

## Article

# Avoiding the Trap of Parallelism: Interlocking Parallel Style in the Interpretation of *Laozi* 29

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**Abstract:** The present paper deals with a specific argumentative feature found in the *Laozi*, namely, “interlocking parallel style” or IPS. It shows how knowledge of this structure can be helpful for the understanding and interpretation of the text. At the same time, the paper demonstrates that, in some cases, rigorously imposing IPS can be counterproductive. To this end, the paper analyses *Laozi* 29, the commentary to it penned by Wang Bi, as well as a close parallel in the fifth chapter of the *Wenzi*.

**Keywords:** *Laozi*; IPS; Wang Bi; *Wenzi*; Heshang Gong

## 1. Introduction

The short ancient Chinese treatise *Laozi* 老子, also known as the *Daodejing* 道德經, belongs among the most studied and revered texts in the world. It has been subject to diverse, often radically different, interpretations in China and other Asian cultures throughout the centuries. Since its introduction in the West, the cryptic sayings of the text have been scrutinized and appropriated by a diverse readership: from proponents of Christian faith to followers of Leo Tolstoy’s moral teachings but also philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and spiritual teachers like Eckhart Tolle, as well as individuals in search of personal growth or remedies for the ills of modern Western society.<sup>1</sup> To many of its readers, the *Laozi* has indeed become a valuable source of intellectual inspiration and emotional relief, addressing their specific concerns. To a large extent, this ability to speak to people across time, space and cultural restraints is grounded in the style and the main theme of the work. The absence of historical references, which are otherwise so common in early Chinese philosophical writings, and the text’s appeal to the level of reality that supposedly transcends the world of manifold particularities do, indeed, make the precepts of the *Laozi* appear timelessly valid.

Their openness to interpretation, however, should not be equated with the absence of compositional principles or random textual arrangement. While on the macrolevel, there is indeed evidence that the two parts of the *Laozi* were arranged differently and divided into a varying number of chapters or *zhang* 章<sup>2</sup>, the nuclei of most *zhang* remained largely consistent and untouched by this process<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, as some studies have demonstrated, the textual organization of an individual *zhang* is often based on some distinct principles.<sup>4</sup> Familiarity with these principles is thus often deemed essential for grasping the meaning of the relevant textual unit.

The present paper deals with a specific argumentative feature found in the *Laozi*, namely, “interlocking parallel style” or IPS, a term that was introduced by Rudolf Wagner.<sup>5</sup> It shows how knowledge of this structure can be helpful for the understanding and interpretation of the text. At the same time, the paper demonstrates that, in some cases, rigorously imposing IPS can be counterproductive.<sup>6</sup> To this end, I investigate closely related passages from Chapters 29 (the main goal of this study) and 64 of the transmitted *Laozi* as well as their counterparts in the excavated versions of the text. I also analyze the interpretation of *Laozi* 29 as provided by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and the related passage in the text *Wenzi* 文



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子. The commentary ascribed to Heshang Gong 河上公 is consulted at some junctures for comparison.<sup>7</sup> The next section provides a brief discussion of the interlocking parallel style.

## 2. Interlocking Parallel Style in the *Laozi*

According to Wagner, the prime example for IPS can be found in the following passage from the transmitted *Laozi* 64:

為者敗之，執者失之。是以聖人無為，故無敗；無執，故無失。(Lou 2008, p. 166)

He who acts fails;

He who grasps loses.

This is why the sage does not act and thus does not fail;

[He] does not grasp and thus is without loss.

This seemingly simple passage has an intricate structure consisting of several constitutive elements. To distinguish between these elements, Wagner gives them different designations. Accordingly, Arabic numbers stand for the order of the respective sentences in this passage, while Roman numerals connote sentences that have the same “argumentative status” or, simply, the same syntactic structure. Then there are letters a, b, c, which demonstrate the thematic affiliation of the respective lines (Wagner 2000, pp. 63–64).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the structure of the passage can be depicted as:

I	1a 為者敗之 He who acts fails	3c 是以聖人 This is why the sage	2b 執者失之 He who grasps loses
	4a 無為故無敗 does not act and thus does not fail		5b 無執故無失 does not grasp and thus is without loss
II			

As can be seen, letters a and b connoting different thematic strands constitute the “vertical” structure of the passage. Strand a (sentences 1 and 4) deals with the topic of taking action (*wei* 為) and failing or ruining things (*bai* 敗), while strand b (sentences 2 and 5) features the notions of grasping (*zhi* 執) and losing (*shi* 失). Letter c indicates phrases, in this case: *shi yi sheng ren* 是以聖人 (This is why, the sage), which refer to both juxtaposed strands. At the same time, the “horizontal” elements I and II signify a general rule (level I) and the sage’s application thereof (level II).

The structure contains a number of nonverbal statements simply by virtue of juxtaposing different elements with each other. That is, it first implies a close connection between “taking action” and “grasping” and, secondly, it suggests that a sage bases his actions on his mastery of universal rules.

While the number of thematic strands in this structure is usually confined to three (a, b and c), each strand can contain several elements (not just two as in the above example). The relationship between them can have varying degrees of transparency, corresponding to what Wagner calls either the “open” (established by the same notions) or “closed” (established by synonyms or related terms) interlocking parallel style. In one of these two variations, IPS appears in almost half of the chapters of the transmitted *Laozi*, 39 out of 81 (Wagner 2000, p. 95).

## 3. Interlocking Parallel Style in the Interpretation of the *Laozi*

According to Wagner, one of the most prominent commentators of the *Laozi*, Wang Bi, was well aware of the prominent role this structure played in the text and interpreted it accordingly. For instance, the opening of Chapter 3 reads:

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。(Zhu 2000, p. 14)

Not to elevate the worthy will keep the people from contention;  
not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep the people from thieving;  
not to display what is desirable will keep the hearts (of the people) from being unsettled.

Rather than understanding this passage as consisting of three parallel sentences, Wagner views it as exhibiting the conventional IPS structure (note the change of subject from the “people” in the two preceding sentences to the “heart” in the last sentence<sup>9</sup>). Accordingly, the first two sentences are thematically juxtaposed, addressing the issues of social status (i.e., elevation of the worthy: *shang xian* 尚賢) and material wealth (goods difficult to come by: *nan de zhi huo* 難得之貨), respectively. As for the third sentence, it functions as a summary of the first two. The resulting structure can be depicted as follows:

1a不尚賢，使民不爭 Not to elevate the worthy will keep the people from contention	2b不貴難得之貨，使民不為盜 not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep the people from thieving
3c不見可欲，使心不亂 not to display what is desirable will keep the hearts (of the people) from being unsettled	

In Wagner’s opinion, Wang Bi was aware of this tripartite structure and had commented on the classic accordingly (Wagner 2000, pp. 108–10). The lines from Wang Bi’s commentary, which correspond to the above sentences from the *Laozi*, can be arranged in the familiar IPS manner:

1a尚賢顯名，榮過其任， 為而常校能相射 <sup>10</sup> If, in elevating the worthy and glorifying the famous, the fame exceeds the assignment, then [the people] will constantly compare their abilities as if in a shooting contest.	2b貴貨過用，貪者競趣， 穿窬探篋，沒命而盜 If valuing goods exceeds their use, then the greedy will compete to rush for them, they will “break through walls and search in chests,” and will steal without regard for their life.
3c故可欲不見，則心無所亂 也。(Lou 2008, p. 8) That is why, if desirable things are not displayed, then the hearts (of the people) will have nothing to be unsettled by! <sup>11</sup>	

The fact that the third sentence opens with *gu* 故 indicated that Wang Bi indeed understood the mention of desirable things (*ke yu* 可欲) as summarizing and concluding the foregoing argument. That is, the people’s hearts are disturbed by elevated social status and material wealth.

This is different from another early prominent commentary on the text, attributed to Heshang Gong 河上公. There, the third sentence is not treated as a concluding summary but, interpreting *xin* as the heart–mind of the ruler, it is taken as pointing to measures pertaining to the “self-government of the ruler” (Chan 1991, p. 135). These measures consist

of banishing the “sounds of Zheng” (*Zheng sheng* 鄭聲) and keeping away the “beauties” (*mei ren* 美人).<sup>12</sup> Thus, we see how the understanding of the text’s structure affects the interpretation of its meaning. According to Wang Bi, the text, after giving two concrete examples for the causes of popular disorder, moved to a more abstract level of discussion. On the other hand, Heshang Gong views it as providing three examples of what a ruler should avoid.

In the next section, I show how different views regarding the arrangement of *Laozi* 29 have affected its interpretation.

#### 4. IPS or Not? (Chapter 29)

This example concerns the opening of Chapter 29, which reads as follows:

將欲取天下而為之，吾見其不得已。天下神器，不可為。為者敗之，執者失之。  
(Zhu 2000, p. 115)

For those who would like to take over the world and act on it —

I see that with this they simply will not succeed.

The world is a sacred vessel;

It cannot be acted upon.

Those who act on it destroy it.

Those who grasp it lose it.<sup>13</sup>

Three distinct positions can be singled out regarding the structure of this passage among different scholars. The first posits that it contains no IPS, the second is that it is built entirely on IPS in its received form, and the third contends that the transmitted text is corrupted at this juncture, containing only a garbled version of the original parallel structure. Yet this parallelism can be reconstructed with recourse to other parts of the *Laozi* and other texts.

The first position is represented by Thomas Michael, who, while applying discernable IPS structures to his translation of the work, does not find here anything resembling IPS (Michael 2015, p. 246).

The proponent of the second view, Rudolf Wagner, analyzes the structure of the chapter in the following way:

1a 將欲取天下 For those who would like to take over the world	2b 而為之 and act on it
3c 吾見其不得已 I see that with this they simply will not succeed	
4c 天下神器 The world is a sacred vessel	
5c 不可為 It cannot be acted upon	
7a 執者失之 Those who grasp it lose it	6b 為者敗之 Those who act on it destroy it

Accordingly, this is a case of closed interlocking parallel style, where the right element addresses the topic of taking “action”, while the left counterpart deals with similar notions of “taking (over)” (*qu* 取) and “grasping” (*zhi* 執). Moreover, in this arrangement, the sentence *bu ke wei* 不可為 belongs to the common thematic line (5c). Thus, Wagner concludes that the verb *wei* 為 as it appears there takes on the meaning of both *qu* 取/*zhi* 執 and *wei* 為 (Wagner 2003a, p. 454).

My reservations against this standpoint are mainly based on the fact that the *Laozi* draws a clear line between *qu* and *zhi*. The text speaks affirmatively about the possibility of “taking over the world” (*qu tianxia* 取天下) on several occasions (Chs. 48 and 57). As for *zhi*,

its most natural objects appear to be the highest principles the work promulgates: the Way in Chapters 14, 35 and the “One” in the excavated equivalent of Chapter 22 (see below). Furthermore, the suggested polysemy of the verb *wei* 為 in line 5c appears rather odd.

The main advocate of the third position, Chen Guying 陳鼓應<sup>14</sup>, in his early *Laozi jinzhu jinyi ji pingjie* 老子今注今譯及評介, reconstructs the relevant passage of *Laozi* 29 to the following effect:

天下神器，不可為也，[不可執也。] 為者敗之，執者失之。[是以聖人無為，故無敗；無執，故無失。] (Chen 1970, p. 125)<sup>15</sup>

The world is a sacred vessel;

It cannot be acted upon.

It cannot be grasped.

Those who act on it destroy it,

Those who grasp it lose it.

This is why the sage does not act and thus does not fail;

[He] does not grasp and thus is without loss.<sup>16</sup>

One can easily recognize that Chen does not only insert the line *bu ke zhi ye* 不可執也<sup>17</sup> but also adds the aforementioned IPS passage from Chapter 64, maintaining that it originally belonged here and was misplaced at some point in the text’s transmission.<sup>18</sup> This second addition was rendered untenable by the publication of the manuscript versions of the *Laozi*, where the sentences in question appear in a textual context that, in the transmitted version, largely corresponds to Chapter 64.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it seems logical that eventually Chen came to reconsider his opinion regarding this matter.<sup>20</sup> As for the insertion of *bu ke zhi ye*, it is likewise not supported by the excavated materials.<sup>21</sup> Yet Chen still appears to view this line as an integral part of Chapter 29. His more recent *Laozi jinzhu jinyi* 老子今注今譯, arguably the most influential commentarial contemporary work on the Daoist classic, reads:

天下神器，不可為也，[不可執也。] 為者敗之，執者失之。 (Chen 2006, p. 188)

The world is a sacred vessel;

It cannot be acted upon.

[It cannot be grasped.]

Those who act on it destroy it,

Those who grasp it lose it.<sup>22</sup>

There are several reasons why this reading appears convincing, even though it is not supported by any known rendition of the *Laozi*. First, in this case, the passage obtains a parallel structure that can be represented as follows:

1c天下神器		
The world is a sacred vessel		
2a不可為也		(3b不可執也)
It cannot be acted upon		It cannot be grasped)
4a為者敗之		5b執者失之
Those who act on it destroy it		Those who grasp it lose it

Even though Chen and other scholars advocating the insertion of *bu ke zhi ye* do not operate with the notion of IPS, the formally complete juxtaposition of relevant sentences seems to be a very compelling reason to validate their assumption.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, in their view, the present reading is supported through Wang Bi’s commentary on Chapter 29 as well as a Laozi-influenced passage from the fifth chapter of the *Wenzi*, which both feature the line *bu ke zhi (ye)* 不可執(也).<sup>24</sup> In the subsequent sections, I analyze

the two mentioned instances beginning with Wang Bi before returning to the discussion of this chapter's structure.

### 5. Wang Bi's Interpretation of *Laozi* 29

Explaining the passage from Chapter 29 dealing with the sacred nature of the world, Wang Bi writes:

萬物以自然為性，故可因而不可為也，可通而不可執也。物有常性，而造為之，故必敗也。物有往來而執之，故必失矣。(Lou 2008, p. 76)

The myriad things have *ziran* as their nature. Therefore, it is possible to follow them but impossible to act upon them, it is possible to merge with them but impossible to grasp them. Things have constant nature, and so by deliberately acting upon them, one is sure to destroy (them). Things have their coming and going, and so by grasping them, one is sure to lose (them).<sup>25</sup>

It would appear that the line *ke tong er bu ke zhi ye* 可通而不可執也 was written to interpret the phrase *bu ke zhi* 不可執, which is absent from the received *Laozi*. The commentary exhibits the familiar symmetrical IPS arrangement:

	1c 萬物以自然為性 The myriad things have <i>ziran</i> as their nature	
	2c 故 Therefore	
3a 可因而不可為也 it is possible to follow them but impossible to act upon them		4b 可通而不可執也 it is possible to merge with them but impossible to grasp them
5a 物有常性，而造為之，故必敗也 Things have constant nature, and so by willfully acting upon them, one is sure to destroy (them).		6b 物有往來而執之，故必失矣 Things have coming and going, and so by grasping them, one is sure to lose (them).

It is evident that Wang Bi used this IPS structure to address the impossibility of “acting” (*wei* 為) upon things together with the unfeasibility of “grasping” (*zhi* 執) them.<sup>26</sup> The question remains, however, of whether we can infer from this that the copy of the *Laozi* that the eminent scholar had at his disposal really contained the line *bu ke zhi* 不可執. The fact that this line is missing from all the transmitted and unearthed editions suggests that it is highly unlikely.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it seems that his interpretation was informed by the standards of parallelism, which Wang Bi also applied in his own writings as well as his hermeneutic endeavors of ancient classics.<sup>28</sup>

As we shall see in the next section, another text in which the sentence *bu ke zhi* 不可執 appears, the *Wenzi*, is also characterized by a high degree of symmetrical organization of argument into juxtaposed strands.

### 6. *Laozi* 29 in Light of the *Wenzi*

As numerous studies have shown, since the Dingzhou 定州 discovery of 1973, when talking about the *Wenzi*, we need to distinguish between the transmitted version and the excavated manuscript, fragments of which were discovered in the grave of a Han dignitary, for these two texts differ in regard to their length, literary form, philosophical outlook and main protagonists.<sup>29</sup> While in the received text, the main protagonists are Laozi and a by far less significant Master Wen 文子, who is depicted as the former's disciple<sup>30</sup>, the excavated manuscript features Master Wen advising King Ping 平王, but their identities are not further specified.<sup>31</sup>



Therefore, in the transmitted text, the passage in question is attributed to Laozi, who is answering Master Wen's questions. In the excavated version, these words are pronounced by Master Wen in his conversation with King Ping. Let us start with the received text:

文子問曰：古之王者，以道蒞天下，為之奈何？老子曰：執一無為，因天地與之變化，天下大器，不可執也，不可為也，為者敗之，執者失之。執一者，見小也，見小故能成大也，無為者，守靜也，守靜故能為天下正。處大，滿而不溢，居高，貴而無驕，處大不溢，盈而不虧，居上不驕，高而不危。盈而不虧，所以長守富也，高而不危，所以長守貴也，富貴不離其身，祿及子孫，古之王道，期於此矣。<sup>32</sup>

Master Wen asked: "The kings of antiquity used the Way to rule over the All-under-Heaven. How did they do this?"

Laozi said: "They grasped the One and did not act. They followed heaven and earth and changed together with them. All-under-Heaven is a great vessel, it cannot be grasped, it cannot be acted upon. Who acts upon it, ruins it. Who grasps it, loses it. In grasping the One they saw the small.<sup>33</sup> Seeing the small, they thus became able to accomplish their greatness. In not acting they kept still. Keeping still, they [thus] became able to be the paragon of the world. Dwelling amidst the great (wealth), they were full without overflowing. Occupying a high (position), they were noble without arrogance. Dwelling amidst the great (wealth) without overflowing, they were full without waning. Occupying the top (position) without arrogance, they were high without imperiling themselves. Being full without waning was their way to continually preserve wealth. Being high without imperiling themselves was their way to continually preserve nobility. Neither wealth nor nobility parted from their side, and their endowment reached descendants—the Kingly Way of antiquity was complete in this."<sup>34</sup>

The passage is an example of IPS of a scope that exceeds anything seen in the *Laozi*. The argument is consistently developed in two juxtaposed strands (a and b) that are connected and/or summarized through the units belonging to the middle strand c. In fact, the development of argument in parallel style is highly characteristic of the *Wenzi*, and, as is sometimes claimed, it reflects the authors' understanding of the Way (Fech 2016, pp. 240–43). The structure of the above passage looks as follows:

1a 執一 [They] grasped the One	3c 因天地與之變化 [They] followed heaven and earth and changed together with them 4c 天下大器也 All-under-Heaven is a great vessel	2b 無為 [They] did not act
5a 不可執也 it cannot be grasped		6b 不可為也 it cannot be acted upon
8a 執者失之 Who grasps it, loses it.		7b 為者敗之 Who acts upon it, ruins it.
9a 執一者，見小也 In grasping the One they saw the small.		11b 無為者，守靜也 In not acting they kept still.
10a 見小故能成其大也 Seeing the small, they thus became able to accomplish their greatness.		12b 守靜能為天下正 Keeping still, they [thus] became able to be the paragon of the world.

13a 處大，滿而不溢 Dwelling amidst the great (wealth), they were full without overflowing.	14b 居高，貴而無驕 Occupying a high (position), they were noble without arrogance.
15a 處大不溢，盈而不虧 Dwelling amidst the great (wealth) without overflowing, they were full without waning.	16b 居上不驕，高而不危 Occupying the top (position) without arrogance, they were high without imperiling themselves.
17a 盈而不虧，所以長守富也 Being full without waning was their way to continually preserve wealth.	18b 高而不危，所以長守貴也 Being high without imperiling themselves was their way to continually preserve nobility.
19c 富貴不離其身 Neither wealth nor nobility parted from their side, 20c 祿及子孫 And their endowment reached descendants 21c 古之王道其於此矣 —the Kingly Way of antiquity was complete in this.	

Evidently, the understanding of this passage is contingent upon grasping its strictly symmetrical structure. The well-ordered arrangement is astonishing given that it results from different combination patterns of involved sentences: abba (sentences 5 to 8), aabb (sentences 9 to 12) and ababab (sentences 13 to 18). Impressive also is the amount of borrowed material, which can be mainly traced back to two sources: the *Laozi* (sentences 1 to 12) and the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (sentences 13 to 21).<sup>35</sup> In order to connect these materials in the given manner, the authors of the *Wenzi* must have been aware of their structural similarities. The resulting philosophical message is unusual in the context of early Daoism as “grasping of the One” (*zhi yi* 執一) and “Non-Action” (*wu wei* 無為) are identified as the main preconditions for preserving wealth (*fu* 富) and nobility (*gui* 貴), respectively.

Despite its similarities to the two mentioned sources, the transmitted *Wenzi* is far from being identical to them. While the parallels to the *Xiaojing* are not going to be discussed here<sup>36</sup>, the connection to the *Laozi* deserves a closer look. When juxtaposed with each other, the corresponding passages of the two texts look as follows:

	Received <i>Wenzi</i>	<i>Laozi</i>	
1.	文子問曰：古之王者，		
2.	以道蒞天下，為之奈何？	以道蒞天下	§ 60
3.	老子曰：執一無為	執一 <sup>37</sup> 無為	§ 22 § 2, 3, 37 ...
4.	天下大器也，不可執也，不可為也，	天下神器，不可為也。	§§ 29, 64
5.	為者敗之，執者失之。	為者敗之，執者失之。	
6.	執一者，見小也	抱一	§ 22
7.	見小	見小曰明	§ 52
8.	故能成大也	故能成其大	§§ 34, 63
9.	無為者，守靜也	守靜	§ 16
10.	守靜故能為天下正	清靜為天下正	§ 45



Clearly, the *Wenzi* features a great number of notions and phrases stemming from the *Laozi*, but it creates a new philosophical symbiosis by establishing connections between borrowed materials that cannot be found in its source, such as, for instance, the equation of “grasping the One” and “seeing the small”. Likewise, we see that some phrases are deliberately modified, thus resulting in the designation of All-under-Heaven as a “great vessel” (*da qi* 大器) instead of “sacred vessel” (*shen qi* 神器).

As was mentioned above, there are currently two main versions of this text, the received and the excavated. The excavated fragments, for all their piecemeal nature, are important as they shed light on the content and organization of a *Wenzi* that existed prior to the creation of the transmitted text. While they also demonstrate heavy influence by the *Laozi*, the latter is never quoted verbatim and is treated as nonchalantly as in the transmitted version<sup>38</sup>. This practice of *Laozi* exegesis is remarkable in the context of early Chinese philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Most likely it is due to the status of Master Wen as a close disciple of *Laozi*. Hence, while the former’s ideas have a distinct *Laozi* “feel”, they are not identical to those of the master.

The parallels to the *Laozi* influenced passage are (preceded by the inventory numbers of the respective bamboo slips) as follows:

	[王曰。吾聞古聖立天下，以道立天下]
2262	King [Ping] asked: “I heard that when the sages of antiquity ordered All-under-Heaven, they used the Way to order All-under-Heaven
	[口何。文子曰。執一無為。平王曰]
0564	How [did they do that]?” Master Wen replied: “They grasped the One and did not act.” King Ping asked
	地大器也，不可執，不可為，為者販（敗），執者失
0870	[Heaven and] Earth are a big vessel. It cannot be grasped; it cannot be acted upon. Who acts, fails; who grasps, loses.
	是以聖王執一者，見小也。無為者
0593	This is why, the sage kings’ grasping the One, was to see the small; [their] non-action
	也，見小故能成其大功，守靜口
0908	Seeing the small, they were thus able to accomplish their great achievements. Keeping still, [X]
	下正。平王曰。見小守靜奈何。文子曰
0775	of [All-under-Heaven].” King Ping asked: “How did they see the small and keep still?” Master Wen said

As can be seen, the differences between these lines and the *Laozi* are even greater than in the transmitted version. For instance, while the latter reads “All-under-Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), the former evidently speaks of the cosmic pair “Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi* 天地) (slip 0870). Moreover, the exemplary rulers in the excavated *Wenzi* are said to be able “to accomplish their great achievements” (*neng cheng qi da gong* 能成其大功), adding the character *gong* 功 to what otherwise would have constituted a verbatim quotation from *Laozi* 34 or 63.

Based on the parallels in the transmitted text, we can reconstruct the structure of this passage in the Dingzhou manuscript, which looks as follows:

	1c [天]地大器也 Heaven and Earth are a big vessel	
2a 不可執 It cannot be grasped		3b 不可為 It cannot be acted upon
5a 執者失 who grasps, loses		4b 為者販（敗） who acts, fails
	6c 是以聖王 This is why, the sage kings’	

7a 執一者，見小也 grasping the One, was to see the small	8b 無為者，[守靜]也 non-action, [was to keep still]
9a 見小，故能成其大功 Seeing the small, they were thus able to accomplish their great achievements	10b 守靜，口[能為天]下正 Keeping still, [they were thus able to become] paragons of All-under-Heaven

While the textual arrangement largely corresponds to the transmitted *Wenzi*, the line *shi yi sheng wang* 是以聖王 (6c) can be found only in the excavated text. The appearance thereof is significant as it distinguishes the general rule (expressed in lines 2a to 4b) from the sagely principles of action (dealt with in lines 7a to 10b). In this particular case, the “sage kings” chose a way of action that opposed common practices (especially evident in the opposition of *wei* 為 and *wu wei* 無為). As such, the content and structure of sentences 2a to 8b appear to result from a combination and modification of the textual materials corresponding to the above-mentioned parts from the transmitted *Laozi* 29 and *Laozi* 64.

Philosophically, there are several points that are worth mentioning at this juncture.<sup>40</sup> In the excavated *Wenzi*, the sage is identified as a powerholder, while the *Laozi* remains ambiguous in regard to the social rank of the exemplary person to the point that it might be considered carrying a subversive message (Fech 2020, p. 374). This implies that the behavior associated with “grasping the One” and “non-action” might have been promoted with a ruler in mind and was not suitable for everyone. Moreover, the reason for the impossibility of grasping and acting upon the world is identified (in both the excavated and the transmitted *Wenzi*) as its greatness and not its sacred nature (as in the *Laozi*). In other words, the world-vessel is not different in kind from regular “vessels” (things created for the very purpose of being subjected to different manipulations), which would preclude the possibility of any (conventional) operations on it. Had the world been “smaller”, then the grasping thereof and acting thereupon would be perfectly valid actions. This seems to be the reason why the sage king is said not to refrain from grasping altogether but to grasp the One, which is uniquely associated with smallness.<sup>41</sup> The change of framework from the rather sociopolitical “All-under-Heaven” to the cosmological “Heaven and Earth” might have taken place because in the Dingzhou manuscript, the “One” was defined as the beginning of the myriad things that were, again rather uniquely, equated with Heaven and Earth.

The emphasis on the world’s greatness might also explain why in the excavated *Wenzi*, it is the agent who suffers the consequences of his own activities in the world and not the entities of the world. One who approaches the diverse phenomena of the vast world head on is bound to fail. The sage kings of the past are shown here to have thrived exactly because they understood how to direct their attention to the source of things. As such, the *Wenzi* presents a clearer appearance of being a governance manual.

In the above passage, the *Wenzi* operates with a great number of notions and expressions from the *Laozi*, yet it produces a philosophy that is markedly different from it. In their use of the literary form of IPS, its authors were not necessarily influenced solely by the foundational work of Daoism. As the example of *Xiaojing* shows, they were also aware of the occurrence of this practice of textual organization in other texts.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the examples of IPS in the *Wenzi*, which are more abundant, large-scale and complex when compared with the *Laozi*, might reflect its different conception of the Way. That is, *Dao* is no longer something unfathomable, impenetrable and obscure but a pattern emerging from a combination and correct arrangement of several distinct principles as reflected in its textual manifestations.

As for the line “it cannot be grasped” (*bu ke zhi* 不可執), in view of the numerous modifications and accretions to which the text of the *Laozi* was subjected in the *Wenzi*, there is no compelling reason to assume that it was actually borrowed from the former. It seems to have been inserted at this juncture to facilitate the development of the argument

in parallel strands. In addition to parallelism, one of the reasons why some scholars were compelled to take this view might have been the fact that in the transmitted *Wenzi*—the only version of the work available until very recently—the present line is ascribed to Laozi. But as we have already seen, originally the whole passage expressed Master Wen’s insights.

When comparing the above passage with the corresponding passage in Wang Bi’s commentary, it becomes evident that in these two instances, the respective strands are arranged in a different order. Namely, in Wang Bi, the treatment of *wei* precedes that of *zhi*, whereas in the *Wenzi*, the opposite scenario is the case. This adduces further evidence that the existence of a copy of the *Laozi* featuring the line *bu ke zhi* 不可執 in Chapter 29 (or its early counterparts) was rather unlikely.

With this in mind, I return to the discussion of that chapter in the next section.

## 7. Laozi 29 Revisited

The foregoing discussion showed that attempts to interpret or reconstruct the first part of *Laozi* 29 using IPS either did not yield compelling results or were not supported by textual evidence. Does this mean that this chapter contains no IPS? To answer this question, let us take a look at it again (this time in its entirety<sup>43</sup>):

	Rhyme	
1 將欲取天下而為之，		For those who would like to take over the world and act on it —
2 吾見其不得已。		I see that with this they simply will not succeed.
3 天下神器，		The world is a sacred vessel;
4 不可為。	哥	It cannot be acted upon.
5 為者敗之，	月祭	Those who act on it destroy it,
6 執者失之。		Those who grasp it lose it.
7 夫物		Now, as for the things:
8 或行或隨，	哥	Some go forward and some follow,
9 或噓或吹，	哥	Some breathe slow and some breathe fast,
10 或強或羸，	哥	Some are strong and some are weak,
11 或接或隳。	哥	Some are continued and some are destroyed.
12 是以聖人		This is why, the sage
13 去甚，去奢，去泰。	月祭 <sup>44</sup>	Removes the extreme, removes the extravagant, the excessive.
(Zhu 2000, p. 115)		

First, it seems that the first two occurrences of *wei* 為, that is in “act on it” (*wei zhi* 為之) (line 1) and “It cannot be acted upon” (*bu ke wei* 不可為) (line 4) correlate. Therefore, the opening of the chapter deals with the unfeasibility of action in regard to the world (lines 1–4).<sup>45</sup> Thus, the fact that the latter phrase is not juxtaposed with *bu ke zhi* (*ye*) 不可執(也) does not imply at all that *Laozi* 29 was incomplete.

In view of this, the two parallel sentences addressing the issue of “acting” and “grasping” (lines 5 and 6) can be understood as explication (by depicting the negative results of acting) as well as expansion (by addressing the harmful implications of grasping) of the foregoing discussion. The resulting small-scale list of impermissible actions and their deplorable outcomes appears to correspond to the “catalogue” of “things” (*wu* 物) and their ways of existence listed further below in lines 7–11. Indeed, these two “lists” similarly mention negative examples in the second position and feature close end-rhymes.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, even though lines *wei zhe bai zhi* 為者敗之 and *zhi zhe shi zhi* 執者失之 have exact counterparts in *Laozi* 64, thus creating a cross-reference to that chapter<sup>47</sup>, they are not necessarily linked by juxtaposition, as it is the case in the latter.

## 8. Conclusions

In the present paper, I follow Rudolf Wagner in arguing that IPS can be a powerful tool for uncovering aspects of meaning in early Chinese texts which emerge from the spatial arrangement of the argument. At the same time, I contend that overemphasizing IPS can be just as counterproductive to text interpretation as not recognizing the presence of this structure. As for the attempts to reconstruct the “original” reading of the *Laozi* based on parallelism or IPS, they are problematic for several reasons. To begin with, there is a general assumption that there was an *urtext*, often, as a superior version, where textual and structural ambiguities were not present and logical connections were all laid bare. However, recent scholarship on the manuscript literature shows that efforts to establish the ideal “original” version run counter to conventions in early China, where it was common for texts to exist in various (equally valid and accepted) versions (Hein 2019, pp. 55–58). In the case of the *Laozi*, as some studies suggest, endeavors to create an authoritative edition were undertaken only after the text had reached a certain degree of influence during the Western Han dynasty and came to be instrumentalized politically (Ding 2017, p. 177). Furthermore, parallelism constitutes only one (albeit important) aspect of literary composition. Thus, a textual sequence which might seem problematic from the standpoint of parallelism or IPS might be intact from a thematic point of view. After all, its ostensible incompleteness might have been deliberate to make a specific point. This shows that in view of the multifaceted nature of texts attempts at textual reconstruction which are not supported by textual evidence are bound to remain speculative regardless of how sound the ideas informing them might appear.

As I argued above, neither the *Wenzi* nor Wang Bi’s commentary provide compelling evidence for the appearance of the sentence *bu ke zhi* 不可執 in *Laozi* 29. Certainly, they demonstrate that the tendency to interpret the beginning of this chapter in light of the juxtaposition between *wei* 為 and *zhi* 執 (akin to the one found in Chapter 64) gained currency already among some of the earliest exegetes of the work. Yet, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the sentence appeared only in these two writings, which heavily relied on IPS. Therefore, its presence can only be taken as evidence for their authors’ strict adherence to IPS. Exegetic endeavors of Chapter 29 should take this into account.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For main positions in the Chinese interpretation of the text, see (Robinet 1999, pp. 130–54). For an overview of the Western reception of the *Laozi*, see (Hardy 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> On chapter divisions in the text, see (Henricks 1982; Han 2012, pp. 210–13; Ding 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Even the excavated Guodian materials, which are significantly divergent from the transmitted editions in wording and structure, are still “remarkably close to those we find in the received *Daodejing*” (Cook 2012, p. 198). On the two main positions regarding the connection between the Guodian manuscripts and the transmitted text, see (Shaughnessy 2005, pp. 445–52).
- <sup>4</sup> See (Liu 1997, pp. 23–32; Wagner 2000, pp. 53–96; 2003a; Gentz 2015, pp. 118–28; Michael 2015, 2021; Lebovitz 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> Wagner (2000, p. 62). This form of parallelism should be distinguished from “double-directed parallelism”, examples of which were studied by Gentz (2015, pp. 118–28). While some scholars, most notably Michael (2015, p. 134; 2021, p. 57), view IPS as indicative of the oral origin of the *Laozi*, I refrain from any definitive conclusions in this regard in the present study. However, as will be partly shown below, some cases of IPS demonstrate such a high degree of structural complexity and intricacy that it appears doubtful that oral transmission would be a suitable means to convey the meaning resulting from the interplay of different structural elements.
- <sup>6</sup> On how parallel passages in the *Laozi* were increased in the course of its transmission, see (Liu 2003, pp. 359–63; 2014, p. 43).

- For brief introductions of Heshang Gong's commentary, see (De Meyer 2004, pp. 72–74; Barrett 2008, pp. 619–20; Tadd 2020, pp. 104–7). For Wang Bi's version and commentary, see (Boltz 1993, pp. 277–78; Robinet 2008).
- According to Wagner (2000, pp. 91–94) there is also another variant of IPS in the *Laozi*, which received the designation “binary series”. This form of textual arrangement allows a piece to contain a larger number of argumentative and/or thematic strands than just three, as shown here.
- The subject of the third sentence varies across different editions of the *Laozi*. In the two Mawangdui 馬王堆 versions, it is the “people” (*min* 民) (Gao 1996, p. 235). In the Beida 北大 manuscript, as well as the text annotated by Heshang Gong, this role is played by the notion “heart” (*xin* 心) (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 145; Wang 1993, p. 10). In Wang Bi's version, we find a combination of the two characters: “the heart of the people” (*min xin* 民心) (Lou 2008, p. 8). The philosophical implications of these variations are significant, focusing on either internal or external manifestations of disorder (Liu 2006, p. 116).
- On the interpretation of this passage, see (Lou 2008, p. 9, note 4).
- Compare translation in (Chan 1991, p. 73; Lynn 1999, pp. 55–56; Wagner 2003a, p. 129).
- Wang (1993, p. 10). For translation, see (Erkes 1945, p. 133; Chan 1991, p. 133).
- Translation adapted from (Henricks 1992, p. 244).
- Chen (1970, p. 126n5) identifies his influences in regard to this view as Liu Shippei 劉師培 (1884–1919) and Yi Shunding 易順鼎 (1858–1920).
- Despite its apparent problems, this rendition of the text came to be accepted by some contemporary scholars, such as Charles Wu in his translation of the work (Wu 2016, p. 66).
- Compare translation in Chen (1981, p. 159).
- Unlike Liu Shippei, Yi Shunding also refers to the IPS passage from Chapter 64 to corroborate his view.
- Here, Chen (1970, p. 127n6) says to be following Xi Tong 奚侗 (1878–1939).
- It is noteworthy that in the Guodian manuscripts, they are to be found in the two documents, commonly designated as the Guodian *Laozi* A and C. For differences in their wording, see (Henricks 2000, pp. 43–44, 120–22). On different thematic concerns of textual units constituting Guodian *Laozi*, see (Henricks 2000, pp. 6–8; Cook 2012, pp. 219–23).
- Note that the second edition of the *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子註譯及評介, which already discusses Mawangdui manuscripts, still retains this modification (Chen 1988, p. 183). This implies that Chen changed his opinion only after the discovery of the Guodian *Laozi*.
- For a juxtaposition of the excavated versions, see (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 201).
- Compare translation in Chen (2020, p. 198).
- Wang Shumin 王叔岷 (Wang 2007, p. 469) and Roth (2010, p. 71) both amend an unmarked quotation of this passage in the first chapter of the *Huainanzi* by adding *bu ke zhi ye* based on the idea of “parallelism”.
- This view is espoused by Liu Shippei, Yi Shunding (as quoted in Chen 1970, p. 126n5) and He Ning 何寧 (He 1998, pp. 72–73).
- Compare translation in Lynn (1999, p. 105) and Wagner (2003a, pp. 217–18).
- According to Wang Bi, the impossibility of any interventionist measures regarding the entities populating the world is rooted in their respective “constant nature”, which cannot be changed and is to be followed. Doing so will naturally bring about “preestablished harmony”, which is “encoded” into the nature of things. For more, see (Wagner 2003b, pp. 110–11, 130, 160).
- Even Wagner, who maintains that the text which Wang Bi once commented was different from the text to which his commentary is attached now, calls this possibility “remote” (Wagner 2003a, p. 454).
- Note that Wang Bi did not attempt to underscore the affinity between *qu* and *zhi* in his commentary to this passage. In fact, the meaning of *qu* was not elucidated there at all. This casts additional doubts on the validity of Wagner's arrangement of the passage.
- On studies comparing the two *Wenzi* versions, see (Ho 1998; Ding 1999a, 1999b; Zhang 2007; Van Els 2018).
- In view of the prominent role of the person and the text *Laozi* in the transmitted *Wenzi*, some scholars view the latter as a commentary to the foundational work of Daoism. See (Jiang 1983). On a comprehensive list of the correspondences between the transmitted editions of the *Laozi* and *Wenzi*, see (Ding 1999a, pp. 175–83).
- On the question of the *Wenzi* protagonists, see (Fech 2015).
- Lau (1992). Compare a slightly different version in (Wang 2000, pp. 233–34).
- The character *jian* 見 in the phrase to “see the small” can be also read as *xian* in the meaning “to appear”, yielding the translation to “appear small”. For this translation, see (Lévi 2012, p. 204; Van Els 2018, pp. 62–63).
- Compare translation in Cleary (1992, p. 68).
- For the parallels between this passages and other early texts, see (Ho et al. 2010, pp. 139–41).



- <sup>36</sup> The main difference concerns the subject of the passage. In the transmitted *Wenzi*, it is the kings of antiquity, while the *Xiaojing* addresses *zhuhou* 諸侯, the feudal lords. For the Chinese text and English translation, see (Rosemont and Ames 2009, p. 106).
- <sup>37</sup> The notion “grasping the One” can be found only in the excavated versions of Chapter 22. In the transmitted versions, it is replaced through “embracing the One” (*bao yi* 抱一). On the different connotations of these two metaphors, see (Behuniak 2009).
- <sup>38</sup> Mukai (2001, pp. 758–60) cites as many as twenty Dingzhou fragments of the *Wenzi* which, while showing proximity to the *Laozi*, are never identical to it. See also (Van Els 2015, pp. 327–28).
- <sup>39</sup> For a comparison with the status and use of the *Laozi* in the *Huainanzi*, see (Le Blanc 1985, p. 84).
- <sup>40</sup> For some in-depth discussions of the topic, see (Li 1995; Ding 1999b, pp. 238–40; Zhang 2004, 2007, pp. 110–18).
- <sup>41</sup> The notion “grasping the One” appears in a large number of the texts from the late pre-Qin and early imperial eras, including the *Laozi*. On the “Legalist” connotations of this term, see (Behuniak 2009, p. 366).
- <sup>42</sup> Note that the *Laozi* is sometimes regarded as a critical response to the *Shijing* 詩經, as the “anti-Shi”, meaning that “the poetics of the *Laozi* tradition developed in direct opposition to *Shi* poetics” (Hunter 2021, p. 115). For an example of “double-directed parallelism” in the *Shijing*, see (Gentz 2015, pp. 116–18).
- <sup>43</sup> Note that, in the Beida manuscript, the sentence “great cutting does not sever” (*da zhi wu ge* 大制無割), which in the received versions closes the preceding Chapter 28, is placed at the beginning of this chapter (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 北京大學出土文獻研究所 [The Institute for Research of the Excavated Documents of the Peking University] 2012, p. 158).
- <sup>44</sup> Rhymes in this passage were identified based on Jiang Yougao 江有誥 (1773–1851) (Jiang 1993, p. 9b), Lau and Ames (1998, p. 122) and Zhang (2010, p. 145).
- <sup>45</sup> In a similar way, Heshang Gong interprets *wei zhi* 為之 as to “wish to govern the people by means of action” (*yu yi youwei zhi min* 欲以有為治民 (Wang 1993, p. 118. Compare translation in Erkes 1945, p. 175). The subsequent *bu ke wei ye* 不可為也 is then explained as “they cannot be governed by means of action” (*bu ke yi youwei zhi* 不可以有為治) (*ibid.*), thus establishing a connection between the two instances of *wei* 為.
- <sup>46</sup> There are multiple examples of “irregular” rhymes between characters belonging to the rhyme groups Ge 歌 and Yue 月 in early Chinese philosophical works. For the examples in the *Huainanzi*, see (Zhang 2010, pp. 93–94).
- <sup>47</sup> For some examples, see (Liu 2003, pp. 356–59).

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