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for Contemporary Society

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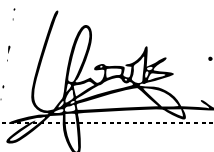
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**The Value of *Laozi's*
'Profound Consonance (玄同)'
for Contemporary Society**

《老子》「玄同」思想的當代意義

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

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, greater exchange of goods, culture, people and capital occur as a result. These exchanges have also increased the chances of friction and conflict, when differences emerge but fail to be reconciled. This essay examines the concept of 'profound consonance' from the *Laozi*, in hopes to offer a solution to problems faced individuals and the society today. Firstly, this essay discusses the concept of 'profound consonance' and its theoretical foundations. Next, the ways to achieve profound consonance is explored, first by identifying the obstacles and then by proposing ways to overcome these obstacles. Finally, the implications for the individual, interpersonal relationships and the society are discussed.

Key words: *Laozi*, profound consciousness, oneness, differences, dualism

摘要

隨著世界相互聯繫的日益緊密，貨物、文化、人員和資本的交流也隨之增加。當人與人的分歧無法得到調節，這些交流也新增添了摩擦和衝突的機會。本文希望通過對《老子》中「玄同」思想的研究，為當今個人和社會所面臨的問題提供一種解決方案。本文首先論述了「玄同」的思想及其理論基礎。接下來便探討如何實現「玄同」的思想，首先找出了不能達到「玄同」的原因，再提出解決方案。本文最後討論了「玄同」給個人、人際關係和社會帶來的影響。

關鍵詞：老子，玄同，一體，分歧，二元對立

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1. Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected, facilitated by a rate of globalisation unprecedented in history. This brings about greater exchange of goods, culture, capital and people, making boundaries between groups, countries and regions increasingly fluid. However, such exchanges have also increased the chances of friction, conflict and warfare, when differences emerge but fail to be reconciled. Recent years have seen many conflicts arising out of differences in ideology, religion and even ethnicity. The Syrian Civil War arose because of the people's uprisings against the Syrian government's authoritarian regimes, resulting in one of the deadliest wars of the 21st century. The 2019 Christchurch shootings took the lives of 51 people and left 40 others injured, as a result of religious intolerance. Differences in ethnicity have also fuelled racism-related hatred and violence, the most recent one being the anti-Asian hate crimes, as people put the blame on Asians for the Covid-19 pandemic. When differences are magnified and people fail to find common ground, intolerance and hatred breed, giving rise to conflict of different scales – among individuals, groups, regions or even at the international scale. In light of these, negotiating differences is therefore particularly important in contemporary society, to build harmonious relations and establish peace.

The *Laozi* offers important lessons for such conflicts of the contemporary era. In particular, this essay focuses on the idea of 'profound consonance' or *xuantong* 玄同, as mentioned in Chapter 56 of the *Laozi*:

Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know. Block up the openings, shut the gateways, blunt the sharp edges, untangle the knots, soften the glare, bring things together on the same track. This is what is called the *profound consonance*.¹

'Profound consonance' is one of the most important ideology in the *Laozi*, which describes an ideal state of life and the goal towards which society should aim to develop. Chen Guying 陳鼓應 describes it as a state of mysteriously wonderful unity, which is also a state of Dao. It is a state devoid of personal bias, where all boundaries are removed, where the narrow limitations of interpersonal relations are

¹ A modified translation of Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 312.

transcended, to make room for one to approach all people and things with openness and without prejudice.² It is the character of ‘inner sagacity and outer kingliness’. When used to guide personal cultivation, one can become a sage; when used to guide a country’s governance, world peace can be attained.³ Therefore, a deeper understanding on profound consonance would be especially valuable, given the context of the present-day society.

With regards to the ideology of profound consonance, there have been research on the meaning of the term,⁴ its implications as expressed in the *Laozi*,⁵ as well as the possible ways it can be implemented in the society.⁶ Most of the literature on profound consonance are in the Chinese language, and in contrast, there is a lack of related literature in the English language, to the best of my knowledge. A search using the keywords ‘Laozi’ or ‘Daoism’, together with different translations of the term *xuan* 玄 and *tong* 同, such as ‘mysterious’, ‘profound’ or ‘dark’, and ‘consonance’, ‘agreement’ and ‘unity’, yields only little relevant results. Research that focuses on the topic is scarce, and even if it were discussed, it is only present as a subtopic.⁷ Therefore, this essay aims to fill this research gap by providing an interpretation of the topic in English. This essay will begin by examining the concept of profound consonance and its theoretical foundations, ways to achieve the state of profound consonance, and finally its implications on interpersonal, intergroup and international relations, based mainly on the *Laozi*. It is hoped that this essay can provide some inspiration to the Western world, on the *Laozi*’s lessons on negotiating differences, paving the way for a world openness, non-prejudice and acceptance in contemporary society.

² Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 314-315

³ Xie Qingguo 謝清果, ‘The Research on Lao Zi’s “XuanTong” ideology and the Construction Method of Human Destiny Community (老子 “玄同” 思想體系與人類命運共同體的建構方略)’, *The Central Plains Culture Research*, 6.1(2018), 32-41.

⁴ Xue Hua 薛華, ‘An Interpretation of “Xuantong” (簡釋玄同)’ *Zhexue Yu Wenhua* (哲學與文化), 5(2004), 3-11.

⁵ Tang Mingbang 唐明邦, ‘On Laozi’s Xuantong Wish (老子尊道貴德尚和的 “玄同” 願景)’, *Journal of Huazhong Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 46.6 (2007), 89-91.

⁶ Wang Lujuan 王路娟, ‘“Xuantong Theory” on the Inspiration of Modern Public Management (老子 “玄同論” 思想對我國現代公共管理的啟示)’, *Journal of Shangqiu Vocational and Technical College*, 9.6 (2010), 15-17.

⁷ Kenneth Dorter, ‘Indeterminacy and Moral Action in Laozi’, *Dao* 13 (2014), 63-81.

2. ‘Profound Consonance’ and its Theoretical Foundations

What does it mean by ‘profound consonance’? Scholars have made the following interpretations. Chen Guying describes it as a state of open-mindedness towards all people and things, where all personal bias are removed, all boundaries eliminated, and all limitations transcended.⁸ He also quoted Wang Chunfu 王純甫, who remarked that profound consonance is a ‘great form of unity with [all things] which does not bear any outward signs [of unification].’⁹ Qing Ningzi 清寧子 was more direct in stating that profound consonance is in fact, the *Dao* 道.¹⁰ From the above descriptions, we can infer that it is a state close to perfection as it had been described as *Dao*, but it is still difficult for us to grasp what the term entails. The following section will examine in detail the term and its theoretical foundations.

2.1. ‘Profound Consonance’ (*Xuantong* 玄同)

In the *Laozi*, the character *wu* 無 which means ‘nothingness’, and is also a form of negation, had been used many times to describe the *Dao*. People have long come to associate the *Dao* with the term *wu*. While *wu* is an important characteristic of the *Dao*, it is just one aspect, and the *Dao*’s *xuan*, or profoundness, is another characteristic that should not be neglected too. The aspect of profoundness in comparison, have received much less attention by scholars. Within the *Laozi*, the term *xuan* 玄 was used 11 times across seven chapters. When it first appeared in Chapter 1, Ames and Hall’s translated it as ‘obscure’, when used to describe *Dao* as something that cannot be named or put into words.¹¹ In Chapter 6, when used to

⁸ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 314-315.

⁹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 314.

¹⁰ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 314.

¹¹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “Making This Life Significant” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 77.

describe *Dao* as the ‘root of the world’, *xuan* is translated as ‘dark’.¹² It appeared twice in Chapter 10 to describe two different things. When used to describe the inner depth of human mind which can clearly reflect all things like a mirror, *xuan* was translated as ‘profound’. When describing the *de* 德 (virtue and efficacy) of a leader who acts in accordance to the *Dao*, *xuan* was also translated as ‘profound’.¹³ In Chapter 15, when used to describe people of the past who were good at forging their way in the world, *xuan* was translated as ‘dark’.¹⁴ Its usage in Chapter 51 is the same as in Chapter 10 when discussing the efficacy of the leader, and is translated as ‘profound’.¹⁵ In Chapter 56, which is where the term *xuantong* 玄同 originates, it is translated as ‘profoundest consonance’.¹⁶ Lastly in Chapter 65, when used to describe leaders in the past who were able to practise *Dao* in governance, *xuan* was also translated as ‘profound’.¹⁷ From these translations of its different usage in the *Laozi*, we know that *xuan* has the meanings of ‘obscure’, ‘dark’ and ‘profound’, which seem to suggest that it is something deep, profound and a concept that evades our full knowledge.

The *Laozi* is otherwise known as *Daodejing* 道德經, consisting of both the *Dao* Classic 道經 from chapters 1 to 37, and the *De* Classic 德經 from chapters 38 to 81. This shows the importance of the concepts *Dao* and *De* in the *Laozi*. What is the significance of these concepts, and the relationship between them? To answer this question, one can look to the opening chapter of the *Laozi*, which states:

The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant “*Dao*”. The name that can be named is not the constant “name”. “*Wu* 無”, names the beginning of heaven and earth. “*You* 有”, names the mother of all things. Thus, for constant “*wu* 無”, one wants to look to its *miao* 妙. For constant “*you* 有”, one wants to look to its *jiao* 徼. These two arise from the same but with different names. And both can be called *xuan* 玄. The *xuan* 玄 of

¹² Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 85.

¹³ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 90.

¹⁴ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 97.

¹⁵ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 157.

¹⁶ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 164.

¹⁷ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 179.

xuan 玄, this is the gate of all subtlety.¹⁸

In Wang Bi's 王弼 commentary of the last three sentence, he states that 'both' refers to 'beginning' and 'mother'. 'Arise from the same' refers to *xuan* as the origin of 'beginning (of heaven and earth)' and 'mother (of all things)'. He went on to explain that *xuan* can be understood as 'dark', 'deep', 'silent' and 'nothingness' (玄者，冥也，默然無有也), which is where 'beginning', and 'mother' originates.¹⁹ In Wang Bi's terms, *xuan* gives rise to the beginning of heaven and earth, and the mother of all things.

Accordingly, the *Laozi* had also clearly established *Dao* as the source or basis for the creation of the myriad things, and that which has existed even before the formation of the cosmos. For example, Chapter 42 states, 'The *Dao* generates oneness, oneness generates twoness, twoness generates threeness, threeness generates all things.'²⁰ Chapter 51 also mentioned, 'The *Dao* generates them, virtuosity (德) nourishes them, things give shape to them, *shi* 勢 [appearance, situation, tendency] brings them to completion. This is why none of the myriad things do not revere the *Dao* and value virtuosity.'²¹ From the two chapters, we can see that the *Laozi* has established *Dao* as the origin of the myriad things, similar to how Wang Bi explained *xuan* as that which has given rise to the beginning of heaven and earth, and the mother of all things. *Dao* and *xuan* are both the source of creation. As a result, Zhang Dainian 張岱年 asserts that *xuan* is another expression of *Dao*.²² This assertion can be supported by how the different meanings of *xuan* in the *Laozi* as mentioned before, namely 'obscure', 'dark' and 'profound', are also the characteristics of the *Dao*. As the term 'profound' can best encapsulate these various aspects of *xuan*,

The character *tong* 同 describes a state of togetherness, sameness, agreement

¹⁸ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 46.

¹⁹ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 7.

²⁰ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 258.

²¹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 290.

²² Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 290.

and unity. This essay adopts Ames and Hall's translation of 'consonance',²³ which refers to the 'agreement or compatibility between opinions or actions'.²⁴ When 'profound' is placed before the term 'consonance', it is an adjective to describe the state of consonance. As established before, 'profound' is another name for *Dao*. Thus, 'profound consonance' refers to the state of agreement, sameness and unity which has reached the level of *Dao*, which has become one with the *Dao*.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

What then, is this state of 'profound consonance'? As discussed earlier, at the very beginning in chapter 1, it is said that 'These two arise from the same but with different names. And both can be called *xuan* 玄'.²⁵ The 'two' refers to the concepts of *wu* 無 [non-presence, lacking, non-being] and *you* 有 [presence, having, being]. Wang Anshi 王安石 explained that *you* 有 and *wu* 無 both emerge through the *Dao*. *Wu* 無 is often regarded by scholars as pure essence, and *you* 有 as unsophistication, but fail to realise that both arise from *Dao*.²⁶ They originate from the same source, but take on different names. Tong Shuye 童書業 stated that 'In terms of their sameness, we find a condition in which they are undifferentiated, which is therefore called *xuan* 玄'.²⁷ These commentaries highlights the fact that both concepts *you* 有 and *wu* 無, which are seemingly opposite and contrasting ideas, arise from the same source, and there exists a state whereby they are undifferentiated.

How can two contrasting concepts be undifferentiated? Chapter 2 states,
As soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful are beautiful, there is already ugliness. As soon as everyone knows the able, there is ineptness. Determinacy (有) and indeterminacy (無) give rise to each other, difficult and easy complement each other,

²³ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, "Making This Life Significant" (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 164.

²⁴ Lexico, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/consonance>, accessed 23 March 2021.

²⁵ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 7.

²⁶ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 52.

²⁷ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 52.

long and short set each other off, high and low complete each other, refined notes and raw sounds harmonize (和) with each other, and before and after lend sequence to each other.²⁸

This chapter presents a series of concepts that seem to be the opposite of one another. When a standard is established, things that do not fulfil this standard come to stand in contrast to it, and its opposite is generated. Therefore, Ames and Hall noted that knowing the world through prescriptive descriptions generates correlative categories, that constitute themselves and their antimonies. Therefore, there is an ‘ontological parity’ among these events, and none of them are more real than any other.²⁹ Opposites are only relative to one another, and their existence depend on one another. They are not mutually exclusive. According to Ames and Hall, neither side is more superior than the other. As we know that *Dao* is the origin of all things, opposite concepts have a common origin too. From an ontological perspective, opposites are not that different from each other, as both sides have a common origin, and it is from each other that both of sides come into existence.

Additionally, the nature of *Dao*’s movement also brings to light how opposites are not that different from each other. Chapter 58 notes,

How misfortunate!, that on which fortune leans; how fortunate!, that in which misfortune hides. Who knows where their limits are? There is no *zheng* 正 [correct, straight, regularity]. What is regular becomes *qi/ji* 奇 [strange, unusual, irregular], what is good becomes *yao* 妖 [evil, demonic, deviancy]. The delusion of human beings has certainly been around for a long time.³⁰

Chen explains that the reason why there is no certainty to fortune and misfortune, is due to the fact that they constantly alternate, as with the movement of the *Dao* described in Chapter 40, ‘*fan* 反 [opposite, reversal] is the movement of the *Dao*.’³¹ Not only does fortune and misfortune alternate, what is considered to be good/evil and regular/strange also turn around and change into their opposites. Each

²⁸ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 80.

²⁹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 90.

³⁰ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 322.

³¹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 249.

component is non-constant, and are only different phases of change. For example, as a wheel turns, what is above would turn into that which is below, and vice versa. Tong Shuye explained that this is the result of all things contain the factors of their own negation within themselves, similar to the assertion of Ames and Hall that correlative categories constitute themselves and their antimonies. The nature of *Dao*'s movement also explains the consonance between opposites.

While we have established from an ontological perspective and the movement of the *Dao* that opposites are not mutually exclusive nor totally different from one another, it does not mean to say that complementary opposites are the same. Beautiful/ugly, good/evil and regular/strange are indeed different, and it is exactly because they are different which makes them elements of a process of change. As Moeller puts it, in contrast to common misunderstandings of Daoist philosophy and that of *Laozi*, it does not deny differences.³² A Daoist sage can clearly tell the differences between opposing concepts, such as beautiful/ugly, good/evil and fortune and misfortune. However, they remain emotionally indifferent in face of these differences, as they appreciate them as equal constituents of reality or of the 'movement of the *Dao*'.³³ They accept that things change, and one cannot say for sure what is ultimately good and bad, or which is superior to the other as a result. Each element turns into one another, like day and night, growth and decay, and in the constant process of change, there is no end. As a result, while acknowledging that they are different, the sage does not make any value judgement, and therefore shows no partiality.

In conclusion, from an ontological viewpoint and the movement of the *Dao*, opposites are not mutually exclusive or totally different from each other. They have the same origin, namely the *Dao*, and mutually consist of one another. Due to the *Dao*'s movement, these opposites constantly turn into each other too. This gives an element of consonance between opposites. On the other hand, this does not mean to say that opposites are entirely the same. There exists differences too. This paradoxical relationship between opposites contribute to the idea of 'profound consonance'.

³² Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), P. 100.

³³ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), P. 104.

3. Achieving Profound Consonance

In the *Laozi*'s discussion on the relationship of opposites and profound consonance, it analysed the human tendencies that impede the achievement of profound consonance, and provided possible solutions to it. In the following section, the obstacles and facilitators of achieving profound consonance will be discussed.

3.1. Obstacles

According to the *Laozi*, the main obstacle towards the achievement of profound consonance is the self. This is because self-centredness makes a person unrealistically obsessed with their own self-importance, seeking to establish one's importance and satisfy one's desires while disregarding the others. An internal desire to elevate one's self-importance, together with the seeking of external pleasures, contribute to the obstacles of achieving profound consonance.

An internal desire to elevate one's self-importance will result in one's 'showing off (自見)', 'considering themselves as right (自是)', 'conceit (自伐)' and 'bragging 自矜', as described in Chapter 24.³⁴ As people indulge in expanding their sense of self through such actions, they view anything that comes in the way of fulfilling their self-interests, such as the opinions, needs and desires of others, as a threat and seek to eliminate them. The expansion of selfish desires would only further the distance between the self and others, as one becomes self-absorbed and neglects the others. This also weakens the ability of a person to empathise and stand in the shoes of the others, and the inability to do so minimises any common ground, enlarging the differences between the self and others, which in turn hinders the attainment of profound consonance between the self and others.

Human's greed and desire for external pleasures and its consequences can be seen from chapter 12.

The five colours blind the eyes; the five tones deafen the ears; the five tastes damage the mouth; to gallop and hunt makes the human heart-mind wild; goods that are hard to obtain will obstruct people's conduct. This is why the sage lives for the belly and not the eyes, he lets go of that and chooses this.³⁵

³⁴ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 52.

³⁵ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional*

The belly refers to internal needs which are easily satisfied, while eyes represent external desires which are insatiable. Excessive desire for pleasures of the eyes, ears, mouth and heart-mind, result in damage to the senses and one's conduct. As greed for external pleasures is insatiable, such greed would drive a person to become more selfish and increasingly self-centred, and pay no regard to the well-being of others. Self-centredness as a result of greed hinders the ability of a person to recognise the oneness of the self and others.

The desires to enhance one's sense of self and external worldly pleasures is fuelled by one's subjective knowledge of the world. Chapter 3 states,

Not promoting talented [persons] makes the people not contend. Not valuing goods that are difficult to get makes the people not be robbers. Not displaying desirable objects makes the heart-minds of the people not disorderly.³⁶

As we can see, what is desired and sought after by people is influenced by their subjective value judgement. When persons of talent are promoted, people seek to establish themselves as 'talented', paving the way for contention. When rare goods become valued, people come to know them as 'valuable', and compete in hopes of possessing them. The knowledge of certain objects and characteristics as 'valuable' or 'desirable', gives rise to competition and conflicts, as people seek to possess them. Therefore, Chapter 3 continues, 'the government of a sage is... to constantly make the people without knowledge and desires (是以聖人之治.....常使民無知無欲)'.³⁷ Knowledge drives desires, and desires, whether they are to elevate one's sense self-importance or to satisfy the sensory pleasures, hinder the achievement of profound consonance.

3.2. Facilitators

Chapter 56 suggests ways to eliminate the sense of self and thus the obstacles to profound consonance:

Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know. Block up the openings, shut the gateways, blunt the sharp edges, untangle the knots, soften the glare, unite

Commentary, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 105.

³⁶ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 64.

³⁷ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing 老子道德經*, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 10-11.

with the dust. This is what is called the *profound consonance*. Therefore, it cannot be made intimate, it cannot be made distant, it cannot be made to bring profit, it cannot be made to bring harm, it cannot be honoured, it cannot be dishonoured. That is why it is the most precious thing in the world.³⁸

The second sentence describes six concrete ways to achieve the state of profound consonance, which informs us how we should view the existence of the self, and how to conduct oneself in relation to others.

Liu Haicheng 劉海成 argues that ‘block up the openings, shut the gateways’, ‘blunt the sharp edges, untangle the knots’ and ‘soften the glare, bring things together on the same track’, refer respectively to the negation and elimination of emotional judgement, value judgement and factual judgement. Such an interpretation corresponds to last part of the chapter and makes the chapter a complete whole.³⁹ First, ‘block up the opening, shut the gateways’ refers to blocking the senses that give rise to desires and emotions, which in turn influences the way one knows about matters and objects in the world. In Wang Bi’s explanation of the same phrase in Chapter 52, openings (*dui* 兌) are where affairs and desires are generated; gateways (*men* 門) are from which affairs and desires proceed.⁴⁰ Openings and gateways can be extended to refer to bodily cavities, such as the mouth, eyes, ears, and nose. These are the mediums through which people’s emotions and desires are aroused and satisfied. When these pathways are blocked, one can be removed from emotional judgement, which makes one more intimate with some and more distant from the others, as a result of one’s own liking. Without emotional judgement, one would then be unable to be made intimate or distant, treating all equally.

What follows from this is ‘blunt the edges, untangle the knots’. Edges represent one’s abilities and knots represent disputes. This refers to the elimination of value judgement one places on others. One flaunts their abilities and enter into disputes because they see themselves as right, and others as wrong. However, such a value

³⁸ A modified translation of Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 312.

³⁹ Liu Haicheng 劉海成, ‘Laozi “Tong” De Sixiang Yanjiu’ 《老子》‘同’的思想研究, *Journal of Shangqiu Normal University* 商丘師範學院學報, 5(2019), 35.

⁴⁰ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 114.

judgement of the self being more superior than others is bound to hurt and upset others, resulting in interpersonal disputes. However, again as mentioned in Chapter 2, ‘As soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful are beautiful, there is already ugliness. As soon as everyone knows the able, there is ineptness.’⁴¹ Beauty is established only because it is relative to ugly, and the able named so, because it contrasts with the inept. Therefore, value judgements are only relative concepts, none is more real than the other. Accordingly, Ames and Hall assert that neither side is more superior than the other.⁴² Only when we are able to recognise this fact can we refrain from value judgement and prevent unnecessary conflict and disputes, which profit some but harm others.

Lastly is ‘soften the glare, unite with the dust’. This is the elimination of factual judgement, which can be thought of as the third phase, after removing from emotional and value judgement. In the physical world, darkness and light, radiance and dust, seem to be objectively contrasting states. However, again according to Chapter 2, all things, concepts and human evaluation emerge in the context of relativity, and are in a constant flux. Even concepts like long and short, high and low which seem to be objective facts, are only long and short, high and low when compared to one another. Something is considered to be long only when it is compared to a short object. When compared to another longer object, we then deem it to be ‘short’. As we can see, our seemingly factual judgements, are only relative arbitrary judgements given by humans. In order to be in line with the *Dao*, we need to recognise this and let go of what we regard as factual judgements. With that, we can transcend the difference between darkness and light, radiance and dust, and become unable to be honoured or dishonoured.

When a person is able to refrain from emotional judgements, value judgements and factual judgements, they are able to transcend differences in how they regard all phenomena. This is similar to what Moeller describes of the Daoist sage, who is emotionally indifferent and impartial towards in face of differences in the phenomenal realm.⁴³ The Daoist sage shows no preference for any state or object, and thus cannot be made intimate or distant, to bring profit or harm, nor to be

⁴¹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 80.

⁴² Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 81.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 104.

honoured or dishonoured. Without emotional and value judgements, one overcomes selfish desires and the sense of self-importance, attaining the state of *wuwo* 無我, or ‘non-self’. Without factual judgements, one overcomes the limitations of subjective knowledge. Subsequently, both obstacles towards profound consonance, as discussed earlier, can be overcome. As Chen Guying describes, it as a state of open-mindedness towards all people and things, where all personal bias are removed, all boundaries eliminated, and all limitations transcended.⁴⁴ In the words of Ames and Hall, this is a process of ‘effecting the most productive relationships within one’s field of experience’,⁴⁵ and is the most precious thing in the world.

4. Implications of Achieving Profound

Consonance

Based on our discussion in the previous section, the ability to be removed from personal emotional judgement, value judgement and factual judgement, deconstructs the sense of self, minimising selfish desires and the limitations of subjective knowledge. This paves the way for the achievement of profound consonance, where boundaries are eliminated, and a state of openness and consonance is achieved. While there exist differences in the phenomenal realm, such differences are not interpreted with subjective judgements, and are viewed indifferently. This state of profound consonance has important individual, interpersonal and societal implications, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.1. Implications for the Individual

When an individual cultivates the indifference of a Daoist sage towards differences, what are the implications on the individual?

Chapter 13 notes,

⁴⁴ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 314-315.

⁴⁵ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *A Philosophical Translation: Daodejing*, “*Making This Life Significant*” (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), p. 165.

‘Favour and disgrace are cause for alarm.’...What does it mean in saying ‘Favour and disgrace are both cause for alarm?’ Favour is *xia* 下 [inferior]. Both gaining it and losing it should be cause for alarm.⁴⁶

Wang Bi warned in his commentary that ‘disgrace will certainly follow when there is favour, and danger will certainly follow when there is honour.’⁴⁷ Both favour and disgrace are equal, in that they diminish a person’s dignity. Why is this the case when one receives favour? Chen Guying explained that psychologically, being unexpectedly bestowed a favour is rewarding, and makes a person value it. As people relish in the favour, they will at the same time be anxious about falling out of favour. As a result, they will be beset by anxiety and fear of losing this favour, and do everything in their ability to retain this favour. In the face of the person who has bestowed this favour, one will do everything to flatter them, and that is when a person loses their dignity. For one who desires, they become slaves to their desires. In comparison, a person who has not been bestowed favour, does not have the same anxiety. There is nothing they want to get out of the other person, and can thus maintain dignity and preserve personal integrity.⁴⁸

People often attach too much importance to external favours, praise, disgrace and slander. When they are bestowed favours and praise, they relish in them, and at the same time hold on to them anxiously in fears of losing it. Disgrace and slander bring them into a state of misery and affliction. As what the *Laozi* has mentioned, honour and disgrace bring the same effect to a person. The detrimental effect of placing too much importance on praise and disgrace can be seen from the numerous suicide cases among young Korean celebrities in recent years. Being under close, long-term scrutiny of the public and victims of malicious comments online, many of them develop anxiety and depression, and ultimately chose suicide to end their misery. However, if we were able to see that favours and disgrace, and even external gains or losses are not that different, in that both causes anxiety and diminishes

⁴⁶ A modified translation of Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 109.

⁴⁷ Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經, (Taipei: Wenshizhe Chubanshe 文史哲出版社, 2014), p. 25.

⁴⁸ A modified translation of Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 109.

personal dignity, we can be less affected and more emotionally resilient towards gains and losses in life. Emotional resilience is one benefit for an individual who recognises the profound consonance of phenomena.

Additionally, Chapter 22 talks about the benefits of being able to see the wholeness within fractions, which is to see the profound consonance among all things. It states,

If you don't want to be broken, bend. If you want to be straight, allow some crookedness. If you want to be filled, become empty. If you want to be made new, let yourself be used. If you want to be rich, desire little. Wanting more and more is craziness! Therefore, the sage embraces oneness, and becomes a model for the world. Not self-centred, they are enlightened. Not self-righteous, they are a shining example. Not self-glorifying, they accomplish glorious things. Not boastful, they grow large inside. They do not compete, and so they world can never overcome them.⁴⁹

People often only take notice of the superficial appearance, but fail to see what is beyond. We do not want to be broken, and pursue what is straight, full, new and rich. In fact, these are the positive side of things, and according to the *Laozi*, in order to achieve the positive aspects of things, we need to grasp its negative aspects, such as to bend so as not to be broken, to become empty so as to be filled, and to desire little to be rich. The underlying principle is similar to the theoretical foundations of profound consonance, whereby opposites exist in relativity, and both sides are mutually interdependent. For example, fruits and flowers are the outcome, while seed and roots are the cause. To enjoy the outcome of the fruits and flowers, which is the observable or 'positive' aspect, one has to grasp the hidden or 'negative' aspect, which is the seed and strong roots, which give rise to them. By being able to look beyond the positive aspect and also see the negative side, one is able to see whole. The whole can be understood as the 'oneness' in this chapter, which is also the concept of profound consonance.

For an individual who recognises the profound consonance of all things, they do not attempt to elevate their sense of self, nor do they hold a discriminating and judgemental attitude towards things and matters as a result of a partial view. Instead, the individual can relate to the wholeness that the fraction implicates. Therefore, they do not hold on to their subjective knowledge of the world and are not self-

⁴⁹ A modified translation of John R. Mabry, *The Book of the Way and Its Power: A New Translation* (Berkeley: The Apocryphile Press, 2017), p. 33.

important. Ironically, without being self-important, an individual becomes enlightened, a role model, accomplished and distinguished. They do not contend, and none are able to contend with them. This is another implication of recognising profound consonance on an individual.

4.2. Implications for Interpersonal Relationships and the Society

An individual who is able to see the profound consonance of all things, recognises that discriminating and judgemental attitude toward things is only a partial view, and behind this is profound consonance that unites different phenomena. When one applies such a view to interpersonal relationship, the result is as noted in Chapter 27,

Towards good people, I am good; towards those who are not good, I am also good. This way, everyone can be made to be good. Towards those who can be trusted, I trust; towards those who cannot be trusted, I trust as well. This way, everyone can be made to be trusting.⁵⁰

The good and the not good, the trustworthy and the untrustworthy, are treated equally by the Daoist sage. Equal treatment that is free from value judgements can bring out the goodness in everyone. The first being the sage themselves. Their character and integrity are preserved regardless of the circumstances. Secondly, this brings out the goodness in others as well, regardless of whether they are good and trustworthy or not in the first place.

Such humanitarian spirit can also be found in Chapter 27 which states,

The sage is always there to help people, so that no one is forsaken. They are always there to see to things, so that nothing is abandoned. This is called primordial clarity. What is a good person but a bad person's teacher? What is a bad person but raw material for a good person? If you do not respect your teacher, or love your 'raw material', you are greatly confused, regardless of your intelligence.⁵¹

This chapter expresses the strong emotional attitude of a sage who never turns their back on anyone or anything. With regards to 'primordial clarity', Shi Deqing 釋德

⁵⁰ A modified translation of Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 285.

⁵¹ A modified translation of John R. Mabry, *The Book of the Way and Its Power: A New Translation* (Berkeley: The Apocryphile Press, 2017), p. 38.

清 notes that ‘with primordial clarity, one opens up what is concealed.’⁵² With the wisdom of primordial clarity, one is able to observe that all people have their own talents and all things have their own function. Therefore, a sage helps each individual reach their full potential and ensures that all things can fully perform their function, by going along with the nature of each individual and object. Additionally, the sage treats all people with well, regardless of whether they are good or bad. Especially towards bad people, a sage does not disdain or desert them. On the one hand, there is a need to urge them to do good; on the other, they are the raw materials for a good person. As with the principle whereby opposites generate each other, both good and bad people are mutually dependent on each other, and are equal components of the *Dao*. Therefore, a sage loves and respects good and bad people equally.

The indifference of a sage can be better illustrated by the parable of *Hundun* 渾沌 in the *Zhuangzi*. The Emperor of the Southern Sea is *Shu*; the Emperor of the Northern Sea is *Hu*; the Emperor of the Middle is *Hundun* [渾沌, Chaos]. *Shu* and *Hu* often met in *Hundun*’s territory, and were always treated very well. They were determined to repay *Hundun*’s hospitality, saying ‘All people have seven holes to see, hear, eat and breathe. *Hundun* has none. Let’s try to bore them.’ Each day they bore a hole, and after seven days, *Hundun* died.⁵³

Hundun 渾沌 refers to a state of primordiality or chaos, which is comparable to the *Laozi*’s metaphor of an uncarved block. In this parable, Emperor *Hundun* is used to represent this state which is also the middle ground which allows two sides, north and south, to meet. As this is a state of primordiality, there is an absence of subjective judgements, evaluations and distinctions. Therefore, whoever that comes is treated with total openness, and despite coming from opposite sides, *Shu* and *Hu* felt that they have been treated very well in the *Hundun*’s territory. The kindness of *Hundun* lies in his ability to be totally open to the otherness of *Shu* and *Hu*. This absence of distinctions of the primordial state is also described in Chapter 25 of the *Laozi*, to be the characteristic of the *Dao*: ‘There is a thing that was formed muddled and mixed, it was born before heaven and earth... I do not know its name and reluctantly call it

⁵² Hanshan Dashi 憨山大師(Shi Deqing 釋德清), *Laozi Daodejing, Zhuangzi Neipian* 老子道德經，莊子內篇 (Kaohsiung: Shetuan Faren 社團法人, 2012), p. 95.

⁵³ *Chuang Tzu* 莊子: *Mystic, Moralism, and Social Reformer*, translated by Herbert A. Giles (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889), p. 98.

“the Dao”.⁵⁴ However, through Shu and Hu’s boring holes in Hundun’s face to make it more distinct, the primordial state of simplicity, free from oppositions and distinctions is lost, and Hundun dies.

Therefore, in the relationship between the self and the other, the sage who treats others equally well, regardless they are good and trustworthy or not, brings out the goodness in all people. A sage who never turns their back on anyone or anything, helps all people to realise their full potential, and all things to fully perform their function by going along with their nature. As seen from the parable of Hundun, a person who is free from partiality is able to be completely open to others, giving others space to go along their natural course. At the same time, they are able to unite opposites by providing the ‘oneness’ to integrate opposites into a continuous and harmonious whole. These are all aspects of profound consonance. In the interpersonal context, this brings about amiable and mutually beneficial relationships, where the self and other constantly helps each other to reach their full potential and be in line with the Dao. On a larger scale, intergroup, interracial, interreligious and international peace and harmony can be attained, when the state of profound consonance is realised.

5. Conclusion

The society that Laozi lived in was one where conflict and contention were present, just like any society in history. Therefore, the main intent of the Laozi’s teachings was to ease the tension and conflict in human society. Among the ideology of the *Laozi*, profound consonance is one of the most important, as it recognises the oneness of the phenomenal realm, and it is this oneness that can bring all things into unity. Unity is what eases the conflict and tension in society.

This essay explores the idea of profound consonance. It describes a state of openness where people are removed from personal bias and where all boundaries are eliminated. This state of consonance and unity is profound because it does not bear any outward signs of unification, but the underlying oneness of all things, people and matters is recognised. From an ontological viewpoint, there is oneness

⁵⁴ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, edited by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, translated by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, Ady van Den Stock et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2020), p. 171.

because all things have the same origin, which is the *Dao*. Opposites only exist in relativity, and they give rise to one another. Moreover, due to the movement of the *Dao* which is in a constant state of change, opposites continuously turn into each other too. This understanding helps us see the oneness and consonance of the myriad things in the world.

While profound consonance is the objective state of the phenomenal realm, human behaviour often deviate from it. The main obstacle to achieving this state is the self. When the sense of self is enlarged, people seek to satisfy their selfish desires, and impose their subjective judgements on people and matters. Therefore, the solution lies in eliminating the sense of self, which involves removing emotional, value and factual judgements, for one to be unable to be made intimate or distant, to bring profit or harm, nor to be honoured or dishonoured. Then, a person can be emotionally indifferent and impartial towards all things. This has important implications on the individual, interpersonal relationships and the society. Being able to recognise the consonance among fortune and misfortune, gains and losses, an individual would be emotionally resilient in facing them. Additionally, they do not attempt to elevate their sense of self, and by not being self-important, they become important. When profound consonance is achieved in interpersonal relationships, people treat one another with complete openness, loving and respecting all people and things equally. Amiable and mutually beneficial relationships are established, and on societal level, intergroup, interracial, interreligious and international peace and harmony can be realised.

Similar to Laozi's time, the contemporary society is also afflicted by conflicts of different scales. As discussed earlier, differences in ideology, religion and ethnicity, have given rise to conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War, the 2019 Christchurch shootings, and anti-Asian hate crimes in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a result of intolerance of 'the other', failing to see the oneness and consonance underlying superficial differences. The self and the other are all fractions of the same whole, we are all interdependent. When we inflict harm on others and disrupt the peace, the whole gets affected, and as part of the whole, we cannot live in peace too. Additionally, the value judgements we make with regards to the self and other, are only subjective and temporary. What we regard as good and bad is based on our subjective and limited knowledge of the world. These value judgements are only temporary, because as with the movement of the *Dao*, things are in a constant state

of change. What is good now may not be good in another temporal and spatial context. Therefore, when we let go of selfish desires and our subjective judgements, and like the Daoist sage, see past superficial differences and recognise the consonance, conflicts as a result of differences can be reduced. These lessons of consonance and indifference are especially important for our world today.

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