

The Rhetorical Construction of the Discourse on the Dao in *Daode jing*

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Abstract

Despite being the most translated and explored of all Oriental classics, *Daode jing* has not been studied systematically in the light of spiritual communication. Yet this Daoist gospel, featuring uniquely negative, paradoxical, and analogical discussion of the Dao, marks a sophisticated cultural form of spiritual communication in China. Its particular approach to constructing the Dao as the eternal and infinite Being has far reaching effects on Chinese spiritual and social life.

Introduction

In China, a powerful concept comparable to the Christian God is the Dao, translated by many as “the Way,” perhaps in the sense that Jesus refers himself to “the way” in the Christian Bible. “To be one with Heaven means to be one with the Dao. To be one with the Dao is to be everlasting” (*Daode jing*; trans. Lynn, 1999, chap. 16). Indeed, for the Chinese the Dao is the eternal and infinite Being, the mother of the whole universe, and the general principle of both the natural world and human life. It is not surprising that the Dao is a core subject of all Chinese philosophical, political, moral, and religious discussion.

However, discussion of the Dao is primarily a spiritual discourse. The term “spiritual discourse” is used here in a broad sense to include all religious and metaphysical utterances that refer to a supreme Being. The discourse on the Dao is not the earliest form of spiritual discourse in China—that position is reserved for the oracle inscriptions of the Shang dynasty (1751-1112 BC), which concerned the prevalent faith in a supreme Being named “the Sovereign on High” (*Shangdi*). The Sovereign on High was an anthropomorphic deity who “sent blessings or calamities, gave protection in battles, sanctioned undertakings, and passed on the appointment or dismissal of officials” (Chan, 1963, p. 4).

The Zhou dynasty (1111-249 BC) witnessed a radical shift from an interest

in the anthropomorphic “Sovereign on High” to an interest in the non-anthropomorphic “Heaven” (*Tian*). Nevertheless, preaching about Heaven still had mythological aspect. Heaven could do such things as appoint an emperor to rule. Thus, the Emperor Pan Geng was said to have claimed that “Heaven will perpetuate its decree in our favor in this new city: the great possession of the former kings will be continued and renewed; tranquility will be secured to the four quarters *of the empire*” (trans. Legge, 1960a, p. 223). In the time of Confucius, “the Dao of Heaven” became a divine subject more compelling than “the Mandate of Heaven,” and spiritual discourse began to take on a demythologized and metaphysical form.

The Dao is expected to exist everywhere, and is thought to be so closely related to Chinese daily life that everyone should and must be willing to speak about it; yet it is most difficult to discuss. The eternal and infinite aspects of the Dao elude rational discourse. Moreover, the Dao must be discussed in a different fashion from an anthropomorphic God, because words such as “omniscient” and “omnipotent,” which are used to describe the Christian God, for instance, are too corporeal to describe the Dao.

All those wishing to discuss and describe the Dao must cope with two fundamental dilemmas. Firstly, the Dao is so mysterious and profound that it is above name and conception. As Lao Zi puts it in the opening lines of his treatise *Daode jing*: “The Dao that can be described in language is not the constant Dao; the name that can be given it is not its constant name” (trans. Lynn, chap. 1). Theoretically, the Dao can neither be discussed nor can its meaning be isolated. Yet those wishing to talk about the Dao must, beyond semantics, ensure that their words shed light on this most important of subject matters.

The second dilemma follows from this point. Can the Dao be discussed as other worldly or this worldly? The Dao is not like the Christian God: it is not “up there,” living in a place called Heaven, which has nothing in common with the world in which we live. To be sure, like the Christian God the Dao is “absolutely other” than any particular being. Yet on the other hand, it is not wholly apart from beings. For the Chinese, the Dao is transcendent of any particular thing, simply because it exists and operates in everything. In contrast, the Christian God can be said to be operating *on* everything. Some Christian theologians have proposed to define God through a process of denial (God is not this, He is not that), but this does not seem appropriate for the concept of the Dao, which is, ultimately, inclusive.

Therefore, the study of how the Dao is addressed will reveal much about spiritual communication. The central question for spiritual communication is simply how to describe the eternal and infinite Being. In the West, Christian theologians such as Moses Maimonides (1904, 1956), Thomas Aquinas (1911, 1947), Rudolf Bultmann (1952, 1958), Karl Barth (1957), Paul Tillich (1957,

1959), Ferre Frederick (1962), John MacQuarrie (1967), and Paul van Buren (1972) have long explored the question. In China, the question has not yet received serious academic attention. Despite the fact that the study of the Dao of Confucius, Lao Zi, Chuangzi, and other great Chinese sages and saints seems to be a perennial fashion for scholars of Chinese thought, they are interested primarily in discovering what these influential Dao preachers meant when they mention the Dao, rather than the way in which they described it as the eternal and infinite Being. Some Chinese scholars, especially those of rhetoric and linguistics (e.g., Lu, 1998), are interested in the language used to discuss the Dao, but would consider it in terms of communicative style and skill. Scholars have not engaged in examining the language of these Dao preachers in the light of spiritual communication, viewing their choices of communicative methods and styles as fundamentally reflecting their intent to speak for divinity. This examination will contribute to our understanding of the social and spiritual lives of the Chinese, who not only believe in the Dao of Confucius, Mencius, Lao Zi, Chuang Zi, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and even of the Chinese Marxists, but also put them into action.

This study explores how Lao Zi uses the *Daode jing* to construct and communicate the idea of the Dao as the eternal and infinite Being. Despite the fact that *Daode jing* is the most translated and explored of all Oriental works, its contribution to establishing a unique cultural form of spiritual communication in China has largely been overlooked.

Lao Zi was traditionally considered an older contemporary of Confucius. However, scholars have found convincing evidence to suggest that *Daode jing* was written after Confucius, and that Lao Zi probably lived during the fourth century B.C. (see Fung, 1953). Although not the first to set forth an explanation of the Dao, Lao Zi certainly initiated a mystic and metaphysical discourse on the subject. Indeed, his subtle and enchanting portraits of the Dao had a far reaching effects on later developments in Chinese spiritual discourse.

For a better understanding of Lao Zi's particular approach to describing the Dao as the eternal and infinite Being, his work is discussed in comparison with accounts of God in the Christian tradition. Among the numerous available English translations of *Daode jing*, Richard John Lynn (1999) has provided the most up to date and reliable version, and it is used in this essay. However, other translations are occasionally preferred to convey Lao Zi's spiritual message and his rhetorical intent more accurately.

This paper reveals that *Daode jing* is a complexity of different patterns of speech, and involves three complementary methods of communicating the Dao as the eternal and infinite Being: Negation, paradox, and analogy.

Negation

The first method of describing the Dao can be labeled the way of negation, which is different, as we shall see, from the Christian method of description by denial that was mentioned earlier.

For instance, Lao Zi could have said that the Dao is transcendent, but he says that: “When we look for it but see it not... When we listen for it but hear it not... When we try to touch it but find it not...” (chap. 14).¹ He could have explained that the Dao is holistic, but instead he uses negative expressions: “Its risings cast no light, and its settings occasion no dark.. Try to meet it, but you will not see its head. Try to follow it, but you will not see its tail...” (cf. chap. 35, 55, 73).

We should not read Lao Zi’s way of negation as a simple denial as it has rich implications. Negative expressions as simple as “Its risings cast no light, and its settings occasion no dark” imply that the Dao cannot be described by ordinary words such as “light” and “dark.” Nor can it be divided into an upper and a lower part, as can any finite being. Here, Lao Zi suggests that the Dao is a “great whole,” but as he does not use the word “whole” he is able to avoid any corporeal connotations and thus preserve its boundlessness.

Lao Zi deploys negation so often that the two most frequently used terms in *Daode jing* are *bu* (not or no) and *wu* (non). The two words, together with others performing the same grammatical function of negation, such as *fei* (isn’t), *wu* (doesn’t), and *fu* (doesn’t), occur 334 times in this treatise of 5000-odd characters.

Lao Zi does not lightly use these negative expressions. They allow him to address the first dilemma of describing the Dao—that of articulating the infinite with the finite. The way of negation helps to solve this problem, because it allows Lao Zi to use daily language whilst going beyond its limits.

At a surface level this way of negation is not overly different from the Judao-Christian tradition of describing God. The twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimonides (1135-1204) claimed that “the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate” (1956, p. 81). Hence, a correct way to say that God exists is that His “non-existence is impossible” (p. 82). For the same reason, one should not express that God is living, but that He is neither dead nor like the living.

For a deeper understanding of Lao Zi’s way of negation, we must further examine his method, and in particular his rhetorical deployment of negative expressions together with positive expressions, which we might call positive-negative attribution. The negative expression usually comes after the positive,

often introduced by the conjunction “*er*” (and, but, or yet), and consequently becomes the focus of the statement.

Lao Zi uses positive-negative attribution in two ways. Firstly, he uses the negative expression to reverse the preceding positive expression. This occurs when Lao Zi attributes qualities to the Dao but does not want the words that he uses to be understood in a normal manner. This kind of attribution is more like a paradox, such as when he describes the Dao as “Empty, [but] it can never be used up” (chap. 5, cf. 55, 58, 73, 77). More often, Lao Zi calls attention to some of the functions of the Dao, and the following negative expressions reject popular views on the possible consequences of these functions. For instance, “He [the Dao] gives them life, yet he possesses them not. He acts, yet does not make them dependent. He matures them, yet he is not their steward” (chap. 10; cf. chap. 2, 27, 34, 35, 51, 55, 64, 66, 81).

The second way in which Lao Zi uses positive-negative attribution is opposite to the first. Here the negative expression does not deny the preceding positive expression, but rather stretches its meaning and implications to infinitude. For instance, “[the Dao is] dependent on nothing, [and] unchanging; all pervading, [and] unailing” (chap. 25; cf. chap. 8, 35, 81).² The meaning of this description is more than the simple sum of the positive (i.e., dependent on nothing and all pervading) and negative attributes (i.e., unchanging and unailing). A complete expression is: “the Dao is dependent on nothing to the extent that it is always itself and unchanging, and pervades everywhere to the extent that that it becomes unailing.”

As the negative attributes are actually the focus of the passage, a superficial reading might suggest that the preceding positive attribution is pointless. This, of course, cannot be the case. Indeed, the pattern of positive-negative attribution allows Lao Zi to overcome the second dilemma of describing the Dao as both of and not of this world. As Lao Zi describes the Dao, it is actually an immense extension of the world.

Paradox

Another rhetorical method with which Lao Zi describes the Dao, and even more forcefully than through negation, is paradox. Examples of this kind are plentiful in *Daode jing*. For example, “The bright Dao seems dark. Advancing on the Dao seems retreat. The smooth Dao seems rough (chap. 41). “The great note is inaudible. The great image is formless” (chap. 41). “The Dao of Heaven is such that one excels at winning without contending. He excels at make people respond without speaking. He spontaneously attracts without summoning” (chap. 73; cf. chap. 22, 24, 38, 45, 58, 63, 64, 66). These paradoxes are more obscure and ambiguous than those of Christian theology. The paradoxes in *Daode jing*

usually contain contrasts, such as those between bright and dark, sound and silence, advancing and retreat, and smooth and rough, which are so striking that the expressions take on the semblance self-contradiction and folly.

However, Lao Zi's use of paradox is by no means a pointless language game. Scholars usually come to understand these paradoxes within the context of dialectical development and transformation. For instance, Lao Zi claimed that "Stepping aside keeps one's wholeness intact. Bending makes one straight. Being empty makes one full. Being worn out keeps one new. Having little gives one access. Having much leads one astray" (chap. 22). Wang Bi, the famous commentator on Lao Zi in the third century, explicated these riddling passages in the following manner:

Avoid flaunting yourself, and your brilliance will remain unimpaired. Avoid insisting that you are right, and your rightness will commend itself. Avoid boasting about yourself, and your merit will be acknowledged. Avoid self-importance, and your virtue will long endure (trans. Lynn, 1999, p. 89).

These explanations catch some of the spark and insight contained in Lao Zi's wisdom. They accord with his explicit idea that:

Thus it is that presence and absence generate each other; difficulty and ease determine the sense of the other; long and short give proportion to the other; highs and lows are a matter of relative inclination; instrumental sounds and voice tones depend on one other for harmony; and before and after result from their relative places in a sequence. (chap. 2)

However, the dialectical view of things merging with their opposites when extreme is not all that Lao Zi captures with his paradoxical expressions. Contemporary readers of these expressions have tended to miss a crucial aspect of Lao Zi's implicit message. In saying that "the bright Dao seems dark," for example, Lao Zi is explaining two things—that the bright Dao is not "bright," but also that it is not "dark" either ("seems" does not equate with "is"). Here the second negation, which is in fact the negation of the first negation, is the key to the understanding of the paradox. The first negation still implies some definite assertion. Suppose there is a given range of alternatives, then to rule out one of them is to make the rest more probable. Thus, to say that the Dao is not bright is to suggest that the Dao is dark, especially in terms of an either-or logic. In certain contexts this assertion may be correct, and even necessary for Lao Zi—the Dao should have its dark side. Yet in other cases Lao Zi needs to go further. Especially when escaping the finite trap of language, he needs not only to use negation, but also to eliminate the positive content that had been brought in with a *simple* negation. Certainly, paradox serves this dual purpose very well.

It should be noted that the second negation—which can be called a double negation or the negation of negation—does not simply return the Dao to the original state of brightness. Instead, it moves the Dao to a greater realm of

negation, the realm of non-brightness and non-darkness.

As with negative expressions, paradoxes have the potential to allow Lao Zi to circumvent the dilemma of describing something that is above name and conception. However, a more subtle reading of *Daode jing* suggests that Lao Zi's use of paradox actually addresses the second dilemma encountered when describing the Dao—that of conceptualizing something which is both absolutely other and inherently familiar to our world. With the subtlety of paradox Lao Zi suggests that the Dao is neither what we think it is, nor what we think it is not. Thus, in the case that “the bright Dao seems dark”, the Dao does not seem bright, but neither does it seem non-bright or the opposite of bright. Lao Zi then places the Dao between positive and the negative lexicons. Paradox provides Lao Zi with a way of stretching his discussion of the Dao to a rhetorical position that a simple negation cannot possibly reach.

However, paradox is still a negative and destructive way of communicating, and Lao Zi must have been aware that one could never foster popular faith in the Dao solely by negative means. Therefore, he developed a positive way of communication as a necessary supplement.

Analogy

Of all Lao Zi's ways of explaining the Dao, analogical projection has the most positive content. *Daode jing* abounds in analogies and metaphors. For instance, Lao Zi provides seven analogies in one passage to characterize the one who practices the Dao:

[H]e seemed hesitant, as one might be when fording a river in winter. He seemed tentative, as one who fears his neighbors on all four sides. He seemed solemn, oh, as if he were the guest. He seemed yielding, oh, just like ice when about to break up. He seemed solid and sturdy, oh, just like an uncarved block of wood. He seemed empty and receptive, oh, just like a valley. He seemed amorphous, oh, just like murky water. (chap. 15)

Lao Zi explains his use of these analogies in a way that suggests no better alternatives. The practitioner of the Dao

[W]as perfectly in step with mystery in all its subtlety and profundity; so recondite was he that it was impossible to understand him. Now, because he defies understanding, all I can do is force a description of what he was like. (chap. 15)

Yet Lao Zi chooses analogies when he encounters difficulty in describing a man of the Dao. The relatively passive tone of this explanation indicates Lao Zi's attitude toward analogy: like other forms of language, analogies are not immediately necessary, but should one discuss the Dao positively, and relate this positive discussion to any knowledge of the Dao, then analogy is the appropriate

choice.

The heavy use of analogy reflects the sophisticated beauty of Lao Zi's language. Yet the significance of analogy in *Daode jing* is more than a vivid and imaginative description. A more important function of analogy is to make possible a positive discussion of the Dao. In his analogies Lao Zi employs similes so often that the prepositions used to introduce them, such as "*ruo*" (like), "*ru*" (as), "*si*" (as), "*xiang*" (as), "*you*" (as), are applied 55 times. As these prepositions introduce analogies and metaphors as "forced descriptions," they convey a tone of reluctance. With this tone of reluctance, Lao Zi now can "positively" discuss the greatness, the deepness, and the extensiveness of the Dao.

In *Daode jing*, analogies could also help to mediate the conflict between the view of the Dao as other worldly and the view of it as this worldly. A key to this lies in the comprehension of another grammatical function of Chinese metaphorical prepositions. That is, the introduction of something that "looks like" something else. The metaphorical expression that "the Dao is like water" thus can also mean that the Dao looks like water, which implies that the Dao may not be water, but that it may as well be that the Dao is water. In this case, the metaphorical prepositions such as "*ruo*" (like), "*ru*" (as), "*si*" (as), "*xiang*" (as), "*you*" (as) introduce nothing more than an uncertain, indefinite tone. It is this tone that allows the concept of the Dao to cross over the gap between this world (water) and the other world (non-water).

Indeed Lao Zi often compares the Dao to mobile and formless things, especially water, wings, and *qi* (ether, air) (see, for example, chap. 8, 10, 15, 20, 28, 32, 42, 43, 66, 78). Moreover, the Dao is the mystic source of these living streams. For instance: "The vessel of the Dao is empty, so use it but do not try to refill it. It is such an abyss, oh, that it appears to be the progenitor of the myriad things" (chap. 4). In the following chapter we read: "The space between Heaven and Earth, is it not just like a bellows or a mouth organ! Empty, it can never be used up. Active, it produces all the more." Later, the Dao is conceived as a living fountain, continuous, "on and on, with only apparent existence, it functions inexhaustibly" (chap. 6). On other occasions the Dao is referred to as things in their primitive state, such as "an uncarved block of wood" (chap. 15, 19, 28, 32, 37), "an infant who has not yet smiled" (chap. 20, 28, 49, 55), and something "amorphous and complete . . . born before Heaven and Earth" (chap. 25).

All of the above analogues are themselves somewhat mysterious. Water, for instance, flowing ceaselessly out of the depths, was puzzling enough for the people of Lao Zi's time, though we now could explain it in scientific terms. These analogues are therefore appropriate to Lao Zi's mystic notion of the Dao. Despite the fact that the depth of the Dao remains concealed in the light of these

analogues, the analogies do provide some insight into the mystery of the Dao. They point to some of its fundamental characteristics, for instance, its unfathomableness.

Lao Zi applies other types of analogies and metaphors as well. He must have been aware that any overemphasis of specific analogues would lead to the idolatry of certain images, and eventually to the demystification of the Dao. Therefore, he also introduces to his symbolic world images of a completely different nature, and refers to the Dao as something definite and distinct, such as a “gate” (chap. 6), a “gateway” (chap. 1, 10), a “highway” (chap. 41, 53), an “implement” (chap. 28), and a pulled bow (chap. 77). While Lao Zi focuses largely on natural analogies, he sometimes discusses the Dao as a person—“mother” (chap. 25, 52), a “female” (chap. 6, 61), a “sage” (e.g., chap. 2, 3, 5, 7), a “gentleman” (chap. 26, 31), a “spirit” (chap. 6, 39, 60), and a “body” (chap. 9, 13). There is no way to reconcile all these images, but from the conflicts the mystery of the Dao finds further expression.

Christian preachers, too, rely heavily on analogy. They resort to analogies to describe an “act”, a “speech”, or the “will” of God. A comparison between this sort of analogy and those of Lao Zi will help us to understand the difference between the two cultural forms of spiritual communication. A situation that especially merits discussion here is how the Christian and Daoist traditions differ in their use of analogy to communicate a sense of divinity in specific cultural contexts.

Lao Zi adopts a system of analogies basically different from those of Christian preachers. An obvious distinction is that Lao Zi uses less corporeal or anthropomorphic analogies. In Christian writings, God “speaks” and “acts,” but in *Daode jing*, to attribute human acts and feelings to the Dao is something that should be avoided. Therefore, Lao Zi discusses it as speechless, actionless, and even heartless and free of desire (e.g., chap. 1, 2, 5, 37, 38).

Another remarkable but often ignored difference between the two traditions is that Lao Zi rarely uses analogues in their extreme forms. In Christianity, a significant way of speaking about the divinity of God, which is what makes God absolutely different from all secular beings, is to speak of Him in terms of extreme purity. When compared to “light,” for instance, He is the “light of lights” or the “polar light” coming directly from above. Thus, in the Bible the holy light is dazzling and often cannot be tolerated by the human eye. When Christian preachers discuss “holy water” as symbolic of God’s spiritual power, the “holy water” must be so pure as to wash the human soul. However, in *Daode jing* the divinity of the Dao needs not be revealed in these pure forms. For Lao Zi, the Dao is holy not because of its purity and exclusiveness, but because of its immense inclusiveness. This inclusiveness must be shown in a vague and obscure manner. Therefore, the light analogy does not figure as prominently in

Daode jing as in Christian writings. Lao Zi sometimes discusses the Dao in terms of light, but the kind of light that he means is rather dim (chap. 4, 41, 56, 58). This is why, as we have seen, that “the bright Dao seems dark.”

As compared with light, fire, and thunder, which are virtually paradigmatic analogues of the presence of God in the Bible, Lao Zi appears more interested in applying the images of water, wings, and *qi* (ether, air) to the Dao. As mentioned previously, the water analogue holds an especially important place in *Daode jing*. In Lao Zi’s words, “it is almost exactly like the Dao” (chap. 8). The reason for its being so important is not difficult to understand. Water seems more flexible and more tolerant than light. However, Lao Zi does not describe water as pure--i.e. there is no correlation to Christian holy water. Indeed, the goodness of water does not lie in its purity, but in its “benefiting the myriad things without contention, while locating itself in [low] places that common people scorn” (chap. 8).

In Lao Zi’s eye, divinity is not defined in terms of purity. It could be said that the holy water of the Dao is somewhat muddy, or to put it more accurately, it is neither absolutely clean nor absolutely turbid. In fact, Lao Zi explicitly suggests that the one who practices the Dao is like “murky water” (chap. 15). “The sage resides among all under Heaven with perfect equanimity and impartiality and for the sake of all under Heaven merges his heart/mind with theirs” (chap. 49). Lao Zi seems to have been in favor of the state of impurity instead of purity, and of the lower, less pure reaches of water rather than the upper, more pure reaches, the former seems to hold greater power of mystery. Hence, two of the most eloquent Daoist arguments about how one can remain powerful and sacred read: “A large state is a catchment into which flow occurs. It is where all under Heaven unite” (chap. 61); and “The reason the river and the sea are able to be kings of all the river valleys is that they are good at keeping below them” (chap. 66, cf. 32).

Conclusion

Although Lao Zi is not the first to explain the Dao, he is certainly the very first to describe it with negative expressions and paradoxes. Prior to *Daode jing*, scholars such as Confucius and Mencius were inclined to describe the Dao in a positive way. Lao Zi is also credited with establishing an almost stereotypic association of the Dao with the image of water and other things of indefinite shape and nature. Yet more importantly, he shows that negations, paradoxes, and analogies can combine to form a discourse with a particular function of spiritual communication. It can be said that *Daode jing* marks a new and sophisticated form of spiritual communication in China.

Three questions that need to be addressed here. Can Lao Zi’s preaching on

Dao be considered as spiritual or religious? Is it uniquely Chinese? Moreover, will it have a far-reaching effect on generations to come in China?

Whether a discourse functions through spiritual communication or not is determined by whether it describes a divine being. Lao Zi does succeed in constructing a being completely different from everything with which we are familiar. The term “Dao” originally meant “road” or “way”.³ It started to carry a spiritual flavor when it became “the way of Heaven” in the Chun-Qiu period (722-481 BC). Yet even then it was still dependent on Heaven for its existence. In the time of Confucius, the concept of the Dao was understood as the way of something. Thus, in addition to “the way of Heaven” (Confucius, 5:13), there was “the way of father” (1:11), “the way of a gentleman” (5:16, 14:28, 19:12), “the way of King Wen and King Wu” (19:22, cf. 1:12), and the like. Only with *Daode jing* does the Dao transcend these finite things and become a single, all-embracing Being. Lao Zi, by way of negation, disconnects all of its normal ties with the world and, with the use of paradox and analogy, constructs a relationship both new and profound. This relationship is mystic and sacred as it has remained elusive and difficult to put into words.

To construct a divine being is essentially to have it go beyond all human conception and descriptions. Yet, as one must do so by means of discourse, the final key to this construction is to create a sacred mode of expression that can justifiably address this ineffable being. Lao Zi has successfully developed such a form.

The three ways of communicating the Dao in *Daode jing* all have an extremely oblique and equivocal character, thus making them appear mystic. The use of these ways of communication implies that the Dao cannot be fully disclosed, and therefore the discourse does not contradict Lao Zi’s notion of the ineffable Dao. These oblique and equivocal ways not only justify Lao Zi’s discussion of the Dao, but also help to build up the faith in the Dao as the unfathomably mighty power.

Every culture has its own pattern of spiritual communication. Lao Zi does not simply contribute to constructing a divine Being—he constructs it in a particular way. If the use of negation, paradox, and analogy is in fact quite common in spiritual communication, and it has been found in Christianity and other religions as well, then the significant question is how Lao Zi uses these expressions. As this study has revealed, Lao Zi’s discussion of the Dao is distinct in that he adopts the method of positive-negative attribution, uses particularly obscure and equivocal paradoxes, and chooses analogues of an indefinite nature. It is these distinctive ways of communication that explain why Lao Zi does not describe a supreme Being like the Christian God, who is wholly transcendent of this world. Lao Zi describes another supreme Being, whose divinity is manifested in its immanence in all things.

Lao Zi's construction of such a divine Being accords with the tendency of his day toward what might be called natural-moral religion. Lao Zi does not create this tendency—it has emerged long before him when the Chinese began to revere the impersonal Heaven instead of their personal Sovereign on High. However, Lao Zi develops this tendency to a more thorough stage with his mystic and sacred discussion of the Dao.

Although a detailed analysis of the long-term effect of Lao Zi's pattern of spiritual communication is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting some significant facts. After Lao Zi, spiritual communication undergoes several changes in China, from its stress on the Dao during the Wei (220-265) and Jin (265-420) dynasties, on the Buddha in the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, on the Principle of Heaven in the Song (960-1279), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, to its focus on scientific laws in the modern period. In this course of development, descriptions of the Dao have become more and more delicate. Yet its fundamental pattern of expression remains largely intact.

With a trend toward the practice of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi's way of explaining the Dao, the Wei (220-265) and Jin (265-420) dynasties are generally regarded as the periods of so-called Pure Talk (*Qingtan*) and Metaphysical Learning (*Xuanxue*). The eloquent Neo-Daoist speakers of these eras, such as Wang Bi and He Yan, spoke of the Dao as non-being, and believed that this non-being was the basis of all things in the world (Fung, 1953).

Buddhism entered China systematically during the period of disunity (221-589) and became a major spiritual force in the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties. The reason for its ability to win over the Chinese mind in a short period arose from its prompt adaptation to Daoist patterns of preaching. Early Chinese Buddhist preachers such as Dao An and Zhi Dun expounded the Buddhist *sutras* in terms of *Daode jing* and other Daoist writings. Thus, the Buddhist *sutras* appeared as no more than "a tributary" of Neo-Daoism (Tang, 1983, p. 228; cf. Zhang, 2000, pp. 133-160).

The Neo-Confucians of the Song (960-1279) and later dynasties believed that all things were produced according to "the Principle of Heaven" (*Tianli*). They, too, applied negative, paradoxical, and analogical expressions to their preaching about this Heavenly Principle. This shapeless and transcendental principle did not constitute a separate world of its own, but was found "within concrete things and objects" (Fung, 1953, p. 543).

The Jesuits who first came to China during the Song period realized that to introduce the idea of God they had to make use of Chinese spiritual language. They thus translated "God" as "Dao." As a result, as J. R. Stevenson observed, they had "passed on to later members of their community a term which, with its strong flavor of immanence, radically changed the character of their

transcendental God” (cited in Wright, 1953, p. 302, n. 8).

The negative, paradoxical, and analogical discussion of the Dao persisted even in the era when “scientific law” came to be seen as the universal Dao in China. A study of the 1923 Chinese campaign for scientism (Xiao, 1998) shows that the advocates of science exploited the conventions of traditional Daoist discourse to justify their scientific worldview. This scientific campaign eventually led China towards a new myth and a new version of dogmatism—exactly the sort of thing that science aims to avoid.

It seems that the religious, ethical, and philosophical developments in China after *Daode jing* can be explained by the ongoing discourse on the Dao. Indeed, negative, paradoxical, and analogical discussion of the Dao remains a crucial and subtle aspect of Chinese spiritual life. Any party who wishes to have a profound impact on Chinese spirituality must make use of this discourse, or undertake the daunting task of changing its practice.

Notes

1. Lynn’s translation. Hereafter this translation is used unless noted otherwise.
2. Waley’s translation (1994, p. 55). Lynn’s translation of this portion of the chapter reads: “... it stands alone, unchanged. It operates everywhere but stays free from danger...” The second line of this translation is problematic. I do not think that Lynn’s translation of the Chinese term “*budai*” as “staying free from danger” is accurate. According to He Rongyi, a well credentialed Chinese commentator on *Daode jing* (1994, p. 186), the term “*budai*” here means ceaseless. “Unfailing” is a much better English word for the Chinese term.
3. The term “*dao*” is scattered in early Chinese literature. Yet its meanings as “road” or “way” were quite consistent. For instance, the Chinese Classical *Book of odes* reads: “Look at that sun and moon! Long, long do I think. The way [*dao*] is distant; how can he come to me?” “I go along the road slowly, slowly, in my inmost heart reluctant. Not far, only a little way [*dao*], did he accompany me to the threshold.” “There is a solitary russet pear tree, growing on the left of the way” (trans. Legge, 1960b, p. 52, 55, 185). Even in the magical *Book of changes*, the term means nothing more than a “way.” For example, “Treading a smooth, level course [*dao*], the perseverance of a dark man brings good fortune” (trans. Baynes, 1977, p. 46).

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批注 [Xiao1]:

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