



Appendix 1 : Undergraduate Assignment Coversheet and Feedback Form



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

(to be completed by marker)

Student Name: Chuide Kong (孔垂德)	
Module Code: SICH4002 Module title: Sinological English I	Student number: 1903358
For completion by marker: Comments:	
Marker's signature:	Date:
Provisional mark: NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.	

A discussion on the descriptions of Tao from Laozi

Word count: 2339

I.Introduction

As we known, in traditional Chinese culture, the meanings and concepts of Tao is extremely difficult to understand and describe. Through the book of Laozi, we could see that Lao Tzu made most of time to describe Tao and wanted to share with the readers. The Tao described by Lao Tzu is independent and special compared with the theories of Tao from other Philosophers at the same period. Professor Fang Dongmei said that: “The concept of Tao is the supreme category in Lao Tzu's philosophical system.”¹ Therefore, to understand the logic of describing Tao from Lao Tzu can help us to know the meanings of Tao and be able to practise Tao in everyone's dairy life, which is the intention of studying Laozi and its theories.

Even though Tao seem so ethereal and even invisible to our eyes, people could feel it from the descriptions of ancient sages and renowned scholars. The article will share the research of the logic of the description of Tao defined by Lao Tzu from three aspects, the the name of Tao, the body of Tao and the use of Tao, mainly based on the original texts from Laozi.

2.The name of Tao

Chapter 1, the beginning of Laozi, contains the deep meanings of Laozi's theories and plays the foremost and significant role of the whole book. Master Hanshan 憨山大師 once said that: “This chapter summarises the body and use of Tao, and tells us how to

¹ Fang Dongmei 方東美, *The development and spirit of Chinese philosophy* 中國哲學精神及其發展, (Beijing 北京: Zhong Hua Shu Ju 中國書局, 2012), p. 126. 「道之概念，乃老子哲學系統中之無上範疇。」

enter it. The more than 5,000 words of the book, Laozi, is just the explanation and deduction of this.”² And the western scholar, John R. Mabry also share the same idea: “So what is the Tao? This is a difficult question, and Lao Tzu tells us right off in his first poem in the Tao Te Ching.....and spends the next 80 poems trying to do just that”.³ Therefore, focusing on the first Chapter can help us see the contour of Laozi’s Tao. There is a renowned sentence in Chapter one that: “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao; the name can be named is not the eternal name.” 道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。⁴ In general, the way of feeling and knowing something mysterious and beyond understanding is to give a formal name for it. However, for Lao Tzu, he believed, Tao cannot be simply named. The ordinary people do not have the high perspective like Lao Tzu, so they are stubborn with the thing that they could see in eyes and can feel personally. Therefore, Lao Tzu have no choice but need to give a name for that, so, the terms “Tao” has emerged.

2.1 The shortcomings of naming Tao

Professor Lai, Hsi-san said: “Generally speaking, Daoism strongly criticizes the power and ideology of language. Dao cannot be spoken about because of its transcendent nature.”⁵ And he also said that: “Laozi is well aware of the qualities and limitations of language, and it is impossible to materialize language and expand its control.”⁶ Therefore, it is difficult to name or just define Tao in a specific realm. Any operation which is artificial will decline the meaning of Tao and its eternity, because simple name is not the eternal thing, which will be extinct one day. Anything which will be extinct is unable to be the supreme thing beyond everything in the world. From Lao Tzu’s opinion, Tao is both the origin and divine law of everything due to its

² (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, (Wuhan 武漢: Chong Wen Shu Ju 崇文書局, 2015), p. 11. 「此章總言道之體用，及入道工夫也。老氏之學，盡在於此。其五千餘言，所敷演者，唯演此一章而已。」

³ John R. Mabry, *The Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way and Its Power*, (the United States of America, originally published as part of *God As Nature Sees God*, 1994), p.2.

⁴ (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 11.

⁵ Lai, Hsi-san 賴錫三, ‘From the Metaphor of the *Laozi* to the Narrative of the *Zhuangzi* —— Zhuangzi’s Narrative Philosophy and Walter Benjamin’s View’, *Journal of Qinghua Studies* 清華學報, 40(1), 2010, 67—111 (p.111).

⁶ Lai, Hsi-san 賴錫三, ‘From the Metaphor of the *Laozi* to the Narrative of the *Zhuangzi* —— Zhuangzi’s Narrative Philosophy and Walter Benjamin’s View’, 67—111 (p.69). 「《老子》深知名言的本質和限制，不可能將語言唯實化而擴張其宰控。」

constancy, which is called “eternal Tao” 常道. If there is a not eternal thing, “simple name”, giving a definition for Tao, thus, its quality of eternity will be affected by the extinction of name. Gradually, people will think that the range of name is the range of Tao. Once it exceeds the range that the name has, people may not be able to understand, thus, unfortunately, Tao will lose its quality of infinity. Moreover, once the name is extinct, people will think that Tao is vanished. Therefore, Laozi rather to use negative expression to describe the exist of Tao instead of naming Tao, and he did not seem Tao as a object or a entity. Therefore, “The Tao that can be spoken of” 可道之道 and “the name that can be named” 可名之名 both are the temporary and functional usage mainly satisfying the ordinary. However, for “eternal Tao” 常道 and “eternal name” 常名, it is unnecessary for them to be simply defined and limited in this way. It will be oversimplified to understand the Tao of Laozi just because its name. In Zhuangzi, ZhiBeiYou 知北遊, it said: “Tao should not be named.” 道不當名.⁷ Master Hanshan 憨山大師 also said: “Moreover, Tao had no name at first, but now it is called "Tao", so all those who can be named are untrue.”⁸ For the solution, Lao Tzu will use another way of expression to describe Tao. As Professor Lai Xisan’s saying: “‘Poetic metaphor’ is the main language style of the description of the body of Tao from Lao Tzu”,⁹ Lao Tzu is likely to describe Tao from the back and front, in order to fully show the tension of Tao. Professor Lai Xisan analysed clearly:

The relationship between Laozi and language is not only manifested in: exposing the ineffability of Tao under the limitation of language, and trying to use vivid poetic metaphors to show the rich existence of Dao, in fact, it deeply understands the binary structure of language, but try to use dialectical rhetoric to launch the dialectics and subversion of the concepts, and then turn to the discussion of the value level (using "the right words if the opposite" 正言若反 to subvert the value ideology established by language).¹⁰

⁷ Cheng Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi Jin Zhu Jin Yi* 莊子今注今譯, (Beijing 北京: Zhong Hua Shu Ju 中華書局, 1983), p.620.

⁸ (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 11. 「且道本无名, 今既强名曰“道”, 是则凡可名者, 皆假名耳。」

⁹ Lai, Hsi-san 賴錫三, ‘From the Metaphor of the *Laozi* to the Narrative of the *Zhuangzi* ——Zhuangzi's Narrative Philosophy and Walter Benjamin's View’, 67—111 (p.69). 「『詩性隱喻』為《老子》對道體的主要語言風格。」

¹⁰ Lai, Hsi-san 賴錫三, ‘From the Metaphor of the *Laozi* to the Narrative of the *Zhuangzi* ——Zhuangzi's Narrative Philosophy and Walter Benjamin's View’, 67—111 (p.69). 「《老子》對道和語言的關係除了表現在: 逼顯語言的窮盡限制處彰顯道的不可言說性, 以及盡力運用活的詩性隱喻來彰顯道的豐富存在性, 其實它亦深明語言的二元結構本質, 並嘗試運用辯證性的詭辭展開對概念的辯證與顛覆, 並由此轉入屬於價值層面的探討 (用「正言若反」顛覆語言所建立的價值意識型態)。」

3.The body of Tao

Professor Fang Dongmei mentioned that: “As far as the Tao body is concerned.....Tao is the one or the original one of the infinite real existences. Lao Tzu tried to describe it in various ways.”¹¹ Through researching, the description of Tao from Laozi can be simply classified in two ways:

3.1 Object metaphor (以有形之物借喻之)

Laozi was likely to use water to describe Tao. In chapter 4, he said: “道沖，而用之或不盈。淵兮，似萬物之宗。挫其銳，解其紛。和其光，同其塵。湛兮，似或存。”¹²

The characters “沖”, “淵”, “湛” are the descriptions relating with water. In Guangyun, Dongyun 廣韻·東韻, it explains: “沖，深也。” It means the unfathomableness of water;

In Shuo Wen Jie Zi 說文解字, it explains: “淵，回水也。” It means the deep water

that cannot be seen to the bottom; “湛，沒也。” It means water submerging. As we known, water possesses the quality of moving, changing, modesty and moistening. And more importantly, it does not have a defined shape to limit it, which is corresponded with the characteristics of the Tao. In English translation, D.C.Lau

translated “沖” as empty,¹³ which emphasizes the quality of empty of Tao. Exactly,

Tao has no shape, and it is invisible and intangible for human. Therefore, using “empty” as description is quite appropriate. Tao forms alongside the process of doing and changing, therefore, Laozi said: “萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。”¹⁴ And

Zhuangzi also said: “道行之而成。”¹⁵ The “empty” referred by Laozi is not means that there is nothing existing, but to use “negative expression” to hint at the non-shape of Tao.

The character “淵” signifies the profoundness and mysteriousness of Tao.

¹¹ Fang Dongmei 方東美, *The development and spirit of Chinese philosophy* 中國哲學精神及其發展, p. 126. 「就道體而言.....道，乃是無限真實存在之太一或元一。老子嘗以種種不同之方式形容之。」

¹² (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 18.

¹³ D.C.Lau translated, *LAO TZU, TAO TE CHING*, (England: Clays Lod, St Ives plc, 1963), p. 8.

¹⁴ (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 86.

¹⁵ Cheng Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi Jin Zhu Jin Yi* 莊子今注今譯, p.69.

The character “湛” also refers the “empty” of Tao. Those characters are all shows the tension of Tao.

ii.Describing its range (以廣大性、空間性喻之)

Tao can contain everything in the world. Laozi was likely to describe its range in order to let us know scale of Tao, and see its eternity and infinity.

In Laozi, chapter thirty-four, it said that: “大道泛兮，其可左右。”¹⁶ according to the translation from Xu Yuanchong 許淵沖, it means: The divine law (Tao) is a stream overflowing left and right.¹⁷ It just likes the poem written by Du Fu 杜甫: “Spring rain slips into the night secretly on the heels of wind, silent and soft, it moistens everything.”(春雨)隨風潛入夜，潤物細無聲。¹⁸ Tao will nourish everything in the world silently. In the daily life, even though we feel hard to feel the Tao, it is everywhere beyond space and time.

According to Lao Tzu, Tao is the origin of the heaven and earth, and Professor Fang Dong mei also mentioned that: “Tao is the root of heaven and earth. Its nature and uses are infinite. Tao is invisible, and it is the source of all things in the universe.¹⁹ The body of Tao is so large and broad that ordinary people cannot measure it with their known knowledge. Lao Tzu uses the concept of space to describe Dao, in order to let us understand the volume of Dao, which fills the space between heaven and earth, and even the universe, nourishing all things like spring breeze and drizzle. However, usually people are not easily aware of the existence of Dao.

III.The use of Tao

The use of Tao means its function in the universe between heaven and earth. In Lao Tzu's description, Tao is the origin of heaven and earth, and undertake the role of cultivating and nourishing all things. This is to describe and understand "Tao" from the perspective of "using". Professor Fang Dongmei said: “As far as the use of Tao is concerned, the infinitely supreme "Tao" is over all things in the world, which pervades all uses or functions, and is inexhaustible.”²⁰ And Tao also demonstrates its tension: On the one hand, it can converge on its own in secret, to the deep state of

¹⁶ (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 74.

¹⁷ Xu Yuanchong 許淵沖, *Chinese-English Edition, The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* 漢英對照老子道德經, (Beijing 北京: Gao Deng Jiao Yu Chu Ban She 高等教育出版社, 2003), p. 74.

¹⁸ (Qing) *Quan Tang Shi* 全唐詩, (Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu Ben 欽定四庫全書本, Ying Yin Gu Ji, Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu, Ji Bu eight, Zong Ji Lei 影印古籍, 欽定四庫全書·集部八·總集類), vole. 226

¹⁹ Fang Dongmei 方東美, *The development and spirit of Chinese philosophy* 中國哲學精神及其發展, p. 126. 「道為天地根，其性無窮，其用無盡，視之不見，萬物之所由生。」

²⁰ Fang Dongmei 方東美, *The development and spirit of Chinese philosophy* 中國哲學精神及其發展, p. 127. 「就道用而言，無限偉大之「道」、即是周溥萬物，遍在一切之用或功能，而取之不盡，用之不竭者。」

retreating to "nothingness"無; on the other hand, it can becoming the divine law in the heaven and earth to be the beneficial of all things, referring to "havingness" 有. So, there is no boundary at all. Professor Fang Dongmei said: "The development and use of the Tao is a two-way type and a dual-track type. If the Tao go smoothly, it will give birth of everything based on its original type, which is non-existent, and each has its own benefits; otherwise, if it meets the block, it will stay at its current state (havingness 有) to ask for sustenance from nothingness 無, and then make the best use of each."²¹

Lao Tzu also said that: "The divine law may go opposite ways; even weakness is useful. All things in the world come into being with a form; the form comes from the formless."²² 反者道之動，弱者道之用。天下萬物生於有，有生於無。 Therefore, understanding the relationship between "havingness" and "nothingness" is also the key to understanding the use of Tao. In general, Tao is empty, but when its function operates, it becomes existing, and is everywhere. More deeply, and philosophically, the universe and all things in the world originate from "nothing", and all the things contain quality of "nothing", like the death of creature and the vanishment of objects. Therefore, Master Hanshan also said: "everything bases on the emptiness."²³ In the simple way, it will be easier to look at the visible qualities of Tao, and to practise in the daily life: For example, Tao has the same qualities as water, which is modest, flexible, and can moisten everything in silent. And those are what Lao Tzu wanted to share with people. We need to follow it and practise in life.

4. Conclusion

Describing the "Tao" is a very long and difficult process. Lao Tzu used his wisdom to describe Tao from multiple perspectives, presenting the whole picture of "Tao" to the ordinary people, from the name of Tao, the body of Tao and the use of Tao. The concept of "Tao" is indeed the deepest part of philosophical thought of Taoism, and cannot be explained clearly in simple words or concepts. At this point, Professor Lai Xisan also said: "Since Tao itself is beyond language, it is the manifestation of pre-language, unpredictable and inexhaustible power. Therefore, any attempt to use language to precisely define it in one meaning will inevitably fall into the predicament of 'dogmatic speech.'"²⁴

²¹ Fang Dongmei 方東美, *The development and spirit of Chinese philosophy* 中國哲學精神及其發展, p. 127.

「道之發用，呈雙軌式：順之、則道之本無，始生萬有，以各明其利；逆之，則當下實有，仰資於無，以各盡其用。」

²² Xu Yuanhong 許淵沖, *Chinese-English Edition, The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* 漢英對照老子道德經, p. 90.

²³ (Ming) Hanshan 憨山, *Laozi Dao De Jing Jie* 老子道德經解, p. 86. 「是則物物皆以沖虛為本也。」

²⁴ Lai, Hsi-san 賴錫三, 'From the Metaphor of the *Laozi* to the Narrative of the *Zhuangzi*——Zhuangzi's Narrative Philosophy and Walter Benjamin's View', 67—111 (p.72). 「由於道體自身超越語言，它是前語言、無法被規定的源源不絕力量之開顯，因此任何企圖用語言命題想精確將之定於一義的努力，都必然落入「言語道斷」的困境。」

Overall, the "Tao" described by Lao Tzu is the ever-changing Tao, and it is not a straight road that can be saw to the end. In Buddhism classic, *Da Cheng Qi Xin Lun* 大乘起信論, it also said that: "Leaving the appearance of names, leaving the appearance of words."²⁵ Lao Tzu also said that: "the more you know of the human world, the less you know of the divine law."²⁶ 為學日益，為道日損。 We need to clearly understand the limitations of language. If we follow the train of thoughts from language and name to understand "Tao", it will not be the real Tao. Therefore, in the process of studying Lao Tzu, although we must understand Tao through the exquisite language descriptions from Lao Tzu, we should not be stubborn with the language and forget the infinity, eternity, and greatness of Tao.

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²⁵ (Liang 梁) Zhen Di translated 真諦 譯, *Da Cheng Qi Xin Lun Xiao Shi* 大乘起信論校釋, (Beijing 北京: Zhong Hua Shu Ju 中華書局, 1992), 「離名字相，離言說相」

²⁶ Xu Yuanchong 許淵沖, *Chinese-English Edition, The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* 漢英對照老子道德經, p. 106.

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