

Is There a Notion of Laws of Nature in Chinese Classical Texts?

Bixin Guo

Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Pittsburgh

摘要

Laws of nature are often considered to have played a crucial role in the development of modern science, and continue to attract discussions in contemporary philosophy. Is there a similar notion of laws of nature developed in the Chinese traditions? Despite its evident significance, there has not been much discussion on this question since Needham (1951) and Bodde (1979). Needham's answer is no, and Bodde largely agrees with him. In this paper, by examining the Chinese classical texts, I argue that two notions, *dao* 道 and *li* 理, count as, or at least can be seen as counterparts of, a notion of laws of nature.

1 Introduction

Laws of nature are often considered to have played a crucial role in the development of modern science. Prototypical examples of laws include Newton's three laws of motion. Modern scientists continue to employ the idea of laws and propose new scientific laws. Contemporary philosophers debate about what it is to be a law. A question naturally arises: Is there a similar notion of laws of nature developed in the Chinese traditions?

Joseph Needham (1900–1995) once asked this question in a particular context. He is one of the most influential, if not the most influential, scholars on the history of Chinese science, and popularized what is now known as the *Needham Question*: Why did modern science not develop in Chinese civilization despite its earlier success in scientific development?¹ This question has two presumptions: On the one hand, Needham acknowledged that Chinese civilization was more scientifically advanced than the West before the sixteenth century. According to the mainstream history of science at the time, science was exclusively Western and there had been a succession of scientific advances from ancient Greece to modern science with little influence from other traditions. Needham challenged such claims and took Chinese science to be an equal contributor among the tributaries that flowed into the sea of modern science.² On the other hand, Needham reaffirmed that modern science did not

1. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. Volume 3: Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth (Cambridge University Press, 1959), 150–168; Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, Reprint in 2005 (Routledge, 1969).

Needham was not the first one to ask questions along this line. For example, in 1922 Feng Youlan 冯友兰 published a paper titled “Why China Has No Science” (Yu-Lan Fung, “Why China Has No Science—An Interpretation of the History and Consequences of Chinese Philosophy,” *The International Journal of Ethics* 32, no. 3 (April 1922): 237–263). In 1953 Einstein gave an analysis of what the Greek philosophers contribute to Western science that the Chinese sages lack in a casual letter (for quotations of this letter by historians, see Arthur F. Wright, “review of Science and Civilisation in China. Volume II, History of Scientific Thought. By Joseph Needham, with the research assistance of Wang Ling,” *The American Historical Review* 62, no. 4 (July 1957): 918; Robert M. Hartwell, “Historical Analogism, Public Policy, and Social Science in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century China,” *The American Historical Review* 76, no. 3 (June 1971): 722–723).

2. Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*; Roger Hart, “Beyond Science and Civilization: A Post-Needham Critique,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 16, no. 1 (August 1999): 94.

Needham's work stimulated extensive discussions on the multicultural origins of science.

develop in China and wanted to explain why. While his explanations mostly focus on how the social, political, and economic conditions of China differed from those of the West, he believed intellectual or conceptual factors made a difference as well. One of the factors he considered is the idea of laws of nature:

There can be little doubt that this idea [of laws of nature] was intimately bound up with the development of modern science at the Renaissance in the West. If it was absent elsewhere, could that not have been one of the reasons why modern science arose only in Europe[?]³

This motivated Needham to investigate whether or not there is a notion of laws of nature in Chinese thought.

Needham's conclusion is NO. His strategy involves selecting a list of notions in Chinese thought that resemble a notion of laws of nature, comparing each of these notions with the notion of laws as enacted by "a celestial lawgiver 'legislating' for non-human natural phenomena",⁴ and explaining how each of them fails to be a notion of laws. For Needham, one of the main reasons China did not develop a notion of laws is because the Chinese tradition lacks the idea of a creator deity, a supreme law-giver.

After Needham, there has not been much systematic discussion on whether or not there is a notion of laws of nature in Chinese thought, with the exception of historian Derk Bodde (1909–2003) who largely agrees with Needham.⁵ One reason could be that the quest for the Needham Question

3. Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 35–36.

4. Joseph Needham, "Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 2 (April 1951): 194–230; Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1956); Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 36.

5. Bodde disagrees with Needham in thinking that there were in fact a few early Chinese thinkers who interpreted cosmic phenomena as being legislated by an all-powerful deity and these thinkers developed ideas that were more conge-

and its related issues has fallen out of fashion, or even been deemed inadmissible, for various reasons.⁶ A.C. Graham, for example, notes that explanations of why China didn't develop modern science have usually been nothing more than showing that China was not on the same path as Europe.⁷ According to Nathan Sivin, although the Needham Question is of heuristic interest, its accompanied discussions often falsely assume that a given feature of Western thought around the time of the Scientific Revolution is necessary to the rise of modern science.⁸

Although these criticisms certainly apply to Needham's discussion on laws of nature, there hasn't been any explication on *exactly* how it is problematic. Compared to other intellectual factors (such as experimentation, mathematization, or causation), laws of nature haven't received sufficient attention even just to set things straight. Until recently we still see claims like: "the idea of laws of

nial to the ideas underlying the notion of laws than one first thought. But he doesn't think this is sufficient to overthrow Needham's main conclusion. (Derk Bodde, "Evidence for 'Laws of Nature' in Chinese Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20, nos. 3/4 (1957): 709–727; Derk Bodde, "Chinese 'Laws of Nature': A Reconsideration," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 139–155.)

Hu Shi 胡适 touches this question by addressing the parallel question of whether or not China developed a moral or juridical concept that corresponds to the notion of Natural Law (Hu Shih, "The Natural Law in the Chinese Tradition," *Natural Law Institute Proceedings* 5 (1953): 119–153), and he considers *dao* and *li* as two candidates for the notion of natural laws. If Hu Shi and I are both right, then it offers additional evidence that the Chinese counterparts of natural laws and laws of nature do share a common root, as what Needham wants. R. P. Peerenboom also focuses on natural law and argues that Huang-Lao's Boshu supports "natural law grounded in the constant and regular natural order". He however doesn't think it is sufficient for scientific development because the Huang-Lao school lost to Confucianism (R. P. Peerenboom, "Natural Law in the 'Huang-Lao Boshu'," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 3 (July 1990): 309–329). Wing-Tsit Chan is skeptical of Needham's claim that *li* does not amount to a notion of laws of nature and that a personal God is necessary for the development of modern science. But he didn't develop these ideas any further (Wing-Tsit Chan, "Neo-Confucianism and Chinese Scientific Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 6, no. 4 (1957): 309–332). Christoph Harbsmeier emphasizes the significance of this issue and offers a list of possible candidates, but does not provide an argument (Christoph Harbsmeier, "Towards A Conceptual History Of Some Concepts Of Nature In Classical Chinese: Zi Ran 自然 And Zi Ran Zhi Li 自然之理," chap. 6 in *Concepts of Nature: A Chinese-European Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Hans Ulrich Vogel and Gunter Dux (Brill, 2010), 231–267).

6. For a review of the significance and problems of the Needham Question, see Hart, "Beyond Science and Civilization: A Post-Needham Critique"; Yung Sik Kim, *Questioning science in East Asian contexts: essays on science, Confucianism, and the comparative history of science* (Brill, 2014), Chapter 5, 9. Its presumption that, for example, civilizations are the appropriate starting point in studies of the history of science is questionable.

7. Angus C. Graham, "China, Europe and the Origins of Modern Science," chap. 3 in *Chinese Science: Explorations of an Ancient Tradition: Needham's The Grand Titration*, ed. Shigeru Nakayama and Nathan Sivin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973), 45–69.

8. Nathan Sivin, "Why the Scientific Revolution did not take place in China—Or didn't it?," *Chinese Science* 5 (1982): 45–66.

nature is a distinctively Western idea. . . . it was one factor that led to the emergence of modern science”.⁹ It is thus worth disputing such claims.

Moreover, the fact that the Needham Question and its accompanied discussions were problematic does not mean that a comparative study on the notion of laws of nature would not be valuable. Independent of the context of the Needham Question, certain Chinese concepts (especially like *li* 理) are sometimes translated as, assumed to be,¹⁰ or even considered obvious to mean¹¹ laws of nature. This suggests, such concepts at least bear some similarities to the notion of laws of nature. It is thus worth spelling out how and to what extent they do so in a systematic way. If such translations or understandings are mistaken, it worths spelling out why. The value of a comparative study is not simply to give a yes or no answer to the question “Is there a notion of laws of nature in the Chinese traditions”. There are multiple ways to frame the project: What concept in the Chinese traditions is most similar to the notion of laws of nature (and how are they different)? Is there a Chinese concept that can potentially develop into one that plays a similar role of laws of nature in history of science? What aspects of such a notion is conducive to the development of science? Such a comparative study on the notion of laws goes beyond, and can be carried out independent of, the Needham Question.

Given these motivations, this paper aims to address the question of whether or not there is a

9. Peter Harrison, “Laws of Nature, Moral Order, and the Intelligibility of the Cosmos,” in *The Astronomy Revolution 400 Years of Exploring the Cosmos*, ed. Donald G. York (Taylor / Francis Group, 2011), 382.

10. Earlier scholars such as J. P. Bruce (1922, 1923), F. G. Henke (1916), G.G. Warren (1924), and Bodde (1942) adopt the translation “law” for *li* (Needham (1951, 208), of course, criticized this translation). Feng Youlan analyzes 邵雍 Shao Yong’s diagram and cosmology in terms of “law of the evolution of things” and “universal law” (Yu-lan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (Free Press, 1948), 276–277). Jeeloo Liu argues for distinguishing *li* for Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692) as laws of nature from *li* for Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi as what Nicholas Rescher calls laws for nature. While this is an interesting line that worths further investigation, Liu assumes that *li* can indeed be understood as laws of nature without giving an argument (Jeeloo Liu, “The Status of Cosmic Principle (Li) in Neo-Confucian Metaphysics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2005): 391–407). Stephen Angle and Justin Tiwald analyze the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* by appealing to natural laws (Stephen C. Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), Chapter 2.3) In the Chinese literature, it is common to use ‘laws of nature’ 自然法则 to understand the *Dao of Heaven* 天道 and the *Li of Heaven* 天理; see, e.g., 陈来 Chen Lai, *Song Ming Lixue* 宋明理学 (*Song-Ming Confucianism*), originally published in 1936 (BEIJING BOOK CO. INC., 2021).

11. Thanks to [removed for anonymous review] for pointing out this.

notion of laws of nature, or at least a counterpart of such a notion, developed in Chinese classical texts. In Section 2, I first identify Needham's criteria for a notion of laws of nature, and explain why a divine legislator is not necessary for a notion of laws. I then illustrate reasons why there is in fact no unique notion of laws of nature in the European traditions that can be unquestionably used for a comparative study on the notion of laws in other traditions. In the last part of Section 2, I specify central features of laws of nature for our comparative study and explain why I choose them. In Section 3 and 4, I argue for two candidates for a notion of laws of nature in Chinese classical texts: *dao* 道 and *li* 理.

There's little doubt that *dao* and *li* are among the most important concepts in Chinese intellectual history. Most discussions on *dao* and *li* in Chinese philosophy focus on their moral and ontological aspects. Not much has been said about what role these two concepts played in the development of science. On the other hand, most efforts in the study of Chinese science have been directed towards excavating the content of scientific texts¹² and towards their technical details;¹³ much less attention has been paid to how philosophical concepts and background assumptions underlie or have shaped the particular course of science.¹⁴ This paper aims to fill this gap at the intersection of Chinese philosophy and history of science. It provides a preliminary survey of the scientific aspects of the notions of *dao* and *li* used in classical texts, particularly by explicating in what sense they amount to a notion of laws of nature. This analysis of *dao* and *li* undercuts Needham's claim that there is no notion of laws of nature in Chinese thought. Even if one perceives the Needham Question as ill-posed or questions the essential role of laws of nature in the development of modern science, this comparative

12. Robin D. S. Yates, "Science and Technology," in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 658.

13. Kim, *Questioning science in East Asian contexts: essays on science, Confucianism, and the comparative history of science*, 116–123.

14. There are a few exceptions including Needham. Yung Sik Kim, however, thinks Needham overemphasized the role of Daoism and urges more studies on the connection between Neo-Confucian natural philosophy and Chinese science (Kim, Chapter 5). Also see, for example, Chan, "Neo-Confucianism and Chinese Scientific Thought"; Lisa Raphals, "Chinese Philosophy and Chinese Medicine," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020).

study can still be meaningful: It investigates how philosophical concepts like *dao* and *li* played a role in the development of natural knowledge and science in the Chinese traditions.

2 On Notion of Laws of Nature

In order to answer the question “Is there a notion of laws of nature in Chinese classical texts?”, we first need to specify what notion of laws we are looking for.

For Needham, the notion of laws of nature in the sense of the natural sciences shares the common root with the notion of natural law in the juristic sense. He takes the essential features of laws of nature as enacted by “a celestial lawgiver ‘legislating’ for non-human natural phenomena”.¹⁵ Such notion, according to Needham, can be traced back to as early as the Babylonian period,¹⁶ and “after so many centuries of existence as a theological commonplace in European civilization, the idea of laws of Nature attained a position of such importance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”.¹⁷ Needham tacitly assumes that there is a unique notion of laws of nature, which is essential to the development of modern science.

Needham’s understanding of laws of nature is built on the scholarly work around his time, particularly, the historical analyses of seventeenth-century scientists’ (or natural philosophers’) ideas of laws (especially by Edgar Zilsel). Such understanding, however, is limited and too simplistic.¹⁸ The literature on laws of nature, on both how the notion is developed historically¹⁹ and how it is employed

15. Joseph Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (I),” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (January 1951): 4, 8; Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 36.

16. Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (I),” 18.

17. Needham, 29.

18. Needham is aware that the notion of laws of nature as used in modern science no longer has the element of divine command, and he wonders whether or not there could be a different path to the modern notion of laws without divine command. But that’s all he has said about this possibility. (Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 37.)

19. See, e.g., Lorraine Daston and Michael Stolleis, eds., *Natural law and laws of nature in early modern Europe: Ju-*

in science, has advanced and become much more sophisticated since then.

For one, it is disputable whether, and to what extent, the idea of divine legislation plays a role in the development of the idea of laws of nature in the Western traditions. In a classic paper, the historian Jane Ruby argues that “it is for the most part mistaken” to think that the concept of scientific laws as used today arose from the idea of divine legislation; the modern use emerged, rather, “through different processes at different times in three distinct fields”.²⁰ Moreover, consider Descartes (who is usually considered to be responsible for the modern concept of laws of nature²¹) and Newton (whose laws are prototypical examples of scientific laws): Although God plays a role in both of their notions of laws, it does not mean that a divine legislator is necessary to their notions. Peter Harrison, for instance, argues that both Descartes’ and Newton’s notions of laws were susceptible to a purely naturalistic reading and the operations of God could be reconceptualized simply as ‘nature’.²² John Henry argues that Descartes only introduced the divine legislator “in order to make sense of, and to persuade contemporaries of the validity of, the concept of laws of nature”.²³

More generally, contrary to Needham’s assumption, there isn’t a unique notion of laws of nature that came in common use in the seventeenth century, which can be regarded as *the* modern concept of laws. Although there are surely important aspects common to the uses of laws by (say) Kepler, Descartes, Boyle, and Newton, the differences among them are in fact larger than one may

risprudence, theology, moral and natural philosophy (Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

20. She does agree with Needham that the idea of divine legislation accounts for much of ancient use of laws of nature. Jane E. Ruby, “The Origins of Scientific ‘Law,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 3 (1986): 342.

21. See, e.g., Edgar Zilsel, “The Genesis of the Concept of Physical Law,” *The Philosophical Review* 51, no. 3 (1942): 269; John Henry, “Metaphysics and the Origins of Modern Science: Descartes and the Importance of Laws of Nature,” *Early Science and Medicine* 9, no. 2 (2004): 73–114; Helen Hattab, “Early Modern Roots of the Philosophical Concept of a Law of Nature,” in *Laws of Nature*, ed. Walter Ott and Lydia Patton (Oxford University Press, 2018), 18–41; Peter Harrison, “Laws of God or Laws of Nature?,” in *Science Without God?: Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism*, ed. P. Harrison and J. Roberts (Oxford University Press, 2019), 58–76.

In contrast, Needham thinks the turning point when the notion of laws began to be taken seriously happened between Copernicus and Kepler (even though Copernicus never used the expression ‘law’ and Kepler did not use the expression for his ‘laws’ of planetary motion (Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 36).

22. Harrison, “Laws of God or Laws of Nature?”

23. Henry, “Metaphysics and the Origins of Modern Science,” 97.

previously recognize.²⁴ One's account of when and how the modern notion of laws was formed depends on their preconception of what laws are, which does not necessarily track how laws are used by modern scientists.²⁵ As for instances where laws of nature were invoked before the seventeenth century, their significance is also judged in accordance with one's preconceived idea of laws.²⁶

Worse, there are no simple and uniform criteria on what laws are as used by modern scientists, and it is an ongoing debate in contemporary philosophy about what laws of nature are.²⁷ For instance, philosophers vehemently disagree about whether or not laws are something over and above mere regularities. Some think that laws cannot be reduced to mere regularities, but necessitate or govern how things behave; in other words, laws are *prescriptive*, rather than merely descriptive.²⁸ The opposed view takes laws to be a special kinds of regularities, and denies that laws of nature involve a sense of necessity or governing.²⁹

24. Friedrich Steinle, "The Amalgamation of a Concept—Laws of nature in the New Sciences," in *Laws of nature: Essays on the philosophical, scientific and historical dimensions*, ed. F. Weinert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 318.

25. Bixin Guo, *On the Origins of Laws of Nature*, Manuscript, 2021.

26. Henry, "Metaphysics and the Origins of Modern Science," 76.

27. There are *prima facie* scientific laws that we can point to as paradigmatic examples of laws of nature, such as Kepler's laws, Hooke's law, Newton's laws of motion and law of gravity, the second law of thermodynamics, the Mendelian laws of inheritance, and so on. It is, however, controversial whether or not any of these laws indeed qualifies as a law of nature. For instance, it has been argued that *only* fundamental laws of physics are genuine laws of nature; the so-called 'laws' of special sciences or any non-fundamental 'laws' are not really laws (see, e.g., Tim Maudlin, *The Metaphysics Within Physics* (Oxford University Press, 2007)). In particular, it has been argued that biology has no laws; for more details, see, e.g., J. Beatty, "The Evolutionary Contingency Thesis," in *Concepts, Theories, and Rationality in the Biological Sciences*, ed. G. Wolters and J.G. Lennox (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), Sandra D. Mitchell, "Dimensions of Scientific Law," *Philosophy of Science* 67, no. 2 (2000): 242–265). In that case, the Mendelian laws of inheritance would not count as laws. One of the reasons why only fundamental laws are genuine laws is that laws of nature are supposed to be universal, and only fundamental laws are universal. Hooke's law, for example, only applies to the spring of elastic bodies and is inapplicable outside that domain. Even laws as broad as Newton's laws of motion are not universal, since they fail in the quantum regime. The second law of thermodynamics, consider another example, is not universal either, but for a different reason: It is not strict, but only expresses a statistical regularity.

28. This is the so-called Necessitarian accounts of laws of nature. 'Governing' here does not necessarily suggest that it is done by an external deity. Although talks of governing echo a theological origin of the notions of laws in the seventeenth century, neither scientists nor philosophers who hold the Necessitarian accounts "make an overt appeal to theology to explicate it. Rather, they understand laws to be features of reality over and above occurrent events that in some way necessitate or govern them". (Barry Loewer, "The Package Deal Account of Laws and Properties," *Synthese*, 2020, 1–25; also see Harrison, "Laws of God or Laws of Nature?")

29. This is the so-called Humean accounts of laws. For more details on this debate, see, e.g., David K. Lewis, *Philosophy-*

In sum, our intuition and understanding of what laws of nature are come from three fields: (A) history (the historical development of the notion), (B) modern science (how the notion is used by modern scientists), and (C) contemporary philosophy (mostly metaphysics and philosophy of science). The notions of laws from each of these three fields do not necessarily converge. A variety of scientific and philosophical discourses have come and gone under the name of ‘laws of nature’. What we have is not *the* notion of laws of nature, but instead *a cluster of similar but distinct ideas* that can be reasonably categorized under the name ‘law’.³⁰ It is thus nontrivial to select *a* notion of laws for the comparative study. If we include features of laws that are contentious or inessential, we risk being overly stringent and unfair in judging whether there is a notion of laws of nature in the Chinese traditions, as happens with Needham.

Needham picks his notion of laws from (A). When he evaluates if a Chinese concept counts as a notion of laws of nature, what is really being evaluated is if the concept matches up to *his preconceptions* of laws, which *he deems as necessary* to the development of modern science. If his assumptions are false, what Needham has shown at best is only that China did not take the same path through which a specific notion of laws of nature (that is, in terms of a celestial lawgiver) developed in the European traditions. This paper challenges his presumptions, and suggests an alternative picture of how the idea of laws of nature could develop without a divine legislator.

By analyzing what is common to (A), (B) and (C), I propose first a preliminary but crucial step in the development of a notion of laws of nature: recognizing that there are patterns, regularities, or lawful generalizations in nature. Such a step may seem mundane to us now, but was not always so. The idea that nature is orderly and stable needed to prevail over the idea that things or events just happen arbitrarily or randomly, or are influenced or determined by capricious gods, ancestors or demons. That is to say, for a notion of laws of nature to develop, it is crucial to recognize that the universe is orderly, systematic, and predictable, despite its orderless appearances or its vicissitudes on

ical Papers, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1986); Maudlin, *The Metaphysics Within Physics*.

30. One may think that there is the right notion of laws of nature, but we just don’t know yet what it is.

the surface.

Moreover, it needs to be recognized that there is not just a large collection of unconnected, isolated patterns, each pertaining to one kind of phenomenon, but a few overarching principles or perhaps rules that account for a wide range of diverse phenomena. In other words, there is something simple, constant, and homogeneous underneath the incessant changes and variations of the myriad things that is the reason why different things behave the way they do. Such principles (or rules) hold irrespective of time, location, or subject; and we thus can use them to make inferences and predictions. Maybe even stronger: such principles (or rules) compel things to act in accordance with them, and it is not possible for things to go against them.

Based on these ideas, we have reached a minimal notion of laws of nature: the constant patterns, regularities, or orders underlying the motion and change of things that explain why things behave the way they do.³¹ It has the features of being (i) constant or invariant (laws do not vary as things change), (ii) explanatory (laws are the reasons why things behave or change the way they do), and (iii) can be used to make predictions or inferences from one case to many other cases. If we were to find such a notion of laws in the Chinese classical texts, it would be sufficiently valuable for our comparative project.

There are other features of laws that are salient in the cluster of ideas under the name of ‘laws of nature’. For instance, laws are (iv) universal, or (v) prescriptive (that is, involving a sense of necessity). For reasons discussed earlier, such features may not be necessary to a notion of laws. But if our candidates for a notion of laws of nature in the Chinese classical texts do share these features, it worths noting that our candidates bear further important similarities to the notions of laws developed in the Western traditions.

31. To clarify, I don’t intend to suggest that what I just offered is *the* right notion of laws of nature.

3 *Dao*

Dao is often translated as the way, the path, or the course. There is no simple answer to what exactly *dao* is, as different schools or scholars at different times use or interpret it differently. Worse, there is no unitary meaning of *dao*, as one author or text attributes different meanings to it in different contexts. But it is hard to deny that the notion of *dao* embodies the idea of pattern, natural order or rule of particular things or the whole universe. Even Needham himself admits this and couldn't resist the word 'law' in describing *dao*:

it is nonsense to say that the assumption of a permanent, uniform, abstract order and *laws* by means of which the regular changes in the world could be explained, was a purely Greek invention. The order of Nature was for the ancient Chinese the *Tao* [*dao*], and as a *ch'hang Tao* it was an 'unvarying Way'.³²

Nonetheless, *dao* didn't even make to the list of notions that Needham considers as candidates for the notion of laws of nature. For him, "the Taoist thinkers . . . failed . . . to develop anything resembling the idea of laws of Nature. . . . It was not that the Tao, the cosmic order in all things, did not work according to system and rule; but the tendency of the Taoists was to regard it as inscrutable for the intellect."³³

What Needham conveniently neglected is that the notion of *dao* is not exclusive to Daoism. It is present across various schools of thought (including Confucianism and Legalism) and throughout Chinese intellectual history. Although the scholarly interests or the contexts in which *dao* is invoked vary greatly,³⁴ what is common, and also most relevant to our discussion, is the idea that *dao* is the way

32. Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 46, emphasis mine.

33. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 543.

34. In particular, the major schools during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) were only classified and labeled by later historians Sima Tan 司马谈 (d. 110 BCE) and Liu Xin 刘

the universe works and why the universe is the way it is.³⁵ This notion of *dao*, it has been argued by Zhang Dainian, came from the notion of *dao of Heaven* 天道,³⁶ which was already commonly used in the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE).³⁷ *Dao of Heaven* originally meant the orbits or regularities of heavenly bodies. According to Chen Lai, advances of astronomy at the time provided the means and context for such a notion to develop, and this very notion was a departure from taking the motion of celestial bodies to be determined by sorcery.³⁸ Generally, ‘Heaven’ embraces a spectrum of meanings. On one end of the spectrum, it embodies the religious idea of God, a higher power which has a will and rules the universe.³⁹ This sense of Heaven was criticized by later scholars,⁴⁰ and gradually became less popular. On the other end, Heaven refers to the sky or the above, in contrast to Earth or Humans. Somewhere in between, Heaven refers to the whole of nature. Accordingly the meaning of *dao of Heaven* expands to the general rules or laws of everything.

The idea of *dao* as the fundamental principle or law, or the constant pattern of the universe is present in the *Zhouyi* 周易 (also known as *Yijing* or *The Book of Change*).⁴¹ It was later included in

韵 (d. 23). (For more detail, see 班固 Ban Gu [32–92 CE], *Han shu* 汉书 (*Standard History of the Han Dynasty*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1962); Kidder Smith, “Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, “Legalism,” et cetera,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 129–156.)

35. For a review on the notion of *dao* in Chinese philosophy, see (for example) Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); 张岱年 Zhang Dainian, *Zhongguo gudian zhixue gainian fanchou yaolun* 中国古典哲学概念范畴要论 (*Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*), Reprint in 2017; English translation by Edmund Ryden Published by New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Beijing: Foreign Languages Press in 2002 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1989); Chen Lai, “The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 30, no. 4 (1999): 9–24.

36. Dainian, *Zhongguo gudian zhixue gainian fanchou yaolun* 中国古典哲学概念范畴要论 (*Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*).

37. Also see 陈来 Chen Lai, “Chunqiu shidaide tiandao guannian 春秋时代的天道观念 (The Notion of Dao of Heaven in the Spring and Autumn Period),” in *Quanshi yu jiangou* 诠释与建构——汤一介先生 75 周年华诞暨从教 50 周年纪念文集 (*Explanation and Construction: On the Memoriam of Zhang Yijie*) (2001).

38. Lai. Chen’s analysis is largely based on two ancient history texts on the Spring and Autumn period, *Guoyu* 国语 and *Zuo Zhuan* 左传. The exact composition dates and authors of these texts are controversial. They are usually taken to be written during the Warring States period.

39. This is how Bodde’s view differs from Needham’s.

40. Such as Wang Chong 王充 (27–c. 97). For more details, see Alexis McLeod, *The Philosophical Thought of Wang Chong* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

41. Initially it was an ancient divination manual, allegedly created by the mythical emperor, Fu Xi 伏羲, with state-

the Confucian classics, but its influence far exceeds one school of thought. According to the *Zhouyi*, *Taiji* 太极 (the *Supreme Ultimate*) is the origin of the universe and the ontological basis of everything. It generates the two Modes, *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳. The successive alteration and interaction of *yin* and *yang* ultimately generates and underlies the constant change of everything.

The [successive] alteration and interaction of *yin* and *yang* is called *dao*.⁴²

Dao is not the *yin* and *yang*; that by which (*suo yi* 所以) the *yin* and *yang* alternates⁴³ and interacts is *dao*. It thus can be understood as the fundamental principle or mechanism, or the universal law that underlies and explains the motion and change of everything.⁴⁴

The classical text that most systematically discusses *dao* is the *Dao De Jing* 道德经, a canonical text of Daoism.⁴⁵ It also takes *dao* to be the general laws, universal patterns, or natural order for all things. What is special about the *Dao De Jing* is that it seems to attribute an additional role to *dao*: the origin and the ontological basis for everything:

There was something formed from chaos, coming into existence before Heaven and

ments supposedly written by King Wen and the Duke of Zhou during the eleventh century BCE. Commentaries were later added by unknown authors around 500–200 BCE, and the *Zhouyi* then came to have great significance in Chinese philosophy and cosmology.

42. 《周易·系辞上》：一阴一阳之谓道。My translation, checked against James Legge and Chung-yin Cheng, “Philosophy of Change,” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 517–523.

43. Lai, “The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy,” 17.

44. The exact dates and authors of some texts quoted in this section (such as the *Xici* and some chapters of the *Zhuangzi*) are debatable. Consequently, when the use of *dao* as laws of nature became common is debatable. [Removed for blind review] points out that it was not until Xunzi 荀子, a Confucian in the late Warring States period, that there was the idea that nature has some universal pattern or principle, and not until the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220) that *dao* was systematically interpreted as the universal principle. Whether or not this is correct does not affect the thesis of this paper, which focuses on in what sense *dao* embodies the idea of laws of nature, rather than when it did.

45. Its reputed author is Laozi 老子, the semi-mythical founder of Daoism. His identity is debated and so is the date of composition of the text. Roughly speaking, the *Dao De Jing* is dated to either the Spring and Autumn period or the Warring States period. There are also different versions of the *Dao De Jing*. I discuss the one that is most influential, since that is what matters to our project.

Earth. How quiet it was and formless, standing alone and never changing, cyclically moving everywhere and never slacking. It can be the mother of Heaven and Earth. I don't know its name, and call it *dao*. If I have to name it, it would be the Great. The Great is so broad [that it is everywhere; as it's everywhere,] it is passing. As it passes, it becomes far away. As it is far away, it returns. . . . Humans *fa* [takes their laws from] Earth, Earth *fa* [takes their laws from] Heaven, and Heaven *fa* [takes their laws from] *dao*; the *fa* [law] of *dao* is being what it is.⁴⁶

The last sentence specifies the relationship between *dao* and everything else (Heaven, Earth, and Humans), which is described by *fa* (used as a verb): They all, ultimately, *takes their laws from dao*. The key to understanding this relationship lies in how we interpret *fa*.

Fa 法 is the same character as used systematically by Legalism: It is usually translated as laws in the juristic sense (when used as a noun). But *fa* also has the broader meaning of rule, order, or standard, and unambiguously applies to non-human things. For example, the *Zhuangzi* 庄子, another canonical text of Daoism,⁴⁷ takes natural things or phenomena to have *fa*:

Four seasons have clear *fa* [order] but never argue. Everything has fixed *li* [principle or order] but never talk.⁴⁸

Moreover, the use of *fa* as taking laws from (Heaven or *dao*) is not unique to the *Dao De Jing*, but can also be found in the texts of other schools of thought. For instance, in the *Mozi*⁴⁹:

46. 《道德经》：有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，独立而不改，周行而不殆，可以为天地母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，强为之名曰大。大曰逝，逝曰远，远曰反。……人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。 My translation modified from Legge.

47. It is named after Zhuangzi, who lived around 300 BCE. The text is widely agreed to be a compiled work by multiple authors, including possibly Zhuangzi himself, his students, and later editors.

48. 《庄子·知北游》：四时有名法而不议，万物有成理而不说。 My translation, checked against Legge and Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 546.

49. The *Mozi* is usually attributed to Mo Di 墨翟 (~400 BCE), the founder of Mohism. The text is a compilation of different authors (possibly the followers of Mo Di) and of different dates.

Thus the ancient sage-kings take investigating prudently, endorsing the virtuous, and employing the capable as governing policy, by taking *fa* [laws] from Heaven.⁵⁰

We can also see this idea in the *Guanzi* 管子⁵¹:

The *fa* [laws] as engraved *fa* [takes laws from] the position of Heaven and Earth, and imitates the operation of four seasons, in order to rule the world. The operation of four seasons has winter and summer. The sage *fa* [takes laws from] it, thus has intellectual and fighting skills.⁵²

One may question if these statements should be interpreted as expressing the idea of *taking laws from*, rather than *modeling*. In fact, Needham does interpret them as saying “the laws of human society were, or should be, *modeled* on non-human Nature”. More specifically, he takes these statements to be “a poetical and metaphorical derivation of human laws, the qualities of which were thought of as mirroring *certain desirable qualities* seen in non-human Nature”. He, however, finds this whole idea “[o]ne of the strangest” and calls it a paradox in the sense that “the Chinese law [in the juristic sense] could not be said to be in non-human Nature” and consequently the laws of human society could not be “derived from where no Law existed”.⁵³

First, it is not obvious in these texts that human laws were taken to be just modeling some sporadic virtues seen in the natural world, instead of how the world works more generally and systematically. For example, in the *Guanzi*, they are modeled on *dao*, the fundamental principle or the univer-

50. 《墨子·尚贤中》：故古圣王以审、以尚贤、使能为政，而取法于天。My translation, checked against Legge.

51. The *Guanzi* is usually attributed to Guan Zhong 管仲, a famous minister of state in the Spring and Autumn period, but it contains a wide range of materials by different authors from the Warring States period to the Han dynasty (202–220 BCE). Guan Zhong is often considered as a pioneer of Legalism, while the *Guanzi* is categorized as a Daoist text by Liu Xin.)

52. 《管子·版法解》：版法者，法天地之位，象四时之行，以治天下。四时之行，有寒有暑，圣人法之，故有文有武。My translation.

53. Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 200–201, my emphasis.

sal law itself: “Sagacious kings model and *fa* [take laws from] *dao of Heaven*”.⁵⁴ Generally speaking, whether interpreting *fa* as *taking laws from* or as *modeling* is better depends on whether or not these texts take there to be laws in the natural world. This leads to our next point.

Second, Needham’s so-called paradox would never arise if we accept that these texts take there to be laws of nature in the first place. We can see this by considering one of the most important topics of Chinese thought: the unity of the natural and the ethical (or social) order.⁵⁵ Despite the appearance that everything is in constant change, there are, on the one hand, stable and constant regularities in the natural realm, including the motions of celestial bodies and the succession of the four seasons; on the other hand, similar regularities or orderliness is also found in the human realm. The open question is how the regularities or laws of the two realms are related. *Dao of Heaven* in the Spring and Autumn period, mentioned earlier, not only applies to nature but also to the human realm. That is to say, moral and political orders or laws are seen as manifestations of *dao of Heaven*. The idea of taking laws from Heaven or *dao* in the texts discussed (developed around the the Warring States period or later) can be seen as a continuation of that.⁵⁶

Third, although it is true that *fa* usually is translated as *laws* for Legalists and as *standard* or *to model* for early Confucians, Daoists, and Mohists, it is open to dispute whether there is a clear

54. 《管子·形势解》：明主法象天道。My translation.

55. This is often associated with the phrase *tian ren he yi* 天人合一. For more details, see (for example) 张岱年 Zhang Dainian, “Zhongguo zhaxuezhong “tian ren he yi” sixiangde pouxi 中国哲学中“天人合一”思想的剖析,” *Journal of Peking University(Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 1 (1985). Needham gives more considerations to this idea in his later work, but concludes that “the phenomenalist conviction of cosmic-ethical unity gave no stimulation whatever to the idea of laws of Nature” without an argument (Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 528). This is probably because he only considered the version of this idea according to which the human realm can somehow interact with the natural realm, which was popular in the Han dynasty but much criticized later. This, however, is not the only version of the unity of the natural and ethical order, as I will discuss next.

56. This later developed into the idea of interactions between Heaven and humans, or correlative cosmology 天人感应, in the Han dynasty. Neo-Confucianism in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties criticizes correlative cosmology, but further advances the idea that the fundamental principle, pattern, or law of the universe applies to the human realm as equally as to the natural realm (I will discuss this more in the next section). Also note that, Xunzi’s view is usually considered different from Laozi’s.

boundary between these two uses of *fa*.⁵⁷ It is suggestive that the texts in question chose *fa*, which is associated with rule or law, instead of some other characters that only mean imitating, resembling, or modeling (such as *xiang* 象). Accordingly, interpreting *fa* as *taking laws from* in these texts may be adequate in the sense that laws need to be obeyed, not defied. This interpretation is supported by the Neo-Daoist Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) influential reading of the *Dao De Jing*.⁵⁸

In sum, *fa* complements the notion of *dao* by explicating its relation with everything else:⁵⁹ They obey, and do not defy, *dao*. It is in this sense that we can consider *dao* as governing the motion and change of everything. And it is in this sense that *dao* resembles the notions of laws of nature developed in the Western traditions in this particular aspect of governing, but without appealing to a divine lawgiver.

One may raise the objection that there is no sense of command in Daoism due to its central idea of *wu wei* 无为, non-action or unforced action. This is in fact one of the reasons why Needham does not consider *dao* as a candidate for a notion of laws of nature.⁶⁰ *Wu wei* is directly opposed to the legislation of a celestial lawgiver, which “would be ‘wei,’ a forcing of things to be obedient[t], involving imposition of sanctions”. Needham, while admitting nature according to Daoism “shows a ceaselessness and regularity”, thinks this is insufficient to produce a notion of laws because “it is not a *commanded* ceaselessness and regularity”.⁶¹

57. See Chad Hansen, “Fa (Standards: Laws) and Meaning Changes in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 3 (1994): 435–488; Jeffrey Richey, “Lost and Found Theories of Law in Early China,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49, no. 3 (2006): 329–343.

58. 《道德经注》：法，谓法则也。人不违地，乃得全安，法地也。地不违天，乃得全载，法天也。天不违道，乃得全覆，法道也。

59. This interpretation of *fa* as describing the relation between *dao* and everything is shared by 王中江 Wang Zhongjiang, “Dao and the Spontaneousness of Things: A Study on the Meaning of Laozi’s ‘Dao Emulates What Is Spontaneously So’ 道与事物的自然：老子‘道法自然’实义考论,” *Philosophical Researches* 哲学研究, no. 8 (2010): 39.

60. Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 213.

61. Needham, 214, emphasis in original.

This argument, however, not only is a restricted reading of the idea of *wu wei*, but also imposes an unnecessary requirement on the sense in which laws of nature govern or command. The *Dao De Jing* indeed says: “*dao* invariably does nothing (*wu wei*) and yet there is nothing which it does not do.”⁶² Although the literal translation of *wu wei* is no action or the absence of doing, if we consider the general context, a better understanding would be non-interference and letting things follow their natural course, or acting in a way that is natural, spontaneous, uncoerced, and yet accords with the order of the universe.⁶³ Despite being *wu wei*, *dao* is still responsible for everything: *dao* produces, “clothes[,] and nourishes all the things, but does not lord over them”.⁶⁴ We can also find this idea in the *Zhuangzi*:

As the air of spring comes forth, all plants grow; as it's the right time of autumn, all the treasures [of nature] are fully grown. Are spring and autumn what they are without receiving anything? *Dao* of Heaven has been in process.⁶⁵

The fact that *dao* is *wu wei* conforms to the notion of laws of nature in contemporary metaphysics and science, instead of contradicting it. Laws do not govern by interfering with the nature or disposition of objects. Nor is it as if objects can somehow disobey the laws and then the divine legislator would

62. 《道德经》：道常无为而无不为。My translation modified from Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 10.

63. This is in fact more or less the standard interpretation. For example, see Edward Slingerland, *Effortless action: Wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 5; P. J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Second (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005). For interpretations that are slightly different from but compatible with this one, see, for example, Chad Hansen, “Wuwei (Wu-wei): Taking No Action,” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 784–786; David Loy, “Wei-Wu-Wei: Nondual Action,” *Philosophy East and West* 35, no. 1 (1985): 73–86.

64. 《道德经》：衣养万物而不为主。My translation.

65. 《庄子·庚桑楚》：夫春气发而百草生，正得秋而万宝成。夫春与秋，岂无得而然哉？天道已行矣。My translation checked against Legge. Although the *Zhuangzi* does not explicitly use the word *wu wei*, the idea is there. Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), who edited the version of the *Zhuangzi* as we see now, identifies the idea of *wu wei* in his comment on this sentence: “Both [spring and autumn] is bestowed with *dao* of nature; thus *wu wei* (皆得自然之道，故无为也).”

punish them for disobeying.⁶⁶ Objects simply follow the laws, and there is no other way for them to act differently. What “governing” really means is that objects are disposed to act in accordance with the laws, or the laws compel them to act.⁶⁷ This is exactly what *wu wei* says about *dao*.

Another reason why Needham does not consider *dao* as a candidate for a notion of laws of nature is because he thinks that the Daoists took *dao* to be “inscrutable for the theoretical intellect”.⁶⁸ The *Dao De Jing* indeed starts with: “The *dao* that can be expressed in words (*dao*) is not the true and constant *dao*”.⁶⁹ But it is controversial to interpret this as saying that *dao* is inscrutable.⁷⁰ Even if we accept that *dao* is inscrutable for the Daoists, it does not mean that *dao* is inscrutable *simpliciter*. As mentioned earlier, the notion of *dao* is not exclusive to Daoism, and other schools do not seem to take *dao* to be inscrutable. Consider, for example, the Legalist text *Han Feizi*⁷¹:

Dao is why everything is the way it is, and is the totality of all principles [*li*]. *Li* is the form of what things come to be. *Dao* is why all things come to be. Thus it is said: “*Dao* is what *li* is.” Everything has its *li*, and can’t conflict with one another. This is why *li* is what constrains things. Everything has its own *li* different from that of others. Once

66. It was thought that both living and non-living things could transgress the laws of God. But as we discussed in the previous section, it is hard to see why this religious element is necessary to a scientific notion of laws of nature.

67. This is consistent with versions of the Necessitarian Accounts of laws of nature in contemporary metaphysics, which locate necessary connections in the dispositions or powers of things.

68. Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 194; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 543.

69. 《道德经》：道可道，非常道。 My translation, modified from Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 95.

70. Especially when one takes into consideration of what follows and its broad context: “The name (*ming*) that can be articulated (*ming*) is not the true and eternal name (*ming*). The Unnamable is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; The namable is the mother of all things” (名可名，非常名。无名，天地之始；有名，万物之母。 My translation, modified from Feng, 95); “*Dao*, being constant, is unnamable” (道常无名。 My translation). Feng Youlan, for example, interprets the sentence in question as saying that *dao* is very different from all material things. For another interpretation that also explains why it does not suggest *dao* is instrutable, see Bo Mou, “Ultimate Concern and Language Engagement: A Reexamination of the Opening Message of the Dao-de-Jing,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2000): 429–439.

71. The *Han Feizi* is attributed to Han Fei (d. 233 BCE), who is considered the most significant representative of Legalism.

everything has its own *li*, *dao* has done its job.⁷²

The *Han Feizi* goes on to claim that *dao* is the reason why the sun and the moon are bright, why celestial bodies move the way they do, why four seasons change, and why sages can write a masterpiece.⁷³ The notion of *dao* also appears in the *Deng Xizi* 邓析子⁷⁴:

Boats float on water; wheels turn around on land. This is *dao* of nature.⁷⁵

This quote explicitly identifies specific natural regularities with *dao*. Confucius (551–479 BCE) also discusses *dao*.⁷⁶

The duke said: “I venture to ask what it is that the gentlemen value in *dao* of Heaven?”

Confucius replied: “[They] value its ceaselessness. Such as the sun and moon following each other around from east to west without ceasing—that is *dao* of Heaven. There is no stopping and no interruption—that is *dao* of Heaven. With no interference and

72. 《韩非子·解老》：道者，万物之所以然也，万理之所稽。理者，成物之文也。道者，万物之所以成也。故曰：“道，理之者也”。物有理，不可以相薄，物有理不可以相薄故理之为物之制。万物各异理，万物各异理而道尽。Han Fei 韩非 [d. 233 BCE], *Han Feizi xin jiaozhu* 韩非子新校注 (*Han Feizi, with New Collations and Commentary*), ed. Chen Qiyu 陈奇猷 (Shanghai: Guji 古籍, 2000), 6.20.411–14. My translation modified from Lai, “The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy.”

73. Hsiao-Po Wang and Leo S. Chang, for example, argue that the *Han Feizi* appeals to the notion of *dao* to build a foundation for its legal and political theories. Hsiao-Po Wang and Leo S. Chang, *The Philosophical Foundations of Han Fei's Political Theory* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986). It is, however, disputable whether this passage or the whole section is actually written by Han Fei, or added by latter editors. See, for example, Sarah A. Queen, “Han Feizi and the Old Master: A Comparative Analysis and Translation of Han Feizi Chapter 20, “Jie Lao,” and Chapter 21, “Yu Lao,”” in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Springer, 2013), 197–256. For our purposes, it suffices to say that the notion of *dao* is commonly used and is not simply restricted as a Daoist notion.

74. The text is attributed to Deng Xi (d. 501 BCE), a renowned lawyer and rhetorician, but it is unclear who its author is. The *Deng Xizi* is classified as belonging to the School of Names by Liu Xin.

75. 《邓析子·无厚》：夫舟浮与水，车转于陆，此自然道也。My translation.

76. It is true that Confucius and Mencius (d. 289 BCE) discuss *dao* of Heaven much less. That is because Confucianism is primarily interested in the order and harmony of human society. But it does not mean that Confucians do not employ the notion of *dao* or they do not think there is *dao*. Rather, they are simply more interested in the other aspect of *dao*, which is *dao of Humans* 人道.

things come to their completion—that is *dao* of Heaven.”⁷⁷

Moreover, it is in fact the goal of Xuanxue 玄学 (sometimes called Neo-Daoism), developed in the Wei (220-266) and Jin (266-420) dynasties, to explicate *dao* with “analytic rigor and clarity”.⁷⁸ For example, the Neo-Daoist Wang Bi (226–249) commented on the *Daodejing*:

Dao has its great constancy, and the principle (*li*) has its great perfection, so “hold on to *dao* of old to preside over what exists now”. Although we live in the present, it is possible for one to know how things were at the beginning of time. Thus one can know [*dao*] without leaving one’s gate or peering out one’s window.⁷⁹

Wang explicitly states here that we can use *dao* to make inferences. This conforms to the notions of laws of nature in the sense that laws can be used for prediction as well as retrodiction. He also emphasizes the constancy of *dao*.⁸⁰

4 Li

Li has been translated as principle, reason, structure, law, order, pattern, and coherence. Similar to the case of *dao*, there is no straightforward answer to what *li* is. It has many facets, and its meanings

77. 《礼记·哀公问》公曰：敢问君子何贵乎天道也？孔子对曰：贵其不已。如日月东西相从而不已也，是天道也；不闭其久，是天道也；无为而物成，是天道也；已成而明，是天道也。My translation modified from Legge and Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 214.

78. Alan Chan, “Neo-Daoism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), Section 1. What is Xuanxue?

79. 王弼《道德经》注：道有大常，理有大致，执古之道，可以御今，虽处于今，可以知古始，故不出户，窥牖而可知也。My translation modified from Bi Wang translated by Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 141.

80. *Dao* is often used together with *chang* 常, which captures the idea of constancy or invariableness. For example, we can find this idea in the *Xunzi* 荀子, which is attributed to Xun Kuang 荀况, a Confucian who lived in the late Warring States period: “Heaven has constant *dao*.” (《荀子·天论》：天有常道矣。My translation.)

are rich and can be flexible. Tang Junyi (1909–1978), for instance, identified six distinct meanings of *li* emerged throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. The most extensive and systematic explication and analysis of *li* is given by the major school of thought in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, *lixue* 理学 (the School or the Study of *Li*) or Neo-Confucianism,⁸¹ which takes *li* as its most central concept.

Needham recognizes that *li* is “not far removed from” the Daoist conception of *dao* as “the order and pattern in Nature”.⁸² Unlike *dao*, Needham does consider *li* as a possible candidate for a notion of laws of nature. He even says: “There is ‘law’ implicit in it”. Nevertheless, he does not think *li* qualifies as a notion of laws, because it is understood by Neo-Confucianism in an organismic sense, in contrast to the mechanical Newtonian sense. According to Needham, the law implicit in *li* is “the law to which parts of wholes have to conform by virtue of their very existence as parts of wholes”, and *li* is intrinsic to all things or patterns of things, “not extrinsic to them, and dominating them, as the laws of human society constrain individual men”. Hence, such a ‘law’ does not have the status as legislated by a celestial lawgiver, but “arose directly out of the nature of the universe”.⁸³

First, the organismic reading of Neo-Confucianism was proposed by Needham. It is an open question whether or not such a reading is adequate, or if it is the best interpretation that accurately encompasses the complexities of Neo-Confucianism.⁸⁴ Second, even if we grant that *li* as used by Neo-Confucians is indeed organismic, what Needham has shown at best is that there is no mechanical conception of laws in China, rather than that there is no conception of laws of nature *simpliciter*.

81. The name Neo-Confucianism is only coined specifically for its introduction to the West.

82. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 558.

83. Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 218; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 567.

84. See, e.g., Brook Ziporyn, “Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence? Li in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 3 (2008): 405, 411.

Even Needham himself admits that “one could not say that ‘law’ in the Newtonian sense was completely absent from the minds of [Zhu Xi] and the Neo-Confucians in their definition of Li” (Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the laws of Nature,” 219).

There are conceptions of laws other than the mechanical one, as Needham himself acknowledges.⁸⁵ Moreover, the primary reason Needham believes that organismic *li* does not qualify as a notion of laws is that it is intrinsic and not imposed by an external lawgiver. But, as discussed earlier, such a feature is not necessary for a notion of laws. Last, the notion of *li* is not exclusive to Neo-Confucianism. For Needham's argument to work, one needs to show that other uses of *li* as the order or pattern of nature should be interpreted as organismic as well. But it's unclear whether this can be done.

The notion of *li* in fact precedes Neo-Confucianism. '*Li*' originally referred to the veins or patterns inherent in jade. Its meaning later expanded to the nature, structure, or pattern of things in general. We have seen this use from the *Zhuangzi* and *Han Feizi* in Section 3. This use of *li* is not limited to philosophical texts. The history book *Stratagems of the Warring States* states: "Things [that will happen] must happen. The *li* is fixed as this."⁸⁶ This sentence was later quoted by Su Xun 苏洵 (1009–1066) and his son Su Shi 苏轼 (1037–1101).⁸⁷ Su Shi also talks about the *li* of everything 万物之理 and *li* of nature or self-so 自然之理.⁸⁸

Neo-Confucian understanding of *li* is greatly in debt to Wang Bi.⁸⁹ Wang is the one who made the notion of *li* parallel to that of *dao*, as "the fundamental principle of the cosmos itself".⁹⁰ For Wang, *li* is not just pattern of things: *li* is what gives order and pattern.⁹¹ He recognizes:

Things don't happen at random. They must follow their laws (*li*). There is a unifying

85. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 582.

86. The book records anecdotes of politics and warfare during the Warring States period. It is compiled by Liu Xiang in the Han dynasty, whereas its original author is unknown. 《战国策·齐策四》: 事有必至, 理有固然。My translation.

87. They are considered to be two of the most influential writers in the Tang (618–907) and Song dynasties.

88. 《上曾丞相书》: 凡学之难者, 难于无私, 无私之难者, 难于通万物之理。……是故幽居处而观万物之变, 尽其自然之理而断之于中。

89. 钱穆 Qian Mu, *Zhuanglao tongbian* 庄老通辨 (*General Discussion on Laozi and Zhuangzi*), Reprint in 2002 (Sanlian 三联, 1973), 331.

90. Alan K. L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and culture (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 52–53.

91. Lai, "The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy," 13.

origin and foundation when organized and ordered; that is why things are many and intricate but not disordered.⁹²

Importantly, Wang points out how we can know about *li*: “By observing the movement of things, then the *li* of why things are the way they are can all be known.”⁹³

The idea of *li* as “the fundamental principle of the cosmos” became more explicit in early Neo-Confucians’ models of cosmology, especially of cosmogony. Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017–1073), Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077), and Zhang Zai 张载 (1020–1077) each developed their own model based on the *Zhouyi* (see Section 3), and incorporated the notion of *li* into their models in different ways. Zhou adopted the concept *Taiji* (the *Supreme Ultimate*), and takes it to be the source that transforms into all things in the universe.⁹⁴ Shao employs *Taiji* as well, but unlike Zhou, Shao focuses on numbers to emblemize the generation of the universe and the regularities of formation and evolution of all things. He believes that all numbers are from *li*, and numbers without *li* are just used for superstitious predictions.⁹⁵

Let’s consider Zhang’s model of cosmology as a more detailed example to demonstrate in what sense his notion of *li* is similar to laws of nature. Zhang takes *Taixu* 太虚 (the *Supreme Emptiness*)

92. 王弼《周易略例·明象》：物无妄然，必由其理。统之有宗，会之有元，故繁而不乱，众而不惑。My translation.

93. 《周易注·乾》：夫识物之动，则其所以然之理，皆可知也。My translation.

94. “*Taiji* produces *yang* through movement. As the movement reaches the ultimate, it becomes quiescent. As it becomes quiescent, it produces *yin*.” Eventually, *Taiji* transforms into the myriad things, which in turn produce and reproduce. Such transformations and changes are limitless. (《太极图说》：太极动而生阳，动极而静，静而生阴。My translation checked against Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 269; Justin Tiwald and Bryan W. van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014), 138.)

Zhou connects *Taiji* with *Wuji* 无极 (the *Empty Ultimate*) from the *Dao De Jing*. It is open to discussion how to understand the relation between them.

95. 《皇极经世书·观物外篇》：天下之数出于理，违乎理则入于术。My translation.

What is interesting to note is that Leibniz used Shao’s diagram of trigrams to show its connection with his binary system. It is, however, not clear whether Leibniz was aware that it was Shao’s diagram that he was using, instead of the original diagram in the *Zhouyi*, which was in fact already lost). I discuss this in more detail in my paper *Leibniz, Binary System and I Ching*.

to be the undifferentiated state of the universe. It is the original state of *qi* 气.⁹⁶ *Qi* is often translated as gas, ether, material force, or vital energy. It is the fundamental source of the universe; everything is generated from the motion and change of *qi*: “*Qi* cannot but coalesce to form all things. All things cannot but become dispersed into *Taixu*. Following this coalescing and dispersing is what is inevitable.”⁹⁷ *Yang* and *yin* are two attributes of *qi*, which are in constant interaction. When *qi* coalesces, things exist; when *qi* disperses, things cease to exist. The way *qi* changes and transform is not arbitrary or random. The rule or order that *qi* follows is *li*:

The *qi* of Heaven and Earth, though it coalesces and disperses, repels and assimilates, and has all kinds of ways to change and vary, it has *li* to follow, acting in accordance with [*li*] and not in a random manner.⁹⁸

That is to say, *li* is the underlying principle or order for the existence and change of everything. Zhang describes and explains natural phenomena, especially astronomical ones, in terms of his theory of *qi* and *li*:

The earth, being purely yin, coalesces at the center, while the sky, being buoyant yang, revolves and rotates outside. These are the constant bodies of Heaven and Earth. The regular stars are not fixed . . . they revolve with the buoyant yang endlessly. The sun, the moon, and the five stars move in the direction opposite to the sky’s rotation, and also surround the earth. The earth is in the midst of *qi*, though follows the sky rotating leftward. Its associated constellations follow; if there’s a slight delay, they shift and move

96. 张载《正蒙·太和》：太虚无形，气之本体。My translation.

Zhang thinks *Taixu* cannot but consist of *qi*. It thus “is not empty, but only the dissipating state of *qi*” (《正蒙·太和》：方其散也，安得遽谓之无。My translation). We can see that Zhang developed his theory explicitly to reject the Buddhist idea of emptiness.

97. 《正蒙·太和》：气不能不聚而为万物，万物不能不散而为太虚。循是出入，是皆不得已而然也。My translation modified from Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 280.

98. 《正蒙·太和》：天地之气，虽聚散、攻取百涂，然其为理也，顺而不妄。My translation.

to the right . . . Venus and Mars, accompanying the sun, move forward and backward;
its *li* is profound and intricate, but can be known through the perceptions of things. .

..

The sun and moon obtain [their position in] the sky, by obtaining the *li* of self-so [nature], not just their physical attributes.⁹⁹

Here, Zhang refers to what underlies the motion of stars and planets as *li*. It signifies a deeper reality that goes beyond the physical appearance of thing.

In Zhang's theory, *li* is not yet *the* core concept. It is Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and his brother Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) who formally establish the Neo-Confucian framework that takes *li* to be its core.¹⁰⁰ For them, *li* is not just the principle or order that things obey, but also the ultimate reality, the ontological basis of the universe—in this sense, it becomes closer to the Daoist notion of *dao*. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) further developed the Cheng brothers' theories into a more systematic and complete framework. After him, Neo-Confucian texts became the official canon of the government. From their work, we can demonstrate and summarize that *li* resembles a notion of laws of nature in the following aspects.

First, *li* is invariant and explanatory. In addition to indicating the order and pattern of things, there is a second layer of the meaning of *li* associated with the idea of a deeper reality. Things in the world appear to be constantly going through changes, which appear to be messy, arbitrary, and sometimes chaotic. Following the fundamental idea from the *Zhouyi* or *Book of Change*, there's however something *unchanging* underlying all the changes, which guide how things change and give them

99. 《正蒙·參兩》：“地純陰凝聚于中，天浮陽運旋于外，此天地之常體也。恒星不定，純系乎天，與浮陽運旋而不窮者也。日月五星逆天而行，并包乎地者也。地在氣中，雖順天左旋，其所系辰象隨之，稍遲則反移徙而右而，間有緩速不齊者……金水附日前後進退而行者，其理精深，存乎物感可知矣。……日月得天，得自然之理也，非蒼蒼之形也。” For more details, see 簡誌寬 Jian Zhikuan, “Lun zhangzai zhengmeng canliangpian zhong de tianwen zhishi 論張載《正蒙·參兩篇》中的天文知識 (Discussions on the Astronomical Knowledge of Zhangzai's Zhengmeng and Canliang),” *Youfeng chuming niankan* 有鳳初鳴年刊, no. 15 (2019): 305–327.

100. There are differences between Cheng Yi's and Cheng Hao's views, which I won't engage in this paper.

order. That is *li*. It is in this sense that *li* is invariant. *Li* is explanatory in the sense that it is the underlying reason why things are the way they are and why things change the way they do; it gives explanations for the appearances of things in terms of their deeper reality, what they really are, their ultimate nature. We have seen this suggested by Wang Bi and Zhang Zai.

The Cheng brothers make it explicit that *li* is explanatory of natural phenomena. For example:

[Someone] asked: “What is the target of investigating things (*gewu* 格物), external things or things within our nature and function?” [Cheng] answered: “There is no restriction. All that is in front of us is nothing but things, and all things have *li*. Such as from why fire is hot, why water is cold, to the relations between ruler and minister, and father and son, these are all *li*.”¹⁰¹

Zhu integrated Zhang’s theory of *qi* and the Cheng brothers’ theories of *li* and further developed them to explain the world, especially various natural phenomena.¹⁰² For instance, he explains thunder and lightning as rubbing of *qi* and refers to its underlying mechanism as *li*.¹⁰³ He explains the regularities of the speed and size of tides in terms of the motion of the moon, and refers as *li*.¹⁰⁴

101. 《二程遗书·卷十九》：问：格物是外物，是性分中物？曰：不拘。凡眼前无非是物，物物皆有理。如火之所以热，水之所以寒，至于君臣、父子间皆是理。My translation checked against Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 568–569.

102. The following dialogue illustrates what Zhu takes the relation between *qi* and *li* to be:

Someone asked again: “How does *li* manifests itself in *qi*?” Zhu replied: “What makes *yin* and *yang* and the *Five Phases* (*wuxing* 五行) not lose their order in the complex interrelationships is *li*.” (《朱子语类·理气上》：又问：“理在气中发见处如何？”曰：“如阴阳五行错综不失条绪，便是理。My translation modified from Tiwald and Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century*, 171.)

103. “As for thunder and lightning, Cheng said it’s just rubbing of *qi*. True or false?” “It is correct. . . . When *qi* condenses, there is [thunder and lightning]; once it releases its potential, it disperses. . . . This is *li*.” 《朱子语类·理气下》：问：“雷电，程子曰：‘只是气相摩轧’。是否？”曰：“然。”“或以为有神物。”曰：“气聚则须有，然才过便散。如雷斧之类，亦是气聚而成者。但已有渣滓，便散不得，此亦属‘成之者性’。张子云：‘其来也，几微易简；其究也，广大坚固。’即此理也。My translation.

104. 《朱子语类》卷二

Second, *li* is prescriptive. For Zhu, this is tied to the explanatory role of *li*:

As for [all] things in the world, each of them *must* have its own reason for why it is as it is, and its principle for how it *should be*. This is what is called by *li*.¹⁰⁵ (Emphasis mine.)

Li does not simply describe what things are, but also prescribes how they *should be*. This understanding of *li* is not necessarily shared by other Neo-Confucians. Along this line of disagreement, Neo-Confucians also debate about the metaphysical status of *li*: whether it is prior to *qi* and material things. These are exactly what the debate between the Humean and non-Humean accounts of laws of nature in contemporary philosophy is about (see Section 2). That is to say, not only does the notion of *li* share similar features with the notion of laws of nature, but also the philosophical debate about *li* echoes the debate about laws of nature developed in the Western traditions.

Third, *li* can be used to make inferences or predictions. The Cheng brothers are explicit about this (continuing the previous quote from them):

[Someone] asked again: “If [I] only understand one thing, only see this thing, can I still see all these *li*?” [Cheng] answered: “You need to look everywhere. Even Yanzi can know only ten things from hearing one. But if [one] later fully understands *li*, then they can infer ten thousands of billions of things.”¹⁰⁶

Zhu discusses using *li* to make inferences regarding, for instance, the motion and change of the moon:

If we infer by *li*, then the moon does not wax and wane in and off itself; [it only appears

105. 《四书集注》：至于天下之物，则必各有所以然之故，与其所当然之则，所谓理也。My translation modified from Lai, “The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy.”

106. 《二程遗书·卷十九》：又问：只穷一物，见此一物，还便见得诸理否？曰：须得遍求。虽颜子亦只能闻一知十，若到后来达理了，虽万亿亦可通。My translation checked against Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 568–569.

to us as if it does].¹⁰⁷

Zhu infers from the presence of conches and oysters fossils on high mountains that the conches and oysters once lived in water, the rocks were once soils, and the mountains were previously at a low altitude under water and only became elevated later, based on his understanding of *li* and *qi*.¹⁰⁸

Fourth, *li* is ubiquitous and, in some sense, universal. Zhang is already explicit that *li* is ubiquitous:

Everything has *li*. If one is not aware of understanding *li*, it is as if they are in a dream their whole life.¹⁰⁹

Zhang believes that understanding *li* is not only possible but also crucial for us. He criticizes Buddhism for not aiming to understanding *li*, and Zhuangzi for not understanding the *li* correctly as stated in the *Zhouyi*.¹¹⁰

The Cheng brothers agree that *li* is ubiquitous:

All the things in the world can be enlightened by *li*. If there is a thing, there must be a rule (*ze*) for it. Each thing has a *li*.¹¹¹

Moreover, for Cheng, “there is only one *Li* in the world; hence it can be applied universally [reaching to the four seas].”¹¹² It is in this sense that *Li* is taken to be universal. For later Neo-Confucians, it is

107. 《朱子语类·理气下》：若以理推之，则无有盈阙也。My translation.

108. For disputes about whether Zhu really understands the mechanism of fossil formation, see Kim, *Questioning science in East Asian contexts: essays on science, Confucianism, and the comparative history of science*, 17–19.

109. 《张子语录》：万物皆有理，若不知穷理，如梦过一生。My translation.

110. 《张子语录》：释氏便不穷理，皆以为见病所致。庄生尽能明理，反至穷极亦以为梦，故称孔子与颜渊语曰“吾与尔皆梦也”，盖不知易之穷理也。My translation.

111. 《二程遗书》：天下物皆以理照，有物必有则，一物须有一理。My translation.

112. 《河南程氏遗书·卷二下》：理则天下只有一个理，故推至四海而准。

a deep philosophical issue of how the single, unified *Li* is related to various particular things (often discussed under the topic *One Li, Manifested Differently* 理一分殊). Different Neo-Confucians address the issue in different ways.

Although it is difficult to pin down the specific content of *li*, Neo-Confucians give suggestions on how we can understand or know about *li*. Recall the second quote from the Cheng brothers: we can only understand *li* by extensive observations. Zhang also gives a methodology on how to understand *li*:

Understanding *li* should be gradual. The more things we see, the more *li* that we understand. In this way, we can exhaustively understand the nature of things.¹¹³

Perceiving all the things and inspecting human affairs are both ways to understand the *li*.¹¹⁴

The notion of *li* is not merely a philosophical term, but in fact used by mathematicians and scientists as well, especially during the Song dynasty.¹¹⁵ Consider the scientist Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031–1095) as an example.¹¹⁶ Shen uses *li* to refer to the patterns or regularities in various scientific contexts, including astronomy, medicine, and, to a lesser extent, magnets, weather, and plants. For instance, when he discusses the phenomena of resonance, he describes it as constant *li*.¹¹⁷ In a discussion on geology, he claims: “This *li* is necessary.”¹¹⁸ Shen thinks that we can use *li* to make inferences and pre-

113. 《张子语录》：穷理亦当有渐，见物多，穷理多，如此可尽物之性。My translation.

114. 《张子语录》：明庶物，察人伦，皆穷理也。My translation.

115. Song is usually considered to be the peak of scientific and technological development in China. And it worth investigating whether there is a mutually beneficial relation between the development of Neo-Confucianism and the development of science and technology.

116. Needham praises him as “one of the greatest scientific minds in Chinese history” (Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*, 27).

117. 《梦溪笔谈》卷十七：殊不知此乃常理。二十八调但有声同者即应。

118. 《梦溪笔谈》卷二十四：此理必然。My translation.

dictions, if we specify the particular local situation.¹¹⁹ It has been argued that Shen, and in particular his scientific study, is influenced by Neo-Confucianism.¹²⁰

Neo-Confucianism and especially its analysis of *li* have a profound influence on the scientific discourse in the Chinese traditions at later times. Consider *gewu*, a term that appears in the first quote from the Cheng brothers. It is a part of the term *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知 from the *Great Learning*.¹²¹ *Zhizhi* means extending knowledge. The Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi specifically interpret *gewu* as “intellectually understanding *li* that underlies things”. Moreover, Zhu Xi believes that *zhizhi* lies in *gewu*¹²²; that is, gaining knowledge lies in “intellectually understanding *li*”. Following this Neo-Confucian tradition, “natural studies” in China had often been classified under the term *gezhi* 格致, since the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). *Gezhi* is the abbreviation of *gewu zhizhi*, and roughly means inquiring into and extending knowledge of things. For example, early translations of Aristotle’s theory of the four elements (1633) and Agricola’s *De Re Metallica* (1640) into classical Chinese used *gezhi* for the Latin *scientia* in their titles.¹²³ In the late Qing dynasty (1636–1912), *gezhi* was used to refer to courses in physics, chemistry, biology, etc. taught at the time.¹²⁴ This use was retained until it is replaced by the modern word for science (*kexue* 科学) in the early twentieth century.¹²⁵ The close relation between *li* and the use of *gezhi* as science mirrors the relation between laws of nature and science in the Western traditions. It further demonstrate that *li* can potentially develop into a notion

119. 《梦溪笔谈》卷七：大凡物理有常有变。……此亦当处所占也。若他处候别，所占异迹。其造微之妙，间不容发。推此而求，自臻至理。

120. LE Ai-guo 乐爱国, “Shen Kuo’s Scientific Research in the Background of Northern-Song Confucianism 北宋儒学背景下沈括的科学研究,” *Journal of Zhejiang Normal University (Social Sciences)* 浙江师范大学学报(社会科学版) 32, no. 6 (2007)

See [citation](#) on how Shen’s uses of *li* differ from Neo-Confucians’ understanding *li*.

121. It is a canonical Confucian text allegedly written in the Warring State period.

122. 朱熹《大学章句》：致知在格物者，言欲尽吾之知，在即物而穷其理也。My translation.

123. Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (University of California Press, 2000), 461–465.

124. This is noted by the Chinese writer Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) in *Na Han* (《呐喊·自序》).

125. In particular, physics was initially translated as *gewu*. See Young John Allen and William Alexander Parsons Martin, who are American missionaries at the time. Zhang Taiyan criticizes such translations. *Kexue*, on the other hand, was adopted from Japanese.

of laws of nature that serves a role in the development of science.

One salient difference between laws of nature developed in the Western traditions and *li* (as well as *dao*) is that the latter explicitly and extensively covers the human realm as well. One may argue that this causes a problem for *li* to count as a notion of laws, especially since Neo-Confucians focus on the normative aspect of *li* more than the natural aspect. The fact that *li* also covers the human realm, however, does not make *li* disqualify as a notion of laws. It is not the case that Neo-Confucians take the *li* of nature to be something distinct or irrelevant to the *li* of human. Rather, *li* applies to both the natural and human realm, in the sense that the human realm is just a part of nature. For instance, according to Zhang, “*Li* is not in humans, but entirely in things. Humans are just one of the things.”¹²⁶ One may wonder how that can be the case that *li* includes both the natural and moral norms, just as someone asked Zhu: “You say that the *li* is something that people and things equally receive from Heaven. But do insentient things also have *li*?” Zhu replied: “They definitely have *li*, like boats can only travel on water, and carriages can only travel on land.”¹²⁷ This is similar to the notion of laws of nature developed in the Western traditions—it is not the case that human beings are somehow not subject to laws of nature. We can distinguish laws of biology, psychology, or sociology from laws of physics or chemistry, just like we can distinguish the *li* of humans from the *li* of nature.

5 *Dao, li, and a Package Deal*

As readers may have noticed, Neo-Confucians continue to use the notion of *dao*. Given their apparent similarities, how exactly is *li* related to *dao*? Here’s Zhang’s answer:

126. 《张子语录》：理不在人，皆在物。人但物中之一物耳。My translation.

127. 《朱子语类·性理一》：问：“理是人物同得于天者。如物之无情者，亦有理否”。曰：“固是有理，如舟只可行之于水，车只可行之于陆。” My translation. This is the same example used by Deng Xizi (see the quote in the last section). We can see a clear connection here.

The *yin* and *yang* are *qi* of Heaven, which is also called the *dao*. . . . Generating and covering is the *dao* of Heaven, which can also be called *li*.¹²⁸

Zhu explains how *li* and *dao* are related more systematically:¹²⁹

Whoever speaks of *dao*, they all mean the *li* of what things should be.¹³⁰

[Someone] asked: “What is the difference between *dao* and *li*?” Zhu replied: “*Dao* is the road; *li* is its pattern of differentiations.” The questioner continued: “Is it like the pattern of wood? Zhu answered: “It is.” One asked: “In that case they seem to be the same.” Zhu responded: “The word ‘*dao*’ is the overarching term, while ‘*li*’ is the many differentiations within *dao*.¹³¹

So why did Neo-Confucians move from *dao* to *li* then? It is partially due to the influence from Buddhism, which popularized the notion of *li* to “account for the ultimate nature and unity of things”.¹³² On the one hand, since ancient Confucians focused on the *dao* of Humans and had little discussion on the *dao* of nature (as mentioned in Section 3), Neo-Confucians felt the need to expand their theory and introduce new concepts. Moreover, since Buddhism was popular at the time, framing Confucian theories in Buddhist terms could be helpful to gain “widespread respectability and currency”.¹³³ On the other hand, since Neo-Confucians viewed themselves as continuous with the great ancient

128. 《张子语录》：阴阳者，天之气也，亦可谓道。刚柔缓速，人之气也，亦可谓性。生成覆幬，天之道也，亦可谓理。My translation.

129. For more details, see Lai, “The Concepts of Dao and Li in Song—Ming Neo-Confucian Philosophy.”

130. 朱熹《论语集注》：凡言道者，皆谓事物当然之理。My translation.

131. 《朱子语类·性理三》：问：“道与理如何分？”曰：“道便是路，理是那文理。”问：“如木理相似？”曰：“是。问：如此却似一般？”曰：“道字包得大，理是道字里面许多理脉。又曰：道字宏大，理字精密。My translation modified from Tiwald and Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century*.

132. Justin Tiwald, “Song-Ming Confucianism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2020, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020). Limitation of space does not allow me to introduce Buddhist views on *li* and whether or not it has a notion of laws of nature.

133. Tiwald.

Confucians like Confucius, it is also important for Neo-Confucians to show their views were either indicated by, or at least consistent with, the Confucian canon.¹³⁴ That's why the new concept, *li*, could not be radically different from *dao*.

Given this continuous development from *dao* to *li* and their close relation,¹³⁵ it would be better to consider them together as a package that expresses the idea of laws of nature. In other words, to sufficiently show that there is such an idea of laws in Chinese classical texts, *dao* and *li* should not be treated separately. In fact, to convey the idea of laws, they are further complemented by a cluster of notions, such as *fa* 法, *ze* 则, and *chang* 常, which added or highlighted the meaning of governing, rule, and constancy. This also suggests that the presence of the idea of laws is not just a few isolated, sporadic instances, but widespread in the Chinese texts (*pace* Bodde).

To clarify, I do not intend to argue that either *dao* or *li* exactly matches the notion of laws of nature developed in the West, or that every instance of the uses of *dao* and *li* expresses the idea of laws. Nor do I mean my arguments are exhaustive. Rather, this paper is intended to be a starting point to consider that there is an idea of laws of nature in Chinese classical texts as represented by *dao* and *li* together (possibly complemented by other notions such as *chang*). This idea of laws is not unique to a particular author or text, but fairly robust through the Chinese intellectual history. Even if some of the particular interpretations that I adopted in this paper turned out to be inadequate, it would not affect the overall thesis that there is such an idea of laws of nature. To put in another way, this paper offers a context and a way to compare two clusters of ideas: one goes under the name 'laws of nature' in the Western traditions and the other including *dao*, *li*, *fa*, *chang*, etc. These two clusters of ideas share important similarities. This project can greatly benefit from further work on more detailed case studies of individual author or text.

134. Tiwald and Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century*.

135. Recall that this relation can be traced to the *Han Feizi* (see Section 3).

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I offered a starting point to address the question of whether or not there is a notion in Chinese classical texts that resembles the ideas of laws of nature developed in the Western traditions, used by modern scientists, and discussed by contemporary philosophers. I first introduced the general context and significance of this comparative project. I then laid out the essential features of laws of nature that are under consideration for our comparative study: being the constant patterns or orders that underly the motion and change of things and explain why things behave the way they do. I demonstrated that *dao* and *li* share these features and thus count as notions of laws of nature. Moreover, I responded to Needham's arguments that (1) a celestial lawgiver is essential to a notion of laws, whereas Daoism and Neo-Confucianism do not have an external celestial lawgiver to govern the actions of non-human natural things; (2) *dao* fails to be a notion of laws because it is *wu wei* and inscrutable; (3) *li* fails because it is organismic instead of mechanical.

Where will this starting point lead us? Consider a charitable reading of Needham's project: the modern notions of laws of nature emerged, at least partially, from the idea of divine legislation; we may then ask: could such a notion have been reached by a different route? The tentative answer of this paper is yes—*dao* and *li* are promising to give rise to such a notion just like the idea of divine legislation gives rise to the notion of laws used in modern science. Next we can further investigate how philosophical concepts such as *li* are employed in the more technical scientific texts and how they may have shaped the development of natural knowledge and science. Moreover, understanding *dao* and *li* in terms of laws of nature offers additional conceptual tools to analyze philosophical texts. For instance, the differences between Zhang Zai's and Zhu Xi's *li* echoes the debate between the Humean and non-Humean accounts of laws of nature in contemporary philosophy. Drawing this analogy can thus add another perspective to understand Zhang and Zhu.

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