

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Kateřina Gajdošová
„Between Dao 道 and Fa 法: intertextual analysis of the Warring States period
cosmological texts.“

Submitted in 2023 at the Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Department of
Sinology, History and Culture of Asian and African Countries

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation builds an argument around the cosmologies of the recently excavated Warring States period texts that are generally classified under the Huang-Lao umbrella and have both Daoist and Legalist inclinations. While not taking these categories or labels for granted, the dissertation seeks to trace new connections between fundamental ontological concepts of these early Chinese texts, to build a coherent understanding of the cosmological presuppositions of those texts. The dissertation employs a process philosophy approach combined with comparisons with pre-Socratic thinkers and the interpretation of those texts by Heidegger. Focusing on naming and the place of names in relation to the cosmological background and the management of human affairs in these cosmological texts, the dissertation proposes a new interpretative framework to better understand these texts and the general philosophical outlook of the Late Warring States period. The dissertation contends that although the general outlook of these texts is one of impermanence and flux, language (naming) can serve both as a useful tool to provide provisional stability and integrity, allowing people and rulers to both navigate the changing world, and to rise above the prevailing discourses to become co-creators of the discourse of the world.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation is largely based on reducing our reliance on Western Essentialist philosophy when reading classical Chinese texts. Instead, it proposes a process philosophy approach. I find the dissertation largely successful in achieving its goals. It sets itself clear perimeters and does not try to achieve more than feasible. The arguments are clearly structured, and the flow of the dissertation is clear. There are no parts of the dissertation that are superfluous. The objective of the dissertation is clear, and the author keeps this objective alive and in our minds throughout the work. Both primary and secondary sources are used well, and care is taken to explicate parts where needed. Both in terms of structure, as well as visual and grammatical presentation, the dissertation reads well. The build-up of the various parts and arguments is generally clear, and the author explains well why certain sources (such as the ancient Greek ones or Heidegger) bear relevance on the topic. Since the dissertation straddles the fields of comparative philosophy and Sinology, the author has taken care to explain things that may not be obvious to readers not well versed in either of these disciplines. Overall, the author provides new angles to existing problems of interpretation by skilfully combining existing

scholarship both in Sinology and Philosophy.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. *Structure of the argument*

The main argument of the dissertation is clear and reinforced throughout the work. As can be expected from a philosophical work, the argumentation in this work is clear and conclusions are generally well supported. The flow of the arguments is clear and historical background is inserted where necessary to back up the evidence used in the arguments. The main objective of the dissertation is to argue for a new way of interpreting the examined texts, and the arguments for this objective are clear and well supported by both primary and secondary sources. Good use of non-standard sources such as the ancient Greek thinkers and Heidegger help the arguments along. As far as I can judge, being a philosopher myself, I have not spotted any faulty arguments. Of course, I have had occasion to disagree with or question some of the argumentation, and some of those disagreements and questions can be found back in section IV of this report. I would like the author to address these issues in answering these questions.

2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The author is coherent in the use of abbreviations, syntax of bibliographical references, and transcriptions of foreign terms. Care has been taken to explicate all translations by the author, or by their sources, or notes have been added when sources have been amended. The author has formatted all the footnotes correctly, and the language of the dissertation is generally grammatically correct and free of linguistic infelicities, with some minor exceptions. For example, in the table of contents, the headings 1 and 4.7 are in bold font, whereas none of the other headings are. And on page 19 line 3 we read "scholars the field of early Chinese texts", which should read "scholars in the field of early Chinese texts". There are more of such mistakes throughout the text, but in my view, these grammatical errors might arise from English not being the native language of the author, and none of these minor exceptions or grammatical errors make the dissertation hard to follow or the language unclear. The dissertation is visually well-presented, and graphically well-formatted. I have not had any reason to doubt the flow of the dissertation grammatically, visually, or graphically in any way.

3. *Use of sources and/or material*

The author works transparently with secondary sources, and most of the relevant sources are made use of. I only have one slight reservation here which I want the author to address in her answer to my first question (see IV.1). Although I am not a classical Chinese language expert, I believe that the primary sources are used properly and reference is made to their original language wherever appropriate. The same goes for the ancient Greek sources. All sources used, as far as I can judge, are employed in a methodologically correct manner. Translation choices are generally well explained or backed up. Sometimes the author could have done more to explain the choices of translation though. For example, when she introduces *dao* as "way to do, way of being" on p8, or when translating *logos* with "the Word" or "speech" on

4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

The dissertation is not merely a compilation of information. The author skilfully brings different fields together and employs insights from both Sinology and Philosophy. The author uses those insights to come to new ideas regarding the way to read classical Chinese texts, and her arguments, while primarily focused on the excavated texts mentioned, are readily extendable to other classical Chinese texts, and could even be extended to other non-Western philosophical sources. The author hints at these extensions but given the focus of the dissertation does not pursue them. The author's use of both primary and secondary sources is not confined to mere example giving, but the author uses these sources to provide new and original insights into the fields of study.

IV. Questions for the author

1. In your discussion of the *TaiYi Sheng Shui* (28ff, 79ff), you have made very little to no use of Ames and Hall's translation and interpretation of this text in their 2003 book. Why, especially since you claim that Ames and Hall form a large part of your philosophical inspiration?
2. Related to this, although you discuss the inappropriateness of a transcendental metaphysical origin approach, little thought is given to an immanent approach, which might be closer to the Classical Chinese worldview, for example 82-83, or 101-104? Or in your deliberations on the One in 3.7 (102-116)? Or by you calling 'it' "the One" with a definite article and capitalised, are you not contributing to the idea that this is a kind of metaphysical principle?
3. On p104 you introduce the wave metaphor, to imagine the cosmic One as the zero state of the oscillations between plus and minus. But if the One is always there somehow, then how can that One be only the zero state? It would then only obtain occasionally when zero state appears? But is not the One also to be found in the extreme pluses and minuses of the oscillation itself? Or in other words, this metaphor seems to suggest that the One only arises occasionally, but is not the One always everywhere?
4. Does there really need to be a sharp distinction between processual and essentialist philosophies? In your work, for example in chapter 4, it seems that Heraclitus would have some kind of position that has processual elements, but also has some essentialist elements (Logos). Would not a true processual view also imply some essentialist elements? In other words, is not a purely processual view, which can only understand the world in terms of change, unworkable and indefensible?
5. In the section of chapter 4 on the Ruists or Confucians, it seems that they do not much appreciate the change aspect of things. How do you square that with your interpretation? The reading most obvious of the rectification of names is that it seeks in a very real way to halt or even reverse change, to come to a static way of life not appreciative of change. This seems evident for example on p168: if names can be freely given and created to suit the ruler's

purposes, what are the criteria for the right way, and not the vile and confused way, to do this?

6. Related to this (169): if there is *Geworfenheit* and we move within the reality that has been pre-structured, then who is to say that this pre-structure is correct? If there is no language-reality correspondence, then any pre-given reality would be correct, which would lead to a cultural and/or ethical relativism? But the Xunzi quote on 168 makes a larger claim, namely that we all 'cognise things in the same way.' But that claim, especially in the light of the difference between Western and Chinese *Geworfenheit*, and the difference in *Entwurf*, seems wrong, especially with the ensuing discussion on names being 'received' and the ruler being a passive recipient. If language is the way things have come down to us in *Geworfenheit*, but the Legalists in 4.7 suggest that this is wrong, then where does that leave the connection between names and coming forth directly from the cosmic oneness? Does this Legalist trait not turn names into something conventional and rather arbitrary?

7. Related to this, the link to power is worth thinking more about. It seems the Legalists were happy to introduce new names (laws etc.) but reluctant to admit that others might introduce their own version of what needed to be done differently. As you say, reducing people with a different opinion to 'things'. Does that not disqualify the Legalists from a cosmological

standpoint of process and change? Which you seem to acknowledge in 177-178?

8. On p187 you speak about responsibility. How can a processual self be seen as responsible? That notion usually requires some form of essentialism, something staying the same in the individual through time, thus going against processualism. And related to this, is not the search for the axis from which to respond, the empty, focused self, displayed in various passages, exactly the search for that essential, stable self said to be missing in Chinese philosophy? If the One is the agency acting through the individual, is that not a similar move as a Western metaphysics which might see God acting in all of us? Where does that leave the individual, since presumably this individual still has the choice of letting the One act or not?

V. Conclusion

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

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Dr. STEVEN BURIK

