

ARGUMENTS FOR A SINGLE AUTHOR OR MULTIPLE AUTHORS OF THE *TAO TE CHING*

I. MULTIPLE AUTHORS

1. The name “Lao Tzu” is generic, meaning “venerable master,” and would be used by anyone quoting the words of his master: “My venerable master said...” Even the proper names given to Lao Tzu in the later tradition (Li Erh and/or Li T’an) are symbolic names denoting longevity and wisdom
2. There are references in early literature to other works with names like the “Lao Tzu” that are clearly compilations, such as the *Lao Ch’eng Tzu* (*The Old, Mature Master*), and the *Cheng Chang Che* (*The Elder from Cheng*). The *Tao Te Ching* is probably of this genre.
3. The ideas contained in the *Tao Te Ching* are very heterogeneous and inconsistent. This is easier to understand if one posits multiple authors.
4. The use of rhyme-words points to a long period of compilation. Words that rhymed at one time changed their pronunciation as time went on and the language evolved. By the same token, words that did not rhyme at one time rhymed later. By noting the use of words as rhymes, we can date various passages roughly to different historical periods.
5. Passages from the *Tao Te Ching* turn up in other works attributed to other authors.

II. SINGLE AUTHORS

1. Aside from the “compilation of sayings of the master” genre mentioned in #2 above, there is another genre of single-author pieces dating from the same period (i.e., the Warring States period) as the *Tao Te Ching* where the authors use pseudonyms, e.g., *The Pheasant Cap Master* and *The Master of Ghost Valley*. The *Tao Te Ching* or *Lao Tzu* may be one of *this* genre rather than the “compilation” genre.
2. The use of a generic pseudonym such as “Lao Tzu” is consistent with a culture that did not value originality, in which thinkers seeking to present new ideas put them forth under other, more respectable names. In addition, during the Warring States period, anonymity may have been valuable. Thus, the generic nature of the name need not imply multiple authors.
3. China’s earliest historical records (Ssu-ma Ch’ien, written around 100 BC) assert the existence of a single figure who composed the *Tao Te Ching*. Moreover, unlike other famous Taoist figures, this one has a minor government post and appears to be a good Confucian character. By the “principle of embarrassment,” we can judge this as at least a kernel of truth under all the later legends.
4. The inconsistencies may reflect the interpolation of passages by later editors for the same reason as given in II.2 above. This does not necessarily mean that there was not an original author who wrote the bulk of the text. The *Chuang-tzu* displays abundant signs of tampering, editing and interpolation, and yet nobody disputes the existence of the author Chuang Chou or the assumption that the core of the work is his.