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Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol3/iss1/14
Harmony and Diversity: Confucian and Daoist Discourses on Learning in Ancient China

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Abstract:
Unlike many areas of the world where religious conflicts have torn countries apart, diversity in ancient China actually helped to promote unification and preserve continuity of the Chinese culture. Through the use of translated primary source documents, such as the Daodejing and the Analects, this paper examines Daoism and Confucianism, and their respective ideas about knowledge and learning. It shows how Daoism taught its followers that the only way an individual can follow the Dao is if he replaces classical book learning and the knowledge of the sages with a greater appreciation of the relationship between the humans and the cosmos. Unlike the Daoist path of natural harmony, the Confucian discourse taught its followers that an individual can achieve personal harmony (and follow the Confucian way) only if he engages in self-cultivation and learns the wisdom of the sages. While holding dichotomous ideas about what constitutes “good learning,” these Chinese philosophies peacefully coexisted in China. The vast differences in these philosophies did not prevent individuals from subscribing to both seemingly contradictory philosophies at the same time; many Chinese were Daoist in private and Confucian in public. This kind of philosophical pluralism and intellectual diversity was embraced by the Chinese people and the government; it played an important role in the later development of a literati ideal and political culture that was compatible with both Confucian and Daoist teachings.

Daoism and Confucianism are “indigenous doctrines in China that emerged roughly in the same period.” What is most interesting about these two philosophies is their dichotomous ideas about learning and knowledge. Daoism teaches that the only way individuals can follow the Dao is if they detach themselves from learning and knowledge of the classics. Having an appreciation for the relationship between humans and the cosmos is more important than classical knowledge according to Daoist discourse. Confucianism, on the other hand, teaches that an individual can only achieve personal harmony (and follow the Confucian way) if he or she engages in self-cultivation and learns the wisdom of the sages.

One theme that is apparent throughout Daoist texts is the Daoist aversion of an educated population. Daoists did not believe that learning was important for individual development; in fact, the texts of Daoism make it clear learning was considered dangerous, corrupting, and otherwise useless to the pursuit of the Dao. The Daoists were adamantly opposed to book learning. According to passages in

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their books, an ideal state is one in which, "There are no books; the people have no use for them." 1 Maintaining one's natural state, even if that natural state meant ignorance, was what the Daoists strived to accomplish.

The human who sought learning and knowledge, according to the Daoists, polluted his or her natural state, risked becoming immoral, wasted his or her time on mediocre knowledge, jeopardized his or her ability to effectively follow the Dao, and could potentially become unruly and difficult to govern. Ignorance of the classics was encouraged for those striving to be good subjects and those seeking inner peace. Daoism was more concerned with individuals gaining knowledge about themselves, their natural environment, and the Dao, than with individuals learning from classical Confucian texts or other texts of the sages. Daoists believed that learning would do more harm than good for the person who sought knowledge. Seeking knowledge would not bring an individual closer to the Dao; it may actually lead a person further from "the way."

The Daoist antipathy to learning is most directly stated in one of the major ideas of Daoism- P'u, or the un-carved block. P'u is the Daoists "symbol of a man's natural state, when his inborn powers (te) have not been tampered with by knowledge." 2 The word 'tampered', usually carries a negative connotation; by using this negative word, with the word 'knowledge', the Daoists are able to effectively demonstrate their distrust of learning. This idea that knowledge negatively interferes with simplicity of an individual's natural state is further explored in the idea that the sense organs, which can be elements used to acquire unnecessary knowledge, were also dangerous to an individual's natural, pure state. The Daoist believed that the "eye is a menace to clear sight, the ear is a menace to subtle hearing, the mind is a menace to wisdom, every organ that senses is a menace to its own capacity. Sad indeed is it that man should look upon these seats of menace as his greatest treasure." 3 The Daoists were dismayed that most individuals used their sense organs to acquire new, useless knowledge to pollute their natural state.

The story of Nanyungch'u gives a concrete example of how knowledge can pollute a person's natural state to the point that they do not know how to get back to the Dao. In the story, Nanyungch'u travels to see Lao-tzu. When he arrives at Lao-tzu's house, Lao-tzu asks him what is troubling him (Lao-tzu can tell by Nanyungch'u's facial expression that something is wrong). Nanyungch'u replies, "The trouble with me is that if I do not know knowledge, people call me a fool. And if I learn knowledge, it makes me so sad." 4 Lao-tzu replies to him, "Indeed, you are a lost soul! You wish to recover your original nature, but are confused and do not know where to begin. I am so sorry for you.... Those who are disturbed by their senses and their minds cannot preserve their own character. How much less they can follow the Dao."

Nanyungch'u's story helps to clarify what the Daoists meant when they talked about how the senses and knowledge can pollute the body and prevent people from finding the Dao.

When knowledge polluted a person's natural state, they were at increased risk of becoming immoral; this was another reason Daoists believed knowledge was dangerous. Daoism warned rulers and others to "Exalt not the wise/ so that the people shall not scheme and contend." 5 Knowledge for the Daoist was an "instrument of evil that lead one away from the moral life." 6 Daoists urged their followers to use their minds like mirrors, "reflecting what is received without concealment," instead of using them as "a clearing house of plans and strategy." 7 If an individual used his/her mind passively the way a mirror passively reflects what is placed in front of it, the Daoist believed that it would be unlikely for any knowledge that entered to have any lasting effect on, or cause injury to, the person's moral conscious.

In addition to losing one's way and becoming immoral, Daoists believed that any book learning available to individuals was a waste of time because of its uselessness. According to the Daoist, Chuang Tzu, the classical books of the so called "sages" were nothing greater then the "lees and scum of bygone men." 8 This idea is fully explored in the excerpt from Chuang Tzu about the Duke Huan of Chi. In this passage, the Duke of Huan is reading a book about the wisdom of the sages. A wheelwright, who is in the same hallway as the Duke of Huan, explains that he has continued to work at his profession, even at the age of seventy, because his skill is so difficult and cannot be effectively explained or otherwise passed on to his son. 9

Using the philosophical ideas of Daoism, the wheelwright, explains that the contents of the books of sages are similar to his situation of passing on his knowledge to his son. The wheelwright believes that like his skills, the best ideas of the sages "cannot be put into words." 10 The most useful knowledge of the sages was too difficult to explain, describe, or, like the skill and talent of the wheelwright, pass on to others. Thus, the contents of the sage's books included only those things that were the easiest to explain and describe, not necessarily the best advice or wisdom that the sages possessed. The wheelwright states, "All that was worth handing on, died with [the sages]; the rest, they put into their books." 11 Thus, any learning that individuals gained from books was nothing but useless, mediocre knowledge- the so called "lees and scum of bygone men." 12

Among other reasons, Daoists were opposed to learning because they were afraid those who attempted to "better themselves" through book learning would forget the basic tenets of finding the way and following the Dao. It was feared that such learning would cause people to forget about the basic, most important principles of living a harmonious life. This idea is best illustrated by the passage from...
Chuang Tzu which discusses the child from Shou-ling, who, “was sent to Han-tan to learn the ‘Han-tan walk’ . He failed to master the steps, but spent so much time in trying to acquire them that in the end he forgot how one usually walks, and came home to Shou-ling crawling on all fours.” Metaphorically, this passage illustrates the claim that learning has the potential for causing individuals to lose sight of the Dao, and could perhaps cripple an individual’s ability to find his or her way back to the Dao.

Another reason for Daoist’s aversion to learning is the fear that an educated populace would make governing them impossible. Stated differently by Daoist Lao-tzu, “[w]hen a people become difficult to govern, it is because it has learned too much.” The government of the sages, Daoists claimed, “ought to aim at emptying the minds…to keep people in pathetic ignorance should be the chief and constant care.” Having a population that knew nothing would “have no desires, will cost but little for superstendence, and will yield richly for the state.” Lao-tzu believed that “it would be better if people knew less, if they gave up tools and abandoned writing, if they lost their desires to travel and engage in war. They would be satisfied with their own lives and not envy their neighbors.” In addition, such a population would “keep the county safe” from internal conflict and demise.

On this subject, the Daoist Lao-tzu went as far as stating, “If I were king of a state… I would put all intelligent men aside, would lead the people back to a primitive ignorance, and forbid all communication with neighboring countries.” If people in their ignorance did not know they were missing anything, they would not have any reason to rebel. Additionally, in their primitive state they would be completely dependant upon the ruler for their every need. Daoists strongly believed that individuals should be kept as ignorant as a small child; this would ease a ruler’s burden and maintain a peaceful population. Keeping people ignorant, according to the Daoist’s view is an easy way to ensure the ruler’s power over them.

Unlike the Daoists, who had a strong distaste for learning and knowledge, Confucianism embraced learning. Confucians believed that learning was a way to improve oneself and cultivate one’s morals. Following the Confucian way meant becoming a “lover of learning” and “rever[ing] the words of the sages.” Confucianism respected learning and knowledge to the extent that Confucius hoped that his students and followers would, “Learn as if you were following someone who you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing.” Learning, according to Confucius, was not something to be feared; rather it was something that was supposed to be actively sought after.

For many of the same reasons that Daoists resisted learning and distrusted the power of knowledge, the followers of Confucius embraced learning. Confucius himself once “spent a whole day without food and the whole night without sleep in order to meditate. It was of no use. It is better to learn.” Confucians valued time spent studying and gaining knowledge more than time spent meditating and thinking about the metaphysical the way the Daoists would. Confucians believed that learning improved one’s moral character, made people easier to rule, and was worthwhile because it improved an individual’s ability to follow the Confucian way. Confucianism even advocated the construction of formal institutions to educate the young. Learning was one of the most important elements of Confucianism.

Confucians believed that learning first and foremost improved an individual’s moral character. Learning, it was believed, enhanced and helped to recover an individual’s natural “good capacity . . . good knowledge . . . [and] . . . good feelings . . . which had been rubbed away by the rough contacts of daily life.” Spoken from a slightly different perspective,

One who studies widely and with set purpose, Who questions earnestly then thinks for himself what he has heard - Such a one will incidentally achieve Goodness.

Recovering one’s goodness and good sense of morality through learning, according to Confucius, could occur anywhere. Confucius, demonstrating this idea, stated, “Even when walking in a party of no more than three, I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. There will be good qualities that I can select for imitation and bad ones that will teach me what requires correction in myself” Confucianism, unlike Daoism, was not concerned that learning would corrupt an individual’s morals. Learning in any form, even leaning “pick[ed] up from [one’s] inferiors,” Confucians believed, would give an individual insight into how to improve his or her morals.

In an idea completely opposite to the Daoist beliefs, Confucianism believed that those who studied and became knowledgeable were actually easier to rule. While the Daoists attempted to keep populations ignorant and uneducated so that they would be easier to control, Confucians attempted to encourage individuals to gain an education. According to Confucius’s student Xunzi, it was when “people lack teachers, their tendencies are not corrected; [and] when they do not have ritual and moral principles, then their lawlessness is not controlled.” Through learning and knowledge of Confucian rituals and the moral principles of sages, people were taught to be morally upright and good citizens. Confucius believed that “The gentleman who is widely versed in letters... is not likely to go far wrong.” Thus, according to this principle of Confucianism, educated individuals are easier to govern.

While Daoists believed that learning was frivolous, Confucians believed that learning was a worthwhile activity that should be performed as often and as frequently as possible. Even Confucius, who began studying at the age of fifteen, dedicated much time to studying;
Confucius said, "Give me a few more years, so that I may have spent a whole fifty in study." Not only did learning help individuals to recover their innate goodness, it also provided wisdom. Confucius often advised his students to take note of who they were with, and "in the presence of a good man, think all the time how you may learn to equal him." Students of Confucius were also encouraged to study the wisdom of the sages; it was believed that this knowledge was some of the best the students could acquire. It was through the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom that one would be best suited to follow the Confucian way.

To promote the cycle of learning, Confucius and his student Mencius laid the groundwork for formal educational institutions. Confucius advised his students to praise individuals who followed Confucius's "unwearying effort to learn and unflagging patients in teaching others." Confucius believed that "those who have received knowledge [had] a duty to share it with others." Confucius's student Mencius advocated the establishment of institutions where individuals could receive an education "centered on moral instruction." These schools were to promote Confucian ideas and traditions; teaching was "the duty of children to parents and of the young to their elders." (Mencius does not discuss the schools in any great detail, but he does stress the fact that they should exist). Learning was so important in Confucianism that there were attempts to formalize a system to educate its followers.

When all of the elements of Daoism and Confucianism are considered, it is not surprising that they take such different positions in regards to learning and self-cultivation. For Daoism, which promotes inaction and the preservation of one's natural state, it only makes sense that they would distrust outside learning, such as the books of sages or Confucian Classics. First of all, the learning gained from these books may have (and would have) contradicted Daoist teachings. Additionally, by nature, learning violated the main Daoist principle of inaction. Confucianism on the other hand, which promotes action, would naturally encourage followers to be active by enthusiastically seeking learning and the advice of the sages. Literati scholars were able to strike a balance between the two extremes of the philosophies and find them meaningful in their everyday life. Unlike many areas of the world where religious conflicts have torn countries apart, diversity in ancient China actually helped to promote unification and preserve continuity of the Chinese culture.

(Endnotes)
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