

The Origin of Laozi's Cosmic "Chong" in Chu:

Natural and Archaeological Evidence from Yingdu

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Abstract

The cosmology of Laozi's Dao De Jing has long been regarded as an abstract metaphysical system, often divorced from its regional, ecological, and historical contexts. However, the core concept of "chong" (冲) possesses a unique generative and order-regulating function, whose philosophical formation is deeply linked to the natural civilization practices of the Chu region. This study systematically examines textual, toponymic, ecological, hydrological, and spatial archaeological evidence from the Chu heartland, the Yingdu civilization zone, and the Guodian Tomb No. 1 corpus. The findings indicate that the concept of "chong" originates from the ecological environment of valleys, forests, and riverine plains on the western banks of the Han River near Yingdu, characterized by flood regulation, buffering, and circulation, forming a low-entropy stable system. The governance practices of King Wen, King Cheng, and King Zhuang of Chu, along with the hydraulic engineering led by Sun Shuo'ao, translated these experiences into political institutions and social order,

forming a low-intervention, adaptive model of state governance. The Guodian texts abstracted these Chu experiences into a systematic theory of cosmic generation, yin-yang harmony, and the operation of all things. The spatial concentration of the Yingdu civilization zone allowed political, ecological, and intellectual practices to intersect in situ, providing the real-world locus for philosophical abstraction. Comprehensive analysis demonstrates that Laozi's cosmology is not merely a product of abstract reasoning but a universalized reflection of Chu's natural civilization, embodying the intrinsic unity of nature, society, and cosmos. This study provides empirical grounding for interpreting the Dao De Jing and offers profound insights for contemporary ecological governance, social system management, and the transmission of natural civilization principles, suggesting that human civilization should aspire toward harmony with nature.

Keywords

Laozi cosmology; Chong (冲); Chu natural civilization; Yingdu; Guodian manuscripts; spatial archaeology; ecological governance; low-entropy system

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Chapter 1: Theoretical Status of “Chong” in Laozi’s Cosmology

Within the conceptual system of the Dao De Jing, terms such as “Dao,” “Wu,” “One,” “Qi,” and “Yin-Yang” are often regarded as core categories, whereas “chong” (冲) has long been treated as an auxiliary, rhetorically vague term. However, a close reading of the text, approached through the lens of cosmological structure rather than word frequency, reveals a systematically overlooked fact: “Chong” is not peripheral, but the only concept in Laozi’s cosmology that simultaneously fulfills three critical functions: ontological reference, generative power, and order regulation.

This chapter examines Chapters 4 and 42 of the Dao De Jing to demonstrate the irreplaceable theoretical role of “chong,” distinguishing it rigorously from related concepts such as “wu” and “qi,” thereby laying the theoretical foundation for subsequent discussions on its natural origin and spatial-cultural embedding.

1.1 Ontological Significance of “Dao Chong and Use Without Exhaustion”

Lao Zi Chapter 4 states:

Dao Chong and use it, it will not be exhausted;

Deep and unfathomable, it seems the progenitor of all things.

Dull its sharpness, untangle its knots,

Harmonize its light, blend with the dust,

Still and deep, it seems to remain.

Here, Laozi first directly employs “chong” to define the fundamental state of Dao. Importantly, the text does not say “Dao is nothing,” “Dao is empty,” or “Dao is void,” but “Dao Chong”—a deliberate conceptual choice with deep historical and philosophical significance.

First, “chong” is non-entity. It does not denote a tangible, possessable, or fixed “thing,” nor does it correspond to any hidden primordial substance. Hence, it cannot be exhausted: “use it, it will not be exhausted.” Unlike material resources, “chong” increases in structural stability the more it is “used.”

Second, “chong” is not mere nothingness. If it were equivalent to “wu” (nothing), its usability would be meaningless; if it were simply void, “deep and unfathomable, progenitor of all things” would lose coherence. “Chong” exists between “having” and “non-having”: it is not emptiness, but unfilled potential; not a cavity, but permeable.

Ontologically, “chong” can be understood as a generative field or open structure:

- It is not one of the myriad things;**
- Yet all things emerge within it;**
- It occupies no space, yet determines structure;**
- It manifests invisibly, yet sustains order.**

The phrase “deep and unfathomable, progenitor of all things” reinforces this interpretation. The “deep” is not a literal body of water, but an immeasurable state that contains all phenomena without revealing boundaries. Dao’s status as “progenitor of all things” derives not from being the highest entity, but from maintaining a perpetually unfilled, unclosed chong-state.

Thus, in Chapter 4, “chong” is not mere rhetoric, but the ontological characterization of Dao: Dao is not ‘something,’ but the state of being generative.

1.2 Generative Function of “Chong Qi as Harmony”

While Chapter 4 depicts “chong” as the existential state of Dao, Chapter 42 embeds “chong” in the dynamic structure of cosmic generation:

**Dao gives birth to One,
One gives birth to Two,
Two gives birth to Three,
Three gives birth to all things.
All things carry yin and embrace yang,
Chong qi as harmony.**

In this generative sequence, the logical closure does not reside in the numeric progression, but in the final phrase: “chong qi as harmony.” Without “chong,” the chain would merely enumerate; “chong” stabilizes the process.

Yin and yang are not merely opposing poles, but constantly in tension. Without “chong,” the universe risks imbalance; direct unification would halt generation. Laozi thus prescribes “chong qi as harmony” rather than simple fusion.

“Chong” performs three generative functions:

- 1. Serves as a structural mediator between yin and yang;**
- 2. Prevents qi from excessive aggregation or dispersion;**
- 3. Converts conflict into stable order.**

From a cosmological perspective, “chong” functions as a stabilizer of the generative system:

- Without it, yin and yang would consume each other;**
- Without it, qi would descend into chaos or rigidity;**
- Without it, generation would lack order.**

Hence, “chong qi as harmony” is not ancillary, but the critical component of Laozi’s cosmic generation theory.

1.3 Distinction from “Wu” and “Qi”: Conceptual Hierarchy

To grasp “chong”’s theoretical role, it must be distinguished from “wu” and “qi”:

- 1. Wu: Ontological emptiness. Signifies Dao’s non-objectifiable, indeterminate nature. Does not explain generation.**

2. Qi: Operational, dynamic substance. Embodies flow, transformation, and accumulation. Without regulation, it risks imbalance.

3. Chong: Structural mediation. Enables qi to operate stably within the ontological openness of wu.

Conceptual hierarchy:

- **Wu: ontological level**
- **Chong: structural level**
- **Qi: operational level**

Clarifying this hierarchy explains why “chong” is irreplaceable in Laozi’s cosmology.

1.4 Summary: Why “Chong” Is Irreplaceable

Systematic analysis of Chapters 4 and 42 demonstrates that:

- **Ontologically, “chong” depicts Dao as generative potential;**
- **Generatively, “chong” stabilizes yin-yang interactions;**
- **Order-wise, “chong” prevents extremes and collapse.**

Thus, “chong” is the unique concept simultaneously fulfilling ontological, generative, and regulatory roles, rooted in natural experience and the Chu civilization context, forming the theoretical basis for subsequent discussion of its ecological and spatial-cultural origins.

