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From Nothingness to Infinity: The Origin of Zhou Dunyi's Cosmology

Introduction

Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073 AD) has been generally regarded as the pioneer of neo-Confucianism, even though some scholars argue that what he teaches is not pure Confucianism. Zhou himself absorbed teachings of Daoism and Buddhism to some extent, and he, unlike other neo-Confucianists, did not severely criticize those two schools' doctrines. Some of his philosophical notions can be traced back to either a Daoist or a Buddhist origin. However, the strongest philosophical heritage in Zhou's work is that of the *Book of Changes* (the *Yijing*) and the "Doctrine of the Mean," both constitutive of core Confucianism. Furthermore, the cosmological explanation that Zhou offered would later become the dominant thesis of the Cheng–Zhu school (see Chapter 3). The Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) studied under him for about one year in their teens. Even though the mentorship was short, it left an ineradicable impact on the two brothers' minds that they decided to pursue scholarship instead of politics. Zhu Xi, as the philosophical descendent of the Cheng brothers, would later become the most fervent defender of Zhou Dunyi's philosophy. He argued that Zhou's thought was truly representative of Confucianism. One might say that it was largely through Zhu Xi's exposition and elaboration that Zhou Dunyi's philosophy acquired the status that it had in neo-Confucianism.

There are only two short philosophical texts by Zhou Dunyi: *The Exposition of the Taiji Diagram* 太極圖說[1] and *Penetrating the Book* (of

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1 Wing-tsit Chan (in the *Sourcebook*) translates this book as "An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate"; Derek Bodde (Fung's *History of Chinese Philosophy*) translates it as "Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained"; Joseph. Adler (in de Bary and Bloom 1999) translates it as "Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity." Here I choose to keep the term *taiji* since all translations would carry extra connotation.

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Changes) 通書.[2] In the former, Zhou explicates the cosmic origin, the cosmic order and the cosmic constitution. He calls the cosmic origin *wuji* (無極) (the controversy surrounding this term will be explained later). The cosmic order is given as a generation process from *Taiji* (the Supreme Ultimate)[3] to the cosmic energy *yin* and *yang*, to the five elements (water, fire, wood, metal, and earth), and finally to the formation of the myriad creatures of the world. The cosmic constitution can be reduced to two principles: the principle of male and the principle of female, represented by the cosmic energy of *yang* and the cosmic energy of *yin*, respectively. Zhou Dunyi only offered this brief cosmological narrative in his entire work, but it became a core thesis in neo-Confucianism. Since this cosmological narrative was given in terse phrases without much explanation, it has stirred up widely different interpretations. The key term here is *wuji*, which did not appear in any ancient Confucian text. It was first seen in the *Daodejing*: "He will never deviate from eternal virtue, but returns to the state of the Ultimate of Non-being (*Wuji*)" (Chapter 28; Chan 1963, 154). Many scholars of Chinese intellectual history have worked as historical Sherlock Holmes in their investigation of the speculated origin of Zhou's *Taiji* diagram. The focus was on whether Zhou Dunyi got the *Taiji* diagram from a Daoist's inspiration. Many philosophers have also debated on the connotations of the notion of *wuji*—on whether it is related to Laozi's notion of *wu* 無 (nothingness). Neo-Confucians had a strong distaste for the Daoist's discourse on *wu*. The fundamental tenet of neo-Confucianism is realism: the world as we know it is real and it exists independently of our conceptions and perceptions. The unease neo-Confucians had was on whether Zhou Dunyi's discourse on *wuji* would lead to the Daoist rejection of the robust independent reality of the phenomenal world.

The controversy over the meaning of this notion is even preserved among contemporary English translations of the text. *Wuji* has been translated as "the Ultimateless" (Feng 1983; Derk Bodde's translation), "the Ultimate of Nonbeing" (Chan 1963; Neville 1980), "Non-polar" (Joseph A. Adler's translation, in de Bary *et al*. 1999), and "ultimate void" (R. Wang 2005). All these various translations reflect the difficulty in deciphering Zhou's idea of *wuji*. Without understanding what the term means, however, we cannot possibly understand Zhou Dunyi's cosmology. The first section of this chapter will explain the historical controversies on the interpretation of this concept. The second section

2 Wing-tsit Chan translates this book as *Penetrating the Book of Changes*; Derek Bodde translates it as *The Explanatory Text*; Joseph A. Adler translates it as *Penetrating the Classics of Changes*. Here I follow Chan's and Alder's translation.

3 In accordance with traditional usage, when the term *taiji* depicts *the* ultimate cosmic state, it is capitalized in this book. When it is used as an adjective or to refer to the term itself, then it remains small letters. The same applies to other special terms such as *wuji*, *dao*, principle, and so on.

will introduce the philosophical debate on being (*you*) and nothingness (*wu*) prior to Zhou's times, to see whether his *wuji* notion is related to the notion of *wu*. The final section will give a different interpretation of Zhou's notion of *wuji*, and further develops his cosmological view. To serve as the entry to neo-Confucianism, this chapter will trace the historical lineage of the founding ideas of Zhou Dunyi.

Historical Controversies over *Wuji*

The opening line of *The Exposition of the Taiji Diagram* "Wuji er Taiji"[4] has received the most critical examination by later scholars. Its interpretation and philosophical implications can be seen as one of the major topics of neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi and Lu Xiangshan had a heated debate over what the term *wuji* could mean in this context, and whether Zhou Dunyi, on account of using this term, ultimately deviated from true Confucian teaching. The debate initially began with letter exchanges between Zhu Xi and Lu's older brother Lu Suosan. Lu Suosan argued that the term *wuji* came from Laozi, and it did not appear in any classic Confucian text.[5] He further argued that Zhou Dunyi only mentioned *wuji* in this work, whereas in Zhou's later and more mature work *Penetrating the Book* (of Changes), the notion was never once discussed. This shows either that this opening line was not written by Zhou himself but was interpolated by someone else, or that Zhou had later rejected the cosmic origin theory depicted in this opening line. Lu Xiangshan picked up the argument from where his brother left off and argued that the word *ji* (極) signifies the mean or center (*zhong* 中) and the term *taiji* simply denotes the Supreme Mean. On the other hand, the term *wuji* means "without the mean (center)" or "without Taiji." *Taiji* is the totality of things in the universe; therefore, "without Taiji" designates a cosmic state of nothingness.[6] Lu Xiangshan also argued that the Chinese conjunctive term between the two terms *wuji* and *taiji*, *er* (而), is not merely to be interpreted as a conjunctive relation: "and also"; rather, it is to be seen as depicting a logical or even temporal order: "and then." He thinks that the first line of *the Exposition* should be understood as "Without-Taiji and then Taiji." Lu Xiangshan argues that this idea is clearly derived from Chapter 40 of

4 The transitional word "er" here also allows for different interpretations: "and," "and then," "and also," "and yet," and so on. How to choose the exact translation for this word would depend on the interpreter's understanding of the connection between the two concepts *wuji* and *taiji*.

5 This is a mistaken view, since Xunzi uses it in multiple contexts. The term in *Xunzi's* usage is synonymous with *wuqiong* (無窮) and both mean "endless, boundless." It is true, however, that in Xunzi's usage the term does not seem to have much philosophical import.

6 Lu Xiangshan's letter to Zhu Xi, No. 1, recorded in Huang Zongxi 1975, Volume 4: 111–12.

the *Daodejing*: "All things in the world come from being. And being comes from [nothingness]"[7] (Chan 1963, 160). Lu thought that in this respect Zhou Dunyi's cosmic view ultimately takes from Laozi's cosmogony: Nothingness is the beginning of the universe; Being comes from Nonbeing. Zhu Xi, on the other hand, argued that the term *wuji* simply depicts the nature of the totality of the cosmos, *Taiji*, as being without limitation, and therefore it does not designate a separate cosmic state of nothingness or Nonbeing. Zhu Xi pointed out that in the development of Confucianism, there were many notions that were introduced by later Confucians. Even the term *Taiji* itself did not appear in earliest texts of the *Yijing* but was introduced into the *Yijing* by Confucius.[8] According to Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi amended this cosmic philosophy with a new and alien notion *wuji*. Philosophically, there is no evidence that he has violated true Confucianism by the introduction of this notion. Furthermore, the Chinese word "ji 極" simply means "ultimate," not "the mean" as the Lu bothers had claimed. The Chinese word "wu" in this context cannot be understood as a noun designating a particular object. The structure of *wuji* is similar to other Chinese terms such as "*wuqiong* 無窮" (that which cannot be exhausted).[9] All these terms signify the limitation of language; they point to what our words cannot describe. In this kind of terminological structure, the Chinese word "wu" does not stand for "nothingness." Therefore, Zhu Xi argues, Zhou Dunyi's *wuji* should be understood as a depiction of something that is so grand, so ultimate, that we cannot confine it with our descriptions. This state is exactly the state of Taiji, that which is so grand and so supremely ultimate. Therefore, according to Zhu Xi, *wuji* and *taiji* are simply two names of the same state; they stand for two sides of the same coin.[10]

The exchanges between Zhu Xi and the Lu brothers culminated in the famous Goose Lake Debate (*erhu zhihui* 鵝湖之會) in 1175. It evolved into a debate between the two schools on the methodologies of attaining sagehood—Zhu's school emphasized empirical investigation and studying books written by the sages, while Lu's school focused on internal reflection and self-cultivation. The former accused the latter as groundless, while the latter

7 Wing-tsit Chan translates *wu* as *nonbeing*, whereas in this chapter we are using *nothingness* to render *wu*.

8 This is Zhu Xi's view. Contemporary scholars have generally placed the authorship of the *Commentary on Yi* in a timeframe much later than that of Confucius.

9 Even though Zhu Xi himself did not give other examples, we can list them here: *wu-liang* (無量) (that which cannot be quantified); *wu-jin* (無盡) (that which cannot be terminated), *wu-bi* (無比) (that which cannot be compared to), *wu-zhi* (無止) (that which cannot be finished), *wu-shang* (無上) (that which cannot be topped); *wu-shu* (無數) (that which cannot be counted; countless), and so on.

10 These arguments were presented in multiple letters Zhu Xi wrote toLu Xiangshan, recorded in Huang Zongxi 1975, Volume 4:112–19.

criticized the former as being scattered and paying too much attention to trivialities. The open debate lasted three days and continued through correspondences. The Goose Lake Debate was a major event in the history of neo-Confucianism, and the trigger for the whole debate was on the interpretation and placement of Zhou Dunyi's idea of *wuji*. We can see why there is a need to further analyze this notion in Zhou's philosophy.

The Exposition of the Taiji Diagram is an accompanying piece of the *Taiji* diagram (see Figure 1.1). Historians also questioned the source of this diagram. The first controversy was stirred up by a Confucian scholar Zhu Zhen 朱震 (ca.1072–1138), born around the time of Zhou's death. Zhu Zhen was an expert on the *Yijing*, and studied Chen Yi's commentary on the *Yijing* in depth. In his preface to his Commentary on the *Yijing* (hanshangyizhuan 漢上易傳), he traced the lineage of Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji* diagram to Chen Tuan 陳摶 (871–989), an enigmatic hermit two hundred years before Zhou's time. Chen Tuan allegedly had a diagram named "The Wuji Diagram" (see Figure 1.2), which again was derived from an earlier diagram contained in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏).[11] According to a historian in the Qing dynasty, Huang Zongyan 黃宗炎 (1616–1686), Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji* diagram is almost exactly like Chen Tuan's *wuji* diagram, except that the former's flow chart proceeds from top to bottom, while the latter's flow chart proceeds from bottom to top. Huang Zongyan claims that Chen Tuan's *wuji* diagram is a diagram of the Daoist's method of alchemy.[12] It gives instructions on how to refine one's energy and spirit to cultivate an internal force, and the final stage of attainment is the state of vacuity and emptiness. Huang alleged that Chen Tuan carved this diagram on Mount Hua. He also endorsed Zhu Zhen's explanation of the lineage of this diagram and claimed that Zhou Dunyi received this diagram from Mu Xiu 穆修 (979–1032), whose academic lineage can be traced back to Chen Tuan. He thinks that what Zhou did was to reverse the order and use it to explicate the *Yijing*. In Huang's assessment, Zhou's theory was a confused conglomeration of Daoist alchemy, Laozi's theory and the *Yijing*'s terminology. By using this diagram, Zhou was seriously distorting the original teaching in the *Yijing* (Huang 1995, 1187–92). Huang's harsh criticism was later echoed and further defended by his son Huang Baijia 黃百家 (1643–1709). Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623–1716) argues that not only did Zhou's diagram come from the Daoist, but his philosophical ideas also came from Buddhism. Zhu

11 Feng Youlan says that the author of the earlier Daoist diagram in the *Daoist Canon* was unknown, but the diagram could be dated to 712–755 AD (Feng 1983, 438).

12 In the Daoist tradition, there are two kinds of alchemy: external alchemy and internal alchemy. The former aims to refine herbs to find the elixir of life; the latter aims to cultivate one's internal energy to achieve concentrated and balanced force field. Chen Tuan's method is supposedly of the internal kind.

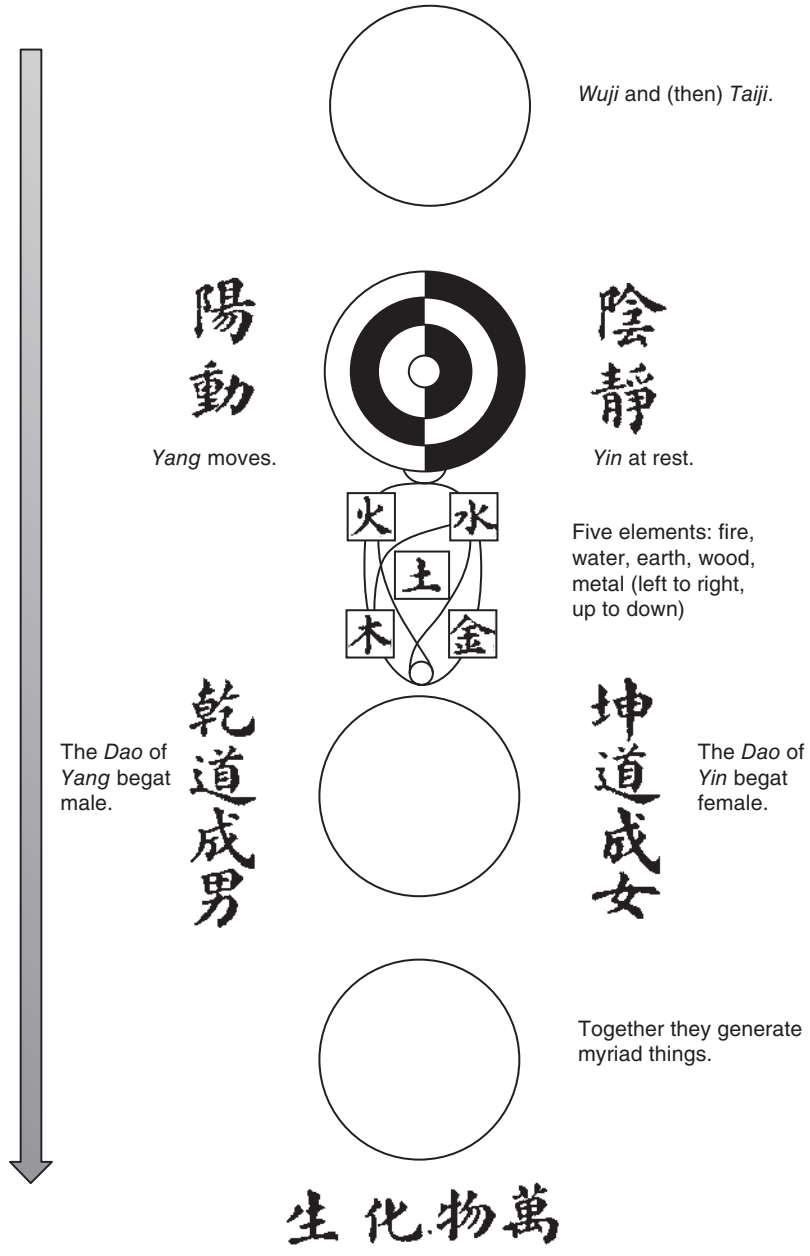


Figure 1.1 Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji* Diagram

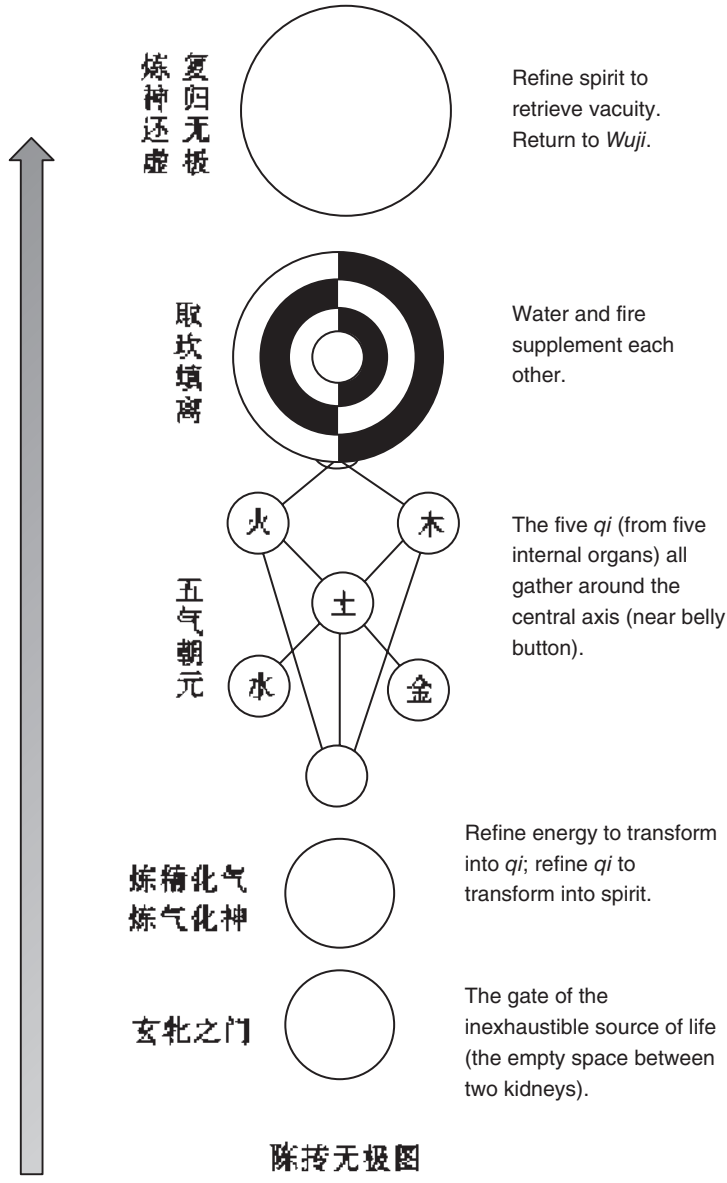


Figure 1.2 Chen Tuan's *Wuji* Diagram

Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709) argues that the origin of *Wuji* diagram could be traced even beyond Chen Tuan, to an early Daoist Heshanggong 河上公.[13] All these historians discredited Zhou Dunyi's Confucian spirit. Through history, it has become a widely held view today that Zhou Dunyi was heavily influenced by the Daoist philosophy, and his notion of *wuji* was chiefly a Daoist idea (Wang 2005; Chen 1990; Lao 1980; Chan 1963, among others).

However, some contemporary scholars began to challenge this view. The most comprehensive analysis and compelling arguments came from Shen Li (2001). According to Li, there was never any historical record of Chen Tuan's carving the *Wuji* diagram on Mount Hua, and no one in history ever recounted seeing this diagram. The first reference of it actually came from Huang Zongyan himself, six hundred years after Zhou's time. It is thus quite a suspicious account (Li 2001, 37). He thinks that the *Wuji* diagram actually came after Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji* diagram and was some later Daoists' concoction based on Zhou's diagram (Li 2001, 54–64). Li further argues that even if Zhou did receive his academic training from Chen Tuan's school (which is already problematic according to Li, because Zhou was only 15 at the time of Mu Xiu's death), this does not mean that Zhou's philosophy must be merely that of his teachers (Li 2001, 16). Yu Guo (2003, 2001, 2000) shares the same view. These two scholars' detailed analyses provide compelling reasons to reject the historical attribution of the source of Zhou's *Taiji* diagram to Chen Tuan. We should therefore not take it for granted that Zhou Dunyi's philosophy is of a Daoist spirit simply because of his usage of the term *wuji* and his *Taiji* diagram.

In the next two sections, we will trace the notions of *wu* and *wuji* to their historical sources to analyze their possible connotations. We will conclude that these two notions, though connected, are not used to express the same philosophical idea. This philosophical analysis will give us an insight on Zhou Dunyi's philosophical interest and his contribution to the new discourse of neo-Confucianism.

Being (*You* 有) and Nothingness (*Wu* 無)

An identifying distinction between Confucianism and Daoism is that the former advocates "being" (*you* 有), while the latter promotes "nothingness" (*wu* 無) as the foundation of all things. There is no consensus among scholars on how to translate the Chinese words *you* and *wu*. A. C. Graham translates

13 This is in Zhu Yizun's "Investigation of the lineage of *Taiji* Diagram (*taijitu shoushou kao* 太極圖授受考)." *Heshanggong* is not a true name, but the name of the alleged author of a commentary on the *Daodejing*. We do not know the author's real name or his background. He might be around the Warring States period. He wrote the first commentary on the *Daodejing* and had a legendary reputation as a hermit and a Daoist alchemist.

them as "something" and "nothing" (Graham 1959/1990); Wing-tsit Chan translates them as "being" and "non-being" (Chan 1963, 160), while Ames and Hall translate them as "determinate" (*you*) and "indeterminate" (*wu*) (Laozi 2003, 139). The Chinese word *you* means "to have," but in the context of metaphysics, it signifies existence, Being, or simply beings as referring to the myriad things. This word itself is not the focus of dispute; however, its counterpart, *wu*, is.

The Chinese word *wu* has three written forms, each with its own etymology. *Wu* is the opposite of *you*, and has often been translated as "nonbeing." However, a better rendition of this word is the negation of something; hence, it should be translated as nothing or nothingness. According to a historically revered lexicographer Xu Shen 許慎 (ca.58–ca.147), the etymology of the Chinese word *wu* has three origins and thus the word has three possible meanings: (i) (*wu*亡), gone, (ii) (*wu*無), meaning what seems to be nothing but is actually something, and (iii) (*wu*无), the original void. His analysis shows that, in as early as the Han dynasty, the word *wu* was already ambiguous. A contemporary scholar Pu Pang argues that these three written forms of the Chinese word *wu* (亡, 無, 无) represent three possibilities of the state of nothing (Pang 1995, 271):

The first *wu* (亡) represents "what used to be, no longer is": This first sense of *wu* can be manifested in states such as loss or death. This state of *wu* is the cessation of being, and is thus relative to a particular existence. The state of *wu* is logically posterior to the state of being. This Chinese written form *wu* (亡) should be translated as gone, without, or as the word stem "-less."

The second *wu* (無) represents "what seems to be nothing but is actually something": The second sense of *wu* depicts what is formless, shapeless, invisible, and imperceptible; however, it is not nothing. Pang argues that the written form *wu* 無 and the Chinese word for dance *wu* 舞 have the same origin and are closely related in a historical context: The primitive people danced in religious ceremonies as a tribute to the invisible, unknowable realm and whatever spirits that might grant them good fortune. Therefore, dance (*wu* 舞) is a way to communicate with the invisible something (*wu* 無). This state of *wu* is therefore still something, but it is a transcendental something that goes beyond human perceptions and defies human conceptions. It can further be seen as a something that encompasses all and is the master of everything. In this sense, this notion of *wu* represents being and thus is the opposite of the previous notion of *wu* 亡—the negation of being (Pang 1995, 277–78).

The third *wu* (无) represents "there never has been, nor ever will be": In Pang's analysis, the third word form of *wu* (无)[14] signifies the absolute emptiness and

14 In simplified Chinese, the second and the third word forms of *wu* cannot be distinguished, since the third form (无) is used as the simplified form of the second form (無).

nothingness. It is not relative to or dependent on the state of being; rather, it is the primordial state of the world. In Xu Shen's celebrated encyclopedia of Chinese vocabulary (*Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字), the word *wu* (无) is interchangeable with the word *yuan* (元)[15], which means the origin, the primordial, and the fundamental. Xu Shen further explains: The vacuous and the primordial is *Dao*. The annotation written by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815) remarks that among the Six Classics,[16] the *Yijing* is the only book that employs this word. Pang argues that this word form was especially created, possibly as late as the Warring States Period (approximately 475–221 BCE), to mark a separate notion of *wu* as absolute nothingness (Pang 1995, 281).

The concept of *wu* was first used as a philosophical concept in Laozi's *Daodejing*.[17] In the *Daodejing*, the word *wu* appears over one hundred times. Even though the current text uses the same word form, the notion has different connotations. According to a contemporary intellectual historian Dainian Zhang, "It is in the Laozi that 'being' and 'beingless' [*wu*] first emerge as a philosophical pair. By 'being' the Laozi refers to the concrete existence of heaven, earth, and the myriad things. [*Wu*] in the Laozi has different meanings. It can refer first to the empty part of a given thing; second to the state before or after a particular thing existed; third to the highest origin that transcends all particular things" (Zhang 2002, 151). The first notion of *wu* appears in Chapter 11 of the *Daodejing*: "Thirty strokes are united around the hub to make a wheel. But it is on its [*wu*][18] that the utility of the carriage depends. Clay is molded to form a utensil. But it is on its [*wu*] that the utility of the utensil depends. Doors and windows are cut out to make a room. But it is on its [*wu*] that the utility of the room depends. Therefore, just as we can take advantage of what is (*you*), so can we make use of what is not (*wu*)" (Chapter 11, Chan 1963, 144, with modifications). The word *wu* can be rendered as empty space or simply as emptiness in this context. It is a pragmatic, rather than a metaphysical, notion.

The second usage, as a form of negation of a particular state of affairs, can be found in Laozi's combining *wu* with other items: *wu-ming* 無名 is "nameless," *wu-wei* 無為 is "nonaction," *wu-si* 無私 is "selfless," *wu-zhi* 無知 is "without cunning," *wu-shen* 無身 is "without the body," *wu-zhuang* 無狀 is "without shape,"

15 Note the similarity in the word forms.

16 The Six Classics include: the *Yijing*, the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*), the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*), the *Classic of Rites* (*Lijing*), *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), and *Record of Music* (*Yueji*). The *Record of Music* is unfortunately lost after the first emperor of China (258–10 BCE) burned books extensively. Hence, the Six Classics was replaced by the designation the Five Classics starting in the Han dynasty.

17 Historically, the *Daodejing* is attributed to Laozi, whose identity is not established. From now on we will follow the Chinese tradition in using Laozi as the alleged author of the *Daodejing* (which is also called the *Laozi* in the Chinese tradition).

18 Chan translates *wu* as "nonbeing," but in this quote and the following we will use the original *wu* to maintain an open interpretation.

wu-wu 無物 is "without object," *wu-yu* 無欲 is "without desire," *wu-suo-gui* 無所歸 is "without a home," *wu-gong* 無功 is "without credit," and so on. The majority of the word *wu* used in the *Daodejing* belongs to this category. It negates whatever item (name, deed, credit, etc.) associated with it in the usage. Later in this chapter we shall see that the troubling term that Zhou Dunyi allegedly derived from Laozi, *wuji*, should be understood as *wu-ji* and be rendered as "without boundary."[19]

The third notion of *wu*, the state of *wu* that precedes all existence, can be seen as a cosmogonic notion depicting the primordial state of the universe. In the explication of the *Daodejing*, we can see that this cosmogonic notion corresponds to the second sense of *wu* analyzed by Pu Pang: it signifies something vague, elusive, formless, shapeless, inaudible, invisible, and naturally, nameless. This undifferentiated something, which existed before heaven and earth, is what Laozi calls *Dao* or "Great."

> Chapter 25: There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change. It operates everywhere and is free from danger. It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it "*dao*." If forced to give it a name, I shall call it "Great." Now being great means functioning everywhere. Functioning everywhere means far-reaching. Being far-reaching means returning to the original point.
>
> *(Chan 1963, 152)*

> Chapter 14: We look at it and do not see it; its name is The Invisible. We listen to it and do not hear it; its name is The Inaudible. We touch it and do not find it; its name is The Subtle (formless). These three cannot be further inquired into, and hence merge into one…. Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name. It reverts to [the undifferentiated *something*].[20] This is called shape without shape, form without object. It is the Vague and Elusive. Meet it and you will not see its head; follow it and you will not see its back…. From this one may know the primeval beginning [of the universe]. This is called the bond of *Dao.*
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> *(Chan 1963, 146; parentheses in original but italics added)*

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19 The full repudiation of the standard translation of "*wuji*" as "the Ultimate of Nonbeing" will be elaborated in the next section.

20 Chan's *Sourcebook* translates the sentence as "It reverts to nothingness" here. However, the original Chinese text does not use *nothingness* (*wu*無), but *something* (*wu*物). See Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*: "There was something (物) undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth." (Chan 1963, 172) See also Chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*: "Something (物) gives them physical form" (my translation).

> Chapter 21: The thing that is called *Dao* is eluding and vague. Vague and eluding, there is in it the form. Eluding and vague, in it are things. Deep and obscure, in it is the essence. The essence is very real; in it are evidences. From the time of old until now, its name (manifestations) ever remains, by which we may see the beginning of all things. How do I know that the beginning of all things [is] so? Through this (*Dao*)".
>
> *(Chan 1963, 150; parentheses in original but italics and square brackets added)*

If the primordial cosmic state in the *Daodejing* is depicted as an undifferentiated something, then the word *wu* in the most notoriously nihilistic chapter of the *Daodejing*, "All things in the world come from being (*you*). And being comes from [*wu*]" (Chapter 40; Chan 1963, 160), should not be understood as "absolute emptiness" or "nothingness." In other words, it should not be interpreted as the third sense of *wu* signified by the third word form of *wu* (无) in Pang's analysis. Pang himself argues that Laozi's usage of the word *wu* could not possibly capture this connotation since the notion did not get developed until later in Chinese history (Pang 1995, 282). In Chapter 34, Laozi describes the nature of *Dao* as "flows everywhere," "can go left or right," so *Dao* seems to be something that moves. In other words, Laozi's *Dao* is not nonbeing or absolute nothingness; it is rather something that cannot be defined, categorized, perceived, or described. This is what the *Daodejing* calls "the mother of the universe" (Chapter 52; Chan 1963, 164).

This philosophical concept of *wu* became the major theme in the philosophical developments during the Wei and Jin dynasties (220–420). Two leading philosophers, He Yan 何晏 (ca.193–249) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), further developed Laozi's notion of *wu* and established *wu* as the ontological basis of all existence. According to a revered intellectual historian Yongtong Tang (1893–1964), the focus of Wei-Jin philosophy was no longer cosmogony or cosmology, but ontology. The philosophical pursuit at the time went beyond speculating on the origin of the universe, and started investigating the substance or the fundamental essence of all things (Tang 2001, 43–44).[21] He Yan's "Treatise on *Dao*"[22] says, "Being, in coming into being, is produced by [*wu*]…. Because of it[23] darkness becomes black and plainness becomes white. Because of it the carpenter's square draws a square and the compass draws a circle. The compass and square obtain forms but [*Dao*] has no form. Black and white obtain names but [*Dao*] has no name" (Chan 1963, 324). Even though the

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21 Tang's analysis on *Wei-Jin* philosophy has become the received view among contemporary scholars.

22 The whole treatise is lost. What we have is only a short segment recorded in Zhang Zhan's annotation of the *Liezi*, an ancient Daoist text.

23 Wing-tsit Chan's translation here uses "because of," so he probably took this to be a logical relation rather than a causal one.

"production" relationship between being and *wu* is obscure, it is clearly no longer a relationship of cosmogonic generation speculated in the *Daodejing*. He Yan's "Treatise on Wuwei" states, "All things in the world has *wu* as its foundation…. *Yin* and *yang* depend on it to transform life; all things depend on it to form concrete shapes…. Therefore, the function of *wu* is without titles, but it is highly valuable."[24] His "Treatise on the Nameless"[25] may give us a clue as to how this *wu* could be the foundation of being:

> No matter how far apart things are, things of the same kind respond to one another, and no mater how near they are, things of different kinds do not violate each other. It is like the *yang* in the *yin* or the *yin* in the *yang*. Each attracts and responds to its own kind.
>
> *(Chan 1963, 325)*

Here he seems to be developing Laozi's principle of complementarities: the opposites complement and complete each other. In other words, without nonexistence, there cannot be existence, just as without empty space, there could not be any chamber, carriage, vessel, wheels, and so on. The concept of *wu* in He Yan's usage seems to be a conceptual construct, to serve as the counterpart of existence (being)—it has to be posited to make existence possible. The word *wu* here can be rendered as nonbeing, as the opposite of being.

Unlike He Yan, who did not leave substantial work behind, Wang Bi produced copious work in his brief lifetime (he died at the age of 24). His *Commentary on Laozi's Daodejing* (*Laozi Daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注) and *A Brief Exposition of the Essence of Laozi's Teachings* (*Laozi zhilue* 老子指略) brought Laozi's notion of *wu* to a new dimension. Wang Bi writes, "All being originated from nonbeing (wu). The time before physical forms and names appeared was the beginning of the myriad things" (Chapter 1; Chan 1963, 321). This remark can be given either a cosmogonic or an ontological reading: Was he talking about the primordial state of the whole universe or the original state of particular things? In the *Daodejing*, the concept of *wu* was used to depict the time before anything was formed and named. In this commentary remark, on the other hand, Wang Bi seems to be dealing with the original ontological state of nonbeing of each particular thing. In the same chapter, Wang Bi continues to say, "All things in the world emerged from subtlety to completion; everything starts with nonbeing (*wu*) and then comes into being" (my translation, Wang Bi 1980, 1). He interprets Laozi's "undifferentiated something" (Chapter 25) from an epistemic point of view: "It (*Dao*) is that which we cannot know, but it completes everything. That is why it is called undifferentiated and yet complete.

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24 This short treatise is partially recorded in the *History of Jin* (*Jinshu* 晉書), Volume 43.

25 Same as "the Treatise on *Dao*," this piece is recorded in Zhang Zhan's annotation of the *Liezi*, Chapter *Tianrui* 天瑞.

We do not *know* its origin, and that is why we say it precedes heaven and earth" (Wang Bi 1980, 63; emphasis added). The cosmogonic sense of *wu*'s preceding being in the *Daodejing* is greatly reduced in this commentary. Yongtong Tang interprets Wang Bi's notion of *Dao* as an a-temporal state: Laozi depicts *Dao* as "preceding heaven and earth," while in Wang Bi's commentary *Dao* is neither before nor after heaven and earth (Tang 2001, 137).

For Laozi's Chapter 38 on virtue (*de*), Wang Bi added the following comment: "Although it is valuable to have *nonbeing* [*wu*] as its function, nevertheless there cannot be substance without *nonbeing*" (Chan 1963, 323; emphasis added). According to Wing-tsit Chan, this is the first time in the history of Chinese philosophy that the notions of substance (*ti* 體) and function (*yong* 用) were used together.[26] This set of notions "were to become key concepts in Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism" (Chan 1963, 323). From Wang Bi's introduction of the relation between substance and function, we can also see his interest in the ultimate nature of things. He takes this ultimate nature, the substance, of all things as *Nonbeing*. How can "nonbeing" serve as the ontological foundation for being? Starting with examples of vessel, container, carriage (the first usage of the word *wu* in the *Daodejing*), where the nature of these things depends essentially on the nonbeing in their internal sphere, we can see also that without the nonbeing (emptiness) outside of each thing's boundary, the thing could not be that thing. Spatially, nonbeing defines the boundaries of particular things. Diachronically, each existing thing has its pre-existing state and its post-existence state. Both of these states are states of its "nonbeing." Therefore, without either spatial or temporal nonbeing outside of each being, no particular thing could be what it is, or could ever come into existence. Nonbeing is thus the ontological foundation for each particular being. However, this nonbeing is not necessarily nothingness since it is not necessarily the nonbeing of the universe and the myriad things. The sense of *wu* employed by Wang Bi is *wu* in the relative sense—the nonbeing is relative to being while at the same time it is what makes particular beings possible.

From the *nonbeing* essential for individual things, Wang Bi further introduced an all encompassing *Nonbeing* as the foundation of all things (the third sense of *wu* in Pang's analysis): "The ten thousand things have ten thousand different forms but in the final analysis they are one. How did they become one? Because of Nonbeing [*wu*]" (Chapter 42; Chan 1963, 323). If we understand the "nonbeing" here as the "negation of (ten thousand different) forms," then we can see how the myriad things can merge into one, and this one seems to be the totality of *qi*: "Although things exist in ten thousand different forms, their material forces (*qi*) are blended as one" (Chan 1963, 323). Nonbeing is without forms, without shapes and without names (designators). As Wang Bi remarks, "The formless and nameless is the master of all things" (Chapter 14;

26 The pair of concepts will be discussed more in details in Chapter 4 of this book.

Wang Bi 1980, 32). This sense of *nonbeing* could be close to how Hegel describes "nonbeing": it is the absence of all determination. Any determination restricts the existent thing and renders it partially complete. In *A Brief Exposition of the Essence of Laozi's Teachings*, Wang Bi gives a fuller explanation:

> If the temperature is tepid, then it cannot at the same time be cool; if the sound is one pitch, then it cannot be another pitch. Forms must necessarily divide; pitch must necessarily belong to its own category.… Name necessarily introduces distinction; title necessarily depends on some basis. When distinctions are made, it cannot encompass all; when there is further basis, it cannot be exhaustive".
>
> *(Wang Bi 1980, 195–96)*

Name is used to "define the other" (Wang Bi 1980, 197). If we give *Dao* a name, then it has an other, outside of it, opposing it. Therefore, *Dao* must necessarily be without names. Title is used to rank things into a hierarchical structure, and it requires some basis for judgment. *Dao* is the basis of everything; it requires no further basis. Hence, it cannot be given a title. In this way, the nameless, untitled *Dao* is the ontological foundation of all things. Wang Bi's *Dao* is nameless, shapeless, formless—total absence of determination, it is *wu*—the absolute Nonbeing. This Nonbeing is not just an "undifferentiated something" like the *Daodejing's Dao*; rather, it is nonbeing in the absolute sense since it is the negation of all existence as well as the substance of all things. As Yongtong Tang explains, "This wu is substance wu, not wu in the relative sense of being (*you*) and nonbeing (*wu*)" (Tang 2001, 45). Wang Bi's theory of *wu* has evolved into a version of meontology—the philosophical study of *Nonbeing* or absolute *nothingness*.[27]

What does it mean to have nonbeing as substance? Substance means the original nature of things. Tang's analysis is that Wang Bi's theory of nonbeing as substance is close to Buddhism's claim of emptiness as the true nature of things (Tang 2001, 47). For Wang Bi, substance is not a thing; it does not exist in space or time, but is beyond space and time. Tang argues that Wang Bi's quest was not about what things are made of, and is thus not a scientific endeavor (Tang 2001, 136).

Since Yontong Tang's analysis of *wu* as an ontological foundation rather than as a cosmogonic state is widely accepted, it is now a consensus among scholars that Wei-Jin Philosophy is fundamentally a philosophy of *wu* (here properly translated as nonbeing) as substance (Tang 2001; Kang 2003; Hong 2008).

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27 "Meontology" is derived from the Greek word "me"—*non* and "on"—*being*. According to Bret W. Davis, "'First Philosophy' in the Western tradition is ontology, which asks the question of 'being qua being'.… In place of ontology, first philosophy in the East is more often a 'meontology': a philosophy of nonbeing or nothingness." See his *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on the Kyoto School (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/#WesBeiVsEasNotOntVsMeo).

Wang Bi's contribution to the development of this notion is indisputable. He and He Yan are considered as the representatives of the School of Nonbeing. However, the teaching of nonbeing (*wu*) began as a metaphysical speculation, and ended as a philosophy of life. What Wang Bi did was not just to turn the *Daodejing*'s cosmological speculation on the state of nothingness into an ontological analysis of the ultimate nature (or substance) of all exiting things, but also to elaborate on the ethical application of the notion of non-discrimination, non-determination—his notion of nonbeing. According to Wang Bi, the whole *Daodejing* could be summarized in one sentence—"elevating the essential and eliminating the frivolous" (Wang Bi 1980, 198). What is essential begins with the mental state of simplicity and sincerity:

> Warding off evil lies in preserving people's sincerity, not in the sharp detection of their evil; ceasing extravagance lies in removing luxury items, not in publishing more laws. The way to curtail robbery is to reduce desires, not to be imposing harsher punishments…. Start planning before any early signs (of trouble) appear, take action before everything began…. This is why [Laozi] manifests the simple and the unadorned while abandoning sageliness and wisdom. He reduces selfish desires and spurns cunning and craftiness. These are all what is called elevating the essential and eliminating the frivolous.[28]
>
> *(Wang Bi 1980, 198)*

Wang Bi made it clear that his speculative philosophy is meant to cure social ills. However, the shift from an ontological confirmation of the state of nonbeing to an ethical advocacy of negation of discernment and distinction had serious social ramifications. Situated amid political turmoil and vicious persecution of the times, Wei-Jin intellectuals were seeking ways out of their precarious predicament. The doctrine of nonbeing and negation gave them an excuse to abandon social bounds and conventional values. A famous slogan among them was "forsake titles and norms to go with nature" (Kang 2003, 209). Legend has it that seven Wei-Jin intellectuals were close friends and often gathered in a bamboo forest to drink and recite poetry all night. They were known as "the Gang of Seven in the Bamboo Forest."[29] Even though these intellectuals had deep philosophical insights and their goal was to pursue spiritual refinement in the midst of political perils, many others merely imitated their conduct without adopting any philosophical position. The doctrine of nonbeing led to the downfall of

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28 The main idea for this long passage comes from Chapters 19 and 57 of Laozi's *Daodejing*. See Chan 1963, 149, 166–67.

29 The seven intellectuals were Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Xiang Xiu,Liu Ling, Ruan Xian, Wang Rong, and San Tao. The location of the bamboo forest is in dispute, but the orthodox view is that it was near Ji Kang's residence. Ji Kang was later framed by his political enemy and executed in 263 at the age of 40.

social mores of the times. In response, some philosophers began to advocate the value of being ("*you*"), and they were known as the School of Being.

Two leaders of the School of Being were Pei Wei (267–300) and Guo Xiang (252–312). Even though Pei Wei supposedly wrote two treatises on this topic, today we have only one short piece by Pei Wei, entitled *Veneration of Being (Chongyoulun* 崇有論*)*.[30] Pei Wei was concerned with his contemporary intellectuals' deviation from social norms and the decline of morals, and he thought that the doctrine of nonbeing was the culprit for the social decline and ethical downfall of the times. He thought that those who indulged in the discourse of nonbeing used it as an excuse to spurn etiquette and decorum, disregard order of seniority and hierarchy of ranking. He criticized them for depravity to the point of "going naked in public, losing any sense of propriety in their speech and conduct" (collected in Gu 1980, 376). Therefore, he advocated the return to the Confucian teaching of being. The first step is to refute the doctrine of nonbeing. Pei Wei writes:

> The absolute Nonbeing cannot possibly resort to anything to generate something. Therefore, the beginning existence has to be self-generating. Since self-generation has to rely on being as substance, without prior being it is insufficient to generate any new existence. Anything that comes into existence must already have its own being; hence, nonbeing is simply the absence, or the loss, of being. [It does not exist on its own.]
> *(in Gu 1980, 377)*

Since this passage is obscure in meaning, we can reformulate Pei Wei's argument as follows:

If there were absolute Nonbeing, it could not possibly resort to anything to generate something.
If (1), then the beginning existence had to be self-generating.
Self-generation must rely on being as substance.
Therefore, anything that comes into existence must already has its own being.
Therefore, there could never have been absolute nothingness.

Pei Wei further argues that only things that exist can be of service to things that exist; therefore, nonbeing has nothing to do with the generation of existent things.

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30 Various historical records ascribed two treatises on this topic to Pei Wei; one of which is "Veneration of Being," while the other one is "Valuing Nonbeing." It is in dispute among contemporary scholars whether Pei really did write the second treatise. See Kang 2003, 212. However, in "Veneration of Being," Pei Wei also presents an aspect of nonbeing that should be valued: nonbeing can be applied to preserve being, as for example, the reduction of desires can benefit one's health, and the cessation of extravagance can bring one back to moderation (in Gu 1980, 376). It is likely that Pei did write a separate article on *how to* value nonbeing.

In contemporary terminology, we might say that Pei Wei is against having any absence in the entire causal chain of generation. Only things that exist can affect or produce other things. As he puts it, "Whatever that can aid and complete an existing thing must also exist" (Gu 1980, 387). Nothing (no-thing) can emerge out of nothingness. Being is primary and nonbeing is secondary; no things could subsist independently of the existence of the phenomenal world.

In this treatise, Pei Wei's ontological speculation is primarily motivated by his pragmatic concern for the ethical implication of one's ontological conviction. For him, it is essential to venerate being:

> Once one devalues the existence of myriad things, one would disregard objects' different forms, which leads to the abandonment of social regulations. Once one abandons social regulations, one would neglect ethical norms. If one neglects ethical norms, then one would also forgo rites and rituals. Once a society loses its rites and regulations, there is no way to keep it in check…. Therefore, a leader must be careful with what is taught. *(Gu 1980, 375)*

In other words, it was primarily to revert the social trend of neglecting social regulations and ethical norms that Pei Wei advocated the thesis of being.

Guo Xiang's philosophical ideas are preserved only in his Commentary on the *Zhuangzi*.[31] Unlike Pei Wei, whose ontology of being was primarily driven by his pragmatic concern for the social ramifications of the doctrine of nonbeing, Guo Xiang had a keener interest in the speculative cosmogony of being. He thinks that being cannot come from nonbeing, both because nonbeing itself cannot produce anything and because being itself has to be self-generated. According to him, "Since nonbeing is nonbeing, it cannot produce being. Before being itself is produced, it cannot produce other beings. Then by whom are things produced? They spontaneously produce themselves, that is all" (Chan 1963, 328). Guo Xiang calls the self-generation of things "spontaneous transformation" (*duhua* 獨化). By "spontaneous," he means "without external factor or outside force." The world is self-sufficient and complete on its own. It does not depend on any external force. In other words, there is no Creator and no creation ex nihilo. As Guo Xiang puts it resolutely:

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31 In *History of Jin* (*Jinshu*), it is recorded that Xiang Xiu (approx. 227–72, one of the *Gang of Seven in the Bamboo Forest*) first composed his commentary on Zhuangzi, which became the basis for Guo Xiang's commentary. But there were two different accounts of Guo Xiang's contribution: one says that Guo Xiang elaborated on Xiang Xiu's commentary and expanded it with more chapters; the other says that Guo Xiang plagiarized Xiang Xiu's ideas and claimed to be his own. Contemporary scholars do not share consensus on whether Guo Xiang plagiarized or how great his contribution was. See Kang 2003, 226–35 for a detailed account of this controversy. Here we shall take "Guo Xiang" simply as "the author of the *Commentary on the Zhuangzi*," with the understanding that the reference could include both Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang.

> But let us ask whether there is a Creator or not. If not, how can he create things? If there is, he is incapable of materializing all the forms. Therefore, before we can talk about creation, we must understand the fact that all forms materialize by themselves. If we go through the entire realm of existence, we shall see that there is nothing … that does not transform itself behind the phenomenal world. Hence everything creates itself without the direction of any Creator. Since things create themselves, they are unconditioned. This is the norm of the universe.
>
> *(Chan 1963, 330–31)*

The implication of this self-transformation view is that the world (something, not necessarily the world as we have it) has always existed. To unpack this dense passage, we can summarize Guo Xiang"s argument as follows:

If being cannot come from nonbeing, then it must come from being.
If being comes from being, then being is self-produced.
If being is self-produced, then it must be present from eternity.
Therefore, there is, and there has always been, being.

Guo Xiang further argues that there always will be being too: "Not only is it impossible for nonbeing to be changed into being. It is also impossible for being to become nonbeing. Therefore, although being as a substance undergoes infinite changes and transformations, it cannot in any instance become nonbeing" (Chan 1963, 335). He did not offer any explanation for what this ever-present, all-encompassing Being could be. He did, however, indicate that it could not be *qi* and could not be *Dao*:

> What came into existence before there were things? If I say *yin* and *yang* came first, then since *yin* and *yang* are themselves entities, what came before them? Suppose I say Nature came first. But Nature is only things' being themselves. Suppose I say perfect *Dao* came first. But perfect [*Dao*] is perfect nonbeing. Since it is nonbeing, how can it come before anything else? Then what came before it? There must be another thing, and so on ad infinitum.
>
> *(Chan 1963, 335)*

His conclusion is thus that the self-transformation of things is the only plausible explanation for how things came about.

For Guo Xiang, the ethical application of the doctrine of being is the obtainment of tranquility and felicity, which comes as a result of one's following the principle of things. He states, "The perfect man is not besieged by calamities, not because he escapes from them but because he advances the principles of things and goes forward and naturally comes into union with good fortune"

(Chan 1963, 328). Guo Xiang fully embraces the philosophy of life advocated by Zhuangzi, and yet he is not anti-Confucian. On the contrary, he shows how Zhuangzi's view is compatible with Confucian ethics. As he says, "A gentleman who profoundly penetrates all things and is in harmony with their transformations will be contented with whatever time may bring. He follows the course of Nature in whatever situation he may be" (Chan 1963, 331). The joy and harmony Guo depicts here is very close to "the delight of Confucius and Yan Hui" on which Zhou Dunyi frequently commented. We should see that even though the doctrine of nonbeing is derived from Daoist's discourse on *wu*, Daoism as expounded by the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* is not necessarily the doctrine of nonbeing developed by the school of nonbeing in the Wei-Jin era. As we will see, Zhou Dunyi would also find valuable philosophical ideas in the *Daodejing* when he developed his own cosmology.

What the school of being affirms is the reality of the phenomenal world. The notion of being is not about some abstract, absolute Being separate from all particular beings, but about the existence of all things—"the multiple beings" (*qunyou* 群有). Being (*you*) is simply the totality of the existence of myriad things. In contemporary philosophical demarcation, the doctrine of being can be seen as a version of objective realism—realism of ordinary objects and natural phenomena. Both Pei Wei and Guo Xiang believe in the presence of order in the phenomenal world. Pei Wei is committed to a rudimentary form of contemporary natural kind theory. He believes that the categorization of things follows some inherent principle of individuation—things of different kinds have different characteristics. "Things are divided into different kinds in accordance with their distinct natures" (cited in Gu 1980, 374). Guo Xiang, on the other hand, can be attributed a *no error* theory: There is no error in nature; things in nature follow natural laws and everything is in its right place. As he puts it, "The principles of things are from the very start correct. None can escape from them. Therefore a person is never born by mistake, and what he is born with is never an error" (Chan 1963, 332).[32] Because the doctrine of being affirms the commonsense world, it further upholds the value of human conventions, systems, and activities. What humans accomplish in this world is real and can amount to something; hence, one should not deny this world to pursue some transcendental ideals. This philosophy very much aligns with the this-worldly orientation of Confucianism,[33] in contrast to the other-worldly pursuit of Daoism or Buddhism.

To sum up, the debate on Being and Nonbeing in Wei-Jin philosophy was primarily a dispute in two dimensions: the ontological foundation of the

32 Wing-tsit Chan thinks that this is clearly a form of determinism and fatalism. "Fate is not merely something beyond human control or understanding; it is necessary truth." (Chan 1963, 332–33) This interpretation is problematic, however.

33 Confucianism is committed to one reality—our world. It does not posit a transcendental realm or a noumenon hidden behind this experiential world.

phenomenal world and the ethical application of the ontology. It was not a pursuit of the cosmogonic origin or cosmological foundation of the phenomenal world as it was manifested in the *Daodejing*. The reason why we have taken such a long detour to introduce the philosophical background of the issues surrounding the two notions, *you* and *wu* (being and nothingness or nonbeing), is to explain why Zhou Dunyi's notion of *wuji* (無極) would raise such an uproar among philosophers of his times and intellectual historians. If his idea of *wuji* indeed came from the Daoist tradition, in particular, associated with the school of nonbeing, then his whole philosophy would be utterly distasteful to his contemporary neo-Confucians who aimed to restore social morals from the corruption of the school of nonbeing.

What Zhou Dunyi accomplished, as the pioneer of neo-Confucianism, was to bring back the speculation of the cosmological origin of the phenomenal world, and established a new form of ethics based on his metaphysical view. We will see that Zhou's ethical proclivity is clearly opposite of the spirit of the school of nonbeing. Instead of focusing on the concept of *wu* (either in the sense of nothingness or nonbeing), Zhou employed the term "wuji," which should be rendered as "wu-ji," namely, "without boundary." Hence, we shall translate it as the boundless or infinity. Zhou Dunyi's emphasis on the state of *wuji* is a totally separate concern from the notion of *wu* for the school of nonbeing.

The Boundless (*Wuji*) and the Supreme Ultimate (*Taiji*)

Previously we have explained that the term *wuji* in the *Daodejing* should be understood as the negation of *ji* 極. According to the classic *Shuowen Jiezi* by Xu Shen, the word *ji* means the main supporting beam of a building. Duan Yucai's annotation explains that whatever that is extremely tall and extremely far away is called *ji*. The word is nowadays used as utmost, extreme, or ultimate. Therefore, the term *wuji* should be translated as without the ultimate boundaries or "infinite," "boundless." The standard translation "the ultimate nonbeing" (Chan 1963; Neville 1980) or "Ultimate of Nonbeing" (Zhang 2002) has actually reversed the Chinese word order, and renders it as *jiwu*—the ultimate *wu*. However, even within the Daoist tradition, Wang Bi's interpretation of Laozi's *wuji* (Chapter 28) is simply "inexhaustible" (*wuqiong* 無窮) (Wang Bi 1980, 74), and this shows clearly that he did not identify *wuji* with *wu* itself. We will now discuss how Zhou's notion of *wuji* is developed in a different context from the notion of *wu* in the Daoist and Wei-Jin philosophy.

A contemporary scholar Yi Jiang has correctly associated the notion of infinity with *wuji*. He says, "Ancient Chinese philosophers mainly discussed infinity in terms of *wuji* (boundless) and *wuqiong* (endless)" (Jiang 2008, 568).

His interpretation of Zhou Dunyi's opening line of *the Exposition* is that the boundless leads to the extremity of boundary. "It is not that there is another thing, the boundless"; rather, the boundless is nothing other than *taiji*, the extremity of boundary (Jiang 2008, 568). This interpretation endorses Zhu Xi's view that *wuji* and *taiji* are simply two sides of the same coin. How do we understand this connection in contemporary terms?

Finite things are determined and hence limited: they must have boundaries set in space and in time. On the other hand, *Taiji* (the supreme ultimate) is indeterminate, unlimited, and hence boundless (*wuji*). From Zhou Dunyi's text itself, it is not clear whether "the boundless" depicts the way *Taiji* is or designates a state existing prior to the state of *Taiji*. *The Exposition* begins with "*Wuji* and (then) *Taiji*" and later states "*Taiji* is originally *wuji*." We can have two equally credible cosmogonic interpretations:

1) There was initially the state of the boundless (*Wuji*), which emerged into a state of a supremely massive *Taiji*. *Taiji* is originally the boundless.
2) The state of *Taiji* is both supremely massive and boundless (*wuji*).

To settle on a correct interpretation, we need to examine the nature of *Taiji* itself to see whether it could be boundless at the same time.

To begin with, if something exists in time, then there must be a time before its existence and most likely a time after its existence. Both the pre-existing and the post-existing states of the thing is its nonbeing. We can call this particular nonbeing a local non-existence. Local non-existence could be rampant in the world of being. For the whole universe to emerge into existence, on the other hand, there has to be a state that has no existence of any particular thing anywhere—there has to be a global non-existence or we can call it absolute nothingness. If we go with interpretation (1) above, then there was a time when *Taiji* was nonexistent—the whole world was not always existent. In this case, to say that the initial state was the boundless would be the same as saying that it was absolute nothingness. It is understandable why so many scholars throughout history have taken Zhou Dunyi's cosmogony to be posting the state of nonbeing or nothingness as the initial cosmic state.

However, if we take a close look at Zhou's description, then we can see that there was a definite stage for the emergence of particular things, but there was never a depiction of the generation of *Taiji* itself. "The two forms of *qi* (*yin* and *yang*) intermingled, and the myriad things were born" (Zhou 1975, 14). Particular life forms are generated by the movement and transformation of *qi*, but *Taiji* is not generated by *qi*—quite the opposite. *Taiji* generates *yang* and *yin* through its movement and stillness; *yin* and *yang* further generates the five basic elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) for concrete things. Heaven and earth had a beginning, and there was a time when myriad concrete things began to form. If we call concrete things "something," "the determinate," "beings," then there was a time when there was nothing rather than something,

and the world was indefinite rather than determined. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there was a time when *Taiji* did not exist. Zhou's whole *Exposition* is about how *Taiji* generates the myriad things through the separate functions of *yin* and *yang*. It never depicts how *Taiji* was generated in the first place. In the *Yijing*, *Taiji* is posited as the primordial state—it has always existed. We could safely assume that Zhou Dunyi's view of *Taiji* is the same as that in the *Yijing*, the source of his philosophical ideas.

If *Taiji* itself did not come into being from nonbeing while the myriad things do, then *Taiji* is divided into two stages: the pre-myriad-things *Taiji* and the *Taiji* with myriad things. What could the pre-myriad-things *Taiji* be like? This may be why Zhou Dunyi brought in the notion of *wuji*. *Taiji* was initially boundless because its existence was beyond both space and time. The space–time framework came into existence after the myriad things were formed and divided—their spatiality marks space because they were separated, and their changes mark time because they come into existence, go through change, and go out of existence. The pre-myriad-things *Taiji* itself could not be identified with the space–time framework itself, as there was no space or time to begin with. There was nothing inside it or outside it; hence, it was without boundaries. It can properly be called "the Boundless."[34]

How do we understand Zhou Dunyi's notion of *Taiji*—whether *Taiji* was before the emergence of the myriad things or filled with the myriad things? What is the nature of *Taiji*? Zhu Xi thought that *Taiji* was simply a cosmic order, the principle (*li*), but is this really Zhou's view? From Zhou Dunyi's own explanation of the cosmogonic process, we should see that *Taiji* is not an abstract order or the pattern of *qi*, since he depicts *Taiji* as having motion and rest—its motion generates *yang* and its rest generates *yin*. Lai Chen, a leading contemporary scholar on neo-Confucianism, argues that Zhou Dunyi's cosmology is a form of *qi*-monism (Chen 2005, 40). Yu Guo (2003, 2001) also argues that for Zhou Dunyi, *Taiji* was initially just one *qi*, which then separated into *yang* and *yin* through motion and rest. Guo cites comments by Zhou Dunyi's contemporary, Liu Mu 劉牧 (1011–1064) and Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077), to show that it was a common view among neo-Confucians in Northern Song dynasty to regard *Taiji* as one *qi*—before *yin* and *yang* are divided. According to Liu Mu, "Yi has *Taiji*, which generates the two modes (*liangyi* 兩儀). *Taiji* is simply one *qi*. Before heaven and earth are divided, the primordial *qi* is intermingled as One. Once the one *qi* is divided, it is called the two modes" (Liu 1995, 1). According to Shao Yong, "Taiji is one, as it becomes

34 A parallel conception of the boundless can be developed out of the Western philosophical notion of *nothingness*. As Roy Sorensen explains, "A concrete entity has a position in space or time.... Sine they have locations, they have boundaries with their environment. (The only exception would be an entity that take up all space and time)" ("Nothingness," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, parentheses in original).

differentiated, the two modes (*yin* and *yang*) appear." He also says, "*Qi* is one. When the one *qi* is divided, *yin* and *yang* are distinguished" (Guo 2001, 3). From these two quotes, it is clear that for Zhou Dunyi, *Taiji* could very well be identified with the one undifferentiated *qi*. Since this seems to be a widely endorsed view in Zhou's time,[35] his comment on "Wuji and then Taiji" may be expressing the evolution of *qi* as coming from boundlessness (*Wuji*) to supremely ultimate (*Taiji*).

If "Wuji and then Taiji" is to be interpreted as a statement on cosmogonic development, then how do we unpack Zhou Dunyi's cosmology? Lai Chen gives a good analysis: "*Taiji* is the primordial undifferentiated state of chaos, while *Wuji* depicts this formless and disordered state of infinity before the universe was formed. As a primeval matter itself, *Taiji* was initially formless and boundless, and this is what is meant by 'Wuji and then Taiji'" (Chen 2005, 39). This "primeval matter" referred to here is simply the primordial *qi*, before *qi* was separated into *yin* and *yang*. Zhou Dunyi's cosmology is simply an explanation of the development of *qi*—a process of division from being one homogeneous state to having two modes of *yin* and *yang*, and finally to the generation of multiplicity.

For our contemporary elucidation, it is possible to associate *qi* with the outdated notion of ether, but a more promising approach is to associate *Taiji* with the space–time framework. According to Roy Sorensen, "Historians of science wonder whether the ether that was loudly pushed out the front door of physics is quietly returning through the back door under the guise of 'space.' Quantum field theory provides especially fertile area for such speculation. Particles are created with the help of energy present in 'vacuums.' To say that vacuums have energy and energy is convertible into mass, is to deny that vacuums are empty. Many physicists revel in the discovery that vacuums are far from empty" (Sorensen 2009, Section 10). Understood in this light, Zhou Dunyi's notion of *taiji* is much more intelligible and plausible.

We can now give a contemporary reinterpretation of Zhou Dunyi's view of *Taiji*. We can also understand why he introduced the notion *wuji* into his cosmological explanation of the universe. The Chinese term for the universe is "yuzou" (宇宙), which literally means space and time: "the four directions (front, back, left, and right) plus the two dimensions (up and down) is called 'yu'; from the ancient and the past to the present and the coming is called 'zou.'"[36] Before heaven and earth were separated and concrete things were

35 The view did not originate in Northern Song dynasty neo-Confucians. It was a prevalent view in Han dynasty, before Wei-Jin philosophy shifted the interest from cosmology to ontology.

36 This analysis originally came from Wenzi, allegedly a disciple of Laozi and a contemporary of Confucius. It was recorded in Duan's annotations to Xu Shen's *Shuowenjiezi*, and is now an established analysis of the term.

formed, the space–time framework itself could be infinitely expansive while at the same time infinitely minute—"its extensiveness is such that nothing could be outside of it; its minuteness is such that nothing could be inside of it."[37] The space–time framework itself "depends on what it frames,"[38] hence, it was without limits and without boundaries when there were no concrete things in space and time. In other words, before any concrete object appeared, space–time would simply have no bounds since there would be nothing external to it either. Hence, it should be called "the Boundless (*Wuji*)." After heaven and earth were separated and the universe formed, there emerged an infinitely massive space–time framework, which Zhou Dunyi calls the Supreme Ultimate (*Taiji*). We can understand why Zhou Dunyi would say that *Wuji* and then *Taiji*; *Taiji* was initially *Wuji*. The cosmological development of *Taiji* is the expansion of matter within a supremely massive space–time framework. Since *Taiji* is identified with *qi* itself, it is not a passive space–time framework as a mere container for concrete things; rather, it is matter and energy conjoined with the framework. In Zhou's depiction, *Taiji* has motion and rest; hence, it is not a vacuum, or at least not an empty vacuum, because it is filled with energy. Zhou's view may be different from Newton's conception of space as "an external, homogenous, three-dimensional container of infinite extent," but it seems to be compatible with Newton's conjecture about what existed before concrete things came around: "the world was empty of objects for an infinite period prior to creation" (see Sorensen 2009, Section 4).

We shall now go back to the question that haunted scholars for hundreds of years: Does Zhou Dunyi's "Wuji and then Taiji" commit him to a version of creation ex nihilo? Even though we have separated the notion of *wuji* from the notion of *wu*, does the state of primordial chaos still end up being a state of nothingness? Sze-kwang Lao argues that since *Wuji* is a separate state from *Taiji*, Zhou's view is positing *wuji* as the substance of everything and hence, it does imply "being comes from nothingness" (Lao 1980, 114). Even though Shen Li rejected tracing the source of Zhou's *Taiji* diagram to the Daoist *Wuji* diagram, he nonetheless argues, "As long as one acknowledges that there is a beginning to heaven and earth, to *yin* and *yang*, one can only trace the origin back to nothingness. Being emerges out of nothingness can be said to be an inevitable conclusion" (Li 2001, 49). However, even when contemporary scholars still embrace the creation ex nihilo interpretation of Zhou Dunyi's cosmology, they do not necessarily treat the initial state to be the later Daoist conception of nonbeing or absolute nothingness.

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37 The original Chinese sentence is: *qida wuwai* (其大無外); *qixiao qunei* (其小無內). It was first employed in the *Guangzi* (compiled during 475–221 BCE approximately) as a description of *Dao*.
38 This is Roy Sorensen's description of Einstein's conception of space. See Sorensen 2009.

Robert C. Neville, for example, takes Zhou's view to be a version of creation ex nihilo, but he explains this process as one in which determinate world emerges out of the state of indeterminacy. Thus, creation is a "decisive process eliminating alternatives" (Neville 1980, 22). Tongdong Bai also argues that there is a sense of nothingness (*wu*), which signifies "the ultimate potentiality that is not fixed and can be led to a myriad of actualities" (Bai 2008, 347).[39] If we accept this understanding of "nothingness," then the "nihilo" from which all things are generated is neither absolute nothingness nor void. It is rather a state of indeterminacy, full of potentiality and possibilities. This would be a reasonable way to understand Zhou Dunyi's boundless amorphous *qi*: as the primordial matter, it is seething with energy. This explains why the myriad things could eventually emerge out of this primordial *qi*. How does something come out of nothingness?—It is because there was always something in nothingness. Under this understanding, Zhou's *Wuji* is not absolute nothingness or complete void. At the same time, since *Taiji* is the totality of *qi*, *Taiji* is not the same as void even before *qi* is divided into *yin* and *yang*. It has no forms, shapes, boundaries, determinacy, and yet it is not empty. This analysis of the connection between *Wuji* and *Taiji* supports the first reading of Zhou Dunyi's cosmology: There was initially the state of the Boundless (*Wuji*), which emerged into a state of a supremely massive *Taiji*. *Taiji* was originally the Boundless.

A stronger, but equally plausible, interpretation of the ontological status of Zhou Dunyi's *Taiji* is to identify it with Being itself. If *Taiji* is the unified and undifferentiated *qi* and *qi* is the constitutive principle of all things, then *Taiji* is responsible for all beings. *Taiji* can thus be interpreted as Being, which must also be both eternal and infinite. According to Gi-Ming Shien's analysis of the nature of Being,

> Being itself transcends both time and space, since it endures for eternity and is the source of all things. We cannot even imagine that Being or the One has either beginning or end.…Being also transcends space and is quantitatively infinite. It is unlimited by anything and is boundless. In this sense it is infinite. These two attributes, eternity and infinite, represent supreme existence and are the summit of absolute perfection. Thus, Being can be the source of all things.
>
> *(Shien 1951, 22)*

39 Bai's article is on Laozi. He argues that when Laozi says "*Dao* generated the 'One,'" Laozi's *Dao* is to be identified with this sense of *wu*.

Even though here Shien is analyzing the abstract notion of Being, the analysis fits Zhou's notion of *Taiji* perfectly. Zhou's *Taiji* also transcends space and time, and by associating it with the notion *wuji*, Zhou depicts it as infinite and boundless. Pure Being as such is "unlimited in its nature." According to Shien, "Regarded from the standpoint of its lack of limitation, it is completely independent, that is, absolute. 'Absolute' means that it is relative to nothing and is self-sufficient" (Shien 1951, 23). In Zhou Dunyi's depiction, *Taiji*, the supreme ultimate, is the absolute self-sufficient and self-contained perfection. Exactly because it is relative to nothing else, it is identical with the Boundless (*Wuji*). Zhou's *Taiji* is simply Being itself; hence it is both supremely massive and boundless (*wuji*).

Whether there is a state of *Wuji* before *Taiji* or *Taiji* is simply *wuji* (boundless) at the same time, there is no hint whatsoever in Zhou Dunyi's cosmology of the Daoist rendition of being comes out of pure nothingness.

From the boundless amorphous *qi* to the supremely ultimate space–time framework, there had to be further changes to bring about concrete things. The first change is the state of motion and rest of this amorphous *qi*. Through motion *Taiji* generates *yang*; through resting it generates *yin*.[40] The two modes of *qi* are thereby distinguished. This is a revolutionary move in the cosmological thinking of Confucianism. As Robin Wang explains, "While no one has solved the problem of how the universe could be produced by the supreme ultimate, Zhou Dunyi's contribution is to identify directly and clearly *yin yang* with … movement and rest as critical to the generation of the universe" (Wang 2005, 316). Zhou Dunyi further elaborated on the *Yijing*'s cosmogonic picture and added the five elements widely discussed by Confucians in Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE): water, fire, earth, wood, and metal. We could see this stage as a turn toward qualitative rather than quantitative change.[41] *Qi* as a pure form of energy constitutes elements of matter. The next stage is the separation of male and female, which is the basis for almost all organic life forms.[42] The basic elements in conjunction with the principles of male and female produce (or constitute) the myriad concrete things.

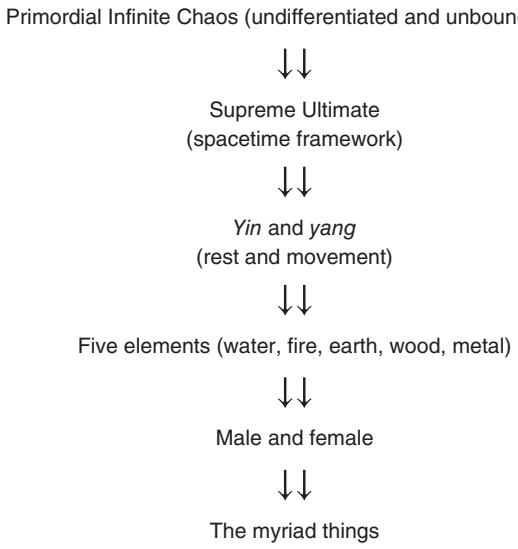
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40 "Generate" is the literal rendition of the text. It could be plausibly argued, however, that the motion of *qi* itself is simply *yang* while the resting state is simply *yin*. The identification of *yang* with movement and *yin* with rest is exactly Robin Wang's (2005) interpretation of Zhou's contribution.

41 Yu Guo (2003) explains that the ancient Chinese cosmological thinking involves qualitative change rather than quantitative change.

42 Some organic entities carry out asexual reproduction, as in the case of amoeba. However, in most cases, it seems that reproduction is possible only with both male and female elements.

We can draw a flowchart of Zhou Dunyi's cosmogonic view:



Based on this view of the origin of the universe, Zhou Dunyi developed his ethical view, which is directly related to the affirmation of the reality of the phenomenal world. His *Penetrating the Book* (of Changes) begins with the pronouncement of the attribute of authenticity (*cheng*) as pertaining to the principle of male and to the sage: "Great is the primordial principle of male (*qianyuan* 乾元)! It is in virtue of which that the myriad things emerged, and it is the source of authenticity. The way of the principle of male generates and transforms everything, such that everything obtains its correct nature and destiny. Authenticity is established in this world and it is perfectly good" (Zhou 1975, 116). Here he is not only affirming the realness of the myriad things but also acknowledging the "integrity"[43] of their existence—their natures and destinies are fixed. The heavenly attribute of authenticity further becomes the foundation for human morals: "Sagehood is nothing but authenticity. Authenticity is the basis of the Five Constant Virtues (humaneness, righteousness,

43 The "integrity of existing things" is a phrase borrowed from Neville. However, Neville uses this phrase in the context of the creation theory. See Neville 1980, 24. In Zhou Dunyi's view, the integrity of existing things comes from the creative force of *qi* itself. Zhang Zai claims that this regulative principle is inherent in the nature of *qi* itself, while Zhu Xi would later identify the cosmic principle (*li*) as what is responsible for the integrity of existing things.

propriety, wisdom and faithfulness) and the fountainhead for all human conduct" (Zhou 1975, 123). From this we can clearly see that Zhou Dunyi's cosmological view does not lead to the denial of the reality of the world as we see it, or the ethical values that we humans establish in our society.

Conclusion

Zhou Dunyi's "Wuji and then Taiji" is a statement of cosmogony, not a statement of ontology. It is not related to the dispute between the doctrine of *wu* and the doctrine of *you* in Wei-Jin philosophy, and it does not lead to the rejection of social norms and ethical standards. His *Exposition of Taiji Diagram*—exactly because of the controversy surrounding it—led to a lively debate on the cosmogonic origin of the universe. He may have been inspired by Chen Tuan's alchemic methodology,[44] but there is no evidence that he was ever a descendent of Chen's school or that his *Taiji* diagram was modeled after Chen's *Wuji* diagram. His speculation of the origin of the universe is compatible with the cosmogonic view in the *Daodejing*, but it is very different from the ontology of nonbeing developed in Wei-Jin philosophy. Neo-Confucianists' vehement rejection of the doctrine of *wu* was prompted by their repulsion of the ethical implications of this ontological doctrine. Even if the *Daodejing's* theory itself encourages the denouncement of social norms and ethical standards, Zhou Dunyi's cosmogonic speculation does not lead to such a conclusion. To restore the true spirit of Zhou's philosophy, it is essential to disassociate it from the doctrine of *wu* in Wei-Jin philosophy. In this light, we may see how Zhou Dunyi's philosophical ideas opened a new path for the development of neo-Confucianism. As Youlan Feng puts it in his historical assessment of Zhou: "The earliest of the neo-Confucianists were chiefly interested in cosmology. The first cosmological philosopher is [Zhou Dunyi]" (Feng 1966, 269). This cosmological turn may be Zhou's greatest contribution to neo-Confucianism. In the next chapter, we will see that the theory of *qi*'s original state and its development would be fully expounded by Zhang Zai (1020–1078).

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44 There is one place in Zhou's *Complete Works* where he mentioned Chen Tuan by his style name Mr. *Xiyi* 希夷先生: "It is only after reading the alchemic aphorism that I believed in *Xiyi*, for he has understood the subtle signs of the creation and transformation of *yin* and *yang*" (Zhou 1975, 345). This poem was one of the three poems written after Zhou visited a Daoist monastery in *Fongdu* (today's Chongqing, China), and the title referred to the "engraving on the stone" in this monastery. It is possible that Zhou did see Chen Tuan's alchemic aphorism that later Daoists put alongside the *Wuji* Diagram, while the diagram itself was later concocted by later Daoists.

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