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Structure and Meaning in the Interpretation of the *Laozi*: Cheng Xuanying's Hermeneutic Toolkit and His Interpretation of Dao as a Compassionate Savior

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Abstract: Cheng Xuanying's *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing* presents the *Laozi* as the origin of Daoism—a Daoism which, by his time in the seventh century, included many beliefs and concepts coopted from Buddhism. The commentary is representative of *chongxuan xue* (Twofold Mystery philosophy), which is characterized by the integration of Buddhist concepts and methods into the interpretation of the *Laozi*. Taking the integration of the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva as universal savior of limitless compassion, this paper investigates the “why” and “how” of this cooption. The question of why Cheng Xuanying wanted to read the *Daode jing* as a testimony to Laozi and Dao being a compassionate, universal savior is addressed with a contextualization of the commentary in its time and location: early Tang Chang'an. Next, the paper discusses, in detail, the hermeneutic tools Cheng Xuanying used to achieve his reading. Cheng Xuanying integrated his commentary and the original text of the *Laozi* in a complex structure, combining the *kepan* technique, interlinear interpretation, and added structuring comments, in addition to what might be termed “strategic citations”. This paper analyzes how he worked with these means to construct arguments and specific readings of the *Laozi*.



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1. Introduction: A New Reading of the *Laozi*

The Daoist Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, who was invited in 631 by emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–49) to come to live in the capital of the Tang, presented an Expository Commentary to the *Daode jing* (*Daode jing yishu* 道德經義疏) to emperor Taizong in 637 CE.¹

This commentary presents the *Laozi* 老子 as the origin of Daoism—of the ancient philosophy as much as of the contemporary Daoism of the seventh century, with all its comparatively recently integrated beliefs and concepts, many of which were coopted from Buddhism. The commentary is a prime example of *chongxuan xue* 重玄學 (Twofold Mystery philosophy), typical for early Tang dynasty Daoist texts. Twofold Mystery philosophy's most salient feature is the integration of Buddhist concepts and methods into the interpretation of the *Laozi*. This paper takes the cooption of the bodhisattva concept, the conception of a universal, compassionate savior, as an example to analyze the “why” and “how” of this cooption.

Cheng Xuanying integrated his commentary and the original text of the *Laozi* in a complex structure, combining the *kepan* 科判 technique, known primarily from Buddhist exegesis, with detailed, word-by-word interpretation, and added structural comments, in addition to what might be termed “strategic citations”. He, thus, operated a very sophisticated hermeneutical toolkit, and this paper endeavors to show how he worked with these means to construct arguments and specific readings of the *Laozi*.

To begin, a juxtaposition of Cheng Xuanying's interpretation of the term “mother” in the first chapter of the *Daode jing* with that of two prominent precursors, Heshang

gong 河上公 (second century CE) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–49), illustrates the novelty of his interpretation of the *Daode jing*:

The second verse of the first chapter of the *Daode jing* says:

無名天地之始 without name, the beginning of heaven and earth,

有名萬物之母 having a name, the mother of the myriad things/beings.

The Heshang gong commentary reads the sentence in the light of cosmogenesis, interpreting the term “mother” as a metaphor for the generating aspect of *qi*, which mediates between the formlessness of Dao (the Way) and the materiality of the things or beings.

“The nameless” refers to ‘the Way.’ The Way is formless and therefore unnamable. “The beginning of Heaven and Earth” means that the Way emits *qi* and unfolds transformations from its empty void. It is the root beginning of Heaven and Earth. “The named” refers to ‘Heaven and Earth.’ Heaven and Earth have form and position, yin and yang, soft and hard. Thus, they are named. “The mother of the myriad beings” means that the *qi* contained within Heaven and Earth generates the myriad beings and helps them grow to maturity like a mother raising her young”. (Tadd 2013, pp. 448–49, Wang 1993, p. 2)

The celebrated Xuanxue scholar Wang Bi read the sentence as an epistemological explanation of the ontological nature of Dao as the ineffable origin and as that which generates all being. Explaining the necessity for Dao to be ‘no-thing’ as a precondition to be able to generate all things, he interpreted the term “mother” as a description of the generative aspect of Dao:

Generally speaking, Entity all begins in negativity [*wu*]. That is why it [the Way] will be at a time when there are neither shapes nor names, the beginning of the ten thousand kinds of entities.² [And]³ when it comes to a time when there are shapes and names, that which [according to *Laozi* 51.3] ‘lets the ten thousand kinds of entities grow, and nurtures them, specifies them, and completes them’; [in short], it will be their mother. This means the Way begins and completes the ten thousand kinds of entities by means of its featurelessness and namelessness. That the ten thousand entities are begun by it [the Way] and completed by it [the Way] but that they do not know that through which these [two, their beginning and completion] come to be as they are [its aspect of being] Dark and Dark again. (Wagner 2003, p. 121)

Cheng Xuanying (seventh century) did not dwell on the generative aspects implied in the term “mother” in the light of the cosmogonic function or ontological nature of Dao. Instead, he read the sentence in the light of soteriological concerns, as an explanation of how the sage (Laozi) explains the nameless origin in order to save the beings by helping them to return to this origin. The term “mother” becomes, here the epitome of compassion.

“The Dao of Twofold Mystery has its origin in the nameless. From the origin, it descends to the [manifest] traces. This is how the names arise. Therefore, when the sage establishes ‘that which has a name’ on the basis of ‘that which is without name,’ and when he relies on ‘that which has a name’ to demonstrate ‘that which is without name,’ he just wishes to raise the sentient beings like [his own] children, and see to it that they return to the origin. Compassionate and nourishing—it is like motherhood”. (Assandri 2021a, p. 41; cf. Meng 2001, p. 376; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287c)

This reading of the first chapter of the *Daode jing* sets the tone for an interpretation, where compassion for all beings becomes one of the major characteristics of the Dao and the sage. Rather than generating the beings—although this theme is not lost to Cheng Xuanying either—they want to save them.

This constitutes a noteworthy shift of meaning in the interpretation of the *Daode jing*, and this paper will inquire into the “why” and “how” of this shift with a discussion of

context and an analysis of literary and rhetorical devices and their effects on the formation of arguments.

2. Context: Emperors, Gods, and Religious Teachings in Seventh-Century Chang'an

2.1. Laozi and the Tang Rulers

The first emperor of the Tang dynasty, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–26), claimed Laozi, whose family name was said to be Li 李, like that of the ruling family of the Tang, was the imperial ancestor.⁴ Having Laozi as ancestor-cum-protection-deity “had the effect of merging the imperial ancestral cult with popular Laozi worship” (Verellen 2019, p. 219), and, thus, Daoism gained much importance in the standing of the three teachings at court. Gaozu’s son and successor, emperor Taizong, confirmed the promotion of Daoism as the first teaching of the Tang and the myth of his family’s descent from Laozi in an edict in 637.⁵

Buddhists in the capital attacked this edict immediately, arguing that Laozi had actually not founded any schools or raised disciples, and contemporary Tang Daoism had nothing to do with Laozi but adhered to teachings developed much later, after the Han and during the Jin dynasty.⁶ While the protests were of no avail, the episode underscores the lively competition between Buddhists and Daoists in the Tang capital, which centered on Laozi, author of the *Daode jing*, deity of Daoism, and claimed ancestor of the Tang emperors.

2.2. Yuanshi Tianzun and Early Medieval Daoism in Chang'an

The Buddhists claiming contemporary Daoism had little to do with Laozi because it promoted teachings that arose much later had reasons for their claim. Even the secular scholars who authored the bibliographic treatise of the official history of the Sui dynasty⁷ introduced their treatise on Daoism with the statement that Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊, the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement, is the main deity of Daoism. Taishang Laojun 太上老君, the deified Laozi, appears only among a group of secondary deities. The *Daode jing* is not mentioned as a sacred scripture of Daoism but is listed in chapter 33 as one of the texts of the philosophical Masters (*zi* 子).⁸

The Daoist scriptures say that there is the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Commencement (Yuanshi Tianzun), who was born before the Great Beginning (*Taiyuan* 太元), endowed with the *qi* of the self-so, indifferent to fame and gain, silent and still, dignified and profoundly remote,⁹ nobody knows his limits. What [the scriptures] say about the destruction of Heaven and Earth when numerous kalpa cycles finish is overall the same as what the Buddhist scriptures say. They assume that the substance/body of the Heavenly Worthy [of Primordial Commencement] exists forever and does not perish. Every time when Heaven and Earth begin anew, either above Jade Capitol, or in the fields of Qiongsang 窮桑 [the son of the Yellow emperor, also called Shaohao 少昊], [the Heavenly Worthy] transmits the secret Dao and this is called the saving of humanity at the beginning of a kalpa. Since the beginnings of kalpas were more than one, there are the year designations of Yankang, Chiming, Longhan and Kaihuang. Between these kalpas pass 41 billion (*yi* 億) years.

Those who are saved are all the highest ranks of the transcendents (immortals) of all heavens, there is Taishang Laojun (太上老君), Taishang Zhangren (太上丈人), Tianzhen Huangren (天真皇人), the emperors of the five Heavens (五方天帝) and all the immortal officials (仙官), in turns they all receive [the secret Dao]. People from this world have no part in this.

The Scriptures which [Yuanshi Tianzun] preaches are also endowed with the *qi* of the Original One, they exist naturally so, they are not created, and like the Heavenly Worthy [of Primordial Commencement] they exist eternally and do not perish. [...] When heaven and earth are not [in danger of] destruction, [these scriptures] are concealed and not transmitted. When a kalpa cycle begins, these scripts become by themselves visible. All together there are eight characters, they

all fully contain the profundity of the substance of Dao; these are called Heavenly Writ. Each character is one *zhang* (ca. 3 m.) square, shimmering in all directions, brilliant and radiating, stunning the mind and dazzling the eyes [. . .].¹⁰

The emphasis on Yuanshi Tianzun as the highest deity of Daoism and sacred scriptures appearing in the sky points to the southern Sandong 三洞¹¹ Daoism, specifically, to the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures. This secular text from early Tang Chang'an underscores that Daoism in the capital Chang'an proposed a version of "integrated Daoism" that strongly relied on texts and practices from the southern Sandong tradition rather than on texts and practices related to Laozi.

The southern Jiangnan area was a hotbed of formation, interaction, and complex developments of Daoism and Buddhism during the time of the divided empire.¹² As of the early fourth century, different traditions of Daoism, including local southern Daoist traditions and Heavenly Masters who had arrived there only recently, and Buddhism became popular with the elites active at the courts at Nanjing. The co-existence of these religious groups in the region was characterized by complex social, political, and religious competition, which eventually led to the appearance of two important Daoist scriptural corpora, the Shangqing 上清 scriptures (364–70 CE) and the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures (ca. 400 CE).¹³

Both the Shangqing and Lingbao scriptures appeared as "newly revealed" scriptures and, as such, needed a position in the complex field of existing religious scriptures and traditions. It seems that the main legitimation of the new texts rested on their claims of having originated from higher heavens and correspondingly higher deities than those previously known to the world.¹⁴ These new higher deities, most conspicuously the highest deity of the Lingbao scriptures, Yuanshi Tianzun, soon outranked Laozi.

As of the fifth century, Daoist masters began to integrate the different practices and scriptures of the Jiangnan area into what came to be called Sandong Daoism. The Lingbao scriptures and rituals remained of utmost importance in this integration; "the Great Liturgy of Lingbao codified by Lu Xiujing became the Daoist ritual standard for the Tang and beyond" (Verellen 2019, p. 223).

2.3. Laozi and Daoist Teachings of Compassion and Universal Salvation

The development of Daoism in the early medieval period went hand in hand with intensifying competition with Buddhism; the interaction comprised of both polemics and cooptions.¹⁵ Mahayana Buddhist concepts of universal salvation and the bodhisattva as a compassionate savior seem to have been among the most attractive concepts; in fact, the Daoist Lingbao scriptures incorporate the ideal of the compassionate bodhisattva and the concept of universal salvation.¹⁶ The results were so successful that the importance of the Lingbao scriptures soon eclipsed that of other Daoist traditions and scriptures (Bokenkamp 1983, p. 448).

The bodhisattva concept and the ideal of universal salvation and limitless compassion were not limited to Buddhist and Daoist soteriological discourses; they also entered political discourse. Thus, emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–49) used the bodhisattva concept very successfully to boost his own legitimacy and prestige (Janousch 1999, 2016).

The first chapter of the popular Daoist *Benji jing* 本際經, written in the early seventh century in Chang'an, sees the deity Yuanshi Tianzun preaching universal salvation and compassion as a means for the emperor to rule and bring peace and prosperity to the state.¹⁷

Thus, we have many indications that Daoism in Chang'an in the early seventh century proposed teachings, ritual practices, and even a main deity, which originated in the southern Sandong tradition, and was, as the secular and Buddhist contemporaries of Cheng Xuanying rightly observed, not really associated with Laozi. Laozi was celebrated as the author of the *Daode jing* but not as the revealing deity of the Lingbao scriptures or rituals which were so prominent in Daoist practice in the capital.

Cheng Xuanying wrote his *Expository Commentary to the Daode jing*, together with a long introductory essay (*kaiti* 開題)¹⁸, just in this period, and it seems that one of his aims was to align the Daoism of his times with the persona of Laozi and the booklet *Daode jing*.

In the following, I will look at the various hermeneutic tools and methods Cheng Xuanying employed to integrate Daoism as practiced in Chang'an at his time into the reading of the *Laozi*.

3. A Hermeneutic Toolkit

Integrating the complex mix of ideas that presented the teachings of Daoism in early-seventh-century Chang'an into the reading of the *Daode jing* was not a simple feat. The meanings that he needed to "extract" from the *Laozi* were rather new; *Laozi* interpretation in early Chang'an was hot and under scrutiny because of the presumed relation of Laozi to the emperor. Furthermore, Cheng had to reckon with well-established readings of the text such as the Heshang gong commentary or that of Wang Bi.¹⁹

To construct meaning in his *Expository Commentary*, Cheng Xuanying used not only the well-tested strategies of parsing the text and explaining words or sections, but he found new ways to add structure and coherence to the text and even, I argue, to superimpose arguments. After a concise description of each of these techniques, the last section will illustrate the functioning of the ensemble of the techniques with a close reading of chapter 40.

3.1. Structure: *Kepan* 科判 on the Level of the Scrolls

Cheng proposed to read the relatively loose collection of 81 short chapters of the *Daode jing* as a coherent text. In order to achieve this, he added structures to the text.

The *Daode jing* was traditionally divided into two scrolls with 81 short chapters called *zhang* 章.²⁰ The first scroll, comprising chapters 1–37, was called *Dao jing* 道經, the second scroll, with chapters 38–81, was called *De jing* 德經.²¹ Overall, the 81 chapters resemble a collection of wise sayings rather than a systematic exposition of philosophy.

Cheng added an extra level of subdivisions: He divided the two scrolls into three units each, with one chapter as an introduction (chapter 1 and 38, respectively), the bulk of the chapters in between (chapters 2–36 and chapters 39–80) as the middle parts, and the last chapters (chapter 37 and 81, respectively) as a conclusion. He explained this as follows:

Now I take up the first scroll with 37 chapters. It can be divided into three large sections. The first consists of one chapter; it presents the fundamental meaning of Dao. The second comprises [the following] 35 chapters; it elaborates further on the teaching of Dao. The third comprises one chapter; it summarizes the gist [of the first part of the *Daode jing*]. (Assandri 2021a, p. 36; cf. Meng 2001, p. 375; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287a)

This [second] scripture consists of one scroll, with 44 chapters altogether. [Looking at] the larger structure of this scripture [on Virtue], the meaning is developed in three parts: The first, consisting of one chapter, correctly introduces the argument on Virtue. The second [part] consists of 42 chapters, which expand the explanation on the meaning of Virtue. The third [part] consists of one chapter, which summarizes the meaning explained before. (Assandri 2021a, p. 192; cf. Meng 2001, p. 451; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 315a)

This technique of creating divisions and subdivisions was introduced for Buddhist texts, where it is commonly called *kepan* 科判.²² It seems that the Buddhist monk Dao'an 道安 (321–85) was the first to propose a basic division of scriptures into three parts, namely, introduction (*xufen* 序分), main thesis (*zhengzongfen* 正宗分), and conclusion (*liutongfen* 流通分; literally, "dissemination") (Tang 1991, p. 550). This corresponds to the three divisions which Cheng applied to the two scrolls of the *Daode jing*.

As commentarial practice, this is substantially different from the *zhangju* 章句 method we find in the Heshang gong commentary, where the original base text is parsed in chapters and then lines and then, line by line, is commented upon.²³ With *kepan*, the parsing functions

somewhat differently: the base text is divided into paragraphs, and the paragraphs are summarized, in addition to a line-by-line explanation. We find *kepan*-style commenting practices especially often in *yishu* 義疏 commentaries by authors from the sixth to the early seventh centuries, such as the Buddhist authors Huiyuan 慧遠 (523–92), Zhiyi 智顗 (538–97), or Jizang 吉藏 (549–623).²⁴ Also, Confucian authors used this commenting style, such as, for example, Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545) in his *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏,²⁵ and the great scholar and Chancellor of the Directorate of Education (*guozi jijiu* 國子祭酒) Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) used this style in the *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 and the *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Zhang 2007, pp. 90–91).

Kepan was presumably intended as a device to facilitate understanding and explanations, and it would make sense to assume that it was intended for use in oral lectures. The form of the expository commentary (*yishu*) has its origin in oral debates and lectures, where a master explains a scripture to an audience.²⁶ It seems, therefore, plausible that *kepan* came to prominence together with lectures and the *yishu*-style commentary (Mou 1984, p. 55).

3.2. Coherence: Adding a Structuring Comment to the Chapters

Having parsed the single chapters, Cheng Xuanying named each chapter with the first two characters of the text. These seem to serve as a title, as is also visible in the Tang dynasty Dunhuang manuscript P 2517, which contains the last 20 chapters of the commentary.²⁷ Right beneath this short title, we find an added structuring comment, which explains the reason for the particular position in the sequence of chapters, relating the content to the respective preceding chapter. This technique seems to be new; I was unable to document precursors.²⁸

The added structuring commentary creates coherence between the single chapters and an explanation for their specific order. It, furthermore, allows Cheng Xuanying to pursue arguments from one chapter into the next. Lastly, these structuring comments reiterate the tripartite division of each scroll, thus, reaffirming the structure of the scrolls as introduction, main thesis, and conclusion.

Chapter 1 begins with the structuring comment:

The chapter “The Dao that Can Be Spoken of as Dao” is the first large section, it presents the fundamental meaning of *Dao*. (Assandri 2021a, p. 36; cf. Meng 2001, p. 375; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 287a)

Chapter 2 then continues:

The chapter “All Under Heaven Know” is the first chapter of the second large section, it elaborates further on the teaching of *Dao*.

The reason why this chapter follows the preceding chapter is that the preceding chapter has explained that the two contemplations of being and nonbeing are not the same with regard to coarseness and subtlety. Therefore, this chapter follows, explaining the potential of non-action, and the harm of action. (Assandri 2021a, p. 45; Meng 2001, p. 378; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 288a-b)²⁹

Chapter 37, the last chapter of the first scroll, has:

The chapter “Dao is Forever Without Intentional Action” is the third part [of the *Daojing*, the Classic of Dao], it correctly explains the conclusion. (Assandri 2021a, p. 189; cf. Meng 2001, p. 449; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 314b)

Chapter 38, the first chapter of the second scroll, begins again with the structuring comment:

The chapter on “Superior Virtue” is the first large section; it correctly presents the argument on Virtue. (Assandri 2021a, p. 193; cf. Meng 2001, p. 451; Xiong and Chen 2011, 315a)

Chapter 39 continues to introduce the main section of scroll two:

The chapter “Formerly” is the first chapter of the second large section; it correctly explains the meaning of Virtue. (Assandri 2021a, p. 200; cf. Meng 2001, p. 454; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 316b)

Chapter 40, the second chapter of the main section of the second scroll, follows up:

The chapter “Returning” follows the preceding one because the preceding chapter correctly explained that the person who has obtained the One uses Dao modestly and unassumingly. This is why this chapter follows, because it explains how this person comes from the origin and descends to the [manifest] traces, in order to sympathetically respond to the needs of the beings. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206; cfl. Meng 2001, p. 458; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 317b)

Chapter 81, as the last chapter, then closes:

The chapter “Trustworthy Words” is the third major section [of the second part of the *Daode jing*]; it concludes the preceding teaching. (Assandri 2021a, p. 363; cf. Meng 2001, p. 534; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 345c)

The structuring comments underscore the tripartite division Cheng established for the two scrolls, making a text that proposes a coherent discussion on a “formal level”, with an introduction, a main part containing the bulk of the arguments, and a conclusion out of two scrolls with a seemingly random collection of 38 and 44 short chapters. However, superimposing such a formal structure remains an empty technicality if it does not find a comprehensible and plausible correspondence in the actual arguments of the text thus structured. Cheng Xuanying achieved this correspondence by applying the *kepan* technique on the level of the single, short chapters.

3.3. Argument: *Kepan* on the Level of the Single Chapters

On the level of the single chapters, Cheng Xuanying applied the technique of *kepan* to divide the chapters into separate sub-sections he called *duan* 段.³⁰ He explicitly declared, in every chapter, right after the structuring comment, the number of sub-sections into which he divided the text and what the main arguments of the sub-sections are. Before each sub-section, he added a synopsis of the argument of the individual sub-section.³¹ Only after this synopsis does the base text and Cheng Xuanying’s interpretative, interlinear comments follow, line by line.

Thus, before the reader gets to see the first line of the base text, he has already read a structuring comment which relates the chapter to the previous one and, thus, explains the reason for the particular position of the chapter in the overall structure of the book. He also has read an outline of the arguments the chapter will propose in form of the synopses of the short sub-sections. In the Dunhuang manuscript P 2517 (Figure 1), these parts are in regular-sized characters, just like the cited base text. Only the interlinear commentary to the single lines is in smaller-sized characters.

The parsing of the inherently very short chapters of the *Daode jing* into yet smaller sub-units might seem an unusual strategy; *kepan*, as used by Buddhist commentators, rather seems to serve to create subdivisions in texts that were too long and, therefore, hard to grasp. The chapters of the *Daode jing*, instead, are extremely short and succinct and, thus, do not naturally invite further subdivisions. However, dividing the chapters into shorter sub-sections allowed Cheng Xuanying to isolate different arguments in the text. He presents these arguments in his synopsis, then cites the base text of the original *Daode jing* lines and explains in his interlinear commentary how to read the *Daode jing* base text in line with the argument outlined in the synopsis. Repeating the synopses twice in each chapter, first in the beginning and then in the apposite position before the sub-section, adds much strength to the arguments formulated in the synopses.



Figure 1. Excerpt of Dunhuang Manuscript P 2517, Gallica, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Pelliot ms 2517. *Daode jing yishu*, chapter 69: chapter title (red), structuring commentary (blue), synopses of subdivisions (different shades of green) marked by author.

3.4. Citations: Adding Cohesion and Context

Lastly, Cheng Xuanying used citations in a strategic way. In addition to unmarked citations from the classics or literature, which are common in the writings of the cultured elite of early medieval China, where such references had become part of a common stock vocabulary, Cheng added many marked citations. What I call “marked citations” are citations which are explicitly marked as such, most often introduced with “therefore text *xy* says”. Different from the unmarked citations, which are simply part of the language of a cultured writer, the marked citations serve a purpose because they connect the text, or the argument addressed, explicitly to another text.

Cheng used two kinds of marked citation: First, he quotes from other chapters of the *Daode jing*, introducing such citations with a reference to the scroll, “therefore the *Daojing* says” or “therefore the *Dejing* says”. These citations are essentially cross-references within the text, which create a dense intertextuality within the *Daode jing*, a web of connections among the different chapters, which has the effect of emphasizing—or constructing—yet more internal cohesion of the otherwise rather loosely connected chapters of the *Daode jing*.

A second kind of citation refers to other texts, most frequently to the *Zhuangzi* but also to the *Book of History*, *Book of Rites*, and *Book of Songs*. These marked citations usually follow at the end of arguments. While Cheng Xuanying’s personal interest, especially in the *Zhuangzi*³², might be one reason for the frequent citations, we should note that they also serve to weave the *Daode jing*, as he read it, firmly into the larger web of traditional Chinese literature.³³

4. An Illustrative Example: Chapter 40

Having introduced Cheng Xuanying’s most important tools for commenting on the *Daode jing*, I will now proceed to look at how these hermeneutic tools worked in practice with a close reading of chapter 40 of the *Daode jing*:

反者道之動；弱者道之用。天下萬物生於有，有生於無

Returning is the movement of Dao. Weakness is the function of the Dao. All the things in the world are generated from being, being is generated from nonbeing.

Wang Bi read this chapter as an instruction for the sage on how to govern (cf. Lynn 1999, p. 130; Wagner 2003, p. 257). Heshang gong read it as a discussion of the life-giving powers of Dao (cf. Tadd 2013, pp. 513–14; Wang 1993, 161–62). Cheng Xuanying read it as a discussion of the soteriological activities of the sage who has obtained Dao (see Meng 2001, p. 458; Xiong and Chen 2011, p. 317b-c; Yan 1983, pp. 461–62).

Cheng begins, like in all other chapters, with the structuring commentary:

Chapter 40: "Returning"

40.0 The chapter "Returning" follows the preceding one, because the previous chapter correctly explained that the person who has obtained the One uses Dao modestly and unassumingly. This is why this chapter follows, because it explains how this person comes from the origin and descends to the [manifest] traces, in order to sympathetically respond to the needs of the beings. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)

This structuring commentary relates the chapter explicitly to the foregoing chapter, offering a reason why the two chapters need to follow upon another. Furthermore, there is a short summary of the content of the chapter: The person (*ren* 人 might here refer to the adept or the sage) has reached Dao (the origin) and now descends to become a manifest trace³⁴ (as Lord Lao or a sage). This person, who has obtained Dao, returns to live in the world in response to the needs of the beings. In short, the chapter is about a bodhisattva-like savior.

Next, Cheng Xuanying introduces the number of subdivisions and presents the synopses of the arguments of the subdivisions:

Getting into this chapter, we can divide the meaning into three parts: The first explains that the sage who returns becomes the same as a common person [because] he compassionately wants to save the beings. The second part explains that even if the traces of the teaching have many different doctrines, nothing is superior to being soft and weak. The third part explains how the two primal forces and the ten thousand images are generated by Dao. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)

The synopsis of the first sub-section states again, clearly, that the sage wants to compassionately save the beings, while that of the second sub-section speaks about the sage's teachings. Only the last sub-section relates to the theme of generation of the beings, which seems so prominent in the base text of the *Daode jing*.

After this long preamble, the commentary of the base text begins: Cheng introduces each sub-section, which, in this case, consists of a few words of the original text, with the synopsis. The synopsis, thus, serves here as a header presenting the main argument. Then follows the line from the base text with Cheng Xuanying's interlinear commentary defining key terms and explaining the meaning of the line.

40.1. The first part explains that the sage who returns becomes the same as a common person [because] he compassionately wants to save the beings.

Laozi Base Text: 40.1. A. Returning is the movement of Dao. 反者道之動.

Interlinear commentary: 'Returning' (*fan* 反) means coming back. 'Movement' (*dong* 動) means compassion.³⁵ The sage who has attained Dao goes even beyond the three highest heavenly spheres.³⁶ But because he is moved by compassion and wants to save the beings, he returns to enter the Three [Clarities and the Grand] Veil-[Heaven],³⁷ and [then] mixes his [manifest] traces into [the world of] being. He preaches according to the opportunities and manifests [his traces] in response [to the needs of the beings.] This is why the first part of the *Daode jing* says: "[Going] far means returning"³⁸. (Assandri 2021a, p. 206)

The repetition of the synopsis with the theme of the compassionate savior is set before the short sentence of the *Daode jing* base text. The commentary then explains how to read the base text in order to reach the meaning proposed in the synopses in concrete detail; the subject of the sentence is the sage. He has compassion and wants to save the beings.

The sage is related, furthermore, to the highest heavens described in the Lingbao scriptures. The final citation ties this—that is, Cheng Xuanying’s—interpretation back to another passage from the *Daode jing*.

If we compare this to the Heshang gong and Wang Bi readings of the passage, it is certainly an innovative interpretation. If we consider the background of the challenges of integrating the Sandong Daoism with Laozi, we can admit that Cheng successfully tied the ideal of a bodhisattva-like, compassionate savior and the highest heavens of the Sandong Daoist cosmology in with the text of the *Daode jing*.

40.2. *The second part explains that even if the traces of the teaching have many different doctrines, nothing is superior to the soft and weak.*

Laozi base text: 40.2.A. Weakness is the function of Dao. 弱者道之用.

Interlinear commentary: Responding to the capabilities [of the beings], he sets up the teaching. Looking up [to what he sets up], there are many doctrines. If we wish to discuss them appropriately, then there is nothing better than being soft and weak. This is why he takes this being soft and weak as the beginning of his transformative work. (Assandri 2021a, p. 207)

Again, the synopsis at the head of the sub-section sets the tone for a specific reading, here, the interpretation of the term *yong* (to use, function) as the teaching and beginning of the transformative work of the sage. It remains unclear here if Dao refers to the manifest divinity (“weakness is the function which Dao [manifest as Lord Lao employs as teaching]”) or to the “way” in the sense of a course of training (“weakness is what is the function of the way [of studying Daoism]”). Both versions are grammatically plausible.

40.3. *The third part explains how the two primal forces and the ten thousand images are generated by Dao.*

Laozi base text: 40.3.A. All things in the world are generated from being; being is generated from non-being. 天下之物生於有，有生於無.

Interlinear commentary: ‘Being’ (*you* 有) is the responding Dao. It is that which is called the *qi* of the original One. The marvelous origin of the original One is what is called the place of dark stillness. It means that Heaven, Earth, and the ten thousand things are all generated from the responding Dao as a thing that exists. It is precisely so that this responding Dao arises from the marvelous origin. Having its beginning in the marvelous origin, it is precisely ultimate non-being. (Assandri 2021a, p. 207)

The last section elaborates on the theme of generating the beings in terms that are much closer to the Heshang gong or Wang Bi commentaries. Thus, it seems that, while Cheng Xuanying introduced, in the first two sub-sections, novel arguments regarding compassion and the ideal of the bodhisattva-like sage, he returns here, in the last part, to the more traditional reading of the sentence in as much as he discusses the relation of Dao, being, and non-being.

He continues the argument of the last sub-section of chapter 40 in the structuring comment of the following chapter, creating, thus, a concrete link between the two successive chapters:

Chapter 41: “The Person of Highest Capacities”

41.0 *The chapter “The Person of Highest Capacities” follows the previous chapter, because the preceding chapter explained that the responding Dao is empty and dark, its origin and traces are both marvelous. Therefore this chapter now follows and explains that the man of higher capacities can realize [the Dao], but it is not something that the men of inferior capacities can hear [and understand].* (Assandri 2021a, p. 208)

In this way, the structuring commentary links the separate chapters by connecting the respectively last argument of each chapter to the short summary of the main argument

of the following chapter. The effect of this is an impression of “chained or connected arguments” and, with that, a coherent text.

Of course, the connections are, at times, tenuous and seem forced; however, the attempt to turn the 81 short chapters into a coherent and cohesive exposition is noteworthy.

5. Conclusions: How the Dao Got Compassion

What does Cheng Xuanying actually achieve with his complex structuring of the commentary? Cheng’s technique was certainly inspired by the Buddhist *kepan* system, which helped Buddhist preachers or translators to structure large texts into smaller units. However, a close reading of the commentary reveals that Cheng, far from just blindly copying a formal technique, used the subdivisions and their synopses to construct new arguments which he superimposed on the text.

The original text of chapter 40 of the *Daode jing* reads:

Returning is the movement of Dao. Weakness is the function of the Dao. All the things in the world are generated from being, being is generated from nonbeing.

The argument developed in the subdivisions and their synopses reads:

The sage, who has obtained Dao, returns to descend into the world, manifesting himself³⁹ in order to save the beings.

Cheng Xuanying’s interlinear commentary then explains how to read the line of the original text in order to arrive at the argument established by the synopsis of the subdivision. This argument (the synopsis) is repeated twice, once in the chapter introduction and once directly before the commented passage, setting, thus, a kind of “talking point”. In our case of chapter 40, this interpretative strategy also involves new definitions of key terms, such as, here, the explanation that “return” refers to the “return of the sage from the Heavens”, and “movement” refers to “compassion”.

The structural commentary picks up the (redefined) key terms from the subdivision summaries to carry the arguments into the next chapter.

With this technique, Cheng Xuanying constructed coherent lines of arguments within chapters and from one chapter to the next, arguments which obviously were of interest to him—such as the sage and his compassionate saving activities. At the same time, he tied these arguments, which, in many cases, introduce novel notions and concepts, into the text of the *Daode jing*. Thus, he connected Laozi, divine manifestation of Dao, ancestor of the Tang ruling family, and author of the *Daode jing*, firmly to concepts which were previously promoted in Daoism mainly on the base of the Sandong scriptures, such as that of the ideal of a compassionate, universal savior.

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Abbreviations

- DZ Zhengtong Daozang 正統道藏.
- T Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經.
- ZD Zhonghua daozaang 中華道藏.

Notes

- ¹ For the dating of Cheng Xuanying's commentary see [Qiang \(2002, p. 322\)](#).
- ² See [Wagner \(2003, p. 119\)](#) for the critical reconstruction of the text. Note that our commonly received version reads heaven and earth instead of ten thousand kinds of entities here.
- ³ Modified, FA. Wagner presents his translation in the parallel style format, which adds visual clarity, but is hard to reproduce.
- ⁴ It seems that Tang Gaozu, when campaigning against the Sui dynasty, found support with Daoists from the Louguan 樓觀 temple, where Laozi was revered because, according to tradition, he had written the *Daode jing* there. Cf. [Benn \(1977, pp. 24–32\)](#) about Louguan and the rise to power of Gaozu. Furthermore, there was a report of an epiphany of God Laojun 老君, the deified Laozi. He was said to have appeared to a commoner on Mount Yangjiao 羊角, where he declared that the Li 李 family, rulers of the Tang dynasty, were his descendants. Cf. [Assandri \(2009, p. 24\)](#) for details on this report.
- ⁵ See his “Ling Daoshi zai Seng qian zhao” 令道士在僧前詔, *Quan Tang Wen*, 6, 26a, which was promulgated in 637. Cf. also [Lewis \(2009, p. 208\)](#).
- ⁶ A report of the Buddhist protests is contained in Daoxuan's *Ji gu jin Fo Dao lunheng*, T 2104, 3, 382c–383a: The Buddhist Zhishi 智實 presented a memorial to the throne which said, among other things: “Today's Daoists do not revere [Laozi's] teachings, the clothes and headaddresses they wear, furthermore, are leftovers from the Yellow Turban [rebels of Han dynasty], they are really not Laozi's descendants. They practice the filthy methods of the three Zhangs [the early leaders of the Heavenly Master sect], and reject the wondrous gate of the 5000 words [i.e., the *Daode jing*]” 今之道士不遵其法。所著冠服並是黃巾之餘。本非老君之裔。行三張之穢術。棄五千之妙門 (T 2104, 3, 382c27–383a01).
- ⁷ The authors of the treatise worked 641–656 under the supervision of Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (594–659) in Chang'an.
- ⁸ *Suishu* 33, Ershiwushi vol. 5, 3372/124a–b.
- ⁹ The Chinese expression *chongxu ningyuan* 沖虛凝遠 is concise; I have expanded the translation to include more of the possible associations the two compound terms *chongxu* and *ningyuan* contain.
- ¹⁰ *Sui shu* 35, Ershiwu shi, vol. 5, 3379/131c. See [Reiter \(1996, p. 291ff\)](#) for a paraphrase of the complete text and [Wu \(2019, p. 296\)](#) and [Bumbacher \(1995, pp. 139–40\)](#) for translations of excerpts of the treatise.
- ¹¹ This designation derives from the early attempts of systematizing the scriptural heritage of the south into three caverns (*dong* 洞), the Dongshen 洞神, which contained the Writ of the Three Sovereigns and related texts, the Dongxuan 洞玄, which contained the Lingbao texts, and the Dongzhen 洞真, which contained mainly Shangqing texts. See [Ōfuchi \(1979, pp. 253–68\)](#), [Steavu \(2019, p. 121ff\)](#).
- ¹² The early medieval development of Daoism from diverse, oftentimes rather unrelated groups based on practices or on specific, usually secret, texts is under study, and we do not have a “conclusive” narrative. See [Strickmann \(1977\)](#); [Robinet \(1984\)](#); [Bokenkamp \(1983\)](#); [Kobayashi \(1990\)](#); [Sunayama \(1990\)](#); [Pregadio \(2006\)](#); [Assandri \(2008, 2009\)](#); [Raz \(2012\)](#); [Kleemann \(2016\)](#); [Steavu \(2019\)](#); [Verellen \(2019\)](#) for diverse accounts.
- ¹³ See [Strickmann \(1977\)](#); [Bokenkamp \(1983\)](#); [Steavu \(2019\)](#) for discussions of the complex developments in Jiangnan Daoism and the role of these scriptural corpora therein.
- ¹⁴ See [Bokenkamp \(1997, p. 382\)](#). Changes in the cosmologies, such as the addition of layers of heavens, might have been influenced by Buddhist conceptions of the cosmos (cf. [Zürcher 1980, p. 121f](#)).
- ¹⁵ See [Kohn \(1995\)](#); [Mollier \(2008\)](#); [Raz \(2017\)](#).
- ¹⁶ See [Robinet \(1991, p. 155\)](#) and [Verellen \(2019, pp. 124 and 167\)](#).
- ¹⁷ We can gauge the popularity of this text from the fact that almost a quarter of all Daoist manuscripts found in the Dunhuang cache were part of this text ([Assandri 2009, p. 57](#)). In most of the scripture, Yuanshi Tianzun is the main deity; for a discussion of the appearance of Laozi in this text, see [Assandri \(2008\)](#).
- ¹⁸ *Daode jing xujue kaiti yishu*. See [Assandri \(2021a, 2021b\)](#) for translations.
- ¹⁹ The second emperor of the Tang, Taizong, included Wang Bi among the 21 ‘sages and teachers of ancient times’, who were honored in the imperial university (*Jiu Tang shu*, 189, pp. 595/4071a); thus, scholars in Chang'an paid renewed attention to Wang Bi's reading of the *Daode jing* ([Wagner 2003, pp. 41–43](#)).
- ²⁰ For a discussion of how and when the 81 chapters were established, see [Ding \(2017\)](#).
- ²¹ This order exists at least in the Wang Bi and Heshang gong versions of the text, as well as in the Tang dynasty 5000-word manuscript (*Zhonghua Daozang*, vol. 9, no. 3). In the earlier Mawangdui manuscripts, we do not find the division in *zhang* but only a division in two scrolls, with the order of the scrolls reversed. Inside the scrolls, even though we do not find the *zhang* divisions, the chapters' order is only slightly different from the received versions. Cf. [Csikszentmihályi and Ivanhoe \(1999, p. 6\)](#). The Beida Manuscript of the Laozi has only 77 *zhang* instead of the 81 *zhang* of the received Wang Bi and Heshang gong editions, cf. [Ding \(2017, p. 171f\)](#).
- ²² The terminology for the procedure varies in Buddhist texts, see [Jin \(2008, p. 7\)](#) and [Zhang \(2007, p. 82\)](#) for a list of the various terms.

- ²³ Cf. Tadd (2013, p. 6) for a description of the Heshang gong commentary's *zhangju* method. Tadd *ibid.* notes that some scholars—he cites Robinet (1977) here—maintain that Heshang gong might have created the divisions in 81 chapters.
- ²⁴ See Jin (2008, p. 61) for concrete examples.
- ²⁵ About this commentary, see Makeham (2003, pp. 79–85, 391–94) and Führer (2013). Makeham (2003, p. 391) points out that Huang Kan opens passages with 'summary commentaries'.
- ²⁶ See Zhang (2007, p. 85), Tang (1991, p. 549f), Mou (1984, pp. 2–5, 12f); cf. Makeham (2003, p. 87f), Führer (2013).
- ²⁷ This use of the first two characters of each chapter as a title is different from the headers we find in the Heshang gong commentary in the Daozang (DZ 682) or Wang (1993) edition.
- ²⁸ There is a vague semblance with the Xugua 序卦 commentary of the *Book of Changes*; however, the resemblance is not strong, and there do not seem to be shared technical terms.
- ²⁹ Such a passage, which explicitly constructs the reason for the specific position of the chapter in the sequence, is offered in almost all of the chapters belonging to the "middle parts" or main part of the two scrolls.
- ³⁰ Duan appears in the same function in many commentaries from the Six Dynasties and Tang period, Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian.
- ³¹ Compare Huang Kan's commentary to the *Lunyu*, which shows a vaguely comparable technique; cf. Führer (2013, pp. 311–12).
- ³² After all, Cheng Xuanying is also author of a sub-commentary to Guo Xiang's *Zhuangzi* commentary; see *Nanhua zhenjing zhushu*.
- ³³ Cheng (2006, p. 154) points out that Cheng Xuanying read the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as mutually supporting each other, citing the texts respectively very frequently in his commentaries to both texts. Cheng interprets this as the texts verifying (*zheng* 證) each other. Such a verification by citations of course also entails the construction of a close relation of the two texts.
- ³⁴ Note that Cheng Xuanying's conception of the term "traces" differs notably from that of Guo Xiang, as discussed in Ziporyn (2003, p. 31f). Cheng interprets trace as the manifestation of Dao embodied as a sage (cf. Assandri 2021a, p. 26f).
- ³⁵ Compassion might be understood here as a movement of the mind, as a state that differs from the absolute stillness of the mind when it is in the state of unity with Dao.
- ³⁶ The term *sanjing* 三境 refers, in Daoism, to the *sanqing* 三清, the Three Clarities, the highest heavens.
- ³⁷ *Sanluo* 三羅: This term appears in the *Taishang xuanyi zhenren shuo santu wuku qinjie jing* (DZ 455, p. 10b). Following Miller (1995, p. 127), I read *sanluo* as a short form of *sanqing daluo*, the Three Clarities and the Grand Veil Heaven.
- ³⁸ This refers to chapter 25 of the *Daode jing*.
- ³⁹ Cheng uses the term "trace" or "manifesting a trace" (*xianji* 顯迹) in the sense of incarnating in a manifest body.

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