

Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism

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CHINESE THINKERS call their highest reality *Tao*. *Tao* is the origination, destiny, creative principle, as well as final cause of all things in the world. Yet in its ultimate aspect *Tao* is conceived to be *wu*, nothing. This paper attempts to explore the various meanings of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching*, "The Canon of Tao and Nature" (ca. 600-300 B.C.), which, being one of the earliest philosophical texts, contains some of the purest and most original metaphysical speculation done by the Chinese. It has also remained the source of inspiration for all later thinkers.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, *wu* (non-being) and *yu* (being) form a polarity in the notion of *Tao*, *wu* being the opposite of *yu* and productive of *yu*. This is clear in many chapters in the *Tao Te Ching* (1, 10, 11, 14, 34, 40).

Wu literally means "there-is-not," "nothing," "the negative." In the *Tao Te Ching*, *Tao* is primarily described as the "not" and "no": *Tao* has no name, no knowledge, no action, no desire, etc. *Tao* is *wu*, the "not." *Wu* is not merely the negation of all limitations and determinations, it contains in itself no affirmation at all. *Wu* is *ch'ung*, the empty, *hsü*, the vacuous;¹ it has no content whatsoever. Because *Tao* is ultimately *wu*, even *Tao*'s existence is said in chapters 4 and 6 to be a matter of question.

To Westerners trained in the tradition of the philosophy of being, the *Tao Te Ching*'s idea of the ultimate as "nothingness," the "not," the "empty," can be very puzzling. In Western philosophy generally, the negative is an inherent character of finite things. Non-being means

¹ Cf. chapters 4 and 5. The *Tao Te Ching* is also known as the *Ch'ung Hsü Tao Te Chen Ching*, or *The Canon on the Empty and Vacuous Tao and Te*.

the absence or negation of being; while being is equated with the real, non-being is found only in the world of appearance. God is Being *par excellence*. In the West, except in Neoplatonism and certain mystical currents, the highest principle is Being, whether conceived as Essence, Existence, or the identity of the two. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, is voicing the Western way of thinking when he says:

Thou therefore, Lord, madest them; Who art beautiful, for they are beautiful; Who art good, for they are good; Who art, for they are; yet are they not beautiful nor good, nor are they, as Thou their Creator art; compared with Whom, they are neither beautiful, nor good, nor are.²

Wu as a philosophical notion proves to have lost much of its original appeal even to the Chinese. For Wang Pi (226-249), the most authoritative commentator of the *Tao Te Ching*, the concept of *wu* is restricted to what is formless and nameless. His commentary on the lines, "Nameless, the beginning of heaven and earth; Named, the mother of ten thousand things," in the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* reads:

All *yu* (being) has begun with *wu* (non-being). Therefore when there is yet no form nor name, it is the beginning of ten thousand things. When there are forms and names, there are things to grow, educate, protect and cover, this is to be the Mother. What this means is that Tao, formless and nameless, is the beginning of ten thousand things. The ten thousand things depend on it to begin, depend on it to complete, but no one knows how. This is called to go to the origin of origins. . . . Ten thousand things begin as the small and then become complete, begin as *wu* (nothing) and then are born.

For Wang Pi, *wu* is the origin of all things because it is the original state of all things. Things were non-existent before; now they exist, but eventually they are to return to non-existence.

This interpretation of *wu* offered by Wang Pi, though it has been adopted by many commentators after him, does not seem to be very satisfactory. When we come to Kuo Hsiang (d. 312), *wu* as a principle to account for the generation of all things becomes quite unintelligible, therefore dispensable. He says:

Since *wu* (non-being) is *wu* (non-being), it cannot give birth to *yu* (being). Before *yu* is born, there is nothing to produce *yu*. Therefore who gives birth to what is born? All things come to be by themselves.³

² *Confessions*, XI, 4.

³ Commentary on the *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 2.

According to Kuo Hsiang, there can be no movement from non-being to being, or from potentiality to actuality; all movements are self-movements from one state of actuality to another state of actuality. Being must come from being. *Wu*, which is according to the *Tao Te Ching* productive of all things, becomes for Kuo Hsiang a mere non-entity. *Wu* is simply nothingness or non-being; as such it is totally impotent to give rise to *yu*.

Although for Kuo Hsiang *wu* as non-being or nothingness cannot give rise to *yu* (being), chapter 40 of the *Tao Te Ching* clearly states that *wu* generates *yu*, which generates all things in the world. Hence *wu* as nothingness that generates being must be a different nothingness from what Kuo Hsiang was able to conceive. Our own investigation of the *Tao Te Ching* yields us, accordingly, three interrelated meanings of *wu*.

WU AS IDENTITY OF THE SMALL AND THE GREAT

One easily recognizable meaning of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching* is that *Tao* as *wu* is both the extremely small and the extremely great, or it is the identity of the small and the great. In chapters 14 and 35 we are told that *Tao* is so extremely small that any time we try to grasp *Tao* with our senses we find that it totally eludes our grasp. Chapter 14 reads:

To look at it, it is *not* seen,
 It is named the extremely dim.
 To listen to it, it is *not* heard.
 It is named the extremely faint.
 To grab at it, it is *not* caught,
 It is named the extremely small.
 These three *cannot* be comprehended.
 Thus they blend into one.
 Its (coming) up is *not* light,
 Its (going) down is *not* dark,
 Unceasing, continuous, it *cannot* be named,
 Again it returns to *no* (*wu*)-thing.
 Therefore it is called the shape of *no(wu)*-shape,
 The sign of *no(wu)*-thing.
 Therefore it is said to be illusive and evasive.

Chapter 35 reads:

Tao, (the way it comes) out of the mouth,
 Is so mild that it has *no* taste.

To look at it, it is *not* enough to be seen.
 To listen to it, it is *not* enough to be heard.
 To use it, it is *inexhaustible*.

In these chapters *Tao* is said to be altogether beyond our senses, thus non-appearing because of its extreme minuteness in every way. *Tao* is *wu* or non-being due to its extreme smallness. Yet although it is extremely small, chapter 35 says: "To use it, it is *inexhaustible*."

On the other hand, in chapters 25 and 41 *Tao* is said to be non-appearing and beyond our senses exactly because it is the extremely great. Chapter 41 says:

Great square has *no (wu)* corner,
 Great vessel is slow to complete,
 Great sound is faint,
 Great sign has *no (wu)* shape,
Tao is hidden and has *no (wu)* name.

In chapter 25 we read that *Tao* is nameless, yet

If forced to name it,
 I say (it is) "Great."
 (To say) "Great" is to say "disappearing."

Tao is *wu*, "nothing," "the not," because it is both the extremely small and the extremely great. Either as the small or the great *Tao* is faint, formless, and nameless; it is beyond the limit of appearance; therefore it is *wu*, nothing, or the non-appearing. *Wu* in this respect is the absolute state of *Tao* in which the great and the small become identified. To borrow from Nicholas of Cusa, keeping in mind that to him God is positive fullness of being, we may say that *wu* is the "coincidence of opposites"; it is the absolute maximum which coincides with the absolute minimum. In chapter 45 this idea is clearly present. We read:

Great perfection is like the incomplete,
 Its use is *inexhaustible*.
 Great fullness is like the empty,
 Its use is endless.
 Great straightness is like the bent,
 Great art is like the artless.
 Great eloquence is like the inarticulate.

When a quality exceeds its ordinary limit, it appears the same as its opposite. The most perfect appears to be, coincides with, the

imperfect, etc. The absolute, from which all opposites come and to which all opposites return in order to become identified, to "blend into one" (chapter 14), itself does not appear. This is one meaning of *wu*. *Tao* is *wu*, non-being or nothing because it is the Absolute underlying all the relative things that are. Professor Bodde's interpretation of *wu* is close to this first meaning of *wu* we have discussed. He says:

Non-being definitely does not mean actual "nothingness." It is simply a convenient name for what is really indescribable and, therefore, strictly speaking, unnamable: the state which is different from, or ontologically prior to, the state of being of our own organized, finite universe. In the same way the Buddhists commonly refer to the world of fluctuating phenomenal existence as that of being,⁵ but to the permanent reality underlying this phenomenal flux as non-being.⁴

We should like to point out here that *wu* as "the permanent reality underlying this phenomenal flux" is not ineffable like the God of Christian mystics, nor is it impassive like the One in Neoplatonism. It is true that in a way *Tao* does not suffer any change; chapter 25 says that *Tao* "stands alone and alters not." Yet even as *wu* it is extremely doubtful that *Tao* could be regarded as totally transcendent like the Christian Godhead or the Buddhist *Nirvana*.

In saying that the ultimate principle must be grasped as the "not," the *Tao Te Ching* has no lack of company. In the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* we read: "He, the Self, is to be described by No, No."⁵ But the *Tao Te Ching* is perhaps alone in portraying this "not" as moving forward to become the "is." *Tao* as the ground of the changing world is not itself immutable or unchanging. Rather, all things change because *Tao* is itself change. The commonly accepted interpretation of *wu* since Wang Pi as a kind of pervasive nothingness seems to have been due to the influence of Buddhism. Wang Pi approached the *Tao Te Ching* with the central idea of *wu* as pure nothingness or vacuity without at the same time grasping it mainly as pure motion. The Buddhist idea of nothingness is a static nothingness which does not move forward to become all things. *Tao*, however,

⁴ Derk Bodde, "Harmony and Conflict in Chinese Philosophy," *Studies in Chinese Thought*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 57-58.

⁵ Nicol Macnicol, ed., *Hindu Scriptures* (New York: Dutton, 1938), Fourth Adhyāya, p. 98.

is the mother of all under heaven, it gives birth to all things in the world.

WU AS PURE MOTION

This leads us to another meaning of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching*. *Wu* is non-being in the sense that it is pure movement or life. This dynamic and organic aspect of *wu* is most clearly stated in chapter 40:

Returning is the way Tao moves.
Gentle is the way Tao functions.
Ten thousand things under heaven are born of *yu*,
Yu is born of *wu*.

From the above lines we learn a number of things about *Tao*, which help to throw light on the meaning of *wu*. The first line tells us that *Tao* moves, that it is a dynamic, not inert, principle. In the same line we also learn that *Tao* moves by reversion, it is a movement that returns to itself. The notion of reversion, a familiar one in the *Tao Te Ching* (cf. chapters 16 and 28), is also present in chapter 25 where we read that *Tao* "moves cyclically without coming to an end." It is understandable that *Tao* moves by reversion because only a reversible or cyclical movement can keep on going without coming to an end, and thus is eternal, as the Greeks also saw.

The second line tells us that *Tao* does not move violently but in a weak and gentle manner, it works so faintly that its movement is hardly felt or noticeable.

In the third line we learn that *Tao* produces all things in the world. *Shen*, to give birth to, is the most important function of *Tao*, at least from the point of view of the ten thousand things. *Tao* is thus not merely a dynamic principle, it is an organic, life-producing principle.

From the last two lines we learn that *Tao* as the generative or life-producing principle has two aspects: *Wu* and *yu*. *Yu* gives rise to all things in the world, yet *yu* itself is generated from *wu*. *Wu* is the ultimate principle which by producing *yu*, generates all things in the world.

Thus chapter 42 reveals to us a second, and in our view more important, meaning of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching*. *Wu* is non-being or nothingness because it is a gentle reversible motion that gives birth to all things in the world. In the *Tao Te Ching*, *Tao* is *wu*, indefinable, nameless, shape of no-shape, sign of no-thing, illusive and evasive (chapter 14) exactly because *Tao* is motion, a motion that produces all things.

Precisely because *Tao* is the mother of all things that exist, its own existence becomes a question. To exist would mean to be limited in the power to change, it means to have a residue which is incapable of change. Such is the case of all things that exist relatively; the residue contained in relative existence must be negated by *wu*; chapter 4 says that *Tao* blunts the sharp, unties the entangled, subdues the bright, and assimilates the dust. Because of this, *Tao* is none of these things, it is *wu*, nothing. *Tao* is nothing because *Tao* is pure motion without any residue. *Wu* means the negation of anything incapable of following change all the way, it is the total dissolution of the static and unchanging.⁶

This second meaning of *wu* as pure motion includes the first meaning of *wu* as the identity of the great and the small, as the Absolute from which all things come and to which all things return. In chapter 25 we read that *Tao* is nameless, yet

If forced to name it,

I say [it is] "Great."

[To say] "Great" is to say "disappearing."

[To say] "Disappearing" is to say "far away."

[To say] "Far away" is to say "return."

Tao is the "great" which yet "disappears" and becomes the "far away," thus it becomes the small, and the small "returns" and becomes again the "great." Here it is revealed to us that *Tao* is not just the abstract identity of the great and the small. *Tao* is the identity of the great and the small because, in its reversive movement, it is itself the great that disappears to become the small and the small that returns to reappear as the great. Neither is *wu* the impassive Absolute from which all things are derived and to which all things return as

⁶ Being is capable neither of movement nor of creation, as Parmenides rightly insisted. Only something accompanied by non-being is capable of motion, as the Greek atomists pointed out. Only pure nothingness can be pure motion and thus be most fecund and creative—this is what the *Tao Te Ching* teaches. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, there is no being that does not contain non-being within itself. Even an atom would contain empty space within itself; thus it is not unchanging, but changing.

Incidentally, Sartre shares an insight with the *Tao Te Ching* in saying that nothingness alone is free, free to act and create, though he equates this nothingness with human consciousness, whereas in the *Tao Te Ching* as the power of nature nothingness is totally unconscious. Further, the freedom of the Sartrean nothingness is doomed to non-fulfillment, but *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching* is not only most powerful; it is that which fulfills all.

to their eternal rest. Rather *wu* has literally given birth to *yu* which has given birth to all things. *Tao* is a working principle. The way it works is not by a sudden fiat, but is weak and gentle, like a mother patiently carrying her child until its birth.

WU AS THE EMPTY

This leads to the third, the most concrete and illuminating meaning of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching*: *wu* means the empty or the hollow. There are in the *Tao Te Ching* three images of *Tao* as the empty. The first one is in chapter 4 where *Tao* is compared to an empty container, a container which contains nothing,⁷ yet from which all things come.

Tao is like an empty bowl,
 Yet in being used it is not depleted.
 Fathomless like deep water,
 It seems to be the ancestor of all things.
 (It) blunts the sharp,
 Unties the entangled,
 Subdues the bright,
 Assimilates the dust.
 So dark, it only seems to exist.
 I do not know whose son it is,
 It seems to have preceded god.

By saying "Tao is like an empty bowl," the *Tao Te Ching* cannot mean that the empty bowl itself is the inexhaustible ancestor of all things, but rather all things issue forth from its emptiness. This agrees with the third line where the emptiness of *Tao* is compared to deep water. *Tao* is the dark, unfathomable depth, which is yet the origin as well as the destiny of all things.

⁷ The notion of *wu* as the empty in the *Tao Te Ching* does not correspond to our understanding of empty space today. The empty or void in the *Tao Te Ching* is rather identified with air. In chapter 4 the bowl is empty, but it contains air; in chapter 5 the bellows is empty, likewise it contains air; in chapter 6 the valley is hollow, again it is not a vacuum. All three images of *wu* as the empty give us the hollow but not the absolutely empty. Such emptiness, the emptiness of air, is considered in Taoism to be the ultimate state of all things. Notice that the notion of *wu* as the emptiness of air readily lends theoretical ground to the cultivation of breathing exercises as a practical method to reach union with *Tao*.

This is the third meaning of *wu*, *Wu* is an emptiness without an origin: "I do not know whose son it is." It is an emptiness that precedes all origins: "It seems to be the ancestor of all things." "It seems to have preceded god."⁸ *Wu* indeed is pure emptiness, the existence of which is a matter of question: "So dark, it only seems to exist." Yet this emptiness is the inexhaustible fountain of all things: "In being used it is not depleted."

The empty bowl imagery of *wu* in chapter 4 fits in with the first meaning of *wu* as the Limitless behind the limited things that war and are entangled with each other. It blunts the sharp, unties the entangled, subdues the bright, assimilates the dust. As the emptiness of the empty container, *wu* is the stillness or quietude that underlies the phenomenal world. Yet this deep stillness does not lay still, but motion gradually stirs from within it; the emptiness of *Tao* surges up to become all things in the world. This is the second meaning of *wu* we have discussed: *wu* is nothingness because it is pure motion, a motion that gently gives birth to all things in the world. This second meaning of *wu* as pure motion that gives rise to all things is vividly captured in chapter 5.

Between heaven and earth,
How like a bellows it is!
Empty and yet it is not exhausted,
Moving and yet it pours out ever more.

Heaven and earth are like the enclosure of the bellows which keeps on pouring out due to its emptiness. Such an emptiness is a moving emptiness and in its movement it produces all things. Because the bellows is empty, it blows in and out without exhausting itself.

WU AS FEMALE PRINCIPLE

The reference of *wu* to the emptiness of a container, whether it is a vessel in chapter 4 or a bellows in chapter 5, must now be connected with the idea of *wu* as the emptiness of the female. *Tao* is said again and again in the *Tao Te Ching* to be a female principle (1, 6, 10, 20, 25, 52, 61): it is empty, dark, and yielding, all characteristics of the female. Let us note that chapter 4 also speaks of *Tao* as the fathom-

⁸ The character *ti*, commonly understood as god, originally meant the first ancestor of the ruling family.

less deep water, a notion basic to *k'un*, the second hexagram, the representation of the mother and the earth in the *Book of Change*. Further, the emptiness of the bellows in chapter 5 is analogous to the emptiness of the female. In chapter 6 *Tao* is literally compared to the dark female animal or the valley spirit that engenders heaven and earth.

The valley spirit does not die,
It is called the dark female animal.
The door of the dark female animal
Is the root of heaven and earth.
Lingering, it only seems to exist,
Yet its use is inexhaustible.

In chapter 6 we do not find the characters *ch'ung* or *hsü*, denoting the empty, which are used in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Still the notion of emptiness is clearly present. The valley is like a vessel, it is hollow the way a vessel is hollow. The reference to the door again points to the existence of emptiness, for the door is an opening to a hollowness within. This time it is not just any door, but the door of the female animal, *p'in*. Chapter 6 in saying that the root of heaven and earth is the door of the female animal is literally determining *Tao* to be a mother principle.

It does not seem to us simply a coincidence that chapters 4, 5, and 6 in a row discuss the same topic, the fertile and dynamic power of *Tao* due to its emptiness or *wu*, and in metaphor after metaphor try to capture and put into concrete terms the meaning of *Tao's* emptiness.

The analogy of *Tao* in chapter 4 as a bottomless empty bowl which "in being used" "is not depleted" does not fully reveal the organic side of *Tao's* emptiness. The empty bowl imagery gives us a static picture of *wu*. This fits in with the first meaning of *wu* as the Absolute from which all things come and to which all things return. In chapter 5, which compares *Tao* to the bellows at work ("empty yet it is not exhausted, moving and yet it pours out ever more"), we are given the idea of a dynamic, productive, and ever working emptiness. This fits in with the second meaning of *wu* as pure motion which has produced all things. The analogy of *Tao* in chapter 6 as the female animal and the valley spirit which "only seems to exist, yet its use is inexhaustible," does full justice to *Tao* as an organic productive principle. Now *Tao* is said to be the living spirit (*shen*^b) of the valley. Since the fertility of the valley is the fertility of the female, *wu* is finally revealed to be the emptiness of the female. Here we see that the third meaning of *wu* as the emptiness of the female productive power encompasses the first two meanings.

There is thus in these chapters a progressive approach to the dynamic and productive nature of *Tao*. The success varies, but the intention of these chapters remains the same: it is to show that the emptiness of *Tao* is an inexhaustible, productive, organic emptiness.

From the foregoing we are led to the conviction that the idea of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching* must be rooted in the belief that the female is the seat of productivity. The female productive power is productive by virtue of its nothingness. Since according to the *Tao Te Ching*, *wu* is prior to and productive of *yu* (chapter 40), the *Tao Te Ching* must regard the mother as mainly responsible for the birth of the child.⁹

When we understand that in the *Tao Te Ching* the ultimate principle of the world is regarded as a mother principle, we can explain why emptiness is exalted above the full (chapter 15), the dark is prior to and productive of the bright (chapter 28), the low-lying is more powerful than the high-rising (chapter 61) and non-being is more ultimate than being. Furthermore, when we connect *wu* with the emptiness of the female productive power, we easily understand why *wu* is not impassive or immobile like the female principle (which is matter) in Greek thought, but is fertile, moving and inexhaustible. Both the *Tao Te Ching* and the Pythagoreans identify the female with the indeterminate, empty, dark, unlimited, and formless. But in the *Tao Te Ching* the female is the origin of motion, life, and unity in all things, while for the Pythagoreans it was the source of evil, corruption, and multiplicity. The reason is not far to seek. The Pythagoreans identified the male as the cause of form or being (being comes from being); the *Tao Te Ching* attributes the cause of being to the female (being comes from non-being).

For this reason we strongly suspect that the *Tao Te Ching* as a thought form traces its original inspiration to the existence of a matriarchal society. A hint of this can be found in the *Chuang Tzu* (ca. 399-295 B. C.), chapter 29, where we read:

During the age of Shen-nung, people rested at ease and acted with vigor. They cared for their mothers, but not for their fathers. They lived among

⁹ It seems that at first men were not aware of, then when they became aware of, they overemphasized the role of the father in the birth phenomenon. Aristotle, who was far in advance of his contemporaries in acknowledging the contribution of the mother in the coming of the child, still considered the male parent to be the sole cause of form of the offspring (*De Anima*, 417 b). The *Tao Te Ching* belongs to a stage of thought when the contribution of the mother was more appreciated.

deer. They ate what they cultivated and wore what they wove. They did not think of harming one another.

The golden age when *Tao* ruled supreme was the age when people “cared for their mothers, but not for their fathers.” It was also an age before men developed their moral consciousness, their ability to distinguish between the right and the wrong, and this was why they did not think of harming one another. Now it is commonly understood that the female represents the unconscious and formless, whereas the male represents the conscious and formed.¹⁰

We also suspect that in the golden age people “cared for their mothers, but not for their fathers,” because, in the first place, they experienced only mother’s love and care; thus they reciprocated with love and care for their mothers. On the distinction between motherly and fatherly love, Erich Fromm says:

Motherly love by its very nature is unconditional. Mother loves the newborn infant because it is her child, not because the child has fulfilled any specific condition, or lived up to any specific expectation. . . .

The relationship to father is quite different. Mother is the home we come from, she is nature, soil, the ocean; father does not represent any such natural home. . . . But while father does not represent the natural world, he represents the other pole of human existence: the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure. Father is the one who teaches the child, who shows him the road into the world. . . .

. . . Its principle is “I love you because you fulfill my expectations, because you do your duty, because you are like me. . . .” In the nature of fatherly love lies the fact that obedience becomes the main virtue, that disobedience is the main sin and its punishment the withdrawal of fatherly love.¹¹

The *Tao Te Ching* mentions only motherly, not fatherly, love; it speaks of *tz’u*, motherly love (67) that spreads evenly (32), that embraces all and excludes none (27, 62), that never withdraws itself, and yet never claims credit (34). At the same time, it speaks against the evils of opening and developing one’s consciousness (24, 47, 52), the futility of making distinctions (2), the limitations of language and speech (1, 5, 32, 81), the adverse effects of civilization and culture (18, 38, 53), and the uselessness of multiplying statutes and laws (57, 74, 75). These symbols and achievements of the father are all summarily dismissed as useless to the smooth functioning of life.

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, Colophon Paperback Edition, 1962), pp. 41-43.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

Following Erich Fromm, we venture to say that the Christian religion in its stress on work, on the need to war against the flesh for the sake of salvation, to accumulate merits on earth in order to gain heaven, aims primarily at winning the favor and love of the father, thus "Our Father in Heaven." Taoism, with its teaching on non-action (2, 37), on the need to give up all efforts (43, 48), to simply abide by the mother (52), celebrates the love of the mother. While the Christian religion reflects a male-centered society, Taoism looks back to an age when the mother with her love was the overwhelming experience of mankind.

Our suspicion that the notion of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching* is closely connected with a belief in the mother as the sole producer of life and thus that it traces its origin to a matriarchal form of society receives further confirmation when we study the etymology of the character *wu*. The archaic form of *wu*, written 舞 now, was *wu^b* 舞, meaning to dance. And *wu^b* goes back to the same oracle form as *wu^c* 巫, which depicts a dancing thaumaturgic woman shaman, holding some ritual objects in her hands 巫. What catches our attention is that *wu^c* denoted a woman shaman¹² who through dancing into a trance communicated with the spirits of the dark unseen world. The concept of *wu* in the *Tao Te Ching* may have been rooted in the ancient shamanistic religion, when the female was the reigning political as well as religious power. *Wu* as a philosophic concept could have been the rationalization of the shamanistic faith in *wu^c*; now the person of the woman shaman was transformed into a metaphysical idea. The dark unseen world of spirits to which the woman shaman had special access became the dark nothingness, the hidden creative power of nature in the *Tao Te Ching*.

In light of what we know today of the relation between religion and early philosophy, we suspect that the idea of *wu* as non-being, the weak, dark, and empty was originally connected with the worship of the female productive power. Since the awareness of the connection between the empty, the female, and the unconscious has risen only in modern times, so far no student of the *Tao Te Ching*

¹² A man shaman was written 巫覡, *hsi*. Cf. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. II: *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 134.

has pointed out the close relation between *wu*, nothingness, and the mother principle in the *Tao Te Ching*.¹³ We have seen that Wang Pi did not fully grasp the organic nature of *Tao*'s emptiness. He interpreted *wu* to mean that things were nothing before and they are to return to nothing later. Yet *wu* as mere nothingness has no power to engender the world, as Kuo Hsiang pointed out later. Without an understanding of *wu* as the nothingness of the female, the argument that nothingness is productive of being soon loses its cogency.

Indeed, the *Tao Te Ching* is alone among ancient Chinese classics in explicitly referring to *Tao* as a female principle. The *Chuang Tzu* in chapter 2 does speak of *t'ien fu*, the heavenly abode, which is the equivalent of *Tao* in the *Tao Te Ching*, as "pouring in, without being filled, pouring out, without being depleted," and in so doing it also considers *Tao* to be some kind of empty and bottomless vessel from which all things come and to which all things return. But although the idea of the empty is preserved in the *Chuang Tzu*, and the golden age in the *Chuang Tzu* is described as a matriarchal society, nowhere in the *Chuang Tzu* is there any mention of *Tao* as a feminine principle. The words that denote the female in the *Tao Te Ching*, like *mu*, the mother (1, 20, 25, 52), *tz'u*^b, the hen (10, 28), *p'in*, the mare (6, 61), no longer retain their preeminence. This shows that while the *Tao Te Ching* still retains traces of its religious root, the *Chuang Tzu* has succeeded in making itself independent of its religious origin.

Still, in general, the Taoist school values the feminine virtues of staying behind, yielding, and quietude, while the Confucian school values the male virtues of activity, justice, and strength. Already in the *Book of Change*, it is the male principle that predominates.¹⁴ In our view,

¹³ Among Western translators, J. J. L. Duyvendak alone in discussing chapter 52 of the *Tao Te Ching* says that it "would seem to suggest a matriarchal society." *Tao Te Ching, The Book of the Way and Its Virtue* (London: John Murray, 1954), p. 115. But he hastens to add that "in the characteristically Chinese culture, developed out of many different influences, the patriarchal principle is predominant." *Ibid.* pp. 115-16.

¹⁴ In the light of recent critical scholarship, only the text of the divination in the *Book of Change* is dated as composed at the beginning or early period of the Chou Dynasty (began 1122 B.C.). The Ten Wings (Commentaries), traditionally attributed to the Duke of Chou (ca. 1122 B.C.), King Wen, and Confucius (551-479 B.C.), have now been determined to be the work of later hands (of about 300 B.C.), with the Commentary on the Decision and Commentary on the Image by Confucianists and the other eight treatises by Taoist thinkers. Cf. Ku Chieh-Kang, *Ku-shih pien* (Discussions on Ancient History), Vol. III (Peking, 1931), pp. 8-28.

Hu shih's conclusion in the *Shuo ju* that Taoism was the original matrix from which Confucianism had extricated itself, that Taoism represented an older form of thought, the way of the weak, while Confucianism represented a rebellion against the traditional thought in advocating the way of the strong,¹⁵ is very illuminating. To us Taoism traces its original inspiration to the mother principle, to pre-Chou civilization, while Confucianism as a thought form, as a political, socio-economic philosophy, confirms and furthers the domination of the male power since Chou times.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

Ch'ung 冲

Ch'ung Hsü Tao Te Chen Ching 冲虚道德真经

Hsi 覡

Hsü 虚

Mu 母

P'in 牝

Shen 生

Shen^b 神

Ti 帝

Tz'u 慈

Tz'u^b 雌

Wu 無

Wu^b 舞

Wu^c 巫

¹⁵ Hu Shih, *Hu Shih wen-ts'un*, Vol. IV, Book 1, *Shuo ju* (13th ed.; Taipeh: The Far East Book Co., 1953).