Embodying the Nameless and Formless Dao:  
Pedagogical Lessons on Affective Education from the Wang Bi
Dao de Jing

ABSTRACT: According to the Chinese commentator Wang Bi (220-246), the Dao de Jing’s speculations of the Nameless and Formless Dao are in fact metaphors for political strategies for cultivating and nurturing an authentically moral political community. These political strategies prescribe what not to do and what to do when trying to nurture authentic moral growth in others, and are built on many insights concerning the unintended side effects of the political ruler’s public verbal and performative disclosures of his moral judgments. I argue that many of these insights and strategies can be imported into and developed for the classroom context and are useful pedagogies for the educator interested in effectively nurturing moral development in his or her pupils.

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Introduction

Recent research on works by the medieval Chinese commentator Wang Bi (220-246) has uncovered several interesting features of his interpretation of the Dao De Jing or Laozi text. As I have argued elsewhere, the way to understand Wang’s interpretation of the Laozi is to understand that the Laozi text works like a code.

Those have glanced through the pages of the Laozi will be familiar with the constant and at the same time curious reference to the “Dao”, that ontological source of the ten thousand things, 万物 (wan wu). Wan wu, the ten thousand myriad things, can loosely be interpreted as the world we empirically experience: the world that we can see, touch, feel, smell and taste. Behind this experienced world is its cause: the Dao.

Although the metaphysical doctrine of the Dao as the source of the ten thousand things features prominently in the text, for the Wang Bi this is not the central theme. The text, he thinks, is at its heart a text on politics. The metaphysical pronouncements are in fact merely codes for another “hidden” text on political strategies for promoting, amongst other things, the authentically moral society. Because the Laozi uses words and phrases that can have equivocal meanings, it is able to capture two different “texts” with these very same phrases and words. Like a gestalt image, there is on the one hand the obvious text concerned with articulating the metaphysical Dao as the source of the myriad things and its ontically nameless and formless nature, and there is the other political text warning of the ill effects of distributing “names” 名 (ming) to lure good behavior and of trying to overtly form 形 (xing) and shape people morally. Let me surface (some of) the latter, before examining their relevance for classroom pedagogy.

1 An extended defense of this interpretation is found in my “Nameless and Formless Dao as Metaphor and Imagery” Journal of Chinese Philosophy (JOCP), Sept 2005 (forthcoming)

2 As I have explained in my forthcoming paper in JOCP, these two are not derivatively related. One does not derive the Daoist political precepts from the metaphysical doctrine of the Dao.
Getting to the hidden text

With something of a kind of naïve ontological argument for the existence of a transcendent being, the Dao de Jing argues that some kind of first being must exist: because there are the ten thousand entities or myriad things, something must have caused them, and this is the Dao. Further, this Dao is formless (wuxing) because it has no phenomenal shape or form, and cannot be sensed, heard, touched or tasted. Given Wang’s correlative semiotic, to the extent that the Dao has no form, it cannot be given a name, and so is nameless (wuming):

[Laozi:] When we look for it but we see it not, we call it the invisible. When we listen for it but hear it not, we call it the inaudible. When we try to touch it but find it not, we call it the imperceptible. Because these three aspects of it are impossible to probe, it remains a single amorphous unity.

[Wang Bi:] It is shapeless, leaving no image, and soundless, leaving no reverberation and reaches absolutely everywhere. We cannot get to know it and even less know how to give it a name derived from how it looks, sounds or feels. Thus, because it is impossible to probe, it remains a single, amorphous unity.

[Laozi:] Its risings cast no light, and its settings occasion no dark. On and on it goes, unnamable, always reverting to nothingness. This we refer to as the shape of that which has no shape, the image of that which has no physical existence. [Wang Bi:] You might wish to say it does not exist, but everything achieves existence because of it, and then you might wish to say that it does exist, but we do not see its form. This is why the text refers to it as “the shape of that which has no shape, the image of that which has no physical existence”.

Moreover, the Dao helps the myriad things arrive at their own flourishing. But when it does, the Dao does not orchestrate the ten thousand things with any intervention. Precisely by not artificially orchestrating their dynamisms, the Dao avoids hindering the natural dynamisms that inevitably lead to the flourishing and ordering of the ten thousand thing. Thus, the famous “straw-dogs passage”:

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[Laozi:] Heaven and Earth are not benevolent and treat the myriad things as straw dogs.

[Wang Bi:] Heaven and Earth [modeling after the Dao,] allow things to follow their natural bent and neither engage in conscious effort nor start anything, leaving the myriad things to manage themselves. Thus they are “not benevolent.” ...Heaven and earth do not make grass grow for the sake of beasts, yet beasts eat grass. They do not produce dogs for the sake of men, yet men eat dogs. Heaven and earth take no conscious effort with respect to the myriad things, yet because each of the myriad things has what is appropriate for its use, not one thing is denied support.4

Now, the talk about the “Namelessness” and the “Formlessness” has another reference. And this is the Daoist sage-ruler: because the sage avoids interventionist politics, he avoids deliberately forming or shaping his subjects, and hence is “non-shaping/forming” or “formless”:

[Wang Bi:] He [the Sage] follows the natural bent of the people, neither formulating nor implementing...Instead, he should follow the nature of the people and not try to carve them into shapes according to forms external to them5

One way that an unenlightened ruler may try “shape“ the peoples is to do so through punitive rules (also xing 刑) or the law. Therefore the Daoist sage ruler who practices non-shaping, wuxing and so avoids “shaping” his subject is as an anti-legalist. He does not seek to “cut things“ into the desirable shapes or forms through promulgating a plenitude of laws. In this sense he is “formless”, or “non-shaping”. The rationale for this policy is that in the end he would only obtain superficial compliance that is motivated externally through the threat of punishment, or else he would only breed a nation of crafty subjects constantly conniving clever ways to get around the law.

However, this “shaping” does not refer merely to the shaping that occurs through the enforcements of punitive legal rules. It also happens when there are disclosures of the ruler’s moral judgments. Because such disclosures encourage morally inauthentic compliance, Wang Bi’s Laozi argues that the ruler needs to practice moral non-

4 ibid., 60
5 ibid., 100
disclosure, “invisibility” or “formlessness”, \textit{wuxing}, (and so be also non-shaping, again, \textit{wuxing}.)\footnote{notice the several layers of “wuxing” metaphorically piled up one on top of another: \textit{wuxing} in the sense of non-shaping, non-punishment, or invisibility or having no phenomenal shape.} To distinguish this sense of \textit{wuxing} from the earlier sense of anti-legalist \textit{wuxing}, let us call this the “non-disclosure \textit{wuxing}”. We will examine the rationale for recommending non-disclosure \textit{wuxing} in greater detail.

Again, the ruler avoids explicitly intervening to encourage moral conformity by distributing honors, promotions and prestige, i.e., he avoids establishing “names” (\textit{ming}: honors, prestige). Thus he is nameless. By being formless and nameless, i.e., by not trying to enforce morality or desired social norms, he avoids promoting the kind of competitive wrangling that is morally insincere and aimed merely at seeking the goods of honors and avoiding punitive consequences. He avoids breeding a nation of people who are simply pretentious do-gooders but who are doing good for the wrong (or at least, less than ideal) non-moral reasons (e.g., for obtaining material advantage, reputation and esteem, etc). In this way, he is the responsible for (creating the conditions for) the (moral) order in the world (that would arise of itself, \textit{ziran} 自然). Wang’s commentary on Section 38 of the \textit{Laozi} delivers these ideas clearly:

\begin{quote}
It is because one functions not by using forms and rules and by not using names that it becomes possible for benevolence and righteousness, propriety and etiquette to manifest and display themselves. If one upholds the people with the great Dao and presses on them with the nameless, they will have nothing to exalt their hearts and their hearts/minds will have nothing to scheme for. As each person tends to his own proper affairs and acts out of his own sense of sincerity, the virtue of benevolence deepens, the practice of righteousness rectifies itself, and propriety and etiquette become pure accordingly.\footnote{ibid., 123}
\end{quote}

To sum: the textual signs, “formlessness” (\textit{wuxing}) and “namelessness” (\textit{wuming}) capture very different sets of referents. They refer to the Dao’s metaphysical structure. And, they also refer to Sage-ruler’s political strategies. The Sage Ruler’s political strategy of namelessness and formlessness is of course, for Wang Bi, the recommended strategy for promoting the moral society.
**Political Strategies as Lessons for Pedagogy: Wuxing and Wuming**

We have seen briefly how the seemingly metaphysical discourse on the Nameless and Formless as the source of all things includes a reference to a second text, which is the political strategy of non-doing/non-intervention (wuwei 无为). The non-interventionist wuwei political strategy is specified as wuming and wuxing. Wang does not have merely one reason for endorsing and explaining the reasonableness of this strategy. Let us detail some of the rationale for recommending this political strategy, and examine how they may be relevant for classroom pedagogy. I will focus on non-disclosure wuxing in the rest of this paper.

Part of the complication is that the common folk are eager to pursue and conform to the Sage-Ruler’s ideals. This is a fundamental assumption in Wang’s Laozi. The Ruler is the Chinese monarch, and all eyes are on him to win his favour. His public proclamations of his likes and dislikes, which come through in his differentiations of what is good and bad lead people to comply to these standards of behavior for non-moral reasons, and thus authentic morality is not encouraged.

Since the Sage knows that as a Ruler, his proclamations of good and bad have the effect of influencing the common folk to conform to these ideals for non-moral or insincere reasons, he avoids these proclamations. Effectively it means that he avoids making normative differentiations. That is, he avoids spelling out to the public what he means by “good” or “bad”. For: a normative differentiation attempts to delineate specifically what “goodness” or “badness” refers to. This does not mean that he is normatively neutral. What it does mean is that he avoids making known his judgments of what is “good” and “bad”, so that the common folk cannot know them.

This wuxing strategy of hiding one’s normative judgments recommended in the context of the assumption that the common folk look to please and conform to the Ruler’s ideals makes Wang’s Laozi immediately relevant for classroom pedagogy because the classroom exemplifies this situation. There is no question about this. When the teacher steps into the room, he is greeted by the students, and all eyes are on him. They await his orders and instructions. Either because they see him as role model or because they are eager to get the “right answers”, they are interested in what he has to say and what his judgments are. My own experience corroborates this. After a philosophical ethics class where I carefully thread the line between

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8 ibid. 159, 183
offering arguments for and against God’s existence (in relation to ethics), a student asked me candidly if I believed God existed. I explained that there are good arguments from both sides although more work still needs to be done—I thought she was asking for my professional opinion on the state of the debate. But she corrected me, pointing out that she was interested in my “personal belief”. Rather obviously I was pleased by the fact that my own belief had not emerged as evident because then I could infer that I had facilitated a truly open-minded discussion. But what transpired was also that the student was still ultimately more interested in the teacher’s own position on the matter. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of closing her mind with my confession.

We have to note it is not just what we say that could adversely affect the affective formation of students. As the Wang Bi Laozi warns, one need not restrict “making known” to the verbal, because the performative also reveals. So by extension, the Daoist Sage-Ruler avoids actions which make known what he thinks are morally praiseworthy qualities, such as “benevolence”, “righteousness” and “propriety”. Such actions include establishing institutions or enacting policies which exemplify or promote these qualities, or these “forms”. For: it becomes quickly apparent to the watching common folk that such “forms” are what the Ruler thinks are good or worthy qualities, which he himself embodies and thus esteems, and wishes to inculcate in others.

It is important to note also that what he wishes the common folk to not know are his judgments of morality, of good and bad. This is not the same as saying that he does not wish them to know what is morally right or wrong; quite the contrary. The purpose of leaving his judgments on these notions muddled (not in himself but) amongst the common folk is that it discourages conformity to these qualities or replicating these moral acts for ulterior, non-moral motives rather than for their own sakes. Hence paradoxically, by not making known his judgment on what are moral virtues, authentic morality flourishes. In this way, those who would be called or named “moral” are now truly moral, as their names suggest. Thus,

“When the Dao is rejected as the means to uphold [the people] and discarded as the means to sustain their lives, use is then made of the concrete forms it takes and application of what the intelligence perceives of it. If [it takes the form of] benevolence, one shows it esteem. If [one takes the form of] righteousness, one wrangles about it. If [one takes the form of] propriety, one makes it an object
of dispute. Therefore the deepening of the virtue of benevolence is impossible for one who uses [the form of] benevolence; the rectification of the practice of righteousness is not achieved by one who uses [the form of] righteousness; and the purification of propriety and etiquette is not attained by one who uses [the form of] propriety.

It is when one upholds them with [the people] with the Dao and unites them and controls them with the mother that benevolence may be manifest but there is no esteem of it, and righteousness and propriety may be displayed but there is no wrangling over them. It is by making use of the nameless that names become honest and by making use of the formless that forms become perfect. If one preserves the child by holding fast to the mother and makes the branch tips flourish by enhancing the roots, forms and names will all exist, but anomalies will not occur.”

In other words, through not revealing verbally and performatively one’s normative judgments, the common folk paradoxically become authentically moral of themselves: their moral forms will truly exist, and only then can we confidently and without falsity accord them the various moral names.

This is good pedagogical advice. Matthew Lipman was alert to this similar state of affairs in the teacher-student relationship, and warns of influencing the student’s thinking through the teacher’s gestures:

“No course in philosophical thinking can more effectively prepare the child to combat indoctrination than philosophy...[However, n]o course in philosophical thinking, whether for children or adults, can succeed if used as a means for implanting the teacher’s values in the vulnerable minds of the children in the classroom. No matter that the teacher is confident his values are the “correct” ones; if this is what he is doing, it is the destruction of philosophy...All teachers reveal their values in what they say and do, if only through inflections of voice, gestures or facial expressions, the way they conduct a class or give a test. Teachers of philosophical thinking must therefore beware at all times of wittingly or unwittingly encouraging children to adopt their own personal set of values uncritically. Not can they escape the fact that children not

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9 ibid., 123
unreasonably look up to those whose experience of the world is broader or deeper than their own. The teacher’s attitudes, whatever they be, are bound to carry considerable weight with youngsters who are unsure of the significance of their own experience.”

But avoiding these performative disclosures can have tricky consequences, and the way to do this needs to be tailored to the kinds of students we have. When I started out I had the idea of keeping a straight face all the time. So I avoided nodding my head when the student is talking, so as not to leave the impression that I endorsed that certain point of view. However, I discovered quickly that this does not always work, because shy Asian students generally need some form of encouragement to break out of their silence and to risk saying things for which they might be criticized. So what I do now is that I will simply nod at every student’s attempt at articulation. In this way they will be encouraged to speak, but at the same time will infer that I have no special preference for any side of the issue. This way of resolving the dilemma works, and I very much encourage it. I think this kind of charitable approval on the part of the teacher creates a “safety net”, to borrow a phrase by Laurens Splitter. Even if the point is not very insightful, the teacher’s non-preferential approval gives the signal that there will be no painfully stinging criticism. This gives the child the courage to think far and venture deeply without the stunting worry that there will be hurting repercussions when he or she goes wrong. I have seen for myself that the students gradually acquire self-confidence because I have done this. I have no quantitative statistics to back up my claim. My evidence is that of an anthropologist: I have seen after some time students making and sustaining eye contact with their fellow-student interlocutor throughout the discussion and not avert to me for approval. Having been a philosophy student myself, I know that that is a sign that the student has developed a healthy disregard for what the teacher’s own opinion is.

As was pointed out, the *wuwei* strategy breaks down into *wuxing* and also *wuming*. This paper has so far concentrated on the former, and tried to sieve out some lessons for classroom pedagogy. Before I end, allow me to point out some questions worth exploring regarding the latter *wuwei* policy for classroom caring thinking pedagogy, *wuming*.

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In the Laozi, the policy of wuming is basically the idea that the sage should not use ming (名) or rewards of titles, associated with prestige and material rewards to entice his subjects to behave morally, or else he will only reap insincere and ill motivated conformity, and hence will ironically fail to cultivate and nurture authentic morality in the subjects. Not only that, seeing that names are put as the final reward, the subjects may be educated into thinking that the ruler believes material benefits are the final end or goods, and thereafter adopt material ends as his own goal. It think this latter is equally, if not more important than the former. It is not just about systematically conditioning another persons’ psychological responses; it is also that we lead others on to believe that material ends are the ultimate values.

If we think materialism is not ideal, then similarly in the classroom, we do not want to leave students thinking that we think material rewards are all that matter. Does this mean that I should never reward my diligent or exceptional students with chocolates or sweets when they do well, or never praise my students in front of her classmates? Perhaps, though it is perhaps also too harsh. The point that one should not encourage students to be motivated by material rewards, nor for them to think that material rewards are what is most valuable. Instead, the hope is that students will acquire some form of intrinsic motivation, such as a love of the subject (and nothing beyond that). Here the teacher who is trying to encourage a student to behave well (in the full sense of the word, meaning with good motivates) ends up with a student who in fact behaves badly because of the poor motives. How then shall we spur the student on, without seducing and perverting her motivations with materialism, nor leaving her on into thinking that material rewards are the worthy trophies of life? Still, perhaps the way out of this is not that difficult: if we rewarded them with tools, e.g., stationery, which by their very nature are ontologically for the performance of intellectual or scientific acts, then the message that the ultimate goals in life are the practice of these intellectual or scientific virtues is retained. Alternatively, when we give rewards that seem to terminate in the sensitive appetite, we could perhaps ask that the student share this with her friends or group members: in this case the terminal reward is not the stimulation of the taste-bud, but the opportunity and experience of communal exchange, or of sharing.¹¹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to sieve out from Wang’s reading of the Laozi some pedagogical strategies that may be useful in the classroom for promoting ethical development in the student. These strategies are captured by the Daoist slogans of *wuxing* and *wuming*. Exploiting the metaphorical nature of the Laozi text, Wang playfully explained that the Sage ruler who practiced *wuming* and *wuxing* embodied the Dao, which is also *wuming* and *wuxing*. Perhaps when the teacher practices *wuming* and *wuxing*, he too is “one body” with the *Dao* (于道同体).