

Charles University  
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**Doctoral dissertation - main theses**

**Between Dao 道 and Fa 法: intertextual analysis of the Warring States  
period cosmological texts**

Mezi Dao 道 a Fa 法: intertextuální analýza kosmologických textů z období  
Válčících států

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## Introduction

The present dissertation is based on the research into ancient Chinese philosophical texts, mainly from the late Warring States period (4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BC). It builds on my thesis “Han Fei's Strategy in Interpreting the Laozi”, a philosophical analysis of the Jie Lao 解老 and Yu Lao 喻老 chapters of the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, the first known commentary of the *Laozi* (or *Dao de jing*). The thesis brought my attention to the close link between the so-called Daoist and Legalist strands of thought, two apparently opposed philosophical traditions. The leading motive for this work was to examine this link closely, and hopefully to come up with a new interpretive framework that would elucidate the relationship between the two strands.

The primary direction of my research was the so-called Huang-Lao 黃老 school of thought, a not very well researched strand of political philosophy of the late Warring States and especially Han dynasty period, presumably combining the elements of Legalism and Daoism. The 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeological finds have brought a large number of new bamboo and silk manuscripts, some of which have been labelled as ‘Huang-Lao’.<sup>1</sup> These texts have brought many new elements to the image of the Warring States period thought environment, some of them thematised in this work. They not only constitute important evidence about social and political life in the late Warring States but also contain a mixture of divination manuals, medical and technical texts and, most importantly, also texts inquiring into the nature and functioning of the universe as a whole and the role of human beings in it. Like pre-Socratic fragments, they can be regarded as representing a new stage in the development of human thought, a shift to a new level of maturity, independence and self-reflection.

The corpus of the dissertation consists of the excavated texts, including the Guodian bamboo manuscripts, the bamboo strips from the Shanghai Museum collection and the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, and the received texts, mainly the representatives of the ‘Masters’ literature’ (*zi bu* 子部<sup>2</sup>). The excavated texts include: *Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水 (The Great One Generates Water) from Guodian bamboo strip collection (ed. Jingmenshi 1998<sup>3</sup>), *Heng xian* 恆先

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the long period of their reconstruction, ordering and transcription, these manuscripts have only recently started being properly researched and interpreted. Last two decades have seen a real ‘excavated manuscript mania’ among scholars in the East and West.

<sup>2</sup> One of the traditional bibliographical divisions into four categories of literature (*si bu* 四部), together Confucian classics (*jing* 經), historiographies (*shi* 史), and miscellanea (collections) (*ji* 集) (from ca 3rd cent. AD).

<sup>3</sup> Primary sources are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

(Constancy in the Beginning) and *Fan wu liu xing* 凡物流形 (All Things Flow into Form) from the Shanghai Museum bamboo manuscript collection (ed. Ma 2004), all dated roughly to the mid-4th century BC. Occasional use is made of the Mawangdui silk manuscript *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 (Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor; ed. Chang and Feng 1998), dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, but possibly of older origin (see Wang 2015). I also draw from a wide range of the received texts from the Warring States period, including the *Dao de jing* 道德經 or the *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, *Guanzi* 管子, *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, *Xunzi* 荀子, or *Shenzi* 申子.

In the light of the excavated material, some previously unnoticed passages from the received texts emerge, in particular passages regarding cosmological order, human cognition, role of language (names), individuation of things etc. The research involves close reading and interpretation of the selected texts, with the aim to detect their intertextual links and correspondences on the level of content, vocabulary, means of expression, and genre. My further ambition is to extend these links in order to sketch a broader framework of the Warring States period thought which will make it possible, on one hand, to contextualize the excavated manuscripts and, on the other hand, draw attention to and reframe some previously unnoticed elements of the received texts. The ultimate aim is to identify an underlying link between seemingly disparate strands of Warring States thought and offer a new interpretive framework for their reading and philosophical interpretation.

The ultimate goal of the work is an attempted reconstruction of shared ontology from which the Warring States texts in question arise. When using philosophical terminology arising from the Western scholarly tradition, one is necessarily confronted with the challenges of the comparative approach, namely the problems associated with applying certain traditional concepts and categories to a different type of thought.<sup>4</sup> A large part of the work is therefore dedicated to clarifying terminology and misunderstandings arising from the application of non-fitting interpretive frameworks.<sup>5</sup> The comparative method is used to show striking similarities between the excavated texts in question and early pre-Socratic thinkers, in particular the

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<sup>4</sup> Incompatibility (or even mutual untranslatability) of “Eastern” and “Western” thought is a view that this work deliberately seeks to challenge. Such view is not only harmful for our understanding of ancient Chinese thought but for contemporary understanding of philosophy as such within a globalizing world.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., applying a ‘metaphysical’ (post-Aristotelian) framework to texts of an essentially non-metaphysical type; more on that in Chapter 3 below.

Milesians and Heraclitus. With the help of Heidegger's reinterpretation of the pre-Socratics, this specific type of thought is presented as deserving a new, non-metaphysical reinterpretation.

## Results

This work started as an inquiry into the character of the early Chinese cosmological texts (in particular *Taiyi sheng shui*, *Heng xian*, *Fan wu liu xing* and *Nei ye*) and an attempt at their intertextual interpretation and systemization. In the beginning of this inquiry, different interpretive frameworks were used and abandoned as unsuccessful.<sup>6</sup> This led me to eventually thematize the problem of interpretive frameworks as such and delve more into the presuppositions through which we usually approach the texts from a very distant cultural sphere and time period. Chapter 1 clarifies the reasons for this step and explains why other strategies proved unproductive. It comments on the problems related to comparative philosophy as a discipline and on the problem of bias introduced by looking at the newly excavated texts through the prism of the traditional 'schools of thought'. Chapter 2 introduces the texts of the corpus in greater detail in terms of their materiality, dating, and provenance. Developing on the brief bibliographical outline in Chapter 1, it also provides more detailed references to the related scholarship in each case.

The work seeks to build a coherent argument through which the previously disconnected elements of the texts in question would come together in a logical way. The building of this newly proposed interpretive framework starts from the exposition of the specific features of early Chinese cosmology, as captured in the texts of the corpus and supported by the received texts from the period. It continues to the investigation of the role of naming and the place of names within cosmological accounts. Finally, it leads to the reframing of the notion of the self in which the cosmological discourse and the naming discourse overlap.

The following main theses are developed in the respective chapters:

1) (Chapter 3: Common features of the excavated cosmologies)

Every philosophical inquiry is embedded in a certain tacitly assumed cosmology; in order to make sense of any questions posed in the texts, we need to make explicit the underlying referential framework. Early Chinese texts, when explored from

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<sup>6</sup> This initial 'fumbling around in the dark' is partly captured in Chapter 1.

philosophical point of view, are often viewed through the prism of dualist and essentialist cosmology, which leads to misinterpretation.

The cosmology behind the various and opposing strands of Warring States thought is formulated in non-dualist and non-essentialist terms. In the texts in question, the cosmos is seen as one. Cosmological texts characterize this One as all-encompassing, ever-present and, most importantly, undifferentiated. They regard the multiplicity of things as manifestations of the One, arising in the process of differentiation. Opposites arise together as complementary and remain 'one', in that they maintain each other in a dynamic equilibrium. Through their interaction, things (distinct phenomena) arise as specific and unique modes of being. The oneness cosmology is characterized by perpetual motion and change, brought about by the continuous dynamic interaction of opposites. A medium of such interaction is sometimes thematised as qi 氣 or water or some other energy-like formless medium. As varied and extreme as some manifestations of opposites may be, they always hold ontologically together, moving around the centre of balance. Being essentially 'one', they define each other through lack and abundance and mutual redistribution of force and energy. That is why the texts emphasize the movement of return, cycle, coincidence of the end with the beginning. Anything differentiated will eventually relapse to an undifferentiated state.

Within such cosmology, many fundamental ontological concepts need to be reformulated: subject and object, active and passive, temporal and eternal – these dualist terms cease to apply. The applicable conceptual model can be found in the process philosophy, as proposed e.g. by A. N Whitehead (3.5).

Oneness cosmology can find its counterpart in certain pre-Socratic thinkers, especially the Milesians and Heraclitus. Early Greek examples are used in close comparison with excavated cosmological texts to show they addressed similar questions in similar terms, and that this type of questioning is embedded in the beginnings of the Western as well as Eastern philosophical discourse.

## 2) (Chapter 4: Role of naming within the cosmology)

Within these cosmologies, a special role is attributed to names and the act of naming. This role has not been well understood up to these days, because the discourse on names was entangled in metaphysical presumptions about the relation between self, language and reality. Within the oneness cosmology however, names play an important ontological role: they are regarded as directly involved in the constitution of things as

things, as the basis of their individuation; on the one hand, they are, as distinctions, embedded in the structure of the cosmos itself and, at the same time, they are created by people and stabilized through shared use and habit. In the cosmos regarded as One, in which all things come into existence only as a result of establishing some temporary boundaries between them, the act of giving a name represents one way of setting such a boundary. Being able to use names in a creative way, human beings are no longer passive elements of the cosmos: they can participate in the co-creation of reality and assume an active role in universal becoming. The key to such understanding is accepting and internalizing the cosmological layout where the undifferentiated is the source of definition.

However, the world of usual human experience is pre-structured by names and names therefore constitute a part of one's condition; but holding one's possibilities together, again in terms of names, allow one to project himself in future possibilities and choose his way (this part is explained with the help of the conceptual framework of Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology and Heidegger's phenomenology.)

When the role of names in the cosmological discourse is reformulated to include these aspects, we can then arrive at better understanding of names in the context of different strands of early Chinese of thought (in Confucianism, as the connective tissue of the society, the medium of attunement, the basis of social order, shared values and cooperative action; in Legalism, as a tool for shaping social and political reality, as a way of imposing rules and standards and managing the state through them, as an instrument of power, and even manipulation).

### 3) (Chapter 5: Self in cosmological texts)

The texts of the corpus of this work address the reader in a new way, as a free, decision-making being, able to accept or reject the argument on his own accord. Their answers are explained, not imposed from the position of authority. They appeal to an individual who has reached a certain stage of intellectual maturity and seeks to understand.

They also invite the reader to adopt a different perspective of self from which one's actions are aligned with the greater cosmic processes.

When the self is no longer separate from the things it deals with, but effectively involved in their becoming, the observation of the world and the way it is described is no longer a disengaged *theoria* but becomes a matter of (practical) agency and thus also an ethical issue. The one who uses names to delineate things is responsible for the world thus

created, and the act of naming is potentially a purposeful, goal-oriented action, just as any other kind of action. The act of naming thus enters the ethical realm, and the need to have ‘correct names’ becomes the central concern for the ruler. To stand in such position and ‘give names’ should therefore only be the privilege of enlightened rulers or ultimately wise sages.

The desirable position to adopt is described in the texts as ‘becoming One’ (*yi* 一) ‘embracing the One’ (*bao yi* 抱一) or ‘holding on to the One’ (*zhi yi* 執一, *shou yi* 守一), that is, to resituate one’s self to the undifferentiated – source of differentiation, which is continuously present in every event as the potential for new development.

Such shiftable notion of self, i.e., as something that both creates and is created, depending on the point of view, can be better understood and reformulated in terms of agency: since there is presumably no gap between the whole of the cosmos (as One in motion) and an individual as its furthest offspring, instead of starting from the self as a source of action and trying to explain the agency from the self, we need to start from the agency, and try to localize the self within the continuum of cosmic agency.

The goal of this work was not to provide an exhaustive exposé of all key topics, but to build, with the help of very divergent philosophical tools, an alternative interpretive framework for reading and contextualising early Chinese texts, especially the newly excavated ones. The proposed framework does not pretend to be without problems and has no ambition to be a final solution for interpretation of this type of texts, but ideally, it could serve as a grid, or a pair of glasses through which everyone can start seeing the previously unnoticed elements of early Chinese thought system and their connections, and develop on it in a productive way.

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