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Abstract

This note focuses upon specifying Le Guin's particular Daoist interests. It also serves as a beginning in mapping out various Daoist concepts that she renders creatively in her literary work, serving as a short primer in Daoist thought and Le Guin.

Additional Keywords

Le Guin, Ursula K.—Taoist influence; Taoism

NOTES

A NOTE ON URSULA K. LE GUIN'S DAOIST INTERESTS

ROBERT STEED

IT IS A RELATIVELY COMMON OBSERVATION to point out that Ursula K. Le Guin, in shaping her work, both fiction and non-fiction, draws among other sources upon Daoism¹ and Daoist concepts. A fair number of critical essays have explored some of the many ways in which she draws upon Daoist conceptions, but most of them have come from scholars and observers versed in various forms of literary criticism rather than those versed in the study of Daoist traditions. In this brief note I will take Daoist concepts as a basis through which we may approach Le Guin's writing, and in so doing, begin to create a kind of primer of Le Guin's Daoist interests. This exploration is not exhaustive or presented as the final word. Rather, it is my intention that it be used as a starting point for further development and additions as scholarly attention to Le Guin's work grows and deepens, expanding beyond the modes of critical literary theory.² To begin, we should note that Le Guin's Daoism is idiosyncratic. She draws from *some* strains of Daoist tradition and thought while ignoring others. It is one purpose of this note to clarify and present what Le Guin's Daoist interests and understanding are in a perhaps more precise way than what has been previously made available.

ON DEFINING DAOISM

As is the case for most religio-philosophical traditions, defining Daoism in a precise way is challenging. The range of worldviews and practices to which the label "Daoism" has been applied is broad and diverse; attempts to provide a concise definition that captures the full range of these expressions are almost equally diverse. However, we may usefully define Daoism as a broad range of practices descended from prehistorical Northeast Asian shamanic

¹ "Daoism" is the *pinyin* transliteration of 道教 (*daojiao*, "philosophical Daoism") and of 道家 (*daojia*, "religious Daoism"). "Taoism" is the older Wade-Giles transliteration. While Wade-Giles is still used, *pinyin* has become the preferred standard in academic discourse, and so will be used throughout this essay.

² For an examination of how Le Guin develops her Daoist interests and why she does so from a scholar grounded in philosophy, see Mills.

cultures, developing in new directions in historical China and applied to almost every aspect of Chinese culture from political and ethical thought to long-life cultivation techniques, ritual practices, cuisine, medicine, alchemy, architecture, burial practices, magic, and metaphysics. What unites these different expressions of Daoism is a concern to cultivate “naturalness” in all these realms, although what that means in specific contexts may also be contested.

ON THE CATEGORIES OF “PHILOSOPHICAL DAOISM” AND “RELIGIOUS DAOISM”

Historically the most common way to categorize Daoist traditions is to separate the overall tradition into two major streams, that of “Philosophical Daoism” and that of “Religious Daoism.” This dichotomy is somewhat alien to Daoist self-understanding, and comes originally from Confucian critics of Daoism, who tended to have a degree of respect for that form of Daoism grounded in the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.E.) textual traditions of the *Daode jing* 道德經³ and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Because these scholars wanted a defensible way to study these texts as Confucians, they called them “philosophical” to lend them an elevated and “worthy” status. Other branches of the Daoist stream, which from a Confucian perspective were superstitious in character, were labeled “religious” with the implication that they were not worthy of serious consideration. When Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the 16th century, for various polemical and missiological reasons they adopted the Confucian way of categorizing Daoism into their own discourse about that tradition, replicating an elitist narrative created in China that they then exported to Europe and the Americas. Until quite recently this separation of Daoism into “religious” and “philosophical” categories was the default in academic analysis. With the increasing recognition of both the divergence of this way of thinking from Daoist self-understanding and the elitist origins of the categories themselves, scholars of Daoism have stopped relying on them as fundamental categories and set them aside in favor of more nuanced modes of analysis.

Relevant to this point is the stance that Le Guin takes on the kind of Daoism in which she is not interested. She writes, “And of course the religion called Taoism⁴ is full of gods, saints, miracles, prayers, rules, methods for securing riches, power, longevity, and so forth---all the stuff that Lao Tzu⁵ says leads us away from the Way” (*Tao Te Ching: A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way* 7). And again: “The religion called Taoism has spent much imagination on ways to prolong life interminably or gain immortality [...]. [T]he Lao Tzu who wrote this had no truck with such notions” (117). In these statements a kind of irony becomes apparent. Throughout much of Chinese

³ Alternate title *Laozi* 老子, after the purported author of the text.

⁴ Le Guin retains the use of Wade-Giles transliteration.

⁵ *Pinyin* Laozi.

history, Daoism was the tradition associated with the non-mainstream, the marginal, the downtrodden, the non-elite, and those imaginative and artistic aspects of the self that elite Confucian traditions tended to either ignore or relegate to a secondary status. Le Guin dismisses precisely those forms of Daoism which frequently championed the kinds of interests she promotes in her own work. In doing so, she ends up replicating the discourse of centrality, authority, and power which many Confucians (and their later Jesuit hangers-on) used in the same dismissive way. This would seem to be at great odds with much of the thrust of both her fantasy and science fiction, and likely is partially or wholly the result of her having come of age at a time when that way of thinking of “religious” Daoism was predominant in both Chinese and Western narratives. Whatever the source of her stance on this matter, it seems counter to the spirit of much of her other work.

What Le Guin is attracted to and draws upon in shaping her work is, as she would call it, philosophical Daoism. This stream of Daoist thought is grounded in a small group of texts and the long commentarial tradition on them. These texts include the *Laozi/Daode jing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi* 列子. Le Guin draws much more explicitly and heavily from the former two than from the *Liezi*, which she rarely if ever mentions. This stream of Daoist thought provides most if not all the concepts that Le Guin employs in shaping aspects of her literary creations. The rest of this note will focus upon brief explanations of those concepts along with some examples of where it may defensibly be argued they appear in her creative work. I will divide these concepts into those which are fairly well-observed in the critical literature on Le Guin’s fiction, followed by those which are less-frequently noted.

WELL-OBSERVED DAOIST CONCEPTS IN LE GUIN’S WORK

1) The **Dao** 道: This term is almost always translated as “Way” or “the Way.” Within Daoist thought, it usually refers to the underlying natural order of the universe, itself beyond direct perception but noticeable through its effects, especially in the natural realm. Nothing ultimately is completely outside the Dao. It produces and sustains *all* things, and all phenomena reveal it. It is most noticeable through the operations of the next concept, that of yin and yang.

2) **Yin** 陰 and **Yang** 陽: Yin and yang are correlative opposite constellations of energetic characteristics. They always are in relation to each other and never separated. All things exist as some combination of yin and yang. Yin is generally described in terms of being the “negative” pole of the pair, and so represents stillness, quietness, flexibility, adaptability, coolness, darkness, and wetness among other possibilities. Yang is the “positive” pole of the pair, and represents motion, noisiness, firmness, rigidity, heat, brightness, dryness, and so on. When these two are in correct balance with each other, things flow

well and harmoniously. When they are out of balance, the world falls into crisis. The relationships between yin and yang are depicted visually in the form of the *taijitu* 太极图, more commonly known in English as “the yin-yang symbol” (see end of this note). Le Guin references, sometimes obliquely, this image in various places in her fiction. One of the most prominent examples is in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in the form of a poem or song that Estreven shares with Genly Ai:

*Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way. [233-234]*

While Le Guin’s interest in exploring conceptions of balance between complementary opposites is readily apparent throughout her entire corpus of work, it is nowhere more apparent than in the Earthsea cycle, where the main concern of the wizards of Roke and eventually many others is the preservation or restoration of The Equilibrium, conceived of as the fundamental balance that creates and nourishes all things. When the Equilibrium is disturbed, crisis ensues. The parallel with the concepts of Dao and concern with the harmony of yin and yang is clear and immediate.

3) **Wei Wuwei 為無為**: This term literally means “acting not-acting.” The character *wei* 為 suggests a kind of planned acting, like an architect building something while following a blueprint. *Wuwei* is the opposite, to not act because of planning. Together, the complete term suggests acting but not with planning, hence spontaneity or naturalness. This ability to flow with circumstances without resisting them, to adjust oneself to the context in which one finds oneself, to move effortlessly from one circumstance to another, in some ways is the highest of Daoist virtues. Both Laozi and Zhuangzi point to *wei wuwei* as the ideal way of being, manifesting because of harmony with the natural Dao. This comes as a paradox: The one who practices *wei wuwei* acts effortlessly (without planning) and all necessary things are nevertheless accomplished.

Again, Le Guin explores this idea most clearly within the Earthsea cycle. Just as *wei wuwei* appears in the one who is in harmony with the Dao, an effective naturalness appears in characters in Earthsea who are concerned to maintain the Equilibrium. Le Guin never uses the term *wei wuwei*, of course, since the language that it is derived from does not belong to that world, but particularly through the figures of Ogion, Ged, and later Tenar, she maps out how a kind of non-planning spontaneity could produce surprisingly effective results. Several of the masters of Roke as well as a few other characters express ideas of the kind of (non) action that flows from respecting the Equilibrium.

LESS WELL-KNOWN DAOIST CONCEPTS IN LE GUIN'S WORK

1) **Ganying** 感應: This term suggests something along the lines of "correlative resonance." While it is explored by Daoist thinkers, especially Zhuangzi, the term belongs to a wider Chinese philosophical and religious tradition, being found in various contexts in Confucian discourse as well as occasionally Chinese Buddhist discourse. The image conveyed by ganying is that of a resonance between things which are apparently separate but have an underlying similarity of some sort. The primary metaphor to illustrate this concept is musical, based on awareness of the harmonics of musical instruments, especially stringed ones. In a harmonic, a note played on one string will cause a correlative note on another string to sound, even if that second note is not directly being sounded by the musician. The resonance between the played note and the harmonic note effects the sounding of the harmonic note.

Le Guin's attention to the interrelatedness of phenomena, whether they be sentient characters or (seemingly) inanimate objects and matter, which underlies almost all of her fiction, may be seen at least partially as an expression of ganying. That which affects one resonates in others, frequently indirectly.

2) **Bianhua** 變化: This term is usually translated as "transformation, metamorphosis." *Bian* 變 means change, with the connotation of changing from state to state within a particular form. This may be seen in water transforming from a liquid state to a solid state. *Hua* 化 means "change," with the connotation of something fundamentally being transformed, like changing lead into gold. However, the etymological boundaries between the two are blurry; between them, they suggest a general field of change and all kinds of transformations.

Zhuangzi especially devotes serious attention to this concept, and in fact his work may be the *locus classicus* for it. It appears especially clearly under Zhuangzi's theory of "The Transformation of Things," illustrated in his story "Zhuang Zhou's Butterfly."⁶ Zhuangzi and subsequent Daoists have used this concept to destabilize an ontology and epistemology of certainty. To put it bluntly, they argue that we cannot be certain of anything except for the fact of change, since even if our reality is only a dream or an illusion, the dream and illusion changes. Change, then, must be the only certainty.

Le Guin explores the reality of change and what it means for her characters and her worlds throughout her fiction, but it most prominently features in *The Lathe of Heaven*. She clearly has Zhuangzi in mind in writing that

⁶ The story: "Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, flying and flitting about, content and doing as he pleased. He didn't know that he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, most certainly Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he is Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the *Transformation of Things*" (Zhuangzi 2:14).

novel. Excerpts from his work appear as quotations at the beginning of several chapters.⁷ The title itself, *The Lathe of Heaven*, is taken from a (mistranslated) image Zhuangzi uses to illustrate the reality of ceaseless change. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the plot of the novel focuses on a character who can dream into existence new realities---a Zhuangzian theme to be sure! The whole novel may be read as a kind of Le Guinian meditation on and expansion of “Zhuang Zhou’s butterfly” and its theory of the Transformation of Things.

3) The Unreliability of Linguistic Expression: One of the most pervasive concepts in “philosophical” Daoism is that of the instability of linguistic meaning. As the well-known first sentence of the *Daode jing* proposes, “The Way that can be spoken about is not the constant Way, the name that can be named is not a constant name.”⁸ Language is understood to be both artificial and limited. It can point to and suggest certain realities but cannot present those realities in their experienced fullness. The word is not the thing. Furthermore, the flow of phenomena that the Dao produces is itself ever-changing. Language, particularly names, is seen as an artificial attempt to fix those changing phenomena into static forms, an attempt which results in a conceptual stasis which is not true to the nature of the flowing phenomena being described. Reliance upon language in its denotative function to capture reality results in delusion. However, language does have an important function in its connotative and poetic modes. It can present to us realities that lie partially hidden from our direct perception, sensitizing us to dimensions of the world that otherwise we may overlook. It does not effectively fix or capture reality in the logical-rational mode, but it can suggest realities in the contemplative and poetic modes.

It is hard for a reader of Le Guin to ignore the ways in which she cultivates the poetic dimension of language, not only in her pellucid prose, but thematically. As one example, we can see the Daoist concept of the instability of language presented throughout the Earthsea cycle, where the speech of dragons is poetic, spontaneous, and natural to them, whereas the speech of human wizards is artificial and largely denotative. Often wizards face the temptation to fix realities in place through the use of language for the sake of manipulating them, leading to problems as the Equilibrium is unbalanced.⁹ The tension between characters’ desire to control phenomena through the denotative use of language and its freer poetic functions underlies much of this series, and Le Guin’s work more generally. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly in terms of Le Guin’s interests, the Daoist and Le Guinian emphasis on the value of poetic language in creating worlds offers itself to a mythopoetic analysis.

⁷ Le Guin spells the name as “Chuang Tse.”

⁸ 道可道 非常道 名可名 非常名

⁹ For a Barfieldian exploration of this theme, see Hart.

CONCLUSION

As stated before, this list of Daoist concepts in Le Guin's work is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be. Neither is this exhaustive of larger Daoist sources and influences Le Guin draws upon in shaping her work. It will take the work of a community of readers, scholars, and commentators to map that. Nevertheless, hopefully this note may serve as a resource to which material can be added and that can offer a foundation for further discussion and exploration. This fuller understanding of Le Guin's Daoist interests and the uses to which she puts those interests can be developed through conversation among scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, including but not limited to those specialized in critical literary theory.

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