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From Laozi to Lao-Zhuang and Huang-Lao Daoism: The Two Paths of Oneness in the Development of Early Daoist Thought

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Abstract: This paper proposes examining the central notion of Oneness (一 *yi*) in Daoist thought by offering an analysis of its uses in the early writings of the Daoist tradition, beginning with the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 before moving on to Huang-Lao 黃老 texts. While Oneness in the *Laozi* primarily appears as another "name" for Dao, it was used in discussions of cosmogony and cosmology, political governance, and personal cultivation. These multiple aspects of Oneness in the *Laozi* were later developed along two different paths in Daoist thought. The first, exhibited in the *Zhuangzi*, the *Baopuzi* 抱樸子, and other similar documents, treated Oneness as the ultimate source of all things and extended its meaning in the context of personal cultivation. In resonance with this path, their central teachings concerned "maintaining Oneness" (守一 *shou yi*). In the second path, expressed in the Huang-Lao tradition's understanding and interpretation of the *Laozi*, Oneness acquired a certain concreteness and was singled out as the criterion and standard for social order, while the notion of Dao gradually devolved into abstraction. Huang-Lao writers hence emphasized Oneness in the sense of unification, uniformity, a singular decree, or law, which opened a theoretical gap between Oneness and Dao, and their central teachings concerned "utilizing Oneness" (用一 *yong yi*) and "holding Oneness" (執一 *zhi yi*).

Keywords: Oneness; early Daoism

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1. Introduction

As a central philosophical concept in early Daoism, Oneness (一 *yi*) carries theoretical significance in terms of cosmogony and cosmology, political governance, and personal cultivation. Beginning with the *Laozi* 老子, Oneness in early Daoism primarily relates to Dao and often appears as a synonym of Dao. However, during the development of early Daoist philosophy, Oneness gradually acquired meanings that distinguished it from Dao, which resulted in it becoming a richer and more sophisticated theoretical concept. The current study explores two different paths of Oneness; the first pertains to Lao-Zhuang Daoism, and the second pertains to Huang-Lao Daoism.

Oneness in early Daoist thought was not a static but rather an evolving concept, as noted by Wang Zhongjiang 王中江, who writes that "it has different styles and characteristics in different texts, which leads to the formation of a complex spectrum of notions of 'Oneness' among early Daoist texts"(Wang 2017, p. 51). Hence, examining the evolution of Oneness in early Daoist writings will improve our understanding of its rich theoretical connotations in the early tradition and deepen our understanding of the distinction between Lao-Zhuang 老莊 and Huang-Lao 黃老. As Wang Zhongjiang writes, "Laozi's philosophy originally combined the regulation of the state and the regulation of the body, though these later developed along two different paths. One became the 'individualist' trend represented by Zhuangzi's emphasis on individual life, spiritual freedom, and transcendence. The other became the Huang-Lao 'political' trend" (Wang 2016, p. 131). Wang's reference to the *Zhuangzi* is to be taken in the context of Lao-Zhuang in distinction to Huang-Lao.

Post-dating the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* treated Oneness as the ultimate source of all things, and it focused on Oneness from the perspective of personal cultivation. The *Baopuzi* 抱樸子 and other texts within this textual lineage inherited this line of thought. They relied on the

terminology of "embracing Oneness" (抱一 *bao yi*) to express an inner spiritual state of unity with Dao in body and mind.

Also, post-dating the *Laozi*, Huang-Lao Daoism pursued different implications of Oneness, including notions of criteria (準則 *zhun ze*), standards (標準 *biao zhun*), unification (統一 *tong yi*), and uniformity (齊一 *qi yi*). Oneness was often placed between Dao and law (法 *fa*) to become a key component in their theoretical structures for understanding the world. In this sense, the concept of Oneness became theoretically distanced from Dao while becoming connected to law.

The first part of this study examines the notion of Oneness and the related term "embracing Oneness" (抱一 *bao yi*) in the *Laozi*. The second part of this study examines the notion of Oneness and the related term "maintaining Oneness"(守一 *shou yi*) in Lao-Zhuang writings, which emphasize the relation of Oneness to personal cultivation. The third part examines the notion of Oneness and the related terms "utilizing Oneness" (用一 *yong yi*) and "grasping Oneness" (握一 *wo yi*) in Huang-Lao's writings, which emphasize the relation of Oneness to governing the country. The intent of this study is to understand the different ways that early Daoism thought about Oneness to help us better interpret the different texts of early Daoism.

2. Oneness and Dao in the Philosophy of the *Laozi*

Oneness appears in eight chapters (Chapters 10, 11, 14, 22, 25, 39, 42, 67) in the received edition of the *Laozi*, while about only one-third of them carry philosophical significance. Two important questions surrounding the notion of Oneness embedded in these chapters concern the theoretical relationship between it and Dao and the philosophical implications of Oneness in a compound with a verb, such as in the notion of "embracing Oneness" (抱一 *bao yi*).

2.1. Oneness and Dao

In terms of the theoretical relationship between Dao and Oneness, *Laozi* Chapter 14 situates Oneness in a description of the unified and undifferentiated state of Dao:

> Looked at but do not seen, it is called invisible.
>
> Listened for but not heard, it is called inaudible.
>
> Touched but not felt, it is called intangible.
>
> These three cannot be exhaustively analyzed.
>
> They merge together as the One.
>
> Its top is not encompassed.
>
> Its bottom is not perceived.
>
> Boundless, boundless, it cannot be named.
>
> It returns again to the state of non-substantiality.
>
> (Michael 2015, p. 240)
>
> 視之不見，名曰夷；聽之不聞，名曰希；搏之不得，名曰微。此三者不可致詰，
> 故而為一。其上不皦，其下不昧。繩繩不可名，復歸於無物。

Pursuing this theoretical relationship, Chapter 39 uses Oneness directly to refer to Dao:

> Of those in the past that attained the One—
>
> Heaven attained the One and became clear.
>
> Earth attained the One and became stable.
>
> Spirits attained the One and became divine.
>
> Valleys attained the One and became full.
>
> The ten thousand living things attained the One and came to be born.
>
> Princes and kings attained the One and became the standards for the empire.
>
> (Michael 2015, p. 250)

昔之得一者：天得一以清；地得一以寧；神得一以靈；谷得一以盈；萬物得一以生。侯王得一以為天下貞。

In the two passages, the meaning of Oneness is either closely related or equivalent to Dao.

In Chapter 42, Oneness stands as an independent stage in the *Laozi*'s cosmogonic sequence, second only to Dao:

Dao gave birth to the One.

The One gave birth to the Two.

The Two gave birth to the Three.

And the Three gave birth to the ten thousand living things.

(Michael 2015, p. 251)

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

Laozi Chapter 14 justifies Oneness as an alternative name for Dao because it represents the essential nature of Dao. It refers not to an object of cognition but to an indiscriminate and chaotic state. In this sense, Dao is an absolute Oneness that is distinct from the myriad things, and the reason *Laozi* uses Oneness as a name for Dao in this and other passages is to emphasize its holistic nature. Due to its indivisibility, Oneness differs from myriad things by sharing the same cosmological status as Dao. Because of the holistic nature of Oneness, Chapter 39 also confidently ascribes it to the Dao while noting that everything in the world comes from Oneness and obtains its own nature from Oneness as the essence of its being. In terms of *Laozi*'s cosmogony in Chapter 42, Oneness or Dao serves as the foundation for the generation and existence of all things (Cao 2017, p. 104). At the same time, it also provides a basis for order among human beings in a community.

In these passages, Oneness is equated with Dao since both share holistic characteristics that are not graspable through physical senses, given that they describe the essence of all things and the source of their existence. In this sense, the meaning of Oneness as uniformity, standard, rule, and law in Huang-Lao Daoism and even in Legalist philosophy is nonexistent in the *Laozi* for which, according to Wang Zhongjiang, Oneness is "a concept on par with Dao, supplements Dao and occurs together with Dao" (Wang 2017, p. 7).

A. C. Graham summarizes this when he writes, "Lao-tzu frequently calls the undivided the One, although generally in relation to the man or thing which 'embraces the One' or 'grasps the One'. As a name however the One is no more adequate than any other. As soon as you try to conceive the Way you conceive the One, but as soon as you conceive the One you conceive the many." (Graham 1981, pp. 221–22).

2.2. The Development and Implications of "Embracing Oneness" (抱一 bao yi)

Laozi Chapters 10 and 22 refer to "embracing Oneness" (抱一 *bao yi*). Chapter 10 states:

In keeping the *po*魄 and embracing the One—can you do it without letting them leave?

In concentrating the *qi* 氣and making it soft—can you make it like that of an infant?

In washing and purifying the profound mind—can you make it spotless?

In loving the people and ordering the state—can you do it non-intentionally?

In opening and closing the Gateway of Heaven—can you play the part of the hen?

In understanding all within the four reaches—can you do it without using knowledge?

(Michael 2015, p. 239)

載營魄抱一，能無離乎？專氣致柔，能嬰兒乎？滌除玄覽，能無疵乎？愛民治國，能無知乎？天門開闔，能為雌乎？明白四達，能無知乎？

The connotations of "embracing Oneness" are different in these passages, and later Daoist writings were keen to pursue the implications. The initial phrase from Chapter 10, "In keeping the *po*魄 and embracing the One—can you do it without letting them leave?" has often been interpreted from the perspective of personal cultivation. A primary exam-

ple is found in Heshang Gong's 河上公 Eastern Han commentary to the *Laozi*. He views Oneness in terms of personal cultivation and explains it through the term "essential *qi*" (精氣 *jing qi*), and he writes that "the One is born of the Way's beginning and is the essential *qi* of Great Harmony." (Tadd 2013, p. 461; Wang 1993, p. 34). The Wei-Jin philosopher Wang Bi王弼 takes a similar line of thinking, he interprets"to keep" (處 *chu*) of the first line of the passage as "constantly staying in" (常居處 *chang ju chu*), and he writes that this chapter can be understood in terms of "the abode of constant sojourn" (常居之宅 *chang ju zhi zhai*), where the Oneness refers to the true nature of human beings. Thus, if a human being would be able "to stay in the abode of constant sojourn", "embrace Oneness", and purify the spirit so that Oneness would never permanently separate from the abode, then the ten thousand things would spontaneously submit.

More recently, the eminent modern commentator of the *Laozi*, Chen Guying 陳鼓應, understands "embracing Oneness" as a unification of the heavenly soul (魂 *hun*) and the earthly soul (魄 *po*), which brings to unity with Dao; he writes that "embracing Oneness means embracing the Dao, namely, bringing physical and spiritual life into a supreme state of harmony" (G. Chen 2020, p. 99).

In short, according to the contents of *Laozi* Chapter 10, together with the history of its interpretations, we might question if Oneness in this context directly implies Dao or not. Nevertheless, it is evident that Oneness in Chapter 10 is not associated with any law or rules, and further, it nowhere implies a political framework. Instead, Oneness is presented as an extension of Dao on the level of cultivation, connoting a single-mindedness of the human spirit and vital essence. This meaning of Oneness was further accentuated in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Baopuzi*, a discussion to be carried out in more detail in the following section of this paper.

In contrast, the use of Oneness in *Laozi* Chapter 22 involves political philosophy. It states:

> Bending leads to intactness.
>
> Twisting leads to straightness.
>
> Emptying leads to fullness.
>
> Exhausting leads to renewal.
>
> Reducing leads to attaining.
>
> Excess leads to delusion.
>
> For this reason, the Sage holds to Oneness and is the model for the empire.
>
> (Michael 2015, p. 243, slight modified)
>
> 曲則全，枉則直，窪則盈，弊則新，少則得，多則惑。是以聖人抱一為天下式。

Among the various editions, the transmitted text states: "For this reason the Sage holds to Oneness and is the model for the empire," whereas the Mawangdui馬王堆 silk manuscripts A and B both write, "it is for this reason that the sages embrace Oneness to be shepherds (牧 *mu*) for the empire."(是以聖人执一以為天下牧 *shiyi shengren zhiyi yiwei tianxia mu*). The character translated as "the model" in the transmitted version is defined by the "Explanation of Graphs and Characters" (說文解字 *Shuo wen jie zi*) as "law" or "method" (法 *fa*), while the character for "shepherd" (牧 *mu*) in the silk manuscripts refers to rulership and governance.[1]

"Being a model" in the context of rulership, laws, and regulations is a common notion in early Daoist texts; for example, Chapter 65 of the *Laozi* states, "One who knows these two (thievery and bliss) also knows the model relevance. Constantly to be able to know this model relevance is called Profound *de*" (Michael 2015, p. 261); and *Zhuangzi* Chapter 7 states, "The ruler of men should devise his own principles, standards, ceremonies, and regulations, and then there will be no one who will fail to obey him and be transformed by them." (Watson 2013, p. 55).

In these ways, one may already see the ways in which Lao-Zhuang would emphasize the notion of "embracing Oneness" in the context of personal cultivation and the ways in which Huang-Lao would emphasize the notion of "maintaining Oneness" in the context

of political governance carried out by the sages. Thus, these uses of Oneness in the *Laozi* had already established the potential for the emergence of these two paths, personal cultivation for the first and laws and regulations in the dimension of political philosophy for the second. It was on that basis that Huang-Lao Daoism developed and expanded the implications of Oneness in a political context, which, in turn, opened a theoretical distance between it and Dao while simultaneously becoming closer to the notion of law.

3. From Embracing Oneness (抱一 *bao yi*) to Maintaining Oneness (守一 *shou yi*)

The *Zhuangzi* inherits the *Laozi's* notion of Oneness in its cosmological connotations and understands the fundamental meaning of Oneness as the essential identity of all existing things, expressed through the notion of "Dao makes them all into One" (道通為一 *dao tong wei yi*) (Watson 2013, p. 11). On this basis, the Zhuangzi understood Oneness on the level of personal cultivation since it connoted the ideal state or perfected state of individual existence. Later, several of the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters in the *Zhuangzi*, together with the *Baopuzi* and other Daoist writings, followed this path by interpreting Oneness in terms of single-mindedness, the inseparability of vital essence and spirit, and the unity of body and mind. These writings advocate a style of personal cultivation intended to enable the practitioner to "maintain Oneness" (守一 *shou yi*).

3.1. Oneness as the Ultimate Source of All Things

The *Zhuangzi* regards Oneness as inherent to the existence of all things and emphasizes that all things are universally holistically integrated and differ merely in the empirical world of value judgments. *Zhuangzi* Chapter 2 states:

> Whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Xishi, things ribald and shady, or things grotesque and strange, Dao makes them all into One. (Watson 2013, p. 11, slightly modified).
>
> 故為是舉莛與楹，厲與西施，恢恑憰怪，道通為一。

> There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is little. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and Pengzu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are One with me. (Watson 2013, p. 13).
>
> 天下莫大於秋豪之末，而大山為小；莫壽乎殤子，而彭祖為夭。天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。

The two articulations that "Dao makes them all into One" and "the ten thousand things are One with me" signify a shift in the paradigm of value perception by observing things through Dao. In observation through Dao, the differences found in all things in the phenomenal world are eliminated and emerge in a certain undifferentiated state.

Zhuangzi Chapter 17 distinguishes three different perspectives: "the point of view of the Dao" (以道觀之 *yi dao guan zhi*), "the point of view of things themselves" (以物觀之 *yi wu guan zhi*), and "the point of view of common opinion" (以俗觀之 *yi su guan zhi*):

> From the point view of the Dao, things have no nobility or meanness. From the point view of the things themselves, each regard itself to be noble and other things as mean. From the point view of common opinion, nobility and meanness are not determined by the individual himself. (Watson 2013, pp. 129–30).
>
> 以道觀之，物無貴賤；以物觀之，自貴而相賤：以俗觀之，貴賤不在己。

Unlike the latter two, "from the point of view of the Dao" means to transcend the distinctions between high and low, as Dao eliminates value judgments or external standards that are artificially imposed. However, in terms of its essence, Dao connects everything to form Oneness, meaning that there is a certain universal and essential connection among all things. Yang Guorong 楊國榮 writes that the phrase "Dao makes them all into One" (道通為一 *dao tong wei yi*) (Watson 2013, p. 11) "expresses an existential image—diversified existence corresponds to internal unity based on Dao" (Yang 2018, p. 59). This internal

unity is reflected in the transcendence of value made possible by Oneness. In the *Zhuangzi*, Dao is not merely the root and law of existence; it is also universally inherent in all things so that each contains a certain universal and internal connection, which can "integrate into Oneness." A debate between Zhuangzi and Master Dongguo in Chapter 22 expresses Zhuangzi's view on the connection between Dao and all things:

> Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, "This thing called the Way—where does it exist?"
>
> Zhuangzi said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."
>
> "Come," said Master Dongguo, "you must be more specific!"
>
> "It is in the ant."
>
> "As low a thing as that?"
>
> "It is in the panic grass."
>
> "But that's lower still!"
>
> "It is in the tiles and shards."
>
> "How can it be so low?"
>
> "It is in the piss and shit!"
>
> Master Dongguo made no reply.
>
> (Watson 2013, p. 182).
>
> 東郭子問於莊子曰："所謂道，惡乎在？"
>
> 莊子曰："無所不在。"
>
> 東郭子曰："期而後可。"
>
> 莊子曰："在螻蟻。"
>
> 曰："何其下邪？"
>
> 曰："在稊稗。"
>
> 曰："何其愈下邪？"
>
> 曰："在瓦甓。"
>
> 曰："何其愈甚邪？"
>
> 曰："在屎溺。"
>
> 東郭子不應。

The fundamental meaning of Oneness in the *Zhuangzi* is further developed to explain the relationship between body and spirit, body and mind, or body and mind and spirit, and expresses the internal connection and unity of the spiritual and physical. In this way, Oneness is significant in cultivation practices pertaining to body and mind as it indicates their unity in Dao, which a genuine person (真人 *zhen ren*) may enter. In this regard, the discussion in Chapter 6 is most clear:

> Therefore his liking was One, and his not liking was One. His being One was One, and his not being One was One. In being One, he was acting as a companion of Heaven. In not being One, he was acting as a companion of man. When man and Heaven do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the True Man. (Watson 2013, p. 44).
>
> 故其好之也一，其弗好之也一。其一也一，其不一也一。其一，與天為徒；其不一，與人為徒。天與人不相勝也，是之謂真人。

Guo Xiang's 郭象 Wei-Jin 魏晉 period annotation and Cheng Xuanying's 成玄英 Tang 唐 period commentary explain this passage by distinguishing the sagely wisdom (聖智 *sheng zhi*) of the "True Man"(*zhen ren* 真人) and the common emotions (凡情 *fan qing*) of ordinary people, because sagely wisdom focuses on Oneness while common emotions remain stuck in value-judgment distinctions, which is not Oneness (Guo and Wang 2004, p. 240). Yet, in essence, "His being One was One, and his not being One was One" signifies that all things have a certain internal unity. Furthermore, the "True Man" is precisely due

to the ability to transcend both sagely knowledge and common emotions to obtain inner unity. In these ways, the *Zhuangzi* regards "maintaining Oneness" as an important method of personal cultivation.

3.2. From Embracing Oneness to Maintaining Oneness

Maintaining that "In keeping the *po* 魄 and embracing the One—can you do it without letting them leave?" (Michael 2015, p. 239) from *Laozi* Chapter 10 refers to personal cultivation, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Baopuzi* extended the meaning of Oneness by emphasizing the notion of "maintaining" (守 *shou*) it.

Zhuangzi Chapter 11 records the Yellow Emperor asking Master Guang Cheng, a Daoist hermit, about the Dao:

> He (the Yellow Emperor) went to visit him (Master Guang Cheng). "I have heard that you, sir, have mastered the perfect Way. May I venture to ask about the essence of the Perfect Way?"
>
> Master Guang Cheng said, "…The essence of the Perfect Way is mysterious and hushed in silence. Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude, and the body will right itself. Be still, be pure, do not labor your body, do not churn up your essence, and then you can live a long live. When the eye does not see, the ear does not hear, and the mind does not know, then your spirit will protect the body, the body will enjoy long life…Heaven and earth have their controllers, the yin and yang their storehouses. You have only to take care and guard your own body; these other things will of themselves grow sturdy. As for myself, I maintain this Oneness, abide in this harmony, and therefore I have kept myself alive for twelve hundred years, and never has my body suffered decay." (Watson 2013, pp. 78–79, slightly modified).
>
> 黃帝……問曰："聞吾子達於至道，敢問治身奈何而可以長久？"
>
> 廣成子蹶然而起，曰："……至道之精，窈窈冥冥；至道之極，昏昏默默。無視無聽，抱神以靜，形將自正。必靜必清，無勞女形，無搖女精，乃可以長生。目無所見，耳無所聞，心無所知，女神將守形，形乃長生。……天地有官，陰陽有藏，慎守女身，物將自壯。我守其一，以處其和，故我修身千二百歲矣，吾形未嘗衰。"

Master Guang Cheng begins his explanation to the Yellow Emperor by pointing to the darkness and chaos of the ultimate Dao and then proceeds to discuss the need to observe and obtain Dao by restraining the senses and keeping to Oneness in a state of emptiness. The last phrase of the dialogue points out that heaven and earth, and *yin* and *yang*, have their own distinctions and perform their own duties; hence, those who cultivate Dao should "guard this Oneness, abide in this harmony" and appreciate and maintain the Dao that bestowed people with inherent unity. Through an inherent unity connecting all things, they exist in harmony. It should be noted that harmony (和 *he*), in this sense, is different from equalization or uniformity (齊同 *qi tong*). Contrary to equalization and uniformity, harmony is based on recognizing and accepting the diversity of all things and realizing their innate connection by way of "maintaining Oneness." In other words, the cultivation method of maintaining Oneness ultimately leads to the fundamental understating of "Dao makes them all into One" (道通為一 *dao tong wei yi*).

In addition to Chapter 11, several other chapters in the *Zhuangzi* raise similar issues, as in Chapter 15, which states:

> So it is said, to be pure, clean, and mixed with nothing; still, being One, and unchanging; limpid and inactive; moving with the workings of Heaven—this is the way to care for the spirit. (Watson 2013, p. 121, slightly modified).
>
> 純粹而不雜，靜一而不變，恢而無為，動而以天行，此養神之道也。

> The way to purity and whiteness is to guard the spirit, this alone; guard it and never lose it, and you will become One with spirit, One with its pure essence, which communicates and mingles with the Heavenly Order. (Watson 2013, p. 121).
> 純素之道，惟神是守，守而勿失，與神為一，一之精通，合於天倫。

"Still, being One, and unchanging" and "become One with spirit, One with its pure essence" in this context imply a state of single-mindedness which accords to the state of Dao. Thus, "maintaining Oneness" is another description of how to achieve that state.

In the *Baopuzi*, "maintaining Oneness" becomes a major method of cultivation that implies cultivating the vital essence so that it does not leak or dissipate, followed by the harmony of the spirit in the realm of Oneness.[2] For example, the *Baopuzi* Chapter 3 states[3]:

> The classic of immortals says: take the elixir and maintain oneness, with the mutual completion with the heavenly, revert your essence, breathe like a fetus, extending life beyond boundaries. This is the essence of the ultimate Dao. (the *Baopuzi*)
> 仙經曰，服丹守一，與天相畢，還精胎息，延壽無極。此皆至道要言也。

Baopuzi Chapter 5 states:

> Today people follow the course of breathing exercises, revert their vital essence to nourish the brain, follow dietary rules, regulate their activity and rest, take medicines, concentrate their thought and spirit to maintain oneness. (Ware 1966, p. 103).
> 今道引行氣，還精補腦，食飲有度，興居有節，將服藥物，思神守一。

Baopuzi Chapter 18 states:

> Able to take ease and precautions, unity never leaves, maintain oneness and the genuine remains, thus you can connect to the spirit. (Ware 1966, p. 304).
> 能暇能豫，一乃不去；守一存真，乃能通神。

Noticeably, "maintaining Oneness" in the *Baopuzi* appears in the context of cultivation practices. It refers to uniting the essence, following the Dao by nourishing *qi* 氣, as well as other cultivation practices. By practicing "maintaining Oneness" together with these other Daoist practices, one can obtain Dao and achieve longevity.[4]

4. From "Embracing Oneness" (抱一 *bao yi*) to "Utilizing Oneness" (用一 *yong yi*) and "Grasping Oneness" (執一 *zhi yi*): Oneness in Huang-Lao Daoist Political Philosophy

In Huang-Lao Daoist philosophy, the implications of Oneness in terms of rule and law gain prominence. This shift in emphasis involved two aspects: The first aspect is related to Dao, which Huang-Lao Daoism identified as something vague and empty. By turning the concreteness of Dao into a kind of cosmic abstraction, Huang-Lao focused on its non-being or absence (無 *wu*), which became relevant for understanding its diminished role in governing the country. The second aspect is that, while Dao became something elusive, Oneness took on its own concrete and practical significance, which had deep implications in the political context. In other words, Huang-Lao emphasized Oneness in the contexts of rulership and law, which were previously considered or observed primarily through Dao.

4.1. The Abstraction of Dao

Interestingly, the description of Dao in *Laozi* Chapter 14 as something indivisible and unrecognizable does not imply that it is utterly void. On the contrary, it is referred to as a concrete thing (物 wu) and can be viewed as a cosmic entity. The chapter refers to Dao as the "the formless form" and the non-substantial image" (無狀之狀 *wu Zhuang zhi Zhuang*, 無物之象 *wu wu zhi xiang*). That is, Dao has the nature of non-existence, yet it also has a form and an image.[5] In Chapters 21 and 25, the association of "things" to Dao is clearly articulated; Chapter 21 writes, "as a thing, Dao…" (道之為物 *dao zhi wei wu*), and Chapter 25 mentions, "there is a thing completed in chaos" (有物混成 *you wu hun cheng*). Dao as a thing is still distinct from the "myriad things" of the physical world, yet the *Laozi* does not treat Dao as a void and emphasizes its concrete essence.[6]

This point is brought forth in the text's description of the relationship between the two aspects of Dao: existence (有 *you*) and non-existence (無 *wu*). According to the *Laozi*, Dao embodies both aspects of existence and non-existence as revealed throughout the chapters in terms such as "non-being names the beginning of Heaven and Earth, being names the Mother of the ten thousand living things" (Michael 2015, p. 235); "the service of a thing lies in its Being. But its use lies in its non-being." (Michael 2015, p. 239). The Dao, which includes both existence and non-existence, generates all things and provides operating guidelines for all things in the world, including for human social order. As such, Dao incorporates the theoretical meaning and the practical function of rules, guidelines, and even laws.

In comparison, as noted, in the developmental course of Huang-Lao's thought, Dao as non-existence was emphasized. *Zhuangzi* Chapter 12 reflects distinct Huang-Lao characteristics in its description of Dao: "In the Great Beginning, there was no being, no name. Out of it arose One" (Watson 2013, p. 88). The *Xin Shu Shang* of the *Guanzi* 管子 says, "What is vacuous and formless is called the Dao…" (Rickett 1998, p. 72), and the 黃帝四經 *Huang Di Si Jing* have similar articulations, such as that found in "The Dao and the Law" (經法 *Jing fa* 道法 *Dao fa*): "Vacuity without form, with its central seam dark and mysterious, it is from it that the myriad phenomena grow" (Yates 1997, p. 51). The *Dao Yuan* "Dao the Origin" (道原 *Dao yuan*) states:

> At the beginning of eternal nonexistence, totally the same as the Great Void; Vacuous and the same, it was the One; Being the One constantly, it was nothing more. Misty and blurred it did not yet possess light and dark. Daemonic and faint, yet it filled everywhere, quintessentially quiescent, it was not luminous. Therefore, it did not possess form; immensely penetrating despite being nameless." (Yates 1997, p. 173).
>
> 恆無之初，迥同太虛。虛同為一，恆一而止。濕濕夢夢，未有明晦，神微周盈，精靜不熙。故未有以，萬物莫以。故無有形，大迥無名。

The *Zhuangzi*, the *Guanzi*, and the *Huangdi sijing* employ the terminology of nothingness, non-existence, and grand void to describe Dao. Although *Laozi* Chapter 16 states, "I extend emptiness to the limit and preserve tranquility in the center"(至虛極 *zhi xu ji*, 守靜篤*shou jing du*) (Michael 2015, p. 241), there is no case in the *Laozi* in which the word Dao is substituted by a word indicating emptiness.

Nevertheless, when Huang-Lao philosophy employed the terminology of non-existence, non-being, and emptiness to discuss Dao, they also negated notions of Dao being a "thing" or an "image". Thus, to a certain degree, Dao was not considered a concrete entity related to existence and non-existence, and its relevance for governing the country was greatly diminished. In the theoretical framework of Huang-Lao Daoism, Dao remained the ultimate foundation for the existence of law, yet the theoretical basis for the aspects of rules and guidelines was relocated to the notion of Oneness. This resulted in a theoretical gap between Dao and Oneness, but it established a strong connection between Oneness and Law.

4.2. From Embracing Oneness (抱一 bao yi) to Utilizing Oneness (用一 yong yi) and Grasping Oneness (握一 wo yi)

In Huang-Lao's writings, the interchangeability between Oneness and Dao did not completely disappear. Nevertheless, it differed from the *Laozi*'s identification of Oneness as Dao in the sense that although Huang-Lao Daoism uses the *Laozi's* meaning of Oneness as Dao, it appears in the context of homogeneity, rules, and laws rather than in the sense of the unity between body and mind and Dao on the level of personal cultivation. In addition, in Huang-Lao texts, Oneness often appears together with concepts such as law, governance, and principle, thereby highlighting its political meaning. Huang-Lao has a definite tendency to objectify Oneness into principles and laws in Huang-Lao thought.

The *Laozi* focuses on elucidating the holistic characteristics of Oneness and its meaning on the level of personal cultivation since it discusses embracing Oneness from the perspective of embodying the Dao. The emphasis in Huang-Lao is placed on the significance of

Oneness as a means or tool for governance as reflected in using terms like "utilizing Oneness" (用一 *yong yi*), "holding Oneness" (執一 *zhi yi*), and "grasping oneness" (握一 *wo yi*).[7] "Grasping" implies manipulation and execution. Oneness that can be manipulated, executed, or used is an objectified Oneness. On this level, Oneness cannot be equated with Dao, which gives birth to all things. Oneness is not something that is "looked at but do not seen", "listened for but not heard", or "touched but not felt"[8], as described in Laozi Chapter *14*, rather it is the principle of governing the country with a specific ideological strategy that can be grasped and applied.

In the "Wielding Authority" (揚權 *Yang Quan*) chapter, *Han Fei Zi* 韓非子 explains "utilizing Oneness" in Huang-Lao terms:

> The way to utilize Oneness starts from rectifying the names. When names are correct, things stay in place; when names are twisted, things shift about. Hence the sage holds Oneness in stillness; he lets names define themselves and affairs reach their own settlement. He does not reveal his nature, and his subordinates are open and upright. He assigns them tasks according to their ability and let them settle things for themselves; he hands out rewards according to the results and lets them arise their own station. He establishes the standard, abides by it, and let all things settle themselves. All the basis of names he makes appointments, and where the name is not clear, he looks to the actual achievement it applies to. (Watson 2003, p. 36, slightly modified)
>
> 用一之道，以名為首。名正物定，名倚物徙。故聖人執一以靜，使名自命，令事自定。不見其採，下故素正。因而任之，使自事之。因而予之，彼將自舉之。正與處之，彼皆自定之。上以名舉之，不知其名，復修其形。形名參同，用其所生。

The notions of "the way to utilize Oneness" and "the sage holds Oneness" refer to a sagely method of governance. As Q. Chen (2000, pp. 145–46) has shown, there were numerous commentators who understood "the way of utilizing Oneness" as "the way of using methods."[9] Reading this passage in the broader context of Han Fei Zi's philosophy, the "methods" referred to here are the skills for locating the correspondence between names and actualities. (Liao 1939, p. 212). The ruler controls the names of official offices, positions, and their corresponding duties so that subordinates will carry out affairs according to their actuality. This clear and unified standard of governance portrays the understanding of Oneness by the *Han Fei Zi* and Huang-Lao Daoism. The *Guanzi* 管子 also describes Oneness in a similar way: "Since his rule is united as one body, he will be able to issue orders and make his laws clear." (Rickett 2001, p. 136).

In addition to "utilizing Oneness", the term "holding Oneness" is also broadly employed in Huang-Lao's writings. For example, the excavated manuscript "All Things Flow into Form" (凡物流形 *Fan Wu Liu Xing*) says:

> It is heard: he who can hold Oneness will not lose any of the hundred things; he who cannot hold onto Oneness, will lose the hundred things… regulate Heaven and Earth by the means Oneness. (Chan 2015, slightly modified)
>
> 聞之曰：能執一，則百物不失；如不能執一，則百物俱失。……此一以為天地稽。

"Holding Oneness" is regarded as the fundamental means of governing the world. The *He Guan Zi* 鶡冠子refers to this when it states:

> Heaven uses four seasons earth uses five elements, the son of heaven holds Oneness and is placed in the middle, regulates the five notes, corrects according to the six rhythms, orders through numerous measures, and executes rule through punishments and rewards." (Huang 2014, p. 92)
>
> 天用四時，地用五行，天子執一以居中央，調以五音，正以六律，紀以度數，宰以刑德。

"Holding Oneness" is a way of governance consistent with the movements of heaven and earth. Terms indicating concrete human order, such as the five sounds, the six rhythms, measures, and punishments, all come from Oneness, which is in harmony with heaven and

earth. In other words, Oneness contains the principle of generating human order. This, in turn, is the basis for generating and ensuring the movement of order while, at the same time, Oneness is also a formula to be used in good governance based on clear regulations.

One of the most important texts of Huang-Lao, arguably the foundational text of the tradition, is the Huangdi *sijing*, and its discussions of Oneness remain among talking about "grasping Oneness" (執一 *zhi yi*) and "guarding Oneness" (握一 *wo yi*). In one passage, it states:

> For the explanation of Oneness, examine into heaven and earth; for the principle of Oneness, apply it to all within the four seas…he must be a corrected person, for then he is able to grasp hold of correction to correct the incorrect, to lay hold of Oneness and use it to know the many; to expel what is harmful to the people and support what is appropriate for them. In the total collectivity, he preserves Oneness and possesses the same ends as Heaven and Earth then he can know the calamities and good fortune of Heaven and Earth. (Yates 1997, pp. 135–37)
>
> 一之解，察於天地；一之理，施於四海……彼必正人也，乃能操正以正奇，握一以知多，除民之所害，而持民之所宜。抱凡守一，與天地之同極，乃可以知天地之禍福。

As can be seen here, Oneness continues to share characteristics with Dao. Because it reaches heaven and earth, it can be applied to all things in the world in the hands of the sagely ruler. This is a Oneness that can be adhered to by "holding" (執 zhi) onto it as the law of governing the state, but also by "grasping" (握 wo) it and "guarding" (守 shou) it. These verbs denote both abstract and concrete guidelines and rules for governing the state and, together with other verbs used in similar ways such as "to hold", "utilize", and "grasp", are worthy of more detailed study, largely because they reflect the Huang-Lao tendency to objectify and regulate Oneness. Oneness in such an understanding is profoundly distinct from *Laozi*'s Oneness, which is another name for Dao. These verbs also underscore the ideological distance of Oneness from Dao, which demonstrates that it leans closer toward an empirical or even natural law. In other words, Oneness as a principle of governing the state leads to forming concrete and specific laws.

On a final note, Oneness is also sometimes used as a verb in Huang-Lao's texts, which means "to make…uniformity" (使…齊同 *shi…qi tong*). For example, in the *Guanzi,* we find:

> The enlightened ruler unifies his procedures and measurements in Oneness, establishes his standards, and steadfastly observes them…since the enlightened rulers has a system of laws and procedures, his ministers all belong to an administration that is honest and upright and do not dare engage in wicked practices. (Rickett 1998, p. 160, slightly modified)
>
> 明主者，一度量，立表儀。而堅守之。……明主者有法度之制，故群臣皆出於方正之治，而不敢為奸。

The Oneness that symbolizes the unification of the empire brings us to the philosophy of Han Fei Zi, who is influenced by Huang-Lao Daoism to a certain extent. We may say that Han Fei's strategy of governing the state, as advocated through the correspondence between names and actualities, clear rewards and severe punishments, and complete exclusion of the ruler's personal will, is an extension of Oneness in the meaning of sameness.

5. Conclusions

In the philosophy of early Daoism, Oneness appears as a concept worthy of attention and careful investigation. This is partially due to the complex theoretical relationship between Oneness and Dao. In Huang-Lao manuscripts, Oneness may still refer to Dao; for example, in one of *the Huangdi Sijing*'s discussion of Dao, it explicitly equates them: "One is its appellation." (一者，其号也 *yi zhe, qi hao ye*) (Yates 1997, pp. 135–37). Second, due to the rich connotations of Oneness and the evolution of its meaning in the development of early Daoist thought, a close analysis of this concept is crucial for understanding the early formations of the tradition. After reviewing the writings discussed herein, we may

conclude that although Oneness mainly serves as another word for Dao in the *Laozi*, it also symbolizes unity and the single-mindedness of body and mind as merging into Oneness.

Following from the *Laozi*, the significance and valence of Oneness progresses in two different paths. One is Lao-Zhuang Daoism, represented by the *Zhuangzi* and the *Baopuzi*, which stresses the meaning of Oneness for personal cultivation; the second is Huang-Lao's Daoism, represented by the *Huangdi sijing*, the *Fanliu wuxung*, as well as other writings, which stressed the meaning of Oneness for governing the empire by strategy, laws, rules, and principles, which are methods of governance that can be adhered to and utilized. By examining the evolution and development of the notion of Oneness, we may learn something about the different aspects of the changes and developments within the Daoist tradition, thereby enriching our understanding of Daoism.

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1 *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字, https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%BC%8F (accessed on 1 January 2023).

2 Ge Hong 葛洪—the author of the *Baopuzi*—is known for his work with alchemy, as well as his work on Daoist philosophy. Thomas Michael is one of the very few Western scholars who sees the connections between early Daoist bodily cultivation that appears in the *Laozi* and the bodily cultivation theories proposed by Ge Hong. See Michael (2022).

3 Translators note: The first of the three citations is the translator's own translation. The second is from Ware (1966), and the third is modified by the translator. For full translation, see James Ware (1966).

4 Many texts of religious Daoism, including the *Heshanggong Laozi* 老子河上公章句 and the *Xiang'er Laozi* 老子想爾注, and the *Taiping Jing* 太平經, present a similar emphasis on these cultivation practices, however, due to space considerations, this study does not accommodate their detailed discussion.

5 In this sense, the "Great Image" in "hold the Great Image and the whole world will follow" of Chapter 35, and in "the Great Image has no shape. The Dao is hidden and nameless" of Chapter 41, can be perceived as an alternate name for Dao. Many scholars have noted this; for further discussion, see Fang (2012, p. 156); Liu (2006, p. 393).

6 In regard to the concreteness of *things* in Chapters 21 and 25, along with the discussion of the relationship between Dao and things, see Song (2018) and Ye (2021).

7 As Wang Zhongjiang observed: "the transmitted version of the *Laozi* has the terminology of 'obtaining Oneness' (得一 *de yi*) and 'embracing Oneness (抱一 *bao yi*)', but there is no usage of 'grasping Oneness'." See: Wang (2017).

8 Indeed, Huang-Lao's writings also have notions such as "grasping the Dao" and "the one who grasps the Dao," but in the contexts in which they appear, Dao refers to the ruler's strategy and not to the origin of all existence. Regarding Dao in the phrase "the one who grasps the Dao", Feng Cao (2008) offers a detailed discussion.

9 The "*Ding Fa* 定法" chapter in the *Hanfeizi* states: "The method is to hold actual services accountable according to the titles". (術者*shu zhe*, 循名而責實 *xun ming er ze shi*). The translation is by the author.

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