Five Daoists
Chapter 35. The God Laozi

It all started with Laozi 老子 — maybe you know him from when we spelled his name Lao Tzu. Here in Li Bo’s poem, he’s called Lord Lao (Laojun 老君).²⁸⁵

Paying respects at the temple of Lord Lao

Numinous First Lord! The power of your sacred temple awes the spirit. Now grasses have grown over the footpath, and birds leave deep tracks in the dust. Off in the sands, the cinnabar stove’s gone out, purple smoke no longer hovers over the Pass. I’m only sad that a thousand years later there’s space to spare in this pine and cypress graveyard.²⁸⁶

Laozi, his fabled writing the Daodejing 道德經 (Canon of the virtues of Dao) — its lead sentence is devilishly hard to translate, since it’s all pun: Dao means “a road, the way, to speak, to lead”:

Dao that can be Daoed is not a long-lasting Dao, names that can be named are not long-lasting names.²⁸⁷
works. Even a materialist is forced to accept the inadequacy of language. But others are welcome to go further into his wisdom: wonder-workers, diviners, spirit mediums, life-extenders, herbalists, healers, immortals, martial artists, militarists. Poets, too, in the way their wordful activity exceeds the word. You can even use those teachings as the basis for a theocratic state. The Bright Emperor was fully awed, copying out the text in his own hand for engraving at the Laozi Temple, and later writing his own commentary.

We’ve just seen the first two sentences of the Daodejing (The scripture of Dao’s power). These are the next two:

“Non-Having” names the pregnancy of Heaven and Earth, “Having” names the mother of the ten-thousand things.

無名天地之始，有名萬物之母

And so Laozi discerns the Nothing that is rife with all possibility and the Something that gives it birth as all appearance. Before him there wasn’t any thing, and afterwards plenty, before him only a (silent) ( silence ), and after him the whole of everything. So he is a cosmic cervix, twixt Naught and Aught, the two ropes of a swing. And thus in the same breath he is the inventor of language, naming names.

Through much of the twentieth century, by consensus in China and abroad, Laozi did not exist. (This was not a problem for him.) He’d been thought up, it was said, as a stand-in for the otherwise nameless author of the world’s second-most translated book, a supposed contemporary of Confucius (551–479). But there are other views. A fourth-century CE devotee gathered some of them:

His mother felt a great meteor enter her, and became pregnant. Although he received his qi-energy from Heaven, because he appeared in a family named Li, he took Li as his surname.
Some say that Laozi was born before Heaven and Earth. Or that he was endowed with the essence-soul of Heaven, so that he was of the class “numinous and divine.”

Some say that his mother carried him seventy-two years before he was born, and that when he was born, he came out of her left armpit. When he was born, he had a white head of hair, so he was called Laozi, “the old child/the ancient master.”

But only by the beginning of Tang did someone remember the older stories, and find a better approximated name for him, “Lord Lao (Laojun 老君).” As in The Scripture in Which the Most High Lord Lao Opens Heaven (Taishang Laojun kaitian jing 太上老君開天徑):

I have truthfully heard:

In the space-time before there was Heaven and Earth, incalculably far beyond Great Clarity, inside empty naught, which is a silent absence with no outside, where there is naught of Heaven, naught of Earth, naught of Yang, naught of Yin, naught of sun, naught of moon […], naught of going, naught of coming, naught of birthing, naught of dying […], only our Lord Lao, dwelling alone beyond the silent absence of empty mystery, amidst vacant mystery. If you look for him, you won’t see him. If you listen for him, you won’t hear him. You may call him aught, but you won’t see his form. You may call him naught, but the ten-thousand things are born from him […].

[After vast eons] and then after 10,000 kalpas, and on to a hundred completions, going on yet another 810,000 years, comes the period “Great Beginning.” At the time of Great Beginning, Lord Lao descends from vacuous emptiness, and becomes “Master of the Great Beginning.”
which is our world and now. But all these times dwell at one time, which is timelessness, so he’s never left home.

Lord Lao, then, is an ancestor one should not miss. The Tang house, equally surnamed Li, recognized him as their progenitor, their First Lord, and offered him imperial rank and title even above their own, sc. Mystery Primal August Emperor (Xuanyuan huangdi 玄元皇帝).²⁹⁹

Fig. 49. Song dynasty-era stone sculpture of Laozi at the foot of Mount Qingyuan.³⁰⁰