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Rethinking Guo Xiang's Concept of "Nothing" in the Perspective of His Reception of Laozi and Zhuangzi

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Abstract: Since Feng Youlan and Tang Yongtong, scholars have mostly understood Guo Xiang's "supreme nothing" (至無, *zhi wu*) as "non-existence", arguing that by denying Dao as the origin of the universe, the philosophical tradition of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wang Bi, he strives to prove "self-generation" (自生, *zi sheng*) of all things. This way of interpretation not only leads to various dilemmas from the perspective of intellectual history, but also diverges from Guo Xiang's own account of Dao. The purpose of this paper is to argue that Guo Xiang, instead of dismissing it, solidifies the opinion of Laozi and Zhuangzi on the transcendence of Dao through the concept of "supreme nothing", and that the self-generation of all things is the logical endpoint of this reinforcement. The seemingly opposite viewpoints of transcendence and immanence, "Dao generates all things" and "All things are self-generated", merge with each other in the context of the proposition "Dao follows nature" (道法自然, *dao fa zi ran*) in Laozi.

Keywords: Guo Xiang; Laozi; Zhuangzi; nothing; Dao; self-generation



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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of modern studies of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism in the early twentieth century, there has been a pervasive dichotomous paradigm in the field of study considering Wang Bi's exegesis of Laozi and Guo Xiang's exegesis of Zhuangzi as representative achievements in Neo-Daoism during the Zheng Shi (正始, 240–249) period and the Yuan Kang (元康, 291–299) period, respectively, and regarding the dispute between their fundamental metaphysical positions, this is much more significant than the succession. On the one hand, Wang Bi's commentaries on Laozi were considered to be an inheritance of the metaphysics of Dao being the origin of the universe by Laozi, and as a means to abstract the above metaphysics further through the concept of "Nothing" (無, *wu*), giving it a stronger ontological dimension. On the other hand, Guo Xiang's commentaries on Zhuangzi are considered to have been developed through some elaborate semantic transformations and interpretive strategies, distorting Zhuangzi's account of Dao being the primal cause of all things, ultimately eliminating the origin, and describing the birth and death of all things as "self-generated" (自生, *zi sheng*) without any ultimate cause (one of the most typical examples can be found in Li 2013). Starting from this, Guo Xiang's metaphysics is considered to be partially independent of the Wei-Jin tradition of Laozegetics that preceded him.

It is the intention of this paper to show that if we examine the remnants of Guo Xiang's commentaries on Laozi in conjunction with his discourses on Dao in his commentaries to Zhuangzi, we may discover that his deviation from the tradition is not as great as previous scholars claim it to be: by portraying Dao in terms of concepts such as "supreme nothing" (至無, *zhi wu*), Guo Xiang follows Wang Bi's way and further strengthens the transcendence of the origin of the universe. The relationship between Dao and the nature of all things is dealt with in a similar manner to Wang Bi's interpretation of Laozi's proposition "Dao follows nature" (道法自然, *dao fa zi ran*). According to the context of Wei-Jin Laozegetics, the verb "fa" is translated as "follow" according to Wang Bi's commentary, i.e. Dao is not

contrary to the natural and actual statuses of all things (道不違自然, Wang 1980, p. 65). In this way, we can reconsider the continuity between Guo Xiang's position and the Wei-Jin tradition of Laozegetics.

It is widely acknowledged that by organizing and reconstructing ancient Chinese intellectual resources from a certain "philosophical" perspective, it is inevitable to draw on the categories and theoretical approaches of Western philosophy, and that the pre-selection of different interpretative orientations will directly affect the conclusions. The issue above indicates the necessity to explain the presumptions of this paper. The interpretations by pre-Qin and Wei-Jin Daoists in this paper are conducted within the framework of "Daoist metaphysics". According to Zheng Kai's representative formulation of this research orientation, the starting point of Daoist philosophical thinking is to inquire into the empirical-physical world made up of "tangible and named" (有形有名, *you xing you ming*) things, and to account for the ground of existence and change of things by means of the "formless and nameless" (無形無名, *wu xing wu ming*) abstract Dao, from which the relationship between Dao and things constitutes the major concern of Daoism. The two poles can be portrayed in multiple ways: the ground and the grounded, the absolute (free of interrelationships and quantitative determinations such as size) and the relative (comparable in interrelationships to each other), the invisible and the visible, the ungraspable and the describable, etc. (Zheng 2003). Daoist metaphysics thus shares with Western metaphysics a surpassing of physics, a concern with the origin of the universe, and a reflection on the general existence of all things. In this sense, it would be legitimate to translate the concepts of *you* (有) and *wu* (無) in the text as "being" and "nothing (non-being)" in accordance with the prevailing translation: the former derives from the meaning of "tangible and named" and refers to concrete and determinate existing things, either here or there; the latter constitutes a negation of the former by its essential characteristic of "formless and nameless".

Given this basic set of relational categories, we can also use the concepts of "transcendence" and "immanence" in a broader sense without sticking strictly to the monotheistic description of God. At the ontological level, when we claim that Dao "transcends" all things, this means that: 1. Dao, which is formless and unbounded, has some way of "being" different from concrete things, and 2. the existence and transformation of concrete things depend on Dao as the origin. This leads to the epistemological consequence that what exists in different ways is known in different ways: concrete things known through senses, languages, and concepts; Dao known through a certain intuitive, undifferentiated, and direct inner experience. Zheng Kai considers *ming* (明, in a cruder sense it can be translated into enlightenment) in *Laozi* to be the most representative of a series of terms used by Daoists to describe this transcendent way of knowing (Zheng 2003). When the author speaks of "absolute transcendence", he is therefore referring to: 1. a strong negation that there is no commonality between Dao and things in terms of their ways of being and being known, and 2. the unconditional dependence of things on Dao in causality¹. In contrast, the concept of "immanence" refers to the omnipresence and comprehensibility of Dao in concrete things to some extent. If this sense of "transcendence" and "immanence" has any resemblance to its equivalent in Western theo-philosophy, it may simply lie in the fact that both assume some form of first cause of the universe and attempt to carve out a relationship between the two—which naturally does not logically imply any commitment to achieving consistency between the two in any specific thesis.

2. The "Nothing" as "Non-Existence": The Traditional Interpretation of Guo Xiang's Theory of Dao and Its Consequences

Since Feng Youlan and Tang Yongtong opened up the field of study of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism, Guo Xiang's so-called metaphysics, which emphasizes the "self-generation" of all things, has often been understood as a rejection or reaction to the theory of Dao of He Yan (何晏) and Wang Bi (王弼) and even to the entire tradition of Lao-Zhuang Daoism: the latter regards Dao as the ultimate basis for the existence and change of all things as the

starting point of their speculative systems, while the former is based on the dismantling of the original status of this ultimate principle. Feng Youlan created the phrase “the theory of no-nothing” (無無論, *wu wu lun*) to summarize the basic position of Guo Xiang. The so-called “no-nothing”, that is, “without the nothing being the origin of the universe”, refuses to acknowledge the Dao of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wang Bi in the sense of the transcendent Being, which brings all things into their own beings and was given the name of “nothing” because of its “formlessness and namelessness”: “Dao is the true nothing. Laozi and Zhuangzi also said Dao is nothing, but they said that nothing is namelessness. That is, Laozi and Zhuangzi thought that Dao is not a thing, so it cannot be named. But Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang thought that Dao is the true nothing, which is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing (無所不在, 而所在皆無)” (Feng 2017). (The original texts and second-hand Chinese literature cited in this paper are all translated by the author.) Feng’s so-called “true nothing” is in fact pure “nothing” in the sense of “non-existence”. It is different from the transcendent cause of the empirical world of forms and names, which is highlighted in the terminology of the Lao-Zhuang tradition, and points to the lack or absence of beingness.

Tang goes even further by explicitly bringing out the dichotomous conceptual framework of “valuing nothing (貴無, *gui wu*)—exalting being (崇有, *chong you*)”: “In terms of their theoretical systems, Wang and He value nothing, while Xiang and Guo respect being” (Tang 2001), locating the differences between what He Yan and Wang Bi understood and what Xiang Xiu (向秀) and Guo Xiang understood in their metaphysical thoughts on Dao, and thus increasingly decisively distinguishing between the latter’s seeming deconstruction of Dao with his theory of self-generation and the former’s statement of “nothing as the basis”, which was apparently introduced by Daoism since Laozi: “The prevailing philosophy of the time said that there is a ‘nothing’ behind this world of existence which depends on this ‘nothing’...Xiang and Guo opposed this theory, arguing there being no ‘nothing’ outside of ‘being’: there is only ‘being’, and nothing is not-existence” (Tang 2001). Let us try to summarize this way of interpretation: Guo Xiang completely dissolves the Dao as the “creator” by replacing the “original nothing”, which is beyond being, with “nothing” that is lacking in existence, and replacing it with a simple recognition of the phenomenal world; only then, Guo Xiang’s proposition “above he knows that the creator is nothing, and below he knows that things that do exist are self-generated” 上知造物無物, 下知有物之自造 (Guo Xiang’s *Preface to Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi 1998, p. 1) can be interpreted logically, and the political environment in which all things are not controlled by a higher being and are self-generated according to their nature can unfold.

We have noticed that this paradigm has had such a profound influence on later scholarship that many researchers on Guo Xiang often refuse to go beyond what the pioneers defined, and instead use it unthinkingly as a common premise for discussing Guo Xiang’s metaphysics. For example, Tang Yijie claims that Guo Xiang treats “nothing” as “the true zero point”, i.e., non-existence in which the existent cannot have any utility (Tang 2000). Similar expressions include “absolute vacuum” (Wang 2006), “absolutely nothing, emptiness, non-existence” (Bao 2013), “nothing, emptiness, zero” (Kang 2013), and so on. No matter what name scholars choose, the way of explaining Guo Xiang’s “nothing” by “non-existence” and thus making Guo Xiang the deconstructor of former Daoism has not fundamentally changed.²

It is indisputable that, given the frequent occurrence of the phrase “the creator is nothing” in Guo Xiang’s *Commentary on Zhuangzi*, interpreting Dao as the “supreme nothing” in its context as “non-existence” that has lost its original function is an easy and logically straightforward way to understand Guo Xiang’s recognition of the unique value of the individual being: Why is it self-generated? Because there is no creator. However, if we reflect a little, it is not difficult to find a series of unacceptable theoretical consequences that this argument may incur. This would lead, first of all, to an absence of the source of Guo Xiang’s theory of self-generation in the history of thought: to attribute the generation and change of all things to purely accidental spontaneous movements, without acknowledging

in any sense that they have a unified cause, is not only inconceivable in the Daoist tradition founded by Laozi, which is “founded on the Eternal, the Nothing and the Being” 建之以常無有 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 615) according to *Zhuangzi*, but also it would be difficult to find precursors or echoes in pre-Qin and Song-Ming Confucianism, which held to the metaphysical principle of “what Tian conditions is a disposition” (天命之謂性). We cannot exclude the possibility that Guo Xiang, to some extent independently of his contemporaries’ general impression of Daoism and the “on-nothing-based” interpretive context, derived such an idea from certain passages in *Zhuangzi* that have the interpretive potential to eliminate the creator (in particular, the depiction of the “piping of heaven” (天籟, *tian lai*) at the beginning of “Qi Wu Lun”). However, if we consider the holistic nature of *Zhuangzi* in the eyes of ancient commentators, as well as, for example, the numerous references to the creator in the chapter Da Zong Shi and the apparently “creationist” discourses there (see Section 4 of this paper), this assumption seems at least to be less acceptable than the assumption that there is more direct continuity between Guo Xiang and his background.

On the other hand, Wang Chong’s (王充) theory of self-generation is entirely based on the simple theory of the generation of qi (氣), stopping at the volitionless and purposeless role of qi as the substrate for the transformation of all things, which has not yet entered Guo Xiang’s context of the reflection on the absolute origin of the universe. As Ye’s examination shows, although Wang Chong’s concept of “nature” can be used to refer to a pre-self-sufficient state in which things are “self-so” and “not made by others”, however, the establishment of this state is attributed to the “spreading of qi” (施氣, *shi qi*) or “moving of qi” (行氣, *xing qi*) of heaven and earth as subjects and is the result of the purposeless movement of qi (Ye 2017). This is also an abstract reflection beyond the empirical world, but it is almost a material and dynamical account rather than a strictly ontological discussion: in terms of the aforementioned distinction between Daoist metaphysics and Daoist physics, it deals with the relationship between the “finer thing” (qi) and “coarser things” (concrete beings), rather than the relationship between the absolute “No-thing” and all things that Guo Xiang tries to clarify. In this regard, there is still causality between the movement of qi and self-generation of things, without touching on what scholars call the absolute “inability” of Dao in Guo Xiang. When Guo Xiang mentions “one qi with a myriad forms” 一氣而萬形 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 365, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), “qi naturally accumulates” 氣自委結 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 424, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), he is undoubtedly influenced by this type of thought of qi, but this is not at the same level as his reflection on the ultimate ontological origin of all things.

Another line of thought is represented by Wang Xiaoyi, who tries to trace Guo Xiang’s dissolution of Dao and his idea of the spontaneous emergence of things back to the translation and dissemination of the *prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* in Chinese scholarship during his time, in an attempt to demonstrate the affinity between this theory, which has no exact precedent in China, and the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which also denies the origin of the universe. Strictly speaking, we do not have (and cannot have) enough evidence to completely rule out this possibility. However, even sympathizers of this argument may have to admit that we cannot find traces of the theory of *pratītya-samutpāda* directly in Guo Xiang’s work—at least as far as the use of such important categories as “Dao-thing”, *xing-qing* (性情), and *xiaoyao* (逍遙) is concerned, the commentary is still very much within a typical neo-Daoistic context, and it is almost impossible to identify the influence of Buddhist texts in it unequivocally, not to mention that the setting of the “natural allotment” (性分) of every individual, which goes hand in hand with the self-generation of things, is fundamentally incompatible with the Mahayana conception of emptiness (*sūnyatā*, 空) and its fierce criticism of self-nature (*svabhāva*, 自性).³ Based on this holistic consideration, it is still a last resort to turn to Buddhism when explaining an individual aspect of Guo Xiang’s philosophy.

Leaving aside these dilemmas outside the theory itself, the more central and by far less considered question concerns the hermeneutic: whether the reading of “nothing” as “non-existence” is fully coherent with Guo Xiang’s entire account of Dao and “nothing”.

As is mentioned earlier, Feng Youlan, in defining Guo Xiang's opinion on Dao as "true nothing", incompletely cites the following notes on the "Da Zong Shi" chapter as evidence: "Dao is omnipresent, that is to say that it has no height in the high things, no depth in the deep things, no length in the long times, no oldness in the old things, and not old in old. It is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing" 言道之無所不在也，故在高為無高，在深為無深，在久為無久，在老為無老，無所不在，而所在皆無也 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 146, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). Here we cannot help but ask: Since Dao is nothing but "non-existence", how can we conceive of its omnipresence? It is not difficult to conceive of a transcendent Being that is "formless and nameless" and yet pervades the universe. However, for "non-existence", for the mere negation and absence of the reality of being, to assert that it is "omnipresent" lacks comprehensibility, because this is tantamount to denying the reality of all empirical things, for the reason that the absence of nothingness and the presence of a being are mutually exclusive, and to assert that there is nothingness somewhere is the same as asserting that there is no being somewhere. A common reading of the statement is to read it as "although Dao is everywhere, we do not find it anywhere (that is, it is not real anywhere, or it "exists" there, but only as the absence of a master or a ground)", which leads to a contradiction between the first half of the statement and the second half: Dao is either there or it is not there, either it exists as a being or it does not exist as an absence, and the assertion that some absence "exists" somewhere is, if not meaningless, then at least convoluted and unserious. For example, we say that "no bread exists on the table", but not that "an absence of bread exists on the table", because absence itself does not "exist". By the same token, if Dao is really nothing but the lack of existence, Guo Xiang should have directly asserted that it "is nowhere" (無所在), instead of trying to assign some kind of omnipresence to this nothingness; because such a formulation is only redundant and logically ineffective, it cannot be regarded as a serious proposition that attempts to reveal certain facts.

It seems that Feng has not paid attention to this implied tension between "non-existence" and "omnipresence", and it is interesting to note that Tang, after he has managed to elucidate Dao as "non-existence", encounters the same notes immediately. In order to describe the relationship between finite things and the all-pervading Dao as aptly as possible, Tang analogizes Dao to the texture of things: one can say that things are high but not the texture of things is high. This explanation seems to be quite sound, but it actually deviates from the previous definition of Dao as "non-existence": the texture as a being can reside in other beings, while "non-existence" itself implies the abolition of being, and it can never coexist with any being in the same way. We see that Tang is forced to revert to a certain doctrine of Dao in the style of Wang Bi's interpretation of *Laozi* in order to rationalize the pervasiveness of "nothing", which is understood as the negation of the determination of being, rather than the negation of the origin itself: "To say that Dao is nothing is to say that Dao is not an actual thing, not that there is no Dao" (Tang 2001). The boundary between Wang Bi's "valuing nothing" and Guo Xiang's "exalting being" seems to be blurred here. Tang does not give further explanation for this apparent inconsistency, which may be attributed to the manuscript and lecture nature of his book. However, it is regrettable that the tension buried here has not been able to provoke later scholars to explain "nothing" by "non-existence", and most of the commentators are still satisfied with the simple contrast between the traditions of Wang Bi's interpretation of *Laozi* and Guo Xiang's interpretation of *Zhuangzi*.

It is true that there are exceptions to everything: a number of scholars have also shown some efforts to transcend the dichotomous framework of "valuing nothing - exalting being" and to identify the inner continuity between earlier Daoism and Guo Xiang. Some of them, represented earlier by Fu Weixun and more recently by Yang Lihua, argue that Guo Xiang's deviation from earlier Daoist tradition was aimed at removing certain elements from the latter's ontology that were not conducive to the full development of the theory of nature. In contrast to Tang's approach of remedying the non-existent "nothing" with the transcendent "nothing", Fu's strategy is to discover factors transferring from the transcendent "nothing"

to the non-existent “nothing”: in Guo Xiang’s view, any attempt to construct some transcendent otherworldly substance would inevitably imply a disrespect for the phenomenal world, thus constituting a violation of the fundamental Daoism principle of the natural movement of all things, and therefore the metaphysical pursuit of Laozi and Zhuangzi must be replaced by a “radical naturalism” (Fu 2005). Yang’s treatment is to a certain extent equivalent to replacing Laozi and Zhuangzi in the context of Fu with Wang Bi: in Wang Bi’s case, the generation of Dao is completely dependent on the nature of the things, and is thus almost in a position of being hollowed out: “Dao follows the square on the scale of square, and follows the round on the scale of round. Dao is not against nature” 在方法方，在圓法圓，於自然無所違也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 65, see (Wang 1980)). Then, this is only one step away from the so-called complete dissolution of Dao by Guo Xiang: the latter is only the removal of the superfluous warts in the system out of some “Occam’s razor” type of simplicity (Yang 2010). Although this solution has to a certain extent bridged the gap between the interpretations of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, it has not only failed to eliminate a series of hidden problems caused by equating Guo Xiang’s “nothing” with non-existence, but also extended doubts to Wang Bi’s *Commentary on Laozi*: If the self-sufficiency and perfection of the nature of all things can be established without Dao, then why does Wang Bi still leave a place for the “formless and nameless” Dao as the creator of all things, and repeatedly emphasize the inevitability of the return of things to “nothing”? Is this rooted in the incompleteness of Wang Bi’s metaphysical system, as Yang suggests, or is it the other way around, that explaining “nothing” as “absence of being” still lacks consideration?

In contrast to the above-mentioned careful delineation that unfolds mainly within the ontological context, another effort to establish continuity between Wang Bi and Guo Xiang lies in understanding the transition from the former to the latter as a transformation from a certain semi-cosmogenic way of thinking to a purely ontological way of thinking. In a similar tone, scholars such as Yu Dunkang, Lu Guolong, and Wang Xiaoyi claim that Wang Bi’s thesis of “nothing generates beings” implies a position of considering Dao as the spatio-temporal starting point of all things, and he does not really have a logical understanding of the relationship between “being” and “nothing” at the level of abstract concepts. Therefore, when such an abstract reflection is actually realized in Guo Xiang, every form of “creator” or “generator” must be denied (Yu 2004; Lu 1996; Wang 2006). An implicit premise of this narrative is that “nothing” as creator or generator can be established more or less only in a cosmogenic, but not in a purely ontological sense. In the rest of the paper, we will carefully examine whether Guo Xiang has really ruled out the possibility of some kind of “ontological generator” in the construction of his metaphysics, and will return to evaluate this explanatory strategy at the end of Section 5.

In the subsequent reading of Guo’s text, we will gradually clarify that the general impression of Guo Xiang’s so-called “dissolution of the Dao” is only an illusion caused by a lack of careful analysis of the text; by criticizing names like “creator” and by proving that the supreme nothing “cannot” generate the things, Guo Xiang emphasizes the transcendent character of Dao, which is free of words and boundless with things, in an unprecedentedly extreme manner through his distinctive way of speaking. In this process of deconstructing and reconstructing past Daoism based on Wang Bi’s interpretation of *Laozi*, what is deconstructed is not Dao itself, but rather the way in which Dao is forcibly framed by various predicates that are only applicable to empirical things, thus reducing it to the level of the “one thing in the things” 在物一曲 (*zai wu yi qu*, Zhuangzi 1998, p. 517). Guo Xiang’s interpretation of *Zhuangzi* has not yet jumped out of the framework of Wei-Jin Laozegetics.

3. The Transcendent “Nothing” in the Laozi-Zhuangzi Tradition before Guo Xiang

In order to clarify the extent to which Guo Xiang’s use of the concept of “nothing” inherited and exceeded the scope of previous scholars, it is necessary to make a brief review of the use of “nothing” in the traditional metaphysics of Lao-Zhuang Daoism. In his

etymological survey, Pang Pu points out three main meanings of the concept of “nothing” in pre-Qin literature, the last of which is the abstract, absolutely empty nothingness of the metaphysical origin (Pang 1996), equivalent to what this paper calls “the transcendent nothing”. The thesis of “all things are created out of the Nothing” in the handed-down *Laozi* sets the tone for Daoist scholars’ understanding of the relationship between “nothing” and everything. As the ultimate basis of the generation of all things that logically precede them, the origin itself must be absolutely different from any of them. This is the idea intended by the basic principle of “what generates all things is not a thing” 物物者非物 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 435) established by *Zhuangzi* on the basis of *Laozi*: once the origin of all things is specified as a certain thing, we can still continue to ask where that thing comes from, and that thing thus is not the common cause of all things. In this sense, things are equal to each other on an ontological level, and nothing can be the ultimate basis of other things. As written in *Zhuangzi*, “the creation of a thing cannot precede other things” 物出不得先物也 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 435). The only one who can “precede” something is the absolute transcendent No-thing (非物, *fei wu*). From this point of view, Wang Jiansong seems to have been a bit hasty when he asserts that nothing as the origin cannot generate beings and that any inquiry into the creator is bound to fall into some kind of infinite regress (Wang 2008). The situation is that Daoist metaphysics assigns the role of creator to nothing precisely because it can circumvent this infinite extension of inquiries by virtue of its character of “no-thingness”, and therefore it is precisely nothing that can logically play the role of creator of all things.⁴

For this reason, it can be said that the absolute origin is not some “supreme” or “most real” being, but rather that it shakes off all the qualities attributed to beings and is a result of “de-reification” or “de-substantiation” of beings. In this way, it is easy to understand the character of Dao as “non-being and non-non-being” (非有非無, *fei you fei wu*), since the categories of “being” and “non-being” in everyday language stand side by side. They imply the presence and absence of beingness, respectively, and must therefore be excluded in the speech of the Absolute. Laozi considered this early on, and is always wary of direct assertions of the existence of Dao: “it seems to exist” 似或存 (*Laozi*, p. 10, see (Wang 1980)), “continuous, seeming to exist” 綿綿若存 (*Laozi*, p. 16, see (Wang 1980)), “Dao as a ‘thing’ is only vague and obscure” 道之為物，惟恍惟惚 (*Laozi*, p. 52, see (Wang 1980)), “it is called the formless form, the image of no-thing” 是謂無狀之狀，無物之象 (*Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), and Cheng Xuanying commented on this: “It is neither being nor non-being, it cannot be specified as being or non-being, so it is vague and obscure” (Meng 2001). In terms of the fact that Dao is not a hollow nothing, which is so-called “the leftover of being” (有之所謂遺者, according to Pei Wei 裴頠, see *Jin shu* 晉書, 35.1046 (Fang 1974)), it can be said to be almost existent; but in terms of the fact that it is not one of all things, it does not have any existence, and therefore it has to be called “nothing” and “formless”.

This seems to suggest to us that any valid statement of the Absolute must be based on the negation of the use of words in some empirical sense. In other words, the only reliable way to speak of the Absolute is to constantly exclude from it determinations belonging to the realm of beings. For this reason, Daoist philosophers obviously prefer to use a negative theological method to strip empirical properties or determinations from the Absolute in order to approach the true nature of Dao to a certain extent, rather than forcing empirical words to illegally expand into the transcendent realm, which is beyond their reach. The concept of “nothing” and the series of “no-x” structured words that it constitutes are the only ones that bear this burden (Rohstock 2014).

It is not difficult to imagine that since all nominal concepts that can be spoken and meant must be stripped away from Dao, categories such as the relation of actors and subjects and the relation of cause and effect, which describe the connection between being and being in the empirical world, must be included in this category. Since Dao is not generally “something”, it cannot naturally be an “actor” or a “cause”. Fundamentally, Dao cannot even be placed in any dualistic relation with anything, because any relation presupposes differences between relational terms, and differences exist only between determinations;

thus, there can be no conceptual distinguishability “between” the transcendent origin, which itself absolutely negates all determinations and beings. Thus, it is beyond the scale of all relational categories. In the text of *Zhuangzi*, this point is expressed as follows: “The origin has no boundary with the beings, while the beings have boundaries with each other, that is the so-called thing-boundaries” 物物者與物無際，而物有際者，所謂物際者也 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 430), that is, beings can only be in opposition to each other, while the origin is not subject to such boundaries. The corollary of this statement is that the propositions given in the Daoism context of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, such as “Dao gives birth to it” (*Laozi*, p. 136, see (Wang 1980)) and “it makes ghosts ghosts and gods gods” 神鬼神帝 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 145), cannot be understood in the sense of causality in the empirical world. It is true that Dao is regarded as the origin of all things, and even in the eyes of commentators like Wang Bi, the title “Dao” is chosen from its status as the origin: ‘Dao means that by which all things are as they are’ 道也者，取乎萬物之所由也 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 196, see (Wang 1980)). However, we must not overlook the fact that “Dao”, which is established in the sense of “cause”, is also only a false name for the absolute origin. It obviously does not mean that there is really a “supreme being” who initiates and dominates the birth and transformation of all things like a mother giving birth to a child or an artisan making a utensil, meaning that empirical causality arises from the action of one existent object on another existing object. For this reason, Wang Bi cautiously refers to the words that are meant to characterize the origin, including “Dao”, as “descriptions” (稱, *cheng*) of the origin, declaring that they “do not exhaust its ultimate” 未盡其極 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 198, *ibid.*).

In terms of this rejection of any meaningful metaphysical description, such a Dao seems to come close to what many researchers of Guo Xiang call the “nothingness” of spontaneous emergence. However, it must be noted that the reason why the categories denoting Dao-things’ causality and difference cannot be applied to Dao here is not in any way because Dao “lacks” these attributes in the sense of absence, but only because it “transcends” or “overflows” them in an uncanny way. The proposition that “the origin has no boundary with the beings” is always grounded in the proposition that “what generates all things is not a thing”; if Dao is to satisfy the absolute “non-differentiation” from all things, it must first be absolutely and unbridgeably “different” from all things, and these two dimensions are in a paradoxical way twisted together in Dao and cannot be separated. Although the true generative work of Dao in a transcendental sense cannot be characterized by human language—which by its very nature has legitimacy only in its dealings with empirical things—the term “generative work” in the empirical world means “self-so” or “self-generation”, but “self-so” or “self-generation” is here inferred and guaranteed precisely as the result of this transcendental causality, which strengthens rather than weakens the dependence of all things on their origin.

Therefore, what a researcher like Wang Bo calls “gentle or mild weak action” of Dao on all things is perhaps not the best expression (B. Wang 2018); instead of calling it “weak action”, the generative work of Dao is absolutely “no action”. The result is that, as Wang Bi’s commentary on *Laozi* says, “Heaven and earth are left to nature, without any action or creation, and everything governs itself” 天地任自然，無為無造，萬物自相治理 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 13, see (Wang 1980)), “Dao is not against nature, it thus realizes its own nature and follows the nature” 道不違自然，乃得其性，法自然也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 65, *ibid.*). In terms of the birth and destruction of all things, there is no higher being as the “cause”, and behind the manipulation and control of all things, it can be said that generative work of Dao on all things in the empirical world can only be realized as natural generation and transformation of all things, which is the ultimate destination and true spirit of *Laozi*’s theory of Dao.

In this regard, Ziporyn, through his examination of the use of the concept of “li” (理) in Wang Bi’s *Zhou Yi Lue Li* (周易略例), has discerningly specified it as “mini-Daos of the particular hexagrams” (Ziporyn 2010), i.e. the dominant and inviolable natural tendencies of movement within the plural of individual things; he undoubtedly captures an important

aspect of Dao at work in all things, namely that the empirical basis for the generation and transformation of all things is fully internalized in the individuals themselves, without the need for some higher being to exert coercive force from outside. However, we should not overlook Wang Bi's efforts to establish Dao as "a self-subsistent metaphysical principle" in addition to these separate and immanent "Daos". The way of thinking in which the singular, primordial One unifies the Many as derivatives is still clear in his interpretation of *Laozi*: "Dao means that by which all things are as they are" 涉之乎無物而不由，則稱之曰道 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 197, see (Wang 1980)), "the many things are as they are by Dao" 衆由乎道 (ibid), and "all things and forms go into one" 萬物萬形，其歸一也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 117, ibid.). The fundamental metaphysical relationship of the "principium" and the "princiatiatum" is consolidated around the dependence of the grounded on their ground, and the internalization of the origin and the positive emphasis on its transcendence form a certain parallel in Wang Bi's context, and there does not seem to be sufficient reason to regard one as the "true intention of the author" and the other as a mere rhetorical or ironic terminology. However, if one considers the metaphysical difference between transcendental nothing and empirical things, as mentioned above, and the distinction between transcendental causality and empirical causality, then it can be argued that those two simply state the same fact on different levels. We are thus not faced with a situation in which "it is not necessary to set up a first principle in addition to the intrinsic tendencies of things", but rather "it is not necessary to accommodate the intrinsic tendencies at the expense of the seriousness of the text's description of the first principle".

This dual construction can also be found, for example, in Wang Bi's use of the concept *ben* (本, which can be translated as "root", "foundation", etc.). On the one hand, in his commentary on *Laozi*, Wang Bi sometimes uses *ben* to refer to the true state of things when they are not disturbed by excessive desires, when it is closely associated with the concept of "simplicity" (樸, *pu*): "ben exists in *pu*" 本在樸也 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 192, ibid.), but, on the other hand, it is more commonly used to refer to some singular, unique and unified total ground of the many: "This is the ground by which they are as they are, the same as the Ultimate, and so is called the root of heaven and earth... All things are born of it" 本其所由。與太極同體，故謂之天地之根也... 萬物以之生 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 17, ibid.) and "if one wants to understand that by which things are as they are, then all things, though obvious, have to be discovered in their origin from the depths, and therefore to account for what is inside the form by what is outside heaven and earth" 欲明物之所由者，則雖顯而必自幽以敘其本。故取天地之外，以明形骸之內 (*Laozi Zhi Lue*, p. 197, ibid.). In this respect, either the one and only Dao or *li* dispersed in things have a certain grounded function, but those two belong to different levels of explanation: the former establishes the origin of all things as a premise, the latter deals with implementation of the origin in things, and the two complement each other.

In summary, it seems that the practice of dissolving Dao into some non-existent "nothing" is not a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of Guo Xiang's theory of the self-generation of things. The theory of "self-generation" had already bred some form of pre-preparation even in Guo Xiang's previous Daoism of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and Wang Bi, in parallel with the development of the theory of "Dao generates all things". When his forerunner, Pei Wei, took a very radical approach to assigning all realities to the concrete beings in the empirical world, Guo Xiang actually had two paths before him: either to follow this purely immanent solution with its overtones of abolitionism, or to draw intellectual resources from the pre-Qin Daoists and He Yan and Wang Bi, so as to better integrate transcendence of the nothing and its immanence. As Yu Dunkang points out, Pei Wei replaced the relation of being-nothing, which corresponds to phenomena and the origin in the early Neo-Daoists, with the relation of existence-non-existence, and then absolutely opposed being and nothing in a "Barmenidian way", only using the former to describe the generation and transformation between beings (Yu 2004). While Guo Xiang restricts the transformation between beings to the realm of being itself, he clearly inherits the idea of Pei Wei's understanding of "nothing" as "non-existence": "Not only cannot nothing become

beings, but also beings cannot become nothing. Therefore, beings change in many ways, but never become nothing. Therefore, since the beginning of time, there has never been a time when there was no being existing; being always exists.” 非唯無不得化而為有也，有亦不得化而為無矣。是以無有之為物，雖千變萬化，而不得一為無也。不得一為無，故自古無未有之時而常存也 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 435, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). Being can only be transformed into other forms of being in the process of change, but it cannot lose its existence and become nothing, and nothing itself lacks this quality of existence and therefore cannot be transformed into any form of being. Guo Xiang agrees with Pei Wei on the point that “nothing” as “non-existence” is completely insulated from the world of being. Such a “nothing” abstracts most completely from the opposite of “being”, but thus becomes completely negative for the construction of the system. However, as we will attempt to explore below, not all of Guo Xiang’s “nothing” in his context should be understood in the sense of the absence of this reality. His discourse on “nothing”, especially “supreme nothing”, has ontological overtones in other contexts. Guo Xiang breaks away from the monotonous framework of Pei Wei, in which “being” is the only reality, by reinterpreting “nothing”, which has faded into “non-existence”, as “nothing” in the early neo-Daoist sense, which transcends phenomena. In the following two sections, we will try to understand the interaction between the concept of the “supreme nothing” and the “self-generation” of things by going deeper into Guo’s specific thesis.

4. “Existing without Things”: Guo Xiang’s “Nothing” and His Highlighting of the Transcendence of Dao

Once we concentrate our discussion on Guo Xiang’s discussion of Dao, we can first find a direct basis for distinguishing between the non-existent “nothing” and the transcendent “nothing” in the fragments of Guo Xiang’s *Commentary on Laozi*, which has received little attention from scholars. Following the sentence “it seems to have existence” in the four chapters discussed earlier, Guo Xiang writes: “Existence, also being. Dao is quiet, unchanged, the end is always the same with the beginning, so it is said to exist. Existing without things, so it is said ‘seems’” 存，在也。道湛然安靜，古今不變，終始常一，故曰存。存而無物，故曰似也 (Tang 2000)⁵. If Dao is considered to be real nothing, then there is no need to go to the trouble of explicitly asserting the existence of Dao, and then to explain that this “existence” is only “seemingly existence” by means of its character of “existing without things”. It is perfectly possible to claim that “seemingly existence” is only a false name, and that there is no Dao; to say forcibly that this “non-existence” exists, just to add to the trouble. In fact, Guo Xiang’s chosen strategy for interpreting *Laozi* is quite similar to the aforementioned Cheng Xuanying’s “double repudiation of existence and non-existence” (有無雙遣, *you wu shuang qian*): first of all, in terms of Dao as the origin of the generation of emptiness, permanence, and unity, it cannot be said that it does not exist, thus dispelling the fallacy that Dao is non-existent; however, it is also not legitimate to use the term “existence” to describe Dao, because what exists can only be something, while Dao is the “nothing” that is beyond every something and negates every something. Therefore, it can only be described by such vague words as “may exist” or “seems to exist”, and thus the delusion of Dao as existence is dispelled, and the transcendence of the absolute origin of the empirical world can be found in the gap between “being” and “non-being”. Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying’s commentary on *Laozi* has reached the same line of thought here.

On the other hand, Guo describes the “existence” of Dao with the phrase “quiet, unchanged, the end is always the same with the beginning”, which is a continuation of the tradition from *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to highlight the transcendence of Dao. Chapter 25 of *Laozi* says: “So silent and desolate! It establishes itself without renewal”, which differs from Guo’s text only in wording. Accordingly, it is not appropriate to interpret “nothing” in this context as a “negation of scarcity” of being, but rather as an “absolute negation”; Guo Xiang, in his *Commentary on Zhuangzi*, repeatedly says that “the creator is nothing” 造物無物 and “the origin is nothing” 物物者無物 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), the meaning of which is still roughly the same as what *Zhuangzi* calls “seemingly

no existence” 若有亡 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 506) and Laozi calls “Existing continuously, it cannot be named and it returns to no-thingness” 繩繩不可名，復歸於無物 (Laozi, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), which does not mean that “there is no origin”, but rather aims to emphasize that “the origin is not a thing that exists, not a determined being”. Only in this way can further discussions of the pervasiveness and transcendence of Dao in his commentary on “Da Zong Shi” become understandable:

“Dao is omnipresent, that is to say that it has no height in the high things, no depth in the deep things, no length in the long times, no oldness in the old things, and not old in old. It is everywhere, but where it is, there is nothing. The thing that is both above and below should not be called high and low; the thing that is both outside and inside should not be called inside and outside; that which changes with change should not be spoken of for a long time; that which is always absent from beginning to end cannot be called old.” 言道之無所不在也，故在高為無高，在深為無深，在久為無久，在老為無老，無所不在，而所在皆無也。且上下無不格者，不得以高卑稱也；外內無不至者，不得以表裏名也；與化俱移者，不得言久也；終始常無者，不可謂老也。(a commentary to Zhuangzi, p. 145f. see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

If we take Dao as “non-existence”, then it can certainly satisfy the requirements of “no height”, “no depth”, and “nothing”, but at the same time it cannot reside in the high and deep determinations of things, thus realizing the “omnipresence” of “no height in the high things” and “no depth in the deep things”, because the presence of a determination and its absence are mutually exclusive. Therefore, the assertion that Dao is “everywhere, and where it is, there is nothing” is very close to the following statements of Wang Bi: “Formless and silent, so it can be in everything and go everywhere” 無狀無象，無聲無響，故能無所不通，無所不往 (a commentary to Laozi, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)), “If it is warm, it cannot be cool; if it is Gong, it cannot be Shang. Form must have a division; the sound must belong. Therefore, forms are not the Big Form, and loud sounds are not the Big Sound 若温也則不能矣，宮也則不能商矣。形必有所分，聲必有所屬，故象而形者，非大象也；音而聲者，非大音也 (Laozi Zhi Lue, p. 195, see (Wang 1980))”. To have a determination means to have some division, some bias, that is, to become a particular being and unable to be in all existences. Therefore, in order to realize the perfect immanence of Dao in all things, one has to resort to the perfect transcendence of it, i.e., one must exclude from it the finite determinations of all things, so that while it dwells in all things (“everywhere”), it does not become any of them (“nothing”). The passage goes on to deny the applicability of a series of prepositions used to describe empirical things to Dao: Dao is full of the universe, so it cannot be called high or low; Dao travels in all directions and remains independent and unchanging, so it cannot be called by the name of long and old. In this kind of general prescriptive layer by layer exclusion, step by step elimination, Dao is progressively pushed away from the empirical world, its transcendence gradually strengthened, becoming increasingly prominent and clear. And of course, the so-called “weakening” or even “dissolving” are thus groundless. If we take these statements on the transcendence of Dao seriously, those traditionally seen as “materialistic” claims should be reconsidered. Since they cannot be taken as a direct negation of the reality of the transcendent as denotation, it seems necessary to delineate different contexts and levels of application for these two conflicting statements, so that they can be compatible and adaptable to each other.

5. The Integration of “Dao Generates All Things” and “Self-Generation”: The Theoretical End Point of the Theory of the “Supreme Nothing”

Up to this point, it can be said that Guo Xiang’s grasp of the transcendent “nothing” as absolute negation and the specific way he chooses to articulate it are no different from He Yan and Wang Bi’s tradition of Laozi-interpretation. However, the path that most easily leads scholars to explain “nothing” by “non-existence” still lies in the recurrence in Guo’s *Zhuangzi Commentary* on “Dao cannot generate anything” and the self-generation of things. It is in these passages that Guo Xiang explicitly demonstrates his novel way of speaking: he

avoids talking about the generation of Dao and focuses almost exclusively on the inability of it. There are four typical commentaries of this kind in the text, and they are excerpted as follows:

a. “Is there something else called ‘piping of heaven’? Since nothing is nothing, it can’t generate something; if something doesn’t exist yet, it can’t generate others. Then who is the creator? All things are self-generated. It is self-generated, not “I generate things”. If I cannot generate things, and things cannot generate me, then I am self-so. If I am self-so, it is called natural. It is only natural, not out of action.” 夫天籟者，豈復別有一物哉？... 無無矣，則不能生有；有之未生，又不能為生。然則生生者誰哉？塊然而自生耳。自生耳，非我生也。我不能生物，物亦不能生我，則我自然矣。自己而然，則謂之天然。天然耳，非為也。(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 26, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

b. “How can nothing generate gods? Not to make the ghosts and gods become ghosts and gods, but the ghosts and gods themselves have become ghosts and gods, this is the making without making; not to give birth to heaven and earth, but heaven and earth generate themselves, this is the generating without generating. It is impossible to let it become a god. It can only become a god by itself. So what credit is there to take? “無也，豈能生神哉？不神鬼帝而鬼帝自神，斯乃不神之神也；不生天地而天地自生，斯乃不生之生也。故夫神之果不足以神，而不神則神矣，功何足有，事何足恃哉？(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 145, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

c. “Dao is impotent, and to attain something is to attain it by oneself. I have not attained it yet, so I cannot attain it. Therefore, whoever attains it, externally, without the help of Dao, internally, without the help of his ego, but suddenly attains it by himself and changes alone.” 道，無能也。此言得之於道，乃所以明其自得耳。自得耳，道不能使之得也；我之未得，又不能為得也。然則凡得之者，外不資於道，內不由於己，掘然自得而獨化也。(ibid.).

d. “What precedes all things? We consider *yin* and *yang* to be prior to all things, but *yin* and *yang* are also things, who is prior to *yin* and *yang*? I take nature to be prior to all things, but nature is the self-so of the things. And I take the Supreme Dao to be prior to all things, but the Supreme Dao is the Supreme Nothing, and since it is Nothing, how can it be prior to things? In this way, who is prior to things? It seems that there is something, but in fact there is not. This shows that all things are natural, and nothing makes them so.” 誰得先物者乎哉？吾以陰陽為先物，而陰陽者即所謂物耳。誰又先陰陽者乎？吾以自然為先之，而自然即物之自爾耳。吾以至道為先之矣，而至道者乃至無也。以無矣，又奚為先？然則先物者誰乎哉？而猶有物，無已。明物之自然，非有使然也。(a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 435, see (Zhuangzi 1998)).

The four paragraphs are very similar in structure, all of them inferring the “self-generation” of things from the inability of Dao to generate them. Among them, paragraph c directly refers to Dao as incompetent, while paragraphs b and d explicitly equate Dao with “nothing” and “supreme nothing”, respectively. The reference to “nothing” in paragraph a is slightly ambiguous: the phrase “if something doesn’t exist yet, it can’t generate others” seems to mean both that non-existence cannot give rise to existence and that the absolutely transcendent cannot give rise to existence. However, one must consider the fact that the other three paragraphs, which are in the same framework as this one, are not concerned with the question of whether non-existence can generate being, excluding the creator and then affirming the “self-generation” in the counter-example of “Dao generates all things”. This is also in line with the original context of the concept of the “piping of heaven”, reflecting on the existence or not of the ultimate cause (怒者其誰, *nu zhe qi shui*), so the latter should still be the case. In giving reasons for the inferred premise that “Dao cannot generate things”, the texts in paragraphs a, b, and d coincidentally resort to the “nothingness” of Dao.

As was discussed earlier, Guo Xiang’s concept of “nothing” in the context of Dao still continues with the transcendent “nothing” of the Lao-Zhuang tradition, thus, the so-called “inability” of Dao here shall be understood in the context of the absolute non-determinate nature of the origin. Paragraph d, which is located under the sentence “what generates all

things is not a thing”, is the most logically rigorous and perhaps the most helpful way to understand the transcendent connotation of this negation. Here, Guo Xiang first sets up a clear context for asking questions about “prior thing”, i.e., the metaphysical origin of all existence, and gives *yin* and *yang* as the first possible answer to this question. However, it is obvious that, as far as *yin* and *yang* are concerned, they are indeed more primitive than the usual individual existents, but they are not yet free of the determinate nature of things as things; therefore, although *yin* and *yang* can be regarded as an empirical cause of the generation, they are not fit for being the ultimate origin of all things, and the basis of their own existence can still be inquired into. It seems that whenever we still attribute the origin of being to a certain being, the origin of this being will immediately be questioned again, and the chain of questioning will thus be extended endlessly into an endlessly regressive situation. In view of this, Guo Xiang follows the line of thought of *Zhuangzi* and pushes the origin of being to “supreme nothing” as the negation of all existents: only that which is “no-thing” can be free of the difficult question of “how did they come into being?” Thus, it stands truly in the realm of “unquestionable” (不可致詰 (*bu ke zhi jie*, *Laozi*, p. 31, see (Wang 1980)).

However, new doubts follow: the words “origin” or “basis” are merely bad names for this “supreme nothing”. The transcendent and absolute Dao has removed all determinations, and thus cannot be placed in any possible relationship with beings: it cannot be represented as an “actor” in relation to the “subjects”, as a “cause” in relation to what is “born from it”, because all these rules only apply in the realm of the intelligible, only to those existences that are distinct from each other and stand in relation to each other. Thus, the paradox arises: “Since it is Nothing, how can it be prior to things?” The transcendent status of the “supreme nothing” as the origin deprives it of the possibility of being described as the origin. The establishment of this “supreme nothing” as the ultimate ground leads to the following consequence: in the empirical world to which everyday language still applies, there is no being that can dominate the generation and change of all beings. The “generative power” of Dao over all beings on the transcendent level is in fact the result of the “making without making” and “generating without generating” in the empirical world. It is ultimately realized as the “self-generation” of all beings without any external or internal reason.

Rather than saying that such a way of thinking is beyond Wei-Jin Laozegetics, we should say that it upholds and advances the principles of Wei-Jin Laozegetics at a deeper level. It can be said that Guo Xiang’s practical intention of emphasizing that “nothing cannot generate something” is indeed to preserve the spontaneity of the self-generation of all things: however, in order to achieve this purpose, it is not Dao being the transcendent basis of the generation that he wants to dissolve. Rather, it is some “supreme being” that can influence all things as a “controller” or “enabler,” that is, to prevent any being from moving toward the ultimate “nothing”. The latter is the threat to the spontaneity of all things, while the former can only serve the function of “not blocking their origins” (不塞其源, *bu sei qi yuan*) and “not forbidding their nature” (不禁其性, *bu jin qi xing*). In this regard, we see that Guo Xiang returns to the theme of “non-action” in the *Laozi* tradition: “only natural, not out of action”—the so-called natural generation of things, what is opposed is precisely the so-called “action”, that is, the interference and manipulation of some alien being, some external enabler, in the generative process of things.

From this point of view, Guo Xiang rejects all the ways of speaking in *Zhuangzi* that are more substantive and may lead scholars to mistake “nothing” of transcendence for “something” of reality: “We start to search for the trace of the true master, but we cannot get it. This shows that all things are natural, and nothing makes them so” 起索宰之昧，而亦終不得，則明物皆自然，無使物然也 (Zhuangzi 1998, p. 29), “Therefore, the creator of things is not a creator, and things are self-generated, self-generated without any dependence” (“故造物者無主，而物各自造，物各自造而無所待焉”, *ibid.*). It can be seen that in this process of constantly criticizing the way of treating something as the common master of all things, and constantly and strictly stripping existence and solidity from Dao,

the transcendent character of Dao as the “supreme nothing” is actually constantly being purified and strengthened. The use of metaphors such as “the true master” and “the creator” in *Zhuangzi* certainly does not seriously undermine its meaning of the piping of heaven of the self-so, and Wang Bi’s usual use of a series of phrases such as “the master of all things” (品物之宗主, *pin wu zhi zong zhu*) does not affect his definition of Dao as “not against nature”, but in its terminological construction itself, it is undoubtedly not entirely free of the practice of “analogizing” the transcendent to the object of experience. It still bears some traces of what Pang calls the “seemingly absent but actually present” master (Pang 1996), and is therefore not as appropriate as the extreme abstraction of the “supreme nothing”.

Nevertheless, by repeatedly portraying the generative function of Dao in an emphatic tone as “reliance” (因, *yin*) and “following” (任, *ren*) on the self-generation of things, and even as a fundamental “non-function” (無功, *wu gong*), Wang Bi has approached Guo Xiang’s position in many paragraphs. If one strips away the contexts in which he explicitly establishes Dao as master, it is difficult to distinguish the following statements of Wang Bi from those traditionally considered “materialistic” by Guo Xiang above: “By all things there is the use, and works are accomplished by them” 因物而用，功自彼成 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 7, see (Wang 1980)), “between heaven and earth, unrestrainedly following the nature of all things” 天地之間，蕩然任自然 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 14, *ibid.*), “things grow and complete themselves, and this is not accomplished under my mastery” 物自長足，不吾宰成 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 24, *ibid.*); the third sentence even has a similar tone to Guo Xiang’s, denying the dominant role of Dao. Similarly, when Wang Bi emphasizes that “nature is sufficient in itself, and action destroys it” 自然已足，為則敗之 (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 6, *ibid.*), he clearly does not attribute the generative function of Dao to such an alien action imposed by the Other, but rather treats Dao as the reciprocal expression of the natural process itself at the transcendental level: in this regard, Dao has no real determinant or driving force for anything, because all “action” relations already presuppose two objects external to each other. If we conclude that such statements by Wang Bi are not contradictory to his affirmation of the transcendence of Dao, but are part of a unified conception of the relation between Dao and things, and therefore do not need to be considered “materialistic”, the same should be true for Guo Xiang, for his statements, which take into account both Dao and all things, do not actually change the structure of the system in any fundamental way, but only emphasize the “self” aspect in a somewhat stronger tone.

In a word, it is through these paradoxical words that Guo Xiang pushes the absolute transcendence of Dao to the center of consciousness in an unprecedentedly extreme way: starting from the principle of *Laozi*’s “Dao follows nature” and *Zhuangzi*’s “what generates all things is not a thing”, the relationship between the absolute origin and all things cannot be conceived as any relationship between things that move and thus depend on each other. This origin transcends the realm of all existents absolutely, i.e., it becomes a “nothing” at this level, and in this sense absolutely “different” from all things: “the Supreme is not limited by beingness” 夫至極者，非物所制 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 369, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). However, the category of “difference” itself is derived from the comparison of the determinations of things, and the non-determinate transcendent thus cannot have any boundary or distinction with all things. The extreme transcendence of the creator thus leads to its extreme immanence: “What generates all things is nothing, and where is the boundary? 物物者竟無物也，際其安在乎 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, *ibid.*). In the words of Cheng Xuanying, who thinks Dao and things are not one and not different, it can be said that the former topic is “Dao and things are not one”, while the latter topic is “Dao and things are not different”. Both of them make the paradoxical character of Dao as “both transcendent and immanent” clear, in the negations of the categories “sameness” and “difference”.

In this regard, Ziporyn comes very close to the conclusion we have reached here when he points out that Guo Xiang converges things on themselves through an extreme emphasis

on their individuality, thus moving towards the affirmation of all empirical facts in an “unprincipled” manner, thus eliminating the possibility of asking for any external purpose or “why” of the facts (Ziporyn 2010). The difference is that we believe that Guo Xiang’s text at the same time does not avoid constructing transcendence in a non-ironic sense: Dao is admittedly a sort of paradoxical “why without a why” or “principle without principle”, but this does not mean that there is really a lack of why or principle, but rather that it is beyond the realm of some existing principle, and this transcendence has always been an indispensable context for Guo Xiang’s inference of his theory of self-generation. In terms of its intelligible ultimate manifestation in the empirical world, which can be legitimately expressed in language, Dao certainly behaves as a kind of “non-principle” or “non-cause”, but in its own right it remains a kind of “super-principle” or “super-cause”. Rather than deriving the legitimacy of such descriptions as “self-generation” or “self-so” from the incapacity of Dao itself, it derives simply from the inability of human language to describe something beyond “objects” or beyond existing “relations”.

Accordingly, we can understand “Dao generates things” as an expression of the transcendent side of Dao and “the self-generation of things” as an expression of the immanent side of Dao in the sense that Dao is never the same as all things; the creation of all things is always based on it, and in the sense that there is no division between Dao and all things; all things do not have a mover and shaker outside of themselves: “That boundless thing, though called the creator, actually only shows the self-generation of things” 不際者，雖有物物之名，直明物之自物 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 430, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). The discussion of “relation” of Dao and things is thus tantamount to the exclusion of categories of empirical relation. When scholars reckon that Dao in Guo Xiang’s context is “incompetent” based on the denotation of the text alone, they confuse Guo Xiang’s abolition of some “supreme being” with the abolition of the absolutely transcendent Dao itself, and confuse the “causality” between Dao and things out of the bad name “causality” with the causality between things. In fact, there is a strict boundary between the relation of things and “relation” of Dao and things in the exact sense. The latter, as the origin and beginning that always defines the former, naturally cannot be described in a way that is appropriate to the representation of the things it generates. This difference is both ontological and hermeneutic: In the case of the former, transcendence and immanence constitute two mutually bounded and irreducible sides of the same coin. In the case of the latter, this two-faced way of describing them exists not because they are trying to explain different facts or processes but because such a dichotomy is necessitated by the limitations of the concept and language from the point of view of human beings as observer and describer. From the point of view of fact itself, the assertion “Dao generates things” and the assertion “things generate themselves” are undoubtedly the same thing, and neither the transcendent nor the immanent side has a special status here. They are in fact equivalent to each other, but they are not alternative to each other in terms of formulation, for only by virtue of their complementarity can the essence of the relation between Dao and things be revealed conceptually without bias, so that we neither diminish Dao to the notion of some actual external dominator nor arbitrarily identify individual things in the empirical world as the only reality.

We can thus review the intellectual historical narrative mentioned in Section 2, according to which Guo Xiang replaced Wang Bi’s transcendental and generative Dao with the abstract and empty “supreme nothing”, thus eliminating some residual cosmogenic tendencies in the latter’s thought, i.e., denying that the universe has a temporal or external beginning, thus obtaining a more purified ontology. We may admit that, due to the ambiguity of his formulation, it is not impossible that there are some so-called cosmogenic residues in Wang Bi, even if the propositions on which Yu and Lu rely to identify these residues, most typically “being is born of nothing” 有生於無 (Lu 1996; Yu 2004), are also open to ontological interpretation.⁶ The question now, however, is as follows: can we conceive of Dao as a beginning only in the cosmogenic sense? According to the previous discussion, Guo Xiang’s expressions such as “no height in the high things” and “no oldness in the

old things” should be interpreted as an explanation of a kind of transcendence that is not limited by space and time. Such an origin has only the purest sense of logical dependence, its “generation” is not in space and time, nor is it “external” to anything in a relative sense, so that even the empirical word “generation” can no longer be applied to it. In light of this, the risk that Yu asserts, that recognizing a transcendent “nothing” as the ultimate ground could easily slip into some kind of “theological teleology”, does not exist because such a Dao likewise does not act as “another” being and would impose any constraints and regulations on other beings, and thus would not have any nameable, intelligible purpose—other than the unrestrained movement of all things that we can observe in the empirical world (Yu 2004). Consequently, such risk only exists in terms: the mere mention of the names “origin”, “creator”, “foundation”, etc. inevitably suggests a theological possibility. However, isolated terms do not have definite meanings themselves. Their actual meanings can only be clarified in a complete theoretical system. The repeated emphasis by Wang Bi and especially Guo Xiang on the aspect of the spontaneous movement of things has sufficiently eliminated the possibility of misinterpreting Dao as some kind of teleological God (including, but not limited to, a personal God in the Christian sense, who instituted the works of salvation and will judge man at the end of the world). It is hard to imagine that anyone who has truly understood their doctrine would still be obsessed with limiting this unrestrained, lively freedom of things by some predetermined pattern and path.

In short, it seems that the transition from cosmogenesis to ontology need not require the abolition of the absolute origin in the logical sense, and we can maintain that Guo Xiang purified Wang Bi’s ontology while claiming that he did not pay the price of abolishing the origin, but continued Wang Bi’s approach and stripped the origin of its substantiality and spatio-temporal determinations in a more explicit tone (i.e., the quotations at the beginning of this section show a literal denial of the creator), thus making Dao a “true” origin in a purely ontological sense—and where the text itself allows for the latter interpretation, claiming the former would obviously attach more unnecessary presuppositions to our inference of a possible continuity between Wang Bi and Guo Xiang. In line with this attempt to preserve coherence to a greater extent, if Liu Xiaogan and Wang Zhongjiang’s so-called all-encompassing “reverse interpretation” (逆向詮釋) or “reversal” of the original *Zhuangzi* text by Guo Xiang’s commentary, in contrast to the positive interpretation and development made by Wang Bi, who follows the logic of the line of *Laozi*, constitutes a “strong assertion” of the difference between *Zhuangzi* and Guo Xiang (Liu 2009; Wang 1993), then what we advocate here is a somewhat weaker—at least only in terms of ontology, leaving aside other dimensions such as epistemology, political philosophy, and so on—interpretation, i. e., there is no fundamental divergence between the positions of Guo Xiang and earlier Daoist metaphysics, but rather a difference in formulation and emphasis, and the consequent as an explicit exclusion of an underlying substantivist interpretation: by literally deconstructing the discourse of the creator in *Zhuangzi* through a bold and radical interpretive strategy, Guo Xiang perhaps reveals more clearly the essence of the metaphysical system that earlier Daoists tried to build up from the front and the opposite side.

6. Conclusions

At the end of this paper, let us review the traditional understanding of Guo Xiang’s “nothing”: the reason why scholars so overwhelmingly agree with the interpretation of “nothing” as “non-existence” is due to the fact that Guo Xiang’s theory of self-generation is unthinkingly tied to the absence of Dao. Since the establishment of the origin necessarily implies that there is something to generate and dominate all things, then the rejection of the origin is a necessary condition for the establishment of self-generation. It is not difficult to find that this way of thinking is also present in the heated debates in recent years around the meaning of “Dao follows nature” in *Laozi*: either to insist on the original status of Dao and to weaken the nature of things (or to directly follow the way of He Shang Gong’s interpretation: “the nature of Dao is natural and it follows nothing”, treating Dao as the

subject of the word *zi ran*, 自然), or the nature of things is strongly spoken of and the generative function of Dao as the origin is downplayed (Luo 2020; Wang 2018; Wang 2020; Yin 2019). In this regard, Guo Xiang's effort to bridge "Dao generates things" and "self-generation" by means of the "nothingness" of Dao leads to a new way of thinking: in the Laozegetics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the two may not be opposites. Is it indisputable that Dao's work of nurturing all things and the natural generation of all things without any cause and control constitute two opposite ends of the same axis, so that the prominence of one side must be "sacrificed" to the other side as the "price"? At least in the mode of the Dao–things relation reconstructed by Guo Xiang through the concept of "supreme nothing", we find that this way of thought, which seems to be the logical one in intellectual discourse, suffers a fundamental reversal. We cannot talk about immanence here apart from transcendence, and vice versa, because the one that is omnipresent can only be transcendent (otherwise it would be limited as a special something), and the transcendent is necessarily immanent (otherwise it would be in some kind of differential relationship with beings, and therefore not really transcendent). The establishment of "nature" or "self-generation" of all things would not be detrimental to the ultimate original status of Dao, but it is precisely when "nature" and "self-generation" are not guaranteed that this original status is not achieved, because in this case Dao is already reduced to the status of a "creator", "master of things", and so on, i.e., as an agent against all things. This will undoubtedly make its transcendent character as the origin disappear. In other words, it is not the absolutely transcendent Dao that damages the self-sufficiency of things, but the "supreme being" that is misconceived as the "creator" and the "true master" and therefore not transcendent enough.

That being said, we need to respond to the possible challenge that Guo Xiang never uses the terms "creator" or "master" in a transcendental sense, and is content to deny their legitimacy in the empirical use of language. If that is the case, is it possible to imagine that Guo Xiang merely retains some formal reality of the transcendent and at the same time completely deprives it of its function as the origin? In short, is the transcendent nature of Dao separable from its generative function? This separation does not correspond to Guo Xiang's thought. When he tries to define the connotation of the concept of Dao directly, he asserts: "All things go by it. Therefore, we tentatively name it by the term 'Dao'" 物所由而行，故假名之曰道 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, 517, see (Zhuangzi 1998)). As discussed in Section 3 of this paper, although Wang Bi argues that the indeterminate transcendent cannot be grasped by determinate language in its essence, he nevertheless approves of our describing it as "Dao" through its foundational role for all things as a matter of expediency. In this sense, "Dao" can be regarded as a name created for expediency, or a "false name" (假名, *jià míng*). Guo Xiang's practice of prescribing Dao "by which (or what)" is obviously a direct continuation of the practice of Wang Bi and other earlier Daoists, in which the name "Dao" is given only because it is a representation of a certain groundness, indicating the metaphysical dependence of all things on Dao. In this regard, the transcendence of Dao is not independent of its generative function, but rather derives only from further reflection and inference based on its generator status, and is thus dependent on this basic function, and Guo Xiang's definition continues this line of thought.

Thus, although Guo Xiang strictly confines the names "creator" and "master" to the empirical world and excludes them—as mentioned earlier, his motive should be understood as a caution against the overly substantialized, object-oriented connotations implied by these terms—he does not fundamentally dismantle the original role of the transcendent in the Daoist tradition. Accordingly, when Guo Xiang declares that "Dao does not block that by which they are as they are, so that all things go by themselves" 道不塞其所由，則萬物自得其行矣 (a commentary to *Zhuangzi*, p. 233, see (Zhuangzi 1998)), he is almost literally repeating the expression in Wang Bi's commentary on *Laozi*: "Dao does not block their origins, so that all things are self-generated, and what merit has Dao?" 不塞其源，則物自生，何功之有? (a commentary to *Laozi*, p. 24, see (Wang 1980)). While the transcendent causality of Dao is evidenced by and implemented through the negation of all empirical

causality, it does not mean that the former is superfluous and useless, because in the idea of constructing Dao-thing structure, the establishment of the latter always depends on the former: if Dao is not established as the absolute transcendent from its original status, thus depriving all concrete beings of the right to be the ultimate master of all things, the self-generation of all things as a result of this theory becomes impossible. That is, the empirical spontaneity of beings cannot be established by itself, but only paradoxically through a transcendent “generator”. When Wang Jiansong claims that Guo Xiang regards the world itself as the Absolute through the multiplicity of beings and transformations (Wang 2008), he seems to ignore the first half of the complete reasoning scattered in Guo Xiang’s commentaries, which are unstressed yet indispensable, and directly concludes that the self-generation thesis is self-sufficient.

Such a transcendence, established through the concept of “nothing”, based on a fundamental distinction between the metaphysical and the empirical levels, does not constitute any contradiction with the “small Daos” of Wang Bi in the sense of Ziporyn, which function specifically in individual things, or with the “li” of Guo Xiang as a total recognition of the actual, given state of the Self of beings (Ziporyn 2010), but only gives the premise from which the ontological commitments behind this immanence can be deduced, and thus completes it. As mentioned earlier, especially for Guo Xiang, each thing is absolutely unique at each moment; it is just so, without any possibility of being asked “why”, and this is where li lies, but the fact that the Self is recognized to such a radical extent depends precisely on the “existing without things” of Dao, which refuses to be reduced to some objective external cause or purpose, and thus does not constitute any destruction of the self-sufficiency and completeness of things as they are. From this point of view, if Ziporyn’s claimed further polarization of the emphasis on the particularity of things from Wang Bi to Guo Xiang (for whom the so-called “principle” is so specific that it ceases to be a principle at all and is nothing more than the whole fact of the existence and transformation of things) is valid, if this is true, then the basis for the possibility of such a transformation may lie precisely in the fact that the tendency to understand the “generating without generating” of Dao as the role of some actual “principle” is further weakened by the increased transcendence of the concept of Dao as “supreme nothing”.

Thus, it can be said that the “real meaning” of the theme “Dao generates things” can only be revealed with the complement of “the self-generation of things”, without being reduced to a controller as an entity. Conversely, “the self-generation of things” can only be accepted as the logical conclusion and theoretical interest of “Dao generates things”, so that it does not fall for limiting the gaze within the empirical world and denying the ultimate cause. In Guo Xiang’s theory—even in the preparatory form of this doctrine by Wang Bi and *Laozi*—as two conclusions derived from the absolute transcendence of Dao, there is no absolute distinction between Dao and the nature of things. “On the contrary, the two seemingly contradictory ends form an inseparable twist in the mutual fulfillment and realization of each other, which can be said to “have the same origin with different names” (同出而異名): it is when the absolute transcendence of Dao is pushed to its extreme that the absolute spontaneity of all things can be released to its extreme, and vice versa.

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Notes

- ¹ When speaking of “causality” here, it is certainly not necessary to limit its use to a specific Aristotelian taxonomic context, but rather it is a general expression of the dependence of all things on their ground, Dao, which is the logical condition for the existence and transformation of the former, as laid down in Daoist metaphysics.
- ² Other scholars have not failed to reflect on the earlier paradigm. Ziporyn, for example, has criticized the interpretation by Tang Yijie and others that attributes the existence of things to some ground of being within things, arguing that this essence-existence distinction does not apply in Guo Xiang’s case (Ziporyn 2010). However, when he analyzes Guo Xiang’s theory of causality and the reflection on the creator based on it in another work, his distinction between the different meanings of “Nothing” in the

context of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang still seems to follow the usual practice of the predecessors: “As for anything other than such being, the completely indeterminate Non-Being of Wang Bi, this is for Guo truly nothing, a cipher that can do nothing.” (Ziporyn 2003). It is still possible to identify the transformation of the meaning of “nothing” here: the term “nothing” in Wang Bi’s sense is withdrawn from its status as the ultimate cause as the creator in Guo Xiang. In a world constituted by the self-generation and self-transformation of finite entities, the formless origin is inevitably dissolved into a purely impotent nothing. This also influences his comments on the relationship of succession between Guo Xiang and Xiang Xiu, where a certain remnant of the creator that still remains in the latter is made clear in the former (Ziporyn 2003).

³ As the author has illustrated, the distinction between Buddhism and Daoism on the basis of their basic positions, *nidāna* (因緣) and “nature”, originated in Zhen Luan’s (甄鸞) *Laughing at Daoism* (笑道論). The Mahayana view of emptiness asserts that all false “existences” arise from the aggregation and separation of *nidāna*, denying on the one hand the existence of beings that are not dependent on any conditions, and on the other hand denying any nature that is innate and abiding. In this regard, Guo Xiang and his successor Cheng Xuanying (成玄英) are still indisputably subordinate to the traditional Daoist model of nature and natural self-generation, and there is a great irreconcilable tension with the Buddhist model of *nidāna* (Gao 2020).

⁴ It is worth noting that such an approach to the determination of the origin of all things, although it seems to have a certain apparent homogeneity with the “cosmological proof” of the existence of God in scholastic philosophy, i.e., both are based on a continuous tracing of the first cause, has fundamental differences in its purpose, thinking, and conclusions. In the classic formulation of Thomas Aquinas, for example, he aims to “prove” the existence of the origin in a way that is accessible to natural human reason, so that he: 1. has to resort to the Aristotelian assumption that “the chain of cause and effect has an end”, and 2. the object of proof is God as “the most perfect Being”, which, although eternal and infinite, is still grasped by human reason in the form of understanding and inference of beingness, and thus remains substantive, which also leaves room for God’s specific domination and arrangement of the world (for an overview of Aquinas’s doctrine, see (Boeder 1970). In contrast, Daoism does not, in the first place, presuppose an object to be “proved”; its reflections are based on an open inquiry into the origin of empirical things. More importantly, Daoism is not satisfied with the introduction of some self-caused being because it presupposes a real end to the chain of cause and effect, but rather denies the possibility of any being as an end, starting from the infinity of the chain. From this, the critique of the proof of God’s existence based on the possibility of “infinite regress” does not apply equally to Daoism, because the derivation of “nothing” as the origin does not assume some original being that is not open to questioning. “Nothing” is absolutely different from being, and therefore is not open to questioning in its own right, as being is. The consequence that becomes the end can only be some “non-ending end”, that is, “nothing” or “non-being”. The consequence inferred by Daoism is not the “most perfect being” at all, but something fundamentally different from all beings, which has no similarity with anything in what Aquinas calls the analogia entis and therefore cannot be grasped by human reason in the way that human reason is accustomed to grasping real objects. As we shall see in what follows, this distinction between “being” and “nothing” is not merely a conceptual game, but leads, in the further development of each, to a very different understanding of how all things go: for Daoism, the universe cannot be dominated and orchestrated by any willed subject (such a subject is determinate and thus can only be a being), and is not closed to some teleological end. It is the “nothingness” of Dao that guarantees the possibility of spontaneous generation and transformation of all things in a completely free and open manner.

⁵ This lost text was originally recorded in Li Lin’s (李霖) *Collection of Good Commentaries to Laozi* (道德真經取善集) of the Jin Dynasty, and is quoted here in accordance with the compilation by Tang Yijie in the appendix of his *Guo Xiang yu Wei Jin xuanxue* 郭象與魏晉玄學 (*Guo Xiang and the Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism*).

⁶ On this verse of Laozi, Wang Bi made the following commentary: “All things in the world come into being by virtue of being, and being has nothing as its root, so if one wants to make being complete, one must return to nothing”. This formulation of the origin or the ground is so vague in its wording that we cannot determine whether it states a temporal or logical relationship, or both. When scholars such as Wang Jiansong claim that the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi are “typically ontological” and Guo Xiang does not recognize “the ontological nothingness of Laozi, Zhuangzi, He, and Wang” (Wang 2008), he undoubtedly takes Wang Bi’s “nothing” as a logical rather than a spatio-temporal starting point.

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