

So-of-itself: Wu-wei 無為 and the 'lower position' in the *Laozi*

A Comparative Study of the *Daodejing*, the *Analects* and the *Xuanxue* School

In *Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*, Edward Slingerland (2004) notes the prominence of metaphors of valleys and water in the *Daodejing* in illuminating the nature of the Way and the Laozian sage's attainment of wu-wei 無為 "effortless action" and ziran 自然 "so-of-itself", "natural". The arising of Something from Nothing, along with the eventual return of Something to Nothing, is seen by Laozi as something like a law of nature, and is given the technical name of "reversion," or "going back" (fan, 反). This principle of reversion of the high to the low is further drawn into a spiritual schema of Virtue (de, 德) in tension with the general Confucian Virtue of ren 仁, "true humanness". In the *Daodejing*, just as water that has fallen as rain and been deposited in the highlands naturally flows back into the valleys, so everything in the world eventually returns to the sage who emulates the Way and takes the lower position (Slingerland 2003, p. 99) For Laozi, Benjamin Schwartz notes, water is 'in a profounder sense stronger than stone' (Schwartz 1986, p. 203).

In a sense too, the 'lower position' of water attends to the evolution and branching of Laozi's ideas from their original form in time. As Sellmann notes, 'in the commentarial practices of the Han, Wei and Jin dynasties, scholars typically incorporated the commentaries of other intellectuals as a type of argument by authority, to help develop their interpretation of a text, and to further create their own philosophy', generating a rich interpretive rivercourse of braidings, tributaries and branchings. (Sellmann 2020, p. 28). This essay explores the 'lower position' as it was interpreted by Laozi and later by Mencius in the Warring States period (BC 481 - 403) and thinkers in the Xuanxue School of the Wei-Jin period (AD 265–420). I also draw on recent discussions in epistemology, hermeneutics, archaeology and linguistics concerning the philosophical interpretation of classical texts.

"Deep and distant is this mysterious integrity! It runs counter to things [與物反矣] until it reaches the great confluence" (*Daodejing* 65, tr. Mair 1990: 36). "Being great implies flowing ever onward, Flowing ever onward implies far-reaching, Far-reaching implies reversal [遠曰反]" (*Daodejing* 25, tr. Mair 1990: 90). Reversal is the movement of the Way [反者道之動]; Weakness is the usage of the Way [弱者道之用]. All creatures under heaven are born from being; Being is born from nonbeing." (*Daodejing* 40, tr. Mair 1990: 8)

Introduction

In the *Dao Companion to Xuanxue (Neo-Daoism)* 玄學 (2020), the authors examine how an early school of thinkers in the transitional, culturally agitated Wei-Jin period would scrutinize the connection between words (*yan* 言) and their meaning (*yi* 意), names and actualities in the classical texts, tracing the concepts of absence (*wu* 無), structural coherence (*li* 理), and oneness (*yi* 一) into deeper, and much more complex, theoretically elaborated understandings of reality (Chai 2020, p. 4). Misha Tadd notes that the original *Daodejing* 道德經 presents us with a collection of aphoristic fragments that on their own remain ambiguous and opaque, and suggests that Daoist philosophy only really begins when the earliest aphoristic records like the *Daodejing* achieve order in subsequent more architectonic works, such as the Metaphysical Schools of the Wei-Jin period (Tadd 2020, p. 103).

In the *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, Xiaogan Liu locates the emergence of Chinese philosophy as an academic subject to Feng Youlan's two-volume *History of Chinese Philosophy*, published in the 1930s and its English translation in 1953. Feng Youlan introduced neo-realism into his interpretation, suggesting that various Western philosophies such as Marxist materialism, Kantian idealism, new realism, American pragmatism, analytical and linguistic philosophy, existentialism, and phenomenology might be used to reinterpret the Chinese classical and related texts (Liu 2014, p. 4). In reaction to this Westernised approach to doing Chinese philosophy, several scholars, particularly in the last two decades, have insisted that 'since ancient Chinese thinkers did not speak modern Western languages and knew nothing of Western terms and theories, we should interpret ancient thought based on indigenous terms and frames' (Liu, 2014, p. 5).

Liu examines the strong influence of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in the field of modern Chinese Philosophy. Gadamer argues that people have historically-effected consciousness, and that they are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them. Historical consciousness is not an object over and against our existence, but 'a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding' (Palmer 1969, p. 117). Liu notes how 'Gadamer's theory has provided a novel way to understand and defend the tradition of Chinese intellectual history; i.e., the

development of new theories through commentaries and reinterpretations of the classics and related texts. ‘This philosophy also supplies keen weapons to cut through the domination of dogmatism’ (Liu 2020, p. 10). At the same time, Liu is critical of oversimplified uses of Gadamer. ‘A typical representative’, Liu writes, ‘is a commentary on the *Laozi*’s thought authored by Xiong Liangshan (Xiong, 2003), who studies technology and has no training in classical Chinese. The book was once celebrated by government and media, and even received awards, because it put popular ideas in Laozi’s mouth’ (2020, p. 11).

Liu also critiques Ji Xianlin’s 季羨林 reinterpretation of the idiom “union of heaven and man” (tian ren heyi 天人合一) as the harmony of man and the natural world (Ji, 1996) suggesting that this interpretation is groundless because there is no textual evidence demonstrating that this phrase ever meant to promote harmony between the human and the natural world. In ancient Chinese texts, tian is a complex term most closely related to a transcendent and mysterious power, whose function determined political and moral principles that extended to human society (Liu 2020, p. 8). Liu recognises the interpretive import of ancient Chinese thought to modern society, such as the role of the modern Neo-Confucianist school yet he suggests that modern interpretation must pay serious attention to historical and textual studies.

In contrast to the tradition of significant new theories built as commentaries on the classics such as Wang Bi’s annotation of the *Laozi*, Guo Xiang’s annotation of the *Zhuangzi*, and Zhu Xi’s commentary on the *Four Books*, Liu argues that modern scholars’ own ideas and their understanding of old texts should be held distinct. This opens a broader philosophical question of whether ancient Chinese thought can only be interpreted within the linguistic, geographical and historical parameters of its emergence, or whether modernity and an environment vastly more urban, dense and coastal, and psychologically if not physically inhabiting the ocean, sky and space, forms an interpretive or evolutionary lens. Gadamer’s historically-effected consciousness attends some of the way to this.

In the same volume, Griet Vankeerberghen examines the 1973 unearthing of the ‘Four Lost Classics’ in three richly furnished Western Han 漢 dynasty tombs at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Hunan 湖

南 and traces the rich excavative and textual work which in a strange symmetry mirrors the work in the interpretation, writing and burying of the original texts. 'Believing that these texts served as foundational texts for the First Emperor of Qin 秦, with whom Mao Zedong 毛澤東 liked to compare himself, politicians pressed for a swift transcription' (Vankeerberghen 2014, p. 308). Slingerland (2004) further asks the question of why certain texts were transmitted by the central courts whereas others, like the *Four Lost Classics*, were not. The historical gaps in the records and intertextual lacunae are in this capacity as important an archaeological practice as textual analysis.

Wu-wei and the 'lower position' in the *Daodejing* and the *Analects*

Slingerland argues that *wu-wei* which literally means "in the absence of / without doing exertion" has been understood primarily as a technique for governing, to the neglect of its most basic meaning in the *Analects*, Laozi (*Daodejing*), Mencius, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi: as a spiritual and religious ideal. Slingerland traces *wu-wei* in a family of metaphors for lack of exertion (*cong* "following," an "at ease"); unself-consciousness (*wang* "forgetting," *shi* "losing"); and the natural or spontaneous (*ziran*, "so-of-itself"). *Wu-wei* 無為 is explored in Confucius and Laozi as action that is spontaneous and yet accords with the normative order of the cosmos. Whereas Confucius holds to a higher position, Laozi expresses the attainment of *wu-wei* through the lower position.

Roger T Ames's 1994 *The Art of Rulership* studies *wu-wei* as a principle of government in Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and the syncretist text the *Huainanzi*. In the *Analects*, *wu-wei*, effortless action, is closely linked to the idea of timeliness (*shi* 時) in the unself-consciously virtuous ruler whose actions are conceived of as somehow "matching up" with the situation, and "responsiveness" (*ying* 應), where the Subject is conceptualised as a thing being stimulated or moved (*gan* 感) by the world as object (Ames 1994). Ames notes how Legalist conceptions of *wu-wei* align with a sense of a political system that once established and set in motion, its laws are self-regulating: 'just as Heaven commands the orderly progression of the seasons and the timely arrival of rains, and just as the Pole Star rules over the fixed constellations in the nighttime sky. The multitude of stars do not crowd together at random, trying to get as close to the Pole Star as possible. Rather, they all remain situated in their proper, predefined places, which in turn are

ultimately oriented toward and held together by the central attractive power of the Pole Star' (Slingerland 2004, p. 69).

Slingerland notes how, in contrast to the awesome pole star or the powerful wind bending the grass from above, Laozi's sage attains virtue by remaining unseen and placing himself below the myriad things. By taking the "lower" position and transforming the world through the subtle influence of his Virtue, the Laozian sage-ruler 'leads the world back to naturalness. By not taking any action or engaging in meddling himself, he is able to cultivate the powerful and mysterious Virtue that gradually washes the people of the world clean of unnatural behavior and desires' (Slingerland 2004, p. 108). In Chapter 32 of the *Daodejing*, Laozi describes the Way as 'like the rivers and oceans are to the valley streams', implying the great source from which water arises and to which it inexorably and naturally returns.

‘江海以此道為百谷王，故能久長功。The rivers and seas are kings of the hundred valleys because of this Dao. Therefore they can extend their achievements for a long time.’ Paul van Els notes Laozi's statement on bamboo strip 0916 praises rivers and seas for their low position. ‘Rivers aimlessly flow downhill and tributaries spontaneously flow into them. Seas are naturally positioned below and all the streams eventually discharge into them. The rivers and seas serve as a metaphor for the ruler, who should strive to go with the natural flow of things and position himself below, and thereby naturally and aimlessly gain the support of the masses’ (van Els 2014, p. 331).

The notion of stillness in movement is a further paradoxical element of *wu-wei*. Sarah Allan notes Laozi 61 describes ‘a large state is the lower reaches. It is the female of the world. It is the intercourse (*jiao*) of the world. The female always overcomes the male by means of stillness (*jing*). It is because of her stillness that it is appropriate for her to take the position below. Therefore, a large state takes over a small state by taking the lower position, a small state, by taking the lower position, is taken by a large state. Therefore, the one by being lower takes over; the other being lower, is taken over. Therefore, if the large state wants no more than to nurture the people in common and the small state wants no more than to enter service, and both are to get their desires; then the large one appropriately takes the lower position’ (*De* 20; 61) (Allan 1997, p. 47).

Imbricated in the logic of *wu-wei* as a physical valley-like movement is the concept of *ziran* (自然), meaning literally ‘so-of-itself’.

In the *Daodejing*, *ziran* holds a water-like quality and movement and conceptually connects to metaphors of birth, motherhood and the “root”. Water “internally” tends to flow downhill and eventually to the ocean. Such behaviour is furthermore “uncoerced”: no one has to force water to flow to the sea”. For Liu (1999), the ‘internal cause’ of *ziran* is therefore closely related to ‘enduring’: it takes no energy to let a thing follow its natural course, and therefore such behaviour is sustainable; on the other hand, the fact that active and constant exertion of external force, such as the construction of a dam, is required to oppose a thing’s essential tendencies dooms such action to eventual failure (Slingerland 2004, pp. 97-98)

Several scholars critique the distinction of Laozi as a spiritual endeavour against the human concerns of Confucius. Kanaya Osamu distinguishes between the more contemplative and “religious” Zhuangzi and the more cynical and this-worldly minded Laozi, suggesting that the Laozian sage instrumentalises his subtle illumination (*ming* 明) of understanding the general, invariable (*chang* 常) laws of the universe - the greatest of which is reversion (*fan*, 反) - to his advantage (Slingerland, 2004, p. 109). The ‘lower position’, Creel argues, ‘is no less motivated to participate in the struggle of human affairs.’ In a modern and creative interpretation, a river also need not be fixed in an imaginary of *da ziran* 大自然, a natural world untrammelled by human beings, in the way that urbanisation as a mountain or river of concrete, glass and cement abstracts *wu-wei* as a complex positional problematique.¹

Wu-wei and the ‘lower position’ in the *Mencius*

Slingerland notes how Mencius attempt to unify the higher and lower positions of Confucius and Laozi, and the paradox of *wu-wei* as natural (effortless) or nurtured (effortful) by tracing a set of metaphors from the realm of agriculture. Mencius, Slingerland notes, supplements his agricultural metaphors with a separate, equally evocative water-based family of metaphors ‘according to which

¹ The higher and lower positions in Confucius and Laozi might find modern interpretation in the analysis of leaders, Xi Jinping, the pole star and Deng Xiaoping, President of the Chinese Bridge Association. A corollary from cognitive psychology might trace whether Laozi was an introvert and Confucius an extrovert, filtering the physical world differently

one can find the "source" (yuan 源) of morality in order to access the “flood-like” (haoran 浩然) qi, allowing moral behavior to follow as inevitably and irresistibly as a spring breaking through the ground or water bursting through a dike’ (Slingerland 2004, p. 12). Mencius, separated from Confucius by several generations, is writing in the Warring States period of the fourth century BC defending the value of traditional Zhou culture and Confucianism in an intellectual milieu marked by challenges from ‘neo-Mohists, primitivist Daoist anarchists and cynical rulers interested only in the acquisition of power, wealth, and territory’ (2004, p. 131).

In this milieu, Mencius explores and defends the paradox that if the Confucian Way is so natural for us as human beings, why do we have to work so hard to concentrate upon it? If it were truly natural, it should be completely effortless—natural in the way that weeds grow or water flows downhill. Mencius develops the argument that we already are wu-wei ‘in the sense that we contain the potentialities for wu-wei within us, but these potentialities—like fragile sprouts of grain—need to be tended to and nourished if they are to grow and realise their telos’ (2004, p. 15). Just as the natural world is not static but has its own direction, it is therefore no more "unnatural" for us to practice the Confucian rites than it is for wheat plants to produce a crop. In this way Mencius is able to associate Confucian morality with the “natural” (ziran) model of wu-wei championed by the Laozi (2004, p. 131). In a debate with Gaozi, Gaozi says:

"Human nature is like a whirlpool. Cut a channel to the east and it will flow east; cut a channel to the west and it will flow west. The lack of a tendency toward good or bad in human nature is just like water's lack of a preference for east or west. Mencius replied , "Water certainly does not have a preference for either east or west, but does it fail to distinguish between up and down? The goodness of human nature is like the downhill movement of water— there is no person who is not good, just as there is no water that does not flow downward. Now, as for water, if you strike it with your hand and cause it to splash up, you can make it go above your forehead; if you apply force and pump it , you can make it go uphill . Is this really the nature of water, though? No, it is merely the result of environmental influences (shizeran 勢則然). That a person can be made bad shows that his nature can also be altered like this’ (Mencius, 6:A:2) (Slingerland 2004, p. 150). Here Mencius

draws on Laozi's *ziran*, so-of-itself to argue for the spontaneous force of human morality as water flowing downhill.

In a later passage Mencius, replying to an interlocutor Bogui's query of the engineering feats of the legendary King Yu, states: 'In regulating water, Yu took advantage of its natural course (dao 道). Hence he used the four seas to serve as his drainage ditch. You, on the other hand, use neighboring states as your drainage ditch. When one forces water to flow against its nature, the result is what is referred to as "flood waters." "Flood waters" represent a "deluge," and this is something that a benevolent person hates. No, sir, you are very mistaken" (6:B:11) (2004, p. 152). Here Mencius continues to try to develop a model of Confucian self-cultivation—which seems on the face of it to be a strenuous, unnatural undertaking—in fact represents the effortless expansion of physiological forces within the self, where morality is 'natural and inexorable as the gushing forth of water from a spring or the power of a river flowing to the sea' and yet Slingerland argues, Mencius's solving of the problem of moral motivations appears to develop new paradoxes and tensions (2004, p. 153).

Slingerland notes the paradox of Laozi's lower position and Confucius's higher position is never fully resolved in Mencius's writing. Mencius recognises the paradox that 'people sometimes need to fight against the pull of natural inclinations in order to be moral. Yet, Slingerland argues, 'since his primary metaphors for self-cultivation and virtue acquisition all involve going along with the natural tendencies of things, they cannot easily accommodate this insight' (Slingerland 2004, p. 172). Like the complexity of the engineering feats of Yu, Mencius is therefore forced to occasionally supplement his ethical schema with externalist metaphors: with a heaven which, in moments of trouble, stirs the 'heart/mind' of the king onto a different course. If human goodness is so-of-itself, natural as water under the force of gravity, how similarly could such insight breathe next to the physical realities of the Warring States period, and the challenge of rationalist Mohist ideas to the naturalistic mysticism of higher and lower positions of *wu-wei* and *ziran* in the Daodejing and Analects.

Wu-wei and the 'lower position' in the Xuanxue School

In the *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (*Neo-Daoism*), Jana Rošker notes how at the turn of the first millennium, 'the classical philosophy from the pre-Qin and Han eras was still rooted in a realist

understanding of reality as the objective external world or external forms of things.’ (Rošker 2020, p. 49). Through their forms, the objects of external reality were mutually linked by an all-encompassing network of structural relations that were seen as the essence of *li*. In the Wei-Jin period of the Xuanxue thinkers however ‘the naming of reality was no longer understood as something directly connected with particular things, and even less as something that would form a part of them. It rather belonged to a coherent structural network in which particular names were connected, but at the same time, mutually distinguished’ (2020, p. 50). In this way, Rošker suggests, *Xuanxue* 玄學 thought moved toward an encounter of deeper and much more complex, theoretically elaborated understandings of reality.

David Chai notes how *Xuanxue* 玄學 philosophy emerged 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. Feng Youlan notes, Xuanxue held its roots in the opening chapter of the Daodejing 道德經 where four interrelated problematic issues were 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).

Teng Wai and Tang Juan note how ‘during the Wei-Jin dynasties, the scholar’s awareness of individual life was awakened, but when they woke up, they found that they were in an era of brutal and precarious dark chaos. Experiencing the joy of life and self-existence, they also always had to confront the threat of death. As a result, some of these scholars were keen on religious fantasies and they sought to explore the spiritual destination of their spirits; some of them revelled in unleashing their bondage while others simply lived as recluses in the mountains and forests to enjoy a temporary physical and psychological liberation.’

The cosmological inquiry of whether the Dao manifested in a higher or lower realm was further expanded upon. As Yuet Keung Lo notes, ‘in the Confucian tradition, the union between heaven and

man was understood as an upward aspiration. In *Analects* 14.35, Confucius said: “I do not complain against heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by heaven.” Hence, “the gentleman aspires upward (*shangda* 上達) while the small man sinks down below” (*xiada* 下達) [*Analects* 14.23]. In fact, even Zhuangzi shared this ascending ambition; the book of *Zhuangzi* opens with the best illustration with the gigantic Peng bird soaring above the blue sky for a six-month long stratospheric flight from the northern ocean to the Lake of Heaven (*tianchi* 天池) (Lo 2020, p. 201).

James D. Sellmann (2020) explores how early Xuanxue thinkers attempted to grasp the meaning of Laozi in a higher, abstract reality that is beyond and, in some sense, generates and controls the lower categories and things of the natural world, mirroring the sequential sense of the high generating the low. Later thinkers, such as Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang would however counter this kind of externalist, transcendental view, and deploy an immanentist, internalist view that grounds reality in the particulars of this world. In Guo Xiang’s philosophy, Sellman notes, *tian* is an abbreviation of *tiandi* 天地 the natural environment, sky and earth, or nature, not a transcendent, other-worldly heaven (Sellman 2020, p. 29). Lo notes how in Guo Xiang’s *Zhuangzi* Commentary the significance of upward transcendence is downplayed or simply ignored. Instead, Guo writes how “reaching out in the four directions means being able to resonate [with one’s surrounds] and extend [one’s influences]; reaching out thus enables one to ride on loftiness and greatness 感應旁通為四達。旁通，故可以御高大也”. The spiritual elevation and altitude of Confucian thought is replaced by attainment through extensive magnitude (Lo 2020, p. 373).

Gil Raz notes how in the alchemical work of Ge Hong 葛洪 (284–364 CE), the Master Embracing The Unhewn (Baopuzi 抱朴子), *xuan* (玄 *black, dark; mysterious, profound, abstruse, arcane*) - in the first chapter of the Daodejing - forms the ultimate cosmogonic source enveloping the universe: So high, it caps and covers the nine empyreans, 其高則冠蓋乎九霄, So wide, it encompasses the eight directions, 其曠則籠罩乎八隅. Yet in Ge Hong’s writing ambiguity is held as to whether the

nine heavens (jiutian 九天) are perceived as arranged vertically or arrayed horizontally in the eight directions, around a central pole (Raz 2020, p. 416).

Xiang Xiu, 向秀 (c. 227–280), a contemporary of Guo Xiang whose commentaries would be heavily integrated into Guo's work further seeks to resolve the higher and lower positions in Confucian and Daoist thought. Lo notes that Xiang was acutely aware of the tension between worldly affairs and spiritual autonomy and saw the world as a shifting matrix of unpredictable circumstances which might be navigated through conducting *ziran* (Lo 2014, p. 440). Xiang writes of the "Perfect Man" (*zhiren* 至人) whose 'actions compare to heaven and his stillness resembles earth; his movements flow like water and his depth is silent like an abyss. Whether it is abysmal silence or flowing water, the movement of heaven or the stillness of earth, they are all identical in being attuned with themselves in their nonaction" (至人其動也天, 其靜也地, 其行也水流, 其湛也淵嘿, 淵嘿之與水流, 天行之與地止, 其於不為而自然, 一也) (Yang, 1985: 72).

The perfect man advances and retreats in the same natural undulating rhythm as the current; he simply empties his mind to yield to the direction he is carried and follows the emergent changes ahead (*wuxin yi suibian* 無心以隨變). In this sense the 'timeliness' of Confucian thought is syncretised with the naturalistic downhill conception of *wu-wei* in the *Daodejing*. Xiang writes, *zhiren* 'acts in a timely manner' and 'yields to the changes and flows along with the waves of worldly affairs'. Lo suggests that Xiang Xiu's metaphysics of change and transformation (*bianhua* 變化) were heavily influenced by his experience of the political turmoil and ruthless murders in the imperial court during the Wei- Jin transition and personal survival looms in his metaphysics (Lo 2014, pp. 441 - 443).

Conclusion

In his study of *wu-wei* as a spiritual ideal, Edward Slingerland notes how 'studies of *wu-wei* in both the West and in Asia are often hampered by a concordance-fixation: in order to understand a concept such as *wu-wei*, the approach is simply to wade through the concordances of the classics, pulling out passages that contain the term "wu-wei" and use these as the data for one's study (Slingerland 2004, p. 11). This essay is a novice example hampered by a 'concordance-fixation',

pulling out concepts across texts that are infinitely more labyrinthine, intertextual and contextual in history than placed. In contrast, Slingerland traces *wu-wei* as a linguistic sign of a deeper conceptual structure, ‘illuminating its central importance as a problematique in Warring States thought—an importance that is severely obscured when we focus solely upon the term “wu-wei” itself’ (Slingerland, 2004, p. 12).

Writing and participating in a term of philosophy at Peking University has given a new sense to the idea Professor Cheng presented at the beginning of the course of concepts as internal mechanisms of semantic transformation and as an infrastructure of Chinese-ness in evolution, branching and braiding. In the classical texts, concepts acquired in interacting with the physical world directly mapped onto more abstract domains (Slingerland 2004, p. 98). The sense of water flowing and philosophy as an encounter with the physical world further drew me toward Bi Gan’s *Kaili Blues* 路边野餐. ‘Flowing down and within Guizhou’s cavernous mountains, water floats the film from past to present and back, always the same, yet always moving. It comes in torrents and cascades but it also drips incessantly, inducing a hypnotic state. With a water-soaked table as the linchpin between two separate but spatially adjacent moments, a pan manages to span nine years of a family drama; only the characters’ shirts distinguish the distinct occasions’ (Xiao and Andrew, 2019). An inner alchemy of memory flows downward and returns to itself in the mountain.

Elsewhere, the spiritual realm of a glacial Himalayas disappearing collides with human government. On the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze, Yellow, and Tarim, hundred of dams, ports and thermal power plants are emerging. In Hainan and Florida, humans disappear into the river of the Milky Way. The complexity of the Mencius’s flood-like ethics, Laozi’s lower position, Confucius’s pole star and the Xuanxue thinkers thought on absence (*wu*), structural coherence (*li*), oneness (*yi*) and the development of deeper, more complex perceptions of reality, virtue (*de*), naturalness (*ziran*), non deliberate action (*wu-wei*), transformation (*hua*), the tension between between 天道 and 人倫 and the resonance of heaven and humanity (*xuan* and *tian ren ganying* 天人感應) find modern dimension. At the same time, the image of archaeologists and researchers standing in the rain in a pit in Mawangdui illuminates something of the transhistorical consciousness, care and method to thought as it is traced toward the current historical cycle.

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