

Article

Guo Xiang and the Problem of Self-Cultivation in Daoist Naturalism

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Abstract: Recent research on Daoism has distinguished various models of self-cultivation present in the tradition, in particular those which aim at returning humanity to a natural, spontaneous form of existence (often associated with early pre-Qin “philosophical” Daoism), and those which aim at transcending human nature through technical practices (often associated with later “religious” Daoism). During the Wei-Jin period, organized Daoist religion was still in its early stages, yet the difference between the two models was very much an issue in the Dark Learning (*xuanxue*) thought of the intellectual elite. In this paper, I trace this debate as expressed in Wei-Jin thinker Guo Xiang’s *Commentary to the Zhuangzi*, in particular in Guo’s criticisms of the desire or attempt to exceed the limits (*ji*) of one’s inherent nature and his reinterpretation of the *Zhuangzi*’s criticisms of technical practices. While Guo follows Xiang Xiu in rejecting many of the claims of radical transcendence through self-cultivation, I argue that this does not imply that he lacks any positive conception of self-cultivation, but rather that he sees such cultivation as only possible through an immanent historical process in which both natural spontaneity and artificial techniques have a role to play.

Keywords: self-cultivation; Daoism; Guo Xiang; naturalism; *Zhuangzi*

1. Introduction

In the main Chinese philosophical and religious traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, self-cultivation (*xiuji* 修己 or *xiushen* 修身) is an issue of central importance, with the former two traditions in particular emphasizing the attainment of individual psychological stability and personal discipline through “governing the self” (*zhishen* 治身) as the foundation for effective participation in social life and the governance of the state (*zhiguo* 治國). While for early Confucianism, such self-cultivation typically focused on ‘external’ aspects such as acquiring the familiarity with classic literature such as the *Poetry* (*shi* 詩) that was the mark of a cultured person and becoming proficient in the traditional rites (*li* 禮) that governed personal and social conduct, in pre-Qin Daoist texts such as the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 it tended to focus more on what is referred to in the *Guanzi* 管子 as “inward training” (*neiye* 內業) and “techniques of the mind” (*xinshu* 心術), i.e., ‘internal’ spiritual and mental cultivation through psycho-somatic practices (Roth 2015). Within the development of this Daoist aspect into various historical traditions, scholars have also picked out several divergent strands of self-cultivation, and distinctions have been drawn between a restorative “quietistic” model and a transformative “alchemical” model (Komjathy 2007), between an “escapist” spiritual model and an “integratist” socio-political model (Kohn 1992), and between the “literati” or “Lao-Zhuang” Daoism pioneered by Wei-Jin writers and earlier “Huang-Lao” or later religious forms (Roth 1991; Kirkland 2004). However, as I discuss in Section 2 below, such distinctions are by no means either uncontroversial or clearly applicable to individual historical Daoist texts.

In what follows, I examine these distinctions between different models of self-cultivation as they are expressed by Western Jin dynasty Dark Learning (or ‘Neo-Daoist’) *xuanxue* 玄學 thinker Guo Xiang 郭象 (c. 252–312) in his influential but controversial *Commentary to the Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子

注), who has generally been seen as fitting into the “quietistic” and “integratist” models (see below), based on the “naturalistic” tendency of his thought and its attempt to reconcile Confucian values with the *Zhuangzi*’s critical perspective.¹ In particular, I focus on the question of the possibility of self-cultivation in Guo Xiang, which appears problematic for him given his deterministic, naturalistic metaphysical world-view, and suggest that Guo’s account of self-attainment (*zide* 自得) and the relation between practice (*xi* 習) and inherent nature (*xing* 性), along with his re-interpretation of the critique of technical action in the *Zhuangzi*, offer a possible response to this issue. I argue that since in Guo’s view, artificial practices and techniques are not necessarily opposed to natural spontaneity, but are ideally complementary to it and constitute inseparable aspects of a single plane of nature encompassing both spontaneity and artifice, so his emphasis on spontaneity need not imply a rejection of practices of self-cultivation, a view at odds with certain views found in the original *Zhuangzi* text on which he comments.

2. Models of Self-Cultivation in Early Daoism

From the very earliest Daoist texts we currently possess, self-cultivation has always been a core concern of Daoism. Chapter 54 of the *Laozi* declares that “When one cultivates it [i.e., the *dao* 道] in oneself, one’s virtue [*de* 德] will be genuine” (Wang 2011a, p. 147; my translation), going on to extend this to the family, the community, the state, and finally the world, thereby rooting social and even cosmic order firmly in individual self-cultivation, particularly that of the ruler, rather than in external control. This vision of “the concentric and mutually entailing circles through which the rippling effect of cosmic cultivation takes place” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 162) is one that the text shares with Confucianism, as later commentators have frequently noted, and continued into the “Huang-Lao 黃老” (Yellow Emperor and Laozi) strand of Daoist thought attributed to thinkers in the late Warring States and the early Han dynasty, despite its increased focus on external practices and techniques of governance.² The “Techniques of the Mind” (*Xinshu* 心術) chapters of the *Guanzi*, which along with the *Laozi* have been seen as some of the earliest Daoist texts as well as connected to Huang-Lao, are almost entirely focused on such cultivation, and link it closely with concepts related to the body such as *qi* 氣 and “essence” (*jing* 精) (Roth 1999; Roth 2015; on bodily cultivation in early Daoism, see, e.g., Michael 2015, pp. 93–137). In the “Inward Training” (*Neiye* 內業) chapter, we read that “By cultivating one’s mind and quieting one’s intentions, the Dao can be attained,” and these texts provide specific guidance for how to practice such psychological cultivation (Roth 1999, pp. 54–55). In the *Zhuangzi*, self-cultivation is famously expressed in terms of “the fasting of the mind” (*xinzhai* 心齋) and “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuowang* 坐忘), though unlike in “Inward Training” these are not presented as specific techniques in any detail (Watson 2013, pp. 25, 53). These early practices continued to feature in Han dynasty works associated with Daoism such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and the Heshanggong 河上公 commentary to the *Laozi*, and from there became key components of Daoist religious practice from the later Han dynasty onward (Kohn 1992; Roth 1991). However, despite the “continuities” of cultivation

¹ Along with other Wei-Jin thinkers, Guo Xiang’s thought has long been recognized as a form of “very thoroughgoing naturalism” (*hen chedi de ziran zhuyi* 很徹底的自然主義; Hu [1959] 2008, p. 87; see also e.g., Rong [1935] 1996; Xu [1993] 2008). However, in Guo Xiang’s case at least, this naturalism should, like that of Lucretius, Spinoza or Deleuze in Western philosophy, be understood not as rejecting the artificial customs, values, technologies and institutions of human society, but rather as an “enterprise of demystification” (Ansell-Pearson 2014) that understands these as continuous with the non-human part of nature and rejects the transcendent or divine authority they are often imbued with.

² There has been much debate over the scope, nature and even existence as a coherent “school” or tradition of thought of the “Huang-Lao” Daoism referred to in Han dynasty histories, particularly after the discovery of the so-called “Huang-Lao silk manuscripts 黃老帛書” at Mawangdui 馬王堆 in the 1970s and the increase in studies of previously neglected texts such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (see, e.g., Tu 1979; Van Ess 1993; Major 1993; Loewe 1994; Queen 2001; Sivin 2011; Cao 2013; Chen and Sung 2015). In what follows, I shall use the term for the sake of convenience to refer to the strand of thought present to a greater or lesser degree in a range of texts from the late Warring States and early Han dynasty that attempt to flesh out *Laozi*’s conception of *dao* by formulating concrete cosmological models, specific practices for self-cultivation, and laws (*fa* 法), and techniques (*shu* 術) of governance. As discussed below, such attempts have often been opposed to the alleged focus on spontaneity found in Wei-Jin Dark Learning and the *Zhuangzi*.

in the Daoist tradition, as emphasized by Russell Kirkland among others (Kirkland 2004, p. 195), various scholars have attempted to separate out different strands of cultivation that have coexisted within it since the time of the earliest texts, in particular focusing on tensions between the Daoist ideal of perfect spontaneity and simplicity and the deliberate, concrete methods of self-cultivation and transformation that may paradoxically be required in order to attain it. Here, I shall consider several of these attempts, focusing on those that concern early Daoism (prior to the development of the organized religious tradition after the Jin dynasty), and particularly those that relate to Wei-Jin Dark Learning and Guo Xiang.

One such distinction is that drawn by Louis Komjathy in his discussions of the later organized religious tradition of Quanzhen 全真 Daoism between a “quietistic” model “most clearly expressed in classical Daoism”, e.g., the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and the above-mentioned chapters of the *Guanzi*, and an “alchemical” model “advocated and employed in both early medieval external alchemy traditions and in late medieval internal alchemy lineages” (Komjathy 2007, p. 21ff). The quietistic model emphasizes a return to one’s “original nature” through non-action (*wuwei* 無為), simplicity (*pu* 樸) and spontaneity (*ziran* 自然), and an accepting view of death as a part of a natural process in which one returns to or merges back into a transforming cosmos. The alchemical model on the other hand emphasizes the “perfection” or transmutation of one’s nature through cultivation and “refinement,” in which “the aspiring adept wishes to transcend” death, which is viewed as the destiny only of ordinary living things, not of the “perfected and immortal being”. For Komjathy, this is a crucial question as it concerns whether or not “the Daoist adept must transform his or her self” into something “other than what one is ... something more,” or whether one must “simply return to ... one’s original place in the cosmos” (ibid.), and thus relates to ongoing modern discussions of the putative distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘philosophical’ Daoism (see, e.g., Creel 1970).

The difference between these two models of self-cultivation (and, by implication, two forms of Daoism) is not simply a product of contemporary academic analysis or the emergence of organized religious Daoism, but was very much alive among the Dark Learning literati of the Wei-Jin period when Guo Xiang was writing, as is evident in the debate between his near-contemporaries Ji Kang 嵇康 and Xiang Xiu 向秀 over “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生) to achieve longevity (see Jullien 2007). While Ji Kang argued that it should be possible to extend one’s life to “over a thousand” or at least “several hundred years” through “guiding and nourishing” that can “reverse your substance and change your nature” (Henricks 1983, pp. 22–23, 58), Xiang Xiu responded that although there may very rarely be people who have an unusually long life, such people have also “uniquely received a special *qi*,” and this is something which “cannot be accomplished by guiding or nourishing” since “the appointment given by Heaven has a limit, it simply is not something things can increase” (ibid., pp. 35–36). Thus, although Ji Kang did not accept that absolute immortality and transcendence of the human condition is possible through cultivation, he did believe that a significant degree of self-transformation in the alchemical sense suggested by Komjathy is possible, while Xiang Xiu took a position closer to the quietism of earlier Daoist texts, one with which, as Livia Kohn has noted, Guo Xiang generally agrees (Kohn 1992, p. 107; see Section 3 below for discussion of Guo’s view).

In her work, Kohn has also suggested another related distinction in Daoist self-cultivation practices, deriving from two strands of early Chinese thought that both had a great influence on the later development of Daoism, namely an “integratist” tradition in which self-cultivation serves the wider goal of social and political participation, largely based on the classical Daoist ‘philosophical’ texts mentioned above, and an “escapist” tradition centered on “the ecstatic visions of the immortality seekers” such as the *Lyrics of Chu* 楚辭, related “escapist poetry” from the Han and Wei-Jin periods, and the Shangqing 上清 tradition of religious Daoism, but also found in the “free and distant wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) and tales of immortals of the *Zhuangzi* (Kohn 1992, pp. 4, 52). For Kohn, these two strands had, by the time of Guo Xiang in the Western Jin, already developed into “two extreme poles,” both of which found expression within the Dark Learning of the time. The poetry of Ruan Ji 阮籍 and Liu Ling 劉伶, both members of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Groves 竹林七賢, has long been seen

as escapist, despite being focused on creating “a free space for a kind of countersociety” based on music and drinking rather than the celestial “otherworld” of early religious Daoism (Kohn 1992, pp. 101–8). Like Wang Bi 王弼 earlier in the period however, Guo Xiang wrote a partial commentary on Confucius’ *Analects* 論語 in addition to Daoist texts, and attempted to reconcile at least the core of Confucian social values with Daoist thought, firmly rejecting the escapist position. Although Kohn suggests that this amounts to a fundamental difference from the *Zhuangzi*’s allegedly apolitical view that “The true person . . . leaves the world behind” (Kohn 1992, p. 80), as Harold Roth has noted, this ignores the explicitly political concerns of many chapters in the *Zhuangzi*, as well as exaggerating the extent to which “oblivion” or absolute transcendence of the actual world is its author’s ultimate goal (Roth 1995, pp. 158–59). If this point is taken on board, then, as Roth suggests, both the apparent contrast between the thought of the *Zhuangzi* and that of Guo Xiang, and indeed Kohn’s “‘escapist-integratist’ contrast” in general appear more problematic (Roth 1995, p. 161).

Despite this critique, Roth himself has proposed various related ways to analyze the different strands of the Daoist tradition of self-cultivation, in particular focusing on an apparent contrast between the true “Taoist philosophy,” i.e., “the ‘Huang-Lao’ of the Han historians,” which “embraced both self-cultivation and politics,” and “the ‘Lao-Chuang’ of the Wei and Chin [Jin] literati,” i.e., Dark Learning thinkers such as Guo Xiang, which allegedly emphasizes “the mystical and cosmological aspects of these [early Daoist] texts at the expense of the political and psychological” (Roth 1991, pp. 606, 649). Having rejected the supposed Lao-Zhuang tradition as an invention of “generations of Chinese literati and the Western scholars who studied under them,” Roth argues that, despite differences in the degree and form of political engagement endorsed by various early Daoist texts, they all include a focus on concrete psychological self-cultivation practices as part of a life lived in accordance with the *dao*, in opposition to the mystical and apolitical thought of Wei-Jin Dark Learning (Roth 1999, pp. 5–8). For Roth then, the truly “escapist” view is not found in the religious Daoist tradition discussed by Kohn, but rather in the philosophy of the Wei-Jin literati who detached Daoist texts from their connection to concrete practices aimed at psychological cultivation and political transformation, turning them into mystical works of metaphysics.

A similar view has been proposed by Russell Kirkland, who, despite noting that “literati Taoism” was in fact the source for almost all the early Daoist texts we see today, still excludes the work of Wei-Jin Dark Learning literati such as Wang Bi and Guo Xiang from his account of the Daoist “tradition,” despite Guo Xiang’s commentary to the *Zhuangzi* becoming a standard commentary on the text in religious Daoism via Cheng Xuanying’s 成玄英 Tang dynasty sub-commentary (Kirkland 2004, pp. 119, 73ff). For Kirkland, the “conspicuous ideal” of “spontaneity” (*ziran* 自然) among Wei-Jin Dark Learning literati is alien to the true Daoist tradition with its emphasis on deliberate cultivation practices, and he doubts whether appearances of the term *ziran* in earlier Daoist texts even had such a meaning, except perhaps in the *Zhuangzi*, which he views as fundamentally separate from the thought of the *Laozi* and the “Inward Training” in that it “does not present [its] ideas as a program for *self-development*” and “gives no specific directions as to how one might go about *attaining* the ideal state that it describes” (Kirkland 2004, pp. 233, 238). Kirkland’s view of the *Zhuangzi* here has more recently been emphasized by Eske Møllgaard, who follows Roth in noting that the text does in fact contain certain passages giving guidance for “inner cultivation,” but nonetheless points out that it frequently “explicitly mocks [such] instructions on inner training” and “rebukes various ways of self-cultivation,” since “No technique, either inner or outer, can bring us to [Zhuangzi’s ideal] state of being” (Møllgaard 2007, pp. 134–37; see Singh 2014 for a similar argument). As with Roth’s view above then, Kirkland views Wei-Jin Dark Learning as an essentially mystical philosophy, one that rejects both the specific psychological self-cultivation practices of early Daoism and the concrete political programs of Han dynasty Huang-Lao thought in favor of *laissez-faire* spontaneity and mystical or metaphysical speculations.

A general feature shared by the various models of Daoist self-cultivation described above is an opposition between forms of active, disciplined cultivation which accept the necessity of concrete techniques and regimes (alchemical, psychological, political; religious Daoism, Huang-Lao) and forms

of passive, spontaneous cultivation which reject deliberate, intentional practice in favor of some form of retreat to a pure or natural world free from human interference (quietist, mystical, escapist; Lao-Zhuang, Wei-Jin). However, with the notable exception of Kohn, who is more positive about Wei-Jin thought as part of the Daoist tradition, none of the above discussions offers any specific analysis of the thought of Guo Xiang or indeed any other Wei-Jin thinkers, despite their critical comments. Indeed, they all too often simply echo the orthodox Confucian histories' view of Dark Learning and its associated "pure conversation" (*qing tan* 清談) as a movement of dissolute literati who lacked any respect for the ritualized moral order of society and thereby "misled the country" (*wu guo* 誤國), much as Socrates was accused of doing in ancient Greece. While this may be a valid criticism of figures such as Liu Ling, it glosses over the degree to which "the controversy over conformity and naturalness," i.e., the relation between cultural practices and natural spontaneity, was a core question within Dark Learning thought itself (Mather 1969).

In this context, Guo Xiang is particularly significant as he has often been regarded as a thinker who finally resolved this controversy by offering a broad conception of the natural that could accommodate the artificial aspects of human cultural practices such as the "teaching of names" (*mingjiao* 名教), unlike figures such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang who saw the two as more fundamentally opposed (see, e.g., Mather 1969; Ziporyn 2003).³ Like Wang Bi before him (see Wagner 2003), Guo's thought is also explicitly concerned with hierarchical social and political order (pace Tadd 2019), and, following the Han dynasty Huang-Lao tradition, he accepts various aspects of Confucian and even Legalist techniques of governance. Seen in this context, the view that Guo must reject the concrete techniques and practices of self-cultivation derives from the false assumption that any thoroughly naturalistic and immanent view of the cosmos like his must necessarily imply a quietistic rejection of all human action and effort. Such an assumption is in fact precisely the target of Guo's critique.

3. Guo Xiang on the Possibilities of Self-Cultivation

As noted above, a recurring topic in Daoist self-cultivation is the possibility of transcending the limits of one's natural life. For Guo Xiang as for Xiang Xiu in his debate with Ji Kang, such transcendence is essentially impossible, since "Things each have their inherent natures, and inherent natures each have their limits" (Guo 1961, p. 11).⁴ Thus, Guo's claim that "he who vanishes into the undying and unliving is without limits" (ibid.) implies precisely the kind of return to an eternally transforming cosmos in Komjathy's 'quietistic' form of classical Daoist cultivation, rather than any form of individual immortality or transcendence. Nonetheless, for Guo it is not only the case that one "vanishes" (*ming* 冥) into the cosmos as a whole upon one's death. He famously argues that "as long as each accords with its inherent nature and share, things vanishing into their limits, then a large shape is not excessive and a small shape is not insufficient" (Guo 1961, p. 81), and thus all things are, at least in principle, capable of attaining the *Zhuangzi*'s state of free and distant wandering during their lives,

³ Mainland Chinese studies of Guo's thought have often emphasized this point, frequently using the phrase "the teaching of names is natural" (*mingjiao ji ziran* 名教即自然) to summarize his position as a conservative one that wholeheartedly endorses hierarchical Confucian values, despite the fact that neither this phrase nor even the term "teaching of names" appear in his commentary (see, e.g., Ren [1963] 2010, p. 239; Pang [1979] 2008, p. 368; Kang 2008, p. 244). As various scholars have noted (see, e.g., Wang and Ren 2001; Wang 2009), this view is a simplification that overlooks both the complexity of the role of "traces" (*ji* 跡) in Guo's social thought, as well as the fact that he generally follows the *Zhuangzi* in criticizing deliberate external "teaching" (*jiao* 教) in his commentary (e.g., Guo 1961, pp. 446, 758). I discuss how Guo attempts to reconcile learning and Confucian values with his naturalistic worldview in more detail below.

⁴ All translations from Guo Xiang's text are my own, based on the partial translations in Ziporyn 2003 and Ziporyn 2009 where available. While Guo treats the *Zhuangzi* as "one coherent whole" and indeed edited the text according to this principle, stripping out those parts he found "vulgar and far-fetched" (Knaul 1982, p. 55), modern scholarship generally sees even his edition as still consisting of a multi-layered collection of texts representing related but clearly distinct philosophical positions (see, e.g., Graham 2001; Lee 2008; Liu 2010; Sarkissian 2010). In my analysis, I thus avoid comparing Guo's views with those of a single putative "Zhuangzi," and treat them instead as the result of Guo's own interpretive synthesis, noting where they differ significantly from the section of the original text to which they are attached.

even if they are not aware of having done so.⁵ However, this state is dependent on one not trying to “cultivate beyond one’s limits,” which can bring only dissatisfaction and harm to one’s life, and thus “he who vanishes into [his] limits accepts his ultimate share and does not add even a speck more” (ibid., p. 115–16). On this basis, when the text of the *Zhuangzi* refers to the sage eventually “tiring of the world after a thousand years, leaving it and ascending to the immortals, [and] riding those white clouds to the land of the gods” (Watson 2013, p. 88), Guo interprets this in a naturalistic way, commenting:

The Perfected Man reaches the length of his lifespan, accepting the change of the final opening; in life he travels with Heaven, in death he transforms with things, hence the text says he ‘tires of the world and ascends to the immortals.’ There is nowhere the dispersal of *qi* does not reach. (Guo 1961, pp. 421–22)

Thus, for Guo, self-cultivation can at most aid one in living out one’s natural lifespan to the full, and changing one’s inherent nature even in the slightest appears to be impossible.

The final sentence in the quotation above suggests the origin of Guo’s conception of the limits built into human nature, i.e., his view of the cosmos as “one *qi* with a myriad forms, in which there is change and transformation but no life or death” (ibid., p. 629). In such a cosmos, each existent only exists by virtue of receiving a “share” (*fen* 分) of this *qi*, different for each individual, which “gathers” (*ju* 聚) at one’s birth, “disperses” (*san* 散) at one’s death, and determines one’s character, personality and ability (ibid., p. 739). Although this apparently determinist and materialist view of character is more commonly associated with Han dynasty thinkers such as Wang Chong 王充 (see e.g., McLeod 2015, pp. 358–61), it was common throughout the Wei-Jin period, as exemplified in the analyses of character in Liu Shao’s 劉劭 (c. 170–245) *Record of Personalities* 人物志. As Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 demonstrated, this view led thinkers of the period to view sagehood as a kind of “talent quality” (*cai zhi* 才質) or “natural endowment” (*tian zi* 天資) that it was thus not possible to cultivate, a conclusion that Mou himself found unacceptable due to its implications for morality (Mou 2010, p. 52).

Such a view seems to be present in Guo Xiang’s commentary in his claim that the “Spirit Man” (*shen ren* 神人), who Guo equates with the transcendent inner state of the sage, does not achieve this state through eating or not eating the five grains, but through being “especially endowed with the most subtle *qi* of nature” (Guo 1961, p. 29). If this is the case, then Guo Xiang’s thought would seem to be a counterexample to Michael Puett’s claim that a “monistic cosmology” such as Guo’s “one *qi*” monism was in both Ancient Greece and early China correlated with “claims of self-divinization,” i.e., the possibility of achieving a transcendent state through self-cultivation, and thereby with a “language of opposition” which provided a critique of the existing order, in particular threatening the restriction of self-cultivation practices to a “shamanistic” elite of “ritual specialists” (Puett 2002, pp. 95–119). Guo’s hierarchical view of society, as expressed in his statement that “the ruler above and ministers below, the hands outside and the feet inside, this is the spontaneity of Heavenly principle” (Guo 1961, p. 58), would seem to confirm the fatalistic implications of such a view. In a different sense, such an understanding also lay behind the Eastern Jin dynasty Buddhist Zhi Dun’s 支遁 influential critique of Guo and Xiang Xiu’s interpretation of the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, in which he argued

⁵ As has been frequently noted by commentators as far back as the Buddhist Zhi Dun 支遁 in the Eastern Jin dynasty (see below), Guo’s relativistic interpretation of “free and distant wandering,” in which he follows the earlier commentary of Xiang Xiu, in this respect departs significantly from the ostensible meaning of the original *Zhuangzi* text, in which such a state appears as a goal only attainable by radical spiritual transcendence. For a representative modern critique of Guo’s view along these traditional lines, see (Pas 1981); for an extensive review of this question and the various responses to it, see (Lian 2009). Although I do not intend to enter into this well-worn topic in detail here, it is clearly closely connected to Guo’s view of self-cultivation: since for Guo the state of free and distant wandering is not restricted to the absolute plane of the sage, its attainment is no longer dependent on a radical spiritual transcendence of all individual limitations and concrete cultural practices, but is rather capable of being expressed and captured to some degree within these. For a discussion that emphasizes this latter aspect of “roaming [i.e., wandering] within boundaries” as already present in the original *Zhuangzi* text, even if it is “more subtle and less prominent in the inner chapters,” see (Jiang 2011, pp. 470–73). Unfortunately, Jiang’s article does not acknowledge the role of Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang’s influential early commentaries in bringing this aspect to light, which somewhat undermines the claim that it has existed in a state of “neglect in the scholarly commentaries” (p. 471).

that their relativized conception of free and distant wandering as “each following its inherent nature” would imply that even tyrants and robbers should count as living according to their natures, and hence would have destructive effects on society (Kohn 1992, pp. 118–19).

However, there are reasons to doubt if such consequences are in fact implied by Guo’s view. Firstly, as Brook Ziporyn has noted, Guo does not in fact claim that an individual’s inherent nature is fixed eternally, merely that it has certain limits that cannot be determined by conscious decision, that it “cannot *be changed*, not that it cannot *change*” (Ziporyn 2003, pp. 143–46). Indeed, Guo’s commentary repeatedly depicts a world of change without stable identities in which “things have no fixed limits, selves have no constant suitability, the many inherent natures have different conveniences, and approval and disapproval have no master,” such that even the self is constantly changing: “the ‘I’ of the past does not return as the ‘I’ of the present” (Guo 1961, pp. 583, 244). As Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) noted early in the Qing dynasty, a view of inherent nature as a “productive pattern” (*shengli* 生理) capable of development from its present state is perfectly compatible with a naturalistic cosmos of “*qi*-transformation” (*qihua* 氣化) like that of Guo in which things are constantly “daily transforming and daily completing” (Wang 1962, p. 55; my translation). Indeed, given such a view of the cosmos, it is unclear how we could even have any real *knowledge* of our inherent nature as any kind of fixed essence. For Guo, “That which the understanding knows is little compared to the multitude of what is present in a body,” and he agrees with the critique of knowledge given in the “Essentials of Cultivating Life” 養生主 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, stating that “knowledge as concerned with names is born from losing what is proper and is extinguished by vanishing into one’s limits” (Guo 1961, pp. 225, 115). Thus, it would seem *impossible* for us to know precisely what our inherent nature and its limits are at any given time, and Guo in any case frequently criticizes action based on assumed “knowledge” such as this. I suggest that he should therefore be understood as proposing that one accept *whatever one’s inherent nature and its limits may happen to be* at any given moment, and that these can never be known precisely as they are dependent on an obscure multitude of changing factors both internal and external.

Secondly, as Kohn has noted, Guo does in fact provide guidance for psychological self-cultivation through a “well-structured reorganization of consciousness,” and in more detail than the original *Zhuangzi* text (Kohn 1992, p. 79). In particular, he provides a much more explicit account of (1) the relation between the different forms of “psychological emptiness” or “unselfconsciousness” identified in the text by modern scholars (e.g., Fraser 2008; Ivanhoe 2011; Barrett 2011), as well as (2) a more in-depth exploration of the paradoxical aspects of the Daoist ideal of actively cultivating a state of non-action to which Edward Slingerland has drawn attention (Slingerland 2003, pp. 210–15; Slingerland 2008, pp. 246–51; Slingerland 2015).

Guo states directly that since “[misfortune] arises from having a [deliberate] mind, so through cultivating the mind one can relieve misfortune,” and explains the *Zhuangzi*’s “being empty and awaiting things” (*xu er dai wu* 虛而待物) as “Leaving behind the eyes and ears, eliminating the intentions of the mind, and according with the self-attainment [*zide* 自得] of *qi* and inherent nature” (Guo 1961, pp. 871, 147; see Kohn 1992, pp. 74–76 for more examples). In statements such as these, he plainly regards the cultivation of a share of the empty “non-mind” (*wuxin* 無心) of the sage that is able to “vanish into things” (*ming wu* 冥物) and thus “respond appropriately to the times” (*ying sui qi shi* 應隨其時) without excessive desires, fixed ideals or stubborn attachments as both possible and beneficial, even if the sage’s perfectly limpid state of “non-dependence” (*wudai* 無待) on the external regardless of his situation remains unattainable (Guo 1961, pp. 3, 20). The “self-attainment of *qi* and inherent nature” is central to Guo’s interpretation here, since it connects the state of emptiness that is the result of psychological cultivation with the “full” development and realization of an individualized inherent nature based on one’s share of *qi*, in which one’s responses to things and events are conditioned by the specific constitution of this inherent nature. As with his interpretation of free and distant wandering mentioned above, the conception of the non-mind he proposes is thus one that is capable of relative degrees or forms of realization based on the inherent nature of each individual and its relation to his or

her unique situational context, rather than a uniform transcendent state that everyone should strive to attain.⁶

According to Fraser's analysis, the *Zhuangzi* text implicitly depicts three general forms of such psychological emptiness: an "instrumental" form focused solely on enabling skillful and efficacious action; a "moderate" form that contributes to individual tranquility and well-being in a "Zhuangist vision of the good life;" and a "radical" form possessed only by the Daoist sage who has "transcended mundane concerns" and vanished (in Guo's sense of the term), becoming one with the *dao* of the cosmos (Fraser 2008, p. 124). Fraser regards the latter form as "detachable" from the first two "for principled reasons available within the context of Zhuangist thought itself" (ibid., p. 125; see Puett 2003 for a similar view), and thus sees the radical ideal of the sage not as implying "an inflexible, absolutist *shilifei* [right/wrong] judgment about the highest form of human life" that would go against the *Zhuangzi*'s skepticism about such judgments, but rather as "just one human project among others" that may be appropriate "for a few unusual individuals" (Fraser 2008, p. 141). Precisely such a move lies behind Guo's extended discussion of the relation between the rare non-dependence of the sage and the "dependence" (*youdai* 有待) of all other people (see Guo 1961, p. 20; Ziporyn 2009, p. 132), in which the latter necessarily retain varying degrees of subjective attachment and desire (*youxin* 有心). For non-sages, cultivating the instrumental and moderate forms of the non-mind serves not to detach them from all specific tasks and human interests, but rather to enable them to more effectively participate in and "vanish into" their personal and social activities by eliminating excessive conscious interference in the "dark [i.e., unconscious] responsiveness" (*xuanying* 玄應) of their inherent natures (Guo 1961, p. 301).

In comparison with Guo however, Fraser's view neglects what Guo sees as the core socio-political function of the sage's perfectly empty non-mind, namely to "accord with the dependent and thereby ensure that they do not lose that upon which they depend" (Guo 1961, p. 20), i.e., to occupy the supreme apex of power and prevent it from becoming occupied by a non-sage who would use it to further his or her own personal ends, imposing his or her subjective intentions and desires on the world rather than impassively "according with" (*shun* 順) and "trusting in" (*ren* 任) its complex multiplicity of events, acting only when required (Guo 1961, p. 295). Rather than a perfected form of "consummate skillful spontaneity" continuous with the instrumental form of psychological emptiness found in absorbed engagement in concrete activities, the distinctive feature of the sage's absolute non-mind is rather precisely the kind of radical transcendence of all individual perspectives and desires that has often been regarded as an implausible and impractical religious ideal (Barrett 2011, p. 690). On Guo's reading, the extreme form of passivity, selflessness and transcendence associated with the radical form of the non-mind in the *Zhuangzi* is thus restricted to the sporadic and fortuitous appearance of sages and their role in voiding the apex of political power, leaving its instrumental and moderate forms as the only ones that might be sought through psychological self-cultivation.

For Guo, the issue with understanding the radical version of the non-mind as a uniform ideal is not only that it is a spiritual plane unattainable for all but the rare and inherently gifted sage, but also that it inevitably comes to be viewed as a puritanical standard against which one can judge the relative moral "success or failure" (*sheng fu* 勝負) of individuals (Guo 1961, p. 1), implying the inferiority of anyone who fails to attain the absolutely empty state of the sage, and thus leading to precisely the kind of competition (*jing* 竟), one-upmanship (*qi* 歧) and falsity (*wei* 偽) in the realm of ethics and virtue

⁶ Steve Coutinho has suggested that such variability is in fact the case for all Daoist concepts based on "*wu* 無" (generally translated in this context as "no-" or "non-"): "[*wu*] has a distinctively Daoist function of *optimal* minimizing. The semantic function of '*wu*' is to optimally minimize the clarity and determinacy of the concept it modifies. This is not unrestricted lessening, but presupposes a specific kind of function: a minimal amount necessary to cooperate symbiotically with our environments" (Coutinho 2014, p. 58). As I discuss below, while this modern reading fits well with Guo Xiang's more relativistic interpretation of Daoist concepts such as *wuxin* (non-mind), it goes against the absolute, transcendent quality frequently viewed as the core of the *Zhuangzi*'s ideal spiritual state (see, e.g., Jiang 2019), which Guo sees as only available to the sage.

cultivation that are an object of criticism in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. It is on this basis that Guo criticizes those who “have a yearning to become a worthy man or sage,” and argues that “worthy men and sages become worthy men and sages by having no yearning [to do so]” (Guo 1961, p. 221), because they simply allow a virtuous potentiality that was already latent in their inherent natures to be realized. Since Guo regards the absolute non-mind of the sage as having an essentially political function, he regards the yearning to elevate one’s spiritual plane as inextricably linked to the yearning for political power, as effectively the desire “to become a god” (as described in Puett 2002), and thus paradoxically as proof that such a person *cannot* in fact be a sage.

Guo’s ideal for psychological cultivation is thus found in the image of water, as in Chapters 8 and 78 of the *Laozi*, since water expresses its inherent nature spontaneously without intention or yearning: “That still water leads to a reflection is not because it makes itself still in seeking to reflect” (Guo 1961, p. 194). Tang Yijie 湯一介 has referred to this paradoxical approach as Guo Xiang’s “negative method” (*fouling de fangfa* 否定的方法), and he traces it back to ideas in the *Laozi*, in particular the central conception of “Doing nothing yet nothing remains undone” (*wuwei er wu bu wei* 無為而無不為) from Chapter 48 (Tang 2009a, pp. 269–72; my translation). According to this method, goal-oriented striving aimed directly at cultivating virtue, whether in the field of psychological self-cultivation or political governance, is essentially self-defeating, since its very existence in a subject already demonstrates that subject’s lack of that which is sought, as in Slingerland’s extensive discussions of the “paradox of *wuwei*” or “trying not to try” (Slingerland 2015). Guo argues that this paradoxical nature is a function of the fact that virtue is irreducibly internal to the subject (i.e., unconscious), while striving necessarily aims at a conscious external goal. In this regard, he views historical images of sages as representing the “outer” (*wai* 外) traces (*ji* 跡) of worldly achievement (*gong* 功) and renown (*ming* 名), while the Spirit Man represents the “inner” (*nei* 內) aspect of virtue (*de* 德) and inherent nature, expressed as the traceless psychological state of “one who has no-mind and accords with things” (Guo 1961, pp. 945, 179).⁷ For Guo, as for many other early Chinese thinkers including Confucius himself (see *Analects* 14.24, 15.21, etc.), the outer should derive from the inner, since seeking it directly inevitably leads to falsity and hypocrisy. Virtue thus cannot be consciously sought as an external object of desire or yearning, but can only be realized through the self-attainment of inherent nature via the “daily diminishing” (*risun* 日損) of excessive desire referred to in Chapter 48 of the *Laozi* (Wang 2011a, p. 132; my translation).

Since Guo does not regard the perfect non-mind of the sage as a universal ideal, such diminishing is for him not aimed at the absolute eradication of desire or deliberate subjective action. However, although he does not regard psychological self-cultivation through this form of subjective diminishing as capable of fundamentally altering or transcending the inherent nature of the individual, he does view it as playing a central role in assisting the individual to realize and develop the potentiality (or virtue) latent in his or her inherent nature through minimizing excessive desire for external goods, including the yearning to become a sage itself.

4. Guo Xiang on Practice and Technique

Thus far, Guo Xiang’s conception of self-cultivation through spontaneous self-attainment still seems to correspond to some degree with the criticism of external “techniques” (*shu* 術) of cultivation found in the *Zhuangzi* itself as discussed by Roth, Kirkland and Møllgaard, in which all forms of technical instructions which aim at the “completion” (*cheng* 成) of specific goals or practices need to be “transcended” in favor of a numinous inner experience of “seeing the unique” (*jian du* 見獨) that would later influence the formation of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in China (Møllgaard 2007, pp. 135–41). In this

⁷ It should be noted here that “outer” for Guo, as for many other early Chinese thinkers, does not simply refer to objectively existing things and affairs in the world, but rather to how such things and affairs become trace-objects imbued with value and esteem within conscious experience, as in the above examples of the achievements and renown of sages. As I argue below, this distinction is crucial in understanding how Guo reconciles the objective historical existence and influence of cultural and technical practices with the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of such “external things” (*waiwu* 外物; Watson 2013, p. 227).

regard, Møllgaard proposes that, rather than giving technical instructions for cultivation as earlier texts such as “Inward Training” had done, “in Zhuangzi the text itself is a spiritual exercise” which functions rhetorically, similar to certain Stoic and Epicurean texts in the Western philosophical tradition (ibid.; see Hadot 1995).⁸ Nonetheless, this remains essentially the same conception of self-cultivation criticized by Kirkland, who associates it with the allegedly “escapist” emphasis on *laissez-faire* spontaneity of the Wei-Jin literati, certain strands of Tang dynasty religious Daoism influenced by Chan Buddhism, and “narcissistic pseudo-Taoists” in the 20th century West (Kirkland 2004, pp. 199–201). As noted above, it is worth considering whether such a view is indeed implied by Guo Xiang’s commentary, and one way to do this is through examining his views on concepts such as ritual (*li* 禮), learning (*xue* 學), practice (*xi* 習), and technical practices in general. As Roth, Kirkland and Møllgaard all note, the original *Zhuangzi* text is generally read as criticizing or even rejecting all of these to various degrees. Guo Xiang, however, interprets such passages differently.

Firstly, although he accepts the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of Confucian ritual propriety and moral values such as benevolence and righteousness (*ren yi* 仁義), he interprets this as primarily referring to those who stubbornly “cling to one model” in the face of a changing world (Guo 1961, p. 519). For Guo, “The classics and rituals of the ancient kings were used to suit their times; if their times have passed but they are not cast aside, they become the devil of the people,” restricting their historical development and becoming merely empty signs of sophistication (Guo 1961, p. 513). Although Guo views benevolence and righteousness as expressions of human nature, he explicitly states that “human nature is changeable” and “different in the past and present,” and hence argues that customs and values should reflect this (Guo 1961, p. 519). When people instead cling to the traces of past sages, then “benevolence and righteousness are inauthentic, and ritual propriety and music depart from inherent nature,” becoming meaningless “forms and façades” (Guo 1961, p. 337). In this respect, Guo’s critique follows the same lines as his criticisms of the desire to become a sage discussed above: benevolence, ritual propriety, etc., were originally spontaneous cultural expressions of ancient people’s inherent natures in their particular historical context, not systems imposed by all-knowing sage-kings, but their historical recording and crystallization in mythical scriptures and classic texts led them to become seen religiously as fixed, formalistic rules and ideals for civilized behavior that must be self-consciously followed, and thereby enabled them to become mere instruments for gaining social prestige.⁹ In this way, Guo is able to affirm both that “ritual was not made for decoration and embellishment,” and also that “the arising of decoration and embellishment is inevitable due to ritual propriety” (Guo 1961, p. 205), i.e., to affirm both that the existence of some form of ritual propriety in society is natural and necessary, as the Confucians argued, and also that this existence inescapably gives rise to an empty excess of falsity and hypocrisy, as Zhuangzi perceived. In this regard, Guo’s view is by no means an unreserved affirmation of Confucian tradition (see note 3 above), but rather acknowledges that the reality of traditions becoming corrupt and alienating over time is a “necessary principle” (*biran zhi li* 必然之理; Guo 1961, p. 205), and thereby accepts both the legitimacy of critique and the necessity of reform.

Secondly, Guo’s attempt to reconcile Daoist spontaneity with Confucian social practices leads him to re-evaluate the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of learning and study. On the one hand, he follows Wang Bi and other earlier Chinese thinkers in arguing that “sagehood cannot be reached through learning” (Tang 2009b, p. 116; my translation) since, as discussed above, it is an intuitive quality based on

⁸ In this respect, Møllgaard’s view of the *Zhuangzi* text as spiritual exercise follows that of Robert E. Allinson, who somewhat speculatively connects it to Guo Xiang’s arrangement of the text (Allinson 1989, p. 128), and indeed Guo himself in the concluding section of his preface explicitly acknowledges the effect the text was capable of producing on even “avaricious men and ambitious scholars” (Guo 1961, p. 3). My concern in what follows, however, is primarily with Guo’s attitude toward the “merely technical” aspects of cultivation that Møllgaard regards the “rhetorical dimension” of the *Zhuangzi* as having “surpassed” (Møllgaard 2007, p. 136).

⁹ Guo’s view here continues the thread of debates concerning the separation between “names” (*ming* 名) and “actualities” (*shi* 實) in the Eastern Han dynasty (see Makeham 1994).

the spontaneous responses of virtuous inherent nature and thus has “no constant traces” (Guo 1961, p. 519). On this basis, Guo in his commentary quotes and endorses Confucius’ lament that “the ancients learned for themselves, while people today learn for others” (Guo 1961, p. 204; see *Analects* 14.24), explaining this as referring to imitating the esteemed traces of idealized figures from the past such as sages, leading to an alienating situation in which “the more is attained through learning, the more inherent nature is lost” (Guo 1961, p. 88). However, as with his view of ritual and morality, this also implies the possibility of a non-alienated form of learning that is not aimed at achieving some external value-ideal but rather at realizing the potential of one’s inherent nature, learning that corresponds to “teaching people through self-attainment” (*shi ren yi zide* 人以自得; Guo 1961, p. 204). The purpose of such teaching is not simply to produce students who can imitate idealized figures from the past or internalize and transmit traditional systems of ritual propriety, but to lead students to be able to realize the unique potential of their own inherent natures and adapt existing knowledge and traditions to the present for themselves, much as the skilled craftspeople depicted in the *Zhuangzi* such as Cook Ding are able to follow and respond to the particular “natural patterns” (*tianli* 天理) and tendencies of their material in their work (Guo 1961, p. 119). On this basis, Guo claims that although “inherent nature can be completed through learning,” this is dependent on “having the [requisite] quality internally,” namely “a ruling host in the center” (*zhu yu zhong* 主於中), similar to the *hegemonikon* of the Stoics, where the *dao* of the sages, i.e., the empty non-mind, can be “stored” to a greater or lesser degree (Guo 1961, p. 518). Hence, although he accepts that almost all people lack the innate capacity of the great sages and opposes striving to become one, he nonetheless sees a key role for learning in the realization of individual inherent nature, one based on the common human capacity to realize to varying degrees the non-mind of the sage.

Guo’s view of practice follows along the same lines as his views of ritual and learning. According to Guo, “In the principle of natural spontaneity, there are things which are completed by accumulated practice,” and thus “although things have inherent natures, they also require repeated practice before they become capable” (Guo 1961, pp. 257, 642). Practice is thus not restricted to the artificial technical practices of humanity, but is rather something that is found to differing degrees throughout the natural world. Although Guo does not give examples, and those in the *Zhuangzi* itself are focused on the human world, it is clearly not difficult to supply them: birds practicing to fly, predators learning to hunt, etc. While the centrality of practice in the “skill stories” or “knack stories” of the original *Zhuangzi* text and their connection to modern psychological concepts such as “flow” has now been widely acknowledged (see, e.g., Barrett 2011), Guo’s discussion of practice, like that of sagehood and learning, focuses especially on its possible social side-effects. For Guo, such practice is “simply the completion of inherent nature” rather than a deliberate modification of it according to a particular goal or ideal, and the risk in focusing on “the achievements of study and practice” in this instrumental way is that people easily “forget the spontaneity of their wellspring-nature,” becoming “conceited” (*jin* 矜) and “narcissistic” (*zi mei* 自美), taking what comes from the spontaneity of inherent nature to be “their own achievement” (*ji gong* 己功) or “possession” (*you* 有) (ibid., pp. 1043–45). In this way, as with the concepts discussed above, he is able to accept the *Zhuangzi*’s critical attitude towards the potentially negative psychological side effects of purely instrumental practice, while allowing that such practice is in itself both useful and necessary.

Finally, a similar attitude is clearly visible in Guo’s interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of human technical interference with nature, for example in “Horses’ Hooves” 馬蹄, one of what A.C. Graham referred to as the “Primitivist” chapters (Graham 2001) that follow *Laozi* Chapter 57 in rejecting technique and skill as corrupting the spontaneous order of nature and society. The original text vehemently criticizes those who think they are “good at handling horses,” accusing them of in fact going against the inherent nature of horses by manipulating them for human purposes with bridles, saddles, stirrups and other technical equipment, instead of allowing them to follow their “true nature” (*zhen xing* 真性) by “munching grass, drinking from streams, and lifting up their feet and galloping” (Watson 2013, p. 65). Since “handling horses” (*zhi ma* 治馬) here is explicitly used as a metaphor

for “governing the world” (*zhi tianxia* 治天下), this is perhaps the *locus classicus* for the *laissez-faire* interpretation of Daoism criticized by the scholars above as the alleged view of Wei-Jin literati and their 20th century followers. In his commentary, however, Guo explicitly rejects such a view, stating that “The true nature of horses is not such that they reject saddles and hate to be ridden, but only that they have no admiration for honor and decoration,” and hence that it is only damaging horses by “seeking to use them beyond their ability” which should be criticized, not the use of technical equipment and training itself (Guo 1961, pp. 330–33). Guo’s interpretation here evidently departs from the ostensible meaning of the original text, and indeed it has been criticized by contemporary scholars such as Li Zehou 李澤厚 and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 for completely erasing the “critical spirit” of the *Zhuangzi* itself (Li 2008, p. 207; Wang 2015, p. 398), since it also implies the legitimacy of at least a degree of government intervention in society. For Guo, it is not such technical and governmental practices themselves that are the issue, but rather the way in which these are wielded excessively in order to realize arbitrary ideals and personal desires.

The same approach to technology can be seen in Guo’s reinterpretation of the *Zhuangzi*’s well-known story of the farmer who rejects Zigong’s 自貢 offer of a machine for irrigating his fields (Watson 2013, pp. 90–93), which for Møllgaard “contains the main points of the critique of technical action that we find in the *Zhuangzi*” (Møllgaard 2007, pp. 30–32). For Guo, however, the point of the story is precisely *not* to reject technical action in favour of clinging to an ideal of primitive “natural” spontaneity as the farmer does, but is rather to be found in Confucius’ comments to Zigong after the encounter, in which he criticizes the farmer as “one of those false cultivators of the arts of Mr. Chaos” (Watson 2013, p. 92). According to Guo’s interpretation, the “true Chaos” (*zhen hundun* 真渾沌) is not the primitive spontaneity of a pristine nature opposed to human interference and technical invention, but rather a singular virtual plane (i.e., the *dao* and the non-mind of the sage that embodies it) that “undulates together with the world without losing itself, and thus, despite wandering amid the customs of the world, disappears without a trace” (Guo 1961, p. 438). The form of “Chaos” envisioned here clearly rejects any opposition between natural spontaneity and technical artifice, and instead sees them as united together on a single plane of nature that encompasses artifice, maintaining spontaneity amidst a constantly changing world of technological and institutional innovations. In recent years, Barry Allen has offered a reading of the Zigong story in the *Zhuangzi* along similar lines to Guo’s commentary here, from which he attempts to derive a positive “Daoist” approach to technical practices and engineering (see Allen 2015, pp. 108–20). However, as Guo’s reinterpretation of the above *Zhuangzi* passages demonstrates, the extent to which certain core Daoist texts such as the *Laozi* and the Primitivist chapters of the *Zhuangzi* reject almost any technical practices as essentially corrupting (see Sarkissian 2010) should not be downplayed.

In summary, through his reinterpretations of the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang proposes what Ziporyn has called a “unity of activity and non-activity” (Ziporyn 2003) in which human practice and technique, provided they do not destructively exceed the limits of the inherent nature of their objects through unrealistic desire or excessive demand, can be regarded as equally spontaneous and natural. It is this approach that enables Guo’s thought to avoid the criticism offered by Roth and Kirkland that the alleged focus on spontaneity in Wei-Jin Dark Learning simply becomes a mystical or *laissez-faire* rejection of all concrete cultivation techniques based on the principle that “technique negates the Way” (Møllgaard 2007, p. 30ff). It also provides a response to Komjathy’s distinction between quietistic and alchemical models of cultivation, in that, although Guo is critical of the desire to extend one’s life beyond its natural limits or fundamentally change one’s inherent nature to match some idealized image of a sage or immortal (*xian* 仙) through cultivation techniques, he also rejects any view that regards accomplishing or realizing one’s inherent nature as a passive process of spontaneous inaction aimed at naïvely returning to some pristine natural state prior to human interference, and instead affirms the indispensable role of “artificial” technical practices in “natural” human and social development. In this sense, Guo’s view of cultivation challenges the models described above, particularly the dismissal

of Wei-Jin Dark Learning as a purely ‘mystical’ tradition that rejected practical affairs of individual cultivation and political participation.

5. Conclusions

From the above analysis, it should be clear that, despite his foregrounding of the concept of *ziran* (self-so, natural, spontaneous) in his *Zhuangzi* commentary, Guo Xiang’s thought is not vulnerable to many of the criticisms of Wei-Jin “spontaneity” that regard it as implying a rejection of psychological, technical, and social practices, including those involved in self-cultivation. While in his attempt to give such practices their proper place in a naturalistic cosmos, Guo’s thought was part of the wider debate over the relation between Daoist naturalism and Confucian social values in the Wei-Jin period, both this debate itself and Guo’s attempted synthesis to some degree retread well-known discussions found in earlier pre-Qin and Qin-Han thought. As Slingerland has emphasized, the “problem of getting large numbers of people to live together in groups,” i.e., the problem of how natural human relations can be extended into large-scale, artificial social structures while avoiding problems such as insincerity, is a central concern in many Warring States texts (Slingerland 2008, pp. 238–39). On this view, a key opposition found in these texts is that between an “internalist” approach to self-cultivation that emphasizes simply allowing one’s natural “virtuous potential to realize itself,” as in the *Zhuangzi*, the *Laozi*, and the *Mencius* 孟子, and an “externalist” approach that stresses the necessity of “a long and intensive regime of training in traditional, external forms,” as in the *Xunzi* 荀子 and (arguably) the *Analects* (Slingerland 2003, p. 265). Indeed, it is based on just such an opposition that religious Daoism has been seen as differing from the internalist emphasis of “Lao-Zhuang” Daoism (and, by implication, Wei-Jin Dark Learning) in its prescription of specific “external” regimens of training and cultivation aimed at transcending or expanding the limits of inherent nature.

As the Eastern Jin dynasty author Wang Tanzhi’s 王坦之 quotation of Xunzi’s criticism of Zhuangzi as “blinded by the natural and ignorant of the human” in the opening sentences of his *On Discarding Zhuangzi* 廢莊論 (see Yan 1999, p. 284; my translation) demonstrates, the opposition between Xunzi’s practice-affirming externalism and Zhuangzi’s allegedly passive internalism was a central issue in Wei-Jin thought, as was the possibility of transcendence of bodily limitations through technical cultivation practices discussed above. For Guo Xiang as for Xiang Xiu before him, refuting such criticisms was one of the central goals of his commentary on the *Zhuangzi*. While Guo accepts the *Zhuangzi*’s internalist view of realizing the virtuous potential of inherent nature rather than modifying it according to fixed external moral standards, he rejects the conclusion that such realization implies abandoning external cultivation practices altogether. Instead, he argues that the *Zhuangzi*’s internalist view merely points to *limitations* on external practices, i.e., that they should be flexible and tailored to the specific inherent natures of different individuals in their historical contexts, rather than applied indiscriminately as a universal and eternally valid system inherited from ancient sages or as purely instrumental processes aimed at achieving certain arbitrarily determined ideals. One key move in Guo’s argument is thus the assumption that the transcendence of the sage is not something available to or even desirable for the vast majority of people, but rather a quality dependent on a particular and rare inherent nature, and thus that self-cultivation in general should not be aimed at attaining such a uniform ideal state. As discussed above, this view is one that his commentary shares with the modern *Zhuangzi* studies that focus on the role of skillful spontaneity and psychological flow rather than absolute spiritual transcendence, and which also stress the importance of technical practice.

However, while such studies largely focus on the individual attainment of skillful spontaneity and flow, Guo’s concern is largely with the psychological and social *motivations* behind such practices, and in particular how these are often connected to excessive desires, i.e., ones that go beyond one’s “share.” For Guo, whether one desires the Daoist immortal’s transcendence of bodily limitations, the Confucian sage-king’s perfect moral intuition and elevated social status, or the consummately skillful flow of Cook Ding in carving an ox, such desires aimed at external ideals inevitably deviate from the potential of one’s own inherent nature, and involve people in competitive judgments of relative success or failure.

If considered separately from such desires, however, “artificial” human practices aimed at health and longevity, regulating social participation, and efficient instrumental action can all be seen as relatively unproblematic and “natural.” Guo’s conception of “share” (*fen*) discussed above thus also implies a recognition that, as opposed to the absolute contentment of the sage, the finite desires and satisfactions of individuals are legitimate provided they are not taken to excess, a view explicitly criticized by the Buddhist *Zhuangzi* scholar Zhi Dun as missing the spiritual meaning of the text’s concept of “free and distant wandering.” In this respect, although Guo like the internalist Mencius regards inherent nature as the ultimate source for ethical values such as benevolence and righteousness, his conception of inherent nature is broader and more naturalistic than that of Mencius (see, e.g., *Mencius* 7B.70), and, like the Guodian 郭店 Warring States period texts discussed by Slingerland, can be seen as attempting to combine the internalist perspective with a naturalistic desire-focused externalism like that of Xunzi (see Slingerland 2008, pp. 251–54).

As well as its connection to Warring States debates over internal and external approaches to cultivation, as Wang Xiaoyi 王曉毅 has noted, Guo Xiang’s deliberate “misreading” (*wudu* 誤讀) of the *Zhuangzi*’s view of technical practices is also clearly indebted to the recognition of “the irresistibility of developments in material technology and society” found in Qin-Han period texts often associated with “Huang-Lao Daoism” such as the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 and the *Huainanzi* (Wang 2011b, pp. 269–73; my translation), which reject any attempt to return to a primitive agricultural utopia and affirm the role of evolving technical practices as an essential part of the natural world. As with the *Huainanzi* (see Meyer 2014), Guo in his *Zhuangzi* commentary views the “branches” (*mo* 末) of concrete technical, ritual and institutional practices as ultimately based on the “root” (*ben* 本) of the spontaneity of inherent nature, which must accompany the former if they are not to lose their way and become purely detached, instrumental tools of excessive desires (Guo 1961, p. 339). However, Guo also acknowledges that the “traces of order” (i.e., the “branches” of concrete practices as described in historical records) left behind by the sages are precisely “that which produces disorder” by giving rise to ideals that later inevitably come to be emulated, and hence that the repeated forgetting and rediscovery of spontaneity is an unavoidable phenomenon in history, and thus is just as “natural” as other “mutually implied” (*hu you* 互有) phenomena in the world (ibid., pp. 389, 226, 583). Thus, although the appearance of sages themselves is originally spontaneous, and Guo affirms that the practices they leave behind are able to exert an ongoing historical influence on society via social and cultural practices of learning and cultivation, as in earlier texts, this does not lead him to exempt either the sages or their practices from criticism, since both also contain the seeds of future alienation.

For Guo, then, nature itself always already includes artifice, as in his clear statement that there is no “pure and pristine” (*chunbai* 純白) world of nature or *dao* in opposition to the “human world” (*shi* 世) of cultural and technical practices (Guo 1961, p. 437). However, he is acutely aware of the tensions involved in such phenomena, acknowledging the necessity of the cultural practices and techniques through which humanity develops, while also noting the historical limitations of specific practices and affirming the necessity of their ongoing transcendence through the intuitive non-mind of the sage. In this sense, Guo’s attempt to provide a naturalistic interpretation of self-cultivation in the *Zhuangzi* should be viewed as situating cultivation practices as part of a complex nature-historical process which swings back and forth like a pendulum, pushing forward and retreating in waves, in which both practical and mystical aspects have roles to play.

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