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From “Blending Qi to Achieve Harmony” to “Supreme Harmony”: A Study of the Concept of “Harmony” in Yan Zun’s *Laozi zhigui*

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Abstract

While scholarship has predominantly focused on the “harmony” of Confucian ethics or the functional and generative “harmony” of pre-Qin Lao-Zhuang Daoism, this study identifies a unique conceptual system of “harmony” in Han Dynasty Daoism through a textual excavation of Yan Zun’s *Laozi zhigui*. Yan Zun transcends the relatively abstract generative narratives of pre-Qin Daoism by creatively substantializing “harmony” into “supreme harmony”, positioning it as a pivotal stage in the four-tiered cosmogonic schema of “Dao–De–Shenming–supreme harmony”. By regarding “supreme harmony” as the “ancestor of Heaven and Earth” and the ontological foundation for the nature and life of all things, Yan Zun endows “harmony” with a definitive ontological status. This cosmological and ontological category further permeates the domains of self-cultivation and state governance. In the realm of self-cultivation, Yan Zun advocates for “valuing the body and nourishing the spirit”, promoting the practice of spirit and *qi* embracing and tranquil non-action to achieve the existential realization and transcendence of individual life; in the realm of state governance, he criticizes rites and laws for harming natural harmony, proposing that the ruler should “embody the Dao and tread upon harmony”. This approach establishes a governance of non-action that aligns with the “utmost softness” of supreme harmony, thereby reconstructing an ideal political order where “harmonious *qi* flows freely.” The concept of “supreme harmony” advocated by Yan Zun not only marks the maturation of Han Daoist *qi*-cosmology, but also offers a new theoretical horizon for re-understanding the transformation of the concept of “harmony” from ethics to ontology in Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: Yan Zun; *Laozi zhigui*; supreme harmony; cosmology; ontology; inner sageliness and outer kingship



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1. Introduction

“Harmony” (和 *he*) is a core concept in traditional Chinese philosophy and serves as the cornerstone for Chinese civilization in constructing cosmic order and social ethics. For a long time, academic research on the concept of “harmony” has predominantly focused on the Confucian tradition. Scholars have largely viewed “harmony” as a virtue, emphasizing the use of moral norms and ritual institutions to adjust conflicts and balance differences, thereby constructing a harmonious social order and interpersonal relationships. As Chenyang Li emphasizes in *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, “Confucian harmony is a dynamic, generative process, which seeks to balance and reconcile differences and conflicts through creativity and mutual transformation” (C. Li 2014, p. 1). Similarly, Xujing Liu has analyzed the concept of harmony in ancient Confucianism from the perspectives

of cosmology, axiology, the theory of mind and nature (心性論 *xin xing lun*), and methodology, concluding that Confucian “harmony” is primarily manifested as a value pursuit within the ethical and political dimensions (Liu 2016, pp. 194–96).

On the other hand, while discussions on the Daoist concept of “harmony” have yielded fruitful results, driven by scholars such as Guying Chen and Liwen Zhang, they have also concentrated mostly on the pre-Qin Daoism of Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子. For instance, Guying Chen points out that “the Daoist view of harmony takes the vast matrix of existence as its background while basing itself on the exploration of the root of individual life.” He provides a detailed examination of Zhuangzi’s concepts of “heavenly harmony” (天和 *tianhe*), “human harmony” (人和 *renhe*), and “harmony of the mind” (心和 *xinhe*) to explain Daoist reflections on human harmony and social order (G. Chen 1986, pp. 42–55). Liwen Zhang provides an in-depth analysis of the “state of harmonious union” (和合境界 *hehe jingjie*) found in the ideal personalities of the Zhuangzi, such as the “spiritual person” (神人 *shenren*) and the “perfect man” (至人 *zhiren*), focusing on excavating the implications of harmony from the perspectives of spiritual cultivation and the philosophy of life (Zhang and Zhang 2025, pp. 118–26). Jie Yang also notes that while Daoism focuses on “heavenly harmony” cosmologically and “harmony of the mind” in terms of spiritual attainment, and Confucianism leans towards “human harmony” in the ethical world, both ultimately point to “a sublime realm where individual freedom and social harmony are unified” (Yang 2016, pp. 69–74).

However, between the philosophical breakthroughs of the pre-Qin period and the metaphysical speculation of the Wei-Jin period, Han Dynasty Daoism serves as a crucial transitional link, yet its theoretical construction of “harmony” has long remained on the margins of academic attention.¹ Although some scholars, such as Franklin Perkins, have noted the concept of harmony in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, arguing that it proposes a view distinct from the mainstream Confucian pursuit of a “grand unity” (大一統 *dayitong*) based on ritual order. Perkins suggests that the *Huainanzi* premises itself on pluralism, advocating that harmony does not stem from top-down unification but from the spontaneous adaptation of all things and humans according to their own characteristics and environments. Consequently, it supports decentralization, autonomy, and the diversity of cultural customs in political history, opposing homogenized control (Franklin 2022, pp. 43–67).

This research status quo—favoring the pre-Qin over the Qin-Han periods, and ethics over ontology—has to a large extent obscured the unique theoretical contributions of Han Daoism. In particular, Yan Zun 嚴遵, a hermit thinker of the late Western Han dynasty, produced the *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸. This work is a masterpiece of Han Daoist thought that creatively synthesizing ideas from diverse schools in its commentary on the *Laozi* (F. Li 2025). Furthermore, it constitutes a systematic construction of a hierarchical yet dynamic onto-cosmology that is both generatively powerful and logically rigorous, thereby revealing a fundamental architecture of Chinese metaphysical speculation (Michael 2025). In this system, “harmony” is no longer merely a description of the state of things or a Confucian-style moralized interpretation; rather, it is elevated to the height of onto-cosmology, becoming a key hub connecting the metaphysical Dao and the physical world. This paper aims to deeply excavate the text of the *Laozi zhigui* to explore how Yan Zun uses the concept of Taihe 太和 (“supreme harmony”) to complete the cosmological reconstruction of the Daoist concept of “harmony” and the unfolding of inner sageliness and outer kingliness (內聖外王 *neisheng waiwang*).

The selection of Yan Zun as the subject of this study is based precisely on his unique position as a pivot in intellectual history. Yan Zun inherits the principles of purity, stillness, and non-action (清靜無為 *qingjing wuwei*) from Laozi and Zhuangzi above, and inspires the Wei-Jin metaphysics trend of “taking non-being as the root” (以無為本 *yi wu wei ben*)

below, holding a pivotal position connecting the past and future in the history of Daoist development. Unlike the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, which draws eclectically from various schools, the *Laozi zhigui* is more dedicated to constructing a rigorous schema of cosmogony based on the text of the *Laozi*. In this schema, Yan Zun creatively proposed a four-stage generative sequence of Dao–De–Shenming (神明 spirit-illumination)–Taihe. This thought of viewing “harmony” as the cosmic critical point and the primal motive force of life, greatly enriched the connotation of the early Daoist concept that “blending *qi* achieves harmony”², and endowed “harmony” with ontological confirmation.

More importantly, Yan Zun’s contemplation of “harmony” did not stop at cosmological speculation; he established it as a universal law pervading every aspect of individual cultivation and state governance. In the vision of self-cultivation, the health and longevity of individual life depend on the Taihe of internal “spirit” and *qi*. In the realm of political philosophy, the ideal way of governance is the ruler’s simulation of the natural generation of heaven and earth through non-action, thereby returning the social order to a state of Taihe. This signifies that in Yan Zun’s ideological system, “harmony” is primarily generative, existential, and physical, and only secondarily ethical and political.

In summary, the concept of “harmony” in Yan Zun’s *Laozi zhigui* is a multi-dimensional category covering the cosmic origin, self-cultivation, and political order. It is both an inheritance and deepening of pre-Qin Daoist *qi* theory and a symbol of the maturity of the Han Dynasty cosmology of *qi*-transformation. Although Yan Zun’s interpretation of “harmony” possesses unique theoretical value, the current academic attention to this issue is relatively scarce.³ Currently, only two articles have been found that specifically discuss this theme: Jinghua Zhang reveals the implications of Yan Zun’s idea of “harmony with the times” for modern harmonious society theory (Zhang 2008, pp. 119–22), and Weibo Li explores Yan Zun’s view of cultivation and his state of harmony in detail (W. Li 2009, pp. 28–31). Beyond these, there is scarce research systematically excavating the unique value of Yan Zun’s Taihe thought from the height of ontological construction.

This gap in research undoubtedly limits our comprehensive understanding of the Han Daoist concept of “harmony”. This paper aims to fill this void. By proceeding from the three aspects of cosmic ontological construction, self-cultivation, and political philosophy, it seeks to comprehensively sort out the internal logic of Yan Zun’s thought on “harmony”. In doing so, it hopes to reveal his unique contribution to Han Daoist *qi*-cosmology and provide a new ontological interpretive horizon—distinct from traditional ethical perspectives—for understanding the concept of “harmony”.

2. Taihe as the Pivot of Generation and Existence

In pre-Qin Daoist philosophy, cosmic generation was often expressed as the abstract sequence of “Dao produced One, One produced Two, Two produced Three, and Three produced all things.”⁴ Although *Laozi* proposed the proposition that “myriad things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, and blend *qi* to achieve harmony,”⁵ he did not detail the specific status of “harmony” in this generative chain. By the Han Dynasty, with the flourishing of the primordial *qi* theory, how to bridge the theoretical gap between the “emptiness and nothingness” (虛無 *xuwu*) of Dao and the substantiality of things became a subject competing philosophers sought to resolve. In the *Laozi zhigui*, Yan Zun creatively substantialized “harmony” into Taihe and placed it in the core link of cosmic evolution, constructing a cosmology of *qi*-transformation with Taihe as the pivot. In this system, Taihe is not only the ultimate matrix of cosmic generation but also the immanent ontology by which all things establish their internal nature and maintain their existence. As scholars have pointed out, Yan Zun “broke through the Han cosmogonic model and entered the realm of ontology.” (Jin 1987, p. 405).

Yan Zun's greatest contribution to the cosmology of the *Laozi* lies in the fact that he did not simply follow the general *qi* interpretation of early Han Huang-Lao thought like the *Huainanzi*, but endowed "One", "Two", and "Three" with definite substantial referents, establishing a "cosmic evolutionary system with nothingness as the source and *qi*-transformation as the flow" (D. Wang 1984, pp. 60–66). In the *Laozi zhigui*, he states at the very beginning: "the origin of Heaven and Earth, the reason for species of things: Dao is the origin, De is the beginning, Shenming is the ancestor, and Taihe is the progenitor."⁶ This assertion is the general outline of Yan Zun's cosmology. Here, the cosmic origin is divided into four progressive stages: Dao, De, Shenming, and Taihe. Among them, Dao is absolute emptiness and stillness; De is the first manifestation of Dao, i.e., One; Shenming is the internal motive force of change (Ding and Gong 2021, p. 354), i.e., Two; and Taihe is the final undifferentiated state before cosmic differentiation, i.e., Three. Some scholar points out that this cosmology reflected in *Laozi zhigui* is not "differentiation" but "manifestation", where "the universe gradually manifests from extreme nothingness in the 'generative' process of becoming substantial and bright." (J. Chen 2016, pp. 5–11).

Yan Zun elaborated on this sequence in detail. Regarding the generative status of Three he wrote: "Two, by means of the nothingness of nothingness, generates Three. The Three Things arise together, chaotic and vast; one looks but cannot see their form, listens but cannot hear their sound... One clear and one turbid move together with harmony; the beginning of Heaven and humanity, without shape or boundary, rooted in the One and receiving mandates from the spirit (神 *shen*): this is called the Three."⁷ Here, Three is explicitly defined as Taihe. Yan Zun describes Taihe as a "chaotic and vast" state; although it is still in the formless stage of invisible and inaudible, it already contains the potential for the differentiation of "one clear and one turbid." In generative logic, it succeeds Shenming above and initiates all things below.

However, Taihe is not a concept indigenous to the *Laozi*; rather, it originates from the *Book of Changes* 周易. Originally referring to the harmonious *qi* formed by the blending of *yin* and *yang*, it was further extended to denote the highest state of harmony where all things coexist in coordination, becoming the ultimate social ideal pursued by Confucianism (Qiu 2011, pp. 29–35). Yan Zun adopted this concept, positing that Taihe represents a state of harmonious coexistence where the clear and turbid *qi* differentiated from Shenming have not yet completely separated. Although it possesses the attributes of clarity and turbidity and contains the material potentiality for generating all things, it has not yet solidified into concrete, tangible objects; thus, it remains a material state of absolute malleability. Since Taihe constitutes the final stage prior to the emergence of tangible forms, it must maintain a state of nothingness. If Taihe itself were tangible, it would merely be one object among many, unable to serve as the ultimate root of generation. Therefore, the nothingness of Taihe does not refer to an ontological emptiness, but rather to a formal state of having no visible signs, serving as the overall background for the flow and transformation of *qi*.

In Yan Zun's philosophical vision, without the link of Taihe, the metaphysical Dao cannot cross the gap to become the physical objects. Therefore, Taihe possesses ontological priority in cosmogony; it is the inevitable gateway for the universe to transform from potentiality to reality. If establishing the generative status of Taihe is Yan Zun's logical construction, then describing how Taihe unfolds into Heaven, Earth, and myriad things through *qi*-transformation is its physical implementation. Yan Zun inherited and transformed the pre-Qin theory of "blending *qi*",⁸ explicitly defining "harmony" as a kind of extremely high and subtle harmonious *qi* (D. Wang 2004, p. 10). In the *Laozi zhigui*, Yan Zun repeatedly emphasizes the material attributes of Taihe. In interpreting chapter 6 of

Laozi, he points out: “Taihe is subtle *qi*, wondrous as a spirit; it takes emptiness as its home and stillness as its norm.”⁹

The term “subtle *qi*” (妙氣 *miaoqi*) here is crucial. The designation “subtle *qi*” is used to reveal Taihe as an extremely refined primordial *qi* situated between metaphysical emptiness and physical existence. Its “subtlety” lies in its transformative function of generating being from non-being, nurturing the abstract Dao into concrete myriad things through the sympathetic interaction of *yin* and *yang*. It indicates that Taihe is not an abstract relational category but a real, pervasive, and refined substance. This “subtle *qi*” possesses characteristics that are wondrous and unfathomable and resides in the vast nothingness. It is precisely within this “Taihe is subtle *qi*” that the motive force for the separation of *yin* and *yang* is nurtured.

Yan Zun describes in detail the dynamic process of the universe evolving from Taihe to Heaven and Earth: “Three, by means of nothingness, creates all things. The clear and turbid separate, the high and low are arranged, *yin* and *yang* begin to distinguish, harmonious *qi* flows, the three lights revolve, and species are born. Those with complete forms that can be followed, and with sounds and colors that can be seen and heard, are called myriad things.”¹⁰ This passage clearly demonstrates the mechanism of Taihe generating all things: that is, “differentiation.” At the stage of Taihe, clear *qi* and turbid *qi* are mixed as one. With the unfolding of generation, Taihe differentiates internally; the clear becomes Heaven, the turbid becomes Earth, and then myriad things are gradually produced. This differentiation does not mean the disappearance of “harmony”; on the contrary, Yan Zun emphasizes that even after the separation of Heaven and Earth, harmonious *qi* continues to flow between them.

However, the *qi*-transformation in Yan Zun’s perspective is not a mechanical movement of matter, but an unfolding of a natural order imbued with value attributes. In discussing the nature of Heaven and Earth, he says: “Heaven’s nature obtains the clearness of the One, yet what Heaven does is not striving for clearness... therefore, *yin* and *yang* arise naturally, and changes correct themselves... Earth’s nature obtains the tranquility of the One, yet what Earth does is not striving for tranquility... Therefore, mountains and rivers arise naturally, and hardness and softness correct themselves.”¹¹ The “clearness of the One” and “tranquility of the One” mentioned here are actually the clear *qi* and tranquil *qi* derived from Taihe. Yan Zun believes that the reason Heaven and Earth can endure is that they have not departed from the origin of Taihe, but have followed the tendency of Ziran 自然 (Self-so) within the Taihe subtle *qi*. The formation of Heaven and Earth is essentially the condensation and expansion of the *qi* of Taihe in different spaces: the clear and light floats up to become Heaven, the heavy and turbid condenses down to become Earth, and what sustains both and keeps them generating endlessly is still the harmonious *qi* flowing between them.

Thus, Yan Zun constructs a picture of a *qi*-transformed world with one source but different names: Heaven, Earth, humans, and things, though different in form, are essentially different manifestations of the Taihe subtle *qi*. As he states, “outside Heaven and Earth, inside a hair’s breadth, endowed *qi* differs, forms and types vary, but all obtain the One of the One to be born, and all obtain the transformation of the One to be formed.”¹² “Obtaining the One” here means obtaining the “*qi* of Taihe” on the material level. As a primordial, undifferentiated *qi*, Taihe evolves the single substance into a colorful phenomenal world through its own movement of “change via reversal.”¹³ This theory greatly elevated the status of “harmony” in Han Dynasty natural philosophy—it is no longer merely the result of the harmonization of *yin* and *yang*, but the premise for the differentiation and operation of *yin* and *yang*.

Yan Zun explicitly points out that once myriad things are generated, they cannot exist independently and must constantly rely on the nourishment and maintenance of harmonious *qi*. This thought is concentrated in his interpretation of the *Laozi* verse: “myriad things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, and blend *qi* to achieve harmony.”¹⁴ Yan Zun believes that any specific life form is a temporary aggregation of *yin* and *yang qi* in a state of “blending harmony.” In the *Dao Sheng Yi Pian* 道生一篇, he not only cites this scripture but further elucidates the decisive significance of “harmony” for maintaining Xingming 性命 (nature-destiny): “the birth of Heaven and humanity is thus: form depends on *qi*, *qi* depends on harmony, harmony depends on Shenming, Shenming depends on Dao-De, and Dao-De depends on Ziran. Thus all things exist.”¹⁵ This is the classic expression of Yan Zun’s ontological logic, constructing an interlocking chain of life dependence. At the bottom is the tangible body, what supports the body is “*qi*,” and the key to supporting “*qi*” from scattering and perishing is “harmony.” The “harmony” here refers to the dynamic equilibrium mechanism formed by “blending *qi* to achieve harmony.”

What is “blending *qi*”? “Blending (衝 *chong*)” means the dynamic process of mutual impact and surging agitation between *yin* and *yang qi* (G. Chen 2006, p. 236). Only in the state of “blending” can *yin* and *yang qi* surge and blend, forming a new quality with vitality, namely “harmony.” This “harmony” is not static dead silence but a life rhythm full of tension. In the *De Yi Pian* 得一篇, Yan Zun proved the terrible consequences of “loss of harmony” from the opposite side: “if Heaven acts with intent... and moves not in accordance with the One... harmonious *qi* is blocked, the three lights are extinguished... the five elements are ruined, the hundred grains wither, and the masses suffer epidemics.”¹⁶ When “harmonious *qi* is blocked,” the cosmic life system collapses. Heaven is no longer Heaven, and myriad things encounter epidemics and death.

Yan Zun further internalizes this cosmic “harmony” into the “rectitude of life-destiny” of individual lives. In the *Shang De Bu De Pian* 上德不德篇, he describes the life state of possessing “superior virtue”: “Xingming is identical to Ziran, emotion and will embody Shenming, actions accord with Taihe, and choices accord with the heart of Heaven.”¹⁷ Here, “actions accord with Taihe” implies that every activity and every function of a living body should coincide with the primordial *qi* of Taihe of the universe. Yan Zun believes that the *xing* 性 (“nature”) and *ming* 命 (“destiny”) of myriad things are not isolated entities but the projection of Taihe on the individual. The existence of an individual is essentially the continuous flow of the *qi* of Taihe within the individual.

It is worth noting that Yan Zun also repeatedly describes the cosmic order brought about by Taihe: when *yin* and *yang qi* are in a harmonious state, the sun, moon, and stars operate normally, the four seasons follow smoothly, and all things grow luxuriantly; this is the image of the realization of Taihe. In describing a peaceful age or the normal operation of the universe, he also frequently uses phrases like such as “*yin* and *yang* are harmonious, myriad things reproduce,”¹⁸ “the heart of Heaven is harmonious, myriad things are abundant and ripe,”¹⁹ and “without laws and calendars yet *yin* and *yang* match, without the first day of the month yet the four seasons are regulated.”²⁰ All these emphasize harmony at the cosmic level: the order of celestial bodies, the succession of seasons, and the growth of life are all established on the balance and regulation of *yin* and *yang qi*. Conversely, when the loss of Dao and De leads to disharmony of *yin* and *yang*, there will appear “Heaven and Earth locked and knotted, *yin* and *yang* separated and closed, stars scattered, sun and moon fighting and eclipsed.”²¹

In short, because of the cosmogonic and ontological dimensions possessed by Taihe, it has become the basis for the existence, growth, development, and change of Heaven, Earth, and myriad things, providing values and standards for human society. A passage in the *Laozi zhigui* can be seen as a concentrated reflection of Yan Zun’s concept: “now, regarding

the relation of harmony to things... Thus, harmony is the function of Dao and De, the aid of Shenming, the regulation of Heaven and Earth, the dwelling of the masses, the essential of ten thousand directions, the repository of Ziran, the door of a hundred auspicious signs, and the household of ten thousand blessings... Why is this so? Because its generation of things is subtle, and its accomplishment of affairs is wondrous."²²

From this, it can be seen that in the cosmic ontology constructed by Yan Zun in the *Laozi zhigui*, Taihe occupies an important position. He elevates "harmony" from a harmony on the experiential level to the "Taihe subtle *qi*"²³ on the ontological level. In cosmogony, Taihe is the fourth great cosmic origin following Dao, De, and Shenming, and is the direct ancestor of Heaven, Earth, and myriad things; in ontology, Taihe is the mechanism of blending *yin* and *yang qi* and the fundamental force maintaining the life-destiny of myriad things. Through Taihe, Yan Zun successfully connected the metaphysical Dao with the physical myriad things. Moreover, this connection provided solid theoretical support for the cosmology of *qi*-transformation in the Han Dynasty while establishing an unshakable metaphysical foundation for the subsequent discussion on self-cultivation and state governance. This construction indicates that the essence of the universe is harmony. In this sense, the ultimate goal of all human practices—whether individual self-cultivation or long-term social stability—lies in returning to and holding fast to this cosmic ontology of harmony.

Placing Yan Zun within the intellectual map of the Han Dynasty, especially in comparison with the *Huainanzi* and the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 further highlights the uniqueness of his concept of Taihe. Although the *Huainanzi* also reveals the fundamental role of "harmony" from a cosmogonic perspective—stating, for instance, "of the *qi* of Heaven and Earth, none is greater than harmony. Harmony is that which attunes *yin* and *yang* and divides day and night to generate living things. ... An accumulation of *yin* leads to sinking, while an accumulation of *yang* leads to soaring; it is only when *yin* and *yang* interconnect that harmony can be realized."²⁴ And "the Dao is called the compass; the Dao begins in unity. Unity alone does not give birth; therefore, it divides into *yin* and *yang*. When *yin* and *yang* join in harmony, the myriad things are born."²⁵ Obviously, it primarily focuses on describing the dynamic mechanisms and generative phenomena of the interaction, fusion, and interplay of *yin* and *yang*. This presents a horizontal, process-oriented view of *qi* transformation, akin to a harmony of balance. In contrast, Yan Zun investigates the existential basis behind "harmony", substantializing it into a specific cosmogonic stage—Taihe—and rigorously embedding it within the vertical hierarchical sequence of "Dao–De–Shenming–Taihe."

Similarly, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 views "harmony" as the concrete process of generating things and the balanced state of the *yin* and *yang* of Heaven and Earth. He states, "harmony is what Heaven and Earth generate... Harmony is the rectitude of Heaven, and the equilibrium of *yin* and *yang*; its *qi* is the most excellent, and it is that from which all things are produced."²⁶ Furthermore, he often discusses "harmony" in conjunction with "the Mean" (中 *zhong*), asserting that utilizing "the Mean and harmony" (中和 *zhonghe*) is key to governing the world and cultivating the self. "The Mean is the terminus and the inception of Heaven and Earth, while harmony is the generation and completion of Heaven and Earth. Of virtues, none is greater than harmony; of Dao, none is more upright than the Mean. ... Therefore, for those who can govern the world through the Mean and harmony, their virtue shall be most flourishing; for those who can nourish their persons through the Mean and harmony, their longevity shall reach the full span of their natural destiny."²⁷

Dong creatively interpreted the concept of *Zhonghe* from the *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 (*zhongyong*), incorporating the prevalent Han theories of *yin-yang* and the Five Elements. *Zhonghe* represents the rectitude of Heaven and the equilibrium of *yin* and *yang*, serving as both the cosmic source of universal generation and the supreme principle for moral-

political order. However, in Dong's system, *yin* and *yang* are not equal concepts. He explicitly states, "Heaven's will is to constantly keep *yin* in a subordinate position... punishment is the assistant of virtue; *yin* is the assistant of *yang*."²⁸ This fixed relationship of "*yang* as master, *yin* as assistant" implies a clear value bias. Crucially, Dong interprets "harmony" specifically through the lens of Heaven-human resonance (天人感應 *tianren ganying*). He posits that with *qi* as the mediating vehicle, humans—and the sovereign in particular—can influence and even alter the generative transformation of the cosmos through their moral cultivation, thereby manifesting a perspective that imbues his theory with pronounced theological overtones (Liu 2016, p. 88).

Through the above analysis of the concept of "harmony" in the *Huainanzi* and the *Chunqiu fanlu*, it is evident that the "harmony" in the *Huainanzi* is essentially a dynamic generative process, emphasizing the activity of interaction, penetration, and fusion between opposing *yin* and *yang* forces—a focus on functional description. The "harmony" (or *zhonghe*) in the *Chunqiu fanlu* primarily manifests as an ideal value, serving as a behavioral standard and target state in ethics and political philosophy, attainable through subjective human effort. Conversely, the *Taihe* in *Laozi zhigui* is a concept with a distinct cosmological position and material attributes; it is the subtle *qi* existing before the differentiation of *yin* and *yang*, the direct matrix for the birth of all things. Ideologically, *Laozi zhigui* and *Huainanzi* align with Daoism, while *Chunqiu fanlu* aligns with Confucianism. Clearly, Yan Zun's *Taihe* differs from both: it transcends the functional description of the *Huainanzi* and avoids the theological tendencies of Dong Zhongshu, thereby establishing a unique position in Han thought by completing a philosophical construction based on natural generation as ontology.

3. "Harmony" in the Perspective of Self-Cultivation

In the cosmology of *qi*-transformation constructed in Yan Zun's *Laozi zhigui*, *Taihe* is not only the ancestral origin of the generation of Heaven, Earth, and myriad things, but also the immanent basis for the establishment and continued existence of individual life. However, how is this cosmic ontology concretely implemented in individual self-cultivation practice? Yan Zun did not stop at general preachings of the unity of Heaven and humanity, but established a profound learning of inner sageliness through a unique differentiation of the three categories of "body", "spirit", and "harmony". On the one hand, he vigorously exalted the value of the body, proposing the idea of "valuing the body" (重身 *zhongshen*); on the other hand, through questioning the essence of life, he dissolved the substantiality of the physical body, proposing the idea of "no-body" (無身 *wushen*). Between the tension of "valuing the body" and "no-body", Yan Zun found a key connecting point—"nourishing the spirit" (養神 *yangshen*). "Spirit" is the true master of the body, and the fundamental path to nourishing the "spirit" lies in returning to the original cosmic *Taihe*.²⁹

The logical starting point of Yan Zun's thought on self-cultivation lies in the re-evaluation of the worth of the body. Against the background of the prevalence of the doctrine of names and standards (名教 *mingjiao*) and the pursuit of profit and emolument in the Han Dynasty, Yan Zun inherited the remnants of Yang Zhu's thought of valuing the self (貴己 *guiji*) and *Laozi* "valuing great trouble as one values one's body"³⁰, placing the "body" at the apex of the secular value system to counter the alienation caused by external fame and gain. In the *Ming Shen Shu Qin Pian* 名身孰親篇, Yan Zun particularly emphasized the importance of the "body":

Lofty and illustrious, auspicious and filled with abundant virtue, deep, vast, and great, honored and exalted to the extreme, nothing is greater than life; all things displayed, strange and precious treasures, gold, jade, and pearls, with deep profit and huge gain, nothing is greater than the body.³¹

This discourse mentions “body” and “life” together, regarding them as the highest existence surpassing all “strange and precious treasures” and “gold, jade, and pearls”, In Yan Zun’s view, fame, position, goods, and wealth are all things external to the body, and only the body is the sole carrier of life’s existence. This theory of “valuing the body” constitutes the cornerstone of Yan Zun’s thought on self-cultivation. However, the body esteemed by Yan Zun is not the flesh and blood body in the physical sense. After establishing the supreme status of the body, he immediately stripped it metaphysically and performed a phenomenological reduction of the essence of the body. In the *Laozi zhigui*, Yan Zun often depicts this as the “body of no-body”. For example, “knowing contentment and knowing others, embodying Dao and unifying with De, severing fame and removing profit, I establish myself in no-body.”³² and “therefore, the sage establishes the body of no-body, embraces the heart of no-heart, possesses the possession of non-possession, and relies on the existence of non-existence.”³³ Using the metaphor of an infant to describe the sage’s state of containing virtue, he says: “living the life of no-life, embodying the body of no-body, using the use of no-use, and hearing the hearing of no-hearing.”³⁴

The so-called “body of no-body” does not deny the physical existence of the flesh but aims to transcend the attachment to the physical form in cognition and state of mind. Yan Zun profoundly perceived that if one is merely attached to the physical body, one will inevitably fall into the fear of death and the pursuit of sensory enjoyment, which will instead lead to the destruction of the body. The true body should be the ontological being of life that is unified with Dao and flows with *qi*. Furthermore, Yan Zun reveals the dual structure of life through the differentiation of “I” and “body”: “the reason I am I, is it me? I am like the body yet not the body. The reason the body is the body is because I exist; and the reason I am I is because there is spirit.”³⁵ “I am like the body yet not the body” implies that the core constituting the “true I” is not the visible shell. The flesh can be called a “body” because “I” exists within it; and the reason this “I” can become the master is that it possesses “spirit”. Thus, Yan Zun completed a key logical transformation: the root of self-cultivation lies not in nourishing the form but in “nourishing the spirit”.

Since the essence of the body lies in the spirit, the resting point of “valuing the body” must be “nourishing the spirit”. In the *Min Bu Wei Wei Pian* 民不畏威篇, Yan Zun explicitly proposed this proposition: “the rule of preserving the body nothing is more urgent than nourishing the spirit.”³⁶ The reason Yan Zun regards “nourishing the spirit” as the top priority for preserving the body is that, in his view, Shenming is not a spiritual consciousness in the general sense, but a fundamental force with a status in cosmogony capable of determining the survival of life. In the *Sheng Ye Rou Ruo Pian* 生也柔弱篇, Yan Zun defined the nature of Shenming and its dominant position in life in great detail:

There is a thing born together with the Dao, without form or sound, having neither color nor taste, nor smell or fragrance; it exits without a door and comes and goes without a gate... It is the beginning of Heaven and Earth, the ancestor of *yin* and *yang*; where it is in things, things exist; where it departs from things, things perish: having no name, it is called Shenming... Therefore, Shenming and sagely wisdom are the masters of constant life.³⁷

First, it points out the priority and transcendence of Shenming—“the beginning of Heaven and Earth, the ancestor of *yin* and *yang*”; second, it establishes the decisive role of Shenming for concrete things—“where it is in things, things exist; where it departs from things, things perish.” For individual life, Shenming is that “master of constant life”. This explains why Yan Zun considers the “body” to be “no-body”. The body is merely a temporary lodging for Shenming, while Shenming is the master that endows the body with vitality. If a cultivator only pays attention to the maintenance of the physical form while neglecting the settlement of Shenming, it is attending to trifles and neglecting the essen-

tials. Only by establishing the status of Shenming as the “master of constant life” can self-cultivation find its true handle. Therefore, Yan Zun emphasizes that true self-cultivation must shift from focusing on the external skeleton to focusing on the internal Shenming.

Knowing that Shenming is the master, how can one retain this “master of constant life?” Yan Zun’s answer is: one must create an internal environment that accords with the nature of Shenming. The core characteristics of this environment are “*tairan*” 泰然 (composure) and “purity and stillness” (清静 *qingjing*), which are the ultimate states of “harmony”. In the *Laozi zhigui*, Yan Zun repeatedly emphasizes that the retention of Shenming is not achieved by forceful retention through subjective human will, but by naturally following the laws of the great Dao. In the *Sheng Ren Wu Chang Xin Pian* 聖人無常心篇, he points out: “the reason the spirit stays with me is caused by the Dao. The art of relying on the Dao and the method of retaining the spirit take purity and stillness as the root and emptiness and nothingness as the norm; it is not something that the mind’s intent can achieve, nor something that thinking can effect.”³⁸ This passage reveals the methodological principle of nourishing the spirit. First, the departure or staying of Shenming is “caused by the Dao”, that is, it follows natural laws. Second, the method of retaining the spirit lies in “taking purity and stillness as the root and emptiness and nothingness as the norm.”

This actually requires the cultivator to adjust the body and mind to a state of emptiness and stillness similar to Dao, because only same frequencies can resonate, and only a vessel of emptiness and stillness can contain the dynamic Shenming. More crucially, Yan Zun points out that this state is “not something that the mind’s intent can achieve, nor something that thinking can effect.” This means that nourishing the spirit cannot rely on deliberate intent and thinking, because excessive mental activity itself is a disturbance to Shenming. True nourishing of the spirit is an intuitive realization and life settlement that transcends thinking. Yan Zun calls this life state after transcending thinking *tairan*. He further points out: “the essential of nourishing the spirit: nothing is more extreme than *tairan*.”³⁹ *Tairan* means a state of ease, broadness, and peace; it is the manifestation of “harmony” on the psychological and spiritual levels. When a person’s inner heart reaches *tairan*, his “spirit” is no longer tense, no longer pulled by external things, but is in a state of high harmony and self-sufficiency. This *qi* of *tairan* is precisely the soil most suitable for Shenming to dwell. Conversely, if the inner heart is filled with anxiety, fear, or wild joy, Shenming will feel uneasy and depart.

Implementing “nourishing the spirit” into specific daily practices, Yan Zun proposes a highly operational criterion: the individual’s behavior and demeanor must be consistent with the cosmic Taihe. He depicts the life atmosphere of the ideal personality, the “ruler of superior virtue”: “*xingming* is identical to Ziran, emotion and will embody Shenming, actions accord with Taihe, and choices accord with the heart of Heaven.”⁴⁰ Here, the phrase “actions accord with Taihe” profoundly embodies the essence of Yan Zun’s theory of self-cultivation. “accord with” (倫 *lun*) means order, comparison, and compliance. “Actions accord with Taihe” implies that every move of the sage possesses a certain intrinsic order; this order is not an artificially set norm of rites and laws, but a natural comparison and compliance with the primordial *qi* of Taihe of the universe. In Yan Zun’s system of thought, Taihe is the ancestral *qi* of cosmic generation and the source of harmony for all things. If a cultivator can make his actions accord with Taihe, it means his life rhythm has achieved isomorphism with the fundamental rhythm of the universe. In this state, the individual is no longer an isolated existence but has become a carrier for the flow of the *qi* of Taihe.

To elucidate this point, Yan Zun also combines his cosmogony to make a more refined division of human life structure. “My nature is endowed by the Dao-De; my life relies on Shenming; my completion depends on Taihe; and my form is entrusted to Heaven and Earth.”⁴¹ Here, Yan Zun analyzes individual life as a unity of four dimensions: “nature” is

endowed by “Dao-De”, which is the most transcendent level of life; “life” relies on Shenming, which is the dominant force of life; “form” relies on “Heaven and Earth”, which is the material carrier of life; and what connects these three and ultimately “completes” them into a whole living body is Taihe. The reason Yan Zun emphasizes that “my completion depends on Taihe” is that there is essentially a huge difference in clarity and turbidity, refinement and coarseness between the form and the spirit *qi* of Shenming. Without an intermediary, it is difficult for the two to bridge directly.

Only Taihe can serve as the medium for the blending of form and spirit. The *qi* of Taihe flows densely within the body, nourishing the physical frame outwardly and settling Shenming inwardly, thereby establishing human *xingming*. Furthermore, Yan Zun also explicitly points out: “the birth of Heaven and humanity is thus: form depends on *qi*, *qi* depends on harmony, harmony depends on Shenming, Shenming depends on Dao-De, and Dao-De depends on Ziran. Thus all things exist.”⁴² This chain clearly demonstrates the pivotal position of “harmony” in the continued existence of life. If “form” does not possess “*qi*”, it is dead matter; if “*qi*” does not possess harmony, it will be violent and scattered. Only when the *qi* in the body is in a state of harmony can life be maintained. Therefore, the primary task of Yan Zun’s theory of self-cultivation is to nurture this *qi* of Taihe, so that it does not become deficient or blocked due to interference from external things.

How can one realize “valuing the body and nourishing the spirit” and ultimately reach the state of Taihe of the “body of no-body”? Yan Zun proposes a set of practice theories centered on *tiandan* 恬淡 (tranquility) and “keeping to softness” (守柔 *shourou*). This is not only a requirement for moral cultivation but also a necessity for physiological health preservation. First is “tranquility and non-action”. Yan Zun believes that Shenming is the master of life, and the nature of Shenming delights in stillness and dislikes noise. In the *Shang De Bu De Pian*, he praises the ruler of superior virtue: “tranquil and non-active, virtue fills the mysterious domain; dark, silent, and lonely, transformation flows into the limitless.”⁴³ “Mysterious domain” is the spiritual mansion of the heart, and “limitless” is the great void of the body. Only when the inner heart is in a state of tranquility and dark silence can virtue be full, and the mechanism of life flow throughout the body. Conversely, if the inner heart is full of restlessness and anxiety, Shenming will be damaged, leading to the dissipation of “harmonious *qi*”.

“Softness and weakness” is another major feature of Yan Zun’s self-cultivation theory. He believes that “hardness and strength” are disciples of death and manifestations of the loss of harmonious *qi*; while “softness and weakness” are disciples of life and symbols of the fullness of Taihe. He advocates nurturing the spirit *qi* through “keeping to softness”: “therefore, Shenming and sagely wisdom are the masters of constant life; softness, weakness, emptiness, and stillness are the dwelling of Shenming.”⁴⁴ This sentence points out the internal mechanism of “softness/weakness” and “nourishing the spirit”: “softness, weakness, emptiness, and stillness” are the residence of Shenming. Only when the body and mind are in a relaxed, soft, empty, and still state can Shenming dwell peacefully within. If the body and mind are stiff and restless, Shenming will be forced to migrate. Therefore, Yan Zun’s art of health preservation particularly emphasizes accumulating softness and piling up weakness to maintain the *qi* of Taihe in the body. Through diminishing desires and keeping to softness, the cultivator will finally reach the ideal state where the spirit and *qi* embrace each other. This is a perfect fusion of body and the spirit on the level of Taihe.

It is not difficult to see that the concept of “harmony” constructed by Yan Zun in the perspective of self-cultivation is a system of life philosophy with progressive layers. First, through the dialectic of “valuing the body” and “no-body”, he establishes that the object of self-cultivation is not the fleshy shell but the ontological being of life centered on Shenming, thereby elevating self-cultivation from physical maintenance to the height of

spiritual transcendence. Second, he proposes the proposition that “nothing is more urgent for preserving the body than nourishing the spirit”⁴⁵, pointing out that Shenming is the true master maintaining the existence of life, while the physical form is merely the lodging of Shenming, establishing the health preservation principle of the spirit as root, form as branch. Finally, he concludes the key to “nourishing the spirit” as achieving harmony. This thought of Yan Zun, compared to pre-Qin Daoism, pays more attention to the combination of the material basis of *qi* and the dominant role of the spirit, pioneering the later Daoist internal alchemy of refining essence into *qi*, and refining *qi* into the spirit.

4. “Harmony” in the Sociopolitical Realm

Yan Zun’s political philosophy profoundly reflects the characteristics of Han Dynasty Huang-Lao Daoism, which integrates cosmology, the theory of mind and human nature, and the art of governance, ultimately leading to the practical goal of governing the body and the state simultaneously. Having discussed Yan Zun’s thought on self-cultivation in detail, we now turn to explore his ideas on state governance centered on the concept of “harmony”. In Yan Zun’s philosophical framework, politics is not an artificial construct separated from nature, but the extension and implementation of the cosmic Taihe order in human society. Since the creation and continuation of the universe depend on the flow of the *qi* of Taihe, the governance of human society must also follow this fundamental law. The core of the political philosophy constructed by Yan Zun in the *Laozi zhigui* lies in exploring how the ruler can use the means of Ziran and “non-action” to eliminate superficial interference and thereby restore the destroyed social order to a state of natural harmony⁴⁶. This political ideal of achieving great peace is essentially a grand return to the cosmic ontology of harmony.

In Han Dynasty political philosophy, the status of the ruler was exalted to the extreme, often regarded as the executor of Heaven’s will. Yan Zun believed that the ruler’s legitimacy as the master of all under Heaven stems not merely from the possession of power, but more importantly, from whether his life state can resonate with the “harmony” of the cosmic ontology. He established the ruler’s way of governance on the basis of “obtaining the one”. Borrowing the *Laozi* verse “the nobles and kings obtain the one to become the rectifiers of all under Heaven”⁴⁷, Yan Zun deeply elucidated the relationship between the ruler and “harmony”:

The nature of nobles and kings obtains the correctness of the One, but what nobles and kings do is not always correct. By discarding the mind and will, and engaging in non-action and no-affairs, they follow their nature; by discarding cleverness and brilliance, and responding naturally through emptiness and nothingness, they preserve their nature and destiny. Therefore, peace arises of itself, and all things correct themselves. Thus, they can embody the Dao and unite with De, and follow the same rule as Heaven; embracing the spirit and treading on harmony, they encompass all things.⁴⁸

This discourse clearly indicates that the establishment of political order does not originate from the ruler’s external forceful intervention, but from the charismatic field inspired by his internal cultivation. “Obtaining the One” means obtaining the Dao, which is obtaining Taihe. Yan Zun pointed out that the ruler’s nature originally inherits the correct *qi* of the great Dao, but without cultivation, his behavior often deviates from the correct path. Therefore, the prerequisite for governing the state is governing the body, and the key to governing the body lies in “discarding the mind and will” and “discarding cleverness and brilliance”.

Only when the ruler dissolves his personal private wisdom and will and enters a state of “responding naturally through emptiness and nothingness” will the *qi* of peace naturally

arise within his body. “Peace” here refers not only to the tranquility of the ruler’s inner heart but also to a political field capable of radiating to all under Heaven. “Embracing the spirit and treading on harmony” vividly depicts the posture of the sage-king: “embracing” indicates non-separation, and “treading” indicates practice. The ruler embraces Shenming and treads on Taihe, thereby being able to “encompass all things”. This means that the ideal political order is constructed not by external decrees or moral dogmas, but by the ruler serving as a massive energy center, summoning and absorbing all things into an orderly track through the *qi* of Taihe he radiates.

Yan Zun further pointed out that this state of “peace” in the ruler is the bridge connecting Heaven and humanity. Only when the ruler maintains himself in the Taihe state of responding naturally through emptiness and nothingness can politics accord with the way of Heaven. Conversely, if the ruler engages in action and violates this natural rhythm, it will lead to disastrous consequences. In the same chapter, he warns:

If nobles and kings engage in action and move not in accordance with the one... then the mind is disordered and the spirit confused, and affairs arise from the self; the hundred officials lose their duties, names and realities do not match; the myriad people do not come to submit, and Heaven and Earth are thereby cut off.⁴⁹

“Moving not in accordance with the one” is violating the natural rhythm of Taihe. Once the ruler acts recklessly and tries to arrange the world with his personal wisdom, it will lead to the blockage of harmonious *qi*. Thus, it can be seen that in Yan Zun’s political philosophy, “harmony” is not only a state of self-cultivation but also a decisive factor for political safety and the survival of cosmic ecology. Political chaos is essentially the blockage of cosmic energy flow. Therefore, the primary task of politics is not formulating policies, but the ruler’s own rectifying position, that is, returning to and holding fast to the “harmony” that serves as the cosmic pivot.

Based on the political ideal of Taihe, Yan Zun conducted a systematic and profound critique of the prevailing Confucian strategies of governance—*ren* 仁 (benevolence), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *li* 禮 (rites), and law. He argued that these moral norms and institutional frameworks, which gradually deviated from the natural essence, were intended to govern the world but were, in fact, often a mutilation and destruction of the natural harmony. In the *Shang De Bu De Pian*, Yan Zun detailed the logical chain of the degeneration of political order: “the root of emperors and kings, the Dao is the primordial beginning. When the Dao is lost, De follows; when De is lost, benevolence follows; when benevolence is lost, righteousness follows; when righteousness is lost, rites follow; when rites are lost, chaos follows. These five are the one body of the Dao and the strengths and shortcomings of worldly rulers. Therefore, what they do is not what they desire, and what they seek is not what they obtain.”⁵⁰

This sequence demonstrates the process of the continuous erosion of “harmony”. The stages of Dao and De represent periods when Taihe was remained thick and pure, and the myriad things existed in a state of undifferentiated wholeness. By the stages of “benevolence” and “righteousness”, biased preferences and subjective judgments began to intervene, breaking the natural integrity of the cosmos. By the stage of “rites”, formalistic and trivial ceremonies that lacked the support of the existential reality of vital energy replaced simple inner sincerity. Yan Zun pointed out sharply that “rites” become the beginning of disorder because they signify the complete rupture of the natural affinity between people, forcing rulers to rely on coercive means to maintain superficial order. Yan Zun believed that this historical degeneration is essentially the loss of subjectivity. In the era of Dao and De, both ruler and people were in a simple state of Taihe; but in the era of “rites”, this natural connection was severed.

Yan Zun's critique of "rites" was particularly profound, pointing out that the essence of ritual governance is "internal and external contradiction": "as for the practice of rites, the internal and external contradict each other; the flower flourishes while the fruit is ruined, the branches rise while the root decays... It is the end of governance and the source of chaos, where deceit and hypocrisy arise and contention and strife originate."⁵¹ Here, "internal and external contradiction" points directly to the destruction of "harmony" by "rites". True "harmony" should be a state where the internal and external are one and the root and branches are in accord the state of Taihe. However, "rites" emphasize outward trivialities while neglecting inner sincerity and simplicity, which in fact creates rifts between people and between individuals and society. Therefore, Yan Zun concluded that such superficial rites, devoid of their fundamental essence, are the origin of disorder.

Yan Zun did not completely deny the expedient role of benevolence, righteousness, rites, and law in specific historical periods, but he firmly opposed regarding them as the foundation of governance. In discussing the consequences of governance by a "ruler of superior rites", he said: "he forces people to do what they cannot do, exhausting the spirit and injuring nature; affairs are many and expenses troublesome; chaos is treated as order, and danger as peace ... the heart of Heaven is not regulated, the four positions lose their norm, thunder and lightning destroy and break, and all things die prematurely."⁵² Yan Zun believed that implementing harsh rites and laws is "forcing people to do what they cannot do", that is, violating the natural nature of the people. This practice not only "exhausts the spirit and injures nature" but also leads to "the heart of Heaven not being regulated" and "all things dying prematurely". Here, political misconduct directly triggers retaliation from nature, once again confirming Yan Zun's political philosophy of isomorphism of Heaven and humanity—destroying social "harmony" inevitably leads to the "disharmony" of cosmic ecology.

Furthermore, Yan Zun also had unique insights into the relationship between "punishment" and "harmony". Unlike some later extreme advocates of non-action who completely abolished punishment, he advocated that punishment must conform to the "harmony" of *yin* and *yang*. He mentioned: "laws and prohibitions are peaceful, orders and decrees are lenient and soft, measures are taken at the appropriate time, and all under Heaven rejoice. Thunder and lightning do not explode, wind and rain do not rise suddenly."⁵³ "Laws and prohibitions are peaceful" is the core of Yan Zun's philosophy of law. He believed that the use of punishment should be like the desolate killing of autumn and winter in nature, a link in the endless cycle of the universe, rather than a product of the ruler's rage. If punishment can conform to the timing of the waxing and waning of *yin* and *yang*, then it is part of "harmony"; conversely, if it is "exploding" or "rising suddenly", it is a trampling of "harmony". Yan Zun's ideal legal system is lenient and soft, just like the *qi* of Taihe, which, although divided into clear and turbid, has no perverse *qi*.

After criticizing the politics of action, Yan Zun depicted his ideal political landscape—a world of Taihe where "all things transform themselves". The core characteristic of this landscape is the invisibility of the ruler and the natural growth of the people. In the *Wei Wu Wei Pian* 為無為篇, Yan Zun gave a poetic description of the effects of "governance by non-action": "therefore, Heaven and Earth are billions, yet the Dao rules them; the myriad *yang* are bright, yet Heaven rules them... without models or forms, things govern themselves; without benevolence and righteousness, things attach themselves... The substance of the Dao is combined harmony; it does nothing to things, yet things transform themselves."⁵⁴ "The substance of the Dao is combined harmony" refers to the highly harmonious and unified ontology of the Dao. Because it does not interfere with things, things can develop and change according to their own nature. Politically, this means that the ruler should be like the Dao, hidden behind the scenes, not establishing complicated

models, not flaunting slogans of benevolence and righteousness, allowing the people to “govern themselves” and “attach themselves”.

This state of “self-transformation” is described in the *Dao Sheng Yi Pian* as the result of the “flow of harmonious *qi*”: “The clear and turbid separate, the high and low are arranged, *yin* and *yang* begin to distinguish, harmonious *qi* flows, the three lights revolve, and species are born.”⁵⁵ In political society, the “flow of harmonious *qi*” manifests as a sense of order without coercive force. The ruler’s presence is extremely low, and the people do not feel the weight of power, as if living in nature. In the *Shang De Bu De Pian*, he describes the society under the “ruler of superior benevolence”: “the ruler is like father and mother, the people are like infants; De flows to the four seas, possessing but not taking.”⁵⁶ The relationship between the ruler and the people is no longer a tense opposition between ruler and ruled, but a natural attachment like that between “parents” and “infants”. This attachment is built not on authority but on the inspiration of “De flowing to the four seas”. It is worth noting that the “infant” is a symbol of thick virtue in the *Laozi*; Yan Zun uses it to compare the people, intending to show that under the politics of Taihe, the people’s nature is not polluted by “wisdom and artifice”, maintaining a complete vitality.

When explaining the operational mechanism of non-action politics, Yan Zun also particularly emphasized the role of “softness and weakness” in maintaining this political harmony, profoundly connecting “softness and weakness” with Taihe. In Yan Zun’s view, political “softness and weakness” is not incompetence, but the manifestation of the *qi* of Taihe at the level of application—because of harmony, there is no contention; because of no contention, it is “soft and weak” yet can overcome the “hard and strong”. In the *Zhi Rou Pian* 至柔篇, Yan Zun explicitly defines the ontological attribute of “supreme softness”: “Taihe, clear and turbid, is supremely soft and formless; it wraps Heaven and Earth, contains *yin* and *yang*, manages all things, and nothing is not within its net... therefore, its style is called supreme softness, and its name is called formless.”⁵⁷ Yan Zun clearly points out that “supreme softness” does not merely refer to physical softness; its essence is Taihe. Because the *qi* of Taihe is formless and does not contend with things, it can “wrap Heaven and Earth” and “manage all things”. This is the metaphysical foundation of Yan Zun’s thought on harmony and weakness.

In concrete political practice, this “Taihe supreme softness” manifests as a governance style that permeates and embraces like water. In the same chapter, Yan Zun writes: “water penetrates metal and stone and sinks all things by means of its mud-like weakness; Earth achieves great merit and overcomes grass and trees by means of its softness and compliance... from this, we see that softness and weakness destroy the hard, and the void gallops through the substantial; it is not done by action, but is the nature of things.”⁵⁸ He uses “mud-like weakness” to describe the virtue of water, pointing out that this seemingly weak force can “penetrate metal and stone” and “destroy the hard” because it conforms to the Dao of “nature” and embodies the pervasive characteristic of Taihe. Implementing this in the ruler’s art of governance, Yan Zun advocates: “laws and prohibitions are peaceful, orders and decrees are lenient and soft, measures are taken at the appropriate time, and all under heaven rejoice.”⁵⁹ “Orders and decrees are lenient and soft” is the manifestation of “harmony and weakness” in administrative orders.

Yan Zun opposes harsh punishments and advocates that punishments and rewards should be “peaceful” and “lenient and soft”, like the operation of the four seasons in nature. He believes that only this kind of governance without violent *qi* can nourish the harmonious *qi* of the world, making the people feel comfortable and joyful. Through this administration of “peaceful laws and prohibitions” and “lenient and soft orders”, the ruler can create a political ecology of “accumulating softness and piling up weakness”.⁶⁰ When depicting this ideal state, Yan Zun says that although the state may have narrow land and

few people and the ruler “accumulates softness and piles up weakness, always staying behind the people”, the result is that “all under heaven go to him as if returning to father and mother”⁶¹, and powerful enemies cannot insult him.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the political philosophy in Yan Zun’s *Laozi zhigui* is a complete system with Taihe as the substance, “non-action” as the method, and “great peace” as the goal. Yan Zun believed that political legitimacy and effectiveness stem from whether the ruler can reproduce the cosmic Taihe order in his own life. The ruler is not only the holder of power but also the medium connecting the way of Heaven and the way of humanity. Therefore, he launched a profound critique of active politics, and constructed the ideal way of governance where harmonious *qi* flows. Yan Zun believed that the best politics is one that conforms to the tendency of self-transformation of all things. This political philosophy of Yan Zun profoundly reflects the thinking characteristic of Han dynasty Daoism, that is inferring the way of Heaven to clarify human affairs. He elevated “harmony” from an ethical aspiration to a political law with ontological binding force—without harmony, there can be no life, nor governance. This not only provided a deep metaphysical defense for early Han Huang-Lao politics but also laid a solid theoretical foundation for the pursuit of harmony in later Chinese political culture.

5. Conclusions

In summary, through textual analysis and the philosophical reconstruction of Yan Zun’s *Laozi zhigui*, this paper unveils the long-observed ontological dimension of Han Daoist “harmony”. Diverging from the prevailing scholarly focus on Confucian ethico-political harmony or the functionalist generative harmony of pre-Qin Daoism, the concept of “harmony” constructed in *Laozi zhigui* is not a mere descriptive state or social vision, but an ontological category of profound existential significance. With unique philosophical insight, Yan Zun transcends the vague generative narratives of early Daoism and creatively establishes a four-stage generative sequence: Dao–De–Shenming–Taihe. This construction not only bridges the logical gap between the metaphysical Dao and physical world, but also consolidates the ontological status of harmony as the cosmic critical point and the generative matrix of all things. Consequently, he successfully channels the natural harmony of the Dao of Heaven into the guiding principles for self-cultivation and governance, achieving a logical closure of the unity of principle between Heaven and humanity.

The further contribution of this research lies in delineating and restoring Yan Zun’s thought, allowing for a re-evaluation of his position in Han dynasty’s intellectual history and the unique paradigm of harmony he offered. For a long time, Han dynasty’s thought has been summarized primarily through the mainstream frameworks of the *Huainanzi* or Dong Zhongshu. However, situating Yan Zun within this intellectual map highlights his distinctiveness. While *Laozi zhigui* clearly inherits the cosmological legacy of the *Huainanzi*, its concept of Taihe represents a further substantialization and ontologization of the *Huainanzi*’s vision, upon which a rigorous and precise generative system was constructed. Similarly, Yan Zun’s Taihe, departs from the theological teleology and the resonance between Heaven and humanity characteristic of Dong Zhongshu’s *Chunqiu fanlu*. By adhering to the Daoist bedrock of natural non-action, he stripped away political and ethical overlays to restore “harmony” to its primal state of cosmic existence. Of course, the evolution of the concept of “harmony” in the Han period was not a simple linear process but a complex structure with multiple facets. It involved both the trajectory of deepening within Daoism itself and the dialogs and debates between Confucianism and Daoism—a broader inquiry that exceeds the scope of the present paper.

From the perspective of Chinese philosophical history, the excavation of Yan Zun’s concept of Taihe possesses vital transitional significance. On one hand, it inherits and

deepens the *qi* theory tradition of Lao-Zhuang Daoism, developing it into a mature *qi*-cosmology. On the other hand, by designating Taihe as the critical link between non-being (emptiness and nothingness) and being and emphasizing natural non-action, Yan Zun's theoretical framework constitutes an intermediary step in the transition from Han dynasty's *qi* theory to the Wei-Jin Xuanxue ontology of valuing non-being. Traces of Yan Zun's thought are discernable in Wang Bi's subsequent proposition of taking non-being as the basis. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of Yan Zun's concept of "harmony" not only corrects stereotypical impressions regarding the philosophical depth of Han Daoism, but also provides essential interpretive clues for understanding the transformation of "harmony" in Chinese philosophy—from cosmology to ontology, and from external order to internal state of mind.

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Notes

- ¹ Although there are a few individual studies involving the Han Dynasty, the overall number remains relatively small compared to Confucianism.
- ² 衝氣以為和. (B. Wang 2008, p. 117).
- ³ Thomas Michael touched upon Yan Zun's concept of "harmony" when discussing early Daoist health preservation thought, but the discussion remains limited. See Michael (2022). In addition, some scholars, while discussing related topics concerning Yan Zun, have touched upon this concept, such as Y. Chen (2012), Yuan (2018, pp. 116–26), Ding and Gong (2021, pp. 357–59).
- ⁴ 道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物. (B. Wang 2008, p. 117).
- ⁵ 萬物負陰而抱陽, 衝氣以為和. (B. Wang 2008, p. 117).
- ⁶ 天地所由, 物類所以: 道為之元, 德為之始, 神明為宗, 太和為祖. (Yan 2004, p. 5).
- ⁷ 二以無之無, 故能生三. 三物俱生, 渾渾茫茫, 視之不見其形, 聽之不聞其聲,一清一濁, 與和俱行, 天人所始, 未有形朕圻墉, 根繫於一, 受命於神者, 謂之三. (Yan 2004, p. 53).
- ⁸ 衝氣. (B. Wang 2008, p. 117).
- ⁹ 太和妙氣, 妙物若神, 空虛為家, 寂泊為常. (Yan 2004, p. 384).
- ¹⁰ 三以無, 故能生萬物, 清濁以分, 高卑以陳, 陰陽始別, 和氣流行, 三光運, 群類生. 有形嚮可因循者, 有聲色可見聞者謂之萬物. (Yan 2004, p. 54).
- ¹¹ 天之性得一之清, 而天之所為非清也.是以, 陰陽自起, 變化自正.地之性得一之寧, 而地之所為非寧也.是以, 山川自起, 剛柔自正. (Yan 2004, p. 27).
- ¹² 天地之外, 毫釐之內, 稟氣不同, 殊形異類, 皆得一之一以生, 盡得一之化以成. (Yan 2004, p. 25).
- ¹³ 變化由反. (Yan 2004, p. 32).
- ¹⁴ See Note 5 above.
- ¹⁵ 夫天人之生也: 形因於氣, 氣因於和, 和因於神明, 神明因於道德, 道德因於自然. 萬物以存. (Yan 2004, p. 48).
- ¹⁶ 使天有為, 動不順一,和氣隔塞, 三光消滅;五行毀缺, 百谷枯槁, 群生疾疫. (Yan 2004, p. 30).
- ¹⁷ 性命同於自然, 情意體於神明, 動作倫於太和, 取捨合乎天心. (Yan 2004, p. 10).
- ¹⁸ 陰陽和洽, 萬物蕃殖. (Yan 2004, p. 12).
- ¹⁹ 天心和洽, 萬物豐熟. (Yan 2004, p. 85).
- ²⁰ 無律歷而陰陽合, 無正朔而四時節. (Yan 2004, p. 80).
- ²¹ 天地鈐結, 陰陽隔閉, 星辰散亂, 日月鬥蝕. (Yan 2004, p. 86).

- 夫和之於物也，……故，和者，道德之用，神明之輔，天地之制，群生所處，萬方之要，自然之府，百祥之門，萬福之戶也。故，智者見之謂之智，仁者見之謂之仁，天下以之日夜不釋，莫之能規。夫何故哉？以其生物微而成事妙也。 (Yan 2004, p. 331).
- 太和妙氣。 (Yan 2004, p. 384).
- 天地之氣，莫大於和。和者，陰陽調，日夜分，而生物。……積陰則沈，積陽則飛，陰陽相接，乃能成和。 (He 1998, p. 934).
- 道曰規，道始於一，一而不生，故分而為陰陽，陰陽合和而萬物生。 (He 1998, p. 244).
- 和者，天地之所生成也。……和者，天之正也，陰陽之平也，其氣最良，物之所生也。 (Dong 1992, pp. 444–46).
- 中者，天地之所終始也；而和者，天地之所生成也。夫德莫大於和，而道莫正於中。……是故能以中和理天下者，其德大盛；能以中和養其身者，其壽極命。 (Dong 1992, pp. 444–45).
- 天之志，常置陰空處，稍取之以為助。故刑者德之輔，陰者陽之助也。 (Dong 1992, p. 336).
- Relevant studies have noted the importance of “harmony” to Yan Zun’s view on self-cultivation, but their focus and approach differ from this paper. See W. Li (2009, pp. 28–31).
- 貴大患若身。 (B. Wang 2008, p. 28).
- 崇高顯榮，吉祥盛德，深閔浩大，尊崇窮極，莫大乎生；萬物陳列，奇怪珍寶，金玉珠璧，利深得巨，莫大乎身。 (Yan 2004, p. 68).
- 知足知人體道同德，絕名除利，立我於無身。 (Yan 2004, p. 73).
- 是以聖人，建無身之身，懷無心之心，有無有之有，託無存之存。 (Yan 2004, p. 114).
- 生不生之生，身無身之身，用無用之用，聞無聞之聞。 (Yan 2004, p. 162).
- 我之所以為我者，豈我也哉？我猶為身者非身。身之所以為身者，以我存也；而我之所以為我者，以有神也。 (Yan 2004, pp. 112–13).
- 存身之道莫急乎養神。 (Yan 2004, p. 293).
- 有物俱生，無有形聲，既無色味，又不臭香；出入無戶，往來無門，……為天地始，陰陽祖宗，在物物存，去物物亡：無以名之，號曰神明。……故神明聖智者，常生之主也。 (Yan 2004, p. 323).
- 神之所以留我者，道使然也。託道之術，留神之方，清靜為本，虛無為常，非心意之所能致，非思慮之所能然也。 (Yan 2004, p. 113).
- 養神之要莫甚乎泰然。 (Yan 2004, p. 293).
- See Note 17 above.
- 我性之所稟為我者，道德也；其所假而生者，神明也；其所因而成者，太和也；其所託而形者，天地也。 (Yan 2004, p. 68).
- See Note 15 above.
- 恬淡無為而德盈於玄域，玄默寂寥而化流於無極。 (Yan 2004, p. 10).
- 故神明聖智者，常生之主也；柔弱虛靜者，神明之府也。 (Yan 2004, p. 323).
- See Note 36 above.
- Some scholars have discussed Yan Zun’s political philosophy in detail around the two concepts of Ziran and “non-action”, but have not touched upon the relationship between his political philosophy and “harmony”. See Ding (2018, pp. 53–64).
- 侯王得一以為天下正。 (B. Wang 2008, p. 106).
- 侯王之性得一之正，而侯王之所為非正也。去心去志，無為無事，以順其性；去聰去明，虛無自應，以保其命。是以，和平自起，萬物自正。故能體道合德，與天同則；抱神履和，包里萬物。 (Yan 2004, p. 28).
- 使侯王有為，動不順一，……扰乱迷惑，事由己出；百官失中，喪其名實；萬民不歸，天地是絕。 (Yan 2004, p. 30).
- 帝王根本，道為元始。道失而德次之，德失而仁次之，仁失而義次之，義失而禮次之，禮失而亂次之。凡此五者，道之以一體而世主之所長短也。故，所為非其所欲也，所求非其所得也。 (Yan 2004, pp. 19–20).
- 夫禮之為事也，中外相違，華盛而實毀，末隆而本衰，……為治之末，為亂之元，詐偽所起，忿爭所因。 (Yan 2004, p. 20).
- 強人所不能行，勞神傷性，事眾費煩，亂得以治，危得以寧。知故通達，醇慤消亡，大道滅絕，仁德不興；天心不治，四位失常，雷霆毀折，萬物夭傷。 (Yan 2004, p. 18).
- 法禁平和，號令寬柔，舉措得時，天下歡喜。雷霆不暴作，風雨不卒起。 (Yan 2004, p. 15).
- 故，天地億萬，而道王之；眾陽赫赫，而天王之；……無有法式，而物自治焉；不為仁義，而物自附焉。……體道合和，無以物為，而物自為之化。 (Yan 2004, p. 250).
- 清濁以分，高卑以陳，陰陽始別，和氣流行，三光運，群類生。 (Yan 2004, p. 54).
- 君如父母，民如嬰兒，德流四海，有而不取。 (Yan 2004, p. 15).
- 清濁太和至柔無形，包裹天地，含囊陰陽，經紀萬物，無不維綱。……故字曰至柔，名曰無形。 (Yan 2004, p. 59).
- 水以淖弱貫金石，沉萬物；地以柔順成大功，勝草木。……由此觀之，柔弱弊堅，虛者馳實，非有為之，自然之物也。 (Yan 2004, p. 60).
- 法禁平和，號令寬柔，舉措得時，天下歡喜。 (Yan 2004, p. 15).
- 累柔積弱。 (Yan 2004, p. 60).
- 累柔積弱，常在民後……天下往之，若歸父母。 (Yan 2004, p. 60).

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