The Tao-Oriented Socialism: Concept, Practices and Significance

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ABSTRACT

The Tao-oriented value system, as a holistic system, provided the basis for China to create common political solutions and to merge different religions and cultures in ancient times. “Tao-Oriented Socialism”, bridging Taoism and Socialism, has the potential to localize Marxism in China and to provide a philosophical framework for integrating different theories and practices with socialism. Based on the lofty values of promoting human fairness, equality and justice, and the pursuit of a harmonious society, the concept of "Tao-oriented socialism" also provides an impetus for human civilization to achieve coexistence, peace and sustainable prosperity.

BACKGROUND

The concept and thought of "Tao", (or Dao), (which can be literally translated as “the Way”) refers to the universal truth or to absolute rules in the universe[1]. The concept of Tao was later developed into Taoism (or Daoism), a complete philosophy that was regarded as the most indigenous spirit and value system advocated and pursued by the ancient Chinese, thus becoming the core of Chinese traditional culture. In Chinese ancient literature, the Tao and its relevant theories were accepted by Confucianism and other schools of philosophy, and its principles and rules were widely practiced in different fields. Even today, in Chinese politics and society, shared core values based on Taoism are still regarded as critical for building a strong social culture and useful in addressing the problem of managing complex social situations[2].

We argue below that the concept of “Tao-Oriented Socialism”, based on Tao-oriented philosophical framework, has the potential to localize Marxism in China and to accommodate different theories and practices of socialism and other political philosophies available in the world. As a matter of fact, in China today, the so-called “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” advocated and practiced by the

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Chinese communist government is in many aspects consistent with the concept of “Tao-Oriented Socialism”, but would benefit from further refinement. Using “Tao-Oriented Socialism” to replace the concept of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” would provide a more solid philosophical basis for the Chinese to localize Marxism and other western theories and to build a harmonious and prosperous society in China. In addition, the noble values of “Tao-Oriented Socialism” would bring together the different practices of socialism around the world, providing impetus for prosperous and sustainable human civilization.

A SHARED TAO-ORIENTED VALUE SYSTEM INTEGRATES CHINESE THEORIES AND PRACTICES WITH SOCIALISM

The spirit and values derived from Taoism have long been regarded as the key pillars to sustain social stability and prosperity in China, and theories of Tao-oriented governance originated as early as the time of Laotzu and Confucius in 500 B. C. Taoism believes that everything in the universe is out of Tao, and thus follows the law of Yin and Yang and its associated five-element theory. As the core philosophy in the Chinese culture, it provided the guideline for Chinese politics, military, arts and agricultural practices in the Chinese ancient society[3,4].

![Figure 1. Taoist Model of the Universe and Mankind[4].](image-url)
“The Significance of the Ethical Framework of Taoism and Confucianism in Chinese Politics and Society”[5] explored the concept of Tao as central to Chinese civilization and argued that the Tao-oriented shared value system ‘glued’ Chinese people together to build a prosperous ancient civilization. In Confucianism, a most comprehensive ethical framework derived from Taoism is known as the Five Virtues Theory, and this has exerted seminal influence on Chinese political governance and on the social behaviour of the Chinese people.

Studies[1, 2, 3] reveal that the Tao-oriented value system is a holistic system emphasizing the harmony of different diversities complementing each other. It has been playing a significant role in Chinese amalgamation of different nationalities and cultures of minorities. Throughout thousands of years, many different schools of philosophies, religions, even the religions from other countries(for example, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity), have been reconciled by the Tao-oriented value system, and have become parts of Chinese civilization[1].

Today, Marxism, market economy theories and many other western philosophies are competing, and often conflicting with each other, in contemporary China[6]. Although no holistic system exists to reconcile all the different theories and practices of socialism and capitalism, it is nevertheless believed that a shared Tao-oriented value system has the potential to provide philosophical framework to integrate Chinese theories and practices with socialism, in the same way as it provided the basis for China to create common political solutions to merge different religions and cultures in ancient times.

“TAO-ORIENTED SOCIALISM” CONFORMS TO HISTORICAL HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL REALITY IN CHINA

Today, public ownership is the fundamental requirement for “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”, regulated by the Chinese constitution[7]. Interestingly, the Ancient Confucian Book of Rites [8] claims that ‘As the great “Tao” prevails, everything under the heaven is of public ownership (equally shared by everyone)’, which means that ancient Chinese philosophy not only welcomed public ownership but indeed regarded it as the most ideal state for a regime. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that even in today’s market economy era, when state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have declined to one third of the economy, the Chinese government is still emphasizing the dominant role of SOEs in all major strategic industries[9].

In the same book, Confucius predicted that the ideal society for mankind would be a Society of Great Harmony (Da Tong She Hui). He also described an intermediate state of governance called Xiao Kang (Moderately Prosperous) society before the final society was realized[10].

Despite the fact that the Communist Party in China (CPC) has declared itself a firm opponent of Chinese feudalism, abundant literature proves that the early Chinese communist founding fathers such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqim and many others, used the term of Da Tong She Hui to describe the future communist society in China to which they aspired[11]. From Mao’s early works, it is easy to find evidence that he advocated localization of Marxism and vowed to build a communist society rooted in the soil of Chinese culture[11].

In order to demonstrate a distinctive departure from the rigid Soviet Union model, Mao’s successor Deng Xiaoping (who introduced the market system into
China) invented the concept of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” to guide the Chinese practice of Socialism[12]. While describing the short-term goal of socialism with Chinese characteristics in 2020, the official documents of the CPC use the exact same term Xiao Kang (Moderately Prosperous) society as described in the Ancient Confucian Book of Rites to define the primary stage of its socialism which has emerged since Deng Xiaoping’s times. An in-depth study of Deng’s thought and practices of governing China shows that he was not much different from Mao in drawing many of his governing principles and rules from Chinese ancient wisdom, in particular Taoism. For example, his famous “Cat Theory” which proclaimed that it didn’t matter whether a cat was black or white provided it caught mice, is regarded a typical mindset of Taoism. Other evidences are his talks on “Both Hands” (right and left) in managing the economy, politics and society, a clear demonstration of Taoist Yin-Yang or Taichi philosophy[13].

The Chinese leaders who followed Deng Xiaoping, such as Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have all emphasized that the rise of the Chinese nation and civilization should be accompanied by the innovation and development of its inherited culture[14]. When answering the question as to what socialist path China should adopt (since there are many different models in the world), the current Chinese president Xi Jinping has insisted that Chinese socialism should follow its own way based on its own distinctive culture and social realities. Xi Jinping even calls on the Chinese people to cherish traditional Chinese values and promote cultural confidence in China with a firm insistence on following the road of Socialism with Chinese characteristics[15].

The Tao-oriented value system is the cultural DNA that is rooted in the Chinese civilization, and the modern "socialism" successfully introduced and practiced in China owes much to the fact that it combines the spirit of "fairness and justice", and to its values of public ownership and its inspiring description of the ideal society for mankind[16]. Hence, the theoretical concept of “Tao-oriented Socialism”, which conforms to the historical heritage and contemporary political reality in China, is likely to maximize the cohesion of Chinese social consensus, providing a potential solution to the problem of localizing Marxism in China.

INCLUSIVE “TAO-ORIENTED SOCIALISM” HAS POTENTIAL TO HARMONIZE CHINESE SOCIETY AND TO REJUVENATE CHINESE CIVILIZATION

He Er Bu Tong (Harmony with the existence of diversity) is a distinctive feature of the Chinese Tao-oriented value system and thus is propagated as one of the most distinctive characteristics of socialism in China[17]. As “Tao is the mother of the Heaven and the Earth”, everything (including God) comes from the same origin Tao. Therefore, there is nothing under the Heaven that should not be tolerated. The concept of Jian Rongbing Xu (Tolerance and Open-mindedness) is a norm for people to interact with and thus learn from others[17].

Numerous literature[18, 19] emphasizes the cultural tolerance of different religions and ethnic groups throughout Chinese history and this is also evident in contemporary China. The Chinese people are known as being most tolerant and open-minded in religious beliefs and of different philosophies. Religious wars were very rare in Chinese history and all religious beliefs are practiced peacefully in Chinese society. Bai and Morris[5] note that despite the fact that the current
Chinese political system is socialism (whose underlying ideology is atheist Marxism), official policy supports the freedom of worship in China. Furthermore, there are about 56 different ethnic peoples in China, where different groups legally enjoy their own distinctive culture and living styles in their autonomous regions.

The value of “Jia Ting”, or “Family-oriented Culture”, is another important concept in the Chinese Tao-oriented value system and is often used to emphasize holistic relationships in social interaction[20]. Focus on the common destiny of human communities and respect for harmony and union in collective organizations are both regarded as the most important moral virtues for Chinese individuals and social organizations. The political assertion of building a harmonious society propagated by the current government is a natural extension of the economic success driven by Tao-oriented values.

Another example is the unique Chinese multi-party cooperative and consultative system. When the major Chinese parties decided to establish a new party system in 1948 after the western parliament system (from 1911) had failed in practice, they agreed to have CPC as the ruling party and the other eight democratic parties as political participating parties working as if they were in a family[21]. Ever since then, Chinese democratic parties have participated in the running of government and have also played a major role in providing advice to and supervision of the ruling party. Each year different parties and social organizations hold “Political and Consultative Conferences” at the national and local levels, discussing and modifying major government plans and policies. The success of the Chinese multi-party participative and consultative system lies in its advantage of collecting different views from different interest groups and avoiding the extreme centralization of government power, a feature which is glaringly distinct from the single party system in the Soviet Union[21]. In addition, this system also solved the problem of severe political confrontation which resulted in social instabilities and even civil wars in the Chinese past, a phenomenon frequently found today in the Western and other democratic countries elsewhere in the world.

Another important feature of Chinese politics is that its governance system emphasizes collective leadership in CPC and governments [22]. From the top CPC standing committee of the Politburo to the local village government, major policies and issues must be discussed, voted or decided on in the collective leadership team according to the CPC charter and civil administrative law. The party head or the administrative chief in any organization cannot decide major issues or make policies simply on the basis of his own view or the votes of the minority. Collective leadership is required in the democratic centralization system which is very much consistent with Tao-oriented values of internal checks and balances, a policy tradition which has existed in China for thousands of years.

Due to the Chinese Tao-oriented cultural influence, it is not rare to find that the Chinese leaders and people welcome any philosophies, theories and practices which they find pragmatic[23]. Today, Marxism, market-economy philosophies and other western theories are all found in the government tool box for managing the economy and society. The practice of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” has enabled the Chinese people to achieve outstanding economic progress over the last four decades and is a major reason why China is the second largest economy in the World today. With Tao-oriented values grounded in legislative mandates, national mission, vision statements of leaders, and in political and public will, "Tao-oriented Socialism" is playing an increasing role in harmonizing Chinese
society. This is why we believe that inclusive "Tao-oriented Socialism" has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development and rejuvenation of Chinese civilization in the future.

**Noble Values of “Tao-Oriented Socialism” Provide the Drive for Sustained Human Civilization**

Today, with the development of science and technology and rapid globalization, mankind has ushered in an era where both opportunities and crises coexist. On the one hand, the productive forces and technological innovation of mankind are creating a world of increasingly abundant materials and ever more affluent life; on the other hand, the rapid worsening of the human environment, including deepening inequality, and increasingly fierce competition between states and peoples are creating a system whereby humans may destroy themselves [1]. There is an urgent need for a set of philosophical and cultural values that are compatible with modernity and high technology, because simple advances in technology and productivity are no longer able to bring lasting peace and happiness to mankind.

When commenting on Western civilization, British historian Arnold Toynbee [24] pointed out that it relies heavily on materialism and technology, which is inevitably leading to a full-blown human spiritual crisis. Due to the fact that the Tao-oriented value system promotes the peaceful development of world civilization, which is unparalleled by any other philosophical thought, he hoped that the Chinese Tao-oriented value system that is beyond the single nation-state would eventually pacify human conflicts and help to avoid the disaster of total destruction of the modern world.

It thus appears that the spirit and value of Chinese "Tao-oriented Socialism" may fill gaps in the world order today, because the Tao-oriented value system in essence advocates moral behaviours and opposes the hegemonism and terrorism that is widely spread around the world. It has produced value principles for the Chinese to focus on the common destiny of the human community and respect for harmony and union in society. It is worth mentioning that the concept was further developed by ancient Confucianism into Tian Xia (All under the Heaven) or Tian Xia Yi Jia (A Big Family under the Heaven) to refer to all peoples coexisting in the world, a guideline for the Chinese to interact with foreign nations[10]. As the Chinese cultural DNA treated other peoples as distant brothers and sisters in a big family, it is natural that the Chinese seldom resorted to war and other violent means to solve differences and conflicts with other nations.

When the Chinese government during Hu Jintao’s presidency sought to build a harmonious world with all other nations, both intellectuals and the common public in China were thrilled and applauded the revitalization of the noble Chinese traditional values[25]. It is also natural for the Chinese to support the Xi Jinping government in proposing the “One Belt and One Road Initiatives” to revitalize the ancient silk-road spirit to help poor brothers and sisters in the developing countries[26]. Meyer [27] argues that the Chinese concept of Tian Xia (All under the Heaven) is a sincere aspiration of the Chinese people to build an utopian world order of unity, prosperity and multi-cultural harmony for thousands of years.

Another noble value principle Nei Sheng Wai Wang (a perfect leader with the qualities of “Sage inward and Kingly outward”) is worth mentioning. It is required that a good leader should be like a sage with complete virtues in balance based on
the principle of “Unity of Heaven and Mankind”[28]. Together with the principle of He Er Bu Tong (Harmony with the existence of diversity) and the concept of Jian Rong Bing Xu (Tolerance and Open-mindedness), the Chinese people have every reason believe that a peaceful and prosperous world would be able to build in the future by leaders which follow such principles.

CHALLENGES TO “TAO-ORIENTED SOCIALISM” IN CHINA

People may wonder why the Communist Party founding fathers did not announce directly that they cherished Taoist values in governing China since they used them all the time in practice. The reason may be found during the time of failure in the Opium War (1840) with the Western powers when Chinese intellectuals attributed China’s defeat to the flaws of Chinese culture[29]. The late 19th century to 20th century witnessed that the majority of Chinese intellectuals had not only advocated that China should learn everything it could from the West but vowed to reject all Chinese traditional culture including Taoism. The well-known slogan of “Down with Confucianism” and “Welcome Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy” in the “May 4th Movement” in 1911 declared the modern journey of China by departing from the past traditional values and adopting the new Western methods [30,31]. Chinese schools and universities have been transformed to introduce Western systems and to learn modern Western knowledge. Traditional Chinese philosophies such as Taoism and Confucianism were thrown away like rubbish, leading to a state of general ignorance of traditional wisdom and values among Chinese intellectuals and common people.

In addition, CPC in its history was a pioneer in welcoming Western Marxism and a firm fighter against Chinese feudalism. A number of political movements since the establishment of the New Communist China in 1949 generated disastrous damage to Chinese traditional culture[32]. “The Great Cultural Revolution” movement which targeted Chinese feudalism from 1966 to 1976 had a particularly severe effect. Today, very few Chinese intellectuals or common people fully understand the profound and complex system of Taoism and Confucianism, resulting in some blind and ridiculous criticism of the theories of Taoism and Confucianism in Chinese academic circles.

Despite the fact that CPC has openly declared itself a defender and successor of Chinese traditional culture and values in the CPC’s 5th Plenary of the 18th Central Party Congress[33], there are still wide-spread doubts about the attempt to revitalize traditional values in China. The current government is promoting good Chinese traditional values and has even included them in the phrasing of the 24-character Core Values of Chinese Socialism[34]. However, in the eyes of many intellectuals of orthodox Marxist and free market schools, Taoism and Confucianism are still regarded as backward and out-of-date in comparison with Western theories.

As a result, before the majority of intellectuals and people in China can fully understand the essence of the Tao-oriented traditional value system and cherish its holistic potential in unifying all different philosophies and theories for good governance, replacing “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” with “Tao-oriented or Confucian socialism” is likely to be another “Long March” in the future.
CONCLUSION

“Tao-oriented Socialism”, which conforms to the historical heritage and contemporary political reality in China, is likely to maximize the cohesion of Chinese social consensus, providing a potential solution to the problem of localizing Marxism in China. From a philosophical perspective, the concept of "Tao-oriented socialism" which is rooted in the holistic, dialectical, open and inclusive "Taoism" philosophy, has the potential to tolerate multiple cultures and provide a holistic platform for different philosophical dialogues between the East and the West, contributing to a peaceful and harmonious world.

By embracing all the achievements of the exploration in human civilization such as different socialist practices around the world, a more prosperous and sustainable human society is more likely to be built up with the concerted efforts of all peoples in the world under the Tao-oriented value system. Covering the lofty concept of promoting human fairness, equality and justice, and the pursuit of harmonious society, the concept of "Tao-oriented socialism" can provide the basis for human civilization to seek coexistence, peace and sustainable prosperity.

REFERENCES