

Original Paper

The Influence of Taoism on American Literature, a Study from the Perspective of Western Binary Opposition

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Abstract

With the deepening communication between the East and the West. Taoism, a domestic religion in China, has also been introduced into the Western world. In particular the masterpiece of Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, has affected numerous readers. There is a huge gap between Western binary opposition and the Eastern philosophy contained in Taoism. Caused by such a mentality, the misunderstanding of American literature on Tao Te Ching and Taoism is ubiquitous. This paper mainly analyzes the introduction and translation of Tao Te Ching in America, the misinterpretation and acceptance of the theory of Lao Tzu and the influence of Taoism on American writers, poets and Chinese-born American writers. Taoism has been greatly promoted and accepted in America with the help of these scholars and works.

Keywords

Taoism, Tao Te Ching, binary opposition, American literature

1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief Introduction to Taoism

Taoism is the only domestic religion in China which owns a history over thousands of years. It is generally believed that Lao Tzu was the creator of Taoism, a philosophy in the Spring and Autumn Period. He claimed that Tao was the principle of the world in *Tao Te Ching*. At that time, Taoism was still a school, not a religion. In the East Han dynasty, Taoism gradually became a religious group. His followers honored Lao Tzu as the founder of Taoism and *Tao Te Ching* as the main classic. As a religion, Taoists in China are not so dominant compared with other main religions at present, but Taoism has already emerged with traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. Taoism concepts like the theory of Yin and Yang, and non-interference are symbols of oriental philosophy. Taoism practices are also inherited by numerous Chinese, such as ancestor worship, Fengshui and tai chi. Clearly, Taoism is

an integral part of Chinese civilization.

1.2 *The Spread of Taoism in the West*

In the 18th century, *Tao Te Ching* had been introduced to Europe by missionaries, written in Latin (Wu, p. 11). Due to the lasting influence of Christianity and binary opposition, most of them couldn't get the authentic meaning of Taoism. On the contrary, they took this book as an inessential complement to their God instead of accepting it, though a few European philosophers appraised this ancient oriental wisdom such as Kant and Hegel (Gao, Zhao, p. 37). The foundation of the United States was based on Western civilization and religion. Like Europeans, these early immigrants were also influenced by Western binary opposition.

But in the 20th century, with the rising of large-scale industrialism and technology, more and more Americans realized that Western civilization was not a panacea for all problems, especially when it comes to world war and increasingly greedy hearts. So some of them tried to find the solution in the East and Taoism. In American literature, some writers and poets studied the system and philosophy of Taoism. Their works greatly help the spread of Taoism in the West. Just like the union of Yin and Yang in Taoism, their successes prove that the union of different religions and cultures is also workable.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Literature Review*

The spread of Taoism in the West is a hot topic in intercultural study. Wu made a systematic and detailed study on the history of foreign languages' versions of Lao Tzu's masterpiece *Tao Te Ching*, and the different translations and interpretations of Lao Tzu in the English-speaking world. Gao and Zhao made an analysis of the Western interpretation of *Tao Te Ching* from 3 main aspects: religion, philosophy and the public (p. 36-38). Shao set the background in the 20th century, and introduced the influence of Taoism on the Western literature field (p. 53-54). Cai and Qin introduced the spread of *Tao Te Ching* in American society, and pointed out the mentality of Western culture like binary opposition (p. 83). Wang made a comparison between Western binary opposition and Eastern fusion of humans and nature, then listed their possible effects on nature.

Some scholars noticed the influence of Taoism on American literature, so they found evidence from different American writers and their works. Guo made an introduction of the literature work of Benjamin Hoof, and analyzed the plots in the book. Liu and Si listed the achievements and books of American scholar Livia Kohn. Cai made an analysis of American acceptance of Taoism in different ways, and listed their improvement in books and daily practices of Tao (p. 7). Yan analyzed the reasons for American poet Robert Bly's acceptance of Taoism, and focused on the influence of Western tradition and binary opposition (p. 173). These works have provided different aspects of Taoism in American society, religion and literature.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Western culture and oriental culture are quite different with each other. One of the most important reasons is the theory of Western binary opposition. Binary opposition is also called dualism. It can be traced back to the idealism of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Modern philosopher Descartes created the theory of dualism based on the mind-body problem. As a pioneer of rationalism, he advocated the absolute division between subject and object (Wang, p. 87). Descartes' philosophy has affected the Western world for hundred years till today. It has indirectly promoted the development of modern technology and encouraged Europeans to explore the new world. It goes without saying that the binary opposition has an immense impact on their minds. So it can be concluded that the theory of binary opposition is deeply-rooted in Western culture and reflected in various aspects of the Western world, such as the opposition between God and humans, humans and nature, and coloured people and white people.

“But oriental tradition supports the blending and exchange of the binaries, like the fusion and transformation of Yin and Yang in Taoism” (Yan, p. 173). It makes sense of the misinterpretation of *Tao Te Ching* and Taoism in the West. When these American writers and scholars change their original view of Taoism, they realize the binary opposition is not totally correct. So they start to express and find Tao in their works, and their works have also affected the masses on the acceptance of Taoism.

3. American Studies of *Tao Te Ching*

As the earliest and the most important masterpiece of Taoism, *Tao Te Ching* is considered as the gateway to seeking Tao. From the early translation of *Tao Te Ching*, it can be seen that misinterpretations are universal. As the melting pot of different races, the clashes between different cultures are very common in America. These English versions of *Tao Te Ching* have provided a new platform for them to learn about Chinese culture and religion in American literature.

3.1 The Introduction and Translation of *Tao Te Ching*

Tao Te Ching had been first introduced into Europe in the late 18th century. At that time, America was just a newly-independent country with many underdeveloped lands. Though a few transcendentalists absorbed some ideas from Confucianism, most scholars didn't pay much attention to the Oriental world, which led that early English versions of *Tao Te Ching* were mostly written by Britons. But after the 20th century, with the economic boom, America stood in for the U.K., becoming the centre of English-speaking countries on translations of *Tao Te Ching*. Especially after WWII, America became the leading country in the Western world. They established research institutes for Chinese culture which directly promoted the studies on Taoism. Statistically, there were 78 English versions of *Tao Te Ching* from 1972 to 2004, and 59 of them were published in America (Wu, p. 12). The American Taoism studies and works are based on *Tao Te Ching*. With a better knowledge of *Tao Te Ching*, then they could try to understand other aspects of Taoism and give their own interpretations.

3.2 *The Misinterpretation and Acceptance of Tao Te Ching*

The earliest English version of *Tao Te Ching* was translated by a British missionary John Chalmers in 1868 (Wu, p. 16). Like former missionaries who introduced Taoism to the West, his understanding of Taoism was based on Christian principles. He translated “the god” in *Tao Te Ching* as “God” in Christianity (Wu, p. 16). This Christian interpretation of *Tao Te Ching* influenced many subsequent translators. Paul Carus, the first American scholar who translated *Tao Te Ching* in 1898, translated “the god” as “the Lord” (Wu, p. 20). Someone translated “Tao” as “Way”, which means the road to God (Cai, Qin, p. 84). These misinterpretations failed to express the authentic ideas of Lao Tzu, but indirectly helped the spread of Taoism at that period. From such examples, it was evident that such interpretations were greatly influenced by the Western binary opposition, because they couldn’t tolerate other gods from different cultures. Under the Christian context, Taoism belief was an adverse enemy to their religion, so they couldn’t and didn’t want to know what was Taoism.

In the 20th century, after witnessing numerous lost lives and devastated houses in world wars, many Westerners took a dim view of human nature. Large-scale industrialism brought material wealth but failed to cure spiritual loss (Yan, p. 173). Lots of Americans tried to seek the antidote from the East. Against such a background, some American scholars tried to interpret *Tao Te Ching* from a different way instead of the original binary opposition. They advocated the simple life like Chinese Taoists, which was to get rid of consumerism driven by material desire and focused on the harmony between humans and nature. American writer Stephen Mitchell published his translation of *Tao Te Ching* in the late 20th century. In order to convey an atmosphere of purity and emptiness of Taoism to his readers, he creatively blended his words with Chinese landscape painting together (Wu, p.28). This combination is also a brilliant practice of Taoism. In his daily life, he is an actual practitioner of Taoism, which helps him better understand the principle of Tao. His English version of *Tao Te Ching* is one of the most important versions in the English world and has affected numerous readers.

4. The Influence of Taoism on American Literature

Under the influence of various versions of *Tao Te Ching*, Taoism is no longer unintelligible, though different people may have their own Tao. Many writers (not just novelists) have started to systematically introduce Taoism and its philosophy to the public. Besides them, poets and American-born Chinese showcase their understanding of Taoism as well. The influence of binary opposition is no longer dominant in their works, and they prove a trend of union influenced by Taoism mentality.

4.1 *The Influence on American Writers*

In the late 20th century, many American writers published their works about Taoism. Most of them were not only writers, but also scholars on religion and Chinese culture. Apart from the ideas of Lao Tzu, they also introduced other aspects of Taoism. Livia Kohn was an outstanding person among them. She wrote a series of books about the introduction of Taoism, such as *Taoist Meditation and Longevity*

Techniques, God of the Tao, and Taoist Body Cultivation (Liu, Si, p. 78). From her books, it can be seen that she is familiar with the system of Taoism as well as Chinese Taoists. In addition to the spiritual pursuit of Tao, she has also probed into the physical practice of pursuing Tao. Her achievements in Taoism is attributed to her decades of practice including qigong, health maintenance and meditation (Liu, Si, p. 78). From her spiritual and physical efforts, she has abandoned the opposition between the East and the West, and finds the union of Tao and herself.

Apart from the introduction of Taoism, some American writers tend to combine Taoism with specific problems in daily life. Sorts of bestsellers are titled “The Tao of XX”, such as *The Tao of Dad, The Tao of Motherhood, The Tao of Dating* and so on (Cai, p. 7). John Heider’s *The Tao of Leadership* is a typical case. It has been reprinted several times since publication. In this book, John connects the principle of nature with leadership together. He depicts Lao Tzu as a wise leader, then applies the wisdom of Lao Tzu to today’s management, so this book is favoured by many American leaders, psychologists and educators (Wu, p. 80). Besides these books targeted at adults, there is children’s literature of Taoism as well. *The Tao of Pooh*, written by Benjamin Hoff, is such an interesting book. Hoff quotes characters from a famous children’s literature Winnie-the-Pooh. Through these classic animal characters like Pooh, Tigger or Rabbit, those abstract and mysterious Taoism concepts are easy to grasp. Hoff excels at using daily trivia to illustrate his ideas of Tao. From the daily conversation between animals, even little kids can understand the inner nature of the world and humorous life wisdom (Guo, p. 189). These writers have combined Taoism with different things together by creative thinking, alike the fusion in Taoism, not the division between them. In this way, they minimize the existence of binary opposition in their works somehow.

Wayne W. Dyer has noticed the traditional Western mindset caused by binary opposition. In his book *Change Your Thoughts, Change Your Life*, he criticizes this opposition and advocates the union of Taoism and Western thoughts (Cai, Qin, p. 83). He interprets the philosophy of Taoism in his own way and extols his God at the same time, so there are still Christian thoughts in this work, but these two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

The above works have various features and understandings, but they all help Taoism cater for American culture. Though most of them confine themselves to their American context, they still reflect certain dialectic thinking and union of Taoism to some degree. This kind of domestic interpretation has greatly helped the spread of Taoism in America.

4.2 *The Influence on American Poets*

Except for writers, Taoism influences many American poets too. Some poets have tried to translate Taoism books and some expressed Tao in their poems. In the early 20th century, American poet Witter Bynner retranslated an English version of *Tao Te Ching*, because he couldn’t read Chinese, titled *The Way of Life According to Lao Tzu* (Wu, p. 101). Unlike other translators, Bynner has elucidated the Tao of life in a poetic way, which makes his works read like philosophical poetry and attract more readers. In the American New Poetry Movement, many poets express their interest in Taoism. These poets

prefer the simple images of nature to highlight the harmony between humans and nature. The ideas of Taoism could be a source of inspiration for their poems, such as W. C. Williams and Carl Sandburg (Shao, p. 54). Fletcher even said that the Pietism in his poems is partially from the non-interference of Lao Tzu (Shao, p. 54). These early American poets see Taoism as essential assistance to their creation. From their poems, the existence of Taoism is indispensable to these poets.

Influenced by these predecessors, Robert Bly, a leading poet of deep image poetics in the 1960s, also stressed the importance of nature (Yan, p. 173). He had been tired of urban life and materialism in modern society, so he turned his attention to ancient Chinese poetry. He clearly noticed the influence of Western binary opposition on people's minds, and found that American poetry would still be overshadowed if they couldn't get rid of this mindset. As Bly put, "the root problem of American poetry lies in the fact that American poetry has been founded upon two basic traditions of American culture: Puritanism and business culture, both of which are essentially materialism" (Yan, p. 174). In order to overcome these obstacles, he tried to find the genuine image from a surreal world and inward life. His ideas just conform to the Taoism concepts such as the union of nature and man, and the balance between Yin and Yang. With the help of Taoism and Oriental culture, Bly finally carried out his duties to reform American poetry (Yan, p. 174).

Poets usually pay attention to the people's spiritual world, and this tenet makes them easier to understand or accept Taoism, so that they can abandon the previous misunderstanding. It stands to reason that American poets are also visible power for promoting Taoism in American society.

4.3 The Influence on American-Born Chinese Writers

The immigration history of Chinese to America is already over a hundred years. These early immigrants' children hold American nationality, but also have Chinese roots. With the increasing population of American-born Chinese, they become a special ethnic group in America: the combination of the Western and Eastern cultures. Deng Mingdao is such a writer. In his book *365 Dao: Daily Meditations*, he introduces a special manner of Taoism-meditation to the masses. He guides people how to achieve the union between our life and Tao through daily meditation (Cai, p. 5). Deng's book has given Americans a new method of pursuing Tao. For Taoists, body practice is a standard procedure. In meditation, they can emerge themselves with nature together, and in this way resist the opposition in their life. For those Americans who want to follow Taoism, they often pay attention to the spiritual aspect, but ignore the body practice of Tao.

Amy Tan is one of the most famous American-born Chinese writers. She writes a series of novels which focus on the clashes between different cultures and the difficulty of national identity. Tan received standard American education in childhood, but her parents kept reminding her of her Chinese roots. In her novels, she advocates American universal values like freedom and equality and criticizes the oppression of Chinese feudal society, but there are also traces of Taoism in her words. For example, in her novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Taoism concepts are mentioned several times, such as the theory of Yin and Yang (Bao, p. 299). The daughter and the mother in this novel are influenced by the

West and the East respectively, so their conflicts represent the contradiction between two disparate civilizations. At the end of this story, the negotiation and reunion between each other is just like the fusion of Yin and Yang, which is quite different from the Western binary opposition. As a Chinese American, Tan can directly feel the intercultural shock, and she notices the usefulness of Taoism in American society as well.

Apart from these American-born Chinese, some Chinese scholars with overseas education have also made contributions to the spread of the Taoism in the West. Lin Yutang is such a representative among them. In 1948, he completed a book to tell about the stories of Lao Tzu in English, titled *The Wisdom of Lao Tzu* (Wu, p. 35). No matter they are Chinese American or overseas Chinese, this group of people are familiar with Chinese and Western culture. They know how to counteract the effect of intercultural clashes, that's why they can clearly elucidate the philosophy of Taoism in English. Their success is further proof of Taoism like the theory of Yin and Yang, rather than Western binary opposition.

5. Conclusion

The Western binary opposition and Christianity have affected many Westerners over centuries. In the “virgin land” America, this kind of influence is still long-lasting. Taoism is a complicated and metaphysical religion even for many Chinese, so it seems understandable that American writers cannot grasp what is Tao. In the early translation of *Tao Te Ching*, their misinterpretation of Taoism was more evident. In American literature, this situation has been improved by many writers, poets and Chinese immigrants. Under their mental or physical exercises of Taoism, they make Taoism more popular among the public, and counteract the effects of binary opposition. From these works, it can be concluded that the influence of Taoism on American literature is massive. Likewise, American literature has shaped its own understanding of Taoism through the fusion and clash of the East and the West. Thanks to their works, the communication between the West and East has been further promoted indirectly.

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