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**Analysis on the Compassionate and  
Non-contending Concept of the Water Image  
in the *Dao De Jing***

**探析《道德經》「水」意象蘊含的慈與不爭**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David

In fulfilment of the requirements for BA (Hons) in Sinology Degree

威爾士三一聖大衛大學

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# Abstract

Dao is a very commonly used concept in *Dao De Jing*. But due to its abstract and mysterious nature, it is not easy for most people to understand. Therefore, through Laozi's observation of all things in nature, he chooses to use the image of water as the expression of the Dao. Analyzing the various virtues of water shows a vivid metaphor for the Dao to every reader. Because the state of water is changeable, the timely growth of all things in the world is formed in the constant circulation of water. This article analyses the important role of Laozi's Dao by analysing the virtues of compassionate and non-contending derived from the constant immutability and humility of water, and its application in daily life.

Key words:

The Dao De Jing(道德經)、non-contending(不爭)、compassionate(慈)、the virtue of water(水德), personal vlaue (個人價值觀)

## 摘要

「道」是《道德經》中非常普遍使用的概念，但由於其抽象玄妙的本質，不容易為一般人所理解，所以老子透過對自然萬物的觀察，選擇以「水」作為「道」的表現媒介，以探析「水」的德性特質來對「道」進行形象生動的譬喻。由於「水」的狀態多變，天地萬物的適時成長，都是在水的恆常循環運動變化中形成。本文透過分析水德的恆常不變和謙卑處下所衍生出的慈與不爭之德，及其在日常生活中的應用，分析老子之道的重要作用。

關鍵詞：道德經、不爭、慈、水德、個人價值觀

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# 1. Introduction

Dao is a very commonly used concept in the *Dao De Jing*. But due to its abstract and mysterious nature, it is not easy for most people to understand. Therefore, through Laozi's observation of all things in nature, he chooses to use the image of water as the expression of the Dao. Analyzing the various virtues of water shows a vivid metaphor for the Dao to every reader. Water can be flexibly converted between liquids, solids, and gases, and its forms are variant, ranging from raindrops to rivers and seas. Due to the changeable state of it, with full of imagination, the elaboration of the Dao is easier for people to understand.

There were many discussions on *shang shan ruo shui* 上善若水 (the highest virtue is gentle like water) in past research, but for the compassionate and non-contending virtues of water only occupy a small amount of space. Some studies focus on comparing the different versions of the words and grammatical problems of the *Dao De Jing*. To question structures of the current versions, those specialized research spirit is admirable, but the process is too complicated to understand which cannot help to solve the problem of how to correctly understand the original meaning of Laozi.<sup>1</sup> Some studies focus on comparing the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Wang shaojun, A New Interpretation of 'Chong Ruruoqing' in Lao zi, *Beijing Social Sciences*, No.8, 2016,81-88. Liao Yangmin, Lei Li, Defects in Modern Antonym Research from the existence and nonexistence in Laozi, *Journal of Guangxi University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, Vol.25, No 2, Apr, 2003, 84-86. Ren fengqin, On Antonym Polymerization from the 'Laozi' Antonym, *Journal of Inner Mongolia University of Finance and Economics*, Vol.11, No. 3, 2013. Shang Yongliang Zhu Chunjie, New Interpretations of Lao-Tse's "Xuan and "Xuan de", *Fudan Journal(Social Sciences)*, No.1, 2020, 101-103. Cui xiaojiao, Water is good for all things and is contentious—Seeing the eighth chapter of Laozi and the development and evolution of the text of Laozi from the Han bamboo slips of Peking University, Laozi, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol 1, 2015, Feb, 5-11. Chen jian, A Potential Interpretation of the Opening Lines of Chapter 78 of the Laozi, *Journal of Shaanxi*

water in xianqin literature and the description for the water virtue in the *Dao De Jing* relatively briefly.<sup>2</sup> It was rarely analyzed in combination with personal values, interpersonal communication, and political domination. To deepen the understanding, this discussion will explore and analyze these two aspects in detail. Since Laozi's Dao on water occupies at least one-fourth of the book, this article will focus on analyzing the words or sentences directly related to these two virtues.

## 2. Exegesis Analysis

Due to the age, Laozi's word is not easy to understand. It is more practical to interpret Laozi's Tao concisely and clearly rather than analyzing difficult issues into more complex. Let the *Dao De Jing* become the book of wisdom and widely read by the general public is better than letting it cover by dust on the bookshelf. First of all, to eliminate some unnecessary interpretations, it is necessary to define the three main concepts discussed in this article from the perspective of exegesis. In particular, the concept of water is clearly defined as a common thing in real life, rather than the concept of five elements prophecy, which will help to understand the metaphor of Lao Tzu's use of water as the Dao discussed in the text and avoid misunderstandings.

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*Normal University ( Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, Vol. 46, No.5, Sep. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Wan zhiquan, Wan liting, On Pre-Qin scholars'expounding theory with water image, *Journal of Nanchang Institute of Technology*, Vol.34, No.5, Oct. 2015. Geng xiaohui, The Complex of "Respecting Water" in Laozi and Its Literary Value, *Research on Chinese Old Schools in the New Era*, Vol.12, No. 5, Oct. 2019.

## 2.1 The Character *shui* 水 (Water)

Water originally refers to a transparent and odorless liquid which is also the general term for different waters like rivers, plains, lakes, and seas. Most of the character water that appears in the *Dao De Jing* falls into these two categories. In the oracle bone graphic form, the character 𠂔 symbolizes natural waterways and flowing water, showing the drifting and changing condition of the water. At the same time, the middle is a solid line, and the two sides are dotted line, which shows the main emphasis of this character is the things flowing in the river. The *Shuowen* explains the character water as the level which means the object to measuring balance, the flattest thing in the world. Xu also said, water represents the journey to the north, many streams of water flowing side by side, the middle curve represents the deeply hidden masculinity. But later scholars think his statement is far-fetched to the practice of *yin yang* and five elements prophecy. At least twenty chapters of the Laozi are directly related to water, not to mention those indirectly related discussions. For focusing, the indirect descriptions are not included in this article.

Linking the *Dao De Jing* with the theory of Yin-yang and the Five Elements will make Laozi's simple philosophical thoughts gradually become religious and the reading for feudal superstition. Once the concept in the *Dao De Jing* becomes evidence of religious belief, its importance may be greatly improved in a short period, but the exalted status will make it can

not be questioned or doubted. Such a sublime would make it vulnerable and obscures its precious inspiration for readers as philosophical thought. The ethos of predecessors' annotations will drive the direction of later learning, and it will also increase difficulties for those who want to understand the essence of Dao in later generations. Furthermore, adding religious color to the interpretation of the *Dao De Jing*, or linking water virtue with *xuande*, women, and gestation is the same situation, and it does not help to restore the true nature of the text.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 The Character *ci* 慈 (compassionate)

The character *ci* 慈 (compassionate) represents kindly love, showing affection or kindness to others. It is often used to describe a loving mother, so the ancients often used this single character to represent mother, like both *cizhi* 慈旨 or *cijiao* 慈教 stand for the teaching of the mother. The *Shuowen* said, it refers to love, to analyze by graphic shape, the upper part *zi* 兹 is for pronunciation and the lower part *xin* 心 is a semantic component. The *Book of Etiquette* annotated the character *ci* in *ciyi ganzhi* 慈以甘旨<sup>4</sup> as 愛敬進之 to help with love and respect. The *Zuozhuan* annotated the character *ci* in 慈者，愛出於心，恩於物也 as to love and be merciful to others sincerely. The Daoist document of Xianqin dynasty *Taiyi*

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<sup>3</sup> Shang Yongliang Zhu Chunjie, New Interpretations of Lao-Tse's 'Xuan' and 'Xuan de', *Fudan Journal(Social Sciences)*, No.1, 2020, 101-103.

<sup>4</sup> Chapter neize, Ma Xinmin edited, (Han) Zhengxuan, (Tang)Kong Yingda annotated, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (十三經注疏) (The annotation of the Book of Etiquettes – the collection of 13 classics version),(Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000). Translated by myself.

*shenghui* begins with: ‘Taiyi produces water and water complements Taiyi, the heaven is accomplished by them... Heaven and earth are born of Taiyi. Therefore, Taiyi hides in water and its moves. At that time, it is the mother of all things.’<sup>5</sup> Hence, the character *ci* indicates one loves and assists others in growth. It is the same with water which to be generous, charity tolerance and sympathizes to surroundings and everyone. The compassion of water is mainly derived from its soft and inclusive nature. It is only because of its softness that it can accept all kinds of differences. Because of its acceptance, it is possible to say that this loving-kindness is universally given to everything without judging the status or abilities of others, so it happens with sincere respect.

## 2.3 The word *buzheng* 不爭 (non-contending)

The character *zheng* 爭 (contention) stands for wrangle, strife, litigation, competition. The word *buzheng* 不爭 (non-contending) means to avoid all of these. The *Shuowen* explains the contention as *yinye* 引也 (guide), which means to take and own things to oneself. This explanation very bluntly points out that the reason for the dispute is that both sides want to take advantage of themselves. The *Shuoyuan* mentioned, ‘Conquest is against virtue.’ It follows from this the avoidance of strife is close to the principle of morality.

*In the Collection of Ancient Documents* chapter Dayu mo said, ‘Without arrogance, no

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<sup>5</sup> 太一生水。水反輔太一，是以成天……天地者，太一之所生也。是故太一藏于水，行于時，周而或□□□□萬物母。Jingmen Museum, *Bamboo slips of Chu Tomb of Guodian*, Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1998. Translated by myself.

one is more talented than you. Without boast, no one makes more contributions than you.’<sup>6</sup>

The *Book of Etiquettes* said, ‘Disputed is the cause of chaos.’<sup>7</sup> This point is very close to the main point of Laozi's full text. To fight for personal interests is naturally against morality, but sometimes one has to fight for the public interest. Even if it is the righteous fight, he still cannot forget to do without intention. During the process of action, do not add personal desires or take credit for oneself after success. To avoid the thought that I have worked harder than anyone else and learn the non-contending spirit of water. Even if the water nourishes all things, it is still willing to be in a lowly position, this is not only to improve one's self-cultivation but also to ensure one's own safety.

The non-contending virtue of water is equal to *bukan xian* 不敢先 (not get ahead of all) which is also one of Laozi's three treasures. Water shows its hamble by going to the low alone while others all go to the high. Through Laozi's word, ‘The reason why the river and the sea become the king of all brooks is they are good at being in low places so they become the place where hundreds of stream meet...Without contention, no one in the world can compete with you.’<sup>8</sup> Therefore, *gu* 谷 valley or *gushen* 谷神 the god of the valley is the extension of meaning for the virtue of water. When Wangbi annotated ‘*kuangxi qi ruogu* 曠兮

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<sup>6</sup> 汝惟不矜，天下莫與汝爭能；汝惟不伐，天下莫與汝爭功。Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/counsels-of-the-greatyu/zh?searchu=%E6%B1%9D%E6%83%9F%E4%B8%8D%E7%9F%9C%E5%A4%A9%E4%B8%8B%E8%8E%AB%E8%88%87%E6%B1%9D%E7%88%AD%E8%83%BD%E3%80%82>, 15/03/22. Translated by myself.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter neize, Ma Xinmin edited, (Han) Zhengxuan, (Tang)Kong Yingda annotated, Liji zhengyi 禮記正義 (十三經注疏) (The annotation of the Book of Etiquettes – the collection of 13 classics version),(Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000). Translated by myself.

<sup>8</sup>(Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *Daode jing jie* 道德經解(The annotation of Dao de jing)(Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009), 128.Translated by myself.

其若谷 (One's mind is broad and open-minded like a deep valley)' <sup>9</sup>, he said, 'The god of the valley, one is not in the middle of the valley. Formless and shadowless, without rebellion or disobedience, being humble and unmoved, keeping stillness without fading, things are accomplished without seeing their shape, this is the ultimate state.'<sup>10</sup>

Constantly changing itself as the environment changes, while the core spirit remains stable, this is the main reason why water is non-contending. Therefore, if one has a clear understanding of the illusion of the duality of things when something happens, he adapts to the situation and conditions, but will not be attached to any result. If one can truly realize that good and bad, disasters and blessings are the same as what Lao Tzu said. Every existing thing is recognized to rely on its opposite, they will transform from each other. Since there is no difference in any choice, contending is no more needed. why do people fight if they will get the same results? Therefore, the virtue of non-contending is actually the belief that the essence of the Dao is empty, full but not overflowing, and that things are only opposite to each other superficially. Without this belief, it is impossible to be non-contending.

### **3. The Constituent Elements of Dao**

First of all, water can show the spiritual connotation of the Dao, which is the

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<sup>9</sup>(Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 53. Translated by myself.

<sup>10</sup> (Wei)Wangbi, (魏)王弼, Bian jiazhen 邊家珍(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, (edited by Zihai Essence) (Phoenix Publishing House·2017), 10. Translated by myself.

embodiment of Laozi's theory. Water is a familiar object of daily life, while Dao is subtle and mysterious to ordinary people, so the connection of the two can improve the understanding of the Dao. Laozi says: 'The ontology of Dao is deep and indifferent, capable of developing all things, and for all things to depend on... The main body of the Dao is still and motionless, with no shape or appearance.'<sup>11</sup> It shows that the Dao is deep, silent, and able to develop all things. It is so empty but fills the heavens and the earth. Most of the time, water is also quiet and peaceful, silently nourishing all kinds of creatures on the earth. In the changes of the movement cycle, the forms of water are numerous. But its total amount rarely changes and is stored within the transformation of the landform, in the clouds, rivers, or deep underground. Therefore, in people's daily life, water appears to be inexhaustible. Because it is similar to the essence of Dao and therefore its core spirit last for a long. Just like the Dao, water is always around people, so it is often overlooked. Only through Laozi's detailed understanding of the metaphor of Dao can we understand the mystery of it.

To further explained, Zhuangzi said, 'The one covers all things which is as big as the ocean.'<sup>12</sup> and 'it is as clear as the abyss.'<sup>13</sup> It implies that the Dao is as vast as the river and sea, and like the transparently clear and limpid of water. Chapter eight of Laozi says, 'The highest virtue is gentle like water. Water is good for everything without contention, and it

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<sup>11</sup>(Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 39. Translated by myself.

<sup>12</sup> (Qing) Wang xianqian, Liuwu (清) 王先謙, 劉武補正, *Zhuangzi jijie* 莊子集解 (The annotation of Zhuangzi)(Beijing: Zhonghua Bookstore Publishing House, 2012), 124. Translated by myself.

<sup>13</sup>(Qing) Wang xianqian, Liuwu (清) 王先謙, 劉武補正, *Zhuangzi jijie* 莊子集解 (The annotation of Zhuangzi), 124. Translated by myself.

deals with what everyone hates, so it almost is the Dao... Only do not fight with anyone, so never cause criticism.<sup>14</sup> Why does Laozi treat water as ‘almost the Dao’ but not the same as the Dao metaphor for water? Wangbi's commentary points out the reason, ‘The Dao has no shape or appearance but water does’,<sup>15</sup> so the Dao and tangible water cannot be completely equal. It was mentioned earlier that the properties of water and the Dao are very similar. But the understanding that water is completely equal to Dao is superficial. Through Wangbi's annotations, we can realize that the profound meaning of the Dao is far beyond the reach of ordinary people's thinking. In the beginning, water is a good medium, but with the deepening of understanding of the Dao, it is not only to this extent.

Without being deficient, or choosing beauty and ugliness, likes and dislikes, water nourishes all things. Its virtue is a universal love to all, and there is nothing it wants to disadvantage. The compassionate includes benevolence, love, equality, and grandeur. Its virtues is changeable but not losing the steadiness, rises into clouds and rains, and it descends into hundreds of rivers. It moves according to the seasons and weather, and its grace is universally bestowed on all things. Its virtue is modest and clear, always be in a humble position, washing everything and removing filth. The above two is describing the compassionate virtue of water. There are many classifications of water virtue in previous studies, and this article mainly discusses the virtues of compassionate and non-contending, so

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<sup>14</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 43. Translated by myself.

<sup>15</sup> (Wei)Wangbi, (魏)王弼, Bian jiazhen 邊家珍(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 6. Translated by myself.

it touches on the two aspects of the origin — humility by no judgment of others, and the constant of the heart. Humility is the premise of loving-kindness. Because of humility, water is willing to be in a place that everyone hates, to do things that everyone is unwilling to do, and even help others to wash away the filth and get clean again. If it is proud and boastful, how can it serve others with sincerity? And broad kindness means that it will not choose to like or dislike before deciding whether to help or not. Everyone or all the environment is equal to it. If it wants to distinguish the good and bad one by one, then its kindness cannot reach every place. In the same way, water will not change its original intention because of evil deeds. For example, it will not reject flow through the polluted place. People will suffer because of self-inflicted, but the result is not the punishment of water.

Chapter sixty-eight describes the specific characteristics of the non-contending virtue of water, including ‘no force, no anger, no dispute, and being subordination’<sup>16</sup>. This chapter is showing the successful way of actions done without intention which achieve far more effective beyond the do with expectation. In Chapter twenty-two, four words of ‘not s self-bragging, not being self-righteous, not self-boast, not self-proclaimed outstanding’<sup>17</sup> were added to describe the non-contending virtue. These two chapters are intended to explain that the right way to ‘be good at being a literati, be good at being a soldier, be good at winning,

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<sup>16</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 132. Translated by myself.

<sup>17</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 65. Translated by myself.

and be good at arranging' is self-restraint. As discussed above, those who truly appreciate Laozi's way do not fight with others because they understand the principle of mutual transformation. But in real life, people often need to try to convince one's opponent with an argument or change the existing situation. As mentioned in the quotation, as officials, soldiers, and leaders, they are constantly making decisions about daily affairs. Does non-contending in the course of this action means passively waiting for the result? As the saying goes, a drop of water penetrates a stone, and even the weakest drop of water can penetrate a stone, so how can people face problems and not actively seek solutions? Just in solving problems, you can not blame others or the environment. If you fail, you must find out what can be improved, restrain your desire for reputation, material enjoyment, and wealth to avoid creating more problems, and do not think that you are the smartest and most capable. The person who successfully solved the problem does not take credit for it. It is precise because water does not compete that success can be achieved. This is the correct interpretation of the way of inaction. If one wants to achieve a goal, the real focus is the restraint of self-obsession, rather than manipulating the external environment to achieve his goal. Through restraint and humility, the effect he achieved is better than the other competitor.

#### **4. Water's virtue of compassionate and non-contending**

The first virtue of water is without being deficient or choosing beauty and ugliness, likes

and dislikes, water nourishes all things. Its virtue is a universal love to all, and there is nothing it wants to disadvantage. Water rises into clouds and rains, descends into hundreds of rivers, moves at any time of the season, and is nourishing with all things. Water contains the changing law of nature, but its core is deep and unchanging, as does the Dao. If its heart is restless and its thoughts change frequently, the natural rules will also be broken, and the creature cannot survive normally. Its constant is the power of change, just as a well-performing machine should be able to respond quickly to all operations, and its host will not fail because of the rapid changes. If people can understand Lao Tzu's way of nature, then most problems in life can be easily solved. Compassionate and non-contending originate from the constant law of water so that it can still maintain a normal state under any circumstances, constantly adapt to changes, and operate normally. Not only should one not shrink back and give up on the harsh environment, but also should not be greedy and attached to the superior environment. This is the revelation brought by the immutability of water.

The ancients set the twenty-four solar terms to cultivate according to the season. If the spring rain does not fall on time, and the winter snow does not arrive on time, the crops cannot grow smoothly. Therefore, although the water is changeable, it has always followed the law of heaven and earth. In Chapter two, 'The high and the down inclined to each other.'

<sup>18</sup> Chapter sixteen, 'Things are Everywhere, each returns to his roots.' <sup>19</sup> Chapter twenty-two,

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<sup>18</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 35. Translated by myself.

‘The most loss, so all things return.’<sup>20</sup> Chapter nine, ‘The ability to think that it is superior, it is better to let go and rest.’<sup>21</sup> The chapter the turn of October in the Collection of Songs, says, ‘Hundreds of brooks boil, and peak tombs collapse. Elevation becomes valleys, and mountain depressions become mountaintop.’<sup>22</sup> All that Laozi wants to say is the interconversion of binary oppositions. Therefore, ordinary people are taking or rejecting things by good or bad, high or low. But Lao Tzu pointed out that things go bad at the best of times, standing at the highest is the easiest to fall. They are easy to overturn. After seeing through the illusion, the best option is to treat gain and loss equally. After a long time test, Laozi's thought proved to be the truth. The principle that extremes must be reversed does not only exist at the material level. This experience is not new to most people. If one adjusts his mentality as soon as possible in the adversity, accepts the situation peacefully, and even looks for what is beneficial. One can get through difficult times faster. Similarly, when things are going well, his inner greed will continue to increase, which will speed up the degeneration of good things. Therefore, although the previous part has been analysing the application of Laozi's teaching of non-existence in life, these methods actually mainly act on people's hearts, and changing

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<sup>19</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 55. Translated by myself.

<sup>20</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 65. Translated by myself.

<sup>21</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), The annotation of Dao de jing, 115. Translated by myself.

<sup>22</sup> (Han)Zhengxuan's commentary, (Tang) Lu Mingde sound and meaning, Kong Yingda annotated, (漢)鄭氏箋, (唐)陸德明音義, 孔穎達疏, *Maoshi Zhushu* 毛詩注疏 (The annotation of Mao poem), (Qing)Jiyun, Yongyong, (清) 紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), volume 19, book 69, 538. Translated by myself.

their values is the key.

Secondly, compassion includes benevolence, love, equality, and grandeur. It can nurture all things, just like the Dao is the source of everything. Chapter four, 'The body of the Dao is empty, and its functions are endless, full of heaven and earth.'<sup>23</sup> Chapter six, 'The body of the Dao just like a continuum which is secluded, subtle and endless.'<sup>24</sup> Chapter thirty-two, 'All streams return to rivers and seas.'<sup>25</sup> Chapter sixty-six, 'Because it is good at being in low places.'<sup>26</sup> The above are all explanations of the inclusiveness of the Dao. Water can change into a square or a circle with the shape of the container. It is willing to change itself to accommodate others, and will not ask others to change to satisfy itself. Most of the time, people cannot perceive its influence, such as the humidity of the air. Although the moisture in the air is invisible, once it is lacking, people cannot maintain a normal life. Derived from its constant nature, this kind of compassion is continuous, just as the annual rainfall and time of each region are roughly the same, if there is a large change in rainfall, it usually means the advent of extreme disasters. Although it is very ordinary, it has a crucial impact on people's lives.

The springs from all over the place continue to gather to the abyss, and it can be full but

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<sup>23</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 39. Translated by myself.

<sup>24</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 42. Translated by myself.

<sup>25</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 80. Translated by myself.

<sup>26</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*,128. Translated by myself.

not overflowing, as the vastness accommodates everything. Its meaning is just like the Meng hexagram in the *Book of Changes*, the mountain is up and the water going down, the spring water flows out from the mountain, and gradually merges into the river and sea, and everything naturally sprouts from this procession. The chapter Shuidi in the *Guanzi* says, ‘What is water? It is the origin of all and the clan of all living beings.’<sup>27</sup> It is described that water is like the blood circulation of the land. The water does not stop to make all things come alive. Water can treat all living things in the world equally, and the same is true for the not overflowing essence of Dao. As long as the water flows through, all things are moistened and revitalized, just as the Dao exists everywhere, so all things can rely on. Moreover, the Dao becomes the basis of all things but does not take credit. Laozi advocates for learners to follow the equality of water and applies their compassion to everything. Following the example of water as the blood of society, willing to live in harmony with others, while maintaining a polite distance without hindering the actions of others, and making the society run smoothly through selfless dedication. This is the best performance of implementing water virtue. This is the key to freedom and keeps multiplying of living beings.

Third, water occupies the low position, removes filth, and wash everything, its virtue is humble and clear. Chapter seventy-eight ‘Nothing in the world is weaker than water, nothing

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<sup>27</sup> (Zhanguo) Guanzhong, Jixia school, (戰國)管仲、稷下學派, ( Tang)Fang xuanling, (唐)房玄齡注, *Guanzi* 管子, (清)紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), volume 14, book 729, 156. Translated by myself.

can overcome it.’<sup>28</sup> Chapter forty-three ‘The gentlest in the world, walks through the strongest in the world.’<sup>29</sup> Most people want to achieve their wishes by gaining more power and making others afraid to bully. But Laozi pointed out that as the weakest competency, water can defeat the mighty force. Because everyone expects leaders who are generally given benevolence. Those who are not contentious do not worry about interests or spend their time and energy trying to outdo others. On the contrary, he actively appears when people want to avoid paying the price. Who would dislike such a person? His existence can make everyone happy, so he becomes an invisible leader. No one has paid as much as him, so everyone is grateful to him. When the situation suddenly changes, he is the most trusted person in their hearts, this is the real noble and powerful.

It is not difficult for insightful people to understand the mystery of water virtue, but why just a few people are able to practice it? Mencius said, ‘Benevolence conquers unkind, just as water conquers fire. Today's benevolence is like saving a carload of fire with a cup of water. If it does not extinguish, people think that water is incapable of defeating the fire, which is even worse than the unmerciful. In the end, it will only perish the climate of good deeds.’<sup>30</sup> Because of the great temptation of reputation, material pleasures, and profit, people

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<sup>28</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 145. Translated by myself.

<sup>29</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 97. Translated by myself.

<sup>30</sup> (Han)Zhaoqi annotated, (Song)Sunshi sound and meaning, (漢)趙岐注, (宋)孫奭音義并疏, *Mengzi Zhushu* 孟子注疏 (The annotation of Mencius), (清) 紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), volume 11, book 195,

knew that benevolence and virtue could bring long-term benefits, but still could not give up the benefits that were within reach or offered benefits to the public falsely. Such kindness is like saving a fire with a glass of water. The problem is not the role of water, but the inability of the practitioners to serve the people wholeheartedly. The power of benevolence without sincerity is naturally inferior to the concentration of those who seek personal interests.

## **5. The Application of Water's Virtue**

The application of the Dao is widespread in everything of daily life. Some scholars divided the water discussed by Laozi into three aspects, morality, life, and the ontology of the universe. This method is convenient for understanding and analyzing. In order to facilitate the discussion, this article will roughly divide the virtue of water into two points, including the improvement of personal value, and the improvement of the effectiveness of governance.

### **5.1 For personal mindset**

In the promotion of personal spiritual value, the virtue of non-contending is not passive waiting, but acting following the virtues of water, doing things vigorously, never stopping, and not taking credit for achievements. Zigong once asked Confucius why he had to look at the great water every time he saw it, and Confucius replied, 'It is universal and selfless, like

virtue; what it reaches is born, like benevolence; it is humble and eloquent, and it follows its principles, like righteousness; its plain meaning is widely circulated, its depth is difficult to measure, like wisdom; it goes to the valley of hundreds of miles without doubt, like bravery.’

<sup>31</sup> Although water virtue is non-contending, it also possesses other qualities such as benevolence, morality, bravery, etc. worthy of the example of a gentleman, indicating that a person should Free yourself from the desire for fame, material pleasures, and profit, restore a pure and rational state of mind and then follow the example of water to contribute your talents to serve the public. ‘The reason that the river and the sea become the king of hundreds of grains is they are good at being in low places, so they become the place where hundreds of streams meet.’ <sup>32</sup> They have become the king of hundreds of brooks because it accommodates many drinks of water without differentiation. The humility and contentment of the water flowing down means that people should be able to be submissive and able to accommodate differences. The lowly position is something that everyone hates and runs away from. Anyone who is not afraid of the filth and filth and puts his interests after the public interests, his virtue can move everyone and become the heart of the people. Moreover, to imitate the virtue of water to get along with others, be sincere and just, and naturally win people's hearts. Laozi

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<sup>31</sup>(Han)Liuxiang, (漢)劉向撰, *Shuoyuan* 說苑·雜言, (清) 紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), volume 17, book 696, 154. Translated by myself.

<sup>32</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 128. Translated by myself.

said, ‘Needless to fight over with others, but be good at victory.’<sup>33</sup> Do not fight for power and privilege. Do not argue for distinguishing right and wrong. One’s status and prestige will gradually increase by his kindness and benefit everyone. By the good performance and status promotion, people’s jealousy may cause criticism. Therefore, Laozi also reminds, ‘Let your heart be as peaceful as the abyss.’<sup>34</sup> To prevent praise and reputation from destroying one’s initial motive, maintain a calm and clear, quiet and profound state of mind, and never argue with or blame others. If the atmosphere of society is injustice, extravagance, or turmoil, keep your mind unmoved, even if the realm is constantly changing, one can always maintain the stillness of his heart. ‘For those dishonest, one should keep his sincerity.’<sup>35</sup> No matter whether others are faithful or not, one must have sincere fellowship with them. Adjusting words and deeds on time will not invite resentment during interpersonal communication.

### 5.3 For the efficiency of governing

In terms of the effectiveness of state governance, imitating water virtue is the way of learning from the Dao and nature. Allowing things to operate according to the laws of natural change, rather than imposing control to achieve individual selfish desires. Governance with no personal intentions can better achieve the state of interaction with surroundings without a

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<sup>33</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 139. Translated by myself.

<sup>34</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 43. Translated by myself.

<sup>35</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 103. Translated by myself.

lack. Therefore, Laozi spent many chapters discussing the virtue of compassion and non-contending. For example, Chapter ten, ‘Love the people and govern the country, as one does nothing.’<sup>36</sup> Chapter eighty-one, ‘The way of the sage is governing without contending.’<sup>37</sup> Chapter fifty-seven, ‘If the ruler governs the country without personal intentions, the people will cultivate themselves. If ruler likes peace, the people will naturally be upright.’<sup>38</sup> Implementing policies under the public sentiment is like water that adapts to temperature and solar terms and changes to frost and rain, because it does not interfere but achieves better results. The implementation of policies does not burden the people but instead benefits them, then everyone is happy to accept rules. Guanzi said, ‘Water is the transformation method of the world by a sage which can solve all problems.’<sup>39</sup> This means that a ruler who imitates the purity and equality of water can make the people's minds upright and peaceful. People will not be obscured by material desires and achieve the effect of social harmony. It can also avoid the embarrassing situation that the government officials took a lot of effort to persuade the public, but it did not work. As the *Huainan zi* said, ‘Personal ambitions cannot interfere with public policy, and personal hobby cannot affect major occupations.’<sup>40</sup> For example, a leader

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<sup>36</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 45. Translated by myself.

<sup>37</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 148. Translated by myself.

<sup>38</sup> (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Dao de jing*, 114. Translated by myself.

<sup>39</sup> (Zhanguo) Guanzhong, Jixia school, (戰國)管仲、稷下學派, ( Tang)Fang xuanling, (唐)房玄齡注, *Guanzi* 管子, *Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge* (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), volume 14, book 729, 156. Translated by myself.

<sup>40</sup> (Han)Gaoyou, (漢)高誘, *Huainan honglie jie* 淮南鴻烈解, (清) 紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei : Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008),

can raise an army to stop aggression and protect the people, but he cannot wage war to expand his territory or collect wealth. Do not use personal interests as a motivation for public policy.

## 6. Conclusion

From the previous analysis, it can be concluded that the Dao of Laozi displayed in the water virtue is in line with the laws of nature and can be universally applied in daily life. Its core is eternal and beyond the scope of water virtue. The Dao, which was born before the heavens and the earth, is always in operation, but because it is formless and colourless at the beginning, it cannot be grasped in the end. Among the tangible objects, water is the most special and can best express the profound nature of the Dao, so it has become the carrier of Dao. Laozi advocated compassion and non-contention based on his observation of the war-torn social situation at that time. Both of them are fundamental ways to get people out of war, crime, and suffering. It will not let people completely change their way of life, just prevent unscrupulous and unjust competition. A quiet and unchanging sincerity is an important source of many virtues of water. Only by being able to appreciate the importance of tranquility can we completely understand the Dao of Laozi. Just like Zhuangzi's question and answer of the river god and the sea god, one is not disturbed by the outside world, and his heart is always at

ease. To be able to coexist with all things is the practice of compassion and non-contention.

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