

How to Rule without Taking Unnatural Actions (无为而治): A Comparative Study of the

Political Philosophy of the *Laozi*¹

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Abstract:

In this paper, I will clarify and elaborate on the *Laozi*'s understanding of naturalness and of ruling without taking unnatural actions, and I will argue that the *Laozi* offers a theoretically adequate and realistic proposal to address both the problems of its times and some of the problems of modernity.

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Political Philosophy of the *Laozi*²

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Abstract:

In this paper, I will clarify and elaborate on the *Laozi*'s understanding of naturalness and of ruling without taking unnatural actions, and I will argue that the *Laozi* offers a theoretically adequate and realistic proposal to address both the problems of its times and some of the problems of modernity.

In this paper, I first elaborate on the *Laozi*'s understanding of the ideas of naturalness and of taking no unnatural actions. In the first two sections I challenge the common understanding that the ideas of naturalness and of taking no unnatural actions separate the political teaching of the *Laozi* from that of Confucianism, and argue that the real distinction between these two schools lies in how these two ideas are understood. In Section 3, to continue my clarification of the *Laozi*'s idea of ruling without taking unnatural actions, I explain the *Laozi*'s elitist idea that the masses have to be kept in the natural state by a small group of Daoist rulers. But, to achieve the restraint of the masses, in Section 4 I argue that the *Laozi* must deviate from the teaching of taking no action, and must allow "small" and "large" actions to be taken, a problem which poses serious challenges to the political teaching of the *Laozi*. These challenges become more serious, and even insurmountable, if we consider the social and political situations of the *Laozi*'s

times. In the last section, however, I propose that the idea of “small-state-with-few-people,” in Chapter 80 of the *Laozi*, should be understood as a realistic solution to the social and political problems of its times. Such a reading might render the political teaching of the *Laozi* relevant to the problem caused by the collapse of the old order and the emerging populous states in the Warring States period. This problem is to some degree similar to the problem of modernity, and the relevance of the *Laozi*'s political teaching to the problem of modernity is revealed through its similarity to the political teaching of Rousseau. Although modern conditions leave little room for this teaching to remain a viable option, I hope this paper can deepen our understanding of the political teaching of the *Laozi*, of the nature of modernity, and of the viability of ancient teachings.

1. Do the ideas of *ziran* (naturalness) and *wuwei* (taking no actions) separate Daoist and Confucian political philosophy?

Probably everyone who has read the *Laozi* knows that the best government is the one that takes no action; probably everyone who has read the *Laozi* carefully knows that “non-action” does not mean quietism or taking no actions whatsoever.³ Rather, “non-action” means taking no unnatural action. The relation between naturalness and non-action, as Xiaogan Liu 刘笑敢 points out, is this: “‘Naturalness’ is the core value of the thought of Laozi, while *wuwei* [non-action] is the principle or method for realizing this value in action.”⁴ Moreover, according to Liu, whose opinion may have been shared by many readers of Chinese philosophy, “A reverence for ‘naturalness’ is the most distinguishing characteristic of the Daoist scheme of values and what most clearly separates it from Confucian theory, which extols hard work and striving.”⁵

This last point, however, may be misleading, because, at least apparently, Confucius, and the Confucians as well, seem to advocate the ideas of following what is natural and of taking no unnatural actions.⁶ In a section of the *Analects*,⁷ “Confucius said, ‘To have taken no [unnatural] action and yet have the empire well governed, Shun was the man! What did he do? All he did was to make himself reverent and correctly face south ...’.”⁸ The Chinese word for “take no action” is exactly the same as the word for “non-action” in the *Laozi*, and curiously enough, Wing-tsit Chan adds the word “unnatural” to clarify this idea, just as is often done to the corresponding Daoist idea. Moreover, according to Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, the appearance of “taking no action” here “is the earliest instance of what is usually taken to be a Daoist idea, ‘nonassertive action (*wuwei* 无为).”⁹ Chan also refers readers to an earlier passage (2.1) in the *Analects*: “Confucius said, ‘A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.’” Clearly, this passage suggests that the ideal ruler should take no action, and in his comment, Chan points out that Confucianism and Daoism are in agreement on the idea of government through non-action.¹⁰

Moreover, the Confucian ideal of non-action is also inspired by observations of nature, and is illustrated with analogies to natural processes, as is the case in the *Laozi*. For example, Confucius wished to say nothing, and when Zi Gong protested that, if he were not to speak, “what can we little disciples ever learn to pass on to others?” he answered, “Does Heaven (*T’ien*, Nature) say anything? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced. Does Heaven say anything?” (17.19). In a footnote, Chan refers readers to Chapter 23 of the *Laozi*,¹¹ where the first line reads: “Nature says few

words.” Also, in Chapter 30 of the *Zhongyong* 《中庸》, Confucius is praised for his conformity to the natural order. Under this order, everything is produced and developed without injury or conflict. This is why heaven and earth (nature) is great, and by implication, this is why the Confucian way is great.

Therefore, rather than being points of contrast, reverence for naturalness and the idea of non-action are actually ideas shared by Confucius and the *Laozi*. The real distinction between them is rather how they understand what is natural. Otherwise put, what is natural is not so natural (self-evident) that it naturally means the same to Confucius and the *Laozi*. For the *Laozi*, what is natural for human beings is to have no material desires beyond the bare necessities, and no desires for human knowledge and virtues. For Confucius, on the other hand, what is natural has a clear Confucian moral undertone.¹² Moreover, heaven and earth, upon which human beings model themselves, are also understood differently. For the *Laozi*, heaven and earth are not humane and moral, but amoral and indifferent to human desires (Chapter 5), while in the *Zhongyong*, for example, the portrait of heaven and earth is humane and benign.¹³ Therefore, how the ideas of naturalness and non-action are fleshed out makes all the difference. Indeed, one can even argue that the Legalist also advocates the ideas of following what is natural and taking no action. But for him, what is natural is the self-interest of human beings, and natural laws of human behavior. If we know how to manipulate people through a well-established and comprehensive institution built upon laws, punishments, and other political tricks, the ruler does not need to take (“unnatural”) actions. The institution that is based upon the natural laws has already taken care of everything.¹⁴

There is also a subtle difference between the kinds of non-action the *Laozi* and Confucius advocate. In the ideal situation, according to the *Analects*, the common people's tendency to become good in a Confucian sense has to be brought out by the best ruler, who takes no action beyond being a moral exemplar for the common people, as the comparison of governing by virtue with the function of the north polar star suggests (2.1). The *Laozi*, however, maintains that the natural tendency of human beings will show itself without any provocation or inspiration, and this is why "the best (rulers) are those whose existence is (merely) known by the people," while the rulers who are loved and praised by the people, apparently the best rulers according to the Confucian standard, are only the second best (Chapter 17). In this sense, one can say that the natural tendency of human beings in the *Laozi* seems to be more natural than that in the *Analects*. Or, as Philip J. Ivanhoe puts it, the force of the virtue of the ideal Confucian ruler is centripetal, while that of the Daoist is centrifugal.¹⁵

However, if the above were all there is to the political teachings of government in the *Laozi* and the *Analects*, these teachings should be dismissed as incredibly naïve by anyone with even a modicum of experience in a civilized society, who would understand how easily human beings go astray from what the *Laozi* or Confucius understand as natural. Put (apparently) paradoxically, human beings are naturally not natural, or what is natural is not so natural. But both Confucius and the *Laozi* understand this danger and offer realistic proposals according to which actions are taken. Moreover, they both have an elitist view of human society and offer solutions based upon this view. Yet, although taking action does not pose a serious problem for Confucius and the Confucians, it does for the *Laozi*. In the following, I will discuss the *Laozi*'s elitist solution and its problems.

2. The natural cyclic movement of the Dao in the descriptive and the normative senses.

One might argue that much of the force of the *Laozi* lies in its denunciation of the hubris of human beings who, in spite of being incapable of the task, foolishly try to improve things on their own. As a result, human interventions are only counterproductive, and the *Laozi* asserts that we should leave human affairs to the great nature, or the Dao. After all, “returning is how the Dao moves” (Chapter 4).¹⁶ That is, things that go astray will be returned by the Dao to their original (natural) places, and human beings do not need to worry about them.

This “go with the flow” attitude is likely to be found in the *Zhuangzi*, although the latter does not seem to have a universal principle of eternal return. But for the *Laozi*, although all movements, under the master principle of eternal return, are cyclic, there is nevertheless a preferred cycle. Within this cycle, human perversions (unnatural desires) are under control, and do not lead to cycles of violent rising and falling. There remain ups and downs in this cycle, but they are neither violent nor drastic. Human beings are born, mature, age, and die, but they are not killed in a conflict caused by greed. They work, but only to get enough food to survive. In this preferred cycle, we are returned to our “root”—the apparent stillness that actually consists of peaceful, smooth, and slow cyclic movements. According to Liu, such a state is what is considered natural by the *Laozi*.¹⁷ Here I should add that naturalness should be understood normatively.¹⁸ Descriptively, all things move in cycles, violent and smooth.¹⁹ But the *Laozi* has a moral preference for the smooth cycle, anointing it as “natural” (in a normative sense).

With this understanding, we can also see how the *Laozi* answers a common challenge. That is, if “returning is how the Dao moves,” and if, in particular, the strong, the wealthy, etc., cannot help but decline after the prime, how is it possible that we hold fast to the “weakness”—something the *Laozi* equally insists upon? But, as I have already shown, what we hold onto is *not* pure stillness. D. C. Lau points out, when dealing with this apparent paradox, that “All that is said is that a thing, once it has reached the limits of development, will return to its roots, i.e., will decline. This is inevitable. Nothing is said about development being equally inevitable once one has returned to one’s roots.”²⁰ But a problem with Lau’s otherwise excellent treatment is that he seems to take the roots as a pure stillness, while, as I have argued, the roots are rather part of a cycle of *smooth* development and decline. What is not inevitable is not development per se, but rather the development from this apparently still cycle to the violent ones.²¹

3. The elitist ancients: the choice of the few and the indoctrination of the many.

We can establish that not all natural cycles are acceptable, and that the *Laozi* has a normative preference. But how are people to stay in this preferred cycle of no unnatural desires? Ideally, it would be great if all human beings were able to choose to stay in such a state. But the *Laozi* clearly indicates that this is not possible. For only the few can really understand the Dao, as is indicated, for example, by the contrast between “me,” someone who is close to the Dao, and the majority, or the masses, (*Zhongren* 众人), who stray from the Dao, in Chapter 20. Only the few, the Daoist elite, can *return* to the state of the infant, an idealized symbol of someone who is free from human desire and human

knowledge. “Returning” (Chapter 28) suggests a *choice* of giving up human bondage. The masses, in contrast, can at best merely remain in the state of infancy.

In fact, not only do the masses remain in the state of infancy not by choice, but they are actually *made* to do so by the ruling elite, the Daoist sages. It is clearly stated in Chapter 3 of the *Laozi* that the Daoist sage *causes* (*Shi* 使) the masses to be without knowledge (cunning) or desires by keeping their hearts vacuous, filling their bellies, weakening their ambitions, and strengthening their bones. A similar teaching is offered in Chapter 65, where those who practice Dao *make* people ignorant (innocent), i.e., free from human (unnatural) knowledge. (For this knowledge is actually bad for human beings, although most of them cannot understand its danger.) Indeed, they might laugh at those, the “messengers,” who warn them of the danger of cunning driven by human desires (Chapter 41). This situation is also dangerous for the messengers because of the public’s failure to understand them, which might result in hostility toward them. To protect both the incompetent masses and the elite messengers, people have to be kept in the dark, and not be enlightened. This might be a non-Legalist and less treacherous reading of a very controversial line in a very controversial chapter, Chapter 36: “sharp weapons of the state should not be displayed to the people.” Such a reading reminds us of the message of romantic writers, such as Rousseau, who claims in the *First Discourse* that the difficulty in obtaining knowledge is a protection nature offers us in the attempt to keep human beings in the “happy ignorance,” where “eternal wisdom had placed us,” as a protective mother hides dangerous secrets from her child.²² We can say that the Daoist ruler in the *Laozi* is someone who understands the wisdom of keeping the masses away from human knowledge.

Interestingly, Chan, in his comment on Chapter 36, claims that “The Confucians have never excused Lao Tzu for teaching such a doctrine of ‘deceit’.”²³ But he might have been mistaken here. For, according to the *Analects*, Confucius said that “The common people may be made to follow it (the Way) but may not be made to understand it” (8.9), and one cannot talk of the higher things to those below average.²⁴ In general, Confucius seems to adopt a similar elitist model in which those with true knowledge rule over the masses who are not able to (fully) understand it and are therefore kept from it. Of course, a crucial distinction here is that Confucius was not hostile to human knowledge and education per se, although he shared the suspicion of the *Laozi* about common people’s competence. Indeed, contrary to the contemporary situation, it seems that such an elitist view was the norm for ancient political philosophers, while egalitarian views were the exceptions.

To be clear, consistent with his pessimistic view of the competence of the many, the *Laozi* seems to think that the many are also not capable of going astray *on their own*. Rather, it is the few men of cunning and unnatural desires, especially the bad rulers, who “enlighten” the many in the wrong way. This kind of “elite” is the initial cause of the evils in the world and has to be controlled. In this sense, the *Laozi* also has an anti-elitist side.²⁵

4. The difficult task of keeping the many natural: the escalation from non-action, to small actions, and to sometimes large actions.

How can the masses be kept in “darkness” by the Daoist sage-rulers?
Interestingly, after talking about how the Daoist sage causes his people to be without

knowledge or desire, the concluding remark is, “By acting without action, all things will be in order” (Chapter 3). In Chapter 57, it is further elaborated that the ruler does not need to do anything but be himself. If he is an enlightened Daoist who takes no action, loves tranquility, engages in no activity, and has no desires, then the people will transform themselves. Unlike in the Confucian model, the ruler here is not even an exemplar for the masses, for he is neither loved nor praised by them, but is merely known (Chapter 17).

This understanding of the role of the rulers is consistent with the anti-elitist side of the *Laozi* that is mentioned at the end of last section: it is the (un-Daoist) rulers, or the powerful elite, who need to be controlled. Unfortunately, there are always people who cannot help but “invent the wheel,” that is, who start the pursuit of human desires and knowledge. They will grab power, and spread their values among the masses. It would be naïve to believe that they would exercise Daoist self-restraint on their own, or that a barely known non-active ruler could stop them, when they have already become powerful. Therefore, if the *Laozi* should be considered a serious work in political philosophy, it should deal with this problem.

It seems that the *Laozi* does recognize the perverse side of human natural tendencies, although, as Schwartz points out, the *Laozi* does not explain how human beings’ “fall” from the Daoist naturalness is possible.²⁶ To deal with this perversion of the natural, however, the all-too-idealistic non-action proposal is actually replaced by a proposal that demands “small” and non-drastic actions. In Chapter 37, after repeating the familiar message that if the Daoist ruler takes no action, all things will transform spontaneously, it reads: “If, after transformation, they should desire to be active, I would

restrain them with simplicity.” In order for such a restraint not to agitate the rest of the public, it should be done unnoticeably with “small” actions, and this is only possible when those who desire to be active are still in a weak, emerging, and easily controllable stage. This is a lesson that is expressed through various metaphors in Chapter 64:

What remains still is easy to hold.

What is not yet manifest is easy to plan for.

What is brittle is easy to crack.

What is minute is easy to scatter.

Deal with things before they appear.

Put things in order before disorder arises.

A tree as big as a man’s embrace grows from a tiny shoot.

A tower of nine storeys begins with a heap of earth.

The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where one stands.

Curiously, immediately after these lines, which suggest that actions need to be taken before it is too late, the next line reads: “He who takes an action fails,” and the last line of this chapter reads: “Thus he supports all things in their natural state but does not take any action.” So, presumably, taking small actions to support (*fu* 辅) all things is the same as taking no action. This goes well with Liu’s claim that non-action means no drastic action.²⁷ But it should be pointed out that such “non-action” seems to be quite different from the kind of non-action suggested in many other chapters of the *Laozi*, some of which I have quoted above. Moreover, as is clearly stated in Chapter 37, the action of restraint is taken after the non-action is already taken, but fails to lead all people to transform themselves. This suggests that the action of restraint is not a non-action. Or, at

least, we should understand that there are two kinds of non-action: one, the non-action in a more ideal state of affairs, where the ruler does not need to make any effort to curb the desires of common people, other than being content himself; and two, the non-action in a more realistic state of affairs, where the ruler does need to make conscious effort to prevent those who dare to act from actually acting.

But what if small actions are not enough? What if there are some deviants—whose existence is rather “natural”—who cannot be restrained with small actions? The *Laozi* seems to acknowledge these challenges, since it does not forbid using drastic punishments and warfare to restrain manifested vices. For example, in Chapter 74, after making an implicit yet extremely powerful protest against the tyranny of a greedy ruler (“if the common people are really not afraid of dying, how can one frighten them by threatening to kill them?”), the text continues: “But if the people are really afraid of dying, and know that we will arrest those who do perverse things, who among them would dare to do them?”²⁸ Here the text seems to sanction punishments by the state, including executions, of the truly²⁹ perverse people. Moreover, in terms of “international” relations, although the *Laozi* registers a strong and powerful protest against war and offers many cautionary notes (for example, Chapters 30, 31, and 46), it nevertheless explicitly states that one can use force when it is inevitable (Chapter 31).

To keep the masses in their innocent state, we see that not only small actions, but sometimes even large (drastic) actions, such as killings, are necessary. One might defend the *Laozi* by arguing that these actions are rare exceptions.³⁰ But even so, there is a series of problems, which concern the people who carry out such drastic actions. In Chapter 74, after sanctioning capital punishment, the text continues: “To stand in for the executioner

in killing people is to stand in for the master carpenter in cutting his lumber. Of those who would thus stand in for the master carpenter, few get away without injuring their own hands.”³¹ Now, how can the ruler make sure, when he orders killings, either through capital punishment or through war, he does not “injure his own hands?” First, to kill justly—“justly” here in a Daoist sense—means to know what is just. But in Chapter 73, it is pointed out, “who knows why Heaven dislikes what it dislikes?”³² Second, even if we know what justice is, much of the *Laozi* is trying to teach human beings that we are unable to sustain any unnatural actions, killings being, obviously, in this category. Third, even if we know what is just and are able to do it, another important lesson of the *Laozi* seems to be that we do not need to. For “Heaven’s net is indeed vast ... it misses nothing” (Chapter 73). The fact that the Dao is mystical (beyond our understanding) and is all powerful (beyond human control and yet all encompassing) is a crucial reason that the *Laozi* insists on treating all people the same, taking no action, and repaying hatred with “virtue” (in a Daoist sense).³³

A solution to these problems can be found in Alan K. L. Chan’s interesting interpretation of the He Shang Gong 河上公 commentary of the *Laozi*.³⁴ Here he argues that the He Shang Gong commentary recognizes the necessity of taking preventative actions and even drastic actions. According to his interpretation of the commentary, the possible abuses of this power can be avoided by the rule of the Daoist sage who does not and cannot become a sage by learning, but is born so. The sages are rare, and their recorded teachings and commentaries serve as guidelines when the sages themselves are not available. This can be used to answer my aforementioned challenges. But even if we accept the existence of such a naturally born sage, we have to ask: first, how does he rise

to power? Through the respect of the people? But does not the *Laozi* also argue that the Daoist ruler should only be merely known (Chapter 17), and that exalting the worthy (Chapter 3), as the Confucians and the Moists advocate, implies distinction and competition, which is exactly the origin of social ills? Second, how do the very obscure texts of the *Laozi* and its commentaries serve as a handbook for taking concrete political action in various special circumstances? Third, if this sage understands the otherwise unfathomable Dao, whatever he does then must be the action of the Dao, i.e., by definition, natural action or non-action. This seems to render “non-action” an all-inclusive and thus meaningless prescript. The various Daoist cults and the revolts Daoists led throughout Chinese history show that such an understanding of the *Laozi* is indeed taken seriously. At the same time, they also show a problem with such an understanding.

5. The “modern” problem of a populous state and “small-state-with-few-people” as the ultimate answer.

Of course, further answers to the above challenges are almost always possible, but I hope I have shown that the problem caused by the necessity of taking drastic actions is a very serious one. Unfortunately, there is yet another, and perhaps more serious problem with taking drastic actions. As is mentioned above, taking such drastic actions has to be rare; otherwise, the teaching of the *Laozi* would not be distinguishable from, for example, Legalist teaching. Indeed, in his commentary on the last line of Chapter 36, Wang Bi points out that the display of sharp weapons is always a reference to punishments (drastic actions), and the prescript of not displaying them means not to use them often.³⁵ But can

such actions be kept hidden? After all, as Chapter 73 suggests, common people have to know that the “deviants” will be punished by the “sharp weapons” of the state, so that they will be “scared straight.” That is, these weapons have to be displayed. But will this lead to the cultivation of cunning among the common people, a danger the *Laozi* never fails to warn us against? Moreover, what if there are many deviants, and the sharp weapons have to be used constantly? If this is the case, the Daoist state will deteriorate into a Legalist one.

Unfortunately, the world of the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, when the *Laozi* was written or compiled, is exactly a world of too many greedy people, vices, and wars. Against such a background, the *Laozi*, sanctioning only non-action, small actions, or at most rare drastic actions, seems to be hopelessly naïve and irrelevant.³⁶ Indeed, exactly this point is part of Han Fei Zi’s criticism of Confucianism. For example, in the famous *Wudu* (Five Vermin) 五蠹 chapter (Chapter 49), Han Fei Zi points out a crucial difference between the “ancients” and the “moderns:” “In ancient times ... the people were few and there was a surplus of goods,” while in “modern” times, due to the natural growth of human population (“today it is not too many for one father to have five sons... so when the grandfather is not dead yet, he already has twenty-five grandsons”), “the people are numerous and the goods and wealth are scarce.”³⁷ This is why in “modern” times people have to work hard, and even struggle for survival, against others, a situation which makes rich rewards and harsh punishments necessary. Failing to appreciate this and other differences between the ancients and the moderns, those who “wish to use the government of generous and relaxed times to rule the people of chaotic times are like wishing to stop a runaway horse without using reins and whips. This is the

danger of ignorance.”³⁸ Although this is an attack on Confucianism, the *Laozi*, with more emphases on non-action—that is, on not “using reins and whips”—than are found in Confucianism, should have even a harder time answering this challenge.³⁹

Indeed, Feng Youlan 冯友兰, a Confucian philosopher of the 20th century, has a similar grasp of the crucial problem of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.⁴⁰ According to him, the political regime of the Zhou dynasty was a feudalistic, pyramid-like system, in which the king ruled over princes, princes over lesser lords, and these lords over people in their fiefs. These fiefs are small in terms of both their sizes and their populations. On each level, one master ruled over a limited number of subjects, and this makes it possible for the master to rule through personal influence and personal contact. But this system was collapsing during the aforementioned periods, and traditional classes were disappearing. Due to wars and conquests, the rulers (former princes under the king of Zhou) had to rule directly over states that kept becoming larger and more populous, and the survival of these states depended upon their strength in wars. The Confucian solution to this problem is to re-establish the old, pyramid-like hierarchy. But the Confucian hierarchy is not based upon class by birth, but upon merit, (defined by the Confucians,) and upon a state that rules through its moral authority. In contrast, doing away with the hierarchy once and for all and keeping only one ruler, and being highly critical of the ineffectiveness and even counterproductive-ness of the Confucian reliance on morality, the Legalist tries to organize the state through the techniques of governance, such as an effective state machine and the use of laws and punishments. If we accept Feng’s account, the solution offered in the *Laozi*, de facto doing away with any

hierarchy (other than a barely known ruler) and condemning the “sharp weapons of state,” seems to be less realistic than both the Confucian solution and the Legalist one.

As is indicated in the above quotations, Han Fei Zi traces the root of the problem of “modernity” to natural population growth (against a fixed amount of natural resources). In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (The Second Discourse)*, Rousseau, a modern western thinker who has many ideas uncannily similar to those of the *Laozi*, goes even further, positing a hypothetical state of nature which exists even before human civil society emerges.⁴¹ In the state of nature, the life of savage man is solitary and easily self-sufficient. He is indolent and content, subject to few passions, and has sentiment and intellect suited to that state. He has no company and no need of his fellowmen, and has no means (language) to communicate with them even if they are together. No inventions, given the savage man’s lack of both intelligence and desires, are likely to be made. Even if they were made, they would perish with him without being communicated to others, “because he [the savage man] did not recognize even his children.”⁴² In such a state, with no one, or few, to emulate and with not even the means to communicate, which is the pre-condition for spreading tales of exotic lands, and desirable objects or conditions, the excessive desires of savage man could not be aroused and, in the case of sexual desires, “any woman is good for him.”⁴³ Therefore, if a human being could be put in this solitary state with no advanced means of communication, all the social ills and evils that result from, according to the *Laozi*, the deviation of human beings from the natural stage of innocence (lacking human knowledge) and the lack of rampant desires, would not arise, thus solving the above challenge to the practicality of the political teaching of the *Laozi*.

With this background in mind, I now propose that the *Laozi* might also recognize these problems and offer a realistic answer in Chapter 80. It reads:

(Let) there be a small state with few people.

Let there be ten times and a hundred times as many utensils.

But let them not be used.

Let the people take dying seriously and not migrate far.

Even if there are ships and carriages, none will ride in them.

Even if there are armor and weapons, none will display them.

Let the people again keep their records with knotted string.

Let them relish their food, beautify their clothing, be content with their homes, and delight in their customs.

Though neighboring states are within eyesight and crowing of cocks and barking of dogs can be heard,

Yet the people there may grow old and die without ever visiting one another.⁴⁴

Considering the *Laozi*'s possible multi-authorship or multi-editorship, its aphoristic style, and the fact that this chapter is the only one with the message of "a small state with few people," I can only offer some speculations in the following, if we adopt the interpretative hypothesis that the *Laozi* has a consistent political message to offer. This chapter might signal the recognition by the *Laozi* (or some of its early authors or editors) that the political teaching of non-action in the *Laozi*, even with its revisions (small actions and limited large actions), is not possible in a large, populous, and well-connected state. For this teaching to be possible, the state has to be small in size and population. Yet the civilized (Chinese) world at that time already had a relatively large

population, and the solution that is offered here is that this world has to be divided into many small states that do not communicate with each other. This is possible because each state is self-sufficient and, although written language is not completely abandoned, it is returned to a very primitive stage of using knotted string. Similarly, the Chinese world already had advanced technologies, but in these small states they are left unused and are likely to be forgotten over the years. The technologies for communication and transportation between states find no use in these small and isolated states, and the lack of a sophisticated written language further helps their disappearance. Similarly, technologies that can only be useful in a well-connected and large state also find no use, and probably could not be invented or maintained in a small state. Moreover, since each state described in Chapter 80 is small in size and population, the centralization of a large amount of wealth becomes extremely difficult. Such a concentration is a key to technological advances and increases in desires, for if great wealth can be monopolized in the hands of a few, there will be luxuries unimaginable by people from a society of relative equality; by setting an example, the rich will fuel material desires. This further leads to fierce competition and social unrest. Furthermore, the concentration of wealth is often a necessary condition for great technological advances and social projects that will lead to a further concentration of wealth and increased technological advances. Also, the lack of sophisticated written language will ensure accidental advances are likely to be forgotten in the next generation. Understood in this way, each of these small states becomes an enlarged version of Rousseau's savage man.

In short, what is described in Chapter 80 is not, as many believe, simply a description of the idealized agrarian society of ancient China or a mere ideal to restore,

but is rather the very condition needed for the non-action teaching of the *Laozi* to be possible as something comprehensive and constructive, rather than as a mere protest.

The classical He Shang Gong commentary, which is believed to be close to the Huang-Lao tradition that is focused on the political teachings of the *Laozi*, partly supports my reading. Its commentary on Chapter 80 clearly takes it as a genuine advice to rulers, not as a nostalgic longing for the pristine past. The title this commentary gives to Chapter 80, which is meant to sum up the gist of it, can be understood and translated as “independence,” “standing alone,” or “self-sufficiency” (*duli* 独立). The commentary on the very first line of Chapter 80 reads:

Even though the sages govern a large state, it is as though it were small. Being frugal they do not demand too much. Even though the people are numerous, it is as though they were few. The sage would not think of wearing them out.⁴⁵

Here the interpretation is not the same as mine. The state is already large and populous, and it is the sages who treat it as if it were small in size and few in population. My interpretation, in contrast, requires that this treatment by the sages be accompanied by an actual arrangement of small states.

Among contemporary commentators with whom I am familiar,⁴⁶ Schwartz is the only one who shares a similar understanding of the connection between the complexity of civilization and the size and population of the state, and of this issue’s significance to the interpretation of Chapter 80. After quoting this chapter in full, he writes:

This does not seem to be the description of a utopia of the primeval past. Clearly we are in a period when “advanced technology” is available. The sage-ruler, however, sees to it (lit. “causes” *shih*) that it is rejected. The sage realizes that the

complexity of the civilization is to some extent the function of size; therefore, he prescribes a “small community.” What the language suggests is not a spontaneously emerging “anarchist” state, but a state of affairs brought about by a sage-ruler.⁴⁷

Clearly, such a small state is still probably too advanced for Rousseau. It has, for example, a spoken language and a primitive written language. (According to Rousseau, the invention of language is a miraculous accident, and is pivotal to the fall of human beings from the stage of savages to that of civilized society ridden with evils.⁴⁸) Nevertheless, Rousseau himself seems to suggest that society is not necessarily bad.⁴⁹ Indeed, at the beginnings of society, in the form of family settlements, society maintains “a golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our vanity.” This stage “must have been the happiest and most durable epoch,” and man “must have come out of it by some fatal accident, which for the common good ought never have happened.” The culprits in this fatal development are agriculture and metallurgy. Compared to this ideal society, the small state described in Chapter 80 of the *Laozi* is already on its way down the road of no return, since it has not only a language, but also very likely agriculture and metallurgy as well. However, for Rousseau, language, agriculture, and metallurgy are bad because they promote rationality, communication, and dependence, all of which might have been effectively curtailed in the small state of the *Laozi*. Moreover, even Rousseau realizes that it is hopeless, or too radical, to go back to that perfect stage, as long as human beings have already been cursed with those fatal accidents.⁵⁰ Indeed, his moderate solution, as is suggested in his dedication of his *Second Discourse* “To the Republic of Geneva”, is exactly a small state with few people. Such a

state is not so rich as to be able to develop luxuries that will corrupt “solid virtues,” and is not so poor as to be not self-sufficient.⁵¹ Such a small state, like the one in the *Laozi*, resembles an enlarged savage man. Of course, Rousseau’s central concern is the protection of freedom and equality, and another crucial reason for the small size of his ideal state is that it has to consist of citizens who are like loving friends who have one and the same interest, so as to form a true republic based upon active citizenship.⁵² These features are not present in the small state of the *Laozi*.

The *Laozi*’s and Rousseau’s insight to the connection between the complexity of civilization and the size and population of the state seems to be borne out by some empirical studies. In Jared Diamond’s fascinating work, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, he, through the study of peoples on some isolated islands, concludes that

Human populations of only a few hundred people were unable to survive indefinitely in complete isolation. A population of 4,000 were able to survive for 10,000 years, but with significant cultural losses and significant failures to invent, leaving it with a uniquely simplified material culture.⁵³

His example of the Tasmanians is especially striking. With a population of 4,000, they *lost* the techniques and tools for fishing, and awls, needles, and other bone tools. There are many other very basic tools that they either were unable to invent independently, or lost.⁵⁴

It should be mentioned as well that many other points made by the *Laozi* and Rousseau do not fare so well empirically. The hypothesis that human beings started from lonesome savage men is a crucial reason that Rousseau found the invention of language so miraculous.⁵⁵ But this hypothesis is empirically dubious, because it is very likely that

human beings have always lived in groups. Empirical studies also show that the *Laozi*'s and Rousseau's romantic understanding of the peaceful primitive life is highly problematic, particularly in view of the fact that the state exists largely as an effective means to reduce violence.⁵⁶ Of course, the *Laozi*'s and Rousseau's accounts of the "state of nature," or of the ideal state, are not empirical, but normative. Yet the challenges from these empirical studies at least cast some doubt upon their *constructive* projects *as a whole*,⁵⁷ and remain relevant today because the views of many "humanists" and individualists can be traced back to the ideas of Rousseau and the *Laozi*.

For argument's sake, let us put aside the question of these systems' empirical merit, or their lack of it, and ask the following question: even if the "small states with few people" are normatively desirable, how do we return to the ideal stage of "small states with few people?" The Tasmanians returned to the state of "innocence" because their connection to other groups was cut off by rising water and they did not have the proper watercraft.⁵⁸ But the *Laozi*, as a work of political philosophy, needs to offer something less arbitrary than "let sea level rise!" As quoted above, Schwartz suggests that this return is brought about by a sage ruler. But such an action has to be heroic and drastic, assuming that the sage-ruler could somehow—nothing short of a miracle—obtain the power to lead such an action. Another possibility is that, after an extremely violent cycle, the huge and populous state may automatically collapse into small states with few people because all the deviants would kill each other off, and advancements fatal to the small state would be destroyed in the wake of this collapse. Then, with the conscious efforts of each state's sage ruler, or an overlord of all these states, the preferred cycle will be maintained indefinitely. After all, as the *Laozi* points out, "Violent winds do not last a

whole morning, And torrential rains do not last a whole day” (Chapter 23).⁵⁹ Moreover, in his commentary on the first four lines of Chapter 36, where the *Laozi* offers four tactics of the “subtle light,” among them “in order to destroy, it is necessary first to promote,” Wang Bi writes: “If you want to get rid of the strong and the violent, you have to use these four [tactics]. You follow the nature of things, destroying them by making them kill themselves, not by using punishments or being the strongest. This is indeed a subtle light.”⁶⁰ The suggestion here seems to be that, when the world is already in turmoil, a sage should “lay low,” waiting for great nature to get rid of the violent and the strong. This will occur because of the universal and descriptive principle of “returning is how the Dao moves.” Then, after the strong and violent destroy themselves, the sage should help to maintain the primitive state that emerges from the chaos, sometimes by applying small actions, and, less frequently, by applying large actions. The development of such a state will be of the preferred and normative cycle of “natural” movements.

To some extent, this “conspiracy” did happen in Chinese history. After seemingly endless wars and conquests during the Warring States, the most powerful and brutal state, the state of Qin, emerged victorious. It unified the Chinese world by using all the sharp weapons of the state, but this only led to its quick demise. The first few Han rulers that came after the Qin dynasty were said to follow the teaching of Huang-Lao, and adopted the policy of reducing the government’s role over civilian lives (*yuminxiuxi* 与民休息, “allowing the people to rest”⁶¹). The return to such policies has often been adopted after a violent cycle of dynastic transition.

If this interpretation holds, the political teachings of the *Laozi* play a significant part in Chinese civilization and culture. This should give us pause when we try to praise

or blame Confucianism, the alleged official ideology of ancient China, for all the good and bad things in Chinese history. For example, ancient Chinese culture was often said to belittle commerce. If this is true, which philosophical schools were responsible for this attitude? This is a serious question that cannot be addressed in this article, but I want to point out that the *Laozi* as well as the Legalist might have more reasons to discourage commerce than do the Confucians.

However, the success of the teachings of the *Laozi* is limited at best, for in ancient China Confucianism was heavily promoted and Legalist teachings were often covertly adopted. But even with the combined influence of all these schools of thought, China in its history seems not to be able to stay in the stage of de facto small states with few people. Wealth was gradually gathered into the hands of a few, inequality became intolerable, and finally devastating revolts broke out. One may argue that the Han and the dynasties that followed it, although unified, large, and populous, often consisted of small villages that fit the description of the small states in Chapter 80 of the *Laozi*. These small villages are isolated and do not trade or communicate with each other. Most of their people are illiterate, and inventions, if made, would be forgotten in the next generation. But this conception of Chinese history is highly problematic.⁶² There might have been villages resembling those described in Chapter 80, but they were few and far between. Most likely any such village could only exist in places with forbidding topography, or in times when all social order had broken down, such as at the end of the Eastern Han. But in the Western Han period and in much of the Eastern Han period, for example, the economy was highly developed, and market exchanges played an important role. Such an economy drove production beyond the primary grain agriculture and the

satisfaction of a family's own needs. Innovations and machines were widely adopted by rich families.⁶³

If these points already cast doubt on the possibility of a large state staying indefinitely in the stage of de facto small states with few people, these doubts will become even stronger in the contemporary globalized world. Indeed, two essential pillars of modernity, mass education and commerce, are exactly what the *Laozi* and Rousseau would consider impediments to realizing their moderate proposal. As Lau points out,

If the Taoist philosopher could have visited our society, there is no doubt that he would have considered popular education and mass advertising the twin banes of modern life. The one causes the people to fall from their original state of innocent ignorance; the other creates new desires for objects no one would have missed if they had not been invented.⁶⁴

Is there still hope for the teachings of the *Laozi* to be adopted comprehensively and constructively? One possibility is that human desires will drive us to total destruction, after which we will be returned to a primitive stage of small states with few people (or even with no people at all), fulfilling the *Laozi*'s universal and descriptive principle of the "eternal return." But if one does not buy this kind of apocalyptic idea, the teachings of the *Laozi* can at best serve as mere correctives for modern excesses, barring the possibility that human beings as a whole miraculously choose to become Daoists. But as Lau points out, the very conditions of modernity run contrary to the basic tenets of the *Laozi*. This sheer contradiction between the corrective and the corrected casts doubt on the effectiveness of the corrective, and even if these tenets could lead to some reforms, the result would still be in conflict with the basic teachings of the *Laozi*, as

long as it remains only a reform and not a complete revolution.⁶⁵ With all this in mind, the strong apolitical attitude found in the *Zhuangzi* seems to become an attractive alternative. As Schwartz points out, Zhuang Zi understood the difficulties in the teachings of the *Laozi*, and therefore dropped the “primitivist” critique of civilization completely, replacing it with an “all-enveloping historical fatalism.”⁶⁶ In other words, the *Zhuangzi*⁶⁷ de-politicizes the *Laozi*. The *Zhuangzi* contains no serious political proposal to solve problems of its times, but only shows how the Daoist elite can obtain happiness by avoiding the hopeless world and enjoying individual freedom with the Zhuangzian “enlightenment.” Clearly, it is far easier to follow the teachings of the *Laozi* in one’s private and personal life; that is, in Zhuang Zi’s apolitical way. After all, one person is able to “lay low” and to avoid concourse with the deviants of the world, whereas contact with them is inevitable for the ruler of a large, populous, and well-connected state.

One last speculative point I would like to make is this: as we see, there is an uncanny similarity between Rousseau, a modern thinker, and the *Laozi*, a classical text of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. This similarity may come from an even deeper similarity between the problems with which they dealt. As I mentioned, part of the problem of China in that period is the collapse of the feudal system, including class distinctions by birth. With population growth and technological development, such as the spread of the use of iron, a culprit for Rousseau in the decline of human species, large-sized and populous states emerged. In these states, traditional social distinctions were disappearing and people became relatively equal and began to have far closer connections with each other.⁶⁸ These were the same developments that took place in Europe during

the transition to modernity, and have culminated in today's globalized, democratized, and democratizing society. This might lead to a profound question: what is the nature of modernity? What distinguishes it from antiquity? If we acknowledge the above similarities, we may conclude that what China experienced during that period (before the common era!) is a kind of transition from antiquity to "modernity," a precursor to the European transition that happened more than a thousand years later. Of course, the Chinese transition is not so drastic. After all, the agricultural and metallurgical revolutions might not be as powerful as the industrial one, and traditional Chinese local communities may have been not as closely connected as European communities in the modernization and globalization period. The Chinese classical thinkers, such as Confucius, the author(s) of the *Laozi*, and Han Fei Zi, also did not have the same egalitarian zeal and firm belief in the power of reason as did the Enlightenment thinkers. Still, these similarities might be what give the "hundred schools" of the Chinese world of the Chinese classical period and contemporary studies of them, their modern relevance.

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¹ I wish to thank Yong Huang, Keith Knapp, Franklin Perkins, Jiang Qian, Timothy Quinn, Robert Rethy, Richard Velkley, and the anonymous reviewers for reading an earlier draft of this paper, giving me encouragements, and offering me extremely helpful comments.

² I wish to thank Yong Huang, Keith Knapp, Franklin Perkins, Jiang Qian, Timothy Quinn, Robert Rethy, Richard Velkley, and the anonymous reviewers for reading an earlier draft of this paper, giving me encouragements, and offering me extremely helpful comments.

³ The authorship or editorship of the *Laozi* and the period in which it was written, edited, or completed are controversial issues. This is why I use “the *Laozi*” instead of “Laozi” to avoid the first issue. Instead of attributing its apparent discrepancies to multiple-authorship or –editorship, I shall investigate whether we can offer a coherent reading of it with regard to its political philosophy. Similarly, I shall treat the *Analects* in a similar manner, that is, as a text with a coherent political message. This is how these Chinese classics have been treated by many philosophically oriented commentators throughout history. On the second issue, the thesis of this article does not depend upon an accurate date of the completion of the *Laozi* other than the general periods of late Spring and Autumn and Warring States.

⁴ Liu 1998, p. 211

⁵ Liu 1998, pp. 211-2.

⁶ I use the statement by Liu in this paper because it nicely catches the gist of this common misunderstanding. However, in his later, and far more comprehensive work (Liu 2006, pp. 235-42 and 398-405), he himself criticizes this misunderstanding, and points out similarities and subtle differences between the *Laozi*'s and Confucius's understandings of non-action and naturalness, although I do not always agree with his comparisons and contrasts in this later work. He also insists that the idea of non-action was originally from the *Laozi* (ibid., p. 236), a statement contradictory to the views that shall be offered in the following. Apparently, the issue of the origin of the idea of non-action depends upon the dating of the *Analects* and the *Laozi*, but it is not important for this paper to take a side on this issue.

⁷ Numbered 15.4 in Chan 1969 and 15.5 in Ames and Rosemont 1998.

⁸ The translations of the *Analects* and the *Laozi* in this paper are from Chan 1969, unless otherwise noted. Benjamin Schwartz points out that there might have been a historically contingent factor—Shun being between a more active predecessor Yao and a more active successor Yü—that facilitates Shun's taking no actions (Schwartz 1985, p. 189).

⁹ Ames and Rosemont 1998, p. 262, note 259; see also Schwartz 1985, p. 190. Schwartz then points out that the Daoist emphasis on non-action is a sharp reaction to the Moists (Schwartz 1985, pp. 190-1), whereas Herrlee Creel suggests it is a reaction to the Legalists (Creel 1970, p. 69).

¹⁰ Chan 1969, p. 22.

¹¹ Chan 1969, p. 47, footnote 175.

¹² Confucius is silent about whether human beings are by nature good or bad, and Mencius, whose view became dominant especially among the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties, clearly states that human beings are by nature good (in a Confucian sense), or have the natural tendency to become good. In other words, Mencius's view of human nature poses a sharper contrast to that of the *Laozi*.

¹³ It should be pointed out that Confucius's own attitude toward *Tian* (heaven or nature) is sometimes ambivalent. See, for example, 11.9 of the *Analects*.

¹⁴ It may be helpful to distinguish two senses of "natural" here. First, when we say human beings have certain natural tendencies, we use the term "natural" in the sense of "being born with." Second, when we say rulers do not take (unnatural) actions and thus rule naturally, we use the term "natural" in the sense of "effortless" (I thank Yong Huang for pointing out this distinction to me). In fact, Edward Slingerland uses "effortless actions" to interpret the Chinese term *wuwei* 无为 in the aforementioned passage, 15.5 of the *Analects* (I thank Keith Knapp for pointing this out to me). He also points out that there are two distinctive lines of interpretations of this term. One, beginning with He Yan 何晏, understands this term as "institutional *wuwei*;" i.e., the ruler does not need to do anything but "fill his ministerial posts with able people and effectively set the machinery of government in motion," and "the state will more or less run itself." But, as is shown in our discussion here, this understanding comes dangerously close to the Legalist understanding of *wuwei*. From the "general drift of the *Analects*," Slingerland prefers the other reading that this term means ruling by virtue. Zhu Xi 朱熹 bridges the two readings by maintaining that the sage rules by virtue and by attracting the right people to fill the various offices (Slingerland 2006, pp. 118-9). Since for Mencius and the Neo-Confucians human beings are born to be good, the various senses of "natural" ("born with" and "effortless" in its two senses) converge.

¹⁵ Ivanhoe 1999, pp. 249-50.

¹⁶ My translation. To be clear, a crucial character here is *fan* 反, which literally means “to oppose.” There can be other interpretations of this character, and I am adopting the meaning of “return” in this paper. I thank Jiang Qian for reminding me of this interpretative problem.

¹⁷ Liu 1998, p. 222.

¹⁸ Liu’s term “humanistic naturalness” (人文自然) seems to mean naturalness in the normative sense (Liu 2006, pp. 509-510). (I thank Yong Huang for pointing this out to me.) By insisting that naturalness of the *Laozi* means humanistic naturalness, he denies the descriptive (“objective”) use of this concept in the *Laozi*, while I think that the *Laozi* uses it in both senses.

¹⁹ To be clear, to call this understanding descriptive does not mean that it has no normative implications. For example, one may loosen his or her attachment to material goods and worldly glories if he or she realizes that things come and go.

²⁰ Lau 1963, p. xxiv.

²¹ There is a further challenge to the “hold onto the roots” proposal throughout the *Laozi*. That is, a crucial message of the *Laozi* is that opposites arise together, “produce” each other, and depend upon each other (Chapter 2). This is why, to stop the evils in the world, we have to stop the good, either defined by the Confucians, the Moists, or any other philosophical schools. Otherwise, the evils will always be produced by the good. That is, we have to abolish all distinctions. But by insisting on holding onto the roots, on choosing “this” over “that” (Chapter 12), the *Laozi* is facing a serious challenge: would this introduce another set of distinctions between good (roots, “this”) and evil (“that”)? In this regard, the message in Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* seems to be more consistent in that it denounces thoroughly the distinction between “this” and “that,” and denounces even its own denunciations; it also does not offer a lesson of “holding onto the weak.”

²² Rousseau 1964, pp. 46-7.

²³ Chan 1969, p. 157.

²⁴ 6.21 in Ames and Rosemont 1998 and 6.19 in Chan 1969.

²⁵ I thank Yong Huang and Franklin Perkins for pushing me to clarify this point.

²⁶ Schwartz 1985, pp. 207-8.

²⁷ Liu 1999, p. 222.

²⁸ The translation is from Ames and Hall 2003, 193. There are some differences between the Wang Bi 王弼 version and the Bo Shu 帛书 A and B versions. For an English translation of the former, see Chan 1969, 173-4; of the latter, see Ames and Hall 2003, 193. For a Chinese collection of both, see Chen 2003, 328 (the Wang Bi version), 405-406 (the Bo Shu A version), and 421 (the Bo Shu B version). Ames and Hall 2003 also offers a good discussion of the problems with this chapter in their commentary on it (pp. 193-4). I will address a paradox they are discussing in this commentary later in this section and in the next section.

²⁹ That is, not those who are forced into crimes by tyrannical and lustful rulers.

³⁰ Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 193-4.

³¹ The translation is from Ames and Hall, p. 193.

³² See also Chapter 58, where it is stated that no one knows the limit or the end of the cycle of good fortunes and bad fortunes.

³³ Another, perhaps more profound reason, is the mutual production of opposite pairs. See Note 19.

³⁴ Chan 1999, pp. 97-100.

³⁵ Wang, p. 21.

³⁶ Given this historical background, Liu's claim that "Obviously, classical Taoist naturalness had no need to deal with radical social change or severe competition" needs some serious explanation (Liu 1998, p. 223). One can argue that the *Laozi* is aimed at the root cause of all the social ills, and the only solution that does not solve one problem by creating another is that of the *Laozi*. In this sense, the *Laozi*'s solution is similar to that of Chinese medicine in treating diseases (I thank Yong Huang for making this point to me). However, this defense does not address the problem of the viability of the *Laozi*'s solution when social ills become rampant.

³⁷ My translation (based upon Han, pp. 339-40). For another English translation, see Watson 1964, p. 97

³⁸ My translation (Han, 342); c.f. Watson 1964, p. 101

³⁹ Strangely enough, Han Fei Zi seems to appreciate the *Laozi* much more than he appreciates other thinkers, evidenced by the fact that there are two chapters in the *Han Fei Zi* that present the commentaries on the *Laozi* in a very favorable light (Chapters 20 and 21). This problem is beyond the scope of this

article. For an illuminating discussion of the connection between the *Laozi*, the Huang-Lao school, and the Legalist, see Schwartz 1985, pp. 237-54.

⁴⁰ Fung 1966, pp. 155-7 and pp. 164-5.

⁴¹ For this state being hypothetical rather than historical or factual, see, for example, Rousseau 1964, p. 103.

⁴² Rousseau 1964, p. 137.

⁴³ Rousseau 1964, p. 135

⁴⁴ My translation.

⁴⁵ Ames and Hall 2003, p. 201, with a minor revision by me. For the original Chinese text, see Wang 1993, pp. 302-6.

⁴⁶ See the works on the *Laozi* listed in the Reference.

⁴⁷ Schwartz 1985, pp. 212-3.

⁴⁸ Rousseau 1964, pp. 119-22.

⁴⁹ Rousseau 1964, pp. 150-2.

⁵⁰ Rousseau 1964, pp. 201-3.

⁵¹ Rousseau 1964, p. 84.

⁵² Rousseau 1964, pp. 78-9.

⁵³ Diamond 1999, p. 313. I thank Jiang Qian for bringing this point to my attention.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵⁵ I thank Jiang Qian for making this point to me.

⁵⁶ See Diamond, *ibid.*, pp. 265-292 and Wrangham 2004 (I thank Jiang Qian for bringing these studies to my attention). Most shockingly, Wrangham points out that, for example, during the twentieth century, Russia, Germany, and Japan each experienced rates of war death that were less than half the average rate of pre-state hunter-gatherer societies (*ibid.*, p. 30). Incidentally, according to Diamond, the threshold below which everyone in a society can know everyone else is several hundred, and it is only in such a small society that conflict can be mediated without a separate authority. When the threshold is crossed, violence can only be effectively controlled by a centralized authority that monopolizes force (*ibid.*, p. 286). If this is true, Rousseau owes us an explanation for how Geneva, a city of (far) more than a few hundred people, could truly be an individualistic and egalitarian republic.

⁵⁷ I emphasize the qualifications “constructive” and “as a whole” because I wish to leave room for acknowledging their powerful critiques of civilizations.

⁵⁸ Diamond 1999, p. 312.

⁵⁹ English translation from Ames and Hall 2003, p. 111.

⁶⁰ Wang, p. 21, my translation.

⁶¹ I thank Keith Knapp for helping me with the translation of this term.

⁶² The following description of the norm of Chinese society is based upon a private communication between me and Keith Knapp. I am grateful to him for helping me to get the history right.

⁶³ See Ma 1997 and Hsu 1980.

⁶⁴ Lau 1963, p. xxxi.

⁶⁵ For a different evaluation, see Liu 1998 (especially pp. 233-4) and 1999 (especially pp. 223-6). To be clear, my paper only challenges the consistency, adequacy, and viability of the *Laozi*'s political teachings as a whole. Such a challenge does not mean that this work does not contain powerful and profound critiques of civilizations. Personally, I believe it does contain such critiques.

⁶⁶ Schwartz 1985, p. 188 and pp. 229-33.

⁶⁷ To be precise, we should say certain passages, especially the relatively authentic inner chapters, in the *Zhuangzi*.

⁶⁸ According to Rousseau, this development actually led to inequality.