THE WHOLENESS OF CHAOS:
LAOZI ON THE BEGINNING

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Abstract

In Daoism the origin of the universe is seen as a spontaneous creation without the intervention of a supreme divine being. This spontaneous creational process is however linked to the myths concerning the birth of Laozi as personifications of the Dao. In these myths many ancient elements of oral culture are preserved. Some are still orally transmitted in China today. As the creational process is seen as a form of gestation and birth, it can ultimately be considered in relationship to the union of man and woman, of complementary opposites, something that is equally fundamental in the Five Classics.1

Keywords: Laozi, yin and yang, primordial chaos, Pangu, transformation, gestation, womb, birth, mother, liturgy, Zhuangzi, Dao De Jing, Five Classics

In the Outer Chapters of the Zhuangzi (3rd century BCE), we find the following story:

Kongzi (Kong Zi) went to visit Laodan (the Long-Eared Old Man, another name for Laozi). Having just bathed and let down his hair to dry, Laodan was sitting so perfectly still that he no longer seemed human. Kongzi at first stood back and waited, but after a while introduced himself, saying: “Dare I believe my eyes? A moment ago, master, your body seemed dried out as dead wood, as if you had abandoned all things and left the world of men for solitude!”

Laodan replied: “I let my heart revel [in the realm] where [all] things have their beginning.”

“How is that?” asked Kongzi.

Laozi said: “One may harrow one’s mind, yet remain unable to understand; open one’s mouth, yet be unable to express what [this experience] means. […] We shall never know where life comes from or where death leads; yet I will try to tell you something about it. The utmost yin is

1 The present article is a reworked version of the chapter “Lao Tzu, the Body of the Tao” in my book The Taoist Body. Los Angeles, The University of California Press, 1993.
stern and cold; the utmost *yang* is flaming hot. The stern and cold proceed from Heaven, the flaming hot proceeds from the Earth. The two intermingle and interpenetrate, and from their union all things are born. Their action alternates through the four seasons, through night and day. [...] Life has its place of germination; death has its place of return. This opposition of the beginning and the end creates an endless circle whose end no one knows. And yet, if not at this here, then where should one look for “the Ancestor?”

In this speech of Laozi to Kongzi, the references to “the realm where all things have their beginning” and to “the Ancestor” are ways of indicating the hidden and unknowable dimensions of the rhythmical rite of the universe. Zhuangzi shows us that Laozi was able to reach these fundamental dimensions in his own body.

The same notion is explained in an ancient inscription, which says: “Laozi sometimes is one with the energy (*qi*) of primordial chaos, sometimes separates himself from it; he is coeternal with the Three Luminaries (i.e.: sun, moon, and Pole star).”

Yet another ancient text tells us that when the adepts meditated on the “body of Laozi,” they conceived this cosmic body in the following manner:

He exists at the origin of the Great Beginning, he walks about in the beginning of the Great Simplicity, he floats in the Obscure Emptiness, comes and goes through the outer door of Dark Tenuity, contemplates chaos before its differentiation, the transparent (heaven) and the opaque (earth) before their separation.—Alone, without companion, he wonders in the times of yore, before there were Heaven and Earth. He comes out of his hidden state and returns there to dwell. Having vanished, he is the Primordial; being manifest, he becomes human. Elusive! Through the transformation of Heaven and Earth and of his spirit, he is made flesh in the bosom of Mother Li.

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2 *Zhuangzi*, ch. 21:711–712. In classical literature, Laozi is often referred to as Lao-dan; historians like Sima Qian treat Lao as a patronymic and consider Dan to be a first name. But here Dan certainly has an allegorical meaning: to have long ears is a sign of longevity.

3 Concerning “the ancestor,” see chapter “Lao Tzu, the Body of the Tao” in my book *The Taoist Body*.

4 *Laozi Ming* (an inscription in honor of Laozi) by Bian Chao and dated AD 165. See Seidel 1969:123.

5 *Laozi bianhua jing* [Book of the Transformation of Laozi], probably AD 165. See Seidel, the complete version of this text has been lost. An important fragment was found in the famous medieval manuscript library in Dunhuang. See Seidel 1969:61, and *Yunji qiqian*, ch. 102, f. 2b. On Mother Li, Laozi’s mother, see section “birth” in chapter “Lao Tzu, the Body of the Tao” in my book *The Taoist Body*. 

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