

The Original Convergence of Zhang Zai's Philosophy and Ancient Greek Philosophy and Its Transcendence over Neo-Confucianism and Logos

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ABSTRACT

Zhang Zai's philosophy bears striking proximity to ancient Greek philosophy, the origin of Western philosophy, yet diverges in fundamental ways: their modes of inquiry, methodologies of reasoning, systems of knowledge, frameworks of deduction, and — most critically — their foundational premises and ultimate objectives differ profoundly. Taking Zhang Zai's philosophy as a watershed, pre-Northern Song philosophy may be regarded as the primordial or spontaneous stage of Chinese philosophy. In contrast, post-Northern Song philosophy represents the self-conscious stage of Chinese philosophy. Furthermore, Zhang Zai's philosophy transcends both Neo-Confucianism (*Lixue* 理学) and Logos (*Daolun* 道论), implicitly pointing toward a trajectory of autonomous development for Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: Zhang Zai's philosophy, Ancient Greek philosophy, Original convergence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Zhang Zai's philosophy, close to ancient Greek philosophy in system, concepts and methods, lays a foundation for Sino-Western dialogue. It transcends earlier Neo-Confucianism and Logos, implies China's philosophical free development, reflects foreign exchange achievements, and shows cultural confidence and theoretical value identity.

2. THE ORIGINAL CONVERGENCE OF ZHANG ZAI'S PHILOSOPHY AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The development of Chinese philosophy during the Northern Song dynasty, mainly through the emergence of Zhang Zai's philosophy: a striking convergence between Chinese philosophy and ancient Greek philosophy — the foundational source of Western thought — in terms of systematic structure, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches. Consequently, Zhang Zai's philosophy inaugurated the "Guan School of Neo-Confucianism" (*Guan School* 关学) within

Chinese philosophy and established a theoretical foundation enabling dialogue and synthesis between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions.

Zhang Zai's philosophy exhibits profound parallels with ancient Greek thought. His concept of vital force (*qi* 气) resonates with Anaximenes' notion of aer (air) as the primordial substance. His idea of the Supreme Void (*taixu* 太虚) aligns conceptually with Anaximander's apeiron (the Boundless). In his philosophy, the dialectical relationship between unity (*yi* 一) and duality (*liang* 两) mirrors Thales' exploration of water as the fundamental substrate underlying all phenomena. His distinction and interplay between transformation and gradual change parallel Heraclitus' dual emphasis on pyr (fire) as dynamic flux and logos (rational order). The debate between the nature of Heaven and Earth (*tian-di zhi xing* 天地之性) and physical nature (*qizhi zhi xing* 气质之性) echoes Socrates' inquiry into the relationship between the summum bonum (highest good) and empirical knowledge. His theory of the mind governing nature and emotions (*xin tong singing* 心

统性情) bears a resemblance to Plato's theory of Forms. Finally, his vision of universal fraternity and cosmic harmony (*min bao wu yu* 民胞物与) reflects ethical and political ideals akin to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Politics.

2.1 A Comparative Analysis of Zhang Zai's Concept of Qi (气) and Anaximenes' Concept of Aer

Zhang Zai states in *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Supreme Harmony* (*Zhengmeng-Taihepian*, 《正蒙·太和篇》): The primordial essence of qi resides in its Supreme Voidity (*taixu* 太虚) — formless and imageless in its foundational state. When activated by external stimuli (*gan* 感), it coalesces into tangible forms. The emergence of form inherently generates oppositions (*dui* 对, e.g. yin-yang, motion-stillness), which provoke contradictions yet ultimately resolve through harmonious reconciliation. Human emotions — love and aversion (*wu* 恶) — originate from *taixu*'s cosmic purity but manifest as desires (*wu yu* 物欲) through material embodiment. These phenomena arise and dissolve instantly, without the slightest pause, epitomizing cosmic operations' divine subtlety (*shen*, 神).¹

This passage demonstrates that in Zhang Zai's philosophy, qi (气) is inseparable from five dimensions: the formless noumenon (*wu xing ben ti* 无形本体), spiritual resonance (*jing shen gan ying* 精神感应), concrete phenomena, contradictory oppositions, and perpetual motion. Anaximenes of Miletus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, proposed aer (air) as the primordial substance (*arche*) underlying all existence. Rejecting Thales' determinate water and Anaximander's indeterminate apeiron (the Boundless), Anaximenes synthesized these views, positing aer as the foundational substrate of all things. Aer remains imperceptible, manifesting indirectly through qualitative changes such as condensation (cold/moist) and rarefaction (hot/dry). Thus, Anaximenes' adhere to three principles: inseparability from a formless substrate, engagement with contradictory opposition, and expression through motion.

By contrast, Zhang Zai's qi expands this framework into a more comprehensive philosophical system. It emphasizes qi's spiritual dimension, mediated through interaction (*gan* 感),

and integrates material desires (*wuyu* 物欲) as intrinsic to its operation.

2.2 A Comparative Analysis of Zhang Zai's Concept of the "Supreme Void" (*Taixu* 太虚) and Anaximander's "Boundless" (*Apeiron*)

Zhang Zai states in *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Supreme Harmony* (*Zhengmeng-Taihepian*, 《正蒙·太和篇》): "The Supreme Void (*taixu* 太虚) is formless — this constitutes the fundamental substance (*ben ti* 本体) of qi (气, vital force). All concrete forms generated through the condensation and dispersion of qi are transient manifestations within its transformative processes. The Supreme Void, in its utmost stillness (*zhi jing* 至静), remains unperturbed by external stimuli (*wu gan* 无感) — this is the very origin of human nature. The cognitions and perceptions humans possess are, in essence, provisional and superficial sensations (*ke gan* 客感) arising from the interaction between sensory faculties and external objects. These transient sensations and temporary forms, born of external contact, and the unperturbed formlessness (*wu gan wu xing* 无感无形) of the Supreme Void can only be unified by those who fully realize (*jin xing* 尽性) their innate nature."²

This passage asserts that the "Supreme Void" (*taixu* 太虚), as the noumenon of qi (气), constitutes an absolute a priori reality beyond sensory or cognitive apprehension, yet serves as the foundation of human nature. All cognition, however, is a posteriori, emerging from empirical perceptions shaped by the interactive resonance (*ganying* 感应) of things. While empirical perception and the transcendental noumenon are ultimately unified, their consistency can only be apprehended through the entire exertion of epistemological inquiry. Anaximander of Miletus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, posited the apeiron (the Boundless) as the primordial substance (*arche*) of all existence. The Apeiron generates things through a process of "separation" and governs their cyclical return to the infinite via the cosmic compensation principle, ensuring the cosmos' inexhaustible multiplicity.

Both *taixu* and the apeiron share critical attributes: neither is non-being (*wu* 无) nor particular or determinate forms of being. However,

1. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.10.

2. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.7.

Zhang Zai elevates this framework by grounding the unity of *taixu* and *qi* in fully realizing human nature. He argues that the proposition “*taixu* is *qi*” (*taixu ji qi* 太虚即气) is validated precisely through human agency — the cultivation of one’s nature bridges the formless (*taixu* 太虚) and the formed (*qi* 气). In contrast, Anaximander’s Apeiron explains the relationship between the infinite and the finite through impersonal mechanisms of “separation” and “return.”

2.3 A Comparative Analysis of the Philosophical Relationship Between Zhang Zai's "Unity and Duality" and Thales' "Water as the Primordial Substance and All Things"

Zhang Zai states in *Hengqu's Commentary on the Book of Changes: Explaining the Trigrams Treatise* (*Hengqu Yishuo*: *Shuogua Zhuan* 《横渠易说：说卦传》): “All things take vital force (*qi* 气) as their fundamental substance, inherently containing the dialectical unity of two opposing aspects (*liang ti* 两体): emptiness-solidity (*xu-shi* 虚实), movement-stillness (*dong-jing* 动静), condensation-dispersion (*ju-san* 聚散), and clarity-turbidity (*qing-zhuo* 清浊). The unity manifests as numinous subtlety (*shen* 神) through the coexistence of opposites, while their interaction drives transformation, ultimately governed by holistic integrity (*tui xing yu yi* 推行于一). This constitutes the triadic dialectical principle of cosmic operation. Without opposites (*liang* 两), unity (*yi* 一) remains invisible; without visible unity, the function of opposites ceases. The *taiji* (太极) is not an independent entity but the self-contained state of *qi*’s dialectical unity: the presence of opposites necessitates unity, and unity inherently contains opposites — whether opposites exist or not, unity persists. Yet without concrete opposites, ‘unity’ collapses into Buddhist-Daoist emptiness, betraying the true essence of cosmic harmony.”

The passage indicates that reality is both unified and necessarily oppositional. “*Qi*” (气) serves as the dynamic force of “spirit” (*shen* 神) and “transformation” (*hua* 化), organically synthesizing “the One” (*tongyi*, 统一) and “the Two” (*duili*, 对立). Thus, “*qi*” acts as the pivotal “Third” (*san* 参) that mediates the absolute stillness of “the One” and the relative motion of “the Two.” In short, “*qi*” is the driving force behind the mutual transformation of unity and opposition. Thales of Miletus, the founder of Western philosophy and the initiator of the Milesian school, proposed water as the primordial substance (*archê*) of all things but failed to explain

how water transforms into the multiplicity of phenomena — how “the One” becomes “the Many.” In contrast, Zhang Zai’s concept of “*qi*” brilliantly demonstrates that “*qi*” operates as the mediating force between the noumenal (*bentijie* 本体界) and the phenomenal (*xianxiangjie* 现象界). This function differs from the noumenal realm’s static unity and the phenomenal realm’s dynamic contradictions; instead, it is the connective bridge between the two.

2.4 A Comparative Analysis of Zhang Zai's Dialectics of “Transformation” (*Bian* 变) and “Subtle Change” (*Hua* 化) with Heraclitus' Dialectics of “Living Fire” (*Pyr*) and “Logos”

In *Hengqu's Commentary on the Book of Changes* (*Hengqu Yishuo*, 《横渠易说》), Zhang Zai states: ‘Transformation’ (*bian* 变) refers to drastic and visible change, while ‘evolution’ (*hua* 化) denotes gradual and subtle metamorphosis.³

In the *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Divine Transformation* (*Zhengmeng-Shenhupian* 《正蒙·神话篇》), Zhang Zai states: “Drastic transformation triggers delicate evolution, representing a shift from the coarse to the refined. Conversely, the modulation and determination of gradual evolution is termed ‘transformation,’ through which manifest phenomena reveal essential subtleties.”⁴ Regarding the metaphysical Dao, he clarifies: “To grasp transcendent principles, one must employ appropriate linguistic signs to apprehend their symbolic meanings. The divine marvel (*shen* 神), being unfathomable, cannot be exhaustively conveyed through leisurely discourse — excessive deliberation reduces it to mere gradual evolution. Similarly, evolution itself eludes full comprehension, and hasty language fails to embody its intricacies — excessive haste regresses to the realm of divine subtlety.”⁵ He concludes: “Divine marvel and cosmic evolution are innate capacities of Heaven and Earth, beyond human manipulation. One can thoroughly fathom the divine and comprehend evolution only by attaining a sublime

3. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.70.

4. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.16.

5. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.16.

state aligned with heavenly virtue (*tiande* 天德). While humans may aspire to greatness, integrating sublimity into evolutionary subtleties cannot be forced — it depends solely on cultivated maturity. Thus, ‘exhausting the divine and knowing evolution’ (*qiong shen zhi hua* 穷神知化) emerges as the natural outcome of flourishing virtue and matured benevolence, never achievable through mere intellectual striving.”⁶

These statements indicate that change (*bian* 变) refers to an external, holistic alteration, while transformation (*hua* 化) denotes an internal, essential metamorphosis. Holistic change is a leap-like macroscopic understanding, whereas essential transformation is a refined microscopic comprehension. To grasp the macroscopic perspective, one must first establish a broad foundation — this is an external effort; to attain the microscopic insight, one must gradually refine toward precision — this is an internal effort. To achieve both forms of understanding simultaneously requires ‘exhausting the divine and knowing transformation’ (*qiongshen zhihua* 穷神知化), a practice that integrates internal and external cultivation, ultimately unifying the innate capacities of Heaven (*tian* 天) and humanity (*ren* 人).

The Ephesian school, represented by Heraclitus, fundamentally differs in its mode of thinking from the Milesian school. The Milesian school’s arche (primordial principle) in ancient Greek philosophy remained material (e.g., water, air). In contrast, Heraclitus of the Ephesian school began to orient the arche toward rational principles. The ‘ever-living fire’ symbolizes the emergence of conceptual principles. Although Heraclitus acknowledged that ‘everything is in flux’, he posited that all changes are governed by Logos (*dao* 道). Logos is the dao — encompassing both metaphysical laws of thought and physical laws of application, akin to the idea that “the path up and down is one and the same.” As Heraclitus states: “This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or humans has made, but it ever was and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures.”⁷

The “ever-living fire” is not merely a metaphor but a philosophical description of the actual state of

cosmic motion — the material foundation for the persistence of a perpetually changing world. “In measures” refers to the normative principles underlying movement and change, which Heraclitus termed Logos. Logos is the rational basis for the order, coherence, and very existence of the world. Heraclitus’s philosophy reveals that the world’s existence depends on both a material foundation and a rational foundation, with two implications:

- The material foundation is not a specific, concrete substance but the essential “ever-living fire” manifested through motion and change. The concept of “fire” illustrates the inseparability of objects and movement: static entities cannot reveal their essence; only through dynamic transformation can their essential nature emerge.
- This essential existence is not a sensory object in the empirical world but a symbolic abstraction captured by the ever-living fire. As the essence of things, the ever-living fire must adhere to the more fundamental principle of Logos, bound by rational norms.

In comparison, Zhang Zai’s theoretical articulation of change is concise and intuitive, while Heraclitus’s is profound and complex — each excelling in its own way.

2.5 A Comparative Analysis of Zhang Zai's Distinction between "Heaven-Earth Nature" (Tiandi Zhixing 天地之性) and "Temperamental Nature" (Qizhi Zhixing 气质之性) and Socrates' Dialectic of "Highest Good" and "Ethical Knowledge"

In *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Sincerity and Enlightenment* (Zhengmeng·Chengming, 《正蒙·诚明》), Zhang Zai states: “Once a human acquires physical form, they develop a temperamental nature (*qizhi zhi xing* 气质之性) conditioned by their material constitution. Yet if one consciously rectifies and returns to their original state, the cosmic nature (*tiandi zhi xing* 天地之性) connected to Heaven can be preserved. Thus, noble individuals do not regard the temperamental nature as their true essence. Human traits — whether resoluteness or gentleness, impulsiveness or deliberation, talent or ineptitude — all stem from imbalances in their material constitution. Heaven’s fundamental principle lies in the harmonious unity of yin and yang, free from bias. By cultivating

6. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.16.

7. [Xiaomang and Zhao Lin]: *History of Western Philosophy* [M], Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2019 edition, p.19.

one's temperament, returning it to its origin without deviation, one fully realizes one's nature and unites with Heaven. When nature remains unperfected, good and evil intermingle; only through relentless perseverance in pursuing goodness can genuine virtue be achieved. If evil is entirely eradicated, the meaning of goodness dissolves with the loss of its counterpart. Hence, we emphasize not merely 'goodness' but assert that 'it is nature itself that accomplishes goodness.'

This passage suggests that once things take form, they inherently acquire characteristics (*houtian* 后天). One can preserve the innate nature only by tracing back to their state prior to formation (*xiantian* 先天). Thus, the "temperamental nature" (*qizhi* 气质之性) — shaped by physical and environmental influences — is both a defining trait and a source of partiality. For Zhang Zai, ethical cultivation requires individuals to rediscover their innate nature (*tiandi zhi xing* 天地之性), transcending the biases of acquired dispositions to transform imperfection into goodness.

In parallel, Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, posited that the essence of philosophy lies in the pursuit of wisdom, which he equated with insight into one's own ignorance. For him, the 'Highest Good' (*zhi shan* 至善) — the ultimate ethical ideal — cannot be attained without knowledge, yet knowledge devoid of the guidance of this supreme good remains blind. While Zhang Zai's "Heaven-Earth nature" represents a primordial unity rooted in cosmic harmony, Socrates' "supreme good" embodies a telos — a final perfection to be realized through rational inquiry.

2.6 The Theory of "Xin Tong Xingqing (心统性情)" in Zhang Zai's Philosophy Resembles Plato's Theory of Forms

In *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on the Expansive Mind* (Zhengmeng-Daxin, 《正蒙·大心》), Zhang Zai asserts: "Knowledge acquired through sensory perception arises from interaction with external objects; it is not the truth apprehended through moral nature (*dexing* 德性). The ultimate truth known by moral nature does not originate in sensory experience." He further elaborates: "If one can enlarge their mind (*xin* 心), they will comprehend all things in the cosmos... Ordinary people's minds remain confined to the narrow scope of sensory perception, whereas sages fully realize their innate nature, refusing to let sensory knowledge shackle their consciousness. Through moral knowing (*dexing zhi zhi* 德性之知), sages

transcend the limitations of the senses, aligning their minds with the Heavenly Dao (*tiandao*, 天道). In this transcendence, they attain the state of cosmic unity (*wanwu yiti*, 万物一体), where all beings are interconnected as one."⁸

This passage indicates that empirical knowledge, dominated by sensory perception, constitutes external cognition formed through human engagement with things, distinct from the internal cognition rooted in moral nature. Whether it is sensory-based external cognition or virtue-oriented internal cognition, both operate through the function of the mind (*Xin*, 心). This is encapsulated in Zhang Zai's statement from *Supplementary Notes on Nature and Principle* (*Xingli Shiyi* 《性理拾遗》): "The heart-mind unites nature and emotions (*xintong xingqing* 心统性情)."⁹ Plato posited that the realm of Forms seeks truth; thus, the human soul partakes in truth; the sensory world seeks beauty; thus, the human body partakes in beauty. The highest existence — the Good (*zhishan* 至善) — embodies truth and beauty. Humans should pursue "the Good" as the meaning of existence and the unity of soul and body. Comparatively, Plato viewed humans as the nexus between the world of Forms and the sensory world. At the same time, Zhang Zai regarded the human heart as the mediator between a life of moral nature and a life of experience. Their philosophies, though distinct in approach, converge in their ultimate vision.

2.7 Zhang Zai's Philosophy of "All People Are My Siblings and All Things Are My Companions" (Min Bao Wu Yu 民胞物与) and Its Parallels with Aristotelian Ethics and Political Philosophy

In *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Sincerity and Enlightenment* (Zhengmeng-Chengming, 《正蒙·诚明》), Zhang Zai expounds: Original nature (*xing* 性) is the shared root of all things, never to be monopolized by any individual. Only the noble person (*daren* 大人), whose moral nature is perfected, can thoroughly actualize this fundamental principle. Thus, establishing oneself necessitates establishing

8. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p. 24.

9. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.374.

all others; knowing truth demands knowing it universally; practicing love requires loving all without exception; and achieving fulfillment must never be pursued in isolation.”¹⁰

In *Correcting the Ignorant: The Chapter on Designating Heaven and Earth* (*Zhengmeng-Qiancheng*, 《正蒙·乾称》), Zhang Zai further constructs his cosmic-ethical framework: “Heaven acts as our father, Earth as our mother; though minute, I stand at the nexus where their energies intermingle. The vital force (*qi* 气) that fills Heaven and Earth constitutes my body; the cosmic principle (*xingli* 性理) that governs them shapes my nature. All people are my siblings, and all things are my companions. This state of cosmic-human unity (*tianren yiti* 天人一体) reveals the intrinsic continuity between individual life and the cosmic origin: human form arises from the *qi* of Heaven and Earth, and human nature inherits their universal principle. Therefore, we should cherish all beings with fraternal care and fulfill our duty to harmonize with and sustain the cosmos.”¹¹

This passage indicates that Heaven-Earth nature (*tiandi zhi xing* 天地之性) and temperamental nature (*qizhi zhi xing* 气质之性) share the exact origin (*tongyuan* 同源). Therefore, the self-construction of humans is essentially the holistic construction of the individual with all things in the world, enabling empathy and collective progress. The idea of “all people are my siblings and all things are my companions” (*min bao wu yu* 民胞物与) represents the self’s attainment of the state of supreme goodness (*zhi shan* 至善).

The philosophical foundation of Western philosopher Aristotle’s ethics and political theory is substance theory. A substance possesses many attributes; the substance itself can only be known through reason (*lixing* 理性), while its attributes can only be perceived through senses (*ganxing* 感性). These attributes constitute different categories of substance. All existence comprises four causes: material cause and formal cause as internal causes, and efficient cause and final cause as external causes. The highest substance is metaphysical existence itself (*xingershang* 形而上), which requires no cause — it is self-caused. At this level, thought and existence are not opposed; thought

takes itself as its object, meaning “thought thinking itself,” where thought becomes existence. By comparison, Zhang Zai’s concept of “all people are my siblings and all things are my companions” (*min bao wu yu* 民胞物与) represents the highest unity of humans and all things at the source dimension. At the same time, Aristotle’s “primary substance” embodies the highest unity of humans and all things at the teleological level.

2.8 The Fundamental Differences between Zhang Zai’s Philosophy and Western Philosophy

In summary, Zhang Zai’s philosophy shares certain parallels and comparability with ancient Greek thought. Why did Chinese philosophy only begin to exhibit epistemological orientations akin to Western modes of inquiry during the Northern Song dynasty? Furthermore, why did post-Song Chinese philosophy not follow a developmental trajectory similar to Western philosophy? An even more fundamental question arises: How should we evaluate and characterize Chinese philosophy before the Northern Song period?

The author argues that Zhang Zai’s system reveals that while Chinese and Western philosophies may address similar questions, they diverge in their modes of questioning, methodologies of thought, epistemological frameworks, and modes of reasoning. Most crucially, they differ in their foundational premises and teleological aims. These distinctions constitute the defining characteristics that differentiate Chinese philosophy from its Western counterpart.

3. THE TRANSCENDENCE OF ZHANG ZAI’S PHILOSOPHY OVER NEO-CONFUCIANISM (LIXUE 理学) AND DAOIST THEORIES (DAOJIA LILUN 道家理论)

3.1 The Generation and Formation of Zhang Zai’s Philosophy

The development of Zhang Zai’s philosophical thought involved a learning path that began with Buddhism and Daoism, followed by the study of Confucianism. In his study of Taoism, Zhang Zai did not give much attention to the Zhou Dunyi and Shao Yong’s Illustrated Discourse (*tu shuo* 图说). While studying Buddhism, he did not accept its

10. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.21.

11. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.62

ethical system and religious beliefs. As an orthodox Confucian heir, Zhang Zai advocated for the restoration of the Zhou rites (*zhouli* 周礼) and the implementation of the well-field system (*jingtian zhi* 井田制) in terms of institutional matters. In terms of philosophical doctrine, he proposed that the I Ching (*yijing* 《易经》) should serve as the foundation, with *the Doctrine of the Mean* (*zhong yong* 《中庸》) as the form and Confucius and Mencius as the guiding laws. In practice, Zhang Zai believed that while principles (*li* 理) are abstract, rituals system (*li* 礼) are concrete, and he upheld the orthodox Confucian stance of teaching through rituals system. His status on the philosophy of human nature and principles directly opposed the Neo-Confucian thought of Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. In philosophy, Zhang Zai was a prominent figure in developing the theory of Moral-Qi Metaphysics (*qi lun* 气论) and a synthesizer of philosophical thought from various periods. Zhang Zai praised *the Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 《中庸》) as a philosophy that cultivates all things in the world, integrating it into the life philosophy of agricultural civilization. He believed that only the 'the person of the highest virtue' (*Zhiren* 至人) in *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi* 《庄子》) could connect with the 'Dao' (*dao* 道). Furthermore, he argued that Mencius's sage and noble people could cultivate 'pure and noble spirit' (*hao ran zhi qi* 浩然之气) (it can be also translated as the righteous and vast spirit), thereby achieving harmony between heaven (*tian* 天) and humans. Zhang Zai even engaged with the obscure wei text - a collective term for prognostic texts (*chenshu* 谶书) and esoteric commentaries (*weishu* 纬书). Notably, he incorporated the hexagram-qi correspondence doctrine - symbolic representations of cosmic phenomena (*guaqi shuo* 卦气说) from *the Esoteric Commentary on the book of change* (*yiwei* 易纬) into his own qi-based metaphysics. Furthermore, Zhang creatively merged the concept of 'profound-occultism' (*chongxuan* 重玄), Daoist philosophical method characterized by dialectical negation from metaphysics and Tang dynasty Daoist philosophy) into his framework. This syncretic approach established crucial metaphysical foundations for his innovative conceptualization of Qi as existing in the liminal space between substantiality and insubstantiality (*xu shi zhi jian* 虚实之间), thereby bridging cosmological speculation with Neo-Confucian ontology.

3.2 The Transcendence of Zhang Zai's Philosophy to Logos (*Daolun* 道论)

Zhang Zai's inheritance and synthesis of preceding philosophical traditions are most concentratedly embodied in his *Western Inscription* (*Ximing* 西铭)

Heaven (*Qian*, 乾) is called father; earth (*Kun*, 坤) is called mother. Though insignificant, I exist blended within their midst. Therefore, what fills Heaven and Earth constitutes my body; what governs Heaven and Earth forms my nature. All people are my siblings, all things are my companions. The sovereign is the eldest son of our cosmic parents; his ministers are stewards of this familial household. Respecting the aged extends our reverence for seniority; caring for orphans and the weak embodies our nurturing of the young. The sage harmonizes with cosmic virtue; the worthy manifests its excellence. All who suffer in the world - the ailing, disabled, lonely, widowed and bereaved - are our brothers and sisters in distress. To protect them is filial devotion, a joyful, anxiety-free existence embodies pure filial piety. Acting contrary constitutes moral rebellion; harming benevolence makes one a villain. Those who assist evil demonstrate inadequacy; true virtue is fulfilling one's physical form through cosmic correspondence.

Maintaining moral integrity in solitude manifests blamelessness before Heaven; preserving an innate mind and nurturing nature demands unremitting discipline. Da Yu's (*Dayu* 大禹) rejection of indulgence epitomizes filial devotion; Ying Kaoshu's (*Ying Kaoshu* 颍考叔) cultivation of talents exemplifies virtue's transmission. Shun's (*Shun* 舜) tireless labour achieved parental contentment; Shen Sheng's (*Shen Sheng* 申生) sacrificial obedience embodied ultimate reverence. Cen Shen's (*Cen Shen* 岑参) bodily preservation perfected filial form; Bo Qi's (*Bo Qi* 伯奇) submissive courage manifested absolute piety. Prosperity thickens life's substance, adversity jade-temperers moral completion. In life, I accord with cosmic processes; in death, I attain cosmic serenity.¹²

Zhang Zai's philosophical framework in *Western Inscription* (*Xi ming* 《西铭》) transcends conventional Logos (*daolun* 道论) by synthesizing

12. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated and annotated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.62-63.

Confucian ethics with metaphysical Daoist principles. The conceptualization of Heaven-Earth (*qiankun* 乾坤) as cosmic parents manifests a Confucian-Daoist syncretism. The identification of cosmic *qi* (*xingqi* 形气) as the substance of human body and the flow of heavenly principles (*tianli* 天理) as human rationality establishes an ontology of 'The Harmony Between Heaven and Human' (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一); the notion of 'all people as siblings and all things as companions' (*min bao wu yu* 民胞物与) extends ethical relations beyond anthropocentrism; the epistemological pursuit of exhausting spiritual principles and comprehending transformations (*qiong shen zhi hua* 穷神知化) articulates the mission of establishing a heart for the whole world (*wei tian di li xin* 为天地立心). The ritualization of cosmic filial piety reconstructs universal order through ethical practice.

If *qi* (*qi* 气) as the cosmic vital force inherently embodies the heavenly principle, how does Zhang's system account for the existence of evil? As recorded in *Records of the Historian-Annals of Five Emperors* (*shiji · wu di ben ji* 《史记·五帝本纪》): "Emperor Hong (*hong shi* 鸿氏) had an unworthy son who obscured righteousness and harboured wickedness, known as Chaos (*hun dun* 混沌); Shaogao's unworthy son destroyed trust and hated loyalty, called Qiongqi (*qiong qi* 穷奇). Zhuanxu's unworthy son defied instruction, named legendary fierce beast (*tao wu* 桀) Jin Yun's unworthy son gluttoned on food and coveted wealth, known as Taotie (饕餮)." ¹³ Thus, it becomes evident that human existence manifests free will, for 'humans can magnify the Dao, not the Dao magnifying humans' (Analects 15.29). Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription* (*Ximing* 《西铭》) demonstrated a distinct anthropological character, representing the culmination of classical Chinese humanistic philosophy. This intellectual lineage traces back to canonical texts such as *The Book of Changes-Qian-Wenyan* (*zhouyi · qian · wenyan* 《周易·乾·文言》): "The great man aligns his virtue with Heaven and Earth, matches his clarity with the sun and moon, coordinates his order with the order of four seasons, and harmonizes his fortune with spiritual forces." ¹⁴ *Zhongyong-chapter 22* (*zhongyong 22zhang* 《中庸·二十二章》) argued: "Only the most sincerity in

the world can enable one to fulfill their nature. One can fulfill the nature of others by fulfilling one's own nature. One can fulfill the nature of all things by fulfilling the nature of others." ¹⁵ By fulfilling the nature of all things, one can assist in the transformation and nurturing of heaven and earth. And by assisting in transforming and nurturing heaven and earth, one can be in harmony with heaven and earth. The passage from *The Book of Rites* (*Li ji* 礼记), Chapter *The Regulation of Rites* (*liyun* 礼运): "When the great harmony society (*da tong she hui* 大同社会) is followed, the world is governed as a commonwealth. The wise and capable are selected, and trust is emphasized while harmony is cultivated. Therefore, a person does not only care for their parents, nor only love their children, but ensures that the elderly have their end, the young have their development, and the strong are given tasks. The widowed, the lonely, the sick, and the disabled are all provided for. Men have their duties, and women have their roles." ¹⁶ Zhang Zai's philosophical synthesis represents a groundbreaking achievement in Neo-Confucianism, and he systematically bridges human subjectivity (*xinxing lun* 心性论) with cosmic Logos (*tiandao lun* 天道论) through his innovative *qi*-based metaphysics.

3.3 Zhang Zai's Transcendence of Neo-Confucianism (Li Xue 理学)

In *Commentary on The Western Inscription* (*xi ming jie* 《西铭解》), Zhu Xi evaluates Zhang Zai's thought as follows: "All creatures coexist between Heaven and Earth, sharing the plenum of Heaven-Earth (*tian di zhi se* 天地之塞) as their physical substance and the ordering principle of Heaven-Earth (*tian d zhi shuai* 天地之帅) as their essential nature. Yet due to variations in their physical endowments (*xing qi* 形气), their natures manifest differing degrees of clarity and obscurity. Humans alone receive the proper configuration of *qi* (*xing qi zhi zheng* 形气之正), endowing them with the most refined mind capable of comprehending the totality of moral nature (*xing ming zhi quan* 性命之全). Standing supreme among all beings, they rightfully regard others as siblings. Creatures, however, obtain partial configurations of *qi* (*xing qi zhi pian* 形气之偏), rendering them incapable of accessing the

13. [Han Dynasty] Sima Qian: *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*), Vol. 1 [M], punctuated and collated edition (Revised Edition of the Twenty-Four Histories), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014 edition, p.43.

14. [Yang Tiancai & Zhang Shanwen (trans. & annotated)]: *The Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi*) [M], Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2019 edition, p.24.

15. [Wang Guoxuan (trans. & annotated)]: *The Great Learning* (*Daxue · Zhongyong*) [M], Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2021 edition, p.116.

16. [Lü Youren & Lü Yongmei (trans. & annotated)]: *Complete Translation of the Book of Rites and Classic of Filial Piety* (*Liji Quanyi · Xiaojing Quanyi*), Vol. 1 [M], Guizhou: Guizhou People's Publishing House, p.425.

complete moral nature. Though sharing the same cosmic origin, they differ in kind and worth from humans, hence being termed companions. This fraternal vision necessitates viewing the world as one family and all Chinese as kin.”¹⁷ Zhu Xi argued that humans are capable of understanding correct principles (*li* 理), whereas physical objects only receive partial manifestations of *li*. This perspective distinctly reflects the Confucian notion of humans as the most spiritually endowed beings among all creatures. In contrast, the late Ming philosopher Liu Zongzhou interpreted the core message of Zhang Zai’s Western Inscription (*Ximing* 《西铭》) as constituting a philosophy of cultivating benevolence (*ren* 仁). As recorded in *The Surviving Works of Master Liu • Hengqu Zhangzi* (*liuziyishu-hengquzhangzi* 《刘子遗书·横渠张子》), Liu commented: “This essay was originally titled Rectifying Stubbornness (*Dingwan* 订顽). Master Cheng Yi (*Yi chuan* 伊川) altered the title to avoid scholarly contention. The term ‘Dingwan’ draws from medical texts that characterize paralysis or numbness in limbs as manifestations of ‘non-benevolence’ (*buren*) - metaphorically paralleling those who prioritize self-interest over others. Thus, this treatise essentially expounds the learning of seeking benevolence. The benevolent individual, perceiving the fundamental unity between heaven-earth and all creatures, achieves the holistic integration of being akin to a single body with multiple limbs.” The Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian scholars formed a consensus on the doctrine of ‘the unity of all things’ (*wan wu yi ti* 万物一体), grounded in the premise that all beings share the same cosmic principle (*li* 理) and vital force (*qi*, 气). While the forms of cosmic phenomena differ, they fundamentally partake in a unified ultimate law (*li* 理) and a shared constitutive substance (*qi* 气). These elements — *li* as the normative order and *qi* as the dynamic material substrate — interpenetrate and co-constitute the organic totality of heaven, earth, and everything. Zhang Zai’s philosophy, however, refined this framework with greater conceptual rigour. He was the first to articulate the proposition ‘there is nothing that is not part of myself’ (*wu yi wu fei wo* 无一物非我), which dissolves the subjective-objective dichotomy by revealing the essential interconnectedness and even isomorphic coexistence between all beings and the ‘self.’ This formulation advances an ultimate ontological horizon wherein all phenomena are

intrinsically interpenetrating and symbiotically co-arising with the human subject. Zhu Xi argued that principle (*li*, 理) is one yet manifests diversely (*li yi er shu* 理一而殊), distinguishing between universals (*gong xiang* 共相) and particulars (*shu xiang* 殊相). In contrast, Zhang Zai emphasized that vital force (*qi* 气) differentiates into purity and turbidity (*qi fen qing zhuo* 气分清浊), revealing the dynamic relationship between substance (*ti* 体) and function (*yong* 用). Zhu warned that human exploitation of objects leads to lack of benevolence (*bu ren*, 不仁), whereas harmonious coexistence with others and all things embodies loving people and cherishing beings (*ren min ai wu* 仁民爱物). Their fundamental divergence lies in ontological frameworks: Zhang Zai’s monism identifies human nature (*xing* 性) with *qi* permeated by principle (*dao*, 道), while Zhu Xi’s dualism separates *xing-as-li* (*xing ji li* 性即理) from *qi*. Zhang Zai’s Zhengmeng · Taihe states: “From the Great Void (*taixu* 太虚) comes the concept of Heaven; From *qi*-transformations emerges the concept of Dao; The union of Void and *qi* constitutes human nature (*xing* 性); The union of nature and consciousness forms the mind (*xin* 心).”¹⁸ This represents Zhang Zai’s inheritance and innovation of the idea that “Heaven’s command is called nature” from *the Doctrine of the Mean* (*zhong yong* 中庸). His theory of human nature (*xing qi lun* 性气论) differs fundamentally from Zhu Xi’s theory of nature, as the former is rooted in cosmology, while the latter is grounded in epistemology.

4. ZHANG ZAI’S PHILOSOPHY AS A WATERSHED IN THE SELF-TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

With Zhang Zai’s philosophy serving as the watershed, we may characterize The Northern Song Dynasty philosophy as representing the spontaneous formative phase of Chinese philosophy, post-Northern Song philosophy as its epistemologically self-conscious phase, the modern philosophy gradually constructed through Eastward dissemination of Western learning since the Ming-Qing transition as its reconstructive phase, and contemporary philosophy developed through sustained Sino-Western comparative engagement as now entering its autonomous synthetic phase. Zhang Zai’s philosophy occupies the self-conscious

17. Southern Song Dynasty] Zhu Xi: *Complete Works of Zhu Xi* (Zhu Xi Quanshu), Vol. 13 [M], Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2002 edition, pp.141–142.

18. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* (Zhangzai Ji) [M], collated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.9.

phase in the evolutionary trajectory of Chinese philosophy, situated between its proto-systemic formative period and later hermeneutic reconstruction phase. More significantly, through its transcendence of both Logos (*daolun* 道论) and Neo-Confucian (*lixue* 理学), Zhang's philosophical system constitutes the seminal milestone marking Chinese philosophy's autogenous transformation into epistemological self-awareness. This paradigmatic shift inherently anticipates the autonomous synthetic phase of philosophical development. This stage emerges dialectically as the logical culmination of Chinese philosophy's endogenous evolution and the universal manifestation of profound Sino-foreign philosophical synthesis.

Though emerging during the mid-imperial Northern Song period (11th century CE), Zhang Zai's philosophical system exhibits profound conceptual resonances with modern philosophical traits. As articulated in his article *The Unenlightened: Chengming* (*zhengmeng · chengming* 《正蒙·诚明》): "The ceaseless operational regularity inherent to the universe itself is termed cosmic operation (*ming* 命), while the irrepressible capacity of all beings to interact responsively with external phenomena constitutes their existential nature (*xing* 性)"¹⁹ "The fundamental nature of qi is at once vacuous (*xu* 虚) and numinous (*shen* 神)."²⁰ Zhang Zai's exploration was particularly attentive to the relationship between Vacuity (*xu* 虚) and Resonance (*gan* 感). Therefore, through primordial comparative analysis between Zhang Zai's philosophy and ancient Greek thought, Chinese philosophy can demonstrate cultural confidence amidst conceptual divergences and achieve value recognition through theoretical synthesis. Through understanding Zhang Zai's transcendence of Neo-Confucian (*lixue* 理学) and Logos (*daolun* 道论), Chinese philosophy can transcend its limitations via intellectual innovation and elevate spiritual horizons through theoretical innovation. These constitute the contemporary significance of Chinese philosophy.

5. CONCLUSION

Zhang Zai's philosophy shares similarities with ancient Greek philosophy, yet differs in thinking and knowledge systems; his concepts like "qi" and "taixu" rival their ancient Greek counterparts. Transcending earlier Neo-Confucianism and Logos, it marks China's philosophy turning to consciousness, implies free development, shows cultural confidence and value recognition, and hints at its contemporary significance.

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19. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.23.

20. [Northern Song Dynasty] Zhang Zai: *Collected Works of Zhang Zai* [M], collated by Zhang Xichen, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978 edition, p.63.