

Book Review

Dongmei Lin, Jun Wang, and Shengdong Yan ♦

Nelson, Eric. *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*. Routledge, 2020. Pp. 156 ISBN (13) 978-03-670251-4-4.

Abstract: Daoism is a religion and a philosophy from ancient China that has influenced folk and national belief. *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* probes deep into the ethics and philosophy of nature in the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and similar texts to illuminate their importance in our current environmental and ecological crises. This book review provides insights for cultivating a more expansive ecological ethos, environmental culture of nature, and political ecology from the view of Daoism.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Daodejing, Daoism, Environmental Ethics.

Daoism and Environmental Philosophy goes back to the early Daoist portrayals of practices of embodied emptying and forgetting and communicative strategies of reversing the compulsions of words, things, and the embodied self. These critical and transformative facets of early Daoism enrich the readers with ideal representations and intuitiveness for inculcating a wider ecological mindset, growing political ecology, and environmentalism.

In the first chapter, "Introduction: early Daoist ethics and the philosophy of nature," the author sheds light on Daoist principles of simplicity, stillness, and emptiness, which can be utilized for the ecology. He doesn't negate the importance of scientific ecological research and the participatory politics in fighting off the current environmental crises. Interpretations of Daoism that highlight practices of detached 'biospiritual' self-formation and fatalistic indifference are the panaceas for environmental and ecological disasters brought about by rapid industrialization and blatant use of fossil fuels, which has resulted in excessive carbon emissions. The

♦**Dongmei Lin** and **Shengdong Yan** (Corresponding Author) are from Qilu Institute of Culture, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China and **Jun Wang** is from the Department of Public Education, Shandong Yingcai University, Jinan, China. Email: ZYM123zc@163.com

Daoists are of the belief that left to its own nature, things always return to their given patterns without artificial and forced interventions. Daoism celebrates life and rejects the reduction of things to the anthropocene and the instrumental usefulness of things. On the other hand, it does not mourn death as it is considered a release, fusing back into nature. It is the wholehearted acceptance of intergenerational justice of letting each take its turn when their time comes, and is a clear manifestation of ecological fair play.

In the next chapter titled “Nourishing life, cultivating nature, and environmental philosophy,” the author analyses early Daoist texts, later forms of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, which adopt elements of Daoist teachings on nourishing, nurturing, or tending to life. “The ecological cultivation of a shared elemental body, which encompasses the non-human and the human, could be interpreted in this respect as the nurturing and tending of the shared body of life and its environmental conditions” (44). The humanity’s footprints and an insatiable urge for domination over nature have devastated the natural equilibrium of the biosphere. Daoist models also contest the binary oppositions in Western Environmental Discourse. The philosophical musings of the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi emphasize “partaking and sharing in a common elemental body in relation to the cultivation and individuation of the genuine through the freedom of being attuned with environmental conditions” (44). The binary of the accordance with natural flow and immersion in the thing need not be seen as the only available alternatives. An alignment and harmonization with nature could be “the natural attunement and ease of a non-absorbed and non-coerced participation and wandering in the multifaceted happening of the whole” (44).

In a very thought-provoking chapter, “Wuwei, responsive attunement, and generative nature,” the author digs deep into early Daoist discourses that take a holistic view of the life of things. Wuwei refers to the practice of taking no action that is not in accord with the natural course of the universe. The celebration of life in all of its manifestations is cherished. Daoism neither accentuates nor degrades natural phenomena but stresses the need for nurture and care for all things with zero partiality. This is to “recognizing and cherishing in an unimpeded solidarity the forms and ways of life that surround them” (69). The living and the non-living and the sentient and the non-sentient cannot be bound into strata of classifications in terms of a

choice between the intrinsic and the instrumental value. Wuwei is the cultivation of a mental state in which our actions are in sync with the flow of life. Nelson insists that "it is not minimal in the sense of not caring, yet entails a therapeutic minimalism of 'doing less' that contests and disrupts the maximalism" (69) of egregious capitalistic societies. The chapter also highlights Ziran (what is as it is) and the importance of a prioritisation of Ziran.

The author dissects the philosophy of language and non-language in Zhuangzi and Wang Bi that illustrates two interminglings yet divergent potential prototypes of ecological pattern of thought processes and speaking in the chapter titled, "Emptying Ecology-Nothingness, language, and encountering things." The text clarifies ever changing perspectives and positions that correlate with the self-transformations (Zihua) of reality. It is the declaration of things in their transformation (Wuhua) that sums up the butterfly dream. The Daodejing highlights the reality, and the Zhuangzi prioritizes it in its transformations. The author further clarifies the point that "the recognition and appreciation of things (that which is as it is) pulls us, as in the dream of the butterfly (an exemplar of transformation)" (96). Early Daoist philosophies underscore the cultivation of emptiness in embodied 'biospiritual' practices via linguistic and other communicative strategies. The book portrays the reimagining of language and non-language and human and the non-human. This in turn affords the reimagining of environmental philosophy and ecological therapeutics. A critical ecology and environmental philosophy can be rekindled employing early Daoist expositions of emptiness and nothingness. Daoist endorsement of emptiness and undoing fixations provide models for the ecological relinquishing of things. The debate between the useful and the useless, the importance of the useless, was also an important theme that was discussed in this chapter.

Early Daoism enunciates a life practice of nurturing care depicting unbiased "equalizing rather than libertarian and economic self-interest" (116). People can break free from the clutches of authoritarianism and libertarianism that impede democracies in respect to the political ecology. A 21st Century Daoist, professing Wuwei and Ziran, conducts his comportment employing reimagining of political philosophy that can transform and enlighten the current democratic dispensations. It recognizes "the shared interthingly body of life, and

its intergenerational taking of turns" (116) as scores of creatures come and go in their momentary existence on this fragile planet.

The Epilogue highlights especially the radicality of the Chan discourses – like the idea of killing the Buddha – to shock and disorient the listener to awakening. An awakening to the capacity of spontaneous compassion and responsiveness. The author articulates the Chan Buddhist concept of emptiness as a practice of emptying – which would have meaningful implications for an "environmental ethics calling for the emptying dereification" (120). In moving towards a Chan Buddhist environmental ethos, Nelson highlights the Chan ethos as an "other-oriented disposition," where perfections are realised in loving-kindness and compassion. In an ecological ethos of emptiness and encounter – the prospect arises to encounter and respond to things in their singularity – by recognising them in the intrinsic or immanent character of their interdependent uniqueness. Chan Buddhism constantly rejects essentialist models, and echoes teachings like the Ziran of the older Daoist teachings. They are an indication towards a therapeutics of emptying, to dismantle the prevalent notion of power over nature that is reflected in the ecological crisis we see today.

The book highlights thus the multiple ways in which we must look to the Daodejing, the Zhuangzi, etc. to show us a way to the creation of an ecological ethos, which entails the non-attached prioritisation of the myriad things – and also an enquiry to the nature of things. It is a quest for attunement in encountering and responding that is highlighted in light of the evolving ecological crisis. Daoism in all its multifaceted aspects takes into account therapeutics and embodied practice of emptying that neutralizes the illusions of grandeur and domination of nature. This clearly shows our ecological crisis generating proclivities. The dream of ecologically sustainable nurturing of life, cultures, and political economies can be realized through Daoist practices of simplicity, stillness, and emptiness.

This work will greatly benefit students and scholars of philosophy, environmental ethics and philosophy, religious studies, intellectual history, economics, sociology, and governance. The book also gives fresh perspectives and solutions to emerging environmental crises such as global warming and the raging Corona pandemic that has devastating effects on our only habitat in the universe: The Blue Planet.