

# Dao: Cosmological Thinking and Social Practice

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## Abstract

*This article analyses the Chinese concept of dao (道) in the classical era of Chinese philosophy. The concept had a fundamental role in shaping all Chinese schools of thought. Dao is not only the key to Chinese cosmological and transcendental thinking, but moreover occupies a central role in how Chinese philosophers, legalist scholars and strategists understood knowledge and coordinated and regulated social and political behaviour. This article illustrates how the concept provides a specific, dynamic and practice-related approach to politics, governance and strategic thinking, fusing conceptions of knowledge and practice into one notion – dao.*

## 1. Introduction

This exploratory article analyses the Chinese concept of *dao* (道). *Dao* is the most central and widely shared concepts of various Chinese schools of thought. It possesses the same philosophical status as ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ in Western philosophy. Instead of these Western concepts, it is the notion *dao* that is foundational in the Chinese world of philosophy. Therefore, *dao* is a key to Chinese thinking, although not an easy one to understand. The polymorphic connotations and functions of *dao* both fascinate and trouble Western educated minds. *Dao* extends its central influence over a whole variety of modes of cosmological thinking and other philosophical discourses in the Chinese tradition. However, more importantly, this article will illustrate how the concept forms the key element in societal, political and strategic practices of agents in China – a process in which the concept conventionally translated as ‘Way’ can take the forms of an abstract noun or verb becoming a political practice aiming at generating societal efficacy.

Adopting a traditional Sinological approach combining philological and

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philosophical explanations, this article shows how Chinese classical era schools of thought utilised and understood the concept of *dao*. This approach is necessary as the traditional Chinese thought understood the role and function of concepts, and more broadly even language on the whole, differently from that of Western thought. Namely, all classical era (and a great majority of later) Chinese philosophers viewed language as an important way to coordinate and regulate social and political behaviour, rather than developing a classical Western kind of theoretical approach to understanding the function of language as depicting facts and grasping the truth or reality. In this sense, an endogenous understanding of the role of language and particularly the function of concepts in early Chinese schools of thought can bring some food for thought to our endeavour to understand the exciting relationship between knowledge and power, or the politics of knowledge.

This article analyses sources that belong to the classical era of Chinese philosophy, also known as the Hundred Schools of Thought era (from the 6<sup>th</sup> century to 221 B.C.), that witnessed the birth and flourishing of dozens of schools of thought. More specifically, the focus is on the main contending schools of thought: Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism, Daoism, and the strategy theorist Sunzi. *Confucianism* is humanistic state philosophy that emphasises intra-family relations and the relationship between the subject and the ruler. Confucianism underscores the importance of self-cultivation that should materialise in certain fundamental values, such as filial piety, propriety, humanness, loyalty, benevolence, and righteousness. The practice of these values formed the foundation of functioning social relations and governance. *Legalism* believed that humans are inherently selfish and therefore did not believe that a society could be governed by benevolent Confucian values, but rather an efficient governance system that relies on strict laws and harsh punishments. *Mohism* is famous for its advocacy of unified ethical and political order based on impartial concern for all, also known as ‘universal love’, and opposition to military aggression. *Daoism* can be best described as an umbrella concept covering a whole range of esoteric, metaphysical, mystic, religious, political, and naturally philosophical paths that all build their understanding of the world and cosmos on mutually opposing and generative dialectic forces of *yin* and *yang*. Lastly, Sunzi’s *Art of War* laid the foundation of Chinese strategic thinking that emphasises the usage of indirect, surprising manoeuvres that are based on dialectic understanding of the strategic configurations. It is notable that the concept of *dao* and its underlying philosophy were shared by all of these schools of thought.

The discussion will proceed as follows: The first section will consider the etymology of the notion *dao* and explicate its specificity philologically. In the second, *dao* will be discussed as the fundamental force of Chinese cosmological thinking. The third section will elaborate how various schools of thought understood the *dao* of heaven (*tiandao*) as a basis of the divine and/or force of nature. The fourth part will elucidate how various schools of thought comprehended and utilised the *dao* of human beings (*rendao*) as a source of societal efficacy. The final part will contain some concluding remarks.

## 2. Etymological roots

A good starting point is *dao* as a word in the Chinese language. The conventional translations of *dao* usually interpret the concept as a concrete or abstract ‘path’, ‘road’ or ‘way’. However, the concept has a number of other connotations as well. It can for example have the meaning of ‘method’, ‘skill’, ‘principle, or ‘to speak’. Naturally, it can refer to the philosophical school of Daoism. Furthermore, the classical Chinese language does not differentiate between singular and plural. Consequently, when the textual context permits, the concept can refer to ‘one particular Way’ or ‘several Ways’, leaving it open for interpretation how many *daos* the text is referring to.

Etymologically, the written character of *dao* (道) is also interesting. It consists of pictograms of a head (首) on a foot (足). Before the written character was standardised into its current form more than 2 500 years ago, the character appeared in earlier bronze inscriptions, showing a head covered by cloth while the person was traversing. This early image of the *dao* character reminds us that the path should be advanced with caution as the head is covered by a cloth. (Wang 2012, 44.)



Figure 1. Early bronze inscription of the character *dao*

This earliest form of the character *dao* provides an important etymological explanation and imaginative illustration of the basis of the different connotations of the concept. The pictogram encourages us to expand our conventional understanding of *dao* as a noun, as ‘a path’, or as a more abstract ‘the Way’. The pictogram suggests that *dao* is, at an abstract level, a process, an undertaking of ‘traversing a chosen path’. This idea integrates *dao* both as a noun and as a verb, which was the commonly shared pattern of the usage of concepts in traditional China. Concepts could be at the same time nouns and verbs, a tradition that stands in stark contrast with Western philosophical tradition, where concepts are always nouns (Li 1994, 94-97).

All in all, the goal or guidance of the traversing man stands in the background of *dao*. It is noteworthy, however, that the goal or guidance is not received from spirits or deities, nor are the goals and means of the undertaking to be determined ‘rationally’, as Westerners would have it, say, through careful logical-deductive processes. Rather, in the *Daoist* philosophy the Way of *dao*, traversing or practising *dao* should be seen as an autogenerative process. In Chinese, this is known as ‘self-so-ing’ (*ziran*, 自然), as an internalised mode of spontaneity that stems from and binds the agent to the context of specific configuration that is particular and universal at the same time. As a form of internalised being and doing, it spins together two

important things: First, the vital energy (*qi*, 气) that is inherent in all things and in all forms of life; and second, the dynamism of the *yin* and *yang* (阴阳), that is, of the two correlatives that oppose and yet mutually complement each other, as elements generating a harmonious process of perpetual transformation. This transformation is not externally generated, but resides within the process itself. (Coutinho 2014, Moeller 2006.)

### 3. Dao as force of cosmology

For the Chinese, forces of *dao* were present everywhere, which brings us to the cosmological dimension of the notion. Early Daoist philosophers believed that *dao* was the source of everything, including the cosmos, heaven, earth, and everything in between. Chinese philosophers were not interested in pondering over ontological questions or divulging the ‘reality’ behind the appearance. Instead, they strove to understand how the world hangs together.<sup>1</sup>

Laozi (ca 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) illustrates this central approach in *Daodejing* as follows:

*Dao* gives birth to one,  
One to two,  
Two to three,  
Three to myriad things.  
Myriad things shoulder yin (阴) and embrace yang (阳),  
Infusing with the vital energy (*qi*, 气) in achieving harmony (he, 和).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the questions of what gives birth to *dao* or what structure resides behind that concept remained irrelevant for the Chinese thinkers. Instead, they simply took the presence of *dao* as granted.

In the Chinese mindset, *dao* is a cosmic force providing the existence of everything. It is a constantly moving process that takes place in and between all things and all forms of life. It generates both the tangible and the metaphysical world. It contains the vital energy *qi* (present even in dead objects such as stones). Yet it cannot be named in the sense that we would be able to gain control over it. In a way, the early understanding of *dao* resembles the way in which the current astrophysics focuses on studying how energy and material behaved after the big-bang. Accordingly, a process exists that is still shaping our universe and life, and one studies that process instead of pondering over what ‘the reality’ or ‘ontological structures’ were before the big bang, as we have no theoretical tools to divulge these properties.

In this sense, Laozi’s *Daodejing* crystallises the Chinese observation on how *dao* not only produces all things of the universe, but eventually illustrates how the process of *dao*, together with other generative and fundamental forces of cosmos

<sup>1</sup> See Ames and Hall 1995, 195-197; Qian 2011, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Laozi: *Daodejing*. Translation by the author.

and life, creates a balanced and natural ongoing process of being – harmony. This metaphysical process definition of *dao* guided the Chinese to ask questions such as ‘how things work’, ‘how to deal with this or that’, or when applied to society, ‘how to be efficient’, instead of asking ‘what is the (ontological) structure behind the appearance’, ‘what structures produce the appearances’, or ‘why things work’, as accustomed in the Western tradition (Qian 2011, 110-112).

Importantly, the above quotation from *Daodejing* not only clarifies the fundamental cosmological thinking of Chinese philosophers, but also provides, on the one hand, the framework for the Chinese-style transcendental discussions, and on the other hand, the grounding inspiration for exploring the ways of generating societal efficacy, that is by good governance and how to act strategically in society and politics. Consequently, in the so-called Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BC), this processual thinking of *dao* grew out of its cosmological context, became more systematic and gained the dominant role in the overall Chinese mindset. Two different spheres of discussions emerged: ‘*dao* of human beings’ (*rendao*, 人道) and ‘*dao* of heaven’ (*tiandao*, 天道).

#### 4. Dao of heaven

The first of these discussions is the *dao* of ‘heaven’, the so called *tiandao*. Heaven is a semantically complex and philosophically important concept in the Chinese worldview. It can refer to ‘sky’, ‘nature’ or ‘cosmos’, but it also has a strong religious connotation of ‘Heaven as a supreme deity’ having a will of its own. The written character of heaven (*tian*, 天) most likely derives from a pictogram of a ‘big man’, and this might explain why the ‘human element’ became part of the Chinese conception of heaven as God. Nevertheless, it is notable that *tian* as ‘a sky’ and as a ‘transcendent God’ was never so much understood as polysemy in the Chinese tradition as it would be in the Judeo-Christian world, maybe because China lacks a human kind of anthropomorphic God. (Fung 1994, 30-31; Coutinho 2014.)

While *tiandao* may be considered to some degree to be reminiscent of our conception of a god and it certainly gives guidance to human life, the genesis of life in the Chinese tradition is not a creation carried out by an all-powerful God who would moreover possess the monopoly over knowledge and the ultimate reason. Instead of an omnipresent God observing, guiding, testing, forgiving, and judging people, in the Chinese tradition it was the Goddess Nüwa who created life: the nobility out of yellow earth and clay and the vast masses of people out of darker clay. Importantly, after this life-giving act Nüwa disappears, without determining the criteria for a morally good man or providing the fundamental commandments of socially acceptable conduct. Instead of Nüwa, the notion of *tiandao*, the way of heaven, took prominence on the ethical stage.

The concept *tian* as ‘nature’, in turn, refers to the empirically observable natural world: sky, cosmos, nature, and all phenomena of nature, such as the cycles of seasons and of day and night. In this sense, the Way of Heaven (*tiandao*) is responsible for the cyclic processes of life, seasons, blooming and withering of life, shifts between cold

and warm, aridness and rain. *Tiandao* conducts all forces of nature that constantly shift beneath the sky or even above the sky in the constellations of stars (Coutinho 2014, 27-32). In *Art of War*, Sunzi elaborates on the properties of *tian* as an element of successful strategy: ‘*Tian* is the changes of weather, winter and summer and constellations of seasons’ (Li 2012, 62).

Different schools of thought had different understandings of the cosmic and natural world. For the Daoist like Laozi, *dao* was generated before heaven or earth, and it was the ultimate source of life and energy that was ‘turning around and round without tiring; it may be the mother of all under heaven’,<sup>3</sup> which points out that *dao* was probably the source of everything. In turn, the early Confucians and the Legalist scholars thought the opposite – *dao* was the source of material and metaphysical world, but it did not produce the heaven as such. Furthermore, Daoists saw nature as a wild, but not hostile environment, having its own natural regularities. For the Confucian scholar Xunzi (c. 310-235 B.C.), in turn, nature was an untamed surrounding that had to be harnessed for the benefit of social prosperity. The military strategy school adopted both the Daoist and Xunzi’s ideas; one should, on the one hand, adapt to the regularities of nature, and on the other hand, try to turn the forces of nature into one’s own benefit. (Graham 2003.)

Furthermore, the concept of *tian* had a religious function in the Chinese mindset. For the Chinese, however, the divinity of the heaven (*tian*) was not so much a source of religious illumination, but rather a force that was in constant motion. Having the heaven following its way (*tiandao*), this force also affected human behaviour. It was common in ancient China that people believed that heaven had a divine will that determined the fate of peace, war and natural disasters. Mozi (470-391 B.C.), the founding father of Mohism that was a competitor of Confucianism, believed strongly that the heaven had a will. Mozi wrote:

People who conform to the will of heaven (*tian*), love without discrimination, help others, will certainly receive rewards; those who counter the will of heaven by discriminating other people, being inauspicious and by doing wrong to others, will certainly be punished.<sup>4</sup>

Even the early grounding fathers of Confucian philosophy, like Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and Mencius (372-289 B.C.), believed that heaven was the supreme lord. Confucius states:

If heaven (*tian*) let this culture where I live to be perished, it would not have given this culture to a person who will eventually die like me. Since heaven has not demolished this culture, what can the people of Kuang do to me?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Laozi: *Daodejing*. Translation by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Mozi, at Will of Heaven. Translation by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Confucius: *Analects*, at Zi Han. Translation by the author.

## 5. Dao of human beings, source of societal efficacy

The second discussion turns to the *dao* of human beings, *rendao*. With the Chinese at the time of the Hundred Schools, the concept of *rendao* became the inspirational source for generating societal efficacy. The conception of *dao* is perhaps the most important among the concepts in Chinese philosophy that have shaped the Chinese societal world view and political practices for the last two millennia. The concept provides a specific, dynamic and practice-related approach to politics, governance and strategic behaviour. This approach was shared by all schools of philosophy, but also by political actors and strategists in their endeavours to create societal efficacy.

The original etymological meaning of the written character of *dao*, ‘traversing a path with head covered with cloth’, provides us with an important image that illustrates the strategic-societal connotation of *dao*. It is not about blind and aimless wandering, but rather about a process where the traversing man should have internalised an understanding of the path ahead. It is about the grasp of the dialectic between the various *yin* and *yang* properties – more precisely, between their correlatives as governing dispositions – that condition the chosen path and the direction of one’s undertaking. This understanding was not received from gods or spirits, but stemmed from actual circumstances and concrete practices. (Wang 2012, 44-45.)

Despite the fact that heaven had an important transcendent role in the early Chinese mindset, sages including Confucius himself did not lay their own or their society’s fate in the merciful hands of the heaven, but rather emphasised the responsibility of men to rely on their own capacities. This is the core of the famous ‘*dao* of human beings’ (*rendao*). As noted in Confucius’s *Analects*, ‘When Master talks of human nature, talk on the Way of Heaven (*tiandao*) cannot be heard.’<sup>6</sup> Human nature and the fate of society was based on the character of individuals: ‘Let the will be on the Way (*dao*), rely in your conduct on virtue, trust in benevolence and find relaxation in the arts.’<sup>7</sup> One of the founding fathers of Confucianism, Xunzi, took the argument even further by stating that ‘The Way is not the way of heaven nor the way of earth, but rather the way of human beings.’<sup>8</sup> Xunzi understood that the creation of societal order is exclusively a human endeavour and that humans should neither seek any help from the heaven, nor have much or any gratitude toward heaven for their fortunes or tragedies.

This idea of Xunzi expands the meaning of *dao* to politics and to the unavoidable element of all political practice: strategic analysis and strategic work. As Li Ling (2012, 61) illustrates, the concept of *dao* can also have the connotation in the field of politics, where it may constitute the most important concept for successful strategy work. This political connotation of *dao* becomes obvious in reading Sunzi’s *Art of War* (Sunzi presumably lived and compiled the book in the 6<sup>th</sup> century), according

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<sup>6</sup> Confucius: *Analects*, at Gong Yechang. Translation by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Confucius: *Analects*, at Shu Er. Translation by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Xunzi, at Ru Xiao. Translation by the author.

to which, correct ‘politics (*dao*) will be supported by many people’ and incorrect ‘politics (*dao*) will be supported by few people’ (Li 2012, 61). In his opening chapter, Sunzi nominates five comparative criteria for successful strategy, the first criterion being *dao*. Sunzi states: ‘Politics (*dao*) is to cause people to be in complete accord with their ruler, then they follow him to death or survival undismayed by any danger’ (Li 2012, 61-62).

This idea reflects the active meaning of the concept of *dao*: it is man’s proper conduct of political practices that wins the hearts and souls of his subordinates. Correct political practices stem from the process where the political leader or commander has internalised the underlying intrinsic properties of *dao* – the subtle and particular political dispositions that reside behind all appearances and phenomena – and is able to communicate his policies to people. Furthermore, as *dao* has also the connotation of ‘to speak’, the process of *dao*-as-politics brings us back to the basic practical political work, that is, convincing of people by way of speaking (Li 2012, 61-62).

Hence, it is not a surprise that in early Chinese politico-philosophical thinking *dao* could refer to politics or practising of politics, famously captured in the Confucian dichotomic conceptualisation: the correct and morally sound politics of ‘the Kingly Way’ (*wangdao*, 王道)<sup>9</sup> juxtaposed against the amoral politics of ‘the Tyrannical Way’ (*badao*, 霸道)<sup>10</sup>. Henceforth, *dao* as politics does not mean merely the internalisation of a body of the fundamental knowledge of underlying properties, means and set goals of action, speech and act that are all activated in one concept. Besides that, the concept is itself a practice – *dao*-as-politics – that enlivens the underlying knowledge, morality, rituals, and norms. This is the political context where there is always a competition going on, and where it is necessary to be resourceful in order to get the upper hand over one’s political rivals. (Moeller 2006, 55-74.)

The theoretical illustration of this *dao*-as-political-practice approach can once again be traced back to the earlier quotation of the Daoist Laozi’s *Daodejing* and its definition of *dao*:

*Dao* gives birth to one,  
One to two,  
Two to three,  
Three to myriad things.  
Myriad things shoulder yin (阴) and embrace yang (阳),  
Infusing with the vital energy (qi, 气) in achieving harmony (he, 和).<sup>11</sup>

*Daodejing* was not only widely regarded as the source of Daoist philosophy, but

9 On the notion of *wangdao*, see databank Ctext.org, available on <<https://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han>> (visited 19 June 2019) and enter “wangdao” in the search engine.

10 On the notion of *badao*, see databank Ctext.org, available on <<https://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han>> (visited 19 June 2019) and enter “badao” in the search engine.

11 Laozi: *Daodejing*. Translation by the author.

also read as a strategy manual: it provided the dialectic approach so fundamental to Chinese strategic thinking. The question of formulating a successful strategy is a question of the ability to identify the dialectical dispositions and forces involved. These dispositions and forces are understood not only as interrelated, but also as dynamically and constantly changing in ‘*dao* processes’. In these processes, the counterparts of the dialectic produce each other as ‘one gives birth to two, two to three and three to myriad things’. Importantly, all entities are dialectic by nature; they consist of correlating and opposing *yin-yang* elements that ‘shoulder’ and ‘embrace’ each other. The list of these *yin-yang* elements is endless, comprising both tangible and non-tangible elements, such as direct-indirect, honest-dishonest, rich-poor, and powerful-weak. A resourceful strategist understood the Daoist sense in which the interaction of the properties with their counterparts was always beyond his complete control, so that no one could ever be in full control of the situation. Rather, the correct identification of dispositions and properties enables him to lead the development in the intended direction by ‘infusing energy’ into one or several of the identified properties. It is only in this manner that the strategist could achieve the ‘political harmony’ he would prefer to build, be it a society based on the Confucian benevolence, on the Mohist universal love and pacifism, or on the Legalist positive law.

Chinese Legalist scholars were also utilising the concept of *dao* in their thinking. For the early Legalist scholars, *dao* is not a transcendental concept, but a universal force that standardises the principles that condition justice. As Guanzi (720-645 B.C.) states: ‘Rites arise from justice, justice from principles, and principles accommodate to the Way (*dao*)’<sup>12</sup>. However, Guanzi does not define *dao*, but provides a metaphorical and conventionally ‘Daoist’ explanation of *dao* as invisible, formless and soundless: ‘The Way cannot be spoken of, eye cannot see, the ear cannot hear’<sup>13</sup> and yet it is producing the myriad things of our existence. This Daoist definition of *dao* provides an intriguing opening to the discussion of the basis of law in the relationship between generally valid norms and particular facts of each case. On the one hand, based on the Daoist thinking to which Guanzi refers, *dao* is a cosmic and universal force that shapes the properties of our existence; on the other hand, *dao* is always particular and cannot be repeated as it always manifests site-specific properties. Unfortunately, Guanzi does not elaborate further on the relationship between the law as legal principles and the law as legal practices, which could have been envisaged against the background of the universal and particular forces of *dao*.

The later Legalist scholar Hanfeizi (280-233 B.C.) elaborated on *Daodejing* in order to relate his otherwise practical Machiavellian and positivist-law based political philosophy to a more general metaphysical world picture. His work, named after him as *Hanfeizi*, contains two separate chapters on Laozi, ‘Interpreting Laozi’ (ch. 20) and ‘Illustrating Laozi’ (ch. 21). However, both chapters contain very little Legalist thinking to the effect of amalgamating Legalism and Daoism or providing

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<sup>12</sup> Guanzi, at Xin Shu I. Translation by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Guanzi, at Nei Ye. Translation by the author.

a Daoist interpretation of the Law. Later, it has even been questioned whether these chapters have been written by Hanfeizi at all. However, in interpreting the concept of *dao* in Laozi, Hanfeizi argues that *dao* is not above heaven and earth, as Laozi claimed, and coupled the idea of affair-guiding principles with *dao*. 'If thinking is methodical you grasp the principles of affairs ... If you grasp principles in affairs you are certain to achieve results'<sup>14</sup>, said Hanfeizi and continued later: 'Therefore observe principles, but if you engage in too many tasks you will change things around you achieving little ... This is why a ruler who has the Way values stillness and does not keep on altering laws.'<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, for the individual, irrespective of their other philosophical inclinations, *dao* represents an important source of knowledge and force that brings into life subjectively chosen morals and conceptions of practices and principles that guide and manifest man's cause of speech and action, i.e. politics. As *dao* is an active undertaking, it should be seen as a self-generating process in which political practices are inseparable from what it produces as concrete and definite policies.

*Dao* is also the ultimate object of knowledge – once the agent has internalised the underlying properties of *dao* (that produce particular phenomena or even the universe) and is able to reflect and radiate these internalised properties in his words and deeds, he/she will reach the status of a Sage. Subsequently, *dao* can also refer to 'mastery' of something that combines the internalisation of an approach of knowing 'how the world hangs together' with 'how it can be led in a desired direction'. These two are reflected in the masterful practice, or even art, of doing something. However, *dao* cannot be thought, learned, memorised, or emulated, but it should be internalised by being one with world. (Moeller 2004; Coutinho 2014.)

## 6. Some concluding remarks

The concept of *dao* is maybe the most fundamental concept, not only in Chinese theoretical thought, but in conditioning the Chinese people's everyday and political practices. As a noun, *dao* most commonly refers to a concrete or abstract way or path. It can refer to the 'reality' as we see it. However, the observable reality is a manifestation of the underlying abstract and/or metaphysical, unique eternal substance, origin and order of things – also named *dao*. Hence, all phenomena or existing things, living or dead, always reflect a particular *dao*. This is the underlying, ultimate intrinsic subsistence that dwells behind and produces all appearances and phenomena, all the existing realities and the universe. However, as *dao* always constitutes a dialectic between opposing and correlative elements that are in constant flux, *dao* is never static, but in constant movement.

The concept of *dao* provides us with an important and culturally specific view on how the Chinese philosophers, policy makers and strategists have related to the fundamental transcendental questions, as well as to the societal questions of how to

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<sup>14</sup> Hanfeizi, at Jie Lao. Translation by author.

<sup>15</sup> Hanfeizi, at Jie Lao. Translation by author.

generate societal efficacy. Chinese schools of philosophy provided the fertile ground for the Daoist conception of a practical *dao* to flourish, as all schools of thought focused on solving the question of how to generate societal efficacy, rather than staying with ontological questions or transcendental debates on, say, the role of God in human life. Despite the fact that Chinese philosophers were interested, and also to various degrees believed, in the transcendental, cosmic or metaphysical forces of the 'dao of Heaven' (*tiandao*), the overwhelmingly dominating and politico-socially most influential discussion took place around the 'dao of human beings' (*rendao*). *Rendao* is based on an idea of detaching man from the transcendental Heaven and understands human beings anthropocentrically: as active, more or less secularised agents.

The polymorphic connotations of the concept *dao* can at the same time take the form of a noun and a verb. On the one hand, it refers to the abstraction of cosmic forces and life. On the other hand, it provides the basis for rational and resourceful strategy analysis and practice. This dispersion of meaning and use over different fields requires a fair amount of sensitivity and imagination from the Western educated mind. This brief overview of the particular role and function that the concept of *dao* has in the Chinese worldview can also raise further questions on the relationship between concepts (as clearly defined nouns) and practices (that are always separated from the conceptualisation process) from the vantage point of the Western tradition.

The concept of *dao* is loosely and yet intimately paired with other concepts, such as the *yin-yang* and the vital energy *qi* discussed above. This conceptual edifice, and the role that concepts in general had in metaphysical theorising, evolved and formed complex discussions in the hands of later Neo-Confucian scholars during and after the Song dynasty (960-1276). Due to the complexity of the Neo-Confucian discussion on *dao*, it has been left out of this analysis. So much can be said, however, that given its theoretical complexity that discussion did not gain wider influence outside theory-oriented thinkers. By contrast, the early Daoist discussion analysed in this short paper has remained popular among policy makers and even ordinary people. For that reason, the classical *Dao* reaches to the contemporary China.

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