ASIAN STUDIES

Editor in Chief
Jana S. Rošker

THEMATIC FOCUS:
NOTHINGNESS
PART II: SUBLATING NOTHINGNESS:
OPENNESS, FREEDOM AND IMAGINATION

Contents

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Editor's Foreword

Part II of the Double Issue on Nothingness

Jana S. ROŠKER

This special double issue of *Asian Studies* is dedicated to exploring the manifold meanings, implications, and philosophical functions of "nothingness" across diverse Asian and transcultural traditions. The first part, titled *Conceptual Foundations and Comparative Perspectives*, published in May 2025, brought together foundational studies that clarified the concept's terminological, historical, and philosophical structures in Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western traditions. It also introduced comparative approaches that situated nothingness as a key category in both metaphysical and ethical discourses. Papers such as Graham Priest's "Paradox and Emptiness", Selusi Ambrogio's "Nothingness at the Crossroads of Minor Canons: A Dialogue between Wang Fuzhi and Charles de Bovelles", Tamara Dietrich's "The Notions of Absence, Emptiness and Nothingness from the Theravāda Buddhist Perspective", and Raphaël Van Daele's "From Nothingness to Nothing: Guō Xiàng's Nominalist Reduction of the Ontological Performativity of Wú 無", exemplified the first issue's focus on theoretical groundwork and conceptual articulation.

In contrast, this second issue presents further developments through four thematic sections, deepening and diversifying the discourse by showing how "nothingness" functions within particular philosophical traditions, artistic expressions, and logical frameworks. While Part I focused on ontological and ethical architectures, Part II engages more directly with interpretive, aesthetic, and cross-cultural applications.

In other words, this second part advances the inquiry by turning to specific constellations of thought in which nothingness plays a formative role. The issue is divided into four thematic sections: "Transcultural Comparisons", "Freedom and Beauty", "Analytical Approaches", and "The Buddhist Legacies in Indian and Japanese Ideas on Nothingness". Each section approaches the topic from a different angle: the first investigates how nothingness mediates philosophical exchange across cultures; the second examines its role in the constitution of axiology in artistic and moral experience; the third offers formal, logical, and epistemological perspectives; and the fourth returns to the Buddhist roots of many Asian philosophies of nothingness to explore their ongoing relevance.

Together, these four sections demonstrate that nothingness is not an abstract negation or lack, but an active conceptual force—manifesting across traditions, disciplines, and modes of experience.

The opening section, "Transcultural Comparisons", presents three essays that explore "nothingness" as a concept shaped through transcultural exchange and philosophical encounter. Eric Nelson maps the complex reception of Buddhist nothingness in 19th-century German philosophy, especially in the shift from Schopenhauer's sympathetic pessimism to Nietzsche's ambivalent critique of "European Buddhism". In a similar context, Mario Wenning turns to literature, examining how Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* reflects Buddhist and Daoist resonances in its dual portrayal of "The Nothing" as existential threat and "nothing" as generative potential. Yang Xiaobo's contribution uses Nishida Kitarō's logic of *basho* to reinterpret Saussurean structuralism, proposing that linguistic structure can be understood as a dynamic system grounded in *mu* (無), or nothingness as "groundless ground".

Despite their disciplinary differences, all three papers highlight how nothingness becomes productive when seen not as mere absence, but as a horizon of openness—conceptually, linguistically, and imaginatively.

In the following section, which is titled "Freedom and Beauty", Téa Sernelj investigates the notion of *xu* (虛, "emptiness") as the metaphysical and aesthetic core of Chinese literati painting. Her article shows how emptiness functions not as negation but as a source of generative dynamism and artistic resonance. Luka Perušić, in turn, examines the philosophical convergence of freedom and nothingness. His analysis, grounded in Kantian and post-Kantian debates, proposes that any vigorous interpretation of freedom must account for its affinities with nothingness—an idea that finds deeper elaboration in Asian traditions.

Both contributions thus connect nothingness with two of the most prized human values: artistic expression and existential agency. They argue that aesthetic creation and moral responsibility may both depend on an engagement with what is not, rather than what is.

The section "Analytical Approaches" contains three papers that offer formal and conceptual clarifications of the logic and ontology of nothingness. Rafal Banka presents a mereological interpretation of Daoist metaphysics in the *Daodejing*, proposing that dao's "nothingness" is not ontological void but a function of compositional logic. Wai Lok Cheung challenges the ontological status of nothingness itself, treating it as a "fictionally fictional object" and offering semantic tools to navigate its paradoxical reference. Finally, Jana S. Rošker differentiates emptiness and nothingness through Zhang Dongsun's panstructural epistemology, shedding light on how these terms are not interchangeable, even within a shared conceptual heritage.

These analytical essays deepen the philosophical stakes of the issue by probing the formal structures and logical presuppositions that underpin our use of "nothingness" in both language and thought.

The final section, titled "The Buddhist Legacies in Indian and Japanese Ideas on Nothingness"*,* presents two essays that return to the Buddhist roots of many Asian discourses on nothingness. Hashi Hisaki reinterprets Nishida's *zettai-mu* (絶対無) in light of both Western and Asian philosophical sources, arguing for a topos of "absolute nothingness" that exceeds binary thinking. Pankaj Vaishnav offers a comparative analysis of Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamaka Buddhism, showing how their respective ideas of non-duality and emptiness converge in their challenge to conventional ontology and epistemology.

Both essays demonstrate that Buddhist traditions, in dialogue with other Indian philosophies and modern Japanese thought, provide some of the most complex and mature articulations of nothingness—not as mere absence, but as a relational or absolute ground for liberation.

This second part of the double issue complements and completes the first by offering concrete analyses of how nothingness functions across aesthetic, ethical, logical, and transcultural domains. If the first issue established a conceptual and historical foundation, this volume shows how nothingness is lived, expressed, and rethought across cultures and traditions.

Taken together, the two issues affirm the centrality of nothingness as a key conceptual axis in global philosophy. This thematic focus also reflects a broader orientation within our journal: over the 13 years of its existence, *Asian Studies* has regularly featured contributions engaging with notions of nothingness (e.g. Hashi 2015; Nelson 2023), emptiness (see Škodlar 2016; Moore, 2024), and absence (for instance Rošker 2016; Sernelj 2022). The commitment to this theme, therefore, is not limited to the current double issue—it is embedded in the journal's sustained editorial trajectory.

By highlighting nothingness not as a marginal or esoteric idea but as a generative ground for reflection on being, knowledge, beauty, and freedom, these volumes demonstrate its enduring philosophical relevance. Centring Asian traditions in these inquiries not only broadens the scope of the philosophical canon, but also invites contemporary thought to critically reexamine its metaphysical assumptions in an authentically global and dialogical context.

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THEMATIC FOCUS NOTHINGNESS
PART II: SUBLATING NOTHINGNESS: OPENNESS, FREEDOM AND IMAGINATION

Transcultural Comparisons

Buddhism, Nothingness, and Pessimism: From Schopenhauer to Nietzsche

*Eric S. NELSON**

Abstract

The present contribution excavates a pivotal shift in the history of European Buddhism. It outlines the conceptual-historical entanglements of "Buddhist nothingness" with nineteenth-century German philosophy from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche. While Buddhism was primarily interpreted as a philosophy and practice of nothingness (as in Hegel) and as ascetic and nihilistic (as in Nietzsche), pessimist interpretations of Buddhist nothingness, negation, *nirvāṇa*, and the unconscious articulated other possibilities that helped promote a more receptive, at times enthusiastic, attitude toward Buddhist thought and practice. Nietzsche's critique of "European Buddhism" as nihilism in his late works and fragments occurs in the context of this shift. Nietzsche's interpretation is not only a continuation of earlier European suspicions concerning Buddhist nothingness. He intentionally deployed a variety of ideas and images drawn from South Asian Buddhist sources to confront and question European modernity as well as Buddhism itself. Works attributed to the Buddha and Nāgārjuna are discussed at points to help contextualize and assess the significance of these discourses.

Keywords: Buddhism, emptiness (*śūnyatā*), nihilism, nothingness, pessimism

Budizem, nič in pesimizem: od Schopenhauerja do Nietzscheja

Izvleček

Pričujoči prispevek obravnava ključni premik v zgodovini evropskega budizma. Opisuje konceptualno-zgodovinsko prepletenost »budističnega niča« z nemško filozofijo devetnajstega stoletja od Schopenhauerja do Nietzscheja. Medtem ko je bil budizem predstavljen predvsem kot filozofija in praksa niča (kot pri Heglu) ter kot asketski in nihilistični pristop (kot pri Nietzscheju), so pesimistične interpretacije budističnega niča, negacije, *nirvāṇe* in nezavednega artikulirale tudi druge možnosti, ki so pripomogle k bolj sprejemljivemu ter včasih bolj navdušenemu odnosu do budistične misli in prakse. Nietzschejeva kritika »evropskega budizma« kot nihilizma, zlasti v njegovih poznih delih in fragmentih, se pojavlja v kontekstu tega premika. Nietzschejeva interpretacija pa ni le nadaljevanje zgodnejših evropskih zadržkov v odnosu do budističnega niča. Nietzsche je uporabil vrsto različnih idej in podob, ki jih je črpal iz južnoazijskih budističnih virov z namenom,

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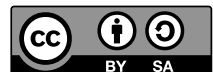
da bi se soočil z evropsko modernostjo, kakor tudi samim budizmom, in ju postavil pod vprašaj. Prispevek mestoma obravnava tudi dela, ki jih pripisujejo Buddhi in Nāgārjuni, da bi tako bolje kontekstualiziral ter ocenil pomen teh diskurzov.

Ključne besede: budizem, praznina (*śūnyatā*), nihilizem, nič, pesimizem

Introduction: Emptiness and Desire

Early modern European discourse described Buddhism as a negative cult, religion, and philosophy of nothingness. Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) signified nothingness and liberation (*nirvāṇa*) annihilation and extinction.[1] *Śūnyatā*, however, did not mean nothingness in classical Buddhist sources; it meant the suspension of views and claims about existence and non-existence, being and nothingness. Similarly, *nirvāṇa* was compared to both the blowing out of a fire and a freedom unattached to fixating and limiting categories such as being and nothingness. The fire, drawing on similes ascribed to the Buddha himself, was the craving and conditioned desire that produced affliction and suffering rather than existence or the mere desire to act as such.

To consider one canonical example, the *Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving* (*Mahātanhāsankhaya Sutta*), a key source from the Pāli Canon, distinguished between *chanda* as the desire to act (*kattu-kamata*), or the intention or motivation for action, and *taṇhā*, as the afflictive desire that produces unwholesome conditions and results (Bodhi and Ñanamoli 2015, 349–61). Desire as *chanda* can be wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral. *Taṇhā* is unwholesome. The Buddha's second noble truth is the origination of suffering (*dukkha*) in craving or afflictive desire (*taṇhā*), while the third and fourth noble truths teach its suspension and freedom through the practice of the eightfold path. The greater the craving, the greater the suffering.

Craving is a deep structural desire that causes this whole mass of suffering of gnawing unease, anxiety, hatred, fear, and violence. Three forms of *taṇhā* are identified: craving for pleasure (*kama-taṇhā*), craving for being (*bhava-taṇhā*), and craving for non-being (*vibhava-taṇhā*). Craving non-existence, death, and nothingness remain forms of afflictive craving, and are thus not elements of the path of emptiness and liberation. The Buddha's middle path (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*) suspends clinging and aversion to empty and clarify motivations in the context of the thoroughly relational and interdependent conditions and nutriments of life. One should not even cling to or crave the *dhamma*, as it is analogous to a raft used to cross a river.

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1   Note that common Sanskrit expressions for Buddhist terms are used in this paper, except when referring to Pāli texts. Citations to Adorno (1970–1986), Nietzsche (1980), and Schopenhauer (1988) are to the paperback German editions of their collected works.

The current contribution excavates a pivotal shift in the history of European Buddhism. It sketches in outline the conceptual-historical entanglements of "Buddhist nothingness" with nineteenth-century German philosophy, and related discourses, from Hegel and Schopenhauer to Eduard von Hartmann, Phillip Mainländer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. While Buddhism was primarily interpreted as a philosophy and practice of nothingness (as in Hegel) and as ascetic and nihilistic world- and life-negation (as in Nietzsche), pessimist interpretations of Buddhist nothingness, negation, *nirvāṇa*, and the unconscious articulated other possibilities that helped promote a more receptive, at times enthusiastic, attitude toward Buddhist thought and practice.

Pessimism and the pessimist controversy dominated intellectual and cultural debates in the second half of the nineteenth-century.[2] Nietzsche's analysis of "European Buddhism" as nihilism in his late works and fragments occurs in the context of these shifting attitudes and growing enthusiasm for Buddhism. Nietzsche's interpretation is not only a continuation of earlier European suspicions concerning Buddhist negation and nothingness. He intentionally deployed a variety of Buddhist ideas and images, mostly drawn from South Asian sources, to confront pessimism and nihilism as expressions of an increasingly "Buddhistic" European modernity. Works attributed to the Buddha and Nāgārjuna are deployed at points in this contribution to help contextualize and assess the significance of these discourses.

Buddhist Nothingness in Modern Europe: Du Halde and Hegel

Buddhism has been understood as a philosophy and practice of nothingness in its European reception.[3] According to the French Jesuit historian Jean Baptiste Du Halde's influential 1735 work *Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*, Buddhism teaches that:

> a Vacuum or Nothing is the Principle of all things … that it is from Nothing … that all things are produced, and to which they all return … to live happily we must continually strive by Meditation, and frequent Victories over ourselves, to become like this Principium, and to this end accustom ourselves to do nothing, to desire nothing, to perceive nothing, to think on nothing …. (Du Halde 1736, 50–51)

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2   See Beiser (2016); Golther (1878); Klingemann 1898; see also the arguments against and for pessimism in Mitchell (1886, 187–94); and Plumacher (1879, 68–89).

3   On the European history of Buddhism and nothingness, see App (2012) and Droit (2003).

Informed by Du Halde's and other accounts, to turn to the nineteenth-century context, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel remarked in his 1827 lectures on the philosophy of religion that Buddhism made nothingness the beginning, center, and end of all things:

> everything emerges from nothing, everything returns to nothing. That is the absolute foundation, the indeterminate, the negated being of everything particular, so that all particular existences or actualities are only forms, and only the nothing has genuine independence, while in contrast all other actuality has none; it counts only as something accidental, an indifferent form. For a human being, this state of negation is the highest state: one must immerse oneself in this nothing, in the eternal tranquility of the nothing generally, in the substantial in which all determinations cease, where there is no virtue or intelligence, where all movement annuls itself. All characteristics of both natural life and spiritual life have vanished. To be blissful, human beings themselves must strive, through ceaseless internal mindfulness, to will nothing, to want and to do nothing. (Hegel 2023, 253)

Hegel was sufficiently concerned with the specter of radical Buddhist nothingness that he criticized it as an empty abstraction in his account of nothingness in the *Science of Logic*, the key systematic work of his philosophy. While negativity and nothingness made Hegel's dialectic radically dynamic and transformative, he rejected the possibility of beginning with them and of their philosophical primacy. Hegel explicitly identified Buddhism with such a self-contradictory point of departure (Hegel 2010, 21, 70). Philosophy can only begin with being, to which nothingness remains necessary yet secondary. Negation is inevitably implicative. It must result in further mediation and affirmation. Hegel also concluded that Buddhist negation, in practical philosophy, led to a practice and condition of quietist inactivity and passivity.[4] It not only undermines the fixed values of an established form of ethical life but the drive and mobility constitutive of life and thinking. Hegel's interpretation foreshadows the viewpoint that Buddhism is fundamentally nihilistic and the question of nihilism in later German thought.[5]

Buddhist Emptiness and Negation as Negative Dialectics

Hegel was right to not isolate the conceptual from the practical in the Buddhist context, as Buddhism's philosophical and meditative-ethical practices are

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4   Hegel repeated the charge of quietism until his late Berlin lecture courses. On Hegel's interpretation of Buddhism, see Stewart (2018, 92–108).

5   On the question of nihilism in and after Hegel, see Stewart (2023).

entwined. Yet Hegel's influential and typical account is questionable. To briefly contextualize and correct such interpretations of Buddhism, meditative emptying and logical negation are complementary practices in the Buddhist path.

In contrast to Hegel, Buddhist negation, as deployed from the Buddha's discourses to Nāgārjuna's *Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; Nāgārjuna 2016): (1) suspends affirmation and conceptualization as hypostatization (*samāropa*, as in 22.15) and proliferation and (2) empties and frees the mind. Negation is therefore non-implicative in that its suspension cuts off proliferation and does not entail or demand further assertions.[6] The *Root Stanzas* unfixes language and mind through withdrawal (*nivṛtt-*) (ibid., 9.12, 18.7), the cessation of objectification and conceptualization (*sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ*; ibid., 25.24), and the abandonment of views (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya*; ibid., 27.30).

The Tibetan Madhyamaka philosopher Je Tsongkhapa, and Indo-Tibetan *prāsaṅgika* (which can be interpreted as "negation-only"), consequently differentiated two varieties of negation: (1) affirming implicative and (2) non-affirming non-implicative. Tsongkhapa recognized how the negation of a quality only entails the suspension of the assertion of that quality without establishing another quality (Tsongkhapa 2015, 59–60). This constitutes, to adopt Theodor Adorno's expression, a "negative dialectics" in that it counters and abandons the fixating compulsion for affirmation, identity, and positivity.[7]

More akin in this respect to ancient Indian and Greek skepticism than to negative theology and speculative philosophy, which construe negation as ultimately affirmative, emptiness (as an existential comportment) and negation (as a practice of undoing conceptual-linguistic fixations) are already sufficient.[8] Nāgārjuna concluded in the *Root Verses of the Middle Way* that the Buddha taught the abandonment of all teachings and views (Nāgārjuna 2016, 13.8; 27.30).

Emptiness and negation aim to undo rather than assert views and doctrines. They do not imply and do not require further assertions that are inevitably hypostatizations (*samāropa*). They cut off conceptual and linguistic proliferation about nothingness, being, an ultimate unconditional reality or truth, or basic truths about the Buddha and *dharma* misconstrued as views through attachment and craving. Consequently, even the distinction between the two truths of conventional and ultimate truth and the distinction between the mundane suffering world of *saṃsāra*

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6   On negation as suspension in Buddhism and ancient skepticisms, see Nelson (2023, 125–44). For an overview of Nāgārjuna and Indian Madhyamaka arguments and sources, see Ruegg (1981).

7   See Adorno (1970–1986, 6). On negative dialectics in Nāgārjuna and Adorno, see Nelson (2025). On Adorno's logic and dialectics in intercultural philosophy, see Rošker (2024, chaps. 5–6).

8   Compare Jayatilleke (1963, 117–40). Early Indian *Ajñāna* (no-knowing) skepticism influenced both Buddhism as well as (through a complex yet a partially historically verifiable transmission) Greek skepticism.

and the freedom of *nirvāṇa* need to be perceived through emptiness as non-dual and relational. Because this suspension of assertions includes consequences and implications, and emptiness is already empty of self-nature (*svabhāva*) or any limiting fixating assertion, there is no problem of a potential infinite regress in which each suspension requires yet another suspension. The objection that *śūn-yatā* entails a potential infinite regress problematically presupposes the logic of affirming implicative negation in which each negation is an assertion in need of another negation. Since Madhyamaka only deploys contradictions for the sake of negation as suspension, contradictions do not entail further proliferation as in (standard) Hegelian and dialethic interpretations.

German Pessimism and Negativity

One ordinary misunderstanding of "pessimism" construes it as an emotionally gloomy and harsh disposition and philosophical orientation. But philosophical pessimism need not be gloomy and typically engaged in a critique and suspension of afflictive or so-called negative emotions. Schopenhauer, Julius Bahnsen, Eduard von Hartmann, Nietzsche, amongst others, wrote variously of cheerful, joyful, heroic, tragic, active, and even affirmative pessimism.[9]

In this manner, praising Christian and modern tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) over ancient tragedy, Schopenhauer noted that it teaches a "joyful abandonment of the world in the awareness of its nothingness and worthlessness" (Schopenhauer 1988, vol. 4, 496). Schopenhauer distinguished moments of joyful freedom in the world in art, ethics, and philosophical insight from Stoic and other forms of neutral detachment. Nor would this freedom, given its structure, require an affirmation—whether dialectical or tragic-heroic—beyond negation.

Schopenhauer prioritized the conceptual-linguistic and practical uses of negation, most distinctly in his teaching of the suspension of the will and its afflictive desires, which he perceived as a shared affinity with Buddhist and Indian philosophies. As is clearly the case in historical Buddhism that utilizes negation while contesting "negative" emotional states and intentions, two senses of negativity likewise need to be distinguished in Schopenhauer's writings: (1) conceptual-logical negation and (2) "negative" afflictive emotions such as gloom, despair, and anguish. These are two distinct senses of negativity that do not necessarily overlap except in a subset of pessimistic and anti-pessimist discourses. "Cheerful pessimism", or imagining Sisyphus happy in Albert Camus's words (Camus 1990), is the very point of Schopenhauer's philosophy that Nietzsche critically turned against it.

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9   On nineteenth-century German pessimism and its controversies, see Beiser (2016).

Schopenhauer understood his own pessimism as being unbounded and undisturbed by afflictive emotions; the simple enjoyment of ordinary life, such as walking one's dog and hearing a concert after a nice dinner, without will and being illuminated by higher aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical states of mind. The practical goal of Schopenhauer's philosophy is to arrive at a satisfied tranquility and tolerance of mind, amidst the flux and suffering of life, through the negation of the will. Schopenhauer identified his own philosophy with the Buddha's and the negation of the will with the Buddha's suspension of craving and afflictive desires.[10]

Classical Indian and modern German philosophy do not share the same concepts of the will and nothingness. As discussed above, classical Buddhism did not suspend every intention or motive (*chanda*), but only unwholesome and afflictive ones (*taṇhā*). Although it was familiar with the suffering of the constructed and projective self, it was unfamiliar with an underlying will as fundamental life-force in need of negation through the recognition of its relative nothingness (Schopenhauer) or artistic self-creation and affirmation (Nietzsche). *Jīva* (the life-force or vital soul of creatures), perhaps the most approximate concept in classical Hindu and Jain philosophy, was rejected or considered only as conditional in Indian Buddhist discourses along with notions of the person (*pudgala*) and substantial self (*ātman*).

Extending this logic, the will should likewise be suspended as dependently arisen and empty, such that there is no will in any more substantive sense (as there appears to be in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) to be negated or affirmed. Schopenhauer's will (which cannot be determined as one or many) can only be momentarily suspended and Nietzsche's will, understood as a multiplicity of shifting conflicting forces, is only distorted in vainly attempting to neutralize itself. While the conditionality of individuation and the self in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche evokes the no-self in Buddhism, the formative role of the will remains distinctive in its structure and purpose.

Nietzsche broke from Schopenhauer's philosophy because it was insufficiently active and radical in its pessimism and lacked Dionysian self-affirmation. In *Beyond Good and Evil* § 188, Nietzsche derided Schopenhauer's banal cheerful enjoyment of ordinary life and his commitments to altruistic ascetic morality and pessimist philosophy (which denied God and the world) as incoherent and ingenuine. Nietzsche articulated in contrast, in earlier and later writings, a more radically affirmative and assertive and thus more joyful amoral "pessimism of strength" (Nietzsche 1980, vol.1, 12).

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10   Such as Schopenhauer (1970, vol. IV.1, 96). On Schopenhauer's appropriation of Buddhism, see App (2006, 35–76), Langone (2024), and Nelson (2022, 83–96).

Negativity in Nietzsche is complicated as he both deployed and critically diagnosed different varieties of conceptual and affective negativity depending on their tendency to heighten or destroy life. He himself deployed and praised negation, powerfully expressed in the lion's emancipatory "holy no" of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (ibid., vol 4, 30), while also persistently linking pessimist and Buddhist negation with underlying pathological emotional states of an ascetic and ultimately nihilistic spirit of revenge (ibid., vol. 4, 128, 180) and *ressentiment* (ibid., vol. 5, 270, 336) against life itself. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, the no-saying that can only negate, without creation, signals a structural disposition of resentment and nausea, the will to nothingness and nihilism (ibid., vol. 5, 336).

A "no" should serve a "yes" and a self-posited aim (ibid., 170). Negation cannot be non-implicative and non-affirmative, since negation must realize self-affirmation and is a moment in either life's self-assertion or its self-destruction. Schopenhauer's suspension of the will can accordingly only express for Nietzsche a self-defeating and self-undermining pathological will. The negation or suspension of the will articulated by Schopenhauer, and that is identified by both philosophers with the Buddhist suspension of afflictive attachment and craving (*taṇhā*), can only be another expression of the will in Nietzsche's analysis. Negating the will only signals the will's lack of power and vitality: "The will would 'rather will nothingness than not will at all'" (ibid., vol. 5, 339). Nothingness is a symptom of a will that seeks to negate itself.

In response to Schopenhauer and Mainländer, and their valuations of Buddhism, Nietzsche concluded that the will that negates itself is both conceptually incoherent and practically pathological. Nietzsche's diagnostic genealogies and symptomologies of ascetic and nihilistic forms of life relies on the impossibility and sickness of the self-negating will. Nietzsche focused most of his polemical efforts against Apollonian and Socratic intellectualism, Judaic-Christian ascetic moralism, and the contradictions of European modernity, while giving Buddhism a privileged position as a higher *avatar* of nihilism.[11] More remarkedly, a new "European" Buddhism became exemplary for the nihilism of modernity itself in Nietzsche's later works (ibid., vol. 5, 252) and his final unfinished project *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 2017; 1980, 12–13).

The Modernity, Pessimism, and Nihilism of Buddhism

How could Buddhism be identified with pessimism, nihilism, and even the problematic of European modernity in nineteenth-century German thought?[12] Bud-

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11   On the question of Nietzsche and Buddhism, see Wirth (2019).

12   Buddhism and pessimism, nihilism, and modernity are discussed, for instance, in Klingemann (1898). For an overview of Buddhism's nineteenth-century German reception, see Dumoulin (1981). This contribution will specifically emphasize the pivotal role of pessimism.

dhism had been dismissively construed in early modern Europe through the categories of paganism, idolatry, and "negative" pantheism and atheism. It was increasingly interpreted through the prism of pessimism and nihilism throughout and since the nineteenth-century. Buddhist philosophy became interlinked with questions of modernity and the modern situation in pessimist philosophy and its controversies, in a movement that encompassed Schopenhauer, Mainländer, von Hartmann, and Nietzsche.

Schopenhauer has been called the "first European Buddhist" and the "Buddha of Frankfurt" (Cartwright 2010, 274; Wirth 2019, 15–21). Interpreters have questioned to what extent he can be genuinely considered a European Buddhist (Troeltsch 2009, 488; Yasuda 1893, 78). In the wake of Schopenhauer, nonetheless, Buddhism increasingly became a model of a modern system of thought and practice. The advertisement for Karl Eugen Neumann's 1893 translation of the *Dhammapada* (*Der Wahrheitspfad*) began with the remark: "Buddhism, as Schopenhauer emphatically pointed out, is closely related to the disposition of the present" (Neumann 1893).

Schopenhauer explained religion to be "truth in the form of a lie" (Schmidt 1986). Buddhism was the least religious and most philosophical form of religion. Buddhism, reinterpreted according to a reconstructed "philosophical core" that stripped away its religious and mythical dimensions that were considered later additions to the original teaching of the Buddha,[13] became entangled in nineteenth-century arguments and controversies regarding nothingness, the suffering of the world (*Weltschmerz*), the secularized problem of evil (theodicy), and questions of the meaning and value of life (nihilism). Buddhist discourses of "no-self" (*anātman*) were linked with the primacy of the unconscious and the multiplicity of the forces of life and sensations *vis-à-vis* the unity of self as well as the character of appropriately modern (secularized if not entirely disenchanted) scientific, religious, and ethical worldviews. Pessimism, as well as Ernst Mach and sensualist empiricism later in the century (Mach 1914, 356), had made Buddhism secular, philosophical, modern, and fashionable for European audiences.

Buddhism had become the highest exemplar and greatest danger. On the one side, for instance, Paul Carus defended Buddhism in a Comtean language as a positivist religion of reason, humanity, and philanthropic ethics deeply in accord with modernity (Carus 1897, 64, 281, 302, 309). On the other side, in his critique of Darwinian evolution, the cleric and naturalist Francis Morris identified Buddhism with a nihilistic striving after the nothingness of *nirvāṇa* in a world shaped solely by contingent unconscious forces (Morris 1869, 58–60). Others, such as

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13 This hermeneutical strategy is still visible much later in, for instance, the portrayal of the Buddha in Jaspers (2012).

the Sanskrit scholar and translator Friedrich Max Müller, pursued a middle interpretive route. Müller analyzed the appropriateness and inappropriateness of the concerns over Buddhism's atheism, negativity, and nihilism in his 1857 "The Meaning of Nirvana" and 1869 "On Buddhist Nihilism", concluding in the latter that *nirvāṇa* could only signify personal annihilation in the end and—akin to philosophical pessimism—a peaceful ethical and psychological disposition in which there is nothing to be feared.[14]

Nineteenth-century fears of Buddhist nothingness as aimless and nihilistic did not only recapitulate early modern ideas of the "cult of nothingness", as articulated in Du Halde and Hegel. They were informed by debates over and reactions to philosophical pessimism that was perceived by conservatives and socialists (such as the "optimist" Eugen Dühring (1881)) as one of the greatest dangers to national life and identity. While most religions posited images of heaven filled with illusory concrete contents, Buddhism and Schopenhauer's philosophy deepened the illusions and shackles of heaven, the beyond, and the transcendent by reframing them as an empty and formless hope- and value-undermining nothingness (Dühring 1881, 6, 21–22).

Nihilism or an Ethics of Nothingness? Nāgārjuna and Schopenhauer

Yet must nothingness nihilistically undermine all practices and ethics, or can it constitute an ethics art of the self as Schopenhauer maintained? In the cases of Schopenhauer and the later pessimist Eduard von Hartmann, pessimism was primarily an ethical project of achieving a free disposition in relation to the flux of the world that could—at the same time—still respond to the world. Schopenhauer advocated an ethics of suffering-with or sympathy (*Mit-leid*) toward all beings capable of sentience and suffering that intersected with elements of Buddhist discourses of loving-kindness and compassion.

Max Müller contrasted the peaceful restfulness of the historical Buddha's *nirvāṇa* from the radical negativity of Madhyamaka philosophy: "only in the hands of the philosophers, to whom Buddhism owes it metaphysics, the Nirvana, through constant negations, carried to an indefinite degree, through the excluding and abstracting of all that is not Nirvana, at last became an empty Nothing, a philosophical myth" (Müller 1881, 306). Radical skeptical and nihilistic interpretations of Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka continue to misinterpret it by disconnecting its radically negative dialectical logic (see Adorno 1970–1986, vol. 6) from the ethical and soteriological concerns that characterize Madhyamaka discourses on

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14   Müller (1881, 280–312); compare Welbon (1965, 179–200), who described Müller's *nirvāṇa* as a condition of peace and rest, atheistic yet not nihilistic in the sense of being purely negative.

ethics and the Bodhisattva path from the *Ratnāvalī* of Nāgārjuna to Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and later Tibetan works.[15]

Nāgārjuna's radically skeptical logic contested epistemological and ontological views and assertions as fixating hypostatizations. Nāgārjuna's works did not contest and remained, as the *Ratnāvalī* illustrates, interwoven with conventional truth (as non-dual from the ultimate), the ethical practices of ordinary lay and royal life, and the bodhisattva path (Nāgārjuna 2024). Emptiness and negation are their very condition, as meditative-ethical and logical-conceptual practices of emptying dismantle affective and conceptual fixations for the sake of a transformation in which generosity and compassion become a spontaneous way of life. Emptiness culminates in the freedom and unrestricted compassion attributed to bodhisattvas.

Schopenhauer's pessimism, entangled with the European reception of Buddhism understood as a philosophy of nothingness, raises in part overlapping questions. Due to the critique of the emotions and the will, and the prioritization of experiential and conceptual negativity, "Buddhism" and Schopenhauer's pessimism have been interpreted as nihilistic negations of meaning, purpose, and ethical life. However, Schopenhauer correlates nothingness not only with liberation but with ethical responsiveness. Ethics is the negation of and protest against the absence of sympathy, tolerance, and justice toward suffering beings. Schopenhauer's pessimist ethics thus has a critical dimension, as is also the case with Phillip Mainländer's social *ethos*.

Ernst Bloch glimpsed in this aspect of Schopenhauer's thinking a "negative utopianism" of "nirvāṇa-nothingness" (Bloch 1972, 277). Schopenhauer's negative ethics is interwoven with a transformative therapeutics of the afflictive emotions and receptively suffering-with sentient beings. Forms of experiential and logical negativity, such as the negation of existing suffering and injustice, are the conditions of compassion and justice amidst the suffering and injustices of the world.

Buddhism as Imperfect Exemplar: Eduard von Hartmann and Phillip Mainländer

Two late nineteenth-century pessimists had more ambivalent responses to Buddhism, embracing and rejecting its different elements. First, Eduard von Hartmann tempered the radical claims and consequences of Schopenhauer's pessimism just as Nietzsche had intensified them. Von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (Hartmann 1869a) was one of the most influential works of its era. His project sought to reconcile Schopenhauer with Schelling and Hegel, or individual

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15   Nāgārjuna (2024); Śāntideva (1996); for an overview of Madhyamaka sources, see Ruegg (1981).

pessimism—that included a sense of the suffering of animals and plants—with a secularized organicist natural philosophy and social-historical optimism about national reform and progress (Hartmann 1869b).

In his 1874 work *Religion of the Future*, he pointedly described Buddhism as a "pure atheism" in which the world becomes a mere appearance of nothingness. It lacks the "metaphysical God" that is the substance of the world and the essence of appearances (Hartmann 1874, 105). Notwithstanding its phenomenalist dangers it is Buddhism rather than Christianity that best approximated the monistic and pessimistic morality, and thus the religion, of the future. He concluded that Buddhism explicitly used pessimism to justify morality and "regarding ethics, we have more to borrow from Buddhism than from Christianity" (ibid., 118).

Schopenhauer's great service was to recover Vedānta and Buddhist philosophy, "restoring its dreamy subjective idealism, its pessimism (far superior in depth to that of Christianity), and the Buddhist ethics and teaching of nirvana" (ibid., 111). Whereas *nirvāṇa* indicates an ethical disposition, nothingness is taken as an extreme that destroys the structural unity and meaningfulness of the world born of the dreaming unconscious.

Second, Phillip Mainländer is in many ways the most radical pessimist of this era, given the radicality of his account of the "will to death", in place of Schopenhauer's suspension of the will, and the world as the corpse of the dead God. He expressed fascination with and appreciation for the Buddha in the fourth essay of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Redemption* and his attempted drama of the Buddha's life. Mainländer praised the Buddha as a social reformer and opponent of caste. He rejected in his *Philosophy of Redemption* (Mainländer 1886) von Hartmann's conditional argument in favor of Buddhist ethics discussed above. The Buddha failed to adequately freely embrace the will to death and absolute nothingness. Buddhism was the individualistic antipode of pantheism in which all is one and the external fate of Brahmanism (ibid., 75). He criticized Buddhism as atheistic, individualistic, phenomenalist, predominantly disenchanted without miracle and wonder, and as "Kantian". This ancient Indian teaching was once again interpreted as at the forefront of European modernity.

Genuine Christianity and esoteric karmic Buddhism best indicated the truth of pessimism regarding the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth outside of individual human power without resorting to pantheism and realism. Moreover, "Buddhism is the sole teaching that sublates [*aufhebt*] all the absurdities of life, its dreadful and horrendous character, and all that is tormenting and puzzling in science" (ibid., 91). The Buddha had rightly perceived that life is suffering but optimistically taught that suffering and fate could be controlled through one's own individual efforts, practices, and idealistic self-consciousness. This implied an individualistic idealism that is higher than realism while lacking a sense of the whole and

fatefulness. It entailed an abstract and atheistic idealism, in the style of Kant, in which the miraculous was eclipsed. Buddhist nothingness is deemed a contradictory abstraction and illusion of freedom, as karma cannot conclude given its real structural priority as the "thing-in-itself" of core Buddhist teachings.

Making his own distinction between popular exoteric and karmic esoteric Buddhist teachings, Mainländer concluded that the ultimate true teaching of Buddhism was unconscious karma: "The only [remaining] miracle in Buddhism is therefore the unconscious, omnipotent, timeless, extensionless, individual karma" (ibid., 85). He argued that karma is primarily a negative concept; yet it retained a sense of wonder and miracle in its power over human lives. It rules over appearances with necessity, like Kantian causality; it makes the world merely phenomenal, as it flows around an idealistic individual consciousness that has power over itself. In this sense, karma is optimistically seen as transient and conditional, since it is self-produced and due to individual activity and responsibility. The "dogmatism" of karma was therefore both overly individualistic and materialistic (in the sense of an atomistic efficient causality), analogous to Kant's dichotomy between the practical freedom of consciousness and the theoretical truth of causal necessity.

Although *nirvāṇa* signified absolute nothingness (ibid., 107), the dogma of karma blocked the path of the will to death to nothingness and redemption, and hence the very movement of humanity from being to non-being (ibid., 86, 91). At the same time, if it is interpreted in that free movement toward death, karma indicates the truth of the human condition that culminates in nothingness. In Mainländer's free affirmation of karma, death, suicide, and nothingness, he remained an affirmative philosopher who did not recognize the releasement of letting go and suspending the will, including the will to death, as well as the proliferation of words and views.

In nineteenth-century German thought, Buddhism became avant-garde and modernistic, a philosophy of the unconscious, the multiplicity of sensuous experience, and either an overly extreme or inadequate form of nihilism in response to suffering life. This intercultural historical context of "European Buddhism", in particular Schopenhauer and Mainländer, shaped Nietzsche's analysis.

In the Buddha's Shadow: Nietzsche and Buddhist Nihilism

In Nietzsche's early discussions of the "death of God" in the *Gay Science* (1882), which is very distinct from Mainländer's conception despite the affinity of their language, the death of God is explained through the image of the Buddha's shadow that continued to be seen after his *parinirvāṇa* and death:

> After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. (Nietzsche 1974, 167; 1980, vol. 3, 467)

This shadow is thought to have initiated the tradition of Buddhist shadow cave art and architecture as places of meditation and devotion. The travelling monk Faxian 法顯 described this shadow in the early fifth century CE as radiant and glorious from afar and vanishing on approach.[16] Nietzsche's dead God is neither luminous nor empty. It casts a grim foreboding shadow over humanity that cannot escape its own created idols. In Nietzsche's last unfinished project, *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 2017; 1980, 12–13), he sought to confront the darkening shadow of nihilism, born of the formation of gods, goals, values, and other idols fixed as absolutes as much as their loss.

In this context, why did Buddhism take on a key role in Nietzsche's confrontation with nihilism? Nietzsche interpreted Indian Buddhism as an exemplary ascetic, pessimistic, and nihilistic denial of life. It was a "nihilistic catastrophe that put an end to Indian culture" and now served as a warning to a creatively and spiritually exhausted Europe (Nietzsche 2017, 52; 1980, vol. 12, 377). Nietzsche's Buddhism is clearly shaped by his polemic with Schopenhauer and perhaps by his reading of Mainländer given their overlapping terminology and philosophical concerns.

According to Schopenhauer, the "value of life" cannot be disclosed in willing life but in no longer willing it. Yet this not willing is not equivalent to willing to actively undermine bodily life, or its health, as is evident in his writings against suicide and for the care of the self. The denial of assertion and willing is depicted rather as a condition that suspends—albeit only conditionally as the drives and forces of life relentlessly reproduce themselves in biological individuals and species—desire and self-concern, allowing bodily and spiritual life a conditional form of freedom or, as Nietzsche called it, Schopenhauer's "relative nirvana" (1980, vol. 7, 434). Nietzsche contested not only such arguments but suspects their very motives as symptoms of declining, self-denying life.

Nietzsche's alternative strategy to Schopenhauer intensified pessimism and skepticism to their most active and self-affirmative extremes to overcome their intrinsic nihilism born of the spirit of negation. Nietzsche thus pursued a strategy

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16   Faxian recorded in his travels that there: "is a rock cavern amid rolling hills, facing southwest. Here the Buddha left his shadow. Viewed from a distance, [the shadow] appears as if it were the Buddha's true form—a radiant golden image in full splendor. Upon approach, the image fades into a tantalizing obscurity. Kings of various regions have sent skillful painters to make copies of the image, but none have succeeded" (Faxian in Swartz et al. 2014, 411).

of the self-overcoming of nihilism through a radicalization that made nihilism radically active and affirmative of the self. Buddhism, in contrast, is the most passive variety of nihilism and the most sublimated—in the Nietzschean-Freudian sense of pathological *Sublimierung*—form of moralism. He described it as a late and overly spiritualized product of a declining and exhausted people (1980, vol. 6, 189), and its "peace of the soul" as the moralistic castration of the emotions (1980, vol. 12, 548).

Nietzsche identified Buddhism as the fullest expression of nihilism as a commitment to complete oblivion and nothingness. While both being and nothing are static, passive, abstract categories for Nietzsche, becoming requires action and creation from chaos and the Heraclitan strife of conflicting multiplicities that have—overlapping with Buddhist no-self and emptiness in this regard—no permanently enduring core being, essence, or identity. Nietzsche appears to have sensed a degree of intersection as well as distinction in his polemical critique. Buddhism signified "world-negation" and the complete "negation of reality as such" in its assertion that appearances or phenomena equal suffering (Nietzsche 2017, 334; 1980, vol. 12, 368–69). The prospect of overcoming nihilism through the radical intensification of "passivity" (as Nietzsche construed Buddhist compassion and tranquility) signifies a challenge and opposing strategy to his philosophy of the will to power that hypostatizes the will and power, even if—as in Giles Deleuze's reconstruction—they are interpreted as conflicting multiplicities rather than as the monistic unity that Deleuze attributed to Schopenhauer (Deleuze 1967).

What then is nihilism for Nietzsche? It is not the mere absence of purposes and values in which everything becomes meaningless; it is the condemnation of existence as lacking any justification (Nietzsche 2017, 15; 1980, vol. 12, 350). The positing of perfection entails the nihilistic condemnation of all action, desire, and existence as imperfection. Nietzsche analyzed nihilism as a historical process, repeated in India and Europe, in which the highest values devalue themselves and reified absolutes undermine themselves: "The result is a Buddhistic disposition, a yearning for nothingness" (Nietzsche 2017, 12; 1980, vol. 12, 126).

Nihilism designates the transformation of morality into nothingness and meaninglessness that remains captured by a fateful underlying moralistic prejudice: "Every merely moral determination of values (as, e.g., that of Buddhism) ends in nihilism; the same thing awaits Europe! We think we can dispense with a religious background when we moralize, but this inevitably leads to nihilism" (Nietzsche 2017, 22–23; 1980, vol. 12, 318). Modern disenchantment and secularization are following the path of Buddhism by contesting everything except the underlying moralistic paradigm itself. Buddhism operated as Nietzsche's name and model for this incomplete and self-destructive process: "The opposite extreme of fanatically

believing in reified absolutes is the 'active Buddhism' that 'believes all is false'" (Nietzsche 2017, 11; 1980, vol. 12, 126). Indian Buddhism, established on a formalized, disenchanted, and thus even more ingrained and undigested moral prejudice in which existence is perceived as an imperfect error in need of punishment, served as an exemplary critical model for his diagnosis of the "greatest danger" of a new, modern, European Buddhism (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 12, 131): "the European form of Buddhism, the active negation that comes after life has lost all 'meaning'" (Nietzsche 2017, 45; 1980, vol. 12, 126).

Nietzsche, Nāgārjuna, and the Emptiness of the Will

While von Hartmann and Mainländer maintained that genuine Christianity and Buddhism were the highest, albeit imperfect, historical exemplars, Nietzsche condemned both as the greatest expressions of nihilism. Whereas Christian love expressed afflictive states of resentment and revenge, Buddhist compassion and mental tranquility was a purer form that resulted from the struggle against resentment and the afflictive emotions (Nietzsche 2017, 139; 1980, vol. 12, 126; also see 1980, vol. 12, 548). All desires and affects, whether good or evil, are to be eliminated such that action loses its binding nature and becomes meaningless (Nietzsche 2017, 104; 1980, vol. 12, 569–70).

Nietzsche argued that Christianity prioritized action, and its activity arose from and was characterized by the afflictive emotional dispositions of *ressentiment* and revenge (Nietzsche 2017, 116, 131; 1980, vol. 12, 126). Buddhism is in contrast, in the *Antichrist*, described as colder, more objective, and more truthful than Christianity (1980, vol. 6, 189). It is the opposite, for instance, of Paul's fanaticism. It is not born of *ressentiment*, as Christianity was, but from a flawed attempt to neutralize it by abandoning action (Nietzsche 2017, 116; 1980, vol. 13, 94). Nietzsche interpreted Buddhism as seeking to suspend all motives for action, and transcend "good and evil", including the spirit of revenge and *ressentiment* that motivated most, if not all, religion and morality:

> In the ideal of Buddhism, emancipation from good and evil seems to be essential; what is envisioned here is a refined transcendence of morality which coincides with the nature of perfection, the assumption that even good actions are only a temporary expedient; that is to say, a means of becoming free from action altogether. (Nietzsche 2017, 104; 1980, vol. 12, 570)

All action is degraded to a conditional useful means (a reference to *upāya*) to achieve liberation. Action loses any self-motivating purpose and the creativity constitutive

of meaning. Nietzsche failed to recognize the difference between clarified wholesome and afflictive unwholesome motives (recall the earlier analysis of *chanda* and *taṇhā*). His analysis is deeply flawed since the former is a necessary condition for both the ordinary Buddhist and the bodhisattva paths. The way begins with an intention, a vow, and dedicated practice (Nāgārjuna 2024; Śāntideva 1996).

Despite sharing an overlapping language of going beyond good and evil, such expressions have distinctive contexts and meanings. Buddhism suspends and clarifies beyond dualistic categories, and Nietzsche affirms action and life free of moralistic judgments. Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer's and Buddhist forms of negation as suspension as self-contradictory, as it is in essence a self-destructive willing not to will. Buddhism was a more mature and dangerous form of the evolution of moralistic prejudice rather than escaping it with its version of "beyond good and evil" that undermined action. Furthermore, Buddhism had become the highest and most dangerous expression of the nihilism that was always intrinsic to ascetic and moralistic absolutes after it had emptied out its absolute.

The works of Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka indicate how suspension is possible and operative through meditative emptying and conceptual-linguistic negation. Emptying the will, following the classical example of emptying the self, can free action and thought to itself. Neither "willing" nor "not willing" are needed, as the metaphysics of the will is itself an unnecessary assumption and fixation. If emptiness empties even itself, along with the Buddha and the basic teachings of Buddhism that should not be hypostatized (Nāgārjuna 2016, 22.15), then emptiness applies not only to any reified absolute or underlying moral prejudice but also to the very compulsion for affirmation and proliferation beyond suspension and releasement.

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Nothing for Children: Buddhist and Daoist Motifs in Michael Ende's Phantastic Novels

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Abstract

Michael Ende's phantastic novels are rich in transcultural references to Asian mythologies. This paper begins by reconstructing these traces in his early children's novels, *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver* and *Momo*, before focusing on *The Neverending Story*. In *The Neverending Story*, his *opus magnum*, Ende draws on Buddhist and Daoist themes to conceive of nothingness in a twofold sense: when written in capital letters, "The Nothing" (*Das Nichts*) is a threatening force that engulfs the fictive world of Phantasia (*Fantásien*). Conversely, when written in lowercase letters, "nothing" (*nichts*) represents the root of human consciousness and imagination, which holds the potential to resist the spread of The Nothing. Ende's transcultural approach unleashes a critical force by exposing deep-seated pathologies linked to the encroachment of Nothingness, as manifested in the destructive impact of the modern rush toward acceleration, consumerism, and loss of meaning. Ende's protagonists resist The Nothing with nothing, which is connected to the rediscovery of the human capacities to wish, to name, and to remember.

Keywords: Michael Ende, Buddhism, Daoism, nothingness

Nič za otroke: budistični in daoistični motivi v fantazijskih romanih Michaela Endeja

Izvleček

Fantazijski romani Michaela Endeja so polni transkulturnih referenc na azijske mitologije. Članek se začne z rekonstrukcijo teh sledi v njegovih zgodnjih otroških romanih *Jim Knof in strojevodja Luka* ter *Momo*, nato pa se osredotoča na *Neskončno zgodbo*, njegovo osrednje delo. V njej Ende črpa iz budističnih in daoističnih tem ter zasnuje ničnost v dvojnem pomenu: kadar je zapisana z veliko začetnico, »Nič« (*Das Nichts*), predstavlja grozečo silo, ki požira domišljijski svet Fantazije (*Fantásien*); kadar je zapisan z malo začetnico, pa »nič« (*nichts*) predstavlja izvor človeške zavesti in domišljije, ki nosi potencial za odpor proti širjenju Niča. Endejev transkulturni pristop predstavlja kritično silo, saj razkriva globoko zakoreninjene patologije, povezane z vdiranjem Ničnosti, kot se kažejo v uničujočem vplivu sodobne naglice k pospeševanju,

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potrošništvu in izgubi smisla. Endejevi junaki se Niču uprejo z ničem, kar je povezano s ponovnim odkritjem človeških zmožnosti po želji, poimenovanju in spominjanju.

Ključne besede: Michael Ende, budizem, daoizem, nič

Introduction: Asian Sources of Ende's Transcultural Imagination

Although interpreters have identified parallels between Michael Ende's work and Christianity (Gallagher 2020), romanticism (Oestreicher 1989; von Wernsdorff 1983), mysticism and Western nihilism (Oberleitner 2020), the abundant references to Asian symbolism in *The Neverending Story* as well as other of his seminal works have, with few exceptions (Koyasu 1987; Sôiku 1991), been largely neglected in Western languages. It is not rare that literature, including children's literature, takes up complex philosophical themes. The literary imagination engages in vivid and captivating thought experiments that can be more effective and transformative than philosophical genres.[1] Ende emphasized that his work was not exclusively directed at children but offered an invitation to the reader:

> I invite my readers to join me in a kind of game. If they accept the invitation, they might find the experience enriching – and sometimes, if the text is good enough, it might make them happy. […] I invited them to take part in the game, and although it may have shaken them up a little, they'll emerge again with a freshly swept soul. (Ende 2023)

However, Ende's stories are far from happy. They are highly critical of modern societies. The strange characters in his novels present the modern world and human life within it by evoking the feeling that this world and this life as we know it is about to be extinguished. Ende's often dark redescriptions of modern life can have a revelatory and therapeutic effect on his readers, as he shakes them up. At its best, this awakening effect offers the potential for resistance against systemic pathologies. This is apparent in the case of *The Neverending Story*, where the threatening force is *das Nichts*. Imagining an ever-expanding form of nothingness and pointing to the human capacity to resist this force allows the reader to, as Ende said, "emerge again with a freshly swept soul". Before focusing on the transcultural and critical dimensions in *The Neverending Story*, though, it is worthwhile to revisit the traces of Asian mythology and philosophical traditions in Ende's earlier work. While there may not be many explicit references to Asian

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1   Emphasizing the reflective as well as emotional advantages of literature over philosophy, Martha Nussbaum writes that "schematic philosophers' examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction; they lack, too, good fiction's way of making the reader a participant and a friend" (Nussbaum 1990, 46).

cultures or philosophies, Ende's subtle incorporation of phantastical elements, moral lessons, and the significance of individual experience parallel concepts found in Eastern philosophies, especially in Buddhism and Daoism.[2]

East Asian art had a significant influence on Ende's phantastic literature and the social critique that unfolded in it. His father Edgar Ende, who was a surrealist painter and radical critic of artistic conventions, introduced him to Asian art, and its brush painting and wood cuts left a major mark on his intellectual formation. Later on, Ende became fascinated by Noh theatre. He also became a prolific reader of Chinese and Japanese philosophy, even if with a healthy dose of poetic scepticism with regard to abstract philosophy. Ultimately, however, even though he read Asian philosophy, Ende believed that complex dimensions such as nothingness can only be revealed by artistic practices and works of art rather than by conceptual analysis. In an interview with Sōiku Shigematsu, Ende mentions the decisive impact of reading depictions of Japanese philosophy and culture by Lafcadio Hearn, Eugen Herrigel and Daisetz Suzuki, and yet, with a tone of reservation, he also "asks himself whether philosophy can at all offer an authentic approach to Zen Buddhism", which he considers to be "probably impossible" (Sōiku 1991, 126). Ende often visited Japan with his wife Mariko Sato—who had moved to Germany from Japan in 1974—for lecture tours. He was intrigued by the hybrid modernization of Japan and especially by how it combined traditional culture with contemporary civilization. He was also fond of the Asian reception of his work, which revealed to him an elective affinity between the attempts to rescue human elements from the devastating impact of modernity in both East and West.[3]

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2   This is not to suggest that certain concepts, such as nothingness, that are often associated with Asian traditions do not play an important role in Western philosophical traditions, as well. Even if mainstream Western philosophy is characterized by a forgetfulness of nothingness in favour of philosophies of being, some heterodox traditions such as negative theology, negative dialectics and existentialism have contributed to a distinctive Western version of philosophies of nothingness. Some Western philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno have not only focused on the destructive dimension (negativity) but have also emphasized positive aspects of nothingness (Lütkehaus 1999). For example, Jean-Paul Sartre establishes a connection between freedom and nothingness when he argues that "Anguish as the manifestation of freedom in the face of self means that man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence" (Sartre 1993, 35). Modern Japanese philosophers tend to be aware of these parallels. For example, Suzuki was fond of quoting Meister Eckhart because he felt that he was a Western thinker with a profound insight into nothingness: "'Then how shall I love him [God]?' 'Love him as he is: a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-person, a not-image; as sheer, pure, limpid one, alien from all dualities. And in this one let us sink down eternally from nothingness to nothingness'" (Eckhart, in Suzuki 1973, 312–13). Ende was highly aware of parallel concerns in the Eastern and Western traditions.

3   To this day, Japan and Germany are the two countries where Ende's work is read the most. Furthermore, Japanese readers are the primary consumers of Ende's nonfictional attempts to develop a new theory of monetary circulation and to lay the foundation for a humane economic system

Ende was a keen reader of the Daoist and Buddhist classics, and noted that "in Zen I have rediscovered much of what was already present in my own thinking, only that in Zen it was formulated in a more correct and precise manner" (Sōiku 1991, 130–31). He also included the famous butterfly dream from the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* in a book that contained what he considered to be his most decisive influences (Ende 1983a).

In Ende's first book, published in 1960, the protagonists Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver leave their home, the tiny island of Morrowland, to travel to China. Having turned their railroad engine into a boat, the two friends set sail for adventure because their island has become too crowded. Since Jim arrived on Morrowland as a baby in a parcel due to a badly written address, he and Luke try to uncover his origins. On their voyage, they meet strange creatures such as the illusory giant (*Scheinriese*) Mr Tur Tur and set out to rescue the kidnapped Princess of China, Li Si, from Dragontown. The dragon woman Grindtooth had bought Li Si, the daughter of the Chinese Emperor Pu Ging, from the "Savage 13", a group of pirates who kidnapped her and, as will be revealed later in the story, are also connected to Jim's origins reaching back to Balthasar, one of the three kings or wise men from the East mentioned in the Bible.

Ende depicts a dragon who indoctrinates kidnapped children and trains them with a draconic pedagogy consisting of strict drills and harsh punishments. Under the tutelage of Grindtooth, the students learn how to count and the meaning of intimidation.[4]

Ende presents China (in later editions "China" is changed to "Mandala") and its capital city Ping as a land of extreme wealth and erudition, where the children convincingly demonstrate that they are the most intelligent on Earth. However, Ende also characterizes China as having extremely hierarchical relationships, an inefficient bureaucracy and a culture of servility expressed by countless acts of kowtowing, thereby presenting a critical mirror of Ende's own society. The "*Oberbonze*", or Chief Boss, is called His Excellency Mr Pi Pa Po (an invented Chinese-sounding name which, in German, means "nonsense"). Mr Pi Pa Po and his constantly giggling underdogs taking note of nonsense, and the Under Bosses do everything to prevent Luke and Jim from meeting the Emperor and freeing his daughter. Li Si is imprisoned in Dragontown, beyond the limits of the Chinese Wall and thus beyond the knowledge of China's wisest scholars.

(Mittelstaedt 2000). Japan is also home to a significant Ende archive in the Kurohime Dowakan museum in the city of Shinano-machi.

4   According to some interpreters, Ende insisted on deleting the explicit references to China, most likely because readers who were part of the pro-Maoist leftist subculture of the late 1960s criticized him for the distorting historical record. See also Geinitz (2011), who compares Ende's invented depiction of discipline in China to the methods propagated by the "tiger mom" Amy Chua.

Faced with these difficulties, the two friends Jim and Luke seek the help of Ping Pong, one of the grandchildren of the Chief Palace Cook, Mr Shu Fu Lu Pi Plu. Ping Pong is a precocious baby who, like most children in China—as least as depicted in the novel—is capable of changing his own diapers.

Ende ridicules the erudition of the wisest scholars of the Chinese empire, the "Flowers of Learning", by describing the physical deformations caused by their extreme learnedness: "Some had become very short and fat and flat-bottomed from sitting about and reading so much, while others had grown long and thin like broomsticks through constantly reaching up to the top of bookshelves, year in and out" (Ende 1997, 79–80).

The Emperor Pu Ging, who, in contrast to his treacherous Chief Boss, is presented as kind and humane, befriends the two visitors. He proposes allowing Li Si to become engaged to Jim Button, if the two of them so desire. As a sign of his hospitality, the Emperor asks the Cook, Mr Shu Fu Lu Pi Plu, to make his guests' favourite dishes from back home. The adventurous and courageous friends free Li Si. They bring her kidnapper, the defeated dragon Grindtooth, back to the Forbidden City to be examined by the Flowers of Learning. Jim and Luke thus conquered the dragon without killing her—the usual fate of such beasts—since Jim wanted to ask the wise dragon about her origins, but Grindtooth cannot answer because she is too tired, and must sleep for a year. In her sleep, the previously sinister Grindtooth slowly transforms into a golden and benign dragon of wisdom. In the German version, Luke says to Jim, "*Da ist nichts mehr zu machen*", which can be rendered as "There is nothing more one can do about it". The transformation to wisdom also requires that one needs to let tired dragons sleep and silent transformations unravel. It is important to wait for the right moment to ask significant questions.

In the meantime, Luke convinces the Chinese Emperor to construct a railway track for their loyal train Emma. At the same time as Jim and Li Si are getting engaged, the Emperor visits King Alfons the Quarter to Twelfth of Morrowland with his imperial ship to set up telecommunication channels and diplomatic relations. Ende's novel is a satire on the conjunction of global technological developments, communication and the ritual of diplomatic exchange between otherwise superfluous dignitaries from distant civilizations.

In his later work, *Momo* (1986), the protagonist is a girl who lives in the ruins of an amphitheatre and possesses the unique ability to listen to people and understand them deeply. The story gives an account of how the protagonist is driven to save her friends from the sinister grey gentlemen who work for a time bank and invade the city. These gentlemen represent the pressure of modern society and time management. They make people work harder. They convince people that, instead of wasting time by playing or chatting with friends, they should develop

new, unnecessary, superficial desires to be good consumers, with the resulting consumerist culture leading to greater isolation and stress. The sage-like misfit Momo, who shares a lot with Luke the Engine Driver, reminds the reader that it is valuable to foster genuine human connections, to take one's time and savour life's truly significant, if often neglected, moments and relationships.

Ende's novels frequently incorporate animal characters. As we will see in the case of Moira, the turtle in *The Neverending Story*, in particular turtles often take on an important role. The turtle is a symbol of omnipresence in the world and especially in Asian mythology (Allan 1991). For example, according to Chinese legend, Emperor Fuxi discovered the trigrams on a turtle, as the structure of the underside of turtle shells is said to have provided the basis for the 62 hexagrams in the classic *Yi Jing*. Ende remarks in his *Zettelkasten* (1994) that, in addition to omnipresence in world mythologies, there are five additional reasons why he feels attracted to the turtle: First, turtles are a symbol of neutrality since they lack both enemies and friends in nature, and do not seem to have an evolutionary purpose. Second, in addition to their neutrality and "uselessness", turtles do not need much to survive. They thus survive in part by having few desires. Third, they are symbols of old age both at the level of the individual and at that of the species. Fourth, turtles always appear to be smiling, which suggests that they may know something that humans do not. Fifth, their form is marked by a shell that allows them to live in their own self-contained space and according to their own time (Ende 1994, 101–03).

In a quintessential scene in the novel, Momo visits master Secundus Minutius Hora, who is responsible for administering time. The turtle Cassiopeia shows Momo the way to Master Hora's home. He lives in the nowhere-house (*Nirgend-haus*) in the never-alley (*Niemals-Gasse*). Momo can only evade the grey gentlemen and find Hora's place by following the turtle and walking backwards, a practice that is quite common in Asia.

Master Hora explains to Momo about the grey gentlemen: "strictly speaking, they're nothing" (Ende 1986, 174). They only live on stolen human time. There are two senses of nothingness: there is the nothingness of time and the nothingness of the grey gentlemen. As Saint Augustine famously claimed, time is nothing. It cannot be perceived or objectified. While the past is no longer there and the future has not yet come, the present is constantly rushing by. Time is nothing that can be grasped and yet it exists. The past, present and future are different modalities of time and yet they are also part of a single unitary time. The grey gentlemen are thieves of time. They are responsible both for the modern rush to acceleration, which swallows up the intricate connections among the past, present and future, but also, in a different sense, for the complex theft of time. They only live off stolen human time. Without amassing time, they are illusions who trick people into

selling their own time. Apart from their attempt to steal time and store it in the "time-saving bank" (*Zeitsparkasse*), these agents are strictly speaking nothing, or mere illusions. Undoubtedly, the illusory grey gentlemen nevertheless exert a pernicious influence. Yet since they are nothing when viewed independently of the human imagination and capacity to save time, it is possible to resist them. As the novel eventually demonstrates, they disappear as soon as they run out of humans who are willing to sell their time, and once they finish smoking their residue of hour-flowers.

The book *Momo* offers a radical critique of how social relationships become reduced to functional relationships in modernity. This reduction occurs whenever time is taken to be a commodity that can be saved and exchanged for other goods and for money. The novel critiques the drive to work, consumerism and the acceleration connected to the attempt to save time and rush forward (Böhme 2007; Schmitt 1995). Ende's analysis thus anticipates the focus on acceleration as one of the major driving forces of modern societies. Modernity is the process of speeding up without thereby moving forward in a meaningful and truly transformative sense (Rosa 2015). *Momo* presents a literary form of a critical analysis of a profound crisis of temporal relationships, which exceeds any form of preoccupation with a philosophy of time as we find it in Augustine. The book not only reveals the non-being of the present, past and future, but also poses an original question about the unity of the present, past and future, a unity that is both real and cannot be represented in thought or perceived in ordinary experience.

Ende's novel performs this radical social critique of temporal relationships by introducing characters who resist the drive to acceleration. Like Momo, the turtle Cassiopeia and the street sweeper Beppo represent counter-figures who defy and thereby rebel against the tendency to rush forward. They symbolize resistance without resisting. They are masters of the art of slowness and dialogue. Beppo's constant sweeping symbolizes being present in the moment instead of racing after distant goals that are nothing in the here and now. Beppo is a Zen-like character who sweeps attentively as if performing meditation. He is mindful of each step and is aware of each present moment: "step—breath—stroke of the broom". This rhythmic mantra is, for Ende, the expression of "life's principle" (Sōiku 1991, 129). The motif of sweeping is frequently quoted in Zen sources as a symbol of sagely attentiveness. For example, in his *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen explains that mindful observation takes place in our everyday conduct such as when we are "sweeping the ground, sweeping the platforms" (Dōgen 2023, 306). In this text, he recounts the following conversation: "Chan Master Tansheng of Mount Yunyan in Tanzhou (succeeded Yaoshan), was sweeping one day, when Daowu said, 'How attentive!'" (in Dōgen 2023, 307). For Dōgen, mindful observation of sweeping

includes the body, the sensation of suffering, the mind as being impermanent and the dharmas as being without self (無我).

When a policeman asks Beppo for Momo's complete name, Beppo interjects that "Momo [is] nothing". Reminiscent of the theories of reincarnation and *samsara* in Hinduism, Beppo tells the policeman that he and Momo have already worked together millennia ago to construct Rome's city wall. As such, his attention being fixed on the present moment does not imply a presentism. Instead, it is in the present moment that the unity of time becomes manifest. His and Momo's friendship is built around the activity of looking back on a no longer conscious prehistory of countless encounters that provide depth and continuity. These subterranean references to Buddhism and Daoism express Ende's attempt to critique and, to some extent, subvert the destructive logic of modern society with the reduction of temporal and human relations to functional relations at its core. These references also recur in Ende's *opus magnum*, *The Neverending Story*, to which we will now turn.

Nothingness in *The Neverending Story*

Ende published *The Neverending Story* (*Die Unendliche Geschichte*) in German in 1979. The book has since been translated into more than 40 languages, making it one of the most popular books of the 20th century. It achieved global success in part because of the 1984 cinematic adaptation of the same name directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Ende was critical of the movie, which, he felt, reduced his imaginative world to "a gigantic melodrama of kitsch, commerce, plush and plastic" (Ende 1984b, 274). And in truth, although popular, the film was bound to fail because of the inherent limitations of the film medium.

The novel follows the journey of a young boy named Bastian Balthazar Bux. Bastian is an imaginative and lonely child who discovers an ancient book titled "The Neverending Story". As he reads the book, he becomes deeply engrossed in the tale of a magical land called "Phantasia", which is on the brink of being destroyed by The Nothing. The protagonist of the story within the book, Atreyu, is a brave warrior whom the Childlike Empress tasks with saving Phantasia and discovering a cure for her illness, which is intertwined with the fate of the realm itself. As Atreyu embarks on his quest, he encounters various phantastical creatures and challenges.

As Bastian continues to read, he realizes that he is not just a passive observer of the story but has become part of it. He realizes that his wishes and desires have the power to influence the story, and he is called to take on an active role to save the magical world of Phantasia from being swallowed up by The Nothing. Life

and literature thus become increasingly interwoven. The novel explores themes connected to the imagination, to the threat of annihilation, to the importance of storytelling, and to the journey of self-discovery. Ultimately, Bastian learns life-shaping lessons about courage, friendship, and the significance of embracing and creating one's own identity. The story emphasizes the transformative power of taking both the threat and potential of nothingness seriously, and highlights the interconnectedness between the reader and the narrative.

Extending the transcultural imagination of his earlier work, Ende's *opus magnum* is replete with references to Buddhist and Daoist philosophy and mythology. To start with, the fictional world in which the story is set is called Phant-ASIA (*Phantásien*). This reference is, unfortunately, lost in the English translation that renders the German "Phantásien" as "Fantastica". An imagined Asia, a fantastic Asia and an Asia of the transcultural imagination thus serve as the foil against which modern societies, East and West, are being mirrored, redescribed, critiqued and, to some extent, cured. While *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver* (1990) draws on mythological dragons inspired by Asian mythology to discuss transformation, exploration and courage, *Momo* draws on motifs taken from Zen Buddhism to critique and resist the time regime of the modern world. *The Neverending Story* then incorporates elements from Asian mythologies and develops a twofold conception of nothingness to recover the creative imagination as a genuine human potential.

The luck or happiness dragon (*Glücksdrache*) expresses some of the most suggestive symbolism of the novel. The name Fuchur is derived from the Japanese term *fukurū*, meaning luck, and *ryū*, meaning dragon. As Lela Bölkow contends, Fuchur has "an undeniably clear relation to Asiatic dragons" (Bölkow 2008). While Grindtooth, the wicked dragon in *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*, transforms into the golden dragon of wisdom, Fuchur is juxtaposed in *The Neverending Story* with the dreadful dragons that have been predominant in the Western imagination. Ordinary dragons are said to "look like loathsome snakes and live in deep caves, diffusing a noxious stench and guarding some real or imaginary treasure". They are "spawns of chaos" who are "wicked or ill-tempered, they have batlike wings with which they can rise clumsily and noisily into the air, and they spew fire and smoke" (Ende 1997, 61). In contrast, luck dragons, following Asian mythology, are characterized positively as follows:

> luck dragons are creatures of air, warmth, and pure joy. Despite their great size, they are as light as a summer cloud, and consequently need no wings for flying. They swim in the air of heaven as fish swim in water. Seen from the earth, they look like slow lightning flashes. The most amazing thing about them is their song. Their voice sounds like the golden note of a large bell, and when they speak softly the bell seems to be

> ringing in the distance. Anyone who has heard this sound will remember
> it as long as he lives and tell his grandchildren about it. (Ibid., 61–62)

There is a close resemblance between the depiction of Fuchur and the description of dragons in Eastern mythology. One can also perceive a parallelism to the depiction of the giant fish Kun at the beginning of the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*. Kun transforms into the bird Peng and then rides the clouds like a fish swimming in the water towards Southern Oblivion.

When Fuchur first appears in *The Neverending Story*, he is caught in a giant spider's web that prevents him from swimming happily through the air. Fuchur engages the spider in combat, even while the spider is transforming into a giant scorpion and a swarm of hornets. In the fearsome battle, "the dragon seemed to seize one of the monster's limbs between its teeth, but bit into the void" (Ende 1997, 62). Even with the help of Atreyu, Fuchur can only barely avoid "falling into the dark chasm" (ibid., 63). The novel stages a confrontation between the free and graceful movements of Fuchur and the ever-increasing monstrous void. In the cinematic adaptation, Fuchur appears more like a fluffy dog, which must have been one of the reasons why Ende rejected the film. Following Chinese mythology, Ende preferred to describe Fuchur in the book as having a head that resembles that of a lion.

Turtle imagery also reappears, this time in the form of the giant turtle Morla, "the Aged One", "with great empty eyes", who lives on, or rather is, "Tortoise Shell Mountain". When Atreyu asks her why she is not afraid of being annihilated by The Nothing, she responds as follows:

> 'Sakes alive!' Morla gurgled. 'We're old, son, much too old. Lived long
> enough. Seen too much. When you know as much as we do, nothing mat-
> ters. Things just repeat. Day and night, summer and winter. The world is
> empty and aimless. Everything circles around. Whatever starts up must
> pass away, whatever is born must die. It all cancels out, good and bad,
> beautiful and ugly. Everything's empty. Nothing is real. Nothing mat-
> ters.' (Ibid., 53)

Morla clearly suffers from cosmic boredom. She has seen it all and is not afraid of The Nothing since she knows that the world is an eternally repetitive illusion.

East Asian mythology also is revealed in the novel's characterization of the Childlike Empress. For example, the Chinese goddess Nüwa is usually depicted as having childlike features and creative power (Birrell 1993, 33–35), and the Childlike Empress has a clear resemblance to the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wangmu). Bastian comes up with the name Moon Child to rescue the previously nameless

Childlike Empress. Likewise, Queen Mother of the West metamorphizes into the moon and bears the name essence of the moon (ibid., 144). The child or infant is also an important symbol in Daoist literature. According to legend, Laozi, whose name does not only mean old man, but can also be rendered as the old child, was in his mother's womb for 72 years (or, according to other accounts, 81). The aged sage and the newborn child thus coincide.

Like Momo, the Childlike Empress does not do much beyond listening. She is modelled after the image of an oriental sage or ideal ruler. In the *Analects*, Confucius asserts that "if anyone could be said to have effected proper order while remaining non-assertive, surely it was Shun. What did he do? He simply assumed an air of deference and faced due south" (Confucius 1998, 15:5). The protagonists of Ende's novel are invited to cultivate what both Confucians and Daoists refer to as *wuwei* (無為)—nonaction, non-dominating action or, as Otto Franke puts it, being "without the gubernatorial urge to achieve" (Franke 1930, 203). The Childlike Empress is not obsessed with control. She does not equate power and achievement. Ende describes her as "never exert[ing] power. It's as if she weren't there. And yet she is in everything" (Ende 1997, 138). Ende clearly models the Childlike Empress after a sage-ruler who practices *wuwei*, an effortless mode of non-dominating action through which the cosmic pattern, Dao, is revealed. As stated in the *Daodejing*: "The Dao never acts, and yet everything is achieved through it. If princes and kings could hold on to it, then all things would follow its example of their own accord" (Laozi 1999, 37).

In addition to having a presence that is both non-dominating and unassuming, Ende also characterizes the Childlike Empress, like Momo, as a silent listener rather than a speaker. This is particularly obvious when she encounters her alter ego: The Old Man of Wandering Mountain, another reference to a Daoist sage and perhaps even to Laozi, who is said to have been an archivist. The Old Man is an ancient chronicler who documents everything that happens without having a memory of his own. His mind is thus empty, and because he is both "everywhere and nowhere" (Ende 1997, 155), one cannot look for him but can always find him. In addition to encountering him without goal and intention, one must meet the Old Man of Wandering Mountain alone.

The Old Man introduces another symbol that Ende's work draws on repeatedly: the mirror.[5] When the Childlike Empress finds him, the Old Man poses a riddle by both speaking and writing at the same time: "What does one see in a mirror

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5   The mirror imagery also appeared in Momo in the form of a magic mirror that is sent out day and night gathering reflections. The mirror appears like the moon and the discarded reflections return to their owners through waterways. *Mirror in the Mirror: A Labyrinth* (*Der Spiegel im Spiegel: Ein Labyrinth*) is also the title of an Ende piece written in 1984. On the symbolism of the mirror, see Müllneritsch (2011).

reflected in a mirror? Do you know that, Golden-eyed Commander of Wishes?"
The Childlike Empress "responds" to the riddle in a typically sage-like manner:
"The Childlike Empress said nothing for a while, and the Old Man wrote that
she said nothing" (Ende 1997, 159). Commenting on the Old Man's riddle of the
mirror mirroring itself in an interview, Ende underscores what he refers to as the
second, creative dimension of nothingness that is juxtaposed with the first dimen-
sion of nothing as an annihilating force:

> If one thinks purely logically, one could answer: 'Nothing'. But it is pre-
> cisely in this 'nothing' that, in my view, lies the true power of humanity
> and the world. When we try to perceive our own self, we perceive noth-
> ing, an empty space. Today's psychologists conclude from this that there
> is probably nothing there. In reality, however, there lies the true creative
> power of humanity. There is also a passage in Goethe's *Faust* where
> Mephisto contemptuously speaks of nothingness, and Faust responds to
> him: 'In your nothing, I hope to find the All'. (II, act 1, V. 6256) (Sōiku
> 1991, 131)

The symbolism of the mirror epitomizes the ambivalence of nothingness. This
ambivalence consists in nothing being both an annihilating force (The Nothing)
as well as "the true power of humanity and the world". Ende sees parallels be-
tween Faust's engagement with the devilish force of the nothingness, which at
the same time includes everything, and the oriental nothingness of being all-per-
vasive. Again, Ende draws on Eastern as well as Western sources in the twofold
description of nothingness as a threatening force (The Nothing) and a human po-
tential (nothing). Ende continues to explain the function of the mirror in his work:

> The mirror is simply an image for consciousness in all of my books.
> When we see a mirror, we always only see what the mirror reflects back.
> We never see the mirror itself. But it's about emptying consciousness,
> so to speak, of everything that it reflects, and getting it to perceive itself.
> This nothingness. This has become very complicated, very philosophical
> – I always try to avoid that. (Ibid., 132)

Ende's novels are thus an invitation for consciousness to empty itself and, at the
same time, reflect back on itself. One could speak of a reflexive nothingness.
Mirror imagery plays an essential role in both of the Daoist classics the *Daode-
jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. In the *Zhuangzi* we read: "The mind (*xin*) of the sage is
quiet, it is the mirror of heaven and earth, and reflects the whole multiplicity of
things" (*Zhuangzi* 1998, 7, 13). Mirror imagery is also further developed in the
Huainanzi, where there are claims about the mind of the sage: "In coming into

contact with things, neither a mirror nor water requires thought or intention in order to reflect them" (1.4b-5a). The sage is presented as internally tranquil due to his capacity to empty his mind and forget himself. He reflects on the natural course of events as "a perfectly clear mirror in which everything can be clearly seen" (*Huainanzi* 2012, 2, 2.3b).[6]

Ende's *The Neverending Story* is highly relevant for contemplating the concept of nothingness, since it engages readers in a way that complements the philosophical discourse on nothingness by drawing on the creative imagination. While philosophy often grapples with the paradoxical task of providing abstract definitions of nothingness, literature—and especially phantastic literature—possesses the unique ability to evoke the imagination and a deep emotional resonance, inviting reflections on ideas that point to that which, by definition, cannot be perceived and yet is everywhere. Nothingness, by its very nature, eludes our discursive grasp, yet through the imaginative creatures, riddles and landscapes crafted by Ende that are in a way reminiscent of Zhuangzi's stories, readers are encouraged to explore and circumscribe this elusive reality, immersing themselves in the nuanced interplay among existence, nonexistence and what lies in between and beyond. In this way, literature can illuminate the nothingness, negativity and the void in ways that philosophical arguments alone may struggle to convey.

In contrast to philosophy and film, literature offers its readers the potential to imagine nothingness without defining or picturing—and thereby reifying—it. The imagination can present glimpses of nothingness and invite the reader to ponder it.

To the best of my knowledge, Ende's work is the only one in world literature where The Nothing is the main adversary, if one can speak of The Nothing as a protagonist. As Oestreicher explains:

> In Ende's novel, the *Nichts* is born out of the absence of imagination. It is concretized as a growing blob of nothing which eats away at the landscapes and figures of Phantasia. Ende modernizes the social criticism levelled at Christianity by the author of *Nachtwachen* [Bonaventura] and bedevils instead the unimaginative, technological society of today, where the *Nichts* is created by the lack of fantasy. (Oestreicher 1989, 115)

It is, however, surprising that Oestreicher and other critics have missed the references to Asian imagery and symbolism in *The Neverending Story* and other works by Ende. It is also surprising that they have overlooked Ende's dialectical conception of nothingness as both an annihilating and potentially rescuing force.

6   On the use of the mirror metaphor in Buddhism and Daoism, see Paul Demierville (1987). On parallels between Eastern and Western mirror imagery, see Cline (2008).

First, The Nothing is presented as a dynamic force—it spreads. In the cinematic adaptation, The Nothing is represented as a monstrous storm that eats up everything in its way. In the novel, however, the depiction of The Nothing is accompanied by the insight that speaking, thinking and seeing it hinders our ability to perceive it. The Nothing can only be seen or, better, detected by becoming blind. Here is the characterization of The Nothing when first encountered by the protagonist, Bastian's alter ego in Phantasia, Atreyu:

> and then he saw it: The tops of the trees nearest him were still green, but the leaves of those farther away seemed to have lost all color; they were grey. A little farther on, the foliage seemed to become strangely transparent, misty, or, better still, unreal. And farther still there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Not a bare stretch, not darkness, not some lighter color; no, it was something the eyes could not bear, something that made you feel you had gone blind. For no eye can bear the sight of utter nothingness. (Ende 1997, 48–49)

The Nothing is presented as the loss of colour and becoming grey, transparent, misty and unreal. The Nothing swallows up Phantasia. Its creatures leap into The Nothing, which does not hurt them. Indeed, one experiences the steadily expanding Nothing as a "force of attraction". Bastian learns that the spread of The Nothing is fuelled (1) by the disappearance of human imagination, hopes and dreams, and (2) by one's reluctance to read books in the real world (the world outside of Phantasia). It is suggested that there may be an unknown entity behind The Nothing with an interest in absolute control, though its identity is never revealed at any point in the novel.

Ende's ontology of parallel worlds is quite complex. The werewolf Gmork reveals the "secret" that he sarcastically calls "a good joke" to Atreyu: Phantasticians who "jumped into The Nothing" became "delusions in the minds of human beings, fears where there is nothing to fear, desires for vain, hurtful things, despairing thoughts where there is no reason to despair". Gmork continues by stating that "When your turn comes to jump into The Nothing, you too will be a nameless servant of power, with no will of your own" helping manipulators "persuade people to buy things they don't need", "hate things they know nothing about", "hold beliefs that make them easy to handle", and "doubt the truths that might save them". Because of these acts of manipulation, "wars started, empires were founded" (Ende 1997, 127).

As noted above, Ende's depiction of the nihilistic power of The Nothing is not the only manifestation of nothingness in the novel. Ende also presents nothingness as a critical potential, which he usually indicates by using lowercase letters and

omitting the definite article, as when he writes with a tone of ironic reversal: "We have to tell the Childlike Empress that nothing can save her" (ibid., 137). The Childlike Empress embodies a contrast to the other creatures of Phantasia. She is not afraid of The Nothing, but also does not seem attracted by it. She reminds Bastian of the genuinely human capacity to freely and creatively travel between Phantasia and the human world, and thereby sustain and enrich both, which is a genuinely human capacity that can only be eradicated by The Nothing.

When The Nothing is substantiated, the reader encounters nothingness as a threatening force that swallows Phantasia up. It is the abstract and linguistic place-holder of that which destroys the rich world of Phantasia. In the second sense of nothingness, nothing is often an adverb, as in the statement: "I am doing nothing", meaning that "I am not doing anything". It can also serve as a pronoun as in the "nothing can save her" cited above. The book makes repeated puns out of the ambivalence of nothing as both threatening and enabling. Ende was a master of irony, and it is indeed the second lower-case sense of nothing that opens up the potential for resistance against the spread of nihilism epitomized by The Nothing.

It is not action or doing something specific that provides an antidote to the destructiveness of The Nothing, but rather a reflexive modification of a subject's relationship between the self and world. The protagonist Bastian learns to take the capacity of his imagination and action seriously by way of reading a book that he realizes is co-created by himself. This emptying out and relexification of consciousness also involves the capacity to listen and be responsive.

In spite of obvious resonances, Ende's complex approach to the ambivalence of nothingness does not pretend to be an adequate interpretation of the way that nothing is conceived in, for example, the *Daodejing*. In the *Daodejing* (40), we read that "everything under the skies emerges from Being. Being emerges from Nonbeing" (天下萬物生於有，有生於無。). The *Zhuangzi* transitions from an ontological or cosmological to a humanist conception of nothingness, which is linked to the mind of the sage, which is, as stated earlier, compared to a mirror.[7] The Zhuangzi asserts that "the Utmost Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing" (*Zhuangzi* 1998, VII, 71). In the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, the reflective quality of water when it is still is compared to a mirror while the stillness of the sage's mind is referred to as "a looking glass for heaven and earth, a mirror for the ten thousand things" (ibid., XIII, 109).

The riddle of the mirror mirroring itself is freed from ontological or cosmological concerns as we find them in the *Daodejing*. Ende is a humanist, and his novel

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7   For a discussion of how Laozi's idea of the concept of nothingness in the *Dao* transforms into the humanist and spiritual conception employed by Zhuangzi, see Chen (2012, 178–80).

is intended to reveal that a human, Bastian, is tasked with the responsibility of rescuing Phantasia. Bastian suddenly realizes that the only way to keep *The Neverending Story* from ending is if he makes it into *his* story. He is invited by the Childlike Empress to jump into the phantasy world. His use of mirror imagery and the subsequent call for the salvation of Phantasia through the human power to wish, to imagine, to name and to remember is an example of Ende's transcultural employment of Eastern and Western symbolism. Ende draws on the mirror mirroring itself as a symbol of human consciousness. Rather than also adopting classical Daoist ontology with nothingness preceding Being and everything under heaven, he adopts a modern postmetaphysical conception of nothing that emphasizes the creative potential of the human imagination. He links the mirror mirroring itself—or mirroring nothing—with the need to turn this nothing into something, to let nothing be creative. The child Bastian, like Momo, is tasked with the responsibility of salvaging the world by recreating and thereby reinhabiting it. The latter eschatological dimension, while not totally absent from religious forms of Daoism and Buddhism, suggests Christian influences on Ende's work.[8]

Another example of the saving force of nothing consists in giving a name to something. Naming is a distinctively human capacity to create something out of nothing. The Childlike Empress is in need of a new name and Bastian is tasked with giving it to her. After realizing that he is the only one who can give her her name, Bastian calls her "Moon Child" (*Mondkind*). The moon with its *yin* energy is often associated with clarity and renewal, but also with nonexistence due to the mirror-like reflection of sunlight. Paradoxically, doing nothing, being silent and naming turn out to be the remnants of what it would mean to act in a different way, in a way that would not threaten but would build on the recreative force of the imagination and remembrance that sustains Phantasia and the human world.

The novel is an invitation to enter the game of taking seriously the existence of Phantasia as a world that was created and is sustained by human imagination. If one believes in the power of imagination, one understands the novel's wonderfully ambivalent phrases evoking the creative power of nothingness: "nothing can happen to you" (Ende 1997, 185), "nothing […] can resist it" (ibid., 190), "nothing is there until I wish it" (ibid., 191), and "nothing can daunt my courage"

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8   Self-emptying and the cultivation of *wu*-practices ("not having a name" *wuming* 無名, "not having desires" *wuyu* 無虞, "not acting" *wu wei* 無為, "not knowing" *wuzhi* 無知, "without heart-mind" *wuxin* 無心) are connected to the promise of achieving a union with the metaphysical dimension *Dao*. This is a dimension that is absent from Ende's novel. Later Daoists have established a connection between the cultivation of the heart-mind *xin* (心), nothingness and the union with *Dao*: "Concentrate one's heart-mind on the distant realm and dwell where there is nothing, you need not a thing as you enter into nothingness. The heart-mind is thus united with the *Dao*" (Sima 2004, 279).

(ibid., 209). Bastian, like the reader of Ende's work, has entered a process of sweeping clean his consciousness and becoming what the Daoists refer to as a genuine person (*zhenren* 真人), one who is free from identifying with one-sided states of mind in this process:

> And nothing had brought him calm and contentment. To be wise was to be above joy and sorrow, fear and pity, ambition and humiliation. It was to hate nothing and to love nothing, and above all to be utterly indifferent to the love and hate of others. (Ende 1997, 274)

Conclusion: Resisting The Nothing with Nothing

In this article, I have argued that Ende's *The Neverending Story* represents a hybrid work of world literature. Extending the transcultural imagination of Ende's earlier work, the novel travels between East and West by combining elements of Asian mythology and conceptions of nothingness that echo Buddhism and Daoism. This is not to deny that it also draws on themes commonly associated with existentialism, Christianity and Marxism, too. Otherwise, it would not be work of the transcultural imagination. In fusing these traditions, Ende develops a transcultural critique of modern societies and forms of life with their pathological time regimes and their ossification of the imagination.

In the novel Ende repeatedly emphasizes that his work should avoid becoming overly philosophical. He does not, for example, systematically distinguish between nothingness and emptiness and does not pretend to engage with East Asian traditions from a scholarly perspective. As a work of fiction, Ende's work does not claim to be an authentic rendering of, for example, Buddhist conceptions of empty consciousness or Daoist (me)ontology. It would thus be misguided to evaluate it as such. As works of phantastic literature, Ende's novels reinterpret modern life as if viewed through a mirror. *The Neverending Story* invites readers to engage in the thought experiment of thinking of The Nothing as a devastating force while encouraging them to cultivate the endangered capacity of withstanding The Nothing, being attentive of the unity of past, present and future, and fostering one's imaginative capacities.

The Neverending Story draws on the image of The Nothing as a means to engage in radical social critique. This critique can be summarized with the following motto: resisting The Nothing with nothing. As a book-length defence of creativity and imagination, the novel reveals the ambivalence of nothingness: The Nothing is an existential threat that transforms beings into lies, but it is also an invitation to use one's phantasy well and continue the never-ending task of using

the imagination wisely. Ende thus fuses different cultural influences to create an East-West tapestry of the imagination that challenges his readers to take nothingness seriously and sweep their consciousness. While he stresses that his books "have a pronounced European character", he also sees himself as a transcultural traveller whose work, without creating uniformity (*Einheitssuppe*), echoes Eastern traditions in an attempt to contribute to the emergence of "a culture of the 21st century, which would perhaps for the first time in the history of humanity be a human culture in which each individual nation would contribute what is its most precious and best" (Sōiku 1991, 133).

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Mu 無 as Structural Ground: Reinterpreting Saussure's Structuralism Through Nishida Kitarō's Logic of *Basho*

YANG Xiaobo*

Abstract

This paper re-examines Saussure's structuralism through Nishida Kitarō's logic of *basho* (*basho teki ronri* 場所的論理), a philosophical theory rooted in the concept of *mu* 無. By adopting this perspective, we explore the foundation of linguistic structure while seeking to transcend its perceived closure and stasis—key critiques of Saussure's theory. We propose interpreting Saussure's synchronicity within the framework of diachronicity. The principle of arbitrariness, in this light, emerges as a trace of diachronic contingency fossilized within a synchronic system. Linguistic structure operates through two interwoven dimensions: synchronically, it manifests as oppositional relations among signs, described by Saussure as "negativity", embodying *mu* as negative dialectics; diachronically, it is shaped by historical contingency, reflected in the arbitrary combination of sound-images and concepts, mirroring *mu* as the "groundless ground". This "groundless ground", as the "*basho* of absolute *mu*" (*zettaimu no basho* 絶対無の場所), reveals language not as a static system but as a dynamic process of systemic becoming, akin to what Nishida terms the "eternal now" (*eien no ima* 永遠の今), which continuously maintains itself in the tension between past and future. Synchronic structure is thus not a frozen moment but a dynamic threshold where historical accidents crystallize into present configurations, perpetually open to reconfiguration. It is both complete (as a system of differential relations) and incomplete (as a site of perpetual reconfiguration).

Keywords: nothing, *mu*, Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralism, Nishida Kitarō, logic of *basho*

Mu 無 kot strukturna osnova: reinterpretacija Saussurjevega strukturalizma z logiko *bashoja* Nishida Kitarōja

Izvleček

Članek prouči Saussurjev strukturalizem na podlagi logike *bashoja* (*basho teki ronri* 場所的論理) Nishida Kitarōja, filozofske teorije, ki temelji na pojmu *mu* 無. S prevzemom te perspektive članek razišče temelje jezikovne strukture, hkrati pa skuša preseči njeno

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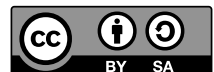
zaznano zaprtost in statičnost, ki je temeljna kritika Saussurjeve teorije. Članek pred-laga, da Saussurjevo sinhronijo interpretiramo znotraj okvira diahronije. Na tej osnovi se načelo arbitrarnosti pokaže kot sled diahrone naključnosti, ki je fosilizirana znotraj sinhronega sistema. Jezikovna struktura deluje skozi dve prepleteni dimenziji: sinhronost se kaže kot opozicijska razmerja med znaki, ki jih je Saussure opisal kot »negativnost« in utelešajo *mu* kot negativno dialektiko; diahrono pa jo oblikuje zgodovinska naključnost, ki se izraža v arbitrarni povezavi med zvočnimi podobami in pojmi, kar odraža *mu* kot »temelj brez temelja«. »Temelj brez temelja« kot »prostor absolutnega *muja*« (*zettaimu no basho* 絶対無の場所) razkriva jezik ne kot statični sistem, temveč kot dinamičen proces sistemskega postajanja, podoben temu, kar Nishida poimenuje »večni zdaj« (*eien no ima* 永遠の今), ki se nenehno ohranja v napetosti med preteklostjo in prihodnostjo. Sinhrona struktura tako ni zamrznjen trenutek, temveč dinamičen prag, kjer se zgodovin-ske naključnosti kristalizirajo v sedanje konfiguracije in so neprestano odprte za preoblik-ovanje. Je hkrati dovršena (kot sistem diferencialnih razmerij) in nedovršena (kot prostor nenehnega preoblikovanja).

Ključne besede: nič, *mu*, Ferdinand de Saussure, strukturalizem, Nishida Kitarō, logika *bashoja*

> BEING. Nothing *is*, or at least in absolute terms nothing *is* (in the linguistic domain).
>
> But …, in other words it is the association itself which makes the word, and without it there is nothing.
>
> Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)[1]

Introduction: Beneath and Beyond Structure

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structuralism, language (langue)[2] manifests as a structured system where meaning arises from the differ-ential relations among signs. Were we to create an artificial language, this differ-ential nature would become even more pronounced. In the film *Persian Lessons* (*Persischstunden*, Perelman 2020), Gilles, a Belgian Jew imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, feigns a Persian identity to avoid ex-ecution. When the Nazi officer Koch, wanting to learn Persian, compels him to teach the language, Gilles ingeniously devises a linguistic system. He creates

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1   Quoted from Saussure (2006, 55, 63).

2   Saussure differentiates between langue and parole. Langue refers to the linguistic system shared by a social community, while parole denotes the individual use of language in specific situations. In his discussions, Saussure often uses the general term "language" to refer to langue. Therefore, in this paper, the term "language" is used in the same sense.

phonemic distinctions by associating arbitrary sounds with everyday objects, and then anchors them through a mnemonic system based on the names of his fellow Jewish prisoners recorded in a ledger. In the end, Gilles manages to teach Koch how to speak and even write poetry in this fabricated language.

This film is adapted from the short story "Invention of a Language" (*Erfindung einer Sprache*) by the German writer Wolfgang Kohlhaase, which draws inspiration from a true story. In my view, the feasibility of Gilles' creation of a "Persian language", where the prisoners' names and the objects they denote lack natural relations, is rooted in the structuralist approach of Saussure's linguistic theory. According to Saussure, signs do not acquire a natural and logical link to objects to derive meaning, but rather their meaning emerges from the differences among the signs themselves. A sign consists of two elements: the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). Their combination is arbitrary but becomes fixed once established. This explains why it is both feasible and practical for Gilles to use the names of his fellow Jewish prisoners as signifiers, thereby constructing a structured yet fictitious language under harrowing circumstances.

However, Saussure's linguistic structure is often perceived as a closed, static system—an understanding stemming from the synchronic approach he advocates, which isolates language from its historical roots. However, the case of Gilles' fabricated Persian exposes the fragility of this closure. Each time Koch's inquiries threaten to uncover the deception, Gilles does not introduce new signs, and instead he retroactively modifies existing phonemic relationships, thus generating a new system of differences. This illustrates that language is not a static system of differences, but a dynamic process of systemic becoming, wherein all synchronic systems bear diachronic traces.

Poststructuralist critiques of Saussure's structuralism have primarily focused on the closure and stasis of the structure, arguing that this framework marginalizes language's historicity, sociological embeddedness, and speakers' subjectivity. However, such critiques may misinterpret Saussure's original intent. As is known, Saussure's intellectual legacy derives largely from posthumously reconstructed materials—most notably the *Course in General Linguistics* (1953), compiled from his students' notes and subjected to extensive editorial mediation. These published texts often diverge from his original manuscripts, revealing inconsistencies that complicate definitive interpretations of his thought. This paper contends that Saussure's structuralism, when disentangled from editorial interventions and examined through his original manuscripts, gestures toward what pulses beneath linguistic structure: speakers' subconscious, which functions as a ground—or, in the terminology of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多, a *basho* (場所 "place" or "field")—for the emergence of differences. As Tu Youxiang (2008, 124) notes,

> The core of Saussure's linguistic theory lies in speakers' language con-
> sciousness, a point that has long been misunderstood and overlooked.
> […] Speakers' language consciousness is largely latent and automatic—
> in other words, unconscious. […] It is precisely this language conscious-
> ness that establishes language as an integrated system, thereby affirming
> this system as one inhabited by an active subject.

Building on this insight, this paper proposes a novel reinterpretation of Saussure's structuralism through the lens of Nishida's logic of *basho* (*basho teki ronri* 場所 的論理), a philosophical framework rooted in the concept of *mu* 無. By adopting this perspective, we aim not only to uncover what lies beneath linguistic struc-ture, but also to transcend its closure and stasis. Nishida's *mu*, as a generative *basho*, provides a dynamic framework that allows us to move beyond the static and closed nature of structure. It enables us to reimagine synchronicity within diachronicity, thereby revealing linguistic structure as a dynamic field embedded in history—much like understanding the present as a self-determining moment in the flow of time. In this framework, linguistic structure ceases to be a closed network of signs and instead emerges as a dynamic *basho* generated through the interplay of speakers' subconscious and socio-historical forces. Such a recon-ceptualization endows structuralism with the dimensions of social-historicity and subjectivity, suggesting that poststructuralism does not represent a radical rupture from Saussure's structuralism, but rather a dialectical progression that deepens its insights and expands its scope to account for the fluid entanglement of language, history, and the unconscious.

Basho 場所 and *Mu* 無

The logic of *basho* constitutes the cornerstone of Nishida Kitarō's philosophy, and central to this theory is the concept of *mu*.[3] As a leading figure in modern Jap-anese philosophy and founder of the Kyoto School, Nishida is renowned for his synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. His philosophy, while integrating both traditions, remains fundamentally rooted in Eastern thought, par-ticularly influenced by Zen Buddhism and Daoism. Thus, the logic of *basho* sig-nifies not only a departure from Western philosophy but also an ambitious effort to systematize Eastern thought within a self-consistent logical framework. As Wargo (2005, 118) observes, "*Basho* is intended to serve as a tool to solve the

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3   The concept of 無 is crucial not only in Chinese and Japanese philosophy but also in broader East-ern philosophy. Byung-Chul Han (2023, xi), a South Korean-born German philosopher, character-izes Eastern culture as a "culture of absencing" (Kultur des Abwesens), emphasizing its focus on transcending the limitations of objectified existence.

problem of completeness". Within this framework, Nishida seeks to transcend the foundational dichotomies that characterize Western philosophy, including "the grammatical subject-predicate, the epistemological object-subject, the conceptual particular-universal, the metaphysical matter-form, the phenomenological *noema-noesis*, content-act, and so forth" (Nishida 2012, 16).

What, then, defines the logic of *basho*? Also known as "predicate-oriented logic" (*jutsugo teki ronri* 述語的論理), it poses a challenge to Western logic, particularly Aristotelian logic, which Nishida refers to as "subject-oriented logic" (*shugo teki ronri* 主語的論理). For Nishida, cognition begins not with the grammatical subject but with the predicate. Consider the proposition "The rose is red". The judgment does not begin with the subject "rose" but with an intuitive awareness that the subject "rose" inherently accommodates a spectrum of potential predicates, such as "red" among others. This inversion demonstrates that the subject "rose" must be subsumed (*hōsetsu* 包摂) within a *basho*, where predicates such as "red" constitute what Nishida refers to as the "predicate-plane" (*jutsugo men* 述語面)—the ground for the emergence of subjects. As he elaborates: "When we think of an object or an event, there must be something like a *basho* wherein the object or event can be reflected (*utsusu basho* 映す場所)" (Nishida 2003a, 416). This *basho* ensures logical coherence of speech by constraining predicates appropriate to the subject (e.g., "red", "fragrant", or "thorny" for "rose", while excluding incongruous attributes like "triangular" or "transparent"). This resonates with Wittgenstein's (2021, 89, 204) assertion that logic, thought, and language form an inseparable triad—what is thinkable and sayable is also logical and possible.

For Nishida, the meaning of "rose" crystallizes through its determinability by admissible predicates. In other words, what a rose "is" must be defined by what it "is not". This reveals that the deep structure of meaning is inherently relational, relying on negative oppositions and differential relations among signs to establish both identity and significance. These oppositional or differential relations among signs are referred to by Saussure (2006, 42) as "negativity", a dynamic force that enables semiotic differentiation. Nishida conceptualizes this generative negativity as *mu*. Yet *mu* transcends mere negation. Its second, more profound dimension manifests as an absolute void—a mirror-like *basho* that functions as the non-objectifiable ground where contradictions and differences interact. Given the lack of a direct equivalent in Western philosophical discourse, I propose the term "void-nothingness" to render the concept of *mu*. This translation integrates "void" (implying an open, indeterminate matrix of potentiality) and "nothingness" (suggesting negation and the absence of objects), thus capturing the dual nature of *mu*.

"Subject-oriented logic", as its name suggests, focuses on the grammatical subject of a proposition—typically viewed as an object or entity. However, Nishida

(2003d, 255) argues that this approach fails to conceptualize the "self", which inherently resists objectification. "Predicate-oriented logic", conversely, begins with the "predicate-plane", which does not refer to the grammatical predicate, such as "red" in the statement "The rose is red", since focusing on it would reify it as an object again. Instead, the "predicate-plane" as *basho* is characterized by Nishida (2003a, 416) as the "field of consciousness" (*ishiki no ya* 意識の野)—a non-substantial ground that cannot be said to "exist" and must be represented as *mu*, or nothing. However, a predicate (e.g., "red") may become a subject in another statement (e.g., "Red is a colour"), thus entering the "subject-plane" (*shugo men* 主語面). Since this transition reveals its incompleteness as the "absolute *mu*" (*zettaimu* 絶対無), Nishida defines this state as the "*basho* of relative *mu*" (*sōtaimu no basho* 相対無の場所), where identity arises through negation.

Nishida (ibid., 416–17) also states the following: "However, in contrast to the ever-changing phenomena of consciousness, there must be a field of consciousness that remains constant. It is through this field that the phenomena of consciousness can be interrelated and connected". While predicates perpetually transition toward the "subject-plane" and become objects of consciousness, new predicates emerge, necessitating an ultimate predicate irreducible to objectification, which Nishida refers to as the "*basho* of absolute *mu*" (*zettaimu no basho* 絶対無の場所). Unlike the "relative *mu*", which opposes *aru* 有, [4] "the true *mu* must be that which includes both *aru* and *mu*, serving as the *basho* where both are established" (ibid., 422). In his later works, Nishida thus employed the term "absolute contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujun no jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾の自己同一) to articulate the "*basho* of absolute *mu*". His subsequent engagement with Marxist dialectics further expanded *basho* to encompass society, history, and culture, ultimately equating it with the world itself.

Due to space constraints, this paper cannot fully trace the conceptual evolution of *basho*, and thus the preceding discussion simply offers a general framework to facilitate the reinterpretation of Saussure's structuralism. In summary, the features of *basho* can be outlined as follows: (1) voidness, (2) nothingness, (3) wholeness, and (4) the unity of oppositions or differences within the whole. These features constitute the foundation of Saussure's structure and open a pathway to transcend its closure, which is the subject I will explore in detail in the subsequent sections.

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4   Like *mu* 無, the concept of *aru* 有 also lacks a direct counterpart in Western philosophy. In both Japanese and Chinese philosophy, it is neither used as the copula "be" nor as the abstract concepts of "being" or "existence". Instead, it suggests the existence of concrete entities. Therefore, in this paper, I choose to retain its original form. Should we translate it, "something" might be an appropriate translation, distinguishing it from the concept of *mu* 無, which represents an unobjectifiable "nothing".

Mu 無 as the Negative Dialectics of Structure

Saussure (1959, 16) defines language as "a system of signs that express ideas", where each sign unites a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (concept). Their connection is arbitrary, established solely through social conventions. The foundational principle of these conventions lies in the establishment of differences among signs—differences that assign value to signs and constitute a structure within language.[5] This structuralist theory, which transcends linguistics, has profoundly influenced fields from literary and social studies to anthropology. Language appears to be a structured system, dependent on two interrelated factors: the synchronic perspective and the differential relations among signs. These two factors are mutually reinforcing: the synchronic abstraction of language from its diachronic evolution allows its structure to emerge as a network of differences, while the differential nature of signs enables language to be analysed as a synchronic system, detached from its diachronic evolution. In short, differences crystallize into structure through synchronic fixation. Yet this structure, as critics have pointed out, risks becoming static and closed. The following section of this paper will employ Nishida Kitarō's logic of *basho* to destabilize such closure. Here, however, we focus on the forces that sustain the linguistic structure.

For Saussure, the signifier and the signified form an indivisible unity, akin to the two sides of a single sheet of paper. They can never be separated, nor do they mirror a simplistic name-object correspondence. As he clarifies: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (ibid., 66). This underscores that the sign system operates independently of direct referential ties to the external world—a departure from Wittgenstein's early *Tractatus* model of language-world isomorphism. Instead, Saussure posits that language represents a mental reality.

How, then, does a sign acquire meaning? Its meaning derives from value, determined relationally through differences within the linguistic system. Thus, value is neither intrinsic nor fixed; instead, it emerges solely through the structural interplay of signs. As Saussure asserts: "In language there are only differences. […] A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas" (ibid., 120). Crucially, these differences are embedded in "negativity"—a concept Saussure articulated in a manuscript titled "On the Dual Essence of Language", which was discovered in 1996. This manuscript frames oppositional relations among signs not merely as contrasts but as mutually

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5   According to Saussure, value is distinguished from meaning in that it is defined through its relations with other values, making it structural in nature. Meaning, on the other hand, relies on value, and the same meaning in one language can assume different values in another due to its relations with other related meanings. Thus, in linguistic structure, value takes precedence over meaning.

constitutive negations. Values are defined not by what signs "are" but by what they "are not," rendering the system a dynamic field of absence-as-presence. As Saussure states in the manuscript:

> There is nothing underlying their existence other than their *difference*, or DIFFERENCES of whatever kind that the mind manages to attach to *the* fundamental *difference* (however, each one's entire existence depends on reciprocal difference). Never do we abandon the fundamental, eternally negative factor of the DIFFERENCE between two terms, rather than the properties of one term. (Saussure 2006, 42)
> *Langue* contains neither *signs* nor *significations*, but DIFFERENCES in signs and DIFFERENCES in significations. (Ibid., 46)
> In essence language rests on oppositions, on a network of wholly negative values which exist only in mutual contrast. (Ibid., 47)

As previously discussed, Saussure conceives of language as a mental reality, writing: "The set of associations ratified socially which constitutes the language is located in the brain; it is a set of realities like other mental realities" (Saussure 1993, 71a). For Saussure, language is a system embedded within collective consciousness rather than external objectivity. As he asserts: "Not only the meaning but also the sign is a fact of pure consciousness" (Saussure 2006, 4). What sustains linguistic structure is precisely this consciousness—what Nishida conceptualizes as *basho*, the non-substantial ground that enables differential relations. This consciousness operates not as a static repository of signs but as a dynamic field of immanent relations where differences mutually constitute one another through reciprocal negation. Consider the distinction between "tree" and "bush": their semantic boundaries arise not from mimetic correspondence to natural categories, but from consciousness sustaining their differential relations within a holistic field. This field, characterized by *mu*, escapes the paradox of structural closure: it is both the condition of possibility for differences and the negation of any fixed foundation. The dialectical tension here is revelatory—structure persists not despite its voidness but through it, as the absence of a positive ground compels differences to mutually define one another in an open system—a ceaseless play of negativity that resists reification. In this light, *basho* as consciousness transcends a mere epistemic framework, and becomes the very modality of becoming wherein signs emerge as relational traces rather than self-identical entities.

To elucidate how signs acquire value through differences, consider the analogy of a tangram puzzle. Each piece derives its functional value not from its intrinsic properties (e.g., material) but from its relational position within the combinatorial system. Similarly, linguistic value emerges through differential relations among signs. Crucially, these relations require a *basho*—not as a fixed container but

as a dynamic field of possibilities. This requires an awareness of completeness, namely, the tangram player's mental blueprint of potential configurations. The *basho* thus manifests as a formless void, only becoming evident when all pieces assemble into a coherent whole. Each time a piece is added to the tangram, one moves closer to this completeness.

Therefore, linguistic structure cannot be anchored in referential relations between signs and objects, as physical objects lack the systematic coherence required for structural integrity. In contrast, "the structure formed by concepts and sound-images is far more comprehensive than that created by objects and their names" (Tu 2013, 346). For instance, while perceptions of beauty and ugliness vary culturally, the oppositional pair "beauty/ugliness" constitutes a stable structural relationship. Similarly, Wittgenstein distinguishes between the ethical and the conventional senses of reward and punishment: the latter remain context-dependent and ambiguous, whereas the former possess categorical clarity—it is "clear that the reward must be something pleasant and the punishment something unpleasant" (Wittgenstein 2021, 245). These distinctions mirror Saussure's dichotomy between content (rewards and punishments in the conventional sense) and value (those in the ethical sense).

Value thus arises from an awareness of oppositional pairs that constitute a structured wholeness—such as existence and nonexistence, difficulty and ease, length and shortness, height and lowness—which are mutually dependent, as noted by Laozi 老子 in the second chapter of the *Daodejing* 道德經.[6] Each pair functions as a *basho* that encompasses these oppositional elements, existing within what Nishida refers to as the "field of consciousness". Although this represents a higher-order framework compared to the oppositional elements themselves, it remains confined to specific categories, thereby constituting only a "*basho* of relative *mu*". Just as "red" gains meaning through its contrast with "blue" within the categorical *basho* of "colour", linguistic categories function as "*basho* of relative *mu*", perpetually transitioning toward the "predicate-plane". This infinite regress necessitates a transcendent *basho* beyond categorical determinations—what Nishida terms the "*basho* of absolute *mu*". It is not a preexisting void awaiting content, but rather the generative medium through which differences manifest.

The tangram analogy cited previously, while illustrative, risks oversimplification. A conventional tangram operates within finite combinatorial possibilities, whereas linguistic structure unfolds through infinite differential combinations. To

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6   "故有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨（《道德經·第二章》）。" (Existence and nonexistence thus generate each other; difficulty and ease rely on each other; length and shortness contrast with each other; height and lowness complement each other; sounds produced and perceived resonate with each other; and front and back follow each other (from the second chapter of the *Daodejing*). (Translated by the author of this paper.)

reconcile this disparity, we must reimagine language as an infinitely expansive tangram—a system whose structural coherence paradoxically relies on its unbounded potential for reconfiguration. This reconceptualization necessitates situating the synchronic structure of language within its diachronic evolution: only by examining how structure evolves temporally can we grasp its simultaneous stability and fluidity.

From a diachronic perspective, even when the bond between the signifier and the signified appears motivated, such motivation itself rests on contingent conventions. The "logic" behind these connections is ultimately arbitrary—a product of historical accidents rather than inherent necessity. Consider the act of throwing two dice. While the combinatorial possibilities are finite (36 potential outcomes), the result of each throw remains fundamentally contingent—a random actualization of one possibility among many. This randomness introduces an element of unpredictability that defies any deterministic framework.

The dice analogy illuminates the synchronic-diachronic dialectic. A single throw reveals an actualized result (synchronic), while the unrealized possibilities linger diachronically as structural potential. Linguistic structure operates similarly through the interplay of actualized signs and latent differential relations—a dynamic web of "what is" and "what could have been or might be". This infinite contingency—the impossibility of structural finality—constitutes what we refer to as the "groundless ground" of language. Like the contingent outcomes of the dice, linguistic structure thrives not despite its lack of fixed foundations, but because of it.

Mu 無 as the Groundless Ground of Structure

Critiques of Saussure's linguistics primarily target the arbitrariness of the bond between the signifier and the signified. Indeed, many linguistic signs exhibit varying degrees of motivation rather than pure arbitrariness. Even Saussure (1959, 131) himself acknowledges this, stating: "Some signs are absolutely arbitrary; in others we note, not its complete absence, but the presence of degrees of arbitrariness: *the sign may be relatively motivated*". From a diachronic perspective, all signs evolve over time and have their origins, making the tracing of these origins an important task in the history of linguistics. However, for Saussure, the synchronic structure of language functions as a self-contained system: "The question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking" (ibid., 71–72).

Saussure's synchronic linguistics is often criticized for confining language to a static, closed structure. This criticism, however, may stem from the mediated

nature of his intellectual legacy—reconstructed posthumously from his students' notes and unpublished manuscripts. Regardless of Saussure's original intent, this mediation invites us to reinterpret his work in a new light. We align with the contemporary Japanese philosopher Karatani Kōjin's 柄谷行人 (1989, 57) modal interpretation of structuralism, which advocates: "Not to treat present phenomena merely as empirical facts, nor to view them as historical necessities, as Hegel does, but to adopt a stance that views them within multiple sequences and possibilities". In this light, language is no longer merely a structural system frozen in time; it becomes a living, evolving process shaped by the interaction of various forces—cultural, social, and historical. Karatani further elaborates:

> Langue represents the totality of possibilities, while parole is always founded on 'selection and exclusion'. Thus, individual utterances should never be viewed in isolation. The actuality of an utterance lies precisely in its exclusion of other possibilities, thereby maintaining its existence through such exclusion. When Saussure speaks of linguistic value, he is not suggesting that utterances or expressions are directly tied to meaning or objects, but rather that they should be understood in terms of their relationships within 'possible worlds'. (Ibid.)

To reduce structuralism to either a purely synchronic or diachronic framework is to fundamentally misunderstand its dialectical essence. Synchronicity—the structural coherence of language at a given moment—cannot be divorced from diachronicity, for the "present" of language is always already embedded within temporal flux. It is precisely this interplay that anchors Saussure's principle of arbitrariness: while a signifier-signified bond may appear motivated within one linguistic system, this motivation is itself contingent. Cross-linguistic comparison reveals the same concept represented by different sound-images, exposing the absence of natural necessity. Even historically evolved motivations remain arbitrary at their core—their diachronic paths could have unfolded otherwise.

As such, the differences that weave the fabric of structure are doubly anchored: synchronically, a sign defines itself against coexisting signs, and diachronically, it differentiates itself from potential alternatives that could have emerged in the past or might arise in the future. As the above-cited dice analogy reveals, each throw actualizes one possibility (a synchronic outcome, such as rolling a "three" and "five"), while diachronically preserving the non-actualized (the unrolled numbers). The structure of this act resides neither in the dice nor in their outcomes, but in the interplay of actualized and non-actualized possibilities—a dynamic mirroring linguistic structure's reliance on both present differences and historical contingency. Each possibility remains suspended in potentiality until actualized, demonstrating that even within finite constraints (e.g., the 36 possible

outcomes of rolling two dice), the actual result emerges through randomness rather than predetermination. Here, Saussure's arbitrariness converges with Nishida's *basho* of absolute *mu*. As Tu Youxiang (2011, 96) observes: "Contingency is the natural unfolding of its void-nothingness [*kongwuxing* 空無性]; what embodies void-nothingness must be contingent."

Arbitrariness, then, emerges as a trace of diachronic contingency fossilized within a synchronic system. A synchronic snapshot—like the fleeting "present" in the flow of time—is not static but a temporal cross-section of ceaseless becoming. It embodies what Nishida conceptualizes as the "continuity of discontinuity" (*hirenzoku no renzoku* 非連続的連続), a moment simultaneously fractured by its past and pregnant with its future. Should we posit a "ground" underlying linguistic structure, it must be a ground without ground, a "groundless ground", which Nishida identifies as the "absolute *mu*". As an unobjectifiable "nothing", it cannot be determined by external forces; as a formless void, it cannot be reflected in anything outside itself. Thus, it is what Nishida describes as "self-determined" (*jiko gentei* 自己限定) and "self-reflected" (*jiko no naka ni jiko o eishuru* 自己の中に自己を映する)—a paradoxical autonomy akin to a mirror that both generates and contains its own image through infinite regress.

Such self-determination and self-reflection embody what Nishida refers to as the "absolute contradictory self-identity", which transcends binarism and reveals the "ground", or *basho*, that holds oppositions as reciprocal determinations of its undifferentiated completeness. However, this "ground" cannot be further grounded in another ground. As a "groundless ground", it is akin to Nishida's concept of the "eternal now" (*eien no ima* 永遠の今), a temporal analogue to his spatial *basho*. As this term suggests, it incorporates the opposites of "eternal" and "now", creating a tension between them. Moreover, it unifies past and future: "What we call the historical present is a *basho* where we can conceive of the infinite past and future coexisting" (Nishida 2003b, 86). It also reconciles motion and stillness: "The present, while in motion, does not move. It is the self-determination of the eternal now (*eien no ima no jiko gentei* 永遠の今の自己限定)" (ibid., 95). The "eternal now" is not a frozen instant but a dynamic threshold where past and future converge through mutual negation. The structure is thus both complete (as a system of differences crystallized through historical sedimentation) and incomplete (as a site of perpetual reconfiguration where difference continuously engenders difference).

Crucially, the "eternal now", which incorporates both the "eternal" and the "now", cannot be reduced to either of them. It is, in fact, atemporal, embodying the very principle of the "continuity of discontinuity". Likewise, the "groundless ground" evokes a similar paradox—it is a foundation that, by its very nature, lacks foundation. It functions simultaneously as a synchronic web of differential

relations and as the diachronic matrix suspending these relations within infinite possibilities. Consequently, it acts as a mirror of the collective unconscious—the immanent field where linguistic differences crystallize. Beneath the surface of flowing consciousness lies a self-reflective void, which Nishida refers to as "self-consciousness" (*jikaku* 自覚). It is not "something" to be observed but the act of self-mirroring through which structure emerges.

Concluding Remarks

The linguistics proposed by Saussure, often labelled as "static linguistics" due to its prioritization of synchronic analysis, stands in contrast to evolutionary linguistics, which focuses on the diachronic evolution of language. This paper challenges the prevalent interpretation of Saussure's synchronicity as merely static. By reinterpreting his structuralism through Nishida Kitarō's logic of *basho*, we recontextualize synchronicity within diachronicity. This synthesis sheds new light on Saussure's principle of arbitrariness, situating it within the infinite contingency of the diachronic evolution of signs. In doing so, we transcend the simplistic stasis/flux binary and deconstruct the structural closure posited by classical structuralism.

The fabric of linguistic structure is woven through dual dimensions: synchronically, via differential relations between coexisting signs, and diachronically, via temporal differentiation between actualized signs and those that could have emerged in the past or might arise in the future. This interplay constitutes what we term the "groundless ground" of structure, much like how the present maintains itself in the tension between past and future. From a diachronic perspective, structure exists in ceaseless flux, while from a synchronic perspective, it appears static. Yet as the primordial basis of structure, it must transcend such binaries—neither motion nor stasis, but stasis-in-motion, like an "eternal now" persisting amidst the flow of time. This paradox is conceptualized by Nishida as "self-motion" or "motion within the self" (*jidō teki naru mono* 自動的なるもの), defined as "that which maintains its identity within itself (*jiko dōitsu* 自己同一) while simultaneously undergoing differentiation and evolution" (Nishida 2003c, 204). As Huang Wenhong (2012, 251) elucidates: "The real identity of a thing is embedded within a dynamic network of relations, while simultaneously maintaining its autonomy. In other words, it is not a constant and static identity established solely 'by itself' (*an sich*), but one that 'remains unchanged amidst perpetual transformation' [*bian zhong bu bian* 變中不變]".

Throughout this paper, parallels have been drawn between the foundation of linguistic structure and the temporal present. As Nishida (2003b, 42) asserts, "only

humans possess the present", which also underscores why language is uniquely human. Therefore, in contrast to critiques that accuse Saussure's linguistics of neglecting human agency, it can be argued that his theory actually presupposes the subjectivity of speakers. By synthesizing Saussure's structuralism with Nishida's logic of *basho*, we gain a deeper understanding of subjectivity—neither diminishing nor deifying it but dissolving the binary opposition between subject and the *basho* in which it resides. In this light, the subject emerges neither as solely environmentally determined nor as an autonomous agent, but as the dynamic process of subject-object interaction within a *basho*. Linguistic structure thus manifests both as an expression of speakers' collective unconscious and a *basho* continually reshaped through subjective praxis.

Ultimately, this synthesis, which introduces the dimensions of historicity, subjectivity, and contingency, bridges the gap between structuralism and poststructuralism, revealing their continuity rather than radical rupture. While poststructuralism rightly critiques structural rigidity, its overemphasis on semantic indeterminacy risks sliding into relativism or nihilism. In contrast, Nishida's *mu*, far from representing a nihilistic void, constitutes the generative *basho* from which differential relations emerge. Structures, while born of this "void-nothingness", are anchored in historical context and shaped by subjective praxis. This framework achieves what poststructuralism often forfeits: embracing semantic fluidity while resisting deconstructive excess. Meaning crystallizes neither as fixed nor as infinitely deferred, but as a generative tension between emergent differences (born of *mu*) and their historical sedimentation (moulded by praxis).

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Freedom and Beauty

The Beauty of Emptiness—The Foundational Root of Chinese Aesthetics

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Abstract

The article explores how the concept of "emptiness" (*xu* 虛) emerged as the defining aesthetic principle in the tradition of Chinese "literati painting" (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Far from denoting absence or nothingness in the strict sense of the word, *xu* represents a dynamic and generative force—an underlying condition through which artistic form, meaning, and spiritual insight arise. Tracing its development from the Wei-Jin period (220–589 CE) onwards, the article examines how *xu* evolved at the intersection of Neo-Daoist metaphysics (*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Chan Buddhist philosophy, transforming from a metaphysical abstraction into a concrete aesthetic language.

Focusing on five key figures—Gu Kaizhi, Zong Bing, Xie He, Jing Hao, and Shitao the study highlights how each articulated core aesthetic principles that grounded painting in the expressive possibilities of emptiness. Concepts such as *liubai* (留白, unpainted space), *qiyun* (氣韻, vital resonance of spirit), and *yihua* (一畫, the holistic or primordial brushstroke) demonstrate how emptiness manifests visually and philosophically. Ultimately, the article argues that *xu* is not only central to Chinese aesthetic theory, but serves as the silent generative force that animates the entire tradition of literati art.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetics, "literati painting" (*wenrenhua* 文人畫), "emptiness" (xu 虛), Daoism, *Zhuangzi*

Lepota praznine – temeljni izvor kitajske estetike

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje, kako se je pojem praznine (*xu* 虛) uveljavil kot osrednje estetsko načelo v tradiciji kitajskega slikarstva učenjakov (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Daleč od tega, da bi označeval prazno ali ničnost v dobesednem pomenu besede, predstavlja *xu* dinamično in ustvarjalno silo – temeljno stanje, iz katerega vznikajo umetniška forma, pomen in duhovni uvid. Članek sledi razvoju tega pojma od obdobja Wei-Jin (220–589 n. št.) dalje ter analizira, kako se je *xu* oblikoval na stičišču neodaoistične metafizike (*Xuanxue* 玄學) in chan budistične filozofije ter se sčasoma preoblikoval iz metafizične abstrakcije v konkreten estetski jezik. S poudarkom na petih ključnih osebnostih – Gu Kaizhi, Zong

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Bing, Xie He, Jing Hao in Shi Tao – študija izpostavlja, kako je vsak od njih oblikoval temeljna estetska načela, ki slikarstvo utemeljujejo v izraznih možnostih praznine. Pojmi, kot so *liubai* (留白, neposlikani prostor), *qiyun* (氣韻, vitalna resonanca duha) in *yihua* (一畫, celostna ali izvorna poteza s čopičem), prikazujejo, kako se praznina uresničuje tako vizualno kot filozofsko. Članek v zaključku trdi, da *xu* ni zgolj osrednji pojem kitajske estetske teorije, temveč tiha ustvarjalna sila, ki oživlja celotno tradicijo umetnosti učenjakov.

Ključne besede: kitajska estetika, slikarstvo učenjakov (*wenrenhua* 文人畫), praznina (*xu* 虛), daoizem, *Zhuangzi*

Introduction

This article examines how the concept of "emptiness" (*xu* 虛)[1] became the defining aesthetic principle in the tradition of Chinese "literati painting" (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Rather than referring strictly to absence or nothingness in a narrow sense, *xu* conveys a dynamic and generative force—a foundational principle that shapes both artistic creation and aesthetic perception. In this sense, true emptiness is a dimension in which things are without any fixed essence, self, or substance (Nelson 2023, 34).

Tracing its evolution from the Wei-Jin period (220–589 CE) onward, the article explores how emptiness emerged at the intersection of Neo-Daoist "metaphysics"

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1   Although this article focuses on the concept of *xu* (虛) in Chinese aesthetics, it is essential to note that *xu* is closely connected with the related notions of *kong* (空) and *wu* (無). While each stems from a distinct philosophical background—*xu* and *wu* from Daoism, and *kong* from Buddhism—they collectively shape the foundation of Chinese aesthetic thought. Although they are conceptually distinct, these three terms are deeply interwoven in Chinese aesthetics, where emptiness is not a lack, but a vital force of meaning and creativity. As presented in the article, *xu* refers to emptiness as openness, receptivity, and latent potential. It is not a mere void, but a dynamic space that allows for spontaneity, transformation, and suggestiveness. In painting and poetry, *xu* often appears as empty space that evokes meaning precisely through what is left unsaid or unpainted. *Kong* denotes emptiness as the absence of inherent, independent existence and reveals the illusory nature of fixed forms, pointing to the impermanence and interdependence of all things. In aesthetics, it imbues works with a sense of transience, detachment, and contemplative stillness. *Wu*—most often translated as "absence", "being-without", "non-being", or "nothingness"—is rendered in this paper primarily as "absence" and signifies the primordial, undifferentiated source from which all things arise and to which they return. Aesthetically, *wu* manifests in the value placed on "naturalness" or "spontaneity" (*ziran* 自然), effortless action, action without forcing or "non-intervention" (*wu wei* 無為), and the subtle presence of the formless within form. For an in-depth examination of the distinctions between these three concepts, see Rošker (2025b).

(*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Chan Buddhist philosophy, gradually transforming from a metaphysical abstraction into a vital aesthetic category.[2]

In Chinese aesthetics, *xu* signifies potentiality—the fertile void from which form emerges and meaning unfolds. In literati landscape painting, emptiness is made visible through *liubai* (留白), or "the unpainted space", which invites the viewer's imagination and contemplative engagement. It appears as mist, void, or spatial openness, evoking the presence of the *Dao* through what is left unsaid and unseen.

The literati painting tradition took shape during the Wei-Jin period as scholar-artists—often poets, calligraphers, and philosophers—rejected technical virtuosity in favour of an art form that embodied spiritual cultivation and harmony with nature. Their approach reflected broader shifts in Chinese intellectual history, including the collapse of Han Confucian orthodoxy, the rise of *Xuanxue* thought, and the integration of Buddhist "emptiness" (*kong* 空) with Daoist notions of "absence" or "nothingness" (*wu* 無). For these artists, brushstroke became more than a technique—it was a medium for communion with the cosmos.

In this article, I examined how five influential figures of literati painters—Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (344–406), Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443), Xie He 謝赫 (479–502), Jing Hao 荊浩 (ca. 855–915), and Shitao 石涛 (1642–1707)—each articulated core aesthetic and philosophical principles that shaped the tradition of literati painting. Gu Kaizhi emphasized capturing the *spirit* (*shen* 神) of his subjects; Zong Bing proposed a Daoist view of landscape painting as a "vehicle for the *Dao*" (*shanshui yi xing mei dao* 山水以形媚道); Xie He developed the influential "Six Principles" (*liufa* 六法), placing *qiyun* (氣韻, "vital resonance of spirit") above realistic representation; Jing Hao explored the hidden "genuine reality" (*zhen* 真) embedded in nature; and Shitao offered a synthesis of emptiness and creativity through his concept of the "holistic or primordial brushstroke" (*yihua* 一畫).

Together, their ideas reflect a shared conviction: that true art transcends representation—using form to suggest the formless, and substance to evoke the void. By tracing this intellectual and artistic lineage, we see how Daoist emptiness became the silent heartbeat of Chinese painting—an invisible force that shaped brushwork, structured composition, and ultimately invited viewers to perceive the *Dao* through the aesthetic experience itself.

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2   It should be emphasized that this transformation is situated within the framework of a much broader turning point in the philosophical, linguistic, and axiological theories of the School of Mystery philosophers. This constituted one of the most significant theoretical shifts in the history of traditional Chinese thought (Rošker 2018, 166). Indeed, it can be argued that the discussions of the School of Mystery philosophers concerning the relationship between language and meaning represent a theoretical advancement of ancient disputations across virtually all areas of philosophical theory.

Through this exploration, the article aimed to show how the concept of emptiness permeates Chinese aesthetics at every level—serving not only as a foundational idea, but as the very essence of artistic expression in literati tradition.

The Birth of Chinese Aesthetic Theory and the Influence of *Xuanxue* and *Qingtan*

The Wei-Jin period marked the first systematic theorization of aesthetics in China, shifting art from moral-didactic Confucian frameworks (e.g. "art as moral instruction") to Daoist and Buddhist infused philosophical explorations of spirit, emptiness, and transcendence. This transformation was driven by *Xuanxue* metaphysics, a philosophical movement that reinterpreted Daoist thought—particularly the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Yi jing*—through a lens of abstraction and ontological inquiry. At the heart of this reorientation lay the concepts of "absence" and "emptiness" (*wu* 無 and *xu* 虛), which would become the cornerstone of Chinese aesthetic theory for centuries to come.

This era marked a pivotal shift in Chinese aesthetics, as Daoist and Buddhist philosophies reoriented artistic expression toward the intangible, the spontaneous, and the spiritually profound. Prior to the Wei-Jin era, Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) art and aesthetics had been largely governed by Confucian principles, emphasizing the accurate depiction of social rituals, historical events, and moral exemplars. The Wei-Jin period saw art transcend mere representation of the external world to engage with metaphysical questions of existence and the nature of beauty. According to Xu Fuguan (1966, 157), this historical moment represents what we might call the "double awakening" of Chinese painting: both its conscious self-realization as an art form and its attainment of complete aesthetic autonomy.

This shift was catalysed by *Xuanxue* thinkers such as Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE), its foremost thinker, who reinterpreted the *Laozi* to argue that all existence originates from *wu* (absence, nothingness). *Xuanxue*'s central debate revolved around the relationship between *you* (presence) and *wu* (absence). Wang Bi argued that all existence originates from *wu*, an infinite and formless ground. His commentary on the *Laozi* crystallized this view:

> 天下之物，皆以有為生。有之所始，以無為本。

> All things under Heaven are born of presence, but the beginning of presence is absence.[3] (Wang n.d., 40)

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3   Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are my own.

This ontological stance[4] gave aesthetic foundations to emptiness—*xu* 虛[5]—as an active compositional force referring to the ineffable *Dao* as the source of both cosmic and artistic truth. Emptiness became an active compositional force (for instance *liubai* 留白—intentionally leaving the unpainted space in painting) and a dynamic field where *qi* (vital energy) circulated, binding form and spirit. For Wang Bi, beauty lay not in formal perfection but in the embodiment of "boundlessness" (*wuxian* 無限), a quality that transcended sensory limitations to evoke the *Dao*'s purity and spontaneity.

Xuanxue sought to elucidate key Daoist principles—such as "absence" (*wu*), "presence" (*you* 有), "emptiness" (*xu*), "spontaneity" (*ziran* 自然), "effortless action" (*wu wei* 無為), and "non-governance" (*wuzhi* 無治)—through rigorous logical analysis, often drawing from the dialectical techniques of the Moist School of Names (*Mingjia* 名家 or *Mingjiao* 名教). In this tradition, emptiness was not mere negation but a foundational metaphysical concept representing the generative ground of being, a necessary void from which presence (*you*) arises and finds meaning.

In parallel, *Qingtan* 清談, or "Pure Conversations", was an intellectual and aesthetic practice in which Wei-Jin scholars engaged in witty, abstract dialogues on Daoist and Confucian metaphysics, privileging rhetorical elegance, paradoxical insight, and spiritual freedom over political utility. While *Qingtan* was primarily discursive, it was deeply interwoven with aesthetic expression, incorporating poetry, calligraphy, music, and meditative practices as embodied ways of attuning to the ineffable *Dao*. At its core, however, *Qingtan* was shaped by *Xuanxue* which served not only as its main philosophical content (Chan 2003, 214), but also as a guiding mode of aesthetic sensibility. Through *Qingtan*, the key ideas of *Xuanxue*, and particularly emptiness (*xu*), were not only rhetorically articulated but also artistically performed and existentially enacted. Emptiness was valued as an inner stillness, a receptive openness that enabled spontaneous resonance with nature and alignment with the unfolding *Dao*.

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4   The cosmological concepts of "nothing" (*wu* 無) and "something" (*you* 有), as they relate to *Dao*, do not refer to non-being and being but to a hidden and omnipresent generative force that resides within each of the Ten Thousand Things. It seems to be nothing at all, but as such, it is everything. Thus, *Dao* is a "nothing" that "appears to not be but is" (Turner 2025, 35).

5   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 grow out from the same root, and right and wrong come through the same door. This ultimate principle of complementarity is always unnameable, empty, and immovable, for every (form of) presence started form the vacuity (*xu*), and every (form of) movement began in "quietude" (*jing* 靜). 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 (Rošker 2025a, 104).

This philosophical shift mirrored broader cultural changes. Amid political turmoil, the Wei-Jin literati turned inward, cultivating an aesthetic of individuality and emotional depth. Poetry and painting became vehicles to explore human fragility—themes of mortality, grief, and the fleeting joy of existence permeated the arts. The idealized state of absolute freedom of "free and easy wandering" (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) of Zhuangzi's sages found expression in a new artistic ethos: the pursuit of *shen* 神 (spirit) over *xing* 形 (form). As will be discussed more in detail in the succeeding subchapter, Gu Kaizhi's dictum "transmitting spirit through depiction" (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照) captured this ideal, where a portrait's power derived not from likeness but its ability to suggest the subject's spirit through minimal, evocative brushwork.

Xuanxue's hermeneutics of "words and meaning" (*yan* 言 and *yi* 意) further shaped aesthetic theory (Rošker 2018, 166). Wang Bi's assertion that "images exist to convey meaning; once meaning is grasped, the images are forgotten" (象者所以以存意, 得意忘象) underscored art's role as a conduit to the inexpressible which brought forth the concept of "suggestiveness" (含蓄 *hanxu* or 暗示 *anshi*) in art. It emphasizes conveying meaning indirectly, through implication rather than explicit statement, allowing space for the viewer's and reader's imagination to participate in completing the artistic experience.

Emptying of the Self as a Precondition for Aesthetic Observation and Creativity

According to Daoist theory, the *Dao* itself is nothingness. It is not any sort of thing that can be directly perceived or named. Thus, one must take the abandonment of sensory experience and conceptual knowledge as a precondition for grasping the *Dao*. In this sense, nothingness is not only a defining feature of the *Dao*, but also a quality the human psyche must cultivate to embody it. As Zhuangzi proposed in the method of *xinzhai* 心齋 ("fasting of the heart-mind") and *zuowang* 坐忘 ("sitting in forgetfulness") one should perceive the *Dao* only with *qi* 氣 and not with the perceptual organs such as eyes and ears, because they are limited. The *Dao* is present only in emptiness, and emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind.[6]

Here, emptiness (*xu*) is not passive, but is receptive. This directly anticipates the aesthetic ideal of the artist who does not impose a vision but receives inspiration from nature, spirit, or form through an emptied "heart-mind" (*xin* 心).

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6   無聽之以耳，而聽之以心；無聽之以心，而聽之以氣。耳止於聞，心止於符，氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛，虛者，心齋也。 (*Zhuangzi* n.d., "Renjianshi")

In the chapter "The Great Master" (*Dazongshi* 大宗師), Zhuangzi presents the method of *zuowang* by which diminishing of bodily and cognitive faculties leads to the state of emptying in which such transformational process enables the unity with *Dao*.[7] *Zuowang* becomes a powerful model for the aesthetic ego dissolving into *Dao*—a precursor to later theories of non-intentional creativity, where great art flows from "non-self" (*wuwo* 無我 or *wuji* 無己) and "effortless action" (*wu wei* 無為).

In these passages, references to the human body—such as "the ears" and the faculties of sharp hearing and sight—symbolize the link between the body and sensory desires, perception, and emotions. In contrast, mentions of the heart-mind and wisdom reflect the human tendency to fixate on conceptual distinctions like true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, or useful and useless. These two aspects—bodily senses and cognitive judgments—form the roots of habitual or prejudiced thinking, which in turn give rise to everyday emotional states such as joy, anger, sorrow, and love, as well as behaviours like striving for rewards or avoiding punishments. From a Daoist perspective, only by shedding these attachments—both to desire and to discriminating knowledge—can one return to a state of inner stillness, simplicity, and wholeness. It is in this empty state of mind that a person can genuinely perceive, experience, and align with the *Dao* (Fan and Sullivan 2010, 562).

Neo-Daoist reinterpretation of the *Laozi*, especially through Wang Bi's emphasis on nothingness, formlessness, and subtlety, laid the groundwork for a metaphysical aesthetics based on emptiness. Zhuangzi's inner disciplines of self-cultivation offered powerful meditative models of aesthetic receptivity rooted in the dissolution of self and form.

These Daoist practices are not merely spiritual, as they establish the conditions for aesthetic perception and expression. The emptied heart-mind becomes the resonant field where form can arise without obstruction. Later artists and critics—beginning with Zong Bing—will adopt this model to describe the artist's mental state as one of clarity, stillness, and atonement.

This movement—from metaphysical emptiness to contemplative openness—marks the shift from ontological to aesthetic *Dao*, preparing the ground for the emergence of Chinese landscape painting and art theory rooted in spiritual limitless spaciousness.

In classical Chinese aesthetics, e.g. the aesthetics of the literati painters, emptiness—expressed as *xu* in Daoism and *kong* in Chan Buddhism—is not a void devoid of meaning, but the very ground from which meaning emerges. Rather than a form of negation, emptiness operates as an active, receptive, and generative

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7   墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘。 (*Zhuangzi* n.d., "Dazongshi")

force—a space of openness, resonance, and spiritual potential. From the meta-physical writings of early Daoist and Buddhist thought to the theoretical reflec-tions of painters and critics, emptiness has stood at the heart of Chinese aesthetic tradition since the Wei-Jin period.

Central to this tradition are aesthetic concepts such as *shen* (神, "spirit"), *qi* (氣, "vital energy"), *yun* (韻, "resonance" or "harmony"), the complementary inter-play of *yin* and *yang* (陰陽), *qing* (清, "clarity" or "purity"), *zhuo* (濁, "murk-iness"), *dan* (淡, "subtlety" or "blandness"), *jing* (靜, "tranquillity"), and *yuan* (遠, "farness" or "depth"). Each of these arises from the principle of emptiness and expresses its influence across all artistic forms in the Chinese aesthetic tradition.

This philosophical and aesthetic understanding of emptiness as a generative ground found its first profound artistic expressions in the work of Gu Kaizhi 顧 愷之 (c. 344–406) and Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443), who translated these abstract principles into concrete painting theory and practice. Where Daoist and Buddhist texts articulated emptiness as a metaphysical concept, these pioneering artists revealed how it could become the very method of artistic creation.

Gu Kaizhi and Zong Bing: The Aesthetics of Spirit-Transmission (傳神 *Chuanshen*)

Gu Kaizhi, the foundational theorist of Chinese figure painting, revolutionized artistic practice by prioritizing the "transmission of spirit" (*chuanshen* 傳神) over mere physical likeness, demonstrating that true representation depended not on meticulous form, but on capturing the spirit (*shen* 神)[8] through strategic emptiness.

Gu claimed that the crucial aesthetic ideal in the art of painting is precisely in the author's portrayal of the spirit and its representation via the external form. This kind of representation is what we are able to see, while the spirit belongs to the unseen, but can be felt. Here, the "spirit" (*shen*) refers to the essence of human beings and the specific characteristic of every individual (Xu 1966, 158).

However, his famous principle of "transmitting spirit through form" (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照[9]) was realized precisely through what he chose not to paint—

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8   According to Xu Fuguan, s*hen* is the essence of a person and also their distinctive character. "神 是人地本質也是一個人的特性" (Xu 1966, 158) However, this definition of *shen* probably refers to its expression in the context of figure painting.

9   In traditional Chinese painting, the verb to "write" or "describe" (*xiehua* 寫畫) was often used in-stead of the verb to "paint" (*huihua* 繪畫), because painting, as an artistic genre actually evolved from calligraphy (Xu 2002, 85).

most notably in his deliberate hesitation to dot the pupils of his subjects' eyes, leaving space for the viewer's imagination to complete the spiritual presence.[10] This technique embodied the Daoist paradox: that the most vital element of a portrait exists in its unpainted voids. His famous dictum reveals his Daoist-inspired belief that true artistry lies in *evoking the invisible through the visible*.

四體妍蚩本無關於妙處, 傳神寫照正在阿堵[11]中。

The beauty or ugliness of four limbs has fundamentally nothing to do with the essence of subtlety. What is crucial in this is the portrayal of the spirit. (Gu, in Li 2003, 88)

Gu's technique embodied the idea that the most vital element of a portrait exists in its unpainted spaces or void. By withholding precise depiction of the pupils, Gu created a "void" (*xu*) that invited viewers to project the subject's spirit themselves. The eyes became a liminal space where the painted form met the viewer's imagination. This technique mirrored Laozi's idea:

道冲而用之或不盈。

The *Dao* is empty, yet inexhaustible. (*Daodejing* n.d., chap.4)

The "incomplete" eyes functioned like Laozi's hub of a wheel or the empty space of the clay vessel – their emptiness enabling dynamic spiritual exchange. Gu's theory of "depicting spirit through form" (*yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神) established a core tension in Chinese aesthetics. The physical image (*xing* 形)—posture, drapery, even the "dotting of the eyes" (*dianjing* 点睛)—was merely the *vessel* (*qi* 器) for the spirit. The subject's *shen*, their essential vitality and individuality, had to transcend its material representation. This idea resonates with Zhuangzi's forgetting of a fish trap:

筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌。

The fish trap exists for the fish; once you've caught the fish, forget the trap. (*Zhuangzi* n.d., chap. Waiwu)

and with Wang Bi's idea that "images exist to convey meaning; once meaning is grasped, the images are forgotten".

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10   Gu Kaizhi famously avoided dotting the pupils in his portraits, declaring, "The spirit-resonance [*shenyun* 神韻] of a figure lies precisely in these dots". This deliberate hesitation reflected his belief that the eyes captured the soul—once completed, the painting's lifeforce would be irrevocably fixed.

11   阿堵 is a vernacular used during the Wei-Jin and Tang dynasties which means "this". In this context, it refers to the eyes and implies a small but expressive part that reveals essence.

Gu Kaizhi promoted the idea of integrating the subject's feeling into the object so that a spirit of the object will obtain artistic image. Such an aesthetic image thus embodies the life spirit of the object (Zhu 2022, 236). The image serves as the vessel through which the spirit expresses itself, with the spirit being the essence behind the image's purpose. The image gains its life and energy from the spirit, and in turn, the spirit depends on the image for manifestation. The synergy of image and spirit is essential for art to align with the *Dao* (ibid., 115).

The aesthetic revolution initiated by Gu Kaizhi's concept of *chuanshen* in figure painting found a profound extension in Zong Bing's theory of landscape (Zong n.d., 375, 443). Gu captured the spirit (*shen*) through subtle absences—most famously in the unarticulated depths of a subject's eyes—while Zong Bing shifted this principle from the human form to the natural world, discovering *Dao* in the voids between mountain peaks.

In his *Preface to Landscape Painting* (*Shanshuihua Xu* 山水畫序), Zong redefines painting as a spiritual practice in which the landscape becomes both subject and expression of the *Dao*. In this work, which represents the first text of landscape painting, the painter becomes a sage who communes with the *Dao* through imagined landscapes. Emptiness becomes both a spatial technique and a contemplative state. Here, we witness the first theoretical articulation of painting as a spiritual practice grounded in emptiness.[12]

Zong was a devout Buddhist and an inheritor of the Daoist contemplative tradition, and his theory of landscape painting draws heavily on Zhuangzian practices of emptying and mental quietude (*xinzhai*) as well as "free and easy wandering" (*xiaoyao you*) of the human spirit pertaining to the aesthetic experience of emptiness and free flow of imagination (*shensi* 神思,[13] "spiritual reflection"). Zong

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12   As Heubel writes, mountain-water painting (*shanshuihua*), understood as an exercise in aesthetic cultivation, moves between the concealed and the manifest. It is the abstention from colours and expressive effects that opens up a sphere of subtle perception in the diffuse liminal area between "without-being" (*wu* 無) and "with-being" (*you* 有), between "emptiness" (*xu* 虛) and "fullness" (*shi* 實). Aesthetic cultivation thus turns around an "energetic transformation" (*qihua* 氣化) in which the manifest emerges out of the concealed and again disappears in concealment. It is the fine shades and barely noticeable transitions between the apparent and hidden that perception learns to be attentive to. In literati painting, an aesthetic limit-experience is practised, which has to do with changing states of breath-energy (Heubel 2021, 278).

13   *Shensi*, as an aesthetic category, refers to the process of artistic-creative thinking and encompasses the full range of mental activities involved in the creation of art—from preparation and conceptualization to inspiration and the actual production of the artwork (Zhang 2021, ix). As both an aesthetic concept and a method, *shensi* involves the imaginative capacity of the artist, the expression of the "spirit" (*shen*) through a harmonious unification of will (*zhi*), understood as the faculty of the heart-mind (*xin*), and vital energy or potential (*qi*). To achieve this unity, the artist is called to "fast the mind" (*xinzhai*), a practice rooted in Daoist thought, which enables access to the true essence of creativity and allows the work to emerge spontaneously and effortlessly. Moreover,

famously asserts that the *Dao* is present within landscape, and thus landscape painting has the power to convey metaphysical truth.

聖人含道暎物，賢者[14]澄懷味像。至於山水，質有而趣靈。

The sage embodies the Way and illuminates all things; the worthy one purifies his mind and tastes [appreciates] appearances. As for mountains and rivers, their qualities evoke spiritual charm. (*Shanshui hua xu* n.d., sec.1)

As we see in the passage, the sage's internal alignment with the *Dao* allows them to understand or reflect the world. The artist's "purified mind" (澄懷 *chenghuai*) mirrors Zhuangzi's *xinzhai*, creating an internal void to receive the *Dao*. With the empty heart-mind the artist is in a state of contemplative, aesthetic engagement with the world.

夫聖人以神[15]法道，而賢者通；山水以形媚道，而仁者樂。不亦幾乎？

The sage models the Way through spirit, and the worthy one connects with it; mountains and rivers embody the Way through their forms, and the benevolent delights in them. Is this not near [to the Way]? (Ibid.)

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shensi includes refined aesthetic emotions—elevated responses to life and the world that arise through contemplative engagement with external objects and situations. In this dynamic process, the aesthetic subject remains in constant interaction with the external world, being stimulated and inspired by its forms, rhythms, and transformations. The concept of *shensi* was first discussed by Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) in his work *The Art of Writing* (*Wen fu* 文賦) and was later developed into a more systematic theoretical framework by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 522) in his seminal literary treatise *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍). Zong Bing's offered a pivotal reflection on *shensi* in the visual arts in his *Preface to Landscape Painting*). He described how painting can convey the spirit (*shen*) and thought (*si*) of both the artist and the natural world, enabling a resonance between the viewer's inner mind and the cosmic rhythms embodied in the landscape. Zong's account positions *shensi* as a mediating force between inner contemplation and external representation, central to the metaphysical function of painting.

14   The difference between the sage and the worthy lies in the degree and scope of spiritual attainment. The sage acts effortlessly in harmony with the *Dao*, with full understanding of Heaven, Earth, and humanity. The worthy is highly virtuous and capable, but not yet at the transcendent level of a sage. They present a model for moral cultivation and wisdom, achievable through learning and practice. The worthies follow and understand the Way (*Dao*) but may still struggle or rely on deliberate effort.

15   In my understanding, *shen* refers to the spiritual essence or transcendent dimension of a person, while *xin* (心) denotes the mind or heart-mind—encompassing reason, emotion, thought, and desire. The *xin* is often regarded as the active and conscious aspect of the self and must be emptied for the *shen* to manifest spiritual insight and a deeper attunement to the *Dao* or cosmic order.

The sage is in spiritual resonance with the *Dao*, and worthy persons on the other hand have intellectual or moral access to the Way. As Zong notes, "mountains and rivers [nature] allure the *Dao* through their forms" (山水以形媚道) precisely because their "material forms" (*xing* 形) are permeated by immaterial voids (mist, streams, clouds). Blank silk or paper becomes emptiness (*xu*) which is not a passive background, but an active cosmological space.

> 聖賢暎於絕代，萬趣融其神思。余復何為哉，暢神而已。神之所
> 暢，孰有先焉。

> The sages and worthies shine beyond their era, and myriad forms merge into their spiritual thought. As for me—what more can I do? I simply let my spirit flow. Where the spirit flows freely, what could precede it? (Ibid., sec. 8)

This passage celebrates the transcendent union of art, nature, and the mind. The sages embody timeless wisdom, their spiritual thoughts harmonizing with the infinite vitality of the world ("萬趣融其神思"). For the artist, the highest purpose is not imitation but spiritual liberation ("暢神") as an unmediated flow of intuition where the self dissolves into creative communion with the cosmos. The rhetorical question ("孰有先焉") suggests that such moments of unblocked inspiration (of the spirit) are primordial, surpassing even the authority of tradition.

Although Zong Bing is not yet speaking directly about emptiness as an aesthetic category, his emphasis on mental emptiness presents a foundation of spiritual engagement with the landscape which leads to harmonious resonance with the external world. This attitude reflects a novel approach in art of painting and aesthetic theory that was further developed by famous painter Xie He.

However, in my opinion transference of Zhuangzi's mental emptiness or *xinzhai* unto the field of aesthetics and artistic practice in Zong Bing's *Preface* presents the foundational basis for further development of emptiness as an aesthetic category that prevailed in Chinese aesthetics. In this sense I disagree with Susan Bush, who argues that the aesthetic and theoretical contributions of Zong Bing pertain primarily to the consistent representation of forms in the art of painting and that convincing representation is all the artist needs concern himself with (Bush 2012, 14). This formalist (or reductionist) reading of Zong Bing misinterprets the radical ontological shift embedded in his landscape theory. A close reading of the *Preface* reveals that Zong's project was never about mere verisimilitude, but about reconfiguring painting as a dialectic of presence and absence—a contemplative practice grounded in Wei-Jin Daoist and Buddhist philosophy.

When Zong instructs artists to "depict forms by forms" (以形寫形), he paradoxically subordinates representation to spiritual cultivation, which again echoes Zhuangzi's famous dictum once you've caught the fish, forget the trap. For Zong, the painted mountain serves as just such a provisional construct—its material form is important only insofar as it points toward immaterial *Dao*.

However, according to Zong Bing's *Preface,* in order to present the *Dao* on landscape painting through form (山水以形媚道), one has to present the forms in the landscape by forms and colours by colours (以形寫形，以色貌色也). Zong insists on depicting forms "as they are" (以形寫形) not for realism's sake, but because the *Dao* self-reveals through nature's unadorned beauty. The artist's emptied mind becomes a transparent medium allowing the landscape's *shen* to imprint itself.

On this grounds, Zong's theory transcends mere representation. His "myriad forms merging into spiritual thought" (萬趣融其神思) describes a dialectical process of emptying of the self in order to let the landscape's *qi* (氣) flow into that void which results in the painting becoming *shensi*—"spiritual reflection and imagination"—a fusion of outer perception and inner emptiness.

This idea was later refined by Xie He 谢赫 in the sixth century into a formalized aesthetic principle. His concept of *qiyun shengdong* (spirit resonance and life-movement) crystallized the artistic philosophy of emptiness (*xu*), establishing it as a lasting standard in Chinese art and aesthetics.

The Interplay of Emptiness and Fullness (*xushi* 虛實): *Qiyun Shengdong* 氣韻生動

Building upon Zong Bing's theory of landscape painting as a spiritual practice grounded in mental emptiness and resonance with the *Dao*, we arrive at a significant turning point in the sixth century with Xie He. While Zong redefined painting as a meditative communion with the *Dao* through form and emptiness, Xie He synthesized this spiritual sensibility into the foundational aesthetic category of *qiyun shengdong* (氣韻生動) in his influential treatise *Guhua Pinlu* (古畫品錄, *The Record of the Classification of Old Paintings*).

This concept serves as a bridge between Gu Kaizhi's *chuanshen*, Zong Bing's emptied mind and free spirit in landscape painting, and the fully codified theory of aesthetic movement and vitality in Xie He. As Xu Fuguan (2002, 91) notes, all earlier notions of spirit—*shenqi* 神氣 ("spirit-vitality"), *shenyun* 神韻 ("resonance of spirit") *shenming* 神明 ("clarity of spirit"), *shenling* 神靈 ("divine spirit")—are ultimately integrated into this singular and generative principle of

qiyun shengdong.[16] In this synthesis, the Daoist-Buddhist idea of emptiness transforms from a meditative state into a dynamic aesthetic force, animating both artist and artwork. In the context of figure painting, *qi* 氣 refers to the inner vitality or spiritual quality of a person, while *yun* 韻[17]denotes the outward rhythm or demeanour through which this inner quality is expressed.

> 所謂氣韻生動就是要求繪畫生動地表現出人的內在精神氣質，　格調風度。

> *Qiyun shengdong* demands that painting vividly express a person's inner spirit, character, and demeanor—not through extravagant description of external circumstances, but through spiritual insight and expressive form ... (Li 2003, 86)

Yun is thus not merely style or tone, but the expressive trace of spirit embodied in form. Xie He appropriates this term from character appraisal or evaluation (*renwu pinzao* 人物品藻) of the *Treatise on Personalities* (*renwuzhi* 人物誌[18]), giving it aesthetic depth. According to Kang (2022, 31), *yun* conveys "the distinctive qualities of an individual", and in painting it reveals how *qi* manifests through the subtleties of posture, gesture, and presence.

While originally grounded in figure painting, Xu Fuguan argues (2002, 920–93) that *qiyun shengdong* finds its true and fuller realization in landscape painting,

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16   For an in-depth study of Xu Fugan's analysis and interpretation of the concept *qiyun shengdong,* see Sernelj (2021).

17   "Yun" originally emerged in the Han dynasty (first to second century CE), where it was defined as "harmony" (和) in the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary. Initially tied to music, it described melodic expression and rhythmic flow. Over time, the term expanded to literature and phonetics, where it came to signify tonal resonance (e.g. rhyme in poetry). As Xu Fuguan notes in his in-depth analysis of the concept *qiyun shengdong*, that across all contexts—whether music, verse, or language—*yun* retains its core idea of proportionate harmony, blending elements into a cohesive aesthetic whole (Xu 2002, 99).

18   By the late second century, the art of character appraisal (*Renwuzhi* 人物誌) had developed into an independent discipline, though it continued to play a role in the official recommendation system during the Wei-Jin period. Notably, their approach to character appraisal was not solely physiognomic but also psychological, aiming to capture the individual's "spirit" (*shen*). This is clearly demonstrated in Liu Shao's 劉紹 (early third century) *Treatise on Personalities*, the only surviving characterological work from this period. Liu's treatise begins with an analysis of "human feelings" (*qing* 情) and "inborn qualities" (*xing* 性), which he considers the foundations of personality. In terms of physiognomic observation, the focus was on transcending physical appearance to grasp a person's spirit—particularly through the study of the eyes, which uniquely convey it. Liu Shao wrote that every person has a body, and each body possesses a spirit. He emphasized that no one can fully understand a person without understanding their spirit (Yu 2016, 140). It is quite possible—and even likely—that Gu Kaizhi, in his aesthetic concept of *chuan shen* ("transmitting the spirit"), was influenced by, or at least reflected, ideas similar to those found in Liu Shao's theory of character appraisal, particularly the emphasis on capturing a person's *shen* ("spirit").

where it articulates the living breath of the cosmos. Here, *qi* becomes not merely the spirit of an individual, but the creative energy of nature itself, while *yun* becomes the harmonious resonance through which this *qi* is expressed in brushwork, rhythm, and composition. In this context, *qiyun* is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic interplay of complementary opposites, akin to the principle of *yin* and *yang* (陰陽). It manifests through paired polarities—such as "emptiness and fullness" (*xushi* 虛實), "hardness and softness" (*gangrou* 剛柔), "clarity and obscurity" (*qingzhuo* 清濁), "distance and proximity" (*yuanjin* 遠近). These are not merely formal contrasts; rather, they embody the rhythmic flow of the cosmos, expressing the aesthetic realization of Daoist metaphysics within the medium of painting. Xu also interprets *qiyun* through Wang Bi's ontology of *benmo* (本末, "roots and branches"), where *qi* is the "generative root" (*ben* 本)—the emptiness-infused creative vitality—and *yun* is its manifest rhythm (*mo* 末). In this sense, "emptiness" (*xu* 虛) is the precondition for *qiyun*: only through an "emptied heart-mind" (*xu xin* 虛心) can the artist respond to and channel the primordial vitality of the world (ibid.).

Thus, in *qiyun shengdong*, we see the transformation of emptiness into aesthetic movement. The artist must first empty the self—release ego, intention, and form—so that the unforced flow of *qi* may shape the artwork from within. The resulting work is not an imitation of the world, but a resonance with the *Dao*, felt through rhythm, breath, and harmony. The "lifelike movement" (*shengdong* 生動) in the painting is not merely visual liveliness, but the *Dao* moving through form. In this way, *qiyun shengdong* is not just a stylistic criterion—it is a metaphysical principle. It expresses the living rhythm of the *Dao* as perceived by an attuned and empty mind. The artist becomes a medium for the cosmos, and the artwork a site of transformation—for both the artist and viewer.

Jing Hao's *Bifaji* and the Aesthetics of Emptiness in Landscape Painting

In his 10th-century treatise *Bifaji* 筆法記 (*Notes on the Art of Brushwork*), Jing Hao fundamentally transformed the Chinese aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong* by expanding it from portraiture to monochromatic landscape painting,[19]

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19   Between the Middle Tang and the Five dynasties period (eighth to 10th centuries), Chinese art underwent a profound transformation. Landscape painting began to eclipse portraiture, and richly coloured religious and narrative scenes gave way to the subtleties of monochromatic "ink-wash painting" (*shuimo* 水墨). While this shift might initially seem like a retreat from visual richness, Tang masters such as Jing Hao, Wang Wei, and Zhang Zao recognized in ink and wash a deeper expressive potential. They criticized the reliance on colour, arguing that it distracted from the essence of a scene. Instead, they embraced monochrome as a medium capable of penetrating beyond

while grounding it in aesthetics of emptiness. His work represents a pivotal moment where the invisible qualities of *qiyun*—previously applied to human subjects—were extended to the natural world, revealing how all things in the landscape possess their own vital spirit (*qi*) and resonant harmony (*yun*) that emerges from their essential emptiness.

Jing Hao's conception of *qiyun* in landscape painting is deeply connected to the Daoist understanding of *wu* (nothingness) and *xu* (emptiness). He saw the landscape as composed of living elements, each containing distinctive inner qualities, with *qi* representing the fundamental life force that painters must capture—not through superficial representation but by conveying the dynamic emptiness from which all forms emerge. This is exemplified in his famous principle that:

山水之象, 氣勢相生。

The imagery of landscapes arises from the interconnection between *qi* and dynamic configuration (*shi*). (Jing n.d., 18)

This dynamic *shi* (勢), the configurational energy or movement of forms, is not fixed but emerges from emptiness and through interrelation. The visible scene is not merely copied, but constructed through attentiveness to the hidden flows of energy, the shifting balances of *yin* and *yang*, and the presence of voids that give form its vitality.

The concept of *xiang* 象 (image-phenomenon) serves as the crucial mediator between visible form and formless origin in Jing Hao's theory. Building on Wang Bi's philosophical framework, *xiang* represents not just physical appearance or physical form of an "object" (形 *xing*), but the artist's mental construction that bridges the tangible world and its intangible source (*yuan*). This creative process involves carefully selecting and rearranging natural forms to reveal their hidden cosmological origin:

須明物象之源。

Illuminating the source of the image of things. (Jing n.d., 17)

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surface appearance to evoke the spirit of the landscape. Crucially, these artists understood the power of emptiness—not as a void, but as an active space that suggested distance, silence, and the ineffable. In this context, blank areas in the composition became as significant as inked ones, reflecting Daoist and Chan Buddhist concepts of non-action and inner stillness. The synergy of brushwork, tonal variation, and emptiness allowed artists to suggest movement, transformation, and inner life, achieving a dynamism that rigid replication could not. The ink-wash technique became the ideal medium to convey not only physical forms but the painter's *qi*—the vital energy—imbuing the work with both immediacy and depth (Kang 2022, 27).

Jing Hao's *Six Essentials*[20] of painting further develop this relationship with emptiness. He describes the brush moving "neither confined to texture nor form, as if flying and running", achieving a state of spontaneous creativity (*ziran*) that mirrors the *Dao*'s effortless generation of the world from nothingness. The painter must cultivate an empty mind (*xinzhai*), free from worldly distractions and technical constraints, to become a conduit for the cosmic *qi*. This culminates in Jing Hao's ultimate advice to "forget brush and ink" (*wang bimo* 忘筆墨), echoing Zhuangzi's ideal of *zuowang* (sitting in forgetfulness), where the artist transcends technique to directly participate in nature's creative process and to express the "genuine reality" (*zhen* 眞),[21] the *Dao* itself.

The harmonious interplay between ink and brush in Jing Hao's method also reflects this philosophy of emptiness. While ink defines forms through subtle tonal variations, it simultaneously conceals brushwork to avoid artificiality, allowing the painting's *qi* to flow unimpeded. The four forces of brushwork—from physical execution to spiritual expression—must align with the cosmic creative act, where form and emptiness, presence and absence, constantly give birth to one another.

Ultimately, *Bifaji* presents landscape painting as a spiritual discipline of emptiness. The painter does not copy nature's surfaces but reveals how mountains,

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20   Probably following Xie He, Jing Hao proposed six essential principles of painting (*Liuyao* 六要) coupled with four forces (*sishi* 四勢: 筋, 肉, 骨, 氣) related to the brush skill. Jing Hao defined the six essentials as follows:
氣者，心隨筆運，取象不惑。韻者，隱跡立形，備儀不俗。思者，刪拔大要，凝想形物。景者，制度時因，搜妙創真。筆者，雖依法則，運轉變通，不質不形，如飛如動。墨者，高低暈淡，品物淺深，文採自然，似非因筆。 (Vital energy [*qi* 氣] is that which your mind follows with the movement of the brush, grasping the image without hesitation. Resonance [*yun* 韻] is that which conceals traces [of the brush] when constructing forms, satisfying a sense of propriety and avoiding vulgarity. Thought [*si* 思] is to condense [the painting] into the most essential [features] and to manifest one's ideas in concrete forms. Scene [*jing* 景] is to properly examine the principles of the changing times and seasons and grasp the profound [*miao* 妙] to create genuineness [*zhen* 眞]. Brush [*bi* 筆] is, while adhering to basic rules, to move the brush fluently and effortlessly with variations and changes, [confined] neither in texture nor in form, as if flying and running. Ink [*mo* 墨] is [to express] the depth of all things with the density [of the ink] and the thickness [of the strokes], creating expressions so natural that they appear as if they had not been done with a brush.) (Kang 2022, 34–35)

21   The philosophical foundation of *zhen* (眞, genuineness) as a core ideal in landscape painting can be traced to the Daoist writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. In Daoist thought, *zhen* is often contrasted with *wei* (偽, artificiality), expressing a fundamental return to the natural, unadorned state of being – embodied in concepts such as *su* (素, plainness) and *pu* (樸, simplicity). This ideal was further refined in Jing Hao's *Bifaji* where *zhen* is elevated as a central aesthetic principle. Importantly, in this context, *zhen* does not equate to mere "likeness" (*si* 似), but to a deeper act of "creation" (*chuang* 創) that requires a penetrating observation and understanding of nature. Rather than replicating appearances, the artist seeks to express the inner truth of a scene or "genuine landscape" (*zhenjing* 眞景) through a process of introspective engagement and imaginative synthesis (Kang 2022, 28–30).

rivers and trees emerge from and return to the formless *Dao*. Through *qiyun*'s vital breath, *xiang*'s mediating images, and *wuwei*'s spontaneous brushwork, Jing Hao's theory embodies the *Xuanxue* ontology of "absence is the root of presence"—establishing emptiness as the very ground of artistic creation and perception in the Chinese landscape painting tradition.

The Decline and Revival of Literati Painting

By the late Ming dynasty, the spirit of literati painting—once rooted in personal expression, philosophical reflection, and the cultivation of inner emptiness—faced a slow decline as the Traditionalist School (*zhengtongpai* 正統派) came to dominate the mainstream. Emphasis shifted increasingly toward technical precision, formal repetition, and the mimicry of past styles.[22] Yet, even in this atmosphere of aesthetic conservatism, voices emerged to reclaim the lost essence of the literati tradition.

Among the most profound theories in this discourse is that of Shitao, whose *Huayulu* 畫語錄 (*Treatise on Painting*) revitalized the foundational principles of literati aesthetics. Drawing on the *Yi jing*, *Daodejing* and Chan Buddhist thought, Shitao formulated his radical notion of *yihua* (一畫) the "one" or holistic brushstroke—through which painting becomes a cosmogonic act, mirroring the spontaneous, undivided emergence of all things from the *Dao*. His invocation of *pu* 樸 (simplicity) and *hundun* 混沌 (primal chaos) as the generative ground of artistic creation framed painting as a process of becoming, not replication.[23] His asser-

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22   The decline of literati painting in Chinese history can be attributed to a convergence of political disruption, institutional transformation, and cultural disintegration, particularly during the transitional period between the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 precipitated a crisis for the literati class: many scholar-officials who had long constituted the intellectual and creative core of literati culture were displaced, executed, or profoundly disillusioned under the foreign rule of the Manchu-led Qing regime. The erosion of Confucian values and the disintegration of the socio-political structures that had traditionally nurtured literati ideals contributed to a widespread cultural malaise. Simultaneously, the increasing professionalization and commercialization of art fostered a widening gap between the literati ethos and the practices of court and commercial painters. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), literati painting underwent a process of differentiation, giving rise to distinctive schools. This evolution ultimately resulted in the classification of Northern and Southern Schools of painting, and later, the categorization into Traditionalist and Individualist Schools formulated by the renowned painter and art theorist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) who explicitly favoured and prioritized the Traditionalist School (Strassberg 1989, 8).

23   太古無法。太樸無散。太樸一散而法立矣。 法於何立。 立於一畫。一畫者眾有之本。 萬象之根。 (There were no [painting] methods in remote antiquity, for the Uncarved block had not yet disintegrated. When it did, methods were established. But what is the basis of any method? They are all based on the Holistic brushstroke. The Holistic brushstroke is fundamental to

tion that *wufa* 無法 (no method or no copying) is the ultimate method resisted formulaic constraint, affirming instead a dynamic openness to spontaneity and transformation.[24]

Central to Shitao's vision is the notion of *mengyang* 蒙養 ("nurturing potentiality" or "concealment"),[25] a subtle emptiness within the interaction of brush and ink, where form arises from formlessness. Shitao reasserted painting as spontaneous, contemplative, and alive—a process in tune with the transformations of Dao rather than bound by convention. This aesthetic of emptiness revived the true ethos of the literati: painting not as representation, but as cosmogonic act.[26]

In the 20th century, the spiritual core of literati painting experienced a powerful revival in both artistic practice and philosophical reflection. Artists like Liu Guosong 劉國松[27] reinvigorated the literati tradition by merging its timeless principles with modern abstraction. His cosmic ink paintings dissolve the boundary between tradition and innovation, layering textured surfaces and vast spatial emptiness to invoke the Daoist notion of formlessness and suggest the sublime. This abstract visual language echoes the same emptiness-as-potential that Shitao once articulated, revealing a continuity of vision across centuries.

Parallel to this artistic renewal, Xu Fuguan offered a profound theoretical reinterpretation of literati aesthetics. In response to what he saw as the decline of

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depicting everything in existence and is the root of all images.) (Shi n.d., *Huayulu*: 1; transl. by Strassberg 1989, 61)

24   至人無法。 非無法也。 無法而法。 乃為至法。。。一知其法。即功於化。夫畫天下變通之大法也。 (The Perfect man has no method. Yet it is not that he has no method. No method is the supreme method. Once you grasp this method, you become one with transformation. Painting is the great way (art) of the transformation of the world.) (Shi n.d., *Huayulu*: 3)

25   As Chai asserts, potentiality derives from the absence of method (法 *fa*) in antiquity; nourishment derives from the lack of differentiation in the primordial chaos. From lack of differentiation comes nourishment; from the absence of *fa* comes potentiality (Chai 2021, 105).

26   For an in-depth study on Shitao's aesthetic theory, see Sernelj (2024).

27   Liu Guosong is widely recognized as the first and most influential figure in modernist and abstract Chinese painting in Taiwan, as well as a leading force in the island's avant-garde art scene. A pioneering artist and theorist, Liu sought to break free from the rigid conventions of traditional Chinese ink painting by infusing it with abstract forms and experimental techniques. Yet, beneath this modernist surface lies a deep engagement with classical Chinese thought—especially the aesthetics of the Wei-Jin period. Drawing inspiration from the Wei-Jin emphasis on individuality, spontaneity, and metaphysical depth, Liu revived the ancient aesthetic ideals of *qiyun* (spirit resonance) and *ziran* (spontaneity) in a contemporary context. Just as Wei-Jin scholars and artists turned inward in pursuit of personal expression and alignment with the *Dao*, Liu embraced abstraction not as a rejection of tradition, but as a return to its most essential, expressive core. His works often reflect a meditative engagement with nature, emptiness, and cosmic rhythm, echoing the philosophical spirit of *Xuanxue* and the poetic sensibility of figures like Ruan Ji or Ji Kang. His most influential work on art and aesthetics is *The Path of Chinese Modern Painting* (*Zhongguo xiandaihua de lu* 中國現代畫的路), which was published in Taiwan in 1965.

existential depth in Chinese painting—driven by social and institutional pressures such as the civil service examination system—Xu critiqued the formalism rooted in Dong Qichang's Northern-Southern School division. Rather than advocating a nostalgic return, Xu proposed a philosophical re-grounding of literati painting in the aesthetic category of *yuan* (遠), meaning "distance" or "farness". For Xu, *yuan* was not only a visual principle of spatial emptiness but also a moral and spiritual dimension, enabling contemplative depth and inner clarity.

For Xu, *yuan* is not simply a spatial device but a metaphysical gesture—an expression of *xuwu* (虛無), an "empty without" that sustains spiritual resonance and ontological depth (Heubel 2021, 284). The distant mountains, receding rivers, and mists in landscape painting enact a subtle transition from the tangible to the invisible, the finite to the infinite. As Xu writes:

> Farness is the extension of what is formed and material in mountain-water [painting]. This extension follows the visual perception of a person which unexpectedly shifts into the imaginary. Because of this shift, what is formed and material in mountain-water [painting] communicates directly with the empty without (*xuwu* 虛無), the finite communicates directly with the infinite... This without, however, is not a void without (*kongwu* 空無), but rather the cosmic source of the power and meaning of life, pulsating in the mist between the concealed and the manifest. (Xu in Heubel 2021, 284)

According to Heubel (ibid.), for Xu, the experience of distance in painting provides a distinctive mode of transcendence within immanence: through the artist's composition and the viewer's gaze, a transition unfolds from the tangible world to the invisible, where the finite realm of form opens directly onto the infinite.

Conclusion: The Persistent Presence of Emptiness in Literati Painting

In the grand arc from Gu Kaizhi's *chuanshen* to Shitao's *yihua*, and finally to Xu Fuguan's vision of *yuan*, Chinese literati painting consistently turns to emptiness—not as absence or nothingness, but as the very ground of vitality, resonance, and meaning. In landscape painting, *yuan* becomes a silent but powerful force: a visual manifestation of emptiness, reminding the viewer that true depth lies not in what is depicted, but in the invisible distances that surround, sustain, and transform it. This aesthetic orientation reveals a profound metaphysical commitment: that emptiness is not void, but potential; not negation, but the condition for emergence. From Gu Kaizhi's emphasis on the transmission of spirit through

form, to Shitao's single brushstroke that unifies multiplicity, and Xu's ontological reading of distance as a medium for moral and spiritual awakening, Chinese aesthetics unfolds as a meditation on the generative power of what cannot be seen. Rather than striving for representational completeness, literati painting invites the viewer into an active process of imaginative participation—where blankness is not a lack, but an opening; where stillness speaks; and where meaning arises not from assertion, but from attunement.

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Is Freedom Nothing?

Luka PERUŠIĆ*

Abstract

This paper raises and discusses the possibility that freedom and nothing are the same phenomenon. Consequently, whether this identification is true or false affects the fundamental understanding of the nature of free will and tests whether moral life is absurd or not. In the introductory section, the problem and the methodology are briefly presented. In the first two parts, the problem of the nature of freedom is explored and its similarity to nothing is brought closer, first through the debate on free will and then through Kant's cosmological theory of freedom. Having the similarity given in brief, the next two parts explore the relation between freedom and nothing, first by examining the problem of the existence of nothing in order to further emphasize the convergence of the two concepts, and then by defining the results of the relevant possibilities for their sameness. The concluding suggestions are that: (1) positively oriented theories of freedom in the Western philosophical tradition should be carefully revised, because the absorption of nothing into freedom either relegates them to the disposition of determinism, rendering the concept impossible, or challenges to accept it on the basis of personal belief, rather than justified argument; and (2) a universal solution to the problem of free will most likely require close communication with the Eastern philosophical tradition, which has made significant theoretical contributions to the problem of the relation between freedom and nothing.

Keywords: freedom, nothing, free will, nothingness, morality, action, Immanuel Kant

Ali je svoboda nič?

Izvleček

Prispevek izhaja iz predpostavke, po kateri sta svoboda in nič en in isti pojav. Pokaže, da imata resničnost ali neresničnost te istovetnosti neposreden vpliv na temeljno razumevanje narave svobodne volje. V tem kontekstu avtor preverja, ali je moralno življenje potemtakem absurdno. Uvodni del članka na kratko predstavi obravnavani problem in metodologijo raziskave. V prvih dveh poglavjih sta obravnavana problem narave svobode in njena podobnost z ničem, najprej v razpravi o svobodni volji in nato na podlagi Kantove kozmološke teorije svobode. Po kratkem prikazu te podobnosti se avtor v naslednjih dveh poglavjih poglobi v razmerje med svobodo in ničem – najprej z obravnavo problema obstoja niča, s čimer še dodatno poudari njuno konvergenco, nato pa z opredelitvijo

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možnih posledic morebitne istovetnosti. Sklepne trditve so: (1) pozitivno naravnane teorije svobode v zahodni filozofski tradiciji bi bilo treba natančno revidirati, saj absorpcija niča v pojem svobode te teorije bodisi podredi determinizmu – kar bi izničilo pojem svobode – bodisi zahteva njegovo sprejetje zgolj na ravni osebnega prepričanja, torej brez racionalne utemeljitve; in (2) univerzalna rešitev problema svobodne volje bo najverjetneje zahtevala poglobljen dialog z vzhodno filozofsko tradicijo, ki je pomembno prispevala k osvetlitvi problema razmerja med svobodo in ničem.

Ključne besede: svoboda, nič, svobodna volja, ničnost, morala, delovanje, Immanuel Kant

Introduction

In the history of Western philosophy, the nature of *freedom* and the nature of *nothing* are among the oldest and most longstanding philosophical issues.[1] They encompass discussions and disputes in all the core disciplines of philosophy, with metaphysics and ethics leading the discourse, but in recent decades also including other scientific perspectives, such as biology, physics, psychology and neuroscience. The literature on these two concepts is so vast that it could be considered uncountable, with no available units covering all the possible aspects, perspectives, and places of debate. This is because: (1) both concepts are peculiar in the nature of their discursive appearance, yet fundamental to our understanding of reality; (2) different study groups focus on different things in different ways; and (3) the conclusions that define the reality of freedom and nothing have some of the bleakest implications for the nature of human agency and society. In these discussions—which consider freedom not as a political or social concept, but as cosmological concept presiding over sociality—*free will*, *spontaneity*, *voluntary action*, *moral choice*, and *responsibility* come to be at stake, all concepts that play a constitutive role in defining what it means to be a human being. Simplified for the purposes of this introduction, the fundamental problem can be stated in the following manner:

- if freedom does not exist,[2] then free will is not possible;
- if there is no free will, then spontaneity and voluntary action are a special kind of involuntary processes;

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1   I thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. They helped in refining the argument and increasing the practical use of the results.

2   Regarding the use of the phrases *existence* and *to exist*, there are historically three basic schools of thought: *existence* can be used: (1) to refer only to self-conscious beings, (2) to refer to all living beings, and (3) to refer to all beings. In this paper, I follow the third option, unless otherwise noted. This is done to simplify the discourse where ontological precision is not needed.

- if they are so, then it is not possible to make a truly authentic moral choice; leading us to the conclusion that:
- it is impossible to truthfully attribute any degree of responsibility or accountability to any subject.

Ultimately, the discussion ends with the critical question of whether or not the moral dimension of our existence is absurd. It suggests cognitively devastating conclusions regarding human violence, existential suffering, and what *cannot* be done about it. My intent is to explore a certain oddity from a perspective uncommon to contemporary Western debates, in order to make a possible contribution to answering the question about whether or not freedom is possible—the possibility that freedom and nothing are the same phenomenon.[3]

The paper cannot withstand a systematic account of the problem of freedom and nothing in Western philosophy, but I did aim to provide necessary context in the process of approaching to the oddity and what essential implications could follow from the equality of their expressive values regarding the moral dimension of life. The paper should be understood as an exploration of one possibility that relies on the outcomes of radical dispositions within the discourses on freedom and nothing. It is based on the observation that the lack of attribution of properties to freedom, while still understood as a substantial entity, in conjunction with descriptions of nothing, seem to bring them into an ontological overlap that cannot be ignored. The results show that there are a variety of cases arguing for the existence of freedom in which parametrically moving away from the disposition of determinism causes the problem of distinguishing freedom from the absolutistic conception of nothing, in turn implying that freedom is not possible even if the claim is exactly opposite, namely that freedom does exist. In the attempt to address the problem properly, my strategy has been to first address the dispute on freedom and free will, since it is the question of *what freedom is* that brings the two concepts closer together. I then outlined a specific problem in this debate and proceeded to question the existence of freedom by contrasting the issue with Kant's cosmological theory of freedom. Kant's theory was chosen for this task not because I think it is correct, but because his ingenious attempt helps to reveal the depth of the problem. This effort can be understood as being the first part of the strategy, and it ends by suggesting the similarity between freedom and nothing. In order to see what the similarities might be, the second part of the strategy has been to explore and define what nothing could be, bridging the two concepts so that the essential implications can be shown and conclusions drawn. This means that both parts turn back to examine some fundamental questions before producing more demonstrable results. Afterwards, both are then joined for the final examination

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3   The word *phenomenon* is used here in the context of everyday language, and does not suggest the schools of phenomenology.

of the implications for morality under the "burden" of the similarity between freedom and nothing. Prior to the conclusion, the paper ends with a commentary on the methodological framework for testing whether it is possible that a theory of freedom arguing in favour of its existence might result in the ontological overlap between nothing and freedom, and thus defeat its main thesis.

What Is Freedom Made Of?

In Western philosophy, disputes on freedom can be divided into two general levels. For the first level it can be said that (I) the object of deliberation is *freedom in the human world*, and for the second level of dispute it can be said that (II) the object of deliberation is *freedom in the universe*. For clarity, I will refer to (I) as "lower-order freedom", and I will refer to (II) as "higher-order freedom", because (II) conditions (I).

The discussion at the level of lower-order freedom presupposes that at the level of higher-order discussion the question regarding the existence of freedom has been resolved with the conclusion that freedom exists in the universe, as does freedom of will, and then proceeds to discuss how freedom manifests within the individual and society. A good example for the discussion on the lower-order freedom is Isaiah Berlin's influential theory of two liberties or freedoms—*negative liberty*, often phrased as *freedom from* and used interchangeably with *negative freedom*, which refers to being left to do things without interference from other people, and *positive freedom*, often phrased as *freedom to* and used interchangeably with *positive freedom*, which refers to self-determination in action (Berlin 2002 [1958], 169; cf. Thiele 1994, 279–80). In this context, in texts written in or translated into English, there is often the distinction between *freedom* and *liberty*, though often they are synonymous. The word *freedom* tends to be reserved either for a sphere of personal constitution and creation, or it represents the cosmic idea of freedom, while *liberty* typically refers to social or political freedom. For example, in Mill's seminal work *On Liberty*, *freedom* is seldom used in comparison to the use of *liberty*, almost exclusively referring to what Mill called "mental freedom" (Mill 2003 [1859], 100), a sphere of personal and religious beliefs, thoughts, dispositions, and the like (Mill 2003, 79, 82–83, 93, 96, 102–103, 106 etc.), which is supposed to create "an atmosphere of freedom" at the level of society under which *liberty* takes place (cf. West 2009, 23–28). If it is done properly, in the translations of the works of German philosophers such as Nietzsche or French philosophers such as Sartre, we will almost never find the words *Freiheit* and *liberté*, respectively, translated into English as *liberty*, unless the political context in the fashion of English-writing authors is clearly being discussed, because under *freedom* they assume more than political or social aspects of human reality. When

this phenomenon is observed cosmologically, *liberty* is the variant that is never used, and where *liberty* is not considered, *freedom* encompasses the meaning related to personal constitution, growth, and creation. A typical example would be Jaspers' claim that "the limit to the universal life-order is, therefore, imposed by the freedom of the individual who must (if human beings are to remain human beings) evoke from his own self that which no other can evoke from him" (Jaspers 1957 [1931], 61–62), or when Schrag, following Kierkegaard and Heidegger, writes that "anxiety discloses my freedom by bringing me to an immediate awareness of my future in which reside my possibilities for self-actualization" (Schrag 1983, 21). In a systematic account of freedom in the European philosophical tradition, Adler identified "three main subjects discussed in the name of freedom", which are "circumstantial freedom of self-realization" (the individual's possession of freedom depends on external circumstances), "acquired freedom of self-perfection" (the attainable condition that makes some human beings different from the rest), and "natural freedom of self-determination" (which is inherent, free from circumstances and mental states), followed by two special subvariants, "political liberty" and "collective freedom", akin to Mill's discourse (Adler 1958, 110, 134–135, 149, 586).

The situation is different in the discussion on the higher-order freedom, which begins by doubting the existence of freedom in the universe, subsequently attempting to solve that problem first, before moving on to the problems of lower-order freedom. The discussion here is terminologically and methodologically oversaturated, and although there are many attempts to classify the very many dispositions that have developed over the past 50 years—with no two overviews that can be considered compatible—but many leading authors admit that neither core disposition is truly advantageous (cf. Mickelson, Campbell and White 2023; Hoefer 2023; McKenna and Pereboom 2016; Beebee 2013; Kane 2012; Berofsky 2012; Fischer et al. 2007). This is even reflected statistically, as a popular survey has shown (Bourget and Chalmers 2023, 7), and in terms of support from other scientific perspectives, such as physics or neuroscience, as scholars from the converging fields take opposite positions on free will (cf. Stapp 2011 vs. Sapolsky 2023; Adler 1958, 462–66), meaning that a broader belief system may play a role in articulating dispositions that the researchers eventually accept subjectively. However, some elements pertaining to the topic of this paper can be laid out to a degree that is significant enough to allow for the discussion to continue:

(1) The root level of the problem of higher-order freedom concerns *the outcome of the universe given the universal laws of nature*. By virtue of what they are, the laws of nature would have to essentially produce certain outcomes. This imposes the possibility that every outcome at every possible moment in the universe could not have been otherwise. In other words, "all events,

including human actions and decisions, can be completely explained in terms of universal (nonprobabilistic) laws", and "all events have sufficient causes", which means that "an action is comprised of multiple causal factors in whose collective presence that sort of action invariably takes place" (Berofsky 2012, 9). When nonprobabilistic laws are considered, the issue becomes more complicated (cf. ibid., 138–39; Hoefer 2023, § 3.3–4.3), but ultimately the continuous actualization of outcomes—whether exact or statistically probable—maintains the root level of the problem, given that, on the one hand, our inability to predict the next state is not really related to whether we are free or not, and on the other, both the probability of outcomes and the uncontrollability of next states challenge the premise that free will is truly possible.

(2) The second level of the problem of higher-order freedom is whether or not the central implication of the root level means that free will exists, and whether it can be precluded.

(3) The third level of the problem of higher-order freedom is whether or not the actualization of free will can be considered separate from the outcome of the universe, given the universal laws of nature, i.e. whether or not free will is a point of independent creation and a source of spontaneity that affects reality differently than in non-free will systems (e.g. crystals).

(4) The fourth level of the problem of higher-order freedom is whether or not moral responsibility is dependent on free will at all. This level has been given greater prominence in recent decades via Frankfurt's thought experiments (e.g. Frankfurt 1969, 835–36), the so-called *Frankfurt-style cases*, by way of which he attempted to show that there are at least some situations in which it is possible to be morally responsible even if, under the general framework of action, the agent did not have the option to do otherwise.

All systematic accounts begin at the root level, with arguing for or against *determinism*—the disposition that every event in the universe was inevitable because of the necessary creation of exact states defined by the governing laws of nature. When a claim is such that the universe always has only one possible consequence (outcome) in any particular state (any particular "snip" of the time-space continuum), it is often called *hard determinism*. When a claim is such that there is a limited alternative to a certain outcome, it is often called *soft determinism*, and when a claim is such that there is an alternative based on randomness, it is often recognized as *indeterminism*.

Determinism immediately implies that free will is not possible, and to certain extent so do variants of indeterminism (if it is random, it is not intentional), and that our sense or belief about having free will is a misrepresentation of the factual

reality, even if we experience it as such. This is where the consideration shifts to the second level, where an interaction between the idea of *causal inevitability* and the idea of *free will* begins. Those who claim that the idea of determinism and the idea of free will are not compatible support *incompatibilism*, while those who claim that the idea of determinism and the idea of free will are compatible support *compatibilism*. In *incompatibilism*, we can group dispositions into negative and positive incompatibilism. *Negative incompatibilism* encompasses dispositions that accept determinism, but deny that free will does not exist or that it is precluded. *Positive incompatibilism* encompasses dispositions that deny determinism and accept free will, and are often recognized under the label of *libertarianism*. Any disposition that denies the existence of free will can also be recognized as *free will denialism*, while the opposite is *free-willism*.[4] These dispositions are usually defined in relation to the so-called *consequence argument* (McKenna and Pereboom 2016, 76):

(p1) No one has power over the facts of the remote past and the laws of nature.

(p2) 'No one has power over the fact that the remote past in conjunction with the laws of nature' implies that there is only one unique future (that is, no one has power over the fact that determinism is true).

(c) Therefore, no one has power over the facts of the future.

That is, "if determinism is true, no person at any time has any power to alter how her own future will unfold" (ibid.). The dispositions will work towards arguing for or against the consequence argument. Alternative approaches and subiterations increase as the dispute moves to the third level, where "sourcehood arguments" and "agent-causal arguments" become relevant. A *sourcehood argument* has the following formulation (McKenna 2009, § 2.2, in Beebee 2013, 78–79; cf. McKenna and Pereboom 2016, 39–41):

(p1) A person acts of their own free will only if they are its ultimate source.

(p2) If determinism is true, no one is the ultimate source of their actions.

(c) If determinism is true, no one acts of their own free will.

The *agent-causal argument* takes a different starting point. Proponents will argue in favour of positive incompatibilism by trying to prove that agents (at least

4   For an expanded overview of various dispositions alongside the core approaches mentioned here, see Mickelson, Campbell and White (2023, 12–14).

self-conscious subjects) have the mental power to determine the decision (and not be deterministically caused by)[5] in an immediate way despite prior processes (cf. Beebee 2013, 120–22; O'Connor 2012). In essence, they invert the negative premise of the sourcehood approach and construct their case upon it, frequently incorporating findings from psychology, quantum physics, and neuroscience into the argument. The fourth level of the higher-order freedom dispute, though intriguing, ultimately converges with the lower-order freedom level of dispute. It is not uncommon to encounter authors who argue as if free will has already been proven, with Frankfurt himself being one of these, and thus focus on the relation between wilful causation and moral responsibility.

To avoid confusion, I would like to bring to note again that the aim of this paper is *not* to argue for or against any of the above orientations. They have been explicated for the purpose of bringing to the fore what I find to be the common general problem of the ontological kind that underlies every stated disposition, regardless of the arguments of which they are composed. This problem—the possibility of the sameness of freedom and nothing—begins with the *common denominator* for all four levels of the higher-order freedom debate in their entirety, which is the question of how freedom is to be identified in order for us to be able to say that something is free will as such. The leading stream of contemporary discussion on free will and freedom might be considered unsatisfactory in this regard, because a fraction of thought is dedicated to the *ontophysical articulation* of the entity fundamental to the discourse.[6] Neglected is the issue of what freedom is "made of"— what is its "body", its "fabric", i.e. what "facts" constitute freedom—that does not in some way refer to being the synthesis of relations among different entities of their own constitutive value.[7] Even though Vargas, as an influential contributor to the discussion, has recently advocated for a revision of the understanding of freedom (Vargas 2007), his overview neither provided a new understanding that would make a difference in our reasoning on freedom, nor has much happened since then in terms of how freedom could be understood. *Free will*[8] is persistently understood to be a kind of (dispositional) power or ability that—if we want to try

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5   On the difference between *determined by* and *deterministically caused by*, see Steward (2012, 152).

6   By *ontophysical* I refer to the simultaneity of the ontological and physical identification of an entity. Whatever is ontologically identifiable has in some way its concrete manifestation in reality.

7   Adler mentions in his survey of Western philosophical canon that precise definitions and descriptions of freedom are "exception, rather than the rule" (Adler 1958, 55). It signifies the human tendency to consider it an obvious matter even though it is far from it.

8   Some of the leading figures of the Western philosophical canon considered "free will" and "will" to be the same thing because having will means being free. For example, Descartes argued that "there is no one who, on considering himself alone, fails to experience that being voluntary and being free are one and the same thing" (Descartes 2008 [1642], 112), while Bergson considered that having consciousness already incorporates the "power of choice" (and thus Bergson grants this power to non-human animals, as well) (Bergson 2022 [1907], 161).

to produce a compound description—has a fourfold character that encompasses choice-making and purpose-projecting (Lehrer 2024, 13–14; Mickelson, Campbell and White 2023; O'Connor 2022; McKenna and Pereboom 2016, 6, 38–39; Beebee 2013, 3–4; Berofsky 2012, 12–18, 71, 78, 83, 85; Kane 2012; Fischer et al. 2007, 1–2; Pereboom 2007, 86–87; Vargas 2007, 160; Adler 1958, 402, 512–13):

(1) to do what is willed (on the basis of reason and spontaneity), and

(2) have the source of willing present in the person that wills, and

(3) have control over what is willed, and

(4) have the option to do otherwise.

This fourfold character, however, depends on the concept of freedom as such. Where freedom is not considered to be a power or natural endowment in the sense of exercising free will or self-determination, it is usually considered to be condition or a state in which the endowment begins to manifest or channel itself. For example, Berlin considered freedom to be the "opportunity for action, rather than action itself" (Berlin 2002, 160), while Maritain acknowledged the concept of choice-making freedom, but emphasized that human beings "tend toward freedom in the sense of autonomy", which has its ultimate historical development as "terminal freedom", which is the last stage of human's continuous growth in the "independence from external and internal constraints of Nature" (Maritain 2011 [1940], 137).

Ontologically, this is a jarring issue, for two reasons—the content of their references and the nature of freedom. What are *will*, *reason*, *spontaneity*, *control*, and *choice-making* exactly made of? If they are abstract notions that refer to something or, in that sense, subsume a part of reality under a notion, to what exactly do they refer to in nature, i.e. what is their factual reality? If the things highlighted exist beyond our imagination, even if they are abstract, then they have to be present in the nature and thus they somehow occupy it. If that is so, then how is their presence such that the outcomes are neither traceable nor explainable in terms of their substance or natural laws that govern or constitute their presence? At least on the basis of the fourfold character of the free will as presented here, we have to assume that at least some aspects or processes pertaining to the (1) (dispositional) power, ability and endowment, furthermore, condition and state, and (2) reason, spontaneity, constitution, control, and choice, are not deterministically caused. What these descriptions request from us is to believe that they are such that we can identify the natural outcomes and reconstruct the process of things possessing freehood, without freehood manifesting as deterministically caused. The situation implies that either freehood exists without its presence being identifiable by its ontophysical constitution, or it exists in such a way that it has the exact

ontophysical constitution as other things they are compounded with in nature except for whatever would allow us to reconstruct the process in the outcomes of present things. If the former is the case, the question is how is it convincingly possible given the elementary knowledge of ontology, and if the latter is the case, the question is how can something be present without having any attributes by which its presence is identifiable.

In getting closer to the problem, Kenny's articulation of the relations among *ability possessor*, *ability*, *ability vehicle* and *ability exercising* is helpful (Kenny 1992). If free will is something we are endowed with, then free will can be understood as an ability (power, disposition, capacity etc.), and as an ability, it can also be understood as a quality or property (since *quality* or *property* can entail something "abstract" and something "concrete"). Ability, however, "has neither length nor breadth nor location", and it cannot be "hypostatised" because it "is not a thing in its own right" (ibid., 72, 73). Ontologically, *ability* is certainly a thing in its own right, at least in the sense of being an abstract entity, so it has to be emphasized that "thing" is not used here in that sense, but rather in the less strict sense of referring to something that has a distinct persistence of its own in what would be usually, although imprecisely, called *material*. A free will does not persist without an entity to carry it. If we assume that there are beings endowed with free will, then without those beings, there is no free will. A human being is the *ability possessor* of free will in the same way in which they are the ability possessor of "hearing". But it is not human beings in themselves who directly actualize the ability, but instead the ability is made of elements through which its nature is carried/channelled into actualization of being that particular ability. In the case of hearing, it is primarily the auditory system by way of which a person exercises the ability; in the case of punching, by contrast, it is primarily the muscular and skeletal systems. The abstract notion of hearing has within itself a multitude of concrete elements as the *ability vehicle* through which ability exercising is possible—they can be traced, weighted, and measured, they are "the physical ingredient or structure in virtue of which the possessor of an ability possesses the ability and is able to exercise it" (ibid., 72).[9] Furthermore, the persistence of ability implies "an enduring state", and what is most important to consider is that the persistence of an enduring state (i.e. the presence in the world) means that any exercise of ability will be by the virtue of its existence a "datable event or process" (ibid., 71).

Following the fourfold character of free will, we can ask what is the ability vehicle for doing what is willed, having a source, exercising control, and making a

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9 It can be speculated that the difference between the ability possessor and ability vehicle is vague because any exercise of an ability is always carried by a possessor, meaning that the possessor can be understood as a vehicle. The difference is that the ability possessor intentionally utilizes the ability for a certain end, whereas the ability vehicle does not do that.

choice. Unless we assume an incorporeal, undetectable dimension of reality fused with physical matter that embodies freehood, it seems that *at least* the human cognitive and nervous systems are coupled as the core ability vehicle. In light of the need to find an ontophysical identification, we would have to suppose that some dimension of the cognitive and nervous systems either exists without its presence being identifiable by its ontophysical constitution, or it exists in such a way that it has the exact ontophysical constitution as other things compounded in the core ability, except for whatever would allow us to reconstruct the process in the outcomes of present things. The problem is, on the one hand, that when the literature interprets the phenomena in light of the clash between physical determinism and indeterminism, any exercise of free will is interpretable in terms of deterministic causation, and on the other, even though it is fair to consider the possibility that the outcome of exercising freedom may be a result of an enduring state of authentic self-determination, unless this authentic self-determination is at the same time a continuous creation of natural laws and thus is always out of mind's reach and even its own understanding, it has to have internal law of how it manifests. This applies even to the radically opposite disposition we will find in Heidegger or Sartre, as philosophers who denied that freedom can be a property of human beings and that it is us who are anathematized to freedom (cf. Nancy 1993 [1988], 96–98). The third option is the incorporeal dimension fused with physical systems, but ontologically—because it *is*—it has to have a readable attribute of the freedom's substance, even if this readable attribute is or would be accessible only to the supernatural entity endowed with abilities surpassing human beings. An alternative—a categorically traceless presence in nature that is free from all attributes—if possible, is a hard challenge to ontology, as it goes against every category the ontological inquiry has thus far discovered for the entities that *are*.

In my belief that the problem outlined is recognised as a conundrum that has to be resolved. I will proceed to address the problem through Kant's cosmological theory of freedom. This point of view assists in bringing forth the central problem more clearly and laying out the implications of each possible pathway.

The Comprehensibility of Freedom's Ontophysical Identity

Given his acquaintance with the findings of the natural sciences and philosophy, Kant had no doubt about what they meant: if the existence of the world is determinable in time, since the concept of time is what allows us to recognize change and establish the causal chain of events, then it is a world devoid of freedom in which *freedom* "would have to be rejected as a null and impossible concept" (Kant 2015 [1788], 5:95). Aware of what this would mean for the understanding of humankind, Kant was not able to accept this, and he tried to find a way to understand

this conflict so that it could accept the obvious truth of determinism—or at least obvious to Kant—while representing free-willism. In doing so, Kant developed a seminal dualistic theory according to which an action is both causally determined and free.

The core background to the central elements of his theory is never systematically revealed and often requires reconstruction. It is essentially based on what Kant called "the fact of reason"—our *immediate conscious awareness* of what Kant called the "fundamental moral law" (Kant 2015, 5:30–5:31). With the awareness of the fundamental moral law—"so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law"[10]—comes a sense of *constitutive* obligation not forced upon us, but rather that manifests in us as welcomed *necessitation*, the "internal constraint" resulting in dutiful actions (Kant 2015, 5:32; cf. Basterra 2015, 80). Kant reconstructed this necessity from three facts of reality, (1) the existence of morality, (2) the individual's ability to express themselves as the subject of action (*I do*), and the individual's feeling that things *ought to be done*. If the whole of the natural world is deterministically caused, i.e. if the system of natural mechanisms is deterministic, then how is it possible for morality to arise in a system stripped of possibility? How is it possible for us to express ourselves as subjects in such a system (e.g. *I do*; cf. *ML*, 28: 26g, in Allison 1996, 127; Kant 2015, 5:30)? And how is it possible, within such a perfectly enclosed system, to feel an obligation to *do something that is not yet present in it* (e.g. we *ought to* end the war, cf. Kant 2007 [1781], B575; Reath 2006, 283)? While it is possible to suppose and explore the "epistemic possibility" that from the objective perspective (third-person perspective) all three facts reveal a complex misperception, that is, that "I am deluded in believing that I am acting" (cf. Allison 1996, 133; Reath 2006, 280)—accidentally constructed in the course of our bio-evolution from unconscious to self-conscious beings—Kant believed that the existence of morality has a "reason to it", and if it does so, then fundamentally its rational structure implies a dimension of reality congruent with natural system of causality that is not bound to it. This is implied because morality as such makes no sense by any definition that would not presuppose the creation of interpersonal reality through the performance of self-determined acts yet to manifest.

The difference between the *thing in appearance* and the *thing in itself* provides an entrance into the reasoning behind the seemingly contradictory proposal:

> … all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things which we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them as

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[10]   There are multiple variations of this proposal. I chose this one because of the crucial development of the theory of freedom is present in *Critique of Practical Reason* (2015).

being, nor their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us, and that if the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of the senses in general, be removed, the whole constitution and all the relations of objects in space and time, nay space and time themselves, would vanish. As appearances, they cannot exist in themselves, but only in us. (Kant 2007, A42, cf. B62; 2015, 5:6, 5:33–5:34)

Things in themselves are not knowable, but can nonetheless be thought of (Kant 2007, Bvi, cf. A36; cf. Franks 2005, 41–47). In Kant, we find that *time* is "the mode of representation of myself as object" (Kant 2007, B54), it serves to determine "the relation of representations by our inner state" (ibid., A33), which means that any object, that is, any "thing", becomes recognized as causally deterministic only in the mode of *thing as appearance* via representations generated by the subject, that is, in their *effect* as *we* take it in via sense-data (cf. ibid., 5:97–5:98), while as a *thing in itself* it is beyond temporal relations and our representation of its presence. This "atemporality" of the things in themselves comes from Kant's awareness of the existence of reality in itself—its necessity of being dictates that it is inherently unconditioned, infinite, and timeless i.e. eternal (cf. Clewis 2009, 66). The universe, to exemplify this idea, may go through the most extreme transformations possible, but it does not cease to be the universe—it maintains the internal persistence of its fundamental identity. From the contemporary perspective, this unconditionality, infinity, and eternality may be attributed to the substance of nature (e.g. matter), or nature as nature under the assumption that it is more than matter, itself such that they are neither caused by something nor have a self-cause, but nonetheless produce effects. From Kant's perspective, such a proposal would imply determinism of the world and the misperception of the human subject. But being under the influence of Christianity, Kant believed that this presupposes a supreme being—God—as "universal original being" that is "the cause also of the existence of substance" (Kant 2015, 5:100) and the "intelligible existence" (ibid., 5:102). What is meant by "intelligible" here is that which is graspable by "mere understanding" (Kant 2007, A249), in other words, reality graspable without sense-data, a "point of view which reason finds itself constrained to adopt outside appearances" (Gr 4: 458; 126, in Allison 1996, 128). This means that it cannot be thought in terms of temporal relations.

As the original being that gives the initial cause, God is the original holder of the capacity to begin a state from itself, which is then transferred to the human being, presumably, out of God's benevolent nature as the Creator. Kant calls it *spontaneity*, "an essential criterion of freedom" (Kant 2001, 27:505), a power to "start to act from itself without needing to be preceded by any other cause that in turn determines it to action according to the law of causal connection" (Kant

2007, a533/b561) (Reath 2006, 278; Clewis 2009, 6–7), "the causality of reason in its intelligible character does not, in producing an effect, arise or begin to be at a certain time. For in that case it would itself be subject to the natural law of appearances, in accordance with which causal series are determined in time; and its causality would then be nature, not freedom" (Kant 2007, B579–B580). This means that, when a person acts, *in effect* it appears deterministic in accordance with the mechanics of nature, yet *in cause*, it appears self-originating:

> Whatever in an object of the senses is not itself appearance, I entitle intelligible. If, therefore, that which in the sensible world must be regarded as appearance has in itself a faculty which is not an object of sensible intuition, but through which it can be the cause of appearances, the causality of this being can be regarded from two points of view. Regarded as the causality of a thing in itself, it is intelligible in its action, regarded as the causality of an appearance in the world of sense, it is sensible in effects. (Kant 2007, B 566)

Kant thus argued that every human action is event-caused from the perspective of the thing in appearance (the *action* as it appears), and agent-caused from the perspective of the thing in itself (the *action* in itself) "since the activity of a transcendentally free cause is not determined by temporally prior events or conditions" (Reath 2006, 278; cf. Basterra 2015, 66). The power (ability) to self-determine is what allows us to overcome our "mechanical" side of being natural entities, creatures that belong to the natural world, the creatures of impulses, drives, desires, that is, *pathological necessitation* (dependence on sensibility, cf. Kant 2015, 5:19–20; 2007 B562; Allison 1990, 58–59), but we do not overcome this nature by way of matter, rather, by way of acting in accordance with the rational principles (Reath 2006, 279). For Kant, it was crucial to recognize this fact, because to choose to act on the basis of the senses meant to be chained to appearances, which are temporal, and this denies the true freedom to make a choice. Acting by pathological necessitation should not be considered as acting freely. In contrast, only the truly free choice allows us to introduce the concept of accountability, whereby "freedom of the will as such is the accountability, or mode of human action that can be imputed to the agent, and morals is the name for the use of freedom according to the laws of reason" (Kant 2001, 27:480). And it might have been otherwise, had Kant not observed that the moral system is not really based on the content but on form, and thus it is not based on the sensibility but on the principles that governs rational choice.

> All imperatives are formulae of a practical necessitation. The latter is a making-necessary of free actions. But our actions, though, can be necessitated in two ways; they can either be necessary according to laws of

free choice, and then they are practically necessary, or according to laws governing the inclination of sensuous feeling, and then they are pathologically necessary. So our actions are necessitated either practically, i.e. by laws of freedom, or pathologically, i.e. by laws of sensibility. Practical necessitation is an objective determination of free actions; pathological, a subjective one. So all objective laws of our actions are in every case practically and not pathologically necessary. All imperatives are mere formulae of practical necessitation, and express a necessity of our actions under the condition of goodness. The formula which expresses practical necessity is the *causa impulsiva* of a free action, and since it necessitates objectively, is called a *motivum.* The formula which expresses pathological necessitation is the *causa impulsiva per stimulos*, since it necessitates subjectively. So all subjective necessitations are *necessitationes per stimulus*. (Kant 2001, 27:255)

Human beings are of double-character, each person has the empirical character, related to the temporality of their existence under the laws of nature, and the intelligible character, related to the principles derived from freedom, with the former resting on the ground of later. Principles are intelligible, not empirical—they express forms, not experiential content—and thus they are "normative", rather than "causal" (Reath 2006, 282, cf. 285; Wood 2024, 22), meaning that they cannot be grasped by the senses, but by reason, which under their governance produces effect via self-determining action. "Form determines the will not only objectively but also subjectively by having an effect on the power of desire without the help of any sensible incentive" (Basterra 2015, 74; cf. Reath 2006, 281–82)—in this Kant saw the connection between human action and freedom.

Since the mere form of a law can be represented only by reason and is therefore not an object of the senses and consequently does not belong among appearances, the representation of this form as the determining ground of the will is distinct from all determining grounds of events in nature in accordance with the law of causality, because in their case the determining grounds must themselves be appearances. But if no determining ground of the will other than that universal lawgiving form can serve as a law for it, such a will must be thought as altogether independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality. But such independence is called freedom in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental, sense. Therefore, a will for which the mere lawgiving form of a maxim can alone serve as a law is a free will. (Kant 2015, 5:29)

Yet we are neither the source of freedom nor the freedom itself. Instead, we could say that we are *ability possessors*, or further, *vessels* in which a greater reality of the unconditional manifests, just as "freedom is not a means by which natural causes affect the world", so "nature with its causes is the means by which freedom effects change in the world" (Frierson 2003, 24). Taking the existence of God as a necessity, Kant further claimed that "one must admit that a human being's actions have their determining ground in *something altogether beyond his control*, namely in the causality of a supreme being which is distinct from him and upon which his own existence and the entire determination of his causality absolutely depend" (Kant 2015, 101). In other words, God as *causa sui* (Allison 1990, 61) "has furnished us with all the materials for our comfort, and endowed us also with freedom" (Kant 2001, 27:367). The fact of reason—the fundamental law—"thus comes from something which is in the subject but is not of the subject" (Basterra 2015, 69), "freedom "contains" the grounds of the law, and the ground of the possibility of freedom is contained by the law", "the law addresses itself to a freedom" (ibid., 73), the fact of reason "happens to reason" (ibid., 80). The fundamental law "*first* offers itself to us and, inasmuch as reason presents it as a determining ground not to be outweighed by any sensible conditions and indeed quite independent of them, leads directly to the concept of freedom" (Kant 2015, 5:30). In other words, freedom not only becomes the "capacity to act from moral law" (Reath 2006, 290; cf. Kant 1991, 6.213–14, 6.224–5) and "the condition of moral law" (Allison 1996, 141), but in a broader sense a kind of *subject* itself (cf. ibid., 142).

The existence of the fundamental law as a fact of reason, Kant argued, directly confirms the existence of freedom without the experiential content by which freedom can be irrefutably known through the senses. To accept this is to exercise *rational faith* (*rational belief*, Kant 2015, 5:126, 5:146) and affirm the "independence of the will from anything other than the moral law alone" (ibid., 5:94). The reason itself works through the contradiction to gain the understanding of the law, that is, to recognize freedom for practical purposes from the practical point of view, rather than theoretical (cf. Heidegger 2002 [1982], 184–85 [GA 268–272]). For Kant, this meant acting in accordance with the laws of one's own making, but it is the fundamental law that in fact posits itself to the will naturally, to affirm the human being as the being of free will. When the fundamental law is incorporated into our premises leading to an action, it redefines our motives for action in that it frees us from being necessarily bound by pathological necessities, and "even if one assumes the existence of a natural drive such as self-preservation, a transcendentally free agent is capable of selecting maxims that run directly counter to its dictates" (Allison 1996, 152).

Within this sketch of Kant's cosmological theory, three claims are crucial to the subject of this paper. First is Kant's claim that freedom is a "property" of human

will by which it is a law to itself (Kant 2015, 5:15, 5:67; 2018 [1785], 4:440; 4:447–48), which means that it is exposed to the same kind of inquiry that was presented in the previous subsection:[11] any property presupposes ontophysical identification. The second is Kant's claim that freedom is causality of a special kind (Kant 2015, 5:6; 2017 B 473–75), "unconditional, supersensible" (Allison 1996, 141), "some pure practical rational principle" that "constitutes the unavoidable beginning and determines the objects to which alone it can be referred" (Kant 2015, 5:16, cf. 5:49, 5:78). It is already contained in "the concept of a will", "a causality that is not determinable in accordance with laws of nature and hence not capable of any empirical intuition as proof of its reality" (ibid., 5:55), meaning that "both "causality through nature" and "causality through freedom" occur within the natural world" (Wood 2024, 23–24; cf. Heidegger 2002, 147–48 [GA 212–215]). On the one hand, this means that any kind of theory of free will that in any way tries to give a physical, physiological, chemical etc. or (socio) psychological explanation of action and its effects, and most if not all contemporary theories that do not involve the concept of God are such, succumb to (hard) determinism, i.e. there is no free will and the moral life is absurd. For this reason, Vilhauer argued that

> … the possibility of free will is the most that anyone can hope to demonstrate, and that a metaphysics similar to Kant's is necessary because Kant is right to think that there is no place for free will in the network of event-causation which constitutes the world we experience. (I think this holds even if the empirical world is indeterministic, since indeterminism would inject mere chance into our wills in a way that is just as inimical to free will as determinism is. (Vilhauer 2017, 353)

On the other hand, this kind of disposition reminds us of the conundrum I presented in the first part of this section: even if freedom, as an ability, being the property of human will, is exercised as "a special kind of causality", ontophysically it must have identifiable attributes, the interaction of which at least a supreme

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11   There is a deeper issue here, in that Kant claims that (A) freedom is an idea (pure concept of reason), a postulate of practical reason that operates on the higher level as "totality of conditions" or "allness of conditions" (Kant 2007, B379), it determines "how understanding is to be employed in dealing with experience in its totality", and within the pure practical reason, ideas "become immanent and constitutive inasmuch as they are grounds of the possibility of making real the necessary object of pure practical reason (the highest good), whereas apart from this they are transcendent and merely *regulative* principles of speculative reason, which do not require it to assume a new object beyond experience but only to bring its use in experience nearer to completeness" (Kant 2015, 5:135)—but at the same time it is (B) property, it belongs to the person, much like e.g. "feeling of pleasure" (ibid., 5:58) or "receptivity to a pure moral interest" (ibid., 5:152). How this transmutation from (A) to (B) occurs is unclear, especially given that Kant had not given much attention to what property actually is, and makes the analysis somewhat of a guessing game.

being would have to be able to understand in themselves (otherwise, even God has no access to the things in themselves, including to its own self).[12] This brings us to the third element, which is Kant's blunt claim that, apart from intelligibly apprehending freedom through moral law from the practical point of view, freedom is *incomprehensible* (Kant 2015, 5:7; 2018, 4:449, 4:461–62).[13] As a "thing" that initiates what we only later recognize as a causal chain it is ungraspable; in its temporality as a thing in itself it is inaccessible; and in its nature as an idea it is stripped of sensory data and thus cannot be empirically impressed upon us. In Kant's theory, this applies to all the ideas for which Kant believed that empirical proof was not possible, such as *God*, *world*, and *soul*, but which must nevertheless exist as the unconditional conditions of totality that gives ground to the explanation of our experience, reasoning, and action. There is no way for us to access the internal mechanisms of such entities and obtain empirical proof of their reality, but nonetheless they impose themselves on us as necessary through rational belief. So, what does this leave us with?

On the one hand, the aim of this analysis was to point out that unless Kant's theory—or something akin to Kant's theory—is accepted, all theories result in determinism, whether probabilistic or not. I have yet to see a work that argued in favour of freedom and has actually given precise ontophysical description of what it means to be the spontaneous, unrestrained source of action beyond having the impression of acting on your own, that is, beyond having a circular, self-contained explanation. In that sense Vargas' appeal was a sign of the age, given that numerous non-deterministic variants essentially ignore the challenge that was demonstrated in Kant's ingenious attempt to solve the problem. On the other hand, the contemporary phenomenological tradition within the debate on free will—the first-person experience of free-willing, which is categorically different from the objective observation—is on the same grounds as Kant's articulation of the necessitation of fundamental moral law. The directness of person's experience does not guarantee the truth-value consistency between the experience and the factual reality of how this experiences comes to be. This issue constantly appears, from visual, auditory, and tactile illusions, dreaming even, then on to cultural imprinting, the mood's susceptibility to weather conditions, even though their real referential system is entirely different. To exemplify: it may be true that a foggy winter day makes a particular person less interested in work and they truly experience a lack of motivation, but this is so only because the person is entirely missing the true referential system of the universe (for example, the

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12   This position that God does not even know itself has been extensively argued by Eriugena, but it certainly is not Kant's view, for whom, additionally, God is a "he". More on this peculiarity in the next part of the paper.

13   For a debate on the possible misunderstandings, see Wood (2024) and Aylsworth (2020), with both whom I agree on this matter.

simplest kind—the fact that the sun is shining all the time, and that even a few hundred metres elsewhere from the point of reference the weather can be different and their mood would shift accordingly). What Kant does is, essentially, an attempt to save the moral system from absurdity exclusively because he cannot convey a referential system different from what he experiences the world to be. The outcome of his grand endeavour remains an attempt to save the notion of God and the moral reality of humankind in the Christian tradition. This is visible in numerous places, including Kant's posthumous fragments. Here is an example from *Lectures on Ethics*:

> The final destiny of the human race is moral perfection, so far as it is accomplished through human freedom, whereby man, in that case, is capable of the greatest happiness. God might already have made men perfect in this fashion, and allotted to each his share of happiness, but in that case it would not have sprung from the inner principium of the world. But that inner principle is freedom. The destiny of man is therefore to obtain his greatest perfection by means of his freedom. God does not simply will that we should be happy, but rather that we should make ourselves happy, and that is the true morality. (Kant 2001, 27:470)

Though it appears as if we truly spontaneously govern ourselves, Kant nonetheless had to impose a fundamental moral law that turns via the feeling of obligation into the essential duties, claiming that this is not a contradiction in the relation between freedom and human will. In the last part of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he considers methods of moral cultivation, he discusses how it is good to make another person sense morality, it is good because

> it teaches the human being to feel his own dignity – gives his mind power, unexpected even by himself, to tear himself away from all sensible attachments so far as they want to rule over him and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he makes in the independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to *which he sees that he is called.* (Kant 2015, 5:152; emphasis is mine)

The problem with Kant's solution to the contradiction is that it is self-contained: his argument that "whereas freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom" (Kant 2015, 5:5, footnote*) is most likely a result of his impossibility to conceive of a system in which soul, immortality, and God are not present, in which there is no such a thing as the originating supreme being, the creation of substance, etc. We then have to also accept the thing in itself, that might as well be merely a mind's regulative invention,

rather than the reference to factual atemporal reality. Further, the *I do* and *I ought to do* might be emergent phenomena of perceptual misalignment with the true system of universe—Kant does not find this conceivable, and so again it becomes a question of belief. If I am to accept all the premises that lead me to believe that I am the non-deterministic originator of my actions in accordance with my own will, then I also must accept that even though I was fashioned by God, even though the moral system imposes upon me the end before I become aware of it, and even though the fundamental law, which is not my own creation, delineates my actions, I still have free will. And if I am to accept this, but still seek the empirical proof, I have to accept that it is inaccessible to me, but yet perceivable via the nature of concepts I identify in the interaction with my impressions. If the whole argument is unacceptable, then I must either accept determinism or develop something similar to Kant's theory. In that case, however, we still have the problem of the ontophysical articulation of the "fabric" of freedom. If I cannot resolve this, then I have to accept the incomprehensibility thesis, namely that freedom is, but is in such a way that it is not empirically comprehensible. Suppose, thus, that the incomprehensibility thesis holds. What does it imply?

We should keep in mind that freedom has been described at least as property (though also as realm and even subject). In that sense, it is either a compound notion referring to a specific set of entities in interaction (e.g. acting in accordance with self-giving law, that is, having control over what is willed and choosing among at least two options), which further means that any entity in interaction that it represents has a dimension empirically incomprehensible to us, or it is a standalone empirically incomprehensible entity working through the interaction of different empirically comprehensible entities. In both cases, it may mean that either freedom actually has no conceivable attributes whatsoever and this is why it cannot be experienced (incompatible with Kant's theory), or it means that we should be a superior being to be able to truly comprehend it (compatible with Kant's theory). Whether the former or the latter, based on the description given, to my mind comes a strong association with another difficult, but much rarely discussed concept in the tradition of Western philosophy: *nothing*. What I wanted to know, therefore, is whether or not the concept of nothing can assist in proving or disproving the existence of freedom, given how little, if anything, has been ontophysically attributed to freedom.

In the following, I will first attempt to identify the existential status of nothing in order to bring the concept closer to that of freedom, with which it is associated. On the basis of the similarities thus established, I will then discuss the possible implications for the existential status of freedom, and then determine what this means for the perception of morality. With the comparison made, the paper will conclude with a suggestion regarding attempts to prove the existence of freedom.

The Existence of Nothing

Discussing *nothing* requires additional precision of expression, and so, to avoid confusion, a reminder on the use of the words *existence* and *to exist* may be useful. In this paper, both are used in the widest possible sense, meaning that everything that can be thought of has some kind of existential identity. What matters is its nature, content and structure: "zoompa" may be no other thing and not a thing more but a word attributed to an abstract concept stored in my mind that refers to the exemplification for this particular paper, but as such it now exists—as an abstract concept in my mind, as a (digitalized) word in this research paper, and as information and a concept in the mind of any reader. If thoughts are material, then zoompa has been created out of the material interaction among the atoms in my brain, and as soon as everything and everybody associated with zoompa ceases to be, its persistence will materialistically disintegrate into something else and stop existing. For each discussed entity, then, it is important to establish whether it is an abstract or concrete object, fantastic or realistic, mental or physical, etc., but all of them exist in some possible way. The difference between existent and non-existent objects in terms of their "faultness" or "fiction" is henceforth disregarded (cf. Crane 2013, 13–27). That being said, when considering *nothing*, we can discuss the problem of nothing on three levels: (1) *nothing* as a word with meaning, (2) *nothing* as an abstract concept, and (3) *nothing* as a concrete object. The first two levels assist in discussing the third level, but they are barely debatable, in contrast to the third level, so I will focus on the third level, at which I suspect the use of the concept.

Though *nothing* is generally used as a pronoun, adverb or adjective in European languages, in Western philosophy it is often the case that *nothing* is discussed as if it were a noun, a type of word used to identify an independent phenomenon. By doing this, we immediately imply its existence. The fact that *nothing* has until fairly recently had never been a noun should give us an insight into the appropriateness of its use, but it is true that in philosophy there is no reason to restrict a particular concept to a particular type of word if we believe that it might express more otherwise, and so we are to consider the possibility of *nothing* being used as a noun. In terms of what the word *nothing* meant historically, however, there is no etymological support for *nothing* to be used as a noun and recognized as if it refers to some concrete object. *Nothing* went through the same type of transformation during the Medieval period as *anything* and *everything*. Originally it was the short version of a more complex phrase—"not a thing", as *anything* was for "any thing", and *everything* was for "every thing". For reasons that are still unclear, as the 20th century slowly approached, it became continuously more enigmatic, and the variant *nothingness* became more popular, eventually becoming a registered noun, often referring to what "nothing" should stand for, although

the morphology of the word tells us that it should refer to a property, condition or state derived from *nothing* (akin to *pleasantness*, *playfulness*, *loneliness*, *blindness*, *forgiveness*, etc., meaning that in the ontological sense it is not substantial but accidental). In the context of the problem of nothing, the earliest relevant accounts on the matter apply the words in the same manner.

For example, philosophical discussions on nothing often begin by mentioning Parmenides, Eriugena and Leibniz (cf. Hass 2023), the former is known for the first recorded European philosophical consideration on what there is not, the latter for asking the question "why is there something, rather than nothing?", and Eriugena for extensively discussing *creatio ex nihilo*. However, when all three sources are examined more closely, Parmenides in Greek, Eriugena in Latin, and Leibniz in French, none of these accounts uses *nothing* literally. Parmenides writes "a thing is not" or "any thing not to be" (ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, cf. Parmenides, fr. 3 (2 DK):5 [2009, 57]), while Leibniz uses the French word *rien* which at the same time also means *anything* (*pourquoi il y a plus tôt quelque chose, que rien ?*), so what Leibniz really asks is *why is there something, rather than not any thing* [*not a thing*]? (the word *rien* comes from Latin *rem—thing*) (Leibniz 2002 [1714], 162, 7). Eriugena's account is interesting for two reasons. The first is that he uses *nihil* and *nihilum* to refer to either *nothing* or *nothingness*, and *nihil esse* to refer to *non-being* (e.g. Eriugena 2003, V. 868A). *Nihilum* is literally "not a bit", "not in the least", which means that, again, *nothing* is not used in a way that may be common today. But Eriugena is more interesting for the second reason, which is how he understood the presence of God. For Eriugena, God cannot be compared with particular beings. It not only spans beyond them but also beyond being as such in its entirety. In fact, Eriugena argued not only that outside of God there is nothing (not a thing) (ibid., I. 452C), meaning that all things are under God or, more correctly, within God, but also that God Himself is, in fact, *nothing* (cf. ibid., III. 634B). How is that possible? God is Nothing because *nothing* as a word can refer to one of the two things:

(a) absence of a thing that was or should have been present;

(b) something that cannot be recognized as a thing, but nonetheless exists.

The variant (a)—*absence of a thing that was or should have been present*—is represented in Tillich's category of *meontic nothing*, the kind of nothing that participates in a dialectical relation to being. This kind of nothing "appears as the 'not yet' of being and as the 'no more' of being" (Tillich 1967, 189), and can also be called a *particularistic nothing*. It can be understood:

(a1) *materialistically*, as the absence of particular material configuration. For example, to respond to the question "Did you find the money?" with "There is nothing here" means that the money is either somewhere else or it is not yet

where it was meant to be. Another example is the concept of a vacuum in physics, which is, firstly, never really entirely empty, and secondly, refers to the absence of matter.

(a2) *abstractly*, as the presence of absence. For example, the sentence "There is nothing like hammer in this room" can be interpreted as "The absence of hammer-like things is present in this room". Yet both do not imply that absence *as such* is present, since *absence* is a compound notion—the word refers to a state of a particular thing being away, and not to the substantially concrete entity called *absence*. The reference is used pragmatically.

The variant (b)—*something that cannot be recognized as a thing but exists nonetheless*—relies on the fundamental ontological difference between a particular entity and the absolute of being (often spelled with a capital "b"). The highest order of extension—Being as Being—cannot be addressed with any word referring to any individual particularity, such as *entity*, *object*, *thing*, etc. In our lack of perception, we mentally deal with absolutes as if they were particulars (and hence why ancient meditation techniques aimed to achieve a state of non-difference), but by understanding their implied scope, we are aware that they are not particulars. An absolute has no limits or boundaries, and as such cannot be identified by words that refer to the particulars. Thus, saying "nothing"—"*no* thing", if not to imply absence, then refers to either (b1) Being or (b2) something beyond Being. Here, (b1) can be understood in two ways:

(b1.1)   *nothing* is the same thing as *Being*, or

(b1.2)   *nothing* refers to the presence of being outside of our *here-being*.

The first case is best understood by the example of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is often misinterpreted as creation out of non-existence, but in fact means creation out of that which is not a thing.[14] Eriugena provided an extensive account of *creatio ex nihilo*, in which he argued that, because God by His nature cannot be a thing, and thus has to be the no-thing, the substance He creates comes out of no-thing, the infinite absolute which Eriugena called nothing, and we might call Being (cf. Heidegger 1949, 360). The second case is best understood as a form of *disclosure* akin to Heidegger's "Nothing that noths" (cf. Thiele 1994, 282; Heidegger 1949, 360). If, however, a thing is not a thing, but exists, yet it does not refer to the entirety of being but rather exists absolutely without having the characteristics that the particular thing or the absolute Being would have (b1.2), then this is the case of what Tillich termed *oukontic nothing*—or, the *absolutistic nothing*. It is nothing that is external to Being and has no dialectic connection to Being. Absolutistic nothing has three possible variants:

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14   I discussed this in Perušić (2020).

(b2.1) *disordered*, in which case it is incomprehensible because it lacks any sortable meaning;

(b2.2) *ordered*, in which case it is incomprehensible because it is infinitely abundant with meaning; (b2.3) *empty*, in which case it is impossible.

The first and second of these can be interpreted as *chaos* or *god* in the traditional (non-physical, non-mathematical) sense, and the third can be interpreted as a *regulative notion* that reason uses to posit the absolute being or the positive knowledge of being in contrast to the opposite extreme, but by itself does not refer to any concrete entity. The initial branching can thus be revised to claim that by *nothing* we refer to:

(a) absence;

(b) Being.

In the contemporary literature most of what is being said about nothing is presented as if it is about (b) but it is often about (a). For example, a common contemporary strategy that wants to affirm the existence of Nothing relies on mathematics, most often on the concepts of *zero* from the elementary mathematics and *empty set* from the set theory. In David Mumford's work, for example, we will find exclusively cases that discuss the manifestations of nothing as absence, rather than nothing as Being or nothing as oukontic nothing (even though Mumford often conflates the two). Among the many cases, Mumford uses an example of zero to argue for the existence of nothing, and claims that with zero, "we are not only giving nothing a name, we also see that it is useful to have it, if not indispensable", and furthermore:

> If we can supply a theory of empty reference, that is, an account of how it is possible to speak and think about nothing, then we can accept zero in mathematics without having to grant that it has troublesome metaphysical consequences. Zero can remain nothing. Neither naming it, referring to it, nor using it, makes it a something. (Mumford 2021, 59)

Zero, however, is not (b). At the first level, *zero* is a word that refers to a particular concept of the specific quantity of things. At the second level, the concept of zero determines the specific quantity of things for which we found we need to take into consideration. It is a mathematical object, which means that it assigns value and has representation of that value. This specific quantity is to be understood as absence of a specific value. Furthermore, a relation e.g. $1 + 2 = 3$ is essentially $1 + (1 + 1) = 1 + 1 + 1$. If we subtract 3 (assigned value $(1 + 1 + 1)$ represented with "3") from the result $((1 + (1 + 1)) – (1 + 1 + 1) = 0)$, it is as if we took away integers one by one until there was absence of integer one. Whenever elementary

mathematics is applied to the concrete reality, having "zero things" means that they are absent from a particular time and space, regardless whether we are talking about the angles of a triangle or about the number of chestnuts in a basket. When there is "not a thing" in my basket, i.e. there are zero chestnuts in my basket, it means that they are absent, i.e. not present in the basket—and should they not have been, given that I am counting chestnuts? When Mumford writes that zero is a number for "what is not" (Mumford 2021, 58), "what is not" is neither "nothing" as (b) or oukontic nothing, but "not the presence of a particular value", that in the real application translates to "not the presence of a particular object"—there is something else here instead (e.g. space unoccupied by what we call "solid objects"). Similarly, Graham Priest writes that "nothing is the mereological sum of the empty set", and even though the conclusion is proper, namely, that "there is nothing in the empty set, so nothing is absolute absence: the absence of all objects, all presences", and thus nothing is "no thing, no object" (Priest 2014, 56, cf. 97–99), an empty set as a concept is not applicable to nothing as (b), because an empty set expresses an infinite collection as an entity, and even though we may speak about the collection of various absences, we are still talking about absences within an entity, which is an empty set, clearly distinguishable as a particularity and of defined boundaries. If we were to remove its boundaries, it would then become oukontic nothing. Nothing as (b), however, would have to exclude an entity "empty set" to be oukontic nothing (or, in this sense, the absolute absence), because what is absent would have to be somewhere or from somewhere has to become from something, in which case the adjective "absolute" does not hold. Thus "nothing" is not really "no thing, no object", "nothing" is with what we refer to either (1) Being or (2) some specific state of entities in the Being. In doing this, the application of "nothing" is quite pragmatic or, as Mumford might say, instrumental.

Unfortunately, the shift from being a pragmatic version of "not a thing" to being a noun has caused "nothing" to be perceived as its own non-abstract, non-referential, self-contained thing, often granted an ontological status it should never have had in the first place. The understanding here shifts from level 2 to level 3 and produces an aberration. *Nothingness* as a variant of the use of *nothing* is also sometimes perceived as its own thing, which is even less meaningful than nothing because it is its derivative. If not understood as absence—about which we should maybe think as if it says *displacement*—and not understood as a negatively expressed Being, then oukontic nothing implies non-existence of the entirety of being. Even though that can still make sense on levels 1 and 2, because it does have an orientative functionality in our reasoning, it cannot be spoken of as if it is a concrete entity, that is, as if it is a substantial part of reality. When nothing is thought about in this way, the approach produces paradoxical and contradictory results, which is why it is possible for, for example, Priest to argue

that nothing is a contradictory object and that "philosophers often wonder why there is something rather than nothing. However, even if there were nothing—even if everything would be entirely absent—there would be something, namely nothing" (Priest 2014, 56; cf. Gabriel and Priest 2022, 19–20, 138). The quoted commentary applies the (b) variant of how to understand nothing but mixes it with (a) to produce a contradiction. It is impossible for everything to be entirely absent. The notion of absence simply cannot be applied absolutely unless we want to commit to error. If "everything" would be entirely absent, where would it be? What would be in its place? What is the ontophysical attribute by way of which we can say that nothing is in fact nothing? If these can be answered, then absolute absence should be reconsidered. But so far no researcher has given any proper answers in this context. And, to my mind, they will never do so because it is fundamentally impossible for reality (nature) not to be.

Reality (nature) might transmute into a "single" geometrical object, and it will nonetheless have to remain at least that (and in that way become the sole Being). If "all things" would be entirely absent, Being would remain as a no-thing (and it would have to be thought of as a sole, limitless entirety). But as absolute absence, it is impossible as a concrete manifestation, though can certainly assist us as useful fiction, "for the purpose of description and communication, *not* explanation" (Nietzsche 2001 [1886], §21), much like an absolute vacuum. Likewise, nothing cannot be a contradictory object. Again, if it is understood as (a) or (b), by definition it is not contradictory: in the case of (a) as long as it is not improperly absolutized, in (b) as long as it is not improperly particularized. But if it is understood as absolutistic nothing, then it is contradictory only if it is used at the third level, that is, if the notion is improperly applied to refer to a concrete object. In other words, *nothing* is an object as a word, furthermore *nothing* is an object as a concept, but *nothing* as a concrete object is impossible, much like *number*, unless thought of as (b). If the opposite would stand, then we might as well accept that number and zoompa can be stretched like a rubber and painted upon, and thus we might be at the verge of revolution in ontology, but such a possibility is yet to be explored. In the ontological imaginarium, however, I find that nothing and nothingness are usable as what we call *useful fictions*. In that regard, nothing is useful in that once understood meontically, claims such as "Death is to be brought to nothing" (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26) show a capacity for utilizing nothingness without us thinking about it in absolutes contradicting reality and spawning unresolvable paradoxes.

Be that as it may, *nothing* has been the subject of many canonical studies since Kant, because influential representatives of European continental philosophy continuously dreaded the possibility of it being something more than merely absence, and as that something it always represented an insurmountable barrier

or danger for personal and political freedom. After Kant, and especially in 19th and 20th centuries, the attitude towards nothing eventually resulted in it being transformed

(1) into an indescribable source or an aspect of freedom and creation; or

(2) an incomprehensible amalgam against which life springs into meaningful existence through freedom.

Theistically, freedom became related to or equated with God,[15] in this, the absolutistic nothing is resolved as the unimaginable beyond of God's immanent power to create. Atheistically, freedom itself works through a human being until its full realization—a pinnacle of this approach we find in existentialism—but has no traceable source. The nothing, then, becomes in freedom the source of spontaneity, of geniality, of decisive action, of meaningful life. While meontic nothing has been constitutive of morality since the age of the idea of the preservation of life, through freedom being realized as ontologically resembling the nothing, the nothing suddenly became constitutive of morality through its essential attribute of nothingness.

Although there is little to be found in philosophy about the figures of interaction *between morality and nothing or nothingness* directly, the canon began to treat *nothing and nothingness* either as:

(1) the spontaneous basis of action that is transformed into a specific framework of volitional agency; or

(2) an evocation of the nothing's "thinghood" by the specific moral disposition that leads to willing the nothingness as a particular, more-than-nothing thing.

Some paradigmatic examples in the West are Sartre, who claims that

> human-reality is free precisely to the extent to which it has its own nothingness to be. It has this nothingness to be, as we saw, in many dimensions: First, by temporalizing itself, i.e., by being always at a distance from itself, which implies that it can never let itself be determined by its past to do this action or that; next, by arising as a consciousness of something and (of) itself, i.e., by being self-presence and not merely self, which implies that nothing can exist in consciousness that is not a consciousness of existing and that, in consequence, nothing external to consciousness can motivate it; and, last, by being a transcendence, which is to say not something that exists first in order to place itself afterward in

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15 This began already in German idealism with Kant's emphasis on the subjective power of freedom in connection to God—it has later resulted in the bridging of spirit and freedom culminating in Hegel's philosophical project, taking many forms afterwards, such as in Kierkegaard.

relation to such and such an end but, on the contrary, a being that is from the outset a pro-ject, i.e., which defines itself through its end. (Sartre 2018 [1943], 593)

Another example is Nietzsche, who equates the nothing with death in his critique of ascetic morals built on Christian discourse (e.g. Nietzsche 2009 [1887] II, §11; III §28), while Kierkegaard finds nothingness to be a source of freedom—which is "the self" (Kierkegaard 2013 [1849], III)—that then becomes the point of tension between the growth of possibilities and the necessity of the self to attain a certain determination, "spot" (ibid., III.b), and so "nothing begets dread" and "dread is freedom's reality as possibility for possibility" (Kierkegaard 1957, §5).

A further example from the West is Heidegger, who aimed to re-introduce the nothing back into the discourse as constitutive to human freedom by being the no-thing rooted in the human condition, by which freedom manifests as "the condition of possibility of the manifestness [disclosure, unconcealment] of the being of beings, of the understanding of being" (Heidegger 2002, 205 [GA 303]; cf. Coe 1985, 116–17), and

> only in the clear night of dread's Nothingness is what-is as such revealed in all its original overtness (*Offenheit*): that it "is" and is not Nothing. This verbal appendix "and not Nothing" is, however, not *a posteriori* explanation but an *a priori* which alone makes possible any revelation of what-is. The essence of Nothing as original nihilation lies in this: that it alone brings Da-sein face to face with what-is as such, (Heidegger 1949, 369)

Soon after, he continues:

> Nothing is that which makes the revelation of what-is as such possible for our human existence. Nothing not merely provides the conceptual opposite of what-is but is also an original part of essence (*Wesen*). It is in the Being (*Sein*) of what-is that the nihilation of Nothing (*das Nichten des Nichts*) occurs. (Ibid., 370)

When in Heidegger nothing is "not revealed by a particular absence or lack in which possibilities remain, such as an empty space that can be filled or a missing object that can be returned", that is, when "it is rather a radical non-occurring and impossibility that can consume concerned life" (Nelson 2024, 149), it provokes freedom, itself tied to nothing in a variety of ways, among which "freedom in openness to an infinite plenitude one cannot encompass or master", "the vast empty fullness of potentiality", and "existential negativity in anxiety" (ibid., 158)

have been the most influential perspectives on the subject matter. Similarities to the presented paradigm are also found in theories where nothing is not directly constitutive, but nonetheless participates in explanations, such as Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty or Hobbes' influential theory of freedom, which is interesting because Hobbes defines it as the "absence of opposition (by opposition, I mean external impediments of motion)" (Hobbes 1996 [1651], XXI.1; cf. XIV.2). Often described as vague, Hobbes' definition is in fact stimulating because it grants identity to freedom via meontic nothing.

With the inclusion of nothing in the discourse of freedom, morality then appears as an emergent form of interaction between nothing(ness) and freedom, in which an action affirms the order, either in the opposition to nothing or having the source in the nothing, and in turn imposes imperatives on the subjects, defines the levels of their autonomous humanity, and enables accountability. The more humane we are, the less the nothing is to participate in our lives, but without it we would not be able to achieve or reveal the meaningful order of existence. And when the order begins to disintegrate or needs to be changed, it is from the nothing that we will draw the power to act and make changes, because it grants us the unconstrained source of action, where *not a thing* can affect the formation and performance of our autonomous act. It allows a resetting of the established order, which can be seen as becoming a nothing. This interplay of two antipodal functions of nothing is what makes it an abode of freedom. It seems, then, that nothing and freedom became understood as two sides of the same coin, with free will taking up the role of the bridging edge. It might also be stated that what Western philosophers have essentially done since Kant is identify that the ground of what spontaneity stems from is nothing(ness). However, the approaches that have brought about such a connection between freedom and nothing must defend two difficult claims in order to make the ideas of free moral agency and free creative power reasonable: (1) that freedom and nothing exist, and (2) that the ontophysical equality of freedom and nothing is a misconception. But what if the distinction is false?

What if Nothing = Freedom?

In both cases—freedom and nothing—there has been no attempt to try to identify what could possibly be their ontophysical constitution under the assumption that they exist as concrete beings. For example, Sartre's extensive and influential discussion on nothing, *Being and Nothingness*, which even includes chapters such as "The Origin of Nothingness", did not explore the fabric of nothing under the assumption that it exists as a concrete being. In Sartre's entire opus, much like in Kierkegaard's or Heidegger's, we see features of meontic nothing, which is perfectly fine, but it cannot claim that nothing exists as such, as it always has at

least some attribution that makes it into something. Heidegger, as shown previously, was perfectly aware of this impossibility, yet still insisted that it not only participates in being, but is in fact a crucial component of essence as essence. It is, then, either a play on meontic nothing—or it nonetheless affirms its existence. It appears in the literature that freedom and nothing are either continuously presented as compound notions, as the representations of various other entities in a specific complex, or they exist as concrete entities, even when it is clearly stated that nothing "isn't", but no exact description is provided. On the one hand, that is, from freedom understood as self, choice-making, the field of possibilities, capacity to self-govern etc., to nothing understood as god, chaos, emptiness, Being, absence, hole, etc.—they are continuously, though indirectly, given attributes and relations that makes them either a merely referential notion or a synthetic entity, a "superstructure" (we could say that in this case they would be ontophysically "descriptive", rather than "normative", that is, "accidental", rather than "substantial").[16] For *nothing*, it means that, though maybe not perceived as so, it is "applied" as meontic nothing. For freedom, it means that it is dependent on the physical reality of entities it is made of. On the other hand, when there is an effort to define them as being substantial entities, normative, their non-synthetic, non-effectual identifiable attribution is avoided as the subject of dispute. An extreme example of this can be found in both Kant—who argues that freedom is, but is incomprehensible, while nothing is for him a functional notion defining impossibility (Kant 2007, B346)—and in Eriugena, who argues that nothing is (though as God), but is incomprehensible, while freedom is for him a form of the absence of obstacles combined with free-willism obtained as an indestructible good from God (Eriugena 2003, IV. 775D, 835A, V. 966D, 974D).[17] The two concepts again seem to converge.

Regarding the existence of freedom in relation to nothing, the *first possibility* is that freedom exists (+), has ontophysical attribution (+), and it is empirically comprehensible (+). If that is the case, then freedom would be descriptive, determinism holds true, absolutistic nothing does not exist because everything has at least one attribute, and particularist nothing is pragmatic. The *second possibility* is that freedom exists (+), has ontophysical attribution (+), but it is not empirically comprehensible (-). If that is the case, then we cannot say for certain whether it does or does not exist, and subsequently cannot make a fair assessment of its similarity with nothing or the authenticity of our experience of self-governance. Kant provided ingenious arguments for the acceptance of freedom on the basis

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16   I am not entirely sure in the use of these phrases, but it seems that they assist in understanding the difference.

17   In fact, Eriugena in that regard goes further than Kant, in that Eriugena ascribes to God the impossibility of even knowing its own self. Eriugena's final conclusion might be understood as Hegel's absolute—reversed entirely.

of rational belief, but the entire argument is founded on heavily contested conceptions (atemporality, supreme original being, immortality, soul, eternality etc.) that together work in only one theoretical way (Kant's way), and that might not be enough for us to abandon the comprehensibility criterion. If this possibility is to be defended, but not in Kant's way, then new foundation has to be discovered for each particular element that constitutes the theory without succumbing to empirically explainable phenomena that results in causally determined action. The *third possibility* is that freedom exists (+), does not have ontophysical attribution (-), and it is empirically comprehensible (+), and the *fourth possibility*—the two are similar in result and so I mention them together—would be that freedom exists (+), does not have ontophysical attribution (-), and it is not empirically comprehensible (-). These two possibilities presuppose the existence of such an entity or the Being itself that exists as *the absolute changing*. How such an entity—or reality—could be knowable I cannot propose, but as far as I can tell, there is currently not enough evidence to assume that this possibility could be true, while the non-comprehensible variant suffers from the same issue as the second possibility. An alternative interpretation of the third and fourth possibilities is that having no attribution means that we are actually talking about nothing.

Freedom and nothing are in that sense alike, in that giving them any kind of attribution is a risk of obliterating the meaning of the notion: if nothing is given attributes, then it stops being nothing and starts being either something or Being, and if freedom is given attributes, then it stops being empirically incomprehensible and starts implying determinism, unless a Kantian-style proposal is accepted. If a theory of freedom proposes that freedom does not have any ontophysical attribution, then it runs the risk of absorbing the identity of nothing. If it is the particularistic nothing, then it is deterministic (thus, not truly freedom). If it is the absolutistic nothing, then it is impossible, thus freedom is impossible. In both cases, our first-person experience of self-governance is an unresolvable delusion, leading to the conclusion that moral life is absurd. In theories where nothing and freedom are interacting "forces", nothing is of meontic type and most likely descriptive, and freedom is either a compound notion (meaning: determinism) or it presupposes an argument in Kant's tradition of the theory of thing-in-itself (e.g. Sartre).

Regarding the existence of nothing in relation to freedom, the *first possibility* is that nothing exists (+), has ontophysical attributes (+), and it is empirically comprehensible (+). If nothing is understood here as another term for Being, then the possibility holds true, but freedom does not arise in such a system, unless defended in the Kantian tradition (to which, in a sense, Heidegger belongs as well). If nothing is understood here as a particularistic nothing, then it may be possible, but does not tell us much about freedom. If nothing is here understood as absolutistic nothing, then the claims are absurd. The *second possibility* is that

nothing exists (+), has ontophysical attribution (+), but it is not empirically comprehensible (-). The problem with this possibility is the same as in freedom. The *third possibility* is that nothing exists (+), does not have ontophysical attribution (-), and it is empirically comprehensible (+). By the interaction of elements this is absurd regardless of the variant of nothing, as in the case of nothing = Being the existence itself guarantees attribution that the notion of nothing cannot withstand, while in other two cases it contradicts itself, and so from all three cases we cannot say anything certain about freedom. The *fourth possibility* would be that nothing exists (+), does not have ontophysical attribution (-), and it is not empirically comprehensible (-). This possibility might be interpreted as either absurd or suffering from the comprehensibility problem, either way, we learn nothing about freedom. The *final possibility* is that nothing does not exist, other than as a word and useful fiction. If that is the case, then only a Kantian-style argument may support that freedom exists, but if that approach is not acceptable, then the concept of freedom again runs the risk of absorbing the identity of nothing, which leads to the conclusion that moral life is absurd.

The exposition of ontological equality between freedom and nothing begs the question of the methodological framework for testing the possibilities that a theory of freedom endorsing the existence of freedom transmutes its central concept into nothing, ultimately rendering its existence impossible. I will try to offer an orientation here by addressing possible objections and proposing some rules for guidance.

Firstly, it is imperative to acknowledge that my attempt to demonstrate the problem rests on the premise that to claim that something exists—in the broadest possible sense of the verb "to exist"—and yet deny it any ontophysical articulation by which it would occupy reality, is nonsensical. My second premise was that in the case of freedom, it is a rule of thumb, rather than accident, that thinkers tend to do precisely that: they take the freedom to be an entity on its own but do not give any precise articulating regarding what freedom is, or they explicate freedom via other entities (e.g. "the ability to make choice"), treating it, at best, as some synthetic or emergent non-substantial entity, but again do not explain how freedom comes to be. For the first case, Kant would say "and rightfully so", because to give the freedom discernable attributes is to subsume it under a general law of nature and thus to make it either a deterministic or an indeterministic entity, both of which are fatal to free will. In the second case, ontologically, the assertion creates a kind of adjacent structure, a "parastructure" within each entity (e.g. within whatever the "ability" is or whatever the whole system that makes free action possible could be), that is supposed to imply free action, yet this parastructure is never explored regarding its ontical content, unless it is again subsumed under the laws of nature with the same fatal outcome. I aimed to show that there is another

phenomenon which, by its definition, lacks ontophysical articulation, and that is *nothing*. Specifically, the absolutistic conception of nothing. For whichever entity we decide not to articulate ontophysically, we invite the absolutistic conception of nothing to take its place instead. The fact that many contemporary philosophers of freedom eventually claim that it is a matter of personal belief whether freedom does exist or not, i.e. whether determinism, compatibilism, libertarianism or indeterminism is true, does not help the matter. In contrast to this approach, note that in the case of Kant's theory of the thing in itself in relation to how freedom manifests itself in reality, Kant *does not* deny any ontophysical articulation of either the thing in itself or freedom, but rather, he denies that we can grasp its tangible content, and we cannot do so because a thing in itself is not bound to time.

There are two general ways of responding to my observation. The first is to object to it by showing that there are authors who clearly provide the ontophysical articulation of freedom in what it is in itself, and yet do not succumb to determinism or indeterminism (when tested in ontophysical articulation, compatibilist theories usually turn out to be one or the other), and thus they also refute Kant's central claim regarding the relation between freedom and natural law. I have not found such an author, but it is possible that I have missed an account. If this can be shown, then at least some theories offer the possibility of avoiding the danger of ontologically equating freedom with nothing, and they certainly merit further research. The second way is to accept the premise but also to accept that freedom can exist, but that we cannot provide its ontophysical articulation. If the reader finds it acceptable that we do not need a precise ontophysical articulation of freedom in order to accept that it exists, or that it exists but we cannot grasp its ontophysical articulation, then they do not need to worry about the problem of equating freedom and the absolutist nothing. However much it may seem that freedom is the same thing as absolutistic nothing, they will claim that there is still an ontophysical difference, however imperceptible, between freedom and nothing. I do not find this line of argumentation strong enough to be able to distinguish between freedom and absolutistic nothing, and I do not see what useful knowledge comes out of it, but I accept that it is a possibility. However, if this exploration has convinced us that there is perhaps something suspect about the way we treat freedom and nothing philosophically, then we should consider some guidelines for interpreting theories of freedom in light of the possibility that we are allowing freedom to share ontophysical articulation with nothing.

In the case of particularist nothing (nothing as absence or emptiness) the two concepts are compatible. They may imply the same thing or two things in the fundamental interplay of reality, but neither implies that they have no ontophysical articulation. Some dispositions may claim that this articulation cannot be grasped, but either way the problem is at a different, acceptable level. These approaches

deserve further study because they may provide additional insight into the nature of freedom when confronted with the problem of natural laws governing reality, but they were not the primary concern of this paper. The primary concern was with theories that imply such an absence of ontophysical articulation of freedom that it begins to share its ontological identity with absolutistic nothing. In order to notice this tendency, we must first extract the direct definitions and descriptions of freedom from an account concerned with freedom or free will. We will notice whether freedom is articulated as an independent entity (substantial entity) or is described as an emergent property of the manifestation of other entities (e.g. that it is an ability, power, disposition, faculty etc.). Most likely it will be the latter. If it is the latter, then we need to look "under the hood", we have to see how these entities are described and look for the dimension that explains how that particular constellation of elements results in having freedom, i.e. for the ontophysical articulation within that is at the same time governable under the laws of nature and yet somehow contains that which escapes them. If we cannot find it, then most likely the account is false. In contrast, if freedom is clearly articulated as an independent entity occupying reality, then we need to observe whether it is seen as a special kind of entity that exists but cannot be ontophysically articulated, in which case it is most likely false unless a Kantian-style theory is accepted, or whether it is ontophysically articulated. If the latter is the case, then we need to consider how it stands up to the laws of nature and the phenomena of probability, indeterminacy, chance, randomness, causality and chaos. If these do not threaten its identity, then the proposed theory of freedom is a viable solution to the longstanding problem of free will and the absurd moral life.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the possibility that in the Western philosophical tradition, freedom and nothing might be one and the same phenomenon. This possibility was explored on the basis of the tendency of authors to avoid ontophysical identification of the "fabric" of freedom, i.e. what substantially constitutes freedom as an entity, which often results in descriptions that avoid proper attribution and proposals that either introduce theories of some kind of dualisms or take freedom at face value. The first two parts were devoted to showing how, in the dispute over the reality of freedom, the concept of nothing "creeps up" on the concept of freedom. The first part was committed to demonstrating an ontological conundrum within the ongoing discussion on free will through which freedom becomes a relevant subject. The second part was dedicated to outlining Kant's cosmological theory of freedom, because Kant's ingenious approach simultaneously helps to better understand the core problem of the ongoing disputes on freedom

and also posits a solution to the problem that further emphasizes the possibility of conceptual equality between freedom and nothing. I also chose Kant's theory because I feel that his challenging proposal has been left out of contemporary discussions of free will without properly explicated justification. The third and fourth parts were devoted to discussing the possibility of the existence of nothing, i.e. what kind of entity it would be, to further present the convergence of the two concepts and to allow for the resolution of the accumulated possibilities and a discussion on the methodological framework for examining the possibilities of the ontological overlap between freedom and nothing.

In view of the results, my main objective was to convince readers that the possible amalgam of the two concepts leads to the impossibility of an authentic moral life. It implies a great sadness of our existence, and the need for the authors who really believe that free will is possible to be very careful in developing the foundations of their theory of freedom, lest it becomes deterministic, likely impossible or purely based on personal beliefs. Although Kant partly objected to Spinoza's approach to the problem, if we can observe how the theory of freedom is endangered by determinism and nothingness, and considering that Kant's solution may not be satisfying, then one of the possible ways of tackling the problem is to reinterpret the "Gordian knot" of free will through Spinoza's *Ethics*. Since Spinoza is another unjustly ignored crucial contributor to the theory of freedom, returning to his work may shed new light on the problem burdened by the convoluted contemporary debates that do not seem to make substantial progress in resolving the problem of freedom and free will. Another possibility seems to lie in the Eastern philosophical traditions, whose understanding of nothing and freedom may prove crucial in finding a universal theory of freedom that does not lead to determinism, its impossibility, or acceptance by personal belief.

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THEMATIC FOCUS
NOTHINGNESS
PART II: SUBLATING NOTHINGNESS: OPENNESS, FREEDOM AND IMAGINATION

Analytical Approaches

Nothingness of *Dao* in the *Daodejing*: A Mereological Interpretation

Rafal BANKA*

Abstract

This article is based on my mereological reconstruction of the Daoist metaphysical system, as presented in the *Daodejing*. I conceptualize the *Dao* and *you* relationship as a relationship between Unrestricted Composition (for any entities, there is a composition that they make) and Restricted Composition (what is an entity is determined by finite composition rules) respectively. This conceptualization, among other things, makes it possible to address the way in which *Dao* is described as *wu*—nothingness or non-being. In this article, I will show that *Dao* as the ultimate reality in Daoist metaphysics is not an ontological nothingness and discuss how this "nothingness characteristic" can be mereologically reconstructed and explained. I will discuss the interpretation of *Dao* in terms of Mereological Nihilism (according to which there are only mereological simples that do not have parts and are not parts of any complex entities), Unrestricted Composition, and consider an option in which mereology is confined exclusively to relationships between parts. I will also discuss how the nothingness aspect of *Dao* can be viewed from a stuff ontology perspective, which questions the ontological standing of parts.

Keywords: nothingness, mereology, Daoist metaphysics, Chinese metaphysics

Ničnost *Dao* v *Daodejing*: mereološka interpretacija

Izvleček

Ta članek temelji na moji mereološki rekonstrukciji daoističnega metafizičnega sistema, kot je predstavljen v Daodejing. Razmerje med Dao in you pojmujem kot razmerje med neomejeno sestavo (za vse entitete obstaja sestava, ki jo tvorijo) in omejeno sestavo (kaj je entiteta, določajo končna pravila sestave). Ta konceptualizacija med drugim omogoča obravnavo načina, na katerega je Dao opisan kot wu – ničnost ali nebivanje. V svoji predstavitvi pokažem, da Dao kot končna realnost v daoistični metafiziki ni ontološka ničnost, ter razpravljam o tem, kako je mogoče to »značilnost ničnosti« mereološko rekonstruirati in pojasniti. Obravnavam interpretacijo Dao v smislu mereološkega nihilizma (po katerem obstajajo le mereološke enostavne entitete, ki nimajo delov in niso deli nobenih kompleksnih entitet), neomejene sestave, in razmišljam o

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možnosti, da je mereologija omejena izključno na odnose med deli. Obravnavam tudi, kako je mogoče videti ničnost Dao s perspektive ontologije snovi, ki postavlja pod vprašaj ontološki status delov.

Ključne besede: ničnost, mereologija, daoistična metafizika, kitajska metafizika

Introduction

This article discusses how *wu* 無 as described in the *Daodejing*, can be understood in terms of nothingness. This discussion is largely motivated by the juxtaposition of *you* 有 and *wu*, the former usually conceptualized as being or what exists, whereas the latter, partly by way of opposition, is identified with or located in proximity to an ontological nothingness. In my article, I address the nothingness of *wu* from a mereological perspective. I base my discussion on my mereological reconstruction of the Daoist metaphysical system as described in the *Daodejing*. Accordingly, I conceptualize the two subregions that constitute the Daoist metaphysical universe—*Dao* and *you*—as Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Composition, respectively.[1] According to Unrestricted Composition (otherwise known as Unrestricted Fusion or Mereological Universalism), for any entities, there is a composition that they make. In other words, any entities form a complex entity, or a whole, of which they are exclusive parts.[2] According to Restricted Composition, composition is determined by one or a finite number of composition rules, which determine the way in which parts are arranged.[3] For instance, on the physical adherence of entities rule, an analogue watch movement is a composition, whereas the Solar System is a composition according to the rule of gravity relationships. The two complex entities will not be compositions if one swaps the composition rules for each other. However, both these entities, and in fact any arrangement of entities, are compositions according to Unrestricted Composition.

The dynamic character of the Daoist model is located in a relationship between *dao* and *you*. I conceptualize this relationship as a mereological overlap, which consists in sharing parts between entities. In the Daoist model, the whole of *you* overlaps with at least a portion of *Dao*. The dynamic *Dao*'s production of *you*,

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1   A detailed account of this reconstruction can be found in Banka (2018).

2   A similar definition can be found in Lewis (1991, 7, 74). For formal versions see, for instance Varzi (2019; 2007, 24).

3   Composition rules are formulated as an answer to the "Special Composition Question" proposed by Peter van Inwagen: "What necessary and jointly sufficient conditions must any *x*s satisfy for it to be the case that there is an object composed of those *x*s?" (Markosian 2008, 342). For the discussion about formulating the question and a formal version of the question, see van Inwagen (1990, 21–31).

as well as the persistence and cessation of *you* are reflected as the volume of the overlap, which ranges from zero to complete.[4]

I believe that this mereological framework for Daoist metaphysics offers a fine-grained insight into the characteristics of the Daoist metaphysical model.[5] This also helps in examining how *wu* is related to an ontological nothingness, or the reason for associating *wu* with a more broadly construed nothingness or its aspects. I believe that viewing this characteristic of *dao* in terms of parthood relationships can offer some plausible solutions to be considered.

I begin my discussion with an analysis of the metaphysical characteristics of *wu*, to form an intermediate interpretation of how *wu* can be situated in relation to the ontological nothingness. In the next section, I will demonstrate how *wu* can be viewed in a mereological way. I will show that we can entertain three possible scenarios: (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) a mereology without upper bounds. Additionally, I will consider a case in which the ultimate reality is ontological matter, which might serve to explain the nothingness of *wu*. In the final remarks, apart from conclusion, I will mention what other aspects of Daoist metaphysics can be mereologically explored.

The Metaphysical Characteristics of *Wu*

In this section, I concentrate on how *wu* can be related to the ontological and more generally construed notions of nothingness. I set out from the notion that *wu* is an aspect of *Dao*—the ultimate level of reality in the Daoist metaphysical model.

Proceeding to discussing *wu*, let us first delineate a distinction between ontological nothingness and nothingness more generally construed (hereafter simply "nothingness"). Ontological nothingness refers to what cannot exist in any way. Since the Daoist metaphysical universe constitutes a reflection of the "one-world view"—a world without transcendence—which is consistent with a large part of Chinese philosophy, ontological nothingness can be further specified as referring to what cannot exist spatiotemporally. Apart from non-existence, one cannot offer another account of ontological nothingness—not because, for instance,

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4   I discuss how the liminal states of *Dao* and *you* overlap can be interpreted in Banka (2022).

5   For some more detailed discussions that are focused on specific issues, see Banka (2018; 2023). Also, the possibility of a mereological reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics is proposed by Chad Hansen in *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (1983). The argument is constructed from a linguistic angle in postulating a semantics of the Chinese language founded on a mereological conceptualization of reality (Hansen 1992, 48, 48n†). On this view, reality is composed of interpenetrating stuffs, which are classified as mereological objects (Hansen 1983, 35). More broadly, this proposal can be situated among recent approaches to Daoist metaphysics. For a brief account of these, see Zhao (2022, 197–98).

ontological nothingness evades systematic ontological accounts, or cannot be cognized—but due to that it does not exist.

A more general concept of nothingness differs from ontological nothingness in that it refers to entities that evade systematic accounts.[6] In other words, nothingness as a concept encapsulates entities that exist or can exist, but are significantly different from what is typically regarded as an existing entity.

The above differentiation can be illustrated by two types of negation proposed by Władysław Stróżewski: crossing-out and differentiating. The former eliminates the referent of a concept or proposition. In this case, the referent is nothing, otherwise non-being (*nie-byt*). The latter indicates that apart from the negated referent there is something different—nonbeing (*niebyt*). Accordingly, the crossing-out negation refers to ontological nothingness. Regarding the differentiating negation, it refers to the result of this very negation. For instance, the non-being of a burnt house are its ruins. They are clearly not the house and are different from the house as the house's nonbeing (Stróżewski 2003, 167–68). Hence, the second type of negation refers to something that exists.

As previously mentioned, *wu* can be conceptualized as an aspect of the fundamental level of reality in the Daoist model. Therefore, my discussion begins by viewing nothingness in terms of ontological dependence, which I believe to be most natural in a further conceptualization of *wu*.

Dao, as the fundamental reality level, is ontologically prior to *you*. In Chapter 1, *Dao* is described as "the beginning of all things [萬物]" (Chan 1969, 139). In this sense, *Dao* is prior to what one can conceptualize as the world, which is made of concrete entities.[7]

The ontological priority of *Dao* consists in being temporally antecedent to the world and being more ontologically fundamental. Regarding the former, evidence can be found in Chapter 25:

> There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. (Chan 1969, 152)[8]

What is of greater importance for our discussion is the latter priority, according to which *Dao* is more fundamental by way of being the material from which

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6   Such entities can be, for instance, entities that have no properties or/and cannot be cognized.

7   I will conceptualize this further in mereological terms in the next section.

8   Considering that Daoist metaphysics, as well as the Chinese metaphysical tradition in general, does not assume a metaphysical "time zero", which stands for the beginning of the universe, the temporal antecedence is not absolute but rather relative in the process of an incessant transformation of the universe.

everything is made. This characteristic is probably best encapsulated in the following simile from Chapter 28:

> When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things (as *Tao* is transformed into the myriad of things). (Ibid., 154)

Analogously with wooden objects made from wood, the world of concrete entities is produced from and persists thanks to *Dao*. This description of *Dao*'s ontological priority also shows in what sense *Dao* is viewed in terms of nothingness. *Dao* is not an ontological nothingness that temporally precedes the origination of concrete entities. *Dao*'s nothingness aspect consists in being undifferentiated in comparison with concrete entities, whose forms are finite and hence definite.

Further confirmation for this understanding of *Dao* as nothingness can be found in Chapter 41, where *Dao*, among other things, is described as the "great square with no corners" (ibid., 160). The great square is not bereft of any corners, but quite the oppositive—it has all the corners that can be actualized as concrete square-shaped entities. Accordingly, the lack of forms (here shape) is not to be attributed to lacking them, but to lacking a particular one or a finite number of them. This can be also confirmed by referring to *Dao* as "the storehouse of all things" (ibid., 168), which points to *Dao* having all entities, instead of being an "empty entity", which could be interpreted as an ontological nothingness.

Thus, *Dao*'s nothingness consists in being an undifferentiated level of reality that can be viewed as a totality or whole on which all concrete entities depend.[9]

According to the above interpretation, *Dao* is not an ontological nothingness contrasted with *you* consisting of existing entities. The difference between *Dao* and *you*, which can be partly mapped onto the generally construed nothingness, consists in the sense that, undifferentiated in contrast to concrete entities, *Dao* cannot be cognized, expressed in language, or even named, as many fragments of the *Daodejing* underscore.[10]

Considering the above, the nothingness of *Dao* consists in lacking the characteristics of actualized concrete entities. In other words, *Dao* exists but, in contrast to concrete entities, it is not particular as a thing—its nature can be named as "no-thingness". In fact, a compliant description can be found in Chapter 14, where the infinite and nameless *Dao* "reverts to nothingness" (Chan 1969, 146). Considering that here "nothingness" stands for the original *wuwu* 無物—literally

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9   Analogously with shapeless wood in Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154), from which concrete wooden things with definite and finite shapes can be produced.

10   For instance, fragments from Chan (1969, chap. 1, 14, 21, 25).

"no-thing", "nothingness", or "no-thinghood"—this metaphysical characteristic can be postulated.

Conceptualizing *wu* as such a variety of nothingness remains compliant with other metaphysical characteristics of *Dao* as the ultimate level of reality. For instance, Chapter 25 describes *Dao* as:

> … undifferentiated yet complete [混成], which existed before heaven and earth … it depends on nothing and does not change [獨立而不改]. It operates everywhere [周行] … (Chan 1969, 152)

Accordingly, by virtue of being all plausible concrete entities, *Dao* is both ontologically complete and occupies (or is) all of spacetime. It is also independent in that its existence is not conditioned by the origination, persistence, or cessation of concrete entities. It can be seen that the nothingness defined by undifferentiation contrasted with the characteristics of particular concrete entities complies with and complements the concept of *Dao* as the fundamental aspect of reality.

To sum up, conceptualizing *Dao* in terms of nothingness is attributed to its not being a concrete object, which is confined by the finiteness and hence definiteness of form. This fact can also support the indescribable and non-cognizable dimensions of *Dao*.

Mereology: Formulating the Nothingness Problem

The above reconstruction of *wu* has excluded the *Dao*'s ontological nothingness status and attributes nothingness to undifferentiation as a characteristic of an existent entity. This in turn invites a more precise account of the nature of undifferentiation, and, as immediately follows, how concrete entities originate from the undifferentiated. I believe that this problem can be approached in a mereological way. In the three following subsections, I propose three plausible explanations of *wu*, which relate to (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) a dismissal of the ontological standing of compositions. In the next section, I propose considering *Dao* as an ontological stuff. This interpretation is connected to mereology by referring to the ontological standing of parts.

Before I proceed to each of these tasks, I ought to present a mereological account of the *you* region, until now described only as concrete entities. This is essential as a foundation to considering each of the three options, and helps explain the mereological nature of the relationship between the *Dao* and *you* regions.

The whole *you* region is constituted of concrete entities, which are referred to in the *Daodejing* as *wu* 物—"things". Chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* paraphrases what

originates from *Dao* as "*wanwu* 萬物", literally "ten thousand things", (Chan 1969, 139), which is usually understood (and translated from the Chinese) as "everything", "all things", or simply "the world" (not an ontological universe). Although the wording is not and should not be taken literally, it suggests that *Dao* produces countable, and hence discrete, entities.

The concrete entities that furnish *you* can be, and mostly are, complex.[11] This is particularly well illustrated by a fragment from Chapter 11, where the usefulness of *Dao* in *you* is demonstrated by, for instance a wheel made of thirty spokes, or a house made of walls (ibid., 144–45). Importantly for our discussion, these descriptions concurrently show that concrete entities are wholes constituted by distinguishable parts, which (here) are spatially arranged in a certain, determined way. Accordingly, concrete entities can be conceptualized as compositions determined by composition rules. In other words, what makes them compositions is their parts and their specific arrangement.

Another important feature of the concrete entities consists in that they are, in contrast with *Dao*, temporal. This characteristic is mentioned in, for instance, Chapter 16:

> All things [*wanwu*] come into being … All things flourish. But each one returns to its root. (Chan 1969, 147)

The existence of concrete entities reveals a defined trajectory: they come into being, persist within limited time, and cease to exist. All these stages are dependent on *Dao*, from which they originate, and thanks to which they can persist (like wooden things thanks to wood mentioned in Chapter 28 (ibid., 154)), and return to the fundamental reality level. This trajectory complies with their mereological characteristics in that concrete entities—wholes—exist as long as their parts are arranged in a determined way. The beginning and end of existence of wholes is tantamount to the arrangement and disarrangement of parts respectfully.

The above mereological reconstruction of the *Daoist* metaphysical model encounters complication when a broader context of the *Dao* and *you* relationship is taken into consideration. The main problem can be formulated in the following way: How can compositions, which constitute the world, be produced by nothingness characterized by undifferentiation, which is not similar to *wu*-things conceptualized as compositions with determined parts and composition rules? Whatever exists as a concrete entity, overlaps *Dao*, which would suggest that the parts or even compositions in *you* must overlap parts and compositions in *Dao*. But in this case, *Dao* would no longer be undetermined.

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11   The *Daodejing* does not mention the existence of things that are made from unique parts, because this is regarded as implausible.

As can be seen here, the problem is not ontologically radical in that it is not about how existence is produced out of an ontological nothingness. Instead, the question concerns how a metaphysical region that lacks compositions can be ontologically (and mereologically) fundamental for the other region that can be fully accommodated in mereological terms. I believe that this question can be consistently solved within mereology, where there are three plausible options of a "mereological nothingness" to be considered. All of them involve assuming a mereological characteristic that differs from the Restricted Composition status if the *you* region. They are: (a) Mereological Nihilism, (b) Unrestricted Composition, and (c) the dismissal of an ontological standing to upper bounds.

Mereological Nihilism in Dao

In order to define Mereological Nihilism, the essential mereological concepts should be introduced, and these include parthood. Mereology distinguishes between two types of parts (or parthood relationships): the Proper Part (PP) and the Improper Part (P). Proper parts overlap the common understanding of part in the sense that it takes more than one part to form a composition, otherwise a whole. This can be formulated in the following way:

$$PPxy \equiv Pxy \wedge x \neq y^{12}$$

An improper part is less intuitive in that apart from consisting in proper parthood, it also accommodates a case in which compositions can be made of only one part:

$$Pxy \equiv PPxy \vee x = y^{13}$$

According to Mereological Nihilism, the world consists solely of mereological simples, which are entities that do not have proper parts and are not proper parts of other entities. Consequently, the only parthood relationship in Mereological Nihilism is the case of improper parthood in which a simple is the part of itself. Therefore, a metaphysical model based on Mereological Nihilism entails a mereologically flat world in which there are no complex compositions.

On mapping Mereological Nihilism onto *Dao*, we achieve a region constituted of mereological simples, which differs considerably from *you* in that there are no complex compositions. Here, the nothingness of *Dao* consists in that the fundamental parts form no compositions, and hence this level of reality cannot be

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12   *x* is proper part of why if and only if *x* is part of *y* and *x* is not *y*.

13   *x* is part of *y* if and only if *x* is proper part of *y* or *x* is *y*.

described in terms of proper parthood and composition rules. Consequently, the totality of simples is not tantamount to nonexistence, and yet is unable to exist as compositions.

This model poses the question of how the simples in the *Dao* region can be proper parts in the *you* region. The legitimacy of this question comes from the fact that all entities in *you* must overlap *Dao*, and what is shared on the side of *you* includes proper parts.[14] A detailed discussion of this problem goes beyond the scope of this paper, and I only list two possible solutions that will make the nihilism of *Dao* and composition in *you* compliant.[15] First, composition in *you* does not necessitate composition in the ontologically prior *Dao.* For instance, the two regions can be subjected to compliant, yet different laws.[16] Second, the ontologically prior *dao* makes composition in *you* possible, but this does not imply that there are proper parts in the *Dao* region, as there cannot be proper parts prior to the compositions that they make.

Dao *as Unrestricted Composition*

As mentioned in the introduction, according to Unrestricted Composition any entities can form a complex entity made from them. Accordingly, *Dao* as Unrestricted Composition would have all the compositions that can be actualized in *you*, which is the region of Restricted Composition. This interpretation also remains consistent with the overlap, in which *you*, as a finite number of compositions, is a portion of all (most likely, an infinite number of) compositions.

Assuming *Dao* as Unrestricted Composition also remains consistent with *Dao*'s ontological priority, as well as its other characteristics. *Dao*, by virtue of being all compositions, is naturally prior to any portion of compositions. Unrestricted Composition also complies with the infinite and atemporal character of *Dao*, in that it is everything that can ever become concrete entities. Accepting Unrestricted Composition also solves the problem of part status, as *Dao* has proper parts, which can be shared by compositions in *you*.

In this option, the nothingness of *Dao* is attributed to undifferentiation by way of being an infinite number of compositions, whose parts are arranged in accordance with an infinite number of composition rules. This status can be illustrated by the uncarved wood from Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154), which has an infinite

14   Although the *Daodejing* does not state whether the *you* region also includes unique part compositions, this option should not be excluded. For instance, electrons are compliant with this model.

15   For detailed arguments referring to Mereological Nihilism, see Banka (2022).

16   This relationship can be interpreted in terms of the dependence between metaphysical nomological laws.

number of wooden objects. The nothingness of *dao* in this case consists in being everything rather than an ontological nothingness.

Dropping Compositions

Mereology is usually construed as a theory of relationships between parts and wholes, but can also be confined to relationships between parts only.[17] A whole, otherwise a composition,[18] is what is constituted by a certain arrangement of parts. However, one can entertain a model in which there are only relationships between parts. For instance, a model of this sort can have the reflexivity axiom, according to which everything is part of itself,[19] as well as the transitivity axiom, according to which if *x* is part of *y*, and *y* is part of *z*, then *x* is part of *z*. Such a model can remain highly informative of parthood relationships and concurrently abstain from introducing the notions of a whole or upper bound. Metaphysically speaking, a parthood-only model would not grant an ontological standing to compositions, which would be of a conventional character.

When mapping such a model onto *Dao*, we achieve a region in which the fundamental level entities remain in parthood relationships, but they do not compose in an ontological sense. Accordingly, here *Dao*'s nothingness consists in evading the "composition conceptualization", in contrast to the *you* region, where determined arrangements of parts constitute compositions that have an ontological standing.[20]

This option can raise a doubt that the ontological status of concrete entities in *you* is merely conventional—since the ontologically prior *Dao* has no compositions, it may be argued that compositions in *you* are also impossible. This state of affairs would consequently cut against the grain of Daoist metaphysics. A plausible solution to this ontological difference in status of compositions across the two regions can be offered by emergent properties. The main characteristics of emergent properties can be formulated as follows:

(a) Emergent properties appear on a certain complexity level of an entity and are significantly different from the properties of a lower level of this complex entity.

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17   Achille Varzi claims that in fact the concept of whole goes beyond mereology and requires a topological complementation (Varzi 2007, 945)

18   This question can also be viewed in terms of the upper bound concept. Roughly speaking, an entity is an upper bound for some entities if they are its parts (not necessarily the only parts).

19   P*xx*.

20   In other words, only the arrangements that agree with composition rules holding in *you* are ontologically valid.

(b) There is a relationship between these two levels. It consists in the determination of the higher by the lower level.

Emergent properties can be illustrated by chemical compounds, whose properties or behaviour are significantly different from the elements that constitute them. Concurrently these emergent properties need to be determined by their fundamental level composites.

Emergent properties can explain the ontological standing of concrete entities in *you* despite their absence in *Dao* in the following way. Considering that in the *you* region compositions exist as long as their parts are arranged in a determined way, it can be said that emergent properties are present in certain arrangements of fundamental parts. In this sense, a composition would be a complex arrangement that concurrently has emergent properties. In other words, the level of complexity at which emergent properties appear is tantamount to a concrete entity. Following this, on (a), what appears at the "thing *wu* complexity" cannot be reduced to the thing's composite parts. In this sense, only things enjoy the properties of concrete entities. Concurrently, on (b), these properties remain dependent on the lower level—*Dao*—which determines all the arrangements, and therefore, has all the properties that can emerge.

Dao as an Ontological Stuff

My final interpretation of *Dao* as nothingness is complemented by stuff ontology. Generally speaking, stuffs are juxtaposed with other entities based on countability. In comparison with countable entities, countability within stuffs appears to be more conventional than intrinsic.[21] For instance, apples, which can be counted by the piece, can be contrasted with apple juice. We can count juice by the litre, gallon, cup, or other volume units, each of which is not embedded in the stuff. Stuffs are externally measured rather than counted based on some intrinsic and unique "unit". Hence, dividing stuff (discreteness in stuff) is conventional rather than ontological.

The above oneness of stuff versus the discreteness of countable entities has also another important implication. It is difficult to talk about an ontological stuff as a complex entity constituted by parts. A house as a complex entity is made of bricks, windows, doors etc., which are distinct and countable composites. A stuff, by virtue of being indiscrete, does not decompose into parts.

This characteristic of stuff is convergent with *Dao*, for instance compared to the uncarved wood from the aforementioned Chapter 28 (Chan 1969, 154). Another

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21   Sometimes, a distinction between counting and measuring is applied to things and stuffs respectively (Steen 2022).

evidence for a stuff interpretation can be found in Chapter 25, which lists the essential characteristics of *Dao* as the ultimate reality:

> There was something [*wu* 物] undifferentiated [*hun* 混] yet complete [*cheng* 成], which existed before heaven and earth.

> … it depends on nothing and does not change.

> It operates everywhere… (Chan 1969, 152).

Although *Dao* is referred to as thing, it is characterized as *hun*, which can be literally rendered as "blended" or "muddy"—something unstructured, which inclines a stuff interpretation. As ultimate reality and everything that can originate in the *you* region, *Dao* spreads over all the spatial locations in the universe. As a stuff, *Dao* is eternal by remaining unchanged at all temporal locations, in contrast to things, whose changes in part arrangement affect their persistence over the whole of time.

We can further look into how the concept of *Dao* as stuff can be further determined. This can be done by examining to what degree *Dao* overlaps a contemporary conceptualization of stuff. Mark Steen compiles the following five categories of an ontological stuff, in contrast with that of things:[22]

1   A stuff and a thing made from that stuff can have different histories as stuff can also exist before[23] the thing. For instance, the clay from which a statue has been made exists prior to, and survives, the statue.

2.   Persistence over time related to the spatial arrangement of parts. While things do not persist after, say, the scattering of parts, the stuff continues. For instance, a house exists as longs as its parts are spatially connected in a house structure, whereas there is no such restriction imposed on, for instance, the concrete from which it was made.

3.   Stuffs are cumulative. Adding portions of a stuff results in *a* stuff, unlike adding things, which become collections of the same things or new things (for instance: a six-pack of beer, 50 cents made from five dimes).

4.   Stuffs can be dissected in the way that dividing a stuff results in a stuff, in contrast to things, which decompose into parts.[24]

5.   Extended simples with no parts are possible but there is always some stuff from which they are made (Steen 2022).

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22   Examples provided by Rafal Banka.

23   And after.

24   It seems that some counterexamples, such as an extended simple, or jellyfish, can be found.

The already mentioned metaphysical characteristics of *Dao* comply with the propensities of stuff from categories 1 and 2. *Dao* as an eternal stuff persists unaffected by the origination and part configurations of the things that *Dao* necessarily underpins. The concept of *Dao* as a stuff also complies with category 5, which is a liminal case of a composition. Category 3 appears notably incongruent with some fundamental characteristics of *Dao*. *Dao* forms a oneness that is complete.[25] Considering these characteristics, *Dao*, by way of permanently being everything that can originate in *you*, cannot be further complemented.

Finally, the concept of *Dao* as stuff is unlikely to accommodate category 4. Although *Dao* is permanently a complete oneness, one can consider the production of concrete entities as a stuff disconnection that converges the dissection mentioned in 4. Accordingly, production consists in that a portion of *Dao* (Unrestricted Composition) overlaps things in *you* (Restricted Composition). This overlap within *Dao* subdivides *Dao* as a whole into the portion of *Dao* that overlaps the actualized things and the portion that is situated beyond the overlap. However, at the level of *Dao*-stuff, there is no spatial disconnection.

Assuming that *Dao* is an ontological stuff, *Dao*'s nothingness would be attributed to being undeterminable in terms of concrete and complex entities, i.e. in terms of parts and wholes relationships.

As in the previous case of dropping compositions, a question arises regarding how *Dao* as an ontological stuff can produce compositions in *you*. This can be analogously answered by resorting to emergent properties.

Final Remarks

As has been demonstrated, the nothingness aspect of *Dao*—*wu* 無—should not be identified with an ontological nothingness. Quite the opposite, *Dao* as the ultimate reality constitutes a whole whose undifferentiation makes it impossible to describe *Dao* in terms of concrete objects.

All of the above discussed mereological interpretations comply with *Dao*'s ontological priority and offer an insight into how, as an undifferentiated whole, *Dao* produces concrete entities in the *you* region. The interpretations also accommodate the dynamic character with regard to Daoist metaphysics, where the coming into existence of things is not to be understood in terms of creating (producing from ontological nothingness) but emerging from transformations of the ultimate reality.

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25   See Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*.

Apart from focusing on the nothingness characteristic of *Dao*, the mereologically informed interpretations open a possibility of exploring other aspects of Daoist metaphysics. For instance, one of them is the nature of concrete objects, whose status depends on their parts and how they are structured. This issue can be viewed in terms of how parthood relationships map onto relationships between spatial regions, and how this mereo-locative relationship complies with the ultimate reality level, which, as has been shown in the above discussion, can be consistently conceptualized in multiple ways.

Acknowledgements

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Fictionally Fictional Object:
The Alleged Objecthood of Nothingness

Wai Lok CHEUNG*

Abstract

Nothingness is inconceivable, yet at the same time it is not inconceivable because it is actually referred to. I propose several accessibility relations to illustrate that nothingness is not an object at all. The fictional object that Sherlock Holmes is belongs to the domain in some semantic context, but the fictionally fictional object that nothingness is does not. Based on this idea, I will also discuss the semantics and the pragmatics of "Nothingness does not exist". How is it that it is not an object, unlike Sherlock Holmes, but we attribute to it nonexistence?

Keywords: nothingness, impossibility, fiction, pretence, counterpart

Fiktivno fiktivni objekt: domnevna objektnost ničnosti

Izvleček

Ničnost je nepojmljiva, vendar hkrati ni nepojmljiva, ker se dejansko nanaša nanjo. Predstavim več razmerij dostopnosti, da ponazorim, da ničnost sploh ni objekt. Fiktivni objekt, ki je Sherlock Holmes, spada v domeno nekega semantičnega konteksta, fiktivno fiktivni objekt, ki je ničnost, pa ne. Na podlagi te ideje obravnavam tudi semantiko izraza »Ničnost ne obstaja«. Kako to, da ni objekt, za razliko od Sherlocka Holmesa, ampak ji pripisujemo neobstoj?

Ključne besede: ničnost, nemožnost, fikcija, pretvarjanje, protipostavka

Graham Priest (2014) pointed to the putative object nothingness, which is both inconceivable and not inconceivable by virtue of being actually conceived. In this paper, I argue that nothingness is not an object. I will discuss the metaphysic, logic, and semantic of conceiving the inconceivable. I will also discuss the negative existential, and contrast fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes with some fictionally fictional objects, such as nothingness.

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Metaphysical Impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about metaphysics.

(1) For any x, any y, and any z, y is metaphysically accessible from x with z if and only if x could have been y with z.

Metaphysically possible worlds are metaphysical possibilities of the actual world; they are worlds the actual world could have been. With my alternative decision, the actual world could have been a world in which I did not publish this paper in 2025. That world, therefore, is a metaphysical possibility of the actual world, and thus a metaphysically possible world. The world in which I became a robot in 2026 is not what the actual world could have been with anything, and thus that world is a metaphysical impossibility of the actual world, whereas that robot in that world is a metaphysical impossibility of me in the actual world. All and only metaphysical possibilities of something real are real, and thus belong to the real domain of quantification; metaphysical impossibilities are therefore unreal and thus fictitious. An epistemic context about something is a set of epistemic possibilities of that object[1]—these are the ways that an object might be given what an epistemic agent knows. If all such epistemic possibilities are real, then the epistemic context is real. If some such epistemic possibilities are fictitious, then the epistemic context is fictitious because part of it fictitious. To be in a fictitious context which includes the worlds in which I am a robot in 2026 is to pretend that I could have been a robot in 2026 through projecting the fictitious possibilities in which I am a robot in 2026.[2] For any p, I could have pretended that p without knowing that it was a pretence, such as when I mistakenly believe that I could have been a robot.

The imagination is a part of the epistemic function operating on semantic states, which takes prior epistemic states into posterior epistemic states with evidence, whereas epistemic states are sets of epistemic accessibilities between worlds (Cheung Forthcoming).[3] For any p, to imagine that p is to conceive that p. Conceiving that p puts one in the position to know about a world, typically counterfactual, in which that p. The epistemic context about that world is thus a set of epistemic possibilities in which that p. With evidence indicating q about that world, the epistemic function takes the prior epistemic state in such an epistemic context about that world into a posterior epistemic state, updating the epistemic

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1   See Stalnaker (2014) for contexts as sets of possible worlds. He focuses on pragmatic contexts.

2   See Everett (2013) for a pretence theory of fiction.

3   A state of a system is constituted by objects with accessibility among them. A function takes a prior state into a posterior state with a given input, outputting something, and is thus constituted by ordered triplets of accessibility. A system is constituted by functions, which thus encode update rules. Systems constitute the context in which they interact.

context about it, with epistemic possibilities in which that q does not instantiate ruled out. The set of epistemic possibilities in the epistemic context about a typically counterfactual world an epistemic agent knows about at some time constitutes the content of his imagination at that time.[4]

For me to conceive something inconceivable relative to me, I have to pretend that I have an enhanced imagination—an enhanced imagination which metaphysically possibly takes my prior epistemic state into a posterior epistemic state that I am metaphysically impossible to be in because of the metaphysical impossibility of the corresponding semantic state. This epistemic function is metaphysically impossible and thus fictitious, and in pretending that my epistemic function instantiates some fictitious properties, the epistemic context, which includes a world in which I have a metaphysically impossible imagination, is fictitious. In that world, I conceive of an object that is actually inconceivable, and the fictitious epistemic function takes my prior epistemic state into a posterior one in which I conceived of nothingness.

Logical Impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about logics.

(2) For any x, any y, and any z, y is logically accessible from x with z if and only if z is true of x only if z is true of y.

Suppose that the epistemic context about the actual world includes only worlds in which Hesperus is bright, but not those in which it is not bright. With the linguistic or conceptual object "Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun", the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state in a given epistemic context into the posterior epistemic state with a posterior epistemic context which includes only worlds of which "Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun" is true. With "Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun", the logical function updates the prior logical state into the posterior one without any modification. This explains the logical entailment from "Hesperus is bright" and "Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun" to "Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun" within some given logical context.

Suppose that the epistemic agent is in the same epistemic context. With the linguistic or conceptual object "Hesperus is not bright", the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state with the corresponding

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4   The content of his imagination might be a set of epistemic possibilities of the actual world if, for example, he has the false belief that not-p about the actual world, and imagines that p.

epistemic context into the posterior epistemic state with the posterior epistemic context which includes worlds of which both "Hesperus is bright" and "Hesperus is not bright" are true, and thus "Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is not bright" is true of them as well. Those are worlds in which logic has an impossible metaphysic.[5] In some cases, with the acceptance of the sentence "Hesperus is not bright", via the logical function, the epistemic agent is in a fictitious epistemic context to which fictitious possibilities with a metaphysically impossible logic belong. Since fictitious worlds of which, for example, "One plus one equals two and one plus one does not equal two" is true are not brought into the posterior epistemic context, acceptance or generation of contradictory sentences does not entail acceptance or generation of every sentence. This logical accessibility relation thus explains what paraconsistent logic explains with respect to logical explosivity.[6]

Suppose that the epistemic agent is in the same epistemic context. With the linguistic or conceptual object "Phosphorus is not bright", the epistemic function, via the logical function, takes the prior epistemic state with the corresponding prior epistemic context into a posterior epistemic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context which includes worlds of which "Hesperus is bright and Phosphorus is not bright" is true. Those worlds are fictitious because, although logically possible because their description is not contradictory, they are metaphysically impossible. Venus could not be both bright and not bright. Although logical impossibility entails metaphysical impossibility, metaphysical impossibility does not entail logical impossibility. A metaphysical impossibility is known by an epistemic agent to be so if his true description of it is contradictory and he knows it.

In the fictitious epistemic context mentioned in the previous section, I think about my situation in terms of how I relate to some objects. The object, nothingness, relates to me in terms of being actually inconceivable relative to me. However, I am in an epistemic state in which I conceived of nothingness, and thus that object is not inconceivable. I am thus in the position to know that nothingness is inconceivable and not inconceivable. Either I conclude, based on the contradictory description, that I have mistaken some impossibility as real, or even actual, and reject that I had conceived of nothingness, or I do not. If I were to accept or generate the linguistic or conceptual object "Nothingness is not inconceivable", I would have been in a further fictitious epistemic context in which logic has an impossible metaphysic by virtue of inferring the contradictory description of nothingness by applying both the predicate "is inconceivable" and "is not inconceivable". To

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5   It might as well be Hesperus that has an impossible metaphysic.

6   See Priest (2016 [2005]) for a paraconsistent logic with a discriminatory use of disjunctive syllogism.

believe that I have conceived of nothingness which is inconceivable and not inconceivable is to be in a fictionally fictional context, in which nothingness is thus a fictionally fictional object.[7] That I have an impossible imagination is fictional, and within that fiction, an object that is both inconceivable and not inconceivable is also fictional.

Semantic Impossibility

Consider the following metaphysical truth about semantics.

(3) For any x, any y, and any z, y is semantically accessible from x with z if and only if z semantically refers to y from x.

Semantic possibilities are conceivable objects, for to conceive of something is to semantically refer to it with some linguistic or conceptual objects. Given any prior semantic state in a prior semantic context, the semantic function takes the semantic agent into a posterior semantic state with a corresponding posterior semantic context which includes x with some words or concepts if and only if x is semantically referred to with some words or concepts from something in the prior semantic state given the prior semantic context, for any x. "John", for example, semantically refers from anything to John. On the other hand, "he" semantically refers to John from John, to Peter from Peter, and to nothing from Mary. When a semantic agent conceives of John, Peter, and Mary, the word "he" semantically updates his semantic state with a posterior context that includes only John and Peter.[8] If there are no words or concepts that semantically refer from anything to an object, that object is inconceivable. That object is, therefore, a semantic impossibility.

When I intended to conceive of nothingness, I pretended to have a metaphysically impossible imagination. The corresponding fictitious epistemic function takes my prior epistemic state given my prior epistemic context, via the semantic function, into a posterior semantic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context that includes nothingness. However, I did not actually conceive of nothingness; I only pretended to do so. Fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes are actually conceived of, with its reality included in the corresponding fictional context, but

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7   The fictional is a subset of the fictitious, with the former instantiating some beauty that constitutes its fictionality that the mere fictitious does not instantiate. See Kripke (2013) for fictionally fictional objects, or fictional fictional objects, as some fiction within fiction. Notice that some fictionally fictional objects have objecthood, unlike nothingness.

8   See Kaplan (1989) for linguistic objects, such as indexicals and demonstratives, the semantic value of which is a variable function, and Kripke (1972–1980) for linguistic objects, such as proper names, the semantic value of which is a constant function.

nothingness is not conceived of whether within or without any fictional context. Nothingness, by virtue of being a semantic impossibility, is actually inconceivable relative to me. Although it is metaphysically possible for me to conceive that I conceived of nothingness, nothingness is only fictionally conceivable without being metaphysically conceivable, or really conceivable. Therefore, in actuality, I did not conceive of nothingness, even though I conceived of Sherlock Holmes in a corresponding fictional context. I project Sherlock Holmes from a real context into a fictional context, fictionalising the original real context; I metaphysically impossibly do similar thing with nothingness.

Ontological Impossibility

In a real context, we refer to an object and attribute to it some properties with descriptions, and thus express a proposition. Through such epistemic predication, the proposition expressed is the set of possible worlds in which the object instantiates those properties. Those possible worlds are real, because it is metaphysically possible for that object to instantiate those properties. Within a fictional context, such as one that includes Sherlock Holmes, it is metaphysically possible that we referred to Sherlock Holmes and attributed to it some properties with descriptions, and thus express a proposition. For example, we describe Sherlock Holmes with the sentence "Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street", and thus express the proposition that is the set of worlds in which Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street. However, since those worlds include a fictional object, Sherlock Holmes, those worlds are fictional, and thus fictitious. The proposition, being a set that includes fictional possibilities, is also fictional. It is in pretending that those fictional possibilities exist that we express a proposition in such a fictional context. The sentence, therefore, only pretends to express a proposition, or merely expresses a fictional, or fictitious, proposition.[9]

This raises the problem of the informativeness of the negative existential. Consider the following allegedly true sentence.

(4) Sherlock Holmes does not exist.

In a real epistemic context, the subject term has no reference and thus (4) does not attribute some properties to any object to express a proposition. In a fictional epistemic context that includes Sherlock Holmes, (4) refers to the fictional object Sherlock Holmes and attributes to it nonexistence.[10] In terms of its informative-

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9   See Kripke (2013) on pretended propositions.

10   I could have also referred to some worlds and attribute to them the property of not including Sherlock Holmes, given my assumption that existence of objects is a property of worlds. The property of including Sherlock Holmes is a fictional property because Sherlock Holmes is fictional. Such

ness, it rules out fictional worlds in which Sherlock Holmes exists. This, therefore, explains the fictional informativeness of the negative existential. However, in the real epistemic context, the sentence did not refer to any object to express a proposition. It is in this way that it does not actually have a semantic value, but is merely fictionally informative, and thus illusorily informative.[11]

For any *x*, an epistemic counterpart to *x* is an object that is epistemically indistinguishable from *x*.[12] If an epistemic agent were to form a fictionally false belief that Sherlock Holmes was born in the United States of America based on his evidence about the actual world, such as in misidentifying an actual detective born in the United States of America as Sherlock Holmes, the content of his fictionally false belief includes the fictional worlds in which Sherlock Holmes was born in the United States of America, with that actual detective in the actual world being an epistemic counterpart to Sherlock Holmes in those fictional worlds.[13]

Given that fictional objects do not exist, and we only pretend that they exist in some fictional contexts, nothingness, as a fictionally fictional object, also does not exist. Consider the following allegedly true sentence.

(5) Nothingness does not exist.

Whereas (4) pretends to express a proposition, (5) pretends to pretend to express a proposition. Although we metaphysically possibly conceive of the possibilities of which (4) is false and thus explains its fictional informativeness through ruling them out, it is metaphysically impossible to conceive of the possibilities of which (5) is false.

The illusion of informativeness, even fictional or fictionally fictional, is explained using epistemic counterparts. When I putatively conceive of nothingness, there is an object that plays the role of nothingness in being actually inconceivable relative to me. That object is not metaphysically identical with nothingness, but is merely epistemically indistinguishable from the putative object of nothingness. That object might be, for example, the eternal *Dao*, which is real.[14] When I falsely believe that I conceived of nothingness, which is actually inconceivable, the content of my such false belief includes possibilities in which I conceive of some epistemic counterparts, which are believed to be actually inconceivable,

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worlds fictionally include Sherlock Holmes, and given such a fictional property, they are also fictional. It is ontologically impossible that Sherlock Holmes belonged to a real domain, and thus metaphysically impossible that a corresponding real world included it.

11 See Kripke (2013) for the sentence to have a semantic value by virtue of expressing the proposition that there is no true proposition that Sherlock Holmes exists.

12 Cheung (Forthcoming).

13 See Cheung (Forthcoming) for doxastic content using epistemic counterparts.

14 See Cheung (2024) for the reality of the eternal *Dao.*

to nothingness. Such epistemic counterparts might be real, such as the eternal *Dao*, or fictional.[15] Furthermore, fictional epistemic agents with a metaphysically impossible imagination are also epistemic counterparts to me, such that the content of my false belief that I conceived of nothingness includes also the fictional possibilities in which some epistemic counterparts to me conceived of nothingness. The fictionally fictional informativeness of (5), in some pragmatic contexts, therefore, is explained with updating a prior epistemic state in a prior epistemic context that includes the fictional possibilities in which I conceived of those epistemic counterparts to nothingness believed to be actually inconceivable, and might as well include fictional possibilities that include some fictional epistemic agents, which are epistemic counterparts to me, conceived of nothingness into a posterior epistemic state with a corresponding posterior epistemic context that does not include those fictional possibilities. Thus is the epistemic dynamic when one apprised of the truth of (5), having understood what nothingness is.[16]

This indicates that we ought to conclude from the contradiction of the description of my relation to nothingness that I did not conceive it. Consider the description "inconceivable". Any object that this description refers to is actually conceived of with this description, and thus is not inconceivable. Therefore, any such putative object is not an object, and thus "inconceivable" refers to no objects at all, although it is meaningful and expresses the empty set even in the broadest semantic context. "Inconceivable" expresses the property that is the empty set,[17] and no objects—real or fictional, or even fictitious—instantiate such a property.

This raises the following issue. If the universal quantifier—"everything"—quantifies over all objects in an unrestricted domain, and only conceivable objects are quantifiable, then conceivability exhausts objecthood. If the semantic relation of satisfaction, or being true of—used in logical accessibility—is identical with the semantic relation of reference, or being referred to or conceived—used in semantic accessibility—then the truth of any universal quantification entails the conceivability of any such truth-maker. That "inconceivable" expresses the empty set presupposes this.

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15   See Cheung (2025) for Neo-Daoism as a reconstructive interpretation of the *Daodejing.*

16   As it stands, (5) does not include any epistemic agents, and thus its semantic content, instead of its informativeness illustrative in some pragmatic context, does not involve the thinker. A semantic value is assigned to its subject term only in a fictionally fictional semantic context.

17   Notice the set conception of property in relation to the set conception of proposition. It does not reduce the property of inconceivability to the empty set. At best, it identifies the set with the property. Emptiness is the essence of nothingness in that in virtue of pretending nothingness to be an object, given a property instantiation conception of objecthood, we approximate its metaphysical impossibility of instantiating any property with emptiness. By pretending its possibility of belonging to any world, we rule such pretence wrong. By pretending its possibility of instantiating any property, we also rule such pretence wrong.

(6) Nothing is inconceivable.

Therefore (6) is true, because no objects belong to the empty set. Holding the domain constant, (6) is logically equivalent to the following sentence, given that "inconceivable" is logically equivalent to "not conceivable".

(7) Everything is conceivable.

Semantics draws the boundary of all objects, such that no objects are beyond it. There are no semantic impossibilities.[18]

Conclusion

When I conceive of nothingness, I pretend that my imagination is metaphysically impossibly enhanced. Nothingness is thus not actually conceived, but merely fictionally conceived. When I think about my imagination, I describe the fictionally conceived object as both inconceivable and not inconceivable, and thus I am in a further fictional context with a metaphysically impossible logic. As such, nothingness is at best a fictionally fictional object. Fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes are in the domain of quantification in the broadest semantic context, but not all fictionally fictional objects are in this domain because some of them are semantic impossibilities. Nothingness, being a semantic impossibility, is not in the domain even in the broadest semantic context. Therefore, nothingness is not an object in the broadest semantic context. If such a context includes all objects—real or fictional, or even fictitious—then nothingness is not an object at all.

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Distinguishing Emptiness from Nothingness: A Comparative Analysis Using Zhang Dongsun's Panstructural Epistemology

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Abstract

The philosophical definition of the relationship between nothingness and emptiness continues to spark academic debates and controversies. In this article, we aim to clarify this relationship by examining some Chinese discourses relevant to the topic. The concept of absolute nothingness, as it was established in the Neo-Daoist philosophy of the Wei-Jin period in China—and reaching perhaps its most sophisticated form in the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō within the Kyoto School—must be distinguished from emptiness in the sense of the absence of substance, which forms the basis of various philosophical discussions in Sinicized Buddhism and continues to resonate in certain epistemological theories of contemporary Chinese scholars. In this paper, I will first provide a brief introduction to these theories of knowledge, with a particular focus on the contributions of the modern Chinese philosopher Zhang Dongsun, whose work was shaped by the classical Chinese paradigm of structural interrelations on the one hand, and the principles of Sinicized Buddhism on the other. In conclusion, I will juxtapose the theoretical foundations of these epistemologies with the aforementioned conceptualizations of nothingness, thereby attempting to elucidate the relationship between these two seemingly related concepts.

Keywords: nothingness, emptiness, Zhang Dongsun, relational structure, coherence

Razlikovanje med praznino in ničem: primerjalna analiza na podlagi panstrukturalne epistemologije Zhang Dongsuna

Izvleček

Filozofska opredelitev razmerja med ničem in praznino še vedno sproža akademske razprave in polemike. V tem članku bom poskušala razjasniti to razmerje na primeru izbranih kitajskih diskurzov, ki so relevantni za to temo. Pojem absolutnega niča, kakršen se je vzpostavil v neodaoistični filozofiji obdobja Wei-Jin na Kitajskem (in morda dosegel najbolj sofisticirano obliko v filozofiji Nishida Kitarōja v kjotski šoli), je treba

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razlikovati od praznine v smislu odsotnosti substance, ki tvori temelj različnih filozofskih razprav v siniziranem budizmu in še vedno predstavlja metafizično osnovo nekaterih epistemoloških teorij sodobnih kitajskih teoretikov. V prispevku bom najprej na kratko predstavila dva tradicionalna temelja epistemološke teorije modernega kitajskega filozofa Zhang Dongsuna, in sicer klasični kitajski diskurz relacijske strukture na eni in budistični koncept izpraznjene strukture na drugi strani. V zaključku bom teoretske osnove teh epistemologij postavila ob bok prej omenjenim konceptualizacijam niča in s tem poskušala razjasniti odnos med tema na videz sorodnima pojmoma.

Ključne besede: nič, praznina, Zhang Dongsun, relacijska struktura, koherenca

The Concept of *Li* 理 as a Relational Network of Coherence

From the perspective of traditional Chinese philosophies, which are grounded in processual paradigms, any notion of substance is absent or, at most, illusory. Consequently, the world can be perceived as ultimately empty. This approach was articulated in a particularly clear and unambiguous manner by Zhang Dongsun 張東孫 (1902–1973), one of the leading modern Chinese philosophers. In the early decades of the 20th century, he developed a distinctive epistemological system known as "panstructuralism". This was built upon two fundamental models, which he integrated in an exceptionally creative way. The first was rooted in the classical Chinese relational worldview of structural coherence (*li* 理), while the second drew from the Sinicized Buddhist conceptualization of emptiness. For Zhang, the external world was devoid of inherent substance, and what existed was nothing more than a structural network of relations.

Before analysing this notion of an empty world, let us first briefly examine its origins, which are deeply intertwined with the concept of the relational structure of coherence (*li*) on the one hand and the Sinicized notion of Buddhist emptiness as formulated by the earliest representatives of Chinese Buddhism on the other.

The Chinese notion of *li* has traditionally been translated as reason or a (rational) principle. However, this interpretation captures only certain aspects of the term, which is one of the fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy.

In his fascinating book *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought; Prolegomena to the Study of Li*, Brook Ziporyn interpreted the term *li* as coherence (Ziporyn 2012), and this understanding marked a qualitative shift in the way this concept was perceived in the Western academic world. The perspective of coherence offered a distinct and more autochthonous image of what traditional Chinese thinkers may have understood by *li*.

Around the same time, I also wrote a book on the concept of *li*, titled *Traditional Chinese Philosophy and the Paradigm of Structure (li* 理*)* (Rošker 2013), in which I interpreted it as a relational structure. When we wrote these books, Brook

and I were unaware of each other's ideas. A few years later, we met at a mutual friend's house in Gaoxiong and discussed our perspectives on the issue. We concluded that both translations were correct and, indeed, coherent (*sic*!). As a relational structure, *li* represents a network encompassing everything that exists (and even everything that does not). Ancient Chinese worldviews were founded on patterns that facilitated human perception, comprehension, and mediation of the world. Such foundational patterns were seen as *li*, a term whose etymology traces back to the character 理, composed of the phonetic element 里 and the radical 玉, which denotes jade. Originally, it referred to the lines or coloured stripes in jade. Wolfgang Bauer (2000, 256–57) notes that when this character was used figuratively in classical Chinese, it also denoted structure—for instance, in the crystalline net that represents the immaterial principle of ordered matter—and that it already appeared in this sense in the Confucian commentary on the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經).

A. C. Graham, a modern pioneer in the study of ancient Chinese logic, is one of the very few sinologists who considers the concept of *li* as the expression of both a structural pattern and a structure:

> *Li* is the patterned arrangement of parts in a structured whole, of things in an ordered cosmos, of thought in rational discourse, and in Names and Objects, of words in a completed sentence. Its emergence in the Sung Dynasty (AD 960–1279) as one of the central concepts of Neo-Confucianism was the culmination of a long development. In pre-Han philosophy it attracts attention especially in the *Interpreting Lao-tzu* of Han Fei tzu, who uses it to mean the specific configuration of properties ("square or round, long or short, coarse or fine, hard or soft") in each kind of thing. (Graham 1978, 191–92)

So, what does *li* have to do with coherence? Actually, a great deal. The structural patterns of *li* are numerous, varying in size and constitution. What unites them, however, is their dynamic, ever-changing nature and their continuous tendency to harmonize with the overarching, universal structure of the cosmos. This gravitational pull toward coherence is not merely a characteristic feature of all patterns; it is an essential aspect of their inner constitution. It manifests itself across ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and all other domains of philosophical thought.

In Confucian ethics, the universal structure is embodied in humaneness (*ren* 仁); in Daoism, it is reflected in the all-encompassing relational pattern of the natural *Dao* 道. To live ethically and meaningfully, our actions and relationships must align coherently with this fundamental relational structure.

In epistemology, the structural network of the universe finds its counterpart in the structure of the human mind. The coherence between these two patterns enables

human beings to perceive and comprehend the external world. Knowledge is possible precisely because the mind and reality share an intrinsic structural compatibility.

Similarly, the axiology of aesthetics follows the principles of coherence, reflecting the relations between the universal and the particular, the macrocosm and the microcosm. Aesthetic experience arises from the recognition of relational harmony, whether in nature, art, or human creativity. Just as the beauty of jade lies in its intricate patterns—spontaneous yet structured—the beauty of the world emerges from the coherence of its interwoven relational patterns. *Li* thus serves as the fundamental principle that binds ethics, knowledge, and aesthetics into a unified vision of existence.

This unification of particular, specific structural patterns into one single, general and basic structure, only became possible through a progressive semantic abstraction of the term *li*. This process lasted several centuries, and must be viewed within the context of the more general changes in Chinese culture and society during this time. In practical terms, it was defined by the political and economic development of traditional China, while ideologically it was the result of factors as varied as the formalization of Confucianism as a state doctrine, the new approaches formulated by Neo-Confucian scholars, and specific elements of Buddhist philosophy.[1]

In this context, we can—once again—reconsider the fundamental paradigms of traditional Chinese cosmology, which is not grounded in an ontology of substance-based Being but rather in a metaphysics of relations. Despite the hybrid nature of modern Chinese philosophies, which was shaped through a dialogue between classical Chinese thought and Western philosophical systems, this foundational worldview of a dynamic, ever-changing, and relational universe, devoid of fixed substance, remains deeply embedded in many theories developed by modern and contemporary Chinese thinkers.

On this basis, let us examine the development of the Buddhist notion of emptiness in the framework of Chinese philosophy.

The Empty Structure of Chinese Buddhism (*kong li* 空理)

This Sinicization of emptiness was based on specific elaborations of the structural semantics developed by philosophers of the Six Dynasties era, who focused primarily on the structural relationships among concepts, words, and meaning.

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1   We can reduce this process of abstraction somewhat schematically to three phases: the phase of ontologization (*li* as the cosmic structure or as the structure of nature and society), the phase of structural semantics (*li* as the structure of language and meaning) and the phase of epistemologization (*li* as the mutually compatible structure of the external world and mind).

Tang Junyi (1955, 80) outlines the theoretical foundations of their thesis, which introduced a semantic shift in classical Chinese epistemologies, as follows: "As soon as a certain concept is established, a structure that expresses its meaning is also established. And as soon as this is established, it cannot be eliminated".[2]

The impossibility of eliminating conceptual structures, of course, derives from the fact that these were abstract structures existing in the human mind. Once formed, these structures contained meanings that could not simply be eliminated. An important aspect here, with respect to the future development of Chinese thought, is that this position is clearly antithetical to the notion of empty (or depleted) structure (*kong li* 空理), as it would be developed in the theoretical discourses of Sinicized Buddhism during the periods of the Northern and Southern dynasties 南北朝 (420–581) and the Sui 隋 (581–618) and Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties (Tang 1955, 80).

The Chinese Buddhists also often applied the character *li* 理 in their writings, especially those of the *Faxiang zong* 法相宗[3], *Tiantai zong* 天台宗 and *Huayan zong* 華嚴宗[4] Schools. Although following the semantic scope of the structure and structural pattern, the comprehension of the term *li* in these texts differs considerably from the understanding of the same character among the exponents of the School of Mystery and the Pure Conversations.

As is well known, a fundamental tenet of Chinese Buddhism is that the phenomenal world is illusory: as such, it is not only abstract and empty, but does not even exist in reality. The Buddhist scholars from the early Middle Ages in China did not occupy themselves with meta-theoretical abstractions of conceptual structures. The "depleted" structure which concerned them was, in its essence, profoundly different from the structure of concepts and meaning that formed such a crucial subject of debate for the exponents of early Chinese structural semantics: "In the treatises of conceptual structure words appear only as words. In the treatises of depleted structure, however, words can help attain the ideal state, in which there are no words" (Tang 1955, 80).[5]

Understanding as such is not a basic aim of Buddhism. Buddhist theory does not seek to comprehend the world and its mechanisms of existence (Hashi 2015, 108). And while explications of Buddhist theory also represent a kind of knowledge, attaining such knowledge is not of central importance in Buddhist discourses, as this would merely signify an ideology, a theory that we could denote, for example, with the expression T and which in order to exist would again necessarily require

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2   一名即立, 則其意所表之理即立, 立即不能取消。

3   Madhyama-yāna.

4   Avataṃsaka.

5   在名理之論中, 言只是言, 而在空理之論中, 則可...以言達無言的理想。

its own negation, namely T. Therefore, Buddhists do not regard their teachings as a form of precious knowledge or theory; instead, their fundamental concern is the gradual elimination of all words and the cognitive scopes they imply (Chen and Rošker 2004, 36). Based upon the unique supposition of the nature of vacancy, Buddhism has developed a special methodology for escaping the closed structures of awareness, in which all living beings are imprisoned.

Buddhism thus seeks to break through the illusory sphere of phenomena: in order to do this, one must gain insight into the real contradictions that determine meanings and their structures, thereby making it possible to eliminate or deplete them (*kong* 空). Although the notion of *kong* has generally been translated as "emptiness" in Indo-European languages, the etymological meaning of the Chinese word *kong* actually differs from the words *xu* 虛 or *wu* 無 which—especially in Daoist contexts—denote two kinds of emptiness. While the latter generally signifies the absence of any (or of a certain) object or entity, the term *xu* refers to an empty space and/or time, i.e. to a certain state of emptiness. The terms *wu* and *xu* were mostly applied by the Daoists, while *kong* was used to denote emptiness in Chinese Buddhist discourses. This notion of emptiness referred primarily to a process of depletion or emptying, and to the result of this process, namely the process of becoming (or being) empty.

> The concept of *kong* as applied by the School of Emptiness [*kong zong*] differed significantly from the term *wu*. This concept cannot be equated with the presence or absence of phenomena. The term *wu* means absence in the sense that there is nothing which might be present (although this term also implies a latent presence). The term *kong*, however, means the elimination of all presence contained in the phenomenal world. The Chinese character *kong* was originally compounded from the characters that denote earth and hole. A hole came into being when workers removed earth from it. Thus, a hole became a hole when earth was eliminated, which meant that it involved an action.[6] (Ibid.)

This action, however, referred only to the elimination of earth. After the earth was removed, the very act of removing (depleting or vacating) was removed (depleted) as well. Thus, even in Buddhism, the word *kong* referred to the depletion or elimination of phenomena which constituted an obstacle to the process of enlightenment. After the phenomenal obstacles were eliminated, the very act of eliminating or depleting was eliminated as well. But as long as we are not completely

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6   至於空宗之說空, 一名不同於說無. 執有執無, 都不是空。 無是莫有。 (無又近乎一潛有)。 空是要去掉我們所執之有。 中國的空字, 原從土從穴。 當時由工掘土成穴之意. 穴之成, 由於去土. 去土是一活動。

freed from the yoke of *saṃsāric* actuality, even after the elimination of these (external) phenomena our awareness still retains certain teachings, convictions and thoughts. Even during the process of trying to break through the sphere of illusion by eliminating these teachings, convictions and thoughts, they still remain latently present. Once the breakthrough has occurred, however, all the teachings, convictions and thoughts that led to it, are eliminated as well. This distinction was stressed by the School of Emptiness, which compared the process of eliminating or depleting thoughts by means of other thoughts with a flame in which something is burning (Tang 1955, 80). After this object has been completely consumed by flame, the flame dies as well and is no longer present.

> When we speak about the depletion of emptiness, this depletion of emptiness also must be depleted. The more we speak about the depletion of emptiness, the more depletion exists and the further removed we are from real emptiness (depletion). Thus, in the context of pure conceptual structure, it is not possible to speak about it.[7] (Ibid.)

In the discourses of Sinicized Buddhism, the meanings and their structures that form a part of our everyday awareness are null and void in their very essence; in order to eliminate them, it is sufficient to gain insight into the empty nature of the structure which defines them. This negation of structure in the sense of phenomena was constantly stressed by the Faxiang School, which repeatedly argued that "phenomena are not structured"[8] (*Cheng Weishi lun juan yi* n.d.).

Before gaining this insight, however, we believe that meanings, as well as their structures within our consciousness, really exist: the meanings of particular events or objects are situated in the conceptual relational structure that corresponds to the things and events of the external world. But this is only a false, deceptive image that has been transmitted to us by our senses. The senses thus lead us to the presence (of the phenomenal world), while the structure denotes (its) absence: "The senses are present, but the structure is absent"[9] (*Dacheng guang bai lun shi lun* n.d.).

This state in which we are victims of our senses can be compared to a rope that we mistake for a snake.

> If we see a rope and think it is a snake, then the presence of this snake is conditioned by the senses. But if we return to reality, or if we think about it from the viewpoint of the (rational) structure, we will perceive

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7   如說空空, 則空空還要空才對。 然如此說, 愈說空, 而空愈多, 愈不成空。 這種問題, 純在名理上, 亦可說是無法將的。

8   執非理。

9   情有理無。

that there is no snake. Thus, the snake is the "structure of absence" or the "depleted structure".[10] (Tang 1955, 81)

If we mistake a rope for a snake, the conceptual structure of this snake is empty. If we consider the snake in terms of this structure, then we cannot establish its actual concept. The snake is thus a metaphor for a world of countless illusory phenomena in the sphere of *saṃsāra*. The existence of any concepts of such illusory phenomena is likewise impossible, since the structure that defines them is also depleted. The depleted structure that exists beyond all illusory phenomena eliminates (depletes) them each time we perceive it. In this sense, the conceptual structure of vacancies differs from conceptual structures as defined by the Neo-Daoists, for while the latter enable us to perceive and comprehend things which exist, the depleted structure of the Buddhists was a means to become aware of their non-existence. It thus resembles a black hole which absorbs everything with which it comes into contact. The structure that, whenever it appears, depletes all phenomena, certainly cannot be considered a condition of their existence. On the contrary, this structure is the cause of their elimination. Hence, it can neither be part of the phenomena, nor of the concepts defined by them. What, therefore, is the real nature of this depleted structure?

> When a person depletes all phenomena and when their awareness is capable of transcending the sphere of language, thought and meaning, they become wise. We cannot say that the wise have no awareness. However, in this awareness there are no phenomena left that can be eliminated (depleted). Nor is there any idea of depleting or any idea of depleted structure. And yet, it still contains a structure that can potentially deplete all phenomena.[11] (Tang 1955, 80)

A person whose awareness is empty while still including this black hole of depleted structure, is a *boddhisattva*. That is, they are an enlightened being who remains in the eternal circuit of lives and deaths in order to help others reach enlightenment, those individuals who, due to their desires and attachments, are still ensnared in the illusion of phenomena and the suffering that results from this. As stated in the principal work of the Faxiang School, *The Completion of Pure Recognition* 成唯識論, the enlightened awareness of *boddhisattvas* cannot be joined to *nirvāṇa*: "When all obstacles of (common) knowledge are eliminated

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10   如我們誤繩為蛇時, 蛇是'情有', 然如落到實際, 或如理而思, 則並無此蛇, 則此蛇是 '理無', '空理'。

11   人空一切妄執後, 能證得超一般意言境思議境之心, 或具般若智之心, 此心並非莫有. 如有此心, 則此心縱無妄執可空, 亦不復再有空之觀念或空理之觀念橫亙於心, 仍不能說其即不具有此能空妄執之理。

(broken) the depleted structure appears; but this depleted structure is not situated in *nirvāṇa*."[12] (*Cheng Weishi lun juan shi* n.d.)

The contents of the depleted structure are therefore an essential part of enlightened awareness.

> If the (awareness of enlightened people) did not contain this structure, it would be unable to exist and live within the world of false phenomena, nor could it proclaim dharmic teachings and methods in order to help others to break through this world of false phenomena. Since this (enlightened) awareness, as such, does not contain any illusory phenomena, it can deplete, one by one, all the phenomena that form part of the awareness of others.[13] (Tang 1955, 81)

If we consider depleted structure (or the structure of depletion) from the viewpoint of awareness, it is clearly a structure which, unlike phenomena, is real (*zhen li* 真理): "When all obstacles of suffering have been eliminated, the real structure appears"[14] (*Cheng Weishi lun juan shi* n.d.).

This insight, of course, is not conditioned by any kind of sensory perception, but by its elimination; and this in turn leads to the pure, real awareness that transcends all the mental (emotional) fluctuations caused by earthly joys and woes:

> The real, actual awareness amalgamates with the structure; the awareness which still contains emotional fluctuations, however, belongs to (earthly) matters.[15] (*Wujiao Zhiguan Yicheng Shixuanmen Hexing Xu* n.d.)

This structure cannot be perceived by the senses, because it does not pertain to the perceptible phenomena of the external world: "The structure does not have any phenomenal form"[16] (*Huayan fajie xuanjing juan shang* n.d.).

The real structure can thus only appear through the depletion of our sensory perceptions. Our senses, which are part of the illusory world, are also eliminated (depleted) by this very structure of depletion. The real structure does not appear upon the depletion of all false phenomena and sensations that falsely convey to us the illusory existence of these phenomena, but only after the depletion (elimination)

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12   斷彼時顯法空理, 此理即無住涅盤。

13   因如其不具此理, 此心即不能常住於無妄執之境界, 亦不能說法以破他人之妄執。 因而其自己之無妄執可空, 對他人之妄執之起, 能一一空之。

14   煩惱障盡所顯真理。

15   心真如門者是理, 心生滅門是事。

16   理無形相。

of the structures of sensory perception that make these processes possible. The structure of depletion thus eliminates the perceptive structures of our senses or, if one prefers, their "essential nature" through the process of depletion (Tang 1955, 81). Hence, this is a structure which is real, and which gradually removes the layers of sensation and awareness of the illusory phenomenal world. Because this structure can only be revealed to us through our insight into the empty nature of reality, the Buddhists named it the depleted structure or the structure of emptiness.

Panstructuralism (*Fanjiagouzhuyi* 泛架構主義)

By taking into account this structural nature of emptiness, which through his early Buddhist education doubtless influenced Zhang Dongsun, it will be easier to explore his structural epistemology of "panstructuralism", which is based upon an ontology of relational emptiness.

Epistemology represents the core of Zhang's philosophical system. He called his theory "pluralistic", because the various elements that enable comprehension and reasoning were mutually exclusive and irreducible (*wu huanyuanxing* 無還元性), meaning that no one of them could be reduced to any of the others. These basic elements for the comprehension of reality and its external structure (*tiaoli* 條理), which correlates with the mind through sensory perception (*zhiguan, ganjue* 直觀, 感覺) and sensations (*ganxiang* 感相), were *a priori* transcendental forms (*geshi* 格式) and logical postulates (*shezhun* 設準); these in turn were divided into categories (*fanchou* 範疇), relations with semantic logical implications (*xiang hande guanxi* 相涵的關係), and concepts or ideas (*gainian* 概念).

Zhang's pluralism is derived from a revised version of Kantian philosophy. To justify such an epistemology, he proposed a new cosmology: panstructuralism.

An important assumption of his theory of knowledge is the neo-realistic view that the external world exists independently of our consciousness, and that there is no exact correlation between external phenomena and our comprehension of them. Hence, we are unable to perceive these phenomena as they really are.

> We should know that what we commonly call "a thing" is a colour that we see, and a form that we touch. These are the "qualities" of a thing. If we do not consider the qualities, then (for us) there are no things. Things possess particular qualities, like colours, scents, etc., which change according to the human senses; therefore, some people claim that they do not belong to things ... There are also some other particular qualities, like the largeness, angularity, or roundness of things. These qualities are

considered by some people as similar to those mentioned before, and therefore cannot define the original thing as such, either.[17] (Zhang 1929, 23–24)

To explain his own view of cosmic order and its relation to our consciousness, Zhang often used examples drawn from the discoveries of early 20th century physics, such as the difference between our perception of a colour and its "actual" substance, or light waves. He argued that colour was something other than light waves: while colour was the product of the interaction between waves and our senses, waves belonged to the "objective" qualities of being (Zhang 1995, 166). Zhang therefore divides reality into the "original state of things" (*wude benxiang* 物的本相) and "things for us" (*women suowei wu* 我們所謂物) (Liu 2002, Part 2, 866).

According to Zhang, the external cause for our sensation is not a substance, but the order or structure of the external world. What is transmitted to us through our sensory impressions is a modification of this external order (Jiang 2002, 59).

> As regards the external reality, we cannot know its internal nature (essence), but we can recognize its relations. These relations form a relatively fixed structure. If we presuppose that the qualities of things do not possess any inner nature (essence), and that things only exist as a structure, we have already recognized the external reality.[18] (Zhang 1929, 32)

In interpreting the basic structure of reality, he also referred to scientific discoveries regarding atoms and their most elementary structures, which transcend the categorical boundary between particles of matter and non-substantial electromagnetic waves. Here, his critique of substance was quite radical, and he denied the real existence not only of the smallest particles of matter, but also of quanta, electrons and electromagnetic waves.

> In fact, I do not believe that atoms really exist in the external world. We should understand that the atomic theory in physics is the same as sensory theory in psychology. Both theories are based on the assumption that the whole consists of the sum of its parts. I call advocates of such theories representatives of the mosaic theory of particularism. This [view] can be compared to [the view of] a pile of sand, in which each grain is both a

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17 須知, 我們普通所謂物, 即是我們所看見的是顏色, 所觸摸的是形樣。這些都是物的 '性質'。可見離了性質就沒有所謂物。 物有一類的性質如顏色與味道等, 是倚著感覺的人的主觀而變的, 所以有人主張是不屬於物的本身…還有一類的性質如大小與方圓, 有人亦說與前一類差不多, 不能即斷定事物的本相。

18 關於外物, 我們不能知其內性, 但能知其關係, 而此關係卻是一種比較固定的架構。若我們暫假定物質并無內性, 而只是架構, 則我們已可謂知道外物了。

solid substance and an unchangeable entity. I personally do not acknowledge any independent existence of so-called sensory impressions in psychology; hence there is no reason to acknowledge the existence of atoms as pieces of substance in physics. Since there is no need to talk about atoms, why should we bother to divide them into electrons, or to divide electrons into wave particles? In my view, all this merely expresses the atomizing nature of external reality, and not the actual existence of atoms as real things. Not only are there no atoms, but there are no electrons or wave particles either. All this merely means that the structure has the possibility of forming certain entities.[19] (Zhang 1995, 168–69)

Similarly, for Zhang the discovery of the Theory of Relativity was important only in terms of recognizing structural laws, and not in terms of recognizing any new essences in nature or the cosmos:

The discovery of the Theory of Relativity only provides some knowledge about the structural modes of the external world; it does not provide us with any knowledge about its content.[20] (Ibid., 170)

The denial of substance also refers to the sphere of ideas. As in Chan Buddhism, all that we perceive is not only empty in the sense of substantial absence, but also illusory. Therefore, Zhang's cosmology is neither materialistic, nor idealistic:

Pluralistic epistemology ... rejects "substance" and is of the opinion that the dualistic theories of idealism and materialism are completely wrong.[21] (Ibid., 214)

In this respect, his approaches recall classical Chinese (especially Daoist and Chan Buddhist) cosmologies, but also certain recent Western ontological systems based on the Theory of Relativity and Quantum Theory.

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19   其實我並不主張外界有如實存在的原子。須知之在物理學等於感覺論之在心理學。他們都以為全體是由部分而推誠的。我名此為零屑論 (mosaic theory of particularism) 派。好像一堆散沙, 每個沙粒是硬的實體, 是不變的單位。我們于心理方面即不承有所謂感相的獨立存在, 則我們在物理方面當然亦用不著把原子認為散屑的實質 (pieces of substance)。姑不論原子尚可分為電子, 電子尚可分為 '波子' (wave particle), 然而這些只可視為表示外界有原子性而已。須知所謂原子性只是在構造 (structure) 上有 '原子的' (atomic) 性質而已。並非說外界確有原子其物。不但沒有原子, 並且亦沒有電子, 沒有波子。所有的只是外界的構造上有分為若干單位的可能性罷了。

20   相對論出來以後只給了我們一些關於物理界的構造方式之知識, 而不關於其 '內容' (content)。

21   認識的多元論...勢必根本上否認 '本質' (substance), 以為本體論上的唯心論唯物論兩元論全是不對的。

> The constitution of time and space is also structural. The Theory of Relativity assumes that time and space are not absolute and unchangeable. On this basis, Zhang Dongsun developed his view that time and space were also a kind of structure, and not a form of matter.[22] (Liu 2002, 867)

One reason for our inability to recognize the essence of external things "as such" is thus to be found in the very nature of their existence; for Zhang, who did not acknowledge the existence of substance, reality was a process of constant changes that manifests itself in the inter-relations of particular entities (Kapetan 2012, 67). His cosmology is not metaphysical. In his view, this constituted another difference between Kantian philosophy and his own. In Kant, metaphysics is not abandoned, even though the priority given to epistemology radically alters its role. Zhang's revision of Kant is, in fact, limited to the Kantian theory of knowledge. The impact of Chan Buddhism is much stronger in his ontology:

> In his early youth, his reading of Buddhist sacred texts got him interested in philosophy. Although he would criticize Buddhism severely later on, he always seemed to have accepted much of Buddhist cosmology, especially certain ideas from the Great Vehicle School (Mahayana). (Jiang 2002, 63)

If we reject the existence of substance, clearly the objects perceived by us cannot possess any "ontological status":

> Plural epistemology advocates the view that sense impressions are non-being. Therefore, they are without a position in the ontological sense; they do not possess any "ontological status".[23] (Zhang 1995, 215)

The Processual Nature of Emptiness and Reality

All beings exist in a process of constant change that manifests itself in a never-ending modification of structural connections, and the growth and decline of the qualities of the "essence" of particular entities. According to Zhang, our consciousness can only recognize certain aspects of these manifest changes. However, this refers not only to the level of our perception and comprehension, as

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22 時空的性質也說明了架構的性質。 相對論認為，時空并不是絕對不變的，張東蓀由此也得出時空也是一種架構而非物質的存在形式的看法。

23 認識的多元論把感相認為非存在者，勢必謂感相在本體上無地位，即沒有 '本體的地位' (ontological status) 。

according to Zhang the structured order of relations is all that really exists in the cosmos. This structural order can be divided into the three basic levels of matter (*wu* 物), life (*sheng* 生), and mind (*xin* 心).

Zhang argues that all these structures are empty, for they possess neither substance, nor its qualities. The level of material being (*wu*) is thus a merely physical substantial phenomenality which cannot be equated with material substance, but, at the most, with structural relations and the physical laws which determine its existence. For him, "matter" is a general concept comprising a total domain of many specific concepts about physical properties. There is nothing in matter itself which corresponds to our concept of matter. It is not the colour, fragrance, sound or size that we perceive through our senses, because they tend to be subjective. Therefore, by "matter" he understood an object's volume, density, or speed. Thus, in his view, matter becomes little more than a set of physics formulas. Therefore, there are only physical laws, but no matter (Jiang 2002, 64).

> In other words: things are physical laws. But we should know that these physical laws refer to relations (namely to the relations between a certain thing and other things); they do not refer directly to things as such. In other words: these physical laws refer to relations between things, and not to their essence. Therefore, attributes such as quality, speed, inertia or density are only different ways of expressing relations.[24] (Zhang 1995, 215)

For Zhang, life (or living) (*sheng*) is a category which includes everything, including biological phenomena.

> What is life? According to biological theories, differences between living and non-living entities can be summarized by four characteristics: 1. community 2. organisation of work 3. growth ability and 4. adaptation ability. These four items cannot be completely explained by physics and chemistry. The physical and chemical treatment of inorganic things is based upon measurement. If we try to grasp living beings solely by subjecting them to physical measurement, it is somehow not enough. Thus, it is necessary to add some new concepts to the existing ones, for example, the concepts of "organicity", "developmentality", "autopoeticness", etc. However, in addition to applying these

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24   或換言之, 即物是物理. 但須知這些物理都是由 '關係' (即一物與他物的關係)而見, 并不直接關於一個物的本身。 換言之, 即物理只講物的關係, 不講物的實質。 所以質量, 速率惰性, 密度等等都是表示關係的樣式之一種。

new concepts, we can also continue to use the previous ones. In other words, we can say that these new concepts actually organize the old ones.[25] (Ibid., 216)

Analogously, mind (*xin*) is a category that belongs to the overall concept of living, but also implies psychological phenomena, which are different from biological functions.

> The same holds true for "mind". The nature of mind differs from biological functions in certain respects. In other words: it is not enough to apply concepts which explain living, in order to explain mind. Let us take the notion of "consciousness" as an example. Consciousness is a unique feature, which can only be seized by applying some new concepts.[26] (Ibid.)

It is therefore better to replace "matter" with "psychic laws", 'life' with "biological principles", and "mind" with "psychology". In other words, terms for substance as carriers of attributes should be replaced by terms for structures or orders (Jiang 2002, 64).

> He also uses the term "arrangement" to replace the term "structure". Here, as well, he emphasizes the non-substantiality of the cosmos.[27] (Liu 2002, 867)

Hence, Zhang's cosmos does not imply any substance or essence, but exists solely as a relational process of structural order. Nevertheless, even this order is not totally natural and objective, but also depends upon our cognitive activities.

> However, these structural forms as such do not entirely belong to external things as such ... From the viewpoint of essence, there are no external things. But with respect to structure and form, most of the forms result

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25 '生' 是甚麼呢? 据生物學家說, 生物有生命, 所以異于無生物之點有四: 第一是組織; 弟二是職司; 弟三是生長的能力; 弟四是適應的能力. 對於這四點卻不能完全用物理化學來解釋。原來我們用物理化學來對付無機物亦不過對於它的一種測量 (measurement) 。 我們拿了測量無生物的物理方法而測量生物必覺有 些不夠用。於是必須於解釋物質的概念以外, 再添一些新概念. 例如 '有機性', '發展性', '自支性', 等等。 就是密度, 速率, 質量, 惰性等以外須再加有這些。不過這些新加的卻可左右他些已有的, 換言之, 即已有的居然為新加的所支配了。

26 至於 '心' 亦是如此. 心的性質确有和生理作用不同的地方。換言之, 即拿了解釋生命的那些概念而用以解釋心意必是有些不夠用。例如'覺' (consciousness) 便是一個有一無二的特征。所以亦非加新概念不可。

27 他還用 '配列' (Arrangement) 代替 '架構' (Structure), 同樣是為了強調宇宙的非實體性。

from the process of comprehension. In other words, they belong to the domain of subjectivity.[28] (Zhang 1995, 171)

All external structures are manifested in our mind, which (re)-establishes them in the process of forming structural patterns of thought and comprehension. However, Zhang's theory is not solipsistic, since "at least some of these structural forms are not just a product of the laws of our recognition"[29] (ibid.).

The relation between the external world and our subjectivity is interactive and correlative.

> Our cosmos does not possess any essence; it is only a structure. Its constitution is not entirely natural but inseparably connected with the function of our recognition. Without recognition we could get a glimpse of the original image of this structure. But it still cannot completely seize its essence. Therefore, we can still claim that the cosmos is a structure.[30] (Zhang 1995, 218)

Zhang often compared his ontology to Chan Buddhist cosmology. What he called "structure", reminded him of the Buddhist concept of (necessary or causal) connection (*yinyuan* 因緣), in which the cosmos was seen as a complex network, consisting of innumerable, interdependent relations that are linked and separated from one another in innumerable ways and upon innumerable levels. He compares this to cosmic emptiness, which, as in the Buddhist view, cannot be equated with "nothingness", but only with the absence of a substance, an unchangeable nature, or a self-contained, self-sufficient being (Ule 2016, 91). Since the cosmos only consists of relational connections, it does not imply any independent, autonomous entity. This is also one of the principal reasons why the existence of substance is impossible: the world is a series of functional relations. In Buddhist cosmology, the world, which is void in itself, is a universal, eternal and unchangeable law of causal relations (*yinyuan* 因緣). Zhang Dongsun equated this law with the real objectivity of being (Jiang 2002, 65).

Zhang connected this essentially Buddhist worldview with the idea of evolution, which implies the appearance of new species, as well as a hierarchy between lower and higher forms of being, with the higher forms controlling the lower ones.

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28   但這些構造方式固然不是完全屬於外物本身的...以實質而言, 本來就沒有外物. 以構造與方式而言, 大部分的方式仍是屬於認識作用本身的, 換言之, 即屬於主觀的。

29   這些構造方式... 其中至少有若干是不由于我們的認識立 法所造。

30   我們這個宇宙並無本質, 只是一套架構。這個架構的構成不是完全自然的, 而必須有我們的認識作用參加其中。因為我們不能拔開認識以窺這個架構的本來面目。然而亦決不十分大虧其本質。所以仍可以說宇宙是個架構。

Here, Zhang was probably influenced by the theory of evolution, developed by C. Lloyd Morgan (1852–1936) and Samuel Alexander (1859–1938). However, the new forms of being which appeared in this context were, in his view, a product of structural, and not of substantial changes.

> Combining the Buddhist idea of non-substance with a similar theory of evolution, Zhang held that the structures of the universe, although empty, are in evolution, and new kinds of structure may emerge due to changes in the combination of various structures. (Ibid.)

But evolution, of course, cannot be equated with change as such. According to Zhang, evolution is a modification of simpler structures into more complex ones, and a joining of partial entities into more universal ones. While these structures still remain structures after their modification, they now differ from their previous forms not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively.

> Each formation as such is already something new ... If we reject this essentialism, which functions with micro-particles, we naturally have to acknowledge that every change creates something new; otherwise, we could not speak about any changes at all.[31] (Zhang 1995, 173–74)

Zhang's theory thus remains consistent, even though it denies substance, while advocating the idea of evolution.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this study, we attempted to clarify the crucial distinction between nothingness and emptiness in three distinct East Asian contexts. This task is not as easy as it seems at a first glimpse, for these are two notions that, despite surface similarities, and their frequent intertwining, belong to very different philosophical paradigms (Nelson 2023, 27). On the one hand, nothingness—as developed in Neo-Daoist thought and in Nishida Kitarō's Kyoto School philosophy (see Priest 2025)—refers to an absolute non-being that ultimately eludes any conceptual grasp. As I demonstrated in my paper published in the first part of this double issue (Rošker 2025), in both Wang Bi's and Nishida's terms "absolute nothingness" transcends the duality of being and non-being and eludes capture by positive thought or language. It is a nothingness beyond all concepts and categories, an ineffable ground of reality rather than a describable entity or

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31   每一個組織在本身必定就是一個新東西... 離開了這個微粒子的實質主義, 當然使我們不能不承認凡是變化都是有所創新, 否則我們勢必根本上就不承認有變化。

state. On the other hand, emptiness—as formulated in Sinicized Buddhism and echoed in Zhang Dongsun's epistemology—denotes not a transcendent void but the absence of any inherent substance in things. Emptiness (*kong*) signifies that no phenomenon possesses an independent, self-sufficient essence, yet this does not negate the phenomenal world but instead allows it to emerge as a web of inter-dependent, mutually conditional relations. In other words, whereas nothingness points to a total negation beyond existence, emptiness points to the insubstantial nature of reality itself, wherein things are empty of fixed being but full of dynam-ic relationality.

The distinction between nothingness and emptiness proves pivotal in understand-ing Zhang Dongsun's panstructuralism and its rejection of any static notion of substance. Zhang explicitly aligns his theory with the logic of emptiness rather than with some kind of inexpressible nothingness. In his panstructuralist episte-mology, the cosmos does not contain any unchanging substratum or essence, and instead it consists of "nothing more than a structural network of relations", with all entities defined by their functional interrelations. By denying the existence of any eternal substance behind phenomena, Zhang mirrors the Buddhist view that reality is empty of self-nature, but also the classical Chinese worldview, which is based on a processual philosophy of continuous change. Moreover, Zhang tries to carry these insights into the realm of those modern Western theories of physics, biology and psychology that were developed at his time. His pluralistic epistemology explicitly rejects the notion of substance and even dissolves the traditional dualism of mind and matter, holding that both idealist and materialist worldviews are fundamentally misguided. In place of substance, Zhang offers a relational structure of coherence: what we commonly take to be "things" are, in truth, configurations of relations without any immutable core. In this sense, Zhang's entire approach can be described as an epistemology grounded in a cos-mology of relational emptiness, wherein the only reality is the coherent pattern of interconnection and change.

Zhang Dongsun's philosophical synthesis highlights the broader implications of this emptiness-based framework. He masterfully weaves together strands from Chinese cosmology, Buddhist metaphysics, and modern scientific thought of his time to articulate a comprehensive structural vision of reality. Drawing on the classical Chinese notion of *li* (理) as an underlying pattern or principle of coher-ence in the cosmos, Zhang emphasizes a universe governed by relational order rather than by any material or mental substance. At the same time, he incorpo-rates the Mahāyāna Buddhist insight that the world is *śūnyatā*—void of intrinsic being—such that all forms arise only through dependent origination (Vojtíšková 2015, 134). This cross-cultural foundation is further enriched by those scientific ideas that were most fashionable at his time. Hence, his work resonates with

modern ontological frameworks like relativity and quantum theory, which likewise undermine the idea of absolute, self-subsistent entities.

Moreover, by integrating the concept of evolution in this theory, Zhang describes the universe as an ever-evolving structural continuum which unceasingly leads to the emergence of new qualities. Indeed, even though the structures of the universe are empty of any fixed essence, they are continually in flux—new forms and higher-level patterns emerge not from any new "substance" entering the world, but from novel combinations and reorganizations of the relations and laws by which they are guided. Hence, for Zhang, change is intrinsically creative: every transformation generates something qualitatively new without ever introducing a permanent substance. In this way, Zhang's panstructuralism synthesizes ancient Chinese process-cosmology, Buddhist non-substantiality, and a modern scientific sense of an evolving cosmos, resulting in a structural cosmology devoid of any essence but sustained by an ongoing dynamic of relations.

The philosophical significance of these insights becomes apparent when we consider contemporary epistemological and metaphysical debates. Zhang Dongsun's distinction between nothingness and emptiness—and his (somewhat bold) adoption of emptiness as the cornerstone of his epistemology—exemplifies a move beyond substance-centric conceptions of reality toward a truly relational paradigm. In a world where physics has shown space, time, and matter to be deeply interrelated, and where process-oriented philosophies are gaining ground, Zhang's vision of an empty yet structurally coherent universe offers a prescient and relevant model. It challenges us to reconceive "what there is" not as individual things with fixed natures, but as interwoven events and relationships, much in line with current discussions in systems theory, process metaphysics, and cross-cultural philosophy. Moreover, by dissolving the rigid borderline between mind and matter (or subject and object) through a coherent structural network ontology, Zhang's approach transcends classical Western dichotomies. His aforementioned rejection of both idealism and materialism does not remain confined to an in-between position, but instead presents a system in which matter and idea, observer and observed, are vivid potentialities within a network of structural correlations.[32]

Thus, the nuanced differentiation between an ineffable nothingness and a structural emptiness is more than a semantic point – it underpins a shift toward seeing reality as a coherent system of relations rather than an assortment of independent substances. Such a perspective enriches contemporary debates on knowledge and being by highlighting the possibility of an ontology that is empty of essence yet full of interconnection. In this regard, Zhang Dongsun's philosophy provides an

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32   In this regard, Zhang's approach can be connected to Chinese art, particularly through traditional aesthetics and practices such as landscape painting and calligraphy, where the boundaries between subject and object, material and immaterial, are deliberately blurred (Sernelj 2023, 335).

alternative, more dynamic, and relational understanding of reality—one that, in my view, still holds significant potential to inspire and inform contemporary philosophical inquiry.

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THEMATIC FOCUS
NOTHINGNESS
PART II: SUBLATING NOTHINGNESS: OPENNESS, FREEDOM AND IMAGINATION

The Buddhist Legacies in Indian and Japanese Ideas on Nothingness

"Nothingness"—A Comparative-Philosophical Interaction in the Field between East and West

Hisaki HASHI*

Abstract

In our digital age, translation software has come a long way, and in the context of business correspondence the cultural differences between languages have been reduced. However, in the fields of culture, the humanities, religion and philosophies, such differences, and the problems they cause, have not been eliminated, because their truths cannot be expressed in quantitative terms, through equations and schematizations in mathematics, physics and statistics. Generally speaking, the discrepancies are broader in classical scriptures due to the following factors: syntactic differences, differences in the meaning of words in their semantic aspects, and differences in the semiotic aspects of using words and sentences. This article attempts to analyse the basic concepts of "nothingness" in a comparative-philosophical manner, using concepts from Plato, Kant, and Hegel, as well as Daoism, Nāgārjuna (an important exponent of Early Mahayana Buddhism in India), East Asian Zen Buddhism, and Nishida (the founder of the modern Kyoto School). This allows the philosophical concepts of "nothingness" in East and West to be critically but interactively considered in their fundamental aspects.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, being and nothingness, critical insight and interaction between East and West

»Nič« – primerjalnofilozofska interakcija v polju med Vzhodom in Zahodom

Izvleček

V naši digitalni dobi se je prevajalska programska oprema zelo razvila in v okviru poslovne korespondence so se kulturne razlike med jeziki zmanjšale. Vendar pa na področju kulture, humanistike, religije in filozofije jezikovne razlike in težave, ki jih te povzročajo, niso odpravljene, kajti njihovih resnic ni mogoče izraziti s kvantitativnimi izrazi, z enačbami in shematizacijami v matematiki, fiziki in statistiki. Na splošno so razlike v klasičnih spisih večje zaradi naslednjih dejavnikov: skladenjskih razlik, razlik v pomenu besed v njihovih semantičnih vidikih ter razlik v semiotičnih vidikih uporabe besed in stavkov. Ta članek poskuša analizirati osnovne koncepte »niča« na primerjalnofilozofski način z uporabo konceptov iz Platona, Kanta in Hegla ter daoizma, Nāgārjune (pomembnega predstavnika zgodnjega mahāyānskega budizma v Indiji), vzhodnoazijskega zen

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budizma in Nishide (ustanovitelja sodobne kjotske šole). To omogoča kritično, toda hkrati interaktivno obravnavo filozofskih konceptov »niča« na Vzhodu in Zahodu v njihovih temeljnih vidikih.

Ključne besede: primerjalna filozofija, bivanje in nič, kritični uvid ter interakcija med Vzhodom in Zahodom

Introduction—What is Nothingness?

The Example of Intellectual History and Philosophies in Asia

Essential problems for a critical but productive reflection on Eastern and Western philosophical ideas and concepts lie—among other things—in the lack of consideration of the following aspects (Hashi 2016, 272–77):

α) Even if the translation is done word-for-word, the translation will have a different connotation in the translation language compared to the original. (Aspect of syntax)

β) Embedded in the translation language, the sentence shows a different meaning from case to case compared to the original. (Aspect of semantics)

γ) Recipients of the translation language have a semiotic relationship with every word embedded in their culture. (Aspect of semiotics)

Since the introduction of Western culture in the modern age, the language and culture in East Asia have also changed. The character 無 *mu* (in the Japanese reading) has been almost synonymous with "nothingness" in everyday language since the 20th century. On the level of everyday life, the way of dealing with "nothing" is almost the same between East and West in a global world. However, the facts are completely different in the history of philosophy.

According to the aspect α) syntax: in Buddhism, the character 無 *mu* was often combined with the character 上 *jō*. This resulted in a term with a special meaning, 無上 *mu-jō*: that which has no further thing to uphold above itself, and thus the highest, the Supreme. This was often used to express the highest quality of Buddha's cognition as the highest Self-Awakening (enlightenment) to the *dharma*, the order of the universal truth. It was expressed as a "supreme spiritual awakening," as follows: 無上正等覚 *mu-jō shō-tō-gaku* (Tokyo daigaku bukkyō seinenkai 1993, 115–17).[1]

Regarding aspect β) semantic: in Buddhism the supreme being as the creator god is not a central topic. Buddha held dialogues with numerous gods on an equal

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1   In *Daibon hannya-kyō* 大品般若経, the classic Chines translation of the *Great Prajñā Sūtra*.

footing with them (Nakamura 1991a). The supreme is not presented with an absolutely positive adjective such as omnipotent, but with *mu* as a negation prefix, as "incomparable" or "unsurpassed". Here, the negation prefix *mu* is combined with the expression of the thoroughly positive.

Regarding aspect β) semantic: in Daoism 無 *wú* (Chinese: nothing, nothingness) is the ground from which all being arises. The *wú* as nothingness is more profound than being (有 *yǒu*). The *wú* has the character of the unlimited. That which is not definable, not limitable is further, more profound, therefore ultimately higher, more significant, more important (Laozi 1978, chap. 40):

Here, a paradoxical meaning is shown, with the character *wú* (nothing), the most profound and the highest is expressed. The reason for this paradoxical category, which can only be expressed through negation, is that Daoism does not believe in one God. The 道 *Dào*, as the origin of all, is not identical to the personal God of Western religion. The entity of *Dào* which cannot be fixed to a personal God has an unlimited character from the very beginning. The *Dào* encompasses questions as to whether the *Dào* itself can be traced back to a specific category and identifiable with the absolute One, what an absolute One means, and so on. This position is: *Dào* is *immeasurable* from the very beginning and cannot be categorically determined definitively by human language (Laozi 1978, chap. 1).

Regarding aspect γ), semiotic: in Zen Buddhism, the term of *mu* 無 (Japanese: nothing, nothingness) is understood as a comprehensive, unlimited openness to an absolute truth. Viewed in transcultural philosophy, it is similar to a metaphysical-ontological ground that cannot be abstracted by an analytical category[2] (Akiziki 1987, chap. 23). Regarding aspects β) semantic and γ) semiotic: in Indian Mahayana Buddhism, and specifically in Nāgārjuna's Madhyamika School, *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is presented as a principle that enables everything that exists and does not exist, everything which is becoming and vanishing (Nāgārjuna 2005). This emptiness has been interpreted as similar to "nothing" in Western languages. In essence, however, it is different from the Western "nothingness" because the Indian way of saying "empty of something" is understood as "free of something" or "free of negative". "Empty of suffering" means "free of suffering", and thus "joy". Similarly "empty of confusion" is understood as "free of confusion", or "clear and bright in consciousness" (Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 89–93).

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2   As soon as one speaks of *mu* categorically, *mu* functions only as a category. This is correct in analytical thinking, but the *mu* should not remain as a pure abstract idea on the theoretical level. Much more important is how one can rescue and actualize this metaphysical-ontological basis of *mu* in a very concrete way in the sphere of life in the empirical world. Here, *mu* is active again in the paradoxical sense. Any further category cannot define this *mu*. It is critical that *mu* (nothing) is essentially more comprehensive than *yū* (Japanese: 有 "being", and in classic literature it can also be read as *u*).

Being empty indicates a space that is *open and free* to receive different things. In semiotic terms, it is not associated with any negative connotation. On the contrary, it points *toward detaching*, and specifically *detaching from negativity*.

In summary, the following characteristics emerge from the concepts outlined above.

α)   Syntactically, the terms formed by combining the *mu / wú* 無, *śūnyatā* /emptiness have the following structure: apart from *mu / wú* being empty, there is no other overarching one.

β)   Semantically, this shows the highest, the absolute, which is meant in a thoroughly positive way.

γ)   These concepts cannot be identified with substantial omnipotence. From a semiotic point of view, what is always sought is the effect of this "nothing" as an *unlimited openness*. Since it is not a fixed category bound to a substance, it can be transferred and applied to the ontic real world as the origin of a supreme truth.

The Classification of "Nothing" in Western Philosophy

What follows are some essential aspects of the consideration of "nothing" by leading thinkers in Western philosophy.

Kant

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant has a table on the definitions of nothing:

1.   empty concept without object—*ens rationis*

2.   empty object of a concept—*nihil privativum*

3.   empty intuition without object—*ens imaginarium*

4.   empty object without concept—*nihil negativum*

(Kant 1990, B 348, A 292)

This explanation is exceptionally brief, contrary to Kant's usual way of thinking: "One sees that the thought thing (no. 1) is different from the non-thing (No. 4), that the latter (No. 4) is a mere fiction. The former (no. 1) is at least a concept, but without object." On the other hand, no. 2 *nihil privativum* and no. 3 *ens imaginarium* are empty data without concepts. As Kant concludes, if the light is not connected to a sense by our thinking, darkness will be equally meaningless insofar as no object can be projected into our consciousness.

According to Kant, negation is a form of intuition. However, even if no real objects and no objects for further thought can be provided, the discussion of these categories of nothingness does not become devoid of content.

Kant's concise reflection assumes that the noun "nothing" in itself determines a total negation of all beings of truth. The adjective "to be empty" is just as absolutely negative, i.e., objectively and in terms of content, nothing of significance. An apparent dichotomy is unambiguously presupposed: the categories of "nothing" and "emptiness" have no further space for thought or discussion.

Hegel

As is well known, Hegel began the first book of his *Science of Logic*, "The Doctrine of Being", with the juxtaposition of "Being" and "Nothing" and their combination through "Becoming".

"Being, pure being—without any further determination." "Nothing, the void; it is simple equality with itself, perfect emptiness; lack of determination and content; undifferentiatedness in itself" (Hegel 1986, I, I.1.1. A., B., C., 82–84).

Hegel's exposition most likely derived much from Kant, whereby he critically examined the absolute-dichotomous idea of "nothingness versus being" and opened his own perspective in the subsequent short section on "becoming":

> Pure being and pure nothing are the same. What truth is, is neither being nor nothingness, but that being passes into nothingness and nothingness into being–not passes but has passed. (Hegel 1986, 83)

Hegel's perspective clearly opens up to a duality of "Being and Nothingness". Hegel's view is that "Being passes into Nothingness" and "Nothingness passes into Being", so that the two mutually demonstrate a property of belonging together. Moreover, mediated by the third category of "becoming", being has passed into nothingness and nothingness into being. What remains of this is their "pure" unity, but one devoid of essence and concept: pure being and the negating nothing are the same (ibid., 83–84).

Compared to Kant, Hegel has grasped "nothing" alongside "being" as a pair of terms. In the following extensive section on "becoming", Hegel points out that the "nothing" in relation to "being" can be significant after all: it is significant as the opposite category of being: as a non-being of being[3] (ibid., 84). Now,

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3   This view is illustrated by referencing Plato's "Sophist". For more details, see the following chapter.

this non-being is a purely abstract category of pure non-being without concept or content, and therefore it can be formulated as "the mere non" (ibid., 83). Hegel immediately contrasts this nothingness with his knowledge of "Oriental thought": "In Oriental systems, essentially in Buddhism, as is well known, nothingness, emptiness, is the absolute principle" (ibid., 82). This idea is directly linked to Heraclitus and his "all is becoming" (Heraclitus 1968, 132), and then again connected to the "Oriental sayings" about the passing of life, death, and a new life after that: in this, being and nothingness are unified. Hegel immediately raises his criticism that this is merely a view of reality. "Being and nothingness are held together in time, presented as alternating in it, but not conceived in its abstraction, and therefore not in such a way that it is the same in and of itself" (Hegel 1986, 85).

Hegel's line of thought here is based on a fundamental misinterpretation of non-European philosophy, and it is a mixture of interpretations of various schools of thought in non-Western philosophy and a lack of basic knowledge of the languages and cultures of Asia. In the further part of this same chapter of the *Science of Logic*, there is also a general description of India in which Hegel claims that Indians all consider categories such as "sensation, perception, imagination, desire, etc. motionless" only in the "Om, Om, Om in itself or nothing at all—Brahma calls" (Hegel 1986, 101).

These are two examples of important thinkers in 19th-century Europe, where Indology, Sinology, and other Asian studies had not yet been established at universities. Regarding their ideas of "Buddhism" and the description of the continuation of life after death, they are probably based on a cursory and mixed interpretation of Brahmanism/Hinduism and Buddhism about the concept of *samsara* (Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 484–89). The term *samsara* itself has undergone extensive changes within Buddhism in the various regions and schools of Buddhist thought in Asia. It touches on the doctrine of the five *skandhas* of early Buddhism in a superficial and inconsistent manner. Hegel's confused interpretation is also noticeable in the part of his text concerning Brahmanism, and his critical opinion of "emptiness" and "nothingness" in relation to "Oriental systems and thinking" is mainly that such philosophical concepts in Asia have largely been presented without really abstracting the categories, without clearly separating and delimiting the pure idea and the factual reality in a mixture.

As for our focal topic, "nothingness", it can be said that Hegel really contributed nothing in terms of the words "nothing" and "emptiness" in the description of non-European philosophy. What he has mainly negatively discussed in a pejorative way about "Asia" in the relevant sections of his principal works shows a series of contrasting characteristics describing what he understood by "philosophy" itself, which Hegel could not find in Asian thought. On the other hand, it turns out

that the characteristics dismissed by Hegel were advantages in Asian philosophical schools, and this is one of the leitmotifs of our comparative philosophical discourse, which I will explain after the following chapter on Plato.

Plato

Parmenides of Elea recognized that the being of the being forms an absolute truth and that non-being, so to speak, speaks nothing of the truth (Parmenides 1968, 165). Plato discussed this point differently. In the dialogue titled "Sophist", and in a section on the "Fight of the Giant", Socrates explains that "non-being" in Parmenides of Elea is an absolute negation of "being" (Plato 1989a, 131a–131d). In the thinking of Parmenides, the latter has an absolutely positive meaning of the "truth of being". Here being is revealed through thinking, and in recognizing this truth, being and thinking are one and the same, thus on this premise non-being constitutes a massive contradiction. The negation of being, which is equated with thinking, leads to thinking about non-being falling outside the truth. In contrast, Socrates conceives of non-being not as a contrasting being, but as an idea of being and, therefore, as something that can take a part in truth (Plato 1989b, 245e–246e).

In the dialogue "Parmenides", the idea of the all-encompassing One unfolds in many directions. The One cannot be divisible, because if it is divided into many parts, then it has a multiplicity, which cannot be equated with the idea of unity. If this position is taken, however, then the following refutation is possible: the multiplicity of the subdivided parts does indeed form a comprehensive unity of the One. Whether the One is divisible or not leads to a contradiction—it is divisible in one argument and indivisible in another (Plato 1989a, 157d–159b).

The being of the divisibility of the idea of the One is, at the same time, the non-being of the indivisibility of the One. The being of one aspect α—syntax and the non-being of the other aspect β—semantics are both constant, because in the "Sophist" Plato recognized "non-being" as being the non-being of a concrete thing, something that only proves the absence of the same: a lack. As an *idéa*, "non-being" is a kind of conceptual being. As the opposite *idéa* of being, "non-being" is independent. If you continue to think along these lines, you end up at the extreme—nothingness. "There is nothing about something concrete", there is nothing there. "There is only nothing about it", and this nothingness is an abstract category because it is not concrete (Plato 1989a, 165c–165e). The One, as the all-encompassing, unlimited *idéa,* would then have to include both the representational and the abstract, which is non-representational. The representational, such as a foodstuff, which is only for eating and brings no further idea, is useless in terms of ideas. No idea is necessary for the purpose of eating: the idea is

not something that is needed to fulfil the instinctive dynamic of satisfying hunger. Seen from the realm of ideas, the mere eating of something without any idea is a "nothing" of the concept, which is probably the most radically negative thing.

Reflections on the One as the all-encompassing continue dynamically. If the One is all-encompassing, it has both the non-being of the representational and the non-being of the conceptual. It encompasses both the nothingness of materials and the nothingness as a pure abstraction. A pure abstract being is the pure idea of the One being. It shares the idea of the One. Pure abstract nothing is also being because non-being and nothingness as the ideas have a meaning for Plato. Both are parts of the concept of the all-encompassing One. One can also claim that pure nothing can also be a component of the One. The pure nothing is also concrete, and the pure nothing is a pure abstract idea. This hypothesis comes in the final part of Platon's "Parmenides" dialogue. Since it is a dialogue, the nuance of this final part is somewhat strange. Socrates: "[...] if that is so, the One can also be a non-being, so it is nothing. It is being and non-being, and it is also nothing." Disciples: "Perfectly true" (Plato 1989a, 166b–166c). Whether this is ironic or revolves around a profound truth, the two remain in resonance with Plato's dialogue.

From Kant and Hegel to Erich Heintel—in 20th Century Vienna

I will start this section with Hegel's critique of Asian schools of thought. Although his critique was based on a lack of basic knowledge of Asian languages and cultures, it is, in fact, an example of how the philosophies of the East and West at the time defined themselves in relation to their tangents. In this contrast, which Hegel emphasized, we can see which criterion was decisive for him as representative of Western philosophy: What Hegel did not consider necessary as "philosophy" was, so to speak, an essential criterion for Asian schools of philosophical thought. To quote Spinoza, *omnis determination est negatio* (Spinoza 1986, 50; Klein 2005, chap. X., 98)—every determination is a negation if you look at it outside the limits of itself.

Hegel's "negation" of "Oriental schools of thought" was primarily based on the lack of clear abstraction of an idea or a conceptual concept. The empirical and the conceptual are not clearly distinguished from each other in a dualistic way. On the other hand, Hegel was also critical of Kant and his transcendental philosophy, because the Kantian absolutely unambiguous demarcation and separate attitude of the two areas, the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, the pure and the empirical knowledge, as well as the transcendental and non-transcendental, ultimately kept the thing in itself as unknowable beyond the reach of human reason (Kant 1990, B 49-B 72, A 309–A375). Based on his critique, Hegel developed the philosophy

of mind to the highest intellectual level. Nevertheless, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one can see that a phenomenon in the empirical world was regarded as a necessary starting dimension for recognizing its spiritual content, in that Hegel, after achieving knowledge of pure intellectual mind, *subordinates* the empirical phenomenon merely "as appearance", once again as a second rank to the spiritual (Hegel 1988, 90). Erich Heintel has critically reflected on this process in Hegel's work, and put forward the new thesis that the *phenomenon as appearance and the noumenal conceptual are always connected* (Heintel 1990, II. § 4, 117–20). In other words, after reaching noumenal spiritual knowledge, the phenomenon appears as an appearance in that the essence and the conceptuality of the thing that appears are clearly and distinctly presented in our consciousness in the midst of the appearance. Inspired by the *eidos* of a material thing, for example, a flower, one beholds the *eternal essence* of the *idéa* of beauty. The diverse empirical factors that disturb our concentration on the *idéa* thus fall down, they *vanish into nothing* in our consciousness. Yet, the contemplated *idéa* is, in the horizon of Aristotle's thinking, connected with the *ousia*, the essence of the being of the thing (here, the blossom). The essence of the blossom belongs to the object contemplated. This essence is again connected to the object of thought in an actual reality. Based on Hegel, Plato and Aristotle, Heintel maintains that the phenomenon of appearing things and our intellectual mind (oriented to essence, entities, ideas) are in a mutual context for commuting and integrating. Let us elaborate: when one side (material being) arises, the other side (intellectual mind) will be hidden. When the intellectual mind arises, diverse material factors *fall into nothing*, whereby our consciousness grasps the illuminating *idéa* based on the *eidos atomon* of the thing in our intellectual view. Heintel manifested this position as "existing transcendence" (*daseiende Transzendentalität*) (Heintel 1988, 7–30; 1968, chap. 33, 627–34).

An Interim Report—"Nothingness" Viewed from Occidental Philosophy

Even though we can find the factors mentioned by Heintel, that the phenomenon of things and transcending ideas can be in mutual interaction and connection, whereby the ideality and reality are growing and hidden, the very concept of "nothingness" in this genealogy is left open in Kant, Hegel, and also in Heintel. Although Hegel considers the non-being of nothing in being and the non-being of being in nothing at the beginning of the logic of being, nothing or non-being are only considered a pure abstraction from which no real idea of the infinite truth can be elucidated. It is this tendency that Nishitani and other philosophers of the Kyoto School have maintained as their indissoluble criticism of Hegel. Hegel

began his logic of being with a pure being. Pure nothingness is merely its opposite and marginalized. Even if the two seem to have mutually transformed into one another, priority always remains with being, not with nothingness. The final chapter of the *Science of Logic* ends with the logic of ideas, in which the actual being of the infinite is always elucidated in the dialectical confrontation of theory and practice, in which the true being impregnates its relevance and absoluteness from stage to stage in every discourse.

However, this definitive separation of Western philosophy as a "failing value of 'nothingness'" was a hurried judgment, as there is an essential chapter in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in the section on the Transcendental Ideal in which the *omunitudo realitatis* (the universe of reality) is characterized in a supreme coincidence of all affirmative and negative predicates (Kant 1990, B 603–B604; A 575–A 576). In this all-encompassing reality, every categorical limitation of an affirmation and a negation loses its meaning and the *omnitudo realitatis* remains with unlimited possibilities of affirmations and negations holding the eternal truth without any limit. This position reminds one of the thesis of Cusanus—*coincidentia oppositorum*—that every limitation and difference falls in the all-encompassing truth of the Absolute One (*Deus*) (Cusanus 1967).

On the other hand, the One as the *idéa* (τὸ ἕν, *to hen*) in Plato's dialogues includes a lot of suggestions. The One envelops an unlimited number of predicates to explain an irrefutable truth. It cooperates and also predicates in a contradiction. In the characteristics of the One, Socrates hypothesizes that the One can also be a "nothingness" because the concepts of every non-being are the essential parts of the all-encompassing One. These positions are suggested by Plato but marginalized in the following tradition in Western philosophy, primarily because Aristotle represented in his logic and metaphysics a clear opposition to every factor of ambiguity what was left open by Plato.

Now we come to the end of the section of Occidental philosophy. After an examination of many factors, we maintain the common opinion that nothingness is a marginalized concept in mainstream Western philosophy.

Concerning Genealogies in Classic Asian Philosophy

The Character of Asian Philosophy

Philosophical schools of thought in Asia usually involve religion and ethics. In the previous century, the saying was: Eastern mysticism, Western rationality. However, this is a generalization that now seems incorrect. Within Buddhism, the Vajrayana schools of thought from India and Tibet are mystical, and their

meditations often lead to intense ecstasy. In contrast, while Mahayana schools in East Asia are not entirely without mystical elements, they strive for an alert, sober consciousness that aims to achieve an ontologically irrefutable truth in the midst of life in the immanent world. Among these, Zen Buddhism is highly rational, intellectual, and made lively through various paradoxes.

In this article, a few examples from Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and some modern philosophy of the Kyoto School and contemporary Zen philosophy will be discussed.

On the general nature of the schools of thought in Buddhism and Daoism, Hegel gave a succinct and convincing explanation for his disparaging and assertive judgments on "Oriental thought": these schools of thought lack an abstraction of pure categories. There contain philosophical adages or pseudo-philosophical teachings on ethics or good. Still, these all remain within the framework of doctrinaire teaching, in which the freedom of the thinking individual to reflect on the object of thought critically is usually lacking (Hegel 1975, 177–82). In short, there is a "lack of category thinking, lack of freedom to raise objections and criticisms of the previous ways of thinking". As such, the main issue discussed over the past few centuries in this context is whether non-Occidental philosophy can be considered under the category of "philosophy" at all.

From the point of view of Asian schools of philosophical thought, it can be said that the definition of what "philosophy" actually is has been different in the cultures of East and West from the very beginning. In the schools of Buddhist thought and philosophy in China and East Asia in general, philosophical thinking serves to help us grasp an irrefutable truth in life. Meditative contemplation serves the profound contemplation (*darśana*) of an ontologically metaphysical truth, which, however, is not developed through category thinking based on the pure abstraction of mental concepts. This basic approach became a point of contention from which opinions are divided on whether such a thing can be called a philosophy in the sense of Western philosophy. In ancient Greece, philosophizing meant rational, critically reflective thinking to arrive at an irrefutable truth through dialectics. The object of thought may be treated dualistically until the thought reaches an indivisible truth, and that is the essence of *dialegesthai*. The whole is guided by categorical thinking.

In Asian cultural institutions in general, this point is handled very differently. What is to be striven for is undoubtedly grasping an irrefutable truth. However, this is not achieved through *philosophein*, but instead through meditative contemplation. In the latter, it is basically not a matter of discursive knowledge, but rather, it is almost the opposite: one becomes, through one's own bodily existence, a "place" in which one becomes one with the truth that has been grasped. Just this, becoming one with an "absolute truth" was often interpreted as "mysticism" in the

previous century, and in the West this more or less corresponds to the genealogy of mysticism in the religion of monotheism. The *unio mystica* or *communio mystica* achieves communion and, ultimately, an absolute unity of God and human, which can lead a person to an extraordinary transcendence with ecstasy.

From a comparative-philosophical point of view, it is not possible to categorically assign all Eastern religions (and also ethics) to "mysticism", since there is basically *no monotheistic creator* (God) personified in Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, etc. Interestingly, these schools of thought (such as Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Mohism, Neo-Confucianism, and so on) have in place of God an abstract concept such as *tiān* (天 the heavenly), *Dào*, *śūnyatā* (空), *wú/ mu* (無 literally the "nothing"), *dharma* (法), etc. However, this "absolute" has no material, positively verifiable substance, and such concepts are basically free of substantive fixation. Therefore, one cannot define this as the "absolute", since the "absolute", as determined by Western religion and philosophy, cannot exclude a firm bond to God, the eternal spirit, the absolute ideas, *idéa*, *ousia,* absolute verification, etc. For the schools of thought in Asia, an "unlimited openness", "unrestrained openness of the one truth", and so on are more suitable terms than the "absolute" (Hashi 2014, Section III., chap. X,1–X.5, 241–50).

The goal of these philosophical schools of thought is to grasp this unlimited openness, a boundless openness of the one truth, through one's own bodily existence with consciousness, whereby the "place" of this recognized truth as a reason for the life of the individual from day to day, historically, can contribute to enabling a good life for oneself and society and the surrounding world. The bodily being with consciousness is always at the centre of this grasping of truth. However, the comprehensive one to unify is not based on God, but instead on "abstract conceptuality", which cannot be sealed by any words or categories. The emphasis is not on the inferred "category", but on the experience of truth and the comprehension of it through one's own existence together with the environment of fellow beings, and this latter unity is often defined as a "place".

Daoism—the Position of Wú 無

This section will explain whether *wú* can be equated in all respects with the category of "nothing/nothingness" in Western philosophy.

The following idea is presented in Laozi's *Daodejing*, chapter 11:

> Thirty spokes converge at the center of a wheel. In a space where there is nothing, the wheel has an effect. You knead clay and form a vessel out of it. From its nothing [*wú*], the impact of a vessel arises. When

building a house, you make the opening for the entrance and exit and the window. In the space where there is nothing, the usefulness of the house exists. Seen in this way, being enriches us with its usefulness. Actually, this usefulness is based on nothingness [*wú*] and its usefulness. (Laozi 1978, 81–82)

This seems to be a paradox. However, this paradox does not lead us to a language game, but directly to a reflective consideration of being. A being thing exists in that it is in a mutual relationship with its opposite, non-being. The extreme case of non-being is nothingness. The example of a vessel shows that "nothingness" is integral to our lives as the direct negation of being. It is a being of nothingness that makes the existence of the vessel possible. If similar to Western philosophy, Daoism considers category thinking to be the centre of its logic, then this way of thinking is not possible because in category thinking the "nothing"—separate from life in the real world—forms an abstractum from the very beginning to the *nihil non*. To grasp and recognize the "use of a vessel consisting of its matter and its nothingness" (Laozi 1978, 81–82), the reader needs to think in analogies.

A person has a permanent place in the world and drinks water from a vessel. This act of drawing water is made possible by "nothing", in that there is nothing between the vessel and the physical existence of the human being to hinder it. Savouring the water has also been made possible because there is nothing between the vessel and the person's will to prevent it. Seen in this way, the *wú* / nothing has an effect everywhere, wherever there is any being, and that it can only appear in the context of *wú*/nothing.

In chapter 40, there is a clear assessment of *wú* / nothingness, as follows:

To become counter-natural is the dynamic of dào. A living being that is weak is the effect of dào. All beings under heaven arise from being [yǒu]. Being [yǒu] arises from wú / nothingness. (Laozi 1978, 115–116)

A precise evaluation of the *wú*/nothing is manifested here. A dualistically separating attitude of being against nothing even seems foreign in this context. That being arises from nothing corresponding to the physical worldview before the Big Bang: before the Big Bang happened, there were states with the dense assembly of protons, photons, and electrons. Before the first photon/light quantum was created, there was a vacuum field everywhere: nothing. Underneath the vacuum field, there was a portion of the uneven vacuum density. This resulted in a fluctuation from which the first photon was created (Saji 1997, 74–77). Quantum

Fluctuations, Vacuum Fluctuations.[4] In Daoism, nothingness is not a category of nothingness. It is a nothingness that acts together with being.

Mahayana Buddhism: *Emptiness—Śūnyatā*

Nothing that exists can be fixed to any substance. The principle that makes all events of being and non-being possible is "emptiness", and Nāgārjuna advocated this position in Mahayana Buddhism in India. In early Buddhism, the three principles distinguishing Buddha-dharma from Brahmanism's *dharma* are as follows (Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 407–09):

1. Everything in the world is in a state of constant change. Nothing is permanent. (*Anitya*: the impermanence of all things).

2. The ego is not a substance. Different orders of truth (*dharma*) cannot be fixed with one interpretation and assertion of an ego, since the corporeal existence of the ego itself is involved in this impermanence of the change of all beings.

3. The world consists of a mass of suffering. Suffering arises from the discrepancy between one's desires and reality.

When the cause of suffering is dissolved, eternal peace arises: *nirvāna.*

Early Buddhism already held the position that the impermanence of all things, the ego without attachment to fixed substance and suffering emanated from no God, no substantially permanent ego, and no substantially permanent causality. The Buddha's view was realistic: suffering arises from the mismatch between a desired self and the given reality. However, in Buddhism, every being is an impermanent bundle of manifold factors, constantly changing with its construct. There is no fixed substance. Given are only the relationships between manifold factors, which change dynamically from moment to moment. Early Buddhism asserts that the causal cause of this dynamic lies in the latter, namely in the impermanence of every factor. In Mahayana Buddhism, a reform of the theory was added to this. The causality of this dynamic of impermanence is itself indeterminable: there is no fixed, substantially demonstrable reason. This reason cannot be sealed in a merely abstract category. This unlimited openness is called "*śūnyatā* / to be empty" (Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 89–93).

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4   There is a controversy in physics about what actually happened before the Big Bang. One hypothesis of how a very first elementary particle was created from physical nothingness (a vacuum) is explained by the theory of fluctuation or (fluctuation of vacuum density). As an intermediate conclusion, this is recognized in the quantum field theory. In the sense of an interdisciplinary ontology, it provides suggestions for Taoism, Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, and leads them into a field of interactive dialogue.

Suppose one receives the above statement in the thought horizon of the analytical philosophy of the Occident. In that case, a paradox is immediately visible: *śūnyatā* / the emptiness itself forms an "abstract category", so that with this self-contradiction it passes over into a dilemma. In doing so, we must immediately remember that in most non-European schools of thought it is not about the pure theory of theory. Still, in their horizon of thought, thinking is just one part of its theory construction, and it is accompanied by the further part, i.e. by acting, behaving, and experiencing the truth through corporeal existence. A philosophical horizon of thought pushes itself directly onto the world of life. The word "emptiness" is not an abstract idea, as it lives in the middle of a world of life. When you drink a cup of tea, an "emptiness" arises in the cup. If no object exists in an open space, the "void" is in the space. If you are free of suffering, you are "empty of suffering" (Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 89). The state of "being empty" is not negative. If something is "empty of any negative factors" it is at least neutral, not pejorative, and is considered partly affirmative-positive.

The word "*śūnya*" means "zero". Point zero appears in a coordinate as a starting point, possibly referring to further points in all directions. A zero state exists everywhere in a living environment. In terms of natural number, zero is the starting point for measuring anything. Without zero, nothing can be achieved.

In the Buddhist theory of time, each moment continues with its disappearance. The appearance of the next moment is connected with its disappearance (*kṣaṇabhanga*; Takasaki and Hayashima 1994, 261–62). In existential philosophy, each moment is an absolute now, a starting dimension of the measurement of zero, which can go in the direction of both the future and the past. This zero point indicates that it points to both a possibility of expansion and a possibility of contraction. The beginning part of the word *śūnyatā*—*śū*—is the stem of the Sanskrit verb "to swell". The "emptiness" as an unlimited openness encompasses the possibility in two polar directions, of expansion and contraction.

Whether *śūnyatā* can be equated with the general category of "nothing" in Western philosophy is a matter on which much can be said.

The general prerequisites for this are as follows:

Terms and categories in Buddhism are not pure or merely abstract ideas. They are always inseparably connected with phenomena of the world and the physical existence of the individual human being with consciousness.

a) "Empty of something" is an "open to something". It is not a *nihil negativum*, not an *ens imaginarium*. The table of categories around the "nothing" in Kant does not agree with the meaning of "emptiness".

b) "Emptiness" as a principle of ontological theory construction in Nāgārjuna:

It proves the unlimited openness of a comprehensive. The comprehensiveness is similar to the one truth in Plato; however, in Nāgārjuna it is not just about a pure idea but about phenomena in the empiricism of the whole. There is no similar concept in the traditional philosophy of the Occident.

c) The characteristics of a) and b) hardly correspond to the "nothing" of Western philosophy. Comparative philosophy is there to open a field of dialogue between the "nothing" (of conventional Western philosophy) and the "emptiness" as the boundless openness of Mahayana Buddhism.

d) However, a few interdisciplinary scientists in the West have been thinking this way in recent decades, such as Francisco Varela (Varela 1993, chap. V, 217–58). In his book *Cognition Embodied*, in chapter V, "World without Ground", Varela presents an interaction between Nāgārjuna's principle of "emptiness" and Varela's biological epistemology. For Varela, the origin of the development of all things cannot be explained by scientific analytical methods of thought, and instead it remains as *śūnyatā*, emptiness, as a boundless openness.

It is important to note that Varela's thesis, in close connection with the Mahayana Buddhist "void", does not in any way negate the conventional epistemologies of Western philosophy. The main reason for this is that Nāgārjuna's "emptiness" is far removed from "nothingness" as *nihil negative*, and instead rather represents a "middle way" between the conventional "being" and "nothing" of Western philosophy, and the open, interactive field of dialogue between the various disciplines of thought.

Mu 無 *in Zen Buddhism*

From the "Emptiness" to *Wú / Mu* 無

The "emptiness" of the Madhyamaka School was translated as the Chinese *kōng* and Japanese *kū*, both written 空. To nominalize "emptiness", the word 性 (in Chinese *sheng* and Japanese *sho*) was added as "essence". Sometimes *śūnyatā* was phonetically transmitted as 舜若多 *shun-nya-ta* (see Hekigan-roku / Biyan-lu). The unlimited openness of *śūnyatā* was reinforced with the adjective "true" 真 and transmitted with the direct insight into the comprehension of this unlimited open truth, *prajñā*. The "true emptiness" as a genuine openness and boundlessness is the essence of *prajñā*: 真空般若 *zhēn kōng pan-nya*; *shin-kū hannya*.[5]

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5 Cf. Dōgen wrote in *Shōbō genzō*, vol. 2, *Maka hannya haramitsu* [Mahā prajñā pāramitā] 摩訶般若波羅蜜 (*Great Entity of the Completed Widsom*): "*Gaku hannya kore kokū* 「学般若」是

Zen, among many other Buddhist schools of thought, also adopted the term. Dōgen was strictly opposed to any sectionalism and pedantry. He even avoided the wasteful use of the word "Zen", and instead emphasized *prajñā* and the true emptiness. On the other hand, Dōgen handed down numerous Zen sayings and koans, which he was confronted with during his study visit to China. The word *wú / mu* (無) also appears in Dōgen, showing the significance of the "emptiness of the true insight *prajñā* to the Awakening / *satori*".

With regard to the significance of emptiness / *śūnyata* from India, the East Asian countries' own, historically established word *wú / mu* (無) was used more and more frequently in Zen. The reasons for this are as follows: 1. the phonetic translation 舜若多 *shun-nya-ta* gradually became replaced by the term 空性 *kōngxìng / kū-shō*; 2. this conceptual word *kōng-xìng / kū-shō* was indeed academic, and largely abstract, and thus at odds with the goal of Zen—the unification of theory and practice; and 3. the East Asian cultures' own word, *wú / mu* 無 had been used since the advent Daoism—despite all warnings and reform movements against syncretic mixed interpretations—and thus was appealing and generally accessible to intellectuals and the general population alike.

In the 15th century, when the dominant schools of Buddhist thought in China were predominantly Zen for intellectuals and the Buddhism of Pure Land for the general populace, it was the former that became indigenous in East Asia and representative of the region's culture.

The Term *Mu* 無 and Its Various Uses

The term *mu* (無) is most commonly used in the Rinzai School of Zen Buddhism. Dōgen, the founder of the Soto School of Zen Buddhism in Japan, tends to use the word *kū* (空). However, Dōgen dealt with many common koans during his stay in China. Here we look at one of the exemplary Zen dialogues by Joshu (Zhao-zhou) about "Buddha nature in a dog". The following is an outline of the story (Dōgen 1980: 69; emphasis is mine):

> A student asked the monk Joshu/Zhao-zhou: 'Does a dog have Buddha nature within?' Joshu/Zhao-zhou answers: 'mu/wú!'

> Another time, a different student asks him: 'Does a dog also have Buddha nature?' Jōshū/Zhao-zhou answers: 'Yes! He also has his Buddha nature.' The student asks back: 'If a dog also has Buddha nature, why is he born as an animal despite his Buddha nature?' Joshu/Zhao-zhou: 'Because he recognizes his own nature, his own karma.'

「虛空」 (To learn a true insight of *prajñā*, we have to recognize that it does not have any substance) (Dōgen 1980).

This dialogue was controversial at the time it was written, in the Song period. Based on the Zen philosophy of Ryōmin Akizuki, a Zen master (Roshi) and Zen philosopher (student of Daisetz), let us examine this classic *kōan* through the experience and the insight gained by Zen practice (Akizuki 1987, chap. 23):

1. Zen words and Zen statements cannot be judged by a pure language analysis. Because they always live in a specific time, a specific place, and a given situation.

2. Why are there two opposite answers to one and the same question? Clearly, each answer is directed at a specific student in his or her specific situation and question. The first student asked about a purely theoretical determination. Buddha-nature is basically "empty of substance". If you associate it with any substance at all, you are making a complete mistake. Hence, the negation "mu". The "mu" can be considered a radical "nothing".

The second questioner had a personal doubt. He cannot be convinced that he has an inherent Buddha nature. Coupled with his psychological confrontation, he pointed to a dog and asked whether "such an animal also has Buddha nature?" Joshu/Zhao-zhou receives the questioner with compassion: "Yes! The dog also has Buddha-nature within it." "Why is he still born as a dog?" "*He* recognizes his karma according to his own nature." The third-person pronoun "he" in this situation belongs to the questioner and also to the dog. In the languages of East Asia, the subject of the sentence can be left out as long as it is clear from the context who is speaking.

3. The same question with two opposing answers: Akizuki shows that the language of Zen Buddhism is not an analysis but a "pedagogical language".

The function of the word *mu/wú* is interpreted as follows.

The character *mu / wú* can (as is usual in Chinese) function as a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, depending on its position in the sentence.

a) As a noun: nothing

b) As a negation adverb: not

c) As a verb: to not

d) As an adjective or prefix: non-X, not-X

Let us summarize:

Syntactically, the first word of Jōshū/Zhao-zhou in response to the first questioner was case a).

Semantically, in case b), the word *mu / wú* has the function of an incessant negation so that the essence of Buddha-nature, the essence of dharma, the essence

of all-embracing truth, etc., can be described by various predicates, showing that no single predicate applies alone to the essence of this metaphysical-ontological truth. To do this, the teacher in Zen Buddhism uses the method of constant negation of negation. The *satori*, the awakening to an original nature of humanity, which is inherent in one's own physical existence, is only illuminated when one's own existence, through the alert content of consciousness, forms a "place" of indivisible primal unity with the sought-after truth. What is asked for is not a theoretical analysis of the question posed, but whether and to what extent one has become one with the *topos* of the question, together with one's bodily existence with consciousness, and from there, a decisive answer related to one's own life.

This act of repetitive negation is similar to existential philosophical self-negation. From a semiotic point of view, repeated negation is a dialectically consciously guided self-negation. Finally, when the answer to the ontological-metaphysical problem based on one's own existence in life becomes one with the question, a new dimension of recognizing a comprehensive truth opens up, which is called *satori* (self-awakening, self-recognition). The repetitive negation of negation ultimately leads to an absolute reversal of the affirmation of the self that lives on in *satori*.

In case c), *mu* in Zen expresses the meaning of the unlimited openness of the "void". However, in Zen it is always pointed out in the very concrete, objective things in everyday life. In contrast to Nāgārjuna, in which the "emptiness" ultimately stands as a pure, indescribable nothingness above the level of ontic reality of everyday life, the "emptiness" as *mu* in Zen may revive as a part of the metaphysical-ontological truth in the midst of the world of life. In this sense, the word *mu* ultimately has a dynamic character: *mu* is capable of confronting people with questions of existential and ontological truth through its negation of negation, ultimately manifesting an absolute affirmation of truth in the midst of life.

Dōgen's Understanding of the "Flower of Emptiness": *Kūge* 空華

In the part of the *Shōbō genzō* 正法眼蔵, volume titled "*Kūge* 空華 (The Essential of Emptiness)", Dōgen gave a remarkable interpretation of the term *kū*ge. Normally, the term was clearly used in a pejorative sense: *kū* 空 as "empty of air", in the negative, derogatory sense of "nothing". The second word, *ge* 華, is a flower (in analogous thinking, the essential core of a being). Still, when combined with *kū* in a negative connotation, it forms a term in analogical thinking: a person has various ideas about *satori* (experiencing, grasping, and self-awareness of a comprehensive truth), but their knowledge with experience is far from it. A person has various thoughts and ideas about what "emptiness" is: all this is an illusory mental game, similar to seeing "shining stars" for a while after rubbing one's eyes (Dōgen 2010, vol. 4, 209–331).

Dōgen, however, developed a completely different interpretation based on this. He considers "emptiness" as the unlimited openness of the all-encompassing truth everywhere "open" (*kū*). This "emptiness" makes it possible to let things arise, become, remain, pass away, and become again. It is "empty" of fixation on its essential substance: its essence itself is "empty and boundlessly open". Because it does not persist in itself, it allows all things to be as they can and should be. It allows all things to pass away and to become empty because the essence of all things is "empty" and open to any fixation. The "emptiness" is nowhere visible outside of the given appearances of all things. It is not beyond the being of things. With its essential nature of "being empty and open", it is present everywhere in appearances (Dōgen 2010, 298, 299, 300, 306).

Seen in this light, all existing things show themselves in appearances as a manifestation of their unique existence. Because the appearance of their existence is limited in space and time, this being-with-existence is a "flower" (華 *ka*, *ge*; Chinese *hua*), which forms the blossom or flower (as object language) and as essence or spirit (in the meta-language).

If you grasp the truth in this way, the "flower/blossom" as the "essential being" of every existing thing is made possible by the "nature of emptiness". You will then realize that every "flower/blossom of the existence of a being" appears in every here and now, together with the "core of emptiness/blossom of emptiness". *Satori* / awakening / spiritual awakening / enlightenment in Buddhism means a knowledge of the origin of being, in which the life of the self with its experiences, its physical and mental aspects, has become indivisibly the "primal oneness" (Nakamura 1991b, 196, *satori*).

It is a primal unity of *satori* as self-realizing knowledge and the realized truth of emptiness. In this context, the place of "God" (in the sense of Western religion) is deliberately kept "open" and "empty". The existing things appear with their essence/blossom. This essence is not an object for the cognizing self. The blossom/ essential being of the existing, together with the recognizing self, forms a "place" of the opening of the "absolute emptiness" as an unlimited openness of the all-encompassing truth. Dōgen expresses this place of realization in literary terms: "Like a blue lotus blossoming in a bright red flame"[6] (Dōgen 2010, 302–03).

This state of "primal oneness" is often compared with the mysticism of Western religions. The similarity exists, yet what is important now is that in Buddhism the primal essence of an absolute (God), which makes this union possible, is consciously kept "open and empty" (*śūnya*) from the very beginning.

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6   It is a poetic image in analogy thinking that the life energy unites spiritually, i.e., ideationally, with an energy of the becoming in the universe in the pursuit of absolute knowledge. In this context, some Platonists express a new possibility for comparative philosophy between the becoming of things in Plato's *Timaeus* and Dōgen's idea of the "flowering of emptiness".

The Logic of Place and the Absolute *Mu* (*Zettai-Mu* 絶対無) by Nishida—In the Modern Philosophy of the Kyoto School in 20th Century

Kitarō Nishida's thinking comes from a melting pot of the manifold currents of thought from East and West from the end of the 19th century to 1945 in Japan. He worked under the influence of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Aristotle, among others, as well as Mahayana Buddhism and other schools of thought in East Asian philosophy. In this article, his discourse will be briefly summarized, concentrating on what the place of the absolute *mu* (nothing) means in his work. Nishida's *mu* is most likely based on the genealogy of Buddhist schools of thought in East Asia. Starting from the "unlimited openness of the void", Nishida defined the focus as the origin of all things, an absolute, indeterminable something that cannot be categorized as *mu* (Nishida 1965, vol. 11, 395, 396. 398, 399, 400, 402, 408). It is not directly God but instead presents itself as the existential origin of all things, which is thought through metaphysically and ontologically.

Interpreters of Nishida (such as Kosaka and Sueki) show a similar character of *mu* in Nishida and *monas monadum* in Leibniz. Now the monad and *monas monadum* are associated with substance, while *mu* cannot be associated with any substance. If *mu* becomes a mere abstract category again, it becomes a pure *negativum*, nothing. In contrast to this, *mu* is always connected with a "place" (*basho* 場所). Similar to Dōgen's "*kūge* 空華 blossom as an essential entity of emptiness", *mu* underlies every manifestation in the world of life. For Nishida, the "world" (*sekai* 世界) is connected with the real, ever-changing phenomenon of the world. The self stands as a corporeal existence with consciousness. It lives and dies with time, which also appears and disappears from moment to moment. Various selves live in every moment together with their fellow beings, the environment, and the whole phenomena of the world: on the one hand, the self is opposed to everything outside of its physical existence. On the other hand, it is connected to everything. Nishida understands this as a "contradictory identity" of the self and the world (Nishida 1965, vol. 11, 402, 403). Even time is, on the one hand, a continuum, consisting of one moment in time after another. On the other hand, it is discrete because each moment momentarily flashes and immediately disappears.

Time is also a "contradictory self-identity" (*mujun-teki jiko dōitsu* 矛盾的自己同一). The "absolutely contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujun-teki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一) is revealed in the relationship between I and You only when the two I's, the I and You, create a place of mutual connection in which the I interactively communicates with the essential ground of the You and merges with it. The You likewise communicates with the essential ground of the I and merges with it. In this place, there is no dualistic division and opposition in the

foreground, but instead a communicative mutual reference in order to accomplish the limited life from day to day and to create good. The I and You as two different individuals would not become the same unity; yet the I negates its ego, and the other I (You) also changes its unity. Both egos in a huge frame are autonomously dissolved: I and You/as another one are not in a same identity, but both are in a contradictory integration of this self and that self. The position of "You" can be diverse: the world, circumstance, another ego in my self-consciousness, the Buddha Nature, the Absolute, the unlimited oneness, mu, etc. The place has a dynamic scope of contraction and expansion.

The geographically broadest place (*basho* 場所) is the world as a whole. Each of us, through our own existence, forms a part of the place with our daily constructive history. The adjective "absolute" is added to emphasize the uniqueness of each moment in view of the irreversibility of history.[7] Accompanied by Nishida's rigorous attitude, *the place of absolute mu* (*zettai-mu no basho* 絶対無の場所) is ultimately the place of grasping, unifying, and manifesting an absolute truth; yet for Nishida, it is not identical to theism. He emphasizes that he could also include the term "God" in his Logic of Place, yet here "God" is (contrary to the previous theses of theism) an absolute unity who can *also negate His absoluteness unlimitedly. An absolute unlimited self-negation* is included in this "God" (Nishida 1965, vol. 11, p. 404, 405, 409; Kosaka 2008, 83)

In his last work, published in 1945, *The Logic of Place and the Religious Insight of the World*, Nishida cited the statements and terms of Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism, and thus the place of absolute *mu* is a *topos* for experiencing and grasping an absolute truth. It was and is a place where Buddha and countless bodhisattvas experienced their *satori / awakening* and realized it. It is the place where the historical event of attaining an irrefutable truth through one's own physical existence with consciousness has taken place. The specific locality of anywhere (e.g., where Buddha attained his *anuttara samyak Sambodhi* (*mu-jō shōtō-gaku* 無上正等覚, see chap. 2.1) was, on the one hand, a basis that made this "place" possible. On the other hand, the objectively delimiting idea, e.g., that only that locality had made possible the unsurpassed awakening of Buddha and that it should therefore be absolutized, must "be negated again".

Interestingly, a feature of the logic of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy seems to emerge here: they do *not* determine and evaluate an existing, irrefutable truth through a positive substrate or predicate of being. Rather, and conversely, they emphasize the absolute and irrefutable by dealing with the negative, *mu*, *wú*,

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7   Essentially, Nishida rarely used *the term* "relative *mu*" (*sōtai-mu* 相対無). He only emphasizes that a nothing or non-being, which stands in a relative, comparable (sometimes merely harmonizing and levelling) relationship to an absolute something, cannot be rigorously equated with the "absolute *mu*".

"nothing", "emptiness", and so on. In this context, the absolute is not a substratum that can be fixed with being, but rather the unlimited-openness. This makes all events possible: it encompasses everything but does not limit itself as an absolute being or non-being in terms of a substratum[8] (Sueki 2021, 219; Nishida 1965, vol. 11). Similar to *Dào*, *wú*, emptiness, and *śūnyatā*, the absolute *mu* underlies all being. However, as Nishida emphasized to his close circle of students, this is *not a doctrine of emanation from mysticism* (as Tanabe criticized Nishida's philosophy with his interpretation that "the theory of absolute *mu* and the logic of place show an emanation theory, a mysticism, like Plotinus […])[9] (Nishida 1965, vol. 11 403; Kosaka 2008, 80–81).

In my opinion, it is close to Kant's *omnitudo realitatis*[10] (Kant 1990, B 603–604, A 575–576). Even though Nishida did not limit the absolute truth to a pure transcendentalism in the Kantian way, the entity of the absolute *mu* by Nishida and the coincidence of each form of dichotomous thinking and acting in the *omunitudo realitatis* by Kant's "transcendental ideal" show us the rich dimension of unlimited possibilities in comparative philosophical reflections (Hashi 2004, chap. V.2., 115–17). Nishida himself claimed that Kant's ethics were postulated by the morality of (world) citizens, and less so from the spiritual postulate (Nishida 1965, vol. 11, 392). Compared to Kant, Nishida defined objects for philosophizing in the midst of the world of our mortal life, wherein we grasp our existence as a part of the whole world's history. At the same time, the world as a whole is in an interactive relationship in the "place" of [I and you], [I and the world], [I and the history of the world], [I as a human (with relativity and limitedness) and the *absolute mu* / absolute unlimited One], etc. In this, the "I" is, in any case, without a substantial fixation, without the inbound of any ideology, a purely and actively living but *egoless self*, and this kind of egoless self is able to construct and fulfil life in the world and environment with compassion and wisdom day by day.[11]

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8   Nishida defines the place of *mu* that cannot be objectivized and substantialized by any category. It has the entity of "enveloping all being an non-being". Encountering and struggling in a dualist way like being versus non-being, supreme being versus nothingness are enveloped.

9   Kosaka notes that "someone who misunderstands the work of Nishida" is Hajime Tanabe, philosopher of the Kyoto School. See Tanabe (1963a, 472; Kosaka 2008, 81): "Nishida wrote in his letter to Nishitani, Keiji on January 6th, 1945: 'Colleague Tanabe represents his thesis that my thought has a basis on Schelling's intellectual view. It is completely false.'" (Cf. Tanabe, 1963b, 304–28)

10 *Das All der Realität*, the universe of reality, see section "An Interim Report—'Nothingness' Viewed from Occidental Philosophy" of this paper.

11 The fact that in his old age Nishida became involved in the militaristic totalitarianism that prevailed in Japan during World War II is another socio-phenomenological problem (cf. Nishida 1965, vol. 17, 19). In his essay "The Problem of Japanese Culture" (ibid., vol. 12), Nishida discussed the previously missing aspects in philosophical schools of thought in Japan, Asia, and East Asia compared to Europe and the West in a clear and critical insight. On the other hand, his aim was to establish a new system of logic that originated from the Asian cultural soul. The logic of place thus emerged as an expression of his compassion.

Conclusion

The interim results of our reflections on various Asian schools of philosophy show their essential commonalities in sections "Concerning Genealogies in Classic Asian Philosophy" and "The Logic of Place and the Absolute Mu (*Zettai-Mu* 絶対無) by Nishida—In the Modern Philosophy of the Kyoto School in 20th Century" of this paper. This focus does not deny the key concept of "Marginality of Nothingness in Western thought—Significance of Nothingness in Eastern thought", which is opposed to the usual, centuries-old opposition: "Western Rationality – Eastern Mysticism". This idea simplifies thought and reflection, occasionally leading us to ideological beliefs. In contrast, sections "The Classification of "Nothing" in Western Philosophy" and "An Interim Report—'Nothingness' Viewed from Occidental Philosophy" showed that Occidental philosophy was never isolated through its denotation of "nothing or nothingness". Viewed from a comparative philosophy that is free of prejudice, there are several hidden factors in Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Heintel to reinterpret this subject in light of philosophy in a globalized world, which will stimulate our thinking in dialogue with Eastern philosophy.[12]

I hope that this interim result with regard to these discourses encourages the further development of comparative philosophy in today's world.

This logic was—unlike in Adorno—not the kind of "negative dialectic" that categorically defines philosophy in the context of the political and social history of the population of the culture of a world region in a critically negative way. This kind of logic does not correspond to the logic of Nishida's place and the schools of thought in Asia that were influenced by him, because in the latter there was no fixed connection between the thing that exists, its category with substance, and the dualistic dichotomous distinction and exclusion of the object of judgment based on this. Nishida, as an influential thinker in his time and as a citizen in wartime, suffered from false quotations and interpretations of his works, including crude criticisms of he and other thinkers as supporters of militarism (see Ueda 1995, 184–224; Kosaka 2002, chap. 20, 261–73. Cf. also Nishida 1965, vol. 17, 631–710; vol. 19, 143–542). Viewed from our perspective in the 21st century, the life of the late Nishida autonomously realized the "logic of place of the absolute *mu*", set against the rigorous reality of wartime.

12   Thus, in the "Preface" and "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel points out that in the realm of dialectical movement, consciousness always contains something unclear and negative (Hegel 1988, 30–31). It is a nothing. The sceptics only define the reason for their scepticism in terms of this negative (of nothingness), and recognize it as their truth as a whole. As Hegel argues: "But nothingness, taken as the nothingness of that out of which it arises, is in fact the true result; it is itself a definite something and has a content" (ibid., 56–57). As a component of dialectics, *nothingness* is hidden, but it leads the consciousness of the thinker to further negation, thus turning the thinking consciousness against the unclear and questionable, and thus towards the attainment of positive knowledge.

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Beyond Duality: Exploring "Nothingness" in the *Advaita Vedānta* and the *Madhyamaka* Traditions of Indian Buddhism

Pankaj VAISHNAV*

Abstract

This article explores the concept of "nothingness" in the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism, analysing their convergences, divergences, and broader implications within Indian philosophical traditions. Both systems emphasize the transcendence of duality and the limitations of ordinary perception in realizing ultimate truth. For *Advaita Vedānta*, *Brahman*—the singular, eternal essence—is the sole reality, with the phenomenal world regarded as an illusion (*māyā*). Liberation arises through self-realization, where one recognizes the unity of self (*atman*) and *Brahman*. Conversely, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism denies the existence of any inherent essence, positing emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) as the nature of all phenomena. Liberation in this framework involves the cessation of clinging and the realization of interdependence. The article contextualizes these philosophies within their socio-cultural milieus, revealing how their metaphysical claims respond to existential and ethical concerns. While *Advaita* seeks to unify diversity through non-dualism, *Madhyamaka* challenges rigid constructs, emphasizing relational existence. Comparative analysis highlights shared principles, such as the critique of ego-based delusion and the transformative power of wisdom, alongside distinct soteriological paths rooted in their metaphysical differences. By engaging with these traditions, the article not only underscores their philosophical richness, but also explores their relevance to contemporary issues, including existential anxiety and ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: *Advaita Vedānta, Madhyamaka* Buddhism, emptiness, Indian philosophy, non-duality, nothingness, *Śūnyatā*

Onkraj dualnosti: raziskovanje »niča« v tradicijah *advaita vedānte* in *madhjamake* indijskega budizma

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje pojem »niča« v tradicijah advaita vedānte in madhjamake indijskega budizma ter analizira njune stične točke, razlike in širše implikacije znotraj indijskih filozofskih tradicij. Obe miselni usmeritvi poudarjata preseganje dualnosti in omejitev

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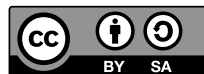
običajnega zaznavanja v procesih spoznavanja najvišje resnice. Za advaita vedānto je Brahman – enotna, večna esenca – edina resničnost, medtem ko je pojavni svet dojet kot iluzija (māyā). Osvoboditev nastopi s samospoznanjem, ko posameznik prepozna enotnost jaza (ātman) in Brahmana. Nasprotno pa budizem madhjamaka zanika obstoj kakršnekoli lastne esence in razume praznino (śūnyatā) kot naravo vseh pojavov. Osvoboditev v tem okviru pomeni prenehanje navezanosti in spoznanje soodvisnosti. Članek umešča ti filozofiji v njuna družbeno-kulturna konteksta ter razkriva, na kakšen način se njune metafizične predpostavke povezujejo z vprašanji bivanja in etike. Medtem ko advaita stremi k poenotenju razlik prek nedualizma, madhjamaka izziva toge miselne konstrukte in poudarja relacijsko naravo bivanja. Primerjalna analiza osvetljuje njuna skupna izhodišča, kot sta kritika ega in preobrazbena moč modrosti, hkrati pa izpostavlja tudi različnosti njunih poti do osvoboditve, ki izhajajo iz njunih metafizičnih razlik. Članek s tem poudarja filozofske globine obeh tradicij, obenem pa tudi njuno aktualnost glede sodobnih vprašanj, kot so tesnoba bivanja in etične dileme.

Ključne besede: *advaita vedānta*, budizem *madhjamaka*, praznina, indijska filozofija, nedualnost, nič, *śūnyatā*

Introduction

Background

The concept of "nothingness" is not merely the absence of existence but a profound philosophical notion with significant metaphysical implications across Indian traditions. In *Advaita Vedānta*, this idea is closely linked with the concept of the illusory nature (*māyā*) of the phenomenal world (Deussen 1906, 227). *Advaita* posits that the diversity and multiplicity of forms we perceive are ultimately unreal, and that true knowledge arises from realizing the non-dual *Brahman*—the ultimate, formless reality that transcends all dualities, including existence and non-existence. The *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* underscores the ineffable nature of *Brahman*, describing it as "unseen, without a second, beyond perception, and free from activity" (*Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, Verse 7). This is further illuminated in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, which states, "In the beginning, this was the Self alone ... It thought, 'Let me become many'" (*Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.1). It emphasizes *Brahman* as the ultimate reality, transcending all dualities, including existence and non-existence. There is nothing more ancient or brighter than *Brahman*, and it is the primal principle spirit of the universe (Radhakrishna 1968, 53). Hence, *Brahman* is not "nothing" in a nihilistic sense but instead beyond any category, including both being and non-being.

In *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, the school founded by Nāgārjuna, the concept of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) plays a pivotal role. *Śūnyatā* refers to the absence of inherent existence (*svabhāva*) in all phenomena, pointing to the relational and interdependent

nature of reality. Nāgārjuna, in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (henceforth MMK), asserts, "Whatever arises dependently, we declare as empty. That is dependent designation. Just this is the middle path" (MMK 24:18). This deconstruction of inherent existence (*svabhāva*) reveals the interdependent and relational nature of all phenomena (*pratītyasamutpāda*), a central tenet in *Madhyamaka* Buddhist thought. The *Heart Sūtra* reinforces this view, proclaiming "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (*Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya*, Verse 1, in Conze 1975), pointing to the inseparability of the phenomenal and ultimate realities. Unlike *Advaita,* which leads to an ultimate unity, *Madhyamaka* suggests that all things are "empty" of an independent, permanent essence and nothing exists independently or inherently (Wimalajothi 2023, 5). This insight deconstructs fixed notions of both existence and non-existence, revealing the Middle Way that transcends duality. These philosophical systems, while distinct in their interpretations, converge in challenging rigid dualistic thinking. By deconstructing apparent boundaries, they illuminate pathways to a more nuanced understanding of reality, one that transcends conventional categories and the limitations of thought and language.

Rationale for the Study

The concept of nothingness occupies a central position in various Indian philosophical traditions, making it a compelling subject for comparative analysis. This study seeks to examine the representation and role of nothingness in the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism, drawing attention to their metaphysical and practical dimensions. Both traditions engage deeply with fundamental questions about perception, the boundaries of existence and non-existence, and the ultimate nature of being, making them particularly compelling for comparative analysis.

One of the key reasons for this comparison lies in the philosophical depth that these traditions bring to the table. In *Advaita Vedānta*, the notion of nothingness is tied to the illusory nature of the phenomenal world (*māyā*) and the realization of the non-dual *Brahman*, which transcends all dualities. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2.1), for example, famously declares, "that thou art" (*tat tvam asi*), emphasizing the unity of the individual self (*jīva*) with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*), which transcends all dualistic categories. *Brahman* is described as the substratum of all appearances, neither being nor non-being, as noted in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.3.6): "Not this, not this" (*neti, neti*). This approach highlights a transcendental resolution to the apparent dualities of existence.

In contrast, the *Madhyamaka* School founded by Nāgārjuna approaches nothingness through the concept of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). Nāgārjuna's MMK (24.18) states that "whatever arises dependently is empty of inherent existence". This

notion deconstructs fixed categories of self (*ātman*) and essence, revealing the interdependent and relational nature of all phenomena. Unlike *Advaita*'s emphasis on ultimate unity, *Madhyamaka*'s emptiness avoids positing any inherent reality, navigating a "Middle Way" that transcends the extremes of existence and non-existence. These contrasting views highlight different pathways toward understanding reality and the self, making their comparative study significant.

Furthermore, the contemporary relevance of these ideas cannot be understated. Concepts of nothingness, particularly those related to the dissolution of the self and the questioning of inherent essence, have influenced modern Western philosophical movements such as existentialism and phenomenology. Moreover, practices grounded in these ideas, such as mindfulness and meditation, have gained prominence in contemporary spiritual and psychological discourses. By engaging with the primary texts and philosophical frameworks of the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism, this study offers a comparative analysis of the concept of nothingness in them. Finally, while these traditions might seem philosophically divergent, this study proposes that when examined through the lens of nothingness they reveal deeper commonalities. The shared metaphysical factors make this comparative analysis a fruitful and necessary area of study, shedding light on broader understandings of existence, reality, and consciousness.

Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the concept of nothingness within the frameworks of the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism, particularly in relation to the philosophical issues of duality, existence, and self-realization. By examining the doctrines of *māyā* in the *Advaita* tradition and *Śūnyatā* in the *Madhyamaka* tradition, this research aims to explore how these schools address the nature of reality and the dissolution of the perceived boundaries between the self and the world. The study thus seeks to understand how nothingness serves as a key to unravelling deeper metaphysical truths in each tradition.

A secondary objective is to critically compare the role and implications of nothingness within both systems. In *Advaita Vedānta*, the realization of *Brahman* as the ultimate reality transcends all categories of thought, including those of existence and non-existence. In contrast, *Śūnyatā* in the *Madhyamaka* tradition deconstructs fixed notions of both existence and non-existence, offering a radical view of reality where nothing has inherent essence. This study seeks to explore these divergent views on reality, examining their epistemological and ontological implications, and the pathways they offer toward self-realization and liberation.

The key research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the concept of nothingness manifest in the doctrines of the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism, and what philosophical role does it play in each tradition?

2. What are the epistemological and ontological implications of *māyā* in the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition and *Śūnyatā* in the *Madhyamaka* tradition of Buddhism, particularly in relation to the self and the world?

3. How can these perspectives on nothingness be compared, and what insights can be drawn from their contrasting views on reality, illusion, and self-realization?

Scope: This study will primarily focus on the core philosophical texts of the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism. For *Advaita Vedānta*, the study will analyse the *Upanishads*, (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (*2.3.6*)*, Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (*6.2.1*) *and Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*) as well as Śaṅkara's commentaries on the *Brahmasutras*. For the *Madhyamaka* tradition, the central focus will be Nāgārjuna's MMK and key early Buddhist texts, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and *Heart Sūtra*. By focusing on these two traditions, the study will present a comparative analysis of how nothingness is conceptualized and functions within their respective philosophical systems, offering insights into their respective views on reality, illusion, and the self.

Methodology

This study employs a combination of philosophical analysis and comparative methodology to explore the concept of nothingness across the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism. The primary focus will be on engaging in a close reading of core philosophical texts to examine how each tradition conceptualizes and situates nothingness within its broader metaphysical framework. The philosophical analysis will involve an in-depth examination of key concepts such as *māyā* in *Advaita Vedānta* and *Śūnyatā* in *Madhyamaka*. By analysing these notions in relation to the traditions' views on reality, illusion, and self-realization, this study aims to uncover the deeper philosophical implications of nothingness within each system.

A comparative approach will be adopted to identify both the parallels and divergences between the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions. This comparative framework will highlight how these two schools of thought address the nature of existence, illusion, and self, offering insights into their unique contributions to the broader discourse on nothingness. The textual analysis will be based on

primary sources such as the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Nāgārjuna's MMK, and the writings of philosophers like Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna. Additionally, the study will draw on secondary sources from modern commentators on Indian philosophy to provide context and engage with contemporary interpretations and arguments surrounding nothingness.

Literature Review

The concept of nothingness in *Advaita Vedānta* has been widely explored in relation to *Brahman*, the ultimate non-dual reality. A key work is by Radhakrishna (1968), where he explores how *Brahman* is beyond all dualities of existence and non-existence. His interpretation of *māyā* as the illusory world aligns with later works that emphasize nothingness as a gateway to transcendence. Likewise, Deutsch (1969) provides a detailed analysis of "not this, not that" (*neti, neti*) as a method of negation, ultimately pointing toward the nothingness of the empirical world to arrive at *Brahman*. Deussen (1906) offers a comparative analysis of the Upanishadic ideas of *Brahman* and draws parallels between nothingness in *Advaita* and other mystic traditions. His interpretation adds historical depth to how the non-dual Brahman transcends the limitations of existence. In contrast, Rambachan (1995) critiques modern reinterpretations of *Advaita Vedānta*, especially regarding nothingness, arguing that Śaṅkara's view of *Brahman* is often misunderstood in contemporary discourse.

The notion of "emptiness" (*Śūnyatā*) is central to *Mahayana* Buddhist philosophy, especially as articulated by Nāgārjuna in the *Madhyamaka* School. One of the most authoritative translations and commentaries is by Kalupahana (1986), where he discusses "dependent origination" (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as central to understanding emptiness. Kalupahana connects *Śūnyatā* with the absence of inherent existence, emphasizing the relational nature of reality. A more recent work by Garfield (2001) extends Nāgārjuna's ideas to contemporary philosophical debates, showing how *Śūnyatā* can be understood in relation to Western phenomenology and existentialism. Garfield's cross-cultural interpretation demonstrates the adaptability of *Śūnyatā* in modern philosophical dialogues. Hanh (1988) offers a more practice-oriented view, connecting the philosophical idea of emptiness with everyday mindfulness practices. His interpretation of the *Heart Sūtra* bridges the gap between the abstract and the experiential dimensions of *Śūnyatā*, making it accessible to practitioners.

In comparative philosophy, works like Kochumuttom (1982) offer insights into how Buddhist *Yogācāra* philosophies approach emptiness. Although the focus is on consciousness-only theory, his distinction between emptiness and illusion is

often compared to *Advaita*'s interpretation of *māyā*. King's (1999) work is especially useful in understanding how both traditions transcend dualistic thinking, although with differing metaphysical implications. He dedicates several chapters to the comparison between *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, focusing on the conceptual overlap between *Brahman* and *Śūnyatā*. Whicher (1998) explores the intersections among the concepts of emptiness in *Advaita*, yoga, and Buddhism, suggesting that the experience of nothingness may not be identical across traditions but is a shared spiritual goal.

Recent works on Indian philosophies highlight diverse approaches to nothingness and ultimate reality across *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism. Thurithiyil (2014) examines nothingness in Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly through experiences of self-realization like *Samadhi* and *nirvāṇa*, which reveal transcendental aspects of the divine (*Atman/Brahman* and *Śūnyatā*). Acharya (2023) explores Vedic philosophy's concept of *Brahman*, drawing connections between traditional insights and modern science in understanding the universe's fundamental nature. Laude (2024) compares Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta* with Ghazālī's Sufism, exploring the metaphysical exclusivity of Ultimate Reality and the nuanced status of empirical existence, where each tradition balances the Absolute with varying degrees of relative reality. Macor (2024)"plainCitation":"(Macor 2024 interprets Nāgārjuna's work, focusing on his critique of fixed philosophical positions and the idea of emptiness as a universal, non-intrinsic characteristic, which does not attribute existence or non-existence to entities. Collectively, these works underscore the nuanced treatments of nothingness and reality in Eastern thought, revealing the complex philosophical, experiential, and metaphysical dimensions that influence interpretations of the "Absolute", self-realization, and existential reality across traditions.

Research Gap

The foundational works mentioned above mainly treat these traditions in isolation, focusing on their metaphysical distinctions. In contrast, the comparative studies referred to here engage with both philosophies but often neglect a holistic exploration of nothingness. Additionally, the existing literature tends to overlook the practical, ethical, and psychological implications of nothingness, as well as its relevance to modern meditation practices and global philosophical discourse. The present article fills this gap by offering a comprehensive cross-tradition analysis that integrates both theoretical and practical dimensions, presenting a fresh, multi-perspective dialogue on nothingness.

The Concept of Nothingness in *Advaita Vedānta*

Non-Dualism (*Advaita*) and Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*)

Non-dualism (*Advaita*), the cornerstone of *Advaita Vedānta*, asserts that the ultimate nature of reality is non-dual, rejecting any fundamental distinction between the observer, the self (*Ātman*), and the observed (the universe). The ultimate reality in *Advaita Vedānta* is referred to as *Brahman*, an entity that is eternal, formless, and beyond all categories of human thought. As stated in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1.1, in Olivelle 1998, 576–77), "*Brahman* is Truth, Knowledge, and Infinity" (*Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma*). Rajagopal (2024, 2) states that at the heart of *Advaita Vedānta* is the notion of *Brahman,* described as the ultimate reality that transcends all forms, names, and attributes working on the conviction that there is only one true entity in the whole universe. *Brahman* is characterized by being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*), collectively expressed as *sat-cit-ānanda*. *Brahman* transcends all dualities, including existence and non-existence, thereby rendering such distinctions irrelevant in the context of absolute reality. This realization forms the core of the *Advaitic* path to liberation, where the seeker overcomes ignorance (*avidyā*) and illusion (*māyā*) to recognize their unity with *Brahman*. The *Upaniṣadic* declaration, "I am *Brahman*" (*Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10), epitomizes this profound unity, suggesting that the essence of the self (*Ātman*) is none other than the ultimate reality.

Brahman is primarily described through apophatic or negative theology, meaning "not this, not this" (*neti, neti*), emphasizing what *Brahman* is not rather than what it is. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.3.6) underscores *Brahman*'s ineffability and transcendence of all human categories, including name, form, and attributes. It is described as without qualities (*nirguṇa*) and unmanifest (*avyakta*), resisting precise definition or conceptualization. As Acharya (2023, 1) says, *Brahman* cannot be fully captured through human language or concepts, defies conventional understanding, and thus eludes precise definition or conceptualization.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* (Verse 7) describes *Brahman* as "peaceful, auspicious, and non-dual" (*śāntaṁ śivam advaitaṁ*), underscoring its absolute, indivisible reality. The perceived world, filled with multiplicity and change, is understood as a projection of *Brahman* under the influence of *māyā*, a concept central to *Advaita Vedānta*. *Advaita*, attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, advocates the philosophy of non-dualism, asserting that the ultimate reality of *Brahman* is the only true existence, and the perceived diversity in the world is an illusion (Mishra 2024, 467). *Māyā* creates the illusion of duality, causing individuals to perceive distinctions between self and other, existence and non-existence, while concealing the non-dual nature of *Brahman*.

Brahman is defined via negation (*neti, neti*), transcending human thought and language. Described as without qualities (*nirguṇa*) and unmanifest (*avyakta*), it is the substratum of all existence, as articulated in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, "peaceful, auspicious, and non-dual" (*śāntaṁ śivam advaitaṁ*). While the perceived world appears real due to "illusion" (*māyā*), it is ultimately a projection of *Brahman*. *Māyā* obscures reality, creating the illusion of duality, but *Advaita Vedānta* teaches that this duality is unreal, akin to mistaking a rope for a snake (*rajju-sarpa-nyāya*).

Revealing the Nothingness of Conditional Realities

In *Advaita Vedānta*, the practice of "not this, not this" (*neti, neti*) systematically dismantles the seeker's attachments to and identifications with conditioned realities. These conditioned realities—such as the body, mind, emotions, and worldly constructs—are negated not to diminish their relative value, but to reveal their impermanence and contingency. By stripping away these layers, the seeker is led to a profound state of emptiness. This state is not synonymous with nihilism but represents the dissolution of finite identities, which veil the substratum of ultimate reality. As Śaṅkara states in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: "When everything is negated, that which cannot be negated—the Self—remains" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 2.4.12). This realization embodies a paradox: the "nothingness" of conditioned realities becomes the gateway to the unbounded and indivisible *Brahman*. The negation of the unreal unveils the real, an ultimate substratum that transcends conceptualizations. As Bilimoria (2012, 5) aptly notes, "thinking about 'Nothing' has its own charms and challenges, as do the traditions that have bothered to engage with this im/probability in the many permutations". The charm lies in the transformative potential of this emptiness, which dismantles illusions and prepares the ground for the realization of *Brahman*.

Śaṅkara's exegesis aligns this process with the *neti, neti* method, emphasizing its function as a spiritual way to experience false identifications. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.3.6) describes such negation not as a denial of existence, but as a process of purification. Through this method, the seeker is not left in a void but transitions to an encounter with the infinite reality, where the finite dissolves, and distinctions cease to exist. This idea finds resonance in contemporary philosophical reflections on emptiness. The negation of conditional realities does not nullify existence, but instead reorients the seeker towards the boundless potential of *Brahman*, where emptiness is the portal to fullness. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.1.1) often employs the metaphor of space (*ākāśa*), illustrating its vast, formless, and infinite nature as an analogy for *Brahman*. Space appears empty, yet it is a medium of infinite possibilities, just as the emptiness revealed by *neti, neti* is

a prelude to the plenitude of *Brahman*. This transformative shift underscores the essence of *Advaita*: the realization of unity through the transcendence of duality.

Beyond Language and Conceptualization

The practice of *neti, neti* also foregrounds the inadequacy of language and intellect in capturing the essence of *Brahman*. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* (7) declares: "It is not describable, ungraspable, without origin, and without end. It is not conscious of the internal or the external. It is pure consciousness." *Brahman*, being without attributes (*nirguṇa*) and beyond manifestation (*avyakta*), defies all categories of human thought and expression. Śaṅkara, in his commentary on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.9, in Olivelle 1998), remarks: "The words cease to operate; mind turns back unable to grasp it." This insight underscores a critical dimension of *Advaita*, the recognition that ultimate reality cannot be comprehended through the dualistic frameworks of language and intellect. The shift from intellectual comprehension to direct experience is a hallmark of *Advaitic* realization. Language, as a tool of human cognition, operates within the realm of duality—subject and object, knower and known. However, *Brahman* exists beyond these dichotomies. Laine (1989, 31) proposes that *Bramhan* was originally a sacred utterance or incantation, and gradually came to signify the power residing in the utterance which was responsible for its efficacy. By systematically negating all conceptual frameworks, *neti, neti* propels the seeker beyond the confines of language and rationality. This process is not merely philosophical but profoundly experiential, requiring the aspirant to embrace silence as a medium of truth.

Śaṅkara often employs metaphors to elucidate this transcendence. One such metaphor compares the process to removing the husk from grain: just as the husk conceals the kernel, language and concepts obscure *Brahman* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, 2.1.20, in Swami Madhavananda 1950). The act of negation reveals the essence, but the essence itself remains indescribable. The seeker, having transcended language, encounters *Brahman* as pure consciousness (*cit*), devoid of attributes and distinctions.

The Journey to Non–Dual Experience

The culmination of *neti, neti* is the realization of non-duality (*Advaita*), where the distinctions between subject and object dissolve. This realization, as Sakhashree (2017) notes, "negates all descriptions about the Ultimate Reality but not the Reality itself". The practice dismantles not reality but the false projections of the mind, allowing the seeker to perceive the unity underlying the apparent

multiplicity. The direct encounter with *Brahman* transcends the egoic boundaries of individual identity, leading to the experience of existence, consciousness, bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*). This state is not a denial of the self but its expansion into the infinite. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.20) poetically captures this realization: "The Self is smaller than the smallest, larger than the largest; it resides in the heart of all beings." This dissolution of dualities brings about a profound sense of peace and unity. The seeker no longer perceives themselves as separate from the cosmos, but as an integral part of the indivisible whole. This transformation is not merely intellectual but existential, altering the very fabric of the seeker's being.

Śaṅkara emphasizes the transformative nature of this realization. He describes the experience of *Brahman* as a return to one's true nature (*svarūpa*), where the illusions of separateness are dispelled. The journey of *neti, neti* is thus a journey home—a return to the self that was always present but veiled by ignorance (*avidyā*). Ramana Maharshi, a modern exponent of *Advaita*, echoes this sentiment: "The Self is ever-present. To ask where it is or how to realize it is like asking where space is or how to attain it. It is always here and now" (Maharshi 2006, 197).

Nothingness as a Path to Realization

In *Advaita Vedānta*, nothingness is not an endpoint but a transformative principle that reveals the ultimate reality of *Brahman*. This nothingness represents the absence of illusion (*māyā*), not the absence of being. Laude (2024, 17) articulates this insight in the following way: "The question of 'Being' is therefore intrinsically connected with identifying that which prevents one from realizing the *ātman*, the one and only Divine Self of all selves." The process of self-inquiry (*ātma-vichāra*), championed by Śaṅkara and Ramana Maharshi, dismantles the layers of ego and false identifications, leading to the direct perception of *Brahman*. The practice of *ātma-vichāra* aligns closely with *neti, neti*. As Dura (2018, 92) observes, *neti, neti* is the only way to communicate the non-dual, unknowable, ineffable and non-relational nature of *Brahman*. Both methods seek to dissolve the constructs that obscure the self's true nature.

The journey through nothingness is a journey of profound transformation. It begins with the negation of conditioned realities, traverses the silence beyond language, and culminates in the direct experience of non-duality. This path is not one of denial but of discovery, where the seeker comes to embody the truth of "that thou art" (*tat tvam asi*), which appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7) and emphasizes the identity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Nothingness, in this context, is not a void but fullness—the infinite potential of *Brahman*.

The Concept of *Śūnyatā* in the *Madhyamaka* Tradition of Indian Buddhism

Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy and the Middle Way

Buddhism, as a profound philosophical and spiritual tradition, provides a subtle understanding of reality that navigates between the extremes of eternalism (the belief in permanent, unchanging entities) and nihilism (the belief that nothing exists). The foundational framework for this approach is the Middle Way (*madhyamā-pratipad*), articulated by the Buddha as a path that avoids these extremes and recognizes the conditioned, impermanent, and interdependent nature of all phenomena. As stated in the *Dhammapada*: "All conditioned things are impermanent—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering" (*Dhammapada*, Verse 277). The Middle Way emphasizes that all phenomena, including aspects of consciousness and the self, arise in dependence upon conditions, and hence lack any intrinsic or independent nature.

As von Bruck (1989, 118) points out, "The 'self', too, exists only in dependence both of the physical aggregates and consciousness". The "self", in this framework, is not an autonomous entity but a dynamic process contingent upon the five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*): form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And "just as the chariot is but a combination of parts, so too is the self a mere designation for the aggregates" (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22:86, in Bodhi 2000). This interdependent nature dismantles the illusion of permanence and individuality, revealing the impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*) inherent in clinging to transient phenomena.

Buddhist teachings, particularly the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, guide practitioners to confront the nature of suffering (*dukkha*) and transcend conceptual dualities. The Buddha warned against metaphysical speculation, urging instead a direct experiential understanding of reality. Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) is the culmination of this insight. It is not a negation of phenomena but the absence of inherent self-nature (*svabhāva*). Nāgārjuna emphasized this perspective, stating: "Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way" (MMK 24:18). By recognizing the interdependence of all things, *Śūnyatā* becomes a tool to dissolve attachments, transcend suffering, and realize the interconnectedness of existence. It reveals that liberation lies not in annihilating the self but in understanding its emptiness and relational existence, thereby aligning one's life with the Middle Way.

*Nāgārjuna and the Doctrine of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*)*

The Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, founder of the *Madhyamaka* School, elaborated on *Śūnyatā* through his seminal text, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK; *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*). His doctrine builds upon the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which posits that all phenomena arise through causes and conditions. As Nāgārjuna clarifies: "There does not exist anything that is not dependently arisen. Therefore, there does not exist anything that is not empty" (MMK 24:19). This radical assertion underscores that emptiness does not negate existence but highlights the lack of intrinsic essence in all things. Nāgārjuna's concept of *Śūnyatā* rejects two extremes: substantialism (which posits an unchanging essence) and nihilism (which denies all reality). Instead, it points to the middle path, which recognizes that phenomena are empty precisely because they arise dependently. Nāgārjuna puts it as follows: "If something is not empty, it is not dependently arisen. If it is not dependently arisen, it cannot arise at all" (MMK 22:11). This insight dismantles the illusion of permanence and challenges conventional assumptions about reality, revealing that what we perceive as real is, in fact, relational and contingent.

Nāgārjuna also critiques the limitations of language and conceptual thought. He argues that words and categories are merely conventional constructs, tools for navigating the world but ultimately devoid of inherent meaning: "The Buddha's teaching is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. Those who do not understand the distinction between these two do not understand the profound teaching of the Buddha" (MMK 24:8). This distinction between conventional and ultimate truth underscores the necessity of transcending linguistic and conceptual frameworks to grasp the nature of *Śūnyatā*. Far from being a nihilistic void, *Śūnyatā* reveals the radical interdependence of all existence. As Westerhoff (2009) explains, emptiness does not negate the existence of things, but rather denies that they exist independently or intrinsically, affirming their dependently originated nature. This realization fosters wisdom (*prajñā*), which dissolves delusion and attachment, leading to liberation. Nāgārjuna's philosophy thus offers a profound reorientation of perception, wherein emptiness is understood not as absence but as a dynamic interplay of conditions that form the fabric of reality.

*Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) and Emptiness*

Dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) is a foundational doctrine in the *Madhyamaka* tradition of Indian Buddhism that explains how all phenomena arise and cease through a web of interdependent causes and conditions. This

principle is concisely expressed in the Buddha's words: "When this exists, that arises; when this ceases, that ceases" (*Samyutta Nikāya* 12:20, in Bodhi 2000). This interdependence lies at the core of Buddhist thought, serving as the bedrock for the understanding of *Śūnyatā*. As Nāgārjuna articulates: "There is nothing that is not dependently arisen; therefore, there is nothing that is not empty" (MMK 24:19). Thus dependent origination and emptiness are inseparable, two facets of the same reality. While dependent origination highlights the relational and conditioned nature of phenomena, *Śūnyatā* draws out its philosophical implications— the absence of intrinsic, independent existence.

The doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* illustrates that entities do not arise in isolation or possess inherent self-nature (*svabhāva*). As Macor (2024, 165) notes, dependent origination negates the notion of entities arising as self-sufficient, revealing that their existence is conditioned and relational. *Śūnyatā*, in turn, deepens this insight by emphasizing that because phenomena are dependently arisen, they are devoid of an unchanging essence. For instance, the self is not an autonomous entity but a construct arising from the aggregation of form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (*pañcaskandha*). The Buddha explains this in the *Samyutta Nikāya*: "The self is only a heap of aggregates, just as a chariot is nothing more than its parts" (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22:86, in Bodhi 2000).

Realizing dependent origination brings the practitioner face-to-face with impermanence (*anicca*) and the absence of a fixed self (*anattā*). This insight dissolves the illusion of permanence and fixed identities, which are often the root of attachment and suffering. By understanding *Śūnyatā*, one recognizes that phenomena exist only in dependence on other phenomena, freeing the mind from clinging and craving. As Nāgārjuna states: "By grasping at emptiness wrongly, the ignorant destroy themselves like a snake improperly caught" (MMK 24:11). *Śūnyatā* is thus not a denial of existence but a gateway to seeing the world as it truly is—impermanent, conditioned, and free from inherent nature. It is both a philosophical insight and a practical tool for liberation, helping to dismantle the dualistic perception of self and other that perpetuates the cycle of life (*samsara*).

Nirvāṇa *and* Śūnyatā*: Liberation from the Cycle of Life (*Samsara*)*

In the *Madhyamaka* tradition of Buddhist philosophy, *nirvāṇa* represents the cessation of *samsara*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The realization of *Śūnyatā* is central to attaining *nirvāṇa*, as it embodies the wisdom (*prajñā*) necessary to overcome the delusions of inherent existence. Ignorance (*Avidyā*) is identified as the root cause of *samsaric* suffering, particularly the belief in the permanence and independent reality of the self and the world. As Thurithiyil (2014, 15) puts it, "liberation involves the dissolution of the illusion of the 'I,' allowing one to

awaken to the fullness of being inherent in the Spirit of the Buddha". The realization of *Śūnyatā* dismantles ignorance by revealing the conditioned and empty nature of all phenomena. Nāgārjuna elucidates this when he declares: "There is no difference whatsoever between *samsara* and *nirvāṇa*. The limit of *nirvāṇa* is the limit of *samsara*" (MMK 25:19–20). From this radical perspective, *nirvāṇa* is not a distinct or transcendent realm separate from *samsara*. Instead, it is the profound realization that *samsara* itself is empty. By perceiving the emptiness of *samsara*, the practitioner transcends dualistic thinking, such as the opposition between existence and non-existence, self and other, pleasure and pain.

The transformative power of *Śūnyatā* lies in its ability to dissolve attachment and aversion, enabling the practitioner to experience reality without distortion. As the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* (Nāgārjuna 1995, 322–23) explains: "*Nirvāṇa* is the pacification of all defilements and the freedom from attachment to dualistic views." Grandy (2016, 55) describes this as the dissolution of dualities, where the ever-changing flow of reality emerges from the emptiness of things, allowing for their interpenetration and mutual dependence. *Nirvāṇa*, therefore, is not an existential void but a transcendental state of freedom in which the mind no longer clings to conceptual constructs. It is characterized by peace, clarity, and the absence of suffering. *Śūnyatā* plays a pivotal role in this liberation, offering a path beyond the illusions of permanence and inherent selfhood. This aligns with *Advaita Vedānta*'s understanding of *māyā* and *Brahman*, wherein transcendence involves overcoming dualistic perceptions and recognizing the ultimate reality. In Buddhism, *Śūnyatā* is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived experience. It underpins the Middle Way, complements the principle of dependent origination, and leads to the realization of *nirvāṇa*. By embracing *Śūnyatā*, practitioners find liberation not in rejecting existence but in transforming their understanding of it, achieving a state of equanimity and profound peace.

Comparative Analysis: Nothingness in the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Traditions of Buddhism

Brahman *vs.* Śūnyatā: *Contrasting the Ultimate Reality*

The *Advaitic* concept of *Brahman* and the *Madhyamaka* Buddhist notion of *Śūnyatā* both address ultimate reality but are grounded in distinct metaphysical and soteriological frameworks. In *Advaita Vedānta*, and specifically the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1, Olivelle 1998), *Brahman* is defined in the as the absolute, unchanging reality underlying the universe: "*Brahman* is truth, knowledge, and infinite" (*Satyam jñānam anantam brahma*). It is characterized as "one without a

second" (*ekam eva advitiyam*) in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2.1), highlighting its singular, non-dual nature. Swami Krishnananda (2024, 1) observes that there is no such thing as knowing *Brahman*, because the knower of *Brahman* cannot separate himself from it. Hence, *Brahman* is the affirmative ground of all existence, transcending time, space, and causality. In contrast, *Śūnyatā*, as elucidated in Nāgārjuna's MMK, denies any inherent or independent essence (*svabhāva*) in phenomena. Nāgārjuna asserts that "emptiness is the relinquishing of all views; emptiness is the ground of all things" (*Śūnyatā sarvadarśanānām; sarvārtha-sid-dhiḥ Śūnyatā*) (MMK 24:14). *Śūnyatā* is not a metaphysical void but an insight into the interdependent nature of all phenomena (*pratītyasamutpāda*). It rejects both the belief in an eternal essence and the belief in absolute nothingness.

The metaphysical difference between these concepts is clear: *Brahman* is described in positive terms as an unchanging substratum, while *Śūnyatā* negates any ultimate essence or fixed reality. However, both aim to transcend dualistic thinking. For *Advaita*, realizing *Brahman* involves recognizing the illusory nature of phenomenal distinctions and affirming the non-dual truth. For *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, realizing *Śūnyatā* means the end of clinging to inherent existence, leading to liberation from attachment and suffering. While *Brahman* affirms a singular, unifying ultimate reality, *Śūnyatā* emphasizes the emptiness of all categories, including the notion of an ultimate reality. This comparison invites reflection on whether these frameworks represent fundamentally different metaphysical systems or complementary paths toward the transcendence of duality and egoic perception.

Māyā *and* Śūnyatā: *Illusion or Insight?*

The *Advaitic* concept of *māyā* and the *Madhyamaka* Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā* offer different lenses for understanding the nature of the phenomenal world. According to Youvan (2024, 3) *māyā* is often translated as "illusion", but this simplification barely scratches the surface of its philosophical depth. In *Advaita Vedānta, māyā* is described in Śaṅkara's commentaries as the power of illusion that obscures *Brahman*'s true nature. *Māyā* creates the appearance of multiplicity and change, leading to ignorance (*avidyā*), which perpetuates the cycle of *samsara*. As the *Bhagavad Gītā* (7.14, in Sri Swami Sivananda 2000) states: "*Māyā*, constituted of the *guṇas*, is difficult to overcome" (*Daivī hyeṣā guṇa-mayī mama māyā duratyayā*). Overcoming *māyā* requires piercing through its veil to realize the non-dual *Brahman*, which alone is real (*satya*). In *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, *Śūnyatā* is central to Nāgārjuna's exposition of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). *Śūnyatā* reveals that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence precisely because they arise in dependence on other conditions. Unlike

māyā, which implies a deceptive appearance, *Śūnyatā* involves a clear understanding of the contingent nature of reality. There is no ultimate deception but rather a misunderstanding of the relational nature of existence.

Both *māyā* and *Śūnyatā* challenge conventional perceptions of reality, but their goals differ. *Māyā's* veil must be pierced to access *Brahman*'s unchanging essence, while *Śūnyatā* encourages the practitioner to recognize the emptiness of all phenomena, including the self. The comparison raises important questions: Are *māyā* and *Śūnyatā* addressing the same truth about the phenomenal world that it is not as it appears? Or do they reflect divergent metaphysical and soteriological goals? It appears that *Māyā* implies a dualism between illusion and reality, while *Śūnyatā* operates within the framework of non-duality, where even the distinction between illusion and reality is empty of inherent essence.

Non-Dualism vs. Emptiness: A Philosophical Dialogue

Both *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism aim to transcend duality but operate within distinct metaphysical and soteriological frameworks. *Advaita Vedānta*'s non-dualism (*Advaita*) asserts that *Brahman* is the singular, ultimate reality, and the apparent multiplicity of the world is the result of *māyā*, a veil of illusion. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2.1) notes the "one without a second" (*ekam eva advitiyam*), which highlights *Brahman*'s unique, indivisible nature. According to Śaṅkara, the realization of *Brahman* entails the dissolution of dualistic distinctions between subject and object, leading to the understanding that the self (*ātman*) is non-different from *Brahman*. In contrast, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism's doctrine of *Śūnyatā* posits that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva*) due to their dependence on other conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Nāgārjuna's MMK (24:18) encapsulates this relational ontology: "That which arises dependently, we call emptiness" (*Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ Śūnyatāṁ tāṁ pracakṣmahe*). Emptiness here is not a negation of existence but an affirmation of relational being, rejecting both eternalism and nihilism.

Loy (2018) observes that non-dualism means "not two", suggesting a relational interdependence akin to two sides of the same coin, although the metaphysical implications differ. For *Advaita,* duality is illusory, masking the singular reality of *Brahman*, while for *Madhyamaka*, duality is empty of inherent essence, pointing to the lack of a singular, unchanging substrate. *Advaita*'s metaphysical monism posits that all distinctions dissolve upon realizing *Brahman*. The *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.19) states: "All this is the Self" (*Ātmaivedam sarvam*). By contrast, *Madhyamaka*'s phenomenological pluralism emphasizes the emptiness of all entities, even ultimate concepts. For instance, Nāgārjuna critiques reifying emptiness itself: "Emptiness depends on emptiness and is not emptiness in itself"

(*Śūnyatā Śūnyatāyā ca, na Śūnyatā vidyate*) (MMK 13:7). This philosophical dialogue reveals that while *Advaita* affirms an unchanging absolute, *Madhyamaka* dismantles all absolutes. Whether these represent divergent paths to the same goal or a fundamentally different metaphysical commitment depends on how one interprets the ultimate nature of reality.

Epistemological and Ontological Differences

Epistemological Perspectives

Advaita Vedānta and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism differ in their approaches to the knowledge required for liberation. In *Advaita,* knowledge (*jñāna*) arises when the veil of *māyā* is lifted through deep meditative insight and self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*). Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras* (1.1.4) emphasizes that this realization is direct and non-conceptual, transcending ordinary perception and intellect. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* (7) describes this state as the fourth state of consciousness beyond waking (*turīya*), dreaming, and deep sleep, where *Brahman* is directly apprehended.

Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasizes wisdom (*prajñā*), cultivated through meditative practices like insight meditation (*vipassanā*). This wisdom involves an experiential realization of *Śūnyatā*, recognizing that all phenomena are interdependent and lack inherent essence. In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, this is described as the perfection of wisdom that sees through the illusion of inherent existence. Unlike *Advaita's* direct knowledge of a singular ultimate reality, *Madhyamaka's prajñā* dismantles all concepts of essence, even the idea of emptiness itself.

Ontological Perspectives

Ontologically, *Advaita* and *Madhyamaka* represent markedly different views of the nature of reality. In *Advaita Vedānta, Brahman* is the only reality, and the world of forms is ultimately unreal (*mithyā*), a manifestation of *māyā.* As the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.5.19) declares: "Not this, not this" (*neti, neti*), affirming the indescribability of *Brahman*. The phenomenal world is seen as dependent upon *Brahman* for its existence, much like the illusion of a snake depends on a rope being seen in dim light. As per *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, the world of forms is neither real nor unreal but empty of inherent essence. Nāgārjuna asserts in MMK (15:9): "Nothing arises by its own essence, by another, by both, or without cause" (*Na svato nāpi parato, na dvābhyām nāpy ahetutaḥ*). Phenomena exist relationally, as part of the dynamic interplay of causes and conditions. There is no ultimate essence (*svabhāva*), not even in concepts like self, emptiness, or *nirvāṇa.*

Advaita's ontology is rooted in metaphysical realism, affirming *Brahman* as the unchanging substratum. *Madhyamaka* Buddhism's ontology, in contrast, reflects relational dynamism, emphasizing impermanence (*anicca*) and interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*). While *Advaita* seeks to transcend the phenomenal world to access *Brahman*, *Madhyamaka* reveals that transcendence lies in understanding the emptiness of the phenomenal world itself.

Main Points of Comparison: Convergences and Divergences

Convergences

Transcendence of Duality

Both traditions emphasize the need to transcend dualistic thinking, albeit through different conceptualizations. In *Advaita Vedanta*, this involves seeing beyond the subject-object duality to realize the non-dual Brahman as the sole reality. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (*6.2.1*) encapsulates this as the realization of "one without a second" which dissolves subject-object distinctions. Śaṅkara (1997) explains in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* (2.1.14) that duality is a projection of ignorance (*avidyā*), which conceals the unity of *Brahman.* In *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, dualistic concepts such as self/other and existence/non-existence are transcended by realizing the emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) of all phenomena. Nāgārjuna in MMK (25:24) highlights this transcendence, stating: "*Nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are not two, for they arise dependently and are empty of inherent existence." Nāgārjuna dismantles dualistic constructs such as self/other or existence/non-existence through the concept of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The MMK (25:19) underscores this: "There is nothing whatsoever that is not dependently arisen. Therefore, there is nothing that is not empty." This idea directly challenges inherent duality and reaffirms the relational nature of all phenomena.

Illusion or Misperception

Both traditions critique ordinary perceptions as misrepresentations of reality. As stated by Vas:

> When Buddhists say, 'Everything is empty', it means everything is dependent on something else, it's empty of intrinsic nature. This is exactly what *Advaita Vedanta* says and there's no disagreement whatsoever, except *Vedanta* uses word *mithya* (which means dependent on something else for its existence), instead of *shunyata*. (Vas 2024)

Advaita Vedānta describes the world as *māyā*—an apparent reality masking Brahman. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (7.14) emphasizes *māyā* as divine, stating: "This divine illusion of Mine is difficult to overcome." For *Advaita*, the world is illusion (*māyā*), which veils the true nature of *Brahman*. As the *Vivekachudamani* (20, in Sri Shankaracharya and Swami Madhavananda 2023) states: "The world, though apparent, is not real; Brahman alone is the substratum." Śaṅkara further elucidates in his commentary on this verse that ignorance veils the unity of *Brahman*. In *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, delusion (*avidyā*) manifests in clinging to inherent existence. Nāgārjuna's analogy of a mirage in the MMK (7:34) illustrates this vividly: "Just as a mirage in the desert is perceived as water, so too are phenomena perceived as inherently existent, though they are empty." The belief in inherent existence (*svabhāva*) is viewed as a delusion that obscures the reality of relational existence and emptiness. This analogy of a mirage emphasizes that the world appears real but lacks intrinsic essence.

Liberation Through Knowledge

Both traditions uphold wisdom as the key to liberation. In *Advaita*, liberation (*mokṣa*) arises through self-knowledge (*jñāna*), the realization that one's true self (*ātman*) is identical to *Brahman*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.19) summarizes this as follows: "He who knows *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*." For Śaṅkara, this knowledge dispels ignorance, revealing eternal unity. Similarly, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism venerates wisdom (*prajñā*) as the means to *nirvāṇa* which involves insight into the interdependent and empty nature of all phenomena. The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* describe this wisdom as "non-grasping", which liberates the mind from delusion. As the *Heart Sūtra* (*Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya,* in Conze 1975, 96) states: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Lew (2024) compares this to the Big Bang, noting that "everything exists within the Big Bang energy field, and nothing exists outside of it".

By focusing on these elements, both traditions seek liberation beyond dualistic appearances. These shared emphases on transcending duality, acknowledging illusion, and achieving liberation through wisdom illustrate profound areas of philosophical overlap.

Divergences

While sharing certain goals, *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism diverge significantly in their metaphysical and soteriological frameworks, as will be explained below.

Nature of Ultimate Reality

In *Advaita Vedānta* the ultimate reality is *Brahman*, an unchanging, eternal, and singular essence underlying all phenomena. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.1.1, Olivelle 1998) describes *Brahman* as "truth, knowledge, and infinity" (*Satyam, jñānam, anantam*), and states that "*Brahman* is existence, consciousness, and infinity", which makes it the eternal substratum of all existence. Śaṅkara's philosophy rests on the non-duality of *ātman* and *Brahman*, where liberation involves recognizing this intrinsic unity. It emphasizes that realization of *Brahman* is a return to an ever-existing state, obscured only by ignorance.

Conversely, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism rejects any ultimate essence. Nāgārjuna's MMK (18:6) argues: "If all things are empty, then there can be no essence anywhere." The ultimate reality in *Madhyamaka* Buddhism is emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), emphasizing the absence of inherent nature and the interconnectedness of phenomena. *Śūnyatā* signifies that all phenomena are empty of inherent nature (*svabhāva*). Nāgārjuna critiques the notion of a singular essence, stating in the MMK (18:6) that "the essence of things is not found within or beyond them". For Buddhism, *nirvāṇa* is not a pre-existing state but the cessation of ignorance and clinging.

Role of the World

Advaita regards the world as *māyā*, a projection that conceals *Brahman.* In *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* (2.32), Gauḍapāda compares the world to a dream, unreal in essence but appearing real under ignorance (Sri Ramakrishna 1936). *Madhyamaka* views the world as dependently originated rather than illusory. It does not consider the world an illusion but instead asserts that it is empty and relationally existent. As Nāgārjuna (MMK 24:18) notes: "Whatever is dependently originated, that is declared to be emptiness." Here, emptiness validates the relative reality of phenomena while negating inherent existence. This divergence reveals that while both traditions challenge the ultimate reality of the world, *Advaita* posits illusory being concealing *Brahman*, whereas *Madhyamaka* Buddhism emphasizes relational being without inherent essence.

Soteriological Paths

Advaita posits that liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained by realizing one's identity with *Brahman*. Through discernment (*viveka*) and meditation, the seeker perceives the illusory nature of the self and unites with the universal consciousness. Śaṅkara likens this to clouds dispersing, revealing the ever-shining sun. In contrast, as observed by Cosselu:

> The goal of *Madhyamaka* is nonetheless soteriological and aimed at the attainment of a 'higher truth' (*paramartha*) which although not describable (being descriptions conceptual superimpositions upon reality), can be experienced. (Cosselu 2014, 31)

Hence, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism's path to *nirvāṇa* involves the cessation of attachment and the dissolution of the self-concept. The *Dhammapada* (277–279) emphasizes impermanence: "All conditioned things are impermanent. Seeing this with wisdom, one becomes detached." This wisdom undoes the constructs of clinging, leading to freedom from suffering. Thus, while *Advaita* emphasizes self-realization and the identification with *Brahman*, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism aims for the dissolution of self and the realization of emptiness.

Practical Implications of Nothingness

Existential Dimensions

The concept of nothingness or emptiness in Indian philosophical traditions carries profound existential implications. In *Advaita Vedānta*, realizing *Brahman* as the sole reality dissolves the individual ego, unveiling the phenomenal world as illusion (*māyā*). In contrast, *Madhyamaka* Buddhism's position of *Śūnyatā* views existence as devoid of inherent essence, highlighting interdependence and rejecting the notion of a permanent self. Both traditions converge in their use of nothingness as a path to liberation. In *Advaita*, liberation (*moksha*) involves recognizing the illusory nature of the ego and uniting with *Brahman*, shifting focus inward to transcend material attachments. Buddhism similarly ties the understanding of emptiness to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, breaking free from the suffering cycle of life (*samsara*). As Thurithiyil states:

> Both the *Advaita* philosophy (Hinduism) and the *Madhyamika* philosophy (Buddhism) are philosophies of liberation of the 'self' from ignorance, suffering, attachment, *maya*, etc. and both the schools propose ways to iteration/self-illumination/self-realization, viz., i. e, through Samadhi (Hinduism) and Nirvana (Buddhism). (Thurithiyil 2014, 34)

Thus, embracing nothingness provides existential freedom, detaching individuals from material and ego-driven concerns, fostering inner peace, and dissolving the fear of death through an understanding of a higher reality or state.

Ethical Implications

Realizing the emptiness or illusory nature of the world also carries significant ethical consequences. In *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, this insight reinforces inter-connectedness and compassion (*karuṇā*), forming the basis for non-harming (*ahimsa*). Enlightenment fosters a commitment to alleviating suffering, exemplified by the *Bodhisattva* ideal, where practitioners prioritize liberating all beings before their own liberation. In *Advaita Vedānta*, the realization of oneness with *Brahman* inspires ethical living rooted in unity. Actions stem not from ego-driven desires but from recognizing all beings as manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Acharya Dharmavajra believes that:

> Hinduism and Buddhism share a common culture and therefore tend to use the same or similar words. They do share certain concepts like *karma* and re-incarnation, although their interpretation differs. Hindu concepts of *karma* and therefore reincarnation tend to be rather linear whereas the Buddhist concept is linked with *pratityasamutpada*. (Acharya 1994)

This non-dual perspective encourages (*karma yoga*) selfless action aligned with cosmic order (*dharma*). While detachment might be misconstrued as indifference, both traditions emphasize a compassionate and engaged ethical life, devoid of egoistic motivations.

Psychological Dimensions

 From a psychological standpoint, nothingness challenges the conventional ego and identity, seen in both traditions as illusory constructs causing suffering. In *Advaita*, this suffering arises from ignorance (*avidya*) of *Brahman*, while in Buddhism it comes from attachment to a false self-fuels suffering (*dukkha*). Transformative insights into nothingness reduce anxiety, cultivate equanimity, and foster a deeper connection with reality. Meditative practices like mindfulness (*sati*) in Buddhism and self-inquiry (*atma vichara*) in *Advaita* reveal the impermanent and interconnected nature of existence. As Hanh (2023, 2) observes: "A man's life has become relevant in the present and future, and one exists in a world where all things are *Śūnyatā*, with no good or bad, merit or sin, or conditional circumstances." These practices dissolve attachments and transcend the limitations of the ego, offering psychological liberation and inner peace. Ultimately, the realization of nothingness redefines the self, life, and ethics, offering transformative pathways to freedom from suffering and a deeper, more compassionate engagement with the world.

Philosophical Contexts and Cultural Specificities

The comparative study of *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism becomes richer when situated within their respective socio-cultural and historical frameworks. While these systems are often analysed in purely philosophical terms, their practical implications and historical evolution reveal their dynamic engagement with the broader Indian intellectual and spiritual milieu.

Socio-Cultural Context

Advaita Vedānta, systematized by Śaṅkara in the 8th century CE, arose during a time of considerable doctrinal debate in Indian philosophy. The intellectual environment was marked by contact and engagement among Buddhist schools, various Hindu traditions, and emerging sects like the *Bhakti* movement. Śaṅkara's polemical works, such as his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*, address Buddhist positions, particularly *Madhyamaka*, reflecting the broader philosophical discourse of the era. Śaṅkara's concepts of *māyā* and non-duality resonated with a hierarchical society. The idea of the illusory world served to de-emphasize worldly distinctions, including caste, offering a metaphysical framework that promised universal liberation (*mokṣha*) regardless of social standing. However, *Advaita*'s emphasis on renunciation (*sannyāsa*) often aligned it with elite, ascetic practices, limiting its immediate socio-political application. Concrete examples of *Advaita*'s influence can be seen in the establishment of Śaṅkara's monastic orders (*mathas*), such as the *Sringeri* and Puri *mathas*, which continue to propagate his teachings and provide a socio-religious structure for disseminating *Vedantic* philosophy.

Madhyamaka Buddhism, as developed by Nāgārjuna (2nd–3rd centuries CE), emerged within a culturally diverse Buddhist world. Nāgārjuna's articulation of *Śūnyatā* provided a unifying framework that accommodated the *Theravāda* emphasis on dependent origination and the *Mahāyāna* focus on the *Bodhisattva* ideal. This synthesis was particularly significant in the socio-political context of *Kushan* patronage, which facilitated the spread of *Mahāyāna* doctrines across Central and East Asia. The practical implications of *Śūnyatā* are evident in rituals, art, and monastic life. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism's integration of *Madhyamaka* teachings with *Vajrayāna* practices exemplifies the adaptability of *Śūnyatā*. The *Avalokiteśvara mantra*, "*Om Mani Padme Hum*", (MMK 24:26) reflects the application of emptiness in cultivating compassion, aligning with the *Bodhisattva* ideal. In Indian society, *Madhyamaka*'s emphasis on the illusory nature of distinctions had democratic potential, challenging rigid social hierarchies by asserting that all beings are interdependent and empty of intrinsic identity.

Philosophical Integration with Cultural Practices

The philosophies of *Advaita* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism are not restricted to theoretical discourses, but have also profoundly influenced cultural and spiritual practices, as outlined below.

Advaita Vedānta in *bhakti* traditions: Despite its emphasis on non-duality, *Advaita* has influenced devotional (*bhakti*) movements. Saints like Ramanuja critiqued Śaṅkara's strict non-duality while incorporating elements of *Advaita* to emphasize the unity of the devotee with God. The works of poets like Tulsidas, the celebrated poet-saint, reflect the integration of *Advaita*'s universalism with personal devotion (*bhakti*) in his magnum opus, the *Ramcharitmanas*. In this, Tulsidas portrays Lord Rama both as the supreme *Brahman* (in line with *Advaita's* concept of ultimate reality) and as a personal deity accessible through devotion, bridging the philosophical and devotional.

Madhyamaka in meditation practices: *Madhyamaka*'s insights into *Śūnyatā* are central to Buddhist meditation practices like *vipassanā* and *zazen*. For instance, in *vipassanā*, the meditator investigates the impermanent and interdependent nature of phenomena, leading to the experiential realization of emptiness. The famous Tibetan text, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Lamrim Chenmo*) by Tsongkhapa, integrates *Madhyamaka* philosophy with practical meditative steps, demonstrating its application in spiritual training.

Influence on Ethical and Social Thought

Both traditions haver also extended their metaphysical principles into the realm of ethics and social thought. For example, *Advaita*'s ethical universalism can be seen in its recognition of *Brahman* as the ultimate substratum of all beings. The great saying (*Mahāvākya*) from the *Upaniṣads*, "thou art that" (*tat tvam asi*), promotes an ethical vision where harming others equates to harming oneself. Mahatma Gandhi drew upon *Advaitic* principles to advocate nonviolence (*ahimsa*), interpreting the oneness of all existence as a foundation for social harmony.

Likewise, *Madhyamaka*'s relational ethics are found in the concept of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which translates into a relational ethic that values compassion and mutual care. The current Dalai Lama frequently invokes this principle, emphasizing that understanding emptiness fosters a sense of responsibility toward others. The *Bodhisattva* vow, central to *Mahāyāna* ethics, embodies this commitment to alleviate suffering while recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings.

Conclusion

The exploration of the *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* traditions of Indian Buddhism through the lens of "nothingness" reveals a profound interplay of metaphysical inquiry, existential reflection, and ethical orientation. Both traditions, despite their differing terminologies and ontological commitments, converge on essential principles: the transcendence of dualistic perception, the critique of inherent reality, and the pursuit of liberation through wisdom. These commonalities underscore the shared emphasis on dissolving ego-based delusions to achieve a state of freedom, unity, or peace. However, the divergences between these systems—rooted in their interpretations of ultimate reality—invite deeper reflection. *Advaita Vedānta* posits *Brahman* as the singular, eternal essence underlying all phenomena, accessible through the realization of the self's non-duality. *Madhyamaka* Buddhism, on the other hand, underscores *Śūnyatā*, or the emptiness of all phenomena, rejecting any ultimate essence while affirming interdependence. This divergence is not merely theoretical, but shapes their respective soteriological paths: *Advaita's* emphasis on self-inquiry contrasts with *Madhyamaka* Buddhism's focus on deconstructing the self-concept and embracing dependent origination.

Philosophically, these debates extend beyond abstract speculation, offering frameworks to navigate existential questions about meaning, selfhood, and the nature of reality. Ethically, both traditions argue that the realization of "nothingness" fosters compassion, detachment, and selflessness, as the practitioner transcends egoistic concerns to act in harmony with a broader interconnected reality. Psychologically, the transformative potential of these insights can be observed in their respective meditative practices, which guide individuals toward inner clarity and freedom from suffering. Contextually, the socio-cultural environments that shaped these traditions also provide a lens for understanding their distinct emphases. *Advaita Vedānta* emerged within a framework seeking unity amidst diversity, resonating with a pluralistic yet hierarchical social fabric. In contrast, the *Madhyamaka* tradition of Indian Buddhism reflected its reformist ethos, deconstructing rigid orthodoxies and emphasizing the fluidity of existence in response to human suffering. These philosophical systems thus not only engage with timeless metaphysical concerns, but also respond dynamically to their historical and cultural milieus.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis of *Advaita Vedānta* and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism invites modern thinkers to engage with their insights as complementary rather than conflicting perspectives. In an era marked by existential uncertainty and ethical challenges, these traditions offer profound resources for self-reflection, spiritual growth, and global dialogue. By transcending oppositions and

embracing the multiplicity of perspectives, they illuminate pathways to a more integrated understanding of self, reality, and liberation.

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THE WINNING ESSAY OF THE EACP YOUNG SCHOLARS AWARD COMPETITION

The (Non)Active Company of Forces: A Deleuzian Reading of the Affected Agential Self in "Boundless Wandering" in *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract

How do we act when we are defined by the relations that we depend on to flourish? How can we celebrate the nonhuman constitutions that constitute us, but still actively become ourselves and take ethical actions for others? The abundant web of impersonal forces Deleuze theorizes calls for a reconfiguration of agency. This paper explores the agency of selves in the *Zhuangzi*'s 莊子 "Boundless Wandering" (逍遙遊) chapter in dialogue with Deleuze's theories of forces in affective relations. I argue for acts of creatively relating to others. These acts constantly redefine our selfhood, enable different ways of enjoying life, and reframe our perspective to include differences. The concept of the "agential self" conceives of who we are through what we are capable of doing. Conversing with Deleuze's thoughts on forces, activeness, and the will to power, this paper explores how the agential self can be active in affective relation through three sets of characters in "Boundless Wandering": First, *Zhuangzi* presents a self that is formally dissolved but affectively connective, elaborated through the description of four types of humans, including Song Rongzi 宋榮子 and Liezi 列子. Secondly, the story of Yao 堯 and Xu You 許由 foregrounds the activeness of a self that embraces its embeddedness in the world of forces. Lastly, the conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi 惠施 shows the power to recreate relations that let diverse lives flourish.

Keywords: agential self, force, affect, active

Moč nedelovanja: deleuzovsko branje aficiranega dejavnega sebstva v Zhuangzijevem »Svobodnem lebdenju«

Izvleček

Kako delovati, ko nas določajo odnosi, od katerih je odvisno naše blagostanje? Kako slaviti nečloveške sestavine, ki nas sestavljajo, obenem pa dejavno postati mi sami in etično delovati v prid drugih? Bogata mreža neosebnih sil, ki jo opisuje Deleuze, zahteva rekonfiguracijo delovanja. Članek raziskuje delovanje sebstev v poglavju »Svobodno

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lebdenje« (逍遙遊) iz *Zhuangzija* 莊子 v dialogu z Deleuzovimi teorijami sil v aficiranih razmerjih. Zagovarjam dejanja ustvarjalnega povezovanja z drugimi; ta dejanja nenehno preoblikujejo naše sebstvo, omogočajo različne načine uživanja življenja in spreminjajo naše perspektive, tako da zajamejo tudi razlike. Koncept »dejavnega sebstva« vzpostavlja, kdo smo, glede na to, kar smo sposobni narediti. V dialogu z Deleuzovimi razmisleki o silah, delovanju in volji do moči članek pokaže, kako je v »Svobodnem lebdenju« dejavno sebstvo aktivno v aficiranih razmerjih na podlagi treh skupin likov. Prvič, Zhuangzi predstavi sebstvo, ki je formalno razblinjeno, vendar afektivno povezovalno, kar ilustrira z opisom štirih vrst ljudi, med njimi Song Rongzija 宋榮子 in Liezija 列子. Drugič, zgodba o Yaotu 堯 in Xu Youju 許由 poudari dejavnost sebstva, ki sprejema svojo vpetost v svet sil. Nazadnje pokaže pogovor med Zhuangzijem in Hui Shijem 惠施 moč preoblikovanja odnosov, ki omogočajo razcvet raznolikih življenj.

Ključne besede: dejavno sebstvo, sila, afekt, dejavnost

Through astonishing fables of transformative creatures and contrasting characters in dialogue with each other, the "Boundless Wandering" (逍遙遊) chapter in the *Zhuangzi* explores a series of questions, which I read as follows: How do we define the agency of a "self" whose realization necessarily relies on other forces? How do we consider our actions upon recognizing that we are conditioned by our relations with others? Rather than seeing ourselves as merely passive constitutions subject to the forces that form us, I want to continue asking the ethical question of what we can do. I propose that selfhood emerges precisely in the capacity to act within the activities of forces. Reading *Zhuangzi* in this light, I develop the concept of the "agential self"—we become who we are because of not just what acts upon us but also how we act.[1] For a self entangled in a web of forces, the ethical questions become: What can an agential self do to neither resist nor overpower the forces that are different from it?[2] How can an agential self not only actively develop itself, but also make space for others to articulate their different forces?

Redefining our agency is an urgent paradox for many contemporary thinkers who have reconfigured who we are through our embeddedness in the entanglement of forces beyond the human. Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark describe this reconfiguration as "the non-human turn": "a critical reappraisal of the human

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1 In *Zhuangzi* studies in Taiwan, the most often used word in the place of "agential self" is "subject" (主體), but what the subject means differs greatly. Zhang Kang 詹康 (2014) categorizes different usages of the word "subject" in *Zhuangzi* studies into six categories and 17 types. But I do not adopt the term "subject" here because of its heavy philosophical and psychoanalytic implications that might not be in line with the *Zhuangzi*.

2 The choice of "it", a non-human pronoun, is deliberate, as the self in both the contexts of Deleuze and the *Zhuangzi* is not limited by an anthropocentric definition. For example, the *Zhuangzi* starts the whole book with a non-human magical creature playing the role of the agential self.

and its place in a broader, nonhuman context" (2015, 2). Many of these thinkers are deeply influenced by Gilles Deleuze, who frees philosophy from the confinements of rational subjectivity to affirm the vital forces of life in affective relations with each other. When these thinkers bring feminist, ecological, and other ethical concerns to bear, they identify "how we act toward/with others" as an urgent question that remains underdeveloped in Deleuze's theories. On this basis, they advocate for thoughts about subjectivity and agency that could lead to ethical actions. For example, reading Deleuze with a feminist concern, Rosi Braidotti configures posthuman subjectivity as follows: "The embodied subject is thus a process of intersecting forces (affects) and spatio-temporal variables (connections)" (2013, 21). Like Deleuze, she embraces forces and connections that are not limited to human definitions, but she differs from Deleuze in her insistence on configuring a subjectivity that has the power of being politically active.

With deep care for queer politics, Karen Barad created the neologism "intra-action" to signify "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, 33). Refusing the illusion of us living isolated and well-defined existences, this concept proposes enhancing the depth and complexity of our consideration of agency. With a deep love for other species and the Earth, Donna Haraway rethinks what we can do to form kinship with other species with the recognition that we have already been involved with them in our "sympoiesis" (2016, 58). As a foundational philosophical root that grows into these lines of questioning, Deleuze's theory inspires with its vitality as much as it stimulates transformation through its insufficiency. It is Deleuze who opens up our consideration of ourselves in the forceful fields of entangled becomings. It is also Deleuze who puts agency in the difficult position that is seemingly passive and possibly helpless. If the subject is considered as a constitution of many anonymous forces, such as "the site of bent force" (Boundas 2017, 115), the discussion of affective relations might not directly contribute to agency (Daratos 2023, 17). For this reason, conversing with Deleuze is my way of aligning my reading of the *Zhuangzi* with these contemporary concerns and rethinking the philosophical reasoning underlying their ways of formulating the questioning. This paper formulates the activeness of the agential self in the *Zhuangzi* in a conversation with Deleuze for two reasons: first, Zhuangzi's view of interdependent forces echoes contemporary notions of interconnected forces influenced by Deleuze; second, Zhuangzi's approach to activeness may offer an alternative conception of human existence that goes beyond Deleuze's framework.

My attempt to read *Zhuangzi* with Deleuze is not entirely surprising, particularly not for Deleuzian thinkers.[3] The connections between Deleuze's philosophy and

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3   And Deleuze himself would not be surprised, either. There are fleeing references to "Dao" and

Asian, particularly Sinophone, thought have been actively explored. As Deleuze studies have grown in Asia, dialogues between these traditions have emerged, exemplified by collections such as *Deleuze and Asia* (Bogue, Chiu, and Lee 2014, viii). This engagement is also driven by core challenges faced by European Deleuzian thinkers. The volume *Deleuze and the Humanities: East and West* seeks a "posthuman and nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti, Wong, and Chan 2018, 4) by drawing attention to "the specific relationship of Deleuze's philosophy of Life and difference, to the naturalistic and holistic traditions of Asian and notably Chinese philosophy" (ibid., 1). These thinkers intuitively recognize how these traditions are holistic in ways that resonate with—and possibly supplement—Deleuze's affirmation of difference and life. One of the central questions that drives this compilation is: "How do Deleuzian 'becomings' help sustain alternative processes of subjectification?" (ibid., 5). While Deleuze leaves this question open, *Zhuangzi* offers profound insights on human potential that are particularly well suited to address it.

The resonance between Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*—or more broadly, Daoism—has also been recognized. For example, Yu Peng thinks of "the bland body" in *Zhuangzi* as a "post-BwO" (2016, 99) to not only read it as an "indeterminate relational process" (ibid., 95) that resonates with the configuration of life in Deleuze and Guattari, but also as a supplement that adds to their theory's political potential he finds particular in Daoism. Not too differently, Peter Zhang and Lin Tian (2018) also try to read BwO with the Daoist practice of *qi*, while Chungmin Maria Tu (2023) finds resonance "between the Daoist Way and the Deleuzian idea of an aleatory point". Margus Ott (2019) connects the Daoist duality of genetic process and thwarting of forms to the Deleuzian actualization and counter-actualization. Continuing these lively and growing dialogues between Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*, my focus is on how human agency plays a role in the impersonal relations of forces. While both frameworks share an emphasis on affective relations, they diverge on the problem of agency—a divergence that invites deeper exploration. To think deeper about the capacity of a self in the entanglement with others, I propose to cross-read "Boundless Wandering" with Deleuze's theory of forces and affects. Rather than aiming for a fusion or simple comparison, I seek to let their questions speak to each another from their different frameworks. In doing so, I hope this dialogue becomes a conjoined questioning that "enables new perspectives through which these theories or systems can be seen" (Rošker 2022, 178).[4]

"Zen" in his writings, and his idea of immanence is even argued to have been made possible by his encounter with East Asian thought (Hetrick 2023, 138).

4   Jana S. Rošker's "Chinese and Global Philosophy: Postcomparative Transcultural Approaches and the Method of Sublation" (2022) offers an insightful discussion of the various philosophical assumptions underlying the different methodologies of fusion, comparison, and sublation.

Inheriting while modifying Nietzsche's philosophy of forces and Spinoza's theory of affects, Deleuze conceives of life as changes, movements, relations, and influences—processes that precede and exceed names and forms. In this framework, force and affect describe two aspects of the same process. As distinguished by Cliff Stagoll, "force" refers to "*any* capacity to produce a change or 'becoming'" (Parr 2005, 107)—capacity always in relation to other forces. By contrast, "affect" emphasizes the relation of forces: forces are described as affects when they influence each other. This concept focuses more on how forces change each other in encounters. A life is a force, and lives affect each other as forces. When Deleuze rethinks the capacity of being active among forces, he faces questions that are similar to those in *Zhuangzi*: When ephemeral lives are constituted by the relations among forces, what does "activeness" mean? Can action not be a passive submission to forceful dominations? What does the power of a force mean in affective relations, if not domination or submission? Facing these questions, Deleuze's paradoxical proposal is that the ultimate "activeness" is "the capacity to be affected" (1990, 217)—a life is more powerful and more active when it is capable of being affected and thus constituted by more affects that are different from the life itself. As any capacity is inseparable from its entanglement with others, rethinking agency means embracing affectability as a vital power.

If we think of agential selves—selves defined by the ability to be active—not as autonomous origins of action but as forces embedded in dynamic relations, then agency shifts from self-contained independence to relational potential. In this view, "activeness" is the ability to participate in and be shaped by the interplay of forces. Deleuze's answer to the question of activeness resonates with—while differing from—*Zhuangzi*'s description of what a human can become in "Boundless Wandering". *Zhuangzi* proposes an optimal state of being/becoming in which the agential self does not unitarily decide its own form (無己，無功, 無名)[5] and is capable of letting the different happenings outside/inside it become forces that constitute it (乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮). The agential self can be formed without waiting for particular conditions to arise to constitute the particular form of the self. Interpretations of *Zhuangzi* have often conceptualized the self through its relations with what is outside it. The concept of the "interdependent self" emphasizes its "situatedness and contextuality" (Lai Karyn 2016, 156), while the concept of the "relational self" affirms a being that "attunes perfectly to the vicissitudes of the world" (Tao 2011, 484). In this view, "self-transformation" (ibid., 466) is deeply related to the "transformation *with* things" (ibid., 465). In the constant redefinition of a self in relation to its changing context, human

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5   All English translations are mine, partly modified from those of Graham (2001) and Ziporyn (2020).

existence is an opportunity for the "spiritual exercise" of "transformation" (Møllgaard 2007, 20): "Zhuangzi wants to liberate human existence from the false values and views we have added to it; above all he wants us to see through the human form to the ceaseless emergence of life itself" (ibid.). What traverses and exceeds the human form is sometimes referred to as *Dao*, under whose sign the self strives for transformation, as in the argument that "though the self is a critical *factor* in one's unification with the Dao, the underlying goal is to strip the self of its role as *actor*, or self-conscious agent, in the world" (Brindley 2010, 55). The self is an agent that is defined by the role it plays in a larger context, instead of by the autonomy of acting against the context.

If we translate the agential self in the *Zhuangzi* into Deleuze's language, we could see that this book illuminates the role a human agent may play in the premise that the more different forces one can form relations with, the more active and capable it is. For *Zhuangzi*, the agential self has to practice its transformation. Activeness lies in not only allowing affective relations to become the changing contents of the self, but also in recreating relations with others that let both oneself and others become active. With and against Deleuze, I argue that, even though similarly affirming the affective relations, *Zhuangzi* develops nuanced layers of an agential self. To explore this, this paper analyses three sets of characters in "Boundless Wandering" in dialogue with Deleuze to examine what "activeness" means for an agential self who is capable of mutually, spontaneously, intimately connecting with other forces, as captured in the description "wandering as non-action company" (徬徨乎無為其側) at the end of this chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. On the one hand, this paper aims to explore the agential self that Deleuze might agree with but does not develop in his philosophy: I ask the question of "what we can do" instead of just "what a body can do".[6] On the other hand, this paper aims to elaborate on how *Zhuangzi* might play a compelling role in contemporary thoughts that redefine life as affective relations while craving agency in ethical relations.

The Dependency Necessary for Flourishing: Song Rongzi and Liezi

The "Boundless Wandering" chapter begins with a myth of a fish that is larger than human vision can capture. This fish transforms into a giant bird whose open wings cover the whole heavens. This eye-opening myth at the beginning of the whole book creates an expansive affective experience that provides the foundation for the subsequent thinking about incredible transformations, according to Hsu Sheng-Hsin (2017, 25–30). *Zhuangzi* shows that life can transform

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6   The famous question in Deleuze's explication of Spinoza (1990, 217).

itself, reform its relation with different forces—waves for the fish or winds for the bird—and move magnificently across vast realms of the world. While the story of this magical creature hints at the possibility of life transforming beyond daily expectations, *Zhuangzi* does not hesitate to reveal how the development of such extraordinary ways of life depends intimately on other forces as necessary conditions for their journeys. The text continues this line of thought through examples of different nonhuman animals, whose different scopes of movement rely on different sizes of external sources. Activities define the animals as what they particularly are, and their agential autonomy is inseparable from their engagement with what is outside them.

What concludes this series of inquiries in "Boundless Wandering" is a description of four types of humans. The first type is an agential self whose accomplishment is completely defined by its service to the external world. Its knowledge, action, and virtue are all measured against exterior standards: its official positions, the territory it rules, and the title it owns (知效一官，行比一鄉，德合一君而徵一國者) (Chen Guying 2020, 15). The agential self of this kind considers how to act solely through its effects on the world, and it even "perceives itself entirely accordingly" (其自視也亦若此矣) (ibid.). *Zhuangzi* reveals the deficiency of the first kind through describing the second kind of agential self: the life of Song Rongzi. If our self-perception is completely defined by how we serve what is exterior to us, praise and critique from others fully govern what we feel about ourselves. In this formulation, there is no autonomy.

In contrast, Song Rongzi 宋榮子 aims for a way of life that detaches his emotions from public opinion: "not being encouraged when the whole world praises him and not disheartened when the whole world criticizes him" (舉世而譽之而不加勸，舉世而非之而不加沮) (ibid., 16). To stay settled in himself, his method is to clearly separate what is external to and what is internal to him in order to distinguish honour and shame as matters that lie outside who he is (定乎內外之分，辯乎榮辱之竟) (ibid.). Because of the clear isolation of the self, his inner stability is not shaken by external change. Presenting Song Rongzi as superior to the first kind of humans, *Zhuangzi* quests for some kind of autonomy for the agential self—even a freedom from being wholly defined by the external standards. Song Rongzi's way of life highlights how distinguishing between inner and outer is essential for preserving a self that is not entirely shaped or destroyed by outside forces. Yet, as *Zhuangzi* comments, Song Rongzi still cannot flourish (猶有未樹). The isolation from the outside world cuts him off from the connections that are the necessary resources for him to thrive. He gains the autonomy of being freed from determinations, but he does not have agency—he is not free to create activeness in his engagements with others.

To think about the relation between autonomy and agency, *Zhuangzi* develops the third type of humans, as exemplified by Liezi 列子, who rides the winds to fly (御風而行) (ibid.). Liezi's choice is the definitive opposite of Song Rongzi. Instead of detaching his self-definition from what is external to him, he enjoys his masterful reliance on external forces—the winds, in this case. The realization of himself in this mythical flying depends on his skilful harnessing of the wind. *Zhuangzi* the rigorously and meticulously advances his argument through subtle comparisons between the four types of humans. Like the first type, Liezi seeks a beneficial relation between the self and outside world. However, while the first type defines the self by its service to the external, Liezi selectively engages with external forces that serve his chosen agency of flying. His identity as a flyer limits his interaction with the world. Like Song Rongzi, Liezi maintains a distinction between the exterior and interior of the self. His internal desire to fly defines his realization of the self through flight. Yet, while Song Rongzi isolates the self from external influences, Liezi chooses to actively depend on them. While Song Rongzi chooses autonomy at the cost of supportive resources, Liezi creates agency as a particular movement—this choice brings into his life the limits of conditions. *Zhuangzi* identifies deficiencies on both sides: Song Rongzi may appear autonomous, but without connection, he cannot flourish (未樹). Liezi thrives in the way of magnificent movements, but he depends (有待) on external forces that might not be present on days with no winds or adverse winds.

Through this contrast between Song Rongzi (who neither depends nor flourishes) and Liezi (who depends and flourishes), *Zhuangzi*'s argument turns into a series of questions: How do we define the "capacity" of an agential self when its realization necessarily relies on exterior forces? How can we define the "activeness" of this kind of self? In Deleuzian language: What can the agential self do to let its own force connect with other forces, without absorbing differences or being completely determined by them? *Zhuangzi* gives a brilliantly paradoxical answer to this series of questions:

> 若夫乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮者，彼且惡乎待哉！
> 故曰：至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。(Chen Guying 2020, 17)

> If one can sit at the axis between Heaven and Earth and ride on the changes of six *qi* in order to wander in the infinite, how does he still depend! In this way, we can say: the ultimate human has no selfhood, the most mythically capable human does not have accomplishments, and the holiest human does not have names.

Acknowledging that the abundance of the self always relies on the infusion of exterior forces does not negate its agency. Rather, agency arises through a practice

applied to the form of the self in the face of abundant affective relations. As Geir Sigurðsson points out, the negation "*wu*" in *wújǐ* (無己) "does not mean that what is being negated has thereby ceased to exist" (2018, 117) but signifies "a temporary letting go of the self while one tends to the world and one's tasks" (ibid.). It is precisely in the embrace of changing connections with the world that the self finds endless new formations. Eric S. Nelson describes how the cultivation and individuation of one lies in "independent and effortless and yet responsive attunement with the myriad things and the way enacted through them" (2014, 728). In "Boundless Wandering", the negation of selfhood is the negation of fixed definitions of a self—an emptying of assumptions that might have been implied in the identity of self so as to more fluidly relate to others. The self continues to exist as a constant practice of becoming human through relating to others. The phrase "the ultimate human has no selfhood" (至人無己) does not deny that we are humans, but instead redefines humanity as the capacity of becoming relationally and responsively closer to things. If the agential self lets go of rigid forms and allows itself to be co-constituted through relation, then the meaning of "flourishing" becomes indeterminate (no longer limited to flying), and the dependency on forces is no longer limiting: selective reliance on particular forces is replaced by the adaptable ability to relate to all different kinds of forces.

The agential self has what Liu Tsanglong 劉滄龍 (2022, 56) terms "passive mobility" (被動的能動性), and what we should do is to "turn our limited body into a field of possibilities for indeterminate". He suggests that "when the objective knowledge and judgment are suspended, and the perception of certainty is loosened, the possibilities in the 'indeterminacy' in things have a chance to open up to the self". (ibid., 55) This opening up happens "when the self has emptied itself".[7] To take this a step further, the ability to see the other/things as "indeterminate" lies in the capacity of the agential self to become "indeterminate". A "thinking subject" actively imposing a system of knowledge risks enclosing itself within a closed oneness, thereby limiting its capacity for relation. In contrast, openness arises through embracing difference with empty arms—a mode of mobility rooted in passive receptivity and acknowledgment. Limitation, then, is not a problem of the finitude of our existence, but a problem of whether the agential self can embrace differences in its relation with other forces; the troubling finitude is being limited by its own system of oneness. In *Zhuangzi*, the agential self is not defined by a consistent form but by the capacity to transform itself, enter into relations with different kinds of forces, and flourish accordingly. This mobility overlaps with a plasticity fundamental to the self's constitution. This formulation of the agential self, defined by its capacity to relate to other forces, can be further developed in dialogue with Deleuze's theory of affects.

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7   My translation.

Inheriting Spinoza's philosophy, Deleuze rethinks the world through affects. He describes how forces affect each other and contribute to the temporary formations of life. In Deleuze's interpretation, Spinoza subtly, or not so subtly, subverts the world that centres around God. Instead of thinking of God as the perfect idea that serves as the starting point and ending point of all the causal relations, the Spinoza in Deleuze's description lets the transcendent overlap with the physical. Affects become the most substantial expression of ideas, apart from which ideas cannot exist:

> from one state to another, from one image or idea to another, there are transitions, passages that are experienced, durations through which we pass to a greater or a lesser perfection. Furthermore, these states, these affections, images or ideas are not separable from the duration that attaches them to the preceding state and makes them towards the next state. These continual durations or variations of perfection are called "affects", or "feelings" (affectus). (Deleuze 1990, 48–49)

The replacement of eternity with durations as the centre of thinking is certainly profane. What is even more intriguing is that, in so doing, Deleuze foregrounds affects, which are transitions and passages between states instead of nameable states themselves, to the extent that nameable states (images and ideas) are no longer the primary focus. The process of change is more important than its results. Transformations are not subordinated to forms. Instead, forms are temporary states of transformation. Translated into *Zhuangzi*'s language, the nameable states might be what is presented as the magical fish/bird in "Boundless Wandering". They are temporary forms that the mystical metamorphosis generates. What the fable truly wants to elaborate might be the process of transformation that is initiated by the relations of the forces. Every form of life implies a relation between forces. Deleuze thus explains what a particular life is in this view of affects, which are more impersonal than humans and less substantial than fixed forms:

> A body's structure is the composition of its relations. What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected. (Ibid., 218)

Since a body is composed of relations, its capacity is determined by how many other forces it can be in relation to. Instead of assuming a substantial body/agent who has fixed qualities and can decide its own actions and create encounters, Deleuze proposes that the relations formed in contingent encounters fundamentally constitute bodies. Thus, the most fundamental capacity is the capacity to be affected. The term "the capacity to be affected" is itself paradoxical: How can

being influenced be a capacity, since we seem to be influenced without doing anything and without any preconditions? However, this term presumes that the body continues to exist despite the encounters, even changing and flourishing because of them. Being affected is a capacity because this body is capable of participating in the forces of others, whose changes and passages are different from what it is. Sean Bowden suggests that after the recognition of the affective relations that compose us, we are required "to become what we really are as expressions of the ceaseless becoming of the force relations that constitute us" (2019, 75). The capacity of ceaselessly becoming in attunement to force relations requires the action of "engaging in an experimental process of creatively interpreting and exploiting one's internal and external 'necessities,' and thereby developing new forms of life" (ibid., 79). There are distinctions between different lives not only in how they are passively constituted by forces, but also in how they are capable of becoming new forms of life within the relations of forces that compose them. The capacity to be affected is accompanied by the capacity to continue itself as a becoming that turns into different forms without being destroyed in encounters.

In light of how lives differ in their varied capacities to be affected. The third and fourth kinds in "Boundless Wandering" can be elaborated in this light: If Liezi's (the third kind) agential self can be established only when he rides the winds and flies high, then he is capable of being affected only by the winds that are suitable for rides. He might not be able to connect with other kinds of aerial or marine forces so that he can become himself in the "proper" definition as "the person who flies". Different from Liezi, the agential self of the fourth kind (乘……) is someone who can be affected by all different kinds of forces. It can joyously wander (遊) in relation to the changes of six different *qi* (六氣), letting its selfhood be constantly redefined by the relations with forces that are different from it. In this way, the relation between agency and dependency is rethought in an interesting manner. When *Zhuangzi* questions if this state of agential self still is still dependent (彼且惡乎待哉) after the description of this fourth type, what he thinks about is not that the self no longer depends on forces but that the self actually is so capable of connecting with the forces and letting them constantly reconstruct its selfhood that dependency is replaced by active relating. This self is an agent even in relation to itself: it can act on itself—it can let its form change and then more flexibly participate in relations. The character for dependency, *dài* (待), also means waiting: it is a dependency that has to wait for favourable conditions. Since the fourth kind of humans does not select only a few particular forces to be the conditions for a particular selfhood to exist, it does not need to wait. It actively relates. This dependency without waiting (無待之待) opens up to relations that are open to differences and that communicate differences without making them homogeneous. What the self depends on no longer causes limitations; instead, the unlimited relations let the self be constituted by infinite others. "Infinity" (無窮) refers to not only the endless

different others that the self is capable of relating to. It also refers to the infinity in every other: in one relation with particular others, the self can embrace the others as infinitely changing processes instead of a nameable form.

The capability of dissolving its persistence in fixating on certain forms enables the agent to connect with differences. In this connection, the physical particular encounter coincides with the fundamental generative process of life. As Yang Rurbin 楊儒賓 puts it in his discussion about how the opening up of scopes of life is in dialogue with mythologies in the *Zhuangzi* (2019, 350), the mythical elevation into Heaven (which corresponds to the story of the flying Liezi) does not truly do away with dependency (無待). Yang argues that *Zhuangzi*'s practice is threefold: dissolving the ordinary (俗), becoming fully one with *Dao*, and then returning to the secular world to wander. As the agential self is capable of cancelling its own fixed forms and has accessed the deepest reality of *Dao*, it expresses itself through the particular relations with different existences. The three folds in Yang's argument concur: the oneness with *Dao* lies in the capacity to co-become with different particular others; the ultimate state is implied in every actual connection between differences. Jean François Billeter 畢來德 suggests that this is a repetitive process in which one goes back and forth between the cosmic "emptiness/potential" (虛) and particular things and constantly redefines itself (Billeter 2011).

Resonating with this view of *Zhuangzi*'s, Deleuze's definition of an individual is closely connected with individuation, the generative process that is more than human and gives rise to humans.

> The great discovery of Nietzsche's philosophy, which marks his break with Schopenhauer and goes under the name of the will to power or the Dionysian world, is the following: no doubt the I and the Self must be replaced by an undifferenciated abyss, but this abyss is neither an impersonal nor an abstract Universal beyond individuation. On the contrary, it is the I and the self which are the abstract universals. They must be replaced, but in and by individuation, in the direction of the individuating factors which consume them and which constitute the fluid world of Dionysus. What cannot be replaced is individuation itself. Beyond the self and the I, we find not the impersonal but the individual and its factors, individuation and its fields, individuality and its pre-individual singularities. (Deleuze 1994, 258)

Inheriting Gilbert Simondon's focus on individuation more than "the I" and "the Self", Deleuze even finds "impersonal" to be an inadequate description. In Deleuze's view, in the Dionysian world in which all are in the constant process of becoming, there is no place for personal problems that assume abstract

consistency. If an individual is defined by the consistency in itself, the constant metamorphosis is an abyss that eliminates all forms and differentiations. The word "subject" might be inadequate to describe this individual: When Yannick Souladié argues for Deleuze and Guattari's mastery of "desubjectification" in their writing, the reason he gives for this choice is that "[t]o define the human being as 'subject' misses the complexity of forces which traverse the individual" (Souladié 2015, 395). Individual is not a term in contrast to the collective but a concept that is inseparable from "individuation". As Keith Ansell Pearson explains, "[t]he subject on this model is … transformed into an 'event' of individuation" (1997, 72). An individual is what happens in the process of individuation. The process of individuation keeps creating different individuals and keeps engulfing them into even more processes of change. The description of an "individual" is only a contingent assemblage of forces without presumed identity. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari even unhook "individuality" from the "individual" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 253). Individuality is composed of different affects in relation to each other. There is no assumed consistency for an individual before, during, and after the encounter.

Zhuangzi would agree with Deleuze's abandonment of the "self" defined as an abstract generality or fixed, eternal meanings. They also both think of affective relations and lively metamorphosis as crucial to life. However, while *Zhuangzi* looks for the transformation of the self, Deleuze points towards its cancellation. This difference might be caused by the fact that the agential self of *Zhuangzi* is much more layered in its practice than Deleuze's self. *Zhuangzi* describes the agential self at the fourth level through three paradoxes that affirm and cancel selfhood at the same time. The agential self is capable of dissolving a layer within itself and continuing to transform. Interestingly, after Deleuze cancels the I and the Self, what emerges is not emptiness but the abundant differences in constant metamorphosis, the individuation that is prior to individuals. In contrast, when "Boundless Wandering" proposes cancelling a layer of selfhood, the agential self actually becomes open to the endless differences that Deleuze describes. In *Zhuangzi*, the active realization of an agential self activates the infinite differences.

Strangely, when *Zhuangzi* describes the fourth level of the agential self, he uses three very active verbs for their actions: "riding" (乘), "mastering" (御), and "wandering" (遊). These verbs seem to imply that the agential self not only becomes one of the many forces it relates to, but also has some capacity to become more active than the other forces. What does this activeness mean? How can the agential self be active even when embedded in affective relations? "Boundless Wandering" develops this series of questions through two sets of dialogues between two pairs of characters.

The "Activeness" in Affective Relations: Yao and Xu You

In deepening his reflection on human-world relations, *Zhuangzi* presents the encounter between two people with distinct choices: Yao, the esteemed political leader of a flourishing civilization, and Xu You, a legendary hermit (Chen Guying 2020, 20). The dialogue unfolds when Yao visits Xu You. Despite having established a peaceful civilization, Yao feels inadequate as a leader and offers the imperial position to Xu You, who firmly declines. A question underlies this dialogue: How can an agential self contribute to the web of different forces it inhabits? After proposing that an agential self can empty its forms to fluidly connect with varying forces, "Boundless Wandering" turns to explore how this engagement might manifest in different choices to act in the secular world.

What concerns Yao is the agential self's relation with the world (天下). Aspiring to influence the whole world, Yao prefers Xu You's relation with the world to his own. The dialogue between them is intriguingly composed of two sets of characterizations—each shaped by the perspective of the speaker. *Zhuangzi*'s argument is presented as much through the two characters as through the way they view each other. From Yao's perspective, the differences between them are presented in metaphorical language:

> 日月出矣，而爝火不息，其於光也，不亦難乎！時雨降矣，而猶浸灌，其於澤也，不亦勞乎！夫子立而天下治，而我猶尸之，吾自視缺然，請致天下。(Chen Guying 2020, 20)

> Isn't illumination vainly difficult for a torch that is not put out when the sun or the moon has come out? Isn't irrigation but needless trouble when rain falls timely? Your mere presence puts the world in order, but I still occupy the emperor's throne. I see my own inadequacy, and I hope you will govern the world.

In Yao's view, although both he and Xu You affect the world with their light and hydration, his efforts resemble artificial aids (torches and irrigation), and Xu You's influence aligns with natural forces (sun, moon, and timely rain). It seems that, according to Yao, he himself can only affect the world like an external force, but Xu You can affect the world as something that has already been embedded in the natural world. Yao's preference for Xu You over himself implies the wish to respect differences, a tendency in *Zhuangzi* that Huang Yong describes as a "Zhuangzian ethics of difference", which exhorts us to respect the differences between us and those who are involved in our actions: "it is not only wrong for us to do things to others for our own benefit, but it may also be wrong for us to do things to others for what we consider to be their own good" (Huang 2010, 74).

While Yao starts from the wish to influence the world with his power as if he is looking at the world of other forces from the outside of it, he ends up valuing Xu You's relation with the world: being within the affective relations of the world. The question of "what I can do to the world outside me" is turned into "how I can act to honour how I have already been situated in the web of affective relations".

Xu You's view is different:

子治天下，天下既已治也。而我猶代子，吾將為名乎？名者，實之賓也，吾將為賓乎？鷦鷯巢於深林，不過一枝；偃鼠飲河，不過滿腹。歸休乎君！予無所用天下為。(Chen Guying 2020, 20)

If I were to replace you after your rule has already put the world in order, would I be acting merely for the title? The title is supplementary to its actual work. Should I be supplementary? A tailorbird can nestle on only one branch in the deep forest; a beaver can drink only the volume of its belly from the river. Please return! I have no use for the world.

In Xu You's refusal to take over the political position, he reveals how deeply he inhabits the world. While he compares himself to a little bird that can only occupy the space of one branch, the branch involves and is involved in the deep forest. While he is a small beaver who can only drink the amount water that would fill his little belly, he actually connects with the vast river running. For Xu You, the way to contribute to the world is to dive into the particular relation of forces that he has already been involved in. As a result, the world of differences opens up to him, and he flourishes with other forces. It is also from this perspective of respecting the context that one has already been embedded in that Xu You praises how Yao has already adequately contributed to the world in the position that he has been uniquely suitable for. Yao and Xu You might just be different, instead of one being superior to the other in their practice in life. As Hsu Sheng-Hsin (2019, 25–56) puts it, they show two aspects of the namelessness that *Zhuangzi* affirms. While Yao accomplishes things through the name of the emperor and moves beyond it, Xu You remains desireless for names throughout.

According to Guo Xiang (2007, 28), Yao's rule is considered to have already involved the practice of "not ruling"—the deactivation of fixed ideas of what ruling means. If Yao is any less than Xu You, it is in the inadequacy of his view: Yao does not understand that he and Xu You have different capacities suitable for different positions. While Xu You appreciates the different positions each of them takes, Yao does not seem to be capable of appreciating his own choice. He does not step back to view both conditions at the same time.

The dialogue leads to an interesting challenge to thought: why can the seemingly less active choice of Xu You's be an adequate answer to Yao's quest for action? As "Boundless Wandering" seems to affirm some kind of activeness in Xu You's way of life, what does this activeness mean? I propose to cross-read this activeness with Deleuze's theorization of Nietzsche's active forces to shed light on what it could mean.

Activity and passivity are concepts that define two different types of forces in Deleuze's (creative) reading of Nietzsche:

> reactive force is: 1) utilitarian force of adaptation and partial limitation; 2) force which separates active force from what it can do, which denies active force (triumph of the weak or the slaves); 3) force separated from what it can do, which denies or turns against itself (reign of the weak or of slaves). And, analogously, active force is: 1) plastic, dominant and subjugating force; 2) force which goes to the limit of what it can do; 3) force which affirms its difference, which makes its difference an object of enjoyment and affirmation. (Deleuze 2006, 61)

Reactive forces evaluate and establish themselves according to whether they can be useful for a larger context. From this utilitarian point of view, larger contexts are inherently partial and limiting because they serve single-minded objectives rather than embracing change and multiplicity. The usefulness of a force is defined by its capacity to serve a goal that remains a consistent standard for different forces. For these forces, determination comes from something external to them. Their potential is not assessed by how they thrive or relate to one another; instead, their purpose is detached from their inherent capacities.

Deleuze's interpretation of the forces fuses the theories of Spinoza and Nietzsche. In his formulation of the Spinozian capacity to be affected, he also speaks of "activeness", as "only active affections could effectively or positively exercise our capacity to be affected; the power of action was thus identical to this capacity itself: as for passive affections, they cut us off from that of which we were capable" (Deleuze 1990, 246).[8] As forces, we are active when we affirm the forces that we are and enjoy their activity. Instead of striving to satisfy external standardized contexts that we are assumed to be in, we embrace the changing, heterogeneous relations that we are in. We constantly reconfigure who we are and what we can do in the affective relations that we are in. The capacity to be affected—the ability to constantly redefine ourselves as what our relations constitute us—is thus identical to the power of action. In Antoine Daratos's words, "true activity does not

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8   Jan Rehmann (2022, 57) even suggests that Nietzsche himself was inspired by Spinoza in his theory of active and passive forces.

depend on the conscious will of an individual subject but, rather, is an affective process that occurs when forces combine into new relations" (Daratos 2023, 13). The "activeness" of an agent lies in how it affirms the relations it is involved in through becoming who it is.

Relocating Deleuze's discussion in the context of my discussion of the agential self, I propose to read the self as a force—in fact, each force comprises multiple forces—negotiating its activity in affective relations. In Deleuze's enjoyable affirmation of active forces, there are two layers: On the one hand, as nothing but a force in affective relations with other forces, a self that is defined as a force does not consider itself to be the centre of the process. Rather than viewing other forces as separate from it, the self is a difference among other differences that it is in relation with. In other words, even the reference point—which a self serves as—is a difference constantly reconfigured through its relations to others. On the other hand, even though being capable of affirming differences, the self is still just one of forces. It does not assert superiority over other differences but remains relatable and communicable with them. The unfolding of the force(s) of the agential self seems to affirm differences in such a way that other forces are mobilized to unfold themselves as they are. The activeness of this agential self seems to enable other forces to unfold not according to external standards but according to the relations between the forces themselves.

In light of this view of the self as a force, the difference between Yao and Xu You might be analysed as two distinct types of forces. Both seek to become active in a larger context of forces, both recognize that the world has already been full of forces that are active in their ways, and both wish to respect other forces through their actions. However, Yao's desire to influence others rests on the assumption that he thinks that his force is beneficial to others. He is willing to let the force enter the realms of other lives to become useful for others. In wishing so, he assumes that there is an all-encompassing influence that can be useful for all, and he actually defines his force by this use for others. In Deleuze's definition, this model of relation is reactive—it serves a homogenous use instead of living out what it is capable of.

In contrast to Yao, Xu You's model is active as he returns to his own realm and becomes "adequate" to his fate, as in Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza (Deleuze 1990). He settles in the depths of the forest and lets the water of the river water run through him. He lets the forces different from him nourish him. Instead of trying to universally influence the world, he abundantly lives out the difference that his life is. By doing so, this life of his opens ways for magical capacities that *Zhuangzi* praises highly, as told in the esoteric stories that follow. In these stories, mythical humans (神人) can live in plenty with all the various forces in the universe. Even if they only practice on themselves, other living beings

flourish because of them (其神凝，使物不疵癘而年穀熟). It seems that when one force lives out its difference, other forces can also live actively, and thus it is as if the transformation of one force activates other forces as well. But how can the abundant unfolding of one force enable other forces to live actively? How can one agential self's unfolding of its force become simultaneously a way to affirm other differences? "Boundless Wandering" explores these questions through the conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi (惠施).

The Capacity to Be Not Only One of the Forces: Zhuangzi and Hui Shi

As shown through the preferred model of Hsu You, the agential self in *Zhuangzi* acts at two levels in the web of affective relations: 1) the realization of itself as one of the many forces; 2) the ability to enable other forces to realize themselves. It seems that the agential self has a capacity for activeness that not all forces are capable of. What is this capacity? How can this capacity not violate but even contribute to the relations between forces and the affirmation of endless differences? Deleuze's intriguing answer is that the capacity to affirm the forces that are different from one lies in another level of capacity: Deleuze distinguishes force from the will to power. Forces differ from each other and can be active or reactive in their own becomings, while the will to power persists at another level. Orkhan Imanov summarizes Nietzsche's definition of the will to power as "a creative and transformative principle driving the process of becoming" (2023, 77). It is not the becoming itself but what drives the becoming.

Intriguingly, Deleuze interprets this principle through four different verbs: "affirming and denying, appreciating and depreciating, express the will to power just as acting and reacting express force" (2006, 53–54). The will to power is the affirmation or denial of forces, and thus it is described as "affirmative" or "negative". In other words, the will to power is not just one of the forces, but what involves and affirms different forces. Instead of defining others as how they are different from itself, the will to power affirms differences in their own right. A force functions as a perspective among perspectives; while the perspective is constantly reformed by the relation with other perspectives, it is still a single perspective at a time. The will to power functions as a perspective that is itself multiple; it is a perspective that differentiates and beholds multiple perspectives. A force is a becoming that is always involved in co-becoming. The will to power is what propels the becomings of forces by forcing them to become in their different ways. This kind of will is by no means the will of a human in the sense of free will. James Mollison argues that "Deleuze further takes the evaluative dimension of the will to power to be non-anthropomorphic: evaluation is part of the essence of life"

(2022, 434). "Evaluation" in this sense is not the judgement of a force according to a system of value. As the will to power lives out itself in generating different forces, its action simultaneously affirms those who enact their unique characteristics and denies those who just try to fulfil themselves according to the assumed determination of their contexts.

The will to power is a force, but it also has another level of functioning:

> We should not be surprised by the double aspect of the will to power: from the standpoint of the genesis or production of forces it determines the relation between forces but, from the standpoint of its own manifestations, it is determined by relating forces. This is why the will to power is always determined at the same time as it determines, qualified at the same time as it qualifies. In the first place, therefore, the will to power is manifested as the capacity for being affected, as the determinate capacity of force for being affected. (Deleuze 2006, 57–58)

The will to power resides in the relation between particular forces. Paradoxically, it not only decides the fundamental relation between the differences, but is also itself decided by this relation. Just like all the other forces, the will to power is formed by relations. The capacity to create differences does not rely on a presumed eternal truth or fixed point of view. Instead, the capacity to affirm differences lies both in being involved in relations of different forces and in holding both perspectives in its perspective of multiplicity. This capacity lies not in shifting between perspectives, but in letting itself become the relation between differences. In Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, the will to power concerns both interpretation (2006, 53) and the generative process of different forces. The interpretation of the will to power is what Joshua Avery Dawson calls "interpretive multiplicity" (2023, 90)—an affirmation of multiple interpretations that arise from the multiple perspectives of the different forces, which the will to power generates.

From force to will to power, Deleuze reconceives actions. For Deleuze, affirmation is not an action nor is it simply defined by "being active":

> Affirmation is not action but the power of becoming active, *becoming active* personified. Negation is not simple reaction but a *becoming reactive.* It is as if affirmation and negation were both immanent and transcendent in relation to action and reaction; out of the web of forces they make up the chain of becoming. (Deleuze 2006, 54)

Affirmation and negation are the becoming of being active or reactive, and this becoming of the will to power has two layers. 1) the becoming of the will to

power as itself a force: it becomes as the difference it is, a difference among differences. 2) The "side effect" of the becoming of the will to power in itself: its becoming enables the becoming of other forces. The becoming of the will to power has one more layer than the becoming of a force. The becoming of a force in the relations of forces seems to be fully determined by the expectable causal relations of the web. In contrast, the becoming of the will to power has the creative power to enable other becomings by recreating the relations that support other forces. When the will to power unfolds itself as becoming active, it functions as the agent that enables the forces to be different. The activeness of the will to power is not a single, specific action, but the facilitation of different becomings. It does take an action as one of the forces that finds its way of being active, and this action has an effect that not all actions possess: it affirms other ways of being active.

Deleuze emphasizes that affirmation is not action, but it does not mean that affirmation is contradictory to action. Instead, he suggests the affinity of affirmation and action.

> Becoming active, on the contrary, presupposes the affinity of action and affirmation; in order to become active it is not sufficient for a force to go to the limit of what it can do, it must make what it can do an object of affirmation. (Deleuze 2006, 68)

Affirmation is not only letting the process of differentiation beyond individuals emerge, but also affirming the powers of the particular forces. Jan Rehmann observes that, in Deleuze's interpretation of the will to power, "the concept of determination should actually be replaced by that of differentiation" (Rehmann 2022, 254: 49). For Deleuze, rather than an external principle determining forces, the will to power functions like individuation—it is a generative power that propels different forces to become themselves. The will to power is an action that affirms other activities of forces through affirming the generative process in which forces participate in each other. In Deleuze's view, the deepest affirmation of individual forces lies in the affirmation of individuation, the process through which the forces become themselves and continue to become. Thus, the question becomes how can an action that belongs to a particular force not only be active in the sense of living up to the particular difference it is, but also unfold the communicative relations of forces to enable different forces to unfold themselves as themselves? It is unclear in Deleuze's theory how to practice this duality. In such a philosophy that orients itself towards subjectlessness, it is difficult to think about who practices the will to power, and what is the will to power like for us who want to figure out what to do with our lives? I propose that reading the dialogue between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi could help see a way of becoming an agential self whose particular practice may include the perspective beyond the limitation of our finite existences.

The dialogue about "utility" (用) between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi further develops the problem of situating the force of an agential self in a larger context of the web of forces, which is explored in the conversation between Yao and Xu You. The conversation between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi foregrounds nonhuman agential selves: a huge gourd, a tree, and even an ox (Chen Guying 2020, 28–31). Their conversation revolves around two nonhuman existences that Hui Shi does not know how to make use of. In the first story, Hui Shi has been given a giant gourd as a gift, which is too heavy to be held by a single person if used as a bottle and too big to go in and out of any bucket if cut in half and used as a ladle (其堅不能自舉也。剖之以為瓢，則瓠落無所容) (ibid., 28). Considering it useless, Hui Shi ends up smashing the gourd and throwing it away. Hearing this, Zhuangzi suggests that Hui Shi could have filled the huge gourd with air, instead of water, and tied it to his waist to be a flotation device. This way, he could enjoy floating in the rivers and lakes with it (何不慮以為大樽而浮乎江湖) (ibid.).

In the second story Hui Shi tells Zhuang about a huge tree that does not fit into the carpentry's measurement because its trunk is too bulging and its branches too twisty (其大本擁腫而不中繩墨，其小枝卷曲而不中規矩) (ibid., 30). Even though it stands conveniently on the side of the road, no carpenters will even look at it. Zhuangzi responds to this evaluation of the tree's uselessness by suggesting letting the tree flourish in wide and empty wildness, and then wandering around the tree and sleeping under its branches. In this way, the walking celebrates "non-action" (無為), and the sleeping invites boundlessness (逍遙). (子有大樹，患其無用，何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下？) (ibid., 31). By shifting the context, Zhuangzi creates new visions of our relationship to nonhuman beings and the actions available for our enjoyment.

Based partly on the reading of this ending dialogue of "Boundless Wandering", Mercedes Valmisa discusses the freedom and autonomy of agency proposed by *Zhuangzi* in the framework of the agent in relation to the constraints of its condition (2019, 9). She thoughtfully points out how the interpretation of *Zhuangzi*'s freedom as contentment in any conditions may endorse the ethically troubling idea of happy slaves (ibid., 3–5). She argues instead that *Zhuangzi*'s proposal is more profound: the ability to "harness changing conditions so as to attain optimal outcomes in light of those changes" lies in the capacity of "transforming constraints into freedom-conducive conditions" (ibid., 9). Actions can be taken to change the conditions (ibid., 8) for the happiness of the agents. Aligned with this argument, I propose that the key to changing the conditions lies in changing the relation between the human agent and other—nonhuman, in this case—agents. Since what conditions us is our relations with other agents, a "condition" is a web of relations that we have always already been involved in, instead of an external

environment we struggle against, even though it might feel like that. I argue that Zhuangzi's brilliance lies in revealing how conditions are constantly recreated by the way we relate to others. Viewing conditions as relations echoes Deleuze's replacement of determination with differentiation. It is no longer a problem between us and the world, but a creative process in which we can recreate relations to shift the conditions for both us and others—we can become the creative force of affirming differences that fluidly constitute instead of fixatedly determining who we are.

The relation between humans and nonhuman agents emerges in this dialogue. As Lai Hsi-san describes it, the most intriguing and significant focus of this conversation is the relation between humans and "things" (物) (Lai 2011, 198).[9] Hui Shi does not reflect on his relation with things when he focuses on finding uses for the things in his hands. Instead, things are foregrounded in Hui Shi's perspective of utility. When he tries to find the contexts in which the things can be useful, he encounters difficulties when the things do not fit the already defined usages, such as holding liquid or becoming furniture. As Lai puts it, the definitions humans give things reflect their perspectives (2019, 204). Hui Shi "innocently" identifies with the utilitarian view through which humans dominate things with technique (ibid., 210). The one-way defined technique decides the fate of things without letting the forces implicated in the thing realize themselves.[10] In the Deleuzian view, as analysed in the previous section, this model of making use of things is very "reactive"—it evaluates the forces in the limiting, preexisting contexts of usages.

On the other hand, Zhuangzi finds contexts in which he can relate to the things fundamentally differently. He situates the giant gourd in rivers and lakes, freeing it from the role of a container for liquid; he places the tree in the wilderness rather than by the roadside or a living room with wooden floors, thereby transforming the activities through which we can engage with the tree. While Hui Shi frustratedly moves from one context of utility to another in search of a place for the gourds, Zhuangzi's shift in contexts is facilitated by his change in relation with the thing in question. The key to the fundamental difference is what Hui Shi overlooks: himself, the agential self. In both stories, Hui Shi does not reflect on how he has been embedded in the context of usage. When he tries to see if the things can serve him, he unconsciously submits to being a slave of the utilitarian view that determines his actions. In contrast, Zhuangzi takes actions that reform the relation between him and things in ways that affirm both his and the things' enjoyment—they float in water together or enjoy the company of each other in the

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9   *Wu* (物) refers to existences that are other than humans that includes both nonhuman things and nonhuman animals (動物).

10   For the relation between uselessness and being in a Heideggerian context, please refer to Chung Chen-yu (2021, 113).

wilderness. By changing his relation to the other existences, he recreates contexts. In Chen Yun's 陳贇 view, selflessness is the subjective condition that enables us to appreciate the use of what seems to be useless (Chen Yun 2017, 127). Selflessness in this case could be interpreted as the ability to reform the starting point of his action without fixed assumptions. In these two stories, Zhuangzi is capable of letting his actions be redefined by the optimal relations he finds at that moment between himself and the things. In these relations, what happens is not only the new activities (floating and wandering/sleeping in the wilderness), but also a redefinition of the human agential self that transforms with the other existences.

The particular others in the story, the gourd and the tree, imply rich significations. Steve Coutinho explicates the metaphorical implications of the gourd and the river floating:

> The seeds of the gourd become a metaphor for the propensities of natural development, the vastness of the gourd a metaphor for unexpected turns of development, and the floating, drifting, meandering along the river a metaphor for accepting and being responsive to the openness in which we are enveloped. (Coutinho 2017, 74)

As the ground embodies the prosperity of a plant that is beyond human measurements, Zhuangzi's recreation of his relation with it implies a redefinition of the human's relation with the wilderness, a wilderness that actually includes us. In the enjoyment with these others in the wilderness, Zhuangzi introduces into the context of relation the openness of the wilderness. In this openness, differences can flourish together.

In the affective relation, three elements transform simultaneously: the human agential subject, the nonhuman existence, and the context. There are two sets of three: first, a huge gourd, rivers and lakes, and Zhuangzi; second, tree, wilderness, and Zhuangzi. In this relation, the task is no longer to find uses in the seemingly useless. As Wang Fu-zhi (1964, 82) puts it, what is in question is how to "use uselessness with uselessness" (以無用用無用). In other words, it is to deactivate our fixed definitions of usefulness (making the method of using itself useless) so as to relate to others in their uselessness. It is to make use of things in a way that allows them to remain defined by themselves instead of their utility for others. It is to thrive without regard for the utilitarian assumptions. It is to replace determination with the acts of relating to things, letting relations serve as the deciding context, which encourages both the user and the used to live out their forces. In this approach, the practice that the agential self does on itself lets things become "useful" according to their own different definitions (神凝者，窅然喪物，而物各自效其用) (Chen Guying 2020, 23). In Zhuangzi's vision, the agential self

creates—through the act of relating—spaces of indeterminacy in which the different existences, forces, and selves can live out what they are capable of. This self is capable of creating relations and changing contexts to let differences better fulfil themselves. Such a capacity resonates with the capacity of the Deleuzian will to power if practiced by an agential self. In affirming differences between individuals, the self enables diverse forces to become active for their own sake (floating, flourishing, and wandering…).[11] As a will to power, the agential self appears capable of activating diverse forces, like the process of individuation. The relation between different active forces creates a space that encourages difference—whether it be rivers and lakes accommodating vessels of various sizes, or a wilderness that does not require trees to exist as furniture. Simultaneously, the human agential self, despite being as capable as the will to power, remains nothing but one of the many forces, albeit one with the unique characteristic of initiative.

Conclusion

I want to begin concluding this paper by analysing the significant use of the verb "to flourish" (樹) in "Boundless Wandering". The two instances in which it appears offer different yet interrelated senses to the ethical action of flourishing. In the first, "to flourish" refers to the agential self's capacity to thrive, exemplified in the contrast between Song Rongzi's and Liezi's cases (彼其於世，未數數然也。雖然，猶有未樹也) (Chen Guying 2020, 16). In this sense, to flourish is to live up to one's potential, becoming what one can become. The second appearance shifts the focus from self-flourishing to "letting flourish"—letting others realize themselves, as elaborated in *Zhuangzi*'s proposal to let the tree stand in the wilderness where he can also rest under it (何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下？) (ibid., 31), an alternative to Huizi's proposal. Moving from "to flourish" to "to let flourish", *Zhuangzi* reveals that the practice of realizing oneself is deeply related to letting others flourish. What can make one flourish is the recreation of relations in which one is embedded. The ability to creatively relate enables *Zhuangzi* to recontextualize what he does. Why can a self recontextualize itself beyond the single framework it may have assumed in becoming who it is at the moment? *Zhuangzi* would answer that this is the wish for others to flourish, differently from but simultaneously with the self's own flourishing. If isolated, every human could be limited to their own habitual ways of functioning. When we actively relate to others with sincere, open consideration for them, we let the different tendencies and characteristics they carry

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11   The ability to affirm both one's own difference and that of others connects this chapter of the *Zhuangzi* with the next, particularly in relation to the concept of "both courses" (兩行). Please refer to Lin Mingzhao's work in this regard (2016).

renovate us. In this relational process, we are capable of radically shifting between frameworks, not abstractly, but through concrete encounters with diverse ways of being.

The methodology of the very writing of "Boundless Wandering" reflects *Zhuangzi*'s refusal to argue from a fixed framework. Instead, he writes from a fluid (yet precise) perspective that affirms the coexistence of multiple frameworks, and *Zhuangzi* thinks through more than three sets of characters. It is in relating these different characters that a vision affirming multiplicity emerges. In this paper, I also try to formulate thoughts of the agential self through the different voices of Deleuze and *Zhuangzi*. On the one hand, I supplement Deleuze's theory of forces in affective relations with the interpretations of *Zhuangzi* to discuss how a self is fundamentally embedded in relations. Our actions express the activities of the forces that constitute us. Since the forces may nourish us, we wish to act in ways that celebrate rather than suppress them. The Deleuzian view of forces helps foreground the fluid, molecular relations that underlie *Zhuangzi*'s redefinition of self. What enables *Zhuangzi* to propose a practice of a flexible self is his penetrating gaze into what composes a self.

On the other hand, to intervene in the contemporary redefinitions of who we are through affective relations, I propose reading *Zhuangzi* as a way to reform Deleuze's philosophy towards a more practicable notion of agency. I challenge Deleuze's strict emphasis on the nonhuman: given that humans are constituted by nonhuman forces and relations, human agency should also be recognized as capable of acting *for*, *with*, and even *as* nonhuman forces. When redefined as the capacity to relate to and become a composition of relations among diverse forces—human or nonhuman—humanity can be a starting point for ethical actions. Zhuangzi never finds being human an insurmountable obstacle to transforming ourselves or relating to others. The real challenge lies in whether we can constantly redefine who we are. In this paper, I insert human agency in a position that is strictly nonhuman for Deleuze: I argue that creative relating to others is a way we can act from the perspective of the will to power, which Deleuze identifies as the generative process that precedes and underlies individual existences: individuation. By creating affective relations that support both ourselves and others, we prompt different lives to flourish in their diverse abundances. The creation of relations implies our ability to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously.

This reading redefines crucial concepts in the discussion of selfhood—such as determination, freedom, autonomy, and agency. Since a self is embedded in the relations of forces that define what it is, the determination of selfhood does not refer to conditions external to the relations. Instead, what determines who we are *are* the relations we are involved in. *Zhuangzi* suggests that relations are not exclusively given but can be actively created: we can actively relate to each other in

new ways. We have always been involved in the activities of relations, consciously or unconsciously. Active and creative relating can thus alter external conditions and even replace the beliefs in fatalistic determination. Since determination is no longer the only background to think about what we can do, freedom can no longer be simply understood as the degree to which we are limited—or not limited—by our conditions. I propose that *Zhuangzi* would say freedom (the exemption from limitations) lies in the ability to not be limited by the particularity of our finite existence—that is, the ability to hold multiple perspectives and to act in ways that reshape the relation between finite beings. Since the ability to connect different particular perspectives and modes of life is valued as a strength, autonomy must also be rethought, and not out of a desire for independence. Autonomy would not be valued as the ability to act without the interventions of other agents. It can be considered as the capability to choose to zoom out from one's immediate standpoint, to recreate relations, and to redefine who we are. Since we redefine who we are by recreating the relations that form us, agency is thus redefined as our ability to enact the activities of forces that constitute us. This enactment would be most successful if we enact multiple forces at the same time. Agency is the agency of relating.

In my reading of *Zhuangzi* in dialogue with Deleuze, *relating* emerges as the most fundamental action. Relating is an action that cannot be initiated by a fixed, predetermined will of the agent. It must affirm the differences of the self and the others it encounters. It is an action that respects the activities of forces involved in the relation without seeking to impose specific outcomes. This mode of action is a non-action (無為). *Zhuangzi* ends "Boundless Wandering" with the "non-action company" (無為其側): the human walks and sleeps in the company of the tree. Without trying to do things to each other, they are involved in the non-action of relating. Relating affirms the activities of their constitutive forces and allow their selfhood to be practiced in the mutual activity. They become companions of ease. The concept of the "agential self" defines a self by what it is capable of doing. The capacity to relate in non-action enables both the human and the tree to become who they are in the movement and restfulness they enjoy with each other.

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OTHER TOPICS

From Grasping to Shaping Reality: Proper Naming in the Statecraft Chapters of the *Chunqiu Fanlu*

*Ivana BULJAN**

Abstract

One of the central yet underexplored debates in Han ethics, politics, and administration concerns the relationship between "titles" (*ming* 名) and "actuality" (*shi* 實). This debate laid the foundation for China's bureaucracy and imperial examination system, also influencing modern administrative theory and meritocratic principles. This paper examines the concept of the proper alignment of names and actualities in the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, specifically focusing on the Statecraft chapters (Chapters 18–22), which discuss governance and political practices. I will explore how this alignment operates within these chapters, focusing on the interplay between language, reality, knowledge, power, and the socio-political order. In particular, I investigate the processual and dynamic nature of naming, framed within a cosmological paradigm. I argue that the act of naming begins with understanding and culminates in shaping reality. I further contend that the authors of the Statecraft chapters identified epistemic hiddenness as a central challenge in the act of naming, but they also proposed solutions to address this issue. Additionally, I highlight the performative role of language in ensuring that names correspond to actualities, asserting that within administrative discourse, language is not merely descriptive but actively shapes and effects change. To illustrate its role as a form of social action, I will link the alignment of names and actualities to contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly the works of John Austin and Judith Butler.

Keywords: titles (*ming* 名), actualities (*shi* 實), *Chunqiu fanlu*, epistemic hiddenness, performativity, cosmology, Austin, Butler

Od dojetja do oblikovanja realnosti: primerno imenovanje v poglavjih o vodenju države v knjigi *Chunqiu Fanlu*

Izvleček

Ena osrednjih, vendar premalo raziskanih razprav v etiki, politiki in administraciji dinastije Han je odnos med imeni (*ming* 名) in dejanskostjo (*shi* 實). Ta razprava je postavila

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temelje za kitajski sistem administracije in cesarskih izpitov, hkrati pa vpliva tudi na sodobno administrativno teorijo ter meritokratska načela. Članek razišče koncept ustrezne uskladitve imen in dejanskosti v knjigi *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, pri čemer se osredotoča na poglavja o vodenju države (18.–22.), v katerih je govor o vladanju in političnih praksah. Avtorica razišče, kako tovrstno usklajevanje deluje v okviru teh poglavij, ter se osredotoča na prepletanje jezika, realnosti, znanja, moči in družbeno-političnega reda. Še posebej razišče procesno in dinamično naravo poimenovanja, ki je uokvirjenja v kozmološko paradigmo. Avtorica trdi, da se dejanje poimenovanja začne z dojetjem in doseže vrhunec v oblikovanju realnosti. Nadalje prikaže, da so avtorji poglavij o vodenju države epistemično prikritost identificirali kot osrednji izziv v dejanju poimenovanja, hkrati pa so predlagali tudi rešitve te problematike. Poleg tega avtorica poudarja performativno vlogo jezika pri zagotavljanju ustreznosti imen in dejanskosti, pri čemer trdi, da v okviru administrativnih razprav jezik ni le deskriptiven, temveč aktivno oblikuje in vpliva na spremembe. Za ponazoritev njegove vloge v obliki družbenega delovanja avtorica poveže uskladitev imen in dejstev s sodobnim filozofskim diskurzom, zlasti z deli Johna Austina in Judith Butler.

Ključne besede: imena (*ming* 名), dejanskost (*shi* 實), *Chunqiu fanlu*, epistemična prikritost, performativnost, kozmologija, Austin, Butler

Introduction: Frustrations with the Naming

During the Han dynasty 漢朝 (206 BCE–220 CE), one of the central intellectual debates revolved around the relationship between names (*ming* 名) and actualities (*shi* 實).[1] Nearly every major text from this period grappled with this conceptual pairing, reflecting a shared concern about the incongruity between the two. Scholars lamented that "the name does not match actuality" (*ming shi bu xiang ying* 名實不相應) (*Hanshu* n.d., 25:1268), "the name exceeds the actuality" (*ming guo qi shi* 名過其 實), "the name and the actuality fail to support each other" (*ming shi bu xiang fu* 名實 不相副) (*Qianfu lun* "Kaoji", Juan 10, 4), and that names had become mere "empty names" (*xu ming* 虛名).[2] These statements underscored a widespread frustration with

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1   The conceptual pairing *ming shi* is addressed in works such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (*Masters of Huainan*), *Baihu tong delun* 白虎通德論 (*Virtuous Discussion in White Tiger Hall*), *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 (*Plain Questions of the Yellow Sovereign's Inner Classic*), Jia Yi's 賈 誼 *Xinshu* 新書 (*New Writings*), *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (*Outer Commentary on the Book of Songs by Master Han*), *Yan tie lun* 鹽鐵論 (*The Discourses on Salt and Iron*), *Zhanguoce* 戰國 策 (*The Strategies of the Warring States*), *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (*Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*), *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 (*Essays of a Recluse*), *Baihutong delun* 白虎通德論 (*Virtuous Discussions of the White Tiger Hall*), Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79–78 or 77–6 BCE) *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (*Garden of Persuasions*), *Xinshu* 新書 (*New Writings*), *Xinyu* 新語 (*New Discourses*), Wang Chong's 王充 *Lunheng* 論衡 (*The Balanced Inquiries*).

2   This phrase occurs in many Han texts, such as Hou Hanshu, Lunheng, Qianfu lun, Lunheng, Shiji, Hanshu, Zhanguoce and others.

the disconnect between names and the actualities they purported to represent.[3]

In the political and administrative context of the Han dynasty, incongruity specifically referred to discrepancies between an individual's official title (*ming*) and their actuality (*shi*). Such disparities were associated with chaos (*luan* 亂), violence (*bao* 暴), institutional collapse, and the overall instability of the empire. To address these issues, scholars advocated for the alignment of names—a reform aimed at aligning official titles with individuals' true abilities and responsibilities. This problem became increasingly acute toward the end of the Eastern Han period 東漢 (25–220).[4] In response, the Eastern Han scholar Wang Fu 王符 (82–167) emphasized the urgency of this reform, asserting that "there is nothing more urgent and pressing" to implement to avert chaos within the empire.[5]

This raises several critical questions: What constitutes proper naming? What are its defining features? What consequences arise from aligning names with reality? What is the ontological status of language in the context of naming? Who determines the names? What role does the ruler play in this process? Finally, how does proper naming intersect with human labour and the products of human work? This paper explores these questions in the composite text *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (*Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*), traditionally attributed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 195–115 BCE). The analysis focuses specifically on the Statecraft chapters (Chapters 18–22), which address governance and political practices. These chapters, originating in the Western Han period, are unlikely to have been authored by Dong Zhongshu.[6] These chapters are:[7]

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3   Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Hans-Rudolf Kantor, and Hans-Georg Moeller highlight that "the mainstream position in ancient Chinese philosophy regarding the relationship between names (*ming* 名) and actualities (*shi* 實) was that names ought to correspond accurately to actualities or forms (*xing* 形)". As they pointed out, philosophical schools generally agreed on the ideal of congruent names but differed on its foundation, ethical functions, and sociopolitical implications, as well as the best methods for implementation (D'Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018, 307).

4   With regard to the latter half of the second century, Mark L. Asselin observed: "The political and social exigencies of the decaying Eastern Han dynasty were antithetical to the correspondence of names to actualities. Reputation supplanted *de* and achievements in importance. That is to say, names took ontological primacy over actuality" (Asselin 1997, 393).

5   "凡南面之大務，莫急於知賢；知賢之近途，莫急於考功。" (In all the great affairs of one who faces south, nothing is more urgent than recognizing the worthy; and in knowing the worthy, nothing is more urgent than examining their achievements.) (*Qian Fu Lun*, "Kaoji", 1).

6   The "Kao Gong Ming" chapter is the only section from this unit that is widely attributed to Dong Zhongshu. I challenged this view in Buljan (2024).

7   This paper builds heavily on my previous studies of the *Chunqiu fanlu*'s Statecraft chapters, particularly their emphasis on aligning names (*ming*) with actualities (*shi*) as a cornerstone of governance. While my prior studies have focused on the administrative and historical aspects of this alignment—such as the *kaoji* system's role in evaluating state officials (*Buljan* 2024)—this paper adopts a fundamentally different perspective. In contrast to prior works that primarily explored naming within the realms of governance and bureaucracy, this paper uses previous philological

1. "Li He Gen" (henceforth LHG) (離合根, Chapter 18, *Separation and Union with the Root*): This chapter explores the complementary roles of rulers and ministers in governance. The ruler, embodying Heaven's qualities of "humanity" (*ren* 仁), "divinity" (*shen* 神), and "impartiality" (*bu si* 不私), governs through "non-action" (*wu wei* 無為), observing and discerning the "true nature" (*qing* 情) of subordinates. Ministers, modelled after Earth, act diligently and transparently, earning rewards or punishments based on their performance.

2. "Li Yuan Shen" (henceforth LYS) (立元神, Chapter 19, *Establishing the Divinity of the First*): The chapter opens by defining the ruler as "the pivot" of all things, responsible for issuing orders and initiating undertakings as the source of order. However, the text warns that errors by the ruler can just as easily lead to disorder. After establishing the ruler's central role, it prescribes the ideal technique of rulership, which (LYS) is centred on avoiding deliberate action (*wu-wei*). This state of deep tranquillity allows the ruler to observe and evaluate subordinates with clarity. The LYS refers to this approach as "the technique of openness and seclusion". The chapter further emphasizes the importance of "transformation" (*hua* 化), asserting that reverence for the foundation is paramount. If the foundation—comprised of Heaven, Earth, and Man—is properly revered, the ruler will transform like a "divinity" (*shen* 神). This reverence is linked to three aspects: "filial piety" and "brotherly love" (*xiao* 孝 and *di* 悌), provision of food and clothing, and "rituals" (*li* 禮) and "music" (*yue* 樂). Neglecting these foundations invites inevitable punishment. The final sections advocate appointing worthy individuals to government roles while the ruler practices non-action. These sections also introduce the concept of "honouring the divinity", though their exact meaning is open to interpretation.

3. "Bao Wei Quan" (henceforth BWQ) (保位權, Chapter 20, *Preserving Position and Power*): This chapter focuses on strategies for maintaining a ruler's authority. It begins by emphasizing the ruler's need to secure a strategically "advantageous position" (*shi* 勢) through control over "rewards" (*shang* 賞) and "punishments" (*fa* 罰), which are tailored to the people's preferences. Proper application of these measures, based on merit and offense, ensures balance, avoiding extremes like

findings to delve into its deeper philosophical significance. By framing naming as a performative and creative act, this paper reveals its epistemological, ontological, and normative dimensions. By positioning naming as a method of cosmic co-creation, and "humanity's 'completion of the world'", it advances our understanding of the interplay between language, knowledge, and reality in Han thought, offering new insights into how naming bridges the human and the cosmic, the constructed and the natural. It addresses key tensions between language and reality, stability and flux, visibility and hiddenness. Drawing on broader philosophical perspectives, including John Austin's and Judith Butler's theories of performativity, the paper investigates the epistemological challenges of aligning names with an ever-changing (and hidden) reality. These challenges highlight the limitations of language and human cognition while affirming naming's pivotal role in harmonizing human constructs with the natural order.

"luxury" (*fu* 富) or "tyranny" (*wei* 威), which can lead to rebellion and "disorder" (*luan* 亂). The text advises rulers to "guard generosity" (*shou qi de* 守其德) and "grasp power" (*zhi qi quan* 執其權) to prevent instability. In its final section, it advocates for "non-action" (*wu wei*), enabling rulers to monitor their ministers while delegating administrative duties, thus maintaining control through careful observation and judicious use of rewards and punishments.

4. "Kao Gong Ming" (henceforth KGM) (考功名, Chapter 21, *Examining Achievement and Reputation*): The KGM is an essay on personnel administration, focusing on the evaluation of civil service officials across the empire. Central to Han political and administrative discourse, the KGM advocates a system of "merit-based examinations" (*kao ji* 考績), promoting commendable officials and demoting those who underperform. It emphasizes that effective governance requires not only the wise selection of officials but also rigorous evaluation of their work to ensure administrative efficiency, political stability, and the attainment of "great peace" (*tai ping* 太平).

The KGM opens by defining its guiding principle: the correct evaluation of merit lies in assessing accumulated "achievements" (*ji* 積). Drawing parallels with the Way of Heaven, which accumulates vital "essence" (*jing* 精) to produce light, the text argues that a sage governs by accumulating good deeds, leading to abundant achievements and state prosperity. The sage's authority relies on measuring "circumstances" (*shi* 勢) and "regulating affairs" (*yin shi* 因事) to provide "benefit" (*li* 利) and eliminate "harm" (*hai* 害), likening him to natural forces like springs and rivers.

The essay then details techniques of administration, highlighting the importance of merit-based rewards and punishments aligned with actual performance, not reputation. Furthermore, it outlines specific procedures for enumerating officials' achievements and awarding them accordingly, reinforcing the principles of effective personnel administration. However, as noted by the Qing scholar Su Yu, the *kaoji* (考績) system described in the KGM does not correspond to the actual features of the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) system of personnel administration (*Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 1992, 177; henceforth *CQFLYZ*).

5. "Tong Guo Shen" (henceforth TGS) (通國身, Chapter 22, *Linking the State and the Body*): This chapter draws an analogy between the state and the human body, proposing that the ruler functions as the central organ coordinating the whole. The main thesis of the TGS is that someone who wants to regulate the state needs to accumulate "worthy" people (*xian* 賢), just as someone who wants to regulate his/her body needs to accumulate his vital essence *jing*. If worthy people are accumulated around a ruler, then subordinates and ordinates will complete each other. The mutual cooperation of two forces defines the well-being of an entity. Only if one hundred offices each attain their place will the state be safe.

Chapters 18 through 22 are closely connected due to their conceptual affinities and overlapping vocabulary, forming a cohesive unit that examines how rulers can maintain power and manage bureaucracy (Arbuckle 1991; Queen 1996; Buljan 2021). Although the terms *ming* (name) and *shi* (actuality) are not explicitly mentioned in Chapters 18 and 22, these provide crucial context for understanding this topic.

Despite comprising a relatively small portion of the text, chapters 18 through 12 are significant for understanding the concept of proper naming in Western Han administrative discourse. First, they propose specific strategies for rulers to govern the bureaucracy, demonstrating how naming and titles are integral to effective state management. Second, they reflect diverse perspectives on rulership—likely due to contributions from multiple authors—offering valuable insights into varying interpretations of the relationship between *ming* and *shi* in governance. Third, they underscore the interconnections between language, power, reality, knowledge, and socio-political order.

Finally, these chapters represent a relatively underexplored aspect of the *Chunqiu fanlu*'s discourse on proper naming, standing in contrast to the widely studied Chapter 35, "Thorough Examination of Names" (*Shen chao ming fa* 深察名號), which has long been the focus of scholarly attention.[8] By examining these lesser-studied chapters, we gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced role of naming in early Han administrative and political thought.

This paper begins by contextualizing the debate surrounding titles and actualities within the political and philosophical framework of the Han dynasty. It then provides a cosmological foundation for aligning titles and actualities.[9] Following this, the analysis explores the act of naming itself. Finally, the paper references the works of Austin and Butler to illuminate the performative dimensions of naming. It argues that the idea of aligning titles and actualities is influenced by a cosmological paradigm, emphasizing that processes of change and accumulation are fundamental to creation. Furthermore, it highlights the performative role of language in correcting names, illustrating that language is not merely descriptive but also a form of social action capable of enacting change. Through these explorations, this paper aims to deepen our understanding of the concept of aligning titles and actualities within Western Han political and administrative thought.

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8   For instance, this chapter was analysed by Roetz (2006), Makeham (1994), and Dai and Abdullah (2024).

9   In ethical theory, the debate on the incongruence between names and titles is addressed under the concept of *zhengming* ("rectification of names"), while in administrative contexts, it is framed as the relationship between *ming* ("names") and *shi* ("actualities").

Titles and Actualities in Han Governance

The Han dynasty was the first stable, long-lasting, and politically powerful Chinese empire. It succeeded the brief and tumultuous Qin dynasty 秦朝 (221–207 BCE). The Qin dynasty ruled over states that were in conflict during the Warring States period (*Zhan guo* 戰國), which lasted from 475 to 221 BCE. The Han Empire was comparable to the Roman Empire in terms of territory and population. Its domain stretched across parts of Central Asia, Vietnam, North Korea, and most of present-day China. As the empire expanded, the centralized state faced increasing administrative challenges. Managing a vast and diverse population requires an efficient bureaucracy capable of maintaining order and stability. The traditional recommendation system often led to nepotism, favouritism, and corruption, failing to meet the demands of this expanding bureaucracy.

By the reign of Emperor Wu 武帝 (156–87 BCE, r. 140–87 BCE), the challenges of managing a growing and complex bureaucratic state had intensified, prompting vigorous discussions on how to recruit, evaluate, and manage officials effectively. Central to these debates was the issue of the misalignment between official titles (*ming*) and actual performance (*shi*). Bureaucratic appointments, often shaped by social status or family connections, frequently placed individuals in roles for which they were ill-suited, leading to inefficiencies and undermining state stability. Resolving this misalignment became a central concern of Han administrative thought, as scholars sought ways to ensure that titles accurately reflected individuals' abilities and contributions.

Three distinct approaches to evaluation systems emerged to address these challenges:

1. Virtue-based systems: These supported traditional practices of nomination and recommendation, emphasizing moral integrity and character as key criteria for selecting and evaluating officials. This approach reflected *ruist* ideals, prioritizing qualities like "sincerity" / "moral character" (*cheng* 誠), "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝), and being "incorruptible" (*lian* 廉).

2. Merit-based systems: Advocating a more pragmatic perspective, these systems emphasized the promotion or dismissal of officials based on measurable performance, tangible achievements, and administrative efficiency. Proposals included the use of written examinations, performance evaluations, and other objective criteria to ensure accountability and reward merit.

3. Virtue-merit hybrid systems: Combining aspects of both, this approach sought to balance moral integrity with practical competence. It advocated the use of written examinations to assess abilities while retaining a focus on virtues like sincerity and moral character.

These debates were not merely theoretical but reflected real tensions in governance. For example, Dong Zhongshu, in one of his memorials to Emperor Wu (as recorded in the *Hanshu* 漢書, the *Book of Han*, which remains the most reliable source of his thought), advocated for a balanced system that emphasized both "moral character" (*cheng*) and "practical contributions" (*gong* 功). According to Dong, an ideal official should embody both virtues and the ability to produce tangible results (*Hanshu* n.d., 56.2499).[10] On the other hand, more pragmatic voices, such as those expressed in the "legalist-oriented" texts, emphasized a strictly results-oriented approach. They argued that officials should be judged solely on their effectiveness in delivering measurable outcomes (*gong*) and their contributions to state stability. This view underpinned the development of systematic merit-rating mechanisms, such as the *kaoji* system described in the *Chunqiu fanlu* (*A Concordance to the Chunqiu fanlu* 1994, 7: 1.16; henceforth *ICS CQFL*.) This system meticulously recorded achievements and failures to ensure accountability and transparency in promotions and dismissals.

These diverse perspectives highlight the dynamic interplay between Confucian (*ruist*) ideals and pragmatic statecraft during the Han dynasty, reflecting the broader intellectual and administrative challenges of balancing virtue and ability in governance. The internal conflict between the values of virtue and ability, central to Han dynasty debates, was vividly exemplified in a famous debate held in 81 BCE, purportedly transcribed by Huan Kuan 桓寬 (early 1st century BCE) in his *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (*Discussions on Salt and Iron*). This tension was shaped by two key factors in Han political culture. On one hand, the expansive policies of Emperor Wu and their continuation under his great-grandson, Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–48 BCE), placed growing administrative demands on the Han Empire. These demands prioritized competence and tangible achievements as essential for effective governance, fostering a performance-oriented culture that valued practical results over purely ethical considerations. On the other hand, Emperor Wu's establishment of an imperial academy, staffed with scholars specializing in the *Wujing* 五經 (*Five Classics*), reinforced the primacy of moral integrity and ethical governance. Namely, the *Wujing* were canonized by imperial edict in 136 BCE under Emperor Wu, solidifying their status as moral and intellectual foundations of governance. Later, under Emperor Yuan 元 (r. 48–33 BCE), knowledge of the Classics became a primary criterion for appointing officials to the highest positions in the imperial bureaucracy, further elevating virtue and moral character as central values.

This dual emphasis on ability and virtue created an enduring tension within the Han bureaucracy between practical achievements and traditional values rooted in moral character. These conflicting priorities not only influenced administrative practices but also shaped the intellectual and cultural trajectory of Chinese

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10   Number 56 designates roll (*juan*), the second number designates a page (*Qian Fu Lun*).

civilization, laying the groundwork for a governance model that sought to balance ethical ideals with practical effectiveness. When comparing the features of Han thought with those of the classical Warring States period, several distinctions emerge. The philosophy of the Warring States period primarily focused on restoring political and social order amidst the collapse of Zhou feudal structures. In contrast, Han intellectual thought extended its ambitions beyond stability, aiming for sustained progress through the principles of merit and labour. This shift represents a significant cultural evolution. While Warring States philosophy concentrated on stabilizing a fragmented society, Han thought prioritized long-term governance by integrating moral and practical values. The Han emphasis on aligning titles with actual performance not only addressed the administrative demands of a vast empire, but also reflected an emerging philosophical synthesis that connected labour, merit, and effective governance.

This debate represented a pivotal moment in Chinese political thought and paved the way for later developments, such as the "Nine-Rank System" (*jiu pin* 九品), a civil service classification framework established in 220 CE.[11] Consequently, the Han period played a crucial role in shaping China's imperial bureaucracy. The alignment of titles with actual performance reflected the Han Empire's pragmatic response to the challenges of governing a vast and diverse territory. This focus on congruence was both a practical necessity and a broader effort to create a stable and harmonious socio-political order.

The Order of Nature

In order to understand the concept of proper naming, it is vital to depict its cosmological background. More specifically, the political philosophy of the Statecraft chapters, including its theory of naming, is based on several cosmological principles concerning the order of nature characteristic of the Western Han period (Buljan 2024). Firstly, they begin from the presupposition that the universe is an ordered unity consisting of its interactive members: "Heaven, Earth and Man" (*Tian Di ren* 天地人). Each of these three members has its specific position, nature and role. The LYS explains this as follows:

天地人, 萬物之本也. 天生之, 地養之, 人成之。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.6: 26)[12]

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11   The nine-rank system was established by Chen Qun 陳群 (d. 236), the imperial secretary responsible for personnel management. It remained in use throughout the early medieval period (220–589) and was eventually abolished after the unification of China in the Sui dynasty. In 583, Emperor Sui Yangdi 隋煬帝 (569–618) replaced the nine-rank system by introducing public examinations.

12   In a similar way, Lu Jia opens his *New Treatise*: "Heaven creates ten thousand creatures, employs Earth to nurture them, and sages complete them." (Goldin and Sabattini 2020, 20)

> Heaven, Earth and Man are the root of the ten thousand things. Heaven gives them birth, Earth nourishes them, and Man brings them to completion.

When each member acts in accordance with their specific nature and position, a "great order" is created (Loewe 2005, 39). The unity of these three interactive members is such that the universe can be viewed as a living organism, interacting "like hands and feet" and the fate of any of these members affects the fate of the other members. As the LYS puts it:

> 三者相為手足, 合以成禮, 不可一無也。

> These three mutually act as the hand and the foot, they join to complete the ritual. One cannot be without either one of these. (Ibid.)

In this ordered unity, all three members/spheres operate according to the same principles.

The second operative presupposition is a "correlative" way of thinking and arguing. Correlative cosmology starts from the thesis that all beings, things and phenomena are intrinsically connected. In this paradigm, entities, processes, and classes of phenomena found in nature correspond to or "go together with" various entities, processes, and classes of phenomena in the human world (Schwartz 1985, 351). In this context, the principles of nature can be read in the social order just as the principles of social order can be read in nature.

A form of correlative thinking that reached its peak during the Western Han dynasty (approximately 200 BCE to the first century CE) is known as "the state analogy" (Henderson 2003, 188). This concept is based on the correspondence between the cosmos and the imperial state or bureaucracy. It draws a parallel between the workings of the cosmos and the proper functioning of the state, linking the conduct of the ruler with Heaven and the actions of the ministers with the Earth.

In addition, one implication of correlative thought is an assumption that nature is structured through oppositions *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. The dynamicity /change is linked to two complementary organismic processes which require each other as a necessary condition for being what they are. This is obvious in the Statecraft chapters' view of proper alignment, which is built around the complementary processes/pairs, such as Heaven/Earth,[13] ruler/ministers (ruled), "hiding/showing" (*cang*

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13   The Statecraft chapters explore rulers' and their subordinates' interdependent and complementary roles. Aligning titles with corresponding responsibilities should be considered as part of a larger order of nature. It is essential that officials hold appropriate and fitting positions and that their titles align accurately with their respective roles.

藏 / *jian* 見), "inwardly/outwardly" (*nei* 內 / *wai* 外), action/inaction, speech/silence, "rewards/punishments" (*shang* 賞 / *fa* 罰), "actuality/fame" (*shi* 實 / *ming* 名), "achievement/fame" (*gong* 功 / *ming* 名), "achievement/misdeeds" (*gong* 功 / *zui* 罪), "worthy/foolish" (*xian* 賢 / *yu* 愚), "substance/ornament" (*zhi* 質 / *wen* 文), "happiness/anger" (*xu* 喜 / *nu* 怒).[14]

The phrase "the language of correlativity is the language of process" (Hall and Ames 1991, 102) indicates that correlative thinking best corresponds to the ideas of dynamism, constant change and continuity. According to such a view, nature is basically incomplete and there is no fully completed "world" as depicted, for example, in Greek antiquity (Veljak 2012, 1125). Rather, there is only the world in constant movement, development, emergence and self-generating transformation, as described in the chapter "Discussion on the Patterns of Heaven" (Tian Wen Xun 天文訓) from the *Huainanzi*.

Furthermore, the process of accumulation (*ji* 積) is the fundamental process of reality and can be applied to the creation and emergence of every aspect of existence (Buljan 2021, 186). For example, Heaven generates light by accumulating vital elements, as the LYS and KGM state.[15] This principle also applies to human beings, as highlighted by the TGS, which states:

［賢］, 積精為寶. (*ICS CQFL* 7.2: 29)[16]

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14   In addition to this, the political discourse of the Statecraft chapters are constructed around the following complementary/polar pairs: "likes/dislikes" (*hao* 好 / *wu* 惡), "encouraging/frightening" (*quan* 勸 / *wei* 畏), "rewards/punishments" (*shang* 賞 / *fa* 罰), "political power/moral power" (*quan* 權 / *de* 德), "pure/impure" (*qing* 清 /*zhuo* 濁), "glorious/disgraceful" (*rong* 榮 / *ru* 辱), "non-action/action" (*wu wei* 無為 / *youwei* 有為), "coming out/returning" (*chu* 出 / *gui* 歸), and "achievement/fame" (*gong* 功 / *ming* 名), "ruler/ministers" (*jun* 君 / *chen* 臣), "noble/base" (*gui* 貴 / *jian* 賤), "body/mind" (*shen* 身 / *xin* 心), and "honoured/humbled" (*zun* 尊 / *bei* 卑), "luxury/tyranny" (*fu* 富 / *wei* 威), "sound/echo" (*sheng* 聲 / *xiang* 響), "shape/shadow" (*xing* 形 / *ying* 影), "high/below" (*gao* 高 / *xia* 下), "position/bestowing" (*li* 位 / *she* 施), "form/light" (*xing* 形 / *guang* 光), "honoured/humane" (*zun* 尊 / *ren* 仁), "divine/illuminated" (*shen* 神 / *ming* 明), "hiding/showing" (*cang* 藏 / *jian* 見), "inwardly/outwardly" (*nei* 內 / *wai* 外), action/inaction, speech/silence; political power/moral power (*quan* 權 / *de* 德) (Buljan 2016, 80).

15   The LYS states: 天積眾精以自剛, 聖人積眾賢以自強. 天序日月星辰以自光, 聖人序爵祿以自明。天所以剛者, 非一精之力; 聖人所以強者, 非一賢之德也。(*ICS CQFL* 26: 6.6) (Heaven [*tian*] accumulates numerous vital elements [*jing*] in order to make itself firm. The sage accumulates numerous worthies in order to make himself strong. Heaven arranges the days and months, the stars and celestial bodies in order to make itself bright [*guang*]. The sage arranges salaries and emoluments in order to make himself brilliant [*ming*]. What makes Heaven strong does not consist of the strength of one vital element [*jing*]. What makes a sage powerful does not consist of the virtuous act [*de*] of one worthy man. Thus, Heaven exerts itself in proliferating its vital elements, a sage exerts himself in increasing the number of his worthy people.)

16   The *Huainanzi* emphasized: "accumulate wisdom and multiply generosity, gather love and concentrate kindness" (Major et al. 2010, 60).

> One who governs a body [*shen*] considers the accumulation of the vital essence [*jing*] to be his treasure.

The concept of accumulation took on a new significance during the new Han Empire, which prioritized community, collective effort, and unity. Han thinkers built ethical, political, and administrative frameworks around the principle of accumulation. Within this context, as I already pointed out, the KGM articulates a vision of the future and the attainment of "Supreme Peace" (*tai ping* 太平), emphasizing that progress toward this ideal depends on the consistent "accumulation of good deeds" (*ji shan* 積善) and accomplishments (Buljan 2024, 359). Roger T. Ames observes that the concept of "radial order" is a defining feature of the Chinese understanding of order during the Han dynasty. This refers to a centripetal structure characterized by the authority of a central figure, radiating outward in concentric circles from the core (Ames 1995, 242). Politically, this framework positions the ruler at the centre of the cosmos. The ruler is depicted as the "source" (*yuan* 元), the "root" (*ben* 本), the "witness" (*zheng* 證), the "wellspring" (*yuan quan* 源泉), and the "foundation" (*shu ji* 樞機) of all things. In this context, the sage-ruler holds the ultimate authority to "assign titles" (*ming* 名), symbolizing their pivotal role in establishing and maintaining order. This structure is further reinforced by the principle of accumulating and "gathering" (*ji* 聚) the finest elements of the entity around its core. To fulfil the dual responsibility of sustaining both political and cosmic order, the ruler must assemble the most capable and virtuous individuals (as seen in TGS and LYS) and consolidate their achievements (KGM). As stated in the TGS:

> 賢積於其主, 則上下相製使。 (*ICS CQFL* 7.2: 29)

> If the worthy are accumulated in their regulator [*zhu*], then superiors and inferiors mutually control and employ each other.

Consequently, the political and administrative structure of the Han can be understood as a centripetal system, driven by the principles of accumulation, gathering and processuality.[17]

This order of nature and worldview had significant implications for the perceived role of humans within the cosmos, their relationships with other living beings, and the ontological nature of human activity and labour. Western Han thinkers, operating under the belief that the world is a continuous process of creation rather than a completed entity, saw humans as playing a crucial "cosmic" role: to complete the natural processes initiated by Heaven and Earth. The LYS states:

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17   The interrelation of these principles—correlativity, accumulation, processuality, and radial order—becomes evident in the opening passage of the KGM chapter. It draws an analogy between the workings of a bureaucratic state and the natural world arguing that, just as Heaven generates light by accumulating the finest elements of an entity, the sage similarly cultivates peace through a gradual and continuous process.

天生之, 地養之, 人成之。天生之以孝。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.6: 26)

Heaven gives them birth, Earth nourishes them, and Man brings them to completion.

The creation of world begins with Heaven, but it is humanity's responsibility to sustain and complete this endeavour. This perspective underscores humanity's pivotal role, portraying individuals not merely as products of the world but as agents tasked with transforming an incomplete realm into a realized vision of harmony. In this vision, individuals are co-creators, actively shaping the world through their work and labour.

Human labour is imbued with cosmological significance, integrating seamlessly into the broader framework of natural processes. When aligned with these, human effort fosters progress and the pursuit of goodness, driving the dynamic journey toward harmony and peace. Culture and civilization, crafted through human effort, must therefore be understood as extensions of the natural processes of Heaven and Earth. This idea is elaborated by Lu Jia, an early Han thinker, who emphasized the continuity between human endeavour and the workings of the cosmos.[18]

Ontologically, human work was not seen as distinct or separate from the natural processes of the world. While human labour is *specificum humanum*, uniquely human, it remains intrinsically connected to the natural order. Through diligent effort, humanity achieves cultural advancements that distinguish individuals from their natural state. These achievements, including language as a product of human creativity, highlight humanity's role in the ongoing co-creative process.

Language, in particular, plays a pivotal role. The act of proper naming reinforces humanity's place within the cosmic order, ensuring clarity and alignment with natural harmony. Similarly, bureaucratic practices, such as the proper awarding

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18   In this context, Lu Jia suggests that without humans other living things could not achieve wholeness or completeness:

Donkeys, mules, camels, rhinoceroses, elephants, sea turtles, amber, coral, kingfisher's plumes, pearls, and jade: are generated on mountains or are stored in the ocean. Each dwells in its chosen region, pure and bright, immersed in moist wetlands. They are so hard that they cannot be made thin, so white that they cannot be made black. Generated by Heavenly breath and put in order by divine numina, they are obscure, tranquil, pure and unspoiled. They float and sink according to supernatural forces. They are all useful as instruments and can be fully utilised as utensils. This is the reason why it is said: 'The sages complete them.' The [sages] can govern creatures and understand changes by regulating natural dispositions and manifesting humanity and righteousness. (Goldin and Sabattini 2020, 16.29)

While anthropocentric views began to emerge during the Eastern Zhou period, these ideas underwent significant development during the Han dynasty.

of titles, serve as essential mechanisms for maintaining social order and fostering collective progress. In this way, human labour, cultural creation, and institutional practices converge as vital elements in the pursuit of a harmonious world, blending human ingenuity with the enduring processes of Heaven and Earth.

For our topic, it is also crucial to observe that Western Han philosophers believed that nature is knowable. However, due to the processuality of nature, such knowledge is reserved for the sage. The sage alone possesses insight into the world's patterns, its inherent changeability, and the underlying order, knowing how to align with these. Following the above-stated presumptions, as I claimed earlier, the Statecraft chapters form a "naturalistic model" of bureaucracy, drawing on entities from nature and legitimising their perspective by establishing a naturalistic approach to rulership that seeks normativity within the realm of nature (Buljan 2021). Their model sharply contrasts with a rational bureaucratic model based on the metaphor of a machine, with the components of the former being likened to the parts of a mechanical device (Buljan 2024, 386).

The Purpose and Consequences of Proper Naming

In the Statecraft chapters, the concept of *ming* encompasses not only an official's title or position but also the reputation associated with that role. Within this framework, names are closely linked to ranks and offices within the state or bureaucracy. Likewise, a "name" can signify the reputation ascribed to an individual—for example, being esteemed as "virtuous" (*xian* 賢) or dismissed as "foolish" (*yu* 愚), as illustrated in the KGM. In some instances, *ming* even extends to the fame or prestige of the ruler, as demonstrated in the BWQ. In contrast, *shi* represents one's actuality, i.e. the effectiveness of an individual fulfilling a role, holding a specific rank, or serving in a particular office.

The Statecraft chapters highlight the alignment of names with actualities as a fundamental "method" (*shu* 術) for effective governance. Titles and roles must not only occupy appropriate positions, but also accurately reflect their designated functions. This alignment ensures coherence between a name and its associated role, enabling a dynamic assessment of whether the role is properly fulfilled. For example, when someone is appointed as an official, they are granted a title reflecting their position and duties. Over time, this title should be reviewed to evaluate whether their performance meets the expectations of the role.

Importantly, as Moeller notes, this process does not involve arbitrarily coining new names. The ruler's task of "making names factual" ensures titles correspond to actual circumstances, such as granting ranks based on merit, thus maintaining order and harmony (Moeller 1996, 482). This method aligns titles

with the actualities of individuals and their roles, ensuring that appointments, promotions, and demotions are based on true competence (*shi*) rather than reputation alone (*ming*).

As stated in the BWQ:

> 擊名考質，以參其實。賞不空施，罰不虛出。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.7: 27)

> In examining an official, the ruler investigates his nature through his reputation to understand his actual situation ... Rewards are not given for nothing, punishments are not handed down for nothing.

Similarly, the KGM emphasizes the practice of rewarding and punishing officials based on their actual performance, rather than on titles or reputations:

> 考績紬陡，計事除廢，有益者謂之公，無益者謂之煩擊名責實，不得虛言，有功者賞，有罪者罰，功盛者賞顯，罪多者罰重。

> 不能致功, 雖有賢名不予之賞;官職不廢, 雖有愚名, 不加之罰。

> 賞罰用於實, 不用於名, 賢愚在於質, 不在於文。 (*ICS CQFL* 7.1: 28)

> He examines an official's merit, sums up the results of his undertakings, and then assigns him to a post or dismisses him. Those who have made beneficial contributions are called "public-spirited" [*gong*], while those who have not are called "problematic" [*fan*]. He grabs his reputation [*ming*] and demands actual performance [*shi*]—this cannot be empty words. Those who have attained achievements are rewarded, and those who have committed misdeeds are punished. Those with abundant achievements are generously rewarded, and those with many misdeeds are heavily punished. Despite possessing a worthy reputation, those who fail to achieve will not be rewarded. Conversely, despite possessing a reputation for foolishness, those who fulfil their duties will not be punished.

Proper naming aims to create a well-administered state where "right" (*shi* 是) and "wrong" (*fei* 非) are clearly distinguishable, where the state can differentiate between capable and incapable individuals, and where officials are motivated to perform their duties:

> 故是非不能混，喜怒不能傾，姦軌不能弄，萬物各得其真，則百官勸職，爭進其功。 (*ICS CQFL* 7.1: 28)

> Therefore, right and wrong cannot be confused, happiness and anger remain balanced, villains and traitors cannot prosper, and each of

the ten thousand things must find its proper place. In this way, all officials are stimulated to perform their duties and strive to advance their achievements.

This practice enables the state to identify virtuous and capable individuals while recognizing those who do not contribute positively, ensuring that the most qualified individuals occupy appropriate roles. Proper naming thus does more than just assign titles, as it ensures that titles align with actual abilities, placing officials in positions where they "fit" (*yi* 宜), as the LHG explains, and where they can maximize their impact. When officials are correctly named and placed according to their abilities, they are motivated to fulfil their duties and contribute to the state's success.

Furthermore, proper naming promotes collective achievement. As noted in the BWQ:

是以群臣分職而治，各敬而事，爭進其功，顯廣其名，而人君得載其中，此自然致力之術也。聖人由之，故功出於臣，名歸於君也。 (ICS CQFL 6.7: 27)

For this reason, his many ministers divide their tasks, and so the country is governed. Each carries out their duties respectfully, striving to advance their achievements, thereby expanding their fame. The ruler's fame is thereby sustained. This is the technique by which achievement is naturally brought forth. The sage follows this, and therefore, achievement (*gong*) emanates from his ministers, and fame (*ming*) returns to the ruler.

Ultimately, it is only through collective efforts—the accumulation of results—that lasting peace (*tai ping*) is achieved, as emphasized in the KGM:

天道積聚眾精以為光；聖人積聚眾善以為功；故日月之明，非一精之光也；聖人致太平，非一善之功也。明所從生，不可為源，善所從出，不可為端。 (*ICS CQFL* 7. 1: 28)

The way of Heaven accumulates and assembles a multitude of vital elements [*jing*] to create light. A sage accumulates numerous good deeds [*shan*] to create merit. Thus, the brightness of the sun and moon does not consist of the light of a single element, nor does the sage's spreading of peace rely on the merit of a single deed. The source of brightness cannot be a single point, and the source of goodness cannot be traced to a single cause.

By ensuring that officials are appointed based on merit and that their responsibilities match their abilities, the ruler creates a system where individual efforts contribute to the collective good, ensuring the state's success. Proper naming is thus not merely about assigning titles, but about linking individual achievement with state prosperity. This alignment promotes efficient governance, supports the ruler's authority, and maintains political stability. The ultimate goal of the alignment of names with actualities is to achieve tangible outcomes that enhance the well-being of the state and its people.[19] Consequently, the Statecraft chapters adopt a consequentialist perspective on naming, and prioritizing practical results—such as order, efficiency, and peace—over abstract ideals. From the context of the entire unit, it can be inferred that the *ming/shi* concept is integral to a theory of rulership centred on attracting worthy individuals to the court and motivating them through promotions.

Beyond its administrative functions, proper naming in the Statecraft chapters is closely tied to the rhetoric of power and the consolidation of authority. First, those in power (sage-rulers) have the authority to assign titles (*ming*). Second, proper naming is a crucial tool for maintaining authority, enabling those in power to control and guide individuals, which reinforces their dominance. This process of naming and categorizing individuals into specific roles allows rulers to exert their influence, ensuring political order and the continuation of their authority. Third, the act of proper naming has tangible effects within the bureaucratic system, highlighting the significant influence of language in shaping political actualities. Lastly, a ruler's fame (*ming*), which is closely tied to their power, is "returned to the ruler", as described in the BWQ, due to the efficiency of the bureaucracy. The ruler's reputation is inherently linked to the proper alignment of names and titles. An organized system of naming and categorization not only ensures administrative efficiency, but also enhances the ruler's authority and political standing.

Epistemic Problems with Naming

There are two main epistemic problems related to the alignment of names with actuality. The first problem concerns the complex nature of reality, and the second pertains to the mental state of the one who is in charge of naming. As I will

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19   In addition, as I showed earlier, the KGM connects proper naming with the promotion of "benefit" (*li* 利) and the elimination of "harm" (*hai* 害), as well as principles such as "righteousness" (*yi*), equality (in opportunities and treatment), and the establishment of objective standards within the bureaucratic system. It emphasizes values like efficiency, achievement, public interest (*gong*), effort, persistence, the promotion of worthiness, merit, hard work, and commitment to the public good (Buljan 2024, 387).

show, there are three key issues concerning the nature of reality: first, its hidden-ness; second, its constant flux; and third, its character as something accumulated.

The Complex Nature of Reality

The Hidden Nature of Reality

The first epistemic challenge lies in the difficulty of accurately discerning reality (*shi*), which is often concealed or obscured. As Heraclitus famously stated, "Nature likes to hide", Plato argued that "Reality is deceptive", and *Qianfu lun* noted that

善惡無彰。 (*Qian Fu Lun* 1919, 2)

Good and evil are not manifested.

These reflections suggest that reality can be hidden, misleading, and cognitively unreliable. This challenge is especially relevant for administrative personnel and officials, whose actions and intentions may not always be fully transparent:

因國以為身, 因臣以為心, 以臣言為聲, 以臣事為形; 有聲必有響, 有形必有影; 聲出於內, 響報於外; 形立於上, 影應於下; 響有清濁, 影有曲直; 響所報, 非一聲也, 影所應, 非一形也。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.7:27)

On the basis of regarding the country as the body, and the ministers as the heart, the ruler regards the ministers' language as sound, and their deeds as form. If a sound exists, its echo must surely exist; if a form exists, its shadow must surely exist. A sound comes from within, its echo replies from without; a form stands above, its shadow casts below. The echo may be clear or muddied, the shadow crooked or straight. What the echo responds with is not just one sound; what the shadow casts is not just one form.

In this passage, the BWQ uses metaphorical language to illustrate how reality is often perceived in fragmented or distorted ways. What is immediately visible, such as sound or form, is complemented by what is latent, like "echoes" (*xiang* 響) or "shadows" (*ying* 影). Therefore, understanding reality requires attention to both the visible and concealed aspects, as each represents only a partial truth.

This distinction is echoed in the KGM and BWQ, which differentiate between the "visible" (ornamental) (*wen* 文) and the "hidden" (substantive) (*zhi* 質) aspects of reality. The external appearance may obscure the true nature, highlighting the importance of looking beyond surface appearances to understand true competence

and moral integrity. The LYS further addresses this challenge with the metaphor of "openness and seclusion" (*kai he* 開闔):

可以內參外, 可以小佔大, 必知其實, 是說開闔。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.6:26)

It is possible to rely on the inner to verify the outer. It is possible to rely on the insignificant to verify the significant. The ruler must know their actuality. This is called 'openness and seclusion'.

This stresses the need to discern between one's "outward" appearances (*wai* 內) and "inner" actualities (*nei* 外) and to pay attention to small, often overlooked details that can reveal deeper truths about character and intent.

The BWQ also emphasizes the need to uncover the hidden (*bi* 蔽) or obscured (*wei* 微):

以著蔽微, 不以眾掩寡。 (*ICS CQFL* 6.7:27)

He does not let the evident hide the obscure; he does not allow the majority to veil the minority.

This reinforces the idea that governance requires insight into both the obvious and the hidden, recognizing that some aspects of reality are concealed, and deeper layers require careful examination.

Ultimately, these discussions underscore the importance of discernment in evaluating one's actions and intentions. The challenge of distinguishing between superficial appearances and deeper truths is central to effective governance, where the ability to see through layers of appearance is essential for sound judgment and administration.

The Ever-Changing Nature of Reality

The second epistemic challenge arises from the fact that reality (*shi*) is not static, but is constantly changing. This dynamism is reflected in the etymology of the character *shi*. As James Daryl Sellmann points out, *shi* means "fruition" and signifies the achievement of a bountiful harvest. As he explains, "From the agricultural perspective, the character *shi* means 'fruition' – the achievement of a bountiful harvest. … What is 'real' is the process of maturation and efficacy" (Sellmann 2002, 193). The connotations of the character *shi* highlight its temporal and processual nature. Actuality is not a fixed entity but an unfolding process that continuously shifts and evolves. Therefore, the concept of *shi* should be understood within a framework of dynamic ontology.

The dynamic nature of reality presents an epistemic challenge: it is difficult to accurately name or categorize something that is constantly changing. Consequently, the process of "correcting names"—aligning names with actualities—becomes an ongoing effort that must continuously adapt to the shifting relationship between *ming* (names) and *shi* (actualities). When discussing the performance of officials, the term *shi* suggests that performance is not a fixed category but one that evolves over time. This insight, when placed within the broader context of governance, indicates that the task of discerning and naming is not simply a static act of classification, but is instead an iterative process that requires attentiveness to change. This highlights the need for adaptability and vigilance in both naming and understanding, ensuring that names accurately reflect the dynamic actualities they represent.

Accumulated Reality

The additional epistemic issue lies in the notion that what is deemed "actual" (*shi*) is fundamentally the fruit of one's effort. In this context, reality is not an intrinsic state but an accumulated construct—an aggregation of actions and performances over time. This concept of accumulation is encapsulated in the opening of the KGM chapter:

考之法。考其所積也 。 (*ICS CQFL* 7.1: 28)

The correct way [*fa*] to examine merit [*ji*] consists of examining what [an official] has accumulated.

An official's *shi* is not the outcome of a singular event but rather the cumulative result of continuous performances, achievements, and failures over time. Thus, reality, in this context, is conceptualized as a continuity of accomplishments that collectively shape an individual's performative identity. In my earlier work, I argued that this idea draws from Xunzi's 荀子 (3rd century BCE) view on identity and self-cultivation, which greatly influenced the KGM. Xunzi emphasizes that personal development is the result of continuous accumulation, much like how the piling up of earth forms a mountain and the gathering of water creates the sea. In his words, "If a person from the street, one of the hundred clans, accumulates goodness and achieves it completely, you may call him a sage" (積善而全盡, 謂之聖人) (*Xunzi* 1996, 8: 34.5).

One's *shi* signifies a dynamic process of "becoming", where identity is forged through sustained effort and repeated actions over time. Titles thus function as markers of an individual's ongoing journey rather than fixed designations. Within this framework, *shi* is measurable and calculable—a tangible manifestation of a person's sustained efforts and accumulated merits. Consequently, an individual's

title should encapsulate the totality of their contributions and achievements, as highlighted in the KGM. This, however, introduces an epistemic challenge in the act of naming: ensuring that the title accurately captures the full scope of what an individual has accomplished.

Performative Acts and Actuality (Shi)

Judith Butler's theory of performativity could offer valuable insights into *shi*, particularly in the context of titles. Butler argues that identity is not innate or fixed, but rather a dynamic, evolving construct shaped by behaviour and reinforced through repeated actions—a continuous process of becoming (Butler 1990, 33). This highlights the fluid and processual nature of roles, emphasizing the interplay among action, recognition, and identity construction.

Building on this, Butler's insights emphasize that naming—whether assigning a title or defining an identity—is not a static act, but rather an iterative process that must continually adapt to the realities it seeks to represent. Both Butler and Xunzi highlight the performative nature of identity and reality, presenting them as processes of becoming rather than fixed states.

In this light, titles are dynamic constructs, validated and redefined through their continuous alignment with *shi*. Similarly, an official's *shi*—the actuality of their position—should not be viewed as a fixed identity or role, but rather as a dynamic construct, composed of a series of acts that accumulate and evolve over time. *Shi*, in this sense, can be understood as an evolving set of actions that continuously shape the official's identity and role within the bureaucracy.

Titles must reflect both an individual's current role and the historical trajectory of their contributions, framing identity as part of an ongoing narrative. This dual requirement underscores the complexity of aligning *shi* with *ming*, because how can a title simultaneously capture both the immediate and historical dimensions of an evolving actuality? The challenge of fully articulating an official's *shi* reveals the intricate relationship between recognition and identity formation. This perspective sheds light on the epistemic complexities of governance and identity formation, where naming, titles, and *shi* are interrelated and in constant flux.

Cognitive and Emotional Limitations in the Act of Naming

The second epistemic issue involves the cognitive and emotional limitations that can distort an individual's perception of reality. The LHG, LYS and BWQ chapters suggest that subjective judgment, influenced by "personal bias" (*si* 私) and

emotions like "happiness and anger" (*xu nu* 喜怒), affect how names are assigned or corrected. This emphasizes that the act of naming, while meant to categorize and clarify reality, is susceptible to error when emotional biases are not controlled.

Epistemic hiddenness and the complex nature of reality both deal with the idea that truth is often obscured, whether by the inherent nature of things or by human cognitive and emotional limitations. The difficulty in correctly applying names (titles) arises from both the hiddenness of reality and the epistemic limitations of the person performing the act of naming.

A Path to Overcoming Epistemic Hiddenness

Non-Action (Wu Wei)

The challenge of epistemic hiddenness—how to fully understand and evaluate the layers of reality that are not immediately visible—requires a multifaceted approach. First, as the focal chapters note, those responsible for naming must manage their own emotions to avoid misjudgements. An effective ruler, according to the LYS, BWQ and LHG, must adopt the cognitive-emotional position of non-action (*wu wei*). As the LHG states:

> 故為人主者, 以無為為道, 以不私為寶。 (*CQFL* 6.5: 25)

> Thus, one who acts as the ruler of men considers non-action [*wu wei*] to be the way [*Dao*] and impartiality to be the treasure.

In this position "one who acts as a ruler empties his mind and dwells in stillness". The LYS states that the will of such a rule is "like dead ash" (*zhi ru si hui* 志如死灰) and his form is "like discarded clothes" (*xing ru wei yi* 形如委衣).[20] Securing vital essences (*jing* 精) and nourishing divinity (*shen* 神), a ruler achieves clarity and impartiality. This detachment is essential for navigating the complex actualities underlying naming and governance. In this state, the ruler refrains from emotionally driven measures, such as using rewards or punishments based on personal emotions, and acting toward scholars with an empty heart (*xu xin xia shi* 虛心下士).

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20   The LYS states: "志如死灰, 形如委衣, 安精養神, 寂寞無為, 休形無見影, 揜聲無出音, 虛心下士。" (ICS CQFL 6.6: 25) (His will is like death ash [*si hui*], his form is like discarded clothes [*wei yi*], he secures vital elements [*jing*] and nourishes divinity [*shen*], he is still and does not act, he settles his body and does not manifest a shadow, his voice is hidden and does not make a sound, with empty heart he acts toward scholars.)

Observing, Testing and Examining

The Statecraft chapters advocate for "observing matters widely" (*wai bo guan* 外 博觀) and thorough "examination" (*cha* 察), urging attention to the smallest and most subtle aspects of reality, stating that one who acts as a ruler "respects the small and is careful in the minute" (*zun xiao shen wei* 敬小慎微). These practices are intended to uncover hidden layers of reality that are not immediately apparent to the observer. The necessity of focusing on neglected and seemingly insignificant aspects of reality is further emphasized in the BWQ, which highlights concepts like "shadows", "echoes", the "insignificant", and the "inner". Addressing challenges requires careful attention to overlooked details—forms and their shadows, sounds and their echoes. Similarly, the KGM calls for investigating one's inner "nature" or "substance" (*zhi* 質) rather than focusing solely on external refinement, such as ornamentation, "patterns", or "outer form" (*wen* 文).

The LYS expands on this approach by emphasizing the observation of people's actions and interactions, consulting wise advisors to gain diverse perspectives, and investigating intentions and inner dispositions (*qing* 情). It also underscores the evaluation of preferences and biases to distinguish loyalty from flattery:

> 觀來察往. 謀於眾賢, 考求眾人, 得其心, 遍見其情, 察其好惡, 以參 忠佞。 (ICS CQFL 6.6: 25)

> He observes their comings and examines their goings; he consults with his numerous worthies to assess [the opinions of] the masses. He understands their hearts, oversees their actual situation (*qing*), and investigates their likes and dislikes to determine their loyalty or flattery.

This layered approach demonstrates a commitment to comprehensive and nuanced understanding, integrating external observation with inner discernment to navigate complex actualities effectively.

The *Kao ji* System

As actuality (*shi*) was understood as something accumulated over time—measurable and calculable—the alignment between names and accumulated reality (*shi*) requires a thorough evaluation of both past and present circumstances.

The LYS text elaborates:

> 考其往行, 驗之於今, 計其蓄積, 受於先賢。 (*CQFL* 6.6: 25)

> A ruler examines their past actions to assess their current ones, and evaluates their achievements to understand what they have inherited from former worthies.

This suggests that governance involves not only monitoring current actualities but also understanding historical contributions and relational dynamics. Reconsidering naming therefore requires careful attention to past achievements and current actualities.

The KGM formulates the "correct method" (*fa* 法) of merit examination as follows:

> 考纪之法，考其所积也。 (*CQFL* 7.1: 28)

> The correct method [*fa*] of examining merit [*ji*] consists of assessing what has been accumulated.

The KGM, following this principle, introduces the *kaoji* system, which is grounded in a standardized approach (*fa*). Rather than deriving titles from isolated assessments, this system emphasizes systematic evaluations conducted over time as part of an ongoing performative process. For instance, as I pointed out in my previous research, monthly evaluations (*shi* 试) were carried out by various marquises to assess kingdoms, seasonal evaluations by regional earls focused on regions, and annual assessments were conducted by the Son of Heaven. This process culminated in comprehensive examinations every three years, a principle known as *san zai kaoji* (三載考績). This system ensured that "promotions" (*zhi* 陟) and "demotions" (*chu* 紬) were determined by the results of three successive evaluations, reinforcing the bureaucratic ideal of merit-based governance (Buljan 2024, 372). The cyclical nature of this process reflects the understanding that merit must be continuously scrutinized. The accumulated results were weighed to ensure fairness and effectiveness in governance.

Another core principle underpinning the evaluation system is *yi duo chu shao* (以多除少), meaning "on account of that which is abundant, eliminate that which is scarce". This principle ensured that assessments accounted for the totality of contributions rather than isolated incidents. For instance, an official with a consistent record of excellent performance would not be harshly penalized for occasional mistakes, while excessive failures could negate accumulated achievements. The balance between achievements and failures thus determined an individual's merit: a surplus of achievements overshadowed minor failures, whereas a surplus of failures negated minor achievements (Buljan 2024, 371). This iterative evaluation process—focused on periodic re-evaluation and adjustment—demonstrates the dynamic nature of the *kaoji* system. Proper naming within this framework

is understood as a temporal and relational practice, requiring the intersection of past actions and present circumstances. Retrospective evaluation considers accumulated contributions, while current analysis assesses the immediate context, ensuring names and titles accurately reflect *shi*.

As noted by the KGM, neither reality nor identity can be fully grasped in a single moment. Therefore, titles must balance the immediate and historical dimensions of *shi*, requiring continuous observation, re-evaluation, and recalibration to remain accurate.

While the other Statecraft chapters emphasize the role of a single ruler tasked with correcting names, the KGM distributes this responsibility to a network of superiors and inspectors at local, regional, and state levels. This shift from reliance on the ruler's judgment to a standardized bureaucratic system addresses the problem of epistemic hiddenness.[21]

Though the ruler's impartiality remains central to effective governance, the introduction of standardized practices, such as the *kaoji* system, provides structured methods for evaluation. By replacing personal discretion with objective metrics, these practices ensure greater consistency and fairness in the alignment of names, reducing bias and enhancing the transparency and accountability of administrative processes.

Through impartial observation, continuous evaluation, and standardized practices, the alignment of names with actualities ensures that language and governance remain grounded in the realities they aim to describe and shape. Proper naming, therefore, emerges as a dynamic process shaped by observation, testing, and revision.

Processual and Dynamic Nature of Naming: From Identification to Transformation

The practice of aligning titles with actualities is a dynamic, multi-step process. It begins with *ji* (擊) (*CQFL* 7.1: 28)—the act of grasping reality—progresses through the act of naming, and culminates in shaping that reality, ultimately generating a new one. This alignment involves perceiving the world, making distinctions, and labelling elements to translate this understanding into external expressions that can be communicated to others. This labelling is not merely descriptive but also structural, organizing reality and creating distinctions (in ranks and worthiness) that clarify its complexity.

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21   This shift is also significant from the perspective of the history of administrative thought: whereas the ruler (as an individual) was once the source of naming, here it is the system that assumes this role. This shift reflects the process of bureaucratization in this context.

When executed properly, this process not only reflects reality but reshapes it, creating a new order that aligns with natural processes and becomes self-sustaining. The alignment of titles with actualities is not a one-time event, and instead it unfolds through a cumulative and gradual process, inherently tied to time and repetition. Language, through this practice, acts as a transformative force, emphasizing its performative power to effect change in the world. As such, naming functions as a form of social action, capable of reorganizing and regenerating reality. Aligning titles with actualities is an ongoing, dynamic process of adjustment, interacting with other social and cognitive processes in the world. This process presumes that the dynamic nature of reality, cognition, and action are fundamental features of existence.

The alignment of titles with actualities is also directional, guiding reality toward specific outcomes such as order, achievement, goodness, and ultimately *tai ping* (great peace). This directional quality can be understood through Aristotle's distinction between *kinesis* (movement or change toward a goal) and *energeia* (activity). Changes, like building a house or cultivating virtues, are processes aimed at a final goal (*telos*)—an ultimate state that transcends the present moment. In contrast, activities such as seeing or living well are complete in themselves, realized in the very act of doing.

In this light, aligning titles with actualities consists of perceiving and structuring reality, translating it into language, and directing it toward ideal states through a continuous and cumulative process. This practice harmonizes human actions with the natural and social order, ensuring that language not only mirrors reality but actively shapes it for the better.

The Ontology of Naming: Language, Reality, and Governance in Statecraft

The Statecraft chapters highlight the critical role of alignment of names with actualities as the method (*shu*) by which the ruler aligns governance with the principles of nature. These principles include conferring benefit, eliminating harm, and fostering the accumulation of goodness as the foundation of rulership. The ruler, by adhering to the "Way" (*Dao* 道), remains non-active yet serves as the "wellspring of the state". The alignment of names with actualities, described as *ziran* (自然), reflects the activity of the Way, embodying perfect spontaneity. This spontaneity is the essence of an effective administration: self-generative, automatic, and functioning without direct intervention by the ruler. Within such a system, proper order emerges spontaneously, and achievements arise naturally.

The nature of language as a creative force raises profound questions: does naming authentically align with reality, or does it impose artificial boundaries on a fluid and dynamic world? In exploring early Chinese naming theories, John Makeham contrasts "nominalism" and "correlativism". Correlativists asserted that names and referents naturally correspond, rooted in the "cosmic or natural order" (*zi ran* 自然). This "correlative theory of naming" posits that harmony between names and actualities originates from Heaven or nature, rather than from arbitrary human conventions.

Nominalists, by contrast, argued that assigning names (*ming*) to realities (*shi*) is fundamentally arbitrary, determined by human decisions rather than inherent connections. They held that no intrinsic correlation exists between a specific name and its referent beyond what has been artificially established by humans (Makeham 1994, xiii).

However, Hans-Georg Moeller challenges this rigid dichotomy by proposing that early Chinese thinkers shared a common ideal: the unification of designation (*ming*) and the designated (*shi*) into a unified whole (*cheng* 成). According to Moeller, concrete names possess a proper correlative "fact", allowing them not only to describe reality but also to prescribe it. A correlative and prescriptive name does more than represent its meaning; it actively embodies and shapes the reality it denotes (Moeller 1996, 482). Rooted in cosmological and ontological principles, this perspective ensures that naming aligns with and transforms reality, avoiding arbitrariness. This approach aligns with the Statecraft chapters, presenting the proper relationship between designation and the designated as "correlative" in Makeham's sense. Through this process, names are not only descriptive but also performative, continuously refining and harmonising the relationship between language, governance, and the natural order.

Performativity and Proper Naming

The relationship between *ming* (name or title) and *shi* (actuality or performance) can be effectively analysed using John Austin's theory of performativity. Austin distinguishes between constative utterances, which describe the world and can be evaluated as true or false, and performative utterances, which enact an action or create a new reality when spoken under appropriate conditions of context and authority (Austin 1962, 6–15). For example, declarations like "I pronounce you husband and wife" or "I appoint you as the Minister of Finance" actively shape reality.[22]

22   This distinction aligns with the Confucian concept of *zheng ming*. Recent scholarship (Makeham 1994; Hall and Ames 1991; Defoort 1997; Mattice 2010) argues that Confucius viewed names as

In the Statecraft chapters, proper naming aligns with Austin's notion of performative language. Assigning a title is a performative act that defines roles and establishes expectations for behaviour and duties. Just as Austin's performative utterances create new actualities, the act of naming formalizes roles within a bureaucratic system. Governance becomes efficient when titles (*ming*) reflect actual performance (*shi*), motivating individuals to meet the expectations tied to their roles.

Austin's theory emphasizes the immediate power of speech acts, which derive their effectiveness from authority and context. In governance, naming influences behaviour by defining individuals' roles. However, Judith Butler extends the concept of performativity beyond isolated speech acts to encompass identity formation through repeated actions, language, and social practices. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988), Butler argues that identity is not inherent but continuously constructed through repetition. This distinction is evident in the Statecraft chapters, where titles and identities are not only assigned but performed over time. While Austin highlights singular moments where language enacts change (e.g., appointing a minister), Butler's framework emphasizes how repeated actions—such as fulfilling duties and meeting expectations—construct identity within a bureaucratic system. Proper naming is thus both a one-time event and an ongoing process. An official's identity is shaped through repeated performances that align with their title, creating a cohesive governance system.

In this way, Austin's theory captures the immediate performative power of naming, while Butler's concept of performativity emphasizes the continuous reinforcement of identity over time. A ruler in the Statecraft chapters assigns titles (an act in Austin's view) and ensures individuals' actions align with these titles, creating a stable governance system. Titles create expectations, and individuals' repeated fulfilment of these expectations reinforces their identity and role within the state.

Butler's theory also highlights the regulatory power of performativity in shaping behaviour. Proper naming leverages this dynamic by aligning individuals' desire for recognition with their roles. When titles reflect true abilities, individuals are motivated to perform well, as their work affirms their social and personal identity. Titles also function as public acknowledgements of competence, organizing society according to individuals' natural dispositions.

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performative, linking their meanings to social roles defined by values like humaneness (*ren*), propriety (*li*), and filial piety (*xiao*). In passages like Lunyu 13.3, Confucius highlights how names shape the proper ordering of social roles. Hall and Ames (1991) suggest that *zheng ming* involves dynamic attunement, rather than strict adherence to an ideal.

This interplay between naming and performance introduces a dimension of justice: assigning titles that reflect actual abilities ensures individuals are placed in roles where they can excel, fulfilling both personal potential and social good. Proper naming thus becomes a tool for effective governance and individual authenticity within the social order.

Drawing on Butler's philosophy—particularly her understanding of language as a habit (Butler 1988)—proper naming must be both retrospective and prospective. Naming encompasses not only a person's past achievements but also their future potential. It reflects a dynamic history of accumulated actions and expectations, aligning titles with both merit and possibility. Naming, in this sense, is a performative act that shapes and reflects social reality, enabling governance systems to enact change and align individuals with their roles and contributions to society.

Conclusion

This paper explored the concept of aligning names with actualities as presented in the Statecraft chapters of the *Chunqiu fanlu*. This alignment serves as a cornerstone of governance, crucial for maintaining order, ensuring the efficient functioning of officials, and upholding the ruler's authority. Proper naming is not just a linguistic exercise, but a foundational principle intertwining language, knowledge, reality, power, and social order in the pursuit of stability.

The Statecraft chapters frame the alignment of names within a cosmological paradigm, where constant change and gradual accumulation underpin creation. I have claimed that naming is an ongoing, transformative process with profound implications for human reality. Chapters such as the LYS, BWQ, and LHG emphasize non-action (*wu wei*) as a critical method for correcting names, yet naming transitions from passively aligning with reality to actively generating new actualities, mirroring natural processes and underscoring its spontaneous, processual character.

In this framework, language transcends mere description—it is performative and creative, shaping reality and influencing outcomes. This imbues naming with ontological and cosmological significance, positioning it as both reflective and constitutive. By aligning language with reality's dynamic patterns, naming fosters peace and affirms humanity's role as a co-creator of cosmic order.

Proper naming is further embedded in a processual ontology. In Han cosmology, reality is dynamic, emerging through processes of change, temporality, and accumulation. This aligns with correlative thinking, where entities and phenomena are interconnected within a system of transformations. However, this raises questions about language's ability to accurately represent such a fluid actuality.

Language, as a tool for categorizing and structuring, inherently simplifies and abstracts, freezing moments in ongoing flux and imposing stability on the unstable. Does naming distort the very reality it seeks to align with? The Statecraft chapters acknowledge this tension, emphasizing repeated observation and re-evaluation to ensure names stay congruent with their referents. The iterative nature of this process reflects the limits of human cognition and language, mirroring Heraclitus' observation that one cannot step into the same river twice. Both perspectives highlight the inadequacy of static linguistic structures in a world defined by flux.

This tension presents an epistemological challenge: the hiddenness of reality and the limitations of human perception. Cognitive biases and emotional inclinations cloud judgment, making continuous evaluation essential. Despite these limitations, proper naming as an ongoing process fosters peace by aligning human constructs with reality's inherent dynamics. Language, in this sense, becomes not merely descriptive but ontologically creative—shaping reality while reflecting its constant flux.

Naming mediates between visibility and hiddenness, stability and flux. Drawing on John Austin's speech act theory, naming is an act that is both epistemic and performative, shaping outcomes and guiding human reality toward harmonious ends. Nevertheless, the process faces challenges due to the complexity of reality—its hiddenness, accumulation, and constant change—as well as the inherent epistemic limitations of human perception. Sages, idealized figures in this context, embody the capacity to align with these patterns, though even they are subject to human finitude. The iterative nature of correcting names reflects the necessity of ongoing adjustment in the face of an ever-evolving reality.

By integrating retrospective, present, and prospective dimensions, proper naming ensures that titles reflect both accumulated merit and future potential. This alignment requires navigating the hidden complexities of reality, including its processuality and temporal dimensions. While language serves as a critical tool in this process, its limitations highlight the provisional nature of human knowledge and the need for continuous adjustment.

The process of proper naming is dynamic and normative, reflecting the relationship between human knowledge, governance, and the cosmos. In Han thought, the cosmological triad of Heaven (*tian*), Earth (*di*), and Humanity (*ren*) frames this relationship. Humans, as co-creators of cosmic order, are tasked with completing processes initiated by Heaven and nurtured by Earth. Proper naming thus becomes a uniquely human method of engaging with reality, mediating between the cosmic and the social. It is also tied to an epistemic ideal: aligning human knowledge and action with the cosmos' inherent principles, which prescribe how rulers and subjects should engage with both the natural and social worlds.

Ultimately, the philosophical exploration of proper naming transcends administrative concerns, offering profound insights into the human condition and human place within the cosmos. By embracing the dynamic nature of reality, proper naming fosters harmony between human constructs and the natural order, positioning humanity as active participants in the ongoing creation and alignment of the world.

In the KGM chapter, naming transitions from the discernment of "sages" or "gentlemen" (*junzi* 君子) to a bureaucratic system characterized by impartiality and standardization. The integration of naming into examinations, mathematical approaches, and verification processes, as exemplified by the *kaoji* system, marked this shift, embedding the principles of *ming* and *shi* within a framework of systematic regulation.

The relationship between naming and actuality is inherently dynamic. A proper title reflects past achievements, present competence, and future potential. Language, in its performative and creative capacities, ensures alignment between human constructs and the natural order while embracing reality's processual nature. Cognitive biases, emotional inclinations, and the limitations of individual perspectives frequently obscure judgment, requiring continuous evaluation and revision. Proper naming transcends its administrative functions, offering deeper insights into the interplay of language, knowledge, and reality. By embracing the dynamism of reality, the alignment of names with actualities has profound philosophical and cosmological implications, enriching our understanding of the human condition and humanity's place within the cosmos.

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Žižek "With Chinese Characteristics": Radical Theory and Its Selective Reception

*Yue WU**

Abstract

Slavoj Žižek's reception in China, shaped by the country's distinct political, academic, and cultural context, varies across philosophical, humanities, and public spheres. In philosophy, his ideas engage with local Marxist discourses, while humanities scholars draw on his theories to navigate global intellectual trends. Among the public, Žižek's provocative style resonates widely. This multifaceted reception serves as a lens, revealing China's ideological tensions, global aspirations, and cultural dynamics. By examining these diverse responses, this study illuminates how Žižek's influence in China, marked by "Chinese characteristics" of selective reception and adaptation, reflects broader truths about contemporary China's intellectual and social landscape.

Keywords: Žižek, China, philosophy, Marxism, humanities

Žižek »s kitajskimi značilnostmi«: radikalna teorija in njeno selektivno sprejemanje

Izvleček

Sprejem Slavoja Žižka na Kitajskem, ki ga zaznamuje poseben politični, akademski in kulturni kontekst države, se razlikuje na področjih filozofije, humanistike in javne sfere. V filozofiji se njegove ideje vključujejo v lokalne marksistične diskurze, medtem ko humanistični raziskovalci uporabljajo njegove teorije za dialog z globalnimi intelektualnimi tokovi. Žižkov provokativni slog je precej odmeven tudi med širšo javnostjo. Ta večplastni sprejem deluje kot prizma, ki razkriva ideološka trenja, globalne aspiracije in kulturno dinamiko Kitajske. S proučevanjem teh različnih odzivov študija osvetljuje, kako Žižkov vpliv na Kitajskem, zaznamovan s »kitajskimi značilnostmi« selektivnega sprejemanja in prilagajanja, odraža širše resnice o intelektualnem in družbenem prostoru sodobne Kitajske.

Ključne besede: Žižek, Kitajska, filozofija, marksizem, humanistika

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Slavoj Žižek (1949–), a prominent figure in Western intellectual circles since his rise to fame in 1989 with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, has become a phenomenon. He is known by various titles, such as the "Elvis of cultural theory", "the most dangerous philosopher in the West", "the academic rock star", and "the celebrity intellectual". In 2010, *The Guardian* noted, "Žižek is to today what Jacques Derrida was to the 80s: the thinker of choice for Europe's young intellectual vanguard" (O'Hagan 2010). Introduced to China in 1999, his reception varies across philosophical and humanities circles and the general public. What's more, his influence extends beyond Chinese academia, and attracts young Chinese audiences as well. Reflecting on this "Žižek fever" in China involves examining how his theories resonate within its distinct cultural and intellectual landscape, leading to a "selective reception" with "Chinese characteristics". This study views this as a historical and cultural phenomenon, using it as a lens to understand the country's complex interplay of ideology, culture, and global intellectual trends.

Žižek's Rise to Fame in the West

Before delving into Slavoj Žižek's reception in China, it is essential to examine his journey and acceptance within the specific historical and cultural context of the West. Understanding this background provides a foundation for analysing his international rise to prominence and the factors that facilitated his success. From an unknown scholar to a celebrated intellectual, Žižek's academic path was far from smooth. Before his breakthrough with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Žižek's academic endeavours in France were particularly challenging. In 1981, he earned his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Ljubljana and subsequently moved to France to study psychoanalysis under Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law. In 1985, Žižek completed a second doctoral degree at the University of Paris 8. However, the publication of his dissertation was rejected by Miller. Eventually, Žižek managed to publish his work—titled *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel passe*—with a relatively small publisher, Les Éditions Érès, outside the core psychoanalytic circle, but it did not gain much traction either academically or publicly. Žižek's major breakthrough came with the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in London in 1989. Despite its significant overlap with his earlier work, this book received considerable acclaim and quickly achieved legendary status (cf. Oltarzewska 2005, 55). This marked a significant shift in Žižek's academic focus towards the English-speaking world and English-language publications.

Eliran Bar-El (2021) explained Žižek's failure to gain academic and public resonance in France through the misalignment between the traditions and preferences of the French intellectual community and Žižek's theoretical style, and highlighted

several key reasons for this. Objectively, the French intellectual community was (and remains) already populated with prominent figures, and the long-established tradition of philosophy and psychoanalysis presented (and presents) a barrier for outsiders and newcomers like Žižek. From the perspective of psychoanalytic tradition, Lacan's theories are deeply intertwined with clinical practice in France. Žižek's mentor, Miller, also positioned Lacan as a theorist grounded in clinical psychoanalytic practice. In contrast, Žižek's interpretation of Lacan aligns him with Marx and Hegel, serving Žižek's politicized reading of contemporary culture. This "unorthodox" use of psychoanalysis not only displeased his mentor, but also struggled to gain acceptance among the French public. Furthermore, the failure of the May 1968 movement led to growing dissatisfaction with Marxism as a solution to French capitalist problems, combined with the anti-Hegelian tendencies of French post-structuralists, making Žižek's Marxist stance and intent to revive Hegel appear counter-current. Additionally, French academia rejected his style of blending philosophical thoughts with psychoanalytic concepts (cf. Bar-El 2021, 412–25). Taken together, these factors prevented Žižek from being clearly categorized and recognized in France, hindering his success.

It was not until the endorsement of Ernesto Laclau, who positioned Žižek as a post-Marxist and facilitated the publication of his works in English, that Žižek began to have an impact in Anglo-American humanities. Compared to his cold reception in France, Žižek's success in the Anglo-American academic world can be attributed to a combination of factors: the rise of post-Marxism provided Žižek with a clear academic positioning and identity, the intellectual and theoretical gaps in Anglo-American humanities created a demand for theorists like Žižek, and the influential Laclau not only provided valuable publishing resources, but also wrote prefaces that increased Žižek's visibility and recognition.

1989, the year Žižek gained fame with his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, was also a period marked by upheaval in Eastern Europe, the destabilization of the Soviet Union, and the global decline of communist politics. This period brought about a crisis in Marxism, and Western Marxism in particular, while also fostering the development of post-Marxism, which integrates Marxism with contemporary "post-" theories such as post-structuralism and postmodernism. Sean Homer pointed out that:

> In a sense, Žižek's work could not have been translated at a more opportune moment. In Eastern Europe, the historic collapse of "actually existing socialism" and the break-up of the Soviet Union were gathering pace, while in Western Europe the final demise of Western Marxism seemed assured if not already complete. The intellectual currents of postmodernism and post-Marxism were at their most vitriolic and triumphalist. (Homer 2016, 13)

On one hand, Žižek's Eastern European background and experience with real socialism fuelled Western curiosity about his perspectives on communist politics. On the other hand, Žižek's mastery of Western popular culture and his eclectic writing style, which aligns with postmodernist formalism, often mislead readers to perceive him as an anti-systems thinker (Johnston 2008, xiii–xiv, xiv). In contrast to his inability to be categorized and recognized in France, Žižek found a clear and academically relevant positioning as a post-Marxist in the English-speaking context. Despite the divide between the British empiricist Anglo-Saxon tradition and speculative continental philosophy, which led some philosophers to reject Žižek's dialectical style of cultural theory (cf. Taylor 2014, 15–25) and relegate him to the field of literary studies as a postmodern cultural critic,[1] the literary departments in the UK and the US were more inclined towards continental philosophy. Additionally, the scarcity of prominent native humanities scholars created a demand for theoretical enrichment. Consequently, the Anglo-American intellectual scene, unlike the well-established and crowded French intellectual world, was more receptive to non-traditional theorists like Derrida and Žižek. Finally, Žižek's success was significantly aided by Ernesto Laclau. In 1985, Laclau gained prominence with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by the internationally renowned leftist publisher Verso. Subsequently, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe collaborated with Verso to edit the Phronesis series, aiming to foster dialogue between post-structuralism and leftist political theory. Recognizing Žižek's originality, Laclau published his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in the Phronesis series and wrote the preface himself. In it, he highly praised the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, represented by Žižek, as one of the most innovative and forward-looking theoretical projects in the current European intellectual landscape. He also remarked that *The Sublime Object of Ideology* was an excellent read for those interested in seeking new theoretical perspectives to address the challenges of constructing democratic socialism in the post-Marxist era. Unlike the challenges Žižek faced in France, where he lacked the support of a mentor and access to quality publishing, in the English-speaking context he benefited from Laclau's endorsement and high-level publishing resources, ultimately leading to his success in the Anglo-American intellectual world.

Even now, Žižek's situation in France remains awkward. As Bar-El points out, "this rejection endures even today in a context where Žižek has been published in roughly 20 languages, but still lacking a resonance with contemporary French intellectual circles" (Bar-El 2021, 418). Why does Žižek's work remain

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1   Žižek himself has expressed strong objections to this characterization, stating, "what really makes me mad when I read critical (and even some favourable) reactions to my work is the recurring characterization of me as a postmodern cultural critic—the one thing I don't want to be. I consider myself a philosopher dealing with fundamental ontological questions, and, furthermore, a philosopher in the traditional vein of German Idealism" (cf. Žižek 2019).

lukewarmly received in France while becoming legendary in the UK and US? As Žižek himself frankly said, "so much depends on circumstances" (Žižek and Daly 2004, 40). The nearly two-decade-long Žižek fever in China similarly relies on the unique political, academic, and ideological context of contemporary China.

The Decade of Absence in Chinese Research on Žižek

Žižek's introduction to Chinese academia was delayed until 1999, when Wang Fengzhen published "Žižek: A New Star in the Field of Criticism" in *Foreign Literature*, marking his first introduction to mainland China. As Žižek observed, "the lack itself functions as a positive feature" (Žižek 2014, 24). Compared to the explosive growth of Žižek studies in the 21st century, this initial ten-year gap (1989–1999) reflects both Žižek's relatively recent rise to prominence in the West, where he had not yet achieved the same recognition as figures like Foucault or Derrida, and the primary focus on Western Marxism and postmodernism within Chinese intellectual circles during the 1990s, which overshadowed other emerging theoretical voices.

In the 1990s, the intellectual background of Chinese philosophy was marked by the academic dissemination and study of Western Marxism. Although Western Marxism had concluded with the failure of the student movements and the May 1968 events, it experienced a "revival" in China during the 1980s and 1990s. Starting from the late 1970s, the trend of Western Marxist thought began to flow into China after Mao's death. This attention was driven not by theoretical awareness, but directly by the political realities of the time (cf. Xu 1999, 1). With the translation and publication of works by Western Marxist thinkers such as Lukács, Gramsci, Marcuse, and Sartre, Western Marxism quickly became popular within and outside Chinese philosophical circles. This period witnessed a surge of debates on reconstructing the Marxist philosophy, triggering a nationwide wave of discussions on Western Marxism (Wang Yuchen 2002, 160). This phenomenon even led to challenges to the official ideology—Chinese Marxism. However, discussions on ideology became subdued after the Tiananmen crackdown on June 4, 1989, and as a consequence

> Chinese intellectuals now approach Western Marxism in a solely academic way and within an orthodox Marxist framework. The "political" element has been conspicuously absent from the studies of Western Marxism; only the 'academic' element remains. (So 1997, 33)

At the same time, the focus of Chinese researchers shifted from existentialist and humanist Marxism to issues of modernity and social critical philosophy.

Post-1990s China entered an era characterized by "economic man", where the problems of modernity became apparent: materialism in social life, ecological destruction, moral decay, and spiritual alienation, alongside the dominance of instrumental rationality. The critiques offered by Western Marxism—scientific-technological rationality, cultural ideology, and ecological issues—were timely and relevant with regard to addressing the social problems that arose during China's period of social transformation, providing significant insights for tackling these issues.

In the context of the appeal of Western Marxism in the 1990s, it becomes clear why Žižek did not receive significant attention from Chinese philosophers at the time. During the "economic man" era, the Chinese philosophical community focused more on the critical aspects of Western Marxism rather than post-Marxism, which emerged from the failure of global socialist movements and advocated for radical democracy. This created a disconnect with international intellectual trends, making it difficult for Chinese scholars to engage with one of the prominent figures of post-Marxism. Moreover, Žižek appeared as an "outlier" both in his ideas and style, making it challenging to position him as an orthodox successor of Western Marxism. Intellectually, Žižek combined late Lacanian psychoanalysis with German Idealism, particularly Hegelian philosophy, which did not align with the Chinese philosophical critique of modernity as a totalizing concept. Stylistically, Žižek's unconventional writing, characterized by extensive references to popular culture, clashed with the elite, serious tone, and cultural industry critique prevalent in Western Marxism.

Within the broader context of the modernity critique, the absence of Žižek's influence in 1990s China can also be attributed to the simultaneous rise of postmodernism in both Chinese and Western humanities. The cultural atmosphere in China during the 1990s was in sync with the West, characterized by the rise of postmodernist thought. In contrast to the methodological constructivism of the 1980s, the 1990s emphasized the deconstruction of values. The grand narratives of progressive development were replaced by deconstructive discourses that permeated the literary scene. Figures like the "Yale School" and French deconstructionists such as Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and Roland Barthes became the leading intellectual figures of the era. Their discourses of deconstruction, subversion, rebellion, desecration, and marginalization became both prevalent terms and potential pitfalls in contemporary writing (Wang Yuechuan 1999, 75). Although Žižek's writing style and form appeared postmodern, his core ideas were not aligned with postmodernism. In his seminal work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek placed Lacan within a rationalist framework, opposing the classification of Lacan within the "post-structuralist" domain, and argued that "Lacanian theory is perhaps the most radical contemporary version of Enlightenment" (Žižek 2008, xxx). This

fundamental inconsistency with postmodernism and poststructuralism meant that Žižek did not have a place in the wave of postmodernist thought in China during the 1990s.

In summary, Žižek did not gain traction in China in the years 1989 to 1998 due to the unique rhythm of Chinese intellectual circles in this era. However, the introduction of Western Marxism and postmodernism during that time prepared the ground for his later reception. Today, Žižek's reception in China varies: the philosophical reception is critical and politically oriented, while the humanities reception is inclusive and globally engaged.

Žižek in Chinese Marxist Circles: From Ideologist to Radical Leftist

Chinese philosophy scholars' focus on Žižek's ideological thought, led by Zhang Yibing's positioning of him within post-Marxist trends, reflects a critical engagement with his Lacanian-Marxist framework, though his perceived lack of Marxist orthodoxy draws critique. There are two pivotal moments in the reception of Žižek in China, in 2004 and 2008. With these, Žižek's positioning shifted from being an ideologist within the post-Marxist trends to a representative of the Western radical left in the context of the Sinicization of Marxism.

In 1999, the Chinese humanities scholar Wang Fengzhen first introduced Žižek to the Chinese academic community. However, as Wang admitted, "due to a lack of research and relevant materials" (Wang Fengzhen 1999, 67), his article did not clearly position the Slovenian author within the Chinese academic context, and thus did not immediately spark a wave of Žižek studies. The true Žižek fever in China began in 2004, when Zhang Yibing of the Philosophy Department at Nanjing University introduced him within the theoretical framework of "post-Marxist trends".

Compared to the 1990s, the early 2000s saw an increase in Chinese translations of Žižek's works, which facilitated greater academic engagement with his ideas and prepared the Chinese philosophical community for new developments in international Marxist studies. Similar to Laclau's role in the UK, Zhang leveraged his academic standing and clear positioning of Žižek within the trend for post-Marxism to start the wave of Žižek studies in China. In 2001, Zhang pointed out the need for a paradigm shift in the study of Western Marxism. As he put it, "we must identify the historical end of Western Marxism and construct a new pattern of coexistence among postmodern Marxism, post-Marxist trends, and late Marxism to reassess the latest developments in international Marxist philosophy" (Zhang 2000, 265). Zhang distinguished between these three categories,

arguing that postmodern Marxist positions, such as ecological Marxism and feminist Marxism, are fundamentally anti-Marxist. He viewed the post-Marxist trends represented by figures like Deleuze, Baudrillard, and the later Derrida as compatible with the mainstream of postmodern thought initiated by Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault. For him, these were not true Marxism but rather a sharp rightward turn of Western Marxism within a postmodern context. In contrast, he believed that only late Marxism, exemplified by thinkers such as Harvey, Hardt, Negri, Jameson, Eagleton, and Derrida, truly adhered to Marxist principles (cf. Zhang 2000, 275–79; 2005b, 5–8).

From 2004 to 2005, Zhang published eight articles related to Žižek, including five in-depth textual analyses of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Within the new pattern of coexistence among postmodern Marxism, post-Marxist trends, and late Marxism, Zhang positioned Žižek within the post-Marxist trends characterized by "impossibility". Zhang argued that Žižek used Lacan to achieve a comprehensive integration of Marx (cf. Zhang 2004, 26–33), and summarized Lacan's late philosophy, centred on the Real, as the "impossible truth of the existence" (cf. Zhang 2005a, 90). This interpretation led Chinese philosophers and humanities scholars to focus on Žižek's ideological thought. In 2007, Nanjing University invited Žižek to speak at the international academic symposium "The Cultural Significance of Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory", where he delivered a keynote speech titled "From Freud to Lacan" (cf. Xia 2007, 27). During this period, Žižek was primarily viewed in China as the Marxist successor of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Given that the post-Marxist trends are viewed by Chinese scholars as not true Marxism, but rather a rightward mutation of Western Marxism within a postmodern context, Žižek, positioned as a member of these post-Marxist trends, is naturally considered "not sufficiently Marxist". His approach of using psychoanalytic theory to fully integrate Marx is also not seen as orthodox Marxism. Under this premise, Chinese research on Žižek has taken two main directions. On one hand, scholars have followed Zhang in studying Žižek's ideological theory and delving into Lacanian psychoanalysis. On the other hand, there has been a persistent critical distance from Žižek's perceived departure from orthodox Marxism. Criticisms have focused on Žižek's excessive critique and insufficient construction, his alleged idealism, and the lack of practical relevance in his theories.

Early research on Žižek was relatively narrow and focused primarily on his critique of ideology and psychoanalytic methods. Besides Zhang Yibing's analyses of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* playing a significant (and in fact leading) role in this initial phase, the complex intellectual landscape of post-revolutionary China also heightened academic interest in ideology theory. As Zhang noted during his 2007 dialogue with Žižek at Nanjing University, "after China introduced the Western market economy in the mid-1990s, commodities and market exchanges

profoundly changed Chinese social life. Consequently, Western liberalism and Western culture have become closely aligned with this market model". However, "the dominant national mainstream ideology remains Marxism", making Chinese ideology "a very complex multifaceted entity" (Zhang and Žižek 2018, 5). In this context of coexisting pluralistic and conflicting ideas, Žižek's critique of cynical ideology—"they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it"—helped people understand and navigate the confusions of their time. This phase of Žižek studies in China reflects a contradictory mindset: on the one hand, there was a desire to align with international intellectual trends and seek fresh theoretical resources to understand and explain domestic social phenomena; on the other hand, there was a need to maintain a critical distance rooted in local Marxist positions. This ambivalence characterized the early reception and study of Žižek's work in China.

The second significant milestone in Chinese Žižek studies occurred in 2008, when Žižek was newly positioned as a representative of the Western "radical left". This shift was closely related to Žižek's own "communist turn" amidst the global financial crisis and the new stage of Marxism's Sinicization in China's academic environment. If the impression of Žižek in the 1990s was primarily "cultural", the Žižek of the 21st century became more distinctly "political". Despite initially entering the Western intellectual scene as a post-Marxist, Žižek quickly diverged from his post-Marxist colleagues, radicalizing his political conclusions and calling for the complete rejection of the liberal democratic system rather than reforms within its framework. His commitment to a communist stance and his determination to reshape political imagination became more pronounced after the 2008 crisis.[2]

Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher identify the historical context behind Žižek's shift from radical democracy to "revolutionary vanguardism". Between 1989 and 2000, as liberal democracy and capitalism surged forward, post-Marxist theories advocating radical democracy faced practical challenges and succumbed to liberal ideology, with democracy and the market becoming the limit of all possible political action. After 2001, the "victory of capitalism" and the "victory of liberalism" revealed their violent and dark sides during the "War on Terror". For Žižek, this signified the need for something beyond democracy, akin to a new socialist revolution (cf. Sharpe and Boucher 2010, 6). Sharpe and Boucher describe this as "revolutionary vanguardism", but it can be seen as essentially the communist cause—a notion Žižek formally embraced only after 2008.

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2   For Žižek, each crisis—be it the European refugee crisis, Brexit, or the COVID-19 pandemic—represented an opportunity to realize communism, prompting him to call for redefined national sovereignty, global cooperation, and the achievement of communism. In this context, the Chinese academic community began to view Žižek not just as a cultural critic but as a political theorist advocating radical leftist ideas.

In 2008, the global financial crisis triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States exposed the absurdity of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, and led to a resurgence of leftist thought in the West. This crisis highlighted the vulnerabilities of capitalism, sparking a renewed interest in leftist theories, although not necessarily leftist policies. Within this context, Western academia witnessed a surge in "Marx fever" and "communism fever", calling for a return to leftist traditions and ideas. While the crisis created favourable conditions for the spread of leftist ideologies, the liberation of thought remained a significant challenge. On the one hand, prejudices against communism persisted following the failures of 20th-century communist experiments. On the other hand, capitalist liberal democracy continued to dominate global politics, so entrenched and pervasive as an ideology that most people found it difficult to even imagine an alternative system. In this context, Žižek saw his communist project as an effort to liberate people's thinking. In 2008, Žižek radicalized his stance, declaring himself a communist and a dialectical materialist, and calling for a broad cultural and political revolution (cf. Sharpe and Boucher 2010, 1). His publication that year, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, was seen as a significant leap in political faith, establishing the identity necessary for communist re-education in the current political climate (Boucher and Sharpe 2010, 3). Since 2009, Žižek and Alain Badiou have led global Marxist conferences centred on "the Idea of Communism", using their influence to fuel a global communist resurgence. In 2011, Žižek delivered a speech at Zuccotti Park in New York to members of the Occupy Wall Street movement, reminding them that the marriage between democracy and capitalism was over and urging them to fight for the commons. Since then, communism has increasingly become a central keyword in Žižek's works. His radical anti-democratic stance, his call to "return to Lenin", and his advocacy of communism have made him a prominent and outspoken figure within the Western left, distinct from post-Marxism and other liberal leftist ideologies. This bold position has set him apart, highlighting his commitment to a revolutionary vision that challenges the prevailing liberal democratic order.

If, prior to this period, Žižek could be characterized as a psychoanalyst of the zeitgeist—embodying Lacanian psychoanalysis, utilizing popular culture, and rooted in Marxism, diagnosing without prescribing—then after the financial crisis, he shed much of his psychoanalytic and pop culture façade, opting for direct, tangible political engagement. He rallied under the banner "Demand the Impossible!" and, alongside radical leftists like Badiou, critiqued the liberal democratic political system of capitalism, arguing that struggles and critiques within the democratic framework ultimately seek a more moderate form of capitalism. In this period, Žižek pursued politics as the "art of the impossible", anticipating the occurrence of events and actions. He aimed to "rewrite the rules of what is and isn't possible, what is and isn't realistic" (Johnston 2009, xvii), essentially attempting to reshape

the political imagination towards communism. This shift marked a significant transformation in Žižek's approach, from a critical theorist diagnosing societal issues through the lens of psychoanalysis and popular culture to an active political figure advocating for radical systemic change.

Amid the impact of the financial crisis and the exposure of systemic flaws in the capitalist development model, Marxism, as a major discipline in China, embarked on a new phase of its Sinicization. Previously, Chinese scholars had positioned Žižek as a postmodern Lacanian, not sufficiently Marxist, and grouped him with theorists of postmodernism like Debord, Baudrillard, and late Derrida. However, contemporary Chinese scholars now see Žižek aligned with radical leftist theorists such as Badiou, Agamben, Rancière, and Hardt. His bold declaration of communist ideals and his critique of Western liberal democratic hegemony are perceived as radical stances, making him a significant reference point for the Sinicization of Marxist theory and sparking a renewed wave of Žižek studies in China. This renewed interest is most evident in the proliferation of National Social Science Fund projects focusing on Žižek since 2008. Among these are "Žižek and Marxist Thought Studies" (Han Zhenjiang), "Žižek's Cultural Critique of Contemporary Capitalism" (Yu Qi), "Philosophical Critique from Žižek's Psychoanalytic Perspective" (Yan Zesheng), and "Philosophical Thought of Slavoj Žižek" (Li Xixiang), among many others. These projects underscore the increasing academic recognition and official endorsement of Žižek's contributions to contemporary Marxist thought within China.

However, Chinese Marxist philosophers often have an ambiguous and divided attitude towards Žižek. On one hand, he is perceived as a misunderstood and imaginary "Other" used to establish their own identity—a Marxist ally of China in the Western world. His exposure of the crises of Western capitalism and criticism of liberal democratic systems partially overlap with the targets of Chinese Marxist critique. On the other hand, China's "resonance" with Žižek is a wishful "misrecognition", as the contexts and goals of their critiques of capitalism differ significantly. This selective engagement with Žižek's work, marked by a distinct "Chinese characteristic", is particularly evident in how Chinese Marxist scholars consistently sidestep Žižek's provocative critique of China's political system. This avoidance is notable regarding his concept of "capitalism with Asian values", which he argues exemplifies a capitalist system thriving without liberal democracy (Žižek 2011, 131–33; 2018). Žižek contends that China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" combines authoritarian state control with aggressive capitalism, challenging the Western assumption that capitalism necessitates democratic governance. In Žižek's earlier work, such as his 2007 analysis of China's "valley of tears", he argues that China's economic system is not true socialism but a form of "authoritarian capitalism", much like Europe's early capitalist days

in the 19th century, marked by exploitation and inequality (Žižek 2007). This view clashes with Chinese Marxist scholars who insist China's system is socialist. These critiques, which position China as a model of authoritarian capitalism rather than socialism, directly conflict with the official narrative of Chinese Marxism as a socialist project, making it politically sensitive. Consequently, Chinese philosophers rarely engage with Žižek's views on contemporary Chinese politics in public, as evidenced by the cancellation of the 2021 "Academic Symposium on Žižek's Philosophical Thought" at Nanjing University, reportedly for "political reasons" (cf. Ming Pao News 2021). In summary, despite appearing as allies and "comrades", Žižek remains an outsider within Chinese Marxist academic circles. By critiquing him as deviating from classical Marxism (for example, some scholars fault Žižek for "replacing economic structure analysis with psychoanalytic-style ideological analysis, thereby negating the reality content upon which ideology is constructed", deeming him "un-Marxist" for this misreading of Marx (cf. Peng and Wang 2018, 130–36) or for offering abstract theories devoid of practical solutions (cf. Lu 2020, 62–66), Chinese scholars reinforce the centrality and superiority of Marxism with Chinese characteristics, distancing themselves from Žižek's unsettling portrayal of China as a capitalist state.

Žižek in Chinese Humanities Circles: The Master in the "Post-Theoretical Era" and Model for the Internationalization of Chinese Literary Theory

In contrast to the last century, when theory propelled real political movements, as Terry Eagleton pointed out at the beginning of *After Theory*, the golden age of cultural theory is long past (cf. Eagleton 2004, 1). The pioneering works of theorists like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida are now many years behind us. Wang Ning proposed that with Derrida's death in 2004, contemporary philosophy and humanistic thought entered a "post-theoretical era" (Wang Ning 2009, 4), characterized by the fall of the big Other and the rise of the little others. The all-encompassing unified theory is being challenged, and deconstructive theory permeates various theoretical trends. Small narratives and marginal discourses have emerged, making research subjects and value judgments more diverse.

Is Žižek considered a new master in the "post-theoretical era" following Derrida? An awkward fact for Žižek is that, despite his resistance to the non-ideological and non-political nature of "post-theory", his critique of contemporary cultural studies as the ultimate expression of the cultural logic of global capitalism (Žižek 2001, 2), and his efforts to restore the critical edge of theory, he is primarily positioned within Western humanistic thought as an outstanding postmodern cultural theorist and cultural critic. This status might be related to Žižek's "not serious

enough" writing style. Terry Eagleton describes Žižek as "a formidably erudite scholar well-versed in Kant and Heidegger who also has a consuming passion for the everyday" (Eagleton 2014). Žižek acknowledges that the numerous examples from cinema, popular culture, jokes, and political anecdotes in his works often push the boundaries of good taste, leading reviewers to describe his style as "post-modern" (Žižek 1999, viii). Despite his frequent emphasis that the cultural examples in his works are merely bait to attract readers to his philosophical ideas, and his desire to downplay his "cultural" aspect, this often backfires. Žižek continues to be labelled in the West with titles he detests, such as "the Borat of philosophy" and "the world's hippest philosopher" (Engelhart 2012).

Contemporary Chinese humanities scholars have kept pace with the "post-theoretical era" in the West. The impact of Žižek on China's humanities circles can be summarized in two main aspects: 1) positioning him as a master of theory; 2) recognizing him as an expert in specific areas in the context of post-theoretical era. Overall, as Lu Tonglin points out, apart from doubts about Žižek's understanding of China and scepticism towards his writing on it, Chinese scholars generally have a high acceptance of his theoretical works (cf. Lu 2011a, 617–25). Some scholars (such as Han Zhenjiang, Kong Ming'an, Wu Guanjun, Zhao Chun, etc.) focus on Žižek's philosophical thoughts, viewing him as a master akin to Lacan and Hegel and considering his ideas as the beginning of a "new theoretical foundation after post-structuralism", and an important new pillar in theoretical circles. They reconstruct Žižek's theoretical system using key concepts from his thought (such as parallax, the Real, death drive, subject, event, action, etc.) and hope that his ideas, as a branch of contemporary Western literary theory, can inject new vitality into Chinese humanities. Another group of scholars, including Hu Shun, Dai Yuchen, Chen Linxia, and Liu Xinting, focus on Žižek's ideas in ecology, posthuman subjectivity, cyberspace criticism, and film criticism within the "post-theoretical era". Their work aligns with current research trends like ecological criticism, posthumanism, visual culture construction, and aesthetics, reflecting the era's characteristic of the coexistence of theoretical diversity and multiple discourses. In the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural context of the post-theoretical era, Žižek, who follows popular topics and is keen on cross-border issues, serves as a significant intellectual resource, providing a fresh perspective from a world-class thinker on these issues. Furthermore, some scholars (such as Zhou Zhiqiang and Wu Yue) use Žižek as a method for literary and cultural studies, applying his central ideas and following his path to analyse contemporary literary and cultural phenomenon.

Compared to the relatively closed and internationally less influential Chinese philosophy academia, the Chinese humanities have a more conscious awareness of engaging with the world and dialoguing with the West. They do not shy away

from academic exchanges and theoretical debates with Žižek on issues concerning China. In 2011, the Chinese-Canadian scholar Tonglin Lu edited a special issue titled "The Chinese Perspective on Žižek and Žižek's Perspective on China" in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (Lu 2011b). In this issue Lu herself, along with the Chinese-American scholar Liu Kang, and the Chinese scholars Zhang Yiwu, Yang Huilin, and Lo Kwai-Cheung (Hong Kong), published articles discussing Žižek and contemporary political, social, and cultural issues in China. The issue also included two articles by Žižek and a response to Liu Kang's article. According to the four stages of Chinese humanities research proposed by Wang Ning—"following others", "speaking with others", "speaking against others", and "proposing new viewpoints and leading international colleagues in discussion"[3]—this represents a successful attempt at the internationalization of Chinese humanities by engaging in a phase of "speaking against" with Žižek.

However, leveraging global interest in Chinese issues and "speaking against" Žižek does not satisfy the ambitions of Chinese humanities scholars. Despite China's leading economic status, it lacks a similarly groundbreaking and internationally influential figure in the humanities. In this context, Žižek, a scholar from a former Eastern European socialist country, transcends the identity politics of Western academia. He is seen "not just as a scholar and theorist from a small nation in the non-Western camp, but as a non-Western voice that can represent the international mainstream" (Wang Ning 2015, 112). This contrast stimulates Chinese scholars who have long relied on Chinese issues to gain international recognition. As Wu Guanjun notes:

> Žižek's current academic influence sharply pierces the consensual framework that has dominated Chinese academia for decades: that scholars from the Third World can only gain international influence by defending "local knowledge," interpreting "native culture/civilization," analysing "regional issues", and adhering to "particularist discourse". (Wu 2014)

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3   Wang Ning believes that:
     Chinese humanities research has undergone and is undergoing four stages: The first stage is "following others", which means that for the past century or more, Chinese humanities scholars have been dedicated to introducing Western theories and writings, to the extent that they have neglected to introduce their own thoughts and academic works to foreign audiences. The second stage is "speaking alongside others", where, after many years of being students, we have finally caught up with our teachers and can discuss issues with them on equal footing. The third stage is "speaking against others", where, while discussing alongside our teachers, we identify some errors and imperfections in their theoretical viewpoints and boldly raise questions and criticisms. The fourth stage is the stage of our gradual maturity, where we are fully capable of proposing entirely new viewpoints, sparking discussions and even debates, with the aim of leading our international colleagues in these discussions. This is particularly applicable to the field of comparative literature research. (cf Wang Ning 2022b)

In 2015, Wang Ning, reflecting on the "Žižek phenomenon", expressed his expectations for Chinese scholars in this context:

> This undoubtedly serves as an inspiration for Chinese scholars and theorists striving to make their voices heard on the international stage. As scholars proficient in both Chinese and Western academic traditions, and capable of writing in English, why can't Chinese scholars achieve this? (Wang Ning 2015, 112)

Žižek, like a catfish among sardines, represents both a challenge and an encouragement to Chinese scholars. The interest and curiosity towards Žižek in the Chinese humanities are not merely theoretical, but stem from a desire to enhance China's academic influence and secure a place in the international mainstream.

The academic career of Žižek exemplifies Wang Ning's "four stages" theory of the internationalization of Chinese humanities. Early in his career, Žižek's translations of texts by Lacan, Freud, and Althusser can be seen as "following others". Joining the ranks of Anglo-American post-Marxism represents the stage of "speaking with others". Subsequently, in debates with post-Marxist scholars like Laclau and Butler, Žižek radicalized his political conclusions, embodying the phase of "speaking against others". Now, advocating for a "return to Lenin" and leading the left-wing theoretical discourse on communism, Žižek is in the fourth stage of "leading others". Žižek, hailing from the small and sparsely populated Slovenia, has won great renown for his country in the realm of ideas (Mead 2003), and thus serves as a model for Chinese scholars aspiring to internationalize Chinese literary theory. While Chinese scholars can gain international attention through elucidating Chinese issues, their influence will be significantly limited if they stop at this step. Žižek's career shows that Chinese scholars need to actively engage in Western theoretical debates, boldly engage in direct dialogue with Western theoretical giants, and present their insights on issues of common concern. Žižek did not confine his research to the cultural, literary, and political realities of the Balkans. Instead, he targeted Western popular culture and hegemonic politics, directly engaging with classic theories from Lacan and Hegel, offering insights that are often more profound than those of Western scholars. As Žižek himself said, "if, as a philosopher, you really articulate the spirit of the time, the result is popularity" (Engelhart 2012). The lesson from Žižek's case for the Chinese academic community and the "Chinese School" is that Chinese scholars need to ground themselves locally while having a global vision. They should propose questions that are original to China, but are also of interest to the international academic community. As Wang Ning aptly put it, "in international contexts, we should not only speak on Chinese issues but also voice our opinions on universally significant issues that concern all of humanity" (Wang Ning

2022a, 15). To sum up, beyond being introduced and studied as the master in the "post-theoretical era", Žižek offers a unique inspirational significance for the internationalization of Chinese humanities scholarship.

The Anti-Establishment Star Intellectual in the Internet Age

In the West, Žižek's influence has crossed over into mainstream culture, earning him the title of "a thinker of choice for the internet generation" (O'Hagan 2013). In various media, Žižek has brought theory down from the academic ivory tower and into the public sphere, making it both entertaining and provocative. Moreover, Žižek's "unserious" image, described by Bar-El as the "anti-intellectual intellectual" (Bar-El and Baert 2021, 551), with his eccentric appearance and behaviour, makes him a "spectacle" for Chinese youth, enhancing his anti-establishment appeal. However, Žižek himself is not entirely satisfied with the truth behind his popularity. He has expressed frustration, saying, "people say, 'He's funny, go listen to him, but don't take him too seriously.' And this sometimes hurts me a little bit because people really often ignore what I want to say" (Bulajewski 2018). From Žižek's perspective, his theories have not been given due attention despite—or perhaps because of—his growing fame, as people seem more interested in his persona than his ideas. Through the dissemination of his "performative" style, Žižek has gained fame on the internet, but in the process, he has also been commodified. Some scholars argue that Žižek has even become an accomplice to capitalism, his radicalism repurposed to reinforce the existing system (Gray 2015).

On the surface, the Žižek fever among young people in China mirrors the popular fascination with Žižek outside of the Western academic sphere, but the underlying reasons differ significantly. On Chinese internet platforms, Žižek is often seen as an anti-establishment star intellectual. This selective embrace of his "anti-establishment" image, coupled with a neglect of his deeper leftist and Marxist underpinnings, reveals a "Chinese characteristic" in his reception. On popular Chinese social media platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin (Chinese TikTok), and Xiaohongshu, Žižek is presented as a prolific, quote-spouting anti-establishment intellectual. However, those who share his content often selectively overlook his leftist and Marxist political inclinations. His films and interview clips, focusing on relatable topics like anime, marriage, and political commentary, are translated and shared widely, amassing significant viewership. As of July 2024, the most-viewed videos on Žižek on Bilibili include themes such as "Žižek Discusses Anime", "Žižek's Sharp Commentary on Marriage", and his opinions on Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, each with over 300,000 views. Prominent content creators discuss and evaluate Žižek's thoughts, contributing to his popularity.

On Xiaohongshu, Žižek is dubbed the "Pure Love Warrior" and "Nasal Philosopher", with his comments on issues such as love and marriage resonating with young audiences, while his habit of sniffing has become a defining characteristic. Žižek's popularity is also exemplified by headlines such as, "On the Day Five People Made Headlines, Lead Singer Renke Was Reading Žižek at Writer Zhang Xiaozhou's House" (Zong 2020). This popularity, however, does not necessarily reflect a comprehensive understanding of Žižek's work, as further evidenced by the partial translation of his books in China.

Currently, out of nearly 50 books authored by Žižek, only about 20 have been translated and published in China, indicating a selective approach. This selectivity in translation and publication, influenced by censorship and market forces, represents a distinct "Chinese characteristic" in Žižek's reception. These translations began in 2002 with Ji Guangmao's translation of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. While new translations continue to be published, they predominantly focus on Žižek's pre-2009 works, which integrate Lacanian psychoanalysis and popular culture, rather than his more recent and politically charged writings, especially after his "communist turn". Several reasons could account for this phenomenon. First, the Chinese translation and publishing industry prioritizes popular appeal over academic research needs, a tendency reinforced by censorship policies that restrict the publication of Žižek's more politically charged works, particularly those critical of the Chinese political system (such as his analysis of "Capitalism with Asian values"). Second, Žižek's analyses of current political events, while insightful, are often subject to the fleeting nature of news, resulting in a limited shelf life for his political writings. Finally, Žižek himself has admitted that his philosophical books are much superior to his political writings (Bulajewski 2018). As a result, and regardless of other possible reasons, Chinese publishers may genuinely believe that Žižek's philosophical and cultural works offer a more valuable investment. In other words, the Žižek that reaches Chinese readers is, in a sense, a Žižek who has been "castrated", his ideas deemed politically problematic and subversive having been removed or suppressed.

Žižek's "unserious" image enhances his anti-establishment appeal. As Sophie Fiennes, the director who collaborated with Žižek on *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, noted, "He is very much a thinker for our turbulent, high-speed, information-led lives precisely because he insists on the freedom to stop and think hard about who you are as an individual in this fragmented society" (O'Hagan 2013). His ability to address real-world issues and break down existing ways of thinking in a relatable, non-academic way inspires the public. Further, the striking contrast between Žižek's personal image and his scholarly identity leaves a strong impression. His often-astonishing behaviour in videos, such as telling dirty jokes or half-lying on a bed shirtless, leads to Chinese

youth viewing him as a spectacle, and to watching and even parodying him. We might say that Žižek's performative and erratic persona functions as a kind of visual provocation—one that captures attention instantly but risks overshadowing the theoretical depth beneath. One's first impression is often that of a quirky and captivating figure, inviting curiosity before reflection. This makes people focus on his performance rather than his theory. Accordingly, the acceptance of Žižek among Chinese youth often stays at a superficial level—focused on his eccentric persona rather than his critical thought—and entails a process of commodification and trivialization, where Žižek's radical edge is blunted and he is recast as an easily consumable symbol of rebellion.

From Žižek's own ultimate perspective, however, his popularity among Chinese youth may be viewed as a failure: "My biggest fear is not that I will be ignored, but that I will be accepted" (Taylor 2005). Lo Kwai-Cheung aptly describes this phenomenon as "Žižek without Žižek" and "an obscene joke without the critical theory behind it" (cf. Lo 2011, 745), asserting that Žižek has been depoliticized and stripped of his excess and radicalism in China. In other words, Žižek has become a meme, a source of edgy quotes, a symbol of intellectual rebellion, but without the substance of genuine political engagement. This raises the question: what fantasy is the Chinese audience projecting onto Žižek? Drawing on his own Lacanian framework, we can understand fantasy as a structuring principle that shapes our desires and our perception of reality. The popularity of Žižek in China suggests a fantasy of rebellion, a desire to challenge authority and question the *status quo*. However, this desire is often expressed through the consumption of Žižek's image and soundbites, rather than through active participation in political movements or a deep engagement with his theoretical work. He offers an outlet for discontent without a genuine commitment to radical change. The lack of engagement with his more challenging ideas suggests a reluctance to confront the complexities of Chinese society and to move beyond theoretical analysis towards transforming that reality.

Therefore, Žižek's popularity among Chinese youth, while seemingly a sign of intellectual engagement, may ultimately be a symptom of a deeper ideological dynamic. He is embraced as an anti-establishment icon, but his radical ideas are often neutralized, commodified and reduced to mere entertainment, failing to spark the kind of transformative event he envisions. This "mutation" of Žižek's theory and persona in China highlights the challenges of reconciling his radical political ideas with the prevailing ideological landscape among Chinese youth, and the way commodification and entertainment render radical theory powerless in the age of the internet.

Conclusion

Žižek's reception in China reflects the nation's complex intellectual and cultural dynamics, showcasing a "selective reception with Chinese characteristics". In philosophy, his role as a post-Marxist and radical leftist both aligns with and challenges Chinese Marxism, serving as a foil to affirm local ideological priorities. In the humanities, Žižek's status as a master theorist in the post-theoretical era inspires scholars to engage globally, pushing for a more influential Chinese academic voice. Among the public, and particularly young people, Žižek's anti-establishment persona resonates as a symbol of rebellion, though his radical ideals are often sidelined. This multifaceted reception—philosophical critique, humanities inspiration, and popular spectacle—reveals more than the fate of a foreign thinker, it unveils China's ongoing negotiation between maintaining ideological control, exerting cultural influence, and accommodating global intellectual trends, all coexisting in tension. Žižek's presence is thus not merely a cultural event, but a symbolic site where China's encounter with global thought plays out—torn between theoretical ambition and political containment, between the hunger for critique and the comfort of spectacle.

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ASIAN STUDIES IN SLOVENIA

Politično-religijska zgodovina Ladakha

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Izvleček

Zgodovina Ladakha še danes ni podrobno raziskana z vidika sodobnega znanstvenega zgodovinopisja, obstaja le nekaj verodostojnih in natančnih študij o zgodovini te dežele, na katerih gradi tudi pričujoči članek. Ta prinaša kronološki pregled poglavitnih dogodkov v politično-religijski zgodovini dežele, začenši z naselitvijo prvih ljudstev, Dardov in Monov, približno v 2. stoletju pr. n. št., nato pa opiše postopno imigracijo tibetanskega prebivalstva, ki sestavlja glavnino etnične strukture ladaškega ljudstva. Do 10. stoletja je o zgodovini dežele znanega zelo malo, saj so pisni in arheološki viri zelo skopi. Ladaško kraljestvo, takrat imenovano Maryul, je bilo ustanovljeno leta 950 in *Ladaške kronike*, pisane na kraljevem dvoru, so do 15. stoletja skoraj izključni pisni vir za to območje. Od 15. stoletja naprej se pojavljajo tudi drugi viri (tibetanski in islamski ter tudi ladaški), zato zgodovina območja ni zgolj bolj poznana, temveč tudi bolj objektivno predstavljena, saj lahko primerjamo različne poglede na dogodke in deželo iz različnih zavezniških in sovražnih držav.

Ključne besede: Ladakh, Tibet, Kašmir, Mogulski imperij, Dogre

Political-religious History of Ladakh

Abstract

The history of Ladakh has not been studied in detail in the sense of modern scientific historiography, and thus there are only a few credible and accurate studies of the history of this land, on which the present article builds. In it there is a chronological overview of the main events in the political-religious history of the land, starting with the settlement of the first peoples, the Dards and Mons, around the second century BC, and then with the gradual immigration of the Tibetan population, who represent the majority of the ethnic composition of the Ladakhi people. Until the 10th century, very little is known about the history of the land, as written and archaeological sources are very scarce. The Ladakhi kingdom, then called Maryul, was founded in 950, and the Ladakhi Chronicles, written at the royal court, represent almost the only written source for this area until the 15th century. From the 15th century onwards, other sources (Tibetan and Islamic, as well as other Ladakhi sources) are also available, and history is not only better known to us, but also presented more objectively, as we can compare different perspectives from different allied and enemy states.

Keywords: Ladakh, Tibet, Kashmir, Mughal Empire, Dogras

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Raziskovanje zgodovine Ladakha

Zgodovina Ladakha je v slovenskem prostoru precej neznana in neraziskana, strokovnega gradiva v slovenščini o zgodovini te dežele pa praktično ni. Toda tudi v drugih jezikih žal ne najdemo prav veliko relevantne in zanesljive zgodovinske literature o tem območju. Številni lokalni ladaški avtorji, pogosto pa tudi indijski, ubirajo drugačno pot, kot jo predpisuje sodobno znanstveno zgodovinopisje. Ta dela vsebujejo pomanjkljive datacije ali pa napačne, prezgodnje datacije, v njih se meša zgodovinska naracija z religijskimi legendami in lokalnimi verovanji. Izzive ladaške zgodovinske naracije lahko enačimo z izzivi tibetanske, kot jih izpostavlja John Powers, saj sta zgodovini teh dveh dežel seveda tesno povezani:

> Ker je budizem vplival na vse vidike tibetanskega življenja – in ker je zgodovina njihove države v razumevanju Tibetancev tesno povezana z budizmom, tradicionalni viri po navadi prekrijejo zgodovinske dogodke z budističnim pomenom ter pripisujejo pomembne vidike teh pripovedi posegom budističnih božanstev. Zgodovinska dela so tako prežeta s tem postopkom, da je bila celo predbudistična zgodovina Tibeta predstavljena kot zgodba o pripravi države za širjenje budizma. (Powers 2007, 139)

Pri poskusu razumevanja zgodovine tega prostora moramo tako na eni strani ohraniti merila znanstvenega raziskovanja preteklosti, na drugi pa se otresti etnocentrizma (konkreten primer bomo omenili) in skušati zgodovino Ladakha razumeti tudi z vidika njegovih prebivalcev, njihovih vrednot ter njihovega načina interpretiranja in vrednotenja lastne zgodovine. S tem seveda ne bomo prispeli do »objektivne zgodovinske resnice«, bomo pa vsekakor bližje razumevanju objektivnih ali vsaj intersubjektivno ustvarjenih vrednot, intenc in ciljev, ki so se izoblikovali v zgodovini tega območja. Eden izmed najbolj reprezentativnih primerov, kjer se prepletata znanstveni in tradicionalno-religijski narativ, je vloga Padmasambhave (Guru Rinpoche) v Tibetu in Ladakhu. V obeh deželah in v vseh šolah vadžrajanskega (skrt. *vajrayāna*) budizma[1] je Padmasambhava osrednja ter najpomembnejša zgodovinska in religijska osebnost, ki je na tem območju uvedla budizem in pripomogla k zatonu stare religije, *bön* – s svojimi tantričnimi močmi je Padmasambhava očistil deželo božanstev *bön* ter tako v Tibetu in širši okolici vzpostavil vadžrajansko tradicijo budizma. V tej tradiciji je Padmasambhava čaščen še bolj in pogosteje kot sam Buda. Zgodovinski viri sicer potrjujejo njegov prihod v Tibet v drugi polovici 8. stoletja – prišel je na povabilo kralja

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[1] Štiri poglavitne šole so: Gelug, Kagju (tib. *kagyu*, ki se nadalje deli na več podšol, najpomembnejši sta Drugpa in Drigung), Sakja (tib. *sakya*) in Njingma (tib. *nyingma*). Omeniti velja še eklektično gibanje Rime (tib. *rimé*), ki je v 19. stoletju skušalo preseči razlike med posameznimi šolami in povezati njihove nauke.

Trija Songdétsena[2] –, vendar njegova vloga pri vzpostavitvi budizma in prevladi nad staro religijo niti približno ni tako pomembna, kot mu jo pripisujejo poznejši in sedanji tradicionalni narativi. Pri poskusih vključevanja tradicionalnega narativa v znanstveni zgodovinski pregled ni mogoče preprosto izključevati vsega »religijskega« oziroma »nadnaravnega« in sprejemati preostanka kot nekaj objektivnega. Treba je biti pozoren na različna vrednotenja pri sami interpretaciji dogodkov in pomena oseb.

Tudi prvi Evropejci, ki so pisali o Ladakhu, niso zapustili objektivnih zgodovinskih opisov. Najprej so v Ladakh prispeli ter o deželi zapustili (pejorativne in času »primerne« evrocentrične[3]) zapise portugalski jezuiti in trgovci. Prvi je v Ladakh prišel trgovec Diogo D'Almeida, in sicer leta 1601. Sledila sta jezuita António de Andrade (1626) in Francisco de Azevedo (1639), leta 1715 pa sta Ladakh obiskala še jezuita Manoel Freyre iz Portugalske in Ippolito Desideri iz Italije, ki sta popisala deželo: Freyre v delu *Tibetorum ac eorum Relatio viarum* (*Poročilo o Tibetancih in njihovih poteh*) ter Desideri v *Relazione* (*Poročilo*) (Sweet 2006, 4–6). Med letoma 1822 in 1826 je Ladakh (predvsem Zangskar) večkrat obiskal madžarski filolog in jezikoslovec Sándor Kőrösi Csoma, ki je napisal prvi tibetansko-angleški slovar ter tibetansko slovnico, zato velja za utemeljitelja tibetologije (le Calloc'h 1998).

Med prve raziskovalce ladaške zgodovine prištevamo še Britanca Alexandra Cunninghama, ki je leta 1854 izdal delo *Ladák: Physical, Statistical, and Historical with Notices of the Surrounding Countries* (*Ladakh: fizikalno, statistično in zgodovinsko z noticami o okoliških državah*), brata Emila in Hermanna Schlagintweita[4] (prvi je leta 1866 izdal delo *Die Könige von Tibet*, (*Tibetanski kralji*), ki v zadnjem poglavju govori o Ladakhu) ter Karla Rudolfa Marxa in Augusta Hermanna Franckeja iz moravske misije. Francke je izdal *History of Western Tibet* (*Zgodovina zahodnega Tibeta*; 1907) in *Antiquities of Indian Tibet* (*Antikvitete indijskega Tibeta*; 1926), ki štejeta za prvi obsežnejši zgodovinski deli o Ladakhu. Obe deli pa črpata predvsem iz ladaških virov, to je iz *Ladaških kronik* (tib. *La-dvags-rgyal-rabs*), ki so jih pisali na kraljevem dvoru, čeprav Francke omenja

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2   Tibetanska in ladaška imena v članku bodo transliterirana po sistemu THL poenostavljene fonetične transkripcije.

3   Krščanski misijonarji iz 17. stoletja so bili prepričani, da je tibetanski (vadžrajanski) budizem oblika krščanstva, ki se je v osamitvi ter zaradi določenih zgodovinskih dogodkov izrodila, in da bo spreobrnitev vadžrajanskih budistov v kristjane preprosta (le Calloc'h 1991, 57). V 18. stoletju so opustili to prepričanje, ne pa tudi pejorativnih sodb o sami religiji in tudi o materialni kulturi Tibetancev. Izjema, ki potrjuje pravilo, je Freyrejevo občudovanje gostoljubja, darežljivosti in odsotnosti ksenofobije, ki jih je opazil pri Tibetancih (Sweet 2006, 6–7).

4   Ne smemo ju zamenjevati z brati Schlagintweit (Hermann, Adolph in Robert), ki jih je Britanska vzhodnoindijska družba poslala na odpravo, da proučijo zemeljsko magnetno polje v Južni in Osrednji Aziji.

tudi tuje pisne vire in nekatere kamnite inskripcije v Ladakhu. Objektivnost pri razlagi ladaške zgodovine predvsem s perspektive dvornih piscev *Ladaških kronik* je najšibkejša v opisu in interpretaciji konfliktov z muslimanskimi sosedi. Njihov vpliv na kraljestvo Ladakh ali njihove vojaške zmage so bodisi prezrti bodisi je njihov pomen znatno zmanjšan; tako zaradi omenjenega kot tudi zaradi drugih netočnosti Franckejevi deli nista zanesljiva vira. Toda Franckeju kot zgodovinarju, ki je v svojem času oral ledino po resnično nepoznani zgodovini Ladakha (*History of Western Tibet* ni zaman podnaslovil *One of the Unknown Empires* (*Eden od neznanih imperijev*)), moramo priznati trud, ki ga je vložil v raziskovanje, na katerem so lahko gradile naslednje generacije. Subjektivnost *Ladaških kronik* je jasno omenil tudi sam:

> Ali nam ladaški zgodovinarji govorijo resnico ali je njihova zgodovina popolnoma ali delno izmišljena zadeva? Najboljši test resničnosti zgodovinske pripovedi je njena primerjava z drugimi, popolnoma neodvisnimi zgodovinskimi dokumenti. Zgolj v zelo malo primerih lahko primerjamo zahodnotibetanski [ladaški] opis dogodka z opisom tuje države. V tem oziru imajo večji pomen številne inskripcije na skalah in kamnih, ki so raztresene po vsej deželi. (Francke 1907, 3–4)

Ta Franckejeva misel v resnici bolj kot zanj velja predvsem za italijanskega zgodovinarja Luciana Petecha. Njegova dela še danes štejejo kot najbolj zanesljiva dela o zgodovini Ladakha, kar velja predvsem za knjigo *The Kingdom of Ladakh, c. 950–1842 A. D.*[5] (*Kraljestvo Ladakh, ok. 950–1842*) iz leta 1977, v katerem Franckejeve izsledke dopolnjuje s tibetanskimi, kitajskimi in perzijskimi viri ter biografijo vrhovnega lame Ladakha v 17. stoletju, Taktsanga Repe. Zaradi te večperspektivnosti in pa Petechovih natančnih preverb z materialnimi viri so njegova dela še danes glavni vir za politično-religijsko zgodovino Ladakha. Omeniti pa velja še dela Janet Rizvi, na primer *Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia* (*Ladakh: razpotja visokogorske Azije*), v katerem poleg zelo dobrega in jedrnatega pregleda ladaške zgodovine piše tudi o zgodovini karavanskih trgovskih poti, ki so vodile čez Ladakh. Prav tako odlično študijo o vplivu treh različnih trgovskih poti na razvoj Ladakha je napisala Jacqueline Fewkes (*Trade and Contemporary*

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5   Petech našteva tudi posamezne rokopise *Ladaških kronik* in navaja, kje naj bi jih hranili (1977, 1–2). Od sedmih naj bi bili ohranjeni samo še trije: enega hranijo v knjižnici Bodleian v Oxfordu, drugega v Britanskem muzeju, tretji pa naj bi bil v samostanu Lamayuru pri menihu Gerganu Sonamu. Petech je o tem pisal leta 1977 (enake informacije o rokopisih *Ladaških kronik* so na spletni enciklopediji *Wikipedija* navedene še danes!), vendar rokopisa »Sonam« ni več pri menihu Gerganu Sonamu, saj je umrl. Med našim terenskim delom smo o možnih lokacijah hrambe tega rokopisa poizvedovali v samostanu Lamayuru, kjer rokopisa nismo našli, pa tudi v knjižnicah samostana Thiksey in Inštituta za budistične študije v Lehu, kamor so nas neuspešno vodile sledi. Rokopis »Sonam« tako še čaka na ponovno odkritje.

Society along the Silk Road, *Trgovina in sodobna družba ob svilni poti*).

Kot član raziskovalnega projekta »Budizem v himalajskih puščavah: tradicija jogijev in jogini v Ladakhu« se opiram tudi na naše terensko delo v Ladakhu, izvedeno v sklopu projekta leta 2024, kjer smo poleg drugih področij raziskovali tudi zgodovino dežele in njenih religijskih institucij ter zunajinstitucionalnih religijskih praks. Terenska dejavnost je zajemala delo v arhivih in knjižnicah (v Centralnem inštitutu za Budistične študije v Lehu, v knjižnici in učnem centru Thiksey ter tudi v knjižnici Bodleian v Oxfordu), intervjuje z lokalnimi poznavalci zgodovine (z dr. Sonamom Wangchukom, vodjo Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundationa, in dr. Tashijem Gyenlayem, profesorjem filozofije na Univerzi v Lehu) ter obisk zgodovinskih krajev.

Umestitev in prebivalstvo

Ladakh leži zahodno od Tibeta (danes kitajske Avtonomne pokrajine Tibet) ter vzhodno od Kašmirja (indijske zvezne dežele Džamu in Kašmir), na jugu meji na Lahul in Spiti (v indijski zvezni deželi Himačal Pradeš), na severozahodu na Baltistan (Pakistan), na severovzhodu pa na zasedeno območje Aksaj Čin in prefekturo Hotan (Ljudska republika Kitajska). Danes je del Indije kot zvezni teritorij Ladakh, ki je razdeljen na dva distrikta, glavno mesto je Leh.

Ladačani so pretežno tibetanskega porekla, toda prvi identificirani prebivalci[6] na tem območju so bili Dardi in Moni. Dardi so indoarijsko ljudstvo, ki se je (verjetno v 2. stoletju pr. n. št.; Phuntsog 1999, 379) naselilo iz Gilgita (severno od Baltistana), njihova religija pa je bila različica religije *bön*.[7] Drugo ljudstvo, ki naj bi na tem območju živelo pred tibetansko imigracijo, so Moni. Ti naj bi v Ladakh prišli z juga, z območja Lahula in Spitija. O njih govori že Francke, Petech (1977, 5) pa trdi, da je Franckejeva teorija o tem, da so Ladakh pred Dardi naseljevali Moni, neutemeljena. O njih je znanega izredno malo in razlogov za to je več: (1) danes je populacija izjemno majhna – ob cenzusu leta 1998 jih je bilo zgolj 700 (Mon, Ladakh n. d.); (2) pomanjkanje podatkov o njih – Francke (1907, 19) piše, da jih je največ v Zangskarju, ker do tja ni segla dardska kolonizacija, Rather (1993, 215) pa, da živijo v skoraj vsaki vasi Ladakha, razen v Zangskarju in Changthangu; (3) ali pa sama nejasnost poimenovanja – beseda Mon je namreč

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6   Pred njimi so že od 3. tisočletja pr. n. št. dalje sledove v obliki petroglifov puščala druga ljudstva. Slog teh petroglifov povezujejo z ljudstvi iz Osrednje Azije in južne Sibirije (Devers 2022, 7).

7   Ustanovitelj religije *bön* je bil Dönpa Shenrap iz Taksika (Perzija), ki naj bi svoje učenje razširil po Kitajski, Tibetu in deželah zahodno od Tibeta (Powers 2007, 492). V kateri smeri se je religija širila po območju, ni povsem znano, zato tudi ni jasno, ali je *bön* do Dardov prišel iz vzhodne, tibetanske smeri ali z zahoda, torej neposredno iz Perzije. Verjetno pa je bil Ladakh v tem času del predbudističnega kraljestva Zhangzhung v zahodnem Tibetu, ki je bilo center *bönovske* religije.

tibetansko poimenovanje prebivalcev dolin onkraj Himalaje in se uporablja zelo ohlapno (Snellgrove in Skorupski 1977, 144). Moni so omenjeni že v inskripciji iz 16. stoletja v samostanskem kompleksu Alchi (ibid., 82), od leta 1989 pa so priznani kot etnična skupina Indije, navedena v nacionalnem registru države. Toda o tem, kdaj naj bi Moni prispeli v Ladakh in od kod so prišli, za zdaj ni mogoče zatrditi nič določenega.

Priseljevanje tibetanskega prebivalstva v Ladakh je potekalo postopoma. Prvi prišleki so bili nomadski pastirji, večina prebivalstva pa se je naselila v 8. in 9. stoletju, ko je bilo to območje pod nadvlado tibetanskega kraljestva, in pa v 10. stoletju, ko je bila osnovana tibetanska dinastija v Ladakhu. Tibetansko prebivalstvo je številčno rastlo in nadvladalo staroselce. Edini preostanek predhodnih ljudstev živi v dolini Inda, na območju od vasi Gurgurdu do skupine vasi Hanu, kjer se je v precejšnji izolaciji ohranilo dardsko prebivalstvo – ljudstvo, imenovano Brokpa.[8]

Že od 2. stoletja je znano, da je na območju Ladakha potekala trgovina med številnimi bližnjimi in daljnimi kulturami. Trgovino med indijskimi in osrednjeazijskimi mesti na širšem območju Ladakha potrjujejo tudi arheološke najdbe iz tega časa (Fewkes 2008, 39). Tako se je prebivalstvo na tem območju selilo in mešalo približno dve tisočletji; tu je potekal del svilne poti, kar je močno zaznamovalo ekonomijo, politiko in kulturo območja (glej Fewkes 2008).

Zgodovina prvih 15 stoletij

O zgodovini dežele do 10. stoletja, ko je bilo ustanovljeno prvo kraljestvo, imenovano Maryul, ni veliko znanega. V 1. in 2. stoletju n. št. je zahodni del Ladakha spadal pod Kušanski imperij, kar dokazuje inskripcija v pisavi *kharosthi*, najdena pri kraju Khalatse (Petech 1977, 7). V tem času je zaradi vpliva Kušanskega imperija v zahodni del Ladakha prišel budizem, in sicer iz smeri Kašmirja in Gandhare, ki sta bila takrat izjemno pomembna centra razvoja budistične kulture. Gre za indijski/kašmirski budizem in umetniške tokove, ki so v Ladakhu pozneje izginili, ker jih je nadomestil tibetanski vpliv. Najdeni so arheološki ostanki predtibetanskih samostanov iz 5. stoletja (Fewkes 2008, 40), najstarejši obstoječi ostanki kašmirske umetnosti v Ladakhu pa so budistični globoki skalni reliefi pri Mulbekhu, Drasu in v Zangskarju (iz 8. stoletja) (Rizvi 1996, 56) ter arhitektura

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8   Brokpa je sicer izraz, ki so jim ga nadeli drugi Ladačani in je zanje poniţujoč (Phuntsog 1999, 379). Podobno je pri Monih: eden od razlogov, zakaj je težko identificirati Mone, je verjetno tudi to, da so v Ladakhu diskriminirani kot najnižji sloj in se neradi imenujejo tako (Rather 1993, 218). Nasprotno pa dobra poznavalka Ladakha Helena Norberg-Hodge trdi, da čeprav Moni spadajo v najnižji sloj, niso obravnavani kot manjvredni, saj so razlike med sloji v tradicionalni družbi Ladakha zelo majhne, med njimi ni segregacije in druženje ali poroke med njimi niso neobičajne (1991, 48).

in poslikave samostanov Alchi, Manggyu, Sumda in delno tudi Lamayuru (od 11. stoletja dalje) (Snellgrove in Skorupski 1977, 6).

V 8. stoletju je bil Ladakh ukleščen med ekspanzionističnima kraljestvoma Kašmirjem in Tibetom. Kašmir je največjo moč dosegel pod hindujskim kraljem Lalitadityo Muktapido, ki je vladal v letih 724–760, Tibet pa je bil od združitve na začetku 6. stoletja do konca 8. stoletja, ko so ga porazili združeni Kitajci in abasidski kalif al-Rašid, vojaška kraljevina, ki je napadala sosednje države in plenila budistične samostane (Powers 2007, 143). Obenem je v tem času po dolini zgornjega Inda rastel vpliv Kitajske – kitajskemu cesarju se je poklonil celo baltistanski kralj (Ahmad 1963, 29). Morda je bil tudi Ladakh pod delno nadoblastjo Lalitaditye, leta 727 pa verjetno že pod nadoblastjo Tibeta (Rizvi 1996, 56). Tibetanska oblast je bila v vsakem primeru ohlapna, zagotovo pa se je končala leta 842, ko je tibetanska monarhija razpadla zaradi religijskih bojev – kralja Langdharmo, ki je odločno preganjal budizem, je umoril budistični menih Pelgi Dorje (Samuel 2012, 109). S tem je bilo konec dinastije in takrat je nastopilo skoraj stoletje nemirov.

Zametki ladaškega kraljestva segajo v čas okoli leta 912, ko je na zahod Tibeta prišel Langdharmov pravnuk Kyide Nyimagon s še nekaterimi drugimi plemiči, ki so bežali pred notranjimi boji v Tibetu, in ustanovil kraljestvo, ki pa še ni obsegalo današnjega Ladakha. Zavzetje širšega območja je dokončal njegov sin Lhachen Palgyigon, ki tako velja za prvega ladaškega kralja (Petech 1977, 17). Po Lhachenu, ki v ladaščini pomeni kralj, se je poimenovala prva vladarska dinastija države. Kraljestvo Ladakh (Maryul) je bilo ustanovljeno okoli leta 950, prva prestolnica je bil kraj Shey ob Indu.

Nyimagonovi potomci so želeli utrditi budizem, zato so se obrnili na Kašmir, ki je še vedno veljal za kulturni in religijski center širšega območja. S tem se je začelo obdobje druge širitve oziroma oživitve budizma v Ladakhu in v širšem tibetanskem kulturnem prostoru (10.–11. stoletje). Najbolj aktiven je bil kralj Gugeja, manjšega kraljestva med Ladakhom in Tibetom, Yeshe-Ö, ki je izhajal iz Nyimagonove dinastije in se je odrekel prestolu ter postal menih. Yeshe-Ö je pošiljal menihe v budistične centre severne Indije (vrnili so se leta 978) in je bil pokrovitelj prevajalca Rinchena Zangpoja iz zahodnega Tibeta, ki je po celotnem Ladakhu, zahodnem Tibetu, Lahulu in Spitiju ustanovil veliko število samostanov (tradicionalni narativ mu pripisuje 108 samostanov, kar je verjetno nerealna številka, ki pa vseeno nakazuje njegov pomen). Naslednik Yeshe-Öja, Chang Chubod, je v Guge povabil enega izmed poglavitnih vadžrajanskih filozofov, Atiśo iz Bengalije. Prišel je leta 1042, ostal tri leta in napisal temeljni tekst vadžrajanskega budizma, *Bodhipathapradīpa* (*Luč za pot razsvetljenja*), nato pa je odšel v Tibet. Njegovi učenci so bili začetniki šole Kadam, iz katere se je pozneje razvila šola Gelug.

Peti kralj lachenske dinastije je bil Utpala, ki je vladal v 11. stoletju. Njegovo ime je hindujsko, kaj več o njegovem poreklu, religiji ali politiki ni znano. Je pa

mogoče v tistem času zaznati hindujski vpliv, poleg tega so za kratek čas v Guge in zahodni Tibet prišla arijsko govoreča ljudstva (Rizvi 1996, 60). Utpala je bil osvajalec, ki je Ladakhu priključil Kulu (južno od Manalija), Mustang (danes severni Nepal), Guge in dele Baltistana. Pod Utpalo so začeli pošiljati menihe novince na dokončanje šolanja v Tibet, to pravilo pa je opustil kralj Ngorub na začetku 13. stoletja. Kralj Ngorub je poznan tudi po svoji podpori šole Drigung kagju – leta 1215 je postal pokrovitelj ustanovitelja šole Drigung, Kyobpe Jiktensumgöna. Tudi njegovi nasledniki so podpirali šolo Drigung, ki je dobila v upravljanje enega najstarejših ladaških samostanov – samostan Lamayuru.

Prvi izmed velikih »postindijskih« ladaških samostanov je bil zgrajen v 12. stoletju v Likirju. Ta samostan ni več zgrajen v kašmirsko-indijskem slugu, temveč v tibetanskem s primesmi lokalnih, ladaških elementov. V 13. stoletju se je po Indiji širil militantni hinduizem in budizem je skorajda izginil s podceline, poleg tega pa je na začetku tega stoletja budistično kulturo doletela velika nesreča, ko so muslimanski zavojevalci oplenili in uničili pomembne budistične samostane v Magadhi (Scott v Sakya Pandita 2002, 3). Zaradi opustošenja budistične kulture in vednosti v Indiji se je Ladakh naslonil izključno na Tibet ter tibetansko kulturno sfero.

V ladaški zgodovini predstavljata 13. in 14. stoletje največjo vrzel, in kot pravi Petech:

> Ti dve stoletji sta za nas absolutna temà. Skoraj gotovo je, da odročni Ladakh ni bil vključen v mongolski imperij, čeprav nekatera uradna pisma cesarskih učiteljev (tishih), ki jih je Tucci našel v samostanu Ža-lu v osrednjem Tibetu in sodijo v začetek 14. stoletja, govorijo o oblasti nad mNa'-ris sKorgsum [zahodni Tibet], kar bi lahko vključevalo Ladakh. Toda mNa'-ris je bil zunaj ozemlja pod neposredno upravo opatov Saskya [sakja] kot predstavnikov mongolskih cesarjev Kitajske; in dejansko ni bil predmet dveh popisov prebivalstva, ki so jih izvedli Mongoli v Tibetu v letih 1268 in 1288. (Petech 1977, 21–22)

Ker ne poznamo nobenih drugih indicev, ki bi kazali na mongolsko oblast v Ladakhu, lahko za zdaj zaključimo, da nikoli ni bil del katerega izmed mongolskih kanatov.

Zgodovina od 15. do sredine 17. stoletja

Od 15. stoletja dalje je o zgodovini Ladakha na voljo več različnih virov. Poleg *Ladaških kronik*, ki so za to obdobje bolj povedne, obstajajo še tibetanski in

islamski viri (Petech 1977, 63); dogodki in osebe so tako bolj poznani ter opisani s perspektiv zavezniških in sovražnih sosednjih držav.[9] Na začetku 15. stoletja sta v Ladakhu kratkotrajno obstajali dve kraljestvi, saj sta si oblast razdelila brata: Dragspa Bum je vladal iz Basga (zgradil si je tudi prestolnico v Tingmosgamu), Drags Bumde (vladal okoli 1410–1435) pa iz Leha in Sheya. Ta je sprejel Tsongkhapovega[10] odposlanca in v Ladakhu se je začela razširjati tudi šola Gelug, ki spada med politično najmočnejše šole vadžrajanskega budizma. Njeni pripadniki so v Ladakhu ustanavljali nove samostane, na primer Spituk in Thiksey, ter prevzemali stare, na primer Likir. Religijsko-institucionalne vezi s Tibetom, od koder je gelug izvirala, so se zaradi tega v tem času še poglabljale. Bhagan, vnuk Dragspe Buma, je ponovno združil deželo in ustanovil dinastijo Namgyal (v lad. zmagoviti) – krvno gre sicer za isto dinastijo. Prestolnica je bila od takrat naprej kraj Basgo ob Indu, ki leži zahodno od prve prestolnice, Sheya.

V 15. stoletju je Ladakh postal tarča plenjenj zahodnih in severnih muslimanskih sosedov – prvi vpad se je zgodil leta 1420, nato pa so se vrstili do okoli leta 1600. Sprva so vdirali iz Kašmirja,[11] pozneje pa tudi iz Baltistana in Yarkanda. Toda samo Purig, območje okoli Kargila (zahodni Ladakh), je prevzel islam, druga področja pa tudi v številnih poznejših poskusih ne. Prvi večji in nevarnejši vpad se je zgodil leta 1532, ko je iz Kašmirja napadel poveljnik Mirza Haidar Daughlat, ki je bil v službi sultana Saida Khana, oblastnika Yarkandskega kanata (Howard 1996, 129). Leta 1545 je vpadel še enkrat in takrat je začasno prevzel oblast v Ladakhu. Nato se je odpravil nad Lhaso, vendar se je moral pred Tibetanci umakniti nazaj v Ladakh. Dve leti je ostal v Sheyu, vendar mu okupacija ni prinašala koristi, zato je Ladakh zapustil. Islamska nadoblast se je končala brez velikih posledic – kot že rečeno, islamiziral se je le del zahodnega Ladakha.[12]

Pod vladavino kralja Tashija Namgyala, ki je vladal v letih 1555–1575, so se razmere glede vojaške moči in vloge napadalca spremenile. Ladaški kralji so

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9   Res pa je, da nas na začetku tega, zgodovinopisju bolj poznanega obdobja še vedno čaka uganka »izgubljenega stoletja«: za skoraj sto let ostaja seznam ladaških kraljev iz *Ladaške kronike* (od sredine 15. stoletja do leta 1555, začetka vladavine Tashija Namgyala) nepopoln (Howard 1996).

10   Ustanovitelj reformistične šole Gelug, ki je večinoma prevzela samostane in zapuščino šole Kadam.

11   Ironično je, da je bil prvi kašmirski muslimanski kralj, Rinchen Bhoti, Ladačan ali Tibetanec (v kašmirščini Bhoti označuje Tibetanca oziroma Ladačana). Prestol je zavzel leta 1320. Sprva je bil budist, potem pa je sprejel islam, da je kot tujec lažje uveljavil svoje politične ambicije v Kašmirju, deželi, ki je bila takrat hinduistična in muslimanska (hindujec ni postal zato, ker ga ne bi sprejeli v nobeno od hindujskih kast) (Fewkes 2008, 43–44).

12   Povedali smo, da ladaški viri radi zmanjšujejo vlogo islama in moči muslimanskih sosedov v zgodovini Ladakha, zato lahko takšno naracijo prežemajo simpatije do budizma in »navijanje« za moč budizma, ki se ne ukloni poskusom islamizacije. Zapisati, da se je islamska nadoblast končala brez večjih posledic, čeprav se je del države islamiziral, je vrednostna sodba v skladu s prej omenjeno naracijo, ki pa jo je mogoče razumeti in umestiti v zgodovinski kontekst.

od vladavine Tashija naprej začeli osvajati sosednja ozemlja. Zaradi tega v tem obdobju Ladakh mnogi zgodovinarji imenujejo imperij[13] – čeravno ni zavzemal velikega ozemlja. Tashi je tako zavzel Purig, Baltistan, Spiti, Zangskar in Nubro. Poleg tega je uspešno odbil islamske vpade iz Osrednje Azije in Kašmirja. Podpiral je šolo Drigung kagju, ki je med drugim zgradila samostan Phiyang. V Lehu pa je Tashi zgradil trdnjavo Namgyal Tsemo (Vrh Namgyal, najvišji del Leha, pod katerim je kralj Sennge pozneje, v 17. stoletju, zgradil palačo).

Tashija je po smrti nasledil njegov nečak Tsewang (vladal 1575–1595), ki je nadaljeval uspešna osvajanja in je razširil oblast na nekatera območja, ki so v preteklosti že spadala pod Ladakh, vendar so se v vmesnem času osamosvojila: Mustang, Kulu in Gilgit; prej neodvisno kraljestvo Guge je moralo plačevati dajatve. Vazale (nove in stare) je kot talce pripeljal v prestolnico, v njihove trdnjave pa namestil svoje uradnike. V njegovem času (leta 1586) je Kašmir prešel pod mogulsko nadoblast, kar pomeni, da je Ladakh dobil nevarnega in močnega soseda s pretenzijami po osvajanju ozemelj ter prozelitizmu.

Tsewanga je nasledil njegov sin Jamyang (vladal 1595–1616), ki je bil soočen z upori vazalov, z vodjo šole *Drugpa kagju* Padmo Karpom pa je vzpostavil odnos menih–mecen.[14] S tem se je začelo favoriziranje šole Drugpa s strani ladaškega dvora in drugpa je postala državna religija, kar je imelo pomembne posledice v poznejših politično-religijskih odnosih v regiji. V času vladavine Jamyanga je leta 1601 v Ladakh prišel prvi Evropejec, portugalski trgovec Diogo d'Almeida.

Kot rečeno, se je Jamyang moral spopadati z upornimi vazali. Okoli leta 1600 je kralj dobil poročilo o boju med dvema poglavarjema v Purigu – poglavarjema Chigtana in Kartseja. Zbral je vojsko in priskočil na pomoč poglavarju Chigtana, toda verjetno je šlo za ukano. Ladačane je presenetila vojska Baltov pod vodstvom vladarja Skarduja Alija Mirja in ladaška vojska je bila uničena, Balti pa so začeli pleniti po Ladakhu, rušiti templje ter zažigati budistične spise. Nato so se iz neznanega razloga umaknili, Jamyanga vrnili na prestol, moral pa se je poročiti s hčerjo Alija Mirja, Gyan Khatun. Tudi ta novi poskus islamizacije je bil neuspešen. Jamyangu in Gyan Khatun se je rodil sin Sennge, ki je nasledil

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13   Ta označba je iz nekoliko poznejšega časa, pojavila se je med vladavino Senngeja (1616–1642), ko je imel Ladakh največji obseg (Petech 1977, 163; le Calloc'h 1991, 59).

14   Prvi odnos menih–mecen so leta 1249 vzpostavili Mongoli, in sicer kan Koden, ki je Sakyo Pandito, vodjo šole Sakja, postavil za gospodarja Tibeta (Sakya Pandita je Kodena ob srečanju spreobrnil v budizem) (Scott 2002, 17). Mongoli so dopuščali delno avtonomijo Tibeta, v zameno pa so kani dobili religijske usluge tibetanskih vrhovnih lam (in v realnosti lažji nadzor nad Tibetom zaradi zvestobe ene izmed močnih šol). Ta odnos se je prekinil, potem pa spet vzpostavil leta 1578, ko je kan Altan imenoval Sonama Gyatsoja (iz šole Gelug) za »ocean modrosti«. Tako je Sonam Gyatsoja postal tretji dalajlama, predhodnika pa retrospektivno prvi in drugi. Povezave med mongolskimi kani in šolo Gelug so se še dodatno utrdile, ko je Sonam leta 1588 umrl in naj bi se reinkarniral v Altanovem pravnuku, ki je postal novi dalajlama (Powers 2007, 159, 164, 165).

očeta na prestolu in je postal največji mecen budizma v Ladaku. Zaradi njega je budizem še okrepil svoj vpliv v državi, hkrati pa je postal Sennge tudi največji ladaški vojaški osvajalec.

Sennge je vladal v letih 1616–1623 in 1624–1642, v vmesnem času pa je vladal brat Norbu, ki je Senngeja prisilil k odstopu, vendar je kmalu umrl v sumljivih okoliščinah. Ob drugem nastopu vladavine je Sennge začel z osvajanji: do leta 1630 je priključil neodvisni deželi Zangskar in Guge (z Gugejem je Ladak bíl 16-letno vojno; Ahmad 1963, 43). V Tsaparangu, prestolnici Gugeja, je bil od leta 1626 prisoten jezuitski misijon, ki ga je ustanovil António de Andrade. Kralj Gugeja je bil naklonjen krščanstvu, med drugim tudi zato, da bi porušil ravnotežje med budističnimi šolami. Sam je pripadal šoli Gelug, večina menihov njegove dežele pa drugim šolam. Tudi njegov brat, vrhovni lama, ki je hlepel po prestolu, je pripadal drugi šoli (le Calloc'h 1991, 58). S kraljevim favoriziranjem jezuitov se niso strinjali domači menihi ter plemstvo in leta 1635 je prišlo do upora proti kralju. Jezuiti so morali zaradi tega zapreti misijon.[15]

Sennge je osvojil tudi zgornji Lahul in napadel Purig, ki ga je hotel ponovno priključil Ladakhu (po porazu Jamyanga Purig ni bil več del ladaškega kraljestva). Dosegel je veliko zmago pri kraju Bodh Karbu, vendar so ga nato porazili združeni Balti in Moguli (Kašmir je bil pod Moguli že od leta 1586). Obljubiti je moral plačevanje dajatev, ki pa jih ni nikoli plačal, s čimer je samo spodbudil mogulske zahteve po Ladakhu. Kot odgovor na to je Sennge Mogulom zaprl trgovsko pot iz Kašmirja, s čimer je pravzaprav najbolj škodil ravno svoji državi, saj je njena ekonomija temeljila na trgovanju in obdavčitvi trgovskih poti, ki so vodile čez ozemlje Ladakha (Petech 1977, 159). Ladakh je tako po smrti Senngeja leta 1642 ekonomsko zelo stagniral in si od takrat praktično ni več opomogel (Rizvi 1996, 69). Hkrati pa je Sennge tudi dodobra izčrpal državne finance, saj je bil velik pokrovitelj gradnje novih samostanov in sekularnih stavb ter drugih investicij v religijske zadeve, kar bomo omenili v nadaljevanju.

Tako zahodni kot ladaški in indijski zgodovinarji kralja Senngeja soglasno štejejo za najpomembnejšega kralja v zgodovini Ladakha, vendar mu poleg slabega vpliva na državno ekonomijo pripisujejo še eno usodno potezo, ki naj bi pospešila ekonomsko propadanje dežele po koncu njegove vladavine. Sennge se je namreč tik pred smrtjo odpravil na vojaški pohod proti mongolskim okupatorjem Tsanga (zahodni in osrednji Tibet), ki naj bi se pripravljali na napad na Ladakh. Mongoli so se umaknili z meje in do spopada sploh ni prišlo. S tem je Sennge pravzaprav

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15   Tri četrt stoletja pozneje sta misijon sicer skušala obnoviti Desideri in Freyre, vendar sta bila zaradi številnih razlogov neuspešna – med drugim tudi zaradi slabe obveščenosti: pot v Guge sta začela v kašmirskem Šrinagarju namesto v garhwalskem Šrinagarju, ki je veliko bližje, v Kašmirju pa sta se kar šest mesecev učila perzijsko, misleč, da ta jezik govorijo tudi na tibetanskem kulturnem območju (Sweet 2006, 7–12).

pomagal petemu dalajlami in mongolskemu poglavarju Gushriju Khanu, da jima je pozneje uspelo združiti Tibet. Tibet je tako (ponovno) postal regionalna velesila, kar se je pozneje Ladakhu maščevalo, kraljestva med Tibetom in Ladakhom pa so bila uničena (Snellgrove in Skorupski 1977, 86). Ta interpretacija temelji na premisi, da bi bilo bolje okoli Ladakha obdržati neodvisna »vmesna« kraljestva, ki naj bi Ladakh ščitila pred večjimi in močnejšimi državami, kot sta bila Tibet in Mogulski imperij. Toda to seveda ni politično-vojaško pravilo, ki bi se v zgodovini vedno izkazalo kot najbolj preudarno, in glede na majhnost Ladakha ter velikost obeh tekmecev je bila Senngejeva strategija povečanja ozemlja Ladakha morda povsem upravičena, saj bi v nasprotnem primeru »vmesna« kraljestva morebiti še hitreje padla pod nadzor večjih sosednjih imperijev.

Senngejeva odprava proti Mongolom je resda koristila Tibetu, kar se je pozneje Ladakhu močno maščevalo, vendar je treba pri tem opozoriti na še eno predpostavko zgodovinopisja tega območja, o katerem žal ni veliko zgodovinskih podatkov. Predvsem v starejših naracijah zgodovine Ladakha (na primer v Franckejevi, deloma pa tudi še v Petechovi) lahko opazimo tiho domnevo spenglerjanskega razumevanja poteka zgodovine posamezne civilizacije, po katerem razvoj države (še raje imperija) poteka od začetnega obdobja vzpona, rasti in konsolidacije moči do vrhunca in obdobja največjega obsega ter moči države, v katerem pa se že kažejo razpoke, ki bodo pozneje pogubne (v tem primeru so nekatera Senngejeva ravnanja na vrhuncu moči Ladakha pozneje pripomogla k njegovemu zatonu). Nato pa nastopi obdobje padca, manjšanja moči in končno propad oziroma poraz proti drugi državi. Četudi je takšen interpretacijski cikel v zgodovini marsikatere države povsem realen, gre pri območju, o katerem ne vemo dovolj, za pretirano prekrivanje podatkovnih lukenj in vnašanje lastnih, neosnovanih, etnocentričnih interpretacij. Dopustiti moramo torej še druge interpretacije ladaške zgodovine oziroma ob pomanjkanju podatkov interpretacijo omejiti na najmanjšo možno raven.

Toda nadaljujmo s Senngejevo religijsko politiko. Ključnega pomena je bilo njegovo zavezništvo s tibetanskim lamo Taktsangom Repo (1574–1651), predstojnikom severne linije šole Drugpa kagju, ki je leta 1622 postal glavni lama Ladakha (Ahluwalia 1980, 97). Taktsang Repa je pod Senngejevim pokroviteljstvom (in tudi še po njegovi smrti pod pokroviteljstvom njegovega sina Deldana) ustanovil številne največje in najpomembnejše ladaške samostane: Hanle, Hemis, Chemrey, Stakna, in gradil zidove mani.[16] Sennge je zgradil tudi veliko palačo v Lehu pod Tashijevo trdnjavo. Leh je v njegovem času začel pridobivati na pomenu v primerjavi s starima prestolnicama, Sheyem in Basgom, tako zaradi lege na pomembni trgovski poti proti prelazu Khardung in naprej proti Yarkandu (Rizvi

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16 Religijski zidovi, namenjeni cirkumambulaciji in polaganju kamnov z inskripcijami manter ali priprošenj.

1996, 69) kot zaradi kraljevih gradbenih projektov. Sennge je naročil tudi prepis tibetanskega budističnega kanona *Kangyur* in komentarjev *Tengyur*, delo pa zaupal mojstru kaligrafije Sponu Namkhi Spalgonu. Kopije, napisane z zlatimi črkami, so shranili v tempelj Serzang v Basgu, kjer jih hranijo še danes.

Kot rečeno, kralji dinastije so že pred Senngejem podpirali šolo Drugpa, ki je postala državna usmeritev, Sennge pa je to šolo še bolj podpiral po tem, ko so mu menihi šole Gelug zaprli vrata v samostan, ko je iskal zaščito pred bratom Norbujem. Vseeno so bili v času Senngejeve vladavine odnosi med šolama Gelug in Drugpa še vedno dobri, zaostrovati so se začeli po njegovi smrti, predvsem pa po smrti Taktsanga Repe. Prav tako topli so bili odnosi z Butanom, kjer je južna, butanska linija drugpe v 17. stoletju postala državna religija (Kapstein 2014, 35), Senngejev brat Tenzin pa je celo postal guverner dela Butana in je Butancem pomagal odvrniti tibetanski vpad.

Zgodovina od sredine 17. do sredine 19. stoletja

Po Senngejevi smrti je nastopilo kratkotrajno regentstvo njegove žene Skalzang Dolme, nato pa je oblast prevzel Senngejev sin Deldan. Deldan je vladal med v letih 1642–1694, leta 1675 ali 1678 je predal posle sinu Deleku, ostal pa je uradni vladar, vendar je Delek umrl tri leta pred njim, leta 1691. Deldan je imel težave z Moguli, predvsem v času vladavine močnega cesarja Aurangzeba, ker še vedno niso plačali dajatev, ki jim jih je po porazu proti njim in Baltom obljubil Sennge. Po Senngejevi smrti so Moguli začeli ponovno pritiskati. Deldan jim je leta 1664 obljubil plačilo dajatev in postavitev mošeje v Lehu. Od takrat naprej je bil Ladakh *de jure* pod mogulsko nadoblastjo (Petech 1947, 171). Po grožnji mogulske vojske na kašmirski meji je Deldan mošejo leta 1667 tudi zgradil. Ladakh dajatev od takrat dalje ni plačeval ali pa jih je plačeval zgolj delno. Senngejevo blokado trgovanja s Kašmirjem so ukinili, kar je dobro vplivalo tudi na ladaško ekonomijo. Navkljub mogulskim pritiskom in načelno vazalnemu statusu Ladakha je Deldanu vseeno uspelo zavzeti Purig in imenovati vazale v treh baltistanskih okrožjih. V odgovor na to so Moguli vojaško napadli Ladakh, vendar jih je Deldan porazil.

Kot omenjeno, je v tem času v Ladakhu prevladovala šola Drugpa, v Tibetu pa gelug, kjer je bila posvetna in religijska oblast ob podpori Mongolije bolj ali manj v rokah dalajlam. Deldan in peti dalajlama sta sklenila dogovor, da bo v Ladakhu dobro poskrbljeno tudi za šolo Gelug, v Tibetu pa za drugpo. Toda Tibetanci se niso strinjali z ladaškim sprejetjem mogulske nadoblasti. Poleg tega so ladaški kralji podpirali drugpo, da bi zaustavili vpliv šole Gelug in s tem Tibeta v Ladakhu, drugpo pa so podpirali tudi v Butanu, ki je bil v tistem času v sporu z dalajlamo (Rizvi 1996, 72).

Spor med Tibetom in Butanom se je razplamtel v vojno. Dalajlama je v Butan poslal vojsko, vendar je bil tibetanski napad neuspešen zaradi dobre butanske obrambe. Čeprav se je njegov zaveznik že izkazal za zmagovitega, je kralj Deldan v Tibet vseeno poslal pismo, v katerem je izrazil podporo Butanu. Zaradi tega je peti dalajlama leta 1679 z mongolsko pomočjo nad Ladakh poslal vojsko. Spor med budističnimi šolami je tako prerastel v novo vojno.[17] V Zangskarju (ki je bil od Senngejevih osvajanj dalje del Ladakha) so se na primer domači menihi gelug pridružili napadalcem – mongolskim vojakom in se borili proti ladaški vojski. Pri tem je treba omeniti, da so za vojno obstajali tudi ekonomski vzroki, povezani z upadanjem trgovine med Tibetom, Ladakhom in državami na jugu (Petech 1947, 172), kar ni ustrezalo ne Tibetu ne Ladakhu.

Leta 1680 je tibetansko-mongolska vojska premagala ladaške sile. Ostanki vojske so se vkopali v trdnjavah okoli Basga, kjer so vzdržali približno šest mesecev, dokler na prošnjo kralja Deldana na pomoč ni prišla kašmirska vojska pod vodstvom mogulskega vladarja Kašmirja Ibrahima Khana. Tibetanci in Mongoli so se nato umaknili ter vrnili v Tibet, kašmirska vojska pa je izkoristila priložnost in se ni umaknila, dokler Deldan leta 1683 ni potrdil mogulske nadoblasti, plačal dolžnih dajatev ter sprejel islama. Preimenovali so ga v Akibata Mahmuda Khana, Kašmirju pa je moral prepustiti monopol pri nakupu zahodnotibetanske in ladaške pašmine, to je fine volne, surovine za končne izdelke, ki so jih izdelovali v Kašmirju (Rizvi 1996, 73). Toda Deldanova spreobrnitev je bila le formalna, osebno je ostal budist in tudi dežela je ostala budistična. Purig in Baltistan pa sta spet postala neodvisna.

Tibetanci, zaskrbljeni zaradi nevarnosti islamizacije Ladakha, so leta 1684 na pogajanja z Delekom in Deldanom poslali vrhovnega lamo drugpe Gyalwanga Miphama Wangpoja. Oba ladaška voditelja sta sprejela zahtevo po vrnitvi v budizem (čeprav je dvor za Mogule še vedno uradno veljal za muslimanskega) in podpisala sporazum, ki je določil mejo med kraljestvoma, ki velja še danes, vendar je zaradi konflikta predmet različnih interpretacij indijske oziroma kitajske strani (Ahmad 1963, 47–49). Tako imenovani sporazum iz Temisganga (Tingmosgam) je določil, da so Guge, Purang in Rudok dokončno prešli pod Tibet. Določena je bila tudi manjša dajatev v obliki religioznih daril, imenovana Lo-pchak, v Ladakhu pa so po sporazumu morali spodbujati večji pomen šole Gelug. Ladakh je dobil nekatere trgovske koncesije in bil obvezan braniti Tibet pred vpadi iz Indije. S tem je bilo *de facto* konec ladaške avtonomije, čeprav je navidezno trajala še okoli 150 let (ibid., 74).

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17   To ni bilo nič novega: v Tibetu, ki od 9. stoletja naprej ni imel več trdnega in enotnega centra oblasti, so bile posamezne šole od sredine 13. stoletja naprej povezane s posameznimi mongolskimi klani in so se med seboj bojevale za vpliv – tudi z vojskami, saj je imel vsak samostan svoje oborožene sile. Toda ravno sredi tega nasilnega časa je nastal tibetanski budistični kanon *Kangyur* (Powers 2007, 161).

Po Deldanu in Deleku je vladal kralj Nyima – uradno v letih 1694/1695–1729, čeprav je posle upravljal že od leta 1691, ko je umrl Delek. Bil je zelo religiozen, postavljal je veliko zidov mani, spodbujal tisk svetih besedil in izpopolnil pravni sistem. Med njegovo vladavino je leta 1720 Kitajska pod mandžursko dinastijo Qing zavladala nad Tibetom, vendar so odnosi med Ladakhom in Tibetom ostali nespremenjeni – v veljavi so ostale vse določbe Temisganškega sporazuma –, kitajskemu dvoru pa je bil dolžan poročati o gibanju Mongolov v okolici Yarkanda.

V 18. stoletju so se razmere v Ladakhu še dodatno poslabšale zaradi notranjih razlogov: državo so slabili najrazličnejši notranji dinastični boji in spletke, številni kralji pa so bili neprištevni in zato nesposobni voditi državo. Zadeve so se tako zaostrile, da so Tibetanci leta 1752 poslali visokega lamo Rigzina Tsewanga Norbuja, da bi spravil sprte frakcije in da bi za ureditev sistema nasledstva sprejeli pravilo primogeniture. To pravilo so sprejeli, vendar je prestol zavzel Tsewang Namgyal II. (vladal 1753–1782), ki je bil mentalno nestabilen (ibid., 76). Kralji Zangskarja so obdržali samostojno oblast, ker je šlo za dinastično linijo, ki je izvirala od Senngeja. V njegovem času je namreč Zangskar dobil njegov tretji sin, Demchog, in ta dinastija je obstala vse do invazije Doger leta 1834. Ladakh je tako v drugi polovici 18. stoletja postal zelo šibka država z nestabilnim vodstvom in vojsko. Vojaki so bili brez izkušenj, urjenja in discipline, nezmožni upreti se novim osvajalcem ali plenilcem,[18] nesposobni kralji pa so s pretiranimi davki izžemali ljudstvo (Petech 1977, 116).

V letu 1752 je Kašmir prešel izpod Mogulov, ki so izgubljali moč, pod afganistansko oblast, ki je trajala do leta 1819 (Tanwar 2025). Leta 1798 je afganistanski vladar Zaman Šah postavil za guvernerja Lahoreja sikha Ranjita Singha, ki je leta 1808 zavzel Džamu (Jammu, južno od Kašmirja), leta 1819 pa Kašmir (ibid.). Kmalu po tem, v letih od 1820 do 1822, sta Ladakh obiskala Angleža William Moorcroft in George Trebeck. Moorcroft je bil veterinar, ki je za Vzhodnoindijsko družbo iskal konje v Osrednji Aziji, v svojih spisih *Travels* (*Potovanja*) iz leta 1841 pa je opisal tudi Ladakh.

Ladaški kralj Tsepal se je zaradi sikhovske nevarnosti zaprosil za zaščito Britance in ponudil zvestobo Vzhodnoindijski družbi, k čemur ga je spodbujal tudi Moorcroft. Toda Britanci so ga zavrnili, ker je pogodba med Britanijo in sikhi iz leta 1809 slednjim prepuščala območje severno od reke Satledž. Britanci so takrat začeli ponujati višje cene za volno tibetanskim in ladaškim proizvajalcem, kar je oslabilo tradicionalno trgovino z volno v Kašmirju. Ranjitov zaveznik in vazal Gulab Singh, voditelj Doger in džamujski radža, je zaradi tega načrtoval invazijo

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18   Do najhujšega plenjenja je prišlo leta 1822, ko so zaradi trgovinskega spora oborožene skupine iz Kuluja, Kanawarja in Lahula napadle ter plenile po Zangskarju. V naslednjih letih so Zangskar večkrat napadle različne skupine, ladaški dvor pa je bil prešibek, da bi se lahko na to odzval (Crook in Osmaston 1994, 460).

na Ladakh, toda v resnici mu je bolj šlo za lastno korist kot za korist maharadže Ranjita (Rizvi 1996, 81).

Ladakh je Britance večkrat prosil za pomoč, vendar je bil vedno neuspešen. Zorawar Singh, poveljnik vojske Gulaba Singha, je Ladakh napadel leta 1834 (Petech 1977, 139). Ladakh je bil brez redne ali izkušene vojske in sredstev, mladi kralj pa je bil ravno na romanju. Oslabljeno kraljestvo je izgubilo vse bitke, zato je postalo vazalno območje Gulaba Singha ter s tem tudi Ranjita Singha. Takoj so morali plačati 50.000 rupij in še letno dajatev 20.000 rupij. Zorawar Singh je nato napadel in zavzel Baltistan. V vojsko je vključil tudi ladaške nabornike, nato se je odločil napasti tudi Tibet, da bi priključil celotno področje proizvajanja volne, obenem pa je želel še opleniti bogate tibetanske samostane. V napadu na Tibet se je oprl na staro ladaško zahtevo po Gugeju.

Ranjit Singh je umrl leta 1839. Sikhovska vlada je bila v razsulu in niso mogli več nadzirati Doger. Zorawar je Tibet napadel leta 1841 in tako sta zahodni Tibet ter trgovina z volno prešla pod njegov nadzor, s čimer ta pomembna dobrina ni več »uhajala« v Indijo. Nato pa so leta 1841 Kitajci podprli tibetansko vojsko, ki je premagala Dogre in v bitki tudi ubila Zorawarja. Ladačani so se leta 1842 uprli, pobili dogrske posadke v ladaških mestih, blokirali posadko v Lehu in razglasili Jigmeta Namgyala za svojega edinega kralja (ibid., 147). Na pomoč so jim sicer prišli Balti in Tibetanci, toda dogrska vojska jih je vseeno premagala blizu Tangtseja in povrnil se je *status quo*, Ladakh je ostal pod Dogrami.

Leta 1842 so Dogre in Tibetanci podpisali Leško pogodbo – zavladal je mir med državama, potrdili so meje, Ladakh in Zangskar sta ostala pod Dogrami. Družina Namgyal je dobila džagir[19] Stok, kjer živijo še danes. Kralj je lahko še vedno pošiljal religiozne dajatve v Lhaso, ki pa niso smele imeti političnih konotacij, Tibetanci pa so se zavezali, da bodo tovorili svojo volno in čaj čez Ladakh, in ne čez Indijo (Rizvi 1996, 86).

Po prvi anglo-sikhovski vojni, leta 1845, je britanska vlada potrdila oblast Gulaba Singha nad Ladakhom; vendar pa so leto pozneje Britanci Ladakhu odvzeli dolini Lahul in Spiti ter ju priključili britanski posesti Punjab (Ahir 1993, 26). Gulab Singh je isto leto od Britancev kupil Kašmir, tako da je pod pokroviteljstvom Britancev nastala država Džamu in Kašmir, katere del je bil Ladakh. Ladaški vazarat je bil razdeljen na tri dele: Baltistan, Kargil in Leh. Ko so sikhi leta 1846 izgubili vojno proti Britancem, so Džamu in Kašmir ter s tem Ladakh prešli pod Britanski imperij.

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19   Oblika indijskega fevda.

Sodobna zgodovina

V sodobni zgodovini Ladakha moramo na kratko omeniti nekaj pomembnih dogodkov, ki so zaznamovali razvoj dežele in oblikovali njen današnji ustroj. Med vojno med Pakistanom in Indijo leta 1948 so pakistanski napadalci iz Gilgita napadli Ladakh, zavzeli so Kargil, nato pa jih je indijska vojska ustavila približno 20 kilometrov pred Lehom (Rizvi 1996, 90). Spopadi na meji in predvsem okoli Kargila so potekali tudi med indijsko-pakistanskima vojnama v letih 1965 ter 1971. Leta 1962 so Kitajci zavzeli Aksaj Čin, ki je sam po sebi pust in brez vrednosti, oziroma kot pravi tudi Rizvi: »[Aksaj Čin je] nerodovitna in nenaseljiva pušča, nikjer nižja od 4500 metrov nadmorske višine, sicer strateškega pomena za Kitajsko, ker zagotavlja povezavo med Sinkiangom in Tibetom, ni pa imela nobene materialne vrednosti za Ladakh ali za Indijo in njena izguba je imela malo praktičnega učinka.« (ibid., 91)

V nasprotju z zavzetjem Aksaj Čina je kitajska okupacija Tibeta leta 1950 Ladakh močno zaznamovala, saj je prekinila tradicionalne trgovske poti in religijske povezave. Ladaški menihi od takrat naprej po znanje hodijo v tibetanske samostane v Indiji, v Ladakhu pa je tudi veliko tibetanskih beguncev, ki so jih Ladačani zaradi zgodovinskih in predvsem religijskih vezi gostoljubno sprejeli.

Zaradi napetosti s Pakistanom in Kitajsko ter obmejnih sporov je danes Ladakh prepreden z vojaškimi bazami in pa tudi z novimi, asfaltiranimi in dobro urejenimi cestami, ki premagujejo še tako zahteven gorski teren, kar je dodatna prednost tudi za turistični razvoj dežele. Turizem postaja glavni vir zaslužka, ki izpodriva tradicionalni poljedelsko in živinorejsko panogo, s katerima se je še nedolgo tega ukvarjala večina prebivalstva (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 11). Ladakh je leta 1995 dobil avtonomijo znotraj zvezne države Džamu in Kašmir (Akester 2024), leta 2019 pa je po dolgoletnih prizadevanjih za odcepitev od Džamuja in Kašmirja postal zvezni teritorij, ki je razdeljen na distrikta Leh in Kargil. Želja po odcepitvi je izhajala tudi iz dejstva, da je bilo budistično ladaško prebivalstvo manjšina v muslimanskem Kašmirju in hindujskem Džamuju, vendar tudi sedaj kot zvezni teritorij pod upravo vlade v New Delhiju nima avtonomije, ki bi si jo mnogi Ladačani želeli.

Ladakh je zaradi geopolitične situacije v regiji in napetosti med tremi jedrskimi velesilami strateško zelo pomemben. Tako maloštevilno budistično prebivalstvo kot občutljivi himalajski visokogorski ekosistem stojita sredi teh trenj. Kot že omenjeno, prihaja zaradi pretenzij po tem ozemlju do številnih reinterpretacij njegove zgodovine s strani treh držav. Mogoče je tudi zaradi tega pomembno ohraniti nevtralno držo in spodbujati znanstveno raziskovanje ladaške zgodovine, ki se bo lažje ubranila silam reinterpretacije in ohranila narativ, bolj zvest dejanski preteklosti tega območja.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jessica Rawson: *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China*

Reviewed by Manuel RIVERA ESPINOZA*

The book is made up of four sections: *Building and Dwelling*, *3200–1200 BC*, *The Language of Objects*, *Converging Cultures*, and *Conquest on Horseback*. Each section focuses on a specific period in ancient Chinese history, using archaeological findings to shed light on the material and spiritual aspects of life in these times.

Part I: *Building and Dwelling,* 3200–1200 BC is composed of chapters 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 1: "The Mystery of Jade" examines the archaeological site of Liangzhu and its jade artefacts. Rawson explains that jade, primarily composed of nephrite, is exceptionally durable and challenging to carve, which has contributed to its enduring cultural appeal (pp. 8–9). She highlights the technical sophistication required to create these pieces and explores their spiritual connotations and fantastical aesthetics (pp. 13–14). The connection between these jade items and Liangzhu's advanced socio-economic structures, including a water management system, is emphasized (pp. 15–16). Following the civilization's collapse due to flooding, some of the surviving jade items were discovered and sparked a long tradition of Chinese jade collecting (pp. 26–27).

Chapter 2: "A Disrupted Banquet" focuses on artefacts from the Taosi archaeological site, including ceramics, a jade item, and a bronze disc. Rawson argues that the ceramics were designed to provide food for the tomb's occupant, reflecting a belief in pleasing the dead with delicacies (p. 43). She views the tomb's looting as a "desecration", and highlights the ceramics' craftsmanship as evidence of sophisticated traditions tied to the afterlife (p. 51). A ceramic drum reflects music's ritual role in spirit communication (p. 51). Sheep and cattle bones and a bronze disc are interpreted as evidence of northern, steppe influences on Loess Plateau societies (pp. 53–57).

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Chapter 3: "The Warrior with the Bronze Hand" explores the influence of steppe culture on early Chinese society, focusing on the tomb of Ya Chang at the Shang site of Huayuanzhuang near Anyang. Rawson identifies Ya Chang as a warrior, interpreting his prone burial position as evidence of northern influence (p. 63). Additional support comes from items in the tomb, including a bronze hand, animal-shaped bronze vessels, a bronze axe, and a rein holder (pp. 63, 75–82). The rein holder suggests Ya Chang's role in managing chariots and cavalry, with Shang chariots and horses believed to have originated from the steppe (pp. 82–90). Despite eventual integration, Ya Chang's foreign identity is emphasized.

Part II: *The Language of Objects, 1200–700 BC* comprises chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4: "Sacrifices in a Hidden Land" examines bronzes from the Sanxingdui site in Sichuan, found not in tombs but in pits, interpreted as "sacrifices or ceremonial offerings" by an unknown clan using a "ritual language we do not recognize" (pp. 98–99). Rawson highlights the uniqueness of these bronzes compared to Shang bronzes, attributing this to a potential inspiration from wood carvings or sculptures, rather than ceramics from the loess plains (p. 103). She speculates that bronze casting arrived at Sanxingdui fully developed, enabling artisans to replicate their woodworking techniques in metal (p. 110). However, she acknowledges the lack of definitive answers with regard to this issue (p. 116).

Chapter 5: "The Gift Economy at Baoji" focuses on the Zhou dynasty site of Baoji in Shaanxi, particularly the tomb of Yu Bo, a probable leader of the Yu clan. Rawson identifies two unusual features of the tomb—its east-west orientation and joint burial—which she interprets as evidence of the Yu lineage's northern, steppe origins (pp. 123–24). This claim is supported by the presence of "northern weapons" like daggers and axes, as well as bronzes with non-standardized designs (pp. 130–31). Rawson argues that these bronzes were likely sourced from Shang or Zhou metropolitan centres (p. 132). Ultimately, the Baoji site is presented as a convergence of steppe and Central Plains cultures, with the Zhou dynasty incorporating the Yu clan's horse-riding expertise to counter nomadic threats (pp. 139–47).

Chapter 6: "Innovations and Heirlooms" investigates the tomb of the Lord of Rui at Liangdaicun, highlighting its connections to steppe nomadic groups through cultural exchanges and marriage alliances. Supporting evidence includes chariots, horses, gold ornaments, belts, braided strings, and bronze armour (pp. 152–62). Rawson also analyses a set of bronze vessels, interpreting them as evidence of the Lord of Rui's participation in the Zhou dynasty's "ritual revolution" during the late ninth century BCE. She cites the vessels' standardization and minimalistic designs as hallmarks of this shift, linking them to the influence of a centralized bureaucracy reflected in their uniform production (pp. 163–75, 166–69).

Part III: *Converging Cultures, 700–300 BC* comprehends chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 7: "The Steppe Frontier" argues that the tombs at the Yuhuangmiao site in the Beijing District, particularly the tomb of a Mountain Rong leader, have steppe origins. This hypothesis is supported by evidence such as the tomb's east-west orientation, animal heads and bones, bronze artefacts, and animal-shaped ornaments (pp. 189–200). Rawson suggests that the bronze vessels in the tomb, though linked to Zhou traditions, were used as displays of wealth rather than for ancestral rituals (pp. 189–92). She further speculates that the Mountain Rong may have acquired these bronzes incidentally, and then repurposed them for steppe-related practices. The animal motifs on certain bronzes are interpreted as reflecting a steppe cosmology distinct from Zhou traditions (pp. 193–200).

Chapter 8: "Circling South" argues that the tomb of Lord Bai at Zhongli, Anhui, exemplifies the penetration of northern steppe culture into China. Evidence supporting this interpretation includes the tomb's circular shape, east-west orientation, presence of animal remains, steppe-style knives, a tiger-shaped ornament, and stone-like structures (pp. 208–26). The chapter suggests that these steppe features entered the Yangzi River region through the acquisition of northern weapons and the capture of prisoners during military campaigns, set against the backdrop of intensified inter-state warfare characteristic of the Spring and Autumn period (pp. 227–29).

Chapter 9: "The Orchestra of Zeng" examines the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, dated to 433 BCE and located in the former state of Chu. The chapter focuses on the remarkable set of bronze bells and other musical instruments, emphasizing the technical expertise required to create them and the grandeur of the artefacts found (pp. 238–41, 248–65). Rawson observes that many items have unusual designs and unclear origins, suggesting they may have served apotropaic purposes (pp. 242–43). She further speculates that motifs such as the bird-catches-snake design, antlers, and animalistic decorations reflect steppe influences (pp. 245–47). Ultimately, Rawson concludes that the tomb exemplifies a fusion of Chinese and steppe cultural elements (p. 265).

Chapter 10: "A Kingdom by Design" contends that King Cuo's tomb blends steppe and Zhou traditions (p. 271). Supporting evidence includes stone structures, chariots, horses, gold ornaments, a jade tiger, horse and dog meat, and bronze items (pp. 274–75, 281–82, 291, 294–95, 298). Rawson attributes these features to Zhongshan's location near the steppe and its history of conflict with northern tribes, especially the Rong and Di (pp. 270–71).

Part IV: *Conquest on Horseback, 300–221 BC* encompasses chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11: "Catacombs and Chariots" analyses the Majiayuan cemetery, focusing on a warrior's tomb. Rawson argues that despite the tomb's proximity to Zhou culture, its features and artefacts indicate the warrior belonged to steppe culture.

Artefacts include gold items, chariots, S-shaped cheekpieces, and beads (pp. 306, 310–15, 320–21). The warrior's tomb links to sites like Pazyryk (Russia) and Persepolis (Iran), illustrating centuries-long China-steppe contacts (pp. 303, 316–18, 324–25). Rawson highlights the sophistication and wealth of the warrior's items, challenging the notion that steppe peoples' lack of literacy implies lack of sophistication (pp. 306–07).

Chapter 12: "The Everlasting Army" discusses the tomb and mausoleum of the First Emperor, highlighting steppe influences. Supporting evidence includes stone encasements, horses, clay wrestlers, bronze cranes and geese, S-shaped cheekpieces, a saddle, and chariots (pp. 334, 336, 340–42, 344–46, 357–58). Rawson links the "realism" of the clay wrestlers and bronze birds to Central Asian origins (pp. 340–46). He emphasizes the technical sophistication of these items, created by a highly organized, centralized system, often using convict labour (pp. 349–55). Rawson argues these figures were meant to serve the emperor in the afterlife, not merely as representations (pp. 333–40, 351).

Epilogue: "Lives Long Buried" recaps the book's main arguments, emphasizing how the archaeological record offers "an alternative history to the early texts" (p. 361). This history is more nuanced, diverse, and free from the political biases of written records (p. 363).

Overall, the book does an excellent job summarizing the contents of the tombs it examines and contextualizing their significance within the broader scope of ancient Chinese history and archaeology. It is well written and features numerous images and drawings of artefacts, which vividly illustrate the aesthetic richness and diversity of early Chinese art and craftsmanship. However, one of the main hypotheses put forward in the book—namely, the argument that elements of ancient Chinese culture and society can, or even should, be traced back to the steppe—feels, at times, forced upon the evidence. For example, the mere presence of chariots, stone structures, and animal remains or motifs in a tomb does not necessarily indicate steppe influence, even if these practices are known to have originated or prevailed there.

Take the case of Lord Bai's tomb at Zhongli: while its circular shape is undeniably unusual and the inclusion of stone structures and animal remains is noteworthy, these features alone are insufficient to definitively establish steppe origins or contacts. Rawson cites dragon-shaped and tiger-shaped ornaments as evidence of northern influence (pp. 219–20), but both exhibit markedly ambiguous shapes. The tiger ornament, while resembling a tiger at Yuhuangmiao (p. 197), exhibits intricate, unclear motifs (p. 220). The dragon ornament's form is so vague that it is difficult to classify it as a dragon—or as anything at all (p. 219). Rawson's assertion that this ornament "replaced the predators attacking deer or rams typical of steppe belt plaques" (p. 219) rests on tenuous grounds, relying more on

speculation than solid evidence. Additionally, Rawson points to knives with rings as evidence of steppe influence (p. 218), but these are just a small part of the tomb's artefacts. Most items, such as bronze tripods and bells, reflect a Chu aesthetic, suggesting that conclusions about northern connections should consider the dominance of Chu style in the tomb's metal items.

In sum, the argument that Lord Bai's tomb reflects northern-steppe origins seems overstated. While steppe elements like circular tombs and ringed knives may be present, the tomb's context suggests they were incorporated into a Chu cultural framework, which likely overshadowed any foreign influences. This perspective, however, is never seriously considered by the author. Notably, Rawson fails to address the resemblance between the tomb's ornaments and Shang bronze decorations, despite well-documented mutual influences between Shang and Chu artistic traditions, as explored by scholars like Constance A. Cook.

Despite certain conclusions leaning heavily on speculation, *Life and Afterlife in Ancient China* deserves recognition for its depth in analysing archaeological finds, emphasizing the technical sophistication, cultural significance, and socio-economic implications of ancient artefacts. It excels in connecting material objects to broader historical narratives, such as the use of jade to infer spiritual beliefs, ceramics to reveal afterlife practices, and bronzes to highlight ritual and regional variations. Its systematic exploration of steppe cultural influences on ancient Chinese civilization offers a valuable framework for examining the interconnectedness of early civilizations. Furthermore, the work stands out for its creative interpretations of artefacts, like the translation of woodworking traditions into bronze at Sanxingdui and the representation of centralized bureaucracy through standardized Zhou bronzes, offering fresh insights into ancient Chinese innovation and cross-cultural dynamics. As such, this book is an invaluable resource that combines scholarly erudition with an accessible presentation.

Matthieu Felt: *Meanings of Antiquity: Myth Interpretation in Premodern Japan*

*Reviewed by B.V.E. HYDE**

(2023. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, pp. 358. ISBN: 9780674293786)

Matthieu Felt aims to show that the Japanese myth of the creation of the nation (*kuniumi*) does not exist outside of history but is instead a product of history, and that its interpretation has changed as the times changed. His argument is that Japanese myths are alive and continually adapting to the context in which they live, and he narrates these changes in meaning over time.

In the 9th and 10th centuries, the creation stories of the *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihongi* (720) were synthesized together into the *kiki* myth which grew to subsume all other historical records, including Chinese ones. Interest in it waned during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but saw a resurgence in the late Heian period when poetic commentators, particularly those analysing anthologies like the *Kokinshū* (914), began referencing the *Nihongi* to explain the origins and meanings of poems. This interpretive trend, combined with the growing influence of Buddhist anecdotal literature, led to a fragmentation of the *Nihongi*'s original narrative. Instead of being read as a cohesive history, it became a collection of individual episodes, making it easier for scholars to attribute new explanations to it, even for topics it had never originally addressed.

When Buddhism started to dominate Japanese intellectual, cultural and political life between the 13th and 15th centuries, Japanese myths were adapted to take on Buddhist elements as scholars argued that the Japanese gods (*kami*) were manifestations (*suijaku*) of Buddhist deities (*honji*). This syncretism of Buddhism and Shintō (*shinbutsu-shūgō*) allowed native Japanese and foreign Buddhist spirits to coexist, but in practice they were not considered equal. At first, Buddhist deities were considered superior, until the school of Yoshida Shintō inverted this principle (*han honji suijaku*)

Then, when Confucianism took hold instead in the 17th and 18th centuries, the myths again adapted to it, as they did once more when a new school of empirical

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scholarship (*kōshōgaku*) took hold of Japanese philology. Chinese Confucian ideas such as principle (*ri*) and matter (*ki*) were applied to the *kiki* myth, while some scholars began to completely reinterpret stories about the Japanese age of the gods in allegorical terms, because this alleged period of Japanese history did not fit the Chinese narratives.

Felt's book tells the story of how a story has changed over time. I have two main points to make about it. Firstly, it is part of an emerging trend in how we understand phenomena in numerous fields. Older academic theories were largely focussed on absolutes and universals, but in recent years we have seen an enormous rise in relativism and an increasing attention to context, distal factors, and confounding variables. I call this contextualism, while others call it situationism, particularism, or localism. Sir Stuart Hampshire (1983) was an excellent example of this approach in ethics: he was concerned with moral problems as they present themselves to us as practical agents. Nancy Cartwright—who may have been influenced by Sir Stuart, her late husband—is a good example of it in philosophy of science: she is known for her work on evidence and causation, particularly as they relate to policy, in which she argues that "it is a long and tortuous road from learning that a policy works somewhere […] to correctly predicting that it will—or won't—work for you" (Cartwright 2012, 988). The particularist view essentially requires a case-by-case examination of phenomena and rejects fixed principles, laws or interpretations that apply across all contexts.

As noted above, this view is part of a growing trend. In the history and philosophy of science, for example, it has been shown by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) that the meaning of "scientific objectivity" varies over time and by the circumstance in which it is used. Felt's demonstration in the field of Japanology that the meanings of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, and the *kiki* myth they share, have similarly evolved over time as circumstances have changed, is very much in keeping with this contemporary contextualist trend that eschews universalist interpretations, viewing subjects and objects as detached from the context in which they are situated. Even in mythology itself we see this trend, for it is becoming increasingly well established by mythologists such as Julien d'Huy (2016) that myths evolve with time and migration.

While I have nothing negative to say about Felt's particularist bent—having myself joined the ranks of particularists as a student and then colleague of Nancy Cartwright—some mythologists might be dissatisfied with his methodology. For instance, Joseph Campbell (1949) and his monomyth framework suggest that myths follow universal narrative structures, which could imply a more enduring continuity in Japanese mythological themes than Felt acknowledges. In fact, on my reading, he seemed to be mostly concerned with the *changes* in the *kiki* myth over time, and might therefore be criticized for paying insufficient attention to

key points of continuity throughout Japanese history. Felt also mostly focusses on Japanological scholarship, but could perhaps benefit from more attention to the work of other mythologists and some comparison between Japanese myths and foreign ones. In fact, his narrative could even benefit from comparison to other Japanese myths rather than exclusively focussing on the *kiki* myth, although I would not know how—if at all—such additions would change his story.

The second point that I want to make is that Felt's book is useful evidence for a theory already advanced by intellectual historians and scholars of Japanese philosophy—such as Thomas P. Kasulis (2018)—that Japanese culture and philosophy are syncretic. Nishida Kitarō, the father of the Kyoto School, and perhaps the father of Japanese philosophy, claimed that Japan has a "musical culture" without fixed form whose excellence lies in "taking in foreign cultures as they are and transforming itself" by way of synthesis (see Morisato 2016). Watsuji Tetsurō (2002, 239–46) said that Japanese culture has layers (*jūsō*), and it is the coexistence of these, rather than the replacement of one with another, that characterizes it. Ishida Ichirō (1963, 3–4) also spoke of the "amazing power of cultural synthesis" possessed by the Japanese. Sometimes this is stated as a rebuke, such as when Sakamoto Hyakudai wrote that "everything is imported, imitated" (Sakamoto, 1993, 3) and thus, as Nakae Chōmin famously commented, "from antiquity to the present day, there has never been any philosophy in Japan" (see Blocker and Starling 2001, 1). Karl Löwith (1995) made an analogy which is fairly well cited amongst Japanologists, that Japanese intellectuals live as if on two floors: a lower, more fundamental one, on which they feel and think in a Japanese way; and a higher one, on which the European sciences from Plato to Heidegger are lined up. Had he known about the Kyoto School, perhaps he would have better realized how those two floors interrelate (Davis 2011). Either way, it is a common assertion that syncretism is one of the defining features of Japan. I have argued that this syncretism can be seen as early as the Shōtoku Constitution which synthesized Confucianism, Buddhism and Shintō (Hyde 2023a; 2023b; 2025), and set the stage for the syncretism of Shintō and Buddhism that would characterize Japanese intellectual history for the next thousand years.

What Felt has shown is that myth interpretation throughout Japanese history had this same syncretic bent. He has carefully documented these changes over time to show how the original meaning of myths is expanded in accordance with new cosmologies, ideologies and philosophies, and how the role of origin narratives shifts over time. Japanology and Asian Studies more widely are sometimes accused of lagging behind other fields, dependent on them for their methodologies and new theories. While Felt does join a growing particularist trend within the academe, he himself is likely unaware of this and has not been responsive to it. Rather than studying the Japanese creation myth with the

aim of understanding it in a particularist way, and inspired by developments in fields such as philosophy of science, he reaches his particularist conclusion independently of other methodological inspirations. This, perhaps, is testament to the fact that this interpretation is the correct one. The only regret I have is that he does not continue his story of the evolution of the *kiki* myth through the 20th century and up to the present day, during which time the rise and fall of State Shintō doubtless had a great influence on the role of the myth in Japan. Perhaps we can anticipate such an analysis in a sequel.

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