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The Many Faces of Huang-Lao

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Of old, the Yellow Ancestral Model, as part of his essential nature, began by loving trustworthiness; he made himself into an exemplary image and faced the four directions to supplement his single heart-mind. Reaching out from the center to all directions, he consulted what was in front of him, he consulted what was behind him, he consulted what was to his left, he consulted what was to his right. (*Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor*, tr. Yates 1997, 105)

Chinese commentators agree that the “Yellow Ancestral Model” in this passage is none other than the Yellow Emperor, the most exalted of China’s mythical rulers. The statement that the Yellow Emperor “faced the four directions” should be taken literally. Various sources of the same period (e.g., *Lüshi chunqiu* or *Shizi*) display the belief in a Yellow Emperor who had four faces and could observe all that happened around him. It is not surprising that a sovereign who bases his government on comprehensive inspection of his realm was seen as the ancestral model for the world, and is still venerated as the forefather of all Chinese.

Both the Yellow Emperor and the work from which the above quotation was taken play important roles in “Huang-Lao.” Huang-Lao is now generally regarded as a set of ideas that gained currency from the final stages of the Warring States period to well into the Han dynasty. “Huang” stands for Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor; “Lao” refers to Laozi, the “Old Master,” who is traditionally regarded as the founder of Daoism. Huang-Lao is thus a combination of ideas attributed to the mythical figures of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi.

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What those ideas are and how they have manifested themselves in Chinese history remains the subject of heated debate. At present, no uniform and unequivocal definition of Huang-Lao exists, one reason being that the historical sources mention the term in various contexts. Thus, like the Yellow Emperor, Huang-Lao has several different faces.

Many Faces of Huang-Lao

Four faces easily distinguishable in Huang-Lao are the philosophical, the political, the religious, and the spiritual. According to the said sources, they manifested themselves in different phases of Chinese history. Huang-Lao's philosophical face was prominent during the final phase of the Warring States period; its political face, during the early Former Han period; its religious and spiritual faces in the Later Han period. Notably, no clear-cut demarcations exist. The distinction between philosophy and religion is, for example, typically modern and Western; they would not necessarily have been experienced as mutually exclusive aspects by a second-century B.C.E. Huang-Lao adherent. Likewise, there is no one-to-one correspondence between Huang-Lao's faces and its phases of historical manifestation. For instance, during the Later Han period, Huang-Lao appeared not only in religious, but also in political contexts.

The present issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* examines Huang-Lao from two perspectives. It focuses on what Huang-Lao was (i.e., how it was experienced when it was popular), and on what it is (i.e., how modern scholars study it). Huang-Lao was not only interesting as a historical phenomenon. It also lends itself to reflection on contemporary Chinese thinkers' interpretation of their intellectual past. This meta-study of the new interpretation of ancient Chinese thought is inspired by the swift proliferation of Huang-Lao studies. Consider the following statement by Chen Guying, a renowned specialist on Daoism:

In the 1960s, my love for Zhuangzi led me to Laozi and other pre-Qin masters. At that time, we studied the four pre-Qin Daoist personages of Laozi, Yang Zhu, Liezi and Zhuangzi. It was not until the 1980s, when the Mawangdui silk manuscript *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* and other lost ancient texts came out, that I first noticed the works of the Daoist lineage of Huang-Lao. (Ding 1997, 1)

This statement perfectly captures the emergence of Huang-Lao as a subject of academic attention. Although the term Huang-Lao was coined more than two millennia ago, it went largely unnoticed until the 1973 excavation of the Mawangdui manuscripts. Previously, few academics had paid attention to Huang-Lao, but the re-discovery of Huang-Lao materialized in a profusion of books and articles. Chen Ligui's *Bibliography of Research on Han Philosophers* (1998) illustrated this point. The section "Huang-Lao Thought and Huang-Lao Political Techniques" lists more than 140 post-1973 writings by Chinese and other East Asian scholars. In addition, she also lists ninety-seven articles dealing exclusively with the *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor*, and numerous articles categorized under headings such as "The School of Song Xing, and Yin Wen and Huang-Lao," "Qi Culture and Huang-Lao," "The *Guanzi*, the Jixia Academy, and Huang-Lao," or "The *Wenzi* and Huang-Lao." Due to this sudden attention and the breadth of subjects with which Huang-Lao was associated in the course of time, Huang-Lao became a prominent topic in the study of Chinese philosophy.

But after thirty years of research, important questions remain unanswered. Which ideas, texts, and historical persons can be associated with Huang-Lao? Did a distinct notion of Huang-Lao ever exist? Why are Chinese thinkers nowadays so much attracted by it? Before turning to these questions, I shall discuss Huang-Lao's different faces, proceeding from the four articles included hereafter in English translation.

Political Face of Huang-Lao

The 1973 demarcation line in Huang-Lao scholarship is not as sharp as it may seem: Huang-Lao was not a virgin topic. Chen Ligui's bibliography, for instance, mentions nearly thirty articles on the subject authored between the beginning of the Republican era and the Mawangdui discovery.

Guo Zhanbo's "The Huang-Lao School" (the first article in this issue) is a representative example of the early stage of Huang-Lao research. With the *Four Canons* still awaiting excavation, source material for the study of Huang-Lao consisted almost exclusively of two important ancient texts that mention the term: Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* and Ban Gu's *Book of the Han*. Guo Zhanbo frequently quotes both. His article also includes quotations from *His-*

tory of Ancient China by Xia Zengyou, a Qing scholar who likewise relied on Sima Qian and Ban Gu.

Heavy reliance on the writings of Sima Qian and Ban Gu strongly colored pre-1973 scholars' interpretation of Huang-Lao. To them, Huang-Lao was a political theory, a set of ideas implemented in politics, rather than pondered by itinerant masters or practiced by meditating ascetics. This view clearly dominated Huang-Lao interpretation before the Mawangdui discovery, as is clear from the entries under which Huang-Lao was discussed in overviews of Chinese thought. Ren Jiyu (1963, 37–38) outlined Huang-Lao under “The Early Han Advocacy of the Political Function of Huang-Lao Thought,” and Feng Youlan (1964, 11–14) described it under “Huang-Lao Politics of the Early-Han and the Rise of Confucianist Thought.”

Because Sima Qian and Ban Gu provided scanty information about Huang-Lao in the Warring States period, pre-1973 publications hardly paid attention to this period. Those articles generally featured such Han figures as Cao Can and Master Ge, and the early Han sovereigns (from Liu Bang to emperors Wen and Jing) as their main characters. The principal player in the promotion of Huang-Lao, and in these works, was without a doubt Lady Dou. As Guo Zhanbo notes, Dou was a potentate who “had enormous influence in the palace and stayed in power for all of forty-five years (179–135 B.C.E.): twenty-three years as empress, sixteen as empress-dowager, and finally six as grand empress-dowager.” Her hatred of Confucian scholars and their doctrines was a blessing for Huang-Lao, which served as the unofficial state ideology when she held sway over the imperial palace. Dou forced members of the palace and of her own clan to read the texts of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. Resistance was futile: People of dissident persuasions were silenced. Two influential Confucian officials, Zhao Wan and Wang Zang, were forced to commit suicide. Another man, Yuan Gu, was thrown into a pen to fight with pigs after making a denigrating remark on the quality of the *Laozi*. Stories such as these, vividly narrated by Sima Qian and Ban Gu, repeatedly appeared in writings on Huang-Lao before 1973.

The battle between Confucians and experts on Huang-Lao, which increased in vigor after Grand Empress-dowager Dou's death, is another prominent topic in Guo's article and in other pre-1973 publications. When the protectress of Huang-Lao died in 136 B.C.E., Tian Fen, a member of the Confucian faction, was re-appointed councilor-in-

chief. Back in his old position, he immediately banned the doctrines of Huang-Lao and expanded the Confucian camp by several hundred heads. The adoption of Confucianism as the official state ideology in 136 B.C.E., and the establishment of the Imperial Academy twelve years, later brought an end to the popularity and political influence of Huang-Lao. Accordingly, articles highlighting the political face of Huang-Lao rarely went beyond those years.

The *Records of the Historian* and *Book of the Han* are mainly concerned with who used Huang-Lao and how this affected the state. Therefore, pre-1973 articles shed little light on the philosophical content of Huang-Lao. All scholars agreed that Huang-Lao was applied in politics during the early Han period, and most of them showed how successful Huang-Lao was by citing Sima Qian's observation of the prosperity during the first seven decades of the Han period (see first article, end of seventh section), but none offered a detailed explanation of the philosophy of Huang-Lao. Guo Zhanbo vaguely describes it as the blending of Laozi and Zhuangzi's naturalism with the theory of *yin* and *yang*. The general consensus was that Huang-Lao was a philosophy of "quiescence and non-action" (*qingjing wuwei*), two terms Sima Qian and Ban Gu mentioned in connection with Huang-Lao. Guo, for instance, shows that Cao Can "ruled by non-action." Ren Jiyu and Feng Youlan also discussed the Huang-Lao idea of "quiescence and non-action." The latter even explained why this creed perfectly matched the political situation of the beginning of the Han period. He reasoned that once the Qin dynasty was overthrown and continuous civil war had near-destroyed the state and decimated its population, the new head of state, Liu Bang, had to steer a different course in order to recover production and win the hearts of the people. The Qin had aroused anger among the people by compelling them to work on ambitious projects, such as the building of the Great Wall; the Han now had to apply the Huang-Lao policy of "quiescence and non-action" to appease the people and secure its mandate.

Philosophical Face of Huang-Lao

During the last two months of 1973, archaeologists excavated tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui, the grave of a son of the Marquis of Dai. This tomb, dated 168 B.C.E., yielded a large library, making it one of the most important discoveries after Dunhuang. The manuscripts—totaling more

than 120,000 graphs—deal with a range of topics, including what we would now classify as medicine, history, geography, military strategy, astronomy, and philosophy. They include two versions of the *Laozi* and, of equal importance for the study of ancient Chinese thought, four previously unknown texts that preceded the second version of Laozi's work.

The four “ancient lost texts” were soon identified as the *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor*. This title occurs in the bibliographical treatise of the *Book of the Han*, but the work itself has not been transmitted to the present day. Three reasons for linking the Mawangdui manuscripts to this entry in the imperial library catalogue are: (1) The name of the Yellow Emperor frequently occurs in one of the four texts; (2) the graph *jing* (canon) appears in the titles of the first two texts; and (3) Ban Gu said that the *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* consisted of four volumes. Some scholars find this identification unpersuasive. They refer to the four Mawangdui manuscripts as the *Huang-Lao Silk Books*, mainly because they mention the Yellow Emperor and preceded the *Laozi* (i.e., a “Huang-text” and a “Lao-text” linked together). Though neither of these options is altogether convincing, the present publication uses *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* (or *Four Canons*, for short), in accordance with the practice of the majority of scholars.

The four parts constituting the *Four Canons* (in Yates' 1997 translation) are: “The Canon: Law” (*Jingfa*), “The Canon” (*Jing*), “Designations” (*Cheng*), and “Dao the Origin” (*Daoyuan*). The four canons vary in size from around 500 to 5,000 graphs, and are heterogeneous in nature. The first canon is divided into nine sections and the second into fifteen, the third consists of about fifty aphorisms, and the concluding canon is written entirely in verse. Debate on the date and authorship of the *Four Canons* has generated various suggestions. No definite conclusion has been reached, but arguments put forward by scholars such as Wu Guang (1985) are more plausible than those of others. Having eliminated the possibilities of an earlier or later dating, Wu concluded that the texts must have been created between the last years of the Warring States period and the transition from the Qin to the Han dynasties. As to the author of the *Four Canons*, Wu argued for multiple authorship.

How did the four silk manuscripts change Huang-Lao's reception? Regardless of how scholars refer to the texts (i.e., as *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor*, or as *Huang-Lao Silk Books*), all agree that they

contain a “philosophy of Huang-Lao.” Whereas, previously, scholars could only base their research on secondary literature and describe Huang-Lao as a political theory of “quiescence and non-action,” they now believed that they possessed primary, authentic material.

Judging by the number of texts listed in the bibliographical treatise of the *Book of the Han* with titles containing the Yellow Emperor’s name, doctrines attributed to this monarch enjoyed popularity from the final stages of the Warring States period until well into the Han. Unfortunately, only a handful of these works has survived. As such, the Huang-part of Huang-Lao has long been a mystery. The unearthing of the *Four Canons* sent scholars of ancient Chinese philosophy into euphoria: After two millennia, the “Huang” could finally be put back into Huang-Lao. Since Laozi is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Daoist school of thought, scholars reasoned that the main factor by which Huang-Lao Daoism differed from ordinary Daoism had to be the Yellow Emperor. Therefore, to understand Huang-Lao, one had to understand the doctrines attributed to him. As a result, the *Four Canons* became the main focus of Huang-Lao scholars. Moreover, comparison of this material with a number of transmitted texts showed that they shared the philosophical outlook of the *Four Canons*. This led to a body of Huang-Lao literature that generally includes the *Huainanzi*, the *Wenzi*, the *Heguanzi*, and parts of the *Guanzi*. Even certain chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are now considered Huang-Lao. But without a doubt, in recent years the most resounding name among the many early Chinese thinkers associated with Huang-Lao has been Xunzi.

Xunzi is generally known as one of the three patriarchs of Confucianism, the other two being Mencius and Confucius himself. Throughout Xunzi’s work, we find quotations and paraphrases of the *Analects*. Moreover, he regularly quoted texts with a virtually sacred status in the Confucian tradition (e.g., *Odes* and *Documents*). His criticism of Mencius’ idea that “human nature is good” did not make Xunzi less of a Confucianist. On the contrary, it strengthened the idea that his philosophical operations took place within a clearly delineated Confucian framework. To link him with the Daoist philosophy of Huang-Lao seems a preposterous undertaking. This is precisely what makes our second article, “Xunzi’s Philosophy and the School of Huang-Lao” by Yu Mingguang, so interesting.

Moving beyond strict generalizations (e.g., “Xunzi is a Confucianist”), we find that Xunzi was a liberal, perhaps eclectic, thinker. Living

at the very end of the Warring States period, Xunzi had an overview of the philosophical activities of the preceding centuries. He criticized the pre-Qin schools of thought, but also adopted some of their philosophical ideas. This explains how, as Yu Mingguang puts it, “a large part of Xunzi’s thought originated in Huang-Lao.” Yu discusses no less than four important concepts that Xunzi derived from Huang-Lao.

Yu’s article deals a serious blow to the idea that Xunzi was a “pure” Confucian thinker. Confucius was convinced that government should be based on “ceremony” (*li*), whereas Mencius urged rulers to think in terms of “humaneness” (*ren*) and “righteousness” (*yi*). That Xunzi additionally espoused the Daoist concept of non-action shows how careful one should be when applying generalizations. Secondly, Yu’s article represents a shift in scholarly focus from the political to the philosophical face of Huang-Lao. To Yu, Huang-Lao was no longer a political movement, but a philosophical current of the Warring States period that flourished prior to Xunzi. Finally, Yu’s article shows the immense scope of this newly discovered side of Huang-Lao. Although Huang-Lao in itself was associated with Daoist currents of thought, it inspired countless thinkers in other schools.

Not all modern scholars are interested in the philosophy of Huang-Lao and its impact on other philosophers. Attention to Huang-Lao after 1973 has also led to studies with a historical perspective, along the lines of earlier publications, but of broader scope and greater detail. These studies, such as Zhang Weihua’s “Explaining the Term ‘Huang-Lao’” (our third article), also have used the *Records of the Historian* and *Book of the Han* as their main source material.

Pre-1973 publications let the “Huang-Lao era” commence with the beginning of the Han period and end with Grand Empress-dowager Dou’s death. Although Dou and other Han rulers have remained the principal figures, post-1973 historical Huang-Lao literature has also discussed Huang-Lao experts of different times and professions. Zhang Weihua discusses the Warring States philosophers Shen Buhai and Han Fei, whom Sima Qian associated with Huang-Lao, and Chen Ping, who was said to have been fond of Huang-Lao in his adolescent years, which were over before the founding of the Former Han dynasty.

Zhang shows that historical study based on the *Records of the Historian* and the *Book of the Han* can help to understand Huang-Lao as a school of philosophical thought. Sima Qian and Ban Gu did not reveal much of its philosophy (other than “quiescence and non-action”), but

they did provide clues as to how it came into existence. Important questions that cannot be solved through strictly philosophical studies are: Who was the Yellow Emperor? Why did the early Daoists make him an important figure in Daoism? And why was he linked to Laozi?

In order to understand why the Yellow Emperor and Laozi were linked together, it is essential to know who the Yellow Emperor was—or rather, who he was thought to be. Zhang discusses the Yellow Emperor's complex status as both historical ruler and legendary hero. He also points out the increasing number of legends concerning the Yellow Emperor and works written in his name. The growing popularity of the Yellow Emperor and the fact that, as a historical personage, he was considered to have become immortal, was important to the creation of Huang-Lao. As a man-turned-immortal, the Yellow Emperor matched the Daoist ideal of "True Man" or "Ideal Man." These categories frequently appeared in Daoist texts (e.g., *Zhuangzi*), which indicated their significance in the philosophy of Daoism. Hence, the legend of the Yellow Emperor turning immortal, Zhang Weihua maintains, constituted an important link for the unification of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi, and for the creation of the school of Huang-Lao.

Religious and Spiritual Faces of Huang-Lao

The discovery of the *Four Canons* brought attention to different faces and phases of Huang-Lao. Moving beyond a philosophical interpretation, Huang-Lao was now studied as a philosophy, a religion, or a method of self-cultivation; moving beyond a focus on the Former Han period, Huang-Lao in the Warring States and the Later Han periods also began to be examined. However, even after 1973, the period following Grand Empress-dowager Dou's death has remained underexposed, and little attention has been paid to Huang-Lao's religious and spiritual aspects. By "religious," I mean the common expression by a group of people of their acknowledgment of the divine; by "spiritual," a related but more individual practice aimed at improving or prolonging one's life. Zhang Weihua only briefly touches upon these aspects of Huang-Lao, whereas Yu Mingguang and Tan Jianhui discuss them in detail in our fourth article, "The Transformation of Scholarly Huang-Lao into Religious Huang-Lao," one of the few works that focus on the final stages of Huang-Lao.

In pre-Han and early-Han times, as reflected in the *Records of the*

Historian and *Book of the Han*, the term consisting of the graphs *huang* and *lao* was employed as an acronym for Huangdi and Laozi, and was used in connection with verbs such as “to study,” “to practice” or “to be fond of,” and nouns such as “doctrines” or “techniques.” The *Book of the Later Han* continues Sima Qian and Ban Gu’s usage of the term. For example, it tells the stories of She Guo, who “understood the *Yijing* and was fond of the doctrines of Huang-Lao” (82a.2720), and of Zheng Jun, who was “fond of the books of Huang-Lao” (27.945-6). However, in the same dynastic history, we also find the term used in connection with Buddha. A memorial by Xiang Kai, for example, mentioned that shrines had been built in the imperial palace for Huanglao and Buddha (30b.1082).¹ Yu Mingguang and Tan Jianhui explain this religious turn of Huang-Lao by the immortalizing or deification of both the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. They show how the Yellow Emperor, who already served as the legendary symbol of a unified empire during the Warring States period, acquired immortal qualities during the Han period. Similarly, whereas Laozi was first believed to have lived 160, possibly even 200 years, he was later also considered immortal. What the authors ignore is the deification of Huang-Lao itself.

Whereas, in the *Records of the Historian* and the *Book of the Han*, people mainly “study,” “practice,” or “are fond of” Huang-Lao, in the *Book of the Later Han* the term appears with verbs such as “to worship,” “to sacrifice,” and “to recite.” King Liu Ying of Chu, for example, is said to have recited “the fine words of Huanglao” (42.1428). And it was recorded that in the state of Chen during the second half of the second century, King Chong and Wei Yin “together sacrificed to the spirits of Heaven,” which is later specified as offering “to Lord Huanglao, asking for the fortune of living a long life” (50.1669). Henri Maspero (1934, 90) pointed out that, according to the religious reality of that time, the title Lord (*jun*) referred to a single divine personage. This Lord Huanglao, Erik Zürcher noted, was “the main deity of the early Taoist pantheon who was especially venerated by the Yellow Turbans” (Zürcher 1959, 326 n.42).

Although Yu and Tan also discuss the abovementioned quotations (i.e., Xiang Kai’s memorial, King Liu Ying of Chu) and, like Zürcher, also establish a link between Huang-Lao and the “Yellow Turbans,” they do not offer their views on the apotheosis of Huang-Lao. Few scholars have touched upon this problem. Zhang Weihua, for example,

makes do with statements such as: “I believe that, generally speaking, in employing the term Huang-Lao the Later Han continued the tradition of the Former Han,” and “the fact that Huang-Lao and Buddha are mentioned together indicates that the former already contained certain religious characteristics.” He, too, fails to explain how far these “religious characteristics” influenced the meaning of the term.

As mentioned in the foregoing sections, the *Book of the Later Han* uses the term not only for a single deity, but also for the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. This means that certain individuals studied their techniques as a method of personal cultivation. Given the parallel in Chinese culture between the state (macro-cosmos) and the body (micro-cosmos), methods used to improve order in the state were also considered suitable for bringing order to oneself. When Huang-Lao was characterized in the Former Han period as a philosophy of “quiescence and non-action,” it is unclear whether this referred only to state government, or also to personal cultivation. In any case, the *Records of the Historian* and *Book of the Han* never explicitly link Huang-Lao to self-cultivation. Only in the Later Han period, when Huang-Lao had lost its political importance, was the spiritual face of Huang-Lao highlighted.

Several examples in the *Book of the Later Han* show that Huang-Lao was regarded as a way of thinking that contributed to inner tranquility or peace of mind. Beyond that, the goal of some practitioners was to reach longevity or immortality. Their methods were breathing and gymnastic techniques, comparable to what is now known as “*qigong*.” The *Book of the Later Han* mentions these methods in connection with Huang-Lao. The following account in the “Biography of Jiao Shen” may serve as an example:

Jiao Shen, with the style name of Zhongyan, was a man from Maoling in Fufeng who studied Huang-Lao in his youth. He went to live as a recluse in a mountain valley, where he made a cave his home. There he quietly practiced the breathing and gymnastic techniques for eternal youth.

Conclusion: Many Faces of Contemporary Chinese Thought

The explosive growth of Huang-Lao studies calls for critical evaluation. Thirty years after the Mawangdui discovery, some basic questions remain unanswered. To start with the most fundamental question: What was Huang-Lao?

A minimal definition of both the form and the content of Huang-Lao is still lacking. The “form” of Huang-Lao refers to how Huang-Lao ideas manifested themselves in ancient Chinese society. The problem here is that many studies have only focused on one face or phase of Huang-Lao. Van Ess (1993), among others, followed the pre-1973 example of interpreting Huang-Lao exclusively as a political doctrine at the Han court, thus ignoring its philosophical and other dimensions. Other researchers (e.g., Chen 1991; Ding 1997; and Wu 1985) have focused on Huang-Lao as a school of thought during the Warring States period, taking little or no notice of developments in Huang-Lao after the founding of the Han dynasty. The “content” of Huang-Lao refers to the ideas that this term stands for. The problem here is that many studies have focused only on one or two source texts. Various specialists (including Jan 1980, 1990; and Tu 1979) have described the philosophy of Huang-Lao solely on the basis of the *Four Canons*, disregarding the fact that there may have been Huang-Lao works with a different outlook.

Should we instead regard Huang-Lao as the sum of its constituent parts? As to its form, we could say that it was first studied by a small group of enthusiasts, probably in the early third century B.C.E. As the popularity of this new philosophy grew, it spread over China. During the early Han period, emperors used it as a guiding principle of government to regain the hearts of the people, whose trust in politics had shattered after the Qin dynasty. Later, Huang-Lao became even more important as a political doctrine. When Emperor Wu established Confucianism as the state ideology, Huang-Lao shed its political dimensions and developed its religious side, eventually evolving into a method of personal cultivation. As to the content of Huang-Lao, the ultimate description would combine the descriptions of all individual works labeled Huang-Lao. Thus, the philosophy of Huang-Lao is a combination of the gist of the *Four Canons*, the *Heguanzi*, the *Huainanzi*, and so on.

But is there enough evidence for a concrete reconstruction of Huang-Lao? Valid support, as Zhang Weihua points out, can be found by analyzing the term in its contemporary usage. Here, we encounter the first problem: None of the ancients is known to have called himself an adherent of Huang-Lao. The first person known to have used the term was Sima Qian. Several aspects of his usage of the term in *Records of the Historian* merit further reflection.

First, Sima Qian wrote his records in the first century B.C.E., when the “golden age” of Huang-Lao had long passed. Given that no record of earlier use of the term exists, we cannot verify his characterization of individuals as “Huang-Laoists.”

Second, the fact that Sima Qian rarely applied the term to pre-Han people is at odds with the view, currently upheld by many scholars, that Huang-Lao was a Warring States school of thought. In the few cases that he does, these individuals are now not commonly regarded as important Huang-Lao experts. Shen Buhai and Han Fei, for instance, are currently categorized as “Legalists”; Shen Dao, Tian Pian, Jiezi, and Huan Yuan (four Jixia-scholars who, according to Sima Qian, “studied the techniques of Huang-Lao”) rarely show up in discussions on Huang-Lao. Conversely, authors now classified as Huang-Lao (e.g., Guan Zhong, Lü Buwei, or Liu An) were not associated with this trend of thought by the famous historiographer.

Third, Sima Qian’s usage of the term was inconsistent, and a similar trend may be found in the *Book of the Han* and *Book of the Later Han*. The historiographers used “Huang-Lao” and “Huangdi and Laozi” interchangeably, and sometimes even replaced “Huang-Lao” with “Laozi” alone. Thus, Huang-Lao does not appear to have been a set phrase, a standard term with a clearly defined meaning.

In discussing Huang-Lao, what most scholars implicitly assume is “the existence of a definite phenomenon called Huang-Lao” (Csikszentmihalyi 1994, 9). The above discussion, however, leads to a speculative question: Did a definite phenomenon called Huang-Lao ever exist? In other words, did the ancients have a distinct notion of Huang-Lao? Huang-Lao has been called a school of thought of the Warring States period, but was it really a school (i.e., concentrated in a geographical location, with masters and disciples and a curriculum), or was it merely a term used by later historiographers to indicate a common outlook on the world they noted among certain otherwise unrelated historical people? After the upsurge in Huang-Lao studies in recent decades, it is important to point out that the assuredness of statements about Huang-Lao is in inverse proportion to the inconsistent use of the term in ancient times, and to the limited amount of surviving evidence.

Let us assume that Huang-Lao did exist. Then, how do we reconstruct it? The term “Huang-Lao” was never defined in ancient times. Huang-Lao stands for the Yellow Emperor and Laozi, and refers to

their texts and philosophy, but it remains unclear exactly which texts or what kind of philosophy. Equally unclear is which authors or works of the Warring States or Han were inspired by Huang-Lao. As a result, what is now classified as “Huang-Lao texts” or “Huang-Lao philosophy” do not necessarily correspond to the interpretation of Huang-Lao by the ancients.

This takes us back to the considerable divergence in scholarly opinion of Huang-Lao noted earlier. The *Four Canons* make the Way (*dao*) a pivotal concept, but also acknowledge the importance of “laws” (*fa*) and “principles” (*li*). Hence, many specialists regard Huang-Lao as an amalgamation of Daoism and Legalism. Schwartz (1985, 237–54) refuted this, maintaining that Huang-Lao was much broader and embraced the best of all other schools of thought. Yates (1997), on the other hand, like Guo Zhanbo, stressed the link between Huang-Lao and the theory of *yin* and *yang*. Similar disagreement characterized views on the composition of a Huang-Lao corpus. Works often labeled as Huang-Lao “compositions” include the *Four Canons*, *Lüshi chungiu*, *Heguanzi*, *Huainanzi*, *Wenzi*, parts of *Guanzi*, and the writings of Song Xing, Shen Dao, and Yin Wen. But while Guo Zhanbo, in the first article, asserts that both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are Huang-Lao, Zhang Weihua (in the third article) points out that when Huang-Lao flourished, people hardly ever discussed the *Zhuangzi*. Whereas the *Four Canons* appears on any list, the number of other works and their titles often differ, as Ryden’s summary (1997, 263 n.1) illustrated. Thus, definitions of “Huang-Lao literature” vary, as a result of which definitions of Huang-Lao itself also fluctuate. In the words of Lewis, Huang-Lao “has become a philosophical football in which modern scholars invent their own traditions by combining whatever texts meet their chosen criteria” (Lewis 1999, 340).

An additional problem in defining Huang-Lao, as well as the literature to be labeled “Huang-Lao,” is that by focusing on the common denominator, subtle differences between individual thinkers and their works are ignored. Or, as Ryden put it: “Authors happily quote any portion of the [*Four Canons*] and indeed from other works to illustrate their point. In so doing, they overlook the niceties of distinct portions of the text” (Ryden 1997, 264).

Classifying thinkers into “schools” or “-isms” is always a *post factum* process. In ancient Greece, Socrates and Plato did not propound their ideas as “members of the Athens school.” And though Søren

Kierkegaard is often called the “father of existentialism,” he did not write his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as an “existentialist philosopher.” The terms “Athens school” and “existentialism” were later inventions assigned to these thinkers in retrospect.

There is nothing wrong with this process. By classifying, evaluating, and sifting the multitude of thinkers and ideas in the philosophical arena, we create a clear and comprehensible picture for ourselves. But Huang-Lao is different. Here, conversely, scholars can be seen attempting to invest an ancient term with retrospective meanings, if only because of its sheer antiquity. The term itself is, then, not a classificatory tool suggested by subject matter in need of organization; rather, it is an age-old yet undefined receptacle for thinkers, texts, and ideas that are to be subsequently identified. As we have seen, this may well be a futile effort.

This critical evaluation is by no means intended to dishearten the reader. I do not believe that nothing can be said or known about Huang-Lao. The purpose of this evaluation is merely to question some aspects of the current hype surrounding Huang-Lao.

Present-day study of Huang-Lao shows an evolution in the study of philosophy since the 1970s: from a dominance of political thinking, to a growing importance of philosophical thought and, more recently, to greater attention to religious ideas. This has resulted in interdisciplinary approaches, greater subtlety, and a broader vision. It also shows the flourishing of textual criticism, which has led to a re-evaluation of texts previously disposed of as “eclectic” (such as the *Lüshi chunqiu* and *Huainanzi*), revealed hitherto unnoticed ideological intertextual links, and resulted in the re-interpretation of a number of previously extensively studied texts (such as the *Xunzi*). Even though it remains unclear what Huang-Lao really is, we have learned a great deal about well-known, lesser-known, and hitherto unknown texts—and, in the process, about the many faces of contemporary Chinese thought.

Notes

This issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* makes use of existing, generally available translations for quotations from ancient texts, with minor adaptations (e.g., conversion of Wade-Giles to “pinyin” as appropriate).

1. As discussed further on, the term “*huanglao*” as used in historiographical works clearly underwent a semantic shift. It is worthwhile to make this shift visible in its alphabetic transcription. In the *Records of the Historian* and *Book of the Han*, where it refers to the two Daoist models, a preferred transcription would be as two separate words linked by a hyphen, with both words capitalized because they are names (i.e., Huang-Lao). When, in the *Book of the Later Han*, the term is placed on a par with Buddha, it refers to the name of a single deity, and a preferable transcription would be “Huanglao.”