Critical Review on Zhuangzi's Xu-Shi as an Epistemology and Its Intercultural Encounter

Ziyue Sun

Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki 00100, Finland

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Abstract: This paper reviews recent studies on Zhuangzi's "xu-shi"(虚实) as an epistemology and emphasize the linguistic gap when these terms encounter interculturality. The paper distinguishes connotative meanings behind the selected translations in English and Chinese. It explains how the "xu-shi" as an epistemology in Zhuangzi's work could be understood. Then, it critically reviews the generation and the application of the language xu (虚) and shi (实) in different research respectively, accompanying with their ideas. Later, the paper highlights that a continuing completing Zhuangzi's xu-shi as en epistemology would offer reflective insights into current analytical frameworks for the studies of multiple discipline, inter-disciplines, and sustainable humanities. It suggests the potential for establishing a research framework based on Zhuangzi's intellect relate to xu-shi. Keywords: Zhuangzi, Xu, Shi, Epistemology, Intercultural Philosophy

1 INTRODUCTION

In *Zhuangzi*, the concepts of "xu" (虚) and "shi" (实) are seen as a form of epistemology and a dynamic relationship of the nature of beings (Chen, 2023; Chen, 2014; Hou, 2008; Hu, 2020; Hu, 2023; Li, 2016; Liu&Yi, 2024; Zhang, 2019). *Zhuangzi* points out that the spiritual world represents "shi" because it is independent of the changing and uncertain nature of the external world, holding a deeper sense of truth (Hu, 2020). In contrast, the external world is described as "xu", not because it lacks substance but because it is fluid and unpredictable (Chen, 1985; Chen, 2023; Chen, 2024; Hansen, 2024). However, *Zhuangzi* does not treat "xu" and "shi" as simple opposites. Instead, it focuses on the process of seeking "xu" within the inner "shi" to achieve transcendence (Chen, 1985; Chen, 2023; Chen, 2024; Chen, 2023; Chen, 2014; Dai, 2024; Hansen, 2024; Hou, 2008; Hu, 2020; Hu, 2023; Kim, 2011; Lai, 2024; Li, 2016; Liu&Yi, 2024;   Wang; 2009; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2019; Ziproryn, 2020). The details of how could xu-shi be understood would be explained later.

Within the recent five years, studies on Zhuangzi's philosophy, as indexed in databases such as CNKI and Google Scholar, have explored a variety of themes. These include the challenges of translating Zhuangzi's texts across cultures, ontological analyses, in-depth interpretations of specific concepts, modern adaptations, and the practical applications of Zhuangzi's ideas in contemporary contexts (Jiang, 2024; Yu, 2023). While the notions of "xu" and "shi" frequently appear in these studies, they are merely addressed as secondary or supporting elements for the topics (Chen, 2024; Chen, 2023; Chen, 2014; Dai, 2024; Hansen, 2024; Hou, 2008; Hu, 2023; Kim, 2011; Lai, 2024; Li, 2016; Liang, 2018; Liu&Yi, 2024; Lu& Wang, 2024; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2019;). To date, no comprehensive study has specifically analyzed "xu" and "shi" in neither constructive nor criticize way.

This article covers the gap by reviewing how "xu" and "shi" are understood by contemporary Chinese and international scholars critically. Specifically, how these concepts are applied in existing research and what interpretative processes they have undergone are reviewed. By addressing what has already been achieved and identifying gaps in the understanding of "xu" and "shi," this study aims to highlight the epistemological significance of them.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to establish "xu" (emptiness) and "shi" (substance) as an analytical framework rooted in Chinese philosophy. Once systematically formed, this framework could become a methodological tool applicable to many areas of research. It could be used to address unresolved historical issues, disciplinary

gaps, and contemporary challenges. The details could be seen within the process of reviewing.

At the same time, the refocusing on the concept of "xu" is particularly meaningful in the digital age. It provides a way to reconsider the "virtual" aspects of reality from a deeper perspective. Human's capability of understanding "xu" is tied to language. To explain, while "shi" is often understood through tangible experiences, "xu" lacks clear experiential grounding. It leads the discussions about "xu" are often vague or misinterpreted, appropriating or being appropriated. In a world where the line between the virtual and the real is increasingly important, developing language to describe "xu" more precisely becomes crucial. This linguistic development could help people better identify and respond to experiences in virtual environments. By improving understanding of "xu," this study opens possibilities for clearer thinking about the virtual world in contemporary life.

This article does not treat *Zhuangzi's* encounter in intercultural philosophy as a separate research question. Instead, it incorporates the factors considered by intercultural philosophy into the understanding of *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi as an epistemology. The author believes that cultural boundaries are an essential part of understanding philosophy. However, culture boundaries happens not only when transport to another land, but happening constantly among individuals. In other words, when someone tries to understand another person's view of the world, intercultural exchange is already involved, as people carry diverse and mixing social and cultural backgrounds.

In this case, in reviewing *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi as an epistemology, this article looks at how scholars from different times and countries have focused on this topic. The review includes issues like translation, the different connotations of one word, and reflections from cross-cultural perspectives. Therefore, besides the summary relate to the history of translation in the beginning of Chapter 3, the other parts of the paper frequently emphasizes the role of intercultural, inter-era, and inter-linguistics factors in understanding, researching, and spreading ideas.

Yet, since the author does not have the necessary proficiency in languages other than Chinese and English, the review does not include studies on *Zhuangzi* in the other languages around the world. It become a gap for future research.

The main body of the article is divided into four sections. Chapter 2 explains what xu-shi as an epistemology is. Chapter 3 focuses on xu-shi as an epistemology has been translated and understood in an intercultural way. The discussion is divided into three stages: cultural reductionism, context-based detailed analysis, and applying dialogue as a method in researching intercultural philosophy. In chapter 4 and 5, the author critically examines how "xu" and "shi" are understood and applied in the existing literature, distinguish the existed connotative meanings. The paper points out how researchers use "xu-shi" in an advantageous way, as well the problems that have arisen. Finally, the conclusion will give a respond to the questions raised in the introduction and outline potential directions for future studies.

2 HOW COULD ZHUANGZI'S XU-SHI AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY BE UNDERSTOOD?

In *Zhuangzi*, "xu-shi" (虚实) serves as a unique epistemological framework that transcends binary thinking and provides a method for understanding the world through a dynamic interplay of opposites (Liu & Yi, 2024). Rather than viewing xu (虚) and shi (实) as isolated concepts, spatial adjectives or descriptions of abstraction and concretion, *Zhuangzi* integrates them into a dialectical approach (Liu & Yi, 2024). This interconnectedness reflects the way reality is experienced—not as fixed categories, but as fluid processes (Liu & Yi, 2024). The xu-shi framework challenges conventional notions of truth and objectivity, emphasizing that knowledge and existence are relational, contingent, and constantly evolving.

There are several suggestions for comprehending xushi. Firstly, xu and shi coexist within the same being (Hansen, 2024; Liu & Yi, 2024). This means that both aspects are present simultaneously in any given entity. Secondly, shi and xu are always in a state of mutual pursuit (Liu & Yi, 2024). For example, when shi represent a spiritual realm, xu is again sought within that spiritual world. Thirdly, xu and shi can transform into one another at any time, allowing for flexibility and adaptability in understanding (Liu & Yi, 2024). Fourthly, individuals who utilize the xu-shi epistemology can switch between xu and shi as needed to comprehend different aspects of phenomena (Liu & Yi, 2024). Finally, *Zhuangzi* believes that all existing and non-existing entities are complete wholes without parts (Hansen, 2024; Liu & Yi, 2024). This means that every being or non-being is whole and indivisible, reflecting a unified and integrated view of existence. By presenting xushi as an epistemological tool, *Zhuangzi* emphasizes the

dynamic and interconnected nature of knowledge and reality, moving beyond simple binary classifications (Liu & Yi, 2024).

Through Xu (虚), we can perceive, experience, and empathize with Shi (实). However, it is important to note that Zhuangzi's view of Xushi is not about simply blurring boundaries or eliminating distinctions. Instead, it reveals the a fine relativity and interdependence of xu and shi. Graham (2022) and Hansen (2024) highlight that simplistic epistemologies such as "either this or that", "this, not that" or "both this and that are irrelevant" fail to capture *Zhuangzi's* perspective. What *Zhuangzi* emphasizes is how xu and shi define and generate each other within specific contexts, rather than reducing them to indistinct categories. Xu is not merely emptiness; it is an openness imbued with meaning depending on the situation. Similarly, Shi is not a fixed, unchanging entity; it is a state that emerges through its relationship with Xu. Thus, Xu and Shi are dynamic correspondences that actively shape and transform one another, rather than static concepts that cancel each other out.

3 THEIR EXPERIENCES AND THE TRANSLATIONS

When placing *Zhuangzi's* concepts of "xu" (虚) and "shi" (实) into a intercultural context, the issue becomes more intricate. Jiang (2024) points out that translators and international sinologists, in interpreting and translating *Zhuangzi*, often reinterpret them based on their own cultural traditions and philosophical frameworks. Different translation strategies not only influence the reception of Zhuangzi's philosophy but also risk introducing certain misinterpretations (Jiang, 2024; Zhu, 2019). Therefore, the following section will examine Zhuangzi's notions of "xu" and "shi" from the perspective of western translation and the method for interpreting. It aims to explore the process from unfamiliarity toward openness in intercultural exchange of one philosophical idea. Also, it recognize the challenges when ideas interact with human brain, that ideas are hard to preserve their original meaning.

The development of *Zhuangzi's* translation and intercultural studies could be divided into three major stages (Jiang, 2024). Each stage reflects different approaches to cultural understanding and translation while highlighting the deep challenges of intercultural dialogue. In the first stage, researchers sought to reinterpret *Zhuangzi's* core ideas based on

a framework they know. While this approach offered certain interpretive conveniences, it inevitably fell into the trap of "cultural reductionism" (Jiang, 2024). Scholars such as David Loy, Paul Kiellberg, and Lee Yearley exemplify this stage, using Western philosophical concepts as tools to position Zhuangzi as either a response to or a complement to Western thought (Jiang, 2024; Zhu, 2019). However, this approach was later criticized by translators for neglecting the uniqueness of foreign philosophy. This method, often characterized by its reliance on theoretical presuppositions, has been summarized by Chinese scholars in international sinology as a perspective that views Chinese philosophy through "colored lenses" (Jiang, 2024). It undermines the contextual integrity of *Zhuangzi*.

In response to the shortcomings of the first stage, sinologists and translators shifted toward methods of close textual reading and cultural contextualization (Jiang, 2024; Zhu, 2019). Prominent figures such as Hans Peter Hoffmann, Chad Hansen, Norman Teng, and Roger T. Ames sought to abandon western philosophy-dominated interpretative frameworks and instead approached *Zhuangzi's* ideas through the historical context of the original text (Jiang, 2024; Zhu, 2019). This approach emphasized detailed analyses of *Zhuangzi's* language, culture, and intellectual background, aiming to restore the historical-philosophical context in which his thought emerged (Jiang, 2024). This stage not only provided a paradigm for comparative philosophy between East and West but also initiated genuine intercultural dialogue (Jiang, 2024; Zhu, 2019). At this juncture, *Zhuangzi* was no longer simply regarded as a reflection of western philosophy, nor was western thought considered a mirror for *Zhuangzi's* ideas. Notably, "dialogue" emerged as an immediate method of cultural study during this phase (Jiang, 2024). While identifying similarities and differences through comparison remained important, scholars recognized that context-based comparison alone was insufficient (Jiang, 2024; Yu, 2023). It often overlooked cultural realities and how it influence ideologies, mindset and cognitive state especially in comprehending and communicating philosophy. In this case, a continuous interactive dialogue became a critical method in intercultural philosophical learning, enabling Chinese and western scholars to discover their unique intellectual structures and generate new understandings (Jiang, 2024; Rosker, 2022).

As dialogue developed as a research method, scholars increasingly realized that close textual reading and cultural contextualization were still

inadequate to fully grasp the complexities of *Zhuangzi's* thought (Jiang, 2024; Rosker, 2022). Thus, the third stage of research focused on the intersection of Chinese and western interpretative frameworks, seeking to explore *Zhuangzi's* philosophical content at the epistemological level. Dominant scholars include Harold D. Roth, Brook Ziporyn, Scott Cook, Rurbin Yang, and Chad Hansen (Jiang, 2024). They not only examined *Zhuangzi's* ideas, but also delved into the structures of classical Chinese prose, which they found the framing of passage represent a mechanism of selecting language and might lead to different mindset (Cheng, 2014; Jiang, 2024; Kim, 2011; Porat, 2022; Ziporyn, 2020; Zhu, 2019). These researchers emphasized that Chinese and western cultures each maintain distinctive logical presuppositions that shape their modes of cultural expression and thought (Jiang, 2024; Rosker, 2022; Zhu, 2019). Consequently, translating *Zhuangzi* requires a more mindful and cautious approach to avoid oversimplified interpretations or cultural misreadings.

After the short review on "xu-shi"'s experience of intercultural encounter, the historical trajectory of translating "xu" (虚) and "shi" (实) will be closely examined next. The discussion below explores existed interpretations and applications of "xu" and "shi" seperately, including their origins, semantic features, and their relationship to *Zhuangzi's* original view.

4 XU

In *Zhuangzi*, "xu" (虚) is a concept with rich and multifaceted meanings. However, in different cultural contexts and translation traditions, its specific connotations are often simplified or reinterpreted (Jiang, 2024; Yu, 2023; Zhu, 2019). The following discusses several common translations of "Xu", examining their origins, semantic features, and the relationship to Zhuangzi's understanding of "Xu".

First, "xu" (虚) is often translated as "virtual" or "artificial" in English. This interpretation captures only a small part of the meaning of "xu", "xu ni" (虚 拟). focusing on it as "non-real but functionally existing". In the context of modern technology, this translation treat the meaning of "xu" as "a similarity to shi (实)". However, this translation neglects other deeper philosophical meanings of "Xu" in Zhuangzi's thought. (Contact the author to see the visualization of the diverse connotative meanings of "xu").

Second, in the 19th century, "xu" (虚) was commonly understood as "false" and "unreal" with an inclination toward a contrasting of "real". It is one slice of the original meaning of "xu" in *Zhuangzi*, which is "xu jia" (虚假). In this interpretation, a binary way of understanding the world is promoted. Also, the concept of "false" and "unreal" were conflated, as well, "true," and "real" has not distinguished. In fact, in *Zhuangzi's* original meaning, xu-shi represent a circle where all points can be both xu and shi at the same time, it transcend the binary way of viewing the world. As well, the differences between "true/false" and "real/non-real" is able to be made in *Zhuangzi* (Chen, 2023; Hansen, 2024).

Third, influenced by western literary devices, "xu" (虚) is sometimes interpreted as "fiction". referring to constructing a novel or a story (xu gou, 虚构). This translation may capture *Zhuangzi's* tendency to deconstruct the boundary between reality and illusion. *Zhuangzi* uses fiction as an effective tool to give argument in imaginary situations and questioning the reality. In this case, we view the meaning of fiction as a method of applying the concept of "xu", which provide an evidence of fictional texts could stimulate real human thinking. This is one of the applications of dialectical thinking in human language and thought. However, it is important to note that the essence of "xu" is epistemological in nature, and it is not merely an application tool (Jiang, 2024; Chen, 2023; Hansen, 2024; Zhu, 2019).

Zhang (2019) discusses the application of "xu" in historical writing, exploring the space of "xu" in history studies that were recorded by language. Zhang (2019) questions the imaginative space in the process of recording history, passing history and receiving historical facts through language, pointing out the possibility of "fiction" elements existing within "real" facts. This highlights the lack of consideration for the epistemology of "Xu" and "Shi" in the development of the historical discipline. If facts are "real," then is language that record the "real" real or false? Language can be "real," but it also sparks listeners' meaning connection, and the space of connection asks for imagination. Imagination belongs to fiction. Zhang (2019) highlights this fallacy in the previous methods for studying history. Zhang (2019) argues that "imagination" (想象) combines both copying and fiction, and that "fiction" (虚构) can refer to fabrications without evidence, or reasoning and narrative forms based on facts. Zhang(2019) proposes Zhuangzi's xu-shi epistemology as a way to reconsider and reconstruct the learning science of

history subject, which recognize the dynamic process that brain experience when studying history.

Fourth, the selected translation, void, seems similar to the concept of a hole in the center of a donut (Yu, 2023; Zhang, 2019). A hole exists because it has an edge, but the hole does not actually exist (Worley, 2016). To explain, "void" could be understood as describing an empty space or area with nothing in it (Yu, 2023; Zhang, 2019). Also, it refers to the absence of something that was previously present, a feeling of emptiness or lack of fulfillment (Yu, 2023; Zhang, 2019). *Zhuangzi's* "xu" also contain this meaning (Hu, 2020; Hansen, 2024; Wang, 2009; Ziporyn, 2020). However, the difference between *Zhuangzi's* "xu" (虚) and "void" is that "xu" is not a static state, it contain the meaning of it could change to a state that is not void at any time (Yu, 2023; Zhang, 2019).

Fifth, "xu" was translated to "nihil", which inter-influenced with western philosophy of nihilism, which led to "xu" being equated with a form of negative denial (Hu, 2023; Lai, 2024; Jiang, 2024; Yu, 2023; Zhu, 2019). For instance, "nihil" can be understood as referring to the concept of nothingness or non-existence, talking about the absence of meaning or value in life or existence, or even describing a philosophical belief that life has no inherent purpose or significance. This interpretation overlooks *Zhuangzi's* "xu" also contain meaning of meaningless as the state at the start, the present and the end of a being (Li, 2016). Differently, *Zhuangzi* apply an positive implications for this "nihil", which consider meaningless as normal or even optimistic (Liu & Yi, 2024; Hansen, 2024; Porat, 2022).

The sixth translation would be "illusion", correspond to Chinese words "xu wang" (虚妄). It emphasizes the idea that something that exists in the realm of the material world is merely a feeling or a sense, and questions whether this feeling is real (Cheng, 2014; Dai, 2024; Hu, 2023; Liu & Yi, 2024; Lu & Wang, 2024; Kim, 2011). This interpretation of illusion (xu wang) is often associated with Buddhist thought and its transmission.

Chen (2024) focuses on one of the various interpretations of "xu" (虚), specifically, "xu wu" (虚无, void). Chen (2024) explores how the concept of void functions within Zhuangzi's epistemology. Specifically, void (xu wu) serves as the premise of all thing, the essence of all thing, and their termination as nothing. Chen (2024) points out that modern Chinese readers and scholars often interpret *Zhuangzi's* Dao as the objective law of beings. However, Chen (2024) argues that *Zhuangzi's* Dao is

in fact nothingness. Importantly, *Zhuangzi* uses the concept of nothingness to explain why he rejects the use of causal thinking to make events seem plausible. That is, before an event occurs, it hasn't happened, and before it hasn't happened, it hasn't happened at all. Thus, the causal relationship between events does not exist. Chen (2024) further argues that void/nothingness is not the actual state of the world but rather a perspective for understanding the law of beings.

Lü (2024) highlights the difference between the contemporary concept of "losing the self" (丧我) and Zhuangzi's idea of "no self" (无我), while also emphasizing how Zhuangzi's epistemology of "Xu" (虚) can be understood as a path to experience "freedom and ease" (自由自在). Lü (2024) attempts to supplement Zhuangzi's concepts by drawing from interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, including those of Han Bingzhe, Freud, and modern discourse. Additionally, Lü (2024) uses Zhuangzi's fable stories to inspire reflection on the central theme of "how to become a free and easeful person," though no direct exploration of Zhuangzi's epistemology is conducted. Lü (2024) opens up the possibility of applying Zhuangzi's philosophy of "Xu" and "Shi" to analyze societal issues and deconstruct social psychology research. Lü (2024) discusses the details that hinder people's understanding of mental health, the self, the construction of their well-being matrix, and the search for inner peace. Lü (2024) also points to the concept of "decentralization" as a potential area for further exploration in Zhuangzi's epistemology. Similarly, Oh (2021) explores how Zhuangzi's understanding of "Xu" and "Shi" can be used to achieve well-being.

Overall, the concept of "Xu" (虚), understood as the Dao (道) in Zhuangzi's philosophy, is highly diverse and complex across different cultural traditions. Different translation paths may either emphasize certain interpretations (such as nihilism or Buddhist interpretations) or weaken some of its original connotations. In cross-cultural translation, how to faithfully represent the dynamic and open nature of Zhuangzi's "Xu" becomes a potential direction for future research.

5 SHI

In *Zhuangzi*, "shi" (实) does not merely refer to concrete material entities or objective reality in the external world, but rather points to an internal, spiritual state of truth (Chen, 2023; Cheng, 2014; Hou,

2008; Kim, 2011; Lai, 2024; Liang, 2018). This understanding is significantly different from the western concept of "reality" or "substance". In western philosophy, especially in the tradition represented by Aristotle, "reality" is often linked to "substance," referring to entities that exist independently and possess essential attributes. For instance, a stone, a tree, or a human body are seen as "real" because they conform to externally perceivable characteristics that can be verified through experience. This materialistic tendency positions "reality" in the objective existence of the external world. In contrast, Zhuangzi's "shi" emphasizes a true state within the mind or consciousness (Fu, 2018). This "shi" is a subjective experience, pointing to an inner sense of truth, rather than merely referring to a specific material entity (Fu, 2018). This state of truth does not depend on the existence of external matter, but is more about a mental or spiritual form of truth (Fu, 2018). The way scholars grasp the meaning of "shi" greatly influences their understanding of Zhuangzi's epistemology. The following paragraphs will explore various interpretations of "shi" from research papers, while also identifying areas for improvement in current studies.

When introducing "xu" (虚) above, "shi" (实) is also mentioned. In order to explain the epistemology of "xu-shi" (虚实), it is important to distinguish the meaning of "shi" from concepts such as "true," "real," or "have." Modern scholars have also studied *Zhuangzi's* concept of "Zhen" (真). Kim (2011) introduced the concept of "truth" in *Zhuangzi*. In *Zhuangzi*, terms such as "zhen ren" (真人, true person), "zhen zhi" (真知, true knowledge), and "zhen zai" (真宰, true ruler) appear and are often translated into English as "genuine" or "real", referring to the true essence or nature of a human being (Kim, 2011). The opposite of "true" in this context is "wei" (伪), which is often translated as "false." The Chinese character "wei" consists of "人" (human) and "为" (behavior), which suggests human behavior, and its meaning is similar to that of the English word "artificial". However, understanding it solely from the perspective of character formation could lead to logical issues—shouldn't "man-made substance" be defined as "real substance"? Does human behavior necessarily imply "untruth"?

However, in *Zhuangzi's* application, such narrow reasoning is not adopted, because his prose style shapes his logical thinking and constructs an epistemology with unrestrained style (Jiang, 2024; Kim, 2011). In *Zhuangzi's* context, "wei" refers to the distortion that occurs when one forces the display of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and morality" without genuinely intending to embody them. It refers to a kind of spiritual unwillingness. Here, both "wei" and "zhen" (true) refer to the truth or falseness on a spiritual level, which is aligned with *Zhuangzi's* concept of "Shi" (real or true) as a mental or spiritual state. Kim (2011) demonstrates the necessity of studying "zhen" from a semantic perspective and provides a comprehensive summary of the various meanings of "zhen" in *Zhuangzi*.

However, this semantic approach to increase intercultural competence remains limited to the exploration of intercultural philosophy in Kim (2011)'s era. Specifically, Kim (2011) reviews the various connotative meanings of "zhen" in Chinese, but it is written in English. The same words in English can evoke different meanings for English readers. This leads to questions about the epistemological process that English learners undergo—whether it triggers dialectical thinking, and whether these connections are traceable, which are still unresolved issues. Furthermore, after reading the text, the new reflections that English learners constructing and critiquing remain unexplored.

Lu (2024) highlights another aspect of *Zhuangzi's* philosophy in intercultural contexts, specifically how the same geographic region, over different periods of time, leads to different cultural understandings and translations of terms. For example, Lu (2024) discusses the term "materialization" (物化,wu hua), which in modern and contemporary contexts refers to the process of converting abstract ideas into material forms, and how the "materialization" of life is seen as the dissolution of the spiritual subject of life and its transformation into a focus on material desires. This meaning is in direct contrast to the original meaning of the same word "wu hua"(物化) in *Zhuangzi's* text. In *Zhuangzi's*, "wu hua" refers to the spiritual state of dissolving differences between things and achieving a state of unity, often referred to as "齐物" (equalizing all things). In this sense, *Zhuangzi's* epistemology asserts equality among things and between humans and things.

Lu(2024) provides an insightful cross-era translation of the term and reflects on both ancient and modern cultures, showing how they mutually reflect one another, offering new philosophical insights. Lu(2024) applies *Zhuangzi's* epistemology of "xu-shi" to the contemporary problem of how technology causes modern humans to lose their sense of true self. Lu(2024) proposes three different strategies for dealing with the encroachment of technology on human beings: conservative, optimistic, and transcendent. This application of

Zhuangzi's philosophy to contemporary issues of humanity's interaction with technology offers potential solutions to the challenges brought about by the intersection of these two realms.

Liang (2018) compares Zhuangzi's understanding of "Shi" with Descartes' understanding of truth, discussing the essential differences between the epistemologies formed by two individuals who both use dreams to explore what truth is. Liang (2018) uses Zhuangzi's allegorical stories as a starting point to explain how people's attitudes, emotions, and aesthetics in daily life are shaped by their understanding of the world. Liang also reflects on epistemology, suggesting that human attitudes and emotions are influenced by individual epistemological perspectives. However, Liang (2018) interprets Zhuangzi's understanding of "Shi" in a pessimistic and negative light, viewing Zhuangzi's treatment of the spiritual world as "real" as a form of passive resignation to the realities of the material world. Liang (2018) believes that Zhuangzi treats sensory perception as the sole way to understand the world and rejects the process through which this epistemology is formed.

Hansen (2024) uses the concept of "perspective" as a framework to understand *Zhuangzi's* idea of "Shi" (实). According to Hansen, *Zhuangzi* considers the "real" (Shi) to be the perspective of a Being—that is, the perspective held by an existing entity. Hansen (2024) explains that every being provides a unique perspective drawn from the various aspects of the universe. Nature, in Hansen(2024)'s interpretation, is visualized as an axis. Each being observes nature from its own perspective. These perspectives is not limited or modest but acknowledges the significance of the existence of every being (Hansen, 2024). Each of these perspectives from beings is considered valuable. Furthermore, every being can also be regarded as a type of nature. Beings themselves become an axis, they accept others' perspectives and each being can view itself from the perspective of others. Ultimately, after these diverse perspectives are explored, nature—and beings as a type of nature—are understood as a unified whole. This whole is indivisible, with no exceptions or distinctions (Hansen, 2024).

Through a review of interpretations of "shi" (实), some researchers consider *Zhuangzi's* understanding of Shi to be negative, while others view it as positive. These differing perspectives cannot fully or definitively define *Zhuangzi's* epistemology of xu (虚) and shi (实). Instead, they largely depend on the extent to which individual researchers capture the meaning conveyed in *Zhuangzi*.

6 CONCLUSION

The following sections provide a summary of this article and point out future implication. The article addresses the lack of comprehensive literature reviews on *Zhuangzi's* epistemology of "xushi". It undertakes a critical review centered on this epistemology to fill the gap, aiming to offer possibilities for developing research methodologies for studying multiple disciplinaries, interdisciplinaries and sustainable humanities based on *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi epistemology. As well, it is for providing a potential framework for understanding world in the digital era. The article begins by introducing how *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi as an epistemology could be understood. It then summarizes the three stages that xu-shi epistemology has undergone during its translation into non-Chinese languages. Following this, the author provides a detailed review of the meanings, concepts, and applications of "xu" and "shi" in contemporary academic literature. Through this process, the author uncovers how modern scholars interpret and apply *Zhuangzi's* ideas in their research. The author highlights areas within each piece of research that have room for further development.

The first direction for future research lies in applying *Zhuangzi's* understanding of language. Wang (2023) provides a comprehensive review of *Zhuangzi's* three perspectives on language. Wang demonstrates how *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi epistemology supports a complete linguistic framework. *Zhuangzi* respects the initial state of language, which is characterized by its "indeterminacy" and "fluidity." Second, language has the capacity to reconstruct the natural characteristics of all things, including humans. Wang (2023) also emphasizes that *Zhuangzi's* view of the Dao is not simply about it being "ineffable" or requiring silence as a substitute for expression. Instead, language plays a vital role in enabling the mind to explore truth from multiple perspectives, allowing ideas to collide and generate new forms of expression. To studying Zhuangzi's understanding of language, future research could analyse language by using xu-shi as an epistemological framework. The changing between xu and shi in language would be analyzed and contribute innovative language model.

Second, the study of xu-shi epistemology provides possibilities for creating methodological frameworks across disciplines. As reviewed earlier, Zhang (2019) explores the relationships among fact, record, imagination, and fiction, and how they can be deconstructed through xu-shi epistemology to present

a more inclusive understanding of history. Historical imagination, through the use of metaphor and narrative strategies, not only depicts facts but also poetically refines them. This approach aligns with *Zhuangzi's* concept of "xu" as a means of transcending fixed, traditional notions of truth. For *Zhuangzi*, "xu" is not mere emptiness but serves as a complement to and a transcendence of "shi," enriching our understanding of reality.

The third implication of *Zhuangzi's* xu-shi epistemology lies in the study of sustainable humanity. For example, in Chinese culture, humility is regarded as a virtuous attitude. The word "谦虚" (humility) contains the character "虚" (xu). How does the semantic significance of "xu" function within the concept of humility? Conversely, terms such as "实诚" (honesty, sincerity) emphasize "实" (shi), yet both humility and sincerity are positively valued traits in Chinese cultural descriptions of humanity. Why does Chinese culture regard human virtues as a combination of "xu" and "shi"? Under what conditions does "xu" take on positive connotations in human ethics, and when does it become negative? Similarly, how does "shi" shift between these roles? These nuanced interactions between "xu" and "shi" offer fertile ground for exploring sustainable human development within a cultural context.

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