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On Philosophical Meaning of Negative Terms in *Laozi*: Revolving around “Truthful Words Seem Contrary” (正言若反)

Yiming Wang 

Department of Philosophy, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China; yimingwang1995@163.com

Abstract: Negative terms are widespread in the text of *Laozi*; however, our understanding of their field, form and philosophical meaning is still unclear. In this paper, I intend to argue that the theoretical meaning of these terms first needs to be understood in terms of the proposition “Truthful words seem contrary”. In this proposition, “contrary” is the accurate meaning of negative terms. I demonstrate that the essence of the “contrary” lies in the critical reaction of *xuande* (dark virtue) to *mingde* (brilliant virtue), which is the traditional highest value. Thus, dark virtue is the theoretical foundation of the “contrary” because it is the new highest value. The “contrary” manifests itself in two forms: intuitive words (including adjectives and nouns), which are reflective, and negative words (including negative adverbs and verbs). Intuitive words represent the highest value or Being by means of the states and beings in the empirical world (I make use of the ontological difference between Being and being made by Heidegger, and so I maintain the capitalization of Being). In contrast, negative words more clearly distinguish the highest value or Being from secular values and beings in negative sentences. According to a further analysis of the relationship between affirmative and negative sentences, the latter is the universal expression of the former. All of these propositions reveal a philosophical possibility in which the diverse ways and values of the existence of all beings are affirmed and fulfilled.

Keywords: negative words; intuitive words; brilliant virtue; dark virtue



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1. Introduction

Negative terms appear with unusual frequency in *Laozi*¹, and this situation cannot be explained by chance. Even the expression *Zhengyan ruo fan* (正言若反) (truthful words seem contrary²) reveals Laozi’s intentional attention to language. Qian Zhongshu obviously realized this point and incisively pointed out: “*Zhengyan ruo fan* is Laozi’s way of speech, this way of speech can be seen everywhere in *Laozi* composed of 5000 words” (Qian 1999, p. 436). Unfortunately, it is not clear in what sense (rhetorical or ideological) is *Zhengyan ruo fan* understood as “Laozi’s way of speech”. To answer this question, it is necessary to clarify what does this expression mean exactly in Chapter 78 of *Laozi* firstly, or we may include other irrelevant linguistic phenomenon in this expression when we try to understand it as a hermeneutic tool, which may bring a huge misunderstanding of this tool.

Qian also summarizes the rhetorical feature of *Laozi* with modern rhetoric (including paradox and oxymoron) to understand *Zhengyan ruo fan*³. However, he does not explain the relation between this feature and the negative words used in *Laozi*, such as *wu* (无) (毋, 勿), *wang* (亡), *bu* (不) and *fu* (弗) (negation⁴). In addition, there is a syntactical difference between this expression and negative words. As we know, *Zhengyan ruo fan* is obviously an affirmative sentence, while the negative words that Laozi uses are linguistically negative due to their adverbial and verbal nature, such as the propositions *shangde bu de* (上德不德) (the highest virtue does not have the traditional virtues⁵) and *daxiang wu xing* (大象无形) (the greatest image has no shape). Is the transition from affirmative to negative

sentences possible? If the answer is positive, then how is the transition possible? These questions have not been theoretically or linguistically answered⁶.

In a special article on the meaning of negation, Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳) considers that the theoretical significance of negation lies in opening up all the possibilities in the world (Zhao 2016, pp. 105–9), which suggests that the use of the negative words in *Laozi* may also have extraordinary philosophical meaning. In addition, if we review these philosophical propositions in *Laozi*, including “Dao always has no name” (道常无名) in Chapter 32, and “the greatest image has no shape” (大象无形) in Chapter 41, then the negative verbs in *Laozi*, and thus the negative sentences open up a metaphysical possibility, although the role and meaning of this metaphysical possibility need to be further investigated. Moreover, if there is a linguistic transition between the two types of sentences in *Laozi*, then certain affirmative sentences will have the same theoretical implications as negative ones because the transition always indicates a common feature that is shared by different things.

Moreover, dealing with whether and how there is a linguistic transition between affirmative and negative sentences in *Laozi* is a reliable way of understanding the mode of thinking in it, because the linguistic analysis of literature can present philosophical thinking as authentically as possible. However, it is necessary to introduce the method and perspective of intellectual history for the achievement of this aim, not only because the writings of the philosophers in the pre-Qin era have a common intellectual background and intellectual resources (Li 2020, p. 287), but also because Laozi’s motivation for thinking was shaped by reflecting on and dialoging with traditional values.

Therefore, in this paper, I will first clarify the precise meaning of *Zhengyan ruo fan* in *Laozi* (especially the meanings of *fan* and *zheng* from the point of view of intellectual history). Based on this, I will identify and explain which linguistic phenomena in *Laozi* can be included within the scope of *Zhengyan ruo fan* to deal with the relation between *Zhengyan ruo fan* and certain negative sentences. Finally, I will reveal the intellectual motives and philosophical meanings behind these different types of sentences in *Laozi*.

2. The Meaning of *Zhengyan Ruo Fan* in Chapter 78 of *Laozi*

2.1. Textual Attribution of *Zhengyan Ruo Fan*

If we want to know whether there is a theoretical connection between negative sentences and *Zhengyan ruo fan*, we need to understand what *fan* means in this proposition. *Fan* is always translated as “contrary”, which refers to a negation of something. Although affirmative sentences are different from negative sentences in syntactics, because *fan* in affirmative sentences and negative words in negative sentences are common as negations of things, we can also make the objects of these negations clear and reconsider the possibility of this connection. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of the text in which the expression *Zhengyan ruo fan* is found. Only in this way can we obtain an accurate understanding of this proposition and its concept:

“There is nothing in the world more soft and weaker than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong there is nothing that can take precedence of it; for there is nothing (so effectual) for which it can be changed. Everyone in the world knows that the soft overcomes the hard, and the weak the strong, but no one is able to carry it out in practice. This is the reason that sages say: ‘Only the person who accepts the dirtiness of state is to be called its legitimate ruler; Only the person who accepts the misfortunes of state to be called its true king.’ Truthful words seem contrary⁷.” (天下莫柔弱于水，而攻坚强者莫之能胜，其无以易之。弱之胜强，柔之胜刚，天下莫不知，莫能行。是以圣人云：受国之垢，是谓社稷主；受国不祥，是谓天下王。正言若反。)(Laozi Chapter 78; Lou 1980, p. 187);

“In bringing harmony (he) to a situation of intense enmity, there is sure to be some animosity remaining. How can such reconciliation achieve good? The sages, holding on to the left half of the tally, do not demand payment from others. Persons who have virtue take charge of the tally, while persons who does not have

it look to calling it due. The way of Tian shows no partiality; It is really on the side of people who are good in their relationships.” (和大怨，必有馀怨；安可以为善？是以圣人执左契，而不责于人。有德司契，无德司彻。天道无亲，常与善人。) (Chapter 79, Lou 1980, p. 188).

The first thing that needs to be discussed is the problem of chapter division. Although this chapter is listed as Chapter 78 in most popular versions of *Laozi*, this situation changes in Yanzun’s version and the excavated versions (including the *Mangwangdui* silk version and Peking University Han version), in which this chapter and Chapter 79 in the popular versions are combined into one chapter (Han 2012, p. 142).

By reviewing this difference in the versions, Zhu Qianzhi (朱谦之) argues that *Zhengyan ruo fan* belongs to Chapter 79 in the popular versions of *Laozi* for three reasons: First, the meaning of the four sentences after “the sages’ words” are already sufficient, and so there is no need to add the proposition *Zhengyan ruo fan*. Second, there is no such example in the other chapters of *Laozi* to conclude that this proposition belongs to Chapter 78. On the contrary, Chapters 20 and 23 both begin with propositions that consist of four words. These examples can function as textual evidence to evaluate *Zhengyan ruo fan* as an opening platform in Chapter 79. Third, both the stele versions (石碑本) and Yanzun’s version of *Laozi* do not divide Chapters 78 and 79 in the popular versions⁸ (Zhu 2000, p. 303).

However, upon careful reflection, these reasons are not very reliable. The first reason is slightly subjective because many ancient commentators advocate the close connection between *Zhengyan ruo fan* and these sentences before this proposition in Chapter 78. Heshanggong’s understanding is “this [Only the person who accepts invective against the state is to be called its legitimate ruler; Only the person who accepts the misfortunes of the state to be called its true king] is the truthful words, but people in the world does not know this fact and think they are contrary words” (此乃正直之言，世人不知，以为反言) (Wang 1993, p. 298). Lu Xisheng (陆希声) and Su Zhe (苏辙) also make similar judgements (Xiong and Chen 2011, vol. 1, p. 618; vol. 3, p. 30). All of them suggest that *Zhengyan ruo fan* could be a summary of the sages’ words.

Second, although proving the textual style of one chapter by means of the styles of the other chapters is a reasonable approach, it also has its limitations, among which is because the textual style of the whole book is not necessarily uniform across ancient literature. Because the text of *Laozi* has undergone the process of classicization and has gradually evolved throughout the history of thought, it is not unacceptable to have chapters of different styles. A similar case also appears in *The Analects*, where differences in the styles and subject matters of the various chapters also occur from time to time (Wang 2011, p. 99–137).

More importantly, the “opening platform” raised by Zhu in his second reason does not fully support the attribution of *Zhengyan ruo fan* to Chapter 79 because the theme of Chapter 79 is not clear. Ancient commentators and interpreters of *Laozi* also have different views on the topic of this chapter. Suzhe and Linxiyi (林希逸) name this chapter *Hedayuan* (和大怨) (bringing harmony to a situation of intense enmity), in accordance with the pre-Qin naming style (Xiong and Chen 2011, vol. 3, p. 30; vol. 4, p. 525). However, this naming seems to have nothing to do with *Zhengyan ruo fan*. Heshanggong tries to grasp the chapter as *Renqi* (任契), from the philosophical meaning (Wang 1993, p. 300), although how to understand this name is still unclear.

If we take Chapter 79 as a whole, the topic of this chapter is on how to achieve good, while the statement “Bringing harmony to a situation of intense enmity” is only an entry point. In Chapter 79, the statement “the sages, holding on to the left half of tally, do not demand payment from others” (圣人执左契，而不责于人) explains how to achieve good before a situation of intense enmity occurs, instead of reconciling it after its occurrence. The claim “Persons who have virtue take charge of the tally, while persons who does not have it look to calling it due” illustrates the dichotomy between the ways of achieving good and those that lead to animosity. The final sentence in Chapter 79 also attempts to persuade us that those who have the virtue to achieve good will be blessed by Tian. Thus, all the claims in Chapter 79 revolve around the means of achieving and benefiting from good, which has

nothing to do with *Zhengyan ruo fan* (Wei Yuan drew a similar conclusion by criticizing the views of Wu Cheng (吴澄) and Yao nai (姚鼐) (Cf. Wei 2010, p. 153). Thus, we should follow Heshanggong, who attributes this proposition to Chapter 78, and who sees it as a summary of the chapter.

In fact, the third reason proposed by Mr. Zhu himself is more worthy of consideration. Because the early excavated versions of *Laozi* take Chapters 78 and 79 as a whole, we can also accept this fact presented by these versions, although we still have to face the theoretical questions associated with the division of the chapters. What is the object of the interpretation of *Zhengyan ruo fan*? More particularly, is this proposition a further summary of the sages' words in Chapter 78, or a platform for Chapter 79? According to the above discussion, we have already rejected the practices that subsume *zhengyan ruo fan* in Chapter 79, and we conclude that the proposition is a theoretical summary of Chapter 78. However, it is still not obvious how it summarizes the chapter. To solve this problem, it is necessary to clarify how *zhengyan ruo fan* is specifically understood in Chapter 78.

2.2. Theoretical Level of Zheng and Fan

According to the ancient commentaries of *Laozi*, most of the ancient commentators affirm the theoretical relation between *zhengyan ruo fan* and the sages' words. However, their affirmations are still ambiguous, for there are different ways of understanding this relation. The first possible understanding is to consider this proposition as a summary of what the sages say, which is expressed by Heshanggong (Wang 1993, p. 298). Lin Xiyi poses the second understanding, which is to see this relation as a generalization of the sages' speech acts and their contents (Xiong and Chen 2011, vol. 4, p. 525). In addition, in what sense are *Zheng* and *fan* to be understood? Are they at the same theoretical level? The solution to this latter question depends on the answer to the former.

As we can see, the sages' words provide concrete content: "Only the person who accepts invective against the state is to be called its legitimate ruler; Only the person who accepts the misfortunes of the state to be called its true king". However, *zhengyan ruo fan* is an abstract proposition; thus, we need to discuss the specific meaning of this proposition in Chapter 78. It is intuitive that *Laozi* shows the importance of *zhengyan* by using the adjective *zheng* (commonly translated as true or appropriate; I translate it as truthful) to define *yan* (usually translated as words). Moreover, when contrasted with the word *fan* (contrary), *zhengyan* obviously has a positive implication (Liu 2006, pp. 409–10, 450; Jin 2013, pp. 1–5).

In terms of the specific content of the sage's words, the subject matter refers to the responsibilities that a qualified ruler should assume; however, the conditions of being a qualified ruler that are posed by *Laozi* violate the common sense and value system of the time because he thinks that the highest mission of a qualified ruler is assuming the dirtiness and misfortunes of the state or people. As a result, the content of the sage's words does not show any positive character in terms of the traditional values and common sense, but rather runs counter to them (Chad Hansen draws a similar conclusion (Cf. Hansen 1992, pp. 222–24)). Thus, it is more appropriate to use the word "contrary" to understand the content of the sage's words⁹.

Because the content of the sage's speech is contrary to the common sense and traditional value, the positive values expressed by *zhengyan* are not in the content of the sage's words but are only in the form of his speech act in Chapter 78. Because the sages in *Laozi* usually signify a positive value¹⁰ by revealing the truth to people, *zhengyan* can thus be translated as "truthful words". Therefore, *zhengyan* (truthful words) actually functions as the form and subject of *zhengyan ruo fan*, and *fan* (opposite) is the predicate and content of *zhengyan*. As a result, we can translate *zhengyan ruo fan* as "truthful words seem opposite".

However, this interpretation leaves two questions: Should *zheng* and *fan* be understood on the same theoretical level¹¹? What exactly do they mean?

For many scholars, the relative ideas *zheng* and *fan* spontaneously recall the claim in Chapter 2: "all in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this they have

(the idea of) what ugliness is" (Legge 2008, p. 10), and they tend to understand *zhengyan ruo fan* by this claim (Liao 2003, pp. 184–91; Ma 2007, pp. 46–53). In addition, this understanding seems to have textual evidence: Chapter 78 also puts opposites together (including soft and weak, as well as firm and strong). According to their understanding, the key meaning of this claim in Chapter 2 is the simultaneous establishment of opposites (相反相成) in daily experience, and *zhengyan ruo fan* expresses a similar meaning, which Ames also refers to as "the passage of experience between the correlative yin and yang phases" (Ames 2004, pp. 268–69).

However, Zhu Mengting (朱孟庭) has indicated the drawbacks of this understanding. According to him, if *Zhengyan ruo fan* is understood in the sense that the soft overcomes the hard, then this proposition is ill-founded because we can easily draw the reverse conclusion, which is that the hard overcomes the soft, which is more common in our daily lives. This reversibility is implied by the expression the "simultaneous establishment of opposites", for the two opposite sides have the same status in this expression. As a consequence, Zhu concludes that *Zhengyan ruo fan* is not a strictly theoretical proposition because it lacks necessity and universality (Zhu 2000, pp. 390–402). Although Zhu's analysis is quite correct, we do not need to accept his final conclusion because what he reveals is only that *Zhengyan ruo fan* cannot be understood in the sense of the simultaneous establishment of opposites, which leaves room for understanding this proposition in another way.

Because the truthful words in Chapter 78 correspond to the sage's act of speech, it is natural that they have a certain transcendental meaning. As Su Zhe points out, "truthful words are in line with Dao and contrary to secular values or common wisdom" (正言合道而反俗). Theoretically, both Dao and the sages suggest a kind of truth or value that transcends secular values or criteria. It is worth noting that Su Zhe here indicates the object of opposition, which is the secular or traditional values or criteria¹². On the one hand, this opposition to secular values or criteria can be seen through the condition of being a king or ruler in Chapter 78. On the other hand, Laozi's confession in Chapter 70, "My words are very easy to know, and very easy to practice; but there is no one in the world who is able to know and able to practice them" (吾言甚易知, 甚易行。天下莫能知, 莫能行) (Legge 2008, p. 128), can also be seen as an inevitable result of the sages' words opposing the secular criteria of value. It is not that the general public does not hear the sages' words, but that they do not understand or agree with them, and so they do not practice them. We can also verify this in Chapter 41:

"Scholars of the highest class, when they hear about the Dao, earnestly carry it into practice. Scholars of the middle class, when they have heard about it, seem now to keep it and now to lose it. Scholars of the lowest class, when they have heard about it, laugh greatly at it. If it were not (thus) laughed at, it would not be fit to be the Dao." (上士闻道, 勤而行之; 中士闻道, 若存若亡; 下士闻道, 大笑之。不笑不足以道。) (Chapter 41, Legge 2008, p. 76).

After hearing about Dao, scholars of the highest class will try to practice what they heard on the basis of their understanding and recognition, while scholars of the lowest class do not care about the content and laugh at it, which indicates that the value held by scholars of the lowest class are so far from the words of the Dao and sages, which they consider to be completely wrong. This difference between the words of Dao and the words of secular value, as well as the corresponding distinction between scholars of the highest class and scholars of the lowest class, shows that truthful words and secular values occupy different value levels. In terms of the superlative degree suggested by Dao and the sages, this difference in the value level can be expressed as the difference between the highest value (sacred value) and conventional value (secular value). Thus, the opposition to the secular value is not directly equivalent to the highest value because the mere opposition to the secular value may be antisocial cynicism, which does not establish a positive value in any way. However, the proposition that truthful words seem contrary is obviously not the case. This proposition is based on the highest value, although this value sounds contrary to the secular value.

Having clarified the different levels of value between “truthful” and “contrary”, we can further answer the questions that follow with the philosophical meaning of this proposition. We have already pointed out that the key point of this proposition is to portray the highest value in a way that is contrary to traditional values. However, two questions still need further discussion: Why does Laozi use the “opposition” (to secular values) to represent the highest value? In what linguistic forms (affirmative sentences or negative sentences) is this highest value portrayed? The first question is directly related to the meanings of the highest value and traditional values, as well as to how the former treats the latter, while the second question is related to the linguistic forms that represent these philosophical meanings. Let us first deal with the former question, because only after that can we more smoothly clarify the second.

3. Intellectual Meanings and Linguistic Forms of *Zheng* and *Fan*

3.1. Reflection on Dark Virtue to Brilliant Virtue

Laozi portrays the highest value in an anti-traditional way. On the one hand, his approach expresses that the value he advocates is different from the values set by the rulers of Zhou Dynasty, and on the other hand, he also believes that the value he holds is more profound than these values. Otherwise, there would be no need to portray the highest value in such a strange way. The proposition *shangde bu de* (上德不德) (the highest virtue does not have the traditional virtues) in Chapter 38 is a direct expression of this view¹³; thus, I will also take this proposition as an entry point to explore how Daoism treats traditional values with the highest values.

Since the establishment of the Zhou dynasty, the civilization system with *de* (德) (virtue) and *li* (礼) (ritual) at its core has permeated all aspects of political and social life. In classical texts, including *the Book of Documents* (尚书), *The Book of Poetry* (诗经), *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan* (春秋左传) and *The Great Learning* (大学), the authors often use the term *mingde* (明德) (brilliant virtue) to denote the supreme sanctity of this virtue, to which nothing can compare; thus, the promotion of the rulers of the Zhou dynasty to the certain virtues is referred to as the tradition of brilliant virtue (Zheng 2009, pp. 235–42). Zheng Kai has already pointed out that Laozi deliberately invented the new term *xuande* (玄德) (dark virtue) to challenge the tradition of brilliant virtue, and to thereby replace its supreme and dominant status. The theoretical expression of this replacement is realized in Chapter 38 through the proposition that the highest virtue does not have the traditional virtues. The dark virtue posed by Laozi is “the highest virtue” (Zheng 2018, p. 18). Thus, the basic meaning of this proposition is the re-evaluation of the traditional value system and the proposal of a new highest value, which is dark virtue, which is different from and beyond this system. This reassessment undoubtedly carries with it a critical and reflective perspective on brilliant virtue. However, beyond this critical reflection, it is more worthwhile to consider how Laozi recognizes the defects of brilliant virtue from the perspective of dark virtue, and how the latter makes up for the shortcomings brought about by the former.

Once Laozi made dark virtue the highest virtue, brilliant virtue was automatically subsumed into the category of general or traditional virtue, and it thus had the same defects. As we know, the core principle of brilliant virtue emphasizes the distinctions between people’s social identities and thus determines the respective obligations of people in society to safeguard the rulers’ rulings and sociopolitical order. This is why Confucius considers *zhengming* (正名) (rectifying names) the basis of the ritual, music and punishment systems (the “Zilu” chapter of *The Analects* (Cf. Zhu 1983, pp. 141–42)). The core aim of rectifying names is to distinguish and determine the human responsibilities and duties in social and political life in order to re-establish the political and social order. Zhuangzi also has a clear understanding of rectifying names. He believes the core aim of *Chunqiu* (春秋) is to display the identities and responsibilities that belong to everyone in political society (the “Tianxia” chapter of Zhuangzi, Guo 1985, p. 1067).

It is precisely the shortcomings of promoting the distinctions brought about by brilliant virtue that Laozi reflects on through dark virtue. Specifically, the various value di-

visions described in Chapter 2 (beautiful and ugly, good and not good) are the result of distinctions made by rulers (Zheng 2018, p.13), which lead to various sociopolitical problems, which are manifested in two aspects. First, because one standard is the result of differentiation, the establishment and promotion of a concrete political standard draws attention to this value or standard, thus leading to political turmoil and mental disorders. This point is clarified in Chapter 3 of *Laozi* (Chad Hansen also suggests that there is private preference behind these distinctions, so that “We learn some pattern of preference or desire for one and aversion for the other” (Cf. Hansen 1992, p. 223)). Second, people and things that do not meet the artificially established standards are judged as unqualified people to be depreciated and discarded. Because people and things have their own natural endowments, the establishment of standards that impose on all people inevitably impairs their *ziran* (usually translated as nature). For example, when superior ability (*xian*, 贤) is promoted by rulers, people who does not possess this kind of ability will be regarded as inferior people (*buxiao*, 不肖人) and then despised due to their inability. In response to this drawback, Laozi proposes the idea that no person or thing will be abandoned under the sages’ ruling in Chapter 27 (Lou 1980, p. 71; Legge 2008, pp. 49–50).

In contrast to the emphasis on the distinctions and standards brought about by the tradition of brilliant virtue, the sages who possess dark virtue (sages in Laozi’s sense) will not deny the differences presented by things and people, and they will reject the creation of artificial standards to evaluate and value all the existence of things and people. We find this proposition in Chapter 49:

“A sage has no invariable mind of his own; he makes the mind of people his mind. To those who are good naturally, I am good, and to those who are not good, I am also good, and thus, this is virtuous good. To those who are sincere, I am sincere, and to those who are not sincere, I am also sincere, and thus, this is virtuous sincere¹⁴”. (善者，吾善之；不善者，吾亦善之；德善。信者，吾信之；不信者，吾亦信之；德信。) (Chapter 49, Lou 1980, p. 129).

The difference between “virtuous good” and “good”, or “virtuous sincere” and “sincere”, corresponds to the abovementioned distinctions between the highest value and general value (sacred value and secular value, respectively) because the adjective word “virtuous” signifies a transcendental meaning that is different from secular values¹⁵. A unique feature of this highest value is its accommodation of all distinctions: good and not good, sincere and not sincere. The motivation behind this is not to set up artificial standards to damage the rich and diverse natures of beings, but to accommodate the diversity of all kinds of beings as much as possible, which is evidenced by Laozi’s statement that “a sage has no invariable mind of his own; he makes the mind of the people his mind” in Chapter 49. The direct result of this motivation is the complete fulfillment of the diverse and infinite possibilities of people and things, which is expressed by the proposition in Chapter 27: “the sage is always skillful at saving men, and so he does not cast away any man; he is always skillful at saving things, and so he does not cast away anything” (Lou 1980, p. 71). Therefore, the highest virtue (dark virtue) connotes the nurturing of all things, instead of the treatment of them as possessions and the establishment and promotion of standards that undermine their natures.

Therefore, the realization of the highest virtue has two points. First, the sages who possess the highest virtue recognize that the differences in all things are universal, which is why Chapter 2 in the *Mawangdui* silk manuscript versions of *Laozi* use “this is constant” (恒也) to define the pairs of phenomena (existence and nonexistence, difficulty and ease, length and shortness, etc.) (Gao 1996, pp. 230–31). Second, after recognizing the existence of these differences, the highest virtue is not to discard one for another, but to fulfill all the differences and let the diversity of beings blossom, which is the content of dark virtue that is repeatedly affirmed by Laozi: “(The Dao or sages) produces (all things) and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; it does all, and yet does not boast of it; it presides over all, and yet does not control them.” (Chapter 10, 51; Lou 1980, pp. 24, 137; Legge 2008, pp. 23, 92–93).

In this way, we can also recognize the reason that Laozi considers brilliant virtue insufficient to be the highest value, which is because the diversity of things will be damaged by its emphasis on certain standards. This insight also leads dark virtue to abandon the tendency of brilliant virtue to draw distinctions and promote standards. This rejection takes place in two different ways in the language. The first, and most obvious, is the critique of the governance under the principle of promoting distinction (emphasized by brilliant virtue) by means of a number of intuitive words:

“My mind is that of a stupid man. I am in a state of chaos! Ordinary men look bright and intelligent, while I alone seem to be benighted. They look full of discrimination, while I alone am dull and confused.” (我愚人之心也哉! 沌沌兮, 俗人昭昭, 我独若昏。俗人察察, 我独闷闷。)(Chapter 20; Lou 1980, p. 49; Legge 2008, p. 38);

“The government that seems the most unwise, oft goodness to the people best supplies; that which is nitpickingly distinguishing everything, will work but ill, and disappointment bring.¹⁶” (其政闷闷, 其民淳淳; 其政察察, 其民缺缺。)(Chapter 58; Lou 1980, p. 151; Legge 2008, p. 106);

“The ancients who showed their skill in practicing the Dao did so, not to enlighten people, but rather to make them simple and ignorant. The difficulty in governing the people arises from their having much knowledge. He who (tries to) govern a state by his wisdom is a scourge to it; while he who does not (try to) do so is a blessing.” (古之善为道者, 非以明民, 将以愚之。民之难治, 以其智多。故以智治国, 国之贼; 不以智治国, 国之福。)(Chapter 65; Lou 1980, pp. 167–68; Legge 2008, p. 119).

These expressions, bright and intelligent (*zhaozhao* (昭昭)) and nitpickingly distinguishing (*chacha* (察察)), are related to the tradition of brilliant tradition, which emphasizes and promotes clear distinctions and standards. This way of ruling creates the disappointment of the people (*queque* (缺缺)). Although Legge understands *queque* as the people's disappointment, Wang Bi also suggests another and more correct understanding of *queque*, which is the disordered state of people's minds, which produces their obsession with norms and the consequent desire to fight with each other, which leads to societal disorder (Lou 1980, p. 151). What makes Wang Bi's interpretation correct is his accurate citation of the claim in Chapter 3, “Not to promote those of superior ability is the way to keep people from rivalry among themselves” (不尚贤使民不争), to understand “The government that is nitpickingly distinguishing everything” (Lou 1980, pp. 8, 151). Obviously, promoting those of superior ability will lead to rivalry among the people because the former are the concrete expressions of the promotion of the standards held by brilliant virtue, and the disordered state of the people's minds is the result of the ruling according to brilliant virtue. In contrast, dark virtue does not advocate the promotion of the standards invented by the wisdom of rulers that is mixed with their private desires “to enlighten people”, but it rather demands a nondifferentiated way to “make them simple and ignorant”. According to Wang Bi's interpretation, the aim of dark virtue is to free people from a disordered state of mind (Lou 1980, p. 168).

Based on the critique of wisdom grounded on the private desires or interests of rulers, Laozi also uses negative words to directly deny the role of knowledge, and he proposes non-knowledge (ignorance), which is the second linguistic way in which Laozi discards artificial distinctions. The promotion of the non-knowledge (ignorance) of people in Laozi's sense does not serve the interests of rulers, but rather it enables people to achieve their natures or “keep their truth of life” (守其真) (Lou 1980, p. 8).

At the same time, different attitudes of brilliant virtue and dark virtue toward all things are revealed by their views towards the promotion of standards and distinctions. Brilliant virtue, because of its emphasis on the necessity of distinction and order in social and political life, has a relatively tough attitude toward all people and things, and it thus

imposes the standards of the minority on the majority by direct coercion or indirect propaganda:

“The five colors blind the eye the five notes impair the ear. the five flavors destroy the palate, the hard riding of the hunt bring disorder to mind, Property hard to come by subverts proper conduct.” (五色令人目盲；五音令人耳聋；五味令人口爽；驰骋田猎，令人心发狂；难得之货，令人行妨。)(Chapter 12; Lou 1980, pp. 27–28).

“Five colors”, “five notes”, “five flavors” and “the hard riding of the hunt” are usually understood as expressions of indulgent desire (Wang 1993, p. 45; Chen 2003, p. 119; Liu 2006, p. 173). However, if we realize that these expressions played their political and social roles in the pre-Qin era, then they should be seen as the part of brilliant virtue that consists of ritual (as its external appearance) and virtue (as its internal essence) (Zheng explicitly explains the theoretical relation between virtue and ritual (Cf. Zheng 2009, pp. 92–95)), which was designed for a few nobles of the Zhou royal family and used to regulate all the people in social and political life (Du 2005, pp. 221–24). Their sociopolitical roles show that the rulers of the Zhou dynasty had a certain strong attitude of taking the world as their own, as pointed out by the “Beishan” chapter of *The Book of Poetry*: “under the wide heaven, all is the king’s land. Within the sea-boundaries of the land, all are the king’s servants” (溥天之下，莫非王土。率土之滨，莫非王臣) (Legge 1960, pp. 360–61). Thus, the establishment of man-made norms is a direct manifestation of this strong attitude.

Because Laozi criticizes brilliant virtue for its promoting standards and thus its failure to achieve the diversity of the existence of things, he also cannot accept the strong attitude of treating people and the world as possessions, and of slaughtering them by rituals grounded on the private will of rulers. The promotion of standards is the result of this rough and strong attitude, which is expressed as *youwei* (有为) or *weizhi* (为之) (the coercive action of rulers):

“If anyone should wish to get the world for himself, and treat it in a coercive action, I see that he will not succeed. The world is a sacred vessel, and cannot be got by coercive action. He who would treat it in a coercive way will destroys it; he who would hold it in his grasp loses it. The course and nature of things is such that, what was in front is now behind; what was warm is now freezing. what was strong is now weak; what was accumulating is now collapsing. Hence the sage puts away excessive action, extravagance, and arrogance.” (将欲取天下而为之，吾见其不得已。天下神器，不可为也，为者败之，执者失之。故物或行或随；或歔或吹；或强或羸；或挫或隳。是以圣人去甚，去奢，去泰。)(Chapter 29; Lou 1980, p. 76).

Here, Laozi criticizes the practice of taking the world for oneself, pointing out that “the world” is a “sacred vessel” that cannot be ruled at will, and that one possible ruler cannot treat the world in an arrogant and coercive way, or he or she will damage the diverse states of things and people (front and behind, warm and freezing, weak and strong), and this damage means the failure of governance. Dark virtue must adopt an attitude of “Gentle weakness and humble self-effacement” (濡弱谦下) in order to realize the diversity in the world. Zhuangzi also summarizes the core feature of Laozi’s theory by the proposition: “Gentle weakness and humble self-effacement are its outer marks; emptiness, void, and the noninjury of the ten thousand things are its essence” (以濡弱谦下为表，以空虚不毁万物为实) (the “Tianxia” chapter of Zhuangzi; Guo 1985, p. 1093; Watson 2013, p. 295). According to this summary, Laozi believed that political power requires a certain self-restraint, and that noncoercive action (*wuwei* (无为)) is the inevitable result of this consideration (Wang 2010, pp. 45–55).

To sum up, the critique of dark virtue to brilliant virtue actually revolves around two aspects: the promotion of artificial standards on the one hand, and the tough and arrogant attitudes toward all people and things on the other. The reflection on and critique of these two aspects led to Laozi’s rejection of the secular virtue by means of the highest virtue (dark virtue), or similarly, his subversion of truthful words to secular values. Thus, the

proposition “truthful words seem contrary” is based on a comprehensive reflection on the tradition of brilliant virtue, and the “contrary” is explicitly aimed at this tradition.

3.2. Linguistic Forms of Brilliant Virtue and Dark Virtue

After using different linguistic expressions to portray brilliant virtue’s emphasis on and promotion of standards and distinctions, Laozi also employs a series of correspondingly negative and reflective expressions as a reaction against the distinctions and standards. Basically, the negative terms used by Laozi can be divided into two kinds of expressions: intuitive words (including nouns and adjectives) and negative words (including negative adverbs and verbs).

As we suggested above, Laozi deliberately uses adjective words with vague and infinite meanings to express his negative attitude to the practice of promoting standards or distinctions, such as “benighted” (*hun* (昏)), “dull and confused” or “unwise” (*menmen* (闷闷)) in Chapter 20 and Chapter 58. These adjective words are contradictory to the values held by brilliant virtue, such as “bright and intelligent” (*zhaozhao* (昭昭)) and “nitpickingly distinguishing” (*chacha* (察察)).

Laozi also attaches negative words to those words that express distinctions or standards to show his rejection of artificially established standards, such as “Not to promote those of superior ability”, and the subsequent proposals of “not to” in Chapter 3 (Lou 1980, p. 8). Moreover, because the act of designing standards is closely related to the application of the distinguishing power (wisdom) that is grounded on the private desires in political society (Xu 2013, p. 321), Laozi also speaks directly of “non-knowledge” (*wuzhi* (无知)) in Chapter 3, and to “not govern the state by wisdom” (不以智治国) in Chapter 65, to express an ideal political state.

Because the promotion of distinction arises from a strong attitude toward all things and people, we also find similar linguistic expressions in Laozi’s criticism of a tough attitude toward the people who exist in this world. On the one hand, in contrast to the “excessive action”, “extravagance” and “arrogance” that are presented by brilliant virtue, Laozi advocates the governance of the world by the principles of noncoercive action (*wuwei* (无为)) and nonintervention (*wushi* (无事))¹⁷. At the same time, he also uses a string of adjective words, including “soft and weak” (*rou ruo* (柔弱)) in Chapter 78, “gentle” (*ci* (慈)) and “economical” (*jian* (俭)) in Chapter 67 as well as nouns (water, valley (溪), gorge (谷) and river and sea (江海)) with the same meanings to show his respect for each and every thing and his attitude of conforming to the diversity of all things.

Because Laozi uses intuitive words and negative words to reflect and criticize brilliant virtue, all these words can be included within the scope of negative terms in a broad sense. In addition, these words are not only merely opposed to the secular values that belong to brilliant virtue, but they are also always related to dark virtue, the highest virtue newly posed by Laozi. If we review these rich linguistic expressions, then Qian Zhongshu’s judgement is indeed correct: the linguistic phenomenon of *zhengyan ruo fan* is prevalent everywhere in Laozi.

At the same time, we cannot attribute the simultaneous establishment of opposites indicated in Chapter 2, and similar expressions, to the scope of *zhengyan ruo fan*, as many scholars have done, because the theoretical meaning of the expression should be that truthful words seem contrary, which is more closed to the proposition that the highest virtue does not have traditional values.

However, what is the relation between these linguistic phenomena, which manifest themselves in different linguistic forms but have negative or reflective meanings? More particularly, does *zhengyan ruo fan* have an original linguistic expression? If so, what is the difference between this original type and other types? We will deal with these questions in the next section.

4. Linguistic Types and Meanings of *Zhengyan Ruo Fan*

I have argued that *zheng* (truthful) and *fan* (contrary) in *zhengyan ruo fan* (truthful words seem contrary) must be understood in accordance with the different levels of value. In other words, the difference between *zheng* and *fan* corresponds to the distinction between sacred values and secular values because secular values and the mere opposition to them remain at the same level of value. Moreover, I also explain why Daoism adopts the “contrary” approach to express the highest value. According to this analysis, the affirmative proposition *Zhengyan ruo fan* is not an isolated proposition but has its particular expressions, such as “the highest virtue seems a deep gorge” (上德若谷). However, there are some propositions with the same intellectual meanings, but that appear in the form of negative propositions (e.g., “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues” (上德不德), and “the greatest image has no shape” (大象无形)). What is the relation between these propositions with the same meanings but different forms of expression (affirmative propositions and negative propositions)? Are they merely parallel to each other or is there a progressive relationship between them? In order to provide further answers, we need to analyze these linguistic phenomena.

4.1. Original Type of *Zhengyan Ruo Fan* and Its Theoretical Meaning

If we merely analyze *zhengyan ruo fan* (truthful words seem contrary) from a linguistic perspective, then this proposition is an affirmative sentence rather than a negative one because “seem” (*ruo*) plays the role of an affirmative copula. Thus, the original type of *zhengyan ruo fan* is an affirmative sentence. Now, if we recall the intellectual meaning of this proposition, then we can directly include affirmative sentences with similar intellectual meanings in the particular examples of this proposition, as follows:

“The highest good seems like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Dao.” (上善若水。水善利万物而不争，处众人之所恶，故几于道。) (Chapter 8; Lou 1980, p. 20.; Legge 2008);

“Radiant way seems obscured; advancing way seems to be receding; smooth way seems to have bumps; the highest virtue seems like a gorge, the most brilliant white seems sullied, the broadest virtue seems deficient, the most steadfast virtue seems dubious, the most pristine and authentic seems defiled.” (明道若昧；进道若退；夷道若颡；上德若谷；太白若辱；广德若不足；建德若偷；质真若渝。) (Chapter 41; Lou 1980, pp. 111–12; Legge 2008, p. 76);

“What is most consummate seems defective, yet using it does not wear it out; what is fullest seems empty, yet using it does not use it up; what is truest seems crooked; what is most skillful seems bungling; what is most prosperous seems wanting; what is most eloquent seems halting.” (大成若缺，其用不弊。大盈若冲，其用不穷。大直若屈，大巧若拙，大辩若讷。) (Chapter 45; Lou 1980, pp. 122–23; Legge 2008, p. 83).

Here, whether it is “water” in Chapter 8, “gorge”, “deficient” and “dubious” in Chapter 41, or “defective”, “empty”, “crooked” and “bungling” in Chapter 45, these words symbolize meanings that are distinct from the virtues belonging to brilliant virtue. However, as stated above, Laozi does not want to promote values opposed to traditional ones to the same level of value. All these words with negative meanings represent the highest virtue newly posed by him (i.e., dark virtue). For this reason, although these words seem intuitive, they all have the spirit of reflection. In other words, these words are proposed in response to the shortcomings of brilliant virtue, which is used to promote certain criteria and emphasize artificial distinctions. Consequently, they are intuitive words with reflective meanings. Therefore, we cannot literally understand the imagery presented by these words. Laozi also deliberates the use of the copula “seem” instead of “are” to suggest this point. In short, these intuitive words with negative or reflective meanings signify a

second-order or a higher-order value system, which involves the reflection of the tradition of brilliant virtue.

Here, we take the proposition that the highest good seems like (that of) water (上善若水) as an example. “The highest good” signifies that this proposition is not about general goodness, but about the highest goodness. The general good always has its counterpoint and is incompatible with it, which is confirmed by the proposition in Chapter 2: “as soon as everyone knows what is good, they will simultaneously know what is not good” ([天下]皆知善之为善，斯不善已) (Lou 1980, p. 6). In contrast to the secular good that disregards what is not good, water, as the representation of the highest good, “benefits all things” without any distinction. Conversely, because water occupies the lowest place that all men dislike, it also has a negative or reflective meaning. Moreover, the way that water acts “is near to” instead of merely “is” in accordance with the Dao, showing not only the literal meaning of “seem”, but also the distinction between the represented (the highest Being or value (Dao)) and representation (water). Thus, this proposition belongs to the scope of *zhengyan ruo fan* according to its linguistic form and intellectual meaning.

This case also applies to the discussions of virtue in Chapter 41. Although there are different types of virtues in the above quoted texts, such as “the highest virtue”, “the broadest virtue” and “the most steadfast virtue”, they all have superlative linguistic forms and the highest meaning values. Moreover, these highest virtues are represented by various seemingly negative terms (e.g., “gorge”, “deficient” and “dubious”). Thus, these virtue propositions are similar to *zhengyan ruo fan*.

In addition, the intuitive words with negative or reflective meanings have their positive meanings. Laozi reflects on this tradition while indicating the positive direction of the realization of the highest virtue through these words. If a supreme value is proposed without pointing out the possibility of its realization in the real world, then the practical meaning of the value itself is greatly diminished. Obviously, Laozi does not accept this case. In addition to the possibility of the realization of the highest virtue demonstrated by water, Laozi also positively posed such intuitive words to show how an ideal ruler rules the world in Chapter 28:

“Who knows his manhood’s strength, yet still his female feebleness maintains; as a valley to the world. . . . Who knows how glory shines, yet maintain sully, as a gorge to the world.” (知其雄，守其雌，为天下溪. . . . 知其荣，守其辱，为天下谷。) (Chapter 28; Lou 1980, pp. 73–74).

In this paragraph, Laozi reveals his reflections on the tough and strong attitude towards the people held by the traditional principle of ruling, as well as his reconstruction of a noncoercive mode of ruling. Thus, this paragraph is not just a mere negation and deconstruction, but it indicates the possibility of realizing this supreme value in reality by means of natural phenomena, such as valleys and gorges.

This positive indication is a unique feature of the affirmative form of *zhengyan ruo fan*. When we review propositions such as “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues” and “the greatest image has no shape”, we directly see that only the highest values and Being are different from secular values and beings. On the one hand, this kind of negative sentence is undoubtedly more abstract and negative, and it does not directly show the concrete and positive way of portraying the supreme value posed by Laozi. On the other hand, the use of more abstractly negative terms also contributes to the form and use of Daoist conceptual thinking. Because the basic linguistic form of *zhengyan ruo fan* is an affirmative sentence, we can further explore the relation between affirmative and negative propositions.

4.2. The Variant Type of *Zhengyan Ruo Fan* and Its Theoretical Meaning

As we have observed, the propositions expressed in negative sentences, such as “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues” and “the greatest image has no shape”, do not belong to the scope of *zhengyan ruo fan* in terms of linguistic form because it is an affirmative sentence first. However, the difference in the linguistic forms between them cannot

obscure the fact that they have the same intellectual meanings. According to the analysis in Section 3, intuitive words and negative words are negative terms in an intellectual sense, by which Laozi describes the highest value in a reflective way. Thus, both affirmative and negative propositions fall into the category of *zhengyan ruo fan* in an intellectual sense. The key questions are whether there is another more particular difference and connection in terms of the intellectual meaning brought about by these different linguistic types.

If we contrast negative and affirmative propositions, then the former will be more universal than the latter in a theoretical sense. As we know, Laozi poses a series of affirmative sentences to show how the highest value (the highest virtue, the broadest virtue, the most steadfast virtue) represents itself in various intuitive phenomena with reflective meanings (gorge, deficient, dubious). Although these phenomena play roles in indicating the possibility of the realization of the highest virtue, these kinds of propositions are always limited to particular phenomena; thus, in terms of their similar intellectual meanings, people consider these propositions separately and not as a whole.

However, this situation can be avoided in negative propositions with similar theoretical meanings. Taking the proposition “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues” as an example, the negative adverb in this proposition completely and universally reflects and negates all virtues or values belonging to the tradition of brilliant virtue. Because brilliant virtue in the civilization system of the Zhou dynasty encompasses all aspects of value, the complete and universal negation of traditional values also includes all the intuitive words with reflective meanings in Chapter 41¹⁸. In other words, we can summarize the affirmative propositions of the highest virtue in Chapter 41 as one proposition: “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues”. In essence, these negative propositions are a consequence of universalization, and they are thus the variant types of these affirmative propositions with the same meanings. Thus, in contrast to the affirmative propositions of the highest value, the negative propositions are more universal in their theoretical meanings.

In addition, the negative propositions of the highest value in *Laozi* also make clear the distinction between the highest value and its representation. Because the highest values are always expressed by particular phenomena in these affirmative propositions, many scholars have confused this distinction and have understood the highest value and its representation at the same level of value. The most typical example is the popular understanding of *zhengyan ruo fan*. Scholars used to understand this affirmative proposition by means of “correlative thinking” or “the simultaneous establishment of opposites”, and they overlooked the different levels between the representation and represented.

However, the negative adverb *bu* and the negative verb *wu* in the negative sentences “the highest virtue does not have tradition virtue” (*shangde bu de* (上德不德)) and “the greatest image has no shape” (*daxiang wu xing* (大象无形)), respectively, more clearly and directly signify this distinction because the secular values and features of beings, in general, are excluded to indicate the unique and unmatched features of the highest value and Being¹⁹. The object of this negation is not only one side of secular values or beings in general, but also the other side of them at the same time. As a result, negative words highlight the transcendence of the highest value. Laozi’s definition of “the most precious thing” (*tianxiagui* (天下贵)) in Chapter 56 clearly indicates this (Lou 1980, p. 148). In this chapter, the most precious thing is defined by excluding every pair of opposites (intimate and aloof, benefit and harm, etc.). Legge realizes this transcendental feature of the most precious thing, and he directly uses the term “beyond” to translate this exclusion (Legge 2008, pp. 102–3).

Because the difference between Dao and things is the basis of Laozi’s philosophy, these negative propositions have great philosophical importance. As we know, what makes Dao different from things in general is its shapeless feature, and the difference between shapelessness and shape is that they are not on the same level of existence, which precisely corresponds to the distinction expressed by negative sentences. The theoretical functions of negative propositions are perfectly suited for ontology because their distinctions are in harmony with the ontological difference between Being and beings. In this sense, these

negative propositions have more profound philosophical and reflective meanings than the affirmative ones.

In conclusion, there are more detailed theoretical differences between affirmative and negative propositions because of their linguistic types, despite the fact that they have the same intellectual meanings of the critique of and reflection on dark virtue to brilliant virtue. In short, affirmative sentences intuitively represent the highest virtue, which negative sentences fail to achieve. Negative sentences have the advantage of clearly and universally expressing the highest value, which cannot be achieved by affirmative sentences. It is precisely because of this close relationship that we can consider these negative sentences variant types of affirmative ones.

5. Conclusions

The original linguistic form of *zhengyan ruo fan* is an affirmative sentence, and the precise meaning of this proposition is that truthful words seem contrary (to traditional or secular values). “Truthful” and “contrary” here are not on the same value level. Moreover, by combining the text with the history of thought, I have more explicitly located the truthful words in Laozi’s expressions of the highest virtue (i.e., dark virtue), broadest virtue and most steadfast virtue. At the same time, the motivation of the “contrary” in this proposition is to critique and reflect on traditional values (i.e., values that belong to the tradition of brilliant virtue). According to this interpretation, propositions such as “the highest a seems b” and “the greatest x seems y”, which express the highest value by means of intuitive words with negative meanings, should be regarded as concrete examples of *zhengyan ruo fan*. For example, in the proposition “the highest good seems like water”, water represents the highest good in the negative sense that all men dislike it. This is also the case with the affirmative propositions in Chapter 41 and 45.

Moreover, although intuitive words and negative words involve the reflection of traditional values, when Laozi wants to emphasize the difference between the highest value or Being and the secular value or beings, instead of emphasizing the particular representation of the highest value or Being, he adopts negative sentences, such as “the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues” and “the greatest image has no shape”. Compared with the affirmative propositions, the negative ones have the advantage of clearly and universally expressing the highest value or Being, because the negation of the traditional values or features of beings in this type of proposition actually refers to all the intuitive words of the affirmative type and excludes these values or features of beings in general from the highest value or Being. It is precisely because of this feature that negative propositions are quite suited to the expression of ontological thinking. In addition, because negative and affirmative propositions have intellectual meanings, the former can be seen as a variant of the latter due to its universalization of the latter.

Finally, the philosophical meanings of these propositions are also revealed by introducing the intellectual history of virtue. The reflection on and transcendence of dark virtue to brilliant virtue open up a new possibility for politics and life. In this possibility, the different ways and values of the existence of people and things are not compromised or denied by the artificial standards set for a few rulers and aristocrats. Rather, the purpose of all political standards is to enable the affirmation and placement of the diversity of people and things according to their natures, which opens up infinite possibilities in the world.

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Notes

- ¹ Ames notes that *wu* forms are pervasive in the *Daodejing* (Ames 2004, p. 54). Cheng Shi (程实) and Ding Yun (丁贇) counted the high frequencies of the two negation words *bu* and *wu* in the popular versions of *Laozi*, and they point out that these two negative words appear in almost all the chapters of *Laozi*, except for Chapter 76. Specifically, *wu*, and its variant *wang* (亡), appear

101 times in *Laozi*, while *bu* appears 244 times (Cheng and Ding 2013, p. 44). If we compare the frequencies of the negative words in similar texts, such as *The Analects* and *Mozi*, the high frequencies of the negative words in *Laozi* are more apparent.

2 This is my own translation. Legge and Ames translate this proposition as “Words that are strictly true seem to be paradoxical” and “Appropriate language seems contradictory”, respectively (Legge 2008, p. 143; Ames 2004, p. 268). Their translations will be misunderstood if we accept Ames’ particular explanation of his translation. According to Ames’ understanding, this proposition “that properly capture this dynamic process [Hot is “hot-becoming-cold”] not only means what they [certain states] mean, but also means their opposite” (Ames 2004, p. 269). Ames’ understanding overlooks the representative relation between *zheng* and *fan*. See below for a more detailed discussion.

3 There are many followers of Qian Zhongshu’s view among Chinese academics. Cheng and Ding, mentioned above, are two of them (Cheng and Ding 2013, p. 46.). In addition, Zhang Hongbo (张洪波), Dong Yicong (董译聪) and Liu Yunhan (刘云汉) more particularly and clearly argue this viewpoint (Zhang and Dong 2014, pp. 338–49; Liu 2011, pp. 236–37). In fact, Qianzhongshu and his followers always connect *Zhengyan ruo fan* with the establishment of the opposite states of things (相反相成), as Ames does. This connection will be misunderstood if we analyze this proposition according to the context in which it appears, which I clarify in Section 2 of this paper.

4 Variants of *wu* (无) and *bu* (不) frequently occur in the Peking University Han version of *Laozi*, such as *wu* (勿、毋) and *fu* (弗). Yang Liansheng (杨联陞) researched the linguistic functions of these variants. According to his research, the meaning of *fu* is a negation of something (不之), while *wu* (毋) means not having or doing something (无之、毋之) (Yang 2006, pp. 177–203). Thus, these variants also fall into the linguistic extensions of *bu* and *wu*. Although he emphasizes the different functions of *bu* and *wu* in linguistics, this difference does not make any intellectual sense in the understanding of *zhengyan ruofan*, which I demonstrate in Section 4.

5 This translation is my own. I explain the reason for this translation in Footnote 14. In addition, Wang Bi has indicated that benevolence (*ren*, 仁), righteousness (*yi*, 义) and ritual (*li*, 礼) belong to the scope of the inferior virtue (*xiade*, 下德) in Chapter 38, because these three values and inferior virtue share the common feature of coercive action (*weizhi*, 为之) (Lou 1980, p. 94). As a result, this article will equate values with virtues, because values are concrete expressions of virtue and thus have the sense of virtue. In addition, although these three values or virtues in Chapter 38 are always seen as Confucian values, this view will miss their roles and status in the value system invented by rulers of Zhou Dynasty in terms of Chen Lai’s brilliant research (Chen, pp. 311–68.). Moreover, in Zheng Kai’s Study of Chapter 38, he further identifies inferior virtue and traditional values (including benevolence, righteousness and ritual) (Zheng 2018, p. 18). Thus, these three values in Chapter 38 are the concrete content of tradition values or virtues.

6 Chen Zhenjie (陈振杰) attempts to see *zhengyan ruo fan* as a category of specific linguistic phenomena that is posed in Daoism and further investigates its theoretical meaning. However, his inclusion of negative, comparative, relative and suspicious forms of words within the scope of *zhengyan ruo fan* is open to question (Chen 2016, pp. 35–41) because he also understands this proposition through the simultaneous establishment of opposites, which actually requires us to clarify the basic meaning of *zhengyan ruo fan* from the text, and to then look at its possible changes, rather than lumping it together in a general way.

7 This translation partly makes use of Legge and Ames’ translations (Legge 2008, pp. 142–43; Ames 2004, pp. 267–68); however, the translation of *zhengyan ruo fan* is my own.

8 The stele versions of *Laozi* is the version that *Laozi* is written on Stele, whose style and structure is similar to the famous Nestorian Stele (大秦景教流行中国碑). This version of *Laozi* is usually used by Chinese ancient editor to make proofreading of *Laozi* before the excavated versions of *Laozi* were discovered.

9 He yuguo (何玉国) considers that *zhengyan ruo fan* explains the content of the sages’ sayings, and he thus corresponds *Zheng* and *fan* to ruler (king) and dirty (misfortunes), respectively (He 2019, p. 35). However, his reading is ill-founded and can be easily refuted because *zheng* is a word that emphasizes or defines *yan* (words) in this proposition, while kings or rulers in the content of the sages’ sayings do not relate to the words at all.

10 Chapter 19 is an exception, but most sages in *Laozi* have a positive meaning and indicate an ideal mode of action and ruling to be followed.

11 Both Li Peiyan (李培艳) and Liu Xuezhong (刘学智) believe that the intellectual meaning of *zhengyan ruo fan* is the mutual transformation of the opposite states of things in time, and the simultaneous establishment in space (P. Li 2009, pp. 69–71; Liu 2019, pp. 292–93). As a consequence, they believe that *zheng* and *fan* are the positive and negative states of things, respectively, and that *zheng* and *fan* are on the same level of existence.

12 There is a close relation between secular and traditional values. In the Spring and Autumn Period, the popular and prevalent values are set and shaped by the system of virtue invented by the rulers of Zhou Dynasty which is judged as inferior or traditional virtue by Laozi. Family reverence (*xiao*, 孝) is an evident virtue or value to show this case. Since Laozi wants to reconstruct value system and thus pose a new kind of virtue, secular or traditional values will mean the same or at least similar thing to him. Thus, I will not distinguish one from another. At the same time, I will also identify the highest virtue newly posed by Laozi with sacred virtue implied by secular values because they have the same theoretical function to criticize and transcends traditional or secular virtue. Graham has suggested that the use of *fan* in *Laozi* is to show how to act in accordance with the Dao by rejecting the traditional distinction of value (Graham 1989, pp. 227–29). His view seems similar to Suzhe’s view. In addition, he also points out that *zhengyan ruo fan* should be understood by means of the simultaneous establishment of opposites (Graham 1989,

pp. 219–20), which suggests his obscure understanding of *zhengyan ruo fan*. Many Chinese scholars have similar problems (Lin 2010, pp. 1–27; Chen 2005, pp. 64–66; Zhang 2011, pp. 11–13, 28).

- 13 I translate *shangde bu de* (上德不德) as the highest virtue, which does not have traditional virtues for two reasons. First, according to the rhetorical rule of ancient Chinese literature, which emphasizes the counterpoint, because Laozi contrasts *shangde bu de* with *xiade bushi de* (下德不失德) (the inferior virtue does not lose traditional virtues) in Chapter 38, *shangde bu de* should be written as, or at least understood as, *shangde bude de* (上德不得德) (the highest virtue does not have traditional virtues) to correspond to the proposition that the inferior virtue does not lose traditional virtues. Because “bude” (不得) here means not having something, we should literally understand *shangde bude de* as the highest virtue that does not have a certain kind of virtue. According to Zheng Kai’s brilliant research, these virtues belong to the tradition of brilliant virtue (Zheng 2018, pp. 16–18). Therefore, I think this proposition can be directly translated as the highest virtue that does not have the traditional virtues. Second, although the ancient commentaries and modern translations are accustomed to understanding *shangde bu de* as “the highest virtue does not seek to show or strive to virtue” (Legge 2008, p. 70; Ames 2004, p. 174), this understanding may not be consistent with the core point of Chapter 38. More particularly, this reading takes as the criterion for distinguishing between “the highest virtue” and “inferior virtue” whether a ruler has an urgent concern for virtue. However, the most core concern of Chapter 38 is to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of different modes of governance, as well as which mode of governance should be adopted by the ideal ruler, which is confirmed by the two instances of “therefore” in Chapter 38. Introducing this subjective attitude of the agents or rulers has no obvious relation to this purpose; thus, there is no need to make such an introduction. Moreover, if we read the ancient commentaries more carefully, the introduction of this subjective attitude may be related to the interpretation of the two propositions *wuwei er wuyiwei* (无为而无以为) and *weizhi er youyiwei* (为之有以为) because both Heshanggong and Wangbi use subjective attitudes to explain *wuyiwei* (无以为) and *youyiwei* (有以为) (Liu Xiaogan also holds the same idea (Cf. Liu 2005, p. 87)). However, I have already argued in the footnote of another article that this interpretation is inaccurate because the discussion of “the highest ritual” in Chapter 38 shows that these two propositions illustrate the different ways in which rulers govern the people and the corresponding responses of the people, and this is the case with the highest virtue and inferior virtue (Cf. Footnote 8 in (Wang 2022, p. 12)). Based on the above considerations, this article translates *shangde bu de* as the highest virtue that does not have traditional virtues.
- 14 This translation is my own. I translate “*deshan*” 德善 as “virtuous good,” and therefore consider “*de*” to be an adjective. This could be supported by the widespread use of “virtuous words” (*deyin*, 德音) in the *Book of Poetry*, as well as by “virtuous conducts” (*dexing*, 德行) mentioned in *The Analects* and *Mencius*. In both cases, *de* always signifies a kind of extraordinary words or conducts.
- 15 In the “Xianwen” chapter of *The Analects*, Confucius questions the principle of “repaying enmity with virtue”, pointing out that it is impossible to repay virtue if we accept this principle. Based on this recognition, he puts forward the specific proposition of “repaying enmity with rectitude and virtue with virtue” (Zhu 1983, p. 157). It is clear that Confucius still adheres to the principle of distinction that is demanded by the tradition of brilliant virtue. In Confucius’s case, “virtue” and “enmity” are two opposing sides of the same level of value, but the so-called “virtuous goodness” and “virtuous sincere” of Daoism transcend this opposition. In this sense, there is a transcendental meaning in “virtuous goodness” and “virtuous sincere”.
- 16 Legge translates *chacha* (察察) as “meddling” and “touching”, which misses the point that the basic meaning of *chacha* is “distinguishing” in the context of ancient Chinese literature; thus, I revise his translation in this study.
- 17 This case can also be affirmed by Chapter 38, in which Laozi distinguishes the highest virtue from the highest benevolence, highest righteousness and highest ritual by means of noncoercive and coercive action. I analyze this chapter in another paper (Wang 2022, p. 4).
- 18 In contrast to Qian Zhongshu’s view that *zhengyan ruo fan* is the basic linguistic style of Laozi’s words, Lin Guojing (林国敬) argues that this view has not yet been able to summarize all the linguistic characteristics of *Laozi*. He points out that the unique feature of the language of *Laozi* is first a reversal of the meanings of common words. For example, intuitive words such as *menmen* (闷闷) (unwise) and *hun* (昏) (benighted) express the meanings of softness and weakness that Laozi esteems. However, these intuitive words are quite different from traditional values and virtues (Lin 2014, pp. 66–71). However, his view that Laozi’s subversion of traditional values is not implicit in the meaning of *zhengyan ruo fan* is open to discussion. In *Laozi*, both “gorge” in the proposition that “the highest virtue seems a deep gorge” and “empty” in the proposition “what is fullest seems empty” can fall under the scope of values that belong to dark virtue, and these two propositions are the classical type of *zhengyan ruo fan*. Wu Kunru (邬昆如) expressed a similar view and combed sixty kinds of negative words in *Laozi* (Wu 1982, p. 800).
- 19 Chad Hansen also suggests that Laozi proposes the abandonment of conventional knowledge because mystical knowledge cannot be spoken (Hansen 1989, p. 68). Because Hansen considers mystical knowledge to be the highest knowledge affirmed by Daoism, his viewpoint is similar to the one in this paper: he also emphasizes the complete distinction between the highest value posed by Laozi and secular knowledge.

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