

Aesthetic Being in Daoism

Summary

People in the West have often regarded Chinese philosophical and religious ideas in terms of their own worldview, values, and philosophical concepts, which in large part are born of dualistic thinking. Such a Eurocentric response has given birth to many stereotypes in assessing Chinese culture.

One of perhaps the most firmly entrenched clichés is the attempt to regard Daoism as an exclusively aesthetic worldview in contrast to Confucianism as an exclusively ethical teaching. This view is almost inseparable from two other stereotypes: the identification of Daoism with the search for transcendental reality and with individualism in contrast, respectively, to the earthliness of Confucianism and its social orientation, or the values that it promotes of living in society.

The connection between these views is entirely rational. As we may imagine, the Daoist, who considers art one of the most sacred ways of directly experiencing the metamorphoses, or Dao, of being and non-being, prefers to occupy himself with this art in solitude by communing not with people but with nature. Thus, he supposedly negates universal human values and morality as well as the squalor of everyday life and devotes himself to the contemplation of the transcendent and of higher reality. The Confucian, on the other hand, whose foremost concern is the affairs of society and saving face, finds fulfillment only in relation to people – in a relation which in essence is considered ethical, obligating him to uphold social norms and rituals as well as thus giving meaning to his life here and now, in the confusion of everyday existence.

The goal of this study, to be exact, is a critical analysis and assessment of these interconnected stereotypes which have long formed the basis for distinguishing between the Daoist and Confucian traditions in a way that has not allowed a more adequate un-

derstanding of either their interconnection or their real differences. In other words, my goal is to show that Daoism is a philosophy and a religion and a way of life and an aesthetic and an ethic whose cohesion becomes perhaps most clearly meaningful in art and artistic creation. This is a book about the Daoist unity, harmony, and center in all of these forms and aspects of its manifestation.

The fundamental idea of this book is that to be or live according to the Dao means being in a direct relationship with the world and experiencing its mutability – experiencing sensorily, empirically, energetically, with one's entire body and being. To be means being at the center, nurturing and creating oneself as a microcosm in a non-committal relationship with others, and being able to harmonize all opposites, or "to be in the world without being in it." More precisely put, the Dao does not require cutting oneself off from the world (people, things, everyday life) because this world is part of the entire cosmos, or Dao, nor does it require tying oneself to the world because this world only points to true existence or eternal potentiality, i.e., that mysterious subtlety in which ontological and artistic experience is fused.

Therefore, as an object of study and also for the title of this book I have selected not aesthetics but aesthetic being. I regard this not as a rigorously defined concept but rather as a metaphor to help comprehend the incomprehensible aspects, as it were, of man's relationship to the world. With the help of this metaphor, I try to look at the Daoist art of life and Daoist artistic works from a much broader – ontological and cosmological – perspective. I try to expand the understanding of Daoist aesthetics and show how these aesthetic ideas and concepts are connected to the universal and distinctive aspects of the Daoist worldview as well as how these ideas were transformed in the general history of the development of Chinese aesthetics. I think that this perspective will not only help reveal the distinctive relationship that Daoists have to nature (things) but will also help the reader take a different look at their relationship to people and the world of people – relationships that cannot

be defined in dualistic terms and to which, in fact, it is difficult to apply any Western concepts. I hope that my analysis of this latter relationship (between the individual and society) will help reveal the status and place of the Daoist artist in the process of artistic creation as well as the ethical content of Daoism, which connects it to Confucianism.

The concept of aesthetic being has been chosen for several reasons. First, I consider the concept of aesthetics (in the classical Western sense) too limited and theoretical to describe the aesthetic worldview of Daoism. After all, it was only in the twentieth century and as a Western neologism that the Chinese themselves began to use this concept, which they connected mainly with beauty (something reflected in the Chinese word for aesthetics – *meixue*, i.e., the study of beauty) and began to apply retrospectively to the entire tradition of early Chinese thought. I think that the concept of aesthetic being far more adequately conveys the ideas of early (classical) Daoism, which at that time had not yet crystallized into a consistent aesthetical theory. This concept also reveals that the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi are connected to Chinese aesthetics as a certain field of artistic practice and reflection on art itself, a field which began to form during the third and fourth centuries (i.e., the period of the Six Dynasties).

Second, this concept embraces a far broader – not only aesthetic but also ethical, religious – dimension, thus helping show that ethical ideas and the ethicality of human existence were no less important for the Daoists than the Confucians, the difference being that they understood this ethicality far more broadly than the Confucians or than people in the West define it. The main distinctive feature of Daoist ethics is that (just like Confucianism, incidentally) it does not provide any one way that is acceptable and suitable for everyone but rather suggests that each person seek his own individual relationship with other people and nature. This relationship tends to be non-committal but natural and may be called, paradoxically, incoherent coherence.

And finally, I hope that the concept I have chosen of aesthetic being will help better reveal the connection of Daoist artistic and aesthetic concepts to ontology and cosmology, at the center of which is the ideal of harmony and unity. This concept of aesthetic being conveys the connection, especially important in Daoism, between art and life. It gives far more comprehensive meaning to the sensoriness of the Daoist relationship to the world, something that is also special: it unites sensory and supersensory experience, which does not allow one to become attached to a specific reality or thing (depicted object). In other words, the Daoist seeks to experience through it (i.e., the specific thing) the reality that is hidden beyond it or in its depths, a reality that is universal, difficult to grasp, but also an inexhaustible source of experiences, often simply called the Dao or spirit.

The concept of aesthetic being is not entirely my own creation. I was encouraged to settle on it by the earlier attempts of Sinologists to describe, in specific terms, the distinctiveness of the traditional Chinese worldview in order to show that it is different from that of the West. It was called "undifferentiated aesthetic continuum" (F. S. C. Northrop), "comprehensive harmony" (Thomé H. Fang), "aesthetic order" (Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall), etc. Usually these concepts were used to describe man's relationship to the world from an epistemological viewpoint, i.e., the distinctively Chinese way of experiencing and knowing the world.

Many of these perspectives primarily focus on highlighting the epistemological, cosmological, and ontological aspects of the Chinese (and specifically Daoist) worldview while emphasizing the intersubjectivity of the relationship between the separate part and the whole, the dynamic-processual nature of the existence of this whole and its elements, and the immanence of their dispersion. While relying on some of these insights, I would still like to reveal in greater detail how this cosmological model was embodied or applied in real practical activity – in artistic creation, in

relationships with other people, i.e., in everything that I have comprehensively called aesthetic being.

Therefore, my attention will be mainly devoted not to an analysis of the epistemological problems of Daoism but to the embodiment of its ontological concepts in society and art, which in my opinion are especially connected and perhaps best reveal the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values in Daoism. For this reason, I will thoroughly analyze the most important Daoist ideals of human perfection, ideals which precisely show the entire paradoxicality of the relationship between human and the world (people) in Daoism and, in my opinion, do not allow one to characterize Daoism rationally and unambiguously.

One of the most important links between these spheres is, in my estimation, the human body, which determined a special aesthetic relationship with the world on all levels by connecting alchemical, artistic, and religious practice (but in no way allowing them to be equated). A no less significant factor connecting various experiences and activities is what I consider one of the most important principles of the Chinese worldview – situativity, which was given meaning in the works of Daoist thinkers and formed the basis of all artistic creation. Therefore, as the most important strategic or practical principle of the Chinese for maintaining relations with the world, it will receive special attention in this book.

One of the main methods employed in this study is the linguistic etymological method, which the Chinese themselves have employed since the oldest times. Its importance can be explained, first of all, by the role of the Chinese language in Chinese culture, where it formed the entire cultural consciousness of the Chinese. An etymological analysis of characters perhaps helps best to reveal that primal direct experience of the world which was expressed for all time in pictographic symbols and has survived until today. However, this analysis does not merely help reveal a visual conception of the world and, with the help of pictographs, highlight the interconnections of things (by analyzing characters that have the same radi-

cal). No less important here is the phonetic aspect of Chinese, which helps reveal these connections with the help of words that sound the same. These connections are made clear by looking for homonymic words. This practice was already most extensively applied in the first Chinese etymological dictionaries, where one character was defined by means of its links to words that sound the same.

Finally, the preference of Chinese Sinologists for analyzing many of the problems and aspects of their philosophy by means of certain concepts also reveals the special status of these concepts in Chinese philosophy. These concepts are not the result of reductive reasoning or of a certain generalization of ideas but are the sources of these ideas. They are certain points of reference, "grains," or "centers" that open the way in all directions and help connect certain phenomena and ideas with others rather than limit them to a specific, defined context. For this reason, concept analysis is extensively applied in both Chinese and Western Sinology. This method will also be extensively employed in my study.

This book will rely mainly on the classical philosophical-religious works of Daoism *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as well as on some other works of a synthetic-eclectic nature in which Daoist ideas dominate (*Guanzi*, *Huainanzi*, *Lushi Chunqiu*). When analyzing the sources of Chinese aesthetic and artistic theory, it is not possible to get by without *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), which was equally important to both Confucianism and Daoism, in a certain sense connecting these traditions. Therefore, I will rely on it extensively in the third part of my book.

This book consists of three parts. The first, "The Origin and Goal of Aesthetic Being – the Dao," is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of the Dao because one cannot otherwise grasp the distinctive nature and practice of Daoist aesthetic being. In the first section, I will briefly survey the history of how Daoism and the Dao were received in the West and various responses, drawing attention to their frequent one-sidedness, to Western attempts to interpret the Dao in terms of the concept of the Christian God and to see

Daoism only through its two basic texts, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, something which accordingly promoted the separation of Daoist philosophy and religion. The current focus in Daoism studies on its religious aspect and on practical methods of self-help as well as the peculiar boom of this emphasis in the West also create a danger of vulgarizing the religious ideas and practice of Daoism by adapting them to the goals of Western consumerism.

Next, I distinguished three aspects of the Dao – the cosmogonical, the cosmological, and the ontological – which are analyzed in three separate sections: “The Dao – the Source of the Cosmos,” “The Dao – the Principle of the Universe,” and “The Dao – Process of Becoming and Transformation.” In regard to the cosmogony of the Dao, special attention is directed at the connection of the Dao to chaos, which determined its distinctiveness as the source of being. In light of the importance of chaos in the Daoist worldview, Daoist cosmogony may be described as a disorderly order that helps explain the interconnections and distinctiveness of all its elements (things, people). It also helps explain the relationship between existence and non-existence, i.e., their mutuality, which does not allow the Dao to be made transcendental or completely material.

In the third section, which is devoted to the cosmology of the Dao, to revealing its functions as a universal regulative and principle of being, one of the stereotypical assessments is critically rethought: the association of the Dao with femininity and the exaltation of the latter. Here, I try to show that any exaltation of one quality and disparagement of another would contradict the Daoist logic of the unity of opposites. Most extensively perhaps, this section analyzes two important Daoist concepts – spontaneity (*ziran*) and non-action (*wuwei*) – revealing their interconnection and the diversity of meaning of the latter (*wuwei*). To this end, I distinguish five levels of understanding and applying *wuwei*, levels whose ultimate goal is forgetting *wuwei* itself.

The fourth section analyzes the ontological aspect of the Dao – its dissemination as a concept of mutability and permanence (mu-

table permanence and permanent mutability). Here, attention is focused on the diversity of concepts of mutability itself in Chinese philosophy and on the distinctiveness of this concept in Daoism, where, it is maintained, mutability is understood, first of all, as transformativeness or transformation (*hua*). The perspective of transformativeness is also used to analyze the Daoist concept of death, which is best illustrated by some histories from *Zhuangzi*. No less important is the Daoist concept of return, which nurtures the permanence of the Dao and indicates the way to experiencing the highest value – Oneness.

The second part of this book, “The Way of Heaven and of Human,” is devoted to an analysis of the ways of Heaven and human and of their relationship. This analysis helps reveal the goals of human self-development and perfection – to be united with Heaven, to absorb heavenliness. The first section discusses the understanding of the way of Heaven and of heavenliness, in large part on the basis of the work *Zhuangzi*. Here, Heaven often assumes some of the qualities of the Dao and is primarily understood as a natural entity connected with the nature of human beings and other creatures. The second section analyzes the human way and the bounds of humanity, more precisely, its boundlessness. This section tries to show that in Daoism human is understood not as a given but as a possibility. Here, attention is mainly focused on the Daoist concept of the human body and personality (*shen*), revealing the contradictoriness and various aspects of this concept (body-form – *xing*; ego – *wo, ji, zi, si*). This analysis leads to the conclusion that Daoism proposes not the rejection of the body in general but only the transformation of some of its aspects, essentially seeking to foster the seamless unity of body and spirit.

The third section discusses human self-development as a bringing into harmony of the “inner” (*nei*) and the “outer” (*wai*). It is a continuation of sorts of the second section, but here attention is focused on the ideal of fostering the plenitude of vital powers (*de*). For precisely this ideal influenced the special attitude toward

one aspect of the body – form, i.e., outward shape, and its relationship to what is within. Perhaps the most important role in this fostering process is played by the heart-mind (*xin*), by its regulation, purification, and emptying, whose stages and ways of application are extensively analyzed here and illustrated with picturesque narratives from *Zhuangzi*.

The fourth section discusses one of the Daoist ideals of human perfection – the authentic person (*zhen ren*) – revealing the contradictory views of this ideal and its connection to the human world. *Zhuangzi* did not clearly answer the question of which of these ways the authentic person prefers, speaking instead in paradoxes. However, his most important goal should be considered fostering Oneness, which, as it were, resolves the contradictions involved in harmonizing the heavenly and the human. One of the most important aspects of authenticity (*zhen*) is that it points inward, to inner reality, which does not necessarily require a corresponding outer expression. This meaning of *zhen* had, I think, perhaps the most important influence on Daoist aesthetics and art, where rendering it became one of the artist's goals.

The fifth section analyzes one of the most important ways of being and perfection in Daoism – carefree wandering, with which the Daoist understanding of freedom and individuality is associated. This analysis prompted a new look at the problem of being a hermit in Daoism, with the recognition that this state was often assessed from the perspective of European thought and culture, in terms of stereotypes formed by dualistic thinking. Here, attention is focused on outward seclusion (seclusion from something) and inward, or true, seclusion, which is true only if it is not sought and reflected upon. However, even this sort of seclusion does not deny the existence of others and does not demand isolation from people but is instead understood as “being in the world without being in it.” In other words, it means neither seclusion nor non-seclusion, for it is based on the same concept of the oneness of differences which *Zhuangzi* calls “being at the center and

going two ways at once." This concept also explains the distinctive Daoist ideal of human friendship.

The sixth section is devoted to a discussion of another important Daoist ideal of perfection – that of the sage (*shengren*). Here, I try to show that precisely he best embodied the Daoist goal of not stopping after reaching the pinnacle of wisdom but going further. In other words, he shows that there is no end to becoming perfect because the goal of Daoist self-development is to help other people, or "after achieving the holy, to return to the human," i.e., to be able to harmonize the ways of Heaven and of man.

The third part of this book, "The Conjoining of Nature and Human Creation in Art," analyzes ways of incorporating features of the Dao and methods of action in artistic creation. Thus, the first section discusses the process of artistic creation and artistic understanding, with an extensive analysis of one of the most important concepts of Chinese aesthetics – vital energy (*qi*). Here, various understandings of *qi* in early (classical) Chinese philosophy are revealed: *qi* as primary vital energy that gives life to all things and people, as psychophysical energy that determines the distinctive character of human nature and feelings, and as all-encompassing vital energy that links people and things on a principle of mutual response. Also shown is the transformation of these understandings in the history of Chinese aesthetics into an entire range of specific concepts that reveal the distinctive character of artistic creation and understanding, their orientation toward the sense of an all-encompassing, subtle, spiritual atmosphere. The concept of *qi* also helps reveal the interconnection that joins all the links in the process of artistic creation – the artist, the work, the viewer – an interconnection which also includes the cosmos as the impetus for this process.

The second section discusses the influence of *The Book of Changes* on the Chinese aesthetic worldview, with special attention devoted to its strategic principle – situativity – and to the explication of the origin and evolution of the world, on which the

formation of trigrams and hexagrams is based. Also analyzed is the concept of image or symbol (*xiang*) as well as its diversity in *The Book of Changes* because this concept was especially important in Chinese painting and for all visual aesthetic understanding.

The third and fourth sections discuss the application of this principle in artistic creation – in painting and music respectively. In regard to painting, especially important is the concept of energetic impulse, or impetus – *shi* – which was used in early Chinese military strategy and in the logistic theory of government. Here, the application of *shi* in calligraphy and painting is treated, for precisely this concept reveals the distinctive nature of situativity in this art. However, no less important is the first principle of painting – spirit resonance and life movement – which points to the highest goal of painting: spiritual embodiment, which links the creator and the viewer and gives meaning to painting as a method of seeking the Dao.

The principle of situativity is no less important in music, especially in playing the *qin* (a type of zither), whose principles are analyzed in the fourth section. Here, attention is also focused on the role of music itself and of hearing in Daoism and in all of Chinese aesthetics because this role is often ignored, with first place being given to visual perception and the significance of seeing. The greatest attention is devoted to the teaching of Ji Kang in *Ode to the Qin* (*Qin Fu*) and to the work *Music Conveys Neither Sadness Nor Joy*. I think that precisely this work best reflects the Daoist theory of music and the Daoist concept of the highest emotion (e.g., joy) as non-emotion, a concept that follows from the ontological concept of the connections between being and non-being.

On the other hand, an analysis of the principles of painting and music shows the special Daoist goal of reflecting nature as naturally as possible. This analysis leads to the conclusion that in Daoism creation by human cannot be distinguished from creation by nature, that these two forms of creation cannot be described by applying dualistic Western concepts of nature and culture.