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Life-Wandering and Death-Return of Liezi with Cross-Comparison to Plato's Soul-Journey

Yufeng Yang and Xiangfei Bao *

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China; theayang@whu.edu.cn
* Correspondence: baoxiangfei@whu.edu.cn

Abstract

The *Liezi* constitutes an important link between the Lao-Zhuang tradition and later Daoism, yet it has long remained marginal in scholarship due to controversies surrounding its provenance. Moving beyond debates over textual authenticity, this article examines Liezi's reflections on life and death through a comparative dialogue with Plato's account of the soul's journey with *you* 游 as a bridging notion. In the *Liezi*, life is construed as a temporary wandering and death an inevitable return. This understanding weakens fixed subjectivity and normative structures, articulating a mode of cultivation that emphasizes accommodation, detachment, and the coexistence with the myriad things in a quasi-religious cosmos. In Plato, by contrast, the soul persists as a moral subject journeying between the sensible and intelligible worlds. It is integrated into a religious cosmic order that unites epistemic with ethical dimensions and is ultimately oriented toward its purification and return to the intelligible world. The comparison reveals a structural divergence between the two thinkers in the ultimate placement of human existence, while also demonstrating how cross-cultural comparison can generate mutually illuminating insights and reopen reflection on the *Liezi*'s place in intellectual history.

Keywords: Liezi; Plato; life and death; wandering; journey

1. Introduction

The *Liezi* 列子 is one of the major Daoist classics. However, unlike the extensively studied *Daodejing* 道德經 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子, it has long remained on the margins of scholarly inquiry. As Ames (2011, p. 1) observes, the *Liezi* is "one of the most understudied texts in the classical Chinese corpus." In the limited existing studies on the *Liezi*, the majority are also constrained by debates over its authorship and textual authenticity (Z. Liu 1997; Zhu 2010; Gao 1985, pp. 24–25; Song 1926; W. Yang 2016; W. Chen 1924; B. Yang 1984; Mou 1986; Yan 1994; Ma 2000; Takeuchi 1929; Graham 1986). The *Liezi* has frequently been undervalued, if not outright dismissed, based on what it is presumed not to be, rather than being interpreted on its own terms (Ames 2011, p. 1). Extended discussions of authenticity have significantly hindered substantive engagement with the text's content (Qi 2021; Zhang 2022).

Although some scholars have given the *Liezi* relatively fair evaluations[1] and have sought to highlight its place in intellectual history, such as its intermediary position and theoretical significance[2], research that truly focuses on its textual content remains rare. Compared with other Daoist classics, however, the *Liezi* offers a more concentrated discussion of cosmogony grounded in the formless Dao. As Michael (2011, p. 108) persuasively argues, such discussion expresses the relevant thoughts found in the early Daoist texts

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more genuinely than later commentaries on the *Daodejing* or the *Zhuangzi*. It is therefore necessary to revisit the content of this Daoist classic to reassess its significance and standing within the global map of religious thought. Clearly, a direct analysis of the text alone cannot achieve this goal. Hence, in this article, to better highlight Liezi's significance and position in the world religious landscape, we adopt a Sino-Western comparative framework. The comparative strategy we employ differs from the common approach of viewing B from the perspective of A; instead, it is a cross-comparative method. Methodologically, this cross-comparison more effectively avoids the biases inherent in either Western or Eastern centrism.

The article selects Plato as the counterpart to Liezi in this cross-comparative analysis. In Western thought, Plato is considered a key figure. As Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) famously remarked, the entire Western philosophical tradition can be understood as a series of footnotes to Plato (Whitehead 1978, p. 39). Plato not only established the basic orientation of Western metaphysics; his thought, moreover, constitutes the background and theoretical foundation of Western philosophical thinking.[3] Given the profound significance of Plato's thought in the history of Western intellectual tradition, a cross-comparative study of Liezi and Plato serves two key purposes. On the one hand, it can reinstate the long-overlooked Chinese text to a central position on the global map of religious thought. On the other hand, it can foster a less biased dialogue between two representative figures from distinct cultural and philosophical traditions. Such a cross-comparison allows us to illuminate, with robust textual evidence, certain fundamental divergences between Chinese and Western thought, particularly in their respective religious dimensions.[4]

In both the *Liezi* and Plato, reflections on the world, life, and death are intrinsically bound up with a notion of transcendent order[5] and its relation to human beings. And this relational dimension constitutes the central concern of the study of religion[6]. In Plato's dialogues, discussions of the soul, the Forms, and the cosmos are consistently intertwined with theological language and religious imagery. To strip these elements from the texts is to forfeit a crucial dimension of interpretation and, as Nightingale (2021, p. 8) argues, to risk misrepresenting the philosophical whole of Plato. Approaching Plato from the perspective of religion is, therefore, not only essential for grasping the full scope of his project but also historically warranted.[7] Suppose Plato's thought cannot be adequately understood without attending to its religious dimension; the same holds for the *Liezi*. On the one hand, the *Liezi* is included in the *Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Era* (正統道藏 *Zhengtong Daozang*) and thus belongs to the Daoist religious literature. On the other hand, later Daoist religious traditions also drew extensively on the *Liezi* in constructing their own doctrinal frameworks. As Li (1991) has shown, Daoist scriptures frequently draw on Liezi's accounts of cosmogony, its narrative models of immortals, and its reflections on destiny, the void, and self-cultivation. From this perspective, approaching the *Liezi* through a religious or, more appropriately, a quasi-religious[8] lens is both textually grounded and supported by its conceptual content.

In both traditions, the understanding of life and death can be approached through the notion of *you* 游[9], which means "wandering" or "journey," though in fundamentally different ways.[10] In the *Liezi*, the myriad things unfold within a cyclical pattern of life-wandering and death-return. In contrast, Plato's conception of life and death is mainly articulated through the soul's journey. *You* may therefore provide us with a productive entry point for comparing the conceptions of life and death in the *Liezi* and Plato. Proceeding from the notion of *you* and drawing on both the *Liezi* and the Platonic dialogues, this article seeks to elucidate the fundamental differences in Chinese and Western understandings of life and death as well as their respective religious orientations.

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The analysis unfolds in two stages. It first demonstrates the respective religious frameworks and conceptions of life and death of the two thinkers. It then adopts a cross-comparative approach in which each serves as a point of reference for the other, using the notion of *you* as a bridge to foreground their underlying divergences. Through this bidirectional comparative method, the position of the *Liezi* within the global map of religious thought can be more clearly delineated, thereby opening a new path for its study beyond the longstanding paradigm of authenticity debates.

2. The Respective Religious Framework of Liezi and Plato

In the *Liezi*, life and death appear as successive phases within the broad process of natural transformation. And life, understood as a form of wandering, ultimately returns to death. In Plato's thought, by contrast, the soul's journey extends across life and death. We can see that neither Liezi nor Plato treats death as an absolute end; both situate it within an ongoing process. This resemblance, however, remains only formal and does not imply that their understandings of death are commensurable. A fundamental divergence remains.

To account for this divergence, it may be beneficial to inquire into their understanding of the world, since death is not an isolated issue; its meaning depends on the place of individual existence within the overall order and on its ultimate belonging. In other words, the contrast between Liezi and Plato in their respective constructions of world order forms the deeper ground of their differing views of death. Therefore, it is not only helpful but also necessary to examine the different conceptions of the world order in the *Liezi* and Plato.

The *Liezi* demonstrates its cosmology through a differentiation between the formless Dao and the myriad things. Dao and the myriad things belong to a single, continuous process of transformation, and their differences mark merely stages or levels within that process rather than an ontological break. Dao, the formless, is temporally before the myriad things and serves as the source of their generation and transformation. As the opening chapter "Tianrui" 天瑞 describes:

> There was the Great Change, there was a Primal Commencement, there were Primal Beginnings, there was a Primal Material. By the Great Change, the *qi* 氣 could not be seen. The Primal Commencement was the appearance of the *qi*. The Primal Beginnings were the *qi* beginning to assume shape. The Primal Material was the *qi* when it began to assume qualities. *Qi*, shape, and qualities were complete, but were not yet separated from each other; hence the name 'undifferentiated whole.' 'Undifferentiated whole' means that the myriad things were mixed and not yet separated from each other. Looking, you do not see it, listening, you do not hear it, groping, you do not touch it; hence the name 'Simple'. The Simple had no shape nor bounds, the Simple altered and became one, and from one altered to sevenfold, from sevenfold to ninefold. Becoming ninefold is the last of the alterations of the *qi*. Then it reverted to unity; unity is the beginning of the alterations of shape. The pure and light rose to become heaven, the muddy and heavy fell to become earth, and the *qi* that harmoniously blended both became man. Hence, the essences contained by heaven and earth, and the birth and changing of the myriad things.[11] (Graham 1990, pp. 18–19)
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> 有太易，有太初，有太始，有太素。太易者，未見氣也；太初者，氣之始也；太始者，形之始也；太素者，質之始也。氣形質具而未相離，故曰渾淪。渾淪者，言萬物相渾淪而未相離也。視之不見，聽之不聞，循之不得，故曰易也。易無形埒，易變而為一，一變而為七，七變而為九。九變者，究也；乃復變而為一。一者，形變之始也。清輕者上為天，濁重者下為地，衝和氣者為人；故天地含精，萬物化生。 (Ye 2011, p. 4)

From this passage, we can see that Dao does not stand outside the world as a separate transcendent entity; rather, it functions as the generative source and driving force of the process itself, as the *Liezi* states, "There are the born and the Unborn, the changing and the Unchanging. The Unborn can give birth to the born, the Unchanging can change the changing" (有生不生，有化不化。不生者能生生，不化者能化化) (Graham 1990, p. 17; Ye 2011, p. 2). Dao is thus not born or changed by anything else, yet it generates and transforms all things. In this respect, Dao does possess a certain kind of transcendence[12] relative to myriad things. This transcendence, however, does not mean its separation from the world of the myriad things. Instead, it lies in Dao's role as the source and dynamic of the ongoing transformation. Dao and the myriad things remain within a single whole and participate together in an unceasing process of generation and change. Moreover, the relation between Dao and the myriad things in the *Liezi* follows a cyclical pattern of generation and return rather than a one-way dependence, as the text states, "Whatever is born reverts to being unborn, whatever has shape reverts to being shapeless" (有生則復於不生，有形則復於無形) (Graham 1990, p. 23; Ye 2011, p. 11). The myriad things arise from Dao and ultimately return to it.[13] Ernst Faber (1839–1899)'s rendering of Dao as "natura non naturata" and "natura naturans," therefore, does capture an important aspect of the *Liezi*'s view, since the changing and the unchanging are compressed into the same nature (Faber 1877, p. 2). Although the *Liezi* does not posit a fully separate, transcendent realm, nor elevate Dao into an absolute other, it still offers a coherent account of how all things find their place within an overall order. In this sense, the world order articulated in the *Liezi* may be understood as a quasi-religious configuration characterized by internal transcendence.

By contrast, Plato's cosmological structure rests on the well-known "doctrine of two worlds" (Horn et al. 2017, p. 367): the intelligible realm of Forms and the sensible realm. As stated in *Timaeus*, "The former is grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is"[14] (τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὄν, τὸ δ᾽ αὖ δόξῃ μετ᾽ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν, γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν) (Plato 1997, p. 1234; 1903, Τίμαιος 28a). The two realms are therefore fundamentally distinct. The intelligible realm, as the domain of what fully is, is eternal, unchanging, and absolutely transcendent, and Plato accords it a certain degree of divine status.[15] The sensible world, by contrast, remains incomplete and unstable, continually caught in processes of generation and dissolution. More importantly, the relation between the two is asymmetric: the sensible world derives its existence through imitation of the intelligible, whereas the Forms do not arise from empirical things. This is further illustrated in *Phaedo* through the discussion of equality (Plato 1997, p. 66; 1903, Φαίδων 75b). It shows that the experience of equality or inequality among sensible things presupposes prior knowledge of the Form of Equal itself. In this sense, the Forms precede sensory experience and are not abstracted from it. Plato thus posits a domain that lies entirely beyond the empirical world and serves as its ontological ground. Locating the ultimate foundation outside the realm of experience gives his world order a pronounced character of external transcendence.

If religion is understood as a relational construct that links human beings to a transcendent order, then both Plato's and Liezi's world order may be regarded as a religious framework, since each situates human beings within a larger whole and addresses the ultimate place and destiny of human existence in relation to a higher order. The difference, however, lies in the mode of transcendence that structures the relationship between human beings and this higher order. In Plato's philosophy, the realm of Forms stands in a relation of absolute external transcendence to the sensible world, and therefore constitutes with the sensible world a fully religious framework. In the *Liezi*, by contrast, the

relationship between the formless Dao and the myriad things is characterized by immanent transcendence. For this reason, the *Liezi* cannot be regarded as embodying a religious order in the same absolute sense as Plato's. Nevertheless, insofar as it still presupposes a transcendent dimension that orients human existence, we provisionally describe it as a quasi-religious framework.

3. *You* as a Bridge Between Two Divergent Conceptions of Life and Death

Within these two distinct religious cosmologies, life and death acquire fundamentally different meanings. As a central image that traverses both life and death, *you* provides a crucial analytical pivot that sharpens the divergence between Liezi and Plato. To render this difference more clearly visible, the following analysis takes *you* as a bridging notion to illuminate the respective conceptions of life and death in the *Liezi* and Plato.

3.1. Liezi's Life-Wandering and Death-Return

In the *Liezi*, life and death are understood as different phases within the process of natural transformation. Liezi regards the dead as those who "have gone back" (歸人 *guiren*) and the living as "travelers" (行人 *xingren*) (Ye 2011, p. 17). Accordingly, life is understood as a process of wandering (traveling), whereas death is construed as a return (going back). However, Liezi's view of life-wandering and death-return does not designate a transcendent destination in an otherworldly sense. Rather, it situates the myriad things within a self-sufficient cosmos, in which the meaning of life and death no longer depends upon an externally posited ultimate end, but instead becomes comprehensible within the ongoing process of transformation itself.

Although the *Liezi* does not provide explicit definitions of life and death, certain implicit determinations can be discerned from relevant discussions. As the section above has demonstrated, all concrete things possess life insofar as they partake of the vital *qi* of Heaven and Earth, thereby undergoing development and change. In the case of human beings, they are constituted through the harmonious blending of clear, light *qi* and muddy, heavy *qi*; these two kinds of *qi* form the fundamental components of their existence, namely their spirit and body. It must be noted that, in the *Liezi*, there is no notion of a Platonic spiritual substance, because what is referred to as "spirit" is nothing more than a rarefied and subtle form of *qi*, which is, in this sense, material, and could not be understood as a soul in the Platonic sense. Correspondingly, death does not signify the entry of the spirit into another transcendent, immaterial realm, but rather its return, together with the body, to their original natural domain. The *Liezi* offers a clear description of the situation after death: "When spirit parts from body, each returns to its true state. That is why ghosts are called *gui*; *gui* means 'one who has gone home,' they have gone back to their true home" (精神離形，各歸其真，故謂之鬼。鬼，歸也，歸其真宅) (Graham 1990, p. 23; Ye 2011, p. 11).

Within the framework of life-wandering and death-return, human existence appears as a temporary sojourn within the world. The *Liezi* describes its course through the four phases of transformation: "infancy, youth, old age, and death" (嬰孩也，少壯也，老耄也，死亡也) (Graham 1990, p. 23; Ye 2011, p. 13). Within this staged transformation, Liezi further reinterprets the feature of life and death. Death is understood as "rest" (息 *xi*) and as a "return to the ultimate" (反其極 *fan qi ji*) (Ye 2011, p. 23). This indicates that death can release beings from the exhaustion and burdens of living, and thus becomes something to be accepted rather than feared. By contrast, life is characterized by toil and depletion. As Zhang Zhan 張湛 comments, "To labor in thought and to exhaust the limbs, these are the affairs of the living" (勞知慮，役支體，此生者之事) (B. Yang 2012, p. 25). It can be seen

from Zhang Zhan's comment that living is, in a certain sense, akin to bearing endless labor, and all activities undertaken by living beings are the continual depletion of both spirit and body. Whereas Zhang emphasizes the exhausting character of life itself, Lu Chongxuan 盧重玄 further radicalizes this point by relativizing conventional moral distinctions. He illustrates this aspect of life as follows: "Living is essentially activity and operation; only in death can there be rest. … The noble pursue reputation, the petty pursue profit, none of them ever cease" (夫生者，動用之質也，唯死乃能休息耳。… 君子徇名，小人徇利，未嘗休止也) (B. Yang 2012, p. 25). In Lu's depiction, traditional moral evaluations, such as those of the noble and the petty, are significantly weakened and relativized, since all pursuits ultimately represent constant toil. In this sense, only death can end the ongoing depletion of spirit and body.

Furthermore, life is endowed with the meaning of traveling or setting out. In traditional Chinese thought, a traveler who travels away is ultimately expected to return home (Sun 2021). In this sense, the course of life as a travel necessarily culminates in death. Death as a homecoming, therefore, is something to be accepted rather than resisted; to reject it would be akin to a traveler abandoning their home. As the *Liezi* puts it, "The traveler who forgets to go back is a man who abandons his home" (行而不知歸，失家者也) (Graham 1990, p. 26; Ye 2011, p. 17). If one only travels (lives) without returning (dying), this would be a repudiation of one's proper place and will thus be reproached.

In the *Liezi*, human life and death represent only one particular manifestation of the broad transformative process shared by all things. If the examination is extended from human beings to myriad things, we can see that the *Liezi* does not posit insurmountable boundaries between them. Rather, it opens a channel of mutual transformation among all things. As Xiao (1990, p. 88) points out, "There are no rigidly demarcated boundaries between things that make them mutually inaccessible" (物與物間，並非界域儼然而不可相通者). And the basis for this mutual transformation of all things lies in their shared grounding in the same *qi*. As Zhang Zhan states in his commentary: "The same *qi* can transform into ten thousand things" (一氣之變，所適萬形) (B. Yang 2012, p. 17).

Life and death constitute critical nodes in the process of transformation, at which myriad things dissolve and are subsequently reconstituted in new shapes. As Zhang Zhan notes, "What is born here may die there; what dies there may be born here" (生於此者，或死於彼；死於彼者，或生於此) (B. Yang 2012, p. 17). In the *Liezi*, not only can animals and plants transform into one another, for instance, "swallows becoming oysters, moles becoming quails" (燕之為蛤也，田鼠之為鶉也) (Graham 1990, p. 21; Ye 2011, p. 8), or "when the plantain reaches dung, it becomes the crowfoot" (陵舄得郁棲，則為烏足) (Graham 1990, p. 21; Ye 2011, pp. 7–8), but transformations also occur across categories, such as between plants and insects: "The root of the crowfoot becomes woodlice, the leaves become butterflies" (烏足之根為蟓蠐，其葉為胡蝶) (Graham 1990, p. 21; Ye 2011, p. 8), or even between the living and the non-living: "The blood of horses and men becoming the will-o'-the-wisp" (馬血之為轉鄰也，人血之為野火也) (Graham 1990, p. 21; Ye 2011, p. 8).

The quotations above demonstrate that transformation is not a linear process directed toward a predetermined end, but rather a circulation unfolding within the ongoing movement of *qi*. Since all things emerge from and return to the same *qi*, transformation thereby weakens the hierarchical distinctions among different forms of life. At the same time, it dissolves any teleological notion of an ultimate end, rendering "life-death-life" an endless cycle without beginning or termination. Within this process, any particular form is merely a temporary configuration rather than a final fulfillment.

Along these lines, life and death are understood as unavoidable natural processes as Liezi emphasizes: "The born cannot escape birth, the changing cannot escape change" (生者不能不生，化者不能不化) (Graham 1990, p. 17; Ye 2011, p. 2); and "That which is born

is that which in principle must come to an end. Whatever ends cannot escape its end, just as whatever is born cannot escape birth" (生者，理之必終者也。終者不得不終，亦如生者之不得不生) (Graham 1990, p. 23; Ye 2011, p. 11). Therefore, any attempt to make life permanent or to predetermine the moment of death is regarded as a misunderstanding of natural order (Ye 2011, p. 11). Accordingly, human beings ought not to intervene in the processes of life and death; nor are they capable of doing so. Although life and death necessarily occur, they do so only in accordance with the *ji* 机, which cannot be predicted or controlled (B. Yang 2012, p. 17). Therefore, human beings are fundamentally powerless over life and death. As the *Liezi* states,

> Valuing life cannot preserve it, taking care of the body cannot do it good; scorning life cannot shorten it, neglecting the body cannot do it harm. Hence, some who value life do not live, some who scorn it do not die, some who take care of the body do it no good, some who neglect it do it no harm. (Graham 1990, p. 129)
>
> 生非貴之所能存，身非愛之所能厚；生亦非賤之所能夭，身亦非輕之所能薄。故貴之或不生，賤之或不死；愛之或不厚，輕之或不薄。 (Ye 2011, p. 129)

Given the inevitability and uncontrollability of life and death, the *Liezi* ultimately concludes that they are matters of "destiny" (命 *ming*). "Destiny" here implies the inevitability of transformation within the spontaneous course of *qi*, rather than a rigid predetermination imposed from outside. On this basis, the *Liezi* advocates an attitude of adaptation to the processes of life and death. Liezi says, "To live and die at the right time is a blessing from heaven" (可以生而生，天福也；可以死而死，天福也) (Graham 1990, p. 127; Ye 2011, p. 163). If we return to the imagery of *you* (wandering), what the *Liezi* seeks to express here is that human beings can determine neither the moment of departure (life) nor the moment of return (death). What remains possible is only to accede to the course of transformation. In this sense, *you* is no longer understood as a movement toward a final destination, but as a natural process unfolding within the inevitability of transformation.

In sum, the *Liezi*'s life-wandering and death-return is grounded in a cosmological understanding based on the ongoing process of transformation. Life and death are merely necessary and temporary phases within this process, through which all things continually transform without fixed ontological boundaries. The ideal mode of existence, therefore, is to wander in accordance with this order, without imposing additional ethical burdens upon the wandering of life.

3.2. The Soul's Journey of Plato

Plato's conception of life and death unfolds primarily around the soul's journey through reincarnation[16]. In its origin, the soul[17] belongs to the eternal realm of Forms: "it (the soul) passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so" (ἐκεῖσε οἴχεται εἰς τὸ καθαρόν τε καὶ ἀεὶ ὂν καὶ ἀθάνατον καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχον, καὶ ὡς συγγενὴς οὖσα αὐτοῦ ἀεὶ μετ᾽ ἐκείνου τε γίγνεται, ὅτανπερ αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν γένηται καὶ ἐξῇ αὐτῇ) (Plato 1997, p. 70; 1903, Φαίδων 79d). Life emerges when the soul enters the body. Plato says: "when the soul is present in the body, it causes it to live and gives it the power to breathe the air" (ὅταν παρῇ τῷ σώματι, αἴτιόν ἐστι τοῦ ζῆν αὐτῷ, τὴν τοῦ ἀναπνεῖν δύναμιν παρέχον) (Plato 1997, p. 118; 1903, Κρατύλος 399d–e). Death, by contrast, is "that the body comes to be separated by itself apart from the soul, and the soul comes to be separated by itself apart from the body" (χωρὶς μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπαλλαγὲν αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὑτὸ τὸ σῶμα γεγονέναι, χωρὶς δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος ἀπαλλαγεῖσαν αὐτὴν καθ᾽ αὑτὴν εἶναι) (Plato 1997, p. 56; 1903, Φαίδων 64c). As the discussions in *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus* suggest, the soul's initial incarnation appears as an anomalous state, often construed as a kind of fall or deviation.[18] In *Phaedrus*, Plato has the

following expression: "a soul that sheds its wings wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body … the whole combination of soul and body is called a living thing, or animal, and has the designation 'mortal' as well" (ἡ δὲ πτεροῤῥυήσασα φέρεται ἕως ἂν στερεοῦ τινος ἀντιλάβηται, οὗ κατοικισθεῖσα, σῶμα γήϊνον λαβοῦσα … ζῷον τὸ σύμπαν ἐκλήθη, ψυχὴ καὶ σῶμα παγέν, θνητόν τ᾽ ἔσχεν ἐπωνυμίαν) (Plato 1997, p. 524; 1903, Φαῖδρος 246c). Plato puts further in *Cratylus*: "the soul is being punished for something, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept … until the penalty is paid" (δίκην διδούσης τῆς ψυχῆς ὧν δὴ ἕνεκα δίδωσιν, τοῦτον δὲ περίβολον ἔχειν, ἵνα σῴζηται, δεσμωτηρίου εἰκόνα … ἕως ἂν ἐκτείσῃ τὰ ὀφειλόμενα) (Plato 1997, p. 119; 1903, Κρατύλος 400c).

In contrast to its purity before incarnation, the soul, once incarnated, becomes impure and limited, and thus incapable of attaining truth or knowledge of the Forms, as in *Phaedo* stated, "as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil, we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth" (ἕως ἂν τὸ σῶμα ἔχωμεν καὶ συμπεφυρμένη ᾖ ἡμῶν ἡ ψυχὴ μετὰ τοιούτου κακοῦ, οὐ μή ποτε κτησώμεθα ἱκανῶς οὗ ἐπιθυμοῦμεν: φαμὲν δὲ τοῦτο εἶναι τὸ ἀληθές) (Plato 1997, p. 57; 1903, Φαίδων 66b). Bound to the body, the soul is hindered in its pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Only through separation from the body can the soul gain its original purity back and apprehend the Forms. We can "do so (attain knowledge) after death. Then and not before, the soul is by itself apart from the body" (ἢ οὐδαμοῦ ἔστιν κτήσασθαι τὸ εἰδέναι ἢ τελευτήσασιν: τότε ᾽γὰρ αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν ἡ ψυχὴ ἔσται χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος, πρότερον δ᾽ οὔ) (Plato 1997, p. 58; 1903, Φαίδων 66e–67a). Accordingly, while alive, one must discipline oneself to approximate this purified state, i.e., "separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body and to dwell by itself" (τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσαι αὐτὴν καθ᾽ αὑτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαί τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν) (Plato 1997, p. 58; 1903, Φαίδων 67c). And "this release and separation of the soul from the body is the preoccupation of the philosophers" (τὸ μελέτημα αὐτὸ τοῦτό ἐστιν τῶν φιλοσόφων, λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος) (Plato 1997, p. 58; 1903, Φαίδων 67d). To practice philosophy properly, therefore, amounts to practicing for dying.[19] Through this sustained pursuit of separation from the body, Plato's account of the soul's journey unfolds as intrinsically directed toward a determinate end, namely, the purification of the soul and its return to the realm of Forms, thereby constituting a soteriological and transcendent model centered on the soul's destiny.

According to Plato's dialogues, the soul does not dissolve upon bodily death[20], nor does it return immediately to the realm of Forms after a single incarnation. Instead, it is placed within a strictly ordered cycle of reincarnation.[21] The soul undergoes a cyclical process extending ten thousand years (Plato 1997, p. 526; 1903, Φαῖδρος 248e), gradually achieving purification through repeated incarnations. After each life, the soul must undergo divine judgment, with its moral character serving as the major criterion. Some are, therefore, "condemned to go to places of punishment beneath the earth and pay the full penalty for their injustice, while the others are lifted up by justice to a place in heaven where they live in the manner the life they led in human form has earned them" (εἰς τὰ ὑπὸ γῆς δικαιωτήρια ἐλθοῦσαι δίκην ἐκτίνουσιν, αἱ δ᾽ εἰς τοὐρανοῦ τινα τόπον ὑπὸ τῆς Δίκης κουφισθεῖσαι διάγουσιν ἀξίως οὗ ἐν ἀνθρώπου εἴδει ἐβίωσαν βίου) (Plato 1997, p. 527; 1903, Φαῖδρος 249a–249b). Plato (1997, p. 526; 1903, Φαῖδρος 248d–e) describes a hierarchy of nine forms of human life, ranging from the philosopher to the tyrant. He also allows for transformations between human and animal forms. A human soul "can enter a wild animal, and a soul that was once human can move from an animal to a hu-

man being again" (εἰς θηρίου βίον ἀνθρωπίνη ψυχὴ ἀφικνεῖται, καὶ ἐκ θηρίου ὅς ποτε ἄνθρωπος ἦν πάλιν εἰς ἄνθρωπον) (Plato 1997, p. 527; 1903, Φαῖδρος 249b).

In addition to ethical criteria, Plato introduces epistemic standards for the divine judgment in *Timaeus*: whether the soul can apprehend truth and practice rationality in life directly shapes its fate, since "all the animals exchange their forms, one for the other, and in the process lose or gain intelligence or folly" (πάντα … διαμείβεται τὰ ζῷα εἰς ἄλληλα, νοῦ καὶ ἀνοίας ἀποβολῇ καὶ κτήσει μεταβαλλόμενα.) (Plato 1997, p. 1291; 1903, Τίμαιος 92c). Plato (1997, p. 527; 1903, Φαῖδρος 249b) also emphasizes the soul's responsibility in choosing its next life, stating clearly that, "each soul chooses the life it wants" (αἵρεσιν τοῦ δευτέρου βίου αἱροῦνται ὃν ἂν θέλῃ ἑκάστη).

In conclusion, Plato's depiction of the soul's journey is not a directionless cycle; rather, it is a process situated within a religious order that is organized by hierarchy and evaluation. The journey of the soul is teleologically oriented. It undergoes purification through successive lives, gradually releasing itself from the body, and ultimately returns to the realm of Forms, thereby achieving alignment with the divine order. In this sense, Plato's conception of life and death can be understood as a typical soteriological structure. The fate of the soul depends on whether it achieves self-purification in its journey and ultimately returns to a transcendent domain. Within this structure, *you* (journey) functions as the central mechanism that organizes the relations among life and death, truth and justice, and the ultimate destiny of the soul.

4. A Bidirectional Comparative Analysis of Life-Wandering and Death-Return in the *Liezi* and the Soul-Journey in Plato

The preceding discussion has examined, within their respective religious frameworks, Liezi's account of life-wandering and death-return and Plato's conception of the soul's journey, thereby demonstrating two divergent configurations of life and death. Thus far, however, the analysis has proceeded through separate, internally focused readings of each system. While such an approach is effective in clarifying the immanent logic of each, it does not fully capture their respective positions or significance within a broad landscape of religious and philosophical thought, especially as these emerge in the tension of comparison. The following discussion, therefore, adopts a bidirectional comparative framework. It begins by taking Liezi's life-wandering and death-return as a dialogical starting point for re-examining Plato's account of the soul's journey. Then it reverses the perspective, using Plato's framework as a heuristic lens through which to reconsider Liezi's conception.

4.1. Interpreting Plato's Journey of the Soul from the Perspective of Liezi

Read from the perspective of Liezi's conception of life-wandering and death-return, it becomes evident that, although Plato similarly describes life and death through the union and separation of soul (spirit) and body, the ethical orientation and the corresponding mode of cultivation fundamentally diverge from those of Liezi.

In the *Liezi*, *you* (wandering) does not presuppose a persisting subject; on the contrary, it denotes a de-subjectivized process of natural movement. If we must identify a consistent subject of this movement, it could only be *qi*, since in the *Liezi*, life and death are merely different manifestations of *qi* within the ongoing process of its transformation. Death does not signify that a self-identical spirit (or soul) embarks upon a new journey; rather, it marks the separation of the clear and muddy *qi*, that is, spirit and body, each returning to its corresponding natural domain.

By contrast, Plato's journey of the soul consistently presupposes the soul as a stable, identifiable unit that can be judged and held accountable. The soul is a substantial entity, characterized by pre-existence, continuity, and self-identity. The descent from the realm

of Forms into the sensible world, the divine judgment after death, and the choice of a new life all presuppose a continuous agent with cognitive and moral capacities. Moreover, the soul's journey, as a passage between distinct ontological realms, is explicitly oriented toward a higher, purer state of the soul.

As the last section has demonstrated, both life and death in the *Liezi* are subsumed within the transformation of *qi*. Mutual transformations of the myriad things realized through life and death are, in essence, transformations of *qi* across different configurations; there is no enduring person that traverses these transitions. Nor does the *Liezi* privilege personal distinctiveness. On the contrary, through the possibility of mutual transformation, it effectively neutralizes individual personality, tending toward a state in which distinctions among the myriad things are effaced. Faber (1877, p. 83) once clearly pointed out that Liezi's ethical thought inevitably leads to the effacement of personality.

Unlike in the *Liezi*, a theory of personality[22] can be readily developed from Plato's dialogues. For Plato, the soul can be interpreted as the bearer of personal identity. Through the soul's immortality, Plato secures both the pre-existence and the persistence of the personality. Life and death, therefore, do not mark the emergence or disappearance of personality, but rather its successive moments of reckoning and fulfillment within a religious-ethical cosmos. The soul's journey across multiple lives continually responds to the question of what the individual has been and what it is to become.

The *Liezi*, through its naturalized account of life-wandering and death-return, deprives both life and death of their urgency as ultimate questions, since each is merely a transient manifestation of *qi*'s wandering. By contrast, Plato's journey of the soul does not dissolve the weight of life and death; rather, it redistributes that weight across an expanded temporal horizon by embedding it within a more complex religious order. Death signifies the moral and cognitive reckoning of one's previous life, while rebirth marks the realization of that reckoning.

In the *Liezi*, life-wandering and death-return do not entail a system of reward and punishment. Precisely for this reason, things that would traditionally fall outside the scope of moral evaluation, such as plants and inanimate things, are equally capable of transformation into and from human beings. In this sense, the ethical outlook expressed in the *Liezi* might be described less as ethics than as a de-ethicized ethics. It resists any evaluative standard imposed by human conventions and instead adopts the natural order as its sole measure. In this sense, virtue is found not in the pursuit of reputation after death or longevity, but in being at ease with the course of life and death. In this way, the *Liezi*'s account of life-wandering and death-return embodies an unburdened ethics, oriented toward a mode of cultivation that accepts fate and conforms to natural processes.[23]

Viewed from this perspective, Plato's account of the soul's journey exhibits a markedly different ethics. Although it similarly denies that death is an absolute end, it embeds the journey within a religious-ethical cosmos. One's way of life in a previous existence directly impacts both their situation after death and their future reincarnation. Therefore, individuals must adjust their behavior in line with established norms to achieve a more favorable outcome. These norms operate along both moral and cognitive dimensions. Those who indulge in desire, embrace injustice, or enact tyranny and predation will be transformed into lower animal forms in the next cycle of existence; conversely, those who cultivate temperance and justice will achieve more favorable destinies. Additionally, the extent to which one approaches truth and attains knowledge of the Forms also plays a crucial role. As Plato (1997, p. 526; 1903, Φαῖδρος 249a) indicates in *Phaedrus*, a soul that lives the life of a philosopher for three consecutive cycles may complete its journey early and return directly to the realm of Forms. The journey of the soul is thus governed by a normative structure defined by moral and epistemic criteria, requiring the living to regulate their behavior accordingly.

In this way, Plato's account embodies a highly normative and teleological religious ethics, oriented toward the purification of the soul and its eventual return to the realm of Forms.

In the light of Liezi's thought, we can clearly see that Plato's journey of the soul reveals a pronounced commitment to religious-ethical normativity. By integrating individual actions into a causal chain spanning multiple lives, it endows ethical choices with enduring consequences and ultimately directs them toward the purification and release of the soul. Life is thereby assigned a determinate ethical task: through the restraint of desire, the pursuit of justice, and the attainment of truth, the soul is to ascend toward higher forms of existence over the course of its prolonged journey. From the perspective of the *Liezi*, however, the soul's journey represents a burdensome ethics, in which a projected future state governs and exerts pressure on present life. However, this contrast should not be overstated. The burdensome character of Platonic ethics lies primarily in its demand that the living regulate their behavior in both epistemic and ethical dimensions. It should not, however, be understood as an ethics that suppresses happiness or imposes external obligations upon individuals. For justice in Plato is defined as an internal state of the soul, in which each part of the soul exercises its own virtue in the manner it should (Annas 1981, p. 132), and happiness consists of being sufficiently supplied with goods (Irwin 1995, p. 33) At the same time, the *Liezi* is not entirely free of normative implications, insofar as it does presuppose an ideal mode of self-cultivation that involves accommodation, detachment, and coexistence with the myriad things, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.2. Reconsidering Liezi's Life-Wandering and Death-Return in Light of Plato's Account of the Soul's Journey

If, conversely, one takes Plato's account of the soul's journey as a theoretical baseline, then Liezi's conception of life-wandering and death-return appears strikingly "thin" and "light"; for Plato, it even seems incomplete.

From the Platonic perspective, the incompleteness of the *Liezi* lies firstly in its inability to address the issue of the possibility of knowledge. In Plato's thought, the soul must "journey" because only through a framework of pre-existence, transmigration, and recollection can Plato explain how human beings acquire knowledge of the Forms. In *Meno*, Socrates explicitly states that: "searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection" (τὸ γὰρ ζητεῖν ἄρα καὶ τὸ μανθάνειν ἀνάμνησις ὅλον ἐστίν.) (Plato 1997, p. 880; 1903, Μένων 81d). He also cites Pindar to claim that the soul, before entering the body and generating life, already possesses knowledge of the Forms (Plato 1997, p. 880; 1903, Μένων 81b–c). Since the soul has undergone multiple lives and has encountered the Forms, human beings are able, in this life, to recollect truths previously seen.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato offers a more complete account of this epistemological structure. Before falling into the body, the soul once followed the gods in a heavenly procession and beheld that "is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge" (ἡ γὰρ ἀχρώματός τε καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος καὶ ἀναφὴς οὐσία ὄντως οὖσα … τὸ τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἐπιστήμης γένος) (Plato 1997, p. 525; 1903, Φαῖδρος 247c). If the soul "takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then it is weighed down, sheds its wings and falls to earth" (λήθης τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα βαρυνθῇ, βαρυνθεῖσα δὲ πτεροροῦσά τε καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πέσῃ) (Plato 1997, p. 526; 1903, Φαῖδρος 248c). Under such conditions, human beings can only gradually recover their memory of the Forms through the impulse of sensory experience. In this way, the very capacity for knowledge is explained as the result of the soul's prior journeys. Only by positing that the soul has seen the Forms before incarnation, and approaches them again through recollection in this life, can Plato account for how knowledge of the Forms is possible.

In contrast to Plato's deep concern with the possibility of knowledge, Liezi displays a striking indifference toward this very question. Not only does Liezi downplay the importance of recollection, but he also emphasizes the essential role of "forgetfulness" (忘 *wang*) in self-cultivation. "Forgetfulness" constitutes one of the central methods of cultivation in the *Liezi*. It expresses a state in which distinctions such as gain and loss, sorrow and joy, preference and aversion, and even the boundary between self and other are dissolved. In this sense, it is understood as a way of being through which the spirit remains undisturbed by external things.[24] However, from a Platonic perspective, Liezi offers no discernible clues or pathways toward resolving the fundamental issue of how knowledge is possible.

Secondly, the incompleteness of the *Liezi* lies in its inability to address the issue of the realization of justice. Plato's account of the soul's journey furnishes a structural guarantee for the ethical order. It ensures that justice is not interrupted by death and enables a system of rewards and punishments that extends across multiple lives. Were the soul confined to a single lifetime, many unjust actions might evade punishment, while many just lives might fail to receive their expected reward. In this sense, the soul's journey secures the realization of justice. In the *Republic*, although both the just and the unjust conduct receive certain rewards and punishments already in life (Plato 1997, p. 1217; 1903, Πολιτεία X 613d), the transmigration of the soul provides a far more powerful guarantee. Since "they are (the rewards and punishments in life) nothing in either number or size compared to those that await just and unjust people after death" (ταῦτα … οὐδέν ἐστι πλήθει οὐδὲ μεγέθει πρὸς ἐκεῖνα ἃ τελευτήσαντα ἑκάτερον περιμένει) (Plato 1997, p. 1217; 1903, Πολιτεία X 614a), wrongdoings are repaid many times over, and corresponding blessings are bestowed upon the just. Thus, by situating life and death within a journey of the soul across multiple lives, justice gains firmer grounding.

Viewed through the Platonic lens, Liezi's view of life-wandering and death-return is utterly useless in laying the foundation for knowledge and justice. According to the *Liezi*, once the spirit leaves the body, it carries no moral ledger or knowledge of truth. It is difficult to assign any systematic function to the spirit. It neither supports the doctrine of recollection, nor explains how individuals might bear responsibility for their actions, nor secures the ultimate realization of justice. In sum, from the Platonic perspective, Liezi's view of life-wandering and death-return appears deficient, offering little satisfaction to one accustomed to Western thought and the pursuit of truth and justice.

However, if we temporarily set aside Plato's evaluative standard, we might find that, precisely in the absence of such structural tension, the *Liezi* reveals an alternative understanding of the meaning of life. Instead of deriving meaning from the future, it liberates life from the burden of meaning itself by recognizing that life is finite and contingent. This orientation is most vividly expressed in the depiction of the "men of the distant past" (太古之人 *tai gu zhi ren*).

> The men of the distant past knew that in life we are here for a moment and in death we are gone for a moment. Therefore, they acted as their hearts prompted, and did not rebel against their spontaneous desires; while life lasted, they did not refuse its pleasures, and so they were not seduced by the hope of reputation. They roamed as their nature prompted, and did not rebel against the desires of all things. (Graham 1990, p. 140)
>
> 太古之人知生之暫來，知死之暫往；故從心而動，不違自然所好；當身之娛非所去也，故不為名所勸。從性而游，不逆萬物所好。 (Ye 2011, p. 180)

This passage can be read as a coherent mode of cultivation structured around several interconnected aspects. "Acting as the heart prompted, and not rebelling against spontaneous desires," indicates that one does not need to adhere to imposed moral standards, but should instead act in accordance with their natural disposition. In simpler terms, one

stops adhering to human-made distinctions between good and evil and instead acts in accordance with the natural order. "Not refusing pleasures of the life, and not being seduced by the hope of reputation," emphasizes that one should neither suppress sensory enjoyment nor pursue reputation as a motive. In other words, one does not restrain oneself for recognition or limit one's life for judgment after death. "Roaming as their nature prompted, and not rebelling against the desires of all things," further suggests that life is not an isolated pursuit of individuals, but rather a participation in the wandering of all things. One does not seek to control or regulate the world, but rather lives in harmony with the myriad things and respects their tendencies.

Taken together, these elements constitute a form of cultivation fundamentally distinct from Plato's orientation. There is no longer a need to take responsibility for a future life or to strive for "purification," "discipline," or "regulation" with that future in mind. Instead, one should only follow one's own nature, transcend conventional moral standards, and live harmoniously with the myriad things. Admittedly, Liezi's life-wandering and death-return do not provide a ground for either the possibility of knowledge or the realization of justice. However, it liberates life from reliance on meaning achieved after death, thereby returning it to the present world.

Plato develops a soteriological model focused on the soul's destiny; Liezi, in contrast, does not foreground individuals as stable moral subjects but instead situates them within a continuous process of mutual transformation. Nevertheless, from Plato's perspective, the thought of Liezi would indeed appear difficult to provide an ethical foundation capable of guiding a modern society marked by deep conflict and competing interests toward any shared consensus. Its tendency to dissolve distinctions and detach the self from normative commitments may offer inner freedom. Yet, it also raises the question of how stable social and ethical bonds can be sustained within collective life.

5. Conclusions

By taking *you* as a bridging notion through which to compare the conceptions of life and death in the *Liezi* and in Plato, this article not only demonstrates the possibility of establishing meaningful comparison between heterogeneous traditions, but also shows how such comparison can generate mutually illuminating insights. Through this cross-comparative method, the divergence of two thought systems becomes evident.

In Liezi's quasi-religious structure, wandering is immanent to the process of natural transformation. Life is understood as a temporary sojourn, and death as an inevitable return. Wandering does not presuppose a persisting subject; rather, it tends toward the dissolution of individual distinctions, returning all things to a state of non-differentiation. Aligning with the natural flow of life and letting go of attachments, the *Liezi* gives rise to an ethical orientation that is non-normative and unburdened; it offers an alternative mode of cultivation that emphasizes accommodation, detachment, and participation in the continuous transformations of the cosmos. In Plato, by contrast, the soul journeys between the intelligible and the sensible worlds through its incarnation in the body, its separation from it, and, ultimately, its return. As a persistent subject, the soul must face a divine judgment after separating from the body, with both knowledge-related and ethical dimensions. The ultimate goal of the soul is to achieve self-purification and align itself with the divine order of the intelligible world.

Liezi's conception of life-wandering and death-return is directed toward the present world, situating life within the natural process itself, while Plato's soul's journey is oriented toward a transcendent beyond and is embedded within a normatively structured ethical, epistemic, and religious order. The former, by weakening both subjectivity and normative structures, understands life as a coexistence with the myriad things. The latter

presupposes the subject's continuity, emphasizing responsibility and normativity, and culminates in purification and salvation. It follows that the divergence at stake is not merely a difference in thematic content, but a structural difference concerning the placement of human existence and its ultimate belonging.

This article aims to quickly situate the *Liezi* within the broad landscape of world religions through a cross-comparison with Plato's account of the soul's journey, and to explore and open new avenues of research that go beyond debates over its textual authenticity. It is therefore hoped that future scholarship will engage with these new directions, enabling a more precise and balanced assessment of the *Liezi*'s place in intellectual history, its quasi-religious significance, and its enduring relevance for contemporary cultivation practices.

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Notes

1 From a comparative perspective, A. C. Graham (1919–1991) (Graham 1990, p. 1) considers the *Liezi* the most intelligible of the Daoist classics and thus "the best introduction" for Western readers to Daoist thought. Study also emphasizes the text's coherence and readability (Jone 2011), while Wong (1995, p. 2) suggests that its teachings are sufficiently simple to be understood even by children.

2 Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) (Wilhelm 1911, p. ix), for instance, regards it as a "mediating link" (das vermittelnde Zwischenglied) between the fundamental conception of the *Daodejing* and the systematic synthesis of Daoist doctrines in the *Zhuangzi*. Similarly, Wang Baoguo 王保國 and Wang Hao 王浩 (Wang and Wang 2020, p. 89) argue that Liezi inherits Laozi's emphasis on "void" (虛 *xu*) and "stillness" (靜 *jing*) while anticipating Zhuangzi's thought of "self-so" (自然 *ziran*), and thus may be understood as an intermediate stage within the development of pre-Qin Daoist thought. Beyond its intermediary position, some scholars have also emphasized its theoretical value. Thomas Cleary (1949–2021) (Cleary 2009, p. 1), for example, describes the *Liezi* as "one of the greatest works of cognitive art and educational science that has ever been produced."

3 Emerson (1892, p. 44) once noted that, "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato." Hegel (2011, p. 175) also said, "Plato is one of the 'world-historical' (welthistorisch) individuals, and his philosophy is one of the 'world-historical phenomena' (Existenzen) that, from their very inception onwards, have had the most significant influence on the formation and development of spirit in all subsequent eras."

4 One scholar has also examined Liezi's notion of life and death within a comparative framework that takes Platonic thought as a point of reference (Jone 2011). However, the comparative scope of the study is rather limited, and it reduces Plato's relevant ideas to mere concealment of death, thereby offering only a limited account of the differences between the *Liezi* and Plato, without further analyzing their fundamental divergence in ethical orientation. Nevertheless, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from modern biology (such as microbial decomposition of corpses), ecology (the interdependence between humans and all beings), and anthropology (funerary rituals), the author's interpretation of the issue of life's continuity remains highly suggestive and of considerable scholarly value.

5 It should be noted that the transcendent order in Plato's thought is conceived as an external transcendence, whereas in the *Liezi* it takes the form of an immanent transcendence. This distinction will be examined and compared in detail in the following section.

6 Although different disciplines offer varying definitions and interpretations of religious phenomena, a return to the etymology of the term "religion" may reveal a shared foundation underlying these diverse accounts. While no consensus has been reached

regarding its Latin origin, the term is more plausibly derived not from *relegere* ("to gather," as proposed by Cicero), but from *religare* ("to bind fast" or "to connect"), from which it comes to denote a form of obligation or a bond linking human beings to the divine. This etymology is notably endorsed by Lactantius, who interprets religion as the binding of human beings to God through piety, thereby fulfilling their duties toward the creator (Lactantius 1964, pp. 318–20). A similar relational understanding can be found in Feuerbach (2019, p. 28), who likewise views religion as a form of connection. However, in his account, the object of this connection is not a transcendent deity distinct from humanity, but rather a projection of the human essence itself. Despite such differences regarding the object of connection, it remains defensible to conceive of religion as a relational construct that links human beings to a transcendent order. For further discussion of religion's definition in specific disciplines, see Pandian (1991).

[7] Yet modern scholarship often privileges the rationalist aspects of Plato's thought. Although some scholars also emphasize Plato's status as a philosophical theologian, the theological elements in Plato's thought are often treated as mere "window dressing" and consequently overlooked. Such an approach is, however, highly reductive. Moreover, Plato's thought exerted a profound influence on both early religious thinkers and later philosophical traditions concerned with theological questions. From late antiquity onward, Christian thinkers appropriated Plato's dualism of soul and body as well as his conception of the Good. The tradition of Christian Platonism begins with Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine. It extends into the Renaissance, where it is represented by figures such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Baldassare Castiglione, and Tullia d' Aragona. Neoplatonic philosophers and commentators, for their part, interpreted Plato's dialogues on both theological and philosophical levels, most notably in the works of Iamblichus, Proclus, Olympiodorus, and Damascius (Nightingale 2021, pp. 6–9).

[8] Under a strict monotheistic definition, the *Liezi* would not qualify as a religious text. However, if religion is understood, in line with approaches in the anthropological study of religion, as a symbolic and practical system articulating the relationship between human existence and a transcendent order, then the *Liezi* may be seen to exhibit a form of quasi-religiosity, since this text not only inquires the place of human existence in the whole, but also offers a unique path of cultivation focused on attunement to natural processes and being at ease with life and death.

[9] Although *you* is also widely regarded as one of the central concepts in the *Zhuangzi*, the present study takes the *Liezi*, rather than the *Zhuangzi*, as its primary interlocutor in dialogue with Plato. This choice is not intended to diminish the significance of Zhuangzi's conception of *you*, but rather because the *Liezi*'s conception forms a more structurally productive dialogue with the soul's journey of Plato. *You* in the *Zhuangzi* has been interpreted in various ways. The prevailing reading takes it to denote a state of spiritual freedom (G. Chen 2008, pp. 424–25; X. Liu 2010, p. 152; Tu 2003, pp. 38–46; Wang 2001), whereas scholars also understand it as a mode of existence characterized by attunement to the Dao (Xing 2022). Despite these interpretive differences, the central concern of *you* in the *Zhuangzi* remains how human beings can realize a free and unencumbered manner of being in the world. By contrast, the *Liezi* situates *you* within a broad cosmogonic framework and the cyclical process of life and death. *You* in the *Liezi* refers to an unfolding stage of life within the cosmic process of *qi*-transformation, and its significance can only be fully understood in conjunction with its counterpart, namely "return" (歸 *gui*). This renders the *Liezi* particularly suitable for comparison with Plato's thought, since both seek to situate human beings within a comprehensive world order and thereby illuminate the meaning of life and death. Plato explains life and death in terms of the union and separation of soul and body, whereas Liezi interprets the course of life through the generation of myriad things by *qi*-transformation and their eventual return to their origin. The present study, therefore, compares not merely two conceptions of *you* but rather two accounts of life and death structured around *you*. The *Liezi* has therefore been chosen for comparison with Plato and can enable a more structurally illuminating dialogue with Plato's reflections on life and death.

[10] The notion of *you* 游 carries distinct semantic emphases and orientations in the dialogues of Plato and the *Liezi*. In Plato, the soul's *you* presupposes a clearly defined course and, more importantly, a determinate destination, thereby rendering intelligible the changes and development the soul undergoes in the course of its movement. This structural feature closely corresponds to the semantic profile of the term "journey," which denotes a defined course of travel, the movement from one place to another, and, by extension, an extended process of personal change and development. On this basis, "journey" provides an appropriate translation for Plato's conception of the soul's *you*. By contrast, in the *Liezi*, life itself is construed as a mode of *you* that, although culminating in a return through death, remains fundamentally indeterminate, purposeless, and subject to ongoing transformation. This emphasis on openness and variability finds a closer analog in the term "wandering." An examination of its etymology further clarifies this affinity: derived from the notion of repeated turning (wiederholt wenden), the term gives rise to meanings such as "to move back and forth," "to go here and there," and "to change one's position." These semantic features directly resonate with Liezi's portrayal of life as an unstructured, ever-shifting process. Accordingly, this article adopts "wandering" as the translation of *you* in the *Liezi*.

[11] The English translations of the *Liezi* used in this article are based on those of A. C. Graham, with minor modifications where necessary. Other Chinese texts are translated by the authors themselves.

[12] Scholar has also examined the transcendence of Dao from the perspective that Dao is beginningless and endless in time, in contrast to the inevitable ending of concrete things. Interested readers may consult Jiang (2013).

[13] It should be noted that the *Liezi* does not directly state that all things ultimately return to Dao. The text only says that what is born ultimately returns to what is unborn, and that what has form ultimately returns to what is formless. And the Unborn and the formless can be interpreted as Dao. From the perspective of *qi*, however, when the text speaks of the return of all things, it refers to their return to a state of formless and void *qi*. If we must ask what Dao refers to in this *qi*-transformation context, it is more likely to denote this clear and void *qi*.

[14] The English translations of Plato's dialogues used in this article are based on *Plato Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and published by Hackett Publishing Company in 1997.

[15] As Nightingale (2021, p. 13) states, "the Forms are ontologically higher than the gods. Plato identifies them as having a unique kind of divinity".

[16] On the origins of the doctrine of metempsychosis in Greece, scholarly opinion remains divided. It is nevertheless clear that Plato did not simply inherit a single tradition from earlier Greek thought, but selectively appropriated and reorganized a plurality of internally differentiated sources, thereby forming an eclectic theoretical synthesis (Horn et al. 2017, p. 367; Bussanich 2013).

[17] There is no scholarly consensus on the nature of the soul in Plato. Some regard it as a Form, others as a particular, while still others place it in a third metaphysical category, namely an intermediate entity between Forms and particulars. For this reason, the soul both participates in the flux of the sensible world and retains the capacity for knowledge and virtue (Stone 2014, p. vi).

[18] In *Timaeus*, however, the soul's first incarnation is not attributed to fault, but described as a natural process (Aranjaniyil 2002). Other scholars argue that the soul's union with the body is not purely passive, but involves the soul's active engagement with the world, even attributing to it a "chameleon-like" character that changes in accordance with its objects (Bostock 1986, p. 119).

[19] Cornelli (2019, pp. 23–32) interprets this philosophical detachment as a moral separation between soul and body, distinct from the ontological separation that occurs after death. For Cornelli, the moral separation precedes the ontological one, since the latter is not merely a given fact but a goal to be achieved through cognitive and ethical effort.

[20] Death is not the end of life or the dissolution of the soul, but rather a reordering force that directs it away from what is base and unjust (Voegelin 2001, p. 8).

[21] Plato does not construct a systematic doctrine of the soul's post-mortem fate, but addresses the issue in various contexts. The *Phaedrus* provides a primary framework, while the *Phaedo* supplements it with mythic material (Aranjaniyil 2002). Accordingly, this article draws on multiple dialogues, especially the *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Meno*, to reconstruct a relatively coherent picture of Plato's soul-journey.

[22] I n discussions of the concepts of "personality" and "self" in ancient Greek thought, the status of Plato has remained controversial. On the one hand, some scholars argue that Plato's metaphysics, centered on the theory of Forms, diminishes the philosophical significance of individual personality. On the other hand, this interpretation has been revised by those who maintain that the Platonic dialogues in fact contain a complex account of the structure of personality, one that not only emphasizes the soul but also engages with the question of individual subjectivity. Although within Plato's hierarchy, personality does not occupy the same status as the Forms, it is nevertheless undeniable that, within his theoretical framework, personality exists and is articulated through the soul as its vehicle of manifestation. Some scholars further develop this line of interpretation by turning to the soul's internal structure, identifying personality with its rational part. Through an analogy between the rational element of the soul and the rational order of the cosmos, they arrive at the conclusion that the true self possesses, in a certain sense, a divine character. This line of argument, however, does not constitute the focus of the present article and will not be pursued here. For further discussion, see Sheffler (2017).

[23] In this sense, the *Liezi* does not provide an ethical manual for those living in the present world, nor does it require individuals to regulate and change themselves in accordance with prescribed norms actively. Rather, by suspending normative constraints and returning to the order of nature, it enables a genuinely rootless wandering. May Sim has compared the Daoist outlook articulated in the *Liezi* with that of Stoicism, noting that both emphasize the extent to which many aspects of human experience lie largely beyond our control, while neither advocates passivity or withdrawal. Unlike Epictetus's *Encheiridion*, however, the *Liezi* cannot be rationally systematized into a coherent "guide to life." For further discussion, see Sim (2011).

[24] The *Liezi* presents this idea most vividly in the story "Huazi of Songyangli Suffers from Forgetfulness in Middle Age" (宋陽里華子中年病忘). To others, Huazi's forgetfulness appears to be a kind of illness. For Huazi himself, however, only by forgetting life and death, gain and loss, sorrow and joy, preference and aversion, and even the existence of Heaven and Earth itself, can the mind remain free from disturbance by external things. Consequently, when Huazi is eventually restored to so-called "normality," he does not experience liberation. On the contrary, once he is thrown back into the awareness, he falls into great rage and therefore rebukes his wife, punishes his sons, and even takes up a weapon to drive away the Confucian scholar who had cured him of his "illness." See Ye (2011, p. 84) and Graham (1990, pp. 70–72).

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