


Britton A. Watson

Two Types of Fish: Confucianism and Taoism

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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Chinese philosophy is founded in the wisdom of *The I Ching*. This ancient book sets forth a foundation based in the concept of balance between two poles, or *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yang* is associated with The Creative, male, brightness, lightness, activeness, sun, sky, east, south, left, thumb, back, head, and a single line. *Yin* is associated with The Receptive, female, shade, inactiveness, darkness, moon, Earth, west, north, right, four fingers, belly, foot, and two broken lines. A black crescent and a white crescent come together to form the symbol . The two crescents are asymmetrical: they are wide on one side and narrow on the opposite side and they are both within one another. *Yang*—the white crescent, contains a black dot and *Yin*—the black crescent, contains a white dot.

In *The I Ching*, Creativity and Receptivity are the primary virtues held in *Yang* and *Yin* respectively. The Creative of *Yang* is the virtue of beginnings or seeds. These concepts may be abstract at first such as spirit or time and their relationship with the Receptive is a critical component of *Confucianism*. *Yin*, or Receptivity, acts upon matter in space and brings completion to the beginnings or seeds planted by The Creative. Generation and birth are metaphysical meanings of such receptivity. Wisdom, knowledge, societal structure, and how to live a good and prosperous life is based in balance, swaying in the directions of *Yin* and *Yang* and ultimately reversion to the mean between the two poles.

Confucianism's great counterpart: Taoism, finds its principles from the same basic concept as Confucianism: on the observation of the natural world. Like Confucianism, Taoism has a framework based on the relationship between *Yin* and *Yang* and its own concepts of balance. Both philosophies emphasize the nature of the whole as opposed to the nature its parts. Confucianism and Taoism both follow principles of natural observation. There are natural relationships such as the earth to the sky and water to fire. There are also animal examples such as birds and cows. Birds and cows move in different ways: birds dart around in a myriad of directions with incredible

ease. Cows move much more slowly—but they also have the power to pull farm equipment and therefore a human purpose of tilling farmland. Despite their differences, both creatures serve a purpose in their system of life.

Confucianism and Taoism avoid the segmentation of traditional philosophical disciplines in Western philosophy such as political and social philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, and etc. are not separate. Western philosophy tends to quarter these off into specialty fields rather than drawing from them simultaneously. For example, modern metaphysics is extraordinarily complex in terms of structure and the language used to express it: time, parts and wholes, possible worlds, the nature of reality and etc. In comparison, Chinese philosophy does not share the obsession with cutting down to the atoms of each specialty of philosophy. Most Chinese philosophy is very accessible because it is based in natural observation rather than complex systems of thought confined to the brain.

A common characteristic shared between Confucianism and Taoism is the relationship between vast open spaces and necessary frameworks. Both of these come from nature. Vast open space is represented by the 1st hexagram of *The I Ching* and in chapter 41 of *Tao The Ching*. In chapter 41, Lao Tzu says: "The perfect square has no corners / Great talents ripen late / The highest notes are hard to hear / The greatest form has no shape." These vast open spaces are necessary for things such as *Tao* because it is not something that is contained—it is formless, has no borders, and etc. The sky is the same way—it is borderless and is uncontained and seemingly endless.

In establishing human frameworks, Confucianism and Taoism seem to move in opposing directions. The natural hierarchies that form in the animal world have influenced Confucianism and the Confucian ideal of "proper" society. Every person has a place in their society. Confucianism concludes that human hierarchy is natural—there are leaders and followers and a

society require both to be successful. Each has a role to play and the society functions only if the various components of human society are functioning in harmony with one another. A western concept of traditional meritocracy is not necessarily reflected in this system. It seems that leaders are born and followers are born: farmers are born and scholars are born, and etc. and they all have their place in the overall system. Confucianism follows the example of a seed—a tiny thing grows and grows. It embraces the human condition by

Taoism seems to be different. At its core, it seems to be about escaping the human condition managed by Confucian authoritarianism. One flows with the water or the situation in a natural way—it is a system of perpetual yielding. In chapter 36, Lao Tzu says that "truly good people are not aware of their virtue", suggesting that true virtue is not necessarily defined by the frames of human understanding. This is in contrast with *The I Ching* and Confucianism where virtues and principles are clearly established by the sixty-four hexagrams.

In the second hexagram of *The I Ching*, "The Receptive" gives several stories showcasing the principle of yielding. The earth yields to man as it is below it. and man above yields to the sky. Yet, men draws their principles from the humble example of the earth below.. The *Tao The Ching* takes yielding to an extreme in chapter sixty-one where Lao Tzu states:

Therefore if a great country gives way to a smaller country,

It will conquer the smaller country.

And if a small country submits to a great country,

It can conquer the great country.

Therefore those that would conquer must yield,

And those that conquer do so because they yield.

The yielding of Lao Tzu is not bound by the relationship of heaven being above nor the earth below. The virtue of yielding is necessary regardless of status. This yielding is like water—it always flows wherever necessary unlike the Confucian seed which only grows in one direction: up.

*The I Ching* is the manifestation of balance between wisdom and humility or *Yang* and *Yin* to sustain and ensure. Going too far in either direction brings misfortune, but achieving the necessary balance will result in fulfilling the ultimate virtue: sustaining and enduring. Lao Tzu follows similar to principles to Confucius but ultimately takes a new path escaping hierarchical human structures where everyone and everything yields to *Tao*. If Confucius and *The I Ching* is a seed, then Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching* is water.

As the *Tao Te Ching* says in chapter 8: the water within *Tao* not only yields, it also nurtures. It does not compete. It is true and just. It flows everywhere—even in places that the rest of nature or man may reject. All seeds may need water, but water does not need seeds. Water is at ease as a cloud, as a river, as the ocean, as rain, it yields and makes no complaint.

The eventual political philosophy of Confucianism follows hierarchical structure while everything in Taoism ultimately yields to *Tao*. It leaves the possibility for a society structured like a Confucian society, but if the perpetual principle of yielding means it could lose the traditional hierarchical structure and function regardless because of its extraordinary adherence to the concept of yielding. The ideal governance of *Tao* is a government that no one ever sees. In this way, it appears that Taoism is even closer to the function of plants and animals in the natural world than Confucianism or the principles *The I Ching*. There is space for both packs of wolves and the lone wolf. There can be miles of forests or a single tree on a great plain. There can be schools of fish or a single shark and yet it is all held together by an invisible structure such as *Tao*.

## References

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