

The Factual and Value-Oriented Nature of Chinese Taoist Philosophy of Heart-Mind

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Abstract

Taoist philosophy of heart-mind explores the nature of mind and psychological phenomena with a factual nature and guides the possibility and practical path of the sage with a value-oriented nature, and realizes the unity of the two in exploring the nature of mind and transcendence. In terms of factual nature, Taoism takes “Tao” as the metaphysical foundation and “qi” as the material basis, emphasizing the emptiness, stillness, non-action, and natural authenticity of the heart-mind, thus realizing a holistic understanding of the nature and functions of the heart-mind. In the value-oriented nature, Taoism takes “becoming a sage” as its goal, affirming the innateness and universality of Tao, believing that everyone can become a sage, and advocating that through “positive and negative cultivation”, we can remove the obscurations of innate endowments and return to the innate state. It also advocates that through “positive and negative cultivation”, the obscurations of the acquired should be removed, and the mind should be returned to the innate endowments, so as to realize the transformation from the “ordinary heart-mind” to the “sage’s heart-mind”. By encompassing both factual and value-oriented, Taoist philosophy of heart-mind offers a distinctive framework for contemporary philosophy of mind, expands the scope of psychological phenomena, and provides a holistic, non-dualistic alternative to mainstream naturalistic approaches. It thus opens new pathways for addressing the “problem of meaning” and advancing cross-cultural dialogue in the philosophy of mind.

Keywords

Philosophy of Mind, Tao, Qi, Factuality, Value

1. Introduction

The philosophy of mind is dedicated to exploring the essential attributes and func-

tional mechanisms of the mind, as well as its intrinsic connection with the world. Its core questions include: What is the mind? How does the mind work? What is the relationship between the body and the mind? These issues involve not only factual descriptions of the mind but also value-based guidance on how the mind should be cultivated and transformed.

The beginning of contemporary philosophy of mind can be traced to Gilbert Ryle's publication of *The Concept of Mind* in 1949. Through logical analysis of behavior, he dispelled the "ghost in the machine" that had haunted traditional philosophy of mind, thereby ushering in a new era of research in the field.

With the development of physics and other natural sciences, the mainstream theoretical paradigm in this field has shifted toward a naturalized philosophy of mind. Naturalists advocate that the essence of the mind must be explored within empirical sciences such as neuroscience and physics, attempting to naturalize psychological phenomena such as qualia and intentionality.

However, naturalism has encountered the interpretive bottleneck of Chalmers' "hard problem". In reflecting on this predicament, contemporary philosophy of mind has given rise to a new turn. On the one hand, the phenomenological tradition is experiencing a strong revival. Research approaches represented by the "4E Cognition" emphasize the irreplaceability of first-person experience in understanding the mind. On the other hand, emerging approaches such as the conceptual study of folk psychology, the direct perception theory of other minds, and neuroethics are flourishing. These diverse theories offer alternatives for the ontological interpretation of consciousness and have done substantial work on factual descriptions.

Likewise, the Western philosophical tradition is not lacking in discussions of value and meaning. Phenomenological investigations of the "lifeworld" and "authenticity", existentialist analyses of freedom and value, and neuroethical studies of the neural basis of moral intuitions have all addressed the value dimension to varying degrees. However, these traditions have not occupied a central place in the mainstream discussions of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind. In this regard, Chinese scholars have pointed out that the "truly hard problem" of Western philosophy of mind is not the problem of consciousness as Chalmers describes it, but rather the problem of "meaning"—that is, the question concerning the meaning of human life and the pursuit of value (Gao & Shu, 2019: pp. 93-102).

Although ancient China did not have the term "philosophy of mind", it had a long-standing tradition of the theory of mind and nature. The core concerns of this tradition resonate profoundly with contemporary Western philosophy of mind.

The ancient Chinese worshipped heaven in nature, revered the sovereign and father in human relations, and honored the heart-mind in the physical body. The "heart-mind" was regarded by the ancients as the sovereign of the body. *The Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* stated: "The heart-mind, being central, resides in the cen-

ter of the body to rule over it” (Li & Tsinghua University Center for Research and Conservation of Excavated Documents, 2018: p. 149), indicating that the heart-mind is the master of the body.

In ancient times, when Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism coexisted, the philosophy of mind became the ideological domain in which they debated with one another. Confucianism established the heart-mind as the origin and subject of moral value; cultivating the heart-mind means nurturing virtue. Taoism held that the essence of the heart-mind is “naturalness” (ziran), and the goal of self-cultivation is to attain spiritual freedom and transcendence. Zen Buddhism advocated “directly pointing to the original heart-mind, seeing one’s nature and becoming a Buddha”, regarding the heart-mind as the vehicle for religious liberation.

Thus, compared with the West, the Chinese philosophy of heart-mind places greater emphasis on the practice and cultivation of the mind. Taoism has developed a comprehensive theoretical system for the exploration of the mind along two dimensions: factual description and value guidance.

By examining the Taoist philosophy of heart-mind, this paper argues that it is neither a purely descriptive theory of the mind nor merely a value-based guide for self-cultivation. Instead, it is a unified system that lays the ontological foundation on “Tao” and “Qi” and guides the value direction with “becoming a sage”. It not only reveals what the mind “is”, but also points out how the mind should be elevated.

The paper is divided into the following parts: The first part systematically outlines the factual dimensions of Taoist philosophy of heart-mind. It examines respectively the foundational roles of “Tao” and “Qi” in the essence of the heart-mind, as well as the functions of the heart-mind in cognition and emotional regulation. The second part turns to the value dimension. It analyzes the basis for the possibility of becoming a sage and elaborates in detail on the various practical cultivation paths. The third part examines the characteristics of Taoist philosophy of heart-mind in terms of philosophical motivation, modes of thinking, and the scope of psychological phenomena. The conclusion summarizes the theoretical insights of Taoist philosophy of heart-mind and contemplates the direction it should strive for in order to truly enter the contemporary discourse system of philosophy of mind.

It should be noted that the corpus of texts examined in this paper is relatively broad, and some of these works do not strictly belong to the Taoist tradition, serving only as supporting evidence within specific domains of inquiry. This paper takes the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Zhuangzi* as its core classics, which together establish the theoretical foundation of Taoist philosophy of mind. The *Huainanzi* is treated as a major supplement, regarded as the development and synthesis of the Lao-Zhuang tradition in the Han dynasty. In addition, texts such as the four chapters of the *Guanzi*, the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon*, the *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor*, although not strictly Taoist canons, provide corroborative evidence and intellectual resources for specific issues—including the theory of jing-

qi, the mechanism of mind-body interaction, the relationship between governing the mind and governing the state, and the rational demystification of ghost beliefs.

2. The Factual Nature of Taoist Philosophy of Heart-Mind

The core task of the philosophy of mind is to explore the essence, structure, and functions of the mind. Taoist philosophy of heart-mind has constructed a factual framework with distinct Chinese characteristics in this field.

2.1. The Essence of Mind: The Unity of “Tao” and “Qi”

The Taoist exploration of the essence of mind always revolves around “Tao” and “Qi”. Laozi regarded “Tao” as the source, while Zhuangzi further internalized “Tao” into the essence of mind, thereby constructing a unique theory of the “Tao-Mind” relationship. “Qi” serves as the material basis of the mind, providing a material foundation for the functions and phenomena of the mind.

2.1.1. Tao as the Metaphysical Foundation of Origin

The initial form of the Taoist concept of “heart-mind” (xin) was systematically constructed by Laozi in the *Tao Te Ching*. Laozi concretized the ideal state of the heart-mind by likening “one who possesses an abundance of De (Virtue)” to “the newborn baby (chizi)” (Laozi, 2007: p. 133).

A newborn baby symbolizes the original, uncorrupted state of the heart-mind, untouched by worldly influences. Its characteristics of being without knowledge, without desires, and naturally non-acting are precisely the ultimate realm of the ideal heart-mind. On this basis, Laozi regarded “De” (Virtue) as the concrete embodiment of the metaphysical principle of “Tao” within the individual. He held that “one who possesses an abundance of De” is, in essence, one who possesses an abundance of Tao. Thus, the “newborn baby” becomes the symbol of a person who has attained Tao and is imbued with its De.

Through the metaphor of the “heart-mind of the newborn baby”, Laozi not only gave concrete form to the ideal state of the heart-mind but also forged an intrinsic link between Tao and heart-mind. By doing so, he established a conception of the heart-mind that originates from Tao. Consequently, the essence of the heart-mind is in communion with the intrinsic nature of Tao.

Regarding the characteristics of Tao, the *Tao Te Ching* offers numerous profound insights, and its core trait lies in “emptiness and stillness”. As Chapter 16 states: “Attain the utmost emptiness; maintain the deepest stillness. Though the myriad things arise together, I thereby observe their return” (Laozi, 2007: p. 40).

Laozi believed that through the ultimate state of emptiness and stillness, the heart-mind is able to observe the patterns of all things, thereby achieving union with Tao. “Emptiness and stillness” is not only an important means of cultivating the heart-mind but also an inherent and essential attribute of the heart-mind itself. It is both the path through which the heart-mind attains its ideal state and the intrinsic requirement of the essence of the heart-mind.

Zhuangzi inherited and developed Laozi’s concept of the heart-mind as origi-

nating from “Tao”. He also believed that the essential nature of the heart-mind is emptiness, stillness, and non-action, like a clear mirror and still water. He stated: “How tranquil is the heart-mind of the sage! It is the mirror of heaven and earth” (Guo, 2011: p. 248). However, on the practical level, the ordinary person’s heart-mind is often agitated by external things, “engaging with and becoming entangled by contacts, daily using the heart-mind in strife” (Guo, 2011: p. 27). This manifests as the proliferation of the deluded mind, which drifts far from Tao. To address this problem, Zhuangzi was the first to propose the term “spirit” (jingshen) and integrate it into his philosophical system of the heart-mind. He pointed out: “Spirit is born from the Tao, and physical form is fundamentally born from spirit” (Guo, 2011: p. 395). This clarifies the origin of both the heart-mind and the physical form, intimately linking the mind to the natural Tao.

As Mr. Xu Fuguan insightfully stated: “The core idea of Zhuangzi is to internalize Laozi’s objective ‘Tao’ into the realm of human life, and further to transform the objective concepts of ‘essence’ and ‘spirit’ into the very character of mind activity. The heart-mind is not merely a mass of flesh and blood, but rather ‘essence’; the activity emanating from this ‘essence’ of the heart-mind is then ‘spirit’. Taken together, they constitute ‘spirit’” (Xu, 2001: p. 345).

This perspective reveals the core position of “spirit” in Zhuangzi’s philosophy of the heart-mind. The heart-mind is the carrier of conscious activity. Its essence is emptiness, stillness, and non-action, yet it is easily disturbed by external things and loses its original state. “Spirit”, however, is the spiritual substance that transcends individual consciousness. Its purity must be maintained through cultivation methods such as the “fasting of the heart-mind”. “Tao”, as the source of the cosmos and ultimate truth, is the root of both the heart-mind and spirit. Thus, the heart-mind is the mirror of “Tao”, and spirit is its flowing current; the three are interconnected and fully realized in the natural and non-active state of life.

2.1.2. The “Essence-Qi” Constitutes the Material Foundation of the Body

In exploring the essence of the heart-mind, Taoist philosophy not only approaches it from the metaphysical perspective of “Tao” but also elucidates it through the material-level concept of “qi”. These two elements together constitute the integral essence of the heart-mind.

“Qi”, as one of the core concepts in Taoism, often has complex and diverse meanings. Some scholars have summarized the concept of “qi” discussed by the Taoists of the Pre-Qin period into four meanings: the qi of heaven and earth, the qi of breath, the qi of blood, and the qi of essence (Kuang & Wang, 2012: pp. 122-129).

Among them, the “qi of heaven and earth” refers to the natural qi that exists universally in the universe, which is the basic substance for the generation and operation of all things. The “qi of breath” refers to respiratory energy, which is directly related to life activities. The “qi of blood and vitality” refers to the physiological energy within the human body, which is closely related to vitality and health

conditions.

These three types of “qi” primarily belong to “qi” in the material sense. They are material existences and do not directly involve the spiritual dimension. However, the “qi of vital essence” has a unique spiritual connotation. It is the most subtle and refined part of “qi”, serving not only as the fundamental driving force of vital activities but also as the material basis for the activities of the heart-mind.

The works that closely integrate the concept of “qi” with the heart-mind and individual cultivation and provide a systematic exposition of it are the four chapters of the *Guanzi* by Jixia and the *Huainanzi* of the Western Han Dynasty. Although there is controversy among scholars regarding the academic circle to which the *Guanzi* belongs, these four chapters of *Guanzi* (including *Neiye*, *Baixin*, *Xinshu I*, and *Xinshu II*) have been widely recognized as important classics for studying Jixia Huang-Lao thought. Its “Monism of Qi” regards “qi” as the origin of all things in the universe and, on this basis, constructs a unique conception of the heart-mind.

In the view of the *Guanzi*, the essence of the heart-mind’s activity is the condensation, dispersal, and flow of “qi”. “Qi” is not only the material foundation constituting all things between heaven and earth, but also the material basis of the heart-mind: “The essence of all things is what gives them life. It generates the five grains on the earth; it becomes the arrayed stars in the sky; flowing between heaven and earth, it is called ghosts and spirits; stored within the breast, it is called the sage” (Li, 2004: p. 931). Here, “essence” is the purest and most refined state of “qi”, and the condensation of “essence-qi” is precisely the essence of the heart-mind: “Essence is the purest form of qi” (Li, 2004: p. 937). Within this framework, the human mind is not an independent entity, but rather the subtle form and dynamic manifestation of “qi”. The *Guanzi* further stated, “Qi gives rise to Tao, Tao gives rise to thought, and thought gives rise to knowledge” (Li, 2004: p. 937). This clearly reveals the relationship between “qi” and life, thought, and cognition. It is evident that “qi” constitutes the foundation of both life and consciousness.

The *Huainanzi* inherited and developed the theory of “qi”, proposing the theory of the unity of “form, spirit, and qi” for the body and mind, and systematically revealing the essence and operational mechanism of the heart-mind. Its core view holds that the heart-mind is not an independent entity, but rather a dynamic whole constituted by form, spirit, and “qi”. Only through the coordinated operation of these three can the clarity of the heart-mind and the integrity of life be achieved.

Specifically:

- 1) The body is the material carrier of life and the material basis for mental activities. The *Huainanzi* emphasized that “the body is the dwelling place of life” (Liu, 1990: p. 50), maintaining that the body is the carrier of life and the heart-mind.

- 2) The spirit is the master of life activities and has a regulatory and controlling effect on physical functions. “The spirit is the controller of life” (Liu, 1990: p. 50).

The spirit is the master of life, dominating cognitive, emotional, and volitional activities.

3) Qi is the source of energy for life, maintaining the normal functions of the body, driving various activities, and serving as the medium connecting form and spirit. That is to say, “Qi is the driving force of life” (Liu, 1990: p. 50).

The relationship among the three is expressed as “if any one loses its proper place, all three are harmed” (Liu, 1990: p. 50). Therefore, the body, the spirit, and qi must each rest in its proper place and coordinate with one another. An imbalance in any single element will lead to the collapse of the whole. The three should maintain a dynamic equilibrium.

Through the integration of “Tao” and “Qi”, the Taoist philosophy of the heart-mind has constructed a unique framework for understanding the essence of the heart-mind. “Tao”, serving as the metaphysical basis of the heart-mind, emphasizes its state of emptiness, stillness, and non-action of the heart-mind. “Qi”, acting as the material basis of the heart-mind, reveals its dynamic nature.

2.2. The Function of Heart-Mind: Cognition and Regulation

Taoist philosophy of the heart-mind not only focuses on the essence of the heart-mind but also explores its functions. From the Taoist perspective, the heart-mind is not only the subject of cognition but also plays a role in regulating emotions and behaviors.

2.2.1. Cognition Function: Introspection and Reasoning

The Taoist cognitive theory of the heart-mind is built on a critique of traditional modes of cognition. It adopts an approach of “destroying first and then establishing” to construct its own view of heart-mind cognition.

The main objects of its critique are sensory cognition and language. Laozi pointed out, “The five colors cause one’s eyes to be blinded; the five sounds cause one’s ears to be deafened; the five flavors cause one’s palate to be dulled” (Laozi, 2007: p. 29). He believed that worldly cognition relies too heavily on sensory experiences, which can easily lead one astray from one’s true nature and obscure the understanding of “Tao”.

Taoism also reveals the limitations of external cognitive tools such as language. Laozi said: “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Laozi, 2007: p. 2). He believed that language and concepts fragment and simplify “Tao”, and true wisdom cannot be fully conveyed through language.

Zhuangzi further pointed out, “Words are meant to convey meaning; once the meaning is grasped, the words are forgotten” (Guo, 2011: p. 493). He emphasized that language is merely a tool, and being obsessed with words only obscures the true meaning.

In the Taoist view, neither sensory perception nor language can attain true knowledge. The task of embodying and apprehending Tao should be entrusted to the heart-mind. As Laozi pointed out, “Without stepping out of one’s home, one

can understand the affairs and principles of the world. Without looking out through a window, one can gain insight into the natural order and the laws of the universe. The farther one travels, the less knowledge one acquires. Therefore, the sage knows without personal experience, understands without seeing with his own eyes, and accomplishes without deliberate action” (Laozi, 2007: p. 115).

This indicates that true knowledge does not rely on the accumulation of experience but originates from introspection and embodied realization. Chen Guying, in his work *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, pointed out that Laozi’s thought embodies a pursuit of “inner transcendence” (Chen, 1984: p. 242). This pursuit involves gaining insight into the essence of the universe through inner contemplation and introspection, enabling one to perceive the external world clearly.

Therefore, Taoism advocates comprehending and embodying Tao through introspection and sudden enlightenment, using the empty and still mind to reflect all things and directly intuit the truth, rather than relying on experience.

Of course, Taoism does not merely advocate the introspection of the heart-mind; it also recognizes the important role of logical reasoning in the cognitive process. The *Huainanzi* put forward the cognitive methods of “inferring the large from the small” and “inferring the distant from the near”.

The meaning of “inferring the large from the small” is that by observing minute things, one can infer the overall situation. When one sees a single leaf fall, one knows that the year is coming to an end; when one sees water freeze in a bottle, one knows that the whole world has turned cold. The meaning of “inferring the distant from the near” is to infer distant situations based on immediate things. That is, it involves moving from the near to the far and seeing the whole from a tiny part. “If three people walk side by side, they cannot even get out of the door; if they walk one following another in sequence, they can travel throughout the world” (Liu, 1990: p. 795).

This discussion embodies analogical reasoning and indicates the initial understanding and application of logical thinking in Taoism. All of these views are unified under the category of “Tao”, integrating inner introspection with logical reasoning. The core always emphasizes that “when the ‘Tao’ that conforms to the laws of nature is established, the heart-mind returns to its original and authentic state” (Liu, 1990: p. 346). It advocates a return to the original heart-mind of emptiness, stillness, and purity, integrating introspection with logical reasoning.

2.2.2. Regulatory Function: The Balance between Emotions and Behaviors

Individual self-cultivation lies at the core of Taoist thought, and cultivating the heart-mind is the key to such cultivation. From the Taoist perspective, the heart-mind is regarded as the sovereign of all faculties. It not only has the cognitive function of embodying and awakening to “Tao” but also serves to balance emotions and regulate behavior.

“When the spirit is calm, and the heart-mind is harmonious, one naturally finds

peace within. If the spirit and heart-mind cannot be pure and tranquil, then the body and spirit will be disquieted, and disease will ensue” (Zhang & Liu, 2021: pp. 7-11). As a medical classic deeply influenced by Taoist thought, the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* (*Huangdi Neijing*) also provides corroborative evidence for this view, which correlates the five psychological emotions (joy, anger, worry, contemplation, and fear) with the functions of the five internal organs, such as “anger impairs the liver” and “joy impairs the heart”. It holds that excessive emotions directly impair the functions of the internal organs.

Therefore, the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* proposed that “if one is calm and free from emptiness, the true qi will follow, and the spirit will be self-controlled” (Yao, 2016: p. 6), advocating that by maintaining the emptiness and stillness of the heart-mind, the true qi within the body can flow smoothly, and emotions can naturally be balanced.

The *Huainanzi* also emphasized the importance of nourishing the heart-mind and spirit. “In cultivating the mind and body, the highest realm is to nourish the spirit, followed by caring for the physical form...When the spirit is clear and the will is balanced, all parts of the body are at peace—this is the foundation of nurturing one’s nature” (Liu, 1990: p. 795).

This indicates that a clear spirit and a peaceful will are the foundation for the health and well-being of all parts of the body, as well as the essence of health preservation.

Taoist thought not only focuses on emotional well-being but also explores the regulatory function of the heart-mind on behavior. For an individual, behavioral activities are controlled by thinking activities, and thinking activities are, in turn, dominated by “spirit”, “essence”, and “qi”.

Therefore, the *Guanzi* proposed that “thinking generates wisdom and cognition, and wisdom enables one to know when to stop” (Li, 2004: p. 937), emphasizing that only through cognitive restraint can one avoid losing control over one’s behavior.

Furthermore, the heart-mind regulation of rulers is also related to the long-term stability and security of the country. “When the heart-mind is at peace, the country is at peace; when the heart-mind is governed, the country is governed” (Li, 2004: p. 781). That is to say, the stability of the country stems from the stability of the people’s heart-mind; the key to governing the country lies in the governance of the people’s hearts and minds.

The ultimate goal of the individual heart-mind is to achieve overall harmony in social behavior. The Taoist theory of emotional regulation not only provides individuals with a guide for self-cultivation but also offers natural principles for governing the country. Cultivating the heart-mind and governing the country go hand in hand without contradiction.

The Taoist revelation of the nature and functions of the heart-mind demonstrates the inheritance and development of self-cultivation paths across different periods of Taoism, providing operable practical methods for the transformation

from the ordinary heart-mind to the sage's heart-mind.

3. The Value Nature of Taoist Philosophy of Heart-Mind

The Taoist inquiry into the nature of the mind does not stop at the level of factual description. On the contrary, these factual descriptions themselves embody a pursuit of value, revealing what the mind ultimately serves to answer the question of how the mind ought to be. Why, then, does Taoism move from the factual to the normative?

First, Taoism holds that the original state of the human mind is continuous with the Tao. Laozi uses the metaphor of the “newborn baby” to illustrate the mind’s original state; Zhuangzi states explicitly that “spirit is born of the Tao”. This means that vacuity and non-action are not only characteristics of the Tao but also the defining features of the human mind in its original state. However, in actuality, the human mind has deviated from this original state due to the obscurations of acquired desires, knowledge, and customs, becoming an “ordinary mind” that “engaging with and becoming entangled by contacts, daily using the heart-mind in strife”. In the Taoist view, this deviation is not a neutral change but a form of “loss”—like a tree severed from its root or a stream cut off from its source. To lose one’s original nature is to live in restlessness and unfreedom. It is precisely this sense of “loss” that provides the motivation for pursuit. Only by returning to one’s original nature can the mind be liberated from turmoil and achieve genuine peace and freedom. Therefore, Taoist philosophy of mind grows naturally out of truth-seeking: revealing what the mind originally is simultaneously indicates the direction in which it ought to move.

3.1. The Basis for the Possibility of Becoming a Sage

The primary issue in achieving the transformation of the heart-mind lies in whether the sage’s heart-mind can be attained, and what the possibility and basis are for transcending the ordinary to become a sage. Based on the primordial and universal nature of “Tao”, Taoism provides a systematic answer to this question.

The possibility of transcending the ordinary to become a sage is rooted in the innate endowment of human nature. Laozi stated in the *Tao Te Ching*: “One who possesses profound De (virtue) is like a newborn baby (chizi)”, holding that the infant, being without knowledge and without desires and untouched by worldly contamination, is the concrete embodiment of the highest virtue. Human beings naturally possess the potential to connect with “Tao”, as stated in “Tao gives birth to them, and De (virtue) nurtures them” (Laozi, 2007: p. 123). Thus, “eternal De (virtue) will never be lost, and one will return to the pure and innocent state of an infant” (Laozi, 2007: p. 71). It can be seen that the true nature of human beings contains the innate endowment for saigehood. To transcend the ordinary and achieve sage is not an external imposition but a return to one’s own innate endowment.

Zhuangzi explored the theoretical basis for transcending the ordinary and at-

taining the sage from the perspective of “Tao unifies all things into one”. He used specific examples such as “ants”, “tiles and bricks”, and “excrement and urine” to illustrate the universality of “Tao” (Guo, 2011: p. 399). This universality indicates that although all things have different appearances, they all originate from “Tao”.

The “Tao” mentioned by Zhuangzi is not an external transcendent entity but a natural state internalized in the human heart. In other words, the sacred heart is not out of reach but an inherent potential in human nature.

On this basis, through self-cultivation and practice, a person can reach the realm of “Heaven and Earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me”, achieving a return to “Tao” and thus transcending the ordinary to attain sainthood.

The four *Guanzi* chapters and the *Huainanzi* supplemented this view from the perspective of the theory of qi. The *Guanzi: Neiye* stated: “The essence of all things is what gives them life. It generates the five grains on the earth; it becomes the arrayed stars in the sky; flowing between heaven and earth, it is called ghosts and spirits; stored within the breast, it is called the sage” (Li, 2004: p. 931). This indicated that “essence-qi” is the origin of all things and also the essence of the sage’s heart-mind. The sage, like all things, is merely a different manifestation of “essence-qi”, thereby essentially affirming the connection between the ordinary heart-mind and the sage’s heart-mind. The individual can achieve the transformation from the ordinary heart-mind to the sage’s heart-mind by cultivating and nourishing essence-qi.

The *Huainanzi* proposed that “one should preserve one’s true nature and without losing oneself” (Liu, 1990: p. 272). It holds that human beings are born by receiving the essence-qi of heaven and earth, and their original nature is naturally complete. One need only remove acquired obscurations through self-cultivation to manifest one’s sage nature.

3.2. The Positive and Negative Cultivation for Becoming a Sage

The Taoist philosophy of heart-mind, through the combination of “negative cultivation” (fu gongfu) and “positive cultivation” (zheng gongfu), provides clear path guidance for attaining sainthood.

3.2.1. Negative Cultivation: Purifying the Ordinary Mind

The focus of “negative” self-cultivation is to purify the ordinary mind in order to attain a sacred state of heart-mind. Worldly desires and ignorance obscure the path to the sage, causing the spiritual realm to remain at the level of an “ordinary heart-mind” or a “foolish heart-mind”. Therefore, the cultivation effort of transcending the ordinary and achieving sage entails the cleansing of desires, emotions, and cognition, as well as eliminating their negative impact on a person’s true life. Taoism summarizes “negative” cultivation as “Guarding the center” (Shou Zhong), “Fasting of the heart-mind” (Xin Zhai), and “Sitting in forgetfulness” (Zuo Wang).

To “guard the center” is to “guard the heart-mind”. How can one achieve “guarding the center”? Laozi believed that the core cultivation was “emptiness and still-

ness". "Emptiness" signified a state of a clear and pure mind achieved by discarding distracting thoughts and preconceptions. "Stillness" denoted the stabilization of the mind, free from the disturbances of desires and emotions. Only through the cultivation practice of "guarding the center" and "making the heart-mind as clear as a mirror to cleanse the mysterious" can one reach the ideal state of a "newborn baby".

The four *Guanzi* chapters also inherited the practice of "eliminating desires". For example, *Xinshu* held that "when desires are emptied, the spirit will enter its dwelling; when impurities are swept away, the spirit will remain" (Li, 2004: p. 759). This indicates that through the practice of emptiness and stillness, one transforms the heart-mind and cleanses the "abode of spirit" in preparation for receiving the "spirit". The "spirit" mentioned here refers to Tao.

Zhuangzi extended the "negative" cultivation, proposing "fasting of the heart-mind" and "sitting in forgetfulness", thus pushing the path to the sage toward self-transcendence. In *The Human World* (*Renjian Shi*), Zhuangzi, speaking through Confucius, expounded the concept of "fasting of the heart-mind": "If you unify your will, do not listen with your ears, but listen with your heart-mind; do not listen with your heart-mind, but listen with your qi" (Guo, 2011: p. 80). This emphasizes transcending sensory experience and cognitive thinking, using "qi" as a medium to directly connect with Tao.

In this process, "the original self and its spiritual world no longer exist, replaced by a purified self and spiritual world" (Yang, 2006: p. 121). "Sitting in forgetfulness" deepens the cleansing of the ordinary mind, with its core being "forgetting" and "losing". In *The Great Master* (*Dazong Shi*), Yan Hui achieved unity with Tao by "discarding limbs and body, expelling intelligence and perception, departing from form and ridding oneself of knowledge, thereby becoming one with the Great Thoroughfare" (Guo, 2011: p. 156).

This is manifested as a dual rejection of sensory input and conceptual cognition. This is essentially the dissolution of the existing "self" (wo), that is, "I lose myself" (wu sang wo). The process from "self" to "oneself" is precisely the path to transcend the ordinary and reach the sacred.

3.2.2. Positive Cultivation: Cultivation and Transformation

After eliminating the negative factors in the process of attaining sage and self-cultivation, Taoism systematically constructed a practical path for the transformation of the heart-mind. Laozi's theory of "Zhuan qi" forms the core practice of his thought on heart-mind cultivation. Here, "qi" refers to the blood-qi that forms the basis of life. Laozi believed that "Zhuan qi can gather essence-qi to make the body supple; it can be like an infant maintaining their innocent nature" (Laozi, 2007: p. 24). This reveals the unique path to achieving spiritual transcendence through the material "qi"—that is, through the cultivation of the "Zhuan qi", ultimately attaining the ideal state of the "infant", which is emblematic of the authentic state of the heart-mind.

In essence, the practice of "Zhuan qi" is the art of regulating and controlling the

blood-qi of life, and its core lies in grasping the principle of “ultimate softness”. This principle has a dual meaning: First, at the methodological level, it emphasizes conforming to the natural movement and transformation of qi, rejecting forced human intervention, thereby aligning with “non-action” (wu wei). Second, in terms of the attitude toward self-cultivation, it advocates maintaining a mind of softness, weakness, and humility, thereby achieving the cultivation sequence of “aligning with *qi* to cultivate the body, and nourishing *qi* to clarify the heart-mind”. It is precisely through this cultivation practice of integrating with natural qi that an individual can reach the ideal state of “unity with Tao”.

The *Guanzi* emphasized the cultivation practice of “Zhuan qi” from the perspective of spiritual essence-qi and proposes that “Zhuan qi is to become spirit; then all things are fully present” (Li, 2004: p. 943). This view reveals that by condensing the essence-qi of spirit, one can reach a state of communion with the divine and thus gain insight into the essential laws of all things.

Guanzi further extended the concept of “Zhuan qi” into the political realm, contending that the monarch, by regulating his own *qi*, can impact the governance of the country. He pointed out: “When the heart-mind is at peace, the country is at peace; when the heart-mind is governed, the country is governed” (Li, 2004: p. 781). Here, both “peace of mind” and “governance of the mind” depend on the regulation of “qi”.

As Zhang Lianwei said, “It (the *Guanzi*) not only explains social politics and human activities through qi but also uses it to explain various spiritual phenomena related to human beings themselves, taking the theory of qi as an important theoretical basis for the moral cultivation of the monarch” (Zhang, 2008: p. 103). This assertion reflects the unique contribution of the *Guanzi*’s theory of qi: it organically unifies the metaphysical philosophy of qi with concrete political practice, forming a theoretical system that links individual cultivation with the governance of the country.

The *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi Sijing*) puts forward the cognitive cultivation path of “preserving knowledge” (cun zhi), asserting that the sage “perceives and knows the world without succumbing to confusion”. In terms of cognitive ability, “Only the sage can perceive the formless and hear the soundless” (Chen, 2016: p. 460). The sage possesses a perceptual dimension that surpasses that of ordinary people, enabling them to grasp the metaphysical reality of the “formless” and the “soundless”. In the cognitive realm, through this special mode of cognition, the sage can attain the ultimate state of “penetrating the Great Void” (tong da xu). In terms of cognitive effect, the sage is manifested as being in communion with the essence-qi of heaven and earth and as being united and integrated with Tao. It flows endlessly and is never exhausted (Chen, 2016: p. 460). This view advocates cultivating cognition through a specific path of self-cultivation, ultimately achieving a transcendent understanding of “unity with Tao”.

The *Huainanzi* adopted a more realistic approach to self-cultivation from the perspective of human nature: “Serenity and tranquility are intended to cultivate

one's nature. Harmony and emptiness are employed to cultivate virtue. If external things do not disrupt the heart-mind, nature will have a proper abode. If one's nature does not interfere with inner peace, virtue will have a stable place. Those who can cultivate their nature, conduct themselves in the world, cultivate virtue, and enjoy their old age in peace can be said to have grasped the essence of Tao" (Liu, 1990: p. 93). This view advocates cultivating one's nature through "serenity and tranquility" and fostering virtue through "harmony and contentment with emptiness", so as to make one's nature appropriate and virtue in its proper place. One has attained the state of "appropriateness" and "right place", that is, "embodying Tao", which means the complete practice of the principles of Tao in both body and mind.

Taoist philosophy of heart-mind has constructed a complete normative system of the heart-mind, holding that the intrinsic basis for becoming a sage lies in the "Tao" inherently contained in human nature. By returning to the original state of existence, an individual can achieve the transformation from an ordinary heart-mind to a sacred heart-mind. Within this theoretical framework, Taoism creatively proposed a practical path that unifies "negative cultivation" and "positive cultivation". The former focuses on breaking through the obscuring of acquired habits, while the latter is dedicated to revealing the innate true nature of Tao. This two-way, mutually reinforcing approach provides systematic methodological guidance for the transformation of an individual's heart-mind.

4. The Characteristics of Taoist Philosophy of Heart-Mind

Taoist philosophy of heart-mind not only pursues an understanding of the essence of the mind but also emphasizes the transformation and elevation through practice. The Taoist exploration of the "heart-mind" aims at pursuing an ideal realm of personality, embodying both strong value demands and a profound humanistic spirit.

4.1. Philosophical Motivation: The Pursuit of an Ideal Personality

In the pursuit of the ideal personality, there are resonances between the East and the West. There is a transcendental reality, which is God and Tao, and there are objective values in God and Tao. Our lives will be meaningful if we form a relationship with the ultimate reality. However, they both pay much attention to our everyday life since God and Tao are both immanent in all things in nature. We can form a relationship with the ultimate reality through establishing a close relationship with the world we live in (Gao, 2023).

Taoism discusses the essence of the heart-mind in terms of "Tao" and its function in terms of "qi". Through a series of cultivation methods and practical paths, it achieves spiritual freedom in the present world, ultimately liberating the heart-mind from the shackles of artificiality (*ren wei*) and restoring it to its natural, authentic state.

Taoist philosophy of heart-mind is concerned not only with an individual's

pursuit of a valuable and meaningful life but also elevates this normative dimension to the level of social governance, closely integrating “governing the heart-mind” with “governing the country”. As Feng Youlan said, “The Huang-Lao philosophy of Jixia regards nurturing life and governing the country as two applications of the same principle” (Feng, 1983: p. 215). This idea originated from Laozi: “If the principles of Tao are applied to an individual, one’s character will be pure and genuine. If the principles of Tao are implemented in the family, the family will be prosperous and abundant. If the principles of Tao are implemented in the countryside, virtuous governance will endure for a long time. If the principles of Tao are implemented throughout the country, the blessings will be abundant and widespread. If the principles of Tao are implemented throughout the world, noble behavioral norms and moral standards will spread across the land” (Laozi, 2007: p. 130). This is in line with the Confucian concept of “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the country, and bringing peace to the world”.

“The Sage has no constant heart-mind; he takes the heart-mind of the common people as his heart-mind” (Laozi, 2007: p. 119). This is not only an exposition of the ideal state of personality but also a positioning of the ruler’s own heart-mind. In the Taoist view, rulers and common people are essentially no different. The reason why rulers stand out is that they are the first to penetrate the essence of the heart-mind and attain its ideal state through self-cultivation, thus becoming “fore-runners of awakening”. Their mission is to guide the people toward a state of “no knowledge and no desire” through exemplary conduct, leading the hearts of the people back to Tao.

The *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi Sijing*) also mentioned that the governance of a country should follow the sequence of “governing a country should start with self-improvement. A monarch must first cultivate his moral character and set a good example. A monarch should uphold impartial and fair laws and regulations and govern the country in accordance with these laws and regulations. The monarch should extend the impartial and fair laws throughout the country and govern the state by using the laws as a yardstick, so that all subjects can abide by the law and maintain social stability and development” (Chen, 2016: p. 285). Here, the “central” precisely refers to “guarding the center”. This indicates that the ruler must first elevate his own heart-mind to the realm of a sage before he can effectively govern the country.

4.2. The Mode of Thinking: The Pluralism of Taoist Philosophy

The Taoist philosophy of heart-mind holds that human beings are a unified whole composed of “qi”. However, “qi” itself contains multiple subsystems with different positions, structures, and functions, such as spirit, emotion, intention, essence, and corporeal soul. These subsystems are both independent of each other and influence one another, forming a complex mind-body system dominated by “qi” and characterized by the interaction of multiple elements. In this system, Taoism regards the mind and body as key factors in a multi-complex entity, rather than

as a simple dichotomous opposition. This view of the body and mind not only emphasizes the unity of the body and mind but also pays attention to the coordination and balance among subsystems.

For instance, as recorded in the *Huangdi Neijing*: “When pathogenic factors invade the human body from the outside, affecting its normal physiological functions, when pathogenic factors invade the internal organs, they have no fixed place to stay. When pathogenic factors invade the human body, they affect the normal functions of the internal organs. When pathogenic factors invade the human body together with the ‘constructive and defensive qi’, it causes the ethereal and corporeal souls to flee” (Tian & Liu, 2005: p. 91). This vividly illustrates the complexity of mind-body interaction and reveals the profound Taoist understanding of their relationship, demonstrating its distinctive pluralistic tendency.

The Taoist understanding of the relationship between the body and the mind is also reflected in its unified practice of “self-cultivation” and “governing the heart-mind”. Taoism holds that the health and harmony of both the body and mind are the foundation for achieving spiritual freedom and liberation. As the *Zhuangzi-Dasheng* stated: “A person with a healthy body and a vigorous spirit can be in harmony with Tao of heaven” (Guo, 2011: p. 342). This indicates that only when all the subsystems of the body (such as essence, qi, and spirit) reach a state of harmony and unity can an individual truly conform to the natural Tao.

Under this concept, Taoist self-cultivation practice does not merely pursue physical health. Instead, it attains an overall balanced state by harmonizing the various subsystems of the body and mind. Cultivating qi is essential for preserving life and health, as different states of qi are associated with various bodily conditions (Yang, Ding, Waks, & Wang, 2026). For example, Taoist practices such as “breathing exercises” and “guiding exercises” aim to facilitate the circulation of qi and blood by regulating the breath and body posture, thus influencing the tranquility and clarity of the heart-mind.

4.3. The Scope of Psychological Phenomena: Diverse Psychological Types

The scope and types of psychological phenomena with which the Taoist philosophy of heart-mind is concerned are extremely broad and diverse. It not only encompasses the relationship between the body and the mind but also delves deeply into various psychological types, such as essence, qi, spirit, numen, ethereal soul, and corporeal soul.

This expansive psychological perspective enables Taoism to understand the complexity of human psychology from multiple dimensions. For example, the *Huangdi Neijing* describes in detail how pathogenic qi affects the ethereal and corporeal souls, thereby giving rise to the psychological phenomenon of nightmares. It stated: “When pathogenic factors invade the human body, causing the ethereal and corporeal souls to flee and be unable to stay calm within, a person will experience symptoms such as restlessness during sleep and frequent dreams”

(Tian & Liu, 2005: p. 91). This description indicates that the generation of dreams is not only related to an individual's internal psychological state but also closely connected to changes in the external environment. By attending to these diverse psychological types, the Taoist philosophy of heart-mind can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the essence of psychological phenomena.

The Taoist philosophy of heart-mind, from a holistic perspective, can explain complex psychological phenomena more comprehensively and deeply. The holistic perspective emphasizes the integrity and multidimensionality of psychological phenomena, regarding their emergence and development as the result of the combined action of multiple factors.

For example, regarding the question of ghosts and spirits, Taoism attributes it to "spiritual disturbance". This passage indicates that ghosts do not exist in reality but are illusions produced by people under illness or psychological stress. Through rational analysis, Taoism attributes these psychological phenomena to sensory effects, psychological effects, and environmental disturbances, thereby avoiding blind superstition about supernatural phenomena.

Based on a rational analysis of psychological phenomena, Taoism advocates maintaining the emptiness and stillness of the heart-mind and avoiding delusory disturbances. The holistic perspective held by Taoism avoids some limitations of Western philosophy of mind and demonstrates a profound insight into complex psychological phenomena.

5. Conclusion

Taoism offers a philosophy of heart-mind that unifies the factual and value-oriented. Its factual exploration of the nature of the heart-mind inherently contains a value orientation toward transformation into the sage's heart-mind. Conversely, its normative construction of the path to sage is always grounded in a profound understanding of the actual operational mechanisms of the heart-mind. The factual dimension provides the foundation for the value-oriented dimension, and the value-oriented dimension actualizes the factual dimension. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin.

This discovery offers a twofold insight into understanding the contemporary value of the traditional Chinese philosophy of heart-mind.

First, the Taoist philosophy of heart-mind reminds us that the exploration of the "mind" should not be limited to a factual description of the mechanisms of consciousness. The mainstream Western philosophy of mind has achieved fruitful results within the naturalistic paradigm. However, its neglect of the "problem of meaning" has precisely provided room for the intervention of Taoist thought. Taoism demonstrates that the truth about the heart-mind inherently contains a value dimension. Understanding "what the heart-mind is" will eventually lead to the question of "how one ought to live".

Second, the cross-cultural value of Taoist philosophy of heart-mind does not lie in providing an alternative set of answers to contemporary philosophy of mind.

Instead, it lies in revealing that philosophy of mind itself can have different problematics and entry points. Taoist attention to diverse psychological types such as essence, qi, spirit, ethereal soul, and corporeal soul, as well as its insistence on the unity of body and heart-mind rather than their dualistic opposition, offers a new possibility for contemporary philosophy of mind that differs from the analytical tradition. This possibility expands the boundaries of philosophical inquiry into the mind and gives voice to Chinese perspectives within contemporary philosophy of mind research.

Admittedly, constrained by the historical context of ancient philosophy of mind, Taoist philosophy of heart-mind must make efforts in at least two directions if it is to truly enter contemporary academic discourse. First, it must engage in empirical dialogue with disciplines such as cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychology to examine the practical effects and mechanisms of Taoist cultivation practices. Second, it must undertake internal comparison with other Chinese intellectual traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism, to reveal the diversity and overall characteristics of Chinese philosophy of heart-mind. Only in this way can the Taoist philosophy of heart-mind contribute more scientific and pluralistic wisdom to humanity's understanding of its own heart-mind.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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