



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
(to be completed by marker)

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The Three Levels of Scholars from *Daode jing*

Nolan: The topic of our presentation today is ‘The Three Levels of Scholars from the *Daode jing*.’

Dannie: They are ‘The best scholar, average scholar, and poorest scholar’ in Chapter 41 of the *Daode jing*.¹ After hearing the Dao, these three levels of scholars show different reactions. We believe this is clearly related to their own cultivation and understanding of Dao.

Nolan: So, today we will focus on discussing this topic. We will analyse the reasons behind their behaviours and use some examples to illustrate the characteristics of the three levels of scholars.

Dannie: For this presentation, we have chosen a question-and-answer style for the discussion. I will be the MC for the first half.

Nolan: And I will introduce before the best scholar.

Dannie: I will explain the sections on the average scholar and the poorest scholar.

Nolan: And I will be the MC for the second half.

Dannie: Well~ Before discussing, I would like to ask you a question. What is the Dao that scholars at three levels hear in chapter 41 of *Dao dejing*?

What is Dao?

Nolan: This is a good question. The Dao’s topic is quite broad, as the *Daode jing* is essentially all about discussing. What is Dao? For example, the first chapter states, ‘The Dao that can be told is not the invariant Dao.’ This sentence highlights that Dao cannot be accurately defined by a specific term or concept. Because the Dao is a very abstract concept,

¹ Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96. With modification.

it is generally difficult to describe it with words. In Chapter 41, there are sentences that describe the function of Dao in phenomenal world:

The bright Dao seems dark. The Dao going forward seems to be going backward. The smooth Dao seems rough. The loftiest De seems like a valley.²

Therefore, I will use one description of Dao as a foundation to explain what the Dao referred to by the best scholar, average scholar, and poorest scholar truly means. Due to time limited, today I will focus on analysing and interpreting just one of these sentences in detail:

The Dao going forward seems to be going backward.³

Although the text states, ‘the Dao going forward seems to be going backward,’ the Dao itself has no concept of forward or backward because ‘forward and backward’ are terms defined by humans. For example, from dusk to midnight, it seems like moving forward. From sunrise to sunset, the day seems to be a process of moving forward in our perspective. However, for day and night itself, it is simply a natural phenomenon, a simple cyclical process. So, Laozi (c. 571–c.470 BCE) wants us to apply this theory in daily life. Where there is forward, there must be backward.

Dannie: Ok~ I got it. In the same way, where there is backward, there must be forward.

Nolan: Yes! You are right! And this principle applies whether in human interactions, job promotions, or other aspects. Laozi wants us to understand this cyclical principle. He hopes that we can focus our efforts on going ‘backward’ because ‘backward’ is a preparation for ‘forward.’ What seems backward is not truly backward. Its ultimate purpose is actually to move forward. This way of thinking is what Laozi refers to as the application of Dao.

Dannie: Your explanation is so clear. Now I have a better understanding of the ‘Dao’ that Laozi hopes scholars can grasp. As you said, Laozi wants scholars to understand that the application of Dao is actually a cyclical principle. He hopes scholars can think in a dialectical way and understand that nothing is fixed.

Nolan: Absolutely. Your conclusion is perfect.

² Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching*(New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

³ Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching*(New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

What are the Best Scholars?

Dannie: Thank you for answering. Now I have an overview of them. Come back to our topic, could you explain what is the best scholars?

Nolan: Of course! let's look at the original text: 'When the best scholars hear about the Dao, they put out great effort to practice it.'

Literally speaking, the best scholar is the highest level of scholar in ancient China. In Laozi's opinion, they study to seek Dao, then they place great importance on practice. In other words, they experience Dao through practice and understand it in the process of doing. They clearly know that their cognitions are limited, one-sided and unnatural. So, they see Dao as a guideline for their actions and use their knowledge to apply it in daily life.

Throughout Chinese history, there are many examples of best scholars. Today, I want to use a Confucian figure as an example of the best scholar.

Among Confucius' 3,000 students, his most beloved student was Yan Hui. Confucius (c. 551–c.479 BCE) once said, 'This was the manner of Yan Hui (c.521–c.481 BCE)..... whenever he got hold of what was good, he clasped it firmly, as if wearing it on his breast, and did not lose it.'⁴ The phrase 'He clasped it firmly' vividly describes how after Yan Hui hearing a principle, would seriously apply it in his life. Additionally, in the *Analects*, it is recorded that Yan Hui asked Confucius about perfect virtue. Confucius replied, 'Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety.' Yan Hui heard Confucius' words and immediately applied them to his life. Later, Confucius praised him, saying, 'Such was Yan Hui that for three months there would be nothing in his mind contrary to perfect virtue.' This shows that after hearing Confucius' teachings, Yan Hui truly applied them in his life. In short, Yan Hui's spirit of learning and putting principles into practice aligns with the standard of the best scholar as described in the *Daode jing*.

Dannie: Thank you for your clear explanation. Now we had known about the best scholar's characteristic and the way of thinking.

What are the Average Scholars?

Nolan: It's my turn to be the MC, and Dannie will present the next parts. Could you explain

⁴ Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

in more detail what the specific behaviour of the average scholars?

Dannie: Of course. Please look at the text: ‘When the average scholars hear about the Dao, they seem to keep it, and seem to forget about it.’ Why is this so? It is because of the error of their way seeking the Dao. The average scholar believes in the existence of the Dao and makes efforts to prove it through theoretical analysis. In doing so, they are able to understand the Dao’s subtlety and greatness, which gives the appearance that they seem to keep to the Dao. However, they lack personal practice. Although they are fully committed to the studying and exploring the Dao, they are unable to truly understand or realize the Dao. Their understanding remains at an intellectual level, which states they seem to forget about the Dao.

Here is a Chinese idiomatic story ‘To Speak of Warfare on Paper,’ which come from *the records of the historian*. The main character in this story is a good example to help us understand what the average scholar is like.

During the Warring State, there was a man called Zhao Kuo (d. 260 BCE). From a young age, he studied the art of war and discussed military strategy with others. He thought nobody knows more about the art of war better than himself. He frequently debated art of war with his father Zhao She (fl. 280 BCE), and even managed to out-argue him. But Zhao She never praised his son. When Zhao Kuo’s mother asked Zhao She why he never praised their son, Zhao She replied, ‘The warfare is a matter of life and death, but Zhao Kuo’s talks about it far too lightly. If the state of Zhao ever puts him in charge of military affairs in the future, he will lead it to destruction.’

Later, Zhao Kuo replaced Lian Po (c. 327 BC–243 BC) and completely changed the military rules. When the state of Qin general Bai Qi heard this, he pretended to retreat, cut off the Zhao army’s supply lines, and surrounded them. The state of Zhao army was cut off from food for more than forty days. Their soldiers became demoralised. As a result, Zhao Kuo personally led an elite force to break through, but was shot and killed by the state of Qin army. The state of Zhao army suffered a major defeat, with hundreds of thousands surrendering and being buried alive. In total, the state of Zhao lost 450,000 people in this battle. The forecast of Zhao Kuo’s father was indeed proven true.⁵

If We can compare the art of war in the story to the Dao, Zhao Kuo is a thorough average scholar. He had good theoretical understanding of art of war, while he trapped within this knowledge, not thinking practical conduct, so when the war really came, he did not know

⁵ Sima Qian 司馬遷: *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historia) 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959) p. 2447.

how to use it. Although he knew art of war, he still failed.

Nolan: Well, so you mean Zhao Kuo' s behaviour is quite like that of the average scholar. He has a good theoretical understanding but lacks practical skills in life.

Dannie: Absolutely!

What are the Poorest Scholars?

Nolan: I like your example describing what an average scholar is like. I am quite interested in what the poorest scholars are like. Could you explain the specific behaviour of the poorest scholars?

Dannie: Yes, let see the original text, 'When the poorest scholars hear The Dao, they just have a big laugh.'⁶ Why are they laughing ? It is because they misunderstand the Dao. They can only perceive the material things and rely solely on their limited personal experience. So, to them, the idea of the Dao seems absurd. The way the Dao expresses itself through opposites in the world they experience is beyond their cognitions. As you mentioned before, they cannot understand backward and forward is a cycle.

To help us better grasp the mindset of these poorest scholars, there was a story from *Zhuangzi*:

In the northern darkness there is a hug bird named Peng. The wide back of the Peng cannot be measured, and when he rises up and flies off, its wings are like clouds all over the sky, and can make waves for 1,245 kilometres. When the sea begins to move, this bird beats the whirlwind and rises more 37,350 kilometres, and it will spend six months to head the southern darkness, a warm and free wonderland.

A group of cicadas saw Peng's action and laughed, 'When we make efforts and fly up, we can get as far as a tree, but sometimes we don't make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go 37,350 kilometres to the south!'⁷

At the end of the story, Master Zhuang (c.369–c.286 BCE) summarized, 'Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the

⁶ Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching*(New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

⁷ Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 24.

long-lived.’⁸ A cicada, with a lifespan of just a few weeks, obviously falls into the short-lived category, so its goal is limited, just flying to a tree, which reflects its narrow understanding. In the sense, how could it possibly grasp the perspective of the great Peng, who lives much longer and aims much higher?

The poorest scholar is short-sighted, much like cicadas—they are trapped within limited cognitions and narrow ways of thinking. In contrast, the best scholar aims for the Dao, just like the great Peng. They are willing to cultivate themselves and actively pursue a higher path.

Nolan: Well, I understand this metaphor tells us that a broader point: Not everyone is able or willing to see beyond immediate concerns. The poorest scholar regards their own perspectives as the truth, so they reject other views that are different from their own, and laugh at them foolishly, not realizing that they are really unwise.

Conclusion

	Understanding of the Dao	Behavioural performance	Example
The best scholars	Putting it into practice, they can truly understand the essence of the Dao and its application.	They gain insight through practice.	Yan Hui
The average scholars	They have only a superficial understanding of the Dao. They merely analyse it from a theoretical perspective.	They cannot practice the Dao in life.	Zhao Kuo
The poorest scholars	They completely misunderstand the Dao, thinking that it is insubstantial.	They cannot understand, nor implement it.	Cicadas

Dannie: According to this table, we can see the biggest difference between the best scholars, average scholars and poorest scholars lies in their different attitudes of mind towards Dao. So best scholars trust the Dao and apply it in daily life. For example, Yan Hui heard something good and immediately put it into practice. He never forgot it. In contrast, Zhao Kuo only knew theory but could not use it practically. Cicadas represent those who don’t trust Dao at all. They neither understand nor apply it.

⁸ Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 24.

Nolan: Returning to ourselves, in real life, most of us are actually average or poorest scholars. When facing a principle or knowledge, we often fail to immediately apply it like the best scholars. Therefore, by comparing the three levels of scholars in Chapter 41 of the *Daode Jing*, we find there are two things we can do to move closer to being the best scholars:

Dannie: First, keep an open attitude to accept and trust the Dao;

Nolan: Second, take immediate action after hearing a principle, applying it practically to understand it deeply through experience. By doing these, one day, we could possibly become the best scholars.

The Three Levels of Scholars from *Daodejing*

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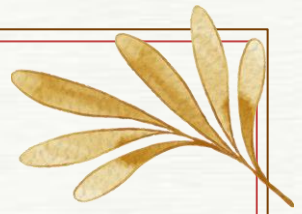
Course audience: Fundamental Degree

Student name: Qiyuanwang (2016002)

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The Main Topic



The Best Scholar

The Average Scholar

The Poorest Scholar





What is the Dao





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The Dao that can be told is not
the invariant Dao.



”



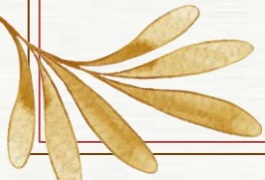
— Chapter 1 of *Daodejing*





Chapter 41

- The **bright** Dao seems **dark**.
- The Dao going **forward** seems to be going **backward**.
- The **smooth** Dao seems **rough**.
- The loftiest De seems like a valley.
-





The Dao going **forward** seems
to be going **backward**.



Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.



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“

When the best scholars hear
about the Dao,
they put out great effort to
practice it.

”



Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

The best scholar



Experience the Dao
through practice



Know their own
cognitive limitations



The Dao is a
guideline

‘This was the manner of Yan Hui.....
whenever he got hold of what was good, he
clasped it firmly, as if wearing it on his
breast, and did not lose it.’



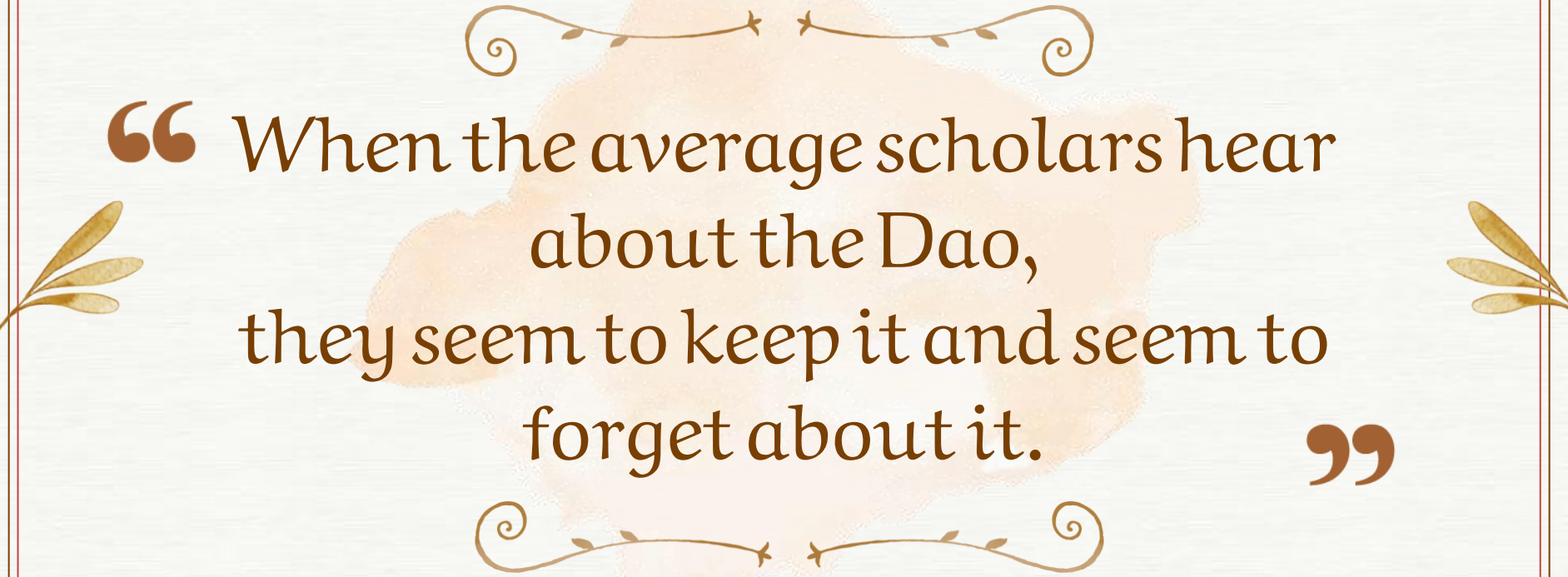
James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, p. 389.

‘Look not at what is opposition to ritual;
listen not to what is opposition to ritual;
speak not what is opposition to ritual;
make no movement which is opposition
to ritual.’



“Such was Yan Hui that for three months
there would be nothing in his mind
opposition to perfect virtue.’



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“ When the average scholars hear
about the Dao,
they seem to keep it and seem to
forget about it. ”

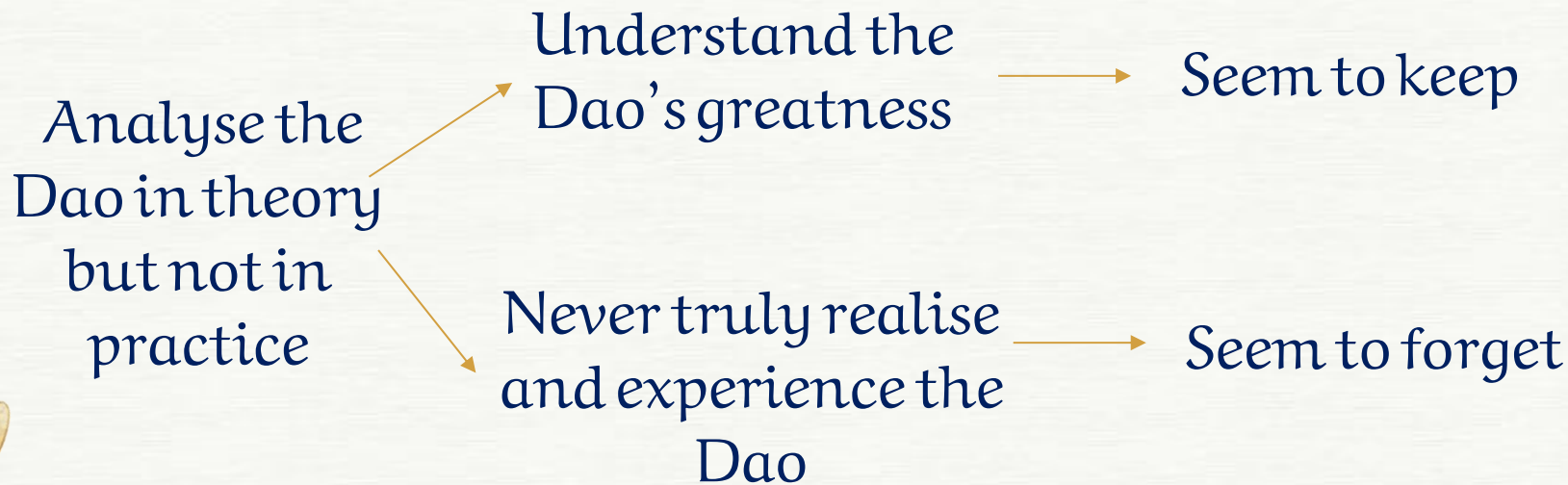
Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.



The Average scholar



They use error way to seek the Dao



To Speak of Warfare on Paper

—— *The Records of the Historian.*





Zhao Kuo (d. 260 BCE)

Knowing the art of war

Zhao She: ‘The warfare is a matter of life and death, but our son’s talks about it far too lightly. If the state of Zhao ever puts him in charge of military affairs in the future, he will lead it to destruction.’

Sima Qian, *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historia)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), p. 2447.

Zhao Kuo replaced Lian Po
changed the
military rules



Bai Qi

- Pretended to retreat,
- Cut off the Zhao army's supply lines,
- surrounded them.
- Zhao army was cut off from food for more than forty days.
- Zhao lost 450,000 people in this battle

Sima Qian, *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historia)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), p. 2447.

Zhao Kuo



→ Average scholar

Good theoretical
understanding of
art of war

Not thinking
practical conduct



“

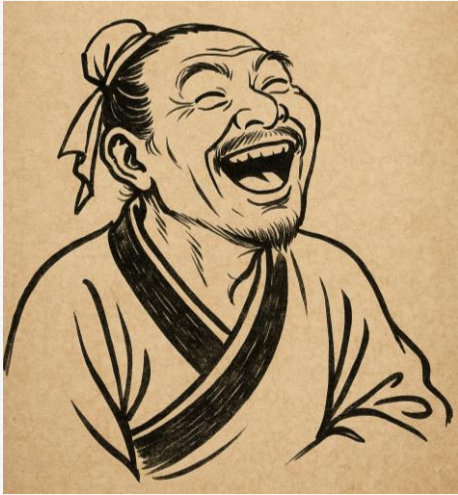
When the poorest scholars
hear the Dao,
they just have a big laugh.

”



Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of The Tao Te Ching* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 96.

Why are they laughing?



Rely on
limited
personal
experience



Idea of the
Dao seems
absurd



Laughing

Hug bird named Peng



Appearance:

Its wings are like clouds.

Its back cannot be measured.

Ability:

Make waves for 1,245 kilometres.

Rise more 37,350 kilometres.

Goal: Fly to the Southern darkness
for six months.

Little Cicada



When we make efforts and fly up, we can get as far as a tree, but sometimes we don't make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go 37,350 kilometres to the south?

Zhuangzi



‘Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived.’

Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 24.

Conclusion

	Understanding of the Dao	Behavioural performance	Example
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The poorest scholars	They completely misunderstand the Dao, thinking that it is insubstantial.	They cannot understand, nor implement it.	Cicadas

What we can do?



- I. Keep an open attitude to accept and trust the Dao;
- II. Take immediate action after hearing a principle, applying it practically to understand it deeply through experience.



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Thank you
for listening

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5. Yim Ho-yin 嚴浩然, ‘Investigation on the conten of “Upper intellectual”, “Middle intellectual” and Lower intellectual” in Lao-Zi Chapter 41 in terms of Jing-jie’ 論《老子》中的「上士」、「中士」、「下士」境界問題, *Dongwu zhongwen xianshang xueshu lunwen* 東吳線上學術論文, Volume 51 (2020).