

Cosmogony and the Origin of Inequality: A Utopian Perspective from Taoist Sources

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The present article examines how classical, early medieval and medieval Taoist sources theorise inequality as an outcome of cosmogonic processes, and how these same sources project eliminating inequality through a reversal of those processes. The first part of the article considers utopias from the Laozi daode jing 老子道德經 (Laozi's Scripture on the Way and its Virtue) and Zhuangzi 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang) and from the early medieval writings of Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262) and Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言 (3rd to early 4th centuries). From these, a number of themes common to Taoist utopias emerge, namely communitarian primitivism, the condemnation of knowledge, and the endorsement of a de-civilising programme of cosmogonic reversion which aims for a return to the golden age of natural spontaneity. The second part of the article is devoted to the mature utopian vision of the ninth-century Wunengzi 無能子 (The Incapable Master). In addition to elaborating on previous themes, the Wunengzi contributes two new ideas to Taoist utopian discourse: first, the distinction between intelligence, which develops naturally, and human knowledge, which is an artificial contrivance; and second, the conviction that an ideal society is achievable through engagement with existing political structures. The conclusion examines basic similarities between Taoist utopias and early modern to modern European counterparts, challenging the validity of Eurocentric notions of a 'Taoist anarchism'.

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Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Grégoire Espeset and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments.

The Medieval History Journal, 17,2 (2014): 295–335

SAGE Publications ♦ Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0971945814545008

Taoist Anarchism?

In discussing the relationship between society and the individual, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), a foundational text of Chinese thought dated to around the third century BCE, famously argued for the absence of institutional government, claiming to paraphrase a number of scholars that good order results naturally when things are let alone.¹ The text similarly propounded a return to a natural state, free from the trappings and conventions of society. Considering the *Zhuangzi* against the background of Western political philosophy invariably generates labels of ‘anarchism’. Since this reading of the text and other later Taoist works as ‘anarchist’ or ‘post-anarchist’ has been debated elsewhere, it is not my intention to reproduce the main arguments of the discussion pertaining to the applicability of such labels.² It should be noted, however, that most recently the dust has proverbially settled and one of the positions that has emerged, represented for example by John A. Rapp in his recent monograph *Daoism and Anarchism: Critiques of State Autonomy in Ancient and Modern China*, is that

Anarchist thought can and has occurred many times and in many places in history and not just among those thinkers and activists in Europe from the early to mid-nineteenth century who consciously took on the anarchist label and who started a movement that then spread throughout the world [...].³

The aim of this article is not to challenge the notion of ‘Taoist anarchism’, as Rapp’s effort is overall commendable, but to amend it. Taoism and anarchism have a few things in common, but they are not the same. Anarchism is a concept that is firmly located in space and time; it is a nineteenth-century European political philosophy that was formulated in circumstances that have absolutely nothing to do with third century BCE

¹ See for example, Hsiao, ‘Anarchism in Chinese Political Thought’; or, the work of Frederic Bender, John P. Clark and Étienne Balasz; for an overview of these, see Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 19–26.

² *Ibid.*: 19–50, especially 19–32, where Rapp does an excellent job of summarising the debate about whether or not Taoism constitutes some form of anarchism; despite his impartiality in presenting both sides of the argument, he remains wedded to the notion of ‘Daoist Anarchism’; for a sophisticated counter-argument, see Ames, ‘Is Political Taoism Anarchism?’.

³ Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 3–4.

Warring States (475 BCE–221 BCE) China.⁴ Thus, in a strictly Chinese context, the notion of ‘anarchism’ should at best refer to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century re-articulations of the nineteenth-century European political philosophy.⁵ But even then the common designation of these re-articulations under the unifying umbrella of ‘anarchism’ could be misleading. The understanding of the term and the circumstances of its uses are dictated by specific historical and cultural circumstances. Each successive iteration of anarchism deviates further from its original context and early meaning.

A second issue with the concept of ‘Taoist anarchism’ is that many of the sources identified as ‘Taoist’ are not at all Taoist, at least in the religious sense—a point that Rapp is cognizant of but is remiss in fully taking its ramifications into account.⁶ Besides the fact that the category of ‘Taoist’ is highly problematic in and of itself, it is disenfranchised members of the ruling elite that typically authored most of the texts identified as representative of ‘Taoist anarchism’. Many held official stations at some point of their career and had been classically educated in the Confucian classics.⁷ Although they were situated on its margins, the thinkers responsible for early medieval and medieval Taoist ‘anarchist’ writings in China were part of the Confucian orthodoxy—one that was intimately involved with the governing of imperial China. Labelling their work as ‘Taoist’ or ‘anarchist’ is not only inaccurate, but it also implies some continuity or mutual awareness between them, when, in fact, there was very little if any. Pre-twentieth-century Chinese ‘Taoist’ and/or ‘anarchist’ thinkers were centuries apart in time and leagues apart in social, historical or political contexts, each writing to address the ills of specific circumstances.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 4–5, introduces the distinction of ‘self-conscious’ anarchism to refer to anarchist movements, Chinese, European or other of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but this implies that early medieval Chinese anti-statist or libertarian thinkers were ‘anarchists’ without even realising it, a rather shaky premise.

⁵ On Western-inspired Chinese anarchism, see the work of Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*; and Müller, *China, Kropotkin und der Anarchismus*; see also, Bernal, *Chinese Socialism to 1907*, especially the first chapter on the Confucian utopian notion of ‘Great Unity’ or ‘Datong’ 大同 and its re-negotiation by the reformist Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927); see also Thomson, *The One-world Philosophy*, for a translation of Kang’s intriguing *Datongshu* 大同書 (The Book of Great Unity) (1935). The text argues for an anti-capitalistic and socially progressive utopia, but it also proposes an ambitious eugenics programme by which a homogeneous race of ‘fair-skinned’ people would span the globe.

⁶ For a cursory discussion of the issue, see Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 7–15.

⁷ For a discussion of the meaning of the terms ‘Taoism’ or ‘Taoist’ see Sivin, ‘On the Word Taoism’; and more recently, Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*: 1–37.

What I propose instead is to abandon the notion of ‘Taoist anarchism’ and consider the loose collection of classical and medieval Chinese visions of a society without class distinctions, hierarchies, private property, policing agencies and in some cases government, in which individuals organise on a cooperative basis to equally redistribute the wealth produced by their collective labours, as defining components of a pluralistic understanding of ‘anarchisms’, of which the nineteenth-century European variety is but one incarnation (or more appropriately, a multiplicity of interrelated incarnations) among others. However, these visions should not be restricted to or simply defined in terms of ‘anarchisms’. They can also be inscribed, perhaps more fittingly, into the broader rubric of global utopian political thought, thereby contributing to the transcultural re-conceptualisation and de-colonisation of other sub-traditions as well.

Thus, in this article, I hope to offer a preliminary identification of key elements that may be counted towards the global understanding of socially progressive thought. More specifically, the first part of this study consists of a detailed overview of classical Taoist projections of ideal societies from early philosophical or political treatises and their subsequent elaborations. From these, I identify recurrent features of Taoist utopias,⁸ namely the celebration of naturalness or ‘primitivism’, a rejection of human knowledge and the absence of differentiation and thus, inequality, and finally, a teleology of return (*fan* 反; *gui* 歸). Such utopias are made possible only through a reversion of the cosmogonic processes of differentiation that lead to inequality in the first place. The second part of the article focuses on a single text, the ninth-century *Wunengzi* 無能子 (The Incapable Master), and shed light on how the features of Taoist utopias fit together in a fully developed Taoist utopian discourse. The cosmogony from the opening chapter of the text serves as a departure point in this endeavour. I then turn to other passages from the *Wunengzi* and first gauge how the text offers a more nuanced reading of knowledge, which is traditionally maligned in Taoist utopian discourse. Lastly, I examine how its vision of ideal society is coupled with an optimistic programme for its attainment. The *Wunengzi* is unique in that it argues for reaching its proposed ideal society

⁸ I acknowledge that, just as ‘anarchism’, the term ‘utopia’ originated in specific historical and cultural contexts; it was first coined by Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) in his *Utopia* (1516). The term was used in as a catch-all signifier for earlier notions of exemplary communities that were envisioned as polycultural and inter-religious, transcending cultural and historical specificity. I employ the term utopia in this sense, as a translocal synonym of ‘ideal society’.

through involvement in government if circumstances are propitious. This is another reason why the ‘anarchist’ label is problematic. Nonetheless, the *Wunengzi* specifically and Taoist utopias more generally appear to share a number of fundamental characteristics with post-Enlightenment European formulations of ideal societies, many of which adopted a similar cosmogonic narrative of gradual social decay and advocated a return to simpler, ‘natural’ models of community. It should be stressed, however, that Taoist utopias prefigure most Western ones.⁹

Early Taoist Utopias

Taoists have a long tradition of attempting and sometimes succeeding, at least temporarily, in the establishment of immanent utopias. The deification of Laozi 老子 in the second century CE and his role as a cosmic messiah whose coming would herald the Taiping 太平, or ‘Great Peace’—an era of universal prosperity, warlessness and harmony—fed the flames of millenarian forges.¹⁰ There was no shortage of movements committed to founding ideal societies on earth, even by means of force, as eschatological principles often dictated.¹¹ The Yellow Turbans (Huang Jin 黃巾) are a well-documented case in point, although the extent to

⁹ The exception would be Hesiod’s (8th–7th century BCE) description of the ‘Golden Age’ in his account of the ‘Five Ages of Humans’ from his poem *Works and Days* (lines 109–201); Plato (between 429 and 423 BCE–ca. 347 BCE) elaborates on Hesiod’s notion of a ‘Golden Age’ in *Cratylus* 397e.

¹⁰ On the topic of ‘Great Peace’, this article would greatly benefit from an analysis of related Taiping jing 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace) materials; the only justification I can forward for not including them is that they are too heterogeneous and therefore, doing them justice would considerably increase the length of this article. The utopian dimension of the Taiping jing is a subject that deserves its own study. For an encouraging step in this direction, see Grégoire Espesset’s ‘À vau-l’eau, à rebours ou l’ambivalence de la logique triadique dans l’idéologie du *Taiping jing*’; the author notably focuses on the notions of a Golden Age and temporal decline in the Great Peace scriptural corpus.

¹¹ On the deification of Laozi and its impact on the religious landscape of China, see Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le taoïsme des Han*; and by the same author, ‘Der Kaiser und sein Ratgeber’. For an exhaustive overview of revolts in which eschatological or millenarian—and thus religious—motivations may have been a contributing factor, see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*. Seiwert’s sweeping inventory, which covers Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, should be read with Grégoire Espesset’s warning in mind; see Espesset, ‘Local Resistance in Early Medieval Chinese Historiography and the Problem of Religious Overinterpretation’ in the present issue, where he argues that the religious dimension to historical seditious movements in China is easily overinterpreted.

which their aspirations were specific to ‘Taoism’ is still debated.¹² The early Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師), the first institutional Taoists, were successful in fashioning a self-sufficient communitarian theocracy, or more accurately, a cosmocracy, in Southwest China.¹³ For a time, this community functioned as a parallel, independent state. Many of its core principles later inspired another Celestial Master cosmocracy at the Northern Wei court (425–451).¹⁴ But in this subsequent incarnation, Celestial Master Taoism proved to be a more reactionary and politically conservative ideology primarily devoted to protecting elite interests and suppressing Buddhism.

In keeping with the themes of this special issue, the historical details of millenarian uprisings and the actual implementation of utopian visions will be put aside to discuss the matter from a more theoretical perspective. The expression of utopian ideals in written and predominantly philosophical sources will thus be the focus of the following pages. Particular attention is devoted to the question of how cosmogonic processes frame the decline of a society as well as—through reversion (*fan*)—its desired return to ‘naturalness’ or ‘spontaneity’ (*ziran* 自然). Beyond utopian visions, the notion of a return to original cosmic unity is a major trope in Taoist currents of different periods. Its variegated formulations in classical sources,

¹² On similar Taiping-inspired peasant revolts, see Văn, *Utopie antique et guerre des paysans en Chine*; on the Yellow Turbans specifically, see Hendrischke, ‘Early Daoist Movements’; and Qing Xitai 卿希泰, *Zhongguo daojiao shi* 中国道教史: 192–221.

¹³ I borrow the term ‘cosmocracy’ from Grégoire Espeset, private communication. A theocracy denotes a system of government in which a priestly class ruling in the name of a god or gods holds effective power. This does not accurately describe the Celestial Master administration, in which the highest-ranking entities are cosmic principles such as the Dao 道, rather than gods. For the early Celestial Masters community, see Bokenkamp *Early Daoist Scriptures*: 34–35; Kleeman, *Great Perfection*: 76–79; Ōfuchi, *Shoki no dōkyō* 初期の道教: 46–55; and Qing, *Zhongguo daojiao shi*: 178–81. The *Dadao jia lingjie* 大道家令戒 (Rules, Commands, and Admonitions for the Families of the Great Dao) contains a cosmogonic passage of interest in that the early stages of humanity are described as more harmonious than later ones. Such passages are relatively uncommon in the ritual codes or praxis-oriented technical literature of Taoism; see *Zhengyi fawen tianshi jiao jieke jing* 正一法文天師教戒科經 (Commands of the Celestial Masters from the One and Orthodox Canon; CT 789), 12b–13b; for an English translation, see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*: 166–69.

¹⁴ On the Taoist Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之 (365–448), his court patron Cui Hao 崔浩 (d. 450) and the Northern Celestial Masters, see Mather, ‘K’ou Ch’ien-chih and the Taoist Theocracy’; Ozaki Masaharu 尾崎正治, ‘Ko Kenshi no shinsen shisō’ 寇謙之の神仙思想; and Tang and Tang, ‘Kou Qianzhi de zhuzuo yu sixiang’ 寇謙之的著作與思想.

including ‘going back to the origin’ (*huanyan* 還元), ‘reversion to origins’ (*fanben* 返本), ‘return to the root’ (*guigen* 歸根), or simply ‘inversion’ (*ni* 逆),¹⁵ notably inspired the development of elaborate soteriological paths in third- and fourth-century self-cultivation practices. The notion of return eventually constituted one of the pillars of Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy), but such praxis-oriented applications of the concept are beyond the scope of the present article.¹⁶

Perhaps, the most commonly cited Taoist utopia is found in chapter 90 of the *Laozi daode jing* 老子道德經 (Laozi’s Scripture on the Way and its Virtue; hereafter *Laozi*):

In a small state with few inhabitants
 Let there be all manner of tools, but no use in them.
 Let its people take death as serious, yet not avoid it.
 Although there are boats and carriages, none ride them.
 Although there are armors and weapons, none expose them.
 Let its people revert to knotting cords and use them [instead of written characters].
 They relish their [coarse] food,
 They admire their [plain] dress,
 They are at home in their [humble] dwellings,
 They delight in their [simple] ways.
 Within sight of the neighboring state,
 Within earshot of the cries of each other’s fowls and dogs,
 Yet its people reach old age and die
 Without ever having visited one another.

小國寡民、
 使有什伯之器而不用。
 使民重死而不遠徙。
 雖有舟輿無所乘之。
 雖有甲兵無所陳之。

¹⁵ See for example, *Laozi* 老子 16, 25, 48, and especially 40: ‘Return is the movement of the Dao’ 反者道之動; and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 11, 12, 16, 28; see Lu Yusan 卢育三, “‘Fan zhe dao zhi dong’ zhuyi” ‘反者道之动’ 刍议: 26–31; and Robinet, *Les commentaires du Tao tō king jusqu’au VII^e siècle*: 66–71; on the notion of ‘returning to the root’ specifically, see Ch’ien, ‘The Return of the Native’; and Puett, *To Become a God*: 220–24, where the author provides a fascinating discussion on the theme of ‘reversal’ in early self-cultivation practices.

¹⁶ In the context of Neidan, we may also cite the notions of *niliu* 逆流 (‘going against the current’) and *diandao* 顛倒 (‘retrogression’); on reversion in the transition from early medieval meditations to Neidan, see Steavu, ‘Cosmos, Body, and Gestation’.

使民復結繩而用之。
 甘其食、
 美其服、
 安其居、
 樂其俗。
 鄰國相望，
 雞犬之聲相聞。
 民至老死
 不相往來。¹⁷

Already, in the fourth-century BCE *Laozi*, the elementary themes of later Taoist utopias are established. The technological potential and thus the intellectual potential of humans are fully developed, but there is no need to actualise them and make them manifest. This is echoed in the line that entreats inhabitants of the ideal state to abandon writing in favour of more primitive forms of record-keeping such as tying knots in cords. It is also in this line that the trope of reversion or return (rendered ‘*fu*’ 復 in this case) to an idealised state first appears. The appreciation of rustic food, indistinct clothing and humble dwellings, along with an appreciation of ‘simple’ customs, implies that there is no covetousness or envy, and, thus, no competition. The inhabitants of this state so lack the spirit of contention that they are not even curious to find out how things are in the neighbouring state.

This earliest depiction of ideal society in Taoist literature would be taken up again and developed numerous times. Most immediately after the *Laozi*, it resurfaces in a brief passage from the ‘Quqie’ 祛篋 (‘Prying Open the Trunk’) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

Formerly, [...] people knotted cords and used them [instead of written characters]. They relished their [coarse] food, admired their [plain] dress, delighted in their [simple] ways, and were at home in their [humble] dwellings. Within sight of the neighboring state, they could hear the cries of each other’s fowl and dogs, yet its people reach old age and death without ever having visited one another. At such a time, there was nothing but perfect order.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Laozi* 80.

¹⁸ *Zhuangzi* 10 (Waipian), ‘Quqie’.

昔者[...], 民結繩而用之, 甘其食, 美其服, 樂其俗, 安其居, 鄰國相望, 雞狗之音相聞, 民至老死而不相往來。若此之時, 則至治已。

Although this was implied in the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* explicitly sets its utopia in the past, rendering it achievable not through forward progress but through an implied return; or forward progress defined by degrowth (*décroissance*) to put it in contemporary terms. Moreover, in contrast to the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* provides some rationale for the disintegration of perfect order. As inhabitants get word of conditions in neighbouring states, they begin to pay attention and inevitably ‘crane their necks and raise their heels’ (*yanjing juzhong* 延頸舉踵). They compare their own state with that of their neighbours and develop a spirit of contention, eventually leaving and neglecting their home in search of what they do not have. In the *Zhuangzi*, that which they covet is not yet material wealth, but rather the intangible yet equally segregating commodity of knowledge (*zhi* 知).¹⁹ Thus, the passage ends with the exhortation: ‘When superior people are truly fond of knowledge and without the Way, then all under heaven is in great disarray!’²⁰

¹⁹ For another passage from the ‘Outer Chapters’ that makes the same point in reference to an ideal golden age, see *Zhuangzi* 16, ‘Shan Xing 繕性’ (‘Correcting One’s Nature’); the relevant section is more explicitly anti-statist than the one cited above, but it is not based on the *Laozi* utopia.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: ‘上誠好知而無道, 則天下大亂矣’. It should be stressed that the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* did not have a monopoly on utopian visions in early China. The fourth-century BCE *Shangjun shu* 商君書 (Book of Lord Shang) from the early legalist (Fajia 法家) tradition contains a brief cosmogonic description of a golden age utopia that quickly degenerates into a society that requires ‘natural’ rules and penalties to restore natural order; see Shang, *Shangjun shu* 18.106–07; see also Lévi (trans.), *Le livre du Prince Shang*: 143–45. A second shorter passage, also cosmogonically framed, echoes the first; Shang, *Shangjun shu* 7.50–51; Lévi (trans.), *Le livre du Prince Shang*: 93–96; An older English translation of the text exists; Duyvendak (trans.), *The Book of Lord Shang*. Interestingly, the Legalists follow the same cosmogony as the Taoists, and they also argue for actualising a very similar utopia via a return to nature. However, they dramatically differ in how to achieve their ideal society. For the Legalists, nature is attained anew at the height of de-naturation and humanisation; only when people have fully internalised laws and punishments that curb their desires, passions, and instincts, will the laws and punishments be rendered useless. At that point, people will intuitively follow the universal law, which is the law of nature; see Lévi (trans.), *Les fonctionnaires divins*: 119–20.

The lifestyle of simplicity (*zhi* 質) that is extolled in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*²¹ does not merely apply to material possessions or technology. The accumulation of intellectual capital is considered just as detrimental to social harmony. Knowledge is divisive as it occurs or can be acquired in different proportions by different people. Moreover, once acquired, it permits discernment and thus constitutes the basis for differentiation and discrimination. Fittingly, Taoist utopias are the end result of a de-civilising programme that peels off all the filters of humanity that people have imposed on themselves and their environments throughout the ages. Through their religious practices, Taoists attempt to transcend the human condition either by becoming divine beings or by returning to a pure state of feral pre-humanity.²² In effect, both trajectories merge as in order to be divinised, Taoists must first de-humanise and zoomorphise. The process involves abstaining from grains or cooked food, bouncing from wild mountain top to mountain top and ascending to the heavens like birds in the sky.²³ In the *Zhuangzi*, the animal, as Romain Graziani has elegantly shown, is a stand-in for the sacred hebetude and celebrated confusion that characterise the undifferentiated cosmos before the separation of Yin 陰 and Yang 陽 and the 10,000 creatures (*wanwu* 萬物), before all the distinctions on which human society is erected arose. Because of the ‘natural’ vantage point they presume, animals, zoomorph hybrids, but also embryos, newborns and infants, as well as fools and the cognitively impaired—in short, the uncultured—are preferred figures in Taoist

²¹ This and other themes identified in this article also figure in the utopia from the fifth chapter (‘Tang wen’ 湯問 [The Questions of Tang]) of the *Liezi* 列子 (Book of Master Lie). Close textual analysis has revealed that many passages from the *Liezi* are inspired or stem from earlier sources, including the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. On the basis of this data, scholars have concluded that the *Liezi* is most likely an antiquarian ‘pastiche’ from the fourth or fifth centuries. For this reason, also because the text contributes little in terms of original utopian perspectives not covered in other sources under scrutiny in this article, I have elected not to deal with the text; for the dating and composition of the text, see Graham’s aptly titled ‘The Date and Composition of the *Liehtzyy*’; and the preface to his translation of the text, in Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzū*. Lévi, ‘Le Mythe de l’Âge d’or et les théories de l’évolution en Chine ancienne’, includes the *Liezi* among the broad swath of classical texts that he uses in his analysis of the myth of the Golden Age and its relation to early Chinese evolutionary theories. Lévi’s article and the present one intersect on a number of themes.

²² On self-divinisation in early China, see Puett, *To Become a God*.

²³ On this notion of animalistic return as a strategy of self-divinisation, see Lévi (trans.), *Éloge de l’anarchie par deux excentriques chinois*: 19–28; and especially: 21–24.

critiques of political authority.²⁴ Hence, the *Zhuangzi*'s condemnation of knowledge, which proves to be a thoroughly artificial and adulterating interface between the self and the cosmos.

This de-civilising logic surfaces in early and early medieval Taoist understandings of 'immortality' (*xian* 仙), the most spiritually perfected state a human can aspire to achieve.²⁵ Immortals, transcendent of humanity, are divine and beastly at the same time. But, as the following account from the fourth-century *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Baopuzi 抱朴子; by Ge Hong 葛洪 [283–343]), illustrates, a return to human society and its cultural practices inevitably entails the dissipation of all the capacities associated with immortality:

At the time of Emperor Cheng [(r. 32–37 CE)] of the Han [dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)] there were some hunters in the Zhongnan mountains who encountered a naked person, whose body was covered in black fur. Upon seeing it, the hunters wished to catch the person, but it crossed ravines and jumped over valleys as if flying, and so it was impossible to catch. Thereupon, they secretly lay in wait at its dwelling. [When it returned], they circled and caught it. They determined that the person was an adult woman. When they questioned her, she said: 'I was originally a Qin [(221–206 BCE)] palace attendant. I heard the rebels had reached the [Hangu] Pass of the East, and that the Qin monarch was leaving the throne and burning the palace. Frightened, I fled into the mountains. In hunger, [I found] nothing to eat. I was on the verge of dying from starvation when an elderly man taught me how to eat pine needles and pine nuts. At that time, I thought them bitter and tart, but I gradually became habituated. As a result, [the diet] made me no longer feel hunger or thirst. In the winter I was not cold, in the summer I was not hot'. The [hunters] calculated that if this woman was indeed an attendant at the palace of monarch Ziying of the Qin [(r. 207 BCE)], then in the [current] era of Emperor Cheng, she would be over 200 years old. They brought her back with them and fed her with grains.²⁶ At first, the mere smell of grains caused her to vomit, but day after day, she grew accustomed. Over two years had passed in this way, and the fur on her body had fallen out. She turned into an

²⁴ Graziani, 'Combats d'animaux'; on similar themes, see Graziani, *Les corps dans le taoïsme ancien*.

²⁵ On the figure of the immortal, see Campany, *Making Transcendents*.

²⁶ 'Grains' (*gu* 穀) here are a synecdoche for conventional, cooked or processed foods. Taoist dietetics strictly forbid the 'five grains' (*wugu* 五穀), that is, conventional foodstuffs issued from agriculture.

old woman and died. Had she not been captured by people, she would have easily become [a full] immortal.²⁷

又漢成帝時，獵者於終南山中，見一人無衣服，身生黑毛，獵人見之，欲逐取之，而其人逾坑越谷，有如飛騰，不可逮及。於是乃密伺候其所在，合圍得之，定是婦人。問之，言我本是秦之宮人也，聞關東賊至，秦王出降，宮室燒燔，驚走入山，飢無所食，垂餓死，有一老翁教我食鬆葉鬆實，當時苦澀，後稍便之，遂使不飢不渴，冬不寒，夏不熱。計此女定是秦王子嬰宮人，至成帝之世，二百許歲，乃將歸，以穀食之，初聞穀臭嘔吐，累日乃安。如是二年許，身毛乃脫落，轉老而死。向使不為人所得，便成仙人矣。

The above passage reinforces the notion that the path to immortality is paved with the same stones as the path to the ideal Taoist community. The trope of return and that of a de-civilised, ‘natural’ and quasi-primeval setting are the features that most warrant our attention for they are intimately tied to the process of cosmogony. Indeed, it is by reverting to the earliest stages of the development of the cosmos that differentiation, and therefore contention, competition and most importantly inequality, are eliminated. In addition to knowledge, which permits discernment, the sensory organs are much maligned. Although they enable individuals to perceive variations in smell, sound, taste, temperature and pressure and quality of light, this is accomplished through distinction.²⁸ Because of the absence of differentiation, the primordial unity that belies the early cosmos and on a more relatable human scale, early nature, is synonymous with harmony between all parts that make up the whole.

Often unable to apply their programme of return on the scale of society, many Taoist practitioners elected to recreate a cosmic utopia within themselves. Although the soteriological underpinnings of individual immortality overlap with Taoist social visions, this article will concentrate on large-scale implementations most often discussed in philosophical treatises. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that when adepts were unable or unwilling to take part in a community-based vision, cosmogonic reversion as a strategy for individual self-cultivation was just as valid a pursuit.

²⁷ *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: The Inner Chapters), 11.207; on immortality in the *Baopuzi*, see Murakami Yoshimi 村上嘉美, *Chūgoku no sennin: Hōbokushi no shisō* 中国の仙人：抱朴子の思想.

²⁸ See the episode in *Zhuangzi* 7: Hundun 混沌—a personified Original Chaos—is poked with ‘sensorial orifices’ by two well-meaning guests who wish it to enjoy the same faculties humans do. After the seventh hole is bored, Hundun dies.

Cosmogony and Inequality

The utopia depicted in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* remained influential for centuries. Notably, it inspired the poetic visions of some of China's most celebrated literary figures, from Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (Tao Qian 陶潛; 365–426) to Su Shi 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo 蘇東坡; 1037–1101).²⁹ Ji Kang 嵇康 (alt. Xi Kang; 223–262) is another intellectual whose writings combined the themes of cosmogony, inequality and return, along with a disdain for traditional—in this case Confucian—forms of knowledge.³⁰ His *A Refutation of the Essay on the Intrinsic Fondness for Learning* (Nan ziran haoxue lun 難自然好學論) contests the illustrious statesman Zhang Miao's 張邈 (d. 195) position that seeking out knowledge is a natural and innate human inclination, one that the classical Confucian curriculum builds on.³¹ Ji Kang's curt critique ultimately aims to dispute the validity of the Six Classics (Liujing 六經) as a template for civilisation,³² but he opens his elenchus with a recounting of the early stages of cosmogony, when all behaviour was innate and natural (*ziran*) and all beings, in their lack of knowledge, were perfect reflections of cosmic spontaneity:

In the era of original chaos, the Great Simplicity had not yet waned [...]. Things were complete and natural principles were followed. There was no one who could not meet their needs by themselves. [...] When it was such, then how could they know about the principles of humaneness and righteousness or the tenets of rites and laws?

When the Accomplished People were no longer, the Great Way declined. Then, they began to use writing to transmit their ideas. They separated the

²⁹ See Tao, 'Taohua yuan ji' 桃花源記 ('Spring of the Peach Blossom'); and Su 'Shuixiang ji' 睡鄉記 ('Record of the Land of Sleep').

³⁰ On Ji Kang and his works, see Holzman, *La vie et la pensée de Hi K'ang (223–262 AP. J.-C.)*; and Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation*.

³¹ Zhang Miao's initial pamphlet, the *Ziran haoxue lun* 自然好學論 (Essay on the Intrinsic Fondness for Learning), and Ji Kang's refutation are found in the *Ji Kang ji* 嵇康集校注 (Annotated Critical Edition of the Collected Works of Ji Kang): 256–64; Both essays were translated into French by Lévi, *Éloge de l'anarchie*: 57–62.

³² These consisted of the *Wujing* 五經 (Five Classics) of Confucianism (1. The *Yijing* 易經 [Book of Changes], 2. The *Shangshu* 尚書 or *Shujing* 書經 [Book of Documents], 3. The *Shijing* 詩經 or *Maoshi* 毛詩 [Book of Poetry], 4. The *Liji* 禮記 [Book of Rites] and 5. The *Chunqiu* 春秋 'Spring and Autumn Annals', together with, in most cases, the appended commentary of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 [Record of Zuo] and the *Sishu* 四書 [Four Books]), along with a sixth tome on the musical arts, which is now lost or has been integrated into the *Liji* as the 'Yueji' 樂記 ('Book of Music') chapter.

multitudes by using rank and clans, and they elaborated humaneness and righteousness to bridle their hearts. They manufactured position and rank to check their behavior. They encouraged learning and emphasized writing in order to sanctify their teaching of fallacies. The Six Classics created confusion and the Hundred Schools proliferated, opening the path of glory and profit—one that [all] greedily rush into without any discernment.³³

洪荒之世，大朴未虧。[……]物全理順，莫不自得。[……]若此，則安知仁義之端、禮律之文？及至人不存，大道陵遲；乃始作文墨以傳其意，區別羣物使有類族，造立仁義以嬰其心，制其名分以檢其外，勸學講文以神其教。故六經紛錯，百家繁熾，開榮利之塗，故奔驚而不覺。

Ji Kang is better known for other polemics, but his exchange with Zhang Miao yields insight into the evolution of Taoist social utopias since the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.³⁴ In the above passage, he equates an early stage of cosmogonic development, original chaos, with a natural order defined by simplicity and harmonious relations. The *locus classicus* for Taoist cosmogony, to which Ji Kang's and all subsequent utopias hark back, is found in chapter 42 of the *Laozi*: 'The Dao 道 generates the One. The One generates the Two. The Two generate the Three. The Three generate the 10,000 creatures. The 10,000 creatures carry Yin and hold Yang. Imbued with *qi* 氣, they are in harmony'.³⁵ The stage of cosmic development that is the setting for the ideal societies of Ji Kang and others is not the pre-cosmic single event known as the Dao, which precedes the One; nor is it the moment of literal unity of all things—a Taoist version of the instant immediately before the Big Bang, to draw an analogy with contemporary cosmology. Rather, the setting is the last stage in the generation of things, immediately after the 10,000 creatures have formed. At this moment, they have not yet lost the proper equilibrium of Yin and Yang and are still pregnant with the harmony-instilling original *qi* (pneuma). Although there are distinctions between the individual categories of the 10,000

³³ *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*: 259–60.

³⁴ Aside from Ji Kang, at least another of the so-called 'Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove' (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢) was known for his explicitly anti-statist position, namely Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263). He notably explores the interrelated themes of differentiation, artificiality and inequality in his poetic essay 'Daren xiansheng zhuan' 大人先生傳 ('A Biography of Master Great Man'); see Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*: especially 195; and Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 35–36.

³⁵ 道生一。一生二。二生三。三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和'; *Laozi* 42.

creatures, there is no difference in ontological value between categories or members of a single category. This early egalitarian society declines for reasons that are not made clear in Ji Kang's account, but it is perhaps noteworthy that the disappearance of 'Accomplished People' is quickly succeeded by the appearance of writing and thought. Social division (on the basis of lineage/class, rank, wealth and morality) and consequently, inequality follow soon after.

Lesser-known thinkers also contributed to the development of utopian themes. Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言 (3rd to early 4th centuries) was an enigmatic intellectual about whom almost nothing is known. His name closely resembles that of Bao Jing 鮑靚 (or 鮑靖; 230 or 260–330 CE), a renowned Taoist master and the father-in-law to Ge Hong, compiler of the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity*.³⁶ Perhaps it is no coincidence that the only known mention of Bao Jingyan's name is found in the 'Outer Chapters' ('Waipian' 外篇) of the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity*. The text also preserves a sample of his work in the form of a debate between him and Ge Hong. The latter defends Confucian-inspired statecraft whereas Bao Jingyan advocates a return to a cruder but fairer and more pleasurable existence. The relevant passage opens with the following line, uttered by Bao Jingyan: 'In the primordial indistinction, undifferentiation was prized and all living beings found joy in the satisfaction it brought'.³⁷ Bao Jingyan proceeds to draw a bleak inventory of the hierarchies that plague his own time. All the binary categories he lists—humans and animals, masters and slaves, rulers and subjects—stem from the more basic division between strong and weak. This division between strong and weak, Bao Jingyan notes, parallels that between those who have knowledge (*zhi* 智)—the typically human capacity to discern 'right' from 'wrong' (*shifei* 是非) according to Confucian thinkers—and those who are simple-minded (*yu* 愚). He continues:

In bygone times, there were no rulers and no subjects. We dug wells and drank. We tilled fields and ate. When the sun rose, we worked, and when it set, we

³⁶ On Bao Jing's relationship to Ge Hong, see Steavu, 'The Many Lives of Lord Wang of the Western Citadel'. It is not impossible that Ge Hong, who was a celebrated local official and a figure of some stature in the Jiagnan 江南 region would have confabulated the debate as well as the figure of Bao Jingyan in order to test the waters for some of his most radical, notably anti-statist, ideas. This hypothesis was first put forth by Lévi, *Éloge de l'anarchie*: 28–29.

³⁷ 夫混茫以無名為貴，群生以得意為歡; *Baopuzi waipian* 48.494.

rested. We floated [through life] without tethers. We could meet our needs abundantly. There was no contention, no profiteering. There was no honor and no disgrace. Mountains had no paths nor trails, and the waterways, no boats nor bridges. Rivers and valleys did not communicate, thus no one sought to acquire the land of others³⁸ [...]. We could step on hungry tigers and grasp venomous snakes. We could cross waters without gulls and fowl flying away, and enter forests without frightening foxes and hares. Power and wealth had not yet sprouted, thus misfortune and disorder were not generated. Shields and spears were not used, thus fortifications and moats were not built. The ten thousand beings abided in profound unity, forgetting themselves in the Dao. Pestilence did not circulate and the people could live out their years. With purity in their bosom, deceitful thoughts did not arise. [...] How then could there be extortion so as to rob the people of their wealth? How could there be strict laws so as to ensnare them?³⁹

曩古之世，無君無臣，穿井而飲，耕田而食，日出而作，日入而息，泛然不繫，恢爾自得，不競不營，無榮無辱，山無蹊徑，澤無舟梁。川谷不通，則不相並兼。[...] 飢虎可履，虺蛇可執，涉澤而鷗鳥不入飛，入林而狐兔不驚。勢利不萌，禍亂不作，干戈不用，城池不設，萬物玄同，相忘於道，疫癘不流，民獲考終，純白在胸，機心不生。[...] 安得聚斂以奪民財，安得嚴刑以為坑阱？

This description is largely drawn from earlier Taoist utopias, but it stresses certain themes such as rusticity and the absence of differentiation or hierarchy (among members of society, humans and animals, or creatures and their environment ['nature']). Again, the utopia is set in the past, in remote antiquity. As in Ji Kang's account, the fact that it is not hypothetical conveys the impression that it is achievable anew. Ge Hong confirms this is indeed what Bao Jingyan is advocating when he mockingly asks if he would really find it plausible to revert to a time when 'people lived in humble dens, the dead were abandoned in the wilds' and naked men, 'encountering by chance a female, would copulate with her without borrowing the services of a matchmaker'.⁴⁰

One of the features that sets apart Bao Jingyan's description of the ideal Taoist society from earlier ones is that he details the process of its degeneration. Ji Kang supplies a somewhat similar account, but it is less

³⁸ The implied means of acquisition here is by force, and thus, warfare primarily.

³⁹ *Baopuzi waipian* 48.498–99.

⁴⁰ 今使子居則反巢穴之陋，死則捐之中野，[...] 裸以為飾，不用衣裳；逢女為偶，不假行媒；*Baopuzi waipian* 48.527.

elaborate than Bao Jingyan's. Moreover, in opposition to Ji Kang, who lists the emergence of writing as the first sign of decadence, Bao Jingyan singles out knowledge (*zhi*), which technically precedes writing, as an initial symptom of things falling apart. Knowledge also appears to be the root cause of later ills, an early link in the chain of degeneracy. Nevertheless, Bao Jingyan, like Ji Kang before him, stops short of clearly identifying knowledge or anything else as the inceptive reason for the decline: 'As decadence befell the end of this age, knowledge was exploited and craftiness arose, the Way and its Virtue both waned. The noble and the base were ranked [in hierarchies]. Relying on knowledge to take advantage of others sets in motion a chain reaction of distinctions, and each successive distinction compounds the inequalities generated by the previous one; soon enough, 'there were sumptuary laws [governing] the complexities of promotion and demotion, as well as profit and loss'.⁴¹ In turn, promotion and profit reinforced hierarchies and accentuated their inequalities. Even with accumulated forests of jades and mountains of gold, the ruling classes could not satisfy their whims or meet their expenditures:

Their level of indulgence in debauchery was such that they violated the fundamentals of the Great Beginning, daily growing further away from their ancestors and increasingly turning their backs on [original] simplicity. Because they promoted the worthy, the people strove to distinguish themselves. Because they valued commodities, banditry arose. For when one sees what can be desired, then the true and upright heart is mired in chaos. When power and wealth are displayed, then the road to plundering is open.

澶漫於淫荒之域，而叛其大始之本，去宗日遠，背朴彌增。尚賢則民爭名，貴貨則盜賊起，見可欲則真正之心亂，勢利陳則劫奪之途開。

What follows plundering is the sharpening of weapons to carry it out. Conflicts and large-scale wars ensue. Bao Jingyan elaborates on the role of rulers, who in addition to establishing inequalities and reinforcing distinctions, can also, because of their accumulated wealth and status, implement all the atrocities their minds can conjure: they punish transgressors by cutting their flesh into strips and mincing it, or by roasting and grilling them. The excesses of the ruling class are the source of all society's ills. Yet, 'they tremble in fear, atop their palaces, as the commoners writhe and foment unrest in their misery'.

⁴¹ 降及妙季，智用巧生，道德既衰，尊卑有序，繁升降損益之禮；*Baopuzi waipian* 48.503.

Bao Jingyan concludes: ‘...to quell them by means of rites and the rules of propriety, or to control them with laws and punishments, this would be just as specious as stuffing a diluvian spring with a fistful of soil or damming the rush of an unfathomable torrent with the finger of one’s hand’.⁴²

The *Wunengzi*: Taoist Utopia in Full Flower

In his treatment of Taoism, Needham devotes a number of captivating pages to the question of Taoist views on egalitarianism and the rise of empirical forms of knowledge. In these pages, the historian of science most notably highlights ‘primitive collectivism’ and the aversion to speculative thought or postulatory knowledge (contrasted with technical, ‘empirical’ know-how), as motifs in Taoist critiques of inequality and social hierarchy.⁴³ Needham’s insights are revealing, but he limits his analysis to classical sources, overlooking materials produced in the Common Era. Yet, it is in this period, particularly in the third or fourth centuries, and then in the late Tang dynasty (618–907), that some of the most significant characteristics of Taoist utopias are developed. Indeed, although the notion of return is implied in earlier formulations of ideal societies, only when once embedded in the cosmogonic process does it become a fully articulated path towards the eradication of inequalities and hierarchies. The combination of classical Taoist utopian themes with that of cosmogonic return in texts from the third or fourth centuries onward results in nothing less than a concrete programme for achieving social harmony and equality.

One of the clearest articulations of a mature Taoist utopia is encountered in the *Wunengzi* (The Incapable Master). This politico-philosophical treatise was composed in Zuofu 左輔 (close to present-day Xi’an) between 26 March and 22 April of 887.⁴⁴ The text’s compiler, a certain Sir Jing 景氏⁴⁵ details in his preface how a long-time friend,

⁴² 人主憂粟於廟堂之上，百姓煎擾乎困苦之中，聞之以禮度，整之以刑罰，是猶辟滔天之源，激不測之流，塞之以撮壤，障之以指掌也；*Baopuzi waipian* 48.509.

⁴³ Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*: 86–132.

⁴⁴ *Wunengzi*: 50. The oldest surviving version of the text is preserved in the Taoist Canon of 1445 (CT 1028). I rely on Wang Ming’s 王明 *Wunengzi jiaozhu* 無能子校注, a recently annotated edition of the Taoist Canon text. All pagination refers to his edition. For various recensions of the *Wunengzi* and their differences, see De Meyer, *Wunengzi (Niteskunner)*: 45–49; for an English-language summary, see De Meyer’s ‘Wunengzi’: 377–78.

⁴⁵ Sir Jing appears as a protagonist in chapter 28 (chapter 8.2 of the third volume); see *Wunengzi*, 43–44.

the Incapable Master, was staying in his cottage during the chaos of the Huangchao 黃巢 rebellion (874–884). He recalls those spring months, when his guest:

...in the morning, liked to recline in bed. Lying there with plume and paper he would produce one or two pages. When he was happy [with what he wrote] he would keep it in his bosom and not show it to me. From the *renshen* day of the second month of spring to the *sihai* day of the last [third] month of spring, he filled up several tens of pages, which he rolled up and bundled. It seemed he had authored something.⁴⁶

...晝好臥不寐，臥則筆札一二紙，興則懷之，而不餘示。自仲春壬申至季春巳亥，盈數十紙捲而囊之，似有所著者。

Sir Jing proceeds to explain that he eventually obtained and then divided the writings into 34 chapters (*pian* 篇) spanning three volumes (*juan* 卷).⁴⁷ He confesses: 'I should have perhaps provided details about the Incapable Master's conduct and behavior, but these are intimate matters, and for this same reason, I do not even relate his surname, given name, or official position'.⁴⁸ Sir Jing elects instead to simply refer to his friend as the 'Incapable Master' (*Wunengzi*). His decision might have something to do with the political climate of the time, the mid-Tang being a period in which political dissent was not easily forgiven.⁴⁹ Given the incendiary nature of the *Wunengzi* and its critical stance towards state ideology, it is understandable that its author would want to remain anonymous.

Few have ventured to guess who may have hidden behind the self-deprecatory title of 'Incapable Master'. Sir Jing, with his intimate knowledge of the Incapable Master's writing process, is a likely but somewhat unexciting candidate. Jan De Meyer has proposed a more titillating hypothesis. He grounds it on the Incapable Master's use of the expression '*xinghai zhi you*' 形骸之友 with reference to Huayangzi 華陽

⁴⁶ *Wunengzi*: 50.

⁴⁷ Despite the fact that some chapters are listed as 'missing' (*que* 闕), De Meyer, *Wunengzi* (*Nietskunner*): 45–49, contends that the received, Taoist Canon version is complete. He argues the original content is intact but its organisation has been modified through successive transmissions.

⁴⁸ 余蓋具審無能子行止、中藏故不述其姓名游官焉; *Wunengzi*: 50.

⁴⁹ For an overview of the political climate and social decay of the ninth century, see Wang, *Wunengzi jiaozhu*: 1–23; and De Meyer, *Wunengzi* (*Nietskunner*): 15–31.

子, the Master of Resplendent Yang.⁵⁰ Typically, *xinghai zhi you* can be rendered as ‘acquaintance’ or literally, ‘superficial friend’ (or even more literally, ‘friend of my body’), but De Meyer speculates this phrase might denote the author’s conventional identity. His ‘true’ self, the one that lies beneath the corporeal surface, is most accurately designated by the name Incapable Master. But who, then, is this conventional incarnation of the Incapable Master that is identified as the Master of Resplendent Yang? De Meyer suggests Tang poet Zhang Bi 張泌 (alt. Zhang Mi) as a possible answer. Zhang Bi’s dates of activity coincide with the composition of the *Wunengzi*. He worked as an official for a period, subsequently leaving office to become a recluse. Thereupon, he was at times known as Huayang shanren 華陽山人, the ‘Mountain Man of Resplendent Yang’⁵¹, or at others, as Huayang daoshi 華陽道士, the ‘Taoist Master of Resplendent Yang’.⁵²

Beyond shrouding the author in anonymity, to the informed reader, the moniker ‘Incapable Master’ immediately conjured a number of familiar classical passages that scorn conventional knowledge. These typically promote the view that to the masses who cannot fathom the depth of his actions, the Taoist sage appears as a hopeless fool without ability (*wu neng* 無能) or value to anyone.⁵³ In his *Records of the Historian* (Shij 史記), Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE) credits Laozi with the words: ‘a gentleman with flourishing virtue appears to be a fool’.⁵⁴ The idea is more fully developed in the *Laozi*, which adopts the perspective of the Taoist sage (*shengren* 聖人) and declares in the first person:

My mind is that of fool, confused and stupid
 Common folk are bright, I alone am dim.
 Common folk are sharp, I alone am dull.
 Floating to and fro, as if lulled by the sea,

⁵⁰ See *Wunengzi*, 3.35 (chapter 22; or the second chapter of volume 3).

⁵¹ Another rendering would be ‘Man of Huayang Mountain’, although to my knowledge there is no connection between Zhang Bi and Huayang Mountain (in present-day Anhui province).

⁵² De Meyer, *Wunengzi (Niteskunner)*: 35–37.

⁵³ See *Liezi* 1, which speaks of the Dao in similar terms: ‘[The Dao] is non-knowing. It is incapable. But there is nothing it knows not, and nothing that it can not’ 无知也, 无能也, 而无不知也, 而无不能也. In this passage, knowledge is intimately linked to ability.

⁵⁴ *Shiji* 63, ‘Laozi Han Fei liezhuan’ 老子韓非列傳 (‘Arrayed Traditions [Concerning] Laozi and Han Feizi’); translation from Csiksentmihalyi, *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*: 102.

Blown about, as if by a ceaseless wind.
 Common folk have purpose, I alone am obstinate like a bumpkin.
 I alone am different from others and value suckling the [Dao] Mother.⁵⁵

我愚人之心也哉，沌沌兮。
 俗人昭昭，我獨若昏。俗人察察，我獨悶悶。
 澹兮其若海，颺兮若無止。
 眾人皆有以，而我獨頑似鄙。
 我獨異於人，而貴食母。

Not only does the sage appear foolish according to normative standards of intelligence, but he is also completely ineffective in standard political and social environments. The words from the *Laozi* are echoed in the *Zhuangzi*: ‘The clever toil, and the knowledgeable are sad. Those who are incapable seek nothing. They eat to the full, and wander idly about’.⁵⁶ In this light, the Taoist sage’s uselessness to his peers and his impotence on the political stage are inscribed in a larger celebration of invalidity, infirmity and deficiency apparent in a number of Taoist sources.⁵⁷ The *Zhuangzi* parable about knotted and crooked tree that escapes the carpenter’s axe and thereby enjoys a long natural life is representative of the value of not being useful (*wuyong* 無用).⁵⁸ Thus, through the distorting lens of conventional knowledge, ‘incapable masters’ appear as inept fools; in actuality, they are all but incapable as they benefit from privileged access to the inner-workings of the Dao.

Sir Jing’s Tang-dynasty preface and other prefaces by later authors characterise the *Wunengzi* as a treatise that essentially enjoins readers

⁵⁵ *Laozi* 20; the Dao is often represented as a maternal, life-giving and life-sustaining force; Lévi, *Les fonctionnaires divins*: 42–45, discusses the motif of the sage who appears as a fool to the near-sighted in Legalist and other sources. *Laozi* 49 declares: 聖人在天下歛歛焉為天下渾其心, which James Legge reads as ‘The sage has in the world the appearance of indecision, and keeps his mind in a state of indifference to all’. More recent translations, such as Ryden’s, *Daodejing*: 103, give a considerably different reading: ‘The Sage joins with the world, And with the world he merges his mind.’

⁵⁶ 巧者勞而知者憂，無能者無所求，飽食而教遊; *Zhuangzi* 32; De Meyer, *Wunengzi* (*Nietskunner*): 32–34, lists this and other passages from the *Zhuangzi*, namely from chapters 20 and 22, where the term *wuneng* 無能 appears. In the case of chapters 20 and 22, the term is taken literally (as in ‘without ability/capacity’ or ‘impotent’) as a pejorative.

⁵⁷ For an enlightening discussion of ‘The look of wisdom and the aestheticization of the sage’ and ‘Self-cultivation and the praise of deformity’, see Graziani, ‘The Subject and the Sovereign’: 504–11.

⁵⁸ *Zhuangzi* 1.

to undertake two things: the first is to return (*gui*) to an elucidation of the principle of ‘spontaneity’ or ‘naturalness’ (*ziran*) without intentional purpose (*wuwei* 無為); and the second is to return (*gui*) to a realisation of the tenets of inner nature and vital force (*xingming* 性命) without desiring it (*wuyu* 無欲).⁵⁹ At first glance, this characterisation of the *Wunengzi* seems to correspond more to a self-cultivation manual than a politico-philosophical treatise. Indeed, the notions of inner nature and vital force are ingredient to Neidan (Internal Alchemy), which was growing increasingly influential in the ninth century.⁶⁰ But the *Wunengzi* is no attempt at a Neidan text. Setting the treatise against the broad background of self-cultivation is a way of underscoring the interchangeability of the idioms of microcosmic individual development and macrocosmic social development. The logic of return (*gui*) and the superimposition of soteriological paths onto cosmogonies are two elements that drive such interchangeability.

The Tang and later Ming (1368–1644) prefaces mention that focusing on ‘naturalness’ (*ziran*) and the cultivation of inner nature and vital force implies the insignificance of [Confucian] rites and the rejection of worldly matters.⁶¹ This understatement is once again attributable to the unforgiving political climate of the mid-to-late ninth century.⁶² In actuality, the *Wunengzi* adopts a tone that is overtly critical of mainstream literati ideology from outset. The opening section of the first volume (*juan*), titled ‘The Errors of the Sages’ (‘Shengguo’ 聖過), is a scathing indictment of a Confucian-inspired society.⁶³ It takes the form of a now familiar cosmogony, beginning with a harmonious Golden Age that gradually declines into the lived state of misery, war and inequality as knowledge

⁵⁹ 其旨歸於明自然之理、極性命之端，自然無作、性命無欲；*Wunengzi*, 50. Likewise, in the Ming dynasty, Sun Kuang’s 孫鏞 (1543–1613) prefatorial critique summarises the *Wunengzi*’s teaching as one whose essentials lie in ‘elucidating spontaneity and seeking Nature and Fate without doing, without intentional purpose’: 旨在明自然，求性命，無作無為，略禮教而外世務；*ibid.*

⁶⁰ For an exhaustive and recent overview of these concepts, see Pregadio, ‘Destiny, Vital Force, or Existence?’.

⁶¹ 略禮教而外世務焉；and 略禮教而外世務 respectively；*Wunengzi*: 50.

⁶² Censors and potential critics would likely read the preface first, and maybe only, in forming their opinion on a work.

⁶³ This title builds on a long Taoist tradition of criticising Confucian sages and what is perceived as their arbitrary categorisations. See, for example, *Zhuangzi* 9 and 10, where the expression *shengren zhi guo* 聖人之過 (‘the errors of the sages’) occurs three times.

and its divisions proliferate. The first stages in the generation of the cosmos are described as follows:

When Heaven and Earth were not yet separated, primordial chaos was unified *qi*. When unified *qi* overflowed, it divided into two principles. There was purity and impurity, as well as lightness and heaviness. The light and pure ascended, becoming Yang and then Heaven. The heavy and impure descended, becoming Yin and then Earth. Heaven was firm yet moving while Earth was pliable yet calm. *Qi* spontaneously arose [from this]. When Heaven and Earth were in position, Yin, Yang, and *qi* interacted; thus naked creatures, scaled creatures, furry creatures, feathered creatures, and shelled creatures were born. Humans were the naked creatures, and they were born together with those scaled, furry, feathered, and shelled creatures, generated from the interaction of Heaven and Earth and *qi*. There is no difference between them [humans and creatures].⁶⁴

天地未分，混沌一炁。一炁充溢，分為二儀。有清濁焉，有輕重焉。輕清者上，為陽為天；重濁者下，為陰為地矣。天則剛健而動，地則柔順而靜，炁之自然也。天地既位，陰陽炁交，於是裸蟲、鱗蟲、毛蟲、羽蟲、甲蟲生焉。人者，裸蟲也，與夫鱗毛羽甲蟲俱焉，同生天地，交炁而已，無所異也。

Already, from the opening lines, the *Wunengzi* stresses the ontological equality of all creatures. The passage states that it is only humans who argue for their difference from other creatures on the basis of their intelligence (*zhiliu* 智慮) and language. Yet, animals too have their own ways of communicating and their own thought processes, which in the end, are mobilised in the pursuit of the same comforts as humans. The differences between naked creatures, scaled creatures, furry creatures, feathered creatures and shelled creature, are of the realm of external form (*xingzhi* 形質) alone. After describing the initial phases of cosmogony, the text turns to the early collective of living things:

In that which was the most ancient time, the naked creatures lived together with the scaled, furry, feathered and shelled. Male and female naturally joined one another without the distinctions of man and woman, husband and wife—or the hierarchies of father and son, elder brother and young brother. In the summer, they built nests and in winter, caves; there was no construction of palaces or houses. They ate raw meat and drank blood, and did not eat the hundred grains. The living moved about and the dead keeled over. None had the mind to rob or to

⁶⁴ *Wunengzi*, 1.1.

harm. There was no such thing as funerary rites. They surrendered to their nature and followed their heavenly perfection. There was no controlling or governing, only primal cosmic simplicity. This natural order, it persisted for a long time.⁶⁵

所以太古時，裸蟲與鱗毛羽甲雜處，雌雄牝牡自然相合，無男女夫婦之別，父子兄弟之序。夏巢冬穴，無宮室之制。茹毛飲血，無百穀之食。生自馳，死自仆，無奪害之心，無瘞藏之事。任其自然，遂其天真，無所司牧，濛濛淳淳，其理⁶⁶也居且久矣。

The *Wunengzi* subsequently engages in one of the most detailed descriptions of a human-instigated cosmic decline to be found in early or medieval sources. The first step in the degeneration occurs when differences in levels of intelligence (*zhilü*) arise among humans. Ironically, since no cause is provided for this sudden variation in the natural order of things, early disparities in human intelligence appear to be a ‘natural’ development preordained by the Dao. How this evolution in cognition runs counter to cosmogonic processes is not answered. The first step in a long series of downturns actually occurs immediately after (and not when) differences in intelligence first manifest. As a result of a jump in mental capacity, the naked creatures (*luochong* 裸蟲) began to refer to themselves as humans (*ren* 人). They imposed their will on other creatures and caught them for food. They developed agriculture, built elaborate dwellings and elaborate funerary rites. They instituted divisions and hierarchies. To govern the resulting communities and regulate the imbalances created by hierarchies, a single ruler (*jun* 君) was chosen (*ze* 擇) among the multitude of humans. Further distinctions arose, this time between the ruler and his subjects (*chen* 臣), and between the noble, who were celebrated, and the base (*zunbei* 尊卑) who were viewed as unremarkable and indistinct. Ranks and emoluments followed the division between noble and base, as did promotions and demotions, and upper and lower classes (*guijian zhi deng* 貴賤之等). Distinction between rich and poor arose as did, inevitably, the spirit of competition (*zhengxin* 爭心).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Wunengzi*, 1.2.

⁶⁶ Ming, *Wunengzi jiaozhu*: 4, no. 18, lists the character *li* 理 as a replacement for *zhi* 治 due to a ‘naming taboo’ or deferential avoidance of Tang emperor Gaozong Lizhi’s 高宗李治 (r. 649–683) name.

⁶⁷ *Wunengzi*, 1.2–3.

Those humans who were endowed with superior intelligence—the sages (*shengren* 聖人) as they were known—realised that they had strayed from the original way. In an attempt to remedy the situation, they devised the teachings of humaneness, righteousness, loyalty and trust, and the rules of ritual and music to regulate the people. The sages hoped that they could convince people to comply with the teachings and rules by honouring the ‘right’ (*shi* 是) and shaming the ‘wrong’ (*fei* 非). But this helped only for a short time. Soon, desires became more impassioned and the people turned their backs on the teachings and rules. The sages established laws and armies to control them; punishments multiplied and weapons proliferated.⁶⁸ Since then, families and entire kingdoms have been habitually decimated, and poverty and death, unrelenting:

Alas! It was natural to regard them as creatures; it was unnatural to regard them as human. They forcefully established palaces and houses, and drinks and food, by which they enticed their desires. They forcefully distinguished between upper and lower classes, and noble and base, by which they aroused their covetousness. They forcefully created humanity and righteousness, and ritual and music, by which they overturned their perfection. They forcefully enacted penal law and warfare, by which they destroyed their lives. This forced them to pursue the secondary and forget about the fundamental.⁶⁹ This confused their feelings and destroyed their Vital Force, and they died confounded. The past, now, cannot be restored. This is the fault of those who are called sages.⁷⁰

嗟乎。自然而蟲之，不自然而人之。彊立宮室飲食以誘其欲，彊分貴賤尊卑以激其爭，彊為仁義禮樂以傾其真，彊行刑法征伐以殘其生，俾逐其末而忘其本，紛其情而伐其命，迷迷相死，古今不復，謂之聖人者之過也。

Thus, the introductory section of the *Wunengzi*, the longest one in the entire text, has very little to do with inner nature and vital force. It offers an elaborate account of a bygone Taoist utopia and the chain of events that led to its demise. It also unmistakably links the birth of social inequality to the cosmogonic process by which the universe and all of its inhabitants are generated. However, in a significant departure from previous utopian accounts, the *Wunengzi* suggests that intelligence

⁶⁸ *Wunengzi*, 1.3.

⁶⁹ Literally, ‘to pursue the branches and forget about the root’.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

(*zhiliu*), although a product of differentiation, is not problematic in and of itself. Differentiation occurs ‘naturally’ as the Dao unfolds: out of unified *qi* emerge Yin and Yang, and eventually the full spectrum living beings. According to the *Wunengzi*, the appearance of differences in intelligence (among members of a species and between various species) is also inscribed in this spontaneous and natural process of differentiation. However, the text contrasts intelligence with knowledge (*zhi*) as the latter constitutes a contrived form of understanding that only humans fabricate. Knowledge imposes distinctions that pervert the natural process of cosmogonic differentiation. In turn, these imposed distinctions produce further knowledge, which generates further differences. As artificial human-imagined demarcations proliferate, hierarchies surface and inequalities follow.

Thus, in its eloquent description of an ideal collectivity and its collapse, the *Wunengzi* establishes a crucial opposition between natural distinctions and innate intelligence, on the one hand, and artificial distinctions and knowledge, on the other hand. While the former occurs spontaneously or naturally (*ziran*) without intentional purpose (*wuwei*) and implies equal overall standing for all the parts that make up the whole (humans are fundamentally the same as any other species; all humans are fundamentally the same), the categorisations typical of the latter are intentionally concocted on the basis of hierarchies of relative ontological value (humans rank higher than other species; some humans rank higher than others). In distinguishing between intelligence as a result of natural differentiation and artificial differentiation as a product of manufactured knowledge, the *Wunengzi* finally addresses the paradox of how differentiation could be negative if it occurred spontaneously as a part of cosmogony, before the appearance of humans—a contradiction that had been pointed out since the fourth century at least.⁷¹

Implementing the Utopian Order

Many of the points developed in the opening passage of the *Wunengzi* are elaborated upon in subsequent sections. For example, chapter 5, ‘Challenging the Baseless’ (‘Zhiwang’ 質妄) contrasts ‘naturalness’

⁷¹ See, for example, Ge Hong’s questions to Bao Jing in *Baopuzi waipian*, 48.523: 子若以混冥為美乎？則乾坤不宜分矣；若以無名為高乎？則八卦不當畫矣。豈造化有謬，而太昊之暗哉？

(*ziran*) with knowledge-based categories intentionally designed to polarise and exploit divisions. Similarly, passages from chapter 28, ‘Sorting Out Perceptions’ (‘Jijian’ 紀見), decry the arbitrariness of social conventions and divisions that people take as inherently valid.⁷² This gradual development of key themes signals that the text is carefully developing a reasoned argument. The *Wunengzi* transcends simple social critique, introducing a new epistemological paradigm to Taoist utopian thought, namely the distinction between natural and artificial differentiation, and the corollary distinction between intelligence and knowledge.

In addition to this original contribution, the *Wunengzi* also presents another particularity. In spite of being condemnatory towards the state and its ideological apparatus, the text does not argue for its outright and immediate rejection.⁷³ This is one of the features that most distinguish it from Western understandings of anarchism. Instead, the author of the *Wunengzi* proposes to engage with the political from within in order to gradually change its function and ultimately render it useless. Paradoxically, stateless utopia may be achieved through direct involvement with the state at its highest echelons. Unfortunately, *Wunengzi* does not elaborate on how to go about it, nor does it include the argument as part of an explicit programme of crafting an ideal society. These are perhaps some of the reasons why most scholars have overlooked the position, continuing instead to interpret the message of the *Wunengzi* as one of complete cynicism.⁷⁴ K.C. Hsiao, for example, portrays ‘Western anarchists’ as ‘constructive, *i.e.*, they attempted to point a way out of the present quagmire and suggest methods for the attainment of future happiness’. He continues, ‘Anarchism with Wu Nêng-Tzû, however, [...]’

⁷² See especially parts 2 and 3 of chapter 28; *Wunengzi*, 3.43–45; see also 1.9–12.

⁷³ John A. Rapp has noted this particularity of the text; however, he interprets it as compromise with Confucians and consequently views the *Wunengzi* as a denatured and diluted form of Taoist anarchism. See Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 96–97; see especially, *ibid.*: 103, where, seemingly under the spell of Western notions of ideological purity, Rapp writes that the *Wunengzi* is ‘a degradation of radical Daoist [anarchist] ideas’. Rapp also considers the *Wunengzi* as reflective of certain Buddhist ideas: he titles the relevant chapter ‘Daoism as anarchism or nihilism: The Buddhist-influenced thought of Wu Nengzi’, but he fails to provide any analysis of Buddhist notions in the text and to identify any clear instances of Buddhist ‘influence’.

⁷⁴ See the dismissive evaluation by Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*: 10, where the author of the *Wunengzi* is interpreted as ‘closer to being a total cynic than a constructive social thinker’, the quote is reproduced in De Meyer, *Wunengzi (Nietskunner)*: 37; and Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism*: 96.

is pure negation: a denunciation of the state without any suggestion as to what is to be done or what shall take the place of the state'. He concludes, perhaps a bit hastily, 'Western anarchism is thus a doctrine of hope, whereas Chinese anarchism seems to be a doctrine of despair'.⁷⁵

Indeed, a closer and holistic reading of the *Wunengzi* reveals its redemptive tenor and participative social constructivism. To begin with, the text's scope is hardly world-negating or transcendent; it aims to engage with and rectify the ills of society, not escape them by taking refuge in some paradise of Taoist immortals. The *Wunengzi*'s focus on the immanent aspects of the human experience is apparent in a number of passages, most vividly in the chapter 'Understanding Misconceptions' ('Xihuo' 析惑), which sternly condemns the pursuit of physical immortality (an emblematic Taoist pursuit).⁷⁶

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the *Wunengzi*'s commitment to a careful transition from a conventional state-led society to small-scale collectivist communities is the series of conversations attributed to (semi-) historical figures that make up the second 'volume' (*juan*) of the text. These conversations are arranged in chronological order from the eleventh century BCE to the third century CE. In a number of them, regimes flourish as a result of high-ranking government figures adopting policies that are mindful of the people's welfare and generally reflective of the *Wunengzi*'s outlook. King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (r. 1099–50 BCE) is mentioned in this context, as is Fan Li 範蠡 (ca. 5th century BCE).⁷⁷ Elsewhere, the focus is more on the troubles that befall administrations when they do not heed the words of hermits or insightful advisors. These would-be counselors—Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 (ca. 11th century BCE), Laozi 老子, Song Yu 宋玉 (3rd century BCE) and Sun Deng 孫登 (3rd century CE) among them—function as mouthpieces for the Incapable Master's positions, but they also provide historical precedent and thus credibility for those same ideas.⁷⁸

The third volume (*juan*) contains a few parables, but it is chiefly made up of exchanges between the Incapable Master and some of his close friends

⁷⁵ Hsiao, 'Anarchism in Chinese Political Thought': 260.

⁷⁶ *Wunengzi*, 1.7; the text argues that the body is naturally dead matter that can only temporarily hold inner nature and vital force. This is what makes it appear alive. Inner nature and vital force are eternal (*changsheng* 常生) but they cannot be contained in dead receptacles such as bodies indefinitely.

⁷⁷ *Wunengzi*, 2.15–16 and 2.22, respectively.

⁷⁸ *Wunengzi*, 2.17–18, 2.19, 2.23 and 2.31, respectively.

or relatives. Despite the informal setting, the content of the dialogues is often related to statecraft. Again, the *Wunengzi* makes clear that it cannot be reduced to a mere fatalistic rejection of all things political or to a simple dismissal of any form of government. It is hopeful, and even optimistic, defending the potential for achieving its utopia even through traditional political structures. In a playful passage, after some market magicians have plunged their hands into burning oil to solicit money, the Incapable Master comments: ‘Thaumaturges can cool a hot pot. How much more can those of superior virtue achieve!’⁷⁹ The anecdote does not spiral into world-renouncing anti-statist pessimism. On the contrary, it culminates in an exhortation to ‘do’ and to put one’s capacities, once sufficiently cultivated, to better use than marketplace tricks. But the author of the *Wunengzi* most clearly spells out his view on participatory governance in the chapter titled ‘Answering Master Huayang’s Question’ (‘Da Huayangzi wen’ 答華陽子問). Here, the aforementioned Master Huayang struggles with the prospect of becoming an official at the behest of one of his friends: ‘I have observed the teaching of “No Intention” (*wuxin* 無心) for a long time, but if I serve it will go against this intention (*xin* 心) [of no intention], and if I do not, I will anger my friend. What can I possibly do?’⁸⁰ The Incapable Master answers in an unexpected manner:

If desire is at the center [of what you undertake], be you a fisherman, a woodcutter, a peasant, or a shepherd, you will have intention. If desire is not at the center [of what you undertake], even in the emperor’s carriage or in the robes of a marquis, you will have no intention. Thus, when it is fitting to live as a recluse, the sage should live a recluse. When it is fitting to assume office, then he should assume office. If conditions accord with benefitting oneself alone, then Xuyou and Shanjuan⁸¹ need not feel embarrassed about remaining ordinary commoners. If circumstances point to indiscriminately aiding all, then

⁷⁹ 幻人可以寒烈鑊。況上德乎; *Wunengzi*, 3.43; in another passage, when the Incapable Master’s cousin Lu 魯 indulges in drink and wallows in the past, he advises him to focus on what’s ahead and desist from ‘pickling himself in malt liquor 浸漬於麴藥; *Wunengzi*, 3.38.

⁸⁰ 吾將學無心久矣，仕則違心矣，不仕則忿所知，如何其可也; *Wunengzi*, 3.35.

⁸¹ Xuyou 許由 was a legendary hermit who famously washed out his ears with water from the Ying River 潁川 after Emperor Yao 堯 (r. 2356–2255 BCE) had defiled them by offering him the throne. For this reason, Xu You is known as the Ying River Recluse 潁水隱士. Similarly, Shan Juan 善卷 was a recluse who refused the throne when Emperor Shun 舜 proposed it to him. His reply is recorded in *Zhuangzi* 28, a chapter that echoes a number of themes from the utopia described in the same text. Xuyou also appears in a number of other passages from the *Zhuangzi*.

Yao and Shun cannot decline to be emperor. Their actions [show] no intention since all are one. [...] If you can fathom this, whether you are fighting chickens and racing dogs at the local meat market or hoisting standards and beheading generals on the battlefield, all can be accomplished, not to mention serving as an official.⁸²

欲於中，漁樵耕牧有心也；不欲於中，帝車侯服無心也。故聖人宜處則處，宜行則行。理安於獨善，則許由善卷不恥為匹夫。勢便於兼濟，則堯舜不辭為天子，其為無心，一也。[...] 子能達此，雖鬥雞走狗於屠肆之中，褻旗斬將於兵陣之間，可矣，況仕乎。

In its world view, the *Wunengzi* provides ample space for the possibility of participation in statecraft. In contrast to earlier ‘centrifugal’ formulations of Taoist utopias, in which the ideal community is cut off from other societies (mainstream or not), the Incapable Master argues for an integrated ‘centripetal’ model whereby all, even state officials—the antithesis to ‘nature’ incarnate—can contribute to the gradual attainment of a common societal project. The operative principle in achieving this is the absence of intentionality (*wuxin*). As the passage makes clear, absence of intentionality consists of not focusing on desire and being open to, but not strictly motivated by assisting others. The *Records of the Historian* quote Laozi as saying: ‘...if a gentleman meets his opportune time then he will ride in a carriage, but if he does not then he picks up and settles like a dry leaf in the wind’.⁸³ In either instance, the sage remains free from intention and amenable to serving of those who are receptive. Sometimes, it is more efficacious to benefit others by exclusively cultivating oneself, merely instructing the few who are responsive to one’s ideas. At other times, it is best to benefit others *en masse* via office if the conditions are right.⁸⁴

⁸² *Wunengzi*, 3.35–36.

⁸³ ... 君子得其時則駕，不得其時則蓬累而行；*Shiji* 63, ‘Laozi Han Fei liezhuan’; translation from Csiksentmihalyi, *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*: 103.

⁸⁴ Another passage, *Wunengzi* 2.15, illustrates the approach to utopian actualisation through politico-social engagement: when Ji Chang 姬昌 (1152 BCE–1056 CE), the Count of the West (Xi Bo 西伯) and future ‘King Wen of Zhou 周文王’ asks his contemporary Lü Wang 呂望 (12th century BCE; also known as Lü Shang 呂尚) to save the people of the Yin 殷 (Shang 商) dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE) from further suffering at the hands of their tyrannical ruler, the sage dismissively answers: ‘Why do you want me to dirty [myself]?’ 汝胡垢予。He elaborates on his abrupt reply, asserting that all living creatures are of one *qi* (pneuma), and that city walls and dwellings are nothing but empty space. If all creatures are killed, their *qi*

Although all Taoist utopias find their blueprint in *Laozi* 80, the ideal societies that Ji Kang and Bao Jingyan describe generally reproduce the renunciant or ‘centrifugal’ topos espoused in the *Zhuangzi*. Conversely, the *Wunengzi*’s fully developed vision promotes involvement in political affairs as a strategy to improve society. In this respect, it more closely emulates the overall spirit of the *Laozi*.

Closing Thoughts and Some Reflections on Similarities between Taoist and European Utopias

I began this article by questioning the claim that certain currents in Taoism constitute a form of anarchism. The comparison between Taoism and anarchism is problematic as even the *Wunengzi*, which is often billed as a representative work of ‘Taoist anarchism’, is supportive of the expedient participation in government—a stance that is in direct conflict with the most fundamental tenets of anarchism. More problematic still is the cultural asymmetry implied in the claim. Since Taoism predates the political ideology of anarchism, it would be more appropriate to ask how the latter might constitute a manifestation of the former. I dare not suggest an actual relationship between Taoism and early modern/modern European social or political philosophies;⁸⁵ but in discussing similarities between systems of thought, as those who speak of ‘Taoist anarchism’ do, we should mention a few examples of conceptual kinship between the

is still one; just as if all city walls and dwellings are destroyed, the space that defined them will still be empty. Before Xi Bo can digest these words, Lü Wang adds:

‘However, as city walls and residences have already been built, there is no need to destroy them; since living people have already taken shape, there is no need to kill them. And so I will save them’. He agreed with Xi Bo and together they rode back [to the capital].

雖然，城郭屋舍已成不必壞，生民已形不必殺，予將拯之矣。乃許西伯同載而歸。

⁸⁵ Nonetheless, there are a handful of enticing connections that deserve fuller consideration from qualified scholars. The case of Oscar Wilde is one instance that we may cite in this context; an avowed socialist and revolutionary, the Irish writer was also fond of classical Taoist thinkers. He famously reviewed Herbert A. Giles’ first English translation of the *Zhuangzi*, (titled *Chuang Tsu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*); see Wilde, ‘A Chinese Sage’; and his essay, ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’; McCormack, ‘From Chinese Wisdom to Irish Wit’, convincingly demonstrates how Wilde’s reading of the *Zhuangzi* was integral to his vision on socialism and social reform.

passages examined above and a sample of Western utopias. A full-fledged analysis is out of the question in these last few pages, but I hope to show that there is enough material for further investigation.

The first case we turn to is from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–78) *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (hereafter *Discourse on Inequality*) published in 1755. Rousseau argues that inequality, in its moral and social manifestations, is not inherent to the human experience.⁸⁶ It is created by civil society, and contrived by a small minority of affluent and influential people to ensure their continued domination over the weak. Rousseau devotes most of his essay to an exposition of how humans developed society and its ravaging inequalities from a utopian omega point of harmony with nature and other creatures. The parallels with the Taoist sources examined above are readily apparent: an idealised rustic golden age and the recounting of its gradual decline along a cosmogonic narrative are the most salient. But some may consider these similarities generic when dealing with utopian critiques of the state. Further points of compatibility are perhaps less incidental. As in the *Wunengzi*, the development of the capacity for language and abstract thought and their unequal distribution among humans is one of the principal reasons cited for the early stages of decline.⁸⁷ This, coupled with the instinctive need to band together in social groupings and the tendency to evaluate oneself by the perception of one's peers, generated distinctions between individuals of the human species and between humans and other species—cleavages that were exploited to the advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others. As societies become more complex, Rousseau explains that they develop the need for rulers, whose functions are modelled (as in Confucianism) on the figure of the father.⁸⁸ Driven by the

⁸⁶ Rousseau points out that physical inequality exists but it would be more aptly defined as physical diversity, with different aptitudes being suited to different environments or functions.

⁸⁷ The opening lines of the 'Second Part' of Rousseau's work assert: 'The first who, having enclosed a piece of land, devised to declare "this is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how much misery and horror would one have spared humanity had he cried to his brethren while ripping out the stakes or filling the ditch [that delineate land]: 'Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that fruits belong to all and the land to no one'; see Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*): 102. All translations from Rousseau are mine.

⁸⁸ Rousseau, *Discours*: 157–62.

hubris (*orgueil*) of their early achievements, humans, individually and as a species, thirst for more and faster progress, multiplying advances (dwellings, clothes, cities, arts, science), but at the same time widening the chasms of inequality, proliferating differentiation and drifting ever further from the pristine shores of their original natural condition.⁸⁹ Rousseau concludes: ‘Inequality, being virtually nonexistent in nature, draws its strength and growth from the development of our faculties and the advancements of human spirit [...]; it is manifestly contrary to the law of nature that a handful of people be saturated with superfluities, when the starving multitude lacks the necessary’.⁹⁰

However, in a letter to Voltaire (1694–1778) Rousseau makes it clear that he is not advocating a return to earlier ways of life.⁹¹ By contrast, Taoists actually seek to re-create their golden age either on the macro scale of society or more commonly, on the micro scale of the individual. Rousseau differs in that he considers ‘original simplicity’ (*l’originelle simplicité*) lost and irretrievable on any scale.⁹² Renouncing the world and retiring to a cave to live as a hermit as the *Zhuangzi* prescribes, will not eradicate the inequalities for those who stay behind. Rousseau’s position is thus closer to that of the *Wunengzi*, and maybe the *Laozi*, in that he still thinks that society and the state are salvageable.⁹³ He lampoons potential misreadings of his *Discourse on Inequality*: ‘What then? Must we destroy societies, annihilate “yours” and “mine”, and return to live in forests with together with the bears?’⁹⁴ No. For Rousseau, the reversion he prescribes is purely heuristic. Only by scrutinising humanity and nature in their broadest cosmic scope can the first causes of disorder and inequality be uncovered and then addressed in such a way that their effects are minimised. In another letter, this time to a ‘Mr Philopolis’ (Charles Bonnet [1720–93]) Rousseau clarifies how his cosmogonic narrative is

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: 105–08, and more generally, 103–41.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*: 196–97.

⁹¹ ‘You understand that I do not seek to re-establish us in our savage unknowing, even though, for my part, I regret the little that I have lost of it. As for you, sir, such a return would be a miracle, so great and so bothersome at once, that it would belong only to God to undertake it and to the Devil to wish it’; Rousseau, ‘Réponse à Voltaire’: 226.

⁹² *Ibid.*, *Discours*: no. 7, 242.

⁹³ Something which Rousseau subsequently provides the blueprint for in his *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique* (1762); see for example, Barny, *Prélude idéologique à la Révolution française*.

⁹⁴ Rousseau, *Discours*: no. 7, 241.

pedagogical, not teleological: societies, like the human body, decay as they advance in age. It is impossible to reverse the process of aging, but one may look to the causes of certain elderly afflictions in one's youth in order to better treat them in old age.⁹⁵

The analogy to biology that Rousseau draws to defend his *Discourse on Inequality* also lends itself to the text's 'cosmogony'. Indeed, it would be suitable to describe the *Discourse on Inequality* as an evolutionary history of human kind.⁹⁶ But Rousseau and the Taoists were not the only ones to exploit the intellectual resonance between evolutionary models of human or social development and utopian political philosophies. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), the zoologist, biologist and prominent anarchist activist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) builds his argument for mutual aid on a foundation of notions derived from evolutionary biology. In opposition to Darwinism and its economic incarnation, capitalism, Kropotkin argues that voluntary association and cooperation not only exist in nature, but that the species which exhibit those behavioral traits adapt much better to changes in their environment. In other words, they evolve faster and have higher chances of survival than species that do not engage in mutual aid.⁹⁷ While the details of Kropotkin's thesis are captivating, they need not detain us here. The point is that 'nature' again, serves as a blueprint for the perfect society. Elsewhere, Kropotkin elaborates on cosmogony, that is the development and resulting 'natural' order of the universe, as a template for human society.⁹⁸ The realisation, in Kropotkin's case, of an anarchist utopia is thus achieved by 'going back' to nature, to what was there all along, to some way of doing things that was lost. The process of loss is plotted

⁹⁵ Rousseau, 'Lettre de J.-J. Rousseau à M. Philopolis': 233; the exchange between Rousseau and Bonnet is titled 'Faut-il aller vivre dans les bois?' ('Must we go and live in the woods?') in newer editions.

⁹⁶ To be accurate, the *Discourse on Inequality* begins with the appearance of quadruped humans in their natural (non-social) context, together with animals. Rousseau's account thereby bypasses the early stages of the formation of the cosmos.

⁹⁷ Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*.

⁹⁸ 'It is to this dust, to these infinitely tiny bodies that dash through space in all directions with giddy swiftness, that clash with one another, agglomerate, disintegrate, everywhere and always, it is to them that today astronomers look for an explanation of the origin of our solar system, the movements that animate its parts, and the harmony of their whole. Yet another step, and soon universal gravitation itself will be but the result of all the disordered and incoherent movements of these infinitely small bodies—of oscillations of atoms that

linearly, as in the *Discourse on Inequality*, and precisely because it is linear, the loss—or at least a consciousness of the loss and hence the impetus to act on it—are somehow retrievable.

Finally, we turn to Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–81) and his *Eternity by the Stars* (*L'Éternité par les astres*; 1871). Blanqui, a permanent insurrectionist of strong socialist conviction, was considered the *de facto* spiritual leader of the Paris Commune (18 March–28 May 1871), despite his imprisonment during the uprising. Overall, he was more concerned with the act of revolution than sketching out any projections of an ideal egalitarian society, but his *Eternity by the Stars* stands out in so far that it offers a glimmer of hope for 'progress' as he terms it, in an otherwise resoundingly bleak view of history, both human and cosmic.

Blanqui begins *Eternity by the Stars* with a cosmogonic introduction to the formation of the universe and its constitutive elements. He then speculates that since space and time are both infinite on a cosmic scale, and the number of elements that make up the cosmos, that is nature, are finite, then human individuals, the history they create and the cosmogonic processes that lead up to these particular configurations are replicated any number of times. As a reproducible conjunction of material elements, there is nothing unique or particular about them. In Blanqui's own words:

...in order to fill its expanse, nature must repeat to infinity each of its original combinations or [primordial] types. Each astral body, whatever it might be, exists in infinite number in time and space, not only in one of its aspects, but as it is in each second of its existence, from birth to death. All beings distributed on its surface, small or large, living or inanimate, share the privilege of this perennity. The earth is one of these astral bodies. Every human being is thus

manifest themselves in all possible directions. Thus the center, the origin of force, formerly transferred from the earth to the sun, now turns out to be scattered and disseminated: it is everywhere and nowhere. With the astronomer, we perceive that solar systems are the work of infinitely small bodies; that the power which was supposed to govern the system is itself but the result of the collisions among those infinitely tiny clusters of matter, that the harmony of stellar systems is harmony only because it is an adaptation, a resultant of all these numberless movements uniting, completing, equilibrating one another. The whole aspect of the universe changes with this new conception. The idea of force governing the world, of pre-established law, preconceived harmony, disappears to make room for the harmony that Fourier had caught a glimpse of: the one which results from the disorderly and incoherent movements of numberless hosts of matter, each of which goes its own way and all of which hold each other in equilibrium'; Kropotkin, *Anarchism*: 3–4.

eternal in each second of its existence. The number of our doubles are infinite in time and space. We cannot ask for more in good conscience.⁹⁹

In this way, individual immortality is achieved. Despite its static undertones, Blanqui's framework involves linear cosmogonic processes, albeit ones that are repeated ad infinitum; it is also one in which cosmic/natural and human orders are imbricated. Furthermore, there is an unstated disregard for anything that is extraneous to those orders, namely religion, class distinctions, or any knowledge-based differentiation among immortalised individuals. At least in its formal features, this model is surprisingly compatible with Taoist utopian views.

But the question of agency remains. For Blanqui, there simply is none: 'Here is, nevertheless a great drawback [to actualized eternity]: there is no progress'. He laments, 'Alas! No, there are but vulgar re-editions, repetitions', pessimistically concluding 'Such are the copies of past worlds, such are those of future worlds'. Yet, in spite of this overwhelming absence of agency, there exists the possibility of attenuating the bitterness of material determinism. Blanqui continues:

Only the chapter of junctions remains open to hope. Let us not forget that *all we could have been down here, we are somewhere else*. Progress, down here, is only for our kin. They have better fortune than us. All the beautiful things than our globe will see, our future descendants have already seen them, are seeing them in this moment, and will see them forever, of course, in the form of doubles that have preceded and will follow them. [...] Isn't it a consolation to know that we are constantly, on billions of earths, in the company of loved ones that are today but a memory? Isn't it another [consolation] to think that we have tasted and will eternally taste this happiness in the form of a double, of billions of doubles? [...] In the end, this eternity of humans by the stars is melancholic, and sadder still is this sequestration of brother-worlds by the inexorable barrier of space.¹⁰⁰

Much like the celestial bodies that he describes piercing through the darkness of space, a gleam of light ultimately punctuates Blanqui's dim outlook. This feature also calls to mind the more redemptive Taoist utopias, such as that of the *Wunengzi*, which champion a change or renewal from

⁹⁹ Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres*: 46–47. Translation mine. See the recent critical translation by Chouraqui, *Eternity by the Stars*. Blanqui's text also attracted Walter Benjamin's attention in the context of *The Arcades Project*: 25–26.

¹⁰⁰ Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres*: 47–48.

within the fetters of inequality rather than their wholesale rejection and the abandonment of the society that upholds them.

To be clear, my juxtaposition of progressive early modern European political philosophies and Taoist utopias is not meant to define the latter as stand-ins for ‘local’ examples of universal (Western) narratives of resistance. Quite to the contrary, by highlighting a few basic similarities, I hope to have taken an initial step in relativising Western social progressivism, thereby inscribing anarchist, socialist, or utopian discourses in a larger framework of global and plural traditions of resistance. Therefore, classical and medieval Chinese Taoist utopias are to be considered on equal footing with other utopias, not as their anachronistically earlier reiterations. Taoist utopias do share a number of elements with other visions of ideal societies, but they developed their own culturally and historically specific tradition. I identified a number of tropes linking the utopian visions of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to those of Ji Kang and Bao Jingyan and that of the *Wunengzi*. These are: the idealisation of communitarian primitivism as it manifests in early cosmogonic phases; the condemnation of knowledge and the unbridled differentiation it generates; and finally, the endorsement of a de-civilising programme of cosmogonic reversion in order to return to a golden age of natural spontaneity. Considered together, these tropes provide a complete picture of the inevitable process by which social inequality is generated, its primary causes and its solution. For Taoists, inequality is the result of linear cosmic development. The correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm dictates that just as the cosmos was undivided in its earliest stages, so too was nature, along with all its constituent parts—humans among them. Thus, the earliest times, in which differentiation was almost nil, were the most ideal. Inequality did not exist.

Yet, the decay of this perfect natural order is preordained, etched into the very cosmogonic processes that first bore it. In a way, it is the logical outcome of those processes, just as Marx argued that the downfall of capitalism is inscribed in the very element that permitted its success, the proletariat.¹⁰¹ More concretely, in Taoist utopias, the downfall of human society is attributed to the development of conventional knowledge and to the distinctions it generates. As these are taken to be reflective of reality, humans deviate further from their primordial unity with other humans,

¹⁰¹ See especially ‘Bourgeois and Proletarians’, Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*: 74–84.

other creatures and nature. They establish increasingly finer divisions that lead to asymmetric relations and to the exacerbation of inequalities. The *Wunengzi*, clarifies that since the appearance of advanced intellectual or cognitive faculties is a natural (*ziran*) step in human development, it is the production of artificial human knowledge that is largely to blame for the loss of the golden age.

The solution to this loss is reversion. Since the process that led to the decline is linear, it can be undone by abandoning the trappings of human society and returning to simpler, rustic time of communitarian primitivism. Return (*fu*; *fan*; *gui*) in any of its multiple forms, is consistently forwarded as a strategy to undo wrongs in utopian Taoist discourse. The *Wunengzi* maintains that if the circumstances are right, one may also undo government, gradually, by working from within it. Merely turning one's back to inequality by abandoning society or focusing on self-cultivation does not suffice. For the more socially engaged variety of Taoists, inequality is more than an abstract philosophical concept. It is also a reality that is addressed with concrete measures. Just as the cosmos or nature hold the seeds to their own perversion in the processes by which they are generated, so too the institutions spawned by human knowledge and differentiation hold the key to their own obliteration in the processes that gave birth to them. In Taoist practice, one can transcend the self by cultivating the self; in Taoist political philosophy, ungoverned utopia is achieved through participation in government.

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