



My Tao Te Ching

ANTHRO 2278: Material Culture Poster 1

Roy Chen
251334988

A Gift Turned Guide (Introduction)

When I visited my parents hometown of Shanghai two summers ago for the first time since the pandemic, my uncle handed me a gift, his weathered copy of the famous ancient Chinese text, the Tao Te Ching (TTC). I recall him telling me that although I won't understand much of it until I'm 40, I should begin reading it now. While I was not familiar with the text at the time, I quickly began to understand its significance, to my life, my family's life and the ways our Chinese heritage continues to shape our identity.

Tracing the Flow of Wisdom (History)

The TTC, a text attributed to the sage Laozi from over 2500 years ago during times of political unrest in ancient China has become the world's second most translated book after the Bible, yet remains one of the most enigmatic (Loy, 1985). The TTC teaches that life flows according to the Tao, the natural "way" or direction of the universe and that for you to live a peaceful life you must be aligned with the Tao (Loy, 1985). One of the text's central ideas, wu wei, means "non-forcing", acting with effortless harmony throughout life (Loy, 1985). This is one of the things often misunderstood by the West to be passivity or inactivity when in reality it preaches deep awareness while allowing life to unfold with minimal resistance. The TTC has slowly become a cornerstone of Chinese thought, influencing all aspects of life (Chang, 1998). During the rule of two of the most notable emperors in Chinese history, Emperor Wen and Emperor Ching, it was said that during their rule these two emperors never governed the people, the TTC did (Chang, 1998). My uncle's copy of this ancient text, printed nearly a century ago, carries and represents this history well. I began to realize that the semi-crumbled pages and faded cover symbolizes the endurance of cultural philosophy surviving through generations of migration.

Tao as a Teacher of Identity (Identity)

Being born and raised in Canada to Chinese parents meant I grew up with two almost opposing value systems. In school I remember often being taught assertiveness and constant ambition. At home, my parents made it clear that I should value humility, patience and what they called "quiet strength". As a kid I felt these two worlds colliding in my head daily. It was only when I first picked up my uncle's TTC was I able to reconcile this internal battle. The TTC encouraged me to take on a way of living that put emphasis on returning to one's true nature, to become more of myself rather than an imitation of my environment. Adopting this allows for one to form self-awareness which in turn allows for each person to "discover and develop their unique talents" (Yang, 2019). While many see being Chinese Canadian as a constant bicultural negotiation between themselves, the TTC helped me to stop seeing being in between two cultures as a weakness, rather as a perfect reflection of the Tao itself. Just like how the Tao flows between opposites, light and dark, hard and soft, my identity too can bounce between cultures without losing essence.

When East Meets West (Race/Global Context)

When the TTC traveled westward, translations made its ideas known, yet oftentimes misinterpreted (Fan & Yu, 2020). It has been noted that while the literal meaning of the words in the original text is usually translated accurately, many translated versions fail to capture the spirituality and the cultural roots behind those words (Ye, 2024). This issue mirrors the experience of Asian Canadians perfectly as we are often seen but stereotyped and simplified. Westerners often praise Eastern wisdom but overlook the people who lived behind it. However, followers of the Tao endure, as the TTC acts as a teacher to anyone willing to listen, a teacher who guides us toward understanding, humility and peace.

A New Way of Seeing (Reflection/Conclusion)

Everytime I open the TTC I hear my uncle's words describing the text's complexity. I have realized that reading the Tao was wildly insufficient in understanding its wisdom, as understanding the Tao requires various lived experiences. As a varsity fencing athlete at Western University studying finance I have begun to see fragments of it in everyday balance. In fencing bouts, where patience almost always trumps aggression, in study sessions where stillness brings clarity and in intimate moments when the value of listening outweighs speaking. The TTC has become my all knowing teacher, one that while not knowing anything, guides me through everything. Through it, I've come to see that race, ethnicity and identity are not fixed labels, rather living currents that shift and blend with time.

Word Count (Not including Subtitles): 748

References Cited:

- Chang, H. (1998). On the Historicity of the "Tao Te Ching." Comparative Literature Studies, 35(2), 146–173. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40247154>
- Fan, P., & Yu, S. (2020). Stephen Mitchell's Version of the Tao Te Ching: A Spiritual Interpretation. Literature and Theology, 34(4), 486–493. <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/fraa023>
- Loy, D. (1985). Chapter One of the "Tao Tê Ching": A "New" Interpretation. Religious Studies, 21(3), 369–379. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20006197>
- Yang, F. (2019, January 1). Taoist wisdom on individualized teaching and learning—Reinterpretation through the perspective of Tao Te Ching. Scholarsportal.info. https://journals.scholarsportal.info/pdf/00131857/v51i0001/117_twoitatpottc.xml_en
- Ye, S. (2024). A Comparative Study of Two English Versions of Tao Te Ching from the Perspective of Toury's Theory of Translation Norms. Journal of Social Science and Humanities, 6(10), 123–125. [https://doi.org/10.53469/jsssh.2024.6\(10\).21](https://doi.org/10.53469/jsssh.2024.6(10).21)