

Author:	Huang, Paulos
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Review: The author offers a critical study of the person and the work of Lao Zi, taking issue with the relatively sceptical positions usually adopted by most influential western scholars including Waley, Creel, Needham, Kaltenmark and Graham. International Chinese scholars such as Fung Yu-lan and D.C. Lau are also in this camp, the latter having doubted the very existence of Lao Zi. To have one's historical existence doubted is of course the ultimate accolade for the hagiographically privileged. But eventually there is a return to common sense. The sober historian of religions usually settles down into the view that Abraham existed, Mose existed, Jesus existed, Confucius existed and the Buddha existed. These figures were not figments of the imagination, even if much which has been said about that them is. The question is, is the present work by Paulos Huang the required swing of the pendulum in this case? He goes to considerable trouble to differentiate between that which the ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian himself seemed to be sure about, and those points about which he himself expressed uncertainty. That Lao Zi existed, and that he was responsible for a tradition of sayings which was eventually edited as the Dao De Jing, seems difficult to dispute unless all the old books are simply to be thrown aside as evidence. Essentially this is the nature of Huang's argument. He seems to feel that there is some kind of a plot among western historians not to believe anything. Though not spelled out, he may have put his finger on a ruling fashion of "historical correctness", which eventually trips up over its own scepticism. At the risk of falling into this trap, I would argue however that the legendary meeting with Confucius described by Sima Qian may nevertheless be an invention. The reason for regarding it thus is simply that the apologetic motive in building up Lao Zi through the reported admiration of Confucius is so evident. To put it more generally, mere scepticism because sources are slender is not a good enough reason for spoiling all the best stories and removing them from "history". A judicious "probably" is a sufficient gloss. But at the same time, the "invention of tradition" is now such a well known phenomenon in the history of religions that clear evidences for it in any particular case must in turn cast doubt on the reliability of details in the narrative, or to put it a little less negatively, lead to caution in their use as historical information. To spell it out, Lao Zi may never have met Confucius. But what early Confucianists felt about the kinds of sayings ascribed to him was sufficiently

interesting to be given dramatised form. Huang offers us a fascinating survey of the ways in which the evidence about Lao Zi has been evaluated by various authors, and his plea for less scepticism should not go unheard. At the same time, his work would be more valuable if he had moved on to a more analytic study of the motives for the creation of the information as we have it and the motives of the various sinologists who have been telling us what to make of it. Perhaps these aspects of the problem will be taken up by himself or by another.

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