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# Responsive Harmony in the *Zhuangzi*

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**Abstract:** This paper adopts a post-comparative approach to explore the concept of harmony in the *Zhuangzi*, moving beyond traditional comparative frameworks. It examines how Zhuangzian harmony offers a solution to the potential risks of domination that harmony may pose to individual freedom. It first challenges Chenyang Li's distinction between Confucian "active harmony" (主动和谐) and Daoist "passive harmony" (被动和谐), arguing that the "passive" label fails to capture the characteristic of Zhuangzian harmony. Instead, Zhuangzian harmony is better understood as "responsive harmony" (随动和谐), a unique form of harmony that is neither passive nor merely the opposite of Confucian active harmony. Responsive harmony shares similarities with active harmony, yet it offers distinct features that address certain challenges to harmony, such as the risk of domination, which Confucian harmony may not fully resolve. This perspective provides a fresh philosophical resource from Daoism for addressing contemporary concerns about harmony in ethical contexts.

**Keywords:** harmony; responsiveness; post-comparative philosophy; the *Zhuangzi*

## 1. Introduction

Post-comparative philosophy has emerged in recent years as a new stage of comparative philosophy. According to Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber, comparative philosophy has evolved through three previous stages: the first stage, from identifying universal similarities in different traditions, to the second stage, highlighting contrasts in non-Western traditions, and the third stage, a critical balance between universalism and localism. In the emerging fourth stage, comparative philosophy can become truly borderless and eventually drop its epithet "comparative". Good creative philosophy in a globalized world should spontaneously straddle geographical areas and cultures, temperaments and time periods, styles, and subdisciplines of philosophy (Chakrabarti and Weber 2015, pp. 20–22). At this new stage, ideas from different philosophical traditions can engage directly and justly with philosophical issues, without centering around Western or any other specific tradition. Each tradition's intellectual resources can contribute to the development of philosophy. Post-comparative philosophy focuses more on considering the unique characteristics of each philosophy and its value in addressing philosophical problems, rather than merely comparing similarities and differences between traditions.

This article will follow a post-comparative approach, focusing on contemporary philosophical issues in the discussion of harmony. It seeks to draw intellectual resources from the *Zhuangzi* to address the practical challenges of harmony, treating the Zhuangzi not as a non-Western philosophical text to be approached differently or merely compared with Western philosophical texts. Instead, it directly applies the *Zhuangzi*'s insights to problem-solving, much like how classical Western philosophical texts are utilized. This approach

moves beyond the dichotomy of Western versus non-Western philosophy, instead emphasizing which intellectual resources can offer new and effective perspectives and methods for resolving specific issues.

Harmony has attracted extensive attention and discussion among scholars over the past few decades, based on intellectual sources across various philosophical traditions. The Confucian tradition, with harmony as one of its core values, offers some of the most extensive discussions on this concept. Chenyang Li synthesizes ideas from Confucian classics, such as the *Yijing* 易经 (*Book of Change*), the *Zhongyong* 中庸, and the *Xunzi* 荀子, and identifies five characteristics of active harmony from a Confucian perspective: heterogeneity, tension, coordination and cooperation, transformation and growth, and renewal (Li 2021). Harmony has also gained increasing attention in other religious traditions, such as Christianity (Neville 2022), Islam (Afsaruddin 2022), and Buddhism (Schlieter 2022; Kantor 2021), as well as philosophical traditions like Daoism (Kwok 2021; Moeller 2021; Ziporyn 2021), Mohism (He 2021), and Western philosophy (Pettit 1997; Kim 2021). Harmony, as an important virtue shared across various traditions, not only contributes to ethical exploration within one tradition but also opens up possibilities for dialogue and comparison between different traditions.

Given the depth and prominence of Confucian scholarship on harmony, much of the research on harmony in other traditions has been framed through comparisons with the Confucian concept of harmony. Traditional comparative approaches have been prevalent in this field; for instance, comparisons among Confucian harmony, Greek harmony, and literal harmony (Li 2016). Such comparisons foster dialogue on harmony across traditions but often remain within the earlier three stages of traditional comparative philosophy, focusing primarily on identifying similarities and differences among various traditions. Post-comparative approaches are also emerging, yet many responses to contemporary issues using the concept of harmony still heavily rely on Confucianism. For example, Philip Pettit employs Confucian harmony as the model of harmony to advocate for cooperation between republican freedom and harmony (Pettit 2022), and Sungmoon Kim's discussion of meritocracy, democracy, and deep harmony also focuses on Confucian harmony (Kim 2021). These discussions, however, often overlook the diversity of harmony models, especially those found outside the Confucian tradition—such as Daoist, Buddhist, and Mohist conceptions of harmony—and their potential contributions to addressing philosophical problems.

This article takes a post-comparative philosophical approach, drawing on the *Zhuangzi* as an intellectual resource to address contemporary challenges in the discourse on harmony. As Hans-Georg Moeller suggests, "post-comparative philosophy, it is argued, moves beyond difference and sameness and engages in diverse philosophical endeavors by employing sources from various traditions without constituting a specific field based on culturalist distinctions" (Moeller 2022). One of the most pressing challenges in current studies on harmony is whether the pursuit of social harmony inherently conflicts with individual freedom. Specifically, the realization of social harmony often entails some degree of domination with individual freedom. Philip Pettit has noted that "it is tempting to think that no matter how they are interpreted, the ideals of freedom and harmony—the ideals of a free society, on the one side, a harmonious society on the other—are in conflict. The one holds out the image of a competitive, chaotic world of self-seeking, the other the image of a world of settled expectation and quiet acquiescence"(Pettit 2022). The question is whether it is possible to minimize, if not entirely avoid, the domination of individuals by leaders or specific groups in society during the pursuit of harmony. This paper proposes to use a harmony model in the *Zhuangzi*, with responsiveness as its main characteristic to ar-

gue that responsive harmony's applicability to the problem of domination is more efficient compared to Confucian harmony.

This paper begins by clarifying the concept of harmony in the *Zhuangzi*[1]. It first challenges Chenyang Li's distinction between Confucian "active" harmony and Daoist "passive" harmony. The passive framework proves insufficient and imprecise for capturing the nuances of Daoist harmony, such as Zhuangzian harmony. It further argues that Zhuangzi's concept of harmony is not simply a "passive" counterpart to Confucian "active harmony" but a unique form of "responsive harmony". This harmony model shares certain features with active harmony but possesses distinct characteristics and responds to challenges—arising from the potential for harmony to enable domination—that Confucian harmony may not adequately address.

## 2. Active Harmony and Passive Harmony

This section challenges the simplistic classification of the Daoist concept of harmony as merely the opposite of Confucian harmony, arguing that Zhuangzian harmony, at the very least, cannot be neatly placed in this category. Before delving into the characteristics of Confucian harmony and Zhuangzian harmony, it is essential to briefly refer back to existing research. The concept of harmony in Confucian thought has been the focus of extensive research over the past few decades. Scholars have explored it from various perspectives. First, discussions have centered on the role of harmony within Confucianism, debating whether it serves as a central value or a pathway to other ideals (Yao 2017; Li 2006), as well as its connections with other key Confucian concepts, such as *li* 礼 (ritual propriety), *yue* 乐 (music), and *zhong* 中 (centrality and equilibrium)[2] (Li 2014b). Second, textual analyses have examined how harmony is expressed in Confucian classics, including the Four Books (Yao 2013), such as *Zhongyong* (Li 2004) and the Five Classics, such as the *Zuo Zhuan* 左传 (*Zuo Commentary*) (Li 2006; Wong 2020) and the *Book of Changes* (Cheng 1989). Third, in terms of scope, research has addressed harmony at various levels, from internal harmony within the virtuous individual to familial harmony, societal harmony, global harmony, and even triadic harmony within the cosmos (Li 2008). Finally, studies have delved into harmony's implications in ethics (Chan 2011; Li and Düring 2022) and political philosophy (Brindley 2010; Li 2009), as well as its direct relevance to specific values like freedom (Li 2014a, 2016) and justice (D'Ambrosio 2020; D'Ambrosio 2016; Fox 1995; Li 2018).

However, harmony in the *Zhuangzi* has not garnered adequate attention. Only a few articles have been dedicated to it, mainly focusing on harmonizing right and wrong (Moeller 2021; Ziporyn 2021) and harmonizing with Dao (Chai 2019; Cook 2003). Harmony in the *Zhuangzi*[3], despite not yet receiving adequate attention, plays an essential role. There are a multitude of discussions in the *Zhuangzi* covering various levels and aspects of this concept. The primary Chinese character for harmony, "*he* 和"[4], appears in the *Zhuangzi* 56 times, even though not all of these instances are directly related to the concept of harmony. Furthermore, there are multiple models of harmony in the *Zhuangzi*. Brook Ziporyn has summarized five models of harmony in various chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, including the "walking two roads/center of the circle" model in Chapter 2, virtuosity as harmony in Chapter 5, three models of harmony from the *Xianchi* (咸池) music passage in Chapter 14, the "syncretist" model of harmony between "tranquillity" and "understanding" in Chapter 16, and the "unification of parts in a static whole" model of harmony in Chapter 33 (Ziporyn 2021). Ziporyn's study shows that the *Zhuangzi* not only mentions the word "*he* 和", but also develops different models of harmony. Given the frequent occurrence of the character and the various models, harmony in the *Zhuangzi* deserves more attention.

Not only Confucianism but also Zhuangzi offers rich discussions on harmony, along with corresponding models of harmonious interaction. Chenyang Li has proposed a dis-

tinction between the characteristics of harmony as conceived in Confucian and Daoist thought. Chenyang Li proposes two modes of harmony, "active harmony" and "passive harmony", for the interpretation of harmony in Confucianism and Daoism, respectively. "Active harmony," as Li explains, involves positive and constructive interaction among all parties, while "passive harmony" is marked by peaceful coexistence instead of active engagement. Li asserts that "while what Laozi and his followers prescribed falls mostly along the line of passive harmony, mainly in the form of laissez-faire disengagement, Confucian thinkers by and large opted for active harmony, in the form of constructive engagement" (Li 2021).[5] It is worth noting that the contrast between "active harmony" and "passive harmony" differs slightly from that of "positive harmony" and "negative harmony". As suggested by Li, active harmony implies not only positive aspects but also constructive characteristics. Comparatively, passive harmony is less constructively engaging, rather than merely harmonizing negatively.

This classifying approach may rely on the relatively well-developed framework of harmony in Confucian thought, framing Daoist ideas—particularly those of Laozi and his followers—as a passive system in contrast to Confucianism's active one. However, such a distinction raises several problems. The characteristics of harmony in Confucian and Daoist thought may not be entirely oppositional. Such categorization risks overlooking the significant features of Daoist conceptions of harmony and their unique contributions to the theme. Moeller has addressed this issue in his research, stating, "It is unquestionable that *he* 和 'harmony' is a highly positive and central notion in the Daoist tradition"(Moeller 2021). Similarly, Wai Wai Chiu's book review also engages with this debate, challenging Chenyang Li's assertion that "when realizing harmony, Daoists are more passive and Confucians are more active" as misleading (Chiu 2017). Both scholars' critiques center on whether "passive harmony" adequately captures the Daoist approach to harmony but do not offer alternative frameworks. In the following paragraphs, I will explore a harmonizing approach of the Daoist representative figure Zhuangzi, arguing that "passive harmony" fails to describe his perspective and provide an alternative interpretation.

Tracing back to the main distinction highlighted by Li between Confucian and Daoist harmony, Confucian harmony emphasizes active engagement, while Daoist harmony does not. The *Zhuangzi* indeed advocates for a certain degree of disengagement. There are many expressions of roaming beyond the social–political–moral boundaries throughout the text. For example, when Yao cedes the empire to Xu You, Xu You refuses (*Zhuangzi* 1.4); Duke Ai of Lu offers Sad Horsehead Humpback the position of prime minister, but Sad Horsehead Humpback leaves (*Zhuangzi* 5.4); the King of Chu asks Zhuangzi to help control his realm, but Zhuangzi prefers "dragging his tail through the mud" (*Zhuangzi* 17.11). However, despite the apparent emphasis on freedom as wandering outside the social areas, the *Zhuangzi* also maintains that in many situations, individuals cannot completely extricate themselves from political life, such as with the challenges suggested in *Ren Jian Shi* 人间世 (*In the Human world*). In the story in which Zigao acts as an envoy to Qi, Confucius says, "There are two great constraining obligations in this world. One is what is fated, one's mandated limitations, and the other is responsibility, doing what is called for by one's position"(Ziporyn 2020, p. 41). For every individual, regardless of when or where they are in the world, it is hard to escape from these two great constraining obligations. Disengagement is not sufficient to explain the *Zhuangzi*'s thought of interpersonal relations, as the *Zhuangzi* acknowledges that engagement is not preferred but sometimes unavoidable. In *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy, the inevitable engagement among individuals challenges the foundational assumption that Zhuangzian harmony is passive.

Furthermore, the term "passive" is not suitable for explaining the *Zhuangzi*'s thoughts. Qian Mu钱穆 has differentiated "passive" and "responsive" to elaborate on the character-

istic of *Yin* 阴 in "*Yin* and *Yang*" 阴阳. He suggests that *Yin* is not *beidong* 被动 ("passive") but rather *suidong* 随动 ("responsive")."Passivity is when an object is pushed by the other, while responsiveness is when the object A follows along with the other object automatically" (Qian 2000, pp. 16–17). While following others is a significant characteristic in the *Zhuangzi*, it does not necessarily involve being pushed by others. The term "responsive" aligns more closely with Zhuangzi's philosophy than "passive," as individuals automatically engage and interact with others during this process, though not in an active way. It is said that "the Utmost Person uses his mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Thus, he can overcome all things without harm" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 72). Notably, compared to "following" or "adapting", "responsive" is more appropriate for translating *suidong* 随动, because it can better echo Zhuangzi's idea of the "*ying* 应" (responding) as illustrated in this "mirror metaphor". Moreover, "responsive" also implies "following" and "adapting". Being responsive means that one does not welcome or reject others in a dominating way or use one principle to harmonize with all others. Individuals respond differently according to others in different situations.

## 3. Responsive Harmony in the *Zhuangzi*

If "passive harmony" as the opposite of Confucian harmony fails to adequately capture Zhuangzi's approach to harmony, how should we characterize Zhuangzi's vision of harmony? Following Qian Mu's idea of Daoism and based on Zhuangzian argument for responsiveness, I argue that Zhuangzi provides an idea of "responsive harmony". This section begins by exploring a musical metaphor of responsive harmony to explain its fundamental modes and then delves into Zhuangzi's allegories to illustrate how virtuous individuals engage with others through this mode of responsive harmony. At the same time, responsive harmony in the *Zhuangzi* is based on interpersonal engagement and has a constructive influence on people who are nearby. Even though such engagement may not be Zhuangzi's primary pursuit, it remains an unavoidable aspect of human interactions.

Confucian harmony is often illustrated through two key metaphors: the sage blending diverse ingredients to create a harmonious soup[6] or harmonizing different notes to produce music[7]. In contrast, responsive harmony offers its own distinct musical metaphor. This kind of metaphor can be traced back at least to the *Yijing*. In the Second Yang of *Zhongfu* 中孚 (Inner Trust) Hexagram, it is said that "a calling crane is in the shadows; its young harmonize with it. I have a fine goblet; I will share it with you" (Lynn 2004, p. 524).[8] The crane just stays in the shadows, subtly escaping notice. When the crane sings, the young are attracted to it naturally and harmonize responsively with it. During this process, the method of harmonizing is largely relied on the calling crane. In other words, in responsive harmony, the approach to harmonization varies based on the object being harmonized. A similar musical metaphor appears in the *Zhuangzi*: when the wind begins to blow, the ten thousand hollows produce a chorus of resonant cries:

> "The bulges and drops of the mountain forest, the indentations, and holes riddling its massive, towering trees, are like noses, mouths, ears; like sockets, enclosures, mortars; like ponds, like puddles! Roarers and whizzers, scolders and sighers, shouters, wailers, boomers, growlers! One leads with a 'yeee!' and others answer with a 'yuuu!' A light breeze brings a small harmony, while a powerful gale makes for a harmony vast and grand. And once the sharp wind has passed, all these holes return to their silent vacuity". (Ziporyn 2020, pp. 11–12)

Notably, when the wind passes through, the hollows harmonize differently, responding to the wind's intensity, whether light or powerful; the harmonies are also affected by the unique shapes of the hollows themselves. The latter illustrates that there is no single way to harmonize with a given object; the process is not merely dictated passively by the

object being harmonized. Similarly, individuals can choose their own ways of harmonizing, which do not need to be uniform, much like the hollows producing diverse sounds in response to the wind. Thus, responsive harmony goes beyond mere agreement with others—it allows one to maintain one's own unique characteristics in the process. As a mode of harmonization, responsive harmony adapts to others without passively following them, embodying an autonomous response.

The music metaphor of Zhuangzian harmony shows that it involves responding to others while preserving one's own distinct characteristics. Hans-Georg Moeller proposed that "harmonizing (with) others based on what is right or wrong for them" on the one hand, means "to make them emotionally harmonious" or, better, "to calm them down". On the other hand, it means that people can affirm what they hold to be right or wrong (Moeller 2021, pp. 89, 93). In Moeller's argument, responsive harmony is highly reliant on agreeing with others, or at least pretending to agree with others, and keeping peace in the heart–mind. However, Zhuangzi's approach to harmony goes beyond mere agreement; it also exerts a constructive influence on others. In this respect, responsive harmony shares similarities with the constructive engagement found in active harmony. In *De Chong Fu* 德充符 (*Fragmentations Betokening Full Virtuosity*), the story of Sad Horsehead Humpback gives an example of a virtuoso harmonizing responsively with others:

> There's this ugly man in Wei named Sad Horsehead Humpback. When men are with him they can think of nothing else and find themselves unable to depart. When women see him, they plead with their parents, saying they would rather be this man's concubine than any other man's wife—this has happened at least a dozen times already! And yet he's never been heard to initiate anything of his own with them, instead just harmonizing responsively (*he* 和) with whatever they're already doing. He has no position of power with which to protect their lives and no stash of wealth with which to fill their stomachs, and on top of that, he's ugly enough to startle all the world. So there he is, harmonizing responsively (*he* 和) with them instead of presenting anything new of his own, his understanding limited to his immediate surroundings, and yet male and female come together before him wherever he goes. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 48)

Sad Horsehead Humpback is an ugly man, with no position of power or stash of wealth, though he still attracts men and women, who come together before him wherever he goes. His main characteristic is that he always harmonizes responsively with others rather than initiating anything of his own. When Duke Ai of Lu heard about the situation with Sad Horsehead Humpback, he became curious and met him. A few months later, he came to regard him highly, and within a year, he began to trust him. In the process, Sad Horsehead Humpback's responsive harmony brought transformation to Duke Ai of Lu. Duke Ai of Lu said, "my state had no prime minister, so I offered the post to him. Looking trapped and put upon, he was vague and evasive when he finally responded, seeming to reject the idea. I was embarrassed, but in the end, I prevailed upon him to accept control of the state. But before long he left me and vanished. I was terribly depressed, as if a loved one had died, unable to take any pleasure in my power" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 48). Only after a few months, Duke Ai of Lu started to trust Sad Horsehead Humpback and hoped to offer him the position of prime minister. Even after Sad Horsehead Humpback left, Duke Ai of Lu did not revert to his former self. Instead, he became deeply depressed and lost all enjoyment in his power, growing detached from his social position, much like Sad Horsehead Humpback. Although Duke Ai of Lu may have remained in his position, his attitude towards it had changed. In the process of harmonization, constructive transformation occurred in Duke Ai of Lu—he shed his previous attachment to power and external status, undergoing a genuine shift in mindset.[9] Notably, the depression of Du Ai of Lu

implies his detachment to power or position, which is constructive in shaping an ideal Daoist characteristic.

Such a constructive characteristic is not necessarily one-way; it can be reciprocal between individuals, and the harmonizing subject is not limited to just one person, as seen in the allegory between the ancient lords Yao and Shun.

> In ancient times Yao asked Shun, "I want to attack Zong, Kuai, and Xu'ao. For though I sit facing south on the throne, still I am not at ease. Why is this?" Shun said, "Though these three may continue to dwell out among the bushes and grasses, why should this make you ill at ease? Once upon a time ten suns rose in the sky at once, and the ten thousand things were all simultaneously illuminated. And how much better are multiple virtuosities than multiple suns?" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 18)

In the conversation, Yao wanted to attack Zong, Kuai, and Xu'ao to become the only lord in the world, similar to the one sun in the sky. However, Shun said that one sun in the sky was not the only way to organize the world, and multiple suns could coexist and thus benefit ten thousand things. In this metaphor, a single center is an option, but multiple centers may work better. It is not necessary to exclude other centers to realize harmony. In this case, every individual in a society, rather than merely the sage-king, could harmonize with others. Furthermore, an individual is not only the subject harmonizing with others but also the object of others' harmonizing process. Individuals can influence and be influenced by each other. In this process, each individual can contribute to the world in his own way. For each sun, the illumination of the other nine suns constitutes the background, and its illumination will, in return, influence other suns. The coexistence of individuals and mutually harmonizing will lead to the prosperity of each other and the world.

Moreover, responsive harmony in the *Zhuangzi* is also related to a crucial concept *wuwei* 无为 (effortless action). Chenyang Li has elaborated on the relation between "harmony" and *wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi*. "*He* 和 (harmony) is used also abundantly in the *Zhuangzi* to describe and prescribe actions of human agency. As such, it is connected closely to the concept of *wuwei*, or effortless action. *Wuwei* does not mean doing nothing, as the notion has sometimes been interpreted. Rather, it means to take a path that harmonizes with the world. The path of *wuwei* is the natural way" (Li 2014b, pp. 34–35). Edward Slingerland also argued that the Zhuangzian idea of *wuwei* represents a state in which one's actions are perfectly harmonized with one's "natural," spontaneous inclinations (Slingerland 2007, p. 175). From the arguments of these two scholars, it is evident that *wuwei* and harmony in the *Zhuangzi* are closely interconnected. Li emphasizes harmony as a response to external circumstances, while Slingerland focuses on harmony as an internal alignment. Both perspectives highlight that *wuwei* entails harmonizing in a natural and responsive way.

In summary, Zhuangzi's responsive harmony encompasses at least the following characteristics: when a virtuous person harmonizes with those around them responsively, first, the specific way of harmonizing depends on the person or object being harmonized. Secondly, throughout this process, the harmonizing individual does not lose their own identity or completely align with others; rather, they maintain their distinctiveness while still having a constructive influence on those around them. Finally, in society, this form of harmony is decentralized. There is not only one harmonizing subject; rather, everyone can engage in harmonious relationships with others. This not only has a constructive influence on others, but also allows individuals to benefit from others' constructive influence. The mutual responsive harmony between individuals fosters the overall harmony and prosper-

ity of society. Lastly, this type of responsive harmonizing process is closely connected to *wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi*.

## 4. Responsive Harmony in Addressing the Issue of Domination

Zhuangzi's concept of responsive harmony and the Confucian notion of active harmony share the characteristic, as Qian Mu points out, of being self-initiated rather than externally imposed. Also, they involve a form of constructive engagement among individuals. In this case, what are the differences between Zhuangzian harmony and Confucian harmony? Moreover, how might these distinctions, from a post-comparative perspective, contribute to advancing the broader discussion on harmony? This section will first analyze the subtle differences between Zhuangzi's responsive harmony and Confucian active harmony. It will then approach the issue through post-comparative philosophy—not limited to comparing the similarities and differences between the two philosophical approaches, but considering the current challenges in discussions of harmony and exploring whether Zhuangzi's philosophy can offer solutions to aspects that Confucianism fails to address.

Regarding active harmony and responsive harmony, a key distinction lies in the sequence of action in the process of achieving harmony. Active harmony involves being the initiator of the harmonious process, which goes first, whereas responsive harmony emphasizes adapting to others and mainly following. Sad Horsehead Humpback, for example, does not lead in advance but follows behind others. Furthermore, in Confucian harmony, the principles of harmony are determined by the harmonizer. For instance, in the culinary metaphor, the master chef creates harmony by skillfully combining and balancing various ingredients, rather than allowing the ingredients to harmonize autonomously. When the soup achieves harmony for the master chef or the noble person, this harmony does not necessarily align with the ingredients' preference. By contrast, in Zhuangzi's responsive harmony, the method of achieving harmony is primarily determined by the one being harmonized with. A virtuous harmonizer adapts his approach based on the unique characteristics of the individuals involved, employing different methods to suit different circumstances.

By examining Zhuangzi's discussions on harmony, particularly his metaphors for responsive harmony and how a virtuous person embodies this approach, we gain a clearer understanding of Zhuangzi's concept of responsive harmony. One significant challenge in discussions of harmony is whether it poses a threat to individual freedom. The tension between freedom and harmony arises, at least in part, from their differing assumptions: freedom assumes that individuals can be potential threats to one another, while harmony assumes that others can be potential collaborators. The former emphasizes maintaining a certain distance to prevent mutual interference or domination. According to Philip Pettit's theory of republican freedom, domination poses a greater threat to freedom than interference. Pettit outlines three conditions for a relationship of domination: "1. they have the capacity to interfere 2. on an arbitrary basis 3. in certain choices that the other is in a position to make" (Pettit 1997, p. 52). This raises the following question: is it possible to develop a model of harmony that avoids threatening individual freedom, allowing social harmony and personal freedom to coexist?

Pettit further provides two social designs that might help to advance non-domination: "One is the strategy of reciprocal power, as we might describe it, the other the strategy of constitutional provision" (Pettit 1997, p. 67). Confucian harmony, to some extent, aligns with the second strategy. However, it does not fully resolve the tension between harmony and freedom. Zhuangzi's approach to harmony, by contrast, offers a complementary perspective that helps balance harmony with the freedom of non-domination. From a post-comparative philosophical perspective, the following discussion will first analyze how

Confucian harmony seeks to avoid domination, and then explore Zhuangzi's alternative approach to harmony and its contribution to advancing non-domination.

Li Chenyang argues that the Confucian approach to harmony does not lead to domination. The sage establishes rituals, which serve as norms to harmonize society. Xunzi provides a detailed account of how the ancient sage-kings brought harmony to society[10]. Xunzi argues that if everyone acted on their desires alone, society's resources would be quickly depleted, resulting in chaos and conflict. To prevent this, the ancient sage-kings established rituals to create social roles and hierarchy, ensuring that each person fulfills their designated function and maintains social harmony. In this model, the sage-king, like a conductor, actively initiates harmony, while the people, like musical notes, are guided into a unified composition. Importantly, just as different melodies can emerge from the same notes, society can achieve harmony in various ways, with the sage-king choosing ritual as the means to guide it. While this form of harmony may involve some level of interference, it does not result in domination, aligning with what Pettit describes as the second approach to advancing non-domination. "The strategy of constitutional provision seeks to eliminate domination, not by enabling dominated parties to defend themselves against arbitrary interference or to deter arbitrary interferers but rather by introducing a constitutional authority—say a corporate, elective agent—to the situation" (Pettit 1997, pp. 67–68).

However, the establishment of rituals or, in modern contexts, constitutional provisions, though effective in avoiding domination to a significant extent, cannot encompass every aspect of social life. In areas where laws or rituals are not fully applicable or where they are poorly observed, the following question arises: is there a form of harmony that can avoid domination in such cases? Zhuangzi's approach to harmony aligns with Pettit's first method of advancing non-domination. "The strategy of reciprocal power is to make the resources of dominator and dominated more equal so that, ideally, a previously dominated person can come to defend themselves against any interference on the part of the dominator" (Pettit 1997, p. 67). The conversation between Yan He and Qu Boyu illustrates how responsive harmony can balance the power between the dominator and dominated, offering a valuable alternative in situations where established norms fall short.

When Yan He was appointed tutor to the crown prince of Wei, son of Duke Ling, he went to consult with Qu Boyu.

> "Here is a man who is just naturally no good. If I find no way to contain him, he will endanger my state, but if I do try to contain him, he will endanger my life. His cleverness allows him to understand the crimes people commit, but not why they were driven to commit these crimes. What should I do?" Qu Boyu said, "A good question indeed! You must be attentive to him, cautious of him, but also put your own person into proper alignment! Best to be both compromising in appearance and harmonious in mind. But even these measures can present problems. Don't let the external compromise get inside you, and don't let your inner harmony show itself externally. If you let the external compromise get inside you, it will topple you, destroy you, collapse you, cripple you. If the harmony in your heart shows itself externally, it will lead to reputation and re-nown, which will haunt and plague you. If he's playing the baby, play baby with him. If he's being lawless and unrestrained, be lawless and unrestrained with him. If his behavior is unbounded and shapeless, be unbounded and shapeless with him. You must commune with him to the point of flawlessness". (Ziporyn 2020, p. 40)

In the story of Yan He, who is appointed as tutor to the crown prince of Wei, he seeks advice from Qu Boyu, expressing a dilemma: the prince's inherently problematic nature poses risks to the state and to Yan He's personal safety. The prince, who is sharp enough

to recognize others' faults yet blind to the underlying causes of their actions, represents a challenge that cannot easily be addressed through direct confrontation. This story underscores the tension between maintaining personal safety and fulfilling social responsibilities, particularly when addressing systemic issues or flawed leadership. In this case, Qu Boyu provides a flexible, responsive approach for the one who might be dominated to harmonize—one that avoids rigid imposition while navigating the realities of existing hierarchies. Such responsive harmony can help the dominated to engage constructively with the dominator without escalating risks. This approach to harmony helps balance the power asymmetry between the dominated and the dominator, thereby advancing non-domination. Moreover, relying solely on the establishment of laws or regulations to achieve non-domination often falls short in practice. Zhuangzi's concept of harmony provides a significant complement to address this limitation. In this case, the story of Yan He first exemplifies "constructive engagement". It illustrates a strategy that not only enables Yan He to maintain his position as the prince's tutor but also seeks to transform the prince, guiding him to avoid behaviors that could endanger the state. Second, the story offers a method for resisting domination, which typically occurs when individuals of higher status dominate those of lower status. Despite being of lower rank than the prince, Yan He's approach demonstrates a viable means for those in subordinate positions to navigate and avoid being dominated by those in power.

Unlike his contemporaries in the Confucian traditions, Zhuangzi did not seek to establish a systematic framework of ritual to harmonize society. Instead, his concept of responsive harmony is rooted in individual virtue. Notably, Zhuangzi did not aim to completely overturn the existing social order; rather, he emphasized that a virtuous individual could find a way to exist harmoniously within the current system while engaging constructively with others. This approach to harmony offers a means to circumvent the domination that hierarchical social structures might impose, particularly from those in positions of power. The parable of the Sad Horsehead Humpback and Duke Ai of Lu exemplifies how such harmony can manifest in interpersonal relationships, even within the constraints of established societal hierarchies.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, exploring responsive harmony in the *Zhuangzi* through a post-comparative lens reveals its unique philosophical contributions, transcending the confines of traditional comparative frameworks. Zhuangzian harmony is not merely the counterpart to Confucian active harmony; rather, it offers an autonomous approach characterized by active mutual engagement among individuals, sharing similarities with Confucian active harmony. Drawing on metaphors such as one person singing while another responds, and the story of the unattractive yet virtuous Sad Horsehead Humpback who harmonizes with those around him without initiating by himself, Zhuangzian harmony emphasizes fostering the flourishing of individuals through natural responsiveness.

Notably, "responsive harmony" in the *Zhuangzi* primarily emphasizes relationships among individuals. However, its application can extend more broadly, including relations between nations, as suggested by the story of Yi shooting down nine suns. If a country seeks to harmonize with others responsively, rather than aiming for domination or elimination of others, it could foster a more harmonious world where all nations can flourish. Furthermore, while the *Zhuangzi* does not explicitly discuss harmony for state governance, its insights offer valuable perspectives. In contrast to the Confucian ideal of active harmony, which may be more proactive or initiative-driven, the concept of responsive harmony suggests that rulers can harmonize the state by adapting to its current conditions and the needs of its people.

From a post-comparative perspective, Zhuangzian harmony serves as a complementary approach to Confucian methods, addressing the potential challenges to freedom posed by harmony itself—specifically, the risk of domination by a group or leader over individuals. This exploration moves beyond the first three stages of the tradition's comparative philosophy, situating Zhuangzi's thought firmly within the post-comparative context. It enriches the existing discourse on harmony, which has predominantly focused on Confucian traditions, by offering an alternative model that is grounded in Daoist philosophy. In other words, Zhuangzian responsive harmony provides a fresh philosophical resource for addressing contemporary issues related to harmony. Its emphasis on adaptability and mutual engagement offers valuable insights into navigating the complexities of human relationships and societal structures, presenting a path from an individual perspective toward avoiding domination.

## Notes

1. The *Zhuangzi* is attributed to Zhuang Zhou, a figure in around the late 4th century BCE in the Warring States. It is widely accepted that Zhuang Zhou was not the only author of the *Zhuangzi*. However, whether the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* or at least its core were written by Zhuang Zhou remains controversial; see (Liu 1987; Klein 2010; Klein 2022; Smith 2003). This paper considers the whole text as a representative work of the Zhuangzi school, and refers it as Zhuangzi's work. It primarily focuses on the Inner Chapters, since they are more distinctive from other schools, while also drawing insights from Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters. This article aimed to propose that there is a conception of responsive harmony in the *Zhuangzi*, instead of "responsive harmony" being Zhuangzi's only view of harmony.

2. The connection between "harmony" and "centrality" is emphasized in *Zhong Yong* 中庸 (*Focusing the Familiar*). The moment at which joy and anger and grief and pleasure have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium (*zhong*); once the emotions have arisen, they are all brought into proper focus (*zhong*), which is called harmony (*he*). This notion of equilibrium and focus (*zhong*) is the great root of the world; harmony, then, is the advancement of the proper way (*dadao*) of the world (Ames 2001).

3. When referring to passages from the *Zhuangzi*, I cite the chapter and section number as they appear in the online version of the text at the Chinese Text Project website (www.ctext.org/zhuangzi (accessed on 10 January 2025)). As for the English translation of the *Zhuangzi*, my primary reference is the translation by Brook Ziporyn (Ziporyn 2020). For some contentious terms in the *Zhuangzi*, I have also consulted other translations.

4. To explore the complexity of the issues connected to harmony in Chinese thought, see So Jeong Park's interpretation of the concept cluster surrounding the central term *he* 和 (Park 2021).

5. Admittedly, it is hard to explicitly attribute Zhuangzi—particularly the *Inner Chapters* of the *Zhuangzi*—to Laozi's followers. The existence of "Daoism" as a coherent tradition and the classification of Zhuangzi within it remain debatable. Nevertheless, the intellectual affinity between the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* is hard to deny. In another book, Chenyang Li does classify Zhuangzi as part of Daoism, stating, "First, whereas Daoist harmony, particularly in the *Zhuangzi*, is primarily between humanity and the natural world...... Second, in promoting harmony, Confucians are more proactive than their Daoist counterparts" (Li 2014b, pp. 34–36). Although Chenyang Li does not explicitly label Zhuangzi's concept of harmony as "passive harmony" in this passage, he does suggest that Zhuangzi's approach to harmony is less active compared to Confucianism.

6. Harmony is like a stew. Water, fire, jerky, mincemeat, salt, and plum vinegar are used to cook fish and meat. These are cooked over firewood. The master chef harmonizes them, evening them out with seasonings, compensating for what is lacking, and diminishing what is too strong. The noble man eats it and calms his heart (Durrant et al. 2016, p. 1587).

7. Sounds are just like flavors. The single breath, the two forms, the three genres, the four materials, the five tones, the six pitches, the seven notes, the eight airs, the nine songs—these are used to complete one another. The clear and the muddy, the piano and the forte, the short and the long, the presto and the adagio, the somber and the joyous, the hard and the soft, the delayed and the immediate, the high and the low, the going out and coming in, the united and separate—these are used to complement one another. The noble man listens to it and thus calms his heart (Durrant et al. 2016, p. 1587).

8     Translated by Richard John Lynn, modified.

9     Even though the story of Sad Horsehead Humpback and Duke Ai of Lu does not provide a detailed explanation of how the responsive process unfolds, we can observe the outcome: Duke Ai changes his perspective and no longer takes pleasure in being the ruler, which implies that the Sad Horsehead Humpback's way of harmonizing Duke Ai of Lu is a conductive engagement.

10     To be as noble as the Son of Heaven and to be so rich as to possess the whole world—these are what the natural dispositions of people are all alike in desiring. However, if you followed along with people's desires, then their power could not be accommodated, and goods could not be made sufficient. Accordingly, for their sake, the former kings established ritual and yi in order to divide the people and establish the rankings of noble and base, the distinction between old and young, and the divisions between wise and stupid and capable and incapable. All these cause each person to carry out his proper task and attain his proper place. After that, they cause the amount and abundance of their salaries to reach the proper balance. This is the way to achieve community life and harmonious unity (Kjellberg 1996, p. 30).

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