

The Supreme Goodness is Like Water

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Abstract. In China, there are mainly two philosophies that had tremendous impact on our civilization, which are Confucianism and Taoism. Taoism is the only belief system native to China, which had a grander perspective, about the relationship among the universe and human as well as human and human. The most important literature of Taoism is *Tao Te Ching*. The main doctrines of *Tao Te Ching* include: a natural state of being and Non-action. To Laozi, the way of water is completely different from the way of people with desire. As the source of life, water nourishes all living things on Earth. Water contributes to the world without regard for gain or loss. Remaining low, level, and quiet, water embraces and reflects everything under heaven. Water is invincible because it desires nothing and contends for nothing. It's soft but not weak, instead, it's full of strength. Water has three important virtues we can learn from, which is "H₂O"—humility, harmony and openness. The influence of Taoism lies in every single aspect of Chinese culture, such as traditional Chinese painting, music and Taiji (an ancient but popular Chinese self-defense art). Beyond that, Taoism has broken the boundaries of nations and attracted global attention and recognition. Of all ages, Taoist ideas have invested Chinese culture and art with a unique tone and an aesthetic beauty that emphasize inner spirit rather than outward forms.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, Taoism, water, Non-action.

1. Preface

For thousands of years, perhaps all ancient civilizations ultimately submerged in the long river of history. But this never happened in Chinese civilization. The civilization and culture, like an aged but still flourishing tree, is still vigorous after the ravages of wind and rain. But where does the vigorous life force come from?

In China, there are mainly two philosophies that had tremendous impact on our civilization, which are Confucianism and Taoism^[1]. The Confucianism focused more on the relationship between human beings, people's life-affirmation and better self-cultivation^[2]. And the Taoism had a grander perspective, about the relationship among the universe and human as well as human and human. At the same time, Taoism is the only belief system native to China^[3].

The most important literature of Taoism is *Tao Te Ching*. *Tao Te Ching* is so important for China that we can even say that Chinese civilization and the Chinese people's character would have been utterly different if the book *Tao Te Ching* had never been written. In addition, no one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, or even medicine without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book. No other Chinese classic works of such small size has had so much influence^[4]. But how exactly did it influence Chinese civilization and culture?

2. Tao Te Ching

In a Chinese wedding ceremony, bride and groom should make traditional obeisance to their parents, to each other as well as to the Heavens and the Earth. While Christians and Muslims commit themselves to each other before God at this moment, Chinese make these commitments to the Heavens and the Earth, which shows that Chinese people have a great respect to the Heavens and the Earth.

There was an old man who for the first time unveiled the law of nature and formed a cosmic view of worshipping nature, by comparing the relations between the Heavens and the Earth and men to a

chain. He said: Man imitates the Earth, the Earth imitates the Heaven, the Heaven follows the Tao (divine law), and the Tao follows the nature.

The old man, regarded by the world as the initiator of the Chinese Taoism, we called Lao Tzu (Laozi).

2.1. Lao Tzu

As a sage of Ancient Chinese time, Laozi had different roles in people's eyes: firstly, he was the father of Chinese Philosophy; secondly, he was an initiator of Taoism. His existence for us seems to fluctuate between that of a God and a man^[5].

Indeed, all founders of the world's great religions were real men, Shakyamuni, Muhammad, and Jesus Christ being three of the most notable examples. They were all defined by their followers after their death. After his death, Laozi was known as the Superior Old God.

Here, I want to make an explanation that, Taoism also has two roles: Chinese philosophy and religion. But as a religion, Taoism was created by another person called Zhang Tianshi instead of Laozi. They worshipped Laozi like Buddhists worshipped Buddha. But I believe this was far away from Laozi's doctrine, he never emphasized human in his mind. So today I interpret Taoism as a philosophy instead of religion.

According to the records, the family name of Laozi was not Lao but Li, and his personal name was Er (which means "the ear"), and he also had a further courtesy name, Dan, which in fact means "big ears". Laozi was born in the Spring and Autumn period. It is said that Laozi's father was a petty officer who provided his son with a good education. When Laozi was grown up, he followed his father to Luoyang in Henan province, which was the capital of the state of Zhou Dynasty (1046BC-770BC). In Luoyang, Laozi found employment as the keeper of the royal files, a position that allowed the young man to absorb all sorts of knowledge. One of the duties of Laozi was to keep a record of various meetings between the king and the ministers. By doing this, he could have a broadened horizon and profound understanding of the politics and society.

Noting the dynasty was slowly falling into decay, Laozi chose to leave the country for the west via Hangu Pass (located in today's Lingbao city, which is 190km from Xi'an). Yin Xi, the guard of Hangu Pass, saw the purple air coming from the east (a prediction that a sage appears). Laozi riding a black ox soon showed up as expected. At the request of Yin Xi, Laozi wrote the Tao Te Ching there before continuing his journey. The attribution of Tao Te Ching let Laozi to be the founder of Taoism.

2.2. Tao Te Ching

Tao Te Ching, consists of just over 5000 Chinese characters. Its 81 chapters are divided into two parts, Tao (the Way) and Te (Virtue). Short it is, the book plays a tremendous role in the development of Chinese culture. It became the basis of Taoism, the philosophy parallel to Confucianism in ancient China. It has also exerted a direct impact on the characteristics, trends of thought and aesthetic sensibilities of the Chinese nation^[6].

2.2.1. What is Tao?

The Tao (or the Way) is the cardinal concept in the philosophy of Lao Tzu, the concept of Tao lies at every heart of Laozi's doctrines, that is to say, all conclusions derive from the idea of Tao, and all finally are deduced to the idea of Tao^[7].

Tao, or Way, its original meaning is "a road or path people walk upon", the Tao of Laozi is a sublimation and extension of that meaning. It's really hard to explain what exactly Tao is, because it contains such abundant meanings.

2.2.2. The main doctrine of Tao Te Ching:

1) Naturalness

Naturalness is an important concept of Lao Tzu's philosophy. It refers to a natural state of being, an attitude of following the way of nature.

Lao Tzu emphasized that everything in the world has its own way of being and development: bird fly in the sky, fish swim in the water, flowers bloom and flowers fall. All these phenomena occur naturally without following any human will, and humans should not try to change anything natural. Lao Tzu admonish people to give up on any desire to control the world. Following the way of nature is the way to resolving conflicts between humans and the world.

2) Non-action

Another important concept of Lao Tzu's philosophy. It is the guarantee of Naturalness.

Act through non-action, by which he didn't mean one should do nothing and passively wait for something to be achieved. Neither did he deny human creativity. What he meant is that human should act on the basis of naturalness., not on any attempts to interrupt the rhythm of nature. Human creativity should be in compliance with the ways of nature^[8].

The wisdom of the Tao Te Ching is so profound, it's impossible to understand all of them within one class, so today I want to share you just one piece of them, which is widely cited and believed.

2.3. The Supreme Goodness is Like Water

Water is so common and we use it every day, we drink it, we wash clothes with it, we go swimming in it...Water is the most common constituent of the planet human being live on; indeed, it is the ultimate source of all life on our planet.

Water functions as an explanatory method for many ancient philosophers as they sought to explain their views on the world. For example, gazing on a flowing spring river, Confucius observed, "The passage of time is just like the flow of water, which goes on day and night." Greek philosopher Heraclitus said,

"You cannot step twice into the same river."

Laozi held the character of water to be most virtuous. He said,

the supreme goodness is like water,

it nourishes everything but contends for nothing.

In dwelling, it stays grounded.

In being, it flows to depths.

In expression, it is honest.

In confrontation, it stays gentle.

In governance, it does not control.

In action, it aligns to timing.

It is content with its nature,

and therefore, cannot be faulted.

To Laozi, the way of water is completely different from the way of people with desire; humans tend to seek higher positions while water always flows to lower spaces. Driven by desire, humans like whatever they think is superior while despising whatever they think is inferior. Yet water always flows downward. As the source of life, water nourishes all living things on Earth. Plants, animals, humans, no life can exist without water. Water contributes to the world without regard for gain or loss. Remaining low, level, and quiet, water embraces and reflects everything under heaven. Water is invincible because it desires nothing and contends for nothing.

The basis property of water is that it's soft. It is so soft that it changes into different shapes in different vessels. Laozi regards softness as symbol of life. He explained this with a comparison between life and death: when a person is alive, his body is soft; when he dies, his body becomes hard and rigid. The same is true with plants; living plants have supple leaves and lovely flowers, while dead plants become dry and hard. Laozi uses these examples to show that the way being soft is the way to preserving life.

But the philosophy of Laozi is by no means weak. On the contrary, it is full of strength. According to Laozi, water accumulates great strength in the weakness and quietude. Its strength can break down all barriers in the world. He said, nothing in the world is weaker than water. Yet nothing is stronger than water when it comes to breaking something strong. One need only look at the mountains and

valleys can get the point: they are all carved over millennia by water's restless force. That "a constant drip can wear through a stone" is important Taoist concept. Water is the typical example of the weak winning over the strong. Actually, the way of the weak is the best way to avoid conflict.

Then does this philosophy of water means to us, in our modern lives? Today we live in a world which is so fast: when we wake up in the morning, there are several messages; and then go to work we have to attend meetings, after work we also have abundant social activities, we are so busy, and productive. But at same time we feel anxious, stressed, and feel missing something important in our life. Maybe this thing is peace which we should learn from water.

Water has three important virtues we can learn from.

The first is about Humility. If we think water flowing in the river, it is always stay low. It helps all plants grow and keeps all animals alive. It doesn't actually draw any attention to itself, nor does it need any reward or recognition. It is humble. In our life, we don't always need to pretend knowing everything. Sometimes it's perfect to say "I don't know, I want to learn more, and I need your help?" Being humble gives water its power, and it makes us the capacity to remain grounded, to be present, to learn from people around us.

The second lesson is Harmony. When faced with obstacles while flowing, water just gets around it, it doesn't get angry, or upset. So, when facing problems, water can find out a solution without force, without conflict.

The third is about openness. Water is open to change. Depending on the temperature, it can be a liquid, solid or gas. Depending on the medium it's in, it can be a teapot, a cup or a flower vase. People tend to hold their own beliefs, and afraid to change. There are many walls built by humans and that's why the discrimination and misunderstanding come from.

3. The Influence of Tao Te Ching

At the beginning, I mentioned that, Tao Te Ching is so important for China that no one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, or even medicine without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy. But how exactly did it influence Chinese civilization and culture?

3.1. Chinese painting

The influence of Taoism lies in every single aspect of Chinese culture. Take Chinese painting for example.

Traditional Chinese painting takes black and white as its principal tones. It shows the philosophy: the greatest truths are the simplest.

Chinese painting trends to use water and mountains, or plants and birds, which shows the idea of following the nature. A unique charm of Chinese painting: which are representations of reality yet they transcend reality.

3.2. Chinese traditional music

Chinese traditional music too has been significantly influenced by the Taoism. Nature is thought of as the source and the soul of Chinese folk music. This life attitude of respecting and returning to nature has a close parallel with the ideas of Laozi about nature. Thousands of masterpieces of ancient Chinese classic music such as Lofty Mountain and Gushing Cascade, Wild Geese descending on the Sandy Beach, Moonlight over the River in Spring all have in common an absolute adherence to Laozi's belief that "the Tao is just nature."

3.3. Tai Chi

We mentioned before one of the Taoism's philosophy is--What appears weak can conquer what appears strong. This idea is vividly demonstrated in the ancient Chinese art of Tai Chi. Softness is the essence of Tai Chi. Relaxation of limbs combines with slow and gentle movements creating an

extreme softness which develops into a powerful force: thus, the weak can conquer the strong. The fluid movements of the body flow gracefully like the drifting clouds and flowing of water. In the realm of a Tai Chi master, there are no others in the world but himself. The interior and exterior worlds combine, so an accomplished Tai Chi master coexists between the Heaven and the Earth^[9,10].

4. Conclusions

Of all ages, Taoist ideas have invested Chinese culture and art with a unique tone and an aesthetic beauty that emphasize inner spirit rather than outward forms.

Except great influence on Chinese culture, Tao Te Ching also had international influence, especially on politics.

After world war I, William II, the emperor of defeated Germany, signed with great emotion after reading the Tao Te Ching for the first time. "If only I have read the book earlier! Perhaps world history could have been rewritten."

The Tao Te Ching has broken the boundaries of nations and countries and attracted global attention and recognition.

2500 years have passed by, Laozi has gone. However, people know, we know, his thoughts are still with us; his soul has rooted itself deeply in the boundless space between the Heavens and the Earth; and his wisdom endures in the minds and hearts of millions of people living on the earth today.

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