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Rivers and Lakes: Zhuangzi's Critique of Just War and the Zhuangzian War Ethics and Peace Strategy

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Abstract: Just war theory, significantly shaped by Christian moral theology, has provided a prominent ethical framework for discussions on the justice of war. Numerous works have been published on classical Chinese counterparts, including passages from the *Mengzi*, *Mozi*, *Xunzi*, and *Huangdi Sijing*. Although the *Zhuangzi* frequently discusses warfare, it has been largely overlooked in this field of research because its war ethics do not revolve around any concept similar to that of justice. Based on Zhuangzian critiques of Confucian and Mohist views on justice, this paper tentatively reconstructs Zhuangzian war ethics. This reconstruction reveals a perspective that the concept of just war or justified war is inherently problematic, and promoting such ideas can be perilous and even morally questionable. The belief that just war theory can help us identify a "just side" to morally condemn or legally restrain aggressors is a dangerous illusion. In practice, this approach fails to prevent wars and often exacerbates conflict. According to the Zhuangzian perspective, during wars, states do not operate as traditional political entities with universal jurisdiction and centralized authority. Instead, they resemble rivers and lakes with indistinct boundaries, rendering the concepts of justice and punishment largely irrelevant. A practical peace strategy, therefore, must abandon the pursuit of administering justice and punishing wrongdoers. Instead, it should focus on strategies that facilitate the involved parties to "forget" their grudges and start their peaceful relationship anew.

Keywords: war ethics; just war theory; comparative philosophy; Chinese philosophy; Zhuangzi

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Academic Editors: Robin Wang and Daniel Sarafinas

Received: 15 November 2024
Revised: 20 December 2024
Accepted: 24 December 2024
Published: 6 January 2025

Citation: Lee, Ting-mien. 2025. Rivers and Lakes: Zhuangzi's Critique of Just War and the Zhuangzian War Ethics and Peace Strategy. *Religions* 16: 46. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010046

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1. Introduction

Although significantly shaped by its origins in Christian moral theology, just war theory has evolved through its adoption and adaptation within various secular and religious contexts, offering a framework for assessing the morality of war and the conditions for its justification. Scholars have identified discussions resonating with just war theory within the Chinese philosophical tradition, particularly in texts such as *Mengzi* 孟子 (Master Meng), *Mozi* 墨子 (Master Mo), *Xunzi* 荀子 (Master Xun), *Sunzi Bingfa* 孫子兵法 (Sunzi's art of war), *Laozi* 老子 (Master Lao), and *Huangdi Sijing* 黃帝四經 (Yellow Emperor's four classics) (Bell 2008; Fraser 2016; Graff 2016; Hagen 2022; Lo and Twiss 2015; Lo 2020; Zhang 2015, 2024). The Mencian and Mohist war ethics are often interpreted through the lens of the Christian tradition of just war theory due to their similarities with the Christian version. Both use the value of justice (*yi* 義) as the core criterion for assessing the morality of war.[1] Additionally, they both believe that the foundation of justice originates from an authority higher than humans and states, whether it be secular or religious, referred to as *tianzi* 天子 ("Son of Heaven" hereafter) or *tian* 天 ("Heaven" hereafter). Consequently, both Mencian

and Mohist theories acknowledge the legitimacy of punitive wars if they are launched by a higher authority to punish the wrongdoer.

While the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang) contains many discourses on warfare, it has received less attention in the study of Chinese just war theory. This is probably because the *Zhuangzi* does not resort to the notion of justice in addressing the issue of warfare.[2] However, this does not mean that Zhuangzi is irrelevant to the study of just war theory.[3] If we accept the just war theory readings of Confucian and Mohist texts, then Zhuangzi's critique of Confucian and Mohist moralistic discourses may constitute a critique of just war theory. Through analyzing Zhuangzi's criticism of Confucian and Mohist just war theories, this paper demonstrates that Zhuangzi finds any articulation of just war inherently problematic and incapable of resolving issues arising from wars or preventing or stopping wars. More importantly, he believes that the ideas of just war or the justice of war ignite conflicts and fuel wars.

To elucidate why Zhuangzi rejects the idea of just war or the justice of war and considers the advocacy of such ideas potentially dangerous and even immoral, this paper first identifies the possible targets of Zhuangzi's criticism, which I believe to be the Mencian and Mohist theses of just war.[4] Subsequently, it interprets the *Zhuangzi* in the context of Mencian and Mohist just war theories to articulate Zhuangzian war ethics and its approach to peace.

2. Wars for Peace and War of Self-Defense: Just War for Mengzi and Mohists

To smoothly conduct the experimental interpretation of Zhuangzian war ethics, this section provides simplified, and somewhat experimental, accounts on Mencian and Mohist theories about the morality of war.[5]

Following the decline of the Zhou regime's authority in the Spring and Autumn period, over a hundred states had already been eliminated and annexed. The era of the Warring States witnessed a continuation and escalation of annexation wars, with remaining powers engaging in military competition to emerge as the ultimate victor and establish a new dynasty, that is, a centralized governing body (Zhao 2015). Amidst the backdrop of incessant warfare, war ethics became a prominent subject within the intellectual discourse of the time. A central question was whether military conquest was the sole viable method for establishing a new overarching government and re-establishing order and peace. Thinkers of the era held differing viewpoints on this matter. While some pragmatically accepted that warfare might be the most achievable means due to its current prevalence and progression, others contested this view, advocating for alternative methods to achieve peace and order. The Mencian theory aligns more closely with the former stance, while the Mohist theory corresponds to the latter perspective.[6]

Mengzi, a representative Confucian thinker during the mid-Warring States period, believed that order would be restored if all-under-Heaven (*tianxia* 天下, translatable as "the world" with the connotations of an overarching political system and sometimes all the people) were unified under one sovereign (*ding yu yi* 定於一) (1A6). As Mengzi conceded that such unification was most likely achieved through force, the focus of his war ethics is placed more heavily on the scale of casualties and the principle of anti-atrocity. As he said, one who does not take pleasure in killing is qualified to be the man who unifies all-under-Heaven (*bu shi sha ren zhe neng yi zhi* 不嗜殺人者能一之) (1A6).

Since this Mencian thesis was construed to accommodate the military approach to restoring order and peace, it does not take for granted that a war of defense must be more ethical than a war of aggression/annexation. Since fighting a defensive war against a powerful state only leads to unnecessary casualties, Mengzi tended to advise weak states to

consider giving up their territories rather than engage in such futile conflicts (1B20). For a similar reason, he would encourage a powerful state to attack other states if there was a just cause, such as a punitive expedition (1B11) (Lee 2017a).

Mohist war ethics, in contrast, considers war of aggression unjust; it permits only punitive war and war of defense fought by those who are willing to sacrifice themselves (Fraser 2016; Loy 2015; Pines 2008). Mohists construct various arguments against the approach of military unification. For example, they resort to a widespread moral intuition that killing men violates the value of *yi* 義 (justice), and the more people one kills, the more punishments one deserves (*Mozi* 17).

However, such arguments could not persuade the ruling elites to stop engaging in wars because the wars had already begun. Perhaps being aware of this predicament, Mohists denied the principle of equal war rights and the moral equality of combatants (McMahan 2008; Rodin and Shue 2010). They put forward a moral thesis that soldiers of the unjust side (the state that initiated the aggression) do not have the same rights because they are murderous gangsters (*dao* 盜) who can rightly be executed by the just side (namely, the invaded state). The *Mozi* states that while gangsters are also humans, "killing gangsters" is not the same as "killing humans" (*sha dao ren fei sha ren ye* 殺盜人非殺人也) (*Mozi* 45).

From the Mohist perspective, the project of unifying all-under-Heaven through force is unjust. For one thing, advocates of this project justify the actions of the unjust side (the aggressors) and thus encourage their soldiers to kill others in the name of restoring peace and order. Furthermore, such a concept of a just war is akin to considering it just for murderous gangsters to sacrifice one group of people and make them go to war in the name of benefiting everyone else in the world. This kind of war cannot be just, as the *Mozi* says,

> 殺一人以存天下，非殺一人以利天下也。殺己以存天下，是殺己以利天下
>
> To kill one person to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven, this is not killing one person to benefit all under Heaven. To kill yourself to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven, this is killing oneself to benefit all under Heaven. (*Mozi* 44)

According to Mohism, only self-sacrifice for the sake of all others can be considered as serving the welfare of all-under-Heaven. A person's choice to sacrifice others, regardless of the outcome, cannot be considered as choosing to benefit all-under-Heaven.

While the Mencian and Mohist ideas of just war oppose each other, both advocate the moral values of "kindness" and "justice" and ground their theories on these values.[7] Mengzi considers the war of unifying all-under-Heaven launched by a kind ruler (one who does not enjoy taking pleasure in slaughtering) just because it would put an end to war with minimal casualties. Mohists, however, regard military aggression against an innocent state as opposing the norms of kindness and justice (*Mozi* 50).

Apart from the opposition between Mencian and Mohist just war theories, each theory also contains its own internal contradictions, and each side considers the other morally undesirable. Mengzi's idea that using war as a means to achieve peace and order is just is contradictory because if peace is the goal, initiating wars is at odds with that goal. Inflicting suffering on people to end their suffering is not an obviously ethical solution. Additionally, the Mencian theory raises an ethical question regarding who is to be sacrificed for the sake of the world. As the *Mozi* points out, using war to end war is not an act of caring for all people, because such a war involves having one group of people killed to benefit another group. In Mohism, a war is just if it is fought by volunteers defending an invaded state. However, the Mohist principle of combatants' unequal rights is similarly paradoxical. If Mohists oppose war because killing is unjust, then permitting killing in a defensive war contradicts their argument against wars of aggression. To resolve this issue, Mohists label the invading troops as gangsters and argue that killing gangsters is not the same as killing

people. However, Zhuangzi harshly debunks this Mohist idea. As argued in the following section, Zhuangzi finds both Mencian and Mohist theories problematic: they are not only inherently self-contradictory but also fail to serve the goal of stopping wars.

3. Zhuangzi's Critique of Just War Theories

The *Zhuangzi* criticizes Confucians and Mohists on several occasions. One criticism echoes the modern critique of just war theory; that is, just war theory is by nature self-contradictory. It justifies what it considers unjustifiable. As the *Zhuangzi* states,

> 故有儒墨之是非，以是其所非，而非其所是。
>
> Hence, we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, both refuting what they approve through approving what they refute. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 14)[8]

Mengzi endorses the idea of using war to end war because war is inherently harmful. Mohism permits killing the soldiers of an invading army because these soldiers would otherwise kill innocent people, and killing is inherently unjust. In this regard, they are "refuting what they approve through approving what they refute". Therefore, Zhuangzi complains about Confucian and Mohist just war theorists, saying that their understanding of "kindness" and "justice" and their judgments of "right" and "wrong" are inextricably messy and perplexing.

> 自我觀之，仁義之端，是非之塗，樊然殽亂，吾惡能知其辯?
>
> From where I see it, all the sproutings of "kindness" and "justice" and all the trails of right and wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused. How could I know how to distinguish and demonstrate any conclusions about them? (Ziporyn 2020, p. 19)

In addition to the obvious problem of being self-contradictory, just war theory indoctrinates people with the idea that a war can be just.

> 禹之治天下，使民心變，人有心而兵有順，殺盜非殺，人自為種而天下耳，是以天下大駭，儒墨皆起。
>
> Yu ordered the world by causing the people's minds to change, so that when someone makes up their mind [regarding what is justice], they use weapons as if they legitimately do so, [saying that] "killing robbers is not killing other men". The people in the world form judgments from their own perspective, and thus the world ends in enormous turbulence, in which Confucianism and Mohism thrive. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 125)

Once people adopt the idea of a just war, their way of thinking about war changes. They may develop the belief that killing a bad person is not really murdering a person. The just war framework traps people's minds in a model of moral reasoning that assumes certain parties in the war are more just than others. This makes people neglect the fact that the question of which party is more "just" is valid only when people, regardless of the circumstances, share the same moral principles and advocate the same version of just war theories. However, this is not the case, as evidenced by the discrepancy between Confucian and Mohist theories.

Even if people share the same version of just war theory, what war or which party in a war they consider just may still depend on their own viewpoints or positions. When people promote or partake in a war, they have already made up their minds about which principle of just war they endorse or which side of the war they support. They then formulate a moralistic discourse to encourage others to use weapons to kill those whom they consider

to be on the unjust side. As Zhuangzi states, it is impossible for people to decide what is right or wrong without having made up their minds beforehand (*wei cheng hu xin er you shi fei, shi jin ri shi yue er xi zhi ye* 未成乎心而有是非，是今日適越而昔至也) (Ziporyn 2020, p. 13). For this reason, the idea of just war cannot prevent wars from happening, nor can it stop a war. It serves war by buttressing people's belief in the justice of the war they have decided to support.

In thinking this way, people shift their focus from the brutality of war and its solutions to the moral assessment of the agents involved in the war. As is common wisdom, just war theories are more about justifying wars than preventing or stopping them. This is a familiar scenario in contemporary global politics. When faced with an ongoing war, the media and commentators analyze the actions of each party to determine which side is less just. By engaging with such analyses within the just war framework, people might unconsciously immerse themselves in intense collective moral emotions. Consequently, they feel compelled to condemn the unjust parties and applaud the just parties, even when the latter engage in the extensive slaughter of the soldiers of the unjust parties.

For Zhuangzi, such moralistic discourses cause more military conflicts and disturb human nature. The "kindness" and "justice" in just war discourses galvanize people's outrage.

> 又何偈偈乎揭仁義，若擊鼓而求亡子焉？意！夫子亂人之性也！
>
> What use is there then to go on with this militant advocacy of "kindness and justice", avidly pounding a drum for battle with the vehemence of a man 'seeking his lost son'? Ach! You, sir, are just disordering the inborn natures of human beings! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 114)[9]

Promoting this kind of morality is by nature promoting the idea that certain kinds of murders are just and even heroic, thus provoking people to kill others. This disrupts the inborn nature of human beings. The more people think and act within the just war framework, the more vehemently they would support or fight a war.[10] Trapped in this line of thinking, people may forget the common sense that it is not in human nature to kill strangers out of anger and hate for the sake of "justice".

Indeed, people share the moral intuition that killing a person is wrong and, thus, that punishing a murderer is right. However, just war theories often err by applying this moral intuition to collective groups and by prioritizing a moral principle that is universal in ordinary circumstances but not necessarily applicable in wartime situations.

> 夫鵠不日浴而白，烏不日黔而黑。黑白之朴，不足以為辯；名譽之觀，不足以為廣。泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呴以溼，相濡以沫，不若相忘於江湖。
>
> A snow-goose does not need a daily bath to become white, and a crow does not need a daily tarring to become black. So, there is no need to dispute about their uncontrived blackness and whiteness, and whatever prospects they may have to bring fame and honor are not worth disseminating. When the streams dry up, the fish cluster together on the banks, gasping and spitting on one another to keep themselves wet and foamed over. But this is no match for forgetting each other in the rivers and lakes. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 124)

Rights and wrongs should be as simple and obvious as black and white. People do not need to debate how to distinguish between black and white, just as it is clear that killing an innocent person is wrong and it is right to punish a wrongdoer. However, judging the rights and wrongs of collective groups in a war is not a task so simple and obvious. Thus, debating which side is more just in the face of war's brutality is merely a "show". According to Zhuangzi, elites do this only to demonstrate their own morality and righteousness

with an intent to pursue fame.[11] The just war theorists propagate the idea that slaughtering for a just cause is heroic and honorable. However, human beings do not have a natural disposition to sacrifice themselves and slaughter others for fame and honor. When a war occurs, what concerns ordinary people are basic survival issues. This situation is analogous to fish in a dried-up stream. Once the stream dries up, the fish would prefer living in "*jianghu*" 江湖 ("rivers and lakes" hereafter) without noticing one another rather than building solidarity on the banks to fight for a common just cause.

However, just war theorists chose to ignore human nature and the wartime suffering and survival of people. The *Zhuangzi* thus denounces Confucians and Mohists, saying,

> 今世殊死者相枕也，桁楊者相推也，刑戮者相望也，而儒、墨乃始離跂攘臂乎桎梏之間。意！甚矣哉！其無愧而不知恥也甚矣！
>
> Nowadays corpses killed in all sorts of different ways lie around in heaps, pillowed one on the other, while prisoners in cangues push one another along between them—the punished and the dead longingly gazing at one another from afar. And now the Confucians and the Mohists come along standing apart from them all on tiptoe and rolling up their sleeves amidst the manacles and fetters. Ach! What a monstrous extreme they have reached in their shamelessness, in their obliviousness to their own disgrace! (Ziporyn 2020, p. 91)

As the mutilated and the dead were not out of everyone's sight, Confucians and Mohists waved their hands amid the corpses, promoting the idea of the justice of war. For Zhuangzi, their lack of guilt and shame was immense. Promoting the idea of just war during wartime is immoral because it draws people's attention away from the ongoing humanitarian crisis to the question of which side and what acts are more just in the war. Moreover, focusing on such a question can incite intense collective emotions, leading people to join in condemning the side they each consider unjust, thus intensifying the military conflict. Therefore, while just war theorists may claim that their aim is to restore order, Zhuangzi states that nothing can be greater than the disorder they could cause (*ming yue zhi zhi er luan mo shen yan* 名曰治之而亂莫甚焉) (Ziporyn 2020, p. 125).[12]

4. Rivers and Lakes: Zhuangzian War Ethics and Peace Strategy

The repudiation of the notion of just war might appear to imply an amoral perspective on warfare. However, the Zhuangzian repudiation of just war theory, as demonstrated above, is a moral critique. For Zhuangzi, promoting the idea of the justice of war is immoral because it neglects humanitarian crises, fuels wars, and hampers possible peace solutions. Once interstate warfare starts, discussions about the justice of the war cannot help stop it but rather amplify the conflict by driving people to severely divided views. Consequently, all the parties involved in the war and their supporters may grow in the tendency to refuse to stop fighting unless their perceived justice is upheld by punishing those whom they consider unjust.

To stop a war, therefore, people should be released from the states involved to prevent them from growing in hate and building solidarity on the riverbanks to fight to the death for their common just cause. Thus, Zhuangzi proposes the idea of "rivers and lakes". In the context of war, states are not clearly defined political entities, as they are in the system of all-under-Heaven, but rather resemble natural rivers and lakes.

In classical Chinese texts, streams, rivers, and lakes are often used as political analogies representing the state, while fish symbolize the people (Lee 2024). The *Zhuangzi* is the earliest known master's text that uses the specific compound expression "*jianghu*". This expression depicts a landscape of world politics that is different from that of all-under-Heaven, which implies an overarching political system with centralized authority.[13]

In Zhuangzi's terms, the all-under-Heaven could collapse due to large-scale interstate military conflicts, but the "*tiandi*" 天地 ("sky-and-earth" hereafter) remains (Parkes 2018). In the domain of sky-and-earth, a state might disappear (be eradicated) like a dried-up river or expand due to floods (war of annexation), as the "Autumn Flood" (*qiu shui* 秋水) chapter reads,

> 秋水時至，百川灌河，涇流之大，兩涘渚崖之間，不辯牛馬。於是焉河伯欣然自喜，以天下之美為盡在己。
>
> The time of autumn waters had come, hundred streams are all discharging into the Yellow River. The expanse of its unobstructed flow was so great that a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow. The Lord of the River was overjoyed, delighting in his own powers, believing all-under-Heaven's beauty now to be encompassed within his own [territory]. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 134)

In this story, the Lord of River, for a moment, even believes that he has gained all-under-Heaven due to the expansion of his territory. During wartime, states are no longer "regular" political entities. They are like streams, rivers, or lakes in the natural world in that their people (fish) and boundaries (water margins) are constantly changing. It is the natural law, or law of the jungle, that dictates the changes and evolution of the situation (Perkins 2005).[14] Just war theory plays a minimal role in this situation because it assumes that the main players in the theory are states and the states' people in their regular forms and that human-made moral norms can predetermine or regulate how things evolve. Promoting a just war theory that does not concede this simple fact, as Zhuangzi puts it, is like standing on other people's corpses and shouting morality slogans to intensify hate and fear and, accordingly, the conflicts. The more tightly people cling to the idea of "just war", the less likely they are able to look at the whole situation and pay attention to practical peace plans.

Therefore, to be moral in wartime situations is not to promote the idea of a just war or to urge people to condemn the unjust parties in the war, but it is to propose and carry out peace plans instead. Indeed, both Mencian and Mohist just war theories aim to solve the war crisis, but they resort to the idea of "all-under-Heaven" in formulating their peace solutions (Lee 2023). They believe that wars will end if the order of all-under-Heaven is restored.[15] The term "all-under-Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi* also refers to the political world or the supreme power a person can seize or yield to someone else. However, Zhuangzi does not believe that re-establishing and rebuilding the all-under-Heaven political order is a viable peace plan. Military conflicts between states are both a cause and an indicator of the collapse of the overarching political system of all-under-Heaven. Therefore, merely addressing the phenomena caused by war cannot end the conflicts.

Zhuangzi's "rivers and lakes" analogy seems to offer a more feasible peace plan. The "The Great Teacher" (*da zong shi* 大宗師) chapter states

> 泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呴以溼，相濡以沫，不如相忘於江湖。與其譽堯而非桀，不如兩忘而化其道。
>
> When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes. Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we would be better off forgetting them both, letting them melt away in a transformation course into the way. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 56)

This passage compares two situations. One is of fish not noticing one another in rivers and lakes, while the other is of fish gathering together and mutually supporting one another on the bank of a dried-up stream. Fish would prefer living in the former situation.

People are also like this. Rather than cultivating a sense of solidarity in the disaster of war, where they fight enemies together for a just cause, it is better to remain strangers in normal life. People would rather forget all about one another in their normal lives than go into battle to fight for "justice".[16] Once a war unfortunately breaks out, morality in war is not to propagate the idea of a just war, nor is it to praise kind rulers or condemn violent rulers. Instead, it is better to set aside the rights and wrongs of all parties in the war and let them find a way to transform conflict into peace through reconciliation.

The Zhuangzian peace solution is to discard the concept of "justice", avoiding the evaluation of good and evil or the questioning of right and wrong. This solution seems to counter our contemporary moral intuitions. In the face of war, we believe that we should support the just side, condemn the unjust side, and use international criminal law to punish the unjust. However, in the absence of a supreme authority, neither moral condemnation nor legal prosecution can stop wars. The Zhuangzian strategy takes this reality into account and thus proposes that we let go of our judgments regarding who is Jie 桀 (the villain) and Yao 堯 (the good person) and forget about what they have done, whether right or wrong. By doing so, we can dissolve the disagreements between the two sides and find a direction for the flow of the two rivers. They may converge and coexist without conflict, or they may find a temporary truce. In any case, the outcome is that the fish in the rivers and lakes can return to their normal, peaceful lives.

Zhuangzi's "rivers and lakes" peace solution is a truce strategy adapted to the anarchic state of "sky-and-earth" like the natural world as well as the underworld. This strategy is reflected in later Chinese classical literature, contemporary *wuxia* 武俠 (martial arts) literature, and gangster films. In these works, resolving grudges often does not involve analyzing right and wrong but rather negotiating terms and mutually agreeing to act as if past events never happened. In other words, it means forgetting the past and starting anew. This truce strategy does not mean that all parties in conflict will immediately stop fighting and sit down for peace talks: the reason they are in conflict is precisely because they have differing views on what is right and wrong. Therefore, the "rivers and lakes" peace plan often requires a neutral, reputable mediator whom all parties can trust. This is also why Zhuangzi believes that engaging in moral condemnation is unethical, because the more people who partake in condemnation, the fewer individuals remain who can act as mediators. Only those who maintain neutrality qualify to be mediators.

Even within the order of all-under-Heaven, there are many human activities operated in the domain of sky-and-earth or underworld that do not fully adhere to the rules of the official political system. Perhaps for this reason, both Chinese *wuxia* literature and contemporary Chinese vernacular continue to use the term "rivers and lakes" to describe informal or unofficial norms and approaches to dispute resolution, while "sky-and-earth" is used in modern times to refer to secret societies or gangster communities (Faure and He 2016; Murray and Qin 1994).

The "rivers and lakes" approach is applicable to ending wars because, once wars break out, we inevitably enter the domain of sky-and-earth or the underworld, where there is no official supreme authority to administer justice. This concept applies to contemporary wars as well, because modern global society lacks a supreme authority; it is a world that mirrors the underworld, where international criminal law has little effect in restoring peace and order.

5. Conclusions

Echoing the just war theory in the Christian tradition, Mencian and Mohist just war theories rely on the value of justice and advocate the concept of just war, positing that a supreme authority higher than states and humans is the foundation of justice and can act

as an enforcer of justice. Like all other versions of just war theory, their focus is on justifying wars rather than formulating peace solutions. More precisely, they assume that making the judgment of which side of war is more just can end wars through moral condemnation or punishment. This is, however, a dangerous illusion. While just war theory may offer a framework for judging the morality of war, it proves powerless in formulating effective interventions.

Zhuangzian war ethics, opposing contemporary moral intuitions, rejects the prioritization of justice. In contemporary contexts, we cling to the idea that just war theory can guide us toward effective intervention by identifying the just. However, without a global government, this reliance on moral judgment often hinders the development of practical solutions that could actually prevent or de-escalate conflicts. Comparing wartime justice to domestic law enforcement overlooks the fact that discussions of justice have a limited impact on peace restoration due to the absence of a legitimate authority to enforce justice.

Those who debate which side is just and those who condemn the unjust engage in intense collective emotional experiences, which can amplify support for perceived justice and intensify hostilities. The condemned side may feel more resentment, while the supported side may justify violence, even against civilians. Consequently, the idea of just war can exacerbate conflicts rather than resolve them.

Therefore, Zhuangzian war ethics opposes the idea of just war. For Zhuangzi, once war has broken out, the ethical response is to call for an immediate ceasefire rather than condemning the unjust side. Zhuangzi employs the analogy of "rivers and lakes" to illustrate his peace strategy: by setting aside the issues of right and wrong and instead focusing on negotiating terms that enable all parties to let go of their grievances and begin afresh. Just as rivers and lakes naturally merge, separate, shrink, or expand in response to environmental changes, Zhuangzi suggests that by embracing fluidity and adaptability, conflicts can be resolved and harmony can be restored. This approach, although it might not meet our moral expectations, is practical and has better potential to end conflicts.

Zhuangzi's rejection of the desirability and legitimacy of just war theory enriches the discussion of war ethics and just war theory, as well as that of international relations and world order. The prevailing theory holds that the idea of "all-under-Heaven" is central to the traditional Chinese view of world order. As a result, scholars who aim to construct Chinese theories of international relations and global order often ground their theories in "all-under-Heaven" discourses to address contemporary issues of warfare and global crises. Introducing Zhuangzian notions of "sky-and-earth" and "rivers-and-lakes" could provide an alternative perspective. According to Zhuangzian insight, in the face of severe global crises caused by interstate conflicts, the more important and ethical task is not to promote a rigid ideal system of global governance but to consider the moral actions to take within the domain of sky-and-earth, where human-made laws have limited impact on improving people's well-being. The Zhuangzian notion of "rivers and lakes" symbolizes unofficial, makeshift strategies used to cope with unpredictable and ever-changing situations. This concept reflects the necessity of continuous adaptation, reinforcing the theme of dealing with uncertainty and constant change that characterizes our contemporary global society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The term "*yi*" 義 is often translated as "righteousness" or "justice". However, in the context of this paper, "justice" is chosen as the translation, as it reflects the understanding that yi, as discussed herein, represents a behavioral attribute rather than simply a personal quality.

2 Sarafinas and Wang (2024) offer a detailed account on Zhuangzi's critique of "justice" and the application of the norm to global politics.

3 In this paper, I use "Zhuangzi" to refer to the ideas (as I interpret them) in the *Zhuangzi*. This does not suggest that I believe in the single authorship of the *Zhuangzi*. For this issue, see Klein (2010).

4 In line with the narratives of the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Scribe*) and other early texts (Lee 2014), this paper assumes that the historical figures of Mengzi, Mohists, and Zhuangzi likely existed around the same period during the mid-Warring States era and aims to reconstruct their potential dialogues or disagreements concerning the cessation of wars and the criteria for justifiable warfare.

5 I have previously published an experimental interpretation of the Mencian and Mohist theories on war elsewhere (Lee 2023). Therefore, I will skip many details. I am aware that some scholars disagree with the just war theory interpretation of the *Mengzi* and *Mozi*, arguing that Mengzi's and Mohist philosophy primarily aims to promote better governance rather than justify war. This paper does not attempt to engage in this interpretive debate for two reasons. First, other scholars have previously interpreted the *Mengzi* and the *Mozi* through the lens of just war theory, establishing it as a recognized academic discourse. Second, the goal of this paper is to draw inspiration from the *Zhuangzi* to address a contemporary question: whether just war theory and the laws based on it can offer an effective intervention in war crises.

6 The experimental reconstruction of Mencian and Mohist just war theories is derived from their interstate relational ethics (Lee 2023).

7 For an analysis of the connotations of the *ren* and *yi* in the contexts of military strategy and wartime ethics, see Lee (2017a).

8 In this paper, the translations of the *Zhuangzi* are mostly adapted from Ziporyn (2020) with a few exceptions.

9 While the subject of the sentence is Kongzi 孔子, it reflects a broader critique of moralists as understood through Zhuangzi's lens (Lee 2017a).

10 The critique of clinging to morality, as discussed by Zhuangzi, may be relevant not only in the context of wars but also in various interpersonal conflicts. However, this paper does not extend this critique to the realm of moral judgment in interpersonal relations and domestic law enforcement (Pereboom 2002). The rationale behind this decision is that domestic governance typically involves an established authority to administer justice, regardless of one's perception of its fairness—a separate topic of discussion. Conversely, in the absence of *tianxia* (a global governing body), it is precarious to rely solely on moral judgment to prevent or stop conflicts and wars.

11 Pre-Qin and Han texts often used the term "*ru-mo*" 儒墨 (typically translated as "Confucians and Mohists") to refer to those who propagate moral values such as "kindness" and "justice" to gain a good reputation and thereby obtain official positions and salaries (Lee 2014).

12 Any debate about the justice of war is destined to be endless and lead to nowhere. Those who join the debate in the framework of just war theory are troublemakers because they start from a problematic framework. This critique of just war theory echoes Zhuangzi's view on assassination (Defoort 2022).

13 For a detailed analysis of the historical meaning of "*tianxia*", see Pines (2002).

14 The wartime situation is akin to the state of nature, a jungle where natural laws dictate behavior, as depicted in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1651). However, unlike Thomas Hobbes, Zhuangzi does not believe that solely the brutal laws of the jungle govern states in such a situation, nor does he think that establishing a powerful, overarching authority is the approach to restoring order.

15 Some contemporary IR scholars revive this line of thinking to address the crisis of global order (Ames and Gan 2023; Bai 2012a, 2012b; Dreyer 2015; Zhao 2011).

16 The best scenario is always to prevent war from starting; as the *Shizi* 尸子 (Master Shi) argues, fighting a "just" war is not heroic, stopping a war from happening is. For an analysis of this view, see (Lee 2017b).

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