

Article

The Revival of Confucian Philosophy Through Its Interaction with Daoism: The Case of Sixth-Century *Master Liu (Liuzi)*

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Abstract: This paper offers the first English-language philosophical treatment of *Master Liu (Liuzi 劉子)*—a treatise that gives a unique insight into the intellectual life of sixth-century China. Most probably written by Liu Zhou (d. 565) and known at the Tang court, the work was later neglected due to its eclectic label. This article argues that *Liuzi* integrated Confucian moral philosophy with selected Daoist ideas and responded to post-Buddhist transformations of key categories of Chinese thought in a manner that anticipates many solutions characteristic of neo-Confucian *lixue*. This includes an innovative understanding of such categories as spirit (*shen*) and heart-mind (*xin*), feelings (*qing*) and desires (*yu*), and, finally, reliability (*xin*) and balancing (*quan*).

Keywords: *Liuzi*; Liu Zhou; Sui–Tang transition; Tang Confucianism; Confucian philosophy; medieval China; philosophical anthropology

What is it that makes you gentlemen worried that Confucius' sagely Way will come to an end? It will certainly not come to an end... Affairs do not conform to a constant uniformity. Given that they come to fullness, they must also come to decline. When the decline reaches its limit, then they will become full again. Nowadays the world is in chaotic disarray and has been without the Way for a long time. After a long period of chaos, things must respond by becoming rejuvenated. This rejuvenation relies precisely upon the fact that Confucius' sagely Way will come to an end.

汝何所憂患於孔子聖道亡失乎。必不已失也。言事不常一。有盛必有衰。衰極必盛。當今天下亂離無道已久。久亂必應復興。興之所寄。政當在孔子聖德將喪亡之時也。

Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545), *Elucidation of the Meaning of the Analects (Lunyu yishu 論語義疏)* 324 [as in: (Makeham 2003, p. 142)]



Citation: Rogacz, Dawid. 2024. The Revival of Confucian Philosophy Through Its Interaction with Daoism: The Case of Sixth-Century *Master Liu (Liuzi)*. *Religions* 15: 1437. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121437>

Academic Editor: Friederike Assandri

Received: 30 October 2024
Revised: 21 November 2024
Accepted: 22 November 2024
Published: 27 November 2024



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1. Introduction

The *Master Liu (Liuzi 劉子)* is a ten-scrolls-long philosophical treatise which gives a unique insight into the intellectual life of sixth-century China. As Yuet Keung Lo (2018, p. 179) observes, it is “one of the few extant works from early medieval China that was classified under ‘philosophical writings’,”; however, despite this fact, “the work is hardly mentioned in Western scholarship and is relatively unknown even to Chinese scholars outside the field.” One of the reasons behind this neglect is that since the book’s first mention in imperial bibliographies, it has been classified under “eclectic writings” *zajialei 雜家類*, which downplays the original contributions of the treatise. In addition, persistent controversies over the authorship of the *Master Liu* (albeit, not so much its authenticity) shifted the interest in *Liuzi* in a more philological direction. The only Western monographic study of the *Liuzi*, namely Theresia Arndt’s (1994) *Meister Lius Traktate zur Erneuerung in Krisenzeiten*, also concentrated on a textual analysis of the work.

To date, no academic articles examining the philosophy of *Liuzi* have been published in English. The following paper fills this lacuna in the studies of medieval Chinese thought

and provides Western readers with an account of *Liuzi's* anthropology and ethics. Moving beyond the dismissive and anachronistic labelling of the treatise as “eclectic”, which suggests that this fairly consistent treatise is a loose compilation of unrelated ideas, the article shows how intellectual interactions with Daoism informed and transformed the Confucian (Ruist) conception of spirit, mind, predispositions, feelings, and moral decision-making in a hitherto unknown way. Unlike Chinese scholarship, which focuses on the connections between *Liuzi* and former ‘eclectic’ philosophical writings such as *The Springs and Autumns of Mister Lü* (*Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋) or *Huainanzi* 淮南子, the proposed discussion reads it against the contemporaneous turn in Ruist philosophy, as exemplified by Huang Kan’s 皇侃 (488–545) commentary on *the Analects*, and indicates those elements of Master Liu’s practical philosophy that contributed to the revival of Confucian thought under the Sui and Tang dynasties, or even later, in Neo-Confucian (mostly *lixue* 理學) philosophy.

2. *Liuzi*: The Authorship and Transmission of the Text

The insufficient scholarly interest in the *Liuzi* is disappointing, given the lack of any major concerns over the authenticity of its received version, as we have it today. None of the four (fragmented) manuscripts of the *Liuzi* are later than middle Tang, while the oldest, discovered in the Dunhuang caves, is usually dated back to pre-Tang times (although some recent discussions date it to the reign of Taizong, see [Qin 2021](#)). What is more, *Liuzi* was a fairly popular text in Tang times and was excerpted in Emperor Taizong’s *Di fan* 帝範 (*Paradigms for emperors*), Empress Wu Zetian’s *Chen gui* 臣軌 (*Models for officials*), and Buddhist works ([Lo 2018](#), p. 181). It was most probably during that period that the treatise inspired its first commentary, *Liuzi zhu* 劉子注 by Yuan Xiaozheng 袁孝政. Since the Song dynasty, the text has mostly been known as *Liuzi xinlun* 劉子新論, alternatively identified as *Liuzi* 流子 or *Teachings of Virtue*, *Deyan* 德言. Two Song commentaries on *Liuzi* (three scrolls each) by Xi Keqian 奚克謙 have been lost, and the catalogs from the Song onwards differ in terms of the number of scrolls and the sequence of chapters attributed to *Master Liu* (see [Jiang 2001](#), p. 555). What remains essentially uncontroversial is that, for the most part, the received text of the *Liuzi* comes from the sixth century and speaks to us with a voice of that epoch.

The earliest mention of the *Liuzi* comes from *Jingjizhi* 經籍志—the bibliography from the official dynastic history *Book of Sui* (*Sui shu* 隋書), compiled between 641 and 656, which records that *Liuzi* contained ten scrolls (*juan*) and was written under the Liang 梁 dynasty. The *Jingjizhi* does not mention *Liuzi's* author but points out that the text had been lost. This was not the case for both the *Old Book of Tang* (*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書) and the *New Book of Tang* (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書), which referred to the ten-scrolls-long *Master Liu* as a saved text and, agreeably classifying it under the label of “eclectic” writings, attributed the treatise to Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522). This act of attribution sparked off a debate over the authorship of *Liuzi*, which, having started in Song times, has not ended in the present day.

In general, the attributions considered least credible are those connecting *Master Liu* with Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 (462–521), a Liang dynasty scholar known for his commentary on *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語), and, rather surprisingly and most probably following some editorial slip, Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE). The earliest attributions from both the *Books of Tang* and Huilin’s 慧琳 expanded lexicon of *Pronunciation and Meaning of All Sutras* (*Yiqiejing yinyi* 一切經音義; 807, original c. 649) associate *Liuzi* with the famous author Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522)—“a renowned and gifted scholars of the Liang dynasty period” (*Yiqiejing yinyi*, *juan* 90.8, p. 2061). However, the biography of Liu Xie in the *Book of Liang* (*Liang shu* 梁書), a chronicle completed in 635, the authenticity of which does not raise any doubts, does not list *Liuzi* amongst Liu Xie’s works (cf. *Liangshu*, *juan* 50, p. 4). What is more, none of its passages are referred to within Liu Xie’s *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍), although Lin Qitan and Chen Fengjin, in the foreword to their edition of *Liuzi* (pp. 372–389), indicate several conceptual parallels between those two works (most of them, however, follow from la-

bellings the two conceptions as belonging to an “idealistic fatalism”, *weixinzhuyi suminglun* 唯心主義宿命論).

On top of that, Liu Xie was a Buddhist, and for some time even an ordained Buddhist monk, whereas the received text of the *Liuzi* leaves almost no traces of that conviction. In contrast, it explicitly supports the “competing” Daoist approach to transcendent values, to the extent that *Liuzi* was included in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏). Despite all this, Wenmin Zhu (2022) does not believe there are substantial reasons for undermining the dominant pre-Song attribution, whereas Theresia Arndt (1994, pp. 187–97) provides textual and historical arguments for attributing the treatise to Liu Xie, although she admits that the lack of any references to Buddhism makes it equally plausible that the text was written by yet another author named Liu.

However, the *Draft notes from the court and the country* (*Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載), an early Tang collection of stories written by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658?–730?), records that while people took *Liuzi* to be the work of Liu Xie, in truth it was made by Liu Zhou 劉晝 (courtesy name Kongzhao 孔昭, 514–565), who, despite his talent, never obtained an official position. A similar view is expressed in Yuan Xiaozheng’s commentary on *Liuzi*, which describes Liu Zhou’s disappointment at never being appointed to the office as a direct rationale for creating the treatise (as in Zhu 2022, p. 6). Liu Zhou’s biography, as transmitted through *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (completed in 636) and *Bei shi* 北史 (completed in 659), portrays a scholar whose career (or rather lack of it) and views are very much in line with the philosophical conceptions and sarcastic allusions made in the *Liuzi*. As a result, “modern scholarship largely concurs that Liu Zhou was the actual author” (Lo 2018, p. 179).

Beiqishu’s and *Beishi*’s accounts of the life of Liu Zhou have been included in the biographies of scholars/Confucians (*rulin* 儒林). Liu Zhou was “a poor orphan who loved to learn” from Bohai 渤海 (modern Fucheng 阜城, Hebei province). Guided by his relative Li Baoding 李寶鼎, Liu mastered the Three Ritual Classics (*San Li* 三禮) and the *Springs and Autumns* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), but failed the *xiucai* examination. Having studied the Classics for two more decades, he again failed the exams and focused more on his literary skills, although the then-famous and influential historian Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572) mercilessly ridiculed the *fu* rhapsody he submitted. In the end, Liu Zhou never obtained the *xiucai* degree, which was the reason he wrote the now-lost *Biography of an Eminent Talent Who Goes Unappreciated* (*Gaocai bu yu zhuan* 高才不遇傳), followed by a series of memorials rejected by the Northern Qi emperor (*Bei Qi shu* 44: 589–590). The latter became integrated into the book entitled *The Way of Emperor* (*Didao* 帝道), which has also been lost, but could have been incorporated into the *Liuzi*, the political philosophy of which is a clear call for institutional and economic adjustments, often directly addressed to the sovereign. Its Ruist anthropology and ethics, however, were formulated in a constructive dialogue with the major challenges of Daoist thought, in line with the overall transformation of Confucianism during the Liang period.

3. The Backdrop: Huang Kan and the Reinterpretation of Confucianism

As Lo Yuet Keung states, the development of early medieval Confucian philosophy was made possible due to works such as Huang Kan’s *Elucidation of the Meaning of the Analects* (*Lunyu yishu* 論語義疏), which absorbed the *Xuanxue* distinction between a transcendental and a phenomenal realm, thereby transforming the Confucian concept of the ideal person (Lo 1999, pp. 67–70). What is more, this profoundly philosophical commentary “preserves recognizable oral patterning in that it shows features of classroom dynamics and exhibits a number of pedagogical features” from the Liang dynasty period (Fuehrer 2013, p. 309) (for the textual history of *Lunyu yishu*, see Liu 2020). A brief discussion of its main theoretical contributions, therefore, sheds light on the background of *Master Liu*.

First of all, *Lunyu yishu* revives and puts a central emphasis on the discourse of human nature/predispositions *xing* 性. It often echoes the theories of the late Han iconoclast, Wang Chong 王充 (27–97), in that it views the purity of human nature as a result of the purity of the vital energy *qi* 氣 that humans consist of and considers the quality of *qi* as

unequal amongst human beings, which then must translate into “three grades” of their possible nature. However, it is precisely for that reason that Huang Kan shifts the discussion from the relationship between *xing* and *qi* towards the dynamic interrelation of *xing* and feelings/emotions *qing* 情. In his commentary on *Lunyu* 17.2—the famous passage in which Confucius claims that “by nature, men are similar; by practice, they are wide apart”—Huang Kan observes that our nature is already complete at birth, and as such, it cannot be said to be either good or bad. Any goodness or badness is a matter of the way it functions (*yong* 用) and comes to life with emotions; these originate in the desirous mind (*qing shi you yu zhi xin* 情是有欲之心) and become manifested only through contact with phenomena/affairs (*jiu shi er xian* 就事而顯). Quoting Wang Bi and *Daodejing*’s Chapter Two, Huang argues that if those emotional responses are to provide us any good, they must be close to our nature and keep desires in line with “the patterns” *li* 理 (Huang 1937, pp. 240–41). According to John Makeham, the novelty of Huang’s approach, also in comparison with that of Wang Bi, lies in positing the Way and patterns (often identified as “patterns of the Way” *daoli* 道理) in a one-many relation, so that “virtue, the capacity to act in accord with the Way, consists in conducting affairs such that one obtains the patterns appropriate to those affairs” (Makeham 2003, p. 107).

Another innovation introduced by Huang Kan concerned his understanding of the sage (*shengren* 聖人). Following Wang Bi, Huang Kan believed that Confucius ‘embodied’ Nothingness (*wu* 無), meaning that his conduct (and virtues) manifested no thoughts of his own but only the patterns and way of things. It is through Confucius that an otherwise inaccessible Nothingness became manifested in the phenomenal world, and as such, it could not be emulated, even by his closest disciples such as Yan Hui. As Lo Yuet Keung argues, “not only was Confucius given a Neo-Taoist aura as a sage, but he was also revered as if he were a Buddhist bodhisatva who adopted expedient liberative measures,” not to mention the explicit idea that the sages have “no mind” (*wu xin* 無心) of their own (Lo 1999, pp. 72–74). Unlike ‘Neo-Daoists,’ however, Huang Kan believed that Confucius deliberately concealed his true status, to exert this transformative impact and associate with the people, acting *as though* he had emotions. Crucially, the conduct of worthies such as Yan Hui can only be but an ‘echo’ of such an unattainable model. As Makeham concludes, this decidedly broke with the Mencian ideal that all human beings are capable of reaching sagehood; instead, by following its “traces” in the world, all people are invited to adopt a variety of more realistic public and private roles, such as those of a ruler, teacher, or gentleman (Makeham 2003, pp. 123–24).

Read against this background, *Master Liu* appears to accept the essentials of Huang Kan’s anthropology, but does not focus on its implications for the ultimately unreachable world of sages and the no less lofty world of the worthies. Instead, it offers a modest yet more balanced view of the nature of humans and the way they can become moral through proper handling of their emotional reactions in morally and socially challenging situations. The quasi-Legalist concerns over the issues of stability and political responsibility, often taken to demonstrate the ‘eclectic’ character of *Liuzi*, are consistently subjugated to this central task, thereby paving the way for syntheses akin to the Sui and Tang eras.

4. Anthropology in *Liuzi*

The ethics and social philosophy of *Liuzi* are built on its vision of human being, including a discussion of the inner structure of human person, which absorbs many elements of Daoism. The complexity of *Liuzi*’s approach fully allows us to address it as “anthropology”, even when compared with its modern Western understanding as represented by, e.g., Max Scheler, for whom any philosophical anthropology should discuss “human place in the cosmos” and offer a vision of “the constitution of human being”, covering the natural, vital, and spiritual dimensions of human existence; cognition; and interaction with the external environment (cf. Scheler 2008, pp. 137–38, 211).

4.1. Spirit (*shen*)

In its very opening lines, *Master Liu* introduces three ‘constituents’ of human being: body *xing* 形, heart-mind *xin* 心, and spirit *shen* 神:

The body is the vessel of life; the heart is the root of physicality; the spirit is the treasury of the heart. Therefore, when the spirit is calm, the heart is harmonious, and when the heart is harmonious, the body is intact. When the spirit is agitated, the heart is restless, and when the heart is troubled, the body [is exposed to] injury. In order to preserve the body’s integrity, one must first order the spirit. Therefore, calming and nurturing the spirit results in achieving peace within, and purifying and emptying the agitated heart prevents it from being led by external [stimuli]. A calm spirit and a steady heart: then the body also does not suffer from ailments.

形者，生之器也。心者，形之本也。神者，心之寶也。故神靜而心和，心和而形全。神躁則心蕩，心蕩則形傷。將全其形，先在理神。故恬和養神，則自安於內。清虛棲心，則不誘於外。神恬心情，則形無累矣。 (*Liuzi* 1.1: 1)

The first sentence, expressed in the poetic language of Chinese philosophy, states that the spirit is what the heart-mind takes powers from, the heart-mind is the source and basis without which the body could not function, and the body itself is a specific “portion” limited to a given physical form, a concrete living being (*qi* 器). The subsequent statements underline the parallelism of the functioning of those components of human being. Importantly, all changes beneficial to the mind and body are initiated by the spirit, or precisely, the processes in it: its purification, calming, ordering, and nurturing.

By partially reducing the heart-mind to the role of an intermediary between the spirit and the body, *Master Liu* also articulates the relationship that occurs directly between the spirit and the body:

If the body is calm, it means that the spirit is purified (...) And if the spirit is purified, external ailments have no entrance (...) The spirit dwells in the body and moves when it encounters stimulation. We can therefore say that changes in the sphere of feelings come from outside.

形靜則神清 (... ..) 神清則外累不入 (... ..) 神居體而遇感推移。以此而言，則情之變動自外至也。 (*Liuzi* 1:1)

The condition of the spirit thus translates into specific physical states. The spirit also “encounters” stimuli and “dwells” in the body, and, even if these are only metaphors, nothing in these fragments testifies to psychophysical dualism. Further lines go even further, calling “the seven organs of perception the windows and doors of the spirit” *qi qiao zhe, jingshen zhi hu-you ye* 七竅者，精神之戶牖也 (a pair of eyes, ears, nostrils, and a mouth constituted *qi kong* 七孔, “seven holes”). This symbiosis of body and spirit, however, indicates a kind of higher-order dualism, occurring—as *Liuzi* emphasizes almost technically—between the “inner” (*nei*) and “outer” (*wai*) spheres. The former includes the spirit, mind and body, so that the individual human being integrally composed of them is still exposed to, often detrimental, stimuli from the external world. This explicit recognition of the ontological otherness of these stimuli mitigates the risk of immanentism, which is characteristic of, for instance, some currents of Buddhist epistemology.

The very distinction between the internal and external spheres of human existence was not, certainly, a complete novelty in Chinese thought. Moreover, *Master Liu*’s description significantly approaches, in a way previously unrecognized in the literature, the so-called Yangism, i.e., a set of concepts and arguments attributed to Yang Zhu 楊朱, often treated as the progenitor of Daoism. While not stated directly, this is historically, and not only logically, possible considering the renaissance of that philosophy resulting from the discussions surrounding the Yangist chapter of the treatise *Liezi*, which dates back to the second half of the fourth century at the earliest ([Defoort 2020](#), pp. 246–47). The division into internal and external spheres, within which care for what is internal consists in protecting the body from external ailments, is one of Yang Zhu’s key themes, closely related

to his vision of human predispositions (*xing*) and the ideal of “preserving the integrity of the living body” *quan sheng shen* 全生身 (Brindley 2022, pp. 112, 121). It is precisely the integrity of the body and its freedom from ailments that are indicated in the *Liuzi* as the primary, and, in fact, the only, effects of purifying the spirit.

However, the use of the Yangist motif as a goal of cultivating the spirit does not necessarily make Master Liu a work closer to contemporaneous Daoism. First, we will not find in the entire *Liuzi* an echo of the belief in the existence of immortals *xian* 仙, common among the Daoists at the time, nor any arguments for the immortality of the spirit. *Liuzi* also excludes any possibility of bodily resurrection: “the deceased body cannot spring into existence again” *shen wang buke fucun* 身亡不可複存 (*Liuzi* 6.30: 176). Since the spirit is stimulated and specifically used up through communication with the aging body, it must eventually reach the end of its lifespan. Second, as John Emerson (1996, pp. 548–49) aptly observes, the Yangist idea of preserving life is not in conflict with traditional Chinese religion, built on the cult of life, fertility, and nurturing/upbringing, nor with the Confucian commandment of “service to the living”. Think of *Lunyu* 12.10, where Confucius, asked by Zi Zhang about virtuosity, replies that “to care for someone is to desire life for her/him” *ai zhi yu qi sheng* 愛之欲其生. Provided that these elements are not radicalized into ethical egoism, they can be effectively integrated within Confucian teachings, and *Liuzi* seems to have achieved precisely that, in a conceptually innovative way.

The transformation of the concept of spirit carried out by *Liuzi* is also worthy of special attention. The term *shen* can be rendered as a noun in the corpus of classical Confucian writings almost exclusively when referring to spirits residing outside of man, usually in the component *guishen* 鬼神; outside this context, *shen* is best translated as an adjectival term: “mysterious”, “elusive”, “unattainable”, “of extraordinary qualities”. In this sense, the incomprehensible conduct of the sages is defined as *shen* by Mencius (*sheng er buke zhi zhi wei shen* 聖而不可知之謂神; *Mengzi* 7B: 394), while Xunzi, answering the question of what he means by *shen*, points to the state of achieving the highest good and maintaining order, which characterizes the actions of the sages (曷謂神? 曰: 盡善挾治之謂神, 萬物莫足以傾之謂固。神固之謂聖人; *Xunzi* 4.8: 133). A slightly, yet not fundamentally, different exposition is present in the Han dynasty writings of Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), who in the chapter *Inquiry into the Spirit* (*Wen shen* 問神) of his *Exemplary Sayings* (*Fayan* 法言 (Yang 2012)) defines *shen* as a feature of the heart-mind (*xin*), especially of the sages, insofar as the heart is immersed in the otherwise unfathomable nature of Heaven and earth (*Fayan* 5: 113). Even Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) does not go beyond this framework; in a separate chapter *On the Establishment of the Primordial Spirit* (*Li yuan shen* 立元神), he speaks of the spirit that should accompany the sovereign so that he can transform his subjects (崇本則君化若神 (...) 神者所以就其化也, 故不尊不畏, 不神不化; *Chunqiu fanlu* 19: 193, 198; English translation renders *shen* as “being spiritlike” cf. Major and Queen 2016, p. 206). None of the pre-Buddhist Confucian works contains the phrase *shen ju ti*, “spirit residing in the body”, which is so central for *Liuzi*. Everything indicates that Master Liu made a post-Buddhist adaptation of the category of *shen*.

The undoubted pioneer of this idea, and most probably also the inspiration for such an understanding of *shen*, was the famous Confucian scholar Fan Zhen 范縝 (450–515), who lived only a generation earlier. Criticizing arguments for the immortality of the spirit, and reincarnation in particular, the anti-Buddhist work *On the Annihilation of the Spirit* (*Shenmielun* 神滅論) was to be followed by over 60 Buddhist polemics commissioned by Liang Wudi himself. Fan Zhen used both arguments and figurative metaphors to prove that “with the dissolution of the body, the spirit also passes away” (*xing xie ze shen mie* 形謝則神滅), “for the body is the stuff of the spirit, and the spirit is the function of the body” (*xing zhe, shen zhi zhi; shen zhe, xing zhi yong* 形者, 神之質; 神者, 形之用) (based on *Liangshu* 48: 665). This means that despite different terms, both refer to the same essence (*ming shu er ti yi ye* 名殊而體一也), like a knife (*dao* 刀) and a blade (*li* 利) (*Liangshu* 48: 666). As Shu-fun Fung (2018, pp. 363–79) rightly notes, the attribution of a reductionist materialist position to Fan Zhen, so common in the Marxist historiography, is unfounded: *shen* is a separate

component, although closely correlated with the body, and neither of them disintegrates separately. However, there is no longer a trace of the meaning of *shen* as the “mysterious” way of acting of the sages.

4.2. Heart-Mind (*xin*)

Master Liu refers to such an interpretation, assuming the interdependence of body and spirit, which excludes the latter’s immortality. However, in *Liuzi*, the mind-heart with its feelings intermediates the spirit and body. As a result, the new understanding of *shen* is integrated into the Confucian program of moral development. Even if the senses are the “windows and doors of the spirit,” they do not provide it with information in an independent way: it is the heart-mind that is the governor of the entire body, including the eyes and ears, which are the “emissaries” heralding news from the outside world (*xin wei shen zhi zhu, er mu houyu wai* 心為身之主, 耳目侯於外) (*Liuzi* 1.6: 29). However, this does not mean that the mind controls the material it receives. On the contrary, when it focuses on what it has heard, it cannot simultaneously concentrate on visual data, with the result that “one then looks without seeing.” In order to illustrate the limitedness of the mind, *Liuzi* suggests in an almost experimental method of trying to draw a square with the left hand and a circle with the right hand at the same time (心駐於耳, 必遺其目, 則視不見也。使左手畫方, 右手畫圓, 令一時俱成, 雖執規矩之心, 回剗剛之手, 而不能者; *Liuzi* 1.6: 29). Master Liu thus elaborates upon the limitations of the human mind(-heart) and temporalizes its functioning, connecting it closely with the sequence of external stimuli.

The limitations of the human mind entail the fact that, despite its embodiment, it is by no means as knowable as the body or, in general, nature (*fan ren zhi xin (...) nan zhiyu tian* 凡人之心難知於天). Unlike heaven and Earth, which are external (*wai*), the mind, which “dwells within” or “is inside” man (*ju yu nei/zai ren zhi nei* 在人之內), cannot be directly perceived or known using any mathematical method (*fei keyi suanshu ce ye* 非可以算數測也). The mind can only be known indirectly, through its “manifestations” (*mao* 貌), such as feelings and behaviors, which at the same time reflect (*zhao* 照) the condition of the human spirit (*Liuzi* 4.22: 129). Noteworthy is the technicality of the language used by *Liuzi* and the awareness of the limitations of the philosophy of mind, which is rather unusual for Confucian philosophy, if not classical Chinese philosophy in general. Such a decisive articulation of these limits leads Master Liu back to the conviction of the necessity of instructing the mind through external teaching. *Liuzi* cites Confucius as an example, as he was supposed to die with a scroll in his hand, and Dong Zhongshu, who is said to have ended his life while reciting classical writings (*Liuzi* 1.5:22). This belief in the need for constant instruction of the mind through classical writings and the understanding of the heart-mind as the governor of the senses is, according to Tak Wah Leuk (2010, p. 160), derived directly from *Xunzi*. And although the inspiration from the thought of the pioneer of Confucian epistemology is indeed unquestionable, there are two significant differences between *Liuzi* and *Xunzi*. First, the mind in *Xunzi* is itself a “spiritual” governor and when it issues orders, it no longer accepts them from anything (心者, 形之君也, 而神明之主也, 出令而無所受令; *Xunzi* 15.21: 397), while the spirit in *Liuzi* is a separate entity from the mind, its “treasure”, and *shen*’s functioning affects into the state of the mind. Second, *Liuzi* seems to go further than *Xunzi* in defining the highest state of mind. In *Xunzi*, it is defined in three ways as the “emptiness, evenness, and tranquility” of the heart-mind (*xu, yi er jing* 虛壹而靜), the former being defined as a state in which what is already stored in the mind does not prevent it from receiving what is new (然而有所謂虛, 不以所已臧害所將受謂之虛; *Xunzi* 15.21: 395). Thus understood, emptiness is the condition for the evenness and calmness of thought, and thus for the proper functioning of the human mind. *Liuzi* agrees that, given the limitedness and instability of the mind, it should be fasted (*xu xin* 虛心), but having said this, he adds that having even the most calm mind is worse than its complete absence, even if such a state is unstable (*you xin zhiyu ping buruo wuxin zhi buping ye* 有心之於平不若無心之不平也) (*Liuzi* 1.3: 11–12).

The lack of trust in the human mind leads Liuzi to integrate his anthropology with the Daoist, specifically Zhuangist, concept of *wu xin*. Remaining within its horizon, he appeals to following the example of the sages to “abandon the mind and be thoughtless, take care of the body and forget about what is fringe” (*qi xin er bu lü, gui shen er wang jian* 棄心而不慮, 貴身而忘賤), since only as a result of the practice of forgetfulness (*wang*), followed by the regeneration of vital energy (*qi*), can one “take care of the body and the integrity of one’s own nature, and not straining one’s heart [let] the *Dao* come by itself” (*xing er yang er xing zi quan, xin by lao er Dao zi zhi ye* 形而養而性自全, 心不勞而道自至也) (*Liuzi* 1.1: 2). From Master Liu’s perspective, the ideal of *wuxin* is compatible with the goals set by the Yangists, and can also be skillfully incorporated into the Confucian program of moral development as its culmination, although not without transforming concepts such as *shen*. This strategy has its precedent in the thought of Huang Kan and is not foreign to neo-Confucian philosophy, especially the Ming *xinxue* 心學. The description of Liuzi’s philosophy as eclectic, which suggests its reproductive nature and influenced the marginalizing classification of this work, is both unfair and historically inadequate in the face of the hybridity of the entire post-Buddhist Confucian philosophy, against the background of which, *Master Liu* appears as an exceptionally innovative conceptual work.

Similar transformations can be observed in relation to the next critical triad of Master Liu’s anthropology, i.e., predispositions (*xing* 性), feelings (*qing* 情), and desires (*yu* 欲). This triad is correlated with the tripartite division of spirit, mind, and body based on the (neo-)Daoist (*xuanxue*) opposition of substance (*ti* 體) and function (*yong* 用), in which we can also see echoes of Fan Zhen’s thought. Just as the spirit–mind–body structure defines the “material” of man, the triad of *xing*, *qing*, and *yu* provides a vocabulary for describing the functioning of the human being that enables his moral development.

4.3. Predispositions (*xing*)

A preliminary outline of the relationship of predispositions to feelings and desires is provided in the second chapter of the *Liuzi*:

In the vital energy that humans receive, there are necessarily both feelings and predispositions. What arouses predispositions and places feelings in their proper place are desires. Feelings come from predispositions, although they may oppose them; desires come from feelings, but may harm feelings.

人之稟氣,必有情性。性之所感者,情之所安者,欲也。情出於性而情違性;欲由於情而欲害情。(Liuzi 1.2: 6)

The relationship between predispositions, feelings, and desires is therefore not only mutual but also ambivalent, and it seems that only *emergens* can harm its source. There exists a mediated but conceptually articulated relationship between predispositions-*xing* and desires-*yu*, similarly to the relationship between spirit and body: desires, not feelings, “awaken” predispositions, which together with feelings belong to the natural vital endowment of every human being (spiritual, mental, and physical).

The term *xing* 性 is quite commonly translated as “human nature.” However, such a translation is problematic in the context of classical Confucianism, as well as in the text of *Liuzi*, due to the essentialist connotations of the Western (precisely Latin) concept of *natura*. The concept of “human nature” overlaps with the notions of “essence” or “basis” of human existence, which is even reflected in the definition of human nature provided by the influential *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, identifying this concept with “the set of features and processes that remain after subtracting those considered unnatural, i.e., concepts such as culture, upbringing, and socialization” (Roughley 2021). In Chinese thought, however, there is no room for such a decisive separation of essence from *accidens*, and even if there were, enculturation and socialization enter into the very essence of being human for the Confucians. However, this whole perspective is, above all, too static from the perspective of Chinese thought: Mencius, who discusses *renxing*, does not understand by this concept the essence that humans always preserve or to which they return on the path of

self-understanding, but rather the starting point, a set of seeds (*siduan* 四端), which is good (*shan* 善) only in the sense that it is sufficient, under undisturbed external conditions, for the further moral development of an individual.

It is no different with Xunzi, who almost identifies *xing* with desires, or, more precisely, with the innate preferences of people, which implies the desires (needs) of the given senses (*Xunzi* 17.23: 434). By distinguishing *xing* and *yu* and assuming that the latter can act against the former, Liuzi does not follow the Xunzian path. What connects Mengzi and Xunzi, as well as the continuators of their dispute in the Han period (Yang Xiong and Wang Chong), is the understanding of *xing* as a disposition to moral or affective action, which under appropriate external conditions or through the appropriate type of instruction can be both developed and suppressed. Hence, from the perspective of the Western system of division of knowledge, *xing* is closer to the psychology of moral development than to the metaphysics of human existence. The usual Chinese term for “nature,” “substance,” or “essence,” i.e., *ti* 體 or *benti* 本體, is not identified with *xing*.

The idea of the dynamic nature, and therefore relative instability, of human *xing* is clearly present in Master Liu: “human dispositions are torn in their expressions of care, and without cultivation and education they will not be fully formed” (*renxing huan hui, fei jixue er bu cheng* 人性讓惠, 非積學而不成). As Liuzi continues, “although these dispositions are [undoubtedly] beautiful, unless they [steadily] adhere to the Dao, they cannot be taught” (*renxing mei, er bulin Daozhe, bu xue ye* 人性美, 而不監道者, 不學也) (*Liuzi* 1.5: 23). To render *renxing* as “human nature” here would be to admit that human nature is something incomplete, unformed, that cannot be itself without modification from that which is outside of it, which clearly contradicts the standard definition of human nature, including the one cited above. *Xing* alone is not a sufficient condition for moral development, although the fact that there are predispositions toward the five virtues indicates a difference between the natural endowment of humans and animals: *ren zhiyu shou gongbing er yi zhi qi jubao wuchang zhi xing* 人之與獸共稟二儀之氣具俱抱五常之性. Good or bad behavior have their source in both predispositions and feelings, *shan-e zhi xing chuyu xing qing* 善惡之行出於性情 (*Liuzi* 7.37: 217). This makes sense insofar as predispositions to moral action may or may not develop through feelings, and there is nothing in *Liuzi* to suggest that they could freely realize themselves against feelings and desires. Feelings and desires are in fact assigned the function of activating predispositions, and unfortunately also of harming them. This is because, at the end of the day, there is a certain amount of immutability in human predispositions: not so much resulting from the nature common to all people, as from the difficulty of the changeable individual character of a person. *Xing* are an expression of the unique human spirit, just as *qing* are reactions of the heart-mind, and *yu* desires resulting from the needs and temptations of the body. As individual personality predispositions that can either promote or hinder moral development through feelings and desires, *xing* constitutes the “unchangeable material” (*buyi zhi zhi* 不移之質) of a given person, and therefore “natural predispositions cannot be forcibly changed” (*ziran zhi xing, fei ke qiang bian zhe ye* 自然之性, 非可強變者也) (*Liuzi* 7.36: 205).

4.4. Feelings (*qing*) and Desires (*yu*)

As predispositions to a specific course of action, *xing* should be distinguished from feelings, which, as functionalities of the particular mind, influence the cognitive process:

Feelings are the rulers of what is true and false, the root of what is beneficial or harmful. When there is truth, there must also be falsehood, and if it is possible to bring benefit, it is also possible to do harm. The “true”, “false”, “beneficial”, “harmful” exist within man, and cyclically passing into each other, they cause doubts. Therefore, by approaching things without feelings, one can actually encounter them and grasp them permanently; however, if one approaches things with specific feelings, chaos will arise in response to contact with them and doubts shall arise. It follows that the place where feelings are born is the

same place where doubts about things arise (...) Like a mirror devoid of feelings: such is [originally] the human heart-mind.

情者, 是非之主而利害之根。有是必有非, 能利亦能害。是非利害存於衷而彼此還相疑。故無情以接物, 在遇而恒通; 有情以接人, 觸應鸞成礙。由此觀之, 則情之所處, 物之所疑也 (... ...) 以鏡無情而人有心也。 (Liuzi 1.3: 11)

The above fragment contains an inference based on three premises: (1) all value judgments have their origin in feelings (or inclinations, attitudes, as the term *qing* also includes these meanings); (2) doubts arise from judgments, and they do not exist in things themselves or directly in relation to them; (3) feelings belong to the inner sphere of man, they do not exist (*cun* 存) in the external world. This leads to two important conclusions: the first is that without feelings there are no doubts about things (1 + 2); the second is that without feelings one can grasp things as they are, and not in a questionable way that emerges from judgments (1 + 2 + 3). Although it cannot be convincingly shown that Liuzi understands feelings as a priori, they certainly belong to a sphere of immanence that precedes all contact (*chu* 觸) and reception (*jie* 接) of external things. This understanding was a novelty in the context of traditional Chinese epistemology, in which, as Margus Ott (2024, p. 86) emphasizes in a recent study, feelings (*qing*) arise only when the mind is stimulated by external things.

Due to this, the proposed program of getting rid of feelings (*wuqing/quqing*) becomes feasible: it requires emotional neutrality towards external stimuli, and thus the re-discovery of a pure, undisturbed state of one's heart-mind. This last element, together with the accompanying mirror metaphor, will resound with full force in 657 in the famous poem by the Chan patriarch Shenxiu 神秀 (605–706). As Christoph Anderl (2004, p. 149) shows, the term *qing* referred in Chan Buddhism to the activity of the unenlightened mind and the inability to grasp the true nature of things, which was to result in attachment to the external world, including the emergence of desires. This perspective is extremely close to Liuzi, albeit the ability to cut off feelings was attributed to ancient Chinese sages:

The virtuous people of antiquity (...) tamed feelings with a purified heart, thereby putting their inner selves in order. When their inner selves were put in order, their spirits were free from confusion. When the outer was not allowed in, their bodies were free from trouble. By strengthening oneself in this way, is one not also achieving integrity?

古之德者 (... ...) 澄心封情, 以定其內。內定則神腑不亂。外密則形骸不擾。以此處身, 不亦全乎? (Liuzi 1.4: 16)

Significantly, the ultimate goal of the self-purification process is once again to preserve the integrity of one's body, as if spiritual order were not a sufficiently motivating culmination of these practices, either in the eyes of Master Liu or from the perspective of an audience living in times of chaos.

The whole picture is completed by an approach to desires which was no less in line with either Buddhism or Daoism. In a style known for his remark on peace of mind, Master Liu states that it is better to have no desires at all, even if this leads to instability, than to cling to purified desires (*you you zhiyu lian buruo wuyu zhi bulian ye* 有欲之於廉不若無欲之不廉也) (Liuzi 1: 11). Addiction to desires (*shi yu* 嗜欲) harms the mind (*gong xin* 攻心) and reverses the proper course of predispositions (*zheng xing* 正性), leading to "inner diseases" (*neiji* 內疾); thus, such desires should be nipped in the bud (*yu zhi meng* 欲之萌) (Liuzi 1.3: 7). What seems to distinguish Liuzi from Xunzi, who was equally critical of desires, is his lack of confidence in the ability of the heart-mind to resist desires; this strength may instead come from the determination (*zhi* 志) of the spirit, or in practice, from all practices that prevent desires from arising in the first place.

It is within the framework of such a structure of human beings that Master Liu discusses the way of moral development and its conditions.

5. Ethics in *Liuzi*

5.1. Conditions of Moral Development

How the human spirit, mind, and body function, and especially the degree to which feelings and desires are controlled, determines moral development. However, whereas *Liuzi*'s anthropology is, after all, a theory of human inner life (*ren zhi nei* 人之内), moral development cannot take place in a vacuum. The formulation of moral philosophy, therefore, required *Liuzi* to specify its external conditions, including the limitations of moral interactions between man and the external world, as well as other people.

In *Master Liu*, this potential vacuum is primarily limited by *ming* 命: an ambiguous category of Chinese thought meaning, depending on the context, "fate", "destiny", "allotment", "order", but also "the length of life". As Mercedes Valmisa (2019, pp. 3–6) observes, *ming* in ancient China meant everything that lies beyond human control and, for this reason, began to be reified into an external force indifferent to people. At the same time, it did not reach the scale of abstraction of ancient *fatum*, as *ming* was not attributed with the agency in terms of predetermining the results of actions. Considering the connotations above, rendering *ming* as "fate" is not the most fortunate choice; the notion of "lot" is closer, as it maintains a connection with *ming* as a royal command or allotment, as well as with the category of the Mandate of Heaven, *Tianming* 天命. Each time, *ming* pertains to the idea of what lies within spheres: of agency, responsibility, human life, etc., and thus also to their "demarcation", allowing us to indicate what, as humans in general or people in a specific role, lies beyond our influence or responsibility. *Liuzi* fits into this approach, although it should be clearly noted that, unlike contemporaneous Daoist texts, which offer specific ways of modifying and extending human *ming* (Robert Ford Campany 2005, pp. 129–50), Master Liu insists on the immutability of human *ming*, linking it—very much like Wang Chong 王充 (27–97)—with the category of contingency (*yu* 遇):

Whether someone is righteous or not depends on their predispositions, but whether one is hired or not—that depends on the lot. Predispositions are visible in a person, so it is possible to determine who is righteous and who is not. The decree comes from Nature (*tian* 天), and thus favorable and unfavorable are difficult to gauge. If the decree of the lot is accompanied by something difficult to encounter, then risk does not necessarily mean disaster, and ignorance does not necessarily lead to downfall. Safety does not necessarily mean blessing and worthiness does not necessarily mean one will succeed.

賢不賢，性也；遇不遇，命也。性見於人，故賢愚可定；命在於天則否泰難期。命運難遇，危不必禍，愚不必窮；命運不遇，安不必福，賢不必達。 (*Liuzi* 5.24: 142)

This fragment, referring to the existence of certain moral predispositions (*xing*), indicates that the effectiveness of the actions of people bearing them, or rather the very fact of noticing them (important from the perspective of a ruler looking for righteous ministers and scholars), depends on external factors, and is, therefore, independent of that person. Importantly, this situation does not solely follow the allotments-*ming*, but rather the interplay of *ming* and the suitable contingent external factors, which in a way "activate" the dependencies hidden in *ming*; without them, *ming* does not determine anything. On the other hand, without these accidental factors, *ming* will not be fully expressed, even when it is beneficial for a given person. Moral development therefore requires a favorable twist of fate and appropriate contingent factors, and both conditions, although necessary, are independent of human will and are difficult to know by the human mind.

The unknowability of the twists of lot is partially reduced by signs/omens (*xiang* 相):

The lot is the root of a given life, while signs help it to be fulfilled. What is already determined delimits even if not physically perceptible; signs are, in turn, manifestations, and thus can be perceived in bodily form. If there are twists, there must be their signs, and if there are signs, they must occur for some twists. Both come from Nature (*tian* 天), but signs must develop [in time].

命者, 生之本也。相者, 助命而成者也。命則有命, 不形於形; 相則有相而形於形。
有命必有相, 有相必有命, 同稟於天, 相須而成也。 (Liuzi 5.25: 145)

Later in the argument, Liuzi also talks about the “mysterious” limitations inherent in the vital energy of every person from the moment of conception: here, the echoes of Wang Chong’s thought are even stronger. However, this does not change the fact that, like the other types of *ming*, they are equally external to the moral agents, who can only indirectly infer their limitations on the basis of specific physical signs, in more or less the same way that specific symptoms of an illness herald a shortening life expectancy (*ming*)—a fundamental limit of moral cultivation (with this, the theme of the body’s integrity returns).

Ming thus allows us to articulate the “liminal conditions” of the process of moral development, but, surprisingly, does not determine its course in any tangible way, leaving this issue open. Here, the concept of reliability, *xin* 信, developed by Master Liu, comes to the rescue. In the eighth chapter entitled *Acting Reliably* (*Lü xin* 履信), *xin* is considered not only a great virtue (德大 *de da*) but also a condition that directs action along the right track, due to which it can become moral conduct (*xing* 行):

Reliability is the basis of conduct, and conduct is the core of being a human being. Without conduct, a person will achieve nothing, and without reliability, they will have nothing to base their conduct upon, which is why trustworthy conduct towards people can be compared to the need to use a boat to cross a river (...). Nowadays, people desire goodness, but they do not know what to base their conduct on: it is as if they were crossing a river without a boat. And even if they want to base their actions on some basis, but do not know that they must establish their credibility, they behave as if they were trying to move a boat without oars.

信者, 行之基; 行者, 人之本。人非行無以成, 行非信無以立, 故信之行於人譬濟之須舟也 (... ..) 今人雖欲為善而不知立行, 猶無舟而濟川也; 雖欲立行而不知立信, 猶無楫而行舟也。 (Liuzi 2.8: 46)

Reliability (credibility) emerges from this passage as a necessary condition for moral conduct, without which this conduct will be deprived of its “foundation” or “establishment”. That one cannot act morally without knowledge of this foundation is something Master Liu takes for granted in his ethical foundationalism. Volitional factors such as the desire for goodness are not sufficient conditions for moral development.

Reliability is not, importantly, an utterly immanent property: someone one cannot trust is simply not trustworthy. The constitution of reliability, therefore, occurs at the intersection of the internal concern about establishing a stable foundation for moral conduct and communication with other people:

Is immoral behavior consisting in untrustworthiness light? After all, the words must act as words [=mean something], this correspondence is, precisely, reliability. In order to believe the words, reliability must precede them; conduct is formed along with the teachings, and so sincerity is revealed outside the words. A noble person knows the value of sincerity and reliability, thus he acts in a reliable and trustworthy manner.

無信之弊, 豈不重乎? 故言必如言, 信之符也。同言而信, 信在言前; 同教而行, 誠在言外。君子知誠信之為貴, 必忱信而行。 (Liuzi 2.8: 47-8)

Reliability emerges from this fragment as a necessary condition of communication, if it is to be communication at all (*yan bi ru yan* 言必如言), as well as a value (*gui* 貴) without which moral interaction with other people will not be possible at all. In this respect, Liuzi’s category of reliability comes close in meaning to, e.g., Habermas’s concept of sincerity.

As Tak Wah Leuk (2010, p. 166) rightly notes, although attributing such a role to *xin* is clearly typical of Confucian thought, in contrast to Confucius, who placed reliability in the sphere of leading people, Liuzi considers it to be the core of moral cultivation. *Xin* in *Lunyu* is the credibility of the ruler in the eyes of the people and their trust in the sovereign, without which the stability of any public authority would be seriously threatened (Rogacz 2022, p. 3). It is reliability, therefore, that is “internal”, while sincerity is “external”. This

is, however, because Master Liu and classical Confucianism operate with different understandings of *xin* and *cheng*: Liuzi speaks of inner integrity, which translates into sincerity in interpersonal relations, while classical, and especially Mencian, Confucianism speaks of sincerity towards human nature as the basis for being recognized as a reliable person.

This does not mean, however, that the relationship between the sovereign and the people was unimportant for Liuzi from an ethical perspective, with the latter being reduced to the sphere of internal moral cultivation. On the contrary, it constitutes an additionally necessary framework within which moral development takes place, which is why Liuzi decisively adopts the Confucian position in this regard:

The people are the sovereign's body, and the sovereign is the heart of the people. And just as the body necessarily finds peace in what the heart likes, so the people will follow what the ruler prefers. The body has not been seen not to act in accordance with the heart-mind's preferences; so the people cannot but follow the ruler's desires. People follow their ruler just as grass follows the wind, and water adjusts to the vessel. The sovereign's virtue is like the wind and the vessel, while human feelings are like grass and water.

君以民為體，民以君為心。心好之，身必安之；君好之，民必從之。未見心好而身不從；君欲而民不隨也。人之從君，如草之從風，水之從器。故君之德，風之與器也；人之情，草之與水也。（*Liuzi* 3.13: 75）

Master Liu's plastic language uses anthropomorphic analogy that refers to his own anthropological vision, combining it with a metaphor known from the words of Confucius himself (*Lunyu* 12.19). People (*ren*) are articulated as members of the people (*min*)—a relatively homogeneous “body” existing in an asymmetrical relationship to the sovereign. In the preceding chapter twelve (*Loving the People, Ai min* 愛民), Liuzi expresses this asymmetry even more radically, calling the ruler the “heaven” of the people (*jun zhe, min zhi tian ye* 君者，民之天也), whose transformative influence on the people (*jun zhi hua min* 君之化民) can only be likened to how heaven/nature nourishes living beings, or comparing the ruler's relation to the people to a parental relationship (*ren zhiyu jun, you zi zhiyu fumu ye* 人之於君，猶子之於父母也). For this reason, the essence of politics is humane concern (*yi ren ai wei ben* 以仁愛為本), although in the interest of preserving human life (*yi quan ren ming* 以全人命), the ruler must reach for punishments and criminal law. Only then will the state prosper and the highest peace reign (*taiping* 太平) (*Liuzi* 3.13: 69).

In this way, Liuzi recognized, unlike Confucius, that punishments are an essential component of politics, thus considering Etatist (Legalist) solutions as acceptable responses to problems posed by challenges to the Confucian vision of politics. As Tak Wah Leuk (2010, pp. 179–80) aptly notes, the references to *fajia* thought present in the pages of *Liuzi* are mainly related to the aspiration to provide tools for stable rule over a unified state, which responded to the situation of political instability and disintegration in China. This is particularly evident in Chapter Fourteen, devoted to law (*fa* 法) and administrative techniques (*shu* 術), presented as necessary instruments of transformation (*hua*) of the people (*Liuzi* 3.14: 83). Both punishments and management techniques are, again, merely frameworks: fortifications guarantying security, thanks to which moral development of the people is possible at all. On this occasion, the Yangist ideal of concern for individual life is also reevoked. Taking this idea of Master Liu into account allows us to see that his ethics is only seemingly individualistic: in reality, any moral development is possible only in conditions that secure the people within a system of laws and punishments, with a significant transformative moral influence (example) on the part of the ruler, and in circumstances not blocked by random factors (decrees of lot). Only then, starting from the development of an attitude of reliability, is it possible to cultivate virtues.

5.2. Ethics of Balancing

Liuzi's ethics are, more than his anthropology, a touchstone for the Confucian profile of his practical philosophy. As Tak Wah Leuk (2010, pp. 136–44, 167) points out, although

the opening chapters on purifying the spirit and eliminating desires are of Daoist origin, they are synthesized with a version of Confucianism close to Xunzi's thought, and the ultimate dissenting voice against Daoism is precisely the chosen catalogue of virtues and the vision of politics based upon them.

These virtues include: humanness (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), dedication (*zhong* 忠), and obedience (*xiao* 孝). In Liuzi's list of cardinal virtues, ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is absent, although failure to meet its norms is explicitly defined as unvirtuous action. Importantly, unlike the Confucian ethics of the classical period (especially Mencian), which clearly preferred the pair *ren-yi*, Liuzi considers *zhong* and *xiao* to be basic—after first developing an attitude of reliability—without which the cultivation (*xiu* 修) of other goods (*ta shan* 他善) on the side of the people (*baixing* 百姓) has no practical meaning (*Liuzi* 10.54: 295). What seems to connect reliability, dedication, and obedience is that each of these concepts refers in its own way to the readiness to provide active moral support to others, and it is in this sense that *xin*, and then *zhong* and *xiao*, constitute a prelude to the practice of *ren-yi*. That such behavior is possible at all is justified by the anthropological chapters, which indicate, among other things, the existence in man of a “predisposition to devotion and righteousness” (*zhong yi zhi xing* 忠義之性) (*Liuzi* 7.36: 205), or more broadly, that the human pursuit of goodness based on these virtues is as natural as the need to cover the head or put on shoes (*Liuzi* 2.10: 59). Liuzi thus fits into the discourse of the original goodness, or rather the moral potential, of human predispositions, *xing*. The connection between ethics and anthropology also acknowledges the role of lot:

Dedication, obedience, humanness, and righteousness: this is the proper direction of virtue; arrogance, self-satisfaction, and indecency—these are the opposites of virtue. Acts in accordance with [the virtues] are the gateway to success, and everything that deters [from virtue] is the anteroom of misfortune. From this it is clear that it is difficult to act against one's own predispositions, and easy to act according to them: this is absolutely understandable (...) Therefore, by remaining in accordance with the pattern [of things] and keeping one's own feelings in check, even if one is not of sound mind, one can still earn one's name; on the other hand, by acting in opposition to the Dao, even if one is an eminent and wise person, only misfortune and harm will result from this. A noble man, if he is able to act in a devoted, obedient, humane and righteous manner, based on reliability and reflecting accordingly, will himself attract the grace of heavens and nothing unfavorable will happen to him.

忠孝仁義，德之順也；悖傲無禮，德之逆也。順者，福之門；逆者，禍之府。由是觀之，逆性之難；順性之易，斷可識矣 (... ..) 故循理處情，雖愚憊可以立名；反道為務，雖為賢哲猶有禍害。君子如能忠孝仁義，履信思順，自天祐之，吉無不利也。 (*Liuzi* 2.9: 54–5)

Arguing that action in accordance with virtue must bring success, Liuzi reaches the “absolutely understandable” conclusion that moral action is easier, and therefore necessarily in accordance with natural dispositions: it assumes a specific model of the rationality of human beings, who cannot but want their own success. This relationship is independent of the subjective qualifications of individuals, as it is anchored in the very order (Dao) and pattern/structure (*li* 理) of reality. Moreover, the need to clarify this context led Master Liu to develop an important category of Confucianism situated at the intersection of epistemology and ethics: *quan* 權.

As shown by Griet Vankeerberghen (2005, pp. 65–83), this concept, originally meaning “weight,” “measure,” and “weighing,” functioned as a philosophical metaphor in a triple meaning: (1) a balanced, i.e., adequate, view of things (*quan wu* 權物; *quan shishi* 權事實), the so-called *quan* A; (2) weighing up “pros and cons,” i.e., the comparison preceding a decision, the so-called *quan* B; (3) balanced, counterweighted action, constituting a compromise with the general rules, i.e., *quan* C. As Vankeerberghen claims, *quan* B and *quan* C are based on different concepts of action: while comparative the *quan* B precedes action maximizing profit, *quan* C is a mechanism that allows the agent to make an inde-

pendent decision to depart from the literal norm without the risk of moral transgression, as, for example, when a ritual norm is violated in order to save someone's life.

Master Liu takes up and develops this third meaning of the concept of *quan*:

Following the pattern and adhering to the principles is what is called *Dao*; making deviations in the face of danger: this I call balancing. The name comes from an analogy to the process of weighing: just as a scale allows us to calculate whether there is actually that much of a body or not, so balancing allows us to measure whether exceptional circumstances are serious or light (...) For such is the conduct of men, that in the face of risk they make concessions and calculate how serious it is, and when [they consider that] there is a balance, they proceed to action. When the ancients weighed [circumstances] and estimated their seriousness, they always applied themselves to the standard [of things], and only then began to act.

循理守常曰道, 臨危制變曰權。權之爲稱, 譬猶權衡也。衡者測邪正之形, 權者揆輕重之勢 (... ..) 人之於事, 臨危制變, 量有輕重, 平而行之, 亦猶此也。古之權者, 審於輕重, 必當於理而後行焉。 (Liuzi 8.42: 234)

The metrical analogies used by Liuzi indicate the contextual, and therefore vague, nature of the power and procedure of *quan*. In many ways, *quan* resembles Aristotelian φρόνησις (*phrónēsis*) as a disposition to act based on consideration of what is good or bad, different from scientific knowledge, which cannot move in the area of what is changeable and unnecessary. Essential to the characterization of *quan* is the engagement of this power in situations of danger, risk, uncertainty, and, as a result, “deviations” (*zhibian* 制變) from the customary, but morally inapplicable in a given context, norm (*jing* 經). This assumption is explicitly stated later in the chapter, where Liuzi states that “balancing deviates from the norm but is in accordance with the *Dao*, and opposes what is righteous but later results in goodness” (*quanzhe, fanyu jing er heyu Dao, fanyu yi er hou you shan* 權者, 反於經而合於道, 反於義而後有善) (Liuzi 8.42: 234). *Quan* is thus a faculty of far-reaching moral insight that temporarily suspends the validity of certain norms or undertakes acts of a means-sanctified kind in order to align the action with the *Dao* in the long run. In principle, however, if the circumstances do not require any compromise of this kind, *quan* as a procedure is unnecessary, and the mere implementation of *Dao* is sufficient for moral conduct: “when *Dao* endures, there is no balancing; when *Dao* is lost, one must proceed with balancing” (*fu you Dao ze wu quan, Dao shi ze quan zuo* 夫有道則無權, 道失則權作) (Liuzi 8.42: 235).

According to Liuzi, situations requiring contextual decision-making usually have the character of moral dilemmas, when in the process of comparative balancing, not one but two obligations (resulting from the developed virtues) are being confronted. For example, our concern for our loved ones, which is a “natural feeling” (*chang qing* 常情) of every person, can be suspended when faced with the obligations of “greater justice” (*da yi* 大義), as the fact that someone is simply our relative cannot exempt us from its requirements. Then, “tender concern is juxtaposed with justice, the two are balanced, and when justice prevails, one can [morally consent] even to the destruction of the loved ones” (*ci'ai fang yi, erzhe xiang quan, yi zhong ze qin ke mie* 慈愛方義, 二者相權, 義重則親可滅). As an illustration of such a resolution of a moral dilemma, Liuzi points to, among other examples, the figures of ancient rulers of China: Emperor Shun and Duke Zhou (Liuzi 8.42: 234). This vision of moral development assumes the occurrence of internal conflicts of demands resulting from the cultivation of specific virtues in the face of unpredictable circumstances. The concept of harmony, *he* 和, is applied throughout the treatise either to an ideal state of mind or heart, or directly functions as a cosmological concept, but it is in vain to look for its application to the description of human moral development and conduct. Human life then appears as, on the one hand, a process of constant (and fundamentally phronetic) balancing of general obligations—then *quan* has the character of a compromise—and on the other, of resolving moral dilemmas, and then *quan* commands the unequivocal sacrifice of one virtue or norm for the sake of another, e.g., *ren* for *yi*.

It should be emphasized that morally balanced decisions are not arbitrary, purely subjective decisions. After all, weighing presupposes the presence of measures and standards: “weighing consists in measuring with the help of a standard when it cannot be applied without any change” (*quan yi li du er buke chang yong* 權以理度而不可常用) (*Liuzi* 8.42: 235; modified following *Liuzi jizheng* 劉子集證 edition). This approach also raises the question of the understanding of *li* 理 in *Liuzi*. In Chapter Sixteen, the only one openly elaborating upon this concept, *li* is placed within the philosophy of language, referring to the meaning of a given utterance/sentence (*yan* 言), analogously to the object that is the referent of a name (*ming* 名) (*Liuzi* 3.16: 94). *Liuzi* therefore uses *li* in a similar way to classical, i.e., pre-Buddhist Chinese philosophy, including Wang Bi (cf. Rošker 2012, pp. 69–78). On the other hand, *li* is that by which the value of action is measured; following *li* is identical with the right Way of conduct (*xun li yue Dao* 循理曰道), and one can act only by first following *li* (*dang yu li er hou xing* 當於理而後行). This would indicate a certain ontologization of the concept of meaning, perhaps not without the influence of Buddhism, so that the meaning of a sentence, being the analog of the object (*shi* 實) of a name, would be but a special case of this meaning. *Li* mediates, in effect, between the power of balancing (*quan*) and the unchanging Way (Dao), and it is *li* as a specifically ontological Meaning that constitutes the proper point of reference and derogation in the course of the balancing procedure. Importantly, *quan* did not have such a relationship to *li* in classical Chinese thought, but these connections would become central to the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi, among others, who, just as *Liuzi*, saw *quan* as an action required in a situation of the inapplicability of the customary pattern (*li*), ultimately aimed at preserving the *Dao* despite the departures from the norm (*Zhuzi yulei* 37: 990). *Quan* thus defined is compared by Conrad Schirokauer (1993, p. 209) directly to the Aristotelian *phronesis*, although Hoyt C. Tillman (2020, p. 181) warns that Zhu Xi contrasted *quan* so clearly with the concept of a fixed norm (*jing* 經) that he did not consider balancing to be essential to the effectiveness of morality itself. *Liuzi*’s concept of balancing can therefore be seen as, if not an anticipation, then at least a significant step towards the evolution of the category of *quan* to its Neo-Confucian form.

6. Conclusions

Master Liu (Liuzi) is a treatise most probably written by Liu Zhou (d. 565) and well-known at the Tang court, which, despite being classified as an eclectic work, presents an original development of classical Confucianism in terms of its anthropology and ethics. By integrating Confucian moral philosophy with selected Daoist ideas and responding to post-Buddhist transformations of key categories, the thought of *Liuzi* also anticipates many of the solutions characteristic of neo-Confucian *lixue*.

The starting point of *Liuzi* is the innovative (on the grounds of Confucianism) tripartite division of the “inner structure” of human beings into spirit (*shen*), heart-mind (*xin*) and body (*xing*), which assimilated the new understanding of the category of *shen*, which was most likely shaped through polemics with the Buddhists. While “residing” in the body, the spirit also “encounters” stimuli from the outside world through the senses, although the heart-mind always mediates their interpretation. The latter, while assigned the task of coordinating the body, is very limited in this functionality and directly unknowable, and therefore requires instruction from scholarly teachings. Here, however, *Liuzi* integrates Confucian teaching with Daoist ones: moral cultivation should, in the face of the weakness of the human mind, be crowned by getting rid of it (*wuxin*, as in Zhuangzi), and its primary goal is the preservation of bodily integrity (as in Yang Zhu). The Ruist incorporation of Yangist elements was one of *Liuzi*’s chief innovations.

When it comes to the functioning (*yong*) of substance (*ti*), to use the *xuanxue* distinction, the triad of spirit–mind–body translates into the trichotomy of predispositions (*xing*), feelings (*qing*), and desires (*yu*). Human *xing*, usually and incorrectly rendered as “human nature,” are the predispositions proper to a given personality, as expressed through feelings. Feelings are the source of judgments about things, including value judgments, and to this extent they stimulate desires. The ideal, however, is emotional and desire insensitivity

to external stimuli that does not disturb the spirit, or, preferably, having no desires at all; this once again testifies to the impact of Daoist thought on *Liuzi*.

However, moral development striving for this ideal does not occur in a vacuum. On the one hand, it is limited by favorable or unfavorable twists of fate (*ming*), combined with contingent circumstances (*yu*); on the other, a significant role in shaping the moral attitude of the average member of the people is played, according to Master Liu, by the transformative example and care of the ruler and the conditions that guarantee the people's safety (including rewards and punishments). Proper moral development must start from an attitude of reliability (*xin*), which is a necessary condition for all moral conduct and human communication in general. In this respect, *Liuzi* assigns to *xin* the value that the virtue of sincerity *cheng* had in classical Confucianism. Moral development itself consists primarily in developing the virtues of humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), devotion (*zhong*), and obedience (*xiao*), with a special emphasis, unlike in the classical era, on the latter pair. In navigating between the often conflicting requirements resulting from the consistent implementation of the requirements of a given virtue, a person must use the ability to balance (*quan*), i.e., the practical ability to deviate from the general norm to maintain long-term compliance with the Dao. The point of reference in this procedure is the very meaning/structure (*li*) of reality. With this idea, *Liuzi* significantly anticipates Zhu Xi's understanding of the category of *quan*, and more broadly—the ontologization of the meaning of moral development proper to Song *lixue*, even though there may be no references to *Liuzi* in the writings or sayings of the Cheng-Zhu school. Given the profound impact of Daoist, and to a lesser extent Buddhist, thought on the direction of the reformulation of classical Confucian philosophy, *Master Liu* may be justifiably viewed as one of the first instances of “Neo-Confucian” writings in the broad sense and deserves much more scholarly attention and further research, particularly a detailed comparison between its philosophy and the mature Neo-Confucian project of Zhu Xi and his *lixue*.

Funding: This research was funded by Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki (National Program for the Development of Humanities), Poland, grant number 22H 18 0173 87.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Friederike Assandri for her insightful and meticulous comments on the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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