



The Value of Daoism in the Contemporary World

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Concerning the advances of Artificial Intelligence, Vienna

Objective

1. How the contemporary global understanding of Daoism is shaped/influenced by its previous reception (especially in the West)
2. How the selection of specific ideas (over others) plays an important role in the popularization of Daoism.
3. How Daoism can play a role (or can be a resource) in contemporary society
4. What are the risks and the methodologies involved behind this idea





Introduction

- oWhat is Daoism?
- oA Concise History of the Western Reception of Daoism
- oContemporary vehicles of promotion of Daoism:
 - 1.Daoism and Ecophilosophy
 - 2.Environmentalism: the greening agenda of CDA (Chinese Daoist Association)

What is Daoism?



道家: Philosophy

- Classical period
- Special attitude toward Nature
- Focus on self-cultivation
- Directly involved in the history of reception and popularization

道教: Institutionalized Religion

- Rules, rituals and practices
- Official Canon
- Not considered by academy until second half of 20th
- Political role (Chinese Daoist Association)

Western Reception of Daoism

1.

Proto-reception: Influence of Jesuits writings (XVII-XVIII)

- Main Characters: Missionaries, philosophers, theologians.
- Characteristics: Negative approach.
 - Examples:
 1. Nicolas Trigault and Matteo Ricci
 2. Athanasius Kircher



Western Reception of Daoism (道家)

2.

Beginning of reception: first flood of Laozi translations; circulation of Daoist ideas (XIX-XX).

Main Characters

Scholars (sinologists), philosophers, literary authors and artists (modernists).

Characteristics

More scholarly approach, philosophical recognition of some Daoist texts (vs popular Daoism), relationship with esoteric groups (ex. Theosophy)

Western Reception of Daoism

Beginning of reception:

Scholarly interests

Abel-Rémusat (College de France); Stanislas Julien.

Orientalist paradigm

Daoist text-based philosophy: timeless spiritual quality vs contemporary Chinese religious culture as degraded tradition.

Esoterism

key role in the popularization of Daoist texts and ideas (ex. Theosophical publishers).

General attitude

growing skepticism toward idea of progress and industrial capitalism. Looking for different spiritual sources. Emphasis in mystical aspects.





Western Reception of Daoism (道家)

3.

The Dao fever (consolidation of reception): second flood of Laozi translations; part of the Mystical Orient brand, Daoism as contemporary religion (second half XX).

Main Characters

Scholars (sinologists), New Age authors (Alan Watts, Blofeld, Lin Yutang) literary authors (Ursula Le Guin, Wayne Dyer).

Characteristics

idea of Daoism as nature-loving mysticism, quietism and inner peace, interests on Daoist body-mind technologies for health preservation.

Popular ideas

Nature-oriented mysticism/philosophy

Allan Watts (1958, 61): A journey into this new mode of consciousness gives one a marvelously enhanced appreciation of patterning in nature.

壬寅春劉开嘉书



道法自然

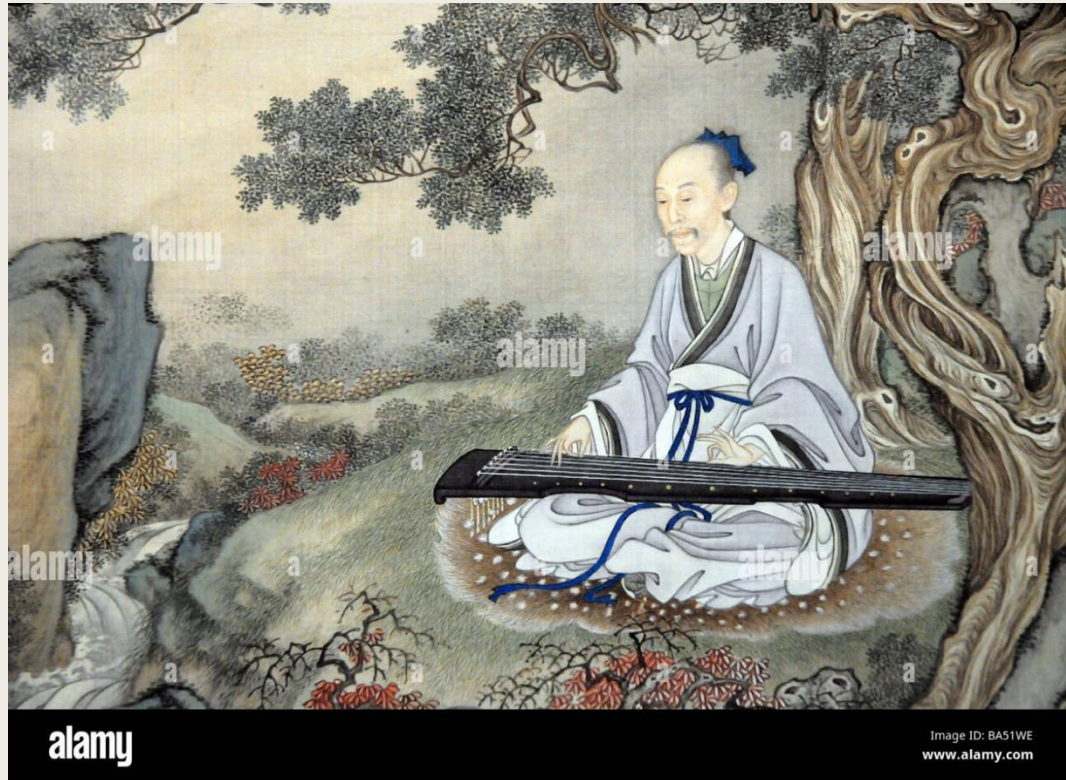
Popular ideas

Philosophy of living/self-help literature

Wayne Dyer (2007, pp.1-4) “I created this book to provide you with a simple yet direct experience for changing your thoughts and ultimately changing your life. Through the steady use of this relaxing Tao-centered work, you will begin to live in harmony with your own nature, feeling more at home than you ever felt before and living what is called a truly God-realized life



Case study: The Greening of Dao



道家: Environmental or Ecophilosophy

- Mainly classics (West and China)
- Orientalizing tendencies (culturalization of ecological discourse)
- New mode of thinking environmental issues



道教: Green Religion

- Institution and related canon
- Greening agenda of the CDA
- Part of the "Ecological Civilization project" of the CCP

道家: Environmental or Ecophilosophy

1. West

'67 White "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"; '70 Watts, Snyder etc; '90 series of conference and publication of "Daoism and Ecology"; from 2000 multiple publications on this topic

Main Characters

Scholars (Giradot, Miller, Liu Xiaogan, Kirkland), New Age/literary authors (Watts, Blofeld, Snyder, Capra, LeGuin);

Characteristics

Daoism as Nature-oriented philosophy; tendency on culturalization of ecological discourse; Daoism as a resource for environmental problems





道家

Environmental or Ecophilosophy

1. China

'90 Zhang Jiyu "Ecological Daoism"; 2000 Le Aiguo and others "religious ecology"; Yin Zhihua vs Western anthropocentrism; 2010 "ethical dimension of daoism"; Lai Xisan and Chen Xia "symbiotic model".

Main Characters

Scholars, Daoist monks;
CDA.

Characteristics

Through the sacredness of nature anticipates the principles of ecological sustainability. Principle of co-adaptation between the human and the natural. Alternative ethical model fundamentally opposed to Western anthropocentrism.

道家: Environmental or Ecophilosophy

- Sources: Laozi, Zhuangzi. Sometimes Commentaries, Taipingjing etc

History: REP, Deep Ecology, Environmental Philosophy

Basic Assumptions and characteristics:

- 1.Chinese/Daoist Ethos is holistic vs Western dualism (alternative solution)
- 2.Inseparability of Nature and Humanity (mutual influence) vs objectification of Nature
- 3.Nature as a subject to feel INTERNAL to the body.
- 4.Symbiotic paradigm: Daoism values all kinds of lives VS Western anthropocentrism

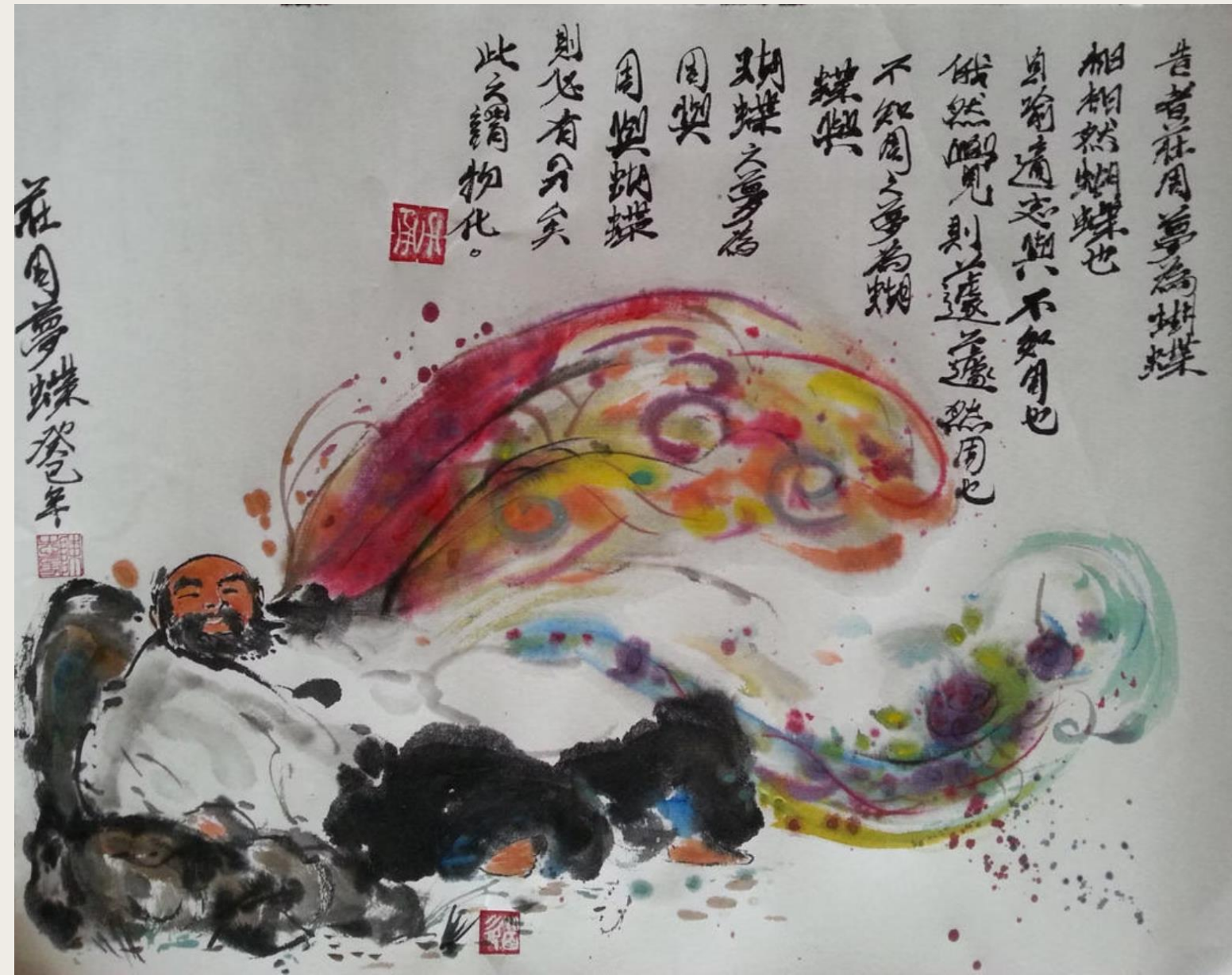
Methodology (risks and possible goals):

- 1.Re-interpretation of the past in relation to contemporary situation (creative re-appropriation)
- 2.Ecological re-reading of texts and concepts (selective reading = interpretative reading)
- 3.Culturalization of ecological discourse = re-assertion of Chinese Traditional values VS creates new ones
- 4.Daoism as resource to exploit (colonial reading) VS
Tool from which reframe/create new ecological discourse (decolonial reading)

道家: Environmental or Eco Philosophy

• Key concepts

1. Nature **道/天**: autopoietic relational reality mirrors the symbiotic paradigm of interconnection, diversity, mutual benefit. Ground of subjectivity (what we inherit)
2. **天人合一**: symbiotic mutuality, continuity between human and natural world
3. **自然**: autonomous, self-regulating system (no need for saviours)
4. **無為**: cluster of ideas (wu-X) acting without coercion, letting things follow their course, acting in harmony with the generative movement of Dao.





Nature in the *Laozi*

The Cosmos as Self-Organizing System

- The *Laozi* views the world as an autonomous, self-regulating whole (自然).
- Humanity is not separate or superior but participates in this relational order.
- *Laozi*'s cosmology mirrors the **symbiotic paradigm**: interconnection, diversity, mutual benefit.

Laozi 25

"Humans follow the Earth. Earth follows Heaven. Heaven follows the Dao. The Dao follows what is so of itself (ziran 自然)."

- This chain expresses the harmony of all beings without domination or hierarchy.

Laozi 2

"Being and non-being produce each other; difficult and easy complement each other; long and short define each other."

- Nothing exists in isolation.

The Problem of Separation

Against Anthropocentrism

Breaking the Balance

Balance

Modern hierarchies mistake humanity as ruler of nature

"The Dao of man... reduces the deficient to supplement the excessive" (ch. 77).

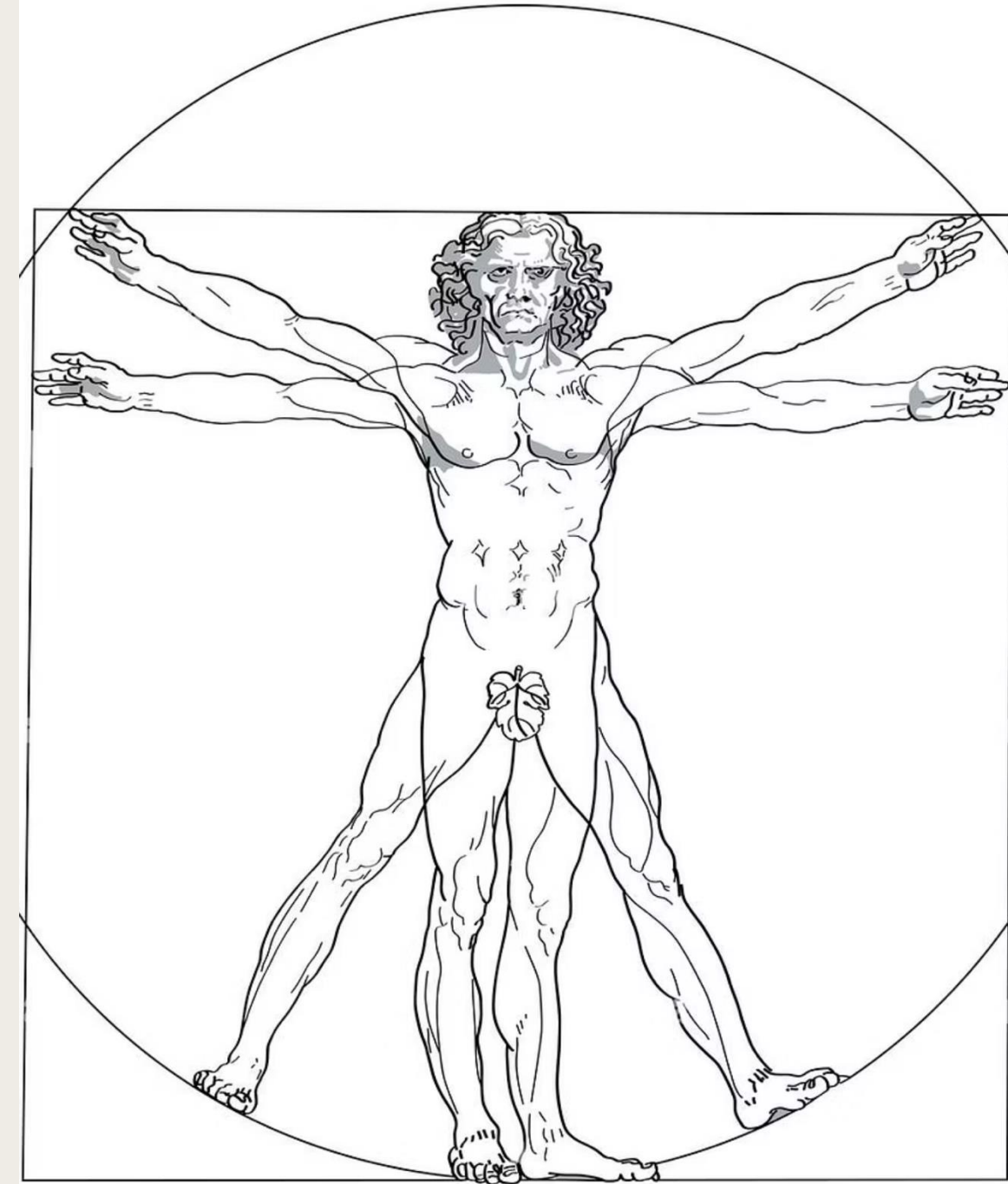
Harmony

Ecological harmony depends on restoring humanity's embeddedness within natural processes.

The Daoist Alternative

Alternative

Alternative defines humans as participants within dynamic balance (Dao of Heaven reduces the excessive and increases the deficient).



道教: Green Religion



Main Characters

Scholars (sinologists), New Age authors (Alan Watts, Blofeld, Lin Yutang) literary authors (Ursula Le Guin, Wayne Dyer).

Characteristics

idea of Daoism as nature-loving mysticism, quietism and inner peace, interests on Daoist body-mind technologies for health preservation.

道教: Green Religion

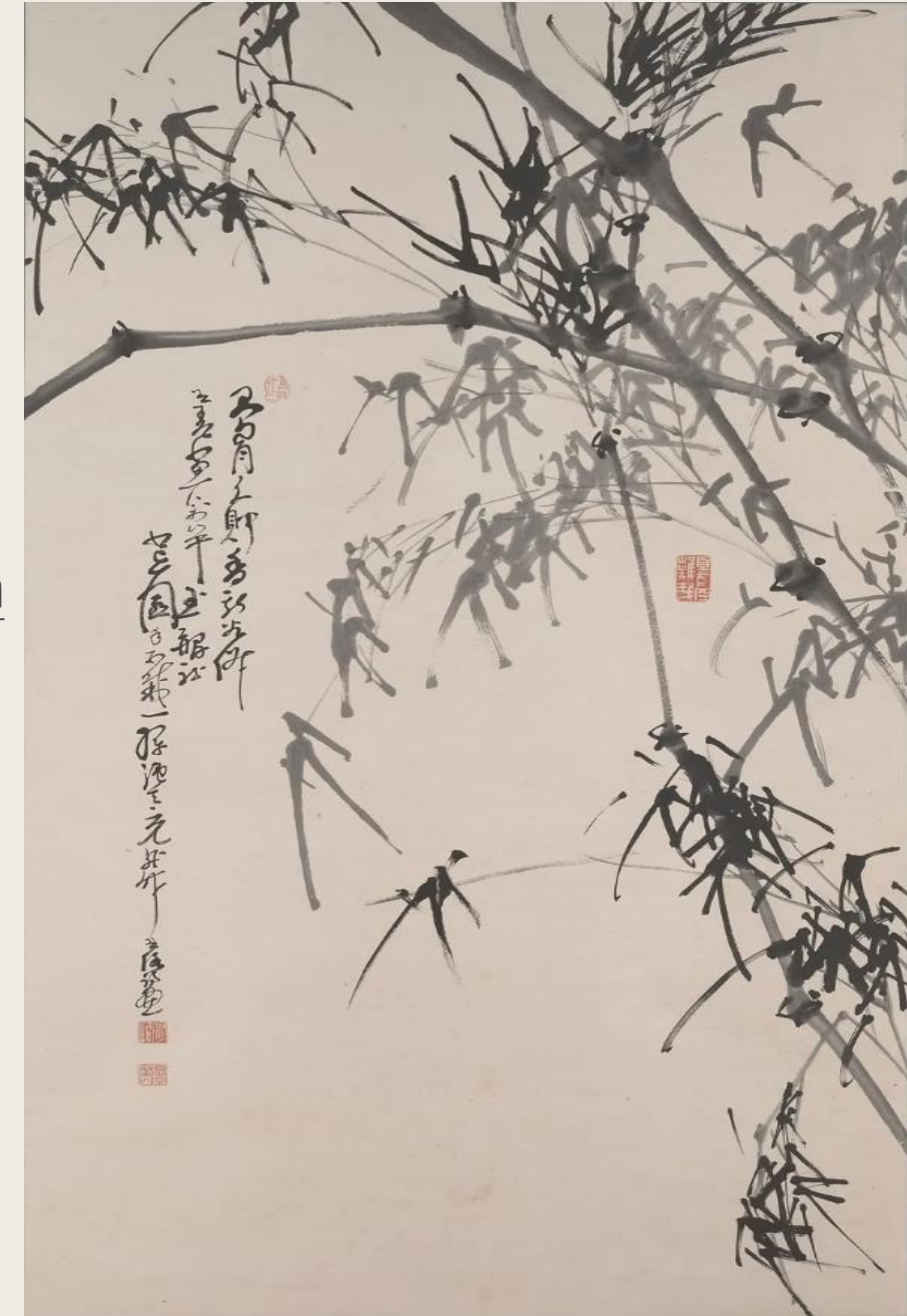
Broad sources: Daoist canon

Basic Assumptions and characteristics:

1. VS modern understanding of humanity as a separate and distinct category from the non-human world.
2. Daoist tradition as life affirming tradition that promote natural elements
3. Interests in Nature and natural order eliminating any supernatural discussion

Methodology (risks and possible goals):

1. Re-interpretation of Daoism aligning with CCP political agenda (sinicization)
2. Ecological re-reading of texts and concepts (selective reading = interpretative reading)
3. Culturalization of ecological discourse = re-assertion of Chinese Traditional values VS creates new ones
4. Focus on ecological practice: Ecology Temples, reducing pollution policies (vs incense, environment protection)



道教: Green Religion

Faith Statements

- **Respecting Dao and Greatly Valuing De:** A Daoist believes in Dao, relies upon Dao, cultivates Dao, and practices Dao. De refers to the particular conduct of the believer as she practices Dao
- **仙道贵生:** “ultimate goal is to let their lives and spirits become one with the Dao—the way of immortality—(*xiandao*). This is the reason why Daoists treasure life and value it as the most worthy thing on Earth.

Key principles

1. 道法自然
2. The harmony of yin and yang
3. Full consideration of the limits of nature’s sustaining power
4. Species diversity as a measure of affluence and environmental health

Daoism and the Ecological Civilization

生态文明



Main statements

- The Declaration of the CDA on Global Ecology (1995): «Daoism as remedy for ecological crisis caused by modern ethical theories»
- The Daoist Faith Statement (2003): «ecological teaching» (4 principles); collaboration with ARC.
- The Qinling Declaration (2006): 5 goals for sustainability. Reduce pollution; use farm land sustainably; protect species and forests; save energy; protect water resources.
- The Maoshan Declaration and the 8 Year Plan (2008): from faith to long-term effort in the direction of environmental activism and sustainability.

The Maoshan Declaration of the 5th International Daoism Forum (2023)

弘扬道教“天人合一、道法自然”思想传统，促进人类身心健康，倡导人与自然是谐相处。

We shall uphold the traditional Daoist ideology of "unity between Heaven and humanity" and "Dao models itself after nature", promoting holistic well-being and encouraging harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.





Thank you!!
谢谢!!

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