



Daoism and Environmental Ethics

There are six schools of classical Chinese philosophy and all of them arose during the *Warring States* period in ancient China. This was a period of several hundred years when China was divided by a number of states that were constantly at war, and which only came to an end with the victory of the state of *Qin* (pronounced *Chin*) in 221 BCE that led to the first unified Chinese empire. It was a time of constant warfare and thus great social distress. It should not be surprising that thinkers would emerge concerned with the disorder of the time to wonder how their society had lost its way and who might be concerned to understand how it might find a way out of such a time. Understandably, then, the six schools of classical Chinese philosophy developed in a dispute about the *Dao*, most often translated as "way" or "path" but perhaps better translated as "way-making" since the Chinese character expresses more of an unfolding event rather than a fixed, unchanging thing.

道

Dao

Classical Chinese philosophy begins with Confucius (551–479 BCE). A learned scholar and cultured gentleman, Confucius travelled around China teaching about the *dao*, trying to encourage the rulers of the warring states to be better rulers through understanding the *dao*. Eventually, the

Classical Chinese Philosophy

1. Confucianism
2. Daoism
3. Mohism
4. School of Names
5. Philosophy of Change
6. Legalism

way of Confucius would be challenged by other thinkers, and thus during this period of the Warring States six schools of philosophy developed. In the painting above of six philosophers, perhaps representative of the six schools, it would not be hard to guess the Daoist philosopher, as Daoism is distinguished from the other schools by attempting to find the way through attuning human beings to the broader course of 'nature' or the 'cosmos,' expressed

in Chinese as *tiandi* (天地), "the heavens and the earth." Whereas the other philosophers are engaged in conversation or examining a scroll, the Daoist has his feet in the flowing stream while observing the course of the water. Alan Watts referred to Daoism as *The Watercourse Way* which is an apt description as the imagery of water is a major theme in the *Daodejing*, the famous text that is the origin of Daoism (Watts 1975). Before explaining further about the Daoist Watercourse Way, it is necessary to say a little more about the background of Chinese philosophy.

Advanced civilization in ancient China goes back at least as far as the beginning of recorded history in China during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE). As their artwork attests the Shang dynasty civilization was quite advanced and sophisticated. The more powerful Zhou people conquered a vast part of ancient China, eventually overthrowing the Shang and establishing the Zhou dynasty in 1122 BCE. Several centuries of relative peace and prosperity followed, but when the Zhou king was overthrown in 770 BCE, the civilization of ancient China gradually devolved into the constant warfare of the Warring States period. An important feature of Chinese thought is that it is much more concerned with finding the *dao*, or way to live in this world, rather than the focus on finding the secret to liberation from this world.

Another important feature of Chinese thought is that the sharp separation between human beings and nature, which is such a distinctive feature of Western thought, just doesn't arise in Chinese philosophy. In ancient Chinese cosmology, there was an assumption that the 'three powers' of Heaven (*tian* 天), Earth (*di* 地), and human beings (*ren* 人) were always understood to be mutually related. The notion of Heaven (*tian* 天) should not be confused with the Christian sense of another world beyond this physical cosmos, but rather something like the sky above, or the cosmos that opens at night when one can see the vastness of the cosmos. Though the term originally referred to a sky god who ruled over the cosmos, it evolved over time, from this notion of a sky god, to something more like 'fate' in the sense of an a power beyond human control, and then eventually to an impersonal standard for human conduct. By the time of Confucius, the notion had become an impersonal force of nature that reigned over the worlds of Earth and human beings. The phrase "the heavens and the earth" (*tiandi* 天地) is often used to refer to the 'whole world', or 'cosmos', and thus might be understood as 'nature' in the broadest sense of the natural world or universe. There is thus this broad sense that human beings are under 'heaven and earth' and thus part of the cosmos, and thus not separated from nature.

The main difference between Confucianism and Daoism might be described as the difference between *humanism* and *naturalism*. Even though there is this broad sense of the interrelationship between the three powers of Heaven, Earth and human beings in Chinese thought, there was always more of an emphasis on the human and the social in the development of Confucianism. For Confucius, the *dao* develops through human beings, through what is best in human culture. For the Daoist philosophers, however, the Confucian perspective was too narrow. They thought it was

necessary to get a wider perspective and see human beings within the context of the natural world, or even the whole vast cosmos. Thus, while Confucianism focuses on knowing humanity and developing virtues that could lead to social harmony, Daoism focuses on knowing the natural world and attuning human society to the patterns or rhythms of the cosmos.

The scholarly Confucius was influenced by the Five Classics of earlier times. Of particular interest in the development of Chinese philosophy is the *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*. This book, the oldest Chinese philosophical text, influenced all the philosophies that would develop in China. Originally this was a book of divination used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties and eventually it became a way of understanding the processes of change. One of the distinctive features of Chinese philosophy is its acceptance that reality is made up of continually changing processes rather than unchanging things.

The Five Classics

Classic of Poetry (Shijing)

Classic of History (Shujing)

Classic of Changes (Yijing)

Classic of Rites (Lijing)

Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu)



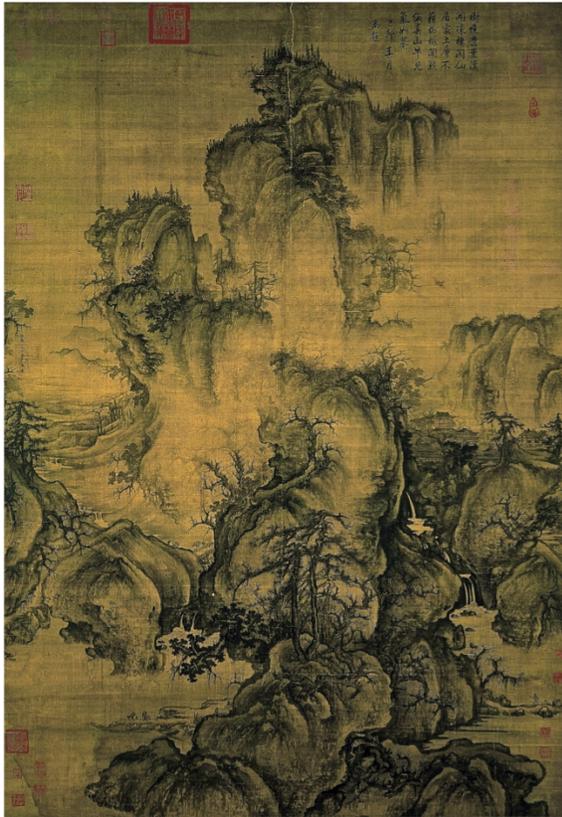
Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate

from the *Compendium of Diagrams*,
1623 by Zhang Huang (1527-1608)

As John Koller explains, "by the end of the Zhou, understanding the changes (*yi*) had become a way of learning how the Way (*Dao*) of the universe functions through polarities of *yin* and *yang*" (Koller 2012, 171). The image of the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* includes the well-known symbol of the *yinyang* polarities, with the *yin* the dark side and the *yang* the bright. Originally, the terms referred to the bright (*yang*) and shady (*yin*) sides of a hill, that would change throughout the day as the sun moved across the sky. Through the polarities of *yin* and *yang* the ancient Chinese sought to understand the process of change by which something comes into existence (*yang*) and then passes away (*yin*) changing into something else. According to the *Yijing*, the basic creative-energy stuff (*qi*) of the universe has two forms, the *yin* being "receptive, dark, hidden, passive, yielding, cool, soft, and feminine" and the *yang* being "creative, bright, active, aggressive, controlling, hot, hard, and masculine" (Koller 2012, 183). The *Yijing* includes sixty-four hexagrams made up of alternating *yang* (unbroken) and *yin* (broken) lines. The hexagrams symbolized all the possible combinations of change from *yin* to *yang* and back to *yin*. The hexagrams and the commentary that followed would provide some guidance about the changes to come in the future.

氣

Qi



Early Spring, Guo Xi, 1072

The painting, *Early Spring*, by Guo Xi is one of the most famous and important works of art from China and it brilliantly suggests the way of the Daoist philosophers. Whereas the Confucians emphasized a *dao* emerging through human civilization, the Daoists recommend attending to nature and its patterns, and trying as best as possible to see what is human in the perspective of the vast, the vastness of 'heaven and earth'. The Earth is small within the vastness of Heaven opened up in the night sky, and within the vastness of Earth, the human being, is very small, barely a recognizable speck in the image of the painting here.

Emerging during the chaos of the Warring States period, Daoist philosophers were concerned to find a way that would allow for a better life. Although they emphasized an acceptance of the inevitability of death, they valued longevity, and thus they recommended a way that would make

possible a long and flourishing life. To this end they recommended simplicity, living a life of modest desires, interfering the least with the natural world, and thus living in harmony with the rhythm of 'heaven and earth'.

There are three important texts of ancient Daoist philosophy, sometimes referred to simply by the name of the authors, the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*. The first book, the beginning of Daoism, is sometimes called the *Daodejing*, the *Book of the Way* (*dao* 道) and its *Power* (*de* 德). As the title *Daodejing* suggests, Laozi's text also is about *de* 德, 'power' or 'potency.' Each person, and indeed every living creature, has a particular power or potency that is expressed in how it lives. It has been suggested that *de* might be understood as "an inner source of power that expands outwardly as a kind of charismatic influence" (Coutinho 2014, 16). One of the most interesting features of Daoism is the suggestion that the most powerful potency or charisma is not the aggressive, male *yang* force, but the passive, female, *yin*. Whereas the *Yijing* recommends a balance of *yin* and *yang* is optimal, Daoism seems to emphasize *yin* qualities. In the *Daodejing* the *dao* is described as the great mother of the myriad things. Another verse recommends that one "know the male, but keep to the role of the female." It goes on to suggest that the most powerful *de* comes from being like a "river gorge." This may not make sense unless one considers another

德

De

verse that says "there is nothing more soft and weak (*yin* qualities) as water" and yet "nothing more effective in attacking what is hard and strong." This is how the water of the river cuts through the hardness of rock to form a gorge. The *dao* is thus like flowing water, especially like the cool mountain streams that make their way downward, softly working their way through the hardness of the rocks on their way to the sea.

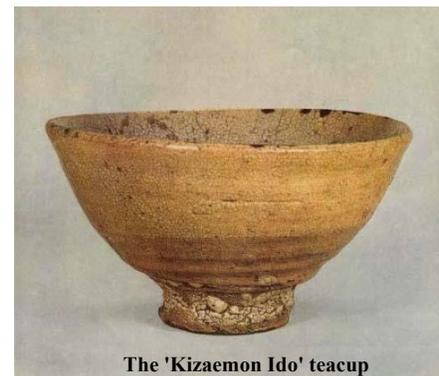
Whereas *yang* is full and *yin* is empty, the *dao* is described as an empty (*wu* 無) vessel. This emphasis on the *yin* is suggested in Chinese landscape painting, as in this painting, whereas, in stark contrast to Western landscape painting, the landscape emerges out of the emptiness in the background. The *yin* emphasis of the *Daodejing* is suggested not only in the imagery of water, the feminine, and the emptiness of a clay vessel, but also in a number of words or concepts, such as the "nameless" (*wuming* 無名), which feature the character *wu* (無). By itself, *wu* can mean 'empty',

無

Wu

but in conjunction with another character it can express negation, such as in, perhaps the most important of these terms, *wuwei* (無為), which is often translated simply as "no action" or "non-action." Thus, there is also *wuyu* (無欲), meaning 'no desire' or 'without desire'; *wuzhi* (無知), meaning 'no knowledge' or 'without cleverness'; and *wuyong* (無用), meaning 'no use' or 'useless'. Each of these terms require careful attention to the context of the passages in which they occur as well as to the sense of the text as a whole if one does not want to misunderstand what is said in sticking to a too literal translation. Thus, *wuwei* is thought not to mean literally 'no action', but to suggest rather a certain kind of action. A famous verse at the end of chapter 25 reads: "Human beings emulate the earth, the earth emulates the heavens, the heavens emulate the *dao*, and the *dao* emulates what is spontaneously so (*ziran* 自然). The implication of this verse suggests that in order to live more in harmony or in tune with the *dao*, it is necessary to act spontaneously, naturally, rather than in a forced, forceful, or contrived manner.

The *Daodejing* also suggests that in being more *yin*, following the female, and thus being like a river gorge, one returns to a state of a newborn babe or, in another important image, the state of an uncarved or unworked block of wood (*pu* 樸). Both of these images suggest a sense of naturalness, as in a newborn babe that has yet to lose its natural tendencies through cultural conditioning, or the natural simplicity of the uncarved wood. This notion of natural simplicity has had a profound influence on East Asian aesthetics, a nice example of which is a simple teacup, the 'Kizaemon Ido,' that is one of the national treasures of Japan. This cup is not overworked like the baroque teacups of Europe, but instead is made with the slightest touch of the potter's hands, preserving the natural simplicity of a simple clay vessel.



The 'Kizaemon Ido' teacup

The *Daodejing* begins with a most puzzling, paradoxical, enigmatic line—the most famous line in all of Chinese philosophy—"the *dao* that can be put into words is not really the *dao*." It is a simple line, but it has been translated many different ways leading to various interpretations of Daoism. Sometimes it is rendered: "the *dao* that can be told, or spoken of, is not the eternal, or constant, *dao*." A common interpretation suggests that Daoism is some kind of mysticism. The book tells of a *dao* that is beyond words, ineffable, and thus knowable, not by the rational intellect, but rather only through intuition. A more pragmatic interpretation suggests that the opening line is perhaps just a warning. Whereas Confucius was quite confident that the *dao* could be put into words, greatly emphasizing the importance of correct terminology or proper naming (*zhengming* 正名) the next line of the *Daodejing* says "the name that can be named is not really the name" and the line after that says "the nameless" (*wuming* 無名) is the beginning of "heaven and earth." The obvious question raised by the opening line of the text is that if, indeed, the *dao* cannot be put into words, why then did Laozi go on to write the book? Perhaps the book is an attempt to suggest or point to the *dao* in words, and the opening line is just a caution not to take the words that follow as the fixed and final words that forever capture the *dao*.

The contrast between the Confucian emphasis on *zhengming* with *wuming* in the *Daodejing* again suggests the intriguing *yin* emphasis in Daoism. One of the most interesting questions regarding Daoist philosophy concerns just why there is such an emphasis on *yin*. How are *yin* and *yang* in a balanced relationship if *yin* is somehow more important? Perhaps the *yin* phase of the changes, the movement toward rest, toward passivity and non-action, is more primordial. Perhaps also, the *yin* emphasis of the *Daodejing* and the later development of Daoism, might be understood as a response to the time of the Warring States. In Chinese medicine all illness can be understood as due to an excess of *yang* or *yin*, when the balance between the two is lost. Thus, if the condition is too *yin*, a *yang* remedy will be prescribed, whereas if the condition is too *yang*, a *yin* remedy is used. Thus, perhaps Daoism may be understood as a *yin* remedy to a time that was out of joint due to an excess of *yang*, which the period of the Warring States surely must have been.

In a famous painting, Laozi, the legendary author of the *Daodejing*, is depicted riding an ox, holding in his hand a scroll that is the text of the *Daodejing*. The story suggested by the image is a key part of the legend of Laozi. Whereas Confucius emphasized the importance of taking on a responsible role in society, being a ruler or at least holding some office and serving as a role model for the people, Laozi is depicted here riding that ox on his way out of the city. He is about to pass through the gate of the city, and there he will hand the text off to the gatekeeper, and then disappear forever into the mountains. Laozi is mentioned in the later texts, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*, and it is suggested there that he is an older contemporary of Confucius, which would place him in the sixth century BCE. Most scholars are now convinced that there may not have existed a single person named "Laozi" who wrote the book.

It is interesting to reflect on the possible relevance of Daoist philosophy in our time. Considering the propensity for war and violence in the world today, perhaps our society too suffers from an excess of *yang*. The environmental crisis and the problem of climate change are obviously also due to too much human activity, polluting the waters, the land, and the air we breathe, and burning so much fossil fuel that the Earth's fragile climate system is being thrown out of balance. In responding to the crisis of their time, the Daoist philosophers sought to understand the difference between nature, or 'heaven and earth,' and human beings. To think about this issue consider a difference between whales and human beings. Marine biologists have come to understand how, just without even trying, by spontaneously doing what they do without even thinking about it, that whales help maintain the health of the oceans and even positively affect the Earth's climate. It turns out that whales fertilize the upper "sunlight" zone of the ocean. Their waste emissions feed the plankton in the "sunlight" zone and this leads to more sea life. Since plankton absorb carbon from the atmosphere, whales actually have a positive impact on the climate. Scientists now think that impact was significant at the height of the whale population. Human beings, in contrast, hunted the whales for food to eat and oil to burn for light resulting in a dramatic decline in whale populations. Most human waste cannot be recycled and absorbed back into the biosphere and this leads to the problem of pollution. There is a very strong consensus among scientists that human activity is causing the average global temperature to dramatically rise. It is now understood that the Earth's climate is fragile and that a rise in average global temperature of only a few degrees centigrade can lead to a 'tipping point' beyond which there is no return to a stable climate that has enabled the evolution of life on Earth. It is becoming abundantly clear, however, that human civilization is driving the planet toward extinction. If there is going to be a foreseeable future for human beings and most of life on Earth, it is becoming more and more obvious that modern human civilization must change. Human beings must become more like the whales. Is it possible for human beings to live in a way that will not have a destructive impact on the environment and the climate?

Tim Freeman
The University of Hawai'i at Hilo

References

- Coutinho, Steve. 2014. *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophie*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Koller, John. 2011. *Asian Philosophies*, 6th ed. London: Pearson Higher Education.
- Watts, Alan. 1975. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon Books.