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How Chinese Philosophies Can Change Your Life

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The proximity of Lunar New Year is an auspicious time to consider the wisdom that ancient Chinese philosophy still holds for us today. And by far the most accessible introduction I have found to the diverse world of Chinese philosophies is a book titled *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life*, by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh.

Dr. Puett is a professor of Chinese History at Harvard University; his course on which **this book is based is the third most popular undergraduate class at Harvard**. If you are curious, the first and second most popular are “Introduction to Economics” and “Introduction to Computer Science” (xiii).

Dr. Christine Gross-Loh, who earned a Ph.D. from Harvard in East Asian History, has distilled Dr. Puett’s semester-long course into a short, 200-page book (205). If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, it really is an easy read. You could even read it comfortably in one sitting if you had a free block of time. If you prefer to dig into primary source material and read these ancient philosophers for yourself, a good anthology is *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Ivanhoe and Van Norden (201).

Setting these preliminaries aside, you may be asking yourself, “Why is this course so popular?” The word on the street from Harvard students who have taken it is that this course really matters to them personally, and that it explores many fascinating

worldviews and transformative practices that are often unfamiliar to westerners. As Dr. Puett emphasizes each semester on the first day of class, **“If you take the ideas in these texts seriously, they will change your life”** (xiv).

Let me give you an example. Let’s start with **Laozi** (老子). Although I will explore the wisdom of a number of Chinese philosophers here, if I had to limit myself to only one, my favorite is Laozi—spelled altogether, as one word. You may also have seen his name spelled as two words—Lao Tzu.

Spelling confusions will arise regularly if you explore Chinese philosophy. Most of the more familiar two-word spellings arose from an outdated way of transliterating Chinese characters into English called the Wade-Giles system, which was developed by two British men in the nineteenth century. **A much better system called pinyin was devised in the 1950s by a group of Chinese linguists.**

So if you ever wondered why Laozi’s most famous book, *Tao Te Ching*, was spelled with two “T”s that are pronounced as “D”s., the reason is the flawed decisions made during the nineteenth century by British imperialists. The good news is that the pinyin system is pretty easy to get used to, is much easier to pronounce, and is much closer phonetically to the original Chinese. **In pinyin, you spell Laozi’s most famous book all as one word, *Daodejing*, with “D”s instead of “T”s.**

To tell you a little more about **Laozi**, that name is actually a **common honorific that literally means “venerable” or “old master.”**

Here’s an example of how taking seriously the teachings of ancient Chinese philosophers like Laozi can change your life: Imagine you are walking through an old growth forest. You are surrounded by many large oak trees that are centuries old. You might find yourself in awe of these majestic trees soaring to heights of fifty, seventy, a hundred feet or more. And there’s nothing wrong with appreciating such striking natural beauty. But here’s the transformative perspective that Chinese philosophy can bring: Laozi would invite you to also **notice the strength of the small saplings** (87).

You may be thinking, how is a small sapling strong? You could snap it easily with your hands, whereas it would take a significant effort and serious tools for someone to take down a full grown oak tree. It may be true that saplings often grow up literally in

the shadow of large oaks, and thus can easily be underestimated. But Laozi invites us to consider that while a strong storm could easily break branches from those large oak trees, or even topple them, In contrast, those small saplings are much more pliable. Ironically, it is that bendiness that gives them a much better chance of being able to bow with the wind and survive a strong storm (*ibid*).

That's the sort of counter-intuitive approach that allows Chinese philosophy to change your life. Don't get me wrong, being big and strong like the majestic oak is appealing. But on the other hand, **equally important power is in the resilience of the sapling that can bend without breaking despite the harsh winds of change.**

Valuing the humble power of the sapling along with the power of the oak exemplifies the Laozian “less-is-more” approach to life. Instead of trying to dominate, force, or coerce others to behave a certain way, one of Laozi's primary strategies is called **wúwéi**, which literally means "inaction" or "effortless action." More expansively, **wúwéi** has the connotation of “appearing not to move or act but, in fact, being very, very powerful” (106).

The word *Dao* in Daoism means “the way.” And one passage describes, **“When [the follower of the way's] achievements are completed and tasks finished, the people say that “We are like this naturally”** (109). Instead of being micromanaging taskmasters, Daoism challenges us to lead in such a way that others' best selves seem to emerge organically, without coercion. Easier said than done, but let's appreciate how mastering this way of leading might be life changing, not only for you, but also for people around you.

If you are curious to read more of the *Daodejing* for yourself, there are many translations available, not all of which are equally respected as authentically reflecting the original. The translation that Dr. Puett recommends to his students at Harvard is [D. C. Lau's translation](#).

There is a lot more to say about Laozi, Daoism, and the *Daodejing*, but I also want to underscore the diversity and variety of Chinese philosophers. As I tell my undergraduate World Religion students there is never one singular “Chinese philosophy or religion;” **there are always Chinese philosophies and religions—plural.**

I said before that if I could introduce you to only one philosopher and text, it would be Laozi and the Daodejing. But if I were to expand the list to two philosophers, my second choice would be **Confucius** (孔夫子), which name in pinyin is rendered Kǒng Fūzǐ or **Kǒngzǐ**, meaning "Master Kǒng." He lived c. 551–479 BCE, and was perhaps two decades older than Laozi (b. 571 BCE).

Confucius (or Kǒngzǐ) has suffered a somewhat diminished reputation among Westerners as a "rigid traditionalist." Although there are aspects of Confucianism that have been used to prop up an antiquated social order, reading his writings for myself, I found the opposite of rigidity. Much of Confucius's focus was on helping others create positive change (50). If you wish to focus on just one text by Confucius, the best starting point is the **Analects**, a collection of sayings attributed to him that was gathered posthumously. As with the Daodejing, D.C. Lau's translation of the Analects is a reliable version with which to begin.

Let me give you an example of how a Confucian approach, taken seriously, can change your life. Unlike a typical approach in Western philosophy, which can often start with giant questions ("Do we have free will? What is the meaning of life? Is experience objective? What is morality?") Confucius's *Analects* focus on **the small habitual details of daily life** (24-25). He recommends that any planned personal changes should start small and build over time.

From a Confucian perspective, if you want to become a person who exercises, you should create a ritual around exercising at a certain time each day, even if it's just for one minute. Over time, that habitual ritual can build and expand, and you will become that person who exercises daily or reads one chapter each day or spends time painting daily—or whatever adjustment you want to add to how you live your life. According to Confucius, we are much less likely to really change simply by 'thinking' about what we want to be different, and **much more likely to change by "acting ourselves into a new way of being in the world."**

Speaking of change, how might Confucius consider Laozi's metaphor of the ancient oak and the young sapling that we explored earlier? Neither sage would falsely equate age with fragility. Quite the opposite, in fact: they would both use their stories to

make the point that **a wise elder often retains the openness to flexibility, growth and change of the sapling.**

Confucius thought that elders could potentially be at their best in many ways during their last years. In Confucius's own words:

At age fifteen, I set my intention upon studying.

At thirty, I established myself in society.

At forty, I freed myself of delusions.

At fifty, I understood the mandates of Heaven.

At sixty, I could hear with clarity.

At seventy, **what my heart desired and what was right came into alignment.** (183)

That sounds like quite an aspirational way to live into one's final chapter of life: living at the alignment of "what your heart desires and what is right."

As for what happens after we die, Confucius used to tell his disciples, "You do not yet understand life—how could you understand death?" (52) I take that to mean that we have quite enough to deal with right here, with learning to live well on this earth, and with one another.

After Confucius himself, the most famous Confucian is **Mencius** (372–289 BC), sometimes called "the second sage." He was born about a century after Confucius died, and extended Confucian thought in some interesting ways.

I particularly appreciate Mencius's forthrightness about how capricious life can be. Despite our best intentions and plans, life can change suddenly and unpredictably—for better or for worse (57). To Mencius, when life pulls the rug out from under us, we can take only the next step of responding as heartfully and mindfully as we are able to in that moment—and again in the next moment after that, and the moment after that (82-84).

We never know what unforeseen opportunities might open up for us—or what terrible things that we would never choose to happen to us, but that nevertheless do. For Chinese philosophers, it is more about cultivating a sense that we are all a part of a larger, uncertain world, and also part of what our UU Seventh Principle calls "the interdependent web of all existence." And sometimes, strands on that web shift and

shake (as with our current pandemic) and there are profound reverberations that have implications for each of us, both good and bad, beyond what we can individually control.

Let me give you a different way of thinking about what I'm describing. Picture in your mind the *yīnyáng* symbol, with a swirling white wave on one side encircling a small dark circle, beside a swirling black wave encircling a small light circle. Something that feels bad can have a seed of good in it, and vice-versa. To give just one example from the pandemic: it has been a terrible experience on so many levels, and yet there are also positive results, like the widespread adoption of live-streaming and video conferencing technologies making many more events more accessible than ever before.

Chapter 58 of the Daodejing offers a verbal representation of the *yīnyáng* symbol:

It is upon *bad* luck that good luck depends.

It is upon *good* luck that bad luck depends.

Who knows where it ends?

This integrated view of life is perhaps even better exemplified in my favorite story from Chinese philosophy:

There was an old man at a frontier fort in the north who understood Daoism.

One day he lost his horse, which wandered into the land of the Hu tribesmen. His neighbors came to condole with him and the man said, **“How do you know that this is bad luck [that I lost my horse]?”**

After a few months, the horse returned with some fine horses of the Hu breed, and the people congratulated him. The old man said, **“How do you know that this is good luck [that I now have so many fine horses]?”**

He became very prosperous with so many horses. Then the son one day broke his leg riding, and all the people came to condole with him

again. The old man said, “**How do you know that this is bad luck [that my son broke his leg riding]?”**”

One day the Hu tribesmen invaded the frontier fort. All the [healthy] young men fought with arrows to defend it, and nine-tenths of them were killed. Because the son [had a broken leg], both father and son escaped unharmed.

Therefore, **good luck changes into bad, and bad luck changes into good**. It cannot be known where their altering ends. (Moeller 99-101)

Perhaps that story offers a sense of openness, a sense of “not-knowing.” We truly don’t know how the world might shift around in a way that reframes what previously seemed to be unalloyed goodness or badness. Reality is quite a bit messier and more mixed up than we imagine at first, an insight which perhaps can liberate us to simply act as best we can in each new moment with as much mindfulness and heartfulness as is available to us at that time.

If we had more time, I would love to share more with you about **Qi** (气; Wade-Giles: ch’i), the cultivation of energy and breath through practices like qigong and Tàijí. And I’d love to tell you about another Daoist philosopher, **Zhuangzi**, second only to Laozi, and another Confucius scholar, **Xúnzǐ**. But my larger intention here is to offer you just a sense of the deep well of ancient Chinese philosophy that is available to you to explore.