

**ORGANIC NATURALISM  
IN THE CHINESE PHILOSOPHY OF DAOISM**  
Yuanyuan LIU<sup>1</sup>

---

**ОРГАНИЧЕСКИЙ НАТУРАЛИЗМ  
В КИТАЙСКОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ ДАОИЗМА**  
Юаньюань ЛЮ

**ABSTRACT.** In the paper, I focus on the concept of *dao*, which is a basic notion in Chinese philosophy, its field of organic naturalism, and which is especially well manifested in *Taoism*. I will try to cover this issue from two aspects. One is taken from the perspective of ontology, wherein the objective and the subjective are transparent to *Dao* as the ultimate reality and also parts of a totally dynamic process; the other is taken from the perspective of organic relationships between man and *Dao*, which is a further evidence for organic naturalism in Chinese philosophy.

**KEYWORDS:** *Tao Te Ching*, Dao, dynamic change, man and *dao*

---

**РЕЗЮМЕ.** В статье я сосредотачиваюсь на концепции Дао, которая является основным понятием в китайской философии, ее области органического натурализма и которая особенно хорошо проявляется в даосизме. Я постараюсь осветить эту проблему с двух сторон. Один из них взят с точки зрения онтологии, в которой цель и субъективное прозрачны для Дао как конечной реальности, а также являются частью полностью динамического процесса; другой взят с точки зрения органических отношений между человеком и Дао, что является еще одним доказательством органического натурализма в китайской философии.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** *Дао дэ цзин*, Дао, динамическое изменение, человек и Дао.

---

<sup>1</sup> The University of Edinburgh, UK.



## Contents

### Introduction

1. Ontology of Dao
2. Relation between man and myriad things

### Conclusion

## Содержание статьи

### Вступление

1. Онтология Дао
2. Связь между человеком и множеством вещей

### Заключение

## Introduction

This paper is based on *Tao Te Ching*<sup>2</sup>, wherein the key concept is *dao*. Although there are divergent understandings and explanations for the concept of *dao*, I will only focus on its ontological meaning. *Dao* is the key concept in *Tao Te Ching*, and it is generally described as invisible, formless, mysterious, oneness and so on. Notably, a general agreement in academic discussions for the definition of the *dao* is not yet obtained.

### 1. Ontology of *Dao*

*Dao* is the key concept in the *Tao Te Ching*, and it is usually described as invisible, mysterious, and infinite, etc. Many scholars, such as Chen Guying, T'ang Chun-I and Chen Chung-hwan, have had discussion on the meaning of *dao*, although different understandings and interpretations will never come to an end, we can still learn a lot from their work. The concept of *dao* in Lao Tsu refers to something independent of all of the objects in our phenomenal world, and it also indicates that this concept is presupposed, but it cannot be defined clearly by language or knowledge since there is always regressive use of language in presupposition to refer to its own presupposition. Lao Tsu claims that the *dao* which can be spoken is not

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Tao Te Ching* is a Chinese classic text traditionally credited to the 6th-century BC sage Lao Tsu.

constant.

Hu Shih makes a cosmological interpretation of *dao*, and claims that *dao* is the origin of the world [Hu Shih 1926: 56, 64]. Fung Yu-lan claimed that *dao* is an ontological concept instead of a cosmological concept, alleging that Dao ‘is Non-being, and is that by which all things come to be. Therefore, before the being of Being, there must be Non-being, from which Being comes into being. What is said here belongs to ontology, not to cosmology. It has nothing to do with time and actuality. For in time and actuality, there is no Being; there are only beings’ [Fung 1948: 96].

Chen Chung-hwan claims that Lao Zi’s *dao* is a unique and universal binding principle [Chen 1964: 150-3], and *dao* is the agent and principle of myriad things’ production and sustainment. The *dao* also has a normative character, since it is what human actions should stick to, and Chen concludes that *dao* is both axiomatic principle and ontic principle [Chen 1964: 154,157]. Ivanhoe makes a comprehensive summary of *dao*, and which includes its aetiological aspect: “The *dao* is the source, sustenance, and idea pattern for all things in the world. It is hidden and difficult to grasp but not metaphysically transcendent. In the apt metaphor of the text, it is the “root” of all things” [2002: xxii]<sup>i</sup>

Chapter 42 of *Tao Te Ching* displays to us: “*Dao* produced the One, the One produced the two, the two produced the three, and the three produced the ten thousand things.” For this passage, there are diverse arguments and understandings, but I would like to claim that the ontological interpretation is more convincing, and Fu also contends that: “Philosophically speaking... the ontological interpretation under the form of eternity, is far more acceptable.<sup>ii</sup> And the passage about “*Dao* produces One” could be understood philosophically as “*Dao* (metaphysically) comes before One... Three (metaphysically) comes before all things.” Taking the ontological version of Lao Tzu’s cosmological thinking, I would maintain that *dao* is the ontological ground of all things in the non-conceptual, symbolic sense; and One, Two and Three<sup>iii</sup> can be regarded simply as the ontological symbols pointing to the truth that what is non-differentiated is that upon which what is differentiated is metaphysically dependent.” [Fu, 1973:378]

Chen Chung-hwan claims that there are three static and three dynamic senses in the *dao*. On the static side, the *dao* is the ultimate source which produces the myriad things, the store-house and the ultimate model of ten thousand things; in the dynamic

sense, the *dao* is the agent of phenomena and the fundamental principle under which ten thousand things are produced and sustained, and it is also something active. All in all, Chen claims that the *dao* is a unique and universal binding principle [Chen 1964]. The *dao* also has a normative character, since it is the principle of human actions ought to conform. Chen concludes that *dao* is both axiomatic principle and ontic principle [Chen 1964]. Chen thinks the *dao*'s function has both spheres of ought to be and is, which seems to be a functional dual interpretation.<sup>iv</sup> Another representative scholar, Mou Tsung-san, gives us a unique explanation. He thinks that *dao* is not the objective origin of the universe, but is a subjective vision which is a kind of empty mind of practical subjectivity [Mou, 1985]. Mou takes *dao* as a concept of “metaphysics in the line of vision”, but not “metaphysics in the line of being”, and he looks into the ontic world from the perspective of “practical mind-vision”.

As an ultimate reality, the *dao* is not only an origin and root, but also it is a creative process, in which the *dao* can still maintain its independence and the generation, transformation and return of things are all parts of this process. What we should note here is, as the source of reality, the *dao* cannot be exhausted by the things produced by it, so it is not limited by its creative performance. Therefore, we should take the *dao* as both transcendent and immanent, as both originating and supporting, in this sense, the *dao* is the genuine creativity.<sup>v</sup>

We have to note that the unity does not stay static; rather, it is both static and dynamic, since on the one hand it is changeless, on the other hand there are changes in it. Like the unity being within the multiplicity, we need to know the changeless is within the ever-changing as well. In order to understand the process of creativity, we have to know the dialectic relationship between the concepts of the changeless and the ever-changing.

Ontologically speaking, *dao* generates, comprehends, transforms and preserves all things and it is impartial to everything, which can be seen from many chapters of *Tao Te Ching*. It is with regard to this impartiality of *dao* that all things can be regarded as being ontologically equal. Now there are two questions to be answered in this connection: By what operation does *Dao* give rise to all things in being? How is *dao* as a *process* of change and *movement* to be described?

*Dao*, is void and yet produces everything. This is so because *dao* has specifically maintained that it is *dao* which gives rise to all finite things that are related to us in any way, and that it is the void or the indeterminate which one has to understand and

to take into consideration in the understanding of *dao*.

*Dao* is the principle by which the negative can become the positive, or, rather, the cycles of their successive domination take place; the potential can become the actual, the void can become the substantive, and the one can become the many. *Dao* in this sense is inexhaustible, and its workings define change in terms of dialectical oppositions and complementation.

Because *dao* is change<sup>vi</sup>, and change is always change from something to something else, *dao* itself is a unity of the two opposites<sup>vii</sup>. The two opposites of *dao* are respectively called *yin* and *yang*, the feminine force (or principle) and the masculine force (or principle). In Lao Tzu it is clear that *the yin-yang* forces represent two aspects of a unity, be it an individual or the totality of *dao*.<sup>viii</sup> *Yin* can be identified with the negative, the potential, the subjective, and the preservative, while *yang* can be identified with the positive, the actual, the objective, and the creative.

There is no substance to individual things and to their individuality, for all individual things are only relatively determined in the totality of the self- and mutual transformation of things. Thus things are ontologically equal also in the sense of both self-activating and mutually determining.

## 2. Relation between man and myriad things

We should not ignore the fact that the *dao* is also closely related to human beings, even though the *dao*, as the creative source of heaven and earth seems more distant than heaven and earth in relation to human beings. However, the *dao* in fact has its way in the transformation of things; thus, the *dao* seems to be closer than the heaven to human beings.

According to Lao Tsu, the world of man and the world of nature are closely associated with each other, and he also applied his ontological principles of generations to the world of man. Human being is one part of the production of the *dao*, therefore, the well-being of man depends on his ability of following the *dao*. Men should be aware of *dao* and cultivate themselves by following the principles of *dao* and imitating the action of *dao*, and in this way, men can free themselves.

According to these principles, the well-being of man consists in his ability to follow the *dao*, and this means his ability to preserve potentiality for action but not actually acting out his potentiality. This is so because man is a part of *dao* and part of the production of *dao*: when he exerts himself to act and exhausts himself, he will be

simply tossed away as a product of the *dao*, which can be explained as exhaustion resulting from too much effort. A better way to deal with life is not to exhaust oneself and to become an object. Instead one should try to potentialize the actual and remain one with the source which is *dao*. To do this one must become aware of *dao* and cultivate the *dao* in the sense of imitating the action of non-action of *dao*, so that man will become infinitely creative and free himself from domination by destructive forces.

In regard to the movement of *Dao*, and in regard to the attainment of the well-being of life, Chuangzi differs fundamentally from Lao Tsu. In the first place, Chuangzi does not stress the idea of a return to *dao* as the source and origin of everything. For him *dao* is a universal presence and the total activity of all things, which is revealed, in particular, in the relativity and relationality of all things. Chuangzi has put a special stress on these ideas. The relativity and relationality of things are twofold: things are relative and relational to each other, and furthermore relative and relational to the totality of things, too. They are relative and relational to each other in the sense that each thing is a 'this' and a 'that', and thus are relatively and relationally determined and defined. Things are different from one another, but are interdependent for their individuality. Therefore, nothing is an absolute or center of the world, because everything is an absolute and a center of the world. Things are relative and relational to *dao* in the sense that they are part of *dao* and each of them comes about by way of self- and mutual transformation. In addition, there is no limitation to the process of self- and mutual transformation, and *dao* itself is a whole which exemplifies self- and mutual transformation. Because of this, no individuation and differentiation of things is absolute and yet there is no simple undifferentiated homogeneity.

From the point of view of *dao*, an individual is both *dao* and not *dao*. It is *dao* because it is an exemplification of the self-transformation of *dao*; it is not *dao* because it is not the totality. This principle of self- and mutual transformation establishes the fundamental equality of things. Furthermore, it applies to the life of man. Recognizing the relativity and relationality of things, man could detach himself from any specific perspective of things and thus open his mind to all the possible perspectives and possibilities which are manifested in things.

As the source of myriad creatures, *dao* also sustains everything by associating with virtue (*de*). Virtue indicates the function and principle of *dao* in individual

things, and we can see how this works in Chapter 51:

*Dao* produces [10,000 things], and *de* rears them. Things take shape, and vessels are formed. This is why the ten-thousand things all revere *dao* and honour *de* (virtue). *Dao* is revered and honoured not because they are bestowed with nobility but because this is an ongoing and natural thing to do. *Dao* produces and rears them, brings them up and accomplishes them, brings them to fruition and maturity, feeds and shelters them. It produces them without claiming to possess them; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude for this; it is the steward yet exercises no authority over them. Such is called *xuan-de* (profound and secret virtue).<sup>ix</sup>

The profound virtue is a characteristic of *dao*, and it also makes the *dao* related with the human world, since the sage in the human world embodies this kind of profound virtue and practices the principles of *dao*.

## Conclusion

I have described the principles and characteristics of *Dao*, the foundational concept of the organic naturalism tradition in Chinese philosophy – from the perspective of interrelations between the objective and the subjective, and the relation between man and *Dao*. Chinese philosophers consider these in terms of natural correspondence, interdependence, and complementation, in which life and understanding can be achieved and preserved. In fact the relationships in question might even be thought of, from a general viewpoint, as continuities, for there is no real break between physical and mental, objective and subjective. Ontologically and cosmologically speaking, the objective and the subjective, and the physical and the mental are transparent to *Dao* as the ultimate reality, and therefore are the parts of a total dynamic process. The potentiality of constant change is in the nature of things, and all things are not only in the dynamic process of transformation, but also are associated with each other in a context of organic relationships.

The organic relationships between man and society constitute further evidence for organic naturalism in Chinese philosophy. In Taoism, man is relational to all things, and also has to interact with and participate in the activities of *Dao* in order to be good and perfect. In this context of organic relationships among men and between man and things, harmony and harmonization are the key words, and harmony and

harmonization are possible only if there are organic relationships of unity in variety. Also, in Confucianism, man is a relational being who depends upon other men for the cultivation and perfection of himself. Chinese philosophy provides a serious elaboration of such relationships as a basis upon which 'goodness' can be conceived as essentially the ability to achieve and preserve harmony.

### References

- Chen, Chung-Hwan (1964). "What Does Lao-Tzu Mean by the Term 'Tao'?" *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 4.2: 150-61.
- Daodejing, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (2002). *The Daodejing of Laozi*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Fu, Charles Wei-Hsun (1973). "Lao Tzu's Concept of Tao," *Inquiry*, 16: 367-94.
- Fung, Yu-lan (1948). *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Free Press.
- Hu Shih (1926). *Zhong-Guo-Zhe-Xue-Shi-Da-Gang* [An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy], Shanghai: Commercial Press.
- Lossky, Nikolay O. (1952). *History of Russian Philosophy*. George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London. 416 p.
- Khroutski, Konstantin S. & Klimek, Rudolf (2018). "Biocosmological definition of Information and its Naturalist causative significance, approaching to evolve the World Information University (WIU)," *Biocosmology – neo-Aristotelism* Vol. 8, No. 2, (Spring 2018); pp. 203-261.
- Khroutski, Konstantin S. (2019). "Discussing the hypothesis of "spatial homeostasis" by Oleg I. Epstein – On the Biocosmological parallels and terminological corrections, and general foundations of the Organicist – *Organon*Kosmological – science in Russia," *Biocosmology – neo-Aristotelism* Vol. 9, Nos. 1&2, (Winter/Spring 2019); pp. 21-136. (in Russian)
- Mou, Zong-san (1985). *Cai-Xing-Yu-Xuan-Li* [Talent, Nature, and the Mysterious Principle], Taipei: Xuesheng Press.

### Editor's notes

<sup>i</sup> We could not but see similarity between the expressed properties of *dao* and the main originative (aetiological) natural forces substantiated in the Aristotelian *Physics*, of the three causative orders : *Hyletic* cause (usually, but wrongly translated as material cause); *Organic* or *Morphogenetic* cause (likewise, incorrectly translated as formal cause), and *Steresis*-cause (στέρησις αἰτίον). The latter (*steresis*, from Greek) is usually translated as



shortage, privation, matrix or womb, or void. We prefer to interpret Aristotle's *steresis* as the "Aether-Noetic (*steresis*-gravitational) physical cause – of the attractive, evolutionary ontogenetic acting; among other major aetiological forces in Aristotle" [2019]. "Other major aetiological forces" certainly include the *κατά συμβεβηκός αιτίον* (cause by coincidence, or the circumstantial cause), which we prefer to translate as the *Resonance* cause [2018].

- ii At the same time, the position of a Russian philosopher Nikolay O. Lossky is to be noted: "On the other hand, having studied the basic elements and aspects of the world, philosophy must detect the interconnection between them which forms the world-whole. Moreover, the world-whole, studied by the branch of metaphysics called cosmology, contains concrete individual elements of such significance as for instance, the biological evolution, the history of humanity – and philosophy must answer the question as to their meaning and their place in the world-whole." [1952, p. 402] Thereby, from the position of Russian philosophy, cosmology is a true all-encompassing discipline; and we do need to introduce relevant cosmological foundations for the rational studying and understanding of the organic world-whole (Kosmos). All the more that the Biocosmological Association (BCA) deals with and evolving precisely the notion of *cosmology* that aims at the all-encompassing (Organicist, of natural studies) exploration of Kosmos – the real living (self-evolving) natural world-whole.
- iii At the same time, we can attach the dynamic (neo-Aristotelian) cosmological sense to the *Tao Te Ching's* "One, Two and Three" concept and notions, that is to treat them as the basic cosmological principles: One is *Dao* – the birth (through *big bang*) of cosmic elements as functionally integral units that constitute the entire Universe, and, thus – the emergence (birth) of a living thing (subject) and its/her/his whole ontogenesis (life); Two – finding the polar (paired) forms among all elements of the One *Dao*-cosmos (Kosmos), thus realizing the life principle of bipolarity (essential co-existence of the two poles in all spheres of a Kosmic subject's life organization; Three – discovery of the integrating (intermediate between polarities, and which unify them) bases (axes) that essentially – *the dao* of a living subject – organize the dynamic integral co-existence and cyclic recurrence (by turn, in dominance) of the three essential Kosmic orders of life activity : the two polar; and one basal (axial), that is intermediate, of integrating essence. The stated Bipolar unity and the dynamic Triadic cyclicity (by the turnover of the Three Kosmic orders and their successive domination) are evidently among the necessary elements for generating the entire (uncountable) amount of living things and their wholesome ontogenesis – the self-evolving reality of the Kosmos.
- iv In general, the dualist (binary) interpretation of reality is typical for the modern Western mode of thinking. However, in contradistinction, and that is inevitable: *Dao*, if generates

the entire life of the Universe – *Dao* cannot do without realizing (in the Aristotelian sense) the Kosmic potencies, thereby underlying and substantiating the essentially dynamic – living, self-evolving – world. In studying the universal significance of Information, and advancing the concept of “Information cause” – we have arrived at the conclusion that *information* cause is inseparable from other causes of the Aristotelian aetiology, both “κατα φύσιν αἰτίον” (as the causes: *hyletic*-material, *organic*-formal, *generative*-efficient, and *telic*-final); and “κατά συμβεβηκός αἰτίον” – the cause by coincidence (*resonance* cause) [2018, p. 257]. Another significant conclusion that was made : Information (and *information* cause, in the Biocosmological meaning) has a similar (backbone) meaning as the holistic *Dao* (in Taoism) and *Meditation*, as a way of life (in Buddhism) [Ibid., p. 239]; and that the Biocosmological rational concept of Information (serving the goals of the 21st century safe, peaceful and wholesome evolvment) is essentially close to the great notions (and their comprehensive systems) of *Dao*, in Taoism; *Meditation* (as a way of life), in Buddhism; and *Entelecheia*, in the Aristotelian *Organon*Kosmology [Ibid., p. 255]. Recent Biocosmological scientific pursuits [2019] provide for special attention to be given to the Aristotelian notion of *aether*; in the Biocosmological evolvment – the Aether-Noetic (*steresis*-gravitational) physical cause : of the attractive, evolutionary ontogenetic acting; which occupies a special place among other major aetiological forces in the cosmological system of Aristotle.

- v Together with ontological and cosmological standpoints, a challenge is to inquire the aetiological aspects, firstly – of *Dao*’s ability to integrate the “transcendent and immanent” qualities of a living subject. The latter, in the given context, are corresponding to the aforementioned Aristotelian three (main, for the subject’s emergence and life activity) causes: *hyletic*, *organic*, and *steresis* (in detail, see the publications in the “*Biocosmology – neo-Aristotelism*” [2018-2019]. Thereby, in the light of aforesaid, *Dao* of the Kosmos (and *the dao* – of a given Kosmic thing-subject) is the *integrating* cause that aims at the sustaining of optimal (homeostatic) life conditions (in all spheres). In this, however, *Dao* is the universalizing Kosmic entity that “can be regarded as being ontologically equal” [p. 359], while *the dao* – vitalizes the given Kosmic subject, and so thus is essentially different (functionally specific) for each Kosmist subject, being considered from the (Bio)cosmological (*entelechart*) and aetiological standpoints.
- vi Among the great philosophers who explored the issues of change, of course – Aristotle is on the first place. So far, however, the rational cognition of this issue, especially – of the ascending self-evolving essence of the real (natural, cosmic) world – has not received, up to date, a clear and satisfactory understanding and explanation.

- 
- vii That is essentially a principle of bipolarity (not duality), committed to the ternary dynamic type of mentality (and not, binary static logic), in a rational expression.
- viii Then, the most vital essence for a Cosmic life is the unity of polarities (opposites); and *the dao*, therefore, is the basis (axis) that realizes the unity (and stableness) of polarities (and their potencies) through the entire wholesome ontogenesis of a Kosmic subject.
- ix This excerpt from *Tao Te Ching* clearly demonstrates that *the dao* has substantially the ontogenetic essence, maintaining the well-being of a Kosmic subject throughout its/her/his entire life.