

Analysis on Tao Ti Lun from the Perspectives of Its Contents, the Discourse Mode and Its Author

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Abstract: Tao Ti Lun (Treatises on Taoist Noumenon) is a work of Tang Dynasty. Its main purpose is to make a further explanation on the concept of Tao. The structure is divided into three parts, including the concepts of Tao and Te, Tao and things, as well as Tong and Yi. As far as the discourse mode is concerned, the article is deeply influenced by Buddhism. If the author is Xuanlan Wang, it should be Wang's early work.

1. Introduction

Tao Ti Lun (Treatises on Taoist Noumenon) is now included in the Taixuan section of *Tao Zang (Collected Taoist Scriptures)*. It has one volume in total, with the author of Mr. Tong Xuan. The History of Song Dynasty: Literature included the article, but did not record the author's name. It is generally believed that Mr. Tong Xuan may be two persons: Guo Zhang of the Tang Dynasty, and Jianming Zhang of the Five Dynasties. However, according to *Summary of Collected Taoist Scriptures*, “in terms of the content of this paper, it should be written by Tang people. The viewpoints and argumentation methods are quite close to Xuanlan Wang”.

Xuanlan Wang was born in the ninth year of Wude (AD 626), the reign of Emperor Gaozu of Tang Dynasty, and died in the first year of Wuzhou (AD 697), the reign of Emperor Zetian Wu. He wrote many books, such as the *Lao Jing Zhu (Notes to Old Scriptures)*, *Zhen Ren Pusa Guanmen (Gate of Bodhisattva)*, *Huncheng Ao Zang Tu (Map of the Mixed Arcana)*, *Taode Zhuxing Men (Gate of Moral Elements)*, and *Lao Jing Kou Jue (Pithy Formula of Old Scriptures)*. But most of them have been lost. The work *Xuan Zhu Lu (The Mysterious Bead)* handed down, which is now included in the Taixuan section of *Tao Zang*. In addition, there is the article, *Xuanlan Wang's Interpretation of Tao Te Ching* unearthed in Dunhuang .

In this regard, this paper mainly analyzes the structure and content of *Tao Ti Lun*, and then analyzes the discourse mode integrating Taoism and Buddhism. Based on this, the paper compared it with *Xuan Zhu Lu*, which is known as *Xuanlan Wang's* work, in order to make a casual comment on its author.r.

2. The Structure and Content of Tao Ti Lun

“The Tao that can be told of is not the Absolute Tao”. The most basic expression in *Tao Te Ching* is difficult to understand. Therefore, there are texts and annotations to explain the concept of Tao. *Tao Ti Lun* is such a kind of text, its main purpose is to explain what is “Tao”. As a whole, the paper is divided into three parts: “On Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching*, the first volume”, “On Tao Ti (Taoist noumenon)” and “On Tao Yi (the meaning of Tao)”. Each part can be further divided into two parts. The first part is the author's point of view, and the second part explains the former in the form of question and answer. The analysis in this paper is based on the basic structure of the text. Firstly, it analyzes the content of “On Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching*, the first volume”; secondly, it analyzes the content of “On Tao Ti”. The content of “On Tao Yi” is relatively miscellaneous, and its main characteristics are the discourse mode. Therefore, the discourse mode, rather than the content of this part is analyzed.

2.1 “On Lao Zi's Tao Te Ching, the First Volume”

2.1.1 Tao and Te

The author's discussion of Tao begins with the relationship between the two concepts of Tao and Te. On one hand, the whole book of *Tao Te Ching* can be divided into two parts, the first is part is Tao Ching; the second is Te Ching. The division obviously depends on the relationship between the two concepts of Tao and Te. On the other hand, the author says, “all things are produced by Tao, and nourished by Te.” The relationship between Tao and Te has become the first issue addressed by the author.

“Tao is the source of Yuan Tong, Te completes concrete things. The creation is obvious and true to all things. So Tao and Te are constant in one process; they cannot separate from each other. They are inter-dependant but still different. Namely, Tao transforms into Tong; Te gives things their names. They are two constant elements. The two elements form a complete cycle. But there's still difference between them. So we call them as Tao and Te.”

“Tao is the source of Yuan Tong, Te completes concrete things.” The former is the origin, the latter is the completion. The two elements show themselves and are being called as “Tao” and “Te”, which shows their differences. However, “Tao and Te are constant in one process”; they are an organic whole. Therefore, Tao and Te “cannot separate from each other.” In the modern words, “Yuantong” means that there are differences and connections between the two factors.

The above quotation is just a basic statement, which contains many concepts that need to be clarified. Therefore, the text begins to clarify concepts in the form of question and answer.

2.1.1.1 The Source of Yuantong and the Origin of Physical Properties

Tao is is “the source of Yuan Tong”, which is different from Te, which “completes concrete things”. The expression includes two concepts. “The source” is the beginning, but “where is the beginning”? What is that level of beginning? Tao, as the source of all things, is the beginning of “physical properties”, that is, the beginning or source of the essence of all things. Therefore, as far as one concrete thing is concerned, its essence, or origin, its noumenon originates from Tao. But it becomes a concrete thing with its shape because of Te. Tao and Te are thus distinguished.

2.1.1.2 Sheng (Produce) and Hua (Transformation).

Tao is different from Te. However, in the specific expression, the author thinks that, “in *Tao Te Ching*, all things are nourished by Te. From which we can know, Xing (nature or property) originates from Tao, while shapes come from Te.” The general expression of the *Tao Te Ching* is, “all things are produced by Tao, and nourished by Te” and “Tao produces one”. That is to say, in *Tao Te Ching*, Tao produces things. But the author says “Te produces things”. “In *Tao Te Ching*, all things are produced by Tao, and nourished by Te. And then the author says, the Mystic Te produces and nourishes things. The former says all things are produced by Tao; the latter says things are produced by Te. Why?” The author makes a further explanation of Tao produces, that is, “tracing back to the origin”. From the perspective of the origin, we can say all things are produced by Tao; from the physical property of concrete things, we can say that all things are produced by Te.

As far as the analysis of concepts is concerned, the author attaches great importance to the concept of “Sheng” (produces), and makes differences in its meaning. As far as the meaning of “Tao produces” is concerned, its original meaning is obviously not only so simple as “tracing back to the origin”. It has the unspeakable essence, which is “Hua Sheng” (produce through transformation). However, the author did not further analyze the concept of “Sheng”. He continued to ask “Tao, as the origin of everything, does it have the name?”

In terms of the relationship between Tao and Te, the author concludes that they are inseparable.

2.1.2 Tao and Things

2.1.2.1 “Tao, as the Origin of Everything, Does It Have the Name?”

“Tao, as the origin of everything, does it have the name?” In fact, the author wants to ask

whether Tao, as the origin of all things, is a specific thing. Once a thing has a “name”, it has a certain shape and becomes a specific thing. “Nameless” is a state of unknown shapes. *Tao Te Ching* also expressed, “the Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth”. If Tao, as the origin of everything, has the name, how does it relate to other objects? If it is nameless, it seems that it has the name of Tao. No matter name or nameless, the relations between “one” and “many”, and between “Tao” and “all different things” are behind this issue.

Although *Tao Te Ching* explicitly says that it is nameless, the author's answer is that it is both name and nameless. All things are traces of Tao; we can infer the origin by traces. Its internal logic is from the result to the cause. From the existence of all things, Christianity traces the cause and effect, infers the existence of a God who makes all things, but maintains the boundary of agnosticism for what the God is. Kant infers the existence of things by themselves from the phenomenon, and also holds the boundary of Agnosticism. Their opinions are limited by names. Although the author thinks that “the Tao exists everywhere with different forms”, it is “comprehensible”. When it is comprehensible, it can be named. Therefore, it has the name, but is not limited by name.

2.1.2.2 The Tao Exists Everywhere, is It Tong or Yi with Concrete Things?

The Tong here does not mean “the same”, but “together”; the Yi does not mean “difference”, but “leaving”. In other words, as the Tao exists everywhere, and is the origin of everything, is it mixed with other things, or stay alone as the independent existence? Is it Tong or Yi? Therefore, this problem involves the relationship between one and many. According to the author, the two are “different but coexist. Things take Tao as their bodies, and Tao also takes things as its body.” Tao and things are mixed together; there is no way to distinguish them. However, the mixture of Tao and things seems to be a kind of thing. What is the relationship between Tao and the mixture? The author expresses directly that “the mixture is a thing; the thing is the Tao. There is no difference between the Tao and the thing”.

Tao Te Ching says, Tao is shapeless, and called it as the “great form”. However, it seems that the mixture has the shape. “*Tao Te Ching* says the Tao is shapeless; the mixture has the shape”. So the next question is, “what's the difference between the mixture and the great form?” In this regard, the author analyzes the concept of name and reality and holds that they are the same and different. Therefore, the question involves the relationship between the name and reality. What is the order of the two? The author thinks that the two factors come behind each other. “As far as the shape is concerned, the name reality first; as far as the meaning is concerned, the name comes first.”

2.2 Wen Dao Lun

The third part of *Tao Ti Lun* is the shortest. In terms of content, it actually continues the first part.

“The Tao has no beginning, no end, no origin, no source. It circles around everything. It's delicate and unique, without the shape or the name. But the common people are unable to understand, so they call it as Tao through importunity. The so-called Tao is the beginning of all things. All shapes and Qi originate from it, so it is the Mother. However, the mother's goal is to cultivate Te; people cannot find its trace. The mother conceals itself, but it is connected with concrete things. In order to understand its meaning, we call it as Tao.”

On one hand, Tao can't be named but it's called as Tao. On the other hand, it says, the Nameless is the origin of the heaven and earth; the Named is the Mother of all things. It involves the explanation of the origin and the mother. “Both the origin and the mother produce things; what is the difference between them?” The author still explains from the differences between Tao and Te. Tao is generally marked as shapeless and formless; Te has the shape and form. Tao is invisible and nameless; it produces creatures but it is not the owner of things, so it is called as the origin of things. After the tangible names of heaven and earth are given, the element which produces can be called as the mother, which is a tangible name. Everything are classified; the producing process at that time means the reproduction, so it can be called as the mother. Therefore, “Tao is unknown, so it is not limited by objects”. Just because Tao is invisible and nameless, it can produce all shapes and names. “All shapes and names we know come from Tao”.

3. The Discourse Mode Combining Taoism and Buddhism

In the analysis of the relationship between the two things, the Buddhist has a unique discourse model, including the modes of affirmation and negation. The affirmation mode is both the same and different; the negation mode is neither the same nor different.

The examples of the affirmation mode are as follows.

“The man asked, 'what's the difference between the mixture and the great form?' The answer is, 'they are the same and different.’”

The man asked again: 'what is the difference between the emptiness and quietness of Tao and the mixture?' The answer is, 'they are the same and different.’”

Examples of the negative mode are as follows.

“The man asked, 'the nameless is the Tao. Is it appropriate to say the nameless?' The answer is, 'it is not appropriate to say the thing not without the nameless; it is not appropriate to say the thing not without the name. It is not appropriate to say the thing not with the existent without; it is not appropriate to say the thing not with the non-existent. If you refuse to cling on it and refuse to leave it, you can find the true answer.’”

“Refusing to cling on it and refusing to leave it” is the deformation of the negative mode; the essence is exactly the same. The expressions of “not without the nameless”, “not without the name”, “not with the existent without”, “not with the non-existent” are also influenced by the Buddhist language.

Influenced so deeply by the discourse patterns of Buddhism, the author takes the relationship between Tao and things as an example in the third part of “Tao Ti Yi” (the meaning of Taoist Noumenon) to deeply explore the same and the difference, showing the profound Buddhist connotation.

“The Taoist Noumenon is ubiquity; its meaning exists anywhere. The meaning is wonderful; it is not contained by names or shapes. It covers all concrete things. The reason of all things is in the same and difference. The reason of the same and difference is be tantamount to the reason of neither the same nor different. The reason of same and difference is ubiquity; it is wonderful and broad. The reason of neither the same nor the difference is wonderful and exists in this process. They are inter-dependent but still different. That is why we call it as Tao.”

In the author's opinion, “the reason of the same and difference is be tantamount to the reason of neither the same nor different”. The “same and difference” (Tong and Yi) and “different but not the same” (Wu Tong Yi) become the discourse mode of analyzing all relations. Between Tong (the same) and Yi (the different), “discussion on difference is based on the common feature; without the common feature there will be no difference nor the common feature. Discussion on the same based on the difference, the difference no longer exists.” According to the discourse patterns of Tong and Yi, Tao and things are “always the same and always different”. “In terms of the differences between things, Tao and things are always different. In terms of physical reality, the things are the Tao, and the Tao is the things”.

Based on the above discourse model, the author analyzes the life and death of Tao and things. When we analyze that everything is Tao but not Tao, if we put aside the specific terms, the text looks like a Buddhist script.

“The man asked, 'all things come from the Tao. Although the Tao is one, it produces tens of thousands of things. Are all living things today the Tao or not?' The answer is, 'for the boundary between Tao and things, who can say it exists or not exists? Existence is also non-existence; non-existence is also existence.’

The man asked, 'when it exists, it cannot be absent (non-exist); when it is absent, it cannot be exist. Why you say the existence is also the non-existence, and the non-existence is also the existence?' The answer is, 'if there is no non-existence, how can we know the non-existence? The question of existence is also the question of non-existence; the analysis of non-existence is also the analysis of existence.’

The man asked, 'everything comes from the Tao, who distinguishes them?' The answer is, 'who need to distinguish them? The discussion on this topic can make them clear.’”

The sentences, “if there is no non-existence, how can we know the non-existence? The question of existence is also the question of non-existence; the analysis of non-existence is also the analysis of existence” are quite like Buddhist scriptures.

4. Mr. Tong Xuan and Xuanlan Wang

It can be sure that *Xuan Zhu Lu* is Xuanlan Wang's work. The influence of Buddhism can be seen in the discourse modes of *Tao Ti Lun* as well as *Xuan Zhu Lu*. But in other aspects, there are also huge differences between the two works.

First, the core concepts of *Tao Ti Lun* are Tao and things; dharma (the rule) and emptiness in Buddhism are dispensable concepts. As far as the concept is concerned, *Tao Ti Lun* basically has no Buddhist features. In *Xuan Zhu Lu*, though Tao and things are still important, the usage of Buddhist concepts such as dharma and nimitta (the appearance) is the same frequent. In addition, many Buddhist terms like worry, emptiness, heart and the formless realm emerge in endlessly, indicating that the author has a complete set of Buddhist discourse system.

Second, when discussing the relationship between Tao and things, *Tao Ti Lun* says they are “mixed”, and takes the relationship between fish and water the an example. Fish is born in water and dies in water; Tao and things are inseparable. There is no Tao body (the Taoist Noumenon) independent of all things. In *Xuan Zhu Lu*, however, the Tao “accords with things” like a seal. Tao is independent from things; the view seems to be influenced by Buddhism's view of truth. Therefore, the concept of Tao has quite different meanings in the two texts.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the author of *Tao Ti Lun* seems to be a Taoists who learns the analytical method and the discourse mode of Buddhism and uses them to interpret Taoism. The author of *Xuan Zhu Lu* seems to be a Buddhist who interprets Taoism. Therefore, if the author of *Tao Ti Lun* is Xuanlan Wang, it should be one of Wang's early works. Later, Wang was deeply influenced by Buddhism; there was a great change in his thinking pattern from Taoism to Buddhism.

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