

[p. 155]

Review article

Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters

Liu Xiaogan, trans. by William E. Savage, 1994

Ann Arbor, Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan

xxii + 217 pp., ISBN 0 89264 106 1

Liu Xiaogan's recent monograph is the most detailed textual and historical study of the *Zhuangzi* to appear in English to date. The book presents a wealth of useful observations about the content of this ancient classic and relations between it and other early Chinese texts. Liu's work is especially notable because he argues in detail for textual theories that many Western scholars have been content to accept on the authority of tradition. This study offers fresh contributions to historical research on the *Zhuangzi* and is essential reading for researchers investigating the development of Daoist thought in Warring States China.

The book includes chapters devoted to the dating and authorship of the *Zhuangzi* Inner chapters, the dating of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters, and the classification of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters. These three chapters are translated from Liu's 1988 Chinese-language book *Zhuangzi zhexue ji qi yanbian*. In an extended Afterword written for this English edition, Liu compares his findings on the dating and classification of the *Zhuangzi* chapters with those of the late A. C. Graham and discusses the dating of the *Daodejing*.

Liu argues for three main conclusions about the date and authorship of the *Zhuangzi*: (1) The seven Inner chapters as a whole belong to an earlier historical period than the twenty-six Outer and Miscellaneous chapters. (2) The Inner chapters were written mainly by Zhuang Zhou, traditionally considered a thinker of the fourth and early third century (all dates are B.C. unless noted). (3) The *Zhuangzi* had essentially been completed and existed as a widely circulated book by the 240s, well before the Qin unification in 221. In addition, Liu classifies the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters into three doctrinally related groups, which he attributes to three schools of Daoist thought: the Transmitters, or expositors of Zhuangzi's philosophy (chapters 17–27, 32); the Huang-Lao school (11B–16, 33); and the Anarchists (8–11A, 28–29, 31). To support his conclusions, Liu presents a richly detailed examination of thematic relations among the *Zhuangzi* chapters and of *Zhuangzi* quotations in other ancient texts. This painstaking textual research makes the book a valuable resource, one that all scholars interested in the *Zhuangzi* will want to consult.

Liu explains that his aim in dating and classifying the *Zhuangzi* chapters is “to establish solid ground for the investigation of intellectual history” (p. 158). In light of this aim—and because this monograph is likely to remain the most extensive, widely available textual study of the *Zhuangzi* for some time—I think it necessary to point out some weaknesses in the reasoning offered to justify the book's conclusions. I have three main concerns. First, the book's central argument about the date and authorship of the Inner chapters appears to beg the question against rival theories. Second, I find that Liu frequently is too quick to conclude in favor of a preferred hypothesis over equally

[p. 156]

plausible and often more cautious alternatives. Third, the overall explanatory theory presented in the book lacks coherence: arguments used to support hypotheses concerning the

dating of the chapters are undermined by the results of the chapter classification. To illustrate these problems, I will examine the book's leading arguments for the three main conclusions stated above.

Liu begins his discussion of the Inner chapters by citing four different opinions about their date and authorship (pp. 1-2). Two of these are especially noteworthy: the majority view (which Liu shares) that the Inner chapters were written by Zhuang Zhou and are earlier than the other chapters, and Feng Youlan's view that the division of the *Zhuangzi* into Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous chapters is irrelevant to their dating and authorship, because each of these groups may contain portions written by Zhuang Zhou. In Liu's view, the lack of scholarly consensus indicates that "traditional methods of textual analysis have fallen short in explaining the significance of the distinction" between the three blocks of chapters (p. 2). Hence he sets out to discover whether there are differences between the Inner chapters and the others that might help to clarify the import of the tripartite division.

He notes what appears to be a highly significant difference: three two-character phrases—*daode* (way and virtue), *xingming* (nature and fate), and *jingshen* (pure spirit)—are found in thirteen of the twenty-six Outer and Miscellaneous chapters, [1] but are absent from the seven Inner chapters. Since these three phrases are common in mid-third-century and later texts but absent in materials generally thought to date from the fourth century or earlier, texts in which they appear are extremely unlikely to have been written before the third century. From these observations, Liu concludes that the Inner chapters are earlier than the other chapters and are the work of Zhuang Zhou. His argument (pp. 14–15) can be reconstructed as follows:

1. We assume that Zhuang Zhou wrote part of the *Zhuangzi*.
2. The division between the Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous chapters is related to authorship: If Zhuang Zhou wrote any of the *Zhuangzi* material, then he wrote one or more of these three distinct blocks of chapters (hidden premise).
3. Zhuang Zhou is traditionally believed to have lived in the fourth century.
4. The usage of the three phrases shows that all of the Inner chapters can be from the fourth century, but some of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters cannot.
5. Therefore Zhuang Zhou wrote the Inner chapters.

Liu does not mention premise 2, but this hidden premise is necessary to make the argument work: without it, the argument shows only that some of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters could not have been written by Zhuang Zhou. However, we are not entitled to assume premise 2, partly because it is not obviously justified (Zhuang Zhou could have written only part of the Inner chapters or parts of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters in which the three phrases do not appear), but especially because this premise is precisely what Feng Youlan's view denies. [2] Thus although Liu cites Feng's position and admits that the significance of the distinction between the three blocks of chapters has yet to be explained, his main argument begs the question against Feng and assumes that the distinction is indicative of authorship.

If, on the other hand, we set aside this assumption and examine the usage of the three phrases more closely, we find that the usage patterns do not clearly distinguish the Inner chapters from the rest. Besides the seven Inner chapters, the three phrases are also absent from seven of the twelve "Transmitters" chapters (the chapters Liu identifies as most closely related thematically to the Inner chapters) and from the

[p. 157]

seven-chapter sequence formed by chapters 25 to 31. [3] Moreover, looking at Liu's usage statistics (p. 9), I find the relatively high frequency with which the phrases appear in the "Anarchist" and "Huang-Lao" chapters as striking as their absence from the Inner chapters. The hypothesis that the Inner chapters are earlier than the rest can indeed explain one aspect of these usage patterns. However, another hypothesis that Liu mentions (p. 16) provides an equally satisfactory and more complete explanation (albeit one without such exciting consequences for dating): The patterns could be due to differences in content and style, which lead the Anarchist and Huang-Lao writers to use the three phrases far more often than the Inner chapters and Transmitters writers, who use them rarely or not at all.

In defending his view that Zhuang Zhou wrote all of the Inner chapters, Liu seems too eager to dismiss the competing views of other scholars (pp. 32, 37–38) without acknowledging the merits of the multiple-author theories they propose. [4] His argument for the authorial unity of the Inner chapters rests partly on his conclusions about their date and partly on his identification of numerous similar phrases and sentences that occur in two or three of the seven chapters (pp. 26–31). However, these thematic connections between chapters can also be explained by the hypothesis that the texts were written by different authors with shared philosophical interests. Moreover, as Liu himself observes, the Inner chapters are "by no means completely consistent" in their point of view (p. 25), and I suggest that the apparent doctrinal inconsistencies are more easily explained by a multiple-author theory than by a single-author theory. Liu argues that doctrinal differences are irrelevant, because often "points of view that are not entirely consistent will appear in the work of one man" (p. 36). But given the piecemeal structure of the Inner chapters and the admitted plurality of viewpoints they express, he should acknowledge that a multiple-author theory offers at least as plausible an explanation of the texts as does his view that they were written by a single author at different stages of life and in dissimilar frames of mind (p. 37).

Unlike his position on the dating and authorship of the Inner chapters, which is shared by many scholars, Liu's thesis that the *Zhuangzi* was completed long before the Qin conquest of 221 challenges the orthodox view that compilation continued into the Han dynasty. Liu's case for an early completion date stems mainly from his claim that material from fourteen *Zhuangzi* chapters is quoted in the *Lushi Chunqiu* and the *Hanfeizi* (which he dates to c. 241 and c. 233, respectively). [5] He argues that this textual borrowing "would have been impossible" if the *Zhuangzi* had not already been circulating widely as a completed book by the 240s (pp. 52, 162). This is an overstatement, however, for an alternative, more circumspect explanation is available: Portions of the *Zhuangzi* could have been known to the *Lushi Chunqiu* and *Hanfeizi* writers well before the final compilation of the text. Since in ancient China an anthology like the *Zhuangzi* consisted of a collection of scrolls to which new components could be added at any time, we need not assume the existence of a finished "book" to explain how parts of the anthology could have been quoted. Nor is wide circulation necessary to explain the borrowing, since the *Lushi Chunqiu* probably includes contributions by scholars from many states, who could have brought texts with them or remembered passages they had studied elsewhere (much of the common material is not word-for-word identical). Moreover, Liu seems to overlook stylistic differences between the *Zhuangzi* chapters that are more difficult to explain if we accept the early completion date he suggests. The narratives in chapters 29, 30, and 31 are considerably longer and more elaborate than those in other chapters; one plausible explanation for this difference is that these chapters are from a later period.

[p. 158]

The argument that borrowings in other ancient texts support an early completion date for the *Zhuangzi* as a whole also illustrates the ad hoc character of the explanatory theory offered in the book. The main problem is that Liu's characterization of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters varies depending on the argument he is making. In dating the anthology, he argues that quotations from selected chapters are best explained by the hypothesis that all the chapters formed a unified corpus at a very early date. Yet in classifying the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters, he suggests that the chapters are the products of three disparate philosophical schools, thus raising the possibility that groups of chapters may have existed separately for a long time before being collected together. Using a conservative count of *Lushi Chunqiu* borrowings (see note [5]), I notice that the bulk of the quoted chapters are from the Transmitters school, and neither the Anarchist chapters 8–11 nor the Huang-Lao chapters 13–16 are quoted. In light of Liu's theory about the heterogeneous origins of the three groups of chapters, this fact makes his explanatory hypothesis concerning the *Lushi Chunqiu* quotations difficult to motivate.

Liu also neglects the implications of his chapter classification when he cites usage patterns in support of an early date for the Inner chapters. His arguments assume that hypotheses about relative chronology can be based on comparisons between the Inner chapters and all of the other chapters, considered as a block (p. 47). However, the only non-trivial usage data he presents concern thematic content (e.g., the three phrases and the terms *you* and *xiaoyao*), and his chapter classification shows that the Anarchist, Huang-Lao, and Transmitters chapters do not form a thematically homogeneous group. The thematically relevant sample to which the Inner chapters should be compared is not the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters as a whole, but the Transmitters chapters only. When comparisons are made on this basis, however, the usage patterns Liu observes appear less significant or vanish altogether. [6]

In general, William E. Savage has done an admirable job of translating Liu's Chinese text into fluent and readable English. A passing comparison against the Chinese indicated a few minor discrepancies (e.g., p. 22, line 21), but also several places where difficult Chinese sentences had been rendered into clear, smooth English.

Though I take issue with the book's arguments, I should stress that Liu deserves praise for defending his textual theory at length, by citing abundant examples and clearly explaining the reasons for his conclusions. Every scholar working on the *Zhuangzi* will want to be familiar with his observations, which all future textual research on this ancient classic will need to address. Readers should be cautious, however, about accepting Liu's account of the early textual history of the *Zhuangzi*, for the reasoning presented in the book is insufficient to warrant confidence in it. Indeed, the inability of such a detailed study to provide a convincing case for widely accepted views about the authorship and date of the Inner chapters is highly significant, for it suggests the support for those views may be much weaker than commonly thought. Many questions about the authorship and dating of the *Zhuangzi* chapters remain unsettled and await a theory that can draw Liu's observations and others together on the basis of more cogent arguments than those offered in this book.

C. J. FRASER

Department of Philosophy, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

NOTES

- [1] This figure takes into account an instance of *xingming* in chapter 24 that the table on page 9 of the book erroneously attributes to chapter 23.

[p. 159]

- [2] Though a minority opinion, Feng’s view or a variant of it is highly plausible. The theory that the tripartite division of the *Zhuangzi* chapters is related to their authorship is relatively recent, dating back only to the Qing dynasty scholar Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692 A.D.). As Liu observes (p. 48), no scholar before Su Shi (1036–1101 A.D.) seems to have questioned Zhuang Zhou’s authorship of any of the chapters.
- [3] The presentation of the usage data in the book tends to obscure these facts. The distribution table on page 9 omits the thirteen Outer and Miscellaneous chapters in which the phrases fail to occur, which might cause readers to mistakenly infer that the phrases appear ubiquitously throughout these two groups of chapters. Also, the instance of *daode* in chapter 28 should be omitted from the table. According to the *Zhuangzi Jishi* of Guo Qingfan (Liu’s source text; see p. 187, n. 10) and most later editions, the one apparent occurrence of *daode* in this chapter involves a loan word for the homonym *de* (obtain) and thus should be discounted.
- [4] Indeed, instead of comparing how well the two approaches explain the state of the text, Liu seems to treat his single-author theory as an established conclusion that rival theories are obliged to disprove. In response to Zhang Hengshou’s multiple-author hypothesis about chapter 4, for example, Liu concludes that “Zhang is unable to dispose of the possibility that [all of chapter 4] . . . was written by Zhuangzi” (p. 32). One naturally wonders how we can “dispose of the possibility” that parts of the chapter were written by someone else.
- [5] The summaries in the book tend to overstate the amount of borrowed material by including passages that involve trivial similarities or what are arguably widely known sayings or stories. The extensive, detailed similarities between the *Zhuangzi* and certain sections of the *Lushi Chunqiu*, such as 14:8, are indeed best explained by the hypothesis that the *Lushi Chunqiu* is quoting *Zhuangzi* material. In contrast, however, one of the *Hanfeizi* passages Liu cites (in chapter 38, “Nan San”) is introduced in the *Hanfeizi* explicitly as a folk saying. After carefully examining Liu’s table of quoted *Zhuangzi* chapters, I think he would be on firmer ground if he discounted at least six chapters (3, 6, 10, 22, 23, and 29) from the list, thus reducing the total from fourteen to eight.
- [6] One of Liu’s arguments for the special status of the Inner chapters is based on his observation that the words *you* (wander) and *xiaoyao* (roam) occur 1.8 times more frequently there than in the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters (p. 23). However, by my rough calculation (without adjusting for chapter length), these words appear only 1.1 times more frequently in the Inner chapters than in the Transmitters chapters, an insignificant difference.