



On the Highlights and Limits of Laozi's Tao

Junheng Sun*, Tan Gong, Xinyu Zhang

Center for Sinology, Wuhan University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China

Email address:

925293371@qq.com (Junheng Sun)

*Corresponding author

To cite this article:

Junheng Sun, Tan Gong, Xinyu Zhang. On the Highlights and Limits of Laozi's Tao. *International Journal of Philosophy*.

Vol. 11, No. 1, 2023, pp. 1-5. doi: 10.11648/j.ijp.20231101.11

Received: December 29, 2022; **Accepted:** January 19, 2023; **Published:** January 30, 2023

Abstract: The main highlights of Laozi (老子) Tao (Dao, Way, 道) philosophy are respects for nature, non-interference with nature and the equality of life. What's more, the key to health is enlightenment, which is also the simplest way of life. Laozi treated everything according to the laws of nature, advocated diversity of ecology and the spirit of equality with tolerance, which was non-anthropomorphism, against interventionism. Laozi applied the nature law to governance, environment and human being, hoped to build a beautiful homeland for mankind, emphasized the importance of the small country with less people for social well-being, and no desire, few wants and simple life for good health. On the other hand, there are mysticism and nihilism limitations in the Tao of Laozi. Tao is unspeakable knowledge and unintelligible thought, which is difficult to understand and practice. Laozi's philosophy is more adapted to the children and the elderly, at least not suitable for the ambitious young people, hardly suitable for times of progressing and enterprising society. The Tao of Laozi embodies in the relation of heaven and man, self-cultivation, health, dealing with the world, employing people, governing the army, clean government, and so on. Laozi's Taoist feelings of dealing with the world, governing without doing anything, the concept of benevolence and frugality, and the thoughts of free transcendence are still of great theoretical and practical significance, especially for world peace, ecological balance and protection, free market economy, and personal health today.

Keywords: Laozi, The Tao of Heaven and Man (天人之道), Governance Without Action, Ecological Balance, World Peace

1. Introduction

Laozi was called a "hermit gentleman" by Sima Qian (司马迁) [1]. Laozi attached great importance to natural, shaped a gentleman's ideal personality of being reclusive, detached, inactive and transcendent. He advocated that the gentleman should follow the Tao rather than the instrumentality, affirmed means and dependence, promoted subjectivity, independence and initiative. Mr. Zhang Dainian (张岱年) pointed out: "Tao is the highest category of Chinese ancient philosophy ontology, which was first put forward by Laozi" [2]. There are profound philosophy behind Laozi's view of gentleman. "I don't think this instability of moral values is the same as moral relativism. Laozi left us a moral view in his own way" [3]. Laozi's thought of being a gentleman is a brand new idea against excessive artificial affectation. His view of a gentleman is detached, elegant, romantic and far from reality, showing the unique style of Taoism. Mr. Ren Jiyu (任继愈) pointed out: "Lao Zhuang (老庄) philosophy is applicable to

people's daily life and political life. It is to take a contemptuous attitude, to regard social life as a fetter, and to regard it as a violation of simple nature" [4]. The superb wisdom of Laozi's Taoist philosophy is the most conducive to the value standard of guaranteeing social harmony. Professor Ji Xianlin (季羨林) emphasized that the key to longevity lies in "keeping healthy without any skill", advocated the "three Nos" (no exercise, no picky eating, no grumbling), and liked the transcendent realm of Xanadu, which is quite a Taoist character [5].

2. Respect Nature by Non-Interventionism

Laozi's concept of ecological nature is to respect nature, revere nature and treat nature well and act in accordance with the laws of nature. It is non-interventionism and non-anthropomorphism. Although Laozi lived in a time with under-population, no big industry and no environmental

pollution, his attitude towards nature and his understanding of the disadvantages of excessive artificial practices helped people guide, educate, restrain and control the expansion of personal interests and misbehaviors from the spirit, and his teachings were very profound and rare. Mr. Ye Haiyan (叶海烟) said, "Since Laozi was not an environmentalist, he still does not seem to be involved in some of the discussions of today's environmentalists. However, we can focus our thinking on the theory of Laozi's "Tao in everything" and the thoughts of nature, independence, equality and oneness preached by him. Then we can take all kinds of thinking beyond anthropomorphism into consideration, which will have positive significance to enlarge the vision of contemporary environmental ethics" [6].

The diversity of ecology requires the spirit of equality and tolerance. Today, the value of ecological diversity is recognized by the scientific community, and the existence and development of societies and civilizations also require diversity. The transformation from the savage to farming, from the industrial revolution to the information society, has constituted a magnificent map of civilization and wrote a stirring chapter of civilization. A single flower does not make a spring. If there is only one kind of flower in the world, it would be monotonous, no matter how beautiful it is. Both the Chinese civilization and other civilizations in the world are the fruits of human civilization... Civilizations are equal, and equality is the prerequisite for exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations. All human civilizations are equal in value and have their own strengths and weaknesses. There is no perfect civilization in the world, nor is there any civilization that is good for nothing. There is no superior or inferior civilization. Civilizations are inclusive, and such inclusiveness has given human civilizations the impetus to exchange and learn from each other. The ocean is vast because it admits all rivers. All civilizations created by human beings are the crystallization of hard work and wisdom. Every civilization is unique. No civilization in the world is perfect or without merit. Xi Jinping (习近平) advocates all achievements of civilization deserve respect and should be cherished [7].

3. Life Is Equal, and the Secret of Health Is to Conform to the Laws of Nature

The Taoist wisdom of respecting nature is very profound. Human beings are a part of nature, their physiology, material and mind are organically unified, and they all follow the laws of Tao and nature. The human body has the movement of life wave and conscious wave, which is the coupling of the cosmic field and energy, and is the activity condition of life. The evolution of the universe is the expansion of the Tao, and different modes of life and ecological civilization are the embodiment of the Tao.

Laozi's style of being a gentleman, returning to simplicity, is completely different from Confucius. Laozi was good at finding the avenue and source of the concept of gentleman,

and opposed Confucius's (儒家的) excessively complicated social norms and etiquette. The logical sequence and process of Laozi's thinking are Tao -- virtue -- benevolence -- righteousness -- propriety -- wisdom. Tao is the most fundamental and the source. Only by insisting that "heaven and earth are not benevolent", "saints are not benevolent", "renunciation of sanctity and renunciation of wisdom", "renunciation of benevolence and renunciation of righteousness", can we conform to the natural state of human society, truly cultivate the wisdom of the gentleman and benefit the society. If we put the cart before the horse and emphasize the culture of rites and music, it will backfire. This was also Laozi's main objection to Confucius. Laozi believed that if the benevolence, righteousness and rites of Confucianism were lost, the source of living water of morality would become dry and rigid. The logos inquiry of western ancient Greek philosophy leads to the same path as Laozi's path. Yang Liu (杨柳) compared the west and Laozi's natural philosophy, stressed that the exploration of Laozi's natural philosophy is helpful to promote the integration of Chinese and the West natural philosophy and provide a new way of thinking for the construction of Chinese and the west philosophical thought system [8].

Keeping healthy and nourishing our mind need to respect nature, reverence nature, care for the environment, keep green mountains and rivers, so that the natural ecology is appropriate. It is necessary to adopt the Laozi and Taoist path of respecting nature, but also to apply modern means of rule of law and governance to comprehensively manage the environment and build a beautiful homeland for mankind. This is in line with the new thinking of scientific development, and public opinion, and has won popular support. Nowadays, there are many unnatural, non-natural and anti-natural phenomena, which are abnormal or even pathological manifestations of ecology. Many of them are against the laws of nature, such as "out of season vegetables", "ripening by chemical", "hair dyeing by potion", "cosmetic surgery". There are many acts of artificial alteration of the original and real natural appearance. Some are counterproductive, self-defeating, even serious harm to health and life. It is not unhelpful to review and learn from Laozi's views on how a gentleman behaves. There are a lot of news reports on this aspect. The serious harm brought by its violation of nature, such as loss of life and money, is shocking to the eyes. We must learn a lesson from the harm, wake up, and earnestly study and reflect on the wisdom of Laozi. "Taoist philosophy and modern biological science are seemingly different systems, but their views of death, regression (the periodicity of phenomena), the complementary interaction of dichotomous systems, and man's place in the universe are strikingly similar. The knowledge of both systems is based on objective observation of natural phenomena, and the similarities arise naturally" [9].

The way to sustainable peace and development of human society is to understand the unity of nature and properly handle the relationship between nature and man. The cosmological view of the unity of man and nature, the international view of harmony among all nations, the social

view of harmony without uniformity, and the moral view of kindness among people in Chinese culture embody the wisdom of Taoism.

Laozi's philosophy of life covers nature, society and life, and freely runs in the field of thinking. He can be called the first real speculative philosopher in China. The breadth, depth, height and abstraction of his theories are universally recognized. Mr. Chen Guying (陈鼓应) said: "Laozi transformed the conception of the Heaven (天) and Destiny (命) since Yin (殷) and Zhou (周) Dynasties into the metaphysical theory of Tao, incorporated the universal life as the whole. The metaphysical system he constructed is the first breakthrough of Chinese philosophical theory" [10].

4. The Simplest Way to Live

Laozi's thought of life dialectics is extensive and profound, which is still rich in teaching. In today's world, people pursue positivism, success, affirmation, progress and prosperity, and oppose negativity, failure, negation, backwardness and decline. They still need vivid dialectical thinking of life. Laozi overturned the hierarchy of values, believing that material wealth is just a game and that failure can be turned into success. For example, manual laborers, washers, and bicyclists are more pleasurable with their lot in their communities than the council president. It is rational to suppose that some clever people will survive in war. "From a Taoist point of view, therefore, the only hope can be that all other surviving human beings will be so confirmed in their stupidity that cleverness cannot lead them astray" [11].

The contradiction of social disorder has existed since ancient times. Laozi experienced the troubled times of the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. After deep thinking, he wrote the prescription that people should understand the historical dialectics and realize the interrelationship between the impermanence of life and the security and danger. To thrive in calamity or adversity and to perish in soft living, from the "troubled times" to usher in "prosperous times".

Laozi's profound wisdom of life lies in the fact that the life of a gentleman should always return to nature, keep the truth and adhere to the single. To this end, we should first have a philosophical world view (cosmology view) of simplicity. The world is very simple, and life should proceed according to this reference. Only in this way can we do nothing and not be troubled by complexity. Mr. Lin Anwu (林安梧) pointed out: "The so-called 'original source' refers to a state before construction, from which new construction manifests. This point, I think, has the most resources in the whole Chinese cultural tradition. Those who reflect the most and have the most resources are the Taoists, namely Laozi and Zhuangzi (庄子)" [12].

Conforming to nature will dispel illness and prolong life. Laozi said that "human follows land, land follows sky, sky follows Taoism, Taoism follows nature" (人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然). If it can be effectively implemented, the benefits will be infinite. Laozi believes that nature is the

source of human life. To maintain life activities, people must follow nature and adapt to the laws of natural changes, so that life will come naturally and people will enjoy it.

The natural way that health preservation follows is the natural realm of the unity of heaven and earth. The ideal pattern of life pursued by Laozi is to integrate individuals into the whole nature, respect and conform to nature, which has become the fundamental principle of keeping healthy, nourishing the mind and keeping the spirit. Static qi leads to softness, and static is positive. Laozi believes that soft vitality is inherent, and is the most vigorous vitality of the human body. It is just like the vitality of a baby, which is full of vigor and is beneficial to the human body. It is called Yuan Qi (Original Air, 元气) by later doctors, guiding the theory of health, and evolving into the Taoist Qigong (气功) foundation of using softness to overcome hardness and using stillness to overcome movement. Laozi advocates static health, static braking, indifferent inaction, self-sufficiency, which will be the invincible medicine of immortality. The road in the course of life, is to govern without doing anything, do nothing & do everything, can look down on any fame and power, do not climb, do not take refuge in the rich and dignitary. Life should be personality independent, free, detached and unrestrained. Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) is rich in the content of the gentleman's health, which is a valuable and important reference resource for us to keep healthy today. Laozi's health thoughts are natural, light, undesired, quiet and soft, which not only have been the guiding ideology of Taoist health, but also accepted by the Chinese traditional medicine, after the experience of doctors and health care scholars continue to supplement, improve, and develop into an important school of China's unique Taoist health care method. *Tao Te Ching* is a simple and concise philosophical text with profound philosophy. Modern society should follow the philosophy of "The smallest are the best" to achieve happiness and avoid pain and annoyance. Simplicity is a panacea. Allen Carlson, a political scientist at Cornell University, believes that: "The appeal of simplicity in *Tao Te Ching* is precisely because it differs from the reader's reality and is introduced in the fetish format -- simplicity can be a pleasure precisely because it is a choice" [13].

In a word, Laozi's life wisdom is the simplest, the best. Put its conscious knowledge to use and the gains will be infinite. When discussing the characteristics of Laozi's "Tao", Mr. Chen Guying pointed out that "the metaphysical Tao gradually falls down to the level of life. As an indicator of human behavior, it becomes the way of life and the way of life of human beings" [14]. The dialectics of Laozi's presence and absence, abundance and transformation can help us to clearly understand the current situation, with stand humiliation and achieve prosperity. In the melody of modern life, especially when people are in adversity, Laozi's philosophy of life is helpful to free people from adversity, and can play a role in adjusting people's psychological balance. Laozi's famous saying, "Hug the wood, born at the end; The nine-storey platform, from the soil", has been cited by scholars around the world many times. To maintain harmony and friendship

between countries, we also need to adhere to the principle of mutual understanding. The nine-layer platform, from the tired soil, must tamp the social soil of the relationship between the two sides. The French proverb "Little by little, a bird builds a nest" coincides with Laozi "A huge tree that fills one's arms grows from a tiny seedling; a nine-storied tower rises from a heap of earth; a thousand miles journey starts with the first step" (合抱之木，生于毫末；九层之台，起于累土；千里之行，始于足下).

5. Mysticism and Nihilism

The way of Laozi gentleman has obvious tendency of mysticism. *Tao Te Ching* is always "unspeakable" knowledge, but also for a long time "unintelligible" thought. The theory of Tao of Laozi is mysterious, full of rhetoric, complicated and elusive, which seems to be knowledge far away from the horizon. It is very difficult for readers to understand and grasp. Mr. Liu Gangji (刘纲纪) pointed out: "Laozi's thought is directly connected with various ideas formed by primitive clan society, and its origin is very ancient, so it presents a mysterious color that is difficult to understand" [15]. The uncertainty and mystery of Laozi's definition of Tao, on the one hand, gave his philosophy of life an abstract universal applicability, on the other hand, indeed left a legacy of questions that remain elusive and debated. Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* begins with a clear meaning: "Tao that can be described is not universal and eternal Tao. Name that can be named is not universal and eternal Name (道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名)".

The word "Tao" is the first to bear the brunt of the mystery of Laozi's way, which is inscrutable. Laozi said that the divine law would be spoken of, but it is not the common law. Tao is the core concept in *Tao Te Ching*. However, the language and thoughts of *Tao Te Ching* are highly speculative and full of various ways of expression, such as specious, yes and no, which provide infinite space for interpretation of the classic and at the same time make *Tao Te Ching* appear mysterious. Chinese scholars mostly interpret mysticism from the perspective of rationality and irrationality, while the western scholars' discussion on whether *Tao Te Ching* is mysticism mainly revolves around whether Tao is transcendental or divine.

Laozi's mysticism is recognized by American scholars. According to the historical mysticism and the description of mysticism, Mr. Benjamin I. Schwartz, an American Sinologist, summed up the three necessary conditions for becoming mysticism. First, there must be a dimension of ultimate reality or ultimate reality which cannot be discussed in human language. Second, it is not enough to admit the existence of ultimate reality. We must believe that ultimate reality, which cannot be expressed in human language, is the source of all meaning in the human world. Thirdly, there must be an assumption that finite human beings or some finite human beings can unite with ultimate reality. Of course, mysticism has nothing to do with what ultimate reality is. It can be seen from the provisions of Schwartz for mysticism that there are

similarities and differences between mysticism, and the differences are expressed in different expressions. Zhang Juanfang (张娟芳) stated: "Schwartz rejects Needham's view that Laozi embodies scientific naturalism. Laozi wrote: 'Heaven and earth are ruthless, they treat everything as straw or dog'. Heaven and earth do not care about the suffering of people, nor do they care about the suffering of other creatures. We can say that the nature of Laozi is a kind of order. It acts naturally, without planning or thinking in advance. That's what makes it shine, that's what makes it mysterious. It should be noted that spontaneous patterns, fixed and regular procedures, cycles, rhythms, natural habits do not indicate a lack of spirit, a lack of curiosity, or a lack of mystery... Laws and rules do not exclude mystery, contrarily they embody it" [16].

The way of Laozi gentleman also has nihilism, concealment and escape tendency. Laozi's subtle words are abstract, elusive, lofty and far-fetched. In the midst of existence and absence, they are fantastic and elusive. Their guidance of life eventually falls into idle talk, silence, emptiness, escape and nihilism. Laozi is a wise choice in the social and historical background of the Spring and Autumn period when the people are destitute and the lives are ruined. A wounded man can survive better without fighting for temptations. Best life choice is to escape from the trouble area. If Laozi's philosophy is a philosophy of life more adapted to the age of children and the elderly, it is at least not suitable for the ambitious young people and middle-aged people who want to make a difference. If Laozi's philosophy is suitable for troubled times and discreet low-key situations, it is hardly suitable for times of peace, when youth is full of vigor, passion and vitality, and society is progressing and enterprising. Mr. Li Shen (李申) carefully explained the philosophical background and characteristics of Laozi, and pointed out the possible choices for believers and users of Taoist philosophy: "Laozi was the frustrated and damaged person in the social struggle at that time. His philosophy is that of the wounded. Therefore, those who are not successful, those who have suffered damage in social life, only often use the philosophy of Laozi to soothe their own traumatized mind. They tell themselves to be humble rather than competitive, and to be content rather than pursuing. They believe that contentment leads to a lingering peace of mind. Therefore, Laozi's philosophy is often despised by those who are enterprising and successful" [17].

6. Conclusion

In short, there is a very profound philosophy in Laozi's treatise on the personality of a gentleman, which still shines with wisdom and is worthy of our critical inheritance. Taoist culture is extensive and profound, which can be used for reference today. Laozi's moral thoughts, such as respect for nature, personal ideals and self-cultivation, and the concept of being human, are the precious spiritual wealth of traditional Chinese culture, which still shines with the light of truth and wisdom, and become an important source of spiritual

cultivation of China in the new era. The idea of Taoism is of great significance on the unity of nature and man, clean politics and diligent public service, frugality and self-preservation, abdicating luxury, concord, seeking common ground while reserving differences, living in harmony, keeping danger and death in mind, managing chaos in mind, and thinking of danger in times of peace. The rich philosophical thoughts, humanistic spirits, educational thoughts and moral concepts of China's fine traditional culture can provide useful enlightenment for people to understand and transform the world, can provide useful enlightenment for governance, and can also provide useful inspiration for moral development. Here, the "Tao conform to nature, man and nature in harmony", "clean politics", "thrifty, refrain from luxury", "harmonious coexistence", "safety never forgets the danger, survival never forget the death, governance never forget the chaos, in times of peace" and other aspects of the thoughts, are directly related to Laozi's gentleman ideas, worth exploring and realistic reflection. Laozi's words of "the heart of the people", "to do what is not done, to govern in order to avoid chaos", and "the highest good is like water" are often quoted by Chinese scholars, which shows the real enlightenment enlightenment value of Laozi's gentleman concept. The Tao and power of Laozi can be a metaphysics of consciousness. This can be achieved by opposing the depiction of Laozi as mysticism or cosmology and asserting his human-centered approach. The three core ideas in Laozi can be understood as the attributes of consciousness: way, return and non-action. Tao is consciousness itself, and 'Wuwei' (无为) refers to how consciousness expresses itself in action. This interpretation is consistent with the Taoist tenet of articulating a way of life that harmonizes human existence with the world. "With the Way metaphorically signifying the origin and the leading principle of the world, the Laozi's treatment of places is based on its specific understanding of the nature of the Way and the generating process of the world." [18].

Laozi stated wisdom of life and Tao theory of the combination of human beings with heaven and earth, the philosophy of nature, and the idea of viewing the world from the perspective of the world, are far superior to ecology and environmental ethics, which are undoubtedly superb wisdom.

References

- [1] Sima Qian. The Biography of Laozi and Han Fei in *Shi Ji* (Historical Records).
- [2] Zhang Dainian (2004). *Culture and Value*. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 147.
- [3] Kenneth Dorter (2014). *Indeterminacy and Moral Action in Laozi, Dao*. Vol. 13, No (1): 63.
- [4] Ren Jiyu (2010). *The Time of Heaven and Man -- Essence of Ren Jiyu's Academic Thought*. Beijing: People's Daily Publishing House, 15.
- [5] Ji Xianlin (2009). *Talks about His Health*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 436.
- [6] Ye Haiyan (1999). *Laozi's Environmental Ethics, A New Theory of Lao Zhuang's Philosophy*. Beijing: Wenjin Publishing House, 72-73.
- [7] Xi Jinping (2014). *Speech at UNESCO Headquarters*. http://news.china.com.cn/2014-03/28/content_31926251.htm
- [8] Yang Liu (2016): *Acceptance and Translation of Tao Te Ching in the Multicultural Context*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 5.
- [9] Ronnie Littlejohn (2007). Taoism: The Enduring Tradition, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 57, No. (3): 389.
- [10] Chen Guying (2006). *Nature, Harmony and Development: Proceedings of the International Symposium on Promoting Laozi Culture*, Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House. 14.
- [11] Holmes Welch (1966): *Taoism*, Boston: Beacon Press. 178.
- [12] Lin Anwu (2016), *Methodology of Humanities: An Exploration of the Source of Interpretive Existence*, Shanghai People's Publishing House. 155.
- [13] Kou Ailun (2016). The Simplicity of a Scholar -- Review of Tao Te Ching, edited by Yao Ping, *Collection of Contemporary Western Sinology Studies* (Religious History Volume), Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. 102.
- [14] Chen Guying (1984). *Commentary and Introduction of Laozi*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. 12.
- [15] Liu Gangji (1991). The effect of Lao Zi, Xiao Jiefu (editor-in-chief). *On the Culture of Taoism*, Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House. 24.
- [16] Zhang Juanfang (2003). Examples of Western Pluralistic Laozi in the 20th Century. Huang Liuzhu, Wei Quanrui, Ed. *A Study on the Culture of Zhou, Qin, Han and Tang Dynasties*, Vol. 2. Xian: Sanqin Publishing House. 154.
- [17] Li Shen (2011). *Laozi and Taoism*. Beijing: China International Broadcasting Press. 30.
- [18] Andrej Feč (2017): Place in the philosophy and biography of Laozi, *International Communication of Laozi Chinese Culture*, Vol. 4, No (1), 53-54.

Biography

Junheng Sun, Professor and director of the Center for Sinology at Wuhan University of Science and Technology, Ph.D of Peking University, Director of the Mozi Society of China, the Confucius Society of China, and Wuhan Yue Fei Culture Research Society. Mainly engaged in Ethics and Sinology. Published *Mozi Ethics*, *Jingchu Buddhist and Taoist Temples*, and *The Seven Scholars on Gentleman in Pre-Qin China*.

Tan Gong, graduate student of Wuhan University of Science and Technology, interest on Classical Philosophy.

Xinyu Zhang, graduate student of Wuhan University of Science and Technology, interest on Chinese traditional culture.