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The Many Voices of Silence:

The Diverse Theories of the Ineffable *Dao*

in the *Zhuangzi*

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The Many Voices of Silence:
The Diverse Theories of the Ineffable *Dao* in the *Zhuangzi*

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ABSTRACT

The theorization of ineffability is a central philosophical theme in the *Zhuangzi*, evident in its recurring mention and the diverse modes of its argumentation. However, attempts to extract a unified philosophy of language attributed to the single hand of Zhuang Zhou often overlook the text's complexity and result in oversimplified conclusions. This paper analyzes three key discourses from "Qiwulun" (Discussion on Making All Things Equal 齊物論), "Tiandao" (The Way of Heaven 天道), and "Waiwu" (External Things 外物), arguing that the *Zhuangzi* presents fundamentally different critiques of language, each rooted in different ontological premises, employing varied rhetorical strategies, addressing specific audiences, and carrying unique significance in the intellectual history. By exploring the heterogeneity of its theories of ineffability, the paper shows that the Zhuangzi's treatment of the ineffable *dao* is more complex than a mysterious assertion of the unspeakable and calls for a nuanced understanding of the role of language in conveying the ultimate truth.

Keywords: Pre-Qin Daoism; Zhuangzi; Philosophy of language; Ineffability; Epistemology; Word–Meaning Relationship

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

A common belief across religious and philosophical traditions holds that the realm of the ultimate, the absolute, or the sacred — exemplified by God in Abrahamic monotheism, the *One* in Greco-Roman Neoplatonism, and *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth) in Mādhyamaka Buddhism — is ineffable, inaccessible by means of language.[2] Similarly, the notion of ineffability in Chinese philosophy has prompted prolonged discourse, engaging voices from diverse schools of thought for over two millennia. Early inquiries into the limitations of language can be traced back to the prominent statement in the *Laozi* 老子, "The *dao* that can be spoken is not the perduring *dao*" (道可道，非常道),[3] and the equally influential proposition in the "Xi Ci Shang" 繫辭上 chapter of the *Yi* (*Changes* 易), "Writing cannot exhaust words, and words cannot exhaust meaning" (書不盡言，言不盡意).[4] The "masters texts" (*zishu* 子書) of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) further interrogated the adequacy and inadequacy of logic and words by scrutinizing the relationship between *ming* 名 (names) and *shi* 實 (actualities). Within this early corpus, the book of *Zhuangzi* 莊子 stands out as a critical text addressing this theme. With its conceptualization of the transcendent *dao* 道, the *Zhuangzi* offers diverse approaches that underscore its skepticism toward human language, thereby holding ineffability central to its metaphysical framework and endowing the text with a repository of resources that continue to captivate philosophers and intellectual historians in the theories of language.

A persistent problem in current scholarship lies in overlooking the heterogeneity of the *Zhuangzi* and seeking a unified philosophy based on certain assumptions of textual stratification. For instance, scholars who attribute the entire work to the historical Zhuang Zhou 莊周 tend to expect a consistent view of language to be extracted from the various sections of the book.[5] Other studies,

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2. For a preliminary overview of common types of ineffability in art, religion, and philosophy, see Silvia Jonas, *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

3. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, ed., *Laozi daodejing zhu jiaoshi* 老子道德經注校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 1.

4. Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008), 291.

5. Some conservative scholarship attributes the entire book to a single author, Zhuang Zhou; see Lu Qin 陸欽, *Zhuang Zhou sixiang yanjiu* 莊子哲學研究 (Henan renmin chubanshe, 1983), 1. Eric Schwitzgebel argues that Zhuangzi's attitude

influenced by the prevailing hypothesis that the first seven Inner Chapters (*neipian* 內篇) constitute a canonical core with greater hermeneutic significance, limit their discussions to these supposedly orthodox chapters to reconstruct Zhuangzi's original teachings.[6] Recent paleographical and philological analysis, however, suggests that the *Zhuangzi*, like most texts of pre-Qin origin that circulated during the Qin–Han dynasties, is a layered composition crafted by multiple hands over centuries. Drawing a definitive history of its transmission from the current evidence is an unlikely task.[7] Consequently, any attempt to filter the ideas of the *Zhuangzi* through a single-authored lens on the basis of selective textual evidence runs the risk of reductionism.

Another common justification for prioritizing a particular group of texts in philosophical studies is that the selection attests to their philosophical profundity, warranting their representativeness of a Zhuangist spirit and worth of study. Yet the problems with this approach are not

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toward language is less serious by using evidence from different chapters interchangeably; see Schwitzgebel, "Zhuangzi's Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism," in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanboe (State University of New York Press, 1996), 68–96.

6. Represented by Guan Feng 關鋒 and Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, such scholars contend that the first seven Inner Chapters were written earlier, while the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters were largely composed by later imitators who followed Zhuangzi's teachings. See Guan Feng 關鋒, "Zhuangzi 'wai za pian' chutan" 莊子《外雜篇》初探, in *Zhuangzi zhexue taolunji* 莊子哲學討論集, ed. Zhexue yanjiu bianjibu 哲學研究編輯部 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 61–98. Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, *Zhuangzi zhexue jiqi yanbian* 莊子哲學及其演變 (Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010), 26–44. Based on this tentative stratification, Yang Lihua 楊立華 selects only the Inner Chapters as primary sources to reconstruct Zhuangzi's theory of knowledge. See Yang Lihua 楊立華, *A Study on Zhuangzi's Philosophy* 莊子哲學研究 (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2020). Steve Coutinho, for the same reason, relies heavily on materials from the first two Inner Chapters to argue that Zhuangzi's embrace of linguistic vagueness is a response to the Mohist emphasis on linguistic simplicity and clarity. See Steve Coutinho, *Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy: Vagueness, Transformation and Paradox*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

7. The excavated *Zhuangzi* passages at Zhangjiashan 張家山 and Fuyang 阜陽 show that the so-called Miscellaneous Chapters (*zapian* 雜篇) are not necessarily late. See Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Zhonghua gudai wenming de qiyuan* 中華古代文明的起源 (Beijing: Sanlian, 2019), 364–365. Furthermore, critical studies by Esther Sunkyung Klein present evidence that the Inner Chapters are not as coherent as often alleged. See E. S. Klein, "Were There 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the Zhuangzi," *T'oung Pao* 96, no. 4/5 (2010): 299–369. See also E. S. Klein, "Early Chinese Textual Culture and the Zhuangzi Anthology: An Alternative Model for Authorship," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*, ed. Kim-chong Chong, *Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 16 (Springer, 2022), 13–42.

limited to its circular reasoning about value; it might mistakenly reduce the very distinct ideas to mere footnotes to a prescribed interpretation that remains unexamined. For this reason, a crucial first step is to disentangle these conflated ideas. The task of this paper is, accordingly, to unpack the heterogeneity of theories of ineffability in the *Zhuangzi*. Rather than becoming embroiled in debates over authorship and authenticity, it treats the received *Zhuangzi* as a whole, namely, a corpus that has fostered an autonomous and enduring tradition since its compilation.[8] By refraining from privileging a specific group of chapters based on presumed antiquity or philosophical preference, I examine three discourses on ineffability drawn respectively from "Qiwulun" (Discussion on Making All Things Equal 齊物論) from the Inner Chapters, "Tiandao" (The Way of Heaven 天道) from the Outer Chapters (*waipian* 外篇), and "Waiwu" (External Things 外物) from the Miscellaneous Chapters.[9] Through close analysis, I argue that the *Zhuangzi* presents fundamentally different critiques of language — each rooted in its own ontological premises, employing different rhetorical strategies, tailored to specific audiences, and carrying unique significance in intellectual history. In this way, dispelling the myth of a singular interpretation of the book helps to uncover its hermeneutic richness and clarifies the complexity of its theorization of language.

"QIWULUN": THE OBJECTION TO *BIAN* 辯

There is a broad consensus that the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, "Qiwulun," offers a coherent doctrinal framework due to its structured content and unified themes.[10] Central to this chapter is the correlation between linguistic expression *yan* 言 (speaking; words) and cognitive performance *zhi* 知

8. The compilation and commentary traditions of the *Zhuangzi* date to no later than the foundational contributions of Xiang Xiu 向秀 (227–272 CE) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312 CE). See Yuet Keung Lo, "The Authorship of the Zhuangzi," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*, ed. Kim-chong Chong, *Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 16 (Springer, 2022), 43–97.

9. The title "Qiwulun" can be interpreted either as "equalizing the arguments on things" (*qi wulun*) or "arguments on seeing all things equal" (*qiwu lun*). To avoid linguistic confusion, I use the Chinese pinyin "Qiwulun" in what follows.

10. A. C. Graham, "Chuang Tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," in *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu*, ed. Harold D. Roth (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 104.

(understanding; knowledge). The text distinguishes greater forms of *yan* and *zhi* from lesser ones. An epistemological understanding of language is therefore formed, whereby the greater one's comprehension of the universe, the less one relies on speech to articulate it:

> Great understanding (*zhi*) is broad and tranquil; lesser understanding is cramped and busy. Great words (*yan*) are energetic and limpid; lesser words are verbose and shrill.[11]
>
> 大知閑閑，小知閒閒；大言炎炎，小言詹詹。[12]

It is important to note that this passage does not reject speech outright. Instead, its affirmation of the "great words" expresses a preference for a more refined form of speech over the "lesser words" that often provoke controversy. These so-called lesser words are closely associated with *bian* 辯, a term that recurs fifteen times in many pivotal passages of the chapter.

In "Qiwulun," *bian* carries a twofold meaning. First, when referring to the internal aspects of human mentality or cognitive process, it is used interchangeably with its homophone *bian* 辨, meaning "to differentiate," "to distinguish," or "to tell apart." Second, in the context of external linguistic practice, it denotes "to argue," "to dispute," or "to debate." The problem of the linguistic *bian* 辯, simply put, stems directly from the *dao*'s rejection of the cognitive *bian*. After a detailed description of how those engaged in linguistic *bian* are ignorant and prone to quarrels, the writer asserts that they are constrained by their narrow vision:

> What does the *dao* become obscured by, that we have true and false? What do words become obscured by, that we have right and wrong?

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11. The English translations in this paper benefit from the two existing translations, by Burton Watson and Victor Mair. See Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (Columbia University Press, 2013); Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).

12. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 51.

> 道惡乎隱而有真偽？言惡乎隱而有是非？[13]

The following line further elucidates this point:

> Nothing has no "that" part of it, and nothing has no "this" part of it.
>
> 物無非彼，物無非是。[14]

Adopting a relativist tone, the passage points out the interdependency of "that" and "this." Human perceptions of true/false or right/wrong arise from partial perspectives, projecting artificial binaries onto the objective reality that lacks such distinctions. Once we impose value-laden categorizations on the natural world, we inevitably fall prey to bias. This one-sided, dualistic, and therefore "lower-level" point of view fails to mirror the impartial, monistic, and "higher-level" point of view — much less to access the ultimate *dao*.[15]

This critique of *bian* 辯 is reinforced in a passage that links knowledge, language, and sagehood within a layered cosmological hierarchy. Regarding what is beyond the Six Directions (*liuhe*), the sages acknowledge its existence (*cun*) but do not theorize (*yi*). As for what is within the Six Directions, they theorize but do not give their opinions (*lun*).

> In the case of the *Spring and Autumn*, which records the thought of the kings of past ages, the sages give their opinions but do not discriminate (*bian*). Hence, those who divide fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate. If you ask what this

13. Guo Qingfan, 63.

14. Guo Qingfan, 66.

15. For the discussion on the higher- and lower-level perspectives in "Qiwulun," see Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy, Vol. I*, trans. Derk Bodde (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1952), 230–235.

> means, the sages embrace things, while ordinary people discriminate among things in order to show off their discriminations to others.
>
> 六合之外，聖人存而不論；六合之內，聖人論而不議。春秋經世，先王之志，聖人議而不辯。故分也者，有不分也；辯也者，有不辯也。曰：何也？聖人懷之，眾人辯之以相示也。[16]

In this framework, sages who embody the highest understanding embrace what exists beyond perceptual boundaries without engaging in linguistic mediation. Ordinary individuals, by contrast, practice *bian* to argue with one another to "show off their discriminations." The flaw of human language here serves as an indicator for human perceptual prejudice; and linguistic *bian* is thus a manifestation of cognitive *bian*. Therefore, it is concluded that "The great *dao* is not named; Great discriminations (*bian*) are not spoken" (大道不稱，大辯不言).[17]

This position, however, raises a further question. Drawing a line between "higher" and "lower" levels of knowledge risks entering the very dualistic realm of *bian*, as exemplified by the "Qiwulun" chapter itself, where writings challenging the power of argumentation are paradoxically crafted into a masterpiece of argumentation. Why, then, would the author(s) insist on articulating ideas that arguably should be left unspoken? The answer lies in the practical motivations behind its objection to *bian*. Textual evidence reveals that two historical phenomena of the Warring States period embody the targets of "Qiwulun": first, the rise of the group called *bianzhe* 辯者 (literally, "those who conduct *bian*"), represented by Gongsun Long 公孫龍 and Hui Shi 惠施; and second, the ideological conflicts among competing schools of thought, epitomized by the long-lasting debate between Confucianism and Mohism.

16. Guo Qingfan, 83.

17. Guo Qingfan, 83.

The term *bianzhe* is associated with what later discourse refers to as *mingjia* 名家 (School of Names), sometimes rendered as "dialecticians," "logicians," and "sophists" in English.[18] Contemporary with the historical Zhuang Zhou, Gongsun Long and Hui Shi were famous for crafting paradoxes that rely on the fallacy of equivocation, a rhetorical device used to make sophistic arguments based on the use of ambiguous language.[19] Regarding Gongsun Long, "Qiwulun" states:

> To use a finger to illustrate that fingers are not fingers is not as effective as using a non-finger to illustrate that fingers are not fingers. To use a horse to illustrate that a horse is not a horse is not as effective as using a non-horse to illustrate that a horse is not a horse.
>
> 以指喻指之非指，不若以非指喻指之非指也；以馬喻馬之非馬，不若以非馬喻馬之非馬也。[20]

This obscure passage alludes to two paradoxes from the *Gongsun Longzi* 公孫龍子: "pointing is not a finger" (*zhi fei zhi* 指非指) and "a white horse is not a horse" (*baima fei ma* 白馬非馬).[21] The former differentiates the abstract from the substance, while the latter distinguishes subsets from their corresponding sets.[22] Nevertheless, "Qiwulun" rejects the linguistic confusion arising from such logic

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18. For the so-called "School of Names" and its focus on *bian*, see Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 238–239.

19. Paul Goldin, *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 15–16; Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Mingjia yu Xunzi* 名家與荀子 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1979).

20. Guo Qingfan, 66.

21. These two propositions respectively are discussed in "Zhiwulun" (On Concepts and Objects 指物論) and "Baimalun" (On the White Horse 白馬論) from the book *Gongsun Longzi*, attributed to Gongsun Long. See Wang Guan 王琯, *Gongsun Longzi xuanjie* 公孫龍子懸解, Xinbian zhuzi jicheng 新編諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 40–55.

22. People have long speculated about the rationale in the first proposition, with one popular interpretation suggesting that the property of an object is not equivalent to the object per se. See Fung Yu-Lan, 205–206; see also *Gongsun Longzi lunshu* 公孫龍子論疏, ed. Hu Quyuan 胡曲園 and Chen Jinkun 陳進坤 (Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1987), 110–117. The second proposition is more evident: the set of white horses is distinct from the set of horses. For example, see Hansen, *A Daoist*

games and wordplay, pointing out that reality persists independently of human conceptualizations or linguistic descriptions. There is no inherent one-to-one relationship between a particular articulation of sound and reality. For example, one might arbitrarily name a horse "apple," yet in this case the horse in the objective world remains unchanged. This is what it meant by "A road is accomplished by people walking on it; things are so because people called them so" (道行之而成，物谓之而然).[23] To borrow Saussure's terms, the relationship between the "signifier" and the "signified" is arbitrary.[24] Hui Shi receives similar critique. Referring to his two intriguing paradoxes, "setting off for Yue today but arriving there yesterday" (*jinri shi Yue er xi zhi* 今日适越而昔至) and "separating hard from white" (*li jian bai* 離堅白), "Qiwulun" implies that when fixation on names is abandoned, the sophistical manipulation of words is automatically deconstructed.[25]

Beyond targeting individual *bianzhe*, the chapter broadens its critique to the ideological conflicts among the many groups of thinkers during what is known in these "masters literatures" as the age of chaos.[26] Confucianism and Mohism, the most prominent voices in these debates, are accused of being concealed by their finite point of view, which obscures the oneness of the transcendental *dao*:

Theory of Chinese Thought, 258–259, and Lisa Indraccolo, "The 'White Horse Is Not Horse' Debate," *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 10 (2017): e12434.

23. Guo Qingfan, 69.

24. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, views language as artificial and arbitrary signs, as against the natural view of language. See de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 65–69.

25. Guo Qingfan, 56, 75.

26. For example, the *Mencius* 孟子 describes it as "the words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di fill the world" (楊朱、墨翟之言盈天下). See *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008), 178. The *Xunzi* 荀子 mentions that "the feudal lords have different governments, and the hundred schools have different teachings" (諸侯異政，百家異說). See Wang Xianqian 王先謙, ed., *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 386. Slightly later, *Han Feizi* 韓非子 noticed that "in the present age, the Confucians and Mohists are well known for their learning" (世之顯學，儒、墨也). See Wang Xianshen 王先慎, ed., *Hanfeizi jijie* 韓非子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 456. In addition to these external references, the *Zhuangzi*, in its final chapter "The World" ("Tianxia" 天下), offers a beautiful depiction: "the art of the Dao in time comes to be torn apart by all under Heaven" (道術將為天下裂). See Guo Qingfan, 1069.

> The *dao* becomes obscured by small accomplishments and words become obscured by vain show. This is why we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists.What one calls right, the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong, the other calls right.
>
> 道隱於小成，言隱於榮華。故有儒、墨之是非，以是其所非，而非其所是。[27]

And the conclusion it arrives at is rather simple: all debates are essentially futile. The very notion of winning or losing in these debates is illusionary, as each only advocates for its own teaching in the language of *bian*, not that of the *dao*:

> Suppose that you and I have a dispute (*bian*). If you beat me and I lose to you, then are you really right and am I really wrong? If I beat you and you lose to me, then am I really right and are you really wrong? … If right were really right, then right would differ from not right, and there would be no need for dispute. If so were really so, then it would differ so from not so, and there would be no need for dispute.
>
> 既使我與若辯矣，若勝我，我不若勝，若果是也？我果非也邪？我勝若，若不吾勝，我果是也？… 是若果是也，則是之異乎不是也亦無辯；然若果然也，則然之異乎不然也亦無辯。[28]

The passages targeting the *bianzhe*, Confucianism, and Mohism may be stylistically idiosyncratic, but the anecdote known as "three in the morning" (*zhaosan* 朝三) encapsulates the essence of the problem of *bian* in a more penetrating manner:

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27. Guo Qingfan, 63.

28. Guo Qingfan, 107–108.

> Exhausting your spirit and intelligence to unify things without knowing that they are all the same, this is called "three in the morning." What do I mean by "three in the morning"? When the monkey trainer was passing out nuts, he said, "You get three in the morning and four at night." The monkeys were all angry. He said, "Well, then, you get four in the morning and three at night." They were all pleased. Names and actualities do not change, yet the joy and anger are generated because he went along with them.
>
> 勞神明為一，而不知其同也，謂之朝三。何謂朝三？曰狙公賦芧，曰：「朝三而莫四。」眾狙皆怒。曰：「然則朝四而莫三。」眾狙皆悅。名實未虧，而喜怒為用，亦因是也。[29]

In this story, the monkeys' anger and delight hinge on the stated distribution of nuts in the morning, as they fail to perceive that the total number of nuts in a day remains constant. This metaphorically illustrates how individuals of "lesser understanding" are troubled with superficial distinctions, misguided by rhetorical artifice away from the proper understanding of the transformation of things under the constancy of the *dao*.[30]

In short, the skepticism of language in "Qiwulun" is predicated on that human discriminations are contrived and unreal. When such discriminations are generated, quarrels therewith arise. This discussion highlights the intrinsic correlation between epistemological obstacles and linguistic inadequacy through the lens of *bian*, critiquing the polemical language prevalent in the Warring States writings. While this chapter advances a significant theory of ineffability, as the following sections will show, it does not necessarily apply to other contexts within the *Zhuangzi*.

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29. Guo Qingfan, 70.

30. Other "Qiwulun" passages continue to propose that the solution to cognitive discrimination is to grasp the *daoshu* 道樞 (pivot of the *dao*) and attain *ming* 明 (bright; clarity; insight), ultimately reaching the state of *qiwu* 齊物 (equalizing all things). For further analysis, for example, see Chris Fraser, "Zhuangzi and the Heterogeneity of Value," in *New Visions of the Zhuangzi*, ed. Livia Kohn (Three Pines Press, 2015), 40–58; and Goldin, Art of Chinese Philosophy, 134–136.

"TIANDAO": THE OBJECTION TO WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Compared to the relatively moderate critique of *bian* in "Qiwulun," the final two sections of the "Tiandao" chapter adopt a radical stance against the value of written language. The first of the two sections reads:

> Those in the world who value the *dao* are books. Books are nothing more than words. Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. There are things that meaning pursues, but the things that it pursues cannot be handed down via words. However, all [people] in the world hand down books because they value words. Although the world values books, I do not think them worth valuing. What the world takes to be valuable is not valuable. This is because what you can see are just forms and colors; what you can hear are just names and sounds. What a pity! People of the world consider forms, colors, names, and sounds to be sufficient to convey the true condition of a "that." In general, forms, colors, names, and sounds are not sufficient to convey the true condition of a "that." Then those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know. How can the world understand this!
>
> 世之所貴道者，書也，書不過語，語有貴也。語之所貴者，意也，意有所隨。意之所隨者，不可以言傳也，而世因貴言傳書。世雖貴之，我猶不足貴也，為其貴非其貴也。故視而可見者，形與色也；聽而可聞者，名與聲也。悲夫！世人以形色名聲為足以得彼之情！夫形色名聲果不足以得彼之情，則知者不言，言者不知，而世豈識之哉！[31]

Starting with the notion of books, the passage outlines a tripartite model for the process of knowledge transmission. The first layer consists of written and spoken language in general, serving as the medium designed to carry *yi* 意, the meaning. In the second layer, *yi* resides within words and constitutes the

31. Guo Qingfan, 488–489.

sole value that words are responsible for conveying. Finally, *yi* attempts to approach something innermost, the ineffable *dao*.

Notably, this model does not deny that human spirituality can reach the *dao*. Instead, it clarifies that words cannot describe the *dao* simply because the *dao* has an intrinsic nature of not being spoken. It is quite striking that, by this definition, the *dao* is intellectually obtainable but linguistically ineffable. The core issue, then, is never that humans cannot understand the truth but that they struggle to transmit that understanding to others. In other words, the focus of "Tiandao" shifts away from cognitive limitations to practical challenges in pedagogy. The dichotomy here lies not between the human and the transcendental realms but between the private experience and public communication. Readers who overlook this nuanced characteristic of the *dao* might draw seemingly plausible parallels to certain Western philosophies. For instance, read out of context, the *dao* can be falsely conflated with Kant's "thing-in-itself" (*Ding an sich*).[32] However, in Kantian transcendental idealism, the "thing-in-itself" is independent of formal features in its spatiotemporal existence and is fundamentally unknowable, whereas the *dao*, although similarly transcending material appearances, is always open to its practitioners.[33] Kant's distinction between the noumenal world and phenomenal world attests to the boundaries of rationality, implying that what cannot be spoken can neither be understood. However, there are no such restrictions on obtaining the *dao* in "Tiandao." Such cross-cultural analogies, while superficially resonant, ultimately overlook the incompatible assumptions on which they rest.

Another noteworthy aspect of this passage is its employment of the notion *yi*. Besides "meaning," *yi* in Old Chinese encompasses a spectrum of concepts, including "thinking," "desire," "intention," "anticipation," "hint," "intuition," and even "suspicion." Essentially, it refers either to meaning itself or to the many sorts of mental activities that carry the meaning. The tension between *yan* and *yi* in this tripartite model reflects a broader theme in early and medieval Chinese philosophy of language, known

32. The many works that interpret the *dao* with the Kantian *Ding an sich* include but are not limited to: Guo Jimin 郭繼民, "Zhuangzi zhexue de houxiandai jiedu — Cong zhongxi zhexue huitong de jiaodu" 莊子哲學的後現代解讀—從中西哲學會通的角度 (PhD dissertation, Shandong University, 2008), 70; Martin Schonfeld, "Kant's Thing in itself, or the Tao of Königsberg," *Florida Philosophical Review: The Journal of the Florida Philosophical Association*, 2003.

33. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 428.

as the "word–meaning relationship" (*yanyi zhibian* 言意之辨). It interrogates a very pragmatic question: Can language fully express what is in the mind? For that matter, Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈 synthesizes the mainstream views on this "word–meaning relationship" in intellectual history into three categories:

1. "Words can exhaust meaning" (*yan jin yi* 言盡意)
2. "Words cannot exhaust meaning" (*yan bujin yi* 言不盡意)
3. "Attaining meaning and forgetting words" (*deyi wangyan* 得意忘言)[34]

Evidently, the "Tiandao" passage offers a classic defense for the second view, "words cannot exhaust meanings." Terms such as "forms" (*xing* 形), "colors" (*se* 色), "name" (*ming* 名), and "sound" (*sheng* 聲) are explicitly associated with the external attributes of things. In contrast, "the true condition" (*qing* 情) signifies their internal quality. While words can deliver information about external appearances, the truth of things is only grasped by *yi* in a tacit manner, culminating in the conclusion that "those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know" (知者不言，言者不知).[35]

This discussion of the inexhaustibility of meaning leads the final section of "Tiandao" to further question the authority of all written materials, particularly the books valued in Confucianism. This idea is elucidated in the famous anecdote of Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 and the craftsman Wheelwright Bian 輪扁. When he noticed that Duke Huan was reading "the words of the sages" (聖人之言), Wheelwright Bian devalued those words as "nothing but the chaff and dregs of the ancients" (古人之糟魄).[36] His bold claim irritated Duke Huan, prompting Wheelwright Bian to explain:

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34. Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈, "Wei Jin xuanxue zhong de yanyi zhi bian yu Zhongguo gudai wenyi lilun" 魏晉玄學中的言意之辨與中國古代文藝理論, *Gudai wenxue lilun yanjiu* 古代文學理論研究 1 (1979): 125–147. In addition, alternative classifications of the "word–meaning relationship" can also reflect significant complexity to this issue. For instance, Cai Qinghua 才清華 contends that the theories of Xun Can 荀粲, Wang Bi 王弼, Ji Kang 嵇康 and Ouyang Jian 歐陽建 on the "word–meaning relationship" are distinct yet interrelated. See Cai Qinghua 才清華, Yan yi zhi bian yu yuyan zhexue de jiben wenti 言意之辨與語言哲學的基本問題 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2013).

35. This sentence also appears in chapter 56 of the transmitted *Daodejing*. See Lou, ed., *Laozi daodejing zhu jiaoshi*, 147.

36. Guo Qingfan, 491.

> I, your servant, look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if I am too gentle, the chisel will slide and won't take hold. But if I am too forceful, it will bite and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard — I can get it in my hand and feel it in my mind. I cannot put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I cannot teach it to my children, and they cannot learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and am still chiseling wheels. When the ancients have died, they take with them the things that cannot be handed down. Thus what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the ancients.
>
> 「臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫。」[37]

Wheelwright Bian's analogy is that just as his wheel-chiseling technique cannot be passed down through verbal instructions alone, so too the *dao* attained by the ancient sages cannot be fully conveyed through didactic writings. Certain forms of understanding exist as a "knack" that resides only "in the mind." Contemporary cognitive psychology distinguishes between two types of knowledge acquisition: "declarative knowledge" and "procedural knowledge."[38] The former refers to information we consciously acquire and can describe, such as the fact that "humans communicate through language" or the applied rule that "a grammatically correct English sentence requires a subject." The latter refers to the skills we master only by doing them, such as learning a new language or driving a car. Wheelwright Bian's expertise in woodcraft naturally falls into this second category, "procedural knowledge." Similarly, the realization of the *dao* necessitates firsthand feeling or experience during the context-specific engagement with the *dao*. This distinction between reading and artisanship is crucial, as Duke Huan

37. Guo Qingfan, 491.

38. See David Charles Funder, *The Personality Puzzle* (New York: Norton, 2004), 557.

mistakenly conflates the declarative propositions *about* the *dao* in books with the procedural embodiment *of* the *dao* in the living world.

Thus, the critique made in "Tiandao" is of neither an anti-intellectualist nor an agnostic sort.[39] Its radical objection to language does not aim to deny the possibility of accessing the *dao*, but to expose how overreliance on the alleged words of the sages deviates from the *dao* itself. The inexhaustibility of meaning and the procedural understanding of the *dao* serve to disprove the legitimacy of Confucian classics as well as their tradition of canonization. To be sure, this is a serious rebuttal of the reading-centered pedagogy in self-cultivation. Alternative paths to the *dao* remain open, and the Confucian classics alone are insufficient as a universal guide.

WAIWU: THE FORGOTTEN WORDS

In its final section, the "Waiwu" chapter introduces the theory of "attaining meaning and forgetting words" as a novel approach to the "word–meaning relationship," transcending the binary division between "words can exhaust meaning" and "cannot exhaust meaning":

> The trap is a means to catch the fish; having captured the fish, forget about the trap. The snare is a means to catch the rabbit; having captured the rabbit, forget about the snare. Words are a means to catch meaning; having attained the meaning, forget about the words. Where can I find someone who has forgotten about words so I can have a word with him?
>
> 荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃；蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；言者所以在意，得意而忘言。吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉？[40]

39. "Intellectualism" is a vague term, associated with diverse epistemological approaches, including rationalism, empiricism and beyond. Meanwhile, "anti-intellectualism" often carries a negative connotation of a mistrust of knowledge in various senses. It is therefore misleading to label the theory of knowledge in the two "Tiandao" passages anti-intellectualist.

40. Guo Qingfan, 944.

The first three sentences follow a perfect parallel structure. The "trap–fish" and "snare–rabbit" pairs serve as analogies for the "word–meaning" relationship. In each pair, the former is an instrument used to capture the latter, and the latter is the goal that the former is designed to achieve.

Three key dimensions of interpretation stand out clearly. First, as a matter of course, there must be a distinction between words and meaning. As Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 commented, "the mysterious theories are manifested by virtue of speech; speech is indeed not the mysterious theories themselves" (玄理假於言說，言說實非玄理).[41] Second, words are presupposed to be capable of capturing meaning. This underlying optimistic stance is crucial in distinguishing the "Waiwu" approach from views that fundamentally negate the usefulness of language, as will be discussed later. Finally, this theory emphasizes the instrumentality of words. To quote Paul R. Goldin, the main point here is that "language is but a tool, not the end in itself."[42] In other words, linguistic presentations are merely a means to direct people toward what lies beyond the linguistic sphere. Once meaning is conveyed, language can simply be discarded because it serves no further purpose. Taken together, these three dimensions constitute what I refer to as an instrumental view of language, establishing the concept of "forgetting words" (*wangyan* 忘言) as a popular allusion that continued to shed light on later intellectuals examining the limits of language.

The second point is particularly worth expanding due to a persistent misreading aligns "attaining meaning and forgetting words" with "words cannot exhaust meaning," potentially blurring the different senses of ineffability in "Waiwu" and "Tiandao."[43] The subtle implication here is that, given that the trap and snare perfectly fulfill their roles in capturing their quarry, words should likewise serve as adequate tools for capturing meaning. The first part of the phrase, "attaining meaning" (*deyi* 得意), directly affirms the role of words and provides the premise for "forgetting words" — language becomes dispensable *only after* achieving its purpose. This clarifies the core difference between the two theories.

41. Guo Qingfan, 646.

42. Goldin, *Art of Chinese Philosophy*, 138.

43. For example, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 traced the idea of "forgetting words" (*wangyan* 忘言) to the "Xi Ci Shang" chapter of the *Yi* based on Wang Bi's reinterpretation of the *Yi* from a Zhuangzian perspective, arguing that it aligns with "words cannot exhaust meanings" and contrasts with "words can exhaust meanings." See Mou Zongsan, *Caixing yu Xuanli* 才性與玄理 (Jilin Publishing Group Co., Ltd., 2010), 213–214.

On one hand, both theories appear to prioritize meaning over language. On the other hand, "Tiandao," deems words nearly useless, whereas in "Waiwu," words are considered effective tools for attaining meaning.[44]

Indeed, the positive connotation of "attaining meaning and forgetting words" is a source of inspiration for many traditions and thinkers seeking to develop linguistic strategies to speak the unspeakable. It may even provide the philosophical justification for the *Zhuangzi*'s own inventive use of language. While an extended discussion of the *Zhuangzi*'s overall solutions to ineffability exceeds the scope of this paper, we know that the "Three Words" (San Yan 三言) theory in the "Yuyan" (Dwelling Words 寓言) chapter advocates for language that is figurative, implicit, and poetic, rather than deductive, descriptive, and referential.[45] Accordingly, adaptive discourse, flowing like water, is deemed a better instrument for capturing meaning than rigid writings bound by deductive reasoning and fixed terms. Another remarkable example is the Buddhist successful adaptation of this "Waiwu" passage to explain the teaching of *upāya* (*fangbian* 方便, "expedient means"). In "Niepan wuming lun" (Treatise on Nirvāṇa Has No Name 涅槃無名論), one of the foundational treatises of Chinese Mādhyamaka, Sengzhao 僧肇 borrows the expression "attaining meaning and forgetting words" to illustrate a dialectic doctrine that the ultimate state of nirvāṇa is both namable and innamable.[46] Similarly, Chan masters from the Tang dynasty onward found the "trap–fish" and "snare–rabbit" metaphors perfectly paralleled the "finger–moon" analogy in Chan rhetoric.[47] They frequently used these allusions in their recorded

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44. A growing body of scholarship today has begun to distinguish between these two theories. See Yuan Xingpei, 125–129. Tang Yijie 湯一介, *Guoxiang yu Weijin Xuanxue* 郭象與魏晉玄學 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010), 300, and Youru Wang, *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The Other Way of Speaking* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 103.

45. Guo Qingfan, 947–950.

46. "Attaining meaning and forgetting words, embodying its nature of 'neither being nor non-being'" (得意忘言，體其非有非無). *Zhaolun* 肇論, in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, R1, T45, no. 1858, p. 159b7–8.

47. Note that Chan Buddhism does not share the same ontological premise as the *Zhuangzi* regarding ineffability. It is based instead on the Mādhyamaka teaching of *śūnyatā* (*kong* 空, "emptiness") and *advaita* (*bu er* 不二, "non-duality"). On Chan's use of fuzzy language as *upāya*, for example, see Sun Ming 孫銘, "Speaking What Cannot Be Spoken: Poetry as a Medium for Ineffability in Chan Rhetoric," 46-67, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 353 (Aug, 2024).

sayings (*yulu* 語錄), reflecting a Chan view of language that rejects dogmatic attachment to words on the one hand, and encourages creative linguistic constructions on the other.[48]

The best example is showcased in the Xuanxue (Learning of the Dark 玄學) scholar Wang Bi 王弼's commentary on the "Xi Ci" chapters of the *Yi*. In his endeavor to bridge the Daoist *Zhuangzi* with the Confucian *Yi*, he transformed the "forgetting words" theory into a hermeneutic framework for legitimizing the study of the *Yi*:

> Generally, images (*xiang*) are what emerge from meaning. Words are what illuminate images. To exhaust meaning, nothing is better than images; to exhaust images, nothing is better than words.... Thus, words are a means to illuminate images; having captured the images, forget about the words. Images are a means to preserve meaning; having captured the meaning, forget about the images. It is similar that, the rabbit snare is a means to catch the rabbit; having captured the rabbit, forget about the snare. The fish trap is a means to catch the fish; having captured the fish, forget about the trap.
>
> 夫象者，出意者也。言者，明象者也。盡意莫若象，盡象莫若言。... 故言者所以明象，得象而忘言；象者，所以存意，得意而忘象。猶蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃也。[49]

48. On Chan masters' employment of the "Waiwu" passage, for example, see *Laṅkāvatāra baojing zhujie* 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經註解: "It is said, 'Do not be dependent on speech.' The subtlety lies in attaining the meaning and forgetting the words. It is like the metaphor of the pointing to the moon — this is (the way of) attaining meaning." (誡云「莫著言說」。妙在得意忘言，如月指之喻，斯得之矣。) R2, T39, no. 1789, p. 0366a26–28. *Fayan Chanshi yulu* 法演禪師語錄: "There is the subtlety of 'capturing the rabbit and forgetting the snare,' yet there is no confusion of 'attaching the finger as the moon.'" (有得兔忘蹄之妙，無執指為月之迷。) T1995 R2, T47, no. 1995, p. 0668c12–13. *Huangboshan duanji Chanshi chuanfa xinyao* 黃檗山斷際禪師傳心法要: "Therefore, it is said, 'capturing the fish and forgetting the trap.' The body and mind spontaneously reach the *dao* and recognize the (buddha) mind." (故云，得魚忘筌，身心自然達道識心。) R2, T48, no. 2012A, p. 0382c12–13.

49. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, ed., *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 609.

Wang Bi incorporates the role of "snare" and "trap" into the *Yi*'s use of the images (*xiang* 象) of the hexagrams (*gua* 卦). He positions the images as a mediating facet between the divinatory meaning and the explanatory words, making it explicitly, "to exhaust meaning, nothing is better than images; to exhaust images, nothing is better than words" (盡意莫若象，盡象莫若言). Hence, words at the highest refined level in the *Yi* not only attain meaning but also exhaust it. For Wang Bi, the logic of "attaining meaning and forgetting words" furnishes a methodological foundation for interpreting the classics, which granted him certainty in his systematic exploration of the mysterious realm, and enabled a conclusion that contrasts sharply with the radical objection to books in "Tiandao."[50]

"Language is both an indispensable tool and an obstacle, hence it has to be both created … and destroyed."[51] Upon closer scrutiny, the ostensibly negative notion of "forgetting words" reveals a rather optimistic belief in the potential of "attaining meaning." From this point, the theory of "attaining meaning and forgetting words" invites us to seek compatibility between strategic use of language and the *dao* in order to speak more effectively and achieve more meaningful outcomes. The boundaries between speaking and silence are reconceptualized no longer as fixed dichotomies, but as dynamic and interdependent modalities. As evidenced by Wang Bi, Sengzhao and Chan masters, thinkers who grasped the implied positivity in this "Waiwu" passage were able to broaden the discourse on ineffability and invite multifaceted approaches to examine the limits of language.

COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

"Qiwulun" attributes the ineffability of the *dao* to the human difficulty in correctly apperceiving the universe, not to any intrinsic flaw in language itself. Therefore, the limitation of human language is merely a by-product of the limitation of human perception. This theoretical construction is deeply

50. Rudolf G. Wagner provides a thorough analysis on how Wang Bi reconstructs the theories of language in the *Yi* and the *Zhuangzi* in in his own Xuanxue project. See Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (*xuanxue*) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 44–82; see also Alex T. Hitchens, "Encountering the Limits of Language: Wang Bi, Wittgenstein, and the Mystical," *Philosophy East and West* 73, no. 3 (2023): 596–617. See also Cai Qinghua, 146–148.

51. Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, transl. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

rooted in the practical concerns of the Warring States intellectual shift, specifically as *bian* manifests in both the paradoxical propositions advanced by *bianzhe* like Gongsun Long and Hui Shi and the ideological conflicts led by Confucianism and Mohism. In response, "Qiwulun" advocates a "higher-level" understanding, that is, a holistic perspective capable of dissolving both cognitive and linguistic discriminations.

In the "word–meaning relationship" discourse, the "Tiandao" chapter proposes a view typical of what is called "words cannot exhaust meaning," contending that one's personal experience of the *dao* cannot be entirely transmitted through mere linguistic expressions. The rationale here is that language is insufficient to convey one's idea fully, not that one's perspective is necessarily biased. Crucially, by holding the *dao* to be accessible but ineffable, "Tiandao" specifically downplays the importance of books, thereby directly challenging the Confucian pedagogy of self-cultivation centered on the "words of the sages."

In its final section, the "Waiwu" chapter reinterprets the "word–meaning relationship" through the theory of "attaining meaning and forgetting words." Unlike the epistemological critique of "Qiwulun" or the linguistic skepticism of "Tiandao," the "Waiwu" passage alone shows no evidence that language is unhelpful. The notion of "forgetting words" is entirely predicated on the premise that words are capable of "attaining meaning," juxtaposing both the instrumental nature of language and the inevitability of using this instrument. Thus, the "forgetting words" theory should not be understood simply as a negation of language, but as a constructive negotiation with ineffability — one that prompts people to contemplate solutions for speaking what is difficult to speak.

Certainly, the theorization of ineffability constitutes one of the core philosophical projects in the *Zhuangzi*, given its recurring mention and the diverse modes of its argumentation. Nevertheless, seeking a unified philosophy writ by the single hand of Zhuang Zhou may overlook the complexity of the book and result in oversimplified conclusions. As we have seen, a close analysis of these three representative discourses reveals heterogeneous positions, each demanding reexamination of their presupposed standpoints, realistic concerns, and responses to the intellectual problems of their time. Indeed, the diverse theories demonstrate that ineffability in the *Zhuangzi* is far more than a mere assertion of the ultimate truth being unspeakable, and the very articulation of these theories reflects a sustained endeavor to probe the limits of human language through the use of that very language itself.

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