


Article

Taiyi: The Axis of Philosophy of the *Laozi*

Yongfeng Huang^{1,2} and Zhikun Li^{1,*} ¹ Department of Philosophy, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, China; xueyeweilu@163.com² Center for the Study of Taoism and Traditional Culture, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, China

* Correspondence: lzk11011011@163.com

Abstract: Taiyi 太一, the void and dark central region of the celestial sphere, carries symbolic implications that resonate with the essence of ultimate reality in the philosophical framework of the *Laozi* 老子. It assumes a metaphorical representation of the ultimate reality and its movement pattern, serving as the axis from which the fundamental concepts and principal branches of this philosophy unfurl. The concept of Taiyi exerts a profound and far-reaching impact on the philosophical discourse of the *Laozi*. It assumes the mantle of a signifier for the ultimate reality within the philosophical framework of the *Laozi*, while its dynamic motion patterns imbue the cosmological principles of this philosophy. On a pragmatic level, Taiyi unveils profound and nuanced insights into human nature and the epistemology expounded by the *Laozi*.

Keywords: Taiyi; *Laozi*; philosophy; axis; ultimate reality

1. Introduction

The Daoist philosophy of the pre-Qin period, as exemplified by influential works such as the *Laozi*¹ 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, has consistently intrigued scholars. Nonetheless, a perplexing contradiction emerges upon closer examination of these texts. The *Zhuangzi* posits that Guan Yin 關尹 and Lao Dan 老聃 “established their doctrines by proposing the eternity of being and non-being, and considered Taiyi as an axis in their philosophical frameworks” (建之以常無有, 主之以太一; Guo 1961, p. 1093)². However, it is important to note that the concept of “Taiyi 太一” does not appear in various versions of the *Laozi*. This intriguing paradox serves as a starting point for exploring the implicit concept of Taiyi within the *Laozi*.

It is prudent to acknowledge that establishing a direct association between “Taiyi” and the philosophy of the *Laozi* solely on the basis of a single quote from the *Zhuangzi*’s *Tianxia* 天下 chapter might prove inadequate. This assumption encounters a fundamental challenge as the specific version of the *Laozi* that the author of the *Tianxia* chapter was alluding to remains undisclosed. Nevertheless, it is imperative to discern that the conception of “Taiyi” as posited by the author in the “*Tianxia*” chapter embodies a metaphorical model. The Chinese characters “太一” merely serve as the name for this symbolic pattern. The absence of this specific name in the *Laozi* text does not necessitate the absence of the underlying metaphorical model.

A more practical query emerges from the available literary sources. Given the absence of the term “Taiyi” in the *Laozi*, the extent to which this term can be meaningfully discussed within the contextual boundaries of the *Laozi* warrants an examination. Within the *Laozi*, “One” emerges as a significant term, bearing a role that approaches equivalence to that of “Dao”. An exemplification in the *Laozi* can be found in chapter 14, where “One” is depicted as surpassing the confines of the empirical world, characterized by attributes such as “colorless (yi 夷)”, “soundless (xi 希)”, and “formless (wei 微)”. Additionally, chapter 39 highlights “One” as the root of all attributes observable in the world of things. Amidst the philosophical framework, the prominence of “One” extends beyond a mere numerical



Citation: Huang, Yongfeng, and Zhikun Li. 2023. Taiyi: The Axis of Philosophy of the *Laozi*. *Religions* 14: 1372. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111372>

Academic Editors: Thomas Michael and Robin Wang

Received: 13 June 2023

Revised: 3 August 2023

Accepted: 15 September 2023

Published: 31 October 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

concept to embrace a greater and more universal essence. In chapter 25, the *Laozi* emphasizes this sense of “greatness”: “The Dao is great, the Heaven is great, the Earth is great, and the prince is also great” (道大, 天大, 地大, 王亦大; Lou 2008, p. 64). Within the context of the *Laozi*, where “One” and “Dao” assume comparable roles, it is reasonable to postulate the existence of a “One” of greatness. Notably, during the Warring States period, a scholar from the Chu 楚 state, upon transcribing the *Laozi*, proceeded to elaborate on his comprehension of the transcribed text. In his writing, the opening four characters emerge as “Taiyi Shengshui 太一生水”.

Taiyi Shengshui, the bamboo-slip text discovered in 1993, has sparked a renewed enthusiasm for exploring the implications of Taiyi, shedding new light on its potential significance in philosophical discourse. In the *Taiyi Shengshui*, Taiyi is portrayed as the origin and center of the universe: “It revolves in a cycle, starting over (its movement), serving as the mother of all things; (Taiyi) encompasses both incompleteness and completeness, serving as the longitudinal thread of all things” (周而又始, 以己為萬物母; 一缺一盈, 以己為萬物經; L. Li 2007, p. 42)³. While the bamboo-slip text of *Taiyi Shengshui* was discovered alongside a copy of the *Laozi* text from the Warring States period, it is noteworthy that the term “Taiyi” is absent in this particular version of the *Laozi*, even though the author of these texts deliberated on the concept of Taiyi. This raises inquiries into the actual role and significance of Taiyi within the philosophical framework of the *Laozi*.

Historical evidence from the Warring States period indicates widespread awareness of the astronomical significance of Taiyi. The *Hanfeizi* depicts Taiyi as an astronomical phenomenon with potential influence on military affairs, highlighting its prevailing understanding during that era. From this vantage, it is reasonable to surmise that the term “Taiyi” had already existed as an astronomical concept preceding the Warring States period. The term “Taiyi” is absent from all versions of the *Laozi*. However, the author of the *Taiyi Shengshui* accentuates the significance of Taiyi during his scholarly endeavors related to the *Laozi*. One plausible deduction is that the author perceives certain constraints within the metaphorical framework of “path” when attempting to grasp the essence of the *Laozi*. As a result, he opted to borrow the term “Taiyi” as a designation for the ultimate reality, a concept intrinsically linked to the astronomical phenomenon of “Taiyi”.

In the *Laozi*, the sentence “The Sage embraces One and becomes the Cosmograph of the world” (聖人抱一, 為天下式; Lou 2008, p. 56), evokes a potential connection between the concept of “One” and the astronomical significance attributed to Taiyi. The term “Cosmograph (Shi式or栻)” refers to an astronomical and divinatory instrument, as described by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄: “The Great Functionary is responsible for embracing the Shi, and through it, they can discern time and predict auspicious or inauspicious events” (太史主抱式以知天時, 主吉兇; G. Jia 1999, p. 697). The central figures of excavated Cosmograph artifacts are mostly Taiyi or the Dipper (D. Yan 1985, pp. 448–51). Within the *Laozi*, should we analogize the Sage to the Cosmograph of the universe, the “One” held close to the chest (the original meaning of the character “抱”) inherently points to none other than “Taiyi”.⁴

Establishing a connection between *Laozi*’s philosophy and the concept of “Taiyi” as expounded in the *Taiyi Shengshui* and the *Zhuangzi* through the astronomical connotations of “Taiyi” opens up an intriguing avenue for exploring the significance of the intangible “Taiyi” within the philosophical framework of the *Laozi*. By employing textual analysis, comparative study, and philosophical inquiry, this article aims to investigate the role and significance of Taiyi in the *Laozi*, elucidating the underlying threads of this concept that permeate the philosophy of the *Laozi*. It asserts that Taiyi, as an elusive and intangible concept, forms the axis of the philosophy of the *Laozi*, providing guidance and shaping other concepts and branches of philosophy within its comprehensive framework.

2. Definition, Origins, and Symbolism of Taiyi

2.1. What Is Taiyi?

The concept of “Taiyi” not only holds significance in philosophical and religious Daoism but also occupies a crucial position throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. The multifaceted nature and evolving interpretability of “Taiyi” have captivated scholars, leading to long-term research and exploration in order to better understand its significance in both religious and philosophical contexts. A comprehensive literature review will establish the basis for subsequent analysis, enabling a nuanced understanding of the significance of Taiyi and its influence on Chinese philosophy.

One of the most instructive scholarly debates regarding the concept of “Taiyi” is the extensive discourse between Li Ling 李零 and Qian Baocong 錢寶琮, which bridged the gap of time. Li argues that Qian’s estimation of the chronology of ancient classics is inaccurate. Furthermore, he asserts that the concept of “Taiyi” already encompassed meanings such as “celestial body”, “divinity”, and “ultimate matter” during the pre-Qin period (L. Li 2000, p. 237). Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 suggests that the pre-Qin concept of “Taiyi” can be understood in four fundamental dimensions: astronomy, mythology, philosophy, and religious studies. He argues that “Taiyi” does not refer to a concrete celestial body but instead symbolizes a point of emptiness or nothingness (Ge 1990, p. 49). It is widely accepted in the academic community that “there was no distinctive pole star, no physical presence at the pivot of the heavens” (Pankenier 2004, p. 220). Feng Shi 馮時 highlights that the position of the Pole Star undergoes shifts over time. When the original Pole Star moves away from the Celestial Pole, people tend to identify a new star closer to the Pole and designate it as the new Pole Star (Feng 2001, p. 128). This conclusion is further elaborated by Zhao Yongheng 趙永恆, who suggests that around 8292 BCE, the Pole Star (referred to as “Taiyi” by Zhao) was σ Her, around 2806 BCE, it shifted to α Dra, and during the Spring and Autumn period, the Pole Star became β UMi (Zhao 2012, pp. 20–21).

In the context of astronomical research, this study adheres to the prevailing consensus among scholars, which posits that Taiyi represents a region of cosmic obscurity, observable during nocturnal examination of the Earth’s rotational axis from the northern hemisphere. Additionally, there exists an empirical perspective where this celestial entity is colloquially referred to as “Celestial Pole (*Tianji* 天極)”. Upon conducting an examination of the extant scholarly discourse, numerous noteworthy parallels and distinctions become apparent. Scholars widely recognize the essence of nihility inherent in the concept of “Taiyi”, which is deemed indispensable in elucidating its function within the philosophical underpinnings of the *Laozi*. This transcendental quality serves as a pivotal constituent in apprehending the profound import of “Taiyi” within the early Daoist philosophical framework. Moreover, the inherent vacuity encapsulated by “Taiyi” and the mutable nature attributed to the Pole Star as its symbolic representation are universally acknowledged.

To ensure perspicuity and foster a shared comprehension of the terminology employed in this article, it is imperative to furnish concise explications of pivotal terminology. The most fundamental interpretation of “yi 一” resides in its representation of the number one, which serves as the foundational marker for ancient Chinese civilization’s numerical system. As stated in the *Taiping jing* 太平經, “One stands as the genesis of numbers” (一者, 數之始也; M. Wang 1960, p. 335). “One” additionally embodies a force of production. As elucidated in the *Laozi*, “The Dao produces One, One produces Two, Two produces Three, and Three produces the ten thousand things” (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物; Lou 2008, p. 117). This pattern of generation from One to the universe is veiled by the disguises of “form” and “name”, whereas the underlying essence of the “One” embodies the primordial force of “to be”, through which everything within the cosmos manifests their being. As per the logical progression elucidated in the *Laozi*, the manifestation of “Two” is indeed contingent upon the presence of “One”. However, it is crucial to note that the *Laozi*’s emphasis does not lie in the derivation of Two from One, akin to the birth of a child from a mother. Rather, it underscores the significance of One as a foundational prerequisite for the emergence of all other numbers and, by extension, the universe. Similarly, the phrase

“The Dao gives rise to One” should not be construed to imply that One is an abstract assemblage of attributes derived from Dao. Instead, it represents a numerical expression capturing the very essence of Dao. Furthermore, the symbolization of “One” extends beyond its numerical value, encompassing the realm of absolute and harmonious order, epitomizing wholeness and perfection. As documented in the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, “The central position is the abode of Taiyi, and all deities admire its order” (中央者, 太一之位, 百神仰制焉; Huang 2004, p. 241). The intrinsic attributes of “One”, including its indivisibility and non-duality, serve as profound metaphors for the unity and interconnectedness that pervade the fabric of the universe.

The term “tai 太” signifies greatness, and “Great One” implies a more universal sense of “One” or a more foundational “one” that encompasses all things. Its inherent significance lies in its capacity to govern and endow all phenomena with the primal force of “to be”. Even the very act of “to be”, the yearning for existence itself, remains inseparable from the “Great One”. This naturally evokes the passage found in the *Laozi*: “The universe emerges from Being. Being emerges from Non-being” (天下萬物生於有, 有生於無; Lou 2008, p. 110). A more comprehensive examination of the interplay between Taiyi and the philosophy of the *Laozi* would be fitting for subsequent sections. The current discussion sheds light on the inherent significance of the term “Taiyi” and its associated astronomical phenomenon.

It should be noted that the concept of Taiyi is related to the observed rotational axis of the Earth, wherein the Pole Star, as a resplendent astral entity discernible to the human eye, holds a proximate position. Owing to the phenomenon of axial precession, various different stars take turns assuming the role of the Pole Star. Furthermore, the concept of the “Celestial Pole 天極” denotes the pivotal and zenithal locus within the cosmological framework constructed by the ancient Chinese when casting their gaze upon the sky.⁵ As delineated in the *Zhoubi Suanjing* 周髀算經, the sky was envisaged to “bear semblance to the form of a conical headgear” (天象蓋笠; Xu and Liu 2015, p. 17), thereby justifying the apt adoption of the Chinese character “極” to depict the perceived axis of the Earth’s rotation. It merits highlighting that David W. Pankenier’s translation of “極” as “culmen” resonates with the intrinsic connotation of the term in the Chinese language. Taiyi assumes the paramount position at the heart of the Celestial Pole in the Chinese cosmological framework. Unlike the transient pole stars, Taiyi eludes tangibility but remains perceptible to all observers, and its enduring and immutable essence fundamentally shapes its significance within the philosophy of the *Laozi*.

To acquire a profound comprehension of the concept of “Taiyi”, it is important to undertake an exhaustive exploration of the original texts, delving into the intricate portrayal of this concept, its distinctive attributes, and its historical contexts as chronicled in ancient literary works. The ancient Chinese observers discerned a congregation of stars orbiting a central locus within the northern firmament. In near proximity to this focal point, they also identified a resplendent stellar entity, which they designated as the Northern Sickle (*Beichen* 北辰).⁶ As observed by Confucius, “The governance guided by virtue resembles *Beichen*, which remains fixed in its position while the surrounding stars encircle it” (為政以德, 譬如北辰, 居其所而眾星共之; Cheng 1990, p. 61). However, it has been discovered that even the Pole Star is also subject to motion. Here, the term *Beichen* alludes to the pivotal axis around which the celestial bodies orbit.

Lüshi Chunqiu 呂氏春秋 acknowledges that “The movement of the Pole Star corresponds with the sky, while the Celestial Pole itself remains fixed” (極星與天俱遊而天極不移; Q. Chen 2002, p. 663). This recognition signifies the acknowledgment of an intangible and conceptual Celestial Pole, representing the abstract notion of “Taiyi”. According to the *Shiji* 史記, ancient Chinese astronomers observed that “the Celestial Pole asterism, with its preeminent star serving as the eternal dwelling of Taiyi, resided proximately to the Central Palace” (中宮天極星, 其一明者, 太一常居也; Sima 1963, p. 1289). This does not imply that the Celestial Pole directly pertains to the Pole Star itself. While Taiyi had assumed a per-

sonified form during that period, this quotation implies an inherent association between the concept of Taiyi and the Celestial Pole.

The sky is adorned with countless stars, but there is only one Celestial Pole in the universe. While the Celestial Pole relies on the Pole Star for its determination, it stands as the sole eternal presence in the night sky. Though it appears as a dark and motionless point, it exerts an influence of celestial entwining over the shimmering stars. It is as if the Celestial Pole serves as the hinge (*shu* 樞), allowing the constellation of stars to revolve harmoniously and attain a state of orderly motion. Various indications suggest that the Celestial Pole is, in essence, the embodiment of “Taiyi” itself. The ancient Chinese usage of the term “Taiyi” exhibited inconsistency. At times, it denoted the Celestial Pole, while in other instances, it referenced the Pole Star. However, it is essential to recognize that the true significance of this term does not reside in accentuating a particular astronomical phenomenon but rather in symbolizing the very heart of the celestial sphere. The symbolic import associated with this central position emerges as a pivotal factor in establishing “Taiyi” as the axis of the philosophy of the *Laozi*.

2.2. The Symbolism of Taiyi

The potency of Taiyi derives not solely from its definition, but also from its capacity to convey profound philosophical ideas. The concept of Taiyi, serving as bridges that connect the ethereal realm of ideas with the tangible realm of human comprehension, plays a crucial role in conveying abstract ideas and intricate thoughts. Indeed, the concept denoted by “Taiyi” transcends tangible manifestation. By employing the terms “tai” and “yi” to designate it, individuals sought to engage in abstract philosophical contemplation of this astronomical phenomenon. However, these contemplations originate from individuals’ tangible observations of the celestial expanse. While Taiyi itself eludes concrete form, the presence of the Pole Star, which serves as its marker, along with the revolving motion of the stars, facilitates the description and articulation of Taiyi.

By embodying and symbolizing notions such as centrality, unity, and origin, and possessing the attribute of voidness and motionlessness, Taiyi assumes significance as a vehicle for exploring and articulating fundamental principles pertaining to existence, knowledge, and the essence of reality. Through its usage and interpretation, the concept of Taiyi engages with and molds the intellectual and perceptual landscapes of ancient Chinese people, offering frameworks through which they can comprehend the world. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Confucius’ examination of virtuous governance exemplifies how individuals employ the concept of Taiyi to gain insights into the workings of the world. Confucius directed his attention not towards the Pole Star itself but the central position it occupies. This position, ethereal yet profound, becomes the focal point around which the entire universe revolves. The metaphor of “guardianship (*gong* 拱)” offers a viable paradigm for expanding the philosophical significance that resides within the concept of Taiyi.

The depth and the richness inherent in the concept of Taiyi allow it to transcend individual perspectives and regional boundaries, resonating with universal themes and igniting contemplation across a wide spectrum of philosophical traditions. This also gives rise to a more intuitive and vivid metaphorical framework. Qu Yuan 屈原 (340BC–278BC) departed from using the metaphorical paradigm of “guardianship” and instead employed a metaphorical model of “attraction-rotation” to convey his observations and insights about Taiyi. In *Tianwen* 天問, he raised his question: “Where should the dipper handle be tethered when it rotates? Where does the Celestial Pole extend?” (斡維焉繫, 天極焉加; Hong 1983, p. 86). The stars represented by the Big Dipper, as they traverse their celestial path, are believed to adhere to the established order dictated by the central axis of the celestial sphere. Qu Yuan metaphorically referred to this order as “cord (*wei* 維)”, while alternative terminologies such as “headrope (*gang* 綱)”, influenced by Confucian thought, may also be employed to describe it.

Although Qu Yuan touched upon the order between the stars and Taiyi, the central idea he sought to convey in this poem is that the most thought-provoking essence of Taiyi

lies in its elusive and intangible nature. The remarkable parallels that can be drawn between the characteristics attributed to Taiyi or the Celestial Pole in Tianwen and the central tenets of the philosophy of the *Laozi* illuminate a connection between these two conceptual frameworks. Irrespective of whether the observer originates from southern or northern China and adheres to what would later be recognized as Confucian or Daoist philosophies, the act of exploring Taiyi inevitably draws their cognition towards the enigmatic, profound, and ethereal essence that lies concealed beneath the cloak of order. The symbolic significance attributed to the concept of Taiyi surpasses its astronomical appearance, bestowing upon it a profound and multifaceted interpretation that reverberates throughout cultural and philosophical traditions.

Taiyi symbolizes a universal and harmonious order, characterized not only by its capacity to govern the celestial motion of all stars from its central position within the celestial sphere but also by its accessibility to all individuals, be they philosophers, princes, peasants, or slaves, who possess the equal right to observe and apprehend its significance. At its core, Taiyi embodies an ineffable and transcendent force that defies both verbal description and sensory apprehension. Despite its abstract nature, this force maintains a tangible linkage with all entities within the vast expanse of the universe. Through perceiving this profound connection, individuals can, to some extent, articulate and express this force from their unique perspectives. Notably, while this article delves into the astronomical perspective of understanding Taiyi as the Celestial Pole, the philosophical connotations and extensions of Taiyi surpass the mere confines of the astronomical concept of the Celestial Pole. Moreover, Taiyi symbolizes motion. Despite its perceived stillness and inability to be directly observed in motion, it possesses an eternal force that drives the universe's movement. From an alternate viewpoint, the Pole Star utilized to locate Taiyi has undergone changes over countless millennia. This variability serves as a catalyst for contemplation on the enduring nature and fluctuating aspects of Taiyi.

3. Taiyi as the Axis of the Philosophy of the *Laozi*

The exploration of the symbolic significance of Taiyi provides valuable insights into its role within the philosophy of the *Laozi*. The symbolism associated with Taiyi offers a lens through which we can better understand its influence on the framework of the philosophy of the *Laozi*. Symbolism, in this context, refers to the use of Taiyi as a representational device that extends beyond its astronomical meaning, by delving into the depths of which we can uncover connections and resonances with the fundamental principles and concepts espoused in the *Laozi*. The symbolic reverberation of Taiyi resounds within the foundational principles expounded in the *Laozi*, encompassing concepts such as Dao 道, De 德, and other intricacies that permeate its philosophical fabric. Delving into the invisible Taiyi within the framework of the *Laozi* can engender profound insights into the symbolic embodiment of Taiyi and its intricate interplay with the fundamental tenets of Daoism.

Indeed, certain scholars have aptly underscored that terminologies from Western philosophical domains, such as “ontology” and “cosmology”, may not necessarily find correspondence in the context of the *Laozi*'s philosophy. Precipitous utilization of such terms could incline our understanding towards the tenets of ancient Greek philosophy.⁷ However, it is equally pertinent to acknowledge that the *Laozi* is also exploring the ultimate reality and the dynamic process of the emergence and change of all things. While unique linguistic nuances and conceptual frameworks may differentiate these philosophical traditions, the exploration of these themes remains an undeniable commonality.

3.1. Taiyi and the Root of the Philosophy of the *Laozi*

Throughout the pre-Qin period, certain philosophers subscribed to the belief that “root” exists in opposition to the universe. As conveyed by the *Zhuangzi* while discussing the *Laozi*'s philosophy, “Root assumes the role of essence, while the universe is perceived as possessing an unrefined nature” (以本為精, 以物為粗; Guo 1961, p. 1093). It is within this specific context that all discussions within this chapter are conducted, centered around the

notion of the contrast and interplay between “root” and the cosmic realm. It is pertinent to exercise caution when introducing novel English terms. However, it is worth noting that the term “rootness” potentially contributes to a more nuanced and effective conveyance of the underlying concept in comparison to the word “root”.

Although the term “Taiyi” does not explicitly surface in any versions of the *Laozi*, and there is no direct evidence to prove that Taiyi is a concept advocated within the text, a discernible resonance arises through the examination of complementary texts, implying an inherent correlation between Taiyi and the philosophical underpinnings of the *Laozi*. In the pre-Qin period, individuals came to recognize that the notion of “Taiyi” represented an ethereal and indescribable essence that transcended the boundaries of language, and even the act of labeling it as “Taiyi” served as a provisional expedient. As articulated in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, “The Dao stands as the utmost essence, impervious to constraints of form and impalpable to delineation through nomenclature. If compelled to ascribe a name, we designate it as Taiyi” (道也者, 至精也。不可為形, 不可為名。強為之名, 謂之太一; Q. [Chen 2002](#), p. 259). This exhibits a remarkable parallel, even in its written expression, to Chapter 25 of the *Laozi*, wherein it is stated, “I am unaware of its name; thus I call it Dao. If compelled to confer it with a name, I would designate it as Great” (吾不知其名, 字之曰道, 強為之名曰大; [Lou 2008](#), p. 63). In *Hanfeizi*, a similar account mentions that “The sage observed its darkness and voidness, applied its rotational movement to practical matters, and reluctantly named it Dao” (聖人觀其玄虛, 用其周行, 強字之曰道; X. [Wang 2003](#), p. 149).

The terminology “darkness and voidness (xuanxu 玄虛)” encapsulate the notion that the ultimate reality eludes direct apprehension through sensory faculties, engendering an inherent enigmatic quality. In contrast, the experientially perceivable “circular motion (zhouxing 周行)” denotes the trajectory of this cosmic movement, which is referred to as the “path (dao 道)”. The ancient Chinese philosophers exhibited a proclivity for employing intuitive and pragmatic metaphors in their literary creations, thereby strategically ensuring the accessibility of their profound ideas to a diverse readership, encompassing not only the learned scholars but also the lords and princes (houwang 侯王) of their era. As stated in the *Hanfeizi*, “sages grasp the tangible efficacy, thus making the form more apparent (聖人執其見功以處見其形; X. [Wang 2003](#), p. 148)”. Undoubtedly, the “path” metaphor, with its inherent ease of comprehension, bears a more persuasive influence than the abstract concepts of darkness and voidness when it comes to facilitating understanding within most discourses. Among the choices available to pre-Qin philosophers for denoting the ultimate reality, the preference for “Dao” over “Taiyi” emerges from the former’s inherent capacity to more intuitively communicate the manifold evident attributes of the ultimate reality, while concurrently accentuating its practical significance.

While philosophers recognize the limitations of language and its potential to restrict a comprehensive portrayal of the ultimate reality, a reliance on the widely embraced metaphor of Dao may inadvertently engender an emphasis on certain salient attributes of the ultimate reality, potentially resulting in the inadvertent oversight of other equally significant facets. From a perspective of form (xing 形), “Taiyi” distinguished by its xuanxu nature, undoubtedly exhibits a higher degree of abstraction in comparison to “Dao”. This is inherently attributed to the fact that the tangible efficacy (見功) of “Taiyi” is not as readily discernible or easily perceived. The propensity for the “Dao” metaphor to assume an overly concrete interpretation can inadvertently limit the comprehension of certain chapters within the *Laozi* solely to the confines of this very metaphor. However, by embracing a broader perspective and perceiving “Dao” as synonymous with the trajectory or movement mode of “Taiyi”, a pathway towards resolving specific challenges encountered in comprehending the *Laozi* may emerge. It is pertinent to acknowledge that the Chinese character “Dao” employed throughout this paper functions mostly as a symbol denoting the ultimate reality. While this paper may touch upon the interpretation of its written form, in most cases, the use of “Dao” in the referenced texts serves as a reminder to the readers that the passage is describing the ultimate reality.

The designations of “Taiyi” and “Dao”, despite originating from seemingly distinct metaphorical frameworks, ultimately converge upon a shared essence. Within a nuanced plurality, they manifest a significance of the so-called “rootness”. Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 has conducted research on the characters related to “Dao” in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, revealing the embedded symbolism and metaphorical connections within their structures. This comprehensive analysis enhances our comprehension of the expansive philosophical discourse encapsulated by the character “Dao”. She advocates that “the movement of the Pole never actually strayed from its central position but rather functioned in the way of guiding and leading the universe to move around it”. She also argues that the concept of “Dao” gave rise to the meaning of “to guide” (J. Jia 2009, p. 475). The act of naming the ultimate reality with the term “to guide”, grounded in its inherent nature of guiding, although an inherently abstract concept, appears to effectively encapsulate the essence of Chinese philosophy pertaining to the ultimate reality.

Some chapters may pose challenges in understanding when solely relying on the “path” metaphorical model. However, with the aid of this metaphor, we gain insights into the three fundamental attributes of the ultimate reality or what we called “rootness”. First of all, the “guide” and the “guided” inherently entail a temporal sequence, whereby the presence of the guide, as the guiding force of the ultimate reality, must precede the existence of the receptive universe being guided. Secondly, if it is postulated that the latter genuinely embraces the guidance of the former, then the form or dynamic state exhibited by the latter must necessarily depend upon the former. Lastly, the one being guided is perpetually under the guidance of the one who guides, not vice versa. Scholars such as Zhang Dainian 張岱年 assert that the concept of Dao in the philosophy of the *Laozi* holds a significance akin to that of “Roots” (Zhang 1994, p. 17), which is widely accepted as a consensus in Chinese philosophy.⁸

From the perspective of the metaphorical patterns employed, it may appear that Taiyi and Dao are separated. However, it is important to note that the concept embodied by Taiyi also encompasses the aforementioned three facets of “rootness”. This article posits that Taiyi assumes a pivotal role as the philosophical axis in the *Laozi*, employing a metaphorical framework inspired by Qu Yuan’s observations of the cosmic motion of “attraction-rotation”. This metaphorical axis not only carries implications of “rootness” but also occupies a vital position within the discourse on cosmology. If a concept is deemed to possess “rootness” within the realm of Chinese philosophy, it must primarily embody the primal source from which all phenomena originate within the philosophical framework in question. As stated in the *Laozi*, “There arose an entity, veiled in chaos, existing prior to the formation of Heaven and Earth, and transcending the realms of audition and vision. It is an absolute and everlasting existence, eternally cycling without depletion, serving as the mother of all things in the world” (有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母; Lou 2008, pp. 62–63). According to *Taiyi Shengshui*, the entire world finds its genesis in the “Water” generated by Taiyi. Taiyi serves as the wellspring of the universe and all its constituent elements (L. Li 2007, p. 41).

This statement inherently introduces the second facet of “rootness” within Chinese philosophy, which posits that the ultimate reality assumes the role of fundamental reliance for the universe. It manifests absoluteness and exists autonomously, detached from external influences, while all other entities undergo metamorphosis owing to its pervasive impact. In alternative terms, one could assert that it functions as the incipient juncture from which cosmological narratives originate. This aligns with the depiction found in *Zhuangzi*, wherein it is described as the “Locus where all entities are interconnected and the reality upon which evolving phenomena rely” (萬物之所繫，一化之所待; Guo 1961, p. 244). This model exemplifies a typical portrayal of the Taiyi paradigm, wherein all entities rely on being firmly tied by invisible ropes to the central axis, which functions as the nucleus. Without being tied to the axis, entities would stray from the eternal order. Much like *Tianwen*, *Zhuangzi* presents introspective inquiries: “Who presides over and orchestrates the celestial movements? Who securely binds them? And who exists in a state of non-action,

propelling them forward?” (孰主張是? 孰維綱是? 孰居無事而推行是; Guo 1961, p. 493). If we were to offer a response to the questions posed in *Zhuangzi*, it would unquestionably be Taiyi, the formless and transcendent entity upon which the entire universe depends.

The questions posed in *Zhuangzi* also imply an exploration of the third facet of “rootness”, namely the dominion of the ultimate reality over all phenomena. Once the ultimate reality is apprehended, profound comprehension of the essence of reality, the genesis of phenomena, and the intrinsic harmony amid multifarious manifestations can be attained. The utilization of Confucius’ metaphor of the Northern Sickle Star is indeed fitting within this context. Embedded within this metaphor is a logical relationship, wherein the Northern Sickle Star symbolizes the sovereign who governs and exercises control over all other stars. Taiyi embodies the ultimate reality or quintessence underlying the cosmos. Taiyi, as the underlying force behind the Northern Sickle Star, not only occupies a prominent role in political allegories but also embodies absolute divine sovereignty in political theology. This notion is evidenced by the excerpt from *Heguanzi* and reinforced by the presence of terms such as “*Taihuang* 泰皇”, “*Taidi* 泰帝”, and “*Taidi* 太帝” in Han Dynasty literature, which serve as a compelling testament to its dominion over all phenomena. These arguments are extensively examined in Ge Zhaoguang’s article (Ge 1990, p. 54). Despite the intricate and diverse nature of the universe, it adheres to the principles dictated by its root. Consequently, the ultimate reality can be perceived as the “fundamental master (*zongzhu* 宗主)” of the universe and its myriad entities.

Despite the distinct labeling of the concepts of “Taiyi” and “Dao”, they share an intrinsic connection by virtue of their alignment with the three dimensions of the study of “rootness” in Chinese philosophy. This alignment forms the bedrock of “rootness” in the philosophy of the *Laozi*. Although they may be approached and discussed from various perspectives or within different philosophical frameworks, the fundamental essence of the entities they signify remains unchanged.

3.2. *Taiyi and the Cosmology of the Laozi*

Through a cosmological lens, Taiyi assumes the role of a cosmic hinge, influencing the intricate shaping of all phenomena through its intrinsic dynamic motion. An internal interconnectedness exists, as if invisible threads bind all things to Taiyi, and upon the conclusion of their existence, akin to fallen leaves, they return to Taiyi as their “root”, thus priming themselves for a renewed cycle of motion.

Once it is established that Taiyi and Dao essentially denote the same concept akin to the root, it becomes more straightforward to delve into the cosmology of the philosophy of the *Laozi* and explore the terminologies employed within the text. Within the *Laozi*, there exists a harmonious interplay, wherein the studies of the universe and the “rootness” seamlessly coexist, implying an intrinsic connection between the two. Rather than existing as separate domains, they intertwine in a symbiotic manner in the philosophy of the *Laozi*, with each domain informing and enhancing the other. In the sixth chapter of the *Laozi*, it is stated that

The emptiness resembling a valley, the mysteriousness, and the immortal nature, can be referred to as the dark and enigmatic feminineness. The door of this dark and enigmatic feminineness can be referred to as the root of Heaven and Earth. The connection [between this root and the universe] is as delicate as silk threads. These ethereal silk threads, as though truly existing, facilitate the effortless manifestation of the efficacy of all things.

谷神不死, 是謂玄牝。玄牝之門, 是謂天地根。絪縕若存, 用之不勤。(Lou 2008, p. 16)

This quotation not only explicitly highlights the eternal and immutable nature of the ultimate reality but also alludes to the metaphor of a “door” within the discourse of cosmogony. Most significantly, all of these elements unfold within the framework of the Taiyi paradigm.

According to Yan Fu 嚴復, “gu 谷” symbolically represents the abstract manifestation of emptiness, while “shen 神” denotes the everlasting interconnectedness with all aspects of the universe (S. Wang 1986, p. 1077). Zhang Dainian holds a slightly different perspective, suggesting that “神” in Chinese philosophical cosmology signifies a subtle dynamism or a propelling force that drives the generation of the universe (Zhang 1994, p. 130). Both perspectives share a common objective of highlighting the entity’s capacity to establish a profound connection with all phenomena. When combined with the attributes of emptiness and eternity, within a particular context, this entity refers to the ultimate reality, or more vividly, the concept of Taiyi.

Since the reference mentions the “root of heaven and earth”, it might be helpful to introduce a passage to gain a brief understanding of how Heaven and Earth are generated in Daoist philosophy. This would aid in comprehending the role played by the “Taiyi” in the cosmology of the *Laozi*. As described in *Taiyi Shengshui*, the process unfolds as follows: “Taiyi gives rise to Water, and Water, in turn, delimits Taiyi. Thus, Heaven is formed in this manner. Heaven, in turn, delimits Taiyi. Thus, Earth is formed in this manner” (太一生水, 水反輔太一, 是以成天。天反輔太一, 是以成地; L. Li 2007, p. 41)⁹.

In this context, the term “Water” does not denote the physical liquid but symbolizes the underlying force of motion that drives the narrative of cosmology. Just as Taiyi relies on the Pole Star to manifest its presence, the stars revolving around Taiyi can be likened to petals floating upon an unseen vortex of Water. The revolving “Water” confers extension upon Taiyi. If we postulate that Taiyi’s force has a limitation, that limitation becomes the boundary of Taiyi, and the expanse encompassed within that boundary, adorned with innumerable stars, is known as “Heaven”. In accordance with the model presented by the “Celestial Lid (*gaitian* 蓋天)” theory, the conical form of Heaven acts as a spatial constraint on the expansive nature of Taiyi. The domain encompassed by Heaven is designated as “Earth”.

In *Taiyi Shengshui*, Taiyi undergoes successive limitations, leading to the formation of Heaven and Earth. They do not originate from a specific essence but are rooted in the swirling motion of the “Water” generated by Taiyi. These texts and reasoning will stimulate contemplation on the essence of the root of Heaven and Earth. In the text of the *Laozi*, the term “root of heaven and earth (*tiandigen* 天地根)” is employed to denote the “door of dark and enigmatic feminineness (*xuanpinzhimen* 玄牝之門)”, while the concept of “xuanpin” itself serves as an abstract expression of Taiyi. Gaining a profound understanding of the interconnection between xuanpin, the door of xuanpin, and Taiyi, as well as comprehending why the door of xuanpin is regarded as the root of Heaven and Earth, is of paramount importance in unraveling the intricacies of the *Laozi*’s cosmology.

The qualities of emptiness and profundity are intrinsic to a valley, as it assumes a receptive state; meanwhile, the term “shen” connotes something enigmatic and capable of giving rise to all things. Thus, Taiyi, embodying these attributes, is also designated as the “dark and enigmatic feminineness”. Regarding the door of xuanpin, it functions as a metaphorical depiction of cosmic movement. In this metaphor, xuanpin assumes the role of the hinge of a door, while all things are likened to the revolving panels of the door. In numerous ancient Chinese literary or philosophical works, the concept of “Taiyi” or the “Pole Star” is frequently correlated with the metaphorical notion of a “hinge”. For instance, Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139) posited that “The Hinge Star pertains to the discernible celestial body commonly referred to as the Northern Pole” (其可睹, 樞星是也, 謂之北極; K. Yan 1958, p. 1553). Similarly, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) asserted that “The beichen designates the celestial region devoid of other stellar entities. It occupies a steadfast and motionless position, functioning as the celestial hinge and nexus” (北辰是那中間無星處, 這些子不動, 是天之樞紐; J. Li 1986, p. 534).

The metaphorical notion of the “hinge” accentuates a mode of motion in which celestial entities orbit around a central axis, akin to the swinging of a door. Within this metaphorical framework, if we designate Taiyi or the Pole Star as the “hinge”, the stars revolving around this pivotal center can be likened to the “door”. Similarly, propelled by the

enigmatic rotational force of Taiyi, the dynamic motion resembling a door can be termed the “door of xuanpin”. In light of the cosmogonic theory expounded in *Taiyi Shengshui*, it is plausible to perceive the “door of xuanpin” as the bedrock of the genesis of Heaven and Earth. In *Taiyi Shengshui*, the genesis of Heaven and Earth is attributed to the rotating “Water”, whereas in the *Laozi*, it is attributed to the revolving “door”. These two metaphors aim to depict how the inherent movement of the ultimate reality gives rise to the creation of the universe.

The implicit and succinct portrayal of the universe’s generative process is followed by the concluding statement, situating the created cosmos within the framework of the “attraction-rotation” order, a distinctive hallmark of the Taiyi paradigm. The resonance between the term “silk thread (*mian* 絲)” in the *Laozi* and the terms “to tie (*xi* 繫)”, “*wei* 維”, and “*gang* 綱” used in Tianwen and Zhuangzi to depict celestial phenomena presents an intriguing proposition that these terminologies associated with threads converge in cosmology, unveiling a shared metaphorical pattern where the *Laozi* accentuates the subtle and imperceptible essence of these threads. These threads, ethereal in nature, intertwine the universe with the intangible essence of Taiyi, referred to as “xuanpin”. Through this intricate connection, the movement of all things is guided by the pull of Taiyi. In this harmonious interplay, all entities effortlessly manifest their intrinsic worth, embodying a state of ease known as “*buqin* 不勤”.¹⁰

An aspect worth highlighting is that the term “root” in the *Laozi* encompasses not only the origin or starting point of the universe but also the ultimate destination. This notion finds expression in Chapter 16 of the *Laozi* (Guodian version), wherein it is expounded that “The movement of the heavens follows a circular path, and all things will return to their root”. The imperceptible threads serve as an assurance that all things, even when bereft of their kinetic essence, shall find their way back to their primordial root (天道員員，各復其根; L. Li 2007, p. 4). Consequently, we designate Taiyi as an entity that resides within the universe, existing in a state of nothingness and darkness. It embodies the starting point and end point of all movement within the universe. This pervasive influence of Taiyi becomes internalized and interwoven into the very fabric of all entities through invisible threads. Thus, these threads serve as the medium through which Taiyi binds all things.

4. Application of Taiyi: Human Nature and Epistemology

The significance of Taiyi in the *Laozi* extends beyond its implications of “rootness” and cosmology, encompassing profound insights into human nature and epistemology. Through elucidating cosmology with Taiyi as the core, the philosophy of the *Laozi* provides a nuanced understanding of human nature, with a key focus on elucidating the origin and manifestation of “De”. Furthermore, by embracing the epistemological implications of Taiyi, the philosophy of the *Laozi* presents a pathway towards a more comprehensive understanding of the ultimate reality and the universe.

4.1. Infancy and Sageness: The Connection between Human Nature and Taiyi

From a paleographic standpoint, the initial definition of De in the philosophy of the *Laozi* remains subject to ongoing scholarly debate as researchers grapple with various interpretations and perspectives. Despite the diversity of opinions, scholars within the field generally agree that De, as found in Daoist philosophy, is deeply rooted in the intricate cosmological framework articulated by the *Laozi*. It is within this philosophical context that the concept of De finds its origins and significance.

Within the philosophical framework of the *Laozi*, De serves as the linchpin that harmonizes the understanding of the macroscopic universe with the intricacies of human nature at the microcosmic level. Scholars have put forth arguments suggesting that the original meaning of De did not encompass humanistic moral values. According to the research conducted by Jia Jinhua, for example, it has been suggested that the prototype of De, which was known as “*zhi* 直”, originally denoted “the midmost and upright gnomon” (J. Jia 2009, p. 485). During the Spring and Autumn period, a significant transformation occurred in the

understanding and interpretation of De. It underwent a process of internalization, where its intrinsic meaning was continually reinforced and deepened (Ye 2013, p. 30). As indicated by Angus C. Graham's translation of "De" as "The Potency" (Graham 1989, p. 218), De assumes a pivotal position within the cosmology of the philosophy of the *Laozi*, wherein it serves as a reservoir, amassing and consolidating the distinctive characteristics inherent in all phenomena. The *Laozi*, proclaims that "The Dao engenders the universe, while the De nurtures the universe" (道生之, 德蓄之; Lou 2008, p. 136).

In the *Laozi*, entities or individuals endowed with a profusion of De are metaphorically depicted as infants. As it states, "Those with profound De resemble newborn infants, red and naked" (含德之厚, 比於赤子; Lou 2008, p. 145). It is intriguing to observe that the concept of De consistently accompanies infant metaphors within the text. This association arises from the *Laozi*'s reverence for attributes that align closely with ultimate reality. When the *Laozi* metaphorically links Taiyi or Dao to a maternal figure, the implication is that all qualities of entities or individuals akin to children emanate from the Dao itself. Those entities or individuals least affected by external influences can be appropriately likened to infants. Infants are depicted as possessing "weak bones and soft tendons" (骨弱筋柔; Lou 2008, p. 145), and they are linked to the qualities of utmost softness, as exemplified by Chapter 10, "Can the condensed Qi, so extremely soft, resemble that of an infant?" (專氣致柔, 能如嬰兒乎; Lou 2008, p. 22). In the philosophical framework of the *Laozi*, the attributes of infants are nurtured and sustained by De, which is regarded as the individual's most primordial and flawless manifestation of De.

The *Laozi* praises an eternal form of De, known as "changed 常德" or "hengde 恒德". In Chapter 28, it is conveyed that:

By understanding the masculine while adhering to the principle of the feminine, one becomes the world's vale. Being the vale of the world, one can remain the eternal De unseparated, and the individual regains a state akin to infancy. By understanding the presence of white while adhering to the principle of darkness, one becomes the Cosmograph of the world. Being the cosmograph of the world, one can remain the eternal De errorless, and return back to the pole of nothingness. By understanding the glory while adhering to the principle of disgrace, one becomes the valley of the world. Being the valley of the world, one can remain the eternal De sufficient, and return back to the state of simplicity. The diffusion of simplicity leads to the manifestation of tangible phenomena, and when harnessing their inherent capabilities, the Sage can assume leadership over officials. Hence, it is asserted that great mastery is nothing about fragmentation.

知其雄, 守其雌, 為天下谿。為天下谿, 常德不離, 復歸於嬰兒。知其白, 守其黑, 為天下式。為天下式, 常德不忒, 復歸於無極。知其榮, 守其辱, 為天下谷。為天下谷, 常德乃足, 復歸於樸。朴散則為器, 聖人用之則為官長。故大制不割。 (Lou 2008, pp. 73–74)

Within the philosophical discourse, "the pole of nothingness (*wuji* 無極)" assumes a name that inherently embodies the characteristic of nothingness, which interestingly aligns with the defining attribute of Taiyi, the void Celestial Pole, suggesting that *wuji* serves as an alternate designation, or perhaps even an equivalent manifestation, of Taiyi in certain respects. To attain the state of ultimate reality, an individual must strive for their eternal De to be flawless and devoid of error. This requires embodying the role of a cosmic compass, aligning oneself with the harmonious order of the universe. The passage offers an enigmatic response to how one can fulfill this role by understanding the presence of white while embracing the darkness.

The primary focus of the research now revolves around comprehending the significance of "white (*bai* 白)" and "darkness (*hei* 黑)". The characteristic of white and dark is not a mere product of imaginative conjecture, but rather a profound synthesis derived from observing the celestial phenomena. The recognition and interpretation of this celestial phenomenon form the basis for white and darkness and lend it a sense of abstract depth

akin to masculine (*Xiong* 雄) and feminine (*ci* 雌), or glory (*rong* 榮) and disgrace (*ru* 辱). The Sage (*shengren* 聖人), as the epitome of the De akin to that of an infant, or the revered ideal personality in the philosophy of the *Laozi*, embodies the cosmic compass. To achieve such a state, one must “embrace One (*baoyi* 抱一)”. As stated in Chapter 22, “The Sage embraces One and becomes the Cosmograph of the world” (聖人抱一，為天下式; Lou 2008, p. 56). The One that functions as the compass within the universe is none other than Taiyi. Gaining a direct comprehension of Taiyi facilitates a deeper understanding of the intrinsic significance of white and dark.

Upon gazing at the nocturnal expanse, one may discern the stars, including the Pole Star, emanating a luminous white hue, while Taiyi and the encompassing void manifest a profound darkness. The white stars, although readily perceivable, are in a state of rotational motion, rendering them incapable of embodying eternity. In contrast, the enigmatic darkness of Taiyi, though elusive to the senses, remains immovably fixed at the center of the celestial sphere, bearing timeless significance. Therefore, those who possess a profound understanding of the nature of Taiyi are regarded as Sages. They adhere to these principles to navigate the affairs of the human world and provide guidance. The eternal De inherent in the Sages, serving as a manifestation of Taiyi, remains errorless (*bute* 不忒) and unseparated (*buli* 不離). As a result, the Sages accumulate De abundantly (*hou* 厚), much like the infant.

In summary, according to the *Laozi*, the state of infancy is regarded as the state with the least depletion or veiling of De, representing a closeness to Taiyi. The ideal character of the Sage, as envisioned in this philosophy, is attained by upholding the eternal principles of Taiyi. This enables the Sage to sustain De within themselves, facilitating a return to the state of infancy and empowering them to guide the affairs of the world.

4.2. Taiyi and the Nature of Knowledge in the *Laozi*

From an epistemological standpoint, the *Laozi* advocates a real understanding of the root of the universe. However, it does not dismiss the value of accumulating and assimilating empirical knowledge. This is akin to the practice of locating Taiyi, where observers rely on the North Star as a guiding reference. In essence, the *Laozi*’s approach embodies a harmonious integration of profound understanding and practical empirical observations, underscoring the complementary nature of these two facets in the quest for a holistic comprehension of the cosmos. Consequently, in the *Laozi*, there exists a significant emphasis on acquiring a comprehension of the empirical world, followed by a transcendence beyond its boundaries. By adopting this integrated approach, individuals endeavor to realize the objective of understanding of the “root”, or Taiyi.

In the realm of the *Laozi*’s philosophy, the exploration of epistemology intertwines with the studies of “rootness” and the universe, forging a profound relationship that sheds light on the nature of ultimate reality, Taiyi. The inaugural passage of Chapter 1 in the *Laozi* (received text) directly confronts the inherent difficulties encountered in comprehending the realm of ultimate reality. It intimates that reason and language possess inherent limitations in their capacity to apprehend the depths of such reality. It asserts that “The Dao that can be articulated through words is not the eternal Dao, and the names ascribed to phenomena are not eternal names” (道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名; Lou 2008, p. 1).

This stance does not signify a retreat in the face of ultimate reality but rather a conclusion reached through earnest endeavors to fathom the essence of Taiyi and its manifold expressions. Through the observation of Taiyi, the *Laozi* offers a reflection on ultimate reality:

The Dao is empty, yet even when it functions, it remains unfilled. How akin it is to an abyss, the progenitor of all things. [It can dull their sharpness, unravel their complexity, gather their radiance, and impartially regard their atoms.] It is so deep as if it truly exists. I do not know its origin, but it seems to be the primordial ancestor of the Thearch.

道沖而用之或不盈，淵兮似萬物之宗。[挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。]湛兮似或存，吾不知誰之子，象帝之先。(Lou 2008, p. 10)¹¹

For a deeper comprehension of this passage, delving into the true significance of the Thearch (*di* 帝) would be a promising avenue to explore. Within the scholarly discourse surrounding the character “di” in this passage, there exists a prevailing assumption that it is synonymous with a personified supreme god. This widely accepted view has shaped the understanding and interpretation of *di* for some time. However, upon closer examination and deeper investigation within the context of *Taiyi*, it becomes apparent that this assumption faces certain challenges in capturing the true essence and scope of the concept *di*. Emerging research by Pankenier sheds new light on the matter, proposing that *di* should be more appropriately associated with the Celestial Pole or the Pole Star (Pankenier 2004, p. 229).¹²

Through observation, one can discern the splendid Pole Star, akin to the Thearch, residing at the center of the celestial sphere, and all its noble attributes are bestowed upon it by *Taiyi*. Consequently, within this metaphorical framework, no other entity can be rightfully regarded as the progenitor of the Pole Star, save *Taiyi*. Being the ultimate reality, *Taiyi* does not originate from any specific entity. Therefore, in the context of the *Laozi*, it is stated that its parentage cannot be known, highlighting its transcendental nature. Acknowledging one’s lack of knowledge about “*Taiyi*” is indeed a manifestation of true understanding, as the nature of *Taiyi* is difficult to comprehend through sensory perception or rational understanding.

In this passage, the usage of the words “abyss (*yuan* 淵)” and “deep (*zhan* 湛)” carries great significance in comprehending the essence of the ultimate reality as depicted in the philosophy of the *Laozi*. If one persists in using the senses to apprehend *Taiyi*, one will realize its profound and unfathomable nature, akin to an abyss. However, this does not imply that one should relinquish the pursuit and comprehension of *Taiyi*. Just as *Taiyi* relies on the Pole Star to show its position, attaining the state of “unknowing (*wuzhi* 無知)” also necessitates an understanding of the empirical world. The excerpt mentioned earlier serves as a notable illustration. To adhere to the principles of darkness, it is typically imperative to comprehend white. The notion of “knowing white” pertains to being acquainted with the phenomena exemplified by the Pole Star and other celestial entities. The term “myriad of things (*wanwu* 萬物)”, frequently used in the *Laozi*, signifies the vastness and diversity of the universe, conveying the boundless realm of knowledge symbolized by “white”. In the presence of knowledge that can be comprehended through language, experience, and reason, the *Laozi* proposes to “engage in learning and accumulate day by day” (為學日益; Lou 2008, p. 127).¹³

While acknowledging the importance of empirical knowledge and the insights it provides into the tangible aspects of existence, the *Laozi* places greater emphasis on the pursuit of understanding that surpasses the limitations of the senses and rationality. By recognizing the constraints of sensory perception and rational knowledge, the *Laozi* promotes a comprehensive approach to comprehending *Taiyi* and the universe. It advocates embracing the notion that genuine enlightenment may arise from exploring realms that extend beyond mere observation or intellectual grasp.

As for how to understand the ultimate reality of the *Taiyi*, the *Laozi* provides a clear answer. In Chapter 16 of the *Laozi* (Guodian version), it is mentioned that “The most vacant entity is the Pole, which accumulates great thickness through adhering to centrality. All things arise on the periphery and will return by simply waiting in stillness. The movement of the heavens follows a circular path, and all things will return to their root” (致虛，極也；守中，篤也。萬物旁作，居以須復也。天道員員，各復其根; L. Li 2007, p. 4).¹⁴ In alternate versions of the *Laozi*, the subsequent passage serves as a commentary on this truth. With the received version being an example, it implies that “The act of returning to the root is referred to as tranquility, which can be seen as returning to one’s destiny. Returning to one’s destiny signifies eternity, and understanding eternity can be termed wisdom” (归根曰靜，是謂復命。復命曰常，知常曰明; Lou 2008, pp. 35–36). “Understanding eternity”

indeed epitomizes the epistemological purpose embedded in the *Laozi*, offering a transcendent pathway for individuals to attain comprehension of the universe. Drawing upon the logical structure inherent in the quoted passage, it becomes evident that “understanding eternity” necessitates employing reverse reasoning, leading to the conclusion that individuals are urged to retrace the essence of things to their immutable “root”. This necessitates that in the pursuit of understanding the universe, it is important to transcend the confinement of superficial appearances. Rather, one must acknowledge that all things are fundamentally shaped by the attributes of their root. In the previous analysis, we explored the “root of the Heaven and the Earth”, which is referred to as the “door of dark and enigmatic feminineness”. This characterization aligns with the movement pattern of Taiyi.

In the journey of comprehending the essence of Taiyi, individuals engage in the process of stripping away the superficial aspects of objects, such as their material nature, attributes, and utility. By doing so, they gradually uncover the position of all things within the movement pattern of Taiyi, which is referred to as the “celestial path” or “celestial Dao (tiandao 天道)”. Due to its abstract nature, the celestial Dao cannot be grasped through empirical means or direct sensory perception. This explains why it is said that “One can see the celestial Dao without even looking out of the window” (不闕牖, 見天道; Lou 2008, p. 126). The cognitive endeavor of stripping experiential knowledge in order to comprehend the Dao is denoted in the *Laozi* as “engage in Dao and strip day by day” (為道日損; Lou 2008, p. 128). By adhering to the fundamental and primal principles governing the motion of Taiyi, individuals can attain a profound understanding of various matters. The *Laozi* articulates this notion by suggesting that “By grasping the primordial Dao and employing it in the governance of present-day practical affairs, one can gain insight into the origins of all things from antiquity. This process is referred to as the head of thread-like Dao” (執古之道, 以禦今之有。能知古始, 是謂道紀; Lou 2008, p. 32). It is noteworthy that this metaphor of the thread remains integral to the “attraction-rotation” paradigm of Taiyi.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has delved into the multifaceted significance of Taiyi within the framework of the philosophy of the *Laozi*. Throughout the exploration, Taiyi has emerged as a pivotal and axial element, bearing profound implications for diverse facets of the philosophy of the *Laozi*. Through this inquiry, it becomes evident that Taiyi assumes the role of a unifying axis, converging the various strands of the philosophy of the *Laozi* and providing a comprehensive comprehension of its underlying tenets. This article encourages further exploration and dialogue, acknowledging that the exploration of Taiyi and its implications for the philosophy of the *Laozi* is an ongoing endeavor.

Perhaps at this point, we can address the initial question posed in the article: why does Zhuangzi consider Taiyi as the core of Lao Dan’s philosophy, while this pivotal term remains absent in the *Laozi*? The concept of “Taiyi” within the framework of the philosophy of the *Laozi* embodies its intrinsic voidness and profound nature. Its true essence remains concealed beneath a multitude of names that can be articulated through language and words, with “Dao” being one of the most prominent among them. Similarly, the name “Taiyi” itself is merely another designation. These names, akin to the radiant Pole Star in the Celestial Pole, may serve as guiding points for individuals embarking on an exploration of the philosophy of the *Laozi*. However, the core of this philosophy, imbued with enduring vitality, does not lie in an experiential or mystical interpretation of “Dao” or “Taiyi” but rather in the active and sincere pursuit of unraveling the mysteries of ultimate reality.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization Z.L.; writing—original draft preparation, Z.L.; writing—review and editing, Y.H.; funding acquisition, Y.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by National Social Science Fund of China, grant number: 21AZJ005.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Unless otherwise specified, the quoted passages and related chapters from the *Laozi* in this text are based on the Wang Bi version (王弼本; cf. Lou 2008), also known as the received version. While appreciating the valuable contributions of existing translations, it is crucial to acknowledge that divergent interpretations and nuanced understandings can emerge as a result of varying hermeneutical perspectives and linguistic intricacies. Therefore, in an effort to ensure a more direct engagement with the original text, an independent translation has been undertaken based on the interpretation of the original text.
- ² The translation of the phrase “常無有” as “eternity of being and non-being” in accordance with the widely accepted interpretation has proven to be rather perplexing. Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 puts forth the notion that this phrase should be understood as “there was no Being before the Pole 極先無有”. Furthermore, Qiu suggests that the character “亙” should actually be “ji 極”, but an erroneous reading as “heng 恆” occurred. Additionally, the bamboo-slip document “亙先” should be interpreted as “極先” (Qiu 2009, p. 3). Examining the cited passage through the lens of Qiu’s perspective appears to lend greater persuasiveness to this article.
- ³ The ancient Chinese weaving technique, which involved securing the longitudinal thread to allow the horizontal thread to shuttle back and forth and create cloth, presents a metaphorical parallel in Chinese philosophy. The term “jing 經” is frequently extended to signify a stable and central element, akin to the fixed longitudinal thread in weaving.
- ⁴ It indeed provokes contemplation to observe the limited presence of the term “One” in the Guodian version and the fragments quoted in the *Hanfeizi*. Such an observation might lead to speculation that the emphasis on the concept of “One” emerged during the later Warring States and even the Qin-Han period in the course of composing the *Laozi*. Nevertheless, we must exercise caution in drawing definitive conclusions due to the brevity of the Guodian version and the specific purpose of the *Hanfeizi*’s quotations. To ascertain the time of appearance of significant concepts in the *Laozi*, we shall await further evidence and scholarly investigations.
- ⁵ This article refrains from extensively exploring the varying definitions of “cosmology” within the Western philosophy, as such an exhaustive inquiry is beyond its scope. Instead, a prudent approach is to identify commonalities with Chinese philosophy by focusing on the etymological sense of the term. By emphasizing shared aspects and linguistic connections, this article can effectively convey its insights while maintaining alignment with the specific context of Chinese philosophical traditions. In ancient Greek, the term “κόσμος” primarily denotes “order” or “harmony”, highlighting the fundamental sense of organization and arrangement. However, it is noteworthy that the word also carries another significant connotation, referring to “ornaments on a woman’s garment”, which offers a more specific interpretation. Etymologically, cosmology in its broadest sense refers to the study of the origin, development, and transformation of the empirical world. While its roots lie in ancient Greek metaphysics, cosmology’s significance transcends cultural boundaries and finds resonance within Chinese philosophy as well. The Chinese character “物” initially depicted “a cow with various colors of fur”, but over time, its meaning expanded to encompass the broader notion of “various types and grades”. Within Chinese philosophy, the exploration of “classifications and grades in the world” undertaken by pre-Qin philosophers primarily pertains to the empirical realm. Both the starry sky and the cow with variegated fur serve as potent stimuli for contemplation among those who love wisdom, inviting reflections on the underlying order pervading the empirical world or the universe. Given the current lack of a universally embraced term to encapsulate this facet of inquiry within the realm of Chinese philosophy, the cautious and precedent-based utilization of the term “cosmology” emerges as a prudent choice.
- ⁶ “Chen 辰”, originally denoting a clam, underwent a semantic extension to encompass the concept of a sickle. During the Shang Dynasty, sickles were crafted using clam shells. In the course of celestial observation, people discerned a resemblance between the arc created by α Sco and its neighboring stars and the blade of a sickle (Xu 2014, p. 1590). Consequently, the luminous α Sco acquired the designations of the “Sickle” or the “Great Sickle”. In parallel, the Pole Star situated in the northern domain became identified as the “Northern Sickle”.
- ⁷ Stephan Feuchtwang contemplates the suitability of designating these universes as “ontologies”, questioning whether such terminology accurately encapsulates the essence of Chinese ritual practices, philosophical debates, and contemplative musings. Notably, Chinese philosophical pursuits refrain from delving into inquiries concerning the concept of “being” or the contemplation of “thinking about thinking”, as postulated in ancient Greek thought regarding the Unmoved Mover. He posits that the intrinsic philosophy originating from China is not preoccupied with the notion of being or engaged in the domain of ontology (Feuchtwang 2014, p. 387).
- ⁸ Given the absence of a universally accepted classification for the category encompassing “Dao”, we may opt for a prudent approach by temporarily employing the term “root (*ben* 本)”, as proposed by ancient Chinese philosophers. This cautious strategy allows for a pragmatic designation that aligns with the historical context and the discourse of early Chinese thought, until a more consensual nomenclature emerges within the academic community. The term “root” serves as a descriptor for the ultimate reality, in contrast to the concept of “universe”.
- ⁹ When referencing the original text on the bamboo slips, Li Ling’s work utilizes the term “Dayi 大一”. However, Li emphasizes that this term should be pronounced as “Taiyi 太一”, as “Dayi” represents the original written form of “Taiyi” (L. Li 2007, p. 42).
- ¹⁰ Some scholars interpret “buqin” as “endlessly”, such as Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (G. Chen 2006, p. 99) and Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 (Liu 2006, p. 137). However, the traditional interpretation seems to be more conducive to understanding the philosophical framework involved in this article.

- 11 The specific sentences that may have been inadvertently duplicated by the transcriber have been identified and marked with square brackets. There is currently no definitive consensus in academic discourse regarding whether to retain or remove them. It is worth acknowledging that the inclusion of these passages does not significantly hinder the overall understanding and interpretation of the document as a whole.
- 12 Rather than engaging in a contentious debate over the rightness or wrongness of Pankenier's view and the established academic standpoint, this article seeks to navigate a path that transcends binary oppositions. It is important to acknowledge the interconnectedness of these perspectives within the scholarly discourse, rather than dismissing one in favor of the other. In this light, the study conducted by Pankenier assumes a valuable role in the broader context of this research.
- 13 It is important to underscore that, while Chapter 48 seemingly implies distinct paths for "engaging in learning" and "engaging in Dao", it does not signify an opposition towards "learning" or acquiring knowledge from the empirical world within the context of the Laozi. Conversely, a wealth of knowledge serves as an essential foundation for individuals who embark on the journey of seeking the Dao. Undoubtedly, Chapter 48 accentuates the significance of transcending empirical knowledge. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge the logical interrelation between the act of "stripping" and its prerequisites: the individual's capacity to engage in the process of "stripping" hinges upon having sufficient objects available for such examination. These objects encompass not only the knowledge acquired through learning but also the very process of learning, or even, the act of "engaging" itself.
- 14 First and foremost, it is notable that the character "ji 極" in the original bamboo-slip text is written as "互", but Li Ling argues that it should be interpreted as "ji" (L. Li 2007, p. 8). Secondly, it is important to note that the Guodian version deviates significantly from other versions in terms of the structure of this passage. The latter includes an additional section of text resembling commentary, unlike the former. Lastly, in other versions where similar passages can be found, there are variations in the choice of certain words compared with the Guodian version. While the expression in the Guodian version offers a more intuitive portrayal of the cosmic movement within this philosophy, these differences have minimal impact on the presentation of the philosophy of the Laozi.

References

- Chen, Guying 陳鼓應. 2006. *Laozi Jinyi Jinzhu* 老子今譯今註. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Chen, Qiyu 陳奇猷. 2002. *Lüshi Chunqiu Xinjiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋. Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House.
- Cheng, Shude 程樹德. 1990. *Lunyu Jishi* 論語集釋. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Feng, Shi 馮時. 2001. *Zhongguo Tianwen Kaoguxue* 中國天文考古學. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2014. Too ontological, too rigid, too ahistorical but magnificent. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4: 383–87. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ge, Zhaoguang 葛兆光. 1990. Zhongmiao zhimen: Beiji yu Taiyi, Dao, Taiji 眾妙之門: 北極與太一、道、太極. *Chinese Culture* (中國文化) 2: 46–65.
- Graham, Angus. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Guo, Qingfan 郭慶藩. 1961. *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Hong, Xingzu 洪興祖. 1983. *Chuci Buzhu* 楚辭補註. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Huang, Huaixin 黃懷信. 2004. *Heguanzi Huijiaojizhu* 鶡冠子彙校集註. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Jia, Gongyan 賈公彥. 1999. *Zhouli Zhushu* 周禮註疏. Beijing: Peiking University Press.
- Jia, Jinhua 賈晉華. 2009. Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the Laozi. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4: 459–88. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Li, Jingde 黎靖德. 1986. *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Li, Ling 李零. 2000. *Zhongguo Fangshu Xukao* 中國方術續考. Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe.
- Li, Ling 李零. 2007. *Guodian Chujian Jiaoduji* 郭店楚簡校讀記. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- Liu, Xiaogan 劉笑敢. 2006. *The Laozi from Ancient to the Modern: Comparative Studies of the Five Versions, Including Introductory Analyses and Criticisms (with Comparative Concordance)* 老子古今: 五種對勘與析評引論. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Lou, Yulie 樓宇烈. 2008. *Laozi Daodejing Zhujiaoshi* 論語集釋. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Pankenier, David. 2004. A Brief History of Beiji 北極 (Northern Culmen) with an Excursus on the Origin of the Character di 帝. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2: 211–36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Qiu, Xigui 裘錫圭. 2009. "The System is Based upon Nothingness" in Zhuang Zi 說 "建之以常無有". *Fudan Journal (Social Sciences)* (復旦學報(社會科學版)) 1: 1–3, 11.
- Sima, Qian 司馬遷. 1963. *Shiji* 史記. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Wang, Ming 王明. 1960. *Taipingjing Hejiao* 太平經合校. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Wang, Shi 王弼. 1986. *Yan Fu Ji* 嚴復集. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Wang, Xianshen 王先慎. 2003. *Hanfeizi Jijie* 韓非子集解. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Xu, Zelin 徐澤林, and Lifang Liu 劉麗芳. 2015. *Zhoubi Suanjing Tujie Yizhu* 《周髀算經圖解》譯註. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press.
- Xu, Zhongshu 徐中舒. 2014. *Jiaguwen Zidian* 甲骨文字典. Chengdu: Sichuan Cishu Chubanshe.

- Yan, Dunjie 嚴敦傑. 1985. On the Ancient Chinese Divinatory Instrument Shi Pan 式盤綜述. *Acta Archaeologica Sinica* (考古學報) 4: 445–64.
- Yan, Kejun 嚴可均. 1958. *Quan Shanggusandai Qinhan Sanguo Liuchao Wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Ye, Shuxun 葉樹勛. 2013. *A Study on The Concept of DE in Pre-Qin Taoism* 先秦道家“德”觀念研究. Beijing: Tsinghua University.
- Zhang, Dainian 張岱年. 1994. *Zhongguo Zhexue Dagang* 中國哲學大綱. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Zhao, Yongheng 趙永恆. 2012. Investigation on the Polar stars of “Tai Yi” “太一”星象考. *Journal of Chongqing University of Arts and Sciences (Social Sciences Edition)* (重庆文理学院学报(社会科学版)) 2: 17–21.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.