

# Interpreting the Tao Te Ching

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# Composition Range

range = from ascribed author's dates to a canonization or a decree\*\*



✦ composed, compiled, redacted, edited

✦ range = c. 600 BCE to c. 140 BCE

✦\*\* a decree by the emperor reigning 156-141 BCE officially elevated the *Lao Tzu* from a revered philosophical text to a sacred one (or *ching*)



# Received Text

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comes from Wang Pi mss. & commentaries +  
Ho-Shang Kung mss. & commentaries

✦ "Ancient Text of the Lao Tsu Collated" c.550CE (complete extant text)  
– based on a text discovered in a tomb from c. 200BCE , (now lost), &  
possibly the source of the *Wang Pi (226-249 CE)* text which  
circulated among scholars & intellectuals

✦ "Essential Principles of The Lao Tzu" c.25BCE (fragmented) --  
thought to be the origin of the *Ho-shang Kung (c. 150 CE)* text  
which diverged into a northern (4,999 words) & a southern version  
(5,302 words) circulating primarily among the illiterate masses



# Ma-wang Tui mss. or Silk mss.



《老子》甲本部分



discovered in 1974,  
are dated to  
c.206-195BCE;  
they show a different  
arrangement of the  
chapters: **38-81, 1-37**

(see Mair; Henricks)



# Silk ms.



《老子》甲本部分



"Laozi, Jia" ["Laozi [A]"].

Silk manuscript.  
Mawangdui tomb,  
Changsha, Hunan  
Province.

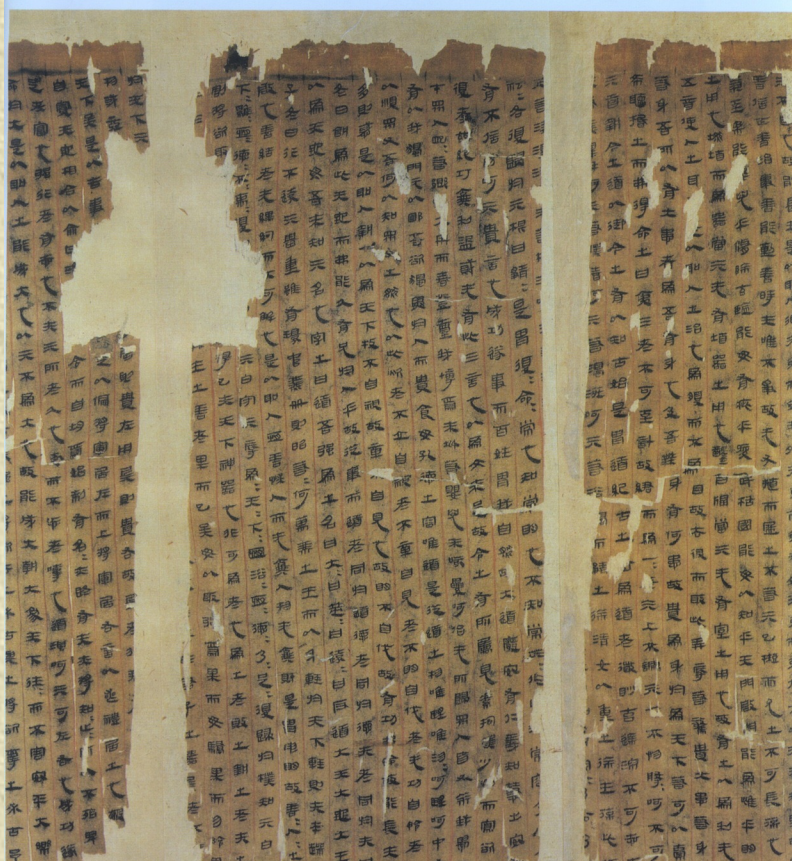
Source: Mawangdui Boshu  
Yishu (Shanghai: Shanghai  
shudian chubanshe, 1996).




From my.harvard




# Silk ms.



 "Laozi, yi" ["Laozi [B]"].

Silk manuscript.  
Mawangdui tomb,  
Changsha, Hunan  
Province.

Source: Mawangdui Boshu  
Yishu (Shanghai: Shanghai  
shudian chu

 banshe, 1996).

From my.harvard

# The Guodian Laozi or Bamboo mss.

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discovered in **1993**, are now the oldest; unearthed from a royal tutor's tomb, where evidence suggests the texts were written **well before 300BCE**; approx. 40% of the Received Text, differing order of stanzas, some chapters briefer

(see Henricks; Ames & Hall; Roberts)



# Bamboo ms.

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In **1993**, a discovery was made at a tomb in Guodia in Hubei province (east central China). Written on strips of bamboo that have miraculously survived intact since 300 B.C., the "Guodian Laozi," is by far the earliest version of the "Tao Te Ching" ever unearthed.





# Bamboo ms.

There were three bundles of bamboo strips (71 strips total), and they contained only chapters 1 to 67 of the modern Dao De Jing.

From  
[edepot.com/taotext.html](http://edepot.com/taotext.html)





“The division of the Laozi [the book] into its 81 chapters was apparently done by Liu Xiang, c.79-c.6 B.C.

Liu Xin, his son, quotes his father saying:

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✦ “When we collated the text of the Laozi, the imperial copy had two sections, the Grand Historian’s copy had one section, while my own copy also had two sections. Taken together... [there were] 143 chapters. We removed the duplications... establishing a text in two parts with 81 chapters. The “upper book” was put first, with 37 chapters, while the “lower book” came second with 44 chapters’.”

✦ (Henricks [Guodian] 9)



## Wordlessness

 the words chosen

and how  
phrases & clauses


are made/used

make


a BIG difference!


Taoism distrusts words;  
does Lao Tzu?






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 “Describing  
the indescribable,  
teaching  
the unteachable,  
pointing the way  
to the Way—what  
does Lao-tzu think  
he is doing here?  
It can’t be done”  
(Mitchell 85).

 “Using words is risky  
for processes that  
distrust words”  
(Grigg 185).




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“...**words are turned against words** to undo themselves so that the word system is prevented from spinning its own illusion of understanding.

Words are not used to push insights beyond the meaning of words but to avoid **the trap that is inherent in words themselves**” (Grigg 194).






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 “The dilemma is words are to be avoided, yet they are unavoidable”

(Grigg 191).

 “...words are (in the traditional Buddhist metaphor) fingers pointing at the moon; if you watch the finger, you can’t see the moon....”

(Mitchell 85).

A stone sculpture of Laozi, located north of [Quanzhou](#)  
at the foot of [Mount Qingyuan](#)

(Lao Tzu, Wikipedia)

