PANORAMA SCHOLARLY GROUP

Three Teachings Studies

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism



Yang Rubin's *Daoism and the Ancient Dao-Techniques*

Hengjie Wang[a,] *

[a]*Independent Scholar, China*

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Daoism
myth and philosophy
Huang-Lao
Laozi and Zhuangzi
Chinese intellectual history

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17287926*

ABSTRACT

This review examines Daoism and the Ancient Dao-Techniques, a recent monograph by Professor Yang Rubin, which offers a bold reconstruction of Daoist origins through the lens of mythological typology and comparative religion. Challenging linear historical paradigms, Yang traces the philosophical foundations of Daoism to pre-philosophical, shamanic practices referred to as gu zhi daoshu. Focusing on the archetypal figures of Huangdi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi, the book reveals a complex spiritual structure underlying the Daoist tradition. This review evaluates the book's methodological innovations, textual interpretations, and implications for future studies in Daoist philosophy and early Chinese thought.

1. Bibliographic Information

Daoism and the Ancient Daoist Arts is among Professor Yang Rubin's seminal scholarly contributions and is featured in the authoritative Collected Works of Yang Rubin series. Published by Shanghai Guji Publishing House in September 2023, this Chinese-language monograph is formally classified under "Daoist Thought—Studies—China—Pre-Qin Period" in the National Library of China's Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) data, firmly situating it within the historiography of early Chinese intellectual traditions. As one reviewer astutely observes, the work offers a profound Daoist reinterpretation of the pivotal intellectual transition "from myth to philosophy" in ancient China.

2. Review Summary

Daoism and the Ancient Daoist Arts explores the mythological foundations, ritual typologies, and cosmological frameworks that shaped early Daoist thought. Tracing its origins to pre-philosophical wu-shamanistic traditions and the archaic mythologies of the Chinese Bronze Age, Professor Yang Rubin introduces the pivotal concept of "Ancient Daoist Arts" (gudai daoshu) to describe this pre-systematic ritual continuum that preceded formal philosophical discourse.

Through a meticulous analysis of three foundational textual-ritual personas—Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor), Laozi, and Zhuangzi—this monograph demonstrates how each embodies a distinct mytho-ritual archetype, thereby revealing the profoundly heterogeneous and internally contested structure of early Daoism. Its paradigm-shifting contribution lies in reconstructing Daoism's origins using a mythological-typological methodology, decisively challenging teleological narratives that portray a linear philosophical evolution from "myth to reason."

(1) **Reconstruction of Daoist Origins:**

* Corresponding author. e-mail: ljkily@naver.com

Yang argues that the roots of Daoist philosophy can be traced back to shamanic and religious practices—what Zhuangzi called *gu zhi daoshu* (古之道術), reinterpreted here as synonymous with "myth," representing an undifferentiated spiritual state.

(2) **Three Archetypes of Daoist Patriarchs:**

A. **Laozi** embodies the Great Mother myth, centered on *creation*, featuring feminine imagery such as *xuanpin* (mysterious female), *gushen* (valley spirit), and chaos (undifferentiated origin).

B. **Huangdi** reflects the Heavenly Sovereign myth, emphasizing *order* and civilization, combining aspects of rational rulership, military power, and cultural heroism.

C. **Zhuangzi** represents the Ascending and Wandering myth, highlighting *spiritual freedom*, rooted in shamanic experiences of transcendence, transformation, and unity with primal breath.

(3) **Dual Structure of Daoism:**

The book contends that the later classification of "Daoism" combines two divergent currents—**Huang-Lao** (focused on political order) and **Lao-Zhuang** (focused on inner cultivation). These streams reflect inherited mythological archetypes rather than merely doctrinal inconsistencies.

Overall, the book is a theoretically ambitious and interdisciplinary work that sheds new light on the deep mythological structures underlying Pre-Qin Daoist thought.

3. Content Analysis

The book comprises nine chapters:

(1) **Introduction:** Establishes the methodological foundation, redefining *gu zhi daoshu* as a mythic pre-philosophical phase and outlining the archetypes of the three Daoist patriarchs.

(2) **Dao and the Mysterious Female:** Analyzes Laozi's maternal imagery, tracing it to Great Mother myths and cyclical cosmologies.

(3) **Daoist Paradise and the Golden Age:** Explores the myth of primordial harmony and undifferentiated consciousness through symbols of the sage-king and roundness.

(4) **The Four Faces of Huangdi:** Interprets Huangdi's image as divine ruler, ancestral founder, god of war, and immortal figure.

(5) **Huangdi and Yao-Shun:** Contrasts Huangdi's power-centric rule with Yao-Shun's moral governance, contextualizing the historical rise of Huang-Lao thought.

(6) **The Dual Faces of Huang-Lao:** Further elaborates on the dual archetypes (benevolent goddess vs. dark goddess) in Huangdi's legacy.

(7) **Ascent, Transformation, and Fire-Water Transcendence:** Focuses on Zhuangzi's links to shamanic transformation, ascent rituals, and altered consciousness.

(8) **From Shamanism to Dao:** Details how shamanic purification evolved into *xinzhai* (mind fasting) and *zuowang* (sitting in oblivion).

(9) **Shamanic Vitalism in Qu Yuan:** Integrates Qu Yuan's texts into the spiritual history of the era, interpreting them as expressions of shamanic ascent and self-renewal.

Argumentative Structure and Theoretical Innovation:

The book applies to a multidisciplinary framework, combining intellectual history, comparative religion, and archetypal psychology (drawing on E. Cassirer and M. Eliade). The analysis of Daoist texts—*Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and excavated texts such as *The Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*—demonstrates mastery of both classical and contemporary scholarship.

The author's reinterpretation of concepts such as *xuanpin*, *you*, and *dao* via mythic and archetypal theory yields innovative insights. Particularly noteworthy is the integration of Huangdi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi into a shared spiritual lineage through the motif of *void and stillness* as a shamanic practice of bodily transformation.

Language and Style:

The book adopts a dense academic style, marked by terminological rigor and cross-cultural comparisons. While intellectually demanding, it offers deep theoretical reflection and critical engagement with both Chinese and Western discourses.

4. Scholarly Significance

Position in the Study of the Three Teachings:

This work elevates the study of Daoism by uncovering its mythological and religious substratum, moving beyond interpretations that treat Daoism as merely escapist or political. It repositions Daoist origins within the broader evolution of Chinese spiritual consciousness and metaphysical differentiation.

Engagement with Existing Scholarship:

- Critiques traditional theories such as the "salvationist" and "royal-official" origins of the *zhuzi baijia*, advocating instead for a metaphysical reading rooted in the unity of *Dao*.
- Builds on the author's earlier work on Confucian conceptions of the body by extending it to Daoist practices.
- Responds to recent debates over Huang-Lao texts and interpretations, emphasizing their mythic rather than purely political dimensions.

Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Value:

By invoking Eliade's "eternal return" and Neumann's archetypes, the book connects Chinese thought to global patterns of myth and consciousness, offering a powerful contribution to comparative philosophy and religious studies.

5. Critical Reflections

(1) **Definition of Myth:**

While the author acknowledges the foreign origin of the term "myth," equating *gu zhi daoshu* directly with "myth" may risk projecting modern Western frameworks onto ancient Chinese texts. Greater methodological clarity on this equivalence would enhance the analysis.

(2) **Integrative Challenges:**

Although the synthesis of Huangdi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi under one mythological model is ambitious and compelling, the transitions between their distinct philosophical concerns (e.g., order vs. spiritual freedom) could be more explicitly elaborated.

(3) **Accessibility:**

The book's high level of abstraction and theoretical complexity makes it difficult for non-specialist readers. A more accessible companion volume might help engage a broader audience.

Suitability for Readers:

Highly recommended for scholars and graduate students in Chinese philosophy, intellectual history, and comparative religion. Those interested in body-spirit practices and consciousness studies will find rich resources here.

Future Research Directions:

- Applying archetypal theory to reread other Pre-Qin and early Han texts.
- Comparative studies of Daoist bodily practices and modern cognitive science or meditation.
- Cross-cultural comparisons of Huangdi and other civilizational founder deities.

6. Conclusion

Daoism and the Ancient Dao-Techniques is a landmark study that bridges Chinese classical philosophy with global mythological and religious discourses. By uncovering the deep structures of Daoist thought through a mythological lens, Yang Rubin offers a profoundly original interpretation of China's intellectual origins. The book not only redefines the nature of the Daoist tradition but also reframes the spiritual evolution of early Chinese civilization in light of global patterns of consciousness transformation.

Recommendation: Highly recommended. A seminal work in Chinese intellectual history that will shape future scholarship on Daoism and Pre-Qin thought.

Author Contribution

Hengjie Wang, MA in Education, is an independent researcher. The author is solely responsible for the content and authorship of this book review.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval: Not required.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Competing Interest declaration

The author declares that, to the best of their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

None

References

1. Yang, Rubin. *Daoism and the Ancient Dao-Techniques*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 2023.