
Daoism and Nature

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Context: The Impact of European Modernity

Chinese intellectual history is well known for its monistic cosmology in which heaven, earth, and human beings are mutually implicated in an evolving organic process known as the Way 道. This worldview is broadly shared by Daoists and Confucians and has been referred to by Tu Weiming as an “anthropocosmic” vision. This view of the world, moreover, is at odds with the intellectual foundations of European modernity:

The modern West's dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/object) is diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking. Arguably, it is also a significant departure from ancient Greek, Judaic, and early Christian spiritual traditions. Informed by Bacon's knowledge as power and Darwin's survival through competitiveness, the Enlightenment mentality is so radically different from any style of thought familiar to the Chinese mind that it challenges all dimensions of the Sinic world. While the Enlightenment faith in instrumental rationality fueled by the Faustian drive to explore, know and subdue nature spurred spectacular progress in science and technology, it also became a justification for imperialist domination and colonial exploitation. As the international rules of the game, defined in terms of wealth and power, were superimposed on China by gunboat diplomacy, Chinese intellectuals accepted the inevitability of Westernization as a necessary strategy for survival. (Tu Weiming, “Implications of the Rise of ‘Confucian’ East Asia,” *Dædalus* 129.1, Winter 2001)

The impact of European modernity and colonialism has thus been (1) the broad acceptance by Chinese intellectuals of the irrelevance of traditional Chinese culture and religion in dealing with the modern world; (2) the removal of any cultural restraints or taboos on regarding the natural world as in any way sacred or valuable in and of its own right; and (3) a clash between the values of modernity and the contemporary scientific account of evolution, ecology, and environment.

What is Daoism?

Daoism (Taoism) has existed as (1) an intellectual alternative to which Confucian literati from time to time subscribed (literati Daoism); (2) a mystical philosophy focussed on attaining unity with the Dao; (3) a potent force in contemporary Western “spirituality” and pop culture (e.g. *The Tao of Pooh* or Yoda in the *Star Wars* series); and (4) a religious tradition, dated to 142 C.E. when Zhang Daoling 张道陵 established the Way of Orthodox Unity 正一道 on Mt. Heming 鹤鸣山 (near present-day Chengdu). It exists today in two main branches, the Way of the Celestial Masters 天师道 (the successor to the original Way of Orthodox Unity) and the Way of Complete Perfection 全真道, a monastic tradition established by Wang Chongyang 王重阳 (1112-1170).

All these forms of Daoism take as their focus the Dao (Tao, Way), which can be understood as the wellspring of cosmic creativity for a world of constant transformation. This Dao is experienced by human beings in terms of the relationship between the vital force 气 within their bodies and within the landscape.

The task of human beings is understood as (1) spontaneous (non-)action 无为; (2) the cultivation of the Dao 修道; (3) the unity of heaven/nature and human beings 天人合一; (4) and the attainment of immortality or transcendence 成仙.

What is Nature?

We can make four basic points about the Daoist experience of the natural world. Nature is a process of constant transforming itself; nature harbours rare and secret powers that can be appropriated by ingestion; nature is the location of sacred revelations; there is no ultimate distinction between the body and the environment; nature is an object of ethical concern.

Nature as A Process of Constant Transformation

The basic understanding of nature as constant transformation derives from the cryptic phrase in the *Daode jing*: *dao fa ziran* 道法自然 which we can interpret as “The Way takes as its model its own spontaneity.” The binome *ziran* has found its way into modern Chinese as the term for “nature.”

The consequence of this basic worldview can be seen most clearly in the famous story in the Zhuangzi of Ziyu, who in his old age, became so hunched over that his abdomen was higher than his head.

“Do you dislike it?” asked Zisi. “No, why should I?” replied Ziyu. “If my left arm should become a cock, I should be able to herald the dawn with it. If my right arm should become a sling, I should be able to shoot down a bird to broil with it. If my buttocks should become wheels, and my spirit become a horse, I should be able to ride in it—what need would I have of a chariot? I obtained life because it was my time, and I am now parting with it in accordance with Tao. Content with the coming of things in their time and living in accord with Tao, joy and sorrow touch me not. This is, according to the ancients, to be freed from bondage. Those who cannot be freed from bondage are so because they are bound by the trammels of material existence. But man has ever given way before God; why, then, should I dislike it?” (Trans. Victor Mair *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Bantam Books 1994.)

Note that this view is an argument *against* the stoic view of nature.

Nature as Ingestible Power

The alchemical tradition regarded the natural environment as containing many secret locations that were full of mystical substances that could have the effect of prolonging life and transforming the body. Nature is not “flat” or “democratic” but a hierarchy of powers, with the most hidden and secret powers as the most powerful.

During the reign of Emperor Cheng of the Han, hunters in the Zhongnan Mountains saw a person who wore no clothes, his body covered with black hair. Upon seeing this person, the hunters wanted to pursue and capture him, but the person leapt over gullies and valleys as if in flight, and so could not be overtaken. The hunters then stealthily observed where the person dwelled, surrounded and captured him, whereupon they determined that the person was a woman. Upon questioning, she said, “I was originally a woman of the Qin palace. When I heard that invaders from the east had arrived, that the King of Qin would go out and surrender, and that the palace buildings would be burned, I fled in fright into the mountains. Famished, I was on the verge of dying by starvation when an old man taught me to eat the needles and nuts of pines. At first they were bitter, but gradually I grew accustomed to them. They enabled me to feel neither hunger nor thirst; in winter I was not cold, in summer I was not hot.” Calculation showed that the woman, having been a member of the Qin King Ziyang’s harem, must be more than two hundred years old in the present time of Emperor Cheng.

The hunters took the woman back in. They offered her grain to eat. When she first smelled the stink of the grain, she vomited, and only after several days could she tolerate it. After little more than two years of this [diet], her body hair fell out; she turned old and died. Had she not been caught by men, she would have become a transcendent. (Quoted in Robert Campany, “Ingesting the Marvelous” in *Daoism and Ecology*, ed. Norman Girardot et al., Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2001).

Nature as Revelation of Sacred Texts

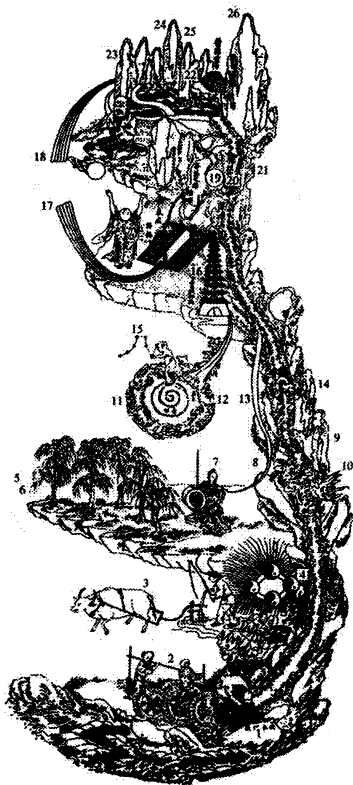
The Daoist scholar Ge Hong (287-347) explained that “all noted mountains and the Five Marchmounts [the Five Sacred Mountains] harbor books of this sort, but they are hidden in stone chambers and inaccessible places. When one who is fit to receive the Dao enters the mountain and meditates on them with utmost sincerity, the mountain spirits will respond by opening the mountain, allowing him to see

them” (The Master who Embraces Simplicity, Inner Chapters 抱朴子內篇 19/336 quoted in Robert Campany, *op. cit.*, p. 134). Mountains were thus important because they were the residences of spirits and libraries of scriptures. The biography of a Daoist saint known as Perfected Purple Yang 紫阳真人, for example, describes his progress through 24 sacred mountains, in each of which he encounters an immortal being 仙人 and receives sacred texts. Consequently, many of these mountains became the location for Daoist temples 觀 or altars 壇, or served as homes for recluses and hermits.

Nature as Landscape of the Body

In Daoist traditions in general, mountains were important in the context of the overall geography of the natural world. The earth was understood as a supportive, biological matrix that delivered water, the vital biological fluid, so as to support life. Water was created in the mountains, and distributed through the rivers. When water flowed evenly and steadily, this was conducive to life. When water flowed too much or too little, this was conducive to death. The landscape (in Chinese, literally, “mountains and lakes” 山水) stored, processed and distributed water through the network of mountains and streams. This understanding of the function of mountains within the “ecosystem” of the landscape closely paralleled the Daoist understanding of the body, in which like mountains, the various organs stored and processed vital force, which was distributed via the meridians.

The *Diagram of the Inner Passageways* 内径图 (late 19th century) and the *Diagram of Yang Ascending and Yin Descending within the Body* 体象阴阳升降图 (1227)



Nature as Object of Ethical Concern

Daoist ethical codes reveal that nature was the focus of ethical concern amongst Daoist communities. We have some insight into how, historically, the Way of the Celestial Masters movement functioned in its earliest days through a text the Celestial Masters adopted and transmitted, known as the *One Hundred and Eighty Precepts* 一百八十戒. In his study of this text, Kristofer Schipper notes that “not less

than twenty [of the precepts] are directly concerned with the preservation of the natural environment, and many others indirectly:

14. You should not burn [the vegetation] of uncultivated or cultivated fields, nor of mountains and forests.
18. You should not wantonly fell trees.
19. You should not wantonly pick herbs or flowers.
36. You should not throw poisonous substances into lakes, rivers, and seas.
47. You should not wantonly dig holes in the ground and thereby destroy the earth.
53. You should not dry up wet marshes.
79. You should not fish or hunt and thereby harm and kill living beings.
95. You should not in winter dig up hibernating animals and insects.
97. You should not wantonly climb in trees to look for nests and destroy eggs.
98. You should not use cages to trap birds and [other] animals.
100. You should not throw dirty things in wells.
101. You should not seal off pools and wells.
109. You should not light fires in the plains.
116. You should not defecate or urinate on living plants or in water that people will drink.
121. You should not wantonly or lightly take baths in rivers or seas.
125. You should not fabricate poisons and keep them in vessels.
132. You should not disturb birds and [other] animals.
134. You should not wantonly make lakes.

Kristofer Schipper, "Daoist Ecology: The Inner Transformation. A Study of the Precepts of the Early Daoist Ecclesia," in *Daoism and Ecology*, 82-3

In answer to the question why the earliest Daoist communities were concerned with the state of the natural environment, Schipper draws the conclusion that the natural environment functioned as a kind of sanctuary, in the sense of a sacred space, and in the sense of a place of refuge from the human world. There is a more fundamental point at stake here, which is evident in the language used: the precepts are directed at members of the community, and in fact we know that they were adopted as the code of practice for the heads of the Celestial Masters community, known as libationers 祭酒. The implication of the imperative "you should not" is that the libationer himself, and by extension the community as a whole, will suffer the consequences of failing to abide by the precepts.

Further Reading

Girardot, N.J., James Miller and Liu Xiaogan, eds. *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001. A wide-ranging selection of essays presented at a conference on Daoism and Ecology, held at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions in 1998.

James Miller. *Daoism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications 2003. [To be republished in 2008 as *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide*]. A basic introduction to the religion of Daoism, organized around eight thematic chapters: Identity, Way, Body, Power, Light, Alchemy, Text, Nature.

James Miller, ed. *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO 2006. Twelve essays covering the transformation of Chinese religions in the modern period. Topics include local popular religions, Buddhism, Daoism, Shamanism, Women, Christianity, Confucianism, Qigong movements, and Chinese religions in North America.

James Miller. *The Way of Highest Clarity: Nature, Vision and Revelation in Medieval Daoism*. Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press 2008 [forthcoming]. A translation and study of three texts associated with the Way of Highest Clarity, a Daoist movement that originated in 4th century China. The book focuses on the practice of meditating on gods entering the body and taking up residence in the various vital organs.