

Original Paper UDC [1:32]:221.3(510)“18”Wei Yuan

Received December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012**Li Man**

Ghent University, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Languages and Cultures of South and East Asia,  
 Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Ghent  
 man.li@UGent.be

## **Laozi Benyi: A Political Philosophy for the Last Phase of Time**

**Abstract**

*A classic offers us a multitude of possibilities for interpretation. The Laozi (老子), sometimes also titled Dao De Jing (道德經), is no doubt one of the most influential and controversial philosophical Chinese classics, and it has inspired numerous annotations and interpretations ever since pre-Qin times (221 B.C.–206 B.C.). This paper aims to analyse the interpretation and annotation of the Laozi by Wei Yuan, a scholar from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), written roughly two thousand years after the original text was created.*

**Keywords**

Wei Yuan, Laozi, politics, truth, discourse, power, state, ideal of governance, differentiation, distinction

### **1. Laozi Benyi: history and significance of the text**

Wei Yuan (魏源 1794–1857), well known as the compiler of the famous *Haiguo tuzhi* (海國圖志 Illustrated Treatise of Maritime Nations) and *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* (皇朝經世文編 Compendium of Writings on Statecraft from the Present Imperial Dynasty), has long been regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the New Text School (今文經學派) of the Qing Dynasty, although later some New Text School followers were not very willing to give recognition to this classification. His unreserved advocacy of Practical Statecraft (*Jingshi zhiyong* 經世致用) influenced generations of Chinese thinkers. Apart from his famous “practical” works *Haiguo tuzhi* and *Huangchao jingshi wenbian*, his historical works, such as *Yuanshi xinbian* (元史新編 New Edition of the Official History of the Yuan Dynasty) and *Shengwuji* (聖武記 Records of Military Achievements) vastly expanded the scholarly interest of Qing literati and officials into the realm of formerly, to a large extent, neglected frontiers. This in turn stimulated their later growing concern for their self-identity as part of the Qing empire. His interpretation and annotation of the Laozi, namely *Laozi benyi* (老子本義 Original Meaning of the Laozi), however, compared to his other works, has not been given much attention, this is partly because this book was posthumously published when his other works had already brought him a great reputation. Although *Laozi benyi* does not carry a lot of weight in the whole oeuvre of Wei Yuan, it has been increasingly considered to be a very important work for understanding his philosophy of history.<sup>1</sup>

1

Xu, Guansan (1980), “Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan’s Philosophy of History and Their Ideas of Political Reform (龔魏之歷史哲學與變法

思想)”, In *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* (中華文史論叢 Journal of Chinese literature and history), vol. 1, pp. 69–104.

Although the completion date of *Laozi benyi* is not the emphasis of this essay, roughly clarifying its writing time would supply a better understanding of the historical context of this book, especially as the social change that from the background against which it was written influenced the thought of Wei Yuan. The First Opium War in 1840<sup>2</sup> must have left its impact on Wei Yuan's thought. Two years later, in 1842, the first edition of the famous *Haiguo tuzhi* was published, along with the *Sheng wu ji* as well. In the *Haiguo tuzhi*, Wei Yuan clearly explained the purpose of compiling the *Haiguo tuzhi* and announced his renowned political proposal: "Why was this book written? For attacking barbarians in their own way and receiving them in their own way, for learning the strong points of barbarians in order to subdue them 是書何以作? 曰: 為以夷攻夷而作, 為以夷款夷而作, 為師夷長技以制夷而作."<sup>3</sup> In *Sheng wu ji*, Wei Yuan described the process of writing this book:

"Lately [I] live in the Jianghuai area, and because of the frequent alarms from the ocean (i.e. western warships haunting in Chinese seas), [I am very much] indignantly touched to the depth of [my] bosom. [I] set out, therefore, all [my] library collections, exploring and contrasting those classics, searching and reading back and forth, so as to preliminarily work out essays concerning military affairs and bring forth former argumentative writings for making up a book with fourteen scrolls. This book, a total of four hundred thousand words, was finished in the month when those barbarians coming from the oceans consented to [the treaty] in Jiangning (ancient name for Nanjing)." (own translation LM<sup>4</sup>)

晚僑江淮, 海警沓至, 愾然觸其中之所積, 乃盡發其櫝藏, 排比經緯, 馳騁往復, 先出其專涉兵事及嘗所論議若干篇, 為十有四卷, 統四十余萬言, 告成于海夷就款江寧之月<sup>5</sup>

Here we have a clear indication why Wei Yuan wrote the *Sheng wu ji*, and "the month when those barbarians coming from oceans consented to [the treaty] in Jiangning" means the month when The Treaty Of Nanking was signed, namely, August 29, 1842. The First Opium War (in a broad sense 1839–1842) frustrated Wei Yuan and his contemporaries and inspired a large amount of academic works later on. The intriguing point is that although the *Laozi* could be taken as a purely philosophical work, the interpretation of the *Laozi* usually constitutes a chance for expressing one's political and philosophical opinions, and Wei Yuan's *Laozi benyi* is no exception in this regard. It is precisely because of this reason, that the completion date of the *Laozi benyi* became an unavoidable question. Because if it was finished in 1820, namely before the critical point: the First Opium War, then this work escaped the impact of this national traumatic event. Otherwise one would expect Wei Yuan's reflections on his country to have been recorded in the *Laozi benyi*, even if only in a concealed way, since it was first and foremost the interpretation of a philosophical work.

The question now is when did Wei Yuan finish writing the *Laozi benyi*? It was exactly the completion of writing the *Laozi benyi* that signified the great breakthrough of Wei Yuan's philosophy of history, as some scholar argues.<sup>6</sup> If this argument is valid, then, in spite of the fact that it was only published in 1899, determining in which year Wei Yuan actually finished writing this book becomes an important question for judging whether Wei Yuan's *qiyun zaizao* (Restructuring the course of events 氣運再造) theory was produced earlier or later than his academic fellow Gong Zizhen's (龔自珍 1792–1841) *Zhongshi sanshi* (Recurrence of three ages 終始三世) theory.<sup>7</sup> Gong's major articles concerning his *Zhongshi sanshi* theory were written and published during 1822 and 1823, but the date of completion of Wei Yuan's *Laozi benyi* was dubious. According to Wang Jiajian (王家儉 1925–) and Xu Guansan (許冠三 1924–2011), the main part of the book was finished in about 1840,<sup>8</sup> but this is refuted by other scholars who favour the year 1820.<sup>9</sup> Judging from

the existing materials and the arguments of both sides, the writing and rewriting of the *Laozi benyi* might have been a never finished process. As these records which are used by Wang, Xu and other scholars show, the major part of the *Laozi benyi* might have been preliminarily completed in around the year 1820, but the prelude and four essays on Laozi were finished much later, probably in 1840, and even the main body of the *Laozi benyi* continued to be revised during Wei Yuan's later years. A record from Wei Yuan's friend, Deng Shouzhi (鄧守之 1795–1870),<sup>10</sup> reveals that until 1845 the *Laozi benyi* was not yet finished: "Deng Shouzhi of Huaining in his *Diary* recorded: when Moshen (i.e. Wei Yuan's Scholarly title) was designated to be the District Magistrate of Dongtai in Jiangsu province, Wuda accompanied him and in a guesthouse transcribed for him the *Laozi benyi* (懷寧鄧守之《日記》載: 默深分發江蘇權東台令時, 五達與偕, 在旅邸為抄《老子本義》)"<sup>11</sup> Wei Yuan's tenure of office in Dongtai was in 1845,<sup>12</sup> therefore the *Laozi benyi* was still in revision until then. As the initial publication of the *Laozi benyi* took place in 1899, the most reasonable answer to the question "when did Wei Yuan finish writing it" might well be: Wei Yuan finished the main body of the book in around 1820, but he probably never finished revising it until his death, the 1845 transcription being one evidence and the posthumous publication another. This conclusion ascertains the impact of the First Opium War on Wei Yuan and his works posterior to that event in general, and on the *Laozi benyi* in particular.

## 2. *Laozi Benyi*: concerns and reflection

In *Laozi benyi*, Wei Yuan addresses two major types of problems: one is the metaphysical problem which is the relation between politics and discourse, and another is political philosophical problems, such as power, ideal, good, equality etc. In the following chapters, therefore, these two major types of

2

In the sense that those military actions before the June of 1840 were regarded by the English government as "reprisal" and they never officially claimed a war till then.

3

Wei, Yuan (2004, editor in chief: Xia, Jianqin 夏劍欽), *Complete Works of Wei Yuan (vol 1-vol 20)*, Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, vol. 4, p. 1.

4

All translations are the author's.

5

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 3, p. 1.

6

Xu, Guansan (1980), p. 96.

7

Ibid. The significance of this problem will reveal itself in later part of this article.

8

Wang, Jiajian (1967), *Wei Yuan nianpu* (魏源年譜 *Chronicle of Wei Yuan*), Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, p. 71; Xu, Guansan (1980), p. 96.

9

Huang, Liyong (1980), "Questioning the Completion Date of Wei Yuan's *Original Meaning of Laozi* (魏源《老子本義》成書年代質疑)", In *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* (中華文史論叢 *Journal of Chinese literature and history*), vol. 4, pp. 281–282, and Huang, Liyong (1985), *Wei Yuan nianpu* (魏源年譜 *Chronicle of Wei Yuan*), Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, p. 54; Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, editorial p. 2.

10

Shouzhi is in fact his scholarly title; his first name was initially Shangxi(尚璽) and later was changed into Chuanmi(傳密).

11

Li, Borong (李伯榮 1983), *Wei Yuan shiyou ji* (魏源師友記 *Prosopographical of Wei Yuan and Related Characters*), Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, p. 12. Wuda is a cousin of Wei Yuan, please see also the same page of the *Wei Yuan shiyou ji*.

12

Huang, Liyong (1985), p. 145 and Wang, Jiajian (1967), p. 109.

problems will be dealt with separately in three parts: first, in the *Laozi benyi*, how did Wei Yuan solve the more metaphysical problem about the relation between truth and the discourse of truth will be explained, illustrated by the relation between this metaphysical problem and the real political concern, for instance what if an emperor who is supposed to be holding the true Way does not in fact comprehend the true Way; second, this article will reveal, through Wei Yuan's interpretation of the Laozi, what is Wei Yuan's idea about state and power, and what is an ideal governance to him; third, Wei Yuan's dialectic attitude towards distinction and differentiation will be examined. In these three chapters, Wei Yuan's political philosophy will be studied through investigating his exegesis on a seemingly pure philosophical text, the Laozi.

### 2.1. Truth and discourse

The first chapter of the Laozi begins with a couple of mystic sayings which are usually taken as general principles of the book itself:

"The *dao* (Way) that can be told is not the constant *dao*; the name that can be named is not the constant Name. The unnamable is the origin of Heaven and Earth. The named is the mother of all particular things."

道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。

In *Laozi benyi*, Wei Yuan annotated this chapter in a remarkably unique way, in terms of truth and truth claims, and he immediately realized the contradiction between the truth claims and the justification of these claims:

"The supreme Man<sup>13</sup> is nameless, being with the truth in embrace and features and intentions in obscurity, he never talks to people, not because of keeping the secret but because the Way cannot reveal itself through language nor be tracked through traces of discourse. When he was compelled by Guanyin's (commander of the Pass) petition, he reluctantly authored the book and solemnly claimed above all that: the Way is extremely difficult to be uttered, because if it can be proposed and signified, then it must be limited to a particular meaning which makes it no longer the ubiquitous Real Constant [way]."

至人無名，懷真韜晦而未嘗語人，非秘而不宣也，道固未可以言語顯而名跡求者也。及迫關尹之請，不得已著書，故鄭重於發言之首，曰：道至難言也，使可擬議而指名，則有一定之義，而非無往不在之真常矣。<sup>14</sup>

Here Wei Yuan clearly indicates the difference between the truth and the discourse of truth. He also incisively sensed and implied that if the real Truth or the real Way is not utterable, then the uttered truth is apparently not the Truth. Since it is not the Truth, people who claim to have the truth in store and obstinately defend this belief end up distancing themselves from the truth. In Wei Yuan's own words:

"If the Non-Real-Constant-Way is taken as the Way, the utterance of Benevolence is a harm to Benevolence, the advocacy of Justice is a harm to Justice, the obedience to Rites is a harm to Rites. In a massive or scattered way, the pretensions and concoction emerge constantly, while the so called [real] Way is destitute, thus how could it [the Way] be Constant?"

非真常者而執以為道，則言仁而害仁，尚義而害義，襲禮而害禮。熙熙子子詐偽之習出，而所謂道者弊，而安可常乎？<sup>15</sup>

Therefore in this way, the truth is concealed. This gives rise to the following question: how to answer criticism on Laozi's teaching by the potential opponents who use the same polemic logic as the one abovementioned, i.e., that the "truth" that Laozi teaches is in fact not the "truth" either? This problem is ultimately rooted in the contradiction between the unutterable truth and the discursive effort to narrate the truth. Confronted with this dilemma,

Wei Yuan proposed his solution which is to deal with the two matters, “the discourse about Truth” and “the Truth”, separately. Firstly, although what can be uttered, namely “the discourse about Truth”, is not the Truth itself, it reveals the Truth and helps the thinking subjects to cognize the truth, or in Wei Yuan’s own words: “generally, those utterables and nameables are embodied in the Five Thousand Characters. 蓋‘可道’, ‘可名’者, 五千言之所具也”<sup>16</sup> Secondly, for the unutterable Truth, the Truth beyond discourse and language, the understanding of the Truth depends on each subject who is searching for the Truth: “that which cannot be conveyed through words lies in the heart of the truth-seeker. 其不可言傳者, 則在體道者之心得焉耳”.<sup>17</sup> Although this differentiation is sagacious, insufficiency hides inside it. In principle there is only one Way, or Dao or Truth or whatever verbal and literal form: “Alas! The Way is only one. The rising of Laozi bifurcated the Way, while authors from a hundred schools divided it into a hundred parts. [However], is there really more than one Ways?! 嗚呼! 道一而已。老氏出而二, 諸子百家出而且百。天下果有不一之道乎?!”<sup>18</sup> In this respect, all “real understanding of the Way” must converge to one or they are in fact the same. But the “real understanding of the Way” is apparently not an easy target to be reached without tremendous effort and sufficient wisdom. Therefore as long as the cognition of the truth or the Way relies on personal perception and comprehension, a personal misperception and miscomprehension of the truth also remains a very likely possibility. When someone, holding this miscomprehended truth, becomes a powerful emperor, it obviously constitutes a danger to other people. Wei Yuan seemed to be very aware of this problem, but due to the immanent contradiction between the “discourse about the truth” and the “truth”, his solution appears inadequate to this problem. Wei Yuan is conscious of this inadequacy, because in later chapters, he repeatedly interprets and expands Laozi’s concepts of “actionlessness 無為 *wu wei*” and “abandonment of sage-ness and wisdom 絕聖棄智 *jue sheng qi zhi*”. Wei Yuan argues that:

“the flaw of unlearned people is rough and easy to be amended, but the flaw of learned people is subtle and difficult to get rid of. [Some people] adhere to [their knowledge] and become sluggish via using it, or [some people] are obsessed by [their knowledge] without absorbing and internalizing it and become prejudiced with their own opinion. Both are problematic and not in accordance with the profoundness. Efforts being necessarily spent on eliminating flaws, together with reflection and enlightening of internity, result indeed in the absolute naturalness and flawlessness.”

未學之疵, 粗而易改。既學之疵, 微而難除。或守之徒滯而運用不靈, 或執之未化而常存我見。是皆足為病而未合乎玄也。必加以滌除瑕垢之功, 重以反觀內照之鑒, 其果純合自然而無所瑕疵已乎。<sup>19</sup>

It is clear here that the learned people or the wisdom is not a help but a hindrance to reach “actionlessness 無為” which is the natural state of the Way.

13

Here Wei Yuan means that Laozi is the supreme man.

14

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 655.

15

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 655.

16

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 656. Here “Five Thousand Characters” refers to the text “Laozi”.

17

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 656.

18

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 648.

19

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 663.

Why are “actionlessness” and “abandonment of sagesness and wisdom” important? This is supposedly due to two considerations: on the one hand, for the possibility of incorrect or even “evil” interpretation and understanding of “Truth”, it is necessary to advocate the returning to the nature and recovering one’s original simplicity, in order to metaphysically contain the fallacious truth; on the other hand, the positive promotion of “the way of governing 政道” hides also in the possible interpretation of “actionlessness and desirelessness 無為無欲” as “non-disturbing the people” and “frugality”. Besides, the historical context of Wei Yuan’s lifetime also has to be considered. The First Opium War as a watershed marked the declining of the once powerful Qing empire, and the foreign imperialistic powers accelerated the decadence. This problem was reflected, on the one hand, in a disastrous decline of state ability and international standing, and on the other hand, in domestic destitute livelihood and rising internal disorder. Hence, against a historical background of demanding a domestic good governance and discarding the illusion of Great Kingdom for a realistic recognition of *status quo* in the international order, how to deal with the relationship between “truth” and “discourse about truth” has more than philosophical interest. In other words, actionlessness and desirelessness regarding external possessions constitute two folds of meanings: on the one side, they are in fact an exhortatory hint for the ruler of the empire to behave appropriately; on the other, from a metaphysical perspective, or from the height of the Way, they negate western “diabolic tricks and wicked craft 奇技淫巧 *qiji yinqiao*” and despise knowledge because it is not to be proud of to only hold technical superiority but without ethical superiority. This, however, does not contradict the fact that from a practical perspective, a physical level, the advocate for learning western technology, namely to “learn the forte of barbarians in order to subdue them 師夷長技以制夷”.<sup>20</sup>

## **2.2. Political philosophy: power and ideal**

### **2.2.1. State and power**

Among the most important topics of modern political philosophy, the legitimacy of the existence of a state is a heavily debated one. Wei Yuan did not expound on this issue or give prove for a state’s legitimacy as what Hobbes or Locke did, but directly took the existence of a state for granted as something naturally reasonable. What concerns Wei Yuan more is the new international relations between the “central kingdom” in the “Tianxia 天下”<sup>21</sup> and new foreign powers, because he is confronted with the brutal reality: there are more “civilized” political entities outside China, and China is just one of the members of the global political system, but not a political and cultural “central kingdom”. Therefore, the former political and philosophical world view, well-known as the “view of Tianxia 天下觀” which took China as the center and only legitimate representative of a unipolar world, or the “Tianxia” as an all-inclusive cultural hierarchical category, needs to be questioned and revised in the face of the unprecedentedly powerful threats from the outside. In other words, the legitimacy of the central kingdom becomes the subject of Wei Yuan’s thinking. Although the major reflections on this problem are recorded in other works of Wei Yuan, other than the *Laozi benyi*, Wei Yuan did give some information about this *problematique* in his interpretation of Laozi, for instance:

“If the virtue of my body is consummated, then viewing other bodies from the standpoint of my body, Other and Self are not distinguished. Therefore, although people from family, state and

tianxia (everywhere under the heaven) are different, the body of that family is just like the body of this family. Hence it is enough to observe a member of my family [in order to understand other families]; the body of that state is just like the body of this state, hence it is enough to observe a member of my state [in order to understand other states]; even the current tianxia is the ancient tianxia and the future tianxia is also the current tianxia.”

苟吾身之德既修，則以我之身觀人之身，彼此無異。是故家、國、天下之人雖不一，而彼家之身猶此家之身，觀於吾一家之人而足矣；彼國之身猶此國之身，觀於一國之人而足矣；即今之天下亦古之天下，后之天下亦今之天下。<sup>22</sup>

The abovementioned *tianxia* was used in the traditional sense, namely as a term to describe China itself as the whole world, but it also involves the contemporary background of Wei Yuan and signifies not only China, but also the world outside China. Another saying in *Laozi benyi* can better illustrate Wei Yuan’s reflection on the world order: “[the principle], extending itself to barbarous regions, can be practiced by them, and is applicable everywhere. This is what ‘[it] can go to tianxia (i.e. it prevails everywhere under the heaven)’ means. 推之蠻貊而可行，放乎四海而皆准。所謂‘天下可往’者，此之謂也”。<sup>23</sup> The term *tianxia* in the quoted sentence signifies the whole space of human existence, while the term “barbarous regions” implicitly suggests the periphery of China. *Nota bene* the two important concepts, *state* (*guo*, 國) and *tianxia*, China as a *state* is taken for granted as located in the center of the political and cultural world, therefore, a vicarious way of thinking from the standpoint of the others can also be naturally employed. This implicit hierarchical narrative had to be reconsidered because of the unexpected rise of the unprecedentedly powerful center outside China, in order to interpret contemporary China’s unfavorable position in the new global political order. In Wei Yuan’s interpretation of the *Laozi* from a holistic perspective, however, although sino-centrism and the *Yi-xia* concept (夷夏觀 the concept of differentiation of Non-Han and Han Chinese), being practically impacted with external reality, remained basically unchanged. More argumentation and nar-

20

This point can be easily seen in Wei Yuan’s other less philosophical works, such as *Hai-guo tuzhi* and *Sheng wu ji*. He mentioned many times in these works about learning the techniques or forte from the westerners, for instance: “...Men should be sent to invite one or two chieftains from America, France and Portugal to the Cantonese Shipbuilding Bureau, while selected smart craftsmen and picked troops pass on and learn their skills and technics, for instance, learning astrology... Thus, before long advanced technics from western sea will all become the advanced technics of China. ...行取彌利堅、佛蘭西、葡萄亞三國各遣頭目一二人，赴粵司造船局，而擇內地巧匠精兵以傳習之，如習天文之例.....而不旋踵間，西洋之長技，盡成中國之長技” Wei,Yuan (2004), vol. 3, p. 469; “...Several thousands of millions of gold bullions for rewarding those barbarians will be saved for purchasing western canons and warships to be used in trainings of water battles and fire(i.e. land) battles. This is to recruit foreign assistance into Chinese assistance, and covert foreign advanced techniques into Chinese advanced techniques. To make the country rich and

its military force efficient depends on this action, does it not?...且可省出犒夷數千百萬金，為購洋炮洋艘、練水戰火戰之用，盡收外國之羽翼為中國之羽翼，盡轉外國之長技為中國之長技，富國強兵，不在此一舉乎?” Wei,Yuan (2004), vol. 3, pp. 485–486.

21

*Tianxia* as a specific term in ancient China means literally “[all] under the heaven”, and the common translation of it is “world”. But here I use the pinyin transcription instead of “world”, because when this term is used it contains a cultural implication that China is the representative of the “world”, so “Tianxia” was very often used to refer to China itself as well. In this article the term 天下 will be translated as “under the heaven” or transcribed as “Tianxia” according to different contextual requirement.

22

Wei,Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 708.

23

Wei,Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 687.

rations of this are scattered in the *Haiguo tuzhi* (海國圖志 Illustrated Treatise of Maritime Nations), although very few evidences can be traced in the *Laozi benyi*<sup>24</sup>.

In traditional Chinese thought, the power of the emperor or *tianzi* (the son of the heaven 天子) is directly derived from heaven (天 *tian*), an idea of authority which has of course some similarities with some western classical thinking and a lot of pre-modern political thoughts as well. One of the most remarkable characteristics of modern political philosophy is the emphasis on narratives on the political legitimacy, *videlicet*, narratives about the legitimacy of disposing political power. What distinguishes modern narratives from classical ones is the core concept that the power of the ruler(s) is not endowed by a transcendental being, but comes from the authorization of the people. One could even say that these two different views on this problem, namely the power is given by the heaven or god or given by the people, constitutes in a sense the distinction between pre-modern and modern political thinking.

In Wei Yuan's exegesis and interpretation of the *Laozi*, the legitimacy of disposing over political power, in other words, the source of political power, is also a good point to observe. The discrepancy of modern and pre-modern political philosophy, or the conflict between the "divine right" of ruler(s) and public authorization of power, is also reflected in *Laozi benyi*.

Due to the limitations of his time, Wei Yuan apparently had to vindicate the legitimacy of the "divine right" of the emperor, however, this vindication is not so much a theoretical one, as a political one. Wei Yuan describes the source of the political ruling power as "heavenly mandate (天命)" and "public will (人心 lit. people's heart)": "Not to even mention the 'holy vessel (i.e. the epithet of political power)' under heaven! The 'holy vessel' is the heavenly mandate and the people's heart which come and go unpredictably and human effort can do nothing to influence it, therefore they are regarded as divine. 而況天下之神器乎! 神器者, 天命人心, 去就靡常, 不可人力爭, 故神之也."<sup>25</sup> In his narration, the status of the "heavenly mandate" and "people's heart" are relatively equal, but the sequentially preferential order of the "heavenly mandate" implies that the narration itself is a compromise of the authorization of political power from "heaven" and from "people". But how to compromise them? Wei Yuan's solution is to equalize the two ways of authorization of political power, by arguing that the Way is ubiquitous and that the true man (真人 *zhen ren*) who is able to attain the highest state of spiritual enlightenment or to thoroughly realize the Way is able to comprehend the need of the people:

"Knowing actions are all illusory and that actionlessness is constant, [the true man], therefore, is able to grasp the nature and the basic conditions in order to command the mass of beings, constantly being and constantly non-being, constantly active and constantly non-active."

知作者之皆妄而靜者之為常, 則執性命以命群物, 常有而常無, 常作而常靜.<sup>26</sup>

At first glance this narrative is quite similar to the virtue ethics argument (德性論 *de xing lun*) of traditional Confucian political philosophy which is usually used in defense of the legitimacy of the ruler of the empire, and Wei Yuan even uses the Confucian terminology of "Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingliness 內聖外王 *nei sheng wai wang*":

"knowledge is not merely obtained through hearing and seeing which is what is called measuring. Unifying object and self, with nothing excluded externally and nothing individualized internally, on the other hand, is close to the real Knowledge. Therefore, when we describe its greatness, [we say] Inner Sageliness to Outer Kingliness; when we describe its transformation, [we say] uniting with the heaven and completing the way."



夫知非聞見，測度之謂也，能渾一于物我之間，外無不容而內無不私者，庶乎真知之矣。是故言其大，則內聖而外王；言其化，則合天而盡道。<sup>27</sup>

However, there is a significant difference: the traditional Confucian narrative about virtue ethics, the core of most known sayings, such as Duke Zhou's (周公) "Advocating Morality and Protecting People, Respecting Heaven with Morality 敬德保民，以德配天", lies in the superiority of one's virtue or morality which certainly involves human value and judgment. Laozi's teaching, on the other hand, such as "That everyone under Heaven recognizes beauty as Beauty brings about Ugliness. And equally, that everyone recognizes virtue as Virtue merely creates Wickedness. 天下皆知美之为美，斯惡已，皆知善之为善，斯不善已",<sup>28</sup> leads to a relativist perspective toward virtue and morality. This is the context in which Wei Yuan uses Confucian terminology such as "Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingliness" to interpret Laozi, which involves neither value nor "virtue ethics" judgments. On the contrary, in Wei Yuan's narration, the Laozian metaphysical understanding of the Way is an effort to resolve the reified virtue and the logic of virtue ethics which emphasizes the moral superiority of the ruler in order to legitimize political power, whereby this effort is characterized by a non-virtue virtue or a virtue of realizing the Way:

"The Way is what is called the constant Way. It is constant in its namelessness, and therefore can only be named as a nameless Simplicity. Simplicity as a 'thing', without human interference, is invisible because of the scarcity and the infinitesimal nature of its body, and is thus nameless. In the beginning of heaven and earth, however, all things depended on it for their growth. Therefore, who under the heaven would dare to subject that which originates from itself and begins with itself?<sup>29</sup> Lords and princes who can observe this are clear minded sages who see the tiniest things and hold fast to the 'mother' when comprehending the 'son' (i.e. stick to the main principle after knowing the sub-principle). If [they] can observe it so as to be the master of all things, is there anything that will not acknowledge its allegiance to [them]?"

道，即所謂常道也。道以無名為常，故但可名以無名之樸而已。樸之為物，未瑀未琢，其體希微而不可見，故無名。然天地之始，萬物恃之以生，則天下孰敢臣其所自生與其所自始者哉？侯王若能守，是見小曰明者也，知子守母者也。守之以主萬物，而萬物有不賓者乎？<sup>30</sup>

In the above quoted passage, the simplicity (樸) is nameless and value free, it is an *Erscheinung*, if a strained analogy to modern phenomenological term is allowed here, of the real Way as the non-virtue virtue is as well. Therefore, just as other similar narration scattered in *Laozi benyi*, the value free, desire free and humble Simplicity, as the non-virtue Virtue, dispelled the virtue or morality based on the superiority of virtue itself over the disparaged wickedness. In this way, a philosophically and morally superior person who occupies the commanding height of morality in order to rule others is substituted by a passive and apparently common man (sometimes being called Sage 聖人, True Man 真人 and Man of the Way 道者 by Laozi) who makes no judgment

24  
For this point, there are detailed discuss in Wang Hui's (汪暉) *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thoughts* (《現代中國思想的興起》). See Wang, Hui, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thoughts*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 658–665.

25  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 681.

26  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 669.

27  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 669.

28  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 656.

29  
Here it implies the real autonomy of a thing makes it unsubjectable.

30  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 684.

concerning morality. Wei Yuan interpreted Laozi's differentiation of "Man of the Way 道者", "Man of Virtue 德者"<sup>31</sup> and "Man of Fault 失者" as:

"Man of the Way, Man of Virtue and Man of Fault are a generalizations of three kinds of people in the world who engage themselves in studying. Maintaining the completeness of nature is called the Way, observing nature is called Virtue, and losing nature is called Fault."

道者、德者、失者，統言世上從事于學之人有此三等也。全其自然之謂道，有得于自然之謂德，失其自然之謂失。<sup>32</sup>

Because the Man of the Way does not boast about his moral superiority and meritorious deeds, is humble and stands aloof from worldly strife, he encourages the people to more willingly choose him as their leader:

"The front bar of a carriage<sup>33</sup> is a thing to be leaned on. Therefore, although it is lowly, it is respected and hence it is used as analogy for the Sage's virtue of emptiness. ... A man's character of not affirming himself, not bragging and not boasting is also like this (virtue of emptiness). The one who can be like this has done nothing special, only embracing the One that can be selfless which in turn enables not to contend. Only because of being uncontenting, everyone under heaven is willing to elect him [as their leader and thus realize the saying of] bowing down to be preserved."

蓋式者，車所俯凭，物卑而人敬之，故以喻聖人沖虛之德也。... 人之不自是、自矜、自伐，亦猶是也。能是者無他焉，抱一則無我，無我則不爭。夫惟不爭，故天下樂推而曲全之耳。<sup>34</sup>

Such an argument is already quite close to the modern political philosophical concept that the ruler's power comes from the consent and authorization of the people, but a major difference is apparent.

The ruler, in the argument of Wei Yuan, is above all a Man of the Way, and in comparison, his role as a ruler is of secondary importance. The Man of the Way, being chosen and recommended as the ruler, is not a positive philosopher king, because he is not fully identified by the people with his position as a ruler. After all, this is different from the ruler who receives his power from public authorization, or in other words, from social contract in the sense of modern political philosophy where there is a complete identity between the person of the ruler and his position as a ruler.

In this sense, the ruler in the perspective of Wei Yuan is also a kind of philosopher king, however, this ruler is not the Platonic active, morally and knowledgeably superior philosopher king, but a passive, apparently innocent philosopher king, whose legitimacy derives from the willing election of the people. Moreover, the people choose him not for his superior wisdom and morality and positive political deeds, but for his non-contenting, desireless, apparently innocent and politically non-interferential actionlessness:

"The principle of Laozi is that only humbleness is greatness. The king (who knows the right way of ruling) is one who attracts everyone under heaven to claim his allegiance to, the sea is where hundreds of waters converge. The reason that people know only the sublimity of the king but do not know the reason of his sublimity is his greatness. The reason for his greatness is his humbleness which can incorporate everything. Only because you are not bragging that no one under heaven can compete with you in terms of capacity; only because you are not boasting that no one under heaven can compete in terms of merit. If everyone under heaven forgets about his superiority and his taking the lead and contends to support him to take the superiority and to take the lead, then the way [of achieving such a status] can be called Great."

惟下乃大，老氏宗旨也。天下歸往之謂王，百川歸會之謂海。人知王之至尊而不知所以尊者，由其至大。所以能成其大者，由其能下而無不容也。汝惟不矜，天下莫與汝爭能；汝惟不伐，天下莫與汝爭功。使天下忘其上且先而爭樂推之使上、推之使先，斯道也可謂大矣！<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2.3. *The ideal of governance*

Another issue that Wei Yuan has to deal with is the ideal of governance, or the philosophical problem of the ideal model of political governance. This issue involves the perspective of the philosophy of history. Of course, the *Laozi benyi* is not a representative work for Wei Yuan's philosophy of history, but it still clearly shows an apparent historical view on the "Three Phases of Historical Development 三世說". As a scholar of the New Text School (Jinwen theory 今文經學) and Gongyang School (公羊學), Wei Yuan's view on history is above all political. He classifies historical development into three phases: *Taigu* times (太古 the remote ancient times), *Zhonggu* times (中古 the middle ancient times) and *Moshi* times (末世 the last phase of time). He takes his contemporary times as the last phase of time or *Moshi* times and at the same time thinks that "the Way of Laozi is the Way of *Taigu* times (the remote ancient times), and the book, the book of *Taigu* times. 老子道，太古道；書，太古書也。”<sup>36</sup> This classification of three phases is apparently based on the thought of the Gongyang school which argues that the remote ancient times was a time of goodness while the last phase of time is an age of decadence. Does the fact that the book belongs to the remote ancient times tarnish its contemporary value? Wei Yuan did not think so. He argued that "therefore, is the Way of *Taigu* times just useless for the contemporary times? Or is [the way of] the *Taigu* times acceptable but the people simple do not adopt it? [I] Say: Confucian books are books of practical statecraft, while Laozian book is a book for saving the world. 然則太古之道，徒無用于世乎？抑世可太古而人不之用乎？曰：聖人經世之書，而老子救世之書也。”<sup>37</sup> But the remote ancient times, to Wei Yuan, is not only a political Utopia, but also a principle for governance. There is only one Way which reveals itself on different conditions through different aspects, hence different names, like a stick has as many shadows as there are light sources under which it is exposed, but there is only one stick. In this sense, *Taigu* is a historical or temporal aspect of the Way.

"What is the root? It is what is called the 'Origin' and 'Sovereign'. In terms of all creatures, it is the 'mother'; in terms of human beings, it is the infant; in terms of the world, it is the king of the hundred valleys; in terms of times, it is *Taigu*; in terms of function, it is female, lowness, and darkness..."

本何也？即所謂'宗'與'君'也；于萬物為母，于人為嬰兒，于天下為百谷王，于世為太古，于用為雌、為下、為玄<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, *Taigu* is a temporal description of the "Origin 宗" or "Sovereign 君" which in their turn are aliases of the Way. The diachronic development

31

De 德 is translated here as Virtue, but the Virtue is different from the virtue of common sense which attached human value into it. The Virtue is rather a valueless and non-virtue of the Way. If the Way is the Principle, then the Virtue is to follow the Principle, or if the Way is the road, then the Virtue is to walk on the road.

32

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 675.

33

式 here means "the front bar of a carriage (che qian mu 車前木)". See Kangxi zidian (康熙字典), Hongkong: zhonghua shuju (中華書局), 1958, p. 283.

34

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 674.

35

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 721.

36

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 646.

37

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 647.

38

Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 645.

of human history from *Taigu* to *Moshi* is like the growth of a human life, as Wei Yuan puts it:

“Like infants being fed at the breast who have not yet been open to knowledge and respond ignorantly to any scolding and forbidding. It is the ‘actionlessness’ of the *Taigu* times; when growing older into childhood, their innocence being kept undivested, there is no crevasse [for them] to be addicted to desire, no bud to grow their intelligence, it is the ‘actionlessness’ of the *Zhonggu* times; when [they grow older and make] mistakes, they are gradually taught to apprehend and comprehend them, without pressuring them too much, it is the ‘actionlessness’ of the *Moshi* times.”

今夫赤子乳哺時，知識未開，呵禁無用，此太古之‘無為’也；逮長，天真未漓，則無竇以嗜慾，無芽其機智，此中古之‘無為’也；及有過而漸喻之、感悟之，無迫束以決裂，此末世之‘無為’也。<sup>39</sup>

According to Wei Yuan’s description, this historical development is not so much a bodily, physical progress, a process forward, as a spiritual degeneration in the sense of the Way. However different the approaches of the “actionlessness” or the approaches of governing the state on the principle of “actionlessness” are, the Way remains singular, with its core unchanged since *Taigu* times, while any superficial changes in the Way are merely expedient forms according to temporal conditions:

“As times are different, the ‘actionlessness’ is also different, however, the ‘heart’ of the *Taigu* times has never been abandoned. Although it may have the appearance of a wooden puppet, are its transformations and movements not like that of a spirit?!”

時不同，‘無為’亦不同，而太古心未嘗一日廢。夫豈形如木偶而化馳若神哉!<sup>40</sup>

What is the mysterious principle of governing through “actionlessness”? Wei Yuan’s explanation is clear that it is absolutely not the inaction of standing by idly, and he criticized the inaction of Wei Jin (220–420) people who revealed their ignorance of the essence of “actionlessness”:

“As for Wei Jin people, their desirelessness is not so [determined] as Zhuangzhou (i.e. Zhuangzi 369 B.C.–286 B.C). They do not know what ‘governing the *tianxia* with actionlessness’ actually means. Does that mean ‘to take everything as worthless and to govern by submissively doing nothing’? [This misunderstanding] led to a disintegration of royal discipline and collapse of all things.”

至於魏晉之士，其無欲又不及周，且不知‘無為治天下’者果如何也，意‘糶糶一切、拱手不事事而治’乎？卒之王綱解紐而萬事瓦解。<sup>41</sup>

The principle of “actionlessness”, according to Wei Yuan, becomes a very abstract and dialectical concept which is neither inaction nor action: “[His(Laozian)] governing through actionlessness is not reigning without ruling, but governing through non-governing. 其無為治天下，非治之而不治，乃不治以治之也。”<sup>42</sup> This actionlessness can only be rightly understood through its relation to “Nature 自然”. According to Wei Yuan, the Laozian Nature is the key and basis for understanding and achieving “actionlessness”:

“The Laozian Nature, from the ultimate emptiness and deep tranquility, gets the strictest and most rigorous thing as the Root. It likes serenity but not impetuosity, heaviness but not lightness, simplicity but not extravagance. Tolerance is better than hypercriticism, reverence is better than impudicity and perspicuity is better than intricacy. Therefore, in the face of things, it is to respond but not give rise to them, [in other words], it is to act/react by force of things and not to act before things happened. It is thus called being Natural. How could swaying from one side to another be regarded as Natural?”

老之自然，從虛極、靜篤中，得其體之至嚴至密者以為本，欲靜不欲躁，欲重不欲輕，欲奮不欲豐，容勝苛，畏勝肆，要勝煩，故於事恒因而不倡，迫而後動，不先事而為。夫是之謂自然也，豈澁蕩為自然乎？<sup>43</sup>

The ideal governance in Wei Yuan's eyes is a governance of "actionlessness" with a thorough understanding of "Nature". This ideal governance was the political ruling form of the *Taigu* times, but in the times after *Taigu*, this ideal political administrative form declined. The essence of this ideal governance lies in the governance of actionlessness which lets nature take its course. Actionlessness, however, as already mentioned, is neither inaction nor action, because inaction is a negatively actionless response to an event which has already happened, while action is a positive action that itself gives rise to events, therefore neither of the two are true actionlessness. According to Wei Yuan, the Laozian actionlessness is a passive reaction, in other words, it is not positively causing the occurrence of events. But if events have already naturally occurred, the response to them, as a reaction, is a passive action and not an actionless nonfeasance or inaction, even though it is passive and reactive.<sup>44</sup>

This elaborate narrative of ideal governing philosophy is aimed at saving the political chaos of the *Moshi* times, but it is not simply intended as a return to the ideal *Taigu* times. The idea is rather to reconstruct an ideal world by reforming the political chaos of the *Moshi* times in accordance with the principle of ideal governance of *Taigu* times. In the *Laozi benyi*, Wei Yuan mentioned more than once that the book of Laozi is a book for saving the world, and the purpose and means of this book is "to correct the malpractices of the *Moshi* times with the good governance of the *Taigu* times. (此遂) 以太古之治矯末世之弊."<sup>45</sup> The Laozian principle for "saving the world" is quite simple and is summarized in three points: "the first is called kindness, the second is called simplicity, and the third is called not presuming to take the lead in front of all under heaven. 一曰慈, 二曰儉, 三曰不敢為天下先."<sup>46</sup> These three simple principles constitute a generalization of Laozian thought, but in order to avoid the potential opponents' criticism on it as a barren and empty theoretical discourse with no practical efficacy for real political governance, Wei Yuan further illustrated that:

"Laozi wrote his book to reveal the Way and save the world. [He] observed that all under heaven came to devote their effort to being strong and powerful, but strength and power are for superiority in competition and fight. Now [Laozi] was to correct the contemporary malpractices, in stead, by returning to kindness, simplicity, humbleness and concession. This was definitely regarded by all under heaven as inapplicable for practical [governance], therefore [Laozi] explained it in a comprehensible way to them, saying that my Way can be practiced in all situations, even in the case of military assault and defense, it would certainly hold the key to victory. Kindness leads to simplicity and kindness definitely takes no lead, which is in fact the military strategy to 'retreat in order to advance' and to 'be weak in order to become strong'."

老子著書, 明道救世, 見天下方務於剛強, 而剛強莫勝於爭戰。今將救其弊, 而返以慈、儉、謙、退, 則天下必以為不適用於用, 故即其所明者以喻之, 言吾之道無施而不可, 雖用之以戰守, 亦無不勝且固矣。蓋慈則必儉, 慈則必不敢為先, 是即兵家以退為進、以弱為強之道。<sup>47</sup>

39  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 647.

40  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 647.

41  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 648.

42  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 648.

43  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 648.

44  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, pp. 648–649.

45  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 657. about this 救世 (saving the world) theme, please also see p. 647, 722, 727 etc.

46  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 721.

47  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 722.

In this way, Wei Yuan linked the metaphysical “Way 道” and the physical “instrument 用” through the linkage of the Laozian three principal points and military strategy, expounding the utilitarian efficacy of these principal points. The historical background of the domestic trouble and foreign invasion of the Late Qing adds extra significance to this interpretation.

The ideal social form of Laozi is a country with “small territory and population 小國寡民”, as Wei Yuan remarked that in “the last chapter [of Laozi], [he] wishes to govern a small country with few people. 其末章，欲得小國寡民而治之”<sup>48</sup> However, the era of an ideal country with “small territory and population” is already gone, so what to do with the ideal world? Although he did not clearly and directly mention this problem in the *Laozi benyi*, but reading in between the lines, we can discern the ideal societal model close to the one of the *Taigu* times:

“It has been long since the birth of all under heaven, and order alternates with turbulence. After [inclement historical and social conditions, such as] the bitter coldness and striking hotness, as well as epidemic diseases, [the ruler] must make a diagnosis and give good treatment in order to rejuvenate the social vitality, and refrain from giving dosages of strict regulations and severe punishment. For instance, the Western Han (202 BC–AD9) inherited [not only] the cultural achievements of the late Zhou (770–256 BC), [but also] the traumatic ravage of wars of the seven Warring States and Qin (221–206 BC) and endured in a time of calamity and suffering. Therefore, Marquis of Liu (Zhang Liang 張良 201–186 BC), under the tutelage of Huang Shi (a legendary figure), helped Gao Zu (Liu Bang 劉邦 256–195 BC) to set up a few regulations to be observed by all under heaven, which are generally about the abolishment of tyranny and excruciation. The teacher Ge Gong (birth and death unclear) of the Prime Minister Cao Can (曹參 ?–190 BC) assisted the states Qi and Han to avoid disturbing litigation and market and to avoid changing rules and regulations, that had begotten the heyday of discarding punishment during the reign of emperor Wen and Jing (179–141 BC). These [two examples] are not less than the *Taigu* times being seen again. This shows that the actionlessness of Huang-Lao (Huang Shi Gong and Laozi 黃石公及老子) can lead to a good governance of all under heaven.”

天下之生久矣，一治一亂，如遇大寒暑、大病苦之後，則惟診治調息以養複其元，而未可施以肥濃峻削之劑。如西漢承周末文勝、七國嬴秦湯火之後，當天下生民大災患、大病瘵之時，故留侯師黃石，佐高祖，約法三章，蓋革苛政酷刑；曹相師蓋公，輔齊、漢，不擾獄市，不更法令，致文、景刑措之治，亦不啻重睹太古焉。此黃老無為可治天下。<sup>49</sup>

These examples of the early Western Han given by Wei Yuan can clearly illustrate his opinion of ideal political governance. To Wei Yuan’s understanding, the administrative characteristics of the reign of emperors Wen and Jing (179–141 BC), the minimal tax burden and rehabilitation of people’s lives on a practical level, and the narrative of “transforming the people with De (the function of the Way, or the Value without value) 以德化民” on a theoretical level, which, , constitute the political realization of Laozian thought. The age of emperor Wen and Jing was already no longer an age of a country with “small territory and population”, but an empire of Great Unification (大一統). In this sense, the exemplary function of the era of Wen and Jing has a specific and heuristic significance for the Qing empire. In the decadence of the late Qing, facing both domestic trouble and foreign invasion, Wei Yuan’s interpretation of ideal political governance apparently needs to firstly handle the internal problems of the country, because if the internal problems are appropriately solved and domestic stability and state capability is fostered, then the problem of external threats will be readily solved accordingly. In other words, the most significant thing is to properly handle domestic problems:

“[Laozi] also talked about governing the body in accordance with the body, and governing the family, state and *tianxia* in accordance with the family, state and *tianxia*. Therefore, [governing] *tianxia* through actionlessness is not to sit submissively in order to see the transformation running. Motionless is better than motion, female is better than male, and it is only when one

has overcome the self that the overcoming of the struggle over all under heaven becomes possible.”

又言以身治身、以家國天下治家國天下，則其輒言天下無為者，非枯坐拱手而化行若馳也。靜制動，牝勝牡，先自勝而後能制天下之勝。<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the logic of Wei Yuan is clearly shown: because the ideal political form of *Taigu* times with a small territory and a small population is not the case of the Qing, the acceptable historical examples close to the ideal model is the early Han when Huang-Lao thought was adopted, so this thought must also be adopted in order to give rise to a stable and strong empire which will solve the problems of domestic instability and state weakness and at the same time the problem of foreign threats.

### 2.3. *Dialectics of distinction: good, equality and noble*

Discussion on good and evil, right and wrong is one of the core problems in ethics or moral philosophy. This topic of course also exists in the Laozian text, but it appears to be a narrative of relativism, as the most famous saying reveals: “When all under heaven recognized beauty as beauty, then this is already ugliness; equally, [when all under heaven recognized ]virtue as virtue, then this is already wickedness 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。皆知善之為善，斯不善已。”<sup>51</sup> According to Wei Yuan, this seemingly relativist concept of good and evil is essentially not relativist, because true and real Virtue and Beauty cannot coexist with wickedness and ugliness like two sides of the same coin, true and real Virtue and Beauty are forever constant:

“Because true Beauty is without beauty, and true Virtue is without virtue. If beauty and virtue are regarded by all under heaven as beauty and virtue, then [they] will seek for and commit themselves to it, thus they cannot be constant. ... When in an appropriate timing and proper situation, all under heaven would name them as beautiful and virtuous; while in an inappropriate timing and improper situation, all under heaven would name them as ugly and wicked. ... The beauty and virtue that have names, always come and go, flourish and decline together with their nominal opposites, because where there is staying there is leaving. If there is no staying, how could there be leaving? This is the Beauty and Virtue of ‘actionlessness’ and ‘nonverbalness’. When there is no nominal opposite, how could it be that beauty is already ugliness and virtue is already wickedness? This [actionless and nonverbal Virtue] can be called the true and constant Virtue.”

蓋至美無美，至善無善。苟美善而使天下皆知其為美善，則將相與市之托之，而不可常矣。……然當其時、適其情，則天下謂之美善；不當其時、不適其情，則天下謂之惡與不善。……夫有名之美善，每與所對者相與往來興廢，以其有居則有去也。苟在已無居，夫將安去？此乃‘無為’、‘不言’之美善，無與為對，何至於美斯惡、善斯不善哉！斯真所謂常善也。<sup>52</sup>

In fact, Laozi did not directly mention this real and constant Virtue, and in Wei Yuan’s interpretation this constant Virtue seemingly carries a tint of Confucianism. However, this constant Virtue is not the positive virtue in the sense of Confucian ethics, the acquirement of the constant Virtue is only possible on the condition of observing the above mentioned principle of “passive (re)action according to the current situation”. This passive constant Virtue is

48  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 643.

51  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 656.

49  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 643.

52  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 657.

50  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 643.

an “Erscheinung” of the non-ontological and non-epistemological Way, erasing any differentiation between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, long and short, difficult and easy, etc. In other words, in Wei Yuan’s perspective, only the state in which all differentiations are eliminated is the true condition of the Laozian Way. The Way which eliminates all differentiations and unifies all things, however, does not eliminate the natural differences, on the contrary, it respects the natural existence of an “otherness” and differences which involve no human value judgment, and it only opposes the artificial differentiation which are involved in such judgments, therefore, the condition of the Way is a state without human differentiation which leaves natural differences intact.

This theoretical attitude towards difference and otherness, once embodied in other issues like equality, noble and humble etc., becomes specially significant and idiosyncratic. For instance, the implicit connotation of “no difference” in “equality” is provided with particular meaning on human issues, because the equality of human beings involves not only the equality of human rights but also human responsibilities, and the implicit egalitarianism hidden in this idea of “equality” induced Wei Yuan’s criticism:

“if Virtue is not achieved, it is similar to the case of the person responsible for the *Che* taxation. He orders a cooperation among eight families, with all farmland equally distributed according to acreage, and in this way he considers himself to be really fair. But he does not know that the preciseness will cause the concerns and tension for amount and number, and the forced equalization of the difference between people will just cause them to contend.”

蓋德之未至，如彼主徹法者然，令八家合作，計畝均分，自以為至平，而不知多寡必較、錙銖不讓，強以齊人之不齊，而適使之爭耳。<sup>53</sup>

The *Che* taxation method, criticized by Wei Yuan, which seems to be an equal and fair way of differentiation, neglects the possible existence of natural difference in reality. For instance, the principle of *Che* taxation that eight families cooperate to labor on eighty *Mu* (畝, a unit of area, equals to 0.0667 hectares), namely ten *Mu* per family, and that the tax collector excises ten per cent of the labour income from each family as tax, seems to be reasonable because the taxation is in accordance with the equally distributed acreage. However, this principle is based on an implicit precondition which is the equality or similarity of productivity of each family. If ten *Mu* requires two labour forces, or two able-bodied persons, and further supposing that, on the normal condition, one family is composed of two adults and two children, then this family can fulfill its normal workload within normal production time. But if a family possess less productive labour force than the normal requirements for the distributed workload, then for this family, to fulfill the workload means to work on an extra production time. while on the contrary, at the same time, a neighbouring family with more than necessary labour force, the surplus labour force of the second family, in certain way, exploited the extra work caused by insufficiency of labour of the first family. So in this sense, the seemingly reasonable *Che* taxation is in fact unreasonable. This is the reason why Wei Yuan analogized the “unachieved” Way with “the responsible person for the *Che* taxation”, because the neglect of natural differences will just lead to the fact that “the forced equalization of the difference between people will just cause them to contend 強以齊人之不齊，而適使之爭耳”.

In the above example of “equality” was only analyzed from the perspective of human interest. Also when used to analyze from the perspective of social status, i.e. the problem of noble and humble, Wei Yuan has a corresponding observation:

“People who are called lords and princes are only regarded by people as lords and princes. If [one] goes to the ultimate reason, the nobles were made by accumulating the multitude of



humbles, in the beginning of the differentiation, there was no nobility; the highs were made by accumulating the multitude of lows, in the beginning of the differentiation, there was no height. It is like making a chariot by accumulating the multitude of wood, in the beginning of the differentiation, there was no chariot.”

蓋所謂侯王者，亦人見之為侯王耳，若推其極致，則積眾賤而成貴，分數之初，無貴之可言；積眾下而成高，分數之初，無高之可言。如會眾材而成車，分數之本，無車之可言。<sup>54</sup>

Wei Yuan relativizes the social status, if there is no lowness, there is no height. The dialectics of lowness and height, humility and nobility consists in the fact that those who think of themselves as noble are precisely not noble, and the true nobles are noble because they do not self-esteem as noble, they are even not aware that they are noble. In this sense, those who are situated in lowness are truly noble, according to Wei Yuan:

“Heaven and earth and all things are growing from nothingness, therefore, heaven is not aware of its own clarity, earth is not aware of its own serenity, spirit is not aware of its own mystery, the valley is not aware of its own fullness, all things are not aware of their own existence, and so lords and princes are not aware of their own nobility, all of this is clear! ... Those who are not aware of their own nobility and loftiness, are those in humbleness and lowliness.”

夫天地萬物，皆有生於無，故天不自知其清，地不自知其寧，神不自知其靈，谷不自知其盈，萬物不自知其生，則侯王亦不自知其貴高，明矣！... 不自知為貴高者，賤下也。<sup>55</sup>

The Laozian nobility is based on humbleness, and loftiness on lowness. The differentiation between nobility and humbleness is based on the existence of humbleness, therefore true nobility is in fact humbleness. In Wei Yuan's words:

“[spirit is]mysterious because of [its] stillness; [the valley is] full because of [its] emptiness; [heaven and earth are] clear and serene because of [their] mindlessness and actionlessness; [all things] exist without expectation of their existence because of [their] naturalness; [lords and princes became] the leaders of all under heaven because of [their] humbleness and lowness.”

寂故靈，虛故盈；無心無為，故清、寧；自然，故不期生而生；自賤、自下，故為天下貞。<sup>56</sup>

Thus, in this regard, the artificial differentiation of nobility and humbleness has in fact reversed the position of this couple, turning humbleness into nobility, and vice versa. Furthermore, Wei Yuan emphasized that unlike the artificial differentiation of nobility and humbleness through human value judgments, true nobility and humbleness are in fact nondistinct and unified:

“ [saying that] there is not at all nobility, humbleness, height and lowness to mention, does that by any means imply that humbleness is the basis and lowness is the foundation? In fact every thing, including the Self, is nonexistent. Without Self means without Thing, and without Self and Thing means without height and lowness, nobility and humbleness. Thus height and lowness are in oneness, nobility and humbleness are in oneness, and other and self are in oneness. If there is nothing other than nothingness, then there is nothing other than oneness.”

至於無貴、賤、高、下可言，則豈但以賤為本、下為基而已邪？蓋并我而無之矣。無我則無物，無我無物，則無高無下、無貴無賤。如此則高與下一也，貴與賤一也，彼與我一也。無往而不無，則無往而不一。<sup>57</sup>

This quite philosophical narrative of Wei Yuan focuses on the elimination of differentiation which highlights the unification of nobility and humbleness in nothingness, and in this way no differentiation and distinction will exist.

53  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 731.

56  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 694.

54  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 694.

57  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 695.

55  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 694.

The dialectic depth of Wei Yuan's attitude towards "differentiation" and/or "distinction" lies in: on the one hand, acknowledge the natural born difference, distinction or differentiation, such as the difference in terms of height, appearance, action and position etc.; on the other hand, the criticism is not saved for those human values attached to the natural born differences, such as tall and short, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, noble and humble. This interpretation of Laozi is another example of the application of the principle of "passive (re)action according to the current situation". Wei Yuan said that "to be like female is not to compete for victory; to adhere to darkness is not to make any differences; to accept humiliation is not to envy 守雌, 不求勝也。守黑, 不分別也。守辱, 無歎豔也。"<sup>58</sup> Hence, making no difference does not mean to disregard natural differences but to put aside human values and judgments attached to those natural differences. In this sense, difference or differentiation is natural and at the same time artificial. If natural differences which are born congenitally and unsurmountably can be "overcome" by disregarding them, and this is achieved without the involvement of human value, the constant Good or the Way can thus be practically realized.

### 3. Conclusion

The historical backdrop of Wei Yuan and his judgment on his era influenced to a large extent his interpretation on Laozi. Precisely because of the downhill sliding of the Qing empire from prosperity to decay, together with its domestic and foreign troubles, the interpretation of a seemingly purely philosophical classic text reveals Wei Yuan's bifurcated and dialectic attitude. His discourse strategy is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, the domestic political instability prompted him to theoretically criticize the dereliction of duty and the loss of Virtue, but at the same time to maintain the existing political structure and keeping it from totally collapsing. On the other hand, the theoretical narrative on domestic politics should also face the international political reality, therefore, it is necessary to theoretically argue that the foreign threats are far away from the true Way because although they are militarily strong and powerful they are theoretically or morally inconsiderable in terms of the Way. At the same time he has to leave certain theoretical room for the necessity of learning the political strategy and advanced technology of the foreign powers in order to become a powerful state. Therefore, in modern political terminology, especially in Leo Strauss's expression,<sup>59</sup> Wei Yuan used both exoteric teaching and esoteric teaching in his interpretation of Laozi.

If a simple conclusion is to be made, then first of all, Wei Yuan anchored his era in the temporality as *Moshi* or the last phase of time as well as an era of decadence, therefore efforts have to be made in order to save the world. The principle of these efforts is to passively (re)act according to events that have happened. This is not only different from active action in order to induce the occurrence of events, but also different from the actionlessness in the philistine understanding which is in fact the inaction or reactionlessness to events that have happened. This passive (re)action only (re)acts after and according to events that happened already, but does not positively give rise to events. This way of actionlessness puts the emphasis on naturalness, but neither on events nor on (re)action. Wei Yuan says:

"[If he]speaks only when the appropriate time arrives, people do not detest his saying. It is like the timely rain which comes according to necessity, neither too fast nor too slow. If the saying is not a natural one but just quibbling and sophistry in order to astound the world, it is like storm and downpour which can only prevail temporarily."

蓋時然後言，人不厭其言，如時雨之應會而至，不疾不徐。若非自然而強談詭辯以驚世，此猶飄風暴雨，徒盛于暫時而已。<sup>60</sup>

Although this saying is particularly intended for discourses, the principle of this saying is the same: events first, (re)action second. In adherence to this principle, Wei Yuan's narrative possesses exoteric and esoteric meaning at the same time. For instance, his narration about big and small states:

“The desire of a big state is just to domesticate others, while the desire of a small state is just to be tolerated by others. This is the nature of all states under heaven. Now that all these desires can be satisfied through being able to situate in lowness, then the function of lowness is extremely great. Therefore, all things under heaven, even those great things must be able to situate in lowness.”

如大國之所欲者，不過兼畜乎人耳；小國之所欲者，不過見容於人耳。此天下之常情。而今皆以能下得之，則下之為用也至矣。故凡天下之物，雖大者必宜下。<sup>61</sup>

This narrative can be interpreted from both opposite sides with equal validity: a big state (it can be the Qing empire) can annex other states, given to its ruling based on Virtue and actionlessness; a small state (it can also be the Qing empire) can coexist with other states (can be western powers), if those big states are not ruling with virtue. Such narratives with duality of exoteric and esoteric teaching abound in Wei Yuan's interpretation. For instance, the narrative about “heavenly mandate (天命)” and “public will (人心 lit. people's heart)” can not only be understood as a frank safeguard of the legitimacy of the way of right ruling (王道) of China which holds up the Virtue as the first prerequisite, but can also be understood as a veiled criticism of the legitimacy crisis caused by the domestic misconduct of the rulers. The narrative about *tianxia* (天下) and *zhongguo* (中國), not only can be understood as a straightforward defense of the theoretically and morally higher position of China and a moral scorn for foreign military threats, but also can be understood as an implicit criticism of the Qing empire for not being able to remain the real “central kingdom” because of the misconduct of the rulers and an anxiety for the possibility of the substitution by other civilization as the “central kingdom” etc.

For the relation between a weak home country and strong foreign powers, the dual meaning of Wei Yuan's saying became more evident:

“If evil does not accumulate, it is not enough to destroy the body. When a wise man treats a wicked man, he normally follows the nature of the Way with no human efforts. For instance, King Tai (birth and death unclear) of the Zhou Dynasty served Xun Yu, King Wen (birth and death unclear) of the Zhou Dynasty served Kun Yi, Gou Jian (496–465 BC) the king of Yue state served the Wu state, as well as later, Zhang Liang (about 250–186 BC) treated state Qin and the king Xiang Yu (232–202 BC), and emperor Wen (202–157 BC) of the Han dynasty treated Zhao Tuo (about 240–137 BC) the king of Nanyue (南越) and Chen Bi (birth and death unclear) the Marquis of Boyang. All these examples showed the principle. Therefore, like the expedience adopted to treat a wicked man is just like the net and snare used to deal with animals, it is a natural principle.”

蓋惡不積不足以滅身。聖人待小人，常因天道之自然，而不費人力，若太王事獯鬻，文王事昆夷，勾踐事吳，以及張良之待秦、項，漢文帝之待佗、鼻，亦皆是也。是故有權宜以待小人，如有網罟以待禽獸，亦自然之理。<sup>62</sup>

58  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 680.

59  
Strauss, Leo (1952), *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press. Reissued Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1988.

60  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 675.

61  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 715.

62  
Wei, Yuan (2004), vol. 2, p. 688.

This can be taken as a strategic advice for the weak China to cope with powerful foreign threats, but also can be regarded as a political warning for if the ruler cannot be aware of his own problem, then the evil will accumulate and destroy the body.

Of course, Wei Yuan's interpretation of Laozi ultimately comes down to actionlessness in the philosophical sense, that is to say that it results in the elimination of differentiations caused by humans, in which are accordingly nullified and unified. It is supplementary to the principle of "passive (re)action" according to what has happened. If there is no human interference, everything happens in a natural way, and the birth and death of events cause no problem at all. After human differentiation solidifies and values natural differences (or/and otherness), problems begin to arise. The fundamental principle for solving problems is the "passive (re)action" according to what has occurred. This means actionlessness is still the fundamental philosophical solution. It is the actionlessness to save the world, in Wei Yuan's words:

"Not valuing those rare things does not mean to discard useful things on the ground; that military forces are used when no alternative is left does not mean never using military forces; to abandon extremity, extravagance and excessiveness does not mean to abandon normality; to govern a big state is just like cooking a small fish, as long as not to harm it (the state), it is already a preservation; to step back in order to advance, to regard victory as not wanted and to regard uselessness as usefulness, [in this way] how could [one] say that 'actionlessness' is insufficient for ruling all under heaven?"

不貴難得之貨，而非棄有用於地也；兵不得已用之，未嘗不用兵也；去甚、去奢、去泰，非并常事去之也；治大國若烹小鮮，但不傷之，即所保全之也；以退為進，以勝為不美，以無用為用；孰謂‘無為’不足治天下乎？<sup>63</sup>

## Bibliography

Huang, Liyong (1980), "Questioning the Completion Date of Wei Yuan's *Original Meaning of Laozi* (魏源《老子本義》成書年代質疑)", In *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* (中華文史論叢 Journal of Chinese literature and history), vol. 4, pp. 281–282.

Huang, Liyong (1985), *Wei Yuan nianpu* (魏源年譜 *Chronicle of Wei Yuan*), Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House.

Kangxi zidian (康熙字典), Hongkong: zhonghua shuju (中華書局), 1958.

Li, Borong (李伯榮1983), *Wei Yuan shiyou ji* (魏源師友記 *Prosopography of Wei Yuan and Related Characters*), Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House.

Strauss, Leo (1988), *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952. Reissued Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Wang, Hui (汪暉 2004), *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thoughts* (現代中國思想的興起), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, vol. 2.

Wang, Jiajian (1967), *Wei Yuan nianpu* (魏源年譜 *Chronicle of Wei Yuan*), Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, p.71; Xu, Guansan (1980).

Wei, Yuan (2004, editor in chief: Xia, Jianqin 夏劍欽), *Complete Works of Wei Yuan* (vol 1- vol 20), Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, vol. 2, 3, 4.

Xu, Guansan (1980), "Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan's Philosophy of History and Their Ideas of Political Reform (龔魏之歷史哲學與變法思想)", *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* (中華文史論叢 Journal of Chinese literature and history), vol. 1, pp. 69–104.

**Li Man**

**Laozi Benyi: politička filozofija za posljednju fazu vremena**

**Sažetak**

*Klasik nam nudi mnoštvo mogućnosti za interpretaciju. Laozi (老子), ponekad zvan Dao De Jing (道德經), bez sumnje je jedan od najutjecajnijih i najkontroverznijih kineskih filozofskih klasika, te je inspirirao brojne komentare i tumačenja još od vremena prije Qin dinastije (221.–206. pr. Kr.) Ovaj članak nastoji analizirati komentar i tumačenje Laozia od strane Wei Yuana, učenjaka iz razdoblja dinastije Qing (1644.–1911.), napisane gotovo dvije tisuće godina nakon originalnoga teksta.*

**Ključne riječi**

Wei Yuan, *Laozi*, politika, istina, diskurs, moć, država, ideal vladavine, diferencijacija, distinkcija

**Li Man**

**Laozi benyi: politische Philosophie für die letzte Phase der Zeit**

**Zusammenfassung**

*Der Klassiker bietet uns eine Vielfalt an Interpretationsmöglichkeiten. Laozi (老子), manchmal auch Daodejing (道德經) betitelt, ist zweifellos einer der einflussreichsten und umstrittensten chinesischen philosophischen Klassiker, und hat zahlreiche Anmerkungen und Interpretationen noch seit der Vor-Qin-Zeit (Qin-Dynastie.: 221 v. Chr. – 206 v. Chr.) inspiriert. Dieser Artikel setzt sich zum Ziel, Wei Yuans (ein Gelehrter aus der Zeit der Qing-Dynastie, 1644–1911) Interpretation von und Anmerkung über Laozi abzuhandeln, die ungefähr zweitausend Jahre nach der Verfassung des ursprünglichen Textes geschrieben wurde.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Wei Yuan, *Laozi*, Politik, Wahrheit, Diskurs, Macht, Staat, Ideal des Regierens, Differenzierung, Distinktion

**Li Man**

**Laozi Benyi: une philosophie politique pour la dernière phase du temps**

**Résumé**

*Un classique nous offre une multitude de possibilités pour l'interprétation. Laozi (老子), connu également sous le nom de Dao De Jing, est sans aucuns doutes l'un des philosophes classiques chinois les plus influents et controversés qui a inspiré un nombre important de commentaires et d'interprétations avant la dynastie Qin (221–206 av. J.-C). Cette article tente d'analyser le commentaire et l'interprétation de Laozi par Wei Yuana, étudiant durant la période de la dynastie Qing (1664–1911), écrit pratiquement deux mille ans après le texte original.*

**Mots-clés**

Wei Yuan, *Laozi*, politique, vérité, discours, pouvoir, État, idéal de gouvernement, différenciation, distinction.