

A Contrarian View of the Philosophy of Zhuangzi,  
“Seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”

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*Abstract: Seeing Zhuangzi as Confucian 莊子儒門說, as will be developed in this paper,<sup>1</sup> is highly controversial because of the huge difference between Confucianism and the classical Daoist interpretation of Zhuangzi. On the other hand, such controversy could be seen as a noteworthy starting point for clarifying Zhuangzi’s philosophical structure because of its disclosure of some crucial incompatibility with Daoism inherent in Zhuangzi that remains obscure if seen only within a Daoist context. Seeing Zhuangzi as Confucian argues that Zhuangzi shares the same concern as Confucianism with the *Yi Jing* (The Book of Changes) and it inherits its tradition in a genuine sense. Those Confucians who pose a challenge to the traditional Daoist interpretation of Zhuangzi further propose suggestions about how to face Zhuangzi’s intrinsic “incompatibility” in a positive way. My focus in this paper will be not on a choice between Confucianism and the Daoist school, or between the philosophy of “being” in a Confucian sense and the philosophy of “nothingness” with its influential Daoist background, but instead on the coexistence of conflicts that have been highlighted by the debates between a Confucian approach and the Daoist school’s viewpoint. However, these also imply an essential characteristic of the Zhuangzi philosophy that is worthy of inquiry. Although a controversial issue, “seeing Zhuangzi as Confucian” all the same raises a fundamental question concerning the logic of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. By investigating the philosophical underpinnings, it could also provide an opportunity for advancing the philosophy of Zhuangzi in a contemporary context.*

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## 1. Is *Zhuangzi* a Classic of the Daoist School, or Is It a Specific Commentary on Confucian Teachings 儒門別傳?<sup>2</sup>

The classical view of *Zhuangzi* philosophy is that it was derived from or at least connected with the philosophy of *Laozi*, and there is evidence to support such an argument. Equally there is evidence that has come to light to suggest that this classical view may need to be reconsidered, for instance, in the discussion of “nothingness”. Nothingness is regarded as one of essential notions in *Zhuangzi*, one which mirrors the understanding of *Zhuangzi* as under the influence of the Daoist interpretative tradition. In this tradition nothingness was the core of *Laozi*’s thought and it was further developed by *Zhuangzi* based on his understanding of *Laozi* or that of the concept of *Dao*. Nothingness, interpreted through a Daoist approach, has continued to be a primary issue until the present in the discussion of *Zhuangzi*, whether one’s focus is on its close relation to or subtle differences from *Laozi* philosophy.

Essential doctrines of the Daoist school have also been developed in the field of religion. Daoism reveals the potentiality of such doctrines in the sense that some aspects of “body” and its related “practice” should be taken into serious consideration when elucidating these Daoist classics. It does appear that *Zhuangzi* therefore seems to possess a dual characteristic: as a philosophical text or as a religious classic. It can be observed that fundamental concerns still remain in such religious interpretation, and these have continued to influence and reinforce those traditional understandings of *Zhuangzi* in their particular ways. “Reversion 逆反” is a central tenet of Daoism, a practice whose focus is on reversing the course of creation for the purpose of returning to the primordial perfection. It is the thought that still echoes through the typical attitudes already emphasized in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, through their well-known concepts such as “weakness 弱”, “softness 柔”, “emptiness 虛”, and “non-doing 無為”, basically showing the stance of passivity and an ultimate pursuit of simplicity.

All of those notions or nuances can be understood against a broader background of “nothingness” defined in a Daoist way: the practice of negation or the

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<sup>2</sup> “A specific commentary on Confucian teachings” is the term used by Yang Rur-bin, see Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈儒門別傳——明末清初《莊》《易》同流的思想史意義〉 [Rumen Biezhuan: Mingmoqingchu Zhunagyitongliu de Sixiangshi Yiyi], in Chung Tsai-chun 鍾彩鈞 Yang Chin-lung 楊晉龍 eds., 《明清文學與思想中之主體意識與社會——學術思想篇》 [Mingqing Wenxue yu Sixiang zhong zhi Zhutiyishi yu Shehui: Xueshusixiang Pian], Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 2004): 245–289.

realm achieved through such practice. Both of them are fundamentally associated with each other and should be recognized as different dimensions to be fully aware of in regards to the discussion on nothingness. For Daoist believers, even if they are not firmly disengaging from the mundane world, they are apparently indifferent to that world because of their belief that the perfect state of real human beings is never accomplished by any practice of following the course of creation. Rather, the solution lies exactly in the reversion of such a course. If using *Laozi's* terms, the crux of the matter is in returning to the original state, like an “uncarved block 樸”, in *Zhuangzi's* terms; the suggestion would be to “sit and forget 坐忘”, an essential notion highlighting the necessity of “leaving form and discarding intelligence 離形去智”, both of which have entailed the connotation of “reversion”, whether the word they have used is exactly “reversion” or not and whether the field they are discussing is purely oriented towards metaphysics or essentially involving “bodily practice”. Such theoretical and practical concern has led both the Daoist school and Daoism into a stance that is counter to Confucianism.

One of the fundamental Confucian doctrines is “ceaseless procreating 生生”, which is derived from the *Yi Jing* and fundamentally associated with its principle of “interaction and resonance 交感”, emphasizing a metaphysical foundation shared by “myriad things 萬物” in this world. While the tradition of the *Yi Jing* highlights the importance of the creation of things and how such creation is possible, in contrast these themes have hardly appeared or been seen as a major question within a traditional Daoist tradition. This suggests a view that the concern with “creation”, a concern which reveals the incessant habits of humanity that have been maintained by Confucianism in various aspects, is just a secular fallacy or a tiresome treadmill that from a classical Daoist viewpoint betrays the sacred truth about life itself.

Nevertheless, there are some ambiguities in *Zhuangzi* that are quite noticeable, through which another interpretative choice could be understood and some challenges could be posed that would be meaningful to a Daoist approach. The first example I would like to touch upon is “wandering 遊”, a concept not only sufficient to represent the core of *Zhuangzi's* spirit, but also one encompassing a wide spectrum of the philosophy of *Zhuangzi*, one which includes aspects of metaphysics, “body”, “practice”, and “subject”, and also extends its influence beyond the realm of philosophy or religion to the domains of art and literature. The significance of “wandering” has been elevated to be seen as the basis of a Daoist understanding, because wandering is easily related to a tradition of “wandering with immortals 遊仙”, or regarded as a certain spiritual development, the nuance of

which is implied in the term “mind-wandering 遊心” in *Zhuangzi*. These interpretations each belong to their own contexts, but they have conveyed a shared message: the concept of “wandering” suggests or at least implies disengaging from the turbid mundane world. Such a passive attitude could be demonstrated based on *Zhuangzi*’s text, but it would also face a potential challenge from another quote, “wandering amidst the mundane world 遊世俗之間”, mentioned in Chapter 12, “Heaven and Earth 天地”, under the discussion on “chaos”.

It could be disputed as to how representative the text is, primarily because it belongs to the outer chapters, a less important part of *Zhuangzi* from a traditional viewpoint, or disputed because such a kind of meaning is emphasized by two Confucian personages: Confucius himself and Zi-gong, whose philosophical concerns appeared to be incompatible with those of the typical interpretation of *Zhuangzi* or the classical Daoist school. A noteworthy philosophical relationship between *Zhuangzi* and Confucianism will be discussed later, but it is still worthy of note here that the mention of such “active” wandering, not suggesting disengagement from, but rather engagement with, the turbid mundane world, does pose a question as to whether the traditional approach is persuasive enough to respond to such dimensions of *Zhuangzi*. It further provides an opportunity to contextualize other important issues in an atypical way.

Another related issue worthy of much notice is language. “Forgetting words 忘言” or “without words 無言” has been seen as the basic attitude of *Zhuangzi* towards the issue of language. This interpretation focuses on the danger accompanying the usage of words, and it is concerned about a necessary fragmentation or unavoidable distortion of “true language”; it suggests a passive or negative attitude towards words, as if based on a Daoist approach, and this has evidential support from *Zhuangzi*’s text, yet it also leaves some ambiguity for further reconsideration. Besides the emphasis on “forgetting words”, the importance of which deserves serious attention since its insight is still enlightening today, “goblet words 卮言”, another term mentioned in Chapter 27, “Parable 寓言”, occupies a key position as well in a further investigation of *Zhuangzi*’s attitude towards language. It would arouse debate, not only because of its connotations concerning the emergence of words, but also because the chapter it is located in is

the one whose theme is language and the focus there is on what true language means.  
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Examining these issues and inquiring into such inherent incompatibility through an atypical lens does not intend to underestimate the decisive role of Daoist interpretation, but, rather, it attempts to advance this inherited tradition in a different way. These conflicts could be regarded as an obstruction to qualifying *Zhuangzi*'s philosophical identity, or, on the other hand, as a starting point from which to further develop the logical structure of *Zhuangzi*, to the extent that the entangled passages could be articulated. The apparent ambiguity in turn may serve as the key to penetrating into *Zhuangzi*'s specific philosophical concern.

For revealing such a possibility, it will be crucial to introduce an unorthodox and controversial approach called “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”. This choice, however, does not imply an intention of replacing authoritative exegeses with deliberate misunderstanding. On the contrary, it is important to advance this philosophical tradition by confronting the ambiguity within it that would not present a problem within its old tradition. An active, constructive side of *Zhuangzi* has already been highlighted against the horizon of Confucianism, and it supports the supposition of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”, in the view of which conflicts inherent in *Zhuangzi* are increasingly clarified and interpreted in a more positive way, an attitude that is not only staying vigilant to the discontinuous nature of the mundane world and its relevant dangers, but one also facing such an existential situation and still waiting for some accounting of it.

With respect to “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”, one could associate it with some statements like “the reconciliation of Confucianism and Daoism 儒道會通”, a major issue of Neo-Daoism 玄學 or “the harmony of the Three Teachings 三教合一” in the Ming dynasty. My focus here, however, is on a specific interpretative approach shedding light on the *Yi Jing*'s origin in *Zhuangzi*, claiming that *Zhuangzi* shares the same metaphysical structure with the *Yi Jing* and penetrates deep into the profundity of the *Yi Jing*'s thought. Based on such philosophical reasoning, advocates like Wang Fu-zhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) argued that *Zhuangzi* should not be regarded as a Daoist classic, but rather known as a noteworthy commentary on Confucian teachings.

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<sup>3</sup> For more discussion on “goblet words”, see Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈莊子的卮言論〉 [Zhuangzi de Zhiyan Lun], 《儒門內的莊子》 [*Rumennei de Zhuangzi*], Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2016: 225–264.

## 2. “Emptiness *ji qi* 虛空即氣” and “the Centre of the Ring 環中”

What interests me here is the interpretation given by Wang Fu-zhi, a representative figure of such philosophical trends as “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”. Wang Fu-zhi’s interpretation of *Zhuangzi* is fundamentally against a peculiar background of conceptualization of *qi* that was mainly philosophized by Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), a Neo-Confucian philosopher in the Northern Song dynasty. Zhang Zai delved into a deeper nuance of *qi*, a signature Chinese philosophical term that had been evaluated before and was mainly understood from the viewpoint of the “primordial *qi* 元氣” but one that rarely shows any connection with “emptiness”, the concept that aroused Zhang Zai’s attention and became one constitutive element in his interpretation of *qi*. “Emptiness *ji qi*”, which has the sense of “emptiness is the same as *qi*”, is the term Zhang Zai made use of to formulate his theory of *qi*, highlighting an inherent connection between *qi* and emptiness. They are not opposed to each other, he proposed, unlike previous thinkers suggesting that *qi* is absolutely non-emptiness because of its undoubtable actuality and profundity, but he saw that rather they are inclusive of each other, meaning only *qi* with its inherent emptiness is the one fundamentally possessing an identity of “actuality-being 實有”. *Ji* illuminates the relationship that *qi*/actuality and emptiness should hold, though such an inherent relationship, however, is not contained in the discussion on *qi* and emptiness; but it extends to every relationship between the one and the other no matter whether or not they are opposed to each other in appearance.<sup>4</sup>

A more detailed account of emptiness *ji qi* and how such logic might work in Wang Fu-zhi’s interpretation of *Zhuangzi* will be mentioned later. But it is still important to note in advance that such a background of the usage of *qi* is highlighted here not for the use of proving again the philosophical succession between Zhang Zai and Wang Fu-zhi, but rather for clarifying the strategy Wang Fu-zhi employed in his interpretation of *Zhuangzi*. Zhang Zai’s influence mainly shows in two

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is possible and would become more clear if “emptiness *ji qi*” is translated into “emptiness is the same as *qi*” or “emptiness as *qi*”, but I would like to use the term of *ji* for clarifying that sense in which “emptiness *ji qi*” should be taken into more careful consideration. That is primarily because, even as a conjunction, *ji* is an essential concept representing a specific logic in an eastern context. The following discussion surrounding *qi* and its inherent connotation of paradoxical unity attempts to reveal the meaning of *ji* and its intrinsically paradoxical state against a specific Confucian background. It entails meanings both of “the same” and “not the same”; the former is one aspect of *ji*, but *ji* goes beyond the definition of “the same”, at least in our present context.

aspects: the theory of *qi* prepares the ground for arguing the plausibility of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”, the reason for which is that *Zhuangzi* shared the same metaphysical concern with the *Yi Jing*, and that has been much clarified and shows its logic through Zhang Zai’s elucidation of emptiness *ji qi*; furthermore, emptiness *ji qi* provides insight into how to reconsider apparent conflicts from a profound horizon. Such conflicts are also found in *Zhuangzi* and might pose critical challenges to Wang Fu-zhi’s interpretation if his approach were still based on the philosophy of “being” that is exclusive of its opposing side, sides of “emptiness” and “nothingness”.

It would not, to a large extent, have been necessary for most researchers to identify *Zhuangzi* as a Daoist or a Confucian, at least for those who focus on *Zhuangzi* for its own philosophical identity. Nevertheless, it would be essential to face up to the fact that two opposing interpretative approaches are fundamentally elicited by the incompatibility intrinsic to *Zhuangzi* as long as further development of *Zhuangzi*’s thought is necessary in a contemporary philosophical sense. In line with this, the perspective of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian” should not and cannot be underestimated because inherent conflicts have emerged, whether they are acknowledged or denied in a positive or negative way.

Wang Fu-zhi’s interpretation is important not because it seems to represent an available approach much different from the traditional one, but because it shows a potential for communicating with the other school that is seemingly counter to the one it belongs to. The importance of Wang Fu-zhi’s interpretation in the context of the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* lies in the fact that he confronts the challenge of conflicts, not only those inherent in *Zhuangzi*’s text but also those that have emerged and are in heated dispute because of his unorthodox position. His interpretation took a new step by penetrating into a profound logical structure that is adequate to explain those conflicts of text, thought, and interpretation, as well as the sense in which his view on “conflict” deserves to be regarded as a starting point to develop *Zhuangzi* philosophy and advance its tradition in a distinguished way.

My focus here is on the concept of “the centre of the ring 環中”, a key notion in *Zhuangzi* but also one fraught with ambiguity. This concept is traditionally viewed as a symbol relating to “nothingness” and its relevant notions, all of which are basically understood in a Daoist context; on the other hand, it is used by Wang Fu-zhi as well to demonstrate its metaphysical concern as already embedded in “Taiji 太極”, the concept in which *Zhuangzi*’s Confucian identity will be justified along with *Zhuangzi* through its own text. The question concerning “the centre of

the ring”, as developed in this paper, is not on which perspective will be more proper for interpretation of such a notion, but rather on whether implicit nuances of the centre of the ring could be revealed progressively, and if so, how, and also how through such clarification to face up to *Zhuangzi*’s conflicting dimensions. In this sense, I would like to focus on the structure of the centre of ring, which has been explicated in Wang Fu-zhi’s commentary on a dialogue between two scholars, Shao Zhi 少知 and Da-gong Diao 大公調, in Chapter 25, “Zeyang 則陽”.<sup>5</sup>

There are two notions running through such discussion: “doing 或使” and “non-doing 莫為”. The question posed by Shao Zhi is: Which is biased and which is the proper way? It seems that there should be no hesitation to give a clear answer in a typical Daoist way; however, one will realize its complexity and difficulty when further looking to the way in which Da-gong Diao answered such a question. In the present context, there are two points worthy of note. Based on Da-gong Diao’s response, first, neither “doing” nor “non-doing” are accurate enough to be representative of the exact practice of Dao, and second, questions relating to doing and non-doing are fundamentally associated with being/actuality and nothingness/emptiness. It is against this background that Wang Fu-zhi goes further in the clarification of such emerging issues through pointing out a constitutive feature of the centre of the ring.

As Wang Fu-zhi argues, the centre of the ring is a key notion with two fundamental elements: “a ring 一環” and the “emptiness within the ring 中虛”. The former highlights the dimension of actuality/being, the later emphasizes the part relating to emptiness/nothingness. It would be important to shed light both on what is the connection between them and on how to reveal their meanings within such a specific context. In Wang Fu-zhi’s view, the real being is not located in the center, which implies a “pivot” or “axis”, but rather it only presents itself as a ring with consistent movement. Furthermore, such a ring is the one fundamentally consisting of its inherent emptiness. There could be no ring without its inherent emptiness, which does also entail that there is no actual being that could exist without its profound nothingness. Similarly, in his thought, emptiness should not be interpreted as one philosophical concern opposed to the other concern for actual being – it rather serves as an essential element constituting actual being by participating in its consistent movement.

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<sup>5</sup> See Wang Fu-zhi 王夫之, 《老子衍 莊子通 莊子解》 [*Laoziyan Zhuangzitong Zhuangzijie*], Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2009: 310–311.



It would be more obvious that Wang Fu-zhi takes a positive attitude towards “emptiness” to a great extent, instead of underestimating its significance that has been demonstrated in a traditional context. His approach to the term of the centre of the ring shows a clear indication that issues surrounding being and nothingness, actuality and emptiness, should be discussed on a new horizon: the Great Dao is represented as such a kind of “a ring”, the ring with its inherent emptiness. And the emptiness is ultimately emptiness itself that could not be replaced by “actuality” in any sense. Accordingly, debates surrounding being and nothingness, actuality and emptiness, could not be retained at the level of apparent difference because their irreplaceable unique identities are only revealed based on such disclosure of their profound relationship. The centre of the ring is full of such potentiality for reformulating relevant essential issues in *Zhuangzi*, and Wang Fu-zhi makes further efforts to develop its insights, demonstrating a logical structure that is familiar to him: the logic of *ji*.

As mentioned before, Wang Fu-zhi is much influenced by Zhang Zai’s thought, especially his argument concerning emptiness *ji qi*. My aim in introducing Zhang Zai’s articulation of *qi* is not intended to discuss Zhang Zai’s philosophy against the horizon of Confucianism as a whole, but rather to point out the importance of *ji* in its providing a unique perspective on the issue of “conflict”.

Emptiness *ji qi* is highly controversial especially within a Confucian context, mainly because of the criticism concerning the insufficient understanding of true “being” in using the term “emptiness”, as applied by other Confucian masters such as the Cheng brothers 二程 or Zhu Xi 朱熹. Their views are that such a highlight on emptiness makes Zhang Zai incline to the dimension of emptiness/nothingness, or causes his theory to just remain at the level of “below form 形而下” rather than achieve the level of “above form 形而上”.<sup>6</sup> Their concern is Zhang Zai’s usage of “emptiness”, the term that was perceived as a very strong Buddhist-Daoist concept, one that is fundamentally in conflict with Confucian philosophical concerns. In addition to such debates surrounding “emptiness”, it would be also crucial to mention the position that *ji* occupied in a Chinese philosophical context. As already shown in Tiantai 天台 Buddhism, the meaning of *ji* is much more complicated and

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<sup>6</sup> See Mou Tsung-san 牟宗三, 《心體與性體 (一)》 [*Xinti yu Xingti (I)*], Taipei: Cheng Chung Bookstore, 1968: 455. A different perspective on Zhang Zai’s interpretation, see Zhang Heng 張亨, 〈張載「太虛即氣」疏釋〉 [*Zhang Zai Taixujiqi Shushi*], *Bulletin of the Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University* 臺大中文學報, vol. 3 (Dec., 1989): 1–44.

with multidimensional aspects,<sup>7</sup> and its meaning will differ depending on different viewpoints, which reminds us of the need to interpret *ji* against our present horizon: emptiness *ji qi*.

Following the interpretation given by Tang Chun-i 唐君毅(1909–1978),<sup>8</sup> an important figure of New Confucianism in modern Chinese philosophical movement, emptiness *ji qi* represents the way that Zhang Zai inherits the tradition of the *Yi Jing*, a very influential book for him, and the way in which Zhang Zai interprets *qi* as the metaphysical foundation of “interaction and resonance”, the principle formulated by the *Yi Jing* and seen as its major subject. Such *qi* is the ultimate actuality—being only in the sense of its inclusiveness of emptiness, as opposed to negating it, in Zhang Zai’s thought. *Qi* is the foundation making it possible to consider that myriad things are interacting with, but simultaneously opposing, each other internally, which means each thing is capable of interacting with the other based on its inherent emptiness, while each thing is containing inherent emptiness, because each one is actually one with the identity of *qi*, the *qi* fundamentally inclusive of emptiness.

Tang focuses on the structure of emptiness *ji qi*, both its vertical and horizontal dimensions, the clarification of which is to show how the logic of *ji* functions both inside one thing and in between the one and the other, and the key to understanding lies in a shift of horizon from the level of form and matter to the level of *qi*.<sup>9</sup> In Zhang Zai’s view, based on his understanding of the *Yi Jing*, the innermost relation between myriad things should not be described as one conflicting with the other, but rather as one interacting with the other. A view of the former is based on the horizon limited by “form and matter 形質”, while the latter is against a deeper horizon opened by *qi*, the actual being that makes all changes of form and matter possible. Indeed, one thing could not be viewed as the thing without its specific form and matter, and in this fact any implication of “conflict” is unavoidable because each thing possesses its form and matter which is different

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<sup>7</sup> See Chan Wing-cheuk 陳榮灼, 〈「即」之分析——簡別佛教「同一性」哲學諸型態〉 [Ji zhi Fenxi: Jianbie Fojiao Tongyixing Zhexue Zhuxingtai], *The Annual of International Buddhist Studies* 國際佛學研究年刊, vol. 1 (Dec., 1991): 1–22.

<sup>8</sup> The understanding of Zhang Zai’s theory of *qi* is basically depending on the interpretation from Tang Chun-i, see Tang Chun-i 唐君毅, 〈張橫渠之以人道合天道之道〉 [Zhang Heng-Qu zhi yi Rendao he Tiandao zhi Dao], 《中國哲學原論—原教篇》 [Zhongguo Zhexue Yuanlun: Yuanjiao Pian], Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1990: 72–120.

<sup>9</sup> See Tang Chun-i 唐君毅, 〈張橫渠之心性論及其形上學之根據〉 [Zhang Heng-Qu zhi Xinxinglun ji qi Xingshangxue zhi Genju], 《哲學論集》 [Zhexue Lunji], Taipei: Student Bookstore, 1990: 219–224.

from the other one's; but on the other hand, a "thing" is not just the thing limited by its form and matter, but also the one with the identity of *qi*, *qi* with its inherent emptiness, such nature making it possible to encounter and interact with the other one, both of which exceed the limitation of their form and matter based on their own emptiness. Furthermore, if mutual-inclusiveness is revealed as a more profound relation between myriad things, differences of forms and matter should no longer be seen as the root of a sequence of conflicts, but rather as luxuriant expressions of *qi* with its consistent movement.

It is such a mutual-inclusiveness that *ji* implies against the background of *qi*, which has been philosophized by Zhang Zai and succeeded to by Wang Fu-zhi. What *ji* shows is not a kind of naivete or negligence of difference to avoid any potential conflicts. It emphasizes a way in which addressing challenges of conflict is possible and probably meaningful. In Zhang Zai's case, he uses emptiness *ji qi* to clarify conflicting notions especially concerning being and nothingness, actuality and emptiness and to reveal their shared metaphysical foundation; in Wang Fu-zhi's, he found that *ji* is the thread running through *Zhuangzi*'s thought as well, by means of which the existing ambiguous texts and conflicting dimensions could be further investigated depending on a deeper logical structure. The specific strategy has emerged through his interpretation of the centre of the ring, and such clarification not merely focuses on a concept called the centre of the ring or only aims to understand the true meaning of the sayings of Da-gong Diao, but also endeavors to head towards the horizon that supports different interpretations but belongs to neither of them. In the discussion on doing and non-doing, Wang Fu-zhi reminds us that both of them are right and wrong: neither of them achieves the marvelousness of the centre of the ring, but either of them still sheds light on one of the two irreplaceable elements.

As shown in his analysis of the centre of the ring, "the actuality of a ring" and "the emptiness inherent in the ring" are two fundamental elements, which means it would be difficult to grasp the essence of the centre of the ring if only focusing on one element but excluding the other. It is the same with tangled issues concerning being and nothingness, actuality and emptiness, doing and non-doing, and other conflicting aspects in or perspectives on *Zhuangzi*. Their differences contain more meaning than conflict, and such nuances would be revealed based on "mutual-inclusiveness" rather than "mutual-exclusiveness". Such an interpretative approach adopted by Wang Fu-zhi is illuminating. Instead of arguing that he, as a Confucian intellectual, interprets *Zhuangzi* in an ordinary Confucian way, it may be

more accurate to suggest that he focuses on such a possibility of furthering *Zhuangzi* with insight into *ji*, which is deeply associated with the philosophical tradition of *qi* and significant influence from Zhang Zai.

### 3. Paradoxical Unity

Rur-bin Yang 楊儒賓 makes use of a term “paradoxical unity 詭譎的同一”, also within the specific context of *qi* formulated by Zhang Zai, to elaborate the logic of *ji* for the purpose of discovering the contemporary position that the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* should hold.<sup>10</sup> With respects to the legitimacy of arguing that *Zhuangzi* inherited the thought of the *Yi Jing*, Yang articulates a basic structure supporting *Zhuangzi*’s thought and enunciates it as “change and non-change present simultaneously 化與不化的同時具足”.<sup>11</sup> This view is derived from a conversation between Confucius and Yanyuan in Chapter 22, “Zhi’s Wandering in the North 知北遊”,

*The ancients, amid external changes, did not change internally; now-a-days men change internally, but take no note of external changes. When one only notes the changes of things, himself continuing one and the same, he does not change.* (James Legge trans.)

古之人，外化而內不化，今之人，內化而外不化。與物化者，一不化者也。<sup>12</sup>

In Yang’s view, a question raised by this text is how to demystify the relation between change and non-change, external and internal, in a metaphysical sense. “Change and non-change present simultaneously” is not an answer to reply to a given question, i.e. a question such as whether the main focus should aim at “internal changes” or at “external changes”, or which attitude is better than the other.

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<sup>10</sup> For more discussion, see Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 《《易經》與理學的分派》 [Yijing yu Lixue de Fenpai], 《從《五經》到《新五經》》 [Cong Wujing dao Xinwujing], Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2013: 279–322.

<sup>11</sup> See Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 《儒門內的莊子》 [Rumennei de Zhuangzi], 《儒門內的莊子》 [Rumennei de Zhuangzi]: 154.

<sup>12</sup> See Guo Qing-fan 郭慶藩, 《莊子集釋》 [Zhuangzi Jishi], Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2007: 765.

Instead, it is an attempt to reformulate such questions by means of inquiring into their constitutive structure that makes them possible and reasonable. Also, it is this fundamental structure that makes it possible to make a statement about “changing internally rather externally” or vice versa, statements that are made according to their approaches to a certain question that has determined by a specific horizon. “Change and non-change present simultaneously” is an articulation of this structure, not only focusing on a certain relation between two apparent conflicting aspects but also highlighting such a relation as fundamentally constituted by two aspects that are opposed to each other. Two conflicting aspects are, accordingly, not only contradictory to but also complementary to each other, with such an inherent relationship that makes their apparent conflicts possible and guarantees their irreplaceable individual identities at the same time. In other words, the situation of conflict is not sufficient to eclipse their inherent relationship, and such relationship never ignores one another’s difference nor intends to reduce any potential conflict caused by differences. It is “paradoxical unity” that is used to explain such an implicit relationship.

This kind of unity does not show a tendency to equate one with the other; it rather implies a specific state of “neither the same nor the other”.<sup>13</sup> The negation of “the same” emphasizes that the genuine unity needs going further into the depth of *qi* inherent in and shared by myriad things, as opposed to some statements that argue the meaning of unity can be well explained at the level of forms, or argue that *qi* can be clarified from a purely empirical viewpoint. “Not the other” describes such a profound relationship between things based on the horizon opened by *qi*, the principle of which is mutual-inclusiveness; more importantly, it further suggests that the genuine unity is the one acknowledging all differences, regarding them as concrete expressions of *qi*, not as conflicts from abstraction to be transcended. It is the mutual-inclusiveness that makes it possible for myriad things to be presented as such with their own form and matter. “Not the other” is fundamentally associated with “not the same”, a unity with such a paradoxical condition that it neither stops at the level of apparent conflicts nor remains limited to a narrow interpretation of “actual being”. This unity entails the logic of *ji*, which is the teaching embedded in the *Yi Jing* and furthered by Zhang Zai’s clarification of *qi*.

According to Yang’s understanding, paradoxical unity is the main thread running through all major issues of *Zhuangzi*, an obvious example is his particular

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<sup>13</sup> See Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 《易經》與理學的分派 [Yijing yu Lixue de Fenpai]: 296–297.

attention to a series of notions related to a metaphor of the “potter’s wheel 陶均”. He is of the view that the potter’s wheel is the fundamental metaphor of *Zhuangzi* and intrinsically related to its expressions of other essential concepts, especially “heavenly wheel 天均”, “undifferentiated heaven 渾天” and “the centre of the ring”, all of which share its round shape, symbolizing completeness, embrace, and wholeness, and contain its theme of driving all movements of the universe. The theme of such internal energy could find its possible origin against a mythological background, but it also can be developed within a philosophical context in which posing questions on its own logic and structure would be essential.

Paradoxical unity could be seen as the thread to clarify questions arising from the metaphor of such forms that are “undifferentiated round 渾圓”. Yang mentions such a fundamental metaphor and its relevant notions “with the essence that is the coalescence of permanence and changeableness, of absolute and relative”,<sup>14</sup> they are in the relation of mutual-inclusiveness, not in the relation that one could be replaced by the other, the sense in which such wholeness is the one with paradoxical identity, and paradoxical unity aims to shed light on such heterogeneousness intrinsic to such an undifferentiated round form.

The focus of paradoxical unity is on its character of “round interpenetration”, rather than on the “flattened sameness”.<sup>15</sup> The former highlights irreplaceable individual identities and their vertical structure within as opposed to the latter’s purely empirical horizon, and such an approach is basically related to Yang’s understanding about *qi* for further examining the issue of “essence 體” and “function 用”, an essential issue in the context of Confucianism and still under discussion today. It seems irrelevant to mention such an issue if one’s concern is on *Zhuangzi* and with no interest in statements about “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”; however, if an approach to such an essential Confucian issue is associated with an insight inherent in *Zhuangzi*, whether *Zhuangzi* belongs to Confucianism or not, it already shows a possibility that *Zhuangzi* does not necessarily play a passive role in the prospect of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”. It could and would in turn occupy a constructive position in a contemporary dialogue with Confucianism.

Wang Fu-zhi’s exegesis has revealed such a possibility and suggests some complexity *Zhuangzi* already possessed. Based on his interpretation in the last chapter “All Under Heaven 天下”, the genuine relationship between essence and

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<sup>14</sup> See Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈莊子的卮言論〉 [Zhuangzi de Zhiyan Lun]: 245.

<sup>15</sup> See Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈檢證氣學——理學史脈絡下的觀點〉 (On the Classification of “*Qixue*”), *Chinese Studies* 漢學研究, vol. 25.1 (Jun., 1997): 264.

function has been indicated by *Zhuangzi* through its fundamental notions, and such a relationship should not be understood as something like “following function yet abandoning essence 捐體而徇用”, or “demonstrating essence yet making function void 立體以廢用”, or like “analyzing essence and function as two independent parts 析體用而二之”, or “identifying essence and function as the same 槩體用而一之”, but rather it should be constructed that “essence is embodied in function and as non-essence 寓體于用而無體以為體”.<sup>16</sup> The term *ji* does not appear in these sentences; however, it is obvious that all words are used to clarify the accurate meaning of *ji* that he grasps depending on his understanding of *Zhuangzi*.

Whether the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* would be detained at the horizon revealed by Confucian philosophers is an open question; nevertheless, *ji* with such paradoxical identity represents an approach to address the challenge of the conflict facing *Zhuangzi*, both in the aspects of text and of interpretation, in a positive way; it also, probably, serves as a starting point from which the meaning of *ji* could be deepened through consistent disclosure of *Zhuangzi*'s logical structure, the step from which a more profound conformation between *Zhuangzi* and Confucianism will emerge again.

#### 4. Two Models of *qi*

In this paper, my focus is on a possibility of developing *Zhuangzi*'s logical structure by an approach surrounding the concept of *qi* and its logic of *ji* that has been demonstrated through Wang Fu-zhi's interpretation of *Zhuangzi*, and such an approach is deeply influenced by Zhang Zai's interpretation and has received further clarification from a contemporary philosophical view. A crucial issue on whether “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian” can justify its argument with convincing reasons and evidence, however, would not be discussed in this paper, mainly because some preliminary issues are necessary while entering into such a discussion, which means some clarification of the question itself is crucial as well. More attention needs to be paid to issues such as which kind of Confucianism is discussed, which philosophical system of Confucianism is referred to, and which approach is adopted by such a system to claim the validity of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”.

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<sup>16</sup> See Wang Fu-zhi 王夫之, 《老子衍 莊子通 莊子解》 [Laoziyan Zhuangzitong Zhuangzijie]: 353–354.

The approach to *qi* mentioned in this paper is such a kind of preliminary research, emphasizing that it would not be very appropriate to only regard it as the *qi* in a universal meaning or as the *qi* broadly defined by Confucianism as a whole, but rather, it contains a specific meaning to be revealed only following the interpretation given by Zhang Zai and his followers. And also, this clarification does not aim at proving or disapproving its legitimacy, but rather at introducing such an insight to open up the horizon already inherent in *Zhuangzi*. The horizon in which the logical structure of *Zhuangzi* could be reinvestigated, and the relation to *Laozi* philosophy could be subject to further critical inquiry, and the place in which the creativity of *Zhuangzi* philosophy could be discovered in a more profound way.

The legitimacy concerning the approach to *qi* is not further examined in our context, but a criticism of such an approach, however, is still mentionable as one of opportunities for elucidation of the types of *qi*: what is and is not the *qi* used here to formulate the statement on “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”. A good place to open such discussion would be through the debates between Jean François Billeter and Rur-bin Yang on the issue of the following question: Is it appropriate to interpret *Zhuangzi* from the view of *qi*, suggesting *Zhuangzi* shared the same philosophical concern with the *Yi Jing*, which is the evidence for claiming “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”?<sup>17</sup> According to Billeter, the position that *qi* occupies within *Zhuangzi*’s context is questionable. First, although the term of *qi* does exist in *Zhuangzi*, this fact does not mean that it can be regarded as a key notion formulating a philosophical system, mainly because *Zhuangzi* philosophy is not a philosophy with continuity that allows us to evaluate it in historical perspective. Second, and more important, is the problem of the continuity of *qi*.

Billeter further explains, against the traditional background of *qi*, that since the Song dynasty the concept of *qi* has played an important role in providing a theoretical foundation for traditional Chinese philosophy, and it serves as the origin of each phenomenon in the universe. As the shared foundation, *qi* promises a fundamental continuity between all phenomena, the sense in which there is no true difference between the one and the other, the sense that everything is changeable

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<sup>17</sup> Jean François Billeter (1939–), trans. Song Gang 宋剛, 〈莊子九札〉 (Nine Notes on *Zhuangzi* and Philosophy), *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy* 中國文哲研究通訊, vol. 22.3 (Sep., 2012): 13–15, and Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈莊子與儒家——回應《莊子四講》〉 (*Zhuangzi* and Confucianism—A Response to Billeter’s Lectures on *Zhuangzi*), *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy* 中國文哲研究通訊, vol. 22.3 (Sep., 2012): 137–141.



and reversible. In this context, it is impossible to allow any sense of “break”, and it is therefore much more difficult to find a real starting point for creation. Owing to such intrinsic defect or imperfection, the theory of *qi* would not provide a convincing argument on issues concerning the freedom of subject or the potentiality of creativity, key issues that have been discussed and developed in the context of the philosophy of *Zhuangzi*. Given this background, Billeter centers the essentiality of paradox and discontinuity in *Zhuangzi*, regarding them as key elements for disclosing a new model of subject specifically from the perspective given by *Zhuangzi*. Issues of creation would have more appropriate discussion after such clarification of this new subject.

To address such challenges, Yang emphasizes a crucial distinction of two types of *qi* within Confucianism: *qi* with a pre-created model and with a post-created model,<sup>18</sup> basically related to their respective understandings of *qi*: the pre-celestial *qi* and the post-celestial *qi*, both of which are different from those meanings elaborated in a Daoist context. The focus of the post-created model is on its empirical characteristic of *qi*, showing a tendency towards naturalism or materialism, owing to which *qi* has been regarded as a less important issue for discussion in Neo-Confucianism. In contrast, the pre-created model of *qi*, the main topic of this paper, dedicates its effort to revealing the depth of myriad things within, and the depth we shared with others is the metaphysical foundation, making our individual identity possible. In Yang’s view, the pre-created model of *qi* indicates a particular sense of “continuity”. Such continuity is not claiming “undifferentiation”; instead, it claims the fundamental unity that necessarily includes and authenticates the specific differences belonging to each one, the sense in which without focusing on such continuity, a complete explanation of individuality or creativity would not be possible. Differences in appearance do not suffice to state individual identity, and also sameness in appearance do not illustrate any concrete unity. The continuity of *qi*, under the disclosure of its pre-created mode, suggests that kind of paradoxical unity, the unity which covers two dimensions both of “the one” and “the other” but encompasses neither of them. Its paradox presents as neither the same nor the other, as mentioned before. Such interpretation echoes Wang Fu-zhi’s approach to *Zhuangzi* to a greater extent, and with respect to relations between myriad things he

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<sup>18</sup> Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, 〈兩種氣學, 兩種儒學〉 (Two Kinds of Ch’i Philosophy, Two Kinds of Confucianism), *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 台灣東亞文明研究學刊, vol. 3.2 (Dec., 2006): 1–39.

leaves an instructive comment: “the myriad things are uniting with others and none are independent of others 萬物合一而莫非獨”.<sup>19</sup>

One further question would arise against the context of debates as to the appropriateness of the theory of *qi* while approaching *Zhuangzi* philosophy. Besides the possible diversity inherent in Confucianism and different connotations implied in the concept of *qi*, various understandings on continuity deserve more attention as well. Before making a judgment on whether continuity is the main concern of *Zhuangzi* or on whether *Zhuangzi* represents a philosophy with continuity, the meaning of continuity and its structure should be taken into careful consideration. A successor to the philosophical thought formulated by Zhang Zai’s theory of *qi* has appeared and has kept developing understanding of his concepts, aside from such a Chinese philosophical context.

Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), the founder of the Kyoto school, also expressed views particularly on the “continuity of discontinuity 非連続の連続”, one of his fundamental concepts to demonstrate the logic of “self-identity of absolute contradiction 絶対矛盾的自己同一”. Their specific meanings and related approaches towards *Zhuangzi* are beyond the scope of the present paper,<sup>20</sup> but this case might contribute to discovering the value of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian”. These concepts of Nishida mean dialogues related to *ji*, paradox, and continuity are no longer limited to the field of Chinese philosophy. And so *Zhuangzi* further extends its possibility to an encounter with Japanese philosophy, not based on any possible relevance traced to seemingly historical factors, but mainly based on the capabilities for developing their own concepts consistently. In the case of *Zhuangzi*, such possibility is revealed and much clarified with the help of a “Confucian” interpretation, the sense in which the view of “seeing *Zhuangzi* as Confucian” would be essential for the furtherance of *Zhuangzi* philosophy and as one constitutive element of such furtherance.

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<sup>19</sup> See Wang Fu-zhi 王夫之, 《老子衍 莊子通 莊子解》 [*Laoziyan Zhuangzitong Zhuangzijie*]: 253.

<sup>20</sup> I have dealt with these issues by investigating a profound meaning of “nothingness”. See Liu Kuan-ling 劉冠伶, 《《莊子》思想的「環中」構造——「絕對無」的線索》 (*The structure of Huanzhong in Zhuangzi’s thought: in view of absolute nothingness*), (Ph. D. diss., National Tsing Hua University, 2016): 70–94.

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