



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Continuity in Zhangian Ontology

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In the shadow of the prolific Wei and Western Jin periods of Chinese philosophy, the Eastern Jin (*dongjin* 東晉, 317–420 CE) contributions of Neo-Daoist Zhang Zhan 張湛 (fl. 370 CE) are easily overlooked. Nevertheless, from his commentary on the Daoist classic *Liezi* 列子 emerges a compelling story of how the world works, and ontological continuity comes to the fore as a valuable topic for reconsideration by readers from early medieval China to the present day. This paper presents three distinct types of continuity that can be discerned from Zhang Zhan's comments on the metaphysically rich first chapter of the *Liezi*, "Heaven's Gifts" (*tianrui* 天瑞).

在中國哲學史上，魏晉時期的豐碩成果使東晉玄學家張湛的貢獻容易被忽視。然而，在他對道家經典《列子》的註釋中，可以看到一個引人入勝的世界觀故事。其中，本體論的連續性成為一個中國從中古早期至今一直值得重新思考的問題。本文從張湛對《列子·天瑞》篇的註釋中提煉出三種不同類型的連續性，並進行深入討論。

Keywords: Zhang Zhan, Liezi, Daoism, Neo-Daoism, Chinese metaphysics, thought

關鍵詞： 張湛，列子，道家，魏晉玄學，中國形上學，子

Introduction

One of the few works of Chinese philosophy composed during the century of the Eastern Jin dynasty (*dongjin* 東晉, 317–420 CE) is the commentary by Zhang Zhan 張湛 (fl. 370 CE) on the Daoist classic *Liezi* 列子. Produced in the afterglow of a prolific Neo-Daoist (*xuanxue* 玄學) era sparked a century earlier by He Yan 何晏 and Wang Bi 王弼, the *Zhang Zhan Commentary* (*zhangzhanzhu* 張湛註, hereafter *ZZC*) not only accompanied the initial release of the *Liezi*, but also advanced the relatively metaphysical Neo-Daoist tradition it inherited. Furthermore, this insightful commentary joined an *Yijing* 易經 commentary by Han Kangbo 韓康伯 and a pair of works by Ge Hong 葛洪 to help offset this period's well-known Buddhist expansion under Kumārajīva, Sengzhao 僧肇, and others.

ZZC uniquely approaches issues of ontological continuity, and its novelty derives in part from the text it expounds. A compilation of documents from various periods, the *Liezi* manages to tell a compelling story about the world, not just developing ideas found in other Daoist classics, but also introducing elements all its own. Described by the renowned scholar A. C. Graham as “the most important Taoist document after the *Tao-te-ching* [*daodejing* 道德經] and the *Chuangtzu* [*zhuangzi* 莊子],”¹ Daoism’s “third great document” (1990, xiii), as he calls it, emerged late enough to make it “the only one of the three books whose author would actually be thinking of himself as a philosophical Taoist” (*ibid.*, 1). Regardless of the benefit it may have derived from these two other classics, the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, and even later Neo-Daoist and Buddhist literature, the *Liezi* distinctively advances Chinese and Daoist thinking, particularly in the metaphysics of its first chapter, “Heaven’s Gifts” (*tianrui* 天瑞).² Thomas Michael thus highlights this chapter’s “fairly sophisticated presentation” of cosmogony (2011, 108), and June Won Seo declares that its “proposition that contradictory conditions exist in dichotomy may be the most invaluable contribution of the *Liezi* to the methodology of the ontological discourse in early China” (2015, 456).

Like Wang Bi with the *Daodejing* and Guo Xiang 郭象 with the *Zhuangzi*, Zhang Zhan leverages his source text to promote a distinctly Neo-Daoist interpretation of the world for readers extending from early medieval China to the present day.³ Of the many contributions made by the *Liezi*’s inaugural

¹ This quotation (1990, 1) refers only to seven of the eight chapters of the *Liezi*, as Graham at this earlier point had not yet come to accept the authenticity of the *yangzhu* 楊朱 chapter. Much remains unknown about the number and dates of the *Liezi*’s authors and editors.

² For his part, Zhang Zhan describes the *Liezi* as “much the same as the *Laozi* (道德經) and the *Zhuangzi*, belonging to a citation genre, and especially similar to the *Zhuangzi* (大歸同於老莊，屬辭引類，特與莊子相似),” also claiming that “frequently it and the Buddhist scriptures are comparable (往往與佛經相參)” (Xiao 1990, 6). In this paper, all citations of *ZZC* are from this text and will generally be cited simply with a page number; all English translations of this text are my own. Chow Ta-hsing 周大興 notably disputes Zhang Zhan’s claim of the *Liezi*’s similarity to Buddhism (2017, 84-90). Despite belonging to the Daoist canon, the *Liezi* says little about such concepts as non-effort (*wuwei* 無為) and the five phases (*wuxing* 五行).

³ Although Seo may be correct that “using of the terms that caused cumbersome arguments such as *wu* (non-being), *you* (being) or *wanwu* (myriad things) has been deliberately avoided in the *Liezi*” (2015, 456), the *Liezi* does occasionally broach such topics, and *ZZC*, for its part, not only frequently cites Wang Bi, Guo Xiang, and other Neo-Daoists of the previous era, but also poses familiar Neo-Daoist questions such as “Since somethingness and nothingness aren’t produced of each other, and the principle is as such, from what are things produced? (故有無之不相生，理既然矣，則有何由生?)” (17), answering that “there is nothing from which heaven and earth are

commentary *ZZC*, some of the most interesting concern ontological continuity, especially that transcending lifespans. Through hundreds of comments spanning the *Liezi*'s eight chapters but particularly concentrated in “Heaven’s Gifts”, a novel Zhangian ontology emerges, and although issues of identity and persistence unsurprisingly appear *vis-à-vis* the physical and non-physical aspects of objects, they somewhat surprisingly surface in contexts transcending existence as well. A distinctly Daoist form of reincarnation underpins Zhangian ontology such that one conceivably encounters a perpetual cycle of iterations, waning reversions into non-existence followed by waxing reversions into existence.⁴ Three distinct kinds of continuity focus the attention of the following study. The first is intra-iterative continuity, that exhibited throughout a single iteration. The second is inter-iterative continuity, that exceeding the boundaries of existence and non-existence. The final is trans-iterative continuity, that which links consecutive iterations like the beads of a necklace.

Admittedly, modern sensibilities may judge Zhangian ontological claims fanciful—more like astrology than astronomy—and deserving critical treatment, if any. Such a third-person approach to *ZZC* would allow one to maintain a safe distance from its claims while profitably examining its arguments and their connections to both the *Liezi* and their common tradition. That, however, is not the approach adopted in this paper. Instead, on the dual assumptions that the merits of a conceptual framework derive mostly from its capacity to agreeably sort experience and that *ZZC* adequately does so,⁵ this paper purposes to faithfully articulate the scheme underpinning Zhangian thinking. For this reason, the default voice driving argumentation throughout this paper is that of *ZZC* itself, or more precisely, that of a *ZZC* adherent. At the very least, consistency with this paradigm is attempted, and although far more textual support could be presented for many of the points made in this exposition, it is believed that the most substantial have been selected.

Intra-Iterative Continuity

From its inception to its termination, a thing maintains a degree of sameness. The persisting sameness of non-existing things is arguably a thornier issue than that of existing things and is best considered in

produced; they are produced self-naturally (天地無所從生而自然生)” (17).

⁴ Chow Ta-hsing cautions against the tendency to identify the *ZZC* position with Buddhist reincarnation, stating of a comment on the *yangzhu* chapter that “I hold that the phrasing of ‘life is really temporary coming, and death is yet again temporarily going’ in this chapter actually still doesn’t allow one to discern traces of having received Buddhist influence (筆者認為，本章之中「生實暫來，死復暫往」的說法，其實仍然看不出受佛家影響的痕跡)” (2017, 88), adding that “the words here ‘the exchange of life and death is not commencing and annihilation’ is only the traditional Daoist thesis regarding the perspective on transforming things (the transforming of all *qi*) that ‘the reciprocation of existence and loss is the continuous transformation of *qi*-forms’ (這裏的「生死變化，未始絕滅」之說，只是傳統道家主張「存亡往復，形氣轉續」的物化（一氣之化）觀點)” (88) because “it lacks the religious background of Buddhist karma reincarnation and incurring recompense for good and evil, and instead derives from the main idea of the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi* about the self-natural transformation of things that is ‘perpetual termination and commencement without grasping any clue’ (其中並無佛家因果輪迴、善惡招報的宗教背景，而是回歸《列子》與《莊子》書中自然物化的「反覆終始，不知端倪」的宗旨)” (89).

⁵ Admittedly, the eclectic nature of the *Liezi* source text complicates Zhang Zhan’s attempt to forge coherence, and the *ZZC* worldview is not easily discerned from those worldviews expounded.

the context of trans-iterative continuity, but the lifelong sameness of an actual entity is also no simple matter, especially when both its physical and non-physical properties are in view. The sense in which something undergoing change maintains coherence is a perennial metaphysical concern, yet four factors seem to account for this sameness, three of which belong wholly to the familiar realm of heaven and earth (*tiandi* 天地) and one of which does not.

This division of realms into the familiar and the unfamiliar, ours and the other, should be recognised at the outset as ontologically fundamental. From its opening lines, “Heaven’s Gifts” itself declares:

There are the born and the Unborn, the changing and the Unchanging. The Unborn can give birth to the born, and the Unchanging can change the changing. (Graham 1990, 17)

有生不生，有化不化。不生者能生生，不化者能化化。(1)

Chow accordingly refers to “two different types of existence (兩種不同的存在)” (2017, 30), and Seo indicates that “the theoretical grounds explored in the beginning section outline an ontological schema based in the distinction between the transcendental and the present realms, as well as the ontological conditions that determine each realm” (2015, 454), further indicating that “the ontological theory in the *Liezi* is built on the notion that present beings and the transcendental being are subject to conspicuously distinct ontological conditions” (ibid., 456). In commenting on the *Liezi*, Seo uses the terms “transcendental being” and “transcendental entity” nearly fifty times in a dozen pages, corresponding with a second notable feature of the *Liezi* and *ZZC*, a reluctance to directly mention the *dao* 道 of Daoism. Michael too notes that throughout an “in-depth discussion of cosmogony that is anchored by and revolves around the notion of the pristine Dao,...the *Liezi* hardly mentions it,” partly attributing this to “the text’s recognition of the views of the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Huainanzi* concerning the idea that the Dao is beyond language and is something not accessible to human thought” (2011, 109–11). “*Liezi* really is talking about the pristine Dao,” he notes, “but in a somewhat devious way because he does not use the term directly” (ibid., 110). Accordingly, only reluctantly will the ineffable be mentioned herein and, in the interest of preserving its otherness, most often simply as “the *other*.”⁶

The first of the three worldly factors bringing continuity to the tangible and intangible aspects of each object of this realm is *qi* 氣. The myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) of this domain are neither fully material nor fully non-material, but rather, each is a persisting amalgam of physicality and non-physicality.⁷ A wholly material object is impossible:

⁶ That such reticence in mentioning the *dao* is a break from earlier Daoist tradition has also been noted by Michael: “The *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Huainanzi* exerted a lot of effort in establishing this usage of their notion of the Dao in relation to cosmogony, where they often directly name the Dao” (2011, 109). The term “the *other*” derives from a *ZZC* citation of Neo-Daoist progenitor He Yan in which he refers to the unborn, unchanging *dao* as “distinct from things (*yiyuwu* 異於物)” (12). I have chosen to italicise rather than capitalise the *other* to indicate a non-standard use of this word while discouraging objectification.

⁷ Although one may distinguish between the relatively material and non-material aspects of people and things, these distinctions do not readily map on to *qi*, which, despite consisting of relatively heavy and light varieties, resists such clear-cut distinctions.

What actuation is there without a form, what form is there without *qi*, and what *qi* is there without spirit?

何生之無形，何形之無氣，何氣之無靈？(59).

Each of the myriad things bears a form (*xíng* 形) involving both actuation (*sheng* 生)⁸ and *qi*, which is never exclusively material. The myriad things of this realm invariably bear such a mixture of *qi* from their inception to their dissolution:

Accumulation bringing about a form and dispersion constituting termination, this is the world's so-called lifespan; as such, an accumulation takes formation as its commencement and takes dispersion as its termination.

聚則成形，散則為終，此世之所謂終始也。然則聚者以形實為始，以離散為終。(55)

Any accumulated form, presumably even that of a creature awaiting birth or a corpse awaiting dissolution, ranks among the myriad things and necessarily consists of not just that which occupies three-dimensional space—bricks and bark and bones—but also of an element which does not.

For intelligent beings, this merger of the physical and non-physical seems relatively intuitive. My thoughts and emotions are both non-spatial and uniquely mine. My childhood memories somehow belong to me, and resentment and anticipation may accompany one throughout life much as shoes and feet do. Nevertheless, inanimate objects likewise share this persisting non-physical component:

The spiritual *qi* of humans is not distinct from that of the multitude of actuated things; [it is only that] roles are discrete, so appearances are not identical.

人之神氣，與眾生不殊，所適者異，故形貌不一。(66)

A harmony of relatively unsubstantial, clear heavenly *qi* and relatively substantial, murky earthly *qi* accompanies all actuated beings until dissolution, when each kind returns to its source:

What is this 'heaven and earth'? It is simply a natural apportionment between the unsubstantial and the substantial, between the clear and the murky.

天地何耶，直虛實清濁之自分判者耳。(23)

The heavenly portion returns to heaven, and the earthly portion returns to earth; each returns to its source.

⁸ The frequent choice in this paper to translate *sheng* 生 with variations of the verb "actuate" rather than forms of "birth" or "life" stems from ZCC's broad application of this term to all formed things, including inanimate objects and, presumably, fetuses and corpses, which have not been born in the first case and are not alive in the second. Where this translation seems too forced, more conventional terms are chosen.

天分歸天，地分歸地，各反其本。(58)

The terminal stop on the waning journey is invariably nothingness. From the moment of inception, existents are reverting to the non-existence from which they emerged.

That which has formed is already diminishing from the moment it is called formed, and that which has actuated is already latently dying from the moment it is called actuated.

成者方自謂成而已虧矣，生者方自謂生潛已死矣。(84)

A persisting object's *qi* endures “myriad forms and myriad changes (*wanxing wanhua* 萬形萬化),” yet while on any individual assignment, it provides to its host a degree of sameness.

In addition to persisting *qi*, a second factor present in the world of objects that likewise bestows a measure of continuity is the manipulation of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. Although the respiration-like contractions and expansions of *yinyang* 陰陽 also effect change, without them the universe would consist only of a nondescript *qi* that Graham translates as “confusion,”⁹ much as in the cosmological beginning:

Yinyang hadn't yet drawn distinctions, thus the so-called confusion [of the next sentence (of the *Liezi*)]; on account of distinguishing by *yinyang*, itemized things bear forms.

陰陽未判，即[下句]所謂渾淪也。陰陽既判，則品物流形也。(19)

The delineating effects of *yinyang* are undoubtedly most noticeable in the empirical arena, yet the intangible aspects of a thing—for example the discrete desires of an intelligent being or the mere “something more” of an inanimate object—likewise yield to the sorting processes of *yinyang*. In light of the previously asked rhetorical question, “What *qi* is there without spirit? 何氣之無靈” (59), how could it be otherwise?

The mind and wisdom, a form and anatomy, these are one body of *yinyang*, one amassing of *qi*.

心智形骸，陰陽之一體，偏積之一氣。(59)

⁹ This phrase with its immediately preceding content more literally reads, “The changing of all *qi* is that which adapts to ten thousand forms. Ten thousand forms and ten thousand changes (一氣之變，所適萬形。萬形萬化)” (46).

¹⁰ “Breath, shape and substance were complete, but things were not yet separated from each other; hence the name ‘Confusion.’ ‘Confusion’ means that the myriad things were confounded and not yet separated from each other” (Graham 1990, 19), “氣、形、實具而未相離，故曰渾淪。渾淪者，言萬物相渾淪而未相離也” (16).

Both terrestrial and celestial *qi* comply with the movements of *yin* and *yang*, with the result that each body making up this universe preserves a measure of each, a portion of relatively non-empirical mind and wisdom (*xinzhì* 心智) with a portion of eminently physical form and anatomy (*xinghài* 形骸).

Human life provides a ready demonstration of such bipartite collocation:

As *yinyang* brings *qi* from all places into convergence, *qi* finds harmony, and harmonious *qi* constitutes human life. On this basis is human life established.

陰陽氣遍交會而氣和，氣和而為人生；人生則有所倚而立也。(23)

Humans have long viewed themselves as more than their bones and skin. Through the blending of *qi*, human life also consists of love and prudence, fears and regrets. None of these human experiences is confined to a moment, and any continuity they exhibit derives largely from the undulations of *yin* and *yang*.

Interestingly, *yinyang* consolidates while dividing. Divisions produce spatiotemporal unity, a sameness extending through space and time. Actuated things thus take on “discrete forms (*kuairanzhixing* 塊然之形)” (5):

A body fits a space, making extraneous matter a boundary.

夫體適於一方者，造餘塗則闕矣。(27)

As long as *yin* and *yang* maintain an object’s discrete form, it persists. The physicality and non-physicality of a *qi* body cohere until dissolution returns *qi* to its source:

When it departs from form and returns to its source, reverting to its true abode, I am no longer a thing.

及其離形歸根，則反其真宅，我無物焉。(59)

In harmony, then, *qi* and *yinyang* guarantee the myriad things a degree of sameness on their lifelong slide back to nothingness. This realm still comprises one other factor that helps to ensure persistent sameness.

The nature of natures (*xìng* 性) is not obvious, yet they assuredly correspond to persisting sameness as well. In fact, a nature is one of “the three (*sanzhe* 三者)” (20), together with *qi* and *form*, which is present at inception. Although “Heaven’s Gifts” refers to them as “*qi*, form, and quality (*qi, xíng, zhì* 氣、形、質)” (16),

“Quality” refers to nature. As objects, whether square or round, hard or soft, still or moving, deep or shallow, each has a nature.

質者，性也。既為物矣，則方員、剛柔、靜躁、沈浮，各有性。(19)

These natures and the various properties they instantiate, whether material or non-material, accompany an object throughout its course. They are irreversible.

Each of the actuated entities has a nature, and each nature has its capacity... Everything has its essential place, and this cannot be resisted.

生各有性，性各有所宜者也... 皆有素分，不可逆也。(27)

Due to the permanence of its nature, a chair remains a chair throughout its existence. Although one may reasonably question the point at which the dismantling of a chair negates its “chairness,” the guiding principle is that today’s chair and tomorrow’s chair are the same chair by virtue of an incorrigible nature that one must simply accept.

This realm then seems to consist of three primary factors granting each of its members a degree of sameness during its iteration here: *qi*, *yinyang*, and a nature. Both their tangible and intangible components hold together under these three influences. Nevertheless, one other contributor would seem to play a hand as well, but because this fourth factor cannot be said to belong to this realm, it is best discussed in the context of trans-iterative sameness.

Given the firm bifurcation of realms, one might anticipate an equally firm aversion to its violation. One would expect no doorways connecting the two domains, no prospect of entry or exit, and no hope of cycling in and out. Rather, one anticipates an impervious wall or chasm preventing any sort of continuity; everything should be confined to one side or the other. One might even expect the magnification of birth and death, or perhaps actuation and termination, as terminal points of embarkation and debarkation. This, however, is not how things are.

Inter-Iterative Continuity

Notwithstanding the stark ontological contrast between realms, two transition events are frequent occurrences. The first is the shift from existence to non-existence and the other is the shift from non-existence to existence. The first terminates a waning iteration and initiates a waxing iteration, while the second terminates a waxing iteration and initiates a waning iteration. A transition event—a crossing from realm to realm—is thus simultaneously an end and a beginning. As previously mentioned, “an accumulation takes formation as its commencement and takes dispersion as its termination (聚者以形實為始，以離散為終)” (55), yet correspondingly,

A dispersion takes desolation as its commencement and takes the realisation of a form as its termination.

散者以虛漠為始，以形實為終。(55)

Analogous to a lifespan that begins with accumulation and ends with disintegration is a span that begins with disintegration and ends with accumulation. What exactly a dispersion is like no one can know, nor can one ascertain the obscure phase it launches, yet it seems that transition points are both endings and beginnings. Dispersion-induced desolation marks a new start, and the realisation of a form spells doom no less than does dispersion.

The first of the two transition events to be discussed is the culmination of a waning iteration. Bidding farewell to existence and activity, one reverts to long-awaited nothingness and rest. With Zhang Zhan, we may note two passages in which the *Zhuangzi* effectively makes this point:

The *Zhuangzi* states, “death is rest.”

莊子曰：死為休息也。(73)

The *Zhuangzi* states, “The universe has encumbered me with a form, burdened me with life, disregarded me with old age, and rested me with death.”

莊子曰：大塊載我以形，勞我以生，佚我以老，息我以死耳。(74)

Death initiates a period of respite. Crossing from an existence iteration into a non-existence iteration affords precious rest:

Only after death can one rest fully prostrate.

唯死而後休息寢伏之。(76)

Notwithstanding the inscrutability of any experience “after death (*sierhou* 死而後),” one could hardly imagine looking forward to dissolution were there not some relief beyond it. Accordingly, Graham summarises two of the arguments in “Heaven’s Gifts” as “life is perpetual toil, and death is a well-earned rest” and “perhaps we shall enjoy death more than life” (1990, 15), pointing to an inter-iterative continuity in which an experiencer of life becomes an experiencer of death.

The other transition event is the culmination of a waxing iteration. Bidding farewell to nothingness and cherished rest, one reverts to engagement with an active world.¹¹ Through a formation event, something that had belonged to the nondescript other realm “steps into (*shayu* 涉於)” this variegated one.

Even that as large as heaven and earth or as numerous as the multitude of items, upon stepping into the portion of actuation and upon involvement with the realm of action and use, throughout alterations of existence and loss complies with what naturally occurs.

雖天地之大，群品之眾，涉於有生之分，關於動用之域者，存亡變化，自然之符。(1)

¹¹ Hence, “suffering a form, one can’t help but nurture it, and incurring actuation, one can’t help but indulge it (遭形則不能不養，遇生則不能不歡)” (36).

Stepping into the portion of activity, there is no acquiring momentary nothingness.

涉於有動之分者，不得暫無也。(5)

Not only do all things “exit non-existence to enter existence, as well as disperse from existence to return to non-existence (出無入有，散有反無),”¹² but in freely stepping across boundaries, they diminish—rather than magnify—the significance of transition events:

All stepping into shifting soil entails that I actuate and that another perishes; taken to the extreme, the principle is that since there is no actuation, neither is there perishing.

俱涉變化之塗，則予生而彼死，推之至極之域，則理既無生，亦又無死也。(36)

Immunity to death and birth is the ultimate boon to continuity.

In reality, the two transition points—stepping into and out of existence—erect no barrier to continuity.

Due to the perpetual undergoing of termination and commencement, in principle there is actually neither termination nor commencement.

故迭相與為終始，而理實無終無始者也。(55).

To whatever the *Liezi*'s central figure Master Lie was speaking when he told his student Baifeng “you were never born and will never die (未嘗生未嘗死也),”¹³ the two transition events are quite irrelevant. Something is born and dies, but it is not Baifeng. Notwithstanding the confinement of *qi*, *yinyang*, and natures to a single realm, inter-iterative movement would seem to pose no challenge.

Trans-Iterative Continuity

“Perhaps we shall be reborn elsewhere,” Graham presents as a message of “Heaven’s Gifts” (1990, 15), highlighting the prospect of continuity across multiple iterations. Something currently waning toward non-existence may eventually reemerge to do so once again, albeit in a different form. Just as one’s life is temporary, so is one’s death:

The sages knew that life is not eternal existence, and that death is not eternal annihilation.

¹² In full, this passage reads as follows: “Exiting non-existence to enter existence, dispersing from existence to return to non-existence, there is nothing that does not derive from this (出無入有，散有反無，靡不由之也)” (47).

¹³ The full statement in Graham reads, “Only he and I know that you were never born and will never die (唯予與彼知而未嘗生未嘗死也)” (1990, 21; Xiao 1990, 35).

聖人知生不常存，死不永滅。(46)

The authoritative knowers of the past apparently indicated that a life phase not only precedes a death phase but also succeeds it.¹⁴ Death eventually yields to life. Just as the day begins with waking up and ends with falling asleep, the night begins with falling asleep and ends with waking up. One does little more than consecutively sleep and wake, understandably minimising the significance of transition events. Although the *Liezi* states that regarding issues of life and death “only the sage knows whom to side with and whom to reject (唯聖人知所與，知所去)” (Graham 1990, 26; Xiao 1990, 73), it is nonetheless advisable to view death as sleep, rather than as permanent loss:

The one taking life and death as sleep, side with this one. The one bereaved and forgetting return, reject this one.

以生死為寢寐者，與之。溺喪忘歸者，去之。(15)

The *ZZC* promise of linking iterations one after another—continuity across iterations—effectively accomplishes the “reconciliation with death” which Graham encapsulates as “the theme of this chapter” (1990, 15). Despite the difficulty in imagining the intra-iterative continuity that a formless sleeper might preserve, the *other* provides some parallels, both within and across iterations.

The *other* depicted in the “Heaven’s Gifts” source text plausibly bears some resemblance to one’s own trans-iterative throughline:

The Unborn is by our side yet alone,

The Unchanging goes forth and returns.

Going forth and returning, its successions are endless;

By our side and alone, its Way is boundless. (Graham 1990, 18)

不生者疑獨，不化者往復。往復，其際不可終；疑獨，其道不可窮。(1)

This eternal one that, according to the “Heaven’s Gifts” source text, “goes on and on, something which almost exists (綿綿若存)” (Graham 1990, 18; Xiao 1990, 1), is both “by our side” and, as Graham may have understood it, in close enough relationship with something to merit the translation “its Way” for *qido* 其道.¹⁵ Whether one follows Graham’s translation—as below—or not, it is no less clear that something endures the churning of *qi*:

¹⁴ Chow Ta-hsing considers such *ZZC* passages that diminish death as assuming a collective viewpoint according to which death is not eternal annihilation for the totality of *qi*. Nevertheless, it is unclear why a sage would be required to confirm such an obvious truth, and it also seems unlikely that the first half was intended collectively. A mid-sentence shift of perspective from the individual to the collective also seems unlikely and would likewise not require a sage’s confirmation. See Chow 2017, 86-88.

¹⁵ Michael likely articulates a more appropriate reading of the term *dao* in this text: “This usage of the term *dao* is very interesting, because

Through unceasing successions and *qi*-form transformations, its Way never ends.

代謝無間，形氣轉續，其道不終。(8)

Both collectively and individually, the myriad things are always changing, yet something is not.

The *other* remains so near at hand that it pervades all things, even one's own body. Like the thread-like element linking the beads of one's consecutive iterations, it too latently accompanies, and even occupies, each of the myriad things:

The actuator of the actuated is unactuated, and the former of the formed is unformed.

Therefore, it is able to actuate and form the myriad things, within my body immutable.

夫生生物者不生，形形物者無形。故能生形萬物，於我體無變。(56)

"Within my body," the *other* resembles that latent interlocutor of Master Lie that was both present in his *qi*-based student Baifeng and incapable of birth or death.

The nature of the relationship between oneself and one's temporary *qi*-based assignment is opaque. An accumulation of *qi* is neither a person nor a possession, but an expression of the *other*. Were a body a person, dispersion would equal annihilation and cause for bereavement, which it does not. As for the prospects of possessing a body,

If a body belongs to you, then beauty, ugliness, death, and life are under your control. That *qi* has presently accumulated and actuated is something you could not forbid. The dispersion of *qi* and perishing is also something that you cannot prevent. This makes it clear that it is entrusted, forms of itself, and is not your possession.

若身是汝有，則美惡死生，當制之由汝。今氣聚而生，汝不能禁也。氣散而死，汝不能止也。明其委結而自成，非汝之有也。(94)

One neither *is* a *qi* form nor *owns* a *qi* form. A *qi* form merely expresses the *other*; the myriad things are expressions, like sentences or dance moves. Using the more literal term "ten thousand" in referring to the myriad things, Rudolf Wagner thus articulates a Neo-Daoist perspective that the *other*

"shines forth" and "comes about" in and through the manifold specifications of the ten thousand kinds of entities. In a sense, it "depends" on the specificity of the specific entities in order to be as their "negative" "That-by-which"; without the specific entities, it "would have nothing" in which to "shine forth" and "come about." (Wagner 2003, 61)

it is in some ways just like a typical *dao* pertaining to some particular way or method, like the *dao* of the king or the *dao* of warfare. In other words, in the single instance in Liezi's cosmogony where he uses the term *dao*, there is nothing particularly cosmic about it in relation to the notion of the source from which all things come" (2011, 109).

Just as a musical expression or a verbal expression alters while cohering as a single expression, an object through its expression gains the last of the four previously discussed sources of intra-iterative continuity. Nonetheless, that latent associate which neither *is* nor *owns* a temporary form persists unobserved.

Not only is the nature of the relationship between bodies and anything transcending them obscure, but so is the practical outworking of this affiliation. Objects are constantly coming and going, yet something immutable accompanies them.

Actuation and change mutually derive, and existence and perishing go in turn; the sequence is uninterrupted.¹⁶

生化相因，存亡復往，理無間也。(8)

Who can fathom the alternations of birth and death? That which is born here perhaps dies there, or that which dies there perhaps is born here.... Despite myriad forms and changes, the immutable persists and returns to immutability.

夫生死變化，胡可測哉? 生於此者，或死於彼。死於彼者，或生於此。..... 萬形萬化，而不化者存歸於不化。(46-47)

It is easy to see that for anything besides the fleeting forms of the myriad things, birth and death are as negligible as previously asserted. In the entirety of both this realm and the other one, only *qi*-based forms come and go. Only *qi*-based forms are locked into a single iteration.

Under these circumstances, not only are the gaining and losing of existence rather negligible, but objects themselves have no great value, as legendary ruler Shun seemingly desired to reveal:

Shun wanted to show that all existing things without exception are as nothing.

舜欲現群有皆同於無。(94)

Seeing that iterations are of so little significance, one should remain unsurprised when noting with Zhang Zhan the distance that both Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 felt from these temporary bodies:

Laozi states, “that which causes me great harm is that I have a body.” Zhuangzi states, “One hundred bones and six organs, which one do I take as intimate?”

老子曰：「吾所以有大患，為吾有身」；莊子曰：「百骸六藏，吾誰與為親？」(100)

¹⁶ The choice to translate 理 as “sequence” here derives from the temporal context.

Waking from sleep again and again to discover one's temporary partner, as well as bidding farewell to body after body while fading into nothingness, could be expected to blunt the novelty of births, deaths, and forms.

Unfortunately, however, trans-iterative continuity does not yield trans-iterative knowledge:

The living do not know death, yet the dead likewise do not know life. Since at its formation, it doesn't know its termination, at its termination, how could it know its formation?

生之不知死，猶死之不知生。故當其成也，莫知其毀。及其毀也，亦何知其成？(90)

Neither the living nor the dead know what awaits. The living do not know of the demise that will cap off their waning reversion and the dead do not know of the formation that will close out their waxing reversion, but presumably they also lack knowledge of past iterations. It is the sages who assure us of that which we could not otherwise know: death is as fleeting as life.

Trans-iterative continuity, like inter-iterative continuity, rests on the authority of others. Still, there is no great cause for doubt. No one knows better than the sages. While persisting within any single iteration, all things maintain an affinity with that which exceeds all iterations:

The mind and the great void alike are empty; fleshly forms and the myriad things all possess them.

方寸與大虛齊空，形骸與萬物俱有也。(100)

The source of one's trans-iterative continuity is opaque, but it could not be otherwise. Such metaphysical postulates are necessarily non-empirical. What it is that has survived its past forms and will eventually survive its present form is hard to say, yet remains worthy of contemplation:

Evidence of this coming and going and proof of this formation and destruction, I am it; since sentiment is neither that nor this, where does a heart reside?

此去來之見驗，成敗之明徵，而我皆即之，情無彼此，何處容其心乎？(90)

What one is surely exceeds what one can know.

Conclusion

In Daoist folklore, Master Lie was said to have ridden the wind, and in the fourth-century publication of the *Liezi* he can be heard reporting,

I drifted with the wind East or West, like a leaf from a tree or a dry husk, and never knew whether it was the wind that rode me or I that rode the wind. (Graham 1990, 37)

隨風東西，猶木葉幹殼，竟不知風乘我邪？我乘風乎？(127)

For some, such a claim may bolster the story that “Heaven’s Gifts” tells about the world, while others will undoubtedly see it as further evidence of irrelevance. For them, even the *Liezi*’s erudite first commentator Zhang Zhan would seem incapable of usefully contributing to contemporary metaphysical discussion. His Eastern Jin Chinese posits about continuity and other matters seem charming, but groundless.

Nevertheless, the human desire to make sense of a fundamentally senseless universe is irreproachable. Modern people and premodern people alike have needed to sort through the data available to them in order to figure out what’s what and to navigate the world day after day. Metaphysical speculation is unavoidable, and we simply need to posit more than our observations can concretely reveal.

Neo-Daoist Zhang Zhan operated with a whole set of presuppositions that the world will never know. Nevertheless, some aspects of his thinking peek through. There are two realms. The *dao* (or the *other*) belongs to one realm and nearly everything else inhabits the other. The objects of this realm persist for a time, but they are not the main show. The main show is whatever may survive their constant cycling into and out of existence. Furthermore, continuity—within, between, and across iterations—is both possible and plausible.

These are all things that one may believe. Zhang Zhan may have believed them. Even if he didn’t, theories are little more than attempts to make sense of the universe, and seen in this light, a relatively overlooked commentary from a relatively overlooked era can offer an important service. It can provide handles by which an otherwise unintelligible world can be grasped.

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