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Exploring Axiological Beliefs in Taoism for Second Language Acquisition

Bhuban Bahadur Bohara

Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus

bbhuwan@gmail.com

Dr. Narendra Raj Paneru

Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus

nrajpaneru@gmail.com

Abstract

Taoism, a major tradition from ancient Chinese thought, centers around the concept of "Tao" or "the Way," emphasizing harmony with nature and balance in life. Originating during the Zhou dynasty, Taoism is shaped by seminal texts such as the Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi. While Western discourse often distinguishes Taoist philosophy (Daojia) and religion (Daojiao), this division contrasts with the holistic worldview of Taoists. Taoist axiology highlights values like balance through Yin-Yang dualism, ethical responsibility towards nature, non-attachment, and skepticism of manmade rules even in English/second language acquisition. The Taoist ethos advocates non-action governance, self-preservation, and the integration of humanity as part of, not superior to, nature. This article explores Taoist values and their relevance to modern contexts, highlighting their contributions to Chinese philosophy, culture, and practices such as Feng-shui, martial arts, traditional medicine, and even in second language learning. Taoism offers a timeless framework for achieving balance, ethical living, and sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: *Taoism, Tao Te Ching, yin-yang, axiology, non-action, Chinese philosophy*

Taoism: An Introduction

Taoism, a prominent Chinese philosophical worldview contemporary to Buddhism originated from South Asia, and Confucianism originated from mainland China, is still influential in most of the religious and philosophical traditions prevalent in China. It maintains the central position of nature and views the creation in unison to nature. Taoist axiological beliefs such as; the openness of mind, ethical responsibilities of a Taoist towards nature, non-attachment, non-action, qualities of sages, and many others are discussed in this work.

Chinese word 'Tao' or 'Dao' literally means the way or path. Therefore, Taoism is about the way one should take in life. It is an ancient tradition of thought developed in China during the rule of Zhou dynasty (1046-221 BCE) (Miller, 2008). During this period the major two earliest Taoist works *Tao Te Ching* (6th century BCE) and *Zhuangzi* (4th century BCE) were written. Taoism developed as a religion after 300 years when Chang-Tao-Ling (34-156 AD), whom all Taoists revere as Chang T'ien-shi, which means "Heavenly Master Chang",

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established the first religious organization named “The Packs of Rice Tao” during eastern Han dynasty (25-220 AD) (Hu & Allen, 2005).

Modern academic discourses very often distinguish Taoist religion, Daojiao and Taoist philosophy, Daojia as entirely different traditions. They refer Wing-Tsit Chan, who sees Taoism as a religion as degeneration of Taoism as a philosophy (Butucea, 2015) and Fung Yu-lan, who demarcate both as separate traditions. For him, the doctrine of Taoist philosophy is following nature, while the latter is working against it (cited in Kirkland, 1992). However; this separation is purely influenced by the Western worldview of inquiry, which overlooks the Taoist masters’ holistic view of life (Littlejohn, n.d.) and is not compatible to Chinese thinking (Butucea, 2015). It is because the Taoist masters not only offered philosophical insights, but they also practised meditation, physical exercises and many other rituals (Littlejohn, *ibid.*; Butucea, *ibid.*). Western non-dualist worldview visualizes the two separately, but the Chinese dualist worldview integrates the both. Both of the philosophical traditions differ in the fundamental questions of their inquiry. European philosophical inquiry is based on the epistemological questions on the existence and nature of knowledge whereas Chinese philosophical inquiry is dominated by the question of change (Henricks, 1989; LaFargue, 1992 as cited in Butucea, 2015). At present at least one fourth of the population of the world is of Chinese ascent spread in China, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, East and Southeast Asia, Korea, and many other countries. Majority of them are to the greater or lesser extent influenced by Taoist ideas, values and beliefs (Hu & Allen, 2005). Many of the other philosophies and movements of Chinese origin such as ancestor worship, the Chinese zodiac, Chinese medical practices such as acupuncture, and the martial arts form Taiji or Feng-shui are influenced by Taoist values (Hu & Allen, 2005).

Axiology

Every philosophical tradition is distinguishable from others based on epistemology, ontology and axiology. So far this work is concerned; it deals with only the axiological ground of the Tao philosophy here. Axiology, a philosophical theory of values (Chmielecki & Chmieleka, n.d.), is very much necessary for the conception of philosophy. It addresses the inherent value system in a particular thought or school of thought. Apart from it, axiology considers the discourses related to ethics and aesthetics relating the notions, ideas, and ideals (Chmielecki & Chmieleka, *ibid.*). Value theory is another name used for axiology. Axiology is taken as “an excellent way to pick up on the complexities of cases to explain the badness of harm” (Cleary, 2013). Brahm (1993) summarizes axiology in two ways, i.e., axiology as a science, and axiology as its relevance to the crisis solution. The former focuses on the nature of axiology and the latter as its urgent need at present to solve aesthetical puzzles. In this work, the Tao values are discussed on the aforementioned conceptualizations.

Yin-Yang as Axiological Belief

The dualism of *yin-yang* is the central theme of Taoism. This dualism symbolizes the existence of opposite but harmoniously interdependent forces of nature. Literally, *yin* and *yang* refer to “the shady and the sunny side of a hill respectively” (Miller, 2008, p. 53). *Yin* symbolizes darkness, water, female, or winter whereas *yang* symbolizes light, fire, male, or summer. Though both of the concepts seem to be contradictory they appear to come as complementary to each other for the integration of nature. This *yin* and *yang* dualism is manifested in a symbol called Taijitu

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(<https://personaltao.com/taoism/what-is-yin-yang/>) which is a rotated pattern inside a circle which are in swirling teardrop shapes fitting within each other. The two contrasting shapes of *yin* and *yang* not only fit each other but they complement each other and rotate anticlockwise. This rotation symbolizes the ultimate nature of Tao; i.e. everything is constantly transforming.

Apart from *yin/yang* Fischer (2015) summarized some Taoist values as knowing contentment; focus; purity and openness of mind; humbleness, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing environment; and grace and perseverance. In this work, some other axiological considerations are discussed.

Other Axiological Beliefs

Tao Te Ching, one of the major texts of Taoism, extended in 81 chapters, manifests various other value systems in Taoism. Though it is not the very first book of the Taoist ideas, it is the first book that laid foundations of Tao philosophy. Here “Tao” literally means “the way” and its meaning can be extended as direction, rule, ideal, or the operating principle of the cosmos and “Te” means power, application or virtue (Hu & Allen, 2005). Here are the major ethical considerations of Taoism that can also be traced in *Tao Te Ching* and other scriptures:

Ethical Responsibilities Towards Nature

Taoism provides “normative guidelines for ethical and actions towards nature ((Kane 2001, Lin and Lin, 2013, Widisuseno, 2018). It is a human responsibility to place him/herself in the order of nature not distinguishing him/her from other organisms. For this sages suggest qualities like simplicity, care of others, flexibility in addressing life issues, being independent, sharpness in understanding, and gentleness ((Kane 2001, Lin and Lin, 2013, Widisuseno, 2018).

Non-Attachment

According to the ancient Taoist text *Chongxuan*, “one does not attach to ‘there is’, nor to ‘there is not’. Not only does he not attach to attachment, but neither to non-attachment” (as cited in Ozkan, 2013, p.13). This notion emphasizes the value of non-attachment in a sage. It maintains that a sage or one on Tao has no attachments either to any belongings or to any disparities. Even they do not display their non-attachment to others because doing so is also a kind of attachment.

Distrust to Manmade Rules

Dunhua (2017) finds Taoism indifferent to the present political axiology as it distrusts the manmade rules. It believes in the order set by nature. Laozi appeals an earlier golden age before men started making a distinction among things (Ivanhoe & Norden, 2005). In the 38th chapter of *Tao Te Ching*, he says that Tao declined after civilization arose.

When the Way was lost there was Virtue;
 When Virtue was lost there was benevolence;
 When benevolence was lost there was righteousness;
 When righteousness was lost there were the rites.
 The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and trust,
 and the beginning of chaos.

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The ability to predict what is to come is an embellishment of the Way,
and the beginning of ignorance.

Tao Te Ching Ch. 38

Ruling With Non-Action Governing

Taoism believes in non-action rather than action. Here non-action refers to noninterference to nature. In many chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*, including Chapters 3, 10, and 14 of the book non-action is taken as a virtue. According to Taoist beliefs, the sage king does not let his subjects feel his rule; he rather maintains order by non-action (Kane, 2001). A successful ruler is supposed to remain least noticed and does not interfere with his subjects and allows them to act by themselves (Leaman, 1999).

And that those with knowledge do not dare to act.

Sages enact nonaction and everything becomes well ordered.

Tao Te Ching, ch. 3

Qualities of Tao Sages

Taoist sages do not engage in dispute and arguing neither do they try to prove their point. They act like water and find their place overcoming the hard and strong by suppleness. Similarly, they act without expectations (*TaoTe Ching*, chs. 2, 51) and live in harmony. They place them at last yet come first (ch. 7) and never make a demonstration of them. They are supposed to create peace; creatures do not harm them and soldiers do not kill them (cited in Butucea, 2015, pp.1570-71).

Humanity as One Among Others in the Nature

Taoism does not place humanity above all other creatures and other entities in nature; it rather places it one among all. In Taoist belief system, everything in nature has the same hierarchical order (Kane, 2001, p. 40).

Obedience to the Laws of Nature

According to Taoism when one maintains the balance of holding on to nature and tries to live fairly. S/he does not do the things that are contrary to the laws of nature. It is seen as to do virtue and brings moral power (Widisuseno, 2018, p. 123). It focuses on the balance of life, i.e., enables a person to avoid the egoism of interest (ibid.).

Self-Preservation

Chang-tzu and Lao-tzu both concern on the self-preservation. Both of the masters saw the degeneration of Chinese society from disorder to chaos in the period of Warring States (475-221 BCE). Lao-tzu opines that the root of this disorder was people tended to establish norms frequently according to their understandings and then wanted to impose them on others by force (Hu & Allen, 2005). Chang-tzu added that people do so trapped in conventional thinking. These types of activities lead them to notice the differences between things and violate the integrity of nature. Therefore, the Taoist masters emphasized a preserved self with the redefinition of “ego” and “self” which they suggest to be achieved on the ground of selflessness. They see our self-awareness and self-observation as the process of separating ourselves from others seeing all organisms mutually exclusive. They say that every process follows a pattern and always returns to the source. This very pattern is the eternal and omnipresent Tao. The masters emphasize the organism’s unison to nature and focus on its preservation (Jacobs, 2015).

Remain Undistracted of Emotions

Taoist sages are not free from emotions; yet remain unaffected by them. They realize that every organism, including themselves, be a part of the natural flow of life. This natural flow is Tao which remains nameless and in the state of governing with non-governance. Taoism believes a state governed by the sage king which govern without any interference to the natural order remaining independent of the external things. Tao sages not even distracted by the concept of death they take it as a part of a natural process (Leaman, 1991, p.85).

Axiological Beliefs in Taoism for English/Second Language Acquisition

Taoist axiological beliefs offer a major framework for understanding English/second language learning. These beliefs emphasize harmony, balance, and alignment with natural processes making them relevant to pedagogical strategies and learner engagement. By integrating Taoist principles into language learning, teachers and learners can transcend conventional approaches, fostering a holistic and meaningful educational journey.

Harmony and Balance: The Yin-Yang Framework in Second Language Acquisition

The Taoist concept of yin-yang represents the interplay of opposing yet complementary forces. It might offer a metaphor for achieving balance in language learning. Yin is associated with receptive language skills like listening and reading emphasizing introspection and patience. In contrast, Yang embodies productive/expressive skills such as speaking and writing, requiring active participation and self-expression. Together, these forces illustrate the importance of harmonizing receptive and productive/expressive skills, promoting a balanced approach to mastering a second language (Laozi, trans. 1997). This balance ensures that learners develop a holistic linguistic competence, reflecting the natural rhythm and flow emphasized in Taoism.

Learning as a Natural Process: Wu Wei in Pedagogy

The Taoist principle of *wu wei* (effortless action) highlights learning as a natural and unforced process. In second language acquisition, this philosophy advocates for immersion in real-life contexts, real-life learning, such as storytelling, discussions, and cultural exchanges, rather than rigid, mechanistic drills (Wong, 2020). Teachers adopting *wu wei* act as facilitators, creating the learning atmosphere where learners can engage organically with the language. By minimizing interference and allowing students to progress at their own pace, teachers foster intrinsic motivation and long-term retention. Here, teachers create the learning zone for the learners since they know very well that a comfort zone is a beautiful place but nothing ever grows there.

Non-Attachment to Outcomes: The Joy of Learning

Non-attachment, a core Taoist value, shifts the focus of learning from rigid outcomes to the process itself. This principle encourages learners to release anxieties and tortures about grades or fluency benchmarks, embracing curiosity and exploration instead (Chen, 2013). Teachers can create supportive atmosphere that celebrate incremental progress, reducing stress and fostering resilience. By prioritizing the journey of learning over its destination, learners develop intrinsic motivation and a deeper connection to the language.

Respecting Individual Rhythms: Obedience to Nature's Laws

Taoist philosophy stresses living in harmony with nature. It argues and respects individual learning rhythms in language acquisition. Each learner's journey is unique, and progress occurs at varying paces. Teachers can embrace this diversity by providing

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instructional methods to individual needs, promoting inclusivity over uniformity (Fang & Dong, 2015). This personalized approach aligns with Taoist values, ensuring that learners feel inspired, supported and empowered throughout their educational journey. The teachers use their own passion, energy, dedication, patience, perseverance and love besides their academic qualities and qualifications to make all the difference of their learners' world.

Simplicity, Flexibility, and Responsiveness in SLA

Taoism values simplicity, humility, and adaptability qualities which are essential for both learners and teachers. An open-minded approach to language learning nurtures adaptability, allowing learners to navigate linguistic contexts with ease. Similarly, flexibility in teaching methods—such as integrating multimedia tools or experiential activities—ensures responsiveness to diverse learner needs and promotes a dynamic, inclusive classroom environment (Zhang, 2019). Such qualities in the pedagogies of English for 21st century skills have also been eagerly desired (Paneru, 2023).

Ruling with Non-Action: Guiding Without Imposing

The Taoist principle of *wu wei* also applies to pedagogy, advocating for teaching methods that align with learners' natural inclinations and learning processes in real life. Teachers practicing non-action subtly guide students by providing resources and encouragement while avoiding excessive control. This approach empowers learners to take ownership of their learning and progress, fostering autonomy and deeper engagement with the language (Laozi, trans. 1997).

In this sense, Taoist axiological beliefs, with their emphasis on harmony, balance, and alignment with natural processes, offer transformative insights into second language acquisition. By integrating these principles into teaching practices, teachers can foster a more meaningful and fulfilling learning experience. This approach respects individual rhythms, nurtures intrinsic motivation, and aligns language learning with broader personal growth, creating a harmonious and holistic educational journey.

Conclusion

Taoism, a major Chinese philosophical tradition, has had a lasting influence on not only the Chinese diaspora but also on various aspects of Chinese religion, culture, and daily life. Unlike Western paradigms, Taoism integrates ethical considerations into its foundational epistemology and ontology, with a significant focus on the virtue of individuals, as expressed in the term "Te" from the Tao Te Ching (Ivanhoe & Norden, 2001). The philosophy places great emphasis on harmony with nature, viewing nature as an interconnected whole that includes all life forms. Taoism's teachings—such as the principles of Yin-Yang dualism, non-attachment, and respect for natural laws—offer invaluable guidance for living a balanced life as well as learning a language. The Taoist ideal of non-action governance, which critiques artificial human-made systems in favor of simplicity and natural order, offers an alternative ethical framework that encourages harmony within the self, society, and the environment. This holistic approach, in contrast to the compartmentalized perspectives of Western philosophies, encourages a unified understanding of life, which has permeated various cultural practices, including martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine.

Moreover, Taoism's holistic nature can be applied to the field of English/second language learning. Much like Taoism's approach to interconnectedness, language learning

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should emphasize the holistic development of learners, incorporating not just linguistic skills but also cultural, ethical, and environmental understandings, fostering an approach that aligns with both individual growth and global awareness.

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