

Article

A Philosophy of Moderation: The “Center” as an Interpretive Key to the Lao–Zhuang Texts

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Abstract: The “center” is a key concept in early Chinese philosophy. While readings of the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 often rely on concepts of “nature” and the “natural”, this article proposes the “center” as an interpretive key that informs discussion of contemporary issues while remaining faithful to the core concerns of the texts. While both texts use the “center” to promote a philosophy of moderation, in the *Laozi*, “holding to the center” (*shou zhong* 守中) refers to a focus on one’s inner center to counteract the dangers of the external, whereas the *Zhuangzi* speaks of a centeredness between inner cultivation and outward socialization. In the *Laozi*, we examine images of one-, two- and three-dimensional centers as well as the bodily practice of focusing on the inner stomach rather than the outward-looking eyes. Our discussion of the *Zhuangzi* focuses on occupying the “center” (*zhongyang* 中央) between extreme inward and outward modes of being. The result is a philosophy of moderation that fosters a sense of humility, balance, and impartiality, cautioning against a drive for overreaching solutions for all humanity, and tempering attempts to conform to extreme “naturalness” or reject all “artificiality”.

Keywords: center; moderation; Daoism; *Laozi*; *Zhuangzi*; *nei* 內; *wai* 外; *shou zhong* 守中



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1. Introduction

This article aims to show how the concept of “center” can be used to convey core elements of the philosophies of the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子, providing a framework to inform discussion on contemporary issues while remaining faithful to the native concerns of the texts. There is a rich discourse in applications of Lao–Zhuang 老莊 thought to contemporary issues such as technology and environment that often use “nature” or the “natural” as interpretive keys (see, e.g., [Parkes 2003, 2013](#); [Allen 2010](#); [Jin and Spence 2016](#); [Nelson 2009, 2021](#)).¹ Scholars have also cautioned against interpreting the Lao–Zhuang texts as expressing concern for “nature” ([D’Ambrosio 2013, 2023](#)) or “ecology” ([Goldin 2005](#)) in the sense that we mean these terms today.² These criticisms create space for finding new interpretive keys to the Lao–Zhuang texts that have the capacity to embed them in discourse on contemporary issues while drawing key concepts directly from the texts. Here, we propose the concept of “center” as one that can encompass several core concerns of the text—moderation, stillness, emptiness, and the interplay of opposites—all of which can speak to contemporary concerns.³ Grasping these key Daoist ideas can help to promote social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, as well as personal and organizational longevity.

The “center” as a key concept by which to understand the Lao–Zhuang texts is underexamined, especially in English language scholarship. There are some treatments of the center and its relationship to the whole in understanding Daoist thought. Brook [Ziporyn \(2003\)](#) describes the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* as presenting an “omnicentric holism”, stating that “each point in any whole is a center of that whole, such that each one adequately represents, perceives, includes the whole” (35). Ziporyn’s discussion does not

pose an objective perspective that observes “nature” and humanity situated within it. By contrast, he notes that:

a thing *is* a perspective. Each thing has a view of the world, a distinctive perspectival relationship to all other things. (Ziporyn 2003, p. 46)

Crucially, Ziporyn’s treatment poses the ontological primacy of the centered perspective in contrast to the objective reality of a thing viewed from an objective perspective. He states, from a Zhuangzian perspective, “My world includes only what exists from my perspective, and yet it includes a you, an other perspective, in contrast to which I define myself” (46). Hans-Georg Moeller (2007) emphasizes the experiential and political importance of the center in the *Laozi*. He emphasizes that, even where the “center” is the locus of the person (sage), it is inseparable from the periphery, and thus the focus pertains not narrowly to that center but to the combination of inner center and outer periphery. He writes on *Laozi* 11:

A center needs a periphery to be a center. Daoism is not one-sidedly focused on emptiness or nothingness. It is only one (but literally the central) aspect of the Dao that cannot be isolated. Together emptiness [of the center] and fullness [of the periphery] bring about benefit and perfect use. (26)

This mirrors an important aspect of our approach. We wish to illuminate not only the importance of the center—the locus of the sage in *Laozi* 11—but the importance of balance and centeredness between opposites, including between inner center and outer periphery.

The Lao–Zhuang texts are often spoken of as promoting a non-anthropocentric worldview (Moeller 2015a; Perkins 2015, pp. 64–65) or “de-centering” the reader’s perspective (Sarafinas 2020). While we do not disagree with these readings, we hold that a prerequisite to appreciating other perspectives is a profound reckoning of our own centered perspective. An awareness of the fact that we occupy a perceived center of the world is an important facet of the texts. Far from entailing an anthropocentric or egocentric arrogance, drawing awareness to ourselves as centers of our perceived worlds increases awareness of the multicentered constitution of our collective worlds. To illustrate this point, let us examine the series of questions put by Wang Ni 王倪 in the “Qiwulun” 齊物論 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, that begins as follows:

When humans sleep in a damp place, they wake up deathly ill and sore about the waist—but what about eels? If humans live in trees, they tremble with fear and worry—but how about monkeys? Of these three, which “knows” what is the right place to live? (2.11; Ziporyn 2020, pp. 18–19)⁴

This passage continues by asking parallel questions regarding the eating and mating preferences of humans and other species. While this passage is indeed “indicative of Daoist epistemological non-anthropocentrism” (Moeller 2015a, p. 101), this decentering requires that humans reflect on our own preferences as a basis for considering those of other species. Insofar as “anthropocentrism” refers to value being human-centered (Kopnina et al. 2018), Daoist centering does not lead to anthropocentrism but rather an appreciation that the human perspective is just one amongst many.

As this article aims to show, when awareness is drawn to ourselves as centers in the Lao–Zhuang texts, it does not foster a sense of privilege, but rather promotes moderation. The recommendation of the *Laozi* to hold to one’s center is a means of discouraging out-reaching ambition and desire. The promotion in the *Zhuangzi* of centeredness between inward and outward modes of being encourages a harmonious mode of interaction with one’s environment. Although the two texts reveal different emphases, their uses of the center are united by a philosophy of moderation. While the centeredness of the human in the *Laozi* refers primarily to holding to one’s inner center to counteract the dangers of the external, the *Zhuangzi* speaks of a centeredness that is between inner cultivation and outward socialization.

While the scope of the present article is restricted to presenting this interpretive framework, the motivation of our research is its applicability to contemporary concerns. We hope

that future research can demonstrate how the notion of “center” can draw philosophical insights from the Lao–Zhuang texts to speak to contemporary issues such as human relationships with technology and with our environment(s) in an alternative framework to those commonly utilized, such as the natural/artificial dichotomy.

2. Holding to the Center in the *Laozi*

2.1. Positioning the Human in the *Laozi*

We wish to preface our exploration of the concept of center in the *Laozi* by posing the view that the *Laozi* focuses primarily on an individually centered human perspective in contrast with an objective perspective of “humanity” or “mankind”. While the *Laozi* aims to view things from a “macroscopic” perspective (Chen and D’Ambrosio 2020), it does not do so by stepping outside of the individual perspective but by broadening it.

In the received Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE) version of the *Laozi*, there are 85 instances of the term “person” or “people” (*ren* 人), and all of these can be seen as treating an individual perspective rather than denoting humanity as a whole. The term “person” is used to refer to a specific kind of person, such as the sage or the ruler (e.g., Chapters 2, 3, 5),⁵ or to a group of people viewed from the ruler’s perspective (e.g., Chapters 8, 20, 42, 59, 68). It can also refer to how individuals interact with their surroundings (e.g., Chapter 12, discussed below). Some instances describe typical human behavior (e.g., Chapters 57, 76), but these focus on—from the political leader’s perspective—how people tend to act, and do not imply an idea of “humanity” as part of the broader sphere of nature. Other characters that refer to a person, such as “I” or “me” (*wo* 我), further emphasize the individual perspective (e.g., Chapters 20, 42, 57).

The last lines of *Laozi* 25 are often interpreted as discussing “humanity” or “mankind” (see, e.g., Chai 2016; Small and Patt-Shamir 2022). We argue these are better understood as referring to the perspective of a person, specifically the political ruler.⁶ These lines read:

The person (*ren*) follows the earth,
The earth follows *tian*,
Tian follows the *dao*,
The *dao* follows its own unfolding (*ziran* 自然).⁷

Some readings of this “person” as referring to “humankind” take this passage as promoting “returning to living naturally” (see, e.g., Cooper 2014). Such a reading is, however, inconsistent with the preceding part of the chapter that lists the “great four” (*si da* 四大) as the king (*wang* 王), earth, sky, and *dao*. It seems safer to assume that the “king” here points to the political ruler than to suppose that mankind is “represented by the ‘king’” (cf. Small and Patt-Shamir 2022, p. 94). We do not consider this passage as promoting humanity emulating *ziran*, understood as “naturalness” (cf. Chai 2016, p. 269). The reflexive particle *zi* 自 in *ziran* refers back to that which is unfolding (*ran* 然). *Ziran* is thus not an essence or quality of nature that can be abstracted and emulated. Rather, it points back to the thing itself. Instead of creating a general plane that relates to all subjects, *ziran* signifies that the person, earth, sky, and *dao* each constitute their own centers. The statement “the people all say ‘I emerge of myself (*ziran*)’⁸ (Chapter 17) is not, we argue, about each person emulating a decentralized “naturalness”, but is about treating each person as a center from which they unfold.

Given the absence of an objectively viewed “mankind” or “humanity”, and the abundance of individual human perspectives such as that of the political ruler, we see the *Laozi* as presenting a human-centered perspective rather than a view of humanity within nature. Although this view is one that warrants further substantiation, we present it here to inform the reader of a core assumption of our interpretive approach to the text.

2.2. Holding to the Center in Three Dimensions

The fifth chapter of the *Laozi* recommends “guarding” or “holding to” the center (*shou zhong* 守中), a pronouncement that encapsulates many philosophical tenets of the text. Sev-

eral images and ideas in the text inform the rich implications of this phrase. Scholars point to its association with key notions such as *dao* 道 and *ziran* and attitudinal states such as “non-coercion” (*wuwei* 無為), “emptiness and stillness” (*xujing* 虛靜)⁹, and “suppleness” (*rouruo* 柔弱).¹⁰ Heshang Gong’s 河上公 (200–150 BCE) commentary on the recommendation to “hold to one’s center” suggests it is about protecting one’s “virtue” or “potency” (*de* 德), “using words sparsely” (*xi yan* 希言), and cultivating one’s “vitality and spirit” (*jing sheng* 精神)—the means for which is “cherishing [one’s] vital breath” (*ai qi* 愛氣).¹¹ Wang Bi considers this passage to be about “disposing of the self and acknowledging [external] things” (*qi ji ren wu* 棄己任物).¹²

In both Heshang Gong’s and Wang Bi’s commentaries, the “center” is the human subject. Somewhat paradoxically, Wang Bi’s comment brings focus to the self with a view to emptying the self. Aligned with Heshang Gong and Wang Bi’s descriptions, Donald Harper (1995) translates the phrase as “guarding the inside” and explains it as “attending to the physio-spiritual needs of the body, in preference to parading one’s intelligence and talent” (383). The phrase “holding to the center” should be viewed in connection with the statements that “the sky and earth are not humane” (*tian di bu ren* 天地不仁) and “the sage is not humane” (*sheng ren bu ren* 聖人不仁), which appear in the same chapter (Shen 2017). Neither the sky and earth nor the sage purposively interfere in people’s affairs, and the non-interference of *tian* acts as a guide for non-interference with one’s environment and non-interference in government.

As the locus of the human subject, the center takes on the meaning of “inner”, vis à vis the “outer” world. It is found in the inward direction of “self” rather than the outward direction of “things”. From the above interpretations, holding to the center also connotes a sense of moderation. It contrasts with recklessly expending one’s energies, parading one’s talents, and purposively interfering. In parallel to these two aspects of center, *zhong* has two spatial meanings: “inner” and “middle” (Nie 2017).¹³ In English, the term “center” captures both spatial aspects—the center of a circle or sphere, for instance, represents both its innermost point and the middle of any diameter passing through it. The geometric aspects of “center” as a one-dimensional “middle” and an inward “center” correspond with the main philosophical connotations of “holding to the center” in the *Laozi*, namely, a moderation between extremes and an inward focus. In addition, the notion of “center” is closely connected to an empty space within something—another important image in the text. Drawing on several images and ideas in the text, we present the Laozian “center” in one-, two-, and three-dimensional terms and explore the connections between spatial and philosophical meanings.

2.2.1. One-Dimensional Center

The *Laozi* promotes maintaining a balanced position and avoiding extremes. While there is no description of a line image in the *Laozi*, the center between two extremes can be understood in terms of the middle point on a line. In this regard, “holding to the center” is finding this balanced center between extremes. A center is not a tangible object but rather a point that is defined by the inward direction along a line. Thus conceived, holding to the center involves moving inward towards the central point. Once having moved past the center travelling in one direction, the center comes to be in the opposite direction and one’s movement should reverse.

Chapter 40 states that “reversal is the movement of the *dao*”, upon which Wang Bi notes that pairs of opposites give rise to one another—“lowness is the basis of highness” (高以下為基) and what is “humble is the basis for what is noble” (貴以賤為本). Chapter 2 illustrates how several such pairs of opposites interact. As Roger Ames and David Hall (Ames and Hall 2010) point out, the *Laozi* does not envisage static states:

Hot is “hot-becoming-cold”; hard is “hard-becoming-soft”. All conditions of experience are alloyed with their opposites [...]. The young grow old, the powerful become effete, the high are laid low. (243)

As their interpretation illustrates, in terms of movement from extremes towards the middle point on a line, holding to the middle point is not a static stance but an ongoing activity of moving between opposites.

The exchange between alternating polarities in the *Laozi* can be succinctly expressed using a phrase from *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, “when things develop to an extreme they become their opposite” (物極必反) (Li 2021, p. 39; see also Sarafinas 2023). This idea has roots at least as far back as the *Zhouyi* 周易. The “Qiangua” 乾卦, for instance, states that “The dragon, when he flies too high, becomes regretful” (Li 2021, p. 39). The “Wenyan” 文言 commentary explains that this regret is due to only knowing to advance but not to retreat.¹⁴ The “Xiang” 象 commentary on this line states how “fullness cannot be long lasting” (盈不可久也; Zhouyi 2011, p. 9). The sage, unlike the dragon flying too high, is aware of this inevitable tempering of extremes, knowing when to advance and when to retreat, when to gain and when to let go, and thus not losing her centeredness.

The notion of things giving way to their opposites when they develop to extremes is used in the *Laozi* to cultivate an attitude of, to use a phrase from the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, “being cognizant of danger while residing in safety” (居安思危) (Li 2021, p. 39). This is reflected, for instance, in Chapter 4, which recommends “blunting one’s sharpness”, indicating the need to temper a dangerously extreme state. When Chapter 28 promotes “guarding one’s femininity”, it does so in the context of “knowing one’s masculinity”, implying that preserving one’s femininity is carried out with a view to tempering, not eradicating, one’s masculinity. The *Laozi* thus emphasizes the dynamic interchange between opposites and warns against clinging to any extreme. The idea of “holding to the center”, one-dimensionally conceived, opposes an attitude that seeks singular notions of what is good, safe, or beneficial. The *Laozi* encourages a dynamic and balanced approach to life and governance, embracing the interplay of opposites and avoiding extremes.

2.2.2. Two-Dimensional Center

The character *zhong* 中 is often associated with a two-dimensional center (Zhu 2021, p. 68), a possible etymology being a pictogram depicting the bullseye of an archery target (Deng 1999, p. 82). The image of the wheel in Chapter 11 illustrates an important aspect of Daoist centeredness, one that is paralleled in the notion of *huanzhong* 環中 in the *Zhuangzi*, discussed later in this article. Holding to the center can be understood in two dimensions through the imagery of a circle. The center of the circle is inward from any point on its plane. The sage is likened to the hub at the center of a wheel, analogous to how the ruler is positioned at the center of a polity (Moeller 2007, p. 26).¹⁵ The wheel revolves around the hub which remains still. While the ruler—represented by the hub—resides at the center of society, the ministers—or spokes—act in various directions. To maintain the proper functioning of the wheel, the hub must not have excessive engagement with any particular direction, as to do so would cause the hub to become off-centered, and the wheel’s proper functioning to be compromised.

As for what this emptiness represents in terms of sagely action, we may return to the notion of “holding to the center” in Chapter 5, which is said to be superior to “much speech”. As the one giving orders, the ruler acts through speaking, and so speech (*yan* 言) denotes words that result in action. The phrase “using words sparsely” (*xi yan*) is paired with “self-emergence” (*ziran*) in Chapter 23, and in the context of the passage it seems to suggest a non-coercive approach.¹⁶ In political texts from the Warring States period (475–271 BCE), *zhong* is sometimes used to refer to the inner domain of the ruler.¹⁷ “Holding to the center” may imply attending to the ruler’s relationship with the ministers rather than issuing orders that concern a broader sphere. Similarly, Chapter 33 advises that horses remain in the fields located centrally in the state, rather than serve as warhorses on the frontiers. This suggests again that what is conducive to social wellbeing is a focus on that which is close at hand rather than perilous engagement with distant matters.

While the wheel metaphor primarily functions as a two-dimensional circle, it is important to recognize the wheel as a three-dimensional object. The emptiness of the hub is

a significant aspect of this image (Moeller 2007, p. 26) and can only be fully appreciated in three dimensions. It is the formlessness of the center that allows it to remain centered even as the forms around it move and change. If the supposed center were a substantive entity, it would potentially become displaced and thus would not be a constant center. To consider the importance of the empty center, we should consider three-dimensional centers in the *Laozi*.

2.2.3. Three-Dimensional Center

The centers of three-dimensional objects in the *Laozi* are significant not because they represent precise points but because they refer to an empty “inside” space, thus reflecting the meaning of *zhong* as “inner”. As with the two-dimensional center, the importance of not straying outward is a feature of the three-dimensional center. Our discussion is devoted to the emptiness of the space inside the three-dimensional objects, such as the bellows, the vessel, and the dwelling.

The character *chong* 冲, meaning “infusion”, “gushing through”, or “emptiness”, appears multiple times in the *Laozi* and is conceptually and etymologically related to *zhong* 中. Its meaning of “emptiness” is derived from its association with the character *zhong* 盅, meaning “vessel” (Deng 1999, p. 80). In Chapter 4, the empty vessel is likened to the *dao*, in that the *dao* can be used without depletion (Moeller 2007, p. 10). This emptiness is paradoxically likened to great fullness; as stated in Chapter 45, “Great fullness is like emptiness (*chong*)”. Excavated Warring States texts have shown that *chong* and *zhong* 中 were also sometimes used interchangeably (Bai 2008, p. 247). In the 16th chapter of the Guodian *Laozi*, the phrase “holding to the center (*zhong*)” is preceded by a mention of the “constancy of the utmost emptiness” (*zhi xu heng* 至虛恒).

The emptiness of three-dimensional objects allows for their functionality. It enables easy passage between the inner and outer and is the condition under which the external can be held by the internal. The emptiness of the bellows (Chapter 5) facilitates the flow of air in and out. The emptiness of the vessel (Chapters 11, 45, and, in most interpretations, 4) allows for the containment and movement of liquid. The empty doors and windows of a dwelling (Chapter 11) permit the passage of people, air, and light, while the dwelling itself, as an empty space, has the capacity to hold them. Emptiness in these images symbolizes impartiality, as it indiscriminately allows things to pass in and out. A focus on the internal is required for the process of emptying, which in turn improves one’s capacity to embrace the external. The following section explores how this “holding to the center” is manifest in our bodily experience.

2.3. The Inward Stomach and the Outward-Looking Eyes

Chapter 12 addresses the threat to personal wellbeing caused by an excess of sensory stimulation from external sources. The means of dealing with this is through holding to the center as a bodily practice. The chapter falls under the theme of “leaving that and taking this” (Zhang and Lang 2020, p. 55; Xi 2015, p. 110), prioritizing what is internal, or close by, over what is external, or distant. In this sense, it mirrors Chapter 3, which states that the bones of the people should be strengthened and their stomachs filled, giving preference to aspects of the body that pertain to the basic continuation of life; meanwhile, their hearts (*xin* 心) should be emptied and their wills (*zhi* 志) weakened, discouraging the filling or strengthening of those parts of the person that can lead to outward ambition and determination. In Chapter 12, the stomach represents “this”, while the eyes (and what is seen by them) represents “that”. The chapter reads:

Five colors make the eyes blind; five notes make the ears deaf; five flavors make the mouth unable to taste; hunting in the fields makes the heart-mind unhinged; things that are difficult to obtain make people act rashly. The sage therefore [acts] for the stomach and not for the eyes, thus leaving that and taking this.

The term “eyes” in the second instance represents not only the physical organ but sensory organs in general, and by extension, an outwardly directed attitude. This is contrasted

with the inward focus represented by the stomach.¹⁸ Heshang Gong interprets this chapter as related to the theme of “nourishing life” and titles it “Regulating Desires” (*jian yu* 检欲). He comments that, when *qi* becomes agitated and breathing becomes erratic, one’s vitality is dispersed, leading to an unhinged state. According to Heshang Gong, the extent to which we can maintain our vital energy determines our capacity to survive (Xi 2015, p. 110). This interpretation emphasizes guarding against losing to the outer that which is inner.

Wang Bi’s commentary on this chapter also emphasizes the relationship between the inner and outer. He states, “Acting for the stomach leads to things nourishing oneself; acting for the eyes leads to being enslaved by things”. This sentiment is reminiscent of the statement in Chapter 46 that there is no calamity greater than not “knowing what is enough” (*zhi zu* 知足). The character *zu* 足 can be translated as “enough” but also as “satisfaction”. The etymology of the character, which has the more basic meaning of “foot”, derives from the fact that the top component of the character *kou* 口 (“mouth”) is at the top of the body and serves as an entry point, while the lower component *zhi* 止 represents the bottom, or “stopping point” of the body (Zeng and Yang 2019, pp. 125–26). The “mastery of satisfaction” (*zhi zu*; Moeller 2006, pp. 87–98) is thus linked to things coming to rest within the body. Satisfaction is attained through the appreciation of stillness within the body and is disturbed by an excessive engagement with external stimuli.

From this analysis, we can observe that guarding the center and managing the inner and outer in the *Laozi* is a means of protecting an inner center in order to preserve safety and wellbeing. It aligns with an attitude of being cognizant of danger while residing in safety. This concept encompasses both the political aspect of tending to the inner sphere of the polity rather than interfering with external dangers and the personal aspect of safeguarding wellbeing against threats posed by external stimuli. We see here a philosophy of moderation that encourages cultivating awareness of the internal as a means to counter the dangers of the external.

From this exploration, we see that the Laozian philosophy of holding to the center is one of moderation, cautiousness, and an “empty” impartiality. While it draws attention to one’s own position as “center” of one’s world, the *Laozi* also recognizes the self-emergence of other beings from their centers, and encourages a non-coercive engagement with the world. While the text tends to show a preference for the inner over the outer, or “leaving that and taking this”, it is with an implicit understanding that an “outer” focus is more likely to generate an extreme than the focus on the inner. As we shall see, the *Zhuangzi* makes this sense of balance more explicit by providing a complimentary warning against an extreme inward focus.

3. Centered between the Inward and Outward in the *Zhuangzi*

The notion of “center” in the *Zhuangzi* conveys, primarily, as in the *Laozi*, a philosophy of moderation and impartiality.¹⁹ One characterization of the respective scopes of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* is that the former is a more overtly political text that addresses the challenges of the human world (*ru shi* 入世), while the latter considers also the possibility of retreat from the social realm (*chu shi* 出世) to live as a hermit (Gao 2021, p. 54). As our discussion aims to illuminate, we by no means take this distinction to be final or absolute.²⁰ Nonetheless, the distinction remains valid insofar as the *Laozi*, in our view, is a predominantly political text and thus operates with the subtext that a significant degree of interaction with external realities is implied. With regard to the center, the texts differ primarily in terms of expression rather than philosophical outlook. The *Laozi* does not deal explicitly with the allure of retreating into one’s center to a detrimental degree by disconnecting from the social world. Such threats to one’s survival and wellbeing are, however, given explicit consideration in the *Zhuangzi*. As a result, our primary focus with regard to the *Zhuangzi* is in the notion of centeredness between extremely inward and outward modes of being. First, however, we begin with some general considerations on the notion of center in the *Zhuangzi*.

3.1. Two Terms for “Center” in the *Zhuangzi*

Two binomial expressions capture the prime philosophical connotations of center in the *Zhuangzi*: *huanzhong* 環中 and *zhongyang* 中央.²¹ *Huanzhong* literally means “the center of a ring” and appears twice in the text. Circular movement revolving around an empty center acts as a metaphor for reality in Daoist texts (R. Wang 2015, p. 28) and *huanzhong* represents a great center that merges with all individual centers. One instance is in the “Qiwulun” chapter, where it refers to the “pivot” or “axis” (*shu* 樞) of the *dao*. The chapter states, “When this axis finds its place in the center (*huanzhong*), it responds to all the endless things it confronts” (2.5; trans. Ziporyn 2020, p. 15, edited). Its philosophical connotations are expressed more concretely in the “Zeyang” 則陽 chapter, which describes the sage-king Ranxiang 冉相 as someone who found such a center and “brought himself to completion by following along with whatever he encountered” (25.3; Ziporyn 2020, p. 209). Geometrically, the center of a ring resembles the two-dimensional center discussed above in relation to the *Laozi*. The idea of “following along with whatever he encountered” can be understood as being the hub of a wheel, so to speak, and engaging impartially with all directions. The center of the ring, as center of a multitude of linear diameters, simultaneously represents the one-dimensional center between extremes—as we see in “Qiwulun”, this center is place of neither “affirming” (*shi* 是) nor “denying” (*fei* 非) (2.5).

The term *zhongyang* can refer to a two-dimensional geometric center, such as the bullseye of an archery target (5.2). In other instances, *zhongyang* suggests the combination of opposites. For example, Huizi 惠子 describes, somewhat paradoxically, the “center” (*zhongyang*) of the world as “north of [northern] Yan 燕 and south of [southern] Yue 越” (33.7). Like the concept of *dao* as the center in the *Laozi*, the center is also an image of great vitality and power. The closing passage of the “Yingdiwang” 應帝王 (7.7) exemplifies this in its discussion of the great primordial Chaos (*hundun* 渾沌) as the Ruler of the Center (*zhongyang zhi di* 中央之帝), denoting the creationist myth of the world originating from a chaotic center (Girardot [1983] 1988, pp. 77–83). While the Ruler of the Center represents great vitality, its faceless image also suggests a kind of impartiality in that it is an “evasive, shapeless and impersonal entity” (Moeller 2017, p. 795).

Thus, we see that the general notion of “centeredness” in the *Zhuangzi* reveals, as in the *Laozi*, a philosophy of moderation between extremes and impartiality. The two instances of *huanzhong* denote the center of a ring, which encompasses the merging of individual centers with the center of the *dao*, expressing an impartiality between different perspectives or a “following along” with whatever one encounters. Mirroring also the emptiness in many of the images in the *Laozi* is the formlessness of the Ruler of the Center. In the following, we investigate a usage of *zhongyang* in the “Dasheng” 達生 chapter, which seems, at first, in contrast with the focus on the inner center of the *Laozi*. This use of *zhongyang* represents a center between the inner and the outer. However, it nevertheless expresses the same moderate centeredness of the *Laozi*.

3.2. Situating *Zhongyang* in the “Dasheng” Chapter

The usage of *zhongyang* in the “Dasheng” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* challenges the understanding of center as “inner”. Here, the term *zhongyang* refers to the central point between the innermost “center” and the outer periphery, the latter referring to an outward mode of social interaction.

Balancing one’s focus on inner cultivation, the *Zhuangzi* emphasizes the importance of maintaining an appropriate degree of engagement with the external world. This balance is exemplified with the juxtaposition of the tales of Shan Bao 單豹 and Zhang Yi 張毅 in “Dasheng”. Shan Bao is a hermit who isolates himself from society, living among the rocky cliffs and drinking only water (19.5). As a result, he maintains the complexion and physical freshness of a child. This would seem conducive to his longevity, if it were not for the fact that he one day encounters a hungry tiger that kills and eats him. This story is juxtaposed with the tale of Zhang Yi 張毅, who spends forty years knocking at the doors of nobles

and participating in social gatherings. Eventually, Zhang Yi falls ill from this lifestyle and dies (19.5).

Tiankaizhi 田開之 summarizes these events in a conversation with Zhongni 仲尼 (Confucius), stating that Shan Bao nourished his internality (*nei* 內) while a tiger consumed his externality (*wai* 外), whereas Zhang Yi nurtured his externality, leading to an illness attacking his internality (19.5). In response, Zhongni remarks that one should neither retreat so much that they become hidden nor proceed outward to the point of being vibrant. Instead, one should be like a withered tree standing in the center (*zhongyang*) (19.6).²² This discussion of *zhongyang* emphasizes that moderation is not attained by rigidly guarding one's inner center but is rather attained through an impartial mode of balancing inward and outward foci.

3.2.1. The Outwardness of the Socialite

Zhang Yi represents being attached to the external aspects of life. He focuses on cultivating his physical appearance and seeks connections with nobles and powerful individuals (Guo 1961, p. 646). His lifestyle is characterized by actively seeking out “every rich family and fancy mansion he could find” (19.5; Ziporyn 2020, p. 152). While he may not have to worry about hungry tigers like the hermit Shan Bao, societal roles and expectations bring their own subtle dangers that threaten his wellbeing. Another example in “Dasheng”, of a figure too focused on the external, is the archer. He is skillful when shooting to win a tile, nervous when trying to win a silver buckle, and loses his mind when competing for gold, showing how, “whenever the external is prized, the internal gets clumsy” (19.4; Ziporyn 2020, p. 151). The external here represents wealth, prestige, power, and fame—the goods of the social world. When the thoughts of social success arise within the archer, he loses his internal mastery over his body and over the task at hand. The “Renjianshi” 人間世 chapter contains another story that represents the dangers of outward social engagement: Zigao 子高, Duke of She (*she gong* 葉公), is sent as an envoy to the State of Qi 齊 (4.3). He seeks advice from Confucius, expressing his anxiety about the risks of his mission and the imbalanced state of his internal *yin* and *yang*. He recognizes how outward success leads to increased psycho-physiological stress, affecting his internal balance and potentially resulting in a deadly illness. He is caught in a dilemma in which, by focusing solely on the internal, he neglects his social responsibilities, while by focusing on external success, he causes his internal balance to deteriorate further.

In early China, where external appearance held political significance, the body was crucial to social roles and acceptance, and mutilation was, for this reason, a common punishment during the Warring States period (Fu 1993, p. 109). The “Dechongfu” 德充符 chapter features a dialogue between Shentu Jia 申徒嘉, a one-footed ex-convict, and Zichan 子產, the prime minister of Zheng 鄭 (5.2). Despite being fellow students under the same master, Zichan distances himself from the disfigured Shentu Jia, expecting him to wait behind and let him exit the classroom first. This can be seen as a critique of those who excessively prioritize external appearances, along with the social benefits (or ramifications) that go along with those appearances. Juxtaposed with the treatment of those with disabilities in “Dechongfu” as possessing great vitality despite their deformities, Zichan's idea that external form (*xing* 形) necessarily reflects actuality (*shi* 實) and the idea that external appearance determines one's internal charismatic and social power (*de* 德) is challenged.²³ However, as we shall see in the following, the *Zhuangzi* does not advocate for an extreme valuing of the internal. The text presents a perspective that emphasizes the need for moderation and highlights the dangers of excessive attachment to either the external or internal.

3.2.2. The Inwardness of the Hermit

The hermit Shan Bao might in some respects be regarded as an emblem of cultivating the internal aspects of life. He lives in harsh conditions, isolating himself from society, and yet maintains the qualities of an infant even after seventy years. These are characteristic traits of a *yangsheng* sage, someone who practices self-cultivation techniques to preserve

the vitality of the body and achieve longevity. As Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (fl. 631–655 CE) explains, Shan Bao is an ascetic hermit with few desires, pure and empty, who cultivates his “internal vitality” (*neide* 内德) (Guo 1961, p. 646). The lifestyle of the *yangsheng* sage includes specific physical exercises to promote a free circulation of *qi* 氣 in and out of the body as well as avoidance of those anxieties and expectations that life in society imposes on the individual (Michael 2015; see also Dear 2012).²⁴

While those skilled in *yangsheng* techniques are generally lauded in the *Zhuangzi*, they are not portrayed as models of the highest wisdom (see Moeller 2015b; Perkins 2019). Shan Bao’s demise, being eaten by a tiger, serves as an ironic critique of the *yangsheng* sage’s pursuit of longevity. It suggests that an excessive focus on cultivating the internal at the expense of care for the external can lead to unbalanced and extreme practices. Shan Bao’s isolation from humanity highlights the issues faced by *yangsheng* sages who neglect the external, including human relations and social roles. Playing a role in society does not necessarily mean excessively valuing the external but is a feature of a moderate and balanced existence.

In contrast to the hermit, the most positive emblems of mastering the internal are those who strike a balance between internal and external foci. These include performers of physical work such as carpenters, butchers, gardeners, swimmers, and fishers. They do not narrowly pursue eremitic practices nor excessively value external appearances. Instead, they engage in practices that simultaneously promote equanimity, health, peace, skillfulness, and active participation in society. The people with disabilities in the “Dechongfu” chapter are emblems of effective socialization (Moeller 2015b, pp. 77–79). Given that they are denied the kind of external appearance that would allow them to move up within the ranks of society, they have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. They therefore do not excessively prize the external, and this is conducive to their living in society and playing a role within it.

A distinction is worth noting between those in the “Renjianshi” and “Dechongfu” chapters who have been born deformed (Shu 疏, Ai Taituo 哀駘它, and the people with disabilities at the end of “Dechongfu”) and those who are deformed as a result of punishment (Wang Tai 王駘, Shentu Jia, and Shu Shan 叔山). While those punished can only look to personal cultivation to release themselves from an attachment to an external social realm from which they have been intentionally excluded, those who were deformed by *tian* are still allowed to play an active role in society, in which they often excel. Shu, “the Discombobulated” (Ziporyn 2020), makes enough to feed ten men by sewing, washing, and pounding the divine sticks for the people and Ai Taituo is so successful that he is offered the role of prime minister by Duke Ai of Lu 魯哀公. These figures, made disabled by *tian*, illustrate an ideal relationship between the inner and outer realms of the individual.²⁵ They represent a healthy form of social efficacy that emerges effortlessly due to having let go of aspirations to fully align personal virtue with societal values (Moeller 2015b, p. 79). Those with disabilities thus abide at the center, striking a balance between the outwardness of social life and the inwardness of individual life.

3.3. Finding the Center at the Periphery

The balance between the internal and the external in the *Zhuangzi* can be illustrated by one potential etymology of the character *yang* 央: a man carrying a balanced load hanging from two baskets on either side of a pole centered on a person’s shoulders (Zhu 2021, p. 67). This image suggests a dynamic middle, a center of balance. If one is partial to a particular basket and moves towards it, the equilibrium will be disrupted, causing the pole and both baskets to fall. This is the case for both Shan Bao and Zhang Yi—their clinging to the internal and external, respectively, caused not only their loss of one but led to their total demise. Avoidance of such harm can be achieved by balancing these inward and outward modes of existence. As we have seen above, those with disabilities can be seen as achieving this balance. Another set of figures who achieve this are those skilled in an art or craft.

The lauding of craftsmen, workers, and swimmers suggests that our sense of self is not located deep within ourselves but at the point of interaction with the external. This notion is illustrated, for instance, by the figure of a ferryman of extraordinary skill described in “Dasheng” (19.4). Confucius identifies the root of his skill, much like that of a skilled swimmer, as “forgetting the water” and thus not treating it as a source of anxiety (Fraser 2019, pp. 165–66). Later in the chapter, Confucius meets a swimmer who survives treacherous waters because he “follows the way of the water and does not attend to his private realm (*si 私*)” (19.10). Such lack of anxiety is possible when there is no distance between their “selves” and the water. Their selves are located at the meeting point between their inner selves and the water. While these stories of expert navigators of water emphasize not identifying too strongly with what is within, the woodcarver emphasizes not getting too attached to what is without. The carver practices fasting to quiet the mind and achieves a state of stillness where external concerns fade away (19.11). Unlike the archer, the carver does not anxiously attend to extraneous factors. However, he still maintains a certain level of awareness and intention to the external (Fraser 2019, p. 174), enough that he may perform his art.²⁶

These figures in the *Zhuangzi* represent an efficacious mode of being centered between inward and outward foci. According to the *Zhuangzi*, our sense of center is neither in the depths of ourselves nor in the distant allure of rewards but rather in tasks at hand—the meeting point between our inner centers and external environments. This serves as a compliment to the Laozian emphasis on holding to an inner center. The concept of “center” as it appears in both texts, however, conveys a philosophy of moderation and impartiality.

4. Concluding Remarks

We have proposed in this article taking the concept of “center” as key to understanding the core tenets of Lao–Zhuang philosophy. The *Laozi* emphasizes the importance of holding to an inner center, guarding against external threats, and counterbalancing a persistent and unavoidable engagement with the external. Protecting the center is part of a general attitude of being cognizant of danger while residing in safety, whether this danger relates to the political sphere, or to harm to our bodily wellbeing. The sage resides at the empty center, exhibiting impartiality towards all directions and this empty impartiality allows for the use of what is external. The *Zhuangzi* emphasizes centering oneself between inward cultivation and outward engagement with the social world. The “center” in the *Zhuangzi* is thus not the inner self, but the point of interaction with the outer world. Bringing one’s focus too far in either the inward or outward direction is detrimental to one’s safety and wellbeing. Reading the Lao–Zhuang with the “center” as a key motif thus provides a framework within which we may view a person’s interaction with their environment.

Future research is required to apply this framework to contemporary issues such as our relationships with the “natural environment” and the web of technology within which we are situated. For now, we venture three suggestions arising from a centered approach characterized by moderation and impartiality: (1) it promotes intellectual humility, as a centered perspective that brings awareness to the fact that the perspective from which any one of us speaks is just one perspective among many; (2) it promotes a cautious approach to issues by “holding to the center” rather than venturing extreme, overreaching, or domineering solutions; and (3) it promotes a balance between inward contemplation and outward engagement—a center between “navel-gazing” or “ivory tower” thinking on the one hand and “data-driven” decision making on the other. As a response to readings of the Lao–Zhuang texts that speak to ecological concerns or promote living in accordance with nature, we do not deny that these readings are possible. The moderate attitude promoted by the texts is indeed beneficial in facing our environmental crisis. However, this moderate attitude also tempers any approach that purports to have a solution for all humanity. Moreover, it provides caution to one who attempts to conform to an extreme form of “naturalness” that rejects all “artificiality”.

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Notes

- ¹ See also, e.g., Miller (2003) and Chai (2016) for dedicated discussions of Daoist philosophy and nature.
- ² We direct the reader also towards critical appraisals of reading contemporary notions of “nature” and “naturalism” into early Chinese philosophy more generally (Xie 2014; Brown and McLeod 2021; Z. Wang 2021).
- ³ Centeredness is a significant concept in early Chinese thought (Shen and Liao 2020), although it is often overlooked when bringing Chinese philosophy into English-language discourse. Fang (2015), for example, notes the absence of attention to the notion of *taiji* 太極 as “great center” (*da zhong* 大中) in translations of this term as “great ultimate” or “supreme ultimate”.
- ⁴ Section numbering for the *Zhuangzi* follows: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ⁵ Unless otherwise stated, chapter numbers refer to the standard Wang Bi 王弼 edition of the *Laozi* as can be found at: <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ⁶ Besides Chapter 25, there are other similar usages in which one might argue “humanity” is being spoken of in relation to nature, such as Chapter 23, “If the sky and earth cannot [act coercively for] a long time, how much less can a human (*ren*)?” This precedes a discussion of achieving “potency” or “virtue” (*de* 德), which indicates the capacity of the sage ruler. We therefore read *ren* here as referring to the individual (ruler) rather than to “humanity” contrasted with nature.
- ⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are our own.
- ⁸ This *wo* 我 is more often translated as “we” or “us” given that the term can refer to either the first person singular or plural. The meaning of the line is almost identical whether it is taken to be the speech of an individual member of the people or as an abstract representation of the people’s attitude generally. We choose the singular as it emphasizes the fact that “self-emergence” or “auto-generation” (Ames 2021, p. 124) of *ziran*. It is singular because the process of generation stems from the thing itself.
- ⁹ Although the characters *xu* 虛 and *jing* 靜 do not appear together as a binomial in the *Laozi*, they are commonly spoken of in commentary as a single Laozian notion and are strongly linked in Chapter 16, “To reach emptiness(*xu*)—this is the utmost. To keep stillness (*jing*)—this is control” (Moeller 2007, p. 41).
- ¹⁰ These views are summarized in Nie (2017) and Shen (2017).
- ¹¹ For all references to Heshang Gong’s commentary see the *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經 as found in the *Sibu congkan chubian* 四部叢刊初編, available at: <https://ctext.org/heshanggong> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ¹² For all references to Wang Bi’s commentary see the *Daode zhenjing* 道德真經 as found in *Zhengtong daoang* 正統道藏, available at: <https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ¹³ The received Wang Bi *Laozi* contains seven instances of the character *zhong* 中. One is in the phrase “holding to the center”, the meaning of which is explored in this article. The six others serve grammatical functions, some denoting “in” (Chapters 21 and 25) and the other meaning “middle” (Chapter 41).
- ¹⁴ The line reads: “Knowing to advance but not knowing retreat, knowing storing but not knowing depletion, knowing gain but not knowing loss. It is only the sage! Knowing advance and retreat, storing and depletion, and not losing his centeredness, it is only the sage!” (知進而不知退, 知存而不知亡, 知得而不知喪。其唯聖人乎! 知進退存亡而不失其正者, 其唯聖人乎!; Zhouyi 2011, p. 25).
- ¹⁵ This centeredness is reflected in how ancient Chinese maps, still found to be in use as late as the Ming 明 dynasty, depicted the territory of a kingdom as concentric realms emanating from the central position of the ruler (Mignolo 1995, pp. 219–20). For further discussion of the political significance of spatial centers in early China, see Lewis (2006, pp. 169–86) and A. Wang (2006, pp. 23–74).
- ¹⁶ There is a wide range of interpretations of the relationship between these phrases. Lau (1963) and Ames and Hall (2010) read it as saying that little speech is “natural”. Moeller (2007) and Ziporyn (2023) read *xi* 希 as “silent” rather than “little” or “sparse”.

Moeller preserves the ambivalence of the connection between the phrases *xi yan* and *ziran* while Ziporyn reads *ziran* as meaning the words are “left to themselves”. We read this line to mean that by not giving orders, the people under the ruler’s charge and their actions are allowed to emerge of themselves. See note 5, above, for further discussion of this passage.

- 17 See, for instance, the *Shenzi Fragments* #25 (Thompson 1979, p. 244), “tending to one’s inner domain (*zhi zhong* 制中) should be done according to ritual”.
- 18 See Michael (2005) for discussion of “prioritizing the stomach, the physical center of one’s person” in the context of this passage (74).
- 19 We treat the entire work of the *Zhuangzi* as a literary whole without asserting any claim regarding its authorship or its absolute philosophical coherency.
- 20 We see the Zhuangzian conception of self as more in line with Roth’s (2000) description of a blend of introvertive and extrovertive experience. While we read the *Laozi* as expressing a concern for political matters, this does not equate to negating all aspects of apolitical readings.
- 21 *Zhong* as a standalone character in the *Zhuangzi* has several usage types, but most of them lack philosophical significance. As in the *Laozi*, it can be a grammar particle meaning “in” or “middle”. Elsewhere it bears the meaning of “matching with” or “corresponding to”, as in 24.1.
- 22 Exactly what “stands in the center” between receding and proceeding is not entirely clear. Whether it refers to a “withered tree” (*gao mu* 槁木) or “firewood” (*chai mu* 柴木), traditional commentary highlights that it does not possess a particular intention (*wu xin* 無心) (Chen 2009, p. 513).
- 23 See Moeller (2015b, pp. 75–77) for this interpretation of cripples in “Dechongfu”.
- 24 Such techniques are also associated with the empty center of the bellows in Chapter 5 of the *Laozi* (Harper 1995).
- 25 There is also another inner/outer framework of interpretation in these chapters. Wang Tai, mentioned at the beginning of “Dechongfu” is said to compete with Confucius on the number of followers he is able to gather around him, despite the fact that he is an ex-convict. Here there is a distinction between what is “within” civil society and what is “without”. It is this inner/outer distinction that is referred to in “Dazongshi” 大宗師 when Confucius says, “these are men who roam outside the lines. I, on the other hand, do my roaming inside the lines”. (6.6; Ziporyn 2020, p. 60). For discussion on the inner/outer distinction in the *Zhuangzi* representing an “in-group and out-group”, see Sarafinas (2020).
- 26 See Jochim (1998) for a discussion of “self” that is not tied to “inwardness” (37–38).

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