

1.

“A Peacock Southeast Flew” Reflection

“A Peacock Southeast Flew” is a narrative poem from the Han dynasty in the 5th century; to this day the author is unknown. However, it is believed to be based on a true story. Scholars believe that a contemporary author heard the ancient tale, felt deep sympathy for the couple, and wrote the poem. It is not typical of Chinese poetry at this time because it is an epic with long narrative qualities. Chinese poetry of this period was usually quite short and descriptive, with a lot of imagery. The uniqueness of this piece has led some scholars to suggest that it has some sort of connection with India. The intense, prevalent image of the regal peacock also suggests that it was influenced by traditional Indian literature at the time. However, these are just theories and the true origin of the poem will most likely remain an eternal mystery.

Sometimes referred to as “An Old Poem for Chiao Chung-ch’ing’s Wife”, the piece exemplifies classical Chinese culture in three respects. These are the prevalent themes of filial piety, social status, gender roles, and man’s connection with nature. Before one begins to understand “A Peacock Southeast Flew” one must first contemplate the properties of the peacock. The male peacock is the beautifully patterned and flamboyant bird one usually thinks of when one hears the word peacock. The female is bland and unattractive, but is still responsible for choosing her mate based on his striking colored feathers. Lastly, like any other bird, peacocks mate for life. Once a peacock couple has been separated, they might as well be dead.

The piece begins with a little foreshadowing, “A peacock southeast flew/ After five leagues it faltered.” These lines foretell of the imminent suicide at the end of the poem and it is nice poetic formulaic opening to the piece. The poem then moves on to Liu, one of the main characters, discussing

her life. She mentions how she grew up learning to make beautiful clothes and playing the lute. At 17, she married Chiao Chung-ch'ing, a government clerk. The couple was madly in love with each other, swearing that they would never be apart. Unfortunately the clerk's mother was never satisfied with Liu's works and constantly berated and criticized her. Mother was never happy with the clothes that Liu made, the speed she made them at, and the way that she acted in the household. Liu complains to her husband, saying that she would have to leave if it continued, so the clerk goes to speak to his mother in defense of Liu and their marriage. The clerk says that if his mother dismisses Liu, he will never remarry, to which his mother replies, "My son, have you no respect?/ How dare you speak in your wife's defense!" This is where we see the first example of Chinese filial piety taken to its extreme. It seems so strange to us that there was a time when a husband could not speak in his wife's defense. However, this was a major value at the time, and family always took precedence over love. The clerk does not reply, bows twice, and leaves to speak to his wife.

The clerk tells his wife that he does not want her to be dismissed, but that she must go home for a bit and he will pick her up after he is done with work. Liu grudgingly accepts this and goes home, knowing in her heart that she will probably not come back. Before she leaves she talks to mother and thanks her for all the money and silk that she was given. She also goes to her sister in law and tells her to take care of mother but also never forget her. While the couple is saying their goodbyes, we see a good example of specific gender roles and ideals in ancient China. While declaring how much they love each other, Liu says to her husband, "You must be rock firm,/ I must be a pliant reed./ The pliant reed is supple as silk,/ The firm rock will not be rolled away." These lines suggest that at this time men were required to stick to their duties and ideals. They needed to take care of their family and work hard, never being pushed around by anyone for anything. Women, on the other hand, were required to bend to the whims of others. They were expected to serve whomever held a higher status than them and not hold any personal ideals over their commands from others. Again, this seems outrageous to us in the

present because we like to promote individuality and freewill among both genders. We live in a drastically different time with very different ideas of the way people should be.

Liu then returns home to a shocked and furious family. Her mother exclaims how she raised Liu so that she could go out, please a man, and raise a family. The fact that Liu has come home with nothing brings great shame on the mother, even though Liu tried her hardest. About ten days after she got home, a matchmaker comes to Liu's home trying to set her up with a young, eloquent, and talented man. The extremes of filial piety can be seen again when Liu's mother tells her, "Go, you may answer 'yes.'" All the marriage decisions in this culture were decided by the parents. Fortunately, after Liu declares her love and promise for her husband, Liu's mother takes pity and tells the matchmaker no. She uses the excuse that Liu could not please an official so there is no way she would be able to please a gentleman's son. Soon enough, the matchmaker comes back with an offer from a very rich gentleman. Still, the mother refuses, claiming her daughter cannot break her promise to the clerk. However, Liu's brother hears of this and gets furious with her. This is where we can see the extreme importance of social status in ancient Chinese culture. Her brother says, "Why are you so unreasonable?/ First you married a government clerk,/ Later you might marry a squire./ Fortune is like heaven and earth,/ It can bring glory to your person./ Not to wed this lord now,/ What will happen in the future?" Liu's brother is saying that she must take the opportunity while it presents itself or else she could end up marrying a poor man. Again, this is strange to us because we tend to value the content of someone's character over the amount of wealth and power they have. But in ancient China social status was very important and took precedence over personality or desires.

Her brother's words finally convince Liu to marry the other man, despite her promise to the government clerk. Another example of the extremes of filial piety are found in Liu's words, "It's my place to follow my brother's wishes,/ Why would I do as I please?" Of course she should be allowed to do as

she pleases, Liu is her own person, but family and honor are held so high in this society that it makes more sense for her to marry the other man. The marriage arrangements are then made and all sorts of fancy gifts are brought in for the wedding to show off the prefect's power. Liu then begins to make her wedding dress, trying to sew through the tears and sobs. The government clerk then hears of the impending marriage and asks for time off work to go see his wife. This is when we see the most shocking example of how important social status was to this culture. When the clerk is speaking to his wife and hears of the man she is going to marry he exclaims, "Congratulations on winning such high promotion!... You may reign supreme like the sun,/ I will face Yellow Springs alone." The clerk is actually congratulating his wife on the status that she will gain from marrying this man, even though they are still madly in love with each other. If this were a western love story, the wife would refuse to marry the prefect and run away to live with her original husband. But this is a true story based on ancient Chinese culture, and so the clerk does not stop his wife and Liu does not run away with the clerk. Clearly devastated, but accepting of the situation, Liu promises her husband that they will meet in Yellow Springs and they part on the most beautiful lines in the piece, "They held hands, then went their separate ways,/ Each returning to their different gates./ For the living to make a parting unto death,/ Is more hateful than words can tell." And like two peacocks bonded to each other for all eternity, they part.

The government clerk then approaches his mother and tells her of his plan to kill himself, finally breaking away from his filial duties he exclaims, "Your son today goes to darkness,/ Leaving Mother to survive alone./ For I must carry out a most unhappy plan;/ Torment our souls no more!" His mother is devastated and says that she could get him another wife, one that is meek and beautiful, so he does not have to kill himself. The clerk just bows his head out of habit and leaves the room. After sunset that night, Liu removes her silk slippers and, "Stands up and goes toward the clear lake." The reader is supposed to interpret this as Liu drowning herself in the lake. Her death is presented so simply and

beautifully, with no unnecessary details, almost as if this is just another part of her journey. In the next stanza we see where the foreshadowing of the first two lines come in. The clerk hears of his wife's death and, "He hesitates under a garden tree,/ Hangs himself from a southeast branch." Like the peacock flying southeast and faltering in the beginning, the clerk loses track of his life's meaning and sends his soul flying southeast into Yellow Springs to join Liu.

It is in the last stanza that we encounter our last theme, man's connection with nature. The two families take pity on the dead lovers and bury them together. They plant a pine and cypress tree on their graves facing east and west, like the direction of the sun. Eventually, "Branch with branch joins to form a canopy,/ Leaf with leaf meets in wedlock." This beautiful imagery symbolizes how the ancient Chinese believed that they were deeply connected with nature, even after death. The lover's souls will forever be ingrained in those trees, entangled for all of eternity. Finally the poem ends with a warning, "Widows get out of bed and pace to and fro./ Be warned, men of the future,/ Learn this lesson and never forget!"

The "lesson" of the poem is left quite ambiguous and open-ended. It could be that men should not leave their lovers for the sake of their duties because it only ends in tragedy. Similar to Shakespeare's "Romeo & Juliet", these two lovers were forced apart by their families and ended up killing themselves because the pressure was too great. One could also interpret this lesson on a larger scale, to represent Chinese culture at the time. It could symbolize how society at this time was stuck in a battle between old values, such as filial piety and social status, and the freewill and desires of the youth. Although a Confucian-centered society is good for taking care of one's family, it can be extremely oppressive and demanding. So much so that it can viciously force true love apart, which a lot of the time can end in great tragedy. Whatever the lesson may be, "A Peacock Southeast Flew" is a beautifully enchanting tale of two lovers who could never get the chance to be together during life. Their only chance at existing together in peace was in death.

2.

Wei Jin Philosophy Essay

The Wei Jin period was a time of great disunity in ancient China. The kingdoms were constantly in battle with each other and barbarian tribes from the north were mercilessly attacking the Chinese people. The constant struggle and bloodshed was terrible, but it sparked some very deep thought and reflection from scholars of the time. Modern historians have labeled the Wei Jin period the “adolescent phase” of classical Chinese culture because old values and traditions were being questioned, which was slowly shaping the future of Chinese philosophy.

One group of poet intellectuals from this time were known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. They lived from the early to middle third century A.D and were a huge influence on the thinking of the times. One could call them the ancient Chinese equivalent of hippies because they were known for their eccentricity and detachment from the aristocratic, official life. They earned their name by constantly gathering in a bamboo grove, where they would drink wine, play music, write poetry, and discuss philosophy and politics. Like all other intellectuals of the time they were schooled in Confucianism. However, they followed the Daoist philosophy as an alternative to the rigid, shallow thinking that accompanied Confucianism. Daoism allowed the Sages to discuss and ponder metaphysical and epistemological subjects, something that Confucianism did not bother to delve into.

Perhaps one of the most notorious and prolific members of the Seven Sages was Juan Chi (210-263). He was known for some very strange habits, which reflected his general outlook on life. One of these was his famous “eye trick.” If he liked someone that he met he would show him or her the blacks of his eyes. If he met someone that he was not so fond of he would show him or her the whites of his

eyes. The second strange habit involved riding a horse-drawn carriage while drinking wine. He would not take the reins of the carriage and let the horses pull him in whatever direction they wished. After a while the horses would have nowhere else to go. Then Juan Chi would start crying because he recognized that there was no longer a path he could travel down. After lamenting over this for a while he would stop crying and head home, only to do the same thing the next day. These two odd acts reflected his general outlook on life by symbolizing how he was quite pessimistic, mournful, and critical of the stupidity and motives of the aristocracy. At the time one corrupt family ruled the royal court. He felt as though there was not much purpose to his life and struggled to find the right path to go down. He believed that life was too short, longing for some sort of liberation from the world's evils and a friend to comfort him in his sadness.

Throughout his life, Juan Chi wrote a series of 82 short, pentasyllabic poems based on his observations, frustrations, and reflections. Entitled, "Songs of my Soul," they reflect a pessimistic reflective attitude and make use of symbolic language, most likely to disguise Juan Chi's distaste for his superiors. The first entry in "Songs of my Soul" illustrates Juan Chi's loneliness. He awakes at night and begins to play his lute. He hears a "lone goose" crying in the distance, much like the lonely state of his soul. He writes, "Pacing to and fro, I wonder what my future will bring/ Anxious and alone, my poor heart is broken." This is a perfect example of the pain that Juan Chi feels.

Entry 49 is a very interesting one, but some of its meaning has been lost in translation. He writes, "My steps lead me to a junction of three roads,/ I ruefully recall the object of my thoughts;/ Could it be that I shall see him this morning?/ Verily, he would seem to appear nebulously." This passage suggests that Juan Chi is at a major crossroads in his life, unsure of where to go. The "he" that is mentioned in the stanza is the result of bad translation though, as the original text does not suggest any sort of being, let alone a male being. Perhaps it would be better translated as "it" or even as the "Dao,"

representing the “Way.” If it were translated as such, it would illustrate how Juan Chi is searching for his true purpose, but it seems to appear in a haze of mist, never truly becoming clear. The next few lines, “In the marsh a towering pine tree grows,/ I cannot hope for its span of then thousand generations” show Juan Chi’s frustration with the shortness of life. He seems to be envious of how long trees can live for, wishing that he had that much time to discover his purpose. He goes on to show his envy for “the high-flying birds,” because they are free and happy, flying above the clouds but he is, “A lonely man walking along the road;/ Tears falling, I bemoan the days gone by.” Juan Chi is obviously upset at his short-lived, wasted days spent in a life without purpose. He likes to personify his envy through his observations of nature. These reflections can also represent Chinese culture at the time, trying to find its purpose and true calling out of a world of chaos.

The next entry, number 50, is an excellent example of Juan Chi’s hatred for the elite and aptitude for symbolic language. He writes, “The lucent dew congeals into frost,/ Flowering grasses give way to mugwort and goosefoot;/ Who says that the ruler’s sagacity/ And perspicuity can long endure?” Here, Juan Chi is using the metaphor of beautiful natural occurrences, lucent dew and flowering grasses, to represent the state that the government used to be in. He seems to believe that what was once beautiful is now degrading and rotting into corruption. He goes on to ask whether the wisdom and goodness of the ruler can ever remain. Juan Chi’s solution to this is to “Mount a cloud and summon immortal Sung and Wang,/ Who will teach me how to respire and live forever!” In this passage he is suggesting that Daoism is his only way out of this corrupt, ugly world. By summoning two famous Daoist transcedents and learning how to meditate, he will be able to free himself from this mortal life and soar on the clouds for eternity.

Entry 56 truly exemplifies Juan Chi’s Daoist philosophy as well as his resentment for the elite of his time. Many great scholars during the Wei Jin period looked to Daoism as a sort of escape from the

evils of this world, wanting to accept what fate brings them. Juan Chi's writing truly emanates this mindset, "Whether one is eminent or humble depends on Fate,/ Success and failure each has its own season." The Daoist philosophy suggests that one should not try to alter the future, but merely go with the flow and follow the "Dao" or the "Way." Notice how the translator of this piece has capitalized the word "Fate." This is most likely to signify that the original piece recognized fate as something divine, worthy of being a proper noun. Perhaps a better translation would simply have been the "Way." By recognizing that success and failure comes and goes in time, Juan Chi is taking a very passive stance towards the government, recognizing that it is corrupt, but not necessarily doing anything to bring it down. It seems as though he knows that fate will eventually even things out and bring the kingdom back into harmony. The next stanza further illustrates his feelings towards his leader. He calls them "glib-tongued" and "good-for-nothing" who "cheat each other in pursuit of profit." This seems to be a common theme of politicians through history, even to this day. Once in power, there are those who will take advantage of their position to gain more profit.

Entry 59 is quite unique and interesting, as it seems that Juan Chi is talking about himself in the third person. It describes an elder living by the river who spends his day weaving, enjoying the taste of indigenous plants and living in a modest hut. Referring to the elite, he writes, "How could he ape those fine, young dandies,/ Who go riding in light chariots drawn by fine horses?/ In the morning, they are born beside the best highways,/ In the evening, they are buried at the edges of byways." He comments on how he could not possibly imitate the happy-go-lucky aristocracy who live in wealth and seek thrills. The last two lines are saying that they are born into wealth and power, but because of corruption and hatred they are soon killed and thrown in ditches. This just goes to show how much conflict there was at the time between the leaders, as they were constantly fighting and killing each other for worthless, material things. Why would Juan Chi want to live a life like that when he could spend his days living in peace, enjoying the simple things?

The next poem, entry number 60, is very interesting because Juan Chi discusses traditional Confucian values, which he was originally schooled in. These include the Six Arts (ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, numbers), being headstrong, obeying the law, living a frugal life, pushing through harsh times without complaint, having faith in the “Way”, and not accepting charity from others. However, at the end of the piece, Juan Chi has something to say about the way that Confucians of the time are. He writes, “But his criticism is so caustic/ That Lao Tzu could only heave a long sigh of despair.” These last two lines suggest that Juan Chi is disappointed in the way that Confucianism is currently being practiced. He believes that it leads to sarcastic and scathing views of other people, which only leads to resentment. It makes people rigid and cold. This goes against the whole philosophy of the Seven Sages, who were very social people. Juan Chi believed that one could practice traditional Confucian values while still remaining friendly and open-minded, as the poem suggests.

One of the last entries, number 71, is a prime example of Juan Chi’s beautiful poetic symbolic imagery combined with his pessimistic and melancholy outlook on life. The theme of this piece seems to be how short life is and how beautiful things will always die. In the first stanza he writes, “The hibiscus grows lushly on the grave mounds,/ It shines with scintillating brilliance;/ But when the bright sun plummets into the forest,/ Its petals flutter forlornly by the roadside.” Juan Chi could be referring to two things in this passage. He could be referring to the individual body, no matter how brilliant it is, it will eventually die. The hibiscus growing on grave mounds could symbolize how beautiful people have the ability to rise from what seems dead. It represents the cycle of things. However, he could also be referring to the state of the government. The royal court used to be a beautiful, honorable court, but corruption and greed have caused its glory to wither and die. The next stanza depicts insects buzzing by his windowsill, but they only last about three days until, “They die in a teeming heap of pretty wings.” The last two lines of the piece most clearly demonstrate Juan Chi’s outlook on life, “Ah! How very short is life’s allotted span!/ Still, impassioned, each being pours forth all of its energy.” In these lines it is

quite clear that he is referring to the life span of each individual. He believes that we are all given a certain amount of time on this planet, and it is too short. However, this realization inspires all living things to make the most of their life. Juan Chi is suggesting that we must try to put forth as much of our energy and effort into the world while we are here. This is typical of the Seven Sages, they were very concerned with trying to make a name for themselves and they tried to do that through their writing.

Out of the violence and corruption of the Wei Jin period came some of classical China's finest, and most existential thinking. Looking for a way out of the chaos, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove turned to the Daoist philosophy for answers to the metaphysical questions that Confucianism did not even bother to ask. Although Juan Chi was sorrowful, critical, and pessimistic, he created some beautiful, enlightening pieces. His writing contributed to the general philosophy of the time and permanently altered the future of Chinese philosophical and political thought. For this, he will always be remembered as one of the most important reflective writers of the Wei Jin period.

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Chinese Classics Core 1110

Reflection of the philosophy of Daoism in the *Zhuang Zi*

I have always considered myself to be an indirect adherent to the philosophies of Daoism because once I transcend from my perspective and reflect upon all of my self-derived axioms and personal maxims that have developed throughout my life; I have noticed many of them resonate with what is taught by Lao Zhi and Zhuang Zi. Zhuang Zi was the later student of Lao Zhi that amended the Daoist philosophy with more esoteric perspectives and although I do not share any connection to Daoist gods or Chinese folk deities, I do take Daoist philosophy to heart and practice during my life because of the similarities to my own.

The most prominent feature of the philosophy described in the *Zhuang Zi* that I take to heart and put into practice is the idea of dimensional thinking. It is where two independent beings may look upon something from two different dimensions and may also come in the form of one independent

being that may look at something from multiple dimensions. An example is a passage in the *Zhuang Zi* that reads:

“All the men regard lady Li as beautiful whereas the fish that lay eyes upon her swim to the bottom of the lake...”

Even though all the men regard lady Li as beautiful, it does not necessarily mean that lady Li actually is beautiful as the fish do not consider her so- they fear her. Lady Li is only beautiful in the eyes of those particular men. Whether or not something is attributed an adjective is dependent upon the perspective of the one making the observation and judgment. This is a direct rebuttal to the school of names that is used in Confucianism. Confucianism states that all things shall be attributed a name and thus convict to the identity of said name. I feel that such a philosophy causes an unnecessary sectary society where people are pressured to live in accordance to the expectations of others and the identity attributed to themselves by others. The idea of Daoism is that the removal of such expectations would cease conflict that arises from sectary society. This very example involving Lady Li shows how such expectations and labels are vain as one being may see one thing as something completely different as another being sees it. I have convicted myself to not intentionally labeling others or having expectations because of such philosophy. Zhuang Zi's dissociative identity is also expressed in his anecdote of transformation into a butterfly- he was not able to discern whether or not he was Zhuang Zi dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly that was dreaming of being Zhuang Zi. His anecdote may have intended to convey that all things were essentially one whole thing and therefore it was foolish to break apart the one thing into many things. All life is to be an ocean where once and a while a wave may crest into something and that something may be anything depending upon the eye of the beholder- the one making the discernment of what it is that came to being.

Zhuang Zi also applied dimensional thinking to influence one's attitude. When many uncontrollable events occur in one's life, how the events are received, whether judged good or bad by others, are rested upon the perception of the one in which they are affecting. One example is the event where Zhuang Zi's wife had died. Zhuang Zi was unphased because he saw the death of his wife as inevitable and thus did not find it wise to continue life in mourning the inevitable. This very kind of thinking enabled me to live through events in my life that others would consider crippling and morbid, whereas I was able to change my own view of situations by looking at it from a different perspective and shedding light on possible positives, for example learning from a situation, or taking into account the continued existence of my health and person. When viewing something from different perspective and changing one's attitude, the effects of the situation may be rendered ineffectual. When serious events in one's life become ineffectual, inner peace and stability may be obtained- which is one of the most important goals in Daoist philosophy.

Another example of Zhuang Zi's philosophy was presented in chapter sixteen of the *Zhuang Zi* where it is explained that things are limitless in their capacities, incessant in their occurrences, inconstant in their portions, and uncertain in their beginning and ending. This philosophy in the *Zhuang Zi*, when spoken in the dimension of human thought, is that knowledge is limitless; however the minds

of human beings are limited. The *Zhuang Zi* can be interpreted it that it is ultimately foolish to pursue the limitless with the limited. Human language and cognition is not possible to convey universal concepts that transcend man and time in general and therefore my interpretation is that it is superfluous to seek answers regarding the origin of the universe or the meaning of existence and that one should rather seek the best way to live life during one's present time. This dimension of thinking is more prevalent in the eastern world than it is the west.

Another passage comes from the fabled chapter two of the *Zhuang Zi* that gives the anecdote of the emperors "Lickety," "Split," and "Wonton." The anecdote explains how Lickety and Split saw that Wonton lacked the "holes" that would enable one to experience the senses. When Lickety and Split proceeded to bore holes into Wonton, he died. When reading this passage I view Wonton as a representation of the untouched, primordial world of the purely natural. Lickety and Split were two who were completely enveloped and immersed in the tangible, myriad world of the senses. Since Lickety and Split were unwise, upon noticing the primordial, natural world, they sought to conform it to their standard, which was myriad. I feel that Wonton did not physically die, but that Wonton died within Lickety and Split as they severed the last connection that they had to the natural, primordial world that is revered in Daoism.

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Chinese Classics CORC 1110

Reflection of Pu Song Ling's The Cricket

Pu Song Ling was a Chinese writer that created works during the early Qing Dynasty. His writings mainly were criticisms written in neoclassical prose that centered upon the shortcomings of the Ming culture and government with special regards to treatment of women, commoners, and the favoritism of government officials. His work *The Cricket* was one of those reflections of his upon the corruption of government officials holding powerful offices and did not act with propriety in regards to the office they held when it came to the treatment of commoners, which in turn violated the core philosophies of the Chinese civilization- Confucianism and Daoism.

The Cricket, despite its name, is not an allegory of sorts, but a critical reflection of the Ming government where a cricket is used as a driving prop for the telling of the story. A man by the name of Zheng Ming was appointed to a mediocre and stressful government post to which he was very apprehensive about and had no choice in the matter. This post cost him much of his resources and savings and forced him to collect a cricket levy. His failure in office had resulted in his punishment and contemplation of suicide. His fruitless search for a suitable cricket for the levy had finally produced something worthy that which his own son ruined by killing the cricket unintentionally as he was an ignorant child. A near death experience of his son and straining of his marriage made him realize his vain anger and brood over the loss of his prized cricket. A sheer stroke of luck enabled him to possess a new cricket even better than the previous and said

cricket caused him great notoriety. His famous cricket was given to the emperor and the emperor in turn granted riches to his prefectural guardian, who in turn granted riches to his magistrate, who in turn granted riches to Zheng Ming and relieved him of his mediocre post.

My interpretation of this prose is that Pu Song Ling sought to show the corruption of the Ming government and the treatment of subjects. Zheng Ming was put into his post as much as human beings were put into existence- without choice and living up to the post or facing dire consequences. This took much from the favorable view of life that Zheng Ming had and possibly alludes to the benefit of Daoist thought over Confucian thought or a reform of Confucian thought. Then there is the merciless cricket levy that causes strife amongst the peasantry as it says in the story that many were facing bankruptcy due to the tax. I feel that this shows how the emperor's petty fetish caused such a disturbance in the lives of the common people and may or not know the effects from his palace. For this reason I feel it is important, and Pu Song Ling may agree, for powerful officials to act in propriety of their offices. The need to fulfill the law by procuring the levy had become so incessant that it almost was the indirect cause of the death of Zheng Ming's son as the latter was threatened with reprisal for killing the prized cricket that was to be used for the levy. This event caused rifts in the relationships between him, his wife, and his son in a culture that was centered on the family; therefore this shows how the levy affected the very core of the Chinese culture. When the luck of Zheng Ming took a turn for the better and he was able to obtain a cricket that not only was sufficient for the levy but the best cricket found at that time, the emperor was so pleased that eventually Zheng Ming was living a life of luxury. This wealth did not directly travel down to Zheng directly, but actually moved through the bureaucratic offices of the prefecture and the

magistrate. Therefore those top government officials not only gained wealth from not doing the work of actually obtaining the crickets, but were given wealth for burdening the people with the forced collection of crickets, positively enforcing their enforcement of a law associated with the myriad of things. In addition, Zheng Ming became wealthy. This succession of success showed that not only the emperor's petty fetish was the source of the myriad law that burdened the populace, but he also possessed the power and ability to free the people of the burden by grace and his appointed government officials remained in power and remained wealthy.

Living within modern times I sometimes feel as if this is resonated in my current culture. At times I feel as if my person is just insignificant in comparison to the great power of the turning wheel of the myriad- where my person is subjected to conforming to the vain demands of the government and of society, placing burdens upon me to fulfill something that I am dissociated with. In the end I find myself constantly at the service and demands of others whilst others do not put into practice their concerns for my own well-being. Yet all of those around me possess the power to end such burdens by simply tossing away the myriad- the very things that drive stress and conflict within society; but they do not do so for there will be nothing to drive their own lives to their own satisfaction- like the Ming emperor's petty fetish for superior fighting crickets from the county of Huayin.

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Laozi – Dao De Jing

Laozi is a mythical person. He is a sage who lived in the 6th century BCE. According to the legend, Laozi stayed in his mother's womb for 62 years, which means he was already 62 years old at birth. Whether or not this legendary figure ever existed, scholars believe that he is the founder of *Dao De Jing*, a profound Chinese classical text about Taoism (or Daoism). *Dao De Jing* is written in old Chinese. It is difficult to deeply and fully interpret Laozi's teaching of Daoism, even a native Chinese person found it hard to understand the meanings in it. According to the class lecture, *Dao De Jing* has been translated into over 250 versions in English. People of different ages might understand the concept of Daoist teaching differently. There are several main points that Laozi wanted to deliver to us. As for my interpretation for my stage of the life, the main theme in Laozi's teachings is the Dao (the Way). Within the Dao, there is nothingness, the balance, and Dao itself that help the Dao becomes the essence.

In Laozi's mind, the Dao is the origin of all the creatures in this cosmos. In the old arrangement of the *Dao De Jing*, there are about 5000 words with 81 chapters. The first thirty seven chapters (1-37) are the "Dao" part. The rest of the chapters (38-81) are the "De" part. The De is a force, a minor Dao, which is within every one of us, so called the "virtue." The Dao governs all the creatures as a whole while the De rules individual creature's behavior. Therefore, this Chinese classic (Jing) of the Dao and the De is so called "the Classic of the Way and Its Power" (Ebrey).

The Dao is the correct way or path that has formed the universe. It is the starting point. The Dao is a mystery, because the Dao does not have any definite shapes or forms. We could not see the Dao through our eyes, but we feel it through our hearts. It regulates all creatures. However, according to Laozi, Dao is traceless and endless, (chapter six) “seemingly insubstantial, yet never consumed through use” (Mair). Thus, it has no limits. One example of an essential matter in our life is the oxygen. We cannot see the air; however, it is limitless; thus, we can never finish using it. Even though the Dao is shapeless, we can feel the Dao’s cycle and its existence, like we know the existence of oxygen that keeps us alive. Dao orders our behavior. In other words, although the Dao doesn’t follow any principles or rules, the Dao is the rule, which guides us to the correct path.

Imagine the Dao as a circular path that has a spirit. This spirit is mentioned in *Dao De Jing*’s chapter six, “The valley spirit never dies – it is called ‘the mysterious female’” (Mair). Here the “valley spirit” is the Dao, which Laozi used “the mysterious female” to symbolize its mystery (Xuan, 玄). For instance, human beings bear and rear offspring, and we continue the cycle like that. Laozi used “female” in particular, because he liked passive creatures. He believed passiveness is often more powerful than activeness. For example, the water is a passive creature. After years, a passive stream can wash a rough and uneven rock into a smooth surface. Moreover, he thought the activeness and passiveness should be balanced, like the Yin-Yang symbol. In the symbol, the dark area (Yin) is equal to the white area (Yang). There is white within the dark and the dark is within the white. They are in harmony. They are in equality. When the white has a stronger force, the dark still exists. It does not disappear totally. However, as the Dao continues its cycle, the dark force becomes stronger and the white becomes weaker. It symbolizes that none of the force in the world can be a strong power forever. Laozi’s point can be proved in almost

every situation. For instance, in the stock market, what goes up must go down. Another example is the business cycle. The peak is when the economy is doing really well. When it goes down, it faces a recession. Then the economy comes up again when there is recovery. And then it cycles back to the economic peak again. Nevertheless, any point on the circle (the Dao in its imaginary shape) can be a starting point that starts a new cycle.

The Dao is infinity so that the Dao is also vital. It creates life and gives life to a myriad creatures. However, it is neither active nor passive; however, it gives birth to our fatherly heaven and our motherly earth. That one big circle splits into two circles, forming the Heaven (Tian, 天) and the Earth (Di, 地). The active father (Yang) and the passive mother (Yin) joints and forms the Man (Ren, 人). This creation requires the balance of Heaven and Earth. In this world, there are nearly 50 percent females and 50 percent males. The Dao creates this harmony or balance naturally. Therefore, Laozi believes it to govern nature, and the Dao is the most natural power that exists. Laozi described this formation of the whole universe in chapter 42, “The Tao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to Three. Three gives birth to all things. All things have their backs to the female and stand facing the male. When male and female combine, all things achieve harmony” (Tao Te Ching). In the opening chapter, Laozi also said, “The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures” (Mair), he indicated that everything starts with nothing but the Dao.

Furthermore, in Laozi’s teaching, the nothingness (Wu, 无) plays a big role in Daoism. In chapter 11, Laozi said, “Thirty spokes converge on a single hub, but it is the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the cart lies. Clay is molded to make a pot, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the clay pot lies. Cut out doors and windows to make a room, but it is in the spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the room lies.

Therefore, Benefit may be derived from something, but it is in nothing that we find usefulness.” (Mair). The point is the nothingness can be useful. For instance, there is a bottle of water. The container is something that holds the water; however, the usefulness is the space within the bottle. The space is occupied by the water. Without the space, the bottle is useless. This bottle of water is in the space provided by the table; and the table is in a room. The usefulness of the room, structured by the walls, is the space in the room. In a larger image, there is a space within another space. Laozi tried to look at things from a different perspective. He looked at the nothingness or the space. This nothingness is what we actually use while the “something” (You, 有) is what we work with. The “You” and the “Wu” are also in harmony. They are complementary of each other. Without the other, the one cannot exist. Thus, nothingness and something are from the same origin, the Dao. Additionally, Laozi promoted the idea of being innocent and no desires (wu zhi, wu yu). Here, nothingness plays the role again. Innocence means not guilty, not sophisticated, and not knowledgeable. With all the “not,” Laozi again pointed out the importance of nothingness. He wanted people to know the existences of desires and knowledge; however, he thought that people should live in the simplest way of lives. Knowing the activeness and being passive is the Way. “Know masculinity, Maintain femininity, [...] Know you are innocent, Remain steadfast when insulted, [...] Know whiteness, Maintain blackness, [...] For Great carving does no cutting” (Mair). Here in chapter 28, Laozi asked people to know the Yang (active), but maintain in the Yin (passive) state. Yin is often the original form that does not have much decorating, meaning things are the prettiest in its simple form. Again, Laozi liked the passiveness and simplicity. Nothingness is zero.

Therefore, look at the number zero, “0.” It looks like a circle with a space in it. Space is within space. With space, there is emptiness. Therefore, there is emptiness within emptiness. Dao

is like that. Similar to the oxygen, Dao does not take any forms, therefore, it is empty but it is in the space, where the usefulness lies. The Dao exists everywhere, but we just could not see it. It is like how we could not see space or emptiness, but we know they exist. Within Dao, there is also Dao. “Mystery of mysteries, the gate to all wonders!” (Mair). Dao is mysterious, but it is the “gate” to everything. The Dao guides us to the right way with balance and mysterious nothingness. Therefore, according to Laozi, Dao is, indeed, simple and profound, which regulates all existences in this cosmos.

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CORC 1110

Reflective essay on Taoism

My presentation was on the Taoist philosophy as presented in the *Tao Te Ching* (translated as “the Classic of the Way and Its Power”), an ancient Chinese philosophical manuscript which is comprised of several books; each book having its own stylistic quality that is unique to itself. My analysis of the text was mainly concerned with the first two sections: the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. The former is a long philosophical poem written by a sixth century Zhou court historian by the same name; and the latter is a compendium of parables, flights of fancy and fictional stories which uses actual historical figures as protagonists to help illustrate the tenets of Taoism. Written by the mystic philosopher Zhangzi, this second book is distinct from the first, not only in the stylistic sense, but also in the sense that *Zhangzi* is much more difficult to understand than *Laozi*. Due to the esoteric and, at some instances, convoluted style that Zhangzi has written in, one must take their time while reading this piece in order to understand everything that is presented by the author.

Though there are several differences stylistically between Laozi and Zhangzi, both works share a set of common attributes philosophically. Six in total, the Taoist principles (or attributes) that I have extracted are as follows: (1) there is a metaphysical entity called “Tao” (or “the Way”) which is totally benevolent and governs all of universe; not unlike Baruch Spinoza’s pantheistic concept of God, the Way exists as both the prime mover and sustainer of all reality; (2) all humans are endowed with a piece of the Tao, called “Te”, which exists in the heart of a person; this concept is best described as a metaphysical potentiality for virtue; (3) rejection of the artificial and unnatural; that is, both authors express a distain for social conventions that bring people away from a “natural way of living” (i.e. writing, higher learning); (4) plants, animals and all the physical constituents of natural world exist in accordance with the Way, and humans do not. Both authors attribute the human disconnect with nature to our higher faculty of reason; (5) one must surrender to the spontaneity of the cosmos in order to get in touch with the Way; (6) humans must actualize their purpose in the world; that is, one must find their place in the nature and live within the boundaries of that role.

One can think of the importance of this final point by conducting a though experiment: imagine an entire species, let’s say of mammals, not acting in accordance with nature. If this were the case then all the other species that depend on this one particular group for something necessary to their survival (i.e. food or population control) would be thrown into chaos; and since it is only natural for certain all species on this planet to depend on another species for their survival, all the other species on the planet would be thrown into chaos. This could eventually lead to the break down the global ecosystem. So, here we can see a conceptual example that illustrates the importance of the sixth Taoist principle.

Being a student of western philosophy, I found myself quite intimidated and concerned when I first approached this piece of philosophical literature. The reason for this is that there is a perception of eastern philosophy that exists within the sphere of western academia that demarcates the discipline as “holistic.” In other words, eastern philosophies are extremely difficult to understand because they do not involve particular studies of things, like epistemology or metaphysics, but rather, eastern philosophy incorporates epistemological, religious, metaphysical and ethical theories in a fashion which can leave the western mind confused. Everything that is discussed by the eastern philosopher seems to be presented in a package, which can be quite difficult to unwrap. In my experience of reading this Taoist philosophy, I find it best to approach this literature with an open mind, devoid of analytical inquiries.

After I got over the initial anxiety of reading such difficult literature, I found myself enthralled by what I had in front of me. Not only are the thoughts of these two men comprehensive in philosophical scope, but they are also similar to the ideas that have been present in the philosophical tradition of the west; for instance, the ethical theories of both Epicurus and Antisthenes are, in a broad sense, Taoist. Epicurus and Antisthenes were both proponents of a philosophical position that states that humans should do their best to return to their assigned roles in nature. This matches up with the third aforementioned Taoist principle. Furthermore, both Epicurus and Antisthenes disapprove of adherence to social convention. Also, the “virtue ethics” that was developed by Aristotle in his classic the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not unlike the idea of “Te” in Taoism. Aristotle defines virtuous actions as only being performed by someone who happens to be acting in accordance with their function. Now, according to the Taoist ethical theory that is supported by the second principle that we extracted from the text, one can only act virtuously if they are acting in accordance with the Tao. This is something like the Aristotelian idea of function. I find these similarities extremely interesting and I wonder if there is any historical record of the philosophies of the east meeting with the philosophies of the west during the classical period. From my experiences a great portion of the historical literature on these subjects is somewhat ambiguous and open to speculation, but that is not to say that there isn’t still some historical evidence that can be found that would support the hypothesis.

I would have to say that the most fruitful thing about reading the *Tao Te Ching* was not the comparisons that I draw between eastern and western philosophies, but rather, the philosophizing that I found myself doing after. I happened to agree with a great portion of what was being said by both Laozi and Zhangzi, particularly the sections where they discuss the importance of being close to nature and not disturbing the natural course of things. To me, it is only obvious that the best way for us to solve a good portion of our dietary and ecological problems would be to return to nature. This is not to say that humanity should lose all of the fruits of technology, but we should be conscious of how our actions affect the environment. The reason for this is that ultimately the better we treat our environment; the better the environment will treat us. So, I can see a utility in the adoption of certain Taoist principles (i.e. “Wu Wei”). But not everything that I read did I find very useful. There seems to be a level of complacency that Taoists have; for instance, there is this concept in Taoism that ‘one must surrender to the spontaneity of the cosmos.’ In other words, no matter what happens in life one must be completely accepting of it. I find this precept dangerous; for example, a Taoist might have advocated inaction during the Holocaust. It would seem that any rational moral agent would advocate action on behalf of the oppressed, but as far as I can tell there is nothing about this is Taoism. In this respect I find Taoism to be analogous to Calvinism.

This by no means is the only problem that I have found with the Taoist philosophy. There happens to be another thing that I think most people intuit once they put a little thought behind one of the main tenets of Taoism. The third aforementioned principle of Taoism implies that one must reject “the artificial and unnatural” part of human behavior, but this raises a question: What is it about human activity that draws a principled distinction between what we might consider to be “natural” behavior and “unnatural” behavior. Take for instance the idea of a large urban city. If it happens to be the case that we must reject all artificial and unnatural things then we must reject the construction of large cities. But, since humans are from nature and anything that a natural being does is ultimately a natural behavioral trait, what is unnatural about large cities? Aren’t New York and Xi’an just products of natural animals, and therefore, natural themselves? Aren’t these large cities analogous to bird nests or spider webs? I think so and I feel that any argument to the contrary would be fallacious.

In summation, I find that there is much that east and west can learn from each other with regard to philosophy; most of this learning will be more affirmation than discovery, but I feel that this is a good thing. It shows not the differences between the intellectual spheres of east and west but the similarities. I imagine that this can be explained in terms of human experience; that is, since philosophy finds its center in human experience and

introspection; it seems evident that the experiences and thoughts of both western and eastern philosophers must have been the same because their philosophies aren't too dissimilar.