

The Formation of the Dào/Dé Jīng

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Abstract. I here update my 1994 note on Dào/Dé Jīng 道德經 (DDJ) formation,¹ which holds that the chapter sequence of the Wáng Bì text is original, was reached by a double accretion process, and lies behind both the Gwōdyèn and Mǎwángdwēi texts. A rough dating is proposed, with links to some contemporary events. The authorship question is here finessed, though these results seem to preclude a single author.

Form. The common perception is that the first half of the text (DDJ 1-37), commonly called the Dào-jīng 道經, is more mystical, and the second (DDJ 38-81) or Dé-jīng 德經, more governmental.² It can further be shown that the first half displays (though the second does not) a symmetrical or head-and-tail distribution of themes. The center of symmetry of that half is DDJ 14, the most mystical chapter in the book. Our impression of the generally mystical character of DDJ 1-37 is thus enhanced if we see DDJ 14 as its earliest portion. To that core, it seems that material was added as suggested in the diagram opposite. If such a form had been imposed by a later transcriber of some unorganized oral sayings, we would expect to find that form displayed also in the second or Dé-jīng half, but we do not.³ If it was not imposed, it is probably integral. If integral, it would seem to be the result of a growth process, in the first stage of which accretion took place at both the head and tail of a core text. This implies that the first part was written over time. The stronger statecraft emphasis in the second part, as well as the abandonment of head-and-tail topical symmetry, suggest some sort of factor at work at this point, in whatever group produced the text.

It follows from the above considerations that the Dào-jīng half of the text does not *begin*, but rather *ends*, with DDJ 1. If so, a rational purpose can be found for DDJ 1: to bridge the gap which by then had developed between the mystical (無名, 無欲) and practical (有名, 有欲) elements of the text. This function of ideological reconciliation will readily explain several otherwise puzzling features of that chapter.⁴

¹First presented at the Third New England Symposium on Chinese Thought, June 1990.

²Creel's terms (**What 5**) are "contemplative" and "purposive." The division need not coincide exactly with the Dào-jīng and Dé-jīng division, which divides the text into two parts with roughly equal *character* count. Lin **Wisdom** 199 argues instead for a break after DDJ 40, which divides the text into two parts with roughly equal *chapter* count. See further below.

³I believe that these facts eliminate the "oral hypothesis" (Allan **Guodian** 83f, 142f) except in a form where both the content and the sequence of the sayings is considered fixed. Such an "oral" hypothesis is indistinguishable in practice from the hypothesis of a written text.

⁴People often concentrate on DDJ 1, as though getting it right would solve everything else. I suggest that it is better to start with something else, perhaps most promisingly with DDJ 14.

PREPOSED CHAPTER SEQUENCE		POSTPOSED CHAPTER SEQUENCE
		<i>Mystical</i>
		14 Meditation
		15 Ancient adepts
		<i>Mystical Applications</i>
Rulership: Identify with Universe	13	16* Rulership: Identify with Heaven
		17 Remote rulership
		<i>Anti-Conventional; Pro-Simplicity</i>
Avoiding sensory distractions	12	18 Against Confucian 仁義 populism
		19 Avoiding sensory distractions
		20* Ditto
The empty core	11	21 The intangible Dào
		<i>Non-Assertiveness; Low Profile</i>
Detachment of ruler	10	22 Unassertiveness of ruler
Do not go too far	9	23 Violent endeavors do not endure
Lowliness of ruler	8	24 Avoiding display
Selflessness of ruler	7	
		<i>Cosmological Dào; Successful Rulership</i>
Mysterious Feminine	6	25A Dào is the Mother of the World
Sage treats people as Nature does	5*	25B The King is part of the cosmos
Dào exists eternally; precedes God	4	
		<i>Paradoxical Dào; Anti-War</i>
Do not employ the talented	3A	26 The stay-at-home ruler
Keep the people strong but stupid	3B	
Theory of opposites; low profile	2A	27 Paradoxes of opposites
		28 Ditto
Low-profile ruler gains his ends	2B	29 Assertive ruler cannot succeed
		30* Against war
		31* Ditto
		32 Know when to stop
		33 Conquest of the self
		34 Dào is universal
		35 Dàoist ruler attracts all
		36 Weakness wins over strength
		37 Subtlest ruler wins
		<i>Synthesis and Reconciliation</i>
Blending mystical / governmental	1	

• *The DDJ 1-37 Double Accretion Pattern* •

Indicating chapters **wholly** or **partly*** included in the Gwōdyèn text

DDJ 1 has verbal affinities (無名, 欲) with DDJ 37, and attempts to reconcile mystical and governmental tendencies. The text may here have reached the maximum for one roll of bamboo strips,⁵ so an overview remark would be especially appropriate. Then we need not look for a sharp transition to statecraft themes beginning at DDJ 38, and in fact such ideas are present as early as DDJ 13 and 16.

⁵For the Mencius parallel, see Brooks **Nature** 248 or Brooks **Interviews** 148.

Rearrangement of material was common in Warring States and Hàn, as is shown by the Gwōdyèn DDJ (whose order differs from Mǎwángdwèi and the received text), and the Gwōdyèn Dǎo-yī 緇衣 (which is differently arranged in the Lǐ Jì version). Of these three arrangements of the DDJ material, we ask the classic Tischendorf question: which, if any, is most easily seen as the point of departure for the other two?⁶

For the GD text, there are two considerations. First, GD lacks anything from the last fifteen chapters of our text (DDJ 67-81). That this was a simple oversight is not statistically tenable;⁷ a truncated text must lie behind GD. It then seems that GD (c0288)⁸ has accessed DDJ while it was still in process of formation, and that the formation process at that time was linear accretion, a process which is more easily formulated in terms of the received text. An order like that of the received text is then prior to GD. Second, for the portion of DDJ (chapters 1-66) of which GD is aware, there is a clear rationale of exclusion. Among the rejected themes were: demeaning the ruler (DDJ 22, 8, 7, 36), disapproval of military force (DDJ 23, 29) and supernatural belief (DDJ 6, 4).⁹ The last is confirmed by the exclusion of DDJ 42, with its Dào cosmogony, and by the addition of the otherwise unknown text Tàì-yī Shwǒng Shwěi 太一生水 (Tàì-yī was a Chǔ deity)¹⁰ with its water cosmogony. The dislike of a humble role for the ruler is plausibly explained by the GD text owner's role as tutor to the Chǔ Heir Apparent.¹¹ The fact that a plausible exclusion rule can be formulated suggests that GD is a selection from something like the received text.¹²

The MWD texts (one written in Chín, the other in early Hàn) are close to the received text. Their differences of order make sense in terms of a potentially rebellious local magnate. MWD puts the statecraft Dǎo-jīng ahead of the contemplative Dào-jīng, signaling practical interest; this move puts DDJ 37, with its promise of universal political power to Kings and Lords (wáng 王 and hóu 侯, these being local-ruler titles under Hàn) at the end of the text, a meaningful position. This would have been ominous in Hàn context. And DDJ 80-81, implying reduction rather than expansion of territory, were moved from the end to the beginning of the DDJ 67-81 sequence, precisely the portion of the DDJ which is not represented at Gwōdyèn.¹³ These thematic emphases and de-emphases seems akin to the cultural censorship seen in GD.

There is thus no difficulty in seeing GD and MWD as thematically motivated rearrangements, and in seeing the order of the received DDJ text as prior to both.

⁶For this fundamental directionality criterion, see Epp **Eclectic** 147.

⁷See Brooks **Probability**.

⁸A first approximation; the midpoint of the available range 0298-0278.

⁹Isabelle Robinet (Allan 167f) contrasts Confucian and Dàoist cosmogonies; the point here seems more likely to be northern versus Chǔ cosmogonies.

¹⁰The attaching of Hwáng/Lǎo material to the MWD text of DDJ seems to be another example of an attempt to adjust the always-suggestive DDJ to specific local conditions.

¹¹I accept the 東宮之師 reading of the lacquer cup found in the GD 1 tomb furniture.

¹²See now also Murphy **Comparison**.

¹³In the process baffling Henricks **Te** xviii (cf Henricks **Chapter** 523), which however see for useful suggestions about the two remaining minor MWD transpositions of material.

Date. If the religious content of DDJ gave offense in Chǔ, then even ignoring the Lǔ-dialect s̄ 斯 “thus,” the DDJ is probably a northern text.¹⁴ In the north, there are several possibly influential events and contacts. Mician critique (see Brooks **Ethical**) is echoed in early DDJ chapters. The 0315 invasion of Yēn was a disaster for Chí. The Gwōdyèn text, simply by its inventory, implies an interruption point in the range 0298/0278.¹⁵ The 0285 conquest of Sùng was another Chí disaster. Lǔ lost half its area to Chǔ in 0255/54 (the DDJ 80 advice to diminish territory 小國 and population 寡民 may refer to this event) and the rest in 0249. In that year, the Analects (in Lǔ) and the Mencius (near Lǔ) ceased to be written. Against that framework, we have:

???? *Mystical*

14 Meditation

16* Rulership: Identify with Heaven

c0330 MZ 25 criticizes extravagance as violating 仁義 social values

Anti-Conventional

18 Against 仁義 social values

???? Dzōu Yēn’s cosmology is popular in Chí

Cosmological Dàu

25A Dàu is the Mother of the world

25B The King is part of the cosmos

5* Sage treats people as does Nature (anti-populism)

0314 Chí is driven from Yēn and humiliated; Mencius leaves Chí

c0313 Dzōu Yēn becomes chief figure in new Jì-syà establishment

Anti-War

3A Do not employ the talented (anti-Mician; anti-Mencius)

3B Keep people strong but stupid (anti-populism = anti-Mencius)

30 Against war

31* Know when to stop (cf MC 1B10)

37 Dàuist ruler wins

The Politics of Weakness

55 Strength in seeming weakness (metaphor of infant)

c0290 LY 16:4 objects to “weakness” as a principle

66 Strategic “lower reaches” of river

c0288 Gwōdyèn extracts are based on DDJ 1-66 only

0285 Chí is driven from Sùng

69 Dare not be the attacker; be rather the attacked

73 Heaven’s Way is to get answers without speaking

c0270 LY 17:17 parodies “Heaven does not speak”

0254 Lǔ loses half its territory to Chǔ

80 Make the country small, make the people few

• *DDJ Passages and Contemporary Events* •

Indicating chapters **wholly** or **partly*** included in the Gwōdyèn Text

The match of text and external event seems actionably suggestive.

¹⁴For the Lǔ features of the MWD version, see Henricks **Problem 6**, which is however reluctant to accept their implication.

¹⁵For an important part of that argument, see Brooks **Probability**.

Other Theories. The variety of viewpoints in the work has led to theories of late date and composite nature (Takeuchi); I hope to have shown that the variety can be accounted for by an accretion process: remaining sensitive to contemporary conditions. The repetition of material within the work has led to theories of broken bamboo slips (Duyvendak) or of four discontinuous layers (Emerson), but repetition of themes and even passages is seen elsewhere (for instance LY 4:14, *14:30, *15:19, and 1:16; note also the duplication of paragraphs within the Mician ethical triplets), and may be only a device by which an evolving text asserts its ideological continuity.

Conclusion. The characteristics of the DDJ can be satisfactorily accounted for by an accretion theory, beginning in c0345 with a mystical core, adding social criticism during the 04c, and concentrating more exclusively on governmental theory in the 03c. Given an awareness of northern events, and the appropriateness of DDJ 80 to the woes of Lǚ in the mid 03c, a Lǚ location is plausible. So is the end of activity after 0249, since Sywǎndǒ (who in SZ 17 天論 disapproves of the “weakness” theories of “Lǎudǒ”) in that year became the governor of conquered Lǚ. The text’s formation then occupied the period from c0345 to 0249. So long a span would be implausible for one leader, so that at least one leadership transition must have occurred during the life of the text.

In sum, the DDJ seems to have adjusted to new developments by adding new material, and at the same time to have maintained its self-identity by stylistic continuity and thematic repetition. DDJ thus gradually assumed, and increasingly emphasized, the advocacy position toward which virtually all of the Warring States texts evolved: that of offering advice to government.

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