



Traversing Deleuze's Plane of Immanence: Reading the *Taixuan jing* as Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to do two things: to introduce to the Western readership a lesser-known Classical Chinese text, the *Taixuan jing*, and to suggest a philosophical reading of that text through the ideas of Gilles Deleuze articulated in his work with Felix Guattari *What is Philosophy*, namely, those pertaining to “concept” and “plane.” The *Taixuan jing* was composed by the Han dynasty polymath Yang Xiong in the imitation of the more famous *Yi jing*. Similarities notwithstanding, the *Taixuan jing* is in fact the creative work of a single mind whereas the corpus of the *Yi jing* is a composite text of many historical layers from different hands. In this comparative study of the *Taixuan jing* and Deleuze's later thought the following will be investigated: that each tetragram complex (linear figure and poetic adornment) of the *Taixuan jing* corresponds to a concept insofar as it is multiple and combinatory; and that the main subject matter of the *Taixuan jing*, that is, *xuan*, the ultimate generating and regulating principle of the cosmos, corresponds to a plane insofar as it is an infinite becoming in endless movement. As such, Yang Xiong's *Taixuan jing* is precisely the kind of philosophy that creates concepts institutes the field of immanence as advocated by Deleuze.

KEYWORDS

Yang Xiong,
Taixuan jing,
Gilles Deleuze,
xuan, concept,
plane of
immanence

I. Introduction

Pierre Hadot once wrote, in evoking the Stoics, that “the parts of philosophy—physics, ethics, and logic—were not, in fact, parts of philosophy itself, but rather, parts of philosophical *discourse*. [...] *Discourse about philosophy* is not the same thing as *philosophy*.”¹ Without going in depth about how philosophy as a practical way of life had slowly receded into the background as the institutional discipline of it rose to the forefront, Hadot’s words prompt us to ask ourselves who we are and what it is that we do. It is not the first time this has been asked. Neither are we the first (or last) ones to do so. This point, or question, about the nature of philosophy *qua* philosophy was also raised by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their brief but dense “manifesto” where they declared the necessity to break through the bonds of logical demonstration and discursive dialectics. In *What is Philosophy* they present it as the creation of concepts and the instituting of the plane of immanence. This plane, or *planomenon*, shifting somewhere between logic and nonsense, and more properly to be of the pre-philosophical, is that which cannot be thought but must be thought. To reframe the matter in format of inquiry: how are we to represent that which is unthinkable but at the same time demands to be thought? If language and logical reasoning cannot capture the image of the unrepresentable, how can we return to

the pre-philosophical in order to rethink the philosophical?

According to Deleuze the one person who was able to think this plane of immanence without falling into transcendence was Spinoza, singled out as the “Christ of philosophers.”² But is there really no one else who can equally illustrate and think the “best” plane of immanence? Perhaps we can find one other instance if we venture across space and time to first-century China, to the text of the *Taixuan jing*, composed by the hand of Han dynasty polymath Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE). It would be audacious to suggest that Yang Xiong consciously composed a work of “philosophy,” but nothing stops one from proposing a particular reading of the text, a reading that is informed by Deleuze and puts the *Taixuan* in a different light, but one that nevertheless is mindful of the historical background of the text. The claim is that the *Taixuan jing* is that kind of philosophy that sets out to create concepts and institute the plane of immanence. One tetragram complex, or “house,” correlates to one concept in all its multiplicity. That which is called *xuan*, sometimes synonymous to *tao*,³ is the One-All *planomenon* of all houses.

The rest of this paper will be structured as follows: In the first section, I will provide an introduction to the life and times of Yang Xiong with an abridged textual history of the *Taixuan jing*.⁴ This may appear as lengthy, but

¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. with introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 266-7. Italics his.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 60. Hereafter, WP.

³ I have left the word “*tao*” unitalicized and in Wade-Giles format for the reason that this word is now so widely known with a *t*- in both popular and scholarly literature. In instances where the word takes on the meaning of “way” as opposed to the “Way” I have

used *dao*. All other Chinese words will be spelled in the standard pinyin system.

⁴ For studies in English on Yang Xiong and the *Taixuan jing*, please see David Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A Study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung (53 B.C. - 18 A.D.)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Hellmut Wilhelm, “The Interaction of Heaven, Earth and Man,” *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes, Seven Eranos Lectures* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 126-163; and Michael Nylan, *The Canon of Supreme Mystery by Yang Hsiung: A Translation with Commentary of the T'ai Hsüan Ching* (Albany: State University of New

since Yang Xiong is a marginal figure, it is worthwhile to have a basic understanding of the social, political, and intellectual background before moving onto philosophical considerations. Because this is a philosophy journal, some historical and philological aspects in regard to author and text will be incomplete. For the interested reader, I have provided suggestions for further reading and brief explanations where needed. Yet, as indicated in the editorial preface, I still wish to have my cake and eat it, and so in areas that are of significance to the topic I have taken leisure to provide extended textual, linguistic, and historical notes. Finally, I will explain how Deleuze's articulation of concept and plane can give us a fresh understanding of the *Taixuan jing*, and how the *Taixuan* in turn can be conceived of as that kind of creative work urged in *What is Philosophy*.

The following is a short list of terminology that may be useful for the reader:

A **head** is a functioning component consisting of the tetragram, name, poetic imagery of the phase of *yinyang* associated with the tetragram, and the nine appraisals. It is said to have an internal consistency insofar as by itself it is a complete cycle. As such, there are a total of 81 independent heads.

A **house** is a head that is dependent upon and operates in relation to the other 80 houses. That is to say, that it forms a larger cycle through interacting with other counterparts. In this way it can be said to have an external consistency.

A **concept-house** is a house conceived as a Deleuzian concept that is necessarily linked to other concepts, is multiple insofar as it consists of many components that are contracted into a single tetragram, and is both absolute and relative.

This article remains a preliminary inquiry and is not meant to exhaust all of the philosophical aspects in the *Taixuan jing*. There are many areas where the junction between Deleuze and the *Taixuan jing* remain fuzzy or incomplete, but these undeveloped flights of thought must wait for a different time and a longer project. One hopes that this initial investigation will spark interest in an otherwise unknown text and open up possibilities for further treatment that may bring Deleuze's thought closer to the Classical Chinese tradition.

II. The *Taixuan jing*

The concern is how to think the plane of immanence when the tool we rely most on, that is language, always seems to fall short of the whole truth. This problem of representability through language has long been a subject of debate and is not unique to any one tradition. In Classical China, the issue was famously formulated in the *Laozi*. "The tao that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name."⁵ As if to follow up on the issue, the "Great Treatise" of the *Yi jing* asks, "Writing does not exhaust words, and words do not exhaust meaning. If this is so, how can the meaning of the sages appear?"⁶ The response is that meaning—and just to be clear, we are talking about *the* meaning of *the* ultimate truth—is

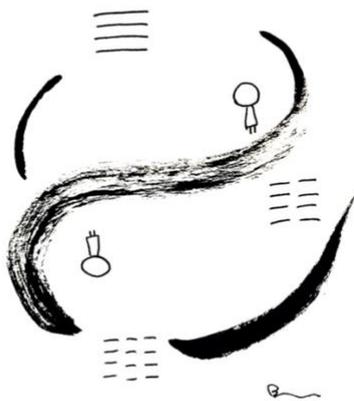
York Press, 1993). For a comprehensive study in Chinese, please see Liu Shaojun 劉韶軍, *Yang Xiong yu Taixuan yanjiu* 楊雄與太玄研究 [Yang Xiong and the Study of the *Taixuan*] (Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 2011).

⁵ 道可道非常道，名可名非常名。Wang Bi *ji jiao shi* 王弼集校釋, ed. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 (Beijing:

Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated in the notes.

⁶ 書不盡言，言不盡意。然則聖人之意其不可見乎。Zhou Yi zhengyi 周易正義, *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要, 7.18a.

found in the linear images of the trigrams, which were created by observing celestial phenomena. This implies an imperfect correspondence between language (spoken and written) and meaning, and yet at the same time hints that there is the possibility for representation lurking beneath the façade of the impossible. The corpus of the *Yi jing* as a whole moreover suggests a mixture of modes of representation: a reduced image consisting of nothing but lines that are then assigned a name, short “descriptive” poetic phrases that are verbal expansions of the hexagrams, and then a series of exegeses in explanatory prose. We will have the opportunity to return to the *Yi jing* later.



⁷ For a study about the literary history of the *fu* see David R. Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody: A study of the Fu of Yang Hsiung* (53 B.C.-A.D. 18) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), and the introduction in his *Wenxuan: or Selections of Refined Literature, Volume I: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁸ For a fully annotated translation of Yang Xiong’s biography in the *History of the Han* which includes his major *fu*, please see David R. Knechtges, *The Han shu Biography of Yang Xiong* (53 B.C.-A.D. 18), Occasional Paper No. 14, Center for Asian Studies

1. The man and his project

Yang Xiong, courtesy name Ziyun 子雲, was a native of the Pi commandery of Shu 蜀 (modern Chengdu, Sichuan) drawn into court life for his talent at composing the *fu* 賦, a poetic genre boasting of epideictic descriptives that first thrived and was in vogue during the Western Han (202 BCE – 8 CE).⁷ During the first years of his official career, he was in charge of composing *fu* at the request of the emperor. Although he never held a high official position (or perhaps it was because of this fact) he managed to live through the fall of the Western Han and into the Xin 新 dynasty (9-23 CE). He had reputedly attempted to jump from the top of the Tianlu library after being accused of a plot against Wang Mang, sole emperor of the Xin. In his later years, he was allowed to return to his hometown on the grounds of old age, passing away into the afterworld at seventy-one.⁸

Yang Xiong considered himself a devoted follower of Confucius and a defender of the classics, immersing himself in a wide range of scholarly compositions including poetry, linguistics, and philosophy. He had a passion for the astronomical sciences, which during the Han tended to overlap with *yinyang* and five phases correlations.⁹ All of the above culminates in the *Taixuan jing*. Under his name we have a fair collection of poetic

Arizona State University (Tempe: Center for Asian Studies, 1982).

⁹ The term “five phases” (*wuxing* 五行) here refers specifically to a system of thought that correlates the five *processes* (also confusingly called *wuxing*) of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth with *qi* 氣. As is with most early cosmological and philosophical concepts of Classical Chinese, the precise nature remains unclear, and scholars differ in their interpretation. For an account of the evolution of the term and the nuances in these two English translations please consult A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argumentation in Ancient China* (La

writings including *fu*, dirges, and memorials. His major compositions include a compendium of dialect words, the *Fangyan* 方言 [Dialect Words]; the *Fayan* 法言 [Modeled Sayings], written in the style of Confucius' *Analects*; and the *Taixuan*, structured in imitation of the *Yi jing*. The complexity of his thought makes it difficult to classify to what "school" he belonged. Suffice to say for now, he was most certainly a Ru scholar with a good dose of scholastic conservatism, and yet at the same time, one notices elements that some today would call "Taoist."¹⁰

Socio-political order was undoubtedly of utmost importance to early Chinese thinkers, and Yang Xiong was no exception. Even the writings of hermits reveal a preoccupation with human affairs, and many scholars today believe that many of the mountain men were not fully detached from the folks of the marketplace or the officials of court.¹¹ For example, the writings in the *Zhuangzi* were informed by intellectual discourses of high-

minded men. The question "to hide or not to hide" was less of an either-or than it was a both-and that swung on a spectrum of preferential modes of living tempered by individual circumstances. The human realm was a conditional fact for Yang Xiong, and all philosophical considerations of his writings must reckon with how the human is situated in relation to heaven and to earth. Modern Western thought may categorize this as ethics, a branch of philosophy, but for the Classical Chinese, the ethical pre-grounds any philosophical system. Or one could even say that Classical Chinese thought is the "pre-philosophical."¹² The restoration of human order lies at the foundation of the creation of the *Taixuan jing*, specifically, the order instigated by Confucius, which Yang Xiong felt had been lost in the warped fabrications of interpretations of the canonical texts (*jing* 經).¹³ Most pertinent to our purposes is that of the *Yi jing*. The *Taixuan* was meant to help recover the original teachings of the sages, designed not as a replacement of the *Yi jing* but rather as a supplementary text.¹⁴ For this

Salle: Open Court, 1989), 315-55. For complications in tracing the meaning of *wuxing* as "five processes" to "five phases" see Michael Nylan, "Yin-yang, Five Phases, and *qi*," 398-414, in *China's Early Empires: A Re-appraisal*, ed. Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). It is my contention that for Yang Xiong *wuxing* was already a part of a sophisticated system that incorporated the forces of *yinyang*, *qi*, and the myriad things as can be seen from his *Taixuan jing*.

¹⁰ Without going in depth about the problems surrounding the classification of "schools," I will just say that by the Han dynasty there is no such thing as pure "Confucianism" (or "Ruism"), "Taoism," "Legalism," etc. The term "Han syncretism" has been used as a general term, but in the case of texts, it is my contention that we should do away with such categories and allow the text to speak its ideas for itself. The so-called "Taoist" undertones to Yang Xiong's thought are probably due to influences from his mentor Zhuang Zun 莊遵, who is recorded to be a hermit that taught teachings from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The only writing we have of Zhuang Zun is the *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸, a treatise on the *Laozi*, only

half of which is extant. For a concise study on Zhuang Zun see Alan Chan, "The Essential Meaning of the Way and Virtue: Yan Zun and 'Laozi Learning' in Early China," *Monumenta Serica* 46.1 (1998), 101-59. There has yet to be an in-depth study on the precise intellectual connection between Yang Xiong and Zhuang Zun.

¹¹ For further elaboration, see Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹² I am here alluding to Deleuze, which we will return to later in the paper.

¹³ That is, apocryphal writings that were intended to supplement the *Yi jing*, and in some cases became a different tradition.

¹⁴ In fact, during the late second century this was probably what the Jingzhou 荊州 school had done in their curriculum for the five classics. According to sources, scholars today surmise that Yang Xiong's *Taixuan jing* functioned as a kind of supplementary "textbook" to be read alongside the *Yi jing*. The Jingzhou school was a local academy founded under the patronage of Liu Biao 劉表 (144-208) that seemed

reason a proper study of the *Taixuan* would necessarily include a treatment of how it connects to the *Yi jing*. Due to considerations of scope, I will only mention superficial comparisons in passing, with a deeper investigation to be pending.

2. The textual history and structure of the *Taixuan jing*

The earliest extant text of the *Taixuan* is the redaction of Jin dynasty scholar Fan Wang's 范望 *Taixuan jie zan* 太玄解贊 [Unravelling the "Appraisals" of the *Taixuan*]. According to his preface, he had edited the text so that the "Appraisals" (*zan* 贊) and the "Interpretations" (*ce* 測), which were originally separate sections from the main text, follow their corresponding tetragrams. Fan Wang's edits have made it easier for the reader to understand and study the tetragrams individually, and it is this version that has become the standard format of the *Taixuan jing*.¹⁵

Based on what many scholars believe is Yang Xiong's autobiography in the *History of the Han* it seems that the original form of the *Taixuan* consisted of three *juan* and eleven *pian*, which we may interpret to indicate three silk rolls and eleven bamboo bundles.¹⁶ Mainland Chinese scholar Liu Shaojun speculates that each silk roll may have

represented the three realms of the *Taixuan*: heaven, earth, and human, with each roll containing the tetragrams specific to that realm.¹⁷ Each bamboo bundle can be understood as "chapters" containing the heads and the ten auto-commentaries. Yang Xiong's disciple Hou Ba 侯芭 was responsible for transmitting the *Taixuan*, and he was also the one to attach the word "classic" (*jing* 經) to the end of the title.

The structure of the *Taixuan* is best understood in relation to the *Yi jing*. The *Yi jing* contains linear complexes consisting of six lines where each line can be either solid or broken once, yielding a total number of 64 hexagrams. Similarly, the *Taixuan* also contains linear complexes but with only four lines. Each line can be solid, broken once, or broken twice, correlating to heaven, earth, and human respectively, yielding a total number of 81 possible tetragrams.¹⁸ Each position of a line in the tetragram from top to bottom is assigned a social division: Region (*fang* 方), Province (*zhou* 州), Department (*bu* 部), and House (*jia* 家). As there are three kinds of un/broken lines, each position is given a number that indicates the possible number of combinations at that position. Thus, there are a total of three Regions, nine Provinces, twenty-seven Departments, and eighty-one Houses.¹⁹

to have diverging interpretations from the imperial academy's (*taixue* 太學) orthodox readings of the classics. See Yoshikawa Tadao, "Scholarship in Ching-chou at the End of the Later Han Dynasty," *Acta Asiatica* 60 (1991): 1-24.

¹⁵ For a comprehensive list of the various editions and redactions of the *Taixuan* see Liu, *Yang Xiong yu Taixuan yanjiu*, 397-558.

¹⁶ "Yang Xiong zhuan" 揚雄傳 [Biography of Yang Xiong], *Han shu* 87.3575.

¹⁷ Liu, *Yang Xiong yu Taixuan yanjiu*, 63-7.

¹⁸ We can further assign each tetragram a specific number with four digits based on the three kinds of lines that would allow us to locate the sequence of the tetragram in the entire system, similar to locating a

library book according to the Dewey Decimal System. A solid line corresponds to the number 1, a line broken once with two segments correspond to 2, and a line broken twice with three segments corresponds to 3. The first tetragram with four solid lines would then be sequence 1111, the second tetragram with the last line broken once would be 1112, etc. This system makes finding a particular tetragram easy, unlike the order of the hexagrams in the received version of the *Yi jing* which may not have preserved the original arrangement.

¹⁹ Some scholars surmise that inherent in these names is a hierarchical structure pertaining to Han social, political, and geographic divisions. For those interested in a more detailed analysis, see Nylan (1993), 10.

In the received *Yi jing* each hexagram comes with a name (most of them *hapax legomena*), followed by a poetic image of the entire hexagram, which is then followed by six phrases (*yao ci* 爻辭) that each correspond to one of the six lines of the hexagram. Likewise, the *Taixuan* tetragrams also have a name with a poetic image depicting yin-yang phases and natural phenomena associated with the tetragram. Where the *Yi jing* have six *yao ci* the *Taixuan* includes a total of nine appraisals (*zan*), which means that each line of the tetragram corresponds to 2 ¼ appraisals. The *Yi jing* hexagrams are read from bottom to top, but the *Taixuan* tetragrams are read top to bottom. Just as the *Yi jing* has been transmitted with the commentarial “Ten Wings” traditionally attributed to Confucius, Yang Xiong supplied his own ten commentaries to the *Taixuan*, each corresponding to a *Yi jing* counterpart: the “Interpretations” (*ce* 測); “Correspondences” (*chong* 衝) in which antithetical heads (*shou* 首) are linked; “Miscellany” (*cuo* 錯) that seem to offer an alternative relation between the heads; “Exposition” (*li* 攤), a highly philosophical treatise on the meanings and significance of *xuan*; “Elucidations” (*ying* 瑩); “Numbers” (*shu* 數); “Embellishments” (*wen* 文) that give

²⁰ Interestingly, Jung also made the following remarks about the “curious principle” underlying the workings of the *Yi jing* which he called “synchronicity,” which is:

a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter is merely a statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve one out of another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers.

a detailed analysis of the first tetragram “Center” (*zhong* 中); “Analogies” (*ni* 梘); “Illustrations” (*tu* 圖); and “Pronouncements” (*gao* 告). We will have opportune later to discuss how the “Correspondences” and “Miscellany” commentaries may help us understand a house as a concept.

Just as the *Yi jing* was used as a divinatory text, so the *Taixuan* was equipped with its own process of selecting the appropriate tetragrams. Prognostication is an important aspect of the *Yi jing* and the *Taixuan*, and should not be regarded as mystical, for such a prejudice would hinder any attempt at a philosophical reading and render its value as outdated and proto-scientific. Carl G. Jung had suggested that the *Yi jing* should be approached as a book of self-knowledge and wisdom.²⁰ Likewise, the *Taixuan*, too, would have something to offer to audiences of the twenty-first century. Correct and timely human action was at the basis of divination, but it is action itself that should be emphasized, not whether the process of divination was valid in the determination of action.

See his “Forward” in *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, translated into German by Richard Wilhelm, rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), xxiv, xxxix. There is much to be said about “synchronicity” in both the *Yi jing* and the *Taixuan jing*. In fact, one may even be bold enough to suggest that what Jung has said about the *Yi jing* can be applied to the *Taixuan*, and what will be said about the *Taixuan* throughout this paper may also pertain to the *Yi jing*, i.e., Deleuze’s concept and plane. Contrary to Jung’s interpretation, Edward Shaughnessy has argued that the *Yi jing* is essentially a manual for divination. See Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Unearthing the Changes: Recently discovered manuscripts of the Yijing (I Ching) and related texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1-36. It does not seem to me, however, that these two uses of the *Yi jing* (book of wisdom versus manual for divination) should be mutually exclusive.

We have now arrived at the crucial question: what exactly is the subject matter of the *Taixuan jing*? The answer lies in how we want to interpret the word *xuan*. Popular definitions include “mysterious,” “profound” or “abstruse,” and “dark”—although in some contexts it can also mean “translucent.” If we traced the historical usages of the word from pre-imperial texts we find that the *locus classicus* of *xuan* is in section one of the received *Laozi*, which was already partially quoted above:

The tao that can be spoken of is not the constant tao, the name that can be named is not the constant name.

That which lacks a name is the beginning of heaven and earth, that which has a name is the progenitor of the myriad things.

Thus, to constantly lack desire—in this way, one observes its miracles;

To constantly have desires—in this way, one observes its endpoint.

These two arise from the same but have different names, together we can refer to it as *xuan*: Profundity upon profundity, it is the gateway to the myriad wonders.²¹

道可道，非常道。

名可名，非常名。

無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。

故常無欲，以觀其妙；

常有欲，以觀其徼。

此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。

玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

The significance of the *Laozi* to Yang Xiong’s project was noted by his good friend and polymath Huan Tan 桓譚 (43 BCE - 28 CE) who made the following assessment about the subject matter of the *Taixuan*:

When Yang Xiong wrote the text of the *Xuan* [i.e. *Taixuan*], he equated *xuan* with heaven and the Way. He discoursed about how the sages and worthy men established methods in thereupon executing affairs, who all followed the Way of heaven as the root principle. On this basis they succeeded with [discussions on] the myriad kinds, the king’s governance, human affairs, and methods and measures. Thus, [this is what] Fu Xi called *yi*, Laozi called *dao*, Confucius called *yuan*, and Yang Xiong called *xuan*.²²

揚雄作玄書以為玄者天也道也。言聖賢制法作事，皆引天道以為本統而因附續萬類、王政、人事、法度。故宓義氏謂之易、老子謂之道、孔子謂之元、而揚雄謂之玄。

Although Huan Tan does not give a precise definition on the meaning of *xuan*, it is clear that he understood it as synonymous with other

²¹Wang Bi *ji jiao shi*, 1-2. Interestingly, the third-century prodigy Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249), who was known for his commentaries on the *Laozi* and *Yi jing*, explained *xuan* as “secluded, silent, lacking that which is” 玄者冥默無有也 (ibid., 2). Here *xuan* seems to take on attributes pertinent to meditative practices. One could even find similarities in some of Yang Xiong’s other writings, particularly with the concept of silence (*mo* 默), which I have touched on elsewhere. See Jennifer Liu, *Painting the Formless and Strumming the Soundless: Yang Xiong’s Taixuan jing as Expression of the Absolute*, Ph.D diss. (University of Washington, 2019). Wang Bi was also the poster-child for the

intellectual movement centered about the topic of *xuan* (called *xuanxue* 玄學, or “abstruse learning”) which flourished from the mid-third to early fifth century. For a study and partial translation of Wang Bi’s commentary on the *Laozi*, see Alan K.L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

²² Collected in Fan Ye’s 范曄 commentary to Zhang Heng’s biography, “Zhang Heng lie zhuan” 張衡列傳, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 [The History of the Later Han] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 59:1898.

primal concepts including change (*yi* 易), the Way (*dao* 道) and origin (*yuan* 元). In the text of the *Taixuan jing* the word *xuan* takes on the following possibilities:

1. The text of the *Taixuan jing*;
2. The North Pole as a metaphysical metaphor for that point of unchanging reference and around which the Big Dipper revolves;²³
3. A synonym to tao as the primal origin of the cosmos, the ultimate principle of nature, and the way in which all myriad beings move and unfold.

Hellmut Wilhelm had discussed a possible point of departure between tao and *xuan*:

The idea of *xuan* is not easily differentiated from other primal concepts, such as the concept of *yi* [change], for instance, or of tao. Perhaps the dividing line could be drawn as follows: *yi* as well as tao are the laws of becoming, under which a phenomenon organizes itself and takes its course, that is, the path of life and the law of change. *Xuan*, on the other hand, as primal energy, is still absolutely undifferentiated; it is the primal energy

monad, which is still completely neutral in respect to future developments.²⁴

Although primarily known as a sinologist, Wilhelm's analysis admits of a philosophical strain which we can push further. Primal undifferentiated energy is a pure potentiality charged with infinite possibilities of differentiation yet to be actualized—that is, in Deleuzian terms, it is a movement of the infinite. In his words, movement “takes in everything” and thus it “does not refer to spatiotemporal coordinates that define the successive positions of a moving object and the fixed reference points in relation to which these positions vary.”²⁵ In a turn toward the philosophical, but without disregarding the value of philological foundations, the claim is that *xuan* can be thought of as a plane of immanence. In the following, we shall see how the *Taixuan jing* is unraveled by using Deleuze's articulation of concept and plane as guiding threads to weave the *Taixuan* into a philosophy of immanence.

²³ According to David W. Pankenier during the Warring States and Han times there was no North Pole Star in that position such as the one we have today. If he is correct, this makes for an ontological difference in the metaphor of using an invisible center as *xuan*, that which is unsensible but around which all things revolve. This difference calls for a reinterpretation of the meaning behind metaphors involving the North Pole. I thank Jason Wirth for his enlightening remarks on this. See David W. Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 91-2. But this is curious as there are references in texts from the Warring States that seems to indicate an actual star in the position of the North Pole. For an authoritative account, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 3, Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1959), 229-231, 259-62. But this then opens up the question of what *beichen* 北辰, which appears in the *Lunyu* “Wei zheng” 為政 chapter, usually translated as “Northern Star” or “North Pole Star,” would refer to.

²⁴ Hellmut Wilhelm, *Change: Eight Lectures on the I Ching*, trans. Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 85. Wilhelm was familiar with Leibniz and the latter's interest in the *Yi jing*, so his choice of the word “monad” is intriguing. Unfortunately, I do not know whether Wilhelm had any further writings on this subject, although he did write an article on Leibniz and the *Yi jing*. See his “Leibniz and the *I-ching*,” *Collectanea Commissionis Synodolis* (1943): 205-19.

²⁵ WP, 37.

III. Concept and Plane

1. Concept is to House...

What is philosophy? Is it contemplation? A sense of wonder? Who is the philosopher, and what exactly is it does she do? Is she like the poet who Emerson calls a “Namer or Language-maker,” who “gives [thought] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object” and “perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidentality and fugacity of the symbol”?²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari counter that philosophy is not just contemplation, nor merely reflection: these are thoughts of sameness trapped within the realm of dogmatic images, the thinker unable to turn away from the shadows on the wall. Rather, “[p]hilosophy is at once concept creation and instituting of the plane. The concept is the beginning of philosophy, but the plane is instituting.”²⁷ The philosopher is one who thinks of difference, connects new relations by disconnecting dogmatic ones, and as such creates singular concepts that are not bound to an identity of the sign. Within this space of thought, something new arises that breaks the surface of the simulacrum.



Key to the notion of “concept” is multiplicity. Deleuze explains that “[t]here are no simple concepts. Every concept has components and is defined by them. It therefore has a combination. It is a multiplicity, although not every multiplicity is conceptual.”²⁸ What he

means is that a concept cannot be constructed into a formula such as $x = y$ which subsumes individual components under a name. Neither can it be demonstrated through logical proofs or discursive methods that produces a particular solution. The creation of a concept also involves instituting the plane upon which concepts unfold. To put it another way, it is the institution of a plane of representability out of which the unrepresentable shows itself through itself in a fleeting movement, like a sudden flash of lightning against the undifferentiated night sky, or the seductive smile of a rose beckoning from a budding bush. It appears only to disappear within the blink of an eye, returning not upon command, but of its own accord in a single, spontaneous act.

A concept is a fragmentary whole that consists of multiple components configured to a certain combination. In theory, these components can also be reconfigured with new additions or subtractions to produce another concept. It is historical insofar as it consists of pieces from other problems that may have been formulated by another individual at another time. “In any concept there are usually bits or components that come from other concepts which correspond to other problems and presuppose other planes. This is inevitable because each concept carries out a new casting-out, takes on new contours, and must be reactivated or recut.”²⁹ We apply this not just to the locally historical (i.e., within the limits of the history of Chinese thought), but also across space and time by “reactivating” concepts in the *Taixuan* through Deleuze. Additionally, the concept “also has a becoming that involves its relationship with concepts situated on the same plane. Here concepts link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their

²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Book League of America, 1941), 132-3. The “poet” for Emerson is really the scholar who reads, thinks, and writes, and is not restricted to one who composes poetry.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ WP, 18.

contours...”³⁰ In other words, a concept cannot be understood in isolation but rather placed on a field of coexistence with and in relation to other concepts. Within the *Taixuan* plane, the complexity of a concept is displayed in two ways: internal multiplicity as a head, and external multiplicity in relation to other concepts. These relations are not of a fixed correlative nature, but indicate a movement, a metamorphosis, a passing through from one state to another, a becoming. To understand what a concept would look like in the *Taixuan* system we must first make note of the difference and connection between a “head” (*shou* 首) and a “house” (*jia* 家).

A “head” includes: 1) a tetragram consisting of four rows of lines; 2) a name assigned to the tetragram (*shou ming* 首名) that captures a general image of the phenomenon dominating the complex; 3) a poetic line (*shou ci* 首辭) depicting a particular image of *yinyang* forces interacting with the myriad things; and 4) a total of nine appraisals (*zan* 贊) reflecting the development and process of said phenomenon. A “head” is a single unit that is complete insofar as it represents a full cycle of the rise and fall of an event. This completeness is what we can call its endoconsistency. A “house” is a head that becomes incomplete insofar as it is a part of the total system of the *Taixuan* and must be read as a member of the neighborhood of eighty-one houses. The force of relation that binds a house to its neighborhood is its exoconsistency. As a demonstration, let us look at the first tetragram, “Center” (*zhong* 中), and its constituent parts in a series of three

readings: the first reading is that of images, the second of discursivity, and the third of philosophy.³¹

EXAMPLE 1

☰ 中 Center

Yang qi is submerged and germinating in the Yellow Palace. Extension is nowhere outside of the center.

陽氣潛萌於黃宮，信無不在乎中。

1. Chaotic and boundless: Hidden.
昆侖旁薄，幽。
2. Spirit battles with *xuan*. Its lines display yin and yang.
神戰于玄，其陳陰陽。
3. The dragon emerges from the center. Head and tail extend. It can be taken as constant measure.
龍出于中，首尾信，可以為庸。
4. Lowly and void without causation. Immense receipt of nature and destiny: Halt.
庠虛無因，大受性命，否。
5. Sun in zenith of the sky. It is furthering to use this time to become master.
日正于天，利以其辰作主。
6. Fullness of the moon wanes. It is best to clear light from the west.
月闕其搏，不如開明于西。³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Taixuan jiao shi* 太玄校釋, Zheng Wangeng 鄭萬耕 ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 4-5. Hereafter, TXJS. This is a modern print edition collated by modern scholar Zheng Wangeng who incorporates various commentaries on the *Taixuan* and is what I will use as my base text for the rest of the paper. The following translation is based on Hellmut Wilhelm’s with slight modifications. See Hellmut Wilhelm,

Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes: Seven Eranos Lectures (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 136-40.

³² There is a variant graph for 搏 which in Fan Wang appears as 博 *bo*. Sima Guang had amended 博 to 搏 based on other versions from the Six Dynasties. In terms of meaning, 搏 *tuan* “fullness; roundness” seems to fit better based on context as the line is talking about the moon. For a full discussion see Zheng, 9, n.11.

7. Cleared wine. Fire harbors nourishment, water contains perseverance.
酋酋，火魁頤，水包貞。³³
8. Yellow is not yellow. Overturning of the constancy of autumn.
黃不黃，覆秋常。
9. Flipping of numen. *Qi* and form return.³⁴
巔靈，氣形反。

The first reading of images. The tetragram is the four-lined figure ☰ and “Center” is the title. The italicized sentences constitute the head phrase, a poetic expression of the dynamism between *yinyang* and the myriad things associated with the motif governing the tetragram. The imagery of the first part of the head phrase, “*yang qi* is submerged and germinating in the Yellow Palace” could be explained using the metaphor of the seedling of a plant that has yet to sprout above ground or take root below. “Yellow Palace” in this interpretation is a metonym for earth, the place from which diverse things grow. The connection of centralization of *qi* to the idea of center is clear enough. Matters become more complicated as we move down to the appraisals. There are a total of nine, and when read in ordinal sequence from the first to the ninth the meaning may appear cryptic at best as there seems to be no apparent connection between each *leitmotif* in each individual appraisal. It is almost as if each line is an isolated phenomenon, arranged according to

no clear relation. For this we will need to turn to the *modus operandi* behind the appraisals.

Second reading of discursivity. In the “Diagrams” commentary, Yang Xiong explains that appraisals 1 to 3 belong to that of “thought” (*si* 思), appraisals 4 to 6 belong to “blessings” (*fu* 福), and appraisals 7 to 9 belong to “calamity” (*huo* 禍).³⁵ We can see how the appraisals form a cycle more clearly if we arrange them in a three-by-three grid:

y_3	3	6	9
y_2	2	5	8
y_1	1	4	7
	Thought 思 <i>si</i> x_1	Blessings 福 <i>huo</i> x_2	Calamity 禍 <i>fu</i> x_3

The x-axis indicates three aspects of an event as it moves from a germinating thought (x_1), to a flourishing position (blessing or positivity) (x_2), and to a state of decline (calamity or negativity) (x_3). The y-axis indicates three stages of each aspect from beginning (y_1), to middle (y_2), and end (y_3), with a return to the beginning of the next aspect. Appraisal 8 at position (x_3, y_2) indicates that it is in the middle stage of the aspect of calamity. The phrase “overturning of the constancy of autumn” uses autumn as symbolic of the transitional phase from the withering state of vegetation to the final position of Appraisal 9

³³ Fan Wang’s version has 大 for 火. Sima Guang took this as a typographic error and amended it to 火 based on other versions. Fan Wang’s commentary to this particular line contrasts 火 “fire” with “water,” and so 火 is probably the better choice. See Zheng, 9, n.12.

³⁴ My translation of 巔 *dian* follows Fan Wang’s gloss and explanation: “*Dian* means to descend. The *qi* from one’s death becomes *hun*, and its form becomes *po*.”

Hun rises to the heavens and *po* returns to the earth. Thus it is said to ‘return’ 巔下也。死氣為魂，其形為魄。魂登于天，魄歸于地。故言反也。 *Taixuan jing*, 1.6b. Sima Guang takes 巔 to be 顛 “extreme top point.” See Zheng, 10, n.15 for alternative interpretations.

³⁵ TXJS, 350.

where the life force fully contracts and returns to the beginning.

This means that if one brackets the nine appraisals of “Center” into three groups according to the x-axis above the following *leitmotifs* of the idea of center emerge: it is a paradoxical extension of infinite parameters (“chaotic and boundless”), underground with vertical depth (“lowly and void”), and with sedimentary layers (“cleared wine”). Such is what a discursive reading of the “Center” head may look like, and admittedly leaves one in want of further explanation. For this we may turn to an aesthetic flight away from the logical, that is, to read a head as a house, and to further read a house as a Deleuzian concept.

Third reading of the philosophical. The aesthetic realm features the appraisals as poetic renditions of what it means to stand in the center, where that which is at the center is the transition between rest and movement. This is what Deleuze might call indiscernibility in the zone of neighboring elements: something undecidable passes from one image in one appraisal to the next, where this area of passage is not a path from one point to another but a “meanwhile.” To push the connection further, we might imagine the set of appraisals as an event: “Each component”—or individual appraisal in a house—“of the event is actualized or effectuated in an instant, and the event in the time that passes between these instants. . .”³⁶ What we encounter in this third reading

beholding the first to the ninth appraisals simultaneously is a “dead time.” The emerging dragon, waning of the moon, clearing of wine and overturning of autumn are all meanwhiles where “[n]othing happens, but everything becomes, so that the even has the privilege of beginning again when time is past. Nothing happens, and yet everything changes. . .”³⁷ Certainly there is a sense of time to the appraisals; for as we have already seen, something moves along the x-axis, and we cannot dismiss the explicit explanation by Yang Xiong himself that the appraisals are to be read at certain times of the day. But this reading is a function of the appraisals dependent upon time, whereas in the third reading the eventhood of “Center” is inoperative in linear time.

A house, as mentioned earlier, is a head placed into the full circuitry of the eighty-one tetragrams of the *Taixuan*. While “Center” as head functions alone within the configuration of its appraisals, “Center” as house functions as a working member amongst the other eighty and must be read in relation to at least two other houses designated by two relational forces: antonymical and synonymical. Thus, in addition to the internal multiplicity of the concept-house, there is also an external multiplicity in that each house is already correlated to at least two other houses in two kinds of relations: in opposition, as explicated in the “Antithesis” commentary; and a shuffling as explicated in the “Miscellany” commentary.³⁸ The external multiplicity of

³⁶ WP, 158.

³⁷ WP, 158.

³⁸ The precise nature of the latter relation and how it differs from the “Antithesis” commentary is unclear. What I have translated as “Miscellany” (following Knechtges) is the word *cuo* 錯, which Yang Xiong glosses as “to place side-by-side” 緝也 (TXJS, 337). In Yang’s biography in the *Han shu* there is a line that says “place them alongside by means of appearance and kind” 緝之以象類. Jin Zhuo glosses *bing* 緝 as “to mix” 雜也, and Yan Shigu as “to place next to” 並也

(HS 87.3576). It seems that in both cases (“Antithesis” and “Miscellany”) the tetragrams are in oppositional relation, but the former is in a shuffled opposition whereas the latter is a sequential opposition. That is, numerically speaking, in the “Antithesis” tetragrams 1 to 40 are paired with 41 to 80 with tetragram 81 as leftover (tetragram 1 with 41, 2 with 42, etc.). In the “Miscellany,” tetragram 1 is paired with 2, 10 with 30, and so on. In this latter case if we looked only at the names of the tetragrams they seem to be similar in meaning, so the relation is a synonymic comparison

“Center” is to take the house as concept in conjunction with tetragrams “Response” (*ying* 應) and “Surrounding” (*zhou* 周). For this example, we need only look at the images of each tetragram described by the poetic line.

EXAMPLE 2

☰ 中 **Center**

Yang qi is submerged and germinating in the Yellow Palace. Extension is nowhere outside of the center.

陽氣潛萌於黃宮，信無不在乎中。

☷ 應 **Response**

Yang qi is at its extreme from above; Yin extends and germinates from below. Above and below mutually respond.³⁹

陽氣極于上，陰信萌乎下，上下相應。

☱ 周 **Surrounding**

Yang qi circulates spirit returning to the beginning. Things continue in their differentiation.⁴⁰

陽氣周神而反乎始，物繼其彙。

Based on a preliminary visual observation of the tetragrams one gleans a general connection of movement and transformation:

☰	☷	☱
Center	Response	Surrounding
Tetr. 1	Tetr. 40	Tetr. 2
Seq. 1111	Seq. 2222	Seq. 1112

Graphically these linear images reveal a passage of complete breakage from Tetragram 1 to its opposite Tetragram 40, and another passage of partial breakage to Tetragram 2. Conceptually, the first change is antonymical where the *yang qi* that was submerged in

“Center” is completely flipped in “Response”: *yang qi* has moved to the top with yin at the bottom in mutual response. The second change is synonymical as the *yang qi* in “Center” disperses outwards and then circulates back to the beginning in “Surrounding.” Standing against these two other houses the identity of “Center” becomes reconfigured. As a house, “Center” is not simply an idea, nor a state of being, but becomes a concept insofar as it is a multiplicity of relations, as these relations are sustained by the subsequent paradoxical consistencies and as this consistency works by virtue of it being the force that holds together a neighborhood, or community, of concepts.

These are the relations, or forces of attraction between neighboring sets of concept-houses. The point is that “Center” as a Deleuzian concept must be situated with other houses. The concept of center moves with the flow of *yang qi* on its way to differentiation. “It is a concept that apprehends the event”—that is, the event of Center-Response-Surrounding—“its becoming, its inseparable variations” that vibrate between the three concepts.⁴¹

2. ...As plane is to *xuan*.

In a departure from the tetragrams and the appraisals we arrive at the auto-commentaries where we find something distinct in both representation and content. In format, these commentaries read more like treatises composed in mostly parallel sentence construction, typical of literary Chinese composition. These short expositions function similarly to appendices, additions which “hang upon” the principal components, and were intended as explanatory material. Whereas the appraisals are written in an enigmatic fashion and are mostly tetrasyllabic, the commentaries are straightforward and precise (relatively

whereas the former is antonymic. At this point, this is all that can be said.

³⁹ TXJS, 123.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ WP, 158.

speaking).⁴² Although to the modern reader there remain many puzzling lexical items one surmises that for a Han dynasty scholar these sections come as a relief in comparison. The point is the commentaries serve to explicitly express the notion of *xuan* in a different manner than the poetic verses from the main text (viz. the eighty-one houses). These constitute three different modes of representation: image in the pure sign of the tetragrams; verse in the prefaces, line phrases, and appraisals; and parallel prose in the auto-commentaries. In the fabric of the *Taixuan* the three modes stitch out the patterns of *xuan* and constitute the ground from which the plane of immanence emerges. The plane of immanence is the becoming of *xuan* upon which the concept-houses populate.

In the auto-commentaries the Whole wave unfolds in an abrupt deceleration where suddenly *xuan* becomes discernible through language, if only momentarily.

Omnitudo of all concepts. Deleuze writes that “the plane itself is the indivisible milieu in which concepts are distributed without breaking up its continuity or integrity.”⁴³ In a later work with Guattari, it is rearticulated as the “potential totality of all BwO’s”—that is, body without organs—or the omnitudo.⁴⁴ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Deleuze and Guattari use tao as an example: “Tao [is] a

field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion.”⁴⁵ The synonymy of *xuan* with tao allows a reconceptualization of *xuan* as that conglomerate non-entity out of which singularity takes shape. In one of the auto-commentaries we read,

Xuan is that which obscurely sets forth the myriad kinds without revealing its form.

It fashions stuff from the void and emptiness, generated from the round; Supporting spiritual brilliance, it establishes the models.

It penetrates unity from the past and present in order to differentiate categories.

Upon the unfolding and circulation of *yin* and *yang*, *qi* is released.⁴⁶

玄者幽攤萬類而不見形者也。
資陶虛無而生乎規，
攔神明而定摹，
通同古今以開類，
攤措陰陽而發氣。

The *xuan*-plane is formless and unsensible, and yet is that creative power that produces the form and the sensible, out of which “models” and “categories” arise. It provides the

⁴² That the tetragram verses and its appraisals are composed in mostly tetrasyllabic suggests Yang Xiong’s preference for the poetic style of the *Book of Songs* (*Shi jing* 詩經) over the more verbose and adorned *fu*.

⁴³ WP, 36.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. with forward by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 157-8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 157. Perhaps the authors had in a mind the passage from the *Laozi* that states “that which is constant lacks desires and in this way observes the miracles [of tao]” 故常無欲以觀其妙. WJJS, 1. Although not much more is said about this, it opens the

door to further comparison between Deleuze and the school of Tao.

⁴⁶ TXJS, 255. The meaning of the word *li* 攤 deserves mention because of the complexity in meaning and usage. It is the title of the auto-commentary from which this particular quote is extracted. Yang Xiong himself glosses *li* as *zhang* 張 in the sense of “extension” or “expansion” (TXJS, 337). As a commentary, the “Li” is analogous to the “Xici” 繫辭 (Great Treatise) commentary of the *Yi jing*, and so functions similarly as explanatory. I have here translated it in the first line as “set forth” and in the last line as “unfolding” to tease out the explicatory aspect of the word.

groundless ground for differentiation, itself paradoxical to the discerning mind.

Image of thought. *Xuan* is that which cannot be thought but must be thought, or we could say that it is the non-thought within thought. There is movement between the sensible and the intelligible now made intelligible, but then immediately reversing to nonsense. It is pure intuition: like a bolt of lightning in the black sky, or Mahakashyapa's smile when Sakyamuni held up a lotus flower.⁴⁷

It hides its position and obscures its boundaries,
Deepens its landmass and blurs its roots,
Veils its efforts and conceals that which makes it so.⁴⁸

夫玄晦其位而冥其畛，
深其阜而眇其根，
穰其功而幽其所以然者也。

There is something that becomes indiscernible in this movement where no particular location or boundary exists, and yet fully penetrates and grounds the immanence of “that which makes it so.” As soon as it is caught sight of it immediately disappears into hiding, fleeing at infinite speed, leaving behind traces that offer clues into the nature of *xuan*. While the indiscernible is itself invisible and is that which resides at the margins of articulation—

⁴⁷ This a reference to a famous story handed down in Buddhist teachings, and has become an important koan in the Zen tradition illustrating an example of “transmission of the untransmittable.” There are slight variations to the account, but the basic story goes something like this: one day Sakyamuni was scheduled to give a sermon. A group of enthusiastic folks gathered and waited for him to say something, but at the end he said nothing, and only held a lotus flower in his hand. To which Mahakashyapa, one of Sakyamuni's disciples, smiled in response. For a Zen interpretation see Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 58-66.

like the obscured boundaries, or the blurred roots—traces can be found in the patterns of language.

Patterns are made visible through the natural, and phrases are made apparent through disposition. Through observing the arranged phrases [of the human realm] the heart's desires become evident.⁴⁹

是故文以見乎質，辭以睹乎情，觀其施辭，則其心之所欲者見矣。

A certain tension is evident as Yang attempts to salvage language by exposing its limits and then to use these limits as the means to bring forth that which cannot be expressed in a return to the sensible. The way to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable is built in the structure of parallel construction in a literary play of compare and contrast. To use Deleuze's words, “[t]hought demands ‘only’ movement that can be carried to infinity. What thought claims by right, what it selects, is infinite movement or the movement of the infinite. It is this that constitutes the image of thought.”⁵⁰

Infinite movement, infinite speed. In the opening line to the “Preface to the Heads” we read, “*xuan* moves in an integral sphere without limit, precisely in the image of heaven.”⁵¹ Insofar as the image of heaven cannot be comprehended in its entirety, and

⁴⁸ TXJS, 256.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 275. NB: There is a double sense of *wen* 文 at play as “pattern” (as parallel with *zhi* 質 “essence,” the basic and naturally un-patterned stuff) and “word” (as parallel with *ci* 辭 “phrase”).

⁵⁰ WP, 37.

⁵¹ TXJS, 1. The word that I have translated as “integral” (*hun* 渾) belongs to a set of phonetically similar words that form a family with the meaning of something muddled and indistinguishable, most notably in the binome *hundun* 混沌 “inchoate chaos.”

insofar as this image must necessarily reflect the profound and generative nature of *xuan*, we could say that it is infinite in its becoming. That is, it is in constant motion “without limit,” and at infinite speed that makes any systematic attempt to grasp its complete nature inadequate. We can analogize *xuan* to a black hole. Black holes cannot be perceived directly due to its minute size and lack of light. However, one could detect its presence from the gravitational fields that it produces on matter around it. In other words, like black holes, *xuan* is not something that can be discerned through sensible attributes of itself. Rather, it must be gleaned from its effect on other things. As far as Yang Xiong was concerned, even if the ultimate principle cannot itself be observed, the fact that natural phenomena are always in transformative motion is enough to show that movement itself is the cause and effect.

Tao has that which flows and that which follows, that which changes and that which transforms. Because it flows [things] follow it, things are made divine with the tao. Through transformation things are changed, with time things are appropriated. Because something flows it is able to change; the heavenly way is then obtained. Because something transforms it is able to flow; the heavenly way is then compliant. If material things do not flow then they do not rise; if they do not change then they cannot become. If one only knows the cause (*yin*) without knowing the transformation, then [our understanding of] things is deprived of principle; if one only knows of transformation without knowing

the cause, then [our understanding of] things is deprived of balance.⁵²

夫道有因有循，有革有化。因而循之，與道神之。革而化之，與時宜之。故因而能革，天道乃得；革而能因，天道乃馴。夫物不因不生，不革不成。故知因而不知革，物失其則；知革而不知因，物失其均。

The terminology has changed from *xuan* to tao, but the matter in question is the same. Time is transformation—the being of time is its becoming. Knowledge of the “cause” (*yin* 因) is knowing the direction of the natural “flow” (*yin* 因) of things, a slightly different meaning to the cause and effect principle in Cartesian logic. To *yin* on something means that A “relies on” or “depends on” B.⁵³ Whatever one chooses “to go by” will determine the path and subsequent result, or effect. For Yang Xiong, *yin* takes a double sense of particular directionality (“flow from A to B”) and natural causation (“A causes B”), where the emphasis is less on the subjects/objects A and B, but more on the fact that something is moving in transformation. So *yin* (to flow) is paired with *xun* 循 “to follow” in a synonymic relation just as *ge* 革 “to change” is paired with *hua* 化 “to transform.” Movement and change are therefore the principle (*ze* 則) and balance (*jun* 均) of all things.

Example 1 above gives a run-down of the “Center” head as a single unit operating in accordance to an internal consistency of the appraisals. Example 2 illustrates a cross-reading of the image of the head that now becomes an interaction amongst neighboring

⁵² Ibid., 276.

⁵³ In the notoriously difficult “Qi wu lun” 齊物論 section of the *Zhuangzi*, this word takes on a special meaning “to go by” (*yin* as verb) a particular “criterion” (*yin* nominalized) in a critique of Mohist logic. See Graham, *Disputers*, 148, 179. For the

passage see *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 2014), 32; for the English correspondence, see A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu, The Seven Inner Chapters and other writings from the book Chuang-tzu* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 53-4.

houses—it becomes a *voisinage*. It is in this way that a head as a house is conceived as a Deleuzian concept.

The internal consistency (or endoconsistency) within a concept-house of appraisals is not constructed and does not operate according to deductive reasoning. The connection from the first appraisal to the ninth can only be made through a contraction of moments that occur within the realm of each particular concept-house. The external consistency (or exoconsistency) of the concept-houses exists between the interactive positions of a neighborhood of concept-houses. Immanence is only perceived when the plane is forced to slow down via the language of thought, but this does not guarantee complete understanding for thought would have to take in the entire breadth of the boundless Whole. Can thought push itself closer to the limit of the infinite by a continuous chase? Perhaps we may never know.

IV. Conclusion

There remains a major distinction between Deleuze and Yang Xiong. The articulation of philosophy as the interplay between concept and plane for Deleuze is one that is impersonal. For the *Taixuan* system, however, the human realm plays an important part in the overlapping domains of heaven, human, and earth. This means that for Yang Xiong there is a necessarily ethical feature to the *Taixuan*, without which would have detrimental effects for the world as he saw it. We see this very clearly in his “Wen” commentary where he provides an explanation of “Center” by grounding it in the actions of the *junzi* and the

petty man.⁵⁴ By ethical is not meant the Kantian sense of imperative categories, but a practical application of the virtues of the human person as one circle of the infinite sphere, without which the three realms would be incomplete. As one circle, there is no space for logocentrism here, for it does not and cannot exist independently from the others. On the flip side, the cosmic realm would not be complete without the human aspect. This is why much of the imagery in the *Taixuan* draws from both the social and elemental, and why the appraisals operate on the three turnings of thought, blessing, and calamity.⁵⁵ Classical Chinese thought is as naturalistic as it is practical, for its primary concern is centered on how the human should move in sync with the flow of the cosmos, that is, tao.⁵⁶ Nature itself has no need for humankind, but so long as we exist as beings in nature we are a part—however miniscule—of the infinite becoming of a *natura naturans*.



Apart from the limits that authorial intent may impose for a comparative study, we can nevertheless lapse into a Deleuzian-inspired reading of the *Taixuan jing*. Instead of approaching the text discursively from beginning to end we are prompted to return to the text with a second, third, and ... glance. These sets of readings constitute the becoming of infinite thought as we are forced recircuit

⁵⁴ For example, Yang Xiong explains Appraisal 2 “Spirit battles with *xuan*” as “the entanglement of a petty man’s heart” 小人之心中雜 (TXJS, 324).

⁵⁵ See for example the use of military formations in the thirty-second head “Multitude” (*zhong* 眾), and the architectural analogy in the fifty-second head

“Measure” (*du* 度). For the Chinese text, please see TXJS, 96-9, 152-3; for an English translation, please see Nylan, 230-4, 318-22.

⁵⁶ I hesitate to call it an ethics, although there are certainly ethical aspects that have to do with correct behavior, as we see in the writings of the Ru traditions.

different kinds of connection between the tetragrams and the appraisals as they move through the representative modes of image, verse, and explanatory prose. Perhaps in some way the third and final viewing of the *Taixuan* is not so different from the divinatory approach—each return to the text brings forth variations of meanings that are tailored specifically to a unique disposition of mind and world. Each return is a recalibration of thought as the mind encounters a chaos, and through a mystical twist, the concepts that were contracted in the tetragrams undergo a reconfiguration and unfold into a slice of the infinite—for a moment, all is aligned with the Way.

*Mensch werden ist eine Kunst.
Becoming human is an art.*

Novalis

Should we continue to pursue the ontology of reading the *Taixuan jing*, we could look to the idea of the rhizomatic book in *A Thousand Plateaus* and say that there are two ways of reading the text philosophically: figuratively and materially. By figuratively, I mean that there are three temporal series: the linear, cyclical, and sporadic. A linear reading is simply reading the text beginning with the first tetragram and ending with the last; a cyclical reading entails a return to the first after finishing with the last; and by sporadic is meant interacting with the tetragrams the way that the concept-houses are linked to one another.⁵⁷ Materially there are three “books”: that of heaven, earth, and humankind. “The ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority of this kind, on a single page, the same sheet”—as Deleuze and

Guattari had written—“lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations.”⁵⁸ We would gather all the heads of heaven (those whose tetragrams begin with a solid line in the first position), of earth (those with a line broken once), and of humankind (those with a line broken twice) and lay out all three scrolls alongside one another on a table from which infinite combinations and lines of multiplicity are drawn.

A philosophical reading of the *Taixuan jing* through the lens of Deleuze’s thought involves a comparison between two traditions so different that it is right to ask whether such a method forcibly transports something from one to the other where it does not exist. I have struggled with this question many times. At the heart of this critique, I believe, lies the very question that serves as the title of Deleuze and Guattari’s book: what is philosophy? But this question is no longer relevant. It is not even the right question to ask. For “the supreme act of philosophy [is] not so much to think *THE* plane of immanence as to show that it is there, unthought in every plane, and to think it in this way as the outside and inside of thought.”⁵⁹ Following Deleuze and Guattari then: how do we present a text like the *Taixuan jing* as philosophy?

It would not be through a demonstration of a metaphysics that was hardly there, nor of logical connections that were never there. In other words, not by categories provided in the authoritative image of philosophy, categories that sort out what belongs and what is excluded. Instead, it would be to show that the *Taixuan jing* is an act of creation through its rewriting of an authoritative text that on the one hand creates new concepts but on the other still remains faithful to the old. It creates insofar as

⁵⁷ At an advanced stage, it would also require interaction with the hexagrams of the *Yi jing*, but this would require another study.

⁵⁸ ATP, 9.

⁵⁹ WP, 59-60.

it breaks down the preexisting structures and builds on top of it; yet it is a continuation of the tradition insofar as the ground from which it rises is the same groundless ground. But the *Taixuan jing* is more than this, for it demands not only thought, but action—proper and timely action.

One could claim that this is but a new authoritative system, that it is but another dogmatic image in place of the first. To say this would be to miss the argument of Deleuze and misunderstand Yang Xiong's project. That is, it is not an image of rigid imitation, like the production of mechanical copies that allow for no variation in a repetition of the same. For Deleuze it is a matter of constructing new modes of thought that brings forth the unground. Thought itself remains unthinkable. It is unthinkable because it is not a being but a becoming—the image of thought can be thought only if the image repeats difference. For Yang Xiong, the concepts of the *Taixuan* are *lived* practices. Life itself is whole, but the eventhood of life is singular: this is what a philosophical reading of the *Taixuan jing* brings to the forefront. It is only when we read the *Taixuan jing* at the junction of logic, poetry, and philosophy and breathe life into these dead words that concepts are created and the plane is instituted.

If Gilles Deleuze cries out the imperative, “Think!”, then Yang Xiong would exclaim a complementary “Act!” Humans are to move their thoughts and transform their actions. Perhaps Deleuze would respond with a nod of affirmation.