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The Feminine Force in Early Daoist Thought

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Abstract

According to the *Laozi* one of the ways to cultivate and grasp Dao is through “remaining female” and “nourishing the mother.” The term mother is used in reference to the beginning of all existence—“the mother of all under heaven,” “the mother of all existences.” The mother is both an active force of generation and the concreteness of the generated beings. In this sense, the feminine attribute of motherhood is a living embodiment of Dao. In the world of myriad phenomena, the mother provides a location of interaction between “absence” and “presence,” between *wu* and *you*. In this paper, I suggest an analysis of the metaphor of mother and other “feminine roles” in early Daoist thought through a textual examination of the *Laozi*. Considering the intellectual background in Warring States period China in which the common understanding of the universe and all phenomena is revealed through the interactions of correlative and complementary forces, the esteem of one over the other—the feminine over the male, the mother over father—is outstanding and deserves serious investigation. The question is what can we learn from the feminine, what can femininity teach us about the world, its generation, and even political practice?

The mother and the feminine in early Daoist cosmology and cultivation

To gain a better understanding of the mother and other feminine traits described in early Daoist texts, I offer two routes of analysis, making a distinction between the metaphysical notion of cosmic generation that begins with Dao and equates Dao to the mother, and between political philosophy that implies the practical cultivation of the sage as a ruler and the suggestion to abide by feminine traits. In the *Laozi*, the *Taiyi Shengshui*, the *Fanwu Liuxing*, and other Daoist or “proto-Daoist” texts, the term mother is used in reference to the beginning of all existence—“the mother of heaven and earth.” Furthermore, in the *Laozi*, both female and feminine traits are favored over male and masculine traits, and in the personal cultivation of the ruler and his governance over the state, the aspiration is to be “the female.”¹

Beginning with cosmology and cosmic generation, the view of the *Laozi* and other proto-Daoist excavated manuscripts differ from other texts and philosophies of the time. The cosmology in the “Zhou Book of Changes” (*Zhouyi*) shows us a world of correlative—yin and yang, sun and moon, heaven and earth, feminine and masculine, all are complementary, working in mutual correspondence.² Furthermore, understanding the world in complementary terms means that every existence and phenomenon

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involves the cooperation of two forces. One of the projections of this world view is seen in the notion of “sky as father; earth as mother” in various ancient Chinese texts. However, this view does not imply a strict separation between the complementary forces, as there is always an interaction between the two. For example, the dyad of *yin* and *yang*, known to denote opposite phenomena such as light and dark, earth and heaven, water and fire, etc., together forms a unity, one Dao. Thus, the *Xici shang* commentary to the *Yijing* says “One *yin* and one *yang* is called Dao.”³ Even within one body—regardless of sex—there are *yin* organs and *yang* organs, *yin* traits and *yang* traits. And the same goes for phenomena of the natural world—winter is *yin*, however day is *yang*, and furthermore, once we reach the winter solstice, *yin* starts to decline while *yang* starts to strengthen.

In addition, in the world view of correlative cosmology, or a cosmogony initiated by an ultimate origin as suggested by Daoist texts, the cosmos (or nature) and human are parallels as a macrocosm and microcosms, mirroring one another and constantly interacting. Hence, cosmic and natural forces are to be found in human beings, allowing the terminology used in the discourse of cosmic generation to be applied to the human realm.

The *Laozi* does not discuss generation in terms of *Qi* or *yin* and *yang*, rather emphasizes the role of Dao and the interactions between *wu*(absence) and *you*(presence) that bring forth the generation of the myriad beings.⁴ This basis of generation is more of a metaphysical notion than an ontological one—it focuses on the process as a whole and remains vague on the details.

In contrast, the cosmogony presented in the *Taiyi shengshui*, a text excavated from the same tomb as the earliest known versions of the *Laozi* in Guodian, begins with an ultimate origin equivalent to Dao, but goes further and details a complete process listing all forces involved from beginning to “end” in a logical order. Interestingly, this manuscript, unlike the earlier versions of the *Laozi*, does mention *yin* and *yang* and places them after heaven and earth, the stars, sun and moon (*shenming*) in the cosmogonic progression of generation. The stars, sun, and moon assist each other and produce *yin* and *yang*; and in repeatedly assisting each other (*fu xiang fuye*), *yin* and *yang* produce the four seasons. The *Taiyi shengshui* also states that the eternal movement of *taiyi*—(“Great One”), who makes herself the mother of the myriad things, is not something that *yin* and *yang* can bring to closure.⁵ In this case, *yin* and *yang* are merely a part of the cosmogonic process and as in the *Laozi*, *yin* and *yang* are natural phenomena and do not refer to either femininity or masculinity.

The *Fanwu liuxing*, an excavated manuscript from an unknown origin held in the Shanghai Museum, also takes a different route in describing cosmic generation. First, the text begins with a series of questions about the world of myriad phenomena, and only later mentions the ultimate origin of all things:

All things flow in to form, how can they attain their completion? Since their flowing into form has turned into a complete body, how can they not perish? Since they have now attained completion and have come to life, how can they voice [their existence] in solitude? What comes first and what comes after when there is source and origin? How can stability be accomplished where *yin* and *yang* meet? How can danger be averted where water and fire converge? (Chan 2015, 288)

Through the questions asked at the beginning of the text, we may note that the cosmic process begins in formless changing, going through a process of transformation and

formation—flowing from the quasi-form and fluidity (*liuxing*), to complete body (*chengti*), to life (*sheng*), stability (*gu*), and harmonious integration (*he*). The ultimate origin in the *Fanwu liuxing* is the “One,” and interestingly it presents the sequence in a similar manner to the *Laozi*. Whereas chapter 42 of the *Laozi* states,

Dao generates the one, the one generates the two, the two generates the three, and the three generates the myriad beings. All things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, blending *qi* together to make them harmonious.

The *Fanwu liuxing* says,

It is heard: one generates two, two generates three, three generates the female, and the female completes the bond. Therefore, when there is One there is nothing that cannot come to existence under Heaven; when there is no Oneness, there is nothing that can exist under Heaven. (Chan 2015, 290)

Dao is the mother of all existence in the *Laozi* and the female completes the bond in the *Fanwu liuxing*; both place feminine traits as key links of cosmic generation. Whereas in the *Laozi* the mother is the starting point of the process, in the *Fanwu Liuxing*, the female is the final link in the generative process.⁶

Regarding cultivation and governance, both the *Taiyi shengshui* and the *Laozi* invoke the feminine and the female. In the *Laozi* the ruler is equivalent to Dao, the singular versus the many, or the mother of the state. In the ruler’s process of self-cultivation, he is to abide by the female and learn from feminine traits found in the natural world like the female animal and the spirit of the valley. In the *Taiyi shengshui*, *taiyi* as the ultimate origin is described as the mother of heaven and earth.

The common thread between the texts mentioned is that they present a synthesis of political philosophy and cosmic generation. The primary concern is to establish a unified and well-regulated state through emphasizing the necessity of the ruler to understand and emulate the ultimate origin and the cosmic patterns. While each text begins with a different ultimate origin, all of them are associated with feminine traits, and the process of cosmic generation is one of endless reversal and recurrence rather than a linear progression forward. The cyclicity is observable from nature, such as the waxing and waning of the moon, the alternation between day and night, the cycle of the seasons, and even the menstruation of a female follows natural patterns as it reoccurs every month during her fertile years—making her an inherent force of nature.

Mother and the generative process

The *Laozi*, known by the title *Daodejing*, is, as the title suggests, a philosophy concerning Dao and De. The record in the “Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei” (*Laozi hanfei liezhuan*) in the *Shiji* mentions that the book written by Laozi has two sections, and that it discusses the meaning of Dao and De in 5,000 characters.⁷ It has thus been traditionally divided into two sections, one focusing on Dao, composed of chapters 1–37, the second on De, consisting of chapters 38–81. The division is seen in the Wang Bi received version, the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, and the Peking University Han bamboo slips. It is safe to conclude that the main notions the *Laozi* focuses on are Dao and De (Zheng 2019, 87).

There are two central relationships in the *Laozi* which are in parallel to one another. The first is the relationship between Dao and the myriad beings (*wanwu*), and its parallel is the relationship between the sage-ruler (*shengwang*) and the people (*baixing* or *min*). However, for the ruler to perceive and cultivate his function as parallel to the function of Dao towards the myriad being, it is difficult to remain on abstract cosmological terms. Thus, another relationship is brought forth: the relationship between mother and son.

The first chapter of the *Laozi* begins with a description of Dao:

Dao that can be put into words is not the constant Dao; names that can be names are not constant names. Nameless, the beginning of heaven and earth; named, the mother of all things. Constantly without desires, one may observe the subtlety of all things; constantly with desires, one may observe the boundaries. They share an origin but differ in name, both are mysterious. Mysterious and dark, the gate to all subtleties.

Although there is not much discussion on the cosmic process of generation in the *Laozi*, the first chapter begins by telling us something about the initial stage of the world. We learn that without a name—*wuming*—is the beginning of heaven and earth, and that the named—or literally, *youming* “to have a name”—is the mother of all beings.

There are two points to be observed here: first, the subject of this chapter is Dao. *Wu* and *you* are two aspects of the Dao, as the phrase “they share an origin but differ in name” tells us, Dao is both. The myriad things are generated from *you* and *wu*. *You* and *wu* are not connected in a sequence, one leading to the other, but rather are parallel, Dao generates *you* and *wu* and both exist at the same time. *You* refers to a general existence that has a form in the formless, yet *wu* is formless, independent, and unchanging—*wu* is part of *you* (Liu 2009, 5).

This point is further amplified by chapter 2 that says, “absence (*wu*) and presence (*you*) generate one another” (*wu you xiangsheng*), and by slip 37 in the *Laozi* Guodian A version that says: “All things under heaven were generated from *you*, generated from *wu*.” In this earlier version of the *Laozi* there is no indication that *wu* is prior to *you*—rather it is the interaction between *wu* and *you* that bring forth the generation of all things. For Wang Bi, however, the concept of *wu* is restricted to the formless and nameless. His commentary on the lines “nameless, the beginning of heaven and earth; named, the mother of ten thousand things” in the first chapter reads:

All *you* begins with *wu*. Therefore, when there is yet no form nor name, it is the beginning of ten thousand things. When there are forms and names, there are things to grow, educate protect and cover, this is to be the mother. What this means is that Dao, formless and nameless, is the beginning of ten thousand things. The ten thousand things depend on it to begin, depend on it to complete, but no one knows how. This is called to go to the origin of origins ... Ten thousand things begin as the small and then become complete, begin as *wu* and then are born.⁸

According to Wang Bi, *wu* is the origin of all things because it is the original state of all things. Things were non-existent before, now they exist, but eventually they are to return to non-existence. The relationship between *wu* and *you* is further explored in chapter 11:

Thirty spokes converge at one hub, but the utility of the cart is a function of the absence inside the hub. We throw clay to shape a pot, but the utility of the clay pot is a function of the absence inside it. We bore out doors and windows to make a dwelling, but the utility of the dwelling is a function of the absence inside it. Thus, it might be something (*you*) that provides the value, but it is absence that provides the utility. (Hall and Ames 2003, 91)

The description of the *wu-you* relationship here can relate to the emptiness of the womb as a location in which *wu* and *you* interact in a perfectly harmonious manner. The emptiness of the womb allows the growth of a fetus, the existence of the womb allows the existence of the fetus to begin with. The mother, both bearing her child in a *wuwei* manner by not interfering with his growth and allowing the fetus to grow by nourishing it without purposeful intention, birthing the baby and nourishing the baby by the milk produced in her body without her intervention, is the ultimate metaphor for the *wuwei* mode of Dao, and the closest parallel to the way Dao functions towards the myriad things.

The assumed predominance of *wu* over *you* from the time of Wang Bi onwards has led commentators and scholars to elevate this notion, equate it to Dao, and thereby also to the mother. In her paper “Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism,” Ellen M. Chen states that Dao is the origination, destiny, creative principle, as well as final cause of all things in the world—and its ultimate aspect is conceived to be *wu* (1969, 391). In chapter 4, the *Laozi* tells us:

Dao being empty, you make use of it, but do not fill it up. So abysmally deep—it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening. It blunts sharp edges and untangles knots, it softens the glare and brings things together on the same track. So cavernously deep—it only seems to persist. I do not know whose progeny it is; it prefigures the ancestral gods. (Hall and Ames, 83)

As the emptiness of the container, the attributes of *wu* include stillness or quietness that underlies the phenomenal world. Dao is the dark, unfathomable depth, which is the origin as well as destiny of all things. The idea of the emptiness is connected to the emptiness of the womb. Thus, Chen concludes, in the *Laozi*, the ultimate principle of the world is regarded as a mother principle (1969, 401). Furthermore, when *wu* relates to the emptiness of the female and her productive power, we find that *wu* is not impassive or immobile. The female is the origin of motion, life, and unity in all things.

Second, the nameless (*wuming*) aspect is the beginning of heaven and earth. Although heaven and earth are also *wu*, they are unlike *wanwu* which are generated from the mother—as they do not “generate” themselves, and so they do not, like plants which have flowered, begin to die. As chapter 7 states: “Heaven is long-lasting and earth is enduring. The reason heaven and earth are able to be lasting and enduring is because they do not generate themselves” (*zisheng*). Heaven and earth are particular within the category of beings/things because they do not reproduce themselves, they change more slowly than other “living” things.⁹

The character *shi* for “beginning” used in the phrase “the nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth” is composed from the radical of the “female” *nü* and a platform *tai*. The ancient dictionary of the *Shuowen jiezi* (“Explanation of Characters”) defines *shi* as “a woman in her beginning,” meaning that this woman, or girl, is not yet married

and cannot reproduce, but does already inhibit the ability to do so. In fact, she is born with the ability to do so, and even in vitro already has a womb.

Liu Xuyi illustrates the difference between *wu* and *you* with the example of a young girl and a mother. A young girl has not given birth, so she is *wu* (*shi*); however, she still has the potential to exercise her reproductive ability to become *you*, or a mother (2009, 287). A young girl becoming a mother is the way of Dao; Laozi's Dao is the mother of all things. This is representative of Dao's unity of *you* and *wu*, of *shi* and *mu*. In chapter 52 this unity of *shi* and *mu* is articulated in terms of generation and the mother-son relationship:

The world has its fetal beginning (*shi* 始), that can be considered the mother of the world (*tianxia mu*). You have to have gotten to this mother before you can understand her progeny (*zi*). And once you have understood her progeny, if you go back and safeguard the mother, you will live to the end of your days without danger. (Hall and Ames 2003, 158).

The difference between a “woman in her beginning” and a mother is merely a difference in the sequence of time, not in essence. As the ancient characters for *woman* and *mother* attest, the mere difference is that the character of mother depicts breasts in addition to the *nü* radical. Thus, being a mother is not merely the ability to grow a fetus and give birth to a baby, it is also the ability to nourish, and that is the crucial aspect that relates the mother to Dao. Hence, there is a distinction between the mother and other feminine traits, while feminine and masculine together form the unity of the Dao, the mother embodies the ability to unite yin and yang in her own body, create a life, nourish it, and bring it to maturation. Thereby, the mother can become a metaphor for the Dao in the manner that Dao generates all things and is hence positioned above the “feminine and masculine” distinction which belong to the realm of the “myriad beings.”

Another point in regard to the first chapter and any other instance where the cosmogonic process is discussed in early Daoist texts is the usage of the verb *sheng* “to give birth.” However, this notion is not limited to mammals giving birth to an offspring, rather includes a broader range of generation. As Sarah Allan points out: “the earliest character is a pictograph of a plant sprouting from the earth ... Like *wu* 物, *sheng* refers equally to the plant and animal world” (Allan 1997, 98–99). The Dao is a life-giving force that generates all the living things, but it does so in the way water gives life, not in the manner of a creator god.

Moreover, Dao, as the life-giving force, does not stop once life is generated. Like a mother, Dao also nourishes and raises the things, brings them to maturity, and allows them to prosper. As both chapter 10 and 51 state, Dao “gives life to the things and nurtures them. Giving life without managing them and raising them without lording it over them—this is called dark efficacy (*xuande*).” In the *Laozi* there is no strict distinction between Dao and De. This dark efficacy is henceforth equivalent to Dao, making both the terms *xuande* and *shangde* synonyms of Dao (Zheng 2019, 16).

The main component of this *xuande* is *wuwei*, to which we could also add the notion of *ziran*. As Dao generates the things and beings, nourishes them, raises, and matures them without lording over them, that is, Dao is *wuwei* towards the beings—it allows the things to flourish on their own terms. As mentioned in chapter 57:

Hence in the words of the sages: we do things non-coercively (*wuwei*) and the common people develop along their own lines (*zihua*); we cherish equilibrium

(*jing*) and the common people order themselves (*zizheng*); we are non-interfering in our governance (*wushi*) and the common people prosper themselves (*zifu*); we are objectless in our desires (*wuyu*) and the common people are of themselves like unworked wood (*zipu*). (Hall and Ames 2003, 166)

The *zi* (self) constructions can only exist when Dao, the mother, or the ruler, adopt the methods of *wu* and do not manage or lord over the myriad beings, the offspring, or the people. In the *Laozi*, the virtues of birthing, nourishing, raising without controlling, are associated to the way a mother raises a child, and to the way that the ruler is to emulate Dao in governing the state. In this regard, the female (*pin*) is associated to the character *xuan*—dark, as in chapter 6: “The life force of the valley (*gushen*) never dies—this is called the dark female (*xuanpin*). The gateway of the dark female—this is called the root of the world. Wispy and delicate, it only seems to be there, yet its productivity is bottomless” (Hall and Ames 2003, 85). Lu Yanying suggests that terms such as *xuanpin*—the “dark female” (translated as “great womb” by Henricks 1989, xviii) and *gushen*—“valley spirit” refer to motherhood. Moreover, she maintains that, while Dao is the mother, *de* refers to infants as infants maintain the original, natural, true state of beings and greatest potency (2016, 36–37). The reference to *de* being equivalent to the infant is derived from chapter 55:

One who is vital in character (*de*) can be compared with a newborn baby, wasps and scorpions will not sting a baby, snakes and vipers will not bite him, and birds of prey and ferocious beasts will not snatch him up. (Hall and Ames 2003, 163)

However, as Hall and Ames’s translation shows, *de* has more than one meaning, and in the case of chapter 55, *de* refers to vitality. In contrast, the *de* as a political and ethical term referred to as “dark efficacy” is associated with Dao and the Mother.

Zheng Kai analyzes *xuande* in the *Laozi* by contrasting it to “shining virtue” (*mingde*) in the Confucian tradition (Zheng 2019, 13).¹⁰ Dark efficacy is subtle, not seen, not exemplified like in the Confucian tradition where virtues are displayed in actions such as humaneness (*ren*), rightness (*yi*), and propriety (*li*). According to Zheng, *xuande* in the *Laozi* consists of two aspects including political and ethical contents (2013, 142).

Following his analysis, the *Laozi* can be seen as a philosophy that seeks to overturn existing contemporary values, thus preference for the more motherly or feminine attributes of being non-active, dark, low, soft, and weak become primary and are seen as having an ethical superiority to the Confucian ideals of humaneness, rightness, and propriety. Chapter 5 exhibits the rejection of the Confucian ideals:

Heaven and Earth are not humane, they regard all things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane, he regards all people as straw dogs. How Heaven and Earth are like a bellows! While vacuous, it is never exhausted. When active, it produces even more. It is better to safeguard what you have within, than to learn a great deal that so often goes nowhere. (Hall and Ames 2003, 84)

The sage, in this case, is to emulate the cosmological processes of Heaven and Earth and the principles of nature which brings the *Laozi* to examine motherhood and femininity, rather than to abide by a man-made social centered ethics. This point is best exhibited by chapter 25:

There is something formed spontaneously, emerging before the heavens and earth. Silent and empty, standing alone as all that is, it does not suffer alteration. All pervading it does not pause, it can be thought of as the mother of the heavens and earth. I do not yet know its name. If I were to style it, I would call it Dao. And if forced to give it a name, I would call it grand. Being grand, it is called passing, passing, it is called distancing, distancing, it is called returning. Dao is grand, heaven is grand, earth is grand, and the ruler is also grand. Within the land there are four grantees, and the ruler occupies one of them. Human beings emulate earth, earth emulates heaven, heaven emulates Dao, and Dao abides by the self-so (*ziran*). (Hall and Ames 2003, 115)

This chapter summarizes best the parallel relations of Dao and the myriad things, mother and offspring, ruler and people. Dao is directly noted to be the mother of heaven and earth, the nameless, the source of all beings and the destination for their return. The four grantees of the universe are Dao, heaven, earth, and human beings.¹¹ The way of the world begins with Dao, is exhibited in nature, and is to be carried on by human beings. In this sense, the mother, whether a human mother, an animal mother, or mother nature herself, is not merely a metaphor for Dao. She is a force of nature, she is Dao.

The feminine in cultivation and rulership

The metaphysical and cosmological terminology used in ancient philosophy are applied to the human body; the living body is conceived as a microcosm embodiment of cosmological forces. Thus, through observation of Dao, the ruler cultivates his own body, nourishes life, and attains longevity.¹² The political position of a ruler is perceived as a “masculine” position, while the advice the *Laozi* offers to the ruler does not discard masculinity, but also embraces femininity and feminine attributes.¹³ The emphasis on the feminine has led scholars to view Daoism in general as “yin,” as opposed to “yang” or “masculine” Confucianism (Needham 1956, 61).¹⁴ However, a more holistic approach reveals that Daoist thought does not make such a separation, but rather seeks unity. Hence, both masculine and feminine are to be embraced, just as the merging of *yin* and *yang* creates harmony.¹⁵

In addition to the mother, the *Laozi* uses two other sets of terms in relation to femininity, *pin* and *ci*. *Pin* refers to female animals in general (in contrast to *mu* which refers to the male) and *ci* refers to hens, as opposed to *xiong* which refers to roosters (Wang 2017). *Pin* appears in a total of three chapters and five instances. In chapter 6, as seen above, it serves as a metaphor of the origin of the cosmos, as the life-force of the valley that never dies. As the chapter exhibits, *xuanpin* serves as a definition of the spirit valley. The *Laozi* thus connects the root source of all things and beings to the feminine, and further applies this to the fundamental principles of social behavior, making the metaphor both descriptive and prescriptive (Liu 2003, 181). *Ci*, denoting the hen, appears in two chapters (10 and 28), in the context of *de* and cultivation. Chapter 10 reads:

In carrying about your more spiritual and more physical aspects and embracing their oneness, are you able to keep them from separating? In concentrating your *qi* and making it pliant, are you able to become the newborn baby? In scrubbing and cleansing your profound mirror, are you able to rid it of all imperfections? In loving the common people and breathing life into the state, are you able to do it without recourse to wisdom? With nature’s gates swinging open and closed, are

you able to remain the female (*ci*)? With your insight penetrating the four quarters, are you able to do it without recourse to wisdom? It gives life to things and nurtures them. Giving life without managing them and raising them without lord-
ing over them—this is called dark efficacy. (Hall and Ames 2003, 90)

The female and femininity, whether as mother or as a soft, gentle, and supple being, shows that femininity has great significance for the *Laozi* and Daoism (Wang 2017, 35). Liu Xiaogan adds that the female in the sexual act and in mothering is the perfect example of doing something in a *wuwei* manner (2003, 200). This connects us to the point that females were conceived to behold traits of softness, stillness, and passivity. Ma Lin argues that the feminine occupies a central place in the *Daodejing*, which is not defined through a relation to the masculine, either in terms of a harmonious and complementary relationship, or in terms of mutual contradiction and distinctiveness from one another (2009, 269).¹⁶ Furthermore, a correlative reading of the feminine and masculine risks taking femininity and masculinity as two sides within a unity, thereby neutralizing and obscuring the thrust of the verses concerning the central importance of the feminine.

Karyn Lai understands the relationship between femininity and masculinity through Daoist notion of complementarity. In this understanding femininity and masculinity are interdependent, mutually inclusive, and in addition, remain distinct and irreducible to one another (Lai 2000, 146–47).

Chapter 28 is of particular importance to understanding the feminine imagery used in the *Laozi*:

Know the male yet safeguard the female and be a river gorge to the world. As a river gorge to the world, you will not lose your real potency (*de*), and not losing your real potency, you return to the state of the newborn baby. Know the clean and safeguard the solid, be the valley to the world. As a valley to the world, your real potency will be ample, and with ample potency, you return to the state of unworked wood. Know the white yet safeguard the black and be a model for the world. As a model for the world, your real potency will not be wanting, and with your potency not wanting, you return to the state of the limitless. (Hall and Ames 2003. 120–21)

According to this chapter, the feminine is not just portrayed as *yin* and the soft and subtle force of the world, but emphasizes a hidden structure in the background, while masculinity specifies what is prevailing, exposed, and at front. As chapter 42 mentions, all things embrace yang and embody yin. Robin Wang points out that one of the main meanings of the word *fu*, translated as “embody,” is to carry or bear something on one’s back, that is, in the background. *Fuyin* then refers to things that are not confronted, not seen, but still carried along (2017, 39). Together, *fuyin* and *baoyang* reveal an awareness of two aspects of reality that manifest in chapter 28 as well—there is the masculine aspect of explicit presence (know the male; know the clean; know the white), and the feminine aspect, the hidden underlying structure (safeguard the female; safeguard the solid; safeguard the black).

The continuity between polar opposites, a persistent theme in the *Laozi*, here applied to gender, suggests that the Daoist image of the sage and the fertile person is an androgyne who has access to the full range of gender traits (Ames 1981. 33). As the opposites are inseparable, the *Laozi* argues that our natural tendency is to observe the obvious,

that which stands before us, and ignore the latent in the background. Thus, the *Laozi* counteracts this tendency with a focus on the feminine who should be guarded (*shou*) and protected (*bao*).

The feminine in the *Laozi* is portrayed as a complement of the masculine and the realization of the sage in the world. Rather than being a reduction to feminine traits or values, the realization of a sage lies in a reconciliation of opposites as manifested in the embodiment of Dao.

In chapter 61 an analogy between a great state, the lower reaches of water's downward flow, and the female is made:

A great State is like the lower reaches of water's downward flow, it is the female of the world. In the intercourse of the world, the female is always able to use her equilibrium (*jing*) to best the male. It is this equilibrium that places her properly underneath. Hence, if the great state is able to get underneath the small state, it can rule the small state. If the small state is able to get underneath the large state, it can get to be ruled by the large state. Hence, some get underneath in order to rule, and some get underneath in order to be ruled. Now, the great state wants no more than to win over the other state and tend to it, while the small state wants no more than to offer the other state its services. If they are both getting what they want in the relationship, then it is fitting for the great state to take the lower position. (Hall and Ames 2003, 172)

In their commentary on this chapter, Hall and Ames stress that it is not stillness or passivity that the female brings to her relationship with the powerful male, but an achieved equilibrium, and underneath. As we saw in chapter 6 and elsewhere, the female is a river valley. "Her deference is a function of her capacity to accommodate and stabilize the relationship by drawing the energy of her emptiness. She 'bests' the male by being able to absorb and reinvest any excess energy in her reproductive role" (Hall and Ames 2003, 173).

Chapter 61 notes that the female overcomes the male by her qualities of stillness, and chapter 28 tells us that to attain union with Dao, one should abide by the female, cultivating the qualities of weakness and softness. Thus, the image of the feminine is not merely one of generating, giving, and nurturing, but also contains elements associated with the darker side of things (exhibited through the notions of *yin* and *xuan*).

In the *Laozi*, along with "mother of all existence," we also find terms such as "mother of the kingdom" (chapter 59). Noteworthy in this context is that the *Laozi* mentions only motherly, not fatherly love. It speaks of *ci*, motherly love, that spreads evenly, embraces all and excludes none, never withdraws itself and never claims credit. Galia Patt-Shamir explores how the conceptual framework of motherhood challenges the definition of self-identity. She notes a "paradox of motherhood" from both theoretical and practical perspective: the self-effacing yet self-fulfilling, giving oneself for another and the annulling of "self." As a mother, by definition, nourishes others, and in some sense is others, when a mother is known, the offspring cannot be ignored (2016, 252). In other words, the unique identity of mother is an identity of direct and necessary co-dependence, just as the myriad things and Dao are co-dependent, and equally, so are the ruler and the people. Chapter 67 speaks of the ruler in terms of a loving mother:

The entire world knows me as great. I am great, and yet bear resemblance to nothing at all. Indeed, it is only because I resemble nothing at all that I am able to be

great. If I did bear a resemblance to something else, for a long time now I would have been of little consequence. I really have three prized possessions that I cling to and treasure: the first of these is compassion,¹⁷ the second, frugality, and the third is my reluctance to try to become preeminent in the world. It is because of my compassion that I can be courageous; it is because of my frugality that I can be generous; it is because of my reluctance to try to become preeminent in the world that I am able to become chief among all things. To be courageous without compassion, to be generous without being frugal, and to take the lead without holding back—this is courting death. Compassion will give you victory in waging war, and security in your defending your ground. When nature sets anything up, it is as if it fortifies it with a wall of compassion.

This chapter exhibits what Patt-Shamir describes as “the mysterious female annulling herself not in the sense of sacrificing herself, but in the sense of being able to make way for others” (2016, 259). Hence, notion of the mother has several implications in the *Laozi*, here used to guide the ruler in his political practices.

Conclusion: Daoist philosophy and feminist philosophy

While early Daoist philosophy indeed stresses feminine traits as ideals for the cultivation of the ruler and the methods of governance, it is important to note that in no way does early Daoist philosophy undermine the existence of a patriarchal society. Although scholars (Chen 1969, 403;¹⁸ Erkes 1935; Duyvendak 1954, 56) have suggested that the *Laozi* was written in the context of a matriarchal society that celebrates the female, the mother, and femininity, the lack of evidence makes this assumption doubtful.¹⁹ While it is true that, unlike other philosophical texts of the time, the *Laozi* alludes to the mother and makes no mention of the father, the point in emphasizing the mother is to discuss Dao. Through the association of mother to the Dao and the equalization between feminine and masculine traits, early Daoism offers a conceptual turn regarding gender by equalizing men and women. Nevertheless, it is the ruler that ought to learn to emulate Dao, to act in a *wuwei* and non-controlling, non-dominating manner that allows the people (*baixing*) or the things (*wanwu*) to attain, or to return to, their natural state. Although Daoism is not explicit on the gender of the sage-ruler, the ruler in a male-dominating patriarchal society is not presumed to be a woman, rather a man that ought to learn and adopt feminine traits in addition to his already existing masculine ones. It is, however, significant that a man ought to learn from femininity, yet in the context of a cosmology that stresses the correlativity and corresponding aspects of yin and yang, *wu* and *you*, heaven and earth and other complementary pairs, it is not completely surprising that early Daoist philosophy would stress the importance of both masculine and feminine traits working together as one. As mentioned by Roger Ames:

The feminine in the *Daodejing* as the true complement of the masculine and the realization of the sage in the world, rather than being a reduction to feminine values, lies in the reconciliation of opposites manifest in the embodiment of the Dao and the attainment of life as a consummate person who is neither feminine nor masculine. (Ames 1981, 43)

Thus, while the *Laozi* and other early Daoist manuscripts do emphasize feminine values, they are not about gender equality, or more radically put, do not concern gender at

all. Thinking in terms of feminine and masculine in ancient Daoism did not have much to do with the actuality and concrete practices of men and women but was rather related to ontological cosmic observation and its implementation on human beings as a microcosm of the universe. This is further emphasized through the choice of vocabulary made by the author(s) of the *Laozi*. As Robin Wang points out, there is no mention of the human-centered terms *nan* for man or *nü* or *fu* for women. In fact, the only social role ascribed to females is as mothers—yet it too is not limited to human females (Wang 2017).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Daoism did not offer a different perspective on women or did not allow them to flourish on their own terms. Ma Lin discusses this perspective as a philosophy of the feminine which attempts to articulate the characteristic and role of women in a positive sense. The principle of abiding by the female in the *Laozi* shows an attempt to reorient our conception of the world and of the ways in which we pursue our goals. Its goal is not a simplistic reversal of woman and man's status. It rather aims to cultivate a horizon of thinking that no longer takes hierarchy and contention as central (Ma 2009, 274).

Notwithstanding, in the context of feminist philosophy prevalent in the Western world today, examining the notions of gender, sex, and sexuality imbedded in non-Western philosophy may provide us with further insights regarding these notions. As early Daoism shows, the ground for developing equality between subjects of different genders and sexes was established in the early writings. Although the scope of this paper is restricted to Daoist philosophy in the pre-Qin era, in later developments in both Daoist philosophy and in the development of Daoism into a religion, women were treated as equal members, gender was abolished, and cultivation practices led to a sexual androgyny. Early Daoist philosophy does not abolish gender, it notes the importance of both genders and equalizes the values of both so-called masculine and feminine traits, and thereby overcomes the tendency to favor one over the other or create a hierarchy between them. Feminist philosophy emerged in the twentieth century in reaction to the prevalent patriarchal system. Similarly, since pre-Qin times, Daoism has always provided an alternative to the dominant patriarchy and Confucian society. It has been the feminist philosophy of China since ancient times, the philosophy that maintains equality and strives to overcome the social distinctions of “the other.” By being “the other,” Daoist philosophy transcends the boundaries between self and other and offers a holistic view in which the different beings and sexes are equally part of a continuum which does not depend on either one to exist, rather on both. A holistic view of sex and gender in the framework of feminist philosophy may assist us to expand the feminist discourse into a transcultural philosophy which overcomes the distinction between East and West.

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Notes

- 1 In the Guodian versions of the *Laozi* there are only references to the mother, and all other words related to the feminine are missing.
- 2 For a complete exploration of gender and cosmology in the *Yijing*, see Jia Jinhua 2016, 281–93.
- 3 *Yi yin yi yang zhi wei dao*.
- 4 An interesting phenomenon in the *Daodejing* is the absence of the *yin-yang* dyad which appears only in a singular instance in chapter 42 of the received version (and in the Peking University Han Dynasty bamboo slips). Moreover, this singular instance of *yinyang* does not appear in the Guodian bamboo slips nor the Mawangdui silk scrolls—i.e., does not appear in any version prior to the Han.

- 5 The text reads: “Circling [and beginning again, it takes itself as] the mother of the myriad things. Waning and waxing, it takes itself as the guideline of the myriad things. It is what the sky cannot exterminate, what the earth cannot bury, that which *yin* and *yang* cannot form (*yinyang zhi suo bu neng cheng*). The gentleman who knows this is called [a sage].” Translation by Allan 2003, 237–85.
- 6 Interestingly, a similar notion is found in the *Xici* (Grand Treatise) commentary to the *Yijing* in regard to the Qian and Kun hexagrams: “Qian knows the great beginning, Kun brings things to completion.” (*qian zhi dashi, kun zuo chengwu*). The two hexagrams generalize and concentrate the presence of yang and yin, which includes the gender binary of man and woman.
- 7 The book of the Laozi is in two volumes, it discusses the Dao and efficacy in over 5000 characters.
- 8 Author’s translation to Wang Bi’s commentary in [Wei] 1980, 1–6.
- 9 The Mawangdui silk versions of the Laozi read: “nameless, the beginning of all things, named, the mother of all things” (*wuming wanwu zhishi, youming wanwu zhimu*).
- 10 A better translation would present virtue versus concealed virtue, as the contrast between the two mainly lies in one being “shown” and presented outwards for others to see, while the virtue the *Laozi* discusses emphasizes a subtle and concealed virtue that consists of being ethical without the need to display the ethical conduct, without the need to be known and credited, rather to allow the beings/people to flourish on their own without knowledge of the source of their prosperity. However, as a full exploration of Daoist ethics does not belong here, in this paper I chose to use the standard translations of *xuan* and *ming* and do not elaborate further on this issue.
- 11 The ruler as the representative of human beings by being the “one” versus the “many.”
- 12 This observation appears in the early stages of Daoist philosophy, e.g., in chapters 7, 9, 13, 16, and 52 of the *Laozi*, and in the excavated manuscript from Guodian, the *Taiyi Shengshui*, slips 10–11.
- 13 Roger Ames makes this clear in terming the ideal of the ruler as an “androgynous” ideal. (1981, 21–45). Liu Xiaogan too explains the relevant versus in the *Laozi* that bear upon the feminine as primarily concerning how to govern the world. He maintains that the *ci*-based techniques are invoked for the purpose of accomplishing the *xiong*-inspired end of political control. Thus, in his reading, the objectives and agents of action are masculine in nature, while feminine virtues are employed as a strategy for achieving the ultimate goal.
- 14 Ma Lin mentions that Needham’s delineation of Daoism as feminine has limitations due to a concern with history, especially in his suggestion that primitive Chinese society “was in all probability matriarchal.” She calls his interpretation a “quasi-feminist historical reading” (2009, 267–68).
- 15 This observation derives from the *Laozi*, chapter 42.
- 16 As correctly observed, Ma emphasizes the fact that *mu* is the only word that never occurs in relation to her opposite (*fu*). In her opinion, this attests to the primacy the *Laozi* attributes to the feminine. It is not only because of her capacity to be pregnant that the *Laozi* accentuates her. *Mu* is referred to as the origin, source, and guardian of the myriad things which appears to be a metaphorical invocation (2009, 273).
- 17 The word compassion is used to translate the character *ci* which originally indicates deep love as the love between mother and offspring, also used to refer to one’s mother in respectful terms.
- 18 As evidence for this point, Chen cites the “Robber Zhi” (*dao zhi*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* that says: “during the age of Shen Nong, people rested at ease and acted with vigor. They cared for their mothers but not for their fathers. They lived among deer. They ate what they cultivated and wore what they wove. They did not think of harming one another.” This does perhaps reflect a matriarchal society, but it is a reference to a pre-civilization period in ancient history which is not the concern of the *Laozi* as a political oriented text. In addition, Chen and Wang connect this ancient matriarchal origin with the character of *wu* 无(無) with the characters *wu* 舞 for “dance” and *wu* 巫 for female shaman, and thus connect the concept of absence (*wu*) in the *Laozi* with an ancient shamanistic religion, when the female was the reigning political as well as religious power. However, there are two problems with this interpretation. One, the character used as *wu* in the Guodian versions of the *Laozi* was not 無, but *wang* 亡. The two were used interchangeably at the time, making the origin of the word “absence” *wang* 亡 and not a dancing shaman. Second, following the analysis of Yan Buke, the character *ru* 儒 is derived from *wu* 舞 and *wu* 巫 in the context of ritualized practice. See Yan 2015, 165.
- 19 Yet we still must keep in mind that Daoism did offer an alternative to the dominant Confucian society. Although it was scarcely politically practiced, Daoism has always been an influence in Chinese culture and political practices. Throughout history there are many examples of Daoism or Daoist institutions who treated women equally and where women were allowed to flourish. For further discussion see: Despeux et al. 2003.

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