

THE “LAOZI” DEBRIS FROM GUODIAN

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In 1993, archeologists hastily excavated several "Warring States Period" tombs in a village called **Kuo-tien/Guodian** (Jingmen city, Hubei), near the ancient capital of Ch'u/Chu. One is believed to be the tomb of the tutor of the crown prince of the state of Ch'u/Chu, and has been dated to ca. 300 BCE. Floating inside the tomb were some 800 bamboo slips inscribed in the Ch'u/Chu script. Scholars found 71 slips containing text that correspond to passages of the famous *Tao te ching / Daode jing*. Physical evidence shows that they (1) came from three separate bundles, (2) contained definable “sets” of passages, and (3) were not written in the same hand. [Cf. Stephan Peter Bumbacher, “The Earliest Manuscripts of the *Laozi* Discovered to Date,” *Asiatische Studien* 52.4 (1998), 1175-1184.]

The charts below follow the arrangement of the material in *Guodian Chumu zhujian* [The Bamboo Slips from the Chu Tomb at Guodian] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998). The section numbers have been added to show correspondences to the received text (Wang Bi ed.), adding Henricks' line numbering. The preliminary translation by Mark Csikszentmihalyi (unpublished) follows the arrangement of the material in Cui Renyi, *Jingmen Guodian Chujian Laozi yanjiu* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1998), which (1) inverts the order of the 3 groupings, and (2) counts the text *Taiyi shengshui* as section A I-III. It should be noted that each “set” is indisputably a single written entity, but that the original arrangement of “sets” within each bundle is unknown.

Certain ideas found in the previously known editions (both the received text and the Mawangdui silk texts) are absent from the Kuo-tien/Guodian texts, most notably attacks on Confucian values (e.g., in chap. 19); behavioral ideals likened to water or to feminine ways (e.g., in chaps. 6, 8, 10, 28); references to “the one” (e.g., in chaps. 10, 14); and some of the harsher political sentiments (e.g., in chaps. 3 and 65). The material in the longest bundle (A) seems to present a fairly coherent program for successfully managing “the myriad things” by applying effective insights into the processes at work in the world. It might actually constitute a tutor’s lessons for a prince who will someday have to govern. Its final section (A, “Set 1”; Csikszentmihalyi, section C V) contains one line (in section “64”) that is found in no other edition. It translates as “The Ordinances for Approaching Affairs,” and, though clearly not presented there as a title, actually serves as a nice summary of the contents of bundle A. The materials in bundles B and C seem less coherent. All commend self-restraint [cf. Kirkland, “Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness: The Moral Teachings of the *Daode jing*,” in Michael Barnhart, ed., *Varieties of Ethical Reflection* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield; in press)]. None commend biospiritual cultivation (as in the *Nei-yeh*). Some passages of the extant *Daode jing* (e.g., chaps. 24, 26, 29) seem entirely consistent with the contents of the Kuo-tien/Guodian texts, but are not found here. Some scholars (e.g., Bumbacher) assume that grave-robbers, who broke into the tomb before the archeologists began work, probably removed the corresponding slips, but such speculations remain highly conjectural. It remains difficult to construct a compelling argument about whether the Kuo-tien/Guodian texts represent an *Ur-text* (to which later redactors added other materials, sometime in the 3rd century), or fragmentary remnants of a fuller text (which would therefore date back to some point in the 4th century). It is noteworthy that none of the extant Kuo-tien/Guodian slips contain any passage that corresponds to any part of chapters 67-81 of the received text. While some scholars blame the grave-robbers, it seems highly important that the “comments” on “Laozi” in chapters 20 and 21 of *Han-fei-tzu/Hanfeizi* also lack reference to sections 68-81 of the extant *Daode jing*. That fact seems unlikely to be coincidence, and suggests that the Han-fei commentators were reading a text that corresponded to the Kuo-tien/Guodian texts, rather than to the received edition or to either of the Mawangdui texts. The significance of such facts — particularly for narrowing down the date or geographic provenance of the evolving text — awaits further research.

"BUNDLE A"

(Kirkland: *"The Ordinances for Approaching Affairs"*)

Kirkland: "Set 1" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C V")

1. 19
2. 66
3. 46: 3-7
4. 30: 1-2, 6-13
5. 15: 1-15
6. 64: 10-18 (also found in C, "set 3")

Kirkland: "Set 2" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C III")

7. 37
8. 63: 1-4, 14-15
9. 2: 1-17 (except 9 & 13)
10. 32

Kirkland: "Set 3" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C I")

11. 25
12. 5: 5-7

Kirkland: "Set 4" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C II")

13. 16: 1-6

Kirkland: "Set 5" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C IV")

14. 64: 1-9
15. 56
16. 57

Kirkland: "Set 6" (Csikszentmihalyi: "C VI")

17. 55
18. 44
19. 40
20. 9

"BUNDLE B"

Kirkland: "Set 1" (Csikszentmihalyi: "B II")

1. 59
2. 48: 1-4
3. 20: 1-6
4. 13

Kirkland: "Set 2" (Csikszentmihalyi: "B I")

5. 41

Kirkland: "Set 3" (Csikszentmihalyi: "B III")

6. 52: 5-10
7. 45
8. 54

"BUNDLE C"

Kirkland: "Set 1" (Csikszentmihalyi: "A IV")

1. 17
2. 18

Kirkland: "Set 2" (Csikszentmihalyi: "A V")

3. 35

Kirkland: "Set 3" (Csikszentmihalyi: "A VI")

4. 31: 4-18
5. 64: 10-18 (also found in A, "set 1")

Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian. By Robert G. Henricks. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-231-11816-3.

This is the first published translation of a fragmentary text of the *Tao te ching* discovered in an ancient tomb in 1993. This "Bamboo-Slip *Lao-tzu*" from Guodian (Kuo-tien) differs in format from the received text or from the Ma-wang-tui "silk-manuscripts" found in the 1970s. Henricks is expert on all such materials, and well qualified to introduce the English-speaking world to the new finds. He explains the textual, historical, and interpretive issues; relates the views of other analysts; and offers his own thoughtful positions. Appendices include a line-by-line comparison (in Chinese) with the more familiar editions, and the translation itself provides the original Chinese text (both in exact transcription and in modern equivalents) on the page facing each translated section. Scholars worldwide are still pondering the new find's significance, and specialists may not share all of Henricks' specific conclusions. But all will appreciate the painstaking care with which he has presented the new text for Western readers.

-- Russell Kirkland, *Religious Studies Review* 27 (2001), 314