

Article

Zhāng Zhàn's Thought on Xūjìng in the Commentary of Lièzǐ

Zhang Na & Mohd Syahmir Alias*

Philosophy & Civilization Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: syahmir@usm.my

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Abstract: Zhāng Zhàn lived during the Eastern Jin period. *Commentary on Lièzǐ* is Zhāng Zhàn's attempt to integrate and synthesize the previous achievements in metaphysical studies, merging Confucianism and Daoism while drawing from Buddhist viewpoints. This work represents a theoretical summary of metaphysical themes. This article aims to explore Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *xūjìng* (emptiness and tranquility), examining its manifestations in cosmology, ontology, and the philosophy of life. This study adopts a qualitative research approach utilizing NVivo qualitative data analysis software, electronic databases, and a thorough analysis of the textual references to *xūjìng* in the *Commentary on Lièzǐ*. Three points were discovered: firstly, Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *tàixū* (supreme emptiness) in cosmology; secondly, his doctrine manifests in ontology as *zhìxū* (ultimate emptiness); thirdly, his doctrine manifests in the philosophy of life as *xūjìng zìrán* (emptiness, tranquility, and naturalness). He asserts that people should not violate the laws of nature and should spiritually transcend the mindset of dealing with everything in the real world. According to Zhāng Zhàn, only by doing so can individuals align with the Dào, surpass the mundane, and attain the state of carefree detachment. This study provides a deeper significance of Zhāng Zhàn's concept of emptiness and tranquility from the perspectives of ontology, cosmology, and philosophy of life. According to Zhāng Zhàn, emptiness is infinite, and only by embodying non-being and making emptiness the essence can one harmonize with the Dào, achieve liberation, and attain a spiritual state of unity with the universe.

Keywords: Zhāng Zhàn; *xūjìng*; *Commentary on Lièzǐ*; Chinese philosophy; Neo-Daoism

Introduction

During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, society faced two major issues, i.e., internal unrest and external threats.

- i. On one hand, the social order in Eastern Jin was more turbulent compared to the Western Jin period, and people's livelihoods became increasingly difficult, leading to restlessness and anxiety.
- ii. On the other hand, the continuous invasions from northern tribes such as the Xiōngnu and Xiānbēi added to the internal and external challenges, causing a sense of fear and insecurity among the people.

In this era of societal and intellectual integration, with an unprecedented awakening of individual consciousness, there was a higher demand for the development of metaphysical studies from society. It was within this context that Zhāng Zhàn's *xūjìng* (emptiness and tranquility) idea emerged on the stage of metaphysical discourse. Within the context of the prevailing Wei-Jin metaphysical trend, *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, could not avoid the issue of "yǒu (being) and wú (non-being)." Its fundamental stance is rooted in the primacy of non-existence, but it is deeply influenced by Guō Xiàng's *Commentary on Zhuāngzǐ* and attempts to transform the concept of preciousness and non-existence through the Theory of Individualization. When

unavoidable contradictions arise between the two, it turns to incorporate the category of “emptiness” from Buddhist teachings to transform the concept of “non-being,” thereby proposing a new ontological category known as *zhì xū* (ultimate emptiness). The article is divided into three parts: the first part mainly elaborates on the concept of *xūjìng* and the historical background of Zhāng Zhàn’s development of the *xūjìng* idea, while the second part mainly analyzes Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of *xūjìng*. It provides a specific analysis of the main content of the *xūjìng* idea, focusing on three aspects. Firstly, the ontological perspective of *xū* as the origin of all things, the cosmic view of the *tàixū* (supreme emptiness) domain. Secondly, the existential view of *níng shén hé dào* (cultivating the spirit and aligning with the *Dào*). Thirdly, the significance and influence of Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of *xūjìng*. Through his work, particularly the *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, he solidified his position within Wei-Jin *Xuánxué* or Neo-Daoist or metaphysical studies of the Wei-Jin dynasties. His establishment of the “Theory of Ultimate Emptiness” led to the conclusion of Wei-Jin *Xuánxué*.

Methodology

When studying Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of *xūjìng*, given the complexity of philosophical concepts and their diverse nature, qualitative research methods serve as effective tools for comprehending and exploring this philosophical doctrine. Zhāng Zhàn’s key ideas are embedded within historical documents like the *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, and qualitative methods offer an in-depth and comprehensive understanding. They aid in uncovering subtle nuances within his thoughts and help in exploring the connotations, characteristics, and underlying significance of Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of emptiness and tranquility. Zhāng Zhàn lived in the late Eastern Jin Dynasty, he incorporated Wei-Jin metaphysical ideas into his interpretation of the *Lièzǐ*, pioneering the commentary on this text. Simultaneously, he referred to many texts that are now lost, contributing richly to the continuous development of academic thought (Liu, 2012).

Therefore, this article primarily employs a literature analysis approach within qualitative research to examine the original texts of Zhāng Zhàn’s *Commentary on Lièzǐ*. It integrates contemporary research findings to conduct a cross-cultural historical period comparison, analyzing its impact and interpretations across different contexts and proposing the structural framework of the article. The study involves systematic literature review, utilizing NVivo qualitative data analysis software, electronic databases such as Google Scholar and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), along with manual searches through relevant books, journals, and library resources. By expounding and interpreting the issue of tranquility and emptiness in Zhāng Zhàn’s *Commentary on Lièzǐ* and considering the historical and cultural background of the Wei-Jin period, this article predominantly delves into textual analysis and interpretation of extensive literary materials. It includes detailed explorations and insights derived from the analysis of the texts, aiming to elucidate the essence of Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophical ideas.

The Findings

The *Commentary on Lièzǐ* by Zhāng Zhàn contains a wealth of content. *Xū* is the core concept in Zhāng Zhàn’s commentary, representing a synthesis of the contrasting theories of valuing “being” and cherishing “non-being” advocated by the metaphysicians of the Wei-Jin dynasties. His establishment of the *zhì xū lùn* represents a realm beyond existence and non-existence, transcending birth, and death, and encompasses the essence of all things and the highest principles. Zhāng Zhàn integrates the preceding notions of emptiness and tranquility while incorporating concepts from Buddhist philosophy (Bian, 2011), presenting the realms of *tàixū* (supreme emptiness) and the realm of *yǒu xíng* (tangible forms), thus constructing a philosophical system distinct from those of Wáng Bì, Jī Kāng, Ruǎn Jí, and Guō Xiàng. This advancement propels metaphysical inquiry further. Based on the historical and cultural background of Zhāng Zhàn’s life, this article identifies three main arguments regarding his concept of *xūjìng* as found in his *Commentary on Lièzǐ*:

- i. The ontological view that *xū* (emptiness) serves as the origin of all things.
- ii. The cosmology perspective of the *tàixū zhī yù* (domain of supreme emptiness).
- iii. The philosophy of life of *níng shén hé dào* (cultivating the spirit and aligning with the *Dào*), emphasizing the focus of the mind and the unity with the *Dào*.

Discussion

1. The Concept of *Xūjìng* (Emptiness and Tranquility) and the Historical Background of Zhāng Zhàn's Development of the *Xūjìng* Doctrine

Zhāng Zhàn, with the courtesy name Chūdù, hailed from Gaoping County in Shanyang Commandery during the Wei and Jin dynasties (Wang, 2004). According to the *Yìwén Zhì* section of the *Xīn Táng Shū* (*New History of the Tang*), Zhāng Zhàn's written works include the following: *Lièzǐ Zhù* (*Commentary on Lièzǐ*), *Yángshēng Yàojí* in 10 volumes, *Yǎngxìng Jì* in two-volumes, and *Gǔjīn Zhēnmíng Jì* in 13 volumes. Apart from the *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, the other three works have been lost. He was renowned as a prominent monk of his time, whose understanding and interests aligned with the philosophies of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ, displaying a demeanor and spirit akin to that of a conversationalist (Tang, 1983). *Commentary on Lièzǐ* stands alongside Wáng Bì's *Commentary on Lǎozǐ* and Guō Xiàng's *Commentary on Zhuāngzǐ* as one of the significant works that have had an impact on Chinese philosophy. Building upon the previous achievements in metaphysical studies, Zhāng Zhàn integrated Confucian and Daoist teachings while also drawing inspiration from Buddhist perspectives, thus providing a theoretical summary of metaphysical themes (Jin, 2008). The core concept in the *Commentary on Lièzǐ* is *xūjìng* (emptiness and tranquility), which manifests as *tàixū* (supreme emptiness) in cosmology, *zhìxū* (ultimate emptiness) in ontology, and *xūjìng zìrán* (emptiness, tranquility, and naturalness) in the philosophy of life.

Xūjìng, literally meaning empty and tranquil, or clear and serene, is an ancient and significant concept in Chinese philosophy. Its earliest appearance can be found in the inscription of the *Dà Kè Dǐng* during the reign of King Li of Zhou in the Spring and Autumn period, where it refers to a state of religious activities characterized by purity, stillness, and devotion. The philosophical implications of *xūjìng* originated from the works of Lǎozǐ in the pre-Qin period, and the complete term *xūjìng* first appeared in the *Zhuāngzǐ* text. The concepts of *xūjìng* in *Lǎozǐ* and *Zhuāngzǐ* texts have profound philosophical meanings in ontology, epistemology, and have developed into the guiding principles of Daoist practices. They represent the essence of Daoist thought and serve as the lifeblood of Daoist philosophy (Xu, 2001).

Lǎozǐ said: “*Zhìxū jí, shǒu jìng dǔ. Wàn wù bìng zuò, wú yǐ guān fù,*” (Chapter 16, *Lǎozǐ*) which translated as: “The state of emptiness should be brought to the utmost degree, and that of stillness guarded with unwearingly vigor. All things alike go through their processes of activity, and (then) we see them return (to their original state).” Lǎozǐ believed that the essence of the *Dào* is inherently empty. *Xū* refers to the internal state of emptiness, while *jìng* refers to the external state of silence and tranquility. Only by reaching the ultimate level of emptiness can one achieve the state of *zhì jìng*, profound stillness. Therefore, *xū* and *jìng* are two distinct but closely interconnected states, with *xū* preceding and leading to *jìng*. It is through these two paths of emptiness and stillness that one can achieve the purpose of embodying the *Dào*.

The primordial essence of the universe, the *Dào*, is characterized by emptiness and profound stillness, surpassing all finite forms, and encompassing infinite emptiness and tranquility. Zhuāngzǐ, following Lǎozǐ's philosophy of emptiness and stillness, further elaborated on it. In the chapter *Tiāndào* of *Zhuāngzǐ*, it states: “*Fu xūjìng tián dàn, jì mò wú wéi zhě, wàn wù zhī běn yě,*” which means: “Being void, tranquil, serene, and inactive is the essence of all things” (Luo, 2005). This implies that emptiness, stillness, tranquility, and inaction are the fundamental aspects of all things. It can be seen from the original text that Zhuāngzǐ combines *xū* and *jìng* together and presents the philosophical concept of *xūjìng* in its entirety. In the chapter *Rénjiān Shì* of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, it further states: “*Wéi dào jí xū, xū zhě, xīnzhāi yě,*” that indicates: “To achieve the state of emptiness and stillness, one must practice *xīn zhāi*,” which means clearing the mind of distracting thoughts and forgetting the distinction between self and others, maintaining a state of purity and clarity, in order to truly understand nature, follow its course, and attain spiritual freedom.

In the discipline of pre-Qin philosophy, apart from Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ, other schools of thought also emphasize the concept of *xūjìng*. For example, in the *Tiān Ruì Piān* of the *Lièzǐ*, it states: “*Fēi qí míng yě, mò rú jìng, mò rú xū, jìng yě xū, dé qí jù yǐ,*” which translated as: “The key lies not in the names of things but in maintaining a state of purity and emptiness.” By attaining stillness and emptiness, one can understand the true essence of things. Similarly, in Xunzi's philosophy, there is the concept of *xū yī ér jìng*, where *jìng* is the

purpose of *xū yī* and the method of *xīn zhī*. The *xīn* represents the cognitive function, while *zhī* represents the understanding of things. The ultimate goal of the *Dào* is to achieve emptiness, unity, and stillness. Xunzi's meaning is that only by maintaining an open, focused, and calm observation of things can one comprehend their true nature. From the above, it is evident that the philosophy of *xūjìng* as a way to comprehend the *Dào* was widely circulated in the pre-Qin period.

After the pinnacle development of metaphysical studies in the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties with Guō Xiàng's "Theory of Individuation," Buddhism also exerted significant influence on the social discourse of life and death liberation during the Eastern Jin period (Huang, 2021). In this era of societal and intellectual integration, with an unprecedented awakening of individual consciousness, there was a higher demand for the development of metaphysical studies from society. It was within this context that Zhāng Zhàn's *xūjìng* doctrine emerged on the stage of metaphysical discourse. Within the context of the prevailing Wei-Jin metaphysical trend, *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, could not avoid the issue of "being and non-being". Its fundamental stance is rooted in the primacy of non-existence, but it is deeply influenced by Guō Xiàng's *Commentary on Zhuāngzǐ* and attempts to transform the concept of preciousness and non-existence through the Theory of Individualization. When unavoidable contradictions arise between the two, it turns to incorporate the category of "emptiness" from Buddhist teachings to transform the concept of "non-being," thereby proposing a new ontological category known as *zhìxū* (ultimate emptiness).

Zhāng Zhàn constructed his own philosophical system with *xū* as its core. This philosophical system synthesizes the ideas of Wáng Bì's "Theory of Preciousness and Non-Existence" and Guō Xiàng's "Theory of Individualization", forming Zhāng Zhàn's unique ontology (Guan, 2017). In Zhāng Zhàn's view, beyond the generation, transformation, and extinction of all tangible existences in the phenomenal realm, there must be an intangible ontological existence. This ontological characteristic is similar to the concept of "emptiness" in the concept of *Prajñāpāramitā* of Mahāyāna Buddhism teachings. His thoughts aim to guide Wei-Jin literati to concentrate their minds, remain undisturbed by external influences, alleviate worries and sorrows, transcend life and death, and enter the realm of *tàixū* (supreme emptiness), which is comparable to the Buddhist concept of "nirvana" (Bian, 2021). The process of achieving this state involves the purification and elevation of the mind, complete liberation, and transcendence of the spirit. It represents the pursuit of the highest spiritual realm by the literati of the Eastern Jin era.

Feng (1998) suggested Guō Xiàng's philosophical system represents the pinnacle of metaphysics. Following this pinnacle comes the conclusion. The representative works marking this conclusion are *Lièzǐ* and Zhāng Zhàn's *Commentary on Lièzǐ*. This emphasizes the significance of Zhāng Zhàn's *Commentary on Lièzǐ*. In Zhāng Zhàn's metaphysical doctrine within the *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, the concept of *xūjìng* holds substantial importance. Most scholars agree that Zhāng Zhàn's "Theory of Ultimate Emptiness" holds ontological significance. Tang (2000) suggests that ultimate nothingness and primordial energy are synonymous with ultimate emptiness. He also argued that due to primordial energy neither arises nor ceases, and it lacks form or shape, it aligns with the concept of ultimate emptiness. Kang (2003), however, posited in the preface to the *Lièzǐ* that the statement all things have ultimate emptiness as their sect, and myriad entities undergo final extinction as their evidence holds identical connotations for all things and myriad entities. Both refer to the intrinsic nature of phenomena within the objective world, which are in a state of constant flux, lacking inherent forms, and their ultimate extinction represents their manifestation in our sensory perceptions.

The introduction of the concept of ultimate emptiness was aimed by Zhāng Zhàn to provide an immutable ontological reference for the ever-changing all things and myriad entities (Kang, 2003). Lu (2004), on the other hand, believes that the term emptiness contains the connotation of falsity and unreality. Zhāng Zhàn explicitly declared: "All things have 'ultimate emptiness' as their sect, and myriad entities undergo 'final extinction' as their evidence," attempting to elucidate the fundamental nature of falsity and unreality in all things. Thus, these discussions are unrelated to an absolute ontology beyond reality using nothingness ('ultimate nothingness,' or 'ultimate emptiness') as an alternative reality" (Lu, 2004). In fact, this essentially dissolves the ontological significance of ultimate emptiness, yet it doesn't negate the existence of ontology. He posits that *tàiyī* resembles Wáng Bì's "nothingness" as an ontology and places it within the realm of ontology. Overall, scholars widely acknowledge the ontological significance of "ultimate emptiness." While,

as Kang (2003) suggests, Zhāng Zhàn's ontological "Theory of Ultimate Emptiness" lacks originality at the theoretical foundation of metaphysics, from the perspective of the societal context at that time, it's crucial to recognize that the pressing issue of the era wasn't solely about a theoretical re-establishment of metaphysics. Its value lies in how it provided a philosophical framework, from the standpoint of metaphysics, to help individuals settle their minds and achieve mental and emotional harmony. It aimed to provide a philosophical route for curbing the unrestrained behavior prevalent during the Wei-Jin period.

Zhāng Zhàn's *Commentary on Lièzǐ* upholds the fundamental ideas of Lièzǐ while incorporating and integrating Wáng Bì's "Originally No Distinctions" and Guō Xiàng's "Theory of Individualization." Additionally, it assimilates Buddhist emptiness theory, taking "ultimate emptiness as the principle" as its logical starting point to construct its ontological philosophical system (Liu, 2017). The concept of "ultimate emptiness" is considered the focal point of Zhāng Zhàn's independent ideological system based on Lièzǐ. Throughout the entire *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, the discussion of emptiness occurs in numerous instances, viewing it not only as the practice and realm of sages embodying the Dào, but also as the cosmic master and the eternal and indestructible ultimate existence (Lin, 2001). Therefore, emptiness serves as the core concept in Zhāng Zhàn's *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, representing a synthesis of the Wei-Jin metaphysicians' reverence for theories of "being" and the value of "non-being." His establishment of the "Theory of Ultimate Emptiness" portrays a realm that transcends existence and non-existence, devoid of birth and death, with the profound significance of encompassing the essence of all things and the highest cosmic law. By blending earlier ideas of emptiness and tranquility while introducing Buddhist concepts, Zhāng Zhàn proposes the realm of *tàixū* (supreme emptiness) and the realm of *yǒu xíng* (tangible form), constructing a philosophical system distinct from those of Wáng Bì, Jī Kāng, Ruǎn Jí, and Guō Xiàng, thus advancing Chinese metaphysics to a new level.

2. Zhāng Zhàn's Philosophy of *Xūjìng*

Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *xūjìng* (tranquility) in his *Commentary on Liezi* mainly includes: the ontological view of *xū* as the origin of all things, the cosmic view of the *tàixū* domain, and the existential view of *níng shén hé dào* (cultivating the spirit and aligning with the Dào).

a. The Ontological View of *Xū Wéi Wàn Wù Zhī Zōng* (*Xū Serves as the Origin of All Things*)

The term *xū* appears 13 times and 21 occurrences in the original text of the *Lièzǐ*. In Zhāng Zhàn's introduction to the *Commentary of Lièzǐ*, he summarizes the main theme of the *Lièzǐ* as follows: "*Qí shū dà lüè míng qún yǒu yǐ zhìxū wéi zōng, wàn pǐn yǐ zhōng miè wéi yàn.*" The quote means: "The essential meaning of the *Lièzǐ* can be summarized as follows – the existence of all things in the world must ultimately trace back to emptiness as their fundamental origin, and eventually they will return to annihilation." According to Zhāng (2013) on the *Tiān Ruì Piān* chapter of the *Lièzǐ*, he states: "*Fū wéi jì rán zhìxū níng yī ér bù biàn zhě, fēi yīn yáng zhī suǒ zhōng shǐ, sì shí zhī suǒ qiān gé.*" This statement suggests that: "Only when something reaches the state of extreme emptiness and condenses into oneness, it becomes the master of all things." It remains unchanged and motionless, transcending the passage of time. The term *jì* conveys the meaning of stillness, and *jì rán* represents the appearance of tranquility. *Zhìxū* signifies the utmost level of emptiness, while *níng yī* refers to the condensation of emptiness and stillness.

Zhāng Zhàn suggests that beyond the cycle of birth and transformation, there exists a timeless and unchanging essence, represented by the concept of *xū*, which serves as the master of all things. Furthermore, he believes that this master of all things, represented by *xū*, is neither subject to birth nor decay. Zhang (2013) states: "*Bù shēng zhě, gù shēng wù zhī zōng; bú huà zhě, gù huà wù zhī zhǔ.*" The term *bù shēng* implies that the root of existence does not lie in the specific forms of living beings, but rather in an intangible entity beyond biological existence. This means that the existence of living beings is not limited to individual entities and forms but originates from a deeper level of existence. On the other hand, *bú huà* suggests that the transformation of the material world is governed by an unchanging dominant force, which serves as the fundamental power driving the continuous change and evolution of matter in time and space. The *bù shēng bú huà zhě* refers to the master and essence of vital changes. This entity, which is *zhìxū*, possesses eternal and

unchanging qualities. It is this unchanging nature that ultimately prevents it from undergoing the same annihilation as other things, allowing it to maintain its status as the ultimate master of the ever-changing world.

Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *xū* encompasses both *wú* and transcends it. *Xū* represents the immortal entity beyond all things. It serves as the basis for the existence of all diverse phenomena, rather than being a creator. Moreover, Yang (1979) states: “*Zhìxū wú wù, gù wèi gǔ shén; běn zì wú shēng, gù yuē bù sǐ.*” The term *xū* is formless and shapeless. It has no physical form and therefore is not subject to the notions of beginning or end, making it incapable of undergoing any changes or transformations. As *zhìxū* lacks any specific attributes, it cannot be grasped through human rational or sensory understanding. In other words, the principles of nature cannot be known through intellectual comprehension.

In summary, we can observe the following characteristics of Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *zhìxū* as the master of all things: it is uncreated and immutable, it is formless and without attributes, and it is eternally unchanging and beyond perceptual knowledge. Kang (2003) argues that Zhāng Zhàn's perspective on *wú* (non-being) is a development of Guō Xiàng's theory, rather than following Wáng Bì's approach. Zhāng Zhàn introduced the philosophy of *zhìxū* because his concept of *wú* is not meant in a generative sense. From a historical perspective of metaphysics, Zhāng Zhàn continues Guō Xiàng's “Theory of Individualization” and combines Wáng Bì's abstract notion of *wú* with Pei Wei's concept of *yǒu* (being). Future discussions on the problem of existence should follow this direction and only extend downward along this path, as any regression would not leave a trace in human thought (Kang, 2003). Zhāng Zhàn, in his theoretical framework, integrates the concepts of *yǒu* and *zì shēng* (self-generation), while the *wú* and *xū* as the essence of the origin of all things, are consistent with Guō Xiàng's “Theory of Individualization.” Kang (2003) believes that Zhāng Zhàn's concept of *zhìxū* indicates a theoretical shift in the metaphysical discourse. From the perspective of the *zhìxū* ontology, the changes in all things are merely alterations in their states of existence, while their fundamental quality of valuing the void remains unchanged. Zhāng Zhàn inherits and expands upon metaphysics at the ontological level, creating a realm of tranquility and harmony, where one coexists with the heavens, earth, and all things, transcending the barriers of self and other, and merging with the unity of the heavens, earth, and all things.

b. The Cosmological View of Tàixū Zhī Yù (The Realm of Supreme Emptiness)

According to Zhāng Zhàn, any specific and tangible thing is limited, just like the heavens and earth. Although they encompass the vastness of the world, they are still finite entities belonging to *yǒu xíng zhī yù* (the realm of the tangible). So, what lies beyond these limited heavens and earth? Zhāng Zhàn proposes the concept of *tàixū*, which is the central idea in his cosmology. The *tàixū zhī yù* is a transcendent realm that surpasses all existence and non-existence. It is a boundless and all-encompassing field that encompasses the heavens, earth, and all things without any spatial divisions. It is also a timeless domain that governs the birth and death of all things without a beginning or end. Zhang (2013) said: “*Fū hán wàn wù zhě tiān dì, róng tiān dì zhě tàixū yě,*” which translates as: “The one embracing all things is Heaven and Earth; the one containing Heaven and Earth is the Great Emptiness.” The concept suggests that while the heavens and earth encompass all things within their limited scope, the *tàixū* is an expansive and infinite realm that includes the heavens and earth themselves. The vastness of the *tàixū* is so immense that even the heavens and earth are merely minute components within it. It represents the boundless expanse and limitless nature of the universe and can be seen as another term for the cosmos.

Within the *tàixū zhī yù*, there is no concept of a beginning or an end. It is a domain where all things exist in an eternal cycle of recurrence without cessation. Zhang (2013) points out: “*Huò zhě jiāng wèi wú jí zhī wài gèng yǒu wú jí, wú jìn zhī zhōng fù yǒu wú jì, gù chóng míng wú jí fù wú wú jí, wú jìn fù háng jìn yě. Zhāng Zhàn zhù yuē, jí wéi wèi zhī wú, hé dé yǒu wài? Gù wú jí fù wú jí, wú jìn fù wú jì yě,*” which translates as “Perhaps beyond the boundaries of the Wei, there is still the Boundless; within the limitless, there is again the Limitless. Therefore, to emphasize the Boundless is once more to emphasize the non-Boundless, and to emphasize the Limitless is once more to emphasize the non-Limitless. Zhāng Zhàn's commentary explains, to call it the Boundless is to deny its exteriority. Hence, the Boundless is again the Non-Boundless, and the Limitless is again the non-Limitless.” The interpretation implies that since *wú* represents the absence of limits,

and *yǒu* represents the absence of exhaustion, they themselves are boundless and infinite. The world is boundless and limitless, extending beyond infinity. The universe is infinite and boundless, and the cycles of existence continuously evolve without a discernible beginning or end. The end of one thing marks the beginning of another, perpetuating an unceasing cycle. Therefore, there are no clear-cut beginnings or endings.

Zhāng Zhàn believed that everything, including the heavens, earth, and all things, exists within the realm of *tàixū*. Only *xū* represents true infinitude. To transcend the constraints of limited time and space, one must return to *tàixū*, *zhìxū*, and *xū*. *Xū* embodies boundlessness, and only by embodying and prioritizing *xū* can the sage harmonize with the *Dào* and achieve a carefree state of being. Wang and Lou (1980, p.93) indicates that: “*Tiān dì suī guǎng, yǐ wú wéi xīn. Sheng wáng suī dà, yǐ xū wéi zhǔ,*” which translates as: “Though the heavens and earth are vast, they are governed with a mind of non-action. Though the sage kings are great, they rule with emptiness as their essence.” The interpretation suggests that despite the vastness of the heavens and earth, and the boundless expanse of the universe, we should approach the world and all things without attachment or interference. We should harmonize with the natural flow, not contradict the inherent laws of the universe, and let go of personal desires to achieve inner tranquility and harmony. Although the sage possesses authority, they must align themselves with the nature of *tai xu*, not only refraining from violating natural laws but also transcending the mindset of how things are perceived in the physical world. Only by doing so can one align with the *Dào* and attain the state of carefree wandering. Zhāng Zhàn, through the concepts of *tàixū* and *tàixū zhī yù*, constructed a cosmogony that explains the generation of the universe.

c. The Existential View of *Níng Shén Hé Dào* (Cultivating the Spirit and Aligning with the *Dào*)

In the tumultuous and fragile social context of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the main concern of the scholars in the *Xuánxué* (Neo-Daoist) school was to seek philosophical reflections that transcended the mundane and offered personal liberation. Zhāng Zhàn’s *Commentary on Lièzǐ* represents the fourth stage of development in the *Xuánxué* tradition, with its primary purpose being to address the issue of personal liberation from life and death. In the discussion of the cosmology of the *tàixū zhī yù* and the *yǒu xíng zhī yù* mentioned earlier, we noted that all things, including human beings, exist within the *yǒu xíng zhī yù*. To address the question of the ultimate destination of human life, Zhāng Zhàn constructed a realm beyond the confines of the *yǒu xíng zhī yù* called the *tàixū zhī yù*. Although everything within the realm of the tangible ultimately returns to the *tàixū*, it does not mean that one should abandon everything within the realm of the tangible. Yang (1979) said: “*Fū shēng zhě, yī qì zhī zàn jù, yī wù zhī zàn líng. zàn jù zhě zhōng sàn, zàn líng zhě guī xū. ér hào yì wù láo, wù zhī cháng xìng. gù dāng shēng zhī suǒ lè zhě, hòu wèi, měi fú, hào sè, yīn yuè ér yǐ ěr,*” which translates as: “The living beings, a momentary aggregation of vital energy, a temporary animation of matter. What is momentarily gathered will ultimately disperse, what is temporarily animated will return to emptiness. To seek ease and avoid toil is the common nature of all things.” Therefore, for those enjoying life, it suffices to indulge in rich delicacies, beautiful attire, pleasurable desires, and melodious music. The essence is that the existence of life is the temporary aggregation of *qi* and the temporary manifestation of spirit. The temporary aggregation will inevitably disperse, and the temporary manifestation of spirit will return to nothingness. This emphasizes the fragility and transience of life, implying that everything in life is temporary and will ultimately return to nothingness.

The pursuit of comfort and aversion to labor are inherent characteristics of things. Therefore, for the existence of life, the things that bring joy are merely good food, beautiful clothes, desires, and music. Life is fleeting, and Zhāng Zhàn, starting from human nature, affirms basic human desires, believing that people should cherish this precious life, comply with their nature, and experience the beauty of life. He opposes the suppression of human nature in pursuit of external fame and fortune and opposes the constraints of Confucian rituals on human nature. The ultimate source and destination of the world is the void of *tàixū*, and the same applies to the destination of human life. The realm of *tàixū* and the realm of form are in a perpetual cycle. Therefore, life and death are also unified in *tàixū*, similar to the concept of reincarnation in Buddhism. There is no need to worry about the length of one’s life but rather to fully enjoy the various pleasures of life. Therefore, there is no need for people to grieve over the arrival of death. Life and death, beginning and end, are natural and unchangeable laws. It is unnecessary for people to be excessively attached to the issue of life

and death. Yang (1979) explains: “*Chéng zhě fāng zì wèi chéng, ér yǐ kuī yǐ; shēng zhě fāng zì wèi shēng, qián yǐ sǐ yǐ,*” which translates as: “Those who claim to have achieved success are already deficient; those who consider themselves alive are already submerged in death.” Since the moment of one’s birth, every person is constantly depleting their life essence, and the process of birth inherently contains death. Since life and death are difficult to change, people should strive to live better in the realm of form.

In order to live better in the realm of form, one should strive to, Yang (1979) emphasized: “*Xīn xū zé xíng quán yǐ, gù ěr bù huò shēng, mù bù zhì sè, kǒu bù zé yán, xīn bù yòng zhī, nèi wài míng yī, zé xíng wú zhèn dòng,*” which translates as: “When the mind is empty, the form is complete. Hence, the ears are not disturbed by sounds, the eyes are not fixated on colors, the mouth does not discriminate in speech, and the mind is not bound by knowledge. When inner and outer become one, the form remains undisturbed. When the mind is empty, the body remains intact. Therefore, the ears are not deceived by sounds, the eyes are not disturbed by colors, the mouth is not picky about words, and the mind does not need to know. The internal and external become one, and the body does not tremble.” Only when we achieve the tranquility and emptiness of the mind can our body truly attain balance and wholeness. It reminds us to maintain inner peace, unaffected by external disturbances and temptations, in order to achieve harmony and stability of the body and mind. In this state, we can better observe, understand, and respond to the external world while maintaining inner calm and ease. The highest realm of all things is *zhìxū*. By attaining the state of *zhìxū*, we can transcend the constraints of the seasons and forget about existence and non-existence, value, and rank, entering a spiritual state of unity with the heavens, earth, and all things.

In summary, the concept of *níng shén hé dào* implies the integration of one’s mind and spirit with the *Dào*, the cosmic way. It suggests that while acknowledging the existence and experiences within the realm of the tangible, individuals should cultivate a state of focused and concentrated mind, harmonizing their actions with the natural flow of the *Dào*. This perspective encourages individuals to embrace both the transcendent realm of the *tàixū zhī yù* and the tangible realm of existence, finding a balance between them and ultimately realizing a profound connection with the *Dào*.

3. The Historical Significance of *Xūjìng* Doctrine

In the Wei-Jin era, whether indulging in wine or poetry, the people earnestly sought inner tranquility and the emptiness of the *Dào* (Ma, 1997). Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of *xūjìng* vigorously aimed to help people settle their minds. He believed that maintaining inner peace would lead to harmony and stability of body and mind. These alleviated certain pressures caused by societal contradictions at the time and provided a philosophical framework for the unrestrained behavior of the Wei-Jin period. Moreover, the notable characteristic of Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy in his *Commentary on Lièzǐ* is its inclusiveness. He not only inherited the mission of integrating Confucianism and Daoism in metaphysics, but also deepened the internal integration of metaphysics. Furthermore, he fused indigenous Chinese metaphysical ideas with imported Buddhist thoughts, presenting the concepts of *zhìxū* (ultimate emptiness) and the *tàixū zhī yù* (realm of supreme emptiness). He regarded “*xū* as the origin of all things” and, similar to the concept of reincarnation in Buddhism, proposed that the realm of *tàixū* and the realm of tangible existence cyclically coexist, thereby unifying life and death within the realm of ultimate emptiness. The successful integration of heterogeneous cultures in Zhāng Zhàn’s *Commentary on Lièzǐ* exemplifies the inclusiveness of Chinese indigenous culture.

Ren (1983) points out that, in a sense, Guō Xiàng’s “Theory of Individuation” represents the culmination of Neo-Daoist philosophy. After Guō Xiàng, there were no other prominent philosophical systems in Neo-Daoism, except for Zhāng Zhàn’s “Theory of Ultimate Emptiness,” which relied on Buddhist thought to be completed. As a rising star in the Neo-Daoist philosophy of the Wei and Jin periods, Zhāng Zhàn further developed the school of thought. Through his *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, he solidified his position in the realm of Neo-Daoist philosophy. His establishment of the “Theory of Ultimate Emptiness” marked the culmination of Neo-Daoist philosophy. Zhāng Zhàn’s philosophy of emptiness and tranquility had a profound impact on later Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, and it also played a significant role in the Sinicization and localization of Buddhism in China.

Conclusion

In the turbulent historical context of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Zhāng Zhàn sought to provide theoretical guidance for people to transcend the secular world and achieve personal liberation. As a result, he annotated the work *Lièzǐ*. In Zhāng Zhàn's *Commentary on Lièzǐ*, he assimilated previous achievements in *Xuánxué* (metaphysical movement in Chinese philosophy), integrated Confucian and Daoist ideas, and drew insights from Buddhist perspectives, aiming to comprehensively summarize the themes of *Xuánxué*. At the heart of his philosophy lies the concept of *xūjìng* (emptiness and stillness). The concept of *xū* (emptiness) in Zhāng Zhàn's philosophy takes various forms within his cosmology as *tàixū* (supreme emptiness), in ontology as *zhìxū* (ultimate emptiness), and in the philosophy of life as *xūjìng zìrán* (emptiness, stillness, and naturalness).

This article has thoroughly analyzed Zhāng Zhàn's "emptiness and stillness" conception in three sections. He emphasizes the importance of not going against the laws of nature and surpassing conventional thinking when dealing with all things in the real world. Only by doing so can one align with the *Dào*, transcend worldly matters, and attain the state of *xiāoyáo* (liberation). Zhāng Zhàn's work *Commentary on Lièzǐ* has solidified his position in Wei and Jin *Xuánxué*, and his establishment of the "Theory of Ultimate Emptiness" brought Wei-Jin *Xuánxué* to its culmination. His philosophical ideas had a significant influence on later generations and underscored the inclusive and integrative nature of Chinese indigenous culture.

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