

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy 14

David Chai *Editor*

Dao Companion to *Xuanxue* 玄學 (Neo-Daoism)

 Springer

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy

Volume 14

Series Editor

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ISSN 2211-0275

ISSN 2542-8780 (electronic)

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy

ISBN 978-3-030-49227-4

ISBN 978-3-030-49228-1 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49228-1>

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This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

1	Introduction	1
	David Chai	
Part I Background of <i>Xuanxue</i>		
2	<i>Xuanxue</i>'s Contributions to Chinese Philosophy	13
	James D. Sellmann	
3	The Metaphysical Style and Structural Coherence of Names in <i>Xuanxue</i>	33
	Jana S. Rošker	
Part II Foreshadowing <i>Xuanxue</i> in the Eastern Han		
4	Oneness in the <i>Taipingjing</i>	57
	Barbara Hendrichske	
5	Yin and Yang in the <i>Taipingjing</i>	81
	Barbara Hendrichske	
6	Dao and <i>Ziran</i> in Heshanggong's Commentary on the <i>Daodejing</i>	103
	Misha Tadd	
7	The Walking Dead: Morality, Health, and Longevity in the <i>Xuanxue</i> Method of the Xiang'er Commentary on the <i>Laozi</i>	129
	Ronnie Littlejohn	
8	WANG Chong's View of <i>Ziran</i> and its Influence on WANG Bi and GUO Xiang	149
	Alexus McLeod	

Part III *Xuanxue* in the Wei Dynasty

9	HE Yan's "Essay on Dao" and "Essay on the Nameless"	167
	Paul D' Ambrosio	
10	HE Yan's Collected Explanations on the <i>Analects</i>	185
	Yuet Keung Lo	
11	RUAN Ji's "On Comprehending the <i>Zhuangzi</i>"	209
	David Chai	
12	Ji Kang's "On Dispelling Self-Interest"	229
	David Chai	
13	The Aesthetics of Musical Emotion in Ji Kang's "Music has in It Neither Grief nor Joy"	251
	So Jeong Park	
14	The Ontology of Change: WANG Bi's Interpretation of the <i>Yijing</i> . . .	267
	Tze Ki Hon	
15	Language and Nothingness in WANG Bi	287
	Eric S. Nelson	
16	Metaphysics without Ontology: WANG Bi and the <i>Daodejing</i>	301
	Alan Fox	

Part IV *Xuanxue* in the Jin Dynasty

17	Re-envisioning the Profound Order of Dao: PEI Wei's "Critical Discussion on the Pride of Place of Being"	325
	Alan K.L. Chan	
18	Metaphysics and Agency in GUO Xiang's Commentary on the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	343
	Chris Fraser	
19	Lone-Transformation and Intergrowth: Philosophy and Self-Justification in GUO Xiang's Commentary on the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	367
	Yuet Keung Lo	
20	GUO Xiang's Theory of Sagely Knowledge as Seen in his "Essentials of the <i>Analects</i>"	393
	Richard J. Lynn	
21	GE Hong and the Darkness	411
	Gil Raz	

22	Seeking Immortality in GE Hong's <i>Baopuzi Neipian</i>	427
	Fabrizio Pregadio	
23	GE Hong's Evolving Discourse on <i>You</i> and <i>Wu</i> and its Roots in the <i>Daodejing</i>	457
	Thomas Michael	
24	The <i>Xuanxue</i> Lifestyle: Self-Cultivation and <i>Qi</i> Practices	479
	Livia Kohn	
25	ZHI Dun on Freedom: Synthesizing Daoism and Buddhism	501
	Ellen Y. Zhang	
	Index	525

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Chapter 1

Introduction



David Chai

Literally translated, *Xuanxue* 玄學 (also known as Neo-Daoism) means to study or learn (*xue* 學) that which is mysterious, dark, or profound (*xuan* 玄)—in other words, Dao 道. In order to accomplish this, the figures associated with this movement worked with and built upon themes and arguments laid-out in the *Daodejing* 道德經, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). These texts would come to be colloquially known as the “three texts of profundity” (*san xuan* 三玄) as evidenced in YAN Zhitui’s 顏之推 (ca. 531–597 CE) *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan* (*Yanshi Jiaxun* 顏氏家訓), specifically the “Encouraging Study” (*mianxue* 勉學) chapter which says:

When we reach the Liang dynasty, the practice of elucidating Daoism once again flourished and the *Zhuangzi*, *Laozi* [i.e., *Daodejing*], and *Zhouyi* [i.e., *Yijing*] were collectively referred to as the “three texts of profundity.” Even Emperors Wu and Jianwen personally discussed and debated them.¹

泊於梁世，茲風復闡，莊、老、周易，總謂三玄。武皇、簡文，躬自講論 (Wang 1993: 187).

Why, however, were these particular texts chosen and what was so special about them that scholars, officials, and the royal family felt compelled to read them? According to YAN Zhitui, it was because “the texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi were about preserving the genuine, nourishing one’s inborn nature, and preventing the things of the world from exhausting the self 夫老、莊之書，蓋全真養性，不肯以物累己也” (Wang 1993: 186). As correct as Yan’s assessment is, *Xuanxue* thinkers

¹Translations in this chapter are my own.

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were much more than mere admirers of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the *Classic of Changes*; they were writers and artists in their own right. Not only did they pen original works of philosophy, religion, and poetry on topics related to physical and spiritual cultivation, music and aesthetics, cosmology and naturalism, morality and politics, and so forth, they were also skilled calligraphers, painters, and musicians.

When it comes to deciding who is a proponent of *Xuanxue*, there are generally two views: the first believes that *Xuanxue* began in the Zhengshi 正始 era (240–249 CE) of CAO Fang 曹芳 (third emperor of the Wei 魏 dynasty (213–266 CE)), which was the time of HE Yan 何晏 and WANG Bi 王弼, and ended in the Western Jin 西晉 dynasty (265–317 CE), the time of PEI Wei 裴頠 and GUO Xiang 郭象. The second view also holds that *Xuanxue* began in the Zhengshi era but sees its culmination occurring in the Eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty (317–420 CE), the time of ZHI Dun 支遁, ZHANG Zhan 張湛, and GE Hong 葛洪. It should be said that these two views are not definitive and their content changes depending on the person discussing them.

For example, when the English translation of FENG Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy* appeared in 1953, it had just two chapters on *Xuanxue* covering approximately sixty pages of text. Within these sixty pages, however, only WANG Bi, Liezi 列子, XIANG Xiu 向秀, and GUO Xiang were discussed. A decade later, Wing-Tsit Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1963) appeared but the space devoted to *Xuanxue* was even less than that in Feng's book, a scant twenty pages dealing with HE Yan, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang. The next major work having content on *Xuanxue* would be BO Mou's *History of Chinese Philosophy* (2009). While classical Daoism was allotted two chapters, *Xuanxue* had to make do, yet again, with a twenty-page chapter on HE Yan, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang (RUAN Ji 阮籍 and Ji Kang 嵇康 are briefly discussed). Thankfully Alan Chan and Yuet Keung Lo would end this pattern with their two-volume anthology on early-medieval China (2010). In volume one, which was devoted to philosophy and religion, the usual suspects of HE Yan, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang appear, but the volume also includes chapters on Ji Kang, religious Daoism, Buddhism, and the theme of reclusion.

Chinese-language studies have proven to be both more detailed and frequent than their English counterparts. TANG Yongtong's 湯用彤 1957 work opened the floodgates for both historical surveys of *Xuanxue* as well as specialized monographs on individual thinkers. On the latter, Tang's son, TANG Yijie 湯一介 (1983) published a work examining GUO Xiang's connection to *Xuanxue*, which was followed by YU Dunkang's 余敦康 (1991) investigation of HE Yan, and PEI Chuanyong's 裴傳永 (2004) examination of WANG Bi.² Regarding historical surveys, besides TANG Yongtong's text, others of note are by XU Hangsheng 許杭生 (1989), ZHAO Shulian 趙書廉 (1992), YU Dunkang 余敦康 (2004), CHEN Pingyuan 陳平原 (2008), and KANG Zhongqian 康中乾 (2008).

XU Hangsheng's book begins with the Zhengshi era and covers every major figure thereafter to the end of the Jin dynasty, including those belonging to Buddhism.

²For philosophical studies in English on individual figures from the Wei-Jin period, see Chan (1991), Wagner (2000, 2003), and Ziporyn (2003); for works in French, see Holzman (1957). For literary studies, see van Gulik (1969), Holzman (1976), and Henricks (1983).

KANG Zhongqian also takes this approach but in greater detail, making for a more satisfying read. ZHAO Shulian, however, does not employ a chronological approach but offers thematically-oriented chapters instead. CHEN Pingyuan's work is a collection of short essays written by different scholars while YU Dunkang's text includes material not found in earlier studies, such as WANG Bi's commentaries on the *Classic of Changes* and *Analects*, however, it lacks chapters on XIANG Xiu and ZHANG Zhan. In other words, all of the aforementioned studies differ in scope and content, meaning readers must consult multiple texts to get a complete picture of *Xuanxue*.

In order to avoid repeating this mistake, the *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* will do the following: first, it will shine a spotlight on texts from the later-Han (25–220 CE) that were either overtly Daoist (i.e., the commentaries of Heshanggong 河上公 and Xiang'er 想爾 on the *Daodejing*), or less obviously so (i.e., the *Taipingjing* 太平經, and parts of WANG Chong's 王充 *Lunheng* 論衡); second, it includes chapters on thinkers from the Jin dynasty, such as GE Hong, a name normally associated with the “religious” side of Daoism and the Buddhist monk ZHI Dun. While every effort has been made to include as many chapters as possible on the principal figures of *Xuanxue* (i.e., those from the Wei-Jin period), in some cases this was not feasible. Furthermore, while there are three chapters each for WANG Bi, GUO Xiang, and GE Hong, but only two for HE Yan, RUAN Ji,³ and JI Kang,⁴ this should not be taken as evidence of the former group's importance and the latter's inferiority; rather, the topics and/or texts chosen for this *Companion* best represents the philosophical thought of that particular thinker.

With regards to the inclusion of Han-era figures and texts, there can be little doubt that the arguments and ideas they developed allowed proponents of *Xuanxue* to read the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Classic of Changes* with fresh eyes and whetted appetites. The presence of Huang-Lao 黃老 thought also played a role, especially when it comes to cyclical change, harmony between heaven and humanity, and the application of Yin-Yang 陰陽 and Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行) cosmology to bodily cultivation. That *Xuanxue* flourished for nearly two centuries not only testifies to the genius of the “three texts of profundity,” it is recognition of the contribution made by the Han gentry and scholars who read, preserved, and wrote the first

³In addition to his essay on music (see Criddle 2007), RUAN Ji also wrote expository essays on the *Classic of Changes*, *Daodejing*, and *Zhuangzi*, but only the latter is included in this *Companion*. He also wrote a long and very well-known essay on the sage entitled “Biography of the Great Man” (*Daren Xiansheng zhuan* 大人先生傳), which does not appear in this *Companion*. For more on Ruan's “Great Man” essay, see Liu 2004. For more on his essay on the *Changes*, see Liu 2006. As for RUAN Ji's essay on the *Daodejing*, all that survives are three textual fragments consisting of 108 characters. See Chen 1987: 159–160.

⁴English-speaking scholars have already produced a handful of studies on JI Kang's essay on music (see Egan 1997; Chai 2009; Middendorf 2010; Kang 2014; and Rošker 2014), and his essay on selfishlessness is discussed in this *Companion*. JI Kang's essay on nourishing life, while not included in this *Companion*, was examined in Chai 2017. Regarding his three remaining essays, English-speaking scholars have thus far ignored them. Of course, we are spoiled for choice when it comes to studies in Chinese.

commentaries on said texts. Had said intellegentsia not served as intermediately agents and facilitators of pre-Qin Daoism, *Xuanxue* might not have amounted to anything more than pure exegesis and fanciful poetics.

One possible reason why this did not happen has to do with a striking cluster of terms belonging to pre-Qin Daoism, terms that would greatly influence the philosophical, religious, literary, and aesthetic thought of *Xuanxue* when it comes to understanding Dao, the natural world, and the myriad things therein: non-being (*wu* 無), being (*you* 有), and oneness (*yi* 一). One would be right to argue there are other, equally pertinent concepts such as, virtue (*de* 德), naturalness (*ziran* 自然), non-deliberate action (*wuwei* 無為), transformation (*hua* 化), names and actualities (*mingshi* 名實), and so forth, all of which are discussed in this *Companion*, however, they do not carry the same fundamental weight as *wu*, *you*, and *yi*. Indeed, it is this triadic set, and their inseparability from and mutual dependency on Dao, that the entire enterprise of *Xuanxue* unfurls. It is owing to this that the present work has chosen to have all of its chapters touch upon or be guided by these three terms. Doing so not only distinguishes this *Companion* from other studies on *Xuanxue*, it lends it a methodological coherency that would otherwise be missing. In light of the fact that *Xuanxue* was not a formal school but a continuum of individuals⁵ interested in the same core texts and ideas, it would be more accurate to describe it as a life-style driven by a form of knowledge and bodily awareness that let its practitioners be persons of the world for the sake of world as opposed to their own selfish betterment.

The chapters comprising this *Companion* are divided into four parts, the first of which deals with the background matters that will greatly assist our reading of the more specialized chapters that follow. Of the two chapters in Part I, the first by James Sellmann outlines the historical context in which *Xuanxue* arose and the biographical details and philosophical achievements of its proponents. Chapter 3 by Jana Rošker shows how *Xuanxue* thinkers scrutinized the connection between words and their meaning in order to lay bare the structural patterns of language and how these, in turn, influence our process of thinking. This evolution of earlier discourses on language seen in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* meant that *Xuanxue* could put the ineffable and apophatic nature of Dao into propositions that were less mystical and more onto-epistemological. By illuminating the co-dependency of words and the silence underlying them, their patterns and principles could be employed in new and far-reaching ways.

Part II of this *Companion* contains five chapters on the texts and thinkers from the later-Han dynasty. Chapters 4 and 5 by Barbara Hendrischke offer a sustained and probing reading of a text rarely discussed in Chinese philosophy, let alone in the context of *Xuanxue*—the *Scripture on Great Peace* (*Taipingjing*). Examining the text's use of Yin and Yang and its doctrine of self-cultivation via “retaining oneness,” Hendrischke provides a key piece in the developmental story of how

⁵The clique known as the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢) is an obvious exception.

body-cosmic harmony evolved from the rudimentary descriptions seen in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* to the richly detailed theories and practices spoken of in *Xuanxue* thinkers such as JI Kang and GE Hong.

Chapter 6 by Misha Tadd investigates Heshanggong's commentary on the *Daodejing*. Focusing on the concept of *ziran*, Tadd argues that Heshanggong extended it beyond Laozi's original use by making it an essential and authoritative component of Dao. In doing so, Heshanggong created a system wherein the ruler gained his authority by embodying and enhancing *ziran* in the world. Any work on *Xuanxue* would be remiss if it did not include a chapter on the second great commentary on the *Daodejing* from the Han: the Xiang'er. Ronnie Littlejohn in Chap. 7 answers this need with a sophisticated and nuanced account of why the text is not concerned with establishing a political structure or ritual practices; rather, the Xiang'er commentary is a meditation on the *Daodejing* and serves as a guide for libationers on how best to improve their health and longevity, a topic of great interest to, yet again, JI Kang and GE Hong.

Alexus McLeod takes us back to the concept of *ziran* in Chap. 8, demonstrating how it functioned in the thought of WANG Chong. Anyone familiar with *Xuanxue* knows that both WANG Bi and GUO Xiang developed *ziran* into something quite different from how Laozi and Zhuangzi originally envisioned it. What many people fail to realize is the role WANG Chong played in this conceptual transformation. According to McLeod, Wang minimized the role of purposive activity in the determination of life-outcomes based on allotment in order to clarify the inconsistencies between a thing's effort and the outcome of said action. In doing so, WANG Chong turned *ziran* into a principle of development and activity tied to each thing's nature, and it was this breakthrough that would hold sway over WANG Bi and GUO Xiang.

With our examination of the Han era complete, Part III of this *Companion* marks the beginning of our discourse on thinkers from the Wei dynasty. Comprised of nine chapters, there are two each on HE Yan, RUAN Ji, and JI Kang, and three on WANG Bi. Chapter 9 by Paul D'Ambrosio looks at two fragmentary essays by HE Yan: "On Dao" and "On the Nameless." Brief as the source texts may be, they intricately weave thick references to the *Daodejing* and *Analects* to discuss namelessness, the sage, and Dao. What we will find is that HE Yan was grappling with the very issues discussed in Jana Rošker's chapter, that is, how can the sage expound upon Dao when the latter is nameless and beyond conventional modes of knowledge. Chapter 10 continues to examine the thought of HE Yan, only now the source text is the *Analects* of Confucius. As Yuet Keung Lo deftly shows, HE Yan's role as co-editor of a volume of collected commentaries on the *Analects* was to produce a work of educational value by way of pedagogical usefulness and efficacy. In Lo's words, HE Yan and his editorial team sought to remove sectarian barriers that might have divided earlier commentators and avoid dictating subjective interpretations to the reader. The picture we get of HE Yan from these two chapters is an individual fascinated with Daoism but ultimately unable to abandon his devotion to Confucianism.

Moving on, the next two chapters are on the poetically reknowned but philosophically neglected figure of RUAN Ji. Chapter 11 by David Chai investigates a short essay Ruan wrote praising the *Zhuangzi*. As Chai shows, the majority of Ruan

Ji's essay is directly culled from the *Zhuangzi*; however, the way that Ruan reconstructed said material as a defense of the source text was quite ingenious. Written in a stylistic manner that would also be employed by Ji Kang, Ruan's essay epitomizes the *Xuanxue* spirit with its robust argumentation, linguistic brilliance, and making a mockery of Confucianism without directly attacking Confucius.

RUAN Ji's love of music was also shared by his friend Ji Kang, the focus of the next two chapters. In Chap. 12, David Chai delves into the ethical aspect of Ji Kang's thought with an analysis of his essay on how to be without self-interest. Briefly put, to be good is to lack self-interest, and to be morally open is to partake in the cosmological oneness of Dao. Conversely, to be bad is to cling to privation, and when things are reduced to the selfish level of humanity, injury and distance from Dao ensure. The key, Ji Kang says, is learning how to turn self-interest into openness and stop using things so that one may be morally transformed by Dao. Chapter 13 by So Jeong Park offers a new reading of Ji Kang's famous essay on the emotionless content of music. According to Park, Ji Kang made it possible for later musical aesthetics to pay greater attention to the structure of music. Instead of simply dismissing emotions from musical discussions, Ji Kang argued we should uplift musical emotion from common feelings because doing so will increase our sensitivity to the world. Appreciating the natural harmony of music also serves as a lesson on how to attain physical harmony with the world, the benefit of which is a prolonged and healthy life.

The three remaining chapters of Part III are devoted to WANG Bi. In Chap. 14, Tze-Ki Hon looks into Wang's commentary on the *Yijing*. For WANG Bi, the hexagrams are pointers that direct us to something hidden and implicit, yet remain fundamental in time and space. Unlike early commentators who turned the *Yijing* into a dry system of signs, WANG Bi saw the text as a living picture of one's surroundings wherein readers could determine the opportunities and limitations of a given situation for themselves. Eric Nelson in Chap. 15 investigates how WANG Bi exposed the sophisticated relationship between words, images, and meanings found in the *Daodejing* and *Yijing*, and the role nothingness plays in our subsequent need to forget them if we are to unite with Dao. Chapter 16 by Alan Fox also examines the role played by language, contending that WANG Bi's emphasis on metaphysics have led European translators and commentators to favor an ontological reading of the *Daodejing*. To rectify the problems of inconsistency and incoherence that arise from this view, Fox offers a process reading of the text and Wang's commentary in which Dao is presented as pluralistic, dynamic, and concrete.

Part IV of this *Companion* is devoted to the Jin dynasty and contains nine chapters. Alan Chan in Chap. 17 provides us with an in-depth analysis of a short but influential essay by PEI Wei in which being holds priority over non-being, a reversal of the argument made earlier by WANG Bi. Indeed, Pei takes being to be a dynamic, as opposed to static, entity dependent on and subject to the influences of external conditions. This, Chan says, was his major contribution and it set PEI Wei against all other *Xuanxue* thinkers. The next three chapters all examine the *Zhuangzi* commentator GUO Xiang. Chapter 18 by Chris Fraser delves into Guo's metaphysics of Dao and how this impacts human activity and agency. For Fraser, GUO Xiang holds a

distinctive conception of the self and agency—and, accordingly, normatively appropriate action—on which self-fulfillment and freedom become consistent with his doctrine of non-mindedness. Another key aspect of Guo's philosophical commentary is the concept of lone-transformation, the idea that each being in the universe is in charge of its own genesis and development, which Yuet Keung Lo makes the focus of Chap. 19. As Lo shows, however, lone-transformation is only realizable in the intergrowth among the myriad things, including the sage who merges and wanders therein. Chapter 20 by Richard J. Lynn examines the surviving fragments of what was GUO Xiang's commentary on the *Analects*. As was the case for his *Zhuangzi* commentary, Lynn shows that Guo's *Analects* commentary reads the source text as a political treatise. By promoting the sage-ruler in Daoist terms, Guo sought to use him as a catalyst for the regeneration of self and society, and the foundation of a worldly utopia. GUO Xiang's commentary on the *Analects* thus advised the ruler, if not how to become a sage, then at the very least how to rule like one.

Moving on, the next three chapters focus on GE Hong who authored the *Baopuzi*. Gil Raz in Chap. 21 writes about the significance of *xuan* (dark, mystery) as the philosophical foundation for GE Hong's exploration of immortality. Indeed, GE Hong linked the ontological premises of *xuan* to a series of epistemological implications, the most important being that true knowledge of *xuan* comes from embodying the cosmological principles found in practices of immortality. Seeking immortality is also the topic of Chap. 22 by Fabrizio Pregadio. Attaining immortality, Pregadio writes, depends on one's destiny and is ultimately tied to the mandate of heaven. The purpose of GE Hong's teachings and practices on immortality are hence the means to fulfill one's destiny. Thomas Michael in Chap. 23 analyzes GE Hong's inheritance of the concepts of being and non-being from the *Daodejing*. What resulted was the articulation of a systematic and theoretical foundation for the pursuit of longevity grounded in the techniques of life-nourishment and the methods of alchemy.

Chapter 24 by Livia Kohn reveals how the longevity techniques first put forward in texts such as the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and the “*neiye*” chapter of the *Guanzi*, were employed by *Xuanxue* thinkers. Since a primary concern of *Xuanxue* is the cultivation of body and spirit, how one manages and refines one's *qi* 氣 is crucial. However, the *qi* within the body is no different from that of the universe, thus by perfecting the techniques of retaining and strengthening *qi* one can then attain oneness with the things of the world and Dao. Of course, nourishing *qi* was not the only technique *Xuanxue* thinkers had at their disposal to conjoin in oneness with Dao, as earlier chapters in this *Companion* have shown. The final chapter of Part IV, and of this *Companion*, is Ellen Zhang's account of the Buddhist thinker ZHI Dun and how his concept of freedom was modeled after that of the *Zhuangzi*. Said differently, ZHI Dun is arguing that Zhuangzi's notion of spiritual fulfillment can be understood through the Buddhist idea of spiritual contemplation. Despite his affinity for Daoism, ZHI Dun did not lose sight of his Buddhist training and created a unique, syncretic vocabulary to accommodate both traditions.

It is fitting that this *Companion* should end with a chapter on ZHI Dun. Not only would Buddhism represent a new phase in the development of China's

philosophical, religious, and cultural heritage, it would employ the conceptual language and imagery of *Xuanxue* as part of its early acclimatization to China. Given *Xuanxue* thinkers show a familiarity with the “three texts of profundity” that modern readers might not possess, reading this *Companion* in tandem with that edited by LIU Xiaogan (2015) on classical Daoism might prove beneficial. For those who already have a solid grounding in said tradition, there is no better place to learn about *Xuanxue* than the volume before you.

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Part I
Background of *Xuanxue*

Chapter 2

Xuanxue's Contributions to Chinese Philosophy



James D. Sellmann

1 Introduction

Xuanxue 玄學 prepared the way for later developments in Chinese philosophy, especially the blending and final amalgamation of Lao-Zhuang (i.e., Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子) cosmological ideas and concepts into the later philosophical developments of the social, political and moral teachings of Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius), Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius), and their followers in Song dynasty (960–1279) *Lixue* 理學 (School of Patterned-Principles) or Neo-Confucianism. It drew from other Daoist sources and syncretized some alchemical and immortality practices with the Kong-Meng self-cultivation arts. In addition to these practical techniques, *Xuanxue* is noted for bringing the art of abstraction to new heights in the development of Chinese philosophy (Feng 1983: 42). *Xuanxue* especially paved the way for later Song dynasty *Lixue* philosophers to absorb Lao-Zhuang transformational vital-breath (*qi* 氣) cosmology into their systems of thought, coupled with the implicit cosmology from the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). *Xuanxue* philosophers opened a debate about the historical-dialectical relation between cherishing non-being (*wu* 無) and venerating being (*you* 有) that culminated in an historical synthesis of valuing “beyond non-being” (*wuwu* 無無). *Xuanxue's* emphasis on non-being or beyond non-being, patterned-principles (*li* 理), original substance (*benti* 本體), and substance-functioning (*tiyong* 體用), established key concepts that reemerged in Chinese Buddhism and Song dynasty *Lixue* (Chan 1963: 318). The various philosophical masters of the Wei-Jin period continued the indigenous Chinese practice of synthesizing and unifying what are apparently diverse, or even divisive, teachings into coherent systems of thought while at the same time offering both abstract and

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D. Chai (ed.), *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (*Neo-Daoism*),

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy 14,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49228-1_2

practical teachings regarding “a more spiritual dimension” to navigate through the human condition (Kohn 2014: 4). *Xuanxue* unlike other Chinese philosophies took abstract inquiry into the fundamental questions of reality, ethics, epistemology, and logic to new heights. It also offers transformational practices to engage in, circumnavigate, or wander-freely (*you* 遊) around the natural-human realm. Generally Chinese philosophies are philosophical belief systems that offer pragmatic or practical *techné* for human flourishing, however such “flourishing” might be interpreted. *Xuanxue* continued and contributed to that practical approach to life and philosophy.

2 Setting the Stage for *Xuanxue*

During the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), the economic and political structure changed with the institution of inherited government posts among the prominent families and the gentry class (*menfa shizu* 門閥士族), who were powerful political families that inherited and passed on government positions for generations. These economic and political changes created a new layer of social prestige with direct control of government offices. The prominent families with hereditary titles created a class divide even among the other gentry families who did not inherit political power, despite their wealth. Those with hereditary titles shared political power with the non-hereditary gentry by one of three methods. They provided a means for them to be appointed or selected for office. The successful sons of these less prestigious gentry families could be drafted (*zhengpi* 徵辟) for office or they could pass the civil service examination. The less prestigious families also intermarried with the families that held hereditary titles and gained power through their offspring. Usually the preferred method was to draft someone by making a special recommendation to the Emperor or high officials based on the recommended son’s moral fiber and standing in the community. The general idea was to select talented people, but often those selected or drafted had close family ties to the hereditary gentry, lacking real talent or morals. Because the drafting process was fraught with problems and corruption, a better method was needed. The person being drafted could not perform the duties of the office because the names or titles did not align with the realities of the job that needed to be accomplished or the draftee was incapable of doing the required work that the office demanded. During the Wei-Jin period (220–420 CE), warlords established and controlled their dynasties by working with the gentry and drafting gentry sons to operate their government agencies. Eventually as the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties unified the empire, they turned more and more to appointment after examination to further dismantle the power held by the families with hereditary titles, and yet the gentry remained in power because it was primarily their sons who could sit for and pass the exams. During the Wei-Jin period, the *Xuanxue* philosophers came from these gentry families.

The Eastern Han also saw the breakdown of the Western Han’s moral norms and ethical code. The norms and code became ossified into dogmatic forms of the doctrine of names (*mingjiao* 名教) and the code of ritual-action (*lifa* 禮法) (Chan 2009:

317). The decline of morals challenged long held family values and basic humanity, leading to the breakdown of the family and even cannibalism. WANG Rong 王戎 (234–305 CE) classified people into one of three categories: sages, the gentry, and the common laborers (Feng 1983: 9). The gentry considered themselves to be the rightful inheritors of political and cultural power because they also considered themselves to be the top-notch, superior people by birth. In other words, “the gentry provided the class origin and social background for *Xuanxue*” (Feng 1983: 10).

3 Philosophical Predecessors to *Xuanxue*: Name and Reality and Evaluating Personnel

As mentioned above, one of the perplexing issues in the Eastern Han was how to correctly appoint and evaluate government personnel. WANG Fu 王符 (ca. 79–165 CE) considered that comprehensively verifying names and their realities was crucial to founding the Great Peace (*taiping* 太平). He said: “The title must match the position of authority; describing a specific reason (*li* 理) must relate to reality. If this is practiced, then there will not be mere symbolic positions in officialdom, and the wrong people will not be in office” (from the “*kaoji* 考績” chapter in the *Discourse on Recluses* 潛夫論; Feng 1983: 12). The proper fit between the actual state of affairs in the world, especially political offices, and the language used to describe them was a concern of many pre-Qin philosophers who discussed the attunement or rectification of names (*zhengming* 正名), the proper fit between penalty-punishment and name-title (*xingming* 刑名), form and name (*xingming* 形名), or name and reality (*mingshi* 名實). Although the concern about language and its proper fit and reference to reality was not new, nevertheless, the concern had lasting significance into the Wei-Jin period. The relationship between reality and how it is described strongly impacts the method of *Xuanxue*.

In the Wei dynasty, LIU Shao 劉劭 (ca. 170–240) and ZHONG Hui 鍾會 (225–264) offered their respective solutions to resolve the name and reality problem. Liu’s *Treaties on People* (*Renwuzhi* 人物志) classified people into three categories: the essential, the heroic, and those who simultaneously possessed both characteristics—the sage-ruler (Tang 2005: 4–5). He expands on these core traits by drawing from Yin-Yang 陰陽 and five agents (*wuxing* 五行) cosmological categories, denoting different personality types based on the different combinations of Yang-active and Yin-passive energy levels. He classified twelve personality types, ranging from pure moral-sentiment, to six types of people interested in managing government offices, to three types of intellectuals, debaters, and those who are heroic (Feng 1983: 19). A person with high quality essential characteristics could serve as prime minister; one with heroic traits could be a general. All of them have a deviant side to their personalities, opening the possibility for incompetence and corruption. The superior personality is the sage-ruler. The sage-ruler is the personality type that combines the essential and the heroic types being essential, intelligent or wise and

extraordinary, and heroic or very courageous. In this way LIU Shao attempted to align the names or position titles with the reality of people's personality types. *Xuanxue* philosophers discussed the characteristics and abilities of the sage in detail.

After LIU Shao, the discussion turned to focus on talent and nature (*caixing* 才性). ZHONG Hui analyzed the four combinations of talent and nature in his work *Discourse on the Four Fundamentals* (*Siben lun* 四本論). First, talent and nature can be identical. Second, they can be different. Third, talent and nature can be united. Fourth, they can be separated. Nature refers to a person's virtuous character, while talent refers to one's capabilities. Zhong's work is lost, and so other sources are used to attempt to reconstruct his perspective on how to match the descriptive name or title and the realities of human personality types.

The works of Liu and Zhong are not philosophical, but they depict a shift from the Han dynasty focus on name and reality to the Wei-Jin focus on distinguishing names and analyzing patterned-principles (*mingli* 名理). What is important to note here is that the early Wei-Jin thinkers were breaking with Eastern Han practices, while forging a new path forward. As FENG Youlan notes, *Xuanxue* has roots in the opening chapter of the *Daodejing* 道德經 where four interrelated problematic issues are discussed, namely: (1) the gap between language and Dao 道; (2) the problem of describing particular things and the constant name (*changming* 常名); (3) being and non-being come from the same origin; and (4) they are named differently but have the same meaning (Feng 1983: 27). A new critical interpretation based on the texts by Laozi and Zhuangzi, as well as *Yijing* cosmology, focusing on how general names refer to specific instances begin the formation of *Xuanxue* philosophy.

During the Wei-Jin period, some scholars of integrity withdrew from court and turned their attention to an apophatic philosophy of non-being to further remove themselves from court intrigue, engaging in "pure conversation" (*qingtan* 清談). Rejecting the popular scholasticism of the day, they studied the Classics from a new and creative perspective incorporating Lao-Zhuang cosmology (Chan 1963: 314). The debate between the New Text school and the Old Text school that centered around whether or not Confucius was the throneless king who would save the world through his subtle teachings, inspired critical inquiry and creative, independent, philosophy (Chan 1963: 315). *Xuanxue*'s emphasis on non-being, patterned-principles, original substance, and substance-functioning, established modes of thought that reemerged in later Chinese Buddhism and Song dynasty *Lixue* (Chan 1963: 318). This is another way of describing *Xuanxue*'s break with Han scholarship, forging a new creative interpretation of the cultural teachings of human navigation through the reality of the natural and social worlds.

4 Confucius as a Deified Sage

Michael Puett (2017) contends that *Xuanxue* philosophers proposed a revised vision of the sage. Instead of focusing only on the sage Confucius as the creator of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋), they focus on the sage

Confucius as the spontaneous teacher who effectively generates an atmosphere or mood for his disciples to emulate. To the extent that the *Zhuangzi*, especially based on a selective reading of the first two passages of chapter 4 (*renjianshi* 人間世) and other selective passages from the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters, set the stage for *Xuanxue*, we can see how the positive images of Confucius as sage in the *Zhuangzi* predisposed *Xuanxue* thinkers to this view of Confucius as a spontaneous sage-teacher.

The early developments of what would become Chinese imperial-court and popular-folk religions were taking root in the later part of the Zhou dynasty, especially the Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE), namely in the Spring and Autumn (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States (480–221 BCE) periods. Despite later attempts to delineate different ways of life or different religio-philosophies, the amalgamating, syncretic, comprehensive and cumulative character of what I am calling Chinese Imperial Religion and also Chinese Folk Religion both embraced ancestor veneration with apotheosis or the deification of great ancestors, such as Confucius, Laozi, the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) and other figures. Both the Imperial and Folk Religions were mixed with nature veneration, dietary-health-hygiene-gymnastic-meditation practices, ritual, magic and other practices and beliefs. There is a “comprehensive harmony” (*he* 和), a unity of opposites and acceptance of a multiplicity of perspectives that is found throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, literature, cultural practices and beliefs. Kirill Thompson (1990), using the harmony of aesthetic order, comes to a similar conclusion that there is a unity of multiple ideas at play in the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* and its use of Confucius, especially where it depicts him in a positive manner, as a master of the proper way to live, accomplishes an important role in the deification of Confucius, and the amalgamating syncretic character of the later development of imperial and folk religion in China where Confucius is the sage of sages, the teacher of teachers, master of masters, the saint of saints, a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The *Zhuangzi's* use of Confucius influences the philosophers who present him as the highest sage, as one who even depicts and embodies the values of Laozi and Zhuangzi in a superior, more lived manner than they themselves were able to do. Despite the *Zhuangzi* passages and other sources that ridicule Confucius, his image as a deified sage-god was inspired by the positive images of him depicted in the *Zhuangzi* and other sources.

5 *Xuanxue* Philosophy

Despite the diversity of *Xuanxue* philosophers, they share a general love for pure conversation or debate about philosophical concepts and terminology. Most of them favor Laozi or Zhuangzi, and *Yijing* cosmology (Yu 2016; Tang 2005; Feng 1983). Many of them exhibit an antinomian spirit and a Zhuangzian love for humor that embraces a non-dual logic and outlook on life. They seek to syncretize the differences between Confucius' proactive self-cultivation of the moral virtues with the

effortless, and apparent purposeless, free-flowing “practices” or behavior patterns exhibited by certain characters in the *Zhuangzi*. It is often pointed out that the character *xuan* 玄 of *Xuanxue* is derived from the opening chapter of the *Daodejing*.

Let us briefly review that text and a passage from chapter 22 (*zhibeiyou* 知北遊) of the *Zhuangzi*, to elucidate the roots of the meaning of *Xuanxue*, and its approach to elucidating Dao. Rather than attempt to give a translation based on the original meaning of the text, let me try to read the ancient sources through the eyes of Wei-Jin philosophers because this is a matter of hermeneutic intertextuality (Swartz 2018: 20–40). Land and sea trade routes had long been transporting products and ideas from foreign lands such that the Chinese intellectuals understood that other cultures had terms for their respective concepts of ultimate reality or divine creator. *Xuanxue* philosophers knew that they too needed to define their ultimate reality or be outdone by the foreigners. They turned to the ancient concept of Dao as an indigenous root-concept for their ultimate reality. How to interpret this fundamental concept was the perennial question in China. The opening chapter of the *Daodejing* reads:

The Dao that is talked about is not the absolute Dao. The names that are named are not the absolute name. Non-being names the origin of sky and earth. Being names the mother of all things. Therefore, sometimes remove your passions to see the secret of life; sometimes embrace your passions to see the manifestations. These two (non-being or the passionless-secret, versus being or the passionate-manifestations) are (in their natures) the same; they are given different names when they become manifest. They may both be called the cosmic mystery (*xuan*); reaching from the mystery into the deeper mystery (*xuan*) is the gate to the secret of all life (Lin 2014: 2–4; translation modified).

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

The *Daodejing* is intriguing in that its poetic style is vague, profound, and opens the imagination to various readings. In the opening poem the ultimate reality is named Dao, and yet its name and all names are readily identified as being inadequate in a dynamic living world of flux and transformations. Names cannot keep up with the rapid changes, transformations, the identity of the various particulars among myriad things shifts, and the whole of nature as the sky and earth is in flux. In Laozi’s correlative thinking, or non-dual logic, being and non-being are locked in a dialectic relationship, and so the human perspective or cognition is also locked into the constant flux between eliminating the passions and embracing them, of having and not having, seeing and not seeing, understanding and not understanding. This worldview is a type of naive realism based on processional transformations filtered through correlative non-dual logic in the form of Yin-Yang classification categories. The correlations align non-being with the passionless secret and being aligns with the passions and manifestations or the objects that become manifest to our consciousness once we begin to have desires. The correlative, interlocking opposites (being and non-being, having passions and being passionless, being manifest and not being manifest, the ultimate secret and the obvious) are one and the same all-embracing ultimate reality, but they are merely given different, inadequate names. If people can grasp the non-dual logic, or experience the passionless, empty, state of awareness, then the mystery of mysteries opens the gate to the secret of all life. To

do this, people have to enter an apophatic meditative state of inner peace and emptiness, or they can penetrate the experience of abstract, correlative, non-dual logic. Religio-philosophically speaking, they venerate non-being as the ultimate, all-encompassing reality.

Another way to think about this is that, at first glance, from the perspective of categories, there are things and all things fall into the larger category of myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物). The myriad things are contained within the category of “sky and earth” (*tiandi* 天地)—the physical, material reality. “Being” is a synonym, or another general, all-encompassing category, that incorporates all things. Is there another larger-scale, abstract, universal category that can include or encompass being? Many mainstream philosophies argue that only Being or God, that is God-as-Being, can be Real. The ancient Greek Atomists, Christian *via negativa* advocates like Nicolas of Cusa, the early Upanishad-Hindus, the Buddhists, and the Daoists argue that non-being, variously conceived as the Void, non-substantial (absolute) God, Ultimate Reality without any characteristics, Emptiness, and *wu* 無, is the higher abstract category that encompasses being and the sensible, material world. That is to say, non-being is the Really Real Reality. This higher abstract non-being is not the mere absence of a thing or the absence of all things; it is conceived as a non-dual logical attempt to find the highest, universal, abstraction that the human mind can conceive to name as a placeholder or null-set for the Ultimate Reality or godhead. This is variously conceived as hitting the limits of language and thought, the ineffable, the inconceivable, the most abstract source of sources, the godhead beyond god itself, the abstract reality beyond physical-reality. It cannot be perceived by the sense-organs, but it can be experienced in dreamless sleep and altered states of consciousness such as apophatic meditation. The abstract concept of non-being is discoverable, experienceable in a sense, in human consciousness by meditation, dreamless sleep and higher order abstraction; people can gain a quickly fading glimpse of “It.” In this sense, these philosophers are proposing that non-being is a more encompassing category than being itself. This is another way to attempt to grasp the meaning of Laozi’s and early *Xuanxue*’s focus on non-being.

Whether they focus on being or non-being, early *Xuanxue* thinkers argue there is a higher, abstract reality that is beyond and, in some sense, generates and controls the lower categories and things of the natural world. However, later thinkers, such as Guo Xiang, counter this kind of externalist, transcendental view, and deploy an immanentist, internalist view that grounds reality in the particulars of this world.

The correlative non-dual thinking about the Ultimate Reality that underlies Laozi’s poetic philosophy is also found in the *Zhuangzi*. In chapter 22 (*zhibeiyou* 知北遊), there is an insightful dialogue between four fictitious characters named Ether, Infinite, No-action, and No-beginning about how (not) to talk about Dao. The passage reads:

So, Ether asked Infinite, “Do you know Dao?” “I do not know it,” replied Infinite. Ether asked No-action the same question and he replied, “I know Dao” ... “I know that Dao can be high, or low, can be congealed, or dispersed. These are some of the specifications that I know.” Ether told No-beginning what No-action had said, and asked, “So, Infinite says he does not know, and No-action says he knows. Who is right?” “The one who thinks he does

not know is profound. The one who thinks he knows is shallow. The former deals with the inner reality, the latter with appearance.” Ether sighed while raising his head, “Then the one who (thinks he) does not know really knows, and the one who (thinks he) knows really does not know. Who knows this knowledge without knowing (or who [thinks he] knows this knowledge without [thinking he is] knowing it)?”

No-beginning replied, “Dao is not heard, what is heard is not Dao. Dao is not seen, what is seen is not Dao. Dao cannot be told; what is told is not Dao. Do you realize that which is invisible in all the visible things? Dao should not be named. If someone answers in reply to a question about Dao, he does not know Dao. Even the one who asks about Dao has not heard Dao. Dao cannot be asked about, and for the question (about it) there is no answer. To ask questions which cannot be answered is to fail to recognize the inner reality. If then those who do not recognize the inner reality try to answer questioners who land in extremities, such people have neither observed the workings of the sky and earth, nor do they realize the Ultimate Source. Therefore, they cannot surmount Kunlun Mountain or travel in the realm of the Great Void (Lin 2014: 3–4; translation modified).

於是泰清問乎無窮曰：子知道乎？無窮曰：吾不知。又問乎無為。無為曰：吾知道……無為曰：吾知道之可以貴，可以賤，可以約，可以散。此吾所以知道之數也。泰清以之言也問乎無始，曰：若是，則無窮之弗知，與無為之知，孰是而孰非乎？無始曰：不知深矣，知之淺矣；弗知內矣，知之外矣。於是泰清中而歎曰：弗知乃知乎！知乃不知乎！孰知不知之知？無始曰：道不可聞，聞而非也；道不可見，見而非也；道不可言，言而非也。知形形之无形乎？道不當名。無始曰：有問道而應之者，不知道也。雖問道者，亦未聞道。道無問，問無應。無問問之，是問窮也；無應應之，是無內也。以無內待問窮，若是者，外不觀乎宇宙，內不知乎太初，是以不過乎崑崙，不遊乎太虛。

It is this kind of thinking by the followers of Zhuangzi that set the *Xuanxue* thinkers on their path of trying not to talk about the ultimate reality, Dao, or when they did talk about it, to do so in such a manner so as not to appear totally ignorant because they had attempted to talk about it! Their approach is first and foremost a rational method of linguistic and literary analysis of “differentiating names and analyzing patterned-principles” (*bianming xili* 辯名析理) (Feng 1983: 33). The exception to this generalization is the non-rational direct experience approach found in the poets and LIU Ling’s “arriving at comprehension” discussed below.

6 The Philosophers’ Contributions

With the above brief exposure to the background that influenced Wei-Jin period thinkers, let us turn to the specific contributions offered by the leading proponents of *Xuanxue*.

WANG Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE) and HE Yan 何晏 (d. 249 CE) lived at the beginning of the Wei dynasty during the Zhengshi 正始 reign period, marking an initial stage in the development of *Xuanxue* philosophy, sometimes referred to as Zhengshi *Xuanxue*. They began a new approach to studying the Classics, breaking away from Han scholasticism, by creating fresh interpretations of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Yijing*, and the *Daodejing*. The Tang court made HE Yan’s commentary on the *Analects*, and WANG Bi’s commentary on the *Yijing*, the official standard

commentaries to be studied for the civil service exams, and their study of the *Daodejing* and the Tang Emperor's belief that he descended from Laozi's Li-family-lineage led to the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* being included on the examination system's list of required readings.

Wang and He both studied the *Daodejing*, and both cherished (*gui* 貴) non-being. Because there is a religious viewpoint underlying their philosophical perspectives, I prefer to use terms like “cherish or venerate” (terms close to “worship”) rather than “value or esteem.” Note that the expression “cherish non-being” (*guiwu* 貴無) is used to describe Wang's and He's outlook in the “Biography of WANG Yan 王衍” in the *History of the Jin* 晉書 (Feng 1983: 48). In a sense they are presenting Dao as non-being, to be the ultimate reality or impersonal godhead. This marks the initial assertion, the thesis if you will, in the historical dialectic development of non-being, followed by PEI Wei's 裴頠 (267–300 CE) veneration of being (*chongyou* 崇有) as the anti-thesis, and finally GUO Xiang's 郭象 (ca. 252–312 CE) synthesis by “moving beyond non-being” via a double negation (i.e., *wuwu* 無無) in the development of *Xuanxue* philosophy. First a look at HE Yan's position.

It reads in HE Yan's *Discourse on Dao* (*Dao lun* 道論):

Being qua being is engendered by relying on non-being. An affair qua that very affair is completed (by originating) from non-being. If something is beyond speech while it is being spoken of it, beyond description while being described, beyond form while being observed, or beyond sound while being listened to, then Dao is complete in it. Hence vital-breath (*qi* 氣) and things are manifest after being able to make the sound and the echo obvious; light and shadow are clear while color and form are made spiritual. [As a consequence,] the darkness (*xuan* 玄) becomes black by it; the pure silk becomes white by it; the T-square-ruler scrutinizes the square by it; the compass scrutinizes the circle by it. Both the circle and the square obtain their forms, but they are derived from the formless; both black and white obtain their descriptions (names, *ming* 名) but they are beyond description.

有之為有，恃無以生；事而為事，由無以成。夫道之而無語，名之而無名，視之而無形，聽之而無聲，則道之全焉。故能昭音向而出氣物，包形神而章光影；玄以之黑，素以之白，矩以之方，規以之員。員方得形而此無形，白黑得名而此無名也 (Feng 1983: 48).

WANG Bi explained it more clearly in the following:

As for the cause by which a thing is produced and merit is accomplished, they must be engendered by what is beyond form and from what is beyond description. What is beyond form and what is beyond description are the ancestor of the myriad things. Neither warm nor cold, neither a high *gong* tone nor a low *shang* tone, it cannot be heard while listening to it; it cannot be seen while looking at it; it cannot be felt while touching it; and it cannot be sensed while tasting it ... Hence covering and penetrating heaven and earth; nothing is not a master; it is able to become the ancestor of the things in categories. If something is warm, then it cannot be [simultaneously] cold; if a sound is a high *gong* tone, then it cannot be [simultaneously] a low *shang* tone. Any form certainly has that which gives it its identity (*fen* 分, allotment); there must be that to which sounds belong to (that is, the scale of tones). Hence the form of any particular phenomenon (*xiang* 象) will not be the greatest phenomenon; any sound in a particular tone will not be the greatest tone. However, if the four phenomena (*sixiang* 四象) do not take shape, then the greatest phenomenon will not be easily accessible. If the five tones are not sounded, then the greatest tone will not be obtained. If things do not have a master (that is, are not in a category of Yin or Yang) while the four

phenomena are in form, then the greatest phenomena will be easily accessible. If one's heart-mind has no specific place to go while the five tones are being played, then the greatest tone will be attained.

夫物之所以生，功之所以成，必生乎無形，由乎無名。無形無名者，萬物之宗也。不溫不涼，不宮不商。聽之不可得而聞，視之不可得而彰，體之不可得而知，味之不可得而嘗……故能為品物之宗主，苞通天地，彌使不經也。若溫也則不能涼矣，宮也則不能商矣。形必有所分，聲必有所屬。故象而形者，非大象也；音而聲者，非大音也。然則，四形不象，則大象無以暢；五音不聲，則大音無已至。四象形而物無所主焉，則大象暢矣；五音聲而心無所適焉，則大音至矣 (Feng 1983: 49; Yu 2016: 133–134).

From these two passages we can see how He and Wang attempted to explicate the higher abstraction of non-being as a kind of plenum-void, an esoteric way of talking about the ultimate reality or ultimate source for the material world by approaching what is beyond sensation and beyond the ordinary usage of terms. The description of that which exists beyond sensation reminds us of chapter 14 of the *Daodejing*. The above passage fits with Laozi's claim that "the myriad things of the world are generated from being and being is generated from non-being" (chapter 40). This interpretation of non-being opens a spiritual dimension for self-cultivation. When the heart-mind (*xin* 心) is empty, Dao dwells within, the practitioner directly experiences the ultimate reality, having a panenhenic—all in one, one in all—experience. In this way "non-being" is used to name the unnamable to discuss what cannot be directly discussed as both cosmological and self-cultivation concepts.

HE Yan and WANG Bi had to discuss the role of the indescribable (*wuming* 無名) and the relationship between the abstract generalization and the concrete particular. Above I translated the third line of the opening chapter of the *Daodejing* as "non-being names the origin ..."; the expression *wuming* can and has been read as "nameless is the origin" or "there is no name for the origin," and it is also read as "non-being names," or "non-being is the name." Wang and He were likely to have read this line in both ways as the nameless and the name called "non-being," or "the nameless non-being." This creates a paradox in that calling it "nameless" is to give it a name. In his essay, entitled *Discourse on Beyond Naming* (*Wuming lun* 無名論), HE Yan argued that, "if we say that being beyond a name (*wuming*) is Dao, and that being beyond reputation is the greatest reputation, then *wuming* can be said to be an a-describable-name, and being beyond having a reputation can be said to have a reputation. However, will this not function the same as having a reputation and having an a-describable-name?" (Feng 1983: 51; Yu 2016: 86). This is not a mere semantic word game. It is an attempt to make an abstract difference between a specific example and a more encompassing generalization. This level of being-beyond-name and being-beyond-reputation functions differently than being nameless or reputationless. As HE Yan explained, "this is comparable to there is nothing, then there is everything. Among 'there is everything,' it should entail 'there is nothing,' and this is different from (the common expression) 'there is everything'" (Fang 1981: 52; Yu 2016: 86). Being beyond description is a type of description. Dao is beyond description hence Dao can be described by any particular-thing. A particular example is used to designate the general category, yet those specific descriptions or