


The negative words and religious turn of Laozi's Dao theory

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Besides concepts such as 'being' (有 [you]) and 'non-being' (无 [wu]), nature and the One to reveal the relationship between Dao and the phenomenal world from a positive perspective, Laozi used negative words, forming a speech system comprising 'opposite words' (反言 [fanyan]), 'forcible words' (强言 [qiangyan]) and 'non-words' (不言 [buyan]). Opposite words contradict common sense to indicate that Dao should be understood in an intuitive way. Forcible words, by analogy with natural experience, describe the perceptive factors upon seeing Dao, trying to restore the corresponding experience. Non-words declare the contradiction that Dao cannot be expressed by language and urge a leap beyond reason and speculation to encounter Dao. Early religious Daoist scholars understood the spiritual realm identified with Dao advocated by Laozi and combined the experience of seeing Dao with the belief in immortality (神仙 [shenxian]) and the alchemical arts (方术 [fangshu]) to enable the religious interpretation of Laozi's Dao theory, thus constructing the theoretical correlation between the basic principles of religious Daoism and Laozi's thought.

Contribution: This article analyses Laozi's negative words on Dao and the relationship thereof with the experience of seeing Dao, which is based on the interaction between an individual and Dao. Finally, it illustrates that the early Daoist classics studying Laozi understood the spiritual realm of Dao as underlined by negative words and combined the belief in immortality and the alchemical arts to transform Laozi's thoughts to reveal the religious philosophy in Laozi's Dao theory.

Keywords: Laozi; Dao; Daoism; negative words; the experience of seeing Dao; modes of speech.

Introduction

Across different sects and eras, religious Daoism mostly adhered to Laozi as its founder and praised *Dao De Jing* as its paramount classic. Religious Daoist scholars commented on and interpreted *Dao De Jing* and conducted impressive studies on Laozi.¹ However, they have neglected theoretical introspection on the religious turn of *Dao De Jing*, especially its relationship with Laozi's Dao theory. The meanings and forms of Dao contained in *Dao De Jing* vary, and the corresponding modes of speech are tangled and difficult to distinguish. Therefore, the key to tracing the religious and mystical interpretation of *Dao De Jing* lies in delineating the core ideological resources in Laozi's Dao theory inherited by later religious Daoism and clarifying such corresponding modes of speech.

Dao De Jing's first chapter defines Dao as an inexpressible object: 'The Dao that can be told of is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name'.² We use concepts or names when discussing general issues. This naming process clarifies the initially fuzzy and chaotic objects in original experiences, in the direction guided by language, providing stable meanings based on the objects' qualities, quantities or relationships with the world. Thus, language grants specific meanings to things and objectifies them. However, Dao avoids the power of language to concretise abstract things, because it is intangible and has no substance. Its connection with things and the world is based on the intimate relationship between an individual

1. Contemporary scholar Liu Gusheng (刘固盛) systematically reviewed the development of studies on Laozi in Daoism, including the works of ancient Daoist scholars such as Gu Huan (顾欢), Meng Zhizhou (孟智周), Zang Jin (臧矜), Cheng Xuanying (成玄英) and Li Rong (李荣) (Liu 2011). These studies on Laozi in Daoism have equally emphasised immortal belief and alchemical arts, exhibiting unique ideas and spiritual characteristics across different eras and embody a religious temperament marked by selfish departmentalism, life care and active realism (Liu 2011). This study concerned with religious Daoism, as different from philosophical Daoism.

2. References to *Dao De Jing* are given by chapter number of the edition in Wang and Lou (ed.) (2011). Most of the English translations of *Dao De Jing* are taken from Chan (1963) and no longer labelled in the text. Only a small portion is taken from Ames and Hall (2003), and if appearing, the reason for changing the translated version will be explained in the corresponding footnote.

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and Dao itself and the individual's interactive understanding of Dao. This connection surpasses the abstract and isolated impressions defined by concepts and names. However, this does not imply that the understanding of Dao can only be personal. Daoism ultimately abstracts Dao as the source of creation, indicating Dao's universal side; however, this side is behind a personalised understanding in terms of order of occurrence. Therefore, reading *Dao De Jing*, we will perceive two forms of Dao: the Dao occurring in Laozi's conscious world (i.e. Laozi's personal understanding of Dao based on his interactions) and the Dao that is the source of creation, based on the judgement of Dao as the highest-level universal resource and a product of metaphysics. Scholars who studied and annotated *Dao De Jing* since Wang Pi ([王弼], 227–249ACE) were more enthused by the latter Dao that forms the Daoist philosophical approach of Laozi's research. This approach focuses on the functional relationship between Dao and the phenomenal world, and its corresponding mode of speech is Dao's positive and conceptual statements. Specifically, it illustrates the relationship between Dao and the phenomenal world using 'being' and 'non-being', summarises the operational rules of all things in the world implemented by Dao using 'nature' and generalises the originality and universality of Dao using 'the One' and so on.³ In contrast, the former Dao, despite its more original nature and accompanying mode of speech that underlies the most mysterious and religious content in Laozi's Dao theory is often neglected, hindering the exploration of the theoretical correlation between early religious Daoism and Laozi's thought. This is a profound research deficiency in the field of Laozi's thought and religious Daoism.

Nevertheless, some scholars have noticed the non-conceptual features of Laozi's language and proposed innovative ideas. For example, Ames and Hall (2003:47) believed that the naming method in *Dao De Jing* does not aim for a fixed meaning and that such naming is 'perlocutionary rather than just locutionary, a doing and a knowing rather than just a saying'. Moreover, Graham (1989:218) focused on the illogical nature of Laozi's common metaphors and asserted that interweaving these metaphors 'is not the illustration of abstract thoughts; it is the thinking itself', concluding that *Dao De Jing* 'is the masterpiece of a kind of intelligence at the opposite pole from the logical'. Furthermore, Robinet (2022:29) highlighted *Dao De Jing*'s meticulously designed language form and 'suggests that it acquired an incantatory power through the kind of

3.'Being' and 'non-being' can be used to exemplify the limitations of using positive words to describe Dao. Dao's relation to the phenomenal world is abstracted as 'being'. Being only refers to a trend, direction or posture that renders existence rather than a form of connection, because if Dao renders existence in a fixed form, then it cannot create an infinitely rich phenomenal world. Dao is not purely 'being'. The negation of being is 'non-being', which represents an intangible, indefinable, purposeless state, independent of external causes. Thus, although 'non-being' and 'being' are differently named, they are unified in a continuous movement toward their opposite, and this process is the fundamental way for Dao to connect to the phenomenal world. In terms of Chinese philosophy's 'substance' (体 [ti]) and 'function' (用 [yong]), 'substance' refers to the essence, while 'function' refers to appearance and utility – 'non-being' and 'being' both focus on the level of 'Dao's function' (道用 [daoyong]) rather than 'Dao's substance' (道体 [daoti]). This imbalance in speech hides Dao's substance, reducing the significance of Dao's existence to theoretical fiction and separates Dao's substance and function. Moreover, static and abstract concepts will obscure the process of connecting everything with Dao in the way of 'non-being' and 'being' as well as the basis to generate the concepts themselves.

rhythmic, repetitive recitation that strengthens a practice', as has actually been done in certain religious sects. Based on these studies, this article delineates Laozi's non-conceptual mode of speech on Dao, reveals its negative characteristics and explains the direct interaction between individuals and Dao as the ultimate goal of this speech mode.

The negative words of Laozi's Dao theory

Opposite words: *Dao De Jing* incorporates common negative words on Dao. The usual format is 'Dao is not x ' or 'Dao cannot be x ', where x represents some common sense based on natural experience. For example, in Chapter 14, Laozi clearly stated that the existence of Dao is undoubtedly true; however, we 'look at it and do not see it', 'listen to it and do not hear it' and 'touch it and do not find it'. That is, outside of hearing, sight and touch, Dao cannot be grasped by perception. Moreover, Dao's function is to find the existence of all things; however, often, Laozi did not positively evaluate this great force that creates the universe and life: 'Heaven and Earth are not humane, (and) they regard all things a straw dogs' (Ch. 5) and 'the Way of Heaven has not favourites'. (Ch. 79) Being treated humanely and favoured are the natural feelings of human beings towards their nurturers, protectors and dependants; however, in the source of all existence, Dao, 'humaneness' and 'favour' are not applicable and even trigger completely opposite feelings. Words such as these comprise 'opposite words'.⁴

Laozi said that 'straight words seem to be their opposite' (Ch. 78), and while opposite words only take the form of a negative expression, they present the content of the feelings invoked by Dao. The fact that Dao is alien or even opposite to natural experience does not imply that the Dao that is active in consciousness is 'nothing'. On the contrary, the antitheses intensify the opposition between the experience of seeing Dao and the natural experiences, infinitely magnifying the differences between Dao and tangible entities. Consequently, the Dao as perceived in consciousness diverges from all known things, nature or norms. These antagonisms and differences from natural experiences invoke paradoxical feelings, for example, a thing that can give birth is not 'humane'. These constantly reinforced paradoxes reveal a unique experience field. Moreover, the emotional elements embedded in such negative words, for example, the sense of detachment and the impartiality represented by the expression 'the Way of Heaven has not favourites', are vividly real. Chapter 21 is more representative:

The thing that is called Dao is eluding and vague. Vague and eluding, there is in it the form. Eluding and vague, in it are things. Deep and obscure, in it is the essence. The essence is very real; in it are evidences. (Chan 1963:150)

4.LaFargue (1998:263) pointed out the 'polemic aphorisms' in *Dao De Jing*, which 'are directed against some common human assumptions or tendencies that they try to correct'; however, he believed that these statements do not fundamentally differ from other proverbs but are intended to provide essentially corrective and compensatory, non-stereotypical wisdom, while semantic contradictions can be understood as intentional exaggeration to attract attention. This understanding confined Laozi's wisdom to the field of natural experience, failing to grasp the efforts of these statements to surpass natural experience and conventional expressions from content to form.

'Eluding and vague' (恍惚 huanghu) describe an indistinct appearance, and due to the limitations of the visual senses, they reflect the feeling of powerlessness as the specific form cannot be explored in the experience of seeing Dao. However, intuition involves extremely active sensory factors related to the essence of life, causing the Dao that is active in the conscious world to seem to have a specific form as a perceptible thing. Thus, we gain a sense of fulfilment from the face-to-face approach to Dao. The staggered emergence of powerlessness and fulfilment establishes a direct and unmasked connection with Dao. We affirm the existence of Dao through the intuitive activity of 'seeing' (观 [guan]). Laozi said, 'Let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety, and let there always be being, so we may see their outcome'. (Ch.1) That is, Dao concretely and authentically unfolds through the process of 'non-being' and 'being', where 'non-being' should be obtained from 'subtlety' (妙 [miao]), that is, the feeling of powerlessness when seeking the source of existence and where 'being' should be obtained from 'outcome' (徼 [jiao]), that is, the sense of fulfilment when confirming the common foundation of various forms of existence. Seeing Dao is a phenomenological activity of intentionality, and Dao is the associated term of this activity. Its content comprises the emerging feelings in the process, including that of complete immersion, silence, harmony and unbridgeable alienation. These original and non-derived feelings constitute a unique pre-conceptual experience field.

To demonstrate Dao's unquestionable transcendence, Laozi often positioned it as the opposite of natural things and their attributes in opposite words. In terms of God and mode of speech, this approach is similar to the negative theology of the Christian traditions. For example, Christian negative theological terms to describe God's attributes, such as invisible, uncontainable, uncreated, uncircumcised, incomprehensible, unnamed, without beginning, unbegot, indestructible and ineffective (Rocca 2014:5-6), echo various negative descriptions of Dao.⁵

Forcible words: Although the encounter with Dao is an extraordinarily vivid experience, if the experience is not described or explained, one can question its authenticity and even reduce it to delirium and delusion. To that end, forcible words will relieve the internal tension formed by the arduousness of depicting Dao. 'Forcible words' reference the following: 'I do not know its name; I call it Dao. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it great' (Ch. 25). Reluctantly assigned, 'Dao' and 'great' do not clearly connote and extend ordinary concepts; they are symbols to functionally indicate 'that thing'. However, a name cannot sufficiently explain the specific situation of 'that thing'; one must also continue to

5. 'Negative theology often refers to a theory about how the divine predicates signify in the discipline of theology' (Rocca 2014:4), which is rooted in the longstanding study of predicates in Greece and Rome, especially Aristotle's delicate analysis of the 10 categories. Therefore, the key to revealing the transcendence, infinity and sublimity of God lies in understanding that God is fundamentally disproportionate to predicates that represent categories such as quantity, quality, relativity, position, state and acting and being acted on. However, the subject-predicate relation in the ancient Chinese language, used to write *Dao De Jing*, is relatively loose, and it emphasises the contextual meaning carried by predicates. Therefore, the negative meanings of Dao are manifested as the discord and contradiction between Dao and the common sense and conventions in the real or conceptual world.

push the forcible words until it penetrates deep into the field 'that thing' generates, that is, the experience of seeing Dao. Since natural experience is always combined with commonly used language, an analogy with natural experience can effectively speak about Dao. In terms of words, 'Laozi often used fuzzy words such as "like", "if" and "or", namely "describing arbitrarily"'⁶ (Zhang 2017:83). These analogies are as follows:

The first kind of analogy is between natural things and the experience of seeing Dao. For example, 'so abysmally deep it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening'.⁷ Ancient Chinese often uses nouns as adverbs as exemplified by the term 'abyss' (渊 [yuan]) here, which expresses two feelings: the sense of darkness and deepness of staring into the abyss are analogous to the sense of emptiness, and the secret growth of fish and grass in the abyss is analogous to Dao's inexhaustible creativity. Furthermore, Chapter 6 uses the female reproductive organ (牝 [pin]) as an image to celebrate Dao's fecundity: 'In this chapter and pervasively in the text, the image of the dark, moist, and accommodatingly vacant interior of the vagina is used as an analogy for this fertility' (Ames & Hall 2003:89).

The second kind of analogy concerns valuable judgements and the experience of seeing Dao. One of the creative achievements of ancient Chinese thought was to construct a meaningful world image with 'yang' and 'yin' (active and passive or positive and negative principles). *Dao De Jing* applies this image. However, in terms of value evaluation and selection, Laozi absolutely prioritised 'yin'. The properties of 'yin' (non-being, darkness, paleness, depth, silence, softness, femininity, maternity, etc.) that manifest in the form of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance' have become more compatible with Dao. The direct interaction with Dao clearly renders these properties more valuable. These are the mottled marks of Dao's after-flow impact on the riverbed of consciousness.

The third kind of analogy concerns the aesthetic activities and the experience of seeing Dao. For example, the realm of 'profound identification' (玄同 [xuantang]) is intensely portrayed: 'Blunting the sharpness, untying the tangles, softening the light and becoming one with the dusty world' (Ch. 56). In such a realm, contradictions and conflicts no longer exist, and even light and dust projected from all directions are harmoniously arranged. Laozi used this aesthetic ideal of near-perfection to describe the feeling of unrivalled perfection and harmony upon seeing Dao.

Whether natural things, valuable judgements or aesthetic activities, analogies to the experience of seeing Dao cannot

6. The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 老子论道，总喜用'似'、'若'、'或'等字，即是'强为之容'之意。

7. The English translation used here is Ames and Hall's version, and Chan's translation of this sentence is 'it is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things' (Chan 1963:141). The main difference between the two lies in the translation of the word 'abyss' (渊 [yuan]). The translation of Chan's emphasised the meaning of deep while neglecting the image of abyss; but Ames and Hall's version is better obviously at this point.

fully reproduce the original experience. The effect is always plausible but not equivalent, rendering an obvious negative meaning, because analogies do not comprehensively represent the richness of the conscious activity during the experience of seeing Dao but only 'draw a tiger after the model of a cat' as much as possible in relation to the experience. The imperfections of these analogies stem from the ineliminable difference in nature between the experience of seeing Dao and the experiences from the phenomenal world.⁸ Analogies, a convoluted strategy for speaking about Dao, somehow restore the atmosphere of the encounter with Dao and reawaken a certain state of mind. Deep, serene and covert moving images – 'dark, night, chasm, cave, abyss, valley, depths, womb – are present in the descriptions of Dao' (Chen 1974:53). The image choice is not necessarily arbitrary; however, by virtue thereof, a soft sense of immersion – a lingering feeling of being caressed and cared for – is awakened, one after another. Through these emotional 'signposts', the Dao that Laozi talked about appears in a calm and soothing way in one's consciousness.

Non-words: The final level of Laozi's negative words on Dao is 'non-words'. He proposed that 'nature says few words' (Ch.23) and believed the best way to teach is 'to spread doctrines without words' (Ch. 2), treating non-words as the ultimate mode of speech on Dao. What exactly are 'non-words'? Can this be literally interpreted as remaining silent? If so, in the words of Bai Juyi [白居易], a well-known poet of the Tang Dynasty:

The one who speaks does not know much and the wise man is silent, and I have heard this from Laozi. If Laozi was a wise man, why did he write a 5000-word article? (Bai & Gu 1979:716 [author's own translation]).⁹

Bai jokingly revealed the paradox of Laozi's instruction of non-words, underlining an unignorable, difficult problem for generations dedicated to studying *Dao De Jing*.

To solve this problem, we must recognise the limitations of language. Laozi said, 'he who follows Dao is identified with Dao' and relatively, he 'who abandons (Dao) is identified with the abandonment (of Dao)' (Ch. 23). The emotions and will generated upon blending with Dao are a continuous whole that cannot be cut into pieces; therefore, there is no 'abandonment'. However, language depends on denotation and denotation begins with selection. Selection foregrounds an aspect, rendering other aspects relatively invisible, dormant and withdrawn. Thus, meaning obtained by virtue of denotation tends to be frozen and monotonous, that is, language will inevitably encompass 'abandonment' due to selection. Therefore, there is a fundamental incompatibility between Dao and language, and we can only speak about Dao after giving up, 'because it inevitably gets lost in language, it evaporates

8. Feelings such as immersion, intoxication and comfort in aesthetic activities are also distinctly irrational and formally more similar to those obtained in the Dao-seeing experience; however, aesthetic activities must be mediated by specific material symbols, and this reliance on phenomena is not necessary for Dao.

9. The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 言者不知智者默，此语我闻于老君。若道老君是智者，缘何自著五千文？

in thought. By constructing, sentences immediately absorb, close, and strengthen it'¹⁰ (Jullien 2014:155, translated by the author). Moreover, speaking presupposes an attitude of keeping out of the affair and objectifying what appears in consciousness; the speaker is detached from the conscious process. Thus, speech destroys the sense of immersion in the experience of seeing Dao and disrupts the flow of consciousness. In short, it is impossible to exhaustively speak about Dao. However, opposite words and forcible words convey the impulse to speak, which is driven by a vivid experience, and complete silence is not compatible with Dao. In this way, Dao resides in a stage of 'pre-speech' intertwined with the desire to speak and the inability of one to do so.

Zhuangzi, another outstanding Daoist scholar after Laozi, concluded:

The ultimate reaches both of the Course (Dao) and of beings cannot be conveyed by either speech or silence. Only where there is neither speech nor silence does discussion really come to its ultimate end.¹¹ (Ziporyn 2020:216)

Non-words are neither a mode of speech expressed in voice or characters nor a complete silence from mouth to spirit. They comprise a volatile state between words and silence, at which one desires to speak but stops. To that end, Zhuangzi provided a poetic metaphor: 'as silent as an abyss yet sounding out like thunder'¹² (Ziporyn 2020:90); the calm water surface does not imply dead silence; however, the impermeable underwater rolls with thunderous waves, just as the empirical realm of seeing Dao is so peculiar that it evades the net woven by words. Yet, one's desire to say something to it and the impulse to speak is ever-present upon a direct encounter with Dao. To closely 'identified with Dao', one's expression must revolve around the impulse to speak, then halting, residing in the moment of speech initiation. This is the essence of non-words.

Thus, opposite words imply that seeing Dao is a unique intentional activity, and forcible words attempt to restore this original experience by analogy, easing, but not completely reconciling, the tension between language and Dao. Firmly executed opposite words or realistically portrayed forcible words do not imply that we can rely solely on language guidance to embrace Dao. In other words, language cannot bear the weight of Dao. Thus, rather than formally denying all words on Dao, non-words remind us of the inadequacy of all modes of speech about Dao, establishing constraint and balance over language. Only by abandoning excessive demands of linguistic meticulousness, one can better experience Dao's unfolding in consciousness.

10. 'Parce qu'elle se perd inéluctablement dans la parole, qu'elle s'évapore à la pensée. En construisant, les phrases aussitôt l'absorbent, la cloîrent, la raidissent' ['Because it is inevitably lost in speech, because it evaporates in thought. As they construct, the sentences immediately absorb it, cloister it, stiffen it.'].¹¹

11. The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 道物之极，言默不足以载，非言非默，议有所极。

12. The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 渊默而雷声。

The creative applications of early Daoist books to Laozi's Dao

In terms of revealing a supernatural field of experience through intricate speech strategies, Laozi's Dao theory and religious phenomenology, especially the 'numinous' theory of Rudolf Otto whose *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) inspired this study, are interesting to compare. Otto used 'numinous' to represent the divine experience of the Holy and used phenomenological methods to analyse the various elements the Holy possessed, such as 'awefulness', 'overpoweringness (majesty)' and 'urgency or energy', concluding that its essential characteristic is the 'wholly other' full of fascination (Otto & Harvey 2013:12–41). Relatively, an encounter with Dao brings about tranquillity, gentleness, harmony, impartiality and so on. A more significant comparative dimension than the differences in terms of such sensory factors concerns the transition from supernatural experience to divine concepts. Otto and Laozi both emphasised the inseparable integration of the subject and divine object in intuiting the Holy or Dao. However, this unity is broken when clarifying the object of religious belief. The Christian God is detached from the object separated from the numinous experience, whereas the belief of immortality in religious Daoism not only forcibly separates Dao as an object in the experience of seeing Dao but also reinforces the seer's subjectivity. This bi-directional transformation upon seeing Dao from the perspective of subject and object relies on early Daoist classics' creative interpretation and inheritance of *Dao De Jing*.

The Daoist classic *An Annotation of Laozi by Xiang'er* is the first to use religious thought to annotate *Dao De Jing*. *Xiang'er* fully utilises the original text of *Dao De Jing* when discussing the transcendence of Dao to elevate Dao as a divine other, completely opposite to humans: 'Dao is noble and sacred, but ultimately does not listen to humans'¹³(ed. Rao 1991:44, translated by the author). In contrast, Daoist seers can establish a direct interactive relationship with Dao, possess divine elements and surpass ordinary people; the outstanding representative is Laozi. *Xiang'er* states, 'the scattered form of the One is Qi, and the gathered form is Tai Shang Lao Jun, who governs on Kunlun Mountain forever'¹⁴(ed. Rao 1991:12, translated by the author). It deifies Laozi as an incarnation who receives the form from Dao (the One), coexists with Dao and lives alone in a famous mountain. This image differs from that of a foolish old man described by Laozi in *Dao De Jing*. Alchemists pursuing longevity provided the ideological source of Daoism in its early stages, establishing its basic values. Among them, the cultural elites noticed that Laozi's Dao was eternal and that they could appreciate the spiritual realm of Dao through Laozi's convoluted and negative speech. Therefore, Laozi's sage image transformed into a vividly enduring example that alchemists boasted of. In this creative transformation of Laozi's thoughts in religious

13.The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 道尊且神，终不听人。

14.The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 一散形为气，聚形为太上老君，常治昆仑。

Daoism, Dao and Daoist seers constitute two poles in the activity of seeing Dao, obtaining a divine position. This process transforms the vague, ambiguous and even negative language in *Dao De Jing* into an absolute affirmation and praise of the eternal divinity.

Early religious Daoism transformed Laozi's thought also with the use of alchemical arts to interpret *Dao De Jing*, which was closely related to his negative words on Dao. Because of the incompatibility between Dao and language, ways to reach Dao beyond language and reason prompted religious Daoist theorists to go beyond speculation, combine ancient health knowledge and cultivation methods together, and expand their thoughts to practical fields. For example, when interpreting Laozi's thoughts, *Xiang'er* extensively mentions cultivation methods such as treasuring essence (宝精 [baojing]), nourishing the mind (养神 [yangshen]), inhaling qi (食气 [shiqi]), concentrating on the One (守一 [shouyi]), staying in silence (守静 [shoujing]) and keeping Daoist precepts (道戒 [daojie]). These reflect a practical tendency to seek breakthroughs beyond doctrine. Through the continuous efforts of later religious Daoist scholars, a religious Daoist alchemical arts system was formed, integrating herbal ingestion (服食 [fushi]), meditation (存思 [cunsi]), outer alchemy (外丹 [waidan]), inner alchemy (内丹 [neidan]) and the art of chamber (房中术 [fangzhongshu]), among others. By the time works such as *Inner Explanations of Laozi* and *Abstracts and Explanations of Laozi* were released, the systematic use of alchemical arts to explain Laozi's thoughts had become widely adopted among religious Daoists. They read *Dao De Jing* 'as the final intellectual result of practical effects to achieve longevity, as a theoretical treatment referring to these practices and allocating to them in a coded form' (Robinet 2022:29). Furthermore, the decoding vocabulary far exceeded the original text's scope. For example, *Abstracts and Explanations of Laozi* annotates 'when gold and jade fill your hall, you will not be able to keep them' (Ch. 9) as:

primordial qi (炁 [qi]) and blood are gold, and essence is jade. If you can cultivate the One, then your body will be unobstructed from top to bottom, abdomen will thunder, limbs and joints will be strong, and eyes will be enthusiastic to correspond to the One¹⁵ (Chan 1963:150 cf. Yan 1965, [authors own translation]).

Here, 'gold' is interpreted as 'primordial qi and blood', 'jade' as 'essence' and 'guarding' as a cultivation method of concentrating on the One. These interpretations are far from what Laozi intended.

Conclusion

However, no matter how far religious Daoism has gone in expanding its alchemical arts to pursue physical longevity and immortality, it has also incorporated the spiritual goal of identification with Dao as advocated by Laozi and Zhuangzi. As the contemporary Daoist historian Hu Fuchen summarised, Those who learn the art of immortality and have made initial progress must not fail to understand the secret of the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi and devote

15.The original Chinese text of the corresponding English citation: 谓炁血为金，精为玉。子能行一，上下开通，腹中雷鸣，支节相扶，目光踊跃与一相应也。

themselves exclusively to the alchemical arts [...] there is no person in the world who really understands the way of immortality without understanding Laozi and Zhuangzi (Hu & Yan 2014:132)

In short, one can only verify Laozi's Dao through personal experience, leading to the personal practice that speech on Dao can only be an introduction rather than a conclusion. This requires flexibility in language. Negative words respond to this demand, establishing a loose semantic space to accept this indescribable thing. This is precisely because Dao and its mode of speech are expandable in that religious Daoist theorists have combined it with the belief in immortality and alchemical arts. Therefore, religious Daoism, with origins dating back to Laozi and *Dao De Jing*, is not just a temporary measure of a peripheral, informal religion that seeks to justify itself by adhering to saints and their classics, but it is founded on a profound theoretical consciousness.

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Author's contributions

Y.Y. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

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Disclaimer

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