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Weiwei Ye

Weiwei Ye, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University, Shanghai 200444 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9030-3819> |  shuyeweiwei@shu.edu.cn

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COMMENT ON “CONFUCIAN THOUGHT OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY CONSTRUCTION”

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Compared with other schools of thought, Confucianism has taken “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” as its basic spirit and core pursuit since Confucius’ inception. Therefore, it has always paid more attention to self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, bringing peace to all under heaven and the techniques of ritual, music, punishment and government. Its thinking has the characteristics of actively engaging with the world. Therefore, regardless of whether we talk about benevolence, righteousness, etiquette and wisdom, it is generally inseparable from the daily use of human relations.

When studying Confucian classics, in the Han and Tang Dynasties, they only focused on exegesis of names and objects and rarely talked about the true nature of the classics. After the Northern Song Dynasty, Confucians began to pay attention to the exploration of principles. They began to explore the origin of Confucian education in the theory of mind and nature, and also explored the origin of mind in the theory of heaven. As the founder of Qi theory, in Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties, and the founder of Guan Xue, Zhang Zai was an important founder of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties. He connected the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of humanity by constructing the theory of the Tao of Heaven and the dualistic dialectical theory of mind. He put forward the idea of “harmony between man and nature”, which not only found the basis for the universe’s

¹ Weiwei Ye, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University, Shanghai 200444 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9030-3819>. E-mail: shuyeweiwei@shu.edu.cn.

ontology for cultivation of peace and harmony of Confucianism and daily use of human relations, but also pointed out a realistic and feasible way for knowing heaven and becoming a saint.

Liu and Wu (2024) gave a rich explanation of Zhang Zai's theory of the relationship between *xu* and *qi*. In fact, the relationship between *xu* and *qi* is not only the core proposition and logical starting point of Zhang Zai's philosophy, but also the ideological thread that runs through Zhang Zai's entire philosophical system. The interpretation of "*xu*" and "*qi*" will directly affect the understanding of Zhang Zai's philosophy. "*Taixu is qi*" is Zhang Zai's general summary of his philosophy of heaven. However, words, such as "*taixu*", "*xu*" and "*qi*", are scattered in different chapters in Zhang Zai's classics, and there is no consistent conclusion. Moreover, there is a phenomenon of mixed use of words in Zhang Zai's book, which leads to different conclusions when interpreting "*Taixu is qi*" from different angles. Therefore, conclusions, such as "Ontology of *Qi*", "Ontology of *Xing*" and "Dualism", appeared.

"Ontology of *Qi*" is represented by Mr. Zhang Dainian and Mr. Chen Lai, "Ontology of *Taixu*" is represented by Mr. Mou Zongsan, Mr. Lin Lechang, etc., and "Dualism" is represented by Mr. Hou Wailu. Among the three views, "Ontology of *Qi*" and "Ontology of *Taixu*" are the mainstream. In summary, the differences among the three views are reflected in: "*Taixu*" and "*Qi*" are the ontological concepts of Zhang Zai's philosophy.

The philosophy of the Han Dynasty and the metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties successively solved the problem of the creation of the universe and the basis of the creation of the universe. By the Song Dynasty, what Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism wanted to solve was the problem of how to connect the universe with all things. In the process of realizing the connection between "Heaven" and "Man", Zhang Zai regarded "*qi*" as an important link between "*Taixu*" and "All Things". Zhang Zai once said: "*Taixu is pure and harmonious, because it is clear and there are no obstacles*". (Zhang, 1978, p. 125). This means that *taixu* itself is clear and clean, and because it is clear and clean, there are no obstacles. Therefore, "*taixu*" and "all things" have a basis for interconnection. This means that the basis for the connection between "*taixu*" and "all things" is the clarity of *taixu*. Wang Euzhi said: "The *qi* has not gathered in *taixu*, it is slightly invisible, so it is clear; if it is clear, everything with a form and image can enter it". (Zhang, 2020, p. 19). He believes that because *taixu* is clear and bright, only the "tangible things" (i.e. *qi*) have the conditions to enter *taixu*. In other words, the clearing of *taixu* provides conditions for the entry of *qi*.

In addition, Zhang Zai believes that *taixu* and *qi* are inseparable. He pointed out:

Although the *qi* between heaven and earth gathers, disperses, repels, and absorbs, and is ever-changing, it follows the laws of nature and does not deviate from the normal track of nature. *Qi* is an object image that spreads out into the invisible *taixu* and

spreads throughout my body; *Qi* gathers together to become an object image, but it does not lose the normal changing law of gas. There cannot be no *qi* in *taixu*, and the *qi* cannot but gather to form all things, and all things cannot but disperse and become the *qi* of *taixu*. The cyclic changes of gas concentration and dispersion in all things are the result of having to follow the laws of nature (Lei and Wang, 2023, p. 95).

Here, “*qi*” returns to and disperses in the invisible “*taixu*”, so there is “spreading throughout my body”, which means that the place where “*qi*” gathers and disperses is “*taixu*”. *Qi* gathers into the “image” of all things, but “does not lose” the “constancy” of the principle of *taixu*, that is to say, it does not exceed the norms of the principle of “*taixu*”. Therefore, Zhang Zai believes that, although the *qi* between heaven and earth gathers and disperses, *taixu* and *qi* are inseparable. *Taixu* cannot exist without *qi*. *Qi* can only form all things, and all things can only disperse into *taixu*. All things are a process that has a beginning and an end, and it is also a cycle of life and death. It is an unchangeable law. This also shows that *taixu*, *qi* and all things are a cyclical process from *taixu* to *qi*, gathering into all things and, then, dispersing into *taixu*. Therefore, Zhang Zai believes that “*taixu*” and “all things” are connected by “*qi*” and are indivisible and an unchangeable natural law.

As for why *qi* has this cyclical process of gathering and dispersing, Zhang Zai pointed out, “*Taixu* is clear, and if it is clear, there will be no obstruction, and if it is not hindered, it will be divine. If it is clear, it will be turbid, and if it is turbid, it will be obstructed, and if it is obstructed, it will form.” (Zhang, 2020, p. 59). He believes that *taixu* is clear, so there is no obstruction. There are no obstacles, so you can be divine. When it reaches the highest purity, it will become turbid. When it is turbid, there will be obstacles. If there are obstacles, it will take shape. Regarding the gathering and dispersion of “*qi*”, Wang Fuzhi also pointed out that before *qi* enters *taixu*, *taixu* is clear, and clearness can allow tangible things to enter. Therefore, once *qi* enters, it will produce turbidity. If there is no access, there will be obstruction. Therefore, the same principle applies to people. If it is too clear, it will produce magical effects, and if there are obstacles, it will produce various human desires. Therefore, Zhang Zai believes that the results of magical effects are caused by the clarity of *taixu*, while the effects of form are caused by obstacles in *taixu*. Therefore, objects have both material and spiritual qualities.

Through the above discussion, the concept of *taixu* can be further clarified. First of all, *taixu* is a completely metaphysical concept, not a tangible material entity. Zhang Zai is a true philosopher. He said that “the physical is not enough to describe” because he wanted to find a concept that could compete with Buddha. This concept must be metaphysical and able to explain the origin of the universe, and *taixu* came into being. Therefore, *taixu* can be interpreted as the source of the universe and all things, so “from *taixu*, there is the name of heaven.” *Taixu* here is the sky that created all things. Secondly, *taixu* has the characteristics

of formlessness and purity. *Taixu* is a metaphysical concept, not a material entity. People can only grasp it through the thinking function of the brain, so it is pure, clear and formless. Yes, it can be said that it is most appropriate for Zhang Zai to use the concept of *taixu*, as the universe's origin.

Finally, in Zhang Zai's philosophy, "*taixu*" is not only equivalent to "Heaven". It is the transcendent inherent ontology of all things in the universe, but also the origin of morality. Zhang Zai said: "Heaven and earth regard *xu* as virtue, and the best is *xu*." "The highest good" is a highly abstract unity of Confucian benevolence, righteousness and morality. Zhang Zai believes that it is the embodiment of heavenly virtue, and its origin is *taixu*. Therefore, Zhang Zai pointed out that "*xu*" is the "origin of benevolence".

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