

Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fictional Feminist Daoism

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Abstract

It is hardly a novel claim that the work of Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018) contains influences from philosophical Daoism, but I argue that this influence has yet to be fully understood. Several scholars criticize Le Guin for misrepresenting Daoist ideas as they appear in ancient Chinese philosophical texts, particularly the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. While I have sympathy for this charge, especially as it relates to Le Guin's translation of the *Dao De Jing*, I argue that it fails to understand the extent to which her fiction contains her own philosophical development of Daoist ideas. Looking at some of her most influential works (e.g., *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, etc.), I suggest that Le Guin's fiction is better seen as a refocusing of Daoist concepts such as complementary contrasts and non-action (*wu wei*) in the contexts of modern feminism, modern anarchism, science fiction, and fantasy. Le Guin was not trying to *represent* ancient Daoism as a scholar. Rather, she was trying to *reimagine* Daoism as a creative artist and philosopher in her own right. This way of viewing Le Guin's work does not fully exorcise the specter of the possibility of Orientalist cultural appropriation, but it does make the issue more complex in a way that can deepen further conversations. To what extent can an artist be guilty of misrepresentation if representation was not, strictly speaking, her goal? I end with a brief reflection on what is perhaps the deepest philosophical lesson of Le Guin's work: everything is more complicated than it first appears. On that note, the present article is an attempt not just to do philosophy *about* Le Guin, but to do philosophy *in a Le Guinian fashion*, which requires rethinking the metaphor of combat that guides much academic philosophy today.

In January 2018 the world of science fiction and fantasy lost one of its greatest authors. Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018) was a major voice in the field for over 50 years, extending from the publication of her first novels in the 1960s to her famous speech upon winning the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2014.¹ Le Guin's work combines literary quality, daring science fictional and fantastic ideas, and deep interrogations of topics including gender, economics, class, race, value, cultural difference, violence, ecology, physics, and more. Few writers of any genre have blurred the lines between philosophy and literature as much as Le Guin. While scholars of literature have seriously studied Le Guin's work since the 1970s, there has been comparatively little attention from philosophers. I think this is a shame, because the philosophical aspects of her work, especially the place of philosophical Daoism, have yet to be fully understood. I suspect we have much to learn.²

While Le Guin is widely respected among science fiction fans, she has been criticized for misrepresenting Daoist ideas as they appear in ancient Chinese philosophical texts. I have some sympathy for this charge, yet I argue that it fails to understand the extent to which her fiction contains her own philosophical development of Daoist ideas. Looking at some of her most influential works (e.g., *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, etc.), I suggest that Le Guin's fiction is better seen as a refocusing of Daoist concepts such as complementary contrasts and non-action (*wu wei*) in the contexts of modern feminism, modern anarchism, science fiction, and fantasy. Le Guin was not trying to *represent* ancient Daoism as a scholar. Rather, she was trying to *reimagine* Daoism as a creative artist and philosopher in her own right. This way of viewing Le Guin's work does not fully exorcise the specter of the possibility of Orientalist cultural appropriation, but it does make the issue more complex. To what extent can an artist be guilty of misrepresentation if representation was not, strictly speaking, her goal? I end with a brief reflection on what is perhaps the deepest philosophical lesson of Le Guin's work: everything is more complicated than it first appears.

Methodological Prelude

Before I dive into the substance of this paper, it will help to explain one aspect of it that may strike some readers as strange. I am not merely attempting to give a typical philosophical argument *about* Le Guin. Rather, the present paper is an attempt to *do* philosophy in a Le Guinian mode.

Most contemporary academic philosophy proceeds according to the guiding metaphor of combat, which according to Sarah Mattice has three main characteristics.

1. Philosophers become adversaries or combatants.
2. The structure of the philosophical activity becomes one of strategic maneuvering, where the movement is conceived in terms of attack, defense, retreat, counterattack, stalemate, surrender, and victory.
3. The purpose of the dialogue becomes victory—to win and defeat the opponent. (Mattice 2014, 30)

I do not have space in this paper to fully explain or defend the notion that philosophers are guided by underlying metaphors (see Mattice 2014, Ch. 1 for one such attempt), nor will I explain other possible metaphors such as play or aesthetic experience (see Mattice 2014, Ch. 3 and Ch. 4). I merely ask readers, as they read this paper, to keep an open mind to the idea that some of what look like faults from one perspective may be strengths from another.

I will leave the details of Le Guinian philosophy deliberately open in the present context. But I will suggest that rather than viewing philosophy as combat, Le Guinian philosophy could see philosophy as a continuing conversation—sometimes playful, sometimes serious, often ambiguous, often open-ended, always nuanced, and always deeply influenced by the Daoist elements I describe in the next section.

Daoist Ideas in Le Guin's Fiction

Daoism was not a faddish or casual interest of Le Guin's. She reports that her father always had a copy of the *Dao De Jing* on hand during her childhood, a book that greatly influenced her throughout her life (Le Guin 1998, ix; Li 2016, 166–167). She even published her own translation of the text in the 1990's (Laozi 1998). She admitted her Daoist influences in numerous interviews and essays.³ Scholars have documented the influence of Daoism in Le Guin's fiction since the 1970's.⁴ Here I would like to focus on a few illustrative examples from Le Guin's fiction that take up Daoist concepts of complementary contrasts and non-action (*wu wei*).

The core of classical Chinese Daoist philosophy is often considered to consist of two texts: *Dao De Jing* (or *Laozi*) and *Zhuangzi*. The possibly legendary author Laozi is said to have lived in the 5th century BCE, but the text traditionally attributed to this author reached a stable form in the 3rd century BCE. *Zhuangzi* was most likely a real person who lived in China in the 4th century BCE, while the text associated with his name reached its present form in the 3rd or 4th century CE. I will not delve further into questions of authorship or textual history, interesting as they are. Nor do I mean to deny the existence of later developments in Daoist philosophy or religious practice throughout history in China and elsewhere.⁵ It is an understatement to say that the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are themselves incredibly rich and complex texts subject to multiple, sometimes competing, interpretations. Much like Le Guin's work, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* may even be specifically designed to resist easy encapsulation, swift digestion, or quick summary. My summaries below should not be thought of as exhaustive or authoritative, but rather as sketches of basic themes that arise in the texts.

Complementary Contrasts

The phrase “complementary contrasts” is used by scholar of Daoist philosophy Steve Coutinho (2014, 40–43) to pick out what is perhaps most famously represented in the *taiji* symbol, sometimes known as the *yin-yang*. Coutinho notes that *yin* and *yang* originally referred to the shady and sunny sides of a mountain (Coutinho 2014, 40–41).

The Daoist view . . . is that contrasts do not conflict but rather mutually complement each other . . . [E]ach is incomplete without the other, and the momentum of transformation between *yin* and *yang* phases is kept going by mutual yielding, not mutual aggression. Lastly, between *yin* and *yang* lies not a sharp and precisely defined boundary, but an extended phase of *yin*-becoming-*yang* and between *yang* and *yin* is a phase of *yang*-becoming-*yin*. There is no single precise point at which one can be said to begin and the other end; each blends smoothly into the other across a penumbra of vagueness. (Coutinho 2014, 42)

While *yin* and *yang* are explicitly mentioned only once in the *Laozi* in chapter 42 and a few times in the *Zhuangzi*, the general idea of complementary contrasts is pervasive. Here are a few representative examples from the *Dao De Jing*.

The heavy is the root of the light.

The still rules over the agitated.

(Chapter 26, trans. Ivanhoe in Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001, 175)

Turning back is how the Way moves.

Weakness is how the Way operates.

The world and all its creatures arise from what is there;

What is there arises from what is not there.

(Chapter 40, trans. Ivanhoe in Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001, 182)

Le Guin once chided critics for misunderstanding this aspect of Daoism in her work as a sort of antagonism of opposites to which she offered a safe middle way. In pointing out this mistake, Le Guin shows that she had a nuanced understanding of this concept (Le Guin 1976, 45). Le Guin's fiction contains numerous examples of complementary contrasts. *Yin* and *yang* are explicitly mentioned in chapter 19 of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin 2010, 287). Consider also the poem that gives *The Left Hand of Darkness* its name, which appears in chapter 16.

Light is the left hand of darkness

And darkness the right hand of light.

Two are one, life and death, lying

Together like lovers in kemmer,

Like hands joined together,

Like the end and the way.

(Le Guin 2010, 252)

Another clear example of complementary contrasts is the "Creation of Ēa" from *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Only in silence the word,

Only in dark the light,

Only in dying life:

Bright the hawk's flight

on the empty sky.

(Le Guin 1989, epigraph)

Consider also Ged's explanation of power in chapter nine of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which demonstrates the complementariness and underlying unity of seemingly separate and contrasting things.

All power is one in source and end, I think. Years and distances, stars and candles, water and wind and wizardry, the craft in a man's hand and the wisdom in a tree's root: they all arise together. My name, and yours, and the true name of the sun, or a spring of water, or an unborn child, all are syllables of the great word that is very slowly spoken by the shining of the stars. There is no other power. No other name. (Le Guin 1989, 164)⁶

Non-Action (Wu Wei)

The concept of *wu wei*, literally non-action, is one of the most important yet difficult concepts in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. This concept has been misunderstood in an Orientalist fashion as representing some kind of "Eastern" cultural trait of passivity. But the concept does not precisely mean not acting at all. It has more to do with what Paul Kjellberg calls "skillful living" (Kjellberg 1996, 13). Some scholars have translated *wu wei* as "effortless action" or "action without artifice" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001, 393; Coutinho 2014, 100). The contemporary notion of "being in the zone" is also similar. The idea is mentioned several times in the *Dao De Jing* (e.g., chapters 43 and 48), but the famous story of Cook Ding from chapter three of the *Zhuangzi* is perhaps the best example. A cook who regularly butchers oxen has not had to sharpen his blade in nineteen years, which he explains by his ability to find the gaps in the joints. Sometimes he must overcome troubles, which he explains as follows.

Nonetheless, whenever I come to a clustered triangle, realizing that it is difficult to *do* anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. Then all at once, I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. I retract the blade and stand there gazing at my work arrayed around me, dawdling over it with satisfaction. Then I wipe off the blade and put it away. (*Zhuangzi* 3.4–3.6, trans. Ziporyn 2009, 23)

Again, non-action should not be understood as literally doing nothing, but rather as acting in a more natural, effortless manner (although learning to act in such a way may ironically require a great deal of effort). My favorite example is this: when I walk up to a drinking fountain with motion detector sensors it does not work if I wave my hand in front of it as my over-thinking implies it should. But if I walk up to the water fountain naturally as if the water will come automatically, it does so without trouble. It is my over-thinking that caused the trouble.

Le Guin's novel *The Lathe of Heaven* is explicitly named for a line in *Zhuangzi* chapter 23: "Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven" (Le Guin

1973, 30). Le Guin later learned that “lathe” is a mistranslation, although she always maintained that the novel is a Daoist book (Le Guin 2012).⁷ More recently Ziporyn has translated this line as, “If there were anything that deviated from This, it would be destroyed in [the turning of] Heaven the Potter’s wheel” (Ziporyn 2009, 99). This line comes directly after a discussion of non-action, which Le Guin cites as the epigraph to chapter three of *The Lathe of Heaven*:

Those whom heaven helps we call the sons of heaven. They do not learn this by learning. They do not work it by working. They do not reason it by reason. To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. (Le Guin 1973, 30).⁸

Both *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* feature protagonists who come to learn that their overt efforts at effecting change are ultimately harmful. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, George Orr eventually stops taking the advice of Dr. Haber to try to use his power to make his dreams reality to improve the world. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the novel’s protagonist Genly Ai learns in later chapters that his earlier efforts to force the success of his mission to incorporate Gethen into the interstellar political confederation of the Ekumen only led to misery.

Something like non-action is also present in the methods of the Ekumen itself. In chapter 18 of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly explains why he was sent as single ambassador to spend years alone on a strange planet.

Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou. Not political, not pragmatic, but mystical. In a certain sense the Ekumen is not a body politic, but a body mystic. It considers beginnings to be extremely important. Beginnings, and means. Its doctrine is just the reverse of the doctrine that the ends justify the means. It proceeds, therefore, by subtle ways, and slow ones, and queer, risky ones; rather as evolution does, which is in a certain sense its model. (Le Guin 2010, 279).⁹

Elizabeth Cummins Cogell has explored numerous examples of *wu wei* in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, particularly the relevance of non-action as a source of Le Guin’s interest in anarchism as represented by the Anarresti people (Cogell 1979, 166–174; Le Guin 1975). While Le Guin was also influenced by modern anarchists like Emma Goldman, the *Laozi* contains several political passages in chapters 57–61 that have been read as representing a type of philosophical anarchism, which is in turn related to the concept of non-action on a political scale.

Obviously, I could provide many more examples, and just as obviously I have merely scratched the surface of ways in which Daoism has influenced Le Guin’s work. Indeed, once one notices the Daoist elements of Le Guin’s fiction, it becomes difficult *not* to see Daoist ideas as pervasively and deeply embedded in Le Guin’s entire corpus.

“She Who Does Not Know Speaks?” Critiques of Misrepresentation and Orientalist Cultural Appropriation

While it is clear that Le Guin considered her own work to reflect Daoist themes, her incorporation of Daoism has itself been subject to a number of critiques. I will focus on two types of critiques: first, that Le Guin is misrepresenting Daoism, and second, that, as a white American writing about Daoism, Le Guin may be engaging in a form of harmful Orientalist cultural appropriation.

Paul R. Goldin (2002) has criticized Le Guin's translation of the *Dao De Jing* for inaccuracies and misrepresentations. For instance, he points out that Le Guin's translation of chapter 25 leaves out a reference to a king, which is clearly present in the text; Le Guin even admits to omitting it because it did not follow her sense of the text (Goldin 2002, 190–191, Laozi 1998, 114–115). One could extend this criticism to Le Guin's fiction as well. Insofar as many readers come to Le Guin's fiction knowing little about Daoism, perhaps we should take seriously the extent to which her fiction is itself a source of knowledge for her audience, especially because Le Guin is often mixing ideas from classical premodern Daoism with ideas from modern feminism and modern anarchism (Lothian 2006, Habib 2007). For instance, her anarchic interpretation of Daoism can be seen most prominently in her depiction of the Odonian philosophy in *The Dispossessed*. While some scholars have interpreted the *Laozi* as advocating a kind of anarchism¹⁰, it is worth noting that Le Guin is taking a particular interpretive stance when it comes to philosophical Daoism, a stance that may not be evident to readers otherwise unfamiliar with Daoist philosophical texts and the scholarship surrounding them.

Alexis Lothian (2006) has also wondered if, as a white American author, Le Guin may be engaging in a form of harmful cultural appropriation despite her move toward a more inclusive feminism in her later work. Lothian presents this at the end of her article on Le Guin as a question for further research: “Or perhaps questions of cultural appropriation might be considered—are there uncomfortable implications in a white American woman's adoption of the *Tao Te Ching*, in her writing a science fiction novel to memorialize the destruction of Taoism in China?” (Lothian 2006, 392).

While Lothian does not further delve into this question, Betsy Huang (2008) has answered it in her discussion of Le Guin's work as a type of Orientalist cultural appropriation. For my purposes in this paper and with regard to this specific issue, I will take Orientalism to be a specific type of cultural appropriation, so that Huang is offering a specific answer to Lothian's question. While a complete discussion of Orientalism is beyond my scope here, I will loosely define Orientalism in the sense popularized by Edward Said (1979) as the tendency to view especially Middle Eastern and Asian cultures as essentially Other (exotic, mystical, feminine, etc.) in opposition to the West's presumed Self (familiarity, rationality, masculinity, etc.). The history of Orientalism is explicitly tied to the history of European imperialism, when it functioned as an ideological justification for colonialism, but Said and others have argued that Orientalism persists in the postcolonial era in the way that many Western people view the Middle East and Asia: the West often

does not let these other cultures speak for themselves, instead creating a simplified, false image for its own purposes.

Huang argues that Le Guin's fiction employs ideas from premodern Daoism for the sake of cognitive estrangement in the sense explained by Darko Suvin (1979). For Huang, this is a form of Orientalism because it casts Daoism as primarily the cure for, or alternative to, harmful Western philosophies; Le Guin's picture of Daoism primarily serves Western needs and exists in Western imagination (Huang 2008, 26–27). Huang claims that Le Guin presents an “idealization of a Daoist-influenced passive, non-interventionist mode of existence...” (Huang 2008, 27).

For both Le Guin and her contemporary Philip K. Dick,

Daoist thought is sufficiently alien from Western psycho-rationalist models to be depicted as a psychological dysfunction or social disorder. The central tenet of Daoism, *inaction*, is particularly vulnerable to being cast as weakness or failure; after all, the unwillingness or inability to *act* in a society that encourages action and activism above all else can only be portrayed as a pathological disorder. Yet it is precisely this perceived vulnerability of Daoism that sustained its popularity throughout the postwar decades because it presents the East as passive, restrained, and non-threatening. (Huang 2008, 28)

Huang describes *The Lathe of Heaven* as “a cautionary fable that pits what Le Guin sees as the indiscretions of Western reason and scientific positivism against the benign qualities of Eastern mysticism” (Huang 2008, 29). While Huang admits that Le Guin attempts to depict Daoism positively in *The Lathe of Heaven*, both through George Orr and the aliens that arrive later in the novel, she offers a critique of the way in which Daoist ideas are presented:

Reminiscent of the trope of the supportive oriental sage who nurtures a young Western hero's quest for truth and self-identity (the monks in the television series *Kung Fu* and Mr. Miyagi in the feature film *The Karate Kid* come to mind), the aliens impart proverbial “fortune-cookie” wisdom to Orr. (Huang 2008, 30)

Huang sums up some of the harm of this sort of Orientalist approach to science fiction as follows.

The “Orient” is the path but rarely the destination, and the characters who embody it are tools for, but not the architects of, the West's construction of its future ... The Western romance of the Orient imagines it as passive and pacifist, while the Western humanist imperative for Asians is to act, to protest. (Huang 2008, 39)

While of course I implore readers to read Huang's article for themselves (it also contains interesting critiques of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*), I might add a bit of clarification. As I see it, Huang's target of criticism is not so much that Le Guin includes Daoist concepts, but the way in

which Le Guin includes them and the uses to which she puts these ideas. The relevant questions to consider are: To what purposes does Le Guin put Daoist ideas? Can these uses fully or partially be understood as harmful Orientalist cultural appropriation, whether intentionally or unintentionally?

Given the importance of Daoism in Le Guin's life and work, I think these questions ought to be taken seriously. Ignoring them is not an option, at least if one wants to take Le Guin seriously as an artist and a thinker. If Huang's critique in particular seems *prima facie* outlandish to some readers, I ask them to take a particularly Le Guinian stance to attempt to imagine why someone might present such a critique, not so much to justify this critique but to understand it.

Le Guin's Work as Transformative and Cross-Cultural

I propose that taking these critiques seriously requires a deeper rethinking of what, exactly, Le Guin was doing in her fiction. I suggest that Le Guin was not trying to *represent* ancient Daoism as a scholarly authority. Rather, she was *inspired by* Daoism as a creative artist and philosopher in her own right.

In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin explains what she sees as the effect a good novel has on its reader.

In reading a novel, any novel, we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we're done with it, we may find—if it's a good novel—that we're a bit different than from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before. But it's very hard to *say* just what we learned, how we were changed. (Le Guin 2010, xviii)

In her essay "A War Without End," Le Guin explains one of the tasks of her fiction.

To me the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment, but, by offering an imagined yet persuasive alternate reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader's mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned. (Le Guin 2004, 218)

Much like the ancient Greek and Roman ideal of philosophy as a way of life or as therapeutic (Hadot 1995, Nussbaum 1994) or the idea that philosophy ought to transform the person as found in many Indian and Western philosophers (Taber 1983, Ganeri 2010), Le Guin's point is that her art does not merely entertain, it transforms readers and expands their sense of what is possible.

Expanding one's sense of what is possible is a benefit of philosophy as well, whether through contemplation of the metaphysical edifices of great philosophers like Plato, Dushun, Śāṅkara, or Spinoza, or through contemplation of issues such as external-world skepticism and thought experiments about zombies or runaway trolleys. As Bertrand Russell wrote,

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind is also rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good. (Russell 1959, 161)

Like the philosophers mentioned, Le Guin hopes that her readers will be transformed, at least a little, even if they cannot quite articulate the ways in which they have changed.

Such transformative intentions are also present in the Daoist tradition. Paul Kjellberg argues that the point of the *Zhuangzi* is not to articulate a theory of the good life but to help readers to engage in "skillful living" (Kjellberg 1996, 13). Given her earlier quotations, it seems that Le Guin's own interpretation of Daoism is similar in that she hopes her work will *do* something to the reader.

However, as Elizabeth Cogell puts it, "To argue that Le Guin has been influenced by Taoism is not to rule out additional influences nor to say that Taoism totally explains her writing" (Cogell 1979, 179). I would argue that Le Guin is doing something similar to what contemporary philosophers Mark Siderits and Jay Garfield refer to as "fusion philosophy" or "cross-cultural philosophy" respectively (Siderits 2003, xi, Garfield 2002, viii). Garfield explains his philosophical methodology as follows.

I prefer to think of my enterprise in these pages as an exploration of cross-cultural philosophy rather than as an exercise in "comparative philosophy." That is, my goal is not so much to juxtapose texts from distinct traditions to notice similarities and differences as it is to do philosophy, with lots of texts, lots of perspectives, and lots of hermeneutical traditions—to make the resources of diverse traditions and their scholars available to one another and to create new dialogues. (Garfield 2002, viii)

As Le Guin noted several times (e.g., Le Guin 1976), she was influenced by a wide variety of authors and ideas. I have already noted two other major strands in her work: modern feminism and modern anarchism.¹¹ Like Siderits and Garfield, I see Le Guin's work as an attempt to bring these disparate influences together to create something new and interesting.¹²

Putting all of this together, I would like to suggest that Le Guin is not so much offering classical Daoist insights in science fictional form as much as she is offering a creative reinterpretation of Daoism itself, one that I call science fictional feminist Daoism.¹³ I am not claiming that Le Guin was necessarily herself cognizant of this, but it is an interpretation that I think makes sense of her fiction.¹⁴

Feminist Features of Le Guin's Science Fictional Daoism

Having explained some of the connections between Le Guin's science fiction and Daoism, I should say a bit more about her connections to feminism. As Le Guin herself noted and as many scholars have discussed, her relationship to feminism changed over the course of her career (Lothian 2006 and Clarke 2010 are good discussions on this point).

Le Guin's juxtaposition of premodern Daoism and modern feminism is not unprecedented. Modern scholars have, for instance, gone back to look at philosophical contributions from Daoist women writers such as Yu Xuanji (c. 844–868) and Sun Bu-er (c. 1119–1182).¹⁵ Furthermore, there have been critical feminist philosophical readings of classical Daoist ideas.¹⁶

While I will not attempt to define feminism here, it is uncontroversial to say that feminist philosophers are often focused, at least in part, on interrogating and rethinking concepts of gender. And Le Guin did just this from relatively early in her career, perhaps most famously in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). This novel is set on the planet Gethen where humans are androgynous except during their sexually-active phase of kemmer, in which they take on what most other humans would think of as either male or female reproductive capabilities.

A field report from an Ekumen anthropologist visiting Gethen includes the following.

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be ... "tied down by childbearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. (Le Guin 2010, 100)

Le Guin also plays with the reader's gender associations, writing for instance, "My landlady, a voluble man..." (Le Guin 2010, 49) or "The king was pregnant" (Le Guin 2010, 106).

Nonetheless, some of Le Guin's critics have noted that her early novels, while questioning concepts of gender, had yet to move beyond a privileging of heterosexual and male perspectives. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for instance, never discusses the possibility of anything other than heterosexual pairings during Gethenians sexually-active phase of kemmer. The novel also uses the male pronoun "he" as an allegedly gender-neutral

pronoun. Le Guin herself later came to criticize both of these aspects of the novel in an essay that encapsulates much of how she rethought feminism during her career: "Is Gender Necessary? – Redux" (Le Guin 1992, 155–172). In this essay, originally written in 1988, Le Guin writes footnotes explicitly criticizing both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and her original 1976 essay, "Is Gender Necessary?"

Later in her career in novels such as *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995) and *The Telling* (2000), Le Guin's focus changed to decentering men's perspectives and to centering women's perspectives. Such novels came to approach feminist philosophy more in the sense described by Rosemarie Tong, who defines feminist philosophy as "a discussion of philosophical concerns that refuses to identify the human experience with the male experience" (Tong 1995, 262).

Likewise, a lot of Daoist philosophy concerns challenging the reader to rethink one's typical perspectives. A good example is Zhuangzi's common tactic of encouraging the reader to imagine perspectives of different humans and animals (e.g., Zhuangzi 2:38–41, trans. Ziporyn 2009, 17–19; Zhuangzi, Ch. 17, trans. Ziporyn 2009, 76).¹⁷ Similarly, what literary theorist Darko Suvin (1979) has described as the "estrangement" of science fiction invites the reader to consider—even to momentarily inhabit—new ideas and perspectives.

As I hope is clear, Le Guin's feminist influences are not at all opposed to her Daoist or science fictional influences, and in fact she engages in a creative juxtaposition of these ideas. She often turns the type of creative rethinking one finds in the *Zhuangzi* toward gender concepts. For instance, just as the *Zhuangzi* encourages readers to reconsider whether human perspectives can yield complete knowledge of reality or whether death is to be hated (Zhuangzi 2:38, 2:41, trans. Ziporyn 2009, 18–19), so does Le Guin challenge the reader's gender associations in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in the ways discussed earlier in this section.

I am not claiming that Daoism is inherently feminist, although Le Guin has argued that Daoist ideals have more feminist potential than more explicitly patriarchal aspects of ancient Chinese cultures (Le Guin 1992, 164–165). Yet the way that Le Guin weaves together her influences shows that feminism, Daoism, and science fiction are all important ingredients of her work.

Thus, my claim is that Le Guin's reimagining of Daoism in a science fictional context is accomplished primarily by bringing together strands of premodern Daoism and modern feminism in the sense of cross-cultural philosophy discussed in the previous section. Daoist ideas about non-action can also challenge many modern Western feminist conceptions of action and agency, encouraging readers to appreciate ways of interacting with the world outside of ways stereotypically coded as masculine in the West, as seen in works such as *The Lathe of Heaven*. In doing so, Le Guin encourages a transformation of both Daoism and feminism—a feminist rethinking of Daoism and a Daoist rethinking of feminism.

As I discussed in the methodological prelude, one type of rethinking involved in Le Guinian philosophy is a reconsideration of the combat metaphor that guides a lot of contemporary philosophy. Combat metaphors are associated with traits like aggression and zero-sum conflicts with clear winners and losers, which are in turn typically associated

with masculinity (not precisely *men*, because of course women and others can be aggressive and engage in zero-sum conflicts, but I'm referring to masculinity as a broader concept that, while often associated with men, is not exclusively tied to a single gender). I suggest—as a move in an ongoing conversation—that there is a further, deeper sense in which Le Guinian philosophy could be an extension of Le Guin's feminist project. Le Guinian philosophy might seek to decenter masculine perspectives by challenging combat as a guiding metaphor for philosophy. A good example of this shift in perspective in Le Guin's work is the ending of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in which the main character Ged embraces and merges with his shadow self instead of seeking its defeat (Le Guin 1989, 179). Another example is Le Guin's statement that she does not like villainy: in *The Lathe of Heaven*, for instance, Dr. Haber is not a villain, but rather he is attempting to do good while not being in tune with reality (Le Guin 2012).

A New Perspective?

Does reorienting our understanding of Le Guin's fiction in the way I have suggested give new resources for responding to the critiques that she is misrepresenting Daoism or engaging in Orientalist cultural appropriation?

It seems to me that the first critique somewhat misses the point, at least with regard to Le Guin's fiction. A translation ought to aim for some fidelity to the original text (although Le Guin herself did not necessarily agree). I do think Goldin's critiques of translations by Le Guin and others who do not know much classical Chinese are fair: taking Le Guin's translation of the *Dao De Jing* as the authoritative final word on the text would be intellectually irresponsible for anyone who cares about understanding classical Daoism historically, culturally, and philosophically.

But it seems to me that as an author of fiction Le Guin never set out to give a scholarly or culturally-immersed representation of Daoist philosophy or practice. To what extent can an artist be guilty of misrepresentation if representation was not, strictly speaking, her goal? Of course, some Western readers will take Le Guin's word on Daoism either in her translation or her fiction, but it is not clear whether we should hold the author responsible for the type of intellectual laziness that would let one's exclusive source on ancient Chinese philosophy be a contemporary American author of science fiction and fantasy. Others may be inspired by Le Guin's fiction to explore classical Daoist texts for themselves, embarking on journeys that go beyond Le Guin's own understanding. She would be pleased with such an outcome, or at least not opposed to it.

Did Le Guin think of herself as a Daoist? Not exactly. She once described herself as "an inconsistent Taoist and consistent unChristian" (Le Guin and Ketterer 1975, 139). This makes sense within the framework I explained in the previous section: Le Guin is not trying to *explain* Daoism or even really to *be* a Daoist with any pretensions of authenticity or consistency with some authoritative idea of what Daoism should be. Rather, she is profoundly influenced by Daoism along the way to her own creative output.

The second critique, that Le Guin is engaging in Orientalist cultural appropriation, is more complicated. It is obviously the case that Le Guin was a white American drawing on Daoist ideas in writing science fiction and fantasy. But Le Guin was not a dilettante who, after reading one translation late in life, elected herself to the post of sole authority on Daoism at the expense of everyone else. It is not unreasonable to say that Daoism was part of her philosophical make-up from a young age. These ideas transformed her throughout her life. Her personal background does not settle the case, but it opens up a new perspective on the classic model of cultural appropriation.

The classic model of cultural appropriation is one where white Westerners take up an aspect of another culture they find useful or charming while ignoring cultural history and real people's connections to that cultural product. Such a model can sometimes be found in some American yoga studios' Orientalist representations of India, white people performing Native American religious rituals, racist sports mascots, or white musicians appropriating the musical styles of African Americans. And even in these cases, a lot depends on context. Do the people in question have any connection to the relevant cultures, through scholarship, personal connections, language, etc.? Do they consider themselves to be authorities on the matter in question over and above the authorities within the relevant culture? Are they exploiting false, harmful stereotypes for material or social gain at the expense of people in the relevant culture? Do they have the attitude of a humble learner or of an authoritative lecturer—or worse yet, of a white savior saving the “authentic” tradition from its negligent keepers?

Huang's (2008) point is not that Le Guin is some 19th century British imperialist learning about a culture merely to better dominate it economically and politically. A different type of Orientalism might be called “benevolent Orientalism,” a framework in which the other culture is represented as superior to Western culture but entirely from within a Western perspective (e.g., “Tibet is such a spiritual country, unlike we materialistic Americans,” or “Daoism is in harmony with nature unlike the environmentally destructive West”). In so far as Le Guin thinks Daoism is superior to the more dualistic ideas popular in Western thought, there may be some sense in which she fits this concept. And the Daoist elements of her fiction do seem to be at least part of how she creates the effect of estrangement in her mostly Western audience.

To push a bit deeper still, though, I think a lot of the discussion on Orientalism and cultural appropriation relies on the idea of a mono-cultural person, a person steeped merely in a single coherent culture. I think this idea is, properly speaking, a myth. For instance, many aspects of what we consider to be “Western” culture were influenced by cultures we would call “non-Western.” Just a few examples are the Egyptian and Babylonian influences on early Greek mathematics and philosophy, the contact and possible influences between Greek and Indian skeptical philosophers in antiquity, the fact that the Roman Empire included large parts of North Africa and the Middle East, the huge influence of Islamic philosophy on Medieval European philosophy, and the myriad cultural influences engendered by European colonialism into the postcolonial era.¹⁸

On a related note, we should not pretend that “the West” is anything like a natural kind, philosophically speaking. The whole idea of “the West” as a hermetically sealed package produced by a handful of men in a few European countries is, to borrow a term from film and television, a massive ret-con job. For instance, Plato did not think of himself as “Western” or as part of “the same culture” or “the same race” as “barbarians” in modern day Germany or England; he had far more in common with Egyptians, Phoenicians, and other ancient Mediterranean people.

Given the extent to which human cultures have been influencing one another throughout history, I think the idea of a strictly mono-cultural person has been myth for thousands of years. Models of cultural appropriation and Orientalism often seem to rely on a model wherein a mono-cultural person takes on another culture from within their mono-cultural view through a mono-cultural lens. Note that I am not claiming something like this has never been the case, as when Western people with little or no experience or training in the philosophy or literature of another culture appoint themselves experts on that culture. But Le Guin would not seem to fit this model in any simplistic sense, neither in her personal history nor in the depth of her work.

Let us consider Le Guin's position. She grew up in the United States as a white person, which gave her Western cultural influences. But she also had other influences early on. And Daoism was perhaps the biggest non-Western influence on her intellectual development. She was not *merely* using Daoism to create a sense of estrangement in her Western readers, as a simplistic model of Orientalist cultural appropriation would have it; rather, Daoism was part of her intellectual makeup from an early age, so it might be more proper to say Daoism was part of her creative self-expression as an author.

Le Guin's education in Daoism came almost exclusively through translations into English, so it might be argued that Orientalism was enacted within the larger cultural and translational project rather than one solitary science fiction author. This may be true, at least partially and unintentionally. I do think Huang has a point in that Le Guin may have unintentionally included problematic depictions of Daoist ideas. While of course Le Guin cannot control how readers interpret her works, in Western cultures many readers will take up these Daoist ideas from within a larger cultural framework of Orientalism. Huang's point is not that Le Guin was a bad individual, but that within the larger cultural context of 20th century America, Le Guin's use of Daoist ideas might have Orientalist effects. By analogy, in recent decades many have defined “racism” as primarily a structural issue rather than merely a personal moral failing. The point is not so much that Le Guin is personally an Orientalist, but that her fiction might have deleterious effects within a larger culture.

None of us in any culture can escape the effects of colonialism in a post-colonial world, although the ways in which these tendencies affect people depend of course on their cultural locations. For example, Orientalist myths about the “passive, irrational East” affect people in Asia and Asian diasporas differently and more harmfully than they affect white Western people. Much the same could be said, of course, for any other type of stereotyping.

But I would like to think that if there is a way out of our Eurocentric world condition, it is through patient learning, hybrid education, and being open to wisdom from all sources, but without reducing those sources to Western needs or Orientalist preconceptions. Whether Le Guin or anyone else can live up to this ideal in the early 21st century, I cannot say. But I do hope that it will be possible one day, and I would like to think that Le Guin's fiction represents a partial, imperfect attempt to envision what a non-Eurocentric world might look like. Contemporary Indian philosopher B. K. Matilal wrote that the problem with both negative and "benevolent" Orientalist myths—aside from the fact that they are false—is that "The Oriental man is either subhuman or superhuman, never human. ... there cannot be any *horizontal relationship* between East and West" (Matilal 2002, 373, italics in original). Perhaps Le Guin's fiction can help us to imagine, however imperfectly, what such a horizontal relationship might look like.

Being true to Le Guin's legacy of highlighting the subtleties and ambiguities of human life forces me to admit that my understanding of her work does not solve all problems. I am not saying we as readers and scholars should not hold her work accountable for misrepresentation or Orientalist cultural appropriation. I do not claim to be an arbiter clearing her of all personal charges in some court of public opinion, nor do I claim victory over other scholars in some philosophical combat. Much as some editions of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* contain the subtitle, "An ambiguous utopia," so is my conclusion an ambiguous conclusion. My "opponents" have a point: I am neither declaring my victory nor their defeat. Instead, these conversations should continue.

We should be more cognizant both of the resources within Daoist philosophies themselves and of Le Guin's work as a creative artist and philosopher as we continue nuanced discussions of her work and its philosophical depth. This is better done by engaging in philosophy with the guiding metaphor of ongoing conversation rather than metaphors of combat in the senses I discussed in the methodological prelude. One of the lessons we learn from Le Guin's work—a lesson I have attempted to enact here—is that everything is more complicated than we think it is.¹⁹ Understanding her fiction philosophically is no exception.



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Notes

¹ A video and transcript of this speech can be found in Le Guin 2014.

² Note that I prefer the pinyin method of Romanization (e.g., “Daoism”) as opposed to the older Wade-Giles method (e.g., “Taoism”).

³ For instance, see Le Guin and Ketterer 1975, 139; Le Guin 1976, 45; Le Guin 1982, 39; and Le Guin 2017, 40.

⁴ For example, see Barbour 1974, Cogell 1979, Hayles 1979, Spivack 1984, Cummins 1990, Wytenbroek 1990, Lindow 2004, Lothian 2006, Huang 2008, and Li 2016.

⁵ I recommend that readers interested in these issues start with Coutinho 2014 and Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001.

⁶ Wytenbroek 1990 focuses exclusively on the Daoist themes in Le Guin's Earthsea novels.

⁷ Perhaps there is another resonance between *The Lathe of Heaven* and the famous story of the butterfly dream in *Zhuangzi* chapter 2 (2:48–49). This is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but it is possible Le Guin had it in mind.

⁸ Here is Ziporyn's translation of the same passage:

Aided by the Heavenly, one is called a Son of Heaven. One who wants truly to learn should learn what cannot be learned. One who wants truly to take action should do what no deliberate action can do. One who wants truly to distinguish what is so by debate should distinguish what no debate can distinguish to be so. When understanding stops and rests on what is not understood, it has reached its perfection. (*Zhuangzi* chapter 23, trans. Ziporyn 2009, 99)

⁹ It's also worth noting that in mentioning the modern scientific concept of evolution, Le Guin is demonstrating that her influences go beyond Daoism (although of course modern ideas of biological evolution are not necessarily in contrast with Daoist ideas). Another strong Daoist element in *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be found in the Haddara religion's emphasis on the value of ignorance. A member of that religion tells Genly that the purpose of foretelling is “To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” (Le Guin 2010, 74). Compare this with the *Zhuangzi*'s image of the useless tree (1:14, Ziporyn 2009, 8) or the following comment in chapter 22: “Not knowing is profound; knowing is shallow” (Ziporyn 2009, 90).

¹⁰ See *Laozi* chapters 57–61. For more on the scholarly issues surrounding anarchic interpretations, see Coutinho 2014, 71–73.

¹¹ N. B. Hayles has argued that Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a cohesive artistic whole not despite but rather in virtue of its disparate ideas; it is “an example of the creative fecundity that is possible when differences are not suppressed by used to create a new whole” (Hayles 1979, 115).

¹² Although I should note that Le Guin is somewhat less focused on solving problems than Siderits: “To those who see problem-solving as central to philosophy, and who also believe that counterposing of distinct traditions can yield useful results in this endeavor, the name ‘fusion philosophy’ seems appropriate” (Siderits 2003, xi). However, one might say that Le Guin's hope is that her work will contribute to solving problems further down the line in imagining better ways of living.

¹³ I suspect relatively few scholars of literature have noticed the extent to which Le Guin is reworking the ideas themselves, because for literature scholars philosophies tend to be “theory”

that one applies to texts for the sake of interpretation or inspiration that one finds in an author for the sake of explaining the text. However, for philosophers—and philosophical authors like Le Guin—the philosophies themselves are inspirations for new ideas, new ways of seeing the world. For Le Guin there is no sense in which the theory can be separated from the text; theory and text are, appropriately enough, complementary contrasts that are aspects of a single thing.

¹⁴ Le Guin herself noted in her response to an issue of *Science Fiction Studies* devoted to her work that some of the scholarly articles

dealt almost exclusively with ideas. They gave me the impression that I have written about nothing but ideas, and I was enormously impressed with myself. By God! did I really think all that? – The answer is, No. I didn't. I did think some of it. The rest of it I felt, or stole, or faked, or intuited; in any case achieved, not deliberately and not through the use of frontal lobes, but through humbler and obscurer means, involving (among others) imagery, metaphors, characters, landscapes, the sound of English words, the restrictions of English syntax, the rests and rhythms of narrative paragraphs. (Le Guin 1976, 44)

¹⁵ For translations of some of Yu's and Sun's poetry, see Bonevac and Phillips 2009, 70-74.

¹⁶ For examples of modern feminist philosophical engagements with premodern Daoist philosophies, see Lee 2014 and Jiang 2014.

¹⁷ Le Guin explores animal perspectives as well as profound questions about language and art in her short story "The Author of the Acacia Seeds" (Le Guin 2016, 617-625).

¹⁸ While most of these examples are (or ought to be) common knowledge, readers interested in possible contact between Greek and Indian philosophers in antiquity should begin by consulting Flintoff 1980. It is also worth noting that the first ancient Greek philosopher, Thales, lived in what is today Turkey, and great Western philosophers such as Augustine and Hypatia lived in North Africa.

¹⁹ Including this statement. Some readers may find this statement to be trite or platitudinous, but I suggest that this reaction itself fails to take the lesson seriously. Much like Laozi and Zhuangzi encourage readers to consider new perspectives and destabilize simplistic, dogmatic views, Le Guin's fiction encourages us to reconsider the ways we think about gender, politics, economics, culture, etc. beyond any easy, simplified answers.

