Taoist Ideas and Eugene O'Neill’s Plays

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Abstract. The word "Taoism" is used to translate different Chinese terms which refer to different aspects of the same tradition and semantic field. Taoism focuses spontaneity, simplicity, passivity and the suspicion that the self and the objective world are illusions. It emphasizes unity, peace and the spiritual rather than division, struggle and the material. Taoist philosophy deals with the pursuit of perfection, with the union of an individual human being with nature. Ecological consciousness in Taoism has reflected in American dramatist Eugene O’Neill’s works.

Introduction

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is a religious, philosophical and ritual tradition of Chinese origin which emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao. The Tao is a fundamental idea in most Chinese philosophical schools; in Taoism, however, it denotes the principle that is both the source, pattern and substance of everything that exists. Taoism differs from Confucianism by not emphasizing rigid rituals and social order. Taoist ethics vary depending on the particular school, but in general tend to emphasize wu wei (effortless action), "naturalness", simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: jing (sperm/ovary energy, or the essence of the physical body), qi ("matter-energy" or "life force", including the thoughts and emotions), and shén (spirit or generative power).

Review of Taoist Ideas

The roots of Taoism go back at least to the 4th century BC. Early Taoism drew its cosmological notions from the School of Yinyang (Naturalists), and was deeply influenced by one of the oldest texts of Chinese culture, the Yijing, which expounds a philosophical system about how to keep human behavior in accordance with the alternating cycles of nature. The Tao Te Ching, a compact book containing teachings attributed to Laozi, is widely considered the keystone work of the Taoist tradition, together with the later writings of Zhuangzi. Only by the Han dynasty (3rd century) the various sources of Taoism coalesced into a coherent tradition of religious organizations and orders of ritualists in the state of Shu (modern Sichuan). In earlier ancient China, Taoists were thought of as hermits or recluses who did not participate in political life. Zhuangzi was the best known of these, and it is significant that he lived in the south, where he was part of local Chinese shamanic traditions. Women shamans played an important role in this tradition, which was particularly strong in the southern state of Chu. Early Taoist movements developed their own institution in contrast to shamanism, but absorbed basic shamanic elements. Shamans revealed basic texts of Taoism from early times down to at least the 20th century (Eliad, 1984). Institutional orders of Taoism evolved in various strains that in more recent times are conventionally grouped into two main branches: Quanzhen Taoism and Zhengyi Taoism (Eliad, 1984). After Laozi and Zhuangzi, the literature of Taoism grew steadily and was compiled in form of a canon—the Daozang—which was published at the behest of the emperor. Throughout Chinese history, Taoism was nominated several times as a state religion. After the 17th century, however, it fell from favor.
Main Principles and Textbooks of Taoism

Taoist Principles

Naturalness is regarded as a central value in Taoism (Nengchang Wu, 2014). It describes the "primordial state" of all things as well as a basic character of the Tao, and is usually associated with spontaneity and creativity. To attain naturalness, one has to identify with the Tao; this involves freeing oneself from selfishness and desire, and appreciating simplicity. (Nengchang Wu, 2014)

An often cited metaphor for naturalness is “pu”. The "uncarved block", which represents the "original nature which is prior to the imprint of culture" of an individual (Demerath, Nicholas, 2003). In 1770 Wang Bi edition of the Tao Te Ching. The Tao Te Ching or Daodejing is widely considered the most influential Taoist text. (Demerath, Nicholas, 2003). According to legend, it was written by Laozi, and often the book is simply referred to as the "Laozi." However, authorship, precise date of origin, and even unity of the text are still subject of debate, and will probably never be known with certainty. The earliest texts of the Tao Te Ching that have been excavated (written on bamboo tablets) date back to the late 4th century BC. Throughout the history of religious Taoism, the Tao Te Ching has been used as a ritual text. The famous opening lines of the Tao Te Ching are: "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao" and "The name that can be named is not the eternal name." (Demerath, Nicholas, 2003). There is significant, at times acrimonious, debate regarding which English translation of the Tao Te Ching is preferable, and which particular translation methodology is best. The Tao Te Ching is not thematically ordered. However, the main themes of the text are repeatedly expressed using variant formulations, often with only a slight difference.

Text Books of Taoism

The book entitled The Zhuangzi, named after its traditional author Zhuangzi, is a composite of writings from various sources, and is generally considered the most important of all Taoist writings. Guo Xiang (AD 300) helped establish the text as an important source for Taoist thought. The traditional view is that Zhuangzi himself wrote the first seven chapters (the "inner chapters") and his students and related thinkers were responsible for the other parts (the "outer" and "miscellaneous" chapters). The work uses anecdotes, parables and dialogues to express one of its main themes, that is aligning oneself to the laws of the natural world and "the way" of the elements. (Dumoulin, Heinrich, 2005).

Another book entitled The Book of I Ching is also important for the reaserches of Taoism. The 8 trigrams of the I Ching, or Yijing, was originally a divination system that had its origins around 1150 B.C. Although it predates the first mentions of Tao as an organised system of philosophy and religious practice, this text later became of philosophical importance to Daoism and Confucianism (Eliade, 1984).

The Book of I Ching itself, shorn of its commentaries, consists of 64 combinations of 8 trigrams (called "hexagrams"), traditionally chosen by throwing coins or yarrow sticks, to give the diviner some idea of the situation at hand and, through reading of the "changing lines", some idea of what is developing.

The 64 original notations of the hexagrams in the I Ching can also be read as a meditation on how change occurs, so it assists Taoists with managing yin and yang cycles as Laozi advocated in the Tao Te Ching (the oldest known version of this text was dated to 400 BC). More recently as recorded in the 18th century, the Taoist master Liu Yiming continued to advocate this usage.

Taoist Ideas Reflected in Eugene O’Neill’s Plays

Early in 1925, O’Neill once told his friend A. H. Quinn in a letter, “I’m almost confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character. I'm always acutely conscious of the force behind—...(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it Mystery, certainly)” (Bogard [Selected Letters] 1988: 195). Most probably, by the
time he claimed his interest in “the force behind”, O’Neill had read some books of Taoism. Then “the force behind” termed by him is just another expression for the Tao termed by Taoists.

Taoist ideas are evident in some Eugene O’Neill’s works. By examining the style and subject matter of his three final works in comparison with those of the plays O’Neill wrote in the early and middle periods, we can find that Taoist idea—“return to the roof” and “return to simplicity”—has found its clear expression in the late plays. O’Neill’s interest in “the force behind” which is shown frequently through the words by his characters of these plays reveals the influence of the Tao, the basic concept of Taoism, Passivity on the part of all the main characters is shaped by another principle of Taoism—“Wu Wei”. At the same time, the dynamic polarity—yin and yang helps O’Neill develop a dynamic vision of reality and harmonize the thematic oppositions between life and death, love and hate, past and future in the late plays. The theme of the pipe dream represents another major connection of O’Neill’s late plays to Taoism. In the three works, Chuang Tzu’s view of life as a dream or an illusion is shared by O’Neill’s characters. The union of an individual human being with nature pursued by Taoists is reached by Edmund, the protagonist in Long Days Journey into Night, who, in fact, is O’Neill himself. Although the experience of being united with the universe is transitory, O’Neill, a western writer, brought up against a dualistic western background, finally, through Edmund, seized internal peace and satisfaction.

The ecological consciousness of Taoism is paid more and more attention at present study on O’Neill’s plays. Taoism respects nature from the aspects of ecological ethic, and even regards heaven and earth as parents. From the aspects of ecological protection, Taoism insists that the relationship between human being and nature is not hostile. Instead, human being should recognize nature and help nature through self-discipline. From the aspect of ecological utilization, Taoism regards that human being should utilize the allure reasonably to maintain ecological harmony. The ecological philosophy of Taoism shows the characteristics that everything follows the nature.

Characters in O’Neill’s tragedies suffer from alienation, materialization, incompetence with vacuous mind and identical life style. Man loses every link to others. Man’s spiritual world is a waste land. The fact that man is not like man is expressed to the fullest in O’Neill’s tragedies. Moreover at the end of his tragedies, good and harmonious relationship, and understanding of each other always can help people regain tranquility in their hearts. Therefore, O’Neill’s works stand for his serious concern for human fate and continuous probing into man’s spiritual world. O’Neill can be ranked with a predecessor of spiritual ecology in the field of tragedy. He has strong awareness of spiritual ecology.

In modern society, especially since the era of industrialization, the moral value of anthropocentrism is in a dominant position which can be clearly reflected in The Hairy Ape. One of the manifestations of anthropocentrism is the pollution of the natural environment. O’Neill’s plays manifest the unharmonious relationship between man and nature. Before the Industrial Revolution, humans showed great awe and respect towards nature and believed that there was a determinate power and mysterious forces over men. Nature at that time was a holistic system and was inseparable from human beings. The relationship between man and his surrounding environment is harmonious which can be traced from Paddy’s description of the past time. He said: Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth, ochone! Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days—clippers wid tall masts touching the sky—fine strong men in them—men that was sons of the sea as if it was the mother that bore them. Oh, the clean skins of them, and the clear eyes, the straight backs and full chests of them! Brave men they was, and bold men surely! We’d be sailing out, bound down round the Horn maybe. We’d be sailing out, bound down round the Horn maybe. (O’Neill, 2007: 210).

The story happened in The Hairy Ape presented a big difference between the former and last period during the industrial revolution. Nature in the era of modern industrialization is viewed as a dump of men’s industrial activities. The attack of human’s instrumental use of nature can be traced in The Hairy Ape in which O’Neill harshly assails on human’s boldness in conquering nature. The process of industrialization is just a process of exploitation and pollution of nature which is vividly described in The Hairy Ape. As the representative of the past clipper time, Paddy resentfully
complains about the sea pollution caused by the industrialization. He described the like this:—black smoke from the funnels, smudging the decks—the bloody engines pounding and noisy pollution.(O’Neill, 2007). he said:—Yank is a symbol of man who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way (John Gassner, 1965: 48). Yank’s tragedy finally ends with death; he may find his belonging, but it is by no means the ultimate belonging because if it is the case, then what is the meaning of being alive? Death is far from being the best solution for humans to walk out of spiritual dilemma, so people alive are supposed to seek out a practical and achievable way to get rid of spiritual crisis and regain the original harmony, otherwise Yank’s tragedy will be put on in modern society again and again. The query that what should we do to avoid the recurrence of Yank’s tragedy is of close attention. Of course we can’t be back to the primitive society for all these civilization accomplishments couldn’t be reversed and the imbalance of nature, society and spirit caused by technology couldn’t be solely solved by science and technology as well. In short, O’Neill’s personal experiences and Chinese Taoism contribute to his ecological awareness.

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References