

# Lecture Today

- Admin stuff
- Concluding our study of the *Tao-te ching*
- Women and Taoism

# Admin stuff

- Women's Caucus Essay Award
- Award is \$200.00. Max. length is 3000 words. Due date is May 31st, 2004.
- Should be original work (term paper, seminar paper, etc.), have a topic involving research on women, and be scholarly (though accessible).
- Collaborative efforts are acceptable and the submission can come from any discipline (within, I presume, the academy).
- Are there any questions about the possible exam questions?

# *Tao-te ching*: On good governance

- Lao Tzu, or the author(s) of the *Tao-te ching*, takes a different tact.
- (i) The ruler **should not** be seen (see Chapters **17**, **22**, **34**, **49**, **57**, **63**, **66**).
- (ii) He **should not** force or encourage obedience to a set of moral rules or principles, in or outside of the Imperial court (Chapters **18**, **30**, **37**, **38**, **48**, **57**, **66**).
- (iii) He **should allow** (or make room for) and **ensure the lack of obstacles to** the populace living naturally, to just living in conformity to the *Tao* (as expressed in Nature and in the natural serenity, selflessness, or peace of the human mind) (Chapters **3**, **18**, **32**, **37**, **57**).

# *Tao-te ching: On War*

- The *Lao Tzu*'s view of war is not inconsequential to the traditional martial philosophies of China and Japan (as we shall soon see).
- The negative outlook proffered of war in the *Lao Tzu* informs how many masters of the martial arts understand violence (be it state or individual violence), and good or effective soldiering. This is particularly true in the code of the Samurai (see class handout).
- For the *Lao Tzu*, violence, and war, are *never* good things ... though they may be, in the end, unavoidable (see Chapters 30, 31, 46) ... which is reminiscent of *some* 'Western' war theorists who have deemed war an occasional necessary evil.

# *Tao-te ching: On War*

- Violence and war bring with them devastation, social disorder and poverty. The *Lao Tzu* appears to offer this as an empirical observation. This is the Way of violence or war (Chapter 30).
- To act in conformity to the *Tao*, for the author(s) of the *Tao-te ching*, we must cultivate a non-aggressive character that takes *no pleasure in* acting violently against another (Chapter 31). This means that *even in victory* we should take *no pleasure* (Chapter 31).
- Indeed we must, in such circumstances (i.e. of violent action), do by not doing (Chapters 31, 69).

# Women and Taoism - preliminary comments:

## Religious Taoism

- Some reminders and preliminary comments that will help with Reed's essay.
- Within religious Taoism you will encounter polytheism, shamanism, and magical rituals or 'spiritual alchemy'.
- Two sources may be appealed to to explain this peculiar mix in Taoism: (1) The popular base of Taoist thought and practice, and (2) its interest in experiment and utilizing natural principles to the betterment of humanity.

## Women and Taoism - preliminary comments: Religious Taoism

- (1) The polytheism and Shamanism in (religious) Taoism may well owe its presence to the popularist nature of its support.
- Taoism's popularity was among the lower classes rather than the aristocracy (probably because they [i.e. the aristocracy] were elitist).
- Among the general populace there was widespread belief in a myriad of deities and the power of the shamans to effect change and influence the spirits of the dead.
- Given the popularity of these beliefs, and the frequent lack of support for Taoism among the aristocracy, Taoism may well have accommodated itself to these beliefs as a means to a greater end (e.g its survival) (see pp.184-87 of your *Course Pack* for these suggestions).

## Women and Taoism - preliminary comments: Religious Taoism

- (2) The use of what we see as magical ritual and alchemy in religious Taoism may well have arisen from the Taoist's willingness to learn from those practiced or skilled in folk medicine, and from the value the Taoist placed in learning from experience and the study of the principles or forces believed to be at work in Nature (see p.185 of your *Course Pack* for some suggestion of these points).
- It is important to note that though death is welcomed as both inevitable and natural in early (philosophical) Taoism, religious Taoism pursues immortality in earnest. This is an important departure from early (philosophical) Taoism, and leads to an elevating of the *yang* principle as superior to *yin* (p. 184 of your *Course Pack*).



# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- Reed notes three important features of early (what I have called philosophical) Taoism as reflected in the *Tao-te Ching*.
- (1) The *Tao-te ching* is replete with female or feminine imagery of the (nameless) *Tao* (p.182 of your *Course Pack*).
  - The Valley spirit never dies. Call it mystery, the woman. The mystery, the Door of the Woman, is the root of earth and heaven. Forever this endures, forever. And all its uses are easy (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.6).

# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- “Heaven and earth and the ten thousand things are born of being. Being is born of nonbeing” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.40).
- “The Way bears one. The one bears two. The two bear three. The three bear the ten thousand things” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.42).
- “For the Way gives them life; its power nourishes them, mothers and feeds them, completes and nurtures them, looks after them, protects them” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.51).

# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- (2) The attributes associated with being female or a woman are lauded as exemplary for all followers of the Tao (pp.182-83 of your *Course Pack*).
- “The Tao te ching uses both female biological characteristics and traditional socially defined characteristics to symbolize the Taoist path. The biological imagery of the womb and breast dominates images of the Tao; the social role of passivity dominates the images of the person who follows the Tao” (p.183 of your *Course Pack*).
- “The way to act in the world is to follow the role traditionally assigned to women in society - to be weak, flexible, and lowly. Creative power comes from these positions, not from positions of strength, hardness, or superiority” (p.182 of your *Course Pack*).

## Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- “Knowing man and staying woman, be the riverbed of the world. Being the world’s riverbed of eternal unfailing power is to go back again to be newborn” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.28).
- “What’s softest in the world rushes and runs over what’s harder in the world” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.43).
- “Insight sees the insignificant. Strength knows how to yield. Use the way’s light, return to its insight, and so keep from going too far” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.52).
- “By stillness the woman may always dominate the man, lying quiet beneath him. So a great country submitting to small ones, dominates them; so small countries, submitting to a great one, dominate it” (*Tao Te Ching*, Chp.61).

# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- (3) Women could participate with men in the practices associated with Taoism.
- “Traditional sex roles and biological differences are recognized but denied determinative status. All people (male or female) should take the role of the infant clinging to the Mother or of the female animal beneath the male in order to live in harmony in the world and to return to the Tao” (p.183 of your *Course Pack*).

# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- In *Chuang Tzu*, the anecdotes used to teach Taoist practice largely involve male characters, and since the author avoids the poetic instructions of the *Tao-te ching*, feminine imagery of the *Tao* of the like seen in the *Tao-te ching* is non-existent in the book.
- However, these male practitioners “act in the yielding and spontaneous way suggested by the *Tao te ching*” (p.183 of your *Course Pack*).
- Also, the immortal beings who are one with the *Tao* within *Chuang Tzu* can be either male or female (p.183 of your *Course Pack*).

# Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- There are worries here, though.
- Consider (1) and (2). Though the *Tao-te ching* is replete with female or feminine imagery, and though female or feminine attributes are tied to living in accord with the *Tao*, the gender stereotypes which informed the images or attributes of early (philosophical) Taoism speak of women or females as weak, submissive and passive (see p.182 of your *Course Pack*).
- Arguably, this did more to enable the Confucian social hierarchy, than to empower Taoist women in Confucian societies.

## Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- Reed also seems to imply at one point that the *Lao Tzu* points to universal (natural) regularities expressed in female behavior when she writes, “[w]hereas the Tao te ching uses universal female images abstracted from nature to counter the normal way of perceiving and acting...” (p.183 of your *Course Pack*).
- This is a standard way of justifying gender social roles in patriarchal societies (i.e. assigned gender roles or characteristics are natural ... where ‘natural’ has strong normative overtones [rather than being merely descriptive]). My ‘inner red flag’ went up at this point in her paper.
- When combined with some of her earlier comments, Reed appears to be implying that women are, *as a matter of fact*, non-aggressive or selfless nurturers (see p.182).



## Reed: (Philosophical) Taoism

- As this is, itself, a politically loaded claim, one used to justify male supremacy in political or economic spheres (i.e. it is not a politically innocent claim to make about natural occurring human behavior), there is good reason to resist accepting it uncritically.
- But it is not merely a politically loaded claim. It also seems to be empirically false. We know, for example, from animal behavioral studies that not all females are natural, or instinctive, nurturers. This is particularly true of more cognitively complex mammals ... dolphins, whales, monkeys and apes (which is why zoos and animal research facilities often require nurseries to rear young ... and this is not merely because of the pathological environment of some, or many, zoos or research facilities). (See Jane Goodall's discussion of chimpanzee mothering in her book *In the Shadow of Man* [Phoenix Press, 2000]).

# Reed: (Religious) Taoism

- Reed notes a number of important features of religious Taoism worth mentioning here.
- (1) Women had a significant role to play in religious Taoism, though perhaps not always as significant as the role of men. On the whole women were well represented in the religious hierarchy (p.184 of your *Course Pack*).

# Reed: (Religious) Taoism

- (2) In the practice of religious Taoism women, as well as men, have the potential to reach immortality, or acquire powers associated with an advanced spirituality. So you can read of women who achieved great skill in alchemy (p.185 of your *Course Pack*), or of women who can communicate with those spirits or deities recognized within mainstream religious Taoism (p.186 of your *Course Pack*), or even encounter women who continue to intercede on behalf of Taoist practitioners (pp.186-87 of your *Course Pack*).

# Reed: (Religious) Taoism

- Interestingly, a woman's menstrual blood is, instead of a pollutant, her *yin* essence which can be used to create an incorruptible body (pp.187, 189 of your *Course Pack*). Males would attempt to nourish their own essence, sometimes in the hopes of creating an incorruptible body, by absorbing the *yin* essence from a female during intercourse (p.189 of your *Course Pack*).

# Reed: (Religious) Taoism

- (3) The female body has been so associated with the creative power of the Tao in religious Taoism that you find references to male adepts who, to show their spiritual advancement, take on certain features or roles traditionally associated with being female (p.187 of your *Course Pack*).
- (4) Within the stories, parables and myth of religious Taoism, stories of female deities, immortals or Taoist adepts abound (pp.190-91 of your *Course Pack*).
- Unfortunately, religious Taoism fairs no better than early (philosophical) Taoism in advancing the position of women in traditional East Asian societies (see p.191 of your *Course Pack*).