

**ZIRAN-WUWEI PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICES:
RETHINKING EDUCATION FROM A DAOIST
EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>As the founding text of Daoism, Dao De Jing has in the course of its thousand-year history powerfully influenced many dimensions of the political, social and philosophical traditions both in China and beyond. In this thesis, I delve into the central Daoist notions of Ziran-Wuwei (自然 无为 “spontaneity” and “non-action”) and explore the epistemological differences they inspire in our approaches towards education. Using a hermeneutic text analysis of Daoist texts and a Critical Theory framework to explore Daoist implications in education, I seek to introduce a new imagination of approaches to education - rooted in the century-old Daoist tradition - that challenges the dominated ways of thinking and practices in the education. I argue for a Ziran-wuwei education that aligns with the operation of Dao; it highlights the development of a state of being in which one engages in spontaneous ways with the surrounding environment of relatedness with minimum impositional actions and normative paradigms of thinking.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

“The Dao always takes no action. Yet nothing remains undone.”

道常无为而无不为 (Dao De Jing, Chapter 37; Ames & Hall, 2003)

“Man follows the Earth

The Earth follows Heaven;

The Heaven follows Dao;

Dao follows itself after nature”

人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然 (Dao De Jing, Chapter 25; Ames & Hall, 2003)

“To understand [the value of] not knowing is the highest;

not to understand [the danger of] knowing is an affliction.”

知不知，尚矣；不知知，病也 (Dao De Jing, Chapter 71; Roberts, 2019, p.153)

The classic Chinese literature, Dao De Jing (道德经), attributed to Laozi in the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE), has in the course of thousand-year history powerfully inspired and influenced many aspects and dimensions of the political, social and philosophical tradition in East Asia and beyond (Roberts, 2019). In no more than five thousand Chinese characters, this short text of Dao De Jing is the earliest philosophical text of Daoism in Chinese history, covering Laozi’s great insights in a wide scope of topics and fields of study. From the origins of the Universe to the ideal form of political governance and international relations, from interacting with people and things, to ways of nourishing life, Dao De Jing bears no equals in the Western canon of literature (Lim et al., 2019; Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003).

As the founding text of the Daoist tradition, Dao De Jing puts forward the profound idea of Dao (道), also translated by the West as *the Way* -- the fundamental, natural principle of existence. It is elusive and intangible. As poetically illustrated in the very opening chapter of Dao De Jing -- “The Dao that could be spoken about is not the eternal Dao (道可道非常道)”, denoting the very unspeakable intricacy of Dao itself (Tan & Bao, 2022). Yet indescribable as Dao is, it is nevertheless compelling, unfolding around every aspect of our daily lives and existence (Raz, 2012 ; Ames & Hall, 2003). According to Chapter 42 in Dao

De Jing, “Out of Dao, One is born (道生一); Out of One, Two (一生二); Out of Two, Three (三生三); Out of Three, ten thousand things (三生万物)” (Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003). This chapter implies the very primitive form of existence of Dao as well as the importance of aligning with the operation of Dao, should one -- as the product of Dao -- live in harmony with the natural way of being in the world (Lim et al., 2019). In aligning with Dao, one also lives to the central Daoist notions of non-action and spontaneity -- “Wuwei” and “Ziran”, two key concepts in Daoism that will be discussed in detail later.

However, poignantly clear to the eyes of Daoists, the modern world two thousand years later is nowhere near the natural way of Dao (Stamatov, 2017). The frantic celebration of human desires and consumption, desperate pursuits of progress and the avant-garde, lasting man-made conflicts and the irreversible consequences of environmental deterioration, all of which point to the bare fact that modernity shows little interest in the operation of Dao, only riding to the very opposite of it with increasing speed. Nevertheless, all hope must not be lost. Daoist scholars around the world continue to study, interpret and promote the Daoist tradition, especially in the fields of philosophy and political sciences (Joshi, 2020; Yu, 2020; Bender, 2016; Brincat & Ling, 2014; Moon, 2015). Generally regarded as a political and philosophical text by modern reading, a well-known stanza from Dao De Jing was even cited by Ronald Reagon in the State of Union speech in 1988 -- "Govern a great nation as you would cook a small fish; do not overdo it (Reagon, 1988, 03:28)."

Yet what has been largely neglected in the modern study of Daoism is the relevance of Dao to education, to which Laozi dedicated several chapters throughout Dao De Jing. Overshadowed by the political and philosophical studies of daoism, Daoist implications in education deserve more attention. Current scholarship on Daoism and education has largely been dedicated to pedagogical practices in classrooms inspired by Daoist ideals (Buckingham, 2014; Lin, 2020; Maki, 2016; Wang, 2019). Yet what is lacking first and foremost is an in-depth, fundamental understanding of Daoism and a Daoist framework in approaching education holistically. This includes an exploration of central Daoist notions and their implications in education comprehensively. What is Daoism exactly? What are the meanings of the key Daoist ideals, “Ziran (spontaneity)” and “Wuwei (non-action)””? Applying to education, what does a Ziran-Wuwei approach look like? What is the Daoist understanding of the purpose of education or the Daoist stance on knowledge? How can such Daoist ideals be relevant in today’s learning and teaching?

These are the important questions I shall explore in this thesis as I examine from a hermeneutic approach the meanings and depths of central Daoist concepts and their enlightenment in our understandings of education. Specifically, I shall delve into the theoretical Daoist philosophy of Ziran-Wuwei (自然 无为 “spontaneity” and “non-action”) and explore the epistemological differences they inspire in our approaches towards education. In the first half of the thesis: *Daoism*, I will embark upon a hermeneutic text analysis of Dao De Jing and discuss in detail the definitions and understandings of Ziran, Wuwei, respectively and together as a phrase Ziran-wuwei. In the second half of this thesis: *Implications in Education*, I will explore how such Daoist concepts can be used to rethink the purpose of education, the conceptualization of knowledge, the positioning of teaching and that of learning. At last, I conclude that a Ziran-wuwei approach highlights the development of a state of being in which one engages in spontaneous ways with the surrounding environment of relatedness with minimum impositional actions and normative paradigms of thinking. A Ziran-wuwei education serves the purpose of guiding individuals to develop their own responsiveness to the surrounding environment in harmonious ways that do not jeopardize their natural characteristics (self-so).

Despite the focus on education, this writing is incredibly relevant as a thesis work under the Master’s degree programme in Language, Globalization and Intercultural Communication. It directly deals with the important discussions of how to approach, introduce and bring voice to the Other in ICC. Against the overwhelming tides of Western sources, discourses and conceptualizations that imagine and “define the rest of the world” (Holliday, 2010; Bhabha, 1994), this piece that builds upon century-old classic Chinese texts intends to challenge such cultural hegemony of Western knowledge production, bringing voice and power to a largely overlooked and understudied philosophy tradition from ancient China. It is an endeavor that is postcolonial and even subaltern. Simultaneously, it is fundamentally decolonizing in its efforts to build an alternative vision midst established practices and understandings of the world that are heavily Western dominated, especially, that is, in the field of education. A Daoist understanding of education will drastically shift one’s understanding of education in normative ideologies derived from Western sources, introducing to the reader the alternative imaginations of knowledge, of learning and of teaching from a different epistemological framework that aligns with Dao. In this sense, this writing itself serves as a means of intercultural communication, introducing the readers to another realm of imagination rooted in ancient Chinese Daoist philosophies.

Additionally, this work also bears great importance to me on a personal level. In the trying times of 2020, it is the Daoist texts that my dear mother handed to me on a dim autumn afternoon that saved me from my struggles with the worldliness. Before I realized it, I was at my desk at six o'clock in the morning, reading again and again for hours those ancient terms, discussing with my mother and exploring together the Daoist concepts of the Way (道, Dao), tranquility (静, Jing), nothing-ness (无, Wu), self-so (自然, Ziran)... Through those aged words of Daoism that wiped my tears and calmed my fears, I started to see, approach and live my local life in this global world, differently, in a way that is truly liberating, soothing and hopeful.

That was when I made up my mind to write about Daoism for my master's thesis. I shall write it for myself in the dark and brighter times, for my mother who has raised and supported me under Daoist beliefs and practices, for my sister who endeavors to live as a Daoist with me, for a world two thousand years later that drifts away from the natural operation of Dao, for the peoples and minds who might also find alternative imaginations and hope in Dao.

1.1 Methodology

This study unfolds in two major parts that involve two different methodologies. For the first part, *Daoism*, I shall present a study of the key Daoist concepts of Ziran and Wuwei by analyzing Daoist texts from Dao De Jing and Zhuang Zi (221 BC). More specifically, I will focus on selected chapters from Dao De Jing that are directly related to the concepts of Ziran-Wuwei and the ongoing discussions in the study, as analyzing Dao De Jing in its entirety is beyond the scope of this study. A few stories from Zhuangzi will also be included in the analysis to facilitate the understanding of Daoist ideologies, since texts from Zhuangzi consist of stories and metaphors that elucidate Laozi's Daoist concepts in simpler ways. Importantly, my text analysis of Dao De Jing will develop upon a hermeneutic approach.

“Hermeneutics” as a word originally refers to the interpretation of classic religious texts (Dallmayr, 2009). Over time it has gradually developed into a major research methodology in social sciences as an art of interpreting a wide spectrum of human life, from texts to lived experiences (Gadamer, 2013; Dallmayr, 2009; Wodak, 2011). Different from research methods that accentuate objectivity and truth in text analysis, an hermeneutic

approach towards texts emphasizes the meaning-making in the process of interpretation -- of and between the interpreter and the reader (Gadamer, 2013; Wodak, 2011; Regan, 2012). As Gadamer believes, it is the life experiences, history and use of language of the interpreter in search of meanings that “re-awaken” the original texts and invite the reader into the dialogue of texts (Regan, 2012). Therefore, in my hermeneutic approach towards the analysis of Daoist texts, I shall take on the interpreter role and present the meaning-making and interpretations of central Daoist notions grounded in (inevitably as well) my personal lifeworld and my resonance with the texts.

Importantly, for an hermeneutic investigation, the validity of the interpretations should also be achieved (Dallmayr, 2009; Wodak, 2011). To this end, the interpreter should be aware of the central hermeneutic concepts, one of which being the hermeneutic circle (Regan, 2012). The hermeneutic circle requires that the interpretation of the partial texts takes place within the boarder context of the entire narrative in a circular fashion (Regan, 2012). In other words, the understanding of the partial components fosters comprehension as a whole, and vice versa, grasping the bigger picture further contributes to comprehension of the partial texts (Wodak, 2011). Such dynamic interplay also implies a progress of understanding that is circular than linear (Regan, 2012). Applying to my text analysis, I shall explore key Daoist notions “Ziran”, “Wuwei” in phrases, in individual characters, in contexts of the local chapter as well as in the entire Dao De Jing narrative. Under such hermeneutic approach, I hope to slowly build up a comprehensive understanding of Daoist philosophies that is dialogic and circular.

Built upon the understandings of Daoist ideologies in the chapter *Daoism*, the following chapter proceeds to explicate a Daoist implication in modern education. Such analysis will develop upon a Critical Theory Framework that aims to recognize and transform forms of normative practices and ideologies for social change (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Specifically, the Critical Theory I adopt here relies on Marx’s definition -- “self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Marx, 1943, as cited in Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Departing from my personal educational experiences, in my analysis I first seek to critically engage with and recognize forms of struggles in various aspects of education. Then I offer a different imagination for change that is built upon the central Daoist dispositions of “Ziran” and “Wuwei”. Under such a critical framework, I aim to challenge the status quo and normative ideologies in modern education established by Western hegemony while bringing power to an alternative epistemological understanding and imagination of education led by the Daoist tradition.

1.2 Politics of translation

Writing about traditional texts from ancient China in modern academic English brings up the necessary discussion of the politics of translation. Since language is the construction of meanings and identities, translation that transforms one site of meaning-making to another becomes a political act (Spivak, 1992). It is a political activity that exercises power in the representation, reinterpretation and negotiation of meanings and identities (Hui, 2019; Spivak, 1992). Entangled within the historical political contexts of power and the power dynamics between languages (Wilmot & Tietze, 2023), the politics of translation problematize the act of translation fundamentally. It becomes a post-colonial engagement that challenges the hegemony of imperial languages and Western knowledge production, searching for ways to represent the linguistic Other in translation and “let the subaltern speak” (Wilmot & Tietze, 2023; Spivak, 1998).

Here in this study, the politics of translation becomes the underlying framework I adopt while translating classic Daoist texts from Chinese to English. Drawing from the translations of Dao De Jing from Roberts (2019) and Ames and Hall (2003), all of whom prestigious scholars and translators in classic Chinese texts in the field, I shall build my translations below upon a combination of the two as well as my own reading.

However, given the fact that Dao De Jing has endured thousands of years of time, compilation, and alterations (Tan & Bao, 2022), this classic text is in fact extremely difficult to read and understand, with depth few dares claim to understand fully, if at all possible. Furthermore, the words of great concision, wisdom and age on top of rhetorical patterns also pose a major challenge in translation (Roberts, 2019). Many translated texts of Dao De Jing inevitably, and problematically, simplify the patterns and add -- in the act of translation -- external interpretations and meanings to supplement the original texts (as also seen in the translations of Roberts and Ames & Hall). Aware of this risk of imposing extra layers of meanings, I present here translated texts that are minimal in liberal translation; they follow a literal translation loyal to the original texts and rhetorical patterns of Laozi, opening up the possibilities of meaning-making based up a Daoist representation of the texts for both the interpreter and the reader. Nevertheless, I recognize the “inevitable failure” in the process of translation (Hui, 2019). Such a recognition of “constitutive failure” (Hui, 2019) takes a humble stance in the political act of translation. Rather than claiming an already complete understanding of the target text and language, this approach acknowledges the constant need for improvement, more exploration and understanding of the texts of Dao De Jing in both

languages. It embraces and performs failure so as to continue the mindful journey of meaning-making across languages.

Additionally, in hope to create what Bhabha (1994) suggests as the third space of hybridity where languages of different power statuses meet (Wilmot & Tietze, 2023), key Daoist terms and texts throughout this study will be presented in the form of Chinese characters or Pinyin (the Chinese alphabet system) along with their English translations. This is also a translanguaging endeavor (Li, 2018) that employs different relevant languages to maximize the communicative potential of this study while generating more representation and space for the ancient Chinese language to speak.

Lastly, I would like to remind the readers to also come into the third space of hybridity and interact mindfully with the texts and meanings of the traditional Daoist texts from ancient China. Since the Daoist ideals challenge, if not reject, many of the conventional paradigms of thought that are largely built upon dominated worldviews/values, an open-minded attitude from the readers is deeply appreciated as the key to start a new conversation where an alternative imagination and narrative outside the main discourses of thought become possible.

2 DAOISM

2.1 Wuwei

As touched upon in the introduction chapter, the depth of Dao, that has spawned myriad readings, interpretations and schools of thoughts throughout the course of two thousand years of history of fourteen dynasties, lies in its unspeakable intricacy. The very opening stanza, *Dao ke dao fei chang dao* (道可道非常道) reads, “The Dao that could be spoken about is not the eternal Dao”. Here, it is worth noting that *dao or Dao* 道 in fact has two meanings in Chinese, “to speak” and “to follow (the way).” While it has been highly controversial within Daoist scholars which meaning holds greater truth, many (myself included) suggest a combination of both meanings to enrich one’s understanding of the text (Tan & Bao, 2022). At the risk of further confusing the reader, on top of the twofold meanings of Dao, I would like to add that *chang* (常) here also carries two meanings, “universal” and “eternal”. Therefore, this opening stanza, in six words alone, delineates comprehensively the grand complexity of Dao -- The Dao that could be easily articulated or followed would not be *the* Dao, or the eternal Dao, as it is by no means static or unchanging across time and space (Tan & Bao, 2022).

How then, does one align with, or follow the Dao, if it is so intricate and elusive, beyond the limits of words, and next to impossible to be expressed exegetically? While it is of immense difficulty to answer this question, it is, however, helpful to start by discussing some essential dispositions of Dao, the careful cultivation of which shall eventually lead to the way of Dao. The first concept to be unfolded here is Wuwei (无为).

Written as two characters, the Chinese term Wuwei 无为 is usually translated as “non-action,” “non-conscious action,” or “non-coercive action”. While Wu 无 in the Chinese language stands for “nothing” or “not having”, Wei 为 means “doing” or “action”. Unfortunately, a common misunderstanding of this Daoist concept entailed by a simplified reading of the word tends to emphasize the passivity and negativity of Dao in urging non-accomplishment or non-engagement in/with life (Liu & Wang, 2018). However, a mindful reading of Dao De Jing with supplemental classic Daoist texts such as Zhuangzi reveals that Laozi’s thought of Wuwei refers to not the absence of human actions altogether, but the absence of actions that interfere forcefully with the original, natural course of being and existing in the world.

In Dao De Jing, the central theme of Wuwei is mostly associated with and illustrated by an ideal model of political governance and leadership of the Sage who leads the nation without forcing upon the mass coercive practices and policies. Domination, violence, force, as well as technologies of control that compromise individuals' natural disposition of spontaneity and continuity are what a Daoist leadership refrains from (Dao De Jing; Bender, 2016). As illustrated in Dao De Jing chapter 57:

天下多忌讳, 而民弥贫

Tian xia duo ji hui, er min mi pin.

The more prohibitions in the world, the more deprived the people will be.

人多利器, 国家滋昏

Ren duo li qi, guo jia zi hun.

The more devices that benefit, The more the bane of the state.

人多伎巧, 奇物滋起

Ren duo ji qiao, qi wu zi qi.

The more strategies and crafts, the more strange things proliferate.

法令滋彰, 盗贼多有

Fa ling zi zhang, dao zei duo you.

The more the laws and statutes declared, the more widespread thieves and crimes.

故圣人云

Gu sheng ren yun.

Hence the Sage speaks.

我无为, 而民自化

Wo wu wei, er min zi hua.

I act not (wuwei), and the people uplift themselves.

我好静, 而民自正

Wo hao jing, er min zi zheng.

I remain tranquil (jing), and the people right themselves.

我无事，而民自富

Wo wu shi, er min zi fu.

I forsake ambition (wushi), and the people enrich themselves.

我无欲，而民自朴

Wo wu yu, er min zi pu.

I desire not (wuyu), and the people remain true and simple.

(Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

In other words, in the Daoist thought, the ills and turmoil of the world result from over-doing -- doing too much, having too much and desiring too much (youwei 有为). Weapons and devices lead to conflicts and competition; laws and prohibitions generate restrictions and disorder; strategies and schemes invite guile and calculation; ambitions of the state generate domination and disturbance (Dao De Jing, Chapter 57). Wise leadership of the state, as the Sage, should thus lead to forsake such deliberated acts and desires that create in the lives of the people disruptions, distractions and chaos that deviate them from the natural course of development. As chapter 63 of Dao De Jing also states, “Act with non-action. Pursue with no ends. Savor with no flavors. 为无为，事无事，味无味” stressing the approach of non-action in the Daoist leadership that avoids coercive interference, socially defined ambitions and material enrichment that shall give rise to a range of issues of social concern (and personal concern) (Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003). By adhering to the Wuwei principle, the leader not only acts minimally but also fosters freedom (Bender, 2016) and make space for the self as well as the common people and the myriad things in the world (wanwu, 万物) so they can develop of their own accord in harmony (Dao De Jing 37).

In addition to the meaning of “to act”, the *wei* as in Wuwei denotes another layer of meaning that helps to further illuminate this central concept in Dao De Jing. According to Chad Hansen’s reading, *wei* can be approached as individuals’ evaluative framework (1992); it means to deem, to regard, to believe, or to judge (Bender, 2016). In this sense, a significant element of Wuwei lies in a rejection of beliefs, understandings, judgments induced by and restricted to conventional social norms and values (Hansen, 1992). In fact, many ideals and concepts established in Dao De Jing are directly and critically responsive to some popular

paradigms of conventional thinking that infiltrate people's lives (back then and now), especially that is, Confucian ideologies on state expansion, authority, education and knowledge, ethics and morality (Roberts, 2019).

Simply put, Wuwei guides in both action and thought; it is simultaneously behavioral and cognitive (Bender, 2016). Some Daoist scholars also argue that the cognitive aspect of non-deeming in wuwei should hold more fundamental importance than the behavioral (Slingerland, 2003, p.89). Indeed, it is the non-deeming -- the realization and rejection of the conventional norms in thought first that shall inspire non-action in one's behavior. Eventually, the goal of Wuwei is to guide people in the way of Dao as people develop themselves actions that are unmediated by conventional knowledge and uncompromised by external interference (Bedner, 2016; Hansen, 1992). As such, actions become "accommodating and spontaneous" with the surrounding environment and in convergence with nature (Ames & Hall, 2003, p.42). Or in other words, it becomes actions of *Ziran* (自然), another central Daoist concept that shall be explained further below.

2.2 Ziran

A key Daoist concept and an essential characteristic of Dao, the Chinese term *Ziran* (自然) composed of two characters Zi 自 (self) and ran 然 (the state of being) is often translated as "self-so," "self-as-it-is" or "spontaneity." Closely relevant to the concept of Wuwei that calls for non-interfering actions, *Ziran* describes a state of being where things can take their natural, spontaneous course of movement as opposed to operating upon external forces that prompt conditioned practices (Cheng, 1986).

One illustration of the concept of *Ziran* in Dao De Jing as spontaneity and self-so points to the state of the common people under a Daoist governance, as stated in Chapter 17:

太上，下知有之。

Tai shang, xia zhi you zhi.

The best rulers were hardly known by their people.

其次，亲而誉之。

Qi ci, qin er yu zhi.

The next are rulers loved and praised.

其次，畏之。

Qi ci, wei zhi.

Next are those feared by the people.

其次，侮之。

Qi ci, ru zhi.

Last come those they disparage.

[...]

功成事遂，

Gong cheng shi shui,

With all things done and completed,

百姓皆谓我自然。

Bai xing jie wei wo zi ran.

The people say, “We are like this spontaneously (ziran)”.

(Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

This chapter instantiates the concept of Ziran as a natural state of the common people whose political leadership, in attaining the way of Dao, renders their acts and practices of governance natural and almost invisible (Roberts, 2019). With no need to disdain their rulers for unreasonable policies and interventions under such governance, or to fear them for violence and oppression, or to praise and love them for acts of justice and righteousness, the people find themselves in the most natural course of living where their energy previously occupied by the political and social matters is freed up, allowing them to live their lives according to their natural characters unmediated by external, conditioned factors that restrict their minds and behaviors (Roberts, 2019). In this process, all works of merit are accomplished, and the people are no longer aware of the presence of their leadership, finding instead peace and fulfillment in a way of life as it is, spontaneous and natural.

Interestingly, here some scholars notice that the interpretation of Ziran, as “unconditioned spontaneity” and “the natural state as it is”, in fact poses in itself a “dual

polarity” (Cooper, 2014). According to this line of thought, spontaneity suggests the freedom of the self to develop its own course, while the latter implies a “prescribed path” despite being a “natural” one (Cooper, 2014). To resolve such seemingly conflicting images of Ziran, one should delve deeper into classic Daoist texts to understand the compound compositions of Ziran intertwined within one another yet not without order.

To start with, one must not obfuscate spontaneity with randomness, or impetuosity, or capriciousness, or unfettered freedom (Ames & Hall, 2003; Cooper, 2014; Lai, 2007). As a Daoist term, spontaneity or self-so calls for following the natural characteristics of things so as to become unity with the surrounding environment and ultimately the earth and heavens at large (tian ren he yi 天人合一) (Ames & Hall, 2003). An appropriate metaphor is that of water. Free as it is, in its natural state it flows from higher to lower grounds. “Spontaneity” thus follows the way of “nature/the natural state of self-so” in the same token.

This is also why one should approach with great care many English texts of Dao De Jing that translate Ziran simply as *nature*. While nature, or the Mother Nature, is the literal translation of Ziran as a two-word phrase in the Chinese language, scholars point out that the objective, defining view of “nature” as a separate and opposing existence to the human world is a modern understanding and does not exist in ancient China (Liu & Wang, 2018). Instead, in Dao De Jing as well as other ancient Chinese literature, conceptualization of nature is often articulated as “tian 天 (sky)” and “di 地 (earth)” or as a phrase together “tiandi 天地 (the heavens and the earth).”

However, this does not mean that Laozi’s conception of Ziran excludes the natural world. While some scholars criticize a naturalistic understanding of Ziran as an imposition of contemporary environmentalist relevance (Lai, 2007), I read Ziran in Dao De Jing more comprehensively, as a combination of both the natural world (self-so) and spontaneity. It is a state of “naturalness” in convergence with nature (Liu, 1999; Liu & Wang, 2018). Such interpretation can also be supported by Chapter 25 of Dao De Jing which famously reads:

人法地

Ren fa di,

Human beings follow the Earth,

地法天

Di fa tian,

The Earth follows the Heaven,

天法道

Tian fa dao,

The Heaven follows the Dao,

道法自然

Dao fa Ziran,

Dao follows spontaneity (Ziran).

(Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

Perhaps one of the most well-known texts from Dao De Jing, this chapter illustrates the rules of order that operate underlying the life of all things including both the human and natural world. In the Daoist view, human beings are subject to the way of heavens and earth, all of which then follow the way of Dao. This Dao, however, is never supreme and dominating but also follows the way of Ziran, which in turn describes the movement of Dao (Cheng, 1986). After all, Dao is in itself a natural Ziran process, a spontaneous movement that takes its course without conditioned efforts or forces (Cooper, 2014). This stanza not only demonstrates that Ziran incorporates the concept of nature (the heavens and earth), but also it resolves the seemingly conflicting relationships of “spontaneity” and “natural state of self-as-it-is”: the spontaneity of the self follows nature and Dao.

The concept of Ziran is also amply instantiated by the works of Zhuangzi, another Daoist master after Laozi whose texts of vivid and eloquent narratives help to clarify many theory-based texts of Dao De Jing. In Zhuangzi, the characteristic of Ziran could be best illustrated by the Swimmer (Zhuangzi, Chapter 19 Mastering Life/达生) who is able to swim safely in peace in great turbulent waters that frighten many. His secret, however, could not be simpler. As he describes, “I go under with the swirls and come out with upward eddies. I follow water and never myself (从水之道而不为私). [...] I grew up by the water. I feel peace in the water. This is my natural disposition” (Burton, 2013).

Growing up by the water and also finding peace in it, the Swimmer develops his natural disposition that aligns with his environment – the water. Moreover, never does he impose upon the water a “course of [his] own” that he maneuvers to his own liking (Cooper, 2014). Instead, he follows the way of water (the Dao of water) as he constantly recognizes

and responds to its changing flows. In this way, he is able to play with water and eventually becomes one with it, following along the character of both the water and himself. Such is the state of Ziran, a state of being that is flexible, responsive, uncontrived yet nevertheless follows the most natural development of things.

2.3 Ziran-Wuwei

As two of the most essential Daoist ideals, the concepts of Ziran and Wuwei have inspired respectively rich Daoist readings and scholarship. More importantly, however, Ziran (Spontaneity) and Wuwei (Non-action/non-deeming) can also be conjugated as one phrase, Ziran-Wuwei or Wuwei-Ziran. Combined, this phrase insinuates the interweaving matrix of both concepts in relation to one another while delivering to the audience a more comprehensive and holistic view of the central Daoist ideal (Lai, 2007). Indeed, while Wuwei calls for non-action, or the absence of coercive actions and conventional ideologies, and Ziran advocates for a natural, spontaneous state of being, altogether the two supplement and correlate to one another in meanings and approaches to the way of Dao. In emphasizing the “relational interaction” of Wuwei and Ziran (Lai, 2007), the phrase highlights a state of being in which one takes no action that disturbs the way of nature and impedes the natural course of things (and the self). Instead, one engages with the surrounding environment in spontaneous ways that “nourish” the self and nature, imposing no external actions or normative thinking upon them (Nelson, 2019). As demonstrated by Zhuangzi’s narrative of the Swimmer in the previous session, she who exercises Wuwei in swimming reaches the state of Ziran. Follow and let follow the character of things as they are, and in this process of non-doing, everything comes into natural fruition (Dao De Jing, Chapter 37).

2.3.1 Interrelationality of Ziran-Wuwei

The interrelationality of Ziran-Wuwei can be better understood as one explores the Daoist view of the self. In Daoism, the self, spontaneous as it is, never exists in isolation but is constantly contextually situated in the living environment (Ames & Hall, 2003). In short, the self is interrelational. As Chapter 39 of Dao De Jing poetically says:

From ancient time, there were those who reached oneness, 昔之得一者,

The heavens in reaching oneness become clear, 天得一以清,
 The earth stable, 地得一以宁,
 The spirits animated, 神得一以灵,
 The river valleys full, 谷得一以盈,
 The myriad things live and thrive. 万物得一以生.
 (Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

Intricate as the texts appear to be, the prime message is clear that for everything in the world to unfold in the ways of Ziran-Wuwei, be it the heavens or earth or living creatures, it is imperative that the state of oneness, or unity, is realized. In other words, this stanza highlights a constant interaction with the surrounding environment or the larger macro-system to eventually merge with it in peaceful and empowering unity -- “oneness”. Indeed, the Daoist self is relational by disposition (Bruya, 2010). It persists not independently but “within an organic web of mutual influence” (Bruya, 2010, p.213).

Such relational interaction underlying the ideal of Ziran-wuwei could also be found in the narratives of Zhuangzi, especially in the story of the Master Butcher, Cook Ting (Zhuangzi, Chapter 3). As told in this chapter of Nourishing Life, Cook Ting craves an ox with rhythm that equals that of ageless masterpieces of music, his movements so smooth, natural that he appears to be dancing. A chopper at hand, he follows not what his eyes capture but where his senses lead him -- senses guided by the natural structures, cleaves and cavities inherent in the ox. While ordinary cooks replace their choppers frequently due to damage, a master like him finds no need to change his chopper whose edge remains as new after nineteen years of practice. Breaking out of the conventional practice of ox craving, he knows to follow the way of nature, letting his knife go with the structural intervals of an ox with no extra futile actions of force, hence his chopper always remains as fresh as coming right from the grindstone. Like the Swimmer, the Cook is another demonstration of Ziran-wuwei; his effortless, uncontrived actions are not only spontaneous in themselves, but also they follow and interact with the natural course of the subject, the ox. Thus, he is able to become oneness with his surroundings.

2.3.2 Simplicity of Ziran-Wuwei

According to the Daoist thought, practices of Ziran-wuwei on personal and societal levels naturally entail a way of life that is simple and down-to-earth, returning to a state of being that is pure and genuine (返璞归真). Simplicity is a key characteristic of Ziran-wuwei realized in the ideal sense. As explicitly shown in chapter 80 of Dao De Jing:

The state is small, its people few, 小国寡民。
 The people have no use for tools,
 That do great work of tens or hundreds, 使有什佰之器而不用,
 The people value lives,
 And thus, do not travel far, 使民重死而不远徙。
 Boat and cart, if kept at all, are not for ride, 虽有舟车, 无所乘之;
 Shield and armory are nowhere to be shown, 虽有甲兵, 无所陈之。
 Guide the people to ancient times,
 When they use knotted cords for signs, 使民复结绳而用之。
 Relish in their food, 甘其食,
 Delight in their clothes, 美其服,
 Find peace in dwellings, 安其居,
 Content with customs, 乐其俗。
 The neighboring states stand in view, 邻国相望,
 Sounds of chicken and dogs are echoed, 鸡犬之声相闻,
 People live till their last of days, 民至老死,
 Without coming back and forth to each other. 不相往来。
 (Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

This chapter represents an ideal, simple Daoist society where people live self-sufficiently with content, rather than relying upon the uses of devices, machinery or weapons for economic, social, and political gains. People may possess some forms of technologies yet have no need for use (Wuwei); people find joy and content in their ordinary lives and surroundings with no external forces of control (Ziran). As the highlight chapter of Dao De Jing, such is the imagery Laozi has for an ideal life of simplicity resulted from Ziran-Wuwei,

a way of life that also mirrors that of the glorious ancient times of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BCE) (Roberts, 2019).

2.3.3 Ziran-Wuwei as an overarching framework

Furthermore, Ziran-wuwei together as one phrase bears great significance in that it constitutes an “overarching framework” that comprehensively incorporates a series of other Daoist virtues and dispositions (Lai, 2007). It is encompassing, integrating qualities such as not-knowing (buzhi 不知), non-competing (buzheng 不争), simplicity (pu 璞), tranquility (jing 静), harmony (he 和), oneness (yi 一) and the list goes on. Such Daoist dispositions of Ziran-wuwei have also inspired or have found their echoes in a significant part of Western philosophical traditions led by Martin Heidegger who called for “letting be” (Gelassenheit) of things (Nelson, 2019), Jean-Jacques Rousseau who “rambles through the universe” letting “ideas follow their own bent without constraint” (Cooper, 2014), Immanuel Kant’s idea of nothingness (Palmquist, 2010), John Dewey’s notion of “philosophical fallacy” (Bender, 2016), Henry David Thoreau’s transcendental philosophy and his experiences of unity with nature at Walden Pond (Thompson & Xu, 2023) etc. Indeed, the Daoist ideal of Ziran-wuwei, simple and short as it is as a phrase, composes meanings, qualities and implications that have sparkled insights and practices throughout the course of two millennia both in East Asia and beyond.

3 IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Despite the lasting, far-reaching influences of Daoism, discussions of Daoist philosophy and its implications remain scarce and relatively new in modern academic scholarship. What's more, even among the current limited scholarship on Daoism, a major composition focuses upon either the political implications of texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi, such as the connections to political theories eg. Liberalism (Joshi, 2020; Yu, 2020; Bender, 2016; Brincat & Ling, 2014), or the naturalistic views of Daoist ideologies in terms of human relationships to the mother nature (Liu & Wang, 2018; Hasenkam & Sun, 2023; Pang-White, 2009). Unfortunately, the relevance of Dao to the field of education, to which Laozi dedicated several chapters throughout Dao De Jing, remains rather neglected.

With a careful and humbling exploration of Daoist concepts, especially that of Ziran-Wuwei explained in the previous chapters, one could ask now the following questions. What are the implications of Daoist ideals in education? How can the Daoist dispositions of Ziran-wuwei shed new lights upon today's education? How does it reimagine the purpose of education, rethink the approach towards knowledge, and reconceptualize the act of learning and teaching? My exploration of Daoist implications in education shall first begin with a critical discussion of the current purposes of education.

3.1 The Purpose of Education

Growing up in a test-oriented education system in China, I have believed that education serves a normative end. By reducing what should be holistic experiences of learning to rote-learning and standardized tests, education nourishes no creative minds but fosters repetition and compliance to authority. My four years of liberal arts college life in the US where I obtained my bachelor's degree, however, point me to a more progressive end of education. It is one that inspires and stimulates the minds and souls. Proudly celebrating exceptionalism, it challenges students to think more critically, creatively, and more in-depth to reach excellence. Knowledge becomes a means of liberation and a symbol of accomplishment, though admittedly a highly selective and exclusive one, only to those with access. Furthermore, my time in Japan and my understanding of its education system introduce me to another narrative. This one promotes and highlights the functionality of collectivity, producing individuals who shall fit right into their roles in the communal life of society. Last but not the least, having lived and studied in Denmark and now in Finland, I have seen a Nordic approach toward

education that emphasizes equity of outcomes (Sahlberg, 2016). Here, education is widely accessible and accommodating, nourishing in individuals a sense of life-long learning and applicability of knowledge beyond school.

Prompted by my diverse learning experiences in different parts of the world -- across geographic, linguistic and cultural borders, I find it imperative to first recognize from a critical perspective the compassing purposes of education in mainstream scholarship, before envisioning one for change that aligns with the dispositions of Ziran-wuwei from a Daoist perspective.

While the question of purpose in education will never fail to trigger a heated debate, if not a fierce argument, schools of thought on this topic could be generally condensed into three purposes, which states and societies draw upon to varying degrees: political citizenship, economic progress and social inclusion (Biesta, 2008; McArthur, 2011; Ali, 2017; Jackson, 2023; Busemeyer & Guillaud, 2023). Citizenship education is perhaps one of the most prevalent in education systems across national borders. The goal is to promote political literacy (or democratic citizenship), with a focus on knowledge and teachings about the rights and duties of citizens and the operation of the political system (Biesta, 2008). More often than not, citizenship education is built upon official views of what constitutes a good and responsible citizen in their immediate political environment (Biesta, 2008). It unfolds with a clear image of the kind of knowledge, skills and dispositions that students should develop in becoming good citizens (Biesta, 2008). The pledge of allegiance in US public schools, the singing of the national anthem and pledge of loyalty to the state every Monday morning in Chinese schools, both are good examples of a citizenship education. Simply put, citizenship education fosters political literacy within students as political citizens.

The economic purpose of education is more commonly accepted and recognized in today's world dominated by capitalism and the neoliberal market (Ali, 2017). The main theory in point here is the human capital theory (HCT). HCT is a comprehensive framework through which a wide spectrum of human activities is examined and analyzed (Tan, 2014). Placed at the center of such a theory is education, positioned as the main driving force behind economic development (Ali, 2017). According to this theory, individuals, along with their labor, skills and knowledge, are viewed as forms of productive and transferable wealth and capital. It is then through education that individuals develop and acquire essential characteristics, skills and knowledge that increase their potential human capital and economic productivity, ultimately contributing to the economic growth of society (Tan, 2014). Despite the voluminous critiques and concerns towards the HCT theory, it remains a mainstream

popular discourse in modern education, underlying the operations of many schools and higher institutions worldwide (McArthur, 2011). This economic focus of education, therefore, highlights its immediate practicality and transferability into economic gains (Tan, 2014).

In addition to political citizenship and economic efficiency, another school of thought on the purpose of education emphasizes social inclusion, where education is viewed as a tool that promotes social mobility (Busemeyer & Guillaud, 2023). By extending access to educational resources and opportunities to those from a lower socio-economic status, education should enable individuals to overcome socio-economic gaps and move up the social ladder. Thus, education, as believed, serves to mitigate inequalities and promote social inclusion and mobility (Busemeyer & Guillaud, 2023). My personal experience of growing up in one of the poorest neighborhoods in a populous city in central China yet eventually making my way to a prestigious higher institution in the US with scholarships ascertained this social function of education. Nevertheless, many critiques (Gu, 2023; Major & Weiner, 2020) also rightly point out that education is by no means a one-way ticket to upward social mobility. In fact, in most situations, promises of social mobility desperately fail due to workings of education (education policies, reforms, pedagogy etc) that tend to hinder if not worsen social inequalities (Major & Weiner, 2020).

To sum up, education can be mainly viewed as a tool to promote political citizenship, economic growth and social mobility. Yet it is important to point out that such conceptualization of education is deeply rooted in the modern way of understanding statehood, progress as well as development of modernity itself. Then, one should ask, how would *Dao De Jing* – a Chinese text dated back to thousands of years ago with ideals and values drastically different from our modern times – shed new light upon the purpose of education? What will be the implications of *Ziran-wuwei* in the purpose of education and the operations of learning and teaching in modern times?

As elaborated in the previous chapters, drastically different from the current market-oriented pursuit of progress and modernity, the ideal Daoist way of life calls for *Ziran-wuwei*, a spontaneous way of being and acting that align with the surrounding environments; it is an imagery of life that is simple, where individuals are able to grow and follow their natural characteristics (with the sounds of chicken and dogs heard in the vicinity). It is in this context that Daoism attaches to education an alternative set of purpose than the modern times. It does not call for political, economic, or social development. Rather, to an almost opposite end, Daoist traditions advocate for education that lets people return to a life of simplicity instead

of one driven by desires and ambitions (politically, economically and socially). It should guide people to become oneness with their environments in the practices of Ziran-wuwei in order to nourish their lives (yang sheng 养生) as opposed to accelerate their exhaustion. As read in chapter 56 of Dao De Jing:

Soften the keen edges 挫其锐;
 Reconcile the conflicts, 解其纷,
 Blend with the light, 和其光,
 Submerge with the dust, 同其尘,
 This is sublime oneness. 是谓玄同。
 (Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

A description of how to react to the environment in non-coercive and spontaneous ways, this stanza manifests again the key characteristic and practices of Dao, or Ziran-wuwei. In the face of harsh edges, it softens. In the face of conflicts, it resolves. Light or dust, it aligns to and becomes oneness of harmony. Such is what I believe to be an illustration of the purpose of education from a Daoist view: it guides individuals to become aware of and responsive to their interrelated environments in order to attain harmony. Such non-coercive responsiveness -- the essence of Ziran-wuwei -- responds to the “complex patterns of relatedness implicated in any event” (Ames & Hall, 2003). In other words, the Daoist disposition of responsiveness requires one to acknowledge the constant “relational interactions” in any aspect of one’s everyday life (Lai, 2007). Importantly, although those patterns are ever-changing and diverse in nature, appearing in their refiguration as constantly new and unique, Laozi believes that such novelty always occurs “within an already familiar context,” all of which constitutes “a fluid continuity” (Ames & Hall, 2003). Take for example again the Swimmer from Zhuangzi who follows the way of water than defies it to his caprice. The swimmer is constantly responsive to the changing patterns of water, yet the novelty will not confuse him who is familiar with water and follows it in the ways of Dao. Such is the significance of responsiveness. It is also the Daoist purpose of education. It is through education that individuals should learn to react to the environments of relatedness and engage themselves in an organic interplay of mutual influence (Bruya, 2010).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that being responsive to the surroundings does not represent a total submission to their flow, as the Daoist disposition of Ziran (self-so) retains

the natural characteristics of the self that should by no means be forsaken. Similarly, Wuwei is to be distinguished also from the passivity of doing absolutely nothing at all (Wang, 2019). In this sense, a balanced negotiation of the self and the environment in obtaining oneness of harmony becomes among the most difficult aspects of a Ziran-wuwei education. Indeed, I argue that a Ziran-wuwei education should serve the purpose of guiding individuals to develop their own responsiveness to the surrounding environment in harmonious ways that do not jeopardize their natural characteristics (self-so).

From a Daoist perspective, the current discourses of the purpose of education are deeply problematic. The cultivation of political citizenship, for example, conforms individuals to predetermined norms and conventional social values and thus it is fundamentally at odds with the non-deeming aspect of Wuwei which calls for a rejection of conventional paradigms of thought that are restrictive and repressing. Worse still is the aiming of economic progress in education. It is an apparent manifest of the opposite of Wuwei – Youwei (desiring too much and doing too much), at the cost of the spontaneous self-so of individuals. While the third purpose of education – the promotion of social mobility -- does not necessarily collide with Daoist concepts, it does not encompass a conceptualization of education as an important means to cultivating essential dispositions in individuals, namely, those of non-coercive responsiveness.

To live up to the proposed Daoist purpose of education as a cultivation of responsiveness to the interrelated environment, I will discuss in the following sections a necessary shift of understanding towards knowledge, the position of teaching as well that of learning derived from a Daoist epistemological framework.

3.2 The (re)conceptualization of knowledge

In order to develop through education spontaneous responsiveness to the surroundings of relatedness, one should, first and foremost, break free from the chains of knowledge, forms of knowledge that prescribe and make inherent certain paradigms of thought and actions, discouraging the cultivation of Ziran-wuwei in individuals. As Freire (1972) famously states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the ills of modern education point to, what he has termed, “banking education” in which students are regarded as mere recipients, or “depositories” of knowledge. More critically, the knowledge deposited through the banking method reproduces and reinforces the “prescription” of rule imposed by the oppressor, further consolidating the status-quo of the oppressed (Freire, 1972). Therefore, as Freire points out, in order for the

oppressed to recognize the situation of oppression as well as nourish the will and hope to surmount it, a major shift of education should be adopted, a key aspect of which being a rejection of imposed conventional “criteria of knowledge” (Freire, 1972).

However, despite Freire’s critique, this model of delivering knowledge from the end of teachers (depositors) to students (depositories) persists to this day as common educational practices in schools. In fact, to the grave concern to Freire, it could be found at both ends of the banking education those who do not lament but rejoice in the constant pursuit and harvest of knowledge. In some market-oriented institutions that endorse the Human Capital Theory, this act of depositing is also acknowledged and termed as “knowledge transfer” (McArthur, 2011). Knowledge, it seems, has become a noble cause; the cravings and desires for knowledge laudable. Yet as Moeller in his 2007 article poignantly points out, while Aristotle famously says in *Metaphysics*, “All men by nature desire to know”, who is to say that such desires to know are substantially different than bodily desires (Laozi)? Knowledge can become an “addiction”, says Moeller (2007) who suggests a more critical approach towards the unproblematically accepted pursuit of knowledge.

As early as two millennia ago, Daoists such as Laozi and Zhuangzi already warned of the danger of knowledge as well as of its excessive pursuit, both of which can be found pervasively in modern education. In applying Wuwei to our conceptualization of knowledge, Laozi calls for “not knowing” wuzhi or buzhi (无知/不知) in education. As chapter 71 of Dao De Jing reads:

知不知上

Zhi bu zhi shang

To understand [the value of] not-knowing is the highest,

不知知病

Bu zhi zhi bing

Not to understand [the danger of] knowing is an affliction.

(Roberts, 2019)

Indeed, from a Daoist viewpoint, *knowledge* should be approached with great care. Although often translated as *knowledge* in English, the Chinese term used in Daoist texts “zhi 知” in fact consists of several meanings such as “awareness” “understanding” “knowing” and

“wisdom,” incorporating a wide range of knowing and practices to the word “*knowledge*” (Buckingham, 2014; Ames & Hall, 2003). For Laozi, the excessive pursuit of knowledge already constitutes a contradiction of Wuwei that calls for non-coercive action and non-deeming. Yet similar to Wuwei that does not insinuate a rejection of all forms of doing, the Daoist view of knowledge does not negate the importance of knowledge all together (after all, Daoism itself is a school of knowledge). Rather, it calls to attention the distilled knowledge and conventional ways of thinking that are in fact rigid, limiting, and cumbersome, what facilitates not the cultivation of respective characters of individuals (Ziran-wuwei) but their obsession with efficiency, productivity and the incessant pursuit of knowledge (Xiong & Ju, 2023). According to the Daoist tradition characterized by “a master of satisfaction”, the perpetual human quest for knowledge entails a lack of knowing in “when to stop” and “when it is enough” (Moeller, 2007). Such insatiable desire for knowledge is oblivious to the danger of knowing more and more, at the cost of the nourishment of the self (Buckingham, 2014). Zhuangzi also eloquently explains Laozi’s concern of a non-critical pursuit of knowledge in the following passage: “My life has an end to it while knowledge has no end. To pursue something with no end with my limited life poses a great peril to myself. (吾生也有涯, 而知也無涯。以有涯隨無涯, 殆已.)”

Then to what extent should one pursue knowledge? Criticizing in his article knowledge consumption and production in mass-media which have rendered knowledge “all-pervasive and meaningless”, Moeller (2007) suggests from a Daoist view, “a minimization of knowledge” and a contained desire for knowing. Buckingham (2014) takes a step further to incorporate the notion of “optimal minimizing” from Coutinho (2013) in understanding the Daoist attitude towards knowing and non-knowing. Such is also the reading that I agree with, as it aligns with philosophies and implications of Ziran-wuwei in education -- “a minimal amount [of knowledge] necessary to cooperate symbiotically with our environments” (Coutinho, 2003, p. 58; Buckingham, 2014).

To conclude, a Ziran-wuwei education challenges the very conceptualization of knowledge. On the one hand, the Daoist thought problematizes an unquestionable acceptance of knowledge, some of which may well be restricting, cumbersome and even “oppressive” (Freire, 1978), impeding the cultivation of one’s responsiveness or spontaneity. On the other hand, the Daoist tradition opposes an incessant, almost addictive, pursuit of knowledge and calls for an optimal minimization of it.

3.3 The (re)positioning of teaching

In addition to a reconceptualization of knowledge, education approached from a Ziran-wuwei framework would also require a reconsideration of the position of teachers. Whilst Dao De Jing does not specifically elaborate upon the positions of teachers per se, it does, however, discuss amply the political and social role of the Sage in a Daoist leadership guiding the common people to a simple life of spontaneity and non-action. Applied to the classroom, the Sage inspires a transformative position of the teacher who recognizes the conventional thinking of rigidity and teaches from “an invisible position” that makes possible a nourishing environment for the students (Wang, 2019; Maki, 2016).

In Dao De Jing, Laozi describes the Sage as an ideal leader who leads without force or control, thus rendering the presence of leadership almost invisible to the common people (chapter 17). The Sage follows the way of Ziran-wuwei. They do not tire themselves with desires, ambitions or competitions, or pride themselves on accomplishments, dominance, or other forms of doing (Dao De Jing, Chapter 2, 64, 66, 67, 68). Rather, they minimize their actions and are unbound by conventional thinking (Wuwei); they stay attentive to the surrounding environment of mutual influence (Ziran), and teach with what goes beyond the spoken words (Dao De Jing, Chapter 2). Like Dao that gives birth to the myriad things in the world but does not seek to claim or occupy them (Dao De Jing, Chapter 9, 51; Wang, 2019), the Sage guides but takes a step back to let things take their own natural course and develop to their true characters (Roberts, 2019; Dao De Jing Chapter 64). They let it go and let it be.

The Ziran-wuwei character of the Sage can be translated into two major dispositions in teachers. First, similar to the Sage, teachers should recognize the rigid, fixed conventions in place that limit the cultivation of the self, both for the teachers and for the students. For Daoists, the Confucius school of knowledge, rituals and precepts that instruct carefully how individuals should think and behave in different situations and relationships are a good example of “a fixed world” of rigidity (Maki, 2016; Laozi). Despite the dominating influence of Confucian thought upon the society at the time, Laozi is able to recognize its fundamental flaws as he harshly criticizes its rigidity in constructing characters of fixed minds, thus (re)producing the system in place (Chang, 2011). Heavily influenced by Daoism on this aspect, John Dewey also sees the problem of rigidity in traditional education. He contends that education should not be like veneering of the wood -- an additional, fixed “outward product” (Dewey, 1925/2008, p.61, cited in Maki, 2016) that interferes and restricts the

cultivation of spontaneity (the “uncarved wood” as Laozi calls it) in the individual (Fech, 2018).

Here, I believe that a recognizance of such rigidity preempts a non-deeming (wuwei) attitude in teachers towards dualistic notions. Good and bad, right and wrong, sense and reason... these are all dualistic categories of naming. In Daoist thought, while various phenomena might be perceived and named differently in dualistic terms, all forms of existence in fact originate from oneness (Roberts, 2019; Dewey, 1925/2008; Dao De Jing, Chapter 1). Truth can in time turn into a lie; beauty into unattractiveness, and vice versa. Things are dynamic in their nature of change. The naming of things, however, are not. The naming of the world is a deliberate process where people create and recreate the world from their current perception and conception of it (Freire, 1978), not the organic display of its true character. As Zhuangzi also expresses, the path is made through walking upon it, the thing is actualized through naming (道行之而成，物谓之而然). A non-deeming attitude towards dualistic notions thus recognizes the natural dynamics of change and ultimately breaks free from judgements of dogmatism and finality (Ames & Hall, 2003).

In becoming non-deeming (Wuwei), teachers, therefore, should be mindful of the act of naming towards students that could potentially reproduce and reinforce certain realities and forms of oppression within both teachers and students. For example, the common dualistic paradigm of teachers being the depositors of knowledge and students being the depositories in school (Freire, 1978) is a naming of hegemony that teachers should recognize in order to dismantle the preexisting structure. Like the Sage who rejects the Confucius norms of order, authority and knowledge, and who learns instead from the cook, the butcher, the disabled man (Zhuangzi), a teacher who aligns with the way of Dao does not limit themselves to the position of teaching. Instead, they open up the possibilities of creating new realities for and from students with a non-deeming attitude that forsakes the convention of authority and normative thinking.

I think of my time at my undergraduate institution in the US when my major advisor in Political Science told me he was curious about the philosophy of *Doing-Nothing/Non-action (Wuwei)* applied to agriculture in some places of Japan, wondering if I had heard of this philosophy. Instantly intrigued, I embarked upon months-long research project with him to explore this brand-new topic in both Japanese and English, a journey that turned out of be one of my most fulfilling times in college. Much to my surprise and gratitude (and those of many others), this renowned professor -- free from many conventional ways of thinking and

naming -- is always ready to create new possibilities and imaginations both for him and for students. Indeed, in being non-deeming, teachers defy the conventional and make it possible to challenge the preexisting problematic mechanisms derived from traditional education that discourages “generous and free aspiration” in students (Dewey, 1925, p. 286, cited in Maki, 2016).

The second key implication of Ziran-wuwei dispositions in teachers lies in the teacher’s role in classroom that is not only invisible but also nourishing in essence. The notion of Wuwei as a rejection of coercive actions and external, impositional forces is particularly informative of the role of a teacher in the development of students and the cultivation of Daoist dispositions. Parallel to the Sage in *Dao De Jing* who governs by non-controlling leadership under which the common people live according to their natural character, almost unaware of the existence of governance, the teacher can also teach “from an invisible position” that fosters self-education and self-organization in classrooms (Wang, 2019). This implies that the teacher-student relationships become fluid, in which both teachers and students are given the trust and possibility to explore and act while engaging themselves in the local, surrounding environments without conventional constraints and restrictions (Wang, 2019).

An important aspect of such invisible position of teachers points to the use of silence, or teaching without words, in classroom as a pedagogical method (Lin, 2020; Xiong, 2022). As Daoists advocate, one should speak less, not more; let meanings nourish in the non-spoken, in the space of silence (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 2, 81). For the teachers, silence in the classroom could become a useful tool that filters out conventional thinking and action on a superficial level, generating instead a space of depth to engage with and respond to the self as well as the surrounding environments (Lin, 2020). Consequently, silence as a pedagogy will inspire more reflection and realizations that are deeply local and personal, what is truly spontaneous and self-so (Ziran) (Lin, 2020).

In a word, the repositioning of teacher asks the teacher to adopt the way of the Sage. Through a non-deeming attitude towards prevalent dualistic categories and acts of naming, the teacher strives to recognize the rigid conventional ways of thinking and avoid imposing them upon students. Additionally, the teacher teaches from a non-visible stance and adopts the use of silence or teaching without words as a pedagogical method to nourish in the students a true sense of spontaneity and self-organization.

3.4 The (re)positioning of learning

As the positioning of teaching shifts under a Ziran-wuwei framework, similarly a Daoist approach also reconsiders the positioning of the students in the pursuit of an education that guides individuals to develop their own responsiveness to the surrounding environment in harmonious ways. In this final session, I argue that a Ziran-wuwei learner is someone who learns through developing a holistic understanding of both the self and the local environment of constitutive relations. In this way, not only do they recognize the limits of conventional knowledge, but also they are able to find a way of living true to the self, without compromising the self-so to follow the conventional, the rigid, and the cumbersome that are accepted as the norm.

In aligning with Ziran-wuwei, a learner first has to recognize the very limits of learning and rediscover what to learn. As discussed in the *Reconceptualization of Knowledge* session, Daoist masters criticize the perpetual pursuit of knowledge as well as an unproblematic acceptance of it. As Laozi contends, “The Dao that could be spoken about is not the eternal Dao (道可道非常道)”. Indeed, sometimes the most important things are those that cannot be expressed or articulated in plain words. Zhuangzi further adds, on radical terms, that true wisdom dies with their people and what is left in the books is merely some residue of no use (Zhuangzi, Tiandao). If the conventional learning of knowledge is problematic, then the question arises as to what one should learn at all. Dao De Jing has also offered answers in this respect. In chapter 33, Laozi writes:

To know others is knowledge, 知人者智

to know the self wisdom. 自知者明

To conquer others is power, 胜人者有力

to conquer the self strength. 自胜者强

(Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

Contrary to the Confucian thought (“Paddle hard in the sea of knowledge that has no end (学海无涯苦作舟)”) that an accumulation of knowledge is key to the cultivation of the self (Roberts, 2019), Laozi questions the incessant desire to know/learn especially knowledge by and of other people. Instead of immersing oneself in the teachings and knowledge of others, learn about yourself; instead of making the endless efforts to compete with and get ahead of

other people, compete with the self. Indeed, for Daoists, to nourish the self, one should look no further than the very local existence and experiences of the self-being. Such notion also echoes the Western philosophical tradition led by John Dewey who argues for learning through returning to individual's everyday experience that are not governed by "ostensive principle" (Bender, 2016) or in Daoist terms, "conscious acts/coercive actions" that are the opposite of *Wuwei*. According to Dewey thought, the conventional learning that involves learning the external principle "identified, isolated, and abstracted from the flow of experience and is then used anachronistically and reduplicatively to rationalize an always-emergent history" (Ames, 2011 p.16, as cited in Bender, 2016) falls into what Dewey terms as philosophical fallacy (Bender, 2016). In Daoist terms, this philosophical fallacy describes everything that *Ziran-wuwei* is *not* in terms of one's approach towards learning and knowledge. It implies a compliance with the conventional rules of external actions, entailing a negligence of the immediate self and consequently jeopardizing one's uncarved experiencing of the surrounding life-world.

In other words, from the viewpoint of both Laozi and Dewey, one should learn from within rather than relying upon external products of perception and cognition (Bender, 2016). True learning, therefore, is grounded upon the spontaneous self and its mindful engagement with the surrounding environment through experiences of locality and mutuality. I think of how I first learned English at the age of 5. While the turn of the century signified for many people the leap of modern technology, life under my family's roof remained simple and basic. Resources were scarce for those who struggled hard just to eke out a living, let alone learning resources for a foreign language. Yet as I recall now, how I approached learning then in fact aligned with a *Ziran-wuwei* thought and practice, thanks to my mother's beliefs in non-action.

I remember that was a time when I was home-schooled. In the mornings, I would watch through the balcony the kids in the neighborhood leaving for school. Then I would return to my table, open the English textbook for children -- the only that we had -- and started doodling on the pages. The cassette was on. The same tape of the textbook played in the background day after day until exhausted. Then we would flip it for another play. I did not understand a word of English, but it did not stop me from persisting with this routine. My mother never told me what to do, or what she thought I should do. The English textbook and tape she bought for me were her means of guidance, and then she let go, leaving me the learner to explore or in fact do pretty much nothing at all in that environment yet at the same time to be able to exist in harmony with it. It was a time when I, as a five-year-old, had not developed any keen desire for knowledge, and I couldn't care less about English as a

something to learn. All I did was to doodle with my sister on the textbook, adding to or changing the very design of the English alphabets and letters, or staring into the nothingness in the air, or got distracted sometimes by the birds passing by the window.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, this young child's innocent state of "doing nothing" or "not knowing anything to do" in fact speaks right to Laozi's notion of Ziran-wuwei. Other than the fact that she is unfettered by the perception of social conventions and external principles for actions (wuwei), a young child also constantly and almost intuitively responds to and engages with the surroundings according to her natural character of spontaneity (Ziran). Before I could realize it, I was listening to the tape and playing with the textbooks, and one day I suddenly understood what the tape was saying. And I remember it till this day; the very first lines are "What's this?" "It's the letter A." Moreover, away from the conventional system of school education at the time, I had plenty of time and freedom to participate in my surrounding world, the empty walls, the neighboring houses, the big black dog in chains downstairs. They all registered in my mind vividly till this day, reminding me time and again of how much I had really *seen* them, paid attention to them and engaged with them. Indeed, this entire experience resided in my memory twenty years later till this day, when I have become a fluent English speaker and proudly an artist and a writer. The level of learning, "knowing" and experiencing I had obtained at the time is irreplicable, made possible only through "responsive and efficacious participation" in the surrounding environment (Ames & Hall, 2003, p.182).

Laozi has also explicitly discussed an ideal learning achieved through local and personal engagement with the environment of mutual influence. As it is eloquently put in De De Jing Chapter 47 (admittedly one of the most controversial chapters of all):

Venture not beyond the doors and know the world, 不出户, 知天下;
Peer not outside the window and know the way of heavens, 不窥牖, 见天道。
The farther one goes, the less one knows, 其出弥远, 其知弥少。
This is why the Sage knows without going far, 是以圣人不行而知,
Understands without seeing, 不见而名,
And gets things done without doing, 不为而成。
(Roberts, 2019; Ames & Hall, 2003)

While a literal reading of this chapter stresses its negativity as seen in the extreme notion of “shutting down” the outside world almost entirely (Roberts, 2019), my reading agrees with that of Ames and Hall (2003) who suggests Laozi’s emphasis on the local “knowing.” One does not need to travel the entire world to know it or initiate as many encounters as possible to know human beings. Instead, Laozi contends that one should learn to engage with the self in order to learn about other people and to participate fully and responsively in the local life-world in order to know the bigger world. It is those genuine and engaging local and focal relationships (Ames & Hall, 2003) that enable one to be and learn spontaneously, unconfined by predetermined principles of deeming and doing. In fact, leaving the local relations and traveling far for knowledge or accomplishments already stray from the dispositions of Ziran-wuwei, as they clearly position oneself as “knowing” and “doing” (Ames & Hall, 2003; Roberts, 2019). While, again, this does not deny the meaningfulness of any kind of travel, it reminds the readers of where the most important learning occurs that aligns with Ziran-wuwei. A focus on one’s locality is not only conducive to knowing, but also “a necessary condition” for it (Ames & Hall, 2003, p.182).

To sum up, a Ziran-wuwei education reconstructs the position of learners. It suggests a Daoist way of learning that is achieved through engagement with the self and the local surroundings rather than distant lands and peoples. Speaking also to the philosophy of John Dewey, a Ziran-wuwei learner returns to the “uncarved” everydayness, the locality of life unbound by “ostensive principles” (Fech, 2018; Maki, 2016; Bender, 2016). As Chapter 48 of Dao De Jing reads, rather than learning more in perpetual pursuit of knowledge, through a Daoist way of learning and being, one *unlearns* the conventional, the cumbersome, and the rigid. One unlearns continuously to the level of nothing-ness. Then through doing nothing, nothing remains undone (为学日益，为道日损。损之又损，以至于无为，无为而无不为) (Dao De Jing, Chapter 48).

4 CONCLUSION

The Daoist thought has in the course of its thousand-year history powerfully influenced many aspects of the political, social and philosophical traditions both in East Asia and beyond (Roberts, 2019). In this thesis, I have examined in depth from a hermeneutic approach the Daoist ideology of Ziran-wuwei and explored upon a Critical Theory framework its rich implications in education, specifically that is, the purpose of education, the reconceptualization of knowledge, the repositioning of teaching and that of learning. Importantly, this study acts as a postcolonial and subaltern endeavor that aims to challenge from a critical perspective the knowledge production and consumption that is heavily western dominated. Drawing upon century-old classical Chinese Daoist texts, Dao De Jing, it seeks to offer an alternative imagination and epistemological framework towards established ways of thinking and practices in the world, especially in the field of education.

In Daoist terms, Wuwei (non-action) calls for the absence of coercive doing and conventional deeming, while Ziran (Spontaneity) advocates for the spontaneous development of things in accordance with its character and surrounding environments. Conjugated as one phrase, Ziran-wuwei insinuates the interweaving matrix of both concepts in relation to one another (Lai, 2007), delivering to the reader a more comprehensive understanding of this central Daoist ideal. Simply put, a Ziran-wuwei approach highlights a state of being in which one engages in spontaneous ways with the surrounding environment of relatedness with minimum impositional actions and normative paradigms of thinking.

While Daoist philosophies have been widely studied and applied in politics and social studies, many of its implications make the Daoist ideologies explicitly educational (Wang, 2019). Applied in education, a Daoist approach suggests a Ziran-wuwei education that serves the purpose of guiding individuals to develop their own responsiveness to the surrounding environment in harmonious ways that do not jeopardize their natural characteristics (self-so). To live up to such a purpose, first, a reconceptualization of knowledge is rendered necessary. A Daoist education challenges the incessant pursuit and unquestioned acceptance of knowledge and conventional thinking that are fundamentally limiting and that interfere with the individuals' spontaneity. Second, the positions of teachers in the classrooms should be reconsidered as well. Following the way of Dao, the teacher recognizes the conventional thinking of rigidity through a non-deeming (wuwei) attitude towards dualistic categories of naming. Like the Sage in non-controlling and non-claiming leadership, the teacher takes an invisible stance in teaching and appreciates the use of silence as a pedagogical method to

nourish self-learning as well as true spontaneity (both in terms of thinking and acting) from the students. Third, in addition to that of teachers, a Ziran-wuwei educational framework is also especially informative of an alternative, Daoist position of learners. Aligning with the Daoist critique of knowledge, a Ziran-wuwei learner recognizes the limits of knowledge and rediscovers for themselves what to learn. True learning, as argued, is made through a holistic understanding of the self and local environments of relatedness. As Laozi contends, one need not travel far or bury deep into books of intricate terms and content to become “knowing” or “knowledgeable” (Dao De Jing, Chapter 47). Instead, one should seek knowledge that is intrinsically local, rising from one’s responsive participation in their local and focal relationships and environments (Ames & Hall, 2003).

Admittedly, the challenges of practically adopting a Daoist framework towards education loom large in today’s modern world. As mentioned in earlier sessions, one key challenge lies in the intricate nature of Daoist texts of Dao De Jing which pose great difficulties in understanding and at the same time open up the possibilities of interpretation. Thus a Ziran-wuwei approach itself could be understood and put into practice in various ways. Another major challenge points to the non-conventional paradigms of thinking of Daoism that conflict with dominated ideologies in learning and teaching, especially systematically. One could fairly ask the poignant question: How can a Ziran-wuwei framework be useful for approaching subjects such as STEM that build upon the urge to accumulate knowledge and understand the unknown?

I argue that it is still highly relevant. The Daoist view of knowledge does not negate the pursuit of knowledge all together, but calls to our attention forms of knowledge that potentially distill certain normative paradigms of thinking and interfere with one’s development of Ziran and Wuwei. From a Daoist perspective, whatever subjects one studies or teaches, knowledge should not reproduce ways of thinking that are rigid, limiting and cumbersome. Instead, it should contribute to the development of the spontaneous self in accordance with the surrounding environments, like the Swimmer to the water. Granted, it could be quite difficult to envision how a Daoist education could survive in today’s world that operate in ways that are drastically different from its ideologies, if not to the sheer opposite. Yet I believe in the importance of first imaging an alternative narrative of approaching the world, as the goal of this thesis. It has been my dream to write about Daoism for thesis and introduce its central dispositions to the readers in JYU and I believe my goals have been met. What could be further supplemented in this writing is more discussion on how

Daoist philosophies in fact resonate with, if not directly inspire, some major Western philosophy traditions. A proper discussion of the common ground of both traditions will most likely facilitate readers' understanding the elusive Daoist concepts while functioning as a mutual space in the act of intercultural communication of this writing.

To sum up, in this thesis, I have presented a detailed discussion of the central Daoist disposition of *Ziran-wuwei* and how it can be used as an alternative epistemological framework in rethinking the purpose and practices of education. Intricate as ancient Daoist texts might appear to be at initial reading, simultaneously *Ziran-wuwei* in fact could not be any simpler. It constitutes a way of seeing, knowing, thinking and being in the world that prompts minimum acting and that responds to the surrounding environments in natural ways. Its tradition of thought is largely divergent from current dominated discourses of progress and efficiency, yet it offers more imagination upon living and experiencing in this world in ways that return to a state of uncarvedness and simplicity (Laozi). It is also in the simple state of being and doing that nothing remains undone. Importantly, a true understanding of such philosophy and its implication requires a life-long being and living that align with the way of Dao, the dispositions of which require in turn a life-long exploration and contemplation.

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