

NATURE NATURING
ZIRAN IN EARLY DAOIST THINKING

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ABSTRACT

Due to the worsening environmental situation, the relation between nature and humans has been reflected on by environmental philosophers. However, we often find that the very meaning of nature has not been brought to light. So what is nature? My thesis shows that *ziran* in early Daoism offers us an alternative to the modern concept of nature as an object to be controlled and exploited for human purposes. *Ziran* is the very process of the transformation of *dao* and things, in which the intimacy of *dao*, things and humans is kept. My thesis presents *ziran* or nature as a way of life that penetrates *dao*, things, and humans. It is with the understanding of *ziran* that the nature of humans and all things are illuminated. Daoist *ziran* also sheds light on the creativity of a feminine power as the realization of nature which emphasizes the interplay between the female and the male (*yin* and *yang*), setting a contrast with any exclusively patriarchal principle of the relationship between humans and “nature.”

While *ziran* offers us an alternative to the modern concept of nature, the investigation on *ziran* seeks dialogue with Western thoughts. By questioning the meaning of nature through the lens of Daoist *ziran* many important terms in western philosophy, e.g., being and nonbeing, permanence and transience, truth, reality, freedom and so on are reinterpreted and gain refreshed meanings. Therefore being and nonbeing do not exclude each other, but are playful and at one with each other; Freedom allows the spontaneity of nature instead of oppressing it; Truth is not the otherworldly shiny little beings, or the categorical necessity on my mind, but the lively creativity in this world. In fact it is life itself; Permanence and transience are not an antinomy but the same.

My research aims to set the metaphysical ground for Daoist studies as well as Daoist

environmentalism and ecofeminism. It anticipates the opening of a new way of life wherein human existence and the realization of human freedom take root in nature.

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1. Introduction

The world has lost the *dao*,
The *dao* has lost the world,
The world and the *dao* have lost each other.¹
世喪道矣，道喪世矣，世與道交相喪也。²

Thus says Zhuangzi³ in the chapter “Reviving the Nature” (*ShanXing* 繕性). Apparently Zhuangzi is only complaining about his time, in the face of the long-lasting upheavals and wars. Still, it is left to us to ask: how can the world lose the *dao* which exists nowhere but in the world? How can the *dao* that is the mother of the ten thousand beings lose the world? In what sense can we talk about the world and the *dao* losing each other?

Right before these verses Zhuangzi talks about humans’ being in the world as “*ziran* 自然.” It is the loss of *ziran* that brings about the world and *dao*’s losing each other. *Ziran* 自然 are the two characters that are used to translate the English word “nature.” Yet when nature is grasped in a modern sense, these verses are obscure and unintelligible. For as long as both nature and the world are simply understood in the modern sense as the natural environment as an object external to human subjects, how can we even talk about the world losing nature? All the same, it is still pointless if one tries to grasp “the world” as a bigger category than nature. At the end of the day, it is rather dubious that a categorical way of thinking can be applied to Zhuangzi’s notion of *ziran*. Perhaps this way of thinking actually obfuscates the meaning of *ziran*.

The problem here is not only the incoherence between the modern term “nature” and ancient Chinese term “*ziran*.” Neither is it the case that the problem will be solved if we translate “nature” with the Chinese term “*wanwu* 萬物” or the myriad things, which precisely presumes a narrow modern metaphysical understanding of nature and at the same time leaves the meaning of “the myriad things” in Chinese philosophy obscure. This incoherence reveals to us a matter of fact, that is, the meaning of nature has been obscured for us today, which itself is indicative of and rooted in the disconnection between our modern living and the cycles of nature. When nature

¹ My translation. Unless specifically notified, the translation of the Zhuangzi in this thesis is my own.

² The Chinese text of the *Zhuangzi* is drawn from Chen, Guying, *A Contemporary Commentary and Translation of the Zhuangzi* (陳鼓應, <莊子今注今譯>, 北京: 中華書局, 1983.) See Chen Guying, 1983, 435.

³ I agree with most scholars that the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are written by Zhuangzi while the other chapters are written by his followers. I use “Zhuangzi” here for the sake of convenience.

becomes the resource and object for the exploitation for profit under the world capitalist system, it is only taken as that which is meaningless and for that reason, at the disposal of the humans. And as long as the meaning of nature is still concealed from us, we cannot even come to understand the matter of fact that *dao* has left us.

So what is nature?

In fact “nature” in Western philosophy has a long and varied history of uses significantly different from our current conception of “nature.” Even today “nature” in Western linguistic contexts is definitely not simply an object opposed to the human subjects. This modern metaphysical “nature” has its historical roots. The brief examination of the genealogy of “nature” below explores the root of the modern metaphysical “nature.” More importantly, it should reveal to us the historical possibility of a different understanding of nature.

Many Pre-Socratic philosophers were intimate with and wondered about nature. This is salient in Heraclitus who underscored change and taught “All is flux, nothing stays still.”⁴ For Heraclitus, “The world, the same for all, neither any god nor any man made; but it was always and is and will be, fire ever-living, kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures.” [B 30]⁵ In this short sentence Heraclitus illuminates the sameness of permanence and transience, of the world in constant flux and the eternal peace, of order and life and death. Sameness and permanence is in the flux of “was”, “is” and “will be”, the world process that is illustrated by the ever-living fire. There is no god as the creator outside of the world. The world or nature is that which is the same for all. Also according to Heraclitus, “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and famine, and undergoes change in the way that fire, whenever it is mixed with spices, gets called by the name that accords with the bouquet of each.” [B 67]⁶ Here Heraclitus tells us explicitly: Nature is god. It shows us that the one is kept in the particularity of the many.

However, the intimacy with nature begins to change in Plato’s metaphysics, wherein the intelligible world is resolutely severed out of the becoming world. In his analogy of the divided line Plato constructs the hierarchy of reality: the *eidos* high above, science in the middle and the world that lies at the bottom. The immutable, independent, and completely self-sufficient ideas

⁴ “... πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει.” See Plato *Cratylus* 402a. *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

⁵ Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, London: Penguin Books, 1987, 122.

⁶ T. M. Robinson, *Heraclitus Fragments: A Text and Translation With A Commentary*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987, 44.

are the being of beings, the “what is.” And what is “completely is,” “purely is,” and “perfectly is.” (*Rep.* 477a, 478d, 479d.) The idea is that which shines, and it is through the shining of the ideas that the transient world can be known at all. This makes an interesting contrast with the ever-living fire that symbolizes the creative nature in Heraclitus. In the allegory of the cave the darkness of the underground cave and the brightness outside under the sun constitute a significant contrast. The outside world under the shining of the sun refers to the realm of the idea while the underground cave refers to the becoming world. For Plato, it is precisely the transiency of the becoming world that causes its darkness. In the sense that the becoming world veils the light of truth, it constitutes the chains formed by our wavering beliefs, ignorant norms and customs. The becoming world therefore consists of the “veil of transience” that needs to be torn away to achieve the freedom of truth.⁷

This is not unfamiliar to Greek thinking, as it is famously recounted by Heraclitus, “Nature loves to hide.” However, for Heraclitus this hiding nature is never viewed as anything to be overcome. Insofar as nature is *phusis*, the ceaseless emerging, what he says is that which is emerging is hiding. And truth lies precisely in the tension of these forces that ultimately form the same process of unconcealment. For Plato, however, this creative unrevealing of truth (*aletheia*) becomes a correctness of viewing, that is, to have the idea in view and to be enlightened by the idea, the being of beings. From now on truth becomes the agreement between the human intellect and being.⁸

Plato’s view of truth and freedom permeates Western metaphysics and science, within which the reification of nature takes place. In fact, we might say that in the light of the idea the becoming world is adumbrated to mere shadows. The certainty of truth for Plato is guaranteed by the calculative reason. Being is now bereft from the creative process of nature and placed solely in human subjectivity: reason, human intellect, *logos* and so on. Philosophy now becomes humanistic and anthropocentric. Meanwhile reason and spirit are ascribed to male and nature as the passive matter is associated with female. Freedom is to break off the fetters of nature – the world in constant change which causes the wavering opinions and illusory desires – to reach the realm of ideas. Freedom in this sense becomes the denial of the meaning of the earth. Kant

⁷ It is important to bear in mind that the significance of the cave allegory is certainly not limited to the metaphysical implications that is listed here. For Plato the quest for truth is intertwined with that for freedom. Freedom to be realized through breaking the chains of the fixed norms and beliefs is an ongoing event everywhere in human history. Here I am only criticizing a peculiar part in Plato and its peculiar historical influence.

⁸ See Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” in *Pathmarks*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

resonates with Plato when he understands freedom as that which transcends all natural laws. Nature thereon becomes an object to be investigated by science to extract truth and reality from. The unveiling of nature through science is therefore essentially a veiling of it. The emancipation from the fetters of nature inevitably creates new fetters, for any reification of nature is at the same time an alienation of humans.⁹

Aristotle places form into individuals to explain change. He defines nature (*physis*) as “the source of movement of natural objects, being present in them either potentially or in complete reality.”¹⁰ However, as with Plato, Aristotle associates activity with male and passivity with female. Form reigns superior over matter. “The female, as female, is passive, and the male, as male, is active, and the principle of movement comes from him.”¹¹

Nature in many forms of modern metaphysics becomes the object to be controlled, regulated and exploited by science and technology. Francis Bacon, one of “the founding fathers” of modern science and philosophy, exclaimed that through the medium of science men should become “masters and processors of nature”.¹² In fact, men should “put nature on the rack and torture her”¹³ so that nature will be revealed and exploited according to men’s needs. What is significant here is the image of “the rack,” which is one of the most notorious torture devices in human history that existed in Europe since ancient times. Its origin is said to be dated far back to ancient Greece. This is a rectangular device like a bed. The victim is fastened to it, with a mechanism attached to it to pull the victim’s limbs until the sufferer’s joints are dislocated and eventually torn apart. When the victim is confined to the rack, other tortures could be applied simultaneously.¹⁴ The image of “rack” presents to us explicitly the naked violence over nature in modern metaphysics.

What should not be neglected here is also the only too conspicuous fact of the affinity

⁹ See chapter 4 and 5 for further analysis.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a15 in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York: Random House, 1971.

¹¹ Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, trans. Arthur Platt, Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1910, 729b13, 730a1-3.

¹² Francis Bacon, “The Masculine Birth of Time and the Great Insaturation of the Dominion of Man over the Universe” in Benjamin Farrington, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, 1970, 28.

¹³ Francis Bacon, “Thoughts and Conclusions” in Benjamin Farrington, 1970, 92. See also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980, 168, 172. Bacon’s orientation towards nature won the appreciation of Leibniz, who applauded as such, “the art of inquiry into nature itself and of putting it on the rack - the art of experimenting which Lord Bacon began so ably.” See Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, translated by L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht, 1969, 465.

¹⁴ For the analysis of the symbol of the rack see Carolyn Merchant, 1980, 164.

between patriarchy and the violence against nature. Nature is viewed, as usual, as a “her,” though not a “her” that demands respect due to her nourishment of all, but a “her” that need to be conquered and, in fact, “tortured.” Modern philosophy proudly identifies itself as *humanism*. It is worth asking, therefore, what kind of “humanity” corresponds to all of this?

The prevalent view of nature nowadays is as a resource to satisfy humans’ needs. This “nature” can be the object that science and technology regulates, as well as the object that the environmental research seeks to protect. Thus we find when our modern way of living has caused the destruction of nature and is thereby facing the depletion of resources, we have naturally turned to the exploitation of new energy resources, viz., so-called sustainable development. But maybe what is depleted is not nature as such but human nature (essence) itself. Maybe the two apparently different “natures” that are used here are not separated. In any case, whether we realize the seriousness of the situation or not, we commonly build hopes on some new technology to resolve the problems created in the first place by our technology. By doing so we neglect a remarkable phenomenon, perhaps the most remarkable one of our time, i.e., with such powerful and advanced science and technology, for which humans are so proud of themselves, the global situation is only becoming worse. Nuclear weapons, pollution, global warming, water depletion and so on, all these problems that are brought forth by modern science and technology are now threatening human existence and forcing us to foresee, actually, an end of human history. This is not simply an argument against science and technology. What it shows is the fact that our way of living calls forth a new understanding of nature, wherein science can be redefined and find its position. That is to say, science and technology should seek integrity with and return to nature.

Heidegger has systematically reflected on modern metaphysics. Against the modern view of “nature” as objective and material, he goes back to its Greek source in which “beings were called *phusis*”¹⁵ According to him, *phusis* means “what emerges from itself” like “the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose.” By the self-emerging of beings Heidegger wants to revive an ancient way of living wherein beings have spontaneity and their being is not required to meet the standards of humans. *Phusis* as such is not just the totality of beings, rather it is the very unconcealment of all. It is viewed as related with the heavenly and the earthly and all beings, and eventually Being

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, Yale University Press, 2000, 14.

itself. Indeed, this spontaneous emerging is Being itself. As Heidegger says, “*Phusis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable.”¹⁶ So his phenomenological portrait of it goes: “... *phusis* originally means both the heavenly and the earthly, both the stone and the plant, both the animal and the human, and human history as the work of humans and gods; and finally and first of all, it means the gods themselves under destiny.”¹⁷

This “nature” that is at one with Being is what Heraclitus has showed us. Nature is then not the object opposed to humans, nor is it the “wilderness” beyond the human world, but the historical event that humans themselves belong to. Considering his interaction with Daoism, it is reasonable to speculate that it might have been under the influence of the “four greats” of Laozi that later Heidegger was able to put forward the idea of the fourfold: the earthly, sky, divinities and mortals. He has seen the oneness of the four, though he could not see that very oneness is nature itself. Meanwhile Heidegger’s thoughts of nature are creative and profound but still need further development.

With the worsening environmental situation, the problem of anthropocentrism and individualism of Western metaphysics has been deeply reflected on by environmental philosophers. Aldo Leopold, for example, in his book *A Sand County Almanac* calls for a land ethic, an ethic that “enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land”¹⁸ wherein *Homo sapiens* is just one plain member of the land-community, instead of the conqueror of it. Arne Naess in his influential *Platform Principles of the Deep Ecology Movement* distinguishes the intrinsic value of nature, which is “independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.”¹⁹ Ecofeminists have systematically criticized patriarchy’s oppression over women and nature and tried to seek new articulations of nature in a refreshed orientation towards woman’s role. A new way of life is called upon. However, we often find that the very meaning of nature has not been brought to light, thus the affinity of a new understanding of nature and a new way of life still remains concealed in these philosophies. In sum, what is nature is the question we face now.

In the field of Chinese philosophy, demanded by the environmental issues, scholars have

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1966, 239.

¹⁹ Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* 1995, 49.

become aware of the affinity between Daoism and ecology. *Ziran* has started to catch philosophers' attention. Chen Guying noticed that Daoism takes *ziran* as human nature (*xing* 性)²⁰; Liu Xiaogan raised the idea of "Humanistic Naturalness." According to Liu, "... what *ziran* expresses is an ideal for human survival in and out of groups and the pursuit of that ideal, a way of getting into harmony with nature, of drawing closer to natural order and harmony."²¹ David Chai envisions a Daoist nature "no longer bound to a singular actuality but one whose presence is felt across an endless range of possibilities as the substantive realization of *Dao*."²² However, systematic investigation in *ziran* in the context of a dialogue with important ideas in western philosophy is still to be done. More importantly, the question of "what is nature" in terms of *ziran*, i.e., how *ziran* designates a different understanding of nature is yet to be asked.

My thesis shows that *ziran* in early Daoism offers us an alternative to the modern concept of nature as an object to be controlled and exploited for human purposes. By doing so it aims to set the metaphysical ground for environmentalism and ecofeminism.

It is now commonly recognized by Chinese scholars that *ziran* has a very different meaning from the modern metaphysical concept of nature. *Ziran* was used in early Daoism mainly as a verb, or an adjective, or an adverb, but never as a noun. (In my view, even when it is translated as a noun in modern Chinese, like in "*Dao* emulates *ziran*," it should be understood as a gerund.) This phenomenon is significant for us today. At the very least, it reveals to us the following: *ziran* is not only not the objective nature as opposed to humans-as-subjects in a modern sense; but also it is not a simple aggregation of beings. However, the legitimacy of putting ancient Chinese thoughts under the examination of modern grammatical structure is yet to be questioned. As an ideographic writing system, classical Chinese does not distinguish the different forms of words, nor does it have tense morphology. One word, depending on context, can be taken in a number of different senses. This feature of Chinese language allows a vital space of expression and interpretation. The distinction of the word forms, i.e., noun, adjective, adverb and so on, is a consequence of the influence of Western languages on Modern Chinese. In this sense, to look for the different word forms of *ziran* in ancient texts is forcing the problems of modern language onto ancient Chinese which it does not bear by itself.

²⁰ Chen Guying, "Truthfulness and Beauty of the Human Nature in the *Zhuangzi*," *Philosophical Researches*, 12: 31-43 (2010).

²¹ Liu Xiaogan, "Transition and Articulation Between Two Orientations: An Experimental Analysis of a New Interpretation of *Ziran*," *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 40(2): 67-88, (2008).

²² Daivid Chai, "Rethinking the Daoist Concept of Nature," forthcoming in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 43.1.

So, how can the original meaning of *ziran* be open to us? In the following I will elucidate the meaning of *ziran* from its etymology. *Zi* 自 literally means “self,” and etymologically represents the shape of a nose. For this reason, it also bears the meaning of “original” (the Chinese character of nose, *bi* 鼻, has the meaning of “beginning,” as is shown in the word *bizu* 鼻祖, the earliest ancestors). *Ran* 然 originally comes from the burning of fire. In its original use, *ran* 然 vividly depicts a dynamic, generative and spontaneous blazing. (In this sense it resonates with Heraclitus’ fire. Interestingly though Daoism underscores *ziran* and gives it rich meanings, it usually prefers the symbol of water.) Therefore *ran* can be translated as “to be (in a certain way),” (*shi* 是) “as such,” (*ru* 如) or “like this” (*rushi* 如是) etc. *Ran* can also be added to characters to describe a state of being as in words like *xianran* 显然 (obviously), *huran* 忽然 (suddenly) and *xinxinran* 欣欣然 (being happy) etc. *Ziran* is usually translated as “nature,” “self-soing,” “self-going,” “being free,” or “spontaneous,” “natural” etc. I will use these different translations according to respective situations in this thesis. What *ziran* expresses in ancient Chinese is primarily a free and spontaneous happening. The *zi* 自 (“self”) of any being must unfold through its always ongoing *ran* 然. The *ziran* understood as a happening is processual and for that reason it is also co-relational. The happening of *ziran* constitutes the “self” in the dissolution of the boundaries between self and others. This self, thereupon, is not exclusive but rather inclusive. For this reason I don’t think *ziran* simply means not to be exerted or affected by some external forces. This view has already presumed a causal thinking wherein “self” is understood as a substance opposite to other entities. A causal thinking, however, cannot approach Daoist thought concerning *ziran*. For in early Daoist texts, *dao*, things and humans are all *ziran*. A causal thinking cannot explain, at this point, how the myriad things are, as all being *ziran*, not affected by the external forces.²³

Ziran 自然 first occurs in the writings of the early Daoist texts, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* and is a central theme in Daoism. If we can say that the highest principle is, for Plato, the Good; and the highest *jingjie* 境界 (realm) for Confucianism is *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義, then the ideal *jingjie* 境界 for Daoism is *ziran*. As Laozi says, “*Dao* emulates *ziran*.” The importance of *ziran* for Daoism can be seen here. In Daoism, the *dao* that is the mother of all is illuminated through *ziran*. In Daoist

²³ For a detailed discussion on causality and freedom in terms of *ziran* see 4.3 “Spontaneity as Freedom: Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans.”

understanding of *ziran*, the understanding of *dao*, things and humans are all implicated.

Laozi speaks of *ziran* five times in the *DDJ*, i.e., chapter 17, 23, 25, 51 and 64, which are listed below.

17: “The people say, ‘We are *ziran* (spontaneously like this, self-soing.)’” 百姓謂我自然

23: “It rarely speaks and is *ziran* (self-soing).” 希言自然

25: “*Dao* emulates *ziran*.” 道法自然

51: “As for the reverence directed at *dao* and the honor directed at *de*, it is out of the constant *ziran* (*heng ziran*, constant self-soing).” 道之尊也, 德之貴也, 夫莫之爵而恒自然

64: “... to help the myriad things with their *ziran*.”²⁴ 以輔萬物之自然²⁵

We can see *ziran* in the *DDJ* is spoken of in different ways: sometimes it is talked about in terms of *dao* (23), or *dao* and *de* (51), sometimes in terms of the myriad things (64), and sometimes in terms of humans (17). (My reading of *ziran* in chapter 25 is that it penetrates all of these different levels. For a detailed discussion of this chapter see 3.3.) *Ziran* is also expressed in different terms in the *DDJ* such as *zihua* 自化. I will discuss these terms in the relevant parts in this thesis.

Zhuangzi developed the thought on *ziran* in the *DDJ* as a way of being in the world that right away goes through the different dimensions of *dao*, things and humans. *Ziran* in the *Zhuangzi* thus bears profound meanings, for we can speak of “being in the world” in terms of *dao* or things or humans. Ultimately any “being-in-the-world” is a manifestation of *dao*’s being in the world; and my being-in-the-world is right away together with the myriad things, and ultimately, with *dao*. In the chapter of De Chong Fu (“Markers of Full Virtuosity”²⁶) *Zhuangzi* talks about “always following along with the way of *ziran*.” In Ying Di Wang (“Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers”²⁷) he says, “Follow the natural course of things and be *ziran*.” *Ziran* here is a

²⁴ Unless specifically noted, translations of the *DDJ* in this thesis are mine with reference to Roger T. Ames and David Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, Ballantine Books, 2003, D. C. Lau, trans. *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, Penguin Books, 1963 and James Legge. For the Legge translation see <http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>.

²⁵ For the Chinese texts of *DDJ* cited in this thesis, I combine different versions, i.e., the Heshang Gong version, the Fu Yi version, the Wang Bi version, the Mawangdui Silk Texts, the Guodian Bamboo Texts the Beida Western Han Dynasty Bamboo Texts and come up with what I think as ideal. I usually give preference to the Mawangdui Silk Texts. See 劉笑敢, <老子古今: 五種對勘與析評引論>, 中国社会科学出版社, 2006 and 北京大学出土文献研究所/朱凤瀚, <北京大学藏西汉竹书-貳>, 上海古籍出版社, 2012.

²⁶ Brook Ziporyn, trans. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009.

²⁷ Ibid.

free and spontaneous way of being together with things in the world. In my eyes, it can be viewed as co-elaborative with “free wandering” (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊). Especially in the chapter of Shan Xing (“Reviving the Nature”) a detailed description of *ziran* as a way of being in the world is presented to us, wherein *Zhuangzi* portrays a picture of humans’ being in the world in harmony together with the *qi* of *yinyang*, the spirits, the four seasons, and the myriad things. All in the world is kept in the state of *ziran*, that is, “*chang ziran* 常自然” – constant self-soing, which implies *dao*’s being kept in the world.²⁸

In my view early Daoism talks about *ziran* in three senses: the *ziran* of *dao*, the *ziran* of the ten thousand things, and the *ziran* of humans. My thesis elaborates the meaning of *ziran* through these different dimensions. *Ziran* penetrates different realms of *dao*, things and humans. It designates the movement of the *dao*. In this sense it is similar to Heraclitus’ ever-living fire, or Heidegger’s *phusis* as Being, or Spinoza’s *natura naturans*. Also similar with the English word “nature,” *ziran* can mean the nature of things, or human nature. Though different from a changeless metaphysical “essence”, the *ziran* of things designates the spontaneity of things, while the *ziran* of humans offers us a different understanding of human freedom which seeks to be intimate with all beings rather than to dominate them.

Ziran is the very process of the transformation of *dao* and things, in which the intimacy of *dao*, things and humans is kept. The disclosing of the *dao*, the nature of things and human nature (i.e., human freedom for Daoism) are just different aspects that speak about the same event of *ziran*, through which we can see the inseparability and the ultimate oneness of *dao* and things.

It is only along with the disclosing of *ziran* that the humans and the myriad things can gain their nature. Only so can both the human and the myriad things be at home. *Dao* can thereby be preserved in the world and illuminate the world. Such is the new way of life that *ziran* shows us. The matter of fact that a way of life reveals to us is that the existence of the human has always already been tightly related to her world, viz., the heavenly and the earthly and the myriad things. And this has always already been closely related to the *dao*. The concealment and unconcealment of the *dao*, the accomplishment or the annihilation of the nature of the myriad things is dependent on the human’s way of life. And it is especially so for modern humans equipped with advanced science and technology. In this sense, *ziran* in Daoism is existential, that is, *dao*’s being-kept-in-the-world is not separate from the practice of individuals and the way of

²⁸ For a detailed reading of this paragraph see 5.3.2 “Freedom and Knowing through Non-knowing.”

living of a community. The heavenly and the human are not two – thus it is at the same time ontological and cosmological.

It is only when the status of *ziran* gets lost that humans are separated from the *dao* and further with heaven and earth and the myriad things in between. At this time, humans' actions cannot complete their nature, but rather hurt their nature and further hurt all things' natures. Henceforth *dao* goes into hiding. It is on this sense that Zhuangzi says, "The *dao* has lost the world; the world has lost the *dao*; the world and the *dao* have lost each other."

While *ziran* offers us an alternative to the modern concept of nature, the investigation on *ziran* seeks dialogue with Western thoughts. On the one hand, everything is *ziran* just as everything is nature, for *ziran*/nature is the only process that the life and death of all beings disclose. *Ziran*/nature as the unfolding event designates the ultimate and ongoing reality, for the reason of which I call it "nature naturing." On the other, this *ziran* of things or humans, just like the nature of things or human nature, is most difficult to realize, in both senses of "to know" and "to make real." Precisely because we are always already in it and are part of it, we don't see it, like eyes don't see eyes. Thereon as part of nature or *ziran*, we make ourselves aliens in ever distancing ourselves from it. The meaning of nature is an everlasting philosophical question. In Daoism the state of *ziran* wherein the intimacy of humans and things is kept is most simple yet most difficult to realize. It then becomes an ideal. This is analogous with human emotions: We are usually thrown about in the ever-arising clouds of anger, joy, depression, excitement, love and so on. The free light of darkness, like the Buddhist state of samadhi, is rarely seen, even though we are always already in it.

But because we are always in the process of *ziran*/nature we are always changing and being changed by it. The serious pollution problem that is caused by the illusion of humans' dominion over nature calls forth a change in our way of living which returns the human back to her integrity with nature. *Ziran* as a new way of life is an action to be taken, a way to be opened up in our everyday life.

I will explore *ziran* as a new way of life in the perspectives of *dao*, things and humans. For the *ziran* of *dao* I use the translation of "self-soing." This is demanded by the primary meaning of *dao*, which will be elaborated in the following two chapters. Chapter 2 elaborates the root-source meaning of *dao* through the investigation of be-ing (*you* 有) and non-be-ing (*wu* 無). Chapter 3 explores *how dao* discloses in terms of the temporality and the place of *dao*.

Regarding the *ziran* of things I use the translation of “spontaneity.” By elucidating the meaning of the *ziran* or spontaneity of things, chapter 4 takes the effort to revert the modern metaphysical motto “humans prescribe laws to nature” to a Daoist one, “nature prescribes laws to humans”, thus anchoring human existence on the ground of the spontaneity of things, instead of vice versa. Chapter 5 on the *ziran* of humans explores how human freedom is achieved through the practice of *wu* (non-be-ing, emptying) in early Daoism.

In the “Conclusion” I look into the land enclosure in China that has led to serious problems with pollution, and try to offer Daoist ecofeminism as a new democracy that defines a different way of life. Daoist *ziran* sheds light on the creativity of a feminine power as the realization of nature which emphasizes the interplay between the female and the male (*yin* and *yang*), setting a contrast with any exclusively patriarchal principle of the relationship between humans and nature.

Many important terms in this essay, e.g., be-ing and non-be-ing, permanence and transience, truth, reality, freedom and finally, the “nature” that I am seeking to give a different articulation are not simply translations of ancient Chinese texts. Their meanings take on new contours through the lens of Daoist philosophy. By doing so these important questions in the history of Western philosophy are also reinterpreted and given new meanings. In fact, if we are willing to jump out of the pit of logocentrism and do not simply dismiss Chinese or Western thoughts, we will have to admit that being and nonbeing, permanence and freedom and so on have different articulations. We will see that being and nonbeing do not have to exclude each other, but can be playful and at one with each other; we will see that Laozi and Zhuangzi were deeply concerned with human freedom (in whichever sense we choose to take, be it existential or ontological) as much as Plato and this freedom allows the spontaneity of nature instead of oppressing it; truth does not have to be the other-worldly shiny little beings, or the categorical necessity on my mind, but can also be the lively creativity in this world. In fact it can be life itself; permanence and transience do not have to be an antinomy but can also be the same. In my writing I have emphasized the distinction between the Chinese and Western thought, and criticized some western theories in response to the serious problems that have been caused by modernity. However, this should not veil the fact that I am using these essential terms to seek the possibility of dialogue between east and west. This attitude, I would argue, allows for the openness of both Chinese and Western thoughts, and furthermore allows them to explore their own diachronic

transformations in their own respective historical context. There is a fundamental universality that is not to be denied as long as we are dealing with human thoughts. The issue at hand is not the dichotomy between universality and particularity, for universalities only lie in particularities; but how to let both ways of thinking open to each other and improve each other. So let's open our doors and share our cakes; our friend's recipes will inspire new ways of cooking for us. And if we like, we are also allowed to use our neighbor's ingredients and come up with different flavors.

I would like to end this introduction sharing with my readers an experience of a walk. On a windy spring afternoon, I took a walk with a friend on Makapu'u Lighthouse Trail.

The hill is not high, and the trail follows along the coastline. I stopped at a lookout spot before the top. The wild wind moved the deep blue Pacific, and the surging waves beat the shore at the foot of the hill. The sound of the waves and that of the wind agitated each other, white terns flying freely in twos and threes on the surface of the ocean. At this time, an 'iwa bird soared silently over the hill and the ocean high into the clouds, gradually becoming a black spot. On the other side of the hill, the green mountain meandered into the ocean, the mountain and the ocean lying in the golden clouds. Overhead the clouds shutting out the sky stretch like a giant wing, guarding the wind and the ocean. Where the ocean and the sky joined each other the white clouds stood in circle. At that moment I suddenly lost my thoughts and words. This is the power that nothing can go against. Everything comes from it and returns to it. Those who don't recognize it will be consumed emotionlessly.

2. The *Ziran* of *Dao*: The Self of Self-Soing

The Root-Source Meaning of the *Dao* in Light of Be-ing (*you* 有) and Non-be-ing (*wu* 無)

Ultimately any self-soing is always the self-soing of *dao*. *Ziran* is the self-opening of *dao*. The "self" then reveals to us the significance of the *dao* as the source, the origin. Though, in Daoism this is not an origin that ascends to an *arche* high above as a final cause, or the highest

being, or a God. Rather it is one that descends down to the earth: *Dao* is the root of all. As chapter 16 of the *DDJ* says: “Things proliferate, and each again returns to its root.”²⁹ For this reason it is called the root-source (*benyuan* 本源). As Laozi vividly puts it, *dao* is the mother of all.³⁰

But it is the most difficult task nowadays for Chinese philosophy to question the root-source meaning of *dao*. This is a meaning that has been lost in our time. Perhaps now the most significant phenomenon in Chinese philosophy is that we don’t wonder about *dao* anymore. In fact we are embarrassed and ashamed of questioning the meaning of *dao*. At this moment probably it can only provoke laughter among modern people: who can give an argument to “prove” that *dao* is the mother of all? Judged from a perspective of scientific and logical reasoning, thinking on the root-source meaning of *dao* has been viewed as “irrational” or “mystical.”

However, the root-source meaning is *the* meaning of *dao*. The questioning of *dao* opened up Chinese thinking and history. Anything that was articulated within this realm, be it philosophy, politics, literature or art, was fundamentally around *dao*. The loss of the root-source meaning in our time reveals the fact that *dao* itself has become inexperienceable for us. Thereby Chinese philosophy has been thrown into an embarrassing situation ever since it has entered modernity; it has gradually lost the capability to understand the *dao* in the course of its admiration of and self-reorientation towards modern metaphysical reasoning. However, Chinese philosophy *must* anchor thinking in the *dao*. The loss of the root-source meaning of *dao* and the loss of the capability to understand *dao* are one and the same. While this loss is vaguely perceived, it is far from fully realized in our time. As a complement we hastily ascribe various epithets³¹ to *dao*: we say that “*dao* is the most universal and the highest principle or law of the universe,” or it is “the highest metaphysical substance,” or it is grasped as “a value principle” and so on and so forth.

²⁹ 夫物芸芸各復歸於其根。

³⁰ This is a recurring and significant theme in the *DDJ*. Both *shi* 始 (1, 14, 32, 38, 52, 64) and *mu* 母 (1, 20, 25, 52, 59) indicate the view that *dao* is the mother of all. The *shi* emphasizes on the meaning of the origin or the beginning, while the *mu* underscores the metaphor that *dao* is the nourishing mother. The profound meaning of these ideas will be elaborated in both this chapter and chapter 3.

³¹ These epithets are widespread as common senses in Daoist studies nowadays. Feng Youlan in his influential *History of Chinese Philosophy* introduces Laozi’s *dao* as “the primary principle of the reason of the generation of the myriad things” (“道即萬物所以生之總原理.” Feng, Youlan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Hong Kong: Pacific Book Company. 1968, 218.) and *de* as the principle of the generation of a particular thing (“德為一物所以生之原理”). These ideas have adopted the language of Greek metaphysics and the scholars after him have by and large followed them.

Thereon we assume to have proved the true existence of *dao*. With the lens of reason in hand, we then turn from *dao* and busy ourselves analyzing other “categories” in Chinese philosophy.

Meanwhile, what should not be neglected is the fact that it is precisely our separation from nature that has caused this “predicament.” In this regard, *unless the meaning of ziran can be sufficiently clarified, the meaning of dao inevitably remains obscure*. Only in *ziran*, the self-soing nature, is the root-source meaning of *dao* preserved. Consequently the speaking of the root-source meaning of *dao* has withdrawn from our modern way of being. Of course, in our culture, talk of “the way (*dao*) of management” and “the way (*dao*) of success” fly in the air everywhere. In fact there has never been a time like ours when so much energy has been poured into “success” and “management.” This language manifests human’s systematic management of other beings and herself, which further reveals the modern metaphysical stance towards nature and human. Precisely in this stance *dao* remains distant from us.

I call this a “predicament” because when we stop questioning the meaning of *dao*, we’ve already put ourselves at a place distant from *dao*. But the nature (*ziran*) of all things, including that of humans, is rooted in *dao*. Hence, when we stop questioning *dao* we have passed over the nature of things and humans. Our very nature has thereby been cast out of our daily existence and we have fallen into the darkness of nihilism. How can this be possible? How does it happen? And, when the pollutions caused by modern life are everywhere, where is *dao*? In our time, *dao* has been carelessly abandoned.

However, if we agree that reason should not be taken as the only standard for thinking, then the ancient Chinese thinking wherein the scientific and instrumental reason did not find its dominance should not be taken simply as a mysticism, and we should be able to re-question and reinterpret the essential Daoist ideas in our time. The root-source needs to be returned to, so that it can be revived and bring us fresh water to nourish a different way of life. To be able to question *dao* in our time, thinking needs to open a new path for itself. This new way of thinking, though it seems strange and difficult at first sight for us moderners, is not unfamiliar to us at all. Lots of thinkers have explored it; traditional Chinese philosophy developed along its path. But it first of all requires a forgetting, to empty ourselves from our harmful judgments, viz., that it is “irrational” and “primitive.” These judgments conceal the path of thinking and keep *dao* essentially alien to us. In this sense scientific reasoning itself constitutes the alienation of humans.

However, this forgetting, being in such contrast with modern metaphysical understanding of human essence through self-consciousness, might be the most difficult thing for us.

The illumination of *ziran* requires us to go back to the root-source meaning of *dao*. In this chapter I will elaborate the root-source meaning of the *dao* in light of *you* and *wu*, that is, be-ing and non-be-ing.

2.1 *Dao* as the Root-source

We are questioning the root-source meaning of *dao*. For us to proceed with this questioning we have to get back to original wonder, which preserves and leads the questioning. For now we have to ask: why was *dao* chosen as *the* character for Chinese philosophy?

Let us go back to the original meaning of *dao*, *i.e.* path or way. Human has human's way. A bird flying across the ocean has its way. Wind and stars, sun and moon, all have their ways. You have your way, I have mine; one way yesterday, another today. Yet, or thereby, we are all on *the* way. Therefore Zhuangzi says, "Thus it is that there are blades of grass and pillars, ugly ghosts and beauties: Strange, grotesque, uncanny or weird, all runs through as one in *dao*."³²


This passage shows us that the Daoist understanding of the way is not a static object that connects two different places. Rather, it conceives of path and way as a dynamic opening. *Dao* means to pass through, to lead forth, and from there on, to reach, to achieve. Any achievement is only possible when it is led by a way, takes the approach of a way, and goes through a way. It is in this sense that we say a way "connects." The connections and associations of all are therefore understood through the dynamic opening of *dao*. This does not imply that *dao* is anything teleological, rather it is before any distinction whatsoever as ends and means. It is that which we are always already on and that which lets all beings open.


The flow of *dao* penetrates and dissolves all boundaries and harbors all in oneness. But this oneness is in no way an empty universality. As we've said above, things all have different ways. The flow of *dao* condenses in things as their *li* 理, whereby it leads the opening of the nature of all myriad things. This is why *dao* also has the meaning of *li*, which is usually translated as "principle" or "pattern." But as we see here *li* in Chinese philosophy is conceived through the

³² Zhuangzi, Qi Wu Lun ("Equalizing Things"). "故為是舉莛與楹, 厉與西施, 恢詭譎怪, 道通為一." For a detailed discussion on one and many see chapter 4.

flow of *dao*, that is, the self-soing (*ziran*) of *dao*. For this reason, we say that *dao* is that which all beings are on.

From the understanding of *dao* as passing through, leading forth, and reaching, the meaning “to speak” is developed. What is noticeable here is that Chinese does not primarily conceive language as an object, a tool of communication that conveys information from which the reason or *logos* of words is derived, which is further defined as the essence of humans, and in turn becomes the basis of which the hierarchy of beings is built. Compared with this certainty brought about by language, both Daoism and the Chan Buddhism that is influenced by it take a rather dubious attitude toward language. Is the *dao* as the root-source of all speakable? If we are already in it how can we have a word about it? Are we not already deviated from it when speaking about it? Doesn’t our language conceal it in this sense?³³

The etymology of *dao* further shows us that it is not merely an abstract concept. The Bronze Script  with the radicals of head (“首”), foot (“止”) and a cross or a road (“行”) symbolizes a person walking on the way, her eyes focusing on her path.³⁴ In the end, any way is always *my* way. That is to say, it has to be within the horizon of my looking and set roots in my understanding. After all, it is the way that I am practicing. This is why many traditional philosophers interpret *dao* as human heart-mind. As the Song Dynasty philosopher Shao Ruoyu says, “The great *dao* is the original heart-mind of humans.” Nevertheless, *dao* is that which incorporates and breaks the limits of all horizons; as such it unfolds all horizons. It is that which any practice takes roots in.

Here, a remarkable characteristic of the origins of the Chinese language is revealed to us. In hieroglyphic form, Chinese characters do not just outline the static forms or appearances of things; nor do they merely represent the world as objects; rather they usually draw upon some on-going events. Above we have seen the example of the character *dao*. For another example, let us take the humble character for “water.” Its oracle bone script  is certainly not just an “imitation” or *mimesis* of the “form” of water; rather what it accentuates is the *flow* of water.

³³ For a detailed discussion of the *dao* and language see Chung-Ying Cheng, “Dimensions of the *Dao* and Onto-Ethics in Light of the *DDJ*,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31:2 (2004) 143–182.

³⁴ For a dynamic reading of *dao* see Roger T. Ames and David Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, Ballantine Books, 2003, 57. In as much as it captures the eventful character of *dao*, Ames translation of *dao* as “way-making” is noticeably outstanding.


Another example is “fire.” Instead of a static external shape, its small seal script 火 emphasizes the burning and blazing of fire. Daoist texts specially pick characters that bear profoundly rich and dynamic meanings at their core. What is important to note here is that Chinese language is aware of the processual characteristic of the world at its root. As such the world flows in Chinese characters. One cannot help supposing that this is why Chinese philosophy places so much emphasis upon change and transformation.

The dynamic understanding of the world gives rise to another distinguishing character of Chinese language: the non-separation between subject and object. More often than not we find that Chinese characters do not distinguish between subject and object; rather they tend to signify both. *Ziran* penetrates *dao*, things and humans. Because the flow of *dao* opens the nature of things, it contains the meaning of *li* of the myriad things in it. The *dao* I am practicing is *dao* as the root-source of all; therefore, *dao* indicates the original heart-mind. This, of course, does not mean that Chinese language cannot distinguish the *dao* of things and humans. The disclosing of *dao* and things underscores the metaphysical point many forms of metaphysics have attempted to attain, only to end up frozen by most in one way or another; that is, *dao* (or “Being” in Western context) is that which makes things be as they are. -- As long as *dao* (or Being) is grasped as any changeless object, or an empty idea, this attempt is doomed to fail from the beginning. *Dao* is not an external object, no matter how we conceive this object, be it a highest principle or law, or a final cause, or a God. I am in *dao* and *dao* is in me. However, this also brings out the possibility of the loss of *dao*. That is, when one stops focusing on her way, she could lose her way. *Because of the processual understanding of dao it is determined that dao was thought in early Daoist context in terms of ziran, i.e., self-soing.*

Above we have gone through the basic meaning of *dao*. Let us now take a close look at the metaphor of root (*ben* 本 or *gen* 根) and source (*yuan* 原). To say that *dao* is the root of all things is to show us in the first place that *dao* is not any immutable substance separated from the becoming of things. On the contrary, it is to accentuate the ultimate fact that *dao* forms one body with the myriad things. In truth the root-source is that which enables and holds the oneness of all in itself. Being one with all things, *dao* does not degrade or deny things, but nourishes and empowers them. As the root of all, *dao* is that which gives clarity to the heavenly and serenity to

the earthly, divinity to the numinous and abundance to the empty valleys.³⁵ It is the proceeding (*li* 理) of generation (*sheng* 生). As such it is that which heaven, earth and all the myriad things arise from and return to. All come into being from the *dao* and pass away according to the *dao*. In as much as it is the *li* of generation, it does not leave perishing out of the picture. For it is plain that any generation must include passing away or else there would be no generation to talk about at all. Hence, there is no need to deplore the impermanence and perishing, because the being and non-being of all things are always within *dao*.

Laozi calls the accumulation of *de* 德 and nourishing one's spirituality as "deepening and strengthening the root."³⁶ Again we see the blur between the subject who is practicing *dao* and the *dao* that she practices, which is similar with the identification of *dao* with the original heart-mind we've mentioned before.

As for the metaphor of the source, Laozi never explicitly speaks of it. He often uses the image of the valley to show the emptiness (*chongxu* 冲虚) of *dao*. Chapter 32 of *Laozi* compares *dao*'s being in the world to waters flowing out of the valley to rivers and oceans. This might have served as an inspiration of the association of *dao* with the source. The phrase of *benyuan* 本原 probably first appears in *Zhuangzi·Tiandi* ("Heaven and Earth"). There it says, "[The virtuous person] establishes herself in the root-source and her knowing is connected with spirituality."³⁷ The character *yuan* 原 was written as  in bronze script. The outer part is a mountain cliff, while the inner part symbolizes water running out of the mountain spring. So *yuan* 原 originally means the origin of waters. *Mengzi·Lilou Xia* says, "The source and the spring gushes out. It rests neither day nor night. It fills up every hole and then advances, flowing into the four seas. Those who stay with their roots are also like this."³⁸ Here Mencius connects the source (*yuan* 原) with the root, though he did not directly use the phrase of *benyuan* 本原. Later on the water radical was added, resulting in the form we commonly see today, i.e., *yuan* 源. As the source of things *dao* is that which all things originate from, and which flows through all.

³⁵ See *DDJ*, 39.

³⁶ "深根固柢" (*DDJ*, 59).

³⁷ *Zhuangzi*, *Tian Di* ("Heaven and Earth"): "立之本原而知通于神." Chen Guying, 1983, 325.

³⁸ *Mengzi*, *Lilou Xia*: "原泉混混, 不舍晝夜, 盈科而後進, 放乎四海, 有本者如是." Zhu Xi, *Commentaries on the Four Books* 四書章句集註, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 北京: 中華書局, 1983, 293.

However, the self-opening *dao*, the root-source of all, is a *wu* 無, conventionally translated as “nonbeing.” Next, I will elaborate the root-source meaning of *dao* through a close reading of *you* 有 and *wu* 無 which are usually translated as “being” and “nonbeing.” In this thesis I will use “be-ing” and “non-be-ing”. (For a detailed discussion about the translation see 2.3.) Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that I am using these two important concepts in Western philosophy in terms of *you* and *wu* whose Chinese meaning will be explored next. Of course one cannot easily get rid of the historical encumbrances that metaphysics has laid on these two terms, so next I will briefly go over the meaning of “being” and “nonbeing” in the history of Western philosophy. The problem here is that “being” is so common a word in everyday language that we tend to presume we understand it before we even question the meaning of it. The same is true with the destining of “nonbeing.” The meaning of being and nonbeing is thus concealed in the history of Western philosophy, which is called by Heidegger “the oblivion of Being.” Heidegger’s questioning of being is very creative and profound and it has influenced many philosophical schools after him. However, interestingly, after Heidegger, the inquiry of being and nonbeing once again falls into silence. Here, I hope the Daoist understanding of *you* and *wu* will open new ways of thinking these two primary words in Western philosophy. That is to say, what I am doing here is, if my readers can forgive my audacity, teaching English to speak Chinese.

2.2 The Light of Being in Western Thought

From the outset of Western philosophy, being has been associated with truth. The world of being constitutes the world of truth. Ultimately, being and truth are the same in Western metaphysics. Meanwhile being has been associated with light in many ways. The reason for this phenomenon is rooted in the Greek experience of truth, i.e., *a-letheia* or “unconcealment” as Heidegger puts it. This alpha-privative form of truth is grounded in a grasp of nature as constantly hiding. Truth is that which needs to be wrested from the hiddenness of nature so that the essence of things can be illuminated by its light. Next, I will trace the history of the light of being in Parmenides, Plato, and Christianity together with the destining of nonbeing that goes hand in hand with that of being.

The poem of Parmenides' begins with a contrast between Night and Day. The poet is escorted by the daughters of the Sun, "...having left the house of night for the light, and having thrust the veils from their heads with their hands." All these show the reader that this is a journey from ignorance of Night to the light of Truth. The poet continues: "There are the gates of the paths of Night and Day, and a lintel and a stone threshold enclose them. They themselves, high in the air, are blocked with great doors, and avenging Justice holds the alternate bolts."³⁹ (B1) The enclosed gates of Night and Day show that the path of truth is not easily revealed to us, as they also guard the separation of the path of truth and the path of opinion. The goddess of Justice holding the alternate bolts of the gates of Night and Day indicates that one will pay for the path that she takes, also evincing the presence of the destining of being and nonbeing.

Perhaps Parmenides' most remarkable and influential thought is that of the radical separation of being and nonbeing. For Parmenides there is no intersection or connection between the two. What is cannot not be; what is not cannot be. (B 2.1-6) It is with this separation that being is taken up as the only way of thinking. Being is the only concern and object of thinking. So, the goddess shows Parmenides, "...the only ways of enquiry that are to be thought of. The one, that it is and that it is impossible not to be, is the path of Persuasion (for she attends upon Truth); the other, that it is not and that it is needful that it not be, that I declare to you is altogether indiscernible track..." (B2.1-6) This radical separation of being and nonbeing is the cause of Western philosophy's rejection of nonbeing. Nonbeing so considered is nothing more than a mere opposite of being. In fact, for Parmenides it is simply a no-thing. The famous expression "from nothing, nothing comes" attests to the nothingness of nonbeing. So Parmenides declares: Nonbeing is neither sayable nor thinkable. (B 8) What this says is no more than that nonbeing is not. Nonbeing is firmly abandoned under the light of being.

Thinking thereby leaves the darkness of nonbeing behind decisively and is guaranteed by the light of being. Parmenides rightly says that "Thinking and being are the same," (B 3) for what shines through the light of being is nothing but human reason. The goddess says, "... nor let custom, born of much experience, force you down this way, by making you use an aimless eye or an ear and a tongue full of meaningless sound: judge by reason the strife-encompassed refutation spoken by me." (B7.2-6) From the separation of being and nonbeing follows the separation of

³⁹ The quotes of Parmenides' poem are drawn from Jonathan Barnes, 1987 and G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

reason and experience. In fact, under the judgment of reason, the senses, custom and experience are all denied. This is why the criteria for the path of truth for Parmenides, Plato's idea of the Good, Aristotle's final cause or God are all guaranteed by the illumination of human reason, and vice versa; The Christian God secures human's "management" and control over all things; later on the Enlightenment merely replaced God with human reason.

The separation between being and nonbeing is fundamentally intertwined with an aversion to change, which again is rooted in fear of change: that nature *is* in constant change. These changes, in spite of our advanced technology, are ultimately unpredictable to the finite humans; everything that was, is, or will be must perish: everything *is* passing away. Under the stimulus of this fear of change, the quest for truth has transformed into the quest for certainty. It aims to secure, to conquer, and to master. Contained in the separation of being and nonbeing is (if not explicitly expressed in Parmenides) the separation of the realm of the changeless from the realm of change. It is with the rejection of nonbeing that change is done away with. As Parmenides asserts, "Thus coming to be is extinguished and perishing unheard of." (B 8.20-1)

The rejection of nonbeing determines the features of being that are recounted by the dominant articulation in Western history through and through, that it is ungenerated, imperishable and therefore immortal, for any generation involves the intertwining between being and nonbeing; that it is one and not many, for there is only what is; that it is indivisible, for any differentiation presupposes nonbeing; it is complete and perfect, because what is completely is. Therefore, the separation of being and nonbeing determines the destining of being that is opened up through the history of metaphysics.

After casting off the danger of the encroachment of nonbeing, being is now secured in itself. So Parmenides tells us: "It (being) never was, nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous. ... Justice has never loosed her fetters to allow it to come to be or to perish, but holds it fast. And the decision about these things lies in this: it is or it is not. ... And how could what is be in the future? How could it come to be? For if it came into being, it is not: nor is it if it is ever going to be in the future." (B 8.5-20) Thus temporality is overcome by the denial of change. For change always happens in time and time is nothing but the transformation of things. Having been cut off from the flow of past and future, being is now frozen in a shining presencing. It is precisely because being is grasped as separate from nonbeing, and secured from change, that it is always sought through the shining of presencing. This presencing is further fixed as some

present appearances or ideas, forms (*eidos*, originally means “appearance.”) – a bunch of fragmented pieces of nows. The light of being is a metaphor of its pure and self-evident presencing. And in Plato this is developed as the origin of the representational thinking, under the view of which being inevitably falls into the realm of beings. Being thereby becomes *a* being:

But changeless within the limits of great bonds it exists without beginning or ceasing, since coming to be and perishing have wandered very far away, and true conviction has thrust them off. Remaining the same and in the same place it lies on its own and thus fixed it will remain. For strong necessity holds it with the bonds of a limit, which keeps it on every side. (B 8.26-31)

Being is now the same. Sameness, so considered, simply means that being is equal to itself. This is a sameness that excludes all differences that are generated through change. The self-identification of being is the ground for classical Logic. The Aristotelian Principle of Non-Contradiction can only be possible with this rejection of nonbeing.

What are the limits of infinite being? Isn't it a contradiction for the infinite to be bound within limits? “Limits” and “fetters” of being appear again and again in the poem. It is certainly not out of some inadvertent thought. So why is it that being has limits? The changelessness that is to establish its perfection consists of its limits. Insofar as it excludes any possibility of coming into being and perishing, being becomes a pure determinacy: that which is impossible. This is, therefore, a determinacy bound by its own perfection. Remaining changeless, the perfect being is deprived of any content and thereby becomes a hollow nothing.

However, one cannot help but ask: What is there out of the limits of being? There silently lies the dark abyss of nonbeing.

With Plato, the world of being is resolutely severed out of the world of becoming. Under the criterion of reason this becomes a separation of the intelligent world and the sensible world. The intelligible world is the one “where truth and reality shine forth (*katalampeí*),” while the sensible world is “mixed with darkness.” (*Rep.* 508d)

Perhaps the most significant thing that has happened with Plato is that being becomes ideas that are sought through “whatness.” Not only do questions like “what is beautiful/good/true” become the beauty itself, the good itself, and the truth itself, but also the always ongoing being becomes, for Plato, a mere idea that is beyond the sensible world. Plato's belief here is one common to Greek thinkers, viz., reality does not exist in change; things in this world are only

appearances or phenomena (Notice that the word “phenomena” is from *phaino* which means to shine, to give light, and also to reveal, to bring to light, and to appear). Or, in Plato’s words, they are merely defective copies of the ideas. However, as mentioned above, the original meaning of *eidos*, which is taken as the real *noumena*, the only that can be known (*noumena* is the passive present participle of *noein*, to know, to think), is “appearance.” In order to avoid being deceived by the transient appearances, another realm of appearances is created. What is left behind is the depth and meaning of life, the turning of good and bad times, the transformation of the decayed and the marvelous, the alteration of the four seasons: the intergeneration of being and nonbeing.

However, as we have pointed out, the word “phenomenon” comes from *phaino*, which means to shine, to give light. Things as phenomena are originally experienced by the Greek as that which shine and disclose by themselves. So what has happened in Plato is that the light is taken away from things in the becoming world and transferred to another completely alien world.

For Plato, just like for Parmenides, what is “completely is,” “purely is,” and “perfectly is,” “really is.” (*Rep.* 477a, 478d, 479d, 597a, 597d) Of all the shining ideas “the brightest of realities” is the form of the good. (508e) It is what “provide truth to the thing known and gives the power of knowing to the knower.” Having realized that change always involves the interplay between being and nonbeing, Plato considers things in the sensible world as “both are and are not.” (477a-478d) However, if we understand “truth” with respect to *aletheia*, or unconcealment, then what this quote shows us is that things in the becoming world are taken as a concealment of which we can have no knowledge. As such, it becomes the unknowable imperfect world, wherein only illusory beliefs come about.⁴⁰ Under the shining of the idea, the changing nature is now reified to the dark matter, that which is not.

The shining ideas are what are solely intelligible, and through their shining they also make the intelligence possible. Thereby in Plato “Thinking and being are the same” gains its new form. Thinking now is thinking toward the ideas that consist of the world of reality and which, again, can only be approached through human reason. For Plato, this reason obtains a more mathematical character. It is under the bond of the “calculation of the reason” that truth is “infallible” and “unshakable.” (*Rep.* 477e) Thinking is therefore an education (*paideia*). It is a training of “turning around from darkness to the light.” (518c) One actually needs to learn to gaze at the light.

⁴⁰ *Rep.* 477-9; *Tm.* 28-9.

With the establishment of being as the idea, the correspondence between the subject's knowing and the idea as its object, i.e., the thing itself, the reality itself, is also established. Knowing has now become the correct representation of the idea, therefore it has become a faculty of human reason. Knowing has by now gotten rid of the transient beings and is related only to human intellect.

By interpreting the being of beings as whatness (i.e., ideas), the most significant paradox in Plato's philosophy, which also haunted Parmenides, appears. That is, the being of beings itself is only beings (substances, ideas). In the course of seeking to represent "objects," metaphysics is ensnared in abstractions and generalities, mere facets of ideas. Being, thereupon, has become the most abstract of the abstractions and the most general of the generals, i.e., the emptiest of the empties. Even Whitehead, with his process metaphysics, cannot avoid the pursuit of eternal objects. Indeed, it is Whitehead who claimed that Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato. In this sense, the paradox of being as a being is the central paradox of metaphysics. This is why Heidegger says, "[Philosophy] thinks from beings back to beings with a glance in passing toward being."⁴¹

The ghost of being as a being lingers everywhere in Plato's philosophy. All kinds of paradoxes fall out of this, some of which are closely examined by Plato himself in *Parmenides*. For example, since the realm of being and that of becoming are so radically separated, how can the man, who always faces illusions and who is part of the illusions himself, have knowledge of pure ideas? In fact, how can he even know that they exist at all? The knowable idea, just like the dark matter, has thereby become an unknowable X. With the separation of the realm of being from that of becoming, both realms are reified.

In Christianity the light of being is transformed into the light of God. In fact, God himself is light. These metaphysical and theological lights create their respective darkness, be it the changing world, or the sensible experience, (which are always associated together, just as thinking is always associated with being) or the human nature that's contaminated by the original sin that rejects God. Metaphysics and theology therefore demand us to turn from the present darkness towards light. Modern philosophy, with its imperative to criticize tradition, has abandoned the ontological search and turned to epistemology. Human reason has now superseded the position of God and become the source of the light of truth. From a metaphysical

⁴¹ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in *Pathmarks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 252.

standpoint, this turn to a different light may look quite familiar. However, what is important to bear in mind is that with the huge influence of science and technology, modern reason has lost its interest in inquiry of being *qua* being, as ancient philosophers did. Modern philosophy construes reason as the tool to cognize and control nature. At the same time, the natural world has been deprived by metaphysics of any meaning. It is now viewed by modern science and technology as completely passive and dead matter, or a mere machine. Thus modern philosophy has given up the light of being –which is called “the oblivion of being” by Heidegger – and gone with darkness from the beginning. Modern philosophy seeks control over the dark material world, and thereby hopes human freedom can be achieved. In fact, the human culture and civilization that modern philosophy quests for is synonymous with conquest and exploitation of nature. But now, it is precisely this dark material world that is viewed as real. This is the materialist disposition of modern philosophy as influenced by science and technology. Even Kant cannot avoid this. When Kant set the ground for modern science with his *First Critique*, he strengthened this materialist objectivity even though it took the form of confirming the pure subjective forms.

While spontaneity is taken away from the world and solely placed in the hands of the human, nihilism has begun to permeate modern culture. Nihilism is becoming more and more distinct in modern history as the basic metaphysical movement. And now, without realizing this itself, it has learnt being indulged in the stimulus of death, which it calls “freedom.” What this says is how nihil is indulged in nihil, and thus how nihil falls into deeper nihil. Insofar as nihilism is the basic spirit of the modern world, what this matter of fact reveals is not only the existential bewilderment of the modern (or post-modern) individuals or communities. It is one dimension of the basic spirit that penetrates the economics, politics and cultures in our time.

As a philosopher who reflected on the destining of metaphysics, Nietzsche first acclaimed nihilism. There he saw an exciting phenomenon, i.e., the collapse of the value systems of the metaphysical world. With this collapse he saw an opportunity of hope for the return to the meaning of the earth. However, when this return is associated with the pursuit of new values that are sought under “will to power,” it fails to be completed, and has thereby fallen into a most horrible situation: the freedom that has been advocated for by modernity has now turned into a pursuit of nihil. The catastrophic modern subjectivity that is strongly criticized by Nietzsche is not resolved in his philosophy. On the contrary, it is transformed to confirm itself: nihil is

endowed with value through the will to power. In this sense, the resistance against reason is not fulfilled—it has fallen into an unscrupulous recklessness and a crazed ignorance.

2.3 The Dark Non-be-ing in Daoist Texts

Above we have explored metaphysics' demand that we turn from the darkness of the present world to the light of being, God, or reason. Daoism, on the contrary, calls us to turn away from the colors and lights of all beings towards the darkness of non-be-ing (*wu* 無). This comparison at least shows us more of a common sense: that Daoism does not take the myriad things as something dark. Still, we have to ask, what does it mean to say that the source of all is the dark non-be-ing?

First of all, this non-be-ing is by no means the opposite of be-ing conceived as a privation or a lack, which is again taken as a no-thing. Rather, as the ultimate non-be-ing it is beyond any negation and affirmation, and thereby affirms all.

Here I would like to address in a few words the translation of *you* 有 and *wu* 無. Conventionally they are translated as “being” and “nonbeing,” or “being” and “nothingness.” However, scholars have usually been aware of the historical encumbrances of these words in English. Variations to conventional translations have been used. For example, Roger Ames, from a processual and relational perspective, translates them as “determinacy” and “non-determinacy”⁴²; Hans-Georg Moller translated them as “presence” and “absence.”⁴³ Considering the characters of *you* and *wu* have always been thought in respect to *dao* from Laozi on, I will use “be-ing” and “non-be-ing” to keep the gravity of these words in English as well as mark a distinction from the conventional translation of “being” and “nonbeing”. I understand the “non-” here not as a mere negation or a deficiency but primarily a “trans-”, for the affirmation of be-ing first of all requires a trans-formation of it. (By this I mean the interplay of be-ing and non-be-ing, which will be illuminated in next section.) Though this “trans-” is not towards a separate realm

⁴² Ames, 2003.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Moller, *Dao De Jing*. Chicago: Open Court. 2007.

above but to go under and to affirm “be-ing.” In this sense, therefore, the “non-” indicates primarily a kinship between be-ing and non-be-ing instead of a denial or a negation of each other. It is a “trans-” understood as an “under.” In Laozi’s words, non-be-ing is the root of all beings. Nevertheless, how can one speak of or even think about non-be-ing? So Laozi says,

Looking yet not seeing it	視之而弗見
Thus it is called “subtle.”	名之曰微
Listening yet not hearing it	聽之而弗聞
Thus it is called “rarefied.”	名之曰希
Touching yet not getting it	搯之而弗得
Thus it is called “intangible.”	名之曰夷
It cannot be questioned through these three (ways)	此三者不可致詰
I thus blend them into one.	故系君而為一
As for this “one”--	一者
Its upper part is not bright	其上不皦
Its lower part is not obscure.	其下不昧
Ceaseless and soft, it cannot be named	尋尋呵不可名也
And reverts again to non-be-ing.	復歸於无物
This is what is called the form of the formless	是謂无狀之狀
And the image of non-be-ing.	无物之象
This is what is called the vague and the indefinite.	是謂惚恍
Following behind without seeing its rear;	隨之不見其後
Encountering it without seeing its head.	迎而不見其首
Hold tightly onto the way since the ancient	執古之道
To drive beings in the present.	以御今之有
And to know the beginning in the distant past.	以知古始
This is what is called the drawstring of the <i>dao</i> .	是謂道紀

However, contrary to typical interpretations, Laozi is not saying that *dao* is beyond the approach of the senses. What Laozi is describing is exactly the experience of *dao*. For he tells us clearly that he is looking at *dao*, listening to *dao*, and touching *dao*. He is questioning *dao*, following and encountering *dao*—he is, in fact, holding tightly onto *dao*. *Dao* is not to be seen, yet all that we look at is *dao*; it is not to be heard yet everything we listen to is *dao*; it is not to be

grasped yet all that we touch is *dao*. “Ceaseless and soft, it reverts again to non-be-ing.” “Non-be-ing” is to say that there is nowhere that it is not. For Laozi, contrary to the be-ing that is only to be thought and said by human reason and human language, non-be-ing is not to be grasped by any human concept or idea. It lies beyond the naming of human language, yet can still be experienced.

So how should we understand this dark non-be-ing? Reason often hastily dismisses anything that it cannot reach as some mysterious experience, assuming it to be irrational. So how should we avoid the concealment of the illumination of reason and let the dark non-be-ing open to us? Where can we find the path towards non-be-ing? Or, if it is, in the end, a pathless land, can *dao* itself as non-be-ing lead us forth?

What *wu* or non-be-ing tells us in the first place is that *dao* is not *a* being. As Zhuangzi says, “That which makes things be is itself not a thing.” (*Zhibeiyou*, “Knowinghood Journeyed North”⁴⁴) There is not an entity or a substance called *dao*. *Dao* is not any principle or concept separated from the sensible world; nor is it a metaphysical totality of things. *Dao* is not what Aristotle calls “*tode ti*.” (*Tode ti* is used by Aristotle to refer to substance, meaning “a this.” It is noteworthy that for Aristotle both the forms and God are all “beings.”)

The distinction between *dao* and things was addressed by many schools at the dawn of Chinese philosophy. The *Xici* commentary of *Yijing* says, “That which is beyond forms is *dao*; that which is within forms is *qi* 器.” *Qi* 器 here refers to things and instruments, in the sense that all the myriad things including humans are related to one another and are thus useful to one another. Things and instruments are rooted in and grow to be what they are in *dao*.

However, this is always the most difficult distinction for humans to make. As soon as we utter the word “*dao*” comes the danger of *dao* being grasped as a thing. The forgetting of *dao* is human’s destining (*ming* 命)⁴⁵, which itself belongs to the destining of *dao*. And when *dao* cannot be experienced as a living experience it is always grasped as a thing, thereby falling into the realm of things. This is why we see that when *dao* becomes inexperienceable in our modern way of life it is ascribed all kinds of labels, e.g., the highest principle, the universal law, the ultimate foundation, etc. These many labels are the proof that *dao* is inexperienceable in our time.

⁴⁴ Ziporyn’s translation.

⁴⁵ I use this Heideggerian term to express the Chinese character *ming* 命 which is usually translated as “fate.” *Ming* is not simply something predestined, but primarily signifies a disclosing. This is why it is used together with *yun* 運 (movement) as in *mingyun* 命運 (“fate”).

Dao is therefore thing-ed, together with the reification of the human. Such is the forgetting of *dao*.

The distinction between *dao* and things in no way means the separation of them. It is precisely due to the separation of being and beings in Western thought that being has been grasped as *a* being, whereby the distinction of the two is forgotten. On the contrary the distinction of *dao* and things demands the inseparability of them.

Precisely because *dao* is non-be-ing (*wu* 無) it can be with all beings (*you* 有). Laozi says “Only the non-be-ing can penetrate the seamless.”⁴⁶ (*DDJ*, 43) “The seamless” refers to the determinacy of beings. All beings are determinate and fixed in some form, at a certain time and in a certain place. Only the non-be-ing can transcend all antitheses. It can be large and small. Because it is non-be-ing, it can be said to be the smallest, yet all beings are in it; it can be said to be the largest, yet it hides itself in nonbeing. “The great way flows freely, running left and right.”⁴⁷ (*DDJ*, 34) It transcends and thereby contains all beginnings and ends. Therefore, there is no beginning and end in *dao*. As such it is called the beginning of the world. It is beyond high and low, warm and cold, movement and stillness, waxing and waning, good and bad, life and death, be-ing and non-be-ing. Thereupon it harmonizes and harbors the lights and colors of all beings in one darkness. Hiding in non-be-ing, *dao* is the oneness that lets the lights of all differences open. Therefore Laozi says (*DDJ*, 51):

<i>Dao</i> gives life	道生之
<i>De</i> nurtures	德畜之
Events shape	物形之
And circumstances consummate	而器成之
Therefore all things revere <i>dao</i> and honor <i>de</i>	是以萬物尊道而貴德
As for the reverence directed at <i>dao</i>	道之尊也
And the honor directed at <i>de</i>	德之貴也
It is out of the constant self-soing (<i>heng ziran</i>)	夫莫之爵而恒自然
Without anyone having ennobled them	
<i>Dao</i> gives them life and nurtures them	道生之畜之
Rears and develops them	長之遂之

⁴⁶ “無有入于無間.”

⁴⁷ “大道汎兮其可左右.”

It brings them to fruition and maturation
Nourishes and extinguishes them

亭之毒之
養之覆之

Dao gives them life
Yet does not own them
It assists them
Yet makes no claim upon them
It rears them
Yet does not lord over them

生而弗有也
為而弗恃也
長而弗宰

This is called the dark *de* (virtuosity)⁴⁸

是謂玄德

The honorableness of *dao* and *de* does not depend on the evaluation of the naming of human language. It is ultimately beyond language. It hides itself in the constant self-soing (*ziran* 自然)⁴⁹. The generation and growth, the fruition and maturation, the extinguishment are all the self-soing of *dao*. For it conceals itself in non-be-ing, it is called the dark *de*. It is noticeable that the *de* here refers both to *dao* and things, for Chinese characters often penetrate both subject and object. As for *dao*, it is that which gives life to and nourishes all, therefore it is called the dark virtue or *de* of *dao*. As for the myriad things, they gain their life, --death included--, from *dao*, and this is called their *de*, from which the character of *xing* 性 or nature of things is developed. It is noteworthy that *de* 德 and *de* 得 which means “gaining” are interchangeable in ancient Chinese.

The hiding and self-soing (*ziran*) of *dao* are not separate processes but are at one with each other. It is that which hides that is manifesting. Such is the self-opening of *dao*. Therefore, non-be-ing is certainly not an absence, or a nothing. Be-ing and non-be-ing are also not two separate processes. Rather, be-ing is the unfolding of non-be-ing. In this regard be-ing and non-be-ing are in constant exchange and interflow with each other wherein lies their sameness. This sameness, however, is not a logical rule of identity, like “A=A”, a meaningless tautology. The sameness of be-ing and non-be-ing is not in conflict with the distinction of *dao* and things, rather, they are the same event. It is precisely in the interflow of be-ing and non-be-ing that the root-source meaning of non-be-ing is disclosed to us.

⁴⁸ Edited translation from Ames, 2003.

⁴⁹ For further elaboration of this essential word for Daoism see Jing Liu “What is nature? — *ziran* in early Daoist thinking,” in *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 26, number 3, August 2016.

Laozi often uses *xu* 虛 to represent the non-be-ing of *dao*. Like many other Chinese characters, this is one that again faces the impossibility of translation. Usually *xu* is translated as “emptiness,” while this is far from perfect, I have chosen to follow this convention for the sake of consistency. However, it is important for us to keep in mind that *xu* is not a metaphysical or physical void. Neither does it refer to the existential awareness of the illusoriness, and for that reason suffering, of the transitory world due to its constant change as is shown by some forms of Buddhism. Under both of these views the root-source meaning of *dao* is abandoned. Early Daoist texts indicate *xu* to be involved with *dao*. Therefore, *xu* and *wu* are closely associated (hence there is the expression *xuwu* 虛無, to which, however, the meanings of “vanity” and “nihility” would later be added). In the sense that *xu* designates involving with *dao*, both *xu* and *wu* should not be simply understood as nouns, but primarily as gerunds. Sometimes Laozi directly uses *xu* as a verb, as in “Empty the heart-minds of the people and fill their stomachs.” (DDJ, 3)

Xu primarily means openness and inclusiveness, and therefore indicates abundance. *Xu*, being empty, is like a valley wherein all beings gather and all transformations be bred. That is why the valley is called the root of heaven and earth. (DDJ, 6) Only in emptiness and non-be-ing is the nature of things unfolded and made manifest to us.

Xu implies the *li* 理 (principle) of change and movement. *Xu* is often associated with *jing* 靜 and is called *xujing* 虛靜, empty and tranquil. Only with emptiness and tranquility can the movement of beings be generated; only that which is empty yet inexhaustible can move and more and more comes out of it. (DDJ, 5) Thereon, “Wispy yet unbroken, it only seems to be there, yet its productivity is bottomless.” (“綿綿若存，用之不勤.” DDJ, 6) *Mian* 綿 has the silk radical (*si* 糸) and the cloth (*bo* 帛) in it. Its original meaning is the accumulation of silk threads to make a cloth, bearing with it the meaning of “connection” and “association,” and from there, “being ceaseless.” *Mianmian* 綿綿 here designates the continuity of *dao*. But this is not the continuity that is constituted by the pure being, like Parmenides’ ball of being. Rather, the continuity of *dao* consists of its emptiness and non-be-ing (*xuwu* 虛無), from which the be-ing of all is generated. Therefore the arising of all beings is unfolded within the emptiness of non-be-ing. For this reason the emptiness and tranquility of *dao* is not an antithesis of the movement of beings, but it contains the arising and passing-away of all and harmonizes them in the darkness of *dao*.

Laozi often uses *chong* 冲 to refer to the emptiness and non-be-ing of *dao*. *Chong* 冲 incorporates both the meaning of movement and emptiness. It originally means the surging up and the swing of water, and later comes to also have the senses of “mingle together” and “harmony” or “harmonize.” So Laozi says, “The ten thousand things all carry *yin* on their shoulders and embrace *yang* in their arms, and blend (*chong* 冲) these vital *qi* together into harmony.”⁵⁰ (*DDJ*, 42) This verse shows us how *dao* moves to harmonize the myriad things. Also chapter 4 says:

<i>Dao</i> mingles and harmonizes and emptifies (<i>chong</i> 冲) in its use	道冲而用之
Yet it is never to be filled up	又弗盈也
Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad things	淵呵似萬物之宗
It blunts the sharpness	挫其銳
And untangles the knots	解其紛
It harmonizes the brightness	和其光
And bring things together to the same dusts	同其塵
So deeply it immerses	湛兮
It is only as if it exists	似或存
I do not know whose progeny it is	吾不知其誰之子也
It prefigures the ancestral gods	象帝之先

The sameness of *dao* presented in these verses through *chong* 冲 and *he* 和 is not like the homogenous being, but incorporates the differences of all brightness.

Xu and *wu* (emptiness and non-be-ing) in this dynamic sense imply the process of the dissolution of determinacy. The emptiness and non-be-ing of *dao* is in contrast with the concreteness of things. The realm of the concrete is one of determinacy and finitude. What can be sensed by manifestation has to be within boundaries. In fact, our senses always demarcate and therefore constitute our boundaries. However, this does not in any sense mean the separation of *dao* and things. Rather, dynamic emptying and non-be-ing shows us that the boundaries and limits of beings can be broken and that emptying and non-be-ing are the way, whereby our senses become that which lead us toward freedom. Emptiness and non-be-ing (*xu*, *wu* and also *chong*) therefore contains the meaning of non-knowing (*wuzhi* 無知), i.e., to empty and bring

⁵⁰ “萬物負陰而抱陽冲氣以為和。”

one's knowing close to non-be-ing so as to reach the infinite darkness of *dao*, in which only can the concreteness and substantiality of all beings be disclosed to us.



We can see from the discussion above that be-ing and non-be-ing are not separate realms in Daoism. Next I will further elaborate the meaning of be-ing and non-be-ing through the interplay of them.

2.4 The Play of Be-ing and Non-be-ing

As two crucial terms in Chinese philosophy, the concepts of *you* 有 and *wu* 無 were first raised and thought by Laozi. Taking an broad survey of world philosophies, we can see that Western metaphysics is mainly involved with being while Indian Buddhism focuses on nothingness or emptiness; comparatively, a remarkable characteristic of Chinese Daoism is precisely that it stresses on the interplay between *you* and *wu*.

However, “being” is so frequently used in common language that we tend to assume the meaning of being and nonbeing is self-evident. So what do *you* and *wu* mean in Daoist philosophy? How do they provide us a new approach to understanding the meaning of be-ing and non-be-ing? And, how do we avoid a Western metaphysical reading of *you* and *wu*?

Firstly, *you* and *wu* are not a degree of sensation of things from reality to negation as magnitudes to be further measured by the calculation of reason.⁵¹ Be-ing and non-be-ing primarily concern the *dao*. It will be conducive to have a close look at their etymology.

In the Bronze Script *you* is written as . The right part of it is *you* 右, meaning “the right,” which is an image of the right hand. The bottom part is the character for meat. According to scholars’ research, the meaning of *you* 有 first came from the ancients’ ritual of sacrifice. It signifies a person holding a piece of meat with the right hand to sacrifice to gods, seeking blessings from gods. If we take a look at the character 祭(*ji*, sacrifice), its Bronze script is , the upper part is exactly the right hand holding a piece of meat. The lower part is *shi* 示, meaning to serve the gods. *You* 又 (the same as *you* 右) is interchangeable with *you* 佑 (to bless, to avail). Its meaning also comes from sacrificing to the gods and seeking blessings. Therefore, in ancient

⁵¹See *CPR*, B207-B218. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996. Here Kant puts our sensation under the measurement of magnitudes (*GroBen*) ranged from something to nothing.

times, the characters 又, 有, 佑, 右, were all interchangeable. Their pronunciations are also similar.

Later from the meaning of “the right hand holding a piece of meat” developed the meaning “to have”. It was then used as a noun, to express that there is something. This is why *you* 有 can be translated as “being” to express the existence of something. Though it is noticeable that *you* 有 has been mostly used as a verb instead of a noun before Laozi. This is also the case even in modern Chinese. For example, on the Yuding script it says, “Great King Wen has (*you*) the grand mandate granted to him from heaven, having (*you*) all the four directions of the broad land.”⁵² The Qiangpan script says, “Extending broadly the kingdom has heaven and earth, bringing the ten thousand countries into harmony.”⁵³ *You* (有) is being used in both passages as a verb, meaning “to have”.

Next let us look at the *wu* characters of *wu* 無 and *wu* 无. These are the two interchangeable characters for non-be-ing in early Chinese texts.⁵⁴ We will first look at the *wu* 无 character. The form of *wu* 无 is similar to that which of *yuan* 元 (beginning). It is only *yuan* 元 passing up a bit. Thus *Shuowen Jiezi* says, “That which connects up to the beginning is the way of non-be-ing.”⁵⁵ Also according to the *Shuowen*, *wu* 无 (or *wu* 無) has the character *da* 大 (great, big) in it. Therefore it also has the meaning of “abundant” (*feng* 豐). This is indeed puzzling at first glance. Since it is non-be-ing, how can it be abundant? Yet in Chinese non-be-ing does have the meaning of “abundance,” which is kept in many Chinese characters. For example, the character *wu* 蕪, with the upper part grass (“艹”), the lower non-be-ing (“無”). It does not mean “no grass,” instead it means “lots of grass.” In the character *wu* 廡, meaning the living quarters next to the main hall, the outer part (广) is house and the inner part is non-be-ing (無). It also does not mean “no house,” instead it means “many houses.” Another example is the special Daoist character *qi* 炁, with non-be-ing up and water down. It does not mean, of course, that there is no *qi*, instead it


⁵² 《孟鼎》銘文：“文王受天有大命，匍有四方。”Yuding is an antique from the West Zhou dynasty.

⁵³ 《牆盤》銘文：“匍有上下，合乎萬邦。”Qiangpan is also an antique from the West Zhou Dynasty.

⁵⁴ See Pang Pu, “On Darkness and Nonbeing.” This is a lecture that is given by the distinctive Chinese philologist Pang Pu at Remin University, 2005. For the edited texts see http://www.gmw.cn/01gmr/2006-05/09/content_413816.htm.

⁵⁵ “通与元者，虚无道也。”

means the abundance of *qi*. We can find lots of examples like these. Obviously, Chinese often use non-be-ing to express “grandness” or “abundance”.

Non-be-ing, abundance, the beginning, -- how can we combine all these meanings in one character? The distinctive Chinese philologist Pang Pu thinks that the character *wu* 無 can explain all these meanings. *Wu* 無 in the Oracle Bone Script was written as . This is a person dancing with two bunches in her hands. According to historical documents these bunches might be grass or some oxtails. This is the same character as *wu* 舞 (dance) in the Oracle Bone Script. Scholars believe that the *wu* 無 character denotes the ancients' dancing ceremony at sacrifices. *Wu* 無 (non-be-ing) is the object that the sacrifice is offered to. It is the be-ing (*you* 有) of all beings, the most abundant source of all.

Etymologically both *you* and *wu* come from the ancients' ritual of sacrifice. They designate the action of holding, having and dancing as well as the object that the sacrifice offers to, i.e., the *wu* or the non-be-ing, that which is beyond all forms, yet holds all within itself. The etymology shows the oneness of be-ing and non-be-ing in *dao*. The root-source meaning of *dao* is revealed through be-ing and non-be-ing. Therefore Laozi says, “Non-be-ing is the beginning of the heavenly and the earthly; be-ing is the mother of the myriad things.” (*DDJ*, 1) What be-ing and non-be-ing speaks out is the awareness of our belonging to the source of the myriad things.

It is notable that *you* and *wu* in ordinary language mainly refer to the existential status of things meaning “have” and “not have”. This was so even in Laozi's time. Laozi's philosophy actually preserved the original meanings of *you* and *wu*. His thinking on *ziran* revolves around the original meanings of *you* and *wu*. Where should we find the way that leads us towards the be-ing and non-be-ing of *dao* today?

Qi thinking is the common background for all the different schools of Chinese philosophy. Next I will explore the meaning of *you* and *wu* through *qi* thinking, hoping that this new approach can deepen our understanding of the be-ing and non-be-ing of *dao*, so that they can be brought under new light. This does not mean that *you* and *wu* are only *qi*, separated from *dao*; or that the *dao* that is articulated through be-ing and non-be-ing is only *qi*, in the sense of which the distinction of *dao* and things is dissolved. As we have pointed out before, the distinction of *dao* and things does not mean the separation of them. Precisely when they are separated their

distinction is dissolved, whereby *dao* is inevitably grasped as *a* being. What we are doing here is to explore the new approach to be-ing and non-be-ing through the lens of *qi* thinking.

Firstly, *qi* is distinguished as *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are interdependent. There is no *yin* without *yang*, just like there is no *yang* without *yin*. Therefore be-ing and non-be-ing are mutually manifest and mutually interpretive. Laozi always talks about be-ing and non-be-ing together. He never leaves be-ing out when he talks about non-be-ing or vice versa. For example, in chapter 11 he talks about the use (*yong* 用) of things, which is depicted as a *you* 有, meaning “having” here. But this *you* is originated in *wu* or non-be-ing.⁵⁶ In chapter 21 he uses *huanghu* 恍惚 and *yaoming* 窈冥 to describe the non-be-ing of *dao*. Both these words have the meaning of “obscure”, “vague”, and “ambiguous”. That which is *huanghu* is unfixed; that which is *yaoming* is deep and far-reaching. Though this non-be-ing of *dao* has to be followed by the be-ing or *you* 有 of it, i.e., *youxiang* 有象, *youwu* 有物, *youjing* 有精.⁵⁷ Literally these words are “being-forms,” “being-things” and “being-essence.” Laozi uses the play of the be-ing and non-be-ing here to indicate the fact that be-ing dwells in non-be-ing. There are numerous examples like this in the *DDJ*. Be-ing and non-be-ing are in intimate play with each other, as the coming and going of *yin* and *yang*. The forms of *huanghu* 恍惚, which depicts the be-ing of *dao*, elaborate this issue. *Huang* 恍 refers to the light of the heart-mind (the right part of *huang* 恍 is *xin* 心 or “heart-mind”; the left is *guang* 光 or “light”), which is a seemingly be-ing. Though it is be-ing, yet it is not a metaphysical substance. *Hu* 惚 is the non-be-ing of the heart-mind, with *wu* 勿 (meaning *wu* 無 here) up and *xin* 心 or heart-mind down. Though it seems as if it is non-be-ing, it is not a pure nothing. It is called, then, by Laozi, “the imageless image and the form of nothing.” Be-ing and non-be-ing illuminate each other; brightness and vagueness are capricious; lights and shadows chase each other; *yin* and *yang* transform together. Such is the play of be-ing and non-be-ing in the *DDJ*.

Secondly, the perspective of *yin* and *yang* is never fixed. Rather, it changes all the time. Take the example of humans. There are males and females, and this is a *yinyang*. If we look at a

⁵⁶ “卅辐同一轂，當其無，有車之用也。埴埴而為器，當其無，有器之用也。鑿戶牖，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。”（11）

⁵⁷ “孔德之容，唯道是从。道之物，唯恍唯惚。忽呵恍呵，中有象呵；恍呵忽呵，中有物呵。窈呵冥呵，其中有精呵；其精甚真，其中有信。自今及古，其名不去，以顺衆甫。吾何以知衆甫之然也？以此。”（21）

peculiar person, her spirituality can be called *yang* while her body can be called *yin*. If we look at her body, the five viscera are *yang* and the six bowels are *yin*. Even within the five viscera, for example, the *qi* of the kidneys has *yin* and *yang* too, and so on and so forth. This process can go on infinitely. In terms of *you* and *wu*, sometimes they can be used to refer to *dao*, sometimes to things, or sometimes to humans, that is, the *hengyou* 恒有 and *hengwu* 恒無 of humans' *gongfu* experiencing the *dao* (see *Daodejing*, 1). Only when one achieves the *wu* forms of *wuzhi* 無知, *wuwei* 無為, *wuyu* 無欲 (non-knowledge, non-action, non-desire) can she function freely with all *you*, i.e., all things. Therefore the use of all beings must be rooted in the experience of non-be-ing (*wu*). On the other hand we can take *dao* as non-be-ing or *wu*, and things as be-ing or *you*. The perspective here is one of *yinyang*, hence it is always indeterminate. All these different layers of *you* and *wu* are at play in the *DDJ*, sometimes even in the same sentence. It is difficult, then, to separate them with modern grammar of the subject-predicate-object structure, which is ultimately at odds with the *yinyang qi* thinking.

For this reason, with classical Chinese texts, it is never the case that things are left out when they speak about *dao*, or vice versa. On the contrary, when *dao* is articulated, it is always already in things; when things are talked about, they are always already on the great way, that is, the *dao*. Therefore I don't think that when Laozi talks about the be-ing and non-be-ing of *dao* he is not talking about the be-ing and non-be-ing of things. Or vice versa. I will elaborate more on this point next.

Thirdly, viewed from the *qi* perspective, be-ing and non-be-ing are not merely some dialectically related abstract ideas. Rather they denote the ceaseless transformation of all. The *Xici Commentary of the Yijijing* says, "The hard and the soft push each other thereby change and transformation is generated." "The hard and the soft" here refers to *yin* and *yang*. Be-ing and non-be-ing designates the dynamic flow of *qi*, the pushing force of *yinyang* with which all are transformed. Thereon, in my view, be-ing and non-be-ing as *you* and *wu* have to be understood as gerunds instead of nouns, which I have elucidated with their etymology. For example, chapter 2 of *DDJ* says, "Be-ing and non-be-ing generate each other. ... Such is *heng* 恒 (permanence, constancy)." Here be-ing and non-be-ing are related with constancy. This is to say, the procedure that be-ing and non-be-ing's generation of each other is the very process of constant change. Chapter 10 says, "it gives life to all yet claims no possession (*you* 有)." The *you* here is used as a

verb. Chapter 11 says, “Be-ing (*youzhi* 有之), and thereon you get the utility of things; the use of all has to be originated in non-be-ing (*wuzhi* 無之).” The *zhi* 之 behind *you* and *wu* indicates they have to be read as gerunds or verbs. *Yin* and *yang*, be-ing and non-be-ing are not some substantial things. In Chinese, on the contrary, things (*wu* 物) must be approached through the flow of *yinyang* and the natural transformation of be-ing and non-be-ing.

Be-ing and non-be-ing thus understood determines that they often penetrate the different levels of *dao*, things and humans, instead of referring to a single layer of them. Lots of Chinese characters support the same point, for example, the *dao* 道, *xu* 虛 and also *ziran* 自然. This also can be viewed as a characteristic of poetic thinking, wherein one word or verse contains different layers of meanings. Consequently Laozi never separates *you* and *wu*, *dao* and things, or forming and functioning (*tiyong* 體用). For example, the be-ing and non-be-ing in chapter 2 do not only refer to things, as it is usually taken, they also refer to the eternal be-ing and eternal non-be-ing of *dao*. Therefore the Mawangdui silk manuscript says, “Such is constancy.”⁵⁸ *Dao* is articulated through things. The permanence of *dao* is not separated from the change of things.

Finally, *yin* and *yang* are one *qi*, while be-ing and non-be-ing are at one with each other. It is not that there is one *qi* call *yin* and another called *yang*. *Yinyang* is to denote the change of the way. Likewise, it is not that one thing call be-ing and another called non-be-ing. What be-ing and non-be-ing designates is not different from *yinyang*. The recession of *yin* is the rise of *yang*. It is not that after *yin* dies a *yang* comes out. Be-ing and non-be-ing are thus the movement of *dao*. *Yinyang* has no beginning, and change and transformation have no end. All of this is talking about the movement of *dao*.

Next let us look at the first chapter of the *DDJ*.

The <i>dao</i> that can be spoken of (<i>dao</i> 道)	道可道也
Is not the constant <i>dao</i> (<i>hengdao</i> 恒道);	非恒道也
The name that can be named	名可名也
Is not the constant name (<i>hengming</i> 恒名).	非恒名也
Non-be-ing (<i>wu</i>) is the beginning of the heavenly and the earthly;	無名天地之始
Be-ing (<i>you</i>) is the mother of all myriad things.	有名萬物之母
Hence always non-be-ing (<i>wu</i>) so as to observe the vagueness (<i>miao</i> 眇) of it;	故恒無欲以觀其眇
Always be-ing (<i>you</i>) so as to observe the clarity (<i>jiao</i> 皦) of it.	恒有欲以觀其皦

⁵⁸ “有無之相生也，難易之相成也，長短之相形也，高下之相盈也，音聲之相和也，先後之相隨也，恒也。”

These two emerge from the same source

兩者同出

Yet are given different names.

異名同謂

Together they are called darkness (*xuan* 玄)

Darkening and darkening-

玄之又玄

This is the gateway of the manifold secrets.

眾眇之門

In the first line, Laozi uses both meanings of the *dao*: the way and to speak. Thus opens the start of the thinking on the relation between *dao* and language in history of Chinese philosophy. After telling us that the constant *dao* is unspeakable and unnamable, Laozi starts his 5000 words articulation of *dao*. He says, “無名天地之始, 有名萬物之母.” There are two traditional ways of punctuation for this sentence. Some scholars punctuate it as “無, 名天地之始; 有, 名萬物之母” which can be translated as “Non-be-ing is the beginning of the heavenly and the earthly; Be-ing is the mother of the myriad things.” The other punctuation goes as “無名, 天地之始; 有名, 萬物之母,” which can be translated as, “The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of ten thousand things.” Here I’ll adopt the first punctuation.⁵⁹ Though even if we punctuate it as “*wuming* 無名” and “*youming* 有名”, that is, the nameless and the named, still they have to be understood as *you* and *wu*. As Jiang Xichang says, “*Wu* is the nameless (*wuming* 無名), and the nameless is *Dao*.”⁶⁰ Obviously we cannot say the same thing about *you*. That is to say, we cannot say that the named or *youming* 有名 is *dao*. For Laozi, what can be named are only things. *Dao* is beyond the naming of humans. That “Non-be-ing is the beginning of the heavenly and the earthly; Be-ing is the mother of the myriad things” is to say be-ing and non-being are the different facets of *dao*, the source of all.

“故恒無欲以觀其眇, 恒有欲以觀其皦.” For these two verses, only the Boshu version has “*ye* 也” which indicates a punctuation behind *wuyu* 無欲 and *youyu* 有欲, making it “without desire” and “with desire.” Now if we follow Boshu’s punctuation, the *yu* 欲 here certainly does not refer to the sensual desires which is taken as the opposite of reason. Here I interpret it as *hengwuzhi* 恒無之 and *hengyouzhi* 恒有之, translated as “always non-be-ing” and “always be-ing.” The *miao* 眇 here is the same as the aforementioned *yaoming* 窈冥, meaning deep and

⁵⁹ For a detailed examination of the punctuation for the first chapter, see Jing Liu, “A Reconsideration of the First Chapter of the *DDJ*,” 杭州师范大学学报, 2016, issue 2.

⁶⁰ “無即無名, 無名即道.” Jiang, Xi chang 蒋锡昌, *Laozi Jiaogu* <老子校詁>, comments on the first chapter. See 嚴凌峰編 <無求備齋老子集成>, 藝文印書館, 1965.

vague. The *jiao* 皦 here indicates a brightness and clarity.⁶¹ “Always be-ing” and “always non-be-ing” refers to the subject’s experience of the *dao*. The be-ing and non-be-ing here penetrates *dao*, things and humans. From be-ing, to non-be-ing returns, so as to observe the obscurity of all beings; from non-be-ing unfolds being, so as to observe the light of the dark non-be-ing. “These two” refers to be-ing and non-be-ing. They are both out of *dao*. Though having different names, what they refer to is the same, that is, the *dao*. Therefore Laozi says, “These two emerge from the same source. Yet are given different names.”

Laozi uses *xuan* 玄 to denote the play of be-ing and non-be-ing, the unfolding of *dao*. First it refers to the dark color, that is, *dao* gathers the colors of all beings in to the dark beginning. According to Pang Pu, the *xuan* character comes from the vortex of water⁶². It also symbolizes twisting silk. *Shuowen Jiezi* says, “*xuan* means deep and far.” In regard with be-ing and non-be-ing, the vortex of water and the twisting silk designate their intertwining, interweavement, interconnection, and mutual generation, so as to observe the infinitely deep and far disclosing of *dao* and things. Therefore it says, “Darkening and darkening, this is the gateway of the manifold (*zhong* 眾) secrets (*miao* 眇).” The *miao* here refers to both *dao* and things. *Miao* (vagueness) is to talk about non-be-ing; while the *zhong* 眾 (manifold) indicates the unconcealment of beings. The gateway is for opening and closing. It opens and all beings come out; closes and all return to non-be-ing. *Xuan* in this sense is a dynamic generation just like be-ing and non-be-ing, or *you* and *wu*. (In Peiking University Han Dynasty Bamboo Texts it is “玄之又玄之” instead of “玄之又玄”. Thus gives it a stronger dynamic sense.) “Always non-be-ing” and “always be-ing,” is darkening and darkening. The play of be-ing and non-be-ing is incessant, running far and deep, yet all in the oneness of *dao*.

Insofar as the soundless and formless *dao* is the root-source of all things, all be-ing is the be-ing of non-be-ing; while without be-ing non-be-ing cannot be manifest. *Dao* is constantly hiding, and constantly emerging; it is constantly be-ing (*you-ing*), and constantly non-be-ing (*wu-ing*). Just like the waves never leave the ocean, all beings come from non-be-ing and is always returning to non-be-ing. The arising and passing-away of all beings is like clouds. Clouds generate clouds; clouds

⁶¹ See Zheng Kai, “Visual Words in Daoism” 道家著作中的‘视觉语词’例释 in *Thoughts and Cultures* 思想与文化, Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe (Huadong Normal University Press) 华东师范大学出版社 (2016) 18: 1-31.

⁶² See Pang Pu, “On Darkness and Nonbeing.” (庞朴, 《谈玄说无》): <http://www.guoxue.com/xzcq/ddxz/pangpu/txsw.htm>.

move clouds; clouds conceal clouds; all clouds then disperse into the darkness and silence of the sky. Are there clouds or not? Are there waves or not? Therefore Zhuangzi says, “We speak of waxing and waning; of withering and decay. Though the waxing and waning are not waxing and waning; the withering and decay is not withering and decay. The root and branches are not root and branches; the accumulation and dispersion is itself neither accumulated nor dispersed.”⁶³ And for what do the clouds arise and pass away? All beings emerge from non-be-ing, and *are* ultimately non-be-ing. Therefore the Song Dynasty Confucian Cheng Hao says, “There is no beginning or end; there is no cause for be-ing (*you*), no cause for non-be-ing (*wu*); where it is be-ing (*you*) is not be-ing (*you*), and where it is non-be-ing (*wu*) is not non-be-ing (*wu*).”⁶⁴ From the perspective of things, the inter-generation of things is an ever-flowing, interrelated dynamic process; from the perspective of *dao*, the historical procedure of the arising and passing-away of all is not different from the dark beginning of non-be-ing.

2.5 “Be-ing Comes From Non-be-ing”

Chapter 40 of the *DDJ* says, “Returning (*fan* 反) is how *dao* moves; and weakening is how it functions. All beings in the world come from be-ing; be-ing comes from non-be-ing.”⁶⁵ Chapter 42 says, “*Dao* generates one; one generates two; two generates three; three generates all ten thousand things.”⁶⁶ These two passages have become the source of all the later-coming forms of “Be-ing comes from non-be-ing.” With the influence of Western philosophy in modernity, this process of *dao* generating the myriad things is then viewed as a “cosmogony.” However, when taken simply as a cosmogony, this theory has been trapped in all kinds of predicaments. Thereupon we start to argue: Is there a beginning nonbeing in the universe that generates all beings? How can we even say there *is* a nonbeing? Since it is nonbeing, how can it generate all beings? How should we imagine this beginning as a nonbeing? Doesn’t it already negate itself as a nonbeing?

⁶³ “謂盈虛衰殺。彼為盈虛非盈虛，彼為衰殺非衰殺，彼為本末非本末，彼為積散非積散也。”(<知北游>) Chen Guying, 1983, 614. My translation.

⁶⁴ “亦無始亦無終，亦無因甚有，亦無因甚無，亦無有處有，亦無無處無。”程氏遺書卷十二·明道先生語二。Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, 【宋】程顥 程頤 (2004). *Collected Works of the Cheng Brothers* 二程集. 北京: 中華書局, 135.

⁶⁵ “反者道之動，弱者道之用。天下之物生於有，有生於無。”

⁶⁶ “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。”

Let us first look at chapter 40. Here *fan* 反 has at least two meanings in it. Firstly, it refers to the mutual generation of the interrelated be-ing and non-be-ing. Secondly, it denotes the matter of fact that the arising and passing-away is the tranquility of returning to the root. Here *fan* is understood as returning. Therefore Laozi says, “All beings in the world come from be-ing; be-ing comes from non-be-ing.” Non-be-ing designates the root-source. All beings are originally non-be-ing, rooted in non-be-ing, and ultimately return to non-be-ing. So, in non-be-ing, one can observe the ceaseless transformation of all, the reverse and impermanence of all (*fanfu wuchang* 反覆無常). Such is the movement of *dao*. This is to observe the movement in tranquility, preserving the root so as to accord with things.

The crucial point here is that Laozi’s *wu* or non-be-ing is by no means a void or no-thing in space and time. What *wu* shows is the root-source meaning of *dao*. Only when we leave its root-source meaning to talk about non-be-ing, it is then grasped as a void, a no-thing—yet precisely here it is grasped as *a* being. We then inevitably fall into self-contradiction: whether there is something, yet this something is a nonbeing; or there is no thing, but how does this nonbeing as no-thing generate all? This is what Zhuangzi calls *huoshi* 或使 and *mowei* 莫為. Zhuangzi is certainly aware of this problem of being attached to things. Zhuangzi says,

"Something has caused it (*huozhishi* 或之使); " "Nothing has done it (*mozhiwei* 莫之為); " but we have not yet escaped from the realm of things; and so in the end we fall into error. "Something has caused it; "— then there was a real Being. "Nothing has done it; "— then there was mere vacancy. While there are names and a “Being,” we are in the presence of things. When there are no names and only vacancy, we exist in the absence of things. We may speak and we may think about it, but the more we speak, the farther away we get from it. Birth, before it comes, cannot be prevented; death, when it has happened, cannot be refused. Death and life are not far apart; but why they have taken place cannot be seen. That something has caused them, or that nothing has done it are but speculations of doubt. When I look for the origin, it goes back into infinity; when I look for their end, it proceeds without termination. However, the infinite (*wuqiong* 無窮) and the unceasing (*wuzhi* 無止) that I talk about here is only the non-be-ing (*wu* 無) in words, which only go with the realm of things; and to say that something has caused it or nothing did it is only originated from words, which begins and ends with words. *Dao* is not *a* being, and beings are not nothing. The name of *dao* is only a convenience (*jia* 假). “Something causes it,” “nothing does it” — these occupy a mere corner of the realm of things. What could they have to do with the Great *Dao* (*defang* 大方)? If our words are sufficient, we can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to the *dao*. But if not, we can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to mere things. The perfection of *dao*

and things is not to be carried out by the distinction of word and silence. It is not about word or silence – this is the highest form of debate.⁶⁷

“或之使，莫之為，未免於物而終以為過。或使則實，莫為則虛。有名有實，是物之居；無名無實，在物之虛。可言可意，言而愈疏。未生不可忌，已死不可阻。死生非遠也，理不可睹。或之使，莫之為，疑之所假。吾觀之本，其往無窮；吾求之末，其來無止。無窮、無止，言之無也，與物同理；或使、莫為，言之本也，與物終始。道不可有，有不可無。道之為名，所假而行。或使莫為，在物一曲，夫胡為於大方？言而足，則終日言而盡道；言而不足，則終日言而盡物。道、物之極，言、默不足以載；非言非默，議其有極。”（《則陽》）⁶⁸

In this passage Zhuangzi analyzed in detail how the ideas of *huoshi* 或使 and *mowei* 莫為 are attached to things. To say that the coming and going of things are infinite (*wuqiongwuzhi* 無窮無止), the non-be-ing (*wu*) is sometimes understood this way. However, this is only the *wu* in words; to say that something causes it (*huoshi*), or nothing causes it (*mowei*), this is only a “root” in words. In fact they both surmise *dao* in the realm of things. Therefore for Zhuangzi, to say that something causes it or nothing does it is but to speak of one phase of things, and has nothing to do with the *dao*.

The fallacy of taking non-be-ing as some being is called by Zhuangzi “*youwu* 有無”, meaning “there is a nonbeing.” This is an awkward situation of humans. In order to show that the root-source is not *a* being, Laozi calls it “non-be-ing.” But humans always inevitably fall into the realm of things, and thus conceive that there is some “thing” called “nonbeing.” Zhuangzi thereon proposes “*wuwu* 無無”, i.e., “no non-be-ing.”⁶⁹ However, *wuwu* is certainly not to cancel the root-source meaning of *dao*. This is a common misunderstanding of Zhuangzi in our modern way of being, which only reveals the matter of fact that our very being is out of *dao*. By *wuwu* Zhuangzi opposes the tendency to grasp *dao* as *a* being. It is only when we have lost *dao* that *dao* is grasped as a being.

Chapter 42 is similar to chapter 40. It is not a positive matter of cosmology or cosmogony. Not that there is a thing called *dao* which produced the myriad things in time. This theory is grounded on a linear concept of time, which is not the case in Chinese philosophy. In Daoism,

⁶⁷ My translation.

⁶⁸ Chen Guying, 1983, 742.

⁶⁹ See the story of “Guangyao Asks about Non-be-ing” in the *Zhuangzi*, Zhi Bei You (“Knowinghood Journeyed North”).

the ocean of time is the dark non-be-ing itself. It is without beginning or end. The “beginning” in the *DDJ* can only be understood with the root-source meaning of *dao*. All beings come from the *dao*, therefore there is no time that *dao* does not generate one two three and the myriad things. It is everywhere. Such is the flow of *dao*. That one generates two, three, and the myriad things is to say *dao* generates all things.

In my view we should avoid the cosmological reading of “*dao* generates all ten thousand things.” There is no distinction of ontology\epistemology\cosmology under the standard of reason in Chinese philosophy. Forming and functioning are not separate from each other. Hence all these dimensions are mixed together in Chinese philosophy. To say that *dao* gives life to all is at once speaking about the heart-mind and nature (*xinxing* 心性). In fact unless she can experience that *dao* gives life to all, it is meaningless for her to utter these words. That is, without the experience of *dao*, *dao* goes into hide. How can she see “*Dao* generates all” at all?

Therefore *Zhuangzi-Qiwulun* says,

The knowing of the ancients really got all the way there. Where had it arrived? To the point where, for some, there have never existed things. This is really getting there, as far as you can go. When nothings are there, nothing more can be added.

Next there were those for whom things exist but never any definite boundaries between them. Next there were those for whom there were boundaries but never any rights and wrongs. When rights and wrongs wax bright, the *dao* begins to wane. What sets the *dao* to waning is exactly what brings the cherishing of one thing over another to its fullness.⁷⁰ (*Zhuangzi*, 2:25)

“古之人，其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣盡矣，不可以加矣。其次以為有物矣，而未始有封也。其次以為有封焉，而未始有是非也。是非之彰也，道之所以虧也。”⁷¹

The knowing of things is ultimately the knowing of the *dao*. Be-ing and non-be-ing is not an issue of a scientific positivity, but the *dao* and things that emerge in one’s knowing. 道之所以虧 does not mean that *dao* left after it produced all things, rather it happens with the rights and wrongs of one’s heart-mind, that is, when *dao* cannot be experienced fully. This is, however, not any idealism, wherein the existence of all things is hastily expunged, and conceded to human subjectivity. The experience of *dao* happens before any subject/object dualism. It intends to guard the *dao* as the root-source.

⁷⁰ Edited translation from Brook Ziporyn, 2009.

⁷¹ Chen Guying, 1983, 75.

3. The Ziran of *Dao*: The Soing of Self-Soing The Temporality and Place of *Dao*

In chapter 2 I examined the root-source meaning of *dao* through an investigation of *you* and *wu*, which can be viewed as the self (*zi* 自) of self-soing (*ziran* 自然), as the title shows. In this chapter I will explore how the self-soing or *ziran* of *dao* unfolds, which is here called the soing (*ran* 然) of self-soing (*ziran* 自然). This will be done by an exploration of philosophy of time and place in early Daoist texts, viz., the *DDJ* and the *Zhuangzi*. I hope to reveal the primordial meanings of time and place, and their interrelatedness with the self-soing nature through this investigation.

3.1 Permanence and Transience: The Temporality of *Dao*

Perhaps the most significant phenomenon about time in our time is the elimination of time. Turning on the computer, one can communicate with somebody in a remote corner of the world. Such communication required the passage of large amount of time before the advent of modern technology, and was in fact impossible for most people. Time is becoming meaningless for our technological being: the alteration of seasons, the migration of birds, the waxing and waning of the moon and even the cycles of night and day - these significant phenomena that have been so crucial to the development of ancient civilizations across the world are now losing their meaning in our time. When the sun is up and the day is bright, we work under lights; when the moon is out, our lights are still on. All the four seasons, we transfer from one cell to another. Everywhere we go the Central Air Conditioner maintains the same temperature all year round. We are thus separated from the natural world that we live in and depend upon. The meaning of time and

nature is thus obscured by our technological way of living. At the same time, the control over time is unprecedented. The uniformity of international production is guaranteed by the universality of time. In factories time is measured not by hours and minutes, but by seconds and milliseconds. However, with this mastery over and the elimination of time, we are only making ourselves the slave of time. Our life is running faster and faster, dominated by schedules and agendas. Speed and punctuality have become the characteristic “virtues” of our time. We are taught to grasp every minute and every second, even when we rest: we find ourselves in a rush to spend every second earned by the efficiency of a speedy and nervous life. There develops, then, the industry of recreation. In fact our very existence is flattened and reduced to some segment in the industrial-social production mode. Nowadays we manage time like money. In fact as is commonly believed: Time is money.

It is worth noticing that human’s mastery over time is *the same process* whereby humanity asserts its mastery over nature. Yet precisely when time is so deliberately calculated and mastered, and even eliminated, have we become the slaves of it. Correspondingly, precisely when we put nature under our exploitation our very existence is threatened by large-scale pollution. What do these paradoxes mean? What does this phenomenon of “the same process” reveal to us? What is time?

In the history of western philosophy, there are two main approaches concerning the investigation of time: it is either taken as an objective phenomenon in terms of movement or as a subjective form. Of course we don’t have to agree with this subject/object dualism, still these two factors are both involved in time. On the one hand, the possibility of change presupposes time. It is only in time that change becomes possible. Ultimately, time is the power that not only permits, but also generates change in the world. All things happen in time. The change of things is determined by time. Change is therefore called timely change (*shibian* 時變) in Chinese philosophy. For this reason time is usually taken as something that underlies change,⁷² though not necessarily as some metaphysical substance; As of human understanding, time is that which makes it possible too. Without time, no human experience. This is well examined by Kant in his First Critique. For Kant, all categories are subsumed under the schematism of time. The schematism of time is the a priori condition for human understanding. My understanding of the

⁷² See Kant, *CPR*, A31/B46-47, A183/B226.

world is therefore determined by time. What is then this determination of time that penetrates change in the world and human understanding? What does this penetration mean?

Of course, there is still another view that takes time as only associated with the phenomenon of change. Time is thereby conceived as a concept abstracted from external experience. No matter what, without the ceaselessly generative self-soing nature, we cannot even begin to have the idea of time; and without the idea of time, change in nature cannot be experienced. What needs to be examined here is not whether time is only an abstract idea, but the original meaning of time (on the basis of which an abstraction can be possible at all), wherein the following question will necessarily be revealed: How are time, nature and self interwoven together?

The most significant characteristic of time is its passing-away. In Chinese *shi* 時 (time) implies *shi* 逝, which means to pass away or to perish. (Notice that these two characters are homophonic.) Time is, ultimately, passing-away itself, the eternal perishing that philosophers lament. Changes and shifts display a riotous profusion, light and shadow run hither and thither, from dawn till dusk, the four seasons roll on. Because of its eternal perishing, time is often associated with the flow of water in various cultures. Perhaps the most famous Chinese example is Confucius' observation of the passage of time. Standing by the Yellow River, he sighed, "So it passes away, not ceasing day or night!" Heraclitus also famously said: "No man can step into the same river twice."

The transiency of time, however, is originated from a sense of loss. It is in the sense of loss that the passage of time is most clearly, even painfully felt. All present and future is inevitably becoming past. Everything that is gained in time will eventually be lost; moments are given, then gone; life is given to us, running towards death every minute. All beings have already, are becoming or will become nonbeing. For this reason Aristotle takes time as the principle of decay. In *Physics* he claims, "... time is by its nature the cause rather of decay, since it is the number of change, and change removes what is." (221b1-2) Precisely for this reason change in Plato's metaphysics is associated with nonbeing. In Greek myth *Chronos*, the god of time, devours his own children. Because of this irrevocable sense of loss associated with it time is resisted, if not hated, in various ways in the main stream Western philosophy. Plato's ideas, Aristotle's substance, and humanity's quest for objectivity and certainty ever since the advent of modernity, can all be seen as manifestations of humanity's relentless efforts to overcome time. Nietzsche

therefore holds that metaphysics is the revenge against time within which the transitory world has been disparaged as meaningless.⁷³

However, time does not pass away. We always say, time flies away. But there is not *a* being called “time” that flows away incessantly. As that which underlies change and persists through change, time itself does not change. What this speaks of is the permanence of time. This does not in any way indicate that time is something like a universal substance, which itself lies beyond change and change happens in it as if in some container, while the container itself does not change. On the contrary, the eternity of time only appears in change and together with change. Time and timelessness are intimately at one with each other.

Regarding the scene of Heraclitus’ famous saying, what is in constant change therein is not only the ever-flowing river, but also the human that steps into the river. The passage of time thereupon has brought us to the ancient problem of identity in history of philosophy: Since everything is in constant change, how can we say that this flowing water is the same river? How can we assert self-identity?

Self and identity are only possible because of the abiding permanence of time. Due to the permanence of time there is the essence of things, that is, the nature (*xing* 性) of things. Therefore it is precisely because of the transiency and permanence of time that there is the unity of change and changelessness of things.


Considered from the aspect of its passing-away, time is the power of generativity itself. Heaven, earth, mountains and rivers, all beings happen in time; wind and rain, humans, the karma of history gather and disperse in time. The power of generativity designates the striving of all beings towards life and death, for the reason of which there is time. As we say, “All is in time.” To be is to be in time. Insofar as be-ing is the unfolding of generativity, to be is its negation, that is to say, to be is not to be. What this says is the interplay of *you* 有 (be-ing) and *wu* 無 (non-be-ing). Time, therefore, holds the coming and going of be-ing and non-be-ing in its power of ceaseless generativity. In this sense, time is non-be-ing as the root-source. And this is the permanence of time. (As we’ve shown in chapter 1, in Daoist philosophy, non-be-ing is not an

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Penguin Books, 1966, II, 20. “This, indeed this alone, is what revenge is: the will’s ill will against time and its ‘it was.’” On the disparagement of change Nietzsche says: “And now cloud upon cloud rolled over the spirit, until eventually madness preached, ‘Everything passed away; therefore everything deserves to pass away. And this too is justice, this law of time that it must devour its children.’ Thus preached madness.”

empty non-existence, or a pure nothing as the negation of being which is taken as all there is in some philosophy. Non-be-ing, permanence and constancy, and the common are different ways that Laozi uses to refer to *dao*, the mother of all beings. I will examine this in detail later.)

Therefore permanence is not some external substance or a subjective form, neither does it only refer to the endless process of the passage of time, i.e., an infinite magnitude of time. It is the dark non-be-ing as the root-source of all beings. Time then harbors the entanglement of permanence and transience in itself, the power of which discloses the course of *ziran*, the self-soing nature.

In the mainstream Western metaphysics, however, the permanent realm of being as the object of reason and the transitory realm of becoming as the object of senses are radically separated. That which is eternal is not in change; and that which changes is not. It is based on this belief that Aristotle has searched for the substratum as *Hupokemenon*. In fact only when change is associated with something which is assumed to lack reality is the search for the changeless substance in change necessary. This metaphysical tradition has fostered our common sense of time today: permanence is not in time, and is irrelevant with time. In fact when the passing-away of time is grasped as a principle of decay permanence thereby is sought as an overcoming of time. Permanence has now become the denial of time. Thereupon permanence, if at all, can only be experienced in the transitory world as a telos, a universal idea, through which alone the existence of things can be actualized. Permanence is then projected to the other world, which has caused all kinds of *aporia* of time in Western philosophy. The original meaning of time is then covered up by metaphysics, wherein the relation of time, nature and self is obscured.

In Daoist philosophy time is the unity of permanence and transience, which I would call the sameness of them. The passing-away of the power of generativity and the permanence of non-be-ing as the root-source is mingled into one in time. This unity (sameness) is captured by the character *heng* 恒 (permanence) in the *Daodejing*. *Heng* is a recurring theme in the *Daodejing*. Many of the *chang* 常 characters in the *Daodejing* were originally written as *heng* 恒. Laozi often addresses the *dao* as *hengdao* 恒道, *de* (virtue) as *hengde* 恒德, be-ing as *hengyou* 恒有, and non-be-ing as *hengwu* 恒無. Even the self-soing *ziran* is called *hengziran* 恒自然. (14) The oracle bone script of *Heng* is written as , the outer strokes representing the heavenly and the earthly and the middle part the moon. The character therefore portrays the waxing and waning of the moon. As the *Book of Songs* says, “like the waxing and waning of the moon, like the rising of

the sun.” In *Shuowen Jiezi*, Duan Yucai comments on this line stating, “The moon waxes and becomes full, therefore, it has the meaning of constancy and long-lasting.”⁷⁴ The running of the moon indicates the passage of time, through which the non-be-ing of time is articulated and that is constancy. The *heng* of *dao* unfolds exactly in the pushing of the sun and the moon, the ceaseless transformation of heaven and earth and the ten thousand things in between. Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* says, “Standing alone, it is does not change; Going around, it is inexhaustible.” What this is talking about is the sameness of permanence and transience. Only so can these verses be understood and not fall into self-contradiction. The *hengchang* 恒常 or constancy in Daoism is absolutely not the eternal unchanging in Western metaphysics, as the static and dead realm of *eidōs*, where the changeless is carefully sorted out of and resolutely isolated from changes in the phenomenon world. There is no such dualism in Chinese thinking at all.

Chengyi comments on *heng* hexagram as such: “Nothing changeless can persist (*heng* 恒). It is through changes and moving that things come to ends and start anew. Therefore it persists (*heng* 恒) and never stops. There are no things between the heavenly and the earthly that does not change, even for things as huge and heavy as the mountains. Hence *heng* does not mean static and immutable. For the changeless and immutable is not able to persist (*heng* 恒). Only that which changes with time is the constant *dao* (*changdao* 常道).”⁷⁵ Permanence manifests itself in transience.

The self-soing nature, or *ziran*, is the opening of *dao* in time. Therefore *heng* has the meaning of *ziran* in Daoist texts. The constant *dao* (*Hengdao* 恒道) is the naturally self-soing (*ziran*) *dao*. Permanence in this sense is therefore everything: movement and stillness, coldness and warmth, good and bad, happiness and suffering, be-ing and non-be-ing—the movement of *dao*. This is why *Boshu Laozi* says,

Be-ing (<i>you</i> 有) and non-be-ing (<i>wu</i> 無) give rise to each other,	有無之相生也
Difficult and easy complement each other,	難易之相成也
Long and short set each other off,	長短之相形也
High and low complete each other,	高下之相盈也
Refined notes and raw sounds harmonize with each other,	音聲之相和也,

⁷⁴ [漢]許慎撰, [清]段玉裁注: <說文解字注>, 上海古籍出版社, 2010, 681. “月上弦而就盈, 于是有恒久之意。”

⁷⁵ “天下之理未有不動而能恒者也, 動則終而復始, 所以恒而不窮。凡天地所生之物, 雖山嶽之堅厚, 未有能不變者也。故‘恒’非‘一定’之謂也, ‘一定’則不能恒矣。惟隨時變異, 乃常道也。” (程頤, <周易程氏傳·恒卦>) Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, 2004, 682.

And before and after lend sequence to each other,
Such is *heng*.⁷⁶

先後之相隨，
恒也。

Heng is the self-soing (nature, *ziran*) of *dao* and things.

Constancy dwells in the process of non-be-ing. Therefore Laozi says, “Empty (*xu* 虛) oneself so as to achieve constancy.” (“致虛，恆也。”) That which is constant is non-be-ing (*wu*). Therefore it is said, “the beginning of the eternal non-be-ing.” (“恒無之初”⁷⁷) The dark non-be-ing is the root-source of all beings, hence time (*shi* 時) implies beginning (*shi* 始). (Notice that they are homophonic just like “time” and “passing-away,” i.e., *shi* 時 and *shi* 始. Therefore time, beginning and passing-away paranomastically interpret each other.) In Chinese *shi* 始 means both the beginning of time and the origin. This is why *Daodejing* says, “The world has a beginning and this beginning is the mother of all.” (52)⁷⁸ The first chapter of *Daodejing* says, “Non-be-ing is the beginning of heaven and earth; be-ing is the mother of the myriad things.”⁷⁹ Here be-ing and non-be-ing refer to the entanglement of the permanence and transience of time, therefore it is the beginning (*shi* 始) of the world and the mother (*mu* 母) of all. (Some scholars distinguish *shi* 始 from *mu* 母, claiming that the former comes earlier than the latter. I don't make such distinction but take them as the same.) Chapter 25 says, “Standing alone, it does not change. Going around, it is inexhaustible. It can be thought of as the mother of the world.” These verses show the same meaning as I have pointed out previously. “Standing alone and changeless” refers to the permanence of time; while “going around and being inexhaustible” refers to the passing-away, the transiency of time. They are ultimately at one with each other, thereupon it is the mother of the world. Chapter 25 also says, “There is a thing (*youwu* 有物), a “gathering” chaos (*huncheng* 混成), emerging before the heavenly and the earthly.” The word “before” indicates the time of the *dao* that generates the heavenly and the earthly.

Following this the Daoist idea that “*Dao* generates the myriad things” can be understood. The eternal non-be-ing as the beginning of the world, or as it is expressed in the *Hengxian*

⁷⁶ *Dao De Jing*, chapter 2. Edited translation from Ames, 2003.

⁷⁷ <黃帝四經·道原>. The Huangdi Sijing (“The Yellow Emperor's Four Classics”) are part of the Mawangdui Silk Texts. Dao Yuan is one of them.)

⁷⁸ “天下有始，以为天下母。”

⁷⁹ This is my reading of the first chapter. For a detailed clarification of the punctuation of this chapter see Jing Liu, “A Reconsideration of the First Chapter of *Daodejing*,” 杭州师范大学学报, Issue 2, 2016.

excavated text, “the eternal beginning of non-be-ing”⁸⁰, does not imply *a* nothingness which exists out of time. What it says is the permanence of time, that is, the non-be-ing as the root-source. It is only after the original meaning of time has been lost that the eternal non-be-ing and the generation of beings are separated into completely different, if not completely unrelated, realms. This is the root of all the contradictions that emerge when we, from our modern perspective, try to interpret Laozi’s “*Dao* generates the myriad things” from the positive method of cosmology.

Where the original meaning of time holds sway the eternal non-be-ing and the transformation of all beings are not contradictory to each other, but **the same** process. *Zhuangzi-Zhibeiyou* (“Knowinghood Journeyed North”) recounts the following story: “Ran Qiu asked Zhongni, ‘Can it be known how it was before heaven and earth?’ The reply was, ‘Yes. It was the same of old as now.’”⁸¹ The eternity of time is in the transitory flowing away of the old and the coming of the present. The non-be-ing as the root-source reveals itself in the course of generativity. Generativity is the emerging of the eternal non-be-ing. Therefore Laozi says, “*Dao* generates one; one generates two; two generates three; three generates the myriad things.”(42) The process of *dao* generating all beings is endless and is present everywhere. What this shows is the sameness of time as the non-be-ing root-source and as the power of generativity. Time is therefore an absent presencing. It is ceaselessly creative, at the same time that it harbors all beings in the one water of darkness. It is in this sense that we say time is that which underlies all changes.


This sameness is not a logical relation in the sense of the proposition “ $A=A$ ”, a meaningless tautology. We have addressed this issue heretofore.⁸² Insofar as it contains all differences in itself, it is the furthest and deepest event. In fact it is the only event, that is, the self-disclosing of the eternal non-be-ing. This is *ziran*, the self-soing nature, and also destining. Owing to the procedure of the unfolding of non-be-ing we can talk about the being of time, that is, a particular time (*youshi* 有時. It means “sometimes” in Chinese, etymologically meaning being-time, or having-time.) A thing only comes into being once it gains its time. Everything has (*you* 有) its time. This particular time (being-time, *youshi*), however, is rooted in the non-be-ing of time. It is

⁸⁰ “恒先無有.”

⁸¹ <莊子·知北遊>: “冉求問于仲尼曰, ‘未有天地可知耶?’ 仲尼曰, ‘可, 古猶今也.’” Chen Guying, 1983, 624.

⁸² See the discussion of the sameness of be-ing and non-be-ing in chapter 2.

only because time is non-be-ing that all beings can gain their being in time. Only due to the sameness of the be-ing and non-be-ing of time can we say, “All things are in time.”

In regard with the sameness of time as non-be-ing and generativity, time is not only an abstract universal concept, but one that is embodied in the seasonal interactions of nature. Time has scenery. The Chinese character for time is *shi* 時. The bronze script  has two parts: the upper part is a foot, which symbolizes going or walking, the lower part is the sun. It uses the image of the running of the sun to symbolize time. As the *Yijing* says, “The sun goes and the moon comes; the moon goes and the sun comes; the sun and moon push each other and brightness is generated. The coldness goes and the warmth comes; the warmth goes and the coldness comes; the coldness and the warmth push each other and the year is generated.”⁸³ What is called “time” is formed in the course of the alteration of the four seasons; *heng* is to observe the persistence and constancy of *dao* in the flux and the transformation of the ten thousand things. All things thus transform together “with” time. Time is not separate from the transformation of things. Rather, the transformation of things is a temporal, processual, and relational event, through which the things and their interactions are brought into existence. Time with scenery is therefore seasonal: the ice meets the east wind and thaws; the plum trees get the seasonal rain and bloom; the dew perceives the golden wind and falls; birds migrate with the change of seasons. These phenomena that hold the meaning of time in themselves and dispose it to our mortal existence are, however, becoming estranged from our modern living. Together with it, the meaning of time and nature has been obscured.

Seasonal time is contextual, within which lies the unobstructiveness of myself and my environment. We do not transmigrate in time as though passing through a container. I am not merely in time: time is in me. I *am* time. There is a time of happiness in which spring blossoms bloom; there is a time of melancholy, falling rain; a time of hardship and drifting snow. A time of warmth, of enjoying freedom from cold and its pleasure, shared with friends. There is a time of questioning, a time of enlightenment, then questioning again. The unity of myself and my world is given by time. The determination of time therefore penetrates changes in the world and human understanding. The inseparability of subject and object is therefore rooted in the unity of time.

⁸³ “日往則月來，月往則日來，日月相推而明生焉。寒往則暑來，暑往則寒來，寒暑相推則歲成焉。”

Seasonal time is not just a linear and uniform progression, the one-dimensional fleeting of past, present, and future: it is multidirectional. It can flow from the present to the past, from past to present, from present to present, from future to future, and from future to present. Time is in my reflection and observation. Reflection and observation generate time. As my understanding of “self” changes, my temporality changes with it. Meaning is thus revealed in time.

This is what is called the timely meaning (*shiyi* 時義) in the *Yijing*. In the *Yijing* every hexagram symbolizes a certain situation or time, within which meaning is preserved. Therefore *jian* 蹇 (meaning “difficult”) so as to turn around and examine oneself, and cultivate her virtue; *Kun* 困 (meaning “hard”, “ensnared”) so as to achieve one’s destining and carry out her will; *qian* 乾 (“the heavenly”) so as to nerve oneself to ceaseless creativity; *kun* 坤 (“the earthly”) so as to enlarge one’s virtue and support things; *fu* 復 (“to return”) so as to see the heart-mind of the heavenly and the earthly.⁸⁴ However, the meaning of a particular time can only be revealed when it is called forth by permanence.

Contextual time constitutes the historicity of be-ing, which is rooted in the destining of the eternal non-be-ing. For the apprehension of permanence, each transient instant strives with its own being to overcome the past and thus opens its future. This overcoming is, however, not a mere denial, but first of all requires an assimilation. It is the inherent principle of generativity demanded by the force of permanence.

Next I will use chapter 16 of the *Daodejing* to illuminate the unfolding of the destining of permanence and transience. Chapter 16 says,

Empty (<i>xu</i> 虛) oneself so as to achieve constancy (<i>heng</i> 恒)	致虛恒也
Preserve the emptiness (<i>chong</i> 沖) so as to bring out concreteness	守沖篤也
In the process of all things emerging together	萬物旁作
I thereby observe (<i>guan</i> 觀) their reversion (<i>fu</i> 復)	吾以觀其復也
Things proliferate	夫物芸芸
And each again returns to its root	各復歸於其根
This is called tranquility	曰靜
As for tranquility, this is called returning to the destining	靜是謂復命
Returning to the destining is called the common	復命, 常也

⁸⁴ 故蹇以“反身修德”, 困以“致命遂志”, 乾以“自强不息”, 坤以“厚德載物”, 復“見天地之心”. These are the commentary on the meaning of the listed hexagrams that symbolize certain situations, see *Daxiang Zhuan* of the *Yijing*.

Knowing the common is called illumination (<i>ming</i> 明)	知常, 明也
While not knowing the common leads to recklessness	不知常, 妄
Ominous it is to act out of recklessness	妄作凶
Knowing the common produces capacity and forbearance	知常容
Capacity and forbearance lead to impartiality	容乃公
From impartiality comes kingliness	公乃王
Kingliness will lead to the heavenly	王乃天
The heavenly to the <i>dao</i>	天乃道
The <i>dao</i> to persistence	道乃久
To the end of one's days, one will be free of danger	没身不殆

This reading is a combination of different versions, mainly the Guodian Bamboo Texts and the Mawangdui Silk Texts. In the second line I read the *zhong* 中 character as *chong* 冲, meaning emptiness. *Chong* 冲 is a special character that Laozi uses to describe the movement of *dao*. It originally means the movement of water, specifically its gushing forth and swaying.⁸⁵ It is usually put together with *xu* 虚 to mean emptiness. Therefore emptiness in Daoism is certainly not a void or some pure nothing. Rather emptiness and non-being is the vast ocean from which all beings arise. Thereupon to preserve the emptiness is to preserve the empty and silent root-source in oneself. Chapter 5 also talks about preserving the emptiness: “Is it not like a bellows in between the heavenly and the earthly? It is empty without being exhausted: The more it works the more comes out. Much speech leads to swift exhaustion. Better to hold fast to the emptiness (*shouzhong* 守中).”⁸⁶ The *zhong* 中 here means *chong* 冲, referring to that which is empty yet without being exhausted. Permanence reveals itself in the course of emptiness and non-being.

Only in the process of emptying is the constant called forth and encountered. Concreteness and substantiality is preserved only in emptying and *wu*-ing. This is a radical contrast with the situation in some metaphysics wherein nonbeing is declined completely and reality is only associated with being. “To preserve” means, for the self, to become one with the permanence of time in the darkness of the permanence of time. It is only now that one can observe (*guan* 觀) the transformation of the myriad things: “In the process of all things emerging together, I thereby

⁸⁵ See *Shuowen Jiezi*, “冲, 涌摇也.” Duan Yucan commented, “涌, 上涌; 摇, 旁摇也.”

⁸⁶ Edited translation from D.C. Lau. “天地之间, 其犹橐籥乎? 虚而不屈, 动而愈出. 多言数穷, 不如守中.”

observe (*guan* 觀) their reversion (*fu* 復). Things proliferate; And each again returns to its root.” The power of the generativity of time is entangled intimately with the non-be-ing as the root-source, and together they enter into the tranquility of permanence.

"Returning to the root" here does not only mean the passing-away of things as it is usually understood. Rather “passing-away” needs to be understood on a deeper ground. The arising of all is not different from their returning: these are not two separate processes. That is to say, the arising and perishing of all consist of their returning to the root, wherein contains the inseparability of movement and tranquility. The tranquility of returning to the root holds within itself the movements of arising and perishing--the transformation of all things. In this sense the destining which is closely associated with tranquility (*jing* 靜) does not entail accordance with preordained commands, arising from a source external to the situation. Destining for Laozi does not only concern humans but all the myriad things. Returning to destining designates the disclosing of the arising and perishing of things. The returning and the disclosing are the same process. But, most importantly, destining is associated with *dao*: It is the self-unconcealment of the eternal non-be-ing of time.

Therefore Laozi says: "Returning to the destining is called the common (*chang* 常)." *Chang* 常 indicates the original time that holds sway in the disclosing and returning of the myriad things. *Chang* 常 is interchangeable with *heng* 恒, meaning constant and natural (*ziran*). Though comparatively *chang* contains the meaning of *yongchang* 庸常 (ordinary, common), *pingchang* 平常 (common, regular, normal), and *shichang* 时常 (Lit. “time-common,” meaning “often,” “at times”). In the Bronze Script, it is written as 常, which depicts the image of a skirt. As is said in the *Shuowenjiezi*, “上衣下裳”, i.e., the upper part of the clothing is called 衣 *yi*, the lower part is called *shang* 裳. *Chang* 常 is directly derived from *shang* 裳.

Its original meaning, “a long skirt,” implies that constancy lies nowhere but in ordinary life. *Hanfeizi Jie Lao* (<韓非子·解老>) says, “Things that now come into being, now disappear; now are dead, now are alive again; now they are in prosperity, now are in decline; these are not what are called *chang* 常. Only that which lives with the beginning of the separation of heaven and

earth, yet does not die or wane until the dissipation of heaven and earth is called *chang* 常.”⁸⁷ Therefore, *chang* 常 has the meaning of constancy and abidingness in it. Yet as soon as we try to grasp this from any metaphysical meaning, we have already brushed past *Dao*. What is called *chang* 常 does not lie in the changeless world of ideas which is separated from the mundane world. On the contrary, the constancy of *Dao* lies in the ceaselessly transforming world. That is why Han Feizi continues, “that which is constant does not change, yet has no fixed principle (*li* 理), has no fixed principle at a permanent place. Thus it is ineffable.”⁸⁸ And “the sage sees its nothingness, makes use of its ceaseless running, and therefore is forced to call it *Dao*. It is only now that we can speak of it. For this reason it is said, ‘the *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *Dao*.’”⁸⁹

Chang is often associated with knowing in the *Daodejing*, called *zhichang* 知常, knowing the common. It is also connected with *xi* 習 (to practice), called *xichang* 習常. I will discuss the *xi* 習 character later. Now I am going to focus on *zhichang* 知常, knowing the common. Knowing the common first of all contains the meaning of “preserving the emptiness.” Only when the self and the non-be-ing as the root-source of time become one can the illumination of knowing be generated. This might seem at odds with what we usually consider as “knowledge.” In a Daoist perspective the common sense of knowledge commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: being involved with things and dealing with things, we normally construe knowledge as knowing things “out there,” while not knowing enough about things is considered to be ignorance. This understanding of knowledge forsakes the source of knowing, and becomes inevitably entrapped in following things. Some mainstream metaphysics, for example, construes achieving an objectivity and certainty with regard to things as knowledge. But the objectivity of things can only be presented and sought through the setup of the subjectivity of subjects, which leaves it in endless contradictions. This understanding of knowing, thereon, only turns round and round in the circle of knowing the quantity, the magnitude of things. The essence of knowing, however, is still beyond its horizon. Daoism conceives of the oneness of self and original time as the source of knowing. This is the original self, in the intimacy with which we are able to *know*

⁸⁷ “夫物之一存一亡，乍死乍生，初盛而後衰者，不可謂常。唯夫與天地之剖判也俱生，至天地之消散也不死不衰者謂常。”

⁸⁸ “而常者，無攸易，無定理，無定理非在於常所，是以不可道也。”

⁸⁹ “聖人觀其玄虛，用其周行，強字之曰道，然而可論。故曰：「道之可道，非常道也。」”

at all. This is why Zhuangzi maintains: “There must be the true woman first for there to be true knowing.” (*Zhuangzi·Da Zongshi*, “The Great Master”) “Knowing the common (*zhichang* 知常) is called illumination (*ming* 明)” is to preserve the common (*chang* 常) of one’s nature (*xing* 性) in silent emptiness, so that all beings can be illuminated. This is the inherent connotation of the unfolding of the non-be-ing as the ceaseless generativity that withholds the original meaning of time in it.

However, very often we find that the heart-mind is trapped in protean colors of the world, only to be obscured by the myriad things. Such is the happening of ignorance (*wuming* 無明 lit. non-illumination). Ignorance breeds reckless and illusory heart-minds. And recklessness arouses ominous clouds. This is why Laozi says, “not knowing the common leads to recklessness; Ominous it is to act out of recklessness.”

Owing to the sameness of the power of generativity and non-be-ing as the root-source in time, the fate of self, i.e., the self of no-self for Daoism, is disclosed in destining. All beings gain their time with their existence, eventually losing it. The experience of genertivity consists in the historicity of self. Historicity first of all means determinacy and limitation. Historicity constitutes my existence and thereby limits it. The historicity of self denotes *youshi* 有時, the be-ing of time, that is, a particular time, or “sometimes.” This is what Zhuangzi calls “as for *dao* there is no (*wu* 無) end or beginning; as for things there is (*you* 有) death and life.” The non-be-ing of the *dao* and be-ing of things speak to us about the tension between permanence and transience, which itself belongs to the sameness of them. Death and life manifest the passing-away of time to us as fate: life is like the dew on a petal. No one knows when it’s going to drop to the earth.

Caught in the impermanence of fate, we strive to grasp time. But aren’t we already separate from time when we want to grasp time? Therefore it is precisely when we want to grasp time that the meaning of time is obscured. This, of course, is not advocating for an attitude of idleness, especially in our time, when time is viewed as money. What this says is the happening of ignorance: only when the self and the original time become one in darkness can illumination be generated; when the self is separated from the original time, however, it will inevitably be ensnared in things and come into conflict with things. The heart-mind of discrimination follows

the flow of things and therein appears the gusty wind and hard rain,⁹⁰ right and wrong, and impermanence. The sense of loss comes along with impermanence and is rooted in the separation of the self and the original time. The self is now drifting in the ups and downs of fate, forgetting her belonging to the destining of time. Thereby she falls into impermanence. Ignorance gives rise to impermanence; impermanence gives rise to ignorance.

However, the historicity of the self is not closed off like an independent piece in the destining of being. Neither is self a discrete atomic individual, to which time is only distributed as fragments. Seen from the fact that “I am time,” the self in generativity is open to both past and future, and therefore present. As my understanding of time changes, my understanding of my own experience of the past, future and present changes too. My world thus changes together with this process. This is not to say, of course, that time and experience are only subjective ideas. Rather the very possibility of the unity of the subjective and objective experience is rooted in the original meaning of time. The determinacy and limitation of our historicity, the self-identity is a gate towards transcendence, which transfers us to permanence and thereby affirms our self-identity in the present. As such transience is preserved in permanence.

Historicity is given to us for the sake of the transcendence towards permanence, for the reason of which there is freedom. Freedom only manifests itself in historicity and determinacy. Historicity in this sense is freedom. However, when we don’t see it freedom goes into hiding. It is in this sense that transcendence is necessary for the sake of freedom.

Ultimately time and self belong to each other. What this shows is that, on the one hand, my very existence is acquired in time and through time; on the other hand, the original self is at one with the non-be-ing of time. Such is non-self.

Next I will take a close look at chapter 52 of the Daodejing.

The world has a beginning (<i>shi</i> 始)	天下有始
And this beginning is the mother (<i>mu</i> 母) of the world.	以為天下母
Having obtained (<i>de</i> 得) the mother,	既得其母
You can understand her progeny.	以知其子
Having understood her progeny,	既知其子
You go back and guard (<i>shou</i> 守) the mother,	復守其母
You will thereupon live to the end of your days without danger.	沒身不殆

⁹⁰ “A gusty wind does not last a whole morning, and a torrential rain does not last a whole day.” (“飄風不終朝，驟雨不終日。” DDJ, 23)

Block up the openings	塞其兌
And shut the gateways,	閉其門
To the end of your days you will be exempt from laborious exertion.	終身不勤
But if you vent the openings	開其兌
And spend your breath in the promotion of affairs,	濟其事
To the end of your days there will be no safety.	終身不救
Making out the small is illumination (<i>ming</i> 明),	見小曰明
The guarding of what is soft and tender is strength.	守柔曰強
Use the light (<i>guang</i> 光)	用其光
And return to the illumination (<i>ming</i> 明),	復歸其明
Bring not misfortune upon yourself.	無遺身殃
This is what is called according with the common (<i>xichang</i> 習常).	是謂習常

The first verse highlights the notion that original time is the beginning and the mother of all. Beginning here does not mean anything like a past fact that only happened once and disappeared ever after. The beginning is that which persists through all changes and makes change possible. That's why it is called the mother of all. One has to reach the beginning and preserve it in oneself. *De* 得 is to become one with time. Only so one can get to know things, and then return to time on the involvement with things. "The openings" and "the gateways" refer to the light of knowing, which is called "use" later on. Su Zhe commentates as follows, "Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and thought encounter things and there are sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and idea. These are all lights (*guang* 光)." Here Laozi takes the use of our senses as the light of our hear-mind. That which is "small" and "soft and tender" both refer to the nonbeing of *dao*. The light of knowing illuminates all beings thereby returns to its illumination, holding onto the dark non-be-ing of time, wherein things and self are fused together into one process. There is no boundary between the world and self. Therefore non-self is achieved. Only with non-self can one stay safe all one's life. It is noticeable that Laozi distinguishes "light" and "illumination" here. Light comes from illumination, which again comes from darkness.

According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, *xi* 習 refers to the birds' practice of flying. Laozi uses *xichang* 習常 to mean our practice to return to constancy in our involvement with things. The *xichang* that uses the light and returns to the illumination means to enter into the indeterminate permanence on a particular situation and at a particular time, in order for the meaning of a

particular time to be illuminated by permanence. The golden light that falls on the green leaves in the early afternoon announces the presence of permanence.

Time is the illumination of every present moment that is rooted in non-be-ing. However, this does not mean, as it is in Aristotelian philosophy, that time is a linear succession of “now” points. Rather, it is coextensive with the unfolding of nature itself. Nevertheless, because everything is time, there is ultimately no ‘fleetingness’ to time, no coming and going of all things.

Zhuangzi-Zhi Beiyao says, “We speak of waxing and waning; of withering and decay. Though the waxing and waning are not waxing and waning; the withering and decay is not withering and decay. The root and branches are not root and branches; the accumulation and dispersion is itself neither accumulated nor dispersed.”⁹¹

Thereupon there is no past and present, no beginning or end. This is not in any sense a denial of historicity, for it contains historicity in itself. Self is therefore always at the permanent present. The Platform Sutra says, “It lasts many kalpas being lost, but it is in a instant that enlightenment happens.” The instant present is the cross point of time and timelessness. The accomplishment of permanence requires in the first place the present. Permanence is only perceived in the present. There is a saying in Chan Buddhism that perfectly depicts this fact: “emptiness of ten thousand years, this wind and this moon at this evening.” The present is the condensation of the power of generativity, instead of some present-at-hand being waiting to be objectified at any moment. The present is the lively self-soing nature, which transfers the ceaseless flow of history to permanence.


3.2 Ziran: the Place of *Dao*

In the last section I try to elucidate the original meaning of time through the temporality of *dao*. In this following section I am going to explore the place of *dao*.

If we ask the question, “Where is the place of *dao*?” Anybody with some knowledge of Chinese philosophy will tell us right away: “*Dao* is in the myriad things.” Or, “*Dao* is everywhere.” But what does this “is in” mean? Of course *dao* is not in the myriad things like a button in a box, as is suggested by some substantial thinking. *Dao* is not a substance, neither are

⁹¹ “謂盈虛衰殺, 彼為盈虛非盈虛, 彼為衰殺非衰殺, 彼為本末非本末, 彼為積散非積散也。”

things. Still the language compels us: *dao* is in the myriad things. Insofar as “is in” signifies place, it shows us the coming-together of being and place. Since the myriad things are indicated as the place of *dao*, this word further shows us the belonging-together of things and place.

The Chinese character for “is in” is *zai* 在, that is, “道在萬物.” *Zai* 在 designates the place of *dao*. In the Oracle Bones Script *zai* 在 is written as . The left side is “*cai* 才” which symbolizes a seed sprouting out of the earth, and the right side of it is the earth. The whole character shows us the location of the sprouting, with the earth radical emphasizing the place. What is significant for us today is that the Chinese language understands place through the self-emerging of the sprout. And, inasmuch as the sprouting designates the seed as it *is*, this understanding of place is at one with being.

The Chinese character *zai* 在 has a wide range of meanings. It means to live, to dwell, to preserve, to abide, etc. Interestingly, etymologically *zai* has a similar meaning with the English word “being.” *Zai* can be used to refer to the existence of things, as in the phrase *cunzai* 存在 (to preserve and to be); it marks out a certain place as well as a certain time. So we can say *zaimoudi* 在某地 or *zaimoushi* 在某时, i.e., at a certain place, at a certain time, or in a certain situation, under a certain context. In this sense *zai* mainly indicates the determinate characteristic of place; it can refer to the happening or going-on of something, as in *zaizuomoushi* 在做某事, meaning doing something. Concerning the etymological implications with the sprouting seed, it also means “letting be,” or “being free,” as it is said in *Zhuangzi*, “I have heard of letting the world be; I have not heard of governing the world.” (“聞在宥天下, 不聞治天下也.”⁹²)

We are told by Chinese philosophy that *dao* is in the myriad things. And we have questioned what the “is in” means. To answer this question, however, we need to further question, how is *dao* in the myriad things? In the sense that the phrase “is in” signifies the place of *dao*, this is asking, how is the place of *dao*?

How is *dao* in the myriad things? In what sense is *dao* in the myriad things? And how is the place of *dao*? These are questions that are bound up with and refer to each other.

As the unfolding of *dao*, what *zai* manifests to us is nothing less than the transformation of the myriad things. Therefore, *dao* is in the waxing and waning of the moon, the rising and the falling of waves, the arising and passing away of all things, as we’ve shown in the temporality of

⁹² Chen Guying, 1983, 292.

dao. That *dao* (the way) is in the myriad things is to say, ways are opened up in the happening of all the ten thousand things. *Dao* flows with the myriad things. Therefore Laozi says, “That *dao* is in the world is like the streams from the valleys flowing to the great rivers and oceans.”⁹³ (DDJ, 32) The streams start from mountains and valleys, and run to rivers and oceans. The mountains and valleys are still, and thus can be viewed as *yin*; the flow of the rivers is an image of flux, and thus can be viewed as *yang*. Hence *yin* and *yang* come together, and flow incessantly. There is nowhere that *dao* is not.

Dao is in things in such a way that things can preserve their essential nature (*ziran*) and thereupon dwell in their nature, that is, they can be as they are. This is to say, *dao* is in things so that things can dwell in *dao*. Insofar as a thing is as it is, it is therefore free. The flowing of *dao* marks out the openness and spontaneity of the myriad things. For nature, essence and the openness or spontaneity and freedom of things I understand as the same. It is this openness of things that is called *ziran* 自然 in early Daoism. Nevertheless, *ziran* as self-soing does not only concern things but it first of all concerns the *dao*. That which is self-emerging is nothing but the *dao*.

Consider the night-blooming cereus. This night-blooming cereus, its leaves lying on the short black wall piled up by the lava rocks in front of this middle school, perceives the spring night *qi* and blooms with the full moon at a certain time deep at night. It then withers with the shining of the sunlight on the second day. *Dao* abides in its short blooming and withering; its thick and strong green leaves hold the shining sunlight and the wild wind within them. Thereby *dao* flows. The night-blooming cereus is as it is in its spontaneity, or self-soing. Therefore we say the night-blooming cereus *is*, or it exits.

The unfolding of place is at one with the happening of things. Usually the unfolding of place is cognized as the concept of space. However, as we see here place is not the abstract concept measured by its magnitudes and based on the empty physical notion of space that is understood as the boundless three-dimensional extension in which objects can have their positions. Place is at one with the self-soing of things which again belongs to the unfolding of the *dao*. Only in the letting-be (*wuwei* 無為) of the *dao* can things open up in spontaneity. In their spontaneity the *dao* can be guarded in the world. The openness of the spontaneity of things preserves their nature, which is always finite and determinate. In this sense *zai* designates the determinate character of

⁹³ “譬道之在天下，猶川谷之於江海。”

place. That is, everything that is has to be at a certain place, at a certain time, under a certain circumstances, in a certain historical context. However, finitude can only be possible when infinitude is already given through it; and determinacy can only accomplish its boundaries when indeterminacy is already preserved in it. As the self-emerging of things, *zai* designates the *yang* side or the *you* 有 (be-ing) of place.

Another Chinese character for place is *huo* 或 or *yu* 域. *Yu* was developed later by adding the earth radical to it. But it was originally written as *huo* 或. In the Oracle Bones Script *huo* was written as 𠂔. The right side symbolizes some weapon and the left side is a mouth that refers to beings. The whole character means using a weapon to guard a place. It marks out a territory, such that the character *guo* 國, i.e., a country or a state was interchangeable with it. Similarly with *zai*, *huo* contains a wide range of meanings. It can refer to some place, some time, or some situation etc. *Huo* also has the meaning of “being,” though understood in an indeterminate sense. *Huo* then can mean “or,” “or else,” or “perhaps.” It signifies the indeterminate existence of something.

Usually when we talk about place we naturally imagine some particular place, i.e., a locale. *Huo*, however, jumps out of this understanding of place as some confinement of a fixed locale. This is not to say that *huo* means some abstract idea of place. It signifies an indeterminacy, as can be seen in common phrases such as this or that, perhaps this perhaps that, maybe here maybe there (all of these phrases can be translated as *huocihuobi* 或此或彼 in Chinese), maybe now maybe then (或今或夕), etc.

This indeterminate character indicates openness and so makes *huo* a very important idea in early Daoist texts. In chapter 25 Laozi refers to the space opened up by the four greats (the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly, and the human) as *huo* 或, or *yu* 域. Also in the Autumn Floods chapter of the *Zhuangzi* the place of *dao* is called the utmost *yu*. (“至大之域”) The existence of *dao* is called *sihuocun* 似或存 by Laozi – maybe it is. The being of *dao* understood in this sense is not the absolute and changeless “being” that shines forth in its very *eidos* (originally meaning “appearance”), as is stated by Plato, what is “completely is,” “purely is,” and “perfectly is.” (*Rep.* 477a, 478d, 479d.) On the contrary, the being of *dao* is indeterminate (*huo* 或). It appears as though it is, but it is not, that is to say, it is formless and soundless. It is non-be-ing, yet it always is. *Huo* as the indeterminacy of be-ing and non-be-ing designates the way that *dao* is in the world,

for the reason of which freedom is open to us. For this indeterminate character of *dao* Laozi describes it as *zhan* 湛, which refers to water as being deep and clear. *Zhan* 湛 also has the meaning of immersing. *Dao* immerses in the world, and this is to speak about the hiding of *dao* in the world. It is that which hides that is emerging. Therefore *dao* is everywhere.

Huo as indeterminacy designates the *yin* side of the place of *dao*. As we have discussed above, in the sense that place indicates the happening of a certain event or thing, it means a particular locale. In this case it manifests as boundaries. That is, I am here, she is there; this is me, that is her; I am not you and you are not me. There must be boundaries and distinctions between me and other beings. *Dao* is in the myriad things. Nevertheless, *dao* is not fixed here or there, now or then. Seen from the perspective of things, there is this and that, waxing and waning; there is end and beginning, arising and passing away. Seen from the perspective of *dao*, all waves belong to the one water of the ocean. All has no distinction and forms one body. Therefore there is no this or that, no here or there, no end or beginning, and thus no past or present, no arising and passing away of all. This territory (*huo* 或) has no boundaries. Determinacy leads to indeterminacy. Indeterminacy flows through determinacy. Therefore we can be at home. Every moment and everywhere is home. Thus we roam together with the happy fishes in the water of *dao*.

Next I will use the recently excavated text *HengXian* 恒先 to illuminate the meaning of *huo* 或, and its intertwinement with *heng* 恒 and be-ing and non-be-ing. The character *huo* in *HengXian* is used to indicate the indeterminate status of the generation of *dao* between be-ing and non-be-ing. *Dao* is in all beings yet it is non-be-ing, that is, formless and soundless. Though *dao* is non-be-ing, it has to *be*. Therefore it is called indeterminate (*huo*). The *heng* 恒 character designates the temporality of *dao*, wherein constancy dwells.

From the perspective of common sense, the *hengxian* text seems to offer us two contradictory cosmologies. In the beginning it shows us a familiar picture of “be-ing generates from non-be-ing”:

In the primordial state of Constancy (*heng* 恒), there is non-be-ing (*wuyou* 無有). There is simplicity, tranquility, and emptiness. Simplicity is Great Simplicity; stillness is Great Tranquility; emptiness is Great Emptiness. It fulfills itself without repressing itself.

The indeterminate (*huo* 或) arises. Once there is the indeterminate (*huo* 或), there is *qi*; once there is *qi*, there is be-ing (*youyou* 有有); once there is be-ing (*youyou* 有有), there is a beginning; once there is a beginning, there is coming and going.

There is not yet Heaven and Earth; there is not yet arising, progression, emergence, or engendering. Empty, tranquil, and as though one. Muddled and murky! All is tranquil in one. There is not yet light, not yet teeming life.⁹⁴ 恆先無有，樸、靜、虛。樸大樸，靜大靜，虛大虛。自厭不自忍，或作。有或焉有氣，有氣焉有有，有有焉有始，有始焉有往者。未有天地，未(第1簡)有作行。出生虛靜，為一若寂，夢夢靜同，而未或明，未或滋生。

Insofar as it depicts the arising of beings from nonbeing, it is similar with what Zhuangzi calls *huoshi* 或使, i.e., “Something causes it.” Though next it overthrows this view and maintains that *qi* is self-generating.

Qi is self-generating; Constancy does not engender *qi*. *Qi* is self-generating and self-arising. The engendering of Constant *Qi* does not happen in isolation; there is something that takes part [in the process]. The indeterminate and the constant (*Huo* 或 and *heng* 恒) are at one with each other. The same can be said of the generation of the indeterminate.

氣是自生，恆莫生氣。氣是自生自作。恆氣之(第2簡)生，不獨有與也。或，恆焉，生或者同焉。

The problem is, then, if *qi* is self-generating and *heng* does not engender *qi*, how should we understand the position of *heng* or constancy in this generation process? The self-generating and self-arising of *qi* is beginningless and endless, apparently this goes against the view of “*hengxianwuyou* 恆先無有,” that is, there is non-be-ing in the beginning which affirms a beginning. Understood as such, then, it would be close to what Zhuangzi calls *mowei* 莫為, viz., “No thing causes it.” In this case, so, how should we understand the status of the beginning non-be-ing?

If we do not take this as a mere cosmology, I think the *Hengxian* text is not self-contradictory. That “constancy does not engender *qi*” is to say *heng* which designates the opening of original time as non-be-ing is not *a* being. There are different ways of punctuations to the sentence of “恆氣之生，不獨有與也。或恆焉生或者同焉。” For the first line we can read it as “the generation of the constant *qi*”. The punctuation should be after *hengqi* 恆氣; or “constancy is the generation of *qi*.” The punctuation should then be after *heng* 恒. In any case, I think what these lines mean is that constancy, indeterminacy and the generation of *qi* are the

⁹⁴ My translation.

same process. I therefore read the first sentence as: Constancy designates the generation of *qi*, which is a dynamic process of the interchange of *yin* and *yang*. Therefore it is said, it is not *du* 獨 (alone, discrete) but has *yu* 與 (company). *Heng* is the very process of the self-generation and self-arising of *qi*, instead of some substantial “being” that is outside of this process. Even if we follow the other punctuation and read it as the constant *qi* (*hengqi* 恒氣), it expresses the same meaning. In fact this is why *qi* can be called *hengqi*, i.e., the constant *qi*. The status of simplicity, tranquility and emptiness does not simply regard with cosmology, but serves as a metaphor for the experience of the *dao*. Later on it says, “Events comes along with *zuo* 作 (doing, acting); without *zuo* there is no events.” (“作焉有事, 不作无事.”) *Zuo* designates the arising of human desires, in which non-be-ing is obscured. The character *zuo* highlights the subject’s experience. The events that are associated with *you* or be-ing is a contrast with the nonbeing that only presents itself in non-acting (*buzuo* 不作), which is a common idea to Daoism. Simplicity, tranquility and emptiness reveal to us the original non-be-ing of time, that is, constancy.

Therefore *Hengxian* shows us this significant phenomenon: It understands *heng* (temporality), *huo* (place), and the generation of *qi* as the same process. The mutual interpretation of *huo* and *heng* (indeterminacy and constancy) presents to us the inseparability of time and place. Nevertheless, this is different from the scientific abstract idea of the “spacetime” as a unified entity calculated by mathematical models that combine space and time into a single continuum. What *huo*, *heng*, and *zai* all show us is the ceaseless transformation of all things. And in this sense things, place, time, be-ing and non-be-ing are involved with and belong to each other, for the reason of which the abstract scientific measurement can be possible at all.

3.3 “*Dao* Emulates *Ziran*”

What is significant here is that, Laozi directly refers to *ziran* as *huo*, or the space that is opened up by the four greats, i.e., the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly, and the human. Next I will take a close look at chapter 25 of the *DDJ* to investigate the involvement of *ziran*, place, time, and the *dao*, and hope to elaborate the meaning of “*Dao* emulates *ziran*” which has caused much perplex nowadays. Chapter 25 reads:

There is a thing (*youwu* 有物), a “gathering” chaos (*huncheng* 混成), 有物混成

Emerging before the heavenly and the earthly.	先天地生
Silent! Empty!	寂兮寥兮
Standing alone, it does not change,	獨立不改
Going round, it is inexhaustible,	周行而不殆
It can be thought of as the mother of the world.	可以為天下母
I know not its name.	吾不知其名
If I were to style it, I would call it <i>dao</i> .	字之曰道
And if forced to give it a name,	強為之名曰大
I would call it the Great (<i>da</i> 大).	
Being great, it is called passing,	大曰逝
Passing, it is called distancing.	逝曰遠
Distancing, it is called returning.	遠曰反
Therefore the <i>dao</i> is great,	故道大
The heavenly is great,	天大
The earthly is great,	地大
And the human ⁹⁵ is also great.	人 ⁹⁶ 亦大
Within our territories (<i>yu</i> 域) there are four greats,	域中有四大
And the human is one of them.	而人居其一焉
The human emulates (<i>fa</i> 法) ⁹⁷ the earthly;	人法地
The earthly emulates the heavenly;	地法天
The heavenly emulates the <i>dao</i> ;	天法道
The <i>dao</i> emulates <i>ziran</i> . ⁹⁸	道法自然

In the very beginning of this chapter, Laozi underscores *dao* as *you* 有, meaning that it *is*. The ten thousand things (humans included) are all born between heaven and earth, yet *dao* emerges before heaven and earth. So how is this *you* or be-ing of the *dao*? Laozi says, it is

⁹⁵ This is according to *Fu Yi's* version. There are other versions that substitute the character *wang* 王 (kings) for *ren* 人 (humans).

⁹⁶ In both the Mawangdui Silk Texts and the Guodian Bamboo Texts the human (*ren* 人) here is written as the king (*wang* 王). Scholars have different readings concerning these two characters. I take the human here for the consistency with the four emulations that follows right after.

⁹⁷ *Fa* 法, means “to follow”, “to take measure from”.

⁹⁸ Edited translation from R. T. Ames, 2003, 115. See also Chang Chuang-Yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975, 71.

huncheng 混成 and *jiliao* 寂寥 (“silent,” “empty”). That which is silent is soundless; that which is empty is formless. The *jiliao* is to speak of the non-be-ing of the *dao*. that is to say, Laozi here is using the non-be-ing of *dao* to illuminate its be-ing. *Cheng* 成 means becoming, accomplishing. *Hun* 混 originally symbolizes the stirring of water, meaning vague and opaque. In this sense it is interchangeable with *hun* 渾 which is homophonic with it. Just like *huanghu* 恍惚 and *yaoming* 杳冥, it is to speak of the oneness of be-ing and non-be-ing (*youwu* 有無). What’s more, *Shuowen Jiezi* says, “*hun* 混 depicts an abundant torrent.” As Mencius says, “the source and the springs flow ceaselessly (*hunhun* 混混), resting not day nor night.”⁹⁹ Whence the *hun* 混 character expresses the springing out of the *dao* and things like waters, illustrating their incessant and creative flowing and transformation. Under this interpretation, the *hun* 混 character resonates with the following account in chapter 25 of *Dao De Jing*, that “Going round, it is inexhaustible,” that it is “grand” and “passing” and “going afar” and ultimately “returning.”

The *dao* that emerges before the heavenly and the earthly is the time of non-be-ing as the root-source, therefore it is called the mother of all. Insomuch as it is that which all beings are already on, it is called the great Way, the *dao*. “Great”, “passing”, “distancing”, and “returning” all designate the running of *dao*, which is later on referred to as *ziran* in this chapter.

Thereupon Laozi moves on to the “Four Greats.” “The *dao* is great, the heavenly is great, the earthly is great, and the human is also great.” And he stresses thereby, “Within the territories (*yu* 域), there are four greats, and the human is one of them.” This stress, however, is not on the importance of humans, contrary to anthropocentric assumptions. Rather, it is on human’s awareness of her belonging-to. In other words, the very importance of human lies in her awareness of her belonging-to. He proceeds: “The human emulates (*fa* 法, means “to follow”, “to take measure from”) the earthly, the earthly emulates the heavenly, the heavenly emulates the *dao*, the *dao* emulates *ziran*.” According to He Shang-Gong, the human should emulate the tranquility and mildness of the earthly.¹⁰⁰ The grains and fruits that she eats, the spring water that she drinks and the clothes that she wears are all from the earthly. The rotation of the seasons of the earthly follows the moves of sun and moon in the heavenly, therefore it is said, “The earthly emulates the heavenly.” The movement of sun and moon again follows the *dao*. *The ceaseless*

⁹⁹ Mencius·*Lilou Xia*, “源泉混混，不捨晝夜。”

¹⁰⁰ See He Shang-Gong, *Commentary on Laozi’s Dao De Jing* in 嚴凌峰 編 <無求備齋老子集成>, 1965.

process of unfolding and returning of the heavenly, the earthly, and the ten thousand things (the human included) itself is the self-soing (*ziran*) of *dao*. For this reason it is said, “the *dao* emulates *ziran*”. This is why He Shang-Gong comments here, “*Dao* is self-soing (naturally so) and it emulates nothing.” That *dao* takes measure from (*fa* 法) nothing is because it is never apart from the ten thousand things. There is nothing that is not *dao*.

After the overall interpretation of chapter 25 of *Dao De Jing*, next I will elucidate on the meaning of *Daofaziran* 道法自然 (“*Dao* emulates *ziran*”), about which there have been ongoing controversies throughout history. Some, e.g., He Shang-Gong, interpret it from the view of the *ziran* of *dao* itself; some claim that the *ziran* here refers to the *ziran* of the ten thousand things. Wang Bi’s commentary apparently supports this view.¹⁰¹ Hitherto there is an ongoing debate on whether the *ziran* here should be predicated of the *dao* or the ten thousand things. Amongst the contemporary scholars, Chen Guying and Liu Xiaogan basically hold that the *ziran* here refers to the *ziran* of the *dao*; while Wang Bo and Wang Zhongjiang hold that *ziran* can only be predicated of things.¹⁰² D. C. Lau avoids this dilemma by translating the “*ziran*” here as “that which is naturally so”; so does Ames with the translation “what is spontaneously so.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, in my view once the meaning of *ziran* is illuminated, we will see these interpretations are not contradictory to one another. Laozi talks about the four greats of *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly and the human, further elucidating it with the four *fa* (emulations) of one another. This shows us that the four greats are ultimately one. That which makes the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly, and the human one is the very event of *ziran*. *Ziran* is that which penetrates the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly and the human. It is the field opened up by the four greats.

The very process that *dao* dwells in the world is a self-soing, i.e., *ziran*. Next, in order to reveal the meaning of *daofaziran* we will look at the *fa* 法. It says, “*Dao* emulates (*fa* 法) *ziran*.” Besides the conventional translation of “emulate”, the *fa* 法 here has some deeper meaning. *Erya*·*Shigu* says, “*fa* means *chang* 常 (constancy, consistency)”. Therefore what “*dao* emulates

¹⁰¹ Wang Bi’s commentary reads: “法自然者，在方而法方，在圓而法圓，於自然無所違也。自然者，無稱之言，窮極之辭也。”

¹⁰² See 陳鼓應, <老子注譯及評介>, 北京: 中華書局, 2009, 163. Liu, Xiaogan, 2006, 290. Wang, Bo, 1995: <老子“自然”观念的初步研究>, in <中国哲学史> Issue 3 and 4. Wang, Zhongjiang, <道与事物的自然: 老子“道法自然”实义考论>, in <哲学研究> 2010, Issue 8.

¹⁰³ Lau, 1963, 30. Ames, 2003, 115.

ziran” says is *dao* gains its constancy through the process of *ziran*, that is, its self-soing. Hitherto this *chang* 常 that is usually translated as permanence is not fixed to a simple location, but rather, precisely an impermanence, a *wuchang* 無常. This *chang* is itself the self-soing of *dao* and the ten thousand things, resonant to *heng*. That “the human emulates the the earthly; the the earthly emulates the the heavenly; the the heavenly emulates the *dao*; and the *dao* emulates *ziran*” is to say the human gains her constancy through the self-soing of the the earthly, of the the heavenly and of the *dao*.

Ziran is the very process of the transformation of *dao* and things, in which the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly and humans are in harmony as one. *Dao* and things are different aspects that are used in history to articulate the same event of *ziran*, through which we can see the inseparability and the ultimate oneness of *dao* and things.

To summarize chapter 25 of *Dao De Jing*, it begins with the *dao*, then disseminates in the middle as the ten thousand things (the grand, passing, going afar, and returning of all), and then generalizes all as the Four Greats. The Four Greats emulate one another, and all of these aspects are brought together as the process of *ziran*. That “the human emulates the the earthly; the the earthly emulates the the heavenly; the heavenly emulates the *dao*; and the *dao* emulates *ziran*” is to say the *dao*, the heavenly, the earthly and the human, all in the cosmos are self-soing (*ziran* 自然). I will further examine the meaning of “*Dao* emulates *ziran*” through the spontaneity of things in the next chapter.

In the first two chapters of my project I focus on *ziran* of *dao*. I have illuminated the root-source meaning of *dao* through an examination of the meaning of be-ing and non-be-ing. This part is called the self of self-soing. Then I elaborated the soing of self-soing through the temporality and place of *dao*. The self is constituted by the soing; the soing is always the self-soing of the *dao*. They denote the same event of the unfolding of *dao* and things.

4. The *Ziran* of the Myriad Things: The Spontaneity of Things

What is “the myriad things”? Is it simply the aggregation of things?

There has been no time like ours wherein things are brought to us in such quick and expedient ways. As a contrast to this quickness and expedience, however, the clean water, fresh

air and rich soil etc., viz., the basic “things” on which the existence of all things depends, are now becoming more and more rare. The uniformity of the industrial production has caused the disappearance of diversity from our world. Under humans’ insatiable desire for things, the ceaselessly generative realm of the myriad things has receded. (I understand “the myriad things” here in terms of the Buddhist idea of “realm” (*jingjie* 境界), which is not merely the sum total of things, nor is it only a subjective human experience, but the realization of diversity.)

But aren’t things always already presented to us under the insatiable desire for things in our capitalist consumeristic time? Our world is filled up with all sorts of products; meanwhile, the realm of the myriad things has left us. Here it seems appropriate for us to make the common sense distinction between natural things and man-made products. Obviously, natural things are becoming more and more rare in our daily life, while man-made products are occupying the world. But what does this distinction mean? What if precisely it is in this ancient and convenient distinction that the destining of the departing of the myriad things has been fermented? This distinction then will not be able to reveal but rather conceal deeper problems. For now I don’t make this distinction. What needs to be questioned is: Where did we lose the meaning of things? How can it be presented to us?

As a matter of fact we are always dealing with things. In this time dominated by capitalistic means of consumption, however, the association between things and humans is flattened: things are only processed, managed and consumed as goods. This is so with the things in regard to our clothing, eating, living and transportation; it is also true with the “nature” that is under protection. A whole industry has been built up around humans’ recreation in “nature.” The spectacles in nature have become goods to be consumed in our time.

Let us take a look at a common scene in our daily life: I go to the supermarket to buy apples. These apples come far away from New Zealand. From the plantation to the transportation to the supermarket, the processing of these apples is controlled by capitalist industry through modern science and technology. The pesticides and fertilizers used in the growth of the apple trees and the chemicals needed in their storage are all carefully calculated by scientists in the labs and controlled by the industrial chain. Here the industrial chain is not only an economic form, rather it delineates the existence of the modern man on the different levels of ontology, ethics and politics. Both space and time are overcome here. New Zealand’s autumn is packaged and frozen

in a supermarket, presented to me as a commodity. And I, as a consumer, live in spring at another corner of the world.

Apples in this picture are not even related to apple trees. What apple trees look like, when they bloom, how their flowers and leaves are, and the earth, day and night, wind and rain that are condensed in the growth of the trees are all concealed. Apples are therefore deprived of any identity related to its life (the growth of the apple tree), existing only as an object to be consumed. Meanwhile, although science and technology have become the belief of our time, the “knowing” of things of humans as consumers is becoming poorer and poorer. Knowing of things is taken away from the lifeworld and reduced into scientific knowledge, which is again transferred into the hands of some small groups of experts and becomes a means to control things for the purpose of making profits. It is noteworthy that a double alienation and exploitation towards both things and humans happens simultaneously in this picture. For this reason, different from a prevalent narrative of “humans master nature”, I maintain that the modern myth of master/slave between humans and nature has been an illusory political, economic and philosophical construct from the beginning. The process of the domination of nature is at the same time the one of humans’ self-alienation. So what does this “same process” mean? What relation of things and humans is revealed to us here?

Modern attitudes towards things have historical roots. Many western metaphysics seek the nature or essence of things in a changeless oneness. Therefore, the nature of things is severed out of things and, whether put in a separate realm of *eidos*, or insinuated in the changing properties of things as *ὑποκείμενον* (*hypokeimenon*), i.e., something that underlies. The nature of things thus presented can only be grasped by human reason or *λόγος*, whose function is viewed as the unification of the sporadic changing appearances of things. (*λέγω*, the verbal form of *λόγος*, has the meaning of “gathering”, from which developed the meaning of “unify”.) Nevertheless, things and nature in this view are de-natured to the extent that they are merely appearances whose truth is controlled and to be unconcealed by human knowledge. As is shown by the Greek word for “truth”, *ἀλήθεια* originally means “unconcealment”, famously elaborated by Heidegger. In modern metaphysics things are understood as objects that “object” to man and resist against man. And, for this reason, they need to be subjected to man, the subject. Things or nature have no independent existence apart from human subjectivity.

Things or nature in this picture are postulated as the other of the human self, which is identified through reason. Such is the simultaneous postulation of the rational self and nature in many forms of western metaphysics. However, the nature of things cannot be grasped by the objectification of them, which is nothing but an illusory ongoing self-construction and self-affirmation of the human ego. It alienates at once both the nature of things and that of humans. At the end of the day, we have to ask, even if we could spread the last particle of a flower in front of us, can the nature or meaning of the flower then be revealed to us? Precisely in the self-construction of the anthropocentric ego that seeks to conquer and master, the nature of things is lost and goes into hiding.

The changeless oneness thus grasped is, in the end, an anthropocentric self-construct which aims to control, channel, and manipulate things that are ultimately in ceaseless generativity. It scrapes a thin layer on the surface of the spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) of things and uses it to set up walls against the spontaneity of things. (Notice that *eidos* originally means “form” and “appearance.”) — Our scientific knowledge, insofar as it aims to dominate things, does not go further than this. Thereby we’ve built up our own underground prison, in the omnipresent spontaneity of things, so that we can seek safety and freedom, which is done by entrenching the walls against things. Meanwhile, we are not completely ignorant of our belonging to things; it is still dimly felt in our fragmented scientific and technological being. Thereby we are left in fear, waiting for the unpredictable punishments of gods, like Prometheus.

The nature of things is expressed through *ziran* in Daoist philosophy. The *ziran* of things is the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實) of the world, which expresses the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. For the translation of *ziran* in terms of things I will use “spontaneity”, the meaning of which will be elaborated through *de* 德, *sheng* 生 (and *xing* 性), freedom, and equality in the next sections. “The ultimate reality” here should not be misunderstood as implying something underlying the appearance, rather it refers to the immediately experienced yet most commonly unrecognized. What is called “the ultimate reality” here is used to express the Chinese word *zhenshi* 真實, literally meaning “true and concrete”. *Shi*

實 originally means “to fill”, and “concrete”. As Laozi says, one should “dwell in concreteness not gloriousness.”¹⁰⁴ The *shi* or concreteness here refers to *dao* and *de*. Also, chapter 16 states:

Empty (<i>xu</i> 虛) oneself so as to achieve constancy (<i>heng</i> 恒)	致虛恒也
Preserve the emptiness (<i>chong</i> 沖) so as to bring out concreteness	守沖篤也
In the process of all things emerging together	萬物旁作
I thereby observe (<i>guan</i> 觀) their reversion (<i>fu</i> 復)	吾以觀其復也
Things proliferate	夫物芸芸
And each again returns to its root	各復歸於其根
This is called tranquility	曰靜
As for tranquility, this is called returning to the destining	靜是謂復命
Returning to the destining is called the common	復命, 常也
Knowing the common is called illumination (<i>ming</i> 明)	知常, 明也
While not knowing the common leads to recklessness	不知常, 妄
Ominous it is to act out of recklessness	妄作凶
Knowing the common produces capacity and forbearance	知常容
Capacity and forbearance lead to impartiality	容乃公
From impartiality comes kingliness	公乃王
Kingliness will lead to the heavenly	王乃天
The heavenly to the <i>dao</i>	天乃道
The <i>dao</i> to persistence	道乃久
To the end of one's days, one will be free of danger	沒身不殆

the *du* 篤 here means *shi* 實, or concreteness.¹⁰⁵ *Chong* 沖 and *xu* 虛 echo each other (both meaning “emptiness”¹⁰⁶); and *heng* 恒 (“constancy”) and *du* 篤 (“concreteness”) elaborate each other. This is to say the constant true concreteness (*zhenshi* 真實) exposes itself in emptiness, i.e., *chong* and *xu*. That which is true and real (or *zhenshi* 真實) is therefore not an abstract idea, but the concreteness that is to be experienced in the our life, through the *gongfu* of emptying.

¹⁰⁴ “處其實，不居其華。” The whole chapter goes as follows, “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。夫禮者，忠信之薄，而亂之首。前識者，道之華，而愚之始。是以大丈夫處其厚，不居其薄。處其實，不居其華。故去彼取此。”

¹⁰⁵ *Du* in Chinese means concreteness or truthfulness as in the word *dushi* 篤實, meaning concrete and true.

Erya-Shigu says, “*Du* means to make concrete and strong.” (“篤, 固也.”)

¹⁰⁶ In the sense that these two terms do not mean a metaphysical void but rather depict the movement of the *dao*, the emptiness here should be understood as a throbbing one which designates the flow of all beings.

Thereon one can observe: Things proliferate and each returns to their root, going back to tranquility. Such is the spontaneity (*ziran*) of things, the way ultimate reality is. *Zhen* 真 is as what Zhuangzi says “returning to being true.”¹⁰⁷ Like the character *shi* 實, it also refers to the ultimate reality.

The *ziran* of the myriad things is the ultimate reality, which at once presents the force of circumstances and the propensity of things. Therefore the spontaneity of things is the happening of *dao*. The spontaneity of things is the expression of *dao*, and *dao* is the expression of the spontaneity of things. There is no otherworldly realm or substance called *dao* that is independent of the spontaneity of things. This is against the understanding that separates *dao* and things as two different pieces. Though this is not any dissolution of the root-source meaning of *dao*. Rather this worry itself shows the understanding of *dao* as some “thing” that is sought outside of the spontaneity of things, whereby precisely the root-source meaning of *dao* is lost. Spontaneity of things as the ultimate reality illuminates the root-source meaning of *dao*. That *dao* is the root-source means *dao* dwells in the spontaneity of the myriad things. Only at the root-source is the reality of the spontaneity of all unconcealed to humans.

“The ultimate reality” is similar to the Buddhist idea “suchness” (*zhenru* 真如, *rushi* 如是) or “the ultimate true form” (*jiujingshixiang* 究竟實相). It is, of course, different from the substantial “reality” in some forms of western metaphysics. However, it does not exclude this understanding of reality. Ultimately, the different views of reality understood from either substantiality or process are only distinct manifestations of *ziran*. Spontaneity as the ultimate reality is against the metaphysics that entitles truth only to human beings who are thought of as being exclusively equipped with *logos* amongst all beings. That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say, humans belong to truth, i.e., the *ziran* of the myriad things. In the ultimate reality as spontaneity human existence unfolds.



I would like to address a few words on the use of “reality” and “truth” here. First of all, they are understood from the Daoist terms *zhen* 真 and *shi* 實. Their meaning is thought through these

¹⁰⁷ “反其真.” See “The Great Master” and “Autumn Floods.” The *zhen* or “being true” in the *Zhuangzi* covers different levels of ontology, existentialism, and epistemology etc. Though in my view they are all grounded in the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實) itself, for the reason of which the *zhenzai* 真宰 (true master), *zhenren* 真人 (true woman), *zhenzhi* 真知 (true knowing) and *zhenxing* 真性 (true nature) become possible at all. Being true therefore pervades *dao*, *de*, things and humans. Because of the truth or *zhen* of *dao* and *de* there is the *zhen* or truth of things, (as *Tian Dao* (“The Heavenly Way”) says, “penetrates to the truth of things”, i.e., *jiwuzhizhen* 極物之真.) and that of humans.

words, which I use to shed new lights on and open new paths to thinking these essential concepts. Reality and truth in Daoist thinking raises questions as follows: Does truth and reality have to exclude different perspectives? Does the one constant truth necessarily contradict the ever-flowing truths that are in constant arising and passing-away? Does truth and reality exclusively belong to human? Daoist answer to these questions is negative. Spontaneity of things as the ultimate reality refutes these prevalent views of truth and reality in the history of philosophy: 1. There is no truth, but only historically oriented narratives and perspectives formed in the course and always after the need of power construction. In other words, truth is man-made. 2. There is the objective truth separate from the appearance of the changing world, to be achieved by human reason. 3. Truth is out there beyond the boundaries of human reason, unexperienceable. Our experience can only reach as far as the objectivity and necessity of appearance guaranteed by pure reason. The first two views fall into the either/or logic of absolutism and relativism, that is, whether there is an absolute truth, or there is no truth at all. However, as much as these two views seem to exclude and contradict each other, they both maintain that truth is a human fabrication. In this sense they both stay anthropocentric. The third one is Kant's unique view of truth and reality. Though in many ways Kant can be said to be a Platonist, he differs from Plato on this crucial point. That is, for Kant, reason is not the way towards truth and reality as it is in Plato, rather it limits human experience in the realm of appearance and can only provides us the objectivity of appearance, for which reason freedom also becomes unexperienceable. Daoism refutes these views of truth and reality. Truth discloses through being experienced. We, together with all the myriad things, live in truth, or truths. And reality is appearing.

In what follows I will elaborate the meaning of spontaneity in terms of creativity(*de* 德), *sheng* 生, freedom and equality.

4.1 Spontaneity as Creativity(*de* 德)

De 德 in oracle bone script is written as . With the eye on the left and the way on the right, the character symbolizes an eye focusing on the way. This is interestingly similar to the *dao* character in bronze script, , symbolizing walking on the way. Before Laozi, *de* in Zhou Dynasty was mainly used to refer to the morality of humans, especially the rulers, which is a meaning that had been inherited by many schools of Chinese philosophy afterwards. This is why

it is usually translated as “virtue.” *De* in the *DDJ*, however, has its target. Laozi takes the aim at criticizing the ideology of *yidepeitian* 以德配天 (lit., “partaking in heaven with virtue”) in the Zhou Dynasty, that is, the notion that heaven bestows power to those who are virtuous. As a historical matter of fact, this ideology was used to justify and strengthen the rule of the Zhou Dynasty. With a new interpretation of *de*, Laozi liberates this term from the mindset of seeing *de* as some political and moral human property, and releases it to *dao* and the myriad things. Laozi’s claim “Heaven and earth are not benevolent; they take the myriad things as strawdogs” bombastically elaborate this point. Franklin Perkins in his outstanding work *Heaven and Earth are not Humane: the Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy* has examined the non-anthropocentric feature in the *DDJ* in detail. There he points out, “... heaven’s action are not *regular* but also that they are not *right*.” And “we must shift our focus from morality to what works according to the patterns of nature.”¹⁰⁸

In my view Laozi hereby raises a Zen question: What is the original face of *de*? The *de* that is released as such is not a tool to serve the purpose of maintaining hierarchies, but it intends to return spontaneity (*ziran*) to the myriad things and humans. On the one hand, it is closely associated with *dao*; on the other, it is an expression of the nature of things (the nature of humans included). Therefore *de* in the *DDJ* pervades the different layers of *dao*, things and humans. In fact, Laozi makes the *de* of things, i.e., the spontaneity or *ziran* of things set the foundation for the *de* of humans. The *de* of humans follows the spontaneity of the myriad things. Obviously, the *de* of humans thus understood, which gains its meaning through *ziran*, is very different from the “virtue” or “morality” by other schools. This historical background also lets another important meaning of *ziran*, that is, freedom, be revealed to us.

Because of these characteristics of *de* in the *DDJ*, when it does not specially refer to the *de* of humans I use Whitehead’s term and translate it as “creativity.” The *Xici* commentary says, “The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* (creativity); the ceaseless generativity is called *yi* (change).”¹⁰⁹ And also, “the great *de* of heaven and earth is called generativity (*sheng*).”¹¹⁰ *De* is the ceaselessly creativity. It resonates with the “power of generativity” in the section of

¹⁰⁸ Franklin Perkins, *Heaven and Earth are not Humane: the Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, 89.

¹⁰⁹ “日新之謂盛德，生生之謂易。”

¹¹⁰ “天地之大德曰生。”

Temporality of *Dao*.¹¹¹ “Creativity” is used here to show that it covers death and life, i.e., what is called by *Zhuangzi* “waxing and waning, withering and decay” (*yingxushuaisha* 盈虛衰殺). A few points need to be addressed here. Firstly, the creativity I am talking about is not the *creation ex nihilo* in Christianity, that is, God the “creator” outside of the world created the world from nothing. *De* as creativity is elaborated by the Category of the Ultimate in Whitehead.¹¹² However, secondly, it is different from Whitehead in that it is not a one-dimensional cumulative progress, which is inevitably teleological. The teleological feature is well voiced through his concepts of eternal objects and God.¹¹³ The Daoist creativity is the transcendence of temporality that is experienced within the infinite flow of time. Creativity designates the spontaneity (*ziran*) of *dao* and things. The transcendence of creativity or *de* is the illumination of spontaneity, which is experienced and manifest in every instantaneous present.

Next I will elaborate the meaning of *de* through chapter 51 in the *DDJ*. Chapter 51 says:

<i>Dao</i> gives life	道生之
<i>De</i> nurtures	德畜之
Events shape	物形之
And circumstances consummate	而器 ¹¹⁴ 成之
Therefore all things revere <i>dao</i> and honor <i>de</i>	是以萬物尊道而貴德
As for the reverence directed at <i>dao</i>	道之尊也
And the honor directed at <i>de</i>	德之貴也
It is out of the constant self-soing (<i>heng ziran</i>)	夫莫之爵而恒自然
Without anyone having ennobled them	
 <i>Dao</i> gives them life and nurtures them	 道生之 畜之
Rears and develops them	長之 遂之

¹¹¹ See 3.1.

¹¹² See A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1985, 20-30.

¹¹³ For a detailed analysis of the cumulative feature in Whitehead, see Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration VS. Interpenetration*, Albany: state University of New York Press, 1982, Part II.

¹¹⁴ The *qi* 器 in the *DDJ* certainly should not be simply understood as “instrument” rather instruments has to be redefined through *qi* 器. *Qi* depicts the *you* 有 or be-ing of all. Chapter 28 says, “when the uncarved block shatters it becomes vessels 樸散則為器”. The *pu* or uncarved block implies the *dao* as *wu* or non-be-ing, while the *qi* shows its be-ing or becoming. Laozi also refers to the event of the world as the sacred *qi* (“天下神器”), which also stresses the disclosing of all. It is for this reason that the latter versions of the *DDJ*, e.g., Wang Bi’s version, use *shi* 勢 instead of *qi* 器. The *shi* grasps the becoming of things through the propensity or power that involves in and shapes a certain thing or event.

It brings them to fruition and maturation	亭之毒之
Nourishes and extinguishes them	養之覆之
<i>Dao</i> gives them life	生而弗有也
Yet does not manage them	
It assists them	為而弗恃也
Yet makes no claim upon them	
It rears them	長而弗宰
Yet does not dominate them	
This is called the dark <i>de</i> (virtuosity) ¹¹⁵	是謂玄德

In this chapter, *dao*, *de*, things, *heng* 恒 and *ziran* all appear together. Contrary to a common understanding, I don't think it is the case that the “*dao* gives life” comes prior to the “*de* nurtures”, which again is subsequently followed by the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of things, no matter how we understand this “priority”, whether it is cosmological, logical, or existential in terms of humans' experience in practice or *gongfu*. The “*dao* gives life” is at once the “*de* nurtures”, which is constancy or *heng*, spontaneity or *ziran*, and which is the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of things.

The meaning of *de* in this chapter is elaborated from both perspectives of giving and receiving. From the perspective of giving, *dao* gives life to all and nourishes all, this is the *de* or creativity of *dao*; from the perspective of receiving, things receive *dao* so that they can have life and grow (*sheng* 生). Such is the *de* or creativity of things, viz., the spontaneity of things, or their growth, nourishing and extinguishment. *De* 德 and *de* 得 are homophonic. *De* 得 means receiving and gaining, which implicates and elaborates the meaning of *de* 德. These two perspectives are mingled into one, the “*dao* gives life” is the spontaneity of the myriad things, and this is the dark *de* (*xuande* 玄德). That which is called the “dark creativity” is spontaneity itself, the illumination of the myriad things by the creativity of the darkness.

Take another example of chapter 39. Laozi says in this chapter:

Of old there were certain things that have got the One:	昔得一者
The heavenly in virtue of the One becomes clear;	天得一以清
The earthly in virtue of the One becomes tranquil;	地得一以寧
The numinous in virtue of the One becomes animated;	神得一以靈

¹¹⁵ Edited translation from Ames, 2003.

Valleys in virtue of the One become full;

谷得一以盈

Lords and kings in virtue of the One rectify themselves for the world.

侯王得一以為天下正

...

This chapter is also an exploration of the relation between *dao*, *de*, things and humans. *De* in this chapter penetrates *dao*, things and humans. In these verses, not only the creativity of things are manifested in terms of their getting the One (which refers to *dao*) and becoming clear, tranquil animated and full, the creativity of the One is also illuminated through the clearing, tranquility, animativity, and fullness of the heavenly, the earthly and the myriad things. The One is that which is independent and changeless.¹¹⁶ It depends on nothing and has no opposite, and therefore can be called the absolute. The absoluteness of the absolute lies in its non-purposive ceaseless creativity. Creativity is the absolute oneness. One and many are, therefore, essentially one. And this is the inseparability of one and many in Chinese philosophy. All distinctions are only out of and for the convenience of language. *De* or creativity is the spontaneity (*ziran*) of *dao* and things.

Creativity is the Way making its ways. *De* is an expression of *dao*, and *dao* is an expression of *de*. *Dao* and *de* disclose each other. There is no priority or posterity between them. People who seek priority and posterity amongst *dao*, *de* and things often grasp *de*, explicitly or implicitly, as particularity and *dao* as universality, while *de* is further taken as a property of things. This view is quite prevalent in academics. For example, Zhang Dainian, in his *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy* says, “*De* is what a things gains from *dao*. *De* is particularity and *dao* is totality.”¹¹⁷ Zhang interprets *de* as the particularity that partakes in the universal *dao*; he then seeks the universality of *dao* in the totality of things. Xu Fuguan says, “What Zhuangzi calls *de* is the *dao* that is internalized in things.”¹¹⁸ – As if *dao* can be external to things. In accordance with the view that *de* is the spontaneity of things, things are the condensation of creativity or *de*. So it is not the case, as a common opinion holds, that things *have de*, whereby *de* is taken as a property of things as substance. Such view is a misreading of *dao*, *de* and things all together. Under this expedient distinction of universality/particularity and substance/property, *dao*, *de* and things are all substantialized therefore reified.

However, *dao* is not an abstract metaphysical principle, neither can the expedient distinction of universality/particularity capture the relation between *dao* and *de*. Spontaneity as *de* 德

¹¹⁶ “獨立而不改.” See chapter 25 of the *DDJ*.

¹¹⁷ 张岱年, <中国哲学大纲>. 南京: 江苏教育出版社, 2006, 44.

¹¹⁸ 徐復觀, <中國人性論史>. 臺北: 臺灣商務印書館, 1969, 225.

(creativity) and *sheng* 生 (generativity) is not particularity, but the oneness of particularity and universality, one and many. *Dao* is at once its creativity, that is, the disclosing of *dao*; such is *ziran*, or spontaneity. Particularity and universality belong to each other in spontaneity.¹¹⁹

De also has the meaning of *shi* 實, i.e., true and concrete. For example, the *deshan* 德善 (lit. true goodness) and *dexin* 德信 (true credibility) in chapter 49 show this meaning. Chapter 49 states:

The sage is always <i>wu-ing</i> her heart-mind.	聖人恒無心
She takes as her own the heart-mind of the people.	以百姓心為心
Those who are good she treats as good.	善者善之
Those who are not good she also treats as good.	不善者亦善之
In so doing she preserves the true good.	德善
Those who are credible she treats as credible.	信者信之
Those who are lacking in credibility she also treats as credible.	不信者亦信之
In so doing she preserves true credibility.	德信
As for the sage's dwelling in the world:	聖人之在天下
Oblivious, she muddles the heart-mind for the world	歙歙焉為天下渾心
The people all have something to occupy their eyes and ears,	百姓皆注其耳目焉
And the sage treats them all like children.	聖人皆孩之

For the first verse, I read *hengwuxin* 恒無心 as a *gongfu* of *wu-ing* (emptying), or a practice.

That is to say, the sage is always *wu-ing* (emptying) her heart-mind so that she dwells in non-being at all times. This reading corresponds to the expression of *zaitianxia* 在天下, or dwelling in the world that appears later in this chapter.¹²⁰ The on-going practice of *wu-ing* indicates the fact that the sage follows the spontaneity of the world so that the truth or reality (*shi* 實) of the good and credibility is gained. This also shows us that *ziran* as *de* is the ultimate reality.

¹¹⁹ It is a characteristic of Chinese philosophy to use different words to depict the same event of nature, e.g., *dao*, *de*, *tian*, *ziran*, *sheng* etc. These terms, therefore, should be taken as aspectual that entail each other rather than analytic categories that seek definitions through setting boundaries. I got this idea from Roger T. Ames.

¹²⁰ For a detailed reading of *zai* 在, see 3.2.

De in the *DDJ* is often associated with *heng* 恒 or constancy. For example, in chapter 51 and chapter 49, *de* and *heng* both appear. Also *hengde* 恒德 is a common expression in the *DDJ*. For Laozi, *heng* is used to describe *dao* and *ziran*. Following this, the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of things are constancy, creativity, *ziran* or spontaneity. And such is *dao*. Spontaneity as constant creativity is to say, that which is permanent is permanent creativity.

4.2 Spontaneity as *Sheng* 生

Ziran in Daoism expresses the nature of things (including humans). What is usually translated as “nature” here is the character *xing* 性. This character, however, is not in the *DDJ*, nor is it in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. For the original form of the character *xing* is *sheng* 生 (life, growth etc.), which is an important term in both texts. It is only later that the heart radical was added to *sheng* 生 and the *xing* 性 character was developed. Take the *Zhuangzi* as an example. In the inner chapters, the *sheng* character that appears in the nourishment of life (*yangsheng* 養生) in the “Yang Sheng Zhu” (“The Primacy of Nourishing Life”¹²¹), the “rectification of life” (*zhengsheng* 正生) and “following *ziran* but not adding to life” (*changyinziranerbuyisheng* 常因自然而不益生) in the “De Chong Fu” (“Markers of Full Virtuosity”¹²²) etc., can all be seen as *xing* 性. For example, the “following *ziran* but not adding to life” is to say that the true nature follows *ziran*. “Da Zong Shi” (“The Great Master”) says, “Fish live free at ease in water, and human beings dwell free at ease in *dao*. Those who live free at ease in the water dart through the ponds, finding their nourishment and support. Those who dwell in *dao* free at ease do not bother to serve any particular goal, thereby allowing the flow of their lives to settle into stability (*shengding* 生定).”¹²³ The *sheng* here can also be viewed as *xing*. This passage uses the fish’s living in water freely as a metaphor to show the following matter of fact: Being in *dao*, humans can achieve the *wuwei* 無為 (non-action) and tranquility of their nature. The character *xing* 性 only began to appear in the outer and miscellaneous chapters. Both the “Pian Mu” (“Webbed Toes”) and the “Da Sheng” (“Fathoming Life”) list *sheng*, *xing* and *de*

¹²¹ Ziporyn’s translation.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ My translation. “魚相造乎水，人相造乎道。相造乎水者，穿池而養給。相造乎道者，無事而生定。” Chen Guying, 1983, 213.

together. For example, in “Pian Mu” it says, “All in the world spring to life spontaneously, not knowing why they are born.”¹²⁴ *Sheng* is understood through spontaneity or *ziran*; it also says in this chapter, “harming their life and hurting their nature” (*canshengshangxing* 殘生傷性). The *sheng* and *xing* correspond to and elaborate each other here. “Da Sheng” says: “Those who open the heavenly benefit life (*desheng* 德生); those who open the human damage life.”¹²⁵ The *sheng* or life here can also be understood as *xing*, put together with *de*, to show the meaning of *ziran*.

Comparing *sheng* 生 with *xing* 性, a distinctive feature of *sheng* is that it penetrates *dao* and things at the same time, like many important terms in Daoism. (e.g., *dao*, *de* and *ziran* etc.) We can talk about “*dao* gives life” (*daosheng* 道生), as well as the life of things (*wuzhisheng* 物之生). Take the example of chapter 34. It states: “Freely flows the Great Way. It runs to the left and right. All myriad things depend on it for life...”¹²⁶ What is translated here as “freely flowing” is the character *fan* 汎, which uses the free-flowing water to symbolize the all-pervading characteristic of *dao*. *Ziran* is articulated here both from the perspective of *dao* and things. It is the freely flowing Great Way, as well as the life of the myriad things. The character *xing* 性 (nature), however, loses the significance of *sheng* that penetrates both *dao* and things, and is used specially to refer to things. The nature of things that departs from the *dao* in language means its understanding of both *dao* and things has left the original meaning of them.

In what follows I will explore the meaning of *ziran* through the original form of *xing* 性, i.e., *sheng* 生. *Sheng* in the oracle bone script is written as 𠂔, with the lower part the earth, and the upper part the grass. The *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 says, “*Sheng* means to proceed. The character symbolizes the grass grows out of the earth.” *Sheng* means to arise, to grow, to proceed, to produce, and life etc. Of course, it also has the meaning of “nature” or *xing* 性. Though *xing* or what is translated as “nature” here has to be understood from its original meaning of *sheng*. The *Xici* commentary says, “The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* (creativity); the ceaseless generativity (*shengsheng* 生生) is called *yi* (change).” That which is daily renovating (i.e., the ceaseless generativity or the *shengsheng*) is *ziran*, and this is creativity or *de*, and also *dao*.

¹²⁴ “天下誘然皆生，而不知其所以生。” Chen Guying, 1983, 260.

¹²⁵ “開天者德生，開人者賊生。” Ibid., 504.

¹²⁶ “大道汎兮其可左右。萬物恃之而生。”

The oracle bone script *sheng* presents such an image to us: A seed buried in the soil perceives the spring, sprouting out of the soil and growing in the sunlight. It further on indicates a broader picture to us: When the sun has reached the meridian height, it begins to decline. When the moon has become full, it begins to wane; Warmness and coldness push each other; *Yang* decreases and *yin* increases; “Thunder moves, wind disperses, rain nourishes, sun dries.”¹²⁷ The spontaneity of the myriad things discloses as such.

Sheng as nature of things means that the true being (that is, becoming) of things is truth, that is, their presencing. Such is *ziran*, and the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實). As such, there is no separation between essence and appearance. In the process of a seed growing into a tree, the growth and death of the seed, the trunk, the branches and leaves is reality itself. Reality is appearing; what appears is reality. Reality is not, therefore, some changeless substance that underlies changing appearances, as with Aristotle’s *hupokemenon*. The ceaselessly generative things are the ultimate reality of *ziran*. Hence the myriad things show the truth; the truth shows the myriad things.¹²⁸ And this is spontaneity. Reality and truth are not any humanistic unifying principle of some unknown lifeless matter. The ceaselessly generative spontaneity as the ultimate reality is all-pervasive, and *ziran* is the oneness of essence and appearance. The high mountains and the flowing water, the drifting clouds and the vast ocean, wind and rain, sun and moon, everything are as they are. Such is the spontaneity as the ultimate reality.

That things are as they are is reality and the nature of things. This understanding of the nature of things is embodied in the important thoughts of many forms of western metaphysics, such as reality, substance, essence, nature (φύσις, *phusis*) and so on. These are basically different forms of “being.” “Reality”, “substance” and “essence” in ancient Greek are all οὐσία, the nominal form of the copula “to be”; τί ἐστὶ (“what is”) is also translated as “essence”; what φύσις articulates is also Being. As Heidegger says, “*Phusis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable.”¹²⁹ The problem of some metaphysics is that Being is understood only as immutable and atemporal. The fact is, however, Being always was, is and will be, which is to say, Being is becoming. There is no substance or another world called Being besides becoming.

¹²⁷ <說卦傳>, “雷以動之, 風以散之, 雨以潤之, 日以烜之.”

¹²⁸ This is inspired by Dogen Zenji, “Only a True Flower Shows Its True Face” in *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 4, Tokyo: Kosen Nishiyama, 1983, 110.

¹²⁹ Martin Heidegger, 2000, 15.

The Daoist *ziran* is similar to the Buddhist idea of *suchness*, both expressing the truth of all dharma. Next I will elucidate its meaning through a Chan Buddhist koan. According to the *Wudenguiyuan* 五燈會元:

Master Xuansha was informally addressing his monastics when he heard a swallow singing. He said to the assembly, “This is the profound dharma of real form. It skillfully conveys the essence of the true teaching.” He then descended from the teaching seat.¹³⁰

Reality appears in the singing of the swallow right here, at this moment. That is to say, the singing of the swallow appears in reality. The singing of the swallow is reality itself and such is *ziran* or spontaneity. The sound and color of all beings can only be true and real when seen in spontaneity. *Ziran* or spontaneity is the constantly appearing reality. It is appearing emphatically, flowing into ever novel forms.

In the image of *sheng* as the sprouting seed, some seeds grow into trees, while some become food for other animals, and some become compost for other trees. All of these are the manifestations of spontaneity. In this growth process of the seed, we can distinguish the seed and the tree, or seek the identity between them. At the same time, the identities of the sun, wind and rain, and the earth are also condensed in the growth of the tree. The Daoist idea of *hua* 化 (transformation) can help to elaborate this point. The ocean evaporates and clouds are generated; clouds gather and rain falls; the rain again transforms into trees, creeks and so on; the fruits of the trees and the creeks then transform into the lives of the animals. As such all is in all, for all is *ziran*. This is what Buddhism calls “All is one and one is all.” The “one” here can refer to particular individuals, and also spontaneity as reality itself. In terms of individuals, every individual as a microcosmos contains and reflects the universe as a whole. Moreover, within every individual there are infinite worlds; in terms of spontaneity as reality, everything is spontaneity or *ziran*, and spontaneity is all. All distinctions or identities are the condensation of spontaneity, also a result of human conceptualization for the convenience of utility.

As a comparison, identity in some western philosophies such as Plato is confined to ideas and forms, which seeks essence only through the changeless sameness. Some modern mainstream scientific ideas follow this type of philosophical thinking, for example, the definition of matter, the search for the smallest particles, and for some fixed structures etc. etc.¹³¹ Nevertheless, in

¹³⁰ 《五燈會元》卷七。【玄沙大師參次，聞燕子聲，乃曰，“深談實相，善說法要。”便下座。】 See http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/ko/X80n1565_007.

¹³¹ Bertrand Russell gives us a good account of the “removal of almost all traces of animism from the laws of

regard with phenomena, there is nothing “same” between a seed and a tree. Of course, according to Aristotle, if a seed is not influenced by harmful external conditions, it naturally grows into a tree. Though what is equally true is that, if not influenced by any “external” conditions, a seed cannot even begin to grow into a tree. A seed needs to assimilate all differences, i.e., the earth, sun and moon, wind and rain, hot and cold etc., everything that can be seen or not, for it to grow into a tree. Sameness and difference are out of the interception and shift of human perspectives. What’s important here is that we have to understand a matter of fact: It is not that there is any *ziran* sought through changeless substance or nature of things, but no matter how humans seek or delineate, there is nothing that is not *ziran*. No matter whether we understand it or not, there is nothing that is not *ziran*.

That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say, that which is constant constantly dwells in ceaseless transformation. That which is in change and impermanence is the appearing of the true and real. As the *Xici* commentary says, “Hardness and softness press onto each other; the eight hexagrams rouse each other; thunder and lightening move, wind and rain nourish. Sun and moon rotate; coldness goes and warmth comes...” This is the way of change. That which constantly is in constant flow; the One can be differentiated. That which is impermanent (*wuchang* 無常) is the non-be-ing (*wu-ing*) of that which permanently is. Because it is in constant transformation, therefore it is constant. And such is spontaneity.¹³²

Spontaneity is the oneness of change and changelessness. Change and changelessness mutually postulate each other. Change is always the change of what is the same; changelessness is only possible because of the experience of change. Metaphysics rightly grasps the point here: it is the changeless that changes. As is recounted by Kant: “Only what is permanent is altered; what can be transformed does not itself suffer any alteration...” (*CPR*, B231) However, both change and changelessness are the result of human conceptualization. In making change and changelessness mutually belong to each other, spontaneity transcends the perspectives of change and changelessness. From the ancient to now till the infinite future, there is only spontaneity. Ultimately, there is nothing else except for spontaneity. In this sense, substance, property, form

physics” in modern science in his *A History of Western Philosophy*. See Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy And Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945, 537.

¹³² <繫辭>, “剛柔相摩, 八卦相蕩, 鼓之以雷霆, 潤之以風雨。日月運行, 一寒一暑。”

and matter, relationality, process, reason, emotion, cause and effect etc. are all reflections of spontaneity as reality.

4.3 Spontaneity as Freedom: Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans

In *Tales of Hulan River* Xiao, Hong writes:

When the flowers bloomed it was as though they were awakening from a slumber. When the birds flew it was as though they were climbing up to the heavens. When the insects chirped it was as though they were talking to each other. All these things were alive. There was no limit to their abilities, and whatever they do, they had the power to do it. They did as they willed in complete freedom.

If the pumpkins felt like climbing up the trellis they did so, and if they felt like climbing up the side of the house they did so. If the cucumber plant wanted to bring forth an abortive flower it did so; if it wanted to bear a cucumber it did so; if it wanted none of these, then not a single cucumber nor a single flower appeared, and no one would question its decision. The cornstalks grew as tall as they wished, and if they felt like reaching up to the heavens, no one would give it a second thought. Butterflies flew wherever they desired; one moment there would be a pair of yellow butterflies flying over the other side of the wall, the next moment a solitary white butterfly flying over from this side of the wall. Whose house had they just left? Whose house were they flying to? Even the sun didn't know the answers to such questions.¹³³

In my view, what this passage shows to us is not only a literary imagination. It rather vividly articulates the Daoist understanding of nature of things and freedom in a literary way, that is, *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, nature) is freedom (*ziyou* 自由). As master Linji Yixuan says, “Lively.” (“*huopopodi* 活潑潑地”) No doubt that this understanding of nature of things and freedom is different from, or rather, contrary to modern metaphysics, according to which things merely follow the rules of cause and effect, having no freedom to talk about at all. Freedom, for the Enlightenment thinkers, exclusively belongs to human beings exercising their rationality. That nature is machine is a main metaphor of modern metaphysics. This can be said to be the common belief of nature of things and freedom in our time.

According to Daoist philosophy, however, things are as they are. Such is *ziran* or spontaneity, reality, and also freedom. Freedom is therefore not the form sealed in some other world that can only be approached through human reason; neither is it an autonomous will of the *animal rationale* exerted against the necessity of nature, or the free choice of the human customer. *It*

¹³³ Xiao Hong, *Tales of Hulan River*, translated by Howard Goldblatt, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., Ltd., 1988, 76.

does not primarily concern humans at all. Rather, spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality is the condition for any forms of human existence. It is not the case, thereupon, that humans possess freedom or master nature. But rather, humans belong to *ziran* (nature, spontaneity) and freedom. For this reason Laozi says, “The human emulates the earthly; the earthly emulates the heavenly; the heavenly emulates *ziran*.” (DDJ, 25) The spontaneity of *dao* and things is what humans emulate. According to Kant, humans prescribe laws to nature, which is a motto of modern metaphysics. Laozi’s claim, therefore, is contrary to this view, which I would like to call here “nature prescribing laws to humans.” Right away we face a Kantian question: how is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Let us first take a look at Kant’s concepts of nature and freedom. Nature has multiple layers of meanings in *Critique of Pure Reason* and they serve different purposes. On the first level, the common sense of the modern concept of nature as the external world is actually things in themselves in Kant’s philosophy. This is the X that is beyond any human experience and knowledge. It is the *noumena*, the pure nothingness that is to be negated and shed light on by human reason. On the second level, nature as mere appearance is a representation of the *a priori* categories. Causality, for example, is one of them. Kant states, “... all objects of an experience possible to us are nothing but appearances; that is, they are mere representations which – in the manner in which they are represented, namely, as extended beings, or series of alterations – have no independent existence outside our thoughts.” (CPR, B519.)¹³⁴ Nature, insofar as it is experienced, is mere representations and has no independent existence outside of human thoughts. For this reason, Kant claims “Categories are concepts which prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, and therefore to nature as the sum total of all appearances.” (CPR, B163) Nature is only a sum total of all appearances, to which human reason gives laws. Thirdly, when it comes to freedom, however, even this nature as mere appearance has to be overcome. For Kant, freedom is “... independent and free ... from all natural necessity.” (CPR, B569) From the antitheses of nature and freedom develops the division of the distinct realms of *noumena* and *phenomena*.¹³⁵

Here nature is posited as the chain that needs to be broken off for the sake of human freedom. Consequently, freedom is spoken of in different senses. Firstly, human freedom or spontaneity means things in nature are determined as mere representations through the concepts of

¹³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Marcus Weigelt, London: Penguin Books, 2007.

¹³⁵ See CPR, B569.

understanding. This, together with sensitivity, however, is posited as another layer of “nature” that needs to be overcome by the freedom of practical reason. These different layers of meanings of nature and freedom in Kant, as one of the most important founders of modern metaphysics, show that the modern concept of “nature” is a convenient human construct for political, economical, and axiological setups. It is designed to fulfill the role of “the dominated.” Nature is set up as that which is to be conquered and mastered by the human subjects armed with a dominating intellect. Consequently, the accomplishment of human freedom means the disavowal of nature. Free will means first of all freedom from the causality of nature. But, according to Kant, causality itself is an *a priori* construct of human understanding, to which the autonomous agent himself has to be subsumed. Insofar as *a priori* is understood as necessary and objective, freedom is reason overcoming its own necessity and objectivity. If this desperate situation of the self-contradictory reason teaches us anything at all, it at least should shed light on the following matter of fact, that is, freedom cannot be taken away and eliminated from nature; and, in the end, when understood as a power against nature, whether it can be achieved becomes fundamentally problematic.

This illusory freedom as against nature is associated with a certain understanding of the nature of things. With the degradation of things to mere appearances of human understanding, thereon freedom is ascribed exclusively to the *animal rationale*. Chinese culture, on the contrary, offers us a different image of the nature of things, and also the relation between things and humans, accordingly a different understanding of freedom. As I have pointed out, nature prescribes laws to humans in Daoism. We’ve also raised a Kantian question: How is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Things are not merely representation of human understanding in Daoist philosophy. On the contrary, *humans belong to things*. Next I will explore Daoist thoughts on things and the relation between things and humans through chapter 37 of the *DDJ*. Chapter 37 states:

<i>Dao</i> constantly non-acts	道恒無為也
Should nobles and kings be able to hold fast to this,	侯王能守之
The myriad things will be transformed of their own accords.	而萬物將自化
After they are transformed, should desire raise its head,	化而欲作
Press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.	將鎮之以無名之樸
Thereon leave off desiring,	夫亦將知足

In not desiring, achieve tranquility

知足以靜

The myriad things will be at peace of its own accord.

萬物將自定

The self-transformation (*zihua* 自化) of the myriad things here refers to self-soing or spontaneity (*ziran* 自然). A common interpretation of this chapter is to understand the myriad things as humans, that is, the people (*wanmin* 萬民) from the perspective of political philosophy, that the nobles and kings stay non-acting (*wuwei* 無為. The meaning of this term will be elaborated in the next chapter) and the people will gain the *ziran* of their nature. However, I don't think we have to be confined to this understanding. The most important thing is that we are aware of the following fact, that is, in classical Chinese “things” or *wu* 物 contains the meaning of “humans” or *ren* 人, which is out of a different understanding of things. I will explore this point later. Meanwhile, the nobles and kings, and also sages in the *DDJ* don't have to be understood as “rulers”. They can also refer to people who practice the *dao*, which again doesn't have to be merely personal and therefore unpolitical. In fact for Laozi, those who can become sages must first of all be practitioners of the *dao*, which must be political. With respect to human life itself the realm of spirituality or *jingshen* 精神 and the political dimension are not separated, which is an important feature of Laozi's philosophy. The freedom of spirituality always seeks its political expression, while the expression of the political power must be grounded in the freedom of the spirit. For Laozi, those spirits who seek to distinguish hierarchies in society have no legitimacy in politics, which still awaits our attention and further exploration.

An important question that this chapter explores is the relation between things and humans in *dao*. In my view, it is not the case, as is commonly understood, that the spontaneity of the myriad things is a consequence of the nobles and kings emulating the *ziran* or self-soing of the *dao*. The myriad things are spontaneous in themselves. The self-transforming of the myriad things is only disturbed when the kings cannot preserve non-action. And it is only when humans can preserve their true nature of *ziran* that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. “After they are transformed, should desire raise its head, press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.” These verses remind us to return to the spontaneity of things at any moment. The “uncarved block” refers to the spontaneity of things. Again, this chapter manifests the conspicuous feature of Laozi's philosophy, that is, it penetrates *dao*, things and humans. *Dao*, *heng* (constancy), *wuwei*, the *zihua* (self-transformation) of things and humans' preserving their

uncarved block, are all spontaneity. The spontaneity of things is the non-action or *wuwei* of *dao*. There is no priority or posterity between them. Any attempt to distinguish priority and posterity between them inevitably separates *dao* and things as two pieces.

The “desire” here first of all refers to that of the practitioner of the *dao*. It can also be understood generally as human desire. The tension between the rising desire and the spontaneity of *dao* and things becomes salient here. Humans must press down their selfish desire to preserve the uncarved block, the simplicity in themselves, so that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. However, ultimately shouldn't human desire itself belong to *ziran* or nature? No matter what, how can the human, as one member of the myriad things, oppose to nature at all?

In ancient Chinese the term “things” includes within it the category “humans”, though “humans” cannot be used to refer to “things”. This is related to the understanding of “things” in Chinese. *Wu* 物 or “thing” in Chinese has the meaning of “event.” Things understood from the disclosing of events in relationality and process reveals to us the spontaneity of the nature of things. *The spontaneity of the nature of things is the ultimate real event*, which determines the extensive use of “thing” in Daoist texts. *Wu* 物 in Daoism penetrates *dao*, things and humans just like *de* 德, *sheng* 生 and *ziran* 自然 etc. Laozi uses *wu* or “thing” to refer to *dao*, calling it *youwu* 有物 (lit. “be-ing thing”) and *wuwu* 無物 (lit. “non-be-ing thing”). For example, chapter 25 says, “There is a thing (*youwu* 有物), a gathering chaos, emerging before the heavenly and the earthly.”¹³⁶ Chapter 14 says, “...reverts again to non-be-ing (*wuwu* 無物, lit. “no thing”),” and also “the form of the formless, and the image of non-be-ing (*wuwu* 無物).”¹³⁷ Doubtless, the modern metaphysical perspective that takes things as objects cannot interpret this use of “thing,” for *dao* surely is not any “thing” confined in a certain form. From the perspective that *things are the disclosing of spontaneity as reality*, however, this use is all natural. Of course, “thing” in the *DDJ* is also used to refer to the myriad things, which also contains the meaning of “human.”

The spontaneity of the myriad things is the ultimate reality. Things understood as such are not objects represented by the rational subjects. Rather humans belong to things, that is to say, human existence takes roots in the spontaneity of things. Human existence unfolds in the process of the causal effects and freedom of the spontaneity of things, not the opposite; humans belong to

¹³⁶ “有物混成，先天地生。”

¹³⁷ “復歸於無物，” and “無狀之狀，無物之象。”

this process, not the opposite; human freedom is contained and grounded in the freedom or spontaneity of the myriad things, not the opposite. In this sense, we say “nature prescribes laws to humans.”

The sun goes and the moon comes; spring arrives and flowers come into bloom; the lotus flower comes out of water in summer; the wild geese fly to the south in autumn; the white snow falls onto the leafless boughs in winter: the spontaneity of the myriad things happens in a way unknown to humans. It is experienceable but cannot be grasped by abstract concepts. We can, of course, -- and we are always doing so -- intercept fragments of spontaneity or nature (*ziran*) with concepts and knowledge. But when these concepts and knowledge are used to oppose and deny nature, thereby we use our confidence in knowledge to complete our ignorance about spontaneity as reality. We therefore firmly belong to nature’s game of life and death, for death itself is part of nature.

The spontaneity of things (including human existence) unfolds in relationality, and freedom lies in this process. Things in relationality and causality are expressions of freedom. Take the example we’ve used in the last section. The ocean evaporates and the clouds are generated; the wind blows and the clouds flow; the clouds gather together and the rain falls; the rain nourishes all myriad things, such that all is in all. In respect to the relationality and process, there is no changeless “self”, i.e., the discrete, individual things as substances. There is only “us”, i.e., the ceaselessly flowing spontaneity of the myriad things. Therefore Zhuangzi says, “All the myriad things and I are one.” (“Qi Wu Lun”) Of course, we can distinguish things with language for the sake of convenience, for example, wind, clouds, rain and things, etc., for the reason of which there is causality in space and time. (I understand *causality* in a broad sense here as the disclosing of relationality.) Ultimately, however, things are the condensation of the creative generativity. The distinctions by language do not obstruct the oneness of them. The ocean is in the wind and clouds; the wind and clouds are in the rain; the ocean, wind, clouds and the rain are all in the myriad things. The concrete is the condensation of the empty; the empty is the dispersion of the concrete. The concrete and the empty generate each other, change and transformation flows infinitely. There is only spontaneity in itself.

Freedom reveals itself in the oneness of spontaneity. Freedom permanently abides in the life and death of the myriad things. The life and death of the myriad things is thereon permanent freedom itself. The ceaselessly flowing causality is the self-manifestation of freedom. This

illustrates the Buddhist idea of independent co-arising and emptiness of Buddha nature (*yuanqixingkong* 緣起性空). The coming-to-be and passing-away of things are formed through causality, or *karma*, all belonging to spontaneity. That which is empty is nothing but spontaneity in itself.

The causality of things is expressed by “inter-dependence” (*xiangdai* 相待) in the *Zhuangzi*. For Zhuangzi, one should enter the freedom of “non-dependence” (*wudai* 無待) from inter-dependence; and the freedom of non-dependence discloses itself in the mutually generating and mutually intertwining causality. Therefore it says,

“*Yin* and *Yang* shine on each other, cover each other, and regulate each the other; the four seasons give place to one another, generate one another, and consume one another. Desires and aversions, the avoidings of this and movements towards that then arise one after another from this process; and from this came the joining of the male and female. Then are seen now security and now insecurity, in mutual change; fortune and misfortune produce each other; gentleness and urgency press on each other; the movements of gathering and dispersion are thus established.”¹³⁸

This is how freedom functions. Take another example of the idea of the *fangsheng* 方生 (“simultaneity of life and death”) in the “*Qi Wu Lun*” (“Equalizing Assessments of Things”) What *fangsheng* 方生 refers to is the interdependence of all. Zhuangzi states,

“Simultaneous life is simultaneous death, and vice versa; simultaneous admissibility is simultaneous inadmissibility, and vice versa; what is circumstantially right is also circumstantially wrong, and vice versa.”¹³⁹

The *fang* 方 character here indicates simultaneity. Because of life there is death, and death transforms into life again. Life and death are the same process; because of admissibility there is inadmissibility, and inadmissibility gives rise to admissibility; the affirmation of this is from the negation of that, and from affirmation negation is again generated. The intertwining of cause and effect and the flow of spontaneity is like this. I am in you and you are in me. In the end, there is no clear and distinct boundary between this and that. “Whenever fragmentation is going on, formation, completion, is also going on. Whenever formation is going on, destruction is also going on. Hence there is no completion or destruction. Things return and are connected to form

¹³⁸ “陰陽相照，相蓋，相治，四時相代，相生，相殺，欲惡去就於是橋起，雌雄片合於是庸有。安危相易，禍福相生，緩急相摩，聚散以成。” (Ze Yang 則陽) My translation. Cheng Guying, 1983, 741.

¹³⁹ “方生方死，方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是。” My translation. Cheng Guying, 1983, 62.

the oneness.”¹⁴⁰ Change and transformation become infinite in the process of life and death, formation, completion and destruction. And all is spontaneity.

Spontaneity as reality is permanence itself, therefore spontaneity transcends causality in space and time. Zhuangzi says, “(The sage) blends ten thousand years into one purity.”¹⁴¹ “The ten thousand years” is wherein causality discloses, yet is all time of the constant spontaneity. The ten thousand things are mutually involved through this (*yishixiangyun* 以是相蘊), therefore one should stop because of this (*yinshiyi* 因是已). The “this” in “through this” means the *ziran* in distinction. This is what Laozi calls *youzhi* 有之 (be-ing); the “this” in “because of this” designates the *ziran* without distinction. This is what Laozi calls *wuzhi* 無之 (non-be-ing).^{142 143} Permanent freedom abides in the play of be-ing and non-be-ing, therefore it is called “two walks” (*liangxing* 兩行).¹⁴⁴ Though the “two walks” are not two, it is only spontaneity. Spontaneity as reality is the non-be-ing of the constant be-ing, and the be-ing of the constant non-be-ing.

That *ziran* or spontaneity is *ziyou* 自由 or freedom is to say, the instantaneous context itself is freedom. Cause and effect is the self-expression of freedom. In this regard, there is an essential similarity between whether a bud is ready to bloom or not, or how it is going to bloom under sunshine and humans’ seeking freedom or keeping silence under oppression. Both of them are moved by and happen with the perception of the power of spontaneity. Both are the illumination of freedom. This is not, in any case, a denial of freedom in terms of humans’ struggle against oppression. Rather what it says is, *the human can only achieve her freedom when she understands and partakes in the ultimate reality*. Like spring arrives and flowers come into bloom, where there is oppression there is resistance. For this reason, the instantaneous context within the interdependent cause and effect is freedom itself. The life and death and love and hatred of the humans, the shadow of a bird occasionally flying over the green in the bright spring

¹⁴⁰ “其分也，成也。其成也，毀也。凡物無成與毀，復通為一。” Ibid., 69

¹⁴¹ <齊物論>，“參萬歲而一成純。”

¹⁴² The use of “this” or *shi* 是 is a conspicuous phenomenon in the Qi Wu Lun. The character *shi* appear 67 times in this chapter. The uses of it include *shifei* 是非 (“right and wrong”), *bishi* 彼是 (“this and that”), *yinshi* 因是 (“because of this”; also “following this”), *yishi* 以是 (“through this”), *weishi* 為是 (“for this reason”), *tongshi* 同是 (lit. “same this”) etc. These *shi* characters cover a wide range of thinking such as the distinctions of language, moral judgments, ontological and existential questioning of human existence and the nature of things etc. etc. It is a theme that awaits for further exploration.

¹⁴³ See *DDJ*, 11. “故有之以為利，無之以為用。” My reading of these verses is as follows: “Therefore the utilization of be-ing is provided by non-be-ing.” I read the *yishi* and *yinshi* in the *Zhuangzi* as a play of be-ing and non-be-ing.

¹⁴⁴ Permanence in this sense, therefore, means transience.

sunshine, or the leaves falling onto the water in the wind, slowly flowing away with the water, are all shining of freedom.

Kant rightly sees that causality is a human construction, that is, the “*a priori* categories.” The problem is that the categorical human construct is taken as a disavowal of nature. Nature is merely a representation that has no independent existence outside of human thoughts, while the noumenal nature in itself is excluded from human experience. The fact is, on the contrary, the subjective construct of causality belongs to nature, that is to say, again, cause and effect is an expression of the spontaneity itself. In this sense, humans are always experiencing spontaneity as reality. This experience itself belongs to spontaneity. Ultimately, this is spontaneity experiencing spontaneity, that is, the self-experience of spontaneity.

Freedom as the ultimate reality is not merely any human idea or value. Neither is it simply any teleological “freedom from” or “freedom to”, even though it does not exclude these kinds of “freedom” that is delineated within the coming and going of cause and effect. Human reason is not the precondition of freedom. It is rather the opposite: spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality is the precondition of any forms of human existence. Hence human kind does not possess freedom or dominate nature. On the contrary, as one member of the myriad things, she is ultimately possessed by spontaneity (*ziran*, nature) itself. She, in terms of both her wisdom of the awareness of her belonging to nature and her ignorance of forgetting nature, is an expression of spontaneity.

Human essence and freedom are involved in and follow the spontaneity of things. It can only be accomplished with the attainment of the freedom of things. The sea, wind, and clouds summon us to leave the dead sedimentation of historical ideologies, to shatter the idolatry of our own remnants¹⁴⁵, to break all self-illusions and to enter the eternal freedom. As Saint-John Perse says, “The uninhabitable is our site.”¹⁴⁶ Spontaneity and freedom transcends historicity. Any history has already been and is always cast away and transcended, and for this reason, is preserved. This is the intrinsic meaning of “historicity.” Hence any effort that seeks some fixed and changeless identity is essentially illusory. Insofar as it departs from freedom, it necessarily causes alienation and oppression. Though this “transcendence” is not a disavowal of historicity.

¹⁴⁵ This is inspired by Michel Haar, *The Song of the Earth*, translated by Reginald Lilly. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993, 149.

¹⁴⁶ “The uninhabitable is our site.” Saint-John Perse, *Collected Poems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. *Amers*, 477.

Freedom always discloses within history. What “transcendence” signifies is the fact that history is led by and reflects freedom. The human should understand and further on, preserve this matter of fact in her own existence. What “transcendence” shows is, historicity is freedom.

The spontaneity of things is the ground that human freedom takes root in. Human freedom can never be achieved through the denial and dominance over things. In fact, the self-understanding of humans is involved in the understanding of things. The oppression of humans in history goes hand in hand with the interpretation of things. Thereon in Chinese history, the hierarchical order in society is set up through the cosmological order. As is famously put at the beginning of the *Xici* commentary,

“Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low. Thus *Qian* and *Kun* are settled (in accordance with this). Things low and high appear display in a similar relation. The noble and mean, have their places assigned accordingly.”

The hierarchical interpretation of the cosmological order serves the purpose of the social hierarchy setups. In the west, the oppression of women and the dominance of nature go together. Hence nature is taken as the passive matter, and also as female, etc. Distinct from both of these perspectives, the Daoist view of the relation between things and humans sees humans as belonging to nature. Consequently, humans’ liberation lies in the realization of this matter of fact. This is why both Laozi and Zhuangzi set the spontaneity of things as the ground for the freedom of humans.

Notwithstanding, when we talk about humans’ belonging to nature, a common misunderstanding arises right away. With a defensive attitude, it takes this as a denial of the technological existence of the modern man. This misunderstanding is originates from the metaphysics that puts nature as the opposite of humans, which, in the end, is an anthropocentric self-construction of the human ego. The quest for human essence in some metaphysics, e.g., Plato’s reason, the modern subject sought through the cognition of the self-consciousness etc., is nothing but the self-construction of the human ego. Insofar as this “self” understands itself as the opposite of things and nature, thereupon making human technology the denial of nature, it constitutes the deepest ignorance of humans: the modern man believes that he can, with the power of instrumental reason, be the master of nature, and control, channel and drive nature to proceed in the direction of his will.

However, humans primarily belong to nature. Therefore any efforts to dominate nature have from the beginning constituted man’s own self-subjugation. When man seeks to control things,

thereby he first of all has completed a self-constraint; when man denies things, simultaneously he has completed a self-denial, even as it is presented as a way of self-construction. Thereupon we see that the violence against things and the reification of humans in capitalist industrial production are the same process. In our time, with such powerful and advanced science and technology, for which humans are so proud of themselves, the global situation is only becoming worse and worse. Nuclear weapons, pollution, global warming, water depletion and so on -- all these problems that are brought forth by modern science and technology are now threatening human existence and forcing us to foresee, actually, an end of human history.

Human existence and human history are part of spontaneity of things. Our denial of things belongs to the self-denial of nature, that is, the unconcealment and creativity of spontaneity itself. As we've mentioned above, death is part of nature. In this regard, modern technology accomplishes a self-expression of nature in its exploitation of nature. In terms of human history, however, this self-expression of nature is the self-eradication of human existence. That is, when the modern man postulates himself as the opposite of nature, thereby he has departed from the root of his own existence. The technological human history against nature is the very event of the eradication of human existence.

However, isn't the power of spontaneity still flowing even in a desert of the Genetically Modified Organism plant farm? Even though the growth of the plants is controlled by chemicals and the procedure of their life is transmuted by technology, every leaf still grows towards sunlight, and their roots still seek the nourishment of the earth. All possibilities of control, regulation and "modification" are rooted in nature itself. Ultimately humans can only follow nature, and the possibility of any technology is only because it has grasped some power of nature. It is impossible for humans to obtain power in the control and domination of nature, which is unfortunately the biggest illusion of modern metaphysics and the time that it defines. Power can only be attained through our belonging to nature, because there is no power except for nature.

This is certainly not to say that we should abandon technology. Rather, for humans to restore the root of our existence in the present historical context, technology needs to seek integration with nature. A common misunderstanding about science and technology that we need to pay attention to is that they are believed to be objective and neutral. The fact is, however, any science and technology are the result and practice of a certain metaphysics and epistemology. What's more, metaphysics, science and technology are tightly associated with the political and economic

system. Hence what technology needs to be developed or what to be repressed is determined by whether the monopoly capitalist groups can make profits and the amount of profits in the capitalist industrial system. So-called objective science and technology in fact serves the interest of a small special group of people. Thereon we see a large amount of scientific research is invested in the military industry, and large amount of science and technology develops out of it.

¹⁴⁷ Meanwhile, even though the destructions of GMO have been largely proved and the consequences are unpredictable, GMO, as a means to control both domestic and international economy, and to make high profits, has gained wide support by many governments. At the same time, the green technologies that foster life health and are urgently needed for sustainability are widely suppressed because they harm the benefits of the monopoly groups. That nature becomes the object of human reason, and that nature becomes the raw material for profits delineate the same process of industrial capitalism from the different aspects of philosophy and economy.

The Daoist understanding of the relation between things and humans, i.e., our ultimate belonging to nature, requires the reflection of our very existence. Human history is not independent of or outside of the event of spontaneity, rather it belongs to nature and is itself an expression of nature. Henceforth, the opening of a more free, good, beautiful and healthy time demands us to break the illusions of the human ego. It demands the awareness of our belonging to nature.

4.4 Spontaneity as Equality: All the Myriad Things are Equal

All things are reality in itself, and the self-realization of spontaneity; therefore all the myriad things are equal. The Daoist equality does not drain meaning from the myriad things to reach the abstract and reductionalist idea of equality. On the contrary, the equality of all means their particularity and diversity, that is, things are as they are.

“All the myriad things are one and equal”¹⁴⁸ is the main idea in both the *Qi Wu Lun* and the *Autumn Floods*. Interestingly, in order to elaborate the oneness and equality of all, the beginning of the “*Qi Wu Lun*” (“Equalizing Things”) presents to us a symphony of difference:

When the Great Clump belches forth its vital breath, we call it the wind. As soon as it arises, raging cries emerge from all the ten thousand hollows. Don't tell me you've never heard how long the rustling continues, on and

¹⁴⁷ See Vandana Shiva, *Women, Ecology and Development*, London: Zed Books, 1989, 23.

¹⁴⁸ “萬物一齊.” Chen Guying, 1983, 456.

on! The towering trees of the forest, hundred spans around, are riddled with indentations and holes – like noses, mouths, ears; like sockets, enclosures, mortars; like ponds, like puddles. Roarers and whizzers, scolders and sighers, shouters, wailers, boomers, growlers! One leads with a yeee! Another answers with a yuuu! A light breeze brings a small harmony, while a powerful gale makes for a harmony vast and grand. And once the sharp wind has passed, all these holes return to their silent emptiness. Have you never seen all the tempered attunements, all the cunning contentions?¹⁴⁹ (*Zhuangzi*, 2:3-4)

Like many stories in the *Zhuangzi* this symphony contains layers of meanings in it. The sounds of the wind blowing through the many holes can be read as a metaphor for, on the one hand, humans' words, affirmation and negation in social life. Emotions arise with the ever-changing circumstances, and affirmation and negation follow the ever-fleeting emotions. As Zhuangzi says in the same chapter, "Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, plans and regrets, transformations and stagnations, unguarded abandonment and deliberate posturing – music flowing out of hollows, mushrooms of billowing steam"¹⁵⁰; on the other hand, it can refer to the myriad things, which then has a similarity to the story of Guanyin Bodhisattva's enlightenment on hearing the sound of water. That which are like noses, mouths etc. refer to the different natures of things; "Roarers and whizzers, scolders and sighers, shouters" are description of the sound and color of all beings. What "one leads with a yeee! Another answers with a yuuu" shows is the interdependent co-arising of all in karma. This is what is called by Zhuangzi "mutual involvement" (*xiangyun* 相蘊) in the "Qi Wu Lun." The indentations and holes are originally empty. The sounds arise with the blowing of the wind. The generation and destruction of all beings are not different from this, which illustrates the play between be-ing and non-be-ing. Therefore Zhuangzi states, "If we follow the perspective of their be-ing, there is no thing that is not be-ing; if we follow the perspective of their non-be-ing, there is no thing that is not non-be-ing."¹⁵¹ Be-ing and non-be-ing are not separate, and in spontaneity they are intimately one. Therefore the oneness of all is spontaneity. But spontaneity is at once difference. This is, therefore, the oneness in which nothing is reduced to the same. This is why Zhuangzi says, "Therefore I list here a blade of grass and a pillar, the ugly ghosts and the beauty Xishi. Strange, grotesque, uncanny or weird, all runs through as one in the *dao*. Fragmentation leads to

¹⁴⁹ Ziporyn's translation. See Brook Ziporyn, 2009, 9. "夫大塊噫氣，其名為風，是唯無作，作則萬竅怒呿，而獨不聞之蓁蓁乎？山林之畏佳，大木百圍之竅穴，似鼻，似口，似耳，似枅，似圈，似臼，似窪者，似汙者。激者，謫者，叱者，吸者，叫者，譟者，突者，咬者，前者唱吁而隨者唱喁。泠風則小和，飄風則大和，厲風濟則眾竅為虛。而獨不見之調調之刁刁乎？" Chen Guying, 1983, 39.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10, 2:7. "喜怒哀樂，慮嘆變愁，姚佚啟態。樂出虛，蒸成菌。" Chen Guying, 1983, 48.

¹⁵¹ <秋水>, "因其所有而有之，則萬物莫不有。因其所無而無之，則萬物莫不無。" Chen Guying, 1983, 452.

completion; completion leads to destruction. But all things, without regard to their completion and destruction, again gain their oneness in the Great Thoroughfare.”¹⁵² The big and the small, the beautiful and the ugly, there is nothing that is not spontaneity. Therefore there is no big or small, beautiful or ugly, *dao* runs through all as one.

Many is the manifestation of one and one is in many. This is a point that many philosophies advocate. For some forms of philosophy, however, the problem is that one and many are separate, thereon one becomes an abstract concept that can only be grasped by human reason, while many is disparaged to the dead matter to be unified by reason. One and many are henceforth simultaneously reified and dead. Oneness in spontaneity is to say, one is many and many is one. One and many are not some reductionalist concepts, but the ceaselessly generative creativity. What they express is the ultimate reality that is experienced by all beings.

The “Qi Wu Lun” elaborates on this,

“When people sleep in a damp place, they wake up deathly ill and sore about the waist – but what about eels? If people live in trees, they tremble with fear and worry – but how about monkeys? Of these three, which ‘knows’ what is the right place to live? People eat the flesh of their livestock, deer eat grass, snakes eat centipedes, hawks and eagles eat mice. Of these four, which ‘knows’ the right thing to eat? Monkeys take she-monkeys for mates, bucks mount does, male fish frolic with female fish, while humans regard Mao Qiang and Lady Li as great beauties – but when fish see them they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, when deer see them they bolt away without looking back. Which of these four ‘knows’ what is rightly alluring? From where I see it, the transitions of Humanity and Responsibility and the trails of Right and Wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused. How could I know how to distinguish which is right among them?”¹⁵³

(*Zhuangzi*, 2:38)

The natures of things are all different, and the likes and dislikes, rejections and attractions are formed out of their natures respectively. “Nature” is not the changeless essence of a categorical delimitation that delineates the boundaries of beings. Rather it designates the flow of the spontaneity itself, wherein all boundaries are diffused. Apparently there are two “natures” we are talking about here: One defines particularity while the other refers to the oneness or universality of all. However, it is noteworthy that, firstly, “nature” or *xing* in Chinese has multiple layers of meanings. We can talk about the nature or *ziran* as the ultimate reality, or we can talk about the

¹⁵² *Zhuangzi*, “Equalizing Things.” (“故為是舉莛與楹，厲與西施，恢詭譎怪，道通為一。”) *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵³ Ziporyn’s translation. 「民溼寢則腰疾偏死，鰭然乎哉？木處則惴慄恟懼，猿猴然乎哉？三者孰知正處？民食芻豢，麋鹿食薦，螂且甘帶，鴟鴞耆鼠，四者孰知正味？猿獼狙以為雌，麋與鹿交，鰭與魚游。毛嫱、麗姬，人之所美也，魚見之深入，鳥見之高飛，麋鹿見之決驟。四者孰知天下之正色哉？自我觀之，仁義之端，是非之塗，樊然殽亂，吾惡能知其辯！」 Cheng Guying, 1983, 90.

nature of humans, snakes, wind, different herbs and so on, we can also talk about this or that individual's nature, this water but not that water's nature. Perspectives are infinite and can shift freely. (The English "nature" also has this feature.) There are, in the end not two "natures." Again, this shows the oneness of one and many in Chinese thinking. The natures manifested through likes and dislikes, rejections and attractions are nothing but the flow of spontaneity.

The myriad things all come-into-being and perish in the decrease and increase of the *qi* between heaven and earth, in the waxing and waning of the moon. Such is the reality of equality. Equality is reality and reality is equality. Therefore Buddhism says "equal and clear" (*pingdengqingjing* 平等清淨), which is a description of the reality of all dharma. Be it small or big, beautiful or ugly, the high and the low, right or wrong, there is nothing that is not *ziran*. As is said in the *Hua Yan Sutra*, the whole universe is the infinite reservoir of lotus flowers, that is, all are the manifestation of the ultimate reality that is equal and clear. There are infinite worlds within worlds, therefore the tip of an autumn dawn is big; it is ultimate beyond the ultimate,¹⁵⁴ therefore Mount Tai is small, and heaven and earth are but a grain of millet. Considered by the amount, there is no end to it; considered by time, there is no stop at any moment. Considering the discrepancy between beauty and ugliness, or the honorable and the low: Even a bird might take its species as beautiful and humans as ugly. Looked down through the view of a bird, the human has no beautiful feathers nor flying wings, bound to the ground by the ponderous flesh like ants. What is the honorability of man? Of course, she has proved that she has the power to destroy the home of the myriad things, to cause the destruction of all beings, including herself. Is her honorability then proved? She then puts on fancy clothes, and takes people with power and wealth as honorable and those who are exploited as low, kings as honorable and the people as low. Isn't all this laughable and pitiable?

Now there are two noteworthy misunderstandings of equality. The first one takes equality as the logical sameness as of $A=A$ that is exclusively grasped by human reason. This way of thinking is destined to seek some changeless nature or essence of things whereby the diversity of things is obliterated. There is no such "sameness" in the becoming world. One is not the same with anyone or anything else just as one's ideas and emotions are in constant flux. But this is not a disavowal of equality as a human idea. What it says is that both sameness and difference arise from equality as the ultimate reality, and are expressions of it. What "equality is reality and

¹⁵⁴ *Zhuangzi*, "Free Wandering." "無極之外復無極也." Chen Guying, 1983, 15.

reality is equality” says is that difference in itself, that is, things are as they are, is equality. The second kind of opinion believes that inequality, be it amongst different species or within the human kind themselves, is all “natural.” This is a thinking that is entrapped in the perspective of inequality. The reality of the equality of all is still concealed from it. Equality in Daoism is not merely a human value or idea. At the end of the day, the anthropocentric view of equality (and freedom) is originated from and deepens the reification of humans, therefore concealing and distorting the true meaning of freedom and equality. Equality of all things is a fact, and inequality is a human construct, originated from humans’ ignorance and selfish desire.

When humans are entrapped in anthropocentrism and dominate and exploit things, they are already thing-ed (viz., reified) by things, and consequently the hierarchical oppression amongst humans is inevitable. The Daoist view of equality deconstructs any anthropocentrism from the root. Thereon it liberates humans from any forms of self-confinement and releases them to the equality and reality of all beings. This is why for the Daoist ideal way of living, returning to nature or *ziran* is a constant theme. As Zhuangzi says, “to live together with the birds and beasts, bunch together with all things.”¹⁵⁵ This in no way is an impractical fantasy in order to abandon and escape human civilization, as is commonly misunderstood by some popular anthropocentric view. It is, rather, a metaphysical, ethical and also political statement demanded by the ultimate reality itself, out of the reflection on human essence, the appeal of eliminating hierarchical oppression in human society, and the understanding and pursuit of ultimate freedom and equality. Zhuangzi also says, “Become simple and uncarved(-block. *Supu* 素樸), and people’s nature will be attained.”¹⁵⁶ The uncarved human nature can only be attained in our returning to spontaneity as equality and reality.

The earth, the wind, and the sunlight are condensed in birds just as they are in the human. When the earth and the wind are polluted, human life itself is threatened. As Zhuangzi says, “all myriad things and I are one.” Such is reality and equality. Therefore Daoist equality is not to be understood simply as equivalent to the logical sameness and changelessness. It is precisely in inter-relatedness and change. When we say that a person is equal to a carrot, we do not mean that a person should not eat the carrot but rather be eaten by it. The carrot I eat all becomes me. What’s more, if I don’t limit my sense of self to this body who is typing in front of a screen at

¹⁵⁵ “Horse Hooves.” <馬蹄>, “同於禽獸居, 族與萬物并.” Chen Guying, 1983, 270.

¹⁵⁶ “Horse Hooves”, “素樸而民性得矣.” Chen Guying, 1983, 270.

this moment, I will see that after this body dies it will in one way or another return to nature and perhaps, eventually become compost for some carrot. (What I am saying here is not that I am now not part of nature. On the contrary, I am always part of nature or *ziran*. Everything is *ziran*.)

Human life should return *ziran* to the myriad things and let things be. This is what is called by Daoism non-action (*wuwei* 無為), and also *Gelassenheit* by Heidegger, which is described as “releasement toward things and openness to the mystery.” Heidegger warns us “the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced *as the only way of thinking*” wherein the human could be found in a state of “total thoughtlessness.”¹⁵⁷ In practice Daoist equality calls forth a lifestyle of simplicity, less consumption and less desire. Let the wind blow freely, the clouds drift freely, the rivers flow freely; and return the birds and trees their home. Human existence takes roots in the earth; her prosperity is together with that of the myriad things. Let the soil that the carrot grows in and the water that it absorbs be pure and clean rather than filled with chemical pesticides; let the sunlight shine on its green leaves, without having to travel through thick smog. Let the carrot be. Allow people to participate in the process of taking care of the carrot through the adjustment of education and economic structures. Allow people to be intimate with nature, rather than confining them only in the jungle of iron and cement, fancying that the carrot in the super market come from trees. Our politics, economy and science and technology should foster this healthy way of life wherein the intimacy with nature is kept, instead of that which dominates nature. The human comes from nature; her essence is defined by nature. And it is her natural and intrinsic need to be intimate with nature. When she forsakes this need and denies nature with other-worldly god or ideas, there she is about to face the fathomless abyss. Let the human be.

In what follows I will take the example of Jim Cheney’s article “Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology”¹⁵⁸ to respond to eco-feminism’s critique of deep ecology. Because Daoism advocates humans’ returning to nature, it is listed as one type of the ecosophies of deep ecology by Arne Ness. In this article Cheney examines the deep problems in deep ecology. According to Cheney, deep ecology’s understanding of the human self was not able to get out of the pit of the masculine atomism, which is a consequence and a component of human alienation

¹⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, New York: Harper & Row, 1966, 55, 56.

¹⁵⁸ *Environmental Ethics*, 9 (1987): 115-145.

wherein hierarchy is inevitable. On the one hand, it advocates the “biospherical egalitarianism in principle,” and “the equal right to live and blossom” of all ways and forms of life. This “equal right to life”, according to Cheney, is a notion that comes from market economies and masculine atomism. It is “a means of stocking capital in the form of potentially satisfiable interests or desires of the individual, possible satisfactions which might accrue to the individual”¹⁵⁹, which inevitably generates hierarchy. On the other hand, however, based on this atomistic understanding of human self, deep ecology has developed the demand of the expansion of the human self to include all beings. The expanding self thus absorbs the other, i.e., nature, into itself out of the need to overcome its own alienation. The identity of the other is then assimilated into the big human self. Consequently the respect for nature becomes empty masculine principles. As quoted by Cheney, deep ecology is “... the self-estranged male reaching for the original androgynous natural unity within himself. The deep ecology movement is very much a spiritual search for people in a barren secular age...”¹⁶⁰ The atomistic self is now entrapped in dichotomy: “We have either atomistically defined selves who are strangers to one another or one gigantic self.”¹⁶¹

While appreciating the depth of Cheney’s analysis, I don’t think Daoism falls into the same pit like deep ecology. In fact, I would argue that Daoism is a feministic philosophy. In the end, *dao* generates the myriad things and is the mother of all. I will explore this feministic characteristic of Daoism in the last chapter. Here I will focus on the idea of the oneness of all beings in early Daoism. Daoism does address on the oneness of all, as Zhuangzi says in the *Qi Wu Lun*, “Heaven and earth live together with me, and the myriad things and I are one.”¹⁶² This is, however, not an expansion of the human ego. Rather it can only be experienced in the realization of no-self. For Daoism, the presencing of the spontaneity and diversity of things first of all requires the recession of the human ego.

In the last paragraph in the *Zhuangzi* quoted above, Zhuangzi discusses knowing together with the diversity of the nature of things. The knowing of common sense follows the construction of the self. The paradox of knowing appears here: the self-centered knowing constitutes ignorance itself. As Guo Xiang commented on this paragraph, “the knowing of a

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶⁰ Ariel Kay Sallach, “Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection,” *Environmental Ethics*, 6 (1984): 339-45.

¹⁶¹ Jim Cheney, 1987, 127.

¹⁶² “天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。” Chen Guying, 1983, 80.

dung beetle is to roll dung balls, while those who laugh at dung beetles treasure incense.”¹⁶³ The experience of reality demands us to cut the self that fragments spontaneity and let diversity flow freely. Only then can the true self show up.

The Daoist idea of the equality of things is not an expansion of human equality, and neither are things equal on the basis of the contentious rights. On the contrary, just like freedom, the equality of things includes and is the root of human equality. The diversity of things fosters the equality of humans. When the equality of things cannot be lived as a way of life, the equality of humans cannot be achieved; when humans are trapped in all forms of anthropocentrism, humans themselves fall into all kinds of hierarchical oppressions. Thereon, as we see, in its madness dominating over nature, the industrial capitalism completes the exploitation of the majority by the minority, and of the colonized countries by the colonizers.

Some modern philosophies, as the ideologies of capitalism, understand persons as the atomistic individuals in conflict with others. Therefore, my rights are the limits of others' freedom. This type of equality and freedom eliminate the particularity and historicity of humans and drain meaning out of human existence, the metaphysical ground being that humans drain meaning out of the earth and things. It is, then, from the beginning, a manifestation of nihilism. Such equality “fractures society, and places on every person the burden of standing on his own two feet.”¹⁶⁴ Many philosophers¹⁶⁵, out of the anthropocentric perspective, believe individual freedom is prior to the equality in the community. Equality is interpreted as, not the power that fosters freedom, but that dissolves it. It has generated a fake dualism: whether it is the atomistic free individualism, or the collectivism wherein the individual freedom has to be sacrificed. This ideology is manifested in modern political regimes as: whether it is an individual and liberal capitalism, or the totalitarian communism. However, as we've seen, both have caused violent exploitation and oppression against both nature and humans. The industrial capitalism has never stopped making beliefs in the neutrality of science and technology, pushing and strengthening the exploitation of nature and humans through wars, politics and economics. Some socialist countries, China for example, have been completely entangled in the industrial capitalist game.

¹⁶³ “蛄蜣之知在於轉丸，而笑蛄蜣者，乃以蘇合為貴。” Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying, *Nanhua Zhenjing Zhushu* 南華真經註疏 Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 北京中華書局, 1998, 48.

¹⁶⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, 167.

¹⁶⁵ See Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Arguing About Political Philosophy*, ed. by Matt Zwolinski, New York: Routledge, 2014.

With the historical background of colonialism, driven by the profit seeking demand of the developed capitalist countries, the violent oppressions over nature and humans are especially serious in these countries. Capitalism and socialism have now cast away the false appearance of antagonism. In these countries, the totalitarianism of communism has become the very strong power to secure the capitalist (both domestic and international) exploitation and oppression. The freedom and equality based on the contentious individual rights entangled in false tensions are the consequence of the departure from the origin and subsequent alienation. Capitalism and socialism inherently endorse the same logic and are both the development of the history of nihilism.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the discourse on human rights is not necessarily patriarchal, capitalist or anthropocentric. Neither does it have to be based on the atomistic understanding of persons. On the contrary, human rights are essentially co-relational and contextual, and for that reason particular. In a totalitarian state, for example, the struggle for equality and freedom is the same process. The problem is not, in fact in any forms of society, and perhaps especially nowadays, that the individual freedom of a small group should be prior to the equality of the whole society, which is a good illustration to Gorge Orwell's famous words, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others", a proclamation by the pigs who control the government; but that how equality and freedom of all can be advanced and realized in their own historical context. Neither is this an issue of universality and particularity, since universality needs to be embodied in particularity. The point here is that hierarchical oppression and exploitation are embodiments of alienation, which is not only of those lives under oppression, but also of those who gain privileges over others in the course of the reification of power. The ruling power, be it totalitarians, a class, a sex, a color, an ideology, a culture or a social norm, or a country, is not free, rather it is an embodiment of slavishness.

The tension between freedom and equality is not necessary. At the origin of their meaning, that is, equality and freedom as spontaneity, they are the distinct expressions of the same event of the unfolding creativity. Freedom and equality as spontaneity offers us a new understanding of human freedom and equality, whereby freedom and equality are not some properties that exclusively belong to the *homo sapiens*, but the source of human existence. This freedom and equality stands on the ground of relationality, historicity, particularity and diversity, more importantly, of humans' belonging to nature, to manifest the meaning of life.

In Daoist philosophy the nature of things is expressed through *ziran*. Through an analysis of *de* 德 and *sheng* 生 or *xing* 性 I elucidated the fact that the spontaneity of things is the ultimate reality of the world, which reveals the sameness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. As the ultimate reality *ziran* contains the meaning of freedom in it. Here I deal with two questions: What are things? What is the relation between things and humans? As a contrast to modern metaphysical motto “humans prescribe laws to nature,” Daoism proposes that humans belong to the constant *ziran* as reality, which is called in this chapter “nature prescribes laws to humans.” In the end I examined Zhuangzi’s view “All the ten thousand things are equal.”

5. The *Ziran* of Humans – On Freedom

Ziran as the ultimate reality is freedom. And because *ziran* is the reality of all things, all are spontaneous and free. Therefore mountains and waters are, and I am. Regarding the humans, freedom is the experience of the ultimate reality of *ziran*. Freedom discloses and manifests itself in being experienced, such as the happening or *ran* 然 (going) of birth, aging, illness, and death; formation, persistence, destruction and emptiness. Humans’ original nature of being free is expressed through *ziran* 自然 in Daoist texts. The terms of *de* 德, *sheng* 生 or *xing* 性 and *ziran* etc. all refer to the true self. Freedom is the true self.

Human freedom is associated with the self-understanding of the humans. Next I will first investigate the idea of freedom in the West through the lens of reason. It should not, however, be simply taken as a critique of reason. Rather it is an observation of the history of freedom disclosed in a self setting-up. For any self-centered self setting-up simultaneously loses the true

self and freedom. Early Daoism emphasized the critique of the Confucian self established through the teaching and cultivation of *ren* 仁 (humanity, benevolence) and *yi* 義 (appropriateness). In my study I will focus on the examination of the rational self.

5.1 Freedom through the Lens of Reason

Many forms of western philosophies in general take reason as the true self. Λογος (*logos*), the Greek word for “reason” is derived from its verbal form λέγω (*logei*), originally meaning “gathering” and “to speak”. In terms of the meaning of “gathering”, λογος does not necessarily refer to the humans. Clouds gather, and the rain falls; Mountains gather birds, beasts, grass and trees; Water gathers; A flower gathers the sunlight, water, earth and air and becomes itself; All the myriad things gather as such. Insofar as it means ‘gathering,’ λογος designates Being itself, a usage which is present throughout the writings of Heraclitus. There λογος is called ‘the common.’ Regarding the humans, it refers to the words or accounts of the humans, just as the Chinese character *dao* 道 also has the meaning “to speak”. However, after Plato λογος has become humanistic and anthropocentric. Its association with the calculativeness with mathematics has been highlighted above all, henceforth reason becomes the only guarantee and means to achieve truth in the realm of *eidos*. Now, as a distinguished feature of the humans, reason defines human essence. From here on, freedom and truth together become ideals, and human essence is now the means towards the realm of the forms.

However, this analysis should not be understood simply as a denial of Plato’s freedom. In the allegory of the cave Plato shows us the process of freedom, that is, to break the chains of any self-delusion, be it from desire, the illusory emotions, the fixed norms, beliefs, the dominating ideologies, or any ruling hierarchies. This progress of achieving freedom, as a matter of fact, cannot be disavowed or dismissed but needs to be reflected upon constantly, to be given flesh and be realized in different historical context. What I underscore here is the fact that human freedom is not only a teleological idea, but the very process of breaking the chains.

Modern philosophy identifies the self as the first principle, which is well articulate by Descartes’ dictum “I think, therefore I am.” For Descartes both the existence of God and things is deduced from the self. Kant follows Descartes on this. For Kant, freedom becomes the free

will of the rational man, meanwhile nature becomes the antithesis of freedom. Freedom is free of the necessity of nature. As Kant states:

‘... such a will must be thought as altogether independent of the natural laws of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality. Such independence is called freedom in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental sense. Therefore, a will for which the mere law giving form of a maxim can alone serve as a law is a free will.’ (5:29, *Critique of Practical Reason*)¹⁶⁶

The rational self establishes its freedom as against the necessity of nature. This freedom, in both its beginning and its historical disclosing, is a double alienation to both nature and the self, for the human is part of nature. For Kant, however, the necessity of nature is constructed by the *a priori* categories of human understanding, therefore it is first of all the alienation of reason itself. Meanwhile, reason that is independent of nature seeks to master nature. As is proclaimed by Kant:

“God’s final end in creating nature must be human beings (only as moral beings). This is because only human beings use reason to set and pursue ends, using the rest of nature as means to their ends.”(5:426-427, *Critique of Judgement*)

Regarding the layers of alienation involved, the rational freedom is a madness which unfolds itself in the modern history. On the one hand, therefore, it is embodied in the oppressions and massacres amongst humans themselves, while on the other, in human’s destruction of the earth that the existence of both things and the human herself depend upon. This destruction is called, by the rational self, “development.”

Now the realization of freedom becomes problematic. In fact, for Kant freedom is inexperienceable:

“Freedom is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be presented in accordance with laws of nature and so too cannot be presented in any possible experience ... it can never be comprehended or even only seen. It holds only as a necessary presupposition of reason in a being that believes itself to be conscious of a will, that is, of a faculty distinct from a mere faculty of desire ...”(*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:459)¹⁶⁷

And, in *Critique of Practical Reason*:

“It is absolutely impossible to give anywhere in experience an example of it, since among the causes of things as appearances no determination of causality that would be absolutely unconditioned can be found.” (5:48)

¹⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Here are some features of Kant's concept of freedom. Firstly, the unconditioned freedom can never be found in the necessity of nature, but only in us humans. For this reason, nature is called a stepmother, so that a godly father needs to be sought to guarantee humans freedom and eternal souls. Nature under necessity is only a stepmother, since she does not provide us with the faculty needed for freedom and the highest good.¹⁶⁸ Secondly, given that humans are empirical beings, freedom is ultimately inexperienceable. Thirdly, in fact both necessity and freedom are only to be found in human reason, depending on whether the world is to be represented as an appearance or a *nuemenon*. "We must think of both mechanism and teleology only as regulative principles that we need to explain nature, rather than as constructive principles that describe how nature is intrinsically constituted." (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:410ff) Nature is still out there.

Eventually freedom in Kant becomes a mere postulate. Freedom, the soul and God have become the shadows of the rational self. The fact is, in any self setting-up, everything inevitably becomes the shadow of the self.

Many philosophies after Kant have foregone the inquiry of self. Under the drive of the capitalist system "freedom" then becomes a calculation of one's own interest. As famously proclaimed by Mill, freedom is " ... pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it." (*On Liberty*) This idea is developed by Isaiah Berlin as non-interference and unobstruction by others. 'Political liberty ... is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.'¹⁶⁹ The self here is defined as the opposite of others. "Freedom" now draws its circle with the self as the center and the self interest as the radius. As a portrait of the all-for-profit capitalism it has unquestioningly become the dominating ideology of capitalism. Standing on the ground of an individualistic freedom, Berlin anticipates pluralism. This is, unfortunately, a pluralism that has fallen into relativism¹⁷⁰ and then nihilism.

Freedom is now known as the "freedom to choose", which means, in our industrial capitalist time, free to buy and free to consume. If, as Berlin pointed out, Kant's freedom based on the

¹⁶⁸ See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:147.

¹⁶⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. See *Arguing About Political Philosophy*, edited by Matt Zwolinski. Newyork: Routledge, 2014, 463.

¹⁷⁰ The relativism discussed here refers to the opposite of absolutism, which, just like absolutism, unfolds as a historical event. It does not criticize relativism considered in a broad sense, i.e., the many particular perspectives and their interdependence. Daoism recognizes and underscores the particularities and interdependence of different perspectives. Our pespectives are as different as our faces. What's more, they can shift just like our evanescent feelings, which is a point commonly neglected by humans. This neglect constitutes a core part of human existence.

autonomous self has become a despotism in the history of capitalism, then non-interference is now an embrace and guarantee of this despotism. Despotism and relativism now fulfill and enhance each other. The atomic self is merely a customer and a consumer subordinated to the singular industrial capitalist system, wherein her consumption contributes to the system, i.e., it constitutes the pollution of nature and the oppression of others, be it another class, a different sex, or the colonized nations. And now, the slavish obedience to the rule of capitalism is called “freedom.” Now consumption has become culture and money is God.

As is mentioned above, human freedom is associated with the self-understanding of the humans. However, now we see that the two have precisely missed each other in the setting up of the rational self. Freedom becomes an ideal in Plato and a postulate in Kant. Reason traps itself in self-assertion and self-identification. Determinism and indeterminism; monism, dualism, and pluralism; absolutism, relativism and nihilism, etc. etc.. It is indulged in these lame and apparently contradictory “-isms”, everyone straining to give more rigid arguments, but, or therefore not being able to see in a deeper level, the fact that humans can freely contemplate, adopt and prove these views itself is significant. What is this freedom? For example, we can believe that there is changeless absolute truth (absolutism), or that everything is relative and there is no objective value (relativism) and therein fall into the nihilism which believes everything is meaningless; Or, as Kant pointed out, one has the choice of either moral conduct or following one’s insatiable desire.¹⁷¹ Humans can realize the equality of all beings in practice as easily as they can believe that they are the masters of nature. They can establish hierarchies of high and low under the teaching of the sages and kings, they can also build up the socialism as authoritarianism and collectivism, or the all-for-profit capitalism. Humans can freely transform amongst these different thoughts, conducts, social values and political systems. What is this freedom? It transverses all beings – languages, thoughts, customs, traditions or political systems – but is not limited by the boundaries of any, as Zhuangzi says, “blending the ten thousand years and accomplishing one purity”¹⁷² (參萬歲而一成純). What is it?

¹⁷¹ As Kant points out insightfully, though ironically, “To satisfy the categorical command of morality is with everyone’s power at all times; to satisfy the empirically conditioned precept of happiness is but seldom possible and is far from being possible for everyone even with respect to only a single purpose. The reason is that in the first case it is a question only of maxim, which must be genuine and pure, whereas in the latter case it is also a question of one’s powers and one’s physical ability to make a desired object real.” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:37)

¹⁷² “Equalizing Things.” Chen Guying, 1983, 94.

Before we move onto next section, I would like to remind my readers that the examination of the history of freedom through the self-establishment of reason should not be simply read as an implicit objection to it. Freedom sought through reason has not only set up hierarchies and caused oppressions, but it has also enormously liberated human creativitiy. The liberal freedom does not simply mean its capitalist form of “to consume”; it primarily means to read what we want, practice a religion of our choice. Neither is it the case that freedom in the west solely revolves around reason. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, reflected on freedom in terms of human existence, for whom freedom is existence and existence is freedom. In this sense freedom is not a mere abstract idea but an action, which resonates with the Daoist freedom. In fact freedom illustrated as an idea is itself an action.¹⁷³ While I am arguing that this freedom through reason is, in large part, to blame for the current environmental crises we face, modern freedom also brings us the invention of democracy, gender equality and so on. Especially for those countries still under the totalitarian rule, these facets of freedom cannot be ignored. In fact it is still their task to gain these precious drops of freedom in their own history. The critique in this thesis is mainly focused on the anthropocentrism in the self setting-up of reason.

5.2 Non-knowing as Not-knowing

Compared with many other philosophies, Daoism does not set up a self besides freedom or *ziran*. Freedom is the true self and the true self is *wu* 無 (emptiness, non-be-ing), also called *dao* 道, *de* 德, *xing* 性, *tian* 天, *zhen* 真 (being true), *ziran* 自然 etc. This is what Buddhism calls “emptiness”, and no-self. Therefore it says, “All dharmas are without self.”¹⁷⁴ All dharmas are selves and self is no self. This is why in Daoist texts freedom as the true self is expressed through the *wu*-forms, such as *wuzhi* 無知 (non-knowing), *wuwei* 無為 (non-action), *wuqing* 無情 (non-emotion), *wuyu* 無欲 (no-desire), *wuming* 無名 (no-name), *wuyong* 無用 (no-use), *wuxin* 無心 (non-heart-mind) *wuxing* 無形 (no-form), *wugujin* 無古今 (no-past-or-present), *wuchang* 無常

¹⁷³ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, tr. by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick, New York: The Noonday Press, 1957, 61-71.

¹⁷⁴ *Dhammapada*, chapter XX. See Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, New York: Grove Press, 1962, 57.

(impermanence), *wuji* 無己 (no-self)¹⁷⁵ ... Next I will elaborate the meaning of freedom as the true self in Daoism through the analysis of *wuzhi* 無知 or non-knowing.

Zhi 知 or knowing is seen everywhere in Daoist texts and is a central problem that early Daoism deals with. For the understanding of knowing determines the experience of the *ziran* of *dao* and things. Both Laozi and Zhuangzi's attitude towards knowing is playful. *Wuzhi* 無知 (non-knowing), *buzhi* 不知 (not-knowing), and *zhi* 知 (knowing) all appear in both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. For example, Laozi talks about *wuzhi* in chapter 10, "With your intelligence reaches in direction, are you capable of non-knowing?"¹⁷⁶ He also uses *buzhi* 不知. Chapter 25 says, for example: "I know not its name."¹⁷⁷ At the same time, he uses *zhichang* 知常 ("knowing the common"), *zhitianxia* 知天下 ("knowing the world"), *zhizhongfu* 知眾甫 ("knowing the beauties of all") and so on.

Zhuangzi followed Laozi and explored the question of knowing systematically. The *Zhuangzi* underscores non-knowing and not-knowing. For example, Nieque asks Wangni in the "Qi Wu Lun" three times, and Wangni replies "I don't know" each time; Grand Purity asks Infinitude in the "Zhi Bei You", "Do you know the *dao*?" "I don't know," was the reply; meanwhile, it also emphasizes "there can be true knowing only when there is a true woman."¹⁷⁸ Now, how should we understand this playful attitude of Daoism towards knowing?

Non-knowing (*wuzhi*) and non-action (*wuwei*) is a fundamental way of being in the world for Daoism. Primarily it designates the fact of "not-knowing" of human existence. Non-knowing as not-knowing is what Buddhism calls "ignorance," which is inevitable whether ontologically, axiologically, or existentially.

5.2.1 The Ontological and Axiological Non-knowing

¹⁷⁵ For the sake of convenience and consistency I use "no" or "non" here to translate the *wu* in these terms. The meaning of the "*wu*" in these terms will be elaborated later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ "明白四達，能無知乎?"

¹⁷⁷ "吾不知其名."

¹⁷⁸ "有真人而后有真知." Chen Guying, 1983, 186.

Ontologically non-knowing is the fundamental state of humans' being in the world. We are full of ignorance both towards ourselves and towards the world. Our feelings and emotions follow the karma in the world and no matter how intelligent a person is, there is no way for her to predict the karma next moment, and therefore no way to know the emotions of joy or anger next moment. Human emotions arise and perish like foam in the ocean. Happiness does not know sadness, sadness does not know anger, anger does not know harmonious joy, despair does not know hope, and so are love and despise, and so on; We are ignorant of our own bodies. We don't know what world the creatures in our stomach live in, neither do they know our existence. Actually we don't know if what we call the "universe" is only the stomach of some creature. As "Autumn Floods" says:

The unipede said to the millipede, "Hopping around on my single leg, I manage to get from place to place, but it requires all my skill. And yet you are somehow able to manage ten thousand legs at the same time. How do you do it?" The millipede said, "It's not like that. Haven't you ever seen a person spit? She gives a hock and all at once the big globules come flying forth like innumerable pearls and the little droplets go spreading out like mist, raining down in a tangle. In my case, all I do is set my heavenly impulse (*tianji* 天機) into action – I have no idea how it's done!"¹⁷⁹

夔謂蜥曰：“吾以一足踰蹕而行，予无如矣。今子之使万足，独奈何？”蜥曰：“不然。子不见夫唾者乎？

噴則大者如珠，小者如霧，杂而下者不可胜数也。今予动吾天机，而不知其所以然。”¹⁸⁰

Just as the millipede does not know how its legs function, we don't know our own body. If one spits at this moment, there is no way for her to know which drops are big, which are small, or how they fall.

We are similarly ignorant about the world. However close a person is to us, we cannot know what is on her mind, even for couples who have lived together for years. (And in this case maybe it is best for them not to know.) As Ze Yang states,

“Chickens squawk, dogs bark – this is something people know. But even someone with the greatest understanding cannot describe in words whence they come to be this way, nor can she plumb by thought what they will do next.”¹⁸¹

Buddhism talks about the three thousand large thousandfold world (三千大千世界). One sun and one moon, around one Mount Sumeru, shining over four continents and interlaying circles of eight oceans and eight mountain ranges, this is one world. One thousand such worlds constitute a

¹⁷⁹ *Zhuangzi*, “Autumn Floods”, edited translation by Brook Ziporyn, 2009.

¹⁸⁰ Chen Guying, 1983, 462.

¹⁸¹ Ziporyn, 2009, 111.

Small Thousandfold world. One thousand Small Thousandfold Worlds constitute a Medium Thousandfold World. Finally, one thousand Medium Thousandfold Worlds constitute a Large Thousandfold World. There are infinite Large Thousandfold worlds.¹⁸² This is talking about the ultimate infinite. In the vast universe, our evanescent existence is like dust, and our knowing counts even less.

Regarding the axiological judgments, Daoists took an attitude of resolute repudiation. For the path of right and wrong, good and evil “the sage does not take but leaves things to be illuminated by the heavenly.” (“聖人不由而照之於天.”)¹⁸³ And, “Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we’d better off forgetting them both and transforming along the course.” (“與其譽堯而非桀也, 不如兩忘而化其道.”)¹⁸⁴ In the Autumn Floods it says, “When you understand the sense in which Yao and Jie each considers himself right and the other wrong, you have grasped the operation of their inclinations.” (“知堯桀之自然而相非, 則趣操睹矣.”)¹⁸⁵

Our moral judgments revolve around the identification of the self. This self-identification can be associated with a certain group, i.e., a sex, an ethnicity, or a country, it can also be associated with the human race. However, we don’t know if it is really “good” for humans to put human interest first. The serious pollution caused by modern anthropocentrism certainly has attested to this point. “People take what they consider beautiful to be sacred and wonderful and take what they dislike to be odious and rotten.” The running of nature is, however, “the odious and rotten transforms into the sacred and wonderful, and the sacred and wonderful again transforms into the odious and rotten.”¹⁸⁶ At the end of the day, everything is nature and there is nothing but the wonderful. This is, however, not a relativism on the monument of which inscribes the motto “everything is OK,” and is thereupon used “naturally” for the legitimization of immoral conducts.

¹⁸² See Shichanantuo (Siksananda) tr., (1998). *Dafangguang Fo Huayan Jing, Hua Yan Sutrua*, Buddhist Education Funding, 406. 《大方廣佛華嚴經》，實叉難陀譯，卷十三首，頁四〇六。佛陀教育基金會，1998。“一日一月，繞一須彌山，照四天下山腰，是四天王天所居 ... 此天之上有一夜摩天、兜率天、樂變化天、他化自在天、梵世天，此名一世界。如此一千世界，一千日月，一千須彌山，一千四天下，一千四天王天，一千三十三天，一千夜摩天，一千兜率天，一千樂變化天，一千他化自在天，一千梵世天 ... 是名小千世界 ... 一千個小千世界，則成中千世界。此中千世界中，共有百萬日月，百萬須彌山，百萬四天下，百萬四天王天，百萬三十三天，百萬夜摩天，百萬兜率天，百萬樂變化天，百萬他化自在天，百萬梵世天 ... 一千個中千世界則成大千世界。大千世界中，共有百億日月，百億須彌山，百億四天下，百億四天王天，百億三十三天，百億夜摩天，百億兜率天，百億樂變化天，百億他化自在天，百億梵世天。”

¹⁸³ “Equalizing Things.” Chen Guying, 1983, 62.

¹⁸⁴ “The Great Master.” Ibid., 195-6.

¹⁸⁵ Chen Guying, 1983, 452.

¹⁸⁶ “其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐”，“神奇復化為臭腐，臭腐復化為神奇。” *Zhuangzi*, “Knowinghood Journeyed North.” Ziporyn, 86.

Daoist repudiation of moral judgments is precisely aware of the root of all ignorance, that is, the setting up of the self. The moral judgments collapse with the dissolving of the self, which reveals to us the thaw of the boundaries both between humans themselves and between humans and nature.

5.2.2 The Existential Ignorance: The Death of Socrates

In the existential sense ignorance is being concealed by selfish desire. Selfish desire is inherent in human existence and constitutes the transmigration of one's karma in life and death.

The death of Socrates, the historical event that happened at the dawn of Western philosophy, attracts my eyes continuously. If we ask: Who is Socrates? There might be many answers to this question, though at the end of the day Socrates is only a true thinker, someone who dedicated his life to thinking. He thought on all occasions, in the battlefield, at the market, on the way to a feast. The poverty in his late years shows he was not much interested in money or benefits, neither was he interested in harming others' benefits. What he did was to benefit others, as he claimed, in the way of awakening others. Despite the complicated political background, however, precisely because of his thinking he was sentenced to death by the Athenian men.

This historical event is significant. In my view, it is not only a philosopher's personal misfortune. Rather it speaks out how ignorance is inherent in and constitutes the world. On the one hand, the world (Samsara) is not different from truth and freedom, and everything is *ziran*. Suffering and decay, just as flourishing and life are expressions of freedom. In this sense, freedom is not anything that can be taken away. People can be oppressed, incarcerated and even tortured under totalitarianism, yet freedom is still with them. A slave belongs to freedom just as a king does; on the other, when humans don't realize the ultimate reality of freedom, thereby the story of master and slave is put on the stage, in the water of complete equality and freedom. Henceforth there is eternal distance between the world and freedom. For this reason Plato perseveringly pursued the shining of the truth in transience. And it is for this reason that for Plato freedom becomes an ideal, and for Kant, freedom, the soul, and God altogether become postulates. Nevertheless, these two aspects are at one with each other. What is is not, what is not is. Such is the play of be-ing and non-be-ing, *you* 有 and *wu* 無.

Freedom never reveals itself easily. When a person is trapped in ignorance, thereby she has lost freedom, and her self, and also the world. She now experiences freedom in the way of loss. As Laozi says,

It rarely speaks, and follows the way of *ziran*. 希言 自然

Hence a gusty wind cannot last all morning, 飄風不終朝

And a sudden downpour cannot last all day. 暴雨不終日

Who is it that generates these? Heaven and earth. 孰為此? 天地

And if heaven and earth cannot sustain things for long, 而弗能久

How much less the human being. 又況於人乎

Thus, those who are committed to the *dao* are at one with the *dao*. 故從事於道者同於道

Those who are committed to *de* 德 are at one with *de* 德. 德者同於德

While those who lose it are at one with loss. 失者同於失

Those who are at one with *de* are also gained by *dao*. 同於得者道亦得之

While those who are at one with loss are also lost by *dao*. 同於失者道亦失之 (DDJ, 23)

Ziran in the first verse refers to both the true self and the *ziran* of *dao* and things. It is the same with *de* 德, the character we've analyzed in detail in the last chapter. Therefore it says "at one with" *dao* and *de*. The *shi* 失 (to lose) means the simultaneous loss of the true self, *dao*, *de* and things, therefore it says "at one with loss." The *de* 德 in the verse "Those who are committed to *de* 德 are at one with *de* 德" is found in the Mawangdui Silk Texts as *de* 得, which means gaining. It underscores gaining from *dao*, and is interchangeable with *de* 德 for that reason. *De* as gaining resonates with "at one with" (*tongyu* 同於), therefore it says, "Those who are at one with *de* are also gained by *dao*." Those who gain the *dao* are also gained by it, and this is why it says being "at one with the *dao*." Those who lose the *dao* are lost by it, thus it says being "at one with loss." There are no barriers between the true self and *dao* or *de*, let alone subject or object. *Dao* is me and I am *dao*. Who is the subject and who is the object?

As the first one of the Four Noble Truths, suffering is a fundamental recognition of the world by the Buddha. It does not mean, however, that there are no joyful moments in life. Rather it designates the status of the loss of freedom in human existence itself. In this sense, non-knowing as ignorance is not merely an individual psychological state. Rather it is an objective historical event that is unfolding systematically, manifested as the different social regimes. Ignorance is the power that unwaveringly advances and seeks to rule. It passes on from generation to generation

through history, culture, and ideology; it strengthens itself through state apparatus and social institutions (family and school etc.), progresses itself through science and technology, disseminates itself through art and literature.

Ignorance fears freedom, hates it and kills it. By this way it demonstrates the generation and destruction of the world in emptiness, and for that reason belongs to freedom. Like the clouds that rise continuously and endlessly, the human deeply desires to repudiate freedom, disavows it and conceals it, which is often out of self-preservation. Meanwhile, in the repudiation of freedom, she yearns for returning to it, consciously or unconsciously. However, freedom only reveals itself in no-self. Thereon, it often becomes a destruction of both the self and each other, whereby she forgets her self in the madness of collectivism, or annihilates her self in the universal sameness of the “consumer culture.” The desire towards life becomes the path towards death. Such is the face of ignorance.

Ultimately, ignorance belongs to freedom, and power is empty. Only when the human realizes this can freedom be revealed to her. It is for the realization – in both senses of “to know” and “to make real” – of freedom that the world of life and death discloses.

Nevertheless, how can one go against or lose the ultimate reality, that is, *dao*, *de*, freedom, *ziran* or her true self since she is already in it as part of it? How can *dao* or *ziran* lose anything since it is always already in everything? This is the tension between *tian* and humans in the *Zhuangzi*. As is stated by Zhuangzi, “How do we know what we call the heavenly is not the human? And that what we call human is not the heavenly?”¹⁸⁷ I have in various ways addressed this issue, that is, it is the loss of the realization of freedom. I am here further elaborating it with the following story.

A group of black bugs have lived in a bag of lotus seeds for many generations. Their memory is long and plenty of books have been written to keep record of their history and wisdom. They have created God in the image of the bugs who is said to have created the bugs in his own image. Some bugs have seriously pondered upon the question of truth and freedom. They have developed advanced technology to improve their life and also to kill each other more efficiently. They have even shot quite a few satellites to the outer space. Eventually they proliferate so much that the bag is full of black bugs. The lotus seeds are then thrown away. The black bugs are all extinguished.

5.3 Non-knowing as Knowing

¹⁸⁷ “The Great Master,” Chen Guying, 1983, 186.

5.3.1 The Problem of Knowing

Out of a deep awareness of the fact of our ignorance, we are always driven by an impulse to seek certainty through knowledge. However, this knowledge of external things as thoughts and ideas, out of the intention to control and master things, does not guarantee us certainty. Ironically, the surer we want to be the less sure we can be; the more we grasp the more we lose, which is a simple fact of our transitory life.

Here again Kant's philosophy is a good example of it. Kant anchors the certainty of knowledge solely in human subjectivity. The being of beings depends on the condition that they are represented by human understanding. Eventually beings themselves become the empty and dark *noumena*, the unknowable and inaccessible abyss to humans. Things in themselves are "not extended, not impenetrable, not composite, because such predicates concern only sensibility and its intuition..." (*CPR*, B411) That is to say, things are deprived of all features, which are thereby transferred to and subsumed under human subjectivity.

Under this certainty of human knowledge and mastery over things, however, understanding itself is put in an ominous situation. As Kant describes:

This domain (of understanding), however, is an island and enclosed by nature itself within its limits that can never be altered. It is the country of truth (a very charming name), but surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the true home of illusion, where many a fogbank and fast-melting ice-floe tempts us to believe in new lands, while constantly deceiving the adventures which he can never abandon and yet can never bring to an end. (*CPR*, A2365-6/B294-5)

The dangerous ocean of storms is the realm of *neumena*, where the causality of freedom rules. When humans set themselves up against things, human understanding inevitably becomes an isolated island. Together with this isolation, the existence of things becomes a stormy ocean, the home of illusion to man. Now truth is nothing but the necessity of human subjectivity. Here lies the secret of modern metaphysics, that is, the objectivity of human knowledge is precisely grounded on the necessity of subjectivity. Obviously, the territory of this form of truth is too limited yet at the same time too bold. On the one hand, it leaves the existence of all things to the unknown abyss. The being of beings is expunged hastily in this sense; on the other, it tries to ground the being of beings simply on human understanding, that is, as Kant states, humans make principles and laws to nature.

Here the problem of knowing is revealed to us. In any quest for the knowing of things through the setting up of the self knowing has thereby become impossible. This kind of knowing operates on some special levels and along certain directions. It follows the intellect, perception, will, ideas, emotion and desire of the humans. In such a quest things have become the shadow of the intellect, perception, will, ideas, emotion and desire of the self. The reality of the spontaneity of all things, however, is still beyond this kind of knowing. Meanwhile, the self as grasped by the intellect, perception, will, ideas, emotion and desire is itself constructed by the karma of the world. Human intellect, perception, will, ideas, emotion and desire follow the wind of the world and are constituted by it. For Daoism, any self setting-up independent of the external world is empty. The independence of the human is not in the setting up of the self. The self sets up its “other” while demarcating its own boundaries. It is, therefore, against other humans, or the myriad things, including humans. For in the self setting-up against others or other things the self is first of all alienated.

Thereon, when the human sets up the authority of reason, she is about to be scourged and constrained by reason; when she curses nature, her own life is thereby cursed. Therefore the *Zhuangzi* says, “... human intellect (*zhi* 知, also translated as “wisdom,” “knowing.”) is an instrument for striving with others.”¹⁸⁸ The *zheng* 爭 (strife) here means not only strife with others, but at the same time and primarily means the strife with oneself. In the self-centered self setting-up slavishness plays itself out.

When the human is trapped in her own claims to knowledge and is distanced from reality she is not aware of the matter of fact that she does not know. The self does not expose itself in setting up. In all calculative and manipulative setting up the self is decisively lost, together with the world.

So, how is knowing possible?

5.3.2 Freedom and Knowing through Non-knowing

The original *wu* (non-be-ing, emptiness) is exposed to us in non-knowing as not-knowing, as a matter of fact. True knowing belongs to and is preserved in *wu*. This is why *Zhuangzi* says, “The knowing of the ancients really got all the way there. Where had it arrived? To the

¹⁸⁸ 知者爭之器也. *Zhuangzi*, Ren Jian Shi (“In the Human World”). Chen Guying, 1983, 120.

point where, for some, there had never existed so-called things. This is really getting there, as far as you can go.”¹⁸⁹ The true self is *wu*, *wu* is the true self. And this is freedom. Next I shall elucidate this matter through a Chan Buddhist Koan.

Dizang asked Fayen, “Where to, esteemed monk?” Fayen replied, “Touring around on pilgrimage.” Dizang said, “Undertaking a pilgrimage – why do so?” Fayen said, “I don’t know.” Dizang said, “Not-knowing is most intimate.” With this Fayen suddenly experienced profound awakening.¹⁹⁰
地藏問法眼：“上座何往？”眼云：“迤邐行腳。”藏云：“行腳事作麼生？”眼云：“不知。”藏云：“不知最親切。”眼恍然大悟。（《從容錄》第二十則）

Suddenly the golden light casts over the green leaves in front of the window, suddenly night covers the vast earth. What is it? Why? Where from? Where to? Don’t know. Why was Fayen on pilgrimage at that time? Why am I writing at this place at this moment? Don’t know. Why do the clouds always drift in the sky? Why is the ocean fathomless? Why do the clouds love to play with the mountains? Why do the birds fly in clouds and mountains? Don’t know. Why are there joy, anger, likes and dislikes? Why are we in the transmigration of life and death? How is the cloud next moment? Don’t know.

In the chapter “Knowinghood Journeys North” in the *Zhuangzi* Grand Purity asks Infinitude, “Do you know the *dao*?” Infinitude replies: “I don’t know.”

Take the example of dream. Dreams are a fundamental metaphor for human’s existence in the world in Daoist texts. Our existence in the world isn’t so “clear and distinct” as we think, but is obscure like the image on the window in the morning. As Laozi says, “vague and obscure,” “obscure and vague.”¹⁹¹ This refers at once to the *dao*, things and the human. The lights and shadows of the world flow and change and the image is formed. Our memory, for example, be it about ourselves or about the world, is vague and indefinite. Much more so are our emotion, perception and desire. This is how we experience and remember the world, and in the same way are experienced and remembered by the world. It is as real as the wind, the light and the cloud, as the rain passing by all of a sudden, as empty as the earth.

¹⁸⁹ “Equalizing Things.” “古之人其知有所至矣。惡乎至？有以為未始有物者，至矣，盡矣，不可以加矣。” Chen Guying, 1983, 75.

¹⁹⁰ The translation is from a dharma talk by Michael Kieran, the zen teacher at Palolo Zen Center at Honolulu Diamond Sangha. The dharma talk is published on Honolulu Diamond Sangha Newspaper, Winter 2018.

¹⁹¹ “恍兮惚兮”，“惚兮恍兮。” (DDJ, 21)

“Now, we only speak of an ‘I’ as compared to each other – how do I know I am what I call ‘I’?”¹⁹² How do I know I am not in a butterfly’s dream? The world enters into my dream just as I enter into the world’s dream. “You dream you are a bird and find yourself soaring in the heavens, you dream you are a fish and find yourself submerged in the depths. I cannot know if what I am saying now is a dream or not.”¹⁹³ Life is a dream; death is also a dream; one dream to be a bird, one dream to be a fish, another to be a human; awareness is a dream; to say that it is a dream is still a dream.

In non-knowing the self and knowing disappear altogether and are released to emptiness or *wu*. Thus Yanhui in the *Zhuangzi* says, “I leave my physical form and oust my knowing, until I am one with the Thoroughfare.”¹⁹⁴ As we mentioned above, the true self is *wu*, which is also called *dao*, *de*, *xing*, *tian*, *zhen* (being true), and *ziran*.

Therefore, the Daoist self is not an identification of any peculiar human characteristic, not reason or *renyi* 仁義 (benevolence and appropriateness), but *wu* or emptiness. It is both being and nonbeing, not being, not nonbeing; both contraction and expansion, not contraction, not expansion; both life and death, not life, not death; not in, not out; not one, not many. It is that which is immediately experienced, whether we are aware of it or not, but not whatsoever is grasped by human language or reason.

The knowing (*zhi* 知), action (*wei* 為), words (*yan* 言), emotion (*qing* 情), desire (*yu* 欲) and heart-mind (*xin* 心) of the humans are all be-ing, and be-ing is non-be-ing or *wu*. Therefore the *wu*-forms means, in the first place, that the arising and passing-away of the human knowing, action, words, emotion, desire and heart-mind are all empty (*wu*). They are generated from *wu*, destructed by *wu* and return to *wu*. They are, ultimately, not different from *wu*. This is what is called by the Heart Sutra “All forms are empty.” (*sejishikong* 色即是空) It also means the so-called “human essence” actually does not exist.

The *Dao De Jing* says,

Dao always persists and is nameless. 道恒無名

Though the uncarved block is simple and small, 樸雖小

No one in the world dare claim its allegiance. 而天下弗敢臣

¹⁹² “且也，相與吾之耳矣，庸詎知吾所謂吾之乎？” *Zhuangzi-Da Zong Shi* (“The Great Master”). Chen Guying, 1983, 218. I deleted the two characters “非吾” that Chen added to the text.

¹⁹³ “且汝夢為鳥而厲乎天，夢為魚而沒於淵，不識今之言者，其覺者乎，夢者乎？” Ibid., 218.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. “離形去知，同於大通。” Ibid., 226.

Should lords and kings be able to keep to it, 侯王若能守之
The myriad things would govern themselves. 萬物將自賓
Heaven and earth come together and sweet dew falls, 天地相合以雨甘露
And the people will be equitable, though no one so decrees. 民莫之令而自均安
Only when there starts to be regulations there are names. 始制有名
But once names have been assigned, 名亦既有
We must also know when to stop. 夫亦將知止
Knowing when to stop it is not to be exhausted. 知止所以不殆
As an analogy to describe *dao* in the world: 譬道之在天下

The creeks come out of the valleys and flow into the rivers and seas. 猶川谷之於江海 (DDJ, 32)

Name is *wu*, and *wu* is also *wu*. Therefore it is called *dao*, or *heng* (constancy). The *pu* 樸 (uncarved block) and *xiao* 小 (small) both refer to *wu* or emptiness. That “No one in the world dare claim its allegiance” is to say there is nothing in the world that is not. When humans keep to the *wu* things are thereon released to their spontaneity. The *bin* 賓 (govern) here exposes freedom. My freedom lies in the spontaneity of things. Therefore it says “Heaven and earth come together and sweet dew falls.” The *ling* 令 (decree) shows us the self that leaves freedom and seeks to rule. “And the people will be equitable, though no one so decrees” is to say, everything is released to *ziran* and the world is kept in peace and tranquility. This is what is called “being at ease with the world” (*zaiyoutianxia* 在宥天下) instead of “ruling the world” (*zhitianxia* 治天下)¹⁹⁵. The regulations and names are both be-ing and all be-ing is non-be-ing. This is why it says “knowing when to stop.” The “knowing when to stop” is to stop at *wu* or non-be-ing. Only then one can see *dao* in the world as “the creeks come out of the valleys and flow into the rivers and seas.” Everything is spontaneous and free.

There is a fundamental metaphor in the *Dao De Jing* for the status of *ziran* and the true self, i.e., the newborn baby. Laozi emphasizes the tenderness and harmony of the newborn baby. Of course, this “tenderness” does not mean being weak. It is noteworthy that, even more so, it does not mean hiding oneself under some shining or kind appearance to trap others or capture the world, which has nothing to do with a baby at all. Neither is the “harmony” here the harmonization that extinguishes all different voices. Laozi’s philosophy is often misunderstood this way intentionally, out of the ignorance and the selfish desire of the

¹⁹⁵ Chen Guying, 1983, 293.

humans. Even though ignorance and selfish desire also are, those who are trapped in them cannot see freedom and decisively lose it. The tenderness and harmony of the baby refer to non-knowing and non-action so as to become one with non-be-ing (*wu*). She who is one with *wu* follows *wu*, seeing *wu* with *wu*, hearing *wu* with *wu*, feeling *wu* with *wu*, knowing *wu* with *wu*. *Wu* calls forth *wu*, *wu* meets *wu*. Such is the experience of *wu*, and such is freedom. Like the baby lying in her mother's arms, the myriad things are free and spontaneous as such, and such is human's being-in-the-world.

Chapter 28 of the *Dao De Jing* says:

Know the male 知其雄

Yet keep to the female 守其雌

And be a ravine to the world. 為天下谿

As a ravine to the world, 為天下谿

The constant *de* (virtuosity) is always with you, 恒德不離

And you return to the newborn babe. 復歸於嬰兒

Know the white 知其白

Yet keep to the black 守其黑

And be a model for the world. 為天下式

As a model for the world, 為天下式

The constant *de* never blunders, 恒德不忒

And return to the infinite. 復歸於無極

Know the glorious 知其榮

Yet keep to the soiled 守其辱

And be a valley to the world. 為天下谷

As a valley to the world, 為天下谷

The constant *de* will be fulfilled, 恒德乃足

And return to being the uncarved block. 復歸於樸

When the uncarved block is split, 樸散

It is made into utensils. 則為器

The sages use them as officials. 聖人用之 則為官長

There is no cutting, however, in the best tailoring. 故大制不割

“The female,” “the black,” “the soiled” and “the uncarved block” all refer to the *wu*. That “the constant *de* (virtuosity) is always with you” presents to us the reality of all phenomenon. To return to the newborn babe is to become one with *wu*, and this is the infinite (*wuji* 無極). The *wuji* here is spoken of as against *youji* 有極. *Ji* originally means the ridge beam of a roof. It is usually used in Chinese thoughts to mean the most important pole that supports the whole structure of the society or the world, for the reason of which it is sometimes translated as “the highest principle.” And because of the position of the ridge beam, it is also known as the great middle or *dazhong* 大中. For example, the *taiji* 太極 (lit. “the utmost *ji*”) in the *Yijing* which is usually translated as “the ultimate” indicates this idea. *Ji* was associated with the ruling power in the Zhou Dynasty. The Hong Fan in the *Book of Documents* says, “The sovereign establishes in himself the supreme principle.” (*huangjianyouqiji* 皇建有其極) This *ji* means the rule of the Zhou Dynasty. Thereon it claims:

Without deflection, without unevenness, 無偏無陂

Follow the royal appropriateness. 遵王之義

Without selfish likings, 無有作好

Follow the royal way. 遵王之道

Without selfish dislikings, 無有作惡

Follow the royal path. 尊王之路

Avoid deflection, avoid partiality; 無偏無黨

Broad and long is the royal way. 王道蕩蕩

Avoid partiality, avoid deflection; 無黨無偏

Level and easy is the royal way. 王道平平

Avoid perversity, avoid one-sidedness; 無反無側

Correct and straight is the royal way. 王道正直

Ever seek for this utmost pole, 會其有極

Ever return to this utmost pole. 歸其有極¹⁹⁶

The *youji* 有極 here literally means “there is an extreme pole or principle,” denominating the king’s power and his way. Laozi’s *wuji* 無極, which means literally “there is no extreme whatsoever” – be it a power or principle – is against this ideology. The constant *de* is always one with and so return to the infinite or *wuji* instead of the royal way. That is, it does not set

¹⁹⁶ Edited translation from James Legge. See <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/great-plan>.

up any extreme which is ultimately centered on the self in order to rule and govern people. Therefore it says “there is no cutting in the best tailoring.” The “no-cutting” means not to mutilate human’s nature of being simple, pure, true, spontaneous and free.

In terms of the human status of being trapped in ignorance and losing freedom, freedom becomes an ideal. Therein the *wu*-forms of non-knowing and non-action means the practice of returning to *wu*. The matter of fact that the true self is *wu* determines that the practice of *wu* is not a cultivation of self setting-up, but a diminishing and dissolving of the self. Therefore Laozi says,

In studying there is a daily increase, 為學日益

While in learning of *dao* there is a daily decrease. 為道日損

She diminishes it and again diminishes it, 損之又損

Till she arrives at doing nothing. 以至於無為

She does nothing yet nothing is left undone. 無為而無不為 (DDJ, 48)

The “doing-nothing” here certainly does not mean doing no-thing, which is obvious in the following verse “nothing is left undone.” The “nothing” refers to *wu* which is embodied in all beings. Here I use this translation to underscore the diminishing process of the practice of emptying, in contrast to that of a cultivation. Insofar as it sets up the self, cultivation is dangerous. This is why Laozi says,

After they (the myriad things) are transformed, should desire raise its head, 化而欲作

Press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block. 將鎮之以無名之樸

Thereon leave off desiring, 夫亦將知足

In not desiring, achieve tranquility. 知足以靜

The myriad things will be at peace of its own accord. 萬物將自定 (DDJ, 37)

The human should be alert to the desiring of the self, and return to *wu* right at its arising.

The *ziran* and freedom of the *dao*, the things and the human only presents itself in emptiness or *wu*. The Geng Sang Chu chapter in the *Zhuangzi* says, “The great peace is vast and empty, and so the heavenly radiance shines forth through it. Where the heavenly radiance shines forth through, the humans are seen as humans and things as things.”¹⁹⁷ Only now the human knowing, action, emotion and desire can be true and *wu* is this knowing, action,

¹⁹⁷ Geng Sang Chu: “宇泰定者，發乎天光。發乎天光者，人見其人物見其物。” Chen Guying, 1983, 648.

emotion and desire. Such is freedom. That freedom is the true self is what the Heart Sutra says “Emptiness is form.” (*kongjishise* 空即是色)

Freedom as the true self is not an idea or a theory. It is an action. It is our very being in the world itself that is lived in every moment, right at this moment, as non-be-ing. This moment is nothing but the realization of freedom. And freedom is being realized whether we are aware of it or not. Not-knowing is the way that freedom realizes itself. When I say freedom is not an idea or theory, however, I do not mean that it cannot or should not be developed as an idea or theory. We already have many and will still have more ideas and theories of freedom. Insofar as freedom is the ultimate reality, the many ideas and theories are themselves action. As a proof of this point we only need to turn our eyes to see how the ideal or theories of freedom have advanced the liberation of humans in Western history.

Freedom is not different from our karma (i.e., what is called *youdai* 有待 or interdependence by *Zhuangzi*) in the world. It is in the karma of life and death, and karma is freedom. Like the wind blows and the waves rise and fall, human existence follows the wind of karma in the world. Freedom discloses itself as such. Take another example of the clouds. We don’t know which cloud is going to drift in the sky at the next moment, yet all clouds are spontaneous and all karmas are freedom. The clouds are free in the sky, and the human is free being in the world. Human morality and ignorance are the presencing of freedom, which is a footnote to the abolition of moral judgments in Daoism. That is, the evanescent emotions of joy, anger, sadness, happiness, likes, dislikes and desire, the struggling in one’s conscience, the deeds of good and bad, are all realization of freedom. For freedom is non-be-ing and non-be-ing is always be-ing, or becoming.

This does not mean, however, that one can do whatever she wills. When the human is occupied by selfish desire, she is about to pay price for it; when people don’t “know” to gather their courage and struggle for freedom, they will easily find themselves entrapped in the fate of being enslaved; when a bird does not practice flying, it can be easily eaten by a cat. Freedom is clear and distinct as such.

In fact only when the human is awake to the fact that freedom is the true self, thereby she starts to be capable of knowing and acting. That is why it says “Do nothing yet nothing is left

undone,” “Know the world without going out of her door” in the *Dao De Jing*.¹⁹⁸ That freedom is the true self is to say, the human does not have to be trapped in any walls of walls and hierarchies that are built up for the purpose of control and oppression through beliefs, cultures, civilizations or ideologies. For the true self is freedom and this is truth itself.

There are no limits or boundaries in freedom as the true self. The human and her world become one and there is no separation between the two. There is no distance, no barrier, no boundary between the human and freedom. As is vividly described in the butterfly dream in the *Zhuangzi*:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, there must be distinctions between Zhou and a butterfly. Such is what we can the transformation of one thing into another.¹⁹⁹ (“Equalizing Things”) 昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻適志與。不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？周與胡蝶，則必有分矣。此之謂物化。²⁰⁰

Distinctions can still be made, as the presencing of non-distinction. Any distinction is essentially the presencing of non-distinction. Insofar as they alienate the free true self, the hierarchies built up through custom, culture, civilization and ideologies are, ultimately, empty.

Therefore Dizang says, “Not-knowing is the most intimate.” In non-knowing the *ziran* of *dao* and things is encountered. The intimacy between humans, things and *dao* is naturally achieved. The fact that needs to be underscored here is: Without this intimacy with nature there is no human freedom. There is, therefore, no human freedom can be spoken of at all in the domination of nature. The intimacy with nature and *dao* is freedom; and freedom is this intimacy. The Daoist knowing, as non-knowing, does not separate things from humans, but lets the myriad things be present of their own accord. The Daoist knowing as non-knowing is being present for the spontaneous presencing of all.

As is shown vividly by the story of the happy fish in the *Zhuangzi*:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were roaming along the bridge over the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, “The minnows swim about so freely, following the openings wherever they take them. These fish are happy.”

Huizi said, “You are not a fish, so whence do you know the happiness of the fish?”

¹⁹⁸ “無為而無不為,”(37, 48) “不出戶知天下.”(47)

¹⁹⁹ Ziporyn’s translation, 2:48-9.

²⁰⁰ Chen Guying, 1983, 101.

Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, so whence do you know I don't know the happiness of fish?”

Huizi said, “I am not you, to be sure, so I don't know what it is to be you. But by the same token, since you are certainly not a fish, my point about your inability to know the happiness of fish stands intact.”

Zhuangzi said, “Let's go back to the starting point. You said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Your question was premised on your knowing that I know it. I know it from here, up above the Hao River.” (“Autumn Floods”)²⁰¹

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：“儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也。”惠子曰：“子非魚，安知魚之樂？”莊子曰：“子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？”惠子曰：“我非子，固不知子矣。子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂全矣。”莊子曰：“請循其本。子曰‘汝安知魚樂’云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。”²⁰²

Insofar as knowing is understood as the setting-up of the self in order to oppose nature, I can in no way know the happiness of fish. The world and things that are viewed as objects cannot be known by the subject, as is shown by Kant. This understanding is used in modernity to master and dominate things. The truth of the *ziran* and spontaneity, the happiness of fish is beyond this type of understanding. In the story of the happy fish, Zhuangzi freely roaming along the bridge over the Hao River, Zhuangzi seeing minnows swim about freely, Huizi's questioning, Zhuangzi's humor, are all spontaneous and free. The happiness of fish presents itself naturally right at this moment, up above the Hao River.²⁰³

The free being-in-the-world of humans and things is expressed in the *Zhuangzi* through the *you* 遊 or *you* 游 characters. These characters describe a status of free wandering or roaming in the world. That is, to empty one's knowing and action to freely roam in the world. As it says in *Zai You* (“Letting Be”): “Wandering listlessly about, I know not what I seek; carried on by a wild impulse, I know not where I am going. I wander about in the infinite, to see the never illusive one.”²⁰⁴ The free wandering and the wild impulse (*changkuang* 猖狂) here indicate the freedom beyond the boundaries and barriers of knowing, that is, to see the true and the real in non-knowing. Non-knowing and non-action as a practice is free wandering. Thus knowing in Daoism is not a cognitive activity, wherein nothing is active but a human

²⁰¹ Ziporyn, 2009, 76.

²⁰² Chen Guying, 1983, 476.

²⁰³ For a detailed and wonderful discussion of this story see Franklin Perkins “Of Fish and Men: Species Difference and the Strangeness of Being Human in the *Zhuangzi*.” (*Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish*, edited by Roger Ames and Takahiro Nakajima, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015.) There Perkins discussed the strangeness of human existence in the world and how to break through our set perspectives of “rights” and “wrongs” in the Daoist context.

²⁰⁴ “浮遊不知所求，猖狂不知所往。遊者鞅掌，以觀無妄。” Chen Guying, 1983, 309.

brain, which is well elaborated or refuted via the Brain in a Vat thought-experiment. Rather, just like freedom, it is an action and a way of being in the world. The “being in the world” here is to say that there is no separation, no distinction like subject and object between I and the world. Like the spring comes and the flowers bloom, the world moves me as such, and I also move the world this way. Also, like the moon comes up above the ocean, the world cannot move me, neither do I move the world. Freely being-in-the-world is *ziran*.

About this way of life of freely being-in-the-world, Zhuangzi says as such:

“The humans of old, in an undistinguished condition, shared the placid tranquility which belonged to the whole world. At that time the *Yin* and *Yang* were harmonious and still; ghosts and gods worked no mischief; the four seasons kept their proper order; the myriad things knew no injury, and living creatures were free from premature death. The human might be possessed of (the capability of) knowledge, but they had no occasion for its use. This was what is called the state of Utmost Oneness. At this time, there was no action on the part of any one, but a constant manifestation of *ziran*. ”²⁰⁵

“古之人在混芒之中，與一世而得澹漠焉。當是時也，陰陽和靜，鬼神不擾，四時得節，萬物不傷，群生不夭，人雖有知，無所用之，此之謂至一。當是時也，莫之為而常自然。 ”²⁰⁶

Along with the disclosing of *wu*, the *qi* of *yin* and *yang*, ghosts and gods, the four seasons and the myriad things and therefore humans, are all guarded in harmony. All things in the world are kept in *ziran*.

Regarding the humans, *ziran* in Daoism designates human freedom. Freedom is the true self. I first analyze how the setting up of the self through reason alienates both freedom and the self. I then elucidate how the true self is understood through the *wu*-forms through the analysis of non-knowing. I examine the problem of ignorance which is inherent in and constitutes the world and also the problem of knowing through the setting up of the self. Next I reveal how self and knowing are achieved through the disclosing of *wu* in non-knowing. In *wu*-ing the intimacy of the *dao*, the humans and things is kept. Such is freedom. This intimacy, I have pointed out, is *ziran*.

²⁰⁵ Zhuangzi, “Reviving the Nature.” My translation.

²⁰⁶ Chen Guying, 1983, 434.

6. Conclusion: Daoist Ecofeminism as A New Democracy

“... these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their means of production... And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”

-- Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I²⁰⁷

After the illumination of the meaning of nature through Daoist *ziran*, in this conclusion I will take a look at China's pollution through the lens of urbanization. China can serve as a perfect case for an observation of many problems caused by modern way of living, for the very reason that modernization has been anything but peaceful for China. After the wars of colonialism at the end of Qing Dynasty and the Civil War between the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China was thrown into the swirls of the Culture Revolution under the CCP's socialism. Now that it has become a capitalist regime as a result of its “economic reform,”

²⁰⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, 875.

(*gaige kaifang* 改革開放), however, new forms of ruthless oppression and exploitation take place under the drive of both international and domestic capital. Nevertheless, with all these modern (communist and capitalist) “accomplishments”, it still has no democracy. I will elucidate the modernization and development of China as an exploitation to both nature and humans through a brief examination of China’s land enclosure movement and then try to raise the notion of Daoist ecofeminism as a new democracy as my own proposed solution.

6.1 Development For Whom? – Land Enclosure in China

The land enclosure ever since the 1980s under the name of urbanization has been a persisting process and constituted the main part of China’s modernization. The transition from traditional agriculture to capitalist production “naturally” starts from the expropriation of land, for land is the primary means of production for capitalism. The factories, the headquarters and branches of its offices, and the shopping malls all require, first and foremost, land. Compared with Marx’s analysis of England, China’s land enclosure enforced by the state seems much more violent and happens on a larger scale. In 23 years from 1991-2013, the arable land occupied and expropriated reached at least 10 million hectares. The number of peasants who became landless during this period may be as high as 130 million people. About 1.4 million to 1.5 million villages were destroyed and disappeared, which is 33.3-35.7% of China’s villages.²⁰⁸ Therefore, “In less than a quarter of a century, 3.4 times as much land has been enclosed in China than throughout the 400 years of enclosures in Britain. ... 3.4 times as many peasants have been dispossessed as those in Britain at the end of its enclosure (1875, 37.5 million). More importantly, Britain’s enclosures reached their peak in about 300 years. Meanwhile China’s contemporary enclosures peaked right at the beginning.”²⁰⁹

The Constitution was amended and laws were made to accelerate the transmission of land to capital. In March 1989 the Seventh Plenary Session of the National People’s Congress amended Article 10 in the Constitution. Although “No organization or individual may appropriate, buy, sell or otherwise engage in the transfer of land by unlawful means,” the clause “The right to the use of land may be transferred according to law” was added. In May 1990, State Council decree

²⁰⁸ Zhang Yulin, “Understanding China’s Land Enclosure Movement”, *Discovering Rural China*, 3, 2014.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

No. 55 entitled “INTERIM REGULATIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA CONCERNING THE ASSIGNMENT AND TRANSFER OF THE RIGHT TO THE USE OF THE STATE-OWNED LAND IN THE URBAN AREAS” (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chengzhen guoyou tudi shiyongquan churang he zhuanrang zhanxing tiaoli 中华人民共和国城镇国有土地使用权出让和转让暂行条例) defined in detail various economic rights to land. The first article of this decree claims, “These Regulations are formulated in order to reform the system of using the State-owned land in the urban areas, rationally develop, utilize and manage the land, strengthen land administration and promote urban construction and economic development.” According to this decree, individuals and/or organizations that acquire the right to use land can also earn profits off it, and transfer usage rights. It then lays the legal ground for the swift and violent land enclosure throughout the country. In June 2016, the Ministry of Agriculture issued the “Rules for the Operation of the Circulation and Trading Markets of the Right to Manage Rural Land (for Trial Implementation)” (Nongcun tudi jingyingquan liuzhuan jiaoyi shichang yunxing guifan (shixing) 《农村土地经营权流转交易市场运行规范（试行）》), emphasizing the management and trading right to rural land. The land enclosure is decisively to be advanced and completed. Just as Marx has pointed out in describing the land enclosure in England, “... the law itself now becomes the instrument by which the people’s land is stolen.”²¹⁰

China has been an agricultural country throughout its history. In 1978 about 80% of China’s population were peasants. This number has dropped to 42.6% by 2016, with still 600 million peasants out of a total population of 1370 million, and 220 million so-called “migrant workers” (*nongmingong* 农民工) who have been thrown out of their land to urban China by the power of capital.²¹¹ This massive transmission of the land farmers to the free workers who are now separated from their means of production and therefore have “nothing to sell except their own skins”²¹² is done via massive violence.

“Violence in the enclosure movement is highly organized. The whole power system including *gongjianfasi* 公检法司 (public security, procuracy, courts, and judiciary collectively) would be mobilized. Hundreds would be mobilized to target a specific ‘refractory holdout’

²¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, 885.

²¹¹ See Li, Peilin, “Deep Changes in Class and Strata Structure in China”, *Beijing Daily*, 1.29.2018.

²¹² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, 873.

(*dingzihu* 钉子户, people who refuse to move), whereas in a larger operation involving a village and a number of peasants, thousands would be mobilized. Many operations took place at night or before dawn, and the boorish behavior was reminiscent of the scene in World War II, when the ‘Japanese imperialist devils entered the villages (*guizijincun* 鬼子进村).’ When fierce resistance was met, “shoot-outs” were justified as a necessity. Gangsters have a wide and profound involvement in the enclosure process ... , where a local gangster would act alone, or they would join arms with the government by taking up a role in the tactical team. Such a union between gangsters and the government in land acquisitions is no longer a taboo for the local government officials; in fact, local officials are longing for the help and influence of gangsters.”²¹³

The expropriation of the arable land is accompanied by the clearing of houses. A human rights lawyer pointed out, “In front of the eviction machines of the local government, the profits of the developers, the violence of the gangsters and the handcuffs of the police, individuals are only powerless. ... Numberless are detained; numberless are thrown to forced labor (*laojiao* 劳教)²¹⁴; numberless are beaten; numberless houses are evicted.”²¹⁵ People who resist the expropriation are ruthlessly cracked down. Qian Yunhui died on December 25, 2010 after being crushed by a truck loaded with crushed rocks. Xue Jinbo died on December 11, 2011 in police custody and caused the Wukan protests. Many are thrown into black jails²¹⁶.

When organized protests lose their efficacy, people to burn themselves. In 2010 alone, 10 “accidents” of self-immolation were reported. And when individual self-immolation does not work, family scale self-immolation begins to happen. On September 10, 2010, three persons of the Zhong family burned themselves in their house in the process of a housing demolition, with one died and two heavily injured. – Not only are the Tibetans burning themselves, more Chinese are doing so. However, after many self-immolations, people are at last beginning to understand

²¹³ Zhang Yulin, “Understanding China’s Land Enclosure Movement”, *Discovering Rural China*, 3, 2014. I made minor editions to the English translation by Pancho Sanchez at <https://libcom.org/blog/china-land-grabs>.

²¹⁴ The so-called “re-education through labor system” is an administrative punishment which allows suspects to be sentenced to forced labor without first undergoing a trial. This system was abolished in 2013 after the efforts of many lawyers and scholars.

²¹⁵ See documentary by *Southern Metropolis China, Forced Eviction in China*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJeTnOxQk-I>.

²¹⁶ Wikipedia gives a definition of “black jails” as follows. “Black jails (Chinese: 黑監獄; pinyin: hēijīānyù) are a network of extralegal detention centers established by Chinese security forces and private security companies across the People's Republic of China in recent years. They are used mainly to detain, without trial, petitioners (上访者, shangfangzhe), who travel to seek redress for grievances unresolved at the local level.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_jails#cite_note-1.

that self-destruction does not help them. The young Zhong daughter cried in hospital, “After seeing the situation of our family I hope people do not burn themselves when their houses are demolished.”²¹⁷

A peasant who tried to burn himself in Zhuzhou, 2011 cried out, “There is no way we can live anymore. We have filed so many lawsuits but they are all useless. The court and law don’t work for us anymore. We went to Beijing to *shangfang* 上访 (petition system in China) (in the morning), but were arrested in the afternoon. We called the police but they wouldn’t help us. We were brought to the police stations and beaten. There is no personal safety for us.”²¹⁸ Compensation is of course always a word out there. In the village of Ge Sanli in Shandong, after their land was taken away, the peasants managed to negotiate for themselves to receive 600 RMB (94.7 US \$) per person per year.

Tramping in between the different forms of patriarchies of tradition and capitalism, women’s situation in the process of land enclosure is significant. According to Sally Sargeson, “Although many women disproportionately rely on agricultural income, nation-wide more than 80 percent of land-use contracts are signed by men, ostensibly as representatives of unitary households.”²¹⁹ When they come out to the job market, however, it is not an optimistic picture. Here they have to face severe gender discrimination. Not only the rate of female employments are much lower than male, but also females are mostly confined to the extension of housework. In the face of the expectation that she become a housewife, Chinese women are now employed as kindergarten teachers, waitresses, and cheap factory workers, with wages far below that of male workers. When asked why he would only hire female workers, a factory manager in toy manufacture told the reporter, “They are easy to control.”²²⁰ The education equity has been often cited in the process of China’s modernization. However, much of the job market in higher positions is still not open to females. According to a report in 2006, at a college graduate job fair in Pudong, Shanghai, more than 30,000 positions were offered by about 300 companies, 80% of which were

²¹⁷ See documentary by *Southern Metropolis China, Forced Eviction in China*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJeTnQxQk-I>.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Sally Sargeson, “Women’s Property, Women’s Agency in China’s ‘New Enclosure Movement’: Evidence from Zhejiang”, *Development and Change*, 39(4): 641–665 (2008).

²²⁰ Lotta Ekelund and Kristina Bjurling, *Santa’s Workshop: Inside China’s Slave Labor Toy Factories*, 2004, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF8jUDzz5bE>.

only for males, with a total of 2/3 female applicants. Discrimination is ubiquitous and severe. The free market is not free.²²¹

Land is now capital and peasants become the cheap labor whose only right is to freely sell themselves. However, the story does not stop here. In November 2017, Beijing launched a campaign to clear out its poor migrant workers, who are now called the “low-end people”. So it is reported in the news, “... as the year draws to a close, tens of thousands of migrant workers are being tossed out of their homes in the freezing cold and biting winds of the Beijing winter, with little or no notice.”²²² Nobody knows how often this will happen. But it certainly does not only happen in Beijing. Driven out of the land, there is no home for them.

The tight connection between capital and power is a salient feature of China’s land enclosure. The enmity between socialism and capitalism is now reconciled. Socialism has become the strong support for the expansion of capital. Many factors are involved in guaranteeing that land is taken away from the peasants who can serve as the cheap labor for the self-valorization of capital: the international background of colonialism, socialism as authoritarianism which again is rooted in the dynastical consciousness that is entrapped in the construction of hierarchy and does not recognize basic human rights, the drive towards profit on the part of domestic capitalists, etc.

It is noteworthy that the process of land enclosure in China is at the same time the one wherein pollution has spread all over the country. The enclosed land is usually used to construct “development zones”, housing estates, retail parks and also infrastructure. Where forests and crops used to grow, mines, factories, and tall buildings are built up. Land disappears under cement and it is now where the industrial waste is dumped into. China then becomes the factory of the world and “made in China” reaches the far corners of the world. Meanwhile, 80% of the country’s underground water is polluted and 1/5 of its arable land is contaminated, with 4000 deaths everyday caused by air pollution.²²³

²²¹ Fu Jing, “An Analysis of the Problem of Female College Graduate Employment in regard to Gender Discrimination”, *Journal of Hehai University*, 11(1):86-89 (2009). (傅静, “从性别歧视的角度简析女大学生就业问题”, *河海大学学报(哲学社会科学版)*, 第十一卷第一期, 2009 年 3 月.)

²²² Simon Denyer and Luna Lin, “Mass evictions in freezing Beijing winter sparks public outrage but little official remorse”, *The Washington Post*, 11.27.2017.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/27/forced-evictions-in-freezing-beijing-winter-sparks-public-outrage-but-little-official-remorse/?utm_term=.98f6a8b039f4.

²²³ *BBC China*, “4000 People Die of Air Pollution per Day in China”, 8.13.2015,
http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2015/08/150813_china_pollution_report. *The New York Times*, “Rural Water, Not City Smog, May be China’s Pollution Nightmare”, 4.11.2016,

Development is then a double oppression over both nature and humans. The oppression of humans is done through the exploitation and pollution of nature.

Development in this sense is violence against nature as well as dispossession of people's right to life. Meanwhile, even though the direct cause of pollution is modernization – be it capitalism or socialism - traditional patriarchy plays an essential role in the manipulation of the capital for the construction of oppression. At the end of the day, the very fact that socialism is developed as authoritarianism in China is rooted in its traditional patriarchy. Development of the capital has now become the ideology of China together with “Marxism”, which seeks the exploitation over nature, women, and the poor.

As a developing country, China plays the role of “the world's factory” as the provider of raw material, i.e., the daily-diminishing clean resources, cheap labor, and the collector and processor of industrial waste for the developed countries. In fact, not only China, development has caused poverty that permeates the whole world while plundering tremendous wealth from the labor of the poor and land and putting it in the pockets of a small group of people.

“The inexorable processes of agriculture-industrialisation and internationalization are probably responsible for more hungry people than either cruel or unusual whims of nature. ... Scarce land, credit, water and technology are pre-empted for the export market. ... The profits flow to corporations that have no interest in feeding hungry people without money.”²²⁴

Development in China today has caused a double poverty. First, the capitalist consumerism fragments and homogenizes life, causing the spiritual poverty of our time. Second, this development is threatening everyone's existence. Basic living resources such as clean water, soil and air are becoming more and more rare. Modern Chinese live in a state of both spiritual and physical homelessness.

The two pictures below illustrate my points above. Some philosophers have noticed the fact that in our highly technological time it is difficult to find the purely “natural” person. However, this point, I would argue, is still grounded in the belief that nature is something out there, something different from cultural beings. In any case, philosophers have proposed that cyborgs, a combination of both organic and biomechatronic body parts, instead of natural human beings, should be considered an indication of a posthuman subjectivity that “provides the grounding for

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/12/world/asia/china-underground-water-pollution.html>. BBC News, “Report: One fifth of China's soil contaminated”, 4.18.2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27076645>.

²²⁴ R. J. Barnet, *The Lean Years*. London: Abacus, 1981, 171.

new ethical claims”.²²⁵ At this point, it is difficult to ask how much we have become machines or how humane machines are in our time wherein things are done and thoughts and ideologies are formed and transformed through medias and screens: TVs, computers, laptops and tablets. Though the apparently complicated phenomena should not obfuscate the following fact: It is the force of capital that drives technology forward. And more importantly, under the dazzling and rumbling technological mechanism it is the social relations that produce the former and at the same time are produced by it.

Therefore, Picture 1, the “female robot” Sophia, who received “her” Saudi Arabian citizenship in 2017 is a good symbol for high-tech cyborgs. Picture 2, however, is another face of the posthuman. This is a picture from Wang, Jiuliang’s documentary *Plastic China*.²²⁶ The girl and her family came from Sichuan province in Southern China. She has no sense that it is capital, both international and domestic, that has driven her family to the plastic workshop in Northern China which processes plastic waste from Europe, the United States and who knows what other parts of the world. As a poor proletariat, her father claims he cannot afford her education and prefers her to take care of her younger brothers, one still in her arms. Her father tried to take two of the children back home where they could be sent to school, only to find, however, right at the railway station, that the tickets back were too expensive for them.

²²⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013, 90.

²²⁶ Wang Jiuliang, *Plastic China*, 2016, Journeyman Pictures.



Picture1. Sophia, the first robot to receive citizenship

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophia_\(robot\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophia_(robot))



Picture 2. 11-year-old Yi-Jie with her brother on a pile of imported plastic waste

Source: <https://www.plasticchina.org/single-post/2017/05/09/Plastics-News>

As the land enclosure is still going on, the impact of it is hard to estimate but will certainly be huge and deep on China's history. According to recent statistics, in 2011 alone, there were as high as 45,000-83,000 "mass incidents" caused by expropriation.²²⁷ In England, according to Marx, the land enclosure not only "created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians", but also produced massive quantities of beggars, robbers and vagabonds. (*Capital*, 895-6) By 1873 the largest landowners who constituted 1.3% of the overall population in England owned 70.7% of the land, whereas the cottagers who constituted 72.3% of the population only owned 0.46% of the land. And "as late as the early 21st century, this gap has not narrowed: the richest 0.6% of the UK's population owns $\frac{3}{4}$ of the country's land."²²⁸ Chinese government has similar goals about land consolidation. However, considering the huge agricultural population and the serious pollution in China, whether or not, and to what extent it will succeed is a question that has to be left to history.

6.2 What Is to Be Done? – Daoist Ecofeminism as a New Democracy

²²⁷ Zhang Yulin, "Great Clearances: The Chinese Version of Enclosure Movement, 1991-2013", *China Agricultural University Journal of Social Sciences Edition*, 32(1), 2015, 19-45. Also see Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 118, No. 6 (May 2013), 1475-1508.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Patricarchal hierarchies have taken on different forms in the West and in China. In some forms of western metaphysics there exists a depreciation and degradation of both nature and the female. Nature is degraded while it is associated with the female. The other world of spirituality is glorified because this world is despicable. In modern metaphysics the enslavement of nature is conceptualized through the language of the enslavement of women, as Francis Bacon shows us. In Chinese philosophy, however, there is no such enmity against nature. Chinese philosophy usually underscores humans' belonging to nature. In fact in some Chinese philosophies the oppression towards women and also the constitution of hierarchies are naturalized. The enslavement of women and therefore the oppression of humans is carried out under the name of natural order. As is famously put at the beginning of the *Xici* commentary,

“Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low. Thus *Qian* and *Kun* are settled (in accordance with this). Things low and high appear display in a similar relation. The noble and mean have their places assigned accordingly.”²²⁹

“天尊地卑，乾坤定矣。卑高以陳，貴賤位矣。”

Contrary to the common interpretation of Chinese philosophy as always seeking harmony with nature, here we see at least a distortion of nature, if not the denial and oppression of it as in some western philosophies. That is, what is natural and spontaneous is now given hierarchical value. The meaning of “the unity of the heavenly and the human” (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一) lies in this, if not only this: The heavenly is taken as father and the earthly the mother, but the former is noble while the latter low; the heavenly therefore governs the earthly. The cosmological order of “the unity of the heavenly and the human” is used to set the ground for gender and hierarchical oppressions. Not only that man is superior to woman, but also hierarchical orders from rulers to commoners are set up for dominant males.

The difference between the Chinese and Western patriarchy indicates that the role of the female in various patriarchies is a convenient setup. All that needs to be denied and controlled are labeled as “female”. In the west, when nature needs to be denied it is regarded as female; when matter needs to be denied it is associated with women. Men are spiritual, rational, objective and civilized, therefore women become bodily, emotional, subjective and wild. In China the female *yin* is associated with subordination and inferiority. The minister needs to be subordinate to the ruler, thereon the minister is *yin*. *Yin* is also associated with moral degradation and other negative values such as insidious (*yinxian* 陰險), conspiracy (*yinmou* 陰謀), sinister (*yinsun* 陰

²²⁹ My translation.

損) etc., all of which emphasize some kind of secrecy and deception. The category “woman” is therefore listed together with the petty persons. Another remarkable phenomenon is that the oppression of women and the alienation of nature are at the same time the alienation of men themselves. This reveals to us that the liberation of women and nature intrinsically fosters that of humans more generally. The question is then, how is it possible to accomplish the liberation of the humans through that of nature and women?

Seen from China’s land enclosure movements, the interaction of various patriarchies – the continuation of the traditional dynastical consciousness, socialism as authoritarianism and capitalism has caused double oppression over both nature and humans. As we have pointed out above, the oppression of the humans is done through that of nature. The liberation of nature is therefore naturally tied up with the struggle for democracy. Next I will try to propose Daoist ecofeminism as a new democracy as a solution to the problems listed above.

“Democracy” here includes but is not confined to various basic human rights within a political regime such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and association, and the right of free unions. More importantly, it refers to a way of life of equality and freedom. Such is what I call *ziran* in this essay. The Daoist freedom does not only belong to the humans but also to the myriad things. As we’ve pointed out, in humans’ enslavement of nature there is simultaneously a violence committed upon humans themselves. The historical event of the capitalist land enclosure movement has fully demonstrated this to us; the serious pollution calls us forth to be aware of it. Human freedom can only be achieved in her belonging to nature. Meanwhile Daoist philosophy not only requests the removal of all oppressions amongst humans, it moreover proclaims that all things are equal. Daoist philosophy makes the following requests of us: Return life to the earth, the myriad things, and the people. It shows us the wonders and marvelousness of nature in complete emptiness, wherein all oppression and exploitation are unnecessary. Like the empty flowers, humans take roots in the earth together with the myriad things, in order to let flourishing grow. *Ziran* or nature is freedom. This is not any abstract philosophical proposition. Rather what it says is a simple way of life that is yearned for by every modern person. This is what I call “democracy” wherein the fertile earth, the pure sky, the freely flowing rivers and the vast ocean are the home and freedom of the myriad things and humans.

Next I will briefly explore the feministic characteristic of Daoist philosophy. As a critique of the hierarchical rule of the patriarchal Zhou dynasty with the *de* of sages and authorities, Laozi

raised the female *dao* and *de* in order to dissolve the alienation of nature and the oppression of humans. *Dao* is the mother of all things and *de* follows *dao*. Such is what is called the dark *de*. The feministic feature in Daoist philosophy therefore has ontological primacy. As a contrast to the honorable heaven and low earth in some Chinese philosophy and the male spirit in some western ones, the *dao* which is the center of any Chinese thoughts is female. This is a salient feature of Daoist philosophy compared with other patriarchal philosophies. The female here is not the power that is opposite to the male, rather she is the root-source of and defines all life power. The female power is the realization of *ziran*.

The first chapter of the *DDJ* reveals the female feature of the *dao*.

The *dao* that can be spoken of (*dao* 道) 道可道也

Is not the constant *dao* (*hengdao* 恒道); 非恒道也

The name that can be named 名可名也

Is not the constant name (*hengming* 恒名). 非恒名也

Non-be-ing (*wu*) is the beginning of the heavenly and the earthly; 無名天地之始

Be-ing (*you*) is the mother of all myriad things. 有名萬物之母

Hence always non-be-ing (*wu*) so as to observe the vagueness (*miao* 眇) of it; 故恒無欲以
觀其妙

Always be-ing (*you*) so as to observe the clarity (*jiao* 皦) of it. 恒有欲以觀其徼

These two emerge from the same source 兩者同出

Yet are given different names. 異名同謂

Together they are called darkness (*xuan* 玄)

Darkening and darkening- 玄之又玄

This is the gateway of the manifold secrets. 眾眇之門

It is not that the *dao* cannot be spoken of, yet all that can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*. It is not that the name cannot be named, yet all that can be named is not the constant one. Therefore to name the *dao* with be-ing and non-be-ing is to refer to the root-source meaning of the *dao* as the beginning (*shi* 始) and the mother (*mu* 母). The beginning verses point out the unspeakability of the constant, then it illuminates the manifestation of the constant be-ing and non-be-ing. Be-ing and non-be-ing are not two but one as the mysterious disclosing of the *dao* as the beginning and the mother of all. The *xuan* 玄 (mysterious) and the *men* 門 (gateway) here demonstrate the feministic feature of the *dao* from the disclosing of it.

Chapter 6 says,

The spirit of the valley never dies. 谷神不死
This is called the mysterious female. 是謂玄牝
The gateway of the mysterious female 玄牝之門
Is called the root of heaven and earth. 是謂天地根
Wispy and delicate, it only seems as if it were there 綿綿若存
Yet use will never drain it. 用之不勤

The gateway here refers to both *dao* and things. In terms of the *dao*, the gateway of the dark female is where all the myriad things are from; in terms of things, the *ziran* or spontaneity of all is the gateway of the *dao*. The gateway in the first chapter also covers the dimension of the humans, that is, the self who embodies the *dao* opens the gate for the mysterious be-ing and non-be-ing. Only she who is at one with the mysterious mother can open the gate for all wonders in the world. The spirit of the valley and gateway are again, female metaphors for the flow of the cosmos power. Obviously, Laozi uses the reproduction of the female to explain the *ziran* of the myriad things. The generation of the myriad things is the reproduction process of the *dao* as the mother. The disclosing of *ziran* wherein *dao*, things and humans are one is grounded on and manifest through the reproduction process of the female. This is similar with the female nature in western thoughts. However, the difference is distinctive, i.e., Daoist philosophy does not seek any human essence to oppose nature beyond it, it rests in nature to seek the freedom and prosperity of the earth and the humans.

Therefore *sheng* 生 (life, to grow, to give birth, to live, to produce, to arise) is an important concept in Daoist texts. It contains both meaning of the disclosing of the *dao* and the nature or *ziran* of things. It is for this reason that the nature (*xing* 性) of things is understood originally as *sheng* 生 which belongs to *dao*. *Xing* 性 was originally written as *sheng* 生.²³⁰ As is shown in chapter 51 of the *DDJ* (see 4.1), that *dao* gives life is at once the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of the myriad things. The life and death of all things are all the self-realization of the *dao* as the female power.

Meanwhile, the creativity (*de* 德) of things and humans follows the *dao* as the mother, which gives life to all but does not dominate as to build up any hierarchy or oppression. Within the power of letting-go (*wuwei* 無為, non-coercive action) of the *dao* the life of things and humans spontaneously unfolds, which distinguishes Daoism from any patriarchal philosophies.

²³⁰ See 4.2 for a detailed discussion.

The female in Daoism is not any passive and dead matter as is understood by some forms of metaphysics. She is, on the contrary, the ceaseless generative creativity itself. It is helpful here to distinguish the “*sheng* 生” which is an important concept for both Daoism and the *Yijing*. The *Yijing* adopted some Daoist thoughts and developed the concept of *sheng* in Daoism. However, the *sheng* (generativity, creativity) in the *Yijing* is associated with *yinyang*, wherein *yang* is exalted while *yin* is degraded, upon which the hierarchy of the honorable and the low is built. – Undoubtedly *yinyang* in the *Yijing* does not have to be associated with this kind of value. It can and should construct a *yinyang* which could bring about a more free and equal way of life. – This is essentially different from the female creativity in Daoism which seeks to deconstruct hierarchy. The female creativity in Daoism is not an opposite to the male power, rather it is beyond the polarity of the female and the male and preserves the two in itself. She is, in fact, the only power in the world.

Laozi is famous for advocating “honoring the soft” and “keeping to the female”. They should not be misunderstood as the so-called “morality” which preaches the subordination and subservience of women. Softness and the female are, like water, the self-manifestation of the female creativity and the freely flowing nature (*ziran*).

The female creativity inherently opposes and dissolves any hierarchical oppression. It does not allow the dominance of the female over the male, or construct any ruling order between genders. Neither does it understand humans in her dominance over nature. It requires us to break off the anthropocentric delusion and cast off any egoistic “self” so as to return to nature, wherein the ultimate equality and freedom are achieved.

Instead of the quest for freedom in contentiousness with other humans and nature, it calls forth the political regime built on non-contentiousness and non-coercive action. Therefore it offers us a female democracy which is different from the capitalist one wherein freedom is defined through the exploitation of nature and the contentious rights amongst the rational beings. In the Daoist democracy the female creativity is the source for both nature and freedom and equality of the humans.

6.3 A New Enlightenment: Taking Root in Nature (*Ziran*)

Daoist ecofeminism calls forth a new enlightenment, an enlightenment that questions any

exclusive patriarchal standards. It anchors human existence on the ground of nature and anticipates human future of freedom and equality in harmony with nature.

Ever since human history entered modernity, we have undergone two world wars. In the course of humans' technological conquest and manipulation of the world, we have seen massive destruction: from concentration camps to nuclear weapons, biological and chemical weapons, from GMO to nuclear power, and the pollution that can be found anywhere in the modern way of living; the clothing, feeding, housing, transportation of humans -- actually almost all human activities have become contributions to the destruction of the world. One cannot help but question, what kind of destruction is this? *What is this destruction that permeates humans and all beings?* I hope I have shown through this essay that this destruction is the very destruction of the status of nature, *nature not as the objective world out there in a modern sense, but as a primordial way of life.* But this nature should by no means be contemptuously disposed as some primitive lifestyle by the modern man. Rather, the very association of nature with some primitive lifestyle maybe reveals the savageness of modern metaphysics, wherein the human sets her self-identification on the exploitation and enslavement of nature. Such is the dialectics of enlightenment and barbarism of modernity. The destruction of our time has shown that enlightenment of humans has not come with the equipment of science and technology. Rather, when the modern man is controlling, calculating and conquering nature with science, he has lost his nature, i.e., the status of *ziran* and has thereby fallen into the darkness of concealment and savageness. *In fact, maybe in our time Kant's question should be raised again: What is enlightenment?* And indeed, does the standard of the enlightenment of the human merely concern herself (e.g., reason) at all? Or does it involve a much larger realm? I hope this essay has offered an answer. But this answer should remain a questioning, for the power to change always firstly requires questioning. And the hope lies in that through this questioning human nature and freedom can be pondered and illuminated anew in connection with nature itself. Thereon *dao* can be guarded in the world whereby the interchangeable pushing of *yin* and *yang*, ghosts and gods, the four seasons, the myriad things and humans are settled in harmony.

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