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## DAO BECOMES FEMALE

### A Gendered Reality, Knowledge, and Strategy for Living

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#### Introduction

Laozi's *Daodejing* or *Classics of Way and Its Power* is traditionally assigned to the sixth century BCE, but possibly dates from as recently as the third century BCE. It has only about 5,250 Chinese characters in eighty-one brief sections or paragraphs, yet is known as the foundation of Daoism (or Taoism). The term *Dao* 道 appears seventy-three times in the text and has a complicated and multilayered meaning. Throughout Chinese history, *Dao* has been cherished by all schools of thought and has generally been taken to be the ultimate origin, source, and principle of the universe and of the myriad things. There is no existence, or literally no-thing, beyond *Dao*.

Daoism, a *Dao* based and inspired teaching and practice, has been considered to be the philosophy of yielding in Chinese intellectual history. One important aspect of yielding is being *rou* 柔—soft, gentle, supple—which the *Daodejing* couples with the feminine. Not surprisingly, then, the female and femininity have enormous significance for Laozi and Daoism. To highlight this unique philosophical aspect of Daoism, this chapter will place femininity/the feminine/the female center stage to investigate Daoist thought and its possible contribution to feminist thought in a contemporary global setting. In this chapter I promote a somewhat female consciousness of *Dao*, or a Daoist female consciousness, which may expand, support, or alter feminist assumptions about femininity/the feminine/the female. The overarching focal point of this understanding lies in a depiction of the female and femininity as a cosmic force, a way of knowing, and a strategy for leading a flourishing life. The main points are that *Dao* does not govern actually existing gender relations—or, at least, that the social and political reality of gender relations is not modeled on *Dao*, because the patriarchy is not *Dao*. Highlighting the female or feminine aspect of *Dao*, or *Dao* as becoming female, is a feminist intervention, using resources from within classical Daoist thought in order to re-imagine or reconfigure gender for our time.

### *Dao* as Cosmic Mother and Female Body

All phenomena in nature or, in classical Chinese terminology, “all things under heaven” (*tian xia* 天下) can be distinguished according to their characteristics as either *yin* or *yang*, and man/male/masculinity and woman/female/femininity are naturally identified with this yinyang matrix (Wang 2012). Unlike other interpretations of the *yin/yang* complementarity in Chinese thought, the *Daodejing* suggests the primordially, indeed the superior power, of *yin* in general and the female and femininity in particular. From the perspective of the *Daodejing* the female/femininity is not excluded, shunned, frozen out, disadvantaged, rejected, unwanted, abandoned, dislocated, or otherwise marginalized. Its basic identity as a cosmic potentiality and a necessary part of any and every generative process is highly valued and celebrated. Actually, the spontaneous potency of *Dao* is female, or is becoming female. *Dao* is associated with the female body, which is a common metaphor for *Dao* in the *Daodejing*. This metaphor reveals not just the importance of *yin* and its generative capacity, but also designates a *yin* origin that is hidden, implicit, or empty.

This is how the *Daodejing* begins:

As to a *Dao*—

if it can be specified as a *Dao*,

it is not a permanent *Dao*.

As to a name—

if it can be specified as a name,

it is not a permanent name.

Having no name

is the beginning of the ten thousand things.

Having a name,

is the mother of the ten thousand things.

(Moeller 2007: 3)

Here the mother is designated as the beginning of all things or the name of all things. In chapter 52 we encounter this mother again:

The world has a beginning:

it is considered the Mother of the world. 天下有始、以爲天下母

(Moeller 2007: 123)

In chapter 25, the *Daodejing* defines *Dao*:

There is a thing—

it came to be in the undifferentiated,

it came alive before heaven and earth.

What stillness! What emptiness!

Alone it stands fast and does not change.

It can be mother to heaven and earth.

(Moeller 2007: 123)

The *Daodejing* explains that the first way to describe the *Dao* is *mu* 母, “mother.” The word *mu* has a broader range of meanings than merely “biological mother.” It is expanded to mean the source of heaven and earth and the myriad things in them. *Dao*/mother is responsible for the origin of all things, is with all things, and provides the patterns that one should follow. This basic philosophical commitment reflects a view that the cosmos and world are generated, not created, through a multiplicative process. The terms used in classical Chinese texts for the origin of the myriad things incorporate a sense of “life” and “birth,” both of which are encompassed in the Chinese term *sheng* 生 (generation). This link between generation and the mother naturally leads to the priority of female energy. It is generation or transformation, not a substance or Being, which builds up the Chinese philosophical landscape or horizon.

In chapter 42, the *Daodejing* gives a specific account of the origination of the world:

Dao generates oneness,

oneness generates twoness,

twoness generates threeness,

and threeness generates the ten thousand things.

(Moeller 2007: 107)

The concrete world originates from a unitary but indistinct source, *Dao*. The movement from that source toward the tangible world is again a process of specification and differentiation, from one to two to three and to the myriad things, literally the “ten thousand things” (*wanwu* 萬物). Thus, *Dao* disseminates a gendered lens through which to perceive the world and reality. As a result this lens is one of change, uncertainty, body, and sexuality. The source of the variable and changing lies in the intrinsic femininity of *Dao*. Interestingly, there are no “male” images of *Dao*, such as father or son; nor are traditionally male traits, like force, strength, or aggression, linked to *Dao*. This gendered world is different from Aristotle’s male–female cosmos in which the masculine *telos* takes precedence, and is a prime mover upon the feminine, passive matter (Bianchi 2014: 2). The Daoist feminine is also different from the ancient Greek and Roman goddesses who are powerful when they possess male power rather than through their own powers of fertility:

The goddesses Diana and Minerva become the symbol of these women [philosophers]. These Roman goddesses, borrowed from the Ancient Greeks, as Diana or Artemis symbolises the tradition of virginity and independence of males, the other . . . Athene/Minerva [is] the goddess of wisdom and war.

(Hagengruber 2010: 11)

In addition to the word *mu* (mother), the *Daodejing* incorporates two other sets of terms in relation to femininity, *pin* 牝 appearing three times and *ci* 雌 appearing twice. It is

important to highlight the fact that these terms are different from *nu* 女 (woman in contemporary Chinese) or *fu* 婦 (woman in classical Chinese). The notion of *nu* or *fu* refers to woman in a social relationship. This social construction of woman does not appear in the *Daodejing* at all. Both *pin* and *ci* have been translated as “female”; in fact *pin* refers to female animals in general and *ci* refers specifically to hens, as opposed to *xiong*, which refers to roosters (for more discussion of these two pairs, see Ryden 1997: 29–36). *Pin* and *ci* are ways to demonstrate a natural supremacy and potency of the feminine.

We read in *Daodejing* chapter 6:

The spirit of the valley does not die—  
This is called mysterious femininity [*pin*].  
The gate of mysterious femininity [*pin*]—  
This is called the root of heaven and earth.

(Moeller 2007: 17)

Here the *pin* is mysterious, the root of heaven and earth, an unlimited resource. This gendered source without beginning or end, persisting in perpetuity, is the realm of becoming. The character for spirit, *gu* 谷, originally meant generation, and is equated with *sheng* (part of the character for gender and nature or tendencies), and its shape is often taken to represent the female genitals.

With respect to “mysterious femininity,” one can notice two interesting directions. On the one hand, there is what we might call the horizontal level in which femininity/yin and masculinity/yang are counterparts, both of which are embedded in the myriad things. On the other hand, there is a vertical level in which masculinity/yang refers to the things before us, while femininity/yin refers to the origin that is hidden, implicit, or empty.

In this context, let us to consider the pairing of *you* 有 and *wu* 無. *You* literally means “to have,” whereas *wu* means “to lack.” To say that something exists in classical Chinese is literally to say that it “is had,” whereas to say it does not exist is to say it is not had or possessed. By extension, these terms come to denote something like “being” and “non-being” or “presence” and “absence.” *You* corresponds with yang/masculinity, and *wu* with yin/femininity.

There are inherent connections between the pairings having (*you*)/not having (*wu*) or fullness (*shi*)/void (*xu*). Excavated versions of the *Daodejing* support this unity. In the received version, chapter 40 says that the myriad things come from being (*you*) and being comes from non-being (*wu*). In other words, the myriad things form simultaneously from *you* and *wu*, the foreground and background, yin and yang. The contemporary Chinese scholar Liu Xuyi (刘绪义) explains the importance of this version of *Daodejing* chapter 40:

The myriad things are generated in *you* (having or to have) and *wu* (nothing). Here *you* (having) and *wu* (nothing) are not connected in a sequence, one leading to [the] other but rather they are parallel, *Dao* generates *you* and also generates *wu*. *You* and *wu* exist at the same time. *You* refers to a general existence that has a form in the formless. Yet *wu* is formless, independent and unchanging. *Wu* is a part of *you*.

(Liu 2009: 5)

Liu illustrates this with the example of a young girl and a mother. A young girl has not given birth, so she is *wu*; however, she still has the potential to exercise her reproductive ability to become *you*, or a mother (Liu 2009: 287) So this description of *Dao* follows the biological ability and development of a female body. A young girl becoming a mother is the way of *Dao*; Laozi's *Dao* is the mother of all myriad things. This is representative of *Dao*'s unity of *you* and *wu*.

*Dao*'s tendency towards reproduction results in an association between metaphysical and ontological origins and biological reproduction. This connection, of course, appears in other cultures as well. For example, Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* says, "All of us are pregnant . . . both in body and in soul" (Plato 1993: xix). One of her definitions of love is the desire to give birth in beauty. *Dao* as the source of generation and reproduction in the world is based on such a biological model, with concrete things being born through the interplay of *you* and *wu*, *yin* and *yang*. More importantly, the *Daodejing* invites us to share in *Dao*, that is, to be with *Dao*, to be female and to accept femininity as a rhythm of our nature and the way of our life. The becoming female of *Dao* and the rhythm of femininity are accessible by all humans or all beings, irrespective of their sexed bodies or gender roles. *Dao* becoming female develops a radically altered consciousness of femininity, and this consciousness-raising might provide a unique and diverse conceptual resource for contemporary feminist thought, one that assumes no rigid division or opposition between femininity and masculinity.

### Femininity as a Way to Know *Dao*

The *Daodejing* arguably designates one model of thinking about the feminine character of nature. The female is not just portrayed and acclaimed as the *yin*, soft (*rou*) force of the world, but also resonates with the mystical meanings of *Dao*. Other traditionally feminine characteristics such as being "empty," "returning," "low," "soft," and "yielding" are attributes of *Dao*. Thus, there is a robust association between the knowing of a female and the knowing of *Dao*. To come to a female consciousness of *Dao* is to problematize a way of thinking and knowing. The feminine as a value in the *Daodejing* conveys a cognitive style and an epistemological stance.

*Daodejing* chapter 40 says that:

Reversal [returning, *fan*] is the movement of the *Dao*,

Weakness [softening, *rou*] is the usefulness [function] of *Dao*. (反者道之動,弱者道之用)

The things of the world are generated from presence [*you*].

Presence is generated from nonpresence [*wu*].

(Moeller 2007: 97)

Returning and reversal as the movement of *Dao* illustrates a waxing and waning of change in *time*, just as the yinyang symbol of two curved, interlocking geometric shapes depicts a rotating, self-creating cycle. The softening function of *Dao* elucidates a great multi-dimensional *space* in which an unseen potentiality is a necessary part of all existence. This characteristic of non-presence or emptiness is what permits or creates the

efficacy of *Dao*. It is noteworthy that the softness of *Dao* is identified with the empty, the void or non-presence of *Dao*.

According to the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*The Book of Han*, AD 111) “*xu*”—emptiness—and *wu*—no-presence—are the foundation of Daoist method:

The Daoist School is about not doing [*wuwei*] 無為, but leaving nothing undone. Its theory is easy to practice but its expression in words is hard to know. Its method takes emptiness and nonexistence as its root and takes following along as its function [道家無為, 又曰無不為, 其實易行, 其辭難知. 其術以虛無為本, 以因循為用].

(Ban 1962: 2713)

The *Daodejing* uses the word *wu* (no-presence/nothingness) 101 times. In the oracle bones (turtle shells used for divinations in ancient China) *wu* is the symbol for dancing. In fact, there are three closely related characters with the same pronunciation: *wu* 無, meaning nothingness, *wu* 舞, meaning to dance, and *wu* 巫, meaning a female shaman. The earliest comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters, the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) by the Han scholar Xu Shen 許慎 (58–147 CE), explicates the link: *wu* 巫 (shamans) are women who can perform service to *wu* 無 (the shapeless) and make the spirits come down by *wu* 舞 (dancing). Dancing was the way to communicate with and know *shen* 神 (spirits) (Xu 1981: 201). However, these spirits are unseen and formless; only through dancing activities can one communicate with *shen*. *Wu*’s dancing is something present, yet they are working (*shi* 事) with *wu* (non-presence). In its origin, *wu* (nothingness) is the undifferentiated source of potency and growth that lets things function, much as the empty spaces between joints and muscles are what allows Cook Ding to cut with such ease in the famous story from the *Zhuangzi* (Ziporyan 2009: 34). More importantly, this non-presence is always a part of femininity’s presence.

Femininity/*yin* emphasizes background and hidden structures while masculinity/*yang* specifies what is prevailing, exposed, and at front. This mindfulness of the background is found in the *Daodejing* statement in chapter 42: “All the myriad things *fu yin bao yang* (負陰抱陽) [carry (embody) *yin* and embrace *yang*]” (Moeller 2007: 103). Here *yin*/femininity and *yang*/masculinity are woven into the condition of the myriad things. *Bao* (抱) means to embrace, and literally refers to putting your arms around something, often in a sense of holding something valuable, as in “to *bao* your child.” The myriad things all embrace or wrap their arms around the *yang*, which is in front of them, i.e. apparent or masculine. The idea of *bao yang* is derived from the sun: one faces south and embraces direct sunlight. Another extension is confronting what is in front and seeing what is present (*you* 有).

The word *fu* (負), translated above as “embody,” has more than twenty meanings in the classical Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi*. One of the main meanings of *fu* is to carry or bear something on your back, that is, not in front of you but behind or in the background. Thus, this word *fu* in the *Daodejing* can be taken as *bei* 背 (on your back). *Fuyin* (負陰) then refers to things that are not confronted, or not seen, but still carried along, something feminine. It is carrying something unseen or non-present. The *fuyin* always predicates a set of situations, a unique way of being with the world. Taken together, *fuyin* and *baoyang* reveal awareness of two aspects of reality: a feminine,



the hidden underlying structure, and a masculine, the explicit presence in front of us. Although *baoyang* and *fuyin* are inseparable, the *Daodejing* argues that our natural tendency is to look more at what stands before us, which is *yang*/masculine, and to ignore *yin*/feminine. The *Daodejing* counteracts this tendency with a focus on *yin*/feminine. The feminine should be guarded (*shou* 守) and protected (*bao* 保). One should remember to “stay at the front by keeping to the rear” (Moeller 2007: 158).

As *Daodejing* chapter 16 explains:

To reach emptiness [虛 *xu*]—

This is the utmost.

To keep stillness [靜 *jing*]—

This is control.

The ten thousand things occur along with each other:

So I watch where they turn.

The things in the world are manifold,

they all return again to their root: stillness.

Stillness—this is what return to the mandate is called.

The return to the mandate—this is permanence.

To know permanence —this is clarity [illumination, 明 *ming*].

(Moeller 2007: 41)

Here the *Daodejing* necessitates a specific meditation method to attain the stage of *xu* and *jing*. This will stabilize the mind and enable us to attain *ming* (illumination). This conceptual formulation has later been developed into a specifically female Daoist practice of body cultivation. For example, female Daoist Cao Wenyi 曹文逸 (1039–1119) was regarded as the “master of tranquility and human virtue and the perfection of the Dao.” Another female Daoist Sun Buer 孫不二 (1119–1182) is one of the most prominent female masters in Daoist history, the only female figure among the seven patriarchs of the Northern School of Daoism in the Song dynasty. Her work is the foundation of the School of Purity and Stillness 清靜 (*Qingjing*), which advocates concentrating one’s heart or mind on the *Daodejing*’s concepts of emptiness and quietness.

This understanding of *xu* and *jing* is rooted in natural phenomena. According to classical Chinese thought, everything emerges from the dark ground and hidden places. A plant comes from a seed that has been hidden in the depths of the earth. The power of growing and nourishment below the surface allows it to spring up and be displayed. In the same way that the soil provides nourishment for the seed, the mother provides a nourishing condition that allows the child to grow and flourish, just as the female body supplies all nutrients for a fetus to survive and develop. When the male’s sperm meets the female’s egg, the former’s function in the process of creating new life can be completed. The female, however, works slowly, nourishing the fetus for nine months. The power and uniqueness of the female’s slower effort should be recognized. Thus femininity is *xu* because it can offer a space for a thing to grow. Femininity is *jing*

(stillness) because it exemplifies the potency of nourishing. This female ability wins the *Daodejing*'s philosophical recognition and admiration. It is called "dark efficacy" (mysterious virtue).

The Dao generates them;  
 The De [efficacy] nourishes them;  
 As things they are formed; And as utensils they are completed.  
 Therefore, the ten thousand things honor the Dao  
 and cherish the De [efficacy].  
 Honoring the Dao,  
 cherishing the De.  
 The Dao generates them,  
 Nourishes them,  
 Lets them grow,  
 Accompanies them,  
 Rests them,  
 Secures them,  
 Fosters them,  
 Protects them.  
 Generating without possessing,  
 Acting without depending,  
 Rearing without ordaining:  
 This is called "dark efficacy." [玄德 *xuande*]

(Moeller 2007: 121)

The importance of this feminine knowing brings out an epistemic assumption underlying thinking: any given point of knowing, like the male/masculine or the female/feminine, is only a small knot in a giant and coherent gendered web. Any knowing contains infinite unknowing, because the known discloses only a part of the unknown. Nonetheless, because we naturally focus on what is present and available, masculinity/*yang*, we pay great attention to the foreground and often ignore the background, femininity/*yin*. Farmers exemplify the *Daodejing*'s point: they do not simply see what will grow out of the soil, but also make an effort to cultivate the soil, that is, they attend to the background. A seed is embraced in the depths of the earth, where it will grow and be nourished, which will allow it to spring up and be on display to the world. And farming is very similar to mothering, as special attention is needed in the cultivation and growth of a child.

Clearly this Daoist gendered knowing is not structured according to a Pythagorean dichotomy between a heavenly order of rationality and a terrestrial disorder of irrationality.



There are not two qualitatively different realms—one the calculable order of heaven that appeals to our thought, the other a variety of earthly shapes and events impinging upon our observation and sensual experience. The world of the senses is pervasive throughout the interplay of cosmic forces, which rule the stars in the heaven, the seasons on the earth, and the smallest elements in human beings.

This Daoist view challenges the gender asymmetry that has been pervasive in the history of Western philosophy, in which the masculine poses as a disembodied universality while the feminine gets constructed as a disavowed corporeality. But the femininity of Daoism is not based in an exclusion of the masculine; nor is the masculine taken to be a rejection of the feminine. There is no feminine outside of the masculine, and there is no masculine outside of the feminine. This prescribes a developmental and dynamic process that defines an original fullness of the ultimate reality and of human being.

Basically, this female Daoist thinking is grounded in the value of the body. There is no dualistic dichotomy that separates reason from emotion and excludes femininity, the body, and engagement from rationality and knowing. As *Daodejing* chapter 13 claims:

Thus, if you esteem taking care of your body (*sheng* 身) more than you do taking care of the world,

Then you can be entrusted with the world;

if you love your body as if it were the world,

then the world can be handed over to you.

(Moeller 2007: 33)

### The Female Mode: The Ultimate Power and Strategy

In a general sense, throughout much of human history and across many cultures, the masculine has been associated with power, control, and dominance, whereas the feminine has been associated with yielding, flexibility, and submissiveness. The *Daodejing* inverts the values of these aspects, pointing out the power of the feminine. Traditionally, however, that inversion went against mainstream views, particularly those of the Confucians who dominated social and political institutions. The *Daodejing* started a full-fledged campaign to put greater pressure on the sages' leadership ability, moral character, and actions. This calling rippled through the fabric of Chinese culture. Sages—who were traditionally men—must have a capacity for fostering femininity.

Scholars have articulated two gendered animal sets for evaluating human actions in early China. The cow and bull correlate with categories of things (e.g. Earth and Heaven) and actions (e.g. receiving and giving). The hen and rooster expound a type of behavior (e.g. humility and arrogance). *Xiongjie* 雄節—rooster mode—invariably leads to fighting and destruction while *cijie* 雌節—hen mode—inevitably generates peace and prosperity. As some scholars write, “Interestingly, the parallel structure inferred in the phrasing for cock mode indicates that hen mode promises to fulfill all the classic goals touted throughout pre-modern Chinese social orders: wealth, health, and progeny” (Ryden 1997: 40). The *Daodejing* exemplifies this emphasis and promotes the “hen mode,” which is the path to be with *Dao* and gains the power that defeats the great and hard.

*Daodejing* 10 asks: “When heaven’s gate opens and closes, can you become female [*ci*]?” (Moeller 2007: 25). Chapter 28 suggests: “Know *xiong* (male) and maintain *ci*

(female), be the world's river" (Moeller 2007: 71). The *Daodejing* accentuates the greater power of the feminine, as in chapter 61: "A large state is low lying waters, the female [*pin*] of the world, the connection of the world. The female [*pin*] overcomes the male by constant stillness. Because she is still, she is therefore fittingly underneath" (Moeller 2007: 141). The *Daodejing* also uses water as a metaphor for intrinsic feminine power and resilience in chapter 8:

The best is like water.

The goodness of water consists in

Being beneficial to the ten thousand things,

And in that it, when there is contention, takes on the place that the mass of the people detest.

(Moeller 2007: 21)

Chapter 78 reads:

Nothing in the world is smoother and softer than water;

but nothing surpasses it in tackling the stiff and the hard,

because it is not to be changed.

That water defeats the solid,

That the soft defeats the hard:

No one in the world who does not know this,

But still no one is able to practice it.

(Moeller 2007: 181)

*Daodejing* chapter 76 also makes a simple observation to confirm the significance of softness:

When alive, men are supple and soft.

When dead, they are, stretched out and reaching the end, hard and rigid.

When alive, the ten thousand things and grassed and trees are supple and pliant.

When dead, they are dried out and brittle.

Therefore it is said:

The hard and the rigid are the companions of death.

The supple and the soft the delicate and the fine are the companions of life.

(Moeller 2007: 177)

Another key factor in this feminine power is a strategy of *yin* 阴. In contemporary Western terminology, this *yin* is similar to the idea of resourcefulness. In the *Lüshi Chunqiu* of 239 BCE, the notion of relying on (因 *yin*) has great importance: "By employing

the techniques of ‘relying’ [*yin*], the poor and lowly can vanquish the rich and noble and the small and weak can control the strong and big” (Knoblock and Reigel 2000: 358). “Relying” is a technique or strategy for success. On what does one rely?

“The wise invariably rely on the right timing or opportunity. But there is no guarantee that the timing or opportunity will come, so one must also rely on ability, just like making use of a boat or a cart” (Knoblock and Reigel 2000: 360). What one relies on is the natural propensity of things, such as water’s power or the tendencies of the human heart. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* articulates this ability to be resourceful through examples:

When those scrutinize the sky to recognize the four seasons by examining the zodiac constellations, this is an instance of relying on the natural state of things. When those who keep the calendars know when the first and last days of the month will occur by observing the movements of the moon, this is a case of relying on the natural state of things [*yin* 因].

(Knoblock and Reigel 2000: 367)

The uniqueness of a sage is found, at least partly, in this ability. Another passage illuminates further:

The true kings of antiquity acted less on their own and more by “relying on.” The person of relying on has the art/technique of a sovereign; action is the way of ministers. Acting by oneself entails disturbance; reliance on others will have quiescence. Relying on winter creates cold; relying on summer creates heat—what need is there for the sovereign to act in that matter? Thus, it is said, the *Dao* of the lord is not knowing and not acting. Yet because it is worthier than knowing and acting, it attains the truth.

(Knoblock and Reigel 2000: 416)

As a strategy, “relying” shifts the focus away from one’s own actions and powers and instead emphasizes what is already available in a given situation. In different conditions, one needs to figure out what kinds of things can be relied on. What are the resources available? There can be different kinds of relying under different circumstances, but everything must have something to rely on for its own existence. This belief also makes clear why *guanxi* (關係) – social connections—permeates all aspects of Chinese social life even up today.

Relying, as a form of non-action or *wuwei* (無為), or appearing soft, indicates the importance of trusting the rhythm, patterns, timing, and opportunities that have an inherent tendency to unfold in a given moment. This relying is different from a causal relationship that articulates a linear sequence between events. Relying is embedded in complexity; it is relying on the context of associations. What sages rely on are the *yin*/feminine factors: *yin* emphasizes background and hidden structures, whereas *yang* specifies what is dominant, open, and in front. Thus *Liezi* says,

If you want to be hard (*gang* 剛), you must guard it with softness (*rou* 柔); if you want to be strong, you must protect it with weakness (*ruo* 弱). Hardness that is accumulated in softness will be necessarily hard and strength that is accumulated in weakness will be necessarily strong.

(Graham 1990: 83)

The necessity of considering *yin* factors arises on several different levels, most of which we have already addressed in more abstract terms. Emptiness (*xu* 虛) and nothingness (*wu* 無) are always intertwined with fullness (*shi* 實) and being (*you* 有). Consider, for example, a vessel or container (*qi* 器), as discussed in the *Daodejing*. A vessel only serves its purpose because of its emptiness. Thus, concrete things themselves always exist through an element of emptiness. Non-presence is embedded in presence. While we might say that both are equally important, our tendency to see only the present and the difficulty of addressing the non-present suggests a deliberate strategy for focusing on the unseen.

### Final Remarks

The *Daodejing* makes a philosophical imaginary of the feminine into a privileged locus and relies on the feminine as a way of thinking, knowing, experiencing, and desiring. This study of the *Daodejing* can proffer a useful framework for raising female consciousness in Daoist contexts. Neither women nor men should reject their important aspects of femininity; rather, both should cultivate their femininity to achieve effective results. However, femininity as the *Daodejing* conceives it was situated in a particular cultural and historical context, so that the text was not intended to change women's social and political position in China. It does not promote the kind of gender equality that Western feminists fight for. The *Daodejing* has not been used politically, socially, and economically to advance women's interests and benefits.

The historical relations between Daoism and patriarchy are both conceptually and practically complex. Daoism values female power and femininity conceptually because it takes them to be a cosmic potent force. To do this, however, is neither to respect women as social beings nor to justify the patriarchal system. Daoism (*dao**jia*) as a school of teaching does not fight to better women's social and political conditions. But Daoism (*dao**jiao*) as a religious practice has offered an alternative way for women to live and to redefine those restrictive social expectations and roles. In particular, Daoism as religious practice does not have fixed restrictions on what women can or cannot do in term of religious leadership. Many Daoist religious masters in China today are women. Thus, Daoism does not make a political critique of the mainstream of Confucian patriarchy, yet it does not fully support that mainstream either.

Nonetheless, a Daoist feminism might use Daoist femininity to challenge sexist patriarchy and cultivate a different value system. China today greatly needs an injection of feminist thought to truly assist women's living conditions. There are at least two conceptual issues we might take from the ancient Chinese Daoist philosophy of femininity. First, this philosophy can help us to rethink the very notions of man/male/masculinity and woman/female/femininity, which are constructed through gendered terminology. The original concepts of female and male in the *Daodejing* were articulated to capture the dynamic rhythm of the nature, the world, and human life. They have little to do with contemporary Western constructions of the social gender of women or men. The *Daodejing* would agree with many Western feminists when they take the view that gender is not natural and that there is nothing essentially fixed about gender roles. The gender identification of women with femininity and men with masculinity implies a predestined biological and social fate. Women and men have internalized those gender-biased social expectations and standards to surrender to a social system. Furthermore, gender as system of social categorization is performative and is culturally

taught, cognitively framed, and implemented by individuals. In contrast, the original concepts of female and male in the *Daodejing* describe the ebb and flow of everything in existence as a sustained dance of *wu* and *you*, *yin* and *yang*.

Second, the Daoist conception of femininity reminds us that feminine and masculine constructions must be situated in the rhythm of interactions and mutual integration. Daoism values fluidity, not solidity. Like *yin* and *yang* classifications of the human body, the same element can be *yin*/female in a certain relation but *yang*/male in another, and one can talk about *yin*/female within a *yang*/male, or *yang*/male within a *yin*/female. Moreover, like the yinyang distinction in the human body the division between the male and female in social life should be highly dynamic and fluid . . . more like using chopsticks rather than a fork and knife. The latter require two hands, while the former constitutes more of a singular harmonious action, with one hand negotiating the utensils. Therefore, using chopsticks is a kind of harmony in action. They must be used in concert with one another. Similar to classifications of femininity and masculinity, the chopsticks' exact position or classification may vary, but only within a rhythmical and interrelated framework—an ongoing dance of mutually engaged and nurturing equals. This is the manifestation of the cosmic forces *yin* and *yang*. Thus, instead of fixating on gender roles as a determining aspect of one's identity, they can be viewed as aspects of the situation with which one can choose to go along. However, they are not decisive for one's identity. A person can “play” or move between different characteristics, be male or female, depending on the situation. One is not limited to what society prescribes.

Finally, the *Daodejing* affirms the remarkable female power contained in *Dao*. Daoism becomes the philosophy most amenable to female influence, glorifying the latent force of the female water element, illuminating the potency of the mother, and prescribing the Daoist sovereign to cleave to the role of the female. We have much to learn from this ancient wisdom!

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### Related Topics

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Feminist methods in the history of philosophy (Chapter 1); feminism and ancient Greek philosophy (Chapter 2); language, writing, and gender differences (Chapter 24); Native American chaos theory and the politics of difference (Chapter 30); Confucianism and care ethics (Chapter 44); multicultural and postcolonial feminisms (Chapter 47).

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