

Translation of Li Tianyun's Article "Comparison of the Views of Lao Zi And Wan Bi on Ontological Issues in the Tao Te Ching"¹

Перевод статьи Ли Тяньюня «Сравнение взглядов Лао Цзы и Ван Би на онтологические вопросы в "Дао дэ Цзин"»

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Abstract

In the treatise "Commentary on the Tao te Ching", Wang Bi showed that his thoughts and those of Lao Tzu are closely connected and intertwined. Wang Bi added his vision to the original work "Lao Tzu" ("Tao te ching") when he commented on it. The basic idea of Lao Tzu's philosophy is Tao, and the basic idea of Wang Bi's metaphysics is Nothing. The basic concept of Lao Tzu Tao is reflected in Wang Bi, and the basic concept of Wang Bi is Nothing, in turn, implied in Lao Tzu. However, Wang Bi understands and interprets Lao Tzu's Tao from the point of view of Nothing, and Lao Tzu discusses Nothing, which was later involved by Chinese metaphysics (Wang Bi) during the Wei-Jin dynasties from the point of view of Tao. This philosophical method of explaining one's own thoughts by interpreting original works as commentary is worthy of our close attention and research.

Keywords: Taoism, Lao Tzu, Wang Bi, "Commentary on the Tao te Ching", Tao, Nothing, Xuan-xue.

Аннотация

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В трактате «Комментарий к "Дао дэ Цзин"» Ван Би показал, что его мысли и мысли Лао Цзы тесно связаны и переплетены между собой. Ван Би добавил свое видение к оригинальной работе «Лао Цзы» («Дао дэ цзин»), когда он прокомментировал ее. Основная идея философии Лао Цзы – Дао, а основная идея метафизики Ван Би – Ничто. Основным концептом Лао Цзы Дао отражен у Ван Би, а основным концептом Ван Би Ничто, в свою очередь, подразумевается у Лао Цзы. Однако Ван Би понимает и интерпретирует Дао Лао Цзы с точки зрения Ничто, а Лао Цзы обсуждает Ничто, которое позже было задействовано китайской метафизикой (Ван Би) в периоды династий Вэй-Цзинь с точки зрения Дао. Этот философский метод объяснения собственных мыслей путем интерпретации оригинальных работ в качестве комментария достоин нашего пристального внимания и исследования.

Ключевые слова: даосизм, Лао Цзы, Ван Би, «Комментарий к "Дао дэ Цзин"», Дао, Ничто, Сюань-сюэ.

1. The Ontology of Tao: The View of Lao Tzu

Sima Qian, in his work Shi Ji, recorded three different people named Lao Tzu, viz: Lao Tang, Lao Laizi, and Tai Shi Dan. Usually in China Lao Tzu is referred to as Lao Tang. Lao Tang, whose surname is Li, whose first name is Er, and whose middle name is Tang, is from the Kuxian district of the kingdom of Chu (now Luyi, Henan). Because Lao Tang was born with a white beard and white hair, he was nicknamed Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu was once the director of the library of the Zhou royal family, and he could be safely described as a man of great intelligence.

According to the Shi Ji records, when Lao Tzu went to the Hangu Pass, Yin Xi (who was in charge of that pass), asked to put the main thoughts of his teachings in writing. This exposition was called the Tao De Jing (Lao Tzu), which has come down to this day. With this Tao Te Ching, consisting of only five thousand words, Lao Tzu became the founder of the Taoist teachings in China. Hundreds of years later, Taoism emerged, and Lao Tzu is considered the founder of Taoism as the Taoist Tianzun. He was called "Taqing" of the Sanqing, that is, "Taishan Laojun" in Journey to the West. It is also said that after Lao Tzu left China, he went to India to give enlightenment and education to his Indian ancestors, which eventually led to the birth of Indian Buddhism, called "Lao Tzu Hua Hua (Lao Tzu Enlightens the Barbarians). Of course, there is little belief in this; rather, it was concocted by Taoism in order to belittle Buddhism and elevate its religion.

Han Feiji was the first scholar to conduct academic research on "Lao Tzu," his main achievements being "Xie Lao" and "Yu Lao. During the Western Han dynasty, He Shang Gong divided "Lao Tzu" into eighty-one chapters. The first thirty-seven chapters are called "Tao Jing," and the remaining forty-four chapters are called "De Jing. Since then "Lao Tzu" has also been called "Tao De Jing. With the exception of the writings of He Shang Gong, "Commentary on the "Tao De Jing" Wang Bi in Cao Wei is the most influential. Mr. Lu Yuile of Peking University collected Wang Bi's "Commentary on the Tao De Jing" Wang Bi, which was published by China Book Publishers and titled "Lao Tzu's Commentary on the Tao De Jing. It is still one of the best versions of Lao Tzu to read, but one must distinguish between what belongs to Lao Tzu's thought and what belongs to Wang Bi's thought. Compared with He Shang Gong's modern translation of the Tao Te Ching, Mr. Chen Guiying's Modern Commentary and Translation of Lao Tzu from the National Taiwan University may be more helpful in bringing us closer to the original intent of Lao Tzu. In 1973, two versions of Lao Tzu were discovered in the tomb of Mawandui Han in Changsha, Hunan, both with "De Jing" on the front and "Tao Jing" on the back. Some of the texts in them differ from He Shang Gong's version. In 1993, three versions of the "Lao Tzu" were discovered in the tomb of Chu in Guodian, Jingmen, Hubei Province. They are relatively short in length, and the text is very different from the same version by He Shan Gong.

The basic idea of Lao Tzu is Tao. The first chapter of "Lao Tzu" says: "If Tao can speak, Tao is not immutable, if they can name it, the name is not immutable" [1, p. 148]. Wang Bi commented

on this point as follows: "Tao, which can express and name, pointing to deeds and creating forms, do not constitute their immutable. Therefore also cannot be expressed, cannot be named" [2, p. 225]. Lao Tzu's reflection on the Tao is extremely important in the history of thought. Before Lao Tzu, Chinese philosophers usually believed that the origin of all things was "heaven," but Lao Tzu said: "Heaven and Earth are not human. They see in ten thousand things only straw dogs." [1, p. 149] Wang Bi said of this: "Heaven and Earth rely on selfhood, are inactive and create nothing, and the ten thousand things themselves govern each other. Therefore are inhuman" [2, p. 227]. Thus, Mr. Zhang Dainian even believed that Lao Tzu was the first philosopher in the history of Chinese philosophy to address and reveal the problem of prime cause, which, in turn, was discussed by Thales in ancient Greece. In "An Essay on the History of Chinese Philosophy," Zhang Dainian noted, "Before Lao Tzu, people thought that the Father of all things was heaven, and that heaven gives rise to everything. But in Lao Tzu's time, It tends to be born out of the sky. Lao Tzu says that "the sky is before the sky, and the foundation of the sky is the Tao." [3, p. 79] Lao Tzu believes that the Tao, about which something can be said, is no longer the real Tao. The implication is that the so-called Tao refers to the undefinable.

The ancient Greek word Logos also means Tao in a certain sense, but it can be said to be the exact opposite of the Tao of Lao Tzu. Heraclitus used the word Logos to refer to that which can be expressed. In Genesis, God creates the world by the Word, and in the Gospel of John, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ refers to something that can be spoken of. And Lao Tzu's Tao refers to something that cannot be said (in this respect it is similar to the One Plotinus). According to the first chapter of Lao Tzu, one can only determine that the Tao is ineffable. From this we can see that Chinese and Western philosophers understand Tao differently, so Chinese thinkers are against using Tao to translate the word Logos in Western philosophy, for they have different meanings. When translating the Tao of Chinese philosophy into foreign countries, it is better to transliterate it into Tao according to the present more common method than to use the original method to translate it into Logos. But in modern Western philosophy this distinction between East and West has gradually disappeared. For example, in the seventh chapter of the "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" the Austrian-English philosopher L. Wittgenstein in the twentieth century stated: "What cannot be spoken of must be silenced" [4, p. 219]. As for the ideological relationship between Chinese Taoist philosophy and Anglo-American analytical philosophy, Chinese scholars have written many related works on this problem. For example, Mr. Han Linhe, an expert on Wittgenstein studies at Peking University, wrote two consecutive works: "Letting Go to Cope with the World - Philosophical Studies of Zhuang Tzu" and "Traveling into Space to Strengthen the Soul - Philosophical Studies of Guo Xiang". Thus, Chinese thinkers explain the philosophy of Zhuang Tzu and Guo Xiang from the perspective of British and American analytical philosophy.

2. The ontology of Nothingness: Wang Bi's View

In the Wei and Jin dynasties there was a philosophical method called "metaphysics. Earlier Chinese translations of Western philosophy often used the word "Xuan Xue" to translate the word "metaphysics" (Metaphysics). In fact, "metaphysics" in Western philosophy as a kind of ultimate questioning of "being as existence" is completely different from the Chinese "Xuan Xue. Whereas "metaphysics" in Western philosophy is always rationalistic, "Xuan Xue" in Chinese philosophy is irrational and mystical. So what is Xuan Xue? In fact, the metaphysicians of the Wei and Jin dynasties did not define the philosophical methods they used, and so the Chinese were inevitably biased in their definition of metaphysics. However, we can notice that in the fortieth chapter of "Lao Tzu" there is such a significant phrase: "To ten thousand things under Heaven life gives existence, and existence itself is born of non-existence" [1, p. 159]. This seems to mark the birth of an entirely new philosophical methodology, but there is no explanation. So, here is Wang Bi's need for a commentary to promote this philosophical method: "For all things Celestial life consists in having,

but the root of that which gives rise to having is non-existence. In striving for the integrity of existence, one necessarily returns to non-possession" [2, p. 245]. Xuan Xue, then, is a kind of mystical contemplation of Nothingness or What and/or a kind of ontological philosophy that uses mysticism for contemplation.

He Yan and Wang Bi are the founders of Wei Jin period metaphysics. He Yan made two important contributions to the history of Chinese philosophy: first, He Yan put forward the idea of reverence for Nothing. Reverence for Nothingness is a metaphysical interpretation of the Tao. He Yan believes that the Tao, repeatedly discussed in Lun Yu and Lao Tzu, is in fact the Nothing, and only the Nothing can be the source of everything. Second, as a significant representative of the Cao Wei regime, He Yan fully supported the young philosopher Wang Bi. Although Wang Bi was never as successful in his official career as his teacher He Yan, he nevertheless displayed outstanding philosophical genius in his short twenty-four years of life.

Wang Bi's major works include "Commentary on Lao Tzu," "Commentary on Zhou Yi," etc., both of which are included in the "Collection of Wang Bi's Works," edited by Mr. Lu Yuile. Wang Bi's works are of a very speculative nature. These works laid a solid theoretical foundation for the metaphysics of the Wei Jin dynasties. Wang Bi inherited from his teacher He Yan a reverence for the Nothingness, and the belief that only the Nothingness is the true noumenon of all things. It is worth noting that when Wang Bi reinterpreted Chinese classical texts such as Lao Tzu and Zhou Yi, he did not come into conflict with official Confucian ideology because of his metaphysical viewpoint. Instead, he used various intelligible linguistic skills to metaphysically transform Confucianism and Confucian classics, thereby avoiding ideological conflicts. Mr. Li Jieho wrote in History of Ancient Chinese Thought, "When He Yan and Wang Bi created the ontological theory <nothing as a source>, they mainly drew from Lao Tzu and did not address Zhuang Tzu. Yet they regarded Confucianism as an orthodox school in which Confucius still prevails over Lao Tzu. But those who really oppose Confucianism and are supporters of Zhuang Tzu in theory and in practice should prefer Ji Kang and Zhuang Tzu to others"[5, p. 202]. Wang Bi's commentary on "Lao Tzu" has a great influence on modern understanding of this treatise, which in many respects even surpasses He Shan Gong's commentary. In spite of the brilliant commentaries on the Tao Te Ching, no one can reconstruct the original intent of Lao Tzu. Every researcher, when interpreting Chinese classical works, must either adhere to a point of view that already exists, or put forward his own. Now it is necessary to make a more profound comparative study of the views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi.

3. The ontology of the Tao and its tradition: similarities between the views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi

The reason why Wang Bi commented on Lao Tzu rather than other classical Chinese works is precisely because the idea of this treatise is largely related to the main idea of his own. Wang Bi used Lao Tzu's status as an ancient Chinese classic to explain his new ideas. It is worth discussing the similarities and differences between the views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi. Similarities between the ontologies of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi:

1) Lao Tzu's ontology is Nothing.

The concepts of What and Nothing have existed in the original work of Lao Tzu for a long time, and Wang Bi was not the first to note them. One might even say that the reason why metaphysicians of the Wei Jin era, such as He Yan, Wang Bi, and Guo Xiang, had this notion and understanding of whether a problem existed was largely dependent on the thought of Lao Tzu himself. In other words, Lao Tzu's thought inspired the metaphysicians of the Wei and Jin dynasties and was one of the important sources of metaphysics in them. For example, Mr. Zhang Dainian said in "An Essay on Chinese Philosophy": "That and Nothingness is also a question that is often discussed in Chinese philosophy. Are What and Nothingness the same truth? The discussion of this question began with Lao Tzu." [3, p. 243] In fact, there are many discussions of What (being) and

Nothingness (non-being). The most typical of them is the transition from Being to Nonexistence in H.W.F. Hegel's "Science of Logic". Georg Hegel wrote in it: "This pure being is pure abstraction and therefore absolutely negative, which, taken also directly, is nothing" [6, p. 220]. The difference is that the distinction between What and Nothing in Western philosophy begins with What. Mr. Deng Xiaoman said in "The Tension of Speculation - A New Analysis of Hegel's Dialectic": "Nothingness is the absence of <what (an established thing) >. For example, darkness is simply the lack of light; cold, it is simply the lack of heat; there is no What, there is no such thing as Nothing. What precedes Nothingness [7, p. 193]. As far as Chinese philosophy is concerned, whether Lao Tzu or Wang Bi, the emphasis is primarily on the Nothingness. In general, philosophical reasoning about What and Nothing was first proposed by Lao Tzu and then advanced by He Yan and Wang Bi. This is also one of the important similarities between Lao Tzu and Wang Bi. He Yan and Wang Bi were the founders of metaphysics in the Wei and Jin dynasties, and their thinking is certainly original. However, any mature thought system first absorbs and makes use of the ideological achievements of its predecessors, and then can be formed only after its own processing. It cannot be groundless. As the founders of Wei Jin Dynasty metaphysics, He Yan and Wang Bi first absorbed and borrowed the great principles of Lao Tzu's original works and then were able to advance their own foundations.

2) Wang Bi's ontology contains the Tao.

Lao Tzu's basic idea is Tao. It rarely provokes controversy. Only by first comprehending the ineffability of Tao can one understand the entire book of Lao Tzu. He Yan and Wang Bi suggested that reverence for Nothing means denying Tao with Nothing, but thought that Tao means Nothing and Nothing means Tao, and Nothing is a philosophical explanation of Tao. Wang Bi interprets Tao and Ming as "cannot be said" and "cannot be called," which is equivalent to interpreting Tao with Nothing. Although Wang Bi explained the Tao as Nothing, he did not, after all, deny the Tao of Lao Tzu, but made an entirely new philosophical interpretation of the Tao of Lao Tzu by making the traditional philosophical term Tao glow with a different color for Taoism. Wang Bi certainly would not have deliberately misinterpreted Lao Tzu when he made his commentary on it, or he would not have had to give it in relation to Lao Tzu at all. However, it cannot be denied that Wang Bi unwittingly added some of his own metaphysical positions to the text of the Tao Te Ching when he was explaining Lao Tzu's thoughts. This is understandable. As for the basic idea of Lao Tao, Wang Bi, in interpreting it, may have felt that only by interpreting the Tao with the Nothing can the philosophy of Lao Tzu be truly explained, is Wang Bi's recreation of Lao Tzu's original idea from his own metaphysical point of view.

4. The ontology of Nothingness and its innovation: differences between the views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi

From all of the above, it is worth concluding that the views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi are inextricably linked. As the founders of Wei Jin metaphysics, He Yan and Wang Bi created their own theoretical system on the basis of absorbing and borrowing the ideological essence of the original Lao Tzu. The basic idea of Lao Tzu Tao is still a strong influence on Chinese philosophers, and because of this it has not been rejected until now. The basic idea of He Yan and Wang Bi The Nothingness was actually reflected in the original Lao Tzu, and it was not created subjectively by He Yan and Wang Bi. Let us discuss below the differences between the ontological views of Lao Tzu and Wang Bi:

1) Lao Tzu uses the Tao to understand the Nothing.

The basic paradigm of the Nothingness metaphysics of Wei Jin, He Yan and Wang Bi and What Guo Xiang were revealed in advance in the first chapter of Lao Tzu. Regarding What and Nothing, Lao Tzu did not favor a particular aspect as the Chinese of the past imagined it, especially the aspect of Nothing, but held that What and Nothing are "the mother of all things" and "the

beginning of heaven and earth," sometimes it must be What and sometimes it must be Nothing, both of which are integral parts of Xuan. Mr. Feng Yulan noted in *The History of Chinese Philosophy*: "The What and the Nothing come from the Tao, which are its two aspects." He Yang and Wang Bi founded metaphysics, but saw only one aspect of the Nothing. Guo Xiang's commentary on Zhuang Tzu played another role in advancing metaphysics, but highlighted only one aspect of the What. Thus, it seems that neither Wang Bi nor Guo Xiang achieved the unity of What and Nothing, nor even the depth of Lao Tzu's thought. Mr. Zhang Dainian said in "Essays on Chinese Philosophy": "The philosophy of He Yan, Wang Bi, and others can be characterized as <philosophy of non-essence>. They believe that <nothing> is the basis of the world. Although their thinking began with Lao Tzu, they were prone to extremes." [3, p. 247] Or, rather, it is only by comparing and reading the works of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang that one can really enter the door of Xuan and enrich and develop the Taoist philosophy founded by Lao Tzu from different angles. If Lao Tzu is open-minded about neither What nor Nothing, then what does Lao Tzu favor? The answer is obvious, the real ontology in Lao Tzu's mind can only be the Tao. Whether it is What or Nothing, the original understanding can only be obtained within the basic paradigm of the Tao. Mr. Hu Shi said in "An Essay on the History of Chinese Philosophy": "Lao Tzu was the first to introduce the Tao. This Tao is an abstract concept that is too subtle to be easily understood. Lao Tzu again reflects on this concrete aspect, so he thinks of the word <nothing> and feels that the nature and function of this <nothing> is most similar to this <Tao> in the whole world" [9, p. 49].

2) Wang Bi uses Nothingness to understand the Tao.

Lao Tzu's original work is a typical Chinese dialectic, repeating the mystical motto "is and is not. It was originally a mystical, even almost literary expression. We may not understand Lao Tzu's original work and feel that it is a "mystery within a mystery," but every time we read Lao Tzu's original work, we will have an elusive experience. After Wang Bi's explanation, the original work of Lao Tzu is immediately transformed into a kind of ontological assumption in the strict sense: "Tao" is that which cannot be said; and all that can be said is not the real "Tao. In fact, it is the metaphysicality of Lao Tzu's "poetic philosophy" that turns the original poetic philosophical proverbs into a metaphysical ontology. Mr. Li Jieho wrote in *History of Ancient Chinese Thought*, "The old teachings of He Yan and Wang Bi differ from the original teachings of Lao Tzu. <Nothing as a source>, which they advocate, requires separation from all kinds of concrete, complex, realistic and, therefore, limited and partial 'finite' things in order to reach and grasp the whole, the infinite and abstract" [5, p. 203]. So, what metaphysical ontology did Wang Bi establish when commenting on Lao Tzu? Since Tao is something inexpressible, Wang Bi's own tendency to Nothingness penetrated into Lao Tzu's Tao unknowingly. After Wang Bi's philosophical interpretation, the Tao immediately became an abstract, mysterious and nihilistic philosophical concept, in other words, the Tao of Lao Tzu was transformed into the Nothingness of Wang Bi. Mr. Feng Yulan explained Wang Bi's thought in *The History of Chinese Philosophy*. He said: "The Tao takes <nothing> as its basic part and applies <nothing> as its use. With <nothing> as its basic body you can have everything; with the use of <non-action> nothing will fail" [Quoted from: 8, p. 513]. Thus, it is worth clarifying that Wang Bi actually explains the Tao of Lao Tzu by means of the Nothing, while at the same time making a metaphysical understanding of the basic idea of the Tao of Lao Tzu.

Wang Bi shaped his philosophical thoughts in the process of interpreting such works as Lao Tzu and Zhou Yi. No one can fully reconstruct the author's original intent in the process of explaining the works. New thought is built on the reconstruction of the thoughts of predecessors. This philosophical method coincides with hermeneutics in modern Western philosophy. Thus, we still recommend reading Lao Tzu through Wang Bi's *Commentary on the Tao Te Ching*. Wang Bi and to study the Four Books through Zhu Xi's *Commentary on the Four Books*. In this process we not only approach the original texts of Lao Tzu and Confucius, but we also gain a general understanding of the precious essence of thought that later generations will spill from the depths of Lao Tzu's and Confucius' writings.

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