The Cosmo-ontological View of Becoming in Ancient Chinese Taoism

吳 展 良
Chan-liang Wu

To define a fundamental distinction between traditional Chinese and Western thought, the former could be characterized by a world view of becoming and the latter could be characterized by a world view of being. The importance of a "world view of being" in the Western tradition has been systematically demonstrated by Lovejoy, Becker, Baumer and others.① However, the importance of a world view of becoming in Chinese culture, although proposed by a few modern Chinese thinkers during the first quarter of this century, was never seriously studied by academia, and is almost unknown to contemporary scholars.② In this paper, I inquired into the world view of becoming presented in the pre-Qin Taoist classics. I seek to illustrate that the ancient Taoists created a full-fledged "cosmo-ontological view of becoming,"

① See Baumer, Franklin L., *Modern European Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. 1977); Becker, Carl L., *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932); Lovejoy, Arthur O., *The Great Chain of Being : A Study of The History of An Idea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936). The world-view of being was originally a Greek, especially Platonic, tradition. Through linguistic, cultural and academic channels, this tradition was treasured and absorbed by Romans, Christians, and moderns, and became probably the most important cultural motif of the Western civilization.

② Liang Shu-ming first made this observation in 1921. See Chan-liang Wu, *Western Rationalism and the Chinese Mind* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1993), ch. 3.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

and that Taoist epistemological and ethical views were inseparable from this cosmo-ontological view. Together, these views formed a "world view of becoming."

Becoming, as will be illustrated, is a cosmo-ontological idea. Discussions about the world view of becoming necessarily focus on the cosmo-ontological part of it. This is why this article is titled the "cosmo-ontological view of becoming" rather than the "world view of becoming." Earlier authors showed that the Taoist cosmological view, being a highly developed "naturalistic" interpretation of the basic quality of the world, is the common ground of most later Chinese philosophies.③ Hence the Taoist cosmological view of "becoming" was also inherited, consciously or unconsciously, by later Chinese thinkers. Given the importance of the role played by the world view of being in the development of the Western civilization, an examination of the world view of becoming in the formative period of Chinese culture would greatly aid us to explain many distinctions between the Chinese and Western civilizations.

The importance of the role that a world view of becoming played in Chinese culture was first proposed by a great modern Chinese thinker Liang Shuming in 1921. However, as a philosopher, Liang was much more interested in advancing his own belief, which was strongly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism and the Ming Neo-Confucianism, than to document his interpretation with historical proofs. He also failed to distinguish original Confucian world view from a later Taoist one, and, consequently, did not recognize the true o-

---

③ 1. See Qian Mu, *Zhongguo xueshusixiangshi luncong* (Taipei, 1977), V. 2, 256-282; Qian Mu, *Zhuanglao tongbian* (Taipei, 1957); Dai Jingxian, *Zhuzi Lixianqihou shuo yu qiqianglihou shuo zhi yanjiu* (Taipei, 1985), 3-9, 28-32, 49-58. Cwei Dahua, *ZhuangXue Yanjiu* (Beijing, 1992), 384-581. 2. What I mean by "naturalistic" in this article is simply not mystic or supernatural-a this-worldly, non-superstitious attitude. 3. Mohist logician Hui Shi initiated the cosmological and epistemological discussions and shared many of his views with his good friend --Zhuangzi. If we take Zhuangzi as the first great Taoist thinker, then we should admit Hui Shi as the precursor of many of Taoist naturalistic ideas.

臺灣大學學術期刊論文資料庫

riginality of the Taoists.④ Moreover, Liang's Buddhist background makes people doubt the authenticity of his interpretation of the ancient Chinese tradition.⑤ Besides Liang, a few scholars and thinkers also endeavored to establish an interpretation of the importance of the idea of change in Chinese tradition. Most of their works are broad generalizations, impressionist characterizations, or theories too much influenced by modern Western philosophy. Few scholars really grasped the richness and depth of the world view based on the idea of becoming, and no author seems to have unveiled the true meaning of the rise of a world view of becoming in ancient China.⑥ To improve this situation, we should at least consider the following questions. First, what are the contents and meaning of the ancient Chinese "world view of becoming"? Second, what are the historical origins of this world view? Third, how does this world view influence later Chinese thinkers? Since a thorough examination of the second and third questions require much more space than is afforded here, I will focus on the first question, though, while necessary, not without mentioning the other two questions.

Studies of the development of ancient Chinese thought in the past several decades clearly showed that the ancient Taoists accomplished a naturalistic interpretation of the world.⑦ Therefore, my objective in this article is not to prove the existence of a naturalist world view created by the Taoists, but to illustrate the role of the idea of becoming in this world view. Earlier scholars like Yan Fu and Hu Shih indicated, with great insight, that an evolutionary

---

④ See Liang Shuming, *Dongxi wenhua jiqi zhexue* (Shanghai, third edition, 1922), 114-125.

⑤ Ibid., 47-50.

⑥ Ex. Fang Dongmei, influenced by H. Bergson, emphasized the existence of a dynamic and creative world view in ancient China (Fang Dongmei, *Yuanshi rujia daojia zhexue*, 190). Gao Huaiming, basing on his study of *Yi jing*, pointed out the importance of the idea of change in ancient China (Gao Huaiming, *Zhongguo xianqin yu xila zhexue zhi bijiao* [Taipei, 1983], 43-47.) Both studies are ahistoric.

⑦ Yan Fu first pointed out that ancient Taoists created a naturalist interpretation of the world. For later research, see Dai Jingxian, "Xianqin zhuzi jieti", in *Guoxued daodu* (Taipei: jyuliu, 1990), 614-622; and Cwei, *ZhuangXue Yanjiu*, 105-142.

臺灣大學圖書館

view or the emphasis on change played an important role in Taoist, especially Zhuangzi's, philosophy. Nevertheless, their theories still miss some key-points of the meaning and importance of a Taoist world view of becoming.⑧ I wish the comparative approach used in this study could illuminate the true significance of it.

Cosmological, Ontological, Metaphysical, or Cosmo-ontological View of Becoming?

To begin with, I need to define the meaning of the word "becoming" and explain why I choose to use the term "cosmo-ontological" to describe what is generally regarded as Taoist cosmological or metaphysical view, and I also need to examine the methodological and hermeneutic problems involved in this kind of comparative study. Becoming, in this article, refers to "fundamental qualitative change," as contrast to "change of position" or quantitative change. A cosmo-ontological view of becoming means regarding everything as

---

⑧ Both Yan Fu and Hu Shih deemed Zhuangzi as evolutionists, and Hu Shih particularly emphasized Zhuangzi's role as a philosopher of biological evolutionism. (Yan Fu, *Houguan Yanshi Pingdian Zhuangzi*, "qiwulun" and "Dasheng pian"; Hu Shih, *Zhongguo zhexueshi dagang* (Shanghai, Shangwu, 1926), 255-279.) This perspective mirrored their concern in an age of evolutionism. It is true that Zhuangzi and, especially, his followers are, in many ways, evolutionists. However, modern western evolutionary theory is a well-defined interpretation of the mechanism of a teleological evolution, while Zhuangzi's thought has none of these features. What is really distinguishing in the so-called evolutionism of the ancient Taoists is their cosmo-ontological view of becoming, which has much greater philosophical significance than the theory of evolution.

Hu Shih, while emphasizing the importance of the idea of change in Zhuangzi's thought, partially noticed the epistemological significance of Zhuangzi's cosmological view of change by comparing it to Hegel's dialectics. However, he did not fully grasp its philosophical importance, misinterpreting the meaning of Tao, missing the anthropocentic and agnostic character of Zhaungzi's thought, and held very low esteem of Zhuangzi's entire philosophy. (see later discussions in this article)

Joseph Needham, on the other hand, termed Taoist cosmology as a kind of "organic naturalism." I agree with him in this aspect. However, he did not really grasp the meaning of the idea of change or becoming in Taoist philosophy either. (Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970] V. 2, 36-56, 74-83, 162, 181.)

臺灣大學學術期刊資訊庫

undergoing a constant qualitative change. It also means the denial or neglect of an ontological realm of being, which is, by definition, timeless and changeless. The denial or neglect of an ontological realm makes the term "ontology of becoming" self-contradictory since ontology, traditionally, is the study of "being qua being."⑨ In what follows, I will illustrate that most of Taoist discussions about universe or nature fall, first and foremost, into a cosmological realm. However, as ontological question and stance are unavoidable, these discussions necessarily reveal their "ontological position." Although Zhuangzi sometimes proclaimed to be an agnostic, the ontological inclination of ancient Taoists is, as a natural result of a view of becoming, a belief in the unity of the substantial world and phenomenal world.⑩ This is why I use the term "cosmo-ontological," which is alien to the western intellectual tradition, to describe their thought.

In ancient Greek, all kinds of substantialist thinkers from Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus, to Plato are protagonists of the "philosophy of being." Aristotle and the Neo-Platonic master Plotinus also accepted the primacy of being, though not without accepting the importance of change in the physical or mundane world. Henceforth, the primacy of being became the most important characteristic of the entire Western intellectual tradition. In contrast, in ancient China, since the Taoists were the first to create a full-fledged cosmological or ontological view, a view soon adopted by Confucian, Yin-Yang, Military and Legalist thinkers, it left fundamental influence on later Chinese intellectual tradition. Different cosmological and ontological views mark one of the basic differences between the Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. A difference which makes an "analysis" of

---

⑨ There are some modern "ontologists", like W. V. Quine, who defined ontology from a completely new approach. However, their definitions are often questioned. Ex. D. W. Hamlyn, *Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), 36-27.

⑩ Zhuangzi matained that the sage only talks about this world, not things beyond or infinite. (Qian Mu, *Zhuangzi zuangjian* [Taipei: Sanmin, 1962], 16) Laozi, however, was confident of his cosmo-ontological view.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Taoist world view in Western language very difficult but highly necessary.

Many works were written on Taoist metaphysics, ontology, or cosmology in which authors started their analysis of Taoist metaphysics, ontology, or cosmology from certain rudimentary metaphysical or cosmological issues like Taoist reflections on being, change, substance, space, time, matter, form, motion, causality, categories, individuality and universality. However, much current misunderstanding of Taoism and the Chinese tradition in academia is caused by starting our study mainly from a Western point of view. Although Western perspective or terminology can be applied, we must bear in mind that Chinese generally see things from distinct viewpoints because there are certain fundamental differences between Chinese and Western world views. In our discussion of "the cosmo-ontological view of becoming of Taoism," the problem is especially serious because almost all terminologies used in Western academia originated in, or at least are fundamentally influenced by, the Greek world view of being.⑪ According to the world view of becoming, the authenticity of these Western terms should be questioned, or be at least reinterpreted.

Taoist cosmo-ontological view of becoming does not start from reflections on space, time, change or motion. The Taoists were even less interested in classifying phenomena of change into change in place, change in time, change in quality, or change as generation or corruption, so as to analyze them in a systematic way. Besides, unlike the Greek thinkers, Taoist philosophy does not start from dialectic or systematic reasoning. Therefore, from a western point of view, there is no systematic treatment of well-defined cosmological, metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical questions. On the contrary, we find that Taoist cosmological, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political thoughts are typically mixed together, pouring out from a single but unutter-

⑪ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

able origin. The Taoist "mode of thinking," which is strongly influenced by the cosmo-ontological view of becoming, is entirely different from that of the Western philosophers.

A fundamental difference is that the Taoists, unlike the Greek, forced no contrast between reality and appearance. They believed that Tao is everywhere, and that the nouminal world and the phenomenal world are one. Therefore, to the Taoists, ontological inquiry cannot be clearly separated from cosmological inquiry, and we can have only very limited knowledge of both.⑫ Consequently, they did not believe that speech or words can grasp "the essence" of our existence. Using Derrida's term, we may say the Taoists "deconstructed" metaphysics and "metaphysical language," which is the core of western intellectual tradition, even at the dawn of Chinese intellectual history.⑬ By so doing they gave Chinese thought and language a character distinct from those of Westerners, a character we should deal carefully in this paper.

If we push Taoist idea of becoming to its logical end and define the term "metaphysics" in a traditional way, then we will find that the term "metaphysical view" cannot be applied to Taoist thought. The reason is not only that metaphysics means systematic study of questions related to "being," but also that the other-worldliness orientation inherent in Western thought made the study of metaphysics mainly a study of the substantial or nouminal world. In Taoist world view of becoming, the substantial or nouminal world and the phenomenal world are inseparable. As the term "metaphysics" traditionally refers to the study of a substantial or nouminal world that does not exist in Taoist philosophy, it is better not to use the term "metaphysical view of be-

⑫ Whitehead, who had a dynamic world view of becoming, seemed to have identified cosmology, ontology, and metaphysics in giving his *Process and Reality* a subtitle *An Essay in Cosmology*.

⑬ About Derrida and Zhuangzi, see Xi mi, "Jie jiegou zhi dao: dexida (J. Derrida) yu Zhuangzi bijiao yanjiu," *Zhongwai wenxue*, 11: 6 (Taipei, 1982), 4-31.

臺灣大學哲學期刊資料庫

coming" but to use the term "cosmo-ontological view of becoming."⑭ The unity of cosmology and ontology or the union of a phenomenal world with a substantial or nouminal world implied by the term "cosmo-ontological" marks a sharp contrast to the dualist tradition of the West.

Zhuangzi's Cosmo-ontological View of Becoming

Whether it was Laozi, Zhuangzi or others first made this cosmo-ontological breakthrough, I believe that the first seven chapters of *Zhuangzi* stood for the original form of ancient Taoism. *Laozi* and all other Taoist writings came later. However, as this question remains highly controversial, and since my basic argument in this paper is unrelated to this issue, I avoid this chronological contention while starting my analysis from Zhuangzi's thought mainly for the sake of convenience.⑮

It is well-known that the idea of *hua* (becoming, change) plays an important role in Zhuangzi's thought. However, what is this role exactly, and,

---

⑭ The first version of this paper, announced in "International Conference on Modes of Thought in Ancient China," Marburg, 1994, was titled "The Metaphysical View of Becoming in Ancient Chinese Taoism." In which I said: "In this paper, the term " metaphysical view " is not defined in the traditional Western sense in which metaphysics is taken as the study of " being qua being. "..... However, we still need a term to describe the " onto-cosmological " thought of the Taoists. Taking the fact that Aristotle's definition of the study of the " first philosophy " is the study of concepts too universal to be treated within any specific field of knowledge, and bypassing Aristotle's passion for ontology and theology, I maintain, following the practice of " descriptive metaphysics, " that what I mean by the " metaphysical view " of the Taoists is a description only of their observations on the most universal and basic " principle " of the universe, a field highly related to what we mean by metaphysics." However, to avoid misunderstanding, I finally decided to change the term "metaphysical" to "cosmo-ontological."

⑮ Nevertheless, as my analysis of Laozi's and Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological views can improve our understanding of this chronological question, I clarify their relations through my study. In order to achieve this, quotations about Zhuangzi's thought are limited to the first seven chapters. For research on the chronology of Zhuangzi and Laozi, see Qian Mu, *Zhuanglao tongbian*; Yan Lingfong, *Jingzi Congzhu* V. 9 (Taipei, 1983), 147-173; Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo sixiangshi lunji* (Taipei, 1975), 93-105; Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo renxing lun shi* (Taipei, 1974), appendix 1.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

more significantly, how does a cosmo-ontological view of becoming relate to the basic characters of Zhuangzi's thought and what is its philosophical significance were never successfully answered. In this section, I will first examine the contemporary relevance of Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming from a historical perspective and then try to answer the above questions.

Although the idea of becoming plays a crucial role in Zhuangzi's thought, it may not be the starting point of his wisdom. To study Zhuangzi's "cosmo-ontological view" and his special way of thinking, we need to begin with Zhuangzi's contemplation on "*Tian*" (The Whole, cosmos) and the relation between *Tian* and human being-- the gist and starting place of Zhuangzi's wisdom and thought.⑯ That the first two chapters of *Zhuangzi* open with discussions about *Tian* and the relation between *Tian* and human being is not fortuitous. In each case, and this is true to the entire *Zhuangzi*, we find "mind's union with The Whole," or "to be one with the cosmic process," is the source of Zhuangzi's wisdom and thought. In fact, Zhuangzi's inquiry into the Way of the universe and the relation between Cosmos and mind make him a "holist," one who believes that things are a inseparable one.⑰ His "cosmo-ontological view of becoming" is a basic characteristic of this holistic view.

In the pre-Confucian, especially the pre-Zhou, period, *Tian* was the center of people's concern. Then, as a legacy of ancient Chinese religions, ideas related to the will of Heaven or gods dominated people's mind for thousands of years. Confucius, based on the tradition of Zhougong, created a humanistic world view. However, Mozi, in his subversion of feudalism and

---

⑯ 1. The Pre-Qin Confucian thinker Xyunzi's famous comment on Zhuangzi is: "Zhuangzi knows the *Tian*, but misses the people." 2. Professor Wang Shu-ming started his analysis of Zhuangzi from the idea of (free and easy) "wandering," (Wang, *Zhuangxue guankuei* [Taipei, 1968], 179-222). Professor Benjamin Schwartz started his analysis from Laozi's and Zhuangzi's mysticism (Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 192-205]). Both of them, it seems to me, did not find the key to Zhuangzi's thought.

⑰ *Zhuangzi*, 1-23, 39-40. Also see Qian, *Zhuanglao tongbian*, 139-140.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Confucianism, tried to revive traditional piety toward the "will of Heaven," so as to support his evangelical gospel of equality. In so doing, Mozi made many people believe that Confucian doctrines were too aristocratic, discriminatory, and narrow-minded. Later Mohists, especially those "Mohist Logicians," advocated "the oneness of everything." Since everything is one, there should not be any artificial distinction, and we should treat everything with equal love.⑱ While trying to prove that everything is one, they created many sophistic or even choplogical arguments in the realm of cosmology and, especially, epistemology. These arguments, although being criticized by Zhuangzi, had great influence on his thought, and helped him to create a full-fledged cosmo-ontological and epistemological view.⑲

Zhuangzi, like the Mohist, protested against feudalism, Confucianism, discrimination, and the age of Warring States. As a result, he too believed in the Mohist doctrine of the oneness of nature and the indefiniteness of common names or notions. However, he disagreed with Mohist assertiveness in knowledge and their using "external nd indefinite knowledge" to conduct people's life. He emphasized the immenseness and immeasurability of *Tian* and man's very limited knowing capacity. Any concrete knowledge about our existence, according to Zhuangzi, must come from one's innermost -- a kind of direct, expansive, indiscrete, completely free and purified experience.⑳ Although he adopted Mohist cosmological and epistemological views in many ways, he preferred to caution us about the limit and subjectivity of our knowledge, and persuade us to grasp only the moment while our mind and the external world meet. For in such a transient world, it is the only moment that reality may reveal itself to us.㉑ As a result, his interpretation of the universe

⑱ *Zhuangzi*, 278-280.

⑲ See Qian Mu, *Zhongguo xueshu sixiangshi luncong*, v. 2, 484-486. Dai Jingxian, "Xianqin zhuzi jieti", 575-579.

⑳ *Zhuangzi*, 8-13.

㉑ *Zhuangzi*, 24-25.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

was a combination of observation, cosmo-ontological beliefs and, most importantly, a highly purified and indiscrete "experience". In this "experience", not in the logical debate of the "Logicians", we find the true origin of the idea of becoming, a notion which faithfully mirror the natural course of things.

Professor Qian Mu pointed out that Zhuangzi's cosmological view, following the humanistic tradition of Confucianism, was based largely on his philosophy of life.㉒ It is true that Zhuangzi anchored his world view on his life experience. This attitude alone presupposed man's inability to know god's will or to understand the ultimate reality or truth of the world -- a humanistic assumption derived from Confucianism and strengthened by Zhuangzi's dissatisfaction toward Mohist cosmology and epistemology. However, Mohist attention to the external world and its cosmological and epistemological discussions still had great influence on him.㉓ Therefore, although Zhuangzi emphasized so much on the limit and subjectivity of man's knowledge and the importance of "indiscrete experience," we still find that a clear and coherent cosmo-ontological view was in and out his thought. This cosmo-ontological view and his anthropocentric epistemology reinforced each other, and it is hard to tell which one is more fundamental. Zhuangzi himself was not only keenly aware of the inseparability of subjectivity and objectivity, the internal and external world, but kept on reminding people of this essential fact.㉔ To Zhuangzi, the ultimate fulfillment of mind -- a sense of complete freedom and contentment -- and a sense of unity with natural or cosmic process is inseparable.

Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view emphasized the unity and oneness of nature. He completely discarded the traditional belief of a Heaven with will and power. In his interpretation, *Tian*, or Heaven, is no longer high above

---

㉒ Qian, *Zhuanglao tongbian*, 135-139.

㉓ Professor Qian Mu have pointed out that Zhuangzi's cosmology seems to have been greatly influenced by Mohist Logician Hui Shi. (Qian, *Zhongguo xueshu sixiangshi luncong*, V. 2, 484-485.)

㉔ *Zhuangzi*, 9-23, 47.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

and untouchable. *Tian* is everywhere, inside everything, and is the sum of everything. Heaven and earth become one, while human beings together with all other things are parts of it. The word *Tian*, which meant "Heaven" in the ancient text, means "the Cosmos" in *Zhuangzi*. Besides this world, there is no such thing as a transcendental or other world.㉕ This naturalistic world view beautifully matched the this-world orientation of the post-Confucian era, successfully filled the cosmo-ontological vacancy left in Confucianism, and replaced the ancient belief in Heaven and God.

The first chapter of *Zhuangzi* opens with an allegorical story describing how an ideal person's mind, like a giant bird, can fly to the top of heaven and then cruise the world without obstacle. The ideal person, in Zhuangzi's eyes, is the one who can transcend one's limited existence, completely open his mind, follow "the way of the universe," and set one's mind at one with the Cosmos.㉖ As everything comes from the cosmic process, when one is at one with the it, it means nothing can offend his mind anymore. The ideal person is more than always at ease with everything--his way of living means the life, the truth, and the Way to the world.㉗

Basing on the notion of "heaven-and-man-are-one" (*tianren heyi*), Zhuangzi repeatedly uses "huge but useless" things to exemplify the Way.㉘ Hugeness, in Zhuangzi's philosophy, is analogous to the wholeness of the universe, and is a metaphorical expression of the openness of the mind of an ideal person. To Zhuangzi, all problems stem from people's discriminate and cir-

---

㉕ Zhuangzi, 4-5, 8-9, 17-19, 54-57.

㉖ Qian Mu, *Zhuangzi Zhuanjian* (Taipei, fourth edition, 1969), 1-4.

㉗ *Zhuangzi*, 1-5; also see 50-51, 39-40.

㉘ 1. *Zhuangzi*, 6-7, 36-37, 154. 2. Scholars like Guo Xiang, the most famous commentator of *Zhuangzi*, used to take those huge but useless creatures in Zhuangzi's writing as metaphors indicating the profound but uncelebrated wisdom of the ideal person. Guo even maintained that because Zhuangzi takes all distinctions between things as illusory, there is no real difference between the biggest and the smallest. (Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi* (originally published in 1894; Taipei reprint, 1975), 1-14.) However, in so doing, Guo forgot the fact that Zhuangzi never used diminutive things to epitomize his thought, and that Zhuangzi frequently criticized what is small and limited.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

cumscribed perspectives. If only one can transcend one's erroneous notions and petty concerns and dissolve oneself into the Cosmos, all the man-made troubles would disappear.

An immediate result of Zhuangzi's holism is his criticism of anything that is partial and fragmentary:

> The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them believed that things (with boundaries) have never existed--so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong. (*Zhuangzi*, 41)[2]
>
> The concept of "thing" (wu) means a subjective division of the original unity. Bound by things, then, means the fragmentation of mind, and the loss of the originally serene and free spirit.

If the boundaries between things are unreal, it implies that everything is in a process of becoming. The famous story at the end of the second chapter of *Zhuangzi* (Qiwulun) indicates his idea of "the Transformation of Things" (*wuhua*) most vividly:

> Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was butterfly, or a butterfly

[2] Translations of Zhuangzi in this paper are from Burton Watson's The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), but sometimes loaded with my modifications.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things. (*Zhuangzi*, 49)

Things may change into each other, and boundaries and identities of things are illusory. The relation between mind and matter is unaccountable, and how do we know things really exist as we see it. In another place, while talking about life, illness and death, Zhuangzi wrote:

> If the process continues, perhaps in time he'll transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I'll keep watch on the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I'll shoot down an owl for roasting..... I receive life because the time had come; I will lose it because things pass on. Be content with this time and dwell in the natural process and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the freeing of the bound.㉚

Things pass on and the world changes with time. There is nothing to stick to, and the best way is to follow the change--to be one with the natural process.

Stories about the transformation of things continue to appear in Zhuangzi's work, and make it a central theme of *Zhuangzi*.㉛ They not only represent a cosmo-ontological view seeing everything as undergoing a process of change, but also manifest Zhuangzi's search for complete freedom and contentment of mind. This is because the search for complete freedom, according to Zhuangzi, must begin with discarding all the bounds in our mind; only by

㉚ *Zhuangzi*, 54-55.
㉛ *Zhuangzi*, 26, 55-59.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

fully recognizing the transience of the world, can one follow the ever-changing process of things and free himself from conceptual mazes, beguiling memories of the past and expectations of the future. He said:

> Let your ears and eyes communicate with what is inside, and put mind and knowledge on the outside. Then even gods and spirits will come to dwell, not to speak of men. This is the genesis and becoming of things, the key of Yu and Shun (ancient sage kings). (*Zhuangzi*, 31)

No matter in nature or society, things change beyond prediction. Our knowledge, expectations and disturbed emotions always conflict with reality, therefore, the best way is to empty our mind and follow the natural process or the becoming of things.[32] In this world, Zhuangzi said, "A good completion takes a long time; a bad completion cannot be changed later. Can you afford to be careless? Just go along with things and let your mind move freely." (*Zhuangzi*, 33) Therefore, an ideal person is someone who "knows clearly what is truly independent (inside), and change not with things. He trusts and follows the change of things, and he holds fast to the souce." (*Zhuangzi*, 39) Things always change, and our mind should "go along with things." However, this does not mean the mind is dependent on things. On the contrary, just because the mind is truly free and independent, can it roll with the change of things freely without being overruled or getting lost.[33]

What is the basis of the Transformation of Things? In Zhuangzi's view, the entire universe is the "*qi* in becoming (*yiqi zhihua*)."[34] *Qi*, in Zhuangzi's philosophy, is the tiniest, shapeless, air-like essence of the universe. The story at the beginning of "Qiwulun", tells us vividly about how

---

[32] Also see *Zhuangzi*, 44, 47-48, 50, 58, 62.
[33] Also see *Zhuangzi*, 53, 57-60.
[34] Ibid., 51, 56.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Zhuangzi viewed the world:

> The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then thousand hollows begin crying wildly..... Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself--all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding? (*Zhuangzi*, 36-37)

To Zhuangzi, all the forms of existence come from the blowing of the "*qi*." Things "take their own shapes by themselves" (*ziran*, *zihua*), but they have the same origin, and are in a process of transforming.㊻ Therefore, all distinctions are only secondary or even subjective. In this naturalistic interpretation of the world, the qi is the formless, omni-present foundation of everything. Everything comes from the "*qi*," and will dissolve into *qi* again.㊼ Nothing is everlasting, and everything is in the process of change, not only their quantity and place, but also their quality. This is "philosophy of process" of a kind.㊽

An important "principle" derived from Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming is the unity of the nouminal and phenomenal worlds. Since the world as a whole is the *qi* in a process of becoming, *qi* is everywhere, and everything is made of *qi*. Basing on this holistic and naturalist world view, Zhuangzi believed that the Way is at one with this world; there is no world other than this world. This is indeed a concise cosmo-ontological expression of

---

㊻ About *zihua* (things taking their forms from the cosmic process by themselves), also see "zaiyou", "qiushui", and "zeyang". [Ref. Cwei, *Zhuangxue yanjiu*, 116]. Although Zhuangzi did not use this term in the first seven chapters, the original shape of this idea was already there. The fact that this idea was conceptualized in later chapters indicates that later chapters were written by Zhuangzi's followers.

㊼ *Zhuangzi*, 14.

㊽ *Zhuangzi*, 55.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

the most crucial "principle" in Chinese civilization: this-worldliness.㊳

According to the "principle" of becoming, nothing is everlasting, so there is no such thing named "substance." The most important thing for us is to find the Way that is witnessed by the cosmic process of becoming. Things are changing, it is effortless to grasp the substantial world. Substance and phenomena are one. What is a "thing" is "nothing," because the so-called thing (*wu*) is becoming rather than being. Both the "principle" of this-worldliness and the unity of the substantial world with the accidental world are attributes of the cosmo-ontological view of becoming.㊴

Basing on this cosmo-ontological view, Zhuangzi and especially his followers readily maintained that words, concepts, theories, and knowledge about specific objects are transient and undependable. To him, "the Way has no boundaries; speech has no constancy." (*Zhuangzi*, 43) Since he rejected the idea of *wu* (thing or entity), and took the boundaries between things as illusion or secondary, those most important terms in Western philosophy like idea, form and substance can find no secured place in Zhuangzi's philosophy. To Zhuangzi, all distinctions between things and those concepts arising from these distinctions are subjective, accidental, and unreliable.㊵ There is no "substance" behind man's words and ideas:

> Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say some-

---

㊳ The word " principle" originally refers to "a substance from which everything else can be derived." (ref. W. L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* [London: Humanities PRESS, 1980], 457.) This, however, is not what the word" Tao" means, as Tao is the unification of the origin and the dervative. There is no proper translation of the wrold "Tao" in English, and probably not in any Western language. What I mean by " principle" in this article is something fundamental and universal, but not "a substance".

㊴ Many of these thoughts were elaborated or made explicit not by Zhuangzi but by his followers in *Zhuangzi's* "waizapian" (later chapters). However, the fundamental themes had already been brought forth, often in an allegorical way, by Zhuangzi himself.

㊵ *Zhuangzi*, 10-12.

臺灣大學學術期刊論文資料庫

> thing?..... But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of the Cosmos. (*Zhuangzi*, 39-40)

Things and words lack constancy, only the Cosmos, or the Whole, is our ultimate guide. As the Way transcends words and form, how can one know the Way of the Cosmos? Zhuangzi says:

> Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with "*qi*." Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind. (*Zhuangzi*, 57-58)

Only when one abandons all given notions about things, can one meet the omni-present, fundamental, formless, and always changing "essence." Only then, Zhuangzi says, can one be alert to the richness of the world. With so many doubts on words and concepts, it is not surprising that Zhuangzi has little interest in "reason." He says:

> Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is investigative and busy. Great words are plain, little words are shrill and fragmented. In sleep, men's spirits go visiting; in waking hours, their bodies hustle. With everything they meet their minds become entangled. Day after day they use their minds in strife, sometimes

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty. Their little fears are mean and tremble; their great fears are stunned and overwhelming. (*Zhuangzi*, 37)

In a deeper sense, as the value of reason relies on its ability to lead to substance, and the idea of "substance" has been denied in a world view of becoming, reason certainly would not be treasured by Zhuangzi. Doubts on the validity of words and concepts also lead to doubts on formal logic and dialectics.

A necessary result of these attitudes is that Zhuangzi had little interest in the following: the idea of "truth," pursuit of knowledge of specific object, classification of things, and inquiry into the question of causality. Those things that interested the Greek thinkers most are typically what Zhuangzi sought to avoid. To the Greeks, these inquiries were the main body of their inquiry into being and substance. However, while Zhuangzi maintained that the world is becoming, and that things and words lack lasting substance, all above inquiries deceased.

Historically, Zhuangzi's epistemology was in many ways a refutation of the ancient Logicians. The second chapter of Zhuangzi (Discussion on Making all Things Equal) was largely devoted to this purpose. It was not their conclusion, but the way they argued, that Zhuangzi disagreed the most. To him, all concepts and theories, proposed by the ancient "Logicians", came from an anthropocentric perspective, and were subjective and limited. The Way those logicians argued yielded only indeterminacy and unhappiness. Only those who "know the process of becoming" (*zhidai*) can follow the natural route indiscriminately (*yinshi*), so as to abide by the Way.[41]

If the major characteristic of epistemology based on a world view of becoming is doubt of word and concept, then the major characteristic of ethical thinking based on such a cosmo-ontological view is distrust toward norms and

---

[41] *Zhuangzi*, 11-13.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

rules. Zhuangzi criticizes the Confucian ethics as a lesser form of living:

> Do you know what it is that destroys virtue, and where wisdom comes from? Virtue is destroyed by fame and name, and wisdom comes out of wrangling. (Zhuangzi, 55)

To Zhuangzi. true virtue is beyond name and form.

> So the sage has his wanderings. For him, knowledge is an offshoot, promises are glue, virtues are a patching up..... The sage hatches no schemes, so what use has he for knowledge? He does no carving, so what use has he for glue? He suffers no loss, so what use has he for favors? (*Zhuangzi*, 75)

Ordinary virtues seek certain benefits but those were not the virtue of the sage. The sage has forgotten all calculation, following the natural route of "the universe as becoming" (*dahua*), and making himself one with the Way of the Cosmos. How can we limit or judge him by ordinary standards? Ordinary virtues are limited, only the virtue of the Cosmos is all inclusive, but it belongs only to those who can "trust and follow the change of things, and holds fast to the source." (*Zhuangzi*, 39)

In summary, we state that Zhuangzi believed that the world is an inseparable one, any division in this "entity" is illusion. The differences and distinctions between things as we see are not lasting. Nothing is everlasting, and everything is in a process of change. There is no such thing as "thing" or entity. The Way is becoming, and becoming is the Way. A wise person is the one who knows that everything is in a process of change, therefore he sticks to nothing, and always course the cosmic process. Never make yourself a prisoner of any desire, idea or theory. The most important thing is to realize the ever-changing situations, empty and free your mind, and to feel and follow the

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

natural tendency and "trace" in this process.[42]

The Cosmo-ontological View of Becoming of Laozi

Unlike Zhuangzi, the focus of Laozi's cosmo-ontological reflection was no longer the Cosmos, but the Way, "formlessness" (*wu*), and "state achieved (*de*)."[43] About Zhuangzi's reflections on the Cosmos, we can see clearly how his thought grew from an ancient tradition and rebelled against, but was also nourished by, Confucianism and Mohism. We also can understand how he derived those abstract ideas such as *qi*, becoming (*hua*), and the Way from reflections on an observable universe. However, in Laozi's case, we find that he started his discourse with extremely abstract ideas as they were already there, made for further discussion. Besides, Laozi's cosmo-ontological view appears to be more mature and complete than Zhuangzi's in many ways. From a historical perspective, it is difficult to explain how anyone could reflect directly on those highly abstract ideas such as the Way, "state achieved," or formlessness and then conceptualize and systematize them in the most matured way, without previous discussions by Taoists. There needs to be someone who created prototypes of those ideas basing on a less abstract, more observable source before Laozi, and Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view perfectly fit this gap.

By comparison with Zhuangzi, as Laozi wrote much more about The Way, "state achieved," and formlessness than becoming (*hua*) or qi, it may seem that Laozi paid much less attention to the idea of change or becoming. However, the truth is that Laozi's philosophy is also underlined by a cosmo-ontological view of becoming. We may find it difficult to explain most central ideas of Laozi, like formlessness, being, the Way, and "state achieved,"

---

[42] *Zhuangzi*, 24-25, 16-17.

[43] In *Zhuangzi*, *de* referred only to people's virtue, but in Laozi *de* also indicated a stable state achieved in the process of change, and began to possess cosmo-ontological implication.

臺灣大學哲學系資料庫

without referring to an underlying cosmo-ontological view of becoming. Moreover, I seek to illustrate that the most abstruse idea in Laozi's philosophy, *wu*, refers not to nothingness, but to the essential state of the cosmic process of becoming (a formless state). We can prove the above points, even if we put the chronology of Zhuangzi and Laozi aside.

Like Zhuangzi, Laozi's cosmo-ontological view is a naturalistic one that emphasizes the idea of from-itself (*ziran*) and the Way. Laozi wrote:

> Man models himself on the Earth, Earth models itself on Heaven, Heaven models itself on the Way, and the Way models that which is so on its own (*ziran*, from-itself). (Laozi, ch. 25)[44]

According to this system, Heaven is no longer categorically separated from Earth and man, and treated as a supreme being. Man, Earth, and Heaven are united, and what unite them together is the "principle" of from-itself-the Way. To Laozi, the world is no longer dominated by the will of God or certain inexplicable agency, but reveals itself in the route taken by each subject.

Basically, we find all these ideas in Zhuangzi's naturalistic explanation of the world. But in *Zhuangzi*, these concepts come from discussions about the Cosmos, whereas in *Laozi* these ideas become ready made, and are arranged in a more systematic way. Here, the major distinction between Laozi and Zhuangzi is that in *Laozi* abstract ideas like the Way and from-itself are elevated above Heaven and the Earth. The Way "of Heaven" now becomes something prior to Heaven.[45] At the same time, the "principle" of from—itself, which was formerly an attribute of Heaven, is put before both Tao and

---

[44] Translations of *Laozi* in this paper are from Robert G. Henricks' *Lao-Tzu te-dao ching* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989; abbreviated as *Laozi* in this paper), but commonly subjected to my modifications.

[45] A paragraph in the fifth chapter of *Zhuangzi* states that the Way is the progenitor of Heaven, Earth, and everything else. However, scholars such as Qian Mu and Yan Fu indicated that the content of this paragraph is doubtful. (See Qian Mu, *Zhuangzi*, 51-52.)

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Heaven. This phenomenon reflects an evolution in intellectual history: ideas gradually obtain their independence from their empirical origins. Cosmic "principles" of Heaven were formerly the object of learning and observation, but they became the dictator of the cosmic process. Ideas created by man, which are necessarily more attainable to himself than the infinite universe, obtain a higher position in his own mind than the less attainable outside world. In so doing, Laozi's thought bears an even more atheistic and rational color than Zhuangzi's.

Both ideas of the Way and from-itself are closely related to Laozi's ideas of formlessness and the nameless. Laozi says:

> The Way does nothing, but accomplishes everything. (Mawangdui edition records: The Way is constantly nameless.) Were marquises and kings able to maintain it, everything would transform on their own. (*zihua*) Having transformed, were their desires to become active, I would subdue them with the nameless simplicity. (*Laozi*, ch. 37)

In order to understand the relations between these crucial ideas, we must analyze this paragraph step by step. To begin with, we find that the idea of self-transforming (*zihua*) plays an essential role in this paragraph. A similar idea appears in chapter fifty-seven in which Laozi wrote: "I do nothing, and the people of themselves are transformed (*zihua*)." In both cases, the term self-transforming refers mainly to the people. But Laozi takes it also as a universal rule, so he uses the term "everything" in the first case.[46] The idea of *hua* (becoming) is crucial to Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming, and is discussed repeatedly in Zhuangzi. Here Laozi uses this idea as if it were a

[46] Ancient Chinese almost always applied what they believed to be universal principles to cosmo-ontological, epistemological, ethical and political issues simultaneously.

臺灣大學哲學期刊資料庫

well-known idea, and adds the word "self (*zi*)" before "becoming (*hua*)," making it a complex idea.[47] This feature indicates, again, that Laozi came after Zhuangzi. At least, we can maintain that Zhuangzi's ideas of from-itself (*ziran*) and taking-its-own-shape (*ziqyu*), and Laozi's ideas of from-itself (*ziran*) and self-transforming (*zihua*) refer basically to the same cosmo-ontological view of becoming.

Both the ideas of self-transforming and from-itself refer to a state in which things find their natural routes if they are let go. Therefore Laozi writes "the Way does nothing, but accomplishes everything." At the end of the above quotation, the "nameless simplicity" is a resonance of doing-nothing. In Chinese, doing nothing (*wuwei*) and nameless (*wuming*) share the same "*wu*" (formlessness, emptiness). Here we confront the idea that greatly stimulates Laozi's imagination, and becomes his greatest creation--"*wu*."[48]

When Laozi writes about "*wu*," he often refers to a mental state, or to a way to cultivate one's mind. In his teachings about the cultivation of the mind, Laozi maintains that we have to empty our mind so as to treat this changing and unpredictable world. However, besides the cultivation of one's mind, does this word possess some cosmo-ontological implications? What is the relation between his cosmo-ontological view and the teaching of cultivating one's mind. In what follows, I argue that, cosmo-ontologically, the so-called formlessness (*wu*) refers not to nothingness but to "the original state of the process of becoming," or "existence without form."

About the central importance of the idea of formlessness, Laozi writes:

---

[47] The term *zihua* occured twice in *Zhuangzi* (in "zaiyou" and "qiushui"), but not in the first seven chapters.

[48] We can find the prototype of the idea non-being in *Zhuangzi*, but not in such a succinct form. Ex. Zhuangzi's ideas about "taking the middle of a circle (*huangzhong*)," "the key of the Way (*daoshu*)," and "stepping on nothing (*wuxingdi*)" can inspire the idea of non-being.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> The things of the world originate in being, and being originates in formlessness (*wu*). (*Laozi*, ch. 40)

Some scholars may take formlessness as the "ultimate principle", but we should recall that Laozi also mentions that "the things of the world originate in being." To Laozi, both ideas of being and formlessness are important, neither can exist without the other, and neither represents the ultimate. Being and formlessness have a dialectic relation, and the Way is a higher union of the two. For that reason Laozi writes, at the beginning of his book, that:

> The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way..... Formlessness names the beginning of heaven and earth, being names the progenitor of everything.

The Way comes first, both formlessness and being are attributes of the Way. But what is the Way? Let us use Laozi's words to answer this question.

> The Way is formless and shapeless. Being formless and shapeless, there is something in it. Being formless and shapeless, there are some images in it. Being so profound and immeasurable, there is reality. (Laozi, ch. 21)

The Way is shapeless and formless, but it is not "nothing" or pure emptiness. It is something with "reality," but is never limited by form. It is what is always becoming, but never to be.[49] Laozi writes:

> There is something shapeless and formless, existing before the emergence of heaven and earth. Being shapeless and formless, it stands on

[49] Also see chapter 14 of *Laozi*.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> its own and doesn't change. It "circulates" without end, so it can be the progenitor of everything. I do not yet know its name, but call it "The Way." Were I forced to give it a name, I would name it "the Great." "Great" means "to proceed (or, to depart);" "to proceed" means "to be far away;" and "to be far away" means "to return." (*Laozi*, ch. 25)

The Way "circulates" without end, it is a process in proceeding. Heaven and Earth come after it, and everything comes from it.

The Way is shapeless and formless, for that reason Laozi writes:

> As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way. As for names, the name that can be named is not the constant names. (*Laozi*, ch. 1)

Immediately after this sentence, he concludes: "formlessness names the beginning of heaven and earth, being names the progenitor of everything." ㉚To Laozi, what could be named or described, or a thing with form, is being; what cannot be named or spoken of, or existence without form, is formlessness—a formless and shapeless essential state of existence. In contrast to things with definite shape and form, it refers to the cosmic process of becoming, existence without form. Therefore Laozi writes: "being comes from formlessness." Things with form (*youxing*) come from a more essential, shapeless state. This "principle" does not deny the fact the Cosmos have in it both existence with form (*you*, being) and existence without form (*wu*,

---

㉚ Some scholars argued that according to Wang Bi, He Shanggong, and the Mawangdui edition, this sentence should be interpreted as "The nameless is the beginning of everything, and the named is the mother of everything." (Ref. Wang Bi, *Laozi Wang Bi zhu*, [Taipei reprint, 1974], 1; Henricks, Laozi, 188). Scholars since Wang Anshi often disagreed with Wang Bi and He Shanggong. Contemporary scholars also question Mawangdui edition's authority on this issue. (Yan Lingfong, *Jingzi congzhu* V. 1 [Taipei, 1983], 120-22.)

臺灣大學圖書館期刊資料庫

formlessness). For centuries, scholars were puzzled by the relations between Laozi's ideas of being, formlessness, and the Way. I believe that this enigma can be solved by interpreting these ideas with the world view of becoming.[51]

Although the Way encompasses both being and formlessness, the state of formlessness represents a more universal and original state of existence. Therefore, the Way is more often linked to ideas of "doing nothing," "the nameless" and emptiness than with things with concrete content. Laozi says:

> The valley spirit never dies; we call it the clandestine female. The gate of the clandestine female, this we call the root of Heaven and Earth. (*Laozi*, ch. 6)

Valley spirit is the metaphorical expression of the Way. The Way has no namable content, just like the valley, the "hollow" place between mountains. However, we should notice that this valley spirit, as the root of everything, never dies. Therefore, it is not pure emptiness.

As a counterpart of emphasis on "formlessness," we also should have noticed that Laozi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming does not deny the fact that there are "things with form." Laozi only seeks to indicate that all forms come from a formless state, and that the formless, or formlessness, is more basic. He writes:

> The Way creates, *de* (trait, quality) nourishes, "thing" shapes it, and tendencies (in and out) complete it. Therefore everything venerates the Way and honors *De*. (*Laozi*, ch. 51)

---

[51] To Zhuangzi, the Way, either as a process of becoming and or the totality of things, is beyond words. Laozi's cosmo-ontological view, is basically a recurrence of Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view, but in a more succinct way. The major difference is that Laozi created the idea of "non-being," and the dialectics between non-being and being.

臺灣大學哲學系

The Way represents the original formless state. *De* represents the trait obtained. Then it becomes a "thing" with a definite shape, and eventually tendencies in and out complete this process of creation. With this evolutionary interpretation of forming of things, Laozi completed the "onto-cosmological" view of becoming that was initiated by Zhuangzi.

With a cosmo-ontological view of becoming, it is understandable that the epistemological view of Laozi is very similar to that of Zhuangzi. The first sentence of Laozi declares:

> The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way; As for names, the name that can be named is not the constant names. (*Laozi*, 188)

Since then, words, speech, forms, and knowledge have never assumed the crown in Chinese intellectual history.

What marks Laozi's true invention is his dialectic, but it also originates in a cosmo-ontological view of becoming. As a description of the cosmic process, Laozi's dialectic indicates that everything, after reaching its climax, declines and proceeds to its opposite side, and eventually returns to the initial state. Hence, everything is in a process of change, there is nothing constant. He writes:

> Take emptiness to the limit; maintain tranquillity in the center. Everything arises side by side, and by this I see their return. Things are so many, each one returns to its root. (*Laozi*, ch. 16)

The "root" refers to the original, nameless and formless state. All things with form or shape eventually dissolve into this state again. Therefore he writes:

> Bent over, you'll be preserved whole. When twisted, you'll be up-

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> right. When hollowed out, you'll be full. When worn out, you'll be renewed. (*Laozi*, ch. 22)

Taking the neglected route or the opposite side and you may accomplish more. This idea is a major theme in Laozi's book. Although Laozi writes this mainly for strategic use in politics. it also reflects his observation of universal "principles":

> The opposite is the agency of the Way; the weak is the function of the Way. Things under heaven come from being, being comes from formlessness. (*Laozi*, ch. 40)

Being and formlessness represent opposite sides of his dialectics. Everything is undergoing a process of change, and eventually the opposite side manifests itself. The most important rule is "sticking to nothing," and waiting for things to change by themselves.

With a cosmo-ontological view of becoming, Laozi's ethical view, like that of Zhuangzi, is necessarily characterized by his protests toward ethical norms:

> When the Great Way is rejected, it is then that we have the virtues of humanity and righteousness. (*Laozi*, ch. 18)

Therefore he says:

> Eliminate sageness, throw away knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold. Eliminate humanity, throw away righteousness, and the people will return to filial piety and compassion. (*Laozi*, ch. 19)

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

To Laozi, both ethical norms and knowledge are things with rigid forms that are obstructive to the unaffected flow of human nature. When the natural course of human nature has been thwarted, the so called "sages" then create virtues with attractive names. To Laozi, these handsome names are not only symptoms of existing problems but also causes of ensuing suppressions, distortions, and ethical and political disasters. Only by returning to the nameless simplicity—the undisturbed initial state, can we avoid all these problems.

In summary, we state that Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming originated in his holistic experience and interpretation of the cosmic process--the Way of the Cosmos (*Tian*). By admitting the "oneness" of everything in this world and by taking boundaries between things as illusion, Zhuangzi creates a world view characterized by the ever changing flow and composition of *qi* (an air-like matter, Zhuangzi takes it as the essence of existence). With this cosmo-ontological view of becoming, he challenges the "ideas" of entity, object, and "thing (*wu*)", and criticizes the reliability of the idea of Idea itself, human knowledge, and ethical norms. In other words, Zhuangzi's cosmo-ontological view of becoming boycotts anything or any ideas taken with a definite form, and makes his thought almost an antithesis to Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy.

In the other part of our picture, we find that all the major ideas in Laozi, such as the Way, being, formlessness (*wu*), state-achieved (*de*), from-itself (*ziran*), are also inseparable from a cosmo-ontological view of becoming. We find that these ideas are conceptualized in an extremely succinct way in Laozi's writing. This fact alone makes us doubt that Laozi's philosophy came after that of Zhuangzi. Since Laozi shares basically the same cosmo-ontological view with Zhuangzi, it is not surprising that he also holds anti-form, anti-norm attitudes towards epistemological and ethical issues.

The creation of a cosmo-ontological view in ancient China by Taoists meant a major breakthrough in the development of Chinese civilization. This view was adopted not only by later Taoists, but also by later Confucians and

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

the Yinyang school. Today, more and more studies have shown the significance of the Taoist tradition in Chinese culture. I believe future studies will prove that the Taoist cosmo-ontological view of becoming has fundamentally influenced the epistemological, ethical, and political views of the Chinese, and helped to mold the distinct character of the Chinese civilization.

[Glossary] *dahua* 大化 *daoshu* 道樞 *de* 德 Guo Xiang 郭象 *hua* 化 *huanzhong* 環中 Hui Shi 惠施 Liang Shu-ming 梁漱溟 *qi* 氣 Qiwulun 齊物論 *Tian* 天 *tianren heyi* 天人合一 *wu* 物 *wu* 無 *wuhua* 物化 *wuming* 無名 *wuwei* 無爲 *wuxingdi* 無行地 *yinshi* 因是 *Yinyang* 陰陽 *yiqi zhihua* 一氣之化 *you* 有

youxing 有形 *zhidai* 知代 Zhougong 周公 Zhuang Zhou 莊周 *zi* 自 *zihua* 自化 *ziqyu* 自取 *ziran* 自然

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫