The “Greening” of Daoism: Potential and Limits

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Abstract
In recent decades there has been much discussion of Daoist thought in the light of environmental or ecological ethics. In this paper, I will discuss the meanings of *ziran* and *wuwei*, the two key terms in Daoism within its own tradition and then explore the possibility of establishing a form of “green Daoism” through an interpretative reconstruction of a *ziran*-wuwei ethic that is relevant to environmental and ecological concerns. I will argue that the Daoist idea of *ziran*-wuwei does not simply mean to accept things passively, but rather it entails a proactive dimension that can be used to challenge aggressiveness and destructive attitudes towards eco-cosmic unity and diversity. The paper intends to show that although some of the ecological issues we address today may not be the major concerns of ancient Daoism, and that the complexity of the ecological problems and solutions are dependent on modern technology, it will not prevent us from taking Daoism as a cultural resource with which we can examine the human place in nature in view of the current environmental crisis.

Keywords: Daoism, environmental ethics, animal ethics, anthropocentrism, *ziran*, *wuwei*

»Ozelni tev« daoizma: potencial in omejitve

Izvleček
V zadnjih desetletjih je bilo veliko razprav na temo daoistične misli v luči okoljevarstvenih ali ekoloških etik. V prispevku bom razpravljala o pomenu narave (*ziran*) in nedelovanja (*wuwei*), dveh ključnih pojmov v daoizmu znotraj njegove lastne tradicije, nato pa bom raziskala možnost vzpostavitve oblike »zelenešega daoizma« skozi interpretativno rekonstrukcijo etike *ziran-*wuwei, ki je relevantna za okoljevarstvena in ekološka vprašanja. V prispevku zagovarjam, da pri daoistični ideji *ziran-*wuwei ne gre zgolj za pasivno sprejemanje stvari, temveč bolj za proaktivno dimenzijo, s katero lahko izzovemo agresivnost in destruktivne pristope k eko kozmični enotnosti in različnosti. V prispevku želim pokazati, da čeravno nekatera ekološka vprašanja, ki jih obravnavamo danes, morda niso bila glavna skrb starodavnega daoizma ter da je kompleksnost ekoloških vprašanj in rešitev odvisna od sodobne tehnologije, še vedno lahko črpamo iz daoizma kot kulturnega vira, s pomočjo katerega lahko preučimo mesto človeka v naravi glede na trenutne okoljevarstvene krize.

Ključne besede: daoizem, okoljevarstvena etika, živalska etika, antropocentrizem, *ziran*, *wuwei*

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Environmental ethics is a relatively new discipline within the academic world. There has been much discussion of Daoist thought in the light of environmental or ecological concerns in recent decades. Major publications on related themes include *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (2001) edited by N. J. Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan,1 *China’s Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (2017) by James Miller, and *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* (2020) by Eric S. Nelson. We also find similar studies in the Chinese-speaking world, such as *Huanjing lunlixue: Zhongxi huanbao zhexue bijiao yanjiu* 環境倫理學––中西環保哲學比較研究 (*Environmental Ethics: A Comparative Study of Environmental Philosophy between the Chinese and Western*) (1991) by Feng Huxiang, *Daojiao shengtai lunli yanjiu* 道教生態倫理思想研究 (*A Research into the Thinking of Daoist Ecological Ethics*) (2006) by Jiang Zhaojun, and *Daojiao shengtai sixiang yanjiu* 道教生態思想研究 (*A Study of Daoist Ecology*) (2010) by Chen Xia. Many scholars in both China and abroad regard Daoism as the exemplar par excellence of classical Chinese thought on environmental and ecological ethics. All these concerted efforts to bring Daoism into the conversation of the contemporary discourse are significant in terms of looking for a possible convergence in different traditions in the face of the environmental and ecological crisis we are experiencing today. It should be noted, however, that whenever we bring a pre-modern philosophical or religious tradition from the East into conversations about modern and post-modern ethical issues, we need to remind ourselves that the contemporary ethical framework defines, to some extent, the parameters for the application of ethical norms (e.g., environmental and ecological ethics), and thus we should try to avoid superimposing the notion of environmentalism onto an ancient way of thinking, like Daoism. But at the same time, the interpretation of an old philosophical or religious tradition like Daoism should not preclude an attempt to explore its ideas and possible connection to contemporary analogous issues within its own cultural context and form.

In this paper, I will discuss the meanings of *ziran* and *wuwei*, the two key terms in Daoism within its own tradition, and then explore the possibility of establishing a form of “green Daoism” through an interpretative reconstruction of a *ziran-wuwei* ethic that is relevant to environmental or ecological concerns. I will argue that the

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1 As ecological concerns were becoming more important in religious circles in the 1990s, this book emerged out of the conference series on “Religion and Ecology” initiated by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard. The discussions in these works are comprehensive, covering a wide spectrum of domains ranging from philosophical Daoism (*Daojia* 道家) represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, to ritual and meditative practices in religious Daoism (*Daojiao* 道教), and from traditional Chinese medicine, Daoist alchemy and dietary practices to Chinese garden designs and measures to protect animals.
Daoist idea of *ziran-wuwei* does not simply mean to accept things passively, but rather it entails a proactive dimension that can be used to challenge aggressiveness and destructive attitudes towards eco-cosmic unity and diversity. The paper intends to show that although some of the ecological issues we address today may not be the major concerns of ancient Daoism, and that the complexity of the ecological problems and solutions are dependent on modern technology, it will not prevent us from taking Daoism as a cultural resource with which we can examine the human place in nature in view of the current environmental crisis.

The Concept of Ziran and its Connection to the Natural World

In the *Daodejing* 道德經 (hereafter, *DDJ*), one of the central themes is expressed through the term *ziran*, which in turn is connected to the central idea of the *dao*. The literal meaning of *ziran* is “arising from itself”, often translated as “self-so”, “what-is-so-of-itself”, or “spontaneously so”.² The Chinese term *ziran* 自然 is a two-character compound of *zi* (自) meaning nose or self and suchness *ran* (然). It is employed to describe the fundamental characteristic of the *dao*. In this context, *ziran* as self-so is in contrast to other-so, denoting the idea that things are allowed to take their own fluid, graceful, peaceful paths without too much external interference. As Chung-ying Cheng has put it, “One important aspect of *tzu-juan* [ziran] is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or conditioning by an external power” (Cheng 1986, 356). Yet the concept of *ziran* has always been contentious one clouded by a variety of conflicting interpretations, especially when it is understood as “biological/physical nature” or the “natural world”. Liu Xiaogan, one of the leading Chinese scholars of Daoist philosophy, has paid special attention to the Daoist idea of *ziran*, arguing that *ziran* should not be understood simply as “biological nature” or the “natural world”, but instead refers to a state of “naturalness” characterized by harmony and spontaneity. This status of “naturalness”, according to Liu, indicates the highest value and central principle for the human world (Liu 2009, 67–88).³ The term *ziran* appears five times in the *DDJ*, all of which suggest relevant aspects of the *dao*, meaning self-so (*ziji ruci* 自己如此), usually so (*tongchang ruci* 通常如此), spontaneously so (*zifa ruci* 自發如此) and harmonious (*hexie* 和諧). Let us look at the following chapters in the *DDJ*:

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² The term “self-so” or “what-is-so-of-itself” is used by Arthur Waley, see Waley (1958, 174).

³ Moreover, Liu points out that the term *ziran* as used by Laozi, then by Zhuangzi, and later by Huainanzi, means something rather different in each case.
Human beings model themselves after the Earth;
The Earth models itself after Heaven;
Heaven models itself after the dao;
The dao models itself after what is self-so (ziran). [DDJ, 5]\(^4\)

Of the best of all rulers,
People will only know that he exists.
The next best is the one they will love and praise.
The next is the one they will fear.
And the worst is the one they will disparage . . .
When the work is accomplished and the job completed,
People all say: “We have done it naturally (ziran).” [DDJ, 17]

Therefore, the ten thousand things honour the dao
and cherish the de (virtue)
The dao is honoured and the de is cherished without
anyone’s order.
So, it just happens spontaneously (ziran). [DDJ, 51]

To talk little is natural (ziran). [DDJ, 23]

Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things
in their spontaneous order (ziran),
and does not take any action (DDJ, 64)

We should keep in mind that none of the term ziran cited above refers directly
to the natural world. In fact, the interpretation of the term ziran as the “natural
world” or the “world of nature” (ziran jie 自然界) has only been employed
since the 18th century, when it was first introduced by the Japanese scholar Andō
Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703–1762), and it was then popularized in Japan in the cen-
turies that followed (Chen Weifen 2010, 104). The term the “natural world” or
“great nature” (daziran 大自然) was adopted in China in the late 19th century
when nature was viewed as a resource to support human existence.\(^5\) In the DDJ,
ziran is deeply entwined with the concept of dao. While dao refers to all things
in the universe (tiandi wanwu 天地萬物), ziran speaks of the primordial state

\(^{4}\) The English translation of the DDJ chapters used in this paper is my own, although I have consult-

\(^{5}\) Wing Tsin Chan’s translation of the line (in the chapter 25 of the DDJ) “Tao models itself after
Nature (ziran)” is misleading since he takes the modern sense of the term ziran (Chan 1969, 153).
of all things. Therefore, the various implications of environmental or ecological significance embedded in *ziran* may not be as inherent or explicit as some environmentalists want to assume.

Nevertheless, we can still ask the question as to whether Laozi prefers the natural, non-human world to the human one. According to Liu Xiaogan, the answer is “no”, as Liu interprets the natural way in the *DDJ* as “humanistic naturalness” (人文自然), because the “natural way”, for Liu, entails a value judgment from a human perspective (Liu 2009, 81). Liu’s argument seems to have a valid point if we look at traditional Chinese art as influenced by Daoist philosophy. Take the Chinese *penjing* or potted plants (*Bonsai* 盆栽 in Japanese), for example. This is an art of growing and training miniature trees in small pots, which combines the natural landscape (e.g., small trees or dwarf plants that mimic the shape of the natural world) with the cultivation and modification influenced by a clearly defined human aesthetic vision. Another example is the Chinese rock garden, in which naturally shaped rocks called “artificial mountains” (*jiashan* 假山) are used as decorations for a carefully crafted pavilion. In no other cultural tradition has nature played a more important role in art, music, and literature than in that of China, but in this context natural beauty is often combined with a human touch. Yet the aesthetic space in Daoism is also regarded as “sacred” space in which humans harmonize with the Earth, Heaven, and the natural environment. In this regard, *ziran* is also perceived as the harmony of cosmic balance (*zhonghe* 中和) and primal energies of nature (*yuanqi* 元氣) that gives life to human beings.

Hans-Georg Moeller takes a different view from Liu, maintaining that Daoist philosophy is completely non-anthropocentric (Moeller 2009, 157). In Moeller’s view, Laozi’s philosophy cautions against the excesses of human civilization, and the same sentiment is also expressed in Zhuangzi’s. For both Laozi and Zhuangzi, human civilization is characterized by a plethora of social ills in the guise of the various lofty values of human culture. According to Moeller’s interpretation, this is the reason why both thinkers advocate a lifestyle without over-culturation (*wen* 文). Obviously, Moeller’s approach to the concept of *ziran* is closer to those holding a primitive position on Daoism. Perhaps, for Moeller, Chinese arts such as potted plants or rock gardens are not purely Daoist in nature, in that they are “polluted” by the aesthetic taste of the Confucian literati.

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6 Nevertheless, David L. Hall argues that the aesthetic view of nature held by Daoists can the same time be a kind of ethics. As he says, “Daoist ethics is in fact a sort of aesthetics in which we are ‘enjoined’ to be spontaneous (*ziran*), that is, to act (*wuwei*) in harmony with things … Such an aesthetic ethics eschews antecedent principles or norms in the same manner that a creative individual would refuse to depend upon past norms for the determination of present actions” (Hall 1987, 110).
Herein lies the question as to whether *ziran* can be understood as a form of naturalism. Since Daoism emphasizes harmony with the natural and the balanced order of the universe, there has traditionally been a tendency to understand Daoist thought in terms of naturalism. For example, one of Xunzi’s critiques of Zhuangzi’s Daoism is the latter’s naturalist orientation in which the role of humans is ignored for the sake of elevating the role of *tian*. For Xunzi, Zhuangzi’s position on the human/nature relationship is wrong because it tends to “neglect the human and lack a proper sense of ethical personhood in maintaining the primacy of an impersonal dehumanizing ‘way’” (Nelson 2014, 723). Xunzi thus states,

> You glorify nature/tian and meditate on her, why not domesticate her and regulate her? You obey nature/tian and sing her praises, why not control her course and use it? You look on the seasons with reverence and await them, why not respond to them by seasonal activities? … To neglect humans and speculate about nature/tian is to misunderstand the facts of the universe. (Xunzi 17:13)

Here Xunzi speaks of nature/tian in a metaphysical sense, in that nature/tian as a cosmic order is marked by the idea of the “production by nature/tian and consumption (or construction) by humans” (*tiansheng rencheng* 天生人成) in contrast to Zhuangzi’s view of humans being consummated or constructed in the context of the turning of nature/tian. The question for us is how to understand this “natural order” implied in Daoism, and its possible connection to environmental concerns. For example, both Benjamin Schwartz and Peter Marshall see Daoism as a “primitive harmonious anarchy” (Schwartz 1985, 210), and Marshall goes further to call this primitive harmonious anarchy a strong foundation for ecological thinking (Marshall 1992, 54). I think that this connection between the natural order and social anarchism suggested by Schwartz and Marshall may apply more to Zhuangzi rather than Laozi. R. P. Peerenboom, however, holds a different view, insisting that Zhuangzi’s nature/tian “refuses to privilege nature over humans”, maintaining that Zhuangzi argues for “a balance in which neither nature nor man is victor over the other” (Peerenboom 1993, 219). Peerenboom seems to suggest...
that the notion of “primitive harmonious anarchy” is not helpful to formulate an effective environmental or ecological ethics.\(^{10}\) Though many environmental or ecological ethicists today tend to be more critical about science and modern technology, this is no way means that they believe in going back to primitivism as a way out of our current crisis.

In response to the Zhuangzi/Xunzi dispute, Eric S. Nelson points out that the difference between the approaches of Zhuangzi and Xunzi does not lie in the argument on the “responsiveness to things”, but “between ethical freedom and moral obligation and their corresponding constructions of the person as according with or imposing upon naturalness” (Nelson 2014, 734). For Nelson, the concept of *ziran* becomes an ethical issue concerning freedom (to keep with one’s inner nature) and obligation (to maintain a disciplined moral cultivation via ritual practices). In addition, Nelson indicates that there is no onto-theological dichotomy in Daoist thought between the natural world and the supernatural or divine world, since Daoism advocates “a more receptive and reverent approach to the myriad thing residing between sky [Heaven] and earth” (Nelson 2009, 296). Nelson then speaks of Daoism in terms of what he calls a “non-reductive naturalistic ethics,” contending that Daoist texts can speak to us “moderns” in terms of ecological concerns (ibid., 294). James Miller holds a similar view when he says that in Daoism “there is no absolute distinction between ‘humans’ and ‘Nature,’ and there is even no absolute distinction between ‘humans’ and ‘gods’ … To think about Daoism and ecology, then, is to think about how human beings imagine, experience, and act within the natural world” (Miller 2017, 14).

How then should we understand the terms “naturalism”, “naturalistic ethics” or “non-reductive ethical naturalism” in the context of Daoism? In the West naturalism often denotes the belief in a set of orders which operates upon the totality of existing realities in the universe, and that these orders can be discovered in the form of laws of nature through empirical observation and human reasoning. “Naturalistic ethics”, on the other hand, intends to make robust sense of moral objectivity and moral knowledge based on human rationality. Daoism is naturalistic in the sense that there is no assumption of supernatural power as the ultimate authority, particularly in the realm of morality and ethics, as we read “Heaven and Earth are not benevolent (ren 仁); they treat the myriad creature as straw dogs” (*DDJ*, 5). Yet neither Laozi nor Zhuangzi hold the view that moral terms, concepts, and properties are ultimately definable in terms of facts about the natural world in terms of human nature and human societies. Their scepticism is stronger

\(^{10}\) In fact, Daoism is often used as a point of reference for a form of “primitivism”, a tradition that speaks for a “negative, backward-looking nihilistic doctrine and not a positive, scientific vision for the future” (Rapp 2012, 29).
than simply saying that moral properties (in the sense that they are open to empirical investigation) are irreducible to non-normative natural properties, nor to normative doctrines.\footnote{The term wuwei or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism and Legalism.}

Hence, instead of speaking of “primitive harmonious anarchy”, Nelson defines Daoist naturalism as being open to natural phenomena, “without reducing things to a specific doctrine or essence of what constitutes nature or the natural”. Daoist ethics, says Nelson, “signifies its cultivation of life as the lived and unforced performative enactment of responsive freedom” (Nelson 2009, 294). The notion of “performance” or “responsive freedom” raised by Nelson clearly shows his rejection of any essentialist interpretations of the Daoist concept of ziran, yet at the same time avoids a “negative” explication in that Daoism is indifferent to anything in the human world. Nelson’s approach, I think, provides an alternative way to understand ziran in the light of contemporary environmental and ecological discourse.

Environmental and Ecological Implications of Wuwei

Along with ziran, wuwei is another highly contested concept in Daoism.\footnote{The term wuwei or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism and Legalism.} Traditionally, when the DDJ is read as a political treatise regarding how to maintain a socio-political order, the concept of wuwei 無為 (non-action, actionless action, or doing nothing) is understood primarily as the proper function of government with its non-assertive or non-coercive action in practice.\footnote{As Herrlee G. Creel has pointed out, there are twelve occurrences of wuwei in the DDJ, and at least six of them are clearly concerned with the technique of government (Creel 1970, 54).} In the DDJ, we clearly see Laozi’s disapproval of any aggressive policies such as war, cruel punishment and heavy taxation which, according to Laozi, express a ruler’s own desire for wealth and power. Therefore, we read the Daoist ideal of governing without governing in the DDJ as follows:

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The dao does not do anything (wuwei),
yet it leaves nothing undone (wubuwei).
If a ruler can cling it,
All things will be self-transforming (zihua).
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11 The term wuwei or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism and Legalism.
12 The term wuwei or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy, such as Confucianism and Legalism.
13 As Herrlee G. Creel has pointed out, there are twelve occurrences of wuwei in the DDJ, and at least six of them are clearly concerned with the technique of government (Creel 1970, 54).
In not desiring, they would be at peace. 
and the world would be self-ordering (zizheng). [DDJ, 37]

Do you think you can take over the universe 
and improve it? 
I do not believe it can be done. 
The world is a sacred vessel, 
You cannot control it. 
The person who tries to act upon it will ruin it. 
The person who tries to hold it will lose it. (DDJ, 29)

Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things 
in their spontaneous order (ziran), 
and does not take any action. (DDJ, 64)

In Daoist political philosophy, self-transforming (zihua 自化) and self-ordering (zizheng 自政) are derived from the key concept of wuwei, denoting that the people can do better without the interference of the state. Similar terms such as self-simplicity (zipu 自樸) and self-prosperity (zifu 自富) are employed in the DDJ to express the same idea that Daoist spontaneous action facilitates the self-transformation of the people. Following this account, some contemporary scholars interpret wuwei as a political call for minimal government or a laissez-faire policy. The claim of “not taking any action” (bugan wei 不敢為) means not taking the action according to what has been planned or designed. According to the DDJ, people try to “take actions to make something happen in the world by their own reasoning, plans, and contrivances”, which, however, often turn out to be disastrous. This idea is also expressed through the metaphor of governing the state “like cooking a small fish” in the DDJ.

Beyond political interpretations, there is also a broad spectrum of understanding wuwei in the Daoist scholarship. When wuwei is rendered as “acting naturally”,

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14 It should be noted that according to the Mawangdui edition, chapter 37 is the final chapter of the entire DDJ, and thus is a kind of concluding chapter.

15 According to Philip J. Ivanhoe, the Daoist ideal of a sage-ruler is more “centripetal”, allowing more freedom for people to find the dao in their own ways. It follows that a political leader following the Confucian model is one who draws people “upward” through the excellence of his moral charisma “like a polar star” (Ivanhoe 2011, 38)

16 David Boaz, the Vice President of Cato Institute, identifies Laozi as the “first known libertarian” of the East in his book Libertarianism: A primer (Boaz 1998).

17 There are different focuses on the meanings of wuwei, such as an action that does not go against “the grain of nature” (Needham 1956), an action that is in accordance with one’s inherent self-nature (Fung 1984), an action that goes with the flow (Fox 1996), and an action that is characterized
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it gives rise to a debate in terms of what “being natural” means here. Ronnie Littlejohn sees “being natural” as “effortless action”, and a *wuwei* action as being “free from the tangles we have created for ourselves by the institutions, rules, and distinctions that clutter our minds and generate tension in our life together” (Littlejohn 2009, 18). Edward Slingerland approaches *wuwei* as a behaviour in comparison with *wuyiwei* 無以為, or action as cognitive “no-regarding”. The basic idea of no-regarding is to avoid contriving to do anything for utilitarian gain (Slingerland 2003, 89). In fact, both Littlejohn and Slingerland attempt to understand *wuwei* in the light of a Daoist form of action-guiding consideration that directs us towards an alternative way of living with things. When we read chapter 38 in the *DDJ* we can see how *wuwei* is associated with *wuyiwei*, i.e., a Daoist non-utilitarian position with no projected expectations. The paradoxical claim of “not doing anything” and “leaving nothing undone” signifies what Laozi calls the “power” or “virtuosity” (*de* 德) of the *dao*. The effectiveness of the result is a by-product instead of a premeditated aim prior to action.\(^\text{18}\) In this regard, *wuwei* emphasizes the mode of action rather than the content of action.

This non-utilitarian position maintained by Daoists is elucidated more explicitly in the *Zhuangzi*, where the idea of *wuwei* is presented through Zhuangzi’s argument on uselessness (*wuyong* 無用). According to Zhuangzi, we can live a life that is happier and more fulfilled if we become more “useless”, that is, our life is not confined to the *status quo* or the social convention that makes a distinction between usefulness and uselessness. To illustrate this point, Zhuangzi shows us the use of a useless tree:

Now you have this big tree and you’re distressed because it’s useless. Why don’t you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? (Zhuangzi, 1; Watson 1968, 35)

By elucidating usefulness in uselessness (*wuyong zhi yong* 無用之用), Zhuangzi recommends that we adopt a different perspective to look at things in their own terms. This notion of discovering the place and function of each thing is also articulated in the *DDJ*, wherein lies the following Daoist critique of the conventional way of thinking:

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\(^\text{18}\) The concept of *wuwei* is also interpreted as “skilful” action or “flow action” which denotes the execution of particular skilfulness, such as the stories of Cook Ding and Wheelwright Bian in the *Zhuangzi*.
When something is bent, then it is can be put straight;
When someone is wronged, then one is ready to be redressed;
When a container is empty, then it can be filled;
When something is worn out, then it is can made new;
When something is few then it can get more;
When something is many, then it can become confused. (DDJ, 22)

Martin Heidegger, who was intrigued by the Daoist idea of the useless, states, “One need not worry about the useless [das Nutzlose]. By virtue of its uselessness the inviable and everlasting suit it. Thus, it is wrong to apply the standard of usefulness [Nützlichkeit] to the useless” (Heidegger 1998, 131). It is interesting that Heidegger speaks of the question of uselessness in his discussion of traditional language and technological language, claiming that “being useless in such a way that they [things in the natural world] let nothing make them immediately practical” (Van Brakel 2014, 391). There is an implicit non-anthropocentric approach to nature in Heidegger’s argument with regard to uselessness. His notion of “letting be” (Gelassenheit), to a certain extent, resembles the Daoist idea of wuwei. This attitude of non-interfering action with regard to natural forces may serve to inhibit positive human adjustment to foundational environmental disruption.

Nevertheless, Peerenboom points out that to understand wuwei as “acting naturally” is unhelpful to the would-be Daoist environmental ethicist. To avoid the ambiguity implied in the expression “acting naturally” (Peerenboom 1991, 3), Nelson interprets wuwei as “responsive participation” (Nelson 2009, 299) which, in comparison to non-action or doing nothing, incorporates a more positive and proactive dimension of the term. Nelson also uses the idea of responsiveness to interpret Zhuangzi’s ziran as both the spontaneity of nature and responsiveness to nature (ibid., 306). In doing so, Nelson avoids the over-passivity implied in the understanding of ziran and wuwei as simply “following the flow”, despite wuwei in its negative sense suggesting a form of human actions that is devoid of excessive intervention in order to preserve the natural flow of things. In his article “Chinese Traditional Thought and Practice: Lessons for an Ecological Economics Worldview”, T. N. Jenkins insists that the Daoist core principles of ziran and wuwei provide us with guidelines for an environmental ethic:

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19 This quotation from Heidegger is taken from Van Brakel (2014, 390). Heidegger opposes the view that technology is “a means to an end” and “a human activity”. These two approaches, says Heidegger, are the “instrumental” and “anthropological”, respectively. We see a similar argument in Zhuangzi’s idea of uselessness.
Together, ziran and wuwei provide appreciation of the need for humanity to understand, identify with, and yield to, natural rhythms and processes, and encourage the harmonious use of senses and technologies, rather than the imposition of form or moral judgement upon life’s processes, in order that humanity maintains a “consciousness of participation” in the cosmos. … For Daoism, the natural world is not an external utilitarian resource to be controlled and exploited, but a dynamic process within which harmonization is a liberating abstraction from the competitive striving of everyday human existence. (Jenkins 2002, 42–43)

Jenkins’ argument corresponds to Zhuangzi’s critique of an anthropocentric notion of usefulness and Heidegger’s argument on the use of technologies. Along the same line of thinking, James Miller pushes the concept of wuwei further by speaking of the Daoist mode of agency which, according to Miller, can best be understood by the term “transaction” rather than “action” or “non-action” (Miller 2017, 41). As he argues,

Daoism proposes a radical reversal of the way that modern human beings think about the natural world. Rather than understanding human beings as “subjects” who observe the “objective” world of nature, Daoism proposes that subjectivity is grounded in the Dao itself, the wellspring of cosmic creativity for a world of constant transformation. (Miller 2017, 26)

The reversal of the dualistic structure of subjectivity and objectivity indicated by Miller reminds us of the well-known story in the Zhuangzi, when Zhuangzi asks if it is Zhuangzi who was dreaming of the butterfly or the butterfly who was dreaming of Zhuangzi. The question raised by Zhuangzi goes beyond the sceptical view of reality versus dreams. Instead, it challenges humanity’s objectification of the “other” (e.g., animals and nature). The notion of a “transaction” as such dismantles the conventional twofold element in a cognitive process, i.e., the distinction in terms of the duality between the agent/subjective and the patient/objective. According to Miller, the Daoist notion of the agency of nature allows nature and human beings to interact and respond to one another creatively, or as he puts it: “Humans do not stand out from the natural world because of their subjectivity; their subjectivity is precisely derived from or modelled on ‘nature’ because Dao in itself is subjectivity” (ibid., 33). This mode of transaction rather than subjective action over an objective world can be inspirational for environmental ethics when we reconsider the place of nature, non-human beings, and humans’ relationship to them.

There is a minor modification of the romanization of the Chinese terms here for the sake of consistency.
Animals: Beyond Animalistic Metaphors

Animal ethics and environmental ethics are often perceived as convergent fields of philosophical inquiry. Among non-human life, animals are an important part of the ecological system. In terms of referencing animals in Daoist texts, we cannot discuss animals from the view of Daoism without mentioning the *Zhuangzi*. In contrast to Laozi’s *DDJ*, where animals are seldom mentioned, the *Zhuangzi* is full of various kinds of animals who play crucial roles in solidifying Zhuangzi’s Daoist philosophy. For example, in the *Xiaoyao you* 逍遥游 (“A Free and Easy Wondering”), the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, we find the image of the big bird Peng who has transformed from a fish to a bird, followed by other little creatures such as cicadas, doves, quails and moles. All the animals described in the chapter play a key role in explaining the idea of *xiaoyao* 逍遥, i.e., a condition of complete freedom and ease. Here is another interesting passage from the *Zhuangzi*:

Moreover, I have heard that in ancient times the birds and beasts were many and the people few. Therefore, the people all nested in the trees in order to escape danger, during the day gathering acorns and chestnuts, at sundown climbing back up to sleep in their trees. Hence they were called the people of the nest-builder. In ancient times people knew nothing about wearing clothes. In summer they heaped up great piles of firewood, in winter they burned them to keep warm. Hence, they were called “the people who know how to stay alive”. In the age of Shen Nong, the people lay down peacefully and easily, woke up wide-eyed and blank. They knew their mothers but not their fathers and lived side by side with the elk and the deer. They ploughed for their food, wove for their clothing, and had no thought in their hearts of harming one another. This was Perfect Virtue at its height! (Zhuangzi, 29)

The passage given above is said by Robber Zhi, who presents a Daoist utopia of living in a harmonious, stateless society. In this ideal society there are more birds and beasts than humans, and people live peacefully and happily with the elk and the deer. Does it mean that Zhuangzi prefers an animal kingdom to the human world, or that he ignores the role of humans for the sake of elevating the role of nature and non-human world, as in Xunzi’s critique? I do not think so. Most of the animal images in the *Zhuangzi* are employed as metaphors as a rhetorical method to illustrate Zhuangzi’s philosophical point, such as the dreaming

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21 All citations of the Zhuangzi in this paper are from Watson’s translation, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (1968), although some minor changes are made for consistency.
butterfly, the happy fish in the river, and the happy turtle in the mud. In fact, the utopia passage cited above is a parody of the Confucian notion of virtue. Moeller makes a similar point when he notes that Zhuangzi’s depictions of animals and other non-human figures are often used ironically to mock humans:

… animals live how they live without claiming to know how to live. They never engage in arguments about the respective merits of their food or habitat, they never try to convince other animals to change their diet in accordance with any “eating ideology”, and they also never skeptically question if the partners they mate with are really right for them. Humans, on the other hand, tend towards an “anthropocentric epistemology” and replace the art of living with the dubious art of “knowing how to live”—which may then threaten social harmony since it easily leads to “relativist” conflicts or skeptical indecision. (Moeller 2015, 105)

Apart from using animal metaphors to mock humans, Zhuangzi also takes animals as models to imitate. Instead of using zoomorphism or human qualities to describe animals, Zhuangzi does the opposite by offering a critique of the human tendency to harm animals (either intentionally or unintentionally) through domestication and instrumentalism. Let us look at three examples given by Zhuangzi:

Example 1: The Marquis of Lu is a bird lover. He treats a seabird to wine, meat, and music, and he does so with good intentions. Yet his treatment of the bird leads to the end of the bird’s life. (Zhuangzi 18)

Example 2: Bo Le, a skilful horse tamer, brands horses, clips their hair, pares their hooves, halters their heads, briddles and hobbles them, confines them in stables, subjects them to hunger and thirst, gallops and races them, worries them with the bondage of bit and breastplate, and threatens them with a whip and switch. (Zhuangzi 9)

Example 3: Jixingzi, a trainer for fighting roosters, is asked to train a fighting rooster for a king. After he completes the training, the rooster refuses to fight and all the other ordinary roosters avoid him. Because the idea of the “fighting rooster” is a human construct, the training distorts the rooster’s natural condition. (Zhuangzi 19)

22 Paul D’Ambrosio also makes a similar observation, pointing out that animals and non-human characters in the Zhuangzi are mainly allegorical or metaphorical, “allowing the Zhuangzi to make broadly applicable arguments”. He also contends that “the primary philosophical significance of animals and non-humans in the Zhuangzi has to do with creating critical distance for philosophical reflection” (see D’Ambrosio 2021, 1–18).
In the first two examples, the human “kindness” to the seabird and horse is nothing but “our (human) experiences of others (animals)” that reduce their “otherness” to the human “sameness”. By so doing, humans fail to acknowledge the innate nature of animals, and thus violate the Daoist principle of *ziran*, i.e., spontaneity and self-so-ness. This is the reason Zhuangzi makes a distinction in the first example between “treating the bird like oneself” (*yiji yangniao* 以己養鳥) and “treating the bird like a bird” (*yiniao yangniao* 以鳥養鳥). The example of the fighting rooster shows the problem when animals are trained to serve human needs. The story also implies that once we align ourselves with nature we would become perfectly unfettered and free. Therefore, Zhuangzi tells us,

> He who holds to True Rightness does not lose the original form of his inborn nature. So, for him joined things are not webbed toes, things forking off are not superfluous fingers, the long is never too much, the short is never too little. The duck’s legs are short, but to stretch them out would worry him; the crane’s legs are long, but to cut them down would make him sad. What is long by nature needs no cutting off; what is short by nature needs no stretching. That would be no way to get rid of worry. I wonder, then, if benevolence and righteousness are part of man’s true form? Those benevolent men—how much worrying they do! (Zhuangzi 8)

Again, the animal metaphors (i.e., the legs of the duck and the crane) used in the passage is a rhetorical means to challenge the conventional norms that distort the true form or authenticity (*zhen*) of the individual person. Nevertheless, the concept of *ziran* as self-so also applies to Zhuangzi’s view on animals as well as the actualization of *ziran* in the non-human world through human’s practice of *wuwei* as an action without being subjected to the desires of human beings.

Apart from the *Zhuangzi*, animal metaphors are extensively employed in religious Daoism. Thus, the place of animals, both actual and imagined, is special, as we see in the “Four Mystical Symbols of the East” (*dongfang siling* 東方四靈), namely, the Blue Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermillion Bird, and the Red Black Tortoise. These four animals are respected since they are perceived as sacred. Meanwhile, specific animals are protected because they are used for farming (*renyong zhe* 任用者) or they are babies (*shaochi zhe* 少齒者) as indicated in *The Scripture on the Great Peace* (*Taipingjing* 太平經), one of the key texts on early Daoist thought.\(^\text{23}\) The Daoist vision with environmental/ecological implications also appears in various forms of the Daoist description of “grotto heavens and blessed lands” (*dongtian fudi* 洞天福地). According to religious

Daoism, these places are transcendent realms of immortals, remote and hidden from the real world. Special self-cultivation is required to find those spectacular locations full of beautiful yet mystical mountains, rivers, plants, and animals. For Daoists, the mystery of the grotto does not suggest merely a geographical location, a “blessed land” that represents the wonderland that human beings can reach in life, but more importantly, a state of the mind in religious cultivation that enables one to reach the realm of immortality. Grotto heavens and blessed lands are an important part of the Daoist worldview about the balance of nature and society, and a belief in immortality. These places represent the embodiment of the concept harmony between humans and nature. However, to translate such ideas into environmentalism requires reconstructive work, especially if we look for a tradition which honours “holistic integration, interrelatedness, embodiment, caring, and love” (Tucker and Grim 1994, 187).

In adhering to Daoist practices related to actual animals, which include dietary regulations and medical practices, early Daoists did not adopt vegetarianism except for special occasions, such as during religious rituals or meditative practice. Even when vegetarianism is practiced, the precept of being vegetarian has little to do with animal welfare, and instead is done for the sake of human health and longevity. Meanwhile, animal tissues combined with medical herbs are often used in the formulas of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), such as tiger bones, antelope, buffalo or rhino horns, deer antlers, the testicles and other parts of black bears, and snake bile. Even though modern Western medicines and remedies also contain animal and plant derivatives, such usage is not as broad as we see in TCM. The practice of TCM is intrinsically connected to Daoist alchemy, in which the vital human organs are perceived as embodied animal spirits. For example, the white tiger for the lung, the vermilion bird for the heart, the dragon for the liver, the phoenix for the spleen, and the dear for kidney. It follows that the Daoist conception of animal spirits as resident in the vital organs is also part of TCM. We may say here that Daoism gives animals or animal spirits a special position, but this position is not completely non-anthropocentric. After the 12th century, due to the influence of Buddhism, some sects of Daoism, the Quanzhen Dao (the Dao of the Complete Authenticity), for example, made vegetarianism part of their monastic order, and the notion of not harming animals become

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24 As Nikolas Broy (2019, 39) points out, in contrast to the strict vegetarian practices that developed under Buddhist influence, fasting (zhai 齋 or ji 齊) served as a means of purification that was limited to specific occasions.

25 Since 1990s, the Chinese government has banned the domestic trade in various animal tissues such as tiger bones and deer antlers, and the use of animal parts in TCM has been evolving in recent decades.
part of the broader Daoist vegetarian practice. However, to say Daoism provides a universalistic ethic of not killing that extends “not only to all humanity, but to the wider domain of all living things” (Kirkland 2001, 284), is not entirely true if we talk about Daoism before the influence of Buddhism.

Another reason for animals having occupied a central position in Daoism is that animal movements are often taken as models to imitate by humans, ranging from martial arts to sexual practices, known as the “art of the bedchamber” (fangzhong-shu 房中術), both of which are perceived as integral part of “inner alchemy”. Animals have a special place in religious Daoism, for humans may observe them for guidance. For example, this idea of emulating animals is shown in the Daoist texts excavated in Mawangdui. As Anderson and Raphals point out, these

present us with an equally early, and much friendlier, view of animals: the use of animal movements as metaphors to describe whole-body movements that do not otherwise lend themselves to clear descriptions. The same kinds of metaphors appear in the later literature of Daoist-inspired martial arts, where the modes of movement of cranes, mantises, and other creatures are taken as models for defense and attacks of martial artists. (Anderson and Raphals 2006, 182)

Generally speaking, animals in Daoism are presented in three ways: 1) as metaphors to critique human society; 2) as metaphors to illustrate the Daoist philosophy of difference; and 3) as potential teachers of human beings as part of lessons learned from close observation of the non-human world. It should be noted, however, that compared with Buddhism, Daoism in general has a weaker notion of the need for animal protection in the sense understood by contemporary ecological discourse. In most cases, animals are used in food, medicine, and meditation for the purpose of attaining health and longevity.

26 The Quanzhen Dao is a syncretic school in which we find a blending of elements drawn from Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Another Buddhist influence, apart from vegetarianism, can be seen in the adoption of celibacy, which was not encouraged in early Daoism. According to Nikolas Broy’s research on vegetarian practices in early Chinese religion, vegetarianism “was never a stand-alone norm in Chinese society but it was always clustered with similar moral values such as chastity, sobriety, and simplicity” (Broy 2019, 57).

27 For example, the Classic of the White Girl (Sunu jing 素女經), one of the earliest classics on Daoist sexology, introduces nine postures for sex, and all these are named after animals and animal postures.

28 For more discussion on this topic, see the article “The Great Unity: Daoism, Nonhuman Animals, and Human Ethics” by Louis Komjathy (2009, 63–83)

29 Therefore, the view that one of the ways to “undercut anthropocentrism” in Zhuangzi’s Daoism is “through entertaining the perspectives of a wide variety of fauna” (Parkes 1983, 237) has a valid point, but it does not represent the whole picture of the Daoist position on animals.
its own concerns that are distinctive from contemporary environmental and ecological discourses. For instance, the current discourse on “animal rights” is based on moral principles grounded in the belief that non-human animals deserve the ability to live as they wish, without being subjected to the desires of human beings. A philosophically viable animal ethics can be established in the philosophy of Zhuangzi, but the concept of “animal rights” which is derived from the concept of “human rights” is totally absent in Daoist thought, as Paul R. Godin points out:

The Zhuangzi does not quite reach the concept of ecology itself, because the text does not consider what might happen if there is an artificial disturbance in the equilibrium between predators and prey. …The Zhuangzi views the natural world as a single and constant system, essentially static, in which various species feed off each other in order to survive. (Goldin 2005, 81)

Godin speaks of the limits of Daoist thought in terms of its potential ecological significance, particularly its view of animals. I am sympathetic to Godin’s observation in certain important respects. Nevertheless, Zhuangzi’s position on the domain of non-humans is still relevant if we talk about the need for humans to keep our hands off the processes at work in the natural world whenever possible.

A Ziran-Wuwei Ethic: An Integrated Reflection

In recent decades, Daoism has attracted much interested from environmental and ecological ethicists in the search for a “greener” worldview outside the Western tradition. Nevertheless, this effort has met a certain degree of challenge for some scholars are sceptical about the viability of Daoism in terms of its ecological implications, as well as its influence on environmental ethics in China today (Nelson 2009, 294–316). The question here is if Daoism is environmentally friendly by default, or if the Daoist body can be as seen as a “political ecology” (envisioned by Miller) given that Daoism is more cosmocentric and less anthropocentric in comparison with many other philosophical and religious traditions. I think that a ziran-wuwei ethic can be deployed, at least at the theoretical level, to support an ecological position such as protecting the environment, the biosphere and biodiversity.  

30 Here, I concur with Nelson’s view, “The Daodejing and the Zhuangzi are not relevant to environmental issues by contributing specific scientific research, political policies, or activist initiatives. It would be anachronistic to have such expectations of ancient texts” (Nelson 2009, 294–316).
The *ziran-wuwei* ethic of Daoism entails both diagnostic and potentially therapeutic dimensions. Current forms of environmental conservationism with their emphasis on the protection of biological life and ecosystems would benefit greatly from the Daoist-inspired notion of cosmic interconnectedness and harmony in terms of thinking about how human beings should experience and act within the natural world. Today’s environmental degradation, from a Daoist perspective, is led by our failure to acknowledge humans’ relation to nature’s ecological integrity, which includes plants, insects, animals, as well as mountains and rivers, or in more Daoist terms, the unity of the human body and the cosmic body. With regard to the potential therapeutic implications, the *ziran-wuwei* ethic of Daoism calls for a proactive way of environmental conservationism and cultural transformation. That is, we need to adapt a way of life that avoids disturbing the natural balance of the world simply for short-term benefits, as we have seen in past three decades in China when the government focused only on economic development. This new conservationist effort should be encouraged both at the personal and state levels to curb the unsustainable pattern of economic development. As it is said in the *DDJ*:

Thus you use your person to survey other persons, 
Your family to survey other families, 
Your village to survey other villages, 
Your state to survey other states, 
and your world to survey worlds past and yet to come. (*DDJ*, 54)

Kristofer Schipper, one of the Daoist scholars who focuses his studies on the Daoist’s vision of the environment, contends that in Daoism, “the idea of responsibility of the king towards his country is extended to the responsibility of each person towards his environment. …He is no longer simply the product of his environment, but dominates and transforms it” (Schipper 1994, 103). Schipper’s notion of “transformation” corresponds to Nelson’s idea of “responsive participation” in the sense that *ziran-wuwei* does not mean simply doing nothing, but acting in the manner of “assisting all things” (*fu wanwu* 輔萬物) to grow in the way as they are, as indicated in chapter 64 of the *DDJ*: “Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things in their spontaneous order (*ziran*).” In the words of Zhuangzi, the *wuwei* action is not the one based on an instrumentalist and desire-based existential mode, but the one that is in attunement with the *dao*. This position is in agreement with environmentalists today who promote a green lifestyle to oppose destructive human behaviours and support the preservation and nurturing of life on Earth.
Regarding the practice of Daoist-inspired environmentalism in China today, one example is the work done by the Chinese Daoist Association (CDA), which has been advocating a vision of organic unity and sustainable development. The CDA speaks of Daoism as a “green religion”, and Daoist monks as leaders of a new green movement. The CDA also regards itself as a bridge between the Daoist religion and the government, in order to increase Daoism’s visibility and influence on efforts at changing the environmental and ecological situation in China. In 1995, the CDA issued a declaration of its commitment to environmentalism:

We shall spread the ecological teachings of Daoism, lead all Daoist followers to abide in the teachings of self-so or non-action, observe the injunction against killing for amusement, preserve and protect the harmonious relationship of all things with nature, establish paradises of immortals on Earth, and pursue the practice of our beliefs … We will raise awareness regarding ecology among various social groups, resist the human exploitation of nature and the abuse of natural environments, protect the Earth upon which human survival depends, and generally make the world a better place for humans to inhabit. (Zhang 2001, 370)

Meanwhile, by building a network of “ecological temples”, Daoist monks are serving as role models for promoting waste management and energy efficiency at all temples and pilgrim sites. For example, at Maoshan, one of the largest Daoist temples in China, tourists can see solar lights line the broad walkways instead of utility poles or power lines. In order to educate the public, Daoist monks offer seminars at temples to promote the Daoist idea of cosmic harmony.

In addition, the Daoist green thinking qua the ziran-wuwei ethic is expressed through the concepts of simplicity and frugality, which may be both directly and indirectly supportive of environmentalism. The concepts of simplicity and frugality can also be understood as a proactive means for sustainable development. Laozi tells us that society would be better off if people could “manifest plainness and embrace simplicity” and “lessen selfishness and reduce desires.” (DDJ, 19). The Chinese word pu 樸 here literally means “an uncarved block” (a symbol for untainted natural state), referring to the ideas of both “simplicity” and “authenticity”. It is also a metaphor for a state of accord with the spontaneous (ziran)

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31 The CDC is a state-sponsored national association responsible for overseeing the management of all Daoist orders and temples. Its active promotion of Daoism as a “green religion” offers an example how Daoism can be engaged in the global effort to protect environment. As Zhang Jiyu points out, “Daoists in China have diligently worked toward disseminating Daoist teachings and maintaining the famous Daoist mountains and hermitages, planting trees and cultivating forests, and protecting the natural environment” (Zhang 2001, 361–72).
The unfolding of the process of nature. For Daoists, simplicity affords a person an existence that is more in tune with nature and oneself. However, Laozi does not advocate any ascetic practice in terms of getting rid of all desires; instead, he criticizes the problem of excessiveness that prevents one from remaining in harmony with one’s natural state and that of one’s environment. Therefore, we read,

No wrong is greater than having objects to crave for.  
No disaster is greater than not knowing one’s true needs.  
No greater ill is invited than by craving to possess.  
Thus, the satisfaction from knowing one’s true needs and not asking for more is eternal. (DDJ, 46)

What Laozi says reminds us of one of today’s biggest problems—consumerism. Modern society is marked by increasing commodification and consumerism, termed “a culture of excess” by Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher and cultural theorist. Consumerism is a pattern of behaviour characterized by the frivolous collecting of products which turns into a process of seduction and stimulation. For example, clothing today has changed from function to image (i.e., fashion), which shapes a person’s self-identity. As a result, a person may have lost the sense of who they are, since self-identity is replaced by the brand name of a product in a consumer age of information and mass media. Such a behaviour of frivolously collecting products has a significant impact on environmental sustainability. Environmentalists see consumerism as a great threat to environmental sustainability, because it emphasizes the accumulation and consumption of material resources. This is the reason why Laozi claims that “No wrong is greater than having objects to crave for; No disaster is greater than not knowing one’s true needs.” (DDJ, 46) According to Laozi, the dao of wuwei not only prevents self-centeredness and self-gratification of the people, but also allows for their utmost simplicity and authenticity. As such, the DDJ proposes that excessive desires are to be overcome by maximizing inner peace and contentment through the tranquillity of the mind. This notion of tranquillity of the mind is intrinsically connected to the Daoist idea of “nourishing life”.

The concept of “nourishing life” (yangsheng 養生) has two dimensions in the Daoist tradition: the nourishment of human life and the nourishment of all living things in the world. According to Fung Yu-lan, one of the most eminent Chinese philosophers of the 20th century, the original concern of philosophical Daoism is “how to preserve life and avoid harm and danger in the human world” (Fung 1984, 99), and as we read in the DDJ: “It [the dao] gives life and nurtures them” (DDJ, 10).

For Laozi, life is more valuable than material things, and thus he asks: “As for your name and your body, which is dearer? As for your body and your wealth, which is more to be prized?” (DDJ, 44). Therefore, the DDJ speaks of preserving life, observing life, cultivating life, and respecting life. Religious Daoism focuses on various self-cultivation practices (such as meditation, breathing exercises, dietary restrictions, and sexual techniques) aimed at enhancing health and longevity. For Zhuangzi, the concept of “nourishing life” is expressed through “nourishing innate nature” (yangxing 養性) and “nourishing heart-mind” (yangxin 養心). For example, there is a dialogue on nourishing life between Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor and Guang Chengzi, a Daoist immortal. When Huangdi asks what he should do to rule his body and attain a long life, Guang Chengzi replies:

Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude and the body will right itself. Be still, be pure, do not labour your body, do not churn up your essence, and then you can live a long life. (Zhuangzi, 11)

For Zhuangzi, we should not only cultivate our bodies but also our minds and innate natures. In the chapter 2 of the Zhuangzi, entitled “The Secret of Nourishing Life”, Zhuangzi uses the story of a cook who is skilful in cutting up an ox to illustrate how we should cultivate our natural strengths and skills by casting aside our ego-centric selves, so we can lead simple and natural, but complete and flourishing lives.

Meanwhile, the concept of “nourishing life” indicates the nourishment of all living things in the world. This notion of “nourishing life” can be extended to environmental and ecological thinking. In this regard, Nelson’s interpretation of yangsheng as “non-purposive nurturing of life” in contrast to the artificiality of “purposive practices” is helpful to embrace a broader meaning of the Daoist notion of the nourishment of life based on a ziran-wuwei ethic. The idea of “non-purposive nurturing of life” is in accord with Nelson’s elucidation of “responsive participation” as a wuwei action. The idea of “responsiveness” (ying 應) requires appropriate actions in certain specific situations as well as recognizing the transformative operation of things in the world in the ways that they are. A ziran-wuwei ethic, therefore, calls on us to act naturally, creatively, and in harmony with the natural world. This “responsive participation”, for Nelson, is a way for us to rediscover “the human” in recognizing its embodied situatedness within “the inhuman” or “natural” (Nelson 2014, 726).

In sum, through the explication of the Daoist notions of ziran and wuwei, in this paper I intend to show how ancient Daoism can be brought into the contemporary discourse of environmental or ecological ethics. It is my contention that a ziran-wuwei ethic does not suggest a form of romanticized primitivism, a life of
the “noble salvage”, nor does it offer a way of thinking that is “environmental” or “ecological” by default. Meanwhile, in order to solve certain specific environmental issues we face today, such as air pollution and climate change, we need more research and development of conservation materials and methods in fields related to biochemistry and biophysics under the eco-technological principle. Nevertheless, Daoism can be reconstructed as a wake-up call and an ethical framework to accommodate our reflection upon the human relation with the natural world in the face of an environmental crisis caused by an over-emphasis on human achievement and domination over nature.

References


The eco-technological principle here means using technologies that favour the environment’s well-being, which then in turn favour our wellbeing. For more a detailed discussion on technology and environmental ethics, see Epting (2010, 18–26).


