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The evolution of *Xuantong* in early Daoist philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Xuantong 玄同 (tentatively translated as dark oneness) is a unique Daoist idea that represents an ideally mental and physical state as a result of cultivation. However, owing to limited context in the *Laozi*, there is no consensus on the interpretation of *xuantong*. Contemporary studies have also neglected *xuantong*'s evolution in early texts and assumed a homogeneous understanding, and hence, failed to provide a nuanced account. In this article, I investigate how *xuantong* evolves from the Guodian *Laozi* to the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi*. I argue that although *xuantong* may originate from the *Laozi*, it is in the *Wenzi* that a coherent theory of *xuantong* is accomplished. This theory advocates an orderly process of cultivation that covers internal mental states, external acts, and integration with the whole universe. The cultivation would eventually lead people to adopt an undifferentiated perspective on, and reach oneness with, all things in the universe.

KEYWORDS

Xuantong; oneness; Dao; cultivation; Daoism

1. Introduction

Xuantong 玄同 (tentatively translated as dark oneness) is a unique idea that represents an ideally mental and physical state as a result of a process of cultivation.¹ We can identify *xuantong* from different versions of the excavated manuscripts of the *Laozi*, namely the Guodian 郭店 *Laozi* A (ca. 300 BCE) and the Mawangdui 馬王堆 *Laozi* A and B (ca. 168 BCE).² The passages that record *xuantong* in these excavated manuscripts correspond to the transmitted *Laozi* chapter 56. Apart from the *Laozi*, *xuantong* can also be identified in other early texts, namely once in the 'Rifling Trunks' (*Quque* 祛箧) chapter (ca. 205 BCE) of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Graham, 1981, p. 196), twice in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (ca. 139 BCE) (Major et al., 2010, p. 1), and four times in the *Wenzi* 文子.³ Notwithstanding its limited occurrence in early texts, the evolution of *xuantong* in early China not only generates a distinctive Daoist theory of cultivation but also sheds light on the very nature of development of early Chinese philosophy.

To understand *xuantong*, however, there is limited context in the *Laozi*. Traditional and contemporary scholars have given various interpretations on this idea, but not reached any consensus.⁴ Furthermore, although *xuantong* is used in different early texts, scholars have often assumed a homogeneous understanding and failed to provide a nuanced account of it. For example, commenting on *xuantong* in the *Zhuangzi*, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 suggests that it is similar to that in the *Laozi* (Chen, 1983, p. 261). Such a homogeneous

understanding of *xuantong* is also adopted by Wang Liqi 王利器, who uses *xuantong* from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to account for that from the *Wenzi* (Wang, 2000, p. 385). In addition, Chan Wing-Tsit perceives a development of *xuantong* from the *Laozi* to the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, but fails to give a detailed account of this development (Chan, 1963, p. 199).

In this article, focusing on *xuantong* in early Daoist philosophy, I argue that in the *Laozi*, *xuantong* merely stands for an ideal state in which people reach *oneness with the surroundings* and *unity with Dao*. Another sense of *xuantong* is advanced in other Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, where *xuantong* is used to refer to *an undifferentiated perspective* on particular things. The scope of these senses is further enlarged in the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi*: an undifferentiated perspective on particular things is expanded on everything in the world, and the oneness between people and their surroundings is extended to all things of the universe. Most importantly, all these senses (namely, oneness with the surroundings, unity with Dao, and an undifferentiated perspective) are synthesized in the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi* to characterize an ideal state, which, I argue, is of *xuantong*.

Eventually, a coherent theory of *xuantong* is accomplished in a discourse from the 'Origins of Dao' (Daoyuan 道原) chapter of the *Wenzi*. This theory advocates a process of cultivation, which focuses on the internal mental states, external personal acts, and interfusing with the whole universe. This cultivation would lead people to possess an undifferentiated perspective on, and reach oneness with, all things in the universe.

The investigation is split into two parts. In the first part, I conduct a close reading on a paragraph from the Guodian *Laozi A* to elucidate the *Laozi's xuantong*. In this part, I also consult early *Laozi* commentaries and other Daoist texts to introduce different senses of *xuantong* exhibited in these texts. In the second part, concentrating on three discourses from the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi*,⁵ I analyze how these discourses are composed, reorganized, and refined to accomplish a coherent theory of *xuantong*.

1.1. *Xuantong in the Laozi and other early texts*

Let us delve into the meaning of *xuantong*. A difficulty we immediately encounter is that the meanings of the two words, *xuan* 玄 and *tong* 同 (which constitute *xuantong*), are hard to pin down. *Xuan* can be understood as a noun as 'heaven', or as an adjective as 'dark' or 'mystic', or even as an adverb as 'darkly' or 'mystically'.⁶ *Tong* can also be understood as a noun as 'unity' or 'sameness', or as an adjective as 'united' or 'same', or as a verb as 'unite' or 'identify'.⁷ For the difficulty in pinpointing meanings of the two words, I leave *xuantong* untranslated in the following discussion.

Although there are various usages and explanations for the two individual words *xuan* and *tong*, in early Daoist texts *xuantong* can be considered as a binary compound. This determination is based on the fact that in the earliest manuscript, the Guodian *Laozi A*, where *xuantong* is identified, *xuantong* is used as a binary compound and has already become a typical Daoist term. It is worth noting that some scholars translate *xuantong* as 'mysteriously unified' (Major et al., 2010, p. 72), which reveals that *xuan* and *tong* can be used separately and doubts *xuantong* as a binary compound. I do believe that later Daoist texts (which is probably influenced by the *Laozi*) follow *Laozi's* use of *xuantong* as a binary compound that may function as a noun or verb.

In some phrases of other early Daoist texts, *xuantong* may function as a verb. For example, the phrase *wanwu xuantong* 萬物玄同 can be translated as ‘the ten thousand things *xuantong*’, and the phrase *tianxia zhide shixuantong yi* 天下之德始玄同矣 translated as ‘the Virtue of the world starts to *xuantong*’.⁸ However, one can also use *xuantong* as a noun to translate the two phrases, namely ‘the ten thousand things in *xuantong*’ and ‘the Virtue of the world starts to be in *xuantong*’. Grammatically, the both ways are equally possible. Furthermore, whatever understood as a verb or noun, *xuantong* necessarily involves an ideal state and a process that leads to it. In other words, understanding of this binary compound as a verb or noun would not influence our discussion of the theory of *xuantong*. For consistency and simplicity, I understand *xuantong* as a noun in the following discussion.

Let us first focus on the *Laozi’s xuantong*, which can be identified from the Guodian *Laozi A* (ca. 300 BCE), the Mawangdui *Laozi A* and *B* (ca. 168 BCE), and the transmitted *Laozi* chapter 56 (edited by Wang Bi, ca. 240 CE). There are variants of some particles and of the sequence of some phrases between the paragraphs of these excavated manuscripts that record *xuantong* and the transmitted *Laozi* chapter 56. Nonetheless, the main points of these paragraphs are identical with that of the transmitted *Laozi* chapter 56, and hence, I base the following discussion on the Guodian *Laozi A*. Given the fragmentary nature of the Guodian *Laozi*, I also consult other versions of *Laozi*, if needed, to complement my discussion.

The paragraph of the Guodian *Laozi A* can be divided into two parts. The first part discusses a process of cultivation to achieve *xuantong*. The second part is a description of the *xuantong* state in which people are free from external influences. It reads:

[The first part] Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know. They close the orifices, block the gates, soften the glare, *tong* the dust, sever the bonds, and untie the knots. This is called *xuantong*.

[The second part] Therefore there is no way to get intimate with them, but there is also no way to shun them. There is no way to benefit them, but there is also no way to harm them. There is no way to ennoble them, but there is also no way to debase them. As a result, they are esteemed by all under heaven.⁹

We can identify from the first part six phrases, that is, [1] close the orifices, [2] block the gates, [3] soften the glare, [4] *tong* the dust, [5] sever the bonds, [6] untie the knots. They correspond to the six Chinese phrases, namely ‘[1] 閉其兌, [2] 塞其門, [3] 和其光, [4] 同其塵, [5] 創其纒, [6] 解其紛’. The six Chinese phrases share an identical syntactic structure: constituted by three words, a verb in the first, a concrete noun in the third, and in the middle the pronoun, *qi*其. Most of translations have paid little attention to *qi*, and failed to make a consistent account of its reference. For example, some read *qi* in the second phrase as desires and explain this phrase as ‘shut the doors of desires’, but neglect *qi* in the third phrase and translate it as ‘soften (their) glare’, which implies that *qi* refers to ‘people’ (Chen, 2006, p. 278).¹⁰ *Qi* is also considered as an auxiliary word, as shown in the above quoted translation (Kim, 2012, p. 79). Without indicating the subjects of ‘the orifices’, ‘the gates’, ‘the glare’, ‘the dust’, ‘the bonds’, and ‘the knots’, relations between these six acts cannot be determined in this translation.

To reach a consistent account of the six phrases, the referents of *qi* in all of them should be identical. I suggest *qi* should be translated as ‘their’. There are two reasons

for this translation. First, unless *qi* refers to ‘their’, the six phrases cannot be explained consistently. If *qi*, for example, refers to desires, phrase 2 can be understood as ‘blocks the gates of the desires’. Yet, if ‘desires’ is put in other phrases, such as in phrase 3, then ‘softens the glare’ would be understood as ‘softens the glare of desires’, which makes no sense.¹¹ Second, following the six phrases, the second part of the paragraph depicts an ideal *xuantong* state in which, as a result of carrying out a series of particular acts, people are impervious to external influences. Taking into consideration the two parts of the paragraph together, the first part suggests a series of particular acts for people to achieve *xuantong*, and the second part depicts an ideal state that results from these acts. Hence, *qi* in the six phrases of the first part can only be used to refer to those who carry out these acts. These phrases are literally interpreted as follows, ‘[1] close their orifices, [2] block their gates, [3] soften their glare, [4] *tong* their dust, [5] sever their bonds, [6] untie their knots’.

To further examine the six phrases, I suggest their sequence should be slightly adjusted as this, ‘[1] close their orifices, [2] block their gates, [5] sever their bonds, [6] untie their knots, [3] soften their glare, [4] *tong* their dust’. It should be noted that the sequence of the six phrases of Guodian *Laozi A* is identical with those of Mawangdui *Laozi A* and B, while this adjusted sequence is in consistency with that of the transmitted *Laozi*.¹² Nonetheless, the main points of the six phrases between these different versions are the same (Gao, 1996, p. 98). I adopt the adjusted sequence in the following discussion, merely because it may better reflect the process of cultivation.

In the adjusted sequence, phrases 1, 2, 5, and 6 suggest a series of particular approaches to detach from external influences. For phrases 1 and 2, ‘orifices’ and ‘gates’ represent human organs, such as eyes, ears, and the mouth, which people depend on to contact with the external world. Yet contacts with the external world could lead to excessively sensual desires for music, foods, and others.¹³ By cutting these organs off from unnecessary contacts with the external world, therefore, excessive desires could be averted. For phrases 5 and 6, both ‘bonds’ and ‘knots’ can refer to objects such as rare goods, or activities such as pursuing money or fame. Thus, phrases 5 and 6 advocate disentangling from things or activities by which people are often trapped and disturbed.

Furthermore, the undesired situations that the four phrases intend people to avoid are also depicted in chapter 12 of Mawangdui *Laozi A* and B, which says,

The five colors make one’s eyes blind; Galloping and hunting make one’s mind go rabid; Goods that are hard to obtain pose an obstacle to one’s activities; The five flavors make one’s palate spoiled; The five tones make one’s ears deaf. (Kim, 2012, p. 193).¹⁴

It is through organs’ contacts with the external world that ‘the five colors’, ‘the five flavors’, and ‘the five tones’ could generate negative influences on the body, and ultimately, disturb mental states. ‘Goods that are hard to obtain’ and ‘galloping and hunting’ refer to objects and activities that could negatively influence people’s behavior and eventually, disrupt their mental tranquility. Because of these undesired situations, people’s minds could be always unsettled. Enlightened from chapter 12, we can reach a better understanding of phrases 1, 2, 5, and 6: these phrases advocate severing unnecessary contacts with the external world, detaching from nonessential objects and activities, and thereby the mental tranquility is achieved.

Let us proceed to examine phrase 3 ‘soften their glare’ and phrase 4 ‘*tong* their dust’, which propose ways to reach oneness with the surroundings. Phrase 3 advocates avoiding being distinctive. The word ‘glare’ connotes features that may distinguish people from others, and so ‘soften their glare’ means underplaying these features to blur distinctions. The sense that phrase 3 conveys is echoed in chapter 58 of Mawangdui *Laozi* B, which says ‘sages are square but not cutting, edged but not stabbing, straight but not displaying, luminous but not glittering’ (Kim, 2012, p. 89). Sages could retain features such as ‘square’, ‘edged’, ‘straight’, and ‘luminous’, but not allow them to lead to distinctions (namely, ‘not cutting’, ‘not stabbing’, ‘not displaying’, and ‘not glittering’).

Phrase 4 ‘*tong* their dust’ suggests actively embracing the surroundings as one. Although *tong* in different contexts could be understood as sameness, unity, or obedience, it more broadly represents *a process of different entities coming as one*.¹⁵ In this phrase, I suggest *tong* should be understood in the broad sense. That is, ‘*tong* their dust’ can be literally rendered as ‘people are in oneness with the dust (that surrounds them)’. Although it is often used in neutral sense, here ‘dust’ conveys a negative sense that is contrary to cleanness. I have two reasons for this reading. First, all the third words of the other five phrases, namely, ‘orifices’, ‘gates’, ‘glare’, ‘bonds’, and ‘knots’, are related to or represent negative things. In consistency with the use of these words, ‘dust’ should be used in a negative sense. Also, the negative sense of ‘dust’ can be identified in expressions from other early texts such as *chengou buwu* 塵垢不污 (not stained by dust and dirt) (Wang, 2000, p. 140). Hence, ‘*tong* their dust’ means that people should not remove things that are usually considered negative or lowly (such as failure or humiliation), but rather embrace them as one. As a result of the acts that are proposed by phrases 3 and 4, the boundary between people and their surroundings vanishes: they come as one.

Taken together, the process of cultivation suggested by the six phrases consists of severing unnecessary contacts with the external world, detaching from nonessential objects and activities, avoiding being distinctive, and embracing negative things. As a result, people would achieve both mental tranquility and oneness with their surroundings. According to the second part of the quoted paragraph, in the state of *xuantong*, people could be free from ‘intimate’ and ‘shun’, ‘benefit’ and ‘harm’, and ‘ennoble’ and ‘debase’.

Returning to the starting point of how to explain the term *xuantong*, we know that *xuantong* represents the oneness that people reach with their surroundings, namely, *tong*.¹⁶ Then, why is such a state not termed *tong* but *xuantong*? Given that *xuan* is closely associated with Dao 道 (as the Mawangdui *Laozi* chapters 1, 51, and 65 show) (Kim, 2012, pp. 159, 61, and 109), a fundamental concept of the *Laozi*, from which every principle originates (as the Mawangdui *Laozi* chapter 1 states), *xuan* is probably used to modify *tong*, highlighting that in the state of *tong*, every act is in unity with the ultimate Dao. Such a way of coining *xuantong* is akin to that for *xuande* 玄德, another important term of the *Laozi*. Like *tong* of *xuantong*, *de* 德 of *xuande* in chapters 10 and 51 refers to a state in which people could act but not take the results for themselves (Kim, 2012, pp. 187, 61), or in chapter 65 represents a type of governance that does not rely on intelligence. In coining *xuande*, likewise, *xuan* is used to modify *de*, implying that such a state of *de* is in unity with Dao. This analysis of coining *xuantong* is just my conjecture. Nonetheless, we can read two related senses from *xuantong*: *oneness with surroundings* and *unity with Dao*.

By giving a close reading on *xuantong*, I do not intend to pursue its proto-meaning, which is impossible. Nevertheless, the two related senses are captured, respectively, by two representative *Laozi* commentators in the Han dynasty. The first sense is captured by Yan Zun 嚴遵 (ca. 86 BCE—ca. 10 BCE), a Western Han philosopher. Commenting on chapter 56, Yan says, ‘living with the world with obscurity, living with the customs in *xuantong*’ (*yushi hundun yusu xuantong* 與世混沌, 與俗玄同) (Yan, 1994, p. 59). In this comment, *xuantong* represents a state of oneness with the surrounding society. The second related sense is captured by Heshanggong 河上公 (ca. 200 BCE—ca. 150 BCE). Glossing *xuan* as heaven, Heshanggong explains *xuantong* as (people) ‘sharing Dao with heaven’ (*yutian tongdao* 與天同道) (Wang, 1993, p. 217).¹⁷ In other words, *xuantong* refers to an ideal state in which people reach unity with Dao.¹⁸

In addition to the related two senses that are revealed from the different versions of the *Laozi* and its early commentaries, we can identify from other early Daoist texts the third sense of *xuantong*: *an undifferentiated perspective*. We can read a sentence from the *Zhuangzi*’s ‘Rifling Trunks’ chapter, that is, ‘Put a stop to the ways of Zeng and Shi; gag the mouths of Yang and Mo; wipe out and reject benevolence and righteousness; and for the first time, the Virtue of the world will reach *xuantong*’.¹⁹ Zeng refers to Zeng Shen 曾參, famous for his filial piety, and Shi refers to Shi Yu 史魚, well-known for his integrity. Yang and Mo refer to the followers of Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Mo Di 墨翟, respectively. Yang Zhu proposes the teaching of ‘acting only for self’, and Mo Di advocates an opposing teaching of ‘universal love’. The phrases, ‘the Ways of Zeng and Shi’, ‘the mouths of Yang and Mo’, and ‘benevolence and righteousness’, represent particular virtues or teachings that are used to judge people’s acts, from which divisions and disagreements arise. To avoid divisions and disagreements, all virtues and teachings should not be followed. Furthermore, *xuantong* in the sentence ‘the Virtue of the world will reach *xuantong*’ literally means the oneness of all the virtues of the world, which fundamentally involves an undifferentiated perspective on all virtues. That is, only when an undifferentiated perspective is possessed, can people avoid following any particular virtues and view all virtues as one, namely *xuantong*.²⁰ Hence, this use of *xuantong* involves an undifferentiated perspective.

The third sense of *xuantong* can also be identified in the ‘A Mountain of Persuasions’ (*Shuishanxun* 說山訓) chapter of the *Huainanzi*. It says that ‘when neither beauty nor ugliness is sought, there is neither beauty nor ugliness. It is called *xuantong*’ (He, 1998, p. 1120). People often use labels such as beauty and ugliness to judge, which leads to divisions and disagreements in society. Likewise, to avoid divisions and disagreements, all labels should not be differentiated and used. It is when boundaries between all labels vanish (namely, all labels come as one) that *xuantong* is reached. In the state of *xuantong* also fundamentally lies an undifferentiated perspective. That is, only when an undifferentiated perspective is possessed, can people avoid using any particular labels and view all labels as one.

We observe from early texts that *xuantong* can contain three senses: *first, oneness with surroundings; second, unity with Dao; and third, an undifferentiated perspective*. Although one or two senses can be inferred from the above discussed texts, we cannot read all the three from one text. It is in another chapter of the *Huainanzi*, namely ‘Originating in the Way’ (*Yuandaoxun* 原道訓), and three chapters of the *Wenzi*, namely, ‘Subtle Illumination’

(*Weiming* 微明), 'Nine Types of Maintaining' (*Jiushou* 九守), and 'Origins of Dao', that all the three senses are combined to depict an ideal state, which, I shall argue, is of *xuantong*.

It is worth noting that there are two understandings of *xuantong* in the *Huainanzi*. A simple understanding appears in 'A Mountain of Persuasions' chapter, where we can only read the third sense, namely an undifferentiated perspective. A more sophisticated understanding is in a discourse from 'Originating in the Way' chapter, where all the three senses of *xuantong* are combined. Given the composite nature of the *Huainanzi* (Le Blanc, 1985, p. 2), the two understandings may reflect an evolved process of *xuantong*: the sophisticated understanding from 'Originating in the Way' may be developed from the simple understanding from 'A Mountain of Persuasions'.

1.2. *Xuantong in the Huainanzi and Wenzhi*

Xuantong's further development can be observed from four chapters in the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzhi*: *Huainanzi's* 'Originating in the Way', *Wenzhi's* 'Subtle Illumination', 'Nine Types of Maintaining', and 'Origins of Dao'.

Particularly, in 'Subtle Illumination', we can observe how the three senses of *xuantong* are synthesized in this sentence, 'that what we call Dao is (when in unity with Dao), there is no before or after; no left or right; the ten thousand things in *xuantong* (mystic-oneness); no right or wrong' (所謂道者，無前無後，無左無右，萬物玄同，無是無非) (Wang, 2000, p. 338). As Dao involves an ideal state, people who reach such an ideal state are in *unity with Dao*. The expressions 'there is no before or after; no left or right' and 'no right or wrong' suggest that an *undifferentiated perspective* must be involved in this ideal state. Furthermore, *xuantong* is used with *wanwu* 萬物 (the ten thousand things) to reveal that, in this ideal state, people not only possess an undifferentiated perspective on, but integrate with, all things in the universe. In other words, they are *in oneness with the cosmos*. Hence, although *xuantong* appears in the middle of this sentence, the ideal state that this sentence depicts is, in fact, of *xuantong*.

Thus, we can observe how *xuantong* is used with *wanwu* to greatly expand the scope of the senses that are displayed in previous texts: an undifferentiated perspective on particular things (such as virtues and teachings in 'Rifling Trunks' and labels in 'A Mountain of Persuasions') is expanded on all things in the world; the oneness between people and their surroundings (as revealed in the *Laozi*) is extended to all things in the universe.²¹

Apart from the above sentence, 'Subtle Illumination' does not give more accounts of *xuantong*. It is in the discourses from 'Originating in the Way', 'Nine Types of Maintaining', and 'Origins of Dao' that *xuantong* is articulated in detail. Before proceeding to examine them, textual relations between the three discourses should be discussed. For example, regarding an ideal state (which, I shall argue, is of *xuantong*), the discourse from 'Originating in the Way' depicts it as this, 'there is nothing by which people are delighted or angered; nothing by which people are enjoyed or worried; the ten thousand things in *xuantong*; no wrong or right' (無所喜，而無所怒，無所樂，而無所苦，萬物玄同也，無非無是) (He, 1998, p. 73). The discourse from 'Nine Types of Maintaining' has an almost identical depiction, namely '無所喜，無所怒，無所樂，無所苦，萬物玄同，無非無是' (Wang, 2000, p. 163), with the function words '而' and '也' deleted from the discourse from 'Originating in the Way'. The variation between discourses from 'Nine Types of

Maintaining' and 'Origins of Dao' is that the phrase '無所樂, 無所苦' in the discourse from 'Origins of Dao' is placed in front of the phrase '無所喜, 無所怒', namely '無所樂, 無所苦, 無所喜, 無所怒, 萬物玄同, 無非無是' (Wang, 2000, p. 19). Thus, these depictions of the ideal state reveal an intimate textual relation between the three discourses from 'Originating in the Way', 'Nine Types of Maintaining', and 'Origins of Dao'.

In the following discussion, I first investigate the discourse from 'Originating in the Way', then examine how it is refined by the discourse from 'Nine Types of Maintaining' to generate a concise one, and lastly elaborate how the discourse from 'Origins of Dao' further develops the previous ones to accomplish a coherent theory of *xuantong*. However, rather than the whole three chapters, I focus only on the three individual paragraphs where the three discourses are identified. This focus is due to my consideration of the nature of early texts. Almost all early texts were compiled at random from individual fragmentary chapters, sections, or paragraphs that had already circulated. For a transmitted text such as the *Huainanzi* or *Wenzi*, its different chapters, sections, or paragraphs may not be composed, edited, or completed by one person or at the same time but by different hands and in different times.²² In other words, there may not exist intimate relations between chapters, or sections, or paragraphs, and focusing on an individual paragraph could be sufficient for us to investigate a discourse. In addition, although it is impossible to determine *accurate completion times* of the three discourses, a developmental process of *xuantong* from these discourses can be delineated.

1.2.1. *Xuantong in the discourse from the Huainanzi*

Xuantong in the discourse from 'Originating in the Way' is presented in the following paragraph, which reads:

The key for living the world does not lie in other, but instead lies in the selves; does not lie in other ones, but instead lies in people's own persons. When people fully realize it [Dao] in their own persons, then the ten thousand things are possessed. When people thoroughly penetrate the teachings of the techniques of the mind (*xinshu* 心術), they will be able to put lusts and desires, likes and dislikes, outside themselves. Therefore (if people realize Dao), there is nothing by which they are delighted or angered; nothing by which they are enjoyed or worried; the ten thousand things in *wanwu xuantong* 萬物玄同; no wrong or right; transform and nourish a mystic resplendence, and being alive seems to be dead. The world is my possession, while I am also the world's possession. So how could there even be the slightest gap between me and the world? [...] What we call self-possession is to complete the own persons. When the own persons are completed, people would be in oneness with Dao. (He, 1998, pp. 73–74)²³

This discourse depicts an ideal state and a process of cultivation that leads to it. To depict this ideal state, the expressions 'nothing by which they are delighted or angered', 'nothing by which they are enjoyed or worried', 'no wrong or right', and 'being alive seems to be dead' are used to suggest that an undifferentiated perspective must be adopted. The sentence 'when the own persons are completed, people would be in oneness with Dao' indicates that such an ideal state is associated with Dao. Furthermore, *xuantong* is used with *wanwu* to refer to the oneness that people reach with the ten thousand things. Thus, all the three senses of *xuantong*, namely an undifferentiated perspective, oneness with the entire world, and unity with Dao, are synthesized to describe the ideal state. Although

xuantong occurs in the middle of the description of the ideal state, this ideal state is, in fact, of *xuantong*.

To realize *xuantong*, this discourse advocates a process of cultivation which focuses primarily on ‘the selves’ or ‘people’s own persons’, and a crucial method is *xinshu*. The term *xinshu* may be primarily proposed by the *Guanzi* to represent a method of stripping away desires and preference from consciousness.²⁴ This discourse echoes *Guanzi*’s explanation, understanding *xinshu* as a method of removing desires and preference from the self.²⁵ If *xinshu* is deftly practiced, as this discourse suggests, a state of imperturbability would be achieved, and people impervious to delights and angers. It is worth noting that that the imperturbability depends on removing desires and preferences is also in line with a point made in the *Zhuangzi*, which states that people’s own persons should not be harmed by preferences or dislikes (Guo, 2006, p. 221).

Furthermore, the expression ‘there is no wrong or right’ implies that people who reach imperturbability would not use their own partiality to distinguish, but employ an undifferentiated perspective on all things in the world. Simultaneously, the boundary between them and the external world becomes blurred: the entire world is their possession and they are also the possession of the entire world. That is, they are integrated with all things in the world.

Yet this discourse does not provide more accounts of how the perfect cultivation on the self can lead to an undifferentiated perspective and to people’s integration of the entire world. Some accounts from other paragraphs of ‘Originating in the Way’ may be instrumental to our understanding. One paragraph suggests that, in order to act in consistency with transformations and changes of the world, particular methods such as drifting with Dao, nourishing people’s own *shen* 神 (spirit),²⁶ and harmonizing and softening *qi* 氣 (vital energy) should be adopted. Another paragraph states that people who reach mental harmony would shut and open with *qi* of *yinyang* 陰陽.²⁷ Drifting with Dao may suggest that in oneness with Dao, people could view all things with an undifferentiated perspective.²⁸ *Shen* depicts both spirits who reside above and possess direct power over natural phenomena and a purified form of *qi*, which may reveal the continuity between humanity and divinity (Puett, 2004, pp. 21–22).²⁹ The methods of nourishing *shen* and modulating *qi* thus lead people to reach mental and physical unity with the universe. These methods may lead people to have an undifferentiated perspective, and to mentally and physically integrate with the whole universe. Given the excursive nature of ‘Originating in the Way’, which displays loose relations between these two paragraphs and the above quoted one, these methods can be, at best, considered complementary to the discourse on *xuantong*. These paragraphs had not been organized and synthesized into a single discourse. It is in the discourses from the *Wenzi* that more coherent ones are formed.

1.2.2. *Xuantong* in the discourses from the *Wenzi*

Wenzi’s discussion on *xuantong* consists of two stages: a primary stage in the ‘Nine Types of Maintaining’ and a completed stage in ‘Origins of Dao’. For the primary stage, we can observe how editors of ‘Nine Types of Maintaining’ extract and assemble the dispersed passages from ‘Originating in the Way’ to generate a more concise discourse on *xuantong*. It reads:

[1] The sages shut with *yin*, open with *yang*. [2] (They) can achieve (a state of) non-enjoyment, then (there is) nothing that is not enjoyable. (There is) nothing that is not enjoyable, then the great enjoyment is in extremity. [3] So it is because of the internal enjoyment that people can enjoy the external, but not because of the external enjoyment that they enjoy the internal. [4] So there is self-enjoyment, [5] That is, (they have) will to detach from the world. The reason in doing so lies in living the world as the world is.³⁰ (The key for living the world) does not lie in other, but instead lies in the selves; does not lie in other ones, but instead lies in people's own persons. When people fully realize it [Dao] in their own persons, then the ten thousand things are possessed in themselves. When they thoroughly penetrate the teachings of the techniques of the mind, they would be able to put lusts and desires, likes and dislikes, outside themselves. Therefore, there is nothing by which they are delighted or angered; nothing by which they are enjoyed or worried; the ten thousand things are in mystic-oneness; there is no wrong or right. [. . .] [6] The sages hold and nourish their *shen*, harmonize and soften their *qi*, extend and smoothen their bodies, and meanwhile float or sink with Dao. Hence, there is no transformation of the ten thousand things to which they cannot correspond; there is no change of the hundred things with which they cannot resonate. (Wang, 2000, pp. 162–163)³¹

In this discourse, except part 4, which may be added by editors of 'Nine Types of Maintaining' to account for the former parts, all of the other parts can be identified in 'Originating in the Way'. Part 5 is in correspondence with the main body of the quoted paragraph in 2.1. Parts 1, 2, 3, and 6 are dispersed in different paragraphs of 'Originating in the Way'.³² The editors may extract and combine these dispersed parts with part 5 to produce a discourse. According to this presumed editing process, the discourse can be divided into two layers. The first layer is part 5, the main body of the discourse; the second layer comprises parts 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 and can be considered supplementary to part 5.

Like the quoted paragraph in 2.1, this discourse depicts an ideal state and a process of cultivation that leads to it. The ideal state also consists of three senses of *xuantong*: an undifferentiated perspective on all things, oneness with the entire world (the both senses are revealed in part 5), and unity with Dao (suggested by part 6). Therefore, this ideal state is, in facts, of *xuantong*.

The ideal *xuantong* state calls for a process of cultivation, which primarily focuses on the self and gradually extends to integrate with the entire world. Focus on the self lies in *xinshu* (as part 5 suggests). The deft practice of *xinshu* would remove desires and preferences from the self, thereby leading to imperturbability (as parts 2, 3, 4, and 5 show), possession of an undifferentiated perspective, and oneness with the universe (as part 5 depicts).

Editors of 'Nine Types of Maintaining' may realize the discontinuity between the cultivation of self and the integration with the universe, which is not addressed in the discourse from 'Originating in the Way'. To deal with this discontinuity, they integrate parts 1 and 6 into the discourse. Particular methods, such as following Dao, nourishing *shen*, and moderating *qi*, do reveal a transition from cultivating the self to mentally and physically interfusing with the universe.

The above analysis reveals that the discourse from 'Nine Types of Maintaining' is a refined version that may result from editing the discourse from 'Originating in the Way'. The methods advocated in the discourse from 'Nine Types of Maintaining', however, remain dispersed in different parts (namely parts 1, 5, and 6) and loosely connected. It is in 'Origins of Dao' that a cohesive discourse is accomplished, which is presented as this:

[1] For the genuine people, [2] (they) value the selves but devalue the world; [3] appreciate the cultivation of their own persons but depreciate the cultivation of other people; [4] (their internal) harmony not disturbed by things; emotions not disordered by desires; [5] hide their names; if possessing Dao, their names are hidden; if not possessing Dao, their names are revealed³³; [6] act non-action, engage non-engagement, know non-knowledge; [7] embrace the Dao of heaven; possess the heart-mind of heaven; [8] exhale and inhale (*qi*) of *yin* and *yang*; spit the old (of *qi*) and take in the new; [9] shut with *yin*; open with *yang*; [10] unfold and fold with the hard and soft; move upwards and downwards with *yin* and *yang*; [11] in one heart-mind with heaven, in one body with Dao; [12] Therefore, there is nothing by which they are enjoyed or worried; nothing by which they are delighted or angered; the ten thousand things are in *xuantong*; there is no wrong or right. (Wang, 2000, pp. 18–19)

We can observe more different sources are synthesized into this discourse. They can be divided into three categories: 'Originating in the Way', including parts 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, and 12³⁴; the *Laozi*, including parts 5 and 6³⁵; and other unknown sources, comprising parts 1, 7, 8, and 11, which may be inserted by editors of this discourse. These different sources are synthesized and organized into a coherent discourse, from which we can observe an orderly process of cultivation to reach an ideal state.

This ideal state also encompasses the three senses of *xuantong*: unity with Dao (as part 11 reveals), an undifferentiated perspective on all things, and oneness with the entire world (the latter two senses are shown in part 12). Thus, editors of this discourse follow those of the former two discourses to combine the three senses to depict the ideal state of *xuantong*.

For the cultivation, parts 1, 2, and 3 state that it boils down to cultivating people's own persons. The cultivation consists of three dimensions. The first dimension focuses on mental states. Part 4 suggests that, rather than engage in external activities, people should detach from external influences and desires to reach imperturbability.

Another dimension is on external acts. According to parts 5 and 6, people should ensure their acts would not lead to distinction between them and their surroundings. By taking particular acts such as hiding the name, acting non-action, engaging non-engagement, and knowing non-knowledge, the boundaries between them and the surroundings would be eventually blurred.

The third dimension focuses on integrating with the entire universe. Parts 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 depict two approaches to integration. Parts 7 and 11 suggest a mental approach to oneness with the universe. In the phrases 'embraces the Dao of heaven, possesses the heart-mind of heaven', heaven represents the universe in which the whole of space and all things are covered. The Dao or heart-mind of heaven stands for the fundamental principles that guide activities of all things in the universe. Thus, it is the Dao of heaven by which all things are associated with each other. When possessing the Dao of heaven, people mentally integrate with all things in the universe. Parts 8, 9, and 10 exhibit a physical approach, namely modulating *qi*. *Qi* can be considered as the vital energy that permeates in the whole universe and on which each and every thing depends. In consistency with the flow of *qi*, people could integrate themselves with all things in the universe. As a result of the two approaches, people reach physical and mental oneness with the universe.

Lastly, for a consummate state that results from the cultivation, as part 12 depicts, people reach the complete imperturbability, not only viewing the ten thousand things indistinguishably but also interfusing with them into a harmonious one.

Taken together, the discourse from 'Origins of Dao' presents an orderly process of cultivation to realize the ideal state of *xuantong*. This cultivation consists of regulating internal mental states, cultivating external acts, and integrating with the ten thousand things. Accordingly, mental tranquility, unity with the surroundings, and oneness with the entire world will be reached. It is worth noting that this process of cultivation does not necessarily imply temporal linear relations between the three dimensions. In practice, they could occur simultaneously and intertwine with each other. Overall, only when each dimension of cultivation is successfully practiced, can the ideal state be ultimately secured.

2. Concluding remarks

We have analyzed how *xuantong* evolves from the Guodian *Laozi* to *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi*. In the *Laozi*, *xuantong* calls for a process of cultivation, which includes severing unnecessary contacts with the external world, detaching from nonessential objects and activities, avoiding being distinctive, and embracing negative things. This cultivation would lead people to reach both mental tranquility and oneness with their surroundings.

Also, two related senses can be read from *Laozi's xuantong*, namely oneness with surroundings and unity with Dao. Another sense is advanced by other Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, which use *xuantong* to refer to an undifferentiated perspective on particular things. The *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi* further enlarge the scope of these senses: an undifferentiated perspective on particular things is expanded on everything in the world; the oneness between people and their surroundings is extended to all things in the universe. Moreover, the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi* synthesize all these senses (an undifferentiated perspective, oneness with the universe, and unity with Dao) to depict an ideal state, which, I demonstrate, is of *xuantong*.

The developmental process of *xuantong* can also be delineated from three discourses from 'Originating in the Way', 'Nine Types of Maintaining', and 'Origins of Dao'. The discourse from 'Originating in the Way' is excursive and its parts are loosely related. The discourse from 'Nine Types of Maintaining' is a refined one that may result from editing the discourse from 'Originating in the Way'. In the discourse from 'Origins of Dao', more different sources are synthesized, its structure neatly organized, and a coherent theory presented. Thenceforth, *xuantong* has been fully developed as a unique Daoist idea, which involves a process of cultivation that covers internal mental states, external acts, and integration with the whole universe. This cultivation would lead people not just to reach mental tranquility and oneness with their surroundings; they would also possess an undifferentiated perspective on, and achieve oneness with, everything in the universe.

Overall, *xuantong* may originate from the *Laozi*, but through a process of evolution, it is accomplished in the *Wenzi*. Last but not least, *xuantong's* evolution in early China reflects the very nature of the development of early Chinese Philosophy. That is, a theory cannot be accomplished by one thinker at a particular time.³⁶ Only through a process of composing, editing, and refining by writers, transmitters, and editors, can a coherent theory be completed.³⁷ Careful investigation on such practice would deepen our understanding of the formation of early Chinese philosophy, and deserves more studies.

Notes

1. Some scholars have already recognized the significance of *xuantong* in Daoist philosophy. For example, Chan Wing-Tist says that *xuantong* is ‘an important one’ in Daoist thought (Chan, 1963, p. 199). Chen Guying, an authority on Daoist philosophy, also suggests that *xuantong* may be the only idea of the *Laozi* philosophy that concerns the ideal individual state (*rensheng jingjie* 人生境界) (Chen, 2006, p. 279).
2. For discussions of these excavated manuscripts, see Henricks (2000, pp. 65–67), and Gao (1996, p. 98).
3. For *xuantong* in these different transmitted texts, see Guo (2006, p. 353), He (1998, pp. 73, 1120), and Wang (2000, pp. 19, 163, 338, 384). There are different views on the completion time of the transmitted *Wenzi*, but based on Van Els’s discussion (Van Els, 2018), I assume the time is later than that of the *Huainanzi* and probably before the fall of Eastern Han 東漢 (220 CE).
4. *Xuantong* can be translated as ‘mysterious merging’, ‘sublime at-oneness’, ‘becoming one with the abstruse’, ‘mysterious mingling’, and more. See LaFargue (1992, p. 66), Roberts (2001, p. 143), Ryden (2008, p. 117), Kim (2012, p. 79), and Chan (1963, p. 200). For divergent Chinese interpretations of *xuantong*, see Wang (1993, p. 217) and Chen (2006, p. 278).
5. Although the *Huainanzi* is commonly attributed to the Eclectic School, I have two reasons to take it into my discussion of *xuantong* in early Daoist philosophy. First, its basic content may be more accurately considered as Daoist-oriented (Le Blanc, 1985, p. 2). Second, there is an intimate textual relation between the *Huainanzi* and the transmitted *Wenzi* (Van Els, 2018, pp. 135–142). The *Wenzi* was viewed as a forgery for a long time. Thanks to the excavation of the Dingzhou 定州 bamboo slips, in which some fragmentary *Wenzi* was discovered, it has been believed to form at least in the early Han. For detailed discussions, see Wang (2000, pp. 1–13). Yet there is a thorny issue regarding relation between the Dingzhou *Wenzi* and the transmitted *Wenzi*. The legible words in the Dingzhou *Wenzi* account for a mere 7% of the transmitted *Wenzi*, while almost four fifths of the transmitted *Wenzi* can be identified in the *Huainanzi*. It suggests that the transmitted *Wenzi* is produced from the *Huainanzi* (including the discourses that will be discussed in this article) and other texts such as the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Overall, the Dingzhou *Wenzi* may be formed in the early Han, but the transmitted *Wenzi* is different from this ancient version and resulted from a process of synthesizing and editing the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*, and other sources. For comprehensive studies on textual relations between the transmitted *Wenzi*, Dingzhou *Wenzi*, *Huainanzi*, see Van Els (2005, 2009, 2015). This article focuses only on the transmitted *Wenzi* rather than on Dingzhou *Wenzi*. To avoid confusion, I use ‘the *Wenzi*’ to refer only to the transmitted version.
6. For different etymological accounts of *xuan*, see Li (1999, pp. 326–327). For a pithy sketch of the different uses of *xuan* in early texts, see Chan (2010, pp. 1–2).
7. Li Chenyang points out that we can observe two related senses of *tong*, namely sameness and unity or togetherness (Li, 2014, p. 11). For a nuanced account of *tong*, see He (2019).
8. For the Chinese phrase 萬物玄同, see He (1998, pp. 73, 1120) and Wang (2000, pp. 19, 163, 338). For the phrase 天下之德始玄同矣, see Guo (2006, p. 353).
9. I borrow from Henricks (2000, p. 65). Italics are my own.
10. Such inconsistency can also be found in LaFargue (1992, p. 66), Ryden (2008, p. 117), and Roberts (2001, p. 143), just to name a few.
11. Analyzing the word *qi* in the *Laozi* chapter 1, Yoav Ariel and Gil Raz further suggest that in chapter 56 *qi* may refer to the entity named ‘mysterious entity’, but they are also cautious in saying that ‘this referent seems to defy our expectations’ (Ariel & Raz, 2010, p. 411). For me, explaining *qi* as ‘mysterious entity’ is also improper. If taking ‘mysterious entity’ into phrase 5, it means ‘sever the bonds of mysterious entity’, which makes no sense.
12. Note that the Chinese phrase 5 ‘創其纒’ in Guodian *Laozi* A is replaced by ‘挫其銳’ in Mawangdui *Laozi* A and B, and the transmitted version (Gao, 1996, p. 98).
13. Both Wang Bi 王弼 and Chen Guying suggest that the words ‘orifices’ and ‘gates’ are related to desires. See Lou (2008, p. 139) and Chen (2006, p. 265).

14. For this chapter, although the sequence of phrases in the transmitted *Laozi* is more ordered than those in Mawangdui *Laozi* A and B, the main points of the three versions are identical (Gao, 1996, p. 273).
15. For a detailed account, see He (2019).
16. In terms of the broad definition of *tong* (namely different entities becoming as one), this can be understood as people and their surroundings becoming as one.
17. Another Han commentator Gao You 高誘 (ca. 168 CE—ca. 212 CE) also explains *xuan* as heaven (He, 1998, p. 73).
18. Apart from the aforementioned commentaries, we cannot identify any comments on *xuantong* from other representative *Laozi* commentaries such as the *Laozi xianger commentaries* 老子想尔注 and the *Wang Bi Laozi commentary* 王弼老子注. See Lou (2008) and Rao (1991).
19. I consult Watson's translation (Watson, 2013, p. 71).
20. Guo Xiang 郭象 (252 CE–312 CE), an influential commentator on the *Zhuangzi*, also associates *xuantong* with an undifferentiated perspective, remarking that 'there is no that or this' (which represents an undifferentiated perspective) leads to *xuantong* (Guo, 2006, p. 66).
21. One may argue that *xuantong* in the *Laozi* may also imply the oneness between people and all things in the universe. Yet the oneness cannot be directly read from this text. We can just read from the *Laozi* the oneness between people and their surroundings. I do believe that only when *xuantong* is used with *wanwu*, is the relation between people and all things in the universe clearly displayed.
22. For detailed accounts, see Yu (2007, pp. 200–210, 213–215), and Li (2004, pp. 197–198).
23. I consult Major et al.'s translation (2010, pp. 71–72).
24. For a detailed account of *xinshu*, see Roth (1999, pp. 99–123).
25. Besides the above quoted passage, this understanding can also be identified in the 'Sayings Explained' (*quanyanxun* 詮言訓) chapter of the *Huainanzi* (He, 1998, p. 996).
26. *Shen* in early China covers a wide range of meanings such as 'deity', 'animating spirit', and 'vital force'. For discussions of the semantic field of *shen*, see Major et al. (2010, p. 234) and Sterckx (2007, p. 23).
27. The two paragraphs can be, respectively, identified in He (1998, pp. 90, 68).
28. The aforementioned sentence of 'Subtle Illumination' also reveals that when in oneness with Dao, all things can be viewed from an undifferentiated perspective as one.
29. *Shen* may also be associated with mental activities of perception and cognition (Major et al., 2010, p. 234).
30. I follow Wang to read the Chinese phrases '即有自志貴乎天下' as '即志遺乎天下' and '因而為天下之要' as '因天下而為天下也'. For detailed arguments, see Wang (2000, p. 164).
31. There is no English translation of the *Wenzi*. All translations of the paragraphs from the *Wenzi* are my own.
32. Parts 1, 2, 3, and 6 correspond to He (1998, pp. 68, 69, 70, 90), respectively. It should be noted that the sequence of parts 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 is identical with that of their corresponding parts in 'Originating in the Way'.
33. The Chinese phrase '有道則隱, 無道則見' (Wang, 2000, p. 18) can also be translated as 'if the world has Dao, the genuine people would hide; if the world does not have Dao, the genuine people would appear'. However, the expression 'if the world does not have Dao, the genuine people would appear' suggests that the genuine people may distinguish from others who do not have Dao and even take action to have Dao prevailing in the world. Given that the whole discourse proposes non-distinction and non-action, this translation would be contradictory to the points that are expressed in this discourse, and so I do not adopt it.
34. Parts 2, 4, 9, 10, and 12 correspond to He (1998, pp. 66, 68, 68, 11, 73), respectively. Although we cannot identify part 3's counterpart, the point that this part conveys is the same as that suggested in the phrase 'does not lie in other people, but instead lies in their own selves' from 'Originating in the Way' (He, 1998, p. 73).
35. The two parts propose hiding name, non-action, non-engagement, and non-knowledge, which can be identified from the *Laozi's* chapters 41, 63, 63, and 70, respectively. See Chan (1963, pp. 174, 212, 212, 224).

36. For example, Chen Guying attributes *xuantong* solely to the *Laozi*, interpreting it as an ideal state in which bias is removed, barriers eliminated, constraints in social relationships overcome, and people treated impartially (Chen, 2006, p. 279). This article rejects this view, arguing that these connotations cannot be directly inferred from the *Laozi*, and it is in the three discourses from the *Huainanzi* and *Wenzi* that they can be read.
37. William Boltz remarks on this process that ‘the practice of compiling texts from a reservoir of preexisting materials, combined with whatever newly composed material was called for, was not just widespread but also norm’ (Boltz, 2005, p. 70). Paul Goldin also emphasizes the important role of transmitters, redactors, commentators in developing early Chinese philosophy (Goldin, 2020, p. 3).

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