The Diversity of Perspectives on Language in Daoist Texts and Traditions

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In their award-winning essay "Incongruent Names: A Theme in the History of Chinese Philosophy," Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Hans-Rudolf Kantor, and Hans-Georg Moeller trace a sustained response to what they call the "mainstream position in the ancient Chinese philosophy of names," for which they endorse John Makeham's formulation: "Congruent names, that is, names corresponding accurately to a referent (such as *shi* [實] or *xing* [形]), were generally desired whereas incongruent names were deemed problematic" (D'Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller 2018: 307; hereafter "D'Ambrosio et al."). D'Ambrosio et al. identify a counterdiscourse, originating in *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and amplified in the Six Dynasties, which holds, in a nutshell, that names cannot perfectly correspond to any referent because reality defies specification in language.

Without oppugning their thoughtful interpretations of such texts, I would encourage D'Ambrosio et al. to abandon their characterization of this counterdiscourse as "Daoist." Anyone familiar with the extensive hierarchy of Celestial Master Daoism (e.g., Kleeman 2016: 118–124) will be nonplussed by statements like "a good Daoist will avoid accepting official positions" (D'Ambrosio et al. 2018: 310). Good Daoists have been accepting official positions for centuries. Simply put, the problem is that there is more to Daoism than *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* (and the particular *xuanxue* 玄學 interpretations that D'Ambrosio et al. privilege—more on this below).

Early Daoist documents such as *The Scripture of Supreme Peace* (*Taiping Jing* 太平經) affirm, contrary to what "Daoists" are supposed to believe, that revealed scriptures perfectly denote ultimate reality, as in this excerpt, where the Master explains why he has written the graph "ten" (*shi* 十) for the students' edification:

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"Graphs" are the accumulated graphs of the Heavenly scriptures that I am currently exposing. "Ten" [means] that the scriptures truly, faithfully, reliably, and limpidly reflect Heaven, with no misrepresentation in ten parts out of ten; there is not a single instance of equivocation. (Wang 1960: 64, my translation; cf. translation in Hendrischke 2006: 155)

No Daoist skepticism of language here! To be sure, *The Scripture of Supreme Peace* does not attribute such power to *all* language—only to the "Heavenly scriptures (*tianshu* 天書)" (with the additional stipulation that these can be understood only under the guidance of the right master). The *problématique* here, however, is not that language is inherently inadequate; rather, what has gone wrong, according to this text, is that society has venerated the wrong classics.

Other Daoist traditions are less optimistic about human language.[1] For example, in talismans (*fu* 符) one finds another attempt to represent ultimate reality, but they do not look like any graph from the ordinary writing system. Sometimes they are comprised of familiar graphs or graphic components, but, even then, always in fantastic configurations. Once again, only a master can explain their significance. (One cannot hope to learn such arcana in the wrong school.) Talismans lie somewhere between the straightforward acceptance of appropriate language in *The Scripture of Ultimate Peace* and the more skeptical positions that D'Ambrosio et al. discuss: talismans imply a recognition that the everyday written and spoken language are indeed too corrupt for any but mundane purposes, yet with the undiminished conviction that human beings can, with the right training, depict cosmic truth graphically (Raz 2012: 127–176).

The Lingbao 靈寶 sect offered another solution, namely the "Hidden Language of the Great Brahmā (Da Fan Yinyu 大梵隱語)":

The Dao said: What is said in the scripture spoken by the Celestial Venerable of the Primordial Instauration are the inner names of the highest deities and the tones of the secret rhymes of the various heavens, as well as the taboo names of the Māra Kings and the secret names of the Hundred Spirits. They are not the ordinary words of the world. Those of the highest sages who have become immortals, who are conversant with the mysterious and have mastered the subtle, can comprehend these stanzas. (J. Chen 1925 [*HY* 87: 1.18b–19b], my translation; cf. translation in Bokenkamp 1997: 409)

This text, *The Wondrous Scripture of the Upper Chapters of Limitless Salvation* (*Yuanshi Wuliang Duren Shangpin Miaojing* 元始无量度人上品妙經), includes 256 graphs of this "Hidden Language," which look somewhat like talismans, but are influenced by Sanskrit (Bokenkamp 1997: 385–389). (One readily detects such connections in terms like "Māra Kings" (*Mowang* 魔王) and, of course, the very name "Hidden Language of the Great Brahmā.") The "Hidden Language" resembles

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[1] Isabelle Robinet, referring to Inner Alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), writes: "Alchemy thus reveals itself as the heir of Zhuangzi as it pursues his reflection on the relation between word and truth, a reflection also exploited by the Chan masters. Language is only a necessary vehicle that one must transcend. The texts often express forceful opposition to words and even images and concepts, and the perversion and distortions to which they lead when they are conflated with their referents" (Robinet 1997: 229–230). The point would still stand even if we italicize *Zhuangzi* (because it is not the work of a single genius named Zhuangzi).

talismans in that it too accepts the limitations of human language (i.e., "the ordinary words of the world" [*shishang zhi changci* 世上之常辭]), but holds out the promise of a perfect language for the most rarefied persons.

Knowing the "true name" (*zhenming* 真名) of a demon is presented in another source, *The Demon Statutes of Nüqing* (*Nüqing Guilü* 女青鬼律), as the secret to dominating it:

> Herewith I record their true names in order to let these be known. As soon as you know a demon's name, its deviance does not dare to approach; if you call out the demon's name three times, its demonic *qi* will be eradicated. (*Nüqing Guilü* 1925 [*HY* 789: 2.5b], my translation; cf. translations in Raz 2012: 143 and Lai 2002: 262)

Unlike Wang Bi 王弼 or Guo Xiang 郭象, the authors—and, perhaps even more importantly, the recipients—of this text did not worry whether the "true name" might fail at the decisive moment because it is at best a "trace" (*ji* 迹) of some metaphysically anterior or ever-changing reality (D'Ambrosio et al. 2018: 316–319). Rather, both the demon and its name are conceived as essentially timeless, the former perduring until the latter is invoked.

Zhuangzi too, even as it questions the reliability of names from a philosophical viewpoint, contains strikingly (and sometimes amusingly) appropriate names. D'Ambrosio et al. refer to a couple of them: "Toeless Shushan" (Shushan Wuzhi 叔山無趾), whose feet have been mutilated (D'Ambrosio et al. 2018: 310), and "Horsehead Humpback" (Aitai Tuo 哀駘它), one of the ugliest men on earth (D'Ambrosio et al. 2018: 312). As I observed several years ago (Goldin 2005: 6–13; see also Chin 2014: 40–48), Chinese philosophical literature abounds in meaningful epithets like these—they can be understood as a literary exploration of the theme of "rectifying names" (*zhengming* 正名)—and *Zhuangzi*, far from reacting against this discourse, gleefully *participates* in it. Someone who looks like a horse-headed humpback is duly named Horsehead Humpback.

Daoist texts exhibit the ideal of rectifying names in other respects as well. A basic aspect of this theory, as D'Ambrosio et al. point out, is the notion of living up to the expectations of a certain role or office (D'Ambrosio et al. 2018: 308). Thus in *Analects* 12.11, Confucius' reply to a question about "government" (*zheng* 政) is: "Let the lord act like a lord, the minister like a minister, the father like a father, and the son like a son" (*junjun chenchen fufu zizi* 君君, 臣臣, 父父, 子子) (Cheng 1990: 25.855). The only lords worthy of the name are the ones who act as lords should. Nothing could be more Confucian. How remarkable, then, that the same trope is evident in the *Xiang'er Commentary to Laozi* (*Laozi Xiang'er Zhu* 老子想爾注),[2] which even uses the keyword "name/title" (*ming* 名) in prosecuting the argument:

> "When the Great Dao 道 decayed, humanity and righteousness came into being" [*Laozi* 18]. In high antiquity, when the Dao was employed, those who took "human" as their name all practiced humanity and righteousness; as they were of

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[2] For different theories regarding the name *Xiang'er*, see Kirkland 2004: 236 n.11 and Bokenkamp 1997: 61–62.

the same kind, the humane and righteous were not distinctive. (Rao 1956: 24, my translation; cf. translation in Bokenkamp 1997: 104)

"When the state and its families became dim and disorderly, loyal ministers came into being" [*Laozi* 18]. When the Dao was employed, thearchs and kings personally revered and practiced it. Through training, they gained insight into its intentions, thereby making themselves subservient to it and drawing near to it. No one among the officials or people failed to imitate this model. Knowing the intentions of the Dao, they held death cheap and immortality dear; they strenuously practiced loyalty and filiality; their character was simple and [*lacuna*] scrupulous. Those who took the title of "minister" were all loyal; being of the same kind, they were not distinctive. (Rao 1956: 24, my translation; cf. translation in Bokenkamp 1997: 105)

The first passage probably plays on the homophony of *ren* 人, "human," and *ren* 仁, "humane": if you are to bear the name "human," you must be humane. The next pair, *chen* 臣, "minister," and *zhong* 忠, "loyal," is not paronomastic, but the underlying logic is the same: if you are to bear the title of "minister," you must be loyal. Only in a disorderly age are humanity and loyalty noteworthy.

By now it should be clear that my critique hinges on the corpora that one is prepared to accept, and I anticipate that D'Ambrosio et al. will respond along the lines of "This is not what we meant by 'Daoism.'" Here I have a final point: it is not just that "Daoism" includes more than *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*; rather, even in the case of *Laozi*, the authors hew to one hermeneutic line and ignore all others.[3] *Xiang'er* is a commentary to *Laozi* too, and although it is often dismissed as outlandish, there is no denying that the text it aims to elucidate is the same one that D'Ambrosio et al. repeatedly cite. (For what it is worth, I do not think its exegesis of *Laozi* 18, examined above, is farfetched or derisible. Other passages in *Xiang'er* are harder to reconcile with modern tastes.) WANG Bi deserves as much credit for his brilliant interpretation of *Laozi* as he has received, but other people have read the text differently.

For example, the earliest interpreters of *Laozi* still regarded "names" as trustworthy indications of reality. In "Explaining *Lao*" ("Jie *Lao* 解老") and "Illustrating *Lao*" ("Yu *Lao* 喻老"), two partial commentaries contained in *Han Feizi* 韓非子, the word *ming* 名 is repeatedly used in the sense of "due reputation" attained by virtue of one's conduct.[4] Other Huang-Lao 黃老 sources single out mastering names as one of the keys to kingship. In the words of R. P. Peerenboom, "The sage must investigate the situation and rectify names according to objective reality" (Peerenboom 1993: 56). Crucially, according to *Names and Principles* (*Mingli* 名理), one must *follow* (*xun* 循) names, not merely assign or construct them, because they are predetermined by the cosmos.

Thus the perspective on the world of one who grasps the Dao [*lacuna*] is that, seeing the correct Dao and following its principles, he can specify the crooked

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[3] Interpretations of *Zhuangzi* before GUO Xiang are difficult to reconstruct because of the dearth of sources, but see Bumbacher 2018 for informed reflections.

[4] For example, "reputation for success" (*chenggong zhi ming* 成功之名) (Q. Chen 2000: 6.20.387) and "great reputation" (*daming* 大名) (Q. Chen 2000: 7.21.457).

and straight, the end and the beginning. Thus he can follow names and master the principles. (Wei 2004: 88, my translation; cf. translations in Yates 1997: 101 and Peerenboom 1993: 56)

Perhaps these authors would have agreed with D'Ambrosio et al. that the Dao is unnamable (*wuming* 無名), but everything else, in their view, can be correctly apperceived and specified (*ju* 舉). There many similar passages in other Huang-Lao texts such as *The Master of the Pheasant Cap* (*Heguanzi* 鶡冠子), the "Clarified Mind" ("Baixin 白心") chapter of *Guanzi* 管子, and so on—too many to cite *in extenso* here.

As is typical of traditional Chinese thought, the foregoing survey, albeit brief, has uncovered a diversity of perspectives. D'Ambrosio et al. are justified in reading a certain type of skepticism about language as a reaction to the confident, perhaps overconfident, discourse of "rectifying names," but it is misleading to label that reaction "Daoist." This would be like focusing on a feature of Christianity found in some of its many branches (say, clerical celibacy), and calling it "Christian" without qualification.

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