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*Frederick Mote, "The Oldest Chinese Book at Princeton", The Gest Library Journal 1, no. 1 (1986): 34-44, accessed January 14, 2017,
https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/mote_frederick.EALJ.v01.n01.p034.pdf*

The Oldest Chinese Book at Princeton

FREDERICK MOTE

Awe and excitement. No other words so well describe the feelings of four members of the East Asian Studies faculty on an afternoon in April 1986. We were in the depths of the University Art Museum in a cool, windowless storage vault, surrounded by Japanese and Chinese works of art. Many scrolls in boxes jammed the shelves all around us. Miss Pao-chen Ch'en, curator of the East Asian Art Seminar, donned white gloves and deftly unrolled a scroll on the long table spread with white felt. It was our first viewing of the so-called "So Tan *Lao Tzu* scroll," a famous manuscript that has recently come into the collection of a Princetonian who has deposited it at the museum on long-term loan.

We could feel the "presence" of this venerable object even before the opening section was unrolled before us (see illustration). We knew that it is by far the oldest East Asian book at Princeton and that it may well be the oldest example in the world of this form of the Chinese book, i.e. a book copied with brush in ink on paper. During the Later Han dynasty (A.D. 21-220) paper making was greatly improved, making it the preferred material for writing, hence for manuscript books. The only other example known to me that might be almost as old is the strikingly similar manuscript copy of a few pages from the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* written by an unknown calligrapher, probably before the year 300, and found in a cache archaeologically uncovered in 1924 at Shan-shan, in the deserts of Sinkiang Province. Like the So Tan scroll, it too represents the new form of the Chinese book that developed in the second century and continued until the hand-copied book slowly came to be superseded by the widespread use of

道主之德畜之物形之勢成之是以萬物莫不尊道
而貴德道之尊德之貴大莫之命而帝自然故道主
之畜之長之育之成之熟養之覆之主而不有為
而不持長而不宰是謂玄德
天下有始以為天下母既得其母以知其子既知其
子復守其母沒身不殆塞其兌閉其門終身不勳
關其兌滲其事終身不敝見小曰明未曰強用
其光復歸其明无遺身殃是謂襲帶
使教尔然有知行於大道唯施是舉大道甚亨而民
好淫朝甚除田甚蕪倉甚虛服文采帶利劍飾會
資財有餘是謂盜誇非道狀
善建者不拔善抱者不脫子孫以祭祀不輟脩之身
其德乃臧脩之家其德乃餘脩之鄉其德乃長脩之
國其德乃豐脩之天下其德乃普故以身觀身以家
觀家以鄉觀鄉以國觀國以天下觀天下吾何以知
天下之然哉以此
含德之厚比於赤子毒蟲不螫猛獸不攫鷲鳥不搏
骨弱筋柔而握固未知牝牡之合而蛟作精之至也
嬰兒食而嗟不噉和之至也知和曰常知常曰明益
生曰祥心使氣曰強物壯則老是謂不道早已
知者不言言不知塞其兌閉其門挫其銳解其紛
和其光同其塵是謂玄同不可得而親不可得而疏
不可得而利不可得而害不可得而貴不可得而賤
故為天下貴

The opening section of "the oldest Chinese book at Princeton," and so far as is known, the oldest Chinese ink-on-paper manuscript scroll book anywhere. It comprises the final portion of the *Tao-te Ching*, also well known from the name of its reputed author as the *Lao Tzu*. The Princeton scroll contains about forty percent of it, being one of two or three scrolls originally comprising the entire *Tao-te Ching*. The first four lines shown here correspond to Chapter Fifty-one in extant Sung dynasty and later printed versions. The Princeton manuscript runs to the end, Chapter Eighty-one, and is signed "second year of the Chien-heng reign period," corresponding to A.D. 270.

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printing after the eighth and ninth centuries. It is but a few pages and, moreover, the So Tan scroll is earlier by a decade or two.¹

I expected this ancient object to show its age: faded, perhaps patched or worm-eaten. The four of us bent over it eagerly. Here was the actual paper bearing brush strokes signed and dated by the skilled calligrapher-copyist, his date corresponding to June 10 in the year A.D. 270 by our calendar. We were examining a manuscript 1,760 years old! Astonishingly, however, the ink turned out to be richly black and fresh-looking, the brush strokes clear and strong. The thin roll of paper was among tens of thousands of scroll books, paintings, silk banners, and early printed books that had lain sealed up for close to a thousand years in a large room cut into a sandstone cliff in the northwest desert locale known as Tun-huang. Of all the items preserved in that arid treasure trove, this one bears the earliest date. Though we have earlier examples of Chinese writing, inscribed on various materials or cast in bronze, in various Princeton collections, this item must count as the oldest Chinese book at Princeton.

Yet, before a claim like this can be taken into account, one must think carefully about the concept, "book." In China, as in the West, it is useful to distinguish epigraphy, the study of writing that is scratched or incised into clay or harder materials, from paleography, the study of ancient writing done with pen or brush, using ink or paint on smooth surfaces like paper or parchment. Although we have rather lengthy inscribed texts from ancient times in both the West and in China, we are perhaps justified in using the word "book" only when writing or printing on lightweight materials made a lengthy text portable and easily read. When "book" is defined in that way, paleographers tell us that the oldest books in the West are the thousands of papyri, mainly those bearing Greek texts recovered from the desert sands along the Nile in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The earliest of those roll books date from the end of the fourth century B.C. Chinese epigraphy begins with the oracle bone texts, the earliest of which date from early in the second millenium B.C. But the Chinese book begins with the silk manuscripts from the sixth century B.C. and onward, and texts written with brush (sometimes subsequently incised) on wooden or bamboo strips called "*chien*," from roughly the same time. Many books have been found in those forms.

In the West, parchment replaced papyrus in later Roman times, and consequently the characteristic form of the book changed from the roll to the

codex—rectangular pages stitched together and often covered in a heavy binding. In China, however, paper became the principal material for writing manuscript roll or “scroll” books, and eventually for printed books. The adoption of page-size wooden blocks engraved for printing by the seventh century, and the truly widespread use of the technique after the tenth, definitively changed the book from scroll to stiched volume.

This form of the Chinese book was somewhat like the parchment or velum codex in the West but was much lighter and far cheaper. Paper-making eventually reached Europe, via the Arabs, only in the twelfth century and was not widespread until the fifteenth. It is not a coincidence that European printing also dates from that time. The impact of materials on the nature of writing, then on the form of the book, and finally on the technology of printing, shows some similarities in China and the West, but even more striking differences. Perhaps this digression into the history of the book East and West will help us to appreciate Princeton’s oldest Chinese book.²

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF SO TAN AND THE SO TAN MANUSCRIPT

So Tan, the calligrapher of our *Lao Tzu* manuscript, was from a family long prominent in the far northwest commandery called Tun-huang. “So” is a rare surname and it suggests that the character with which it is written may have been used to transliterate a name of non-Han origin, but there is nothing in the existing biographies of So Tan and his known kin to support such speculation. By the third century, at any rate, his family were within the mainstream of the Chinese cultivated elite. His biography in the *History of the Chin Dynasty* states that after a long career as a man of learning, he died peacefully at his Tun-huang home at the age of seventy-four.³ Professor Jao Tsung-i, the eminent sinologist, published a definitive study of the So Tan *Lao Tzu* manuscript. In it he calculated that So Tan was born in the period 249-53, and thus must have died between 323 and 327; we might roughly assign him the approximate dates 250 to 324.⁴ When So Tan was still a young scholar in his teens, but already of demonstrated talent, he was admitted to the Imperial Academy at Lo-yang, the capital of the waning Wei dynasty that was to fall to the succeeding Chin dynasty in 264. Uncles and cousins had preceded him to the national capital. Some of those clan members became prominent, one or two as calligraphers. So Tan himself became

an accomplished scholar in the classics in the usual pattern of preparation for an official career. But that was a time of impending disorder: the end of the Three Kingdoms era attending the fall of the Wei dynasty in the North. Young So Tan attempted to flee those troubles by going to the Yangtze delta region where the Kingdom of Wu had its capital, at modern Nanking, then called Chien-yeh. That is why in 270, when So Tan was perhaps barely twenty, he signed a copy that he had carefully made of the *Tao-te Ching* (the *Lao Tzu* if we call it by the name of its reputed author) using the reign title of the last Wu monarch by which to date it. Professor Jao has speculated that he might have gone to Wu to study the Taoist writings with experts there; he also was becoming noted for dream prognostication and related arts. We do not know how long he remained in Wu but Professor Jao estimates that he returned to Tun-huang after 280, the final year of the Wu Kingdom before it too was absorbed into the new Chin dynasty. Back in Tun-huang he lived out his long life as an honored scholar and member of one of the great families, but he never held office, so far as we know.

Making careful, artistic copies of the Taoist classics (as was later done with the Buddhist sutras) was both a scholarly and devotional act. So Tan probably wanted for his own use an accurate copy of the text in this version, representing one of the two most influential transmissions of the *Lao Tzu* text then available. He must have carried it with him, eventually back to Tun-huang. Perhaps it was a valued family heirloom for generations thereafter; quite possibly it was subsequently donated to the library of a temple.

We can only speculate about the scroll's history from 270 until it was discovered in its long-sealed cave by a local Taoist priest in 1900. In 1907 the Hungarian-born, naturalized British explorer, Mark Aurel Stein (subsequently Sir Mark Aurel Stein), who conducted archaeological explorations for the British government in India, trekked from the Pamir Mountains in Afghanistan east across the Tarim Basin and came to Tun-huang. Once a great outpost of the T'ang (618-906) Empire, it was now only a tiny oasis in the vast desert frontiers of northwest China. Stein had heard rumors about ancient objects coming to light in the Tun-huang region. It was not long until he met the Taoist priest who had made the cave discovery and Stein induced him to reveal the trove. For small sums of money Stein was allowed to sort through much of the accumulation of centuries, picking out things that interested him. He could read some Western Asian scripts but knew no Chinese; nonetheless he appreciated the importance of preserving ancient

objects. He packed thousands of items in chests and transported them by camel caravan back to India. Most of his finds have ended up in the British Museum. I must digress to note that some years ago his nephew, residing in Vienna, presented Stein's own copies of the lavish publications of his explorations, and other memorabilia, to Jeannette Mirsky for the Gest Library; Miss Mirsky had interviewed him in Vienna in the course of the extensive research she carried out while writing her acclaimed biography, *Sir Aurel Stein, Archeological Explorer* (Chicago University Press, 1977).⁵

Hearing of Stein's finds, French, Japanese, and other seekers of antiquities soon were on the scene, eager to scoop up what was left. So spectacular were the reports that the moribund Chinese imperial court (it died in the Revolution of 1911) sent officials of its Ministry of Education in 1910 to secure the remaining finds in the name of the Chinese government, and to transport them to Peking. But many items at that time fell into the hands of Chinese collectors and dealers. The So Tan manuscript seems to have passed from one of the Chinese officials then posted in the Tun-huang region to a relative, a collector in Peking, whose seals and colophon it bears. In 1947 it became the property of another collector in Peking who subsequently took it to Hong Kong; that is where Professor Jao was invited to study it, and to make the meticulous analysis of the text published in 1955. In 1985 it was acquired by the collector who now has placed it on long-term loan at Princeton.

The transmission of this object since 1910 is clear enough, even though the earlier owner was very secretive and refused to allow noted experts then studying the Tun-huang texts to see it. He did however invite Mr. Yeh Kung-ch'ö (1881-1968), one of the most learned scholar-officials and bibliophiles during the Republican Period (1912-1949), to examine it. Mr. Yeh's colophon, evaluating the work and placing it in the history of calligraphy (see below), is among several appended to the scroll when it was mounted on a paper backing by one of its recent owners.

The arid climate of Tun-huang at the edge of the Takla Makan desert is perfect for preserving paper, textiles, and wood. Princeton's Gest Library possesses an item acquired for Mr. Gest from dealers in Peking sixty years ago that also came from the Tun-huang caves. It is a Buddhist sutra, undated, but similar to the So Tan manuscript in its being written with brush in ink on paper. Internal evidence dates this scroll to the seventh century.⁶ About four hundred years younger than the So Tan manuscript, it nonthe-

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less is almost 1,400 years old. It has not been mounted or backed, and its thin paper is still tough and flexible, showing that ancient Chinese paper has remarkable longevity. A comparison of these two scrolls, the oldest Chinese books at Princeton, reveals the continuity of the handwritten scroll book from Han to T'ang times. These two scroll books from the Tun-huang cache are important testimony to the form and the aesthetic standard of the beautiful manuscript book that only gradually gave way to printing in T'ang times.

THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF THE MANUSCRIPT

Is the So Tan manuscript an art museum object or more properly a library holding? That question could be asked of many of the rare books in the Gest Library, and of some of the calligraphic works in the Art Museum. But it is not an important question. The So Tan manuscript serves the needs both of scholars who use the library and of those who depend on the holdings of the Art Museum, by being at Princeton. At present the Art Museum is better equipped to care for an item of such extraordinary character, so that is where it has been placed on deposit. The more interesting question is: What is the importance of this object to scholars, at Princeton and elsewhere?

We can usefully distinguish at least three kinds of enduring importance which this manuscript holds for scholars, in addition to the sheer aesthetic pleasure that any person might derive from seeing and knowing about an object whose history is so intriguing.

First, the So Tan manuscript is one of the earliest versions of a book—more precisely, of the latter part of a book, originally one of a set of two or three scrolls comprising the entire *Tao-te Ching*—a book that has been of central importance to Chinese civilization. When Professor Jao published his critical examination of this text in 1955 he could state quite confidently that it is the oldest known copy of that work. He could not foresee that in 1973 an amazing archaeological discovery at Ma-wang-tui in Hunan Province would bring to light the tomb of a Han dynasty imperial relative which contained, among many spectacular finds, two essentially complete manuscripts of the *Tao-te Ching*, written on silk (*po shu*); “Manuscript A” probably written about the year 200 B.C., and “Manuscript B” perhaps thirty years later. The texts are essentially the same.⁷ Professor Jao could identify two independent textual traditions in the transmission of the *Tao-te Ching*,

one stemming from the third century A.D. scholar Wang Pi,⁸ and one from the second century B.C. exegete known as Ho-shang-kung (“the old man by the river bank”). The earliest known copies of the *Tao-te Ching* in the Wang Pi tradition are several incomplete manuscripts from the sixth to the ninth centuries, also from Tun-huang. The So Tan manuscript is the earliest known example of the *Tao-te Ching* in the Ho-shang-kung tradition. Now, however, we can also speak of a third independent textual tradition, that of the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts. We still do not know how to construct a filiation of these three distinct transmissions of the *Tao-te Ching*. The Ma-wang-tui silk manuscript versions are more than four-hundred years earlier than our So Tan manuscript, and the text of the Taoist classic in those earliest of all known versions is significantly different from all the third-century and later transmissions of the work. But not even the Ma-wang-tui silk manuscripts are close in time to the *ur-text* written by “Lao Tzu”—whoever he might have been—sometime between the sixth and the fourth centuries B.C. It is possible that archaeologists may someday discover a still earlier version, or other versions filling in the important time-gap between the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts and our So Tan manuscript.

Whether or not that happens, the comparative study of the three known independent textual traditions must continue to engage the best efforts of scholars, and the So Tan manuscript of the last two-fifths of the book, as the earliest example from one of those three, remains one of the essential building blocks of such study.

A complete photograph of the So Tan manuscript was published in 1955 along with Professor Jao’s detailed textual analysis. One might therefore say that the scholarly world’s requirements for comparative study are available, making this object no longer essential. In an important sense that is true. But on the other hand it would be incorrect to say that we no longer need the original versions of the *Magna Carta* or the Declaration of Independence, since facsimile copies of them can be found in all libraries.

Second, the So Tan manuscript is of importance to scholars as an example of the new standard form of the Chinese script that was evolving during the Han dynasty and throughout the third and fourth centuries A.D. The First Emperor of Ch’in (reg. 221–210 B.C.), whose grandiose tomb containing thousands of life-size terra cotta soldiers and horses has been under excavation since the 1970s near Sian (Xian), implemented a variety of cultural unification measures after he accomplished the political unification of the

Chinese empire. One of those measures was standardization to eliminate all the regional variations in the way Chinese wrote their script. It was decreed that all must write the new standard characters used in the offices of central and local government; we call that the *li-shu* or clerkly script. This remained the official standard for Chinese writing under the following Han dynasty. A bit cumbersome to write, clerks tended to modify it. Especially as paper became the favored writing medium, as ink was improved, and as brush design was adapted to the use of ink on paper. The clerks and government officials began to write the clerical script somewhat more cursorily, in the interests of speed, convenience, and beauty. The modified hand became known as "*Chang-ts'ao*" which may be taken to mean "the cursive (*ts'ao*) hand used in government documents (*chang*) or, by another explanation, "the cursive script favored by Emperor Chang" (reg. A.D. 76-89). In his learned colophon appended to the So Tan scroll, Mr. Yeh Kung-ch'ò has described the calligraphy as follows:

His calligraphy is a mutation wholly derived from *chang-ts'ao*, similar in style to that of the wooden strips (*mu chien*) dating from the beginning of the Chin dynasty (*ca.* 265); moreover, here and there it carries the flavor of clerical script.⁹

He goes on to call it a close match to the early Chin dynasty manuscript of a few pages of the *San-kuo Chih* ("Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms") discovered in 1924 at Shan-shan, which has been mentioned above.

Yeh Kung-ch'ò thus identifies the So Tan manuscript as one of perhaps only two existing specimens of brush-on-paper calligraphy dating from an important transitional moment in the history of the Chinese writing system. Because the So Tan manuscript bears so importantly on the history of China's premier art, as well as on the evolution of the writing system itself, it is an object of highest value. Moreover in this context its value inheres in the original object; no number of excellent facsimile reprints can supersede it, just as superb Roman copies and technically perfect modern casts do not supersede original Greek sculptures. Historians of calligraphy, as art or as technology, must see and study this object in order to fully understand it; the intrinsic importance of the object will always be there.

Third, the So Tan manuscript is the earliest complete scroll (if only part of the text of the entire book) that we know of, to represent the physical form of books in this phase of their development. Within the history of the

book through the many centuries before printing, this single scroll is at present (and may well remain) the earliest known example in a line of development. Even if archaeologists should turn up an earlier example, this scroll is sure to retain its historic importance as exemplar of the third-century book. This value also inheres in the physical object itself and will not be superseded by any number of superb copies that modern craftsmen may turn out—though any recent visitor to China's great museums will testify to the diabolical cleverness of the artisans who make the "museum copies." The Gest Library is one of the very few places in the West where the history of the Chinese book as artifact can be extensively displayed. The So Tan manuscript copy of the *Tao-te Ching* will no doubt claim pride of place in any such display.

Princeton's oldest Chinese book thus is a great treasure. We hope it soon may be properly displayed for all to see.

NOTES

1. *The Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* (*San Kuo Chih*) by Ch'en Shou (died A.D. 297) was completed sometime after the fall of the Kingdom of Wu, the last of the Three Kingdoms to submit to the Chin dynasty, in 280. The manuscript fragments found in 1924 have been published several times, most recently as eight pages of frontispiece to the Hsin-hua Shu-tien punctuated edition of the *San Kuo Chih*, Peking, fifth printing, 1973. The fragments correspond to text (without P'ei Sung-chih's commentary) of part of *chüan* 57, pp. 1321-1330 in the 1973 printing, and, moreover, have allowed the editors to make corrections. See the *chiao-chi* ("collation notes") appended to the 1973 edition, pp. 1508-09 covering pages 1321-1330 of the *Chronicles*: no fewer than ten errors in later printed editions have been emended on the authority of this manuscript fragment.
2. See Joseph Needham et al., *Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume V, Part One, Cambridge, 1986, *Paper and Printing*, by Tsien Tsuen-hsün, especially section 32e, pages 132-196. This new book is reviewed by Diane Perushek in this issue of *The Gest Library Journal*.
3. So Tan's biography appears in the *History of the Chin Dynasty* (*Chin Shu*) by Fang Hsüan-ling et al., compiled A.D. 646-648, in *chüan* 95, Peking edition, 1974, pp. 2493-95. (This earlier Chin dynasty is sometimes spelled Tsin.)
4. Jao Tsung-i, "Wu Chien-heng erh-nien So Tan hsieh-pen *Tao-te Ching* ts'an-chüan k'ao-cheng" ("The Su [sic] Tan Manuscript Fragment of the *Tao-te*

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- Ching*, A.D. 270"), *Journal of Oriental Studies* (Hong Kong University), Vol II, part one, 1955, pp. 1-71, in Chinese with English summary. See especially pp. 22-23 for a study of So's birth and death dates.
5. Jeannette Mirsky, eminent historian of geographical exploration, resides in Princeton and has been a visiting fellow in the Department of East Asian Studies.
 6. This very fine Tun-huang scroll from the Gest Collection is a portion of the *Fang-kuang* sutra, a version of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* as translated by the Khotanese monk Mokshala in A.D. 291 and revised in 303-304; See Ch'ü Wan-li, *A Catalogue of the Chinese Rare Books in the Gest Collection of Princeton University*, 1974, pp. 361-62; and Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, two volumes, Leiden, 1959, pp. 63-65. On the basis of internal evidence Professor Ch'ü dated this scroll to the first quarter of the seventh century; the latest possible date for it the year 685, that date given in a seal impression found both on the scroll and on its hemp wrapper.
 7. On the Ma-wang-tui silk manuscripts of *Tao-te Ching*, or, as it appears in those manuscripts, the *Te-tao Ching*, see D.C. Lau, *Tao-te Ching*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1982. In this work Professor Lau revises his earlier translation of the *Tao-te Ching* (Penguin Classics, London, 1963) and compares the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts with other versions of the text. For an account of the archaeological setting of the *Lao-tzu* discovery at Ma-wang-tui, see Michael Loewe, "Manuscripts found recently in China: a preliminary survey," in *T'oung-pao*, 63.2-3 (1977), pp. 118-120. For facsimile reproductions of the text, see parts 1-2 of *Ch'ang-sha Ma-wang-tui san-hao Han mu po-shu*, Shanghai, 1974. See also T'ang Lan, "Ma-wang-tui ch'u-t'u *Lao-tzu* i-pen ch'ien ku-i-shu te yen-chiu," *K'ao-ku hsüeh-pao*, 1 (1975), pp. 7-38; and Jan Yün-hua, "Tao yüan or Tao: The Origin," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 7.3 (1980), pp. 195 ff.
 8. A recent work has analyzed the sources of Wang Pi's life and discussed his family's history and his career within the context of other canonical exegetes' families and works. See Howard L. Goodman's, *Exegetes and Exegeses of the Book of Changes in the Third Century AD: Historical and Scholastic Contexts for Wang Pi*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Univ., 1985.
 9. Quoted in Jao Tsung-i, *op. cit.*, p. 2, from Yeh Kung-cho's colophon appended to the So Tan manuscript scroll.