**Role of Taoism in Environment Protection: Case in Modern China**

Janussakova Zaure

Graduate student of International Relations

[Dzhanusakova\_zaure@mail.ru](mailto:Dzhanusakova_zaure@mail.ru)

China, Shanghai

East China Normal University

**Abstract**

Taoism was and rightfully remains one of the East's most widespread philosophical and religious teachings. The prerequisites for the emergence of Taoism were rooted in the public consciousness of the inhabitants of ancient China. Still, it is unknown who exactly is this philosophical movement's founder. One of the most famous and first mentioned Taoists are Laozi（老子） with his treatise "Tao Te Ching" (道德经), Yang Zhu (杨朱), whose views were described in one of the chapters in the treatise "Lie Zi" (列子), as well as Zhuangzi (莊子) who is the author and whose name was given to the book of parables. All these philosophers have contributed to the Taoist teachings, and only their works can be used to write many books and articles. However, in this article, we would like to present readers with only a few key elements from their treatise and explain Taoism's role in the fight for environmental protection in modern China.

**Keywords:** China, Taoism, Laozi, "Tao Te Ching", Zhuangzi, environmental protection

Taoism is most closely associated with the concept of dao (道), which translates as the path or way a person follows. However, this concept can be interpreted in different ways. The first interpretation speaks of general laws followed in different spheres, such as the moon, sun, and stars, called the path of heaven. This means that human activity depends on the movement of these celestial bodies, which entails changes or no changes in his life path. The second meaning says that dao (道) is the basic and universal laws of nature, which all living things obey. The third explanation is very similar to the concept of god in religion, as it explains to us dao (道) as the primary source of everything beyond human understanding, having neither form nor smell. It is the basis of the origin of the universe and human activity.

Also, one of the main principles of Taoism is the term wu wei (无为) which can be interpreted as “nonaction” or “effortless action”. Unfortunately, many Western people understand this expression as nonaction in a negative way, however, in fact, this expression does not carry any negative or positive. Most likely, this expression should be understood as non-interference in the natural state of things, since any interference can turn out in the wrong direction that we wouldn’t like. No wonder “ziran” (自然) is translated as natural or occurring without human intervention. It can be assumed that the expression “tian ren he yi” (天人合一) follows from this principle. The expression “tian ren he yi” (天人合一) means that man and nature are one. Here man is perceived neither as the crown of creation, nor as its slave, but only as one part of it. To be more precise, it implies that both are indivisible and that an influence on one part of this whole can affect another. This idea is the main tenet of Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子). Today, this dogma is as popular in China as it was thousands of years ago and is the background idea that leads the country to step-by-step reforms to protect the environment.

Despite their philosophy of “non-interference in the natural course of things”, due to the greed and selfishness of people that destroyed the natural balance in the world, which led to environmental degradation, the Taoists had to take uncharacteristic measures for them. And now, more than 2,500 years later, where Laozi (老子) wrote his classic volume in Louguantai (楼观台寺), the leading Taoists of China gathered at the same place and concluded the Qinling Agreement, in which they pledged to protect the environment and became part of "Green Revolution" which they called "Daoist Ecological Protection Network"(道教生态保护网络). And since the founding of this organization in 2006, 120 temples have already joined them. Some of these temples use biofuels and solar energy, others plant trees and organize volunteers to collect waste and put-up posters that encourage conservation and the importance of nature. However, some believe these organizations are not as active as other eco-activists that write petitions, protest and distribute leaflets. But by nature, Taoists are not intrusive and passive, which is reflected in their style in the fight for ecology. They prefer to be a role model, which they think can attract more people than being overly aggressive. So, for example, in the 28th chapter of “Tao teqing” it says:

“Know the white,  
yet keep to the black:  
be a model for the world.  
If you are a model for the world,  
the Tao inside you will strengthen  
and you will return whole to your eternal beginning.”

These lines can be understood as if we start with ourselves, lead a righteous life and do good and good deeds, then we can become a role model. Seeing your good deeds, people can follow you and this will lead to a chain of good deeds. In addition to the supreme quotation, we can add chapter 36, which says:

“If you want something to return to the source, you must first allow it to spread out.  
If you want something to weaken,  
you must first allow it to become strong.

If you want something to be removed, you must first allow it to flourish.  
If you want to possess something, you must first give it away.

This is called the subtle understanding  
of how things are meant to be.  
The soft and pliable overcomes the hard and inflexible.

Just as fish remain hidden in deep waters, it is best to keep weapons out of sight.”

This chapter can be interpreted in many ways, but according to the author, it can be assumed that in this part it was meant to act like water, which, due to its softness, can continue to flow even if there is a stone in front of it. You must adapt to the situation, remain calm and not act rashly. You should not be too firm in your intentions, otherwise you can be left with nothing, so you need to make concessions to get what you want.

Summarizing all the above interpretations of the two chapters, we can conclude that the Taoists act on the principle of “soft as water”, that means act without unnecessary aggression. By their example we can see how you can help nature without any extra effort, and people will not be discouraged their desire to help. So that, seeing taoist’s good example, people by themselves want to change their thinking.

One example of how the Taoists respected nature thousands of years ago is their temples. They were skillfully built and did not come into conflict with nature. There were neat paths, small bridges and all this was surrounded by many trees and bushes in different designs. All these temples have always been protected by Taoists, Buddhists and people, and nowadays also by the government. All these landscape designs inspired and continue to inspire all generations of rulers. So, for example, in almost all modern cities in China, you can find public parks with a huge amount of greenery, flowers, and even with their ponds, which are always full of living creatures and lotus flowers. Even in that densely built-up Shanghai of 25 million inhabitants, every district has at least one large park where people can come and enjoy nature in the middle of a huge metropolis.

However, it is worth noting that Taoists also have their own mistakes. For example, in Louguantai (楼观台寺), the Taoists took it upon themselves to protect the most famous animal in China, the panda, which is the symbol of this country. In their opinion, the panda was supposed to enjoy the wild mountain nature, landscape and peace, so it was. But they did not consider that a large stream of tourists can cut through the forest and slowly destroy the pandas' habitat. Here we can assume that there is no fault of the Taoists, they just wanted to help, but as Taoist philosophy says, any action violates the natural course of things. Here, rather, it is necessary to lay the responsibility on the tourists, who did not try to take care of the preservation of the forest, but only led to the quick satisfaction of their desires to see the pandas.

I would like to point out another interesting concept of the Taoists in enlightening people how to introduce themselves to nature, by giving them positive alternatives while avoiding negative expressions. This concept includes explaining what to do and how to do. For example, at the Maoshan Temple (茅山) located near Nanjing, booklets are hung out describing the importance of maintaining cleanliness and its methods. There are such methods of positive reinforcement in psychology that are actively used in the market. If a person is told “do not litter”, then only the word “litter” will be deposited in his subconscious, and the “not” particle will not be remembered. We can dare to assume that the Taoists are very good psychologists, since they understand the human nature and how his brain works.

The administrations of Chinese cities use the same method, where you will often see posters calling for respect for nature and for the people around them. So, for example, posters and video clips calling for sorting garbage into categories, as well as the importance of this action; calls for respect for elders and the importance of culture in public spaces. Or, for example, in the middle and primary school, a lesson on environmental protection was introduced so that children have a sense of responsibility and a level of awareness from childhood. This step will help raise the next generation of Chinese who are even more motivated to enter specialized educational institutions to further study ways to prevent a global environmental catastrophe and protect our common planet.

Another important teaching of Taoism is YinYang (阴阳) which is one of the basic and oldest philosophical concepts in Taoism. It is an explanation of universal unity and continuous change. But unlike Tian Ren He Yi (天人合一), YinYang (阴阳) is not only a symbol of one whole, but also a symbol in which opposites interact with each other and have a strong qi (气) energy that is constantly evolving due to the interaction . This concept of the interaction of two opposites is different from the Western understanding, where black and white are opposed and fought with each other. In Chinese philosophy, the key concept is “he xie” (和谐) harmony and “ping heng” (平衡) balance, which means that YinYang (阴阳) must always be in balance in order to achieve harmony. And if you look at the YinYang symbol (阴阳), it has two parts: white is Yin (阴) which means everything is dark/soft/pliable/feminine, while Yang (阳) is something light/dominant/hard/masculine. But it is also worth noting that on each of these parts there are dots of the opposite color. These points can be interpreted in different ways, for example: every good thing has something bad, and every bad thing has something good. Or something like that Yang (阳) sees the world through the eyes of Yin (阴), and Yang (阳) through the eyes of Yin (阴). In this sign, you can understand that every bad is followed by good, and every good is followed by bad. So, for example, in the 42nd chapter of “Tao teqing” it says:

The Tao gave birth to One.  
The One gave birth to Two.  
The Two gave birth to Three.  
The Three gave birth to all of creation.

All things carry Yin  
yet embrace Yang.  
They blend their life breaths in order to produce harmony.

People despise being orphaned, widowed and poor. But the noble ones take these as their titles.  
In loosing, much is gained,  
and in gaining, much is lost.

What others teach I too will teach:  
"The strong and violent will not die a natural death."

From these lines it follows that a reaction and the world follow every action must be in balance and having lost something, you can always gain something else in return.

Or, for example, a wonderful parable about a runaway horse, which brought another horse, but on which the son of a peasant broke his leg while riding around it, but later, because of the broken leg, this son was not taken to war. This parable makes us understand that life does not consist of only black or only white, but consists of the same pattern as a zebra.

There is an opinion that if the balance is disturbed, wars and crises can begin, which is quite logical. So, if we take the same example with natural resources: if humanity overuses natural resources, they simply will not be able to recover and depletion will occur, which will lead to food, environmental, economic crises, which will subsequently lead to a war for resources and death of millions of people. Based on this and the above, Taoists have four principles that they follow to protect the environment: 1) follow the earth (道法自然), 2) harmony with nature (阴阳平衡) , 3) ​​too much success (知止不殆) , 4) affluence in bio-diversity (万物共生).

The first of these principles of following the earth tells us that we must allow plants to grow naturally and not harm them for no reason. And since religious communities were able to return to the sacred mountains after the Cultural Revolution, in the late 1990s it was found that a wider range of plant species was protected in these areas than in other mountain areas, since Taoist temples highlight local and endangered species and create suitable conditions for them and restore their population. In the second principle, as stated above, they follow the harmony between YinYang (阴阳). Still, we will not repeat ourselves, but only supplement this information with the fact that the Taoists believe that if we use natural ingredients for our medicinal purposes, the balance of YinYang (阴阳) will be disturbed. This medicine will not bring any benefit, but rather cause only harm. One could argue with this statement, since from a biological point of view, all useful components are preserved even after the plant has been uprooted. However, from the Taoists point of view, when the plant is damaged, the qi (气) energy is disturbed, which leads to negative consequences of using the medicine.However, we should agree with them in protecting endangered species of tigers, rhinos and elephants, which poachers hunt for their horns and fangs. Poachers sell them to healers, who often use them in folk medicine as an elixir of youth and energy. Although the Taoists prefer not to use the method of intimidation, the "warning" in this case is extremely effective and useful, as they greatly influence society. The third principle says that the great desire for development is contrary to the harmony and balance of nature, and we must refrain from it even if it brings profit. As was said earlier about the excessive consumption of resources, Taoists argue that excessive ambition can lead to the path of defeat. So, for example, they noticed that the richer the parishioners, the more they bought incense sticks in abundance and burned them in huge quantities, because of this there was a lot of smoke and there was a feeling that the temple was on fire. Therefore, the temples organized the Three Sticks Movement (三支香运动), which means that only three sticks of incense are enough, one for heaven, one for earth and one for yourself. This helped the temple fight air pollution and over-consumption of incense.

Last but not least, the fourth principle of affluence in bio-diversity is that the most valuable and unique thing about Taoism is that it judges wealth by the amount of species diversity. This means that a society or a country can be considered rich if everything flourishes in it, otherwise it can be considered in decline. It is this mindset that prompts the government of not only China, but other countries to take care of nature and save endangered species through the active promotion of respect for plants and animals. The government actively cooperates with Taoist and Confucian temples to promote their ideas to the general public.

It is worth noting that according to some studies, there are about 50,000 Taoist monks in China, who live in a total of 9,000 temples, which is much larger than 1,500 temples 20 years ago. Although there is no official data on the exact number of Taoists in China, a 2007 survey of spirituality nationwide found that 12 million Chinese people firmly identified themselves as practitioners of Taoism, and 173 million citizens claimed to practice Taoism from time to time. These studies show that every year more and more Chinese citizens come to Taoism and its popularity is growing rapidly.

It can be assumed that one of the reasons for such a rapid growth in the popularity of Taoism and Confucianism is associated with the growth of the national self-awareness of Chinese society. One of the prerequisites for this was that Western values ​​were actively instilled in the Chinese people for centuries, which often conflicted with the Chinese vision of the world. And now, according to most of the citizens of this country, the time has come to return to their cultural roots, develop further along their intended path, and share their both positive and negative experience with other countries. And by using their successful example, show how to fight with the ecological crisis, because in the late 1970s, due to the expansion and acceleration of the economy, problems with nature pollution by enterprises also appeared. But since 1995, the link between economic growth and pollution has been weakening due to reforms and increased environmental investment.

**Conclusion**

In a new stage of development, humanity has developed large-scale production, there is a rapid population growth, and unfortunately, we see a certain lack of self-discipline that can lead to the destruction of the nature around us. And Taoism teaches us to once again perceive ourselves as part of nature and treat it as our own home, rather than just as a source of resources. And since more and more countries began to realize this the concept of "environmental thinking" has appeared. So, from this article, we can conclude that in modern China, Taoism, despite its concept of “non-intervention” in the natural order of things, it nevertheless took the initiative to promote ideas for protecting the environment and popularizes “environmental thinking” not only in Chinese society but also overseas. Due to its popularity and good intentions, Taoism receives support from the public and the state.

The cooperation between Taoists, public and government is already giving results in reducing air pollution, recycling waste, and protecting animals listed in the red book. It also gave us, observers, the understanding that modern society and technology can go hand in hand with traditional beliefs and philosophies, and that they can lead to better order and peace on our planet. By its example, China shows us that Taoism can be an excellent tool in educating the people about how we can save our planet and ourselves, because we cannot be without the planet, but it can be without us. Hence more and more countries actively studying Chinese culture and the country, the popularity of Taoism may increase in other parts of the planet, which can lead to real changes in the fight for our home.

**Bibliography**

1. Hruby, ​Denise. “Taoist Monks Find New Role as Environmentalists.” *China Dialogue*, 29 Sept. 2021, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/nature/9669-taoist-monks-find-new-role-as-environmentalists/>.
2. Palmer, Martin. “Daoism, Confucianism and the Environment.” *China Dialogue*, 3 Nov. 2020, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/nature/6502-daoism-confucianism-and-the-environment/>.
3. Рутковская М. В. *Понятие «Дао» в китайской философии //* Научно-методический электронный журнал «Концепт»*. – 2016. – Т. 33. – С. 73–76. – URL: <http://e-koncept.ru/2016/56704.htm>.*
4. Kerina, E.N, and A.R Kerina. *“Overview Features Landscape Architecture of China.”* Modern High Technologies*. – 2014. – № 8 – P. 45-49*, <https://top-technologies.ru/en/article/view?id=34623>
5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. *“Охрана окружающей среды в Китае(Белая книга)”* – 1996-06-25. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/zl/ce_ceml_chn/zfbps/199606/t19960625_878936.html>
6. Lao-Tzu. *“Tao Te Ching”.* //A translation for the public domain by J.H. Mcdonald. 1996.
7. Цзянь, Вэнь. “Глава 5. Даосизм и Современное Общество Китая.” *Даосизм в Современном Китае*, edited by Л. А. Горобец, Амурский Государственный Университет, Благовещенск , 2002. *URL:*  <http://daolao.ru/Contemp/sovr_dao.htm>