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A Naturalistic Understanding of *Taiyi sheng shui*'s 太一生水 Cosmology

After the bamboo slip inscription *Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水 was unearthed at Guodian 郭店 in 1993,¹ a number of scholars have attempted to determine the nature of the text, linking it to several received texts conveying cosmogonic concerns like the *Laozi* 老子, the *Xici* 繫辭, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, etc. Also, many have attempted to add a richer cultural and historical backdrop to their examination of the inscription. In these contextualizing efforts, one of the most controversial issues is whether this work is a reflection of a spirits-related cult of the Warring States period or whether it was composed from a purely philosophical and conceptual perspective.²

¹ The transcription of the inscription was first published by the collective efforts of Jingmen Museum scholars in 1998. See Jingmen shi Bowuguan 荆門市博物館, *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), 13-14 (reproduction) and 125-126 (transcription).

² Sara Allan and Donald Harper both hold that the excavated text *Taiyi sheng shui* illustrates that there was no clear bound between religious and philosophical Daoism. Sara Allan states “Finally, whereas modern scholarship makes a strict distinction between “religious” and “philosophical” Daoism, it is clear that such a distinction was not made in traditional China.” (Sarah Allan, “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*: New Light from Guodian,” *T’oung Pao* 89 (2003):285). Donald Harper states “First, we do not have enough evidence to precisely identify the religious and philosophical background of the text, but the text itself is yet another piece of archaeological evidence that makes it impossible to study Warring States philosophy in isolation from concurrent religious ideas. Second, the text is certainly relevant to identifying Warring States antecedents of later, so-called religious Daoism.” (Donald Harper, “The Nature of *Taiyi* in the Guodian manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui* – Abstract Cosmic Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity? *Chugoku shutsudo shiryō kenkyū* vol. 5 (2001): 16). In contrast, Pang Pu holds that the term *Taiyi* should be understood as its literal sense “great one,” which symbolizes the beginning of all things without any mystical connotations. (Pang Pu 龐樸, “Yizhong youji de yuzhou shengcheng dushi : Jieshao Chu jian ‘Taiyi sheng shui’ ” 一種有機的宇宙生成圖式—介紹楚簡《太一生水》, *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 17 (1999): 302.

This paper takes this controversy as its central concern and argues that *Taiyi sheng shui* may be better understood through a naturalistic perspective without involvement of anthropomorphic deities.³ In doing so, I will argue that although the two key terms *taiyi* 太一 and *shenming* 神明 may have mystical and anthropomorphic connotations elsewhere, they are used in the *Taiyi sheng shui* as abstract and demystified concepts.⁴

To verify my claim, I will rely primarily on two methods. First, I will examine the inner logic of the text using textual analysis to show precisely why *taiyi* 太一 and *shenming* 神明 are better understood as naturalistic concepts in the text in question. In developing my argument, I will pay particular attention to Donald Harper's article "The nature of Taiyi in the Guodian manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*: Abstract Cosmic Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity?" and Sarah Allan's article "The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*: New Light from Guodian." Second, I will compare the text with other Warring States cosmologies to show evidence of a trend, engaged in by numerous thinkers of that time,

³ The terms "anthropomorphic" and "anthropomorphism" derive from a combination of Greek words that mean "human" and "shape" respectively. In common usage, anthropomorphism means to attribute uniquely human features and characteristics (i.e., human face, hands, speaking) to non-human creatures (i.e., animals, trees, rocks). I use the term "anthropomorphic" to refer to entities that do not necessarily have to have the physical form of a human being (such as eyes, mouth, hands and etc.). But the term is used to refer to any entities which are believed to have any human abilities (such as thinking, volition, speaking, and so forth). By contrast, naturalistic meanings refer to an entity which does not have functions particular to humans. In other words, a naturalistic entity in this paper refers a transcendental entity that reveals no sign of human ability, emotional, sensory, or physical ability. But a naturalistic entity still may be believed to influence the human world through natural phenomena.

⁴ The naturalistic cosmogonic process can be viewed as being mystical and wondrous, since many stages of the generation process are out of the compass of human understanding. However, the expressions "demystified" or "demystify" are employed to denote that willful or whimsical spiritual beings are not involved in the cosmogonic process.

to intentionally demystify customs or practices and rationalize them by connecting them to abstract principles. My contention is not only that such a trend exists but that the *Taiyi sheng shui* is best seen as a reflection of the trend.

***Shenming* 神明 as a Set of Opposing Entities**

Many associate *Taiyi sheng shui*'s cosmogony with the Warring States period religious practice, mainly because they understand *shenming* 神明, one of the entities involved in the hierarchical account of genesis, as a spirit-related entity.⁵ Donald Harper, for instance, translates this term as “spirit illumination,” and claims that “*Taiyi sheng shui* is best read as a religious cosmogony.”⁶ He asserts that the text is a “Chinese cosmogonic account in which genesis is initiated by a deity,”⁷ and reads the *Taiyi sheng shui* as the oldest Chinese text which describes the genesis of the cosmos by spiritual beings.⁸ To further support this idea, Harper asserts that *shenming* refers in the *Taiyi sheng shui* to the involvement of spiritual beings in the course of that genesis. Harper argues that the term “expresses the limitless responsiveness of a numinousness that is everywhere in the

⁵ Sarah Allan translates *shenming* 神明 as “the numinous and the luminous” (“The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*,” 261); Donald Harper renders it as “spirit illumination” (“The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*,” 3-4), and Michael Puett gives it as “the spirits and the illuminated” (*To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2002], 161).

⁶ Harper, “The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*,” 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Though Harper notes that the relationship between this religious cult and the philosophical concept of Taiyi is unclear, Harper claims that Taiyi 太一 is the name of a deity during the Warring States, citing an archaeological evidence suggested by Li Ling 李零 of a Taiyi cult in that period. See Li Ling, “An Archaeological Study of Taiyi (Grand One) worship,” *Early Medieval China* 2 (1995-96): 1-39.

cosmos – including particularized spirits – and in the human microcosm, where it constitutes the spiritual and intellectual core of a human being.”⁹

However, such an understanding of *shenming* doesn't seem to fit the contextual framework of the text. Judging from the numerical scheme of the cosmogonic process, *shenming* should be read as referring to opposing entities rather than a single homogeneous entity. Specifically, the process of cosmic generation described in *Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水 is as follows: “*Taiyi* 太一 (Grand One) → *shui* 水 (water) → *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth) → *shenming* 神明 (?) → *yinyang* 陰陽 (*yin* and *yang*) → *sishi* 四時 (four seasons) → *hanre* 寒熱 (cold and hot) → *shizao* 濕燥 (damp and dry) → *sui* 歲 (year),¹⁰ and the numerical evolution can be illustrated as follows: “1 → 1 → 2 → 神明? → 2 → 4 → 2 → 2 → 1 or myriad.” Instead of viewing *shenming* 神明 as a homogenous entity, it seems more plausible to understand *Shenming* 神明 as referring here to a symmetrical set of opposite entities of the same type, particularly since the surrounding cosmogonic phases, such as *tiandi* 天地, *yinyang* 陰陽, *sishi* 四時 and so forth, all refer to symmetrical sets of entities. Also, judging from the word *xiang* 相 (each other or reciprocally) in the phrase “神明復相輔也,” (*shen* and *ming* repeatedly assist each other),

⁹ Harper, “The Nature of *Taiyi* in the Guodian manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*,” 5. In his book *Early Chinese Medical literature*, he suggests the term *shenming* in the “*Neiye*” 內業 chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子 refers to “something like the divine spark of intelligence.” Harper, *Early Chinese Medical literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 120. This understanding of *shenming* reminds me of the Holy Spirit described in the Bible, and Plotinus's concept of *Nous* in the tradition of the Western philosophy. In this regard, Harper seems to interpret the genesis of the *Taiyi sheng shui* in association with the Western framework.

¹⁰ based on “*Taiyi sheng shui*” This process was first diagramed by Li Ling 李零 account in his article titled “Du Guodian Chu jian ‘*Taiyi sheng sui*’” 讀郭店楚簡□太一生水□” in *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 17 (1999): 316-331.

the term *shenming* should be view as two separate entities in the context. In addition, it seems more reasonable to interpret *shenming* 神明 as entities relating to natural phenomena or non-intelligent things, rather than spiritual or intelligent entities, since all other entities (excluding the contentious concept Taiyi) are all related to non-intelligent entities or natural phenomena.

If this is true, what are the symmetrical set of opposing natural entities for *shenming*? I would argue that *shenming* 神明 might be understood as carrying a similar meaning to *huiming* 晦明 (darkness and brightness). This interpretation was first proposed by Zhao Weidong 趙衛東 in his article “Taiyi sheng shui ‘Shenming’ xinshi” 《太一生水》“神明”新釋. He holds that *shenming* refers to the opposing forces of darkness and brightness, and proposes that it has the same connotation as *huiming* 晦明, *youming* 幽明, or *hunming* 昏明.¹¹

This reading may be backed up by the following reasons: First, the character *ming* 明 may be understood straightforwardly as referring to “brightness.” As the term *shenming* 神明 refers to opposing natural entities, the character *shen* 神, as the opposite of brightness, is bound to be interpreted as “darkness.” Having made this logical

¹¹ In this article, he also summarizes the previous readings of the term *shenming* into four categories: 1) *shenling* 神靈 (spirits), 2) *dao de shenmiao zuoyong* 道的神妙作用 (mysterious function of *dao*) or *tiandi de gongneng* 天地的功能 (the function of heaven and earth), 3) *jingqi* 精氣 (refined *qi*), and 4) *ri yue* 日月 (the sun and the moon). See Zhao Weidong 趙衛東, “Taiyi sheng shui ‘Shenming’ xinshi” 《太一生水》“神明”新釋, *Zhouyi yanjiu* 55 (2002, 5 ed.): 10-15. In addition, Sándor P. Szabó also gives a comprehensive summary of previous studies of *shenming* and suggests that this term should be understood as “qi-condensing” and “qi-extending.” See Sándor P. Szabó, “The Term *Shenming* – Its Meaning in the Ancient Chinese Thought and in a Recently Discovered Manuscript,” in *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung*, Vol. 56 (2~4) (2003): 251- 274.

deduction, the next step is to see whether this conjecture is really cogent or not, which requires an examination of both the intrinsic properties of the word and the available textual evidence provided through other received and excavated texts.

The character *shen* 神 is often associated with the sense of “obscurity” or “unfathomability,” each of which share similar properties with darkness. The *Xici* 繫辭 says “陰陽不測之謂神” (The unfathomability of *yin* and *yang* is called *shen* 神).¹² In this regard, there appears to be no compelling textual or contextual obstacle to interpreting *shenming* 神明 as analogous to *huiming* 晦明 (darkness and brightness), and this interpretation seems quite plausible.

Moreover, early Chinese texts quite often utilize the contrast of brightness and darkness in describing cosmogonic processes or natural principles. The “Tianzi Fang” 田子方 chapter of the *Zhangzi* 莊子 says:

“至陰肅肅，至陽赫赫。肅肅出乎天，赫赫出乎地。兩者交通成和而物生焉，或為之紀而莫見其形。消息滿虛，一晦一明，日改月化”¹³

Utmost *yin* is gloomy; utmost *yang* is bright. Gloominess is generated from heaven; brightness is generated from earth. When the two interact and form a harmony, then things are generated. Some regard this as the primary rule; however none has seen their form. Breath is sometimes full or sometimes empty; sometimes dark sometime bright; the sun renews itself and the moon transforms.

We can see several parallels in this passage between the contrast of *hui* 晦 (darkness) and *ming* 明 (brightness) and contrasts made in other accounts of cosmogonic generation. In

¹² Li Xueqin 李學勤 ed., *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 1999), 272.

¹³ Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhuanghua shuju, 1961), 712.

addition to its use in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 account, *huiming* 晦明 also precedes *yinyang* 陰陽 as a cosmogonic phase in the excavated text referred to as *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經. The “Shida jing” 十大經 section says “無晦無明, 未有陰陽” (When there was no darkness and brightness, then there had not been *yin* and *yang*).¹⁴ The order between *huiming* 晦明 and *yinyang* 陰陽 in the *Huangdi sijing* exactly mirrors that between *shenming* 神明 and *yinyang* 陰陽 in “Taiyi sheng shui,” suggesting that *shenming* 神明 and *huiming* 晦明 may be similar, if not identical, in their reference.

Moreover, the excavated text “Hengxian” 恆先, buried at roughly the same time as “Taiyi sheng shui,” also lists *hui* 晦 and *ming* 明 as opposing forces in the cosmogonic process as the following passage will show:

“先有中，焉有外。先有小，焉有大。先有柔，焉有剛。先有圓，焉有方。先有晦，焉有明。先有短，焉有長。”

The center exists first, then so does the outer; the small exists first, then so does the big; the soft exist first, then so does the solid; the round exists first, then so does the square; the dark exists first, then so does the bright; the short exist first, then so does the long.

As previously discussed, interpreting *shenming* 神明 as referring to the same opposing natural forces invoked by the phrase *huiming* 晦明 can be backed up by analyzing the inner logic of the text and other examples of sequences of hierarchical development of the cosmogonic process. In addition, interpreting *shenming* 神明 as “darkness” and “brightness” is both semantically and logically cogent.

¹⁴ Chen Guying 陳鼓應 ed., *Huangdi Sijing jinzhu jinyi* 黃帝四經今註今譯 (Taipei: Shangwu inshuguan, 1995), 268.

Taiyi 太一 as an Abstract and Naturalistic Entity

Like Harper, Sarah Allan also thinks that Taiyi reflects ideas held by a Warring States cult of spirit dedicated to Taiyi. In her article “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*: New Light from Guodian,” she considers the first eight slips of *Taiyi sheng shui* (it is called *Da Yi sheng shui* in the article) to be an appended text (because their style is unlike that of *Laozi C*) and considers the other six slips to be part of the main *Laozi C* text, pointing out that the bamboo slips of the *Taiyi sheng shui* have the same physical structure as those in the third bundle of the *Laozi* (i.e. *Laozi bing* 丙 or “*Laozi C*”), and claiming that they have close conceptual similarities.¹⁵

Her claim of conceptual similarities between the *Taiyi sheng shui* and the *Laozi C* rests on the concepts of Taiyi 太一 (Great One) and divinatory practice. She says that the *Taiyi sheng shui* “has a theoretical relationship to ‘Great One’ divination,”¹⁶ equating ‘Great One’ with Dao 道 in the *Laozi*. She holds that *Taiyi* in the *Taiyi sheng shui* refers to the Pole Star and that it is associated with the spirit of that star and *dao* 道 (Way).¹⁷

¹⁵ Allan, “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*,” 238-285.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 253.

¹⁷ In claiming this association, she quotes Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光’s speculation, writing: “According to Ge’s analysis, the term *tai yi* (sometimes abbreviated as *yi*, “one”) refers to four overlapping semantic fields that are correlated, or, to use his terminology, “coordinated” with one another in early Daoist texts. They include (1) the North (Pole) star, (2) the spirit of that star, (3) Taiji 太極 (the “Great Ultimate”), and (4) *dao* (the “Way”).” (Allan, “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*,” 271). In addition, this article contains many noteworthy points. Her speculation of the origin and function of water is very insightful. She states “Cosmologically, when the Great One is taken as the Pole Star, the water may be understood as a river, namely the Milky Way, in which the Pole Star may be hidden. The Pole Star / Way is then the ultimate ancestress, a never-ending

Basing her claim largely on these associations, Allan goes on to assert that “the entire *Daodejing* [i.e., the *Laozi*] plays upon themes associated with the Great One cult,”¹⁸ and concludes that the “distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘philosophical’ Daoism [i.e., Taoism]” is a relatively modern invention and was not made in early China.¹⁹ This claim appears to be based upon her perception that Taiyi refers to both the celestial entity “the North Pole” and its spirit. In other words, she seems to think that since the Taiyi was regarded as a spiritual entity, the text’s reference to Taiyi must be related to religious practice of the time.

While I agree with many of Allan’s carefully argued insights, I find her claim that Taiyi in the *Taiyi sheng shui* is associated with spiritual involvement and reflects a Warring States cult unconvincing. My contention is that while many of the *Taiyi sheng shui*’s terms and expressions may have been derived from contemporary cults and customs, the author(s) of the *Taiyi sheng shui* did not necessarily intend to carry over any of these possible religious and spiritual associations into the text. Rather, the author(s) seem to have deliberately and consistently removed religious and spiritual facets from the text. This can be shown by examining the text’s historical context alongside several trends among thinkers of the Warring States period.

As Allan rightly observes, the core concepts of the *Laozi* are *wuwei* 無爲 (non-action or doing nothing) and *ziran* 自然 (being so spontaneously), and the text makes explicit its fierce objection to any involvement in intentional or artificial action undertaken by any entities, including humans and spirits. Instead, the *Laozi* highly values

source for the celestial river and all living things – themes that are central to the *Daodejing*” (See, “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*,” 264).

¹⁸ Allan, “The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*,” 253.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 285.

spontaneity and naturalness. If there are, as Allan claims, close conceptual similarities between the *Laozi* and the *Taiyi sheng shui*, these same values and properties should be evident in our reading of the *Taiyi sheng shui*.

Apart from the two controversial terms *Taiyi* and *shenming*, all other expressions and descriptions in the *Taiyi sheng shui* are related solely to natural and non-volitional aspects of the cosmogonic process. Merely through an examination of text's inner logic, we ought to conclude that its cosmology should be understood from a purely naturalistic perspective rather than from an anthropomorphic perspective. The following passage from Slip 7 is a good example. It reads:

是故大一藏於水，行於時，周而又[始，以己為]萬物母，一缺一盈，以己為萬物經。

Therefore, *Taiyi* stores in water and moves in the seasons. Circling and [beginning again, it takes itself] as the mother of the myriad things. Waning and waxing, it takes itself as the guideline of the myriad things.

While *Taiyi* is identified as the source of all things in this passage, all the descriptions regarding its function and mechanism refer to natural entities, and there is no indication anywhere that volitional beings of any kind are involved in the genesis of things.²⁰

²⁰ As some scholars have already noted, cosmological schemes in which everything in the world originates from the “Great One” are found in many texts, including the “Zhongxia ji” chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu* (Mr. Lu’s Spring and Autumn) and the “Li yun” (Changes in the Rites) chapter of the *Liji*. The relevant lines in the “Li yun” are: “For this reason, the rites must originate with the Great One [daiyi]: It separates, forming heaven and earth; revolves, creating Yin and Yang’ changes, creating the four seasons; and orders all things, creating the ghosts and the gods. The Lushi chunqiu account begins with the words “The Great One produced the two principles [liangyi], which produce Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang changed and transformed, one ascended, the other went down.” Then in succession are mentioned heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, stars and constellations, the four seasons (some being hot and some cold), and finally the ten

A Trend of Naturalistic Cosmologies in the Warring States Period

In terms of comparable or parallel passages, Chapter 25 of the *Laozi* might be the most noteworthy in that it shares similar wording and notions as that of the *Taiyi sheng shui*. Furthermore, since Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 has shown that *Taiyi* in the pre-Qin philosophical texts is simply another name for *dao* (Way), examining how *dao* is described in the *Laozi* is also germane to our examination of *Taiyi*.²¹ If, following Ge, we were to hold *Taiyi* and *dao* as interchangeable, the following passage becomes exceptionally valuable for our current analysis:

有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道。...人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

There is something which has been formed in chaos. It came to being prior to heaven and earth. It is soundless and limitless; it exists alone and does not change. It goes everywhere, but is inexhaustible. It can be the mother of everything under heaven. I don't know its name; I just call it as "dao." ... Humans take after the earth; the earth takes after heaven; heaven takes after *dao*; *dao* takes after *ziran* (being so spontaneously).

thousand things: "The ten thousand things emerged from the Great One and were transformed [hua, given form? Given life?] by Yin and Yang.

²¹ In his article "Zhong miao zhi men – bei ji yu tai yi, dao, tai ji" 衆妙之門-- 北極與太一，道，太極, he illustrates that "Taiyi 太一," "Dao 道," and "Taiji 太極" are used interchangeably in the pre-Qin period. See Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 "Zhong miao zhi men – bei ji yu tai yi, dao, tai ji" 衆妙之門-- 北極與太一，道，太極, *Zhongguo wenhua* 3 (December 1990), pp 46-63. In addition, Harold Roth also shows that the term yi 一 (One) is often used interchangeably with dao 道 (Way) in the *Laozi*. See Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University press, 1999).

The central concern of this passage is cosmology, and this passage is particularly striking because of its parallel wording to the *Taiyi sheng shui* passage above. The passage gives a glimpse of the origin of things and claims that *dao* is the first cause and source of everything under heaven, physical and non-physical.²² As for the meaning and function of *dao* in early Daoist texts, Mark Meulenbeld suggests it refers to “the abstract and impersonal force that engenders the cosmos and every being in it.”²³ In other words, any entities involved in the cosmogonic process of the *Taiyi sheng shui* and the *Laozi* should not be understood as willful or whimsical entities. In addition, in the passage above, one noteworthy term is *ziran*. *Ziran* 自然 can be literally translated into “being so spontaneously.” The structure of the passage may lead a misconception that *ziran* is an entity above *dao* in the hierarchy. However, it should be understood as the property of *dao*, because *dao* is the ultimate and highest entity in the sequence of generation as shown in the former part of chapter 42.²⁴ As for the connotation of *dao* and *Taiyi*, I’d like to quote Meulenbeld’s description of *dao* to show how *Taiyi*, if considered as a synonym word for *dao* (as I have argued that it can be), might be understood in the Warring States period. Meulenbeld writes:

²² This cosmological claim has further significance since it clearly states that that human society is modeled upon natural principles, which themselves are derived from *dao*, as is well shown in the passage “人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然” (Humans take after the earth; the earth takes after heaven; heaven takes after *dao*; *dao* takes after *ziran*).

²³ Mark Meulenbeld, “Taoism,” in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 233.

²⁴ This cosmological understanding of *dao* as a matrix of both physical and non-physical dimensions is illustrated in a more figurative way in a passage from chapter 42, which reads: “道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物, 萬物負陰而抱陽, 沖氣以為和” (*Dao* generates One, One generates Two, Two generates Three, Three generates myriad things; myriad things holds *yin* and embraces *yang*; myriad things are harmonized by abundant *qi*.)

“The Dao constitutes a natural order that eternally structures the dynamics of birth, life, and death. As the universal “Way” of growth, early Daoist writings emphasize that this natural order is always already present in every being: our heart ‘knows’ how to beat, and no tree needs to be told how or when to grow leaves. As one thus need not search for the Dao outside oneself, one similarly does not require instruction in religious dogmas or orthodox teachings in order to attain it.”

In addition, one noteworthy characteristic of *dao* in the *Laozi* is that it does not presume an immutable hierarchy for either the natural or the human world. Chapter 2 puts it this way, “有無相生, 難易相成, 長短相較, 高下相傾” (Being and non-being generate each other; difficult and easy form each other; long and short compare each other; high and low tilt each other.) In the passage, though the idea of binary division is clearly illustrated, the binary terms are not described as antagonistic or oppositional; rather, each is portrayed as interdependent and interrelated. In other words, the *Laozi* does not assign hierarchical importance or exceptional value to any single entity, but views these things as equally significant and essential. This idea is clearly expressed by the following claim from the chapter 39 of the *Laozi*: “貴以賤為本, 高以下為基.” (Nobility takes humbleness as its basis; loftiness takes lowness as its basis.)

This interdependence can also be regarded as one of notable characteristics of the *Taiyi sheng shui*. In his examination of the expression *fan fu* 反輔 (to return and assist) in the *Taiyi sheng shui*, Pang Pu 龐樸 points out that the *Taiyi sheng shui* is the only text which explicitly reflects the idea of reciprocal assistance and interdependence among

different phases of the cosmologic process.²⁵ To be specific the *Taiyi sheng shui* says: “太一生水, 水反輔太一, 是以成天” (Taiyi [Grand One] gives birth to water. Water returns and assists Taiyi, thereby forming Heaven.) This passage clearly implies a reciprocal interaction and interdependence between the cosmogonic phases of Taiyi and water. To be specific, although Taiyi generates water according to the *Taiyi sheng shui*, water assists Taiyi in forming the other cosmogonic stage of *tian* 天. Likewise, though the *Taiyi sheng shui* offers an account of somewhat hierarchical steps of genesis similar to those offered by other Chinese texts on cosmogony, the *Taiyi sheng shui* is particularly noteworthy in that it explicitly illustrates reciprocal interaction between the different cosmogonic stages.

In addition, another naturalistic description of cosmogonic process in the Warring States period is found in “Hengxian.” In examining the nature of its cosmogony, one core phrase of this article is *qi shi zisheng* 氣是自生 (*Qi* 氣 is self-generating). Cao Feng 曹峰 points out that, contrary to the prevailing belief, the idea of *zisheng* 自生 has a long and in some ways venerable tradition in early China.²⁶ Many scholars agree with the idea that

²⁵ See Pang Pu 龐樸, “Yizhong youji de yuzhou shengcheng dushi : Jieshao Chu jian ‘Taiyi sheng shui’ ” 一種有機的宇宙生成圖式—介紹楚簡《太一生水》, *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 17 (1999): 301-306. In this article, he claims that representative texts of Chinese cosmology, such as the *Laozi* 老子, *Xici* 繫辭, and some Han texts, preach one-way cosmology, making no explicit statements about interaction between different cosmogonic phases. For example, the *Xici* holds that *Taiji* 太極 generates *Liangyi* 兩儀, *Liangyi* generates *Sixiang* 四象, and *Sixiang* generates *Bagua* 八卦. Thus, we can see that the *Xici* has an explicit hierarchy among cosmogonic phrases, with no hint of reciprocal assistance. However, this claim can be disputed since some phrases in the *Laozi* convey the ideas of reciprocal interaction and interdependence, as discussed above.

²⁶ See Cao Feng 曹峰. “‘Jisei’ kara ‘Jii’ e: ‘kōsen’ seiji tetsugaku kenkyū” “‘自生’から‘自為’へ: ‘恆先’政治哲學研究.” *Chūgoku shuddo shiryō genkyū* 中国出土資料研究 9 (March 2005): 20-41.

somewhat developed accounts of *zisheng* 自生 first appeared in Guo Xiang's 郭象 commentary to the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. In particular, *duhua* 獨化, one of Guo Xiang's 郭象 well-known concepts, is regarded as the first systemically developed idea of *zisheng* 自生. However, according to Cao Feng, the idea of *zisheng* 自生 appeared in many transmitted Chinese texts prior to Guo Xiang, such as in the *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *Lunheng* 論衡 and so forth.²⁷ Here, Cao Feng's attempt to interpret the meaning of *zisheng* 自生 is worth careful scrutiny, because it can provide significant insight into how the terms *Taiyi* and *shenming* in the *Taiyi shengshui* might be interpreted as naturalistic beings.

On the one hand, "Hengxian" says "氣是自生，恒莫生氣" (*qi* 氣 is self-generative; *heng* 恆²⁸ does not generate *qi* 氣) and "舉天[下]之事，自作為事" (All the things under heaven do their work by self-generating). The main idea of these two phrases seems to be that each entity comes into being on its own without external causes or causal relationship among different entities. On the other hand, "Hengxian" also says that "有出於或，性出於有，音出於性，言出於音，名出於言，事出於名" (Things are from space; characteristics are from things; sounds are characteristics; words are from sounds; names are from words; affairs are from words). This passage obviously holds that there is a causal sequence of creation and that not all things are self-generating. This conflict is actually one of the most ambiguous and evasive aspects of "Hengxian."

²⁷ Furthermore, Cao Feng claims that these Taoist texts introduced the idea of *zisheng* 自生 to serve as a theoretical basis for their political doctrines, such as *ziwei* 自為, *zihua* 自化 (self-transformed), and *zizhi* 自治 (self-governed).

²⁸ In "Hengxian" 恆先, the concept *heng* 恆 refers to the ultimate and highest entity of all things, just like *dao* 道 in the *Laozi* 老子.

According Cao Feng, this conflict can be resolved as suggested by Wang Chong 王充 in the *Lunheng* 論衡. The relevant *Lunheng* 論衡 passage reads as follows:

夫天地合氣，人偶自生也；猶夫婦合氣，子則自生也。夫婦合氣，非當時欲得生子，情欲動而合，合而生子矣。且夫婦不故生子，以知天地不故生人也。²⁹

(Heaven and earth combine their *qi* 氣; humans are by chance generated by themselves. This is like the case that when a man and woman combine their *qi* 氣 then children generate themselves. At the time when man and woman combine their *qi* 氣, they don't intend to give birth to a baby; their lust activates and [their *qi* 氣 is] combined. [Because their *qi* 氣 is] combined, they give birth to a baby. The man and woman do not intentionally give birth to a baby; from this, it can be known that heaven and earth do not intentionally generate humans).

Here, we need to analyze the logic of *zisheng* 自生. As illustrated in the passage above, a baby is self-generating (i.e., *zisheng* 自生), because their parents do not necessarily intend to give birth to it when they have marital relationships. However, it can not be doubted that their parents directly cause babies into life (i.e., “generate the babies” in Wang Chong’s term). From this we can infer that *zisheng* 自生 means “to be generated without intention or purposeful behavior.” In other words, even though A generates B and B’s generation is directly caused by A, if A does not intend to generate B, B’s generation can be called “self-generation.” This definition of *zisheng* 自生 is even more clearly implied in the following passage which states “天動不欲以生物，而物自生，

²⁹ Huang Hui 黃暉, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, 4vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 144.

此則自然也” (When heaven activates, it does not intend to generate things; however, things generate themselves. This is so-called self-so).³⁰

Using this definition of *zisheng* 自生, Cao Feng interprets the passage “氣是自生，恒莫生氣” in the following way: *qi* 氣 is actually generated by the ultimate entity *heng* 恆; however, *qi* 氣 is called self-generation, because *heng* 恆 does not intentionally generate *qi* 氣. Based on this logic, Cao Feng claims that the seemingly conflict between the phrases “舉天[下]之事，自作爲事” and “有出於或，性出於有，音出於性，言出於音，名出於言，事出於名” is no longer contradictory, because the concept *zizuo* 自作 (self-doing / self-productive) does not necessarily mean to be done on its own without external cause or influence. In other words, so long as no intention or desire is engaged, any thing can be regarded as self-productive, even though there may be obvious causality between things.

In fact, besides the *Lunheng* 論衡, many other transmitted texts also have the similar or even identical logical structures. For example, the *Laozi* 老子 has the well-known hierarchical order of generation, “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物”(*Dao* generates One, One generates Two, Two generates Three, Three generates myriad things). However, chapter 42 of the *Laozi* also emphasizes some concepts which seem to deny the hierarchical order of generation, such as *zihua* 自化, *ziwei* 自為, and *zizhi* 自治. This

³⁰ Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 776. One more related passage is “夫天不能故生人，則其生萬物，亦不能故也。天地合氣，物偶自生矣” (Heaven can not intentionally generate humans. In generating other things, the heaven likewise can not be intentional. Heaven and earth combines their *qi* 氣, then things by chance generate themselves). Huang, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 146.

seemingly contradiction can be approached from the same logic as shown in the *Lunheng* 論衡.³¹

Many puzzles concerning “*qi shi zisheng* 氣是自生” can be resolved through textual analysis of transmitted texts. In short, if we interpret *zisheng* 自生 literally as “self-generation,” we might be left with several seemingly unanswerable puzzles. However, if we base our analysis on patterns observed in several transmitted texts and interpret *zisheng* 自生 as “being generated unintentionally,” then the puzzles in “Hengxian” can be resolved in a plausible way. That is to say, “*qi shi zisheng* 氣是自生” can be interpreted as follows: “Qi 氣 is generated [by hengxian 恆先] without intention.” According to this logic, there is no conflict between the two phrases “舉天[下]之事，自作為事” and “有出於或，性出於有，音出於性，言出於音，名出於言，事出於名，” because there is, as shown above, no logical distinction contradiction between the structures of “A *zizuo* 自作” (A is self-generating) and “A *chuyu* 出於 B” (A is generated from B).

If we apply the same logic proposed by Cao Feng, it seems obvious that *Taiyi* and *shenming* should not be understood as entities which have intention and will. In this regard, the cosmogonic process of the *Taiyi sheng shui* should be interpreted as naturalistic one devoid of involvement of anthropomorphic entities.

Conclusion

³¹ The *Laozi* 老子 itself also uses the same logic, as seen in the following phrase “我無欲而民自樸” (I have no desire; however, common people become simple by themselves). See *Laozi*, chapter 57.

As is true of other phenomena, it would be very risky to jump to draw a black and white map of cultural or intellectual complexities. However, it seems apparent from the textual analysis that though the terms like *Taiyi* and *shenming* in the *Taiyi sheng shui* may be derived from a religious background of the Warring States period, their implications and senses seem to have been freed from any involvement of willful spirits by the author(s) or compiler(s) of the text. In other words, the terms might be derived from a contemporary vocabulary, but their connotations are quite different from those implicit in contemporary usage. Just as the term *dao* (way) was derived from a common noun referring to concrete things (the roads) and evolved to refer to the truth or right things, and eventually came to indicate the ultimate entity and principle of the cosmos as seen in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, my contention is that a similar process of etymological change took place for both *Taiyi* and *Shenming*.

Appendix

1. The Transcription of *Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水

... (《郭店楚墓竹簡》, p.125)

大(太)一生水，水反□(輔)大(太)一，是以成天。天反□(輔)大(太)一，是以成□(地)。天□(地)□□□【1】也，是以成神明。神明復相□(輔)也，是以成□(陰)□(陽)。□(陰)□(陽)復相□(輔)也，是以成四時。四時【2】復相□(輔)也，是以成倉(滄)然(熱)。倉(滄)然(熱)復相□(輔)也，是以成溼燥(燥)。溼燥(燥)復相□(輔)也，成□(歲)【3】而止。古(故)□(歲)者，溼燥(燥)之所生也。溼燥(燥)者，倉(滄)然(熱)之所生也。倉(滄)然(熱)者，【四時之所生也】。四時【4】者，□(陰)□(陽)之所生【也】。□(陰)□(陽)者，神明之所生也。神明者，天□(地)之所生也。天地【5】者，大(太)一之所生也。是古(故)大(太)一□(藏)於水，行於時，□而或□□□□【6】□(萬)勿(物)母，□(一)□(缺)，□(一)□(盈)，以忌(紀)為□(萬)勿(物)經。此天之所不能殺，□(地)之所【7】不能釐，□(陰)□(陽)之所不能成。君子智(知)此之胃(謂)……【8】

天道貴溺(弱)，雀(爵)成者以益生者，伐於□(強)，責於……【9】

下，土也，而胃(謂)之□(地)。上，□(氣)也，而胃(謂)之天。道亦其□(字)也，青(請)昏(問)其名。以【10】道從事者必□(託)其名，古(故)事成而身長。聖人之從事也。亦□(託)其【11】名，古(故)□(功)成而身不剔(傷)。天□(地)名□(字)竝立，古(故)□(過)其方，不思相……【12】於西北，其下高以□(強)。□(地)不足於東南，其上□□□□□□□【13】者，又(有)余(餘)於下；不足於下者，有(有)余於上。【14】

2. Translation

Taiyi (Grand One) gives birth to water. Water returns and assists Taiyi, thereby forming Heaven. Heaven returns and assists Taiyi, thereby forming Earth. Heaven and Earth [repeatedly assist each other], thereby forming *shen* and *ming*. *Shen* and *ming* repeatedly assist each other, thereby forming *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* repeatedly assist each other, thereby forming four seasons. Four seasons repeatedly assist each other, thereby forming cold and hot. Cold and hot repeatedly assist each other, thereby forming wet and dry. Wet and dry repeatedly assist each other, forming year. Thus, the process is completed.

Year is what wet and dry generate. Wet and dry are what cold and hot generate. Cold and hot [are what four seasons generate]. Four seasons are what *yin* and *yang* generate. *Yin* and *yang* are what *shen* and *ming* generate. *Shen* and *ming* are what Heaven and Earth generates. Heaven and Earth are what Taiyi generates.

Therefore, Taiyi stores in water and moves in the seasons. Circling and [beginning again, it takes itself] as the mother of the myriad things. Waning and waxing, it takes itself as the guideline of the myriad things. This is what Heaven cannot kill, what Earth cannot bury, and what *yin* and *yang* form. The gentleman who knows this call . . .

The way of Heaven values weakness. It reduces its completion, thus adding to life. By cutting back on strength, making clear . . .

Below is soil; it is called Earth. Above is *qi*; it is called Heaven. Dao is also its style name, clear and musky are its name. He who follows things by means of *dao* must depend on its name; therefore, things are accomplished and his lifespan is prolonged. When the sage does things, he also depends on its name. Therefore, his achievements are made and his body does not get harmed. The name and style name of Heaven and Earth stand side by side. Therefore, they shift their areas, not intending them to match each other. [Heaven is not sufficient] in the northwest; what is below it is high and strong. Earth is no sufficient in the southeast; what lies above it is . . . When the insufficiency lies above, there is excess below. When the insufficiency lies below, there is excess above.