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# The Significance of the Mean in the “Wuji” Section of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips

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## Abstract

The “Wuji” section of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips offers great insight into the pre-modern Chinese philosophical landscape. At the heart of this section lies the concept of *zhong* (mean), which is intricately woven into the fabric of the *tian dao* (the way of Heaven) and the *ren dao* (the way of man). This concept is reflected in the “wuji” and the “wude,” embodying the pinnacle of political principles and the ideal outcome of governance. The notion of the mean transcends traditional Confucian values such as *zhong* (loyalty) and *xin* (trustworthiness), encompassing qualities of centrality, equality, justice, impartiality, and abundance. It is revered as an absolute and sacred principle, serving as both a coveted goal and the most effective means to achieve it. To fully grasp the implications of “the mean” in the “Wuji” section of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, a fresh examination of received texts such as the *Yizhoushu*, *Analects*, *Guanzi*, and *Heguanzi*, as well as excavated texts like the “Baoxun” and “Xinshi weizhong” of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, and the *Huangdi sijing* of the Mawangdui Silk Texts, is warranted.

## Keywords

Tsinghua Bamboo Slips – Wuji – mean – loyalty – trustworthiness

## 1 Introduction

The recently published “Wuji” 五紀 section of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips (*Qinghua jian* 清華簡) is a comprehensive and meticulously structured work that delves into the creation of the world from chaos to order. It explores the concept that the harmony of the *dao* of heaven (*tiandao* 天道) is reflected in the *dao* of man (*rendao* 人道), detailing how Houji 后帝 re-established cosmic order and earthly law from chaos. While drawing inspiration from texts such as the *Shangshu* 尚書 and *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經, “Wuji” presents mostly new content that is rich in information. The thought-provoking questions raised in the present study will hopefully continue to inspire scholarly exploration.

The focus of this article is on one specific character, *zhong* 中, which frequently appears in the “Wuji” section. Collators have at times interpreted this character as “loyalty” (*zhong* 忠), but I argue that it is more accurately understood as “the mean,” the concept that represents the highest ideal, the most optimal outcome, unity, and harmony, all of which are connected to the rule of man. In this article, I will delve into the significance of the mean as it is portrayed in various texts such as the *Shangshu*, *Analects*, *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, and *Yizhoushu* 逸周書. Additionally, I will examine its representation in the “Baoxun” 保訓 and “Xinshi weizhong” 心是謂中 sections of Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, as well as the *Huangdi sijing* of the Mawangdui Silk Texts (*Mawangdui boshu* 馬王堆帛書).

## 2 The Mean as the Highest Ideal

The concept of *zhong* 中 (the mean) in “Wuji” can be categorized into three distinct types: as the ultimate ideal, as a tangible manifestation of virtue, and as a guide for behavior. Let us begin by exploring the highest ideal.

In the opening passages of “Wuji,” the text vividly portrays the tumultuous state of the primordial era:<sup>1</sup> “The ancients endured catastrophic floods that reached the heavens. Society plunged into disarray, morality crumbled, and the celestial order of the five measures of time fell into disarray.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars have

1 Huang Dekuan 黃德寬, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2021), 11: 89–132.

2 This translation into English is based on the understanding of Huang Dekuan 黃德寬. See Huang Dekuan 黃德寬, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ pian jiangoude tianren xitong” 清華簡 “五紀” 篇建構的天人系統, *Xueshujie* 學術界, no. 2 (2022), 5–13.

debated the meaning of *quan* 權 and *zhan* 戰 in the above passage,<sup>3</sup> but I am fairly certain that they concern the disintegration of or a blasphemous disregard for the mean and virtue (*de* 德).

The expressions *youzhong* 有中 (the mean) and *youde* 有德 (the virtue) may be understood as representing the highest standard and the optimal condition in a particular polity, both of which are intimately related to the five measures of time (*wuji* 五紀).<sup>4</sup> Similar chaotic conditions are depicted in the received version of the *Huangdi sijing*. Its “Shiliu jing” 十六經 (Sixteen Sutras) chapter describes how Huangdi put an end to chaos and rebuilt order. The “Guan” 觀 chapter within it reads:

Heaven and earth had formed, and mankind came into existence. However, at that time, there were no established standards for morality or ethics. There were no yardsticks for reward and punishment, no celestially determined times for work and rest, and no clear distinctions between social classes or sacred and secular realms. As I desired decency and propriety ... I decided to establish rules for heaven and earth.<sup>5</sup>

Huangdi then ordered Li Hei 力黑 to “travel, incognito, to the four corners of the earth to observe the chaos and to rectify it with laws.”<sup>6</sup>

It is thus understood that the world was once in a state of chaos, lacking standards, laws, celestial timetables, social or spiritual hierarchies, and lasting stability. This portrayal mirrors the themes found in “Wuji” depicting the destruction of the mean, virtue, and the five measures of time. In the “Sixteen Sutras,” Huangdi sought to establish the mean as the governing principle in heaven and earth, utilizing reward and punishment to restore order to the world. As we delve deeper into the text, we discover that the concept of the mean in “Wuji” is closely tied to *shusuan* 數算, a method of mathematical calculation that views numbers as reflections of the *dao* of heaven. The mean, therefore, represents heavenly order. In “Wuji” it is written: “When rules are established throughout the world, norms are followed without mistakes.”<sup>7</sup>

3 Zhang Yusi 張雨絲 and Lin Zhipeng 林志鵬, “Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian wuji zhacong, shang” 清華大學藏戰國竹書五紀札叢 (上), *Jianbowang* 簡帛網, <http://www.bsm.org.cn/?chujian/8597.html>, Jan 7, 2022.

4 Ibid. Zhang and Lin have also pointed out the similarities among the words “mean” (*zhong* 中), “virtue” (*de* 德) and “celestial rulership” (*tianji* 天紀) here.

5 Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, ed., *Changsha Mawangdui Hanmu jianbo jicheng* 長沙馬王堆漢墓簡帛集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 4: 152.

6 Ibid., 4: 152.

7 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 106.

This highlights the importance of virtue in maintaining order. From the initial discussions of the mean and virtue, it becomes apparent that the author of the text viewed them as symbols or results of a well-structured society. This suggests that the establishment of order is closely linked to the concepts of the mean and virtue in “Wuji.”

In “Wuji,” the mean signifies centrality and unity. The section suggests that a well-organized society is one that has a clearly defined center and where the highest political authority can ensure that policies are effectively enforced. When Houdi appears, he is always flanked by four senior ministers (*sigan* 四幹) and four important assistants (*sifu* 四輔) who, taken together, only accentuate his position as the mean, as the central figure.

The bamboo slips of “Wuji” can be divided into two parts; those below number 97, entitled *Zhenglie shisheng youwu* 正列十乘有五,<sup>8</sup> relate to Huangdi. “Wuji” states: “Having taken ownership of heaven and earth, Huangdi began to build a kingdom by fielding officials such as those with the title *wanggong*. Heavenly deities such as *sihuang* 四荒, *siyin* 四允, *sizhu* 四柱, and *siwei* 四維, as well as earthly deities of all kinds and all of his subjects, began to worship him.”<sup>9</sup> From this text, it is clear that Huangdi was seen as the creator of the earthly kingdom and its political system. Apart from the earthly deities and his subjects, he was surrounded by quartets of heavenly deities.

Cheng Hao 程浩 points out that this is what is meant by the “four-faced Huangdi” (*Huangdi simian* 黃帝四面) who appears in the “Shizi” 尸子 chapter quoted in *juan* 79 of the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, also in the “Zhizheng zhidao” 治政之道 section of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, and the “Liming” 立命 section of the “Sixteen Sutras.”<sup>10</sup> For instance, it is stated in “Liming” that, “Huangdi of antiquity believed in *dao* and promoted honesty and trustworthiness. His corporeal image was the embodiment of everything in nature. He had four faces and a fortified heart which radiated rays in all four directions.”<sup>11</sup>

While there is no direct mention of the mean in the depictions of Huangdi in “Wuji,” when we combine the mentions of the mean in the aforementioned texts, we can see the importance of the mean in the images of Huangdi depicted in “Wuji,” which also states, “The five measures of time have a plethora of details that express and assist in heavenly law; for instance, the mean is yellow-colored and occupies the central position.”<sup>12</sup> As the text below will make

8 The exact meaning of this phrase is unknown and is thus left untranslated.

9 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 124.

10 Cheng Hao 程浩, “Qinghua jian ‘wuji’ zhong de Huangdi gushi” 清華簡 “五紀” 中的黃帝故事, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 9 (2021): 91–94.

11 Qiu Xigui, *Changsha Mawangdui Hanmu jianbo jicheng*, 4: 151.

12 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 97.

clear, the yellow-colored mean has to do with Huangdi and we can imagine him occupying the median pole (*zhongji* 中極).

The mean is the highest representation of cosmic order that Houdi desires to manifest. Having regulated the five measures of time, Houdi says:

The five measures of time have been put into place. They crisscross one another and emanate multi-colored rays. The measures of time operate ceaselessly; the sun, the moon, and the stars all seem exceptionally bright. The sun rises from the east, using its brilliance to express *li*; the moon ascends from the west, using its unchanging regularity to express *yi*; the four poles of east, south, west, and north and the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter use the fluctuating *yin* and *yang* to express *xin*, as square and circle together express the mean, and as *quan* and *cheng* together express justice.<sup>13</sup>

When the five measures of time are set in motion, their actions intertwine, creating a clear and orderly harmony between heaven and earth. Every element falls into its rightful place within the universe, allowing the essence of justice, centrality, absoluteness, and order – known as the *dao* of heaven – to manifest and be safeguarded.

The mean is intimately related to *shusuan*, which is the irresistible law of human will; it is unchangeable because it has withstood the test of time. It is stated on the bamboo slips that, “Once the five measures of time are put into place, the ‘five counts’ are established, and the laws for understanding the *dao* of heaven can be known.”<sup>14</sup> In his analysis, Huang Dekuan 黃德寬 emphasizes that the concept of the five measures of time and the “five counts” (*wusuan* 五算) are synonymous. This principle serves as a foundation for Houdi’s capacity to effectively manage crises, suppress dissent, and implement ethical guidelines for societal relationships.<sup>15</sup>

Following from this, it is necessary to establish the five measures of time – or five counts – to understand the *dao* of heaven. In other words, it is accurate mathematical formulations that make understanding the universe possible. The laws symbolize an immutable, absolute, and necessary order; they are akin to “the promulgation of systems and the establishment of laws” (*bu zhi jian ji* 布制建極) in the “Guan” passage of the “Sixteen Sutras.” It is worth noting that

13 Ibid., II: III.

14 Ibid., II: 90.

15 Huang Dekuan, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ pian jiangoude tianren xitong,” 5–13.

in early China there were officials with titles of *sizhong* 司中 and *shangzhong* 尚中 who were masters of *shusuan* calculations. The implication is that these officials were skilled not only in mathematical calculations, but also in understanding the *dao* of the mean. It is clear that the mean as depicted in “Wuji” symbolizes accuracy, impartiality, and immutability.

“Wuji” also uses the terms “circle” (*yuan* 圓) and “round abundance” (*yuan yu* 圓裕) to describe the mean. It states: “Rope corresponds with *li*, the protractor corresponds with *yi*, the level corresponds with love, the scale corresponds with trustworthiness,<sup>16</sup> the circle corresponds with the mean. These are the highest principles of heaven and earth.”<sup>17</sup> Just like rope, protractors, levels, and scales, the compass is also an instrument, though of a more exalted status. “Wuji” also records that, “The mind corresponds with the mean; the mean is harmonious and abundant action.”<sup>18</sup> When the mind is in harmony with the mean, the action it entails is abundant, that is to say, effective and whole.

Furthermore, annotators noted that “round abundance” is an abbreviation for “square round brilliant abundance” (*fang yuan guang yu* 方圓光裕), writing, “When heaven was separated from earth, there was ubiquitous and powerfully brilliant light; square, round, brilliant, and abundant light shone on and ruled the four corners of the world.”<sup>19</sup> This suggests that Houdi’s political actions are square (immutable laws) and round (harmonious, effective, impartial) and gave way to brilliant (powerful light shining on all things in the universe) and abundant results (copious and universal wealth).

In essence, achieving harmony and abundance in both heaven and earth, and ensuring peaceful coexistence among people, necessitates the adherence to celestial law. This principle, known as the mean, is crucial for establishing optimal political conditions and garnering the support of the populace. The mean, also referred to as celestial law or *shusuan*, represents the fundamental element in the universe and serves as the most effective method of governance.

16 Critics have translated *li, yi, ai, xin, zhong* 禮、義、愛、信、中 as *li, yi, ai, ren, zhong* 禮、義、愛、仁、中. Philologists are of the view that *ren* 仁 (benevolence) in “Wude” should be translated as *xin* 信 (trustworthiness) and this view is convincing. For references see: Cheng Hao 程浩, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ sixiang guannian fawei” 清華簡“五紀”思想觀念發微, *Chutu wenxian* 出土文獻, no. 4 (2021): 1–16, 154; Zi Ju 子居, “Qinghuajian shiyi wuji jiexi, zhiyi” 清華簡十一(五紀)解析(之一), <https://www.xianqin.tk/2022/01/09/3595/>, Jan 9, 2022; Chen Minzhen 陳民鎮, “Shilun qinghuajian ‘wuji’ de demu” 試論清華簡“五紀”的德目, *Jianghuai luntan* 江淮論壇, no. 3 (2022): 19–26.

17 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 91.

18 Ibid., 11: 95.

19 Ibid., 11: 105.

“Wuji” is not unique in viewing the mean as the highest ideal. The “Baoxun” chapter of the *Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* contains the final words of King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (1152–1050 BCE) before he died. Using Emperor Shun 舜 and Shangjiawei 上甲微 as examples, the king speaks four times of the importance of the mean, which is that the mean has to be inherited and promoted in order to justify the heavenly mandate. The mean that Emperor Shun inherited “can effectuate changes in position. Instruments can be created to measure all things in heaven and earth that are shaped by the yin-yang duality and to discover heavenly laws that cannot be violated.” Here the mean is more than an ideal; it takes on physicality. In effect, the mean has to do with instruments that measure the *dao* of heaven. For Shangjiawei, the mean “can resolve disputes among different tribes and compel the guilty to accept judgment.”<sup>20</sup>

The mean in this context relates to the legal system. The four references to the mean in “Baoxun” suggest that it is not only a crucial concept in governance, but also can be embodied in tangible laws and regulations. It serves as a bridge between heaven and earth, and offers an efficient approach to resolving tribal or ethnic issues. Therefore, it symbolizes impartiality and justice,<sup>21</sup> aligning perfectly with the concept of the mean in “Wuji.”

In many chapters of the *Shangshu*, including “Lüxing” 呂刑, the mean is synonymous with criminal law. Such is also the case with the “Changmai” 嘗麥 chapter of the *Yizhoushu*, where law enforcement officers are called *dazheng* 大正. This latter chapter tells the story of Huangdi quelling the anger of his people by using military force to defeat Chiyou 蚩尤 so that the *dazheng* can “enforce divine intention and create social order.” The result is that “peace reigns in heaven and earth with no periods of chaos.”<sup>22</sup> These ideas dovetail with those in “Wuji” and show the intimate relationship between “Lüxing” and “Changmai.”

In conclusion, the “Wuji” section emphasizes the importance of the mean, which encompasses both the *dao* of heaven, represented by the five measures of time, and the *dao* of man, represented by the five virtues. The mean embodies ideals such as centrality, universality, abundance, all-encompassing

20 Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2010), 1: 143.

21 For more detailed analyses see Cao Feng 曹峰, “‘Baoxun’ de ‘Zhong’ ji ‘gongping gongzheng’ de linian shuo: jianlun ‘sanjiang zhide’” 《保訓》的“中”即“公平公正”的理念說—兼論“三降之德”, *Wenshizhe* 文史哲, no. 6 (2011): 36–43; also see Cao Feng 曹峰, “The Concept of Zhong in Baoxun Testament: Interpreted in Light of Two Chapters of the *Yizhoushu*,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 47.1/2 (2020).

22 Huang Huaixin 黃懷信, *Yizhoushu jiaobu zhuyi* 逸周書校補注譯 (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), 294.

brilliance, impartiality, and justice. It serves as a symbol of the highest political principle and facilitates the most effective governance outcomes.

### 3 The Mean as Virtue in Concrete Form

The five virtues are a crucial component of the “Wuji” section. In addition to the five measures of time (the sun, the moon, the stars, *chen* 辰, and *sui* 歲), the five occasions (wind, rain, cold, heat, and thunder), the five instruments (rope, protractors, levels, scales, and compasses), and the five colors (green, white, black, red, yellow) – all of which are integral to the *dao* of heaven – the author of “Wuji” also includes the five virtues (*li*, *yi*, love, trustworthiness, and the mean), which are part of the *dao* of man. There is a connection between the *dao* of man and the *dao* of heaven, and this connection may manifest in tangible ways or remain abstract.

When the “five elements” (*wuxing* 五行)<sup>23</sup> of the *dao* of heaven align with the five virtues of the *dao* of man, it represents a connection that is not tangible. However, when it is stated that, “*li* corresponds with green, *yi* corresponds with white, love corresponds with black, trustworthiness corresponds with red, and the mean corresponds with yellow”<sup>24</sup> or “rope corresponds with *li*, the protractor corresponds with *yi*, the level corresponds with love, the scale corresponds with trustworthiness, and the compass corresponds with the mean,” the connection becomes real, tangible, and direct. The five virtues align with both the five instruments and the five colors, giving them a higher status in cosmic law.

Apart from the correspondences mentioned above, much more is said about the five virtues in “Wuji.” The following are some quotations from Houdi:

To make colors come together and etiquette shine, one may solely rely on virtue. Virtue encompasses *li*, *yi*, love, trustworthiness, and the mean. When these virtues are combined, they set a standard of excellence.

*Li*, *yi*, love, trustworthiness, and the mean – these are the virtues Houdi uses to rule over the people.

We shower *li* on people of lower status, *yi* on people of similar status, love on guests and wives, trustworthiness on friends, and the mean (loyalty) on emperors and parents.

23 “Wuji” mentions the five elements but does not specify that they are metal, wood, water, fire, and earth.

24 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 96.

*Li* represents respect, *yi* represents caution, love represents humility, trustworthiness represents conscientiousness, and the mean (loyalty) represents fear.

*Li* corresponds with ghosts, *yi* corresponds with man, love corresponds with earth, trustworthiness corresponds with time, and the mean corresponds with heaven.

*Li* is founding, *yi* is rising, love is going, trustworthiness is coming, and the mean is stopping.

The eye corresponds with *li*, the mouth corresponds with *yi*, the ear corresponds with love, the nose corresponds with trustworthiness, and the mind corresponds with the mean.

The eye matches *li*, which strives to be a rope; the mouth with *yi*, which aims to be a protractor; the ear with love, which aspires to be a level; the nose with trustworthiness, which seeks to be a scale; and the mind with the mean, which aims to achieve harmony and abundance.<sup>25</sup>

In these quotations, the concept of “the mean” is portrayed as a reflection of earthly virtue. The third quotation exemplifies the use of the five virtues as a code of conduct for the emperor’s subjects.<sup>26</sup> The mean (loyalty) is expected to be directed towards the emperor and one’s parents, serving as a guideline for interactions with individuals of higher social status. The fourth and sixth quotations further emphasize the importance of the mean, highlighting the values of fearsome respect, trustworthiness, and loyalty that are seen as essential for maintaining harmonious relationships.

This concept of the mean shares similarities with Confucian principles of loyalty. According to Confucian teachings, a minister should serve the emperor with unwavering loyalty, as espoused in the “Bayi” 八佾 chapter of the *Analects*. Additionally, adults are encouraged to practice filial piety, respect, loyalty, and trustworthiness in their free time so they may uphold these values within their own households, as well as exhibit them towards elders and the king outside of the home, as discussed in the “Lianghuiwang shang” 梁惠王上 chapter of the *Mencius*. This must be the reason why the editors of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips sometimes substitute the concept of the mean 中 with that of loyalty 忠, or that some scholars view the five virtues as a Confucian concept.<sup>27</sup>

25 Ibid., 11: 96, 93, 94.

26 It is worth noting that, while “Wuji” also touches on the various social classes, it does not make them the central theme. The primary focus is on the governance of the masses, which it refers to as the “tens-of-thousand faces.”

27 Cheng Hao says that “Wuji” repeatedly praises Confucian concepts of *li*, *yi*, love, benevolence, and loyalty. See Cheng Hao, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ zhongde Huangdi gushi,” 91–94. Cheng also believes the reason benevolence (*ren* 仁) is not a focus of “Wuji” is that its

The significance of the mean extends far beyond what has been discussed thus far. As previously mentioned, the mean is the central concept of “Wuji” and holds the highest position and greatest value. It occupies a unique position as the final of the five virtues, which align with the five elements, yet it operates as a “4 + 1” system where one element reigns supreme over the others. According to Houdi, the mind corresponds with the mean, highlighting it as the pivotal and authoritative virtue. In other words, it is only through the mind that the mean can be truly understood and realized.<sup>28</sup>

Using the mean as a metaphor for the mind was a prevalent practice during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). In the “Xinshi weizhong” section it is written: “The mind is the mean; it partakes in and rules the body. The eye, ear, mouth, and heel can only offer support. This is the reason that the mind can be called the mean.”<sup>29</sup> If the eye, ear, mouth, and heel can only offer support, it is because the mean plays the role of the emperor. Here the heel takes the place of the nose. The same phenomenon is described in the “Neiye” 內業 chapter of the *Guanzi*: “The mean is a righteous mind; once achieved, order prevails in all things.”<sup>30</sup> Similar descriptions can be found in the *Guodian Slips* (*Guodian jian* 郭店簡), the “Wuxing” 五行 chapter of the *Mawangdui Silk Texts*, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Mencius* 孟子, *Xunzi* 荀子, *Shizi*, *Heguanzi*, and the “Ziyi” 緇衣 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記,<sup>31</sup> but none of them state directly that the mind is the mean.

There is logic behind the correspondence of the mean with the color yellow. Huangdi 黃帝, literally “the Yellow Emperor,” is so-named because he occupies the “central” (*zhong* 中) position in the five elements, which is a “4 + 1” type of system, and therefore the correspondence is between earth and yellow. The

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author cherry-picked those Confucian ideals that dealt with obedience to imperial rule. The part of Confucian ethics that helps the masses raise consciousness and awaken their true nature, such as the idea of benevolence, was deemed reactionary by the “Wuji” author, and he basically deleted all of it from the text. See Cheng Hao, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ sixiang guannian fawei,” 1–16, 154. But as will be seen from texts below, the mean is a complicated idea and does not only concern ethics. Additionally, “Wuji” does not concern itself much with social classes. Cheng himself admits that benevolence can be understood as trustworthiness; if this is the case, his point about benevolence is moot.

28 There are works that discuss trustworthiness and love at length, likely influenced by the widespread adoption of *nanmen* and *beidou* practices. However, I will not delve into those topics in this article.

29 Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2018), 8: 14.

30 Li Fengxiang 黎翔鳳, *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注, comp. Liang Yunhua 梁運華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 938.

31 For details see Cao Feng 曹峰, “Qinghuajian ‘xinshi weizhong’ de xinlun yu minglun” 清華簡 “心是調中” 的心論與命論, *Zhongguo zhhexueshi* 中國哲學史, no. 3 (2019): 5–13, 29.

“Yueling” 月令 chapter of the *Liji* states, “The midpoint of the year corresponds with the earth element; its propitious days are *wu* 戊 and *ji* 己 of the heavenly stems, its heavenly ruler is Huangdi, its earthly deity is Houtu.”<sup>32</sup>

There are other passages that illustrate this point. There is the “Wudi benji” 五帝本紀 chapter of the *Shiji* 史記, which describes Huangdi thus: “He has the auspiciousness of the earth element, and is therefore named the Yellow Emperor.”<sup>33</sup> There is also the “Fengshan shu” 封禪書 chapter which states, “Once Huangdi gained the propitiousness of the earth element, there appeared yellow dragons and huge earthworms.”<sup>34</sup> Additionally one may consider the “Tianwen” 天文 chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, which states, “The mean corresponds with the earth element, whose ruler is Huangdi, and with assistant Houtu, he rules the four corners of the earth with rope.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the “Yingtong” 應同 chapter of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 offers helpful points based on the mutually restrictive aspect of the five elements:

An emperor’s accession to power is preceded by auspicious phenomena seen by the masses. At the time of Huangdi, there were yellow dragons and huge earthworms in the sky. Huangdi said, “This is a sign of abundant earth.” Because the earth was abundant, yellow was the color of Huangdi’s reign, and his actions were based on the propitiousness of the earth.<sup>36</sup>

It may be that the appearance of Huangdi in “Wuji” was based on the knowledge of the five elements, but it is difficult to say whether the five measures of time also have a mutually restrictive aspect.

The “Wuji” section also states: “*Li* 禮 is called *ze* 則, trustworthiness (*xin* 信) is called *shi* 食, *yi* 義 is called *shi* 式, love (*ai* 愛) is called *fu* 服; respectful observance of the four *li* 禮 and a perfect mean (*zhong* 中) is called fortune (*fu* 福).”<sup>37</sup> Notably, the exact meaning of *ze* 則, *shi* 食, *shi* 式, and *fu* 服 is not clear. Again from “Wuji,” it is written that: “*Li* 禮 corresponds with ghosts (*gui* 鬼), *yi* 義 with man (*ren* 人), love (*ai* 愛) with earth (*di* 地), trustworthiness (*xin* 信) with time (*shi* 時), and the mean (*zhong* 中) with heaven (*tian* 天),” and also, “*Li* must not be coarse, *yi* must not be violated, love must not be possessive, trustworthiness

32 Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, annot., Shen Xiaochen 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 460–61.

33 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 6.

34 *Ibid.*, 1366.

35 He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 186.

36 Xu Weijue 許維禱, *Lüshi Chunqiu jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 284.

37 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 110.

must not be feared; when these four challenges are successfully met, the mean may reign as standard.”<sup>38</sup>

These quotations demonstrate that the mean occupies the central position in the five virtues. The virtue with which to shower the emperor and one’s parents is the highest, the most perfect, and the most consistent with the *dao* of heaven. Having all the other four virtues is insufficient; it is the mean that will allow the emperor to ascend the heights, grasp the *dao* of heaven, and be the master of heaven and earth. This is similar to the descriptions in the Guodian Slips and in the “Wuxing” chapter of the Mawangdui Bamboo Slips that having the four virtues of *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, and *zhi* 智 is not enough; it is “sacredness” (*sheng* 聖) that will allow one to grasp the *dao* of heaven. The mean as described in “Wuji” has the same special meaning as sacredness does in “Wuxing.”

“Wuji” states that there are five systems of deities: *shusuan* 數算, *shi* 時, *du* 度, *zheng* 正, and *zhang* 章, each of which has six deities. The deities of *shusuan* are *tian* 天, *di* 地, *dahe* 大和, *dacheng* 大乘, *xiaohe* 小和, and *xiaocheng* 小乘. “Wuji” states, “The *shusuan* of heaven and earth is the law of Houdi.” This implies that *shusuan* is the most important of the five systems of deities, which also corresponds with the five virtues. Since the *sizhong* 司中 are masters of *shusuan*, they manifest and control the mean. On the human body, *shusuan* is calculated from the dimensions of the hand and feet.

Huang Dekuan points out that slips 12 and 13 state that the eye, mouth, ear, nose, and mind correspond with the “five virtues” (*wude* 五德) and “five regulators” (*wuzheng* 五正), while slips 86 to 88 echo these correspondences. What may be concluded here is that the ear corresponds with love, the eye corresponds with *li*, the nose corresponds with trustworthiness, and the mouth corresponds with *yi*. However, the mean is missing here. Huang believes that “loyalty” is hinted at in slips 88 to 91, which describe the relationship between corporeal lengths and *shusuan*, and that this relationship indicates not only the reason for measuring corporeal parts but also the special correspondence between *shusuan* and the mean.<sup>39</sup>

One may also refer to the detailed study conducted by Jia Lianxiang 賈連翔 regarding the significance of the body in relation to *shusuan*.<sup>40</sup> It is fascinating to note that “Wuji” connects *shusuan* with the concept of the mean. This

38 Ibid., 11: 130.

39 Huang Dekuan, “Qinghuajian ‘wuji’ pian jiangoude tianren xitong,” 5–13. What has to be pointed out is that this text substitutes “loyalty” (*zhong* 忠) for “the mean” (*zhong*), whereas I do not.

40 Jia Lianxiang 賈連翔, “Qinghuajian wuji zhongde xingxiang zhize yu tianren guanxi” 清華簡五紀中的行象之則與天人關係, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 9 (2021): 87–90, 94.

connection may stem from the belief that the body is a divine creation, and many of the measurements we use today are based on corporeal lengths. The mean is closely associated with “laws” (*li* 律), which are related to celestial calculations; corporeal lengths as reflections of celestial calculations may indeed play a role in the relevance of the mean to law and *dao*.

Slips 63 to 69 describe the correspondences between *li* and the sun, *yi* and the moon, trustworthiness and *nanmen* 南門, love and *beidou* 北斗, and finally, mean and *jianxing* 建星. The virtue that is *jianxing* acts according to the mean, positions the sun and the moon to generate *sui* 歲, merges heaven and earth, and ends *wushu* 五數; it is the law of *shusuan*, of which Houdi is therefore the master.

Why is it that *jianxing* can pass over the sun, the moon, *nanmen*, and *beidou*, to appear as the last virtue and the symbol of the mean? The reason appears in the “Lüshu” 律書 chapter of the *Shiji*: “*Jianxing* creates all manners of life and corresponds with the twelve months, whose law corresponds with *Dali* 大呂.”<sup>41</sup> As we have seen from the above statement that “the virtue that is *jianxing* ... ends *wushu*,” *jianxing* occupies a special place and symbolizes the end of the year (*sui*) and the birth of all manners of life. It also symbolizes the *dao* of heaven, as in “... positions the sun and the moon to generate *sui*, merges heaven and earth ...” It is also the principle and form of *shusuan*. These are ample reasons that *jianxing* corresponds with the mean and is the reason for Houdi’s accession to power.

The concept of the mean, as represented by *jianxing* in the *Analects*, aligns with *shusuan* and the positioning of the sun and moon to create *sui*. This merging of heaven and earth provides insight into the meaning of the following quotation from the “Yaoyue” 堯曰 chapter of the *Analects*: “Yao says, ‘Shun! *Lishu* which partakes in the *dao* of heaven falls on your shoulders. You must take the reins of the mean’”<sup>42</sup>

The “Baoxun” chapter of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips also delves into the intricate relationship between Shun and the mean. It is evident from these texts that Shun embodies the virtue of *jianxing*. Contrary to some annotations, *lishu* is not merely about heavenly fate, but rather a fundamental aspect of the *dao* of heaven that embodies righteousness and impartiality. This is precisely why Shun was able to govern the world with such grace and wisdom.

In conclusion, the five virtues may seem like earthly laws, but they are actually a part of the heavenly *dao*. This applies not only to the mean, but also to

<sup>41</sup> *Shiji*, 1244.

<sup>42</sup> Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, annot., Gao Liushui 高流水 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 756.

the other four virtues. The logic of “Wuji” suggests that heavenly virtues come first, followed by corresponding earthly virtues that humans should strive to embody.<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on heavenly virtues is not commonly found in Confucian texts; rather, it is more prevalent in the School of Naturalists and the Huang-Lao school, which inherited Naturalist beliefs. Both of these schools assert that virtue is inherent in all things in the world, and is evident in their qualities, characteristics, functions, and abilities.

The “Wangfu” 王鈇 chapter of the *Heguanzi* contains the following passage:

Heaven operates on “faithfulness” (*cheng* 誠), the law of the sun. The sun rises and sets faithfully, orbiting between the northern and southern tropics from which it never deviates. This is why heaven and earth always emulate the sun’s faithfulness. Heaven operates on “trustworthiness” (*xin* 信), the law of the moon. The moon ascends from the west and sinks in the east, waxing and waning regularly and ceaselessly. This is why the emperor’s policies always emulate the moon’s trustworthiness. Heaven operates on “clarity” (*ming* 明), the law of the stars. Each of the multitudes of stars has its own position and path, about which it never becomes perplexed. This is why earthly events big and small emulate the stars’ clarity. Heaven operates on “cause” (*yin* 因), the law of the four seasons. Spring, summer, fall, and winter change at the right times; they never infringe or offend one another. This is why heaven and earth always consider the “cause” of the four seasons as necessary. Heaven operates on “one” (*yi* 一), the universal law. This law never changes, be it on the left or right, front or back, past or present. This is why heaven and earth always consider “one” as the eternal law. Heaven has faithfulness, trustworthiness, clarity, cause, and one as its five virtues which it never claims to dominate, so it never has competitors.<sup>44</sup>

As we can see, heaven has faithfulness, trustworthiness, clarity, cause, and one as its five virtues. Specifically, faithfulness manifests the law of the sun, trustworthiness the law of the moon, clarity the law of the stars, and cause the law of the four seasons. These four virtues have different characteristics

43 “Wuji” states: “Houdu says, ‘*li*, *yi*, love, *ren*, the mean; the six virtues (*liu* 六德) harmonize with the five establishments (*wujian* 五建); movement of the stars in the four corners of the sky can be traced,” and the names of 28 mansions follow. The five establishments are the five virtues as noted by the annotators, but it is still not known what the six virtues are. All the same, five virtues and the *dao* of heaven are discussed together.

44 Huang Huaixin 黃懷信, *Heguanzi jiaozhu* 鶡冠子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 163–66.

and functions. One, the last virtue, dominates the other four. It is by mastering “one” that the emperor has no competitors from left or right, front or back, past or present. This “one” of the “Wangchou” chapter is comparable to the mean of “Wuji” and can help in gaining a deeper understanding of the latter.

The “Sishi” 四時 chapter of the *Guanzi* contains the idea of “five elements.” Both the four directions (east, south, west, and north) and the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) correspond with the four elements of wood, fire, metal, and water, but earth is hinted at in the four seasons:

The center is called earth. The virtue of earth is to help with the changing of the seasons; it makes the winds blow and the rains fall at proper times and strengthens the power of earth. The earth grows skins and muscles; its virtue manifests peacefully and evenly, squarely and impartially, and it aids the four seasons materially: birth in the spring, growth in the summer, harvest in the fall, storage and shutting down in the winter. The arrival of “Greater Cold,” the last solar term, creates wealth for the kingdom and inspires deference from four directions. This is called “year virtue.”<sup>45</sup>

There are three important points here; first, earth is central; second, earth is peaceful and even, square and impartial; third, earth aides the four seasons and inspires deference from four directions, thus becoming “year virtue,” a commanding form of virtue. All of these characteristics resonate with those of the mean in “Wuji,” including dominance, impartiality, positioning the sun and moon to generate *sui*, merging heaven and earth, and ending *wushu*. It is evident that there is a high degree of consistency.

The “Daoduan” 道端 chapter of the *Heguanzi* states:

The emperor sits in the central position and commands people surrounding him: benevolent people on the left, loyal ministers in front, righteous ministers on the right, and saintly people in the back. The guiding principle on the left is benevolence, representing spring cultivation. The guiding principle in front is loyalty, representing summer merits. The guiding principle on the right is righteousness, representing fall maturation. The guiding principle in the back is holiness, representing winter

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45 But, the virtue of earth in the “Sishi” chapter appears in the “southern” season, or summer. This may have to do with the summer occupying the central position of the year. Li Fengxiang, *Guanzi jiaozhu*, 847.

storage and closing down ... These represent the foundations of all things, portals of heaven and earth, and benefits of ethics and virtue. The benevolent, the loyal, the righteous, and the saintly constitute the emperor’s “four assistants”; they are his assistants outside of himself.<sup>46</sup>

Benevolence, loyalty, righteousness, and holiness are four virtues that come directly from the other four virtues of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There is no mention of the virtue of the emperor, but the text states later that “the emperor occupies the corresponding position of heaven. Benevolence symbolizes his ethic, righteousness his conduct, loyalty his administration, trustworthiness his advocacy, and holiness his teacher.”<sup>47</sup> The emperor is then master of the mean and owner of the other four virtues.

#### 4 The Mean as Conduct

The concept of the mean, as described in “Wuji,” holds various correspondences that go beyond traditional ethical concepts like loyalty and trustworthiness. It plays a crucial role in regulating social interactions and shaping social etiquette. While the Confucian interpretation equates the mean with loyalty, this narrow view limits its true significance. Loyalty is just one virtue among many, not superior to other virtues like *li*, *yi*, love, and trustworthiness. The Confucian school’s hierarchical approach to virtues, placing loyalty above others, contradicts the all-encompassing and omnipotent nature of the mean in “Wuji.” The mean, as a concept, embodies absolute sacredness and resonates with values like uprightness, justice, impartiality, and abundance. It serves as the ultimate goal to strive for and the most effective way to achieve it, a view which “Wuji” emphasizes repeatedly.

The expression *xingzhong* 行中 appears often in “Wuji.” It implies that the mean is action or conduct. It is to set the mean as a goal, as a way to achieve the goal, or as a goal that animates one’s action. “Wuji” states: “The mind corresponds with the mean, and the mean acts to achieve harmony and abundance.” The mind is within the body and controls all the organs of the body; it is its duty to be centered, just, and upright. The previous statement regarding *jianxing* can be reinterpreted more literally this way: “The virtue that is *jianxing*

<sup>46</sup> Huang Huaixin, *Heguanzi jiaozhu*, 88, 94.

<sup>47</sup> This is still the four virtues, though holiness is replaced by trustworthiness. Holiness is not ignored but is expressed instead by “holiness symbolizes his teacher.” We can’t say holiness is one of the emperor’s virtues, for it would contradict the previous text. 89.

states, 'I act with the mean on principle; I position the sun and moon to generate *sui*, merge heaven and earth, whereupon *wushu* ends.'<sup>48</sup> That *jianxing* acts with the mean on principle is precisely the reason that it towers over the other heavenly bodies, is able to set the sun and moon on their courses to generate a year's worth of time, and merges heaven and earth. *Jianxing* is the foundation for the rule of Houdi; therefore, they also act with the mean on principle. "Wuji" also states:

The law of conduct comprises: *li*, *yi*, love, trustworthiness, and the mean as the virtue of humanism; "benevolence" (*ren* 仁),<sup>49</sup> "kindness" (*shan* 善), "steadfastness" (*yong* 永), "chastity" (*zhen* 貞), and "conscience" (*liang* 良) as virtues of wisdom; "clarity" (*ming* 明), "dexterity" (*qiao* 巧), "beauty" (*mei* 美), "strength" (*youli* 有力), and "effect" (*guo* 果) as virtues of warfare. These three virtues must be promulgated everywhere. Houdi says, "Of benevolence, benevolent action is based on *li*, and the benevolent have clarity. Of kindness, kind action is based on *yi*, and the kind have dexterity. Of steadfastness, steadfast action is based on love, and the steadfast have beauty. Of chastity, chaste action is based on trustworthiness, and the chaste have strength. Of conscience, conscience-minded action is based on the mean, and conscience-minded have an effect."<sup>50</sup>

As the editors of "Wuji" indicate, the crisscrossing correspondences within the virtues may be represented thus:

- *li* → benevolence → clarity
- *yi* → kindness → dexterity
- love → steadfastness → beauty
- trustworthiness → chastity → strength
- mean → conscience → effect

It can be seen that they correspond with the three virtues of "humanism – wisdom – warfare" which have their most exalted conditions in "mean – conscience – effect." The mean is conduct, wisdom is the praise for such conduct, and the outcome of such conduct is effect. Only those actors whose

48 Ibid., 11: 111.

49 The annotators interpret benevolence (*ren*) as trustworthiness, but Chen Minzhen disagrees. Moreover, the annotators interpret the trustworthiness in "chaste action is based on trustworthiness" as benevolence, which Chen once again disagrees with. Based on the context and what we know of the Chu 楚 language, I think Chen is right. See Chen Minzhen, "Shilun qinghuajian 'wuji' de demu," 19–26.

50 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 130.

conduct is based on the mean can obtain ultimate success (i.e. effect), whereas clarity, dexterity, beauty, and strength are merely characteristics of such actors.

“Wuji” also states, “The mean is words ... The mean is conduct.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, actors of the mean must embody the principle of “walking the talk” by supporting their words with tangible political actions. Linking the mean with behavior suggests that it is not just an abstract concept, but a tangible objective to strive towards achieving.

As previously mentioned, “Wuji” delves into the intricate relationship between corporeal lengths and *shusuan*. While it does not explicitly mention the mean, it subtly alludes to it. I interpret this subtle reference as an indication that the concept of “law” is inherently embedded within corporeal lengths, *shusuan*, and the mean. Furthermore, as evidenced in this paragraph, the mean is not an external entity to be sought after. Rather, it already resides within one’s body; all that is required is to extend it outward into the external world.

Texts of the Huang-Lao school such as *Huangdi sijing* and the *Heguanzi* contain the view that *dao* (or law) begins with one’s body. The “Wuzheng” 五正 section of the “Sixteen Sutras” states that, “the law of uprightness has to be established within one’s core.” Huangdi asks in the same section, “I want to promulgate the ‘five regulators,’ so where do I begin and where do I end?”<sup>52</sup> Yanran 闡冉 replies, “They begin with you. You establish them at the core of your body, and then you extend them to others.”<sup>53</sup> The message being conveyed here is that the *dao* of governance is within oneself; one has only to distill it, grow it, and promulgate it. The “Duwan” 度萬 chapter of the *Heguanzi* states in a similar way:

The ruler implements the five regulators of [deification, bureaucratization, edification, causation, and administration] based on the five clarities [*qihuang* 氣皇, *shenming* 神明, *xiansheng* 賢聖, *houwang* 后王, and *gongbo* 公伯]. The ten changes and nine constancies always start with one’s body. The five sounds [*gong* 宮, *shang* 商, *jiao* 角, *zhi* 徵, and *yu* 羽] and the six laws [*huangzhong* 黃鐘, *taicu* 太簇, *guxi* 姑洗, *ruibin* 蕤賓, *yize* 夷則, and *wushe* 無射] always emanate from one’s body.<sup>54</sup>

51 Ibid., 11: 107.

52 Qiu Xigui, *Changsha Mawangdui Hanmu jianbo jicheng*, 4: 155.

53 What the five regulators are exactly is not specified here, but stated in the “Duwan” 度萬 chapter of the *Heguanzi*, being namely deification, bureaucratization, edification, causation, and administration.

54 Huang Huaixin, *Heguanzi jiaozhu*, 148.

This means that the emperor's implementation of the five regulators starts with himself, since the ten changes and nine constancies of the world start with the body. Earthly order and *shusuan* are established based on the law that one has experienced in one's body.<sup>55</sup> Li Xueqin 李學勤 (1933–2019) explains that the emperor's uprightness is propagated to become his subjects' uprightness, which is in turn propagated to become the uprightness of all things in the world.<sup>56</sup> In the "Wuji" it is written: "The perfect man is the one who experiences laws in his own body."<sup>57</sup> As this perfect man carries laws within him, he has gained the *dao* of the mean and can use it to execute concrete political actions,<sup>58</sup> and he does so effortlessly.

In summary, "Wuji" is a text that delves into the concept of the mean, emphasizing the importance of embracing it and putting it into practice. It begins by defining the mean and concludes with a powerful statement: "The ruler who embodies love and the mean in his heart ensures that his subjects live in harmony without any doubts. The mean guides his actions and enriches his mind with generosity and abundance. This was the approach adopted by Houdi in governing the world."<sup>59</sup> This serves as a compelling validation of my argument.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, the mean is represented in the "Wuji" section as embodying holiness, uprightness, justice, impartiality, wholeness, and abundance. Achieving mastery over this ideal, which aligns with the *dao* of heaven, fosters stability and garners respect from the populace. It fosters a harmonious society where

55 Ibid., 148. Huang says of the ten changes and nine constancies that "the *dao* is constant and everlasting, the opposite of change. Nine and ten are both large numbers, so ten changes and nine constancies represent all the changes and constancies of the world." The five sounds and six laws are similar to Shun's "sound is law, body is yardstick" in the "Xiabenji" 夏本紀 chapter of Shiji, meaning one must use one's own body as the standard of law.

56 Li Xueqin 李學勤, "Heguanzi yu liangzhong boshu" 鶡冠子與兩種帛書, in *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 道家文化研究, ed. Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 1: 342–43.

57 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 131.

58 The idea here is *canwu* 參伍, using two or more different or opposing things or phenomena to compare and verify. In "Wuji" it means comparing things that are inside and outside oneself.

59 Huang Dekuan, *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian*, 11: 131.

the *dao* of heaven reigns eternally and the people uphold virtues while abiding by the law.

While understanding the concepts of the *dao* of heaven and *shushuan* in “Wuji” can be challenging, the text offers a remarkably detailed history of thought. It delves into the idea of the mean in premodern China, revealing how the people of that time intertwined the *dao* of heaven with earthly politics, law, and ethics. “Wuji” serves as a connecting thread between various early Chinese texts like the *Shangshu*, *Yizhoushu*, *Analects*, *Guanzi*, *Zhongyong* 中庸, *Heguanzi*, and unearthed documents such as the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, Mawangdui Silk Texts, and Guodian Slips. This text is a treasure trove waiting to be fully explored, with countless discoveries yet to be made.

*Translated by Eric Chiang and Carl Gene Fordham 傅君愷*

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