

STRATEGIC SOFT POWER AND RADICAL FEMININE DAOISM: A POLITICAL READING OF FEMALE VITALITY AND NON-ACTION

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Abstract: This article reinterprets the feminine principle in Daoism as a form of strategic soft power embedded in classical political thought. Rather than reducing femininity to biological fertility, Daoist philosophy – especially the *Daodejing* attributed to Laozi – conceives yin as a generative cosmological force that sustains relational order. The maternal metaphor signifies not merely reproduction but an ontological ground from which authority emerges as non-coercive influence. From a political perspective, Daoist femininity does not denote passivity; instead, it challenges rigid, masculinist models of sovereignty. Through *wu wei* (non-action), receptivity, and yielding, the feminine articulates a strategic mode of governance in which softness becomes efficacy and restraint becomes transformative leadership. Rather than marginalizing the feminine, Daoism situates it at the center of cosmic and social equilibrium. Radical feminine Daoism thus emerges as a political vision that reconceives authority through vitality, relationality, and balance.

Keywords: *China, Daodejing, Daoism, Feminine Principle, Laozi, Non-Action (Wu Wei), Soft Power, Yin.*

1. Introduction

The marginalization of women's voices in philosophical methodology has long been a persistent critique within academic discourse. For centuries, intellectual traditions have privileged male perspectives, often overlooking or silencing female contributions. This exclusion extends beyond scholarship into social and political life. In many cultural contexts, women are

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silenced not only structurally but also violently—through practices that subordinate them in the name of family honor or social norms. In parts of Asia, for instance, women who experience rape or abduction may be discouraged from speaking out, as public testimony is perceived as bringing shame upon the family. Such dynamics render female silence at times imposed, at times internalized, reinforcing perceptions of women as socially and politically weaker.

Within constitutional, political and educational systems, feminist approaches are frequently marginalized. Gender bias in curricula, publishing and institutional recognition continues even in developed societies. Studies of the Anglophone publishing world point to the dominance of male voices as normative, often treating them as universal benchmarks. This imbalance not only limits women's participation as authors but also shapes knowledge production itself. Women writers face obstacles in publishing in their native languages and in gaining international recognition, while male authors are disproportionately elevated as canonical or commercially successful figures. Although initiatives have created new linguistic and social spaces—particularly for Asian women writing in English—structural inequities persist. These debates bring forth the importance of recovering women's voices and rethinking the frameworks through which authority and authorship are defined. Beyond modern feminist critique, alternative philosophical traditions offer distinct visions of femininity. In Western thought, the 1970s emergence of ecofeminism—articulated by thinkers such as Françoise d'Eaubonne—challenged patriarchal hierarchies by linking the domination of women with the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminism reframed the feminine as a generative and relational force, seeking to overcome oppression through ecological and ethical renewal. Yet other traditions, particularly Daoism, present an even earlier and profound articulation of feminine power.

This article turns to the Daoist understanding of the feminine as a cosmological and political principle. In the *Daodejing* attributed to Laozi, the feminine (*yin*) is not confined to biological fertility, though birth symbolizes its generative capacity. Rather, it represents the “mother of all beings,” a nurturing source that

sustains the harmony of the universe. Femininity here transcends gender hierarchy; it signifies receptivity, creativity and balance. The maternal metaphor extends to all existence, encompassing men and women alike within a relational cosmos. In contrast to religious and philosophical systems that subordinate women, Daoism symbolically elevates the feminine as foundational to cosmic order. A close reading of Laozi’s text highlights three interrelated roles of *yin*: fertility, universal motherhood and a quasi-sacred principle that harmonizes and equalizes. Twentieth-century political interpretations further reveal how female vitality and *wu wei* (non-action) can be understood as forms of soft power. Yielding and flexibility are not signs of weakness but strategic modes of influence that surpass rigid, force-based models of authority.

2. The Notion of Patriarchal Society in *Daodejing*

Why is Laozi’s text significant for challenging patriarchal society? Does the *Daodejing* promote gender equity or does it privilege the feminine over the masculine? These questions are central to any attempt to address entrenched patriarchal structures. To engage them meaningfully, one must first understand how Daoism conceptualizes femininity and how that vision resonates in the present era. The *Daodejing*, one of the foundational texts of Chinese philosophy, traditionally attributed to Laozi and dated between the fourth and second centuries BCE (Schones 2020, 606), presents a cosmology that destabilizes the assumption that power is inherently masculine.

Chapter 6 famously declares:

The valley spirit never dies. / It is called the mystical female. / The entrance to the mystical female / Is called the root of Heaven and Earth.

Here, the “mystical female” symbolizes the generative source of existence itself. Rather than depicting authority as domination, the text portrays ultimate power as maternal, subtle and inexhaustible. As Roberts (8–9) observes, the highest authority in the *Daodejing* resembles a maternal force that gives birth to the “ten thousand things,” with humanity as only one part of a larger

natural order. Unlike the *Analects* of Confucius, which addresses concrete social and political concerns, the *Daodejing* emphasizes alignment with nature and the Dao. It affirms that all beings arise from and return to the natural source. According to Pinghua Liu (2024, 3), Laozi's recurrent use of terms such as "mother," "maternity" and "female" reflects generative, nurturing and loving capacities. These metaphors do not merely elevate women symbolically; they reconfigure the meaning of power itself. Chapter 28 reinforces this inversion: "Knowing the manly, but clinging to the womanly, / You become the valley of the world." The "valley" suggests receptivity, humility and depth—qualities presented as pathways to enduring virtue.

The *yin-yang* framework further supports this complementarity. As Miller and Nelson (3) note, *yin* (associated with the feminine) and *yang* (associated with the masculine) are interdependent and mutually sustaining. Neither dominates; each requires the other. In this sense, Daoism does not simply reverse hierarchy by favoring women over men. Rather, it challenges the logic of hierarchy itself. Power is not equated with aggression or rigidity but with balance, flexibility and harmony. Over its 2,500-year history, Daoism has associated the feminine with fertility, esoteric wisdom, sexuality and creative potency. Catherine and Livia (1) emphasize that the female is linked symbolically to the Dao as the mother of all beings. This cosmological reverence stands in stark contrast to cultural contexts in which women are reduced to objects of pleasure or confined to subordinate roles. From a Daoist perspective, feminine qualities—nurturing, cultivating, sustaining—are not weaknesses but foundational to cosmic and social equilibrium.

Recent scholarship (Zou and Chen, 1-2) highlights how classical Daoist principles such as *Qiwu*, *Zhuyin* and *Xujing* articulate ethical relationships among humans, nature and the self. These principles evolved historically yet retain contemporary relevance. *Zhuyin* emphasizes harmony; *Xujing* promotes inner cultivation and stillness; *Qiwu* encourages recognition of the interconnectedness—or "thingness"—of all beings. Together, they offer ethical resources for addressing ecological crises, social fragmentation and gender inequality.

3. The Image of Femininity: Daoist and Contemporary Approach

Contemporary feminist approaches often focus on beauty, fashion, body politics and sexuality within modern contexts rather than engaging deeply with ancient Chinese thought (Jiaran, 23). Yet the question remains: does restoring the image of femininity require reinterpreting Daoism for the present age? The task is not merely to restate classical ideas but to search for, reimagine and reactivate the role of femininity in ways that speak to contemporary concerns. Ege Selin Islekel (2024), drawing on Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia*, distinguishes between merely speaking the truth and courageously risking oneself to recover obscured truths (260–261). In many cultures, women’s speech has been restricted or discouraged, especially in public or cross-gender contexts (Sadiq, 363–373). Islekel (272) further differentiates between searching for truth, telling truth, adapting truth and motivating truth. These phases suggest that reimagining femininity involves not only articulation but transformation—translating ancient insights into lived ethical practice. In a Daoist framework, this transformation may unfold through the logic of soft power: influence grounded in receptivity, relationality and moral vitality rather than confrontation.

The aim, however, is not to revive femininity in order to deepen gender divisions. Instead, it is to re-envision the feminine as nurturing, fertile and generative in a way that reshapes social imagination. While Western traditions have often associated femininity with weakness or submissiveness, Daoist philosophy affirms a deeper equity (Wei, 779). In Laozi’s vision, the feminine gives life without demanding return, embodying a power that sustains rather than dominates (Chen, 55). The maternal image is central here. Ellen Marie Chen (1974) argues that in Daoism a mother’s love signifies unconditional acceptance and joyful affirmation of whatever life generates (62). Motherhood is not reduced to biological reproduction but symbolizes devotion to all beings. The vitality of the feminine thus expresses itself in unconditional care, generativity and the capacity to nurture the world.

Goddess symbolism offers another dimension of Daoist

femininity. In many religious traditions, goddesses are associated with reincarnation, fertility and the power of death and resurrection (Yongfeng and Geng, 1). While Daoism shares life-affirming motifs, Laozi's imagery differs in its philosophical depth. The female body is portrayed as the generative ground of heaven and earth, the matrix from which all existence emerges (Small, 255). Wangheng Chen (2025) interprets Laozi's imagery as presenting the feminine not merely as a deity but as the embodiment of Dao itself—an archetypal mother whose generative portal gives birth to the universe (287–288). Such vivid symbolism emphasises creativity and cosmic participation rather than hierarchical control. This perspective dissolves rigid distinctions between *yin* (female) and *yang* (male). Instead of privileging one over the other, Daoism emphasizes interdependence and harmony. Reverence for the feminine extends beyond social advocacy to a metaphysical affirmation of life's interconnectedness. Unlike certain strands of contemporary feminism that center resistance to male dominance, Daoist femininity highlights transformation through nurturing power, adaptability and creative renewal.

The fertility associated with femininity therefore transcends biological birth. It designates a life-sustaining principle that embraces humanity and the natural world alike. This expanded maternal metaphor reframes femininity as a universal matrix of vitality rather than a gendered function. When interpreted for the contemporary era, the feminine Dao becomes less a social category and more an ethical orientation—one that cultivates harmony, attentiveness, and ecological sensitivity. In this way, Daoist thought does not merely restore women's symbolic dignity but reconceptualizes power itself as generative care rather than domination.

4. Political Reading of Female Vitality and Non-Action

Western conceptions of feminism often revolve around identity politics, conflict and the negotiation of difference. By contrast, classical Chinese Daoist thought offers a distinctive vision that does not sharpen gender divisions but seeks to dissolve them. This raises an important question: does Daoism genuinely affirm

women’s voices and status? One response lies in its understanding of femininity as a form of soft power – an ethical and political force grounded in receptivity, humility and generativity. As Liu (288) suggests, softness in Daoism resembles water: it erodes rigidity without confrontation. Its efficacy lies precisely in its refusal to compete for supremacy. The Daodejing portrays the feminine as the origin and sustainer of life (chapter 52), invoking motherhood as a metaphor for ontological continuity. Here, the maternal does not merely nurture; it stabilizes the cosmos by sustaining relational coherence. Although articulated within a patriarchal milieu, this imagery subtly destabilizes assumptions that authority must be forceful.

Central to this political reorientation is *wu wei*. Rather than inactivity, it signifies disciplined non-coercion – action aligned with the spontaneous order of the *Dao*. As Guying Chen (2018) notes, such governance minimizes interference while preserving stability (31). Eric S. Nelson (2020) similarly cautions against reading Daoism as either anarchist or authoritarian, proposing instead an “anarchy of *Dao*” grounded in self-organizing relationality (102–114). Non-action thus reframes leadership as responsive presence rather than assertive control. Nature exemplifies this principle. Animals, plants and ecosystems follow spontaneous patterns rather than moralistic codes. Yu (4) notes that *wu wei* also applies to emotional life: feelings arise and pass without forceful suppression. In political and social terms, this suggests that genuine order emerges when domination is relinquished. Feminine softness becomes the model for governance – resilient, adaptive and life-affirming.

Applied to the modern world, Daoist femininity offers a framework for honoring women’s dignity without framing the struggle solely as opposition to patriarchy. Recognizing the feminine as fertility, motherhood and goddess re-centers nurturing, love and generative creativity as political virtues. Such recognition could contribute to ending violence against women, rejecting their objectification and promoting equity in education, employment and compensation. The three archetypes explored here – the fertile female, the loving mother and the generative goddess – symbolize not subordination but life-giving strength.

Jing Liu (2022) articulates this insight clearly: “Power in human society should follow the *dao*, and be dissolved into nothing (or non-being) or *wu*.” Through the deconstruction of dominance, all beings unfold spontaneously in freedom and equality within the nourishing “mother” of emptiness. This perspective reframes feminist aspirations not as rivalry but as restoration of balance. Chapter 49 of the *Daodejing* further illustrates this ethos:

The sage has no mind of his own./
 He is aware of the needs of others.../
 I am good to people who are good. /
 I am also good to people who are not good.../
 The sage is shy and humble-/
 He behaves like a little child. /

Here, humility, compassion and trust define authority. The sage’s childlike openness mirrors the maternal embrace of all beings. Political strength lies in responsiveness rather than rigidity. Ultimately, Daoist thought invites a feminist vision that transcends binary identities. The feminine—as woman, mother and goddess—embodies fertility, love and creation. By dissolving anthropocentric and hierarchical assumptions, it points toward harmony with nature, other beings and oneself. Rather than privileging one gender over another, Daoism reimagines power itself through the quiet resilience of the feminine Dao—a soft power capable of restoring balance, stability and well-being in a fractured world.

5. Conclusion

Laozi’s text offers a subtle yet profound challenge to patriarchal constructions of authority. By elevating the feminine as a cosmological principle rather than a social category, the *Daodejing* reframes power through generativity, receptivity and balance. In other words, Daoist femininity cannot be confined to biological fertility; it functions as a symbolic and political matrix through which vitality, equality and relational order are sustained. Rather than reversing hierarchy, Daoism questions hierarchy itself. Through *wu wei*, authority is reconceived as non-coercive efficacy—leadership grounded in alignment rather than domination. The feminine, understood as mother, matrix and

generative source, becomes emblematic of this alternative political imagination. That is to say, radical feminine Daoism articulates a model of strategic soft power capable of rethinking sovereignty, ethical responsibility and social harmony. In doing so, it contributes a distinctively Chinese philosophical resource to contemporary discussions of gender, governance and global imbalance.

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