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Incongruent Names: A Theme in the History of Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract This essay is meant to shed light on a discourse that spans centuries and includes different voices. To be aware of such trans-textual resonances can add a level of historical understanding to the reading of philosophical texts. Specifically, we intend to demonstrate how the notion of the ineffable Dao 道, prominently expressed in the *Daodejing* 道德經, informs a long discourse on incongruent names (*ming* 名) in distinction to a mainstream paradigm that demands congruity between names and what they designate. Thereby, we trace the development of the idea of the ineffable Dao quite differently from modern mystical interpretations. We show how, in an early Chinese context, it first gives rise to a sociopolitical critique of the incongruity underlying socially constructed names in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, then to a discourse on the incongruity between moral virtues and names in Xuanxue 玄學 philosophy, and eventually to Sengzhao's 僧肇 claim that a perceived congruence of names with things does not entail actual congruence between names and reality.

Keywords Incongruity · Names (*ming* 名) · Zhuangzi 莊子 · Xuanxue 玄學 · Sengzhao 僧肇

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1 Introduction

This essay traces the trajectory of a somewhat subversive motif in the history of Chinese thought: the idea that names do not match what they designate, and that the ensuing incongruity can be philosophically significant and fruitful.

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is an early Chinese text that challenges a mainstream view of the times which holds that names (*ming* 名) ought to be congruent by corresponding correctly to actualities (*shi* 實) or forms (*xing* 形). Building on the philosophy of ineffability in the *Daodejing* 道德經, which implies that the most important names, Dao 道 and "sage" (*sheng ren* 聖人), do not correspond correctly to a referent, it expounds the view that that honorific social titles and role indications are incongruent and thus not something one should adopt. This leads to the more radical general assumption that there is a basic incongruity underlying all (socially constructed) names; they do not properly indicate specific forms or actualities, or any specific referent, and only foster falsity and hypocrisy.

Later, Xuanxue 玄學 thinkers take seriously the worry over hypocrisy as an effect of incongruent names. Instead of seeking to bolster the relationship between names and actualities with new theories of congruence, they rely on Daoism, and mainly on the *Zhuangzi*, to form bridges between a theory of incongruity and morality. HE Yan 何晏 (195–249) employs the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*'s arguments for the incongruity between names and the Dao to interpret the greatness of Confucian sage emperors. WANG Bi 王弼 (226–249) goes beyond HE Yan and argues that Confucian virtue, or morality in general, is ineffable, and that therefore there is an incongruity between virtues and names. Expanding on theories of transformation and change in the *Zhuangzi*, GUO Xiang 郭象 (252–312) posits even more generally that all actualities are constantly fleeting, and names only indicate traces that are left behind by actualities.

Eventually, in early Chinese Buddhist philosophy, the Madhyamaka distinction between two truths implies that a perceived congruence of names with things does not entail actual congruence between names and reality. Resorting to Daoist rhetoric, Sengzhao 僧肇 (374–414) refers to this distinction as the "incongruity between names and reality/actuality" (*mingshi wudang* 名實無當). Paradoxical enough, such incongruity implies consistency between the canonical word of the Buddha's teaching and the ineffable sense of his "liberation"—the Chinese Madhyamaka sense of nonduality.

2 Congruent Names and Sociopolitical Discipline

Ancient Chinese texts often articulate a philosophy of names or of naming (*ming* 名) rather than a philosophy of language. Reflections on the significance of names and the proper relation between them and what they name (i.e., their referents) abound in the writings of many of the so-called hundred schools (*bai jia* 百家) of the classical period. They continue to occupy later philosophical debates and have exerted a profound influence on Chinese intellectual history. In his groundbreaking study *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought*, John Makeham, while focusing specifically on the lesser known late-Han 漢 dynasty scholar XU Gan 徐幹 (170–217), presents a thorough outlook on both the philosophical and

sociopolitical dimension of the philosophy of names and naming in early China. Central to Makeham's approach is an analysis of the relation between names and the "actuality" (*shi* 實), or, alternatively, but often analogously, the "form" (*xing* 形) that they indicate (Makeham 1994).[1]

Makeham distinguishes between what he calls "correlative" and "nominalist" views on naming in ancient China.[2] There is no terminological correspondence in ancient Chinese texts to this distinction, and the division of texts and thinkers according to these categories could be challenged in some cases. However, Makeham is doubtlessly right in pointing out that determining how to achieve congruence between names and referents was of prime importance for many ancient Chinese philosophers—notwithstanding their potential correlativist or nominalist leanings. Some—particularly those labelled "correlativists" by Makeham—found this congruence by insisting on the natural correspondence between names and their referents, while others—particularly those labelled nominalists by Makeham—were concerned with achieving and/or maintaining proper congruence through various means of an "appropriate application of names" or *zheng ming* 正名, to use the most famous formulation of this approach as it occurs in Confucius' *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) 13.3.

The position on the desired relation between names and actualities that Makeham ascribes to XU Gan is that "there is accord between them such that names faithfully represent actualities and actualities give names their meaning and significance" (Makeham1994: xiii). We believe that this position not only sums up XU Gan's normative views on naming, but that it represents a "mainstream" position in the ancient Chinese philosophy of names: *Congruent names, that is, names corresponding accurately to a referent (such as* shi *or* xing*), were generally desired whereas incongruent names were deemed problematic.* The debates between different philosophical schools commonly did not question this congruity as an ideal, but differed with respect to (1) the foundation of this congruence, or of its perceived lack, and (2) the best means to administer its implementation. In other words, while the desirability of congruent names was generally agreed upon, there was considerable disagreement about its philosophical foundations, ethical functions, and sociopolitical implications.

According to most philosophers in ancient China sociopolitical order would go along with congruent names, while incongruity between names and actualities would indicate sociopolitical disorder. Particularly in Confucian writings (but equally so in Legalist texts), names are therefore commonly associated with social

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[1] We agree with Makeham that *xing ming* 形名 "is the Legalist application of the *ming* and *shi* polarity" and that "there are several ways in which the *xing ming* mechanism can be seen to reflect and parallel *ming shi*" (Makeham 1994: 79). We would like to add, though, that the "Legalist" usage of *xing ming* as parallel to *ming shi* is not restricted to texts that are associated with this school of thought, but can also be found in other texts of the era. The relationship between "actuality" and "form" becomes increasingly complex in the Chinese discourse, as we will demonstrate in this article.

[2] According to Makeham, the correlative view on naming holds that "there is a proper or correct correlation between a given name and a given actuality, determined, variously, by what has been ordained by Heaven (*tian* 天) or by 'what is naturally so/so of itself (*zi ran* 自然)'" (Makeham 1994: xiii). A nominalist view on naming, to the contrary, assumes "that it is man who arbitrarily or conventionally determines which *ming* should be applied to which *shi*; that is there is no proper or correct correlation between a given *ming* and a given *shi* other than what has been artificially determined by man" (Makeham 1994: xiii).

roles, ranks, and offices within the family or the state (for example, "father" or "ruler," as in the famous statement in *Analects* 12.11, which demands that rulers may act as rulers and fathers as fathers). Correspondingly, "actualities" or "forms" would indicate the actual quality or performance of someone enacting a certain role, having a particular rank, or serving in a specific office. Similarly, a "name" could also refer to the *reputation* and the social "branding" assigned to someone, for instance being a "person of virtue" (*ren ren* 仁人), or, conversely, a "robber" (*dao* 盜). The paradigmatic expectation expressed or implied in many Confucian texts, such as the *Analects* or the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), was that social order depended on the actual virtuosity of those reputedly virtuous, and on having people in social rank and office whose performance and character was actually in accordance with the exalted names of such ranks and offices. Sociopolitically, congruent names would thus ensure, it was hoped, a harmonious domestic life and an effective government, and thereby a stable society. This made it morally imperative that everyone would sincerely (*cheng* 誠) live up to their social roles, ranks, and reputation so that a correct and appropriate (*yi* 義) social fabric would emerge. In effect, the doctrine of congruent names thus gave rise to regimes of personal and social discipline to enforce this very congruence.

The ideal of a possible perfect congruence between personal virtuousness, social rank, and reputation opens up room for suspicion, hypocrisy, dishonesty, and, perhaps most problematically, self-deception. Social reality repeatedly reveals that those in exalted social positions are not necessarily actual worthies. Once congruence becomes normatively imperative, empirical incongruity looms heavily on the horizon. The Confucian answer to this predicament was an insistence on "ruthless" moral cultivation; the requirement for constant moral scrutiny, both sociopolitically and intra-personally, with the intent to ensure that everyone would work toward being as good as one's name indicated one was (i.e., fathers should constantly be concerned with sincerely acting as fathers, and so on)—or, in case, of a bad reputation, that one would devote oneself to changing one's evil ways in order to regain society's favor.

From a Confucian perspective, moral cultivation of an ideally perfect and sincere congruence between one's social role and rank (i.e. one's name) and one's actual character and performance (i.e., the actual referent of that name) should, and eventually (and hopefully) would, lead to a virtuous and stable society. Other schools of thought, though, disagreed on methodological grounds and suggested that instead of a moral cultivation project other more "applied" means of achieving congruent names were called for. The Legalists, for instance, stipulated a strict regime of rewards and punishments to ensure the best possible match between the names of social roles and the performances of the role-bearers. For them, sociopolitically congruent names could best be achieved by strictly monitoring all role performances and harshly disciplining any incongruity.

One of the very few major philosophical positions in early Chinese philosophy that did not react to the practical predicaments ensuing from the paradigm of congruent names by reflecting on the best personal discipline or social regime for enforcing it can be found in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, quite surprisingly, the ancient Chinese mainstream ideal of congruent names is often subverted, deconstructed, and challenged by an alternative philosophy of *incongruent names*.

3 Three Types of Incongruent Names in the *Zhuangzi*

The first hypothesis in this essay is that the philosophy of names in the *Zhuangzi* is best understood, *at least in part*,[3] in terms of a philosophy of incongruity. It emerges, we think, as a counter-position to the ideal of congruent names, and, in particular, reacts critically, and satirically, to what it perceives to be an unhealthy sociopolitical regime of enforcing such congruence on others and, eventually, on oneself. In short, the *Zhuangzi* views the demand for congruent names as a recipe for creating sociopolitical oppression, deceit, and/or hypocrisy as well as personal depression, pride, and/or arrogance.

3.1 "Dao" and "Sage": Incongruent Names

Put briefly, at least three different but related approaches to a philosophy of names and naming can be identified in the text. First, an inroad to an eventual philosophy of incongruent names is opened up by insisting on an apophatic understanding of the Dao 道 ("way") as ineffable by being nameless and formless. This understanding is reminiscent in both style and content of the *Daodejing* 道德經, and echoes such famous proclamations as "The Dao is constantly without name" (*Daodejing* 32; Moeller 2007: 79) and "Having no name is the beginning of heaven and earth" (*Daodejing* 1; Moeller 2007: 3). Pronouncements in the *Zhuangzi* such as "the sage has no name" (*Zhuangzi* 1.3) and "the Dao cannot be spoken, whatever is spoken is not it; do you know that what forms forms has no form? The Dao corresponds to no name" (*Zhuangzi* 22.7; Ziporyn 2009: 90, translation modified) highlight the idea that in addition to the world of ten-thousand things, which are all identifiable by their respective names and forms and, accordingly, by their social positions and tasks, there is the Dao as the nonspecific generating center of all activity. In society it is represented by the sage-ruler. Without task or title, the nameless and formless (power-) center is distinguished from all names/forms. The philosophical structure employed here distinguishes between a realm of (still congruent) forms and names (or actualities) and the Dao that, by virtue of its namelessness and formlessness, constitutes the immanent source of that realm and provides it with its order. This philosophy, both in the *Daodejing* and corresponding sections in the *Zhuangzi*, has clear political connotations. In short, it connects with the mainstream philosophical view that order is equivalent to the congruence of names and actualities or forms, but it also stipulates that the source of this order is not subject to this congruence by being void of both name and form (or actuality). The resulting ineffability of the Dao can be understood as constituting an incongruity between the Dao and its name. *Paradoxically, while there is a congruity of names and forms, this congruity ends with the Dao and the sage. The most important names, the names "Dao" and "sage," are incongruent.*

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[3] We say that the *Zhuangzi* is best understood in this way only *in part* because we acknowledge that it is a multidimensional text open to various interpretations, and, even more importantly, that it is a heterogeneous text combining materials from various sources and expressing various philosophical or "ideological" positions.

3.2 Incongruent Names of Honor

A second approach to a philosophy of names and naming in the *Zhuangzi*, that is much more peculiar to it and not immediately connected with the *Daodejing*, applies the idea of the ineffability of the Dao and the corresponding idea of the incongruent names "Dao" and "sage" to a sociopolitical critique. Many famous narratives in the *Zhuangzi* point out how a Daoist sage, rather than becoming a nameless and formless political ruler, is instead immune to the seductiveness of honorific names and ranks. As much as possible, a good Daoist will avoid accepting official positions, and, in particular, free him- or herself from the desire for a social reputation.

The direct relation of this concrete application of the Daoist philosophy of namelessness and formlessness to a social criticism of the pursuit of social fame and recognition that was associated with Confucianism becomes evident in a passage in the Inner Chapters. In *Zhuangzi* 5.3, a character named "Toeless Shushan" (Shushan Wuzhi 叔山無趾), a criminal "whose feet had been mutilated as punishment," is quoted in a dialogue with Laozi 老子 as saying that Confucius "must be seeking some bizarre, deceptive, illusory, freakish thing like a good name, not realizing that the consummate person views such things as handcuffs and leg chains" (Ziporyn 2009: 35). Similarly, an irreverent narrative in section 20.4 has Confucius depicted at the brink of starvation after failing to morally educate the politicians of the time. His Daoist interlocutor then explains to Confucius that his downfall is due to his pursuit of merit and reputation, and that it would have done him better to "forfeit merit and reputation and return to the ranks of the common people" (*qu gong yu ming er huan yu zhong ren* 去功與名而還與眾人).

Unlike the philosophy of the ineffable Dao, which paradoxically anchors the congruence of names and forms, the second approach to a philosophy of names found in the *Zhuangzi* implicitly questions the ideal of congruent names by highlighting the vanity (or emptiness) of pursuing a good name by taking on a powerful political or social role. It not only points out that such careerism and the striving for social acclaim corrupts a person and will eventually ruin him or her through ultimate consumption by the social machinations and machinery, and that therefore one should remain as "nameless" and fameless as possible, but it also hints at a certain incongruity within the realm of names and actualities or forms itself. Quite to the contrary of the assumption that honorific names correspond to actual qualities of a person, the anti-careerist narratives in the *Zhuangzi* point out that social ranks and reputations are, as such, inherently contrived and that trying to identify with them constitutes an impossible and ultimately destructive or corrupting endeavor.

3.3 Incongruity between Names and Actualities/Forms

The anti-careerist narratives in the *Zhuangzi* pave the way for a third and most radical approach towards names and naming in the *Zhuangzi*: an explicit philosophy of the incongruity between names and actualities or forms. This approach explicitly subverts the mainstream idea of the desirability of congruent names and has, as we intend to show, produced significant reverberations in Chinese intellectual history.

In a formulaic statement, the idea of a general incongruity between names and actualities is expressed in *Zhuangzi* 18.5: *ming zhi yu shi* 名止於實. Translated more or

less literally, this is to say that "names stop at actualities"; in another way the sentence may be rendered as "Names only go so far with respect to actualities." According to YANG Guorong, this pronouncement represents the *Zhuangzi*'s view on names and actualities in conjunction with another one in section 1.4: "Names are the guests of actualities" (*ming zhe, shi zhi bin ye* 名者 實之賓也) (G. Yang 2009: 137). We are not sure that these two statements really encapsulate everything that the *Zhuangzi* says about names and actualities or forms, but, in a compressed way, they communicate an insight that the text otherwise tends to outline narratively, namely that social designations are in fact neither descriptive nor normative indicators of what a person or a thing "really" is or ought to be.

One of the most famous stories about a Daoist incongruity of names and actualities is found in section 6.7 in the Inner Chapters. This imaginary story depicts YAN Hui 顏回 (521–481 BCE), Confucius' beloved student, asking Confucius why MENGSUN Cai 孟孫才, who cried without tears and mourned without sadness at his own mother's funeral, is nevertheless deemed the "master mourner" of the state of Lu 魯 (Confucius' home state). The flabbergasted YAN Hui wants to understand how "someone who does not have the actuality still gets the name" (*wu qi shi er de qi ming* 無其實而得其名者). YAN Hui thereby proclaims the standard Confucian expectation that a person's actual "state of being" (for lack of a better rendering of *shi* 實 in this context) should be congruent with his or her social role, that is, in this case the role of a mourner of a deceased parent. In an ironic fashion, so typical for the *Zhuangzi*, Confucius contradicts the role expectation of a Confucian and answers YAN Hui's question, most incongruently, from a Daoist perspective. In short, he points to the Daoist cosmological view of the "transformation of all things" (*wu hua* 物化) which subjects all things to constant transformation in the course of life and death. MENGSUN Cai understands and affirms the transience of everything in nature as a core constituent of the reproduction of life. Consequently, like many other Daoist characters in the *Zhuangzi*, he is able to show equanimity in the face of death.

The Confucian role expectations of a son whose parent has died are extremely strict. A parent's funeral is a sort of litmus test for the Confucian core virtue of *xiao* 孝, "filial piety" or "family reverence." To mourn without sadness is, therefore, from a Confucian perspective, an utmost ethical violation contradicting the most basic normative foundations that are hailed as supporting social order and comprising the very fabric of a community. The incongruity displayed by MENGSUN Cai is *tremendously scandalous* for Confucians. Ironically, however, in the story Confucius praises MENGSUN Cai so that such scandalous incongruity emerges as an expression of some higher wisdom. At the same time, it exposes the falsity and hypocrisy of the Confucian social norms and role expectations. At the heart of one of the most central and morally and emotionally charged mourning rituals lies a deep ignorance about life, which, at the same time, imposes unnecessary feelings of sadness and depression on humans who try to match the Confucian "names" with their personality (or "actuality").

The story of MENGSUN Cai indicates that, on the basis of an affirmation of radical transformation, all "forms" or "actualities" indicated by social role-names are—although they are social realities one has to cope with—ontologically and existentially insubstantial and inessential. The Daoist insight into the "transformation of all things" thereby corresponds to a denial of Confucian demands to make social names "sincere"

by grounding them in a self as its essential form or actuality. The idea of radical trans*form*ation ontologically implies that no form can sincerely match a name.

On a less ontological or existential level, personifications of an incongruity of names and forms or actualities can be found throughout the *Zhuangzi*. Chapter 5, entitled "Markers of Full Virtuosity (De Chong Fu 德充符)" (Ziporyn 2009: 32), introduces a number of "crippled" characters, who are either suffering from physical ailments and bodily deformations or, such as the previously mentioned "Toeless Shushan," from mutilations resulting from legal punishment. Most of the cripples and criminals in the chapter nevertheless achieve impressive social success. They thereby contradict the Confucian expectation that social rank and reputation mirror a person's actual inner and outer "form." In effect, each of these characters can thus be understood, to speak with P. J. Ivanhoe's characterization of the chapter title, as a "conscious parody of Mengzi's notion of the ideal man" (Ivanhoe 2002: 188).[4] As grotesque exemplars of incongruity, they undermine and ridicule the normative expectation that socially successful people are actually healthy, good, and "correct." One of the main characters, named "Horsehead Humpback" (Aitai Tuo 哀駘它), is described as "someone whose *de* ('virtue') does not take on form" (*de bu xing zhe* 德不形者) (*Zhuangzi* 5.4).

While it can be healthy to avoid social rank and reputation and remain "nameless," one should also be aware of the "formlessness" (*wu xing* 無形, which is how the first protagonist in Chapter 5 of the *Zhuangzi* named WANG Tai 王駘 is described) of name and fame. Confucian social and political teachings imply that social power reflects virtuous "form"—but satirical characters like the criminals and cripples in Chapter 5 suggest that there is nothing behind the façade of social success. Social success is "formless" and it is a dangerous illusion to believe that one can actually become good by personally committing one's "state of being" to socially constructed roles and reputations.

The humorous story of Confucius' meeting with the notorious Robber Zhi (Dao Zhi 盗跖) in Chapter 29 of the *Zhuangzi* outlines the social incongruity of names and actualities at some length. It has been argued that this chapter, because it is specifically named in Zhuangzi's biography in Chapter 63 of the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*) as the work of ZHUANG Zhou 莊周 (Klein 2010), may be older or more authentic than even (some of) the Inner Chapters. Be that as it may, the reference to this chapter, along with its classification as being wrought with anti-Confucian polemics or satire, in the *Shiji* clearly shows that it was historically regarded as quite representative of Zhuangzi's writings. The story is full of incongruities. It contrasts Robber Zhi, the social outcast who is strong, healthy, intelligent, brave, and good looking, but at the same time also vicious, brutal, and bad-mannered—in other words, completely immoral—with Confucius. Here, Confucius, who is representative of state power, social order, and normative ethics appears rather stupid, ridiculous, grotesque, contrived, and as a suck-up and complete hypocrite, but at the same time he is also portrayed as overly polite, well spoken, and considerate. The dialogue revolves around Confucius' (obviously corrupt) offer to the Robber that if he would only join the state authorities,

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[4] Although we do not want to imply that authors of the earliest sections of the *Zhuangzi* necessarily knew of Mengzi or his work.

Confucius would see to it that he would receive official rank, feudal territory, and (most importantly in Confucius' eyes) no longer be labeled a "robber." Robber Zhi exposes Confucius' hypocrisy most vividly and eventually cries out: "There's no robber worse than you. Why doesn't the world call you Robber Confucius instead of calling me Robber Zhi?" (*Zhuangzi* 29.1).

The story can be read as a drastic critique of the social corruption instituted by the impossible expectation of establishing norms based on congruence between social roles and personal qualities. Plainly speaking, it says this: names corrupt and absolute commitment to names corrupts absolutely. Very clearly, the Daoist position in this chapter is not to suggest one should try to replace the failed Confucian attempt to achieve congruence with a potentially successful, Daoist "authentic" match between names and actualities or forms.[5] To the contrary, the *Zhuangzi* constantly satirically undermines the attempt to erect exemplary role models who represent such congruence. Its characters are *anti-role models*, showing how the very attempt to form oneself in accordance with the prescriptions imposed on one by social ranks and reputations are a root cause of contrivance and hypocrisy. Rather than striving for congruence, the *Zhuangzi* thus shows, in many narratives and through many of its incongruent characters, including Robber Zhi and the cripples and criminals of Chapter 5, that "names only go so far with respect to actualities." The point, therefore, is not to strive for an impossible congruence with any socially ascribed identity (and thus not merely to avoid highly ranked social positions), but to remain ultimately "nameless" or "formless" in order to somehow stay sane in the midst of a social "bonfire of vanities."

4 Three Types of Incongruity in Xuanxue Philosophies

According to TANG Yongtong 湯用彤, a philosophical understanding of the relationship between names and actuality (*ming-shi*) is at the heart of Wei-Jin 魏晉 period scholarship, or Xuanxue 玄學 (Y.-T. Tang 1957: 12). In terms of developing the notion of an impossible congruence between names and actualities in the *Zhuangzi* outlined above,[6] as well as with regard to the influence on later Chinese interpretations of Buddhist texts, the key representative thinkers of this time are HE Yan 何晏 (195–249), WANG Bi 王弼 (226–249), and GUO Xiang 郭象 (252–312). It should be noted, however, that the developments in this period do not cleanly map onto the three types of incongruity outlined above. Perhaps the closest direct elaboration is on the ineffability of Dao.

HE Yan and WANG Bi draw on the *Laozi*'s and *Zhuangzi*'s ineffable Dao to provide support for Confucius' claim (*Analects* 8.19) that the legendary sage-ruler Yao 堯 is unnameable. Here HE Yan mainly focuses on the ineffable Dao, while WANG Bi ends up going beyond him, arguing that Confucian virtues and morality are, in general, likewise unrepresentable in language. A further development of this discourse appears in the work of GUO Xiang. Picking up on the philosophical implications of the word *ji*

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[5] Most famously *Zhuangzi* repeatedly and actively avoids such engagement throughout Chapter 2.

[6] Despite wide agreement on the important role of the relationship between names and actualities in Wei-Jin thought, this topic has not been thoroughly researched. Most scholars have focused instead on the perhaps equally important issue of the relationship between language (*yan* 言) and ideas or meaning (*yi* 意) (see, Y.-T. Tang 1957; Wang 1987; Wagner 2000, 2003; Yu 2004; Bao 2013; Cai 2013), or language and patterns (*li* 理) (e.g., L. Yang 2010; Bao 2013; Shang 2013).

迹, meaning "footprint" or "trace," which appears in the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and in WANG Bi's writings, GUO Xiang argues, in a manner that is not dissimilar to Buddhist views,[7] that names are always fixed, and that which they name (that is, actualities) are constantly changing. Names and actualities are thereby inescapably incongruent.

The focus on the relationship between names and actualities in Wei-Jin philosophy builds off late-Han concerns about widespread social, political, and moral hypocrisy.[8] WANG Fu 王符 (85–163) and XU Gan, for example, identified the abuse of names as the source of these problems. According to XU Gan, the dangers of misusing names was already recognized by Confucius with his remark about the hypocritical *xiang yuan* 鄉 愿 or "village worthies" in *Analects* 17.13. Xu comments, "Today village worthies with false names [*wei ming* 偽名] throw virtuosity into confusion" (Makeham 1994: 107– 108; translation modified). For both WANG Fu and XU Gan the solution was to draw on Confucius' teachings and reweave the congruence between names and actualities. Wei-Jin period thinkers carried, to varying degrees, doubt about the possibility of establishing any such congruence. In this area the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* were particularly influential, though Confucian concepts remained the backbone for many theorists.[9]

One of the major motifs in Wei-Jin Xuanxue philosophy is the attempt to rework the relationship between themes found in the *Analects* and those in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.[10] The philosophical link between this reworking and the issue of congruence versus incongruity can be found in the distinction between *mingjiao* 名教 ("orthodoxy" or "teaching of names") and *ziran* 自然 ("self-so" or "spontaneous").[11] The terms are often loosely assigned to Confucian and Daoist themes respectively,[12] although the discussions of the "teaching of names" and "self-so" can (and often should) be approached with appreciation for their more nuanced connotations.[13] A central motivation of reimagining the association between *mingjiao* and *ziran* was the philosophical desire to replace rote adherence to *mingjiao*, and reliance upon names and naming in

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[7] There is a lively debate among scholars of the Wei-Jin period about when Buddhism was first introduced and to what extent it was known at different periods. JIA Jinhua, for example, argues that GUO Xiang followed closely the Chinese translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (Jia 2015: 551). Others, including Brook Ziporyn, contend that GUO Xiang's philosophy is "rooted in the world of indigenous (pre-Buddhist) ancient Chinese philosophy" (Ziporyn 2003: 4).

[8] Many leading scholars of Wei-Jin philosophy have noted that the breakdown of the correspondence between names and actualities, which led to social, political, and moral hypocrisy during the Han, was a central problem for many Wei-Jin scholars (Y.-T. Tang 1957; Yu 2004; Y.-J. Tang 2009; L. Yang 2010). Drawing on the *Zhuangzi* they often use the phrase "to have the name without having the actuality" (*you qi ming er wu qi shi* 有其名而無其實) to describe the issue—which, ironically, for the *Zhuangzi* was not a problem.

[9] The idea that HE Yan, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang are ultimately Confucian in terms of their political, moral, and social commitments is widely shared (Ziporyn 2003; Yu 2004; Li 2008; Shang 2013).

[10] The standard reading suggests that Xuanxue thinkers were attempting to "fuse" or "integrate" Confucian and Daoist ideas (Y.-J. Tang 2009; Yu 2004). However, we think it is at least as likely that Xuanxue thinkers actually did believe in the similarities between Confucian and Daoist arguments that they point out (Chan 2010a; D'Ambrosio 2016).

[11] TANG Yongtong 湯用彤 popularizes these terms, writing, for example, "Confucius treasures *mingjiao*, Laozi and Zhuangzi esteem *ziran*" (Y.-T. Tang 1957: 107). Later scholars, such as YANG Lihua 楊立華, credit Tang with popularizing this terminology (L. Yang 2010: 36), which practically every contemporary scholar who deals with Wei-Jin period philosophies has drawn on.

[12] Alan Chan, for instance, provides a good argument for relating *mingjiao* to Confucian orthodoxy, or at least to the attempt to create one (Chan 2010a: 3–4).

[13] The extent to which this association is philosophically appropriate depends, of course, largely on the context of the argument. For the purposes of the present argument, there is no reason to go further into this issue.

general, with a theory about the ineffability of key social, political, and moral ideas. In this way, Wei-Jin thinkers sought to undermine the very possibility for hypocrisy, which for them meant arguing for the incongruity between names and actualities. The effort begins in earnest with HE Yan.

4.1 HE Yan: Incongruity between Names and the Dao

The two major surviving pieces of HE Yan's work, "Dao Lun 道論" or "Discourse on Dao" and "Wu Ming Lun 無名論" or "Discourse on Nameless," both offer explanations for why Dao is ineffable. In these essays HE Yan argues that everything that exists (*you* 有), including all actualities, comes from Dao. This also includes all "particularities" (also *you* 有). [14] That which gives birth to these, HE Yan says, is itself nameless because it is complete (*quan* 全), encompassing all discrete and opposing actualities. In "Discourse on Dao," HE Yan makes his point clear:

> Then, indeed, it is clear that the Dao is complete. […] What is dark obtains its blackness from it; what is plain obtains its whiteness from it. The carpenter's square is able to make a square because of it; the compass is able to make a circle because of it. The round and the square obtain their form, but that which gives them their form itself does not have any form. The white and the black obtain their name, but that which gives them their name itself does not have any name. (Chan 2010b: 25)

Dao generates forms as well as their corresponding names, but it remains outside the realm of names. Names are congruent with forms by virtue of indicating what makes them particular. There is nothing, however, that makes Dao particular. It has no specific form, and thus no name.[15] Reasoning that this demonstrates the completeness of the Dao, HE Yan finds a commonality between Dao and Confucius' description of Yao as a model of utmost virtuosity in the *Analects*. In "Discourse on Nameless," HE Yan writes:

> What is naturally of itself so is Dao. Dao is fundamentally nameless. Thus, Laozi said that he only forced himself to assign a name to it [*Daodejing* 25]. Confucius praised the sage-king Yao as "far-reaching, [whose beneficent accomplishment] no one could name" [*Analects* 8.19]. Later in the same passage, he said that Yao was toweringly majestic in his accomplishment. In this instance, he was forcing himself to give Yao a name, taking a term that is commonly recognized by everyone in the world and applying it to Yao. How could it be otherwise that Yao's accomplishment had a name and Confucius still maintained that no one could name it? Precisely because Yao's accomplishment is nameless, one can therefore justifiably choose from all the names in the world to name it. (Chan 2010b: 27–28; translation modified)

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[14] According to HE Yan, as with many other Chinese philosophers, there is no difference between what might be identified as the "properties of a thing" or "attributes" and that which may be called the "thing itself" or "essence."

[15] This is not necessarily an ontological argument. Saying that Dao has no "form" does not imply that it does not exist, nor does it say that Dao is outside the realm of "being" or "presence" (*you* 有) (see the previous footnote).

According to HE Yan, the "namelessness" of Dao is analogous to Confucius' praise of Yao in *Analects* 8.19 as being so "far-reaching" that his accomplishments could not be named. Just as one could choose any name to name Yao, one could likewise choose any name to name Dao. Blackness, whiteness, squareness, and roundness are all words that describe Dao, but they are insufficient for establishing congruence in that they only get at some limited part of it. Dao is "namelessness" because one could "justifiably choose from all the names in the world to name it," but no name chosen could be completely congruent. HE Yan thus asserts that there is a continuity between the namelessness of Yao, as completely virtuous and therefore full of all nameable virtues, and the namelessness of the Dao, as the mother of all things and therefore full of all names (and nameable forms). Using language to describe either Yao or Dao only gets at some aspect of their wholeness; both are too complete or full to be confined by any single name.

4.2 WANG Bi: Extending Incongruity to Names and Virtues

Philosophically, WANG Bi's comments about Yao in *Analects* 8.19 are similar to HE Yan's. Wang does, however, implement a vocabulary that hits directly on the theme of this article. Confucius' description of Yao as "vast" and unnameable is, WANG Bi says, "a designation for saying [that he] has no form and no name" (*wuxing wuming zhi cheng ye* 無形無名之稱也) (Lou 1999: 626). Drawing on the logic of the *Daodejing*, Wang reasons that Yao, as completely good, lacks complementary "bad" features, which means there is no way to describe him. Wang writes, "Good and bad must have each other, and names differentiate forms" (*shan e xiang xu, er mingfen xing yan* 善惡相須, 而名分形焉) (Lou 1999: 626). In other words, as ultimately good, Yao's goodness is not of the kind that could be differentiated and delineated as the opposite of badness. Thus, given his perfect virtuosity (that is, devoid of any badness) Yao cannot be accessed by means of names and designations. Here, Wang finds an opening for his reading of virtues themselves as ineffable:

> If great love completely lacks selfishness, how then could it be specified? The utmost good has no preference, how then could its name be generated? (Lou 1999: 626)

Wang thus goes beyond HE Yan by extending the incongruity between names and Yao's virtue to *a more general incongruity between names and virtues themselves*. The names or descriptions that Confucius gave in examples of virtuousness provided in the *Analects* do not get at the "great" or "utmost" of what he was talking about. Confucius' virtues are themselves, like Dao, outside the realm of names and actualities. There can be no congruence between the name of a virtue and that virtue itself.

Wang thus points to the incongruity between the ineffable source of names and forms and names and forms themselves, a theme found throughout the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*.[16] Virtues are unnameable in the same way that Dao cannot be

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[16] Outside the moral and political realm Wang argued that "all names arise from forms" (*fan ming sheng yu xing* 凡名生於形). However, this theory of names is used to create the foundation for the critique of naming formless virtues and Dao (for more on this, see Chua 2010).

adequately described in words. Providing either with a name reduces them to something partial. Neither have the fixed particularity that would allow them to be adequately expressed in language. Further, this provides reasons why morality may transform over time or be expressed differently in various situations.

In the opening paragraphs of his "Laozi Zhilue 老子指略" ("Introduction to the *Daodejing*"), Wang Bi establishes a link between moral practice or norms and the Dao. In this way his argument that Confucius virtues are unnameable becomes an account of the transforming manifestations of morality. Here Wang links "name" or "definition" with *xiang* 象 or "image"—a term he borrows from the *Yijing* 易經 (*The Book of Changes*). In a poetic expression Wang demonstrates how morality, as a manifestation of Dao, is excluded from the realm of names and forms:

> Thus an image that takes an actual form is not the great image; […] and if one uses the great note, folkways and customs will undergo moral transformation […]. Folkways and customs undergo moral transformation, but this transformation is impossible to analyze. […]. The Sage [Confucius] may have promulgated the five teachings [the five human relationships], but it is those who do not speak who bring about moral transformation. Therefore "the Dao that can be described in language is not the constant Dao; the name that can be given is not its constant name. (Lynn 1999: 30–31; translation modified)

Names and images can both be understood in the realm of language and forms. The Dao and morality may project themselves into this realm, but ultimately remain outside of it. Morality can become manifest in the realm of forms, but it is never completely disclosed therein. Confucius' teachings are then just as limited in explicating morality as the word "Dao" or any other label is in expressing the Dao. In fact, Wang takes the *Daodejing*'s (admittedly) "forced naming" of the Dao as "Dao" (see *Daodejing* 25) a step further in his writings by often simply using the words *wuxing* 無形 (formless), *wuming* 無名 (nameless), and *ci* 此 (this), instead of "Dao." Additionally, Wang develops a corresponding understanding of the *Analects*. There, Confucius illustrates morality largely through examples. Wang builds on his conception of the incongruity of morality and names to explain why Confucius' answers are not given in the form of nominal definitions. In Wang's view, Confucius' focus on the specifics of the person and situation in determining moral appropriateness blossoms into a theory of the incongruity between morality and names.

In his commentary on the *Daodejing*, Wang develops this theory employing the term *ji* 迹 (trace)—the word that becomes pivotal for Guo Xiang and influential in Chinese Buddhism as well. It appears in *Daodejing* 27, which reads: "One who is good at going does not leave traces" (*shan xing wu zhe ji* 善行無轍迹) (Moeller 2007: 67), in response to which Wang Bi observes: "Traveling by *ziran* 自然 [or "self-so"], nothing is formulated nor implemented, thus things attain their utmost, and no trace is left upon them" (Lou 1999, 71). Reflecting back on his comments about virtues and morality, the role of a "trace" becomes clear; it is the leftover mark of self-so action.[17] For Wang,

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[17] Brook Ziporyn has been influential in promoting the word "trace" as the most philosophically suitable translation for *ji* 迹 (Ziporyn 2003). The sinologist Richard John Lynn has taken issue with this, preferring the more literal rendering of *ji* as "footprint" (Lynn 1999).

virtuosity and morality are characterized by leaving no such marks. That part of "self-so" that can be named is only a leftover imprint of what has already passed by. Names of virtues or morality thus speak to a form that is in fact only a trace and not the "self-so" virtue or morality itself. Names can only correspond to forms that serve as the traces of virtue.

4.3 GUO Xiang: On Incongruity between Names and All Actualities

Even more than WANG Bi, GUO Xiang highlights the notion of "self-so" (*ziran* 自然). For Guo everything is already self-so, and nothing can be otherwise. In terms of incongruity Guo centers on the problem of fixed names, on the one hand, and the always-evasive transience of all forms and actualities, on the other. *According to Guo, all names and actualities are incongruent.*

Wang stresses the ineffable, formless, and shapeless realm of nothingness, Guo instead turns to another important theme in the *Zhuangzi*: change or transformation. Commenting on *Zhuangzi* 6.2 Guo writes:

> Never ceasing for an instant, we find ourselves constantly thrown suddenly into newness. There is no moment when all things between heaven and earth are not moving along. The world is ever new but believes itself to be old [...]. "Me" goes away together with the present moment. How then could the past be held onto? (Guo 1990: 249; Ziporyn 2009: 195)

This account shares some of the terminology found in later Chinese Buddhism,[18] as will be shown in the following section. Importantly, however, it is a logical development of the emphasis on transformation already found in the *Zhuangzi*. In this passage (6.2) *Zhuangzi* addresses the change from life to death and alterations from night to day, and goes on to look at the continuous transformations of all things. As to human beings, the *Zhuangzi* states, "the human form in its time undergoes ten thousand transformations, never stopping for an instant" (Ziporyn 2009: 43). In Guo's philosophy, the transitory nature of things structures the relationship between all names and all actualities.

If actualities are never the same, if they change in every instant, then any attempt to fix them, especially through naming, is doomed from the start. The original act, self, or actuality is that which leaves the trace, but it vanishes as quickly as it comes about. What is leftover is merely the imprint of something that has already moved on and become something else. Whatever was done or existed in the past is gone forever. Nothing exists or is done in a vacuum; for Guo, everything is intimately connected.[19] Each thing and each action is a part of its environment—which means it is a part of all other things and all other actions that

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[18] Parts of this passage are quoted at the beginning of Sengzhao's "Wu Buqian Lun 物不遷論" ("[Real] Things Never Move"), although Sengzhao's conclusion is quite the opposite of Guo's, as will be shown in the next section.

[19] This idea is expressed in Guo's philosophy through the concept of *ming* 冥, or "vanishing." For Guo all things "vanish" into one another—in the twofold sense of no longer being what they were, and submitting to the influence of others (see Ziporyn 2003: 85–99).

make up its environment. The change of even one factor thus implies a transformation in all others.

The difficulty here is that traces are often not recognized as traces; they are instead mistaken for that which left the trace. In terms of naming, this problem becomes manifest in the assumption that names can be congruent with actualities. Names are fixed and can, at best, only correspond to the traces of what is gone—and never actualities themselves. Guo summarizes: "The names and patterns (*ming fa* 名法) are merely traces of what has already departed. They are not sufficient for moving along [with actualities]" (Ziporyn 2003: 53).

In the moral sphere, Guo's theory of the incongruity between names and actualities may seem reminiscent of Wang's account; however, Guo's argument about incongruity is not based on the ineffability of the complete or formless, but on the acknowledgment of constant change. Guo writes:

> "Humanity" is the trace left behind by an instance of unbiased love. "Responsibility" is the effect left behind by an instance of bringing something to completion. Love is not humanity, but the trace of humanity comes from love. Completing things is not responsibility, but the effect of responsibility emerges from the act of completing things. Maintaining humanity and responsibility is insufficient to bring about an understanding of real love and real benefit, which come from intentionlessness. Hence, they must be forgotten. But this is merely the forgetting of the traces and effects. It is not yet the wondrous comprehension into which one vanishes completely. (Guo 1990: 293; Ziporyn 2009: 204, translation modified)

Here, Guo is distinguishing between the actuality of unbiased love and what is generally named "humanity," as well as between the actuality of bringing something to completion and what is generally named "responsibility." The reason that these names do not reach actualities is not, as Wang would have it, because the virtuous exists in a shapeless and formless realm, but rather because all actualities are in flux. All names are, to use Guo's own words, only "adopted names" (*ji ming* 寄名) (Guo 1990: 236).[20] They are not congruent with fluctuant actualities (see Y.-J. Tang 2009: 260–262). In the next section, we will show how Buddhist theories further develop this idea, and represent another transformation of the *Zhuangzi*'s argument for the incongruity between names and actualities.

5 Incongruity in Chinese Buddhist Thought

5.1 Incongruity and Nonduality in the Madhyamaka Concept of the Two Truths

During the Wei-Jin period, Kumārajīva's (343–413) disciple Sengzhao 僧肇 (374–414) composed four treatises, the "Zhao Lun 肇論 (The Treatise of Sengzhao)," and a

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[20] Ziporyn translates *jiming* as "borrowed names" (Ziporyn 2009: 192), which fits in this context, but in order to avoid confusion with the Buddhist term *jia ming* 假名, which can also be understood as "borrowed names," we have used "adopted names."

commentary to the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, incorporating the ideas and rhetoric of incongruity from the Daoist and Xuanxue discourses into his own exposition of Buddhist Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka thought.

Nāgārjuna's (c. 150–c. 250) Madhyamaka teaching, introduced in China through the translation work of Kumārajīva, holds that the interdependent arising of things (*pratītyasamut-pāda*; *yuanqi* 緣起) is equivalent to emptiness of inherent existence (*śūnyatā*; *kong* 空), thereby stressing the distinction between two truths (*satyadvaya*; *erdi* 二諦), called conventional and ultimate truth. Rooted in linguistic construction, conventional truth is incongruent with the ineffable sense of ultimate truth—a sense which is undistorted by any construction. Such distinction between the incongruent conventional and ineffable ultimate implies that perceived congruence of names with things does not entail actual congruence between names and reality. Resorting to Daoist rhetoric, Sengzhao refers to the Buddhist differentiation of the two truths as "incongruity between names and reality/actuality" (*mingshi wudang* 名實無當).

It is important to note that such incongruity nonetheless resonates with two other levels of congruence that Sengzhao does not dismiss: (1) "incongruity" is not tantamount to saying that names and things, at the conventional level, are completely separate, or arbitrarily associated—to the contrary, in order to make interaction possible for us, our daily speech presupposes congruence between names and referents (things) insofar as the two must appear to be correlatively dependent (*xiangdai* 相待) in the conventional realm of linguistic construction; (2) paradoxically enough, the insight about incongruity is essential for us in realizing the consistency between the canonical word of the Buddha's teaching (*jiaoyan* 教言) and the ineffable sense of his "liberation" (*jietuo* 解脫). Such consistency corresponds to the Madhyamaka sense of "nonduality" (*buer* 不二) and, again, this can only be realized by virtue of our insight into incongruity.[21] To further elaborate on this sense of consistency in terms of nonduality qua differentiation between two truths (incongruity), Chinese Mādhyamika proponents, such as Sengzhao, Sanlun 三論 master Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), and Tiantai 天台 master Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597) resort to the binary "traces and root" (*ji ben* 迹本)—a Chinese Madhyamaka concept most probably developed on the basis of GUO Xiang's explanation of the relation between actualities and traces (*shi ji* 實迹) in his commentary on the *Zhuangzi*.

All this implies that Mahāyāna Buddhists generally distinguish between the language in daily speech and the Buddha's word (*Buddha-vacana*; *foyan* 佛言). According to this view, linguistic construction in daily speech usually generates reifications which lead astray and are deceptive insofar as they conceal what they actually are, causing us to mistake the unreal for real, called inversion (*viprayāsa*; *diandao* 顛倒). By contrast, the canonical word of the Buddha's teaching devises a

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[21] One of the two anonymous readers assumes that Sengzhao's understanding of nonduality does not allow for incongruity. As a matter of fact, Sengzhao uses the characters "*bu dang* 不當" which can be translated as "incongruent," and, contrary to the reader's claim, Sengzhao never explicitly discusses "nonduality" in his treatises, although we believe that nonduality (like in all Mahāyāna texts) is always implicitly addressed. However, there is a Chinese Madhyamaka master who explicitly deals with the concept of nonduality, called Jizang 吉藏, who borrows a lot from Sengzhao's works. He refers to "nonduality" in a deliberately paradoxical way, when he says that "polarity [differentiation between two truths] manifests [their] nonduality" (*er biao buer* 二表不二). In this context, "polarity" means differentiation between two truths and therefore is what we refer to as "incongruity" in Chinese Madhyamaka thought.

type of construction that is instructive, advancing our awareness of a falsehood which is inextricably bound up with all linguistic expression. Transmitted in the canonical shape of sūtra (scripture) and śāstra (treatise), such a language often uses paradoxical expression to reveal and underscore its consistency with the ineffable.[22] Hence, for the Chinese Buddhist masters, language is ambivalent. In their commentaries to the Indian sūtras and śāstras, they often try to interpret and present the root text as an instructive example and elaboration of the linguistic strategy that liberates us from our own misguided use of speech and hints at the inexpressible sense of the Buddha's insight.

The project of the Mahāyāna teachings then contains two major aspects: (1) it tries to detect an insensible bondage to deception, which is deeply rooted in all conceptualizing thought and gives rise to reifications inherent in all types of linguistic signification; (2) it explores the liberation from such bondage. The discernment and awareness of foundational and inevitable falsehood is believed to advance the ultimate insight into the emptiness of all referents of our intentional acts (ultimate truth), which eventually liberates from all inner deceptions and inversions. That sense of emptiness and liberation reaches beyond language and thought, but does not imply total nonexistence, although it does deny that things *inherently* exist. No thing arises in separation and independent from other things, nor is any thing intrinsically what it seems to be. For the Mādhyamika, the identity of a particular thing is solely determined by its extrinsic relationships and has no real foundation; it is constituted by interdependent arising. Emptiness of inherent existence—the denial of an independently existing entity—means that things are ultimately unreal but simultaneously not nonexistent. Unreality and nonexistence are not the same, because unreality might have an instructive or deceptive impact on our existence, and therefore it is existentially relevant.

On the basis of this observation, Nāgārjuna states that the interdependent arising of things does not reach beyond the conventional realm of our existence and should not be confused with the (ineffable) realm of ultimate truth. Pervading the way we conventionally exist, unreality persists, and rests upon true emptiness in the specific sense that emptiness, unequal to nonexistence in its denial of independent existence, ultimately sustains the interdependent arising of things in our illusory and ephemeral world. Emptiness implies that truth and falsehood are inseparable—the Madhyamaka sense of nonduality. Yet according to the "Zhong Lun 中論"—Kumārajīva's translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*—a genuine understanding of true emptiness cannot confuse the two, and therefore must differentiate between the realms of the (incongruent) conventional and (ineffable) ultimate.[23] This differentiation between the

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[22] The Chinese text of the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Jingang Bore Boluomi Jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經), translated by Kumārajīva and others, could be an exemplary model of this language, for instance: "What is spoken of as 'Buddha-dharma,' is not [really] Buddha-dharma; this is what we name 'Buddha-dharma'" (T08, no. 236, p. 758, a24).

[23] The conventional realm, which consists of construction and unreality, is incongruent with ultimate truth, which is empty of construction and thus ineffable. The "Zhong Lun" states: "On grounds of the two truths, all the Buddhas expound the dharma for the sentient beings, which are, first, the conventional truth and, second, the truth of the ultimate meaning. The one who does not know to differentiate the two truths does not know to fathom the true and real sense in the deep Buddha-dharma. Without the reliance on the conventional truth, the meaning of the ultimate is unattainable; the one, who fails to achieve the meaning of the ultimate, cannot achieve nirvāṇa" (T30, no. 1564, p. 32, c16–p. 33, a3).

two truths realizes and expresses an insight into the inevitable falsehood of the language that we must rely on even while explicating that sense of true emptiness.

Revealing incongruity, such differentiation also generates a stance of self-referential observation within the textual transmission of the Buddha's teaching: the teaching (*jiao* 教) itself constantly distinguishes the ultimate and ineffable sense of liberation from the contingent, provisional, and incongruent forms through which it alternatively presents the same at the conventional level. By virtue of constant differentiating, our understanding of incongruity comes to see that the ultimate is what consists only in a deferred manner, which simultaneously reveals inseparability of the two—nonduality of the conventional and the ultimate. Chinese Mādhyamikas, such as Jizang, therefore explain that constant differentiation between two truths is what characterizes the Buddha's teaching and informs its linguistic strategies, while nonduality is what features the realm of his liberation. Most importantly, apart from these traces of differentiation in the teaching there is no access to liberation, just as apart from nonduality in the Buddha's liberation there is no other root which can constitute that teaching. Hence, realizing incongruity, such differentiating aims at liberating our understanding from our/its own deceptive reifications; this amounts to disclosing to us the ineffable sense as nonduality (which is inseparability of emptiness and interdependent arising, truth and falsehood, conventional and ultimate).

5.2 Sengzhao on the Incongruity of Names and Reality/Actuality

According to Sengzhao, who tried to promote Madhyamaka thought, which was barely known to the world of Chinese literati at Kumārajīva's time, the denial of the congruity between names and actualities in the *Zhuangzi* helps to clarify the Buddhist issue of linguistic signification. However, unlike the *Zhuangzi*, Sengzhao does not intend to criticize the demand that actualities in the realm of human existence must become congruent with social norms and constructions. He adopts the Daoist notion of incongruity between names and actualities, without really considering its sociopolitical implications. His discourse instead intends to connect with the notion of the ineffability of the Dao to illustrate the Buddhist sense of inconceivable liberation (*acintya-vimokṣa*; *busiyi jietuo* 不思議解脫) from within the tradition of indigenous thought. In this way, his dictum "reality/actuality is incongruent with names" (*shi budang ming* 實不當名) seems to be modelled after the statement "the Dao is incongruent with names" (*dao budang ming* 道不當名) (*Zhuangzi* 22.7).

In this context, it is important to note that his dictum entails a reinterpretation of the Chinese character *shi*, which in the arguments outlined above corresponds to the English "actuality." In addition to connoting "actuality," the term *shi* seems, for him, to be used to convey a semantic field disclosed by Chinese translations and interpretations of Indian Buddhist texts. For instance, *shi* occurs in the Chinese Buddhist neologism *shixiang* 實相, which is often translated as "real mark" or "mark of reality," and corresponds to the meanings of the Sanskrit expressions *bhūtalakṣaṇa, tattva, abhūta, yathābhūta, śūnyatā, dharmatā*, and so on.[24] All of them hint at the Mahāyāna sense of emptiness, which accounts for what is ultimately true and real, and yet denies

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[24] See CHENG Gongrang's 程恭讓 article on Kumārajīva's translation of *shixiang* and the Tiantai use of that term (Cheng 2013).

real existence or actualities considered to be congruent with names. From the viewpoint of Buddhist emptiness, nameable "actualities" are empty and unreal, while the "real mark" or "mark of reality" (*shixiang*) adumbrates what evades linguistic signification and instantiates ultimate truth that reaches beyond language and thought. In the Buddhist context, *shi* accounts for the sense of reality that cannot be considered to be an "actuality" congruent with any name.

Sengzhao's second treatise, "Buzhen Kong Lun 不真空論" or "Emptiness of the Untrue/Untrue Emptiness," expounds the complex view that congruity between names and things does not entail congruity between names and reality. The statement expressing this is embedded in a modified quote from the *Zhuangzi*, which argues for indifference and equanimity toward the world of present things. The passage in the *Zhuangzi* reads: "[One should use] things just as things without making oneself become a thing controlled by [those] things, how could this ever entail any burden?" (*wu wu er bu wu yu wu, ze hu ke de er lei ye* 物物而不物于物, 則胡可得而累邪) (*Zhuangzi* 20.1). Sengzhao's very similar wording modifies the meaning and relates it to the Buddhist context of linguistic signification:

> If using [the name of] a thing to present as a thing what is a thing, then what is presented as a thing can be considered to be a thing. If using [the name of] a thing to present as a thing what is not a thing, then, although presented as a thing, it is not a thing. Therefore, things do not become real [just] owing to their inseparability from names; and names do not become true [just] on account of their inseparability from things. However, ultimate truth [emptiness], which remains solely in silence, is what reaches beyond names and teachings. How could this ever be featured by virtue of speech and written text? (T45, no. 1858, p. 152, a24–27)

Although the shift of context is fairly obvious, with regard to content there is a point of intersection between the two passages, which could be summarized by Sengzhao's phrase "smoothly passing through without departing from things" (*jiwu shuntong* 即物順通; T45, no. 1858, p. 152, b3).[25] However, the two are almost contrary in terms of their ontological approach. Sengzhao emphasizes that, in order to accomplish a state of imperturbability, it is important to see the unreality of things, which is not the same as their nonexistence.

The *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, maintains a stance of indifference and equanimity that does not require scrutinizing the ontological status of things referred to by names, because it is simply referring to a state of mind devoid of any enforced relation toward the world of distinct things. This perspective aligns one's mental state with the self-so course of all things.

Nonetheless, Sengzhao seems to believe that the Daoist classics and subsequent philosophical developments of the Xuanxue thinkers fit the Buddhist discourse. He provides two arguments for the unreality and emptiness of things referred to by names, and explains why it is important to differentiate unreality from nonexistence. At the

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[25] This is reminiscent of GUO Xiang's commentary to Chapter 6 of the *Zhuangzi*, "Its Great Source as Teacher" ("Dazong Shi 大宗師," Ziporyn 2009: 39), which reads: "Smoothly passing along with what is there by virtue of a mind that is empty [of all this]" (*wuxin yi shunyou* 無心以順有; Guo 1990: 268).

same time, he does not deny "real things" that evade linguistic signification. Expounding those views inspired by Madhyamaka thought, he repeatedly resorts to Daoist or Xuanxue images, rhetoric, and ideas. This is particularly true with respect to his arguments for the unreality and emptiness of all referents of intentional acts.

His first argument draws upon the topic of *dong jing* 動靜, or "motion and stillness," often discussed by those considered to belong to the Xuanxue tradition. It clearly mirrors the notion of change and transformation that, as described above, is also of great importance for GUO Xiang. Sengzhao observes that language construes universals and tends toward reification, which is tantamount to construction and falsehood. In our use of language, we equalize and identify unequal or differing things by overseeing and nullifying the temporality of particulars. In the first of his four treatises, "Wu Buqian Lun 物不遷論" or "[Real] Things Never Move," he describes the temporal aspect of particulars in terms of *jing* 靜 or "stillness," which does not exclude the sense of nonabiding or unceasing change but which, like *kong* 空 or "emptiness," evades our conceptual understanding. Only with regard to its respective point in time, a particular thing unchangingly and really is this particular thing. Viewed from another point in time, there is no longer the same thing anymore. Consequently, Sengzhao claims that a particular thing, though unceasingly changing, constantly stays (*changcun* 常存) in its respective point in time.

This stillness denies duration in the flow of time, but not continuity of real things. Those can never be represented or referred to in a genuine way, given that neither the real thing nor the image representing it would be the same when viewed from another point in time. Due to this sense of temporality, we cannot talk about really existing things; and, contrary to our ordinary assumptions, names too are impermanent—we never actually use the same name at different times. Although predicated upon the same argument of incessant and irreversible change, unlike GUO Xiang, Sengzhao does not consider incongruity as the discrepancy between dynamic actualities in constant motion and fixed names which are like traces left behind, abiding in stillness.[26] Rather, Sengzhao's incongruity emerges in his observation of temporality that equally embraces names (signs) and things (referents)—a perspective which reveals an indispensable and hidden type of falsehood that is constitutive for all referential relations. Consequently, his treatises use the Chinese *wu* 物, translated as "thing," in an ambiguous fashion: similar to "truth," which must be interpreted differently depending on its conventional or ultimate sense, this character could either mean "real thing" or "unreal thing"—nameable things are unreal, and real things evade linguistic signification.

The character *wu* or "thing" in the title of Sengzhao's treatise, "[Real] Things Never Move," implies "real thing." In contrast to this sense of a real thing that never moves, our daily speech must presuppose the opposite view, according to which nameable things may move in space and time without any essential change. In our use of names, we assume that we can refer to the self-same thing from different points in time, which characterizes the viewpoint of conventional truth through postulating that names and things must be congruent. Viewed from the vantage point of ultimate truth, addressed by that title, this assumption entails constructions and falsehood. However, Sengzhao's discussion is in accordance with the Madhyamaka differentiation of the two truths

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[26] For GUO Xiang names and traces do not differ regarding their incapacity for congruently signifying actualities.

expressing nonduality. He tries to illustrate the paradoxical relation of the two truths with the inseparability of the opposites "motion and stillness," which is an image that he might very well have adopted from WANG Bi's works.

What appears to us like a thing's limited journey in the continuous and irreversible flow of time is called "motion." In fact, this is nothing but the incessant change of unequal things, all of which themselves remain unchanged in their respective point in time, devoid of any motion. The overwhelming abundance of such stillness is what an instant of time amounts to, and further explains why real things cannot be objects of our references. In our attempt to hint at such stillness, only motion is what appears to us, although there is nothing that really moves. In other words, stillness is no more beyond apparent motion than motion is beyond true stillness. On this level, motion turns out to be stillness in the same way that on the conventional level stillness appears to us as motion. This is not a contradiction, since the motion that Sengzhao addresses is that of unreal things (the conventional), while stillness (the ultimate) only concerns real things; like the two truths, apparent motion and true stillness do not exclude each other.

Again, Sengzhao's point that incongruity results from the stillness of real things is the opposite of GUO Xiang's view which stresses incongruity due to the fact that actualities are in constant motion. Indeed, Sengzhao reverses GUO Xiang's view, by following the same observation though. His reversal is motivated by his understanding of the Buddhist concept of the two truths: the ultimate accounts for what is real, which is emptiness and stillness, while the conventional represents the unreal, provisional, and changing aspects, all of which are associated with motion. For him, motion and stillness are in the same way inseparable as the conventional and ultimate are nondual. He therefore uses the former to illustrate the latter, implicitly criticizing GUO Xiang's view for failing to realize nonduality in his discourse of incongruity. Sengzhao's illustration suggests that without realizing nonduality observation of incongruity remains unaccomplished.

The same ambiguity that characterizes Sengzhao's use of "thing" applies also to other terms borrowed from Daoist and Xuanxue sources. His second treatise takes *you* 有 as both really existent and illusively existent, while *wu* 無 is taken as emptiness and nonexistence. Even the title of the second treatise, "Emptiness of the Untrue/ Untrue Emptiness," is ambiguous, since the deconstructive sense of emptiness applies to this very expression itself. "Emptiness" reveals its true meaning by denying what it signifies; it is precisely in this paradoxical manner that the incongruity of names and reality becomes apparent. In his third treatise, "Bore Wuzhi Lun 般若無知論" or "Wisdom as Non-Knowledge," he explains the Mahāyāna sense of wisdom, or *prajñā* (*bore* 般若), as contrasted with common knowledge (or conventional knowledge), and uses *zhi* 知 to indicate both the noble wisdom and its opposite, the common false knowledge.

On account of that ambiguity, the signifying function of these four terms can operate in the same way as the self-referential expression "emptiness" does. In order to reveal the Madhyamaka sense of reality, which is incongruent with any name, each of these four must enact its own self-falsification. Sengzhao's purposely ambiguous use of Daoist and Xuanxue terms is the basis for the paradoxical language that he must employ to unveil the deceptive force in our conceptualizing thought and to hint at the limits of the conceivable. Without awareness of its own limits and falsehood, our

understanding cannot comprehend the true sense of emptiness, which accounts for the Madhyamaka sense of "ultimate truth."

We may now look at Sengzhao's second type of argument to deny the reality of referents signified by names. In the treatise "Emptiness of the Untrue/Untrue Emptiness," he addresses unreality in relations of mutual dependence. "Correlative dependence" also embraces reference relations that consist of the two elements of what signifies and what is signified (*neng suo* 能所). In this treatise, Sengzhao points out that our use of speech and language assigns names to things in such a manner that the two constitute a relationship of mutually dependent elements, within which both are taken to be really existent entities. No name, it seems, persists without the real thing that this name indicates, and no thing occurs apart from the true name that represents that thing. However, rooted only in mutuality and correlative dependence, the two (names and things) are equally devoid of a real foundation. Nonetheless, the manner in which our language use enables us to perform meaningful interaction relies on precisely such unreality.[27]

Again, Sengzhao's dictum that all referents are unreal conversely means that real things cannot be referred to. There is simply nothing that can really be considered a thing, and even the image of the sign that is meant to point at a certain thing is devoid of a real foundation. The same also applies to such unreality, whose ontological status cannot be denied and which, in fact, informs the way we actually relate to and truly exist in our world. Paradoxically enough, even the name "unreality" is therefore just a "false/provisional sign" (*jiahao* 假號) and untrue. If it is true that all referents are unreal, then this unreality of nameable things evades, like a blind spot, our epistemic-propositional references. At the conventional level of our cognition (and in our conventional use of language), we are unaware of this. The falsehood or unreality that Sengzhao's discussion implies is a blind spot and concomitant feature of our conventional use of language.

Thus, through constantly realizing unreality, we cultivate an understanding that approaches the nature of reality in the self-modifying fashion of a hermeneutical circle. Further insight into one side (unreality) modifies and advances that of the other (reality), as neither of the two is given apart from the other, similar to the mutuality between our knowledge of healing and that of sickness. Mutual modification allows for the further growth of each side: to realize unreality entails seeing reality and vice versa. The practitioner's turn from a nonawakened into an awakened being requires the awareness and full realization of this evolutionary force, which is a progressive or transformative circularity and advances her/his change. This is the core of cultivation, awakening, and transformation in Chinese Madhyamaka Buddhism.

On the basis of self-referential observation, our comprehension constantly renews and actualizes our insight into the ontological status of an inevitable but evading sense of an unreality that informs the way we truly relate to and exist in our world. The acknowledgment of the incongruity of names and reality is instrumental in fostering this sense of unreality. At the same time, this acknowledgment of

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[27] See the passage that states the incongruity between names and reality (T45, no. 1858, p. 152, c18 – p. 153, a3).

incongruity allows for the understanding of the nonduality of conventional and ultimate truth.

Based on this understanding of nonduality, Sengzhao, Jizang, and Zhiyi try to highlight the consistency between the ineffable sense of liberation and the Buddha's word in the canonical shape of sūtra and śāstra. As previously mentioned, they do so by applying the terminology of "root" (ben 本) and "traces" already found in GUO Xiang and others influenced by Daoist thought. Ineffable liberation is considered the invisible "root" that constitutes the manifesting teaching transmitted in the words of sūtra and śāstra. The teaching again embraces all the various "traces" of the Buddha, which in turn refer back to, guide to, and reveal the ineffable root. "Traces and root," mentioned as a binary in Sengzhao's commentary on Kumārajīva's translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* for the first time, accounts for the circular mutuality and nonduality of silence and speech, and is an important hermeneutical device in Jizang's and Zhiyi's sūtra exegesis.[28]

Jizang particularly stresses that "traces" accounts for differentiating the two truths, which instantiates the insight about the incongruity of the conventional with the ineffable ultimate, and thus informs the entire teaching in the sūtras and śāstras—the Buddha's word. "Root" is what the understanding of nonduality embraces, embodying inseparability of truth from falsehood. In accordance with Nāgārjuna's sense of the two truths, he stresses that such nonduality of the root can only be revealed via the differentiation of the traces. In other words, apart from the insight into incongruity via differentiation, nonduality cannot be realized.

Although adopted from Daoist and Xuanxue sources, "traces" are differently evaluated in the Buddhist context: while GUO Xiang emphasizes that our adherence to the fixed traces may prevent us from aligning ourselves to the self-so course (*ziran*) of the ever changing actualities, the Chinese Mādhyamikas stress that apart from the traces the root remains inaccessible, because it is the root that constitutes all the traces. But at the same time, the Buddhists do also share GUO Xiang's view that our clinging to the traces entails counterproductive effects. Hence, nonduality in Chinese Madhyamaka means that the traces account for the provisional apart from which the ultimate cannot be approached, and the root for the ultimate apart from which the provisional cannot be constituted. Most importantly, it is this understanding of circular nonduality wherein the Chinese Madhyamaka sense of incongruity reveals an aspect that goes beyond the Daoist and Xuanxue discourses of the ineffable, which originally is the source of its inspiration.

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[28] See the passage from Sengzhao's sūtra commentary ("Zhu Weimojie Jing 注維摩詰經"), which is frequently quoted throughout the works of Zhiyi and Jizang: "Without the root (ben 本) there is nothing that hands down all the traces (ji 迹), and without the traces there is nothing that reveals the root. Although root and traces must be differentiated, they are one with regard to the inconceivable" (T38, no. 1775, p. 327, a27–b5). In the first chapter of the earliest extant Chinese translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, accomplished by Zhiqian 支謙 (222–252), the two terms "traces" and "root" appear in combination (T14, no. 474, p. 519, b2–3). However, they do not bear the sense of nonduality that Sengzhao, Jizang, and Zhiyi later ascribed to this binary. Kumārajīva and Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602–664) later translations (as well as the extant Sanskrit version) of the same sūtra do not contain these terms and moreover agree with one another regarding the passage that Zhiqian has otherwise translated with "traces" and "root." Buddhist scholarship in ancient China adopted those two terms from the indigenous Xuanxue tradition.

6 Conclusion

In this article, we aimed at reconstructing the historical development of a philosophical theme that was first conceived as a somewhat subversive sociopolitical idea in the *Zhuangzi*. A mainstream ethical demand for congruity between social roles and political functions and the actual performance of such roles and functions was shared by many philosophers of the "classical" period, albeit with significant variations. While, for instance, Confucians propagated a morally charged "rectification of names," Legalists advocated a strict correspondence between "names and forms/actualities" for political ends. As we argue, the *Zhuangzi* represents a Daoist alternative to such conformity demands and instead develops a "deconstruction" of the presumably ideal commitment to actualizing prescribed roles in one's person. The fulfillment of social role expectations may only lead to existential and/or social vanity, hypocrisy, and/or corruption. The *Zhuangzi* instead suggests the possibility of namelessness and formlessness by distancing oneself from one's socially ascribed identities and, at times, by recommending an altogether avoidance of socially exalted positions. This sociopolitical and existential attitude connects with the more general Daoist idea of the ineffable Dao. The Dao is void of specific qualities and is therefore shapeless and nameless. Its ineffability is mirrored, in a sociopolitical context, by a Daoist resistance against identifications with socially prescriptive "names."

In the Xuanxue philosophy of the Wei-Jin period, when the relationships between major Daoist and Confucian themes came into focus, at least three major thinkers, namely HE Yan, WANG Bi, and GUO Xiang, continued the discourse about incongruity between names and forms/actualities we find in the *Zhuangzi*. There is a scholarly consensus that the discussion of the relation between names and actualities (*ming shi*) is a central concern in Xuanxue texts. HE Yan and WANG Bi try to reconcile Confucian moral teachings with Daoist conceptions of incongruity and ineffability. For HE Yan, the Confucian model emperor Yao's virtuosity resembles in its completeness—but also in its resistance against any specifications—the ineffable Dao of the Daoists. Therefore, he concludes, moral discourse has its linguistic limits. That which is good beyond definition cannot be named. The Daoist ineffability theme is thereby applied to ethics, and moral terminology emerges as generally incongruent—as WANG Bi outlines in his discussions of the *Analects* and, more extensively, in his elucidations of the *Yijing*. Eventually, GUO Xiang explores the Daoist notion of the "trace" that is found in the *Daodejing*, in the *Zhuangzi*, and in WANG Bi. This metaphor represents the elusiveness of all things. Given the constant transformation of all things, names can only identify an instantiation of something that has (always) already been subject to further transformation. Therefore, there is an inbuilt paradox in the relation between names and what they signify. Names are static "traces," the leftovers of constantly moving "self-so." The image of the trace thus symbolizes the inherent incongruity between fixed names and dynamic actualities.

The Daoist theme of incongruity, along with related conceptions of ineffability, plays a major role in the formation of Chinese Buddhism. The Madhyamaka master Sengzhao paves the way for a significant reliance on Daoist ideas and terminology in the interpretation and development of Buddhist philosophy. Sengzhao, as well as other important later Buddhist masters such as Jizang and Zhiyi, points out the nonduality of, on the one hand, the ineffable "inconceivable liberation" that is present in the ultimate

truth of the Buddha's teaching and, on the other hand, its conventional linguistic expression, for instance in the Buddhist texts, which gives rise to falsehoods in the form of language-based reifications. While, in a conventional sense, language is necessary for communicating and constituting experienced existence, it simultaneously provides the illusion of inherently existing entities and thus obscures the realization of the interdependent arising of all things. In order to expose the one-sidedness of a merely conventional understanding of truth, Sengzhao engages in a Daoist critique of the "incongruity of names and realities/actualities." Unlike his Daoist and Xuanxue predecessors, however, Sengzhao's critique is neither socially-politically nor morally motivated. Rather, he makes use of the Daoist conceptual framework and its related terminology of incongruity and ineffability to illustrate the intricacies of a Buddhist ontology and to promote a soteriological awakening experience.

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