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Introduction to Studies of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*: an Adherence to Tradition and a Foray into Innovative Reinterpretation

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The scholarly study of the *Dao De Jing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 in Chinese academia spans two millennia. Contemporary research on the two works aims both to conform to past traditions and to pursue revisionist and innovative approaches. This introduction seeks to evaluate the five articles of this issue through this dual lens.

In recent years, the political and legal implications of traditional Daoist principles have constituted a major focus of relevant academic research. The articles by Cao Feng 曹峰 and Chen Xia 陳霞 in this issue thoroughly explore such implications found in the *Dao De Jing*, one of Daoism's fundamental works. Similarly, interpretation of the *Dao De Jing* from the perspective of military and political strategy has played a prominent role in the study of Chinese classics. Nevertheless, it is widely known that the text of the *Dao De Jing* contains significant criticism of both the Confucian and military schools of thought. Regarding Confucianism, Laozi 老子 (571–470 BCE) expressed his criticism in the following four ways: 1. "Only when the basic tenets of society have been abandoned do we see the promotion of such concepts as 'benevolence' and 'justice.'" 2. "The proliferation of disingenuousness and deception is preceded by a general tendency toward the misuse of personal wit and cleverness." 3. "Only when irreconcilable friction appears between family members do the principles of 'filial piety' and 'affection' prevail in discourse." 4. "Only when instability and

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political chaos embroil the state do we hold aloft the loyal and principled ministers."[1]

These overarching sentiments can be interpreted as a direct criticism of the principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom in Confucianism.

Regarding military thought, Laozi commented that "monarchs who conduct themselves according to Daoist principles would not need to rely on the force of arms to dominate all under Heaven." He goes further to describe arms themselves as "inherently inauspicious objects—objects of fear and hatred by all living things, objects which true adherents of Daoism would never allow themselves to employ."[2]

However, since the 1980s, philosopher Li Zehou 李澤厚 has espoused the idea that the *Dao De Jing* was itself a military treatise—a view first proposed by scholars Wang Zhen 王真 (690–744) and Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112), of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) eras, respectively. According to Li Zehou, "although the *Dao De Jing* did not expressly describe military matters, its precepts were still closely tied to military philosophy." Li further notes that this observation constitutes "an important insight for the research of Chinese classical thought—an insight that lays bare how the seemingly extreme 'calm and collected' attitude toward all matters of life exhibits itself as a primordial component of Chinese cultural psychology, and also leaves an indelible mark that shaped Chinese civilization itself."[3]

Such sentiments are not purely a product of contemporary research. During the era of the Hundred Schools of Thought, Han Feizi 韓非子 characterized the *Dao De Jing* as possessing "a direct link to political strategies of the day that seek to rule and dominate."[4] Han Feizi's view is perhaps not an auspicious sign for the immense prestige of the *Dao De Jing* in the world of Chinese intellectual history, as the Legalist emphasis on the art of power is largely perceived as engaging in insidious and cunning schemes by the broader Chinese tradition.

The article by Cao Feng largely confirms the prominent status that the *Dao De Jing* enjoys in the history of Chinese thought, especially in politics and law. Cao Feng points out that the knowledge and thought system attributed to

1 Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所, *Beijing daxue cang Xihan zhushu* 北京大學藏西漢竹書 (Beijing: Shanghai shiji chuban gufen youxian gongsi & Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 1: 196.

2 Ibid., 202.

3 Li Zehou 李澤厚, "Sun Lao Han heshuo" 孫、老、韓合說, in *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* 中國古代思想史論 (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 1: 82–83; originally published in *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 4 (1984): 41–52, 31.

4 Ibid., 83.

Huangdi 黃帝 (Yellow Emperor) is complementary to that of Laozi. The binary structure of the *Dao* 道 (the ruler) and the *Wu* 物 (the ruled) inherent in Daoist thought can be applied to the political sphere, in order to provide an ideological basis for the centralized system of rule utilized by imperial Chinese dynasties. This is evident in tales in the *Shiji* 史記 pertaining to Huang-Lao Thought. Cao Feng takes special care to remark that Huang-Lao Philosophy itself transforms the metaphysical propositions of Laozi into an operable "art of rulership" with the aid of the concept of *wuwei* 無為, following such specific tenets as "adhering to tradition" and "adapting to the changing times." Cao Feng's article uses recently-discovered materials such as the Shuihudi Qin bamboo texts and the Mawangdui *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 as proof that *wuwei* does not necessarily indicate passive rulership, but the institutionalization of "adhering to tradition" as a means to reduce the costs of ruling. Despite the article's assertion that the "harmonization of Daoist and Legalist thought" is characteristic of Huang-Lao Philosophy, Cao Feng clearly states that such a harmonization "is not the only standard by which Huang-Lao philosophers should be judged." Instead, Huang-Lao Philosophy inherent within the *Shiji* can be divided into the following five categories: 1. Quiescent Non-Intervention; 2. The Primacy of Monarchical Authority; 3. Bureaucratic Accountability; 4. The Metaphysics of Way and Virtue; 5. The Nourishment of Life to Attain Transcendence.

Among these categories, those pertaining to the nourishment of life itself comprise the fundamentals of Huang-Lao Philosophy, serving as a key reference point throughout its emergence, development, and transformation.

In her article, Chen Xia first remarks that only a few Han-era (206 BCE–220 CE) commentaries of the *Dao De Jing* have survived until the current day. Among these are the *Daode zhenjing zhigui* 道德真經指歸 by Yan Zun 嚴遵 (86 BCE–10 CE), the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句, and the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注. Only the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* survives in its entirety. Chen Xia's article notes that the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* vividly illustrates the importance of "nourishing life" in Huang-Lao Philosophy, providing a clever integration of the principles of nourishing life and statecraft. The *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* attributes an axiomatic nature to the "natural ways to prolong life." By breaking through the limits of the original text of the *Dao De Jing* in its interpretation, the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* paved the way for the pursuit of immortality, a tenet of Daoism. On the other hand, the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* portrays political, educational, and classical principles as ones that can be "spoken of"—principles of a lower status than their axiomatic counterparts. However, certain commentaries from the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* on the *Dao De Jing* evidently targeted

Chinese emperors, such as Emperor Wen of Han 漢文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE), suggesting they were written specifically for imperial consumption. How can this logical inconsistency be reconciled? Chen Xia argues that the sociological and political context of the era in which the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju* was written must be taken into account. Empress Dou 竇皇后 (d. 135 BCE), wife to Emperor Wen of Han, personally favored Huang-Lao Philosophy, which provided an intellectual basis and "imperial sanction" for the composition of the *Laozi Daodejing Heshang Gong zhangju*. The first monarchs of the Han dynasty were highly cognizant of the emphasis on Legalism by the preceding Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), which resulted in harsh punishments and incessant warfare during the final years of the Qin. To remedy the consequences of this highly destructive series of events, the early Han emperors employed the principle of "allowing the populace to rest," which contributed to the subsequent rise in stability and prosperity of the state. This phenomenon is a testament to the application of the principle of "nourishing life" in imperial rulership, transforming the concept of a "natural and long life" into a sustainable means of state governance.

The articles by Chen Hui 陳徽 and Tan Mingran 譚明冉 both focus on the "novelty" in the study of intellectual and academic history. In the study of traditional Chinese thought, there exists a long-established binary division between Daoism and Confucianism, or even a tripartite division between Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Confucianism is primarily characterized by its worldly nature, whereas both Daoism and Buddhism seek to break free of the constraints of the natural, physical world. However, if "breaking free from the world" truly is an incommutable precept of Daoism, then our previous discussions on the political and legal implications of Daoist principles would become moot. Both Daoism and Buddhism have, at various times, become the prevailing political thought of imperial China. The aforementioned Empress Dou's penchant toward Huang-Lao Philosophy serves as an example. As such, how should we examine the "worldly" nature of Daoism? Chen Hui points out that the idea of being "carefree" in the *Zhuangzi* definitively does not mean an "artificial" freedom of one's spirit, untethered by the world, or a solipsistic attitude toward life itself. Instead, Chen Hui argues that the idea of being carefree means to respond to the "inevitability of fate" with the "inevitability of nature." The human experience of living in a world that constantly imposes physical restrictions on the self is a reality that cannot be ignored, thus constituting the inevitable nature of the human fate. Notwithstanding constraints of the physical reality, the five cardinal relationships advocated by Confucianism at the interpersonal and social level—benevolence between ruler and subject, kindness and filial piety between parents and son, as well

as friendship and deference between brothers—arguably make up the most prominent aspect of the human fate. The coercive nature of such a political order that apotheosizes interpersonal ethics on all levels of society renders it impossible for mankind to disregard its fate under this system, as such a fate instead becomes an inalienable "duty." In order for one to fulfill one's duties and uphold the correct path, one must actively and, albeit reluctantly, engage and work with this coercive system.

The "inevitability of nature" can be understood through a framework characterized by the inherent "rhythm" of the physical world. All beings possess their own, natural rhythm, which humanity should treat as an "ethereal" guide in the process of moving through the world, instead of as a force to be subjugated according to one's own will. This ubiquitous and universal rhythm serves as a constant reminder of the inevitability of nature, with which mankind is perpetually (even if reluctantly, as aforementioned) interacting. In other words, Chen Hui's article pay homage to the traditions of Wei-Jin (220–420) metaphysics, which combined Confucian teachings of social structure and propriety with the Daoist precepts concerning nature. This can also be interpreted as an attempt to counter philosopher Guo Xiang's criticism of the "otherworldly" aspects of Daoism—that "one can only achieve *wuwei* by hiding in the forested mountains, completely sheltering from the outside world by doing nothing and making no sounds."[5] In comparison with the traditions of Wei-Jin metaphysics, Chen Hui's views have their own independent origins. The concept of "abandoning private desires to go with the flow of the world" in the *Zhuangzi* represents an ideological course adjustment away from the intellectual cul-de-sac of transcendence and its related arguments. Consequently, the *Zhuangzi* should not be regarded as possessing an overarching consistency in its entirety (whether as a coherent whole regarding the principles of transcendence or free will, or a coherent whole regarding their inward counterparts like "returning to" or "roaming" the world). Rather, thematic differences between different chapters should be employed as an aid to understand the exploratory and even hesitant aspects in the thought process and writing behind a work as intellectually monumental as the *Zhuangzi*.

Chen Hui's article serves as a continuation of traditions in the vein of the Guo Xiang's 郭象 (252–312) *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注. In contrast, Tan Mingran's article presents a detailed discussion of a crucial element in Guo Xiang's Commentary. Among the various commentaries of the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang's Commentary was heavily influenced by *Qiwu lun* 齊物論, particularly with

5 Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, annot. Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), 27.

Guo Xiang's reverence of "the oneness of things" as an underlying principle that ties together all chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. As such, there should exist no hierarchical differences between such highly regarded personalities in the *Zhuangzi*—namely, "celestial beings, divine beings, perfected beings, and sages." Regarding one of these four states as a *primus inter pares* or an "ultimate state of the highest and grandest nature" would mean a violation of the spirit of "the oneness of things": the one who remains most steadfast in the maintenance of "the oneness of things" would simultaneously be the "highest and grandest" among all things.[6] This paradox is likely the intellectual starting point of Guo Xiang's assertion that the aforementioned four states represent *one* being, a sentiment echoed by other works influenced by his commentary. However, as noted by Tan Mingran, while Guo Xiang's theory of "one being, four names" enjoys great support, arguments to the contrary have been proposed by scholars including Xuan Ying 宣穎 (ca. 1655–1730), Gao Heng 高亨 (1900–1986), Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990), and Tan Jiefu 譚戒甫 (1887–1974). Such contrarian arguments maintain that the four states of being are differentiated by their "realm," and are hierarchical instead of identical in nature. Tan Mingran's article sets out to further illustrate this view, which is generally held by a minority of scholars. The article comprehensively delves into many chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, including "Tianxia" 天下 (All Under Heaven), "Xiaoyao you" 逍遥游 (Carefree Wandering), "Gengsang Chu" 庚桑楚 (Kengsang Chu), "Waiwu" 外物 (External Things), and "Da Sheng" 達生 (Understanding Life). From his thorough examination of these chapters, Tan Mingran asserts that a strict hierarchy exists among the four different states of being: "celestial beings, divine beings, perfected beings, and sages," in descending order. In addition, any being positioned higher in the order incorporates all the functions and capabilities of the beings below it. I would like to address Tan Mingran's views with a twofold approach—an assessment of the argument's premise, as well as a presentation of an alternative hierarchy.

First and foremost, Tan Mingran's advocacy for the "minoritarian" view that an inherent hierarchy exists among the highly-regarded states of being represents a positive contribution to the modern study of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole.

However, further research into the veracity of both views is still needed. The supposed rhetorical equality of "celestial beings, divine beings, perfected beings, and sages" is debatable, owing to the relative independence of each chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, along with the unrestrained style of writing

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6 See Zou Xiaodong 鄒曉東, "Guo Xiang shi 'qiyi' beilun yu *Xiaoyaoyou* 'chongda' wenmai: jian bo Mou Zongsan suowei 'guici wei yong,'" 郭象式"齊一"悖論與《逍遥游》"崇大"文脈—兼駁牟宗三所謂"詭辭為用", *Guanzi yanjiu* 管子研究, no. 3 (2025): 44–46.

that borders on the "paradoxical" and "absurd" in some of its argumentative methods. Academically, Tan Mingran's automatic acknowledgement of the uniformity among various chapters of the *Zhuangzi* risks exposure to criticisms regarding its "questionable premise" and "illegitimate interpretation across different chapters."

Lastly, my own research diverges from Tan Mingran's version of the hierarchy of the four states of being. As surmised from the chapter, "Carefree Wandering," the order should be "perfected beings, divine beings, and sages," which diverges from Tan Mingran's descending order of "celestial beings, divine beings, perfected beings, and sages."[7] This is surmised from the following excerpt: "Perfected beings do not hold on to stubbornness within themselves, divine beings do not seek external validation for their merits, sages do not seek fame or glory."[8]

Ye Shuxun's 葉樹勛 article in this edition of the JOCH is straightforward and logically concise. Instead of a subversion of the prevailing academic view of the concept of "nature" in Daoism, Ye Shuxun explains a dichotomy inherent in the Daoist view of "nature" with a consistent perspective and line of reasoning. Such a dichotomy is evident in the concepts of "discarding the machine heart" and "non-interference," the former of which is placed under the umbrella of the latter by Ye Shuxun, who argues that "nature," or a "natural state," is fundamentally a result of "non-interference" by outside forces. This logic serves to illustrate the implementation of *wuwei* from the *Dao De Jing* in a political context—namely, "the ruler's avoidance of employing external forces to interfere with the natural living conditions of his people." On a smaller scale, the "nature" of an individual similarly possesses "spontaneous and naturally occurring patterns and rhythms," which stand in stark contrast to what could be termed a "deliberate affectation" resulting from "external interference." Any "deliberate affectation" could be understood as a manifestation of the "machine heart" as described in the *Zhuangzi*—a "deliberate," external factor that disturbs the natural state of the individual. Therefore, "discarding the machine heart" can logically be understood as a component of "non-interference."

7 Ibid., 44–46.
8 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*.