'Dao' as a Nickname

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MARCH 27, 2003

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1. Introduction: Two Puzzles

Few would deny that the *Dao De Jing* is a puzzling text. One puzzle that has particularly vexed interpreters in recent years is how to understand the central term of the text, ‘*dao*.’ The difficulty can be brought out by considering the first lines of two consecutive chapters:

[41] When the highest type of men hear the way, with diligence they are able to practice it....

[42] The way gives birth to the one....

‘Way’—the ubiquitous and appropriate translation for ‘*dao*’—seems to be used in two very different fashions in these two passages. In [41], ‘way’ looks to be used in much the same way that other earlier texts had used it: as a way to act, which with diligence certain people are able to follow. For example, *Analects* 4.9 reads, ‘The Master said, If an officer is dedicated to the Way, but is ashamed of having bad clothes or bad food, he is not worth taking counsel with.’ In [42], on the other hand, ‘way’ seems to be an entity capable of giving birth. So which is it: a way to act or an entity?

Most interpreters respond that it is both. In some contexts, *dao* means way to act; in others, it means a kind of supreme entity. In the introduction to his recent translation, Moss Roberts writes that ‘Whether *dao* is common or transcendent, something to walk upon or something higher than heaven itself—or both—is an ambiguity that informs the *Dao De Jing*.’

Chen Guying sees understanding the multiple meanings of *dao* as a key to understanding the text, writing that ‘There are instances in which the *Dao* refers to a metaphysical entity; there are instances in which the *Dao* refers to a kind of natural law, and there are instances in which the *Dao* refers to a kind of principle or pattern for human life. Although the individual and specific meanings of the word in its various contexts are not the same, they are still all interrelated.’
Chen believes, in other words, that the meaning of *dao* changes in two ways: (1) It has a new meaning in this text, and (2) It has more than one meaning within the text.

Chad Hansen has argued that such ‘meaning-change hypotheses’ are unlikely to be correct, at least in this text.⁶

The texts contain exactly the same graph, and nowhere do they say ‘Let’s change the subject.’ The hypothesis that *dao* mysteriously changes its meaning for Daoists entails that the subject-matter and style of philosophy must have changed *simultaneously*. And the change must have been imperceptible to the participants. Philosophical interest must have shifted from practical, pragmatic concerns to Western-like metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics while everyone slept one night. That a tradition should so radically redefine itself with no clear motivation is, on its face, a widely implausible interpretive hypothesis.⁷

He suggests that, absent any explicit claim in the text that *dao* is being used in more than one way, we should at least start from the position that *dao* is likely to continue to mean what it meant in earlier texts. Hansen argues that we should strive to interpret passages like [42] without changing the meaning of *dao*; his own suggestion for the first line of [42] is: ‘A guide generates “one.”’⁸ Hansen’s argument is not that meaning change is impossible, but rather that (1) An assertion of meaning change must be justified; it cannot be simply taken as obvious; and (2) In the context of both the *Dao De Jing* itself and the texts that precede and follow it, this specific meaning change is in fact unlikely.

The most pointed response to Hansen’s argument has been from scholars who claim that the *Dao De Jing* does in fact contain an explicit statement that *dao* will be used in the text in a new way. Bryan Van Norden, for instance, has written that in [25]:

> After describing what I take to be a metaphysical entity..., the text says, ‘As yet I do not know its name./ I style it “the way”’. Here we have, recorded for posterity, the moment in Chinese history when [*dao*] is first used to refer to a metaphysical entity.⁹
It sounds like if Van Norden is correct, then Hansen should be largely satisfied. Hansen is not contending that radical philosophical shifts are impossible, just that they cannot be ‘imperceptible to the participants.’ Van Norden is suggesting that the shift was both perceived and clearly labeled.

We will have much more to say about the way the shift is labeled — in terms of a ‘style’ instead of a ‘name’ — in a moment. To understand what may have shifted, though, we first need to unpack the idea of ‘meaning’ more thoroughly. Notice that Van Norden says that dao is used ‘to refer to’ an entity; Chen also uses ‘refer to’ quite liberally in the passage quoted above. Since the pioneering work of Gottlieb Frege in the nineteenth century, philosophers have distinguished between several different dimensions of meaning. For our purposes, the two most important dimensions are reference and sense. The reference of a word is the thing, stuff, state, or event that the word is about: ‘car,’ for instance, is about a certain type of vehicle (that is, cars). So we can say that ‘Jones’s car’ refers to a particular object (which, as these words are being typed, is in the shop).

According to Frege, the sense of a word is the thought that the word expresses. Less technically, we might say that while reference is simply a relation between a word and an entity, the sense of a word is how that entity is presented. Consider the difference between ‘Jones’s car’ and ‘Jones’s headache’: both might be taken, in a suitable context, to refer to the same object, but the senses of the two expressions are very different. Context is obviously very important, since on another day, ‘Jones’s headache’ might refer to his computer or even to an ache in his head. The reason that the expression can be used to refer to such disparate things has to do with a similarity in the senses of the expression as used in the different contexts: in each case, to simplify, there is something that is causing Jones mental anguish.
When we ask whether *dao* has more than one meaning — sometimes meaning ‘way to act,’ other times meaning ‘metaphysical entity’ — therefore, we need to be more specific about what we are asking. The same goes for assertions that the meaning of *dao* has, or has not, changed. Are we dealing with mere homonyms, like ‘bank’ (the edge of a river) and ‘bank’ (a financial institution), in which there is continuity of neither sense nor reference? Or is this a case more like ‘headache,’ in which a single sense is extended in different ways in different contexts, thus referring in some contexts to a way to act, and in others, to a metaphysical entity? We believe that paying careful attention to the language the author of the *Dao De Jing* uses in the passage Van Norden highlights can help to answer these questions.

The problem we see with Van Norden’s proposed solution to the worry about meaning change is that on his way to solving the puzzle with which we began, he glosses over a second puzzle. Van Norden takes little notice of the odd phrasing of the passage he cites. What does it mean to ‘style (*zi*)’ something ‘the way,’ as opposed to ‘naming (*ming*)’ it? One answer, albeit an answer that does little to lessen our feeling of puzzlement, is offered by P. J. Ivanhoe, who attaches the following note to his translation of the lines about ‘naming’ and ‘styling’ the way:

> There is a play here on the difference between one’s *ming*, ‘proper name,’ and one’s *zi*, ‘style.’ In traditional Chinese society one does not use the former, personal name in public. And so the author can be understood as saying he is not intimately familiar with the Dao and so knows only its style, or perhaps that it would be unseemly to speak its true and proper name to unfamiliars.10

On their face, however, each of these two explanations is internally contradictory. The first asserts, in effect, that the author does not know *dao*, but only knows its style, ‘*dao*.’ This conflates ‘name’ and ‘style,’ leaving it unclear what point the author was trying to make. The
latter explanation—that the name is known but not to be shared publicly—seems to be directly contradicted by the text of [25], wherein the author says ‘I do not know its name’.

In one form or another, many interpreters of [25] gloss over the implication that dao is a mere style in much the same way. Our contention in this essay is that the puzzle surrounding style can be unraveled if we view the style (zi) as a kind of nickname, and that understanding dao as the nickname for an un-nameable thing solves the puzzle about what dao itself means throughout the text. We will argue for these conclusions as follows. In Section 2, we develop our idea that zi is like a nickname. In Section 3, we look at the text of [25] in more detail, noting ways in which different versions of the texts bear on our puzzles. We also note important similarities between the terminology in [25] and parts of the recently discovered text Taiyi Shengshui. Section 4 then turns to the commentarial tradition on the Dao De Jing, and demonstrates that our thesis gets considerable support from the commentaries. In Section 5, finally, we look at the implications of our view, both for the interpretation of specific passages dealing with dao, and for an understanding of the Dao De Jing as a whole.

2. Hypothesis: Names and Nicknames

The author of the text is presumably drawing on Chinese naming practices in some way, according to which one’s birth name is distinct from the style one receives on coming of age. But how does the difference between those two kinds of name translate into the context provided in [25]? We will argue that the ming of [25] entails a substantive claim about what type of thing the object is, while the zi is based on a looser grasp of some aspect of the object named. In this way, zi is similar to a nickname.
First, let us focus in on what the difference is between nicknaming and other ways to assign words to people. Here are three facts about one of the co-authors of this essay: he is named John, he is a person, and he is nicknamed Space. The relations between the co-author in question and ‘John,’ ‘person,’ and ‘Space’ each differ from the other. Begin with ‘John.’ This name was given to him at birth, and while it was no doubt meaningful to his parents in some sense—because it was a continuation of a family tradition, among other reasons—the name was not chosen to say something about the individual in question. In particular, despite the fact that according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘John’ is used ‘as a representative proper name for a footman, butler, waiter, messenger, or the like,’ John’s parents were not indicating that John was a butler.12 In fact, philosophers are wont to say that proper names like ‘John’ are mere tags that do nothing except help us to keep track of people. In actual practice, parents may spend hours poring over name books to find just the right name, with just the right meaning, for their child. These names are generally prescriptive—expressing hope for the child’s life—however, and not a descriptive claim about the child. More significantly, the ways we actually use proper names do not entail any descriptive claims about the person.

‘Person’ is, of course, a different matter. Saying that John is a person is a substantive claim about what kind of thing John is. Of course, working out the details depends on what ‘person’ means. Some use ‘person’ synonymously with ‘human’; for others, the former but not the latter is a moral category, so that both humans and Martians might turn out to be persons. Asserting that ‘John is a person’ thus may, or may not, be intended to rule out John’s being a Martian. In either case, substantive claims are clearly being made.

What about ‘Space’? A bit of reflection on how we use nicknames should make clear that it is more like ‘person’ than ‘John,’ but not identical with either. John’s friends call him ‘Space’
not because he is space—no, he’s a person, a friend, and so on, but not space—but because in some respect he’s *like* space. Space is vast and mysterious; to some, John seems, well, mysterious, anyway. A nickname calls attention to the resemblance between some aspect of the nicknamed individual and some aspect of the meaning of the word used as nickname. Our contention is that the key to understanding [25], and much else besides, lies in understanding the implication of a certain thing’s being nicknamed ‘*dao*.’

The institution of individuals having ‘styles’ in addition to ‘names (*ming*)’ is apparently quite ancient. The basic idea is well understood. The ‘name’ was given three months after birth (prior to which the child was called by a ‘milk name (*runing*).’ For people of social standing, ‘at coming of age it was normal to receive a disyllabic courtesy name (*zi*). This was usually chosen to extend the meaning of the *ming* and was used outside the family.’ In addition to the *ming* and *zi*, many Chinese took on additional names. One modern scholar distinguishes these between ‘literary names’ (*hao* or *biehao*), which one adopted on one’s own, and ‘nicknames’ (*chuohao*, *hunhao*, *hunming*, and other terms), which were given by others, and ‘were usually in direct, not refined, language’.

It should be clear from this summary that the *zi* is not exactly like the sort of nickname we described above. One or another variety of *hao* comes much closer. We are not asserting, therefore, that the style functioned just like a nickname (in our favored sense). Still, the style does occupy at least part of the same semantic space as the nickname: it is an additional name given someone, distinct from the ‘name’ itself. In addition, our concern is not with styles in general, but with the metaphorical use of style in [25]. We say ‘metaphorical’ because this is the only case we know of in the entire classical literature, with one important exception to be discussed below, in which style is applied to a thing rather than to a person. In addition, it is
quite clear that the zi of [25] has nothing to do with coming of age, nor with use outside a family. Finally, note that the contrast drawn in [25] is simply between ming and zi: no other varieties of name are mentioned here, or anywhere else, in the text. Given the way that styling works as applied to people, and given what the author(s) rule out by asserting ‘I do not know its name,’ we propose that nicknaming is the best available model to understand what the text is claiming.

What, then, do the author(s) mean by ‘I do not know its name’? The Dao De Jing itself does not specifically lay out a theory of naming, but the theories found in other Warring States texts are extremely suggestive. A.C. Graham has argued that several later Mohist texts, along with a chapter from the Xunzi, are the only pre-Han texts that specifically discuss ‘the problem of common names’. While it would be incautious to assume that the author(s) of the Dao De Jing knew of—let alone agreed with—Mohist theories of naming, it is worth mentioning them if only to provide a framework for theories of naming in the pre-Han period during which the Dao De Jing was composed. In addition, it is quite possible that at least the basic elements of the theory of naming presented by the Xunzi and the later Mohists were generally accepted in the pre-Han period.

The later Mohist Canons and Explanations divide names into three categories:

A78 (Canon) Names. Unrestricted, of the kind, private. (Explanation) ‘Thing (wu)’ is unrestricted; an object necessarily awaits this name. Naming something ‘horse’ is of the kind; for ‘like the object’ one necessarily has the use of this name. Naming someone ‘Zang’ is private: this name stays in this object.

Names, in other words, can be of three types: (1) the general name wu, which applies to everything; (2) of-the-kind names, which categorize sets of similar objects; and (3) private names, which are arbitrarily assigned and do not relate to any sort of similarity to other objects. Graham points out that for the Mohists, names need not necessarily be nouns: ‘Although in A78
the names cited as typical are all nouns (“thing”, “horse”, “Zang”), *ming* ‘name’ covers every kind of word, not only “stone” but “white” and “big,” even *ju* “all” and *duo* “much,” or *huo* “some.”

If the author(s) of the *Dao De Jing* subscribed to a similar view of *ming*, then ‘not know its name’ could be either not knowing its ‘private’ name or not knowing its ‘of the kind’ name. The general name ‘thing (*wu*)’ is already ascribed to it in line 1 (as we shall discuss further below). When, later in the chapter, a name is reluctantly ascribed to the thing, *da* is chosen. In this context, *da* is often translated as ‘the Great,’ which makes it sound like a private or proper name. Given the broad Mohist definition of *ming*, however, *da* need not be understood as a noun, and so we suggest translating *da* as simply ‘great’ or ‘big.’ This makes it clearer that the *ming* is a substantive claim about the thing. *Da*, that is, seems to be an attempt to ascribe an ‘of the kind’ name to the thing.

We believe that in [25], the author(s) of the text are playing with two different meanings of *ming*, both as substantive and as proper name, or, to use the later Mohist terminology, both an ‘of the kind’ name and a ‘private’ name. On the one hand, *ming* is being used in the text as a substantive; on the other hand, the pairing of *ming* with *zi* brings to mind the distinction between a person’s proper name and his style. We suggest that the author(s) are likely making a pun between the two senses of *ming*, and extending the notion of *zi*-ing from people to the ‘thing’ of [25]. ‘*Dao*’ is chosen as the nickname because it captures an aspect of the thing: the thing is something on which one can model, something that one can, in a sense, follow, as we will discuss in our final section. *Way* is an appropriate nickname because the thing is like a way, though it is clearly not simply a way, just as John is like space, but not simply space.
3. Texts

In order to begin fleshing out our case, we turn now to some of the many different versions of the *Dao De Jing*. Before settling on an answer to what the characters mean, it is a good idea to ask ‘Which characters should we be looking at?’ This can be a very complicated question with so many different versions of the text extant, especially in light of two recent tomb excavations that have reinvigorated study of the *Dao De Jing*. Fortunately, when it comes to [25], issues of textual inconsistency are rather minor.

Most of the standard received versions of the *Dao De Jing* are based on the text in the *Wang Bi* commentary. The text of [25] in another influential commentary, that attributed to He Shang Gong, is identical to the *Wang Bi* version. We will take the text as it appears in these two versions as our starting point. It runs as follows:

There was a thing chaotically formed.
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent! Formless! Standing alone, unchanging.
Traveling everywhere endlessly.
It can be taken to be the mother of all under heaven.
I do not know its name.
I nickname it ‘*dao*.’
Forced to give it a name I call it ‘*great*.’
Great implies leaving.
Leaving implies distance.
Distance implies return. So *dao* is great. Heaven is great. Earth is great.
The King is also great.
In the realm there are four greats. And the King is one of the four.
Humanity models itself on earth.
Earth models itself on heaven.
Heaven models itself on *dao*.
*Dao* models itself on that which is so on its own.
In addition to the Wang Bi and He Shang Gong texts, two archeological finds bear importantly on our subject. First, in 1973, two silk manuscripts of the Dao De Jing were unearthed together with many other texts and artifacts from a tomb in a small village in Hunan province near Changsha called Mawangdui. The dating of the tomb places the texts before 168 BCE, and further linguistic analysis suggests that one of the texts was copied before 206 BCE, while the other was copied between 206 and 194 BCE. These texts are largely similar to the received version of the text, containing all 81 chapters, but they do differ in some significant ways from the received text.

Second, more material from the Dao De Jing, as well as several other texts, were discovered in 1993, unearthed from a tomb in Guodian village, now a part of Jingmen city in Hubei province. The tomb at Guodian can be dated to around 300 BCE, and it is possible that the texts were copied even earlier, making the Guodian texts the earliest versions of the Dao De Jing passages they contain to be discovered so far. The texts which match parts of what we now know as the Dao De Jing have been divided into three title-less groups of bamboo strips (designated A, B, and C), which together contain parts of only 31 of the 81 chapters found in the received Dao De Jing. Group C also contains fourteen strips that do not correspond to any part of the received Dao De Jing, which some scholars are treating as an independent text, and have named the Taiyi Shengshui, based on its opening lines. While the Taiyi Shengshui does not correspond to the received Dao De Jing, it does use similar language to [25], a similarity which we will discuss later.

As mentioned above, the Wang Bi and He Shang Gong versions of [25] are identical. Neither the Guodian nor Mawangdui texts present substantially different versions of [25], but there are some smaller, yet significant, issues.
First, the Guodian text has *zhuang* 状 instead of *wu* 物 in line 1. Henricks notes that:

Qiu Xigui suggests [that the character] might be read as *dao* 道, that is, ‘the Way.’ But in his notes to ‘Wuxing,’ he proposes a reading of *zhuang* (莊) for this character. Thus it might be a phonetic loan for the *zhuang* (状) that means ‘shape’ or ‘form.’ In modern editions of *Laozi*, the Way is called ‘the formless form’ (無狀之狀) in chapter 14.29

Thus, in the Guodian text, rather than ‘a thing chaotically formed,’ we might read ‘a form chaotically formed.’ In either case, we have *something* chaotically formed, which is later nicknamed *dao*.

Second, both versions of the Mawangdui text, and the Guodian text, use *wei* 未 instead of *bu* 不 in line 6. One meaning of *wei* is ‘not yet,’ which could lead to a reading of the Mawangdui and Guodian texts as ‘I do not yet know its name,’ as opposed to the ‘I do not know its name’ of the received text. On this reading, the older texts would seem to suggest an ongoing effort to know the name, and emphasize that the effort has not been successful. However, in many contexts in ancient texts, *wei* simply means *bu*, in which case there need be no implication that the name can come to be known some time in the future.30

Third, both the Guodian and Mawangdui texts lack line 4, which reads ‘traveling everywhere endlessly,’ in the received text. Line 4, however, is a descriptive line that does not have bearing on the discussion of what language is used to refer to the ‘thing.’ The lack of line 4 might be relevant to a discussion of what the thing is, though, to which we turn briefly at the end of this essay.

Finally, a matter of common dispute is whether or not there should be a *qiang* 强, or ‘forcibly,’ at the beginning of line 7. Neither the Mawangdui nor the Guodian texts have *qiang*, nor do the standard versions of the *Wang Bi* and *He Shang Gong* texts, but it has been argued that the *Wang Bi* version originally did have a *qiang*. A prominent proponent of this thesis is Liu
Shipei, who argues that having a *qiang* would make the line a better parallel to line 8, and cites the *Han Fei Zi*, which we will discuss below.\textsuperscript{31} Given that the older Mawangdui and Guodian texts lack the *qiang*, Liu’s argument seems rather flimsy. Also, we have argued that the nicknaming in line 7 is not ‘forced,’ and thus *qiang* would not be a good fit at the beginning of line 7.

The mere presence of [25] in the Guodian texts is significant. As Henricks writes, ‘Of the chapters in the *Laozi* that go into detail in discussing the Dao—chapters 1, 4, 6, 14, 25, 34, 51, and 52 (opening lines)—only one is present in the Guodian slips, Chapter 25.’\textsuperscript{32} Given that it is the only detailed description in this earliest extant text of what *dao* is referring to, it seems reasonable to take [25] as a key to understanding the usage of *dao* in the text.

The so-called *Taiyi Shengshui* can also shed some light on the meaning of the discussion of *dao* in [25]. Indeed, the appearance in the *Taiyi Shengshui* of *zi* bears importantly on the relation between that text and the *Dao De Jing*, as we discuss below.\textsuperscript{33} The text of strips 10 through 12 of *Taiyi Shengshui* runs as follows, in Henricks’s translation:

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What is below is soil; yet we refer to it (wei zhi) as the earth: what is above is air; yet we refer to it as heaven. In the same way, ‘the Way’ is its designation (*zi*). ‘But, may I ask, what is its name (*ming*)?’ One who uses the Way to work at his tasks certainly relies on its name; for this reason his tasks are completed and he endures. When the Sage works at his tasks, he also relies on its name; as a result his deeds are achieved and he suffers no harm. With heaven and earth, ‘name’ and ‘designation’ both stand together. But when we move beyond these domains, we can think of nothing that would fit [as a name].\textsuperscript{34}
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In other words, just as we use the word ‘earth’ to refer to this ball of soil that we live on, so is ‘*dao*’ the designation for the ‘thing chaotically formed’ of [25]. With the thing we call earth, we can see, touch and comprehend the stuff to which it is referring—it is *tu*, or soil. The text seems to say that for things as extensive as heaven and earth, the *zi* and *ming* are the same, but for
anything beyond the domain of heaven and earth, the ming is beyond our comprehension, and so we can only (in Henricks’s translation) ‘designate (zi).’ This is in accordance with [25], where the ming is unknown but a zi can be assigned. It seems possible that the Taiyi Shengshui is here referring directly to [25], as the thing of [25] is clearly seen to be greater than heaven and earth. Both texts use dao as a zi. Thus the ‘it’ of strips 10-12 of the Taiyi Shengshui can be seen as the ‘thing’ of [25].

There has been much debate over how to view the text that has come to be called the Taiyi Shengshui. Is it to be considered a part of the Dao De Jing text found at Guodian, or should it be seen as a separate text? William Boltz argues for the latter — in fact, as noted above, dividing the Taiyi Shengshui material itself into two separate texts — when he writes that ‘The C manuscript consists of six texts, each self-contained on from two to eight bamboo strips, none linked by a common strip to another, but all physically part of a single manuscript document.’ He adds that this evidence, in turn, supports the conclusion that the Dao De Jing ‘arose through a process of textual ‘sifting-and-choosing’ whereby preexisting passages were included or excluded when the text was finally ‘fixed’ in a form close to when we know from the Mawangdui manuscripts and from the received version.’ Martin Kern has similarly argued that not only is there no positive evidence to separate the Taiyi Shengshui material from the rest of bundle C, but there is ‘positive evidence not to separate them.’ Xing Wen also argues that the Guodian Dao De Jing and the Taiyi Shengshui are one text, but maintains that the Guodian Dao De Jing and the received Dao De Jing represent two different systems of thought. E. Bruce Brooks, on the other hand, argues that the Taiyi Shengshui was likely associated with the Guodian Dao De Jing only by the copyist, and that we should consider it a separate text. Given
the close relationship in both topic and language of [25] and the Taiyi Shengshui strips 10-12, particularly their similar usage of zi, we argue that the texts might in fact be closely related.40

4. Commentaries

The earliest extant commentaries on the Dao De Jing appear in the ‘Explaining the Laozi’ and ‘Understanding the Laozi’ chapters of the Han Fei Zi. The other best-known commentaries on the Dao De Jing are the Wang Bi and the He Shang Gong, the oldest extant complete commentaries on the text. Chan goes so far as to say that, ‘Without exaggeration, subsequent commentaries were as much an encounter with these two works as with the Lao-tzu itself’.41 This essay is also, in many important ways, an encounter with the commentaries. Our argument is largely in agreement with the major commentaries on [25], with perhaps a slight difference in emphasis. The following is a summary of relevant sections of the Han Fei Zi, Wang Bi, and He Shang Gong commentaries on [25].

In its ‘Explaining Laozi’ chapter, the Han Fei Zi invokes language from [25] when discussing what is the first line of [1] in the standard text:

To have nothing determined as a pattern is to not be in a constant place; this is why it cannot be spoken. Sages observed its darkness and emptiness, used its ‘going everywhere,’ forcibly nicknamed it dao, and thus it could be discussed. So it is said, ‘Insofar as dao can be spoken of, it is not the constant dao.

The ‘it’ which the Han Fei Zi refers to seems to be the ‘thing chaotically formed’ of [25]. The Han Fei Zi refers to [25] in emphasizing that dao is chosen to render the thing discussible, and it seems to suggest that dao in particular is chosen because it is related to the ‘going everywhere’ of the thing. We part company slightly with this commentary’s claim that the style/nickname
must be ‘forcibly (qiang)’ applied; nicknames need not be forced because there is no expectation that they cover all aspects of something. [25] itself reserves the word ‘forced’ for giving the thing an actual (substantive) name (ming) — that is, ‘great’ — in line 8.

Wang Bi is more specific on the subject of why dao was chosen, in his discussion of the difference between ming and zi.

*Ming* are to determine form. *Zi* are to designate things insofar as they can be expressed. ‘*Dao*’ is chosen because there is nothing that doesn’t follow [a way]. This, among all the things which chaotically come into being, is the greatest of all expressible designations.

‘*Dao*’ is chosen because all things have something that they follow. While it is not a true name for the thing, it does express something about the thing, which is in concordance with our postulate of dao as nickname.

*He Shang Gong* has a similar but more straightforward explanation of the *ming* and *zi* of the thing: ‘I do not see dao’s form or shape, so I do not know how I ought to name it. I see that the ten thousand things all are born following a way, so I style it “way”’. For the *He Shang Gong*, naming must be based on direct observation, while *zi*-ing may be based on indirect or partial observation by drawing on one aspect of the object. The first use of ‘*dao*’ in this passage cannot be a ‘name,’ since knowledge of how to name ‘it’ is explicitly denied. Again, as with Wang Bi, the *He Shang Gong* interpretation fits with an understanding of *zi* as nickname.

There is some ambiguity, though, about how to interpret the second use of ‘*dao*’ in this passage. Our translation of ‘萬物皆從道所生,’ as ‘the ten thousand things all are born following a way,’ differs significantly from Chan’s, who renders the phrase as ‘the ten thousand things are all produced by the Tao…’ Are things born following a way or path, or are they produced by the Way? In our terms, this question becomes: is this use of ‘way’ a regular, of-a-kind name for
‘path,’ or is it a nickname for ‘the thing’ that produces the ten thousand things? Either seems possible, though we prefer our alternative, since that makes better sense of why the author(s) of *He Shang Gong* would say this here: they are explaining why ‘*dao*’ was chosen as the nickname.\footnote{44}

All three of the commentaries stress the notion that *dao* is chosen as a moniker for the thing so that it can be expressed. All three also argue that *dao* in particular was chosen because it seems to express something about the thing. Thus the *zi*-ing of the thing has a distinct utility, both in that the inexpressible can be expressed, and in that the word chosen, *dao*, seems to express something of the nature of the thing. With such an interpretation of the passage, the commentaries support our argument for seeing *dao* as a nickname.

5. Implications

Our postulate of the use of *dao* as a nickname in the *Dao De Jing* allows for a more unified reading of the character *dao* throughout the text. Let us revisit [41] and [42], which we initially used to show the difficulty posed by *dao* in the text.

[41] When the highest type of men hear the way, with diligence they are able to practice it....

[42] The ‘way’ gives birth to the one....

[41] may still be read as a conventional usage of *dao* as a way to act, or a path to follow in life. Our reading of [42], however, no longer requires a meaning change for *dao*. That is, in the terms we used above, the basic *sense* of ‘*dao*’ does not change. Rather than taking on the meaning of some sort of Supreme Being, *dao* is simply used as a nickname referring to the mysterious
‘thing’ or [25], chosen because its sense expresses some aspect of the thing in question, which itself may or may not be some sort of supreme entity. The use of dao in [42] is certainly a different, creative usage, but the basic sense of dao remains the same: a way to act, or a path to follow. Dao is not the thing being described, but rather a nickname that describes something about the thing.

Early in this essay, we quoted Chen Guying’s assertion that in the text, ‘There are instances in which the Dao refers to a metaphysical entity… and there are instances in which the Dao refers to a kind of principle or pattern for human life’. In context, it seems clear that Chen here is saying that the meaning of dao changes, but it is important to note how subtle the difference is between this and our position, according to which the word ‘dao’ is indeed used to refer to different things. Rather than having fundamentally different senses in the text, though, ‘dao’ is simply used in different ways, often as a nickname.

Once it is accepted that in the Dao De Jing, ‘dao’ (1) does not come to have a significantly new sense, but also (2) is used creatively to refer to different things, Hansen’s criticism of a weak ‘meaning-change hypothesis’ becomes moot. By recognizing that dao is often used as a nickname in the text, we are neither forced to postulate an unjustified meaning change, nor compelled to accept the awkward interpretations of passages that are brought about by clinging to the idea that every usage of dao in the text refers precisely to ‘a way to act.’ Following our interpretation, in the instances where dao is used as a nickname, the term dao’s basic sense remains ‘a way to act,’ but it refers to the ‘thing chaotically formed’ of [25], line 1. Van Norden was thus correct to see [25] as offering a solution to worries about meaning change, albeit not exactly the solution that he thought.
Returning to [25], we might inquire into the nature of the thing nicknamed dao. The beginning of the chapter describes the thing as ‘chaotically formed,’ ‘before heaven and earth’, and ‘traveling everywhere endlessly’. The end of [25] provides some further guidance:

Humanity models itself on earth.
Earth models itself on heaven.
Heaven models itself on dao.
Dao models itself on that which is so on its own (ziran).

The chain presented here links humanity to the thing nicknamed dao. We can further see why dao is an appropriate nickname for the thing, because it is the model followed by the myriad things, as a way or path is followed. The thing itself is said to model itself on ziran, or, ‘that which is so on its own’. Ziran could also be translated as ‘the natural’, ‘naturalness’, or ‘the self-so’.45 It seems that what is natural, what is so on its own, is the thing itself. But what is so on its own? What can be characterized as ‘Standing alone, unchanging’, and yet as ‘Traveling everywhere endlessly’? While arguing for an answer to this question would take us too far afield, we suggest that unchanging patterns of cosmic change may meet all the desiderata set out in the text.

Taking dao as a nickname also informs a reading of the first chapter of the received Dao De Jing, which begins: ‘Ways (dao) which can be spoken of are not the constant way (dao). Names which can be named are not constant names’. The fact that the ‘constant way’ is rather obviously spoken of in the passage itself can give these lines an air of paradox. Reading the final dao as a nickname helps us to better understand the passage. The text asserts that while many ways of being can be articulated, they are not the eternal thing which was ‘before heaven and earth’, ‘travels everywhere endlessly’, and has been nicknamed dao. Similarly, the second line of [1] points out that all of the things that can be given of-a-kind names do not include the
unnamable thing that ‘can be seen as the mother of heaven and earth’. This passage, like [25], seeks to undermine the views of those philosophers who (from the perspective of the author(s) of the *Dao De Jing*) mistakenly think that the way we should act can be fully discussed in substantive ‘names’. Instead, argues the *Dao De Jing*, the best we can do is to gesture at the thing underlying reality, and on which we should model ourselves, by means of a nickname.

ENDNOTES

1 This is perhaps an apt moment to thank those who have particularly helped us as we worked through the puzzles of the text. First, we gratefully acknowledge the support we received from a Christian A. Johnson Research Apprenticeship grant. Thanks also are due to Bryan Van Norden, Martin Kern, Xing Wen, and William Bolz, all of whom read and commented helpfully on an earlier version of the essay. Finally, we would like to signal our appreciation to the moderators of and participants in both the ‘Warring States Workshop’ and the (now defunct) ‘Chinese-Philosophy’ group, two email discussion lists whose contents have been extremely stimulating to our thinking about matters more and less related to the present essay.

2 All translations are the responsibility of the authors, unless noted otherwise, though our translations draw freely on HENRICKS, ROBERT G. (1989) *Te-Tao Ching* (New York, Ballantine) and Lau, D.C. (1982) *Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong, Chinese University of Hong Kong Press).


5 CHEN, GUYING (1981) *Lao Tzu: Text, Notes, and Comments*, trans. by Rhett Y. W. Young and Roger T. Ames (Taipei, Chinese Materials Center), p. 2. Chen’s translator actually uses the Wade-Giles system of romanization, according to which the word we render ‘dao’ is written ‘tao.’ For clarity, we have converted this to the Pinyin system that we follow throughout. See also CHEN, GUYING (1984) *Laozi Zhuyi Ji Pingjie* (Beijing, Zhonghua Shuju), p. 2).

6 ‘Traditional interpreters see the focus on limitations of language and the mystical paradoxes and supply the Indo-European justifications as the obvious deep explanations. This requires them to reinterpret dao as a metaphysical object’ HANSEN, CHAD (1991) *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 204.

7 Ibid., 207.


For example, Benjamin Schwartz writes, ‘How does a term, which in Confucianism refers mainly to social and natural order, indicate a mystic reality? … As a mystical text, like similar works, the Tao-te-ching is not deeply committed to the term itself: ‘I do not know its name, so I style it the Tao…’ (SCHWARTZ, BENJAMIN (1998) ‘The Thought of the Tao Te Ching,’ in: LIVIA KOHN, and MICHAEL LAFARGUE (Eds) Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press), p. 190. See also HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 2, pp. 245-246).


There is another way of referring to people that is also called ‘nicknaming,’ as when someone whose proper name is Elizabeth gets called ‘Lisa.’ This practice is clearly a variant on proper naming, and is quite different from the kind of nicknames to which we refer in the text.


We would like to thank Xing Wen for urging us to clarify the matters discussed in an earlier version of the paragraph.


As Graham has argued of the later Mohist texts, ‘The nominalist position is not argued but taken for granted; although Feng Yu-lan and others have tried to identify the zhi 指 (literally ‘pointings’) of Kung-sun Lung as universals, there is no firm evidence that there were any realists in pre-Han philosophy’ (ibid., pp. 32-33).

Translation from GRAHAM, A. C. (1989) Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle, Illinois, Open Court), pp. 140-141. See also GRAHAM, op. cit, note 17, p. 325.

Translation slightly altered from GRAHAM, op. cit, note 17, p. 35).


Though it is accepted that Wang Bi (226-249 AD) did write the commentary, Alan Chan points out that Wang Bi’s commentary on the Dao De Jing ‘was not widely recognized prior to the Sung dynasty. As a result, numerous textual problems confront students of the commentary’ (CHAN, ALAN K. L. (1991) Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu (Albany, State University of New York Press), pp. 3, 37-38).

There is much debate over the dating of the He Shang Gong commentary. Legend ascribes it to the 2nd century BCE, when the divine figure of He Shang Gong presented the text of the commentary to Emperor Wen. Most contemporary scholars argue for a much later date. Alan
Chan tentatively concludes that the *He Shang Gong* text probably has its origins in the late Han dynasty (ibid., pp. 107-108, 118).

24 This discussion of the Mawangdui texts is largely drawn from HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 2, pp. xiv-xvii.

25 This dating of the Mawangdui texts is partly based on noticing the replacement of the character *bang* 邦 in Mawangdui A with *guo* 國 in Mawangdui B. The use of the character *bang* would have been taboo during (and after) the reign of Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han (ibid., p. xv). See also (BAXTER, WILLIAM H (1998) ‘Situating the Language of the Lao-tzu: The Probable Date of the Tao-te-ching,’ in: Kohn & Lafargue, op. cit, note 11, pp. 231-232). We would like to thank Bruce Brooks for help in sorting out some competing claims about taboo practices.

26 This discussion of the Mawangdui texts is drawn from HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 2, pp. xiv-xvii.


28 Scholars disagree both about the relation between the so-called *Taiyi Shengshui* material and the remainder of bundle C, and about whether the *Taiyi Shengshui* itself is one or two texts. Both Hendricks and Boltz divide the *Taiyi Shengshui* bamboo strips into two groups, though they do so differently. See BOLTZ, op. cit., note 27, pp. 6–7 and HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 27, pp. 123–129.

29 HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 27, p. 55. It is interesting that Qiu would suggest that the character be read as *dao*, but it would be strange, almost nonsensical, to say that something is *dao*, then later nickname it *dao*.


32 HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 27, p. 18.

33 As noted above, some scholars treat the *Taiyi Shengshui* as two separate texts. While we find this plausible, we will not take a position here, as our concern with the *Taiyi Shengshui* material is quite focused.

34 HENDRICKS, op. cit., note 27, pp. 123–126.

35 BOLTZ, op. cit., note 27, p. 6.

36 Ibid., p. 7.

37 KERN, MARTAIN, personal communication.


40 Exactly what the relation might be is difficult to say. The bamboo strips containing (25) are part of bundle A, not bundle C, so if we are right that the presence in (25) and in the *Taiyi*
Shengshui material of ‘zi’ is significant, then this suggests that all three bundles might derive from some common source.

41 CHAN, op. cit., note 22, p. 2.
43 Ibid., p. 124.
44 It may also be significant that the Daozang edition of the He Shang Gong has er 而 instead of suo 所 which, if accepted, would grammatically preclude Chan’s translation (WANG, KA (Ed.) (1993) Laozi Dao De Jing He Shang Gong Zhang Ju (Beijing, Zhonghua Shuju), p. 104.
45 Liu Xiaogan notes that ziran should not be confused with modern ideas of the natural world. This confusion is brought about in part by the fact that in modern Chinese ziran does mean ‘the natural world’, or ‘nature’ (LIU, XIAOGAN (1998) Naturalness (Tzu-jan), the core value in Taoism: its ancient meaning and its significance today’, in: KOHN & LAFARGUE, op. cit., note 11, p. 212).