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## Persuasion Through the Water Metaphor in Dao De Jing

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### Persuasion through the Water Metaphor in *Dao De Jing*\*

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#### Abstract

This paper analyzes how Lao Zi uses the water metaphor in *Dao De Jing* to transform meanings of *Dao* from the metaphysical level to social and behavioral levels. Through the water metaphor *Dao* is unified into three concepts: *Zhi xu* (attainment of complete vacuity), *yong rou* (softness/weakness), and *chu xia* (subordination)/*bu zheng* (non-competition). Judging from the rhetorical perspective the water metaphor used by Lao Zi not only frames a unifying image of *Dao* by creating a shared meaning among the public mind, but also helps people capture the real picture of the society and further persuade them to adopt a new way of thinking. In this sense, as a persuasive rhetor, Lao Zi successfully demonstrates that the metaphor, as a linguistic tool of expression, is a powerful means of transmitting and elaborating an intended meaning of a metaphysical concept.

#### Introduction

As one of the three major systems of thought in China, Daoism, along with Confucianism and Buddhism, continues to permeate Chinese life and affect cultures of the Far East. Indeed, because most of the principal concepts in traditional Chinese philosophy originate in Daoism, a number of scholars (e.g., Chen, 1999) hold that philosophical Daoism, based on Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, is in fact the main stream of Chinese philosophy. Daoism not only transcends Confucianism in scope and depth, but also serves as a bridge via which Buddhism could be assimilated into Chinese culture.

The influence of Daoism on Chinese life is not merely because of its status as a philosophical tradition, according to Ge (1991) and Nagel (1994), Daoism continues to be a key to understanding many aspects of contemporary Chinese culture, including the rhythm of daily life, medical practice, personal cultivation, *qi kong*, the spirit of literature, architecture, painting, business management, military strategy, agricultural methods, and environmental protection. Because of its distinct naturalistic and humanistic orientation, Daoism is “an important part of the backbone of every aspect of Chinese civilization” (Chan, 1963, p. 3). So extensive is its impact that “Taoist thinking is deep in the heart of every

Chinese... Every Chinese body has at least more or less a cell of Lao-Tzu" (Yu, 1989, p. 1). To know Daoism and its influence on East Asian culture is therefore an important way to reach cross-cultural understanding between the Far East and the West.

There have been numerous studies of philosophical Daoism in the areas of literature, philosophy, and religion. Scholars in communication studies have begun to provide new perspectives for exploring Daoism, especially from the rhetorical perspective, contributing new insight into the nature of communication (Combs, 2000, in this issue; Crawford, 1996, 1997, in press; Holt, in press; Holt, Chang, & Steingard, 1990; Holt & Steingard, 1990; Jensen, 1987, 1992; Lu, 1998, in this issue; Oliver, 1961; Xiao, in this issue). This paper extends these lines of research by examining how Lao Zi employs the water metaphor as a persuasive tool in *Dao De Jing* for the purpose of reforming social life.

### Metaphor

The metaphor is the most fundamental form of figurative language. Figurative language differs from literal usage because of its assumption that "terms literally connected with one object can be transferred to another object... with the aim of achieving a new, wider, 'special' or more precise meaning" (Hawkes, 1972, p. 2). Metaphor, broadly conceived, is simply the linguistic process in which one thing is seen in terms of something else. According to Bednar and Himeline (1982), metaphors serve three major functions: expression, perception influencing, and learning. The metaphor, as a linguistic tool for expression, is a powerful means of conveying, relating, transmitting, and elaborating an intended meaning. Metaphors "stretch literal expressions by supplying language with flexibility, expressibility, and a method by which to expand" (Billow, 1977, p. 81).

The metaphor, as a language device, also affects what we perceive and how we perceive the world. The metaphorical utterance functions as a way to view and understand (Loewenberg, 1975). The use of metaphors guides and integrates human experience by providing the target, focus, and reference fixation necessary to perceive and interpret the often seemingly tangled external world (Boyd, 1979; Hawkes, 1972). Brown (1976) and Morgan (1980) point out that metaphors not only frame an image of reality and provide focus, but also reframe and create new perceptions of reality. This perception-reframing process "provides a release from old, entrenched interpretations, and a breaking away from conventional or traditional modes of thinking and behaving" (Bednar & Himeline, 1982, p. 12).

Moreover, Hawkes (1972) notes that the metaphor is a vital part of the

learning process, presenting, retaining, recollecting, and extending information and knowledge. It is a tool for “capturing and dealing with what is perceived to be out there” (Morgan, 1980, p. 610). The learning function serves to confirm, validate, sanction, endorse and authenticate specific thoughts and behavior, and in turn it “evokes a particular structuring of beliefs and emotions” (Edelman, 1971, p. 61).

Edelman (1972) employs the above functions of metaphors to explain political events, asserting that metaphors perform “a crucial function by creating shared meanings, perceptions, and reassurances among mass publics” (p. 65). The symbolic use of political language, therefore, can be a tool to increase the effectiveness of rhetorical persuasion. Martin and Martin (1984) point out that a persuasive political metaphor can create unifying images, and can be used to reason with audiences, reinforcing symbolic images and creating participatory roles.

Examining *Dao De Jing*, we realize that its author takes on the role of an effective rhetor who uses the water metaphor to delineate the meaning of *Tao*, which becomes the cardinal concept to persuade readers to accept his arguments about the best way to change chaotic social conditions. Through the use of the water metaphor in *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi conveys the meaning of *Dao* and helps people perceive the entangled circumstances of society, where language works inevitably to imprison communicators (Holt, in press). Lao Zi not only uses the water metaphor to make rhetorical points and create a unifying image of *Dao* for the time in which he lived, but also successfully evokes a structuring of political and philosophical beliefs to be used in dealing with social disorder during and after that turbulent period. In this sense, water becomes the “root metaphor” through which a whole set of conceptual schemes about *Dao* can be induced (Allan, 1997). Water, as an analogy for *Tao*, patterns these conceptual schemes into more concrete and understandable categories which function at both the social and social-behavioral levels. Thus, as an empirically observable phenomenon, water invokes a structure that helps people come to grips with the thought in *Dao De Jing*. This paper analyzes how Lao Zi, in *Dao De Jing*, uses the metaphor of water to expound ideas about *Dao* for the purpose of persuasion.

### **The Man, the Book, and the *Dao***

Although none of the important facts about Lao Zi and *Dao De Jing* can be completely confirmed by historians, the prevailing belief is that Lao Zi was a curator of the archives in Loyang, capital of the Zhou dynasty (Chan, 1963). The book, originally called “*Lao Zi*,” was composed in the latter part of the Warring States period (403—222 B.C.). It was named *Dao De Jing* (“*The Classic of the Way and its Virtue*”) in the Former Han Period (206 B.C.—8 A.D.), becoming a

classic of Chinese philosophy. Depending on which version of the text is consulted, *Dao De Jing* contains between 5,227 and 5,722 words, and is often known colloquially as “*Lao Zi’s little book of 5,000 words.*” The book is divided into two parts, *Dao Jing*, containing 37 short “chapters,” and *De Jing*, with 44 chapters.

While *Dao De Jing* is considered a book of mysticism because it asserts that understanding *Dao* is beyond words, it also deals with philosophical issues such as ontology, ethics, and cosmology (Blakney, 1983; Huang, 1981). The book mainly treats *Dao* as the vital source and reality of the world, and delineates the application of *Dao* to human life (Chang, 1966; Fang, 1981; Lao, 1991).

*Dao* is a cardinal concept of most of the schools of traditional Chinese philosophy. It originally meant “the Way,” connoting social and moral meanings to be taken as a path or a road, and then later used to refer also to method, truth, principle, and reality (Chan, 1963; Watts, 1975). However, Lao Zi also extends the meaning of *Dao* to the realm of the metaphysical. As Fung (1983) notes, in Lao-tzu, “... we find the word *tao* being given a metaphorical meaning. That is to say, the assumption is made that for the universe to have come to being, there must exist an all-embracing first principle, which is called *tao*” (p. 177). Fang (1981) points out that the meaning for *Dao* Lao Zi intends to delineate in *Dao De Jing* can be classified as four perspectives: ontological, cosmo-genetical, phenomenological, and characterological.

Ontologically, *Dao* is the fathomless unity, the fundamental root, the great form, the unique pattern, and the final destiny of all beings, including heaven and earth, with invisible shape, as Lao Zi indicates, “The *Tao* that can be told of is not the eternal *Tao*; the name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; the named is the mother of all things” (chap. 1). This vacuous, fathomless unity of *Dao* is inexhaustible. “*Tao* is empty. It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted. It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things” (chap. 4), and it is the origin of the myriad things of the world: “It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it *Tao*” (chap. 25).

Cosmo-genetically, *Dao* exerts an all-pervasive function, exerting powerful energy by existing in the transcendental realm of Nothingness and progressing in a dynamical process of transformation. *Dao* is the all-embracing, spontaneous generative principle of the universe. The spirit of *Dao* is like a river constantly running in a valley, “The spirit of the valley (*Tao*) never dies—It is continuous, and seems to be always existing. Use it and you will never wear it out” (chap. 6). It is profound and obscure, but it forms the essence of the cosmos:

The thing that is called *Tao* is elusive 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... How do I

know that the beginnings of all things are so? Through this (*Tao*). (chap. 21)

Moreover, Lao Zi argues that the movement of *Dao* is the reverse of ordinary direction; for example, weakness is considered strength, as mentioned in chapter 40: “Reversion is the action of *Tao*. Weakness is the function of *Tao*.” Phenomenologically, on the one hand, the natural attributes of *Dao* express in the form of eternity inherent in *Dao* itself. Fang (1981) indicates that *Dao*’s natural attributes include its inseparable character; actionless completion; the begetting and energizing of all things without claiming origination and merit; accomplishment of the universe with detachment; non-dominating support of all things; and creation without possession. For example, “*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (chap. 37); and again, “*Tao* is hidden and nameless. Yet it is *Tao* alone that skillfully provides for all and brings them to perfection” (chap. 41):

The *Tao* produces One. The One produced the two. The two produced the three. And the three produced the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry the *yin* and embrace the *yang*, and through the blending of the material force they achieve harmony. (chap. 42)

On the other hand, Lao Zi argues that *Dao* is characterized with arbitrary attributes that include greatness, abstruseness, vacuity, invisibility, inaudibility, namelessness, shapelessness, and fathomlessness. All these attributes can be affirmed by a person’s subjective viewpoint and the use of human language. “We look at it (*Tao*) 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. These three cannot be further inquired into, and hence merge into one” (chap. 14). In fact, because of its omnipresence and its function as the sources of all existence, *Dao* is indescribable and unnameable—it can only be perceived.

Although the nameless *Dao* is simple and looks insignificant, it cannot be overcome. “*Tao* is eternal and has no name. Though its simplicity seems insignificant, none in the world can master it” (chap. 32). Another reason *Dao* cannot be overcome is that there is nothing that resembles it, “All the world says that my *Tao* is great and does not seem to resemble (the ordinary). It is precisely because it is great that it does not resemble (the ordinary). If it did resemble, it would have been small for a long time” (chap. 67).

Finally, according to the characterological perspective, the supreme excellence of *Dao* is reflected in the integrity of the sage. The sage, possessing the full spirit of *Dao*, becomes its exemplar in human society by restoring people to perfection, “The sage embraces the One and becomes the model of the world” (chap. 22), and “... acts, but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it. He has no desire to display his excellence” (chap. 77). The reflection of *Dao* in the sage is also

illustrated in the following chapter:

Therefore the sage manages affairs without action and spreads doctrines without words. All things arise, and he does not turn away from them. He produces them but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. (chap. 2)

To summarize, the meaning of *Dao*, based on Lao Zi's arguments in *Dao De Jing*, can be described as "the substance of the cyclic and dynamic universe. It (*Tao*) seems empty but full, static but dynamic; it contain spiritual and materialistic attributes, time and space; and it produces and regulates activities of all beings" (Chang, 1977, p. 27).

### **Water Metaphor and the Unifying Image of *Dao***

In Chinese history the Warring States period of the Zhou dynasty was characterized by continuous fighting, greed, and discontent among the people. As a philosopher, Lao Zi strove, as others have, to reform society through developing an ideal state. To Lao Zi, this ideal state would be small, isolated, and simple:

Let there be a small country with few people... Let the people again knot cords and use them. Let them... be content with their homes, and delight in their customs. Though neighboring communities overlook one another and the crowing of cocks and barking of dogs can be heard, yet the people there may grow old and die without ever visiting one another. (chap. 80)

To achieve this goal, Lao Zi establishes a philosophical system, based on the metaphysical perspective of *Dao*, that can be used for three purposes: (1) to reprove the rulers' inhumane treatment of the people; (2) to teach and persuade people to understand the predicament of the society; and (3) to provide suggestions for necessary improvements in order to reach an ideal society (Liu, 1970; Wang, 1991).

The question is: How could Lao Zi transform the meaning of *Dao* from the metaphysical level to social and behavioral levels to fulfill these three purposes in reforming society? Xiao (in this issue) indicates that the rhetorical construction of discourse in *Dao De Jing* consists mainly of three complementary methods: negation, paradox, and analogy/metaphor. Among these, the metaphor has been a rhetorical technique used repeatedly in classical Chinese literary and historical texts (Lu, in this issue). The use of metaphor is especially common in *Dao De Jing* as Lao Zi tries to render *Dao* into concrete terms, easily observed and understood by the common people.

Although Lao Zi uses several effective metaphors for *Dao*, including the infant, the female, the valley, and the uncarved block (Chan, 1963, p. 13), one of



the most flexible and powerful metaphors is that of water: “The best is like water. Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them. It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain. This is why it is so near to *Tao*” (chap. 8). Elsewhere, Lao Zi also observes, “*Tao* in the world may be compared to rivers and streams running into the sea” (chap. 32); and “The Great *Tao* flows [like water] everywhere. It may go left or right. All things depend on it for life” (chap. 34). As Chan (1963) notes, “Water is perhaps the most outstanding among Lao Tzu’s symbols for *Tao*” (p. 113).

Analyzing the content of *Dao De Jing*, we find that Lao Zi uses the water metaphor to unify the image of *Dao* by means of three conceptual schemes: *Zi xu* (attainment of complete vacuity), *yong rou* (softness/weakness), and *chu xia* (subordination)/*bu zheng* (non-competition).

#### ***Zhi Xu* (Attainment of Complete Vacuity)**

According to Lao Zi, the highest state of *Dao* is to “attain complete vacuity” (chap. 16) which functions as the wellspring of all life, as indicated in various chapters, “Therefore in the government of the sage, he keeps their (the people’s) hearts vacuous” (chap. 3); “*Tao* is empty. It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted” (chap. 4); and “What is most full seems to be empty; but its usefulness is inexhaustible” (chap. 45).

To attain complete vacuity refers one must return to the root through tranquility (Chan, 1963; Chang, 1977). For example, “Attain complete vacuity. Maintain steadfast quietude. All things come into being, and I see thereby their return. All things flourish, but each one returns to its root” (chap. 16); and “Reversion is the action of *Tao*... All things in the world come from being. And being comes from non-being” (chap. 40).

In order to reach a state of vacuity Lao Zi recommends that one emulate water, because water resembles *Dao* which possesses attributes of vacuous, heart, usefulness, selflessness, inexhaustibility, and non-competition, “The best is like water. Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them. It dwells in [lowly] places that all disdain. This is why it is so near to *Tao*” (chap. 8); and

All things depend on it [water] for life, and it does not turn away from them. It accomplishes its task, but does not claim credit for it. It clothes and feeds all things but does not claim to be master over them... Therefore [the sage] never strives himself for the great, and thereby the great is achieved. (chap. 34)

Three methods of attaining *zhi xu* specified in *Dao De Jing* are: *wu wei* (actionless action), *wu yu* (non-desire), and *wu shen* (non-self). As will become clear, each of these methods is made understandable through the metaphor of water.

**Wu Wei (Actionless Action).** According to Lao Zi, the purposeful action of rulers often creates serious problems for the state. Too much action violates the law of nature and damages people and society:

The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people will be. The more sharp weapons the people have, the more troubled the state will be. The more cunning and skill man possesses, the more vicious things will appear. The more law and orders are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers there will be. (chap. 57)

Further, “They (people) are difficult to rule because their ruler does too many things” (chap. 75). Therefore, “Not to know the eternal (*Tao*) is to act blindly to result in disaster” (chap. 16), and “He who acts on it (the empire) harms it. He who holds on to it loses it” (chap. 29). Knowledge results in having social and political institutions artificially designed to satisfy human desire. Although such institutions regulate human life, their purposeful actions are contrary to the natural course of the universe, bringing harm and leading to disaster. Ironically, social institutions are sources, not of order, but of disorder, producing the opposite of what was intended (Fung, 1983).

To correct the problem caused by the purposeful action, one has to practice “actionless action” by not taking purposive and excessive action, as explained by Lao Zi in these passages, “Therefore the sage manages affairs without action and spreads doctrines without words” (chap. 2); “When one desires to take over the empire and act on it, I see that he will not succeed. The empire is a spiritual thing, and should not be acted on” (chap. 29); “Through this I know the advantage of taking no action. Few in the world can understand the teaching without words and the advantage of taking no action” (chap. 43); and “An empire is often brought to order by having no activity” (chap. 48).

However, Lao Zi explains that this actionless activity is not simply “doing nothing.” Instead, it follows the way of Nature like water, “Man models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after *Tao*. And *Tao* models itself after nature” (chap. 25). Wang (1971) calls *wu wei* the “supreme good and of orderly movement” (p. 4). Natural action (that is, actionless action) eventually causes the completion of the task, “By acting without action, all things will be in order” (chap. 3); “They (rulers) accomplish their task. Nevertheless their people say that they simply follow Nature” (chap. 17); and “*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (chap. 37). Actors in all these situations are like water moving naturally here and there, doing nothing purposefully but accomplishing important tasks—water, merely by following the flow of nature, cleans all which is dirty, as well as enriching and nurturing all existence (Li, 1992).

Chang (1977) further argues that Lao Zi’s *wu wei* in fact encourages people

to act. For instance, Lao Zi says: "When the highest type of men hear *Tao*, they diligently practice it" (chap. 41). Moreover, "He who knows the white and yet keeps to the black becomes the model of the world... He who knows glory but keeps to humility becomes the valley of the world" (chap. 28); "In order to contract, it is necessary first to expand. In order to weaken, it is necessary first to strengthen. In order to destroy, it is necessary first to promote. In order to grasp, it is necessary first to give (chap. 36); and "Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small" (chap. 63). Such words as "practice," "keeps," "expand," "strengthen," "promote," "give," "prepare," and "deal," indicate taking action. Nevertheless, all these actions must be as natural as running water and leave no trace.

A good traveler leaves no track or trace. A good speech leaves no flaws. A good reckoner uses no counters. A well-shut door needs no bolts, and yet it cannot be opened. A well-tied knot needs no rope and yet none can untie it. (chap. 27)

Water cleans and evaporates completely; it performs all kinds of functions and benefits myriad things, yet never claims credit (Li, 1992).

**Wu Yu (Non-Desire).** Desire is the source of the kind of purposeful action that leads to calamity, "The five colors cause one's eyes to be blind. The five tones cause one's ears to be deaf. The five flavors cause one's palate to be spoiled. Racing and hunting cause one's mind to be mad" (chap. 12); and "There is no calamity greater than lavish desires. There is no greater guilt than discontentment. And there is no greater disaster than greed" (chap. 46). Therefore, *Dao De Jing* teaches, one should reduce selfishness and avoid desire. When people are free from desire, the goal of *Dao* is reached: "Being free of desires, it is tranquil. And the world will be at peace of its own accord" (chap. 37); and "I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple" (chap. 57).

According to Lao Zi, contentment is the principal way to reduce desire. The teaching of contentment is no doubt a reaction against the struggle for fame, wealth, and personal gain that plagued social and political life in the Lao Zi's time. Contentment means knowing when and where to stop. Although contentment might produce negative effects, such as discouraging progress and advancement, it is different from renunciation (Chan, 1963). Lao Zi explains, "He who is contented is rich" (chap. 33); "He who is contented suffers no disgrace. He who knows when to stop is free from danger. Therefore he can long endure" (chap. 44); and "He who is contented with contentment is always contented" (chap. 46).

Contentment resembles Confucian doctrine of moderation which is based on discarding "the extremes, the extravagant, and the excessive" (chap. 29), and

on blunting “the sharpness,” untying “the tangles,” softening “the light,” and becoming “one with the dusty world” (chap. 56). Lao Zi describes this state as “profound identification” in which Being and *Dao* are merged into a harmonious state and all distinctions and differentiations are totally removed (Chan, 1963). That *Dao* gives birth to myriad things and does not possess them is again best illustrated by the image of water, which occupies low places without complaint and benefits all existence without desiring to claim credit or be arrogant.

Another way to reduce desire is to be against war. Lao Zi indicates that wars among states are the most unethical acts committed during the period of the Warring States. War comes from human desire for fame and profit. Avoiding war will naturally reduce desire; therefore, Lao Zi is against the use of weapons (Wang, 1971). In a chaotic time such as the Warring States period a nation may keep military and weapons, but they should only be used for the defensive purpose, “Even if there are arrows and weapons, none will display them” (chap. 80). Lao Zi continues, “He who assists the ruler with *Tao* does not dominate the world with force. The use of force usually brings requital. Wherever armies are stationed, briars and thorns grow. Great wars are always followed by famines” (chap. 30); and “Fine weapons are instruments of evil. They are hated by men. Therefore those who possess *Tao* turn away from them... When he (ruler) uses them unavoidably, he regards calm restraint as the best principle” (chap. 31). The characteristic of non-desire is like the nature of water which benefits all things without competing with them, and in turn prevent wars from happening.

**Wu Shen (Non-Self).** Instead of disregarding or destroying one’s body, *wu shen* refers to existence without consciousness of self and regarding oneself as the least important. Lao Zi does not regard the body as an evil, but recommends on treating the body with extreme care to avoid selfishness (Chan, 1963, Chang, 1988). Therefore, on the one hand, Lao Zi underlines the importance of being unselfish, “Heaven is eternal and Earth everlasting. They can be eternal and everlasting because they do not exist for themselves, and for this reason can exist forever (chap. 7); and “What does it mean to regard great trouble as seriously as you regard the body? The reason why I have great trouble is that I have a body. If I have no body, what trouble could I have?” (chap. 13).

On the other hand, Lao Zi highlights the importance of loving one’s life, “Do not oppress their (people) lives. It is because you do not oppress them that they are not oppressed. Therefore the sage knows himself but does not show himself. He loves himself but does not exalt himself” (chap. 72). Moreover, persons who know how to love their life know how to well keep it, “I have heard that one who is a good preserver of his life will not meet tigers or wild buffaloes, and in fighting will not try to escape from weapons of war” (chap. 50). Once again, according to Lao Zi, to love one’s life must follow the way of

Nature and the selfless water.

***Yong Rou (Softness/Weakness)***

Lao Zi not only treats weakness as “the function of *Tao*” (chap. 36), but also advocates the superiority of weakness over strength. The nature of water illustrates this point, “There is nothing softer and weaker than water, and yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things... All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard” (chap. 78). Lao Zi further uses another example to support this argument:

When man is born, he is tender and weak. At death, he is stiff and hard. Therefore the stiff and the hard are companions of death. The tender and the weak are companions of life. The strong and the great are inferior, while the tender and the weak are superior. (chap. 76)

Since it is weak, soft, and tender, water is therefore the best model to follow. It has the power to transform everything, not by artificial force, but by unobtrusive gentleness. In *Dao De Jing*, through the attributes of water, Lao Zi applies *yong rou* to four aspects of life: personal cultivation, problem solving, governing the state, and military strategy (Chang, 1977).

**Personal Cultivation.** Cultivating oneself through *yong rou* leads to a peaceful society. Lao Zi informs us, “Sharpen a sword-edge to its very sharpest, and the (edge) will not last long” (chap. 9). As soon as a thing reaches its extremity, it reverses course. Thus, passively, people should “weaken their ambitions” (chap. 3) and emulate *Dao*, which “blunts its sharpness, unites its tangles, and softens its light” (chap. 4), and, actively, should “concentrate one’s vital force and achieve the highest degree of weakness like an infant” (chap. 10). The strategy for entering state of pure nature, such as that enjoyed by infants, is: “He who knows the male and keeps to the female becomes the ravine of the world. Being the ravine of the world, he will never depart from eternal virtue, but returns to the state of infancy” (chap. 28).

**Problem Solving.** The principle that “the weak overcomes the strong” is also used to resolve problems in the process of social interaction. By using negative force (i.e., weakness) to treat positive force (i.e., strength) is an example of “contradiction transcendancy” which transcends the confinement of the law of contradiction (Wang, 1971). For example, Lao Zi points out, “In order to contract, it is necessary first to expand. In order to weaken, it is necessary first to strengthen. In order to destroy, it is necessary first to promote. In order to grasp, it is necessary first to give” (chap. 36). Underlying this universal principle is the phenomenological change of reversion, the idea that “if any one thing moves to an extreme in one direction, a change must bring about an opposite direction”

(Fung, 1983, p. 182). Application of this principle, however, has to be in the right time and at right place. In other words, it has to fulfill the requirement of *Dao*, which models itself after Nature and is analogous to water which is soft and weak but can overcome the hard and strong.

**Governing the State.** In the art of governing, “The state should place itself low,” at the place where the water accumulates, because “A big state can take over a small state if it places itself below the small state; and the small state can take over a big state if it places itself below the big state” (chap. 61). Moreover, as a ruler, one should emphasize public opinion, not one’s own, emulating water, which has no fixed shape, “The sage has no fixed (personal) ideas. He regards the people’s ideas as his own... The sage, in the government of his empire, has no subjective viewpoint. His mind forms a harmonious whole with that of his people” (chap. 49). In addition, one who assists the ruler with *Dao* should not wish to dominate the world with force, “A good (general) achieves his purpose and stops, but dares not seek to dominate the world... (For) after things reach their prime, they begin to grow old, which means being contrary to *Tao*. Whatever is contrary to *Tao* will soon perish” (chap. 30).

**Military Strategy.** Lao Zi vehemently opposes the use of weapons. However, when war is unavoidable, one must handle it with loving care, for “deep love keeps one to win in the case of attack, and to be firm in the case of defense” (chap. 67). To Lao Zi, this deep love is to be applied not just to one’s own people but to one’s enemy, “A skillful leader of troops is not oppressive with his military strength. A skillful fighter does not become angry. A skillful conqueror does not compete with people” (chap. 68). Lao Zi quotes an old saying to further reinforce his principle of weakness in war:

The Strategists say: “I dare not take the offensive but I take the defensive; I dare not advance an inch but I retreat a foot.” This means: To march without formation, to stretch one’s arm without showing it, to confront enemies without seeming to meet them, to hold weapons without seeming to have them ... Therefore when armies are mobilized and issues joined, the man who is sorry over the fact will win. (chap. 69)

Undoubtedly, this principle reflects the recurring theme Lao Zi emphasizes in *Dao De Jing*: “Keeping to weakness is called strength” (chap. 52), a principle perfectly in keeping with the nature of water.

***Chu Xia (Subordination)/Bu Zheng (Non-Competition)***

Throughout *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi uses water to illustrate the idea that mastery of life is to be achieved through subordination, “It (water) dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain. This is why it is so near to *Tao*” (chap. 8); “A big

country may be compared to the lower part of a river. It is the converging point of the world” (chap. 61); and “The great rivers and seas are kings of all mountain streams because they skillfully stay below them” (chap. 66). At these and other points, Lao Zi emphasizes subordination through cultivating a humble attitude and cautiously preparing oneself, from the almost imperceptible beginning of any movement, “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 stories begins with a heap of earth. The journey of a thousand miles starts from where one stands” (chap. 64). Hence, to stay low is to possess the means to elevate oneself; to start from what is small is to accomplish what is great, “Therefore humble station is the basis of honor. The low is the foundation of the high” (chap. 39). Furthermore,

Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small. Difficult understandings have always started with what is easy. And great undertakings have always started with what is small. Therefore the sage never strives for the great, and thereby the great is achieved. (chap. 63)

*Chu xia* also refers to *bu zheng* (non-competition). Lao Zi conceives *Dao*, as reflected in water, as non-competition, “Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them” (chap. 8). He treats non-competition as one of the three treasures he proposes in *Dao De Jing*: “I have three treasures. Guard and keep them... The third is not to dare to be ahead of the world... Because of not daring to be ahead of the world, one becomes the leader of the world” (chap. 67). Non-competition also serves as a guide for behavior, “The Way of the sage is to act but not to compete” (chap. 81). Consequently, through non-competition one will naturally achieve the goal achieved by using the method of competition, “It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him” (chap. 22); and “The way of Heaven does not compete, and yet it skillfully achieves victory” (chap. 73). It is possible to distinguish two types of non-competition in *Dao De Jing*: non-competition for fame and non-competition for profits.

**Non-Competition for Fame.** Lao Zi believes those who follow *Dao* should conceal their talents and live in a situation something like taking refuge or retirement. He expresses this idea by comparing, as he often does, the elevated object to the lowly, “Therefore enumerate all the parts of a chariot as you may, and you still have no chariot. Rather than jingle like the jade, rumble like the rocks” (chap. 39). If this is remembered, and if one does not “exalt men of superior talent and virtue” (chap. 3), then people will not compete with each other, and if one remembers to “Abandon sageliness and discard wisdom; then the people will benefit a hundredfold” (chap. 19). The practice is quite different

from Western rhetorical traditions where knowledge and display of superior speaking skill are held to be virtuous.

Although Lao Zi asserts the positive effect of discarding wisdom and sageliness, he does not really mean to deny their existence. "Straight words seem to be their opposite" (chap. 78), he writes, and based on this principle, which one might call transcendence through opposition, we know that wisdom is an important attribute of *Dao*. However, one must remember that wisdom has a special meaning in *Dao De Jing*. Wisdom, in most philosophical thought, is gained via elaborate, frequently tortuous, extensions of language, to Lao Zi, this sort of "wisdom" takes one, not closer to truth, but further away. To be the basis of persuasion, wisdom must be like water, unselfish and noncompetitive. Instead of carving out a piece of the truth via debate and argumentation, the sage need not establish truth, since "the truth" is the truth of nature, which has always existed and always will. Hence, the sage need establish no personal claim with respect to knowledge. "Therefore, the sage acts, but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it. He has no desire to display his excellence" (chap. 77).

**Non-Competition for Profits.** When people compete, they often do so in order to simultaneously obtain fame and profit. Since competing for profit seems much more disreputable than competing for fame, why do people do it? According to Lao Zi, it is because society values rare treasures and displays objects of desire. "Goods that are hard to get injure one's activities" (chap. 12); moreover, "He who has lavish desires will spend extravagantly. He who hoards most will lose heavily" (chap. 44). To remove the incentive to compete for profits is a good way to reach an ideal state for society, because if the people learn to "Abandon skills and discard profit" they will have a state where there are "no thieves or robbers" (chap. 19). The idea of "abandoning skills" is rendered by Feng and English (1989) "give up ingenuity," a way of putting it more directly relevant to the practice of persuasion. Ingenious language is unnecessary and indeed even leads one to stray from the truth. Better one strive to run constantly in the lowlands and nurture things unobtrusively, like water, than concentrate on accumulation of artificial objects that nourish nothing and benefit no one.

### Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that the metaphor is an effective and powerful tool used by Lao Zi to delineate his ideas in *Dao De Jing* in which the central concept is *Dao*. *Dao* serves as the fundamental basis of Lao Zi's metaphysical position where *Dao* is described as vacuity characterized by namelessness,



elusiveness, fathomlessness, pervasiveness, profundity, and shapelessness. However, as other philosophers in his age, Lao Zi's purpose is to reform society to reach an ideal state. To achieve this goal, Lao Zi has to transform the metaphysical meaning of *Dao* into a set of concepts easily understood and able to persuade rulers and people to act in accordance with his principles. To accomplish this, Lao Zi uses the water metaphor to transmit and transform the metaphysical *Dao* to a practical level in which meanings and functions of *Dao* are more easily grasped. More specifically, the water metaphor used in *Dao De Jing* symbolizes *Dao* as *zhi xu*, *yong rou*, and *chu xia/bu zheng* embedded in social and political life. Figure 1 summarizes the process.

The analysis also demonstrates that, as Lu (in this issue) has argued, rhetorical practices have long existed in Asia, with Asian rhetoric often characterized as moralistic and implicit (Garrett, 1991; Jensen, 1992). Lu's (1998) study confirms this argument. Thus, criticism from Western scholars (e.g., Becker, 1986; Oliver, 1971) that Chinese lack a rhetorical tradition is premature. Although Lao Zi does not advocate the use of persuasive messages in human interaction, *Dao De Jing* itself is a superlative example of an effective tool for rhetorical persuasion. This paper shows how the metaphor, as a linguistic tool of expression, can serve as a powerful means of transmitting and elaborating an intended meaning of a metaphysical concept.

The water metaphor created by Lao Zi not only frames a unifying image of *Dao* by creating shared meaning among readers, but also helps people capture a more accurate picture of society and persuades them to adopt a new way of thinking. As a persuasive and successful rhetor, Lao Zi's *Dao De Jing* continues to significantly impact many aspects of Chinese and other East Asian cultures. For more than two thousand years, Chinese customs, metaphysical philosophy, political behavior, arts, and literature have been deeply engraved with the brand of Daoism (Kim 1973; Lin, 1948; Liu, 1970). *Dao De Jing* deserves further study from rhetorical and communication perspectives.

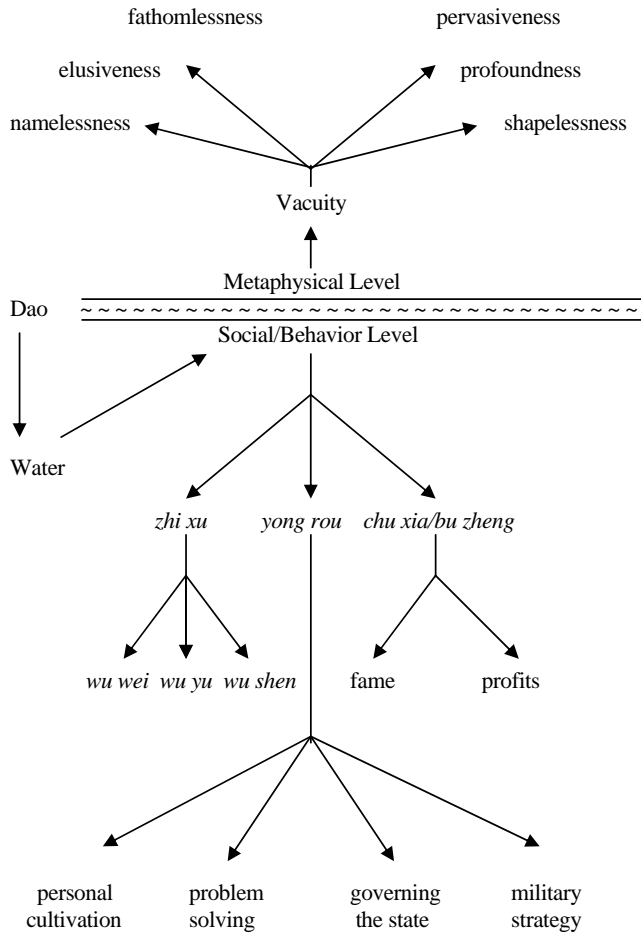


Figure 1. The Water Metaphor and *Dao*

\* This paper adopts the pin-yin system for romanizing Chinese characters (e.g., *Dao* as *Tao*) except for those in quotes and references, and translations of *Dao De Jing* used are based on Chan's *The Way of Lao Tzu* (1963).

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