

# **Lao Zi's Skepticism and its Conceptual Influence on the Development of Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism**

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## **Abstract**

Taoism and Confucian are two of the most representative schools in the history of Chinese philosophy. The Taoist philosophy created by Lao Zi is a school that emphasizes the connection between metaphysical and ethical notions. Thus, given the elusive nature of the universal truth, the Tao, Lao Zi conceived a skeptical philosophy that defines the notion of good based on the absence of intentionality and beliefs. As Confucianism progressed, the Confucian scholars adopted many of Lao Zi's philosophical conceptions into their studies while retaining many classical Confucian methodologies, therefore creating a new school of Confucian philosophy in the Song Dynasty, often referred to as the "Song Neo-Confucianism" or "The School of Reason." This thesis is targeted at the interpretation and analysis of the skeptical ideas in Lao Zi's Taoism and their influences on the development of the Song Neo-Confucianism.

## **The Metaphysics and World View of Lao Zi's Taoism**

Lao Zi's (est. 600 B.C – 470 B.C) Taoist metaphysics inherits many views from the Chinese "book of changes" (易經) originated in the Zhou Dynasty (est. 1046 B.C - 256 B.C) (also known as Zhou-Yi (周易), meaning the "Zhou's book of changes"). In Zhou-Yi metaphysics, everything in the world is originally one integral, inseparable whole. As the world evolves, the unity divides into two polar extremes, the Ying (陰) and the Yang (陽). The Ying represents passiveness, and the Yang denotes activeness. The conception of the polar extremes of Ying-Yang is known as the Tai-Ji, meaning "the great polar extremes".<sup>1</sup> In Lao Zi's conception of Zhou-Yi metaphysics, "Tao" (道), is perceived as the universal truth to which all physical and non-physical interactions pertain. Thus, the Tao is applicable to all tangible and intangible entities.

In particular, Lao Zi perceives the Tai-Ji to be an embodiment of the Tao, thus the interactions of matters too pertain to the Tai-Ji. The relationship between a tangible entity and the Tai-Ji can be evidenced in the life span of a human: an infant grows out of weakness and becomes a physically strong adult; then the adult grow out of the physical prime, and becomes aged and weak. Thus, Lao Zi concludes that polar extremes are interdependent, in the sense that a movement towards one polar extreme often results in movements in the opposing extreme and when one extreme gets too

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<sup>1</sup> Tao-De-Jing ("The Book of Morals") Chapter 40,42

violent, the tension will cause its opposing extreme to prosper.<sup>2</sup> In this perspective, the only unchanging truth is the set of principles described by the book of changes (ie. Tai-Ji), and under Lao Zi's conception, this unchanging truth is called the Tao.

A total epistemological understanding or a metaphysical description of the Tao, in Lao Zi's view, is impossible. As Lao Zi stated in the opening chapter of his *Tao De Jing* (道德經), or *Book of Morals*:

道，可道；非常道。  
名，可名；非常名。

This is interpreted as “If there is an expression for the Tao, the expression is not eternal; If there an object is named, the name is not eternal.”<sup>3</sup> By this, Lao Zi contends that no one can perceive the world in its physical and metaphysical entirety, thus no name or description assigned to Tao and its creations will be consistent throughout history. This epistemological anti-realist conception characterizes the essence in the study of the Tao, which is what the Chinese referred to as “the metaphysical studies” (玄學), or “the studies of entities beyond perception.” Following this perspective, Lao Zi is more concerned with the metaphysical conceptions of tangible matters, than their physical composition, as Lao Zi describes in chapter 11 of the *Tao De Jing*:

三十輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。  
埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。  
鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。  
故有之以為利，無之以為用。

Which translates into: “Each wheel has thirty spokes, when the wheel's center is hollowed out, it can be used for transportation; the purpose of ceramics is to create containers, only when the center of the pot is hollowed out, can the pot be useful; we fix windows for a room, when the center of the room is hollowed out, the room becomes desirable to live in; thus the notion of ‘being’ benefits utility, whereas the notion of ‘nil’ defines the usage.”

Working from this perspective, Lao Zi establishes two concepts, one physical and the

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<sup>2</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 16, 25, 30, 36, 52, 58, 57

<sup>3</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 1

other metaphysical. Physically, he asserts that the hollowing out of items is what creates their usage. Metaphysically, he asserts that the matter merely grants utility and that the usage of the product is granted by something intangible. (For example, a wheel is not useful because it is made out of wood but rather because ‘circular objects are easier to roll.’)

Lao Zi’s Taoism, as its name adequately describes, is a school that grounds its philosophical notions in the Taoist metaphysics. The metaphysical conceptions such as Tao’s agnostic nature and the continual cycle of the great polar extremes in particular have significantly contributed to Lao Zi’s development of a skeptic philosophy on which Lao Zi’s ethics and political philosophies root.

### **Lao Zi’s Skepticism**

The skepticism in ancient western philosophy is founded on the notion of questioning existing beliefs; Lao Zi’s skepticism on the contrary, is a fundamental conception of skepticism that focuses on preventing the acquisition of beliefs derived from the Taoist metaphysics.

The metaphysics of Taoism dictates that the polar extremes of the Tai-Ji are interdependent, interacting and complementary. Lao Zi’s understanding of the applications of the metaphysics to the physical is summarized in the Tao De Jing:<sup>4</sup>

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。  
萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。  
人之所惡，唯孤、寡、不谷，而王公以為稱。  
故物或損之而益，或益之而損。  
人之所教，我亦教之。  
強梁者不得其死，吾將以為教父。

This translates into: the Tao gave birth to unity; from the unity formed the two polar extremes; from the interaction of the polar extremes came the birth of all matters. The matters bear Ying (passiveness) and thus resort to Yang (activeness), the two trends blend to form harmony. People detest loneliness and clumsiness, and thus the Chinese kings often refer to themselves as the ‘lonely and

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<sup>4</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 42

clumsy ones' in light of modesty. Thus, matters gain from losses, and lose from gains. I must teach what others teach. 'the forceful ones will suffer dreadful deaths' is the father of all teachings.

As well as the following:<sup>5</sup>

將欲歛之，必故張之；  
將欲弱之，必故強之；  
將欲廢之，必故興之；  
將欲取之，必故與之。  
是謂微明。  
柔弱勝剛強。魚不可脫于淵，國之利器不可以示人。

This translates into:

To cease one must first expand. To weaken, one must first strengthen.  
To abolish, one must first nurture. To take, one must first give. This is a subtle understanding. Tenderness overrules rigidity and strength.  
A fish must not leave the river; a nation must not display its tools (mainly weapons) to others.

In light of these intricate interactions and consequences of the polar extremes, Lao Zi suggests that when one extreme becomes too violent, it will turn into its opposing extreme, or, its opposing extreme will become more obvious; following this perspective, the notion of “completeness” in Lao Zi’s Taoism is founded on the aloofness of extremes<sup>6</sup>; therefore, anything that is truly complete, will lack perceptible notions, and thus appear as if it is lacking in many regards. This concept is described in Tao De Jing as the following:<sup>7</sup>

大成若缺，其用不敝；  
大盈若沖，其用不窮。  
大直若屈，大巧若拙，大辯若訥。  
躁勝寒，靜勝熱，清靜為天下正。

This translates into:

True completion appears as if something’s lacking, even though

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<sup>5</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 36

<sup>6</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 2, 18, 22, 29, 30, 36, 40, 41, 42, 45, 58, 68, 76, 77, 79, 81

<sup>7</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 45

nothing is in shortage. True abundance appears as if something's weak, even though nothing is in depravity. The great righteousness appears as if one's been humiliated; the great craftsmanship appears to be clumsy; the great rhetoric appears to be a temperance of speech. Impetuosity conquers chill, calmness conquers heat, and the state of peace is righteousness.

The same notion of completeness is extended to Lao Zi's view of learning and education, as the following passage:<sup>8</sup>

為學日益，為道日損；  
損之又損，以至於無為；  
無為而無不為矣。

This translates into:

The act of learning makes one gain, the act of practicing the Tao makes one lose. One continues to lose, until one loses all intentions to conduct. No intentions to conduct, thus does no evil (misbehaviors).

Lao Zi reveals in the passages that the common notion of learning is in fact a process that entices one to intellectual dogmas and beliefs, which are considered extremes in the thoughts under Lao Zi's Taoism. Similar in essence, yet different from ancient Greek skepticism methodologically, Lao Zi suggests a more fundamental development of skepticism that refrains the practitioners of Tao from approaching extremes. As Lao Zi would say, 「其安易持」<sup>9</sup>, or “Something is easier to maintain when it is calm.”; prevention of intellectual corruptions is likewise, more effective than the purging of thoughts.

This skeptic conception of Lao Zi's philosophy can be complemented with considerations for actuality and then be applied to practical situations such as the forming ethical judgments, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

## Lao Zi's Ethics

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<sup>8</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 48

<sup>9</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 64

Proceeding to the applications of Taoist ideals to the society, Lao Zi established his notions of ethics by extending his ideas of skepticism to incorporate the valuation of tangible entities.

As an extended notion of dogma, Lao Zi views tangible entities such as titles, wealth, or even the word ‘saint’ itself as enticements that move one’s mind from the mean. According to 「多言數窮，不如守中。」<sup>10</sup> which translates to “loquacity exhausts the effects of the speeches, one should instead uphold the ‘mean’,” Lao Zi’s rendition of the doctrine of the mean is based on the lack of extremes, or more specifically as the state of 「無為」, or “non-intentionality”. (Note: the character 「為」 in Mandarin Chinese could be interpreted as either “intention” or “action”; this ambiguity may account for the interpretations that concluded Lao Zi’s notion of the mean to be ‘physical inanimation,’ or ‘thoughtlessness’ which is a blatant philosophical contradiction to numerous notions of ‘self-improvement’ in the *Tao De Jing*.)

Having instituted the doctrine of the mean and the notion of non-intentionality, Lao Zi suggested the denunciation of tangible entities that is summarized in chapter 3 of the *Tao De Jing*:

不尚賢，使民不爭。  
不貴難得之貨，使民不盜。  
不見可欲，使心不亂。

This translates into:

Without the respect for the saints, there is nothing for people to compete for. Without the obsession with valuables, there is nothing for people to steal. Without the sight of the desired, the heart is free of vexation.

From the above passages, Lao Zi concluded that tangible entities inspire the intentions to adopt beliefs, which according to Lao Zi is a favoritism that violates the Tao’s mandate of neutrality, as described in chapter 5 of the *Tao De Jing*:

天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。  
聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。

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<sup>10</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 5

This translates into: The universe does not uphold the virtue of kindness, thus all are no more than creatures that they are in this perspective. A saint, likewise, does not uphold the virtue of kindness, thus all people are no more than the creatures that they are in the eyes of a saint.

In light of this anti-favoritism, the competitions for and pursuits of tangible entities are the products of intentionality, and are thus considered inconsistent with the practice of the Tao.

Lao Zi's Taoist ethics, as a collection of notions galvanized by the suspension of dogmas and beliefs, object the pursuit of virtuous notions like the ones sought in Confucianism. In chapter 38 of the *Tao De Jing*:

故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

Which translates into: Thus, when the way of the Tao is lost, there are virtues. When the virtues are lost, there is kindness; when kindness is lost, there is righteousness; when righteousness is lost, there is courtesy.

Lao Zi argues here that the pursuit of concrete notions of ethics is an undesirable alternative to the practice of the Tao. When there is a conceivable notion of ethics, the study of virtues become an intentional, pretentious practice, and thus is not truly virtuous.<sup>11</sup>

By the same conception, Lao Zi deemed the commoners as ignorant conformists driven by emotions and easily enticed by tangible entities. The view of a practitioner of the Tao is summarized in chapter 20 of the *Tao De Jing*:

眾人熙熙，如享太牢，如登春臺。  
我獨泊兮其未兆，若嬰兒之未孩，垂垂兮若無所歸。  
眾人皆有餘，而我獨若遺。

Which translates into: People seem to interact with such joy, as if they are on their way to attend a ceremony, or to go sight-seeing in the spring. I stood and grew alone without such passion; like an

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<sup>11</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 36

infant, I'm exhausted and I don't belong to such a congregation. Everybody seems to have something to rely on, yet I am alone as if I've been left out.

From the quotes Lao Zi described explicitly the difference in philosophical views between a Taoist practitioner and a commoner. It seems as though a commoner who indulges in concrete absolutes has more to enjoy and boast whereas a practitioner of Tao would have no beliefs to rely on, and thus appear to the public as unwise and confused.

### **Lao Zi's Government and Politics**

The notions of politics and government under Lao Zi's Taoism make further extensions on Lao Zi's ethics, more specifically on the doctrine of the mean and the concept that "preventions are more effective than antidotes".

As suggested as a part of Lao Zi's ethics, a practitioner of the Tao is to disengage in conceptual extremes. Chapter 65 of *Tao De Jing* stated the following:

古之善為道者，非以明民，將以愚之。  
民之難治，以其智多。

Which translates into:

Since the ancient times, those rulers who practice the Tao weren't there to pave a path to wisdom for the people, instead, they were there to fool the people. When people become wise and crafty, they are hard to govern.

As an extended notion consistent with the doctrine of the mean, Lao Zi perceives purging people's conceptual extremes as a responsibility of the governor. This effort cannot be done through strict legislations and law enforcement, as Lao Zi stated 「太上，下知有之。其次，親而譽之。其次，畏之。其次，侮之。」<sup>12</sup> which translates into "The best way to rule over (to govern) people, is to take away the pressure of being governed; second to that, is to govern so people uphold your image and praise your name; and below that, is to make people fear the stern governor; and below all, is to bully the people." In light of 'non-intentionality', Lao Zi complements

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<sup>12</sup> Tao-De-Jing ("The Book of Morals") Chapter 17

the political notion with 「故聖人云：我無為而民自化，我好靜而民自正，我無事而民自富，我無欲而民自朴。」<sup>13</sup> which translates into “Thus the saints say: If I lose my intentions, the people will adjust themselves; if I value peace, people will become righteous themselves; if I don’t stir up troubles, the society grows wealthy; if I lose my desires, people will too embrace simplicity.”, thus illustrating an ideal governor who sets himself (herself) as an example of the mean for the commoners to observe rather than forcefully imposing ideologies on the people.

Aside from the extension of the doctrine of the mean, Lao Zi through the quote 「治之於未亂。」<sup>14</sup> (translates into “fix it before it falls to chaos”), re-emphasized the importance of his fundamental precepts that it is more effective to demonstrate the ‘mean’ during peaceful times, than to use it as an imperative response to crisis.

### **Neo-Confucian Historical Background**

The Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian movement is one of the most prominent renaissances in the history of Confucianism since its original conception in the feudalist late-Zhou dynasty.

After the feudal state “Qin” (秦) conquered the rest of the feudal states and brought an end to the era of the warring states (戰國時代, 403 B.C – 221 B.C), the scholars of different schools of philosophy dedicated themselves to the studying of the texts left from the Zhou Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618 A.D – 907 A.D) , the Confucian texts and its related source books were organized into what is known as “The Four Books and the Five Classics” (四書五經). The four books are *The Confucian Analects* (論語), *The Great Learning* (大學), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) and *The Analects of Mencius* (孟子); The five classics are: *The Classic Poems* (詩經), *The Book of Government* (尚書), *Customs and Courtesy* (儀禮 or 禮記), *The Book of Changes* (周易 or 易經) and *The History of Late-Zhou Warring States Era: Spring and Fall* (春秋 or 左傳).

Since its introduction in the Han Dynasty (漢朝, 202 B.C – 220 A.D), Buddhism (釋), along with Confucianism (儒) and Taoism (道), were considered the three mainstream philosophies in the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D – 907 A.D) and have developed great influences on each other.

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<sup>13</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 57

<sup>14</sup> Tao-De-Jing (“The Book of Morals”) Chapter 64

This interaction between the three schools of philosophy gave birth to a new school of Confucian philosophy in the Song Dynasty (宋朝, 960 A.D – 1279 A.D), called “Neo-Confucianism” (新儒), or more specifically “The School of Reason” (理學). The Song Neo-Confucian scholars extended their philosophical notions beyond the origin Confucian texts, and incorporated ideas from Taoism and Buddhism.

The Song Neo-Confucian is subdivided into four major schools: Lian (濂), Guan (關), Luo (洛) and Min (閩). The Lien school is lead by Zhou Lian-Xi (濂溪先生), who incorporated the Taoist conception of Zhou-Yi metaphysics and the methods of Buddhist meditation into his “Illustrated Explanation of Tai-Ji” (太極圖說). Lian-Xi was viewed as the first prominent figure of Song Neo-Confucianism who galvanized the development of the other Neo-Confucian schools; The Guan school was represented by Zhang Heng Qu (橫渠先生), who accentuated the teachings of courtesy in a scholarly pursuit; The Luo School was lead by Cheng Ming-Dao (明道先生) and Cheng Yi-Quan (伊川先生), the brothers who studied under Lian-Xi. Ming-Dao and Yi-Quan were particularly interested in the inheritance of the metaphysical “Reason” (理) in tangible entities and in the methods of rediscovering this “reason”; Lastly, the Min School was headed by Zhu-Xi (朱熹), a student of Yi-Quan’s. Zhu-Xi’s based his world view on Lian-Xi’s “Illustrated Explanation of Tai-Ji” and elaborated on the relationship between “Reason” (理) and “Chi” (氣).

In overview, the four schools of Neo-Confucianism are by essence extensions and complements of each other, rather than adversely competing schools. In the late-Song (or South-Song, 南宋) Dynasty, Zhu-Xi analyzed and compiled various works of the four schools and organized the quotes into a concentrated Neo-Confucian source book containing fourteen chapters (metaphysics, education, politics, government, familial values...etc), called *Jin Si Lu* (近思錄), or *The Book to Approach Thoughts*.

The following sections on Neo-Confucianism will focus on the analysis of selected chapters of *Jin Si Lu* with an emphasis of conceptual influences from Lao Zi’s Taoism.

## **Neo-Confucian Metaphysics and World View**

The Neo-Confucian’s world view is founded on four primary metaphysical

concepts that many of which were inherited from Taoist metaphysics.

The first concept is the notion of “Tai-Ji born from an integral whole” (無極生太極) and the continuous cycling between polar extremes,<sup>15</sup> which is one of the primary grounding metaphysical notions in the conception of Taoism.

The second concept is the constructive and destructive principles of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), which is inherited from the Zhou-Yi metaphysics.

The third concept is the complementary qualities of “Reason” and “Chi.” “Reason”, or 「理」 is the notion of universal truth that governs all tangible entities, which is in essence an analogous conception to Lao Zi’s “Tao”. Humans inherit a part of this “Reason,” and that is the “character” (性) of a person;<sup>16</sup> “Chi” (氣) on the other hand, is the embodiment of life that resembles a person’s health. In the Neo-Confucian conception of a human mind, the “character” (or “reason”), similar to the Aristotelian notion of “essence,” is a conception of rationality granted by nature; the “chi” on the other hand, constitutes a human being’s realization of the necessity for commodities, and thus produces desires and intentionality. In chapter 2, quote 30 of *Jin Si Lu* (The Book to Approach Thoughts):

明道曰：論性不論氣，不備。論氣不論性，不明。二之則不是。

This translates into:

Ming-Dao said, if we discuss character without discussing the chi, then something is lacking in the argument; if we discuss chi without discussing character, then we cannot reach full understanding. Any attempt to separate the two is faulty.

Even though the Neo-Confucian ethics accentuates the product of “reason” over the product of “chi”, the major Neo-Confucian scholars such as Ming-Dao (明道先生, 程顥), deemed the understanding of the “reason” and “chi” as complements of each other in a study of metaphysics<sup>17</sup>. (Neo-Confucian ethics will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper.)

The last concept of metaphysics is notion of “heart.” Like the ancient

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<sup>15</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 1, Quote 1

<sup>16</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 1, Quote 39

<sup>17</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 2, Quote 30

Egyptians, the Chinese scholars deemed a person's heart to be the hub of thoughts, as opposed to the brain, which is now taken to be the seat of thought in modern neurosciences and cognitive sciences. The "heart" is viewed as a container of the products of "reason" and "chi," thus the heart has two notable features: the first being a representation of conscience and the second being a mechanism of self-conditioning and emotional control.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly to Lao Zi's Taoist formalism of ethics, the Neo-Confucians adopted their metaphysical notions as the basis for their ethical notions. In this perspective, the similarities and differences in the metaphysical notions of Lao Zi's Taoism and Neo-Confucianism in turn indicate what of Neo-Confucianism was adopted from Lao Zi's Taoism and what was retained from Classical-Confucianism.

### **Similar concepts but different formulations in Ethics and Doctrine of the Mean**

The Neo-Confucian ethics are extended from their metaphysical counterparts. The Neo-Confucian notion of rationality is based on the "character" humans inherited from the world's metaphysical "reason". The Neo-Confucian scholars, like their Classical-Confucian predecessors, view the virtue of kindness (仁) as the ultimate good, as described in chapter 1's quote 11: 「仁者,天下之公,善之本也。」, which translates into "kindness, is the prime principle of the world and the root of good."; however, the Neo-Confucians devised an analogy to the Taoist view of "a world pertaining to the principles of Tao" by explaining "kindness" as a part of the "character" that human inherited from the metaphysical "reason." In this perspective, the Neo-Confucians, much like Lao Zi, viewed "good" as a value contained in all humans since birth, and the pursuit of good can only be done by through the purging of intentionality.

In order to describe this intentionality, the Neo-Confucian defined a separate notion of emotional disturbance in terms of "chi." As described in the Neo-Confucian metaphysics, the "character" and "chi" as both contained in the "heart", and are thus complementary and inseparable in a discussion of good. "Chi," being the resemblance of health, is a source as well as a necessity for emotions, intentions and thoughts. It is commonly perceived amongst Neo-Confucian scholars that the products of the "chi" are what disturb the good conceived by humans' inherent "character." Therefore, in the Neo-Confucian ethics, the doctrine of the mean is defined by the ability to

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<sup>18</sup> Jin Si Lu ("The Book to Approach Thoughts") Chapter 2, Quote 4,50

overlook intentionality and rediscover this “character” that a human inherits from nature. In comparison to Lao Zi’s Taoism, the Neo-Confucian sought a more concrete notion of good, or “kindness,” through the purging of intentionality, which is notably represented in its Taoist counterpart.

In chapter 4 of *Jin Si Lu*, quote 53, a dialogue between Yi-Quan (伊川先生, 程頤) and Su-Ji-Ming (蘇季明) provides a comprehensive overview of the pursuit of good in relation to “character” and “chi” (original text followed by translation)

「蘇季明問：喜怒哀樂未發之前求中，可否？曰：不可。既思於喜怒哀樂未發之前求之，又卻是思也。既思即是已發。才發便謂之和，不可謂之中也。」

Su-Ji-Ming: “Can one pursue the mean before emotions come to be?”

Yi-Quan: “No, you’re pleading for an opportunity to think before emotions come to be, and yet you’re already thinking. Since you’re thinking, the notions for emotions have already come to be. In the beginning when emotions just came to be, there is harmony, but that is still not the mean.”

「又問：呂學士言當求於喜怒哀樂未發之前，如何？曰：若曰存養於喜怒哀樂未發之前則可，若言求中於喜怒哀樂未發之前則不可。」

Su-Ji-Ming: “Scholar Lu said we must pursue the mean before emotions come to be; why is that?”

Yi-Quan: “If one wishes to condition the mind before emotions come to be, sure, but to pursue the mean, you can’t.”

「又問：學者于喜怒哀樂發時，固當勉強裁抑。於未發之前當如何用功？曰：於喜怒哀樂未發之前，更怎生求？只平日涵養便是。涵養久，則喜怒哀樂發自中節。」

Su-Ji-Ming: “When emotions are stirred up, a scholar must suppress, so how does one know what to improve on, before emotions come to be?”

Yi-Quan: “The question is, how do you know you have to improve, before emotions come to be? All you need then is conditioning. If one has conditioned for a considerable period of time, then when emotions are unleashed, the mean will be sought.”

「曰：當中之時，耳無聞，目無見否？曰：雖耳無聞，目無見，然見聞之理在始得。賢且說靜時如何。」

Su-Ji-Ming: “When one is at the mean, does one not hear and not see?”

Yi-Quan: “Even though one does not hear and does not see, the principles of seeing and hearing will become apparent when one begins to see and hear. Please, tell me what happens when one is at peace.”

「曰：謂之無物則不可，然自有知覺處。」

Su-Ji-Ming: “You cannot say matters do not exist; the judgment comes precisely at the point of contact.”

As described the passages, when one acquires consciousness, emotions are formed, as both are products due to the flowing of the “chi.” The complementarities of “character” and “chi” become more apparent through the analysis of the provided passages: one cannot seek the “mean” before one is able to think; likewise, one cannot understand what to seek, until one has been disturbed by emotions; thus, there cannot be a conscious pursuit of good without considerations of both the “character” and the “chi.”

Therefore, following a similar conception of “good” inherited from nature that is similar to its Taoist counterparts, the Neo-Confucians based their doctrine of the mean on a less idealistic premise that “every scholar is inevitably under the influence of emotions and intentions,” and thus devised a more methodological approach to pursue the mean.

### **Similar concepts but different formulations in Education**

The Neo-Confucian view of education follows Lao Zi’s Taoist conception in

the defining the purpose of education as an approach to non-intentionality, and this notion is extended to the idea of learning through observation. One of the most significant ideas the Neo-Confucians adopted from the Lao Zi's Taoist notions of learning is the denouncement of the pursuits of names and titles. This is addressed in quote 62 of chapter 2 in Jin Su Lu:

學者須是務實，不要近名方是。有意近名，則是偽也。大本已失，更學何事？為名與為利，清濁雖不同，然其利心則一也。

This translates into:

Scholars should be down-to-earth, and keep the notion of fame outside their minds. If a scholar intends to earn a great name, then he (she) is pretentious. One has already lost the essence of a scholar. What can one ever learn? To earn a name, as opposed to earn profit, though different in terms of clarity, they originate from the same intentionality.

And later in quote 66 of chapter 2:

古之學者為己，其終至於成物。今之學者為物，其終至於喪己。

This translates into:

The ancient scholars learn out of self-motivation, thus they end up producing tangibles (names, titles, texts...). The modern scholars learn out of greed for the tangibles and thus end up losing themselves.

This understanding is further generalized as an avoidance of setting concrete goals, as they are deemed to be intangible limitations that confine a scholar's vision, which in turn undermines one's determination.<sup>19</sup>

Even though the Neo-Confucian views on education have been conceptually influenced by the Taoist formalisms, Neo-Confucians did not fully agree with the Taoist methodologies; instead, they preserved many of the “down-to-earth” educational and political precepts of its classical predecessors. For instance, instead of embracing Lao Zi's idealistic method of avoiding concrete notions of “learning,” the

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<sup>19</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 2, Quote 22,24,40,48,53,59,74,83,91,101,103,111

Neo-Confucians suggested a method similar to the one appealed to the ancient western skeptics: the disturbance of emotions and intentionality as necessary experience that lead up to realization of the good; only through the engagement of questioning<sup>20</sup> and self-reflection,<sup>21</sup> can one gradually approach the way of the Confucian saints.

In light of the abdication of concrete goals, the Neo-Confucians, like Lao Zi, had determined the observation of phenomena as the highest form of learning; despite this fact, the Neo-Confucians did not strictly rest the notion of learning on observation like Lao Zi did in his rendition of learning of the Tao. In chapter 2, quote 18 of *Jin Si Lu*:

孟子才高，學之無可依據。學者當學顏子，入聖人為近，有用力之處。又曰：學者要學得不錯，須是學顏子。

This translates into:

Mencius is phenomenally talented; he is capable of learning from things that aren't known to be traced by studies. Scholars should learn from Yen-Zi, and approach the saints, thus there is a direction. Thus say, "if a scholar wants to study well, he (she) must learn from Yen-Zi."

As evidenced in the quote, the Neo-Confucian scholars viewed the Taoist notion of "learning through observation" as a method of learning available only to the extraordinarily gifted ones, such as the classical Confucian scholar Mencius; thus, the Neo-Confucians suggested that scholars should rely on a more concrete notion of learning that allows one to identify "where to invest the efforts and where to collect the fruits of learning."<sup>22</sup>

Following this concrete notion of learning, the Neo-Confucian compared the development of a scholar to the planting of a tree. The growth of the tree must first be supported by laying bricks around the trunk to form a scaffold. Then, after the trunk thickens and grows upright, this scaffold can be removed and the tree allowed to grow freely.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the Neo-Confucians are not entirely confident about scholars' ability to study from sheer observations, thus suggesting that scholars should

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<sup>20</sup> Jin Si Lu ("The Book to Approach Thoughts") Chapter 2, Quote 98,102

<sup>21</sup> Jin Si Lu ("The Book to Approach Thoughts") Chapter 2, Quote 11,110

<sup>22</sup> Jin Si Lu ("The Book to Approach Thoughts") Chapter 2, Quote 45

<sup>23</sup> Jin Si Lu ("The Book to Approach Thoughts") Chapter 2, Quote 33

condition themselves against unorthodox ideas by enrolling in defined curricula and the studying of ancient texts before they are afforded the freedom to conduct free deliberation. This is a representative example of how the Neo-Confucians maintained methodological distinctiveness despite Taoist conceptual influences.

### **Disagreements in the Government**

In the studies of the Neo-Confucian text *Jin Si Lu*, governmental and political philosophies seem to be the only areas in Neo-Confucianism that resisted the influence of Taoism.

Confucianism had been historically known as a great proponent of defined social institutions. The Song Neo-Confucian scholars held the Confucian traditions in high regard, especially the principles of courtesy and music (禮樂) instituted by the ancient kings of Zhou, as attributed in the opening quote of chapter 9 of the *Jin Si Lu*:

濂溪先生曰：古者聖王制禮法，修教化，三綱正，九疇敘，百姓大和，萬物鹹若。乃作樂以宣八風之氣，以平天下之情。故樂聲淡而不傷，和而不淫。入其耳，感其心，莫不淡且和焉。淡則欲心平，和則躁心釋。優柔平中，德之盛也。

This translates into:

Lian-Xi said: wise ancient kings institute principles of courtesy, practice education, installed the three principles (husband-wife, king-courier, father-son), erected the nine disciplines (described in Hong-Fan 「洪範」, Shang-Shu 「尚書」), thus the people live in harmony, and all matters coexist in peace. The kings also fund musical performances to ease the chi from the eight directions (north, north-east, east, south-east...etc), which in turn calms the emotions of all. Therefore, the music should be light and not obtrusive, accordant and not extravagant; the music enters through the ears and affects the heart, and it does so through tender and harmonious influences. Tenderness calms the heart; harmony eases the tension. Beautifully tender melodies discover the mean and makes virtue prosper.

This passage pronounced Lian-Xi's (Zhou-Dun-Yi 周敦頤，字茂叔) faith in the

ancient methodologies of conditioning the society through teachings of courtesy and music. (Note: the book of music, or 「樂經」 is believed to have been burnt in the first emperor's reformation against intellectuals; others believed there is no book of music to begin with, thus there is saying that 「詩為樂心，聲為樂體」, which translates into “poetry is the heart of music, and sound is the body of music”.) Further in the quote, Lian-Xi elaborated his view on the principles of courtesy and music:

後世禮法不修，政刑苛紊，縱欲敗度，下民困苦。謂古樂不足聽也，代變新聲，妖淫愁怨，道欲增悲，不能自止。

This translates into:

if the people in the coming ages don't practice the courteous ways, and resort to strict and complex penal systems, then the people will fall to debauchery, lose their morals, and ultimately collapse into poverty. If people do not listen to the music of the ancient times and attempts to be innovative, the society becomes filled with indecency and moroseness; desires and melancholy will consume the society, forming a never-ending cycle of deterioration.

In this sense, even though both Neo-Confucian scholars and Lao Zi would disagree with a government that relies on its penal system and lawful institutions, Neo-Confucians remained faithful to the establishment of a stable society through the conditioning of courtesy and music. Such conditioning was viewed as a complement to governmental restrictions and policies. In quote 4 of chapter 9 of *Jin Si Lu*:

伊川先生上疏曰：三代之時，人君必有師、傅、保之官。師，道之教訓。傅，傅之德義。保，保其身體。後世作事無本，知求治而不知正君，知規過而不知養德，傅德義之道，固已疏矣。

This translates into:

Yi-Quan said: during the three dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou), the kings must have three types of officers: teachers, discipliners and maintainer. The teacher teaches knowledge and gives sermons; the discipliner assists the building of virtues and the maintainer teaches about conditioning of the body. The people from later times are not concerned with the foundations of operations, we attempt to govern without conditioning the kings to be upright, attempt to correct mistakes without improving our virtues, then the principle of

virtuous teachings is lost.

Yi-Quan (伊川先生) clearly confirms the complementarities between teachings, constitutions and enforcements that were instituted in the first three Chinese dynasties. In this view, if a government relies too heavily on laws and neglects teachings and enforcements, people become preoccupied with intentions and oblivious to true virtues. For instance, the Song imperial government once pursued high-reward policies for scholars, including the increasing of the enrollment capacity of the national institution to five hundred scholars; as a result of this policy, people who intended to pursue imperial titles abandoned their families, traveled long distances and forgot the true reason behind learning<sup>24</sup>. Thus, from the insufficiency of legal institutions, Yi-Quan concluded the nature of government with Wang Jie-Fu's (王安石, 字介甫, 1021 A.D – 1086 A.D) quote “the book of law only solves eighty-percent of the problems”<sup>25</sup>.

In overview, despite the fact that the Song Neo-Confucians adopted many concepts from Taoism, the notions of government and politics are the areas in which the Neo-Confucians maintained the views of their classical predecessors rather than adopting the Taoist conceptions.

## Conclusion

This thesis is focused on interpreting and analyzing Lao Zi's conception of Taoism as a skeptical philosophy and its influence on the development of Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism one and half millennia later.

As discussed in previous sections, Lao Zi's metaphysics provided the foundation for his skepticism, which in turn erected notions of non-intentionality, completeness and the doctrine of the mean. This great consistency in metaphysics, ethics and politics is celebrated by the Song Neo-Confucian scholars in the adoption of “Reason” as a natural basis of rationality; in addition, Lao Zi's understanding of non-intentionality and skepticism were also conceptually accepted, thus deriving the notion of “character” that is disjoint from intentions and using “questioning” as a method to sharpen understanding.

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<sup>24</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 9, Quote 5

<sup>25</sup> Jin Si Lu (“The Book to Approach Thoughts”) Chapter 9, Quote 20

Despite the absorbance of Taoist conceptions, the Neo-Confucians did not adopt the exact methods of education and government suggested by Lao Zi; instead, the Neo-Confucians inherited most of the government and political notions from the ancient Confucian texts and devised concrete notions to work for or against in a scholastic pursuit.

The establishment of the concrete ethical and metaphysical notions in Neo-Confucianism rendered it an innovative school of philosophy that transcended the studies of ancient Confucian texts and is more approachable to the general public than its Taoist predecessor.

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