

China Perspectives

THE METAPHYSICS OF PHILOSOPHICAL DAOISM

Zheng Kai



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Part 1

The meaning of *dao*, *de*, and metaphysics

The purpose of this book is to provide an account of the core thesis of philosophical Daoism; namely, a theory of metaphysics that is pregnant with profound insight and practical wisdom. To this end, a number of principal questions will be addressed in turn:

- 1 What is the core thesis, or the most significant characteristic, of philosophical Daoism? From a synoptic and structural perspective, this book will explain that the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) merits our attention as the most foundational and important thesis. In other words, the theory of *dao* (*daolun* 道論) and the theory of *de* (*delun* 德論), developed by Daoist philosophers around the concepts of *dao* 道 and *de* 德, encompass the theoretic core and basis of philosophical Daoism. They also mark the school's principal intellectual characteristic.
- 2 *Dao* is an important and characteristic concept of philosophical Daoism. Its meaning is deepened by Laozi with inventive intellectual ingenuity via the concept of *wu* 無 (i.e. "not"). If the theory of *dao* 道論 forms the core thesis of philosophical Daoism, it is elucidated by application of the concept of *wu*. *Wu* has implicated in it a series of meanings, including concepts such as formlessness (*wuxing* 無形), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為). Among these, namelessness and non-purposive action are the most significant and special.
- 3 In addition to the proposition of *dao*, philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward transformed the pre-established and long-standing intellectual tradition of *de* with creative ingenuity. The result of this endeavour is the concept of murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) and the profound and characteristic theory of murky-*de* 玄德論, which encompasses various and complex subjects, including ethics, political philosophy, and theory of heart-mind-nature (*xinxinglun* 心性論).
- 4 What is the nature of the kind of metaphysics that is to be ascribed to philosophical Daoism, if we can do so legitimately at all? In other words, on what ground do we judge philosophical Daoism to be a "metaphysical" (*xingershangxue* 形而上學) theory? It is incumbent upon this book to provide

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a comparative study of metaphysics, as it is conceived in the Western philosophical tradition and in its Chinese counterpart, i.e. *xingershangxue* 形而上學, before we can identify with specificity the characteristics of the metaphysics of philosophical Daoism.

We shall now address these questions in detail.

1 The meaning of *dao* and *de*

Philosophical Daoism's core thesis

The identification of the principal theme and distinctive characteristics of philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward continues to prove a controversial topic among commentators and interpreters. One may observe that spontaneously self-so (*ziran* 自然) and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為) are regularly referred to in outlines of philosophical Daoism since the Wei and Jin period. However, I consider *dao* and *de* to be the two central concepts of philosophical Daoism (of Laozi and Zhuangzi) and the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) the fundamental theoretical basis of philosophical Daoism as a whole. In the following chapter, I shall offer a detailed discussion beginning with an account of the interpretive history regarding the meaning of *dao* and *de*. In *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》, Sima Tan 司馬談 states,

Daoists hold the idea of non-purposive action, which is also said to be all-achieving. [. . . They] base their theories on emptiness (of heart-mind), and argue for argue for governance as according with [the nature and circumstance of the governed]. 道家無為，又曰無不為。 以虛無為本，因循為用。

Why does Sima Tan omit the meaning of *dao* and *de* in his outline of Daoism? He does this because the Daoists he discusses in this passage refer primarily to Huang-Lao Daoists 黃老道家, who have markedly different theoretic emphases to those of Lao-Zhuang philosophy 老莊哲學.¹ The following account follows the interpretive track of his son, Sima Qian 司馬遷, for whom philosophical Daoism from Laozi onward is ultimately epitomised in the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). We shall see that Sima Qian's interpretation is perhaps more convincing.

Strictly speaking, the name "Daoism" (*daojia* 道家) did not exist before the Han dynasty, although Daoist thinkers clearly predate that time frame. The term "Daoism" was coined by Han dynasty intellectuals in an attempt to differentiate the various intellectual schools and intellectual movements in the pre-Qin period. Among these intellectuals, Sima Tan and Sima Qian were first to use the term "Daoism". In Sima Tan's *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools*, Daoism is also referred to as *Dao-de-ism* 道德家. An apparent mention of *Dao-de-ism* is similarly

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found in Sima Qian's *Shiji – Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing* 《史記·孟子荀卿列傳》.² These texts evidence that *Dao-de-ism* is another name for Daoism and is perhaps a more accurate designation. In the *Shiji – Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei* 《史記·老子韓非列傳》, Sima Qian writes,

Laozi revises *dao* and *de*. His philosophy places great importance on anonymity and namelessness. [. . .] Laozi produced a two-part volume of work, explicating the meaning of *dao* and *de*, containing roughly five thousand words. 老子修道德，其學以自隱無名為務。 老子乃著書上下篇，言道德之意五千餘言。

Repeated references to *dao* and *de* and the meaning of *dao* and *de* in Sima Qian's *Record* aptly reflect his astute academic acumen. The two-part volume of work refers to the two parts (*pian* 篇) of Laozi's work, which are respectively titled *Dao* and *De*. All existing versions of the *Laozi*, including the received text of Wang Bi 王弼, along with the excavated manuscripts of Mawangdui 馬王堆 and the Peking University bamboo slips, are divided into two parts, with titles that reference *dao* and *de*, respectively. The two parts that constitute the Mawangdui *Laozi* are titled *Dao Pian* 《道篇》 and *De Pian* 《德篇》, whereas those of the Peking University version are titled *Dao Jing* 《道經》 and *De Jing* 《德經》.³ The received text and manuscripts from archaeological finds are consistent with the records of the *Shiji* 《史記》, attesting to the fact that the *Laozi* is also known as the *Daodejing* 《道德經》. In brief, the bipartite thematic division of the *Laozi* corresponds to the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). This correspondence warrants careful consideration, as it signals an interpretive approach inherent to the philosophy of Laozi.

Every classical text from ancient China has undergone a process of textual formation and canonisation (canonical texts taught and handed down by Confucians also underwent a process of Confucianisation). Evidence from archaeological finds and various surviving textual traditions show that the *Laozi* is no exception. During this process, the structure and philosophical character of the *Laozi* are given form. In brief, the earlier Guodian 郭店 texts (excavated from a tomb near an early capital of the state of Chu that is dated to the mid-Warring States period, containing three groups of *Laozi* texts, A, B, and C) have a chapter sequence that is evidently inconsistent with the current version of the *Laozi* (i.e. the received text of Wang Bi). The slightly later Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts (containing two versions, A and B) are much more similar to the current version than the Guodian texts (they are said to be remarkably similar to the Tang dynasty Fu Yi 傅奕 version of the *Daodejing*, as it is recorded in the *Daoist Canon* 《道藏》); a thematic division is present, although *de* part is placed before *dao* part, in contrast to a reverse arrangement in the current version. The Peking University version of the *Laozi* is still more similar to the current version than its preceding redactions: Not only is it divided into two parts, but the parts are also titled *The Upper Part of Laozi* (*Laozi Shangjing* 《老子上經》) and *The Lower Part of Laozi* (*Laozi Xiajing* 《老子下經》). This provides us with clear evidence that the *Laozi* was accorded the status

of a classic (*jing* 經) at that time.⁴ The bibliographical “Record of Art and Culture” of the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·藝文志》 reports that there were four works attributed to Laozi. These works have long been lost, but the *Record*’s account bears witness to one particular stratum in the process of the *Laozi*’s canonisation. Heshang Gong’s 河上公 textual version distinguishes itself from others, as it carries individual chapter titles. Wang Bi’s version has similarly undergone a complicated process of textual dissemination, which means the so-called received text of Wang Bi we see today has deviated from its original formulation. We may conclude that the *Laozi* the Grand Scribe, Sima Qian, had access to was close to a stable version and was textually very similar to the received text we have today. Correspondingly, the Grand Scribe’s understanding and summary of the *Laozi* are also relatively judicious and accurate.

From the perspective of the history of thought, one may observe that writers from before the Wei and Jin period mostly navigated their interpretation of Daoism through the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意). In *Shiji – Biographies of Laozi and Hanfeizi*, Sima Qian writes,

Zhuangzi decimates *dao* and *de* and writes without self-constraint. The main purport of his writing converges upon the notion of spontaneously self-so. [. . .] Hanfeizi imposes strict measures for moral behaviour on account of the law, devises clear categories for judgement between right and wrong, seldom acts charitably or forgivingly. All of these originate from the meaning of *dao* and *de*. 莊子散道德放論，要亦歸之自然 . . . 韓子引繩墨，切事情，明是非，其極慘礪少恩，皆原于道德之意。

This particular comment points out that the meaning of *dao* and *de* is recognised as the principal thesis for both philosophical Daoism (Laozi and Zhuangzi) and Huang-Lao Daoism (including, to an extent, Daoist-Legalists and Legalists such as the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子》). In fact, the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) is an important strand of philosophical thinking that permeates many exponents of the various pre-Qin schools of thought. For example, “All Under Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* relates a regrettable state of there being “no unity for *dao* and *de* 道德不一” (i.e. lack of consensus regarding how to interpret and apply the various sayings on *dao* and *de*) and that “the art of *dao* was about to be torn into fragments by the (various academic schools of the) world 道術將為天下裂” Interestingly, the same state of affairs is portrayed as “the way of the proper ruler wanes 王道陵夷” and “the *de* of Zhou withers and shrinks 周德衰微” by Confucians. *The Annals of Lü Buwei* 《呂氏春秋》 blends all of the various pre-Qin dynasty schools of thought into one melting pot (using a duodecimally structured astronomical and agricultural almanac advanced by the Yinyang School as its overall theoretical framework) and is highly praised by the Han dynasty commentator Gao You 高誘, who says it is “a great improvement upon the Hundred Schools 大出諸子之右”. Gao asserts that

The Annals of Lü Buwei is aimed at *dao* and *de*, is principled by non-purposive action, uses the standards of consummatory conduct and optimal

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appropriateness, and measures itself with judiciousness and reason. 以道德爲標的，以無爲爲綱紀，以仁義爲品式，以公方爲驗格。

Gao You's 高誘 *Preface to the Huainanzi* 《淮南子序》

Similarly, the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》, which assumes the theoretic basis of the then prevalent Huang-Lao Daoism and contains all sorts of topics far and wide, likewise proclaims that

20 *pian* or chapters are thus written to compose this book. The principle of heaven and earth is now thoroughly investigated, affairs of the human world are now unimpeded and productive, the art of governance of the ruler is now comprehensively understood. 故著書二十篇，則天地之理究矣，人間之事接矣，帝王之道備矣。

“Yaolue” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·要略》

Gao You 高誘 believes the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子》 to be a collaborative product of the masters of esoteric arts (*fangshi* 方士) and scholars of various schools, who

[j]ointly elaborate on *dao* and *de*, unify the meanings of consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*), and thus write this book, . . . in order to reveal fully the meaning of *dao* and *de*. 共講論道德，總統仁義，而著此書 以窮道德之意。

“Xumu” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·敘目》

Gao You's comments are not at all groundless, for “Qisuxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·齊俗訓》 also states,

The meaning of *dao* and *de* is definite and unchangeable like (the paths of) the sun and the moon, like (the positions of) the southern side of the Yangtze and the northern side of the Yellow river. 道德之論，譬猶日月也，江南河北，不能易其指。

It is clear that the treatment of the meaning of *dao* and *de* as a fundamental topic of discourse was widely shared among thinkers of Huang-Lao Daoism as well as other schools of thought. The principal aim of Yan Zun's 嚴遵 *The Main Purport of Dao and De* 《道德指歸》 is to “follow the meaning of *dao* and *de*, and to study the heart-mind of heaven and earth 上原道德之意，下揆天地之心” as well as “to embrace the meaning of *dao* and *de*, and to attain the heart-mind of spiritual illuminations 上含道德之意，下得神明之心”. Such is the importance of the meaning of *dao* and *de*. The *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子》 asserts that “*Dao* means ‘withdrawing the self’, and *de* means ‘capable of benefiting others’ 所謂道者，無己者也。所謂德者，得人者也。” It also states that “the principle of *dao* and *de* provides for the activities and development of the myriad things, 道德之法，萬物取業。” (*Huanliu* of the *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子·環流》) and that “*dao* of the sage is attained from spiritual illuminations, for this reason it is called *daode*. 聖人之

道與神明相得，故曰道德。” (*Taihong* of the *Heguanzi* 《鶡冠子·泰鴻》). In “Biography of Yangxiong” 《漢書·揚雄傳》 in the *History of the Han Dynasty*, Huan Tan 桓譚 reports that

[Laozi] wrote two *pian* of essays with words of emptiness and nothingness. He debases consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) and defames ritual propriety (*li*) and learning. Nonetheless, people who are partial to his writing consider it a work greater than the Five Classics. Accounts of this phenomenon have been recorded since the Emperors Wen and Jing of the Han dynasty and Sima Qian. 昔老聃著虛無之言兩篇，薄仁義，非禮學，然后世之好之者尚以為過於《五經》，自漢文、景之君及司馬遷皆有是言。

Ruan Ji 阮籍 believes that the main purport of the *Zhuangzi* lies in its “explication of the subtle and ingenious greatness of *dao* and *de*. 述道德之妙。” He also says that “the form and the spirit are in me and *dao* and *de* are complete. 形神在我而道德成。” (*Reaching Zhuangzi* 《達莊論》). The *daode* Ge Hong 葛洪 discusses in the *Inner Chapters of the Baopuzi* 《抱樸子·內篇》 is also to be differentiated from the *daode* in Confucian discourses; for example, he says, “Confucian and Mohist teachings gain audience when *dao* and *de* are lost. 道德喪而儒墨重矣。” In the preface of his annotation to Guo Xiang’s 郭象 commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 highlights the four key concepts of *dao* and *de*, twofold mystery (*chongxuan* 重玄), non-purposive action, and transformation by virtue of oneself alone (*duhua* 獨化) to offer his summary of philosophical Daoism in general and of *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy in particular. In addition, according to Wang Yinglin’s 王應麟 *Textual Research on the Record of Art and Culture* 《漢藝文志考證》,

Chaogongwu says, “In the forty-second year of the Emperor Ping of Zhou, (Laozi) produced a document upon the request of Yinxi. It consists of eighty-one chapters and contains five thousand and seven hundred forty-eight words. The theme of the work is the meaning of *dao* and *de*”. 晁公武曰：（老子）以周平王四十二年，授尹喜，凡五千七百四十有八言，八十一章，言道德之旨。

In the *Miscellaneous Essays on the Zhuangzi* 《讀南華真經雜說》, Lu Xixing 陸西星 advises that “before one reads the works of Laozi and *Zhuangzi*, one must first be acquainted with these two words: *dao* and *de*. 看老莊書，先要認‘道德’二字。” Jiao Hong 焦竑 also writes in the preface to his commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子翼》 that the five thousand words of Laozi propose to “explicate the meaning of *dao* and *de* 明道德之意”.

An abundance of evidence shows that the essence of Laozi and *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy is the meaning of *dao* and *de*. Notions such as non-purposive action, namelessness, and spontaneously self-so are derived from the meaning of *dao* and *de*; for example,

Dao emulates that which is spontaneously self-so. 道法自然。

(ch. 24 of the *Laozi*)⁵

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Dao never does anything [for the sake of doing it], and so there is nothing that it does not do. 道常無為而無不為。

(ch. 37 of the *Laozi*)

All things are produced by *dao* and nourished by *de*. They receive their forms according to the natural propensities of each and are completed according to their circumstances. Therefore, all things without exception honour *dao* and exalt *de*. This honouring of *dao* and the exalting of *de* is not the result of any ordination but is always a spontaneous and self-directed tribute. Thus, it is that *dao* produces (all things), and *de* nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurtures them, completes them, brings them to fruition, sustains them, and encompasses them. It produces them and makes no claim to possess them; it carries them through their natural processes and does not flaunt its ability in doing so; it brings them to maturity and exercises no control over them. This is called murky-*de*. 道生之，德畜之；長之育之；亭之毒之；養之覆之。生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

(ch. 51 of the *Laozi*)

Non-purposive action is the *de* of heaven. [. . .] To act through non-action is an act of Heaven; to speak through non-purposive action is an act of *de*. 無為也，天德而已矣。 無為為之謂天，無為言之謂德。

(“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)⁶

Placidity, indifference, silence, quietude, emptiness (of heart-mind), and non-purposive action: these are the qualities that maintain the level of heaven and earth and are the essence of *dao* and *de*. 夫恬淡寂寞，虛無為，此天地之平而道德之質也。”

(“Constrained in Will” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Given the evidence at hand, is it not justified to say that *dao*, *de*, and the meaning of *dao* and *de* are more effective in revealing the core and fundamental thesis of philosophical Daoism than spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action?

If one grants that the greatest concern for Confucian thinkers is based on “the occasion for consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) 仁義之際”, then it seems obvious that the fundamental thesis of Daoism is tied to the meaning of *dao* and *de*. However, since Confucian philosophy emerged within the cultural framework of the Western Zhou dynasty that was nested in *de* and official rituals and was guided by the doctrine “let the will be set on *dao*; let every attainment of *de* be firmly grasped 志於道，據於德” (“Shu Er” in the *Analec*ts), not to mention that it champions the benign rule of *de* and is undeniably a member of the schools that pursue *dao*, it is certain that Confucians would not stand by and let the Daoists claim *dao* and *de* exclusively for their own. Han Yu 韓愈 points out that “consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) have definite meanings, while *dao* and *de* are abstract expressions. 仁與義為定名，道與德為虛位。” He also differentiates between *dao* and *de* of Confucianism and of Daoist philosophy, stating, “All I have to say about *dao* and *de*

is said in accordance with consummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*), 吾所謂道德云者，合仁與義言之也”，while Laozi speaks of *dao* and *de* to “eliminate consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 去仁與義云者。” Han Yu’s clarification of the essential difference between the Confucian and Daoist understandings of *dao* and *de* gains the approval of Zhu Xi 朱熹 in due course, as it is recorded in *Zhuzi Yulei* Vol. 137 《朱子語類》卷一三七. On a separate occasion, Cai Shen 蔡沈 questions Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 understanding of *dao* and *de* regarding his references to the meaning of *dao* and *de* in his previously quoted summary of the Daoist School and raises this question to his master Zhu Xi 朱熹: “To which school do ‘*dao* and *de*’ really belong?” According to his master, “‘*Dao* and *de*’ refer to themselves, and they are [not to be claimed by any particular school of thought]. 這‘道德’只自是他道德。” Cai Shen later passes judgement accordingly, saying, “[T]he Grand Scribe is of humble intellect. 太史公智識鄙下” (*Zhuzi Yulei*, Vol. 125). Cai’s verdict is perhaps rather too rash a critique of the ancient historian.

Dao and *de*, or the meaning of *dao* and *de*, in the context of intellectual and academic history have different meanings from *daode* (i.e. morality) in vernacular Chinese. The reason could be that *daode*, as it is used in the context of daily conversation, has absorbed and incorporated extensive Confucian influences over the centuries. In other words, Confucian thinkers have consistently interpreted *dao* and *de* with “consummatory conduct” (*ren* 仁) and “optimal appropriateness” (*yi* 義) (this tendency has increased since the Qin and Han dynasties), while philosophical Daoism, by contrast, insists upon separating and removing these two Confucian “virtues”, or *ren* and *yi*, from their understanding of what *dao* and *de* mean.⁷ This position is criticised by Ban Gu 班固, who says that “when the unruly and indulgent assume ruling positions, they would seek to uproot the rituals and learning, and abandon consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 及放者為之，則欲絕去禮學，兼棄仁義。” (“Record of Art and Culture” in the *History of the Han Dynasty* 《漢書·藝文志》). While Confucians insist on identifying “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” (*renyi* 仁義) with *dao* and *de*, and thereby making their important contribution to the field of ethics, does the Lao-Zhuang Daoist’s deliberate contrast between “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” and *dao* and *de* imply an outright rejection of ethics? In fact, the Lao-Zhuang Daoist’s understanding of the meaning of *dao* and *de* is more nuanced and profound than being merely a critical theory, for it incorporates theories of natural philosophy (including cosmology and physics) and metaphysics, social and political philosophy, and ethics. Although the ethics that Lao-Zhuang Daoism establishes with the essential concept of murky-*de* is a kind of anti-ethics, it is one that transcends ordinary life and the specifics of any particular moral maxim. It is one that is established without specific regard to any individual socio-political system or cultural convention. As such, the applicability of its contents is not confined by particular circumstances. The meaning of *dao* and *de* is pregnant with rich connotations, including not only physical and metaphysical issues concerning the relationship between *dao* and material objects and between *you* and *wu* but also those between the theories of murky-*de* and non-purposive action as well as

questions and issues ranging from the political and the social to the field of ethics. Hence, it is fair to say that the thoughts and theories incorporated in the meaning of *dao* and *de* are much grander and more profound than a simple reduction of *dao* and *de* to the normative virtues of “consummatory conduct” and “optimal appropriateness”, as maintained by Confucian scholars.

In sum, with regard to the root and theoretical structure of philosophical Daoism, the school’s essential doctrine can be summarised by the meaning of *dao* and *de*. From the Wei and Jin periods onwards, influential thinkers have consistently considered spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action to be the main principles of philosophical Daoism, overlooking the fact that these two notions are but manifestations of the meaning of *dao* and *de*.⁸ The fundamental disagreement between Confucianism and philosophical Daoism is also highlighted by their different interpretations of *dao* and *de*. As for ideologically motivated attempts to label philosophical Daoism as a philosophy for the feeble, sluggish, or pessimistic, along with other otherwise unprofitable interpretive experiments that see philosophical Daoism as a mystic, nihilist, relativistic, or sceptical school of thought, I do not think it would be worthwhile to give them further consideration here.

Dao and *de* in the phrase “the meaning of *dao* and *de*” ought to receive separate treatment as two distinct concepts that jointly constitute the core concepts of philosophical Daoism. In the following chapters, further investigation will be carried out along the theoretical paths set forth by the concepts of *dao* and *de*.

Notes

- References to Daoism are found in Sima Tan’s *On the Key Thoughts of the Six Schools* 《論六家要旨》 and Sima Qian’s *Shiji – Hereditary House of Chen* 《史記·陳丞相世家》. However, what is noteworthy is that the predominant impression of Daoism in the minds of Han dynasty intellectuals derives mostly from Huang-Lao Daoism (cf. Zhang Shunzheng’s *On the Dao in Zhou and Qin Dynasties* 張舜徽《周秦道論發微》). In fact, Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism are not frequently distinguished in writings from that period. Ban Gu’s *Record of Art and Culture of the Book of Han* 《漢書·藝文志》 serves as an example in this regard. The interrelation of Huang-Lao Daoism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism must not obscure an inherent disparity. In brief, the principal theoretic import of Huang-Lao Daoism lies in “*Xingming Fashu* 刑名法术”, i.e. governance through law, title, and reward and punitive actions, and that of Lao-Zhuang Daoism, or the meaning of *dao* and *de*.
- Shiji – Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing* 《史記·孟子荀卿列傳》: “Xun Qing dislikes the politics of the corrupt world, where individuals bring the state to its destruction and confuse the roles of the ruler and the minister, fail to follow the great *Dao* and instead put faith in divination. Minor scholars spend time debating unimportant matters; similarly, people like Zhuang Zhou upset traditional customs with seemingly smart words. Therefore, Xun Qing sets down an account of the activities of Confucians, Mohists, and *Dao-De*-ists. He died after writing tens of thousands of words.” 荀卿嫉濁世之政，亡國亂君相屬，不遂大道而營于巫祝，信禱祥。鄙儒小拘，如莊周等又滑稽亂俗，于是推儒、墨、道德之行事興壞，序列着數萬言而卒。” “*Daode* 道德” in this passage is an abbreviation of *Dao-De*-ism.
- The two parts of these texts are ordered differently to that of the received text, with the *De* part being the foremost portion of the text.

- 4 Wei Han 韓巍, “Textual Characteristics and Academic Value of the Bamboo Slips Laozi from the Western Han Dynasty 西漢竹書《老子》的文本特征和學術價值”, *Laozi: Peking University Collection of Western Han Bamboo Texts* 北京大學藏西漢竹書, Vol. 2 (2012): 207–225.
- 5 Translation of the *Laozi* in this book largely relies on the English translation by D. C. Lau, with minor editing. D. C. Lau, *Chinese Classics: Dao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1982).
- 6 Translation of the outer and miscellaneous chapters of the *Zhuangzi* throughout this book borrow heavily from the English translation by Burton Watson. Burton Watson (*trans.*), *Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 7 For example, Laozi says, “When *dao* is long neglected, there are virtues of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness. 大道廢，有仁義。” (ch. 18), and also, “Exterminate consummatory conduct, discard optimal appropriateness, and the people will again be filial. 絕仁棄義，民復孝慈。” (ch. 19) “*Dao* and *de*” is first mentioned in the last sentence of “Webbed Toes” in the *Zhuangzi*, whose meaning is opposite to that of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness: “I do not venture to raise myself up in deeds of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness or to lower myself in deluded and perverse practices. 上不敢為仁義之操，下不敢為淫僻之行。” “Horses’ Hoofs” in the *Zhuangzi*, however, says, “[T]o take the destruction of *dao* and *de* as consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness, that is the error of the sages. 毀道德以為仁義，聖人之過也。” “Shuoshanxun” in the *Huainanzi* 《淮南子·說山訓》 also says, “[C]onsummatory conduct (*ren*) and optimal appropriateness (*yi*) cannot surpass *dao* and *de*, as they are subsumed under *dao* and *de*. 仁義之不能大于道德也，仁義在道德之包。” Hence, it is clear that “*dao* and *de*” and “consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness” (*renyi* 仁義) are distinct in meaning in the context of philosophical Daoism.
- 8 This argument will be elaborated further in the following chapters.

2 *Dao*

A discussion with the meaning of *wu* at its centre

The intellectual discovery of *wu* 無 (whose meaning within the context of philosophical Daoism includes “not”, “not-having”, “indefinite”) is an important foundation for Laozi’s philosophy; it also sets an important measuring stick for the philosophical achievements made by scholars in the pre-Qin period.¹ Without this intellectual achievement, ancient philosophers would not have been able to “venture from the world of ordinary objects to the world of *dao*”, nor to venture “from the world of *you* 有 (the opposite of *wu*) to the world of *wu* 無”.² It was precisely the discovery of *wu* and Laozi’s original and ingenious interpretation of the *dao* of his predecessors through the notion of *wu* that made the *dao* of the *Laozi* philosophically significant. In one stroke, Laozi greatly enriched the meaning of *dao* while setting it completely apart from previous uses of the word.³

Dao underwent a process of conceptualisation under Laozi. *Dao* as a philosophical concept is distinct from ordinary, vernacular meanings of the word (including “way”, “road”, “discourse”, and “principle”). By the same reasoning, one must not attempt to interpret *dao* through its vernacular or lexical meanings (e.g. through analysis of the glyphic composition of *dao*). This is because the chief and foremost meaning of *dao* is *wu*. Daoist philosophers following Laozi developed the philosophical meaning of *dao* precisely through *wu* 無.⁴ In brief, *dao* as a philosophical concept is a product of a series of philosophical breakthroughs achieved by thinkers since the late Spring and Autumn period. The essential property of this concept is represented by the notion of *wu*. That is to say, concepts descriptive of *dao*, such as formlessness (*wuxing* 無形), imagelessness (*wuxiang* 無象), objectlessness (*wuwu* 無物), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), non-obsessive desire (*wuyu* 無欲), and non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為), as well as their derivatives deep and dim (*yaoming* 窈冥), solitary and still (*jimo* 寂寞), and indeterminate and indistinct (*huanghu* 恍惚), are devised to make *dao* intellectually discernible through written words.⁵ Among these, namelessness is one of the most important concepts in Laozi’s philosophy and is also one of the most bemusing.⁶ Name (*ming* 名) and namelessness in the ancient Chinese context are philosophically significant with regard to both philosophy of language and political philosophy. For this reason, the Daoist “theory of the nameless 無名論” ought to receive treatment in both of these regards. We shall first pay attention to the linguistic side of the problem and address issues concerning the relationship between *dao* and *yan* 言 (i.e. speech and discourse).⁷

- 6 “Namelessness” receives repeated mentions in the *Laozi*. (*Wuming* 無名 in ch. 1 cannot be read separately as two words. It is a multi-character phrase throughout the *Laozi*.) Sima Qian also concludes that the main purport of philosophical Daoism is expressed by the concept of namelessness.
- 7 Briefly put, the “truth of the *Dao*” pursued by Daoist thinkers cannot be attained without reference to an investigation beyond form and language (i.e. a study of that which goes beyond form *xingershangxue* 形而上學). Therefore, the problem of *dao* and speech involves *you* (having form and having name) and *wu* (formless and nameless) as well as the issues revolving around the notion of “indeterminate and indistinct”. The problem is also related to the various problems of a transcendental political vision and historical rationality in the political philosophy of non-purposive action.
- 8 Abel-Rémusat’s partial translation, entitled *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu, philosophe chinois du VIe siècle avant notre ère, qui a professé les opinions communément attribuées à Pythagore, à Platon et à leurs disciples*, contains only five chapters of *Daodejing* (1, 14, 25, 41, 42).
- 9 Fredrich W. J. Schelling, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, Augsburg: J.G. Cotta, 1856), 564.
- 10 Also, “path of myriad transformations” (*wanhuazhitu* 萬化之途) (“The Great Source as Teacher” in the *Zhuangzi*).
- 11 For example, Qingzhong Lu 魯慶中, “On Laozi’s ‘wu’ 論老子之‘無’”, in *Laozi and Chinese Civilization Inheritance and Innovation* 老子與華夏文明傳承創新 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2013), 198–211; and Zhixue Wu 伍至學, “Laozi on *Wu* 老子釋無”, in *Laozi and Chinese Civilization Inheritance and Innovation* 老子與華夏文明傳承創新 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2013), 212–226.
- 12 Zheng Kai 鄭開, *Lectures on Zhuangzi Philosophy* 莊子哲學講記 (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press 廣西人民出版社, 2016), 82–83.
- 13 Tang Lan 唐蘭 considered *wang* 亡 to be the etymological root-script for *wu* 舞, but this hypothesis is contested by many philologists. See Min Yu 俞敏, *Collected Works on Jingzhuanshici* 《經傳釋詞》札記 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1987), 180.
- 14 Li Zehou 李澤厚 has argued for this position. See Zehou Li 李澤厚, *Jimao Five Essays* 己卯五說 (Beijing: China Film Press 中國電影出版社, 1999), 65–67. But these arguments are soundly rejected by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭. See Xigui Qiu 裘錫圭, *Ten Lectures on Ancient Documents Excavated in China* 中國出土古文獻十講 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press 復旦大學出版社, 2004).
- 15 Min Yu 俞敏, *Collected Works on Jingzhuanshici* 《經傳釋詞》札記 (Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House 湖南教育出版社, 1987), 47–48, 181–184.
- 16 Translation adapted from Zongyi Rao 饒宗頤, *Heart of Extraction* 澄心論萃 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文藝出版社, 1996), 148.
- 17 Wang Dianji 王奠基 says that Laozi “advanced the dialectical concept of ‘the theory of being nameless (*wuming*)’ which does well in summarising this negative concept, which is the existential principle of ‘wu.’ Laozi’s so-called ‘wu,’ as a ‘negating form’ and logical ‘negative concept,’ is both an absolute substance as well as a mutual co-dependent”. For more details, refer to Dianji Wang 王奠基, *Laozi’s Logic in Simple Dialectics – The Theory of Namelessness* 老子樸素辯證法的邏輯思想 – 無名論 (Wuhan: Hubei People’s Press 湖北人民出版社, 1958), 44–45.
- 18 Zheng Kai 鄭開, “On the Nature and Characteristics of ‘wu’ in the *Laozi* 試論《老子》中‘無’的性質與特點”, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門, Vol. 29 (2014).
- 19 *Logos* from ancient Greek philosophy incorporates various meanings, such as utterance and principle, and has led many scholars to believe it is similar in meaning to *dao* in Laozi’s philosophy.
- 20 *Ming* also has political connotations in this context; namely, structured and artificial uses of “name” in law, governmental positions and responsibilities, and moral teaching.

It rears and nurtures, matures and brings them up, benefits all without being partial, and joins with heaven and earth. This is called *de*. 畜之養之，遂之長之，兼利無擇，與天地合，此之謂德。

(“Daode” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·道德》)

These passages represent writings that are most directly related to the notion of murky-*de* in ancient China. However, to formulate an adequate interpretation of the term, we need to expand our scope to include other related concepts in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as well as other ancient texts. By doing so, we will be able to appreciate the intellectual lineage of the term, particularly the way it emerged from its preceding background of *de*-related ideas, and understand why this emergence ought to be seen as an important philosophical breakthrough.

A number of synonymous words are used to refer to the notion of murky-*de* in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.⁴ They include expressions such as constant-*de* (*changde* 常德), highest-*de* (*shangde* 上德), extensive-*de* (*guangde* 廣德), vigorous-*de* (*jiande* 建德) (ch. 28, 38, 41 of the *Laozi*), perfect-*de* (*zhide* 至德), and heavenly-*de* (*tiande* 天德) (“Horses’ Hoofs” and “Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*). These terms are, to different extents, dissimilar to the meaning of *de* before the Hundred-Schools-of-Thought began to emerge. By contrast, the Confucian notion of illustrious-*de* (*mingde* 明德) represents a renewed iteration of the tradition of *de* and ritual. The following passages are demonstrative of this contrasting relationship:

The highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de*. The lower-*de* never strays from *de* and that is why he is without *de*. The former never acts purposively yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts (with clear purposes and methods) but there are things left undone. A person with the most consummatory conduct (*ren*) acts, but from no ulterior motive. A person who does with the most optimal appropriateness (*yi*) acts, but from ulterior motive. A person most conversant in ritual proprieties (*li*) acts, but when no one responds he rolls up his sleeves and resorts to persuasion by force. Hence when *dao* was lost there was *de*; when *de* was lost there was consummatory conduct; When consummatory conduct was lost there was optimal appropriateness; When optimal appropriateness was lost there were the ritual proprieties. 上德不德，是以有德；下德不失德，是以無德。上德無為而無以為；下德為之而有以為。上仁為之而無以為；上義為之而有以為。上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

(ch. 38 of the *Laozi*)

The highest-*de* is like the valley; the sheerest whiteness appears sullied; extensive-*de* seems insufficient; vigorous-*de* seems indolent; plain truthfulness seems soiled. The great square has no corners; the great vessel takes long to complete; the great note is rarefied in sound; the great image has no shape. *Dao* conceals itself in being nameless. 上德若谷；太白若辱；廣德若不足；建德若偷；質真若渝；大方無隅；大器晚成；大音希聲；大象無形；道隱無名。

(ch. 41 of the *Laozi*)

Non-purposive action is the *de* of heaven. 無為也，天德而已矣。
 (“Heaven and Earth” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Chapter 38 of the *Laozi* is titled “On *De*” in Heshang Gong’s version of the text, indicating that the subject matter of the chapter is the relationship between *dao* and *de* (i.e. highest-*de shangde* 上德) on the one hand and consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, and ritual propriety on the other. Seemingly paradoxical phrases such as “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de* 上德不德，是以有德。” reveal that a distinction is made between the meaning of highest-*de* and ordinary *de*. The former is variously expressed as the great-*de* (*kongde* 孔德) (ch. 21), constant-*de* (*changde* 常德) (ch. 28), extensive-*de* (*guangde* 廣德) (ch. 41), or murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德) (ch. 10, 51, 65). These terms invariably refer to a philosophically distilled *de* that is contrasted with *de* in the ordinary sense of the word; namely, particular moral virtues and moral behaviours, including consummatory conduct (*ren* 仁), optimal appropriateness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 智), doing one’s utmost (*zhong* 忠), family reverence (*xiao* 孝), culture (*wen* 文), and refinement (*mei* 美).⁵ By contrast, highest-*de* refers to spontaneously self-so (*ziran* 自然), non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為), unadorned and uncarved (*supu* 素樸), emptiness (of heart-mind) and at rest (*xujing* 虛靜), placidity and indifference (*tiandan* 恬淡), maintaining female amenability (*shouci* 守雌), noncontending (*buzheng* 不爭), and keeping a low position (*chuxia* 處下). For example, the *Wenzi*’s interpretation of “[t]he highest-*de* does not keep to *de* 上德不德” is that

heaven covers over the myriad things. It implements its *de* and nourishes them. It supplies without taking. Therefore, the vigour and spirit [of the myriad things] adhere firmly to it. 天覆萬物，施其德而養之，與而不取，故精神歸焉。

(“Shangde” in the *Wenzi* 《文子·上德》)

In other words, the *Wenzi* uses “[*de*] supplies without taking 與而不取” to explain the idea of “the highest-*de* does not keep to *de*, and by so doing achieves *de* 上德不德，是以有德” because it also coincides with an important aspect of murky-*de*; namely, “supplying (all things) without expecting requital; nourishing (all things) without presiding (over them) 為而不恃，長而不宰”. From the Daoist point of view, highest-*de* is so called owing to its superiority over *de* in the ordinary sense. Since highest-*de* does not consider the ordinary *de* of consummatory conduct and optimal appropriateness to embody the true significance of *de*, it achieves genuine *de*.

Focussing on Chapter 38 of the *Laozi*, the phrase “striving for it” (*weizhi* 為之), which appears repeatedly, means “purposive action” (*youwei* 有為), the opposite of non-purposive action (*wuwei* 無為). *Yiwei* 以為 refers to deliberate actions that are driven by narrow purposes or are methodologically obsessive. In other words, they are actions that originate from and are limited by various purposes and intentions (e.g. from selfish motivations to ideological objectives). According to the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子》 and the Fu Yi 傅奕 version of the *Laozi*, *yiwei* 以為 is

themselves. The active force that drives the myriad things is also within the individuals themselves, not external to them. The *Zhuangzi* hesitantly indicates that “it seems there is some great controller behind it all. 若有真宰” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*) and expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the existence of an all-governing entity behind the myriad things. The *Zhuangzi*’s persistent suspicion and harsh critique of “something causes it” and “no one does it” also seek to strengthen this intellectual tendency. It can be said that Zhuangzi’s profound scepticism over “something causes it”, i.e. the existence of an all-governing ruler behind the myriad things, directly led him to reject causality (*gu* 故). From the point of view of *dao*, all things are as they are because of themselves; there was never any cause to begin with. It ought to be observed that the thought of the *Zhuangzi* is both profound and self-contradictory. It places itself in the tension between two parallel intellectual tendencies: On the one hand, *dao* is the ultimate cause or principle behind all things, formless and unperceivable; on the other hand, *dao* is not the ultimate cause of all things, and there is no causality to start with in the beginning. Zhuangzi’s thought contains these two different intellectual tendencies. Guo Xiang 郭象 extracts the latter tendency and expands upon the notion of spontaneously self-so. For this, he is worthy of being said to have “grasped the principles of Zhuangzi in an extraordinary fashion 特會莊生之理” (Lu Deming 陸德明, *Jingdianshiwen* 《經典釋文》).

What is the reason behind Zhuangzi’s scepticism regarding cause and his tendency, to a certain extent, to deny its existence altogether? Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 sharp words provide an acute answer: “That which is self-so is such and becomes such without cause. 自然本無故而然。” That is to say, there is not “one thing that governs as the ruler of [all things] 一物司其主宰” in nature.⁶ To Western thinkers who are used to the quest for the origin and essence of the universe, such a notion would certainly strike them as quite odd. From Zhuangzi’s point of view, “cause”, “something causes it”, and “reason for it being so” are problematics formulated by intellection, corresponding to knowledge of things in accordance with the intellectual mode of thinking. In a certain sense, Zhuangzi’s essential statement is “an emphasis on the fact that rationality (or more properly, intellection) attains knowledge within the bounds of the realm of phenomena, and thus refuses to admit to the existence of that which is behind phenomena and determines phenomena”.⁷ As such, Zhuangzi’s scepticism and rejection of cause are in essence scepticism and rejection of the intellectual mode of thinking, including its way of questioning and its contents. With this, Zhuangzi strives to go beyond the world of things and to approach *dao*. Or, in other words, he seeks to sweep away knowledge by intellection in order to embark upon knowledge of the metaphysical (beyond form) kind. This is the vital key to the problem.

Philosophy always asks why. In this sense, philosophical questions are often those that are at the bottom when one seeks to get to the bottom of things. Such a bottom is often seen as the cause behind phenomena or the “reason why” over and above all things in the universe. However, Zhuangzi disagrees. He denies that *dao* is in any way governing the order of things in the world, and he is highly sceptical of a reason behind the universe. One of Zhuangzi’s favourite lines is “How do you

know that to be so? 奚以之其然也? ” From Zhuangzi’s point of view, seeking a reason for the world as it is is utterly pointless because things with form are brought forth from that which is formless: “The myriad things [. . .] succeed one another in different bodily forms 萬物 以形相禪” (“Imputed Words” in the *Zhuangzi*). All is but a process that is constituted by individual spontaneous self-transformations. There is nothing to indicate that there is an invisible hand behind it all. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* is dotted with phrases such as “one does not know how it is so 不知其然也”, “one does not know how such has come to be 不知其所有”, and “one does not know why it is so 不知其所以然”. The unknowability of things-in-themselves in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy is similarly directed against the limitations of intellection. Zhuangzi and Kant are millennia and thousands of miles apart, yet how similar are their thoughts?

The second passage that I wish to direct our attention to is extracted from the “Equalizing Assessments of Things” chapter:

There is a moment of beginning [of all things in the universe]. There is a time when the first beginning had not yet come to be. There is a time when there was not yet the time when the first beginning had not yet come to be. There is existence. There is nonexistence. There is a time when neither existence nor nonexistence had come to be. There is a time when there was not yet a time, when neither existence nor nonexistence had come to be. All of a sudden, there is [this division] between existence and nonexistence. Still, how does one attempt to learn whether the result of this [division between] existence and nonexistence is substantial or empty? 有始也者，有未始有始也者，有未始有夫未始有始也者。有有也者，有無也者，有未始有無也者，有未始有夫未始有無也者。俄而有無矣，而未知有無之果孰有孰無也？

(“Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi*)

Previous interpreters have debated the exact meaning of this passage and have invariably been confused by the surface meaning of the words. Argumentation in philosophical Daoism typically uses the literary tactic of “expressing truth in seemingly paradoxical language 正言若反”. Considering the tone of this passage, we can surmise that Zhuangzi is not arguing in the direction of the affirmative, but of the negative. This view is supported by the fact that if we see it as arguing in the affirmative, it concludes with a self-contradiction that vitiates the logic of Zhuangzi’s thought. In other words, Zhuangzi intends to show that the intellectual quest for the origin of all things inevitably results in an infinite regress from which there is no escape. The *Zhuangzi* firmly rejects the limitations imposed by blind misuse of the intellectual mode of questioning that includes “deduction” (*tui* 推). Deduction is proudly practised by the Warring States period thinker Zou Yan 鄒衍 and is also revered by Confucians, who argue for the method of “know that which is far away by studying that which is near 以近知遠”. They often pride themselves on being “excellent at deduction 善推”. However, in Zhuangzi’s view, such methods of intellection ought to be criticised and discarded. The distinction and dichotomy of *you* and *wu* (including “having a beginning 有始” and “not having a beginning 無始”)

*image
not
available*