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Transience, Responsible Transformation, and Deep Time in Daoist Thought

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1 Introduction

Daoism is often described as a cosmological philosophy and, later, a religion that aims to link human beings with the processes of change and transformation that occur all around us. Indeed, the concept of Dao, or “path,” links space and time together, understanding the cosmos not simply as a static place or an order that is given to us, but, rather, as a dynamic process that is always on the move from one place to another. The nature of Dao, according to the *Daode Jing*, is to give birth to the myriad things (*wanwu* 万物) that constitute the world around us, in a process of constant transformation (*bianhua* 变化) that, optimally, leads to their full flourishing (*fanrong* 繁荣). The universe is a space for things, and it also has a time in which things arise, transform, and decay. Dao is the mysterious source from which the myriad things arise and, hence, constitute the universe of space and time that we inhabit. We human beings are no different from the things that constitute the world around us. We too are subject to the same process of transformation, flourishing, and decay as the myriad things.

This unity of space and time is also revealed in the Chinese term *yuzhou* 宇宙, which means universe, but is more accurately translated as “spacetime.” The word is comprised of two characters, *yu* 宇, which refers to the four cardinal points plus up and down, and *zhou* 宙, which refers to the duration of time from past to present and to future (Wang 2021, 103). One consequence of this orientation to the universe as a “spacetime” process is that research into the specifically temporal aspects of the universe has not been extensive in Chinese thought. Rather, time and space have been studied together as elements of the spacetime process, and a greater emphasis has been placed in both Confucian and Daoist thought on the relationship between the individual and the cosmological patterns that we can observe all around us in the cycles of

time. Temporal and spatial aspects of the cosmos are usually correlated with each other: The morning is correlated with the sun's rising in the east; the winter with the north, and so on. An integrated spacetime cosmology means that time has not frequently been considered an independent variable, but rather as something always correlated with spatial processes.

The cyclical nature of time does not preclude a sense of progress or evolution. The *Daodejing* (ch. 42) famously understands the creation of the universe as a process of “birthing” where the Dao gives birth to one, two, three – and eventually the myriad – things or processes that we find in the cosmos. But, unlike modern Western understandings of temporal progress, the evolutionary aspect of time is not always viewed by Daoists in a positive way. Daoist alchemy often seeks to “reverse” or “revert” temporal processes, and many Daoist texts call for humans to “return” to the Dao, advocating that which is simple or pure over what is complex or ornamental.

Recently, there has been some considerable research into the concept of time in Daoist thought, stimulated by a conference on *Daoism and Time* in Los Angeles in 2019, which took place next to the seventeenth triennial conference of the *International Society for the Study of Time*. This society was established about fifty years ago by J. T. Fraser (1923–2010), who conducted a major study of the concept of time, in which he distinguishes six different “chronotypes” or frames of time which mediate human experience of time. The contiguity of the two conferences has meant that Fraser's thought has had something of an impact on the study of time in Daoist thought, and in the volume of essays that arose from the conference (Kohn 2021). The essays in that volume make a powerful case that time has been a neglected topic in the study of Daoism, and that, especially in relation to the experience of time in the body, the concept of transformation, and alchemical processes to “reverse” time, the Daoist experience has paid close attention to time as a foundational element of the human condition.

If we consider time as an independent concept in Chinese thought, then, Joseph Needham (1954) notes, there are two concepts in addition to that of the more complex “spacetime” (*yuzhou*). The first is *shi* 时, the common word for time, but which also has an important secondary connotation of “timeliness” or “seasonality”; the second is *jiu* 久 which refers to “duration” or “permanence.” The first concept, timeliness, refers to the importance of acting in accordance with time or at the right time. Thus, foods must be eaten in the correct season, medicines must be adjusted according to the time of day or time of year, and in politics, interventions must be made at the right time, not too early or too late, if they are to be successful. In this regard, Chinese thought about time bears a close resemblance to what Wole Soyinka (1995 [1976], 10) refers to as

“traditional thinking” which “creates a cyclical reality, not a linear timeline.” This “cyclical reality” can be seen in that the traditional Chinese calendar is not a linear calendar in which years accumulate in an infinite linear series from a conventionally designated starting point.

The traditional Chinese calendar gives names to years based on a combination of the five elements and the twelve animals, which resets itself every sixty years: 2023, for example is the “water rabbit” year. In the Chinese calendar, 2083 will be the same “water rabbit” year as 2023. The only way, traditionally, to differentiate times that are sixty years apart is by reference to the reign title of the emperor and the name of the dynasty. Thus, 1580 is the “metal dragon” year of the Wanli emperor of the Ming dynasty. But there is no explicit sense that this date is chronologically later than (let alone morally or ethically superior to) the “metal dragon” year of the Zhengde emperor, which occurred in 1520. The year 1580 is simply a different (not a better, or more progressive) political reality than the year 1520. Time is denominated politically rather than enumerated mathematically. A powerful effect of this denomination of time is to diminish the sense of time as a teleological, linear accumulation, something akin to the modern Western concept of “progress.” Indeed, this concept of progress is precisely what gives a normative orientation to the modern sense of time, a sense that what is newer must be better than what is older, and that we have a moral obligation to make progress and improve things step by step. This normative orientation is absent in the cyclical concept of time. Rather, cyclical time has the normative orientation of “seasonality”: of doing things that are in the correct time or at the appropriate moment. To do things out of season or at the wrong time is to go against the normativity that is embedded in the cyclical concept of seasonality.

The second Chinese concept of time that Needham refers to is *jiu*, which we can understand more as “duration” or as “a stretch of time.” This also carries a normative sense to it in that the ability to “last” in the face of the constant changing of time is considered to be a moral ideal. An excellent example of this “staying power” can be found in the famous story of Zhuangzi (ch. 4) called “the useless tree.” In this story, a carpenter complains that a gnarled and knotted tree is useless because it cannot easily be turned into a useful source of wood. On the contrary, says Zhuangzi, the tree has perdured precisely because of its uselessness to the carpenter. For this reason, the tree becomes, paradoxically, a moral exemplar in Zhuangzi’s universe: an element of nature that has withstood the ravages not only of time, but of human intervention. The word Zhuangzi uses here to refer to the tree’s perduration is *shou* 寿, usually translated as “longevity” or even “immortality.” Where *jiu* refers abstractly to a “stretch of time,” *shou* refers more concretely to the

successful “living out” of one of the myriad things (including human beings) across a long period. It too is a temporal ideal in Daoist thought and contributes to the quest for immortality and transcendence in Daoism. The paradox here is that the tree becomes a moral exemplar by managing to eschew any “intent” to become an example of anything. Unlike the deliberate quest of Confucians to attain sagehood as a state of moral and spiritual transcendence, the tree becomes so effortlessly.

At this point a question arises: How can Daoist thought prize both cyclicity and longevity? Do these normative ideals not contradict each other? Should Daoists accept the transformation of things within the cycles of time, or should they seek to transcend those cycles and achieve something supra-natural or “beyond time?” To address this question, it is necessary to investigate further the concept of time as transformation (*bianhua*).

2 Transience and Transformation

A common understanding is that time is associated with change, and change fundamentally means decay or loss. Time means the transformation of something – that is, into something that it is not – and this is often perceived as a loss of identity. Jing Liu (2021, 70) notes that, in Chinese, this sense of time is understood through the concept of “passing” (*shi* 逝) in the sense of “passing away,” which is a homophone of the word for time itself (*shi* 时). Whatever the original thing was, through the process of time, it has become what it was not. She writes:

The transience of time, ... originates from a sense of loss. It is in the sense of loss that the passage of time is most clearly, even painfully felt. All present and future is inevitably coming past, everything that is gained in time will eventually be lost; moments are given, then gone; life is given to us, running toward death every minute. All beings have already, are becoming, or will become nonbeing. (70)

The difference in the Daoist context is that this transition is also viewed positively. While the passage of time can be “painfully felt” and Daoists can rightfully lament the conditions of war and devastation that they see around them, this lament does not define the whole of the Daoist’s attitude to time. If we think about Dao as the wellspring for cosmic transformation, the path of spacetime, what we see is that the passage of time, alternation, transience, and things becoming what they are not, is precisely the source of life. That is to say, change is what enables life to take place. Biologically, we know that the process of evolution could not take place without the deaths of individual

animals. Indeed it is death that enables life, growth, and evolution to take place. Rather than viewing transience with a sense of loss or regret, Daoists tend to celebrate the transitory nature of life as intrinsic to vitality. To move, to change, to alter is to be alive. To remain the same, unaltered is indeed a horrifying prospect.

A further story from Zhuangzi (ch. 6) can serve to illustrate this idea. This is the extreme, even absurd, story of Master Yu who becomes disabled and eventually dies. The first stage of his illness causes him to be hunched over so that his “back sticks up like a hunchback and my vital organs are on top of me.” This process of transformation, however, causes him no distress, rather the opposite:

If the process continues, perhaps in time he'll transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I'll keep watch on the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I'll shoot down an owl for roasting. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my buttocks into cartwheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I'll climb up and go for a ride. What need will I ever have for a carriage again? (trans. Watson 1968, 80)

Just before Master Yu's death, Master Li approaches him with the following insight: “How marvelous the Creator is! What is he going to make of you next? Where is he going to send you? Will he make you into a rat's liver? Will he make you into a bug's arm?” (trans. Watson 1968, 81). The sense here is that human beings have the capacity to experience transience not only as loss, but also as cause for celebration. The loss of form and the loss of identity that occurs through disease, disability, and death are not chiefly to be resented, but to be celebrated as the processes by which life occurs. Far from exhibiting the calm, stoic acceptance of the inevitability of change and decay, the masters in this story exhibit a kind of giddy, childish delight.

This emphasis on delight in transformation lies at the heart of the Daoist response to the sense of time as passing, or passing away. It also helps to resolve the contradiction between the normative values of “seasonality” and “longevity.” Here, longevity or immortality do not mean the perdurance of a thing in a specific form for an infinite period of time, or even liberation from the changes that take place through time but, rather, entering a state of “extended transience.” That is to say, it is not permanence that is supremely valued but rather a “positive transience,” a transience that is not viewed negatively as a “passing away” but as the condition for the possibility of transformation itself.

The high value placed on transience in Daoist thought is also connected, in the *Daodejing*, to a preference for the “soft and weak” over the “hard and strong.” The *locus classicus* for this way of thinking can be found in *Daodejing* 76:

Humans are born soft and weak.
 They die stiff and strong.
 The ten thousand plants and trees
 Are born soft tender,
 And die withered and sere.
 The stiff and strong
 Are Death's companions
 The soft and weak
 Are Life's companions.
 Therefore the strongest armies do not conquer,
 The greatest trees are cut down.
 The strong and great sink down.
 The soft and weak rise up.

(trans. Addiss and Lombardo 1993)

It is precisely because of the softness, pliability, or “weakness” of natural things that they are able to change and grow. Only dead things are hard and cannot change. This realization produces a reversal in the normal concept of agency. In Indo-European languages, agency and passivity are linguistically embedded in the active and passive moods of verbs. In order for a verb to be used in a sentence, there must be a declaration of whether the verb is in the active mood or the passive mood. While there are occasional quirks to this rule, such as deponent and semi-deponent verbs, in general, one must always indicate whether a verb is being used in the active or passive mood. This linguistic rule reflects the semantic importance attached to knowing whether a subject is acting on an object or vice versa, and a preference for subjects to demonstrate their agency over objects. But in Daoist thought, it is precisely the passivity of subjects, our ability to be constituted rather than to constitute, that gives rise to our vitality. If we understand agency as the projection of penetrating force that has the ability to deform a passive object without it itself being deformed, then this is nothing less than the mistaken exaltation of death over life. Indeed, the repudiation of destructive military power is one of the most consistent ethical themes in the *Daodejing*.

To be alive is not to be a subject with sufficient agency to bring death or destruction to others, but to be a subject with sufficient passivity to allow oneself to be constituted and even penetrated by the Dao's life-sustaining powers. The gendered aspect of this way of thinking goes without saying, and can be seen in Daoism's preference for the *yin* (feminine) over the *yang* (masculine). Ontologically, it can be seen in the priority given to nonbeing (*wu* 无) over being (*you* 有). Praxiologically, it can be seen in the priority given to non-assertive action (*wuwei* 无为) over assertive action (*wei* 为). The Daoist preference for the soft, passive, pliant, and even penetrable, constitutes a major repudiation of the phallogocentrism embedded in Indo-European languages.

Generally, Indo-European languages require sentences to be articulated with verbs in the active or the passive voice. A subject does something to an object. While some languages have middle, deponent, or semi-deponent voices that complicate this picture, the default function of a verb is to denote the action of a subject towards an object. When the male gender is associated with activity and the female gender is associated with passivity, a gendered aspect of the linguistic construction of reality inevitably arises. Men are, naturally, presumed to be the actors and women the objects of action. Chinese, as a non-inflected language, does not have this particular linguistic problem.

3 Deep Time

There has been a strong movement in the past decades to place human history within a much longer or deeper timeline than that of recorded human history. Thanks to the development of evolutionary science, astrobiology, and cosmology, we can now begin to place the story of human life within that of the 4.5 billion-year history of the earth, or even the 13.8 billion-year history of the universe. Although the concept of the Anthropocene has become a keyword of modern thought, it is intriguing to put this recent event of human–planetary relations into a much larger cosmic perspective. One example of this has been the work of Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, whose *Journey of the Universe* film and book (Swimme and Tucker 2011) seeks not only to place human life within a cosmic timescale, but also to evoke intimate connections between human life and the lives of animals, planets, and even stars. They rely here on the Confucian concept of principle or pattern (*li* 理) according to which it is possible to evoke a connection between human life and “heavenly” or “natural” life. The common Chinese phrase here is “the harmony of humanity and nature” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一). (Note that the Chinese term heaven (*tian* 天) can also mean nature or environment). Swimme and Tucker evoke this concept visually in the film through images of swirling galaxies that fade into images of whirlpools, suggesting a “patterning” that cuts across the many dimensions, and epochs, of cosmic life.

The part of the film that has always resonated most with my students is where Swimme intones “The stars are our ancestors,” evoking a deeply filial connection between anthropogenesis and cosmogenesis. The phrase also brings to mind the first line of the famous *Western Inscription* (a text placed on the west wall of the scholar’s study in his home in Hengqu, Shaanxi) by the Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (1020–1077): “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place

in their midst” (trans. Chan 1963, 497). Zhang Zai makes the argument that all of us are brothers and sisters because we are all descended from heaven and earth (*yang* and *yin*), the two primordial ontogenetic principles out of which the myriad things emerge. Modern cosmology tells us that these are not just symbolic affiliations but rather deep time affiliations. Just as we gaze into outer space, we gaze into the deep past, so also when we evoke macrocosm–microcosm correspondences between humans and stars, we are also tracing a connection that threads back billions of years.

The Daoist religious tradition conceptualized the relationship between humans and the stars in terms of the relationship between the outer space of heavenly bodies and the inner space of the subtle Qi-body of human beings. Gods were seen to descend from the stars and enter one’s vital organs by Daoist practitioners of visualization meditation. The correspondence here is not simply between an inner landscape and an outer landscape, but between deep cosmic time and human time. The grandeur of deep space and deep time is also experienced as a moment of subtle intimacy, the outer space and deep time of the stars and the planets conjoined with the inner space and shallow time of the human body (see Miller 2017).

But deep time, in the human perspective, flows not only from the past, but long into the future. David Farrier has written about the importance of thinking about the long-term, deep-time effects of contemporary human life. In his article published in *The Atlantic*, Farrier (2016) notes two particular misnamings that are central to our present worldview. The first is that “plastic” is anything but plastic, and indeed far more persistent than its human creators. He writes:

Plastics, which began being mass-produced in the middle of the 20th century, give us back the world as the West has been taught to see it – pliable, immediately available, and smoothed to our advantage. Yet almost every piece of plastic ever made remains in existence in some form, and their chemical traces are increasingly present in our bodies. ... Single-use plastic might seem to disappear when I dispose of it, but it (and therefore I) will nonetheless continue to act on the environments in which it persists for millennia.

Here, we see the deep time effects of a deadly linguistic inversion. By misunderstanding plastic as something “soft” and ephemeral, we have blinded ourselves to its deep impact not only on the environment today, but far into the future.

The second misnaming he cites is “the cloud.” The cloud implies something ephemeral, immaterial, or heavenly, invisible data occupying no space or time. But the reverse is the case. He writes: “Despite the appealing connotations of ‘the cloud,’ this data has to go somewhere. Greenpeace estimates that the power consumption of just one of Apple’s immense data centers is equivalent to the annual supply for 250,000 European homes. Traces of this seemingly

ephemeral data will persist into the deep time of the future, as rising concentrations of carbon warm the atmosphere.” Farrier’s critique of our misapprehension of these two key elements of modern life echoes Daoist arguments about our mistaken predilection for the permanent and the hard over the transient and the soft. The things that we think of as transient, *yin*, or soft (plastics or cloud data) are in fact instances of material persistence, *yang*, or hard, whose effects will be felt well into the future, and which cannot easily be undone. From a Daoist point of view, such deep time “persistences” do not contribute to the overall vitality of the cosmos because, in effect, they refuse to die.

4 The “Invironment”

Farrier’s work recalls the arguments made by Zhuangzi and others that our “normal” view of the world is not only mistaken but actually upside down, causing us to mistake one thing for its opposite. I would like to connect this false inversion of transience and persistence to another false inversion that I first explored in my book *China’s Green Religion; Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (Miller 2017). In that book, I developed the argument that the received wisdom that humans are somehow supposed to “save the environment” is misguided, because it preserves the notion that the environment is a thing that exists in space outside our bodies. So long as we think of the “environment” as something that is separate from us in any important respect, it will be impossible to transition to a way of thinking that starts from the mutual intertwining of human life and planetary life. My study of Daoist thought about the identification of the microcosm of the body and the macrocosm of the world around us suggests that we should not think of the environment as something that exists outside the hermetically sealed walls of our bodies. Indeed, Daoist art is famous for its depiction of the body as a landscape, using images of mountains, clouds, stars, and gods to show the Daoist experience of vital energy flowing through the meridians of the body. This leads me to conclude that we should not imagine the “environment” as something that “exists” beyond our bodies, but more like an “invironment”: something that “insists” deeply within our bodies.

This way of thinking leads to two related conclusions. Firstly, human life is not to be understood as a form of “existence” but as a form of “insistence,” the coming together of all the various vital forces into a particular form that allows us to be. Secondly, the environment is not a backdrop on which human actions take place; rather, it informs, insists, and indwells our bodies, enabling us to have life. These two conclusions, moreover, can be further extended to the concept of

time as well as space. If, from a Daoist perspective, the world indwells the body just as much as the body indwells the world, so also deep time inscribes itself in human history just as much as human history inscribes itself within cosmic time. We do not “exist” in deep time; rather, deep time “insists” in us.

The result of this spatial inversion of body and world, and this temporal inversion of human history and deep time, does not, from a Daoist perspective demean or diminish what it means to be human. The contrary is the case. To think through spacetime is not to imagine human life as a transitory flash within a majestic unfolding of the evolution of the cosmos over 13.8 billion years but, rather, to see our transience and the transience of the cosmos itself as the glorious, complex, and as-yet undetermined outworking of spacetime creative powers. Inasmuch as human actions enable that transitory, creative process to continue, they are to be celebrated. Inasmuch as they inhibit the flourishing of the world through ossification, they are to be deprecated. Our error comes when we mistake one for the other, when we treat plastics as disposable, and data clouds as immaterial and ephemeral.

5 Responsibility

Finally I would like to move to consider the question of responsibility. There has been a lot of research on Daoism and ecology over the past twenty years, but largely focused on nature, rather than time. Indeed, I’ve previously written that one way to think about the relationship between Confucianism and Daoism in Chinese thought is to think of Confucianism as taking care of time, and Daoism as taking care of space (Miller 2017, 74). Confucianism is concerned with patriarchal genetics, anchored in the concept of filial piety. Filial piety, which is the foundation of Confucian ethics, means the obligation of the person to their genetic creator. If that is one’s ethical foundation, then it is principally the responsibility of younger generations to take care of older generations and not the other way around. Confucianism is founded on intergenerational ethics, but it is ordered the wrong way around from the perspective of long-term responsibility for the future. It is not in the DNA of Confucians to worry about seven generations into the future (see Chapter 2 by Matthias Fritsch and Chapter 7 by Jing Iris Hu). Rather the reverse: Descendants have the obligation to take care of their ancestors seven generations into the past.

Can Daoism help remedy this defect in Chinese philosophy? Firstly, I think that the Daoist diagnosis of the human condition as misreading soft and hard, and misvaluing permanence and transience is a step in the right direction. This perhaps points to the role that philosophy can play in general, identifying truths

about things and critiquing misperceptions about things. But as the *Daodejing* notes, simply understanding the problem does not mean that it is easy to fix it.

Secondly, however, if we think of the Daoist attempt to dissolve the boundaries between “inner space” and “outer space” via the concept of the porosity of the body, not simply in terms of landscape or spaces, then we can begin to construct an ethic of responsibility to one’s past and one’s future, one that aims to conserve or even increase the “soft” over the “hard.” Daoists have not, however, been deeply concerned with imagining the futures of their children, yet alone their children’s children, but rather have sought to cultivate ways of living in the world that maximize the flourishing in transformation processes. This ethic of care, or responsible transformation, can only be realized in the context of a porous body. We live and breathe because we ingest and excrete, not because we isolate our minds and bodies from the planetary context that enables us to draw breath in the first place. Inasmuch as that planetary context is not simply a “place” but a “process” and a transformation, then Daoists will always advocate agility and suppleness, an ethic of plasticity in the true sense of the word.

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