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# Introduction

## Daoist Cosmology in the Light of Excavated Manuscripts

A major philosophical breakthrough occurred between the traditional religion of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou) and the new worldview of the Eastern Zhou. It was nothing short of revolutionary. Closely related to the political and economic changes that accompanied the transition from a central government to a multiplicity of small states, it moved in two directions. For one, it shifted from mythical religion to the humanistic rationality of Confucianism; for another, it unfolded into the nature philosophy of Daoism.<sup>1</sup> Unlike in ancient Greece, where the philosophical breakthrough of the Axial Age went first to nature philosophy and from there to individual self-awareness (Jaspers 1953; 1989, 7-29; Xu 2006, 168-213; Yu 2005, 88-244), in China the two happened almost at the same time and gave rise to vigorous philosophical debates and the pluralistic competition of ideas.

There is little doubt about how Confucian humanism came about—notably in the light of the Guodian finds and matching materials in early ritual sources—but many questions remain about the development and unfolding of Daoism, not least the dating of its major early works. For example, quite a few scholars in both China and the West believe that the *Laozi* is actually later than the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and did not emerge as a full text until the Qin and Han dynasties. This means that Chinese cosmology was formulated rather late, finding its first full expression in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Ikeda 2009, 336-38; Graham 1989; 2003, 371-72).

Historical studies often give high priority to newly discovered materials, rightly so, since it is often hard to come to new understandings based on transmitted sources alone. In addition, newly found sources invite new methodology and encourage alternate perspectives. The bamboo slips and silk

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<sup>1</sup> The Daoist concept of nature encompasses the two dimensions of a transcendent force and origin of the world and an inherent set of measures and standards to return to in life. While one is more pronounced in the *Laozi* and the latter is key in the *Zhuangzi*, I use the term “nature” to refer to both, including its full metaphysical understanding, inherent qualities, and existential relevance.

manuscripts recently unearthed in central China are a case in point. This book, then, explores the *Laozi* 老子 and *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水 from Guodian 郭店, the *Hengxian* 恒先 and *Fanwu liuxing* 凡物流形 from Shangbo 上博, as well as the *Huangdi sijing* 黄帝四经 from Mawangdui 马王堆.<sup>2</sup> These various manuscripts and fragments, used in conjunction with transmitted sources, offer new insights into the birth and unfolding of traditional Chinese cosmology and concepts of nature. In fact, their holistic discussion is becoming increasingly urgent, especially since previous studies were limited to certain kinds of texts.

## Dating and Content

As much as these texts form part of the Daoist tradition, their expressed worldview is also representative of it. As much as they emerged during the Eastern Zhou, their cosmology reflects major beliefs of this time. A key question in this context, then, is where exactly to situate the *Laozi* and whether or not it is the first and original formulation of nature philosophy in China.

The discovery of its bamboo fragments at Guodian mark a major turning point. Much has already been written about its date. Based on archaeological studies, the Guodian tomb dates to around 300 BCE, that is, from the latter half of the Warring States. Two observations are obvious: first, the Guodian manuscripts cannot be any later than the tomb closure; and second, they must be earlier. In addition, since the manuscripts were hand-copied and some of the materials exist in other variants, they must go back to a longer tradition. This means that the text of the *Laozi* may well go back to the late Spring and Autumn period.

As Guo Yi, moreover, has already shown, the Guodian *Laozi* is the ancestor of all later versions discovered to date (1998). However, there are major discrepancies in the A and C versions (notably of ch. 64), which make it clear that the text existed in different strands and may even have had various original versions. This, in turn, means that the Guodian *Laozi* may be just one among several early redactions; it definitely shows that there were multiple strands and lineages of the work.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's Note: English translations of these texts are found in Henricks 2000; Cook 2012; and <http://terebess.hu/english/tao/taiyi.html> for the Guodian texts; Brindley et al. 2013 for the *Hengxian*; as well as Chang and Feng 1998; Ryden 1997; Yates 1997; and Lévi 2011 for the *Huangdi sijing*.

Now, the Guodian *Laozi* consists only of about 1,600 words, about one third of all other, later versions—the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, the Peking University Han bamboo text, and the transmitted edition. Most scholars, in an attempt to explain this discrepancy, regard the Guodian *Laozi* as a portion of the other versions, but it remains unclear whether the other parts were supplemented later or just not contained in the tomb, nor do we know whether they were by the same or different author(s).

An important piece of evidence comes from a citation of the *Laozi* by Shu Xiang 叔向, which does not appear in the Guodian text. According to the “Jingshen” 敬慎 chapter in Liu Xiang’s 刘向 *Shuoyuan* 说苑, Prince Ping of Han asks Shu Xiang a question about the respective merit of “hardness and softness.” The latter replies with a reference to Lao Dan 老聃 and two citations from the *Laozi*: “The softest thing in the world overcomes the hardest” (ch. 43), and “People at birth are soft and weak; at death, hard and stiff” (ch. 76). Prince Ping is Han Xu 韩须, the son of Prince Xuan, a vassal of Duke Ding of Jin who ruled from 511 to 475 BCE (Xiang 1987, 245).

Shu Xiang, too was of the late Spring and Autumn period, a retainer of Duke Ping of Jin (r. 557-532). At the time of the recorded dialogue, Shu Xiang was already well over eighty years old. A contemporary of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子), he cites the *Laozi* with a passage that otherwise only appears in late Warring States materials, which means that the text was already known at that time and that passages beyond the 1,600 words found at Guodian go further back in history. Quite possibly, the *Laozi* already had about 5,000 words, and later additions were rather limited (see also Chen 2015).

The passage also gives testimony to the fact that Lao Dan and Laozi are one and the same person. This is also borne out in the *Zhuangzi*, which cites the two interchangeably—as does the *Hanfeizi* 韩非子, which incidentally is the first source to cite “Laozi” as a text rather than as a person. The yet unpublished Han *Laozi* at Peking University does the same and is also the first source to speak of a First and Second Book (*shang/xia jing* 上/下经) in this context. This shows that Laozi the person and *Laozi* the text form part of the same strand and tradition. To sum up, the various excavated materials present us with four distinct *Laozi* texts, showing just how Laozi’s thought unfolded from the Eastern Zhou to the Qin and Han.

Besides the *Laozi*, excavated manuscripts also include three early texts and one set of later materials. The first early text is the *Taiyi shengshui*, discovered at Guodian in the same cluster of bamboo slips as the C version of the *Laozi*. It thus dates from the same period, and most likely goes back to Laozi’s disciple Guanyinzi 关尹子 (aka Yin Xi 尹喜) (see Li 1998). The text

clearly shows influence of the *Laozi* in both its key concepts, “one” and “water,” which it expands to indicate the underlying “great oneness” and core creative factor of the universe. Its emphasis on the notion that “the Dao of heaven values weakness,” too, connects to Laozi’s favoring weakness and softness over aggression and competition. The Guodian *Laozi* even has a section heading, “Weakness is the Function of Dao” (ch. 40 today).

The two other early texts are the *Hengxian* and *Fanwu liuxing* from Shangbo, the tomb of a Chu noble. Archaeological carbon dating places this find to about the same period as Guodian, i.e., 2257 ± 65 years before present (Zhu 2002, 3; Ma 2001a, 2). The three texts are thus part of the same tradition, placed as they are “between Laozi and Zhuangzi” (Li 2006, 494-95).

The later document is the *Huangdi sijing*. A collection of four treatises from the Huang-Lao 黄老 school of the late Warring States period (Tang 1975), it consists of *Jingfa* 经法 (9 chs.), *Shida jing* 十大经 (15 chs.), *Cheng* 称 (1 ch.), and *Daoyuan* 道原 (1 ch.). Overall, it presents a synthesis of Daoist thought with other major philosophies of the time, notably Legalism, Confucianism, and Mohism. Like the *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi* 列子, *Guanzi* 管子, and *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 (Dai 2000, 15-39), it represents a later stage of Daoist thought.

Last but not least, there are the two *Hanfeizi* chapters, “Jie Lao” 解老 and “Yu Lao” 喻老 (chs. 20-21), so that the complete list of early Daoist cosmological materials is as follows: *Laozi* → *Taiyi shengshui* → *Fanwu liuxing* → *Zhuangzi* → *Guanzi* → *Huangdi sijing* (*Daoyuan*) → *Heguanzi* → *Hanfeizi*. All these texts go back to the Eastern Zhou and accordingly reflect the philosophy and cosmology of this period, clarifying just how revolutionary the change was from the mythical religion of the Three Dynasties.

Generally speaking, myth and religion, science and philosophy all provide explanations on how the world came into being, but the general tendency is that the earlier the period in human history, the more dominant were myth and religion and the weaker were science and philosophy. A crucial change occurred around 600 BCE, in what Karl Jaspers has called the Axial Age (1953). In China, too, at this time, the myth-based, religious cosmology of the Shang and Western Zhou had weakened considerably while philosophy began to rise. Although history is not generally linear or follows a single stand, this overall tendency is clearly visible in both East and West.

Among the various philosophers of the Eastern Zhou, moreover, Daoists had the strongest predilection and richest interest in questions regarding the origin of the cosmos and all beings. They were the most enthusiastic in pursuing heavenly writings and proposing solutions to cosmic riddles. For this reason, they came to lay the foundation of nature philosophy in China, influ-

encing even the *Xici* 系辭 commentary to the *Yijing* 易经 as well as the *Xunzi* 荀子.

Laozi and other early Daoists replaced the major Three Dynasties cosmic powers of the thearch (*di* 帝) and heaven (*tian* 天) with Dao and oneness, which their successors turned into the foundation stones of Chinese cosmology. The Daoist tradition is thus at the center of the development of early Chinese nature cosmology. As clearly expressed in *Laozi* 25, they defined Dao as the underlying force of the universe. Under its influence, the three early manuscripts developed the concepts of oneness (*yi* 一), Great Oneness (*taiyi* 太一), and Constancy Before (*hengxian* 恒先) in an effort to describe the origin of the myriad beings. The *Daoyuan*, too, uses Dao to speak of the root of all beings and identifies it with oneness. The *Zhuangzi*, in addition, in its development of Laozi's Dao, emphasizes the notion of the "transformations of energy (*qi* 气)," while the *Guanzi* provides explanations of both Dao and virtue, and the *Hanfeizi* combines Dao with principle. All these are ways in which early Daoist cosmology developed during the Eastern Zhou. Let us now look at these features in some detail.

## Cosmic Unfolding

Examining the various explanations offered by philosophy and science for the origin of the universe, it becomes obvious that scientific theories today are gaining in importance, while philosophical concepts are increasingly less relevant. In antiquity, the opposite was true, and philosophical theories were more widespread. Even more amazingly, the cosmologies of contemporary science and of ancient Chinese philosophy bear some strong similarities. As Dong Guangbi outlines, many new Daoist thinkers today come from the natural sciences, following in the footsteps of Fritjof Capra and linking modern physics with Oriental mysticism (see Dong 1991; Capra 1975; 1999). Their premises are obviously vastly different and we have to be careful with one-on-one comparisons. Yet, to say that they have nothing in common would also be very shortsighted.

Ancient Daoist thinkers firmly believed that the universe and all beings had a particular source or origin, which they called Dao, oneness, Great Oneness, Constancy Before, etc. This cosmic origin to them was also the mother of all existence. While they insisted on a specific source, however, they also emphasized the enormous dimensions and infinity of the world, so that both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Mozi* 墨子 speak of space and time as limitless.

Philosophers generally distinguish concepts according to time and logic. Cosmogony clearly belongs into the first category, as something that occurred earlier in time. Both ancient Daoists and contemporary scientists posit that the universe has a beginning or primordial state, but while scientists see this as a singular point, Daoists understand it to be a multilayered phenomenon. Depending on which aspect of this they emphasize, moreover, they describe the inherent nature and unfolding of the universe differently.

The excavated texts present four distinct models. First, the *Fanwu liuxing* describes universal unfolding in terms of beginning with oneness, then moving to the two, the three, the mother, and eventually resulting in “combination” (*jie* 结). The *Hengxian* speaks of Constancy Before, from which things evolve through space (*huo* 或), energy (*qi* 气), material existence (*you* 有), and beginning (*shi* 始) to the passage of time (*wang* 往). The *Taiyi shengshui* begins with Great Oneness, which gives birth to water, from which arise heaven and earth, which in turn connect back to Great Oneness and water. Once established, spirit and light emerge, in due course giving rise to yin and yang, the four seasons, cold and heat, dampness and dryness, to result in the ongoing cycle of the years (*sui* 岁). The *Huangdi sijing*, finally, has the universe begin with oneness, from which spring heaven and earth, yin and yang, the four seasons, and hard and soft, to result eventually in the myriad beings.

Transmitted sources add their own versions. Thus, the *Laozi* has the well-known sequence from Dao to oneness and on to two, three, and all beings (ch. 42). The *Wenzi* 文子, not unlike the *Huangdi sijing*, sees life arising from oneness, then move on to heaven and earth, the four seasons, yin and yang, humanity alone, and hard and soft, to eventually result in the myriad beings (ch. 3, “Jiushou” 九守). The *Heguanzi*, finally, starts it with the one energy and moves through intention, planning, naming, form, affairs, connections, and seasons to beings (ch. 5, “Huanliu” 环流). All these different models can be understood and analyzed from a variety of different perspectives.

Let us first look at what they propose in terms of origin. They speak variously of Dao, oneness, Great Oneness, constancy, and so on, but why do they use so many different terms, and what exactly is the relationship between them? The three early manuscripts do not speak of Dao at all, but refer to oneness or constancy, possibly to avoid being lumped together too closely with the *Laozi*. Thus, the *Hengxian* only uses Dao only once, in the combination “Dao of heaven,” while the *Fanwu liuxing* speaks of it variously, but consistently places greater emphasis on oneness. The same also holds true for other, traditionally transmitted sources.

Still, the various terms early Daoists use for the beginning of the universe are quite compatible with each other. Laozi uses primarily Dao, but he also employs oneness, as in the expression “oneness of heaven.” Following in his wake, Daoists honor Dao as their key concept, yet they also elevate oneness to the notion of Great Oneness. Examples include the *Daoyuan* of the *Huangdi sijing* with its statement that “one is the core number,” and the “Chengfa” 成法 chapter (ch. 9) of the *Shida jing* in the same collection with its claim that “oneness is the root of Dao.”

Oneness also plays a role in the *Fanwu liuxing*, while the *Taiyi shengshui* elevates it to Great Oneness. According to one interpretation, the latter refers to the star god of the North Culmen (Beiji 北极) (Li 1999, 297-300), but that link came after its importance as a philosophical concept and was a secondary modification (see Qian 1932). Transmitted sources, too, for the most part accept the notion that both oneness and Great Oneness refer to Dao. Another term for the universal origin is Constancy Before, the title of the *Hengxian*. Its close relation to Dao is apparent in the *Daoyuan*, which explains one with the other. Its primary goal is to “inquire into Dao,” but when it speaks of Dao’s beginnings, it uses Constancy Before. Both “constancy” and “before” are terms related to time. However, the latter is not used in its ordinary sense as coming before something else, but rather in a more cosmic manner as the state of the universe before the beginning of all.

Whichever term they use, Daoists in all cases indicate the root and original state of the universe. Although at first glance quite different from dominant Western notions and descriptions of the beginnings of humanity, there is quite a bit of similarity with ancient Greek philosophies of nature, although the latter have a great deal less interest in cosmological speculation. Still despite the large variety of different terms and concepts, in many ways, both would agree to Laozi’s formulation:

There is a state, in chaos yet complete;  
 It comes first, before heaven and earth.  
 Silent it is, and solitary;  
 Standing alone, it never changes.  
 We can consider it the mother of all under heaven.  
 I do not know its name.  
 To call it something, I speak of Dao. (ch. 25; Guodian A; see Henricks 2000)

Here the term “Dao” indicates the initial state of the universe. The transmitted version of the *Laozi* further notes that Dao cannot be described (ch. 1), although it “may appear as a being, yet it is vague and obscure (ch. 21). It is “simple and nameless” (ch. 32), “hidden and ineffable” (ch. 41), and

so on. All these are expressions for the original state of the universe, Dao at the beginning of creation.

Both the *Hengxian* and the *Huangdi sijing* develop Laozi's basic notions. The *Hengxian* begins by speaking of the state before being (*wuyou* 无有), describing it in terms of simplicity (*pu* 朴), stillness (*jing* 静), and emptiness (*xu* 虚), emphasizing each by adding the epithet "great" (*tai* 太), meaning to the highest degree, ultimate, utmost. It says, "Before there were heaven and earth, before there was any doing, moving, emerging, becoming, emptiness and stillness rested in oneness, serene and peaceful, still and unified, without any light, without any arising." Based on this, it becomes clear that the original state of the universe was long-lasting, "a constant and permanent state." The *Daoyuan* echoes this,

At the initiation of constant nonbeing,  
All was merged in great emptiness.  
Empty and same, all was in oneness,  
Constant oneness, nothing more.  
Misty and blurred,  
There were neither light nor darkness.  
Spiritual and subtle, yet it filled everywhere;  
Quintessentially still, it was not luminous. (see Yates 1997, 173)<sup>3</sup>

This strongly emphasizes the state of "great emptiness" at the beginning of creation, how all was merged and undivided, without light, in total oneness. Daoist descriptions of the original state thus do not make use of concrete terms but speak of it as being without name, without form, without image, greatly empty, merged in chaos. Yet the state also contains the potentiality of all and is the greatest font of all existence.

Still, we have to take this a step further and realize that the original creative state of the universe is real, it is something: Dao, oneness, Great Oneness, or Constancy Before. These are highly abstract concepts, despite the fact that they are also expressed in metaphors such as the "mysterious female" or the "spirit of the valley." Daoism does not have anything like the ancient Greek concept of the elements, like water or fire, nor does it have ideas of things like metal and earth, later part of the five phases. Naturally, it also lacks any version of the Greek notion of "atoms" or other solid building blocks.

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: The word "see" in reference to previous translations of ancient sources indicates that this work was consulted, i. e., used with adjustments. For the *Laozi*, I have consulted Addiss and Lombardo 1993; Chan 1963; and Legge 1962.

Although Daoist thinkers often use the negative “non” to describe the original nature of the pre-creation state, yet—as is well known—they do not mean “pure empty nonbeing” but rather “ultimate being.” This is evident in Laozi’s words, “The myriad beings carry yin and embrace yang;” in Zhuangzi’s statement, “The one energy pervades all under heaven;” in Guanzi’s notion of “essential energy;” in Liezi’s account that “Great Antecedence is the beginning of energy;” as well as in Han visions of primordial *qi*—expressed as “constant energy” in the *Hengxian*. It is thus best to think of “ultimate being” in terms of cosmic life energy—despite the fact that the sources do not speak in these terms to begin with.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, different generational models speak differently about the mode of universal becoming. Some being more abstract than others, it is often hard to determine what they mean exactly, particularly the *Laozi*, *Fanwu liuxing*, and *Hengxian*. Some are so abstract, moving forever from complexity to intricacy, that they cannot be understood by themselves, but require recourse to other sources. For example, in the classical passage of the *Laozi*, “Dao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two give birth to three, and three give birth to the myriad beings” (ch. 42), what exactly and in concrete terms is meant by going from two to three? The *Huainanzi* provides the earliest interpretation, “Dao begins with oneness. Oneness alone, however, does not give birth. Therefore, it divided into yin and yang. From the harmonious union of yin and yang, the myriad beings were given birth” (3.28; Major et al. 2010, 133). That is to say, in this reading, “two” is an expression for yin and yang, while “three” indicates their joining.

The *Hengxian* model is different. “Space arises. Once there is space, there is energy. Once there is energy, there is material existence. Once there is material existence, there is a beginning. Once there is a beginning, there is the passage of time.” None of these, with the exception of energy (*qi*), is at all clear in concrete terms—they are all highly abstract, especially “space” (*huo*) and “material existence” (*you*). It is possible to read “space” as the open state between Dao and energy (Li 2003, 288) or read it as “domain” (*yu* 域), which would indicate the cosmos (*yu* 宇) (Li 2003, 81-82; Wang 2008). But the later state of “material existence” remains utterly unclear. I am inclined to read it in terms of a great state of initial form, i.e., an expression for heaven and earth. “Beginning” and “the passage of time,” then, might refer to the myriad

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<sup>2</sup> On Greek concepts of nature, see Collingwood 1945; 1999, 31-99. For ancient Indian notions of creation through water, see Wu 2000, 103-05, 159-62.

beings as birthed by heaven and earth plus their transformations and unfolding.

The *Fanwu liuxing* echoes the *Laozi*, but phrases it in three-character lines and adds a phase of “mother” before its final state of “combination.” All terms it uses are highly abstract, and despite its similarities to the *Laozi*, it really presents its own vision, which may or may not be reconcilable with ideas of cosmic energy. As different as these various models are, a key way of understanding them is by comparing the various concrete terms and metaphors they employ in their description of the gradual unfolding of existence from one level to the next.

Important supplementary information comes from the other manuscripts and some transmitted sources, including the *Taiyi shengshui*, the *Huangdi sijing*, and the *Wenzi*. They all tend to describe the universe as moving from Great Oneness to somewhat more concrete entities, notably water, heaven, and earth. In all cases, the models give evidence to the urge of the ancients to identify a pivotal factor and systematic evolution of nature.

All early cosmologists believed that the universe took its beginning from a foundational natural entity and created life in a particular order, but they had a hard time determining what exactly that central pivot or foundation was. In addition, while they all insisted that simpler factors generated more complex structures (e.g., wood being shaped into different types of furniture), the more concrete entity they proposed at the origin, the harder it was for them to see it evolve into complexity (e.g., once wood is shaped into a chair, it is hard to transform into a table).

Be that as it may, at this point we can distinguish two dominant tendencies: to see cosmic unfolding through a figurative versus abstract model. Within this framework, Daoist cosmology proposes that the universe underwent a step-by-step evolution, transformation, or emergence. This is cosmogony, distinctly different from visions of active creation or intentional bringing forth. The Daoist vision of universal emergence and cosmic structure always moves from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from simplicity to complexity, from the one to the many. Within this, it proposes various abstract or figurative (concrete) factors to outline levels and goals, increasingly differentiating beings from chaos in the process of arising.

The *Laozi* and the *Fanwu liuxing* both use the concept of “giving birth” (*sheng* 生) to describe the arising of the universe. The *Huangdi sijing* first uses “becoming” (*cheng* 成), and only then speaks of “giving birth,” using the term to refer to a higher and more complex level in the process. The original meaning of “giving birth” goes back to plants sprouting from the soil; from there, the word expanded to include the raising of livestock and children.

Based on the natural birthing process of human life and natural phenomena, Daoists extrapolated the unfolding of the universe in terms of being birthed by a “mother.” Compared to the contemporary vision of universal beginnings in terms of the Big Bang, the vision of giving birth is warmer and more integrative, laying the foundation of an organic understanding of the world.

The word *cheng*, then, has implications of change, transformation, unfolding, and completion. Compared to the rather active, even forceful “giving birth,” it expresses more the silent and gentle transfiguration of beings and situations. Most texts, other than the *Hengxian*, tend to speak of “once there is. . . .” Words like “moving” and “being” imply a sense of emergence and birth, arising and transforming. Since Daoists never suggested the existence of an active creator, of a force beyond nature that would produce things, the origin and arising of the universe as well as of all beings must rest in itself, go back to its own inherent way (Dao) or underlying unity (Great Oneness). Thus, the *Hengxian* says, “It fulfills itself without repressing itself,” and the *Zhuangzi* speaks of universal “self-stimulation,” “self-creation,” and “self-transformation.”

## Virtue and Differentiation

The Daoist vision of creation is essentially cosmogony, but it is also a form of ontology or, as Zhang Dainian calls it, a theory of foundations (1982, 6-24; 2002). The two closely merge in Daoism, which makes it significantly different from the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle as well as harder to define as a single system. Multiple versions of cosmogony preclude a systematic ontology founded on logic and reason that serves to explain the ultimate cause and inherent nature of all beings.

A key concept in the Daoist context, moreover, is virtue or inner power (*de* 德), prominent in all its different strands and often identified with Dao. It plays a central role in the Daoist vision of living beings, since the relation between Dao and virtue serves as the model of that between the primordial origin and all life. Still, it only represents one aspect of the feature, others including the relation between Dao and beings, simplicity and complexity, and the one and the many. The various excavated materials are essential in providing a fuller understanding of these dimensions.

Unlike Confucian thinkers who focus centrally on the human mind, Daoists are primarily interested in the original nature of living beings and develop their general theories from here. How, then, can this original nature be best understood? Scholars often explain it in terms of virtue, inherent in all beings

and affairs, a form of secondary application or concrete manifestation of Dao—but they never quite say how Dao comes to be so (Chen 1992, 13-14; Luo 2005, 91-92).

Contemporary cosmologists claim that nature and living beings evolved gradually over a vast time span. Their original nature accordingly forms part of this evolution. It is open to discussion just how much evolution there is in ancient Daoism, despite the fact that Zhuangzi clearly speaks of the transformation of energy, giving quite a few concrete examples, and Hu Shi thinks of him as an early representative of progress thinking. Still, Daoists in general are not that interested in understanding just how each being came to be what it is and how diversity arose on the planet.

To them, the nub of the matter lies in the relationship of the originally unified Dao, simplicity, or oneness to intricate virtue, complexity, and multiplicity—the former pointing to the inherent original nature of all things while the latter express their concrete manifestation (Ikeda 2006, 15-30). Thus, the *Laozi* says, “When uncarved wood breaks up, it forms vessels” (ch. 28); “Dao in the world can be compared to rivers and streams flowing into the sea” (ch. 32); and “Great Dao flows everywhere; it may go left or right” (ch. 34). Similarly, Zhuangzi notes, “Dao does not falter before the huge, is not forgetful of the tiny; therefore, the myriad beings are complete in it” (ch. 13) and “Dao: there’s nowhere it is not” (ch. 22). Passages like these show that Daoists think of the different qualities and manifestations of things as the result of Dao “breaking up” or “dividing.”

The *Laozi* does not yet make the common later connection of virtue and its homophone *de* 得, “to attain.” Here, “attain” only means that individual beings realize certain particular characteristics and traits on the basis of all-pervasive oneness. The classical passage has, “heaven attained oneness and became clear; earth attained oneness and became tranquil” (ch. 39). The general understanding is that “oneness” means Dao and these various entities realize Dao. Since beings are different, they inevitably gain different things when attaining oneness. In other words, the passage speaks of how different beings attain different part of universal oneness and how they relate to Dao differently. It reflects but does not explain the inherent interconnectedness and fundamental multiplicity of all that is.

Like the *Laozi*, the *Fanwu liuxing* says that “there is oneness” and notes that beings “attain it” when it speaks of the difference among living beings, but it still does not connect “attain” with virtue like the *Daoyuan* of the *Huangdi sijing*. It examines the manifold things of existence—sun and moon, thunder and lightning, wind and rain in heaven as well as water and fire,

grasses and trees, birds and beasts, soil and humans, ghosts and spirits on earth—and asks over forty questions about them. For example,

All beings flow into form, but how do they attain it? They flow into form and become bodies, but how can they avoid dying? Humans flow into form, but how do they attain it? They flow into form and become bodies, but how do they lose them again and die? How do grasses and trees come to grow? How do birds and beast come to sing?

While we can offer scientific explanations to these questions today, the text starts out with the basic assumption that there is some common ground and that all beings somehow attain it. For example, when it asks why there are different species in the universe and the world, it says, “There is oneness; if the world perishes, it no longer exists. If oneness perishes, the world also loses its existence.” Similarly, when it asks why plants grow and animals make sounds, it says that “plants attained it and came to grow; animals attained it and came to make sounds.” In other words, all beings came to be what they are because they “attained” the function of oneness and Dao.

In contrast to this, the *Daoyuan* has no interest in how Dao relates to the concrete factors of the world, but instead focuses on the broader connection between Dao, living beings, and affairs. Still, it works with “attain”:

It takes oneness as its measure and never changes,  
 And is right there even for crawling insects.  
 Birds attain it and fly.  
 Fish attain it and swim.  
 Wild animals attain it and run.  
 The myriad beings attain it and live.  
 The hundred affairs attain it and are complete. (see Yates 1997, 173)

This is also reflected in the transmitted sources. For example, the *Zhuangzi* says, “Dao has its reality and its signs . . . Xiwei attained it and held up heaven and earth” (ch. 6). This shows that the core idea of Dao is precisely that it is immanent in all beings, endowing them each with unique characteristics and abilities. While the *Zhuangzi* points to humanity as playing a prominent part in the greater picture, it yet insists that all beings attain their particular nature from Dao.

Another transmitted text that echoes this is the *Hanfeizi* in its discussion of the relation of Dao to beings and principle (*li* 理). Here Dao is the root cause “that makes the myriad beings just so,” and “causes them to grow.” It is their “specific inherent principle” that makes them unique. The text lists a number of different things as examples to prove the point. “Heaven at-

tained it to be high; earth attained it to be containing” (ch. 20). In both the use of “attain” and their overall vision, the two texts are very close.

In all these Daoist discussions of the inherent characteristics and shapes of living beings, “virtue” plays no role whatsoever. They do not oppose or connect Dao to it, but contrast Dao with beings, simplicity with complexity, and the one with the many. Nevertheless, there is a link, most clearly expressed in the *Laozi*: “Great virtue flows from Dao” (ch. 21); “Who follows Dao joins Dao, who follows virtue joins virtue” (ch. 23); “When Dao is lost, virtue arises” (ch. 38); “Dao gives birth to them, virtue raises them . . . ; therefore the myriad beings venerate Dao and honor virtue” (ch. 51). But while virtue is present in all beings here, there is no sense of any “attaining” taking place.

A typical expression how things attain virtue from Dao appears in the *Guanzi*: “Virtue is the lodge of Dao. All beings attain it to take birth . . . For this reason, ‘virtue’ is ‘attain,’ and ‘attain’ means ‘to realize one’s natural so-being’” (“Xinshu shang” 心術上). That is to say, “virtue” here not only means the characteristics and traits individual beings get from Dao, but it also takes on the role of the force that “nurtures” and “raises” them, echoing the *Laozi* (ch. 51).

Xu Fuguan interprets “raise” to mean “produce” (2001, 298), but that may not be entirely correct. To me, it is more like “support,” as the word *chu* 畜 appears in the *Shijing* 诗经: “But you do not support me, and I go back to my country and clan” (“Xiaoya” 小雅). This is echoed in the *Laozi*, when it speaks of Great Dao as “clothing and feeding all beings without claiming to be master over them” (ch. 34). Here the meaning is clearly “nurture.” The same tenet also appears in the *Guanzi*, which states, “What nurtures the myriad beings is called virtue” (“Xinshu shang”); and the *Wenzi*, “That what gives birth to beings is Dao; what grows them is virtue. It supports them and nurtures them, follows them and grows them, benefiting all without preference, in harmony with heaven and earth—this is what we call virtue” (ch.5, “Daode” 道德).

If we assume that Dao is the highest force of support, then virtue is its concrete aspect, a mothering, raising power essential for the life and growth of all beings. The *Zhuangzi* says, “That by which beings come to life is virtue. . . Form without Dao is not alive, life without virtue does not shine” (ch. 12); and, “Dao is the idol of virtue; virtue is the radiance of Dao” (ch. 23). The word *sheng* 生 in connection with virtue is different from when it appears linked with Dao: meaning “life” rather than “giving birth” and pointing to enhancement rather than existence. Virtue in this sense, then, is the power of protecting and enhancing the life of all things and beings, connecting

closely to its understanding as supporting force. This, moreover, holds not only true for life within individual entities, but also applies to their interaction, so that each thing or being in the process of life rests in constant interchange with all others.

The Han dictionary *Shuowen* 说文, compiled by Xu Zhen 许慎 (ed. Beijing: Zhonghua 1983), explains “virtue” as “what one attains on the outside from other people and on the inside from oneself.” Daoists, on the other hand, do not limit this feature to humans but expand it to all things and beings, both in terms of internal quality and external exchange. “Virtue” here comes to mean the inherent power that nurtures and supports all. Most fundamentally, Daoist thinkers take the unlimited nature of Dao, as well as its open flexibility, and use it to explain how oneness or unity at the highest level can divide into the multiplicity of things and manifest in their vastly different characteristics.

The *Huainanzi* provides a further clue to this understanding, claiming that beings emerge differently from oneness because they take form as different separate entities (*fenwu* 分物). “Together emerging from oneness, so that each acquired its distinctive qualities, there were birds, there were fish, there were animals: this we call the differentiation of things” (14.1; Major et al. 2010, 536). Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties express the same idea when they speak of “the principle of oneness separating into differentiation” to explain the relationship between the one underlying principle and the multiplicity of existence in an expansion of the *Hanfeizi* notion of Dao as principle.

When Daoists relate Dao with beings, simplicity with complexity, and the one with the many, they not only look for particular laws and rules but also for the connection of unlimited potential and matter to the concrete abilities and physical nature of all beings. In this way, they can explain how the myriad beings attain their particular abilities (principle) as well as their unique shape (energy, matter) from Dao. To borrow Plato’s concept of particularity, the myriad beings are not all the same because they cannot possibly share in the Dao in the same way. However, the particularity of separate entities here does not carry the Platonic implication of the world of forms or ideas that is beyond reality and devoid of solidity nor is it a mere concept without physical substance. It is both ideal and real, physical and metaphysical.

Unlike the Christian concept of God taking a particular embodiment in the world, Dao in China is spread throughout the myriad beings and shared among them. “Dao forms the body of all beings,” they say, but again this is not the same as the notion of divinity spreading everywhere as formulated in Spinoza. For Daoists, Dao spreads throughout living beings—transcendent and immanent at the same time, theory and practice integrated.



