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Yizhi Weishi: The Zhuangzi's View of Time for the Genuine Human and Its Modern Value

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Abstract: In modern society, Time is developing into a dominant force, with time anxiety, time poverty, and time tyranny becoming increasingly prevalent. The Genuine Human's "yizhi weishi" (以知为时, to take Understanding as composed of time), the concept of time found in the *Zhuangzi*, emphasizes the overall perception and active construction of characteristics of time, and offers the possibility of enhancing a proactive understanding of time. In the *Zhuangzi*'s perspective, time is not only continuous, infinite, and one-dimensionally linear, but also intermittent, finite, and cyclical. "Yizhi weishi" is intended to grasp these characteristics of time, to actively use and participate in the construction of time, which is the method of the "Genuine Human" for mastering time. For modern society, the "yizhi weishi" perspective of time enlightens people to harmonize their socially ordered time with the rhythms of nature, to reconstruct the vast connection between human beings and cosmic space with a contextualized concept of time, and to manage time from the perspective of "internal dynamics" rather than "external limitations". Such a perspective has important inspirational value for enhancing the quality of human life and improving the order of human production and existence.

Keywords: the *Zhuangzi*; Genuine Human; genuine understanding; yizhi weishi; reshaping of space-time



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1. Introduction

Marx said, "Time is the active existence of man, it is not only the measure of human life, but also the space of human development" (Marx 1979, p. 532). However, time in modern society is increasingly developing as the primary regulator, coordinator, and organizer of human action, with calendars and clocks turning into dominating forces (Sz-tompka 1993, p. 50). "Tyranny of time" (Lian 2021, p. 29), "time poverty" (Wang 2018, p. 67), and "time anxiety" (Chen 2016, p. 71) have become common concerns for modern people. The existence of these problems is certainly "a subjective feeling, but its attribution lies in the structural disorder and disorder jointly constructed by clock time and social time" (Yan 2021, p. 92). Clock time and social time conspire to achieve control over modern humans in terms of physical and social laws, respectively. However, they disregard the human capacity for subjective construction of time. Accordingly, T.P. Van Tienoven argues that the concept of personal time should be introduced (Van Tienoven 2019, p. 3). Personal time is a sense of time formed on the basis of grasping the physical and social laws "allowing the individual to be subject to these two temporal constraints while at the same time using and participating in the construction of time to some extent dynamically" (Yan 2021, p. 94). The solution to these problems is not only related to the improvement of the quality of life of modern people, but also to improvements in production and lifestyles of modern society. In this regard, there are many resources in both the West and China to reflect on, including, for example, Bergson's "duration", Mohism's "time cannot be captured", Confucianism's "acting in accordance with the times," and the *Zhuangzi*'s "taking Understanding as composed of time". Compared with the first three, which emphasize

conformity to the laws of time, the idea of *yizhi weishi* 以知为时, or “taking Understanding as composed of time” highlights humans’ subjective interaction with time.

For a long time, the *Zhuangzi*’s proposition of *yizhi weishi* (以知为时) has largely not been taken seriously and has even been misunderstood. In the sixth chapter, “The Great Source as Teacher,” it is stated that the ancient Genuine Human “took punishments as their own body, ritual as their wings, *yizhi weishi*, and virtuosity as sliding along”, and further that *yizhi weishi* arose for them only when the situation made it unavoidable” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 55). Some scholars have suggested that this paragraph mentioning punishment, ritual, understanding, and virtue together is “extremely unlike Zhuangzi’s thought, and even more contrary to the main theme of ‘The Great Source as Teacher’, so it should be deleted” (Chen 2014, p. 206), a sentiment with which A.C. Graham (1981), Robert Eno (2019), and others agree. Other scholars think that “understanding” should be understood as “wisdom,” and that *yizhi weishi* means “to examine the time and situation by virtue of wisdom” (Fang and Lu 1998, p. 180), or that the ancients “regarded wisdom as what is timely, there were things that he could not keep from doing” (Watson 1968, p. 122). Some scholars have even stated that the *Zhuangzi* “distances itself from the view of hyper-reality in time and space, transcends time and space, denies time and space, and is therefore a form of idealism” (Yang 1961, p. 32). As such, the proposition of *yizhi weishi* is easily overlooked in regard to the *Zhuangzi*’s Genuine Human. It is worth pointing out that even the monograph “*With Time: A Study of Zhuangzi’s View of Time*” (Wei 2022), which is claimed to be “the first systematic and in-depth study of Zhuangzi’s view of time in China”, does not deal with the proposition of “knowledge as time”.

In terms of a broader study of the *Zhuangzi*’s view of time, there is also room for further advancement. For example, David Chai (2014, pp. 361–77) distinguishes the *Zhuangzi*’s view of time into Dao-based time, cosmology-based time, and human-measured time. On this basis, Georg Northoff and Kai-Yuan Cheng (Northoff and Cheng 2019, pp. 1014–33) further subdivide the *Zhuangzi*’s human-measured time into cognition-based time and experience-based time that mediates between experience and cognition-based time on the one hand, and Dao-based time on the other. They use the story of Cook Ding dissecting an ox to demonstrate the process that connects the experience and cognition of time to the comprehension of Dao. These novel perspectives are useful for further research, but how does the *Zhuangzi* reconcile different levels of time? What is the contemporary value of studying these issues? *Zhuangzi*’s proposition of “*yizhi weishi*” deserves attention.

This paper starts from identifying the “understanding” (*zhi* 知) in *yizhi weishi*, then discusses the characteristics of “time” (*shi* 时) in the context of *yizhi weishi*, and explains the significance of *yizhi weishi* for the achievement of the “Genuine Human.” This will include the constructive implications for modern people to understand the relationship between social time and natural time, to resolve the structural disorder between social time and clock time, and to release humanity from the domination of time.

2. “Understanding” within the Concept of *Yizhi Weishi*

“Time gathers the richest diversity and the truest unity” (Wu 2006, p. 1). On one hand, time exists objectively and is expressed as the movement and change of matter; on the other hand, “the existence of time depends on human perception, the measurement of time depends on human activity, and the content of time depends on human thought” (Yu 2015, p. 12). Scholars who emphasize objectivity tend to examine the natural movement of the universe from the perspective of physics and develop a natural view of time. Scholars who emphasize subjectivity understand the human perception of time from a philosophical level and form a social view of time. In the *Zhuangzi*, the Genuine Human’s *yizhi weishi* view emphasizes the subjective perception and active construction of time from the perspective of the individual.

The *Zhuangzi* refers to the Genuine Human as *yizhi weishi*, that is, they take the subject’s perception rather than the object’s existence as the measure of time. In the *Zhuangzi*’s view, time can only achieve significance if it is perceived by the subject. Limited by life,

“the morning mushroom knows nothing of the noontide; the winter cicada knows nothing of the spring and autumn” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 4). The rhythm of time does not lay in the objective changes of natural time, but in the course of the development of the subject’s life. For example, “in southern Chu there is a tree called Mingling, for which five hundred years are as a single spring, and another five hundred years are as a single autumn. In ancient times there was even one massive tree whose spring and autumn were each eight thousand years long” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 4). The *Zhuangzi* believes that the important thing is to understand a temporally situated way of existence, expressed in the text using the four seasons. “Heaven and earth possess vast beauties but speak no words. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities but offer no opinions. Each of the ten thousand things is perfectly coherent but gives no explanation” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 175). Here life is presented from the perspective of heaven and earth using the four seasons. Another example states “when both Yin and Yang get overdeveloped, the four seasons do not arrive when they should, and the cold and hot do not achieve their harmony” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 89). This passage derives the *dao* of health such that one should not be overjoyed nor excessively angry from the four seasons. The passage “failure and success are nothing more than a passing sequence of cold and heat and wind and rain” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 235) uses the four seasons to describe the *dao* of life such that one can be “happy whether they succeed or fail.” The passage “spring and summer precede, autumn and winter follow; such is the sequence of the four seasons” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 111) derives the *dao* of society from the four seasons such that “the hierarchies of honored and lowly, first and following” are recognized. Likewise, “each of the four seasons has its own type of weather, but the sky grants favor to none, and thus does the year come into being” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 214) derives the *dao* of governing a state from the four seasons such that “the five bureaus of government have their different duties, but the ruler is not partial to any of them, and thus the state is well governed”. Therefore, Chen Guying comments “Zhuangzi’s knowledge does not focus on external objective knowledge, but on the internal feelings of the subject. He thinks that knowledge is to be implemented on the level of human life, to settle the inner life, so this kind of knowledge is the knowledge of subjectivity” (Chen 2014, p. 24).

However, if the subject’s perception is the only measure, it will inevitably fall into relativism. In fact, the “understanding” in the *Zhuangzi*’s *yizhi weishi* is not the general empirical knowledge of time, but the “Genuine Understanding” of time. In the *Zhuangzi*’s view, general knowledge is only “within the limits of the realm of beings” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 215). It cannot transcend objects of experience; because of its constant changing, the knowledge of experience contains uncertainty. “The becoming of things is like a galloping horse, transforming with each movement, altering at each moment” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 138). From the point of view of the subject, because there exist different subjects capable of empirical perception, the standard for judgment of empirical knowledge cannot be unified, or as the *Zhuangzi* states:

‘that’ is then itself already both ‘this’ and ‘not-this’, both a right and a wrong. But ‘this’ is also itself already both ‘this’ and ‘not-this’, both a right and a wrong. So is there really any ‘this’ as opposed to ‘not-this’, any right as opposed to wrong? Or is there really no ‘this’ as opposed to ‘not-this’, no ‘right’ as opposed to ‘wrong?’ (Ziporyn 2020, p. 14)

Therefore, general knowledge of things is merely a “small understanding” (*xiao zhi* 小知) and only by stepping out of the empirical world and taking “the point of view of the *dao*” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 136) and becoming one with the *dao* can we “divest ourselves of small understanding and clarify great understanding” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 222), thereby achieving Genuine Understanding of time. The *dao* is the ultimate root of time and provides the source of the development of time. “Ebb and flow, fullness and emptiness, now darkness and now light, the sun changing and the moon transforming—every day something does all this, but none can see its workings” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 167) The *dao* gives time its universality and infinitude. “Time cannot be stopped; the *dao* cannot be blocked” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 126) The evolution of the *dao* is accompanied by the existence and devel-

opment of time. In a sense, “time and space are the manifestation of *dao*” (Liu 2000, p. 3) and, likewise, “the *dao* is first and foremost temporal rather than spatial” (Zhang 1995, p. 384).

The *Zhuangzi* requires that Genuine Understanding of time be attained from the level of the *dao* such that knowledge of time goes beyond the physical level and rises to the philosophical level. In the language of the *Zhuangzi* we see that words related to timekeeping do not focus on the exact description of physical time, but rather on giving multiple philosophical meanings. As Ma Qijun 马启俊 describes the *Zhuangzi*’s use of timekeeping semantics:

Some time-keeping words are open-ended, indicating an indefinite amount of time, either here or there, more or less; some time-keeping words are descriptive, comparative, and descriptive, their meanings will vary from time to time, from place to place, from person to person; some time-keeping words often have multiple meanings (Ma 2014, p. 57)

In order to provide time with a philosophical flavor, the *Zhuangzi* goes to great lengths to exaggerate, crossing the boundaries of life and death and the limits of time, even reversing life and death, or death being the same as life, things being treated as indistinguishable from the individual, all things equivalent, etc. Some words have both temporal and philosophical meanings, such as “boundless,” (*wuqiong* 无穷) “no beginning,” (*wushi* 无始) “limitless,” (*wuji* 无极), “no end or beginning,” (*wu zhongshi* 无终始), etc. The *Zhuangzi* also attempts to define time philosophically, suggesting that “what has duration but no beginning or end is the whole expanse of time” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 190). Compared with the works of Wenzi 文子 and Shizi 尸子, which define time by “from the ancient until today” and highlight the extension of time, the *Zhuangzi* tries to go deeper into the nature of time, philosophically reflecting on it.

In general, the *Zhuangzi*’s *yizhi weishi* emphasizes the individual’s subjective perception and active construction of time. This is not a general “knowledge”, but a “Genuine Understanding” of time from the perspective of *dao*, a deeper reflection on the nature of time from a philosophical level. This will fundamentally change people’s understanding of time.

3. Time in the Context of *Yizhi Weishi*

The clock-based view of time in modern society views time as “a ready-made, self-contained ‘serial stream’ that continuously transports the future to the past through the ‘present’” (Wu 2006, p. 4). Time is displayed as continuity, infinity, and one-dimensional forwardness. However, this is only one aspect of the properties of time, or rather this only develops one aspect of the properties of natural time. In the *Zhuangzi*’s *yizhi weishi*, which emphasizes perception from the perspective of *dao*, time is also intermittent, finite, and cyclical, or time is a dialectical unity of two aspects.

Firstly, when viewed from the perspective of *dao*, time presents a unity of intermittency and continuity. In the chapter “The Whole World” 天下, the *Zhuangzi* puts forward the proposition that “a flying bird’s shadow never moves,” and that “a speeding arrow in flight is at a time neither moving nor at rest” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 273). That is, “a movement through time and space can be divided into many points, and the points in space and the points in time are matched together one by one. As such, it can be seen that the shadow of the flying bird at a certain point in time stops at one point in space, and thus it ‘never moves’” (Chen 2014, p. 1037). In this way, in terms of a certain point of time, the object (arrowhead) is embodied as both in a certain place and not in a certain place, embodied as the unity of intermittency and continuity of time. In addition, the *Zhuangzi* also develops an inquiry from the perspective of the ultimate *dao*.

There is a beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-not-yet-begin-to-be-a-beginning. There is existence. There is nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-be-nonexistence. There is a not-yet-beginning-to-not-yet-begin-to-be-nonexistence. Suddenly there is

nonexistence. But I do not-yet know whether ‘the existence of nonexistence’ is ultimately existence or nonexistence (Ziporyn 2020, p. 17)

In other words, before the “beginning” there is a “beginning” that has not yet begun, and there is a “beginning that has not yet begun” that has not yet begun. It is in this sense that the *Zhuangzi* says, “the past is like the present” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 181). Ancient times are spoken of in terms relative to the end, and the beginning is also produced out of this, and thus for one’s own beginning, the beginning is also the end. Therefore, the beginning and the end are not separated from one another but are interconnected. Time is manifested as numerous intermittent connections.

Secondly, from the perspective of the *dao*, time is a unity of finiteness and infinity. In terms of specific living beings and things, time has a limit. For example, “the morning mushroom knows nothing of the noontide; the winter cicada knows nothing of the spring and autumn,” and “you cannot discuss ice and snow with a summer insect” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 134). The limitations of time and the course of life mean “that thing is inexhaustible, but people all think it has an ending. That thing is unfathomable, but people all think it has a limit” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 93). Thus, only by transcending the disparity of direct experience can the infinity of time be recognized. The *Zhuangzi* turns to the method of theoretical deduction and proposes that “if you remove half of a footlong stick each day, it will not be depleted even after ten thousand generations” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 273). The “footlong stick” is finite, but it can be cut infinitely. In other words, finite time contains an infinitude. The *Zhuangzi* then proposes to look at it from the level of the *dao*. “I gaze at its root, and its antecedents go back without end; I seek its furthest developments, and their coming stretches on without stop” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 216). Although the time of a concrete life is finite, it is infinite in terms of its origin and development. In other words, the *dao* presents an endless extension that is realized by the succession of the birth and death of things. “The *dao* has no end or beginning, while creatures are born and die” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 138). In this respect, the infinity of time consists of the finite and exists through the finite, and thus the infinite contains the finite.

Again, from the perspective of the *dao*, time appears as a one-dimensional linear and cyclical unity. The natural view of time based on Newtonian mechanics holds that time exists independently of moving matter, passes uniformly and independently of any external circumstances, and is one-dimensionally linear and irreversible. The *Zhuangzi* acknowledges that things are “transforming with each movement, altering at each moment,” but the movement of time is not always unidirectional. The *Zhuangzi* cites the phenomenon of “going to Yue today and arriving yesterday” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 273). This is like saying “I arrived at Yue today late at night, and so local people in western Sichuan would say that I arrived at Yue ‘yesterday’” (Chen 2014, p. 1026). Because of the shift in space, a shift in time is brought about. “Thus the present and the past are also relative; these two opposites can be transformed into one another” (Chen 2014, p. 1026). Furthermore, time is also cyclical in nature. In the *Zhuangzi*’s view, the development of time is based on the changes of yin and yang, the movement of qi, expressed as “the four seasons arrive in it one after the other, and all things are produced accordingly” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 120) and “the four seasons replace one another, give birth to one another, slaughter one another” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 215). On a larger scale, birth and death, the past and the present, all things emerge (birth) from the nothingness of the *dao* and eventually return (death) to the mysterious realm of the *dao*. The *Zhuangzi*’s presentation of time is as a structure of continuous forward rotation, thus unifying the one-dimensional linearity and the circularity of time’s development.

From the perspective of the *dao*, time presents continuity, infinity, and one-dimensional forwardness, but also intermittency, finiteness, and circularity. This seems to be a kind of “walking two roads,” but its significance lies in the possibility of “subjective existence” of human beings in time. The *Zhuangzi* says that the Genuine Human has the *yizhi weishi* perspective, which is to grasp these two aspects of time, so that they can participate in the construction of time in an active way.

4. The Significance of *Yizhi Weishi* for the Genuine Human

The *Zhuangzi* puts forward the proposition of *yizhi weishi* in the chapter “The Great Source as Teacher,” which elaborates on the Genuine Human. *Yizhi weishi* is a characteristic of the Genuine Human, and the reason why the Genuine Human is the Genuine Human is that they have a thorough grasp of the laws of time such that they:

understood nothing about delighting in life or in abhorring death. They emerged without delight, sank back in without resistance. Whooshing in they came and whooshing out they went, nothing more. They neither forgot where they came from nor inquired into where they would go. Receiving it, they delighted in it. Forgetting all about it, they gave it back. This is what it means not to use the mind to fend off the *dao*, not to use the human to try to help out the heavenly. Such is what I’d call the Genuine Human (Ziporyn 2020, p. 54)

As the text makes clear the importance of the connection between the two, this section analyzes the significance of *yizhi weishi* for the attainment of becoming a Genuine Human.

Firstly, the Genuine Human is able to grasp the law unifying the intermittency and continuity of time, and thus is able to “understand nothing about delighting in life or in abhorring death” and be “content in the time and finding their place.” From the perspective of specific life events, there is always a beginning and an end. The coming and going of individual life is only a segment of the long river of the life of the *dao* that keeps transforming. Life and death are such that “just as the sun slants as soon as it reaches high noon, things start dying as soon as they are born” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 273) and average people “try to exhaust this vastness with this meagerness that they bewilder and frustrate themselves” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 135). From the perspective of the *dao*, time is a constant flow and eternal development. The coming and goings of individual lives constitute the long and continuous river of life of the *dao*, which is expressed as the process of the gathering and dispersion of *qi*. “The birth of man is just a convergence of *qi*. When it converges, he lives. When it scatters, he dies . . . Just open yourself to the single *qi* that is the world” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 175). The Genuine Human

knows that the temporal changes of things are endless. Understanding their fillings and emptyings, he can gain them without joy and lose them without sorrow, for he knows that there is no single constant way of dividing them up. Comprehending their clearings and smearings, he does not rejoice in finding himself alive nor bemoan his death, for he knows that there can be no fixity to their finishes and starts (Ziporyn 2020, p. 135)

In this way, living well at every stage of life regardless of their transformations is true wisdom. “When it came time to arrive, the master did just what the time required. When it came time to go, he followed along with the flow. Resting content in the time and finding his place in the flow, joy and sorrow had no way to seep in” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 31).

Secondly, the Genuine Human is able to grasp the law unifying the finiteness and infinity of time in order to “neither forget where they came from nor inquire into where they would go,” and thus be able to form a single body from both life and death. Time is the unity of finiteness and infinity. The finite aspect of time contains the infinite; the infinite character of time is connected by the finite. In terms of finite time, individual life “begins” (*suoshi* 所始) with “birth” (*chusheng* 出生) and “ends” (*suozhong* 所终) with “death” (*siwang* 死亡). However, compared to the finite time of a specific life, there are smaller sets of finite time, for example, the Cicada which dies within a day of being born. In terms of infinite time, the “beginning” of individual life is from the *dao*, and in the end returns to the *dao*. In other words, although individual life is limited, it can be extended infinitely forward and traced infinitely backward. Therefore, “neither forgetting where they came from nor inquiring into where they would go” means that we should not only pay attention to the birth and death of this life, but also understand its “origin” in and its “return” to the *dao*. In other words, we should connect the finiteness of this life with the infinity of the *dao*. This

requires a long process of time sharpening through the methods of “fasting of the mind” and “sitting and forgetting,” and the text thus says:

after three days he was able to expel from his mind all under heaven . . . after another seven days he was able to expel from his mind the existence of any definite things . . . after nine days more he was able to expel all coming to be born and all life, including his own. With his own life fully cast out, dawn broke through everywhere. With dawn breaking through, whatever showed anywhere was the one and only. Seeing everywhere the one and only, there was no division of past and present. Free of past and present, he could enter the unborn and undying (Ziporyn 2020, p. 58)

This is the realm of the Genuine Human as described in the *Zhuangzi*.

Thirdly, the Genuine Human is able to grasp the law unifying the one-dimensional linear and cyclical nature of time, so that they can “not use the mind to fend off the *dao*, not to use the human to try to help out the heavenly” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 54) and thereby wander freely through heaven and earth. Time is a unity of one-dimensional linearity and circularity, presenting a structure of continuous forward rotation. In terms of the one-dimensional linearity of time, the *Zhuangzi* laments that “life between heaven and earth is like a white stallion galloping past a crack in the wall; just a sudden swoosh and then it is all over” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 177) and “although some are long lived and some die young, how much of a difference is there really? It’s all a matter of no more than a single instant” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 177). The *Zhuangzi* states that “you cannot wait for a future era, nor can you recapture the past” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 42) and that a reasonable attitude towards life is to “not follow after them when they perish nor trace them back to whence they arise” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 215). In terms of the circularity of time, however, the *Zhuangzi* says that the Genuine Human “works when the sun comes out and rests when the sun goes down. Thus far-flung and unfettered do I live between heaven and earth” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 229). The “sunrise” and “sunset” reflect the law of the cyclic operation of time. Today it is “sunset,” but tomorrow it will still be “sunrise,” therefore, there is no need to worry about the past, nor is there any need to be anxious about the future. The wise thing to do is not to interfere with the operation of time and to “use one’s mind like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 72). The reason why the Genuine Human can “work when the sun comes out and rest when the sun goes down, thus living far-flung and unfettered between heaven and earth” is that they have a thorough understanding of the one-dimensional linearity and circularity of time, so that they can be free in the world of practical life in accordance with heaven and earth.

In the world of the *Zhuangzi*, “as the ideal realm of existence, the character of the Genuine Human is always tied to the *dao* . . . moving towards the realm of the Genuine Human or the supreme man, are accompanied by the grasp and identification with the *dao*” (Yang 2006, p. 129). Grasping time plays a mediating role in this process, particularly insofar as the concept of *yizhi weishi* empowers the Genuine Human with a self-awareness as the subject of time so that they can be “content in the time and finding one’s place,” experience “the single body formed by life and death,” and “live far-flung and unfettered between heaven and earth.” This state is exactly what modern people, who are suffering from the troubles of time, are looking for.

5. The Value of *Yizhi Weishi* for Modern People’s Temporal and Spatial Reshaping

Time and space are linked and always accompany the developmental process of human life, but only in modern society does this become an active concern for people. This is because “modernity has brought about the abstraction of time and time has begun to function as a self-contained object separate from the social practices of specific territories and groups, gradually coming to control the social behavior of people” (Jing et al. 2012, p. 106). In this process, the invention of the clock played a great role in changing the relationship between social time and the rhythm of nature. The shift of social time to clock time created structural disorder while constructing a new order. In this context, “reinventing the con-

cept of time and space is of key importance” (Jing et al. 2012, p. 102). As a crystallization of the thought of pre-modern society, there is unique value in the *Zhuangzi*’s new time consciousness and the new way of feeling and thinking about the value of time contained in *yizhi weishi*.

First, it promotes the harmonization of social time and natural time. In the pre-modern era, time within human society was largely constructed based on the rhythm of nature. The emergence of clocks separated time from natural events and abstracted it into a kind of scale, which also shifted social time to be constructed based on clock time. Time thus became “perceived as an objective force in which people are imprisoned” (Thrift 2009, p. 112); “People’s rest and labor, leisure and social interactions are governed not by the rhythm of human impulses and needs as an organism, but by the rhythm of machine time” (Mukerjee 1943, p. 260). From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*, *yizhi weishi* can enlighten people to grasp time through individual consciousness so as to realize the harmonization of social time and clock time. On the one hand, time is continuous, infinite, and one-dimensional; on the other hand, time is intermittent, finite, and cyclical. The continuity of time is composed of countless intervals, and the intervals of time are the slices of continuity. The infinity of time contains countless finite moments, and the finite moments within time together create infinity. In the short process, time seems to be moving one-dimensionally forward, and in the long process time’s movement is constantly cyclical. The *Zhuangzi*’s view of *yizhi weishi* lies in the harmonization of social time and clock time through the rhythm of nature. The text uses the rhythm of nature to recontextualize time as it is understood according to human society and time as it is understood according to the clock, and “the interaction between subjects and the integration of time need to take natural time as the standard and reference” (Wang 2004, p. 23). This proposition is not only a great wisdom for individual human beings to achieve harmony with heaven and earth, but also has the potential to be translated into practical governance of human affairs, such as environmental issues. Because time orders human production and life, we need an axial shift from “where we are” to a sense of “being born again” as one within the natural universe (Gardels 2022). The *Zhuangzi*’s proposition of *yizhi weishi* opens up such a possibility from the perspective of understanding time.

Secondly, reconstruction of the spatial dimension is used to establish a connection between the individual and the larger space. Time always takes place in a certain space, and thus is intrinsically connected to space. Before the advent of the clock, time in human society was always terrestrialized and humans lived according to time within a specific spatial realm. The emergence of the clock enabled the deflation of time, which in turn triggered the deflation of space and human relations. In modern society, space has evolved into the names of places or train stations on maps, and the proximities of social relations and emotional intimacy are no longer necessarily related to spatial distance. On the one hand, this has expanded the space for human interaction, and on the other it has led to what Hartmut Rosa calls an “alienation” of relationships within a world of indifference, characterized by lack of consideration for the other and silent disregard for the subject. In this situation, how we establish a positive “resonant” relationship, that is, a relationship in which the subject and the world respond to one another (Rosa 2018, pp. 12–19), becomes an important problem that modern society must solve. The *Zhuangzi*’s view of *yizhi weishi* is unique in that it emphasizes a contextualized understanding of time. The *Zhuangzi*’s “‘four seasons’ are not four moments or four periods of time external to one another, but holographic and figurative realm stretches . . . each time phase summons the corresponding orientation, sound, color, smell, animals, and plants all to the scene . . . the transition of different time phases is interdependent, and each contains the continuum” (Wei 2017, p. 64). This awareness of time enables man and space on earth to be reconnected, through grasping the finite and infinite, interval and continuity, one dimensionality and cyclicity of time, thus connecting humans with the larger space, allowing an expanded understanding of human existence.

In this regard, the *Zhuangzi* also proposes the method of “being in the center of the circle responding to all the endless things it confronts. Thwarted by none” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 15). Northern Song dynasty commentator Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) commented on this line in a similar way. In his view, the “circle” (*huan* 环) here is not composed of “right and wrong (*shifei* 是非) depending on one another”, but “yin and yang depending on one another”. Not only is it “endlessly cyclical” (*xunhuan wuqiong* 循环无穷) temporally, but it is “endlessly cyclical” spatially as well (Shao 1992, p. 523). The “center of the circle” is the starting point for the creation of all things. For nature, it is the position of Taiji 太极 and for human beings it is the position of the human heart. Through the “center of the circle,” the communication is realized between nature and human beings, the *dao* and the heart, thus establishing resonance between human beings and the surrounding interpersonal world, nature, and even the supernatural universe.

Again, from the dimension of value, the text promotes the shift from the “external limitations” of life to the “internal dynamics” of time and space. The view of time based on Newtonian mechanics understands time as an external framework for measuring events and processes, and space as an external scale for the movement of objects. The course of life is reflected in the process of a diminishing remaining lifetime and constantly restricted space for activity. Extracting ourselves from this dilemma requires us to re-consider the value of time and space. In fact, we find that “time is also connected to social change in another way, not as an external, conventional framework, but as an ontological property inherent in social events and processes” (Sztompka 1993, p. 43). From this perspective, space-time is the endogenous variable and force of social change. The *Zhuangzi*’s understanding of space-time is precisely along these lines. As mentioned earlier, the *Zhuangzi* sees “space-time” as the embodiment of the *dao*, and through the *dao* it is transformed into life. It becomes the constitutive element of life and promotes the development of life. The *Zhuangzi* says “life and death are fated, and that they come with the regularity of day and night is of heaven” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 55). The text advocates the attitude of “letting yourself be carried along by things so that the mind wanders freely. Hand it all over to the unavoidable so as to nourish what is central within you” (Ziporyn 2020, p. 39). Being “carried along by things” (*chengwu* 乘物) embodies adaptively responding to changes in space and time, thus bridging the gap between difficulties and hope. The “wandering mind” (*youxin* 游心) embodies a new orientation towards the development of space-time, wandering in the mind, wandering in the *dao*, wandering in infinity. “Nourishing what is central within you” (*yangzhong* 养中) is to enable the body to withstand the changes in space and time without dissipating energy, through practices such as nurturing the mind, nurturing one’s *qi*, and nurturing the central meridian (Wang 2021, p. 131–56).

The *Zhuangzi* help us to grasp the value of the intrinsic dynamic of space-time for the development of life. Furthermore, it also provides significant theoretical innovation. Currently, “most social analysts see time and space as mere environments of action and accept unthinkingly the conception of time, as measurable clock time, characteristic of modern Western culture” (Giddens 1984, p. 110). Chinese scholars, such as Jing Tiankui 景天魁, consciously regard space and time as intrinsic factors in the constitution of social objects and intrinsic variables for theoretical analysis, and thereby treat them as important means of understanding and studying social phenomena (Jing 2013, pp. 99–106). From this perspective, the *Zhuangzi*’s temporal view of *yizhi weishi* has significant value as a resource for establishing a sociological theory of space and time with Chinese characteristics.

6. Conclusions

Space and time are the basis of human existence and development, and in the present era have even more significance. Affecting most of the world, “the most profound and fundamental change in the era of globalization is the change in spatiality and temporality, and the change in spatio-temporal characteristics in economic and social development” (Jing 2013, p. 102). The study of spatial and temporal changes and the search for solutions

to their related problems are closely linked to the improvement of the quality and the order of human production and life.

This paper focuses on the tyranny of time on human beings in modern society, and tries to find wisdom in the concept of *yizhi weishi* within the *Zhuangzi*. After an analysis of “understanding,” discussion of “time,” the significance of *yizhi weishi* for the achievement of the Genuine Human, and the interpretation of modern values, we see that the *Zhuangzi*’s *yizhi weishi* emphasizes the overall perception and active construction of time from the perspective of the individual. From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*’s Genuine Human, time is not only continuous, infinite, and one-dimensionally linear, but also intermittent, finite, and cyclical. *Yizhi weishi* lies in grasping these two characteristics of time so as to be able to actively use and participate in the construction of time, which is the method of the Genuine Human. For modern people, the Genuine Human’s *yizhi weishi* view of time enlightens them to the possibility of basing social time on the rhythms of nature, to reconstruct the inner connection between human beings and cosmic space within a contextualized concept of time, and to re-examine space and time’s value to human life and society in terms of “inner dynamics” rather than “outer limitations.”

From a theoretical analysis, we see that the Genuine Human’s time concept *yizhi weishi* found within the *Zhuangzi* is not out of place with other elements of the *Zhuangzi*, as some have argued, but rather emphasizes Genuine Understanding and serves as the ideal personality goal for achieving the state of the Genuine Human. Furthermore, it cannot be simply labeled as “surrealism” or “idealism,” but rather it highlights the subjective cognitive and constructive characteristics of time. This paper not only rediscovers the concept of time implied by “*yizhi weishi*,” but also advances the study of the *Zhuangzi*’s concept of time in the academic community. Compared with the studies by David Chai (2014) or Northoff and Cheng (2019), this paper interprets time in the *Zhuangzi* from the perspective of different attributes, maintaining a holistic understanding of time and avoiding its artificial fragmentation into multiple dimensions. Secondly, it follows the *Zhuangzi*’s proposition of “*yizhi weishi*” and explains the inner mechanism of the Genuine Human’s self-mastery over time, breaking through the description of phenomena, based on the story of the ox. Thirdly, going beyond mere typological analysis and theoretical interpretation, it considers the *Zhuangzi*’s view of time from the perspective of reshaping concepts of time and space, promoting the reconstruction of modern subjectivity and peoples’ attitudes towards time.

It is worth pointing out that the discussion of the *Zhuangzi*’s concept of time as *yizhi weishi* is not intended to replace the clock-based time of modern people. In fact, the scale time of the clock can satisfy the need for synchronization of collective social action, promote the coordination of individual action, determine the chronology of social events, and serve as a tool for timing and measurement. All these are based on the continuity, infinity, and one-dimensionality of time. The *Zhuangzi*’s concept of time, *yizhi weishi*, does not deny this aspect of time, but adds to our understanding the intermittent, finite, and cyclical nature of time, unifying its aspects. It is in this sense that it helps to overcome the shortcomings of the modern view of time and serves to create a modern life more “at home” with time.

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