ABSTRACT

The dating of Laozi and his work Laozi has been an issue of recurring controversy over an extensive period of time. The exact dates are difficult to verify mainly due to the dearth of materials on Laozi, leaving much room for diverse speculations. Even after the ancient silk manuscript of Laozhi was unearthed, there have been differences in opinion regarding the dates of Laozi, sometimes to the extent of two to three centuries.

Dr. Liu Xiao Gan is of the opinion that “Shijing evolved into Chuci and then developed into fu of Han Dynasty, which later became pianwen of the Wei-Jin Period as well as Tang shi and Song ci. Approximately, after every two to three centuries, there would be a major development”. Enlightened by my supervisor Dr. Liu, I conducted a comprehensive comparison of Laozi, Shijing and Chuci, based on their respective versification characteristics, to demonstrate that Laozi was produced before the establishment of the Chuci style and during the height of the Shijing style. That is, Laozi was probably completed towards the end of the Spring and Autumn Period.

This dissertation first approaches the study from the angle of tonal rhymes (韵) to make an exhaustive statistical analysis of Laozi, Shijing and Chuci. It then conducts a detailed comparative investigation of the versification characteristics of the three works under study. This is to prove objectively the great probability that Laozi was a work of the Shijing style of the late Spring and Autumn Period and not a product of the mid-Warring States or Chuci era.

Secondly, through analysis and comparing the rhyme schemes (合韵) found in Wang Bi’s edition of Laozi with those occurring in Shijing and Chuci, examines the issue on dating Laozi. For rhyme schemes common to Shijing and Laozi but absent in Chuci, there are 23 examples falling into 6 categories which are...
zhiju heyun, youhou heyun, youxiao heyun, wujue heyun, yuezhi heyun and zhengyuan heyun. These categories are not found in Chuci and there is, strictly speaking, no occurrence of any rhyme scheme common to Laozi and Chuci but absent in Shijing. From the above approximate quantitative comparison, it can be seen that the similarity between Laozi and Shijing is very obvious. This suggests that Laozi appeared at the time when Shijing wielded considerable influence.

Next, I probed the musical elements of rhythm and metre of the works under study and found that Laozi and Shijing are relatively simple and unadorned, both belonging to ‘yayan’ and ‘yayue’, whereas Chuci is influenced by the prevailing ‘zhengsheng’ of the mid-Warring States Period.

Regarding the dating of Laozi, I am inclined to concur with Sima Qian’s Shiji. Laozi probably lived during the final years of the Spring and Autumn Period and thus the main corpus of Laozi was the work of the same era. For, whether it is based on existing materials or my own investigation, the advocates of Shiji have not been disproved nor its sceptics proven, by concrete evidence.