

Leiden University  
Faculty of Humanities

# Transcending Destiny in the *Liezi* 列子

Tanja Lindenmann  
S1884050

Master's Thesis  
Asian Studies: History, Art and Culture  
Supervisor: Dr. Paul van Els  
December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Word Count: 15,249

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>1 The Concept of Destiny</b>	7
1.1 Life and Death, Fortune and Misfortune	7
1.1.1 The Way of Heaven – or Time	9
<b>2 Destiny in Duality</b>	13
2.1 Ontology and Cosmogony	13
2.1.1 Being and Non-Being	13
2.1.2 Chaos and Order	16
2.2 Free Will and Determinism	18
2.2.1 Rejoicing in Nothing	23
<b>3 Destiny in Oneness</b>	30
3.1 Traveling in Time and Space	30
3.2 The Way of the Sage	33
3.2.1 Stillness and Emptiness	34
3.2.2 Returning to Oneness	36
<b>Conclusion</b>	40
<b>Bibliography</b>	43
<b>Appendix</b>	48

## Introduction

The clouds above us join and separate,  
The breeze in the courtyard leaves and returns.  
Life is like that, so why not relax?  
Who can stop us from celebrating?  
– Lu Yu

From time immemorial, people have pondered the question whether human life is based on free will or determined by forces beyond human control. The *Liezi* 列子 is a Daoist document in which this issue plays a prominent role. The text is attributed to Lie Yukou 列御寇 (列禦寇) of the late fourth or fifth century BCE, whose historical identity is as mysterious as the origin of the text itself. At present, it is thought the extant text was composed around the late fourth century, even though it consists in part of earlier materials.<sup>1</sup> It was published by the aristocrat and court official Zhang Zhan 張湛 (ca. 370 CE) who also wrote its first commentary. A.C. Graham, who did extensive research on the *Liezi*'s dating and composition, claims that it was presumably compiled by a single author within the Zhang family.<sup>2</sup> The *Liezi* is often considered the most important Daoist document after the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, both dating from the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), and consists of eight chapters with marvelously eccentric and fantastic yet allegorical anecdotes and parables, often with mythological elements, as well as philosophical arguments, in addition to stories of the legendary Master Lie who is said was able to fly upon the wind.

The *Liezi* establishes the seemingly paradoxical relationship between determinism and free will in reference to the Daoist sage and the ordinary person and demonstrates *how* to find “a constant Way behind the changing and conflicting ways of life.”<sup>3</sup> On one hand, the text seems to emphasize the centrality of determinism, as in the anecdote of a certain Ji Liang who fell ill and

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the presumed textual history of the *Liezi* see Graham 1990b, 216-282, Kreger 2016, 53-101, Littlejohn 2011, 31-49, Seo 2000, 63-88, Seo 2015, 449-453.

<sup>2</sup> Graham 1990b, 282.

<sup>3</sup> Graham 1989, 223.

whose three sons invited three doctors to help their father. The first doctor ascribed his illness to an unhealthy lifestyle, whereas the second doctor diagnosed an incurable disease. Only the third doctor attributed Ji Liang's illness to destiny which no medicine can cure. The first two doctors were dismissed, and soon enough, Ji Liang recovered.<sup>4</sup> This anecdote seems to suggest that illness and recovery are beyond human control. On the other hand, there are stories which illustrate free will, such as when a man named Yuan Xingmu declined help from a criminal and thus starved to death.<sup>5</sup> This anecdote apparently suggests that humans are to some degree in control of their own life.

The problem that arises with a concept such as determinism, is our strong belief in man's freedom to choose. Yet in the *Liezi*, the sage represents both, determinism *and* free will. This thesis attempts to reconcile the paradoxes between determinism and free will based on the *Liezi* by examining the relationship between the sage and the concept of destiny. I argue that – *if the Liezi* is considered in its entirety – the text shows that determinism and free will are merely two different viewpoints on life. The relationship between the two may seem paradoxical. Yet, when applied to human life, determinism and free will are shown compatible, and even inextricably bound to one another. According to the *Liezi's* cosmogony, this is because destiny and the nature of each individual originate from the primordial Dao 道 and follow the divine laws which are based on the complex systems of nature. Dao means 'the Way' and is considered the ultimate reality and creative power in Chinese philosophy. The Dao is nature and the cosmos, it is the process of how everything manifests, the infinite and inexhaustible source of change, and therefore, inseparable from all organisms, things and events. It has cosmological as well as ontological qualities and alludes to the intangible and the tangible, the transcendent and immanent, the internal and external.<sup>6</sup> The Dao is called the Way because "the way things move and events take place cause or determine what they are or what they become."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Way represents the human condition as well as destiny.

There has been scant academic research on the topic of this thesis. Most scholarship on the *Liezi* focuses on the authenticity of the extant text or to what extent the text is considered a forged document. In contrast, June Seo has done extensive research on the *Liezi's* historical and

---

<sup>4</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 128-129.

<sup>5</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a., 173-174.

<sup>6</sup> Cheng 2003, 202-203.

<sup>7</sup> Cheng 2003, 202.

philosophical context as well as its metaphysical arguments, while other scholars identify various separate concepts and themes, as in the edited collection *Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic*. Steve Coutinho, who wrote *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, discusses the cosmological and metaphysical fundamentals in the *Liezi*. Yin-Ching Chen has explored the *Liezi's* view on nature in regard to its ecological value, whereas Shirley Chan identified its humor. More recently, Wayne Kreger substantially studied the *Liezi* as a 'Master Text,' locating it historically and philosophically in search of Buddhist tendencies, while Richard Sage has analyzed the "gradual modification of the perceptive process" of regular human beings to "become an 'utmost human,'"<sup>8</sup> a topic that comes closest to my own study.

In comparison to other Daoist classics, the existing academic literature leaves a large gap on the philosophical significance of the *Liezi*.<sup>9</sup> This study intends to reduce this gap with an in-depth analysis on destiny in relation to sagehood. Although there are isolated discussions on destiny – e.g., for Seo, destiny is "equivalent to the notion of spontaneity,"<sup>10</sup> whereas for Coutinho, destiny is "circumstance,"<sup>11</sup> – looking at destiny through the lens of the sage, makes the Daoist approach of the *Liezi* more applicable because the philosophical meaning of the text is often hidden between the lines. My research interest lies primarily in "the powers of the Daoist master" and since the *Liezi* contains ancient materials, my hypothesis is that the text may not only shed light upon "the traditions of the earliest masters"<sup>12</sup> but, from its account of destiny, it also provides insight into *how* these Daoist sages stood apart from what is ordinarily perceived as fortune or misfortune since they are said to be invulnerable.

This study is based on the methodological approach of close reading while complying with the textual-historical orientation of the text. Since "the connections between the many anecdotes are not made explicit,"<sup>13</sup> with close reading the *Liezi* "as an edited whole, not as individual fragments,"<sup>14</sup> the relationships between the interdependent themes of the chapters (which consecutively depict an indistinct synthesis), and their allegorical stories and arguments regarding destiny and the individual become evident and reveal a complete philosophical system. Therefore,

---

<sup>8</sup> Sage 2016, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Seo 2000, 89, Kreger 2016, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Seo 2000, 260.

<sup>11</sup> Coutinho 2014, 165-167.

<sup>12</sup> Littlejohn 2011, 44, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Barret cited in Seo 2000, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Seo 2015, 454.

the meaning of passages of the earlier material does not necessarily remain in their original context.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, I understand that the *Liezi's* fantastic elements are not to be taken literally, but rather they are used to explain the unexplainable because “it is the suggestiveness of the words, and not their fixed denotations and connotations, that reveals the [Way].”<sup>16</sup> In addition, I am using a descriptive method to illuminate the *Liezi's* correlative thought between cosmogony, ontology, destiny and the sage which simultaneously connects the mundane and the spiritual. To simplify matters, I will focus my attention on the *Liezi* only and not compare its contents to other Daoist texts. Furthermore, due to differing demarcations of sections between Graham's translation and the Chinese text found on the Chinese Text Project website, as well as the relative brevity of the *Liezi* chapters, I refer in my footnotes to whole chapters only. For reasons of consistency, I exchanged any British spelling to American English, and the Chinese Romanization system from Wade-Giles to Pinyin, with the exception of reference names.

This thesis is structurally divided into three parts that build on each other and over which I roll out my argument. Chapter 1 elucidates what destiny is according to the *Liezi's* understanding of destiny. In Chapter 2, I show the *Liezi's* view on life and human nature based on its cosmogony and ontology, which explains the metaphysics of destiny, and correlate the established principles to the Way of the sage in contrast to ordinary people. Chapter 3 answers the question of why there is no conflict between destiny and the sage by expounding on how sages apply the cosmogonic and ontological principles in order to transcend destiny. The conclusion consists of a summary and discusses my findings in regard to why free will and determinism are the same but two different viewpoints on life.

---

<sup>15</sup> Seo 2015, 453.

<sup>16</sup> Fung 1960, 13.

# 1 The Concept of Destiny

The Chinese term for destiny, *ming* 命, means to name, to order, to decree, fate or life and derives etymologically from the Chinese character *ling* 令 (to order, command, or decree).<sup>17</sup> Over three thousand years ago, the differentiation between the two terms lay in that *ling* ‘gave’ decrees, whereas *ming* ‘accepted’ decrees.<sup>18</sup> The characteristic of *ming* as in ‘destiny’ evolved from the idea of *tian ming* 天命, the mandate of Heaven,<sup>19</sup> through which rulers since the Zhou dynasty legitimated and confirmed their rule after the defeat of the Shang (ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Since *ming*, it was believed, was reserved for the ruling class to bring good fortune to the people but appeared to be inconsistent to keep this promise, people eventually began to resent heaven. Over the course of time, *ming* became “destiny of individuals”<sup>20</sup> and was adapted to the individual’s life to establish moral conduct (Confucianism, 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), while at the same time giving the individual volition.<sup>21</sup> In other words, *ming* became the life assigned by heaven that people had to fulfill during their time on earth.

## 1.1 Life and Death, Fortune and Misfortune

Life can be understood as a powerful and vital force of nature, which moves and transforms, and as an individually experienced lifespan based on destiny or will in order to give life value.<sup>22</sup> Daoism was “less interested in the problem of destiny [*ming*]”<sup>23</sup> since it bases its notion of life on the term *sheng* 生, to be born, to give birth, to grow, life.<sup>24</sup> However, the concept of destiny is much discussed in the *Liezi* as a means to tackle the question of happiness and the unpredictability of life. Man’s destiny is the inevitability of death, for every organism that is born, will have to die

---

<sup>17</sup> Schuessler 2007, 361, 387.

<sup>18</sup> Ding 2009, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Ding 2009, 16-18.

<sup>20</sup> Ding 2009, 19-21.

<sup>21</sup> On the concept of destiny in China see Chen 1994, Ding 2009, Lo 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Bauer 1971, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Graham 1990a, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Bauer 1971, 68.

at one point or another. Moreover, the *Liezi* claims, everything that happens between one's birth and death arises spontaneously, pursuant to the Daoist principle of *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, nature, literally 'being-so-of-itself'), which is the source of all action and intrinsic to the Daoist concept of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action). In other words, success and failure in life 'come about of themselves' and are beyond human control. If human life is determined by destiny, the question of how to live a successful life arises naturally. On the premise that everybody has a destined lifespan, the text says:

To be born normally, coming from nowhere, is the Way. When a man follows a course consistent with life, and lives, so that although he dies when his term is up he does not perish before his time, this is normal; to follow a course consistent with life and perish before his time is misfortune.

To die normally, in accordance with your manner of life, is also the Way. When a man follows a course which leads to death, and dies, so that he perishes by his own fault even before his term is up, this is also normal; to live after following a course which leads to death is good luck.

Therefore to be born depending on nothing is called the Way, and to live out your term depending on the Way is called normal. Death which depends on your manner of life is also called the Way, and premature death which depends on the Way is also called normal. When Ji Liang died, Yang Zhu looked towards his gate and sang. When Sui Wu died, Yang Zhu wept embracing his corpse. But ordinary people sing when anyone is born and weep when anyone dies.<sup>25</sup>

This statement establishes three notions in regard to destiny: normal, fortune and misfortune. Birth and death are "the Way" and "normal." It means "coming from nowhere" and "depending on nothing." A life lived "depending on the Way," that is harmoniously following the Way from which one originated – from "nowhere" and "nothing," which notions are conterminous – is normal and naturally leads to normal death at the end of one's lifespan, unless misfortune or premature death strike. Alternatively, it is also "the Way" and "normal" to die "in accordance with

---

<sup>25</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 83-84.

[one's] manner of life," that is to live according to life-affirming or to deleterious principles. Living with or against the Way, in either case one's death will correspond to one's Way of life – unless misfortune or fortune occur respectively. In short:

- To be born is coming from nowhere and depending on nothing. This normal.
- To live normally and die normally is normal.
- To live harmfully and die prematurely is normal.
- To live normally and die prematurely is misfortune.
- To live harmfully and die normally is fortune.

Birth, and death according to one's life, as well as fortune and misfortune are the Way and normal, but people's ignorance prevents them from understanding destiny as indicated in the statement's illustrative closing section of Yang Zhu<sup>26</sup> who sang when Ji Liang, having lived out his lifespan "normally," died, whereas he cried when Sui Wu died by "misfortune."

### 1.1.1 The Way of Heaven – or Time

The question of distinguishing between "normal," "fortune" and "misfortune" is explored in a dialog between the personification of destiny and the personification of endeavor in which Endeavor asks Destiny how Destiny's effect can be greater than the effect of Endeavor because Endeavor thinks that "Whether a man lives long or dies young, succeeds or fails, has high rank or low, is poor or rich, all this is within the reach of my endeavor."<sup>27</sup> After having pointed out that life is not always just, Destiny asks Endeavor:

If all this is within the reach of your endeavor, why did you give long life to one and early death to the other, why did you permit the sage to fail and villains to succeed, demean an able man and exalt a fool, impoverish good men and enrich a bad one?<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Little is known of Yang Zhu (ca. 440-ca. 360 BCE) whose "nourishing life" philosophy (*yangsheng* 養生) was absorbed into Daoism.

<sup>27</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 121.

Whereupon Endeavor replies “If it is as you say, certainly I have no effect on things. But is it you who directs that things should be so?”<sup>29</sup> Destiny wins the argument by saying:

When we say that a thing is destined, how can there be anyone who directs it? I push it when it is going straight, let it take charge when it is going crooked. Long life and short, failure and success, high rank and low, wealth and poverty, come about of themselves. What can I know about it?<sup>30</sup>

Destiny is clueless and not in control of things. The nature of destiny is spontaneous and non-judgmental. If an action is in tune with a particular situation, life flows unhindered. If the same action is forced and goes against destiny, life gets stuck. Therefore, man cannot know fortune and misfortune in advance:

To live and die at the right time is a blessing from heaven. Not to live when it is time to live, not to die when it is time to die, is a punishment from heaven. Some get life and death at the right times, some live and die when it is not time to live and die. But it is neither other things nor ourselves that give us life when we live and death when we die; both are destined, wisdom can do nothing about them. Hence it is said:

‘Inscrutably, in endless sequence,  
They come to pass of themselves by the Way of Heaven.  
Indifferently, the unbroken circle  
Turns of itself by the Way of Heaven.  
Heaven and earth cannot offend against this,  
The wisdom of sages cannot defy this,  
Demons and goblins cannot cheat this.  
Being of themselves as they are  
Silently brings them about,  
Gives them serenity, gives them peace,

---

<sup>29</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 121.

<sup>30</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 122.

Escorts them as they go and welcomes them as they come.<sup>31</sup>

Destiny inevitably responds spontaneously to things, and they “come to pass of themselves.” That which makes things “come to pass” or change is time, it is the “the Way of Heaven” (*tiandao* 天道). Time is indicated as advancing cyclical – not linear – time (e.g., the four seasons, day and night, the moon, the tides, etc.). Moreover, time is inscrutable, indefinite and indifferent. Yet the Way of Heaven brings everything into harmony – silently and peacefully – as it “welcomes” things as they happen and “escorts” them to let things go. “Heaven and earth” cannot infringe the power of the Way of Heaven. This implies that man, who stands between heaven and earth, is part of a duality that automatically entails endeavor through choice, which is not silent and peaceful because man’s willpower leads to action that “offend[s]” the Way of Heaven. Even sages “cannot defy this” and are subject to fortune and misfortune, as exemplified by the four great sages Shun, Yu, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius who are said to have had an overall miserable life, while the two villains Jie and Zhou enjoyed a merry life, in spite of their later execution.<sup>32</sup>

To emphasize the futility of managing destiny, the *Liezi* mentions ancient masters who understood the uselessness of its endeavor:

Yu Xiong said to King Wen:

‘What is long of itself we have not increased, what is short of itself we have not reduced. Estimating chances makes no difference.’

Laozi said to Guan Yin:

‘When heaven hates someone  
Who knows the reason?’

They meant that there is no point in trying to accord with the will of heaven, and measuring the benefit or harm of what we do.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 127-128.

<sup>32</sup> *Liezi* 7; trans. Graham 1990a, 150-152.

<sup>33</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 129-130.

Yu Xiong and Guan Yin are Daoist sages. The latter is the (mythical) gate keeper who is said to have received the *Daodejing* from Laozi.

Calculating destiny is fruitless because man's judgement is relative. Besides, fortune and misfortune may revert at a later point in time, as depicted in the story of a father and son in the state of Song who went blind despite a good omen that Confucius foretold them. When war broke out, men were recruited, and many died, but being handicapped father and son escaped and regained their eyesight miraculously after the war.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, things and events come about of themselves, without us knowing why, such as our birth and death. We are born "coming from nowhere," and "depending on nothing." This is the Way. To live out one's lifespan "depending on the Way" is normal while death depends on the "manner of life," which is also the Way. Whilst man has perception of duality, the dynamics of destiny are indifferent, mysterious and spontaneous and correlate to the cyclic changes of the Way of Heaven. Hence, it is senseless to push things forcefully for change. Change happens by itself and is only a matter of *time*. As such, destiny brings about of-itself fortune and misfortune and no one can know destiny, not even destiny itself.

In the above portrayal of destiny, endeavor epitomizes the free will of man, whereas destiny exemplifies determinism. However, there seems to be a way to unify the duality of heaven and earth by imitating the Way of Heaven – that is through silence and peace. In order to understand the relationship between the Way of Heaven – or time – and man, we need to look at the nature of being, and how the cosmos came into existence.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 168-169.

## 2 Destiny in Duality

Daoist sages (*shengren* 聖人) are regarded as true men (*zhenren* 真人), highest men (*zhiren* 至人) or spirit men (*shenren* 神人)<sup>35</sup> because they show a content attitude towards life that is percipient, deeply dignified and humane in nature. This Daoist ideal is based on a holistic worldview in which cosmogony and ontology are fundamentally tied together. Understanding the metaphysics of the *Liezi*, we gain insight into how sages respond to destiny in contrast to ordinary people, which will be the subject of this chapter.

### 2.1 Ontology and Cosmogony

Ordinary people tend to give life a positive and death a negative notion, as seen in Yang Zhu's comparison, where joy is experienced when someone is born and grief when someone dies. People usually perceive death as misfortune even when it is "normal" due to the experience of loss. Fear for loss of merit, power, status, wealth etc. has its root in fear of the ultimate loss, death. Therefore, the *Liezi* begins with an explanation of how the world works in order to reconcile with death. The text is hereby building an understanding that death is not *separate* from life, but that death makes up the *totality* of life.

#### 2.1.1 Being and Non-Being

Ontologically, the text establishes, that the Unborn (*busheng* 不生) begets (*sheng* 生) the Born (*shengzhe* 生者), and the Unchanging (*buhua* 不化) changes (*hua* 化) the Changing (*huazhe* 化者). "Birth and change are the norm," but the source of all things (*wu* 物) is the Unborn and the Unchanging.<sup>36</sup> The Unborn and Unchanging are the origin of all existence. Together, the Unborn

---

<sup>35</sup> "True" in this sense does not refer to moral aspects of an individual but means realizing or perfecting the potentialities of the body. Spirit refers to the transformation of, not the transcendence from the physical body. Michael 2005, 64.

<sup>36</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 17-18.

and Unchanging and the Born and Changing *complete* each other and constitute the totality of being (*you* 有) and non-being (*wu* 無),<sup>37</sup> which is necessary for growth. Growth means constant change, and every new change is like being born over and over again – which simultaneously implies the death of whatever preceded the change. The dynamic process of birth and change (with its implied death) is perpetual and functions as the natural order of all things, and therefore the cosmos, that the *Liezi* calls “the alternations of the Yin and Yang and the four seasons.” This again indicates time. Albeit, the Unborn and the Unchanging generate the Born and Changing and vice versa – in *time*, – the Unborn is always *present*, it is “by our side yet alone” while at the same time the Unchanging “goes forth and returns” to its death to bring about new generation. Therefore, the Way of the Unborn and Unchanging (“its Way” *qidao* 其道) is “boundless” and its “successions endless.”<sup>38</sup>

It is important to remember that being and non-being are not static entities but are fluent and in constant flux:

So the thing which is shrinking there is swelling here, the thing which is maturing here is decaying there. Shrinking and swelling, maturing and decaying, it is being born at the same time that it is dying. The interval between the coming and the going is imperceptible; who is aware of it? Whatever a thing may be, its energy is not suddenly spent, its form does not suddenly decay; we are aware neither of when it reaches maturity nor of when it begins to decay. [...]. But we cannot be aware of the intervals; we must wait for their fruition before we know.<sup>39</sup>

When a thing is ‘born,’ it is actually ‘dying’ at the same time because the life of things travels towards death from birth by constantly changing. Where things stand in their natural cycle is ‘mandated’ by heaven, or *time*. The connection between heaven, earth and things is established through “energy,” or *qi* 氣, the “basic substance of the universe”<sup>40</sup> and the life force that is immanent in all things. *Qi* “is not suddenly spent” and refers to the destined lifespan of things

---

<sup>37</sup> Note that non-being is not absence of being but its negative complement. Graham 1990c, 345.

<sup>38</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Graham 1990a, 50n1.

based on the amount of *qi* they were ‘born’ with. When *qi* is depleted, naturally or by force, things die. Moreover, the ontological mode of *qi* applies not only within things but also between things since when one thing energetically or physically expands another thing has to contract and vice versa.

In the same way, death is the “universal process of transformation”<sup>41</sup> of life that allows evolution to happen.<sup>42</sup> Sages consider physical death as the “zenith”<sup>43</sup> of life in which they ultimately return to the source of their birth, their “true home.”<sup>44</sup> For this reason, their attitude in life is as if already dead.<sup>45</sup> The *Liezi* clarifies that death is perceived as the end of life due to people’s unawareness of the ontological totality of things, and because for the dying person heaven and earth will end.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, the source of heaven and earth, or life and death, is always there, yet at the same time “does not exist,”<sup>47</sup> it knows neither life nor death, because it is the Way, the “unchanging life-giving Principle.”<sup>48</sup> This means that the perpetual alternation of being and non-being constitutes “the underlying Truth [...] that there is neither any beginning nor any end at all.”<sup>49</sup> This is Liezi’s realization upon seeing a hundred-year old skull at the road side when he says to his disciple:

Only he and I know that you were never born and will never die. Is it he who is truly miserable, is it we who are truly happy?<sup>50</sup>

Realizing that peoples ever changing circumstances serve as means for further growth by understanding energy and time, the nature of things and their relationship to each other appear not threatening but are the natural outcome of duality, in which man “forms part of the energetic system of heaven and earth, that changes and develops according to the laws greater than itself over which [man] has no control,” except over himself.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Graham 1990a, 22n1.

<sup>42</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 21-22, Jones 2011, 244-246.

<sup>43</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 23.

<sup>44</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 23.

<sup>45</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 130.

<sup>46</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Zhang Zhan cited in Giles 1925, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Zhang Zhan cited in Giles 1925, 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Kohn 2011, 169.

The above ontology demonstrates that fear is based on the awareness of the possibility that one opposite might cancel the other. However, by realizing that all opposites are not only interdependent, but in fact one entity, one obtains an entirely new attitude towards life because one “gain[s] a basic understanding of how the [Way] works in the world” which “is most important [...] so that one can discern when to move forward and when to retreat, when to accumulate more and when to leave well enough alone.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, sages rely on the Way to unite and harmonize all opposites. In life, they are part of the mode of being but at the same time, they are aware of the non-being aspects of things that reveal themselves in *time*. Having understood that the Unborn and Unchanging are “the root of heaven and earth,” and that non-being is “something” that “goes on and on,” the *Liezi* invites us to “Use it, [because] it never runs out.”<sup>53</sup> In order to do so, we need to consider the interrelationship between heaven, earth and man that unfolds in the *Liezi*’s cosmogony.

### 2.1.2 Chaos and Order

The origin of the cosmos is explained in the description of the stages of the generation process: In the beginning, before the cosmos came into existence, there was “Primal Simplicity” (*taiyi* 太易). When this ‘Nothingness’ moved, the beginning of breath, energy (*qi*), was generated (“Primal Commencement,” *taichu* 太初), which again went through two transformations to materialize, first, shape (*xing* 形; “Primal Beginnings,” *taishi* 太始), then, substance (*zhi* 質; “Primal Material” *taisu* 太素).<sup>54</sup>

Breath, shape and substance were complete, but things were not yet separated from each other; hence the name “Confusion.” “Confusion” means that the myriad things were confounded and not yet separated from each other.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Kohn 2008, 133.

<sup>53</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 18-19.

<sup>55</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 19.

The stage before existence came into being is Confusion, chaos (*hunlun* 渾淪) and called the “Simple” (*yi* 易). It cannot be seen, heard or touched, yet it exists, infinitely and limitlessly.<sup>56</sup> When the “Simple” changed, it became One. After nine alterations, breath returned to One, in other words, the *movement* of *qi* became *still* which allowed *qi* to change its shape and substance: “Pure and light” *qi* ascended to become heaven and “muddy and heavy” *qi* descended to become earth. Light and heavy *qi* “which harmoniously blended both became man.” Hence, the *Liezi* concludes that man contains the essence of heaven and earth and is subject to birth and change of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物).<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, I argue, the *Liezi* metaphorically implies that movement generated *energy* and *time*, which became heaven; and the accumulation of energy generated *space*, which became earth, because movement relies on energy and time, and shape and substance depend on the emptiness in which it is contained in order to exist. In other words, energetically, time is ‘movement,’ space is ‘form,’ and man not only lives in time and space but is, figuratively, the combination of energy, time and space.

The cosmos, the order due to separation, and chaos, non-separation, are subject to the same ontological principles of being and non-being. In this regard, each thing has its own “function” but cannot function by itself. Their functions work together concurrently. Heaven’s function is to give life and to “shelter,” whilst earth’s function is to maintain life and to “support.” Sometimes one function “excels” the other because “the Way of heaven and earth must be either Yin or Yang [...] and the myriad things, whatever their functions, must be either hard or soft,” to which sages respond with “kindness or justice” because their function is to “teach and reform.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, according to the *Liezi*, the world generated itself and connotes that all organisms constitute of primal *qi* which undergo the same metaphysical process. The Way of heaven and earth (*tiandi zhidao* 天地之道) is either Yin or Yang which indicates that all opposites of the world stand in direct relation to each other and alternate in *time*, and hence, they must be ‘named,’ in other words, ‘destined.’

Ontologically, destiny is evolution on a macrocosmic *and* microcosmic scale but only persists in duality in which things and events are either recognized as fortunate or misfortunate.

---

<sup>56</sup> The “Simple” accounts for non-being, whereas “Primal Simplicity” accounts for the non-existence of non-being because on a different account it is said: “When Nothing stirs, it begets not nothing but something.” *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 19-20.

From a cosmogonic perspective, destiny consists of “seven [...] interpenetrating realms or states in which the [Way] cosmologically manifest itself, namely, *qi*, *yin-yang*, Heaven-the Human-Earth, and, finally, the ten thousand things.”<sup>59</sup> This means that all existence is relationship, and destiny is the outcome of interrelationships between time, space and man. The common feature of destiny and the Way is that they function according to the same cyclic principles of change, that is *ziran* (spontaneity) and the Way of Heaven, or *time*. Therefore, life and destiny follow the same process, and thus, the ontological and cosmological principles of the Way.

## 2.2 Free Will and Determinism

Man experiences the interrelationship of time and space through body, mind and emotions. A physical body has an inside and an outside. Ordinary people tend to *separate* their internal condition from their external environment: Any misfortune generates desire for fortune. When fortunate events happen, one’s objective is not to change for them. Hence, the path to happiness becomes *dependent* on what occurs outside, rather than experiencing content from within, *independent* from external circumstances. In this case, the question whether people’s life is influenced by their will or determined by outside forces becomes pivotal. For ordinary people, determinism or “destiny”<sup>30</sup> is a separate entity since the notion belongs to all *outside* phenomena that are beyond their control, whereas free will or “endeavor”<sup>27</sup> happens *inside* the mind before it is executed through action on the outside. Knowledge of inside and outside gives people choices to influence outcomes but simultaneously makes them vulnerable to things and events that they cannot control, be it due to consequences of anteceded or arbitrary events. Under such circumstances, people’s reality becomes an internal struggle between inside versus outside experiences that emerges from questions of what, when, where, why and how? The answers of these questions depend on people’s particular viewpoint that changes while they move in time from one space to the next. Consequently, they accumulate knowledge in relation to others which is perceived as one’s personal history. In this regard, knowledge means perspectival knowledge<sup>60</sup> of

---

<sup>59</sup> Michael 2005, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Ziporyn 2009.

- Emotions (joy/sorrow),
- Moral positions (right/wrong),
- Identity (self/other),
- Time (past/present/future) and
- Space (here/there; this/that).

Through knowledge, ordinary people establish the value of their life based on notions of personal and/or conventional standards that create as many subjective realities as there are individuals, hence, subjective realities are relative. In the *Liezi*, Laozi states:

Nowadays everyone in the world is deluded about right and wrong, and confused about benefit and harm; because so many people share this sickness, no one perceives that it is a sickness.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, the *Liezi* says that knowledge is not only a “sickness” that is thought of as normal, but an illusion,<sup>62</sup> as illustrated in the anecdote of the “man who lost his axe, and suspected the boy next door.” The man was convinced that the boy was the thief because he perceived the boy’s attitude as suspicious. After the man found his axe in his garden and saw the boy again, “nothing in his behavior and manner suggested that he would steal an axe” at all.<sup>63</sup> This shows how easily the mind is conditioned and deluded by knowledge and *thinks* what it imagines it true. Moreover, a conditioned mind also “confound[s] [the] heart.”<sup>64</sup> The *Liezi* explains that when the body encounters “something,” mind and heart create knowledge, and people “do not recognize where the changes excited in them come from [and] are perplexed about the reason when an event arrives.” However, when “someone’s spirit is concentrated,” phenomenal illusions “diminish of themselves,” and one can “recognize where [the changes] come from [because one does] know the reason; and if you know the reason, nothing will startle you.” The “reason” is the ontological totality of things in *time* by which “the arrival and passing of the transformations of things” reveal themselves

---

<sup>61</sup> *Liezi* 3; trans. Graham 1990a, 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Liezi* 3; trans. Graham 1990a, 65.

<sup>63</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 180.

<sup>64</sup> *Liezi* 3; trans. Graham 1990a, 71.

Interestingly, in Chinese there is only one word for heart and mind: *xin* 心.

because their non-being aspects are not clouded by the senses:<sup>65</sup> Since “in reality the myriad things of heaven and earth are not separate from each other,” to *think* that one’s volition determines the outcome of one’s action is “wrong-headed” because it constitutes a self-serving interest that separates from the Way.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, ordinary people’s ignorance prevents them to depend “on the Way” and so they depend “on [their] manner of life,”<sup>25</sup> in other words, their free will.

But there is a way to live in accord with the Way without losing one’s ‘free will,’ that is when one relies and act according to one’s inborn nature (*xing* 性). In contrast to free will, inborn nature does not act upon knowledge and refers to the notion of determinism. Inborn nature is existent in all beings and the essence of each individual whose form is automatically subject to the change of time yet holds the infinite life force of the Way.<sup>67</sup> To follow one’s inborn nature means to live out one’s destiny that ideally facilitates living up to one’s highest potential, because inborn nature is given, or ‘mandated’ by heaven.<sup>68</sup> However, one’s inborn “nature and destiny [...] are the course laid down by heaven and earth.”<sup>69</sup> The *Liezi* clarifies that “heaven and earth are ‘things’ like the things within them; and things have imperfections.” And “although the shapes and energies of things differ, they are equal by nature, none can take the place of another, all are born perfect in themselves, [and] each is allotted all its needs.”<sup>70</sup> But due to the interrelationship between heaven, earth and man, people’s choices create “events causation”<sup>71</sup> which in return may produce “constraints on the possible outcomes” of the course laid down for them, that people cannot control.<sup>72</sup> Events causation as seen in Yuan Xingmu who starved to death because he refused to take food from a criminal, thereby “confus[ing] the name and the reality,”<sup>5</sup> is what I call fate<sup>73</sup> and is caused by free will. Events causation based on inborn nature, is destiny, because inborn nature authentically acts according to its own nature:

Yang Zhu said:

---

<sup>65</sup> *Liezi* 3; trans. Graham 1990a, 66-67.

<sup>66</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Bauer 1971, 68.

Etymologically, the term *xing* 性 is derived from *sheng* 生 (be born, to live). Bauer 1971, 68, Graham 1989, 56.

<sup>68</sup> Fox 2008, 362, Graham 1989, 56.

<sup>69</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 29.

<sup>70</sup> *Liezi* 5; trans. Graham 1990a, 96, 99.

<sup>71</sup> Chad Hansen cited in Fox 2008, 363.

<sup>72</sup> Fox 2008, 362.

<sup>73</sup> Compare Fox 2008, 362-363. Fox distinguishes “‘natural’ destiny” from determinism. Destiny means the “best possible outcome or set of outcomes” whereas fate stands for the “vicissitudes of life.” Fox 2008, 362.

‘People find no rest because of four aims – long life, reputation, office, possessions. Whoever has these four aims dreads spirits, dreads other men, dreads authority, dreads punishment. I call him “a man in flight from things”.

He can be killed, he can be given life;

The destiny which decides is outside him.

If you do not go against destiny, why should you yearn for long life? If you are not conceited about honors, why should you yearn for reputation? If you do not want power, why should you yearn for office? If you are not greedy for wealth, why should you yearn for possessions? One who sees this I call “a man in accord with things”.

Nothing in the world counters him;

The destiny which decides is within him.<sup>74</sup>

One’s destiny is to be sought within oneself based on the ‘free will’ of one’s inborn nature, *unconditionally* and *independent* from but in flow with external circumstances, which then will be “in accord with things,” otherwise, free will based on knowledge determines ‘outside’ fate.

Interestingly, inborn nature and destiny hold no place for morality because spontaneity and non-judgement are intrinsic to both due to their relation to heaven. No morality is not to be confused with immorality but coincides with humane amorality based on one’s inborn nature. Since actions based on inborn nature are creative expressions of the Way, they hold no fixed moral standards because all things are equal as such. Hence, there is an amoral dignity based on life-affirming principles,<sup>75</sup> and since each situation is different in nature, moral distinctions cannot be absolute because “the problem is to restore man to the true course which is the Way, so that he grows again in the right direction which is different for different people.”<sup>76</sup> One anecdote in which certain attitudes are typified in twenty different men who lived a successful life in accord with their inborn nature exemplifies this: Artful, Hothead, Sleepy and Wide-awake, each relied on and “was satisfied of the profundity of his own wisdom” to embrace life. Tricky, Simple, Tactless and

---

<sup>74</sup> *Liezi* 7; trans. Graham 1990a, 154.

<sup>75</sup> The *Liezi* declares that the highest purpose in life is to enjoy life and dedicates one chapter to hedonism. Since not everybody becomes a sage, and due to man’s impotence against destiny, the *Liezi* advises to refrain from suppression of one’s natural instincts because vexations go against inborn nature. It is believed that what is naturally desired will bring happiness, and therefore, health and wellbeing. Moreover, the hedonist approach proclaims philanthropy and even juxtaposes the ‘hedonist’ with the sage. *Liezi* 7; trans. Graham 1990a, 141, 143-147, 156-157.

<sup>76</sup> Graham 1989, 309.

Fawning had different methods to encounter life but each “was assured of the subtlety of his own skill.” Underhand, Frank, Tongue-tied and Browbeater each “was convinced that his talents would win him success.” Cheeky, Stolid, Daring and Timid each “supposed that his conduct was irreproachable,” and Hanger-on, By-himself, Privileged and On-his-own each “thought that his behavior suited the times.” The *Liezi* says, that although the men’s attitudes differed greatly, all twenty men followed “the Way in the direction destined for them”<sup>77</sup> and concludes:

Wisdom cannot know the time to act and the time to stop. He who trusts destiny does not think of the things outside him in one way and of himself in another. [...]

Hence it is said: ‘Death and life depend on destiny, riches and poverty depend on the times.’<sup>78</sup>

Each of the men did not compare themselves to the other three but lived successfully according to their given nature. They trusted destiny and accepted the times, because they knew that one’s lifespan depends on destiny, but the quality of life depends on the time, which knowledge cannot convey. The *Liezi* emphasizes that ordinary people’s illusions confuse this truth with “seeming” because they judge from outside appearances. If the ontological totality of things is grasped, there is no fortune or misfortune, although it seems there is in the conventional sense. In order to non-distinguish between outside and inside, one has to “cover” one’s senses to “not fall over” by happiness or sorrow. Calculation through knowledge does not make any difference because people “lose as often as they win.” Best is to “measure nothing,” then life will be “complete and without deficiency” because “it is not by knowledge that one is complete or deficient; completeness and deficiency come of themselves.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, if one understands destiny *and* time – while keeping to one’s inborn nature – life and death, fortune and misfortune cannot harm by virtue of one’s trust in oneself, destiny and time. This is because destiny

orders human existence in exactly the same way that principle structures the universe.

While [destiny] shapes the concrete (outer) conditions of life, [inborn] nature determines

---

<sup>77</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 130-131.

<sup>78</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 131-132.

<sup>79</sup> *Liezi* 6; trans. Graham 1990a, 131-132.

the psychological (inner) pattern of the individual. [...] They both need to be accepted and fulfilled, not counteracted. The more one works along with one's destiny, the better one realizes oneself, and the more contentment and happiness, and perfection one experiences. The more one tries to avoid it, the harsher the realities appear.<sup>80</sup>

People's realities appear 'softer' or 'harsher' because people are *free* to associate their history of experiences – that are situated in *time* – to new experiences, which are reflected only in a conditioned mind as relative fortunate or unfortunate events because the senses were influenced by outside circumstances.

Due to the separation of inside and outside, knowledge is created, through which free will tries to control outcomes. Because knowledge obliterates ordinary people's understanding of the ontological reality that changes in time, they create their own fate. The dichotomy between inside versus outside defuses when people live according to their inborn nature, that is, *if* they dispose of knowledge, so that their concentrated spirit grasps the non-being aspects which bring forth all phenomena in due *time*, and that the *Liezi* considers as reality.<sup>81</sup>

### 2.2.1 Rejoicing in Nothing

In order to dispose of knowledge, it was said to "cover" the senses since the Way cannot be sought and imparted through passions or the senses.<sup>82</sup> For this sake, we have to gain deeper understanding of the ontological principle and the importance of non-being aspects in life. According to the *Liezi*, anything perceived through the senses is so-of-itself, not doing or knowing what it is, it just *is*, e.g. the sounding of a sound. It came about itself effortlessly and spontaneously through whatever has begotten it. The function of all non-being aspects of things is "That Which Does Nothing," their function is *wuwei* (non-action):

It knows nothing and is capable of nothing; yet there is nothing which it does not know, nothing of which it is incapable."<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Kohn 2011, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Seo 2000, 204-213.

<sup>82</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 35, trans. Giles 1925, 39.

<sup>83</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 20.

In Daoism, this concept represents the sage’s state of mind and heart and is called ‘no-knowledge’ (*wuzhi* 無知),<sup>84</sup> which is considered true knowledge. No-knowledge can perceive anything and “provides one with a sense of the [...] particular focus [of a thing], rather than knowledge of that thing in relation to some concept or universal.”<sup>85</sup> In regard to destiny, the *Liezi* voices through Confucius the meaning of no-knowledge:

Rejoicing in nothing and knowing nothing are the true rejoicing and the true knowledge; and so you rejoice in everything, know everything, care about everything, do everything.<sup>86</sup>

From no-knowledge not only inborn nature reveals itself in its pure essence but also true happiness arises. For this reason, “the True Men of old forgot themselves,”<sup>87</sup> in order to *see* through perceived duality. No-knowledge is achieved through stillness and emptiness of mind and heart because it establishes a connection with the eternity of the Way through the completion – not transcendence<sup>88</sup> – of being and non-being. Moreover, in emptiness all ‘named’ or ‘destined’ opposites dissolve:

Someone asked Liezi:

‘Why do you value emptiness?’

[Liezi said:]<sup>89</sup>

‘In emptiness there is no valuing.’

Liezi said:

“‘Value’ is not the name for it.

Best be still, best be empty.

In stillness and emptiness, we find where to abide;

Taking and giving, we lose the place.

---

<sup>84</sup> Compare Girardot 1983, 51.

<sup>85</sup> Hall and Ames 1998, 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 76.

<sup>87</sup> *Liezi* 3; trans. Graham 1990a, 67.

<sup>88</sup> Ziporyn 2003, 24.

<sup>89</sup> *Liezi* 1.11; Chinese Text Project 2006-2018.

The man who, when his actions go wrong, begins to play about with moral distinctions in order to put them right, cannot find the way back.<sup>90</sup>

Liezi advises stillness (*jing* 靜) and emptiness (*xu* 虛) because they involve no judgement of knowledge. Stillness and emptiness correlate to the harmony of heaven, which is silent, and the harmony of earth, which is peaceful, and therefore, dwelling in stillness and emptiness, one finds inner balance by imitating the Way of Heaven.<sup>31</sup> Then one will not lose the Way and knows how to “abide” because the right course of action will spontaneously arise through one’s insight. The Way is lost when mind and heart are entangled mentally or emotionally because their “moral distinctions” separate from the ontological truth due to the separation of inside and outside.

Inside and outside become One through no-knowledge of duality. Due to this paradox, sages *see* the ontological totality of things and their relationship, and in the same manner, equate existential duality by nullifying it:

Yu Xiong said:

‘If your aim is to be hard, you must guard it by being soft.

If your aim is to be strong, you must maintain it by being weak.

What begins soft and accumulates must become hard.

What begins weak and accumulates must become strong.

Watch them accumulate, and you will know where blessing and disaster come from.’<sup>91</sup>

By equalizing duality, sages are “adapting [themselves] to the Way,” and “[have] learned both to survive and reconcile [themselves] to misfortune and death; it is because [... they are] on the side of the Way that the Way works in [their] favor”<sup>92</sup> in due *time*. Blessing and disaster arise because the universe or cosmic order functions like a mechanism, and destiny is part of this mechanism. When one part is out of order, other parts become affected.<sup>93</sup> Therefore,

---

<sup>90</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 27.

<sup>91</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Graham 1989, 231.

<sup>93</sup> Fung 1948, 133.

equalizing the give and the pull is the ultimate principle of dealing with the world. The same applies to the things within it.<sup>94</sup>

This shows how the ontological principle is applied on the inside through no-knowledge of things and on the outside through equalization of opposites.<sup>95</sup> In this sense, using force in action is not a sign of strength but weakness. This is because softness and weakness “belong to life,” whereas hardness and strength “belong to death,” as Laozi voices in the text.<sup>96</sup> The *Liezi* says that ordinary people do not recognize this ontological principle because they are “conquered,” or led by their own body, in other words, their free will. But if people equalize things with opposite movements, they “always conquer” whatever they encounter because they do not “conquer” their environment but themselves, and hence, their “force is immeasurable” in the world.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, sages equalize their inside with no-knowledge and their outside by ‘softly’ responding to circumstances rather than intentional action:

Guan Yin said:

‘If nothing within you stays rigid,  
Outward things will disclose themselves.  
Moving, be like water.  
Still, be like a mirror.  
Respond like an echo.’

Therefore this Way is accord with other things. Things make themselves go counter to the Way, the Way does not go counter to things. The man who successfully accords with the Way uses neither eyes nor ears, neither effort nor mind. If, wishing to accord with the Way, you seek it by means of sight and hearing, body and knowledge, you will not hit on it. [...] It is grasped only by one who grasps it in silence and lets it mature naturally.

---

<sup>94</sup> *Liezi* 5; trans. Graham 1990a, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Compare Graham 1989, 228-230.

<sup>96</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 53.

<sup>97</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 52-53.

To know without passion, be able but not Do, is truly knowing and truly being able. Discard ignorance, and how can you feel passion? Discard inability, and what can you Do?<sup>98</sup>

Things unfold effortlessly and spontaneously when the inside of the body becomes a reflection of the outside due to no-knowledge, then action becomes “non-intentional activity [which] is capable of completing the world.”<sup>99</sup> This kind of spontaneous and effortless action is called *wuwei* (non-action). Non-action defines the nature of the Way because the Way *is* the totality of all life (and death) that is self-regulating itself. Therefore, in Oneness with the Way, sages are able to do but do not do and still get everything done, which is the reason, why “depending on the Way is called normal.”<sup>25</sup>

Non-action does not necessarily mean to refrain from action but is an inherent quality of sages’ attitude towards the world due their understanding of the ontological principle. Non-action in action is shown in an anecdote where Liezi’s master Huzi taught him “how to behave” by learning from his shadow “how to keep the rear.”<sup>100</sup>

So whether to bend or stand upright rests with the figure and not with the shadow; and whether we should be active or passive depends on other things and not on ourselves. This is what is meant by ‘staying at the front by keeping to the rear.’ [...]

Therefore the sage knows what will go in by seeing what came out, knows what is coming by observing what has passed. This is the principle by which he knows in advance.<sup>101</sup>

Such as a shadow follows its figure, so do events depend on how and when they were set into motion. Sages ‘know’ certain things “in advance” because they *see* the ontological totality of things by looking not at outcomes but what preceded outcomes in order to understand actual consequences while not interfering or forcing a particular outcome. They ‘know’ that after things ascend to their peak they will descent and vice versa since change is inevitable in time. For this reason, they keep their effort “to the rear,” and thus stay “at the front.” In other words, sages

---

<sup>98</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 90-91.

<sup>99</sup> Michael 2005, 79.

<sup>100</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 158.

<sup>101</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 158-159.

simplify situations “to bring [them] within the limits of [their] knowledge”<sup>102</sup> by focusing on the event (“figure”), not a certain outcome (“shadow”) to yield to events, so that the best possible outcome may come to pass effortlessly and spontaneously. The following story demonstrates the difference between non-action and intentional action:

There was a man living by the sea-shore who loved seagulls. Every morning he went down to the sea to roam with the seagulls, and more birds came to him than you could count in hundreds. His father said to him: ‘I hear the seagulls all come roaming with you. Bring me some to play with.’ Next day, when he went down to the sea, the seagulls danced above him and would not come down.<sup>103</sup>

This shows the power of non-action through no-knowledge of action, mind and heart. Then, when action is required, “inner and the outer being [...] act together,”<sup>104</sup> and action is executed with non-action. Understanding the ontological totality of things enables sages to deal with the world in accord with the Way because the sage “trusts the transforming process of the Way, and puts no trust in cunning and skill.”<sup>105</sup> This is so because sages do not rely on their senses but are guided by their inborn nature to live out their destiny. It does not mean that sages have no senses, but that they are not influenced by outside stimulus. Gengsangzi, who, according to the *Zhuangzi*, is a disciple of Laozi,<sup>106</sup> elaborates:

‘I can look and listen without using eyes and ears. I cannot exchange the functions of eyes and ears. [...] My body is in accord with my mind, my mind with my energies, my energies with my spirit, my spirit with Nothing. Whenever the minutest existing thing [...] affects me, [...], I am bound to know it. However, I do not know whether I perceived it with the seven holes in my head and my four limbs, or knew it through my heart and belly and internal organs. It is simply self-knowledge.’<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Graham 1989, 233.

<sup>103</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 45-46.

<sup>104</sup> Schipper 1993, 133.

<sup>105</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 161.

<sup>106</sup> *Zhuangzi* 23.1; Chinese Text Project 2006-2018.

<sup>107</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 77-78.

Self-knowledge (*zizhi*, 自知) arises when body, mind and heart are united and equates inborn nature and no-knowledge simultaneously because “in perfect alignment, the person’s body, mind, *qi*, and spirit are matched harmoniously with the [Way], so finely attuned to everything that perception is absolute and does not come through one or the other sense organ but through the very fabric of the person’s being.”<sup>108</sup> Paradoxically, then no-knowledge becomes perfect knowing<sup>109</sup> through self-knowledge which enables non-action to become perfect action.

By examining the *Liezi*’s ontological and cosmological principles we gained insight into how sages understand life: In reality all things are united but appear separated, yet their relationship still exists due to their energetic connectivity with heaven and earth in time and space. Ordinary people fail to see this ontological truth due to knowledge, and therefore, destroy the harmony of the Way through their willful actions which creates a different fate than destiny would have decided for them based on their inborn nature. Understanding the relationship of time, space and energy, and how these concepts relate to man, sages are able to reconnect with the Way by equalizing duality with no-knowledge on their inside and non-action on their outside. The next chapter will show how these concepts are internalized and applied in life.

---

<sup>108</sup> Kohn 2011, 177.

<sup>109</sup> *Liezi* 8; trans. Graham 1990a, 160.

### 3 Destiny in Oneness

In the *Liezi*, the myriad things are connected through energy (*qi*) by way of a reiterating process of the cosmological and ontological principles. Sages revert this process through stillness and emptiness, thereby experiencing the totality of being and non-being, in order to complete and return to the Oneness of the Way while still being part of duality. Unlike ordinary people, sages are no longer looking for a sense of self outside themselves but within themselves. Paradoxically, they ultimately return to self – not their self-seeking self but their inborn nature, which allows them to take full responsibility of their inside and outside by transcending time and space through their mind and heart, thereby harmonizing themselves with the world. This gives them the ability to accomplish marvelous things yet is accompanied with strict discipline of inner body cultivation, by means of body *qi*. Thoughts and emotions are forms of *qi* which, if guided excessively by knowledge disperses body *qi*.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, sages perfect their no-knowledge through breath and *qi* regulation, which enables them to transcend destiny without compromising their personal freedom. It is through this self-cultivation process, that we are finally able to see *how* free will and determinism are reconciled.

#### 3.1 Traveling in Time and Space

Time is perceived as the chronological continuation of existence. On the outside, time is physical movement, on the inside, time is psychological movement of the mind. But in fact, there is no existential past or future time, there is only the present, the tiny gap between past and future where time ceases. The present becomes past through memory, and the future is a contingency, both are not reality but knowledge. Therefore, thinking is movement of time through analysis and calculation of knowledge where the mind separates (it-)self from the timeless and eternal presence

---

<sup>110</sup> Compare: “An insatiable nature is a grub eating away one's vital forces.” *Liezi* 7; trans. Graham 1990, 156.

Body *qi* is used up naturally through interaction “with the world on the basis of passion, desires, sensory or sexual exchanges and intellectual distinctions” and when declined results in sickness and eventual death. Healing is the replenishing and harmonization of *qi*. Kohn 2008, 8.

Note though, that the *Liezi* disapproves of medical approaches as seen in Ji Liang's anecdote.<sup>4</sup>

of the Way. The thinking mind only knows the past and the future and *thinks* of the present as an isolated event in which the self takes a mental position. But when there is no thought, there is no thinker, and hence, ‘no-self’ (*wuji* 無己).<sup>111</sup> Yet thinking cannot be stopped by will or desire because then the mind would still think an intention. Thinking automatically ceases *effortlessly* in the present moment since the mind becomes awareness that is not obscured by knowledge and where freedom from the mind’s movement allows to fully experience the new. Life takes place only in the present moment where the ontological reality can be grasped by an unconditioned mind in stillness which completes the Changing<sup>36</sup> of the outside with the Unchanging<sup>36</sup> on the inside.

Space is not only the physical universe but also the empty scope in which things exist. On the outside, things exist and move in space and are seen and distinguished from each other due to the empty space that separates them. On the inside, space is the emptiness in which psychological ‘forms’ of the heart are in flux which are perceived as emotions and that the mind grasps intellectually. Therefore, emotions are the forms of knowledge in time that happen in space. Yet, emotions cannot be trusted “for when joy passes its climax we are bound to revert to anger, and when anger passes its climax we always revert to joy, because in both cases we are off balance.”<sup>112</sup> Emotions only function like a compass and indicate how the physical body perceives its environment. When the mind is silent and still, the heart becomes peaceful and empty, in other words, emotions calm down, and clarity arises that enables no-self to respond – not react – impartially to occurrences in alignment with one’s inborn nature. The point is, “if [the senses do] not reach [their] limit [they] will not revert.”<sup>113</sup>

Mind and heart become One when the silent gap between thoughts is extended through stillness of the mind and emptiness of the heart. In this state of Oneness, inside connects with the outside which allows sages to be in tune with the Way. The mind of ordinary people wanders ceaselessly while identification with thoughts and emotions are perceived as true, although the individual’s inside and outside are separately changing constantly: On his path to sagehood, Liezi contemplated the patterns of change. For this reason, he liked to travel because it was his belief that through travel he could observe “the way things change.”<sup>114</sup> But master Huzi elucidates the matter:

---

<sup>111</sup> *Zhuangzi* 1.3; Chinese Text Project 2006-2018.

<sup>112</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 43.

<sup>113</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 84.

<sup>114</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 81.

Anything at all that we see, we always see changing. You are amused that other things never remain the same, but do not know that you yourself never remain the same. You busy yourself with outward travel and do not know how to busy yourself with inward contemplation. By outward travel we seek what we lack in things outside us, while by inward contemplation we find sufficiency in ourselves. The latter is the perfect, the former an imperfect kind of travelling. [...]

In perfect travel we do not know where we are going, in perfect contemplation we do not know what we are looking at.<sup>115</sup>

Looking outside for what is lacking inside is “imperfect” because one does not become whole. Looking inside, one finds “sufficiency in [oneself]” because one’s being is completed by non-being when the flux of thoughts and emotions observed in “perfect contemplation” disappear in stillness and emptiness and “we do not know what we are looking at.” Then one has arrived in the present moment. Sages train their mind to *remain* fully present, and therefore, keep an objective reality in each moment which allows discernment without judgement:

By conceiving something you fail to identify it;  
By pointing it out you fail to reach it;  
By treating it as an object you fail to exhaust it.  
[...]  
Without concepts, your mind is the same as it;  
Without pointing, you reach everything;  
Whoever exhausts the object exists for ever.<sup>116</sup>

The moment a thing is grasped mentally by naming it, or through speech,<sup>117</sup> its ontological truth is separated by conceptual knowledge. Hence, by just looking at things, there is no separation between subject and object because they are connected through *seeing*, and there is no ‘space’

---

<sup>115</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 82.

<sup>116</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 88.

<sup>117</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 80.

between them; subject and object are One. Knowledge separates subject from object which obstruct ‘perfect’ action because of the limitations of the conditioned mind.<sup>118</sup> Sages are, if at all, not thinking but observing a thought because they return to the *timelessness* of the present moment where there is no-knowledge of self in time which allows things to be undisturbed in space. Then, the energy of things reflects and confirms the ‘perfect’ outcome by itself.

### 3.2 The Way of the Sage

In order to develop no-knowledge and non-action, sages cultivate their body to “systematically training the mind away from relying on the senses and toward using subtler, more immediate perception and by reorganizing the body toward finer attunement with the energies and actions of the outside world, [so that] a deep mental calm and inner stability is reached.”<sup>119</sup> When body, mind and heart are One through meditative practice and enhanced by regulating body *qi*, inside and outside are united which permits the Way “to become fully present in the world [...because] Without the human body, the [Way] would have no way to enter.”<sup>120</sup> In this respect, it is said, sages become invulnerable<sup>121</sup> because their inner virtue or inborn power, *de* 德, quasi ‘overrides’ duality. Whereas inborn nature is a mind devoid of thoughts, inner virtue is “a heart devoid of anxiety and pleasure.”<sup>122</sup> Inner virtue is the power within inborn nature and refers to the inner processes of the body, “rather than to the outward aspects of proper behavior” based on knowledge.<sup>123</sup> As inborn nature arises from “unselfconsciousness”<sup>124</sup> of being-of-itself, pure inner virtue occurs when the individual “possesses no self-conscious intention to have [their] acts fulfill

---

<sup>118</sup> Compare Michael, 2005, 70-71.

<sup>119</sup> Kohn 2011, 176-177.

<sup>120</sup> Michael 2005, 109.

<sup>121</sup> The *Liezi* disapproves of physical immortality, yet I assume it approves of spiritual immortality because it refers to spirit journeys, in which sages spiritually travel to unknown lands in order to find equilibrium in the paradisiacal world of immortals. These landscapes represent the realm of Daoist immortality and symbolize the return to a world that was never lost in duality. See spirit journey of the Yellow Emperor, who became an immortal, and King Mu of Zhou, who did not reach immortality. Graham 1990, 33-35, 61-64, 102-103.

The landscapes correspond to Daoist cosmology and mythology are also found in Daoist *Neidan* (Inner Alchemy) practice through which ‘inner landscapes’ of the body are visualized to refine the energies of the body. Schipper 1993, 100-112.

<sup>122</sup> *Zhuangzi* cited in Michael 2005, 126.

<sup>123</sup> Michael 2005, 117-118.

<sup>124</sup> Ivanhoe 2011, 127-149.

Unselfconsciousness is not to be confused with an absent-mindedness.

any criterion of virtue.”<sup>125</sup> Inner virtue becomes “overwhelmingly powerful within the body” when “the cosmic components of the body transform and merge with [...] the [Way],”<sup>126</sup> making inner virtue the “vital potency of life.”<sup>127</sup> Inborn nature in alignment with inner virtue and *qi* become so strong that anything may become possible.

### 3.2.1 Stillness and Emptiness

The process of training the mind and heart in no-knowledge is captured in the story of Liezi riding the wind after finishing his studies with his teacher Old Shang and his friend Bo Gaozi. A certain Yin Sheng heard of this and sought to become Liezi’s disciple. After some time, Yin Sheng left disgruntled because Liezi had taught him nothing. Yet a few months later, he resumed his wish to learn the Way of the sage and returned. At that, Liezi informs Yin Sheng about his own process, which left Yin Sheng ashamed:

‘Three years after I began to serve the Master and befriend a certain man, my mind no longer dared to think of right and wrong, my mouth no longer dared to speak of benefit and harm; and it was only then that I got as much as a glance from the Master. After five years, my mind was again thinking of right and wrong, my mouth was again speaking of benefit and harm; and for the first time the Master’s face relaxed in a smile. After seven years, I thought of whatever came into my mind without any longer distinguishing between right and wrong, said whatever came into my mouth without any longer distinguishing between benefit and harm; and for the first time the Master pulled me over to sit with him on the same mat. After nine years, I thought without restraint of whatever came into my mind and said without restraint whatever came into my mouth without knowing whether the right and wrong, benefit and harm, were mine or another’s, without knowing that the Master was my teacher and the man I have mentioned was my friend. Only then, when I had come to the end of everything inside me and outside me, my eyes became like my ears, my ears like my nose, my nose like my mouth; everything was the same. My mind concentrated and my

---

<sup>125</sup> Michael 2005, 77.

<sup>126</sup> Michael 2005, 98.

<sup>127</sup> Michael 2005, 63.

body relaxed, bones and flesh fused completely, I did not notice what my body leaned against and my feet trod, I drifted with the wind East or West, like a leaf from a tree or a dry husk, and never knew whether it was the wind that rode me or I that rode the wind.<sup>128</sup>

It took Liezi nine years of longstanding practice and determination to internalize stillness and emptiness. The method that Liezi explains is called “concentration-congealing the mind” (*xinning* 心凝). It is believed to take three, five, seven and nine years to re-experience and “return to the primordial condition [which] requires a symbolic recapitulation of the stages of creation.”<sup>129</sup> After three years Liezi was able to withstand the mind’s comparisons and implement non-judgement in speech, so that, after five years, he could think and speak of distinctions again. After seven years, Liezi freely thought and spoke of distinctions without internal judgement because he had stopped labeling things by detaching himself from thoughts and emotions. Finally, after nine years, mental activity had ceased, and Liezi’s mind was concentrated and still, and his heart empty. In thought and speech, his inborn nature reflected the objective reality of the present moment. Although his senses, in the same manner as Gengsangzi, still carried out their designated function, through no-knowledge his inside and outside fused to One, and “everything was the same.” Liezi had reached a state of mental and physical equilibrium and relaxation that allowed him to implement non-action which could be said to have set him in a state of lightness and ease for that he metaphorically could fly.<sup>130</sup>

In this way, the reciprocation and conflation of free will and determinism is reflected in sages’ attitude towards their life and can be summarized as follows:

At the center of himself the sage is spontaneous, belongs wholly to Heaven, does not make any distinction between benefit and harm, self and other, even heaven and man. At the periphery he is a thinking man, finding means to the goals towards which heaven moves him, and collecting the information towards which he is moved to respond. On the

---

<sup>128</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 36-37.

Compare *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 81.

<sup>129</sup> Giradot 1983, 160.

<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, Zhuangzi states that Liezi was still dependent on the wind. *Zhuangzi* 1.3; Chinese Text Project 2006-2018, Ziporyn 2009.

periphery he does make distinctions, although only as provisional and relative [...], and deliberately pursues what he likes and avoids what he dislikes.<sup>131</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Return to Oneness

Man is considered “the breath of heaven and earth which goes to and fro,”<sup>132</sup> and breath or vital energy (*qi*) is the link between heaven, earth and man. Cultivating one’s *qi* allows man to keep greater “harmony between the forces.”<sup>133</sup> As is said in the *Liezi*, “whenever there is ease within there are no difficulties outside.”<sup>134</sup> In the face of difficulties outside, a tense body would only separate from the Way because it is ‘full’ of knowledge. This is illustrated in a story in which Liezi, who was showing off his excellent archery skills to his friend and teacher Bohun Wuren (伯昏無人, literally Uncle Confused No-One), collapsed when invited to shoot off his bow while standing half off the edge of a thousand feet deep cliff. Subsequently, Bohun Wuren explains to Liezi that whatever the “highest man” encounters, “his spirit and his breathing do not change,” otherwise “isn’t there danger within [him]?”<sup>135</sup> This is what it means to regulate breath. Had Liezi stood off the cliff in fear, he might have fallen down the ravine; whereas if his breath had been stable, fear could not have entered his mind and, presumably, he would have mastered the task. Liezi’s experience demonstrates that breath regulation allows the body to overcome one’s thoughts and emotions, which had empowered Bohun Wuren to marvelously ‘hover’ above the abyss.

Breath regulation is taken a step further through *qi* cultivation by which sages become invulnerable. This is explained to Liezi when he asked Guan Yin how “the highest man walks under-water and does not suffocate, treads fire and does not burn, walks above the myriad things and does not tremble.” Guan Yin informs him that by “holding fast to [one’s] purest energies” and “hid[ing] in Heaven,” sages are not harmed. They complete their outside “by grasp[ing] and fathom[ing] the Unshaped” with the “Changeless” of their inside. Therefore, sages have “no flaws” and no emotional, mental or physical injury can penetrate them from outside because their inborn nature, *qi* and inborn power become so pure that they connect to “the place where things were

---

<sup>131</sup> Graham 1989, 197.

<sup>132</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 30.

<sup>133</sup> *Liezi* 1; trans. Graham 1990a, 29.

<sup>134</sup> *Liezi* 4; trans. Graham 1990a, 86.

<sup>135</sup> *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 39.

Compare *Liezi* 2; trans. Graham 1990a, 43-44.

created.” Destiny, even death, has no power over them, since “Heaven inside [them] will keep its integrity.” Guan Yin compares this state of being with a drunken man, who falls out of a cart knowing nothing, and therefore does not get harmed.<sup>136</sup> This illustrates how relaxed and “unselfconscious” body, mind and heart of sages are when danger arises so that they can ward off any misfortune that destiny bestows on them.

In addition, breath and *qi* regulation enable sages to reconnect with the primordial “breath” (*qi*)<sup>54</sup> of the Way. Master Huzi, being himself a sage, taught Liezi the ultimate power of *qi* cultivation. In this anecdote, Liezi renounced Huzi for the shaman Ji Xian who is said to have prediction powers like “a god.”<sup>137</sup> Seeing that Liezi has not found the Way yet, since he had only scratched the surface and not the substance of Huzi’s teachings, the shaman was invited four times. Each time Huzi performed a stage of the soteriological return to the primordial Dao. On the first visit, Huzi demonstrated, presumably while sitting in meditation, “the configuration of earth”<sup>138</sup> by making his breathing calm so that his life force seemed to have ceased and his inner virtue seemingly was yet to be developed by which Ji Xian mistook him as a dying person. The next day, Ji Xian boastfully proclaimed to have healed Huzi since he saw Huzi united with the pure *qi* of heaven. His mind and heart were still and empty while his whole body was breathing “incipient breath” “from the heels.”<sup>139</sup> On the third visit, Ji Xian became confused because he could not read Huzi at all, and promised to return whereupon Huzi tells Liezi:

I have just shown him the absolute emptiness in which there is no foreboding of anything. He must have seen me as I am when I even out the incipient motions of my breath. Whirlpools, still waters, currents, all hollow out deep pools; of the nine kinds of deep pool I have shown him three.<sup>140</sup>

“Absolute emptiness” is the state of the infinite and limitless, the time before the formation of the cosmos. Huzi had returned to the state of the “Simple” (Confusion) where breath, shape and substance were not separated yet.<sup>55</sup> In this state of unity, his breath “even[ed] out” and inhale and

---

<sup>136</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 37-38.

<sup>137</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 47.

<sup>138</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 47.

<sup>139</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 48.

<sup>140</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 48.

exhale became indistinguishably balanced. The “nine kinds of deep pool” refer to the nine changes during the gestation period of the “Simple.”<sup>141</sup> In Daoism, the quality and power of water, the epitome of vitality, is used to symbolically allude to the Way. Such as the Way, which formlessness and “constant flowing back and forth from the state of chaotic unity,”<sup>142</sup> water expands and contracts and takes on any shape when contained and penetrate anything when uncontained. In other words, like the Way, water “yield[s] and respond[s] perfectly to any situation.”<sup>143</sup> Huzi had demonstrated three of the nine stages of gestation of Chaos but in reverse to allow his mind to undergo a “progressively deeper experience”<sup>144</sup> of return to his “true home.”<sup>144</sup> When Ji Xian returned, Huzi proceeded his reversal of the cosmogonic process to the nothingness of the “Primal Simplicity,” the state before the appearance of breath (*qi*).<sup>54</sup> This state made the shaman flee:

‘I have just shown him,’ said Huzi, ‘myself before we first came out of our Ancestor.  
With him I dissolved, and drifted winding in and out of things,  
Unknowing who and what we were.  
To him, it seemed we had floundered,  
It seemed that the waves had swept us away.  
That is why he fled.’<sup>145</sup>

Huzi spiritually had returned to the time before time and into the realm of the unknown; he tapped into the ‘energy’<sup>146</sup> of ‘nothingness’ that generated everything, but to Ji Xian it seemed he has gone mad. Having witnessed the powers of his master, Liezi humbly realized that “he had never learned anything,” whereupon he changed his life to follow the Way of sage.<sup>147</sup> In regard to Huzi’s return to the primordial state, it is said that “the law of the [Way’s] constant ‘return’ and perpetual creative activity is something that microcosmically applies to man as well as to the universe.”<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> See Graham 1990a, 51n2.

<sup>142</sup> Giradot 1983, 146.

<sup>143</sup> Giradot 1983, 146.

<sup>144</sup> Giradot 1983, 73.

<sup>145</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 48-49.

<sup>146</sup> Note that energy, *qi*, was only generated at the stage called “Primal Commencement,” *after* the ‘nothingness’ of the “Primal Simplicity” had moved.

<sup>147</sup> *Liezi 2*; trans. Graham 1990a, 49.

<sup>148</sup> Giradot 1983, 157.

For more information on Huzi’s return to the primordial Dao see Giradot 1983, 156-160.

Through the soteriological return, sages “break through all the stages of the cosmological sequence while continuing to remain in this world.”<sup>149</sup> They become ‘invulnerable’ to destiny in Oneness with the Way which functions “as the universal solvent of all dualities.”<sup>150</sup>

For sages, destiny is life. The goal of sages is not to overcome fortune or misfortune but to unite with the Way, that was lost through knowledge, in order to complete all aspects of life. Such as life and death, the notions of free will and determinism arise naturally from the Way and conflate again with the Way: When their inside and outside become One reality, sages execute their ‘free will’ through their inborn nature and transcend the ‘determinism’ of destiny through their inner virtue or power which both arise spontaneously from stillness and emptiness. Hence, in Oneness with the Way, destiny becomes the Way.

---

For more details on the relation between water and Chaos and the “identification with the pristine Dao through physical embodiment,” see Michael 2005, 17-22, and Schipper 1993, 207.

<sup>149</sup> Michael 2005, 61.

<sup>150</sup> Giradot 1983, 146.

## Conclusion

In the *Liezi*, destiny is not predestination, but the path to fulfilling one's natural and highest potential by adapting to time and space. Destiny follows the divine laws of nature, which the text calls the Way of Heaven, and comes about of-itself spontaneously. Heaven and earth form *one* complex system of which man is part of. The relationship between heaven and earth is harmonious by nature, yet man perceives them as duality – because heaven, earth and man constitute a triad. Therefore, man makes choices that either go with or counter the harmony of heaven and earth. These choices reveal themselves in each moment as sequential 'meeting points' of time and space – containing all previous points in time up to the present moment – which man in return perceives as fortune or misfortune.

According to the *Liezi*, destiny is the unknown and spontaneously – for better or worse – changing condition of man in *time* as well as the outcome of the choices made by man, yet he understands these outcomes as determined when the outcomes do not conform with his expectations. This is what man calls determinism. Free will is based on man's cognition that give him an identity, as well as the ego's need for personal survival, and through which he tries to influence his destiny, often unaware that his choices of action depend on – or are determined by – prior causes. Therefore, the notions of free will and determinism naturally coexist.

Destiny and man's volition automatically arise from the Dao, the Way of how things are and change, and the source of all existence. Consequently, free will and determinism are both 'nature' and 'spontaneously come about of themselves.' Yet their dichotomy is an illusion and only constitute two different viewpoints of the same reality. In fact, the relationship between the individual and the world is based on determinism *and* free will, because individuals are passively propelled by their environment and actively change their environment by their willful action. Therefore, the relationship of free will and determinism is reciprocal, influence and complete each other in the same way as the relationship between yin and yang, being and non-being, and all other opposites of duality, which constitute the ontological truth of reality.

According to the *Liezi*, the posing of the question whether destiny depends on either free will or determinism stems from a lack of awareness of the cosmological and ontological principle

of the spontaneity of nature (*ziran*). From an ontological point of view, ordinary people fail to see the connectedness of their inner and outer reality because they are conditioned by their knowledge of past experiences and future expectations which separates them from the Way, and therefore creates limitations for them because they cannot understand how things relate to each other *in time*. In order to complete the ontological truth of reality, sages balance their inside with stillness and emptiness while equalizing things and events on the outside, so that they do not revert. Thus, their ‘free will’ and their destiny’s ‘determinism’ conflate to the Oneness of the Way in which they move in time through space on earth effortlessly. As a result, “the completion of the ultimate harmony of the triadic world is [fulfilled] by the Sage’s merging with it.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore, sages are independent of time and space because they are so closely connected to and in harmony with heaven and earth that their being is as silent and peaceful as the Way of Heaven itself.

From a cosmological viewpoint, people are embodiments of the Way. People’s lifespans are determined based on the amount of *qi* that they receive from heaven. How it is used up, is up to them. People’s inborn nature determines their destiny, whereas time determines their circumstances. If people are able to side with time, time will be on their side, because time corresponds with heaven, which was said “shelters”<sup>58</sup> them. If people have *time* away from the things they desire, they will have more *space* to recognize themselves as an ontological totality, because from the standpoint of time, their ‘desires’ are destined and might come to pass *in time* spontaneously – *if* people become that totality, as seen in the case of sages. Therefore, sages trust their inborn nature and destiny, *and* understand the times, hence, they are at peace.<sup>152</sup>

The ontological totality is achieved when sages complete their being with non-being due to no-knowledge on the inside and non-action on the outside. Their mind and heart are filled with presence through stillness and emptiness. When the mind does not move, the heart becomes peaceful, and time and space disappear; then the mind is able to control all functions of the body, as illustrated in Huzi’s soteriological return to the primordial Dao. Through the equilibrium of body, mind and heart with the outside world, sages *see* the ontological truth of things, and as a result, are free from choices: By regulating their vital energy (*qi*) through breathing, they develop their pure inborn nature (*xing*) which reveals the one and only choice they have to yield for the perfect and necessary action through spontaneous and effortless non-action (*wuwei*) because their

---

<sup>151</sup> Michael 2005, 49.

<sup>152</sup> Coutinho 2014, 166.

inborn power (*de*) naturally makes them relaxed, and figuratively, invulnerable. Paradoxically, because they relinquish control, sages gain the power of the Way and thereby live in a state of freedom from the duality of destiny.

In this sense, freedom from duality by means of the Way was invariably and all along a concern of Daoism, yet by including the concept of destiny as “a process of *ziran* realizing itself”<sup>153</sup> into the themes of classical Daoism, it was *time* that enabled the *Liezi*’s compiler to gain more insight into the mysteries of the Way – which the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* so ingeniously had expressed before – and made it more applicable to human life.

---

<sup>153</sup> Lo 2010, 334.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

Chinese Text Project. 2006-2018. “列子 *Liezi*.” Accessed December 5, 2018. <https://ctext.org/liezi>.

——— 2006-2018. “莊子 *Zhuangzi*.” Accessed September 11, 2018. <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>.

Giles, Lionel, 1925. *Taoist Teachings from the Book of Lieh Tzu*. London: John Murray.

Graham, A. C. 1990. *The Book of Lieh-tzu. A Classic of Tao*. New York: Columbia University Press.

## Secondary Sources

Bauer, Wolfgang. 1971. *China und die Hoffnung auf Glück. Paradiese, Utopien, Idealvorstellungen*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag.

Berthrong, John H. 2008. “Coursing through the Dao: The *Liezi*.” In *Expanding Process. Exploring Philosophical and Theological Transformation in China and the West*, 59-84. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Chan, Shirley. 2011. “Identifying Daoist Humour: Reading the *Liezi*.” In *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters. Classical and Traditional Approaches*, edited by Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis, 73-88. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Ch'en Ch'i-Yün. 1986. "Confucian, Legalist, and Taoist thought in Later Han." In *The Cambridge History of China Volume I The Ch'in and Han Empires 221 B.C.-A.D. 220*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, 766-807. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chen, Ning. 1994. "Concepts of fate in ancient China." PhD diss., University of Pittsburg.

Chen, Yin-Ching. 2012. "The Idea of Nature in the Daoist Classic of Liezi." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Cheng, Chung-ying. 2003. "Dao (Tao): The Way." In *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Cua, 202-206. New York: Routledge.

Coutinho, Steve. 2014. "The *Liezi*." In *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, 145-167. New York: Columbia University Press.

D'Ambrosio, Paul J. 2016. "Wei-Jin Period *Xuanxue* 'Neo-Daoism': Re-working the Relationship Between Confucian and Daoist Themes." *Philosophy Compass*, 11, 621–631.

Ding, Weixiang. 2009. "Destiny and heavenly ordinances: Two perspectives on the relationship between Heaven and human beings in Confucianism." *Front. Philos. China*, 4, 1: 13-37.

Fox, Alan. 2008. "Guarding What Is Essential: Critiques of Material Culture in Thoreau and Yang Zhu." *Philosophy East and West*, 58, 3: 358-371.

Fung, Yu-Lan. 1960. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Edited by Derk Bodde. New York: Macmillan.

Girardot, N. J. 1983. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism. The Theme of Chaos (hun-tun)*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Graham, A. C. 1990. "The Date and Composition of *Lieh-tzu* 列子." In *Studies in Chinese Philosophy & Philosophical Literature*, 216-282. Albany: State University of New York Press.

——— 1990. "'Being' in Western Philosophy compared with *Shi/Fei* 是/非 and *Yu/Wu* 有/無 in Chinese Philosophy." In *Studies in Chinese Philosophy & Philosophical Literature*, 322-359. Albany: State University of New York Press.

——— 1989. *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle: Open Court.

——— 1959. "The Dialogue between Yang Ju and Chyntzyy." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University London*, 22, 1/3, 291-299.

Graziani, Romain. 2009. "The subject and the sovereign: exploring the self in early Chinese self-cultivation" In *Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, edited by John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, 459-517. Leiden: Brill.

Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. 1998. "The Focus-Field Self in Classical Daoism." In *Thinking from the Han. Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, 45-77. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2011. "The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the *Liezi*." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi. A New Perspective on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann, 127-149. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Jones, David. 2011. "When Butterflies Change into Birds: Life and Death in the *Liezi*." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi. A New Perspective on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann, 241-253. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kohn, Livia. 2011. "Body and Identity." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi. A New Perspective on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann, 167-192. Albany: State University of New York Press.

———. 2008. *Chinese Healing Exercises. The Tradition of Daoyin*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kreger, Wayne. 2016. "Echo of the Master Shadow of the Buddha the *Liezi* 列子 as a Medieval Masters Text." PhD diss. University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Michael, Thomas. 2005. *The Pristine Dao: Metaphysics in Early Daoist Discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Littlejohn, Ronnie. 2011. "The *Liezi's* Use of the Lost *Zhuangzi*." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi. A New Perspective on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn and Jeffrey Dippmann, 31-49. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Littlejohn, Ronnie and Jeffrey Dippmann, Eds. 2011. *Riding the Wind with Liezi. A New Perspective on the Daoist Classic*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lo, Yuet-Keung. 2010. "Destiny and Retribution in Early Medieval China" In *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China*, edited by Alan K.L. Chan and Yuet-Keung Lo, 319-356. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sage, Richard J. 2016. "'Annihilation of the Heart': The Ideal of Non-Perception in the *Liezi*." *Problemos 2016 Priedas*, 75-93.

Schipper, Kristofer. 1993. *The Taoist Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schuessler, Axel. 2007. *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Seo, June Won. 2015. "The *Liezi* and Daoism." In *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, edited by Xiaogan Liu, 449-467. Dordrecht: Springer.

——— 2000. "The *Liezi*: The Vision of the World Interpreted by a Forged Text." PhD diss., University of London.

Wu, Kuang-ming. 1995. "Spatiotemporal Interpretation in Chinese Thinking." In *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, edited by Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher, 17-44. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Zhao, Yanxia. 2014. "Yang Zhu's 'Guiji' Yangsheng and Its Modern Relevance." *Philosophy Study*, 4, 3, 173-188.

Ziporyn, Brook. 2009. "Zhuangzi as Philosopher." Accessed July 7, 2018.  
<https://www.hackettpublishing.com/zhuangziphil>.

——— 2003. *The Penumbra Unbound. The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang*, 23-30. Albany: State University of New York Press.

## Appendix

The following two tables summarize sages' and ordinary people's relationship to destiny:

Table 1: Sages and Destiny

<u>Determinism</u>	<u>Free Will</u>	<u>In Time and Space</u>
Outside	Inside: No-Self	
Body in duality: Being and non-being	Harmony between inside and outside: Objective reality, truth → <i>Xing, de</i> ,	Oneness through inner self-cultivation: Relaxation → mental and physical invulnerability
Heaven Time: Past, present, future	Mind: Stillness → Present	No-knowledge → Amorality
Earth Space: Place, quality	Heart: Emptiness → Oneness	No-knowledge → <i>wuwei</i>

Table 2: Ordinary People and Destiny

<u>Determinism</u>	<u>Free Will</u>	<u>In Time and Space</u>
Outside	Inside: Self	
Body in duality: Being and non-being	Separation of inside and outside: Subjective reality, illusion → Identity	Duality: Fortune and misfortune → Tension
Heaven Time: Past, present, future	Mind: movement of time → Thoughts	Knowledge → Morality
Earth Space: Place, quality	Heart: movement of forms → Emotions	Knowledge → action