**Rivers and Lakes: Zhuangzian Critique of Just War Theory and Perspective on International Relations in Wartime**

# Abstract

A plethora of works has been published on classical Chinese just war theory. The philosophical texts that often receive scholarly attention include the *Mengzi*, *Mozi*, *Xunzi*, *Sunzi Bingfa*, *Laozi,* and *Huandi Sijing*. The *Zhuangzi* has rarely been discussed in this research area because it is believed to be silent on the topic. This paper demonstrates the *Zhuangzi*’s relevance to the discussion of ancient Chinese theory of war and international relations through an analysis of its criticism of Mencian and Mohist just war theories and its “rivers and lakes” analogy. The analysis suggests that Zhuangzi not only posits that just war theory is invalid and unjust; from a Zhuangzian perspective, any rendition of just war theory is inherently self-contradictory, and promoting just war theory can be dangerous and even immoral. It fuels wars and results in negligence of wartime suffering and survival of the people. This Zhuangzian thesis yields an insight that during wartime, states are not regular political entities as they are in the all-under-Heaven; instead, they are akin to rivers and lakes with blurry boundaries to which people do not politically belong.

**Keywords**: war, just war theory, Chinese philosophy, Zhuangzi, Daoism

# Introduction

In the discussion on classical Chinese just war theory, the *Mengzi* 孟子 (Master Meng), *Mozi* 墨子 (Master Mo), *Xunzi* 荀子 (Master Xun), *Sunzi Bingfa* 孫子兵法 (Sunzi’s Art of War), *Laozi* 老子 (Master Lao), and *Huandi Sijing* 黃帝四經 (Yellow Emperor’s Four Classics) have received scholarly attention (Bell 2008; Fraser 2016; Graff 2016; Hagen 2022; Lo & Twiss 2015; Lo 2020; Zhang 2015, 2024). The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuangzi) has been marginalized in this area of study because it contains limited remarks on just war. However, Zhuangzi’s remarks are noteworthy in that they suggest a negative answer to the question of whether there is such a thing as “just war theory.”[[1]](#footnote-1) To better comprehend Zhuangzi’s criticism of just war theory, this paper first outlines its possible target, namely, the Mencian and Mohist just war theories. Next, reading the *Zhuangzi* in light of the Mencian and Mohist just war theories, the paper explains why Zhuangzi repudiates the legitimacy of just war theory and considers the promotion of just war theory dangerous and even immoral. Zhuangzi’s critical remarks on just war yields a perspective on the nature of state and interstate relations during wartime.

# 1. War to End Wars and War of Self-defense: Just War for Mengzi and Mohists

The historical Mengzi, Mohists, and Zhuangzi are from more or less the same time during the mid-Warring States period. In the Spring and Autumn period, more than a hundred states had already been eliminated following the decline of the authority of the Zhou 周 regime. The wars of annexation continued and grew more large-scale during the Warring States period, and the remaining powers competed militarily to be the final winner and to establish a new regime. This ambition is termed “seizing all-under-Heaven” (*qu tian xia* 取天下) or “becoming the king of all-under-Heaven” (*wang tian xia* 王天下). Under the circumstances of constant wars, just war theory was a focal topic in the then intellectual scene. Thinkers at the time were divided in terms of whether military conquest was the only possible approach to establishing a new regime and restoring order accordingly. One side believed that the war was the most realistic and feasible approach because it had already taken shape and been in progress. The other disapproved of installing a new regime through military conquest, arguing that there had to be alternative approaches to end wars. Mencian theory better describes the former approach and Mohist theory the latter.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mengzi, the representative Confucian thinker during the mid-Warring States period, believed that order would be restored if all-under-Heaven was unified under one sovereign (*ding yu yi* 定於一) (1A6). For Mengzi, a war of unifying all-under-Heaven could put an end to wars and bring about order, so this kind of war was justified if it did not imply unnecessary killing.[[3]](#footnote-3) As Mengzi put it, one who does not take pleasure in killing is qualified to be the king to unify all-under-Heaven (*bus hi sha ren zhe* *neng yi zhi* 不嗜殺人者能一之) (1A6). Since the Mencian just war theory was construed to accommodate this approach of restoring order and peace, it does not consider war of defense more ethical: Mengzi tended to advise weak states to give up their territories rather than fighting a vain defensive war (1B20). For the same reason, he would encourage a powerful state to seize opportunities to attack other states to further its geopolitical power (1B11) (Lee 2017). War of “invasion” in this context would not be less “just” than war of defense because it could speed up the course of establishing a new regime and henceforth end the war situation (if ending wars was seen as the main goal). The war of unifying all-under-Heaven is not merely a war between two states but rather a war of one state against the rest of the world (1A7). Therefore, the state that can achieve the goal must have strong military prowess while also ruling kindly at home. A ruler who is kind to their own people has a better chance of conquering other states because their own people are more willing to fight for them.

地方百里而可以王。王如施仁政於民，省刑罰，薄稅斂，深耕易耨。壯者以暇日修其孝悌忠信，入以事其父兄，出以事其長上，可使制梃以撻秦楚之堅甲利兵矣。

If Your Majesty applies kind governance to the people, spares punishments, and reduces taxes and levies to make plowing deep and weeding prompt. […] They then can be employed to make clubs so as to beat the strong armor and sharp weapons of the troops of Qin and Chu. (*Mengzi* 1A5)

By being kind to their own people, the state ruler could establish a good reputation, and the people of other states would welcome their troops when they came to annex their states (1B18). This is why a kind ruler would not encounter any enemies in their path to conquering other states (*ren zhe wu di* 仁者無敵) (1A5).

Mohist just war theory, in contrast, considers war of aggression unjust; it permits only war of defense fought by those who are willing to sacrifice themselves (Fraser 2016; Loy 2015).[[4]](#footnote-4) Mohists construct various arguments against the approach of military unification. For example, they resort to moral intuition, pointing out the paradox of morality of war. As the *Mozi* states, people share the moral intuition that killing men violates the value of “justice” (*yi* 義), and the more people one kills, the more punishments one deserves. Yet at the same time, people paradoxically believe that war, which involves killing people on a massive scale, can be just (Sun 2007: 129). However, such arguments could not persuade the ruling elites to stop engaging in wars because the wars had already begun.

Mohists were aware of this predicament and put forward a thesis to thwart military aggression: they, for example, denied the principle of equal war rights and the moral equality of combatants (McMahan 2008; Rodin 2010). The thesis argued that soldiers of the unjust side (the state that initiated the aggression) do not have the same rights because they are murderous robbers and gangsters (*dao* 盜) who can rightly be executed by the just side (namely, the invaded state). The *Mozi* states that while robbers are also humans, “killing robbers” is not the same as “killing humans” (*sha dao ren fei sha ren ye* 殺盜人非殺人也) (Sun 2007: 418).

From the Mohist perspective, the project of “becoming the king of all-under-Heaven” (*wang tian xia* 王天下), namely, war of unifying the world, is unjust and nonessential. It justifies the unjust side and encourages the soldiers of the unjust side to fight the war. In this regard, Mengzi’s just war theory was in favor of murderous robbers, and it could not be a method of benefiting all-under-Heaven. The *Mozi* thus remarked,

遇盜人，而斷指以免身，利也；其遇盜人，害也。斷指與斷腕，利於天下相若，無擇也。

When a man encounters a robber, if he can save his own life by cutting off a finger, then doing so is to pursue [the greater] benefit. That he encounters a robber is a misfortune. Whether he cuts off a finger or a wrist, it makes no difference to the benefit of all under Heaven, so there is nothing [for him] to choose between. (Sun 2007: 404)

According to Mohism, invaders are murderous robbers. Encountering robbers is unfortunate for everyone. When facing the robber, one may choose to sacrifice a finger to keep his life. However, what one chooses to do is irrelevant to all other people in the world. One cannot rescue others by allowing the robber to hurt him or anyone else. Mengzi’s just war theory is nonsensical in that, in the name of all-under-Heaven, it holds that it is just for a murderous robber to sacrifice other people and make them go to war.

While the Mencian and Mohist theories oppose each other, both advocate the moral values of “kindness” (*ren* 仁) and “justice” (*yi* 義) and grounded the theories on these values.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mengzi considered the war of unifying all-under-Heaven launched by a kind ruler (one who does not enjoy taking pleasure in slaughtering) just because it would put an end to war with minimal casualties. Mohists, however, regarded military aggression against an innocent state as opposing the norms of kindness and justice (Sun 2007: 484). They called for a pause of wars and urged all states to switch into the post-war moral mindset of “inclusivity” (*jian* 兼); that is, the rich states should help the poor states recover from the damage caused by war. Mohists argued that if the ruling elites of every state cared for all people in the world inclusively, none of them would consider invading any state just.

A natural question arises. If war is obviously bad and must be stopped, as both Mengzi and Mohists agree, then whose just war theory is more sensible and ethical? The *Zhuangzi* finds both theories problematic in similar ways.

# 2. The *Zhuangzi*’s Criticism of Mencian and Mohist Just War Theories

Mengzi might have been right that one leader conquering all other states and establishing a new regime would put an end to the Warring States situation, as history has proven. Yet, it is still a controversial belief or thesis that this person must be kind and the wars they launch must be just.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, Mencian theory assumes that a kind ruler should strive to end wars from which all people suffer. Following this line of thinking, the idea of using war as a means to end war is self-contradictory because it implies inflicting suffering on the people to end their suffering. In addition to being contradictory, the Mencian theory yields an ethical question regarding who is to be sacrificed for the sake of the whole world. As the *Mozi* points out, using war to end war is not a deed of caring for all people because such a war involves having one group of people killed to care for another group of people. Mohist just war theory could avoid this ethical problem because it emphasizes the principle of self-sacrifice:

殺一人以存天下，非殺一人以利天下也。殺己以存天下，是殺己以利天下

To kill one person to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven, this is not killing one person to benefit all under Heaven. To kill yourself to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven, this is killing oneself to benefit all under Heaven. (Sun 2007: 404)

In Mohist theory, a war is just if it is fought by those who volunteer to defend the invaded state. However, the Mohist principle of combatants’ unequal rights is paradoxical in a similar vein. If Mohists oppose war because killing is unjust, then the permission to kill in a defensive war would contradict the Mohist argument against a war of aggression. To dissolve this issue, Mohists called the invading troops robbers, and killing robbers is not killing people. The *Zhuangzi*, however, harshly debunks this idea.

The *Zhuangzi* criticizes Confucian and Mohist just war theorists (*ru mo* 儒墨) on several occasions.[[7]](#footnote-7) One criticism echoes the modern critique of just war theory; that is, just war theory is in nature self-contradictory. It justifies what it considers unjustifiable. As the *Zhuangzi* states:

故有儒墨之是非，以是其所非，而非其所是。

Hence, we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, both refuting what they approve through approving what they refute. (Ziporyn 2020: 14)[[8]](#footnote-8)

Mengzi approves of the idea of war to end war because war is bad. Mohism permits killing the people of the invading troop because the soldiers of the invading troop would kill people. In this regard, they are “refuting what they approve through approving what they refute.” Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* complains about Confucian and Mohist just war theories (or just war theorists in general), saying that their understanding of “kindness” and “justice” and their judgments of “right” and “wrong” are inextricably messy and perplexing.

自我觀之，仁義之端，是非之塗，樊然殽亂，吾惡能知其辯?

From where I see it, all the sproutings of “kindness” and “justice” and all the trails of right and wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused. How could I know how to distinguish and demonstrate any conclusions about them? (Ziporyn 2020: 19)

In addition to the obvious problem of being self-contradictory, just war theory indoctrinates the idea in people that a war can be just.

禹之治天下，使民心變，人有心而兵有順，殺盜非殺，人自為種而天下耳，是以天下大駭，儒墨皆起。

Yao ordered the world by making the people’s minds all focus on kinship affection, so that when someone killed the killer of his parents, no one blamed him. […] Yu ordered the world by causing the people’s minds to change, so that when someone makes up their mind [regarding what is justice], they use weapons as if they legitimately do so, [saying that ] “killing robbers is not killing other men.” The people in the world form judgments from their own perspective, and thus the world ends in enormous turbulence, in which Confucianism and Mohism thrive. (Ziporyn 2020: 125)

Once people have the idea of just war, their way of thinking about war changes. They may develop the idea that killing a bad person is not really murdering a person. Just war theory traps people’s minds in the model of moral reasoning with the prioritized assumption that war can be just. Thinking this way, people stop focusing on the brutality of war and focus instead on the moral assessment of war.

The focus on which side is more “just” leads to the third Zhuangzian critique of just war theory; that is, just war theory fails to consider that people do not share the same moral principles and advocate the same just war theory. Even if they do, what war they would consider just depends on their own viewpoints or positions.[[9]](#footnote-9) When people promote a war or partake in war, they have already made their minds regarding which just war theory they endorse or which side of the war they support. They then formulate a moralistic discourse to encourage others to use weapons to kill those who they consider belonging to the unjust side. As the *Zhuangzi* states, it is impossible for people to decide what is right or wrong without having made up their minds beforehand (*wei cheng hu xin er you shi fei, shi jin ri shi yue er xi zhi ye* 未成乎心而有是非，是今日適越而昔至也) (Ziporyn 2020: 13). For this reason, just war theory cannot prevent wars from happening, nor can it stop a war. Just war theory serves war through buttressing people’s belief in the justice of the war they have decided to support. Therefore, while just war theorists may claim that their aim is to restore the order of the era of sage kings, Zhuangzi states that nothing can be greater than the disorder they could cause (*ming yue zhi zhi er luan mo shen yan* 名曰治之而亂莫甚焉) (Ziporyn 2020: 125).[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Zhuangzi, promoting just war theory is not promoting peace but war. By justifying wars, it causes more interstate conflicts and disturbs human nature. The “kindness” and “justice” in just war discourses galvanize people’s outrage.

又何偈偈乎揭仁義，若擊鼓而求亡子焉？意！夫子亂人之性也！

What use is there then to go on with this militant advocacy of “kindness and justice,” avidly pounding a drum for battle with the vehemence of a man ‘seeking his lost son’? Ach! You, sir, are just disordering the inborn natures of human beings! (Ziporyn 2020: 114)

Promoting this kind of “kindness” and “justice” is in nature promoting the idea that certain kinds of murders are just and even heroic, thus provoking people to kill others. This disrupts the inborn nature of human beings. The more people think and act within the framework of just war theory, the more vehement they can be in supporting or fighting a war. Being trapped in this line of thinking, people may forget the common sense that it is not in the nature of human beings to kill strangers with anger and hate for “justice.” Indeed, people share the moral intuition that killing a person is wrong, so punishing a murderer is right. Yet just war theory errs in applying this moral intuition to the state. The rights and wrongs in just war theory are fabricated morality.

夫鵠不日浴而白，烏不日黔而黑。黑白之朴，不足以為辯；名譽之觀，不足以為廣。泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呴以溼，相濡以沫，不若相忘於江湖。

A snow-goose does not need a daily bath to become white, and a crow does not need a daily tarring to become black. So, there is no need to dispute about their uncontrived blackness and whiteness, and whatever prospects they may have to bring fame and honor are not worth disseminating. When the streams dry up, the fish cluster together on the banks, gasping and spitting on one another to keep themselves wet and foamed over. But this is no match for forgetting each other in the rivers and lakes. (Ziporyn 2020: 124)

Rights and wrongs should be as simple and obvious as black and white. People do not need a theory to debate how to distinguish between black and white. To lure people into reasoning within the self-contradictory and counterintuitive framework, just war theory brings in the factors of fame and honor. It plants the idea that slaughtering for just cause is heroic and honorable and thus deserves fame and admiration. Nevertheless, human beings do not have the natural disposition to sacrifice themselves and slaughter others for fame and honor. When a war happens, what concerns ordinary people is basic survival issues. This is analogous to the situation of fish being in dried-up stream. Once a stream dries up, the fish leave for other rivers and lakes rather than building solidarity on the banks. This leads to the last Zhuangzian critique of the idea of just war; that is, it ignores the wartime suffering and survival of the people. The *Zhuangzi* denounces Confucians and Mohists, saying,

今世殊死者相枕也，桁楊者相推也，刑戮者相望也，而儒、墨乃始離跂攘臂乎桎梏之間。意！甚矣哉！其無愧而不知恥也甚矣！

Nowadays corpses killed in all sorts of different ways lie around in heaps, pillowed one on the other, while prisoners in cangues push one another along between them—the punished and the dead longingly gazing at one another from afar. And now the Confucians and the Mohists come along standing apart from them all on tiptoe and rolling up their sleeves amidst the manacles and fetters. Ach! What a monstrous extreme they have reached in their shamelessness, in their obliviousness to their own disgrace! (Ziporyn 2020: 91)

As the mutilated and the dead were not out of everyone’s sight, Confucians and Mohists waved their hands amid the corpses, promoting the idea of justice of war and that of justice in war. For Zhuangzi, their lack of guilt and shame was immense. Promoting just war theory during wartime is immoral because it draws people’s attention away from the ongoing humanitarian crisis to the question of which side and what acts are just in the war.

# 3. Replacing “*Tianxia*” with “*Jianghu*”: Zhuangzian Perspective on Interstate Relations During Wartime

Repudiation of just war theory might appear to imply realism in international relations and an amoral perspective on warfare. However, it is an oversimplification to state that Zhuangzi advocates a realistic and amoral theory of interstate relations and war. Zhuangzi’s repudiation of just war theory, as argued above, is a moral critique. It resorts to moral values to criticize just war theory and the behavior of promoting just war theory.

Indeed, in a sense, the Zhuangzian theory of war can be characterized as realism. Yet, it is realistic mainly in that it concedes this: once a war starts, no moral theory can help stop it. Thus, to be moral in wartime situations is not to promote the idea of morality of war or just war theory, but rather, to focus on what can be done to minimize the casualties and damage caused by war. The fish in a dried-up stream analogy is an expression of this perspective. The *Zhuangzi* utilizes the same analogy in the “Great Source as Teacher” (*da zong shi* 大宗師) chapter, saying:

泉涸，魚相與處於陸，相呴以溼，相濡以沫，不如相忘於江湖。與其譽堯而非桀，不如兩忘而化其道。

When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes. Rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, we would be better off forgetting them both, letting them melt away in a transformation course into the way. (Ziporyn, 2020, p. 56)

Once the stream dries up, the fish leave for other rivers and lakes, forgetting about each other and the home river. This is the nature of fish. Humans are the same. Once a state becomes a battle, people would rather forget all about one another in their normal lives rather than going into battle to fight for “justice” or for the “kinder” ruler. Therefore, morality in war is not to praise kind rulers or condemn violent rulers so as to mobilize people to fight. If one truly cares for the people, one should let people find a way to survive and forget about rights and wrongs. Because, as mentioned earlier, the matter of right and wrong is akin to the distinction between black and white. It is simple and obvious. The right is right with or without people praising it and taking action to prove it; the same applies to the wrong. In other words, an emphasis on the justice of war or in the war may be redundant and could unfortunately cloud the more important issues such as the refugee issue. Refugees are people who do not want to fight a war; they would rather leave for other states, like the fish with their rivers and lakes.

Using “*jianghu*” 江湖 (“rivers and lakes” hereafter) as a metaphor for the state is particularly noteworthy in classical Chinese philosophy. In classical Chinese texts (including the *Zhuangzi*), the stream, river, lake, or sea is often used as a political analogy that stands for the state, and fish or turtle stands for the people (Lee 2024). However, the *Zhuangzi* might be the only early master’s text that invokes the particular expression “*jianghu*” in a political context. This terminology yields an alternative theory of interstate relations for the wartime situation, which differs from the *tianxia* 天下 (“all-under-Heaven” hereafter) theory (Ames & Gan 2023; Bai 2012A; Bai 2012B; Dreyer 2015; Zhao 2011).

Both Mengzis and Mohists tackled the question of how to end wars by resorting to the idea of “all-under-Heaven.” When referring to world politics, “all-under-Heaven” has the connotation of world government or a hierarchical system of interstate relations (Bell & Wang 2020; Pine 2002). From the Mencian perspective, the situation of constant war results from the lack of top authority of all-under-Heaven and the concomitant decline of the world order. Once the authority of all-under-Heaven—that is, the *wang* 王 (king) or *tianzi* 天子 (Son of Heaven)—is installed, the interstate wars will end. The *Mozi*, however, argues that the most urgent task is not to install a Son of Heaven because he is not the highest authority. As the expression “all-under-Heaven” indicates, the highest authority of “all-under-Heaven” is the Heaven rather than the Son of Heaven, and all the states are “under” Heaven. Thus, to respect the top authority, all state rulers should model their behavior on Heaven and care for the people. If they did so, they would immediately stop engaging in wars.

The term “all-under-Heaven” in the *Zhuangzi* also refers to the political world or the upmost power a person can seize or yield to someone else. While people can choose not to fully engage in the political world, all-under-Heaven, they and the political world are inevitably part of “*tiandi*” 天地 (“heaven-and-earth” hereafter), the sphere from which no one can escape. When discussing how individuals deal with and position themselves in their living environment, the *Zhuangzi* tends to use the expression “heaven-and-earth,” which is the natural world that cannot be manipulated by humans (Perkins 2005). Heaven-and-earth sometimes stands for the natural law or the nonartificial norms that regulate the patterns and results of human political acts. The all-under-Heaven could collapse, but the heaven-and-earth remains. When the *tianxia* system falls apartment and enters the stage of interstate wars, the remaining states are akin to “rivers and lakes.” A state might disappear (be eradicated) like a dried-up river or expand due to floods (war of annexation), as the “Autumn Flood” (*qiu shui* 秋水) chapter reads,

秋水時至，百川灌河，涇流之大，兩涘渚崖之間，不辯牛馬。於是焉河伯欣然自喜，以天下之美為盡在己。

The time of autumn waters had come, hundred streams are all discharging into the Yellow River. The expanse of its unobstructed flow was so great that a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow. The Lord of the River was overjoyed, delighting in his own powers, believing all-under-Heaven’s beauty now to be encompassed within his own [territory]. (Ziporyn 2020, p. 134)

The ruler of the river is delighted when his territory expands thanks to the autumn waters. For a moment, he even believes that he has gained all-under-Heaven until he meets the Northern Sea (*bei hai* 北海), whose territory is obviously much larger.

With the collapse of the political world (all-under-Heaven), states are no longer “regular” political entities. They are like streams, rivers, or lakes in the natural world (heaven-and-earth) in that their people (fish) and boundaries (water margins) are constantly changing. The same applies to the people, who are no longer the people of a particular political unit but rather animals in the natural world. It is the natural law, or law of the jungle, that dictates the changes and evolution of the situation. Just war theory plays a minimal role in the situation because it assumes that the main players in the theory are states and the states’ people in their regular forms and that human-made moral norms can predetermine or regulate how things evolve. However, for Zhuangzi, just war theory cannot adapt to the trajectory of any war nor, as mentioned earlier, can it bring about positive impacts. The more tightly people cling to the idea of “just war,” the less likely they are to look at the whole situation and pay attention to the fish dying on the river banks, meaning the wartime suffering of the people. This negative assessment of just war theory, once again, does not imply an amoralist perspective on international relations and warfare. The “rivers and lakes” analogy stresses that once a war starts, we inevitably enter a world of the law of the jungle. Promoting a just war theory that does not concede this simple fact, as the *Zhuangzi* puts it, is like standing on others people’s corpses and shouting morality slogans to encourage more people to enter the jungle.

From the Zhuangzian perspective, it is a misconception that we can discover any kindness and justice in wars. As Laozi says, weapons are ominous and the ritual for military victory is like a funeral; nothing about war can be praised or celebrated (Zhang 2015). The only sensible moral principles concerning wars are basic rules, such as “do not have any wars” and “one must try their best to prevent any war from happening.” If a war begins, being kind is to care for humans rather than state agents, whose shape and identity are blurry like waters in the realm of heaven-and-earth.

# Conclusion

This paper examined Zhuangzi’s critique of just war theory, the Zhuangzian theory of war, and interstate relations during wartime. To better comprehend Zhuangzi’s critique of just war theory, this paper began with an introduction to Mencian and Mohist just war theories. The former disapproves of war and thus approves the justice of ending war with war. The latter disapproves of war and thus approves the justice of killing soldiers of the invading side. The two opposing just war theories demonstrate that people’s moral intuitions can result in incompatible just war theories and that any version of just war theory is intrinsically self-contradictory. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* criticizes just war theory for being inevitably invalid and leading to endless debates. Engaging in such debates, people cannot help but reason with the prioritized assumption that war can be just. With the idea of “just war” in mind, people focus on the “legitimacy” of waging and fighting wars. For this reason, Zhuangzi considers articulating and promoting just war theory dangerous and even immoral; it ignites outraged people to go to war, causing more causalities. People with a strong commitment to just war theory or the moral imagination of justice of war or justice in war might believe that the soldiers of the unjust side do not deserve the same rights to human survival, and that killing them is just or even heroic. Such beliefs disorder the inborn nature of humans. Humans have survival instincts and a natural disposition to fear death and brutal slaughtering. As the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly emphasizes, killing others for justice is opposing human nature. When war starts, people are inclined to flee to another place to survive and live a normal life. Thus, an overemphasis on just war theory might have the unintended consequence of distracting people from the real urgent issue of wartime suffering and survival of the people.

Zhuangzi’s repudiation of the desirability and legitimacy of just war theory contributes not only to the discussion of ancient Chinese just war theory but also to that of the Chinese traditional perspective on international relations and world order. As the dominant theory holds that the idea of “all-under-Heaven” is the trademark of the Chinese traditional view of world order, scholars have constructed Chinese theory of international relations and world order based on “all-under-Heaven” discourses to address contemporary questions regarding warfare and the crisis of global order. It may be worthwhile to introduce and consider an alternative perspective, that is, Zhuangzian notions of “heaven-and-earth” and “rivers-and-lakes.” According to Zhuangzi, if the crisis of global order resulted from warfare is severe, the more important and benign task is not to promote an ideal system of global governance but to contemplate the moral thing to do in the realm of heaven-and-earth, where human-made laws have very limited effects on improving people’s well-being. Entering this realm, states are like rivers and lakes that have no clear or permanent boundaries, and the people are animals who strive to survive in the jungle.

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1. In this paper, I use “Zhuangzi” to refer to the ideas (as I interpret them) in the *Zhuangzi*. This does not suggest that I believe in the single-authorship of the *Zhuangzi*. For this issue, see Klein (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The reconstruction of Mencian and Mohist just war theories is derived from their interstate relational ethics (Lee 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mengzi does not stress that the person who is going to conquer all other states intends to end wars. His exchanges with the state rulers suggest only that the rulers aspire to become the king of a new dynasty. Thus, it is likely that Mengzi “uses” their ambition to achieve the goal of restoring order and peace, so for him, the rulers’ intention is not significantly relevant. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Mozi* seems to approve war of punishment in some occasions; for a detailed analysis, see Fraser (2016) and (Pines 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an analysis of the connotations of the *ren* and *yi* in the contexts of military strategy and wartime ethics, see Lee (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mengzi perhaps does not have such a belief; what he wishes might be the use of moral principles to dictate war behavior. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the meaning of “*ru mo*” in the *Zhuangzi*, see Lee (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In this paper, the translations of the *Zhuangzi* are mostly adapted from Ziporyn (2020) with a few exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In this regard, Zhuangzi’s theory is neither moral relativism nor amoralism (Ivanhoe 1996). Zhuangzi expresses concerns with morality and people’s well-being, and as will be shown in the subsequent discussion, Zhuangzi explicitly states that being right or wrong is not difficult to tell at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Any debate about the justice of war is destined to be endless and lead to nowhere. Those who join the debate in the framework of just war theory are troublemakers because they start from a problematic framework. This critique of just war theory echoes Zhuangzi’s view on assassination (Defoort 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)