

CONCEPTUAL AND COMPARATIVE FORMULATIONS OF DAOISM:  
AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN DAOISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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To the faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of XIAN LIU find  
it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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# **CONCEPTUAL AND COMPARATIVE FORMULATIONS OF DAOISM**

## **AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN DAOISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

Abstract

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There is an increasing trend in current arena of environmental ethics to see what we can borrow from non-Western traditions to remedy environmental crises and enrich environmental thought. Some Eastern-ingrained religions and doctrines have been regarded as theoretical foundations for the proliferation of ecophilosophy. The frequently invoked and so-called “non-Western traditions” encompass Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam. This paper is intended to make an explicit and concrete investigation pertaining to Daoist environmental perspectives, concluding that Daoism is capable of offering a consistent and illuminating framework concerning the attitudes for nature in three dimensions of metaphysics, axiology and practice. Moreover, this thesis also makes a comparison between Daoist and traditional Western dominant paradigms so as to acquire a more objective and comprehensive Daoist “environmental thought”. This paper argues that we cannot be obsessed with the congruence between Daoism and Ecology merely predicated upon literal meaning and conceptual translation of Daoist texts. Rather, we need to wrestle with Daoist thought from broader contexts to view the interplay between Daoism and environmental ethics.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary environmental crises, such as widespread pollution, depletion of natural resources, extinction of endangered species, and human overpopulation, have caused us to reconsider the relationship between humans and nature. There has been a trend in the spectrum of environmental philosophy, especially for those who hold non-anthropocentric and ecocentric stances, to turn to non-Western cultures and religions for the sake of the enrichment of environmental ethics, since traditional Western traditions in general, and dualism between subjectivity and objectivity in particular, are in essence ambivalent to the congenial relationship between humans and nature (Callicott, p.69, 1997).

In retrospect, the seminal paper of British ecologist Lynn White “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” is widely regarded as a fuse sparking the extensive debate concerning the comparison between Western and Eastern thoughts with regard to environmental ethics. In White’s view, the Jewish and Christian traditions in the West underscoring the transcendence of God above nature and the dominion of humans over nature has simply led to a disregard of the natural world and an ensuing destruction of its resources for the sake of human utility. By regarding nature as alien, a mere resource to be exploited, humans have so greatly harmed the Earth that they are now reaping the consequence. Humans have gradually realized that the deeper root or current

environmental crises lies at our distorted attitudes for nature, rather than the problems of science and technology. As such, White indicates that, for the amelioration of environmental problems plaguing us, we need to abandon some stereotypes ingrained in Judaism and Christianity and establish a new attitude for nature.

But White nonetheless rejected the assumption arguing that this defect of the Western tradition could be remedied by simply looking at non-Western cultural traditions, on the grounds that most of these Eastern traditions are too heterogeneous to Western culture and thus none of them could offer viable construction for the reconciliation.

What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one. The beatniks, who are the basic revolutionaries of our time, show a sound instinct in their affinity for Zen Buddhism, which conceives of the man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view. (Lynn White, Jr. 1967, p.1206)

From then on, the discussion regarding what we can extract from Eastern traditions to flesh out contemporary environmental thought sprang up. Not surprisingly, more and more scholars are convinced that an ecological wisdom could be found in the East.

Among those Eastern-embedded scenarios, Daoism has been frequently invoked as an ecologically-resonant doctrine which deserves more of our attention and might help us to institute a new impressive outlook for nature. Dubbed as “natural

partner” of ecology, Daoist rhetoric has been perceived as a doctrine capable of providing illuminating insights regarding the nature of nature and the relations between humans and nature. For example, two Australian environmental philosophers Richard Sylvan and David Bennett say, “Daoism is throughout ecologically oriented; a high level of ecological consciousness is built into it, and it provides the practical basis for a way of life whose main tenet is ‘Follow Nature’.” (Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, 148)

This seeming congruence between Daoism and ecology in some respects has promoted relevant scholars to pay more attentions to Daoist research. Though it is necessary to absorb a different metaphysic and axiology with respect to the attitudes towards nature, we need nevertheless to wrestle with Eastern perspectives from broader contexts while endeavoring to reach a “reconciliation” between Western and Eastern attitudes. If we intend to adroitly formulate what we can borrow from Eastern scenarios, like Daoism, into the construction of environmental ethics, then it is insufficient to merely delineate literal sentences from the texts or scripts of a given Eastern tradition, based on our current perception and paradigm. A couple of other factors must be taken into account.

This thesis follows above rationale to decipher Daoist environmental perspective, attempting to avoid an inappropriately simplistic demonstration of Daoist philosophy. It consists mainly of three parts. The first part addresses the conceptual formulation of Daoism by reference to three dimensions of metaphysics, axiology and

practice, encompassing a construal of key Daoist concepts, such as *dao*, *de*, *ziran*, *wuwei*, *qi* and *yin yang*. The second part acts as a critique of some deep ecologists who just investigate Daoism via literal translation. It makes the comparison between dominant Western paradigms and Daoist counterparts in order to obtain a more objective and comprehensive understanding of Daoism, presenting a more explicit demonstration of the background and mechanism of so-called Daoist “environmental thought”. This work is quite important but typically neglected by deep ecologists. The final part of this thesis discusses the interplay between Daoism and contemporary environmental ethics and the prospects of this dynamics.

In formulating Daoist perspective, this paper focuses mainly on the works of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, two major figures and the principal founders of Chinese Daoism. This thesis refers to *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi* as primary sources because of their canonical status as the core texts in both classical Daoist philosophy and Daoist religious practice. In addition, the translation of all Daoist concepts is based on more up-to-date Pinyin transliteration system other than the fading Wade-Giles system.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONCEPTUAL FORMULATION OF DAOISM

#### I Metaphysical Account

##### *Dao and De*

To make sense of the Daoist conception of nature, we should first look at the notion of *dao*, the most basic notion in Daoism.

Lao Zi, in *Dao De Jing*, presents a rich but typically amorphous representation of how nature works by reference to the function of *dao*. Its literal meaning is a ‘way’, ‘road’ or ‘principle’ to which every entity follows and nature conforms. In *Dao De Jing*, it is said:

There is a thing confusedly formed,  
Born before heaven and earth.  
Silent and void  
It stands alone and does not change,  
Goes round and does not weary.  
It is capable of being the mother of the world.  
I do not know its names  
So I style it ‘*the way*’. (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 25)

This ‘the way’ is translated from *dao*, which is the highest object of pursuit for the Daoists. In Daoism, *dao* is the origin of the cosmos from which all things originate. It is “the absolute or the Way”, and “in its personal aspect is the God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, and Lord of all things and events.” (T. Izutsu, p.91) For the Daoists, *dao* was

not the right way of life within human society, as it was for the Confucians, but the way in which the universe worked; in other words the Order of Nature, which brought all things into existence and governs their every action. In *Daode Jing*, *dao* or the way is demonstrated as, “The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures.” (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 42)

This can be interpreted as the expression that *dao* gives rise to continuity (*qi*), continuity to difference (*yin* and *yang*), difference to plurality (heaven, earth and humans), and plurality to the myriad things. In a nutshell, *dao* is pervasive in the universe and every thing depends on it to exist. “The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority.” (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 34)

Though figuring as the ultimate origin and reliance for all things to function, *dao* is not an entity, a thing, or a matter to which we can apply our cognitive capability to understand. Instead, it is invisible, inaudible, imperceptible and all-pervasive. In other words, *dao* is nameless, beyond the capacity of human comprehension and cognition, and cannot be summarized by words or any literal manifestation. We can perceive it by feeling or introspection but not by logical analysis. In this way, the nature of *Dao* is at best indeterminable insofar as human knowledge is concerned.

*The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way;  
The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.  
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;*

The named was the mother of the myriad creatures. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.1)

Also,

The way in its passage through the mouth is without flavor.

It cannot be seen,

It cannot be heard,

Yet it cannot be exhausted by use. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.35)

Since all entities comply with this overarching and nameless *dao*, then this *dao* is characteristic of totality or wholeness. The myriad things, in nature, follow *dao* to form a harmonious whole and the universe will become an integrated organism.

The second word to be articulated is *de*. The direct translation of *de* is “virtue”, which refers to *de* in most western translation versions, for example,

The way (*dao*) gives them life;

Virtue (*de*) rears them;

Things give them shape;

Circumstances bring them to maturity.

Therefore the myriad creatures all revere the way and honor virtue. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.51)

But *de*'s connotation in Daoism is quite different from the meaning of “virtue” in current ethical and moral context, and it is not tantamount to the saying “to be virtuous” or “to be moral.” Rather, the saying “*de* rears them” means that the movement and function of each thing are pushed and activated by this *de*. Daoism holds that each living form has its own disposition or rhythm to grow, develop, prosper and resist negative external forces obstructing its germination. This disposition or rhythm

distinguishes a given thing from other kinds and acts as a basic and inherent mechanism for the movement and function of a thing, which is more accurate to the meaning of *de* in Daoist rationale. As such, *de* represents the wholeness of *dao*, nourishing and energizing specific beings. Linked to current environmental ethics lexicon, *de* is synonymous to “intrinsic excellence”, “self-realization” or “self-direction”. *De* comes from *dao* and is *dao* endowed in the individual things. *De* is, then, the individualizing factor, which gives things their determinate and distinctive features or characters.

But this intrinsic excellence or self-direction does not just refer to internal characteristics independent of other things and external environment. Rather, it also implies the interaction and relatedness between a given entity and others, which is a constituting part of *de*. For example, the growth of trees and blossom of flowers are ascribed to the distinctive function and the self-realization of trees and flowers, but these developments are also ascribed to the interaction between trees, flowers and other entities of the external environment. As such, *de* involves both internal and external meanings: for internal dimension, *de* refers to intrinsic excellence, individual self-realization; for external dimension, *de* refers to interaction and relatedness among various things. Both of these dimensions deserve our attention and regard. Daoists are particularly cognizant of the fact that nothing can develop itself without interplay with the external environment. In different circumstances and contexts, each individual might manifest its *de* in different ways.

Cultivate it in your person

And its virtue (*de*) will be genuine;  
Cultivate it in the family  
And its virtue (*de*) will be more than sufficient;  
Cultivate it in the hamlet  
And its virtue (*de*) will endure;  
Cultivate it in the state  
And its virtue (*de*) will abound. (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 54)

As a matter of fact, *dao-de* might be better understood as a whole. An insightful and influential interpretation of *dao-de* is to envisage the *dao-de* as the relationship between field (*dao*) to focus (*de*). The principal representatives of this argument include Sinologists Roger T. Ames, David L. Hall and Karyn L. Lai. In this view, *dao* gives birth to the myriad things and *de* nurtures them. *Dao* is the overarching metaphysical matrix in which all things secure their existence, and *de* denotes the particular instantiation of each existing thing. *Dao* refers to totality and integrity of particulars, including relations between particulars and particulars as well as the particular and the whole. *De* refers to the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each particular, which is realized only within the context of its interdependence with others. In a word, *de* becomes “both an *individuating* concept and an *integrating* concept.” (Roger T. Ames, p128) We say it is “individuating” in the sense of particularity, uniqueness; on the other hand, we say it is “integrating” in the sense of relatedness between myriad things.

As such, Ames portrays *dao-de* as, “This, then, is the basis of the polar relationship between *dao* as field and *de* as particular focus. *Dao* is the defining conditions — the context or environment — for the particular *de*.” (Roger T. Ames,

p.132), and concludes,

Particular *de* are described, like *dao*, as *ziran*, “self-evidencing.” This means that they are self-disclosing within the conditions of their unique contexts, and cannot be explained fully by appeal to principles independent of them. Importantly, given the intrinsic relatedness and interdependence of particulars, the “self-evidencing” of any one particular requires the “self-evidencing” of its environing conditions. (Roger T. Ames, p.135)

Another scholar Karyn L. Lai shows the same stance, that is, *de* cannot be dislodged from its overarching framework *dao*, in which all entities show their distinctiveness and creativity. Each thing illustrates its particular *de* within the context of *dao*.

The interdependent relation between the self and others within the context of the whole engenders a relational and contextual concept of the self. Within such as structure, individuals can only achieve full realization in the context of their independence with other...The ontology is particularly interesting because all things are seen to embody their distinctive natures *in and through* their common origin, *dao*. (Karyn L. Lai, pp.251-253)

In Daoist view, both integrity and particularity should be taken into account: neither flippantly sacrificing the whole in favor of individuals nor unwarily sacrificing individuals for the sake of the whole is appropriate. The interest of the whole and the particular are interwoven and consistent: the good of the whole can preserve the well-being of the constituent components; in return, the good of particulars can conduce to a more harmonious integrity. They are mutually inclusive, not exclusive.

## *Qi and Yin/Yang*

Daoism holds that most things in the cosmos are in persistent motion, and all of these motions are driven by *qi*, an ancillary and instantiated form of *dao*. Pursuant to current understanding, *qi* is approximately identical to a kind of vital energy that animates the entire universe, and it is also visualized as the blood and breath of the vital force that underlies all beings. All of humans, animals and plants live on this *qi* to grow and transform. Analogous to *dao*, *qi* is also inaudible, invisible, imperceptible, all-pervasive and out of the comprehensive capability of humans. In sum, *qi* is a ubiquitous vital energy in the universe driving all transformative movements.

*Qi* is subdivided into *yin* and *yang*, two polarities whose interaction gives rise to the mutual transformations and movements permeating in the cosmos. *Yang qi* pertains to Heaven and *yin qi* pertains to Earth. As previously stated, in *Dao De Jing* chapter 42, “the way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures.” Herein one corresponds to *qi*, the very origin of all transformations and movements in the world. One, or *qi*, however, does not give concrete forms to things. Therefore, it is divided into *yin* and *yang*, corresponding to two. From the harmonious union of *yin* and *yang*, the myriad things were produced. As Zhuang Zi states, “I realize myself as a production of nature: Heaven and Earth have given me my body and appearance through my reception of the vital energies of *yin* and *yang*.” (*Zhuangzi*, 17)

*Yin/Yang* is, as it were, an important paired complementarity in Daoism — a

concept resembling two sides of a coin — to elaborate unitary and complementary features, not exclusionary and conflicting ones. Simply put, the *yin* symbolizes yielding, soft, quiescent, female, cold and dark. By contrast, *yang* signifies active, strong, dynamic, male, hot and bright. Given this complementary relation, *yin* does not transcend or dominate *yang*, nor vice versa. Instead, *yin* entails *yang* and *yang* entails *yin*. Neither can exist without referring to the other. “The myriad creatures carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the blending of the generative forces of the two.” (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 42)

In Daoism, *qi*, and *yin/yang* represent the dynamic and transformative characteristics of nature. *Qi* moves and flows in every corner of the world and is the fundamental driving force accounting for every motion and transformation of the myriad things. *Yin* and *yang*, partaking of polarity, are two elements of *qi*, giving concrete forms of the myriad things. All things in the world are in dynamic and transformative state driven by generative force of *qi* and *yin-yang*.

For instance, Daoism pays more attention to “turning back” movements permeating in the cosmos —*dao* causes a multiplicity of things to undergo a process of cyclic change. “The myriad creatures all rise together, and I watch their *return*. The teeming creatures, all *return* to their separate roots. (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 16) Zhuang Zi also says, “The principle of following one another in orderly succession, the property of moving in alteration, *turning back* when they have reached the limit, beginning *again*

when they have ended — these are inherent in things.” (*Zhuang Zi*, p. 292)

By directly observing natural phenomena and process, Daoist progenitors find that nature is in essence orderly and harmonious, and cyclic movement is ubiquitous in the world. The diurnal, monthly, and annual motions of the heavenly bodies; the incessant cycle of seasons; the fixed rhythm of dawn, morning, noon, afternoon, dusk, evening; the growth, reproduction, and death of living things, waxing and waning — all represent a cyclic coherency in nature. Daoism values these ‘turning back’ or cyclic motions and regards them as a main embodiment of nature partaking of a dynamic characteristic. “The movement of the *dao* is described as ‘turning back’. This is usually interpreted as meaning the *dao* causes all things to undergo a process of cyclic change.” (D.C. Lau, p.25)

Daoism is convinced that all entities in the world are unexceptionally made of *qi*, and humans are just a component of the world, synonymous to rivers, rocks, mountains, trees and animals with which humans are organically connected. All things are integral parts of a continuous process of cosmic transformation. Specifically speaking, all beings in the cosmos originate from the integration of two basic vital force of *yin* and *yang*. Zhou Dunyin once said, “the interaction of these two *qi* engenders and transforms the myriad things. The myriad things produce and reproduce, resulting in an unending transformation.” (Wing-tsit Chan, p. 463) Daoist scholar Wing-tsit Chan once elaborates on this dynamic and transformative worldview,

The fact that things of the world, whether rivers or mountains, plants or animals, those with or without intelligence, and those yielding blossoms or bearing fruits, provide beneficial support for all things is the result of the natural influence of the moving power of *qi*. It fills the universe. And as it completely provides for the flourish and transformation of all things, it is all the more spatially unrestricted. As it is not spatially restricted, it operates in time and proceeds with time. From morning to evening, from spring to summer, and from the present tracing back to the past, there is no time at which it does not operate, and there is no time at which it does not produce. (Wing-tsit Chan, pp. 698-99)

As with the picture of nature, Daoism holds that the world is not created by an omniscient God, but “as constituting the central features of spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself.” (Frederick W. Mote, 1971, p.17) This self-generating cosmos is consequent upon all-pervasive, incessantly flowing *qi* and embodied by polar interaction of *yin* and *yang*. This spontaneously self-generating life process not only reveals the inner connectedness and interdependence among myriad life forms, but also indicates their infinite potential for development and transformation. Daoism never abnegates the features of change, dynamism and transformation pertaining to nature. The cosmos is in a state of flux; everything changes and nothing is constant. Energy flows continually between the negative pole of *yin* and the positive pole of *yang*. “*Qi*, thus, is not illusory. On the contrary, it is a fundamental, not to say essential, feature of reality. The Dao is, as it were, the coordinated direction of diverse, multifarious natural process.” (Callicott, J. Baird, 1997, p.69)

As such, the absolute stillness or permanence is repudiated in Daoist extent as it runs counter to the transformative characteristic of nature. In this sense, Daoism might not take sides with all conservation movements, to the extent that they are antagonistic to transformation.

In short, the nature in Daoist perspective is compatible with current ecological findings — our ecosystem is complicated, diverse, dynamic and self-regulating and we need to keep its integrity, beauty and diversity. In this sense, Daoism puts forward the framework of ecosystem two thousand years ahead of modern ecology, but their contents are almost the same (Paper, pp. 8-12, 1995).

## II Axiological Account

The axiological elaboration is predicated on Daoist metaphysical conceptual formulation. As stated in previous section, Daoism applies four basic concepts, viz., *dao*, *de*, *qi* and *yin/yang*, to demonstrate the relationship between the particular and the whole, the individual and another individual, as well as humans and nature.

*De* can be visualized as an intrinsic excellence or the instinctive capability pertinent to self-direction of an individual thing. But this merit is not diametrically independent or internal; it also implies the interaction and relatedness of a thing and other things. In Daoism, the *de* of a thing would be futile without the mutual transformation and adjustment with other entities. Anything is unlikely to fulfill its growth, development

and prosperity without the interplay with other things. Human beings are without exception internally linked to *dao* as well as to other species. Thus, an axiological account is instituted as to the relationship between humans and nature. In the Daoist perspective, there is no insuperable rift between humans and nature, or humans and other species, on the grounds that everything is inherently associated with others. The *dao* is not separated from the natural world of which it is the source. Daoism stresses homogeneity and repels heterogeneity as to the dynamics between humans and nature.

As a result, Daoism prompts egalitarianism and impartiality: all things are intrinsically equal (individual *de*) and inherently related (integrating *de*); each thing has its own distinctiveness and *de*, and its *de* is realized through mutual transformation and interaction with other things. All things deserve our respect under the rule of impartiality. “But should one act from knowledge of the constant. One’s action will lead to impartiality.” (*Dao De Jing*, chap.16)

Daoism holds that every species in the world is intrinsically equivalent. It is untenable to confer more special attentions or prerogatives for humans, nor do humans possess dominion over other species. If we distinguish ourselves from other creatures, it is derived by our presumption, our feelings of self-importance. On the contrary, we should apply a kind of egalitarian axiology for all beings living in the universe in lieu of anthropocentrism. “Beings are ontologically equal because they are formed as a result of a process of self and mutual transformations. The alleged individuality and uniqueness of

beings can be determinable only in such process. Everything is related to everything else through these processes of self and mutual transformations.” (Po-Keung Ip, 1983, pp339)

As a result, humans should dissolve ego-self, whereby humans are capable of accepting *de* of non-humans and dissolve the boundaries between self and others, conforming thus to the tenets of egalitarianism and impartiality. The following is a paragraph excerpted from *Zhuang Zi* to show Daoist egalitarian thought,

Yen Hui said, “I have sat and forgotten.”

Confucius, noticeably flustered, inquired: “What do you mean by ‘sitting and forgetting?’”

“I have demolished my appendages and body, expurgated my perceptiveness and perspicacity, abandoned my physical form and repudiated wisdom to identify with the Great All,” said Yen Hui. “This I call ‘sitting and forgetting.’”  
(*Zhuang Zi*, 19/6/89)

All in all, Daoism calls for an egalitarian attitude for the myriad things intricately meshed in the cosmos, rejecting imposing any human-centered perspective on non-human lives and will not expect the myriad creatures to conform to human norms.

### **III Practical Account**

This section is used to demonstrate, in Daoist view, how we should handle the interaction between humans and nature in the practical dimension. The applicable foundation of Daoism is principally embodied by two concepts *wuwei* and *ziran*.

Ostensibly, the direct interpretation of *ziran* is nature, as stated in *Dao De Jing*,

There is a thing confusedly formed,

Born before heaven and earth.

Silent and void.

...I know not its name.

So I style it 'the way'.

...Man models himself on earth,

earth on heaven, heaven on the way, and the way on that which is naturally

(*ziran*) so. (Dao De Jing, chap.25)

The last sentence explicitly states the supremacy of naturalness as the core value of Daoist philosophy; even *dao* (the way), the highest pursuit in Daoism, follows this naturalness. We cannot, however, really understand *ziran* just from ontological perspective and thus regard it as undifferentiated from the identity of nature. Instead, it is better if we conceive of it as a process or movement.

Recalling previous statements, Daoism propounds a dynamic image of nature in which parts of the entire universe interplay and transform under the self-generating principles of *qi* and *yin-yang* polarity. This self-generating process is never driven by any external force or an omniscient God; rather, it is driven spontaneously, or just by itself. Since *dao*, *qi* and *yin yang* are all action-in-itself, then it certainly requires no additional action to act. "Yet the way is revered and virtue honored not because this is decreed by any authority but because it is *natural* for them to be treated so." (*Dao De Jing*, chap.51)

Daoism values the natural process with which human actions should comply. "To say *dao* takes no action can best be understood as *dao* taking no exogenous action to

act, since such action would be redundant.” (Po-Keung Ip, 1983, pp340) Thus, *ziran* connotation in Daoism is more of spontaneous overtones than the simple identity of nature. Accordingly, “the way on that which is naturally” signifies that it must defer to the operations of Nature — operating spontaneously in accordance with its self-so (*ziran*) feature.

On the Daoist account, following *ziran* entails us comply with the principle of *wuwei*. Historically speaking, *wuwei* is also a well-known but contentious Daoist metaphor. The *prima facie* construal of *wuwei* is “inaction” or “not act at all”, which is in accordance with Chinese literal meaning — *Wu* means “not” and *Wei* means “action” and their amalgamation naturally fashions non-action or inactivity. This construal of *wuwei* is, however, thousands of miles away from its authentic meaning in Daoist literature. Daoism does encourage humans to do something in certain contexts,

It is easy to maintain a situation while it is still secure;  
It is easy to deal with a situation before symptoms develop;  
It is easy to break a thing when it is yet brittle;  
It is easy to dissolve a thing when it is yet minute.  
Deal with a thing while it is still nothing;  
Keep a thing in order before disorder sets in. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.64)

“Deal with a thing” and “keep a thing in order” definitely overturn the allegation of “non-action” or “not act at all.” Also, non-action explanation of *wuwei* is explicitly at variance with previous statements illustrating that dynamism and transformative motions are stressed in Daoism. As a matter of fact, the interpretation of

“not acting assertively” or “acting naturally” is more consistent with the authentic meaning of *wuwei* in Daoist perspective.

*Wuwei*, not acting assertively, then, is the warrant to realize *ziran*, the spontaneous nature of the world. In this sense, *wuwei* is mainly designed to exhort humans to not impose intervention against nature, entailing us to appreciate the uniqueness and intrinsic value of every entity. Humans cannot, and ought not, meddle with nature’s process, inasmuch as there is already a greater force than us at work in the world. “There are hundreds of millions of things in this world, but Heaven and Earth never take forcible possession of them.” (*Guanyinzi*, 20) In this sense, *wuwei* points to a kind of self-restraint of human behaviors, and this self-restraint involves two layers.

The first is external restraint, which is aimed to preventing unwarranted interruptions and activities pertaining to humans so as to maintain the natural state of the world. Daoism believes that nature itself is orderly and harmonious, and the myriad things are spontaneously demonstrating their self-realization in terms of intrinsic *de* and nourishing *qi*. It is not appropriate for humans to muddle with this natural process, and our assertive behaviors are more likely to disrupt this harmony and spontaneity.

Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.  
Therefore the sage, because he does nothing, never ruins anything; and,  
because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.  
64)

As with internal restraint, it signifies that we ought to curb selfish desires, hubris,

vanity, over-ambitiousness and intense lust that typically give rise to our unnatural behaviors. Lao Zi once contends, “in therefore the sage desires not to desire, and does not value goods that are hard to come by. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.64) Daoism labels some inner mental states, like “too many desires”, “not being content” and “being covetous” as evil perversions, which somehow engender unscrupulous human intervention and infringement against nature.

The is no crime greater than having too many desires;  
There is no disaster greater than not being content;  
There is no misfortune greater than being covetous.  
Hence in being content, one will always have enough. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.46)

In short, *wuwei* does not entail quietism or passivity. Instead, it encourages humans to live in accordance with nature, or, do neither coercive nor assertive behaviors toward nature. To comply with *wuwei*, humans have to discard unnatural desires and activities in favor of nature. “The Daoist trusts that the world is already operating as it is supposed to be operating and that all human activity — no matter how well-intentioned — can only interfere with the course of nature as it is already unfolding.” (Russell Kirkland, p.288)

Overpowering desire and unrestricted intervention give rise to *youwei*, an opposite direction of *wuwei*. If our behaviors or technologies involved are of large scale, quite influential and likely to engender potential destruction or unforeseeable aftermath, then it falls under *youwei*. Absent those traits, *wuwei* could be expected. In fact, Daoism

is not squarely anti-technology. Rather, what Daoism rejects is technology that transgresses the nature of things upon which human “obsessions” are imposed.

For instance, both nuclear power and wind-pushed devices are applied to generate electricity, but the former falls under *youwei* and the latter is nonetheless *wuwei*; since the former would beget much more intervention and negative influence against nature than the latter. Daoist scholar Goodman makes a similar contrast in which nuclear electricity is *youwei*, and solar heating is *wuwei*,

Though the distinction between *yuwei* and *wuwei* is not easy to apply in every case, heating a house with nuclear fission-generated electricity is clearly a case of the former; passive solar heating an instance of the latter. (Russel Goodman, 1980, pp.79-80)

Based on generic rationales of *wuwei* and *ziran*, Daoism propounds three specific principles guiding our behaviors: (1) Compassion; in the world, sympathy, respect and deep love are part of the notion of genuine relatedness, and humans need to show compassion for other species; (2) Simplicity and frugality; extravagant, lavish lives of high-consumption definitely run counter to *ziran* and deflect from *wuwei*; (3) Modesty or humility; not to dare to be ahead of the world, not to take the lead. “The humble is the stem upon which the mighty grows; the low is the foundation upon which the high is laid.” (Waley, chap. 39) These three dimensions are explicitly demonstrated in *Dao De Jing*,

I have three treasures

Which I hold and cherish.

The first is known as *compassion*,

The second is known as *frugality*,

The third is known as not daring to *take the lead* in the empire. (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 67)

In sum, Daoism employs the concepts *ziran* and *wuwei* to underlie the conceptual formulation regarding how we should act toward nature. *Ziran* is the vivid mirror of natural reality: all entities are living in a natural and spontaneous order, entailing no externally unnecessary constraints and impositions, which is the essence of the principle *wuwei*. *Wuwei*, then, is the means to realize and warrant *ziran*, especially for the restriction of some human behaviors.

*Wuwei* and *ziran*, understood in combination, provide a coherent picture of Daoist non-assertiveness: allowing for the spontaneity of any one individual requires the other, or others, not to impose unnecessary constraints on this individual. In other words, *wuwei* expresses the methodology of *dao* which, in respecting the integrity of individuals, allows room for their spontaneous development. (Karyn L. Lai, p.257)

Pursuant to Daoist concepts of *wuwei* and *ziran*, we could find that a wealth of human movements leading to environmental crises in post-industrialized societies are at variance with *wuwei*.

#### IV Summary

After illustrating Daoist conceptual formulations through three dimensions, viz., metaphysics, axiology and practice, we can see how Daoism propounds a consistent and

illuminating framework concerning the nature of nature and the relationship between humans and nature.

In metaphysical perspective, by applying concepts of *dao*, *de*, *qi*, *yin yang*, Daoism formulates nature as a complicated, dynamic, self-regulating, harmonious and nourishing system, and humans are part of and rely on this system. Each thing is of its own *de* and distinctiveness that need others respect and concern, but the realization of each individual is meaningful only within the context of its relatedness and responsiveness to others within the whole (*dao*). As such, the contradiction between the whole and individuals is eliminated since the integrity, creativity of individuals, and the relatedness are all respected in Daoist framework.

In axiology, Daoism concludes that all objects in the world, including humans and nonhumans, are intrinsically valuable and inherently equal. It advocates that egalitarianism and impartiality should be applied as our attitude toward nature.

In practice, valuing *ziran* as a real state of our world teeming with spontaneity, Daoism comes up with *wuwei* as a paramount tenet for human practice. Specifically, it encourages the behaviors in accordance with nature and cries out against those activities stemming from imposition and coercion. Daoism pays more attention to inner transformation, i.e., controlling unnecessary desires, ambitions, pretensions, etc., which is the basic approach to avert external imposition and *youwei* behaviors. Under such rationale, a laudable life is to live with simplicity and frugality, conveying compassion

and concern to others and nature.

As above, Daoism, at least in theory, sets out a coherent conceptual formulation bridging metaphysics, axiology and practice, as to what we should do and what kind of attitude should be held toward nature. So it is not surprising that Daoism is prevailing for deep ecologists and egocentrists. For instance, deep ecologist LaChapelle say,

Now after all these years of gradual, deepening understanding of the Taoist way, I can state categorically that all these frantic last minute efforts of our western world to latch on to some “new idea” for saving the earth are unnecessary. It’s been done for us already— thousands of years ago — by the Taoists. We can drop all that frantic effort and begin following the way of Lao Zi and Chuang Zi. (LaChapelle, p.90)

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **COMPARATIVE FORMULATION OF DAOISM**

Developments in the fields of life sciences and ecology during the twentieth century have caused us to reconsider traditionally Western--entrenched pattern regarding the essence of our nature and the nexus between humans and other life forms. The emergent ecology has convincingly justified a living world in which myriads of species are more internally and complicatedly snarled than classical science had figured, and things have become what they are through a process of mutual adjustment and evolutionary co-determination. A species in general and an entity in particular cannot survive without the support and interaction of other species and entities. The viability of the entire ecosystem is contingent on the incessant energy flow and food chain through inorganic substances, producers, consumers and decomposers, though humans are located at the top of consumers.

As such, recent scientific development has begun to show us a new image of nature convergent with Daoist perspective and divergent with previous patterns embodied by, for example, dualism between human and nature and mechanical image of the world in which we dwell. Our nature, in our mind, is on the road to be more nondualistic, nonreductive, integrative, organic, holistic and relational. All of these pave the way for implementing a comparative exploration between Daoism and the traditional Western paradigms.

The forgoing section has revealed that Daoism is capable of providing a coherent and insightful framework concerning environmental thought, by reference to literal interpretation of its canonical texts. But one caveat we cannot ignore is that just literal translation of key concepts is insufficient to explicitly demonstrate the interplay between Daoism and environmental ethic. In this section, we will plumb Daoism, within the spectrum of environmental ethics, from a broader context, especially from the comparison between it and Western-ingrained paradigms, to see what the underlying distinctiveness of Daoism is contributing to environmental insight. This approach not only helps us understand Daoism more objectively and comprehensively, but also presents us a more explicit picture regarding the interplay between Daoism and environmental ethic. .

## **I Dualism and Holism**

Historically speaking, dualism is one of dominant paradigms in Western tradition. Its frequently invoked ramifications involve: form/matter, male/female, humans/nonhumans, subject/object, fact/value, theory/praxis, body/mind, and so forth. Among those dichotomies, the schism between subject/object and humans/nonhumans are believed to be at least partially responsible for current environmental degradation.

The crux of this dualism establishes an antagonism between humans and

non-human entities, whereby nature is regarded as a “dead thing” which can be arbitrarily used and manipulated by human beings. From Protagoras’s “man is the measure of all things” to Kant’s transcendental idealism, and importantly including Descartes body/mind dualism, there is an overt demarcation between human and nature as well as subject and object. Some milestone-like movements in recent history, say Renaissance Humanism, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and Deconstructive Postmodernism, drastically glorified human subjectivity and reinforced human hubris that “framed the human story apart from the larger unfolding story of the earth community.” (Charlene Spretnak, p.433) All of these stressed the ability of human beings to subjugate and manipulate nature.

Matter is seen as “dead” — as inert, passive, homogeneous stuff endowed with no inner principle of action. This version of matter receives its definitive expression in Descartes’ famous mind/body dualism, a doctrine whose ramifications saturate every aspect of our western culture. As Descartes sees it, mind and matter are distinct substances, logically mutually independent: mind can exist in the absence of matter, and matter in the absence of mind. Each depends for its existence only on a transcendent creator. (Freya Mathews, p.41)

This persistent dualism finally spawns a distorted viewpoint pervasive in human cultures: humans are independent of, superior to, and dominant over the natural environment which could be and in fact should be utilized as a kind of means for the well-being of humankind. The relationship between humans and nature is portrayed as utilitarian and instrumental. We no longer feel that nature is part of us, nor do we feel that

we are part of nature. This perverted paradigm is widely regarded as a damaging force for the relationship between humans and nature. It warrants the domination and exploitation of the natural environment by human beings, neglecting the fact that human benefits are simply linked to the good of nature. Philosopher Po-Keung Ip describes it as the conflict between subjectivity and objectivity,

On the subjective side, we find man with his feels, desires, sentiments, passions, reasons, purposes, sensations etc., all of these are regarded as needing to be satisfied, fulfilled or worthy of preserving and cultivating. On the objective side, we find the nonhuman world totally devoid of any sentience, functioning blindly according to mechanical laws. Such a machine-like world certainly cannot have any value and worth of its own except as a means to the satisfaction and fulfillment of human needs and wants. (Po-Keung Ip, 1983, p.341)

Contrary to Western dualistic paradigm, Daoism comes up with a holistic counterpart: all entities in the world, both human and nonhuman, are united in a kind of wholeness, and this wholeness is, on Daoist account, an underlying harmony which we should appreciate. Daoism believes that everything is inextricably interacted with others and nothing can exist independent of its holistic background. As Zhuang Zi says, “A mountain is high because of its individual particles. A river is large because of its individual drops. And he is a just man who regards all parts from the point of view of the whole.” (Zhuang Zi, 1980, p. 256) As with the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, Daoism underscores their natural harmony rather than dualistic clash. It pictures that every things originates from and share the supremacy of holistic *dao*, and

this holistic *dao* is beyond human understanding and not subjected to human transformation and manipulation. There is an intimate nexus between the myriad things and all things can live harmoniously based on a spontaneous state. Daoism employs “the One” to express the harmony and solidarity of the myriad things in the cosmos.

Of old, these came to be in possession of the One:  
Heaven in virtue of the One is limpid;  
Earth in virtue of the One is settled;  
Gods in virtue of the One have their potencies;  
The valley in virtue of the One is full;  
The myriad creatures in virtue of the One are alive;  
Lords and princes in virtue of the One become leaders in the empire.  
It is the One that makes these what they are. (*Dao De Jing*, chap.19)

We cannot find the dichotomy between subject and object, for the supposed gap between humans and nature simply has no place in the Daoist conception of the human-nature relationship. Subject and object, through self and mutual transformations, are metaphysically conflated and unified. The insistence on ontological and axiological equality of all beings in nature completely annihilates paradigms emphasizing the chasm between subject and object. In addition, it also grants values to nonhuman objects regardless of their utility to human beings. Daoism holds that, in essence, humans are not different from non-human entities and there is a harmony between the myriad things. As Zhuang Zi says, “Heaven and Earth and I live together, and all things and I are *one*.” (*Zhuang Zi*, chap.2)

Though appreciating the holism of nature, Daoism argues that the whole is not

more important than, or independent of its constituting individuals; rather, we can obtain a better understanding of individuals by reference to the framework of interdependence in which myriads of individuals are situated. In this sense, Daoist holism is different from so-called environmental fascism, which inappropriately compromise individual interests for the sake of the good of wholeness. Daoism intends to evoke the profound awareness of self-in-environment and of interdependence of individuals and species within the context of natural environment.

The basic spirit of Daoist culture is that “part” and “whole” are blended and mutually entailing. From the perspective of recognition, you do not divide a part out from a whole, and from the perspective of feeling, the part strives to realize the whole. (Tian, p.56)

## **II Atomistic-Mechanistic Image and Organic Image**

Another Western paradigm is to view nature as atomistic-mechanistic matter, a concomitant given previous dualistic scenarios. In pre-scientific thought, especially animism, non-human life forms are conceived of as entities with telos and spirit. Human beings existed in an intricate web of spiritual and teleological relations with the natural world. From the mechanistic point of view, however, nature is represented as particulate, reductive, material, inert, quantitative, and mechanical, comprised by matter; and matter

is insensate, dead, inanimate, rigid, which can be perceived and understood merely by scientific and mathematic algorithm. In this framework, parts and components are separable and determined by an externally imposed designer, and the function of the machine as a whole can be reduced to the sum of its several parts.

This viewpoint might date back up to Leucippus and Democritus in era of ancient Greece, who contended that all entities around us are composed of void and inseparable atoms (particles). The myriads things in the universe can be perceived as temporary associations and disengagements of the atoms in the course of their ceaseless jostling and shuffling. (G.S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, 1962) Synonymous to the dualistic pattern, atomic-technical mode was also sharpened during recent centuries. A well-known representative is well-known philosopher Rene Descartes, who argued that the world is depicted as a big machine consisting only of extended matter. It has no life and value of its own, let alone intrinsic value or inherent worth, subjected to human needs and purposes. “As if it were a machine in which there was nothing at all to consider except the figures and motions of its parts” (*Principles*, part four, §188, I, 279). Descartes proudly claimed that the aim of philosophy/science was to render humans to become the “masters and possessors” of nature. Another influential philosopher Francis Bacon, the ideological father of science, also alleged that humans should perceive knowledge as strength to subdue and transform nature in the mode of our desires and wishes.

This atomic-mechanical image mainly applies two avenues to analyze entities:

one is reductive, in the sense of all composite bodies can be reduced to their simpler constituents; another is mechanical, in the sense of all causal relations are described as motion or transformation between simpler components and this process can be reduced down up to the motions of atoms. In consequence, the world has been viewed as a multiplicity of individual objects which are logically mutually independent but bound in a web of causal ties. The atomic-mechanical tenet might be conducive to the development of science and technology but, more or less, overrides the dynamic linkage between humans and nature. Philosophers J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames succinctly encapsulate this atomistic-mechanistic paradigm as,

In sum, then, the endemic Western picture of living nature prior to its transformation by ecology might be characterized somewhat as follows. The terrestrial natural environment consists of a collection of bodies composed of molecular aggregates of atoms. A living natural body is in principle a very elaborate machine. That is, its generation, gestation, development, decay, and death could be exhaustively explained reductively and mechanically. Some of these natural machines are mysteriously inhabited by a conscious monad, a “ghost-in-the-machine.” Living natural bodies come in a wide variety of types or species, which are determined by a logico-conceptual order, and have, otherwise, no essential connection to one another. (J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, p.54)

Unlike the atomistic-mechanical image, Daoism perceives the cosmos as the unfolding of continuous spontaneity which cannot be figured out along mechanistic and reductive patterns. Rather, it views the identity of nature as an organic process, meaning that all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all

interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process. Most things are undergoing a cyclic process of birth, growth and death, driven by all-pervasive *qi* and their own *de*. Ubiquitous *qi* flows and connects all things in the world, and humans cannot survive without the interplay with external surroundings. Man is just one part of the ecosystem. The derivation of energy for movement is intrinsic as in an organism rather than extrinsic as in a machine. The organic process as a spontaneously self-generating life process implies that nature is of continuity, wholeness and dynamism.

The model of causality in Chinese philosophy is exactly contrary and converse to the mechanical-atomistic model of scientific Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries... It is the difference between the Image of Life and the Image of Machine. Insofar as life is a concrete experience of man and a machine is built from an abstract design and quantitative draft, one may also say that the Chinese model of causality is basically reflective of the concrete experience of life, history, and time, whereas the Western scientific model of causality is basically a reflection of abstract thinking and quantitative calculation. (Zhong-ying Cheng, 1976,12)

### **III Rational Order and Aesthetic Order**

Influenced by dualism and a mechanical image of nature, humans, in Western traditions, are more accustomed to using reason, rationality and logical analysis as effective ways to explain and explore the external world so as to obtain various “rules” and construct scientific theories. Most of so-called “knowledge” is attained through this avenue. Logical inference and rational analysis are frequently applied in this system. This

thought order is quite quantitative and mathematical “in the sense that the elements signaling the order are replaceable, substitutable.” (David L. Hall, p.105)

In general, the fundamental features of rational order include: a stress on the preassigned pattern of relatedness wherein unity is prior to plurality; the process of formal abstraction, moving away from the concrete particular toward the universal; a focus on “logical ties” between process in analyzing matters, like the process from premise to conclusion, or from antecedent to consequent, in which conformity and rigorousness are more important than creativity and imaginative thought. (Roger T. Ames, p. 116)

Daoist aesthetic ordering, on the other hand, illuminates the method of knowing from an exceptionally different direction, which has not yet gained enough attention from Western thinkers. The most distinctive characteristic of the aesthetic mode from rational order is that we can understand the world without the use of pattern concepts, presupposed principles, concrete regularities and uniformities, and explicit logical demonstration, which are of vital importance in a rational paradigm.

Accordingly, Daoist aesthetic order characteristics embrace: a stress on the uniqueness of the one particular in an emergent complex pattern of relatedness; enjoys the beauty, harmony and prosperity of nature consisting of the myriad individuals; advocates to use creative thinking, intuition, imagination and epiphany to perceive the beauty and aesthetic relish of nature.

As a matter of fact, Daoism is more of an aesthetic or art-like pursuit than an argument intended to give us knowledge or theory. In this sense, we should view Daoism like “artist addressing his canvas, not the scientist working off of a hypothesis.” (Roger T. Ames, p.140) Roger T. Ames, in his seminal paper “Putting the De Back into Daoism”, even coined a neologism “*ars contextualis*” to express that Daoism is impregnated with aesthetic relish. In this rationale, it focuses on the concrete rather than the abstract, the particular rather than the common. Daoism is more inclined to consider nature as an emergent regularity rather than an abstract, preexistent principle. It contends that, by spontaneity, cosmos itself is a harmonious, orderly organic process, which is not governed by any external rules and principles. Everyone is capable of feeling the beauty, harmony and complexity of nature, but we can feel it by appealing to introspection, inner epiphany, intuition or other imaginative approaches, other than those preassigned patterns, stereotyped principles, logical inferences or any scientific theories. Daoism believes that if we succeed to recognize this aesthetic relish, then we can reach a revitalized and ecstatic state of our mind and spontaneously coalesce ourselves into the wholeness of nature, whereby we understand the essence of the cosmos.

As a result, the aesthetic delight that one experiences is no longer the private sensation of the individual but the “harmonious blending of inner feelings and outer scenes.” (Yu-Kung Kao and Kang-I Sun Chang,1980) To be preoccupied with sensory perceptions and conceptual analysis in Daoism, however, is inappropriate and inelegant

since they would alienate us from the beauty of nature as well as its affinity with us.

Daoist ethics is in fact a sort of aesthetics in which we are “enjoined” to be spontaneous — that is, to act in harmony with things by deferring to the intrinsic excellences (*de*) of items encountered and by enjoying acts of deference directed toward us by virtue of the appreciation of our *de*. Such an aesthetic ethics eschews antecedent principles or norms in the same manner that a creative individual would refuse to depend upon past norms for the determination of present actions. Creativity is the spontaneous production of novelty. There can be no rules for it. (David L. Hall, p.110)

#### **IV Knowledge and No Knowledge**

Lao Zi once claimed his *Dao De Jing* as *wuzhi*, whose direct literal meaning is “no knowledge”. But it nonetheless does not mean no knowledge at all; as we are accustomed to Daoist enigmatic metaphors; rather, it is closer to “unprincipled knowing”: a mode of thought derived mainly from creative thinking and meditation, rather than analytic inference, rigid science and logical rationality. Zhuang Zi once exercises “small knowledge” and “great knowledge” to represent these two kind of knowledge, “In the Zhuang Zi an apposite distinction is made between small knowledge, which is inquisitive, partial, discriminative or merely analytic, and great knowledge, which is ‘leisurely and at ease’, comprehensive, extensive and synthetic.” (Sylvan and Bennett, p.155)

Daoism regards formal knowledge as a mass entangled with human experience, language, understanding and intelligence. This knowledge is nothing more than the extent

to which humans could understand the world based on our cognitive organs. It may, however, be far away from the true image of nature since nature itself is, in Daoist view, beyond human cognitive understanding. Daoism admonishes that humans should not be restricted by and obsessed with formal knowledge. Instead, individuals ought to be more open to intuitive knowledge so as to attain a kind of no-knowledge.

To reach this “no-knowledge”, Daoism highlights internal meditation and introspection, and imaginative thinking, rather than those rigorous logical inferences, scientific formulas and fixed principles, which are valued in our formal knowledge system. For example, Lao Zi argues that humans are capable of discerning the way of heaven by internal reflection, without observing external natural phenomena. “Without stirring abroad, one can know the whole world; without looking out of the window, one can see the way of heaven.” (*Dao De Jing*, 47). A contemporary scientist might be muddled by this expression, since we are taught from childhood that we cannot understand what the sky is without looking out of the window. This paradox cannot be unscrambled unless we realize what this “unprincipled knowledge” implied in Daoism.

Meditation is considered by Daoists as an efficacious approach to realize the essence of nature and humans. For most Daoists, a routine personal exercise denominated “meditative breathing” or *kuan* is indispensable for their everyday lives, the process rendering body free of consciousness and mind tranquil. It is the very tranquil state that evokes tacit knowledge, intuition, inspiration and epiphany, dissipating our egoistic desire

and self-interest. In a sense, *kuan* resembles a mirror, which never refuses to show anything but retains nothing afterwards. It resonates to natural things without prejudice or foresight. The Daoist tone of quiescent contemplation is expressed in this passage,

I do my utmost to attain *emptiness*;  
I hold firmly to *stillness*.  
The myriad creatures all rise together,  
And I watch their return.  
The teeming creatures,  
All return to their separate roots.  
Returning to one's roots is known as stillness.  
This is what is meant by returning to one's destiny. (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 16)

“Unprincipled knowledge” also entails creative thinking methods, such as imagination, analogy, intuition and epiphany. As a matter of fact, some cardinal Daoist concepts like “nameless *dao*”, “intrinsic *de*”, “imperceptible *qi*” and “spontaneous *ziran*” are all visualized through those creative thinking modes, other than reason and logic. As Chinese philosopher Du Weiming says, “The loss of analytical clarity is compensated by the reward of imaginative richness. The fruitful ambiguity of *qi* allows philosophers to explore realms of being which are inconceivable to people constricted by a Cartesian dichotomy.” (Du Weiming, p.69) Analogous to meditation, analogy, imagination, and intuition are also regarded as effective ways to grip the nature of nature.

This “no knowledge” scenario is predicated on Daoist assumption that human cognitive capability cannot fully make sense of the essence and complexity of nature.

Daoism perceives creative thinking, intuition and imagination as “natural thinking” stemming from the natural state of human mind. Daoism does not intend to completely jettison rationality and logic, but it nonetheless believes that creative and aesthetic thinking ways are better alternatives in that they are more consistent with the *ziran* of nature. “Only the knowledge which is intuited by oneself is true knowledge or personal knowledge which can be called Tao or great wisdom.” (Kuo, Y, p. 208) *Wuwei* renders us reach our natural state in the sense of behavior, and “no knowledge”, on the other hand, renders us reach natural state in the sense of thought. After that, one may fully realize his naturalness which is in accordance with the nature of nature.

## V Summary

This section explores Daoism from a broader context and thus further stands out distinctiveness of Daoism, given the framework of environmental ethics. Compared with several Western traditional traits, such as dualism, atomistic-mechanical image of nature, rational and logical order, and normal system of knowledge, Daoism turns into an opposite direction in shining its “environmental thought”: it regards nature as a holistic, organic, self-generating unity; it hails the beauty, harmony, and spontaneity of nature via unprincipled knowledge and creative thinking. These characteristics are conducive for us to secure a more objective panorama of Daoist perspective with respect to environmental

ethics and thus cannot be dismissed. Some basic Daoist concepts, such as *dao*, *de*, *qi*, *yin/yang*, ect., are nurtured in the context of those characteristics. In any case, Daoism may act as an alternative or complementary worldview for us to reassess the relationship between humans and nature. Roger Ames summarizes this account as,

What makes things clear in the distinctly Eastern mode of thinking, on the other hand, is often an effectively *focused image*, not a theory; an inexpressible and inimitable experience, not an argument; an evocative metaphor, not a logically demonstrated truth. The aesthetic sense of coherence more typical of Eastern philosophical reflection fosters a pluralism in Eastern philosophies that is not present in the same degree in the Western tradition. (J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, p.15)

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONCLUSION: DAOISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

The foregoing chapters elaborate on Daoist environmental perspectives in virtue of two aspects: in conceptual formulation, Daoism puts forward a consistent and heuristic environmental framework bridging metaphysical, axiological and practical arenas; the comparative part shows that, other than literal formulation, we also need to focus on some implicit but indispensable Daoist factors in dealing with the interplay between Daoism and current environmental ethics.

Following Lynn White's reflection upon Jewish and Christian cultures and taking account of the insuperable rift between human and nature in Western tradition, some scholars consequently allege that Western cultural paradigms are the root of ecological crisis and, even, they claim that these paradigms are actually irremedial. To be sure, historically speaking, Western tradition is a large system involving a rich variety of thought, and, certainly, not all of them should be considered as the causes for current environmental degradation. It is, consequently, implausible to argue that Western tradition as a kind is responsible for environmental problems. But, it is widely accepted that, at least in the academia of environmental philosophy, some ramifications of Western worldview, such as dualism between human and nature and atomistic-mechanistic image of nature, have something to do with contemporary environmental crisis. Based on this background, some scholars began to turn to Daoist light for a new illustration of life and

nature so as to salvage us from ongoing environmental mires.

For example, comparative philosopher Po-Keung Ip appreciates Daoist environmental thought as it breaks Western metaphysical barrier that separates humans from nature, and then successfully reconnects the essential link between human and nonhuman counterparts which has been misunderstood for so long. He concludes that Daoist ideas “are vitally important to the construction of a viable environmental ethic, and are, in my view, capable of providing the necessary metaphysical underpinnings upon which an environmental ethics has to rest.” (Po-Keung Ip, 1983, pp.341)

Australian philosophers Richard Sylvan and David Bennett argue that Daoism is more ecologically-oriented and coherent than Deep Ecology, and Daoism is a full-fledged theoretical and practical guide for us to redeem the environmental crisis: “Taoism is throughout ecologically oriented; a high level of ecological consciousness is built into it, and it provides the practical basis for a way of life whose main tenet is ‘Follow Nature’”. (Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, p.148)

Deep ecologist Dolores LaChapelle even ventures a more radical stance: given the impeccable Daoist environmental framework, we can abandon all other religions and paradigms and just follow Daoist approach,

Now after all these years of gradual, deepening understanding of the Taoist way, I can state categorically that all these frantic last minute efforts of our western world to latch on to some “new idea” for saving the earth are unnecessary. It’s been done for us already— thousands of years ago — by the Taoists. We can drop all that frantic effort and

begin following the way of Lao Zi and Chuang Zi. (LaChapelle, p.90)

Religious scholar Marshall is convinced that Daoism is the most profound and eloquent philosophy of nature: “Daoism provides the philosophical foundations for a genuinely ecological society and a way to resolve the ancient antagonism between humanity and nature which continues to bedevil the world.” (Marshall, Peter, p.23)

Following those arguments, we could find that Daoism is assumed to be capable of offering illuminating points for us to assimilate, as shown in the above chapters. But, on the other hand, we should be more prudent before hailing the prominence of Daoism in the framework of environmental ethics. Most scholars glorifying Daoist “environmental ideas” principally depend on literal expression and translation of Daoist canonical texts, especially *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi*. The second chapter — conceptual formulation of Daoism, is an elaboration of this mode; that is, by perusing and scrupulously translating Daoist texts, we try to attain a literal meaning of Daoism concerning its attitude on the essence of nature, the relationship between humans and nature, and what we should accordingly do. It is conducive for us to analyze Daoist thought within the framework of environmental ethics, and then describe Daoist relevant insightful points. It is the first and necessary step of the process to reconcile the East and the West.

But this account itself is insufficient to clarify the interplay between Daoism and environmental ethics. A point we should notice is that Daoism was generated and

developed over two thousand years ago. At that time, humans lived, overall speaking, in a harmonious relation with nature and other species, and there were not so severe environmental crises as we face today. Daoist progenitors were not so eagerly to intentionally put forward a theoretical basis aimed to resolving environmental crises, as what we have done in current academia of environmental ethics. As a matter of fact, Daoism was not interested in addressing concrete environmental problems, such as resource depletion, soil degradation and deforestation in ancient china. “Nor does Taoism have much to offer directly on such contemporary issues as animal liberation, species loss, urban decay, and so forth...Historic Taoism too was a product of its times, adjusted to what were seen as problems when Lao Tze was writing.” (Sylvan and Bennett, p.156)

As a result, some philosophers think that we should hold reservations about Daoism, since “nothing that deals with ecological and environmental problem in ancient Daoist texts.” (Jeffrey F. Meyer, p.219). To be sure, this contention seems somewhat implausible and radical, on the ground that Daoism, by implication, presents an insightful formulation about the picture of nature and how we should handle the relationship between humans and nature. To understand Daoist implication, however, we need to view Daoism from a broad context, not just literal interpretation.

A weakness of those deep ecologists who vehemently defend Daoism is that they merely concentrate on the literal meaning and conceptual translation of Daoist texts, detaching so-called Daoist “environmental thought” from its cultural, historical and

integral backgrounds. Apart from literal construal, we also need to plumb Daoism from a broader context to identify what it intended to say, irrespective of what we today might wish they said.

It is fortunate that this problem has recently caused academic concern. For instance, Sinologist Jordan Paper rebukes some deep ecologists in that they just rigidly translate Daoist works, but, ironically, they do not understand what the nature of Daoism is.

They provide contemporary Western interpretations of the texts, which is acceptable only if they recognized what they were doing; and, strangest of all, they celebrate an assumed antimystical, antireligious orientation in texts clearly related to both mysticism and religion in China. (Jordan Paper, p.115)

He calls their rigid construals as “romanticized translations”, with little understanding of Daoist metaphors. They fail to take account of Daoist historical and cultural context, as well as the actual applications, regarding the subject of environmental concerns. Notwithstanding the affinity between some of its ideas and ecological conclusion, Daoism conveys its “environmental thought” in the way quite different from Western science and metaphysics. Yi-Fu Tuan, a geographer, argues that if we but look at literal translations, then we are “in detachment from the questions of how — if at all — these ideas guide the course of action, or how they arise out of it.” (Yi-Fu Tuan, p.91)

Holmes Rolston is another philosopher endeavoring to make contribution in dealing with this problem. Bolstering those deep ecologists who construe Daoist

canonical texts into the realm of environmental philosophy, Rolston believes that Daoism does offer insightful points and thus helpfully promotes us to reflect our traditional paradigms and behaviors. In addition, he is confident that the infusion of Daoism would make environmental ethics academia more integral and dynamic. But, however, he warns that we need much more to do than translation and construal while contrasting the East and the West. “My own judgment is that the East needs considerable reformulation of its sources before it can preach much to the West.” (Holmes Rolston, p.189)

Herein this “considerable reformulation” corresponds to a “demythologizing” process of the East texts, since there are two languages of the East and the West: one is religion, and another is science. This demarcation is always overlooked by some deep ecologists who hail the victory of Daoist thought just by translating related texts. “Religion and science, some say, speak two different languages, and to confuse the two is to make a category mistake, something like confusing the languages of poets and lawyers.” (Holmes, p.172)

The chapter three of this thesis is an example of this reformulation process. As stated above, it is not difficult for us to feel a *prima facie* coincidence between Daoism and ecology which is stressed by deep ecology and biocentrism: both describe nature as a dynamic, cyclic and complex totality involving the myriad things through complicated interaction. Through comparative formulations, however, we could find that this coincidence comes from two quite different contexts. The key concepts *yin*, *yang* and *qi*

cannot find appropriate place in biology and physics.

This “reformulation” of Daoism may well tell us something that we cannot get from deep ecologists. Some cruxes include:

(1) Daoism enjoys envisaging nature as a holistic, spontaneous and organic integrity in which human and nature are substantively fused and no insuperable rift transpires, rather than dualistic and mechanical patterns.

(2) Daoism perceives nature itself as a beautiful, harmonious and complex body and thus is relentlessly in pursuit of this natural aesthetic relish. It is better for Westerners to understand Daoism if viewing it as an art rather than a metaphysics.

(3) Daoism intends to persuade people to conduct an internal transformation, not an external scientific theory, to improve our moral level — to purge egoist desires, self-interest, anthropocentrism and ambitions — whereby we could combine ourselves with nature to reach spontaneous harmony. Herein Daoism establishes a connection between moral standard and aesthetic pursuit: the highest moral level of humans is *zhenren*, who can completely understand the “big aesthetics” of nature and fully enjoy this harmony.

(4) Daoism stresses the modes of thought of intuition, epiphany, imagination, analogous inference, and meditation, not logical thinking and rationality. As a matter of fact, many Daoist metaphors and key concepts are spelt out via those creative thinking, which partially account for the difficulty of some Westerners to understand Daoism.

Apart from conceptual interpretation and formulation, the foregoing features of Daoism, corresponding to Rolston's "religious language", should also be taken into account in case we intend to explore the dynamics between Daoism and contemporary ecophilosophy. Those underlying Daoist traits, i.e., imaginative modes of thought, internal transformation, aesthetic pursuit, and moral standard promotion, could explicitly reveal that Daoism is operating in a context or background fairly different from Western scientific and metaphysical modes, preventing us from muddling Daoism and ecology.

Illuminating as Daoism is, some negative and confusing points cannot be ignored in our research. As shown above, Daoism does not enjoying employing rationality, logical extrapolation, and principled knowledge to analyze phenomena and events in our world. In addition, though not opposing all science or technology, Daoism might strongly discourage most current advanced technology, since those matters are highly likely to boost human hubris, egoism and consequently impose substantial and long-standing influence upon nature. "The Taoist were not totally against technology. What they rejected was technology that went against the nature of things, that involved imposition of human 'obsessions'." (Goodman, p.79) If we follow the suggestion of some deep ecologists to completely defer to Daoist way and overthrow any previous traditions, then we might be confused that how we could deal with rationality, reason, scientific knowledge and advanced technology. We are, however, very clear that we cannot completely discard rational order, scientific formulation and advanced technology. It is

undeniable that some technological inventions are quite helpful for us to resolve environmental problems. As such, there are some “anti-Daoism” philosophers arguing that Daoist texts are actually extraordinarily inimical to modern sensibilities and thus useless as a source of remedies for most modern problems. (Holmes Welch, pp.164-78) In any case, similar to *yin/yang* conversion, aesthetic order and logical order should be complementary not mutually exclusive.

In fact, some scholars, say David Hall, Roger Ames, J. Baird Callicott and Goodpaster, have set out to introduce Daoist features of creative thinking, aesthetic pursuit and moral standard promotion into current environmental ethics. This trend could respond to what Rolston depicts as “reformulation of the East”.

For example, David Hall, in his paper “On Seeking a Change of Environment”, puts forward that it is a long tradition for us to stress rational order and analysis in both ethics and science, but it is the very right time now for us to rethink the pros and cons of this overemphasis. He argues that, though not jettisoning the merit of rational analysis, we need to employ Eastern aesthetic mode of thought into our edifice of ethics. “In fact, one of the main burdens of contemporary speculative philosophy has been to search for a new language for philosophy which can accommodate aesthetic understandings.” (David L. Hall, p.106)

Similarly, Roger Ames also contends that, by learning Daoist thought, it is the appropriate time to apply ourselves to the aesthetic task of cultivating an “environmental

ethos” in the construction of environmental ethics, inspiring people to, like artists, pursue the beauty of nature.

The alternative understanding of dao as the aesthetic order of nature would not provide us with an ethic, but and “ethos”: the expression of the character or disposition of an integrated natural environment that conduces most fully to the expression of the integrity of its constituent particulars. (Roger T. Ames, p.135)

All in all, this thesis intends to illustrate Daoism and environmental ethics based on two cardinal points. First, at least as a complementary alternative to some Western patterns, Daoism could figure as an insightful source which calls for us to reconsider the our theory and practice, resulting, for instance, in a less anthropocentric rationale and in a more sensitive way to value nature. Second, in handling the interplay between Daoism and environmental ethics, it is not enough whatsoever just interpreting Daoist literal concepts, sentences and expressions based on our current context to assertively conclude what we can borrow from Daoism with respect to environmental ethics construction. We cannot neglect the fact that Daoism is embedded and developed in the soil quite different from Western counterpart. Some distinctive characteristics of Daoism, such as holistic framework, modes of thought, and aesthetic relish, should be taken into account while we are trying to bridge the gap between the East and the West. Also, Daoist model is not so much a descriptive theory, scientifically or metaphysically, about the way the universe is running, as it is a prescription regarding what we should do

and how we could escalate moral standard.

In any case, it is unlikely that Daoist thought would overthrow traditional Western paradigms and revolutionize environmental ethics, as some radical deep ecologists hoped. The prospect of the mixture of East and West in environmental ethics is more likely to be: “ideas from Eastern traditions of thought will be selectively incorporated, gradually assimilated, and eventually lose their exotic flavor.” (Eugene C. Hargrove, xx) And, Eastern modes of thought, in short, may resonate with and thus complement and enrich the concepts of nature and values in nature recently emergent in the historical dialectic of Western ideas. (J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, p.17)

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