Laozi and T. S. Eliot
— in Pursuit of Order

Yujiao JIANG
Zhejiang Normal University, China

Introduction
Laozi, born in around 571 B. C. and died in around 471 B. C., was a native of Chu Kingdom of the Zhou Dynasty. He served as a keeper of archival records at the court of Zhou. He witnessed the decline and the breakdown of the Zhou State, and concluded what he witnessed and what he read from the forefathers’ history into the book titled The Book of Laozi, or The Book of Tao and Teh, or The Book of the Way and Virtue. This book is so titled because it consists of two parts (81 chapters in number): Tao and Teh, or The Way and Virtue, ranging from philosophy, theology, history, politics, ethics, sociology, ecology, religion, anthropology, and cosmogony to the cultivating of men’s personality, with Tao as the core of all of them. Besides,
this book is so systematic, logic, coherent, and persuasive that the teachings of it become the guide of Taoism; and Laozi becomes the founder of Taoism. Tao, to Laozi, is the way to achieve “a universal order”: “Long and short manifest themselves by comparison;/ High and low are inclined as well as opposed to each other;/ Sound and noise harmonize each other;/ Front and back follow each other;/ Being and un-being beget each other.”111 “Un-being designates the beginning of Heaven and Earth;/ Being designates the mother of all things./ Hence, one should gain an insight into the subtlety of Tao by observing un-being;/ One should gain an insight into the beginning of Tao by observing being.”121 Then, what really connects all the things together and makes them work in a harmonious order? Laozi speaks of it directly in Chapter 24: “There is a thing integratedly formed;/ It is born before Heaven and Earth;/ Silent and empty, it relies on nothing;/ But it moves around for ever./ We may regard it as the mother of all things./ I do not know its name,/ So I name it as Tao.”131

T. S. Eliot, born in 1888 and died in 1965, witnessed the two world wars and saw the calamities the wars brought to people; “[...] and certainly the circumstances of Eliot’s life and the nature of his personality would impel him in his search for order.”141 Eliot is an American English poet, dramatist, critic, and philosopher and his writing covers a large range of subjects: literature, culture, religion, politics, sociology, and anthropology as well; he was trying to find “a universal order” for the fallen world. “Order” is, in Eliot’s philosophy, not only a fairly complex and contradictory notion, but also a covert and mysterious existence going through his life: starting from his childhood’s mystical hallucination—“the betrothal of Miss End and Mr. Front”, “the elopement of Mr. Up and Miss Down”,151 to his mature thought—“The way up and the way down are one; the way forward and the way backward are one”; “And the way up is the way down; the way forward is the way back”; “What we call the beginning is often the end/ And to make an end is to make a beginning”.161 However, Eliot’s idea of order—“they [finite centers] aim at being one...to be identical with the whole universe”17—was formally initiated in his dissertation, Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley (finished in 1914 but published in 1964), for the doctor’s degree and was, later, interwoven into his social and cultural criticism, and his creative writings as well.

Both Laozi’s and Eliot’s idea of order is a problem of metaphysical philosophy and religion. Both of them employed the same device—negativity, the apophatic philosophy and theology, to lead to a greater affirmation of the truth of the
order—that is “a universal order” of “simplicity”, which is established on their
denials of desire, wisdom, knowledge, and will, which are, in reality, the radical
nature of the negations for their greater affirmation of the virtues of “humility and
simplicity”: “the apophatic leads to the cataphatic—a paradoxical dialectic.”[18] “The
device of apophatic theology,” according to John Bowker, “is ‘theology by way of
negation,’ which means that God is known by ‘negating concepts,’ thus underlining
the ‘inadequacy of human language and concepts’ to tell us anything about the
nature of divinity.”[19] This article tries to explore how Laozi and Eliot used the
device of apophatic philosophy and theology to establish “a universal order” by
burning desires and discarding wisdom to foster the virtue of humility and to
achieve “a condition of simplicity”.

I. The Burning of Desire—In Pursuit of a Universal Order

In Chinese culture, there is a saying: Every one has seven emotions and six
desires. To Laozi, desire is one of the major things that lead the society to “great
disorder”. So, in Chapter 3, Laozi lists out the desires that might cause violence.
The first desire is the desire for fame and wealth, which is aroused by grading
people’s talent; so Laozi suggests that the sage (a good ruler) should not group
people into the one with great talent and the other without talent, and should not
give them the position in the kingdom and bonus according to their ability because
such kind of way would greatly encourage people to forget their own nature and
conscience to struggle for fame and wealth, regardless of the consequences. The
second desire is the desire for theft, which is aroused by distinguishing some goods
as valuable or rare. The two desires can be concluded as the desire of the greed for
fame and wealth. Therefore, Laozi advocates in Chapter 3: “Keep people from the
disturbed state of mind by destroying desires”, “weaken their will”, “reduce their
desires” and “simplify their minds”; consequently, “He [the sage] can stop the
strong-desired men from taking any ill action,/ By keeping people from knowledge
and desires, if people act in accordance with this principle of non-action (wu wei),/
The world will be kept in an order everywhere [a universal order]”. [10] Laozi
concludes the principle of non-action as the way of keeping the world in a universal
order; namely, people should do things naturally without destroying their own
nature and conscience, which is, to Laozi, a prerequisite for the establishing of “a
universal order”. Then, what is the prerequisite for keeping the principle of
non-action? There are two conditions for it. The first condition is that “Get rid of
the desire, simplify the mind, and return to being a baby” (Chapter 56).[11] For the second condition, in Chapter 66, Laozi used an analogy to explain how important humility is to non-action. Laozi said, “Why can the sea become the king of the streams? Because it always takes the lower position of all of them. So, if the king takes the position of the Valley, he will be a sage. In this way, people will feel respected instead of feeling oppressed. Because he is humble, the king competes with no one. Then, no one competes with him. At length, the kingdom is kept naturally in order.”[12] The way to keep the spirit of “non-competition” (wu zheng) requires burning the desire, simplifying the mind, and maintaining the position of the Valley (This point will be discussed in the third part).

Eliot shares this idea with Laozi in this aspect. The Waste Land (five parts together) written in 1922, is a typical example to prove this point. Eliot employed “The Fire Sermon” as the title of the third part of The Waste Land with a detail description at the end of it:

On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.
la la
To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
burning.[13]

There are two notes by Eliot. The first note tells us: “The passage from the Confessions quoted here occurs in St. Augustine’s account of his youthful life of lust.”[14] Namely, St. Augustine came to Carthage, a holy city, to confess before God. Ironically, according to Eliot’s second note (These words are taken from the late Henry Clarke Warren’s Buddhism in Translation), St. Augustine turned to Buddha for help to burn the desire for lust by the eye: “The eye […] is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-conscious is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire.[…]”[15] These lines show that St. Augustine’s plight of his suffering life cannot be solved by
God in Christianity; and it also reveals that Eliot, who was, at that time, not yet converted to Christianity (He was baptized and received by the Church of England on 29 June, 1927), negates his own religious belief and also others' belief in the power of the God who created human and judged humanity. So, here, Buddhism can be seen as supplementary to Christianity but not a substitute for it. This situation is of a paradoxical dialectic theology between two religions, but the result is of double effect and of an organic combination, a sort of pious relativism to rescue the waste land. If these desires were burned, we would “become humble people, expecting nothing, connecting nothing with nothing”, which is what a Christian should be and sees to the paradigm of “non-action” by Laozi: “getting rid of desire—being humble—competing with no one—letting things develop in a natural order.” Then, in the last chapter of The Waste Land:

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
...Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina.[16]

According to Eliot’s note, the last sentence is Italian, which means “[h]e hid himself in the fire which refines them [...] the refining fire represents one of the hopeful fragments shored up by the seeker for regeneration and order”. At last, “Shantih (Peace) shantih (Peace) shantih (Peace) occurs naturally on the Waste Land”; Eliot invited the Oriental source—peace (according to Eliot’s note: this is Hinduism) to appear on the Occidental land, presenting “a universal order”, connecting the West and the East, though the setting of the Hinduism culture is, paradoxically of the negative way to God in Christian. Apart from The Waste Land, in the Four Quartets, with the first movement of the first quartet’s opening the present world—“human kind cannot bear very much reality” (“Burnt Norton” I), the second movement gives advice on how to relieve its pain—“The inner freedom from desire”, “[t]he release from action and suffering” (“Burnt Norton” II); the fifth movement analyzes the cause of the intolerable reality—“Desire is [...] Not in itself desirable”, because it is the “cause and end” of the “love” (“Burnt Norton” V). Then, the poem goes into the second quartet and the fourth quartet with a reason for setting oneself free from desire, the desire for love, because “Love” is “Love of the wrong thing” (“East Coker” III) and love is “not least of love but expanding/ Of love beyond desire” (“Little Gidding” III). Lustful love is the clear idea of one of the intolerable human realities, and its source is the desire. So, in the fourth quartet,
the image of the “fire” dominates the treatment of human desire for lust of love throughout it: from the first movement of “frost and fire”, “pentecostal fire” (“Little Gidding” I), to the reinforced progress of “water and fire”, “refining fire” (“Little Gidding” II), to the refined development that “human power (desire)” “Consumed by either fire or fire” and “To be redeemed from fire by fire” (“Little Gidding” IV), and to its final celebration—“the fire and the rose are one” (“Little Gidding” IV). The process of the refining, the consuming, the redeeming, and the purifying of love is the process of salvation. “Rose” is the symbol of love. Here it refers to the “fire-refined”, “fire-consumed”, “fire-redeemed” and “fire-purified” love; so it is no longer the temporal love or “a lifetime’s death in love” (“The Dry Salvages” V), but a sort of “renewed, transfigured [holy love] in another pattern” of a universal love (“Little Gidding” III). According to David Moody, “Such detachment from human feeling makes it easy for the passage to shift from the idea of love and desire to ‘love of a country’, and from that to ‘History’; and then to have everything loved—the persons and the places”. Such kind of “a universal love” comes to the final fulfillment: “a condition of complete simplicity” (“Little Gidding” V). Since human beings live in “a condition of complete simplicity”, “the moment” is “not of action or inaction” (“The Dry Salvages” V), and “there is no competition” (“East Coker” V) for a universal order; for “In my beginning is my end” (“East Coker” I), and “In my end is my beginning” (“East Coker” V), the paradox of the poem resonates with the paradox of the Christian death-rebirth order.

The negation of men’s desire is for the purpose of transform the fallen human world into a new one, and to balance the assertion of the truth of human personalities, and the ascetic “negative” of the personal desire is just for the life-affirming “positive” of an impersonal order of “detachment/ From self and from things and from persons” (“Little Gidding” V), and “the disregarding of his own existence” (Chapter 7 of The Book of Tao and Teh). Sacrificing personal interest is in the hope of establishing a universal order for all people’s benefit.

II. The Discarding of Wisdom—In Pursuit of a Universal Order

In Chapter 19, Laozi re-stresses the importance of burning or reducing desire, for desire will ruin people’s naturalness from birth; the pursuit of wisdom, which, at the same time, ruins people’s naturalness, because wisdom, which can only be acquired from others’ experience, will arouse people’s desire for fame, wealth, power and bias for or against others. Accordingly, the state will break down due to the mutual
deceit, tricky tactics, and dishonest manners. So, Laozi argues: “If people discard cleverness and wisdom, people will benefit themselves a hundredfold” (Chapter 19) and “Love and kindness come naturally;/ People remain like a baby that has not yet learned to smile;/ The world will be a simple place for every one to stay in” (Chapter 20). To achieve such a harmonious world, Laozi suggests that we should follow three conditions:

- Keep being simple in nature and mind;
- Discard selfishness and weaken desires;
- Discard knowledge and wisdom and worries will disappear (Chapter 19).  

The discarding of knowledge and wisdom is also one of the prerequisites for the establishing of a universal order. If we have discarded cleverness and wisdom, we can destroy our desire. If we have destroyed our desire, then, we can discard wisdom. If people observe the two rules, the world can be kept in “a condition of simplicity of Tao” (Chapter 37), in which there is no theft, worry, care, or a complex relation between people who are simple-minded and between the states which rule themselves naturally. So, to Laozi, wisdom is one of the causes of disorder: “The great hypocrisy follows the emergence of cleverness and wisdom. [...] Then, the state is in great disorder.”

Actually, this is a kind of apophatic-cataphatic philosophy. Laozi tells people that those who know how to discard wisdom know how to get great wisdom and become great men. Let’s read the following sentences:

- He who is good at walking leaves no traces;
- He who is good at speaking leaves no slips;
- He who is good at counting uses no counting device;
- He who is good at shutting renders all efforts of opening in vain though he uses no bolts;
- He who is good at tying renders all efforts of untying in vain though he uses no ropes.

That is why the sage is always good at saving people, abandoning no one;
That is why the sage is always good at saving things, abandoning nothing.
This is called the intrinsic, great wisdom.  

Now, let’s talk about Eliot’s view of wisdom. In the essay, “Francis Herbert Bradley” written in 1927, Eliot wrote: “Of wisdom Bradley had a large share; wisdom consists largely of skepticism and uncynical disillusion; and of these
Bradley had a large share. And skepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding. Eliot spoke of Bradley’s position as “metaphysical skepticism” from the point view of wisdom, which, to him, was something negative.

In *The Idea of a Christian Society* written in 1939, Eliot said:

> While the practice of poetry need not in itself confer wisdom or accumulate knowledge, it ought at least to train the mind in one habit of universal value: that of analyzing the meanings of words: of those that one employs oneself, as well as the words of others. [...] I am not at this moment concerned with the means for bringing a Christian Society into existence; I am not even primarily concerned with making it appear desirable. [...] Now, to understand the society in which he lives, must be to the interest of every conscious thinking person. My subject is a preliminary to the problem of Church and State: it involves that problem in its widest terms and in its most general interest.

Here, Eliot’s view of wisdom is also the same as Laozi’s: (1) advocating discarding wisdom and knowledge for they are other people’s experiences, which will rob the person as the subject of its own subjectivity and naturalness, and which are, actually, kinds of desire, probably, to attempt to interrupt the rhythm of nature, that is, letting things go on “naturalness” and keeping the mind in nothingness, which means keeping a person as a self, and the self can reach the state of “naturalness” to Laozi, and “the self [can be] stretched to the vastness of God” to Eliot; (2) advocating less care of the being, for there is a position of the un-being to care; (3) advocating concealing desire and discarding wisdom for a good society is of “the universal value” for all the interest of every body but not for one person or a small group of people, and for Church and State to cooperate well, abandoning no one. This presents Eliot’s use of apophatic-cataphatic philosophy in the theoretical development apart from utilitarianism and liberalism which were prevalent at that time.

Then, in “East Coker” II of the *Four Quartets*, written in 1940, Eliot explicated in the first stanza the disaster caused by the power of the wisdom: “The world shall bring [be brought]” “to that destructive fire” (“East Coker” II); and in the second stanza, he expounded the meaning and the function of wisdom:

> And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us,
> Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elder,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness into which they peered
Or from which they turned their eyes. There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm...
Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. [28]

The above stanza tells that wisdom is the knowledge of the old-fashioned things
that are acquired from others' experience; it is personal and limited by time, so its
value is limited. Such kind of wisdom should be discarded because it cannot satisfy
the pattern, which is changing in every moment, "not the intense moment/ Isolated,
with no before and after" ("East Coker" V). The pattern to Eliot is another way of a
universal Christian order—death and rebirth, for "[...] the pattern [is]/ Of dead and
living" ("East Coker" V). It’s clear that the wisdom Eliot wants is impersonal. Then,
where can people get impersonal wisdom? Whose wisdom is impersonal—Aristotle’s? Plotinus’? Saint Thomas Aquinas’? Descartes’ or Hegel’s? Their
wisdom is the "wisdom of age", which is "not very satisfactory" (East Coker II), to
any times. Eliot gave us a definite answer: "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility.” "Humility” is, from a secular point of view, a
kind of wisdom of the following knowledge:

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.[29]

If we know what we do not know and we acknowledge the fact that we do not
know it, and if we own such kind of ignorance, we own wisdom or knowledge.
Eliot tells us that a man of great wisdom must know these principles: ignorance
gains knowledge, dispossession obtains possession, the absent makes the present,
and un-being produces the being. In other words, only if we know the importance
of the negative side and the absent side, can we know what we need in the future.
Only in this way can our wisdom or knowledge satisfy the timeless pattern. Knowing the
ignorance and the absence, the dispossession and the un-being is the winning of
wisdom or knowledge. Laozi had the same opinion about this: “He who shows off
his wisdom he won can never be conspicuous;/ He who boasts of the work he did
can never make achievement” (Chapter 24); “A man of great foresight begins from
ignorance” (Chapter 38).[30] This is a paradigm of apophatic-cataphatic philosophy:
the pure negation of the worn-out experience and old achievements is a heady
affirmation of the power of people’s wisdom about future. From the theological
point of view, to Eliot, the only person whose wisdom is not personal and whose
wisdom is a kind of endless humility is Jesus Christ whose wisdom was given by
God and is of a universal truth (further explanation on this point will be given in the
next part).

There are more descriptions about wisdom by Eliot. For example, In For
Lancelot Andrewes published in 1928, Eliot said that “wisdom” meant “worldly
wisdom”.[31] Then, in Essays Ancient and Modern published in 1936, he explained
further, “if worldly wisdom” was “merely worldly or crossly expedient, i.e.
unguided by virtue or ‘spiritual wisdom’, it is not true worldly wisdom” and could
be “as vain as folly itself”,[32] which was a kind of “encouraging cleverness rather
than wisdom” which led to “the artificial, mechanized or brutalized control which is
a desperate remedy for its chaos”.[33] To Eliot, obviously, “true wisdom” is
something of a virtue, a spiritual criterion, which must be a remedy for its chaos, in
the hope of keeping the society in order, based on the natural action just as Laozi’s
ideas mentioned in the above paragraphs: a sage with great wisdom does not do
things artificially, or brutally, but can achieve things without destroying the balance
of the other things. For both Laozi and Eliot, the power of the negation of wisdom will allow us to get a kind of spiritual device, a virtue—humility, so as to get the "true and great wisdom". Conclusively, the wisdom that both Laozi and Eliot advocate discarding is a kind of cleverness, or partial, fake, old-fashioned, or unenlightened wisdom. The true wisdom can transcend itself by the dialectical antinomy and closes to Tao according to Laozi and to God according to Eliot.

III. The Fostering of Humility—In Pursuit of a Universal Order

In the whole Book of Laozi, Laozi uses metaphorical rhetoric and dialectic antinomies to express the quality of humility and the importance of being humble. He says that the high is based on the low; if there is nothing low, there will be nothing high; if there is nothing short, where can the tall be born? If there is no woman, where is the man from? There will be no mountain if there is no Valley; there will be no heaven if there is no earth. The strong is based on the weak; the river is based on the stream; the king is based on his subjects. That's why Laozi, in The Book of Laozi, had been trying to teach people how to benefit from humility by persuading people to learn how to be humble first, and then, how to make use of its advantage. Laozi takes water as an analogy. To his mind, water owns the virtue of humility; for water is always running down and never going up, competing with others. Then, he compares a powerful (large) state to the river and a weak (a small) state to the stream. The streams are always running down to the lower position of the river. The state, which takes the lower position of the river, can naturally control the small states which are just like the small streams running naturally to the river. This is, also, another way for non-action or nothingness to keep a universal order and achieve greatness naturally, without taking force, competition, or hard policies upon people. So, Laozi respects water, for it owns the virtue of humility; and he worships the Yin (weak party or the female) and the Valley (the lower party), for they are always humble. In Chapter 39, Laozi concludes:

That's why the humble is the root of the noble,
And the high is based on the low.
The highest honor means humility;
The king should take humility as the primary principle.
The large state can annex the small ones by taking the lower position (being humble);
The small states can gain the trust of the large one by taking the lower position.\textsuperscript{34}
Let's see how Eliot treats humility. In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot said, "It [exhilaration] causes pride, either individual or collective, and pride brings its own doom. For only in humility, charity and purity—and most of all perhaps humility—can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without human operations."[36] In Eliot's opinion, humility is a kind of belief in God and a virtue given by God to man; and it is, also, a major element of which our life is made up; humility brings people blessings while pride will bring people bad luck. In *For Lancelot Andrewes* published in 1928, Eliot argued that humility was "the first and most complete incarnation of English policy" carried out by "the humble Welsh family of Tudor"; and it was also "representative of the finest spirit of England of the time" "under Elizabeth [Elizabeth I]."[37] Humility, to Eliot, is one of the major reasons which lead the kingdom of Elizabeth 1st to a golden age, for it is one of the greatest Christian virtues: "Baudelaire came to attain the greatest, the most difficult, of the Christian virtues, the virtue of humility."[38] Furthermore, to Eliot, humility needs "intellectual and social training; otherwise, "an untrained mind, and a soul destitute of humility and filled with self-righteous, is a blind servant and a fatal leader".[39]

Then, in "East Coker", Eliot continues to explain, "[t]he only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless". There is an intrinsic correlation between wisdom and humility according to Christian idea: "[...] Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God" ("Corinthians" 1:30 in *the New Testament*). The birth of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, in the manger, is the symbol of humility; it provides a model for humility for all mankind; it's also a virtue—"godly or true wisdom" "marked by humility" ("Proverbs" 1:20 in *the Old Testament* and "James" 3:13 in *the New Testament*). That's why humility is, to Eliot, endless and eternal.

Laozi and Eliot have almost the same opinion about humility: (1) humility is a virtue to human given by God in Eliot's eye and a gift to human by Nature in Laozi's eye, but still it needs training and fostering; (2) humility exists both physically and mentally, hence it can help to keep a universal order; (3) like Laozi, Eliot also protests against "competition", which is "only the fight to recover what has been lost/ And found and lost again and again", "neither gain nor loss".[40] This is not only kind of negative criticism on taking improper action, but also a kind of positive proposal of taking non-action.
IV. The Achieving of Simplicity—the Establishing of the Universal Order

In Chapter 28, Laozi employs “the Valley” as the metaphor of the virtue of humility; for the Valley takes a lowest position so that it can hold all things and tolerate everything, never competing with others for it’s always humble; and in the Valley, people can achieve a condition of simplicity for the Valley is empty. So, Laozi said, “If we are content to be the Valley (gu) in the world, we will be accompanied by the eternal virtue (humility);/ And return to the situation of being a baby.../ Return to the final truth.../ And Return to the condition of simplicity of Tao.”[41] Then, in Chapter 37, Laozi explicates the function of Tao:

Tao always takes non-action, yet it acts upon everything in the world.
If lords and kings can keep it, all creatures will grow and develop naturally.
When desires are kindled in the growth and development,
I can suppress them with a nameless [complete] simplicity of Tao.
Once I do so, desires will be repressed.
Once desires are repressed, the whole world will be naturally at peace.[42]

Laozi witnessed the decline and breakdown of the Zhou Dynasty, so he encouraged a change in approach, returning to “non-action (wu wei)” for a condition of “a complete simplicity”. However, “non-action” does not mean “not doing anything at all”, but means “acting spontaneously”, and “flowing in compliance with the law of Tao”, avoiding such things as wars and violence, and cruel laws and heavy taxes carried out upon people, so as to keep the whole world in a natural order and in a simple condition like the Valley. When people achieve simplicity in the Valley, “The Valley becomes full;/ All creatures becomes alive;/ The heaven becomes bright;/ Earth becomes steady” (Chapter 39).[43] And “all things, full of vitality, finally, return to their own roots./ Returning to roots means returning to a state of stillness in an extreme emptiness of mind” (Chapter 16).[44] The Valley supports creatures and plants because it is empty; the Valley accepts the flow of the stream because it is the lowest; the Valley keeps the heaven bright because it is in the darkness; and the Valley keeps the earth full of vitality because it is in stillness, taking “non-action”. The metaphorical rhetoric of the Spirit of the Valley shows that Laozi uses apophatic philosophy as a method to help define the cataphatic philosophy: the negation leads to a greater affirmation. Then, why is the Spirit of the Valley so negatively positive? In Chapter 6, Laozi gives us a mysterious metaphorical explanation: “The Spirit of the Valley (gu shen) never...
dies;/ It’s a deep womb of the woman./ The gate to the womb/ Is called the root of heaven and earth./ It exists for ever,/ And its use can never be exhausted.”[45] “The deep womb” is analogous. It embodies the spirits of the Valley and reveals the features of the Valley: the situation of being a baby, the state of stillness, the circumstance of emptiness, the condition of simplicity, and the virtue of humility. According to Eva Wong, “the gate” means “opening” and “it is the root of existence of all things.[…] When this gate is opened, the immortal emerges”. [46] This is called “the Valley of the Universe”, which is “the model of the World”—“a universal order” as Laozi explains in Chapter 28. Eliot pursues the same spirits and the same virtues as Laozi does. Eliot presents them in the Four Quartets. For example, the first movement of the first quartet and the last movement of the last quartet echo to each other in the rose-garden: “Footfalls echo in the memory down the passage […] into the rose-garden”; “the lotus rose, quietly and quietly”; and “the leaves were full of children, containing laughter” (“Burnt Norton” I); “Through the unknown, remembered gate […] at the source of the longest river”, “[t]he children [are] in the apple tree” “in the stillness” (“Little Giddling” V). This is the situation of being a baby or a child: from the quiet environment to the still situation and the simple condition:

Descend lower, descend only/ into the world of perpetual solitude (“Burnt Norton” III);
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/ Moves perpetually in its stillness (“Burnt Norton” III);
The dahlias sleep in the empty silence (“East Coker” I); A condition of complete simplicity (“Little Giddling” V). [47]

The lower world of perpetual solitude and stillness, and the condition of empty silence and complete simplicity reveal the Spirit of the Valley explained by Laozi. Eliot’s “a condition of complete simplicity” occurs in the rose-garden which links the four quartets together and is the model of the world Eliot seeks after—the idea of Eden-like Christian society. The detailed description of the rose-garden goes from the first movement of the first quartet:

Footfalls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden. […] / Through the first gate./ Into our first world.[48]

Human beings’ first world built by God is called the Garden of Eden; so the
rose-garden is the representation of the prototype of the Garden of Eden where there is no pressure or desire: “without pressure, the music unheard, the eyebeam unseen” (“Burnt Norton” I); and there is “the pool filled with water out of sunlight and the lotus rising, quietly, quietly, and trees, flowers, and leaves, and laughter, and the bird” (“Burnt Norton” I); and the bird is trying to guide modern people out of the suffering world into the Garden:

Go, for the leaves were full of children,/ Hidden excitedly, containing laughter./ Go, go, go, human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality./ Time past and time future/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present.\(^{[49]}\)

In deed, Eliot’s view of being a baby or a child is the state of the first human beings: without desire and knowledge or wisdom, being simple-minded, before they fell and lost the Garden of Eden. The representation of the quiet environment of the Garden of Eden and the childlike happiness and simplicity of the first human beings’ life makes a contrast to the suffering and disillusion of the modern people’s experience on _The Waste Land_. Besides, the above lines tell people that the rose-garden is the end point to connect the past and the future through Creation—Destruction—Recreation pattern. It refers to the world which was created by God, but from which humanity has fallen, and to which all will return, at length; so it’s always present.

Time past and time future […] / But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden […] / Be remembered; involved with past and future./ Only through time time is conquered.\(^{[50]}\)

From what has been explained about “the burning of desire”, we may find, in the _Four Quartets_, Eliot employs “the rose” as the symbol of “the ideality” and “the fire” as the symbol of “the reality”. He places reality and ideality in the rose-garden, where people can achieve “a condition of complete simplicity”, and “all shall be well”, when “the rose and the fire are one” (“Little Gidding” V); then, people can “acquire confidence from God and get an eternal home like the Garden of Eden where people can enjoy their spiritual life out of despair and illusion from _The Waste Land_”.\(^{[51]}\) So, to Eliot, God is the only person who helps to recreate the Garden of Eden, where people can achieve “a condition of complete simplicity”, living like children, while, to Laozi, Tao is the only thing that guides people to the
Valley where people can achieve “a condition of complete simplicity”, living like children: “The great Tao is all pervading,/ Extending in all directions” (Chapter 34), though “it cannot be seen;/ it cannot be touched;/ it cannot be heard;/ for it’s colorless, soundless, and shapeless” (Chapter 14).\textsuperscript{152} When Tao guides people to “a condition of simplicity”, Tao itself reaches the condition of simplicity, which is called “the simplicity of Tao”. To Laozi, Tao is shapeless, while the Valley is an entity. The Valley is the physical image of simplicity; and Tao is the spiritual image of simplicity: “Being one with Tao is eternal” (Chapter 51). Laozi and Eliot’s use of apophatic philosophy and theology that establishes a universal order on the condition of simplicity is much directed at criticizing and refuting the tyranny of the kingdom to Laozi, and the basis of twentieth-century totalitarianism to Eliot.\textsuperscript{153}

**Conclusion**

“In such a despairing time, he [Eliot] is still appealing for a kind of spirit”,\textsuperscript{54} which Eliot calls in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, the “spiritual institutions”, “by which men have lived in every society”,\textsuperscript{55} to maintain the order. And in the *Four Quartets*, he uses the rose-garden to express his spiritual institution—the Garden of Eden. How can people realize their ideal of reaching their spiritual home? As what has been talked about in the above paragraphs, people can achieve it by the practice of burning desire, discarding wisdom, and being humble and simple, which can be concluded as the “non-action”; both Eliot and Laozi share the apophatic-cataphatic dialectic—seeking for “The inner freedom from practical desire”, “[t]he release from action and suffering”, “release from the inner and outer compulsion”, “moving without motion,” “emptying the sensual” “to purify the soul” “cleansing affection” and “distracted from fancies”; then, “[t]he resolution [...] protects mankind from heaven and damnation” (“Burnt Norton” II, III),\textsuperscript{56} because “[f]or only in humility, charity and purity—and most of all perhaps humility—can we be prepared to receive the grace of God”.\textsuperscript{57} Laozi’s views are: to practice “behaving with no action”, “teaching with no words”, “ruling the state with non-action”, “destroying and weakening desires”, “discarding knowledge and wisdom” and “taking humility as the primary principle”; then, “[p]eople will naturally crave for peace”.\textsuperscript{58} Ethically, to both of them, non-action does not mean doing nothing at all but means doing things as naturally as possible, making rough rules as few as possible and interfering with people’s life as little as possible; for
Those who rule the state by force will lose it. [...] When reaching the state of non-action, one can succeed in everything. To govern the world well, one must take non-action as the principle. If one governs with too much action, one is not a respectful governor.\[59\]

At this point, negation can be an organic mechanism for a greater ruler to rule the state: the apophatic leads to the cataphatic—this is a paradoxical dialectic: a negative action leads to an effective result.

Religiously, to Laozi, Tao, is another way to express “non-action”. In Chapter 37, Laozi speaks loudly of Tao and asks people to follow the Tao. But when we follow it, we “cannot see its back”; it has words but “cannot be seen or heard; it has image “without shape”, and “without substance,” so “[i]t cannot be touched”; Tao itself is “nothingness”\[60\]. This is the way to negate the being of Tao—un-being and nothingness; but this negation proves a positive affirmation of Tao’s being omniscient like God, though we can not see it; it judges and functions naturally, and stands behind us as the one who helps us when we follow it and as the one who stirs us if we do not follow it. “Tao doesn’t try to force anything, and yet nothing is left undone.”\[61\] If people understand suppressing desires, discarding wisdom, and following the complete simplicity of the Tao, “[t]he whole world will be naturally in a peaceful order”. Tao, theologically, is the spiritual being of Nature and human beings. It does not exist, but it guides us for the goodness and grace. This is a kind of theological apophaticism. Eliot, from the religious point of view, presents his positive attitudes towards God through negating God’s position by using paradoxical antinomies. For example, “My soul is in the darkness of God”; but “the darkness shall be the light” (“East Coker” III); there is “the agony of death” and there is also “the agony of birth” (“East Coker” III). “Their [those with wisdom] fear of possession belonging to God”; but “wisdom is endless humility” (“East Coker” II). In deed, Eliot indicates that humility is God’s wisdom, which will last forever. “The bone’s prayer to Death its God”, and “[a] symbol perfected in death,” “the moments of agony,” and “the moments of happiness” (“The Dry Salvages” II), “[w]herein, if we do well, we shall/ Die of the absolute paternal [God’s] care/ That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere” (“East Coker” IV). God is Death, but he prevents us everywhere. Though there are negations of the trust in God with a dark sense of fatality, there is a strong faith in the imperative mood towards God: “wait without hope” and “wait without love”, “[b]ut the faith and the love and the
hope are all in the waiting” (“East Coker” III). “Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and/ And all manner of thing shall be well/ By the purification of the motive/ In the ground of our beseeching.” (“Little Gidding” III) [62] The end of the Four Quartets is “the fire and the rose are one”. “The fire” is the symbol of the temporal world and “the rose” is the symbol of the spiritual world. In actuality, this is the unity of the physical world and the spiritual world. Eliot realizes his dream of “a further union, a deeper communion” [63] which is put forward in the last movement of the second quartet, “East Coker”.

Philosophically, both Laozi and Eliot stress the importance of the binary oppositions like the Yin and the Yang, the big and the small, the high and the low, the beautiful and the ugly, the new and the old, the strong and the weak, pride and humility, gain and loss, birth and death, being and un-being.... The two parties develop in opposition; finally, the negative party transforms into its opposite in a compromising contradiction. This is an apophatic-cataphatic dialectic pattern, with the opposites interdependent and interactive, recycling forever, making the order of the universe:

Un-being designates the beginning of the Heaven and Earth;
Being designates the mother of all the things;
Un-being and being are two things of the same origin, observed by Tao. […]
Trees will be cut down when they grow up. […]
A thing is, sometimes, added to when being reduced
Or reduced when being added to. […]
A creature in its prime is at the turning point of being dying. […]
Cycling is the movement of Tao. [64]

To Eliot,

The detail of the pattern [of the universe] is movement, between un-being and being. […]
In my beginning is my end
Houses rise and fall.…..
Houses live and die.…..
The only hope, or else despair lies in the choice of pyre. […]
Attachment to self and to things and to persons,
Detachment from self and from things and from persons, and growing between them. […]
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning,
Conclusively, to Laozi and Eliot, the paradigm of order is negating desire and wisdom, worshipping humility and simplicity, in order to establish a universal order. To Laozi, Tao is the dialectic law: maintaining naturalness and returning to Simplicity of the Valley (fanpu guizhen), and to Eliot, his Christian belief is the dialectic law: the creation, the destruction, and recreation of the garden of Eden. Both Laozi and Eliot employ the law of negation to lead to a greater positive affirmation, like respecting the virtues of humility and simplicity to win a higher honor from Tao, to Laozi, and, to Eliot, to win a higher grace from God, taking the lower position so as to control a higher situation, and taking non-action so as to achieve greatness.

Though, in the pursuit of a universal order, there is so much similitude between Laozi and Eliot, there are still many differences between them: (1) Laozi tries to find the paradigm of order by reasoning various possible solutions either inductively or deductively, while Eliot does so by describing various situations either poetically or instructively; (2) Laozi’s order is guided by Tao which is the law of Nature, while Eliot’s by God, the law of Christianity; so Laozi’s view of “the situation of being a baby” refers to the state of being natural, simple and humble—the Spirit of the Valley, while Eliot’s refers to the Christian belief—“if you change and become like children, you will enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (“True Greatness” 18, Matthew of the New Testament); (3) Laozi relies on naturalness, trying to establish a universal order which should return to its original state—the primeval situation—the Valley, “emptiness”, while Eliot lies on religious belief, trying to establish a universal order by reconstructing the Garden of Eden and to restore the original creation by God; (4) in a word, because of different cultural background, Laozi’s “order” is in compliance with the law of Tao, while, Eliot’s “order” is in conformity with the doctrine of God.

To sum up, epistemologically Laozi’s and Eliot’s recognition of the world as an ontological being is different: the former used Tao as the epistemological tool—a symbol of naturalness, while the latter relied upon God in Christian. However, methodologically Laozi and Eliot look at the world as an entity of human beings and nature in the same way: observing the principle of apophatic philosophy and
theology.

Notes:
[1] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 60.
[2] Ibid., 58.
[3] Ibid., 313.
[4] Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 156.
[5] Ibid., 23.
[6] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 187, 197.
[7] T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 202.
[8] Paul Brazier, “Barth’s First Commentary on Roman (1919): An Exercise in Apophatic Theology”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (Vol. 6, No. 4, Oct., 2004), 388.
[9] John Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.
[10] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 64-66.
[11] Ibid., 234.
[12] Ibid., 264.
[13] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 70.
[14] Ibid., 70.
[15] Ibid., 70-71.
[16] Ibid., 74-75.
[17] Ibid., 75.
[18] Ibid., 75.
[19] David Moody, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 154.
[20] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 113.
[21] Ibid., 111.
[22] Ibid., 109.
[23] Ibid., 136.
[24] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 222.
[25] Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky Inc., 1959), 47.
[26] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 8-10.
[27] Daniel J. Ebert, *Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God’s Wisdom for Us* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2011), 1.
[28] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 179.
[29] Ibid., 181.
[30] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 128, 174.
[31] T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), 67.
[32] T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 120.
[33] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 16.
[34] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 244.
[35] Ibid., 179, 243.
[36] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 96.
[37] T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1928), 14-15.
[38] T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1928), 99.
[39] T. S. Eliot, *After the Strange Gods* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 59.
[40] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 182.
[41] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 140-143.
[42] Ibid., 168.
[43] Ibid., 176-177.
[44] Ibid., 102.
[45] Ibid., 72.
[46] Eva Wong, *Cultivating Stillness: A Taoist Manual for Transforming Body and Mind* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992), 18.
[47] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 174-75, 187, 197-98.
[48] Ibid., 171.
[49] Ibid., 171-72.
[50] Ibid., 173.
[51] Bernd Bergonzi, ed., *T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 233-235.
[52] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 160, 95.
[53] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 18.
[54] F. R. Leavis, F. R. "T. S. Eliot’s Later Poetry," *Scrutiny* XI (No. 1, Summer, 1942), 71.
[55] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 16.
[56] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 173-74.
[57] T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 96.
[58] Gu Zhengkun, trans., *Laozi: The Book of Tao and Teh* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 201, 233-34.
References:

[1] Great thanks should go to Doctor Daniel Albright, Professor of Harvard University, for his ideas about Laozi’s and Eliot’s view of order and also for his ideas about the way of composing the paper.

[2] There are more than ten English versions of The Book of Laozi in America and China. This paper is mainly based on the version translated by Doctor Gu Zhengkun, Professor of Beijing University; but, in a very few places, there are small changes according to the author’s understanding. For example, Professor Gu translated “gu (valley) shen (spirit)” in Chapter 6 into “Tao”; the author translates “gu shen” into “the Spirit of the Valley”. Professor Gu translated “wuming zhipu” in Chapter 37 into “the nameless simplicity”; the author translates it into “a complete simplicity”. Professor Gu translated “zewu buzhi” in Chapter 3 into “The world will be kept in order every where”; the author translates it into “The world will keep a universal order”.

[3] This paper is part of the research project, “A Comparative Study of the Western and Chinese Poetry”, financed by The Educational Ministry of China, the code number of which is 09YJAZH09.

Yujiao JIANG, Ph.D. Currently she is a professor at the College of Foreign Language Studies and the College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, China. From Sept. 2010 to March 2011, she was a visiting scholar in Eastern Washington University and Harvard University. Her academic interest covers English Literature and Comparative Literature.