Chapter 4
Laozi's Philosophy: Textual and Conceptual Analyses

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The *Laozi* or *Daodejing* is a fascinating, compelling, inspiring, and elusive work. Indeed, its themes and doctrines have been interpreted in radically different ways. Its ideas have been taken as treatments on metaphysics, ontology, ethics, social philosophy, political strategy, the arts of statesmanship and military strategy; it has been reckoned a source for the art of *qigong* (vital force exercise), the religion of immortality, and even a theory of feminism. Divergent interpretations of the *Laozi* have developed various, even opposed, strands of thought such as theism, atheism, and pantheism; idealism and materialism; rationality and mysticism; naturalism and humanism. Can we accept all these divergent and conflicting readings and impressions as equally valid approaches to the text? If not, how should we think about them? There is certainly no straightforward approach to judging between different standards of interpretation. After all, texts can be interpreted in as many ways as there are readers. But if we are interested in pursuing a faithful understanding of Laozi's thought, we cannot assume that all interpretations are of the same accuracy and trustworthiness. It appears to me that the most reliable interpretation of the *Laozi* can only be achieved by approaching the text meticulously and comprehensively in its linguistic, social, and historical contexts.[1]

[1] Some passages in this chapter are adapted and altered from Liu 2009b.

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1 An Experimental Approach

In the humanities, a faithful reading is always the primary approach and a prerequisite for academic study and interpretation; thus, it is actually a critical preparation for research and interpretation. Textual analytical knowledge and a circumspect attitude can build a foundation of close familiarity with the text and more accurate interpretation of Laozi's philosophy, which in turn lays the groundwork for creative interpretation and philosophical construction. In this way, the difference and connection between newly created ideas and original textual meanings will be demonstrated clearly, unlike the traditional approach, which mixed an interpreter's new ideas and textual explication. In this chapter, I will concentrate on close reading and contextual understanding, leaving creative interpretation and modern reconstruction to other works. Here I will consider the *Laozi* text as closely as possible and investigate its basic meaning, so that we may have a better foundation for modern comparison, reconstruction, and application of its ideas to today's world. To take account of the various surviving versions of the *Laozi*, I consult and compare its bamboo slip, silk manuscript, and received versions, with the aim of staying as close as possible to the most ancient text to identify its most plausible meanings.[2]

While the Chap. 2 of this volume surveys the various approaches and interpretations in Laozi studies, this chapter introduces a more comprehensive and coherent analysis of three central concepts in Laozi's thought. They are *ziran* (自然 naturalness), *wuwei* (無為 non-action), and Dao.

When we wrestle with concepts from ancient Chinese thought in English, there is the issue of working through the Western philosophical terminology available to us. As long as philosophical discussion is concerned, no matter if it is Chinese, Indian, or African, we can hardly avoid using Western terms, though there is no philosophical vocabulary appropriate for all locations and periods. Faced with this issue, we are careful in our use of ready Western terminologies and theoretical frameworks in the discussion of Laozi's philosophy, and when we need and have to use them, we try to be sensitive to the areas of discrepancy between them in their Western framework and in the context of Laozi's thought. Thus, our policy is this: (1) we try not to apply ready Western concepts to Laozi's text; (2) we will coin new phrases where possible to convey the unique meaning of a Laozian concept, for example, "civilized naturalness"[3]; and (3) we indicate the difference between

[2]This comparison of the various versions becomes easy and convenient with the publication of *Laozi Gujin* 老子古今 (Liu X. 2006b). For the transformations of the various versions over two millennia, see Liu 2003.

[3]The Chinese word *ziran* in ancient times meant only "natural" or "naturally," in an adjectival or adverbial sense, even if it was used grammatically in a subject or object position. *Ziran* has nothing to do with the idea of Nature, and it was not translated as that until the early twentieth century (Lin 2009). The new term "civilized naturalness" was recently invented so that the *Laozi*'s *ziran* would indicate the naturally harmonious state of *civilized* human societies, in hopes of

Western terms and Laozi's ideas when use of a Western term is unavoidable. For example, when we use metaphysics to discuss Laozi's Dao, we do not mean to suggest that Dao is metaphysical in the platonic sense: namely, it does not suggest any dichotomy between the physical and metaphysical worlds, since the world is all of a piece in Laozi's Daoism.

In this chapter, we will try to reveal a relative coherent system of Laozi's thought, which consists of three key terms and theories in the *Laozi,* namely, *ziran* (natural order in civilized societies), *wuwei* (imperceptible yet effectual action), and Dao (the source and ground of the universe). They are associated in a roughly coherent body of theories in which they support and interpenetrate each other.

2 Ziran: *The Core Value of Laozi's Philosophy*

Unlike most studies of Laozi's philosophy, which usually focus on the concepts of Dao and *wuwei*, this chapter will first highlight *ziran* 自然, introducing it as the core or highest value in Laozi's philosophy.[4] The *Laozi* text asserts that "Dao models itself after *ziran,*" which puts *ziran* in the highest position of all things. Using this highest concept, Laozi wants people to understand and be able to pursue the ideal state of the world through his idea that Dao is the model for man, earth, and Heaven.

In the compound *zi-ran*, "*zi*" 自 denotes "self", "*ran*" 然 denotes "so"; thus, *ziran* seems literally to indicate the state of "self-so" or "so-in-and-of-itself," suggesting the spontaneous existence and development of things without artificial interruption or arbitrary control. However, the translation "self-so" or "so-in-and-of-itself" is possibly misleading, because in *ziran*, "*zi*" does not necessarily denote a person or agent who might cause or initiate something. "*Ziran*" in most situations indicates that something exists or happens without any known cause or agent.[5] It is different from the English word "self," which usually indicates subjectivity or agency; thus, the translation of "self-so" may mislead some into an individualist interpretation of *ziran*. Even though its literal meaning is clear, its implication and connotations are complicated and obscure, and we discovered many divergent and strange interpretations. Some of them will be discussed and clarified later. Because there is no simple word that accurately and fully captures *ziran*, we will temporarily use *naturalness* as a token for narrative convenience.

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preventing confusion with the natural world, the state of primitive societies, the "state of nature" as in Hobbesian theory, or the like.

[4]I learned the term "core value" from Wei-ming Tu who was teaching Confucianism at Harvard University when I was a visiting scholar there in the late 1980s.

[5]Actually, all terms in which *zi*自 used as an adverb cannot be understand as "self" per se, such as self-transformation (*zihua* 自化), self-correct (*zizheng* 自正), self-prosperous (*zifu* 自富), (*zipu* 自樸), self-equilibrium (*zijun* 自均), self-obedience (*zibin* 自賓), and self-stabilization (*zi-ding* 自定). In these compound terms *zi* should not be understood as if a person or entity is a conscious agent of action.

There are many levels of difficulty to getting at an understanding Laozi's *ziran*. First, based on our investigation of extant texts and documents, Laozi must be credited with invention the term, but he did not provide a definition or explanation of its meanings. Second, scholars and commentators right through history have repeatedly reinterpreted Laozi's *ziran* according to their own logic and viewpoint, a practice that prevents later readers from gaining an accurate understanding of Laozi's meaning. This is especially the case since modern scholars seem inclined to follow later interpretations, especially that in WANG Bi's commentary. We will deal with these two difficulties by textual analysis later. But generally, we should consciously try not to read later interpretations into the original text. We are, in a sense, engaging in conceptual archeology.

The third level of difficulty derives from the translation. The Chinese word *ziran* and the English word "nature" are often translated one for the other. Accordingly, modern scholars are inclined, consciously or unconsciously, to understand Laozi's *ziran* through the meanings of the English "nature." This is a serious problem that deserves to be reexamined and clarified.

2.1 Is Ziran Equal to Nature?

Raymond Williams has noted that for English "nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (Williams 1985: 219); "it is necessary to be especially aware of its difficulty" (ibid.: 224). The complexity of the English word "nature" dramatically aggravates the difficulty and divergences that crop up when it is employed to stand in for the Chinese *ziran*. Therefore, to clarify the meanings of *ziran*, we first have to be clear about the meanings of "nature." From this judgment we can better decide if that is the best way to translate and interpret Laozi's *ziran*.

Williams has distinguished three areas of meaning. Nature is:

(i) the *essential quality* and character *of* something;
(ii) the *inherent force* which directs either the world or human beings or both;
(iii) the *material world* itself, taken as including or not including human beings. (Williams 1985: 219)[6]

He further asserts, "It is usually not difficult to distinguish (i) from (ii) and (iii); indeed it is often habitual and in effect not noticed in reading" (ibid.: 219). For example, the common phrase "human nature" could be used in all the three areas: (i) human nature as essential quality and character of human beings; (ii) human nature as directing inherent force of human beings; and human nature as "one of the variants of sense (iii), a fixed property of the material world, in this case 'natural man'" (ibid.: 220). Another common phrase, "state of nature," whose

[6]According to Williams, in English, sense (i) is from century 13, sense (ii) from century 14, sense (iii) from century 17 (Williams 1985: 219). The italics in the quotation are mine.

meaning is varied and "could be contrasted—sometimes pessimistically but more often optimistically and even programmatically—with an existing state of society" (ibid.: 223). Intriguingly, all these meanings of nature, human nature, and state of nature can be found, explicitly or implicitly, in modern interpretations of Laozi's *ziran*.

Obviously, there is little chance that an understanding *ziran* derived mainly from the varied meanings of "nature" can be more accurate than a close reading and analysis of the text itself. What is worse, such improper interpretive practices are not confined to the world where English is the first language. It was also prevalent in Chinese intellectual circles around 1905 when Chinese accepted Japanese scholars' transformation of *ziran* into a noun in parallel with "Nature" (the material world), even though the word *ziran* had originally been imported from China to Japan (Lin 2009).[7] This translation represented a radical change, since *ziran* had been, for two millennia in China, a basically adjectival marker that described a character or feature of a state of things or movement, even it sometime grammatically functioned as a noun. *Ziran* had been used to translate only "natural" or "naturally" before twentieth century (ibid.). In classical Chinese *ziran* had never been used as a noun that denotes or connotes the material world. In pre-modern China, words like *tian* 天, *tiandi* 天地, or *wanwu* 萬物 denoted the material world In a way equivalent to the sense (iii) of nature. Similarly, *ziran* was never used to indicate senses (i) and (ii) of nature. For sense (i), Chinese had used the indigenous word *xing* 性 to denote the essential quality and characteristic of a thing or phenomenon since ancient times.

However, ever since *ziran* was use to translate "nature," the variants and complex mean of "nature" have been mapped onto the Chinese word. Gradually, some Chinese scholars came to accept the varied senses of "nature" as native meanings for *ziran*. Consequently, they take it for granted that Laozi's *ziran* can be fairly understood by reference to the complex meanings of "nature." Hence we find that clearly modern meanings of the word "nature" have been carelessly read into Laozi's *ziran*—not simply the physical world, the nature of myriad things, the biological nature of human beings, the state of uncivilized societies, doing nothing so that nature may take its course—but even the Hobbesian "state of nature." A key purpose of this chapter is to do the linguistic archeology work necessary to discover the historical truth of Laozi's terms and concepts buried beneath modern and Western languages and theories. Needless to say, our approach to this goal must be faithful analysis that is grounded in the text's own historical and linguistic background, which is different from interpretations of modern-concerned orientation (Liu 2008–2009, 2009a).

[7]According to Lin Shujuan 林淑娟, it is not until 1905, after a century's hesitation, that *ziran* was finally used to translate the material sense of nature under the influence of the Japanese. See Lin 2009, which provides most useful information of the history of the translation between *ziran* and nature.

2.2 Ziran: *The Model of Dao*

To understand Laozi's *ziran*, we might first go to the last passage of Chapter 25, which says:

> Man takes his models from Earth (*ren fa di* 人法地),
> Earth takes its models from Heaven (*di fa tian* 地法天),
> Heaven takes its models from the Dao (*tian fa dao* 天法道),
> and the Dao takes its models from *Ziran*. (*dao fa ziran* 道法自然). (Lynn 1999)[8]

Obviously, the four sentences follow the "subject–predicate–object" structure, so that "man," "earth," "heaven," "Dao," separated into four sentences, act as subject, "takes (models) . . . " is the common verb, and "earth," "heaven," "Dao," and *ziran* are the four objects of the verb *fa* (法), though *ziran* is not an entity, unlike earth, heaven, and Dao. This is the conventional straightforward reading, and it accords with syntactic analyses, admits no redundancy, and unfolds step by step from human to Dao without distorting the grammatical parallelisms and coherence. Therefore we believe this conventional understanding is correct and better than other strange readings.[9] The meaning of the passage here is that human beings should attend to the world to recognize the principles of Heaven; Heaven in turn operates in accordance with the principles of Dao, and Dao operates according to the principles of *ziran*. Grammatically *ziran* is a noun, though its meaning here is "natural" or "a situation developing naturally." Therefore, Richard Lynn's translation of *ziran* as "the Natural" is better than other translations and acceptable.

However, some have translated *ziran* as Nature (Chan 1963) or claimed that *ziran* indicates the natural world and phenomena. One astonishing interpretation reads: "[*Ziran*] is various phenomena of the natural world: sun, moon, and stars; wind, rain, thunderstorms, and lightning; lunar and solar eclipses, mountain and earth cataclysms; and the births and deaths of all living things" (Yin 1998: 342). Above we mentioned that the use of *ziran* to denote the natural world started in the twentieth century, so this interpretation is obviously lacking historical and linguistic grounds. Besides, the text repeats the verb *fa* 法 (model after) four times to emphasize that human beings should ultimately model themselves after the principle of *ziran*. If *ziran* denotes the natural world and phenomena, then why and how people should model themselves after natural changes or even cataclysmic events? It doesn't make sense. Although scholars may not agree with this ridiculous interpretation, they are still inclined, if unconsciously, to be influenced by the conceptualization of *ziran* as

[8]Lynn translates *ziran* as "the Natural." With some exceptions, translations of the *Laozi* in this chapter are mostly adopted with modification from Chan 1973; Henricks 1991, 2000, Ivanhoe 2000, Lynn 1999, and Lau 2001 with notes of chapter numbers, but no specific citation. The Chinese version is mainly based on Liu X. 2006b. In this chapter, the translations from the *Laozi* are used mainly for convenience of argumentation and narrative, and chosen for their accuracy in matching the Chinese meaning, structure, and grammar; thus readability is not the first concern.

[9]For information about the other two alternative readings, see Liu X. 2006b: 288–89 and Wang 2003: 229.

natural world as they try to understand and interpret Laozi's thought. If people want to comprehend Laozi's *ziran* faithfully, they must get past the modern association of *ziran* with the natural world. Thus, we occasionally use *naturalness* as a stand-in for *ziran* because this approach steps back from the idea of *ziran* as a kind of entity and instead forefronts its adjectival quality, if in nominative form. Still, this is not an accurate translation and could be misunderstood. For example, some might think the sentence "Dao takes its model from *ziran*" means Dao exerts no function and just lets everything follow its own nature or naturalness.

This understanding is problematic and requires further discussion. The critical question for understanding Laozi's *ziran* is the scope of its concern. Does it concern single beings or the general situation of human beings, as well as the universe? Let's analyze the text seriously. Laozi arranges the "four greats" in an ascending row, from man, earth, Heaven, through Dao, the source and ground of the universe. This clearly points to expanding human insight beyond people's own existence to the whole of the universe, with special concern given to the ultimate condition of mankind. This evokes nothing about any specific being or single entity in the empirical world. So we should not understand Laozi's *ziran* as pertaining to any single entity, although WANG Bi (226–249 CE) did suggest this individualist interpretation in his famous and popular commentary on the *Laozi*. Wang's commentary reads: "Dao avoids acting contrary to *Ziran* and so realizes its own nature (*xing* 性). To take models from *Ziran* means that when it exists in a square, it takes squareness as its model, and when it exists in a circle, it takes circularity as its model: it does nothing that is contrary to *Ziran*" (Lynn 1999: 96). According to Wang, Laozi's *ziran* concerns even individual beings, relating to each one's own nature (*xing* 性). Thus, Wang's *ziran* falls into each individual being's character (squareness or roundness) and carries no sense of transcendence. Actually, Laozi wants human beings to go beyond their limitations by taking models from earth, heaven, and the ultimate, Dao, while Wang makes Dao, Heaven, and earth common singularities in the physical world. Wang was the first author who began to see Laozi's *ziran* from the perspective of personal nature, in part reflecting the interests of his historical period, though he does not say that *ziran* is one's nature. Personal nature was a central concern of the Neo-Daoism and Profound Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) movements of the third century. Wang thus failed to understand Laozi's philosophy in a faithful and accurate way, but he succeeded in creating a new and influential philosophy.

Based on Chapter 25, as well as other chapters, we could recognize that Laozi's *ziran* is about neither the natural world nor about human nature and individual inclination. Dao is the ultimate source and ground of Heaven, earth, and people; thus, Laozi's claim that *ziran* is the object after which Dao models itself promotes *ziran* to the very highest status, as both a positive value and a central principle for human beings. Thus, Laozi's *ziran* suggests an idealist state of human societies and of the universe, without conflicts, oppression, or chaos. In short, Dao not only has universal force and function, it also promotes and embodies the highest values for

human societies. As the model for Dao itself, *ziran* here is advanced as the central value at the highest, most holistic stratum.[10]

2.3 Ziran: *Between Sages and People*

In Chapter 25, Laozi contends that humans should take models from earth, heaven, Dao, and finally *ziran*. However, it is not the common people but sages who should first practice and embody the principle of *ziran*, the core value and highest principle of Laozi's philosophy. Still, sages' existence and function have direct relation to the common people. Chapter 17 presents these features of the sage. Fortunately, we have not only the received version of this text, but also the two most recently unearthed versions, namely, the bamboo and the silk manuscripts recovered from tombs in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively. Logically, these recovered versions should be nearer the oldest or original version. After analysis, the antique versions indeed proved superior in terms of their content and thought. The bamboo version reads:

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to subjects,

Next comes the ruler they love and praise;
Next comes one they fear;
Next comes one whom they insult … … …

(1) Hesitant, [I (voice of the sage)] do not utter words lightly (*Youhu qi guiyan ye* 猶乎其貴言也),
(2) when [I] have accomplished my task and done my work (*chengshi suigong* 成事遂功),
(3) Then the common people all say that I [(the sage) have realized] the principle of *ziran*. (*er baixing yue wo ziran ye* 而百姓曰我自然也).

Here the best ruler does not force people to do anything and makes no display of his own kindness or capability—the people only know of his existence and have no need to pay attention to him, let alone express gratitude and eulogy. This is the "empty throne" ruler, the Daoist ideal. The next best ruler acts in ways that excite the admiration and affection of the people; this is the sagely ruler according to conventional or Confucian ideal. The next best ruler instills fear in his subjects; this is what is commonly referred to as a benighted ruler. Even worse is the ruler who inflicts hardships upon his subjects and earns himself nothing but insults and abuse. This is what is referred to as a tyrannical ruler. The sage, the Daoist ideal model of leadership, is unhurried and at ease, a person of few words. He has accomplished tasks to his satisfaction, and yet the people do not realize that he has done a thing, but admire him for his practicing the principle of *ziran* or naturalness.[11]

[10] In chapter 51 *ziran* is also invoked at this level, described as the key feature of Dao.

[11] This kind of admiration is obviously different from regular eulogy mentioned for the second best rulers.

Obviously, *ziran* has nothing to do with natural world and primitive societies, it is derives from and used for a civilized society. Again, here *ziran* focuses on general state of the society or groups of people, instead of issues concerning single beings.

There is a problem of interpretation with regard to this chapter. Most scholars have been of the opinion that *ziran* here does not indicate that the ruler did nothing, but rather that his actions were accomplished imperceptibly without the people being aware of them, or that his actions were accepted as something that had developed of its own accord. This raises an important issue: whether or not the value of *ziran* can allow for the effect of external force, for example, from a sage. According to traditional commentaries, the application of external force counts as natural as long as people are not directly aware of it. If one accepts this interpretation, then *ziran* would not preclude the exertion of external force or acquiescence to the influence of such force, it just precludes the use of external force in a *coercive* manner. Thus, to practice the principle *ziran* suggests a principle that the leadership should be efficacious yet attract no attention or notice.

Another problem in interpreting this passage is discerning just who is speaking. My reading, which is further supported by the bamboo and silk versions, is different from popular commentaries. There is no subject in lines (1) and (2), but I assume the subject is "I", the author and the representative speaker for the sage. This pattern is also seen in Chapter 43: "Thus *I* know the advantages of *wuwei* (non-action). *The teaching that is without words*, the advantages of *wuwei*, few in the world attain these." Here "I" practice teaching without words, similar to line (1): "[I] do not utter words lightly." Chapter 2 also reads: "[The] *sage* abides in the business of non-action and *practices the teaching that is without words*." Thus we can assume that "I" is used for the voice of the sage. This is common and more examples could be found in chapters 20, 57, 67, and 70. My reading of line (3) "Then the common people all say I have realized the principle of *ziran*" is similar to "The whole world says that I am great" (silk version, Ch. 67).[12] In this sentence, the subject "I" cannot be changed by 'people in the world' (Liu X. 2006b: 207–10). According to this reading, *ziran* is a concept to promote sagely principles in the treatment of people and the world. Chapter 17 discusses the relationship of the sage and the community, covering the significance of *ziran* or naturalness at the middle level, namely, the community stratum. Chapter 23 mentions that "To be sparing with words is in accordance with *ziran,*" which also belongs to this stratum. *Ziran* in chapters 17 and 23 concerns the sagely principle of leadership and advances more sophisticated social management; therefore, *ziran* has nothing to do with primitive societies or the dark side of culture as some scholars have criticized.

Now we move on to the foundational and individual stratum of the principle of *ziran* or naturalness. Chapter 64 develops the concept of *ziran* from the perspective of the relationship between the sage and the myriad things. The received version is:

> Therefore the sage desires not to desire,
> And does not value goods that are hard to come by;

[12]The sentence in the received version is "The whole world says that *my Dao* is great."

He studies what is not studied,
And makes good the mistakes of the multitude.
He just *assists* the myriad things' *ziran* and *dares not to act*.
(*Yi fu wanwu zhi ziran er bu gan wei* 以輔萬物之自然, 而不敢為)

The key point is lies in the last sentence: the sage *assists* the myriad creatures to realize their natural prosperousness, but *dares not to act* generally in the manner of the common people. However, the relation between "assist" and "not to act" is unclear, for we may understand that assisting is also a kind of acting, so there appears to be a kind of contradiction here. Another translation reads: "Thus he supports all things in their natural state but does not take any action" (Chan 1963). Here *does not take any action* may trump the sages' act of *assistance* or *support*. At very least the relation between the two phrases is confusing. Fortunately, this relation is presented clearly and forcefully in the bamboo versions A and C.[13] Bamboo A might be earlier, based on the handwriting style, but here the sentence is more complete, and its meaning is more readily comprehensible:

And so the sage is *able* to assist the myriad things's *ziran*,
but is *unable* to act [in the common manner]
(*Shigu shengren neng fu wanwu zhi ziran er funeng wei*
是故聖人能輔萬物之自然, 而弗能為).[14]

This earliest version forefronts the contrast between "able" and "unable," which in turn illuminates the relation between assisting and acting. We can finally make out that Laozi does not mean "assisting the myriad things' *ziran*" to be the usual sort of "action" we might expect of mundane people. Instead it demonstrates that Laozi does not value the common actions and behavior that comes from regular knowledge and practice, but promotes a special kind of action and behavior that proceeds according to the principle of *ziran*. In other words, the sage is able to assist natural prosperity of the myriad creatures and things, but unable to take action in regular ways.

Here, three critical words deserve our attention. First, *fu* 輔, which can be translated as to assist, help, or support, etc. It is better understood on a spectrum between

[13]For these differences and analyses of the various versions, see Liu X. 2006b: 621–22.

[14]The words *bu gan wei* 不敢為 in received versions are replaced by *fu neng wei* 弗能為 or *fu gan wei* 弗敢為 in the bamboo and silk versions, respectively. Although both *bu* 不 and *fu* 弗 are negative adverbs, *fu* 弗usually suggests an omitted objective *zhi* 之 after the verb negated by *fu* 弗. Therefore, *fu neng wei* 弗能為 might read as *fu neng wei zhi* 弗能為之. Lau asserts that 之 indicates *fu wanwu zhi ziran* 輔萬物之自然, and renders the sentence "The sage is able to help the myriad creatures to be natural but he dare not do it" (Lau 2001:164). It is also translated as "[The sage] is able to help the 10,000 things to be what they are in themselves, and yet he cannot do it" (Henricks 2000: 42). These are misreadings, and puzzling in any case. First, Lau dogmatically applies a grammatical rule in this reading and neglects the fact that there are always exceptions to any grammatical regulation. Second, Lau neglects that in this case, after *fu* come the two combined verbs *neng wei*, so this not a regular case with only one verb. Third, Lau seems to believe that *Laozi*'s sage would do nothing, even "to assist the 10,000 things." The next chapter will argue that *wuwei* does not mean doing nothing, but rather "doing" in a more effectual way for the harmony of the natural world and society.

two extremes. One extreme is restraint, manipulation, interruption, interference, exploitation, control, and oppression; the other is pampering, spoiling, indulgence, permissiveness, and over-protection. Thus, *fu* or assistance is the careful and prudent art of sagely leadership; its purpose and objective are completely aimed at benefiting the myriad things, no aspect of which shows off the sage's own importance and intelligence or accrues personal benefits. We will come back to this point when we discuss Laozi's concept of *xuande* 玄德 (profound and mysterious virtue).

Another concept is *wanwu* 萬物, the myriad things. This term seems archaic and has been commonly replaced by Nature or the natural world, but it is rather meaningful for modern societies. *Wanwu* is not an abstract single like "mankind," nor a collective like "students." It features (1) the inclusion of all human beings without exclusion and discrimination, (2) the equality of human beings and all other creatures and things, and (3) a simultaneous indication of both the whole and the sole. That whole is composed of all individual beings and the sole is always part of the whole; thus it is different from the concepts of individualism and collectivism. This concept may inspire new ideas about the whole and the sole among human beings and in the relation between humans and other beings.

The most important concept here, of course, is *ziran*. But the old question comes back again: does *ziran* in this passage concern only the individual nature (*xing* 性). Because the myriad things the sage helps can be taken both as a collective and as individual entities, so the sage's assistance must fall to each individual thing within the collective or else this assertion is a boast and a falsehood. When Laozi makes *ziran* the highest value and principle, it must implicate respect, concern, and loving care for all living things in a peaceful natural order. Not only does the sage's role include nurture and concern with overall development, it means allowing each blade of grass, tree, and person to enjoy conditions that support their natural development. In modern world, it may include each family, household, village, town, and territory to enjoy the environment and space each needs to develop normally. This is the foundation and condition of the overall natural order and a socially harmonious situation alike. Thus, the *ziran* that the sages assist cannot be understood merely as individual nature (*xing* 性), and the passage is better interpreted as sages providing the conditions for the natural prosperity of the myriad things.

2.4 Summary of Ziran

To sum up, here are the key points:

1. Laozi's *ziran* is the highest principle and core value of his philosophy; it is advanced and embodied by Dao, the source and ground of the universe. Laozi's other key concepts, such as Dao of Heaven, *xuande* (profound and mysterious virtue), *wuwei*, femininity, and softness, are all associated with it and purport to help realize it.

2. *Ziran* provides the functional model for Dao, Heaven, earth, and mankind; therefore the scope of its concern is the general and ultimate condition, state, and order of the universe and societies. It is not merely about individual beings, though individuals are included as members of the myriad things.
3. Based on etymological archeology, Laozi's *ziran* has nothing to do with the natural world, human nature, primitive societies, and various notions about the state of nature.
4. Thus, we can say that *ziran* suggests the idealistic natural order of civilized societies and the world. So for narrative convenience we might use *civilized naturalness* or *a natural civilized state* as English stand-ins for *ziran*.
5. *Ziran* as coined by Laozi originally had an ambiguous meaning, rather different from the usage of later Daoists, such as Zhuangzi, Huainanzi, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang, never mind modern Chinese renditions of *ziran* or the English word "nature." Thus, to understand Laozi's *ziran*, we must work to avoid reading later and even modern interpretations of *ziran* into Laozi's text.

3 *Wuwei*: The Principled Method

Wuwei (無為) and *ziran* are often breezed over and taken to be similar terms in Daoism, but this is not a conclusion based on a serious reading of the *Laozi* text. By careful textual analysis, we can establish that *ziran* is the core value of Laozi's philosophy, while *wuwei* (無為) is a general method by which to realize the value. *Wuwei* is often translated as "non-action," which is not perfectly precise, but we may take it as a convenient token for the sake of discussion, so long as we keep in mind that its true meaning goes well beyond the literal. *Wuwei* has also been rendered as "acting naturally" and "non-purposive action," as well as "effortless action" (Slingerland 2003), each of which reflects certain elements of the term's range of connotations. Additional interpretations include "never over-doing," "no conscious effort," "no set purpose," "non-dual action," and "utilitarian principle that serves the social purpose of winning the world" (Zhu 2002: 53). Unfortunately, no terms or concepts in modern languages coincide with the meanings of *wuwei* in the *Laozi*.

The form of the term *wuwei* is negative. What is the object the term negates? Three items have been proposed: (1) any act, (2) intentions or desires, and (3) forceful action. Based on this classification, J. Liu has developed a comprehensive theory of *wuwei*: "Laozi's notion of *wuwei* incorporates all three functions: (1) when things are running well, do nothing to interfere; (2) when the sage has to do something, let him do it with no personal, selfish desire; (3) in all his acts, the sage should conform to *Dao*, the natural pattern of things, and refrain from introducing human intervention." (Liu J. 2006a: 143–45) This is both a reasonable and a comprehensive explanation, and it helps us to further investigate the meanings of the term and related theories.

Actually, Laozi's philosophy is not a treatise or system of concepts, but a collection of terms, ideas, proverbs, loose passages, poetic sayings, and the like, with a general view of the universe, the world, societies, and the myriad things, as well as their conditions and circumstances. It is neither a systematic monograph, nor a disordered mixture of maxims and truisms. So we should not analyze its concepts or terms with the expectation of modern philosophical order and regularity. We have to ferret out the specific characteristics of its terms and patterns of expression.

3.1 Dual Meanings of Wuwei-like Terms

When we read the text closely and seriously, we find that Laozi repeatedly claims great advantages for *wuwei*, as well as other negatively stated terms such as "no-business" (*wushi* 無事), "not struggling" (*buzheng* 不爭), "not doing" (*buwei* 不為), "not using force" (*buwu* 不武), "not daring" (*bugan* 不敢), "no-anger" (*bunu* 不怒), "no-desires" (*wuyu* 無欲, *buyu* 不欲), "no-possessions" (*buyou* 不有), "no-dependence" (*bushi* 不恃), "no-authority" (*buzai* 不宰), "no-knowledge" (*wuzhi* 無知), "no-selfishness" (*wusi* 無私), "no-body" (*wushen* 無身), and the like.[15] These are merely a handful of the dozens of *wuwei*-like terms and phrases, which in effect form a large family of similar terms. Therefore, our analyses of *wuwei* should simultaneously consider all members of this big term-family.

Before we consider Laozi's idea of *wuwei*, two points should be clarified. First, who can be an agent of *wuwei*? Second, is the sage a ruler like a king or prince? Some scholars take *wuwei* as a general principle of behavior for the common people and consider sages equivalent to rulers.[16] But these readings are not careful enough. If we pay close attention to and investigate these questions, we can arrive at the finding that in fact, in the *Laozi* the sage is never a ruler as in the real world, instead, he is a idealistic model for rulers. Furthermore, in Laozi's thought, only the sage is the agent of the principled method of *wuwei*, though the sage may certainly be seen as a model for the common people who should follow and practice the principled method.

The agent of *wuwei* is clearly the sage, who stands in distinction from regular kings or prices, or any ruler in history. Textual evidence makes this clear. On examining the twelve references to *wuwei* in ten chapters, we find that the sage is explicitly specified as its agent in five of those chapters. For example: "The *sage* says, 'I conduct *non-action* and the people transform themselves,'"(Ch. 57); "Thus the *sage* abides in the business of *non-action* and practices the teaching that is without words" (Ch. 2).[17] In four chapters, we can easily infer that the agent of

[15]For details, see Liu X. 2006b: 606–9.

[16]D. C. Lau: "When [Laozi] mentions the way of Heaven, or Heaven and Earth, there is an implicit lesson for the sage, i.e., the ruler." Cited in Liu J. 2006a: 146.

[17]To save the space, we omitted the examples in chapters 3, 63, and 64.

non-action is also a sage; for example, Chapter 43 says: "That is why *I* know the benefit of taking *non-action*, the teaching that is without words . . . ." Obviously, here "I" must refer to same agent specified in Chapter 2, since the wording is otherwise the same; so we know that the "I" who knows the advantage of non-action is also a sage.[18] The only exception, where the agent is not a sage, occurs in Chapter 37: "*Dao* consistently conducts *non-action*, but nothing is left undone. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, the myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord."[19] Here, Dao is the formal and anthropomorphic agent of non-action. Because the sage is an embodiment of Dao in the human world, we can conclude that Dao-as-agent is in accordance with the sage as agent of non-action. Rulers, such as lords and princes, or kings and barons, should take Dao as their operational model. Therefore, we can comfortably assert that the sage is the essential agent of *wuwei*. This does not suggest that common people should not or cannot learn and practice *wuwei*, but that is not Laozi's interest. If we want to discuss Laozi's *wuwei* instead of the general philosophical theme of *wuwei*, we should not forget that the agent of *wuwei* is the sage, the model of Daoist leadership, instead of a ruler of a state in the world.

Why do we have to argue that the sage is the agent of *wuwei* or non-action? There are two points. First, it accentuates that the *Laozi* is not a book on the practical arts of government (*junren nanmian zhi shu* 君人南面之術); this strain of thinking was only later introduced in Han period Daoism (first century BCE?), also known as the 'Huang-Lao school' (黃老之學). Second, *wuwei* is the ideal practice the sage uses to treat and take care of people, societies, and the world. It is geared to realize a holistic social order and is not a common craft or method for people in everyday life, though the folk can learn its principles from the sage and assume this approach. Again, *wuwei* is promoted to realize *ziran*, the order of a naturally harmonious environment. It is neither an utopian plan nor a matter of practical schemes and techniques, let alone conspiracy or trickery as some scholars have criticized.

If we consider *wuwei* a concept in Laozi's philosophy, we must realize that it is rather different from philosophical concepts in the modern sense. It is not easy to analyze and establish clearly simple meanings because this ancient text was not a work of conceptual analysis. If we read seriously and comprehensively, however, we discover that *wuwei* is actually a dual-meaning term: its surface meaning is *wu* 無 *wei* 為, which seems to denote literally "not any action" as an isolated term; but its actual meaning in its rich contexts promotes an extraordinary Daoist way of action and behavior in leadership and management. This significant meaning, disguised in the surface negative construction, is essential to the unfolding of the whole text and is even more noteworthy philosophically.

[18] More examples are in chapters 10, 38, and 48.

[19] This is from the received version. The silk and bamboo versions are "Dao has consistently no name" and "Dao consistently conducts non-action," respectively. In sum, in most versions, the agent of *wuwei* is Dao.

First we should clarify the purpose of *wuwei*. Does *wuwei* really mean merely doing nothing? It certainly does not. With close reading, we can readily see that Laozi does not promote "doing nothing." *Wuwei* instead is a negation of not all action, but only actions based in "common knowledge and practice," such as control, coercion, competition, exploitation, oppression, strife, and impulsiveness, namely, all actions that run counter to the principle of Dao and civilized naturalness. We touched on this issue earlier when we discussed the statement, "The sage is *able* to assist myriad things' natural prosperity, but is *unable* to act." Obviously, though seeming to negate all actions, Laozi in fact promotes another style of action that common people may never know. Numerous sentences and phrases indicate that Laozi aims to promote the effectual act and behavior in an irregular way; for example, "to retire when *the task is accomplished"* (*gongsui shentui* 功遂身退) (Ch. 9); "it *accomplishes its task* yet lays no claim to merit" (*gongcheng er buchu* 功成而不處) (Ch. 2); "the sage embraces the One and *is a model for the world*" (*shengren boyi wei tianxia shi* 聖人抱一為天下式) (Ch. 22); and "*win the world* by engaging in no activity" (*yi wushi qu tianxia* 以無事取天下) (Ch. 57), to name just a few. The words in italics indicate actions, but they are different from regular action that *wuwei* negates. One side is the result of successful action, such as "the task is accomplished," "is a model for the world," or "win the world"; the other side is an exceptional attitude or approach: "not claim to merit," "embrace the One," and "engaging in no activity," which are things common people cannot do. These two sides constitute Laozi's idea of principled action and behavior, and they also result in "profound and mysterious virtue" (*xuande* 玄德), which we will discuss later. The numerous examples of similar sentences are too many to set out here. For brevity's sake, we can say that Laozi in no way promotes doing nothing or merely withdrawing from a world full of conflicts. His ideas, including *wuwei*, are intended for achieving incomparable results with minimum side-effects by way of exception sorts of action.

3.2 Intending the Positive by Posing the Negative

Again, by negating people's customary values and practice, Laozi aims to reach and realize higher and better goals and results, therefore. All his negative terms have double functions: they directly negate things, acts, and attitudes of the common sort while at the same time effect great results and outcomes. The negating aspect is represented by *wuwei*; and the positive aspect is perfectly represented by the phrase *wubuwei* 無不為 (nothing left undone). Thus we have Laozi's famous proverb "To do nothing yet nothing is left undone" (*wuwei er wubuwei* 無為而無不為) (Ch. 48).[20] Here *wubuwei* is obviously higher and more desirable then *wuwei* itself.

[20]This famous and important phrase appears in all versions of Chapter 48, including the bamboo versions, though in silk version it is missing. In received versions, the phrase is repeated in Chapter 37. For details, see Liu X. 2006b: 483–85.

Thus, Laozi's *wuwei* is not merely a negative term. It suggests a transcending negation or common actions for higher goals and better results. Unfortunately, this more significant side is often neglected by readers and researchers.

Wuwei suggests the cancellation of regular actions in order to realize ideal results, even an ideal state of society and the universe. For example, "The sage makes *no attempt to be great* (*buwei da* 不為大). It is for this reason that he is able to perfect greatness (*guneng cheng da* 故能成大)" (Ch. 34, silk edition, and Ch. 63). Not attempting to be great is the way to achieve true greatness; the negative side is the condition by which to accomplish the higher and better outcome. Similarly, in Chapter 48, following the statement "do nothing yet nothing is left undone," we read: "To gain the world (*qu tianxia* 取天下) one proceeds by having no-business (*wushi* 無事); as soon as one has business (*youshi* 有事), he will fall short of gaining the world." The same idea appears again in Chapter 57. And in Chapter 3, the last sentence reads: "If one goes with non-action (*wei wuwei* 為無為), nothing will be not in order (*wu bu zhi* 無不治)." Through all these concerns with mundane business, we see the pattern of a negative approach achieving positive results, which is actually in accord with the metaphysical model of Dao. Thus Chapter 73 contends: "Dao of Heaven suggests that [Dao engages in] *no fighting* but is *good at victory*, [it has] *no words* but is *good at response*, and [makes] *no call* but things *come of their own accord*" (silk version). All these passages demonstrate that the seeming negative and passive patterns of action and attitude in Laozi's philosophy in fact aim for achieving perfect accomplishment.

The most important positive function of *wuwei* lies in the realization of *ziran* or natural order in civilized societies, whereby myriad things develop and prosper spontaneously and are grateful to no one. Chapter 57 states:

1. Follow what is correct and regular in ordering your state,
2. Follow what is strange and perverse in deploying your troops,
3. Follow *no business* (*wushi* 無事) and gain the world (*qu tianxia* 取天下).
4. How do I know that things are this way?
5. Through this:
6. The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people.
7. The more sharp implements the people have, the more benighted the state.
8. The more clever and skillful the people, the more strange and perverse things arise.
9. The clearer the laws and edicts, the more numerous thieves and robbers.
10. And so sages say:
11. I *do nothing* (*wuwei* 無為) and the people *transform themselves* (*zihua* 自化),
12. I prefer *stillness* (*haojing* 好靜) and the people *correct and regulate themselves* (*zizheng* 自正),
13. I engage in *no business* (*wushi* 無事) and the people *prosper by themselves* (*zifu* 自富),

14. I have *no desires* (*wuyu* 無欲) and the people *become simple themselves* (*zipu* 自樸).[21]

This chapter provides a good illustration of the multiple aspects of Laozi's *wuwei*. The sage practices the principled method *wuwei*, while people enjoy their natural development in a harmonious environment. Lines 1–3 emphasize that the negative action *wushi* 無事 (no business) can achieve the positive result of "gaining the world"; lines 6–9 demonstrate the harmful results of regular values and actions, namely, a poor, benighted and perverse society with more thieves. All items considered valuable by the common people and rulers, such as things clever, clear, sharp, skillful, prohibitions, actually oppose *wuwei* and give rise to actions that destroy the natural order of society. Then the author comes to the conclusion, lines 11–14, to reveal the great consequence of the principled method of *wuwei*, which also involves stillness (*haojing* 好靜), no business (*wushi* 無事), and no desires (*wuyu* 無欲). The results are indicated by four pairs of parallel words that indicate the natural transformation of the people spontaneously, i.e., *zihua* 自化, *zizheng* 自正, *zifu* 自富, and *zipu* 自樸. Other similar terms found in the *Laozi* are self-equilibrium (*zijun* 自均), self-obedience (*zibin* 自賓), and self-stabilization (*ziding* 自定). All these constitute a *ziran*-like term family. All of these desirable effects, seemingly achieved by people themselves or naturally, are the very result the Daoist sage expects and enjoys. This has a kind of resonance with Chapter 17, which claims that "the leader is best when people barely know he exists" (Bynner 1972), and a perfect illustration of the claim in Chapter 64 that "the sage is *able* to assist myriad things' *natural prosperity*, but is *unable* to act." That the sage practices the principle of non-action, no-business, and no-desire, while people of themselves become correct, prosperous, and simple is a quintessential example of Laozi's proverb "To do nothing yet nothing is left undone."

In sum, a simplifying self-transformation of people is the purpose of *ziran*, as is natural prosperity among them and the myriad things, without any need for control or command, and even less any need to feel gratitude to the sage. The sage is the agent of *wuwei*, and people are its beneficiaries. This result, a natural order in the world, is the very purpose of the sage who pursues *ziran* by means of the method *wuwei.* In these natural, harmonious circumstances, the sage realizes his highest ideal and thus is also one of the beneficiaries.

In addition to claiming great achievements via *wuwei*, Laozi also emphasizes *wuwei*'s passive advantage, by which failure is avoided. A passage in Chapter 64 contends:

> Those who act on it ruin it;
> Those who hold on to it lose it.
> Therefore the sage does not act,
> And as result, he doesn't ruin things,
> He does not hold on to things,
> And as a result, he doesn't lose things. (Henricks 1991)

[21]This translation is based on and modified from Ivanhoe 2002. The modification mainly demonstrates the Chinese parallelism and the author's argument, not for readability.

This is the clearest statement of the benefits of *wuwei*, though stated from a passive or negative perspective. Similarly, chapters 22 and 66 argue: "Because they (sages) do not contend, no one in the world can compete with them" (Ivanhoe 2002: 22, 69). And Chapter 8 echoes: "Only by avoiding contention can one avoid fault" (ibid.: 8). Thus, *wuwei* aims not only at an idealistic goal, but proceeds from realistic and prudent consideration.

All the discussion above concerns mainly external action and behavior. This external *wuwei* is just a natural extension of the sage's internal *wuwei,* which can be represented by the term "no-desire" (*wuyu* 無欲) (chs. 1, 3, 34, 37, 57). As with *wuwei*, no-desire does not mean the negation of all desires, but only the ordinary desires of common rulers and people. In the *Laozi*, no-desire appears five times, in chapters 1, 3, 34, 37, and 57. The sage is a figure of no-desires, and his most characteristic feature is his profound and mysterious virtue (*xuande* 玄德). Chapter 51 introduces this feature:

> Dao is esteemed and virtue is honored without anyone's order.
> They always come naturally (*ziran*).
> Therefore Dao produces them (myriad things) and virtue fosters them . . . .
> (Dao) produces them but does not take possession of them (*buyou* 不有)
> It acts, but not rely on its merit (*bushi* 不恃),
> It leads them but does not rule them (*buzai* 不宰),
> This is called profound and mysterious virtue (*xuande* 玄德). (Chan 1963)

Here the profound and mysterious virtue belongs to Dao, and it features no-possession, not relying on merit, and not ruling. A similar statement appears in Chapter 2, but the same virtue is attributed to the sage. This proves that the author believed that profound and mysterious virtue is shared by both Dao and the sage. Thus this virtue is at once a feature of Dao, and a prescription for human beings. The sage is an exemplar of this virtue, an intermediary between Dao and mankind, and a model for the people. In addition to no-possession, not relying on merit, and not ruling, Laozi also advances no-body (*wushen* 無身) (ch. 13), no-selfishness (*wusi* 無私) (ch. 7), and no-mind (*wuxin* 無心) (ch. 49), other examples of *wuwei*-like terms. These internal forms of *wuwei* are the foundation of and conditions for externalized *wuwei*.

3.3 Summary of Wuwei

Finally, let us summarize our points about *wuwei* in the *Laozi* text.

1. *Wuwei* is the most prominent in a family of negative terms that have dual meanings, that is, literal and intentional meanings. The literal meaning negates common forms of action and behavior, while the intentional meaning points to exceptional results.
2. *Wuwei* suggests measures instead of a purpose. Generally speaking, *wuwei*-like terms aim at higher and greater accomplishments; specifically, *wuwei*'s ultimate achievement is *ziran* or civilized naturalness.

3. The sage is the agent of *wuwei*, whose goal is achieving *ziran* or natural civilized order in society and the universe; this extraordinary end cannot attain by regular ways. Therefore the *wuwei* approach is an inevitable part of Laozi's philosophy.
4. The precondition to practicing *wuwei* is its agent's internal *wuwei*, namely the exclusion of personal desires for such as merit, fame, victory, etc.; otherwise, no one can practice the principle of *wuwei*, or the external *wuwei*.
5. The minimum significance of *wuwei* is as a means to avoid failure or avert harm. This is the negative side of its benefits.
6. Thus, we may propose that Laozi's principle of *wuwei* refers to an *imperceptible form of action that still effects extraordinary results.*[22]

4 Dao: Source and Ground of the Universe

In studies of the *Laozi*, there is agreement that Dao is the key critical term or concept.[23] Dao is commonly described as invisible, inaudible, subtle, formless, infinite, vague, mysterious, oneness, and so on. We are bound to fail, however, to find agreement in academic discussions that try to define and interpret Dao in simple terms and concepts. There is no single word or term, even in modern Chinese, let alone English, that can adequately gloss Dao.

4.1 Inspiration from Divergent Interpretations

Hu Shih 胡適 (1891–1962) might have been the first to try to interpret Dao in modern Western terms. Hu thought that Dao of heaven (*tiandao* 天道) is tantamount to the Law of Nature, and Dao is the origin of the world (Hu 1926: 56, 64). This kind of thinking is the root of *cosmological* interpretations of Dao.[24] Hu was followed by Fung Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990), who pointed out that before Laozi, the meaning of the Dao "was always restricted to human affairs, whereas when we come to the *Laozi*, we find the word *Dao* being given a metaphysical meaning. That is to say, the assumption is made that for the universe to have come into being, there must exist an all-embracing first principle, which is called *Dao*" (Fung 1952: 177). Here Fung

[22]Laozi's *wuwei,* "doing nothing yet left nothing is undone," is based on his distinguished philosophical theory, which might be called "transformational oppositions or oppositional transformations" (this term was suggested by Douglas L. Berger in a personal communication). Due to limited space, we cannot deal with it here. For details, see Liu 2005: 184–98.

[23]We find 71 references to Dao in the silk versions and 76 in the Wang Bi version (Liu 2003: 369).

[24]The italics here and following are my highlighting and are meant to emphasize and compare key points among the various interpretations of Dao.

proposed that Dao is an ontological rather than cosmological concept, claiming that Dao "is Non-being, and is that by which all things come to be. Therefore, before the being of Being, there must be Non-being, from which Being comes into being. What is said here belongs to *ontology*, not to cosmology. It has nothing to do with time and actuality. For in time and actuality, there is no Being; there are only beings" (Fung 1948: 96). Hu and Fung should be remembered for setting out the direction of modern interpretations of Dao in Western terminology. Following on their work, countless interpretations and controversies about Dao have mushroomed in China, most of them employing translated Western philosophical terms, such as cosmology, ontology, matter, ideas, principle, reality, substance, metaphysics, laws of nature, materialism, idealism, and so on. None of these terms can encompass the complicated meanings of Dao, thus divergent understandings and interpretations will never end, which may stimulate our further speculation and examination of the true meanings of Dao. Again, our effort must lie with either to approximating the meaning of the Laozi's Dao or creating a more philosophically satisfactory theory of Dao. We can see the mixture of these two orientations in the following interpretations, but this chapter's emphasis remains reaching an understanding based on the faithful reading of Laozi's text.

Interpretation of the *Laozi* developed considerable sophistication when the preeminent scholars CHEN Chung-hwan (陳忠寰 [陳康]), TANG Chun-I (唐君毅), YEN Lingfeng (嚴靈峰), and CHEN Guying (陳鼓應) laid out a spectrum of possible meanings for Dao that ranged from metaphysics to matters of human life. Of these, CHEN Chung-hwan's interpretation raised much discussion and serves as a good foundation for our discussion here. Chen identifies three static and three dynamic senses of Laozi's Dao. We will list the six senses of his interpretations here; the first three are static senses of Dao (lines 1–3), and the last three are the dynamic senses (lines 4–6).

1. The ultimate source from which the myriad things come,
2. The storehouse of the myriad things,
3. The ultimate model of things, non-human, and human beings.
4. The agent or the efficient cause of phenomena,
5. The principle under which the myriad things are produced and sustained,
6. Something active and its activity is reversion. (Chen 1964: 150–53)

Dao is, Chen claims, a unique and universal *binding principle* (ibid.). This generalization and the six senses are based on faithful textual analysis and evidence. Chen is a specialist in Western philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, but he does not use ready and popular Western terms to define or describe Dao. He has discerned the differences, subtle and obvious, between Laozi's Dao and Western terminology.

If we want to more simply state what Dao is, we may take the Chen's sense (1) as the *ultimate source of the universe*, focusing on its generating or producing function; and senses (2) through (4) as the *ground of the universe* or myriad things, including its functions as storehouse, model, and cause of phenomena. These demonstrate that Dao's functions penetrate the whole world, including all manner of things. The fifth sense involves two aspects: principles of production and sustainment,

of which, the former might be attributed to the "source" function, and the latter to the "ground" function. Sense (6) can be understood as the features of Dao's operation and movement not included as function. So the answer the question of what Dao is may be boiled down to this general statement: Dao is *the source and ground of the universe*. Certainly, this is not a definition and omits many features of Dao, but it is simple and catches the essential functions of Laozi's Dao.

In addition, Chen raises an important question that deserves our discussion here. When we read "the Dao once declined" in the Chapter 18, we may wonder, how can the "constant Dao" decline? How can the Dao in decline still be universally binding? Chen answers, "There is no self-contradiction here, for the Dao is so in relation to two different spheres, that of human actions and that of non-human actions." Thus the Dao, the universally binding principle in the sphere of non-human actions, is that to which everything conforms and from which nothing is able to deviate, but the Dao as the principle of human actions is different. Here it has a normative character, it is something to which human actions ought to conform. Dao is, Chen concludes, both axiomatic principle (*sollensprinzip*) and ontic principle (*seinsprinzip*) (Chen 1964: 154, 157). Chen believes "there is no self-contradiction" when he claims that Dao is both normative and ontic because Dao's function covers both spheres of "ought to be" and "is." This seems to be a functionally dual interpretation, which has caused significant discussion.

Unlike the above-mentioned scholars whose interpretations focus specifically on the *Laozi*, one representative philosopher of the contemporary New Confucian movement, MOU Tsungsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), presents a new theory. He seems to solve Chen's dualist problem by claiming that Dao is not a concept of "metaphysics in the line of being" but "metaphysics in the line of vision." Hence Mou's interpretation or definition of Dao in his own philosophical system refocuses on its "practical ontology," viewing the ontological world and issues through "practical mind-vision" (*shijian tizheng* 實踐體証). Thus Dao is by no means the objective origin of the universe; on the contrary, it is a *subjective vision* (*zhuguan jingjie* 主觀境界), a kind of empty mind of practical subjectivity (Mou 1985: 160–62). This view comes not from a close reading of the *Laozi*, but rather belongs to a great construction that subsumes Daoism and Buddhism into a new Confucian metaphysical system. Mou's interpretation of Laozi's Dao is part of his own philosophical construction of a new Confucianism instead of a faithful understanding of Laozi's text in its own right.

One of Mou's students, YUAN Pao-hsin 袁保新, not satisfied with either Chen's or Mou's interpretations, presents a new theory that asserts Dao is the *metaphysical foundation of the realm of values*. Yuan believes that this avoids Mou's subjectivized definition of Dao and resolves the gap between the ontological and axiomatic spheres in Chen's interpretation (Yuan 1991). Whether or not we agree with Chen or Yuan, the issue remains: why may human actions deviate from the principle or course of Dao? Are we satisfied with Chen's answer?

In a more ambitious endeavor Charles Fu (1933–1996) presented an interpretation of Laozi's metaphysics of Dao by employing a complex method that

combines linguistic and philosophical analyses, and by comparing Laozi with Spinoza, Heidegger, and Buddhism. Fu assumes that the *Laozi* "creates a naturalist metaphysics of Dao *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Fu 1973: 368). He further argues:

> As in the case of Spinoza, Laozi's metaphysical attention is essentially focused on Nature as such or (the totality of) things-as-they-are, without positing or speculating upon what possibly exists behind or beyond Nature. Unlike Spinoza, however, Laozi's metaphysics of Dao is not merely non-dualistic, it is also non-conceptual: It is not structured in any kind of conceptual or propositional framework such as has characterized the Western philosophical tradition since Parmenides and Plato. For Dao is not an entity, substance, God, abstract notion, Hegelian *Weltgeist*, or anything hypostatized or conceptualized. Dao is, if you like, no more than a metaphysical symbol Laozi uses to denote, without any distortion, *Nature itself* in terms of the spontaneous self-so-ness (*ziran*) of the world and man (Fu 1973: 369).

Fu is absolute right that Laozi's thought is not a Western "conceptual or propositional framework." And he is inspiring in his assertion that Laozi's Dao is a metaphysical symbol. However, according to our textual reading, it is difficult to accept his claim that the Dao symbol indicates Nature itself (see the section above on *ziran* or civilized naturalness). Fu's philosophical explication of Laozi's conception of Dao explores six dimensions:

1. Dao as reality
2. Dao as origin
3. Dao as principle
4. Dao as function
5. Dao as virtue
6. Dao as technique

Numbers (2) to (6) can be subsumed as "manifestations to us" (ibid.: 367). "Reality" and "manifestation" are two perspectives on or aspects of Dao, which is a symbol reflecting Laozi's metaphysical way of understanding the totality of things-as-they-are (ibid.: 373–74). "These six dimensions are not 'categories' or 'attributes' in the Western (conceptual) sense, but are inseparable aspects of Dao reconstructed from the *Laozi* in order to show the best possible way of understanding Laozi's metaphysical thinking" (Fu 1973: 367).

Fu's deep thinking and broad associations between Laozi and Western thought have contributed many thought-provoking insights that deserve our admiration. While I appreciate and accept many of his ideas and approach, I think his interpretation is overly influenced by Spinoza, and in the end is more a modern and creative construction than a historical and textual investigation. However, since his purpose is modern reconstruction or creative interpretation, instead of close textual interpretation, this may be discounted. Little wonder that he would later publish an essay officially advocating *creative hermeneutics* (Fu 1976). Given his goals and approach, we may say he contributed a representative model of creative hermeneutical work for our examination and discussion.

There have been many brief interpretations of Dao, which we will not discuss in detail, but they can be helpful in our thinking about how to understand Laozi's Dao. For example, Dao is a mysterious "ineffable reality" (Schwartz 1985: 194),

"the source of all things," (Graham 1987: 219), and a "metaphysical monistic absolute—the Chinese equivalent of Parmeniedean being" (Hansen 1992: 13). Ivanhoe's summary presents a brief yet comprehensive understanding: "The *dao* is the source, sustenance, and ideal pattern for all things in the world. It is hidden and difficult to grasp but not metaphysically transcendent. In the apt metaphor of the text, it is the 'root' of all things" (Ivanhoe 2002: xxii). All these characterizations of Dao are useful for a more comprehensive understanding and better wording for our interpretation.

4.2 A Faithful Reading and Interpretation

After briefly reviewing these various modern understandings and interpretations of Dao, we find countless divergent theories. This raises many questions: Is Dao metaphysical in the traditional sense? Is it cosmological or ontological? Transcendent or immanent? Substance or principle? Matter or idea? Objective or normative? Mysterious or natural? Entity or symbol? Reality or vision? Humanistic or naturalist? Religious or philosophical? Among all these different and opposing positions, each side has its supporters. This fact suggests that none of our modern (mostly Western) philosophical concepts is a good match for Laozi's Dao, though each one may be apt or suitable to account for specific aspects and to certain degrees. To borrow A. C. Graham's observation, the trouble with our terms "is not that they do not fit at all but that they always fit imperfectly; they can help us towards Dao, but only if each formulation in its inadequacy is balanced by the opposite which diverges in the other direction"(Graham 1987: 219).

To try to understand Dao as precisely as possible, we have to return to the text itself repeatedly, reading closely and meticulously not only word by word and sentence by sentence, but also paying attention to a possible whole picture, that is, the relative consistency of meaning across the text. The expression "relative consistency" assumes that the *Laozi* contains, in certain degree, systematic and consistent theories. It *is* consistent and coherent, if in a weak or slack sense, rather than in accordance with the strict criteria of modern logic. Thus I disagree with the claim that "there is no topic that the *Laozi* systematically addresses" (Moeller 2006: 3), which may come from the expectation that the *Laozi* as a treatise must proceed in line with modern logic and argumentation. After the fashion of ancient Chinese exposition, the text does indeed exhibit persistent interest in certain themes.

The first theme of interest concerns the origin of the universe. Chapter 42 reads:

> Dao generated the One (*sheng yi,* 生一), the One generated the two, the two generated the three, and the three generated the myriad things.[25]

[25] In the translation, the word "generate" is suggested by JeeLoo Liu.

This is quite like a process of universal temporal evolution. The meaning of "generate" or "produce" (*sheng* 生) is simple if we read it straightforwardly, but this easy passage has produced conflicting readings and arguments. This probably started with WANG Bi's (226–249 CE) commentary. Its exegesis on this passage says:

> Although the myriad things exist in myriad forms, they all revert to the One (*qi gui yi ye* 其歸一也). Why do they all ultimately become One (*heyou zhiyi* 何由致一)? It is due to *non-being* (*wu* 無). Because One comes from *non-being*, can One be still called *non-being*? Because we already call it "One," how can there not be a word for it? Because we have this word and because we have the One, how can there not be two? Because we have the One and have these two, this consequently gives birth to three . . . (Lynn 1999: 135)

Wang's expressions *guiyi* 歸一 (revert to the One, reduce to or return to the One) and *zhiyi* (致一, become One) are apparently not about the origin of the universe, irrelevant with Laozi's *shengyi* 生一. According to Wang, Laozi's claim that Dao generated the One, two, and three does not necessarily describe a physical process of universal evolution. Wang's explanation is more like an intellectual inference and language game influenced by the Logic school (*mingjia* 名家) in the late Warring States period. Wang's exegesis is closer to ontological theory than cosmological hypothesis. Thus TANG Yongtong 湯用彤 (1893–1964) has suggested that Laozi's philosophy is cosmological and it was WANG Bi who first formulated Chinese ontological theories, taking *wu* 無 or non-being as *ontic* (Tang 1983: 195, 214).

Tang's argument has been championed, ignored, and challenged. Much depends on how one reads the word *sheng* 生. MOU Zongsan proceeds from WANG Bi's idea and proclaims that the word *sheng* in the *Laozi* refers merely to a *gesture*, not actually production, and so he reduces the meaning of Dao to a subjective vision. Similarly, after reviewing the cosmological understanding, Fu claims:

> Philosophically speaking . . . the ontological interpretation under the form of eternity, is far more acceptable. And the passage about "Dao generates One" should be re-rendered philosophically as "Dao (metaphysically) comes before One . . . Three (metaphysically) comes before all things." Taking the ontological version of Laozi's cosmological thinking, I would maintain that Dao is the ontological ground of all things in the non-conceptual, symbolic sense; and One, Two, and Three can be regarded simply as the ontological symbols pointing to the truth that what is non-differentiated is that upon which what is differentiated is metaphysically dependent. (Fu 1973: 378)

Both Fu and Mou try to explain away the cosmological meaning of Chapter 42, but their aim is philosophical construction; again, this is different from our job here, which is to pursue primary textual reading and close contextual interpretation.

In the most straightforward reading, *sheng* 生 means to generate, produce or bring about, though not necessarily as mother gives a birth to a baby. As for the One, two, and three, these have been assigned various identities, such as ultimate reality, *yin* and *yang*, the harmony of *yin* and *yang*, etc. However, these interpretations are not necessary; in any case, they cannot be tested, though they may represent best guesses. Wing-tsit Chan has pointed out:

> It is often understood that the One is the original material force or the Great Ultimate, the two are *yin* and *yang*, the three are their blending with the original material force, and the

> ten-thousand things are things carrying *yin* and embracing *yang*. However, there is no need to be specific. The important point is the *natural evolution* from the simple to the complex without any act of creation. This theory is common to practically all Chinese philosophical schools. (Chan 1973: 161)[26]

Chan's interpretation of "natural evolution" (different from biological evolution theory) is simple, plain, close to the text itself, and so is more acceptable and better than any attempts to specify the One, two, and three. The reason is evident. Laozi does not try to identify what is One, two, and three because that identification lies beyond his attention and focus. The essential aim of this passage is to present a hypothesis about how the myriad things happen to evolve from nothing to something, from the sole to the multiple, and from the simple to the complicated. This is a kind of abstract formula that accounts for the origin and evolution of the universe. We do not need to read external terms and theories into it if our job is to understand the *Laozi* in itself rather than create our own new theory. If you suppose the world comes from fire, then the questions would be, Why? How to prove it? And what came before it? If we understand Dao, One, two, and three as symbols without any specific content, the formula becomes simple, clear, and logical, without philosophical or scientific difficulties. This understanding also makes it easier to accommodate other theories and new discoveries, even the Big Bang theory, that have been continuously developing as scientific and theoretical inquiry has proceeded.

A second consistent interest is the question of whether or not Dao is *wu* 無 (nothing, non-being). Laozi never answers this question explicitly, but Chapter 40 presents an implicit answer in its discussion of *wu* 無 and *you* 有 (being, there is). Different translations of this passage represent various understandings about Dao and *wu*. Chan's translation is conceptual: "All things in the world come from *being* (*you* 有), and being comes from *non-being* (*wu* 無)" (Chan 1963: 173). D.C. Lau has: "The myriad creatures in the world are born from *Something* (*you*), and Something from *Nothing* (*wu*)" (Lau 2001: 61). Ivanhoe tries to avoid using a technical term: "The world and all its creatures arise from *what is there* (*you*); What is there arises from *what is not there* (*wu*)." (Ivanhoe 2002: 43) The ten-thousand things (*wanwu* 萬物) come from *you*, and *you* in turn comes from *wu*, thus *you* and *wu* represent two phases in a sequence, not a pair at the same level. Obviously, *wu* is the ultimate origin. Since according to chapter 42 Dao produces ten-thousand things, it is easy to infer from chapters 40 and 42 that Dao is equal to *wu*. But Laozi does not present this conclusion; that step was left to WANG Bi, who lived roughly seven centuries later. While Laozi does not say Dao as the ultimate is *wu*, Wang takes Dao to be *wu* and makes *wu* the foundation of all beings. Therefore, *wu* in Wang's philosophy can be rendered as non-being, while in Laozi's text, it is better understood as simply "nothingness" or "what is not there." However, this conclusion is based only on chapters 40 and 42.

[26]The italics are mine.

Wu or nothingness fits the meaning of Dao as the source of the universe; however, when Laozi discusses Dao's features or characteristics, Dao is not simply nothingness. Instead, it features both aspects: It has the character of *you* and the character of *wu,* which are expressed as "nameless" (*wuming* 無名) and "named" (*youming* 有名), respectively, in Chapter 1. *Nameless* equals *wu* (non-being), denoting the mysterious aspects of Dao that lie beyond human observation and comprehension, while *named* equals to *you* (being), which suggests and confirms Dao's existence and functions so that humans can imagine and describe it. Chapter 1 of the silk manuscript version can be rendered as "Nameless (*wuming* 無名), Dao is the beginning of myriad things (*wanwu*); Named (*youming* 有名), it is the mother of myriad things (*wan-wu* 萬物)." Unlike the received versions, this couplet repeats myriad things in association to both the nameless and named, which suggests that *you* (being) and *wu* (non-being) are equally features of Dao.[27] In this context, Dao's implicit *you* and *wu* are equal opposites in a pair, as distinct from their relationship in the cosmological process, in which *you* (beings) emerges from *wu* (nothingness). Dao's features, *you* and *wu,* should not be confused with *you* and *wu* in the physical world and human life. When Chapter 2 states: "'What there is (*you* 有)' and 'what there is not (*wu* 無)' generate each other," it by no means applies to Dao, or to the general relationship of *you* and *wu*.

Thus, we find *wu* in three different contexts. The first is the source of the universe, or the state before anything has appeared; this *wu* is just "*nothingness*"; later WANG Bi adjusts this to a more conceptual and abstract "*Non-Being*" as the reality of the universe. The second aspect of *wu,* together with *you,* constitutes a pair of features of Dao. These two concepts belong to the metaphysical level and should not be confused with the notions in physical realm. Again, the word "metaphysical" is not to be taken in the Platonic sense; on the contrary, Dao is imminent in all the myriad things. The third aspect of *wu* is a notion or phenomena opposite to *you* in the empirical world. At this level, *wu* and *you* transform from and into each other. Thus, *wu* is indeed a critical concept in Laozi's philosophy, but these three senses of *wu* should not be confused.

All told we find 101 references to *wu* in Wang's version of the *Laozi*, but most of these are in the form of negative adjectives and adverbs, and not used as a technical philosophical concept. Only in three cases is *wu* used as a philosophical term: once in Chapter 40 where it is described as the ultimate source (beings comes from *nothingness*); another is in Chapter 2, about the mutual independence of *wu* and *you* in physical world (being and non-being generate each other); and the third is in Chapter 11 where Laozi describes the advantages and utility *wu* presents for human life (Only by relying on emptiness (*wu*), do we have use of the room).

[27]That both *you* and *wu* constitute Dao's feature is obvious though Laozi doesn't explicate it. For example, in Chapter 21, on the one hand, Dao is shadowy, indistinct, dim, and dark, which suggests *wu*; on the other hand, within Dao is image, substance, essence, and genuineness (Lau 2001), which suggests *you*.

Dao is not only the source, but also the sustaining power and normative model of all beings. These latter functions are usually associated with and embodied by *de* 德, another term difficult to render, though it is usually translated as "virtue" or "power." *De* essentially denotes Dao's function, feature, and principle as these are embodied in individual beings. Chapter 51 of the silk manuscript versions states: "Dao generates (myriad things), and *de* rears them. Things take shape, and vessels are formed. This is why the myriad things all revere Dao and honor *de*." More important is *xuande* 玄德, profound or mysterious virtue, which we discussed above as a special feature of the sage.

4.3 Summary of Dao

Dao is an indefinite and ambiguous term with a core meaning. This feature seems a disadvantage, especially to modern philosophers who are used to defining concepts and propositions clearly. But in Laozi's case, in the context of cosmological and ontological issues that have eluded resolution by the measurements of science and mathematics, this might well be reckoned an advantage and a strength. We should pay attention to Laozi's naming Dao. The bamboo-slip version of Chapter 25 reads: "There was some shape (*zhuang* 狀) undifferentiated and yet complete, which arose before Heaven and Earth. Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging."[28] This is speculation on the primordial origins of universe, but a more significant claim follows: "It can be regarded as the mother of the universe. Not yet knowing its name, I have styled it Dao; forced to give it a proper name, I would call it Great." This reluctant attitude and ambiguous statement must derive from foresight and discretion. Laozi seems to know that he himself and even mankind have no grounds to suppose any specific things about the origin and basis of the universe. The concrete things human beings know, such as fire, water, wind, and earth, could not have produced the whole universe. This sounds logical and in accord with scientific principles. What Laozi is sure about is that there must be a beginning stage and state from which the universe evolved, and it could be the ground that maintains the universe, including the myriad things. He could not, however, know exactly what it might be. For him, Dao was simply a compromise, a symbol for that stage and state, as well as the ground of the universe. If Laozi is forced to name it, he will say its name is Great. Obviously, "great" is not a proper name, but an exclamation. Laozi's attitude is logical and rational, even acceptable, from modern philosophical and scientific standpoint, because it is compatible with various theories about the origins of the universe. Thus, we may not have to attempt a precise and specific definition for it.

[28]Major differences between bamboo and received versions include: shape (*zhuang* 狀) is thing (*wu* 物) in received versions, and the latter has one more sentence "It operates everywhere and is free from danger." See Henricks 2000: 55; Li 2002: 3; Qiu 2004: 208.

Let us conclude with a brief summary of what we know about Laozi's concept of Dao.

1. The concept of Dao was invented by Laozi for answering the question, what is the source and ground of the universe? What is the root of universal originality and consistency? (just like CHEN Chung-hwan's *binding principle*.)
2. Dao as the origin of the universe indicates nothingness, from where all beings evolve and develop; however, Dao as the ground of the universe features a combination of both *you* (being) and *wu* (non-being).
3. The concept of Dao is just a style and symbol of a supposed universal source and ground, which Laozi and mankind cannot know or even name.
4. Dao as the ground of the universe penetrates the myriad things and maintains their existence and development. This is a key feature of metaphysics in Chinese thought wherein entity and principle are mutually engaged.
5. Thus, human beings should take their model from Dao to lead a better life; Dao in turn models itself on *ziran*: civilized order and civil conditions are the natural state of society.
6. Dao's operation embodies and supports the reversion of the myriad things in the empirical world.[29]

5 Conclusion

We have briefly discussed the core meanings of three key terms and theories in the *Laozi,* namely, *ziran* (natural order in civilized societies), *wuwei* (imperceptible yet effectual action, a transcending negation), and Dao (the source and ground of the universe). These three aspects of Laozi's thought should not be understood as separate or isolated. They are associated in a roughly coherent system in which they support and interpenetrate each other. Dao provides metaphysical support for the highest value *ziran*, and *wuwei* provides a principled method by which to realize that value. *Ziran* and *wuwei* also embody the features and character of Dao.

A more comprehensive picture of the system of Laozi's philosophy must also take into account the theory of reversion or transformational oppositions, and *de* (德), especially *xuande* (玄德), the profound and mysterious virtue. The brief analyses presented above are sufficient to demonstrate that the *Laozi* deserves more serious academic investigation and discussion from various approaches, textual, objective, comparative, and creative, and for different purposes, historical, philosophical, contemporary, and practical (Liu 2008–2009, 2009a). Even so, a faithful and meticulous reading of the primary text is the necessary foundation to a clear and reliable understanding of the *Laozi*'s thought.[30]

[29]For details, see Liu X. 2005: chapter 5.

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