

# Zhuangzi's concept of harmony and its cultural implications

Vladimir V. Maliavin

*Tamkang University*

**Abstract.** The ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC), whose views comprise the core of the book ascribed to him, offers a profound concept of harmony, the basic condition of which is the differential relation within the continuity of universal change. Harmony for Zhuangzi is the predetermined or rather in-determined power of self-affection which constitutes the nature of life. As such it stands for the symbolic matrix of experience anticipating the world of things. This idea of harmony lies at the origin of creativity and style in culture. Zhuangzi's philosophy is neither nihilistic nor apologetic in relation to actual cultures but provides, as it were, a comment on the conditions of the formation of culture.

The concept of harmony has recently become a distinctive mark of China as a new global power. The Chinese government has declared that its goal is 'the building of harmonious socialist society' and many Chinese scholars are now keen on proving that the main advantage of Chinese civilization and the secret of China's recent spectacular success in modernization is the capacity of the Chinese to establish spontaneous and intimate harmonious relations in their social environment.

This opinion is only to be expected if we take into consideration that the imperative for moral cultivation has always been the basic trait of Chinese social order. In fact, harmony is a perfect word for any perfectionist philosophy. No matter how sublime our notion of harmony is, it is always possible to conceive of even more comprehensive harmony. Indeed, the quest for harmony obliges us perpetually to raise our moral standards and our sensitivity. And this makes harmony so elusive, but also so encompassing. In what became a classical dictum, Alexander Pushkin in his tragedy 'Mozart and Salieri' ascribed to Mozart's unhappy friend an attempt

To dissect music like a corpse,  
And measure harmony with algebra.<sup>1</sup>

In Pushkin's play Mozart, a genius musician, does not care about matching things and is at ease everywhere. Salieri, a malicious mediocrity, poisons Mozart for the sake of restoring justice since perfect harmony overturns the mundane order. Salieri's sinister revolt of deliberating reason against the immensity of spiritual freedom

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referred to the source, all translations are by the author.

reminds us that the idea of harmony, like that of God, may finally remain the only one to be endowed with real infinity.

Can we say then that harmony is essentially something that infinitely transcends itself? And the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, in one of his obscure phrases which fell out of the present text of his book, seems to define reality as ‘infinity beyond infinity’. In what follows below, I will try to outline both the metaphysical and cultural dimensions of such ‘double infinity’. This attempt calls for adopting a specific kind of language which, though quite consistent in its own right, can hardly be reduced to a set of technical terms; it is bound to preserve—or rather reveal—the creativity of human speech capable of virtually endless transformations and interplay of meaning assigned to words. Consequently, this approach calls for changing our way of perceiving the world; it requires our sensitivity to be heightened and enriched. Indeed, transformation and transcendence are key notions here. Chinese philosophy, as is well known, is a philosophy of change. Change as an ultimate reality is a profoundly ambiguous concept. In order to be what it is, it must change itself and become a non-change, a constant. Infinity beyond (or within) infinity is a famous Oriental non-duality: a hidden depth of being, a non-differentiating difference, the condition of every possibility. Let us see how this ambiguity affects the notion of harmony.

### **The Daoist metaphysics of harmony: A non-founding foundation**

The term ‘harmony’ (*he*) is frequently used both in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. Apparently, harmony in ancient Daoist literature is a starting point for evaluating various phenomena and human activity, an essence of being itself. For Laozi and Zhuangzi alike, harmony presents the possibility of every existence, a condition of all conditions. It is remarkable that the chapter ‘Regarding All Things as Equal’ begins with a description of reality in terms of the various degrees of harmony. This parable of the Pipes of Heaven yields a surprisingly rich knowledge of the Daoist philosophy in its entirety. It says (in a modified translation of Wu Kuang-ming):

The Great Clod belches out breath; its name is called wind. Originally it is not up to anything. Once it starts, then myriads of hollows rage up howling. Don't you hear them roaring yourself? There are those which shout like waves, those which whistle like arrows, those which screech, those which suck, those which yell, those which wail, those which moan, and those which scream. Those which are before sing ‘yu –’, and these which follow sing ‘yung –’. Breezy wind, then a small harmony of chorus; whirling wind, then a huge harmony of chorus...

Myriads of voices! Who is he who blows them on in the same way while letting them be what they are and pick themselves? (Wu Kuang-ming 1990, 135–6; *Zhuangzi yinde* 1971, 2/4–9).

In Zhuangzi's view, reality itself, once it is engaged in motion *is* harmony, i.e. a co-respondence, a non-measurable measure. Harmony can develop in degrees from being 'small' to being 'great' without interruption. It is the essence of the qualitative change. The Daoist philosopher offers his original concept for this endlessly diversifying, seemingly chaotic universal chorus: 'voices in transformation' (*hua sheng*), a multiplicity of earthly sounds which are as dependent upon each other as they are not. They are equal in being incommensurable. This chaosmic (both disordered and orderly, non-measurable and measured) totality, the matrix of all meanings, may be perceived as *paroles confuses* of nature but it carries a crystal-clear message of perfect harmony—that 'hidden harmony', which, as Heraclitus knew, 'is stronger than the manifest one'. Zhuangzi does not distinguish between conventional human music and 'the music of nature', not even between sounds and silence. Yet for him music possesses great edifying value as long as it embodies, or rather unleashes, the creative power of life. (Curiously, Mozart, depicted by Pushkin as a messenger of ultimate harmony, was one of the first composers who experimented in fusing articulated music with cacophony.)

The passages quoted above make clear that harmony transcends and precedes the world of entities—be it finite things or the void that penetrates and embraces them. Yet this harmony is indistinguishable from a thing's individual voice, presumably because things must *transform* themselves into their voice, their qualitative existence and the essence of the absolute harmony is nothing but the transformation itself. It is a supreme oneness identical to an actual infinity and, therefore, transcending itself. It cannot be reduced either to manifestations or to the principle of manifestations. The primordial Great Clod has no characteristics or attributes. Within its stillness or absence of self, there emerges—perhaps by a pure, 'non-temporal' event—a wind, or movement, so that solid matter and emptiness, stillness and motion are divided and yet intertwined. The sequence here is ontological, not temporal. Neither things nor emptiness possess a substantial unity: they exist only in relation to each other, in the network of impulses and responses, in the co-relatedness of 'what comes first' and 'what follows suit'.

Let me note that Zhuangzi's concept of harmony had a solid historical, in particular, Confucian background. The Confucian classic *Doctrine of the Mean* draws a distinction between 'the centrality' (*zhong*) which is an inner pre-condition of life's dynamic, and harmony proper (*he*), the visual expression of the internal equilibrium of being. It is the nature of this a priori centrality which will interest us most in this paper.

Centrality and harmony, while forming a continuity, are precisely incommensurable, linked by what can be called a fold (to recall a principle of Baroque harmony recently

popularized by Gilles Deleuze). For Zhuangzi things and the void are assembled and put one against the other by the ‘workings’ (*zuo*) of the universal wind. They *create* harmony and this means that they remain distinct in a sort of disjoining unity, incommensurable within ontological continuity. In this regard, the wind of Zhuangzi resembles another archetype of transcendent harmony—the fire. Zhuangzi himself compares the substance of life to the wood or oil devoured by fire. In the medieval Daoist treatise *Guanyinzi*, we find an even more definitive statement expressed in the form of sacred riddle:

One spark of fire can destroy all the trees in the forest, but when trees finish burning, where will the fire abide? One fleeting moment of the Way can bring all things into nothingness. But when the things disappear, where will the Way abide? (*Guanyinzi* 1969, 10182).

In contrast to the Heraclitian symbolism of fire, the Daoist philosophy stresses the presence of a common ground of forms and the formless—apparently because the emptiness empties itself and turns into the absolute fullness of being. The latter is in fact the infinite multitude of everything existent founded on the principle of ‘being so of itself’, a non-principled principle. It is essentially a pause, an ‘in-between’ moment (*jian*), a ‘fleeting moment of stillness’ (*xi*), or to use Zhuangzi’s poetic metaphor, ‘a leap of a steed over a crack’. A leap from where to where? From ‘being of itself’ to ‘being of itself’ (*ran you ran*), from life to even more lively life (*sheng sheng*). It is a movement of chaos which never ceases to lose itself in its eternal non-reversing of itself; a non-moving movement which transcends the logic of identity and difference. Chaos is indeed the father of harmony.

In looking for the illustrations of this central vision of Daoism, let us turn to the story about a fantastic cook who cut oxen in such a way that his knife always remained impeccably sharp. The cook calls himself ‘a lover of the Way’, adding that this love ‘is above the common skill’. He cuts the oxen as if dancing to music and discloses the secrets of his art in the following words:

I practice spirit-contact and do not look with my eyes. I withdraw my senses and understanding, and let my spirit desiring act and rely on Heavenly truth...

[In the body of an ox] there are caverns and this knife of mine has no thickness. When something without thickness enters empty space it has more than enough room to roam freely... Yet every time I come to complexities and see a difficulty, I get extremely cautious, my glancing around stops, my movements slow down, my knife advances so delicately and then—Lo! The ox releases itself and like a piece of earth falls on the ground (Wu Kuangming 1990, 286; *Zhuangzi yinde* 1971, 3/5–11).

Many details in this picture are already familiar to us: the cook and the ox are freely interpenetrating in that intermediary ‘empty space’ (*jian*), the space of *centrality*, omnipresent in-between, which, while being infinitely small, embraces both subject

and object; it is in fact the seed of the world. So the cook and the ox merge in one universal and ever-absent vortex, (non)articulated by the pure rhythm of life, a vital pulse pointing to the abyss *within* experience. So the butcher undoing bodies is for Zhuangzi the paragon of 'life nourishment'! But in fact we are invited to transcend physical life and death. The 'object' of Daoist vision is not some essence but the very finiteness of existence, the *impossible distance*.

The acute awareness of a thing's internal limit in Daoist insight presupposes an extraordinary heightened—to the degree of being spiritualized—sense of touch. Among all senses, it is the touch that delineates most convincingly the inner space of our life. By constantly pushing our consciousness to the impenetrable surface of outer being, the tactile perception maintains and preserves the awareness of the self's inner continuity even beyond active memory and imagination or, in Daoist terms, in the realm of 'no-mind' (*wu xin*). The 17<sup>th</sup> century commentary by Wang Yu (son of the famous philosopher Wang Fuzhi) links the idea of intermediary 'empty space' here with the notion of the 'central meridian' (*du*) in the human body or the Middle Way mentioned by Zhuangzi in the passage immediately preceding the parable of the cook (Wu Kuang-ming 1990, 285; Wang Fuzhi 1974, 30–1). To enter this elusive, symbolic distance *between* identifiable qualities of existence actually means, as Zhuangzi never tired of declaring, 'to wander in the everlasting'. The cook is right: it is impossible to master this unconditioned habit, one can only *de-learn* it.

The act of undoing the ox is endowed in this context with brilliant ambiguity. To cut is essentially to divide, to expose the finiteness of things. Yet Zhuangzi speaks here of 'releasing' (*jie*) the body as if a tiny piece of soil regains its original integrity through merging with the totality of the earth. In describing this reunion of infinitely small with infinitely great, Zhuangzi uses the term *wei*, which has the meaning of 'letting oneself go' and at the same time 'folding upon itself'. In other important contexts, it is used in the obscure expression *wei yi*, which according to Fukunaga refers to the image of the coiled snake (Fukunaga 1969, 498). The genuine transformation, therefore, can be defined as the anaphoric transfiguration: it is an implosion, an act of self-concealment (self-dispersal) which confirms the fullness of one's being and is marked by the ascending intensity of existence.

This idea became the fundamental motif of Chinese philosophical and artistic tradition. In one of the earliest treatises on calligraphy, ascribed to Cai Yong (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), creativity is identified with the act of dispersal (*san*), which makes us perceive (i.e. spiritually 'touch') that stubborn fact of 'being-by-itself'. Cai Yong's apology of creative 'dispersal' (which can be interpreted also as 'letting-go') is somewhat paradoxical because it is related to the inner integrity of spirit. Cai Yong writes:

Writing is dispersal... In order to write one should sit in silence, calm down one's thinking, and let the will soar freely. He should neither speak nor interrupt his breath but seal his spirit deep inside. Then his writing will be perfect (Cai Yong 1984, 5–6).

The true meaning of Daoist transformation (*hua*) is the appropriation of life's magnitude that presents itself, in Zhuangzi's words, as 'putting an end to ending' (*zhi zhi*). The 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar Hao Jing described it as an 'inward wandering' (*nei you*), bringing the mind to absolute rest beyond the stillness of still water. This movement leaves no traces and does not match any ideas. It is to be distinguished, as Cheng Chung-ying observed, from visible changes (*bian*) because it refers to imperceptible minute transformations (Cheng Chung-ying 1988, 247). This is the symbolical matrix of being, the plenitude of virtual changes which disappear even before they acquire visible form.

So genuine harmony makes possible the unique voice of everything; it bestows on each existence its individual quality, its 'subtle principle' (*miao li*), which should not be confused with substance, form, idea, or any other ideal or material reality. As the 16<sup>th</sup> century art critic Li Kaixian pointed out,

All things in the world, great or small, possess their subtle principle coming out of the hidden transformation which is so of itself (Yu Ku 1977, 420).

This quality of absolute solitude (*du*) in existence is the mark of complete self-sufficiency and uniqueness. It is more concrete than any experience of ours and it changes and evades itself even before it acquires any perceptible form.

We come to the conclusion that the infinitely variable chorus of the universe unwittingly confirms the absolute unity of being, the inner self-identity of everything existent, i.e. the 'one' or the 'great transformation' (*yi hua, da hua*).

In Daoist vision, therefore, the 'in-between' space or 'the space between' (*zhong jian*) precedes things that are linked; the Way as such is more real than the spots it binds together. This distance 'between what is and what is not' (*you wu zhi jian*), being infinitely small, nevertheless makes possible the existence of the whole world.

As Zhuangzi and other Daoist authors often stress, the Great Way is precisely the non-measurable distance between infinitely small and infinitely big. An infinity over infinity. To defend his philosophy of permanent change, Zhuangzi does not spare any effort to fence off all attempts to attach fixed meanings to words. He preserves—and creates!—their fascinating ambiguity. For him, perishing is coming into being and dissolving is gathering.

The outcome of such thinking is familiar to every novice in Taijiquan boxing who has to cope with the advice 'to be full while being empty', 'to view movement as rest', 'to search in the crooked for the straight', etc. In fact, the Daoist chaos is nothing but the Great Clod pulverized to the smallest possible particles, which can freely mix

with each other like the dust whirling in the air—one more paradigmatic image in the writings of Zhuangzi. In Daoist literature, these most minute kernels of life's growth are quite reasonably called the 'semen' (*jing*) of things.

It is remarkable, too, that in classical Chinese thought, both Daoist and Confucian, the notion of the inner or anticipated fullness or perfection of being (*de*) goes together with the idea of harmony (*he*) and for Zhuangzi—even with the complete fusion or mutual penetration ('mutual enclosing'—*xiang lan*) of things. Heaven and man for Zhuangzi are not separated, but not because they are in any way analogous. Primordial chaos and human activity coincide by their very *limit*—in virtue of their concrete and self-transformational character. Man is something next to zero when confronted with the 'great transformation' of the universe, but he is really great in his participation in this grandiose One Movement of things. The non-duality of the uncreated chaos (in Chinese: no-limit—*wu ji*) and the secondary Chaos of aesthetically liberated, stylish life (great limit—*tai ji*) delineates the intermediary space of Dao's vortex or, as Jirardot puts it, 'a chaosmos'.

So the supreme harmony is designated in Daoist texts as pure and simple oneness having nothing outside of it. It is a 'perfect' or 'subtle' unity (*zhi yi, miao yi*)—not a pure entity of formal reasoning but a oneness of 'one body' (*yi ti*) infinitely complex in organization within which its live pulsation spots a resistant continuum of the great void. Cai Yong said that through realizing fundamental qualities of the life-force in writing (i.e. through the creative act of dispersal) 'one can even without a teacher be secretly in accord with the ancients'. Harmony's main qualities, according to Zhuangzi, are traversing (*tong*) and thus 'assembling' (*he*) multiple planes of being. It operates on the level of 'subtleties' or 'semen' (*jing*) of things through the universal alchemy of Chaosmos capable of turning everything into everything else. Its abode is the 'abysmal valley' ('*Daodejing*') of pulverized and thus spiritualized matter or, in Zhuangzi's words, a 'treasure house', a 'magic tower' of being. Zhuangzi describes this world as 'bits of dust, creatures permeating each other with breath'. That breath has of course a depth. The Great Way of the universe is to fold endlessly unto itself. Its function is the eternal reversal of being to itself, the 'meeting of earth with earth'. Here are three of Zhuangzi's sayings involving the images of oneness in multiplicity:

The great oneness pervades everything (*Zhuangzi yinde* 1971, 24/107).

Be one with the spirit; the subtleties of oneness traverse everything and are in accord with the heavenly order (*ibid.*, 15/20).

Realize that which is one everywhere and be identical with it; then your body will become like dust (*ibid.*, 21/33).

The Great Way equalizes incommensurable beings and reconciles solitary life-worlds. This predisposition for *coincidentia oppositorum* accounts for a peculiar



paradoxical manner of Daoist philosophizing whose European analogues can be found in the writing strategy of Nietzsche or modern French post-structuralists: to accentuate contrasts, to push conceptual contradictions to their limit beyond which the concepts explode and lose their conventional meaning, and this explosion of reason launches the spirit into a ‘joyful wondering’. The concept of oneness, of course, is no exception. The oneness of the Way is *not* different from change. Zhuangzi seems to adopt a specific term for designating this union of oneness and becoming—the word ‘equalizing’ (*qi*). ‘Voices in transformation’, according to Zhuangzi, should be equalized ‘on the whetstone of heaven’. Wang Fuzhi offers the following commentary to this statement:

All voices undergo transformations that are never fixed. But in fact transformations produce voices. It is like blowing in a bamboo pipe: the various notes produced by it do not compete with each other but fuse into one magnificent sound. Our notions of right and wrong are not contained in the sound but are born from our reliance on form... There are no fixed opinions in the sound that we can take as our teacher. Treat them as one on the whetstone of heaven—can voices in transformation be not equalized then? (Wang Fuzhi 1974, 29).

According to Wang Fuzhi, the world of Change is a starting point both for learning to be wise and falling into ignorance. The ignorant construct forms out of sounds and are entrapped by them. The wise open their minds to the unity permeating the universal chorus. This unity can only be ‘trusted’ (*xin*) for it is the absent depth of everything represented, a non-excluded middle in any argumentation. The point after all is not the identity of whatever it is, but the constancy of one’s attitude to changes. This can even provide the concept of oneness with practical implications. For instance, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century book on military strategy by Jie Xuan, the notion of oneness is conceived as something ‘extra’ in any situation or interplay of forces:

To have just one rule for accomplishing a certain affair, to have just one idea for carrying out a certain plan cannot be called real mastery. Using your intelligence conceals one idea. Applying rules add one trick... Our methods are something regular, but oneness is something irregular (Jie Xuan 1996, 157).

Jie Xuan’s attitude is not the outcome of any deliberate inclination or personal taste for stratagems. It is in fact the only possible position for someone who is familiar only with the idea of a ‘folded’ or ‘double-layered’ reality. In the Chinese view of the world, to be wise *always* means to be a strategist. One must add, however, that ‘the hidden thought’ of the Chinese sage is not just one more idea alongside others, but non-thinkable depth of experience providing for all thoughts.

‘The subtlety is just in one turn’ states the Daoist proverb, thus integrating practical wisdom and metaphysical truth. In Daoist tradition, the non-differentiation between the forms and the formless suggested by this saying determined both the model of



the universe and the way of self-cultivation. It is enough to recall the correspondence between the 'anterior to heaven' (*xian tian*) and 'posterior to heaven' (*hou tian*) aspects of existence or between 'consequent' (*shun*) and 'reversed' (*ni*) flows of life energy in Daoist medicine. It is harmony that eventually makes it possible 'to save appearances' in China, but it does so on the condition of universal transformation, through releasing the creative potential of things.

Accepting perfect oneness as an infinitely flexible continuum and abiding in the 'inbetweenness' of being, 'in proximity' (*ji*) of everything is the final—and extremely indefinite—word of Zhuangzi's philosophy. It is (un)pronounced in order to disavow all judgments and turn to absolutely natural practice—walking along the Way. So, to understand the actual implications of the Chinese concept of harmony we should examine its social and cultural implications.

### Harmony as style

The above survey raises a question: how can this concept of harmony as double-layered or folded oneness be sustained or even recognized? The fact is that this elusive idea has a direct appeal to human self-awareness and, by extension, to cultural tradition. In the world of the 'semen of things' there is no being but only co-being. The very correlation of 'what comes first' and 'what follows suit' points to the intuitive recollection of an infinitely small fracture in existence, which generates inner temporality and thereby consciousness. In Daoist tradition, the discovery of this internal gap corresponds to emerging of intentionality (*yi*) out of primordial (w)holeness of being, the latter being equated to the 'original heart-mind' (*ben xin*). This is what Zhuangzi's story of the Great Clod is about: the Wind comes out of the resting-resistant Clod as intentionality is issuing forth from the original unity of life. As for the transformational oneness, which comprises both the Will and its medium, it has had since ancient times its existential correlate in the notion of 'one heart-mind' presumably shared by the wise men of all ages. Already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Lu Xiangshan spoke of 'the one heart-mind' (*yi ge xin*), stressing its definitiveness.

Daoist intentionality is therefore the passage from the indefinite Mind to the definite one, from no-limit to the great limit. Contrary to the Western notion of intentionality, it has no objective contents. It is a pure creativity marking the limits of things or moments of transformation, the 'in-between' spaces. Oscillating between the pulsating continuum and the continuum of pulsation, it represents a pure affectivity, an eternal reaction, a course of self-cause, and thus an inexhaustible efficiency. What is the prototype of this movement of deferring/returning which leaves no visible trace and yet brings about qualitative change? I think we should look for it in the kinaesthetic unity of the living body that makes possible all finite movements. It is the

virtual act of intentionality, a symbolic matrix of transformations which *anticipates* the world and permeates various planes of being.

The 'second bottom' of Daoist reality is not different from the definitive unity of the individual body and yet represents the movement of reversal, the countercurrent (*dian dao, ni liu*) in all natural processes. What does it mean in terms of human cognition and culture?

Recently Dieter Henrich has made some profound observations on the nature of cultural style in its relation to the problem of harmony. Conscious life, he states, is governed by two principles of unity: 'the one instantiated at the origin of conscious life, the other suitable for the conclusion that origin always projects before itself... The way in which these two unities are integrated and thus constitute an ultimate response of conscious life to its condition always depends upon how conscious life itself advances and experiences its viability and its significance through conflict and reconciliation. To this extent a culture is never a static structure but a continuously repeated process' (Henrich 1988, 29).

In light of what has been said about the self-transformational nature of harmony, we can safely assume that culture as a 'continuously repeated process' is the very medium of Tao's 'double movement' or ever advancing reversal. Intentionality in Taoism is bound to fall back on the vacuity of the mind to appropriate or rather let grow the seeds of all things. In this circular (non)movement from oneself to One Self (let us recall the Daoist apology of 'being solitary'), the crack in existence engulfs the whole universe, life is being constantly enlivened, and things are being endowed with their definite qualities. The equation of heart-mind with the vortex introduced by Zhuangzi became traditional for Chinese thought. In Wang Yangming's philosophy, for instance, the action of the 'innate knowledge' (*liang xin*) was described most often as a 'spontaneous fusion into one body' (*hunran yiti*), an 'incessant turning around from the heavenly impulse' which brings together the inner and the outer aspects of existence.<sup>2</sup>

So the experience of inner Enlightenment that is the core of Chinese tradition represents an existential correlate of the anaphoric transmutation described above. The senses and formal thinking should 'come to a stop' or 'withdraw inside' for the heart-mind to acquire capacity to defer and to reverse, i.e. to follow the continuum of one transformation. This heightening of one's sensitivity through the loss of ego opens the transcendental dimension in the inner experience: it gives birth to the universal self. The whole world receives the stamp (becomes the tally, as Zhuangzi would say) of this expanded self's awareness beyond the split of subject and object. Wang Yangming's

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<sup>2</sup> This subject is treated in my article, see Maliavin 2005.

radical followers would speak of 'subtle resonance' (*miao ying*) between the inside and the outside, impression and retention. The status of the phenomena is changed correspondingly: now things, instead of being reduced to objects, acquire the creative power of transformation and acquire the nature of type which is a supra-temporal quality of existence, the 'voice' of a thing. What is being cultivated in Chinese culture is not the form *per se* but the awareness of the limit—itself unlimited—of forms. As for types, they represent the moments of conscious, i.e. *awakened*, and thus self-perpetuating life. That is why they are the basic units of cultural tradition.

The tale of Heavenly Pipes is, in fact, a metaphor of the universal human. It is a tale of man who paradoxically realizes his humanity by returning to the bosom of the heavenly void; who asserts his living, i.e. immanent, unity with the Mother of Heaven and Earth. As an awakened or self-humanizing creature, man, concedes Zhuangzi, cannot do without technology, and no ancient writer paid as much attention to the secrets of the craft as this professed lover of naturalness. Yet for him technology should serve 'the heavenly liberation' (*tian fang*) of people who are destined to discover the unique quality of their existence. A metaphor—just another one in the long line of Daoist metaphors of 'change of change'—is everybody's most common job, like tilling the land or making clothes: an occupation which allows one 'not to depend on others'. No wonder, Wang Fuzhi interprets Zhuangzi's seemingly mystical words about a sage who 'has not yet come out of his primordial ancestor' (from the story of Master Huzi in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter) in an overtly pragmatic key:

Not to come out of one's ancestor means holding fast to the centre of the vortex and responding to things without end. Do not rule over the world and yet the world would not go astray. Tilling the soil, weaving the cloth, executing rituals and punishments will be done by itself and everybody will find rest in what is heavenly in him (Wang Fuzhi 1974, 74).<sup>3</sup>

The Daoist idea of social harmony and sociality itself is derived from the pristine integrity of human practice as long as it reproduces spiritual re-action within the fracture, or 'heavenly vortex', of existence. It is, to be sure, a highly cultivated practice, a virtuosity (hence the importance, though only relative, of technique) which has no external form because it signifies the *immanent transcendentalism* of the Way's vortex. Since the work here has no object, it is not divorced from play and its delights. In fact, the pure joy of play is for Zhuangzi the most essential quality of being. Work and play are united in creativity: Zhuangzi's thought, as is well known, became the most powerful source of inspiration for Chinese artists. Artistic form in Chinese tradition was modelled after the inner dynamism of heart-mind itself: a pause punctuating the rhythm, a limit of no-limit. This co-being of two infinities—an

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<sup>3</sup> Already Guo Xiang interpreted this image as a capacity 'to deal with the world without departing from the innermost limit'.

infinitely small fracture within an eternity of calmness—which determines the nature of Chinese thinking is often overlooked in the Western studies of China because it has no direct counterpart in European thought. In Chinese it is referred to by the terms *pin* or *ge*, usually translated as *categories* or *types*, but also as *qualities* or even *elaborate objects*. In European philosophy the notion that comes most closely to it has been coined (following Duns Scotus) by Deleuze and Guattari: it is the concept of *hacceity* (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 112). The *pin* quality of existence is, strictly speaking, neither an object nor an idea but rather the inner limit of a thing, the point of its (self)transformation—a source of unlimited efficiency. It is in the notion of *pin* as a typified form that we find, perhaps, the most radical attempt in the history of philosophy ‘to save appearances’ and justify the presence of things *as* things, i.e. as bearers of unique qualities of existence *and* limitless power of creativity. Both aspects converge in the metaphor of shadow—a material image of emptiness and transformation. The passion for transforming the material environment into the decorum of being, i.e. something substantial and intimate in its very exteriority, or, to put it differently, into the network of types with its infinitely rich texture of symbolic associations, has been, no doubt, the guiding force in the development of Chinese culture. It has nourished, according to Hall’s penetrating remark, ‘the experience of the infinite allusiveness which makes possible the enjoyment of a thing as such and presupposes infinitely complex world created by this object’ (Hall 1982, 237). A good illustration of this kind of thinking is the passion of the Chinese literati for antique objects, ‘ancient toys’ as they were called. This is how an influential painter and art critic of the Late Ming times, Dong Qichang, describes the delights derived from contemplating ‘ancient toys’:

Enjoying antique objects can cure illnesses and prolong one’s years. But one should not enjoy them improperly. One should prepare a solitary house and even though it is located in the city it must have the pure and peaceful atmosphere of ‘wind and moon’. There must be well-swept paths, burning incense, and a murmuring stream. The guest should discuss with lofty gentlemen issues of art and truth amidst flowers lit by the moon, bamboo, and cypress trees while eating delicate snacks without haste. Then on a clean table covered by an exquisite cloth one can put the objects of his collection and enjoy them. The pleasure of meeting with the ancients can soften a hardened spirit and strengthen a weakened heart (Dong Qichang [s.d.], 260).

The complex and potentially omnipresent network of typified objects-affections described by Dong Qichang implies a sort of a double movement of spirit. On the one hand, it leads a reader’s imagination into the esthetical plenitude of experience acting as a medium for generating and sublimating (‘spiritualizing’) desire. On the other hand, the same process draws attention to the ever more subtle nuances of sensations, thus bringing awareness down to the plethora of material life. The presence of these

two movements of spirit—ascending and descending—results in an ironic attitude so peculiar to the literary tradition founded by Zhuangzi. But it also helps, as Dong Qichang emphasizes, to restore man's inner harmony because mutually invoking aspects of self-transformation point to the linkage between two poles of conscious life: the 'small body' (*xiao ti*) of the physical self and the 'great body' (*da ti*) of the (immanently) transcendental self. The great should be perceived in the small: this rule of 'monumental fragment' shaped the Chinese conception of space which is manifest in all visual arts of China from painting to miniature gardens. By the same token, the external form of the indeterminate movement shaped by culture reproduces the inner circuit of the universal Way in the world of 'subtleties'. Hence the notions of the 'large' and 'small' spheres in the Daoist practice of self-cultivation.

The principle of 'double movement' does not deny, of course, the validity of One Transformation for Chinese aesthetics. It is reminiscent of the inner tension which goes together with creativity. As for the Oneness of co-beings, it has a psychological correlate in the notions of all-pervading 'mood' or 'atmosphere' (*qu*) as well as 'one law' (*yi fa*) or 'one stroke of the brush' (*yi hua*). All these concepts emphasize the inner continuity of spirit in the visible variety of images so that the former is dependent on the latter and vice versa. The intermediary space between them—always imaginary and elusive—is the world of 'fantastically-minute transformations' (*huan bian*), a pictorial correlate to Zhuangzi's 'voices in transformation'. This aesthetic ideal accounts for a strong expressionist trend in Chinese artistic style which slides so easily into non-figurative representation.

It has important phenomenological implications too. By heightening sensitivity, the vortex of one transformation pushes awareness beyond the limits of representation into the 'dark valley' of subtle nuances, the 'seeds' of things, infinitely small differences resembling the *petits perceptions* of Leibniz. The transformation of these formless micro-perceptions into visual images was one more correlate to the Tao's movement as anaphoric transmutation—the one that constituted the cultural tradition. Certainly, traditional type-forms—those that could be perceived and recognized—were only metaphors, approximations of purely internal, non-representational reality. These were conventions which had no prototypes in the external world. Justifying various orders of their selection was a problem that Chinese tradition did not and could not explain. This accounts for the indisputable dominance of the inner or intimate forms of sociality in China related to the family, the school, the secret society, and other closed corporations. But the cultural practices in China are distinguished as much by the fluidity in their imagery and terminology as by the constancy of their structural principles: these are indeed 'voices in transformation' awakening awareness of the void's absolute oneness.

Chinese culture *is* style—hence its originality so obvious even to those who possess the scarcest knowledge of China. Historically it exhibited tremendous vitality because it provided means to postulate a continuity of any finite action and infinite reaction. To be sure, the wisdom for Zhuangzi is the knowledge of a boundary between ‘the heavenly’ and ‘the human’. But this boundary is nothing but the omnipresent finitude. The knowledge of it is necessary only for keeping human thoughts and deeds in the shadow of the great oneness. The wise man, says Zhuangzi, ‘is one in the human and one in the heavenly’.

The world of type-forms coined by Chinese tradition transcends the dualism of spirit and matter. The persuasiveness of China’s art and efficiency of her science and technology come from what might be called ‘transcendental empiricism’<sup>4</sup>—a method of learning based on the inner perception of the laws of life in the circuit of ‘Self yielding to Self’. This method’s driving force is not some kind of subject, but an environment of transformation which matches the virtual matrix of conscious life, or, in Henrich’s terms, it postulates the linkage between the beginning and the end of culture’s advance as style. The existential contradictions in this vortex are resolved in a non-dialectical way—by a disjoining unity of opposites. The historical limitations of this outlook are too big a topic to be discussed here but one remark seems appropriate: the very quest for defining the ‘imperceptibly subtle’ (*jing wei*) seeds of established type-forms led to their naturalization and the eventual collapse of symbolist thinking. This irrevocable trend in China’s history gained momentum, I believe, with the transition from Ming to Qing.<sup>5</sup>

### Final observations

Let me finish this paper with some general observations which should be treated not as conclusions but rather suggestions for further study.

First, Zhuangzi offers a radical concept of harmony which comprises chaos as the world of singularities without ontological unity. This position seems to open a perspective on transforming comparative philosophy into what it is destined to be: the philosophy of com-parity. The European counterparts of this view can be found in some versions of modern post-structuralism, particularly in the philosophy of Deleuze.

Second, Zhuangzi’s philosophy is neither nihilistic nor apologetic in relation to actual cultures but provides, as it were, a comment on the *conditions* of the formation

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<sup>4</sup> This notion comes from Maine de Biran and has recently been developed by G. Deleuze and M. Henry; cf. Henry 1975.

<sup>5</sup> This issue is treated at length in my book; see Maliavin 2002.

of culture. It points to the significance of cultural practice as a space of mediation between inner and outer, a priori and a posteriori aspects of experience. Daoist oneness allows for both uniqueness and universality of self; it is both the essence of singularity and the essence of communication. In this regard, Zhuangzi's thought creates new opportunities for reconciling some classical conflicts in social science such as the conflict between communicative and monadic theories of human personality (Cf. the controversy between Jürgen Habermas and Cornelius Castoriadis in Whitebook 1997, 172–96). In more general terms, Zhuangzi's philosophy safeguards the mediating functions of cultural tradition in social life and thus prevents social consciousness from slipping into some sort of totalitarian ideology, be it autocratic or anarchistic (these two extremes tend to meet, of course). It provides, in particular, a perspective for a non-totalitarian interpretation of Heidegger's notion of releasement unto being (*Gelassenheit*) and his theory of cultural type-formation.

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Vladimir V. MALIAVIN, Ph.D. (106438@mail.tku.edu.tw), Professor at the Institute of European Studies, Tamkang University, Taiwan.

✉: Institute of European Studies, Tamkang University, 151 Ying Chuang Rd., Danshui, Taipei hsien, 25137, Taiwan, R.O.C.