

Life and Death in Laozi and Zhuangzi: Comparative Perspectives and Contemporary Significance

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Abstract: Life and death are among the ultimate questions of human existence. Within pre-Qin Daoist thought, Laozi and Zhuangzi approach these questions from a distinctive perspective marked by detachment, naturalness, and spiritual freedom. Through close textual comparison, this paper examines the similarities and differences between their views from the dual perspectives of life and death. It argues that both thinkers adopt a transcendent attitude toward death, oppose the damage to life caused by excessive desire, anxiety, and rigidity, and advocate material moderation together with spiritual cultivation in accordance with nature. At the same time, they differ significantly in their understanding of the unity of life and death and in the role of *qi* in explaining the life-death process. In the context of intensifying social competition and hyper-competition, the Lao-Zhuang philosophy of life and death retains important contemporary significance by helping individuals move beyond utilitarian obsessions, alleviate existential anxiety, and cultivate more natural ways of preserving life.

Keywords: Laozi; Zhuangzi; Daoism; Life and death; Qi; Contemporary significance

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1. Introduction

Life and death constitute a momentous and unavoidable issue in people's existence. They mark not only the end of individual life but also the starting point for understanding the meaning of life. People's attitudes toward life and death shape not only their mindset at the end of life but also their daily value choices and behaviors. Among the pre-Qin thinkers, the Daoist school, represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, confronted life and death with a detached and open-minded attitude. Compared with the relatively restrained treatment of death in early Confucian texts, and with the Mohist emphasis on frugal funerary practices and beliefs concerning ghosts and spirits, Daoist thinkers integrated life and death into the broader process of natural transformation. Today, as social competition intensifies and involution prevails, individuals often lose sight of

the authentic essence of life in the relentless pursuit of utility. Revisiting the wisdom of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and re-examining the relationship among life, death, and existence, can help settle restless minds and foster a healthy conception of life. Therefore, this paper aims, on the one hand, to compare the similarities and differences between Laozi's and Zhuangzi's views on life and death, and on the other, to explore their practical implications for contemporary human conditions.

2. Similarities between Laozi's and Zhuangzi's views on life and death

2.1. Detachment toward Death: Death as a natural process, and opposition to death caused by violating one's true nature

Both Laozi and Zhuangzi maintain a detached attitude toward death, viewing it as a natural and spontaneous process rather than a fearsome calamity. However, this detachment does not imply passive resignation. On the contrary, both explicitly oppose unnatural deaths resulting from human-induced violations of one's innate nature. In their view, there are three primary ways in which life is damaged and death accelerated.

First, the erosion of the body by excessive material desires. Laozi states: "The five colors blind the eyes; the five tones deafen the ears; the five flavors dull the palate; racing and hunting madden the mind; rare goods corrupt the conduct" (*Laozi*, chapter 12) ^[1]. In his view, excessive sensory stimulation, though momentarily pleasurable, ultimately damages sight, hearing, taste, and even the mind—a gain that is not worth the loss. Zhuangzi similarly says: "Those with deep desires have shallow heavenly endowment" (*Zhuangzi*, "The Great and Venerable Teacher") ^[2]. Once desires run deep, they obscure the authentic "heavenly endowment" of life, trapping people in petty gains while neglecting higher life potentials. Both agree that inflated material desires are the first snare that harms life.

Second, the disturbance of the mind by excessive anxieties. In facing gains and losses, honors and disgraces, people commonly "are startled by favor and disgrace, and regard great troubles as their own persons" — "startled when gaining, startled when losing" (*Laozi*, chapter 13) ^[1]. Such a mentality, Laozi holds, only deepens one's predicament and prevents inner peace. Zhuangzi further observes: "Human life is born together with worry. The long-lived are muddled; if they live long in worry, what misery!" (*Zhuangzi*, "Perfect Happiness") ^[2]. Truly long-lived people are not free from worries, but they know how to live in a "muddled" way, remaining unentangled in trivial troubles and thus spending their lives contentedly. As a common folk saying goes, "Eat and sleep without a care."—a folk saying that accords with the Daoist principle of dispelling worries to nourish life. If one is constantly trapped in fear and anxiety, life's suffering knows no end; conversely, treating matters with tolerance and open-mindedness can greatly reduce mental attrition.

Third, lack of adaptability leading to perilous situations. Laozi points out: "Coming out into life, entering into death. Those who are companions of life are three in ten; those who are companions of death are three in ten; and those who by their activities move toward the place of death are also three in ten" (*Laozi*, chapter 50) ^[1]. Many do not even realize why they fall into desperate straits; the root cause is that "the rigid and strong belong to the companions of death"—excessive obstinacy and a lack of adaptive flexibility. Zhuangzi elaborates through specific examples: Boyi and Shuqi declined the throne and starved to death on Mount Shouyang; Bao Jiao, self-righteous and critical of the world, died embracing a tree; Shen Tudi, failing to remonstrate with his lord, drowned himself with a stone; Jie Zitui, who cut his own thigh to feed his lord, was finally burned to death; Weisheng, keeping his word, clung to a pillar and drowned when the flood came

(*Zhuangzi*, “The Robber Zhi”) ^[2]. In Zhuangzi’s view, though each of these six had moral integrity, they “valued reputation over life and neglected the cultivation of their natural lifespan”—lacking the wisdom of flexibility, they ended their lives in meaningless ways. Here, Laozi and Zhuangzi concur that rigidity and obstinacy, with no capacity for adaptation, are another source of unnatural death.

2.2. Valuing life through compliance: Not deliberate life-nurturing, but preserving innate nature

Regarding “life,” neither Laozi nor Zhuangzi advocates deliberately “nurturing life” through purposeful efforts; instead, they emphasize preserving life by conforming to one’s natural endowment. Below, the study elaborates from both material and spiritual dimensions.

On the one hand, reduce material desires and attain contentment. Laozi asks: “Fame or life, which is dearer? Life or goods, which is more important? Gain or loss, which is more harmful?” (*Laozi*, chapter 44) ^[1]. Compared with external fame and wealth, life itself is clearly more intimate and essential. His answer: “Excessive affection must cost great expense; abundant hoarding must entail heavy loss. Knowing contentment avoids disgrace; knowing where to stop avoids danger—thus one can endure long” (*Laozi*, chapter 44) ^[1]. In material terms, Laozi advocates “filling the belly,” “strengthening the bones,” “sweetening the food”—satisfying basic needs without craving excess; what matters is the ease and comfort of the body and mind. Zhuangzi is even more explicit in his disdain for fame and profit. While fishing by the Pu River, the king of Chu sent two high officials to invite him to court. Zhuangzi, without turning his head, used the metaphor of the sacred tortoise: “Would it rather be dead and have its bones honored? Or would it rather be alive and drag its tail in the mud?” The officials replied: “It would rather be alive and drag its tail in the mud.” Zhuangzi said: “Go away! I will drag my tail in the mud” (*Zhuangzi*, “Autumn Floods”) ^[2]. This celebrated anecdote vividly demonstrates that Zhuangzi regards the freedom of life itself as the highest value, not external honor.

On the other hand, Laozi emphasizes spiritual cultivation. Laozi proposes “attaining the ultimate emptiness, and abiding in profound stillness” (*Laozi*, chapter 16)—through quiet and introspective cultivation, one calms the mind, thereby “observing the return” of all things to their root, perceiving the “constant Dao,” and nourishing life according to this constant Dao ^[1]. Zhuangzi, instead, focuses on adjusting one’s attitude toward death to nurture the spirit. He advocates “not rejoicing in life, not regarding death as a calamity,” and “letting no fear of life or death enter one’s breast” (*Zhuangzi*, “Autumn Floods”) ^[2]. One need not be overly delighted by life nor view death as a disaster. One who truly excels in nourishing life abides in a “muddled” state, undisturbed by external things and untroubled by the fear of death, thereby preserving life from unnatural attrition and allowing it to fulfill its natural span.

3. Differences between Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s views on life and death

Although Laozi and Zhuangzi share a high degree of congruence in their fundamental orientations, they diverge profoundly on several key theoretical issues, mainly in the following two aspects.

3.1. Different understandings of the unity of life and death

For Laozi, “life” and “death” are not explicitly treated as an integrated whole. The issue of “life” is mainly linked to cosmogony. He says: “There is a thing undifferentiated, born before heaven and earth” (*Laozi*,

chapter 25)^[1]; “The myriad things in the world are born from Being, and Being is born from Non-being” (*Laozi*, chapter 40)^[1]. The “undifferentiated thing” and “Non-being” both refer to the Dao, intended to elucidate the process whereby the Dao, from formlessness to form, generates the myriad things. The issue of “death,” however, is more connected to Laozi’s socio-political concerns. Laozi criticizes rulers who “wear embroidered robes, carry sharp swords, are surfeited with food and drink, and possess more wealth and goods than they need” (*Laozi*, chapter 53), as well as a social order that “takes from those who have not enough in order to give to those who have too much” (*Laozi*, chapter 77). Under such conditions, the people may come to “not fear death” (*Laozi*, chapter 74) and even to “make light of death,” because those in power consume an excessive share of their livelihood through taxation (*Laozi*, chapter 75).^[1] To this end, Laozi proposes the ideal of a “small state with few people,” hoping to achieve a tranquil situation where “the people value death and do not migrate far” (*Laozi*, chapter 80)^[1]. Thus, Laozi’s discussions of life and death are more embedded in the political philosophy of governing the state and securing the people, and do not treat life and death themselves as an internally unified ontological issue.

Zhuangzi, by contrast, explicitly combines life and death into a unified discourse, emphasizing their oneness. First, he uses the metaphor of bodily organs: “Taking Non-being as the head, life as the body, death as the rump – who knows the unity of being and Non-being, life and death?” (*Zhuangzi*, “Gengsang Chu”)^[2]. He compares life and death to different parts of the same body, pointing out that they are two sides of one whole. Second, Zhuangzi considers life and death as the inherent finitude of physical things: “The Dao has no beginning or end; things have life and death” (*Zhuangzi*, “Autumn Floods”)^[2]. For human beings, “The great mass of nature gives me this form, toils me with life, eases me with old age, and gives me rest with death” (*Zhuangzi*, “The Great and Venerable Teacher”)^[2]. Birth, aging, illness, and death are all natural rhythms bestowed by creation. Finally, Zhuangzi uses a series of vivid metaphors to dissolve the gap between life and death: “Life and death are as day and night” (*Zhuangzi*, “Perfect Happiness”)^[2]; “Life floats like a drift, death rests like a repose” (*Zhuangzi*, “Ingrained Ideas”)^[2]. By likening life and death to the alternation of day and night, or floating and resting, the gravity of death is absorbed into the ordinary flow of natural transformation.

3.2. Different conceptions of the relationship between *qi* and life and death

Laozi was the first to introduce the concept of *qi* philosophically, using it to describe the concrete process by which the Dao generates the myriad things, but he did not directly link *qi* to the issue of life and death. He says: “The Dao produces One, One produces Two, Two produces Three, Three produces the myriad things. The myriad things carry the Yin and embrace the Yang, and the rushing *qi* harmonizes them” (*Laozi*, chapter 42)^[1]. Here, “One,” “Two,” and “Three” can be interpreted as the original chaotic *qi*, then the Yin-Yang *qi*, then the harmonized *qi* that generates all things. *Qi* here is mainly a cosmological constituent. Besides, Laozi mentions “concentrating the *qi* and achieving suppleness—can one be like an infant?” (*Laozi*, chapter 10) and “letting the mind direct the *qi* is called strength” (*Laozi*, chapter 55) — the former speaks of nurturing internal *qi* to reach a gentle state, the latter warns against using the mind to force *qi* and become overbearing—but both pertain to self-cultivation methods and do not enter the ontological dimension of life and death^[1].

Zhuangzi, building on Laozi’s *qi* theory, explicitly introduces *qi* into the explanation of life and death, thereby establishing a *qi*-transformation view of life and death. He states directly: “Human life

is the gathering of *qi*. Gathering gives life; dispersing gives death” (*Zhuangzi*, “Knowledge Wandered North”) ^[2]. Life and death are no longer two utterly different states but two manifestations of the same process of *qi* condensation and dissipation. When Zhuangzi’s wife died, Hui Shi came to console, but Zhuangzi sat singing with a basin. His reason: “In the midst of the dim and obscure, change produced *qi*; *qi* changed into form; form changed into life; and now it changes again into death. This is like the succession of the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter” (*Zhuangzi*, “Perfect Happiness”) ^[2]. Here, the process of *qi* transformation is endowed with the naturalness and necessity of seasonal succession. Death is no longer a rupture of life but a transformation and return to life’s form. By incorporating life and death into the flow of *qi*’s gathering and dispersal, Zhuangzi not only dispels the fear of death but also greatly elevates life’s openness and ease.

4. Contemporary significance of the Lao-Zhuang views on life and death

The Lao-Zhuang views on life and death occupy a distinctive place in traditional Chinese thought. Unlike Confucius’s saying, “Not yet understanding life, how can we understand death?”—which leaves the matter aside—Laozi and Zhuangzi chose to face death directly and naturalize it as part of the whole of life. Especially in Zhuangzi’s view, life and death are understood as the gathering and dispersing of *qi*, the rotation of the four seasons; life does not truly vanish but continues in another form within the great transformation. This view philosophically dissolves the ultimate fear of death and, on the practical level, offers wisdom for settling the body and mind in contemporary times.

Today, social competition is ferocious, involution intensifies, and fast-paced life, endless utilitarian rivalry, and persistent mental attrition have become the norm. Many fall into a vicious cycle of chasing fame and profit, constantly overdrawing their physical and mental health for worldly achievements, status, and wealth. Psychological and physiological problems—anxiety, depression, burnout, and suboptimal health—proliferate. Some even suffer self-doubt and mental collapse due to excessive involution, forgetting the intrinsic value and meaning of life—precisely falling into the predicament that Laozi described as “valuing external things over life itself.” At such a time, the Lao-Zhuang attitude of detachment, calmness, and conformity to nature reveals its invaluable inspirational significance.

First, the Lao-Zhuang view of life and death helps contemporary people break free from utilitarian fixations and establish a clear understanding of life’s value. Today’s involution, in essence, ties life’s meaning too tightly to external systems of evaluation, leading to constant self-exhaustion in comparison and pursuit. Laozi admonishes: “Knowing contentment avoids disgrace; knowing where to stop avoids danger—thus one can endure long.” (*Laozi*, chapter 44) ^[1]. Zhuangzi’s carefree “dragging the tail in the mud” (*Zhuangzi*, “Autumn Floods”) reminds people that life’s core value lies not in external gains or losses, but in inner peace and the preservation of one’s true nature ^[2]. People do not have to strive for the lead in everything, nor compete with others in every dimension. Appropriate trade-offs and clear-headed restraint can break the cycle of inner depletion and restore life to a relaxed and self-consistent authentic state.

Second, the Lao-Zhuang view of life and death helps contemporary people alleviate existential anxieties and cultivate a calm and composed mindset toward life. Although modern medical conditions far surpass those of ancient times, people’s fears of aging, accidents, and failure have not decreased; on the contrary, they have become more acute due to information overload. Zhuangzi’s open-mindedness—“life and death are as day and night” (*Zhuangzi*, “Perfect Happiness”) and “gathering of *qi* is life, dispersing is death” (*Zhuangzi*,

“Knowledge Wandered North”)—incorporates death into the natural order, thereby breaking the fixation on life’s finality ^[2]. This wisdom enlightens people: the gains and losses, prosperity and decline, beginning and end of life are all part of nature’s rhythm and need not cause excessive anxiety. Instead of being uneasy about an unpredictable future, people should live in the present, cherish the moment, and face life’s ups and downs with a broad heart.

Third, the Lao-Zhuang view of life and death guides contemporary people to practice natural ways of nurturing life, safeguarding both physical and mental health. In the era of involution, many sacrifice their bodies and rest to chase short-term gains—a self-defeating strategy. Laozi and Zhuangzi advocate conforming to one’s nature, preserving stillness in the mind, and nourishing life through non-action, offering a sustainable path for life-nurturing. In daily life, people should abandon extreme, self-destructive lifestyles, follow the rhythms of life, keep regular hours, and balance work and rest. In the spiritual dimension, people should emulate Laozi’s cultivation of “attaining utmost emptiness and abiding in profound stillness”—calming the restless mind and reducing unnecessary worries and attachments. Only in a state of material contentment and spiritual purity can individuals achieve genuine physical and mental well-being and long-term life development.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s views on life and death show a high degree of congruence in their detached attitude toward death, opposition to violating innate nature, and advocacy of conforming to nature. However, they differ in emphasis on the unity of life and death and the relationship between *qi* and life and death. Laozi’s discourse leans more toward cosmogony and political governance, whereas Zhuangzi develops it into a thorough existential attitude and spiritual cultivation. Despite their divergent paths, their core spirit points to respect for life’s authenticity and compliance with the great transformation of nature. In today’s anxiety-ridden and involution-ridden society, returning to the Lao-Zhuang wisdom on life and death is not an escape from reality but a way to reposition life’s value from a higher perspective, thereby finding inner certainty and composure amidst the hustle and bustle.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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