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Xiong Shili in Conversation: Transcultural Epistolary Exchange on the *Daodejing*

Linda Anna Pietrasanta
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract The present paper examines a letter that the Chinese philosopher Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885-1968) sent to the Italian journalist Luciano Magrini in 1936, with the purpose of elucidating the main purports of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (The Classic of the Way and Virtue). This letter will be studied from two different perspectives, thus achieving a twofold aim: on the one hand, as a witness to the relationship between these two intellectual personalities; on the other, as a valuable source for philosophical speculation. For this reason, the first part of the article will adopt a historical perspective, aiming at reconstructing the context and background of this epistolary exchange, while the second will engage philosophically with the content of the letter, clarifying Xiong's interpretation of Daoist philosophy and relating it to his personal philosophical system.

Keywords Xiong Shili. Luciano Magrini. Chinese philosophy. Twentieth century. Cosmology. Daodejing.

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1 Introduction

In 1936, the Chinese philosopher Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885-1968) sent a letter to the Italian journalist Luciano Magrini (1885-1957). This epistolary exchange, edited and published in *Shili Yuyao* 十力語要 (Dialogues of Xiong Shili) (Xiong 2007a), is valuable for two reasons that I will explore in the present contribution. On the one hand, the letter allows us to reconstruct the cultural and historical background of this international exchange and understand some of the dynamics behind the reception of knowledge about China in Italy; on the other, it is an important testimony of Xiong Shili's interpretation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (The Classic of the Way and Virtue) and of his engagement in a transcultural philosophical dialogue. The article will be accordingly divided into two parts: the first one will be focused on the context that the letter, as a historical document, gives us access to; the second one will delve into the content of the letter, this time taken as a vehicle and a receptacle of philosophical speculation. In particular, I will closely examine Xiong's remarks on cosmological and epistemological theories, taking as respective starting points his commentary to stanzas 1 and 47 of the *Daodejing*.

2 The Letter and its Context

2.1 The Sender and the Receiver

The Chinese philosopher Xiong Shili wrote the letter published as *Da Magelini* 答馬格里尼 (In response to Magrini)[1] in 1936. At this time, Xiong, who was born in 1885, had finished his training both in Confucianism and Buddhism, and had already been hired as lecturer at Peking University by the will of Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940). His *opus magnum*, the *Xin Weishi lun* 新唯識論 (Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness, henceforth XWSL), was published in 1932. The author himself described it as the "crystallization of Oriental philosophy" (Lin 2014, 361), in so far as it represented a synthesis of Confucian and Buddhist philosophy. Besides his affiliation to a specific tradition, the main argument of Xiong's philosophy is that, metaphysically speaking, the absolute or unconditioned principle does not stand independently beyond things or phenomena, which

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights and suggestions. Any remaining inaccuracy or error is entirely mine.

1 This letter, albeit never thoroughly examined, is briefly mentioned in Guo Qiyong 1996, 242 and Bresciani 2009, 158.

in turn constitute the relative, the conditioned. This is expressed by Xiong by means of the formula *tiyong bu er* 體用不二 (non-duality of substance and function). Xiong will continue to strenuously prove this point almost until his death, which occurred in 1968 in Shanghai. Today, he is retrospectively identified as the founder of New Confucianism, along with other intellectuals of his generation (Makeham 2003).

Luciano Magrini, the recipient of Xiong's missive, is a lesser-known figure, but we do have one comprehensive study of his life and work by Lorenzo Marco Capisani (2019). His interest in the study of Magrini is connected to the line of research on the Sino-Italian political and diplomatic relationships during the second half of the twentieth century. The analysis of the relationship between Magrini and Xiong Shili – which will be the core of the first section of this article – is largely based on Capisani's study of Magrini's biography, as well as on the direct testimony left by Magrini in the form of books and articles.

Born in Trieste in 1885, after a politically turbulent youth, Luciano Magrini worked as a news correspondent for several Italian newspapers, covering the years of World War I. After the war, in the 1920s, he continued his activity as a reporter and journalist and was sent to Asia twice: between 1923 and 1924, and later in 1926. An interesting account of these travels is included in Magrini's book *La Cina d'Oggi* (China Today) published in 1925 (Magrini 1925).

During these trips, Magrini became acquainted with Chinese society. He engaged with political matters but was also interested in local cultural and academic circles. It is likely that this is how, either directly or indirectly, his first contacts with Xiong Shili came about. The knowledge and connections Magrini gained during these years proved invaluable in the 1950s, when he began to plan an institute to foster cultural and philosophical dialogue between Italy and China. His dream came true on 9 September 1954, with the founding of the Istituto Culturale Italo-Cinese (Italian-Chinese Cultural Institute, henceforth: Institute or ICIC) in Milan. In its early years, the Institute focused on enlisting prominent figures from the Milanese intellectual circles and clearly defining its mission and objectives. This foundational work was crucial to its survival, particularly given the emergence of a competing study centre in Rome in 1953, the *Centro Studi per le Relazioni Economiche e Culturali con la Cina* (Center for Studies on Economic and Cultural Relations with China, henceforth: CsChina).

Magrini faced the challenge of clearly and narrowly defining the scope of his Institute's activities to ensure that it complemented, rather than overlapping with, the work of CsChina. This focus, combined with Magrini's personal interests, steered the Institute toward cultural and intellectual pursuits, leaving political, diplomatic,

and economic matters to the centre based in Rome. The latter, among other activities, brought together members of the Italian Communist Party, who were primarily interested in political engagement with the PRC. As Capisani shows, Magrini "distanced himself from the ideological affinity that tied Italian Communists to the PRC cause" and "treated the issue of diplomatic normalization as separate from the study of Chinese civilization" (2019, 567-8).

The ICIC's primary activity was the biannual publication of the series *Quaderni di Civiltà Cinese* (Notebooks on Chinese Civilization). This collection of pamphlets featured articles on Chinese history and culture, contributed by members and collaborators of the Institute, most of whom were intellectuals active in academic circles. Regular contributors included Magrini himself, Gerardo Dino Fraccari (1909-1999), a high school philosophy teacher and freelance lecturer at the State University of Milan; Rosanna Pilone (1931-2006), a sinologist and expert in Chinese art and philosophy; and Maria Attardo Magrini, the founder's daughter, who oversaw the section on Chinese poetry. Particularly notable were the Institute's strict translation guidelines. According to these, "each work had to be translated collaboratively by a Chinese scholar and a European scholar", so as to ensure both an "accurate interpretation of Chinese thought" and a "polished, distinguished Italian linguistic presentation" (Capisani 2019, 580).

In its later years, the Institute expanded its philosophical contributions. Alongside Fraccari, it featured Paolo Beonio-Brocchieri, known as the "intellectual-mediator" (Colombo 1993) for his comparative studies of Eastern and Western civilizations. Beonio-Brocchieri also served as a bridge between the Institute's members and the Milanese philosophical community of the time. After his collaboration with the Institute, he contributed to Mario Dal Pra's *Storia della Filosofia* (History of Philosophy), editing the second volume, *La filosofia cinese e dell'Asia orientale* (Chinese and East Asian Philosophy), which includes mentions of Xiong Shili (Beonio-Brocchieri 1977, 269).

Among the Institute's many interests and activities, its extensive focus on the study of the *Daodejing* (henceforth: DDJ) stands out. As mentioned, the letter that Luciano Magrini received from Xiong Shili in 1936 was precisely a detailed commentary to the Daoist classic. From the letter's opening lines – and from the title of its edited version, *In Reply to Magrini* – it is evident that the letter sent by the Chinese philosopher was part of an ongoing exchange. Xiong begins his reply by addressing the questions and points raised by his interlocutor's earlier correspondence:

> In the letter you sent me, four were the issues: first, you asked my interpretation of Laozi's philosophy; second, you asked how and

> which aspects were influenced by Daoism in China; third, you inquired about the teachings of Chinese contemporary Daoism; fourth, you asked about the number of devotees and temples of modern Daoism. (Xiong 2007a, 125) [2]

Xiong's reply spans 24 pages. The bulk of the letter is devoted to addressing the first question about Daoist philosophy and sets aside issues related to contemporary Chinese society. After a brief introduction discussing the status of Chinese philosophy and its differences from the Western canon (a topic that will be addressed in the second part of this contribution), Xiong delves into an investigation of the philosophy of the DDJ. He selects 10 stanzas (numbers 1, 4, 6, 14, 15, 16, 21, 25, 47, 48) and provides detailed commentary on each. While I will explore the content of this commentary in the next section, my focus here will be on the reception of this commentary in Italy, thanks to Luciano Magrini's efforts and commitment.

2.2 Italian Reception and Translation History of the DDJ

Magrini's interest in Daoism is evident from the earliest issues of the *Notebooks*. In the first issue, he authored a historical-philosophical essay on the figure of Laozi, titled *Lao-tse* (Magrini 1955a). In the second issue, he wrote the article *Luci e riflessi del Tao* (Lights and Reflections of the Tao) (Magrini 1955b), which explored the influence of Daoist principles on Chinese culture and philosophy. His commitment to studying Daoism culminated in the second issue, which featured the first (out of three) part of the publication of the Institute-sponsored translation of the DDJ, a project initiated at Magrini's suggestion. The translation was carried out by the aforementioned journalist and sinologist Rosanna Pilone. Pilone worked in a synoptic perspective, consulting both the Chinese critical edition of the DDJ edited by Jiang Xichang 蔣錫昌 (also transliterated as Chiang Hsi-chang) and the English translation by Wu Jingxiong 吳經熊 (also as Chin Hsing Wu).

Pilone prefaced her translation with a brief *Introduzione al Tao-te-king* (Introduction to the Tao-Te-King), in which she acknowledged the Italian translators who preceded her in tackling this "enigmatic text" (Pilone 1955, 139): Guglielmo Evans (1922), Julius Evola (1924),

2 *Jié lái wèn, lüè yǒu sì shì: yī, wèn wú duìyú Lǎozi zhéxué zhī jièshì. Èr, wèn Dàojiào zài Zhōngguó suǒ yǐngxiǎng yú gè fāngmiàn zhě rúhé. Sān, wèn Zhōngguó xiàndài Dàojiào zhī jiàoyì. Sì, wèn xiàndài Dàojiào zhī xìntú duōguǎ yǔ sìyǔ duōguǎ* 接來問, 略有四事:一、問吾對於老子哲學之解釋。二、問道教在中國所影響於各方面者如何。三、問中國現代道教之教義。四、問現代道教之信徒多寡與寺宇多寡。Unless otherwise specified, the translations of the cited passages are by the Author.

Alberto Castellani (1927), Xiao Shiyi (1941), and Baldo Peroni (1949). In this *Introduction*, she also touches upon the story of Xiong Shili's manuscript, claiming that:

> I have kept the comments to a minimum, avoiding those of ancient Chinese commentators and European translators. From an unpublished, extensive manuscript, written in English, by the greatest Chinese philosopher of the last century, Shi-li-hsiung (or Hsiung-hsi-ling as referenced by Siao-Sci-yi, who consulted the same manuscript sent by the philosopher to Luciano Magrini), I have translated ten chapters that the reader will find reproduced in the respective notes. (Pilone 1955, 142)[3]

This passage introduces two relevant elements for our analysis. Firstly, Pilone's notes confirm that the "extensive manuscript" she is referring to is precisely the letter that Xiong Shili (transliterated as "Shi-li-hsiung" or "Hsiung-hsi-ling") sent to Magrini in 1936. However, Pilone appears to have misunderstood a key detail. She suggests that the manuscript was written in English, but this is contradicted by Xiong himself at the end of the letter, when he states: "I was asked to reply in English, but being unable to write in English, I drafted it in Chinese and entrusted Mr. Qian Xuexi [錢學熙] to translate it for me" (Xiong 2007a, 149).[4] This misunderstanding also affects Pilone's presentation of Xiong's commentary. In the footnotes to her own translation, she referenced what she believed to be Xiong's "translation" of the text. In reality, Xiong quoted the original text in Chinese, then providing his own commentary, leaving the actual translation of both the DDJ verses and his own commentary to Qian Xuexi.[5]

Secondly, Pilone's introduction presented Xiao Shiyi 萧师毅 (also transliterated as Siao-Sci-yi or Hsiao Shih-yi) as a key figure in the dissemination of Xiong's ideas. As a matter of fact, Magrini did not restrict circulation of Xiong's manuscript to members of the Institute but shared it with Xiao Shiyi, also known in Europe by the name of Paul. Paul (or Paolo) Xiao Shiyi (1911-1986) was a Taiwanese philosopher who moved to Europe in the late 1930s to continue

3 "Ho limitato i commenti al minimo, evitando quelli degli antichi commentatori cinesi e dei traduttori europei. Da un inedito, ampio manoscritto, steso in lingua inglese, del più grande filosofo cinese dell'ultimo secolo, Shi-li-hsiung (o Hsiung-hsi-ling come lo chiama Siao-sci-yi che ha consultato lo stesso manoscritto inviato dal filosofo a Luciano Magrini) ho tradotto dieci capitoli che il lettore troverà riprodotti nelle rispettive note".

4 *Lì bùnéng wéi Yīngwén, tè yǐ Zhōngwén xiědìng, ér shǔ Qián Xuéxī jūn wéi wú yíyì*. 力不能為英文, 特以中文寫定, 而屬錢學熙君為吾移譯 (Xiong 2007a, 149).

5 Qian Xuexi (1906-1978) was professor of English language and literature and followed Xiong to Sichuan during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

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his studies between Milan and Freiburg. While in Milan, at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Xiao completed his translation of the DDJ, which was published in 1941 by the Laterza publishing house. Xiao's relative fame is tied not only to this translation – whose publication was facilitated by the renown philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) – but also to an episode involving the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). As Xiao recounted in a surviving testimony, he travelled to Freiburg in 1942 to attend Heidegger's seminars, where he presented the German philosopher with his freshly published translation of the *Laozi*. After this first encounter, on the initiative of Heidegger, the two started a collaborative translation of DDJ into German, delving into 8 stanzas of the Chinese classic.[6]

In the introduction to his widely recognised translation, Xiao acknowledges the pivotal roles of Xiong Shili's commentary and Magrini's mediation:

> The fervour for philosophical and literary exploration in the vast field of Chinese literature was shared by an Italian, Prof. Luciano Magrini, who visited China twice, earning significant prestige within Chinese cultural circles for his expertise and insight. [...] Luciano Magrini collaborated with the greatest philosopher of modern China, Hsiung Hsi-ling, of the National University of Peking, conducting an in-depth study of the *Tao-te-king*. [...] My approach to translating the *Tao-te-king* was greatly facilitated by Luciano Magrini, who generously made his research findings available to me and allowed me to consult a valuable manuscript sent to him by Hsiung Hsi-ling, containing a brilliant interpretation of the Tao. (Xiao 1941, 16-17)[7]

Xiao's translation of the *Laozi* gives considerable weight to Xiong Shili's commentary. His comments are translated and incorporated by Xiao in the footnotes to all ten stanzas considered by Xiong. Among these, Xiao emphasised the originality of Xiong's interpretation of the first and forty-seventh stanzas – these will be examined in detail in the next section of this article.

6 More on this encounter in Parkes 1987 and Francescato 2022.

7 "Al fervore delle ricerche filosofiche e letterarie nel vasto campo della letteratura cinese ha partecipato anche un italiano, il prof. Luciano Magrini, che visitò due volte la Cina acquistando per la sua competenza e comprensione un particolare prestigio nel campo culturale cinese. [...] Luciano Magrini intraprese in collaborazione con il più grande filosofo della Cina moderna, Hsiung Hsi-ling, della National University of Peking un accurato studio sul *Tao-te-king*. [...] Accingendomi alla traduzione del *Tao-te-king*, questa mi fu facilitata dall'assistenza di Luciano Magrini, che mise liberamente a mia disposizione i risultati dei suoi studi e mi rese possibile consultare un prezioso manoscritto a lui inviato da Hsiung Hsi-ling nel quale quest'ultimo dà una geniale interpretazione del significato del Tao".

In sum, Xiong's commentary of the DDJ generated two threads of reception of the *Laozi* in Italy. Turning now to the next section of this article, I will show that the letter is a relevant piece of philosophical speculation, as well as a rare testimony of Xiong Shili's interpretation and account of the philosophical purport of the DDJ.

3 The Letter and its Content

As noted above, Xiong's letter is a response to Magrini's questions about Daoist philosophy and the meaning of the *Laozi*. In order to explain his own understanding of the DDJ, Xiong articulates his response as a commentary to the text itself,[8] starting from the first stanza which, in his words, is "the most important and the one that has always been most commented on by Chinese scholars" (Xiong 2007a, 129).[9] It is at this point that Xiong puts forward – as claimed by Xiao Shiyi – his "brilliant interpretation of the meaning of the Dao" (Xiao 1941, 17).

3.1 Xiong Shili and the DDJ: Stanza 1, Verses 1-2

After addressing the paradoxical nature of the question concerning the Dao – which remains inherently indefinable and unnameable –[10] Xiong proceeds to expound upon the structure of Daoist cosmology, focusing on the relationship between the Dao (道) and the 'ten thousand things' (alternatively referred to as *wanwu* 萬物 or *wanyou* 萬有). He interprets this relationship in terms of two interconnected aspects: the Dao as the unique, eternal, unconditioned and absolute principle, and the ten thousand things as the differentiated, conditioned

8 Xiong comments on the so-called Wang Bi's 王弼 (226-49) edition of the *Laozi*, the version preserved in print alongside Wang Bi's commentary. However, as Wagner (2003) has shown, Wang Bi's interpretation was almost certainly based on a version of the text different from the one that later became associated with his commentary and now carries his name.

9 *Lǎozi shǒu zhāng zuì wéi zhòngyào, Zhōngguó cónglái xuézhě wèi zhī zhùshì bù xià shù bǎi jiā* 老子首章最為重要, 中國從來學者為之注釋不下數百家 (Xiong 2007a, 129).

10 The reference is at the well-known opening stanza of the DDJ. For the sake of clarity, the following is the first part of the stanza in both Chinese and English, in the translation by Ryden (2008, 5): *Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào* | *Míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng* | *Wú míng tiāndì zhī shǐ* | *Yǒu míng wànwù zhī mǔ* | *Gù cháng wú yù yǐ guān qí miào* | *Cháng yǒu yù yǐ guān qí jiào* 道可道非常道 | 名可名非常名 | 無名天地之始 | 有名萬物之母 | 故常無欲以觀其妙 | 常有欲以觀其徼 (Of ways you may speak, but not the Perennial Way; | By names you may name, but not the Perennial Name. | The nameless is the inception of the myriad things; | The named is the mother of the myriad things. | Therefore, be ever without yearning so as to observe her obscurity; | Be ever full of yearning so as to observe what she longs for).

and relative multiplicity of experienced entities. Xiong's account of the cosmology of the DDJ is modelled on the core metaphysical assumption of his own metaphysical system, emphatically rendered through the expression *tiyong bu er* 體用不二, which translates as 'the non-duality of substance and function', that is the non-duality of the unconditioned principle and its conditioned phenomenal manifestations. Transferring this to the specific context of the letter, Xiong argues for the 'non-duality' (*bu er* 不二) of the Dao and the ten thousand entities.

Xiong's main focus is demonstrating that the Dao is the foundational principle underlying all manifestations, and nonetheless it cannot be understood as existing separately from or beyond those phenomena. Instead of transcending them, the Dao is inherently identified with them, following the principle of 'non-duality' – or 'non-separability', as Ng Yu-Kwan prefers to put it (2003). In this view, things are the expression of the Dao itself. Here are two meaningful extracts from the letter, where Xiong clearly discusses this point:

> The term 'Dao' at the beginning of the verse refers to what was previously referred to as 'true principle', which here indicates the fundamental substance (*shiti*) of the cosmos. However, in Western philosophy, [the concept of] 'substance' is discussed as if it were separate from the phenomenal realm, suggesting that behind phenomena lies an essence, which is called substance (*shiti*). In contrast, Chinese philosophy does not adopt such a perspective. For instance, the Dao of Laozi certainly is not posited as something separate and detached from the phenomenal realm. Rather, it is asserted that all entities within the phenomenal realm are manifestations of the Dao. Put simply, all things take the Dao as their underlying substance (Xiong 2007a, 130)[11]

> To clarify with an analogy: just as all forms of ice have water as their substance, and there is no separate essence of ice apart from water, so too does water not exist as something apart from ice. [Similarly,] all phenomena take the Dao as their substance, and the Dao, in turn, does not exist independently of the myriad phenomena. […] If one were to claim that the Dao exists entirely beyond and

11 *Jùshǒu 'Dào' zì, jí qián suǒwèi zhēnlǐ yě, cǐ mù yǔzhòu shítǐ. Dàn Xīyáng zhéxué tán shítǐ sì yǔ xiànxiàng jiè fēnlí, jí jì xiànxiàng zhī bèihòu yǒu qí běnzhì, shuō wéi shítǐ. Ér Zhōngguó zhéxué shàng zé wú chí cǐ děng jiànjiě zhě, jírú Lǎozi suǒwèi Dào, jú búshì chāotuō xiànxiàng jiè zhīwài ér bié yǒu wù, nǎi wèi xiànxiàng jiè zhōng yīqiè wànyǒu jiē Dào zhī xiǎnxiàn. Yì yán zhī, yīqiè wànyǒu jiē yǐ Dào wéi shítǐ* 句首"道"字, 即前所謂真理也, 此目宇宙實體。但西洋哲學談實體似與現象界分離, 即計現象之背後有其本質, 說為實體。而中國哲學上則無持此等見解者, 即如老子所謂道, 決不是超脫現象界之外而別有物, 乃謂現象界中一切萬有皆道之顯現。易言之, 一切萬有皆以道為實體。

> separate from all phenomena, then the Dao would become a mere void, and how could it then be called the fundamental substance of the universe? Laozi's follower Zhuang Zhou once expressed this idea brilliantly, saying, "The Dao is in the piss and shit",[12] illustrating that the Dao is not independent, separate from the myriad things. (130)[13]

At the core of Xiong's commentary is what we could define as a sense of immanence of the Dao (*ti*) within the phenomenal realm of experienced entities (*yong*), a relationship he illustrates by means of a metaphor. A piece of ice exists only because of the water that constitutes it. The relationship between ice (form) and water (essence) is reciprocal: ice cannot exist independently of water that constitutes it, just as water cannot exist as a 'thing in itself', that is it cannot be manifested without a specific form. The particular piece of ice is inseparable from the specific portion of water that forms its essence and 'fills' it. Likewise, the water, at that moment, 'exists' precisely as that particular piece of ice. In this metaphor, the ice stands for the ten thousand things (*wanwu* or *wanyou*), which are the constantly differentiated phenomena – what Xiong usually refers to as *yong* (function), the visible and tangible aspects of reality that we encounter and engage with. Water, on the other hand, symbolises the Dao, the unifying principle and essence that gives substance to all things (Xiong's *ti* or *shiti*).[14] He explicitly characterises the relationship between these two factors by positing the phenomenal multiplicity as the manifestation or appearance of the Dao, and the Dao itself as the 'substance' or 'reality'[15] (*shiti*) of phenomena. The

12 Translation by Burton Watson (2013). To be precise, the Zhuangzi reads *shini* 屎溺 instead of *shiniao* 屎尿.

13 *Qiáng yǐ yù míng, rú yíqiè bīng xiàng jiē yǐ shuǐ wéi tǐ, fēi lí shuǐ ér bié yǒu bīng xiàng zhī zìtǐ. Jì bīng yǐ shuǐ wéi tǐ, zé shuǐ gù fēi lí bīng ér bié yǒu wù. Yíqiè wànxiàng, yǐ Dào wéi tǐ, zé Dào gù fēi lí yíqiè wànyǒu ér bié yǒu wù.* […] *Ruò wèi Dào guǒ chāoyuè yú yíqiè wànyǒu zhī wài zhě, zé Dào yì wánkōng, ér hé dé míng wéi yǔzhòu shítǐ yé? Lǎozǐ zhī hòuxué Zhuāng Zhōu céng yǒu miàoyǔ yún "Dào zài shǐniào", kě jiàn Dào bù lí yíqiè wànyǒu ér dú zài yě* 強以喻明, 如一切冰相皆以水為體, 非離水而別有冰相之自體。既冰以水為體, 則水固非離冰而別有物。一切萬象, 以道為體, 則道固非離一切萬有而別有物。[…] 若謂道果超越於一切萬有之外者, 則道亦頑空, 而何得名為宇宙實體耶? 老子之後學莊周曾有妙語云 "道在屎尿", 可見道不離一切萬有而獨在也。

14 I treat *ti* and *shiti* as synonyms and render both as 'substance' (or, more rarely, as 'reality', when adopting Makeham's translation), since Xiong explicitly equates the two in the majority of his writings. Makeham (2015, xxiv) notes that Xiong, both in the vernacular edition of the XWSL and in his *Fojia mingxiang tongshi* 佛家名相通釋 (Complete Explanation of Buddhist Terms), not only equates *ti* and *shiti*, but also extends this equivalence to other terms, such as *benti* 本體, *zhenli* 真理 (see also footnote 34) and *shixiang* 實相. I, therefore, take it that here Xiong is referring to one and the same concept, albeit expressed through different terms.

15 This second term is used by Makeham to translate *ti* 體 and *shiti* 實體 (2015; 2023).

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Dao, therefore, is affirmed as a unique and absolute principle, yet it is not conceived as heterogeneous and separate from the realm of experience, multiplicity and relativity. Instead, this Dao-principle is realised precisely through its integration with and participation in the multiplicity of phenomena.

If this interpretation is correct, Xiong is thus refuting those metaphysical conceptions that are based on the idea of transcendence, *de facto* advocating for a position of immanence, which he also tracks, as this letter suggests, within the *Laozi*: the Dao does not exceed and stand independently beyond the things (*wanwu*) through which it is manifest. Xiong seems thus to align the philosophy of the *Laozi* to his personal metaphysical position which, borrowing from Makeham's terminology, can be defined as a 'monism': "opposed to ontological dualism and pluralism, he was an ontological monist" (Makeham 2017, 502).

This monistic perspective, which Xiong Shili derives from and ascribes to the DDJ and the broader Chinese philosophical tradition, is presented, here in the letter, as fundamentally opposed to Western philosophy. According to his analysis, Western philosophy is characterised by the presupposition of a realm 'beyond', that is: it is primarily concerned with the concept of 'substance' (*shiti*) as something existing beyond or separately from phenomena (*xianxiang* 現象). He refers to this as the 'separation' (*fenli* 分離) or 'transcendence' (*chaoyue* 超越) of substance (*ti* or *shiti*) from the realm of experienced phenomena (*yong*). In contrast, Chinese philosophy – especially as articulated in the metaphysical framework of the DDJ – understands substance, or the Dao, as inherently connected to the phenomenal realm, which serves as its direct manifestation. Xiong emphasises this fundamental distinction at the outset of the letter, where he argues that:

> The distinctive characteristic of the Chinese is the absence of religious thought, as can be evi-denced from the ancient Book of Odes (*Shijing*). [...] In the *Shijing*, there is no concept of divine worship. (Although terms such as 'Heaven' (*tian*) and 'Sovereign' (*di*) occasionally appear outside the 'two *nan*s', what is referred to as *tian* is the principle of the self-so, while *di* represents the flow of great transformation, akin to a guiding authority at most. These terms do not refer to a deity with will and personality existing beyond the myriad things). Thus, the notions of *tian* and *di* in the *Shijing* cannot be interpreted in the same way as terms like 'Heavenly Sovereign' (*tiandi*) in Christian scriptures. This

> [distinction] illustrates the unique character of the Chinese. (Xiong 2007a, 125-6)[16]

Xiong's interpretation of the DDJ seems thus shaped by this fundamental conviction: that the notion of transcendence is essentially alien to the Chinese tradition, already from the time of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes). This insistence on what we have defined as the 'immanentistic' nature of Chinese philosophy can be linked to the desire of freeing the Chinese tradition from any links to the concept of 'religion'. As a matter of fact, Xiong Shili clearly bonds 'transcendence' to 'religion', as his critique of Buddhist thought also attests elsewhere: "the basis of Buddhist teachings is, after all, religion. These masters were compelled to posit a spirit-cum-*ātman* in altered form so not to lose the traditional spirit [of Buddhism as a religion]" (Makeham 2023, 116). By reading the whole Chinese tradition as free from transcendence, Xiong can then argue it to be exclusively a-religious. As shown, this happens in spark opposition to other systems, namely Western and Buddhist traditions: although by means of different concepts and ontological models, both Western philosophy and Buddhist thought, according to Xiong, share the same metaphysical assumption, which marks their fundamental difference from the Chinese model.

Before going back to the commentary and moving to verses 3 and 4 of *Laozi* 1, one final observation.

In order to reach a more thorough understanding of the general view that Xiong is presenting in the letter, it is important to stress the context in which it is situated. Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, and all throughout the 1930s, the Chinese empire (before) and the Chinese nation-state (later) underwent a period of massive modernisation-qua-westernisation. At the heart of this process lay, first and foremost, the concept of 'science' as a distinctive Western enterprise. However, the introduction of science – and its application to various fields including the military, economic, politic, public and educational – brought about a whole new way of conceiving the very same notions of field and category, what Hui (2011, 58) calls "a paradigm shift". One of these new categories was precisely that

16 *Zhōngguó mínzú zhī tèxìng jí wéi wú zōngjiào sīxiǎng, cǐ kě yú Zhōngguó yuǎngǔ zhī "Shījīng" ér zhèng zhī.* […] *"Shījīng" zhōng jué wú shéndào sīxiǎng (suī èr Nán yìwài yì jiān yǒu Tiāndì děng míngcí, rán suǒ yún Tiān zhě, jí wèi zìrán zhī lǐ; suǒ yún Dì zhě, wèi dà huà liúxíng, ruò yǒu zhǔzǎi éryǐ. Fēi wèi qí chāoyuè wànyǒu zhī wài ér wéi yǒu yìzhì yǒu réngé zhī shén yě. Gù 'Shījīng' zhōng zhī Tiān yǔ Dì, bùnéng yǔ Jīngjiào jīngdiǎn zhōng zhī Tiāndì děng cí tóng yī jiěshì) jí cǐ kě jiàn Zhōnghuá mínzú zhī tèxìng* 中國民族之特性即為無宗教思想, 此可於中國遠古之《詩經》而證之。[…]《詩經》中絕無神道思想(雖二南以外亦間有天帝等名詞, 然所云天者, 即謂自然之理; 所云帝者, 謂大化流行, 若有主宰而已。非謂其超越萬有之外而為有意志有人格之神也。故《詩經》中之天與帝, 不能與景教經典中之天帝等詞同一解釋)即此可見中華民族之特性。

of 'religion' (*zongjiao* 宗教, a rendering imported from Japan)[17] that, along with those of 'philosophy', 'superstition' and 'science', was part of the transcendental scheme of concepts and categories that shaped modernity, both in China and elsewhere.[18] This framework was not just a neutral sum of concepts: it came also as a system of values and enforced hierarchies of the very categories it was bringing along. Within this scale, science, as the hallmark of a modern, progressed and secular society, was undoubtedly more favoured than practices and doctrines associated with the realm of religion. This context likely played a role in shaping Xiong's persuasion of the non-religious character of Chinese philosophy and culture; although one might question to what extent that was a persuasion and to what, instead, it was a clever way of presenting Chinese philosophy, so that it would be taken more seriously, with religion being the mark of non-scientificity.[19] As a matter of fact, Xiong, in the letter, explicitly states that "Europeans, when discussing Chinese philosophy, often conflate it with religion", to the point that universities around the world "exclude it from curricula of the course in Philosophy, or take it as a mere subsidiary of theology" (Xiong 2007a, 125).[20] Xiong sees this treatment as based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese philosophy, which actually is, in his view, a "non-religious form of thought" (*wuzongjiao sixiang* 無宗教思想).

Xiong's reading of the Chinese tradition as completely a-religious – despite being a stretched interpretation – is grounded in his view of the different historical processes that interested the West and China, and that, in his time, brought about the latter's subordination to the former. This idea will be better examined in the next section, with regards to *Laozi* 47. For now, it is important

17 It is important to highlight that, although the equation of the term *zongjiao* (Jap: *shūkyō*) with the European concept of 'religion' was primarily a Japanese undertaking, the compounds *zongjiao* and *jiaozong* 教宗, as well as the individual characters, were originally Chinese. In fact, they were already used by the Buddhist master Zongmi 宗密 (780-841) to distinguish different strands of Buddhism. The process of resemanticisation of these terms is thoroughly documented by Barrett and Tarocco (2012).

18 As Tarocco states for the specific case of 'religion', already from the nineteenth century, the Chinese language experienced a significant lexical expansion, absorbing a wide range of terminology connected to Western knowledge and thought (2008, 49). The impact that Japanese lexicon had on this reconfiguration of the Chinese language is analysed by Masini (1993).

19 With specific regard to Xiong's XWSL, Major (2023) offers an interesting analysis of the discursive tools and argumentative strategies employed by the author to navigate his peculiar position at the challenging crossroads between modernity and advocacy for tradition.

20 *Wú wèn Ōurén yán jí Zhōngguó zhéxué, zhé yǔ zōngjiào bìng wéi yī tán. Gè guó dàxué yú zhéxué kēmù zhōng bìng bù lièrù Zhōngguó zhéxué, huò zé yú shénxué zhōng fù jí zhī* 吾問歐人言及中國哲學, 輒與宗教並為一談。各國大學於哲學科目中並不列入中國哲學, 或則於神學中附及之 (Xiong 2007a, 125).

to highlight that Xiong Shili's emphasis on the non-religiosity of the Chinese tradition can be linked both to his philosophy of history and to the socio-historical context he was experiencing, which, as shown, relegated 'religion' to a subaltern position.

3.2 Xiong Shili and the DDJ: Stanza 1, Verses 3-4

Xiong Shili concludes his discussion of Daoist cosmology by referencing the third and fourth verses of the first stanza of the DDJ, which he interprets as an explanation of "the functional manifestation (*fa yong* 發用) of the Dao" (Xiong 2007a, 131). The reference is here to the third and fourth verses of the stanza, according to which the nameless (*wuming* 無名) is the origin of heaven and earth (*tiandi* 天地), while the named (*youming* 有名) is the Mother (*mu* 母) of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物). The aim of Xiong's commentary to these verses of the *Laozi* is to clarify the relationship between these two poles (namely, the nameless and the named) and their connection to the Dao. His main argument is that the *wuming-youming* binary structure – which he equates to the relationship between *wu* (無, non-being) and *you* (有, being)[21] – is not to be read as an equivalent of the relationship between the principle, Dao, and the 'ten thousand things' (*wanwu*). This is because the Dao and the *wanwu* follow the *ti-yong* metaphysical pattern, while the *wu*(*ming*)-*you*(*ming*) structure, introduced in verses 3 and 4, concerns only the generative process of the 'ten thousand things' (the *yong*).

With this general framework in mind, Xiong reads the 'nameless' and the 'named' (as well as 'non-being' and 'being') mentioned in the *Laozi* as another way of denoting what he respectively calls 'spirit' (*jingshen* 精神) and 'form' (*xingben* 形本) – this latter being closer to

21 Xiong explicitly equates *wuming* with *wu* and *youming* with *you* (2007a, 131): *"Wúmíng" yī cí, qí yìyì réng shì yī "wú" zì.* […] *"Yǒumíng" yī cí, qí yìyì réng shì yī "yǒu" zì* "無名"一詞, 其意義仍是一"無" 字. […]"有名"一詞, 其意義仍是一"有"字。(The term 'nameless' retains the same meaning as 'non-being'. The term 'named' retains the same meaning as 'being').

the concept of 'matter'.[22] The spirit, he explains, is not only called non-being (*wu*); it is also nameless (*wuming*) because of its amorphous nature: "that which is without form cannot be named; the spirit is without form and is therefore called 'nameless'" (Xiong 2007a, 131).[23] Following the same logic, that which is with form "is different from that which is without form; therefore, it is called 'being' (*you*). For it is given a name out of 'being' (*you*), it is called 'named' (*youming*)" (Xiong 2007a, 131).[24]

By linking the Laozian concepts of *wuming* and *youming* to *jingshen* and *xingben*, Xiong is able to: (1) describe their operation and interaction in terms consistent with his own philosophical framework; and (2), more importantly, clarify that these represent two tendencies (*shi* 勢) active at the level of *yong*, thereby avoiding the risk of equating *wuming* with *ti* (or Dao). Let us briefly explore these two points.

Xiong engages with this cosmological model from his earlier texts and until one of his latest works, the *Tiyong lun* 體用論 (Treatise on Reality and Function, henceforth: TYL) published in 1958. The core idea is that the dynamic interplay of these two opposing tendencies allow for the cosmos' perpetual transformations to occur and be manifest. These principles are expressed by means of different terms both in the letter and elsewhere. For example, while in the letter Xiong employs the aforementioned *wu-you*, *wuming-youming*, and *jingshen-xingben*, in his XWSL and his TYL he resorts to "expansion (*pi* 闢)-contraction (*xi* 翕)", "*Qian* (乾)-*Kun* (坤)" – both derived from the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) – and "the pure and spirit like (*jingshen* 精神)-matter and energy (*zhili* 質力)".[25] These different terms, I believe, all refer to the same binary concept. In each case, the first element of the pair designates the tendency responsible for the formation of 'spiritual' or 'mental' (*xin* 心) entities, defined precisely by their lack

22 I render it as 'form' since Xiong often uses the abbreviated term *xing* (形) for *xingben*, treating them as synonyms. However, it should be noted that he explicitly states that, when talking about 'form', he is referring to "the subtle and incipient beginning of form", "its very first condensation" at its "most subtle state". The beginning of form – that here should be intended as closer to the concept of matter, which can be interested by the phenomenon of condensation – is thus the point of origin (the Mother) of the myriad things. He even draws an analogy between *xingben* and atoms (*yuanzi* 元子) and electrons (*dianzi* 電子) in order to highlight that "it differs from already formed things", as it is the incipient state of matter. Xiong appears to borrow the term *xingben* from the *Zhi Bei You* 知北遊 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, where, due to its closeness to the concept of matter, Watson translates it as "the body", while rendering *wuxing* 無形 as "formlessness" in the same passage (Watson 2013, 180).

23 *Wúxíng zhě bù kě míng, jīngshén wúxíng, gù wèi zhī wúmíng* 無形者不可名, 精神無形, 故謂之無名 (Xiong 2007a, 131).

24 *Yì wúxíng gù, yīng fù shuō yǒu, yuán yǒu qǐ míng, gù yún "yǒumíng"* 異無形故, 應復說有, 緣有起名, 故云"有名" (Xiong 2007a, 131).

25 The translation of this last pair is by Makeham (2023, xxviii).

of visible and tangible form. The second, by contrast, denotes the tendency responsible for the formation of 'material' (*se* 色) entities, which possess tangible form and arise through condensation (*ning* 凝).[26]

As a matter of fact, this binary structure, which lays at the basis of the constant transformation of the cosmos, is frequently juxtaposed to another similar structure employed by the author in his philosophy: the *ti*-*yong* pair. If read through this lens, *ti* and *yong* appear as merely one of the various ways and terms through which Xiong conveys this concept of complementary dynamism of elements or principles. However, I argue that the *ti*-*yong* pair – although still binarily configured – is fundamentally different from the abovementioned structure.[27] If this is true, then these two should not be juxtaposed and treated as different forms of the same concept. In other words, the *ti* is not equal to 'spirit', 'expansion', 'non-being' or the 'nameless'; the *yong* is not equal to 'body', 'form', 'contraction', 'being' or the 'named'. Especially with regards to the couple *wu*-*you*, Xiong explicitly states that "spirit (*jingshen*) is equivalent to non-being (*wu*) and therefore [belongs to] the *yong* of the Dao", while "*ti* indicates the fundamental substance (*shiti*) which is equivalent to the Dao" (Xiong 2007a, 132).[28]

Moreover, as mentioned at the outset of this paragraph, Xiong unmistakeably states that by addressing the relationship between 'named' and 'nameless', 'being' and 'non-being' the original text is actually explaining the "functional manifestation of Dao". Therefore, the interplay of *wu* and *you*, and of all the equivalent couples, happens at the level of *yong*:

> Therefore, one must know that the functional manifestation of the Dao, on one side, appears as spirit (*jingshen*), that is what is referred to as the silent, formless, and nameless. On the other side, from this spirit emerges a re-action, that condenses into tangible forms. […] Although speaking from the point of view of their origin,

26 It is important to note that when Xiong discusses the interplay between these two tendencies, he appears to draw on the Buddhist notion of 'conventional truth' by positing the existence of material and mental phenomena – or *dharma*s (fa 法) – only provisionally (*jia* 假). Both their distinct existence and their dualistic characterisation are by-products of our linguistic and cognitive practices. Rather, they should be understood as non-abiding epiphenomena of the ceaseless transformation of the *ti*, generated through contraction and expansion – or any other equivalent pair of terms (Makeham 2015, xlvii-xlix).

27 This is asserted also by Makeham (2023, xxxi), who states that "the constantly turning over", another name for Reality, "is *ti*, and *xi* and *pi* are *yong*".

28 *Shén jí wú, nǎi Dào zhī yòng. Tǐ zhě shítǐ, jí Dào shì yě* 神即無, 乃道之用。體者實體, 即道是也 (Xiong 2007a, 132).

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> it can also be said that form and spirit are both manifestations of the Dao. (Xiong 2007a, 131-2)[29]

We can, thus, reasonably argue that the *ti-yong* pair has only one other equivalent – at least within the text of the letter – which is the relationship between the Dao and the ten thousand things. On the contrary, the relationship between spirit and form has been proved to be expressible through many other terminological forms. The *ti-yong* structure, then, appears to encompass the other type of structure, rather than being its equivalent. If this is correct, Xiong Shili's philosophy seems to allow for analysis on two distinct levels: a cosmological level and an ontological-metaphysical one.

As shown by John Makeham, Xiong Shili himself clarifies this point by stating that "ontology (*bentilun* 本體論), also called metaphysics" is the field that "investigates the Reality of the cosmos (*yuzhou shiti* 宇宙實體)"; while cosmology (*yuzhoulun* 宇宙論) is the field that "explains the cosmos' myriad images (the phenomenal world)" (2023, xxii). Following this distinction, cosmology – which inquires about entities and phenomena as constantly changing and as subject to laws of space and time (*yuzhou* 宇宙, precisely) – is centred on the dynamic interplay of two different but complementary tendencies: spirit and form, being and non-being, expansion and contraction, and so on. Ontology, on the other hand, addresses the conditions of possibility of the very realm examined by cosmology, as much as its question is about the nature of that *shiti* that enables the realm of *yong* to appear and be manifested.

This two-level distinction, I argue, is eminently at play in the letter, and largely shapes Xiong's reception and interpretation of the DDJ. While the general layout we have described is more or less consistent throughout his works, Xiong's decision of including the *wu*(*ming*)-*you*(*ming*) pair within the realm of cosmology – and not that of ontology or metaphysics – is somewhat peculiar, although perfectly coherent with his metaphysical assumptions. He stresses this choice by arguing against Wang Bi's[30] commentary to the DDJ:

> None of the commentators of the Laozi throughout history has provided a thorough explanation of the meaning of being (you) and non-being (wu). Even Fusi's profound understanding goes only as far as skimming the surface, by saying "all beings originate from

29 *Gù zhī Dào zhī fāyòng, yī fāng bì fāxiàn wéi jīngshén, suǒwèi jìmò wúxíng ér wèi zhī wúmíng zhě shì yě; yī fāng yòu yóu jīngshén ér fāxiàn yī zhǒng fǎn zuòyòng, jí níng chéng xíngběn*. […] *Suī tuīyuán ér yán, yì kě shuō xíng yǔ shén tóng wéi Dào zhī fāxiàn* 故知道之發用, 一方必發現為精神, 所謂寂寞無形而謂之無名者是也; 一方又由精神而發現一種反作用, 即凝成形本。[…] 雖推原而言, 亦可說形與神同為道之發現。

30 Xiong addresses him by his courtesy name Fusi 輔嗣.

> non-being". In the end, it is un-clear on what basis he speaks about non-being. This until Tang times, when Lu Xisheng's genera-tion [of scholars] interpreted non-being as ti and being as yong. This view, albeit coming closer to the truth, still lacks accuracy and truthfulness. (Xiong 2007a, 131)[31]

Xiong seems to be shifting Wang Bi's claim about being and non-being to the cosmological level, instead of the ontological one. This is the only solution in order to avoid the identification of Dao (and, thus, of *ti*) with non-being or nothingness.[32] This is typical of Xiong's metaphysical programme and it is one of the main mistakes he ascribes to Buddhism.

This criticism of the postulation of a quiescent, empty or void *ti* – behind the phenomenal realm of the *yong* – is very much present in Xiong's works. Although he is well aware of the aporetic nature of an absolute reality which cannot be properly and directly defined, he still argues for a 'positively' present *ti*. In other words, it can be formally addressed only in negative terms – due to the intrinsic limitations of language –, but its positive nature has to be assumed and, eventually, reached by means of intuition. Xiong explicitly states this in his XWSL, when he talks about a *ti* "which is not empty", and "which is able to be profoundly realised by means of proper attentiveness" (Makeham 2015, 126). This will be the point of rupture with Buddhism (especially Madhyamaka),[33] in so far as, according to Xiong, it fails to establish a correct interpretation of the nature of *ti*.

31 *Cónglái zhù Lǎozi zhě, yú yǒuwú yì dōu wú quèjiě, suī yǐ Fǔ Sì zhī hèzhì, yì zhǐ fúyóu qí cí yuē: "Fán yǒu jiē shǐ yú wú." Zhōng bù míng yī hé ér yán wú. Zhì Táng Lù Xīshēng bèi, huò yǐ wú wéi tǐ, yǐ yǒu wéi yòng, qí shuō jìn shì ér yóu qiàn jīngshěn* 從來注《老子》者, 於有無義都無確解, 雖以輔嗣之壑智, 亦只浮游其詞曰: "凡有皆始於無"。終不明依何而言無。至唐陸希聲輩, 或以無為體, 以有為用, 其說近是而猶欠精審。

32 As a side note, Feng Youlan, in his *History of Chinese Philosophy* published between 1931 and 1934, comments on this passage from *Laozi* 1 with a similar concern regarding *wu* and *you*: "*Shìwù kě míng yuē yǒu; Dào fēi shìwù, zhǐ kě wèi wéi wú. Rán Dào néng shēng tiāndì wànwù, gù yòu kě chēng wéi yǒu. Gù Dào jiān yǒu wú ér yán; wú yán qí tǐ, yǒu yán qí yòng*" 事物可名曰有; 道非事物, 只可謂為無。然道能生天地萬物, 故又可稱為有。故道兼有無而言; 無言其體, 有言其用。(Things can be named '*you*'; the Dao is not a thing and thus can only be named '*wu*'. However, the Dao generates heaven, earth and the myriad things. Thus, it can also be named '*you*'. Hence the Dao encompasses both *you* and *wu*: *wu* expresses its essence (*ti*), and *you* its function (*yong*)) (Feng 1961, 220).

33 Along with Yogācāra (*youzong* 有宗, Existence School), Madhyamaka (*kongzong* 空宗, Emptiness School) is one of the two main branches (pai 派) of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Xiong (2007b, 18-19) describes it as mainly interested in discussing emptiness (*kong* 空), by means of arguments in *via negativa* (*zhequan* 遮詮), with the aim of discarding any form of attachment to phenomena (*zhixiang* 執相) and conceptual elaborations (*xilun* 戲論). He eminently associates this school with the figure of Nāgārjuna (*Longshu* 龍樹) and his *Zhongguan lun* 中觀論 (Treatise on the Middle Way), as well as with the *Da boreboluomiduo jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 (Perfection of Wisdom Sutra) and the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom).

Therefore, there appears to be a link between the philosopher's critical remarks to Buddhist interpretations of reality or substance (*ti*) and the distance he marks from Wang Bi's commentary on the nature of *wu* in the DDJ. As a matter of fact, in the letter he also makes explicit that the '*wu*' mentioned in the DDJ and in its commentaries, "is named *wu* only because it has no form; it is not [to be intended as denoting] emptiness" (Xiong 2007a, 131).[34] This way, Xiong manages to define *wu* (and *wuming*) as something that, albeit without form, is still, precisely, 'something', is still positively present. And this resonates well with Xiong's notion of spirit (*jingshen*), as well as expansion (*pi*), which he then proceeds to equate *wu* to.

3.3 Xiong Shili and the DDJ: Stanza 47

Laozi 47 can roughly be considered as discussing ways and means to gain knowledge (*zhi* 知). As argued by Andreini (2018), this stanza has been read from different perspectives, giving rise to various and diverse interpretations both by ancient commentators and contemporary scholars. Xiong Shili traces in the Laozian verses the assessment of two different ways of gaining knowledge: one oriented outwards, the other inwards.

The first typology is expressed in the DDJ by means of two metaphors: "going out the door" (*chu hu* 出戶) and "peeping through the window" (*kui you* 窺牖).[35] The former, according to Xiong, expresses the meaning of being directed "outward" (*wai* 外), which as far as knowledge is concerned, is equal to "establishing the existence of external objects and applying the techniques of observation and measurement" (Xiong 2007a, 140).[36] While "peeping through the window" is the action that allows one to see just "a splinter of light", which applied to knowledge refers to the analytical method: in order to "achieve a comprehensive understanding" of a phenomenon, this approach fragmentarily "delves into parts" of it. By building on the images found in the text, Xiong describes this first type of *zhi* as obtained through the "objective method" (*keguan fangfa* 客觀方法): the reference here is at the empirical study of things, which entails

34 *Yǐ wúxíng gù, míng wú, fēi kōngwú zhī wú yě* 以無形故, 名無, 非空無之無也 (Xiong 2007a, 131). In a further parallel, Feng Youlan also notices that *wu* "is not equivalent to 'null' or zero. The Dao is the general principle by which heaven, earth and the myriad things arise, how can it be equivalent to the nothingness of zero" (*Fēi jí shì líng. Dào jí tiāndì wànwù suǒyǐ shēng zhī zǒng yuánlǐ, qǐ kě wèi wéi děngyú líng zhī "wú"* 非即是零。道及天地萬物所以生之總原理, 豈可謂為等於零之「無」。) (Feng 1961, 221).

35 Translation by Ryden 2008, 99.

36 *Chū hù míng wài, jí shèdìng wàijiè shìwù, ér xíng zhìcè zhī shù* 出戶名外, 即設定外界事物, 而行質測之術 (Xiong 2007a, 140).

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the presupposition of the effective and external existence of such 'things' – that can, thus, be determined, measured and acted upon – as well as their calculability. This method is also defined as "analytical" (*jingxi* 精析), in so far as it enables things to be sectioned into analysable parts (*xiwu* 析物), leaving synthesis as a result following this 'analytical moment'. As anticipated, this modality – expressed by means of the aforementioned metaphors – is linked with the concept of 'outward' or 'external': things can be analytically measured only because they are thought as isolated, abstracted and external 'objects', receptive to the agency of a 'subject'.

However, as Xiong points out, there is one other type or modality of knowledge, which does not presuppose the subject-object division and which is antithetically defined with the metaphors of "not going out the door" (*bu chu hu* 不出戶):

> Now, saying "go not out the door, know all under Heaven" means that there is no need to seek externally, nor to rely on objective methods, to comprehend (*zhi*) the great origin of the world. (This *zhi* is not the same as the *zhi* in *zhishi* [knowledge]; rather, it refers to *zizheng* [to directly experience]. While "the great origin of the world" refers to the Dao (Xiong 2007a,140)[37]

Xiong plays on the ambiguity of the term *zhi* 知, generally translated as 'knowledge' or 'to know', to show that it encompasses two different modalities of approaching things. One the one hand, what has been defined as the "analytical" and "objective" approach (conveyed by the metaphor of "going out the door") is the first sense of *zhi* as *zhishi* 知識. On the other, *zhi* can also attest for knowledge that comes from direct experience, intuition, awareness. Xiong expresses this second faculty with various terms, such as *zizheng* 自證,[38] *mingjue* 明覺,[39] *tiyan* 體驗[40] and *zhengzhi* 證知. These two different faculties, that Xiong here sees

37 *Jīn yuē "bù chū hù, zhī tiānxià", shì bù dài wài qiú, jí bù yóu kèguān fāngfǎ ér zì zhī tiānxià zhī dàběn yě (cǐ zhī fēi shì zhīshì zhī zhī, nǎi zìzhèng zhī wèi. Tiānxià zhī dàběn, jí wèi Dào)* 今曰「不出戶, 知天下」, 是不待外求, 即不由客觀方法而自知天下之大本也(此知非是知識之知, 乃自證之謂。天下之大本, 即謂道)。

38 Not to be mistaken for *zizhengfen* 自證分, the third of four aspects of cognition in Yogācāra Buddhism, that Xiong frequently mentions in XWSL and *Fojia mingxiang tongshi* 佛家名相通釋 (Complete Explanation of Buddhist Terms).

39 Translatable as 'numinous awareness', *mingjue* is defined by Xiong as the faculty to reach and realise the ultimate reality (Xiong 2007a, 144).

40 As argued by Stanchina (2025, 140), the verbal meaning of *ti* as in *tiyan* or *tihui* 體會 (to directly experience) is "metaphorically bounded to the corporeal sphere (*shenti* 身體) and means to embody, to make something present through your flesh and bones". For example, the compound *tiwu* 體無 (verb and object) "does not mean contemplating *wu* as an exterior object, but becoming it through the act of *wu*-ing, so to realize the verbalization of the noun in your practical activity".

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as implicitly pointed at in Laozi's words, are traceable back to a pair of concepts he frequently employs in his XWSL: *zhi* 智 (wisdom) and *hui* 慧 (discernment). While wisdom "does not rely on sensory experience, nor on logical inference", discernment aims to "distinguish things" and "pertains to the physical world". As a matter of fact, in order to further clarify its meaning, Xiong Shili resorts to the *Laozi*, arguing that "the *zhi* 智 that Laozi rejected is called 'knowledge' (*zhishi* 知識), what I term *hui* 慧" (Makeham 2015, 25).

Now that the terminology is laid clear, Xiong puts forward one final point. These two faculties, being different in their method, are also different in their object. In his XWSL, Xiong already stressed that "discernment (*hui*) pertains to the physical world" and "its application is limited", while only wisdom (*zhi*) "can be used to perceive Reality (*ti*)" (Makeham 2015, 26). In the letter, he remarks upon this, asking "how could it ever be that [Reality] can be investigated by means of the same techniques applied for analysing external objects", given that it is "absolute", "silent" and "without dimension and form" – with 'external objects' being precisely the opposite:

> Being accustomed to discriminating and analysing things, and make it into systematic knowledge, this is termed 'science'. Hence, [taking the] efficacy of science and applying it to the [study of] Dao is definitely inappropriate. Why is it so? Because with regards to science, one has to work externally; […] as for the Dao, one has to work internally. (Xiong 2007a, 141)[41]

Again, the idea of an outward-oriented *vis-à-vis* an inward-oriented knowledge, which Xiong draws from the metaphors employed in the *Laozi*. At this point, it is clear that, albeit not as a whole, the objective and analytical approach (also referred to as 'discernment') is rejected when it comes to the investigation of the Dao. This conclusion is perfectly coherent with his commentary to *Laozi* 1: the Dao cannot be conceived as 'something', which means that it cannot be treated in the same way as any other 'thing' or object of knowledge. Unlike other objects, *shiti*, being the absolute (*juedui* 絕對), is not determinable, nameable and knowable by means of differentiation, discernment and judgment. For these reasons, Xiong resorts to the figure of an inward-oriented investigation, so as to step back from a perspective that sees the absolute substance as an 'object' laying externally, ready to be grasped by a knowing 'subject'.

41 *Xí yú biànxī shìwù, ér chéngwéi yǒu tǒngxì zhī zhīshì, shì wèi zhī xué. Gù yǐ wéi xué zhī gōng ér wéi Dào, bì wú dàng yě. Hé zé? Wéi xué bì yònggōng yú wài,* […] *wéi Dào bì yònggōng yú nèi* 習於辨析事物, 而成為有統系之知識, 是謂之學。故以為學之功而為道, 必無當也。何則?為學必用功於外, […] 為道必用功於內。

Finally, Xiong adds one last layer to this interpretation of *Laozi* 47. The metaphors found in the original text, as shown, are read as revealing the implications of the phenomenon of *zhi*, which encompasses both the analytical and the experiential approaches. Xiong goes one step further: remodelling the text onto his own historical context, he interprets these two different approaches as representing, respectively, the cores of Western and Chinese philosophies:

> The method of Western philosophy is the analysis of things. […] In short, [Western metaphysicians] take the principle to be a 'thing' existing in another realm and they infer it relying only on their knowledge. In this sense, [they] regard the principle as being analysable in terms of quantity, quality, relations and so on. […] Chinese philosophy has a peculiar spirit that pays fundamental attention to the experiential method. With the experiential method, any type of the so-called differentiations, such as inside/outside, subject/object, identity/difference, are unattainable. […] The principle is ultimately without direction and without form. Hence, it can't be inferred by means of knowledge. (Xiong 2007a, 126)[42]

In light of this passage, it is clear that, when Xiong denies the applicability of the analytical method to the study of the Dao, he is not doing so neutrally. He is actually putting forward a critique towards the analytical approach, typical of Western philosophy, to metaphysical matters, contextually reserving a privileged position to Chinese philosophy, the only capable of 'knowing' the Dao.

While this understanding was not limited to Xiong, his reasoning still has some originality. First of all, the essentialist view that sees these two traditions in direct opposition stems coherently from Xiong's commentary to *Laozi* 1, where he clearly differentiated Western cosmology from the Chinese one. The Western idea of a principle that is transcendent, external and creative matches its objective, analytical and 'outward-oriented' method of philosophical inquiry. Whereas Chinese cosmology, expressing the idea of a principle that is nowhere else but within 'this world' or within 'this mind', echoes the

42 *Xīyáng zhéxué zhī fāngfǎ yóu shì xī wù zhī fāngfǎ.* […] *Yàozhī, dōu bǎ zhēnlǐ dàngzuò wàijiè cúnzài de wùshì, píngzhe zìjǐ de zhīshì qù tuīqióng tā, suǒyǐ bǎ zhēnlǐ kànzuò yǒu shùliàng, xìngzhì, guānxì děngděng kě xī.* […] *Zhōngguó zhéxué yǒu yī tèbié jīngshén, gēnběn zhùzhòng tǐrèn zhī fāngfǎ. Suǒwèi nèiwài, wù wǒ, yī yì, zhǒngzhǒng chābiéxiàng dōu bùkě dé.* […] *Zhēnlǐ bìjìng wú fāngsuǒ, wú xíngtǐ, suǒyǐ bùnéng yòng zhīshì qù tuīduó* 西洋哲學之方法猶是析物的方法。[…] 要之，都把真理當作外界存在的物事，憑著自己的知識去推窮他，所以把真理看作有數量、性質、關係等等可析。[…] 中國哲學有一特別精神，根本注重體認的方法。所謂內外、物我、一異，種種差別相都不可得。[…] 真理畢竟無方所，無形體，所以不能用知識去推度。

image of an 'inward-oriented' investigation. This shows coherence between cosmological and epistemological conclusions.

Finally, it appears that Xiong's exposition of these structural differences is based on this general assumption: although the metaphysical, cosmological and epistemological aspects, being different manifestations of the core assumption of a system, are all entangled and mutually defined, and they are all contributing factors to historical development, metaphysics has a privileged position in determining everything else. This is eminently evident in the way he discusses the historical development of the two traditions he is considering. In his comment to *Laozi* 47, he seems to present two traditions that are different both in terms of philosophical inclination and historical trajectory without explicitly linking these two parameters. However, at the outset of the letter, Xiong underlines that it is precisely the fact that Chinese philosophy envisions the principle as attainable through experience that "made it difficult for science to be developed [in that context]" (Xiong 2007a, 127).[43] The Chinese philosophical approach, having as its main focus a metaphysical principle that is not an 'object' that can be grasped, defined and calculated, was never a driving force for the development of the scientific outlook that, instead, was the hallmark of Western philosophy and civilisation. Western metaphysics, precisely because it envisioned a metaphysical principle that is outside and independent from the world, and which can be "discriminated in terms of quantity and quality" (127), has been the propulsive force for the development of logic and science.

Aside from the historiographical accuracy of Xiong's judgment, his reflection is relevant in so far as it gives us a hint of his philosophy of history, a theme certainly worth of further investigation. The reasons behind China's backwardness with respect to the West and Japan represented the *vexata quaestio* of Xiong's time: the scientific and technological development in China was not sufficient to stand its ground to the West, resulting in the Chinese 'century of humiliation'. In light of this, it is not only a matter of chance that Xiong addresses this problem precisely in a letter to a European. On the contrary, this is a precious testimony of Xiong's interpretation of the link between cosmology and historical development, and the extent to which the former influences and determines the latter. His reflection resonates with Yuk Hui's (2016, 19) understanding of "technics" as being "always a cosmotechnics": different cosmologies bring about different technologies, and, thus, different historical trajectories.

43 *Cǐ děng zhéxué* […] *yǐ bù zhòng xī wù zhī fāngfǎ gù, jí bù yì fāzhǎn kēxué* 此等哲學 […] 以不重析物的方法故, 即不易發展科學 (Xiong 2007a, 127).

It is interesting to point out that in China, from the end of the nineteenth century, this problem was expressed by means of the *ti-yong* structure – the same employed by Xiong in his metaphysics. The question was about the extent to which it was possible to adopt Western learning, the *yong*, while still preserving a Chinese core, the *ti*. As argued by Xiong in this letter, China and the West, being different in their *ti* (cosmology), also differ in their *yong* (their historical and technological development).[44] Cosmology is then a deciding factor in so far as it determines the way in which one perceives and approaches beings and things, both at individual and collective level. This is probably one of the reasons behind Xiong Shili's interest in metaphysics and cosmology, making his engagement in these fields all but neutral and ahistorical.

4 Concluding Remarks

As stated at the outset of this article, the present study aimed at achieving two distinct purposes. On the one hand, shedding light on this letter, as a testimony of a fragment of intercultural history. As shown, this epistolary exchange accounted for an ongoing relationship between Chinese and Italian intellectuals of the twentieth century. Luciano Magrini sponsored much of the research done on Chinese culture and philosophy in Italy at the time and, thanks to his expertise and his acquaintances, the manuscript that he received from Xiong circulated widely, even to the point of reaching, by means of Xiao Shiyi's work, Martin Heidegger.

On the other, this letter is an interesting and rich repository of philosophical speculation as well as a rare example of Xiong Shili's comprehensive engagement with Daoist philosophy. To this regard, it is relevant to highlight that his vision will be completely revised 22 years later, in his TYL, where he blames Laozi and Zhuangzi

44 As argued by Alitto (1979, 6), the *zhongxue wei ti*, *xixue wei yong* 中學為體, 西學為用 (Chinese learning for fundamental principles; Western learning for practical application) formula, employed by the "cautious Chinese reformers", was based on the "theoretical distinction between principles and practical applications". Considering Xiong's *tiyong bu er* philosophical assumption, it would be logical to conclude that such a reformist position is incompatible with his system. However, in his XWSL, Xiong only disapproves of the use of discernment (which in the letter is associated to Western learning) "to solve metaphysical problems", while if it is "used only in the universe that constitutes our every-day lives—that is, within the world of physical principles—of course it cannot be deemed inappropriate" (Makeham 2015, 26).

for (1) treating the Dao (the *ti*) as a transcendent principle,[45] (2) explaining this principle in terms of nothingness and pure stillness and (3) giving rise to weak and passive political and moral theories (Makeham 2023, 6-7). While entailing a complete retraction of the content of the letter, this later development of Xiong's interpretation of Daoist philosophy is worth of further investigation, although it lies beyond the scope of this article.

Leaving aside this later overturning, Xiong's commentary to the DDJ, although structured in a quite traditional fashion, still conveys a modern outlook as far as historical background and philosophical speculation are concerned. As this letter suggests, Xiong's hermeneutical approach to ancient texts is close to what Huang Chun-chieh (2005, 288-9) defines a "intersubjective" or "experiential" reading of the classics,[46] vis-à-vis an "objective" and "philological" one. While this latter works by means of textual annotations and takes the original meaning of the text as something that can be objectively reconstructed, the presupposition of the first approach is that the classics, albeit bearers of a trans-historical truth (or *dao*), can be fully comprehended only when instantiated in the concrete historical and personal experience of the interpreter. This approach is defined "inter-subjective" in so far as the *dao* of the text "is not something that exists objectively, independent of the interpreter", and, as argued by Ng On-cho (2005), it revokes the Gadamerian positive revaluation of tradition and 'prejudice' as the wealth of experience that makes the very act of comprehension possible. Read through this lens, Xiong's interpretation of the *Laozi* is not to be regarded as an anachronistic reading of an ancient text, but as the only way of properly 'instantiating' its *dao*.

45 Interestingly enough, this conclusion is close to Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619-1692) evaluation of the DDJ, a thinker that strongly influenced and shaped Xiong's philosophical ideas. As shown by Black (1989, 67), in fact, according to Wang, "If the ordinary world (characterized by diversity) came from a non-ordinary source (transcending diversity), then that source would be something existing in its own right apart from the ordinary. Such was the fault he found in the Taoism of the *Lao-tzu*".

46 It is interesting to point out that Huang explicitly relates Ma Yifu 馬一浮 (1883-1967), friend of Xiong an author of a preface to the XWSL, to the first hermeneutical method (Huang 2005, 288).

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