

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 Department of Sinology

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The thesis deals with cosmology reconstructed on the basis of selected ancient Chinese texts and some other related topics, like the theory of naming and the role of human agent in the proposed cosmology.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

This is an excellent dissertation with ambitions to significantly advance the state of research in the field. Overall, the thesis is very clear and consistent, follows a clear line of argument, works meaningfully with the sources and clearly fulfils its aims.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

The submitted dissertation is of very high quality and also very ambitious. In essence, it attempts to provide a groundbreaking theory of the nature and role of cosmological thought in ancient China. Moreover, the argumentation is very convincing. Cosmology, as the author reconstructs it on the basis of selected texts, bears the main mark of a good theory - it explains some aspects of the texts under study better than earlier theories.

The following key claims of the dissertation are the best example: We have always known that early Chinese texts contain cosmological passages contrasting the undifferentiated *dao* as the cosmic origin and the world of differentiated things that arise from the *dao* and depend on the *dao* for their existence. At the same time, we know that many of the relevant passages feature various intermediate stages of this process, often formulated using bipolar categories such as *yin* and *yang*. These intermediate stages have not usually received much attention, and the contribution of the present work, in terms of interpreting cosmological passages, lies primarily in the fact that it places these “intermediate stages” in the spotlight. In the author's interpretation, it is not things that emerge directly from an undifferentiated beginning (understood structurally, not temporally), but processes that create the constantly pulsating dynamics of all existence, and things are understood only as a by-product of these processes. The strength of this interpretation is that it makes clear sense of the notion of a processual conception of being (processual cosmo/ontology), often associated with Chinese thought

(again admittedly something “we have always known”), but never, in my view, so convincingly grasped.

The theory of naming proposed in ch. 4 is equally convincing. I will get back to some of the interesting aspects of the theory later in this review.

The whole interpretation is convincingly built on a group of key Chinese texts (mostly excavated) and supplemented by references to passages in many other texts, especially from the Masters (*zi*) category. Another framework that contributes to the persuasiveness of the interpretation is the contrast between the processuality of Chinese thought and the entity-oriented thought of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. Besides classical Chinese, the author also demonstrates an excellent knowledge of Greek philosophy and the ability to work with Greek original philosophical texts.

The only critical reservation about the structure of the work is a certain discrepancy between the original intention of the work (as the author informs us about it in the introductory chapters) and the final focus on cosmology based on key texts of archaeological origin. It seems that the author originally intended something like the final chapter 5, whereas the importance of cosmology itself (ch. 3) and the related problem of names (ch. 4) only became apparent later and became the real focus of the thesis. This is also reflected in the title, which apparently has not been changed from the original intention(?). Before the publication of the thesis (which is an obligation) I would recommend some modifications in this direction, probably basically getting rid of the dao – fa (Daoist – Legalist) dichotomy/continuity framework, which I think has been replaced by much better approach.

Formally, the work is almost flawless. Only the differences between the translations of the relevant passages in the text of the thesis and in the overall translations of the works in the appendix of the thesis, are a certain defect. And I must also mention ch.2.6, which ends with paragraphs that essentially reformulate the research questions into their final form. These paragraphs are here safely hidden from anyone looking for the research questions and are therefore a major (though not very significant in the context of the significance of the whole thesis) formal problem. It is also obviously due to the aforementioned shift from the original intent of the project.

I have the following partial reservations of methodological nature:

1. The dissertation hardly deals with the question of „how to read an ancient Chinese text“ and follows the practice of freely selecting fitting passages from anywhere to illustrate a given argument. This is not so much true of ch. 3, which analyses almost the entirety of the key texts

in detail (made possible by their relatively small size). However, in chs. 4 and 5 this is already evident, also because the scope of texts being discussed becomes much broader in these chapters. This might seem logical in a work that assumes a shared cosmological framework across texts of different origins and focus. But the existence of this shared framework is defended by the very textual passages chosen, and so the argument comes full circle, in my view. Even texts that one would not expect at first glance, such as *Xunzi*, are embedded in the given cosmological framework in this way. In the *Xunzi*, however, we find passages that would seem to be in direct opposition to the cosmological model presented. For example, those that contrast the sphere of heaven and earth with the human sphere, whereby man is supposed to create artificial things (culture) and not interfere in the affairs of heaven and earth (nature). Is this objection concerning the purposeful selection of passages relevant, according to the author, and how could it be addressed?

2. There is another distinctive theory concerning the excavated texts in question. In this theory, these texts are read as „argument-based texts“ (as opposed to most of the received texts) – Meyer 2011. Autorka mentions this book briefly but not in her analysis of the excavated texts. Is this theory irrelevant to the analyses in the present work? Could reading the text as a structured whole contribute to the argument here?

3. I see some ambiguity in the way the author works with her cosmological theory. Some passages articulate a very ambitious approach, according to which this cosmology lies at the foundation of all (early?) Chinese thought, e.g. p. 41. In other parts of the work, however, the author works with the cosmological theory as an innovation, a new and radical response to the challenges of profound social changes of the time - e.g. ch. 4.1. How can these two perspectives be merged?

At the end of my review, I have a few additional, not critical, suggestions for debate:

4. Laozi 51: This chapter is the clearest example of the relation of *dao* and *de* in the *Laozi*. Interestingly, the structure resembles closely the proposed cosmological model – *de* works as an intermediary between *dao* (generating) and *wanwu* (generated, and perhaps also co-generating). And yet, the role of the intermediary seems to be different from the proposed model and focus seems to be on things, not the processual forces generating things as by-products. How does it relate to the proposed cosmology? Is it cosmology? A different one, or a version of the same? There are more examples of this kind of relation between *dao* and *de* in the *Laozi* and especially in *Xinshu shang* 6 (numbering according to Chinese Text Project).

5. In Confucianism (in general and very broadly) the way a person becomes *junzi* also resembles closely the proposed cosmological model (or more specifically – the proposed theory of naming). In the self-cultivation process, the person receives the tradition (culture, not cosmos), is shaped/named by it and himself does further shaping/naming. There is definitely element of indeterminacy in the process etc. I am not sure it is plausible to simply say this is because the proposed cosmology underlies and forms this kind of view of self-cultivation. Would it be possible that there is a deeper common framework underlying both the proposed cosmology and Confucian views of self-cultivation – perhaps based on a shared concept of receiving-creating (naming) interplay (and not necessarily the cosmology itself)? (Actually, here I am probably suggesting that the proposed theory of naming might be a better candidate for the shared background of everything, than cosmology.) Please comment.

6. In general, I have doubts concerning reading the cosmology as a shared background of everything. There are texts where person (human being) is presented as a part of the cosmic continuum or as a perfect ruler managing things according to principles implied by the cosmic continuum. Weak becomes strong, strong becomes weak, and the ruler's action is modelled after this principle. Here the cosmology is clearly present, receiving and creating (naming) in mutual interplay, human being as a „process among other processes“ (p. 188). But in a text like *Hanfeizi*, one part of the binary is missing – the ruler receives from the cosmos (if we accept this reading of certain parts of the *Hanfeizi* for the whole *Hanfeizi*), shapes his actions according to it, but actively acts/names according to pragmatic needs, not as a part of the cosmic continuum. The same applies to *Xunzi*, *Mozi* etc. – what comes *from* the ruler, is no longer the cosmic continuum, it is culture, conceived of in purely human terms. There is a gap between receiving and creating. It is only *stated* the ruler has a cosmic connection (and only in some parts of the texts), it has no consequences. To sum up this „suggestion for debate“: If culture is not part of nature (in shared cosmic continuum), is it still part of the proposed cosmology?

IV. Questions for the author

Stated above, points 1-6 in the previous section.

V. Conclusion

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

22. 11. 2023

Dušan Vávra