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Reading The *Daodejing*: Ethics and Politics of the Rhetoric

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After brief consideration of introductory matters in the light of modern textual discoveries, the essay seeks to “read” some old themes of the classic following the perception of conflict between Daoists and Confucians first recorded by Sima Qian. The section on “rhetoric” concentrates on the familiar opening sentences of Chap. 1, and its linguistic analysis challenges the “punctuation” of the Mawangdui manuscripts. The “thematics” section discusses the key topics of the Dao, Reversion, and Rulership and highlights the text’s contentious dialogue with the Confucian discourse.

Author and Texts

The *Daodejing* 道德經 or *Classic of the Way and Virtue* (hereafter DDJ) is traditionally attributed to Lao Dan, a slightly older contemporary of the historical Confucius (551-479 BCE). Preponderant Chinese scholarship of the twentieth century (with notable exceptions found in Hu Shi[h] 胡適 and Xu Fuguan [Hsü Fu-kuan] 徐復觀)¹ has both doubted and contested the attribution, and its cumulative skepticism across several decades has in turn influenced a great deal of modern scholarship on early Chinese thought,² including even more recent examples.³ The most vigorous defense of the traditional position, marshalling counter-arguments from a wide spectrum of current Chinese scholarship and archeological findings, has been mounted by Chen Guying 陳鼓應, a professor of philosophy who has taught in both Taiwan and Beijing,⁴ but the controversy is by no means settled.

Complicating the controversy of dating has been the discovery of new materials. The first major archeological find crucial for our understanding of Laozi and a host of

¹See Hu Shi 胡適, *Zhongguo gudai zhhexueshi* 中國古代哲學史 (1919; rpt. Taipei: Commercial Press, 1961), pp. 43-63; Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, “You guan Laozi qi ren qi shu di zai jiantao 有關老子其人其書的再檢討,” in *Zhongguo sixiangshi lunji xubian* 中國思想史論集續編 (Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 1980), pp. 217-310.

²E.g., Herrlee G. Creel, *What is Taoism?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), Chapter 1; Lao Siguang 勞思光, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhhexueshi* 新編中國哲學史, 3 vols. (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1981), 1: 205-52.

³E.g., William G. Boltz, “Lao tzu Tao te ching 老子道德經,” in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts, A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and The Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), pp. 269-92.

⁴See Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Lao Zhuang xinlun* 老莊新論 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1991).

other related topics, issues, figures, and texts is, of course, the 1973 unearthing of the Mawangdui tomb materials located in what would be the region named Chu 楚, in present-day Changsha of Hunan province.⁵ The wealth and importance of the materials have been compared with those of the Dead Sea caves in the ancient Near East.⁶ Since their discovery, two versions of the DDJ on silk, copies in two different ancient Chinese scripts with some significant variations in diction, chapter order, and reversal of the two-part divisions of the received text, have been studied extensively by scholars worldwide. As one of the more recent translators has noted, however, “the Ma-wang-tui texts do not differ in any *radical* way from later versions of the text.”⁷ At least three translations of the Mawangdui texts are now available to the English reader.⁸

The second and most recent (1993) discovery is also found in the land of Chu, located in Tomb Number 1 of the village Guodian 郭店, at the town of Jingmen 荊門, Hubei province. Three copied versions of the DDJ are preserved on bamboo slips, now judged to be the oldest surviving texts of the classic because the date for them may possibly be set at “the end of the fourth century,”⁹ a date that would locate immediately the texts and the formation of the DDJ discourse as contemporaneous with Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE) or possibly much earlier. Preliminary examination indicates that the contents of the three versions (about two-fifths of the extant DDJ) are again largely similar to the received text, though the documents reveal different chapter arrangements and are not divided into two parts on the Way and Virtue, a staple feature of all known extant textual specimens up to this point.¹⁰ Participants of

⁵Earliest reports and transcriptions of the texts may be found in “Changsha Mawangdui hanmu chutu *Laozi* yiben juanqian gu yishu shiwen 長沙馬王堆漢墓出土《老子》乙本卷前古佚書釋文,” *Wenwu* 文物 (October 1974): 30-42; “Mawangdui hanmu chutu *Laozi* shiwen 馬王堆漢墓出土《老子》釋文,” *Wenwu* 文物 (November 1974): 8-20. For an early study in English of the texts, see Jan Yun-hua, “The Silk Manuscripts on Taoism,” *Toung Pao* 63.1 (1977): 65-84.

⁶See Robin D. S. Yates in *Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huanglao, and Yin-yang in Han China* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), pp. 3-5.

⁷See Robert G. Hendricks, trans., *Te-Tao Ching* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), p. xviii.

⁸They are: D. C. Lau, trans., *Chinese Classics: Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1963/1982); Victor Mair, *Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); and that by Robert Hendricks. In addition, there are two more recent translations of the received text undertaken with obvious knowledge of the new textual discoveries. See Moss Roberts, trans. with commentary, *Laozi Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), and Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans. and commentary, *The Daodejing of Laozi* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002).

⁹*The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998*, eds. Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and The Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000), p. 120.

¹⁰See *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡, ed. Jingmen Museum (Beijing: Wenwu

the International Conference at Dartmouth have debated the various conjectural hypotheses on the relationship of the Guodian's manuscripts to the received text of the *Laozi*—i.e., whether one derives from another, whether both represent diverse versions or textual stemmas, whether both represent different transcriptions from a common source, either written or oral, and what may be the relationship between these two text groups and the Mawangdui materials.¹¹

According to the brief but much later written biography of Sima Qian,¹² Lao Dan was a native of Chu, a southerner from the perspective of ancient geography. His family name was given as Li 李, name Er 耳, and his style Dan 聃, the last graph glossed by the Han lexicon *Shuowen* 說文 as meaning "ears extended 耳曼也." He was said to have served as the archivist of the Zhou royal court. Although the graph Li itself has appeared already in such ancient documents as the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Zuo Commentary*, and *Mencius*, with the meaning of plum tree or its fruit,¹³ as a name, it has been considered by Chinese philologists since the Han to have evolved from the homophone *li* 里, meaning village.¹⁴ The *Tongzhi* 通志 compiled by Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104-62), on the basis of the alleged custom in antiquity to use one's appointed office also as surname, offers an alternative explanation that Li derives from such other homophones as *li* 理, meaning messenger or envoy, or *li* 吏, meaning jail warden. Because *li* as village is frequently on loan for the word for envoy,¹⁵ which, in turn, has been used already by Sima Qian to account for the identity of the homophonous name Li Li 李離,¹⁶ a definitive origin of the name Li may remain a philological puzzle.

Sima Qian's biography, however, has aroused further scholarly controversy over name and identity, because his narrative, by mentioning a nameless person observing that "Lao Laizi is also a person of Chu 老萊子亦楚人也," seems to suggest that his subject under discussion also might have gone by the name of Lao. Although the

chubanshe, 1998). I thank Professor Roger Ames for his generous gift of a copy of this book.

¹¹See the summary in *ibid.*, pp. 142-6. For a brief but illuminating discussion of the problem of sequentiality for the different sections 章 in different textual groups of DDJ, see Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the "Laozi"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 58-9.

¹²See "Laozi, Han Fei, liezhuan 老子韓非列傳," in Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記, *juan* 63 (10 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1969), 7: 2139-56.

¹³See Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1972), pp. 258-9, Graph 980 a.

¹⁴The Jin minister (*dafu*), Li Ke 里克, mentioned in *Zuozhuan* 左傳, Duke Min 2, is written as Li Ke 李克 in *Lü shi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, Bk. 19, in the chapter on "Shiwei 適威" or "Moderating Severity;" see *The Annals of Lü Buwei, A Complete Translation and Study*, John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 494.

¹⁵See Karlgren, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶See *Shiji*, *juan* 119, "Xunli liezhuan 循吏列傳," 4: 3102, for the assertion: "李離者晉文公之理也."

graph *lao* 老 is indisputably used to designate a surname in such ancient texts as the *Zuo Commentary* (Duke Cheng, 15; Duke Zhao, 14) and the *Analects* (7. 1), Sima's casual narration does not warrant confident reception. Most modern scholars agree that the word *yi* 亦 as used in the observation has the force of making Laozi and Lao Laizi two different persons. Finally, the biography cites a third observation by a nameless person that "[the Grand Scribe of Zhou] Dan is, in fact, Laozi [周太史]儋即老子," but this ancient hypothesis has been hotly contested and largely refuted in modern scholarship.¹⁷ The incident of the Grand Scribe meeting with Lord Xian of Qin 秦獻公 alluded to in the biography is also recorded in such other parts of the *Shiji* as "The Basic Annals of the Zhou 周本紀," "The Basic Annals of the Qin 秦本紀," and "The Document of the Fengshan Ritual 封禪書," but none of those episodes has any reference to the identification of Dan as Laozi.

Sima's tantalizing mode of presenting his subject's identity may have followed, as one modern editor and translator of the DDJ suggests, the "rhetorical rectitude of the Spring and Autumn Annals: that one should use what is trustworthy to transmit what is trustworthy, and what is doubtful to transmit what is doubtful 春秋之義，信以傳信，疑以傳疑。"¹⁸ But what is doubtful, thus represented, has certainly elicited more doubt not confined merely to the name of Laozi, and an opinion such as that of William Boltz's, that the biography "contains virtually nothing that is demonstrably factual,"¹⁹ is widely shared today. That conviction notwithstanding, three assertions by Sima are noteworthy not only because they help to shape the entire textualized tradition of Laozi for posterity, but also because they continue to influence the contemporary scholarly reception of this tradition.

The first of the assertion from the biography claims that Laozi had authored a book in two parts that, in five thousand plus words, expounded the meaning of the Way and Virtue. The length of the work thus noted roughly matches that of the DDJ's received text, while the summary of its content has not been challenged by the two most important textual discoveries of the twentieth century. The second remark pertains to the venerable tale of Confucius making inquiry of Laozi about ritual or *li* 禮, a story that may have derived from a widespread legend of many meetings between the two eminent thinkers of antiquity, but the emphasis invariably falls on Confucius' respect

¹⁷The most serious modern advocate of identifying Laozi with Taishi Dan seems to have been Luo Genze 羅根澤, *Zhuizi tansuo* 諸子探索 (Hong Kong: Xuelin shudian, 1967), pp. 207-19; 220-56. Luo in the same volume (pp. 257-78) provides an informative review of the history of critical investigation into dating and authorship of the DDJ in traditional Chinese scholarship. For the most cogent critique of the Taishi Dan identity theory, see Gao Heng 高亨, *Laozi zhenggu* 老子正詁 (Shanghai: Kaiming, 1940).

¹⁸See Yu Peilin 余培林, *Xinyi Laozi duben* 新譯老子讀本 (Taipei: Sanmin, 1997), p. 8, citing from *Guliang Commentary*, Duke Huan 5.

¹⁹See Boltz in Loewe, p. 270.

for and homage paid to the “Daoist” teacher.²⁰ Of the at least sixteen episodes in the *Zhuangzi* that mention Laozi by name, for example, eight of them—all preserved in the “Outer Chapters” of the work—relate contacts or conversations of the latter with Confucius, and their discussions touch on “how to study the Way 治道” (*Zhuangzi* 12), on the *Classic of Poetry*, *Classic of History*, *Classic of Change*, *Classic of Ritual* (13), on ancient texts and the way of governance in relations to benevolence and rectitude (14), on cosmology (21), and on the nature of self-growth in all things (22). The Sima Qian’s story of inquiry on ritual is given much more elaborate content and detail in the “Zengzi wen 曾子問 [Master Zeng’s queries]” chapter of the *Classic of Ritual*. *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, moreover, remarks that “Confucius studied under Lao Dan” and with two other named but now unknown masters.²¹ Finally, the story of “Confucius meeting Laozi” is given pictorial form preserved on a slab of stone carvings found with the remains of the Wuliang Shrine and dated to the second century CE. Such a representation, according to a contemporary art historian, has, in turn, inspired a great many “iconographical studies” by mid- and late-Qing scholars eager to establish correspondence between the venerated classics of their literary sources and visual artifacts.²² As may be seen readily, this little tale of which thinker learned from whom, whether strictly historical or not, can attain enormous significance for one assessing the development of ancient Chinese thought. In a culture where priority and antecedent—and not just origin—inevitably posit also authority, whether Confucius took some ideas from Laozi matters a great deal.

One aspect of how it matters, in fact, surfaces in the last and third assertion of Sima Qian, for his biography tellingly observes that “today, followers of Laozi denigrate Confucianism and students of Confucianism also denigrate Laozi.” Taken as a description of the relations between these two schools of thought descending from ancient China and already heir to protracted and intense rivalry by the Han, the historian’s words are nothing if not historical and factual. Indeed, they would acquire added truth and acuity across the centuries in highlighting such a clash of sentiments that has persisted down to the present. Not only are there charges and counter charges among modern savants in their findings, but their unacknowledged desire for the primacy of Confucius or Laozi as China’s first serious thinker would also color frequently their views on date, authorship, and textual meanings. Even for scholars who seemingly have little ideological stake in upholding the priority of either Confucianism or Daoism, their interpretations can vary on how one should construe a self-same issue. Because the story of Confucius’s inquiry into rites with Laozi had been alluded to even in so

²⁰*Shiji* 63; 7: 2140. Sima repeats the assertion of Laozi as a contemporary of Confucius in the Preface to “Biographies of Confucius’s Disciples 仲尼弟子列傳,” in *Shiji*, 67; 7: 2186.

²¹Knoblock and Riegel, p. 90. The compilation of the *Annals* was dated by Michael Carlson and Michael Loewe to 239 BCE in *Early Chinese Texts*, p. 324. See also Knoblock and Riegel, pp. 27-35 for further discussion of the text’s formation.

²²See Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 42-5.

manifestly a Confucian text as the *Record of Ritual*, the surmised reason for its inclusion divides modern readers. For Xu Fuguan, this legend had to be handed down from a tradition prior to the Han, one which had been so firmly entrenched that not even Han Confucians dared devise its removal. For A. C. Graham, on the other hand, the anecdote would appear more likely to be a Daoist invention to counter the growing influence of Confucianism during the Warring States period.²³

Rhetoric

If the dating of the DDJ and the identity of its putative author or compiler(s) still await solution despite recent discoveries of new textual materials, the construal of textual meaning also continues to pose daunting challenges, as is evident in the scholarly discussions recorded in the Dartmouth Conference proceedings volume. In spite of its being one of the shortest classics of antiquity, its terse and subtle rhetoric, devoid of any mimesis of conversational discourse among named (and frequently known) figures of history—a staple feature in the vast majority of Warring States texts harking back to the *Analects*—has teased and tantalized readers down through the centuries. This and other features may contribute to explaining why the DDJ has been one of the most translated ancient texts of China in our time.

When compared with another text like the *Zhuangzi*, the DDJ displays a much more limited vocabulary and simpler diction, and its overall syntax seems less complicated than even a text like the *Mencius*. Upon every scrutiny, however, the DDJ appears to sport a deliberate predilection to exploit a well-known feature of classical Chinese: the grammatical fluidity, and thus ambiguity, of individual words. As all students of the language realize, a single graph in literary Sinitic, depending on the context, may be used as either a noun, a verb, an adjective, or even an adverb. How the reader construes its grammatical function will significantly modify its meaning. But, apart from this general linguistic character, why the DDJ continues to vex and perplex its every interpreter and translator must be the parlous and pervasive lack of infratextual context to ground one's conjecture of grammatical functions and meanings. Bereft of any dialogical or narrative constraints manifest in so many of the texts that purport to record the gathered teachings of Warring States thinkers, the voice of the DDJ speaker at once asserts and teaches anyone and no one, a discourse without context or audience. The pithy, verse-like meditations are unlike other known specimens of Chinese poetry of antiquity. Despite the noticeable use of rhyme and the tetrasyllabic line in many segments of the work, the textual content hardly engages any concrete specificities or visibilia of the natural (for example, the fauna and flora of the *Classic of Poetry* that so pleased Confucius) and human world. Among the early group of Warring States texts, the gnomic and sapiential texture of the DDJ is manifestly laced with the most abstract of diction. The occasional transposition of different sections in any one

²³See Xu, *op. cit.*; A. C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 115-7.

text—a problem that may have been caused by copyist “error,” redactor judgment, or the “misplacement” of writing materials like bamboo slips—and the seemingly casual insertion of connectives like “hence” or “therefore” augment the difficulty in gauging argumentative logic or coherence. To illustrate yet again some of these difficulties, the familiar sentences that open Chapter 1 of Part I of the received text (the chapter order of which will be presupposed throughout this brief essay)²⁴ may serve as the convenient example beginning our discussion.

The pair of statements opening Chapter 1 (*dao ke dao, fei chang dao; ming ke ming, fei chang ming* 道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名) seems as memorable as they are relatively uncomplicated. Virtually all readers past and present have understood the grammatical structure of the parallel assertions to be something like noun+auxiliary word+verb. A nagging question, nonetheless, involves how best to understand the second *dao* in each clause in such a way that will enable the three word unit to form a cogent assertion. Translations into languages other than Chinese are also frequently tempted to indicate in some manner the sense and effect of the pun, but this attempt is complicated by the fact that already in the *Analects*, we can discern at least four senses in the usage of *dao*. The nominal one refers to a path or road (9. 11; 4. 15; 5. 6) or an ethico-political principle operative within a person, community, or an institution (1. 2, 11, 12; 3. 16; 4. 15; 5. 2, 21; 7. 4; 15. 7, 29; 15. 40; 16. 2; 18. 6; 19. 12, 22, 25). The verbal one can be: to guide or instruct (1. 5; 2. 3; 12. 23); to say or speak (14. 28; 16. 5).

Most interpreters of the first *dao* seem to favor collapsing the two nominal usages into a related one: thus an abstract principle becomes metaphorically a way to be walked on or a path to be followed, a trope that finds increasing preference among recent English translations. For the second *dao*, the last option of the verbal meaning as saying or speaking has also been the preferred reading of most translations, in Western languages or the modern Chinese vernacular, especially in the light of such later comments by Zhuangzi: “The Way has never had borders, saying has never had norms... The greatest Way cannot be cited,/The greatest disputation cannot be spoken,... The Way lights up but does not guide,... Who knows an unspoken disputation, an untold Way? 夫道未始有封，言未始有常... . 夫大道不稱，大辯不言... . 道昭而不道... . 孰知不言之辯，不道之道.”²⁵ A reading of the DDJ that comports with Zhuangzi and its own (Chap. 2) equally provocative description of the sage as one who “undertakes teaching without words (*xing bu yan zhi jiao* 行不言之教),” a phrase repeated in Chap. 43, therefore, will emphasize “the untold Way” as the fitting *changdao* or constant Way.

One clause in Zhuangzi’s very chapter on “The sorting that evens things out 齊物

²⁴Essentially the Wang Bi 王弼 (226-49 CE) version collated with the *guben* 古本 (old text) version of Fu Yi 傅奕 (c. 558-c. 639 CE).

²⁵English rendering is taken from A. C. Graham, *Chuang Tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzu* (London: George Allen & Unwen, 1981), p. 57; the translation has been slightly modified. For the Chinese text, I use the *Xinyi Zhuangzi duben* 新譯莊子讀本, ed. and annot. by Huang Jinhong 黃錦鋹 (pub. 1974; 13th ed. Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1996), p. 64.

論,” however, may insert a different, albeit not unrelated, nuance in the opening declaration of the DDJ. In observing that “the Way lights up but does not guide,” Zhuangzi may well be targeting for critique that understanding of *dao* as a form of normative and thus, superior, guidance for the people (*min*民) prescribed by the Confucian discourse (e.g., *Analects* 2. 3: “Guide it with government [versus] guide it with virtue 道之以政... 道之以德”). Seen in this light, the DDJ’s first clause may mean something like “the Way that can instruct or guide is not the constant Way,” or to translate Zhuangzi’s phrase differently, only “the Way that does not guide, *bu dao zhi dao*” is knowledge worth having.

Although differing in degree, both Laozi and Zhuangzi evidently share a stern estimate of language’s intrinsic limitations. This common skepticism, however, extends not merely to language per se, but much more so to linguistic discourse as a form of political and moral action such as that championed by Confucians and to its compatibility with the non-discriminatory and non-interventionist mode of operation Laozi and Zhuangzi associate with the true and constant Dao. Read from the latter perspective, the first assertion of the DDJ is not necessarily one of apophatic mysticism, that somehow an ineffable or unspeakable *dao* is to be preferred. What is constant (*chang*), rather, must be made consonant with the virtues of the Dao articulated repeatedly in different segments of the text. If Confucius wishes to set forth a basis for proper government by fashioning or attempting to revive a normative system of names and referents (e.g., *Analects* 6. 25 and 13. 3 for “the rectification of names;” 12. 11 for “government” as “let the ruler be a ruler,... etc.”), the derived principles and inferences of which would be honored as authoritative *paideia* and encoded as canonical classics by later followers, the DDJ as a Daoist text would counter with a discourse that challenges both the need and adequacy of the discursive medium as self-authenticating nominalization and normative instruction.²⁶ This difference on whether the Dao should be taken as a discourse of guidance has not been lost in subsequent centuries. Nearly two millennia later, Wang Shouren (Yangming) 王守仁 (1472-1528), on the occasion of dedicating a refurbished library of a private school, would begin his commemorative essay with the ringing declaration for the enduring texts of his own tradition: “The Classics, they are the constant way 經·常道也.”²⁷ For someone like Laozi, on the other hand, the

²⁶Cf. the astute observation by Chad Hansen: “Lao turns his analysis back on the discourse *dao*. The *Daode Jing* analyzes the way in which discourse *daos shape and polish* us and our behavior. However, what Confucius took as their value, Laozi treats as a tragedy. He supports this by a theory of the mechanisms by which language guides us. It explains in greater detail the current theory of how names contribute to the guidance inherent in *daos* and how they influence behavior. This is the explanation that undermines Mencius’ status-quo claim that his existing inclinations are natural or innate.” See *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought, A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 209-10.

²⁷The essay, “Jishan Shuyuan Zunjingge ji 稽山書院尊經閣記,” makes constant reference to the Six Classics (*liu jing*) and dates to 1525. See *Wang Wenchenggong quan shu* 王文成公全書, 14 ce (4 vols. Shanghai: Shangwu, 1936), 4th ce: 47-48.

“constant Name” is no more nameable, as we shall see, than ascribing to the constant Way a disposition for prescriptive guidance.

After such an intriguing beginning, the DDJ text goes on to declare:

That-which-is-not names the beginning of heaven and earth.

That-which-is names the mother of ten thousand things.

無名天地之始

有名萬物之母

The subject of these two sentences that I deliberately render in this clumsy manner refers, of course, to two of the most important dialectical concepts in the text: the *wu* 無 and the *you* 有 that have the literal meanings of “there is not” and “there is,” although those meanings obtain in this particular instant only if the two graphs are taken to be nominals. If they are regarded as adjectives (and thus it obliges the concomitant switch of name [*ming*] from a verb to a noun), both the grammar and the semantics of the two statements may change significantly to the following:

Without name (i.e., the nameless), the beginning of heaven and earth.

With name (i.e., the named), the mother of ten thousand things.

There is nothing in the received text’s Chinese construction, as far as I can determine, that would prevent either reading, but the force of the two assertions and their nuanced implications vary with the grammatical changes, much as the Keatsian “a thing of beauty is a joy forever” is not to be equated with the tepid “a beautiful thing.”

To both these sentences in the Mawangdui manuscripts, as A. C. Graham rightly observes,²⁸ there is added a terminal particle (*ye* 也), in which case, the construction decisively prohibits making *wu* and *you* the nominal subjects. Instead, that feature turns the nameless (*wu ming* 無名) and the named (*you ming* 有名) into the proper ones. However, it must be pointed out as well that this particle is tagged on to all first six sentences of Chapter 1 of the Mawangdui versions. The particle is a staple feature of definitions, explanations, and conclusions, and thus the way those texts punctuate, for this reader at least, conveys the tone and flavor of a particular editorial explanation. Despite a date earlier than the received text’s extant version, the Mawangdui texts may be no more authoritative than the later received text in providing us with the most “authentic” or compelling textual meaning. In this regard, it is unfortunate that the early chapters of the DDJ are not preserved in all three of the Guodian versions.

Wu and *you* in the DDJ and other classical Chinese texts have, of course, been translated frequently as “nothing” or “non-being” and “something” or “being.”²⁹ Apart from the problem of whether to use the language of ontology in exegesis and translation,³⁰

²⁸A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), p. 219.

²⁹For an illuminating discussion of this pair of terms, see “‘Being’ in Western Philosophy Compared with *shih-fei* and *yu-wu* in Chinese Philosophy” in A. C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 322-59.

³⁰Graham is scrupulous in avoiding the diction of ontology when discussing and translating

the inherent grammatical instability of the terms themselves imposes further difficulty when they are joined with other words in constructions susceptible to different readings. A revealing example may be found in what follows immediately in the text of Chapter 1:

Therefore

frequent no/nothing desire/intend by means of observe its wonder

frequent is/something desire/intend by means of observe its bound

故

常無 欲 以 觀 其 妙

常有 欲 以 觀 其 徼

Once more, the crucial problem of interpretation in these lines boils down to whether the dialectical pair of *wu* and *you* ought to be taken as nominals or adjectives, for that decision will, in turn, affect one's understanding of the sentential syntax, of how the string of graphs may be divided into meaningful units (i.e., *duan ju* 斷句). If the words are taken as adjectives, then they must be regarded as qualifiers of the word *yu* 欲, now understood in the nominal sense of "desire." All five of the recent English translations (Lau, Mair, Hendricks, Ivanhoe, Roberts) have opted for this solution made explicit by the syntactical variation of the Mawangdui texts, but such a reading, I must point out, fails to persuade completely on two counts.

First, the reading does not provide us with even a hint as to why the text should want to bring up the issue of desire and its lack thereof so abruptly at this point as a requisite for its cosmic observer. True enough, by Chapter 3, the speaker is already using the phrase "*wu yu* 無欲," but this is perfectly understandable even in a confined segmental context in which the discourse concentrates on how the sage's action would affect the people. In Chapter 1, on the other hand, we have no such indication. Why do we need desire to observe the wonders or subtleties (*miao*) of something, and why do we need to be rid of desire to observe the very limit of something (*jiao*, literally, boundary or border)? Moreover, although the DDJ certainly teaches the importance of not having desires, the opposite emphasis of "having desires 有欲" is hardly conceivable in the light of such explicit statements elsewhere in the same document: "Watch the colorless and embrace the simple, diminish private longings and reduce desires 見素抱樸，少私寡欲" (Chap. 19); "I have no desires and the people themselves become simple 我無欲而民自樸" (Chap. 57). Second, this reading emphasizing desires fails to pin down the exact force of the possessive deictic *qi* 其 (its), because it cannot locate its attributive referent. What is the object possessive of wonders/subtleties and boundary for which the text urges observation? Neither the reading of the Mawangdui texts nor

pre-Qin texts. On the other hand, Rudolf Wagner builds on the pioneering studies of Wei-Jin thought and language philosophy by Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 to argue for the peculiar contribution of Wang Bi's commentary as precisely the elicitation of ontological implications in Laozi's language. See Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Explorations of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), esp. Chaps. 1 and 2. For a critique of Wang's approach from the point of view of a modern Daoist scholar, see Kristofer Schipper, *Le corps Taoïste* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1982), pp. 247-9.

the translations based on them seem to offer satisfactory answers to such questions.

If, however, we take *wu* and *you* as nouns, a reading consistent with their possible grammatical function already surfacing in the previous sentences of the chapter, the difficulty dissolves. The sense of the assertions would be:

Therefore, frequent [in the sense of hold on to or stay with] that-which-is-not, with the intent by means of which to observe its wonders;

frequent that-which-is, with the intent by means of which to observe its boundary.

We may notice in this connection that the word *chang* 常 (frequent, constant) has been regarded by Qing philologists as a loan word for *shang* 尚 (to uphold, honor, esteem, respect) in classical texts like the *Classic of Poetry* and *Guanzi*,³¹ an understanding further supported by historical phonology because both words were thought to be vocalized as *ziang*.³² If this move is adopted, the reading's cogency would be strengthened further, for the sentence would read something like: Uphold that-which is not, with the intent by means of which etc.

The reasonableness of such an interpretation is fourfold. First, it avoids the tendency, perhaps unintended, of so many translations in turning the sentences of each chapter into unrelated, individual utterances. Scrutiny of the Chinese text ought to persuade any attentive reader that the text's playful and perplexing rhetoric is not achieved at the expense of coherent thought and argument altogether, virtues which the reading proposed here seeks to honor. Because the previous pair of sentences already asserts that *wu* and *you* perform a naming function of different aspects of the cosmos, the next pair adduces an argument of consequence—therefore (*gu*) do such and such. Second, the action proposed by this reading has nothing to do with desires or their lack thereof in the observer. The textual injunction is for the addressee to have constant regard for “nothing” and “something” so as to observe its wondrous manifestations and its reach or extent.

Third, this reading brings out more distinctly the difference of what is to be observed with respect to *you* and *wu* that justifies the use of the argumentative adverb, *gu* therefore. Having asserted that these two terms name “the beginning of heaven and earth” and “the mother of ten thousand things,” the text says, “therefore,” if you stay constantly with x or y, you will be able to observe the proper effects of x and y. The effects, however, are not the same, and, therefore, the observable bears a different character. If that-which-is-not or nothing (*wu*) names the beginning of heaven and earth, this is, in effect, another way of asserting (with Chap. 40) that “something (*you*) is begotten of nothing 有生於無.” The common-sense speculation on cosmogony in the West may perhaps best be summed up in Lear's words of Shakespeare's play: “Nothing will come of nothing” (I. 1. 90). Only the deity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is capable of *creatio ex nihilo* or making something out of nothing. Although the creative artist in later periods of the Western tradition is affirmed to have a capability

³¹See the gloss in *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, 12 vols. (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1987), 3: 733.

³²See Karlgren, for graphs 725a and 725e, pp. 190-1.

that mimics the creative act of God, an affirmation interestingly echoed in the Chinese aphorism on falsehood and fiction no doubt derived from the DDJ—"of nothing was born something, *wu zhong sheng you* 無中生有"—Laozi's use of the word *miao* (mystery, marvel) here in Chap. 1 aptly depicts the character of self-contradictory genesis. The action of how something is born of nothing defies explanation. On the other hand, once something (*you*) is posited as "the mother of ten thousand things," the result of this procreative process involves replication and multiplication. Hence what is to be observed is the *jiao*, the range and reach, the border or limit, of ever expanding phenomena.

Fourth and finally, this reading thus satisfies the grammatical and syntactical demands of the text by making *wu* and *you* the proper attributive referents of *qi* (its) within the structure of the self-same sentence. What wonders and boundary are we supposed to observe? They are none other than the very conditions or characteristics of that-which-is-not and that-which-is. As the text goes on to specify one further linkage in the discussion: "These two things [i.e., *wu* and *you*] come out from the same [source] but they differ in name 此兩者同出而異名."

To close this section, we may point out finally that in an eighth-century Dunhuang text, the Upper Scroll of *Laozi's Scripture of the Way* 道經上, a further variant may be found for the two sentences under consideration.³³ What is noteworthy in this manuscript version is that the two uses of the coverb *yi* 以 are completely removed by either the editor or the copyist,³⁴ such that the sentences read: 常無欲觀其妙，常有欲觀所噉。" Apart from the alteration of diction at the end so that a different *jiao* (brightness) provides the object of vision, what is significant in this construction is that the graph *yu* makes much better sense as an auxiliary verb—so as to—than as a noun meaning desire. If this view is accepted, the syntactical pause will almost certainly have to come after *wu* and *you*, thereby effectively eliminating any reference to desire from the couplet. As in the case of all textual interpretation and translation, reading the DDJ makes it apparent that philology at the level of individual words attains its true worth only if it serves the cause of hermeneutics, because textual understanding occurs largely at the level of sentences or meaningful semantic units (*ju*).

³³See part of the spread out scroll on which is produced a highly legible reproduction of the first four chapters in *Taoism and the Arts of China*, ed. Stephen Little with Shawn Eichman (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, in association with University of California Press, 2000), p. 118. The scrolled is identified as Pelliot Chinois 2584, part of the collection housed in Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

³⁴I use the term coverb as it is defined and discussed in Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), pp. 47-50.

Thematics

The Dao. In the course of the received text, the graph for *dao* occurs at least 73 times, but as in the case of some of the words already discussed in the previous section, the meaning of the graph varies significantly in different contexts. And, as has already been observed, the familiar couplet opening Chapter 1 readily displays the speaker's rhetorical cunning in the use of punning or paronomasia to define the enigmatic cosmic principle called the Dao. Moreover, as we have argued at length, the pun of the first line can be understood in at least in two ways, whereas the pun of the second line is most likely to be understood as "the name that can be named is not the constant name." Because the *dao* and *ming* are nothing if not two of the most debated terms in the schools of thought emerging in the early Warring States period, the polemical overtones immediately audible may well have come from targeting a rival position like the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names (*zheng ming* 正名). If the Master in *Analects* 6.23 wants to pin down even a wine vessel with its "proper" appellation (*gu* 觚), and if his later disciple Xunzi contends that wise men "instituted names to refer to objects 制名以指實,"³⁵ the speaker in the DDJ is far less certain about either the accuracy of linguistic names or the identity of the object of his speech. Nonetheless, he offers an arresting depiction: "There is a thing comminglingly formed,/Born before heaven and earth./Silent and solitary,/Standing alone without altering,/Going around without tiring,/ It can be the mother of the world." The denomination he assigns to this "thing (*wu* 物)," however, is entirely arbitrary: "I, not knowing its name,/style it as Dao; reluctantly I give it the name of Great" (Chap. 25).

In sharp contrast to the Confucian teaching on names, the Dao in such a view exists linguistically as an uncertain signifier. In the thought of the DDJ, the Dao is referentially elusive, for it points neither to any palpably physical or material object (despite its being designated as a "thing" that, according to Chap. 21, is "shadowy and indistinct" 恍惚 both in itself and in its image) nor to a fixed mental concept. Because of its invisibility, inaudibility, and intangibility, the speaker heaps on it such descriptions as "evanescent 夷," "rarefied 希," and "minute 微." Although "these three cannot be fathomed, they commingle to become one," existing in such oxymorons as "the shapeless shape, the substanceless image 無狀之狀，無物之象" (Chap. 14). Verbal ironies of this sort in both Laozi and Zhuangzi have in recent years tempted scholars to interpret them as virtually "proto-deconstructionist" thinkers, a view which this reader does not entirely endorse. Their reservations about language notwithstanding, neither of the Daoists seems to me to entertain a thoroughgoing skepticism in regard to the linguistic sign. How they use language is arguably the way a poet in many traditions uses language: keenly aware of the fugitive ephemerality of his or her medium, the poet nonetheless exploits it to the utmost to convey what

³⁵Xunzi *jijie* 荀子集解, ed. Yang Jialuo 楊家駱 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1987), *juan* 16, ch. 22, p. 276; John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988-1994), 3: 129.

seems impossible to communicate. Like the epic narration striving to make “darkness visible” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (I, 63), Laozi’s metaphors seem intent on rendering absence presentable.

Haphazard as this process may seem in constructing a “foundational” concept for his thought, the DDJ speaker is not at all shy in detailing all sorts of features and activities of the Dao. Because “the ten thousand things of the world are born from that-which-is, but that-which-is is born from that-which-is-not” (Chap. 40), *wu* and *you* thus *both* constitute the “nature” of the Dao. Appositely, therefore, it is the “Dao [in the creative process] that begets one, one begets two, two begets three, and three begets ten thousand things” (Chap. 42). In attributing (Chap. 51) a cosmic procreative and nurturing role for the Dao and Virtue (*de*), the DDJ echoes the punning definition in the *Zhuangzi*: “that by which things obtain (*de*) life is called Virtue (*de*) 物得以生謂之德.”³⁶ This understanding of the Dao as a force and principle of nature poses one most pointed contrast to the Confucian view. In the *Analects*, the word Dao also appears some seventy-seven times, but its meaning lies entirely in its socio-political significance and not in its generative agency, as may be seen from such following remarks:

The superior man... swift in action but cautious in speech, would follow those possessive of the Way and become upright (1. 14).

Of the Way of the former kings, this [i.e., the alleged “harmony” wrought by rites] is the most beautiful:... (1. 12).

The superior man works at his foundation; when his foundation is set up and the Way is born. Being filial and obedient as a brother, is not this the foundation of a man’s character (1. 2)?

Those who are called great ministers would serve their ruler with the Way, but when that’s not possible they would desist (11. 24).

Unlike this sort of emphasis rehearsed by Confucius and his disciples, the DDJ asserts that if man, heaven, and earth all model themselves after the Dao, what the Dao models itself after is the self-so (*ziran* 自然) frequently translated as Nature (Chap. 25). The semblance between the Dao and nature is what motivates the ten thousand things “to honor the Way and esteem Virtue 尊道而貴德,” but this sense of deference differs from the Confucian imperative because, “not decreed by authority, it is made constant in nature 夫莫之命而常自然” (Chap. 51). As this crucial segment of the DDJ goes on to make clear, the character of such life-giving and nurture bestowed by nature’s Dao is its very “selflessness:” “It gives life but claims no ownership;/It acts without causing dependency;/It promotes growth without governance;/This is called Mysterious Virtue.”

Namelessness in such a view implies the correlative rejection of a sense of self or identity. “The Dao is made constant in being nameless 道常無名” (Chap. 32), declares the text, and again, “The Dao lies hidden in being nameless 道隱無名; /thus only the Dao is good at lending and bringing things to completion” (Chap. 41). Such a posture

³⁶*Zhuangzi duben*, chap. 12, p. 156.

in turn makes for profound implications for both ethics and psychology:

Thus the sage embraces the One to become the world's mode:
 He has no view of his own, and therefore he understands;
 He does not affirm himself, and therefore he is known;
 He does not commend himself, and therefore he is meritorious;
 He does not boast, and therefore he endures.
 He alone is not contentious, and therefore the world can never contend with him
 (Chap. 22).

Whereas Zeng Shen 曾參, one of Confucius's chief disciples, frets about scrutinizing his body/self thrice daily (吾日三省吾身) to determine his moral accomplishment (*Analects* 1. 4), the DDJ offers a strikingly different model:

The reason why heaven and earth are longlasting
 Is that they do not give life to themselves.
 Therefore, they can live long.
 Thus the sage puts his body/self last,
 And his body/self comes first;
 Treats his body/self as extraneous,
 And his body/self endures (Chap. 7).

It is this very principle of "not ever regarding itself as great 終不自為大" that the Dao may be called great (Chap. 25) and "able to bring to completion its own greatness 能成其大" (Chap. 34). Because the sage's pacific and non-self-centered disposition (cf. Chap. 24) is seen to be actually a source of immense power, the DDJ can declare that "the loftiest good is like water./Water benefits ten thousand things without contention,/And it settles where most people despise./Hence it comes nearest to the Way" (Chap. 8).

The aquatic simile just cited, interestingly enough, reveals another significant difference between the DDJ and the rhetoric of a Confucian like Mencius, and the difference of linguistic construction indicates a deeper disparity in logic. For Mencius, the "natural" inclination of humans to pursue a benevolent ruler (1A. 6) and practice the good (6A. 2) is likened to water's natural tendency. The passage in 6A. 2, in fact, declares that "the matter of human nature being essentially good is like water always flowing downward 人性之善也，猶水之就下也。"³⁷ Notice that the Mencian argument proceeds from an assertion about the fundamental goodness of human nature assumed to be indisputable, and it then elicits for its support through analogy a phenomenon of nature. The analogy, of course, is debatable on two counts. On the premise itself, his fellow Confucian Xunzi a little later would offer the most pointed challenge to the affirmation of the goodness of human nature. As for the concluding comparison, the seemingly prescient acknowledgement of gravity can still be disputed when one remembers that primitive agricultural technology, already in use in Mencius's time, can force water to flow "upward" or "sideways" in a particular arrangement or circumstance. The last point, in fact, was implicit in Gaozi's remark about how human

³⁷Chinese text of *Mencius* is cited from *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979, 1984), 2: 222.

nature was like water that could through “outlet” be made to “flow east and west” at will, an observation that drew the Mencian attempted rebuttal.

The DDJ’s argument, on the other hand, does not start with human nature; its text by contrast abounds with praise for what it considers to be water’s semblance to supreme goodness 上善若水. The defining “character” of water is precisely its manifest pliancy and weakness that no other thing under heaven can surpass 天下莫柔弱於水 (Chap. 78), and this virtue further translates metaphorically into its pacificity or non-contentiousness (*bu zeng* 不爭). In this view, from the observed phenomenon of how gravity affects the behavior of water (same acknowledgement as Mencius’s) emerges a different, but more compelling, ethical analogy: water’s willingness to take a lowly position, an excellent disposition that renders the River and the Sea to become “king of the hundred valleys 江海之所以能為百谷王者，以其善下之” (Chap. 66), provides the basis for the argument that “the extremely pliant in the world will ride rough shod [D. C. Lau’s translation] over the hardest in the world 天下之至柔馳騁天下之至堅” (Chap. 43). The physical attributes and propensity of water, thus distilled, provide the discursive model for the seeker of Dao.

Reversion. “Reversion is the Dao’s movement 反者道之動” (Chap. 40), and this statement of the DDJ, already illustrated by the example of water just cited above, validates A. C. Graham’s conclusion that “the most characteristic gesture of *Lao-tzu* to overturn accepted descriptions is the reversal of priorities in chains of oppositions.”³⁸ The gesture, in sum, represents an enlistment of what are perceived to be examples in natural phenomena to challenge directly certain cultural assumptions and ordering, the descriptions and priorities already valorized in human thought and society. If society tends to exalt “something,” “doing something,” “knowledge,” “male,” “big,” “strong,” “hard,” “straight,” and the like, the DDJ takes pains to foreground the opposites of “nothing,” “doing nothing,” “ignorance,” “female,” “small,” “weak,” “soft,” and “crooked.” The latter group of characteristics, however, represents more than mere oppositions, for they are ineluctably related to the former. One unavoidably implies the other because Laozi’s assumption is that such is the nature of the universe. Hence the text observes:

What is about to shrink
Will always stretch out;
What is about to weaken
Will always be strong;
What is about to become useless
Will always flourish;
What is to be taken
Will always give out.
This is called minute discernment 是謂微明 (Chap. 36).³⁹

³⁸*Disputers of the Tao*, p. 223.

³⁹My translation, excepting the last line, follows Chen Guying, *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子注譯及評介 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), pp. 205-8.

Although such an observation has been taken in both antiquity (e.g., *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, Chap. 21; 7: 11a, *SBBY*) and subsequent commentators as the stratagem of *Realpolitik*, the text itself may be arguing first for the dialectical phenomenon of how the fullest manifestation of one quality or condition must imply its diametrical opposite. Thus Laozi never tires to emphasize that “The bright way seems dull;/The progressive way seems regressive” (Chap. 41). Again, “Great perfection seems incomplete,/But its use does not fail;/Great fullness seems drained,/But its use is inexhaustible” (Chap. 45). The use of the word “seems” (*ruo* 若) in these declarations is noteworthy, for it suggests that neither natural phenomena nor cultural priorities are what they appear to be. To understand the “omen”⁴⁰ and persistence of reversion requires, as the text says, “minute discernment” (*wei ming* 微明). The hiddenness of the Dao and the paradox of appearance—“The great square has no corners;/The great vessel is late in making” (Chap. 41); “Great skill seems clumsy;/Great eloquence seems tongue-tied” (Chap. 45)—thus oblige the Daoist sage to be an astute hermeneutician. Not merely a transmitter, an editor, or an interpreter of texts, this sort of a sage must also possess the ability to read the subtle semiotics of nature and culture, to see what others do not see. It is for this reason as well that the sage himself also does not appear to be what he is, for his deportment and even his demeanor are utterly different from the rest of the people (cf. Chap. 20).

The meaning of reversion (*fan*), however, is not exhausted by opposition or opposite. As the idea is discussed in the DDJ, it acquires further development when it becomes associated with such notions as reversal and return (*gui*, *fu*). When attempting to describe the invisible, inaudible, and ungraspable Dao in Chap. 14, the text goes on to say: “Its upper part does not dazzle;/its lower part is not opaque./Unending, it cannot be named;/Once more it returns to no thing 復歸於無物.” The movement of the Dao thus operates in the mode of recursive cyclicity, because according to the logic here, that *you* which is begotten of *wu* (Chap. 40) will also eventually go back to “nothing.” Hence the crucial and grand declaration of Chap. 16:

The ten thousand things flourish together;
And I use them to observe reversal 吾以觀復。

The irony of the declaration here is generated precisely by the paradox that when everything seems to be alive and thriving, the sage speaker—and *he alone*—is the one who sees through that very phenomenon to adduce an opposite condition. Thus he continues:

Now, these things thrive in abundance,
But each again returns to its roots.
Return to roots is called stillness.
It is called the reversal to destiny.
Reversal to destiny is called constancy.
Knowing constancy is called discernment.

⁴⁰Chen in *ibid.*, p. 206, uses the term *zhengzhao* 徵兆 to translate *ming* 明, but the DDJ (Chap. 52) defines *ming* as “to see the small 見小曰明.”

Not knowing constancy, one foolishly practices violence.
 Knowing constancy induces forbearance;
 Forbearance is impartial;
 Impartiality is king;
 Kingliness is heaven;
 Heaven is Dao,⁴¹
 And Dao is perpetuity,
 Free from danger till the end of life.

A knowledge of such a constant process wherein all things must reverse from a state of “something” to a condition of “nothing” induces a concomitant re-ordering of preferences and values. If age is valorized in Confucius’s autobiographical account of his moral accomplishment based on advancing decades of cultivation—“at seventy I followed my heart’s desires without overstepping the line” (*Analects* 2. 4)—the DDJ, on the other hand, puts its recurrent emphasis on the condition of infancy or babyhood (Chaps. 20, 28, 49, 55). The praise for the abundantly virtuous naked child who is immune to attacks by poisonous insects or ferocious animals, however, has little to do with secret revelation of Christian messianism read into the text by later Jesuit exegetes. Although both the terms (naked child, *chizi* 赤子; baby or infant, *ying’er* 嬰兒) and the depiction of infancy had been appropriated by later Daoist adepts to represent the state of realized immortality in physiological alchemy, the DDJ text makes it apparent that what it cherishes in the infant is its characteristics of weakness (*ruo* 弱), pacificity (*he* 和), and suppleness or pliancy (*rou* 柔). Because a living human is supple and only a dead one is stiff (Chap. 76), the infant betokens the supreme embodiment of life. “Things that mature will become old, / And this is called Not-Dao. / Not-Dao will perish early” (Chap. 55). Herein lies one intriguing but perhaps unintended irony of the DDJ: Laozi or Master Old, so named by the legend that he was born with a head of white hair, is actually required by his teachings to exalt the youthful and the newborn.⁴²

Rulership. As has been intimated somewhat in the foregoing section already, the implications for ethics and psychology embedded in the DDJ betoken more than insights for personal self-cultivation. The text makes apparent that its concerns are deeply embedded in politics and the implicit critique of rival theories on society and government. Beginning with Chapter 2 and going right to the end, the vocabulary of the DDJ alights repeatedly on such names as *min* 民 (people), *zhi* 治 (governance, to

⁴¹This and the previous clause may be a deliberately ironic echo, nearly verbatim, of the *Zuo Zhuan*, Duke Xuan 4: “The sovereign, he is heaven. Can one flee from heaven 君天也，天可逃乎？”

⁴²For this charming aspect of Laozi’s physique at the time of his birth and other mythological details of his person, the account is traceable to the *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 by the third century Daoist writer, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343). We now have a magnificent translation and critical study of this important text in Robert Ford Campany, *To Live As Long As Heaven And Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong’s Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). See pp. 194-211 for the hagiography of Laozi.

rule), *baixing* 百姓 (literally, the names of a hundred clans, stock metaphor for the common folk), *guo* or *guojia* 國家 (state), *tianxia* 天下 (under-heaven, stock metaphor for the political domain as known world), *wang* 王 (king, kingly, kingliness, and to rule as king), *chen* 臣 (political subject), *bing* 兵 (soldiers, arms, troops, military affairs), *shi* 士 (troops), *jun* 軍 (troops, military units), and *jun* 君 (sovereign, ruler). They are all terms receiving recurrent explication and debate among Warring States thinkers, and it is in comparison with them that Laozi's thought attains its pithy and piquant distinctiveness. Whereas the Confucians, the Mohists, and the later Legalists have all advocated theories of governance which rely on policies and examples issued from the top down, the DDJ speaker is forthright in rejecting much of the leadership role of the ruling classes and places the proper initiatives as squarely coming from the common people.⁴³ Laozi's program of reversal may readily be seen in Chap. 77, where he seeks to overturn the locative metaphors of the high or upper (*shang* 上) and the low (*xia* 下) by re-valuation: "Is not the way of heaven like stretching a bow?/The high is pressed down;/The low is raised;/The excessive it hurts,/And the deficient it mends." Exactly opposite such heavenly generosity is "the way of humans 人之道" that "hurts the insufficient in order to serve the excessive 損不足以奉有餘." The injuries perpetrated by humans are traced (Chap. 75) specifically to heavy taxation that causes popular starvation, to the ruling classes's over-craving for life that leads them to regard death lightly, and to their predilection for sheer intervention (*you wei* 有為) that eventually makes the governance of people difficult (*min zhi nan zhi* 民之難治). This critique of those in power, however, does not mean that Laozi is advocating necessarily an incipient form of republicanism, let alone democracy,⁴⁴ for in his thinking, there is still the Daoist sage who, like the ideal "kingly one (*wang zhe* 王者)" championed by Mencius and Xunzi, is especially fit to govern because of certain qualities. For Laozi, "he who is possessive of the Dao (*you dao zhe* 有道者)" is the one who can "offer his surplus to the world" (Chap. 77). That is why the text observes in another place that "The sage resides above but the people are not burdened;/He leads in front but the people are not harmed" (Chap. 66).

The DDJ's focus on the needs and priorities of the common people thus complements the reversal of the sage ruler's role and values, while both themes derive apparently from the fundamental concept of the Dao and its relations with nature or *ziran*. In this light we may understand not only the powerful critique that Laozi mounts against Confucian ethics and politics but also his ostensibly more extreme statements on the people. Familiar to students of classical Chinese thought, the Confucian emphasis on the personal rectitude of the ruler as virtue (*de*) is firmly and finally

⁴³On this point see Xiao Gongquan 蕭公權, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi* 中國政治思想史, new ed., 2 vols. (Taipei: Zhongguo wenhua xueyuan chubanshe, 1980), 1: 168-71.

⁴⁴Hu Shi in *op. cit.*, pp. 46-49 calls Laozi's thinking "a revolutionary political philosophy" because of its anti-establishment attitude. The point is that Laozi's rhetoric is equally critical towards unnamed rival thinkers whose teachings, in his judgment, continue to support contemporary values and institutions.

based on its suasive power to attract and mold his subjects (*Analects* 2. 1 and 12. 19), causing his people to rush to his allegiance like water flowing downward (*Mencius* 1A. 6). The constitution of that virtue, too, is well-known: filial piety (*xiao* 孝), and benevolence (*ren* 仁) concretely defined as primarily the love of parents and kin,⁴⁵ and the regard for established rituals and ceremonies (*li* 禮) amidst both court and clan (*Analects* 1. 12; 2. 5, 23; 3. 17, 22; 4. 13; 13. 4). Such a notion of virtue as a capacity not only to practice the good but also by that very practice to provoke a similar response from those benefitting from such an action may underlie the paronomasic definition of “virtue is that which acquires or obtains, *de zhe de ye* 德者得也.” *Analects* 2. 1 provides the classic proof text: “To govern by means of virtue may be compared with the Pole Star: it assumes its proper position [in the middle] and the various stars gather to pay homage 為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之.” These oft quoted words of Confucius validate a modern scholar’s elucidation of the Confucian conception of *de* as a propensity to influence feeling and behavior, a “moral force” or potency that would elicit reciprocity.⁴⁶

It may be gathered from the DDJ that its speaker teaches with full acknowledgement of virtue’s power, but the distinctive content that he gives to this notion, as we have seen, is based on his ideas about the Dao, heaven, and nature. The potency of the cosmos, in Laozi’s reading of nature, works differently since it is never acquisitive or interfering. Consider the difficult (possibly corrupt) sentences of Chap. 38: “The person of loftiest virtue does not act but leaves nothing undone;/ The person of lowest virtue acts but leaves something undone 上德無為而無以[不]為，下德為之而有以[不]為.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere (Chap. 21), Laozi says, “The action of the profoundest virtue/ Is to follow only the Dao 孔德之容惟道是從.” The way virtue (*de*) shares in the creative process of the Dao (“The Dao gives birth to it;/Virtue rears it 道生之，德畜之”) is precisely what earns it its name as “mysterious virtue 元德,” for it is an action that seeks no telos in “ownership 有, dependency 持, and governance 宰” (Chap. 51). Unlike the authoritative stance—reciprocity ends in homage from others—predicated of virtue in the Confucian discourse, the virtue of the DDJ unites with the Dao in not undertaking any action of self-aggrandizement. This is the reason why “The naked babe is incomparable as the abundant embodiment of virtue 含德之厚，比於赤子,” its supremely pacific nature (*he*

⁴⁵It is important to note that although Confucius defines benevolence famously as “to love all” and “to love people” (*Analects* 1. 6; 12. 22), the priority of kinship is never far from his thinking. Thus “when the gentleman is devoted to his parents, the common people will be moved to benevolence” (8. 2). See also *Doctrine of the Mean* 20: “Benevolence is the characteristically human, but loving one’s parents is the greatest [expression] thereof (*ren zhe ren ye, qin qin wei da* 仁者人也，親親為大.” This definition is repeated often, including that given in the first dictionary, *Shuowen*.

⁴⁶See David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (La Salle: Open Court, 1996), pp. 25-6.

⁴⁷My translation follows D. C. Lau’s emended collation of the received text with the Mawangdui B text. See his *Tao Te Ching*, pp. 56-7.

zhi zhi 和之至) rendering it immune to the attack by poisonous insects and ferocious beasts (Chap. 55).

The Great Way...
 Clothes and nurtures ten thousand things and refuses to be lord.
 Ever free of desire
 It may be named small;
 When ten thousand things submit to it
 And it still does not become lord,
 It may be named great.
 That it itself never seeks to be great
 Is why it can perfect its greatness (Chap. 34).

This utter repudiation of purposive action for itself on the part of the cosmic Dao thus obligates similar repudiation, including moral cultivation, by those in true union with the Dao. It helps explain the DDJ's derogatory and highly striking remarks on the non-benevolent nature of heaven and earth (Chap. 5), on the need to "abolish benevolence and discard rectitude" (Chap. 19), on how all rituals and ceremonies are but "the thinning of loyalty and trustworthiness, the beginning of chaos" (Chap. 38), on how a state not governed by cleverness is its blessing (Chap. 64), and how the people must be kept in a state of ignorance (Chap. 65) and desirelessness (Chap. 3). Above all, it serves to elucidate the central precept of no action or do nothing (*wu wei* 無為), a topic eliciting endless discussion since antiquity.⁴⁸

"The Way abides in no action, but there is nothing it does not do 道常無為，而無不為" (Chap. 37). As a nearly identical construction, the clause *wu wei er wu bu wei* 無為而無不為 (doing nothing but there is nothing it does not do) is repeated in Chaps. 38 and 48 of the received text, but it does not appear in the Mawangdui materials possibly because of loss (48) and emendation (37, 38). Along with its antecedent four lines of Chap. 48, however, the entire clause of six graphs is preserved intact in the B text of

⁴⁸The limited space of the essay does not permit any detailed tracking of this term's history of interpretation. I cite some notable examples from the works of Western scholarship during the last half century or so. Consistent with his long-held and asserted thesis of considering Daoist thinking as a form of "proto-scientific" discourse, Joseph Needham contrasts the word *wei* 為, 偽 (the latter favored by Xunzi) with *wu wei*. He translates the first two words as "action" or "action contrary to nature" that are typical of the intervention in nature and culture advocated by the Confucians, whereas *wu wei* of the Daoists signifies for Needham "non-action" or "action not contrary to nature." See *Science and Civilisation in China*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): 68–71; 562–4. For a cogent discussion of *wu wei* (variously translated as "nonaction", "doing nothing", and "acting naturally") in relations to the different principal discourses on rulership in the Warring States, see Roger Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 28–64. For a recent study that seeks to relate the term to the Confucian and Daoist agenda of moral self-cultivation, see Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the Guodian manuscripts.⁴⁹ The declaration in Chap. 37 makes apparent that the concept of *wu wei* does not mean inaction or without activity, because the DDJ is replete with descriptions of what the Dao and the Daoist sage (*sheng ren* 聖人) can do and what they are doing constantly. Wang Bi's annotation on the phrase, that it means "to obey nature 順自然也," has exerted a lasting influence on subsequent students of the text. Building on the interpretation by Fukunaga Mitsuiji 福光永司, Chen Guying argues that *wu wei* should be understood in the sense of *wu wangwei* 無妄為 or do not act recklessly, unscrupulously, or even willfully, and the seemingly paradoxical result would be that everything gets done.⁵⁰

If this line of thinking is deemed plausible, one can also begin to appreciate how the rhetoric of the DDJ continues to heighten the contrast between appearance and reality, between what seems to be "inaction" and "non-activity" on the one hand and what the Dao and the sage are actually accomplishing. The parallel assertions are plain:

The Dao constantly does nothing,
And yet there is nothing it does not do.
If lords and princes could hold fast to it,
The ten thousand things would be transformed by itself (Chap. 37).

...

Thus the sage says,
"I do nothing,
And the people on their own will themselves" (Chap. 57).

The transformation of things (*hua wu* 化物) and the transformation of humans (*hua ren* 化人) are both cherished accomplishments in ancient Chinese thought, for the knowledge of these processes indicates respectively the power of creative nature and the efficacy of such cultural institutions as government and education. It is in regard to these two crucial fields of knowledge that the pre-Qin philosophers all attempt to advance their own teachings and propositions. Within this arena of discursive contestation, the DDJ's injunction (Chap. 3) is bluntly oxymoronic—*wei wu wei* 為無為—but like other rhetorical ironies studding the text, this particular injunction may also be asserting a meaning entirely opposite of what seems like the surface meaning of "do no action." Only by recalling the lessons learned in hints and inferences gleaned from other textual segments and filling in the argumentative blanks, so to speak, can one begin to comprehend the oddly non-sequitur conclusion: "then there is nothing that is not in order, *ze wu bu zhi* 則無不治." It is this lesson of doing no reckless thing that helps us appreciate more deeply Laozi's arresting ideal:

That's why the sage acts without presuming on his own ability,
Achieves merit but refuses to dwell on it.

⁴⁹See *Guodian*, p. 118.

⁵⁰See Chen, *Laozizhuyi*, pp. 67-70; *Lao Zhuang xinlun*, pp. 33-4. Chen's citation of Fukunaga is taken from a Chinese translation (by Chen Guanxue 陳冠學) of the Japanese scholar's book on Laozi.

Isn't it because he has no desire to appear as a worthy (Chap. 77)?

Laozi might not have been a revolutionary, but measured by even the values of more than two thousand plus years after him, his thought is nothing if not extraordinary. At a time when officials of particular nations on earth are vying to vaunt the ability of their leadership or the merit of incomparable power even in the looming shadow of catastrophic conflict, the wisdom of the DDJ seems ever more compelling and urgent.