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Daoism as anarchism or nihilism: The Buddhist-influenced thought of Wu Nengzi

Introduction: The Main Problems Raised by the *Wunengzi*

The ninth century CE Chinese text known by the name of its pseudonymous author, Wu Nengzi (literally, “Master of No Abilities”), was the first (surviving) piece of writing in 500 years to revive the anarchist side of philosophical Daoism. Though starting out in the same radical anti-statist and utopian fashion of earlier Daoist anarchist texts of the third to fourth centuries CE, in the end the author of the ninth century text seems to acquiesce in the idea of rule, as we will see below. Thus, this text creates problems for anyone who would seek to use the radical side of philosophical Daoism to build a modern anti-statist critique. The first problem, more narrowly linked to Daoist anarchism, is whether the *Wunengzi* demonstrates more openly a flaw that may be present in all radical Daoist texts or whether the author of this text makes a fundamental shift of his own based on influence from his interpretation of Buddhist doctrines. The larger problem for all anarchists is whether or not the *Wunengzi* demonstrates flaws present in postmodern and/or “lifestyle” anarchist thought. Can an “ironic stance” toward political authority combined with ways of living supposedly apart from the state and claims to reject any overarching principle or “meta-narrative,” in the end lead too easily to a cynical acceptance of the state

and/or a refusal to oppose it directly? Even if one rejects such an “ironic stance” alone as adequate and wants to go beyond it, are there any grounds to do so from a perspective that denies humans’ ability to learn and know any absolute truths objectively?

To answer these questions we need first to reexamine the nature of Daoist anarchism before Wu Nengzi and then see how Wu Nengzi himself applies and possibly changes the lessons of Daoist anarchism. After examining nature of the text itself and analyzing its main tenets, we can return to the questions raised above.

Although the *Wunengzi* has been referred to by several students of Chinese thought, including Germaine Hoston, Peter Zarrow, and Gotelind Müller,¹ it has previously only been partially translated into English by Hsiao Kung-chuan.² There is also the partial German translation by Alfred Forke and a full German translation in an unpublished PhD dissertation by Gert Naundorf.³ This relative neglect is unfortunate, since the text can teach us much about both Daoist and Western anarchism. Thus this book contains the first full translation of the surviving text (see Appendix 5), which is analyzed in this chapter.

The surviving text of the *Wunengzi* (as the text is referred to in this work, with its author referred to as Wu Nengzi) contains 3 books with a total of 23 chapters and a preface by an unnamed friend who reports that Wu Nengzi wrote the text during the Huangchao rebellion (875–884 CE), when he fled his home and travelled about, having no regular abode, finally living with a peasant family.⁴ The author of the preface claims to have created the text from scattered scraps of paper that Wu Nengzi left in a bag. From chapters in the text it would seem that Wu Nengzi had disciples and was consulted by many people for sagely advice.

Daoist Anarchism before Wu Nengzi

We can perhaps most profitably compare the thought in the *Wunengzi* to that of Bao Jingyan. As we saw in the previous chapters, Bao was heavily influenced by the famous classical text the *Zhuangzi* (ca. 300 BCE), as were most of the thinkers in the revival of philosophical Daoism at the end of the later Han Dynasty (10–220 CE) and the Three Kingdoms era at the beginning of the Period of Disunity (220–589 CE). Bao completely rejects the Confucian idea of rule by the morally virtuous based on any “Mandate of Heaven” from an impersonal deity and in place of this utopian view of benevolent rulership (based on a Mencian interpretation of Confucianism), posits the existence of an ideal utopia of original undifferentiated simplicity where there were no rulers and everyone lived in harmony. In Bao’s utopia, which we will compare and contrast with that of Wu Nengzi, there were no

“princes and ministers” and no means of transportation over wide areas so that “wars of conquest between states did not occur.” Since there was no “greed for power and profit,” there was no “unhappiness and confusion” and people lived in “mystical equality” (*xuantong*) “without famine, pestilence or disease.” Given their simple lives, it was impossible to implement crushing taxes on them or trap them with harsh punishments.⁵

While there is no evidence that Bao joined or fomented any political uprisings, we saw in previous chapters that he clearly viewed all government as immoral, unnecessary, and dangerous to human survival, and there was thus no way that he could ever accept the need for a state of any kind. Rather than follow the Confucian advice to resign office in an immoral government, as we also saw previously, Bao argues that it would be better if there were no offices in the first place. Bao bases his political stance on the concept of *ziran*, literally “of itself so,” often translated as natural or spontaneous, a term that other scholars argue is the closest term in classical Chinese thought to the concept of freedom.⁶ Likewise, Wu Nengzi starts with this same concept in a similarly radical sounding fashion, and at first seems to also reject serving in government, but by the end of his tract, as we will see below, he comes to a very different political conclusion from Bao and the Wei-Jin Daoist anarchists.

The Political Thought of Wu Nengzi

In his first chapter, Wu Nengzi picks up the description of the Daoist utopia in terms very similar to those of Bao Jingyan, where all creatures “lived together indiscriminately” without gender or other hierarchical distinctions. As a result, there were no crimes of theft or murder and no elaborate rituals. “They followed what was natural; there was no ruling or shepherding, [and everything was] in its original simplicity; according to these principles they could live long lives.”⁷

Again, as with Bao Jingyan, those who would “help” others by instituting government entered the picture and started to draw distinctions between humans and other animals in order to dominate the animals, which introduced the principle of hierarchy, first between men and women and finally between leaders and the led in general. Once introduced, the principles of hierarchical rule and economic inequality became more and more developed, and human oppression increased as a result:

. . . After we imposed the construction of hierarchy; there came about rulers and ministers . . . We imposed assessments on people, so now they started to realise the distinction between honourable and disgraced. Now, the pure and natural has been weakened, and passions and predilections

are embraced by vying hearts. If there is competition, there is stealing, if there is stealing, there is chaos [*luan*], [so] what is to happen in the future?"

Given the worry of the ruling class about ordinary people's increasing restiveness, "sages" then developed the Confucian principle of benevolence and propriety and regulation of people through ritual and music. Under this scheme of supposedly benevolent rule, "when a ruler oppressed his subjects he was to be called cruel, and the ministers would say that the government was illegitimate. When the ministers usurped [the ruler's authority], the ruler would call them rebels. . . ."

Thus, far from reflecting Heaven's will and an unchanging human nature, as for Bao, so too for Wu the Confucian ideas of cultivation of "virtue" only served to legitimate and protect domination of some humans over others. Based on chapters from the received *DDJ* and the *Zhuangzi*, and again following the tradition of the Wei-Jin Daoist anarchists such as Bao Jingyan, Wu Nengzi goes on to argue that the introduction of Confucian hierarchy only inflamed the people's passions and awakened their desire to compete with each other for dominance. Thus eventually the "sages" "had no other option but to establish laws and punishments and organise armies to keep the people under control" including eventually instituting the harsh punishments of the Legalists, which only led to armies being sent over the land and violence spreading over the whole country, so that in the end, far from improving their lives, "the common people came to dire poverty and died."

In the end, similar to the arguments of Western anarchists such as Michael Bakunin, Wu Nengzi turns on its head the typical question about how anarchists would handle the problems of crime and warfare in the absence of government. Instead, Wu Nengzi argues, it is the principle of rule and the imposition of hierarchy that leads to chaos and the destruction of human life:

Alas! It was natural to treat [the people] as beasts; it was not natural to treat them as humans. Imposing the establishment of palaces and mansions, [formal] meals and [prepared] food stirred up desires; imposing distinctions between the exalted and debased and the honourable and disgraced excited competition; imposing benevolence, virtue, ritual and music perverted what was natural. Imposing punishments and laws and [using] military [force] immiserated [people's] lives . . . this disturbed their passions and attacked their lives, and together in great numbers they died.

Thus far, Wu Nengzi's critique sounds as radical as that of his Daoist predecessors, including even Bao Jingyan, based on Daoist principles of

original simplicity (*si*), primeval unity without hierarchy (*hundun*), and especially *ziran* (the natural or spontaneous), which as we noted in previous chapters could serve as metaphors for human freedom in nature. But in later sections in Part 1 of his text, though still based on the Daoist idea of nature as an undifferentiated whole, Wu Nengzi starts to introduce themes concerning the identity of life and death, almost certainly influenced by the spread of Buddhist ideas in China during the Tang dynasty. In his Chapter 3, Wu Nengzi examines human nature and how humans look at the human body, concluding that,

That which is born from Nature, although it exists separately and can be broken off, is eternally alive. That which naturally dies, although it moves around, it will always die.

Beginning with the Daoist principles that nothing exists separately and that the idea of life and death is like *yin* and *yang*, or two sides of an undifferentiated whole, Wu Nengzi denigrates those who would seek the elixir of long life instead of worrying about the quality of their lives. This “idiotic” desire for long life in the end only gets people further from life. Though based on Daoist principles, Wu Nengzi seems to be introducing a Buddhist-influenced idea of the unreality of both life and death, as in his Chapter 4 of Book 1:

As for death, it is the most despised by the people. But there is no death to be despised, besides the shape and skeletal structure; is there anything really to disturb feelings of utmost harmony and satisfaction?

Throughout the next chapter, Wu Nengzi continues to denigrate people’s fear of death and their desire for material things and a fine reputation as ideas inculcated and fanned by the so-called sages. While still serving the purpose of undermining Confucian and Legalist concepts of rule, we will see below how this Buddhist-influenced denial of material needs based on the denial of the distinction between life and death ultimately served to undermine his anarchism.

Nevertheless, in the second part of this same chapter, Wu Nengzi continues his radical egalitarian vision. Far from naturally favoring our relatives and close friends, as Confucian thinkers would have it, he argues that we should not differentiate among people and treat all equally. Far from teaching people to treat each other with benevolence, Confucian ideas of benevolent hierarchy lead only to strife and contention.

It is in the second of his three books that Wu Nengzi’s political ideology starts to show the effects of his Buddhist-influenced stance of detachment from material things. In retelling a famous incident from the period toward the end of the Shang or Yin dynasty and the beginning

of the Zhou (ca. eleventh century BCE), Wu Nengzi takes up the eternal question for intellectuals first raised in the *Zhuangzi*, whether or not to serve in government—a question many chapters in that text and the later neo-Daoists answer in the negative. Answering a Confucian-influenced gentleman named Xi Bo who would try to rescue the Shang dynasty from chaos, at first Wu Nengzi's reclusive sage Lü Wang seems to follow the radical Daoist advice to not get sullied by serving the state, though in terms that seem to deny the reality of the people's suffering:

... the Shang Dynastical government became chaotic by itself, and the people are in great pain out of their own doing. What is the connection to you? Why do you want to sully me?' ... If something killed off all humans, birds, beasts, and insects, the ether would still be the ether. How can we do anything about the Shang government's loutishness? How can we say anything of people's hardship?

Though sounding very indifferent to ordinary people's suffering, this passage could be based on Chapter 5 of the received *DDJ*, which advises the sage to be ruthless and treat the people as straw dogs—advice which Arthur Waley claims is a bait for the Legalists.⁸ That is, since “nature is perpetually bounteous” and thus perhaps takes care of people on its own, there is no need for rulers to paternalistically “take care” of the people. Nevertheless, in a very important shift, Wu Nengzi allows his reclusive official to serve the state after all in the end:

[D]espite all of this, the castle walls, houses, and cottages are already built and so need not be destroyed, just as the people are already formed and need not be killed, so I will save them!

In answering another of his officials as to why he decided to aid the suffering people of the Shang dynasty despite his talk of the virtue of the Daoist principle of *wuwei* (inaction, or doing nothing), Xi Bo replied with what one could argue is a very Buddhist take on *wuwei*, an interpretation that Wu Nengzi has Lü Wang endorse:

Xi Bo said, “Heaven and Earth are inactive, yet the sun, moon, stars, and constellations move in the day and the night. There are rain, dew, frost, and freezing rain in the autumn and winter. The great rivers flow without pause, and the grass and trees grow without stopping. Therefore, inaction can be flexible. If there is a fixed point in action, then it cannot be inaction.” Lü Wang heard this and knew that Xi Bo really did have compassion for the people and didn't want any profit from the Shang Dynasty's world. Thereupon, Lü Wang and Xi Bo finally made the State of Zhou prosperous and powerful.

This conclusion of the chapter goes to the heart of the difficulty of Wu Nengzi's thought. If life and death are the same and material suffering is just an illusion, then being attached to opposing all government is also an illusion. In the end, for Wu Nengzi, one *can* try to help people by trying to govern them, but only as long as one has no desire to dominate them and no illusions about the ultimate worth of government. One then could wonder whether Wu Nengzi's prior condemnation of all government and his ridicule of the idea of benevolent rule for the benefit of people completely fall apart. If nothing matters, so too does opposition to the state not matter. Perhaps we could use contemporary language to say that Wu Nengzi would not oppose intellectuals taking part in government as long as they have a stance of ironic detachment while they are governing.

In the rest of Part 2, Wu Nengzi turns the tables on both famous officials and famous recluses in Chinese history, making both look ridiculous for seeking virtue and fame either by holding office and great wealth or by becoming hermits. Both are deluded, he seems to be saying, if they think they have found the truth. It is being attached to any desires that leads people astray, whether the desire is to hold high office or to hold a reputation as an honest recluse. Standing by itself, this message would not depart very much from the ideas of earlier Daoist anarchists, especially those of the poet Ruan Ji. As we saw in Chapter 2, in his great poem "The Biography of Master Great Man," Ruan Ji's hero answered the Confucian gentlemen who came to him to criticize his "immoral" behavior of not dressing properly or seeking high office by comparing these men ambitious to serve nobly in high office to lice who inhabit a pair of trousers. Ruan Ji goes on to make the argument, echoed by Bao Jingyan, that it would be better if there were no offices and honors to seek than to resign office from an immoral government. Wu Nengzi likewise criticizes the idea of serving in government for noble reasons, more cynically than Ruan Ji or Bao Jingyan, and goes on to argue that serving in office is nevertheless not to be condemned if one has no illusions about the morality of serving. In Chapter 6 of Part 2, he has two officials discuss retiring from high office after achieving success for their king. The first official cannot imagine retiring at the point of their highest achievement, while the other warns that the king will now only be jealous of their success if they stick around:

... because he hated the state of Wu, [the king] employed you and me in order to use our schemes. You and I benefitted from the pay and therefore we schemed against Wu [for the king], and we [can] take as a sign of our success, the destruction of the people, and as payback, he gives us our emoluments. The duplicity of people is such that they say that they are like Heaven and Earth's births and killings [and] that they are agents of Heaven and Earth—what sages call getting rid of harm and bringing things to completion, isn't this just a big scam?⁹

In other words, Wu does not really criticize the idea of serving in office nor even the destruction of a whole people for the benefit of a king, but only the idea that the rewards earned by serving the king will last forever or that the government service has some higher purpose.

In Chapter 8 of Part 2, Wu Nengzi tells the story of four famous recluses whom a king tried to entice to join his government, probably in order to demonstrate that the most virtuous officials were willing to serve him. Though they agreed that the emperor was more kind and virtuous than his rivals for power, the four recluses made a cynical conclusion to serve the evil Queen Mother and her henchman the Marquis of Liu, who were scheming to replace the emperor with her son, the Crown Prince.

. . . As for Empress Lu, that woman's nature is cruel and mean, [and] her son Ying is not yet firmly established as the crown prince, so she has necessarily been pushed to a crisis. In crisis, she has come seeking us; the peaceful resolution of the crisis depends on us. If she seeks us but does not get us, she will necessarily bring disaster upon us, therefore we must answer yes to her.

Thus the four former recluses agreed to do the dirty work of the Empress and the Marquis, to the point where her son ascended the throne and her enemies were eliminated. At that point the four men refused her offer of further honors and returned to their reclusion. We should note again that this chapter does not criticize the idea of serving in government, even serving obviously power-hungry nobles and officials at the expense of more high-minded rulers. The only thing being criticized is the belief that either serving or not serving in office can ever demonstrate moral virtue.

This cynical attitude is perhaps why Hsiao Kung-chuan claims that in the end Wu Nengzi's thought is nothing more than "a pure negation without any suggestion as to what is to be done or what shall take the place of the state" and thus demonstrates that Chinese Daoist anarchism is merely a "doctrine of despair" rather than one of hope as in Western anarchism.¹⁰ As we saw in the first chapter, Peter Zarrow thinks that Hsiao unfairly characterizes Daoist anarchists as a whole, some of whom did possess an "alternative social vision" if not a theory of revolution; nevertheless, Zarrow does accept that Wu Nengzi is an exception to other radical Daoists and is closer to a "total cynic than a constructive social thinker."¹¹ Similarly, Germaine Hoston thinks his cynical attitude marks Wu Nengzi's thought as nihilistic.¹²

In Part 3 of the *Wunengzi*, the author speaks more in his own name and says things more directly. His main point is still that people should have no intentionality, and Wu Nengzi continues to interpret the Daoist principle of *wuwei* as taking no *intentional* action out of a desire for personal or social benefit, except perhaps for the benefit of continuing to live, which would seem to be an obvious contradiction to having no desire. Nevertheless, in other chapters Wu Nengzi disparages even the desire for health and long life.

Perhaps he is arguing that having no intention and having no desire is not always the same thing. In Chapter 2 of the third book Wu Nengzi answers a friend who came to him asking about whether to accept another friend's offer to serve in office by saying that taking office is not against the principle of *wuwei* as long as one has no intentionality (*youxin*) or desire to get ahead.

... when the situation is favourable then it is permissible to provide aid to the world. Therefore the emperors Yao and Shun didn't decline the office of emperor. In both cases [the hermits and the emperors] were united in having no intentionality.

Thus Wu Nengzi concludes this chapter on a very Confucian note, even to the point of accepting the official Confucian model heroes Yao and Shun and the Duke of Zhou. Taking away all intentionality and all illusions about trying to rule for the benefit of the people, he seems to be saying, might sometimes allow not just for serving in government but, in the end, even for ruling in ways that would benefit oneself and others, although only if one does not have the desire or intention to benefit people at the outset.

If this conclusion is valid, then one might obviously ask if anything at all is left of Wu Nengzi's anarchism. After all, the minimal definition of anarchism offered at the outset of this book is that the state is unnecessary, harmful, and dangerous. Though some Western anarchists, most famously Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, at some points accepted service in the state, perhaps for tactical or limited reasons, as also, for example, some of the anarchists who cooperated with the Republican side in the Spanish civil war, most modern anarchists would point out the obvious contradictions even for tactical or temporary compromises with the state, since the main anarchist principle is that the state's very nature as a monopolistic operation will eventually lead it to dominate other interests, including those of class, interest group, gender, or ethnicity. If there is something in even the radical side of philosophical Daoism that would excuse state service, then it would seem the possibilities for Daoist anarchism are severely compromised, to say the least.

More Narrow Problem: Is All Daoism Nihilism?

As we saw in earlier chapters, at other times in preimperial and early imperial China, individuals justified or excused service in the state using Daoist principles. If we can find some common shift in language or rhetoric among those who used Daoist terms to justify rule, perhaps we can determine whether those thinkers who remained ostensibly loyal to the anarchistic side of Daoist thought shared a common flaw or whether those who accommodated themselves to rule introduced changes in Daoist

thought not shared by radical Daoist thinkers, and perhaps not shared in the original Daoist texts such as the *DDJ* and the *Zhuangzi*. To review what we found in earlier chapters, the three most important times earlier in Chinese history when thinkers used Daoism to justify or acquiesce in rule included the early years of the former Han dynasty (ca. 202 BCE–9 CE), the first generation of the revival of philosophical Daoism at the end of the later Han dynasty (ca. 220 CE), and the third generation of neo-Daoists at the beginning of the Wei-Jin period (ca. 220–300's CE).

In the early Han dynasty, intellectuals were casting around for a suitable legitimating ideology of rule for the Han leaders, given that the previously prevailing ideology of Legalism had been discredited by the harsh rule of the Qin dynasty that the Han had recently overthrown. For a relatively short time, Daoism seemed to gain ascendancy at the Han court. The basic argument of these court Daoists was that the Han regime ruled lightly, with less harsh taxes and less need for military repression compared to the Qin and so could be said to be like the ideal ruler in the received *DDJ* who is unseen and unfelt by the people. This use of concepts in the *DDJ* to justify rule perhaps came from what is known as the “Huang-Lao” tradition, which combined the mythical Yellow emperor with a deified Lao Zi (the legendary author of the *DDJ*). Most famously, in one of the silk manuscripts unearthed near the village of Mawangdui in Hunan province in 1973 from a tomb that had been sealed in 168 BCE,¹³ the author argues that a ruler in touch with the *dao*, or the Way, should be able to know what is needed and how to get others to accept his rule:

Therefore only Sages are able to discern [the *dao*] in the Formless,
And hear it in the Soundless.
And knowing the reality of its emptiness,
They can become totally empty,
And then be absorbed in the purses essence of Heaven-and-Earth.
Absorbed and merged without any gaps,
Pervasive and united without filling it up.

Fully to acquiesce to this Way:
This is called ‘being able to be purified.’
The lucid are inherently able to discern the ultimate.
They know what others are unable to know,
And acquiesce to what others are unable to attain.
This is called ‘discerning the normative and knowing the ultimate.’

If sage kings make use of this,
All-under-Heaven will acquiesce.

...

One who is truly able to be without desires
 Can give commands to the people.
 If the one above truly acts without striving
 Then all living things will be completely at peace.¹⁴

The first change one can discern in early Han Daoism from ideas in the received *DDJ* and the *Zhuangzi*, texts that were used by later Wei-Jin Daoist anarchists to deny the need for all rule, is the Han thinkers' confidence that the *dao* can be known and interpreted by the sages or even one sage-ruler and applied to others. The second, related shift concerns the blowing up of the concepts of nothingness (*wu*) and the emptiness or void at the heart of the universe.

The most famous version of this Daoist justification of rule in the early Han, we saw in Chapter 1, was the text known as the *Huainanzi*, which was presented to the future Han emperor Wu (r.141–187 CE) in 139 BCE as a preferred method of rule that would help justify his regime. The authors of this text continue to use the principle of non-action or doing nothing (*wuwei*) found in the *DDJ* but now interpret it not as calling for anarchy, but as favoring a ruler in touch with the *dao* who rules by emptying his mind and limiting his and his subjects' desires.¹⁵ Roger Ames argues, however, that in practice the authors of this text were trying to subvert rule and get the king to rule in a less overbearing manner and thus continue to be influenced by the anarchist side of Daoism.¹⁶ We asked above whether an anarchist-influenced observer would instead conclude that these intellectuals' attempt to soften Han rule was in practice overwhelmed by their participation in aiding the state's legitimation. In any case, it is the shift toward the belief in one or a few sages knowing how to interpret the *dao* for others based on a *dao* that is equated with nothingness that allows for the justification of rule.

In the end, of course, the state eventually abandoned most claims to follow Daoist principles when the Han dynasty gradually had to rule more directly and forcefully as more officials and their families became tax exempt, public works needed to be repaired, and armies replenished to fight nomadic invaders and internal rebels. As a result, the Han eventually turned to a new synthesis of Confucian doctrines as its main legitimating ideology.

The second major period when philosophical Daoism was put in the service of rule was in the early Wei-Jin period (ca. 220 BCE–62 CE). As we saw in the first chapter, at this time, after the fall of the later Han dynasty and the beginning of a long period of political disunity in imperial China, some of the intellectual figures around the legendary general Cao Cao (155–220), who was seeking ways to legitimate his rule as the leader of a would-be new imperial Wei dynasty, returned to the received *DDJ* to try to find ways to justify his rule. The Daoist-influenced intellectuals serving him also returned to the idea of *wu* or nothingness as the main principle of Daoism. According to this version, all things in the universe come not from an underlying unity

in the world but from nothing. All actions should be carried out according to a principle of spontaneity (*ziran*), but for these Daoist advisors there was nothing wrong in principle with the idea of rule. Thus Cao Cao's rise from a person of low birth to that of possible emperor was the rise of a ruler coming "out of nowhere." Cao Cao's apologists used this version of philosophical Daoism against the rival Sima clan, who came from the higher class of land-owning gentry and whose preferred ideology of rule lay in the Confucian doctrine of the time known as *mingjiao*, or "teaching of names."¹⁷ Against this doctrine, the apologists for Cao Cao used Daoism to provide an ideological justification for a new type of government based on people "arising out of nowhere" based on their ability, especially in military campaigns, instead of the *mingjiao* praise for rulers with family connections within the old aristocracy. Thus, Richard Mather argues, these Wei official intellectuals emphasized Daoist concepts of "naturalness" [*ziran*] and 'non-actuality' [*wu*] against "the [Confucian] shibboleths of the old aristocracy concerning 'goodness and morality,' [*ren-yi*] 'loyalty and filial submission' [*zhong-xiao*] . . ." not in order to call for anarchism, but instead to justify Cao Cao's rule.¹⁸

As we noted in the first chapter, Daoism was only one of many philosophical strands picked up by Cao Cao's coterie, who also borrowed concepts from Legalism and even Confucianism to justify his rule. In this synthesis, some intellectuals claimed that Confucius was a better sage than Lao Zi as in the following exchange from the biography of the noted Wei philosopher Wang Bi (226–249):

[As Pei Hui asked Wang] "Nothing (*wu*) is, in truth what the myriad things depend on for existence, yet the sage (Confucius) was unwilling to talk about it, while Master Lao expounded upon it endlessly. Why is that?" Wang Bi replied, "the sage embodied nothing (*wu*), so he also knew that it could not be explained in words. Thus he did not talk about it. Master Lao, by contrast, operated on a level of being (*you*). That is why he constantly discussed nothingness; he had to, for what he said about it always fell short."¹⁹

This elevation of Confucius above Lao Zi by the neo-Daoist intellectuals around Cao Cao mirrors their elevation of sages who rule over those who refuse to participate in rule, reversing the praise of the latter type of sages found most famously in the *Zhuangzi* that the full-fledged Daoist anarchists Ruan Ji and Bao Jingyan had copied.

We saw in Chapter 1 that only after the Wei rulers were overthrown by the Sima clan, who founded the Jin dynasty, did some of the descendants of the Wei intellectuals turn philosophical Daoism into a doctrine opposing all rule, as reflected in the ideas of the poet Ruan Ji and the thinker Bao Jingyan. But as the Jin dynasty itself broke down into infighting among royal princes and as northern nomadic groups moved into northern China and the

political situation became even more chaotic at the end of the Wei-Jin era of the Six Dynasties period (220–589), Daoist-influenced intellectuals and members of the upper classes turned neo-Daoism once again into a nihilistic doctrine. As Balazs puts it,

What had been, with men [of the second generation of anti-statist neo-Daoists] a high state of tension that was part of a serious effort to transcend human limitations, relapsed into mere abandonment of the ordinary decencies of life. The frenzied attempt at emancipation had turned into wanton frivolity, the cry of cynical revolt to cynical acceptance, liberty to libertinage.²⁰

Men of this third generation of neo-Daoists once again began to justify government service as being in line with *ziran* or spontaneity, based again on the idea of *wu* or nothingness as the basis of the *dao*.

What all three prior instances of Daoist anarchism turning into nihilism share then, is the emphasis on the universe as based on nothing and the idea of the superior ability of properly detached sages to realize this and to interpret principles for others without getting sullied or corrupted by rule. Of course Wu Nengzi shares at least the former belief, and implicitly the latter in his claim that the truly enlightened sage knows when serving in government is folly and when it is permissible. The shift in emphasis in all these instances was literally from everything to nothing, that is, from the belief in an overarching unity of the universe that cannot be objectively known and applied by some to rule over others to the idea that everything that seemingly exists comes from nothing and thus that there were no a priori principles that would make all rule illegitimate. The shift in all instances was also from the idea of rejecting all participation in government as inherently corrupting to the idea that the wisest people with the coolest attitude of detachment could have the superior knowledge and ability to allow them to acquiesce in rule, or even to rule over others themselves, without being corrupted.

The flaw then, is not in the Daoist principle of *wuwei* itself but in the denial of any preexisting overarching principle underlying the unity of existence and equality of all things. What is also missing from those Daoists who justified rule and service in government is any true belief in human equality and freedom for all, not just for superior sages, despite the talk of favoring all equally in *Wunengzi* Book 1, Chapter 5 that we examined above.

Larger Problem: Is Postmodern Anarchism Nihilism?

The larger problem presented by the breakdown of Daoist anarchism in the thought of Wu Nengzi into passive nihilism is the lesson for postmodernist thought, especially those postmodernists who call themselves anarchists.

Anarchists up to the postmodernist period would reject the classic conservative critique that by denying the existence of preexisting standards of morality, all anarchism is nihilism in the end. This conservative stance is perhaps most cogently summarized by Fyodor Dostoevsky's claim that "once God is abolished, anything is possible" and in his denunciation of early Russian revolutionaries as immoral nihilists too easily duped by power hungry would-be supermen, such as Sergei Nechaev, the associate of Michael Bakunin and the basis for the character of Pyotr Verkhovetsky in Dostoevsky's novel *The Devils*.²¹ Classic anarchists, most notably Peter Kropotkin, are more easily able to reject this critique in their claim that there is a natural underlying morality of humans based on human evolution, a morality that existed prior to the establishment of organized religion and the state.²²

Many postmodernist thinkers, on the other hand, would seem more open to the organic conservative critique to the extent that they accept the premise that all "meta-narratives" meant to explain the world and give people a guide to action are inherently just constructions of new forms of domination that stand in the way of liberatory goals. While they claim to deny any overarching "meta-narrative" as valid for all other people, one must ask whether postmodernist anarchists reserve for themselves the right to be critical of all other narratives while preserving their own ideas as something other than a true narrative. Even if they claim their own approach is not a meta-narrative but only a stance of "ironic detachment," then one could argue that this stance too easily smacks of intellectual superiority.

While they clearly remain within the tradition of classical anarchists who viewed all religious and political doctrines as attempts to enslave people with metaphysical or real authority, one must ask whether postmodernist anarchists go further to deny the existence of all truth, even truth that cannot be known objectively or imposed on others. If so, as asked by many critics about postmodernism, how is one to criticize any political doctrine or state as evil, even fascist states? This charge was most famously and, perhaps for postmodernists, most infuriatingly raised by Richard Wolin who examines the collaborationist and even fascist background of some of the seminal postmodernist thinkers in order to expose flaws in postmodernist thought as a whole.²³ While those who want to find a genuine liberatory critique in postmodernism may decry his attack as relying almost completely on guilt by association, perhaps it is too easy for postmodernist anarchists to make this charge and ignore the need for serious self-examination. It seems obvious to this author that the move among Daoist thinkers such as Wu Nengzi from pacifist anarchism to passive nihilism was based on a similar shift in emphasis from the nonexistence of hierarchical distinctions to the nonexistence of everything.

This charge of nihilism against postmodernist and/or "lifestyle" anarchists who think their intellectual stance alone will serve to achieve

anarchism may be the opposite side of the coin of those who find Daoist anarchism a mystical doctrine that relies on a supernatural authority and is thus inherently un-anarchist, a view of Daoism with which this author obviously strongly disagrees.²⁴ Even if Daoists believe in the existence of an overarching, undifferentiated whole, they would deny that one can objectively reconstruct that whole for others. More dangerous, a Daoist anarchist would argue, is any doctrine based on the idea that some may know objective truths better than other people and thus also when to apply those truths on behalf of others, which may too easily lead to would-be anarchists acquiescing and even participating in establishing authority over fellow humans. Only by embracing the whole, not denying its existence, a Daoist anarchist would argue—that is, by accepting the underlying unity and thus equality of all things, even if by its very nature that whole cannot be hierarchically organized—can one stay loyal to a fully anarchist vision.

Nevertheless, perhaps given the difficulty radical Daoists faced in order to survive and publish their works, not to mention the degradation of radical Daoist ideas in works such as the *Wunengzi*, the idea of Daoist anarchists as passive escapists survived in Chinese culture to the point that, as we will see in the next chapter, most participants in the twentieth-century Chinese anarchist movement declined to accept Daoist anarchism as a worthy predecessor.

Notes

- 1 See Germaine Hoston, *The State, Identity, and the National Question in China and Japan*, 158–9; Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, 10–11; and Gotelind Müller, *China, Kropotkin und der Anarchismus*, 116–18.
- 2 Hsiao Kung-chuan, “Anarchism in Chinese Political Thought,” 251–63.
- 3 See Alfred Forke, *Geschichte der Mittelalterlichen Mittelalterlichen Chinesischen Philosophie*, 330–2; and Gert Naundorf, *Aspekte Des Anarchischen Gedankens in China: Darstellung der Lehre und Übersetzung des Texts Wu Neng Tzu*.
- 4 For a modern reprint of the classical text, see Wang Ming, compiler, *Wunengzi jiao shu*.
- 5 Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness*, 139.
- 6 See, for example, Holzman, *Poetry and Politics*, 190.
- 7 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Wunengzi* in this chapter come from the first complete English version by the author’s student colleague, Catrina Siu, with editorial assistance from his faculty colleague, Daniel Youd of the Department of Modern Languages at Beloit College, which is published in its entirety in Appendix 1 of this book.
- 8 See Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 147.
- 9 Translated in Holzman, 192–5.
- 10 Hsiao, *History of Chinese Political Thought I*, 260.

- 11 Zarrow, 10, 262, n. 23.
- 12 Hoston, 159.
- 13 For an account of the discovery of this manuscript, see Wm. Theodore deBary and Irene Bloom (trans. and compilers), *Sources of Chinese Tradition, vol. 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*, 241–2.
- 14 Translated in deBary and Bloom, 254–5.
- 15 In their introduction to Liu An, King of Huainan, *The Huainanzi*, 27–32, the translators discuss the differing views of scholars (including the translators themselves) as to whether the text should be considered Daoist or some kind of eclectic mix. In either case, the text certainly contains and adapts Daoist themes related to governance.
- 16 Ames, *The Art of Rulership*, 46, 148.
- 17 See Balazs, 234–5.
- 18 Mather, “The Controversy over Conformity and Naturalness,” 161, 163.
- 19 In the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*, translated in de Bary and Bloom, 385.
- 20 Balazs, 247.
- 21 The title of this novel has also been translated as *The Possessed* and more recently, by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky as *Demons*, who note in their foreword, vii–viii, that Dostoevsky based the character of Verkhovensky on Nechaev and his actions in the actual murder of the fellow revolutionary Sergei Ivanov.
- 22 Kropotkin expressed this idea of a naturally existing human morality most famously in his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* and also in his unfinished but posthumously published work, *Ethics: Origin and Development*.
- 23 See Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*.
- 24 A charge made against Daoism by Janet Biehl, an associate of Murray Bookchin and the Social Ecology school, in exchanges with this author on the Research on Anarchism (RA-L) listserv. Biehl’s charge against Daoism as a “supernatural” or “mystical” authority was in her “Re: Comment on Bookchin,” Part 2, September 30, 1998, and “Reply to Rapp,” Parts 1 and 2, October 22, 1998, which no longer seem to be in the RA-L archives; this author’s original post on October 2, 1998 and his rejoinder to Biehl’s critique on October 28, 1998 can be found at www.zpub.com/notes/JohnRapp.html and www.zpub.com/notes/JohnRapp.html respectively. Though both posts contain a rather unrefined view of the split between religious and philosophical Daoism, the main point that one does not have to take a “mystical” interpretation of the classical Daoist texts as appealing to “supernatural authority” still applies.