zi*.

In the history of the world, the Neolithic Age belongs to the remote past, and there are very few direct records of this ancient time. People usually adopt the methods of modern anthropology to review and analyze this period. Thanks to *Lao Zi* (c. 6 B.C.–5 B.C.), much of this archaic social culture has been preserved for humanity. People could confirm this history from the aspect of ancient historical documents. The more valuable fact is that people's inner world in that ancient society could be known to present people. By this evidence, the history of Chinese culture is longer than three thousand years at least.

Many penetrating thoughts and views of Lao Zi have emerged from a society that has embraced the concepts of non-hierarchical system. A number of politicians have adopted these ideas to manage state affairs and to relieve social conflict (as did, for instance, the rulers in the early years of the Western Han dynasty). Lao Zi's great insightful philosophic thoughts have provided civilized society with another worldview, which is opposite to the worldview of Confucianism. Chinese intellectuals for more than two thousand years have identified themselves with it. An unavoidable misapprehension has resulted: the idea that both Confucianism and

Taoism are the outcome of the same social culture in the Spring and Autumn Period. This misapprehension was begun by Liu Xin and Ban Gu, and it persists to the present day.

In accordance with the *Yiwenzhi* of *Hanshu*, almost all other schools of thought depend on Confucianism. As it says:

At present, the different schools publicize the virtues of their doctrines respectively. They dispense their wisdom in order to make the points of their doctrines clear. Although there are many blind spots and shortcomings in their doctrines, by summarizing the key points, one can see that they are branches and twigs of "the Six Classics." All the schools advocated their doctrines by adopting and valuing different aspects of "the Six Classics." Their aim is to be appreciated and adopted by the feudal lords. [*Yiwenzhi*, *Hanshu* (Accounts of Literature, *History of Former Han Dynasty*)]

However, Taoism does not belong to these schools. It is neither a branch of the "Six Classics," nor an attempt to have its way accepted by the lords. Instead, it is a cultural relic unrelated to "the Six Classics" or Confucianism, which represents another way of life and its social culture. This is the fundamental difference between Lao Zi and Confucius in the pre-Qin period. Understanding this essential difference is very meaningful to the study of the historical formation of the Chinese nation and its culture in ancient times.

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