

Water Metaphors in *Dao de jing*: A Conceptual Analysis

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This paper focuses on the use of water metaphors in the ancient Chinese text *Dao de jing* (168 BC), which is the foundational text of Daoism and a primary source of modern Chinese ideas about life and politics. The paper analyses how the image of water is used in the text to facilitate the conceptualization of the core philosophical concepts. The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). Water is discovered as occupying an essential position in the conceptualization of the Daoist worldview, which is manifested in notions of 道 *dao* and 德 *de*. It demonstrates that a cognitive approach offers an effective way to explore the cognitive basis of the text's views on the eternal cosmological processing and of the application of morality in the human world.

Keywords: Water Metaphors; *Dao de jing*; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Conceptualization

Introduction

Metaphor is pervasive in our everyday life, in the way we express our ideas, actions, and experiences. Recently, cognitive linguistic research on metaphors reflects a renewed interest in the study of metaphor and focuses the attention on conceptual metaphors, for conceptual metaphors are believed to play a significant role in shaping the process of thinking itself (e.g., Goddard, 2002; Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, 2002; Kövecses, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Reddy, 1979; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1999; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009). It has been argued by cognitive linguists that rather than being just a type of metaphor, conceptual metaphors actually occupy a central position as the most basic set of correspondences within the human conceptual system (e.g., Lakoff, 1987, 1992, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1994). Human thought is deemed as an interactive process and conceptual metaphors are believed to form a basic cognitive structure that permits the understanding of a relatively abstract concept by virtue of a more concrete concept (Gibbs, 1994; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989).

Since the emergence of conceptual metaphor theory, numerous works have sought to explain its working mechanism in the English language (e.g., Lakoff, 1987, 1992, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1994). Much research has been done across different languages into the working mechanisms of metaphorical thinking patterns (e.g., Goddard, 2002; Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, 2002; Kövecses, 2002, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Reddy, 1979; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1999; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009). Metaphor studies in Chinese linguistics, in particular on Chinese philosophical discourse, however, are comparatively rare. Meanwhile, extensive linguistic research has been done in Chinese to explain the significance of figurative language in the ancient Chinese classics (Garrett, 1993a, 1993b; Lu, 1994; Ma, 2000). Only a few studies (e.g., Slingerland, 2003; Yu, 1998, 2007, 2009) focus on the workings of metaphors as such. These Chinese linguistic studies offer philosophical insights into the use

of metaphorical language that tend to confirm Lakoff and Johnson's view (1980: p. 180) that human understanding of the world is largely based on people's interactions with their immediate environment. This perspective is useful in considering the use of conceptual metaphors in Chinese philosophical texts.

In this paper, I focus on water metaphors as they appear in 道經 *Dao de jing* "the classic of the way and the virtue", an ancient Chinese philosophical text that has exercised enormous influence on Chinese culture and remains frequently quoted inside and outside of China to this day. It is a foundational text for Daoism as well as for Chinese thought. It can be said that *Dao de jing* includes discussions of various aspects of the meaning of human life and the relationship between human existence and nature; many of its arguments and stances are prescribed with water metaphors. The image of water is believed to be the most outstanding symbol of *dao* (Chan, 1963: p. 113) and the metaphors that draw on the image of water convey *Dao de jing*'s main philosophical proposition and political doctrine (Chen & Holt, 2002: p. 155). A conceptual analysis of the water metaphors will be followed by a discussion that focuses on the cognitive basis for *Dao de jing*'s central argument of strength-through-weakness through the physical weakness and the flowing-downwards tendency of water. In addition the image-schematic feature of the cyclical movement of water will be explored, which, I argue, provides a cognitive model to conceptualize Daoist eternity.

Approaching *Dao de jing* from a Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

Dao de jing touches upon such issues as cosmology, morality and politics with a wide discussion of the relationship between human beings and nature, as well as the relationship between human beings and society. It describes and discusses various philosophical notions, such as 道 *dao* "the way", 德 *de* "the virtue", 真 *zhen* "authenticity" and 無為 *wu wei* "noncoercive action". It also describes concrete objects, including natural substances and entities, artificial crafts and human body parts,

e.g., 水 *shui* “water”, 淵 *yuan* “deep pool”, 樸 *pu* “uncarved block”, 素 *su* “raw silk”.

Recurring metaphorical statements can be found in the text to describe the features of these notions. I will focus on water metaphors found in *Dao de jing*, which, it is argued, are the root metaphor (Allan, 1997) through which a whole set of conceptual schemes about *dao* can be induced. As an empirically observable natural substance, water invokes a structure that helps people come to grips with the thought in the book (Chen & Holt, 2002: p. 155). In the current study, this text will be analyzed in terms of how these metaphors are conceptually constructed.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory defines conceptual metaphor as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. We draw metaphorical expressions from the source domain, the more concrete sphere, to understand the more abstract domain of knowledge from the target domain (Kövecses, 2002: p. 4). This process of understanding meaning can be described as a set of correspondences that is formed at the conceptual level between the entities in the two domains through cross-domain mappings and metaphorical entailment.

In the analysis, I shall follow two following procedures: first, a lexical semantic and morphological analysis of the metaphorical expressions in the text will be given, accompanied by a discussion of the properties of the source domain concept, based on their descriptions from the text. Second, correspondences between the philosophical connotations of the designated target domain concept and the properties of the source domain concept will be established mainly on the basis of cross-domain mapping and metaphorical entailment.

Water Metaphors in *Dao de jing*

Throughout *Dao de jing*, the features of the two core philosophical notions, *dao* and *de*, are described mostly in terms of 水 *shui* “water” and water-related images such as 淵 *yuan* “deep pool” and 谷 *gu* “mountain valley”. The analysis starts with water-based metaphors that have *dao* as the target concept. Next, the analysis turns to metaphors with *de* as the target concept.

Dao is Water

In *Dao de jing*, the term 道 *dao* appears in the title of the work. This indicates the special importance of *dao* as a notion in this text. In the text, *dao* is described in metaphorical language as the ultimate reality which exists prior to the emergence of the physical universe and everything in it (Hansen, 1992: p. 229), and it reflects the mythological consciousness or the cosmological ideal that *Dao de jing* is upholding. It is found that *dao* is manifested in a number of water-related imageries, invoking the conceptual metaphor, which is advised here: *dao* is water.

Dao de jing gives both explicit descriptions of the properties of water and of *dao*, offering rich contextual information about the two respectively. Water is explicitly described as sustaining the growth of 萬物 *wan wu* “everything in the world” but willing to dwell at the lowest places. For this reason, it resembles the features of *dao*:

In other chapters, it is described as flowing from higher to lower places and the lower it goes, the greater the power it gathers (see example 2); it appears to be soft and weak, but it can overcome the hard and strong (see example 3):

(1)	水善利萬物而不爭,處眾人之所惡,故几於道 ¹	8
	It is because water benefits everything without contentiousness, dwelling in places loathed by the crowd. That it comes nearest to proper <i>dao</i> .	
(2)	江海之所以為百谷王者,以其善下也	66
	What enables the rivers and the seas to be king over all the valleys is that they are good at staying lower than them.	
(3)	天下莫柔弱於水,而攻堅強者莫之能先,以其無以易之	78
	Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water and yet in attacking what is hard and strong, there is nothing that can surpass it.	

As noted above, *dao* can be explained as suggesting some cosmo-relational facts. In the following examples, *dao* is non-metaphorically described as the spontaneous origin of vigor and the ultimate reality that gives rise to the physical universe and everything in it (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 143) (example 4). It acquires an ontological dimension of being, vacuous yet sustainable, and cannot be designated by fixed reference (example 5). It is formless (6), vague and indefinite (7); though it appears as weak and gentle (7), it is inexhaustible (8); and, it always returns (9):

(4)	道生一,一生二,二生三,三生萬物	42
	Dao gives rise to continuity (one-ness), continuity gives rise to difference (two-ness), difference gives rise to plurality (three-ness), and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (ten-thousand things).	
(5)	道恒無名,萬物將自化	37
	Dao is really nameless; all things would be able to develop along their own lines.	
(6)	是謂無狀之狀無物之象	14
	This is (dao) what is called the form of the formless and image of indeterminacy.	
(7)	道之物唯恍唯惚,惚呵恍呵中有象呵	21
	As for the process of dao, it is ever so indefinite and vague. Though vague and indefinite, there are images within it.	
(8)	綿綿呵若存,用之不勤	6
	Wispy and delicate, it (dao) only seems to be there, yet its productivity is bottomless.	
(9)	反者道之動也,弱者道之用也	40
	Returning is how dao moves; weakening is how dao functions.	

By comparing the metaphorical and nonmetaphorical statements about *dao* and the descriptions of water, it can be seen that, based on the similarities between the two, the properties of *dao* in *Dao de jing* are described in terms of those of water. *Dao* flows like water; it offers revitalizations like water; and like water it appears to be weak and soft. On the basis of these correspondences, it can be argued that *dao* is water is the guiding metaphor in *Dao de jing*. Next the analysis of *dao* is water shall be presented from the following three aspects: *dao* in the form of water, *dao* flows as a river and *dao* preserves as a deep pool of water.

¹Examples throughout this paper are formatted in two tiers. The first tier presents the Chinese character, based on the richly annotated version of *Dao de jing*, first published by Zhonghua Book Company, titled *The silk text Laozi with annotations* (Gao, 1996); the corresponding chapter number is provided. The second tier provides the English free translation based on Ames & Hall (2003).

Dao in the Form of Water

Water, as a liquid substance, takes various forms, which I suggest, is mapped onto *dao*'s formless feature (example 6). They share the ability of going in any direction as can be noticed from the example below:

(10) 道泛呵,其可左右	34
Dao flows easily which can run in any direction.	

泛 *fan* “to flow easily” signifies the movement of water. Water, which cannot be attributed to any fixed form, can thus aid the metaphorical conceptualization of *dao* as dynamic and transformable.

Water, with its ability to nourish everything on earth, as exemplified in (example 1), can be thought of as a metaphor for the ability to “give rise to continuity” of *dao* (example 4). *Dao* is the origin from which everything on earth draws vigor, just as all living beings need water to sustain their growth:

(11) 道者萬物之注也	62
Dao is the pouring together of all things.	

In this example 注 *zhu* “to pour together”, similar to the character 泛 *fan* “to flow easily”, can also be argued as evoking the image of water, for they both contain a water radical (氵 on the left of each character). This nourishing feature of water, I suggest, is mapped onto *dao*'s feature of providing vigor to all things, as metaphorically indicated by 注 *zhu* “pour”.

Further, beyond the basic mappings mentioned above, as water takes various forms, it occurs everywhere: as clouds in the sky or as the blood inside an animal's veins. With its omnipresence, water carries a feature of offering nourishment and in this resembles *dao*, which exerts its influence widely and pervasively.

It can be explained from the physical perception that water, though it appears to be soft compared to other elements found in nature such as stone and metal, becomes great in power when it gathers to a great amount. This feature can also be understood as a metaphorical representation of the pervasiveness of *dao*. It can also be inferred from this set of correspondences that the influence of *dao* on 萬物 *wanwu* “everything in the world” is in a manner that is characterized by 無為 *wuwei* “noncoercive action”. Without coercion, *dao* allows everything in the world “to develop along their own lines” (example 5). Such noncoercive functioning of *dao* can be thought of as corresponding to water, which appears to be weak and gentle.

Dao Flows like a River

Water flows continuously. Streams gather together and flow to the sea, as stated in example 2. Moreover, *dao* exerts its influence by flowing from higher to lower places. *Dao de jing* suggests a similarity between this downward flowing tendency of water and the movement of *dao*.

(12) 大邦者下流也	61
A great state (the state that masters the art of dao) is the lower reaches of water's downward flow.	

Drawing from our own experience, it is not difficult to observe the direction of the water when it flows, which is downwards. As explicitly pointed out in *Dao de jing*, what enables rivers and seas to be king over all the valleys is that they always stay lower than the valleys (example 2). As shown in example 1, *Dao de jing* explicitly draws a correspondence between *dao* and water for the way water functions “comes nearest to proper *dao*” (example 1 in bold). Although *Dao de jing* does not claim that *dao* appears in the form of water, it does inform the reader that the best way to comprehend *dao* is in terms of water. It can thus be further inferred that the dynamic and vigorous *dao* is manifested in the image of flowing water.

Dao Preserves as a Deep Pool of Water

In addition to the explicit and indirect reference to *dao* as water, a liquid substance and a flowing entity, *dao* is also described as pool of water that is both deep and mysterious: a metaphysical bottomless water container. The linguistic sign that occurs in the text is 淵 *yuan* “deep pool” as a noun or “deep” as an adjective as shown in the following example:

(13) 道沖而用之有弗盈也,淵呵似萬物之宗,湛呵似或存	4
<i>Dao</i> being empty, the use of it cannot be filled up.	
So deep, it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening.	
So deep, it only seems to persist.	

The character 淵 *yuan* “deep”, according to the oldest Chinese character dictionary, 說文解字 *Shuo wen jie zi* (Duan, 1815), is formed pictographically². This character is pictographic because of the component on the right, which is comprised of an image of water with two shores on each side. When used as an adjective, it describes the depth of a pool of water. Alternatively, it can be used as a noun to signify a pool of water characterized by its depth³ (e.g. chapter 36).

The character 沖 *chong*, which appears in the same example (see also chapters 4 and 45), denotes “empty” and is contrasted to 盈 *ying* “overflowing”. Morphologically speaking, the character 沖 *chong* “empty” has 中 on the right, which means middle (part). According to 說文解字 *Shuo wen jie zi* (Duan, 1815), 沖 *chong* as an adjective means “empty” and is contrasted with 盈 *ying* “overflowing”. The character 盈 *ying* includes a container radical at the bottom part. In 說文解字 *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Duan, 1915), it is explained as a compound word that is made up of two parts: 皿 and 冫, signifying a filled container. According to *the Ancient Chinese Dictionary* (Chen, 2009), 盈 *ying* describes the state of something that is overflowing, e.g., water overflowing from its container.

In example 14, adjectives such as 微妙 *weimiao* “subtle and mysterious”, 玄達 *xuanda* “dark and profound” and 深 *shen* “deep or profound” are used, which seem to portray *dao* as some kind of water reservoir characterized by an enormous capacity:

²This dictionary summarized six categories of Chinese characters 六書 *liu shu*: self-explanatory characters, pictographs, picto-phonetic characters, associative compounds, mutually explanatory characters and phonetic loan characters.

³This character is translated as “abyss” by Ames & Hall (2003: 83). However this notion “abyss” does not successfully evoke the Chinese term's connotations of water, the translation “deep pool” is used instead in analysis.

(14) 古之為道者微妙玄達，深不可識	15
Those of old who were good at forging dao in the world, subtle and mysterious, dark and profound. Their profundity was beyond comprehension.	

Therefore, it can be said that *dao* can also be metaphorically conceptualized as 淵 *yuan* “deep pool”. 淵 *yuan* “deep pool”, which can be image-schematically conceived as a container with a structure characterized by its vacant middle part that can hold water. Perceptually, it remains still all the time; the more water it holds, the darker it gets. Furthermore, the amount of water it can hold depends on the size of the vacant middle part.

Given the metaphorical description of *dao* as being empty and deep, it can be said that the vacant middle part of a deep pool corresponds to that empty aspect of *dao*; the imperceptible bottom maps the greatness of *dao*. *Dao*, which is also described as being vague and indefinite yet possessing a limitless dynamism, can, therefore, correspond to the capacity of the deep pool.

In summary, the conceptual metaphor *dao* is water can be seen as providing the conceptual basis for the notion of *dao*, prescribing the ontological status and features of *dao*.

De is Water

Besides the cosmological ideal that is suggested through the metaphorical description of *dao* in terms of water, morality is frequently discussed through the notion of 德 *de*, translated as “virtue” or “efficacy”. 德 *de*, which also appears in the title, is the central topic in the second half of the original Chinese text: 德經 *de jing*, which mainly deals with the social, political and philosophical applications of *dao*. Moeller suggests that *de*, as opposed to *dao*, is the aura of a perfect functioning (2006: p. 43) or to put it another way, of the art of governing everything on earth in accordance with the true way. Ames and Hall (2003: p. 107) out analyze the relationship between *dao* and *de* by interpreting *de* as the character of any particular disposition within the totality of experience, which is determined by *dao*’s pervasive influence. This can be inferred from chapter 21, in which *Dao de jing* says that “*de* is committed to *dao* alone”. Thus, the notion of *de* can be thought of as the moral application of the *dao* (Roberts, 2001: p. 19), i.e., the entity which is in accordance with the true *dao*. Some of the nonmetaphorical descriptions of *de* are listed as follows:

(15) 上德不德是以有德，下德不失德是以無德，上德無為而無以為也	38
It is because the most excellent <i>de</i> does not strive to excel, that they are of <i>de</i> , and it is because the least excellent does not leave off striving to excel that they have no <i>de</i> . Persons of the highest <i>de</i> neither do things coercively nor would they have any motivation for doing so.	
(16) 天地不仁 ⁴	5
Nature is not partial to institutionalized morality.	
(17) 弱者道之用也	40
Weakening is how <i>dao</i> functions (<i>de</i> , as discussed, can be deemed to be the functioning of <i>dao</i>).	

⁴ 仁 *ren*, a core philosophical notion in Confucian values, is interpreted here as institutionalised morality by Ames & Hall (2003: p. 206). I agree with their interpretation that by denying *ren*, the *Dao de jing* shows a suspicious attitude towards Confucian values, as manifested in *ren*, which only emerges when genuine moral feeling has been conventionalised. This *ren* also appears in other chapters (e.g., chapters 8, 18 & 19); these chapters make up *Dao de jing*’s counter-attack on Confucian morality.

It can be found from example 15 that *de* has a passive and noncompetitive character with great potential and does things by exerting little coercion, displaying a supreme impartiality. In chapter 8, 善 *shan* is used as an alternative notion of 德 *de*, translated as “efficacy”, which is explicitly likened to water:

(18) 上善 ⁵ 若水	8
Highest efficacy is water.	

The conceptual metaphor that is advised here is *de* is water, which is believed to have formed the conceptual basis to the understanding of Daoist morality. With the presentation of *de* through water, *Dao de jing* argues that to act without coercion is virtuous. Next, *de* is water will be explored from the following two aspects: *de* applies as water and *de* is water running through a deep valley.

De Applies to Water

By comparing the physical properties of water with the ontological characteristics of *de*, some metaphorical correspondences can be suggested. As shown in example 15, the most outstanding ontological characteristic of *de* lies in this manner of concealing rather than displaying. In the cultivation of one’s own character (*de*), to display what is in accordance with a premeditated morality is at the cost of one’s natural moral tendency (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 136). *De*, instead, should be non-pretentious and noncompetitive, and is marked with a sense of nonworldliness. This nonworldliness of *de* can be interpreted with reference to water’s tendency to dwell at lower places (see example 1).

As has been pointed out above, *de* signifies the ideal application of *dao*. Therefore, as *dao* functions in the world without imposing any coercion (example 5), *de*, from a socio-moral perspective, implies that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled should also be featured by noncoerciveness. In chapter 66, *Dao de jing* explains that no one in the world is able to contend with the rulers who master the art of *de* because they strive without contentiousness. This application of *de* by using accommodation rather than coercion (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 182), correspondingly, can be metaphorically understood in terms of water following its natural tendency of flowing downwards.

For *Dao de jing*, premeditated morality is a sham (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 136). As shown in example 16, the most appropriate manner of conduct in accordance with *dao* lies in non-human or superhuman excellence, for the natural world generated by *dao* is not “partial to institutionalized morality” (example 16). With this claim, *Dao de jing* suggests that nature does not run in a way that reflects human expectation. In *Dao de jing*’s description of water (see example 1), water is said to nourish 萬物 *wan wu* “everything in the world”, good or bad. Therefore, another mapping correspondence of *de* and water can be drawn as such: the impartial nonhuman excellence of *de* is mapped onto water’s trait of giving nourishment without discrimination, and flowing everywhere disdaining nothing.

De is Water Running Through a Deep Valley

Among many of its metaphorical descriptions in the text,

⁵ 善 *shan*, in other chapters (e.g., 49, 54 and 68), also denotes the meaning of “being good at” or “well established”.

Dao de jing proposes 谷 *gu* “mountain valley” as an image of *de* where *de* is explicitly likened to 谷 *gu* “mountain valley” (see examples 20 & 21 below). The character of 谷 *gu* “mountain valley” is made up of two parts. According to 說文解字 *Shuo wen jie zi* (Duan, 1815), it depicts water coming out of a passage that cuts through the mountain in which the upper part is derived from 水 *shui* “water” and the lower part signifies a mountain passage.

When *de* is metaphorically presented in terms of mountain valley, it is sometimes described as 玄 *xuan* “dark” and 深 *shen* “deep” (see example 19 below):

(19)	玄德深矣远矣,与物反矣乃至大顺	65
	Dark <i>de</i> runs so deep and distant only to turn back along with other things to reach the great flow.	
(20)	上德若谷,大白如辱	41
	The highest <i>de</i> is like a valley ⁶ , the most brilliant white seems sullied.	
(21)	為天下谷,恒德乃足	28
	As a valley to the world, your constant <i>de</i> will be ample.	

Similar to water, which “dwells in places loathed by the crowd” (example 1), the valley is endowed with a willingness to occupy the lower position and it always remains still regardless of the manner of how the water runs through, be it wild or quiet. This low-positioning and stillness can be mapped onto the noncompetitive character and the supreme impartial excellence of *de*. The valley serves as a water passage by letting things go through without obstruction. Such a characteristic of the mountain valley, abided by the interpretation of *de*’s noncoercive application through the previous analysis, can also be regarded as corresponding to *de*’s noncoercive character.

Although lying in the lowest place, the mountain valley, metaphorically and metaphysically presented by *Dao de jing*, denotes an imperceptible depth and distance. In the text, *de* is repeatedly referred to as 玄德 *xuan de* “dark *de*” (e.g., chapters 10, 51 & 65). I believe the darkness of *de* should be interpreted in terms of 谷 *gu* “mountain valley”, which evokes a sense of depth and darkness. Although, the depth and darkness of the mountain valley is not described explicitly, further inference can be made to correspond this feature, as gained though human perception of mountain valleys, to that of *de* in the form of metaphorical entailment. The mountain valley’s great depth connotes the capacity of itself, and thus can be deemed as a metaphorical presentation of the unpredictable and yet powerful potential of *de*.

Discussion

Water, as a shared target domain concept, I argue, provides a conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between the notions of *dao* and *de*. This section will discuss how *dao* is water and *de* is water can be argued as jointly establishing the cognitive basis for *Dao de jing*’s central argument of strength-through-weakness through the physical weakness and the flowing-downwards tendency of water. In addition, as many studies show (e.g. Ames & Hall, 2003; Schwartz, 1985), by affirming

⁶ 谷 *gu* is translated by Ames & Hall as both valley (2003: p. 140) and river gorge (2003: 120). This paper has chosen valley as the English translation for this notion.

strength-through-weakness, *Dao de jing* tacitly negates the positive, which is constantly praised by Confucian teachings. It proposes to optimize the creative possibilities of the opposing elements to allow both of them to transform noncoercively. This section will also discuss the image-schematic feature of the cyclical movement of water, which I argue, provides a cognitive model to conceptualize Daoist eternity.

Strength-through-Weakness

As analyzed previously, *dao* and *de* are both metaphorically represented by water, yet two different sets of correspondences can be generated in, which features of *dao* and *de* are mapped onto different aspects of water. Although *dao* prescribes the cosmological ideal held by *Dao de jing*, *de* deals with the social and moral application of *dao*, as discovered above, while the noncoercive sense is what they share in common.

In the previous analysis of *dao* is water and *de* is water, some points were made to identify the noncoercive sense of *dao* and *de* that maps the features of water as soft and weak and flowing downwards without contentiousness. This noncoercive sense can also be argued to map the mountain valley’s feature of accommodating life while exerting little coercion on things that grow inside or run through it.

Many studies show that the noncoerciveness described by *Dao de jing* is presented in an anti-Confucian manner (e.g., Ames & Hall, 2003; Schwartz, 1985). *Dao de jing* sidesteps the Confucian moral emphasis on good as opposed to evil and focuses instead on forces at work in nature, which lies in the continuity of process that is featured by the mutual entailing and transformation of opposites. Based on this understanding, the weak and the soft, which is usually treated as the negative, can and ultimately will defeat the strong and the hard.

In *Dao de jing*, it says that weakening is how *dao* functions (example 9) and the soft and weak vanquish the hard and strong (chapters 36 and 43). Chen & Holt (2002: p. 163) identify this argument from *Dao de jing* in which weakness is not only treated as “the function of *dao*” (example 9), but also advocates the superiority of weakness over strength. Therefore, in an abstract sense, this noncoerciveness, it can be argued, demonstrate the strength-through-weakness.

Metaphorically, the realization of strength-through-weakness should be based on the proper conceptualization of the strength-gaining process in *Dao de jing*’s terms. The best way to comprehend it is through water again. Water is featured by its softness when it is in a small amount. This, as introduced previously, can be thought of as corresponding to *dao*’s noncoerciveness. Water flows to low places, following its natural course; it is deemed as virtuous and set as the best example to metaphorically represent the noncoercive application of *de*. This strength-gaining process can be pictured and thus conceptualized as numerous small amounts of water converging into a greater whole. Although considered as being weak, water possesses great potential in terms of accumulating in quantity as a result of its fluidity. This is exemplified in *Dao de jing* as “what enables the rivers and seas to be king over all the valleys is that they are good at staying lower than them” (example 2) and “a great state is like the lower reaches of water’s downward flow” (example 12). The lower the water flows, the more it grows in quantity; correspondingly, the less coercion one display, the more virtuous and powerful one becomes. Thus, noncoerciveness, equated with the notion of strength-through-weakness can

be thought of as metaphorically corresponding to the downward flowing of water.

Eternity as a Continuum

To account for the relationship of the polarities, *Dao de jing* optimizes the creative possibilities of the opposing elements to allow both of them to transform noncoercively. Based on this understanding, it can be inferred that the focus should not be on the comparison, but should be on the transformational process of the weak and the strong in a manner of noncoercive natural development.

Weakness and strength can be thought of as two opposing states. *Dao de jing* points out several times that *dao* moves in the manner of 復歸 *fu gui* “to return” (chapters 14 and 28), which suggests that the two opposites operate in a mutually transformative manner. With the dynamic continuity of its circulation and its ability of self-renewal, *dao* becomes perpetual and eternal (Ames & Hall, 2003: p. 83). To create a pictographic interpretation of Daoist eternity first requires us to establish metaphorical correspondences between water and eternity in the sense that they both signify self-renewal.

Dao de jing states that *dao* works pervasively, without any pause, and this is an ongoing process, without a primary beginning or a termination (e.g. chapters 2, 14, 22 & 25). Based on this understanding, eternity, for *Dao de jing*, cannot be pictorially viewed as a linear process but should be viewed as circular. It is characterized by the circulation of the opposite polarities, weakness and strength, for instance. The mutual in-taking of the polarities happens in the manner of gradual transformation as suggested by a cyclical conduit which allows circulation.

On the one hand, as discussed previously, *dao* is indeterminate and vague, yet serves as the origin of the ultimate creative vigor. To go back is thus to regain indeterminacy and vagueness; once it goes back, its potential is renewed. On the other hand, according to our observation of seasonal changes, water can be seen circulating in the world: spring rain revitalizes the plant by pouring vigor into its body; when water is on the ground, it flows to lower places to merge with a larger body of water; once it flows away, new water will fall from the sky.

Thus, the conceptualization of Daoist eternity can be achieved through the projection of the cyclical movement of water. Thus, the image-schematic feature of the latter provides a cognitive model for the former to fit into. This can be confirmed with Ames & Hall's (2003: p. 116) argument that in Daoist terms the flow of experience has no beginning and no end, for whatever is most enduring is ultimately overtaken in the ceaseless transformation of things (2003: p. 83) and with the opposing categories mutually entailing one another (2003: p. 81), none of them would come to a stop.

Conclusion

Water, as a natural element, can be viewed as a manifestation of softness and powerlessness. When used in metaphors in *Dao de jing*, water denotes a potential to take new forms and to overthrow the powered because of its softness compared with other natural substance. By analyzing the conceptual metaphor *dao* is water, *dao* can be understood more concretely by viewing water as a moving or flowing entity oriented in a certain direction, with an ability to penetrate and to exercise power with subtlety. Through *de* is water, the notion of 無為 *wu wei*

“noncoercive action” also finds a more physical ground that should be understood as following the way water does. The weakness and yieldingness of water is singled out as the metaphorical basis for the understanding of this ideal ethical conduct.

A conceptual analysis of the water-related metaphors central to the notion of *dao* and *de* demonstrate the conceptualization ground for these two concepts through water. It also helps to conceptually explore strength-through-weakness, which is one of the central arguments of *Dao de jing*, through the image of water flowing downwards to gather its strength. Moreover, strength-through-weakness can be thought of as supporting *Dao de jing*'s view on the relationship between the two opposites. To account for the relationship of the polarities, *Dao de jing* optimizes the creative possibilities of the opposing elements to allow both of them to transform continually, thus permitting the eternal working of the two. A conceptual analysis of image-schematic pattern reflected by the water metaphors can be argued to offer an effective way to visualize this Daoist view on the eternal cosmological process.

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Appendix 1. Translation⁷

- [2:8] 先後之相隨恒也。
Before and after lend sequence to each other, this is how it works.
- [4:1] 道沖,而用之有弗盈也,淵呵,似萬物之宗。湛呵似或存。
Dao being empty, the use of it cannot be filled up. So deep, it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening. So deep, it only seems to persist.
- [5:1] 天地不仁。
Nature is not partial to institutionalized morality.
- [6:1] 綿綿呵若存,用之不勤。
Wispy and delicate, it only seems to be there, yet its productivity is bottomless.
- [8:1] 上善若水。水善利萬物而又爭處眾人之所惡,故几於道。It is because water benefits everything without contentiousness, dwelling in places loathed by the crowd. That it comes nearest to proper dao.
- [10:8] 生而弗有長而弗宰,是謂玄德。
Giving life without managing them, and raising them without lording it over them, this is called dark de.
- [14:5] 繩繩呵不可名也,復歸於無物,是謂無狀之狀無物之象。
Ever so tangled, it defies discrimination and reverts to indeterminacy. This is what is called the form of the formless and image of indeterminacy.
- [14:7] 隨不見其後,迎不見其首。
Following behind you will not see its rear; encountering it, you will not see its head.
- [15:1] 古之為道者微妙玄達,深不可識。
Those of old who were good at forging dao in the world, subtle and mysterious, dark and profound. Their profundity was beyond comprehension.
- [21:1] 孔德之容唯道是從,道之物唯恍唯惚,惚呵恍呵,中有象呵。
Those of magnificent de are committed to dao alone. As for the process of dao, it is ever so indefinite and. Though vague and indefinite, there are images within it.
- [22:2] 洼則盈敝則新。
Hollow then full, worn then new.
- [25:3] 周行而不殆。
All pervading, it does not pause.
- [28:5] 為天下谷,恒德乃足,恒德乃足,復歸於樸。
As a valley to the world, your constant de will be ample. With ample constant de, you return to the state of unworked wood.
- [34:1] 道泛呵,其可左右。
Dao flows easily which can run in any direction.
- [36:6] 柔弱勝強,魚不可脫於淵。
The soft and weak vanquish the hard and strong. Fishes should not relinquish the depths.
- [37:1] 道恒無名,萬物將自化。
Dao is really nameless... all things would be able to develop along their own lines.
- [38:1] 上德不德是以有德,下德不失德是以無德,上德無為而無以為也。
It is because the most excellent de does not strive to excel, that they are of the highest de, and it is because the least excellent do not leave off striving to excel that they have no de. Persons of the highest de neither do things coercively nor would they have any motivation for doing so.
- [40:1] 反者道之動也,弱者道之用也。
Returning is how dao moves; weakening is how dao functions.
- [41:9] 上德若谷,大白如辱。

⁷Translation for lines taken as examples from the *Dao de jing* is listed in the format of [chapter number: line number].

- The highest de is like a valley, the most brilliant white seems sullied.
- [42:1] 道生一,一生二,二生三,三生萬物。
 Dao gives rise to continuity (one-ness), continuity gives rise to difference (two-ness), difference gives rise to plurality (three-ness), and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (ten-thousand things).
- [43:1] 天下之至柔,馳騁天下之至堅。
 The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the hardest things.
- [45:2] 大盈若沖,其用不窮。
 What is fullest seems empty, yet using it does not use it up.
- [49:2] 善者善之,不善者亦善之,得善也。
 To not only treat the able as bale, but to treat the unable as able too.
- [51:6] 生而弗有也,為而弗恃也,長而弗宰也,是謂玄德。
 (Dao) gives things life yet does not manage them, it assists them yet makes no claim upon them. It rears them yet does not lord it over them. It is this that is called dark de.
- [54:1] 善建者不拔,善抱者不脫。
 What has been well-planted cannot be uprooted, what is embraced tightly will not escape one's grasp.
- [61:1] 大邦者下流也,天下之牝也。
 A great state (the state that masters the art of dao) is the lower reaches of water's downward flow.
- [62:1] 道者,萬物之注也。
 Dao is the flowing together of all things.
- [65:7] 玄德深矣,遠矣,與物反矣,乃至大順。
 Dark de runs so deep and distant only to turn back along with other things to reach the great flow.
- [66:1] 江海之所以為百谷王者,以其善下也。
 What enables the rivers and the seas to be king over all the valleys is that they are good at staying lower than them.
- [66:6] 非以其無爭與,故天下莫能與之爭
 It is because they (the virtuous ruler) strive without contentiousness that no one in the world is able to contend with them.
- [68:1] 善用人者為之下,是謂不爭之德。
 Those who are good at employing others place themselves beneath them; that is called having noncontentious de.
- [78:1] 天下莫柔弱於水,而攻堅強者莫之能先,以其無以易之。
 Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water and yet in attacking what is hard and strong, there is nothing that can surpass it.