

The Presence and Power of the Cosmic Yin: An Analysis of Chinese Women in Taoism

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to place a Western, twentieth-century understanding of feminism in dialogue with the ancient religion of Taoism. The paper examines women's placement and presence within Taoism, focusing on their arguable agency, influence and reverence within the religion as a whole. While normative views present Taoism as a reflection of the mainstream Confucian restrictions imposed on women at the time, Fleming would argue that Taoism, predating patriarchal ideologies, valued a feminine ideal that honored the cosmic yin and revered important Goddesses and immortals. In turn, this respect for females makes Taoism a philosophical religion that also progresses the values of Western "feminism" while underscoring its value as an egalitarian, humane, and truth-seeking spirituality.

For centuries world religions across the globe have subjugated women, leaving them persecuted and voiceless. The image of an oppressed, silenced woman seems to be the most widely held Western vision of Asian women. The oppression of women is certainly universal and has historically been felt in the West and the East, transcending borders, class, and ethnicity. However, for the purposes of this paper I will focus primarily on the religion of Taoism, the indigenous high religion of traditional China.¹ My aim is to place a Western, twentieth-century understanding of feminism in dialogue with the ancient religion of Taoism. I want to look at women's placement and presence within ancient Taoism, focusing on their arguable agency, influence and reverence within the religion as whole. While normative views present Taoism as a reflection of the mainstream Confucian restrictions imposed on women at the time, I would argue that Taoism, predating patriarchal ideologies, valued a feminine ideal that honored the cosmic yin and revered important Goddesses and Immortals.² In turn, this respect for females makes Taoism a philosophical religion that progresses the values of western "feminism" while underscoring its value as an egalitarian, humane, and truth-seeking spirituality.

In order to place Taoism and the Western tradition of feminism in dialogue with one another it is imperative to historically situate Taoism against the patriarchal backdrop of Confucianism. Confucianism was a conservative ideology that dominated the Chinese body politic for twenty-two centuries.³ One of the main

¹ Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn, *Women in Daoism* (Cambridge: Three Pines Press, 2003), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 5

³ Thomas Cleary, *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1989), 1.

political goals of this reigning ideology was to keep all political power in the hands of the narrow-minded male elite, and "to this end it attempted to suppress free thinking, imagination, social change, and inklings of the spiritual side of humanity."⁴ Juxtaposed against this oppressive regime is the ancient tradition of Taoism. This system of thought and belief cherishes the significance of the feminine element and counts many women as its founding leaders and teachers. Symbols such as the "Mysterious Female" and "Mother Earth" are paramount in the foundation of Taoist belief;⁵ these symbols are representative of the cosmic yin and are feminine in nature. The symbolic qualities that characterize the "Mysterious Female" and "Mother Earth" are practical traits that all practitioners of Taoism should exhibit; however, women are known to be more inclined towards embodying them. As a result, it was considered to be relatively simple for women to achieve the fundamental heart of Taoism even under oppressive patriarchal conditions.⁶

There is a great deal of historical evidence that further polarizes Confucianism from Taoism, such as the following facts from the late Han dynasty. During the late Han dynasty, Confucian college students suggested to the Emperor Wu that Confucius's teachings on humanity and justice would benefit the Chinese citizens if they were actually put into practice. Resulting from this 'radical' proposal to the state was an en masse slaughtering of Confucian college students.⁷ As Thomas Cleary articulates in his book, *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women*, due to this mini genocide of college students many survivors turned to Taoism, joining "generation upon generation of seekers of truths that lie beyond the realm of narrow and despotic orthodoxy."⁸ In this way, Taoism provided a way out of political oppression for many people. It became an escape for forward-thinking youth who were refused not only basic human rights to justice and freedom of speech, but were also being murdered for suggesting that such rights exist.

Taoism also tends to be conflated with Confucianism by scholars who misrepresent the differences between the two religions. For instance, Cleary discusses Max Weber's characterization of Confucianism as "masculine rationality" and Taoism as "feminine hysteria."⁹ It would seem here that Weber's argument is more fueled by misogyny than by any reputable academic research. Cleary goes on to say that "if the masculine/feminine polarity has any relevance at all in this context, it might be more historically accurate to characterize Confucianism as 'masculine authoritarianism' and Taoism as 'feminine nurture'."¹⁰ Taoism vastly exceeded the appeal of Confucianism in its attention to human rights and the egalitarian interests of its citizens. There is no doubt that the importance of the female and feminine

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

influences within Taoist lore have transcended social institutions and patriarchal ideologies throughout the ages.¹¹

Many Chinese women were active in the ancient Taoist tradition and appear frequently throughout historical records as priests, renunciants, teachers and Immortals.¹² To preface an understanding of immortality within the context of Taoism, an understanding of “Tao” itself is essential. According to Wang Yi’e in his book *Daoism in China: An Introduction*, Tao is the “root and essence of all that exists in the universe.”¹³ Yi’e goes on to quote a famous Taoist text, *Daode Jing* (written by Laozi, a great philosopher who is credited along with Zhuangzi for founding the philosophical school of Taoism)¹⁴:

[Tao] emerged before the cosmos. It is solitary, self grounded, and unchanging, permeating all processes without fail. We can deem it the mother of the world. Look at it and you will not see it, listen to it and you will not hear it. It is shapeless, existing apart from the senses. It is the permanent root from which all things grow.¹⁵

This definition is fluid yet emphasizes the unchanging aspect of the doctrine. For example, “it is permanent and infinite and its movement is limitless. The birth, changes, and extinction of all things have a temporary nature, yet through their changes they manifest the working of [Tao].”¹⁶ The goal of Taoism is to encourage its followers, whose bodies are temporary, earthly matter, to follow the natural inclination of their souls or the depth of their beings, which are essentially all a part of the unchanging “Tao,” the way, the source of all creation.

The Taoist notion of immortality means to have gone beyond the boundaries of this world and ascended to a higher level of enlightenment, as authors Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn have researched in their book *Women in Daoism*. They argue that “[Taoism] is a form of transcendence to a divine realm that is closely connected with the origins of the universe.”¹⁷ The physical, earthly beings that achieve this level of divinity do so by adhering to the following principles: living in separation from their families and society, engaging in techniques of bodily and spiritual control, devoting and disciplining their minds towards spiritual enlightenment, and acquiring magical powers as they progress in their training.¹⁸ Despeux and Kohn beautifully describe the transitory and all-knowing nature of Taoist Immortals:

¹¹ Cleary, *Immortal Sisters*, 2.

¹² Despeux, Kohn, *Women in Daoism*, 83.

¹³ Wang YI'E, *Daoism in China: An Introduction* (China: Floating World Editions, Inc., 2006), 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Despeux, Kohn, *Women in Daoism*, 83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

Immortals are at home both in the world and in the heavens. Accepting life and death as a single flow, they take neither too seriously and make the best of all they meet, exhibiting a happy attitude and playful way of being. They are perfected companions of the [Tao], realized ones who have fulfilled their potential, true persons that have become fully human and thus superhuman.¹⁹

Immortals are truly influential and venerated figures within Taoist lore. Their understanding of the Tao helps them exercise control over their natural surroundings as well as use their "magic" over natural phenomena and divine agents.²⁰ However, Immortals only use their "magic" in altruistic ways when it would benefit the well being of the community.²¹ An example of such a prominent figure would be the feminine influence of Immortal Sister Zhao of the Song dynasty (960-1278 C.E) who epitomizes the latter description of the humanitarian aspect of Taoism.²²

Cleary describes Immortal Sister Zhao, who was known for partaking in generous, humanitarian acts of kindness. As her brother constantly undermined her charitable works and questioned the value in doing such things as "rainmaking" for the farmers,²³ Sister Zhao would reply:

[Immortals'] hidden works are carried out in secret, their virtuous deeds are practiced covertly. Such is their range that they cannot be encompassed in one generalization. But the spiritual immortals do not take pride in themselves, and are wary of becoming known to the public; therefore worldly people do not get to hear about them.²⁴

This Taoist tale helps debunk the archaic belief that Taoist history consists of stories about the lives of well-known men from aristocratic families and/or political organizations.²⁵ Immortal Sister Zhao's story also falsifies a widely held belief that there is a relative shortage of information written on great Taoist and Buddhist women in China. Cleary warns against some "Western neo-Buddhist writers" who are quick to suggest that the higher knowledge traditions of China such as Taoism were embodiments of antifeminist doctrines, which, given the content of Immortal Sister Zhao's story, seems not to be the case.²⁶

While Cleary provides extensive information regarding women's presence

¹⁹ Despeux, Kohn, *Women in Daoism*, 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cleary, *Immortal Sisters*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Cleary, *Immortal Sisters*, 6.

and agency within the religion, he also explains why information and records on women in Chinese history have been so difficult to recover. He gives two reasons for this: firstly, "A skilled artisan leaves no traces," a Buddhist expression that conveys the altruistic nature in which prominent Taoist women would exercise their goodwill.²⁷ The fact that there is a void in retrievable information about the history of women in Taoism does not completely negate the possibility that the information does exist. Secondly, many female Taoist followers or Immortal Sisters were victims of Confucian society. In other words, "the perceptions of those around them were geared only toward certain definitions of women in terms of social position and duty as defined by quasi-Confucian orthodoxy. Notice of what they did, therefore, was ordinarily taken only within certain parameters."²⁸ Thus, Immortal Sisters moved silently, their spiritual talents invisible to their family members, as they belonged to a society more interested in upholding male dominance than female autonomy.

Cleary is not the only scholar who has been successful in giving voice to the resurgence of biographies of female Immortals within Taoism. Daniel L. Overmyer is another such scholar whose article entitled "Women in Chinese Religions: Submission, Struggle, Transcendence" discusses the primary document *Yun-chi ch'i-ch'ien* (HY 1026), an eleventh century collection of Taoist texts compiled for the emperor.²⁹ Although he admits that these stories are presented to the modern reader in "legendary form," they provide the reader with an account of female agency during a restrictive Confucian dynasty.³⁰ The stories from this document are set in the Eastern Chin dynasty (317-420 C.E).³¹ Overmyer and Cleary both point out that these enlightened females were everyday common women: mothers, wives, daughters of officials who studied the Tao with such dedication that they ascended to the level of Immortals.³² Overmyer also provides an example of a female Immortal, Sun Pu-erh, who was one of the "Seven Perfected" Immortals of the Ch'uan-chen Taoist tradition in the twelfth century.³³ Sun Pu-erh and her husband were disciples of Wang Che (1112- 1170), the founder of the Ch'uan-chen Taoist school. After Sun Pu-erh and her husband separated she became quite successful in gathering a following and spreading Taoism on her own.³⁴ Once deemed an Immortal, she became a catalyst and inspiration for other women in her community who began seeing themselves as valid practitioners in their country's ancient indigenous religion.

²⁷ Cleary, *Immortal Sisters*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Daniel L. Overmyer, "Women in Chinese Religions: Submission, Struggle, Transcendence." In *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion in Honour of Professor Jan Yun-Hua*, ed(s). Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schoper. (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1991), 97-101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

After reading both Overmyer and Cleary's analysis of primary documents relating to the testimonies and biographies of female Immortals, it is very apparent that women were very much a part of the foundations of ancient Taosim. Cleary's text was monumental for presenting Immortal Sister Sun Bu-er's famous set of fourteen verses for the first time to Western readers.³⁵ Her poems are stunning and illuminate the sacred traditions of Taoist belief. In order to demonstrate the impact and significance of her work, I will provide a brief close reading of the following poem by Immortal Sister Sun Bu-er:

"Before our body existed,
One energy was already there.
Like jade, more lustrous as it's polished,
Like gold, brighter as it's refined.
Sweet clear the ocean of birth and death,
Stay firm by the door of total mastery.
A particle at the point of open awareness,
The gentle firing is warm."³⁶

Based on the commentary in Cleary's book by Chen Yingning, the "one energy" that Sun Bu-er speaks to in her poem is a primal energy that is not dichotomized because "when it becomes dichotomized, it cannot be called one energy."³⁷ The poet avoided delineating along gender lines, creating a verse that spoke to the universality of energy and not only to yang or yin energy specifically. Sun Bu-er's line "the door of total mastery" was, according to Yingning, what the "Old Master called the door of the Mysterious Female, and what later Taoists called the opening of the Mysterious Pass."³⁸ This magical, "mysterious" opening is a very significant passage but "is made of creativity and receptivity joining together."³⁹ It has also been called the "lair of spirit and energy," and essentially describes "just one yin and one yang, one spirit and one energy, that is all; if you can get yin and yang to combine, spirit and energy to mass together, then the substance of the Mysterious Pass will be established."⁴⁰ Immortal Sister Sun Bu-er is neither subjugating women nor advocating for a superior position; instead, she simply and skillfully advocates a union of both ying and yang energy, because this blending of masculinity and femininity allows real harmony with the Tao to be achieved. The meaning here is extremely egalitarian in subtext and advances my argument that women were active participants in the rudiments of one of the world's most revered and ancient religions. This argument would undeniably be categorized as a feminist standpoint as defined by a western notion of "feminism".

³⁵ Cleary, *Immortal Sisters*, 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

How then can one place Taoism and western feminism in dialogue with another? To begin, Taoism and feminism pride themselves on being philosophical traditions that provide spiritual and intellectual inspiration.⁴¹ If this is true, then it is certainly productive for them to use each other's perspectives as mirrors to better understand their own weaknesses and strengths. Taoism is rooted in Chinese medicine and attempts to undo emotional blockages on an individual level.⁴² Harmonizing Taoism with feminism may suggest ways of overcoming these blockages and also allow us to work towards a more comprehensive understanding of this ancient philosophy through dialogue with our current critical practices. The goal of Taoism and Taoist practice is to return and be reunited with the Tao, the source of all creation. The primal energy in all of us must flow freely without emotional blockage, for the proper circulation of energy through the body and mind.⁴³ It is only then, after this work of clearance has occurred, that the individual's spiritual development can have a positive impact on society.⁴⁴ A point of diversion between feminism and Taoism is in Taoism's belief not so much in social mass movements but in the effect of the enlightened person on whomever she or he comes into contact with.⁴⁵

In terms of the maturation of western feminism over the twentieth century, the standpoint of Taoism might see the changing waves of feminism in this light:

The different feminist perspectives might be seen as vehicles that, while valuable at one point of development in the social history of women and men, need to be put aside once they have served their purpose. Otherwise, these perspectives become blockages to further development just as attachments to objects and ideas become blockages to enlightenment.⁴⁶

This description uses Taoism as a strong metaphor for understanding an interesting perspective on the evolution of western feminism. Taoism would instruct feminism not to get caught up in mistakes of the past, it might encourage feminists to see past shortcomings as moments of self-reflexivity, and constructive criticism not as abominations to the movement of feminism as a whole. For example this Taoist principle of undoing blockages lends itself to the American philosopher Judith Butler who has widely contributed to the field of feminism. Butler has been instrumental in contributing to what is commonly known as the third wave of feminism. Butler

⁴¹ Karen Laughlin and Eva Wong, "Feminism and/in Taoism." In *Feminism and World Religions*, ed(s). Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 149.

⁴² Laughlin and Wong, "Feminism and/in Taoism," 149.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 151.

reminds us of the danger in idealizing a time that can no longer be recovered.⁴⁷ She suggests not partaking in "feminist mythmaking," rather, we should re read the past with a less glorified and more pragmatic "revision of history".⁴⁸

Taoism would commend Butler for her desire to move forward from earlier waves of feminism that now, in the twenty first century no longer serve their purpose not only in feminist academia but also in advancing feminism as a social movement:

While it has been important for women to develop a sense of their rights and place within history – in China as in the West – feminists have also recognized a need to let go of their attachments to "great women" rather than merely patterning feminist history on the history of "great men".⁴⁹

This quotation, in addition to warning against attachments to the past, connects nicely with a latter point regarding the Taoist attitude towards public displays of "greatness." It explains why great women are not always visible.⁵⁰ Sharma and Young cite Cleary saying that, "[t]aoism's respect for the unheralded sage may in fact do more to account for the relative scarcity of information about great Taoist women in China than any presumed misogyny on the part of a male-dominated power structure."⁵¹ To conclude the latter "dialogue" between feminism and Taoism, it would seem then that Taoism could very well be classified as feminist (as understood by a western motivated definition). With wrinkles in the unification here and there I would argue that Taoist principles, although flourishing during periods of extreme patriarchy, was conceived during a pre-Confucian era, and thus placed and places today enormous importance on the beauty and reverence of yin but more importantly on the equal balance of energies between yin and yang.

A great master of Taoism Li Ni-wan, in his *Precious Raft*, describes the nirvana that is experienced when one ascends to the level of immorality:

"[w]hen one's practice reaches the level that there is no going and no coming, no entering and no emerging, then far and near, inner and outer are eliminated" (Wile 1992, 208)." This refers to the dissolution of the barrier between the microcosms of the body and the macrocosms of the universe, when the energy inside the body is the same as the energy in the universe, and both partake of the primordial vapor of the Tao. This is the state of the highest

⁴⁷ Laughlin and Wong, "Feminism and/in Taoism," 153.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 154.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

level of Taoist training, the return to the Tao, when the practitioner can “age with heaven and earth, and cultivate with the sun and moon”.⁵²

This is the hope for all women, not just practitioners of Taoism. The whole sky, not just half, is there's to claim. That women as well as men in China and around the world can “age with heaven and earth, and cultivate with the sun and moon.” The world with all its earthy pleasures and high realms of spiritual thought exists for us all. Despite evolving in a constrictive Confucian ideology Taoism transcended current expectations of women by revering and respecting many women as prominent leaders and enlightened Immortals. Despite close parallels between feminism and Taoism, Taoism believes in changing individuals on a spiritual level as oppose to changing social institutions on a political level. Incomplete without the balance of the other, yin and yang are the two energies of Mother Earth, there union brings humanity a sense of equanimity, peace of mind and ultimately when our physical bodies grow old a spiritual “return to the Tao”- our creator.

⁵² Laughlin and Wong, “Feminism and/in Taoism,” 170.

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