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Introduction to the Study of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* During 1911-1949 in China



YANG Jiahong¹, YEUNG Siu Kwai² and YANG Zhao Gui²

¹College of Humanities and Technology, Guizhou University for Nationalities, China

²Faculty of Education, University of Macau, China

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***Corresponding author:** Yang Jia Hong, Student, College of Humanities and Technology, Guizhou University for Nationalities, University City Campus, School of Humanities and Technology, Guizhou Minzu University, Dangwu Town, Huaxi District, Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, China

Abstract

*Laozi*老子, *Zhuangzi*庄子, and *Liezi*列子 are important texts of Taoism in China and the essence of Chinese traditional culture. Scholars who want to understand China and Chinese culture, it is necessary to understand them, and it is also necessary to understand the research situation from 1911 to 1949 because this period was the time when many important and authoritative works were published. This paper introduces the research on these three books during that period.

Keywords: *Laozi*老子; *Zhuangzi*庄子; and *Liezi*列子; 1911-1949; China; Taoism

Introduction to the Study of *Laozi*

There are many books and papers on the study of *Laozi*. Now we only select works with high academic value and great influence for review. The following first briefly reviews the research overview from the perspective of ideological research. The first perspective is to interpret “*Laozi*” through Confucianism. Representative works include: Xu Ang徐昂’s Confucian Interpretation of the *Tao Te Ching* 道德经儒诠states that the origins of Confucianism and Taoism are the same. Ma Qichang马其昶’s *Laozi* Gu老子故 believes that *Laozi* comes from the Book of Changes易经, and he also explains *Laozi* with Confucian classics such as The Analects and Mencius.

The second perspective is to interpret “*Lao*” from the perspective of Buddhism. Representative works include: Liang Qichao梁启超’s *Laozi*’s Philosophy老子哲学 pointed out that *Laozi* created a systematic philosophy for China. Although this was a rough creation, it was large-scale and raised many questions for future generations to study.

Zhang Chunyi张纯一’s General Explanation of *Laozi*老子通释 interprets *Laozi* through Buddhist perspectives on cause and effect, life and death. However, the Interpretation is somewhat excessive and clumsy. Ma Yifu马一浮’s Annotations to *Laozi*老子注 explains the “*Dao*” in *Laozi* through the concepts of “reality” 实相, “thusness” 真如, and “non manifestation” 无相示相, and uses Bodhisattva to interpret the Holy King.

The third ideological perspective is to interpret *Laozi* through Western philosophy. Representative works include: Zhi Weicheng支伟成’s Punctuation Annotations on *Laozi*’s *Tao Te Ching*标点注解老子道德经, which is mainly classified according to modern Western disciplines, including *Laozi*’s cosmology, nominalism, political philosophy, philosophy of life, and philosophy of education. He advocates promoting both the excellent elements of traditional culture and absorbing reasonable elements from the West philosophy and culture.

The fourth ideological perspective is to interpret *Laozi* by using the thoughts of the pre-Qin Schools. Representative works include: Miao Zhuan缪篆’s *Laozi* Gu Wei老子古微 which places each chapter of *Laozi* at the beginning of the chapter, and then quote sentences from literary works of pre-Qin different scholars, or “Zhuan Yue”(Miao Zhuan’s view) which breaks off one’s own meaning. This approach is in line with the study of pre-Qin scholars and is worth learning from in modern research on pre-Qin literature (including unearthed literature).

Secondly, there was a heated debate among scholars before 1911-1949 regarding the author and completion date of *Laozi*. Even though The Guo bamboo slip version of *Laozi*, the Mawangdui silk script version of *Tao Te Ching*, and the Peking University Han Dynasty bamboo slip version of *Laozi* have been unearthed, there is still no consensus in the academic community

in China and abroad on this matter. During 1911-1949, Liang Qichao 梁启超, Hu Shi 胡适, Feng Youlan 冯友兰, Qian Mu 钱穆, Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚, Gao Heng 高亨, Luo Genze 罗根泽, Ma Xulun 马叙伦, Zhang Dainian 张岱年, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Jiang Boqian 蒋伯潜, and others all joined this debate. Afterwards, Qian Mu compiled several papers published during this period into Zhuang Lao Tong Bian 庄老通辨. Hu Shi published "On the Issue of the time when *Laozi* was written with Qian Mu" 与钱穆论〈老子〉成书问题. Gu Jiegang published Inferring the Writing Age of *Laozi* from Lü Shi Chun Qiu 从〈吕氏春秋〉推测〈老子〉之成书年代. Basically, it can be said that there are debates in the academic community on whether *Laozi* is a real person, whether the author of *Laozi* is only *Laozi*, the time when *Laozi* was written, and the main ideas of *Laozi*. The opinions are divided into two schools: one believes that there was a person named *Laozi* who lived during the Spring and Autumn period, and that *Laozi* was written by *Laozi* during that period. The other believes that there may not necessarily be *Laozi* himself, and that the author of *Laozi* may not be *Laozi*. It should have been written during the Warring States period, while some believe that it should have been written after *Zhuangzi*.

In addition, as an ancient book and classic, *Laozi* is similar to other ancient books, and many scholars carry out proofreading, annotation, and other work. Some of the most famous works include Ma Xulun 马叙伦's *Laozi Fu Gu* 老子覆诂, Jiang Xichang 蒋锡昌's *Laozi Xiao Gu* 老子校诂, and Gao Heng 高亨's *Laozi Zheng Gu* 老子正诂.

Introduction to the study of *Zhuangzi*

Since the 20th century, scholars have studied the methods of *Zhuangzi*, some using traditional elementary school methods, while others citing Buddhism or Western philosophy to interpret *Zhuangzi*.

Annotate *Zhuangzi* on the academic aspect of traditional philology and collation methods

During 1911-1949, scholars used traditional methods such as collation, exegesis, identification of falsehoods, and compilation to organize *Zhuangzi*. Some of the more famous works include Ma Xulun 马叙伦's *Zhuangzi Yizheng* 庄子义证, Gao Heng 高亨's *Zhuangzi Xinjian* 庄子新笺, Wang Shumin 王叔岷's *Zhuangzi Jiaoshi* 庄子校释, and Zhang Mosheng 张默生's *Zhuangzi Xinshi* 庄子新释.

A Study of *Zhuangzi* from an Ideological Perspective

The first method is to interpret *Zhuangzi* through Western philosophy. Hu Shi 胡适's Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy 中国哲学史大纲, Xian Qin Ming Xue Shi 先秦名学史, and others divided *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy into *Zhuangzi*'s theory of evolution, *Zhuangzi*'s logic, and *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy of life. Feng Youlan 冯友兰's History of Chinese Philosophy 中国哲学史 applies Western philosophy to study *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy, comparing *Zhuangzi*'s "Dao" and "De" with Western "Ideas" and "God". Jiang Xichang 蒋锡昌's *Zhuangzi Philosophy* 庄子哲学 uses

philosophical terms proposed by Plato, Kant, Spencer and others to explain the "Ontology of the Heavenly Way".

The second method is to interpret the *Zhuangzi* by using Buddhism terms and concepts. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎's Interpretation of Qi Wu Lun 齐物论释 explains "Qi Wu 齐物" in Buddhist terms of "equality". Liang Qichao 梁启超's Overview of the School of Thought after *Laozi*, Confucius and Mohism 老孔墨以后学派概观 believes that *Zhuangzi*'s views are similar to Mahayana Buddhism.

The third method is to integrate Chinese and Western learning methods and philosophical connotations to study *Zhuangzi*. Lang Qingxiao 朗擎宵's *Zhuangzi Case Study* 庄子学案 not only uses Western methodology and epistemology to study *Zhuangzi*, but also uses traditional research methods such as citing literature from various pre-Qin schools and documents to compare similarities and differences with *Zhuangzi*, inventing and annotating each other. The most important feature of Jiang Xichang 蒋锡昌's *Zhuangzi's Philosophy* 庄子哲学 is the integration of philosophy and exegesis, which is a correct method of studying and interpreting *Zhuangzi*'s ideas, reducing the drawbacks of applying Western philosophy, and avoiding unreasonable application of Western theories. Overall, scholars made progress in their research on *Zhuangzi* in terms of Philology, Exegesis, Collation during 1911-1949. Due to the influence of the West, scholars have used Western philosophical theories to study. Some have explored *Zhuangzi*'s whole philosophy, some want to use *Zhuangzi* to express their ideals, and some have explored anarchism based on the political situation and trends of the time.

Introduction to the study of *Liezi*

Study and annotate *Liezi* from a traditional perspective

During 1911-1949, some scholars followed the research method of the Textual Criticism of Qing Dynasty, used different methods such as collation, exegesis, identification of falsehoods, and compilation of lost works on *Liezi*. Some of the more famous ones include: Tao Hongqing 陶鸿庆's Reading Notes on *Liezi* 读列子札记, Wang Zhongmin 王重民's Annotations on *Liezi* 列子校释, Wang Shumin 王叔岷's Supplement to *Zhuangzi* 庄子补正, Yang Bojun 杨伯峻 revised the sentences of *Liezi* in his Annotations to the Collection of *Liezi* 列子集释, believing that *Liezi* was a collection of essays after Qin and Han Dynasties. Ma Xulun 马叙伦's Examination of *Liezi*'s Counterfeit Books 列子伪书考 proposes twenty things to prove that *Liezi* is a fake book.

Study *Liezi* from an ideological perspective

Some scholars used Buddhist ideas to interpret *Liezi*, such as Zhang Huaimin 张怀民's New Interpretation of the Chapter "Tianrui" of *Liezi* 列子天瑞篇新义.

Other scholars start from the perspective of selecting articles and editions of *Liezi*

For example, Chen Hexiang 陈和祥's Commentary and Notes on *Liezi* 评注列子读本 and Tang Jinggao 唐敬果's Selected

Annotations on *Liezi* have played a significant role in popularizing *Liezi*.

Conclusion

During 1911-1949, Chinese scholars conducted research on various aspects of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Liezi*, which played a role in inheriting and promoting China's excellent Taoist culture. Their

research results have made great contributions. Until now, when we study Taoist thoughts, documents, and classics, we must refer to these research results. They occupy an important place in the history of Chinese Taoist research. Moreover, Taoist community advocates harmony and peace, which plays a significant role in the development of global civilization.



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