A Deity Without Form: The Earliest Representation of Laozi and the Concept of Wei in Chinese Ritual Art

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This paper identifies an early symbolic form of Laozi. The central question is, how was Laozi represented in Daoist rituals before the invention of anthropomorphic icons of this most important Daoist deity? The existence of a symbolic form of Laozi during the late Eastern Han (25-220) and post-Han period is implied in a seeming contradiction in our understanding of early Daoist ritual practice. On the one hand, scholars all agree that along with the emergence of religious Daoism in the second century, Laozi was gradually transformed from a historical figure — the author of the Eastern Zhou (770-221 BCE) text Daode jing — into a supernatural being for religious worship (Kohn, pp. 39-41). A number of historical records reveal that at least around the mid-second century, Laozi was honoured in special structures and received regular ritual offerings. On the other hand, scholars also generally agree that the ancient Chinese did not make figurative images of Laozi until the fifth century, a contention supported by both written texts and surviving images.

Among the textual evidence for this contention, a famous passage from Falin’s treatise Bianzheng lun (In Defence of What Is Right) has been cited by almost every writer discussing the origin of Daoist icons in general and the invention of Laozi’s images in particular (Taihō shinshū daizōkyō, 2110.52.535a). Falin was a Buddhist monk of the Tang dynasty (618-906), who, in an effort to attack Daoism, has nevertheless left us some invaluable information about the practice of his religious opponents. His general argument is that according to an authentic Daoist theory, ‘the Dao has neither matter nor form’ and is therefore beyond representation. When mediaeval Daoists made anthropomorphic images of Daoist deities, they were actually imitating Buddhist iconic worship. To Falin, the imitative nature of Daoist images made them inauthentic and inferior.

To support this argument, Falin cited a passage from a biography of the Daoist master Tao Hongjing (456-536), which records that when Tao established his religious institution at Mount Mao near Nanjing, he constructed two halls, one for the worship of Daoist deities, the other for Buddhist deities. A key sentence in the passage reads: ‘Foting you xiang. Daotang wu xiang’ (‘The Buddhist hall had images; the Daoist hall had none’). This arrangement probably continued an older tradition, because Daoist icons had already come into existence by Tao’s time. As evidence of this, in the same treatise Falin identified Lu Xiujing (406-77), who lived about half a century before Tao, as one of the earliest makers of Daoist icons.

Falín’s dating of the invention of Daoist icons to the fifth century is supported by historical texts such as the Wei shu (History of the Northern Wei), which states that in circa 430, Kou Qianzhi (365-448) had images fashioned of the Heavenly Worthy and other Daoist deities. This dating has also been substantiated by material remains available to us. A number of scholars in China, Japan and the West have conducted exhaus-

(Fig. 1) Stele with the deified Laozi and two attendants
Northern Wei period, Yunchang reign, 515
Sandstone
Height 43.5 cm
Yamaguchi Collection
Osaka Municipal Museum of Art
ship of Laozi among Daoist believers was widespread. Laozi’s image only began to appear 250 to 300 years later (Fig. 1). How was this deity represented in the preceding centuries? We can formulate this question in a different way: although Laozi was not portrayed figuratively during this period, he was definitely represented by certain visual symbols, which would indicate his presence in a ritual structure as the recipient of offerings and homage. What were these symbols?

To answer this, it is necessary to review the earliest records of Laozi worship in the *Hou Han shu* (History of the Later Han). Again, these records have been cited in every introduction to the early history of Daoism, but I believe that a close and careful reading of the material can still yield important information that has been overlooked before.

Passages scattered in four chapters of the *Hou Han shu* — ‘Huandi benji’ (‘Biography of Emperor Huan’), ‘Xiang Kai zhuang’ (‘Biography of Xiang Kai’), ‘Xiyu zhuang’ (‘Records of the Western Region’), and ‘Jisi zhi’ (‘Records of Sacrifices’) — record a series of events that took place in 165 and 166. (*Hou Han shu*, pp. 313, 316-317, 320, 1082, 3188). According to these passages and Li Daoyuan’s *Shuijing Zhu* (Annotated Canon of Waterways), in 165 Emperor Huan (r. 147-67) sent the eunuchs Zuo Guan and Guan Ba as his personal envoys to offer sacrifices in a shrine at Laozi’s birthplace, Kuxian in present-day Henan province. The emperor also ordered the local governor, the scholar Bian Shao, to compose a memorial eulogy entitled ‘Laozi ming’ and to inscribe it on a stele erected next to Laozi’s shrine. This eulogy, which was later published by the Song antiquarian Hong Kuo in his *Li shi, juan 3* (*Interpreting Han Clerical Writings*, vol. 3), promotes Laozi to an unsurpassable status by crediting him with the creation of the universe. The next year, in 166, Emperor Huan upgraded the sacrifice to Laozi by transferring the rite to the imperial court. Both the *Hou Han shu* (p. 3188) and the *Xu Han zhi* (Sequel to the Records of Han, cited in *Hou Han shu*, p. 320) record that the emperor set up a ritual ground to worship Laozi and the Yellow Emperor in an important palace building, called Zhuolong Gong (‘Hall of Washing the Dragon’) in the capital, Luoyang.

Many scholars have pointed out that this sequence of events signified a turning point in the transformation of Laozi from a historical figure into a cosmic deity. I am intrigued, however, by a specific aspect of this transformation concerning the physical form of the 166 sacrifice. Here is how the ritual site is described:

[The emperor] personally offered sacrifices to Laozi in the Zhuolong Gong. An altar covered with patterned woollen fabric was prepared, and vessels decorated with gold rims were used. A seat was set up [for Laozi] under an elaborate canopy [she huagai zhi zuo]. The music played during the sacrifice was adopted from the semi-annual sacrifice to Heaven. (ibid., p. 3188; italics added)

Significantly, no image or statue of Laozi is mentioned. Instead, this supreme deity was symbolized by a ‘seat’ (zuo) placed under an ‘elaborate canopy’ (huagai). The seat implied Laozi’s
presence and emphasized his spiritual nature. In the second century, people would have conceived the seat as a wei, which, rather than identifying the physical appearance of a god or spirit, defined its ‘position’ in a ritual environment.

Here I must broaden my discussion to address the concept of wei, because this is crucial to understanding the earliest representation of Laozi, and also because it will help us discover interesting connections between Daoist and non-Daoist rituals during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-CE 220). Generally speaking, wei is a visual technology that through marking the proper position of a subject, allows people to represent this subject without literally portraying it. I call this visual strategy a ‘technology’ because it underlay an entire system of visual presentation and representation in ancient China. Numerous texts and images, including all those classified as tu (diagrams), were created based on the concept of wei. The pre-Qin treatise ‘Mingtang wei’ (‘Positions in Bright Hall’) in the Li ji (Book of Rites), for example, defines the ruler’s authority not by describing his actual power, but through locating his central position within layers of frames constituted by the courtiers, the feudal lords, and the barbarian chieftains in the four quarters of the world.

In the domain of religion, ritual canons of ancestral worship—the dominant form of religion in pre-Han China—instinct that when worshipped in a family temple, a deceased ancestor should be symbolized by a seat, a tent, or a plain wood tablet called a pai wei. A wonderful visual presentation of the last form is found in Li Gonglin’s (1049-1106) Illustrations of The Classic of Filial Piety, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 2). None of these objects represent the likeness of the ancestor, but instead function as place markers, their sole significance being to locate the subject of worship. It was the worshipper who was supposed to work hard to evoke a mental image of the dead through a three-day pre-sacrificial ritual. Thus Li ji teaches:

He should think how his ancestors lived and how they smiled and spoke, think of their views and intentions, and think of what they enjoyed. On the third day, he will see those for whom he is conducting the vigil. On the day of sacrifice, when he enters the shrine, he will indeed seem to see the ancestors at his wei-place. After he has made his rounds and is about to go out, with a sense of awe he will hear the ancestors’ voices. When he has gone out into the front hall, softly he will hear the ancestors’ sighs. (‘The meaning of sacrifice’; see Legge, 28, 211)

The Han jiu yi (Old Ceremonies of the Han), cited in Hou Han shu, it is clear, on the arrangement of the royal ancestral hall during the Eastern Han period. The main subject of worship in this hall was Shoten’s founder of the dynasty, Gaozu (r. 202-195 BCE). His presence in the hall was indicated by a seat covered by a tent. Interestingly, the text specifies that the tent was elaborately embroidered (xiu chang), and that the sacrificial vessels were inlaid with gold rims—similar items were used in Emperor Han’s sacrifice to Laozi.

The Han ancestral hall has long disappeared, but similar seats have been discovered in Han tombs. These constructed spaces are rarely, if at all, mentioned in archaeological literature, however, largely because each of them typically appears as an assemblage of artefacts and does not represent the physical appearance of a deceased individual. Archaeologists normally classify them into various ‘material categories’ (such as metal, wood or fabric) in excavation reports, while art historians often use them as examples to illuminate the historical development of individual art traditions.

I would argue, however, that an empty seat was a crucial component of a tomb because it was prepared as the wei for the occupant’s invisible soul. In the famous Mawangdui Tomb 1 at Changsha, Hunan province, for example, the coffin of the deceased Lady Dai was placed within a huge wooden box and surrounded by four chambers (Fig. 3). Unlike the other three chambers to the east, west and south, which were filled with grave goods, the north chamber at the head of the coffin was rather empty and arranged as a stage. Silk curtains were hung on the walls and a bamboo mat covered the floor. Elaborate vessels were displayed in front of an empty couch furnished with thick cushions and backed by a painted screen—a seat prepared for an invisible subject (Wu, 1992). We realize the identity of this subject from the objects placed around the seat: in front of the couch were two pairs of silk shoes, and next to it were a cane and

(Fig. 3) Plan of the gao chambers in Mawangdui Tomb 1, Changsha, Hunan province.
(Fig. 4) Musicians and instruments
From Mawangdui Tomb 1, Changsha, Hunan province
Western Han period, 1st half of the 2nd century BCE
Heights 32.5-38 cm
Wood with polychrome pigments

two toilet boxes containing cosmetics and a wig – all intimate personal belongings of the deceased woman. (Scholars have noted that the famous painted banner found in the same tomb portrays Lady Dai as an aged woman leaning on a cane, which seems to be related to the cane found next to the couch.) Joining these objects to frame the wei for the woman’s soul were several groups of figures, including eight singers and dancers performing in the company of five musicians (Fig. 4). This performance was staged at the east end of the room, opposite the couch at the west end. We can well imagine that the invisible Lady Dai, while enjoying food and drink, was watching the performance from the empty couch.

Similar wei also existed in Mancheng Tomb 1 of Prince Liu Sheng, whose ‘jade suit’ has become world-famous. This tomb was constructed inside a mountain cliff in Hebei province and centred on a large chamber arranged as a sacrificial hall. Inside were two empty seats, originally covered with silk tents (Fig. 5). Vessels and figurines were lined up in rows in front of, as well as beside, the central seat, clearly mimicking the situation of a ritual offering.

Because no seat was found in the nearby burial of Liu Sheng’s consort Dou Wan (Mancheng Tomb 2), I have suggested that the two seats in Liu Sheng’s tomb may have been prepared for the souls of the couple (Wu, 1997). In other words, although Dou Wan enjoyed an individual tomb, her posthumous soul received ‘subordinate offerings’ (peiji) in a sacrificial hall mainly established for her dead husband. The couple’s unequal positions in such rituals are indicated by the two seats in the
Mancheng tomb: one stood on the central axis, while the other was placed to the side and slightly behind it. The coexistence of these two seats recalls a famous episode in the life of Emperor Wu, a half-brother of Liu Sheng. The emperor longed for his favourite concubine, Madame Li, after her untimely death. The necromancer Shao Weng promised the emperor that he could summon Li's soul back for him:

Shao Weng then set up lanterns at night, arranged a curtained seat, and displayed food and wine. He asked the emperor to stay in another curtained seat. From there, Emperor Wu saw a beautiful woman who looked like Madame Li. She first took the seat inside the tent and then walked out. Unable to bring himself to look at her closely, the emperor missed her even more intensely and became sadder then ever. He composed a poem and ordered the singers in the royal music department to perform it: "Is this her or not? Standing on my feet I gaze at her. But why is she so slow to come?" (*Han shu*, p. 3952)

Emperor Wu also wrote a long rhapsody to express his sorrow. Preserved in the *Han shu (History of the Former Han)*, the rhapsody ends with these lines:

She has gone forever to the world of darkness, never to return.
She has descended to her new [underground] palace, and will never reside in her former home again.
Alas! So much do I long for her departed soul!
(*Han Shu*, p. 3955)

We can relate these stories and poetic expressions to the Mancheng tomb, in which two covered seats were constructed for the deceased royal couple. Additional archaeological evidence reveals that this mortuary practice and related religious beliefs were not monopolized by aristocrats, but were shared by low officials and even commoners during Han and post-Han times. In many small and mid-sized tombs from this period, a special 'altar' was constructed in the front chamber; sacrificial vessels and pottery models placed on it (Fig. 6) Ground plan of a well-preserved tomb at Qilhe near Luoyang, Henan province Eastern Han period, 2nd century (Adapted from Nickel, 2000)
(A) Entrance
(B) Courtyard
(C) Sacrificial area
(D) Storage room
1) guard dog
2) chicken
3) pigsty
4) kitchen
5) knife and chopsticks
6) table with ear-cups
7) supposed seat of the deceased
8) musician figures
9) acrobat figures
10) lamp
11) mountain censer

(Fig. 7) Niche attached to the north wall of the main chamber in Tomb 133 at Foyemiaowen, Dunhuang, Gansu province Western Jin period, late 3rd century
framed an empty space as the wei of the deceased person’s soul. In a second century brick tomb at Qilin near Luoyang, for example, the west section of the front chamber was occupied by a raised platform (Area C in Fig. 6), on which trays, dishes, ear-cups, and chopsticks were set up on a low table before an empty space. Beyond the table were pottery figures of dancers and acrobats. This arrangement has led Lukas Nickel to conclude that “almost certainly this empty space was where the occupant was expected to sit” (“Some Han Dynasty Paintings in the British Museum”, in *Arthaud Asie*, LX:1 [2000], p. 73). This burial practice continued even after a portrait of the deceased was sometimes created in the front chamber of a tomb as the subject of worship (as in two Eastern Han tombs at Anping in Hebei and Cangshan in Shandong, respectively). In a third century tomb at Foyemiaowan near Dunhuang, Gansu province, a tent was painted inside a niche attached to the main chamber, above a platform ‘couch’ covered with a bamboo mat (Fig. 7). While vessels and a lantern were placed before the couch, no image was found inside the painted tent or above the couch; the empty space was again reserved for the invisible soul.

The textual and archaeological evidence discussed here reveals a ritual convention during the Han period: an empty seat in a sacrificial space stood for the subject of worship and defined the focus of the worshipper’s mental concentration. The encounter of a worshipper’s gaze with an anthropomorphic icon, so often found in other religious art traditions around the world, did not exist in this case. Instead, the seat’s non-figurative form encouraged visualization. It is clear that the same idea underlay the ‘seat under an elaborate canopy’ that Emperor Huan set up in the Zhuolong Gong for Laozi.

The Zhuolong Gong no longer exists, and can only be imagined based on textual sources. But fortunately, an image decorating a type of Han and post-Han mirror may represent Laozi’s wei. This type of mirror is conventionally known as sanduanshi shenxian jing or ‘mirror with images of immortals on three registers’ - a designation based on the design on the back, which is divided into three registers of equal height by two horizontal bars. The top register is centred on a non-figurative image. As exemplified by two mirrors in the Seattle Art Museum and Beijing’s Palace Museum respectively, this image consists of a broad umbrella standing on the back of a turtle (Figs 8 and 9). Several figures, including a ‘Jade Maiden’ (yu mi), stand beneath the umbrella and pay homage to it, while a large figure with wings is seated to one side.

Different identifications have been offered to explain this image. Hayashi Minao, for example, believes that the winged figure next to the umbrella represents Tianhuang Dadi (the Great Heavenly Emperor) at the North Pole in Heaven, and that the umbrella symbolizes the Huagai Xing (‘Elaborate Canopy’ constellation), which consists of a series of nine stars next to the North Pole (Hayashi, pp. 28-34). Hayashi’s opinion has been challenged by Takayasu Higuchi and Huo Wei. In particular, Higuchi argues that it would be illogical to depict the ‘canopy’ stars in the centre and to place the Heavenly Emperor to one side (Higuchi, p. 226). I agree with this argument, and want to propose a new identification for the umbrella image. In my view, any interpretation of this image must take these three features into consideration: 1) its placement in the most honourable position in the decorative programme of a three-register mirror; 2) its composite form as an umbrella standing on a turtle.
(in some cases a xianwu – a combination of a turtle and a snake); and 3) its role as the subject of reverence and worship by surrounding figures. Relating these features to textual references, I propose that it actually represents the deified Laozi in a symbolic form.

Simply stated, the image depicts huagai zhi zuo ‘the seat under an elaborate canopy’ – which is the phrase used in the Hou Han shu for the place of Laozi in the imperial sacrifice. This significance would explain the placement of the image in the most honoured position in the mirror’s decorative programme, and would also explain why it is depicted as a subject of worship and reverence. A number of factors further support this identification.

First, in the early fourth century, Ge Hong (283-363) instructed in an ‘inner chapter’ of his Baopuzi (Master Who Embraces Simplicity) how to use a mirror to visualize the ‘true form’ (zhen xing) of Laozi. According to Ge, a believer can either use a single mirror, a pair of mirrors, or as many as four mirrors to visualize Daoist deities. When Laozi’s ‘true form’ emerged, the believer should stand up and bow. Significantly, these instructions identify Laozi’s throne as a ‘divine turtle’ (shen gu) (Baopuzi, p. 273). It can hardly be a coincidence that the ‘elaborate canopy’ illustrated on a three-register mirror is supported by a turtle. Later in this paper I will suggest that the three-register mirror was closely related to Wudoumi Dao (‘Five Bushels of Rice’ Daoism), a powerful Daoist church in Sichuan and southern Shaanxi province from the second to early third century. It is not impossible that this type of mirror was designed to facilitate the visualization practice described by Ge Hong. As mentioned earlier, the non-figurative form of Laozi would encourage a worshipper to achieve an inner vision of the deity.

Second, all other motifs on a three-register mirror reflect Daoist beliefs, and constitute a pictorial context for the wei of Laozi. Images on the middle level always form a symmetrical pair. On most three-register mirrors, the two images are the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East, two mythological figures who were absorbed into the Daoist pantheon during the Eastern Han period (Fig. 8). In other cases this pair consists of a dragon and a tiger, which are among the most important Daoist symbols, and are used as chief metaphors in Daoist writings on both internal and external alchemy (Fig. 9).

Figures on the lower register are centred on a strange tree with two intertwining trunks. Hayashi Minho has identified it, quite convincingly in my opinion, as the mysterious jiamu, described in ancient texts as a divine tree ‘at the centre of Heaven and Earth’ along which heavenly lords (Di) moved back and forth between these two realms (Hayashi, p. 37). The Sichuan scholar Huo Wei has found that texts say this tree was located at Duguang or Guangdu, a place some thirty li (approximately fifteen kilometres) west of Chengdu (Huo, p. 47). It is highly significant that this location was very close to Yangping Zhi, the headquarters of Wudoumi Dao. It is possible that by appropriating the ancient jiamu myth, followers of Wudoumi Dao identified Yangping Zhi as ‘the centre of Heaven and Earth’. This, in turn, implies a close relationship between Wudoumi Dao and the three-register mirror.

Third, the relationship between this type of mirror and Wudoumi Dao is further supported by their overlapping geographical distribution. When Zhang Ling founded Wudoumi Dao in the early second century, he established a series of Daoist centres called ‘the 24 zhi’ in a broad belt from Xichang in the south to Hanzhong in the north. The core area within this region was the Chengdu plain at the upper reaches of the Min and Tuo rivers (Fig. 10) (Yunji qigian, juan 28; see Wu, 2000). Under Zhang Ling’s grandson Zhang Lu, Wudoumi Dao became not only the region’s dominant religious authority but also established the first Daoist regime in Chinese history. According to the Sanguo zhi (Records of the Three Kingdoms), Zhang Lu replaced local officials with Daoist priests called Jijiu, a reform welcomed by the local people (Sanguo zhi, p. 263). After taking over Hanzhong in present-day southern Shaanxi province, Zhang Lu ‘assumed the title Shi jun [Master-ruler] and taught people Ghost Dao [Wudoumi Dao]. For some thirty years he ruled the region of Baijun’ and Han[zhong] majestically. This was at the end of the Han. Unable to subjugate him, the central government was forced to offer him titles such as General of Subjugating Barbarians and Grand Magistrate of Hanning (ibid, pp. 263-64). After Zhang Lu lost power in 215, many Daoist believers migrated from Sichuan and Hanzhong to the Xi’an area, and played important roles in the development of Daoism in northern China during the subsequent centuries.

All excavated three-register mirrors are from this region – at least three are from various locations in southern Shaanxi (Tomb 457 at Baqiao near Xi’an, Tomb 1 at Hansengzhai in Xi’an, and a tomb at Chaoxian); a fourth is from a cliff tomb at Hejiaoshan near Chengdu. This last example is especially worth noting because it bears an inscription. According to the excavation report, the inscription is damaged and cannot be comprehended completely. But the transcribed portions include an unusual phrase, cui yu bai gui (‘sacred canopy made of kingfisher feathers’) (Hetun 1991:3, pp. 4-5). This phrase clearly refers to the umbrella image in the mirror’s decoration. This phrase is close to huagai or ‘elaborate canopy’, the term used in the Hou Han shu to describe the umbrella above Laozi’s seat.

The last sentence in the inscription expresses the wish that a

![Location of the 24 zhi of Wudoumi Daoism in Sichuan province](image-url)
figurative icons for Laozi and other Daoist deities gradually became a conventional practice from the fifth century. A major reason for this change, as Falin pointed out more than a thousand years ago, was the strong influence from Buddhist art. This influence is both fascinating and ironic, because, as is well known, the earliest representations of the Buddha in India were also non-figurative, and the emergence of figurative images was partly due to influences from further west. When Daoist art began to develop its own figurative icons, however, it was Buddhist art that provided the necessary stimuli. Viewed from this perspective, we may consider the anthropomorphic Laozi as a consequence of a global cultural interaction in the ancient world, which appropriated an indigenous visual tradition that favoured non-figurative images in representing a subject of religious worship.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that Laozi was represented solely by anthropomorphic images after the fifth century. It is typical that in traditional Chinese culture, an old form persisted for a long period after new forms were invented. In the domain of ancestral worship, non-figurative tablets remained in currency even after ancestral portraits became widely used. Likewise, figurative images of Laozi never completely replaced non-figurative representations of this deity in Daoist rituals. To support this argument, Stephen Bokenkamp has brought to my attention a large silk painting in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, recently shown in the exhibition Taoism and the Arts of China (see Little, pp. 190-91). Created in the Qing court, it depicts a Daoist 'fasting' (chá) ceremony, in which a Daoist priest stands on a tall altar, performing the ritual on behalf of a lay worshipper kneeling in front of a smaller altar (Fig. 11). The subject of worship, possibly Laozi, is represented not by a statue or a painted image, but by a wooden tablet placed on this second altar. This is significant for this paper, above the tablet is a huanggai made of multicoloured fabric and peacock feathers.

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