TO LIVE A RIDDLE:
THE TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECT OF
THE LAOZI 《老子》

Laozi, the person or the myth has captured human creative minds through the generations;¹ the Laozi 《老子》 or Daode Jing 《道德經》 is still open to deliberation and sinological debates regarding its versions, its dating, and its authorship;² the manifold versions of translation as well are still open to disparity and dissent.³ Nonetheless, as much as there are versions to Laozi’s life, the Laozi’s authenticity and its proper translation, there are even more interpretations to its ideas and their meanings.⁴ This plurality of possibilities is perhaps a major attraction to many human minds, occupied in the modern world with a text that was composed over 2,000 years ago. The Laozi presents practical poetry, anti-theoretical philosophy, inconsistent logic, atheistic religion, daily metaphysics, earthly mysticism, inactive politics, and ancient feminism.⁵

In this article I would like to refer to the Laozi as a “transformative text,” namely, a text which, once understood, transforms the perspective one has on world and life, and thus brings the reader to actual transformation in life, as explained later. I suggest that the Laozi’s special use of riddling language is intended to lead the reader to response in life. Hence, the contradictory expressions in the text can be viewed as keys for response to a “living riddle,” and through the riddle we may learn something about the form of life of the follower of dao. In this sense I take up from Chung-ying Cheng’s statement:

[T]o examine the use of language in relation to reality is to take the dao seriously and therefore is the gateway to enter the dao. But to enter the dao is also to put language aside in order to concentrate on concrete and total aspects of the dao. . . .

For this reason we have to speak of the dao as both the unspeakable and the speakable and understand how each needs the other.⁶

In this article I show that by means of contradictory expressions, the Laozi calls for constant transformation of perspective, wishing to bring the follower of dao to “turning back” since “turning back is how
the way moves.” In this way the text introduces a dialectic move between opposites that culminates in a “leap” from text to life. In other words, the dialectical “thesis” refers to dao as constant and thus ineffable; its “antithesis” refers to the ever changing and outspoken dao; the inevitable contradiction in the nature of dao necessitates an actual shift of perspective as a “synthesis.” The new perspective brings transformation and thus one’s actual life changes. The textual contradiction between the presuppositions regarding dao, which is not resolved in theory, brings the open-minded reader to a response and a resolution in life.

I. The Textual Perspective: The Dialectic of Dao

The Laozi suggests a twofold attitude toward dao. On the one hand dao is eternal, infinite, constant and indivisible and thus ineffable, while in some different sense there is a namable reality, which according to the common interpretation is inferior to dao, and yet it is called dao too; to be more precise it is the language of dao (dao kedo 道可道) as opposed to dao beyond language (changdao 常道). As we learn in the text, human beings name reality in various ways; however, by this very act reality loses its dao and human beings limit their (or our) own experiencing the world. Being limited by the actual world that we created, and limiting our experience in turn is clearly second best (if not completely unwished for) according to the Laozi. However, when we focus on the dual nature of the way and ask for its significance, we realize that instead of distancing us from dao (since it can’t be spoken and hence nonattainable) it may help one getting closer to it. Let us see how it works in the introductory verse of the Laozi.

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery—
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

The verse poses an inherent ambiguity that forms the dialectic through which a gate may open and one may then transform. This
transformation is attained by means of a “dialectic walk” between routes: One route amounts to desiring and achieving “manifestations,” the other—to ridding of desires, or forgetting and thus reaching secrets. Thus, we are first introduced with a dao kedao, which is not, so we are told, changdao. In other words, dao that can be “daoed,” that is, be named, told, defined, but also directed and walked, is not constant, real, eternal, and nameless. The fact that it is “daoed” does not imply that it is not real, and therefore ultimately nonexistent.10 As we shall see hereafter, “daoed dao” is a necessary aspect of dao. Moreover, the first phrase of the Laozi does not imply two different meanings of dao. While there is some “dual citizenship” of dao, its descriptions together form one concept (the third section hereafter explores this further). There are different uses of dao, and accordingly we are presented with two senses of it. Ultimately, dao, either named or nameless is one; however, from the human perspective it can be walked, described, and guided through; and yet again, as such it is a limited dao. In this way our knowledge of dao is limited by our own epistemic tools, by theories of reference, and by and theoretical frameworks, and thus, it is not “constant.”

Since the manifestations are many, one faces a plurality of choices, expressed in the next lines through the relation between names which can be named (ming keming 名可名) as equivalent of dao kedao, revealed later on as “the mother” of things (wanwu zhimu 萬物之母), and always attained through having desires (youyu 有欲), and reaching its boundaries (jiao 微).11 On the other hand, changdao amounts to the ineffable and nameless (wuming 無名), which is the beginning (tiandi zhi shi 天地之始); attained through not having desires (wuyou 無欲), which leads to observing its wonders, or “secrets” (miao 常). In the first case, one may touch “the boundary” which is so crucial for our knowledge: For example, we may think of any theoretical framework, and how we are lost as researchers without it (we may recall Kant’s antinomies of pure reason).12 And yet, while it is exactly our “limits” which allow us to know and understand, there is also a second way to know. In the second case, without desires, we lose the limits and only then we may delve into the mystery of life itself.

It doesn’t take too long for the division between the distinct ways to fade out in the first chapter. Laozi stresses that these two “daos” are the same (ci liangzhe tong 此兩者同) and as such are called “mystery” (xuan 玄). While “mystery” (or unknown) is a name, mystery is also what life is. As mystery (and not “mystery” as name), dao and changdao form together a gateway to secrets (xuan zhi youxuan, zhongmiao zhi men 玄之又玄妙之門), the secrets of the world, of life, and of the person. Potentially, this gate is also the gateway for growth and development. Having and having-not desires manifest a
dialectic through which absence cannot be compromised, and yet it cannot manifest itself either, except through an ongoing shifting of aspects. The writer offers a dialectical method: dao can be expressed, named, and desired, while in reality it cannot; it forms limits, borders, manifestations, but in fact it is limitless, mysterious, and has secrets. As namable, dao can be almost anything, in particular it can be a gate to the mystery which embodies in it both secrets and manifestations. However, when one realizes it, both aspects are revealed as one, and a gate opens. Thus, the Laozi opens by captivating the reader with the following riddle: “follow a way that cannot be walked” (since as soon as you step on it, it isn’t the true way). Or better defined by the text, how dao kedao fei changdao?

道可道，
dao kedao
The dao that can be daoed
非非，
fei fei
is not is not
常道。 
changdao
the constant dao

名可名，
mìngkēmíng
The name that can be named
非非，
fei fei
is not is not
常名。
changmíng
the constant name.

有名萬物之母。
yōumíng zhàngwù zhīmǔ
Named (it is) the mother of the myriad things

故

Therefore,

常無欲以観其妙。
changwú yúyì guānqímiào
Always be without desire to observe its secrets

常有欲以観其徼。
changyǒu yúyì guānqǐjiāo
Always have desires to observe its boundaries

此兩者，
cǐliàngzhě
These two are

出而異名，
cū er yìmíng
But diverge in name as they issue forth

謂之玄。
wèizhīxuán
they are called mystery

玄之又玄眾妙之門。
xuán zhìyóuxuán zhòngmiào zhīmén
Mystery upon mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets.
The dialectic leading to secrets in the first chapter of *Laozi* demands of the reader a constant walk back and forth between two routes, with neither stopping in one end, nor completely reaching “the constant.” This walk demands a transformation appreciative of the aspects of both *dao kedao* and *changdao*. The walk is exemplified throughout the text by a variety of ideas. In the present context, I wish to demonstrate this walk by means of the dialectic of being (*yōu* 有) and nonbeing (*wu* 無) leading to acting by non-acting (*weiwuwei* 為無為) which necessitates lessening (*sun* 损) and turning back (*fan* 反).

Chung-ying Cheng explains that *dao kedao* implies *yōu*, and *changdao* is *wu*, in the sense that *yōu* and *wu* have the same origin, but have different names. Moreover, Cheng stresses also that *wu* and *yōu* mutually generate each other, and yet, the ten thousand things are produced from *yōu* which in turn is produced from *wu*.

Cheng claims that this contradiction can be resolved when one realizes that *wu* has an epistemological and phenomenal sense as the opposite of *yōu* but also an ontogenetical and ontological sense as the source origin of *yōu* and all things, and thus beyond any distinction, including that between *yōu* and *wu*. Wu is not absolute nothingness, it is rather “standing against all things in language” and thus beyond distinctions, while is also to be approached by observing boundaries. In this way the reality of things is not denied and yet there is a reality beyond the concrete.

A first clue for this intuition was implied in Wang Bi’s concern with the “mystery” of life. Alan Chan refers to Wang Bi’s finding in the *Laozi* “an antidote to the ills of society,” and thus implies that Wang Bi saw the power of *wu* as enabling transformation and change. According to Wang Bi, *wu* as lacking is a function (*yōng* 用) of *dao* as natural (*ziran* 自然); *yōu* as having is the presence of anything. Hansen explains: “Where conventional wisdom normally invites us to value *yōu*, *Laozi* invites us to reflect on the value of *wu*... All learning of distinctions comes with disposition to prefer one on the other.” Lynn stresses that *wu* as “that which has no somethingness” is a key concept in Wang Bi’s thought, “by it, he seems to mean the perfect absence of conscious design, deliberate effort, prejudice or predilection...” Nonbeing functions as a principle, and acting out of nothing brings to happiness and peace of mind. In this sense Chan stresses that “non-action” is definitely at odds with total inaction; Lynn believes that it cannot mean “non-action” as inertia; it rather amounts to no deliberate differentiation, and Cheng stresses that “non-action” is something to be done (*weiwuwei*) directing to the wishful result of leaving nothing undone.
The above views regarding the relatedness of \textit{wu} to \textit{you} reaffirm the significance of non-action as a practice. Having this in mind, we may turn to the second verse of the \textit{Laozi}, in which we find the dialectic referred to in the first chapter, yet this time in a more practical context, guiding the sage toward “non-action.”

The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly;
the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.
Something and Nothing (\textit{you} and \textit{wu}) produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short off-set each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other.
Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking non-action and practices the teaching that uses no words.

The practical-human context of the chapter forces the author to present two movements. The first two lines describe a dualistic mode of thinking in which the recognition of beauty or of goodness creates ugliness and evil. If human beings would not have searched for the beautiful and the good, the distinction between “that which is good” (or beautiful) and “that which isn’t” would have never been made, and evil (or ugly) would not have been created. This way of thinking should be ultimately discarded, as the chapter clearly shows us, and yet in order to refer to anything we do need language. Moreover, as was shown in the first verse, \textit{dao kedao} is about the boundaries, which are necessary and can be reached through language solely.

Then, the verse offers a non-dualistic picture of a production of \textit{you} and \textit{wu} from each other. This non-dualistic picture amounts to \textit{changdao}, despite the presence of \textit{you}, and in fact owing to its presence. The dialectic between dualistic and non-dualistic states of consciousness (which also forms the core of mysticism as a whole) ensues the possibility to transform as it appears in the last part of the verse. The process of transformation, consisting in “taking non-action” and “using no words” is a process of lessening. The process allows one that while living in a world that “recognizes the beautiful as beautiful,” we are aware that “\textit{you} and \textit{wu} produce each other.” The important clue given in the second verse is that “the sage keeps to the deed (\textit{shi}) that consists in taking non-action” (\textit{wuwei}).

Regarding \textit{wuwei}, in verse 37 we read that the way is in non-action and nothing is undone (\textit{wuwei er wubuwei 無為而無不為}). In this “undone” reality “The myriad creatures are transformed by them-
selves.” Non-action demands not intervening, and moreover, non-desiring. 

Wuwei functions as a key to the mystery of life. What is the undone action that dao permits in its pursuit? Let us read verse 48:

In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day;  
In the pursuit of the way one does less every day.  
One does less and less until one does nothing at all  
and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone.

Doing less is revealed a practical demand, with which the Laozi guides the reader “without guiding.” Chan suggests that non-action is an expression of nonbeing and is thus free from the store of “competing interests.”26 Thus, the pursuit of dao “decreases” daily until it reaches non-action in which “nothing is undone.” This is what Wang Bi refers to in chapter 48 as “to return to emptiness and non-being.” In order to attain non being, one has to get rid of desires, relinquish the burden of memory, and forget what we have mistaken as “understanding.”27 There is a deed, yet of a different type, which embodies the mystical movement as a walk backwards (or “turning back,” fan) as we read in verse 40:

Turning back is how the way moves;  
Weakness is the means the way employs.  
The myriad creatures in the world are born from  
Something, and Something from Nothing.

A question to be asked is what should we “turn back” from? The answer, according to Laozi must be: “everything.” “Turning back” is turning away from any prescribed direction, or any direction that can be prescribed, since no direction is better than any other. Any direction presupposes an end, while transformation is continuous and ongoing. According to the passage, the strength of the way is in a “weakness” that allows “turning back” as the birth of you from wu (in the way that they produce each other as in the second verse). Wherever we turn, the Laozi invites us to turn back, arrive at the beginning, and keep on turning back. And then? Turn and turn again. This idea, which might sound unintelligible at first, signifies a grave commitment to the whole process. Committing oneself to such a process is the implicit willingness to accept a way that always demands a walk toward an unknown, since in the minute an end is known, a turn should be taken, and the route changes. But it is also an epitome of common sense, manifested in thinking of the unknown in simplicity. For example, let us recall a journey we have recently taken in a train. We progress in “inaction” and the more we look out the window toward the way, the more we realize that the way is “going back” against us. The same is true for every movement, in particular, since any movement involves the movement of time. The more we face the future, the more we realize that it is the past which grows and thickens.
In this turning back, and employing “weakness” in order to give new births, conceptual and intentional activities have to be lessened. “Lessening” leads to a “nothing” that is neither a vacuum nor is it the elimination of sense-data. Reading verse 12 of the *Laozi* should, therefore, be done carefully:

The five colors make man’s eyes blind;  
The five notes make his ears deaf;  
The five tastes injure his palate;  
Riding and hunting  
Make his mind go wild with excitement;  
Goods hard to come by  
Serve to hinder his progress.  
Hence the sage is  
For the belly  
Not for the eye.  
Therefore he discards the one and takes the other.

The process one goes through is a process of lessening; yet “lessening” is not necessarily a “removal” of sense-perception. Colors, notes, and tastes are indeed taken in this process to be damaging. And yet, the damage of colors is not in their being, but in their leading to discriminations, relying on sense-preferences, and quick desirous judgments, which are indeed, quite “blinding” as making the mind “go wild with excitement.” Hence, the sage “is for the belly, not for the eye.”

Roth sees mysticism as “removing the normal contents of the mind: Sense perception, desire, the emotions, knowledge and scheming.” Referring to the above verse he says: “The activities of the senses . . . must be set aside if one is to make any kind of progress in inner cultivation.” Hansen, on the other hand, claims that a valid interpretation of *Laozi*’s verse 12 should take into account the Chinese worship of nature, and therefore, any idea of “sense-skepticism” is not to be applied to the *Laozi*. According to the present understanding there is a “name-skepticism” in the text; as verse 32 says: “As soon as there are names one ought to know that it is time to stop” (verses 47, 52, and 56 suggesting to “Block the opening, Shut the doors” may be interpreted similarly). Name skepticism brings us closer to *changdao*, revealed as a unique sense of emptiness (*xu* 價). Let us take a look in verse 16:

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;  
I hold firmly to stillness.  
The myriad creatures all rise together  
And I watch their return.  
The teeming creatures  
All return to their separate roots.  
Returning to one’s roots is known as stillness.  
This is what is meant by returning to one’s destiny.
Returning to one’s destiny is known as the constant.
Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment.
Woe to him who willfully innovates
While ignorant of the constant,
But should one act from knowledge of the constant
One’s action will lead to impartiality,
Impartiality to kingliness,
Kingliness to heaven,
Heaven to the way,
The way to perpetuity,
And to the end of one’s days one will meet with no danger.

On the one hand, the author arrives at ultimate emptiness (zhi xuji 致虚極); on the other hand the “myriad creatures,” or the world we live in, rises from it. Again we face the riddle and its practical solution: We walk toward emptiness since the concrete is limited and has to be discarded, and yet the empty begets the concrete. “Emptiness” cannot mean emptiness of sensual experience. Going backward one arrives at the emptiness in which the myriad creatures rise and return to their “roots” (gen 根), namely this emptiness is the reaffirmation of the authentic world as it is.\(^{31}\) This returning brings to changdao calling for knowledge of the world; however, it calls for a direct and non mediated knowledge. This knowledge as impartial leads to “kingliness,” to heaven, to the way and to longevity and no harm; which are all in this very world. We face a continuous process which goes through the abstract and heavenly to the concrete and worldly, just as we read in the first verse. According to the dialectic in Laozi’s introductory verse, “the two are the same.” Indeed they “diverge in name as they issue forth,” yet, being the same they are on the one hand a “mystery” and as such, on the other hand they are the “gateway of the manifold secrets.” In verse 16, we read that “The myriad creatures all rise together; And I watch their return”; the latter amounts to “emptying the mind.” Emptying the mind is not “not seeing,” it is rather depth vision. To see means to see what is, and not what is thought to be seen, or ought to be seen, or selectively wished to be seen. We are called to develop a “disciplined maintenance,” watchful of desirous biases and preferences reflected in distinctions, not for the benefit of not-seeing, but for the sake of an improved capacity of seeing.

Verse 25 of the Laozi refers again to this void and its various aspects:

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it “the way.”
I give it the makeshift name of “the great.”
Being great, it is further described as receding,
Receding, it is described as far away,
Being far away, it is described as turning back.
Hence the way is great;
Heaven is great;
Earth is great;
The king is also great.
Within the realm there are four things that are great,
And the king counts as one.
Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.

We arrive at a suggestion that preserves the “dual citizenship” of dao as an eternal nothing (that cannot be said) and a way to practice (which can be described in proximity). In other words, that which disappears from the world allows it to be what it is, or “in itself-so” (ziran), as verse 25 ends. However, verse 25 opens with the thing accomplished in darkness, born before heaven and earth, quiet, unchanging, and chaotic. Since its name is unknown it is styled by the speaker “the way.” Henceforth its other titles ensue. No name is “right,” not even dao. Lessening does not amount to a “removal” of functions; it is rather avoiding the perceptions which are reflected in distinctions, not for the benefit of not-seeing, but for the sake of an improved capacity of seeing, in a Zhuangzian expression, “seeing things equally.”

III. Methodological Cue

In the first part of the article we focused on a dialectic presentation in the first chapter of Laozi which introduces dao as a riddle. In the second part we focused on a movement from the riddle of daokedao fei changdao to the response in the form of life the dao follower as turning back (fan). As we have seen the response to the riddle is a movement which opens with the appreciation of the dynamics between being (you) and nonbeing (wu), through acting by means of non-action (wuwei), then lessening (sun) and turning back (fan) as the living manifestation of the riddle. I would like to say that dao is a unique riddle that is responded in practice, and thus brings transformation. In order to do that, let us explicate the relationship between riddle and form of life.

“What is daokedao fei changdao?” or how can one “follow a way that cannot be walked?” satisfies the requirements for a riddle intro-
duced in an article by Cora Diamond: It is a problem which is given to
a person without a method of solution; when the solution is found, one
is forced to accept it and the whole picture then gains meaningfulness.
Diamond stresses that a riddle is a question in which the answer is
inherent. Moreover, the riddle itself should be taken as a tip or a clue
to its solution. If one succeeds in following the clues, one gets closer to
a full understanding of the path. Diamond distinguishes riddles from
“great riddles,” namely mysteries that display the riddle of life and
death. In the case of a great riddle, there is no “answer” to the riddle
that can be theoretically given; rather, the response to the riddle is a
form of life. Diamond’s model for riddles is mathematical; and even
when she discusses God, it does not deal with the aspect of religious
life in practice. I target this missing “practical” aspect, hence I refer to
great riddles responded in practice as “living riddles.” According to
my understanding, the riddle of *dao* appears to be a “great riddle” in
the *Laozi*. While textually it is expressed in apparent contradictions
just like in mathematics, practically it is a “living riddle,” or a riddle
that is responded in life rather than be hermistically solved. Respond-
ing to the riddle of *dao* necessitates openness, creativity, and the
flexibility of a form of life. In the language game of *dao* only when
walked, it can be referred to as *dao*, since “a way” is senseless other-
wise. And yet, as soon as it is walked, it is not *changdao* (since it is
necessarily distinguished, named, evaluated and so on.)

As Cora Diamond said, a riddle contains “a tip” for its understand-
ing. Understanding a great riddle amounts to living the riddle. The
relation between understanding a riddle and living it is clarified by
Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion on understanding. An expression
in riddles might be a clue or “a tip” to understanding a form of life.
While language assists us in understanding specific matters, it is
unhelpful for understanding a form of life.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein refers to two senses of
understanding that form together one concept. Similarly, I wish to
make the point that in *daokedao fei changdao* we speak of two senses
of understanding *dao*, which do not amount to two separate meanings,
and form together one concept of it. Within a different context, and
yet with great appreciation for the ineffability of human life and the
importance of practice, Wittgenstein expresses a sentiment toward the
two that are one in §531 of the *Investigations*. First, understanding is
being able to replace words by others that say the same thing. In this
sense *dao* can be “*daaed*”; we can describe it as “endless,” “infinite,”
“constant,” “real,” “true,” or “ultimate” and show understanding of it
in this way. Wittgenstein has a lot to say about understanding in the
sense of substituting words by others, which has to do with “technique
mastering” and “rule following.” Both the author of the *Laozi* and
Wittgenstein, each in his particular context, masters techniques, and excels with rules of various language games, both are articulate concise writers, and are guides to others. And yet, they both know that despite the fact that the only way to express understanding is using this first sense, as soon as we show some understanding by words, we distance ourselves from that which we wish to understand.

According to Wittgenstein understanding has a second sense in which we realize that what is said or shown cannot be replaced by any other words “[a]ny more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.”34 According to Wittgenstein, in order to understand a form of life, one needs to go beyond the first sense of understanding. Wittgenstein illustrates understanding of a form of life through an analogy to the understanding of a musical theme, an artistic expression, a poem, or a religious belief. In Investigations §531 we read that in any of the latter we cannot replace a sentence by means of a different one which “says the same thing.” Such a replacement shows misunderstanding: Think for example of replacing dao by elohim (Hebrew for God) in order to explicate daokedao fei chang dao, under the assumption that both dao and elohim refer to “ultimate.” It won’t sound the same, it doesn’t mean the same, and it isn’t used by the same people. The “second sense,” captures the uniqueness of experience rather than the commonly accepted.35 What is then grasped is a point,36 and a good teacher can guide to it by giving “tips.”37 A riddle may serve as a good “tip.”

Dao is definitely a form of life, and seeing the textual riddles as “tips,” is helpful to understand the project of the Laozi. However while it is the second sense of understanding which touches the uniqueness, Wittgenstein explains in Investigations §532 that the two senses are two kinds of use that make up one’s concept (Begriff) of understanding. A concept reflects how we act, or how we use our language.38 Ultimately dao is one, but we use its notion in different senses. We tend to replace words in order to show understanding (as I do like my other colleagues right now or in my classes with my students, striving to explain dao as constant, infinite, ineffable and so on). Yet we know that our words belong with a form of life and can’t be replaced. But then again, we can’t say it.

The Laozi says things about dao, despite the fact that the very saying is itself not dao. However, saying it in riddles is “saying without saying,” rather it is showing. For example, verse 14 says that

This is called the shape that has no shape,
The image that is without substance.
This is called indistinct and shadowy.
The author says something from within his form of life, and yet he knows that if he grasped dao as that which can be “daoed” and expressed, he said nothing about dao (changa dao). Thus, he expresses it through paradoxes and riddles, ultimately to be responded in life. Experience is not an outcome or conclusion of understanding, but a sign of it, according to Wittgenstein. Laozi knew it ages earlier and through his riddling text he forced the reader to respond in life.

IV. Turning and Turning over—a Concluding Note

Going back to the beginning of this article, we may join Isabelle Robinet in saying that in fact, leaving abundant sinologists debating over the philosophy of the *Laozi*, is its success, being stimulating. According to the present suggestion, the *Laozi* offers a unique form of dialectic, or a way of canceling the contradiction in living a form of life which transcends the dialectic of conceptual contradictions. This pragmatic dialectic leaves language and concepts behind, by going back to life. It turns out that one reveals a deeper sense of reality which is beyond language and concept. In the text, Laozi demonstrates the dialectic between being and nonbeing, and in his life he exemplifies the practical sense of turning back.

The call to move from text to life takes us back to the diverse images Laozi receives in his different biographies, this time as demonstrating how Laozi’s ideas are indeed instrumental. According to “his” ideas the one who cultivates dao, in fact, loses every distinguishing characteristic of the “self.” The historian, tells us in accordance:

Laozi cultivated the *Dao* and its virtue. He taught that one should efface oneself and be without fame in the world. He lived under the Zhou dynasty. Thereupon Laozi wrote a book in two sections dealing with the *Dao* and its virtue. It had more than five thousand words. Then he left, and nobody knows what became of him.

According to Laozi, “effacing oneself” is a way to be “in the world,” not as a self, but as a spontaneous constant change. Being in the world can be done only by turning back as response to the riddle of dao. Laozi who taught that “those who follow the way are the same as the way” (congshi yu dao zhe tong yu dao 從事於道者同於道, verse 23) is a Laozi who disappeared, leaving nobody behind to tell what became of him, perhaps, since there is no longer “him.” Rather, there is dao. Sinologists as A. C. Graham and Livia Kohn dealt with the fascinating versions of the story of Laozi’s life. The present perspective is obviously not a claim regarding the historical authenticity of Laozi; it is used here as an example to the riddle of dao which is responded in
life; in the present case in Laozi’s life. The text allows Laozi to be an immortal, the personification of dao, a celestial deity who moves freely in the cosmos, a popular savior, the body of dao, or a magical healer. Laozi can be anybody since philosophically speaking, he is no one. Through his successful response to the living riddle of dao, by means of forgetting himself and turning back, Laozi’s life is the best manifestation of his ideas. Moreover, his own text is the best example of a practical use of his way: The text is Laozi’s own deed, and it is a manifestation of the changdao. Non-action is thus perfected in a direct action: A written text (you) exemplifies wu in its spirit. In verse 21, Dao is thus revealed:

Shadowy and indistinct.
Indistinct and shadowy,
Yet within it is an image.

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ENDNOTES

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5. There is another approach in philosophizing Laozi, according to Linyu Gu. As early as in the fall of 1987, her M. A. thesis, titled as “Laozhi Chongshang Ziran de Jiazhi Quxiang《老子崇尚自然的價值取向》(Literally, Laozi’s Value Approach [or perspective or orientation] in Honoring Ziran [naturalness or naturality]), made a pioneer exploration into Laozi’s value orientation/perspective and its naturalistic metaphysics. Gu has recently mentioned that Liu Xiaogan, although in an incomplete description of the real event, has an acknowledgment of receiving her influence, see Liu’s note 22 of “An Inquiry into the Core Value of Laozi’s Philosophy,” in Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe, Religious and Philosophical, 236–37. The metaphysical ground of Linyu Gu’s above thesis, for the first time, discovers that the central and core value of Dao lies in its fundamental emergence, namely, ziran自然 (naturalness or naturality). Such naturality, in another word, serves the ontological foundation of Laozi’s value perspectives, which
are carried forward by three dimensions of an effortless process of *wuwei*. Laozi’s methodology of dialectic thinking on *zheng* (affirmation) and *fan* (non-affirmation) is a supporting thread penetrating the interrelationships among Dao, *ziran*, and *wuwei*. To conclude, doing nothing is not what Loazi has in mind but acting naturally is. Gu directs that, for a published version of her M. A. thesis, see *Xueshu Yuekan* (Academic Monthly), January 1989. For her detailed references, refer to note 5 in Linyu Gu, “‘Waiting or Godot’? Contemporaneity, Feminism, Creativity,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2009): 313–330.


8. For a comprehensive discussion on the language of dao and dao beyond language, see Cheng, “Dimensions of the *Dao*,” 144–50.

9. In my citation I use D. C. Lau’s translation, which follows the Mawangdui 馬王堆 text. Accordingly this line is punctuated: 常無欲，以觀其妙。常有欲，以觀其微。 *changwuyou, yiguan qimiao. changyouyu yiguan qijiao.* According to an alternative reading, which refers back to Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) the punctuation differs such that 常無，欲以觀其妙。常有，欲以觀其微。 *changwu, youyiguan qimiao. changyou, yuyiguan qijiao*, namely, “always in nonbeing, one wishes to observe its secrets, always in being, one wishes to observe its manifestations.” In the present article I do not deal with these alternatives. I do hold that nonbeing is strongly related with no wishes and with secrets, while being is related with wishes and manifestations.


12. On linguistic expressions and boundaries, see Cheng, “Dimensions of the *Dao*,” 145.

13. This shifting will be discussed later as related to *wu* and manifested in the act of “turning back” one is called for.

14. Referring back to the expression *guan qijiao* as “observing its limits,” and *guan qimiao* as “observing its secrets,” Yoav Ariel and Gil Raz suggest that the first chapter of the Laozi can practically be read as an introduction to the text, if the two qi characters on the fifth and sixth lines are cataphoric. Namely, rather than referring back (anaphorically) and hence pointing at the dao as either embodying manifestations in the first case and as secrets in the second, they are pointing forward (cataphorically) to the rest of the book. If the first verse is about the book and not about dao, then the dialectic gets a rhetoric value as an introduction to the system which is suggested later on in the book. See Yoav Ariel and Gil Raz, “Anaphors or Cataphors? A Discussion of the Two Qi’s 其 in the First Chapter of the *Dao De Jing* 道德經,” *Philosophy East & West* 60, no. 3 (2010).


16. Ibid.


21. Ibid., 18.


25. My addition. When quoting D. C. Lau’s translation I follow his rendering of you as “something” and wu as “nothing.” Otherwise, I keep consistency with “being” and “non-being.”
27. Cua deals with this forgetting (wang 惱) in the case of Zhuangzi, and stresses that “to forget distinctions is to enmesh oneself in the experience harmonious union of things,” which is “less of a theoretical doctrine but more of an attitude toward human affairs.” Antonio S. Cua, “Forgetting Morality: Reflections on A Theme in Chuang Tzu,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 4, no. 4 (1977): 306–7, see 305–28.
29. Ibid., 73.
32. The term “great riddle” was coined by Cora Diamond, “Riddles and Anselm’s Riddle,” *The Realistic Spirit—Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). In her article Diamond offers a model mainly based on mathematics, to distinguish “riddles” from “great riddles.” While she deals with the theoretical conceptual status of “the riddle of life and death,” I focus on its significance from the perspective of life and the practice it entails.
33. The Wittgensteinean methodology that I use here, is discussed in length in a previous work. See Galia Patt-Shamir, *To Broaden the Way—A Confucian Jewish Dialogue* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).
35. In this limited scope I refer to “the uniqueness” of experience only as a technical term referring to forms of life in the Wittgensteinean sense. See full explanation in Patt-Shamir, *To Broaden the Way*, 75–85.
38. Since a concept refers to a use it cannot be taken as separate from practicing. Since Wittgenstein finds it empty to say that language expresses thoughts (in §501)—and that there is therefore some a priori Platonic fit between linguistic concepts and mental representations—we must take our concepts and our thoughts as belonging together with ways of practice.
39. For the methodology of “living riddles,” see: Patt-Shamir, *To Broaden the Way*, 63–110.