

# From Fundamental Absence to Absolute Nothingness: Sublating Nishida Kitarō's and Wang Bi's Meontologies

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## Abstract

This article aims to explore the existence of absolute nothingness within the Daoist framework. The inquiry will revolve around an imagined dialogue, juxtaposing the ideas of Nishida Kitarō and Wang Bi through a contrastive analysis employing the transcultural method of sublation. While Nishida asserted that his philosophy was underpinned only by Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy, we will illuminate the frequently overlooked but profoundly influential role of Chinese Daoism in shaping Nishida's concept of nothingness. It is no coincidence that Nishida himself appeared to be unaware of this Daoist influence, and I believe that this constitutes a flaw not only in Nishida's work, but also in its common reception. By comparing Nishida's and Wang's respective conceptualizations of a dynamic (or "moving") present, I will demonstrate that both theories depict time in a similar way, i.e. as emerging from the intimate "translocation" of reality. Building on this foundation, this analysis critiques Nishida's reductionist view that the Chinese (or Daoist) concept of nothingness is confined to a mere opposition of being, representing a simplistic dichotomy between being and non-being. Instead, I argue that Wang Bi's notion of original nothingness or fundamental absence (*benwu* 本無) offers a nuanced parallel to Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無).

**Keywords:** Nishida Kitarō, Wang Bi, Meontology, moving present, Daoist nothingness

## Od fundamentalne odsotnosti do absolutnega nič: sublacija meontologij Nishide Kitarōja in Wang Bija

### Izvilleček

Članek raziskuje obstoj absolutnega nič v okviru daoistične miselnosti. Študija temelji na fiktivnem dialogu, ki prek kontrastivne analize s pomočjo transkulturne metode sublacije primerja ideje Nishide Kitarōja in Wang Bija. Čeprav je Nishida trdil, da sta osrednja stebra njegove filozofije zgolj zen budizem in zahodna filozofija, bo članek osvetlil pogosto prezrto, a močno vplivno vlogo kitajskega daoizma pri oblikovanju njegovega

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pojma ničā. Menim, da ni naključje, da se Nishida tega daoističnega vpliva ne zaveda, saj predstavlja ta vidik pomanjkljivost ne le v samem Nishidovem delu, temveč tudi v njegovi običajni recepciji. S primerjavo Nishidovih in Wangovih konceptualizacij dinamične (ali »premikajoče se«) sedanjosti bom pokazala, da obe teoriji čas prikazujeta na podoben način, torej kot nastajajoč iz intimne »translokacije« resničnosti. Na tej osnovi bom kritično preverila Nishidov redukcionistični pogled, ki vidi kitajski (ali daoistični) koncept odsotnosti kot omejen zgolj na nasprotje prisotnosti, kar predstavlja poenostavljeno dihotomijo med bitjem in nebitjem. Nasprotno pa trdim, da Wang Bijev pojem izvirnega ničā ali fundamentalne odsotnosti (*benwu* 本無) predstavlja subtilno vzporednico z Nishidovim pojmom absolutnega ničā (*zettai mu* 絶対無).

**Ključne besede:** Nishida Kitarō, Wang Bi, meontologija, premikajoča se sedanjost, daoistični nič

## Introduction

The present paper deals with the concept of absolute nothingness within Daoist philosophy by envisioning a hypothetical dialogue between Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) and Wang Bi 王弼; (226–249). Through a contrastive analysis grounded in the transcultural method of sublation,<sup>1</sup> it challenges the common understanding of Nishida's philosophical roots.

While Nishida claimed that his ideas were shaped solely by Zen Buddhism and Western thought, this study highlights the often-overlooked but significant influence of Chinese Daoism on his notion of nothingness—an influence that Nishida himself seemed unaware of. In this context, Marko Uršič argues:

Here I have in mind particularly the Buddhist 'origin' of Nishida's key concept (or, better, of his intellectual 'in-tuition') of *mu no basho* [無の場所], the 'place of nothing', as well as his basic idea of the 'ungroundedness' of the will. In this context, I would like to express my opinion that every pristine philosophical thought has and indeed must have its spiritual, 'experiential' background, both personal and cultural, whereby I guess that we can more easily recognize the background of a philosophical system that is rooted in another cultural frame, more or less different from our own. (Uršič 2023, 73)

This unrecognized connection reveals a critical gap not only in Nishida's work but also in its general interpretation. By examining how Nishida and Wang respectively conceptualize a dynamic, "moving" present, this analysis demonstrates

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1 For a detailed explanation of this method, see Rošker (2025).

that both view time as arising from the intricate “translocation” of reality. Building on these insights, the critique addresses Nishida’s reductive framing of Daoist nothingness as a binary opposition to being. In contrast, it argues that Wang Bi’s concept of original nothingness (*benwu* 本無) provides a more sophisticated counterpart to Nishida’s absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無).

## Conceptual Backgrounds

Given my background as a sinologist, my primary focus in this regard naturally lies in uncovering the transcultural dimensions within Nishida’s body of work and discerning potential linkages to the realm of Chinese philosophy. Notably, Nishida openly acknowledged only the two aforementioned primary sources of influence on his theories: modern Western philosophy and Zen (or Chan, in a Chinese context) Buddhism. Strikingly, he adamantly repudiated any notion of Chinese philosophy having impacted his intellectual development.

Undoubtedly, Zen Buddhism’s origins and development trace back to the Chinese tradition, something that is widely acknowledged. I thus will not spend much time exploring this issue further. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the parallels between Nishida’s *basho* (場所) theory and specific discourses on nothingness within traditional Daoist thought.<sup>2</sup> Examining Nishida’s philosophical stance through a sinological lens reveals a remarkable resonance with numerous aspects of this notion found within traditional Daoist teachings. However, Nishida persistently and resolutely disavowed any significant correlation between his philosophical constructs and the Chinese tradition, a view that he maintained throughout his career.

When Nishida tried to explain his concept of “absolute nothingness” and to posit it in contrast to the earlier East Asian philosophical traditions, he wrote, among other things:

Even if we call Daoist culture a culture of non-being, it is still imprisoned in non-being (*mu*), captured in the form of non-being. Its present was not a moving one but a simple infinite present. (Nishida 1970, 252)

Later in the same text he emphasizes that his concept of the “eternal now” (*Eien no ima* 永遠の今) means something completely different from the Daoist “simple infinite present” (*tada mugen no genzai* 唯無限の現在), which, in his view,

2 In his paper “Martin Heidegger and Kitayama Junyū: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Thing”, Eric Nelson also points out that the conception of “Oriental nothingness” has a complexly mediated relation with premodern interpretations of Daoist nothingness and Buddhist emptiness (Nelson 2023, 31).

is just a kind of reciprocal pulsation that always stays in the same place. By contrast, his own “eternal now” functions as a “moving present” (*ugoku genzai* 動く現在), because time itself spreads out of the intimate “translocation” of reality.

In fact, Laozi—and his interpreter Wang Bi—distinguish two types of time: one is empirical time, which is the finite continuous temporal succession associated with things that are not difficult to understand; the other type of time is transcendental time, which is an infinite continuous temporal succession associated with *Dao* and its various metaphors. Through a textual analysis of the connotations of *heng*, 恒 especially in the phrases *hengdao* 恆道 and *daoheng* 道恆, we can discover that the temporality of the latter is seen as infinite, eternal, and transcendental. It is actually very similar to Nishida’s all-embracing translocation of reality. The temporal nature of material objects finds its source in the temporal essence of *Dao*. Furthermore, objects have the potential to acquire and extend their own temporal dimensions when they align their actions with the universal principles of *Dao*.

In this context, it is interesting to delve a bit deeper into the original meaning of the word *heng* and its diverse connotations. Wang Zhongjiang, Li Qiuhong, Bai Xi, and many other Chinese scholars explain it in a similar way, highlighting that based on the evolution of the character *heng* 恒 and its role in early Confucian and other philosophical traditions, 先 *xian* become a noun referring to constant entities and enduring realities (Wang and Li 2023, 2). It has evolved into a concept and symbol denoting the ultimate source of the universe and all things. Hence, *heng* represents a form of transcendental becoming that encompasses both the unity of all existing things and that which denotes any particular entity as that which it is. (Wang 2016, 36) This dual ontological nature of *heng* as a transcendental becoming is evident in its fundamental manifestation, where it integrates a static element within dynamic change. It embodies the continuity of change, the uninterrupted permanence of the flow of time, which, in itself, remains unchanging and eternal (Xi 2019, 35). *Daoheng*, in this sense, implies an eternity that is woven into each sequence of temporal change, all of which manifest themselves in each present moment. In this context the term *daoheng*—with “*heng*” as the noun or grammatical subject and “*Dao*” as the adjective or descriptor—defines this specific type of *heng* as the stable moment of permanence shaped by *Dao*, the infinite process of dynamic creation. In this sense, *hengdao* represents the fusion of change and immutability, doubtless transcending time in the sense of an infinite present (Wang 2016, 38ff).

## Correcting Misinterpretations

Nishida's inability to recognize the dual dimension of time in Daoist discourses results in a misinterpretation, framing them within a static framework. However, adhering to the original Daoist premises as expressed in the earliest texts and interpreting them coherently reveals that their understanding of time and temporality cannot be confined to a mere "infinite present" (*mugen no genzai* 無限の現在). Contrary to Nishida's view, which reduces this concept to a form of reciprocal pulsation fixed in place, the Daoist perspective is far more dynamic and nuanced.

However, Nishida's misunderstanding is not the sole modern misinterpretation of these ancient texts and their philosophy. Interestingly, this notion of "reciprocal pulsation" has also been a primary critique levelled by Chinese Marxists against their own traditional dialectics. They argue that because it does not progress toward new and increasingly advanced stages of development, it is inherently conservative and anti-progressive. Yet, paradoxically, whether intentionally or not, this framework also influenced their construction and justification of the concept of permanent revolution.

In contrast to Marxist or Hegelian dialectics, this model of dialectical thinking lacked a teleological structure. The absence of synthesis ensured that development did not aim toward any final goal. Instead, within this framework, opposites remained in perpetual tension, persisting through every phase of social development.

But Nishida's misreading of the Daoist understanding of time, considering it a static construct, naturally leads him to the erroneous conclusion that it stifles the evolution of creative vitality. He states: "Chinese culture lacks that spirit that searches endlessly for the truth", and this, in his view, it "became solidified and fixed in itself" (Nishida 1987, 12: 144). For him, this was the central paradigm of Chinese thought, based on the aforementioned "reciprocal pulsation, staying in the same place".

However, it is very much an open question as to whether the Daoist comprehension of the complementary principle can actually be reduced to an uncreative one-dimensional pulsation, especially when we consider that it springs from the infinite creativity principle of the *Yi jing* (*shengsheng bu xi* 生生不息; see Zhu Xi 1270, Yinyang: 21; Chengzizhi shu II: 19), which is also reflected in Laozi's creative cosmology, (see for instance *Dao De Jing* n.d. 42). In his cosmogony, *Dao* as the ultimate principle creates the Oneness, and this unity produces binary oppositions, through which a dialectical triad is born that ultimately produces everything that exists.

The Way creates the Oneness, the Oneness produces the Two, the Two brings forth the Three and the Three brings everything which exists into life.<sup>3</sup> (*Dao De Jing* n.d. 42)

The passage can be explained as a cosmogonic process, beginning with the ultimate principle (of nothingness) that creates the binary dichotomies (comprehensible through the method of binary categories<sup>4</sup>). In the next step, these dichotomies form the dialectical triad, which brings forth everything that exists.

The fact that this dynamic and ever-changing dimension of the traditional Chinese model is also creative, i.e., that it can only exist in the constant production of new qualities, entities, and objects, also becomes very clear if we look at the Neo-Confucian schema of cosmogony, the so-called Taiji Diagram or the Diagram of the Ultimate Reality, which was composed by Zhou Dunyi in the 11th century.

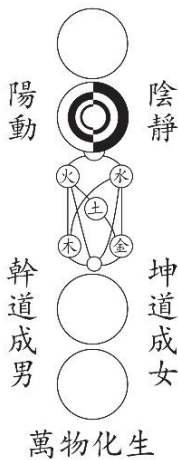


Diagram 1: A copy of Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Ultimate Reality. Made by Jure Preglau.

3 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

4 Binary categories (*duili fanchou* 對立範疇) in Chinese philosophy refer to paired concepts that are often used to represent oppositional or complementary relationships. These categories are not strictly dualistic in the sense of mutually exclusive opposites, but instead they frequently emphasize dynamic interaction, balance, and interdependence. This approach reflects the holistic and process-oriented nature of classical Chinese thought. Some of the most well-known binary categories are, for instance, *yinyang* 陰陽 (“the shadowy side and the sunny side”), *benmo* 本末 (“root and branch”), and *tiyong* 體用 (“substance and function”). In the context of the problem under debate, the most important binary category is *youwu* 有無 (“being and non-being”, or “presence and absence”).

In this diagram, the ultimate reality produces five phases through movement and stillness (*dong* 動 and *jing* 靜). This reciprocal pulsation does not remain on the level of a simple static (i.e., one-dimensional) pulsation, for it is a continuously productive force. The dynamic interaction between these five phases then divides into two oppositional poles that have been metaphorically denoted as the male and female antipodes, because they create and give life to everything that exists.

This refutes the criticism of an eternal reciprocal pulsation, which, in Nishida's view, is always self-referential and could, at best, merely form a circle. However, as we have observed, this system of complementarity does not remain confined to a circular pattern but instead evolves into a dynamic spiral, continually ascending to qualitatively new levels of existence.

Let us now turn to the second aspect of Nishida's criticism, which is closely related to the first one discussed above. According to this, the Chinese (or Daoist) concept of non-being constitutes a simple opposition to being. Yet the classical Chinese cosmology is a bit more complex than it seems at first sight.

As previously mentioned, the second chapter of Laozi's *Dao De Jing* asserts the correlative complementarity of opposites. The most basic dichotomy, or the most basic binary category in this cosmology, is the dichotomy of *you* 有 and *wu* 無, which are commonly translated as being and non-being or nothingness. Due to the dual ontological nature of the classical Chinese discourses, which can be expressed by the concept of immanent transcendence, because of the correlative and dynamic nature of ancient Chinese philosophical discourses, and especially due to the absence of the copula "to be", and hence of a Western-style ontology, such a translation seems problematic. Therefore, I prefer to translate the two notions composing this binary category with the terms presence and absence.

## The Becoming of Nothingness

As we have seen, Nishida believed that classical Chinese cosmology was not only based on, but also limited to, the complementary interaction between absence and presence. However, we must not forget that the binary categories merely represent a method of development of the phenomenal world, or a method of comprehension of this development. The synthesis of the two opposites, which, as noted above, does not form a qualitatively different, separate phase of development, is unspeakable, unnameable, and discursively not detectable. It is *Dao*, or the Way, that is at the same time the ultimate principle of any existence. It brings forth all things, guides them and aligns them with the *li* 理, the all-embracing and coherent, relational and patterning structure of the universe. Since it is unnameable, it



can only be conveyed indirectly, as a latent manifestation arising from the inter-play between presence and absence. As the Laozi states:

All things under Heaven emerged from presence, and presence emerged from absence.<sup>5</sup> (*Dao De Jing* n.d., 40)

However, this method is not to be understood in the sense of a *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather in the sense of a *creatio ex nihilo continuum*. This basic scheme was further elaborated in the third century by the metaphysicians of the School of Profound Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄学). Wang Bi, who was among the most prominent members of this stream of thought, has explicitly argued that the concept of *wu* could not be limited to the function of a contrastive oppositional notion of the concept *you*. On a meta-level, however, it implied the ontological basis of reality. As Wang wrote:

In spite of the great wideness of Heaven and Earth, their core is nothingness. (Wang Bi s.d., 38)<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, Wang describes this absence with a (somehow more concrete) compound *xuwu* 虛無 (“void”), and at times he even uses the term *xu* 虛 (“emptiness”). On the other hand, however, he still remains faithful to the principle of complementarity defining all mutually opposing antipodes, and he emphasizes that the complementary interaction between any two antipodes (any binary category) is always rooted in the same origin:

Beautiful and ugly is like love and hate. Good and evil are like right and wrong. Love and hate grew out from the same root, and right and wrong came through the same door. This ultimate principle of complementarity is always unnameable, empty, and immovable, for every (form of) presence started from the vacuity (*xu*), and every (form of) movement began in quietude (*jing*). Hence, even though everything that exists functions in a binary way, it always returns to this empty stillness in the end, which is the ultimate authenticity. (Ibid., 2)<sup>7</sup>

However, the concept of *wu* as articulated by Wang Bi in this context diverges significantly, much like Nishida's own *basho* model, which is grounded in a metaphysical foundation transcending the realms of matter and idea, subject

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5 天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

6 天地雖廣，以無為心。

7 美惡，猶喜怒也；善不善，猶是非也。喜怒同根，是非同門。



and object, and the multitude of implications stemming from such dichotomies. Unlike the paradigms within Buddhist thought or Mou Zongsan's constructs, these frameworks cannot be classified as idealistic, nor can they be rooted in materialism.

Through Wang Bi's commentaries, Laozi's original complementary correlativity of presence and absence is developed into a primacy of absence, which then becomes the ultimate principle of existence and attains an ontological priority. For the first time in Chinese intellectual history, we encounter an axiological distinction within binary categories that were hitherto functioning in a completely balanced complementary way. In this way, Wang Bi profoundly transformed traditional models of correlative dialectical thinking and laid a cornerstone for the later development of proto-dualisms as created by the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song and Ming dynasties. Wang names this basic principle, which can only be described negatively, the fundamental absence (*benwu*). He identifies it with the pure, original substantial root (*benti* 本體), which is single, all-embracing, all-pervading and always in accord with all cosmic and existential laws. Hence, on this meta-level, it can no longer be translated with the term absence, but rather with nothingness. Within this framework, Wang's *benwu* can be readily compared with Nishida's absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*).

In Wang Bi's philosophical framework, a departure from preceding viewpoints is evident in his conception of the unity or universal wholeness of existence. Unlike prior notions, Wang Bi posits that this unity is not an inherent facet of existence itself, which he characterizes as being evident, varied, and nameable. Instead, he identifies the wellspring of all phenomenal existence in *wu*, which encompasses the concept of nothingness not merely as absence but as a profound metaphysical principle. This *wu* resides in a transcendent realm that overcomes the limitations of differentiation and linguistic expression, going beyond the boundaries of what can be categorized or described. This perspective aligns Wang Bi's meontology with that of Nishida, offering a parallel between their systems. Both these systems also exhibit resonance with select Buddhist paradigms. The concept of "nothingness" (*benwu*) in Wang Bi's philosophy finds affinity with the Buddhist notion of "emptiness" (*kong* 空), an integral facet within Buddhism, particularly in Zen or Chan Buddhism, and here we should note that Zen (Chan) Buddhism in China emerged as a synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist philosophy.

## Conclusion

The Daoist principles of harmony with nature, the interplay of opposites, and the quest for unity amidst diversity have unquestionably woven their threads into the fabric of Nishida's thought. The subtleties of Daoist notions like the elusiveness of fixed definitions can be discerned in Nishida's exploration of the self, reality, and the nature of existence. By not explicitly acknowledging this support, Nishida's work might inadvertently obscure the lineage of his ideas, potentially limiting a more comprehensive understanding of the philosophical tradition he is a part of. In this light, the absence of recognition goes beyond mere politeness and, particularly in the context of his era, it touches upon the responsibility of a philosopher to trace the roots of their concepts and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of thought.<sup>8</sup>

It is, therefore, not unexpected that this oversight goes beyond the boundaries of Nishida's philosophy alone, as its traces are also discernible in the writings of his contemporaneous interpreters. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of scholars like Tomomi Asakura, who have significantly contributed to the study of comparative East Asian philosophy. His work raises critical questions about the unique characteristics of East Asian traditions. However, his assertion that the concept of *basho* lacks relevance to East Asian traditional thought, and that there does not exist any common foundation for an East Asian philosophy, therefore overlooks the nuanced parallels explored in this analysis (see Asakura 2013, 8). It is thus even more important to see how Wang Bi's notion of *benwu* and its intricate interplay with concepts of absence and presence exemplify a shared philosophical foundation, offering a fertile ground for further exploration of comparative East Asian philosophy. The analysis and critical introduction of Wang Bi's notion of nothingness presented above undeniably reveal the existence of common threads, indicating that a potential "foundation for comparative East Asian philosophy" (ibid.) can indeed be discerned in early medieval Chinese philosophy. However, it is disheartening to note that this rich source has been regrettably overlooked, even in the discussions explicitly aimed at investigating the origins of Zen Buddhist meontology within the Japanese Kyoto School.

Ultimately, Wang Bi's concept of *benwu* illustrates the dynamic, foundational interplay between presence and absence, bridging seemingly disparate traditions. By revisiting these connections, we reaffirm the possibility of a shared philosophical foundation, enriching our understanding of both individual traditions and their interrelations.

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8 Although, as Richard Stone argues, politics appear to be quite distant from Nishida's concerns—particularly in his earlier works—this does not mean that his ideas were without political consequences (Stone 2023, 178).

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