

Ancient Daoist Wisdom and Its Associated Principle of Yin-Yang for Contemporary Classrooms as Foundations for a Harmonious World

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This article focuses on ancient Daoist wisdom, together with its associated principle of yin-yang, and their contemporary significance in terms of how they might be applied within today's classrooms as foundations for a harmonious world. It does so by illustrating the significance of Daoism and yin-yang from both historical and philosophical perspectives, as well as highlighting their spread to the West in relatively recent years in which growing numbers of classroom teachers are applying Daoist wisdom in their classrooms. It then suggests further approaches through which teachers might continue applying Daoist wisdom towards a harmonious yin-yang balance based on the associated Daoist principles of the virtue-less virtue of de and the naturalness of ziran, as well as the effortlessness of wuwei and the universal abundance of qi energy.

Introduction

To underline the contemporary value of ancient Daoist wisdom and its relationship with *yin-yang* as foundations for a harmonious world, this article begins with a historical perspective of this principle, dating back to Neolithic times and how it influenced the teachings of the *Laozi* (the foundational text of Daoism). It then discusses the notions of the Dao and *yin-yang* from a philosophical perspective. Next, the focus is shifted to our contemporary world of unprecedented global challenges alongside the spread of Daoism to the West, where growing numbers of teachers are becoming inspired by its propensity to bring harmony to their learning environments. Thereafter, three further dimensions in which Daoist wisdom and *yin-yang* might become further infused within contemporary classrooms are contemplated within the context of further Daoist principles. The first concerns the idea of an authentic state of virtuosity in terms of the virtue-less virtue of *de*. The second is a style of leadership derived from *de* that is uncontrived and promotes harmony through a genuine “self-so-ness” in terms of the principle of *ziran*. The third is associated with a mindset which encourages actions that flow harmoniously with the spontaneous unfoldment of circumstances in terms of the principles of *wuwei* effortlessness and *qi* energy.

The word “Dao” (as written in contemporary Pinyin Romanization) is used in this article, except where the word “Tao” (as written in earlier Wade-Giles classifications) is expressed by other writers. All quotations from the *Laozi* in this article are from the Lau (2009) translation.

A Historical Perspective of *Yin-Yang* and its Influence on the Philosophy of Daoism

The ancient cosmological principle of *yin-yang* expresses the underlying complementary nature of all apparent opposites. It shaped Chinese philosophy for thousands of years and deeply influenced Daoism (Lee, 2000;

Wang, 2020). Its beginnings date back to the shamanic origins of Daoism in prehistoric Neolithic times (c. 8500–2070 BC), and continued through the Xia dynasty (c. 2070–1600 BC) and the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1045 BC), and into the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BC).

Such were volatile times, when the fortunes of good crops were interspersed with the misfortunes of widespread flooding along the banks of the Yellow River. The tendency for good and bad fortunes to follow each other in cyclic rotations was noticed by the mythological folk hero Fuxi, who conceived of eight trigrams, consisting of broken *yin* lines and solid *yang* lines, as a divinatory means of understanding the unpredictable interplay between good and bad fortunes. His insights into the interplay of *yin-yang* continued through to the Bronze Age of the Shang dynasty, when divination methods based on cracks in turtle shells were recorded on oracle bones – a time when the Chinese writing system emerged based on pictorial descriptions. Later, his trigrams were combined and grouped into a sequence of 64 hexagrams by King Wen (1112–1050 BC), the posthumous founder of the Zhou dynasty, for which the text called the *Zhou Yi*, meaning *Changes of the Zhou*, was written during the Western Zhou dynasty from 1046 to 750 BC. Thereafter, it evolved into a cosmological text known as the *I Ching*, meaning *The Book of Changes*, towards the end of the Zhou dynasty, which later became canonized as a Confucian classic during the Western Han period (202 BC–9 AD). The *I Ching* is among the most ancient of the classics of China and has remained in much the same form up to our present day (Liu, 1997; Millidge, 1999; Kern, 2010; Redmond & Hon, 2014; Ritsema and Sabbadini, 2005; Smith, 2008).

When the feudal system which had been established in the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BC) began to crumble during the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC), there arose the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC), followed by the turbulent Warring States period (476–221 BC), when seven fragmented states ferociously battled against each other for territorial supremacy and to become the supreme ruler of China (Wong, 2011). This was partly because of the demise of the Zhou dynasty, which had lasted 790 years, and which coincided with the Iron Age and its socio-political changes through increased food production, population growth, and new technologies ranging from plowshares to weapons (Kohn, 2008).

Alongside these chaotic times arose the Hundred Schools of Thought, which was comprised of a multitude of philosophical perspectives suggesting ways out of the quagmire of the Warring States period – and of which many later became important components of Chinese culture, existing to this day (Huang, 2010). Most prominent amongst them were the social values and rituals of Confucianism, the harmonization with nature of Daoism, the laws and punishments of Legalism, the universal love of Mohism, the *yin-yang* and *wuxing* five phases cosmologies of the School of Naturalists, the diplomatic training of the School of Diplomacy, the correlation between words and objects of the School of Names, the judicious military strategy of the School of the Military, and the importance of health in the School of the Medical Skills.

It was during these strife-torn times of the Warring States period that the first Daoist classic, the *Laozi*, was written. Also known as the *Daode jing*, meaning the *Classic of the Way and Its Virtue*, it is a short book of 81 poetically styled aphoristic chapters. It seems possible that its teachings may have been influenced by the School of Naturalists, founded by Zou Yan (who lived from 305 to 240 BC), for this school extended the *yin-yang* understandings of changing circumstances towards their notion of *wuxing*, meaning “five phases,” based on a generative and degenerative interplay between the cosmological elements of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth, and which emphasized a dynamic interplay of universal oneness (Watts & Huang, 1975; Kohn, 2009; Clarke, 2000; Komjathy, 2013).

The Warring States period ended with the establishment of the first imperial Qin dynasty in 221 BC, which consolidated all seven feuding states into a single political and geographic entity. This was an extremely authoritarian regime that favoured Legalism. Scholars were executed and their books burnt in a bid to consolidate power. However, this was a short-lived dynasty, lasting only until 206 BC. Following a brief period of political discontinuity from 206 to 202 BC, the Han dynasty, which favoured Confucianism, was established. Apart from the brief interruption of the Xin dynasty from 9 to 23 AD, the Han dynasty remained until 220 AD. Although Confucianism, with Legalist elements, was revived and mostly favoured during the Han dynasty, Daoism was founded as a philosophy (known as the *Daojia*), and it also became China’s main indigenous religion (known as the *Daojiao*). This period also saw the infusion of Buddhism into China from India along the Silk Road, and Daoism served “as a bridge via which Buddhism could be assimilated into Chinese culture” (Chen & Holt, 2002, p. 153) Also, the Chinese form of Chan Buddhism arose from the

fusion of Mahayana Buddhism with Daoism in the 6th century AD (Grigg, 1994). Chan Buddhism later spread to Vietnam (where it is called *Thiền*), Korea (where it is called *Seon*), and Japan (where it is called *Zen*).

Despite the many challenges that Daoism faced since its shamanic origins in Neolithic times, it has stood the test of time. It is an essential part of the cultural fabric of China and is one of the “three teachings” alongside Confucianism and Buddhism.

The Omnipresent Dao and the Complementary Duality of *Yin-Yang*

The Chinese word “Dao” means “the Way,” as with a “path,” a “method,” or a “principle” (in its noun form), and it also means “to speak” (in its verb form). Alignment with it was, for Fung (1948), “the highest achievement in the spiritual cultivation of a sage” (p. 38) because the Dao is “that by which anything and everything comes to be” (p. 113).

Kohn (2009) pointed towards the Dao as “an integral part of nature and the greater universe, which functions in perfect harmony and is fundamentally good” (p. 365), and Wong (2011) noted that “it is nameless, invisible, and ungraspable by normal modes of perception” (p. 28). Other scholars have suggested that the Dao is “the general cosmic course [and] the most general term for the integrated order of cosmic and social processes – it is itself neither beyond processes nor actively initiates them [through letting] things happen as they happen by themselves” (Moeller, 2006, p. 48); the “natural order that underlies the substance and activity of the universe” (Norton, 2014, p. 2); the “eternal principle which we cannot fathom intellectually because it is beyond the mental framework of time and space” (Gregory, 2018, p. 39); a “path to be walked, not a word to be defined” (Wood, 1998, p. 3); something that has “existed before heaven and earth but cannot be described as possessing action or form” (Mair, 2000, p. 43); and the “source of all existence” (Komjathy, 2013, p. 112); and as Chang (2011) pointed out, “the value of the Dao lies in its power to reconcile opposites on a higher level of consciousness” (p. 11) such that “the belief in which the spontaneous processes created by the phenomenal and natural worlds influence all creation in life and life itself” (Chuang, 2002, p. 31).

The opening lines of the *Laozi* are: “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name” (chapter 1). This suggests the ineffability of the Dao in a metaphysical sense and is echoed in other parts of the *Laozi* – for example, “I know not its name so I style it ‘the way’” (chapter 25), “the way is forever nameless” (chapter 32), and “the way conceals itself in being nameless” (chapter 41). Thus, “Daoists hold that everything, living and non-living, emanates from the Dao and as such contains some element of the Dao within it” (Culham, 2014, p. 33). These, in turn, suggest that aligning with its flow implies a certain degree of transcendence from the conventional rationality of cognitive perceptions but without their wholesale abandonment, for the Dao is in essence “the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature” (Watts & Huang, 1975, p. 48), beyond the limitations of intentional seeking (Watts, 1997), and its essence “cannot be told, but only suggested” (Fung, 1948, p. 30), and knowing it “emphasizes direct experience” (Prince, 2005, p. 106).

Such an alignment with the flow of the Dao is associated with the principle of *yin-yang*, and the *Laozi* expresses this as:

The way begets one, one begets two, two begets three, three begets the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the generative forces of the two. (chapter 42)

Here, the “one” is the all-inclusive universe, the “two” is the complementary duality of *yin-yang*, and the “three” is the relationship between heaven, earth, and humans which produces the myriad creatures which “carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the generative forces of the two,” which, in turn, is the mutually interdependent dynamic that brings harmony to every facet of life (Lee, Yang & Wang, 2009).

These point towards the totality of *yin-yang* interdependency from a Daoist perspective and its role as the underlying essence of the Way, in which *yin* represents the subtler nature of the cosmos and *yang* represents its bolder nature, as Fung (1948) elaborated:

The word *yang* originally meant sunshine, or what pertains to sunshine and light; that of *yin* meant the absence of sunshine, ... shadow or darkness. In later development, the *yang* and *yin* came to be regarded as two cosmic principles or forces, respectively representing masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, hardness, ... for the *yang*, and femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, softness, ... for the *yin*. Through the interaction of these two primary principles, all phenomena of the universe are produced. (p. 155)

Moeller (2006) also pointed out that “*yin* and *yang* constitute the rhythm of the Dao” (p. 36), and Kohn (2008) noted that while the “Dao at its core is ineffable and inaccessible by human perception or intellect; on its periphery, it can be observed in the workings of natural rhythms, described in terms of *yin* and *yang*” (p. 32). *Yin*, therefore, represents the subtler nature of the cosmos while *yang* represents its bolder nature, and they engage in a dance of mutual arising, which sets the tone of the universe, without which it would just be “static, segmented and piecemeal” (Fang, 2014, p. 2). This implies that “we are dependent on our environment to stay alive. Working with nature we can ensure our supply. Working against it, we destroy our livelihood and ultimately our species” (Kreger, 2011, p. 52).

Therefore, the common façade of separateness reflects itself at deeper levels as an innate inseparability for both arise mutually given that the existence of one is the condition of the other, for “the *yin-yang* principle is not, therefore, what we would ordinarily call a dualism, but rather an explicit duality expressing an implicit unity” (Watts and Huang, 1975, p. 36). Similarly, Komjathy (2013) stressed that “*yin* and *yang* are not polar opposites or antagonistic substances; they are, in fact, complementary principles, aspects, or forces [and] are used to represent different dimensions of the same phenomenon or situation” (p. 106).

As previously explained, the inspiration for *yin-yang* in the *Laozi* originally came from the *I Ching*, via the School of Naturalists. It is essential to note that, although the first hexagram of the *I Ching* is comprised entirely of six solid *yang* lines and the second hexagram is comprised entirely of broken *yin* lines, there exist another 62 hexagrams comprised of varying *yin* and *yang* dimensions. Another way of comprehending this would be to compare the flipping of a coin to decide between two possibilities in which one wins over the other, while on the other hand the *I Ching* has 64 possibilities, and “there is never the ultimate possibility that either one will win over the other” (Watts & Huang, 1975, p. 34).

As such, *yin-yang* effortlessly regulates the harmonious interdependency of all existence – such as the interchange between nights and days, the ebb and flow of the tides, and the comings and goings of the seasons, each being indispensably fundamental to the existence of each other, and of which humans are also an innate part. A mindset in alignment with *yin-yang* appreciates that transformations are inevitable and that uncertainty is a fact, for *yin-yang* offers a moderation between excesses, because “everything extreme must swing to the opposing end” (Chuang, 2002, p. 29).

Deng (1992) also reminded us that all excesses cannot last indefinitely, because “whenever any phenomenon reaches its extreme, it will change toward its opposite, just as the darkest night begins to change toward dawn, and the coldest winter is followed by glorious spring” (p. 98), for “in Daoist thinking, humans are a microcosm of the universe and therefore contain all of the possibilities of the universe: *yin* and *yang*, good and bad, ugly and beautiful” (Culham, 2014, p. 37).

The Persistence of Global Challenges, and the Appeal of Daoism and *Yin-Yang* in the West

Today, despite humanity’s many impressive accomplishments through technological prowess, as well as in the name of civilization, challenges remain – not entirely dissimilar to those of the Warring States period – persisting on a much wider scale, across the globe. They envelop the social fabric and environments of every country, whether Asian or Western, developed or underdeveloped. This necessitates a return to

contemplations and applications based on ancient Chinese Daoist wisdom, in order to discover old ways out of these new challenges – because a return to the Daoist notion of nature as an inseparable part of ourselves is indispensable for survival, for “the ill-treatment of the environment is damage to ourselves” (Watts and Huang, 1975, p. 29).

These challenges come in many forms such as resource depletion, species extinction, nuclear catastrophes, cyber-attacks, terrorism, the thawing of permafrost, and now the COVID-19 pandemic – all driven by a compulsive obsession with competition and instant gratification based on the excessive *yang*-ness of “bigger, better and faster” (Chu, 1992, p. 84). They are compounded by a perception of nature as an external resource to be conquered and exploited (Lee, Holt & Jamnik, 2019). This perception has been described as “too rational, male and aggressive” (Capra, 1975, p. 108), and promoted “from the earliest stages of education into adult working life” (Gregory, 2018, p. 68), resulting in situations in which “humans tend to forsake their proper place and upset the natural harmony of the Way” (Ivanhoe, 2001, p. 158), in a world that “emphasizes and encourages action, ambition, force, and excitement, which are all primarily *yang* in nature” (Hetherington, 2014, p. 32).

The educational field has also not been spared from such challenges, for since the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s in the West, academic success has been mostly focused on memorization and regurgitation, and rewarded mostly through abstract measurements based on high-stakes standardized testing that depend on the capacity to memorize and regurgitate, and which are rewarded in terms of the abstract measurements of grades (Coombs, 1985; Stronach, 2010; Robinson, 2011). The resulting fear of failure and anxiety among students has, concomitantly, become increasingly endemic (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Bandura, 1977; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whilst the predominance of standardized testing may have served the automation needs of industrialized society, it has become obsolete and divorced from the needs of new modes of production introduced by the Internet, in which novel approaches based on independent thinking and flexibility are key.

However, coinciding with these challenging times of strife in the West is a heartening and inspiring interest in Daoism. The *Laozi* has, in fact, become the second most translated ancient text in the world, following the Christian Bible (Chan, 2013). It was first translated into French by Stanislas (1842), and into English by Chalmers (1868), Legge (1891), and Giles (1905), among others. More recent English translations of the *Laozi* include those of Cleary (1993), Roberts (2001), Ivanhoe (2002), Ames and Hall (2003), Wagner (2003), Lin (2006), and Moeller (2007). All of this has heralded a fresh seedbed in the West for the germination of visionary creativity based on ancient Daoist wisdom.

The *I Ching* has also become increasingly popular in the West ever since it was first translated by Legge (1899), followed by further translations by McClatchie (1876), Wilhelm (1950), Blofeld (1965), and Shaughnessy (1996), among others. Interestingly, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, mathematician, and political adviser Leibniz (1879/1998) noticed the sequences of mathematical binaries found within the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, and as a result, they serve as a basis for contemporary computer software programming. Also, the renowned psychoanalyst Jung, who introduced the concepts of archetypes (patterns that are universally shared in the collective unconscious) and synchronicity (non-causal yet meaningful coincidences), applied the *I Ching* in his consultations (Wilhelm, 1950).

Chai and Chai (2014) noted that “Daoism became extremely popular with the counterculture movement in America in the late 1960s and 1970s” (p. 80), and Poškaitė (2013) stressed that Daoism has become an “inspirational resource of alternative ideas, helping to solve the intellectual, spiritual and existential problems of contemporary Western civilization” (p. 52). Indeed, Western business managers such as Strutton and Pelton (1997), computer scientists like Sodan (1998), physicists such as Capra (1975), and socio-political observers of the calibre of Clarke (2000) and Kim (2001) have all applied Daoist principles to Western culture. Daoism has also inspired Western writers, through books such as *The Truth of Tao* by Russian Grandmaster Anatole (2005), philosophical children’s stories such as *The Tao of Pooh* by Hoff (1982), cooking books such as *The Taoist Cookbook* by Saso (1994), and books on movies such as *The Tao of Star Wars* (Porter, 2003). There have also been Daoist-inspired books for animal lovers, such as *The Tao of Meow* (Japussy, 1990) and *The Tao of Bow Wow* (Wood, 1998). Although these popular contemporary attempts at elucidating Daoism have often been dismissed as forms of New Age Daoism and corruptions of the classical Daoist texts, Poškaitė (2013) has stressed that they “deserve a more careful study by sinologists, since they are the manifestations of the process of globalization of Daoism, which is inevitable in the 21st century” (p. 53).

Examples of Daoist-inspired teachers seeking a balance between extremes in a classroom environment include Nagel (1994), who wrote *The Tao of Teaching*, a book based on the *Laozi* that promotes an embracing of authentic virtue, an appreciation of stillness, and mutual respect, using real classroom examples, with her subtly powerful reminder that “tranquility is more important than perfection” (p. 133). Another is Doerger (2004), who wrote an article titled “The Teacher As Taoist” and noted that Chinese “philosophies align well with many of the contemporary ideas related to humanistic ideals, holistic views, interdisciplinary instruction, and constructivist education” (Doerger, 2004, p. 1).

Other applications of Daoism among teachers have provided insights into intersubjectivity, mindfulness, human agencies, and animism (Bai, 2001a, 2001b, 2006, & 2009), and on educational notions of complexity and morals (Bai & Banack, 2006). Daoist wisdom has been accessed through contemplative approaches to teaching (Bai, et al., 2014) and teacher education (Bai, Scott & Donald, 2009), as well as through the Daoist contribution to martial arts and its application to educational scenarios (Bai, Park, & Cohen, 2016).

Cohen (2009) introduced teachers to the basics of Daoism and focused on Daoist-inspired holistic and contemplative approaches to educational scenarios (Cohen & Bai 2007, 2012, 2019). Flowers (1998) brought Daoism to problem-solving approaches in technological instruction; Bird (2012) applied the Daoist notion of *wuwei* to his instruction style; Culham (2014) emphasized Daoist-inspired applications of compassion in education; Yang and Lin (2016) applied the Tai Chi model (based on *yin-yang* principles) as an alternative to the dichotomy of student-centred and teacher-centred learning; Bulei (2013) applied the *wuxing* five phases theory to teaching English as a foreign language; Castillo (2016) shared his pedagogical approaches, which were inspired by the Daoist water metaphor; Yang (2019) advocated drawing on Daoism to re-emphasize individuation in education; and Chen and Lee (2019) applied the Daoist water metaphor to encourage collaboration in present-day education.

Harnessing Yin-Yang Harmony in Contemporary Classrooms

Inspired by the combination of the gentle and unassuming tenacity of Daoism, and by these Daoist-inspired teachers who have infused their learning environments with its age-old wisdom, this article now proposes further considerations towards embracing such wisdom within current learning environments, as a foundation for a harmonious world.

These considerations will be discussed through the associated Daoist principles of the virtue-less virtue of *de*, the spontaneous unfoldment of the naturalness of *ziran*, and the effortlessness of *wuwei*, together with the abundance of universal *qi* energy – these are the signposts that caution one not to wander too far off into *yin* territory (for excessive *yin* can become too soft and thereby weak), nor too far into *yang* territory (for excessive *yang* can become too strong and thereby brittle). Along this path, perceptions are not derived from the notion of a separate world outside of ourselves to be conquered, but rather out of an awakening to the importance of participating with nature in the world we live in because it also lives within us.

The Virtue-less Virtue of De

The notion of virtue-less virtue is expressed in the *Laozi* as *de*: “a man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue” (chapter 38). *De* from a Daoist point of view suggests that genuine virtue involves a state of not being aware of virtue. As such, *de* transcends the conventional notions of righteousness and arises spontaneously of its self-so-ness without intention. It is an innately natural state, beyond illusory egoic notions based on separateness. Therefore, *de* is devoid of authoritarianism and manifests in the grace of accepting each passing moment, in a sense that liberates one from feeling like a prisoner inside oneself and a victim of everything unpleasant. In this manner, *de* inspires a genuine empathy towards everybody, including the oppressed, the marginalized, and the rejected.

In the classroom, this inspires a genuine sense of trust between teachers and students because it is a moderate, compassionate, and humble manifestation of tranquility. This helps teachers to bring out the best

in their students, and students to bring out the best in their teachers, in the same way that *yin* trusts in *yang* to bring out the best of its *yin*-ness, and to which *yang* trusts in *yin* to bring out the best of its *yang*-ness, because “teachers need the respect of their students but it is something that must be earned, not forced” (Doerger, 2004, p. 6). Perhaps the most tangible expression of *de* is when a teacher moves from a “sage on the stage to a guide on the side” (A. King, 1993, p. 30). This is expressed in the *Laozi* as “[when] the sage puts his person last and it comes first” (chapter 7), such that “when his task is accomplished and his work done the people all say ‘it happened to us naturally’” (chapter 17), because “he who considers himself right is not illustrious” (chapter 24).

As such, *de* implies a teaching style based on setting good examples of behaviour that have deep and long-lasting impacts. A central part of this is in not talking too much, and “[using] few words” (Nagel, 1994, p. 71), which allows space for students to find a foundation within the learning process upon which they can build their ideas. An awareness and understanding of this inspires a balanced *yin-yang* approach towards instruction, rather than the mechanical manner of a “my way or the highway” mentality, which is disproportionately *yang* in orientation – for “truly good teaching [is] an interactive combination of evocative (leading out) and narrative (telling) practices, not just one or the other” (Nagel, 1994, p. 2). Along these lines, the *Laozi* reminds us that:

Something and nothing produce each other; the difficult and the easy complement each other; the long and the short offset each other; the high and the low incline towards each other; note and sound harmonize with each other; before and after follow each other. (chapter 2)

This encourages less prescription, and a propensity to comprehend hidden advantages within apparent disadvantages, which harmonizes challenges and keeps potentially explosive situations intact: “the Tao holds that no one is good or bad, they simply make good or bad choices” (Doerger, 2004, p. 3). Similarly, the principle of *de* encourages us to refrain from labelling people in terms of being “good” or “bad.” With less labelling, comparison, division, and discrimination, and with more empathy, gentleness, and modesty, there can be a heightened synchronization with the selfless humility of the Dao in the classroom, such that:

The myriad creatures rise from it yet it claims no authority. It gives them life yet claims no possession. It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude. It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. (*Laozi*, chapter 2)

In this way, dichotomies in classrooms become bridged, which heightens the sense of awareness, alertness, focus, and presence, such that these are harmonized in a flow of universal spontaneity free of disproportionate coercion and control, because “the compassion called for by Daoists is impartial, expects nothing in return, and is not possessive” (Culham, 2014, p. 37). Associated with this is the reminder given by Cohen and Bai (2007) of the importance of appreciating that “there is no separation, only points along the way that are interconnected” (p. 10). Such perspectives help to transcend the illusory notion that the interests of teachers and students are inherently juxtaposed – rather they are as interdependent as the sunrise which welcomes the day and the sunset which welcomes the night.

An awareness of this interdependency gives rise to the understanding that there is no need for manipulation and obsessive control to fit predetermined outcomes in the classroom – for that only leads to frustration, as well as mental and physical exhaustion. This keeps classrooms from descending into conflict and inspires students and teachers to become inseparably interconnected, as opposed to being hostile strangers in antagonistic competition with each other. As such, the virtue-less value of *de* welcomes and encourages everyone in the classroom, out of appreciation for their innate sets of abilities, aptitudes, and inclinations.

The Spontaneity of Ziran

Ziran is the Chinese word for nature in a cosmic sense, in which everything exists in tandem with authentic self-so-ness. The *Laozi* expresses this as: “man models himself on earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the way,

and the way on that which is naturally so” (chapter 25). Thus, *ziran* is the expression of nature in terms of its original pureness, freshness, wholeness, and completeness. With *ziran*, nothing is rushed, yet nothing is left undone, because everything in nature is a perfect expression of the Dao. For this reason, there are no imperfect clouds, no imperfect bird songs, and no imperfect mountains, for they are all of their self-so-ness.

However, in most classroom situations, the teacher might well consider some students as good and others as bad, and the students may have similar opinions about the teacher. This is because classrooms are places where it is challenging to emulate *ziran*. Yet, there is always the potential for states of *ziran* to be replicated in classrooms because, just as the seasons come and go rhythmically, the cycles of teaching and learning can resemble *yin-yang* harmonization (Yang & Lin, 2016). To infuse states of *ziran* in the learning environment requires balancing *yin* and *yang* through patiently and impartially observing the unfoldment of all phenomena and in flowing with whatever follows, without emotional entanglement and contention.

In terms of manifesting *ziran* in classrooms, it would seem that simplicity is a key ingredient, for learning environments all have their intrinsic states, and the more that these are nurtured the more harmonious they tend to become. It is therefore sensible to “seek simplicity and honor what is known” (Nagel, 1994, p. 113). In doing so, classrooms naturally awaken their innate capacity to become harmonious, without being forced to do so, because comparisons, judgements, and criticisms, which create an environment of fear and anxiety, are largely absent. Such classrooms engender curiosity, and a desire to explore all criteria – including that which is outside the curriculum, because it is central to fulfill the inquisitive needs of students. In this way, the classroom becomes a creative space in which the *yin*-ness of curiosity and the *yang*-ness of working towards students’ fulfillment intertwine in a *yin-yang* harmony of heightened curiosity, self-reliance, and imagination. However, classrooms are not without obstacles and challenges, and therefore a teacher should ideally act as a stimulus, awakening students to the enjoyment of learning. Such a teacher creates the conditions that allow learning to take place.

Intellect is important, but on its own it is insufficient and lacking an intuitive capacity to fully comprehend the holistic integration of *yin* and *yang*. This is because *yang* tends to be more outward looking for the acquiring of external knowledge, while *yin* tends to be more inward looking into the nature of the intuitive self, which transforms the mind from within to mentally digest such knowledge. Thus, novel insights and their applications come from trusting one’s intuition. For this reason, “good teaching is not pouring information into the heads of students and expecting them to spit back answers. The good teacher instead lets students learn naturally” (Doerger, 2004, p. 3). In the desired absence of authoritarian control, *yin-yang* melts away dichotomist comparisons into a harmonious wholeness in which the *yang*-ness of teaching and the *yin*-ness of learning intertwine within a harmonious and joyous sense of wonder.

Such *ziran*-inspired notions have also been expressed in terms of the characteristics of water, and in the *Laozi* it is said that the “highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefitting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be” (chapter 8). The humble yet dynamic qualities of water are also expressed in other parts of the *Laozi*, in such statements as “the way is to the world as the river and the sea are to rivulets and streams” (chapter 32) and “the reason why the river and the sea can be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position. Hence, they can be king over the hundred valleys” (chapter 66). Indeed, the mystical essence of the Dao is expressed through the metaphorical significance of water (Allan, 1997; Yu, 1998; Slingerland, 2000, 2003; Chen & Holt, 2002; Lu, 2012; Castillo, 2016).

Associated with this, Lee (2003) pointed out five qualities of water – altruism, moderation, adaptability, transparency, and persistence – and explained how, when infused within a personality, these constitute a “wateristic” demeanour. All of this associates the innate spontaneity, the suchness, the self-generative-ness, the intrinsic formlessness, and the self-so-ness of water with the Dao (Lee, et al., 2008), which flows ever downwards and lies in places of deep and unfathomable obscurity – where those who pursue the superficial heights of self-interest, pride, wealth, and status feel out of place, and do not like to go (Slingerland, 2003; Gregory, 2018).

The idea of the adaptation of water to its environment can encourage classrooms to become *ziran*-inspired environments – for in the same way that water is without a constant shape, teaching and learning could ideally be without constant rigidity, and more flexible, as well as accommodating of changing needs. In the same manner that water flows around rocks, dissolving them over long periods whilst leaving behind

brehtaking landscapes, *ziran*-orientated classrooms could encourage teachers and students to flow more with, and contend less against, the obstacles that come their way. This would inspire a *yin-yang* harmonious spirit whereby students not only acquire the necessary skills to pass their exams but also become creative and curious people as they meander like rivers throughout the terrains of their lives.

The Effortlessness of Wuwei and the Abundance of Universal Qi Energy

Associated with the paths of *de* and *ziran* to *yin-yang* harmony are *wuwei* and *qi*. *Wuwei* is derived from two Chinese words: *wu* meaning “not” and *wei* meaning “action.” Though they are often falsely related to notions of apathy, R. J. King (2015) stressed that *wuwei* is “not the lack of action, but a state of mind to be maintained while acting” (p. 55). The *Laozi* likens *wuwei* to “the sage, because he does nothing, never ruins; and, because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing” (chapter 64).

Wuwei has been described as a mindset based on “non-interference and non-intervention” (Komjathy, 2013, p. 21), as a state of “acting effortlessly and spontaneously” (Slingerland, 2000, p. 296), and as a “spiritual adhesive that harmonizes the Dao among humanity” (Gregory, 2018, p. 98). Dyer (2007) expressed the idea of *wuwei*, writing that “by letting go of your inner drive to push ahead, you’ll see that you ironically do better than when you tried so hard” (p. 213), and according to Watts (1997), “when you force a lock, you usually bend the key, so instead, jiggle gently [and] then it all happens as if it were natural and not forced” (p. 7).

Wuwei is, therefore, an effortless alignment with the Dao through flowing with the unfoldment of situations without resisting them. Unnecessary escalations can be avoided by not jumping to hasty conclusions in unexpected situations – because through *wuwei* comes the recognition that the whirlpool of impulsive thought is usually focused on problems which do not exist. In this way, *wuwei* helps one avoid anxiety, depression, insomnia, and the paralysis of indecision.

Wuwei moderates the aspects of teaching that tend to be more *yang* in orientation, and that are inclined to be based more on the tangible human constructs of curriculum delivery, lesson planning, course outlines, rules and regulations, deadlines, test preparedness, examinations, and grades, as well as on the administration of punishments and rewards. Indeed, it is tempting to adopt a completely rational mindset as a teacher that, as Cohen and Bai (2007) stressed, “wants to acquire more and more knowledge and skills” (p. 5). However, Lambert (2016) cautioned that “conventional social rules, rituals, and methods of social control are insufficiently sensitive to the nuances and subtle changes in the forces shaping most situations” (pp. 6–7). Therefore, the passive aspects of teaching that are more *yin* in orientation are also indispensable to success in education – for they tend to be related to creativity, mentoring, and trust.

Yin-yang is, therefore, not entirely pro-intellectual nor entirely anti-intellectual, for it is accepting of the important role of intellectuality in education while also appreciating that there are dimensions of learning that transcend the grasp of the intellectual mind. However, excessive rewards and punishments are best avoided, for they tend to be signs of desperation and exasperation, which diminish trust and contentment. In their place, a *wuwei* style of non-interference involves an appreciation of the wisdom of leaving things to return to their naturally harmonious states, in much the same way that mud in water, when left alone, settles to the bottom in its own time and of its own accord, becoming that from which beautiful lotus flowers grow and bloom.

Wuwei is also associated with the life-giving energy of *qi*, which emerges from the dynamic creative interplay of *yin-yang*. *Qi* is “contained in the foods we eat and the air we breathe [and] it is also the life force in the human body and as such forms the basis of all physical vitality” (Kohn, 2008, p. 51). It is also the invisible cosmic glue that flows throughout the universe and binds everything together. Moeller (2006) remarked that “all the ten thousand things ... are present within the rhythm of *yin* and *yang* in and as *qi*” (pp. 38–39). As such, there is no “good” or “bad” *qi* because it is only humans who categorize *qi* as “good” or “bad.” Just as electricity is neither “good” nor “bad,” but only flows in “positive” and “negative” currents, so *qi* flows in cycles of “positive” *yang-qi* and “negative” *yin-qi*. As Kreger (2011) noted, “*qi* is everywhere, within and throughout all life” (p. 38), and is “the mysterious force that animates all living things” (p. 40).

Classrooms can also become infused with *qi*, which manifests in harmonious states when circumstances become aligned with it through *wuwei* in states of flow, as described by Bird (2012):

Nature almost always goes with the flow, naturally. Water flows over rocks. Birds slice through the air. Leaves bud and grow and change color and fall ... As teachers, we must read and study and plan – but after the reading, after the study, after the planning, comes the time to turn off our overloaded brains and let the teaching flow. (p. 2)

Daoist-inspired teachers thus both recognize and are acutely aware of the presence of *qi* in classrooms, because “teachers are energy workers [and] once you sense the energy, you can begin to follow it, work with it, and nurture it” (Cohen & Bai, 2007, p. 8). With *qi*, classrooms become places of synergistic reciprocity, inter-reliance, and harmony, in which the unfoldment of happenings becomes aligned spontaneously with contentedness, which in turn opens synchronistic pathways to authentic creativity.

Conclusion

This article emphasized the significance of a *yin-yang* harmony for classrooms – one which harmonizes the elements that tend towards being more *yang* in orientation (such as intelligence, academic rigour, and logical thought) with the elements that tend towards being more *yin* in orientation (such as wisdom, intuition, and asymmetrical thought), laying the foundation for a harmonious world, which needs a balanced blend of both *yin* and *yang*.

It did so by underlying the contemporary value of ancient Daoist wisdom and its relationship with *yin-yang* as foundations for a harmonious world. It began with a historical perspective of their origins, dating back to Neolithic times, and how they influenced the teachings of the seminal Daoist text known as the *Laozi*. It then discussed the notions of the Dao and *yin-yang* from a philosophical perspective. Following that, the focus shifted to our contemporary world, with its unprecedented global challenges, examining it alongside the spread of Daoism to the West, where growing numbers of teachers have become inspired by its propensity to bring harmony to their learning environments. Thereafter, it suggested three further dimensions in which contemporary classrooms might become more infused with Daoist wisdom and *yin-yang*, within the context of further Daoist principles. The first concerned the ideal of an authentic state of virtue in terms of the virtue-less virtue of *de*. The second was a consideration of a style of leadership derived from *de* that is uncontrived and promotes harmony through a genuine self-so-ness in terms of the principle of *ziran*. The third involves a mindset that encourages actions that flow harmoniously with the spontaneous unfoldment of circumstances, in terms of the principles of *wuwei* effortlessness and *qi* energy.

In terms of the virtue-less virtue of *de* as the first approach towards a *yin-yang* harmonization within classrooms, it was noted how *de* contributes to a humility that encourages authentic expressions of harmonious learning within the classroom – a classroom in which everyone is equally welcome, and in which diversity is viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat. Concerning *ziran* as the second path towards a *yin-yang* harmonization within classrooms, it was explained how an appreciation of the spontaneous unfoldment of *ziran* within a classroom can help get rid of artificiality through an infusion of naturalness based on the purity of the is-ness of nature, in which nothing is forced and yet nothing is left undone. As such, *ziran* is beyond all attempts to shape the unfoldment of events to force outcomes to fit preconceived expectations. Thereafter, the principles of *wuwei* and *qi* were discussed as the third approach towards a *yin-yang* harmonization within classrooms, with *wuwei* as a non-interfering course of action that binds the virtue-less virtue of *de* with the naturalness of *ziran*, acting together with the universal energy of *qi* to bring classrooms into a spontaneous and unforced alignment with the Dao, enabling the principle of *yin-yang* to manifest harmoniously within classrooms as a balanced middle ground that avoids extremes.

In these ways, the final wish within the *Laozi* that “people will return to the use of the knotted rope, will find relish in their food and beauty in their clothes, will be content in their abode and happy in the way they live” (chapter 80) might be fulfilled in the classroom, where teaching and learning can become more joyous and fulfilling, and, as such, can become foundations for a harmonious world where “the way of heaven benefits and does no harm, [and] the way of the sage is bountiful and does not contend” (chapter 81).

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