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探討以水隱喻老子道之哲學

Supervisor: Mr. Chong, Ching-Chuan 鍾清泉老師

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The Significance of the Metaphor of “water” in Laozi’s
Philosophy of the “Dao”

探討以水隱喻老子道之哲學

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
In fulfilment of the requirements for BA (Hons) in Sinology Degree

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Abstract

Laozi's philosophy embedded in *Dao De Jing* is considered to be highly profound, covering explorations in many areas, such as the universe, sociology and life. It has imposed significant influence on the philosophical and cultural thoughts of the future generations, as well as on the art of war and many other fields. But "Dao" is a very abstract concept and is difficult to understand or decipher directly. Through further study and deeper insights of *Dao De Jing*, it can be found that Laozi uses water as a metaphor to describe and explicate the "Dao". Through closely examining and the study of the parts of *Dao De Jing* that are related to water, this paper will attempt to explore how water was utilised as a medium by Laozi to elucidate the existence and manifestation of "Dao" and how "Dao" can therefore be applied in one's life.

Key words:

Daodejing (道德經), Dao, water, Metaphor

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The Significance of the Metaphor of “water” in Laozi’ s Philosophy of the “Dao”

1. Introduction

More than thousands of years ago, by chance, Laozi wrote down his teachings in a 5000 character document later known as the *Dao De Jing*. The philosophy embedded in *Dao De Jing* is considered to be highly profound, covering explorations in many areas, such as the universe, sociology and life. It has imposed significant influence on the philosophical and cultural thoughts of the future generations, as well as on the art of war and many other fields. It is believed that the core idea of *Dao De Jing* is attributed to the “Dao”. Taiwanese scholar Xu Fuguan proposes that Laozi’s philosophical thought with “Dao” as the core in fact encompasses China’s greatest spirit of art.¹ The “Dao” is known to be the essence of Laozi’s philosophy, it is not only understood as the origin of all things (*wanwu*) of nature, but also the law that organises how all things (*wanwu*) operate and develop. This became Laozi’s philosophical basis and shaped the way he thought about and explored the world. On the surface, “Dao” may seem to model itself on the law of nature (*ziran*), but in more depth, it can be contended that the true intention lies in the philosophy of life; that is, Laozi takes the idea of “Dao” as natural law to be the starting point of this philosophy, while its ultimate purpose and interest are in the life of people and individual existence. Thus, the study of Laozi is not only about the law of nature, but more so about the philosophy of life.² Scholar Chen Guying believes that if the metaphysical “Dao” is not implemented down to the people, then it is only an empty concept.³ Laozi said: “Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is.”⁴ This shows that the “Dao” comes down to man through the laws of Earth and

¹ L. Wang, (2009).The Study Of Xu Fu-guan's Spirit Of Chinese Art Postgraduate Of The Literary Theory)

² Huang Chenggui 黃承貴 and He Yingmin 何應敏, ‘Shui: Laozi shengming zhexue de ziran diyun’ 水：老子生命哲學的自然底蘊, Jiangxi shehui kexue 江西社會科學, 5 (2003), p.48-51.

³ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, Lao zhuang xinlun 老莊新論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), p. 26.

⁴ James Legge, Dao De Jing; <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>, 18/03/2022

Heaven, so it can be seen that Laozi's ultimate intention was for man to practise and apply "Dao" in everyday life.

However, "Dao" is a very abstract concept and is difficult to understand or decipher directly. Through further study and deeper insights of *Dao De Jing*, it can be found that Laozi uses water as a metaphor to describe and explicate the "Dao". A typical example of this lies in the beginning of its Chapter 8: "The highest excellence is like that of water. The goodness of water nourishes all things (*wanwu*), yet it does not strive to compete with the other, but is content with even the places all men disdain. Hence the way of water is most near to that of the "Dao".⁵ This verse clearly demonstrates that to Laozi, the character of water is very near to the nature of "Dao". American scholar Sarah Allan points out that in early Chinese thought, concrete imagery, as significant as the vital water, was used as a model for Chinese philosophical concepts including the "Dao".⁶

Through closely examining and the study of the parts of *Dao De Jing* that are related to water, this paper will attempt to explore how water was utilised as a medium by Laozi to elucidate the existence and manifestation of "Dao" and how "Dao" can therefore be applied in one's life. The whole research will be carried out with the focus on two aspects; firstly to explore the relationship between the "Dao" and "water", and secondly to use the metaphor of water as the principal subject to analyse and demonstrate how "Dao" can be operated and applied in man's life.

2. Relationship between the "Dao" and "Water"

There is no doubt that "Dao" is the core idea of Laozi's philosophy, however, in Laozi's description of the "Dao", its existence is seemingly covered with a mysterious veil; on the surface it appears to be comprehensible, but in fact it is still difficult to fully grasp its meaning from an intuitive perspective. Nevertheless, it can be discovered from the illustration of Laozi's philosophy that "Dao" and "water" have a close relationship connected by a

⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.31.

⁶ Sarah Allan, *Shui zhi dao yu de zhi duan: zhongguo zaoqi zhixue de benyu 水之道與德之端——中國早期哲學的本喻*, trans. by Zhang Haiyan 張海晏 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010), p. 5.

certain level of commonality and this commonality is the key factor in the exploration of the existence and manifestation of the “Dao”.

1) The Commonality of “Dao” and “Water”

First of all, when Laozi taught about “Dao”, he stated that the emergence of “Dao” was far earlier than the rise of all things (*wanwu*), in this world. So naturally, the “Dao” began to be perceived as the origin and foundation upon which all things in the universe flourished and developed into form.⁷ Chapter Five of *Dao De Jing* says that something undefined and nebulous came into existence before Heaven and Earth. It was silent, formless and stood alone, undergoing no change. Eternally revolving without perishing and is worthy to be the Mother of All Things. I do not know its name but can address it as “Dao. Must it be given a name, then I shall call it “Great”.⁸ This illustrates Laozi’s view of cosmic generation and the “Dao” is regarded as a distinctive essence which appeared before the existence of Heaven and Earth and its being is independent from any exterior factors. It seems that the “Dao” is eternal and would not perish, and in its time of eternity, it acts as the origin of all things and nurtures like a Mother.

This kind of description of the “Dao” is not specific enough and is very abstract. In the process of textual research on Laozi’s classics, it is not hard to notice that in his discussion of the core content of “Dao”, though he gave very prestigious position to the “Dao” in his philosophical system, but the description of “Dao” itself is still considered somewhat abstract and unclear. For instance, he said in the first chapter: “the “Dao” that can be expressed is not

⁷ Cao Di 曹荻, *Laozi shui zhexue yanjiu* 老子「水」哲學研究 (Unpublished Master thesis, University of Zhengzhou, 2019).

⁸ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie* 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.28-29.

the true “Dao”.⁹ This shows that the meaning of the true “Dao” is beyond the scope of language can explain and it is not possible to accurately and directly depict its existence and purpose. In Laozi’s own description, he did not present a specific shape or form of the “Dao”, just like what he said: “The nature of Dao is elusive, yet concealed in it are forms; as elusive as it is, yet concealed in it are the things.”¹⁰ This is to explain and confirm that “Dao” cannot be displayed in specific shape, as it cannot be seen when we seek to look at it, it cannot be heard when we try to listen to it, and it cannot be touched when we intend to grasp it. As Laozi further pointed out: “It is the Form of the Formless, the Image of Nothingness, and that is why it is called the elusive.”¹¹ Thus, it can be concluded that “Dao” is in itself formless and invisible, though it cannot be seen or touched but still concretely exists.

This invisible “Dao” has become the origin of the world in Laozi’s philosophy. It is believed that “Dao” is not anything derived from something else, but the first and foremost independent existence in the universe.¹² Therefore, the “Dao” can be seen as the Mother of Heaven and Earth, it is the root where all things in Heaven and Earth began to develop and flourish.¹³ As recorded in chapter sixty two of *Dao De Jing*: “Dao is the most profound and has the most honoured place among all things (*wanwu*)”¹⁴ Here “Dao” appears to be the ruler of all life, which concept further proves that “Dao” is the root and origin of life.¹⁵ Although

⁹ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.19-20.

¹⁰ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.57-58.

¹¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.41-43.

¹² Sun yikai 孫以楷, *Laozi jiedu 老子解讀* (Hefei: Huangshan shushe 黃山書社, 2003), p. 77.

¹³ Xin Zhanjun 辛戰君, *Laozi yizhu 老子譯注* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), p. 103.

¹⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.126-127.

¹⁵ Huang Chenggui 黃承貴 and He Yingmin 何應敏, ‘Shui: Laozi shengming zhexue de ziran diyun’ 水：老子生命哲學的自然底蘊, *Jiangxi shehui kexue 江西社會科學*, 5 (2003), p.48-51.

“Dao” is capable of fostering and nurturing the growth of all things, but it does not mean to act on it purposely; like Laozi said: “the Dao in its regular course does nothing purposefully, but there is nothing which it does not do.”¹⁶ Scholar Zhu Weihuan comments that there are no subjective ideas or self-aware intention from the “Dao” to encourage the development of all things, but all things just emerge spontaneously.¹⁷ So “Dao” exists like the law of nature. Laozi believes that the movement and change of all things in nature follow certain laws, an important one of which is “the contrary (*fan*)”. As he said himself: “The movement of the Dao, by contraries proceeds.”¹⁸ “The contrary” means that all things have two sides and will begin to move and change in the opposite direction; but eventually the movement will bring all things back to its initial state and the process will then embark on the same journey and follow a cyclic path.¹⁹ It is the power of such circulation that provides the necessary conditions for the survival of all things, having four seasons in a year is a typical example of this cycle. Everything develops and changes in an endless cycle from growth to decline, like the fallen leaves returning to the roots, reverting to its origin. Laozi felt that the Great “Dao” pervades all, it can be found everywhere; all things depend on it for growth, yet it does not boast; when the work is accomplished, it does not claim credit or ownership of the things.²⁰ Su Zhe’s annotation states that the “Dao” is formless and nameless, although it pervades in all things (*wanwu*), but not a single object can claim to resemble “Dao” completely. “Dao” is vast and broad, if it can be represented by a single object, then how is it vast and broad.”²¹ Here, vast is used to describe the extension of “Dao” to point out its

¹⁶ James Legge, Dao De Jing; <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>, 18/03/2022

¹⁷ Zhu Weihuan 朱維煥, Laozi daodejing chanshi 老子道德經闡釋 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2001), p. 26.

¹⁸ James Legge, Dao De Jing; <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>, 18/03/2022

¹⁹ Li Shunlian 李順連, Daolun 道論 (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2003), p. 4-6.

²⁰ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.81.

²¹ Su Zhe 蘇轍, Su Ziyong daodejing zhu 蘇子由道德經注, in Laozi jicheng 老子集成, ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011), vol. 3, p. 27.

greatness. Laozi summarised this concept as it is through its not making itself great that the greatness can be accomplished.²² From the above mentioned, we can see that the “Dao” cannot be manifested in a material way; although its existence sustains the living and growth of all things, but its invisible nature increases the difficulty of our understanding of the “Dao”.

In Laozi’s vision, “Dao” cannot be explicated by words, but he chose water from all the things with a form to describe the characteristics, functions and purpose of “Dao”. The image and connotation of water plays an important role in Laozi's philosophy, according to Laozi, there are various commonalities between the characteristics of water and “Dao”, so water could be considered the most appropriate natural object with a form to convey the significance of "Dao".²³ Just as Laozi said: “Dao pervades the world, just like the streams from the valleys will eventually flow into the rivers and the sea.”²⁴ Indeed, in the material water, water is often recognised as the source of all things. In a similar time period to Laozi, many other philosophers also had similar thought on this. Guan Zhong, a philosopher in the same period with Laozi, once mentioned the thought of water as “the origin of all things”²⁵ and wrote much discourse on it. He believed that water constitutes all things and their sustainability depends on water. At a similar period, on the other side of the world, Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus (Θαλῆς ὁ Μιλήσιος) proposed the concept that water is the arche (beginning) of all things. Life comes from the water and returns to water.²⁶ Scholar Li Daoyuan from Northern Wei Dynasty said in his book of *Shui Jing Commentary* that: “There

²² Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.81.

²³ Wei Wei 魏微, ‘Lun laozi yu zhuangzi shijie zhong de shui’ 論老子與莊子視界中的「水」, Qiqihaer daxue xuebao 齊齊哈爾大學學報, (11) 2018, p.44-46.

²⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.77-78.

²⁵ Lishan 李山, Guanzi 管子 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), p. 211.

²⁶ Bertrand Arthur William Russell, Xifang zhexue shi 西方哲學史 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2003), p. 43.

is much water under the Heaven, it is ubiquitous, reaching everywhere from high to low and all things are nourished.”²⁷ This is also indicating that water is the source of Heaven and Earth and offers great benefits to all things. Laozi concurs with this idea in saying that the excellence of water appears in benefiting all things without striving to compete with others.²⁸ This coincides with his view on the action produced by “Dao” without specific purposes. Water supports the growth of all things, and the blooming of all life is inseparable from the participation of water. Similarly, water has no subjective consciousness that it has helped others. Its nurture and care to all things also follows the law of nature.

Overall, many characteristics of water are similar to the nature of “Dao”, so the study of these commonalities would give people a more comprehensive and clearer understanding of the “Dao”.

2) Investigation on the Dependent Connection

Between Water and “Dao”

As “water” and “Dao” have many commonalities, so scholars have always had a range of different views on the relationship between them. The mainstream viewpoint lies in the belief that water can represent “Dao”, in other words, the characteristics of water are equivalent to the nature of “Dao”. Scholar Ye Shuxian has long said that as “Dao” belongs to the early category of Chinese ontology, so its original form should have followed the way of the solar cycle with the chaotic (hun dun) flood as the starting and end point.²⁹ Here he clearly proposes that water is the original and the beginning form of “Dao”. Carl Jung once said when discussing archetypes (the original form): “water is the most common symbol of

²⁷ Li Daoyuan 酈道元 and Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛, *Shuijingzhu jiaozheng* 水經注校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), p. 1.

²⁸ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie* 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.31.

²⁹ Ye Shuxian 葉舒憲, *Tansuo feilixing de shijie* 探索非理性的世界 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1988), p. 164.

unconsciousness... Water is the 'spirit of the valley', it is the “flying dragon” of the “Dao”.³⁰ In his view, water is a hidden spirit in the ravine, which is essentially similar to the abstract and unclear character of "Dao". This interpretation was adopted and elevated to another level, many scholars began to think that the “Dao” is the philosophical sublimation of water and water is actually the original material form of “Dao”.³¹

Based on this theory, some scholars have provided data and statistical support and evidence. For example, according to Dr. Wen Leping, the *Dao De Jing* written by Laozi has a total of 81 chapters, of which 20 chapters consist materials related to water, this engages a quarter of the whole book.³² Moreover, another scholar more accurately collected the statistic of 27 places that mentioned water in *Dao De Jing*.³³ It can be seen from the data analysis that the close relationship between water and “Dao” is an especially prominent and evident phenomenon. The frequent occurrence of “water” in *Dao De Jing* cannot just be a "coincidence". On the contrary, it demonstrates a certain connection between "Dao" and the natural element "water", and this relationship is more directly linked. Some other scholars have made a comparison between the characteristics of water and “Dao” to prove that water is the material entity of “Dao”. For instance, Shen Mingming elaborated on the five "virtues" contained in "water", which is considered by some the soul of Laozi's philosophical thought.³⁴ Dong Chenggui believes that "water" is the natural heritage for Laozi's philosophy of life. He discusses the origin, nature, attribute, every manifestation of water and its correspondence

³⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, Rongge wenji 榮格文集 (Beijing: Gaige chubanshe 改革出版社, 1997), p. 56.

³¹ Diao Shenghu 刁生虎, 'Shui: zhongguo gudai de gen yinyu' 水：中國古代的根隱喻, *Zhongzhou xuekan* 中州學刊, (5) 200, 180-183.

³² Wen Leping 溫樂平, 'Dao, shui, ren: laozi de shuizhexue' 道·水·人：老子的水哲學, *Nanchang gongcheng xueyuan xuebao* 南昌工程學院學報, (32.5), 180-183.

³³

³⁴ Shen Mingming 沈明明, 'Shuide: Laozi zhhexuesixiang de linghun' 「水德」：老子哲學思想的靈魂, *Fujian luntan: renwen shehui kexue ban* 福建論壇：人文社会科学版, (3) 2010, 51-55.

with "Dao".³⁵ Scholar Zhang Wenying summarised the relationship between "Dao" and "water" in terms of their characteristics, quality and energy.³⁶ The above information, from direct recognition, data evidence to the comparison between the two, all strongly demonstrate evidence that water is the original material form of "Dao", in other words, the nature of water and "Dao" can be seen as equivalent. In this context, these scholars believe that Laozi's metaphor of "water" for the description of the "Dao" is purely rhetorical thinking.³⁷ The metaphor of water works well as a medium to represent the nature (noumenon) of "Dao" as the metaphorical entity of water and the true entity of "Dao" appear to be portrayed and compared on the same level, so Laozi used help from water as an analogy to demonstrate the existence of "Dao".

From a personal point of view, one could argue with the mainstream thought on this matter. Although water can be used as a medium to prove the existence of "Dao", but water should not be perceived as the "Dao" itself. Hence, there should not be a direct relationship between the metaphorical entity of water and the true entity of "Dao". In Laozi's philosophy that centered on "Dao", it was stated that "Dao" existed before the beginning of the universe, which shows that there was no other thing that coexisted with it. Laozi said that "The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things".³⁸ This is to explain the process of "Dao" creating all things. First of all, "Dao generates one". The "one" here refers to Qi, the undivided Qi of the beginning chaos (*hun dun*); this chaotic (*hun dun*) Qi then differentiates into Yin and Yang; and the constant changes of Yin and Yang subsequently produce all things in the world. This shows that the nature of the origin of

³⁵ Dong Chenggui 董承貴, 'Shui: Laozi daolun de benyu' 水：老子「道」論的本喻, Qinghai shehui kexue 青海社會科學, (6) 2004, 71-74.

³⁶ Zhang Wenying 張雯穎, Laozi shui yixiang yanjiu 《老子》水意向研究 (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue, 2016).

³⁷ Xu Lu 徐璐, 'Lun laozi yi shui yu dao de xiucixing siwei' 論老子以「水」喻「道」的修辭性思維, Wuhan ligong daxue xuebao: shehui kexueban 武漢理工大學學報：社會科學版, (4) 2017, 175-180.

³⁸ James Legge, Dao De Jing; <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>, 18/03/2022

“Dao” is unique, and water actually is produced from “Dao”. The simplified version of *Lao Zi* unearthed from the Chu tomb in Guodian explains in this way: “Da Yi produces water, water comes back to complement the Da Yi, Heaven emerges. Heaven complements and nourishes the Da Yi, the Earth appears. Moreover, Da Yi creates Heaven and Earth, hence water also originates from Da Yi; all movement and change operate according to the cyclic path of Da Yi which is considered the Mother of all things.”³⁹ Da Yi here means Tai Yi which is the “Dao”. It can be contended that water is subordinate to “Dao”, it depends on “Dao”, so the two should not be perceived as equals. Laozi also said in *Dao De Jing* that when Heaven and Earth unite as one, then the sweet dew will fall.⁴⁰ As mentioned before, “Dao” acts as an eternal natural law in the universe, so water should certainly follow this Law in order to foster and nourish the growth of all things in the world in its various forms. Wang Bi commented that “Dao” is invisible while water can be seen and is tangible; the character of water is very near “Dao”.⁴¹ When water benefits all things, it is visible to man, it does not mirror the abstract nature of “Dao”, so we can only say water has a close resemblance to “Dao” but it is not “Dao” itself. “Dao” can only be felt and perceived through experiencing other existing things.⁴²

Therefore, my personal opinion concurs with the idea that water is only a metaphor expressing the connotation of “Dao”. The so-called metaphor refers to “we come to understand another field of experience according to one particular field of experience.”⁴³ Shu Dingfang believes that there are two kinds of Metaphor: one is based on the pre-existing similarity

³⁹ Tu Zongliu 塗宗流, *Dao zhi yuan: guodian laozi yanjiu 道之源——郭店老子研究* (Shantou: Shantou daxue chubanshe, 2006), p. 52.

⁴⁰ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie 老子道德經解* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.87-89.

⁴¹ Wang Bi 王弼 and Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, *Laozi daodejingzhu jiaoshi 老子道德經注校釋* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), p. 20.

⁴² Wang Linjiao 王琳嬌, *Shilun laozi zhong shui de jiazhi neihan 試論《老子》中「水」的價值內涵* (Unpublished Master thesis, University of Neimenggu, 2020).

⁴³ Lakoff George and Johnson Mark, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 1-4.

between the original entity and the metaphor (known as similarity—based metaphors); the other is based on created similarity imposed by the author (known as similarity—creating metaphors).⁴⁴ The metaphor of "water" should belong to the latter.

Laozi was born in the Xiang land of the state of Song at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period. State Song was later occupied by Chu, and Xiang became the land of Chu, which is located in the vortex River Basin, a tributary of the Huaihe River. The Huaihe River Basin has many tributaries, dense lakes with sufficient rain. This unique natural condition can be closely linked to the fostering and growth of life, which should have an effect in guiding the people living in the Huaihe River Basin pay additional attention to the close relationship between the good qualities of water and life.⁴⁵ Water nurtures and nourishes life, and all living things cannot be separated from water at all times. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that according to Laozi's personal experience of living in the Huaihe River area, he decided to use "water" as a model to represent the concept of "Dao", and through the study of "water" to find and attain the principles and laws of nature. Laozi took "water" as the object of observation and mapped out the irreplaceable position of "Dao" in Heaven and Earth from the irreplaceable position of "water" in nature, and then from that he made considerations on ethics. He attempted to adopt the moral connotation, the values of benefiting all things and the virtue of selflessness from "water" so as to employ them in the application of virtues for man. The previous section pointed out that the ultimate purpose and interest of Laozi's philosophy lie in the life of man and individual existence. Not only is water close to every man's heart and is always used for good purposes, but it also signifies goodness and can act as a moral compass. Learning and emulating the virtues of "water" is considered to be on the

⁴⁴ Shu Dingfang 束定芳, *Yinyuxue yanjiu 隱喻學研究* (Shanghai: Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

⁴⁵ Li Xia 李霞, *Shengsi zhihui: daoia shengmingguan yanjiu 生死智慧——道家生命觀研究* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2004), p. 13.

path to realising the “Dao”. This is believed to be the significance of Laozi’s metaphorical way of explaining “Dao” with water.

3. Water’s Softness and Weakness- A Manifestation of the “Dao”

In Laozi's philosophy, the metaphor of water may connote many characteristics of the “Dao”; amongst them, many scholars believe that the most important feature of water is that it reflects the virtue of humility in “Dao”, according to Laozi’s statement that “the highest excellence is like that of water which nourishes all things (*wanwu*), yet it does not strive to compete with others.”⁴⁶ But it can be contended that there is a more evident quality of water that can be used to manifest the existence of “Dao”, and that is the soft and gentle nature of water.

1) The Soft and Gentle Nature to Display the Vitality of “Dao”

The Buer Chapter in *Lüshi Chunqiu* says that Lao Dan (Laozi) is esteemed and revered for his gentle nature.⁴⁷ The soft and gentle characteristic displayed by water is the fundamental expression and function of the “Dao”. Laozi believes that the softness of water is the manifestation of vitality in all things and a symbol of real strength and power.

According to the research from previous sections, it can be understood that the “Dao” does not act intentionally, but there is nothing which it does not do to assist with the growth and sustainability of all things. The existence of “Dao” is like the law of nature that follows a

⁴⁶ Translated by Taiyu Cao Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie* 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019), p.31.

⁴⁷ Xu Weiyou 許維遹, *Liang Yunhua* 梁運華, *Lüshichunqiu jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010)

cyclic path and its movement is endless. The soft and gentle nature of water very well shows and supports this quality. Laozi once said: “There is nothing in the world more soft and gentle than water.”⁴⁸ Heshang Gong’s interpretation of this verse is that “it falls into a round shape when in a round vessel; it falls into a square shape when in a square vessel; it stops when encountering an obstacle and moves instantly when there is an opening.”⁴⁹ So the nature of softness and gentleness of water indicates that water goes with the flow, it can adapt to all circumstances and adjust itself accordingly. Water has no fixed shape and is constantly in a state of change. It never deliberately shapes itself into a certain form, but always takes the form that the nature endows. It takes whatever shape or circumstance given, even in a swamp, it would also happily “stay”. Water is flexible and free, it is compatible in every way, showing the adaptability that comes from the quality of softness. If we make further interpretation of the "shape according to the object" quality embodied in the softness nature of water, it points to the spontaneous action in accordance with the law of nature, and this reflects the characteristics of “Dao”. It is always dynamic and adapts and changes according to the situation.

Furthermore, Jiang Xichang said: "Laozi's way of softness and gentleness is based on the observation of natural phenomena." ⁵⁰ Therefore, apart from the soft nature of water, Laozi also used "infant" and "plants" as examples to show the power and strength of "softness." Although an infant’s muscles and bones are weak and fragile, but he could still clench his fist very firmly, showing the strength and vitality coming from the other parts of his body. So it can be seen that soft and gentle things can also encompass strong vitality and resilience. Sprout is another good example, the life of new sprouts maybe soft and crispy, but it can still

⁴⁸ James Legge, Dao De Jing; <https://ccontext.org/dao-de-jing>, 18/03/2022

⁴⁹ Laozi daodejing heshanggong zhangju 老子道德經河上公章句 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), p. 297.

⁵⁰ Jiang Xichang 蔣錫昌, Laozi jiaogu 老子校詁 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), p. 268.

grow into a strong plant in time. So from the perspective of the development of things, although at the beginning they may appear weak and fragile, but huge strength of life is concealed underneath and enable itself to overcome any obstacles so as to flourish and thrive. This example further explains why things with a soft and gentle nature can be full of vitality. To Laozi, softness and gentleness are never signs of weakness, but the most powerful energy; and on the other hand, the hard and strong are not the embodiment of vitality, but can represent decline and destruction. On the whole, Laozi's philosophy of softness and gentleness is a way of life, a way of freedom and nature; it manifests the continuation of all living phenomena. The exuberant vitality and great energy contained in the nature of softness and gentleness is also the manifestation of the sublimity and greatness of the "Dao".

Nevertheless, it is still common for people to hold a rather negative view towards softness and to think that it means cowardice. But we can see from Laozi's philosophy, the softness of water itself has a strong sense of strength, this strength is not endowed or developed by external forces and factors, but comes from its internal tenacity. "Soft" is the opposite of "hard", "gentle" is the opposite of "strong", so "soft and gentle" is easily perceived as the contrary to "hard and strong. Generally speaking, when people hear "soft", they seem to immediately think of the negative connotations of being weak, frail or timid. But Laozi used water as an example to make an argument to reverse the idea of perceiving water as the weakest element in all things, in fact, the so-called or commonly recognised hard and strong things may not compete with the vitality of water. "There is nothing in the world more soft and gentl than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong, there is nothing that can take precedence of it;

2) The Application of “Softness and Gentleness”

The adaptability and strong internal tenacity discussed earlier are the characteristics of the softness and gentleness of water. The adoption and application of it in life can be attributed to quick adaptation and perseverance. Lao Tzu once said, "May the Dao of Heaven be compared to the method of bending a bow? The part of the bow which was high is brought low, and what was low is raised up. So it diminishes where there is superabundance, and supplements where there is deficiency." Although water is extremely soft, it is not cowardly, but changes and adjusts according to the circumstances at hand. It does not have persistent attachment. It seems that it has not fixed shape, but it has high applicability. This is the resilience and flexibility of water, and this is what man should learn from water. Though everything has two sides, if water turns into rain and fog, it is too vain; if it condenses into ice, it is too hard and crisp, either one of those loses the soft and gentle resilience of water. So it is only by learning and practicing the spirit and quality of water can men better grasp and live the profound principles of life. This is where the quality of water lies, and consequently, the manifestation of the nature of “Dao”.

Furthermore, whether to be soft or tough is a choice. As Laozi said: “He whose boldness appears in his daring is put to death; he whose boldness appears in his not daring lives on. Of these two cases, either beneficial or harmful? Even the sages find this account difficult.” In Laozi's view, boldness is divided into two kinds. One kind of boldness can bring oneself misfortune or even killing, while the other kind of boldness can offer us better living. In the two kinds, the interests and consequences can be drastically different. Laozi believes that the law between nature and the way of survival is to be "soft and gentle", not to be rough, self-willed and reckless; humility is a better gesture than arrogance. It is believed that as long as the existences within the nature follow the natural law in its development and living, it will eventually achieve desirable and favourable outcomes. Laozi's philosophy on the quality of

“softness and gentleness” is a great inspiration for our life today. In our lives, we could try and not to blindly pursue fame and status; in everyday life, one can endeavour to treat other people with sincerity and honesty, avoid conflicts and slowdown in competing for gains and losses all the time, It is commendable to be modest and courteous with a broad mind like the sea and be kind to others. All of these qualities coincide with that of the “Dao”. If we act on its contrary, when you don't know how to deal with others in a soft and gentle way, if you are too strong and sharp, it is only asking for trouble yourself.

Laozi has profound insight into the way of society and life. He believes that worldly things that are hard will lose its vitality, but flexible and resilient things are full of strength and power. Therefore, it is fair to say Laozi does not encourage an arrogant and competitive way of living, but would rather acknowledge gentleness and modesty in a person’s way of life.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the core of Laozi’s philosophy is “Dao”, he considers “Dao” as the mother of all things, which nurtures the development and sustainability of the universe. “Dao” itself is mysterious and abstract, as “Dao” is intangible and nameless. We cannot directly see the existence of “Dao”, but it is experience in our life at all times. So Laozi’s used something that shares commonality with “Dao” to help man better understand the true existence of “Dao”.

He takes water as a metaphor to explore the origin and the law of Heaven and Earth and all things in the universe and that is Dao. Because the “Dao” of humanity is closely connected with the Dao of heaven and earth, to achieve the goal of understanding occurrences in life through the learning from Dao. In the process of the essence of “Dao” to the manifestation of it in life, the image of water can be said to play a decisive role. Laozi derived the values he

promoted from the unique way of allegorizing Dao with water, thus connecting the ultimate meaning of the Dao of heaven and earth with the ultimate concern of human things. Laozi abstracted the supreme Dao that dominates all things from nature, not for appreciation and admiring. Because if a theory cannot guide practice, it is meaningless as an empty concept. Therefore, the reason why Lao Zi explored Dao and its essential characteristics is that he aimed to find out a human existence paradigm. So, the discerning point to allegorize Dao with water is that it is a pun. On the one hand, it establishes the basic image of ontology, so that people can understand the profound connotation of Dao from one point to another. On the other hand, it lays the basic orientation of moral theory, to highlight morality through the extremely soft gentle character of water.

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