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Transcendental Time and Empirical Time: Two Types of Time and Their Internal Connection in the *Laozi*

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Abstract: The concept of time in Laozi's philosophy is more complicated than it appears. Its complexity stems from the fact that there are two distinct concepts of time: the temporality of empirical things, which is constructed as a finitely continuous temporal succession that is perceptible, and the temporality of the shapeless dao 道, which is conceived of as a transcendental and infinitely continuous temporal succession that is imperceptible. Referring to the excavated Laozi texts, we find that most of the heng 恆 characters were replaced by the character chang 常 in the transmitted versions of the text. In addition, inspired by the excavated text Hengxian 恆先, the concept of heng in Spring and Autumn period philosophy has become an important subject of study. These two factors collectively lay a thought-provoking foundation for understanding Laozi's ideas about the continuous, large-scale temporal eternality of dao. This article argues that both the daoheng 道恆 and hengdao 恆道 are used in the Laozi to describe the temporality of dao but that the latter has long been forgotten and overlooked by modern scholars. In the compound word hengdao, the character heng is a noun that acts as an attribute; whereas in the compound word hengdao, the character heng is a noun that acts as the predicate. This article argues that Laozi introduced the theory of "dao is eternal" (dao yongheng 道永恆) as evidenced by the use of heng and several time concepts such as "it seems to have even preceded the first ancestors" (xiangdi zhi xian 象帝之先), "the spirit of the valley never dies" (gushen busi 谷神不死), "he who lives out his days has had a long life" (si er buwang 死而不亡), "the way ... by which one lives to see many days" (changsheng jiushi 長生久視). The temporality of material things originates from the temporality of dao. Moreover, things can possess and expand their own time if they act in accordance with the universal law of dao.

Keywords: empirical time; transcendental time; dao; heng; continuous; finite; infinite

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Citation: Wang, Zhongjiang, and Qiuhong Li. 2023. Transcendental Time and Empirical Time: Two Types of Time and Their Internal Connection in the *Laozi*. *Religions* 14: 656. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050656

Academic Editors: Thomas Michael and Robin Wang

Received: 7 April 2023
Revised: 11 May 2023
Accepted: 12 May 2023
Published: 15 May 2023

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1. Introduction

The study of time can be conducted in a variety of disciplines. Linguistic studies, for example, are likely to focus on the semantics and pragmatics of time whereas philosophical studies are likely to focus on the nature of time. If studies conducted within one discipline and across multiple disciplines are allowed, we will not only achieve the goals of each discipline but will also be more methodologically flexible. Today, the studies of time are finely compartmentalized (into philosophy, science, culture, and so on), but are yet interconnected in some ways (Wu 2006; Lippincott et al. 2012; Z. Wang 2019). For now, we have a variety of studies on time, such as linguistic studies (Y. Zhou 2012, pp. 4–8; Jiang 2012, pp. 19–20), philosophical studies (K. Zhou 2019, pp. 168–75; S. Chen 2009, pp. 52–55), and intersectional studies.[1] The diversity of studies is a result of the cross-cutting yet overlapping nature of the ideas of time in ancient East and West traditions.

This is the case with Laozi's view of time. From the perspective of philosophy, Laozi's concepts of time can be divided into two categories: (a) concepts related to *dao* 道 and metaphorical expressions of *dao*, such as *heng* 恆 (replaced with *chang* 常 in transmitted

texts), *jiu* 久 (*dao naijiu* 道乃久 [the way to perpetuity]); *bushi qisuozhe jiu* 不失其所者久 [to not lose what one has is to last]),[2] *shi* 始 (*wanwu zhishi* 萬物之始 [the inception of the myriad things]), *busi* 不死 (undying), and so on; and (b) concepts related to the process by which things come into being, change and die, such as *sheng* 生, *si* 死, *xin* 新, *jiu* 舊, *shi* 始, *zhong* 終, *zao* 早, *wan* 晚, *ji* 既, *jiang* 將, *shi* 時, *xian* 先, *fu* 復, *gui* 歸, *fan* 返, *chang* 長, *jiu* 久 (for example, "heaven and earth are enduring" [*tianchang dijiu* 天長地久]). From an astronomical and calendrical perspective, Laozi's concepts of time are *zhao* 朝, *ri* 日, *chun* 春, *dong* 冬, *nian* 年, and so on. Finally, from a historical perspective, Laozi's concepts of time are *xi* 昔, *xiri* 昔日, *xizhe* 昔者, *gu* 古, *jin* 今, *gushi* 古始.

It should be noted that these classifications are rather relative; additionally, certain concepts (such as *jiu*, *shi*, and so on) have multiple meanings. Nonetheless, the concepts of time in the *Laozi* can be broadly divided into two categories: infinite continuous temporal succession and finite continuous temporal succession. The former is primarily concerned with the temporality of *dao* and its various metaphors (such as *mu* 母, *gen* 根, *gushen* 谷神, *xuanpin* 玄牝, *men* 門, etc.),[3] whereas the latter is concerned with the temporality of things, including heaven, earth, and humans, among others. The time concepts under the categories of astronomy, calendrics, and history can be classified as the latter category. The former can be referred to as transcendental time while the latter can be referred to as empirical time. The main aim of this article is to investigate these two different types of time in Laozi's philosophy, namely the infinite transcendental time of *dao* and its metaphorical expressions and the finite empirical time of material things and the physical world. These two types of time are internally connected in a way that the temporality of material things shares the infinite time of *dao* while the temporality of *dao* becomes perceptible by virtue of the finite temporality of things.[4]

In order to demonstrate our proposition, we must first analyze the eternity of *dao* and its connotations in the Laozi, especially the connotation of the concept *daoheng* in which the noun *heng* serves as the predicate of *dao*: "*Dao* is eternal". Our questions are: is *daoheng* really a concept in the *Laozi*? What does this concept mean when it refers to the temporality of *dao*? What is a suitable and accurate understanding of the temporality of *dao*? Based on this, we will further investigate the following questions: what is the relationship between the temporality of *dao* and the temporality of things? And if they are not the same, how should we understand the temporality of things? These two aspects are intertwined. By discussing these interlinked issues, I propose that the eternal temporality of *dao* can be understood not only by the phrase *hengdao* (eternal *dao*), but also by *daoheng* (*dao* is eternal), and also by multiple scales used to measure the temporality of things. These scales are used to depict various forms of time (for instance, continuity, duration, and interval) in the process of generating, changing, cycling, and dying of things. The temporality of things differs from, but is also unified with, the temporality of *dao*. This is the underlying structure and connotation of *Laozi's* view of time.

2. Question on Laozi's Temporality of *Dao*

People have come up with ways to calculate time and have made tools to measure it since the dawn of civilization. What is more, numerous terms connoting time have been created to express and convey ideas related to time. It would seem that during the activities of measuring time, constructing calendars, keeping time, and communicating, people fully understand what time is; in addition, they can live conveniently because of their understanding as such. However, people quickly become confused when they are confronted with questions about what "time itself" is and whether there is "independent" time in the universe. Theologians and philosophers are the first to experience this sense of confusion, the first to attempt to reveal the mystery of time, and the first to try to explain what kind of "arrow" the "arrow of time" is. Complex concepts and ideas of "time" have been developed and preserved in the history of the thought of time (Liu 2000), amongst them is Laozi's concept of time, which is far more perplexing than it appears to be. One of the main disagreements regarding this is whether or not the *dao* is temporal (Zhang 1996, p. 244). I

agree that *dao* is not outside of time, although it is the shapeless absolute. Beginning from here, this article will take one step further and thoroughly analyze the temporality of *dao* in the *Laozi*.

Philosophy, as well as theology, in the Eastern and Western traditions, contains a wide variety of theories on time. People find it difficult to understand why *dao*, the source of all things, can have a "temporal state" (*shitai* 時態). It is as perplexing as God creating everything, including time, but all the while existing outside of time. The question of what God did before creating the world was previously avoided with jokes; it was only St. Augustine's studies that were thought to have reached the deepest level of theories such as the big bang, the origin of the universe, and the beginning of time (Lippincott et al. 2012, p. 12). It is pointless to argue that saying that God is outside of time means that God transcends finite time, that God is eternal, or that God is everlasting in temporal successions since such claims do not exclude temporality from God (Huang 2012, pp. 1–28). Sometimes "God" is translated as *dao* implying that God is *dao* (Alexander 1895).[5]

In this sense, *daoheng* is comparable to the temporality of God. In the field of philosophy, it is widely accepted that the universals (for example Plato's idea) and *li* 理 (for example Zhu Xi's 朱熹 *tianli* 天理 [Principles of Heaven]) are invariant and transcend specific time and space. However, does this mean that they are unrelated to time and space at all? In fact, there are two concepts of time in the field of philosophy: finite time and infinite time. The former is the temporality of material things and the empirical world, while the latter is the temporality of the transcendental world which, different from the former, is infinite and eternal. The temporality of material things is measurable, some last relatively long, while others are relatively short. Either way, this "time" we measured undoubtedly is finite. The temporality of the absolute is fundamental to the temporality of things, as was the case of the temporality of *dao* in Laozi's philosophy.

As regards Laozi's *dao* (i.e., super entities, superpowers, and super laws), we would better avoid finding ourselves trapped in complicated debates, but rather focus on its temporality and its relation to the temporality of things. However long (for example, *tianchang dijiu*) or short (for example, *fangsheng fangsi* 方生方死) the time of things might be, it is a finite amount of time. The temporality of *dao* transcends that of material things since *dao* has no shape (*xing* 形) or image (*xiang* 象), and thus it is different from (and therefore transcends) material things. However, this does not imply that *dao* is not temporal; rather, it means only that the temporality of *dao* is difficult to understand.

The *Laozi* held the view that the universe has a specific beginning, an idea commonly seen in Daoist cosmology. The following two sentences from chapters 42 and 51 of the *Laozi* illustrate this well, "The way begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets the myriad creatures" (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物) and "the way gives them life" (道生之). According to these two, it is reasonable to assume that before *dao* gives birth to the One and the myriad things, there is no temporality of material things, but only the temporality of the ultimate *dao*. It is similar to the situation before God created things, at least formally. After giving birth to the myriad things, *dao* remains independent, on the one hand, and internalized in particular things on the other hand. This is similar to the relationship between *dao* and *li* 理 in Han Feizi's 韓非子 philosophy.[6] According to Laozi, although *dao* is independent and self-sufficient, it nurtures and rears things. This is made explicitly in Chapter 25's "*dao* stands on its own and does not change" (獨立而不改) and Chapter 34's "the way is broad, reaching left as well as right" (大道汜兮, 其可左右). In this respect, the temporality of *dao* is empirical. In other words, even though *dao* itself is eternal and infinite, it may nevertheless appear to be temporally discontinuous because it goes through the birth-death processes of things.

The view that *dao*, the transcendent absolute, is unrelated to time is hardly acceptable (Guan and Lin 1959). This argument has been rejected by Zhang Dainian 張岱年. He believed that *dao* is temporal or that *dao* is not an existence that exists outside of time. The *Laozi* explicitly associates time with *dao* in Chapter 16: "the way to perpetuity" (道乃久) (Zhang 1996). In fact, the term *heng* in the *Laozi* is not only a good example that *dao* is

temporal, but also indicates that Laozi considers the temporality of *dao* to be eternal, permanent, and infinite. This can be shown by the relationships between *dao* and *heng* in the *Laozi*. It is the case, however, that the semantic connotation of this conceptual relationship has been unfortunately smothered and ignored. This situation is primarily due to the perplexity caused by the complexity of the concept of *dao* and, to a lesser degree, a lack of linguistic understanding.

It should not be surprising that fully understanding the temporality of the *dao* is a very challenging task. Fortunately, we now have several factors available as a new condition for understanding the concept of *heng* in the minds of philosophers during the Spring and Autumn period: (1) we now know from the various excavated texts of the *Laozi* that the majority of the *chang* characters found in the transmitted versions of the text were originally written as *heng* and were substituted with *chang* in order to avoid the name taboo of Emperor Wen (whose personal name was Liu Heng 劉恆); (2) the *Hengxian* 恆先of the Shanghai Museum's collection of excavated texts has drawn attention to the concept of *heng*; (3) the concept *heng* has become the subject of much academic discussion.[7]

3. The Loss and Recalling of the Meaning of *Daoheng* 道恆

To begin, we must determine whether *heng* is used as a predicate of *dao* in a grammatical sense. In addition, a crucial question that we must seek an answer to is whether or not the phrase *daoheng* is a legitimate expression in the *Laozi*.[8] In fact, the phrases *hengdao* 恆道 and the *daoheng* are both expressions of the temporality of *dao* in the *Laozi*. It is because we have failed to accurately comprehend the meaning of three passages related to this that we have been led to parse them incorrectly and therefore misread them. The three passages in question are:

1、道 恆 無名，樸雖小，而天下弗敢臣。

(Mawangdui version *jia*)

道 常 無名，樸雖小，天下莫能臣也。

(Wang Bi version Ch. 32)

The way, as an eternal being, is nameless. Though the uncarved block is small no one in the world dared claim its allegiance.

(Mawangdui version *jia*)

The way, as an eternal being, is nameless. Though the uncarved block is small no one in the world dared claim its allegiance.

(Wang Bi version Ch. 32)

2、道〔汎呵，其可左右也。成功〕遂事而弗名有也。萬物歸焉而弗爲主，則 恒无欲也，可名於小。萬物歸焉〔而弗〕爲主，可名於大。

(Mawangdui version *jia*)

"大道氾兮，其可左右。萬物恃之以生而不辭，功成不名有，衣養萬物而不為主。常　無欲，可名於小；萬物歸焉而不為主，可名為大。以其終不自為大，故能成其大。"

(Wang Bi version Ch. 34)

The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures return to their own way because of it, yet it does not become their lord. The way (as eternal being) is free of desire, it can be called small; yet as it lays no claim to being master when the myriad creatures turn to it, it can be called great.

(Mawangdui version *jia*)

The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority. It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no claim to being their master. The way (as eternal being) is free of desire, it can be called small; yet as

it lays no claim to being master when the myriad creatures turn to it, it can be called great. It is because it never attempts itself to become great that it succeeds in becoming great.

(Wang Bi version Ch. 34)

3、道恆無為也。侯王能守之，萬物則自化。

(Guodian version)

道常無為而無不為，侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。

(Wang Bi version Ch. 37)[9]

The way, as an eternal being, takes no acts. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.

(Guodian version)

The way, as an eternal being, takes no acts, yet nothing is left undone. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.

(Wang Bi version Ch. 37)

In most historical and contemporary readings, the words *heng* 恆 or *chang* 常 are commonly read together as modifiers of the word that immediately follows. Therefore, the first passage is read as *dao heng wuming* 恆無名 or *chang wuming* 常無名 (i.e., "*dao* is always nameless"); the third passage is read as *dao chang wuwei* 常無為 or *heng wuwe* 恆無為 (i.e., "*dao* always 'does nothing'"); and the second passage is read as *dao heng wuyu* 恆無欲 or *chang wuyu* 常無欲 (i.e., "*dao* is always without desires") where the *heng*/*chang* modifies the subsequent binomial phrase as an adverb ("always").

Reading *heng* or *chang* as an adverb is where the problem lies, and to deal with it properly, we must confront the linguistic issues regarding the character *heng* in the *Laozi*. It has become a common understanding in recent Laozi studies that *heng* plays an important role in the text as evidenced by its frequent use.[10] In some cases in the Laozi, *heng*/*chang* can be considered as an adverb such as in "when someone wants to take control of the world, he must always be unconcerned with affairs" (取天下恆以無事) in Chapter 48, "people always ruin things when they're right at the point of completion" (常于幾成而敗之) in Chapter 64, and "the *dao* of heaven is always with the good man" (恆與善人) in Chapter 79.

With all these examples, which have a formal resemblance to the relation of *dao* and *heng* in the phrases *dao heng wuming* and *dao heng wuwei*, people have widely accepted the idea that *heng* is an adverb. The underlying assumption is that since people do certain things frequently, so does the *dao*. Is this right, though? Is it possible that in the preceding three sentences the *heng* is a noun rather than an adverb? If this is the case, these sentences should be read as:

1. 道恆，無名。樸，雖小而天下弗敢臣。 The way *is eternal* and nameless. Though the uncarved block is small no one in the world dared claim its allegiance.
2. 道〔氾呵，其可左右也。成功〕遂事而弗名有也。萬物歸焉而弗爲主，則恒,无欲也，可名於小。萬物歸焉〔而弗〕爲主，可名於大。 The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority. It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no claim to being their master. The way *is eternal* and free of desire, it can be called small; yet as it lays no claim to being master when the myriad creatures turn to it, it can be called great.
3. 道恆，無為也。侯王能守之，萬物則自化。 The way *is eternal* and takes no actions, yet nothing is left undone. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.

The usage of *heng* and its relationship with *dao* in the Laozi provide substantial evidence that the *heng* in the phrase *daoheng* is a noun. This can be proved in other instances, in Chapter 28, for example, the *heng* in the phrase *hengde buli* 恆德不離 is also a nominal

attribute. *Hengde* refers to invariance, consistency, and long-lasting virtue. When it comes to the temporality of *dao*, especially its eternal property as a temporal succession, usually the first thing that comes to mind is the term *hengdao* from Chapter 1 of the *Laozi*, where *heng* is a nominal attribute.

It is logical and reasonable to say that people do or do not do something frequently. However, such statements are inappropriate to describe the original *dao*. *Dao* is the standard measure of the myriad things and its activities are consistently persistent. It is just as *Xunzi* says: "Nature has its constant motions". ("Tianlun 天論") We may conclude that, just as the *heng* in the phrase *hengdao* is a nominal attribute that defines the traits of *dao*, the *heng* in the phrase *daoheng* can be considered a nominal predicate that defines the traits of *dao* as well. Even if no such term exists, we could reasonably assume that the meaning of *daoheng* is hidden in the text. However, we do not have to infer this because the phrase *daoheng* is in the *Laozi* (*daoheng wuwei* and *daoheng wuming*). Most interestingly, both of the characters *heng* are nominal predicates, the same as *wuming* and *wuwei*.

For the instances of *heng* used as a nominal predicate, we have Chapter 34's "the way is broad . . . hence it is eternal" (道泛呵 . . . . . 則恆)[11] in which *heng* is a noun serving as a predicate of *dao* at the beginning of the sentence; in the sentence *zhixu heng* 致虛恆 in Chapter 16, the *heng* is also a nominal predicate implying that one needs to persist and concentrate in the process of cultivating the spiritual realm of emptiness and tranquility,[12] a notion reminiscent to the Chinese idiom "to persist in doing something with perseverance" (*chizhi yi heng* 持之以恆). The *heng* in Chapter 16 is equivalent to *heng* of *ren er wuheng* 人而無恆 (a man devoid of constancy) which Confucius quotes from the southerners (Lau 2000, p. 129).

4. Infinite Continuous Temporal Succession: The Eternity of the Transcendental *Dao*

Based on the linguistic evidence shown thus far, it seems clear that the word *heng* in the phrase *daoheng* in the *Laozi* is a noun rather than an adverb. The following part of this article delves into the meanings of *heng* as a nominal attribute and as a nominal predicate of *dao* in the *Laozi*. We have repeatedly pointed out that *Laozi's dao* is temporal, and that the temporality of *dao* differs from the temporality of things for it is an infinite instead of finite temporal succession devoid of specific forms of time such as birth and death. Now we can finally examine the connotation of the *heng* in the text of the *Laozi* and the premise of our argument that *dao* is infinite in temporal succession.

In terms of etymology, the word *heng* originally referred to the regularly changing phases of the moon. This meaning was later extended to include such ideas as continuous (*chixu* 持續), enduring (*chijiu* 持久), long-lasting (*changjiu* 長久), everlasting (*yongjiu* 永久), forever (*yongyuan* 永遠), frequently (*changchang* 常常), principle (*faze* 法則), and so on. As previously discussed, the majority of these usages in the early Chinese classics may also be found in the *Laozi*.

Philosophically, it is acknowledged that the universe is constantly changing where material things exist in a cycle of birth and death; their temporality is expressed as the enduring continuity of their life between the two poles of birth and death. Regardless of how long things exist, whether long, short, or even in the blink of an eye, they exist in a finite temporal succession, just as they occupy finite space. The concept of "relative time" (the observable time of a given entity, particularly those in motion) employed by Isaac Newton suggests that the temporality of things is finite.[13] As already said, however, philosophers generally believe that there is a kind of time that is infinite (Q. Wang 2019, pp. 118–24). For example, Chinese natural philosophers believed that time (*zhou* 宙) and space (*yu* 宇) were both infinite. The chapter "Gengsangchu 庚桑楚" of the *Zhuangzi* says "it has reality, yet there is no place where it resides—this refers to the dimension of space. It has duration but no beginning or end this refers to the dimension of time"[14] and the *Shizi* 屍子 also says "The north, south, east, west, the above, and the below are called *yu* (space); the past, present, and future are called *zhou* (time)". In addition to relative time, Newton also proposed the notion of absolute time (which is independent, does not change, and passes

evenly through things) which may suggest that time is infinite (an idea no longer accepted by scientific research).

For the following reasons, we may confidently come to the conclusion that the *heng* in the phrase *daoheng* in the *Laozi* is used to indicate the infinity and constancy of *dao* in temporal succession: the character *heng* is a noun in both the phrase *hengdao* and *daoheng*; the semantics of the *heng* in both phrases are the same; theories of infinite time have been brought up in the field of philosophy, and finally, the original meaning of the character *heng* is "permanent" and "everlasting". Even if the temporality of *dao* in the *Laozi* is absolute in some ways, it differs from Newton's absolute time in that time is inseparable from *dao* rather than independent of everything, as Newton claims. One of the theories that Zhuangzi developed from the *Laozi* is that the temporality of *dao* is infinite. In the "Qiwulun 齊物論" chapter, Zhuangzi questioned the origins of the world, claiming that because ancients had varying degrees of knowledge, they counted time on different scales. He used tongue-twister language to explain the concept of infinite time:

> There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing.

This infinite time is the temporality of *dao*, as the "Dazongshi 大宗師" chapter states: "*dao* . . . is its own source, its own root. Before the heavenly and the earthly existed, it was there, a firm from ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits and numinous; it gave birth to the heavenly and the earthly. It exists beyond the highest point, and yet you cannot call it lofty; it exists beneath the limit of the six directions, and yet you cannot call it deep. It was born before the heavenly and the earthly, and yet you cannot say it has been there for long; it is earlier than the earliest time, and yet you cannot call it old". The time that exists "before the heavenly and the earthly" and "earlier than the earliest time" refers to the temporality of *dao*. The "Qiushui 秋水" chapter explicitly points out that the temporality of *dao* is continuous and expands to infinity: "*dao* is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death".

Other passages in the *Laozi*, such as those dealing with the traits of *dao*, the relationship between *dao* and ancestral deity (*di* 帝), and metaphorical depictions of *dao*, can further illustrate that the phrase *daoheng* relates to infinite time. Laozi employs two crucial analogies to represent *dao's* temporal affinity and turn the meaning of the phrase *daoheng* in this direction. The *di* was regarded as the supreme religious god or supernatural force, the creator of myriad things, and the beginning of things in the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (c. 1500–750 BCE). (Chao 2016, pp. 130–46; Fan 2017, pp. 46–55) Laozi replaced *di* with *dao* as the origin of things, claiming that *dao* was born and existed before *di* implying that *dao* is the beginning of temporal succession and would endure without cessation. The heavenly and the earthly were also regarded as the creators of myriad things and the beginning of temporal succession in the Western Zhou dynasty and the Confucian school of thinking. Laozi also said that *dao* exist before the heavenly and the earthly implying that *dao* exists in eternity.

In the Laozi, *dadao* 大道 and *daoda* 道大 are two phrases used to describe the qualities of *dao*. So, what exactly does *da* mean? Normally, big (*da* 大) and small (*xiao* 小) are scales used to quantify how much space something takes up. The "Qiwulun" chapter of the *Zhuangzi* has shown through *da* and *xiao* that the scale used to measure the space of things is relative: "there is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is small;" similarly, in the "Qiushui" chapter, it says that "if we regard a thing as big because there is a certain bigness to it, then among all the ten thousand things there are none that are not big. If we regard a thing as small because there is a certain smallness to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not small".

For the *Zhuangzi*, if the *da* in the phrase *daoda* refers to the ultimate entity and universal principle, then it is different from specific things and principles since *dao* is the mother of the whole universe and the myriad things while not being a thing itself. Likewise, *dao's*

relation with space is that *dao* is spaceless in the sense of existing in infinite space, so it is different from material things, which occupy a big or small space. Space and time are two inseparable qualities of things. Anything that is finite in space must also be finite in time. Since the *dao* is infinite in space, it is undoubtedly also infinite in time. Chapter 14 of the *Laozi* emphasizes that *dao* is infinite in the sense of space by saying that "Go up to it and you will not see its head; follow behind it and you will not see its rear". Chapter 25 emphasizes that *dao* is infinite in the sense of time by saying that "it stands alone and does not change". Therefore, the *da* in the phrases *dadao* and *daoda* illustrates that *dao* is infinite not only in space but also in time.

The *Laozi* says that "the way conceals itself in being nameless" (道隱無名) and that "I know not its name" (吾不知其名); similarly, the *Zhuangzi* says that *dao* transcends language. Despite the seeming contradiction between *dao* and language, both the authors of the *Laozi* and their successors not only used language to depict but also discuss *dao* in many ways. One way depicts *dao* metaphorically. There are various metaphors for *dao* in the *Laozi* that are also considered to be infinite, such as *mu*, *xuanpin*, *gushen*, and so on. For instance, *Laozi* describes the "mystic female" thus: "The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth" (Chapter 6). We can see from the phrase "Constantly, and so forever" that the *dao* is inexhaustible as the greatest energy and that the *dao* is infinite. Correspondingly, Laozi had also said that "the valley spirit does not die" thereby illustrating that the *dao* is eternal and everlasting.

Is this infinite temporal sequence of the *dao* linear and reversible, or is it nonlinear and irreversible? Or is it both? Is the path of *dao* cyclical and periodic? The answers to these questions differ depending on the interpretation of related passages of the *Laozi*, including "turning back is how the way moves" (反者道之動) in Chapter 40 and "goes round and does not weary" (周行而不殆) in Chapter 25, and so on.[15] If we consider the *fan* 反 and *zhouxing* 周行 as the qualities of *dao*, and the *zhou* in *zhouxing* as having the meaning of a circle (*yuanzhou* 圓周), we may argue that the temporality of the *dao* has features of returning and cycling. If we agree with this view, then we must ask why the movement of *dao* is returning and where it returns to? Why does *dao* move in a cyclical manner? Can we project the cyclical movements of particular things onto that of *dao*? We already discussed why, even though the *Laozi* truly contains the notion of *zhouxing*, the character *zhou* cannot be interpreted as "circular" but rather must be understood as "everywhere" (*bian* 遍) instead. In other words, the character *zhou* in *zhouxing* is comparable to the *fan* 泛 in the phrase *dadao fan xi*. Similarly, the *fan* in the phrase *fanzhe dao zhi dong* does not refer to "to return", but instead refers to the alienated things returning to themselves with the help of the *dao*. The concepts of *fu* and *gui* in the *Laozi* refer to things that "after they are transformed, should desire to raise its head" (化而欲作) returning to themselves which provides us with additional strong evidence for our argument (Z. Wang 2016b, pp. 139–68). Taken together, these ideas suggest that the infinite temporal succession of *dao* in Laozi's philosophy is linear and irreversible, rather than non-linear and reversible and cyclic and periodic.[16]

5. The Relationship between Empirical Time and the Eternality of *Dao*

Based on the connections between *dao* and *heng* and other related concepts in the *Laozi* texts, the previous section of this article argued that the term *daoheng* denotes that the temporality of *dao* is infinite. This is, however, only one type of time theory in Laozi's philosophical ideas. When we consider the temporality of material things, we will obtain a different picture. For starters, physical time and physical things have finite temporalities. In Laozi's philosophy, no finite thing can exist forever, rather, they are existences with beginnings and ends, life and death.[17]

The concept of finite temporal succession indicates that material things develop in a linear, reversible, circular, or periodic way. For example, the linear temporal succession is evident in the statements of continuous accumulation (such as from few to many, from small to big, which is also the accumulation of time), e.g., "the great vessel takes long to complete" (大器晚成) and "be as careful at the end as at the beginning" (慎終如始).[18] The

reversible temporal succession is evident in the states related to the returning of things to their original state; the circular temporal succession is evident in the statements related to the transition of increase and decrease (*sunyi* 損益) (including a thing is sometimes added to by being diminished [*sunzhi er yi* 損之而益] and diminished by being added [*yi zhi er sun* 益之而損]) and of disaster and fortune (*fuhuo* 福禍). These are all features of physical time. Below, we will look at the inherent relationship between the finite temporality of things and the infinite temporality of *dao*.

One of the peculiar psychological features of human beings is the desire for the things they love, whether it is their own lives or natural things, and also to live longer, even eternally despite the fact that they are mortal and cannot transcend the limitations of time. Once this hope becomes a belief, they will pursue it, or at the very least, expect it. This is why Chinese people developed early ideas of immortality which were later systematized in religious Daoism. A person who is aware that their physical body will die but refuses to accept this fact will fantasize about immortality. In contemporary society, people who are motivated by the advancement of life projects expect advancements in human abilities. In addition, the superhuman belief in immortality was enhanced (Alexandre and Besnier 2019, pp. 81–90).

Pursuing the immortality of material things is closely related to theological beliefs about the absolute (such as God) and various philosophical ideas about absolute beings and supreme entities. The infinite temporal succession of *dao* endows things with finite temporality while ensuring that things have their own time (one of the instances is the notion of living to the full extent of their destined age). If the finite temporality of material things can be extended on a larger or smaller scale, then human beings will naturally lengthen their lifespan as long as they live according to the principle of *dao*. Otherwise, their lives only will be shortened. Laozi expanded on this idea claiming that the eternity of *dao* enables the finite time of things to unceasingly extend. Seeking unity with God or the absolute through self-cultivation, whether or not it is a kind of mysticism from the perspective of religion and philosophy, implies a desire to pursue eternal time. This concept is also present in Laozi's theory of health preservation (*yangsheng* 養生) (Ikeda 2019, pp. 438–82). It is not out of thin air that Daoist believers regard Laozi as the founder of immortality beliefs.

In Laozi's philosophy, no matter how significant the effect of material things is, it is limited and no matter how insignificant the effect of *dao* is, it is infinite. This is why ideas and beliefs frequently appeal to universal principles and laws. That is what the *dao* is. In Laozi's ideological structure, the relationship between *dao* and things is the relationship between origin and flow (*yuanliu* 源流), substance and application (*tiyong* 體用), mother and child (*muzi* 母子), and so on. The myriad things originated from *dao* but they nonetheless each have their own sovereignty. On the one hand, *dao* respects the autonomy of all things; on the other hand, it assists all things (with their growing and developing). So, Chapter 51 of the *Laozi* depicts the inconspicuous virtue (*xuande* 玄德) of *dao* as "it gives them life yet claims no possession; it benefits them yet exacts no gratitude; it is the steward yet exercises no authority" (生而不有, 爲而不恃, 長而不宰). The *dao* generates and feeds all things, so things, especially humans, can become immortal if they use the energy and principle of the *dao*.

In these ways, the eternity of *dao* is shown not only by the contrast between the infinite temporality of dao and the finite temporality of things but also by the approximation of finite temporality to the infinite temporality. There are two types of inner relationships between empirical time and transcendental time in the *Laozi*: the first is between the duration of things in general and the eternity of *dao* and the second is between the lifespan of humans and the eternity of *dao*. In both cases, living a long time is not only desirable but also expected to become a reality. The foundation of this expectation is the unity of things and the *dao*. Things and people can live a long time if they comply with and hold on to the *dao*.

Concerning the length of life, Chapter 16 of the *Laozi* says, "the way to perpetuity" (道乃久), and Chapter 33 says "he who lives out his days has had a long life" (死而不亡者壽), Chapter 59 says "the way of deep roots and firm stems by which one lives to see many days" (長生久視之道), and Chapter 52 says "to the end of one's days one will meet with no danger" (沒身不殆). In these passages, concepts such as *jiu* 久, *chang* 長, and *shou* 壽 are used to describe the length of life. Lets us now examine Laozi's assertion of the phrase "the way to perpetuity" (道乃久) on its own. It appears to speak about the infinity of *dao* itself. However, based on the context, it is clear that the subject of this sentence is "people", just as in the previous sentences in this verse: "but should one act from knowledge of the constant, one's action will lead to impartiality, impartiality to kingliness, kingliness to heaven, heaven to the way". Therefore, the meaning of this sentence is that people who can understand the constancy of *dao* will become all-embracing; and those who can be all-embracing will become impartial; those who can be impartial will become kingly; those who can be kingly will be able to conform to the way of the heavenly; those who can conform to the way of the heavenly will be able to conform to the *dao*; those who can conform to the *dao* will "be long-lasting" and "to the end of one's days will go unharmed".[19]

In short, a dangerous life will surely be short-lived, yet a life without danger can be long. So, the notion of *dao nai jiu* reveals that one's life can be prolonged as long as one's behavior "conforms to the *dao*". Living reasonably is a necessity for a sound life, and living in accordance with *dao* is far more prosperous than a sound life. In addition to the term "one who excels in safeguarding his own life" (善攝生), Laozi also offered ideas about how to conduct oneself in a reasonable manner, such as "in a home, it is the site that matters; in quality of mind, it is the depth that matters; in an ally, it is benevolence that matters; in speech, it is good faith that matters; in government, it is order that matters; in affairs, it is the ability that matters; in action, it is timeliness that matters". (Chapter 8) The idea "in action it is timeliness that matters" (動善時) combines rational conduct with appropriate timing. It should be noted that "timing" here refers to more than an opportune moment.

According to the phrase "he who lives out his days has had a long life" (死而不亡者壽), "long life" is when people do die but do not disappear. This "long life" certainly refers to something other than a natural lifespan. The maximum human lifespan is said to be one hundred years. Laozi, on the other hand, believes that humans have a mental existence that lasts far longer than their physical lives. This mental longevity is future generations' eternal memories of human excellence. In other words, even after a person's physiological life has come to an end, his spiritual existence can continue and be remembered. What Laozi truly advocated was the immortality of the human spirit and the endurance of human spiritual influence which can compensate for the length of human physical life. This is the meaning of the ancient saying of three immortalities (*sanbuxiu* 三不朽 i.e., renowned "virtue", "success", and "sayings").[20]

The two assertions, "you can then endure" (可以長久) and "the way of deep roots and firm stems by which one lives to see many days" (長生久視之道), both indicate that the lives of humans can be long. The reason for this can be found in Chapter 44:

> Your name or your person, which is dearer? Your person or your goods, which is worth more? Gain or loss, which is a greater bane? That is why excessive meanness is sure to lead to great expense; too much store is sure to end in immense loss. Know contentment and you will suffer no disgrace; know when to stop and you will meet with no danger. You can then endure.
>
> 名與身孰親？身與貨孰多？得與亡孰病？是故甚愛必大費，多藏必厚亡。知足不辱，知止不殆，可以長久。

From this, we can see that people who know contentment and when to stop will suffer no harm as a result of living according to the principles of *dao*. On the contrary, people who desire more will lose more and those who store a lot will lose a lot as a result of not living according to the principles of *dao*.

The idea of *changsheng jiu shi zhi dao* indicates that long life and long-lasting vision are a result of cultivation. What is the meaning of *dao* here? Let us take a look at Chapter 59:

> In ruling the people and in serving heaven it is best for a ruler to be sparing. It is because he is sparing that he may be said to follow the way from the start; following the way from the start he may be said to accumulate an abundance of virtue; accumulating an abundance of virtue there is nothing he cannot overcome; when there is nothing he cannot overcome, no one knows his limit; when no one knows his limit he can possess a state; when he possesses the mother of a state he can then endure. This is called the way of deep roots and firm stems by which one lives to see many days.
>
> 治人事天莫若嗇。夫唯嗇，是謂早服；早服謂之重積德；重積德則無不克，無不克則莫知其極；莫知其極，可以有國；有國之母，可以長久。是謂深根固柢，長生久視之道。

According to this chapter, being frugal, temperate, and appreciating one's own life are the keys to longevity. One will become resourceful and immortal if one can develop this virtue and consistently practice it. According to Chapter 50 of the *Laozi*, one will not be able to live to the destined lifespan if they "set too much store by life" (生生之厚). Instead, he who is adept at preserving his life will be able to avoid all dangers "because there is no place for death in them" (以其無死地) (Chapter 50) and will live to their destined lifespan. One will be long-lived if he practices the *dao*, holds fast to the *dao*, and lives in accordance with the *dao*:

> The world had a beginning and this beginning could be the mother of the world. When you know the mother go on to know the child. After you have known the child go back to holding fast to the mother, and at the end of your days, you will not meet with danger.
>
> (Chapter 52)
>
> 天下有始，以為天下母。既得其母，以知其子，既知其子，復守其母，沒身不殆。

Sayings that regard the duration of things in the *Laozi* include Chapter 7's "heaven and earth are enduring" (天長地久), Chapter 33's "to not lose one's place is to last" (不失其所者久), and Chapter 59's "when he possesses the mother of a state he can then endure" (有國之母，可以長久). According to the line "to not lose one's place is to last" (不失其所者久), things that do not lose their place can last for a long time. In this case, "place" (*suo* 所) refers to *dao*. If things do not lose their place but stay in their place, hold on to their place, and hold on to their *dao*, then they will "last a long time". According to"heaven and earth are enduring" (天長地久), the heavenly and the earthly can last long. Why is this the case? According to Laozi, "the reason why heaven and earth can be enduring is that they do not give themselves life" (天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生). The heavenly and earthly, as material things, can exist for a longer period of time than other things. This is an anthropomorphic approach to explaining why heaven and earth may continue for so long which is akin to the explanation of a short life span by saying that people "set too much store by life" in Chapter 50.

The salient attributes of *dao* include non-interference, non-control (*wuwei* 無為, *wushi* 無事) tranquility, and softness. As previously mentioned, humans who follow the principle of *dao* can live out their natural lifespans and things that act according to the *dao* can live a long time. Soft things seem to be feeble so people tend to regard them as powerless and ignore their virtue and value. However, according to Laozi, what is truly powerful is what is *ruo* 弱. In Laozi, softness is the nature of *dao* as well. The *dao* treats everything with softness, "softness is the means the way employs" (弱者道之用). On the contrary, properties such as rivalry, toughness, strength, and fullness appear to be powerful but are not. It is weakness, gentleness, and humility that are most powerful, "the submissive and weak will overcome the hard and strong" (柔弱勝剛強). Things endowed with the softness of

dao can last a long time.[21] It is not so much to say that Laozi exaggerated softness as it is that we exaggerate the strength.

Laozi believed that the *dao* plays an indispensable and fundamental role in sustaining the life of things and humans. Considering the distinctive worldview of the ideology of softness (*rouruo zhuyi* 柔弱主義) of Laozi, this relationship between *dao* and things can be recognized by the fact that when things take action they should be tenderly, similar to the *dao,* and avoid being powerful and radical. Otherwise, things will lose their existential foundation. In Chapter 55, Laozi claimed that "that which goes against the way will come to an early end" (不道早已), which is a conclusion drawn from "a creature in its prime doing harm to the old is known as going against the way" (物壯則老，謂之不道).

Other statements relating to this principle include Chapter 9's "rather than fill it to the brim by keeping it upright better to have stopped in time; hammer it to a point and the sharpness cannot be preserved forever", Chapter 23's "hence a gusty wind cannot last all morning, and a sudden downpour cannot last all day. Who is it that produces these? Heaven and Earth. If even heaven and earth cannot go on forever, much less can man", and so forth. The effects of being weak and strong were further illustrated in Chapter 76's saying that "thus the hard and the strong are the comrades of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life. Therefore, a weapon that is strong will not vanquish; a tree that is strong will suffer the axe. The strong and big take the lower position, the supple and weak take the higher position".

6. Conclusions

Understanding the philosophy of time in the *Laozi* has proven to be more challenging than we expected. In fact, *Laozi* distinguishes two types of time: one is empirical time, which is finite continuous temporal succession associated with things that are not difficult to understand; the other type of time is transcendental time, which is an infinite continuous temporal succession associated with *dao* and its various metaphors. Through genuine understanding of the connotation of *heng*, especially in the phrases *hengdao* and *daoheng*, in combination with time ideas expressed by metaphors of *dao*, this article has argued that the *Laozi* not only proposed the notion of *hengdao* but also *daoheng* and that the temporality of *dao* is infinite, eternal, and transcendental. The empirical time and the temporality of things are endowed by the temporality of *dao*. The transcendental temporality of *dao* is the source of temporality in things, the guarantor of the temporality of things, particularly human life, and also the guide that assists things and humans in prolonging their lives.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Z.W.; Data curation, Z.W.; Formal analysis, Z.W.; Investigation, Z.W. and Q.L.; Methodology, Z.W.; Resources, Z.W. and Q.L.; Supervision, Z.W.; Validation, Z.W.; Writing—original draft, Z.W.; Writing—review & editing, Z.W. and Q.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

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

Notes

[1] See (Kou 2018, pp. 51–56). Kou divides time concepts into four categories based on different criteria. The first classification criterion is word class, according to which the Kou mistakenly believes that Laozi only uses nominal time concepts (such as *ri* 日, *zhao* 朝, *chun* 春, *dong* 冬 and *nian* 年). In fact, there are also adverbial concepts (as shown in note 2) and adjectival concepts (such as *jiu* 久, *chang* 長 etc.). The second and the third classification criteria are: "sequence" (time concepts belonging to this classification are *xian* 先, *zao* 早, etc.) and "process" (time concepts belonging to this classification are *gu* 古 and *jin* 今, *shi* 始 and *zhong* 終, *jiu* 久, *chang* 長 and *wan* 晚 and *heng* 恒 [equivalent to *chang* 常] etc.). The fourth category, based on another new criterion, is "time concepts that refer to life stages" (time concepts belong to this classification are *xin* 新, *lao* 老, *sheng* 生, *si* 死 etc.).

One of the limitations with this explanation is that it completely sets aside the relation between the temporality of *dao* and that of myriad things. Furthermore, Kou's argument is also highly questionable because Laozi's concept of time does not emphasize "immediateness", but rather, it emphasizes continuity, continuous accumulation and permanence ("the great vessel takes long to complete" 大器晚成). Whether in nature or in the human world, good things are the result of continuous accumulation. As Zhuangzi said, *mei cheng zai jiu* 美成在久 (A good completion takes a long time). What "instant transcendence" really means is that things breaking through at a critical point after continuous accumulation. The same is true of epiphanies. No transcendence can occur without continuous accumulation. This is what A. N. Whitehead meant when he said that there is no transcendence at the moment.

2 All translations of the *Laozi* follow Lau's version (Lau 1963) and have been modified to fit the argument of the present article.

3 The supreme God in different religious beliefs, and absolute entity in some metaphysics, are regarded as the eternal entity and the ultimate source of things. Examples of the former are the notions of *di* 帝 and *tian* 天 in the thoughts of ancient China, while examples of the latter are Laozi's dao and Zhuxi's *tianli* 天理. The concept of "transcendence" used in this paper refers to the absolute reality beyond human experience and cognition. The reason why Laozi said that dao has no shape or image, and that people cannot see, hear or touch the dao, is that Laozi intended to reveal that dao is different from tangible things, in terms of that dao is a transcendent entity that beyond human perception. Accordingly, Lao Zi's *daoheng* emphasizes that the temporality of dao is eternal, transcending the temporality of things–which is perceptible and is conceived by analogy of the birth-death chain. In short, the term of *daoheng* indicates that temporality of dao is transcendental.

4 One of the meanings of *yi*—("one" or "the One") in the *Laozi* is *dao*. That things *deyi* 得—(attained the one) means that their existence is endowed from "the One" or *dao*. As the chapter 39 says, "Of old, these came to be in possession of the One: heaven in virtue of the One is limpid; earth in virtue of the One is settled; gods in virtue of the One have their potencies; the valley in virtue of the One is full; the myriad creatures in virtue of the One are alive; Lords and princes in virtue of the One become leaders of the empire. It is the One that makes these what they are".

5 I am neither in favor of the translation of "God" in the Bible as "dao" nor the "dao" in the Laozi as "God". Because "God" is the supreme God in religion and dao is the highest reality in metaphysics. To say that God and dao are comparable only means that they both are eternal.

6 The chapter "Jie Lao 解老" of the *Han Feizi* elaborates on the relationship of dao and *li*", Dao is the way of everything, the form of every principle. Principles are the lines that complete things. Dao is the cause of the completion of everything . . . everything has its unique principle and Dao disciplines the principles of all things . . . By nature the inner reality of Dao is neither restrained nor embodied. It is either soft or weak according as the occasion is, and is always in correspondence with principles. Because of it everything dies. Thanks to it everything lives. Because of it every affair fails. Thanks to it every affair succeeds. " The translation of the *Han Feizi* follows (Liao 1959).

7 For a discussion on *heng*, see (Z. Wang 2016a, pp. 35–44). Thomas Michael (2022) also discusses this concept. I came across this issue while discussing Laozi's philosophy, and specifically brought it up at a conference for academics. In light of this conclusion, I have revised my sentence reading and interpretation of relevant texts, but I have not provided a thorough explanation for it. I occasionally noticed that (Yang 2007) suggested that *dao* chang 道常 is a compound word when explaining its appearances in Chapter 32 and Chapter 37 This indicates that he disagrees with the conventional theory, but he did not explain the rationale behind his interpretation and sentence reading.

8 Translator's Note: As will be seen below, this line of question hinges on whether or not the heng in the phrase dao heng wuming 道恆無名 is to be read as a nominalpredicate (i.e., "dao is eternal and nameless") or an adverb (i.e., "dao is constantly nameless").

9 This sentence is written as " 道常無為而無不為" in the transmitted text (namely Wang Bi version), as " 道恆無為也" in the Guodian bamboo slips version, as " 道恒無名" in Mawangdui silk roll version, and as " 道恆無為" in the Peking University han bamboo slips version. The original sentence in fact is " 道常無為也".

10 The word *chang* appears 32 times in the transmitted *Laozi*. According to the unearthed texts of the *Laozi* including the Guodian slips, the Mawangdui silk scrolls, and Peking University Han slips, the character *chang* is commonly written as *heng* with a few exceptions (such as chapters 16 and 55). The character *heng* has different meanings in different contexts.

11 The author's understanding of this sentence differs from that of previous scholars, so this sentence is retranslated according to the meaning expressed by the author.

12 The word *heng* in the phrase *zhixu heng* is written as *ji* 極 in the transmitted text. According to the next sentence, *ji* is a phonetic loan character of *heng*, not the other way around.

13 Jin Yuelin 金嶽霖 developed Isaac Newton's theories of absolute time and relative times in the philosophical field. Refer to (Jin 1987, pp. 106–28).

14 The "Qiushui 秋水" chapter of the *Zhuangzi* also clearly states that time is infinite: there is no end to the weighing of things, no stop to time, no constancy to the division of lots, no fixed rule to beginning and end. Therefore, great wisdom observes both far and near, and for that reason recognizes small without considering it paltry, recognizes large without considering it unwieldy, for it knows that there is no end to the weighing of things. It has a clear understanding of past and present, and for that reason it spends a long time without finding it tedious, a short time without fretting at its shortness, for it knows that time has no stop. It perceives the nature of fullness and emptiness, and for that reason it does not delight if it acquires something nor worry if

it loses it, for it knows that there is no constancy to the division of lots. It comprehends the Level Road, and for that reason it does not rejoice in life nor look on death as a calamity, for it knows that no fixed rule can be assigned to beginning and end. All translations of the *Zhuangzi* follow (Watson 2013).

15 Chapter 25 also says that "being great, it is further described as receding. Receding, it is described as far away, being far away, it is described as turning back".

16 Even if zhouxing er budai 周行而不殆 in the chapter 25 of the transmitted version of the Laozi is is the original sentence (we must bear in mind that this sentence can not be found in the Guodian and Mawangdui version), the zhouxing 周行 does not mean "goes round" as suggested by Lu Yusan 盧育三 (Lu 1995, p. 26). The character "Zhou 周" means "bian 遍", which means "everywhere". In the Peking University bamboo slips version, this character is written as "bian 偏", a interchangeable word of "bian 遍" (G. Chen 1984, pp. 163–69). Accordingly, zhouxing er budai means dao goes everywhere unending. This shows that dao, unlike four seasons, does not go through cycles. More importantly, each and every character fan 反 of the Laozi should be interpreted as fan 返 with only one exception, that is, zhengyanruofan 正言若反, in which fan 反 means xiangfan 相反 (opposite to), including: fanzhe daozhidong 反者道之動 (in Guodian version, fan 反 in this sentence was written as 返 directly), yuwu fanyi 與物反矣 in the chapter 65. Fan in these two sentences and that of in chapter 25 means "fanhui 返回", namely "returning to". However, this do not mean that the dao returns to somewhere at some point, but that if things deviate from the dao in the process of spontaneous movement, the dao will correct the abnormal action and facilitate them to return to their own way (Z. Wang 2018, pp. 1–20). This is This is a new revelation of the complexed internal relationship of dao and things in the Laozi, which may appear very different from the common understanding and interpretation.

17 Chapter 2 says that "Something and Nothing produce each other" (有无相生).

18 For a discussion on the phrases "*daqi wancheng* 大器晚成" and "*daqi miancheng* 大器免成" in the *Laozi*, see (Z. Wang 2015, pp. 171–84).

19 Generally speaking, things have their own temporality, so do human beings. However, influenced by all sorts of practical factors, it is not certain whether things, including human beings, can live to the destined lifespan. Putting things on hold, Laozi's answer to how people can live to the destined lifespan is that they should be good at preserving life (*shanshesheng* 善攝生), living according to the dao, and becomeing one with the dao. This is what Laozi meant when he said, "*daonaijiu*", "*changsheng jiushi zhidao*", and "*bushi qisuozhe jiu*".

20 One of the evidences is that "he who lives out his days has had a long life" (死而不亡者壽) in the chapter 33 of the Laozi, the character "*wang* 亡" is an interchangeable character of "*wang* 忘", and is written as 忘 in the Mawangdui version. Laozi thought those who die and don't disappear are long-lived. If the character 亡 was literally interpreted as "death", this sentence could be understood as the meaningful things that people bring to the world will not perish with their death. Hence, the notion "he who lives out his days has had a long life" clearly indicates that human spirit and virtue will be forever remembered and eulogized by the people, just as those who " set a high moral standard", "bringing good to the country and the people " and " put forth noble ideas".

21 According to Laozi, softness, the most powerful, vital and enduring power in the whole universe, can overcome that of hard and strong. Laozi used the metaphor of water and female to show that the highest virtue of dao (*xuande* 玄德) is softness, which implicitly indicates the inner grounds of dao's eternity. As long as things, especially human beings, follow the way of the dao and remain soft, will have vitality and be able to preserve and even prolong their life.

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