
**TRANSLATING EARLY CHINESE TEXTS
AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTEXTUALIZATION:
THE EXAMPLE OF CHAPTER 1 OF THE *Lǎozǐ*¹**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the issue of contextualization in translating early Chinese texts. It takes the example of Chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ*, which is analysed sentence by sentence with the focus on possible contexts in which the sentences can be read. Three types of contexts are distinguished in the article – immediate textual context, edited context, and discursive context. While the former two types of context (paragraph, chapter, book) are evident and naturally taken into account in any translation, it is stressed in this article that the discursive context is often overlooked or at least not regarded properly. The article argues that discursive context is crucial for translating early Chinese texts in general, and in particular an ambiguous text like the *Lǎozǐ*.

Keywords: *Laozi*; translation; context; textuality; Chinese philosophy

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Chapter 1² of the *Lǎozǐ* 老子³ is one of the most famous pieces of early Chinese literature and also one of the most abstruse and difficult to translate. In the following, I use Wáng Bì's 王弼 received edition of the *Lǎozǐ*,⁴ which reads as follows:⁵

<i>Dào kě dào fēi cháng dào</i>	道可道非常道
<i>Míng kě míng fēi cháng míng</i>	名可名非常名 ⁶
<i>Wú míng tiān dì zhī shǐ</i>	無名天地之始 ⁷
<i>Yǒu míng wàn wù zhī mǔ</i>	有名萬物之母 ⁸
<i>Gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào</i>	故常無欲以觀其妙
<i>Cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiǎo</i>	常有欲以觀其徼 ⁹

² Chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* in the received version of the text (for details about the extant editions, see notes 3 and 4). In the excavated manuscripts that contain this chapter (the *Mǎwángduī* 馬王堆 manuscript and Peking University manuscript; for details, see note 3), however, the chapter is placed in the middle of the text. In both manuscripts we find the order of two parts of the text – *Dào jīng* (ch. 1–37 in the received text) and *Dě jīng* (ch. 38–81) – reversed.

³ The text is also known as the *Dào dé jīng* 道德經 (*The Canonical Book of the Way and Virtue*). It is traditionally attributed to Lǎozǐ (“Old Fellow”) identified by Simǎ Qiān 司馬遷 as a Zhōu 周 royal archivist called Lǐ Ěr 李耳 living in the sixth c. BCE (cf. Loewe 1993: 269–271). This attribution as well as the dating is usually not accepted in modern Western scholarship, which dates the origin of the text to the Warring States period (453–221 BCE), most likely the fourth c. BCE (see, e.g., Henricks 2000: 1–5). Furthermore, it is assumed that the text underwent a centuries-long period of formation before it was fixed in the received form during the Hàn 漢 dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). This process is fragmentally documented by the excavated *Lǎozǐ* manuscripts, namely the *Mǎwángduī* (MWD) manuscripts (early Western Hàn dynasty, 206 BCE – 9 CE), the *Guōdiàn* (GD) manuscripts (sealed in a tomb in ca. 300 BCE), and the Peking University (PU) manuscript (early Western Han). For a full translation and discussion of the *Mǎwángduī Lǎozǐ*, see Henricks 1992; Lau 2001: 155–325. For the *Guōdiàn Lǎozǐ* manuscripts, see Henricks 2000; Cook 2012: 189–322. For the Peking University manuscript, see the edition Běijīng dàxué 2012.

⁴ The *textus receptus* of Wáng Bì's *Lǎozǐ* is the edition most commonly used from premodern China up to now. There are several extant editions of the *Lǎozǐ* – both received and excavated – as well as a number of modern critical editions. For an overview of the transmission of the text, see Loewe 1993: 271–286; Wagner 2003: 33–68. As for the name “Wáng Bì's *Lǎozǐ*”, it refers to the most famous and influential commentary to the text by Wáng Bì (220–249 CE). It should be noted, however, that the *textus receptus* is actually different from the text Wáng Bì used, while it is virtually identical with another famous edition of the text with commentary – the *Héshàng gōng Lǎozǐ* 河上公老子. See Wagner 2003, Loewe 1993.

⁵ This wording of the chapter is Wáng Bì's *textus receptus*. We find textual variants in this chapter in the *Mǎwángduī* manuscripts, the Peking University manuscript, and the “real” Wáng Bì's *Lǎozǐ*, as reconstructed by Rudolf Wagner (2003). I add the different readings of each line in the following footnotes. Throughout this paper I quote *Lǎozǐ* chapters primarily from Wáng Bì's *textus receptus*, unless a comparison with other editions is needed. Wáng Bì's *textus receptus* is always quoted according to Lóu Yǔliè 2008.

⁶ *Mǎwángduī* manuscripts (both A and B): 道可道也，非恒道也。名可名也，非恒名也。See Gāo Míng 1996: 221; Lau 2001: 266. The Peking University manuscript has 道可道，非恒道也。名可命，非恒名也。The substitution of *héng* 恒 (which we find in both Western Hàn manuscripts) for *cháng* 常 (in all later editions) is due to a tabooing of the word *héng* after the death of Emperor Wéndì 文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE, personal name Liú Héng 劉恒).

⁷ Wáng Bì's *Lǎozǐ* as reconstructed by Wagner: 無名萬物之始 (Wagner 2003: 119). MWD manuscripts: 无名萬物之始也。See Gāo Míng 1996: 222; Lau 2001: 266. PU manuscript: 無名萬物之始也。See Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

⁸ The MWD manuscripts and PU manuscript add a final *yě* 也 to this line, like in the previous lines. See Gāo Míng 1996: 222; Lau 2001: 266; Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

⁹ For these two lines, *Mǎwángduī* manuscripts A and B differ slightly from each other and contain several problematic characters. The two lines in the MWD reading can be summarized as follows (for details and discussion, see Gāo Míng 1996: 223–225): 故恒无欲也，以觀其所眇。恒有欲也，以觀其所噉。The wording in the PU manuscript is almost similar; see Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

Cǐ liǎng zhě tóng chū ér yì míng

Tóng wèi zhī xuán

Xuán zhī yòu xuán zhòng miào zhī mén

此兩者同出而異名¹⁰

同謂之玄¹¹

玄之又玄眾妙之門¹²

When reading the existing translations of this text into various European languages, one basic observation can be made. The translators often include rich references to elucidate the complexities of the text at the lexical and syntactic level, as well as the complexities of the textual context (the chapter, or the *Lǎozǐ* as a whole). Seldom, however, does one encounter attempts at contextualizing individual terms or passages as belonging to specific discursive practices.¹³ The textual context of the book is often preferred, which adds to the idea of the unique nature of the text (created according to the traditional dating and status of the *Lǎozǐ* as the first book of Chinese philosophy).¹⁴ Besides, the context of “Daoism” is often employed, which is a retrospective term of doubtful value for reading Warring States texts.

The absence of discursive contextualization of individual terms or structures often results in translations that simply leave the text’s vagueness not only unexplained (explanation may not be fully possible anyhow) but even untouched. I would argue, however, that the vagueness of an original text in Classical Chinese on one hand, and the vagueness of a modern translation on the other, is not the same thing – the translator always makes choices and in a vague translation these choices are simply not made clear to the reader. It must be the task of the translator to firstly understand the text itself in all its complexity and, secondly, transform this understanding into the target language (using footnotes or longer commentaries, if it is impossible directly through translation alone).

Compare, for example, the following translation of the beginning of chapter 1 by D. C. Lau (2001: 2–3):

The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way;

the name that can be named is not the constant name.¹⁵

道可道，非常道。

名可名，非常名。

In D. C. Lau’s book this translation is left practically uncommented; the translator does not answer the questions his translation may evoke:

(1) “The way that can be spoken of”. We can easily base our understanding of “the way” on the context of the whole *Lǎozǐ*. The *Lǎozǐ* speaks frequently of “the true way”

¹⁰ Wáng Bì’s *Lǎozǐ* as reconstructed by Wagner lacks the initial *cǐ* 此 (Wagner 2003: 120). The same is true for the MWD and PU manuscripts, which, in addition, omit *ér* 而. See Gāo Míng 1996: 227; Lau 2001: 266; Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

¹¹ The MWD manuscripts connect this phrase to the previous line: 異名同胃. See See Gāo Míng 1996: 227; Lau 2001: 266. The same is true for the PU manuscript; see Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

¹² MWD and PU: *miào* 眇 for *miào* 妙. See Gāo Míng 1996: 222; Lau 2001: 266; Běijīng dàxué 2012: 144.

¹³ For example, the words *dào* 道 and *míng* 名 have variable and very distinctive discursive uses across the ‘landscape’ of early Chinese texts. I argue that we should ask, in the first place, what is the particular discourse at play in the given context, and translate the term or passage in light of it. See my discussion of ‘discursive context’ later in this paper.

¹⁴ In some translations, the syncretic nature of the *Lǎozǐ* is stressed – see, for example, Lau 2001: ix–xl. Still, however, D. C. Lau’s concern seems to be the unique nature of the syncretism, rather than discursive diversity.

¹⁵ We can find a very similar rendering of the first two lines in many other translations. Cf., for example, Křebsova 1997: 29; Kral 1994: 39.

(as compared to other “ways”), which guides processes in nature as well as the proper ordering of society. The phrase “that can be spoken of” is problematic – the book really “speaks of” it a lot. In the context of the *Lǎozǐ* it is said repeatedly that the way cannot be “named” (*bù kě míng* 不可名), but *kě míng* is evidently different from *kě dào*.

(2) “Is not the constant way?” “Constant” is a very vague term, and better contextualization of *cháng* is needed. Moreover, although there are chapters in the *Lǎozǐ* where the “true *dào*” the text speaks of is represented as something lasting from ancient times to the present,¹⁶ many other chapters (or sometimes the very same chapters) stress its abstruseness, imperceptibility, and changeability.¹⁷ There, we can ask, in what sense is it “constant”?

(3) “The name that can be named is not the constant name”. If the meaning of “the *dào* that can be spoken of” is difficult to grasp and the “constant *dào*” too vague, this phrase then is a complete mystery. It makes no sense, and there are no other instances of “names being named” or “constant names” not only in the *Lǎozǐ* but in the whole body of early Chinese literature. Moreover, this translation obviously parallels the “constant way” and the “constant name”, as if both referred to some “constant” mysterious entity. There is, however no support for this reading in the *Lǎozǐ*. On the contrary, the way is said to have “no constant name” (道無常名) in chapter 32 (Lóu 2008: 81).

Chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* is definitely difficult to translate. In this paper I do not intend to present just another translation, and surely not one I would consider “definitive” in the sense that it solves all the problems presented by the text. Instead, my ambition is to expose the textual and discursive possibilities we must consider when reading the chapter and thus present various possible contexts in which the chapter *could be read*. Indeed when translating a text written in classical Chinese, the translator has to make choices based on four types of contexts: the lexical and syntactic context, the immediate textual context, the edited textual context, and the discursive context.

First, the text must be fully decoded on the *lexical and syntactic level*. The words and their grammatical functions must be identified. For example, in the first line of the *Lǎozǐ*, we get the following:

Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào. 道可道，非常道。
'Dào that can be dào-verb-ed, is not *cháng*-modified dào.'

This semi-finished translation makes the syntax of the sentence completely clear. The semantics is, however, not clear at all. Only the words *kě* 可 and *fēi* 非 can be unequivocally translated on the basis of a purely lexical and syntactic analysis. All the other words (left in *pinyin* within the English sentence above) require contextualization and cannot be translated without it.

Second, we must take into account the *immediate textual context*, which can further establish the meaning of a word. This context consists of a sentence or textual unit.¹⁸ It

¹⁶ *Lǎozǐ* 14; 21. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 31–32; 52–53.

¹⁷ *Lǎozǐ* 4; 8; 14; 21; 25; 41. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 10; 20; 31–32; 52–53; 62–63; 111–113.

¹⁸ It is difficult to precisely define the term *textual unit*. Here I tentatively define it as a piece of text structured by internal criteria – a continuous narrative or dialogue, continuous exposition on a given topic. For the problem of “textual unit”, see, e.g., Boltz 2005: 50–78.

is, of course, often difficult to define what “immediate” means. I define it for the purpose of this paper simply as the section of a text that clearly forms a homogeneous statement (a piece of text that clearly “belongs together”). Usually, a sentence is a safe example of an immediate textual context, such as the following sentence from *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*:

Shāng wáng dà luàn, chén yú jiǔ dé. 商王大亂，沈于酒德。
 ‘The Shang king was extremely disordered and sunk into the power of alcohol.’¹⁹

In this sentence, the modifier *jiǔ* 酒 (alcohol) contextualizes *dé* 德 in a specific, less usual manner. It makes clear that *power* (*dé*) refers here to a distinct characteristic of alcohol (its power, the threat of alcohol addiction) and not, for example, to the virtuous qualities of a sagely ruler (a common meaning of *dé*). The immediate context, however, does not necessarily answer all the questions the text elicits – the text can be vague and equivocal, like, for example, the first sentence of the *Lǎozǐ* quoted above (and chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* as a whole too). The immediate textual context can be a longer section of a text as well – a continuous narrative, dialogue, clearly framed exposition on a theme, a whole chapter. In these cases, however, questions about the text’s integrity may arise that are difficult to answer – see below my discussion of the edited context.

The immediate textual context may also include certain formal features we often find in texts written in Classical Chinese, especially various forms of parallelism.²⁰ These formal features are often key principles of textual construction and must be taken into account in the process of establishing meaning for a text. For example, the first two sentences of the *Lǎozǐ* are parallel, and this feature contributes substantially to the formation of the meaning of the text:

Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào. 道可道，非常道。
 Míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng. 名可名，非常名。

There are more parallel structures in chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ*, and their potential implications are complex. They will be discussed below.

Third, we must consider the *edited textual context*. All *received* early Chinese texts traditionally dated to the Warring States period (453–221 BCE) or earlier are *edited*. They certainly include a large amount of Warring States (or older) material, but some parts can be later (typically Western Hàn). Above all, though, the received form of this material in its entirety (for example, the *Lǎozǐ*) is the product of later editing during the Hàn dynasty or even later.²¹ The prevalent view in the recent scholarship has it that before the Hàn, the texts circulated as relatively short textual units and were put together in various ways over centuries of circulation.²² The excavated manuscripts corroborate

¹⁹ *Lǔshì chūnqiū* 16/1.3. Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 374.

²⁰ For various formal features contributing to the construction of meaning in early Chinese texts, see Gentz and Meyer 2015.

²¹ On text circulation and book formation in early China, see, e.g., Li Ling 2004; Boltz 2005: 50–78; Fischer 2008–2009: 1–43; Meyer 2011; Richter 2013; Defoort and Standaert 2013.

²² It must be noted, however, that views on this question vary widely. There are influential scholars, both in China and in Western academia, who tend to accept traditional dating and notions of authorship.

this view.²³ This interpretation means, above all, that received texts contain a great deal of heterogeneous material that may have originated at different times and in different social contexts and discursive practices.²⁴

Acknowledging the composite nature of early Chinese texts has an unavoidable impact on translating them. If we read a text as a homogeneous whole, we naturally compare words and expressions across the text and build the translation within the context of the whole text. (In other words, we take the whole book as the immediate textual context.) But the composite nature of early Chinese texts problematizes this approach because different parts of the text may have originally belonged to different discourses and different textual practices, and may have even originated during different periods of time. Thus, the approach to translating early Chinese texts advocated in this paper is based on the conviction that it is the task of the translator to *retain discursive differences*, as long as they are discernible.

Having pinpointed the composite nature of early Chinese texts as a factor with crucial impact on the reading strategy we should adopt when approaching the texts, I must add the following: It does not mean that these texts cannot be read as *books* (as meaningful wholes). It only means that we must be more careful when reading a meaning into these texts. Just as we are supposed to read the texts closely, with perfect understanding of the complexities of the language in which they are written (Classical Chinese), I argue that we must be equally sensitive to the discursive practices that are at work in these texts.

Finally, the *discursive context* must be considered. For the reasons stated in the above discussion of the edited context, I believe it is necessary to establish the discursive context(s) for the text we are translating. In Classical Chinese many characters represent a number of different words with several meanings. Syntactic patterns in concrete cases are often open to multiple interpretations, and the textual context itself may not suffice to narrow the range of possible meanings either. Choosing the most appropriate meaning of a word and interpreting the syntax of a sentence often relies on correctly identifying the discourse the text represents.

The key questions we must ask when translating a text like the *Lǎozǐ* are: What are the actual discursive uses of a word, a term? Which of these are instantiated in the passage in question? In seeking out answers, it is necessary to realize that various discourses are spread across the Warring States texts and do not necessarily conform to the established classifications of “philosophical schools” or other traditional categories. While it may be viable to conceive of a “Confucian discourse”, for example, it is probably less helpful to think of a “Daoist discourse”, since “Daoism” is a much vaguer and more artificial category.²⁵ Above all, however, many early Chinese discourses are shared across classifica-

For the *Lǎozǐ*, see, e.g., Li Xuéqín 1995; Liú Xiàogǎn 1994. Liú Xiàogǎn is the main proponent of the traditional view in the West. See Liu 2014a.

²³ See especially Richter 2013: 22–35.

²⁴ I use the word *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense to mean a set of (usually unspoken) rules of what can be said in a given social and historical context. Foucault defines discursive practice as “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function” (2004: 131).

²⁵ For problems concerning the traditional categories of “philosophical schools”, see Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003; Smith 2003.

tions of texts established ex post, and many do not have a “name” within the traditional classification framework.

Consider, for example, chapter 18 of the *Lǎozǐ*, where the discursive practice at play is quite evident but still, as we shall see, requires careful examination:

<i>Dàdào fēi, yǒu rényì;</i>	大道廢，有仁義；
<i>Zhìhuì chū, yǒu dàwěi;</i>	智慧出，有大偽；
<i>Liùqīn bù hé, yǒu xiàocí;</i>	六親不和，有孝慈；
<i>Guójiā hūnlùn, yǒu zhōngchén.</i>	國家昏亂，有忠臣。

When the great way is discarded, morality appears.
When there is intelligence, great deceitfulness appears.
When the clan is not in harmony, loving care for parents appears.
When the state is in disorder, loyal ministers appear.²⁶

This piece of text is rather unproblematic, and it is basically translatable on the lexical and syntactic level.²⁷ The expression *liùqīn* 六親 presents the only problem. Most modern interpreters follow the medieval commentators, who, beginning with Wáng Bì, understood this term to mean ‘the six family relations’, that is, the relationships between father and son, older and younger brothers, husband and wife.²⁸ There are, however, a few earlier instances of this expression, dating mostly to the Hàn dynasty but also possibly to the Warring States. One of the earliest, found in Jiǎ Yì’s 賈誼 (ca. 200–169 BCE) *Xīnshū* 新書 actually contains a rather detailed description of the term, which differs from that of later commentators. According to the *Xīnshū*, *liùqīn* refers to the six generations of one’s clan as they stem from one “father” to the next generation.²⁹ The meaning of the term thus seems to be simply ‘clan’ (or ‘kin’), similar to the more frequent *jiǔzú* 九族. The other Hàn or Warring States occurrences of the term are less specific but seem to confirm the *Xīnshū* interpretation rather than that of later commentators.³⁰

A full understanding of the chapter requires discursive contextualization. The text contains substantive references to the Confucian discourse; it discusses morality (*rényì*), loving care for parents (*xiàocí*), and loyal ministers (*zhōngchén*). These three concepts associated with the Confucian discourse “appear” when another set of categories is abandoned or in a chaotic state – the great way (*dàdào*), the clan (*liùqīn*), and the state. In the context of this chapter, the *way* clearly means “order”.³¹ The nature of this order is not specified, although it obviously is one that existed prior to the advent of Confucian val-

²⁶ Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 43–45.

²⁷ There is, however, an important textual problem. The second line of this chapter is missing from *Lǎozǐ Guōdiàn* manuscript C (see Cook 2012: 311–313). Some modern editions (e.g., Chén Gǔyǐng 2009) omit it based on the GD manuscript. The following discussion of this chapter shows, among other things, that its parallelism and overall meaning would work better without the second line. The inclusion or omission of this sentence, however, does not make a difference to the argument here.

²⁸ Wáng Bì: “Six relations’ refer to the relations between father and son, older and younger brothers, husband and wife.” 六親，父子兄弟夫婦也。See Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 43.

²⁹ See *Xīn shū* 8.4. Jiǎ Yì 2000: 317.

³⁰ For example, *Lièzǐ* 1.10: “There are people who leave their native village, part from their kin, abandon their family business, roam in the whole world and do not return back – what kind of people are they?” 有人去鄉土，離六親，廢家業，遊於四方而不歸者，何人哉？ In: Yáng Bójūn 1979: 27.

³¹ The complexities of the meanings of the word *dào* are discussed below in this paper.

ues and institutions (and is thus “more natural”). This understanding of the ideal social order is in tune with many instances of the word *dào* in the edited context (of the *Lǎozǐ* as a whole). The same can be said of the “clan” (natural organization of the large family prior to the Confucian ordering of family relations) and the “state” (the natural, or “right” organization of human society prior to Confucian-style government). We find numerous instances of the clan and the state being organized “naturally” in the received *Lǎozǐ*. In sum, this chapter critiques Confucian values and institutions – they are said to appear only when true order disintegrates. Identifying the discursive context (Confucian vs. “Laoist”) is crucial for understanding this chapter.

The lexical problem concerning the expression *liùqīn* discussed above has an impact on the discursive contextualization of the chapter that should not be overlooked. Some translations of this chapter insert the following addition to the text: “When the great way is discarded, [the idea of] morality appears” (they also amend the third and fourth sentences in a similar way).³² The insertion of “the idea of” (or “the concept of”, “the demand of”, etc.) suggests that the “natural” conditions stated in the left column of the text³³ already include the Confucian values stressed in the right column (probably in a “spontaneous”, non-discursive way). It is as if Confucian family relations already existed in a “natural” state in the ideal human society, and the decline represented by Confucianism was just a less perfect way to the same goal marked by defining specific values and enforcing their realization in human society.

It is crucial to note that this common approach to the chapter is, first, brought to play solely by reading *liùqīn* as ‘six family relations’. As we have seen, this reading is based on medieval commentators, Wáng Bì above all. If *liùqīn* means ‘six family relations’, then the Confucian web of human relations is present already in the “natural” state, at least in rudimentary form. If we, however, read this expression as ‘the clan’, then there is nothing necessarily Confucian about the *dào*-clan-state triad. Second, the reading of Daoist texts as a sort of “spontaneous Confucianism”, in the sense that they share values with it but differ in the ways to implement them (spontaneously by human nature in the *Lǎozǐ* or *Zhuāngzǐ*, by enforcement in Confucian texts) is a specific discourse developed by *xuānxué* 玄學 thinkers in the third century CE. Wáng Bì’s commentary, the origin of the “six family relations” commentarial entry to the *liùqīn* sentence, was one of the most important texts promoting this discursive practice.

Thus, two different discursive contexts are established for the chapter by choosing one of the two possible explanations of the expression *liùqīn*. In one, the chapter is read simply as a critique of Confucian values. In the other reading, it is not a critique of the Confucian values as such but only of a certain way of implementing them in human society.

In the following, I will go through chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* sentence by sentence and term by term and try to distinguish the possible contexts into which we can read the chapter.

³² E.g., Henricks 2000: 112; Sehnal 2013: 139; Král 1994: 49.

³³ Except the second line, which is omitted in GD manuscript C.

Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào. Míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng. 道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。

(1) *dào* 道

The character 道 refers to two words, *dǎo* (written also 導) and *dào*.³⁴ *Dǎo* means ‘to guide, lead’ (somebody). *Dào* as a noun means ‘way’ in the physical sense (road), and it also has several abstract meanings, including ‘method’ (the correct way to do something), ‘order’ (the correct way of doing things implemented or realized in human society, the human body, or the natural world), and ‘teaching’ (the correct way of doing things expressed in words). As a verb, *dào* means ‘speak’, and it has several other verbal meanings linked to the concept of ‘way’: ‘regard as the right way’ or ‘follow as the right way’, ‘walk through’, and ‘to be in conformity with the right way’.

When denoting the natural world order, *dào* is often used in a context traditionally understood as “Daoist” and associated primarily with the *Lǎozǐ*.³⁵ In this discursive context, *dào* refers to hidden principles of the world (of reality as whole) and simultaneously to a source of life through which everything exists (sometimes even conceived of as a metaphysical entity beyond the empirical world). In this cosmological discourse, *dào* has the following characteristics:³⁶

- It is more fundamental than other traditional cosmological categories. (It was here before Heaven and Earth, it shelters Heaven and supports the Earth, etc.)
- It cannot be grasped with senses and cognition. (It is “empty”, “formless”, etc.)
- It has universal characteristics; it is both big and small, and so forth. (“Unroll it, and it blankets the six directions, roll it up, and it is less than a handful.”³⁷)
- Things are born of it and raised by it; everything becomes what it naturally is by virtue of it (“by virtue of it, mountains are high”³⁸).
- If the ruler rules by means of the *dào*, the world is in order.

In sum, the *dào* is omnipresent but invisible and unknowable; it is the hidden principle or structure of reality. It is manifested in the world by the fact that the world is orderly – mountains are high, valleys are low, animals fly, fish swim, and so forth. The *dào* makes every single thing what it is. In some texts, in this context it is called the *dé* 德, ‘the inner natural characteristics of every being’.³⁹ The *dào* is universal, the *dé* is particular; the *dé* is the *dào* in things.⁴⁰ This world-structuring power is, furthermore, usable by the sage-rul-

³⁴ This short description of the semantic range of *dào* 道 is based on the Thesaurus Linguae Sericae.

³⁵ *Dào* appears rarely with this meaning in the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子, but it is common in some later texts, like the *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子.

³⁶ The most comprehensive and explicit account of this kind of cosmology is probably the “Original *Dào*” chapter (*Yuán dào* 原道) of the *Huáinánzǐ*. See Lau and Ames 1998 for a full translation of this text.

³⁷ “The Original Dao” (chapter 1 of the *Huáinánzǐ*). In: Lau and Ames 1998: 60–61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 62–63.

³⁹ *Dé* has several interrelated meanings: ‘the inner natural characteristics of every being’, ‘inner power’, or ‘charisma’. All these meanings refer to substantial features of a thing or a person as manifested outwardly. The most common meaning, ‘charisma’ or ‘virtue’ of a ruler, indicates ruling by moral qualities (as manifested outwardly), in contrast to ruling by force.

⁴⁰ The idea is explicitly expressed in this passage in “Techniques of Mind I” in the *Guānzǐ* (the text is corrupted, as is usual in the *Guānzǐ*; in the following, various amendments and alternative readings have been proposed, according to Rickett 1998: 77 and Li Xiángfēng 2004: 770–772): “The *dào* of heaven is empty and without shape. Being empty, it cannot be bent. Being without shape, it cannot be

er and can be implemented to make order in human society as well (the meanings of cosmic order and method of government are typically interrelated). In the following, I call this *dào*-based cosmology the “cosmological discourse”.

When reading and translating early Chinese texts, it is often very difficult to distinguish this cosmological discursive context from more common usages of the word *dào* – a specific order or method. Moreover, the characteristics of the cosmological *dào* summarized above can sometimes be applied to a specific *dào* as well. For example, in chapter 30 of the *Guānzǐ*, we read the following:

道者誠人之生也。非在人也。而聖王明君善知而道之者也。是故治民有常道，而生財有常法。

The way [of right government] truly produces men but it is not inherent in them. The sage kings and enlightened rulers are those who are good in understanding this and guiding them [the people] properly. Therefore, there is a constant way in governing people and there are constant models for producing wealth.⁴¹

In this passage, we learn of the “constant way” (*cháng dào*), and there is also a verbal use of the word *dào*. Both these features can be reminiscent of the first line of the *Lǎozǐ*. It is only through the context of the chapter that we learn the *dào* here means a specific and practical method of government of a (broadly speaking) “Legalist” nature. *Dào* here clearly refers to specific methods of government only. Despite this, in another section of the chapter, the *dào* is said to have an “empty set-up” (*xū shè* 虛設) – it exists only when embodied in the right ruler, and it cannot be embodied in reality and thus known to everyone. The image of the hidden and mysterious way pervades many discourses on government, not only the cosmological discourse.

In the *Lǎozǐ*, we find clear examples of the cosmological discourse but also many sections describing a way of government where the presence of the cosmological discourse cannot be ascertained. The following example from chapter 25 is definitely an instance of the cosmological discourse:

有物混成，先天地生。[...] 可以為天下母。吾不知其名，強字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

There is a thing born out of chaos, preceding the birth of heaven and earth. [...] It can be regarded as the mother of the world. I do not know its name but when forced to designate it, I call it “the way”. When forced to name it, I call it “great”.⁴²

opposed. This is why it permeates all things and does not change. *Dé* is the abode of *dào*. All things obtain it to live. The living beings obtain it so that they can perform [the behaviour allotted to them by] the essence of *dào*. Therefore ‘*dé*’ (= the natural characteristics of a given thing) means ‘*dé*’ (= obtain). ‘To obtain’ refers to the [characteristics] things obtain so that they are what they [naturally] are. When ‘doing nothing’, it is called *dào*. When abiding in things, it is called *dé*. This is why there is no difference between *dào* and *dé*. 天之道，虛其無形。虛則不屈，無形則無所位，無所位，故遍流萬物而不變。德者道之舍，物得以生。生知得以職道之精。故德者得也，得也者，其謂所以然也，以無為之謂道，舍之之謂德。故道之與德無間。In: Li Xiāngfèng 2004: 770.

In *Hánfēizǐ* 20 (chapter “Analysis of *Lǎozǐ*”, *Jiě Lǎo* 解老), a similar argument is made by using the opposites of *dào* and *lǐ* 理 (= ‘structure’). In: Wáng Xiānshèn 1998: 146–147. For a Czech translation, see Zádrapa 2011: 275.

⁴¹ *Guānzǐ* 30. In: Li Xiāngfèng 2004: 563. The character 姓 in the original edition has been amended to 生, according to Li Xiāngfèng 2004: 563.

⁴² *Lǎozǐ* 25. In: Lóu Yùliè 2008: 62–63.

The following introductory sentence from chapter 37, however, can clearly be read in two ways:

道常無為而無不為。侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。

(1) The true way is constantly doing nothing and still nothing is left undone. If the dukes and kings were able to keep to it, the myriad things would get civilized by themselves.

Or:

(2) The true way is to constantly do nothing and still nothing is left undone. If the dukes and kings were able to keep to it, the myriad things would get civilized by themselves.⁴³

The idea of “doing nothing” in the *Lǎozǐ* can be applied to both the way and the ruler, and in this chapter both readings are possible. The import of the text is not changed much by choosing one translation over the other. We must be aware of the fact, however, that the former translation brings into play the cosmological discursive context, while the latter employs just the common meaning of a governance method.⁴⁴ This is an important difference, which can be less clear in and have more important consequences for the translation of other passages.

Most interpreters of the *Lǎozǐ* consider chapter 1 a clear instance of the cosmological discursive context. This view can be supported by the immediate context of the chapter – the “nameless” is described as “the beginning of all things, the mother of all things”. These formulations clearly place the chapter within this cosmological discourse. The actual instance of *dào* in the first line can, however, still refer to specific governing methods. Choosing one of the discourses makes an important impact on the translation and eventually the whole meaning of the translated text. It will be demonstrated below.

The verbal form of *dào* in the first line of the *Lǎozǐ* can be translated in several ways: the way that can be *spoken of*, the way that can be *walked*, the way (the method of doing things) that can be *followed*, and the way that can be *regarded as* the true way. It is probably impossible to contextualize the expression *kě dào*, since it is not a part of a distinctive discourse. When trying to assess the possible translations of *kě dào*, we must turn to the modifier *cháng*, which can shed more light on it.

(2) *cháng* 常

Understanding the meaning of the modifier *cháng* (*cháng dào*) in chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* is no less important than comprehending other terms. This word has several inter-related meanings that all refer to regularity and predictability (= regular, as a rule, constant, enduring, normal, common, ordinary). Since *dào* means ‘order’, the first choice for translating *cháng dào* should probably be “regular, unchanging order” (or regular “way”, of course). This might fit well into the context of many other expressions conveying the meaning of stable order (“regular laws”, for example, *cháng fǎ* 常法).

⁴³ *Lǎozǐ* 37. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 90–91.

⁴⁴ The method of governance can be derived from the model of cosmological *dào*, which it clearly is in many instances in the *Lǎozǐ*. It does not change the important fact, however, that two different discourses are employed.

Cháng can also be used as an abstract noun meaning ‘regularity, regular procedure, regular principles’. Consider these two examples from the *Hánfēizi*:

穆公問之曰：寡人嘗聞道而未得目見之也，願聞古之明主得國失國何常以？

The duke Mù [of Qín] asked him: “I have heard about the way but I have never seen it with my own eyes. I wish to hear about the regular principles by which the enlightened rulers of the ancient times gained and lost their states.”⁴⁵

故先王以道為常，以法為本。

Therefore the former kings took the way as the regular principle and the laws as their basis.⁴⁶

These two sentences belong to a discourse (represented by the *Hanfēizi* and many other texts) that emphasizes the importance of regularity in governance. The “way” (*dào*) is a natural part of this discourse, and its regular implementation in government is appreciated.

The *Lǎozǐ* lacks comparatively clear passages. Sometimes, *cháng* is positive, but the immediate context is never clear. *Cháng* can also be negative, however, like in this passage from *Lǎozǐ* 49:

聖人無常心，以百姓心為心。

The sage does not have a constant mind-set. He takes the people’s mind-sets as his mind-set.⁴⁷

This sentence brings into play another discourse, one associated with Legalist and Daoist writings, but above all with those texts that are traditionally labelled as “Huáng-Lǎo”⁴⁸ This attribution is not without its problems,⁴⁹ but, for the sake of convenience, in the following I will call this discourse the “Huáng-Lǎo discourse”. One of the principle ideas in this discourse is the absence of the ruler’s “mind-set” (that is, intentions, plans, etc.), while the activity of the ruler rests in reacting to outer impulses only. In this dis-

⁴⁵ *Hánfēizi* 10. In: Wáng Xiānshèn 1998: 70.

⁴⁶ *Hánfēizi* 19. In: Wáng Xiānshèn 1998: 126.

⁴⁷ *Lǎozǐ* 49. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 129.

⁴⁸ The attribution of specific texts to “Huáng-Lǎo” is extremely problematic, and in this paper I refer to “Huáng-Lǎo” as a type of discursive practice present in various texts classified usually as either “Daoist” or “Legalist”. The most conspicuous feature of Huáng-Lǎo discursive practice can be described as using “Daoist” terms in a clearly political fashion. For a more detailed discussion of the content of “Huáng-Lǎo”, see Chen and Sung 2014. The term *Huáng-Lǎo* appears several times in Simǎ Qiān’s *Records of the Grand Scribe* (*Shǐjì* 史記) as well as in the *History of the Western Hàn* (*Hànshū* 漢書). Modern scholars often identify Huáng-Lǎo with “Daoism”, as conceived of in these texts, which is supposed to be the principal understanding of Daoism during the Western Hàn dynasty. This is a political Daoism with a pronounced affinity for those thinkers identified as “Legalist”. For this understanding of Huáng-Lǎo, see Chen and Sung 2014 and other chapters related to Huáng-Lǎo in Liu 2014b. The concept of Huáng-Lǎo is set against the later (Eastern Hàn and onwards) concept of Daoism based on identification of the *Lǎozǐ* and the *Zhuāngzǐ* as the principal texts (in this categorization, a larger part of the *Zhuāngzǐ* does not belong to Huáng-Lǎo, see Liu and Wong 2014). It is this concept of “Daoism” that is still prevalent today (and not that of Huáng-Lǎo, which is viewed as a distinct Western Hàn interpretation of Daoism).

⁴⁹ For a thorough criticism of identifying the term *Huáng-Lǎo* with Western Hàn Daoism (see the previous note) and a different definition of the term, see Ess 1993.

course, it is wrong to be *cháng* because it is inflexible. The correct way of doing things is, on the contrary, based on flexibly reacting to changing circumstances.

So, if we get back to the first line of the *Lǎozǐ* – 道可道非常道 – how are we supposed to contextualize *dào* and *cháng* in this sentence? Based on lexical and syntactic considerations, three possible translations emerge:

(1) *Dào that can be expressed in words is not the constant dào.* In this variant, the first *dào* is negative, the second is positive (“the true way”). *Cháng* is positive too (the correct way is constant or regular). This reading assumes the true *dào* to be a regular principle or procedure, and it may be understood in the cosmological discursive context as well as in the context of specific governing methods. In this reading, *dào* refers to regularity in nature and in human society.

(2) *Dào that can be followed (or: walked, regarded as the true dào)⁵⁰, is not regular dào.* In this reading, the first *dào* is positive (the true *dào*), and “*cháng dào*” is negative (regularity is unwelcomed). Again, the meaning of *dào* can be either cosmological or refer to governing methods.

(3) *Dào that can be followed (walked, regarded as the true dào), is not an ordinary dào.⁵¹* This is a variant of the previous translation. Here the “true *dào*” is not denied a specific feature (regularity), like in the Huáng-Lǎo discourse, but it is simply identified as ‘not ordinary’. This translation seems to reference only government methods because it is hard to imagine the difference between “true” and “ordinary” in the cosmological context.

The nature of the difference between readings (1) and (2) is significant and it must not be overlooked. It reveals the discrepancies between two discourses that inform an immense portion of early Chinese thought: human action based on following regular principles versus human action based on the proper response to changing circumstances.⁵² This difference pervades a huge number of texts across various strands of Chinese thought. It is at least interesting to note that the first sentence of the *Lǎozǐ* (known as a popular text open to many interpretations) can be read in line with both these discourses.

(3) *míng* 名

Míng means ‘name’ (noun) and ‘to name’ (verb). It also means ‘fame’ or ‘reputation’ in addition to having several other related meanings. This word figures prominently in a broad and common discourse, that of “matching names and realities” (*míng shí* 名實) or “correcting names” (*zhèng míng* 正名).⁵³ This discourse is spread across a vast range of different texts of differing traditional classifications. It is concerned with proper “nam-

⁵⁰ These possible translations have the same impact on the meaning, and we need not distinguish them.

⁵¹ This translation was suggested by Sehnal (2013: 80–82). Sehnal typically reads obscure passages in a way that rids them of any reference to a discursive context and establishes a sort of “down-to-earth”, common sense interpretation. Cf., for example, Sehnal’s reading of the first line of the famous chapter 40: “The right way produces the first thing, the first thing produces the second thing, [...], the third thing produces all things.” 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。(Sehnal 2013: 215; translation from Czech by Dušan Vávra).

⁵² The former is represented, above all, by Legalism and Confucian ritualism, the latter by Huáng-Lǎo, the five phases, or yīn-yáng discourses, many Daoist texts, especially the *Zhuāngzǐ*, and those strands in Confucianism that stress the personality of the “gentleman” (*jūnzǐ* 君子) as the source of proper decision-making.

⁵³ For a thorough discussion of the topic of “names and realities” in early Chinese thought, see Makeham 1994.

ing,” that is, attaching the correct names to the realities encountered or achieved. In texts traditionally categorized as “Legalist”, matching names (that is, appointed tasks, orders, or promises) with achievements (the results of actual work on the task) is one of the principle methods of ruling. Confucians, on the other hand, were concerned with “correcting names”. They believed that well-ordered rule depended on attaching the “true” names to (primarily) social realities. In both cases, naming is not just a formal task of “giving a name”. It was believed that “naming” has a direct and profound impact on order in human society.

The sentence “*míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng*” is one of the most abstruse in the whole *Lǎozǐ*. Its meaning is already unclear on the lexical and syntactic level. First, as was noted by Sehna (2013: 82–83), the common translation of “name that can be named” is grammatically wrong. *Míng* is a transitive verb and it forms the construction ‘to name (call) somebody something’.⁵⁴ Thus, a name cannot be “named”, but it can be “uttered.” *Míng*, however, has a different meaning. The expression “*cháng míng*” (constant name) is less clear still, and it occurs nowhere else in early Chinese literature.

The sentence is parallel to the first sentence and thus should probably be read in similar syntax. This does not help much in understanding this passage, however, because the meaning of “name” is unclear (unlike *dào*).

The text of the *Lǎozǐ* offers a possible clue for interpreting the expression *kě míng*. It is used several times in the text, and, apart from in chapter 1, it invariably refers to the *dào* that “cannot be named” (*bù kě míng*), that is, no name can be permanently attached to it. There are several instances of “naming” the *dào* as well, again with the characteristic emphasis on the provisional character of such naming.

The concept of “nameless” (*wú míng* 無名) *dào* (and, analogically, of the sagely ruler) is a constituent of the Huáng-Lǎo discourse mentioned above. In texts sharing this discourse, we can find a distinctive concept of “naming,” which bears important resemblance to the *Lǎozǐ*. Consider the following quotation from “Cleansing the Mind” (*Bái xīn* 白心), a chapter from the *Guānzǐ* 管子.⁵⁵ This text contains many difficult and probably corrupt sections, but its basic tenet is still quite evident. The text demands cleansing and quieting (*jìng* 靜) the mind, which must be devoid of all activity and only react to external stimuli. The ruler is quiet, inactive, and “nameless” (*wú míng*) and only judges and classifies (attaches “names”) to what is happening:

是以聖人之治也，靜身以待之，物至而名之。正名自治，奇名自廢。名正法備則聖人無事。

The governing of the sage is like this: He quiets his person and thus awaits what is coming. The things come and he attaches names to them. If the names are correct, things are put in order naturally on their own. If the names are not correct, things are abandoned naturally on their own. If names are correct and laws complete, the sage has no business.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ E.g., 名之以誑。 “They called him a fraud.”

⁵⁵ “Cleansing the Mind” is one of the four “Daoist” texts from the *Guānzǐ*. The others are “Inner Training” (*Nèiyè* 內業) and the “Techniques of the Mind I–II” (*Xīnshù shàng* 心術上 and *Xīnshù xià* 心術下). For a translation and discussion of these texts, see Rickett 1998: 15–97.

⁵⁶ *Bái xīn*. In: Lí Xiángfèng 2004: 789. The original text amended according to Lí Xiángfèng 2004: 792–793. Cf. a similar passage in *Hánfēizǐ* 5: “Thus [the ruler] remains empty and still and awaits

上聖之人，口無虛習也，手無虛指也。物至而命之耳。

As for the former sages, their mouth was not engaged in empty rehearsing, their hands were not engaged in empty pointing. Things appeared and they named them, and that was all.⁵⁷

是謂寬乎刑，徒居而致名。去善之言，為善之事，事成而顧反無名。能者無名，從事無事。審量出入，而觀物所載。

This is called being lenient towards punishments, merely stay and wait and attach names [to things as they appear]. If [the ruler] abandons speeches about good and [instead] does good things, the things get completed and he reverts back to the “nameless”. The capable ones are nameless [or: without fame] and in their undertakings they are without [their own] undertakings. They inspect going and entering and observe what things are carrying.⁵⁸

In this text, the ruler is engaged in “naming”, an important constituent act of his ruling practice. The ruler, however, remains hidden (“nameless”, or perhaps, “without fame”), and the act of naming is presented as a spontaneous activity based on the nature of things and the circumstances of their appearance. The ruler’s naming lies in properly reacting to situations at hand, without a rigid pre-established concept of naming. The ruler’s being “nameless” can simply stress the fact that he is the source of naming (and is not “named” himself). It can also refer to his being without reputation. The ruler certainly engages in undertakings, but nevertheless he enacts them in such a way that his subjects have no knowledge of his ruling activity.

Can this analysis of the meaning of *míng* 名 be of any help when reading chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ*? Let us check the translations of the second line against the translations of the first line stated above. Both are clearly parallel in the original and that is our main guideline to the abstruse second line.

(1) *Dào that can be expressed in words is not the constant dào*. This translation of the first line is commonly followed by the straightforward parallel line: *The name that can be named is not the constant name*.⁵⁹ However, I really cannot see what this translation is supposed to mean. It is devoid of any context, even edited context.⁶⁰ I find the parallel between *dào* and *míng* in this rendering hopelessly obscure and I see no way to solve this problem.⁶¹

what is coming. He makes names name themselves and things fix themselves. Because he is empty he understands the true essence of things. Because he is still, he understands the movements of things.” 故虛靜以待，命名自命也，令事自定也。虛則知實之情，靜則知動者正。In: Wáng Xiànshèn 1998: 26. For a Czech translation, cf. Zádrapa 2011: 126.

⁵⁷ *Bái xīn*. In: Lí Xiángfèng 2004: 802.

⁵⁸ *Bái xīn*. In: Lí Xiángfèng 2004: 794.

⁵⁹ Cf. Lau 2001: 3; Křebsová 1997: 29; Král 1994: 39.

⁶⁰ As noted above, the problem of *bù kě míng* exists in the edited context but always in relation to *dào*, not “name”. Additionally “constant name” does not appear in the *Lǎozǐ* or anywhere else.

⁶¹ It must be noted, however, that Wáng Bì’s commentary (probably the oldest extant commentary to chapter 1 as a whole) puts forth this exact rendering. Nevertheless, Wáng Bì seems to be putting the commentarial entry in a way that deliberately avoids the problem: “A way that can be spoken about and a name that can be named refer to a demonstrable process and created shape, but not to their Eternal. This is because their Eternal cannot be spoken about and cannot be named.” 可道之道，可名之名，指事造形，非其常也。其不可道，不可名也。(tr. Wagner; see Wagner 2003: 120–121). Wáng Bì comments on both *dào* and *míng* simultaneously and, moreover, takes *míng* as actually referring

(2) If we read the first line as referring to governing methods (and, by extension, to the cosmology of the *dào* as well), we could arrive at the following translation, which stresses the ordering activity of the ruler in the social world: *The way that can be followed (or: walked, regarded as the true way) is not a constant (regular) way. The names that can be regarded as true (right, correct) names are not regular (rigid, pre-established) names.*

The Huáng-Lǎo discourse, employed in this translation, puts to the fore the activity of the right ruler. The way is something to be followed by the ruler and it is not fixed – the point is in responding flexibly to the changing circumstances. The “names” (or the ruler’s act of naming) refer to the same order-making activity described more explicitly in the above passages from the *Guǎnzǐ* chapter “Cleansing the Mind”. Again, the point is in flexible ‘naming’ according to the situation at hand.

The reading of the first sentence does not exclude the presence of the cosmological discourse in the text. The way that is followed by the ruler can still be the cosmological *dào*, which would assume a close parallel between the functioning of the *dào* and the ruler. This is well-attested in the *Lǎozǐ* as well as in other texts. In this reading, the cosmological meaning of the *dào* (the undifferentiated source of the differentiated, empirical reality) is linked with the concept of naming, which is analogous (naming as making order in the otherwise undifferentiated social world).

This translation has an undeniable advantage – it constructs a clear understanding of the parallel of *dào* and *míng* that is so strongly suggested by the original text, it constructs the parallel completely in all three positions of *dào* and *míng*, and, above all, it places the *Lǎozǐ* passage into a discursive context in which the terms and concepts used in the passage have a well-attested and well-defined meaning.

***Wú míng, tiān dì zhī shǐ; yǒu míng, wàn wù zhī mǔ.* 無名, 天地之始; 有名, 萬物之母。**

(1) *wú míng* 無名

The expression *wú míng* is found several times in the *Lǎozǐ*, as well as in many other texts. *Wú míng* can mean ‘without fame’. As for the discourse of attaching proper names to realities, there are two possible lines of translation: “unnamed” or “being without naming”. The former refers to the *dào*, or the position of the ruler. The latter refers to the *dào*’s and the ruler’s lack of ordering activity towards the world. Both are common in Daoist texts and the Huáng-Lǎo discourse.

Furthermore, we can distinguish two basic connotations of *wú míng* found in different contexts: negative and positive. Negative connotations (it is wrong to be “unnamed” or “without naming”) can be found in texts occupied with the need to properly name things, either in Legalist or Confucian fashion. Being “without proper naming” refers to a disordered society and chaotic state. In the *Guǎnzǐ*, for example, we find the following:

to named things (“created shapes”). In this reading a particular *dào* (process) and a particular thing both have their “that by which” they are created, called by Wáng Bì “*cháng*” (Eternal), among other expressions. It demonstrates a common feature of Wáng Bì’s commentarial practice – reducing the plethora of (often obscure) images of the *Lǎozǐ* into a well-defined set of terms. Cf. Vávra 2006.

名正則治，名奇則亂，無名則死，故先王貴名。

When the naming is correct, there is order. When the naming is deviant, there is chaos. When there is no naming at all, there is death. This is why the former kings valued proper naming.⁶²

Positive connotations (it is good to be “unnamed” or “without naming”) can be encountered in many Daoist texts and in the Huáng-Lǎo discourse. In these texts, being ‘unnamed’ is a desired state but only for the ruler and the *dào*. The ruler is expected to keep in hiding and it is precisely his hidden position (“not being there”: *wú* 無) that enables him to rule properly (and “name” properly, which can be interpreted as ‘not naming’).

In the *Lǎozǐ* (besides in chapter 1), the expression is invariably linked to the position of the *dào* or the ruler (or both):

Chapter 32:

道常無名。樸雖小，天下莫能臣也。侯王若能守之，萬物將自賓。[...] 始制有名，名亦既有，夫亦將知止，知止所以不殆。

The *dào* is constantly without naming.⁶³ Although it is small in its simplicity, nobody in the world can subdue it. If the dukes and kings could keep to it, all the things would respectfully submit on their own accord. [...] When we start to regulate things, names/naming will appear. Names/naming being already there, we must know how to bring it to a halt. Bringing it to a halt is the way how to not get into danger.⁶⁴

My translation of the first sentence, “the *dào* is constantly without naming”, already presupposes the “naming” discourse being at play here. Of course, the translation might as well be “the *dào* is constantly without name”. However, the whole context of the chapter (the immediate textual context) strongly suggests the activity of “naming” as a means to bring the world to order (the *dào* does it without naming; the ruler cannot dispense with naming but must be able to stop it in time).

The juxtaposition of *wú míng* and *yǒu míng* in this chapter presents an important edited context for chapter 1. We will get back to it below.

Chapter 37 includes another interesting instance of *wú míng* in the *Lǎozǐ*:

道常無為而無不為。侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而欲作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸。無名之樸，夫亦將無欲。不欲以靜，天下將自定。

The *dào* is constantly without action and still nothing is left undone.⁶⁵ If the dukes and kings were able to keep to it, all the things would get civilized on their own accord. If they get civi-

⁶² *Guānzǐ*, chapter 12, “Cardinal Sayings” (*Shū yán* 樞言). In: Li Xiángfèng 2004: 242.

⁶³ Other possible translations are “The *dào* is constantly without name” and “The right way is to be constantly without name/naming.” The translations differ in whether they stress the *dào* or the ruler, and the state of being nameless or the (lack of) activity of naming.

⁶⁴ *Lǎozǐ* 32. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 81.

⁶⁵ Or “The right way is to be constantly without action and still nothing is left undone.”

lized and desires still emerge, we will restrain them by means of simplicity without naming. Simplicity without naming will surely lead to absence of desires. If [we] do not [deliberately] desire to quiet them, the whole world will get stabilized by itself.⁶⁶

This chapter is in many ways parallel to chapter 32 quoted above. Here, *wú míng* is explicitly associated with the ruler's activity, which supports the idea of "naming" as a plausible framework for translating *míng*. Being "without naming" is in this chapter the correct attitude on the part of the ruler that can prevent the world from reverting to chaos. "Naming", on the other hand, would be harmful.

(2) *yǒu míng* 有名

This expression is opposite to *wú míng* and refers to the presence of fame or names (or the act of naming). In the *Lǎozǐ* it occurs twice, in chapter 1 and chapter 32. Chapter 32 brings important edited context for chapter 1; *yǒu míng* is clearly presented in chapter 32 in the context of "naming", a governing activity of the ruler (see above).

(3) *shǐ* 始 and *mǔ* 母

In chapter 1, *shǐ* ('beginning') and *mǔ* ('mother') are paralleled:

The absence of names/naming is the beginning of heaven and earth. 無名，天地之始。
The presence of names/naming is the mother of all things. 有名，萬物之母。

Wú míng and *yǒu míng* are evidently opposites. "Beginning" and "mother" should thus be read as opposite expressions in the same manner. "Absence of naming is the beginning of heaven and earth" can be read straightforwardly in the cosmological discursive context. The cosmological state before heaven and earth must be an undifferentiated state before anything was "born" and thus "named" (put in proper cosmological order). The relationship between *yǒu míng* and "mother" of all things is more complicated.

The expressions *shǐ* and *mǔ* are similarly linked in chapter 52:

天下有始，以為天下母。既得其母，以知其子，既知其子，復守其母，沒身不殆。

The whole world has a beginning that can be regarded as its mother. Once we get to the mother, we understand her progeny by it. Once we understand the progeny, we get back to hold on to the mother. Until the end we will not be in danger.⁶⁷

The chapter makes clear an important distinction between "beginning" and "mother" because it makes explicit the close connection between the mother and the progeny, that is, in the cosmological framework, between the origin of things and the things. While "beginning" seems to be simply a beginning (an undifferentiated state before heaven and earth were born), "mother" refers to that beginning too, but stresses another aspect: the beginning retains a mother-like contact with the world of which it is the beginning and the mother.

⁶⁶ *Lǎozǐ* 37. In: Lóu Yǜliè 2008: 90–91.

⁶⁷ *Lǎozǐ* 52. In: Lóu Yǜliè 2008: 139.

This difference is well in tune with the *wú míng-yǒu míng* distinction. “Beginning” belongs to *wú míng* (nothing yet there), while “mother” belongs to *yǒu míng*, the differentiated state (the empirical world being there). In other *Lǎozǐ* chapters, we find yet another similar distinction – that of *dào* and *dé*. Again, *dào* is associated with the “beginning”, while *dé* refers to the nurturing aspect.⁶⁸

As for the “naming”, both the cosmological context and the Huáng-Lǎo context are possible frameworks of this part of chapter 1. Naming can be cosmological (the birth of things from the undifferentiated state) or connected to ruling (the birth of naming, that is, governing). Moreover, it cannot be excluded that both these discursive contexts can be applied at once.

Gù cháng wú yù, yǐ guān qí miào. Cháng yǒu yù, yǐ guān qí jiǎo. 故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其微。

Compared to the previous section of chapter 1, this one seems to follow a similar parallelism in juxtaposing *cháng wú yù* 常無欲 and *cháng yǒu yù* 常有欲. “Being constantly without desires” can thus be understood as parallel to *wú míng* and “being constantly with desires” as parallel to *yǒu míng*. The expression *wú yù* appears several times in the *Lǎozǐ* in two immediate contexts: First, it is recommended to the ruler to keep the people “without desires” (*wú yù*).⁶⁹ Then, the *dào* is said to be, or the ruler is required to be, “without desires” in order to rule properly.⁷⁰

“Being constantly without desires” is meant to “observe its subtle points” (*guān qí miào* 觀其妙), “being constantly with desires” leads to “observing its fringes” (*guān qí jiǎo* 觀其微). I understand *qí* 其 here as referring to *dào* (the beginning and mother of all things), following most of the interpreters of the *Lǎozǐ*, whether pre-modern or modern ones.

The word *miào* can mean ‘mystery’, ‘subtlety’, and ‘the subtle points of something’. It typically refers (just like its synonym, *wēi* 微) to something difficult to grasp by discursive thinking but crucial to understanding the given problem. Thus, I understand it as ‘subtle points’, that is, that what is crucial to the way and difficult to understand. It can be understood only in the specific state of “being without desires”.

Jiǎo is a rare word found in chapter 1 and its interpretations vary widely. The only guidance we have is the parallelism of the text: *jiǎo* should be opposite to *miào*. In this respect, it can mean ‘to be marginal, peripheral’, similar to the much more common *mò* 末 (tip of a branch). Thus, I understand “observing the fringes” as insight into the furthest manifestations of *dào* in the world. Together “observing *miào* and *jiǎo*” refers to the capacity of observing reality, from its most minute subtleties the things originate in, up to the furthest fringes of reality’s development.

⁶⁸ See *Lǎozǐ* 10 and 51. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 22–24; 136–137.

⁶⁹ *Lǎozǐ* 3. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 8.

⁷⁰ *Lǎozǐ* 34, 37, 57. In: Lóu Yǔliè 2008: 85–86; 90–91; 149–150.

Cǐ liǎng zhě, tóng chū ér yì míng, tóng wèi zhī xuán. Xuán zhī yòu xuán zhòng miào zhī mén. 此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，眾妙之門。

The last sentence of chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ* can be understood on the basis of lexical and syntactic analysis and the immediate textual context.

I present my translation first: “These two emerge together but differ in name. Together I call them mystery. Mysterious, and mysterious again, the gate of many subtleties.”

I believe the interpretation of this final section is in fact the simplest of all from chapter 1, no matter how abstruse it may at first sound. The “two” can refer only to the repeated parallel “twins” from the previous part of the chapter: *wú míng – yǒu míng, shǐ – mǔ, wú yù – yǒu yù*. On the basis of the previous analyses it has already been repeatedly stated that these all express the twofold nature of the *dào*: it refers both to the primordial undifferentiated state before heaven and earth and to the nurturing state of “mother” of ten thousand things.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above analysis I present my own translation of chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ*:

The way that can be regarded as the right way is not a constant way.
The names that can be regarded as the right names are not constant names.
The absence of naming is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The presence of naming is the mother of all things.
Therefore, by being constantly without desires we observe its subtle points,
By being constantly with desires we observe its fringes.
These two emerge together but differ in name; together I call them mystery.
Mysterious, and mysterious again, the gate of many subtleties.

As we have seen throughout this paper, almost every line of this text can be translated in many ways. The translation presented here is thus one of many possible. The most important thing about this translation is not the individual decisions themselves but the way the decisions were made, by *contextualization*. Two types of contextualization were crucial in producing the translation: first, textual contextualization within the chapter (the chapter is interwoven with parallelisms that play a crucial role in the chapter’s construction of meaning), and second, discursive contextualization (the first four lines were translated by finding context for its terms in other related texts).

Discursive contextualization must be emphasized as the most important method used in the translation. Several discursive contexts have been suggested for various terms in the text, especially for *dào* 道, *míng* 名, *cháng* 常, and *wú míng* 無名. Discursive contextualization is based on a reading of the *Lǎozǐ* as a part of larger discourses common in Warring States philosophical thought. The advantage of this approach lies in the disambiguation of the abstruse lines in chapter 1 of the *Lǎozǐ*. While not denying the ambiguity of this piece of text as such, the paper argues that the concrete solutions offered for the

ambiguous text can convey a clear-cut and well-established meaning within the proposed discursive context.

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