An Uncommon Alliance: Ecofeminism and Classical Daoist Philosophy

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Classical philosophical Daoism and ecofeminism converge on key points. Ecofeminism’s critique of Western dualistic metaphysics finds support in Daoism’s nondualistic, particularist, cosmological framework, which distinguishes pairs of complementary opposites within a process of dynamic transformation without committing itself to a binary, essentialist position as regards sex and gender. Daoism’s epistemological implications suggest a link to ecofeminism’s alignment with a situational and provisional model of knowledge. As a transformative philosophy, the cluster of concepts that give specificity to the Daoist notion of transformation offers content and direction for the notion of transformation central to many ecofeminist philosophies. These affinities offer possibilities for developing the relevance of both philosophies to bear upon a theoretical understanding of how we can live in a respectful and sustainable relationship with our natural environment.

Know the male but keep to the role of the female.¹

I. DAOISM AS CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

When Greta Gaard defines ecofeminisms as flowing from “the streams of ecofeminism,” referring to their “permeable boundaries (hence, the water metaphor),”² she uses a central trope of Daoism. By using metaphor to express the interconnections among ecofeminisms, she parallels a Daoist approach that relies upon narrative and layers of imagery to yield insights into nature as an open-ended, dynamic process of permeable identities, constituting a field of “focus” phenomena rather than an order of neatly categorized “things.” Yet, ecofeminist literature seems tied to distinctions that divide one ecofeminism from another in a way that threatens to deprive this emerging philosophy of relevance and meaning. Cultural, radical, and spiritual ecofeminists are distinguished and sometimes disparaged by liberal, activist and academic ecofeminists. Materialist, activist, social, socialist, womanist, “animal,” transformative feminists are delineated as distinct ecofeminisms and compete for

¹ Konkordanz zum Lao tzu, ed. C. C. Müller and R. G. Wagner (München: E. Schmitt, 1962), poem 28 (emphasis added). We use the Pinyin romanization in this article. Other references to this same text by authors using the Wade-Giles romanization appear as the Daodejing.

intellectual space in a way that often pits one against the other. Gaard makes the point. "Politically active ecofeminists worry that spirituality oriented ecofeminists will privilege their own inner transformations over the very necessary work of social and economic transformations."

Such worries can become divisive distractions but they take us to the crux of the issue. The radical/liberal, materialist/spiritualist, academic (theory)/activist (practice) distinctions are hung on a dualistic framework. Feminists analyze such distinctions as masculinist, arguing that the tendency to divide and categorize is the motive force behind the hierarchical structures that grant privilege and allow "one" to oppress an "other." A we-are-not-they mentality pits one against the other in antagonisms that are as old and potentially destructive as those that are the focus of feminist critiques. While distinctions can highlight important differences, this taxonomy runs amok if it serves to create oppositional structures that weaken the potential coherence of ecofeminism's more important concerns. Whether viewed as spiritual or intellectual, individual or social, personal or political, transformation involves transforming belief, consciousness of self, and ultimately a way of being and acting in the world. Ecofeminism's commitment to transformation seems to grate against its commitment to diversity. Its acknowledgment that the contextuality of individual experience implies different, yet nonetheless potentially valid knowledge perspectives seems to urge ecofeminism away from a singular approach to transformative liberation. Yet, liberation in some sense of the term remains the transformative goal of ecofeminism. Given the prevalence of the concept of transformation within ecofeminist literature, we see a need to develop a framework within which this notion may be understood more richly, and in this respect we find promise in ancient, philosophical Daoism.

As a transformative philosophy, Daoism is interested in our human capacity to find a genuinely authentic place within the flow of phenomena. Roger T. Ames describes the dao as "an emerging pattern of relatedness perceived from the perspective of an irreducibly participatory de, or particular." Daoism preserves the integrity of individuals while deferring to a larger process that is the dao. As a normative philosophy it recognizes a prevailing disharmony in current states of affairs and advocates balance between human need and environmental resources while integrating and accommodating personal and social-political transformations. It draws gender to the center of analysis from a critical perspective, and encourages self-other transformation within the context of constant change, promoting the balancing of patterns of thought and behavior in a way that disallows privilege. As an emerging pattern itself,

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3 Ibid., pp. 44–46.
ecofeminism resonates with the strategies and dynamic qualities that reflect its multiple origins. Each ecofeminism signals an impulse integral to a larger transformative process that includes thought and action, intellect and spirit, individual and social aspects. The privilege of gender and other forms of distinction focus its critique; yet, it too, looks forward to a normatively better balance between humans and the wider world.

Ecofeminists argue that Western patriarchy is a system of ideas grounded in metaphysical dualism. Dualism divides, not in a benign way that allows us merely to distinguish difference, but in a way that gives conceptual support and justification to privilege and oppression. According to Val Plumwood, “Dualisms are not just free floating systems of ideas; they are closely associated with domination and accumulation, and are their major cultural expressions and justifications.”

She has shown how, through a language of alterity, male and female, public and private, culture and nature, have been delineated in such a way that only one is desirable (male, culture, reason, etc.), while the “other” (woman, nature, emotion, etc.) serves at best an instrumental value. She has further demonstrated that this way of dividing the world of our experiences can “be seen as an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm.”  

This deep structural dualism pervades all aspects of knowing and valuing in Western thinking, providing the undergirding for a habit of thought that promotes both the oppression of women and the destruction of the natural environment.

Clearly, the Chinese divide their world into two. Nothing is more strongly associated with Chinese thought than the yin/yang symbol. As a nondual philosophy, Daoism is based on the yin/yang model. The pairs of female/male, dark/light, and hot/cold interlace along conceptual poles that distinguish two qualities while noting a unity and interdependence between them. These complementary pairs are not defined in mutually exclusive and antagonistic terms. They interconnect and interpenetrate, and we find the presence of both in all things. Heading a long list of conceptual pairs by which the human and the wider world are understood and valued, yin and yang are strongly mapped against sex and gender, characterized by a language that conveys the same stereotypic thinking that is the focus of feminist critiques. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames point out how Daoist literature presents the yin element. “The key metaphors such as water, the infant, the valley, the mother, and the source, which parallel references to the female, are all defined in the language of feminine gender traits such as softness, weakness, darkness, tranquility, receptivity.” In contrast, the masculine yang is strong, constructive, and active. To

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6 Ibid.
feminists this language is disturbingly familiar, provoking us to entertain Elizabeth Dodson Gray’s concern that casting masculine and feminine in terms of yang and yin will only “confine the one to activity and the other to passivity.”

We are aware how of characterizations of “the feminine” in essentialist and gendered terms have functioned to define women in ways that delimit their potential and the possibilities of their lives. The very qualities used to define women have been precisely those that have fueled arguments that women deserve their subjugated position. Given a history of oppression at least equal to that of the West, we need to bring Chinese philosophy in general, and Daoism in particular, to account. While scrutinizing the meaning of the yin/yang distinction, however, we should be wary of projecting our own cultural characterization of the masculine/feminine dichotomy, assuming its implications apply to a similar distinction in another culture.

Daoist scholar, A. C. Graham, draws our attention to the fact that in their earliest sense, yin and yang refer to shade and sunshine respectively, as “two of the six atmospheric influences.” Simple observation shows that shaded and lit portions of a mountain alternate with the motion of the sun, and it is this motion that is essential to the yin/yang distinction. Yin and yang do not mean “male” and “female.” They are not attributes of things, but complementary aspects of a single process of growth and development. In the Laozi we see the cosmological thinking of the Chinese distinguish itself. “The 10,000 things carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two.” Here, the yin/yang distinction does not divide things, assigning value and order according to rigid gender/sex categories. It does not present what Karen Warren calls an exclusive and oppositional disjunctive pair of the sort that places higher value on one term than the other. Yin and yang derive from the dao as correlative forces in a single, dynamic process in which all particulars have equal value.

Emphasizing several points of distinction to demonstrate how Daoist understanding differs from Western dualism, Karen Lai points out the positive potential the yin/yang concept has for feminist thinking. In these pairings, meanings are porous, completing one another in a way that preserves the distinctiveness of both. Neither member of this pair, nor any complementary

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9 A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), p. 325.
10 Laozi, poem 42.
pair, stands as an independent concept. Rather, their interdependence suggests a mutual entailing and dynamic interaction that privileges neither. This implies the nonreducibility of yin and yang. The yin/female cannot be explained as a truncated, immature, or lacking male. Both are necessary, primary and valued. As Lai points out, “[T]he view that contrastive pairs are interdependent incorporates not only the idea that the terms are nonseparable but also that the integrity of each is maintained.”

Furthermore, yin and yang are not static. “The reciprocity and mutual dependence of one on the other renders the relation between both concepts, as well as the concepts themselves, dynamic.” Lai’s observations echo Hall and Ames, who have argued the Chinese tradition offers a more androgynous ideal of a fully realized human being. “On the ‘dao’ model, realized individuals become correlates of dao, having available to them the full range of yin/yang traits that includes both sides of the divine/human (tianren) complementarity, both sides of the reason/emotion (zhiren) complementarity, both sides of the theory/practice (zhexing), substance/function (tiyong), spirit/flesh (xinshen), practice/language (xingyan) complementaries.” These pairings acknowledge appropriate deference without implying a rigid hierarchy or the superiority of one over the “other.”

As qualities that define persons, yin and yang present both negative and positive associations that apply equally to both sexes. Characterized by Min Jiayin as “fuzzy concepts,” they yield the terms, yanggang and yinrou. While these correspond to male and female respectively, the underlying assumption is that they combine in varying degrees across individuals.

A yanggang person is strong, brave, extroverted, enthusiastic, enterprising and creative, good at logical thinking, just-minded, and with a strong sense of responsibility. This is the positive side. The negative side of yanggang is crude, cruel, robust but muddleheaded, predatory and disruptive. A person of yinrou is tender, modest, introverted, sensitive, good at perceptual thinking, good at imitating, sympathetic, etc. The negative side is timid, weak, sentimental, indecisive, conservative, and self-exclusive. Therefore, there is yinnish yang in yanggang and yangish yin in yinrou.

This qualitative difference allows the Daoist yin/yang distinction to avoid what Plumwood has called “the cavern of reversal” on three counts. First, Daoism’s complementary pairs do not fit Plumwood’s criterion, which understands dualism as “the process by which contrasting concepts... are formed by

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13 Ibid., p. 146.
14 Ibid., p. 147.
15 Hall and Ames, Thinking, p. 95.
17 Ibid.
18 Plumwood, Feminism, p. 61.
domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive.”

To the contrary, the Daoist analysis views these pairs as nonoppositional, nondomining and nonsubordinating. All of reality displays a yin/yang continuity. Indeed, yin and yang provide the dynamic background from which the myriad things that constitute the dao proceed. As a process of becoming, the dao transforms through recurrent passings of day into night, the changing of seasons, and cycles of life and death. Without the mutual entailment of yin and yang, the processes of life and creativity cease.

Second, while it finds expression in a sex/gender distinction, one is yin or yang relative to different individuals and contexts. Chung-ying Cheng clearly makes the point: “[N]o single yin/yang distinction is sufficient to characterize things in their relation to many other things. A wife who is an employer can be yin in relation to her husband but can be yang relative to her employees. In fact, she can be both yin and yang to the same object, depending on the contexts of relationships which give rise to differences of activities and positions.”

Thus the yin/yang distinction is not exposed to the essentialist charge that has been leveled against cultural and spiritual ecofeminists. Advocating a return to yin modes of being is not tantamount to advocating the ways of women to the exclusion of males. Males are not essentially yang and females are not essentially yin. These qualities are present in all beings, and necessary for any particular to exist as a creative, dynamic phenomenon. Finally, reversal or return, as the very movement of the dao, does not seek to replace yang by yin. While one of the most striking features in the Laozi is the constant reversing of pairs, Graham points out that these reversals are “merely of relative superiority, they are not experiments in abolishing A in revenge against the traditional effort to abolish B.”

The ideal expressed in this concept does not imply that one holds ground over the other, but that the two energies actively move to harmonize with one another. As Hall and Ames observe, “[T]he Daodejing is not advocating the substitution of yin values for the prevailing yang ones... Rather the text pursues both the personal and the political ideal that reconciles the tension of opposites in sustained equilibrium and harmony.”

The yin/yang distinction deserves closer scrutiny, however. Hall and Ames note that several passages in classical Daoist literature indicate that while “the preferred posture is certainly androgynous, ... the yin character [is] on balance superior to those associated with the yang.” Daoism explicitly pushes yin forward, not to place the feminine in a supporting role, nor to complement the

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19 Ibid., p. 31.
21 Graham, Disputers, p. 227.
22 Hall and Ames, Thinking, p. 93 (emphasis added).
23 Ibid., p. 95.
insufficiency of the masculine mode, but because a yin mode is the preferable mode of being. How are we to understand this preference? The dao itself is an open-ended, organismic process, characterized by yielding, deference, and nonconstraint. These are yin qualities, but there is never a thought that yin, by itself, in place of yang, presents a preferable mode of being. For Daoists, yin without yang is neither sensible nor sustainable. From this premise, Daoism functions as a critical philosophy analogous to feminism. Daoists do not prefer yin to yang in any absolutist or essentialist sense. The preference of yin derives from a critical and normative perspective that values harmony. Given imbalance, compensatory movement is necessary and natural, and given a world imbalanced in favor of yang, a yin space provides the only ground available from which to take a critical stand.

Harmonization has implications both for personal and for social and political transformation. Since individuals are defined relationally, by and within a dynamic context of myriad interacting particulars, individual change inevitably has a potential to initiate larger transformations. Similarly, an individual cannot but be affected by the constant flux of a larger context. In Daoist philosophy, balancing yin and yang does not dissolve hierarchy, which is intrinsic to the dao. Yet, hierarchy does not confer privilege since, as Hall and Ames point out, all things ultimately defer to all other things.24 It is within a particular context of particular relationships that one thing takes precedence or has authority over another, not by virtue of its classification. In this sense, hierarchy does not draw in its wake the inevitability of oppression with which it is often associated by feminists, since authority shifts its locus within the constant flux that is the dao. Although the very thought of hierarchy raises flags for feminists, Warren has observed, “Ecology and ecological principles recognize hierarchies in nature. What is problematic is a normative dualism or a value hierarchy that grants higher prestige, status, or value on one pair of the dualism than the other, . . . ”25 Within the Daoist philosophy prestige and privilege are clearly not the aim. Hierarchy reflects natural patterns of deference apparent in and through our being-in-relation to others, as when children naturally defer to their parents or when a field of wheat naturally defers to the wind. Such deference is temporal and situational, not categorical. Diversity and change are the two most salient features of the dao and yielding the means by which balance is achieved at every turn. In focusing on the practical effectiveness of yin-feminine attitudes and modes of being, Daoism does not advocate a theoretical construction grounded in a transcendent metaphysics. It presents a sound, practical philosophy geared toward the pragmatics of achieving a fulfilled human life situated amid myriad and diverse others. The yin/ yang cosmology found in Daoism presents a highly gendered world on the one hand, with a moral ideal that advocates a harmonization and balance of genderized

24 Ibid., p. 71.
qualities. Harmony is achieved through the constant interplay of ever-changing, interlinked, and interdependent processes, the totality of which constitutes the dao.

The ideal of harmony is an obvious point of convergence for Daoists and ecofeminists. Whether posited as utopian ideal or achievable reality, harmony between human and nonhuman others, and within human communities is an ecofeminist goal. In the classical texts, the Laozi and the Zhuangzi, the idea of transformation brings the transformative processes inherent in the natural environment and the self-transformative experiences of individuals into focus. An overarching concern of the texts is the harmonization of human beings within a larger, nonhuman world. This speaks to a critical philosophy that offers the observation that human behavior and attitudes create and sustain discontinuity within a wider world. It encourages us to rethink what it means to be human, situated in a context that must balance diverse needs within a context of constant change. The role played by gender distinctions is made clear from a parable in the Zhuangzi concerning the heroic sage, Liezi. The story tells of Leizi’s days as a student of Master Huizi when his attention is caught by the feats of a shaman. After telling his master of the shaman’s impressive abilities, Huizi invites Liezi to bring the shaman to him and over several days a series of encounters ensues between the two. Huizi reveals himself in a different aspect at each meeting until the exasperated shaman flees. In a Socratic moment of humility, Liezi realizes that “he has not yet begun to learn anything,” and he returns home where

he replaced his wife at the stove, fed the pigs as though he were feeding people, and showed no preferences in the things he did. He got rid of the carving and polishing and returned to simplicity. He let his body stand alone like a clod. In the midst of entanglement he remained sealed, and in this oneness ended his life.26

Liezi’s return home is emblematic of a transformation from a life guided by ambitions to achieve socially prescribed goals. He returns to a life intimately connected to those around him, finding spontaneous expression in cultivating personal relationships and tending to the most immediate needs of others. Liezi’s return is a retreat from the public arena where males show their strength and the prowess of their skills, to the domestic world where one responds. Sandra Wawryko has pointed out that the distinction between “outer” (wai) and “within” (nei) parallels the public/private distinction given prominent attention in feminist discourse and carries similar implications for the division of labor.27 Thus, Liezi’s return involves a reversal of roles (illustrated by taking

his wife's place by the stove). More importantly, it reflects a preference for a feminine and yin mode of existing over an aggressive yang mode that has driven Liezi's life to this point. In The Taoist Body, Kristofer Schipper casts the point specifically in gender terms remarking that Liezi "goes to live the life of a woman. He cooks, feeds his small world, and looks after daily life."[28]

Modern readers may picture Liezi as a high-powered professional who decides to become a househusband. His return illustrates a conscious revaluing of a feminine space and the modes of existence and knowing that correspond with the home. Coming from a competitive world that values ambition and achievement, being at ease in the home requires letting go of desires for acquisition and social recognition. To accept the home as one's own requires one reclaim an internal awareness and a willingness to yield, not in a way that effaces one's value, but in a way that enhances one's existence by harmonizing with the context in which one is embedded. Graham notes, "For Taoists it is by unlearning the conventions and ambitions which society tries to convince you that you share that you discover your true spontaneous tendency."[29] These conventions are associated with success in a public world where women rarely tread. The image of returning home suggests a revaluation of what is required to sustain the "inner" world. It exemplifies a return to a human root, to a "place" that allows us to be most in accord with who and what we are. The home represents not only a feminine space, but the ideal of natural spontaneity and a mode of acting in an easy, responsive and accommodating manner.

The image of Liezi as a cook turns our attention to a common epistemological posture shared by Daoism and many feminists,[30] for the cook's effort to balance a range of diverse and even contradictory elements requires a kind of knowing valued by Daoist philosophy. Daoist epistemology is illustrated by the figure of Cook Ding who demonstrates a kinesthetic knowledge that proceeds from embodiment. His knowing is intuitive and responsive, evidenced by displays of skillful actions that lack effort and strain. His frictionless motions accomplish their tasks with a relaxed confidence that exhibits freedom and spontaneity. The truth of his knowing "how to" is evidenced by his graceful execution and quality results. His knowledge is developed over time and honed by the practice of concrete skills. Cook Ding becomes a Daoist argument for the significance of embodied knowledge over rigorous intellectual knowledge by which one masters theoretical understanding without expressing its practical implications in action. Daoism recognizes the importance of knowledge that is

demonstrated through a precise and consistent doing, even if it is never articulated and defended in theory. In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva addresses a similar point with respect to rural Indian women whose “knowing hands” risk being marginalized by “talking heads.” 31 The experiential knowledge of women reflects knowing the phenomena of nature, not from a generalized theoretical perspective articulated in text, but in a kinesthetic embodiment of nature’s basic principles. The rural women, like Cook Ding, know truth in practice. They know the materials with which they work, the “way” of the tools they utilize, and the simple ends their work accomplishes. They have acquired knowledge through observation and daily practice and pass it on spontaneously from one generation to another without effort or ambition. These values are inherent in Daoist concepts of knowing and existence. They reflect the spontaneity of *ziran* (literally, being-so-of-oneself) and the core of *wuwei* (acting without acting purposively), values apparent in knowing how to live as aware and responsive companions among myriad others. This preference for nonexplicit presentations of truth and knowledge communicated by means of narrative, poetry, even joke and innuendo, points to a substantive epistemological viewpoint in Daoism, to a dynamic theory in process or a meta-theory that links knowing with acting.

Pragmatic aspects resonate through the metaphor of cooking. The process of producing a meal is a concrete act of creation, particular and repeatable. It is simple, necessary and naturally productive. One gathers the food, prepares it, serves it, cleans up and repeats this process continually as one’s daily, human work. The ingredients are diverse. While each has its own defining characteristics, any particular instance will fall within a range. Cabbage has a certain flavor and texture but this particular cabbage may be more bitter or more sweet. Salts and spices have certain flavor values, but this salt may be stronger; this spice more biting. Attention to context and the possibility that individuals may vary means that one’s knowledge must be appropriate and responsive to this situation. A cook must be attentive and willing to work with whatever is at hand as an engaged knower, using all her senses to balance a diversity of flavors, textures and energies. Her knowing reflects a contextualized art in which she must stay attentive, alert, aware and agile, relying on a naturally cultivated spontaneity that proceeds without conscious effort to achieve a set result distinct from one’s self. Thus, the image of cooking represents not only the value of harmony but also a way of knowing and understanding that is flexible, provisional and sensitive to contextual detail.

The presumption that knowledge is “always proximate, situational, parzzticipatory, and interpretive” 32 presents a strong parallel between Daoist

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and feminist thinking. For the Daoist, that all knowledge is "irreducibly social" derives from the fact that one-who-knows is always "radically situated,"³³ the center of a nexus of interconnected relationships. All subjects continually influence and are influenced by diverse others, mutually establishing one another in an interrelational dynamic through which one’s epistemic commitments serve not to provide knowledge about an objective and separate world, but to sustain the community that is the dao. As a single community, humans and nonhumans form a moral environment. The image of the home highlights the knowledge one acquires and uses spontaneously, for the purpose of sustaining one’s own life and the lives of others. Liezi sustains his wife and the pigs, two others against whom he would stand in marked and superior contrast as a male and a human from the perspective of social convention. Yet, within the home they constitute a dynamic community and the simple action of cooking and feeding epitomizes the caring relationship that binds them.

The epistemic stance found in the Zhuangzi begins and ends with a situated knower. Knowledge is not, and cannot be, a priori or certain. It is always provisional and flexible and thus demands the knower adapt to circumstances. Daoism makes no effort to seek definitive answers, to assert a single truth, or to use knowledge to dominate or gain control. Rather the emphasis is on maintaining an equilibrium within the diversity that surrounds one, thus making personal action more immediate and impacting. Daoism arrives at its epistemological stance in a way that does not exclude women as knowers, thus it avoids the kinds of criticisms lodged by feminists against traditional, Western epistemological approaches. Schipper raises the more pertinent question, however, when he asks, "And what about women themselves?" His answer tells us of the inclusion of women and their parity within Daoist organizations,³⁴ providing evidence that the philosophy neither devalues women’s cognitive styles as inherently inferior nor identifies devalued modes with women. Zhuangzi relishes "alternative" ways of knowing and gives short shrift to modes of knowledge the West considers definitive, favoring instead what is non-discursive but made apparent in humor, metaphor, paradox and even silence. He affirms our inability to know anything objective about the world, if by objective we mean what can be understood independently from a particular point of view. As Ames informs us, for a Daoist "[k]nowing can only be ‘here’ and thus can only be ‘from this,’ which is inclusive of one’s perspective as opposed to ‘from that,’ which would exclude it. The focus, then, is not upon the external environs as an object of knowledge, but upon the perspective where the action of knowing takes place."³⁵

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³³ Ibid., p. 219.

³⁴ Schipper, Taoist Body, pp. 128–29. Schipper claims that women were among Daoist initiates and that the inclusion of women was based on "absolute equality." Jiayin presents a more controversial view, arguing for the matriarchal roots of Daoism in ancient China. See Min Jiayin, The Chalice and the Blade, pp. 590–94.

Daoism seeks useful knowledge that supports the need to live in concert and dynamic interaction with myriad other beings. It challenges assumptions that knowledge is objective, that a knower is a detached, impartial, independent, or rational observer of a passive object called “nature” that can be definitively known. Its acceptance of knowledge as contextual, situated, and provisional coincides with arguments that have been developed over the past few decades by feminist and ecofeminist philosophers. But apart from this common epistemological ground, Daoism stands beside ecofeminism as a critical philosophy in two senses. First, Daoism identifies human values, ends, and practices as the source of our human discord with the world we dwell in and turns a critical eye to the tension between humans and the wider world. It further locates its critical stance within a feminine space, focusing on the need to change our thinking and our way of behaving in the world. As the Liezi narrative illustrates, Daoism values the “feminine” as a preferable mode of being in a way that instructs us to consider our current choices and encourages us to transform our priorities and reconnect with the things that matter. In reconnecting, we not only balance yin and yang forces as gendered beings, we find balance between our human selves and nonhuman others.

II. TRANSFORMATION

In the Zhuangzi, existence is understood as wuhua, or the “transformation of things.” “The 10,000 things change and grow, . . . each with its distinctive form, flourishing and decaying by degree, a constant flow of change and transformation.” In the Laozi transformation is depicted using both metaphor and abstract concepts to describe “feminine” modes of being as models for the way of transformation, observing that the forces of the natural world, (especially water, the paradigm of yin energy) operate in a soft, flexible and frictionless manner. Yin, valued as a source of the 10,000 things, is promoted as a critical attitude and behavioral model for all humans to cultivate. From the argument that the feminine presents an equal complement to the masculine, Daoism concludes that the feminine must be circulated, encouraging humans to adopt yin-feminine attitudes and behaviors and shed yang-masculine ones. For Daoists, nature is not an abstraction, but tiandi, the concrete realm of sky and earth. It provides the model for transformation of all kinds. Among the cluster of concepts that illuminate the process of transformation, return (jiu) or reversal (fan), are central. They refer to the spontaneous propensity in things to self-correct and find their natural place of balance. The multiple resonances of the idea are expressed in the Laozi:

36 Chuang Tzu, p. 146.
Attain to utmost vacuity,
Hold fast to being still
The ten thousand things are creating together
I watch them returning
Things grow and grow
Each returns, going back to its root
Going back to the root means being still.
This is the meaning of returning to natural-conditions.
Returning to natural conditions is called regularity.
Knowing regularity is called being illumined... 37

This poem tells us that returning is a manner of yielding and the very movement of the dao. It is a kind of deference to what a thing is in any given situation. Mountain and river defer one to the other in a mutually defining relationship. It is not a matter of dominance or will, but a simple reality observable in patterns that appear in the diverse phenomena that surround us. Reversal is the natural spontaneity by which each particular in nature is "so of itself," or ziran. Tiandi is a model of ziran, which refers to the responsive way things move and change in accord with their own nature. It is a self-coincidence by which action and behavior proceed from what one is, not from an end one has projected beyond oneself. As Hall and Ames characterize it, ziran is a "mirroring response."

As such, it is action that accommodates the other to whom one is responding. It takes the other on its own terms. Such spontaneity involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other, and responding in such a way that one's own actions promote the well-being both of oneself [and] the other. 38

Ziran does not efface individuality. The concept simply suggests that our actions be self-coincident, in contrast to ordinary human actions calculated to achieve particular human ends. This calculative tendency in our penchant to achieve goals outside ourselves contributes to our disconnection from the dao. Complementing ziran is wuwei, nonpurposive action. Being ziran, one is able to act without acting for this or that purpose because one is responding to and accommodating the actions of others. According to Ames, wuwei contrasts with "that kind of 'making' or 'doing' that requires that a particular sacrifice its own integrity in acting on behalf of something 'other,'... that kind of engagement that makes something false to itself." 39 Wuwei does not imply apathy, lack of mindfulness, or a detached existence apart from society. In wuwei one preserves one's integrity by reflecting continuity with others.

37 Laozi, poem 16.
38 Hall and Ames, Thinking, p. 53.
Together this pair of concepts reflects Daoism's awareness of context and relationality, and the value of engaged responsiveness to the totality of one's environment.

Moving without resistance and yielding are implicit in two other concepts, jie (cutting loose) and jue (to awaken). These ideas allow us to explicate further the kind of self-cultivation capable of affecting self-transformation and eliciting social and environmental changes. Jie is illuminated in the story of Master Yü, who experiences the twisting deformation of his body with apparent delight as he faces illness and death. Asked if he likes this transformation, he says, "Be content with this time and dwell in this order. Then neither sorrow nor joy can enter you. In times of old this was called jie."\(^{40}\) Asked if he is resentful, he replies, "What would I resent? If the creative process continues, perhaps in time it will transform my left arm into a rooster... my right arm into a crossbow pellet... my buttocks into cart wheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I'll climb up and go for a ride."\(^{41}\) Far from sitting back and allowing transformations to take over, Master Yü relishes the prospect of taking action within transformation. But, perhaps more importantly for a feminist critique, this passage illustrates the collapsing of categories by which human beings bind their identity and thus their expectations for action. How much more intimately could Master Yü have experienced the reality of transformation? How much more completely might he have "cut loose" of conventional values and expectations? Like Donna Haraway's cyborg,\(^ {42}\) Zhuangzi forces us to think beyond the distinctions that separate and define us as human, unmasking the fallacy of seeing substantial distinctions between humans and animals, and nature and artifact. Both thinkers play with a similar insight, recognizing the need to break conceptually from the stale constructions that bind us to limited identities. Daoism exposes the fact that rigid, categorical distinctions fail in the final analysis. It views "nature" or "the natural" as a process in which complementary aspects continually co-define and co-determine one another in a process of dynamic change. For the Daoist, all things can and will become the other, and any distinction is, if not entirely arbitrary, certainly temporary.

Jie and jue are critical for accepting the transformative processes of change and acquiring the consciousness that allows one to activate one's own self-transformation. Jie advocates living this moment in a manner that affirms the inevitable changes that are part of the creative process that itself is existence. In jue we awaken to a different understanding of our personal and human existence. This awakening is critical for the liberation that results from personal transformation, particularly for those who would assume political leadership. One

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\(^{40}\) Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 84.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

awakens in order to forget the anthropocentric preferences that separate and privilege. The implication is that one awakens to a new understanding of self and reality. Jue brings us to accept our interrelatedness to all things and to acknowledge that death, too, is but a part of nature. It engenders humility and sensitivity, manifesting itself in transformed attitudes and behaviors. Again, distinctions collapse as life/death, spiritual/material, human/nature give way to one another within the process of flux that is the dao itself. Some might characterize this attitude of acceptance as spiritual but it stems from accepting the very materiality (and vulnerability) of our existence. It is precisely these qualities that we share with all other particulars within the dao.

The conceptual cluster of fan and fu, jie, and jue, and ziran and wuwei might seem to offer too little for ecofeminism, which seeks the common liberation of women and nature from oppressive social structures and ideologies that see the primary value of both to be instrumental. A Daoist view would perceive the need not so much as a liberation to be purposefully pursued, but as a restoration of the balance and continuity that link humans to one another and to the larger context of living creatures. This shift in perspective may seem insignificant but it makes all the difference when one considers the call to action. For how can we transform others before we are ourselves transformed? The Daoist position does not imply privileging self-transformation over political transformation, nor does it necessarily demand withdrawal from political life into personal, spiritual life. It argues that these conceptual poles of transformation are interdependent, mutually entailing phenomena. Julia Schofield Russell grasps this characteristic of the transformative relationship between self and context in Daoist thinking and she sees also the positive implications of simplicity as a core value when she says, “As we transform ourselves, we transform our world... How do you initiate this process in your life?... What seems easiest, ... Start there.”43

Observing that the diversity of individuals can present models for transformation, Daoism encourages cultivation of flexible and tranquil qualities that promote responsive self-development. It depicts the consummate political model in terms of patterns exhibited in the changing courses of all living objects. A political leader cannot be effective imitating conventional political protocols because these are often overly aggressive patterns reflecting individual ambitions and lust for power. Rather than harmonize, they tend to divide. One must jie from prevailing paradigms of thought, transforming one’s self-understanding in relation to the dao in order to begin effective political

43 Julia Russell Schofield, “The Evolution of an Eco-feminist” in Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990). Although a Zen Buddhist, Russell acknowledges the Key theme that we are developing when she claims, “As we transform ourselves, we transform our world... We move into the Tao” (p. 229).
work. Zhuangzi makes this point through the figure of Confucius, whose own transformative experience elicits the announcement, "For a long time now I have not been taking my place as a man along with the process of change. And if I do not . . . how can I hope to change other men?"  

As a contemporary instance, Julia Butterfly Hill illustrates the model of Daoist political action. Her experience living in companionship with a tree, Luna, testifies to her profound acceptance of its parity with human life and to the totality of self-transformation advocated by Daoism. Hill recognizes the depth of this transformation when she explains, "Your mind, the way you think changes. The way you feel changes. Just everything changes."  

As political actions her actions were wuwei. She did not plan them or strive to change others. She responded in a way that was coincident with who she was and reacted spontaneously to the context in which she found herself. By allowing herself to be changed, she affected larger transformations, impacting the perceptions and actions of others. The Daoist quality in Hill's political model is further illustrated by the fact that she allowed the tree to teach her how to respond. Listening to the tree "speak," she "heard" it tell her, "In a storm trees allow themselves to be blown with the wind, Julia. And those trees and those branches that try to be to strong and stand up straight, they break. . . . You allow yourself to be blown with the wind. Let it flow, let it go."  

From a paradigm that sees trees as mute instruments that serve human need, this kind of tree-talking is ridiculous, but it would not be so for a Daoist who sees parity among all of the 10,000 things and acknowledges that other living forms provide models for our living. Daoism neither values political ends above others, nor neglects them. They are simply accomplished in a yin manner and do not necessarily register when our expectations gear us to see only what is direct or aggressive. Indirection and responsiveness may align Daoism with spiritual or cultural feminists, but just as there is no thought of yin without yang, there is no thought of the spirit acting apart from the intellect, the mind apart from the body, or an individual apart from a larger social context. The paradox, again, lies in the understanding that a fundamental interconnectedness with others implies that change in our own behavior will effect change on a larger scale. As James Sellmann has argued, Daoist self-transformation involves a deep alteration of "one's embodied consciousness," and results ultimately in "a complete metamorphosis, a holo-metabolism, in which the mind and body form an integrated whole wherein being, thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting are not separable in reality or in thought."  

This is wuwei. One need not act beyond the demands

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44 Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 166.
46 Ibid.
of one’s own course. If one’s course has harmonized with those of others, then indeed one appears to be not acting at all. Given the interrelatedness of all the 10,000 things, the effects of individual (non)action inevitably bring about change in a larger context.

Recognizing that all creatures undergo the great transformations of life and death need not lead in the direction of an expansion of a self-identity (as one might find in deep ecology), or a cynical nihilism. It can support a simple acceptance of our own human life as a transforming process within transforming processes. Daoism thus addresses the worry expressed by Gaard that personal transformation may privilege itself over larger social/political transformations. Personal self-transformation, significant enough to effect greater changes, is the Daoist goal. Daoists propose that self-transformation be patterned on what we observe in the 10,000 things, which are themselves transformational processes. Reflection upon one’s most basic nature as a being among myriad others, differentiated but necessarily interconnected, self-disclosing yet mutually entailing, brings one to a starting point in humility. From humility we can accept ourselves as equally placed alongside a multitude of diverse beings, as no more than one alongside all others, limited in our capacity to know and do. This understanding becomes the first step toward assuming an ethical way of relating to all others. Its effectiveness begins, however, by abandoning rational egoism, the view that depicts the world as merely instrumental, and all concepts that present self as inherently superior to and rightfully capable of dominating others.

This lesson is beautifully told, again in a narrative. As Zhuangzi roams the Tiao-ling forest, a magpie of mythic proportions almost collides with him. Arrogantly he pursues it as prey and is about to shoot when he notices nearby a cicada who is prey to a mantis who is prey to the magpie that is now in his sites. This fractal image prompts Zhuangzi to jue to the reality of his place within the interconnected network of life. He drops his crossbow and turns to leave the forest only to be admonished for trespassing.48 This cryptic story offers multiple interpretations, but Graham suggests the incident transformed Zhuangzi and gained him the central insight that “[i]t is inherent in things that they are ties to each other, that one kind calls up another.”49 Its resonances develop into a nature-based philosophy that derives from the humility of realizing one’s place in relation to and one’s commonality with other beings. Whether historic or heuristic, the account illustrates what Plumwood has called, the “discontinuity problem,” namely, the problem of viewing humans as completely different from and thus outside the sphere of nature.50 It shows how abandoning conventions that have led to our hyperseparation from the natural world, can yield a consciousness that results in a more balanced view

48 Watson, Chuang Tzu, pp. 218–19.
49 Graham, Disputers, p. 176.
50 For a discussion of this “discontinuity problem” see Plumwood, Feminism, pp. 70–71.
of human and nonhuman needs. That balance derives from humility and the respect that results from knowing one’s place within a larger context, as one alongside others. For Zhuangzi, this newly acquired awareness affords him a certain sensitivity toward other creatures. He knows they, too, have a place worth considering. In a similar manner, Liezi has come to know the value of his wife and the pigs and acknowledges them in relationships of deference and reciprocity. These stories not only provide models of personal transformation, they illustrate the way in which an epistemic crisis affects behavior and changes values. If, like Zhuangzi, we can come to know our place as one within a complex of equal yet different others, if we can appreciate and defer to those others, acknowledging their value, then we, too, have a chance to begin the process of becoming “companions of nature.”

Marti Kheel characterizes ecofeminism as a deep philosophy which calls “for an inward transformation in order to attain an outward change.” In this sense, Daoism can also be characterized as a “deep philosophy.” From the Daoist perspective, if inward transformation accords with the dao, resulting actions will appear as spontaneous events, blending seamlessly into a broader context of transformation. Daoism argues for fundamental change, for change in one’s internal perspective and relationship to the world; for change in human social relationships, goals and values; for change that allows us to live more in accord with the patterns that are observable in the things of the sky and the earth. It is not a matter of personal transformation or social transformation, but of mutually entailing, interdependent processes. As a critical philosophy, taking its stand within a yin/feminine space and trumping a dualist framework that dichotomizes the very forces that enact creative change, Daoism promotes a responsive ethic grounded in respect. Acceptance of our place within a transformation mitigates the egoism that privileges human existence over other existences and advocates using “others” as instruments for human ends. By abiding in the movement of return, one lives and acts in a self-consistent fashion, relying on the yin modes of being, which allow for transformation and yield balance. Symbolized by clusters of images (water, mother, women, valley, stillness and yielding) the yin modes reflect the values of transformation. If, as Wing-tsit Chan suggests, these symbols are essentially ethical, not metaphysical, in meaning, then the way is made more clear for an alliance between these two diverse philosophical perspectives. For both are less compelled by a desire to merely rethink ecology on a deeper level or expand

51 Watson, Chuang Tzu, pp. 56, 57.
horizons of self identity, than by actual activation of personal, social, political, and environmental transformations.

Converging on key points, cofeminism and Daoism hold the promise of contributing to a global environmental ethic. The project begins with a profound sense of humility that acknowledges the limits of human worth within a wider scheme of all things, and the limited potential of human knowledge and action. The Daoist stories of individual self-transformations speak to the depth of humility that results when one takes one’s place in the kitchen and the forest, among pigs and birds and insects. Implicit in these images is a rejection of any ideological construction that would define humans over and against others, be it man over woman, or human over animal. Liezi’s story expresses a particular recognition of parity, showing his involvement in concrete actions that respond to the day-to-day needs of others. Through this one short narrative we become aware of how conventional categories of male and female, human and animal, culture and nature begin to collapse and we can see the possibilities for radical reconceptualization of the kind ecofeminists advocate. These categories are further crushed in Master Yu’s story as human boundaries merge with animal and even machine. As pictures of self-transformation, these tales tell us how profound the change in thought and behavior must be in order for one to undertake the project of “being a companion with nature.”

Given our human tendency to divide, categorize and conquer, Daoism’s complementary pairs have equal potential to be distorted and used in support of oppressive strategies, as evidenced by the use of the yin/yang distinction to sustain patriarchal structures and male privilege in China. Ecofeminism seeks to be an activator of the type of transformations that would make humans “companions of nature.” Its clarity regarding the historical realities of oppression and the ways in which oppressive strategies can proceed from core ideologies and disrupt nature’s patterns, provide a necessary supplement to Daoism’s inclusiveness and appreciation for diversity. The success of any ecofeminism depends, however, upon widespread transformation across the community of human beings. It will not do that some think the Earth is a suitable dumping ground, while others tend to it with spiritual love and care. Humans must, in general, agree that the 10,000 things matter, not simply as instruments to satisfy human ends, but in themselves. As a philosophy that intends to be globally relevant, ecofeminism must seek alliance with the globe. This will not likely be accomplished by taking ecofeminism to the globe, for as some critics have observed, ecofeminism appears to many to be a product of the same white and privileged West that has imposed its “progressive” solutions without duly respecting the customs and knowledge of others. Thus, ecofeminism begins its project hampered in such a way that the value of its core ideas risks being effaced by the shadow of those who are the very focus of its critique.
It is not necessary to produce a more perfect ecofeminism. We agree with Noël Sturgeon that it is important to develop "the dance of critique and consolidation that is part of theorizing and political action; new alliances, complex analyses, and creative oppositional strategies."\(^{54}\) Charlene Spretnak encourages ecofeminism to make broader connections as well. "The ecofeminist critique of dualism needs to be joined... with an appreciation of pluralism... An ontology based on dynamic and admittedly partial knowledge as well as awe toward the complexity of embodied and embedded existence would contribute substantially to the profound social transformation that is needed."\(^{55}\) Daoism's process-oriented, aesthetic cosmology presents such an ontology. It illustrates the kind of choices needed to live an environmental ethic and it implies that these choices can only be made from a radically transformed consciousness. As a critical philosophy, it joins ecofeminism in rejecting opposing dualisms in favor of complementary nondualities, valuing the full spectrum of being and knowing in this world, and seeking, through transformation, a way of living that unites thought and action. The inseparability of self and environment entails the actions (or nonactions) of anything condition the actions of others. Self-transformation is social transformation and part and parcel of an environment of interconnection and change. Yet, transformation of the type that will affect human behavior on a scale meaningful enough to impact the environment means abandoning the terms and assumptions that have defined the hyperindividuated, modern human self. Daoism and ecofeminism have the potential to amplify the voice of the other as complementary partners in ways that extend the reach and relevance of both, not merely as correctives of the biases that contribute to environmental degradation, but as positive perspectives capable of guiding choice. Daoism tells us that an ecological philosophy cannot be a salvation philosophy. We, as humble participants in a much grander process cannot decide the fate of the planet. We can, at our best, gain limited insights and make limited contributions within specific contexts. As transforming particulars in this world, we can move toward a clearer understanding of ourselves as beings-in-relation. We can generate greater harmonization and live well, in concert with others of all kinds, but only when what we do proceeds from a fundamentally transformed way of thinking about ourselves and others.
