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Self-Transcendence and Its Discontents: Criticisms and Defences of the *Zhuangzi* in Wei-Jin Thought and Their Modern Significance

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Abstract: Although the *Zhuangzi* is mentioned in late Warring States and Han Dynasty texts, it was in the post-Han Wei-Jin period that it first exerted a significant influence on intellectual life, becoming a central target for both praise and criticism, much of which focused on its transcendent attitude toward Confucian social values and secular interests. This paper examines these discussions, focusing on criticisms from the pragmatically minded realist Confucian literati of the period, who largely regarded the text as detaching and distracting scholars from the pressing needs of the state and responses from the more sympathetic and idealist "Neo-Daoist" figures of the Dark Learning (*xuanxue*) movement. For the latter, the spiritual self-transcendence that could be found in the *Zhuangzi* text was not only a source of personal satisfaction and joy but also served an important function in Confucian ethics, leading readers to transcend narrow obsession with individual self-interest, political power and social status. While these debates express the state of Chinese society after the collapse of the Han Dynasty, they have also been seen as reflecting wider issues that have become prominent in modern Western philosophical and religious thought, notably the concept of nihilism, an association that is here critically assessed in detail.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*; self-transcendence; Wei-Jin thought; nihilism

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1. Introduction

Along with the *Laozi* 老子, modern readings of the pre-Qin Daoist text *Zhuangzi* 莊子 both in China and abroad have frequently placed it in a "philosophical" context in which it can enter into dialogue with aspects of modern Western thought from Emerson and Nietzsche to phenomenology and postmodernism. A common critical response to such studies is that they read the *Zhuangzi* text through a modern lens that was absent in ancient China and thus tend to exaggerate certain aspects of the text that reflect Western preoccupations (ontology, transcendence, naturalism, etc.) rather than understanding it in its native Chinese context (see Clarke 2000, pp. 166–93). One possible approach to assess the validity of such criticisms is to examine how the *Zhuangzi* text was received in later Chinese history, a reception which began in earnest in the Wei-Jin 魏晋 period (c. 220–420 CE). By comparing the issues and problems that native Chinese readers had with the text and its thought at a time closer to its composition, such an approach can potentially provide insight into which interpretations of the text possess more widespread or even universal cultural applicability and which may be more tightly bound within particular cultural and/or historical contexts.

Following this approach, this paper examines the reception of the *Zhuangzi* text in the Wei-Jin period, focusing on the core criticisms and arguments concerning self-

transcendence that its new popularity gave rise to and, in particular, how these relate to modern discussions of the concept of nihilism. After first briefly summarising the general situation of the *Zhuangzi*'s reception in the Wei-Jin period and its modern relevance, the Section 2 examines several specific arguments that were made by critical scholars of the period, such as Fu Yi 伏義, Pei Wei 裴頠 and Wang Tanzhi 王坦之, who accused the *Zhuangzi* text of embodying a notion of self-transcendence as a particular psychological response to social chaos, one that led its admirers toward what their critics saw as "nihilistic" conclusions. The Section 3 discusses various attempts by "Neo-Daoist" or "Dark Learning" (*xuanxue* 玄學) scholars to defend the *Zhuangzi* against such accusations, including those such as Ruan Ji 阮籍 and Ji Kang 嵇康, who are usually seen as accepting the radical form of self-transcendence allegedly proposed by the *Zhuangzi*, and others such as Xiang Xiu 向秀, Guo Xiang 郭象 and Li Chong 李充, who are usually viewed as attempting to interpret it in a synthetic manner that minimises its potentially nihilistic implications, with this paper arguing that their defences should all be seen as adopting some form of relativising approach. The Section 6, then, focuses on how the form of "nihilism" at stake in the above debates compares to the modern Western concept of nihilism as discussed by philosophers from Jacobi and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治. While the Western concept of nihilism has been associated with Buddhism at least as far back as Nietzsche, its relation to both Daoism and especially the thought of the Wei-Jin period when Buddhism was beginning to spread in China has yet to be critically assessed in detail, despite Etienne Balazs' 1948 claim that a "great wave of nihilism… broke over China" at the time (Balazs 1964, p. 234).

2. The Wei-Jin Reception of the *Zhuangzi* and Its Modern Relevance

Although it was clearly already known in both the pre-Qin and Han periods, it was only in the Wei-Jin period that the *Zhuangzi* began to receive significant attention, with commentaries on it proliferating, most notably those of Sima Biao 司馬彪, Cui Zhuan 崔撰, Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang. Most prominently, the text played a central role in the "pure conversation" (*qingtan* 清談) discussions that flourished in this period, with key concepts and passages such as those concerning "free and distant wandering" (*xiaoyao you*逍遥游) and the "equalization of things" (*qiwu* 齊物) as well as even somewhat lesser-known chapters such as "The Old Fisherman" 漁夫 becoming key points of debate among participants (see, e.g., Liu 2002, pp. 115, 127, 131–32). In addition to textual commentaries and intellectual debates, the *Zhuangzi* also became a frequent reference in casual conversations among the elite literati of the Wei and Jin courts, with even their young children apparently familiar with its general themes, demonstrating its widespread popularity (see, e.g., Liu 2002, pp. 56–57). One notable feature of this reception is that the *Zhuangzi* text was clearly regarded as a resource of philosophical thought that could be studied for enlightenment and self-transcendence, in contrast to records of perfect sages such as Confucius, who was simply "wise at birth" and thus could not be easily emulated (ibid.). While the *Zhuangzi* can clearly also be read in other ways, including for its fantastic literary charm, religious symbolism or pseudo-historical anecdotes, Wei-Jin literati were particularly concerned with engaging in formal debates on the more abstract "principles" or "patterns" (*li* 理) that it contains, including such problems as the relation between concrete "beings" (*you* 有) and metaphysical "non-being" (*wu* 無) or between the placid "inherent nature" (*xing* 性) perfectly embodied by sages and the "emotions" (*qing* 情) in which ordinary people inevitably become entangled (Liu 2002, pp. 100–9). It is such aspects that justify describing such Wei-Jin thought as "philosophical", and which indeed led it to become one of the key periods of classical Chinese thought for the construction of a modern academic discipline of "Chi-

nese philosophy", along with the earlier pre-Qin masters (*zhuzi* 諸子) and later Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理學).

However, as with the flourishing of philosophy in Ancient Greece and modern Europe, the rise of such "philosophical" trends in intellectual circles, with their tendency to criticise and thus rationalise existing thought and culture, was accompanied by a decline in respect for tradition and liberation of the individual from traditional social bonds (see Yu 1985, pp. 121–25). As scholars such as Yu Ying-shih have argued, for its proponents, this represented a form of "individualism" in the name of "inner authenticity" that, while it differs in important respects from similar phenomena in Western modernity, it nonetheless shares with the latter a sense of "rupture" or break from the past, one that, as Foucault noted, is not only a recognition of "the discontinuity of time… a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment" but also a "deliberate, difficult attitude [that] consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it" (Yu 1985, p. 140; Foucault 1984, p. 39). For many Wei-Jin literati, this meant an attempt to recapture the authentic *dao* 道 of nature that had once been embodied by Chinese society as recorded concretely in the Confucian classics, but whose fundamental characteristics Daoist philosophical texts such as the *Zhuangzi* were better able to present and explicate in general and conceptual terms. In the eyes of their critics, however, these same qualities of seeking authenticity and liberation from the fetters of tradition represented a threat to social order itself, coinciding as it did with the collapse of the Han dynasty. While similar worries have appeared in various historical contexts, of particular interest for our purposes is the way in which such criticisms in the Wei-Jin period were not limited to the critical and irreverent aspects of the *Zhuangzi* but often took aim precisely at the radical self-transcendence it seemed to advocate. In this respect, it is not only the iconoclastic individualism of the Wei-Jin reception of the *Zhuangzi* that finds echoes in Western modernity but also the accusation that its admirers' yearning for self-transcendence represented a form of "nihilistic Taoism" that was contributing to social decline and, according to Balazs, earned "the hatred of all right-minded people and persecution at the hands of the authorities" (Balazs 1964, pp. 234–35).

3. Critical Responses to the *Zhuangzi* in the Wei-Jin Period

The most explicit and focused critical response to the *Zhuangzi* from this period is found in the essay *Treatise on Discarding the Zhuangzi* 廢莊論by Eastern Jin dynasty scholar Wang Tanzhi 王坦之 (c. 330–375 CE) who like many Confucian officials of his time "held pure conversation primarily responsible for the loss of North China" and was known for his fondness for Confucian orthodoxy combined with strict Legalist techniques of governance (Hsiao 1979, pp. 646–47). In his text, Wang first quotes earlier brief critical comments on the *Zhuangzi* from earlier Confucian thinkers including Xunzi 荀子 ("blinded by the Heavenly and ignorant of the Human"), Yang Xiong 扬雄 ("dissolute and without rules") and He Yan 何宴 (c. 195–249; "Peddling *Zhuangzi*'s corpse, released into the obscure void, uncomprehending of the changes of the times"), before going on to accuse its author of being distant and detached from ordinary life and lost in the eternal "void" (*xu* 虛), thus failing to "harmonise" in response to everyday affairs, "clinging to the *dao* but departing from customs" and "speaking of the *dao* but losing it in action", as opposed to a true sage like Confucius who was able to "embody the distant and thus make use of the near" (Yan 1999a, p. 284, my translation). Thus, Wang argues, although the "self-sufficiency" (*zizu* 自足) of spiritual self-transcendence offered by the *Zhuangzi* may indeed seem valuable, it is only available to "the few", while "the many" are only able to "submit to teachings" (*xun jiao* 徇教). Given this natural state of affairs, to promote liberation from such restrictions as a universal goal is precisely to neglect the reasons why the former sage-kings

introduced "honest ritual propriety" (*dun li* 敦禮) and "daily practices" (*ri yong* 日用) in the first place, as a means to regulate human life and achieve social stability. Wang thus argues that, despite the *Zhuangzi's* undeniable literary and speculative brilliance, it is simply a product of its author's "bitter self-absorption", and by leading people away from pressing issues of life, its "benefit to the world is little, [its] harm to the world great", since "Mr. Zhuang produced his works and customs went into decay" as a matter of indirect cause and effect, just like when, as the *Zhuangzi* notes, "The wine of Lu was poor and Handan was besieged" (ibid.; for the latter anecdote, see Lynn 2022, p. 198). As the *Zhuangzi* quote here shows, Wang repeatedly attempts to use the *Zhuangzi* text to undermine itself, and in his conclusion, he brings up the anecdote of "the old man from the south bank of the Han [River]" who "practiced the arts of Chaos" (*xiu hundun zhi shu* 修混沌之術) and consequently rejected technological advances, whom Confucius (as portrayed in the *Zhuangzi*) criticises as "knowing the first thing but not the second" (Yan 1999a, p. 285; see Lynn 2022, pp. 243–45). For Wang, this is precisely the issue with the *Zhuangzi* text itself: it promotes unrealistic and thus nihilistic ideals of ultimate spiritual self-transcendence (here, the "arts of Chaos") while rejecting and undermining the concrete practices maintaining society that the apparently transcendent sage-kings introduced.

Wang's response reflects more general critical responses to the *Zhuangzi* during the Wei-Jin period, which see its apparently corrupting influence as lying behind the rise of the "pure conversation" discussions of the Dark Learning movement among Wei-Jin elites. In a preserved letter to Ruan Ji (210–263) criticising his impropriety in conduct and urging him to apply himself to worldly service, the otherwise unknown Western Jin Confucian scholar Fu Yi included a passage tracing his criticism back to "the followers of Zhuang Zhou 莊周 [i.e., Zhuangzi], Huainanzi 淮南子, and Dongfang Shuo 東方朔," who he claims "set their thoughts on the Great Darkness…, claiming that they could return to the very ends of the Heaven and Earth, observe and grasp the limits of the world, and attain the ancestor of things" (Chen 1987, p. 75, my translation; see Holzman 1976, p. 84). Fu's problem with these fantastic beliefs is not that their claims of self-transcendence go against Confucian orthodoxy but rather that they stem from such thinkers' "dissatisfaction over what they cannot obtain", leading them to "make use of the 'absence of desire' in order to 'liberate themselves'" and declare that life is "a painful corvée", with their failure to follow through with such views and either "kill themselves" or cast aside all their worldly goods being due to their "arrogance" (Holzman 1976, p. 84, translation modified; Chen 1987, p. 75). While Fu acknowledges that such a retreat from life may have been a natural response to troubled times in the Warring States period of the *Zhuangzi*, he argues that such views can all too easily become ingrained beliefs that lead otherwise worthy and capable individuals like Ruan Ji to renounce worldly affairs in the name of the absolute salvation of self-transcendence, as Ruan himself put it in one of his poems: "Resting and feasting in the City of Purity/I will transcend the world (*chaoshi* 超世)! And who would prevent me?" (Holzman 1976, p. 172). For Fu then, Ruan's fascination with Daoism and the *Zhuangzi* in particular was, like his "feigned madness" and his "continuous drinking", more of a psychological technique by which he could "escape the hate and envy of his contemporaries, the despotism of princes, and the follies committed by those in power" than a sincere belief in spiritual liberation based on philosophical insight (Balazs 1964, p. 237).

This line of argument attributing the rise of Dark Learning and the popularity of the *Zhuangzi* to a psychological response to worldly dissatisfaction and alienation was most prominently taken up by Pei Wei (c. 267–300 CE) in his *Treatise on the Exaltation of Existence* 崇有論, in which he acknowledges that, like the *Zhuangzi* itself, the Dark Learning thinkers "do indeed set out the causes of existence and physical forms with great profundity, and describe the beauty of emptiness and nothingness with splendour" (Yan 1999a,

p. 328, my translation). For Pei, however, such "sophisticated argument" and "superficial images" like those in the *Zhuangzi* and the discussions of pure conversation merely serve to "bewilder" the multitude, leading them to "disregard the task of organizing the world" in favour of the illusory immaterial satisfaction of philosophical self-transcendence. The crucial problem for Pei, then, is not simply the content and ideas of texts like the *Zhuangzi* but rather the way they give full play to certain natural but problematic tendencies of human psychology, notably those to flee from suffering and struggle rather than deal with them in practical ways, and he thus sets about "dissecting nihilist ideas with the surgical skill of a subtle dialectician" (Balazs 1964, p. 254). Pei begins by observing that, upon perceiving the inevitable periods of strife in human society, "The followers of easeful leisure, shocked by disputes like these, seek out the causes of such harsh struggle. Examining the harms caused by partiality of qualities and perceiving the good brought about by simplicity and reduction, they begin to discuss the value of nothingness (*gui wu* 貴無) and construct theories on the baseness of existence" (Yan 1999a, p. 328). However, adopting a similar Xunzi-inspired realist position to Wang Tanzhi, Pei argues that such an analysis fails to recognise how, although "superfluous desires can be reduced, [desire] cannot be suppressed out of existence", and the same is true for utility, since it is the inherent nature of existing things to be "partial" (*pian* 偏) and thus have "no self-sufficiency", instead being "dependent on external resources" (*ping hu wai zi* 凭乎外資). Nonetheless, he continues, the acknowledged seductions of spiritual self-transcendence override such factual concerns, leading those affected to "disregard the task of organising the world, despise the utility of strenuous effort, promote frivolous and drifting occupations, and deprecate the merits of practical management", instead dedicating themselves to a lofty and detached disregard of any activity that might smack of practicality and worldly concern (ibid.). For Pei, then, the appeal of the *Zhuangzi* stems from a reaction to the struggles and strife of secular life and a consequent nihilistic desire to devalue the concrete material aspects of social existence in favour of a higher ideal of self-transcendence.

Interestingly, although Pei's assault is evidently directed at the whole tendency of the Dark Learning movement based on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, towards the end of his essay, he attempts to defend the *Laozi* against his own accusations, claiming that, apart from occasional phrases such as "existence is born from nothingness" (*you sheng yu wu* 有生於無) from Chapter 40, the text, in fact, focuses on ideas such as "stillness" (*jing* 靜) and "unity" (*yi*—), which Pei acknowledges "offer people relief and ease of mind" and praises as "conforming with the precepts of the 'Reduction', 'Modesty', 'Restraint' and 'Regulation' [hexagrams] of [Confucian classic] the *Book of Changes* 易" (Yan 1999a, p. 329). This implicit tendency to associate the apparent nihilism of Daoist-influenced Wei-Jin literati with the *Zhuangzi* more than the *Laozi* can also be seen in the writings of Jin dynasty religious Daoist Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), in which, in contrast to his hagiography of Laozi as "an exemplar of transcendence", he "can make no sense of" the *Zhuangzi*'s counselling "not the pursuit of immortality but the abandonment of one's attachment to life in this present body", a view that, despite plentiful textual evidence in the *Zhuangzi* itself, Ge attributes to "a facile reading" from Dark Learning scholars who "turn away from the declarations of the scriptures to attend to the books of the philosophers" (Campany 2002, pp. 84, 115).[1] Here, although Ge's religious Daoist viewpoint differs significantly from the more mainstream Confucian and Legalist views of the critics mentioned above, it can be seen as sharing the fundamental view that the *Zhuangzi* as received in the Wei-Jin period represented a nihilistic view of spiritual self-transcendence and philosophical detachment that neglects the importance of the physical body and material existence in favour of a metaphysical reality of nothingness or non-being (*wu* 無).

4. Wei-Jin Responses in Defence of the *Zhuangzi*

Despite the vehemence of some of the above criticisms, it should be acknowledged that most views of *Zhuangzi* in the Wei-Jin period were much more ambiguous, with even the most critical often finding much to admire in the text and vice versa. One notable example is Wang Tanzhi's inclusion of He Yan, usually regarded as an admirer of both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* and, indeed, the preeminent leader of a group that formed "a political centre for nihilist leanings" during the Zhengshi 正始 period, the "apogee of the nihilist movement", in his quotations of earlier criticisms of the *Zhuangzi* (Balazs 1964, p. 235; for discussion, see Wang 2011b, p. 68). Like almost all the Dark Learning literati usually regarded as "Neo-Daoist", He Yan was also a staunch admirer of Confucius and much of the Confucian tradition, with his *Collected Commentaries on the* Analects 論語集解 becoming a standard edition for centuries to follow, and it is thus perhaps no surprise that he would retain a critical perspective on some of the more extreme views to be found in the *Zhuangzi*.

Similar ambiguities exist with figures such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang (c. 223–262), who Balazs portrays as two of the most extreme nihilists in the Wei-Jin period, with the latter claiming to have "nothing but contempt for all the most revered heroes of Confucianism" (Balazs 1964, pp. 236–42), and both of whose works are filled with allusions to the *Zhuangzi*. Nonetheless, when Ruan came to compose his lengthy essay *On Understanding the* Zhuangzi 達莊論, he portrayed the text and its purported author not as radical "destroyers of Confucianism" but rather as its reformers, "infusing a kind of 'spontaneity' and cosmic awareness in what had become a vitiated and narrowed political dogma" and raising it back from a merely pragmatic instrumental system of governance to a spiritual philosophy of self-transcendence (Holzman 1976, p. 102). Given, then, that Ruan composed essays such as this and two on Confucian music and the classic *Book of Changes*, how can this be reconciled with his clear statements criticising ritual propriety such as "Surely you do not mean to suggest… that the rules of propriety (*li* 禮) apply to me?" (Balazs 1964, p. 238) and lengthy criticisms of apparently Confucian figures in his epic mystical poem "Biography of Master Great Man" 大人先生傳 (see Holzman 1976, pp. 192–205)? A possible answer can be found in Ruan and Ji Kang's letters in response to suggestions that they take up official careers from Fu Yi and Shan Tao 山濤, respectively. Although Ruan's letter first establishes an opposition between his own lofty self-transcendence and the "shameful" and "base attitudes" of worldly Confucians like Fu, he goes on to describe the latter as "like a man sunk in a puddle formed in an ox's hoof-print who is indignant because heaven's river, the Milky Way, has no end!" (Holzman 1976, p. 86). Ruan's disdain for Fu was thus not based on the latter's Confucian values themselves but rather on Fu's attempt to *impose* these values on him, rather than acknowledging that people have different spiritual planes of existence that cannot be equalised. In Ji Kang's letter breaking off relations with his former friend Shan Tao after the latter had recommended him for an official position, he makes his similar viewpoint even more explicit, describing at length his own individual character and how it developed, in part by his reading of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and how his idiosyncrasies make him eminently unsuitable for office, concluding that, "In relations between people, what is valuable is recognising their inherent natures, and thereby assisting them to develop it" such that each "finds its proper place" rather than imposing one's own preferences on others (Yan 1999b, p. 499, my translation).

For both Ruan and Ji then, the kind of criticisms of the *Zhuangzi* noted above are misplaced because they regard the text as proposing *universal* positions that would regard radical self-transcendence as a goal to be pursued by all and would regard a more worldly life of self-interest and official service as *wrong*, rather than simply as unsuitable for people with different natures and proclivities. Such a relativistic view is almost ubiquitous in the *Zhuangzi* text, although not usually explicitly couched in terms of self-transcendence but

rather of different animals having different preferences for food, habitat, shelter, mating, beauty, etc. (see, e.g., Lynn 2022, p. 43). When applied to self-transcendence, such a view is much more prominently expressed in Guo Xiang's (c. 252–312 CE) *Zhuangzi* commentary, as well as that of Xiang Xiu (c. 227–272; now mostly lost), on which it was based, in particular how both relativise the "free and distant wandering" of the *Zhuangzi*'s opening chapter such that it no longer refers only to the radical "non-dependent" (*wudai* 無待) state of the sage's self-transcendence but also to the "dependent" (*youdai* 有待) state of ordinary living things when they are able to attain a stable and satisfactory life suited to their inherent natures (see, e.g., Jiang 2019; Coles 2019). In Guo's commentary, this division implies a philosophical perspective in which the self-transcendence of the sage is effectively beyond the experience of all other human beings, who are left situated in an "in-between" liminal zone in which they are both unable to return to the primordial innocence of nature yet also unable to fully transcend the limits of their humanity and attain an absolute transcendence. Several of the Wei-Jin anecdotes recorded in *A New Account of Tales of the World* 世說新語 suggest that this view was, in fact, extremely widespread during this period, notably the response of pure conversation participant Wang Yan 王衍 when asked about his uncontrollable grief upon the death of his infant son: "A sage forgets his feelings; the lowest beings aren't even capable of having feelings. But the place where feelings are most concentrated is precisely among people like ourselves" (Liu 2002, p. 347). For Wang, Guo and other Wei-Jin literati then, one key value of the *Zhuangzi* text was thus that it enabled people to "taste" the sage's transcendent realm and attain some relief from the painful experiences inevitably found in human life and not that such self-transcendence could or should be regarded as an absolute goal for all.[2]

In relation to the more general accusations that the *Zhuangzi*'s critical comments on Confucianism were undermining social morality, Guo's commentary also developed an ingenious and influential hermeneutic method based on other passages from the *Zhuangzi* to absolve the text of responsibility: When the text appeared to be criticising and even condemning the Confucian sages, as in more radical chapters such as Chapter 8, "Horses' Hooves 馬蹄," it should, in fact, be understood as criticising the *ideas* and *records* of the sages, i.e., the "traces" or "footprints" (*ji* 跡) left behind by the original sages, by which means later non-sages attempted to emulate the practices and policies of the sages when they were no longer appropriate (Lynn 2022, pp. 193–94; see extensive discussion in Ziporyn 2003, pp. 31–61). This approach can be seen in many later attempts to defend the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* against such accusations, such as that of Li Chong (c. 300–365), who used the concept of "stale traces" (*chenji* 陳跡) to explain how Daoist methods represent the "pristine simplicity" of the "beginning", the constant "root" of which the various Confucian teachings of later sages are all the "branches", practices which must be maintained only pragmatically and not mistaken for "unalterable institutions" (Yan 1999a, pp. 557–58; see Hsiao 1979, pp. 648–49). As with the above approach to individual self-transcendence, such views effectively relativised both Confucianism and Daoism, regarding them each as valid within their appropriate limits and not beyond. Similar ideas can even be seen in the criticism of Wang Tanzhi discussed above, in particular his argument that spiritual self-sufficiency is only available to a vanishing few, while the majority must make do with more attainable Confucian rules of propriety. Already during the Wei-Jin period, this relativistic interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, as pioneered by Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang, received criticism from Buddhist thinkers such as Zhi Dun 支遁 (c. 314–366 CE), for whom it was essential that a mere secular life of material comfort and official service could not be regarded as ultimately satisfactory or salvific, and only the "perfect contentment" or self-sufficiency of the sage (interpreted through the lens of Buddhism) could be "genuinely transcendent" (Liu 2002, p. 116). While this was seen by Zhi Dun as a defence of the true meaning of the

Zhuangzi against the relativistic misreading of Xiang and Guo and was certainly greatly influential, it likely would have done little to ease the minds of those Confucian or Legalist critics who viewed the text as endorsing a nihilistic devaluation of worldly existence in favour of the absolute detachment of self-transcendence.

5. Nihilism and the Modern Significance of Wei-Jin Debates over the *Zhuangzi*

When Balazs characterised the main intellectual trends of the Wei-Jin period as "nihilistic revolt" and "mystical escapism" in 1948, he discussed the two aspects mainly as represented by "libertarians" and "libertines", whom he essentially regarded as two different and indeed opposed class expressions of Daoism: one, that of "peasant revolts" that aimed at a "Utopian ideal", and the other, that of disenchanted "intellectual circles" who merely discussed "Taoist ideas" (Balazs 1964, p. 232). Although he labelled the former as "nihilistic" and the latter "mystical", he made it clear that he, in fact, regarded both groups as simply "various manifestations of the nihilistic attitude found in all classes of Chinese society after the fall of the Han" (ibid.). From the above discussions, it should be clear that Balazs was not without justification in finding some form of "nihilistic" tendency in the reception of the *Zhuangzi* in Wei-Jin intellectual circles, at least, even if he did not define his concept of "nihilism" clearly, especially in relation to the existing Western concept, studies of which were still in their relative infancy. While the concept of nihilism had been introduced into Western philosophy by F.H. Jacobi in the late 1700s, it was originally intended to refer quite narrowly to "the alleged solipsistic consequences of all rational inquiry and criticism" in contrast to the irrationality of faith (Beiser 1987, p. 4), an epistemological sense which is clearly somewhat removed from the more existential "nihilism" diagnosed by Balazs in Wei-Jin China, which lacked anything directly corresponding to the faith/reason dichotomy.

By the time the concept was inherited by Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 1800s, its meaning had already shifted significantly to refer to a more general "absence of purpose and meaning" in existence once belief in "an essentially moral order can no longer be sustained", a concept that, even disregarding Nietzsche's own claim that it represents a "European form of Buddhism" (Nietzsche 2003, pp. 117–18), is far more potentially applicable to the situation of China during and after the collapse of the Han dynasty and its Confucian moral orthodoxy. As then taken up by Martin Heidegger in the 1940s, however, the concept was further developed to correspond to his own concept of metaphysics as the "forgetting of Being", leading to modern science and technology which deals with only "beings", and, owing to Heidegger's own engagement with Daoism, it is this sense in which "nihilism and tyranny reign supreme via the attitude of literalistic objectivity that leads to detached and controlled manipulation" that has been most often taken up by discussions of nihilism in the context of Daoism (Wu 1982, p. 46). Somewhat unsurprisingly, given its clear context of Western modernity and science, such discussions have tended to deny that such a concept could have any relevance to ancient Chinese thought, with Katrin Froese arguing that "What is immediately noticeable to the Western reader is that, while there is repeated reference to nothingness in [Daoist texts], there is virtually no trace of nihilism to be found", and that "The experience of nihilism is largely foreign to Daoist thinkers because they focus on nothingness as an opening, thereby privileging interconnection over individuation" (Froese 2006, pp. 141, 157). Similarly, Ge Ling Shang has argued that Zhuangzi was, like Nietzsche, implicitly aware that "scepticism, relativism, and finally nihilism are precisely the inevitable consequences of metaphysics" and that he thus resisted any urge to theorise about "any transcendent 'Lord' [or] Being behind, above, or *prior* to the apparent world in which we are living" (Shang 2006, pp. 118–19). While such comments may be ac-

curate with regard to the *Zhuangzi* text itself, they are far less self-evident in relation to its Wei-Jin reception, with Dark Learning thinkers such as Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) attempting to develop its ideas into a consistent metaphysical system which draws clear distinctions between concrete individual "beings" and the "radical transcendence" of the "non-being" or "nothingness" that lies behind, beneath or prior to them, albeit not in the form of an anthropomorphic deity or substance (see, e.g., Chan 1991, pp. 56–63).

The crux of such comments is that even if we accept that, as Steven Burik notes, "nihilism is only a function and problem of still thinking within the metaphysical structure", we should also acknowledge that "all language… is subject to the restrictions and dangers inherent in language", namely those of falling back into "the metaphysical structure" (Burik 2009, p. 171). Hence, while the *Zhuangzi* text itself may be able to largely avoid these dangers thanks to its literary style and reluctance to directly theorise about and explicate the *dao* with any consistency, the same cannot be said for those who choose to theorise about and explicate the *Zhuangzi* text itself into any form of consistent conceptual system, as the Wei-Jin thinkers did, notwithstanding that they did so in the classical Chinese language rather than a European or Indo-European language.

Perhaps more importantly however, as already suggested above, if any Western concept of nihilism could be applicable to the thought of the Wei-Jin period, it would be that of Nietzsche rather than Heidegger (or Jacobi), with his conception of nihilism as a "radical rejection of value, meaning, desirability" that is not caused by "psychological, bodily, intellectual distress" alone but that also requires some form of crisis of morality and belief in a moral order (Nietzsche 2003, p. 83). In this context, one of the most important analyses of nihilism for any discussion of it in the Wei-Jin period is that of Japanese thinker Nishitani Keiji, who took up Nietzsche's account in particular, arguing that nihilism is both "an existential problem" that "transcends time and space and is rooted in the essence of human being", as well as "a historical and social phenomenon" that represents "a sign of the collapse of the social order externally and of spiritual decay internally… a time of great upheaval" (Nishitani 1990, p. 3). For Nishitani, then, although it is true that the modern concept of nihilism is essentially "the product of a particular epoch, the modern period in Europe" (Nishitani 1990, p. 7), it is one that is potentially universal and can appear in varying degrees and forms in different contexts: "This is not to say that the awareness of the abyss of nihility found in nihilism appears only in the West. Quite to the contrary, it has been present in the East, particularly in India, since ancient times as a perennial and fundamental issue" (Nishitani 1982, p. 168). Indeed, according to Nietzsche's own discussions, while the extreme "third and final form of nihilism", that of "condemning the entire world of becoming [as] a deception, and inventing a world which lies beyond" is clearly somewhat more extreme than most literati views in the Wei-Jin period, the two lower forms, in which "the view that the transiency and becoming of the world have a definite, fundamental *purpose* ends up in disillusionment", and the "belief that binds human beings to a great totality that transcends the self" and "enables them to devote themselves to the welfare of the whole" is seen to be "merely a fictitious construct" can both find analogues in the state of social crisis at the time (Nishitani 1990, pp. 34–35).

Furthermore, it is also important to note that since the concept of nihilism is essentially a polemical one concerned with value judgments, what is at stake in the above discussions is not merely whether or not the thought of any particular Wei-Jin literati *is*, in fact, nihilistic but also whether or not it was *seen* as or *accused* of being nihilistic (life-denying or devaluing) by its contemporary critics. In this context, the introduction of Buddhism to China, including its merging with Dark Learning in the Eastern Jin dynasty, is of great significance to any such analysis.[3] As Nishitani himself acknowledges, although Nietzsche's view of Buddhism as nihilistic was vastly oversimplified and historically uninformed, there are key

connections between the development of the modern Western concept of nihilism and Buddhism, notably for example in the way in which, in Buddhism, "All attachment is negated: both the subject and the way in which 'things' appear as objects of attachment are emptied" such that "Everything is now truly empty, and this means that all things make themselves present here and now, just as they are, in their original reality" (Nishitani 1982, p. 34). As discussed above, a very similar conception of absolute detachment and self-transcendence was present not only in the thought of many Dark Learning figures but also as the target of accusations of nihilism from their critics, who regarded our customary "attachments" to worldly practices and relationships as absolutely essential.

6. Conclusions

In the Wei-Jin debates over the *Zhuangzi*, the text was understood as distinctively "philosophical", one whose literary charm and speculative complexity offered a form of radical self-transcendence that can be compared to those of Western philosophy, especially in its more traditional ancient forms as argued by, e.g., Pierre Hadot (see, e.g., Hadot 1995). For its critics, such advocacy of self-transcendence represented a dangerous and unrealistic detachment from the necessary attachments, relationships and responsibilities of social life, while for its defenders, it was vital that the *Zhuangzi* allow for at least the possibility of such self-transcendence, even if it were limited to a small minority of sages, since without this, the regulative functions of the Confucian political project itself would inevitably fall into self-interest and manipulation. Following the introduction of the concept to Wei-Jin studies by Balazs, this paper has argued that these debates can indeed be characterised in terms of "nihilism" and in a sense that can be fruitfully connected to Western discussions of nihilism, particularly those of Nietzsche that relate to the devaluation of worldly existence in the name of higher values and can even potentially be linked historically to Wei-Jin thought via the contemporaneous introduction of Buddhism to China. Such connections also align with the fact that, compared with earlier Chinese thought from the pre-Qin and Han periods, Wei-Jin Dark Learning has long been seen as representing a breakthrough from the "Cosmology or Cosmogony" of the Han dynasty to a new form of "ontology or theory of being" concerned with the "substance" (*benti* 本體) of the myriad things, as notably proposed by Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 in 1940 (Wagner 2003, p. 85), and it should perhaps not be surprising that this breakthrough would coincide with more radical forms of self-transcendence and accusations of nihilism.

Of note here is the fact that, in several of the critical responses to the *Zhuangzi*, such as that of Wang Tanzhi, it was precisely this "philosophical" aspect of the text (as received in the Wei-Jin period) that was objected to, while the self-transcendence of "distance" (*yuan* 遠) found in true sages such as Confucius was praised for its *non*-philosophical qualities of being directly "embodied" (*ti* 體) in practical social activity rather than being pondered in intellectual speculation and argument (Yan 1999a, p. 284). Self-transcendence would thus not necessarily be a problem in itself, provided it was fully applied and engaged in "immanent" service to family, society and state. Interestingly, such critical responses to the *Zhuangzi* at this time also, in many ways, reflect the "nativist" criticisms of "Western" interpretations of the text in the modern world, in which its speculative philosophical perspective and alleged promises of transcendence are regarded as "foreign" intrusions, and provide some grounds to suspect that such criticisms are in many ways simply playing out contradictions and debates that have been part of Chinese culture as far back as the *Zhuangzi* text itself. In this sense, the plea for coexistence given by Ruan Ji and Ji Kang to their more worldly contemporaries could well be extended to more broad contexts, in which the Chinese tradition is permitted to contain multitudes and not be reduced to a single "worldview" or set of fundamental assumptions.

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Notes

[1] Even where the *Laozi* was the direct target of criticism, as in Jin dynasty scholar Sun Sheng's 孫盛 "On Lao Dan [i.e., Laozi] Not Being a Great Worthy" 老聃非大賢論, it was his general focus on the "purity and quiescence" of "spontaneity" and criticism of ossified Confucian ritual that was objected to. The most vehement criticisms of Dark Learning as expressed by, e.g., Fan Ning 范寧 (c. 339–401), for whom the lasting corruptive influence of the movement pioneered by Wang Bi and He Yan was famously described as a worse "crime" than the "violence and evil deeds" of reviled ancient tyrants such as Jie 桀 and Zhou 紂, objected to aspects such as "arrogance" and a "facile tongue" that incites "libertine behavior" that seem to have more in common with the playful wit and rejection of public service found in the *Zhuangzi* than with the more restrained words and political focus of the *Laozi* (see Hsiao 1979, pp. 647–48).

[2] As one reviewer notes, the self-transcendence of the sage can, at least in Guo's reading, also be considered paradoxically as a realisation of his or her true, transcendent self-nature, with this self-nature simply being different from that of all other beings. In this sense, the sage's apparent self-transcendence perhaps only appears as such when viewed from the perspective of *non*-sages; for the sages themselves, they are simply expressing their own self-natures. For Guo, this approach is thus part of his general attempt to eliminate the need for any deliberate or forced transcendence, which only appears necessary due to misunderstandings and emulations based on historical records of sages' actions (see the discussion of "traces" below).

[3] It should be noted here that some scholars, notably Wang Xiaoyi 王曉毅, regard it as possible and indeed even likely that Wei-Jin Dark Learning was influenced by Buddhism as early as the *Zhuangzi* commentary by Guo Xiang, and possibly even the founding works by He Yan and Wang Bi in the Zhengshi period (for evidence, see Wang 2011b, pp. 133–41; 2011a, pp. 176–99). Needless to say, while not widely accepted, if confirmed, this possibility would change the entire scope and problem of this paper since the radical self-transcendence and accusations of nihilism against Dark Learning could both be considered as influences from Buddhism, thereby introducing questions of the relation between, e.g., Nietzsche's thought on nihilism and Buddhism.

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