

The Symbolic and Environmental Value of Water in Daoism

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Introduction

My presentation today is a report on a larger project which aims to make a contribution to the emerging field of religions and ecology by investigating both the symbolic and environmental value of water in Daoism. Traditionally religious studies has focussed principally on understanding the myth, rituals and symbols of religious traditions. This is a powerful interpretive framework for dealing with the historical and cultural value of a religious tradition but it fails to register the way in which religions are implicated in and impact upon their environmental contexts. This project aims to test the hypothesis that interpreting religions in terms of their environmental contexts generates valid knowledge about the function of religion—a function that has hitherto been largely overlooked.

It is worth considering briefly why this way of interpreting religions has not figured at the forefront of religious studies in the past. I offer two comments.

One: religious studies has largely developed in the Christian west and Christianity is a universal religion whose success is predicated on its ability to construct religious meaning independently of the geographic location of the religious actor.

This mode of religious transaction can be distinguished from indigenous or

localized traditions in which religious meaning is constructed around specific geographic and environmental locations. Indeed Christians have historically denigrated the indigenous or localized traditions that they have encountered, believing, for internal theological and philosophical reasons, in the superiority and ultimate validity of a single, universal religious framework. Since the meaning of Christian religion does not depend heavily on the environment in which it is practiced and has historically opposed localized religions, religious studies as an academic discipline has not paid significant attention to the issues and meanings of religion and environment. Indeed religious studies has generally confined itself to the study of world or universal religious traditions, and the study of indigenous or localized traditions has taken place in departments of anthropology.

A second reason for the historical neglect of religion and environment is the division of knowledge in western universities between the natural and the human sciences. This division is predicated on the enlightenment notion propagated most famously by Bacon that human beings are apart from nature not a part of nature. Since the rise of the sciences of evolution and ecology in the 19th and 20th centuries this distinction between humans and nature has become increasingly tenuous. Yet universities continue to propagate this falsehood through the institutional separation of the sciences and the humanities. This separation makes it less likely that scholars will attempt to understand the scientific value of culture or the cultural value of science. But it is my contention that religions must

be interpreted in both scientific and cultural ways if we are to generate a full and comprehensive picture of their function.

The Symbolic Value of Water in Daoism

The symbolic affinity between water and early Chinese philosophy has been well demonstrated by Sarah Allan (1997). Allan argues that water “which provides life, gurgles up unbidden from the earth and moves of its own accord, becomes perfectly level and clears itself of sediment when still, takes the shape of any container, penetrates the tiniest opening, yields to pressure but wears down the hardest stone, becomes hard as ice and disperses as steam was the model for philosophical ideas about the nature of the cosmos” (1997: 4). Allan’s work is based on the concept of a “root metaphor” developed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Allan argues persuasively that early Chinese philosophy’s root metaphors or pre-logical conceptual schemes were developed principally from images of nature: “Water, in the form of the stream with a natural spring as its source, provides a model for ideas of both transience and continuity” (1997: 13). In contrast to the abstraction of Western philosophical terms, Chinese philosophical terms remain embedded in the particularity of nature and environment.

In her book, Allan concentrates on understanding the cultural meanings of the terms she is dealing with, treating them, in Lakoff and Johnson’s terms, as metaphors. *Shui*, the Chinese term for water, for instance, has a wider semantic range than the English term. It denotes fluid, flowing, and river as well as water. The Chinese character for water depicts a flowing stream. This idea “streaming”

is captured in a range of early Chinese philosophical texts all documented in detail by Allan. My interest lies in understanding the ways in which water and fluidity are used in terms of C. S. Peirce's understanding of icons, indexes and symbols. An icon is a simple representation of a thing. An index is a sign that refers to the reality of another thing (smoke is an indexical sign of fire). A symbol is a purely conventional sign (the letters f-i-r-e referring to the reality of fire). I would like to examine the use of water as a sign in *Daode jing* 15:

Of old he who was well versed in the way
Was minutely subtle, mysteriously comprehending,
And too profound to be known.
It is because he could not be known
That he can only be given a makeshift description:

Tentative, as if fording a river in winter,
Hesitant, as if in fear of his neighbours;
Formal like a guest;
Falling apart like the thawing ice;
Thick like the uncarved block;
Vacant like a valley;
Murky like muddy water.

Here it is clear that water is important chiefly as a metaphor, that is, a literary index in which some property of water is used to point towards some other reality. Here the thawing of ice is linked indexically to the concept of falling

apart; the muddiness of water stands is linked indexically to the concept of murkiness etc.

Consider another use of water as an indexical sign, also from the Daode jing:

Highest good is like water.

Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way.

Here water is also employed as a metaphor for goodness. Good is defined as being like water in the sense that water benefits creatures without contending with them and in that it chooses the lowest place. To be good thus means to be of benefit to others and to be humble. All this is straightforward. But I would like to consider this indexical use of water more closely. In this sentence water has two relevant properties. The first is that it benefits the myriad creatures. The second is that it always sinks to the bottom. Of these two properties I would like to argue that the first is uniquely the property of water whereas the second is the property of any liquid. The unique property of water is that it benefits the myriad creatures (*wanwu*) without contending with them—without causing them any harm. The Chinese term *wanwu* is rather unusual in that it includes humans, animals and plants in a single biological category. The most important ecological connection between these three life-forms is that they are all dependent upon the earth's water cycle. To be alive, to be one of the myriad creatures, is only achievable through water. Thus in Daoist and ecological terms, life is a water-based proposition. Therefore in this context some other liquid metaphor would

not work. Although Diet Coke or toxic sludge could be used to express the concept of “settling where none would like to be” only water “excels in benefiting the myriad creatures.” Thus the indexical use of water in this text here is based in its natural, biological value for human beings.

My point is this: some religious signs are in Peirce’s terms symbolic, cultural conventions (saying Amen at the end of a prayer to signify an act of faith); but other religious signs are indexes whose value lies in their natural biological properties. Although such symbols acquire different meanings in different cultural systems, at least part of their meaning lies in their indexical reference to their natural biological properties. In the passage above it is water’s ability to sustain water-based life that makes it philosophically significant. It expresses a biological dependence that transcends culture and embeds religious meaning within biological life.

I would like to consider two more examples of the indexical value of water that are important in Daoist thought: the notion of fluidity and the concept of a source or a spring. Daoism takes life to be fundamentally fluid in both symbolic and natural ways. The *Zhuangzi* speaks of the ideal of “free and easy wandering” (*xiaoyou*) both characters of which are expressed graphically with the water radical. The notion of being fixed or static is derided as the false ideal, whereas fluidity and motion are praised as the ideal state of the sage. In Daoism this ideal is more than cultural symbolism and is rooted in biological experience centred on the notion of Qi or vital breath—the confluence of fire and water, yang and yin—that circulates within the body. Chinese medicine takes the flowing of Qi

to be the foundation of life. When Qi is disrupted or blocked, humans develop symptoms of illness which are to be treated by restoring the flow of Qi within the body. The concept of flow, therefore, is not simply a symbolic ideal inscribed within Chinese cultural history—though it is certainly that—but it is also a natural feature of human biology that is deemed religiously significant in Daoist tradition. Moreover western and Chinese medicine concur in defining health as a dynamic equilibrium among the body’s physiological systems. It is not simply the flow within one system that brings health but the overall harmony of all the interdependent systems.

The interrelationship between health and religion is a standard feature of Daoism that has been well documented. Both medicine and religion are based in the biology and symbology of the fluid, with water as the liquid of life par excellence. The notion of the spring is more mystical. The *Daode jing* speaks of the Dao not just as the watercourse, or the irrigation channels of cosmic vitality, but as their mysterious ever-full source:

The Dao is empty [empties], yet using it it does not need to be refilled.

A deep spring (*yuan*)—it seems like the ancestor of the myriad living things (*Daode jing* ch. 4; quoted in Allan 1997: 76)

The irrepressible flood of life that constitutes the world is a source of mystery. Life’s liquid vitality must originate in some watery abyss, some deep well that “does not need to be refilled.” For Daoists this unfathomable mystery is fundamentally fluid in the symbolic sense of being ungraspable by human

reasoning and in the indexical, biological sense of being the wellspring of water-based life.

The Environmental Value of Water

So far I have aimed to sketch the outlines of an interpretation of water in Daoism in terms of its indexical biological value. The question I am posing in this research project is whether the environmental value of water is equally important. Here I am not interested so much in the biological properties of water—that it gives life to the myriad creatures—but in the environmental properties of water—of its relation to larger features of physical geography: valleys, rivers and lakes.

To begin, I would like to return to the work of Sarah Allen. According to her, these broader environmental features are important for understanding the Daoist concepts of not acting and not contending. According to Allan (1997: 81-82) not acting and not contending are rooted metaphorically in the concept of rivers flowing into seas. The large rivers are lower than the streams and the sea is lower than the rivers. Thus the lower position is held to be the greatest, the most majestic and powerful: thus the ruler does not contend with his subjects but takes the lowest place, receiving their tributes like the tributaries flow into the great rivers. This is acting by not acting.

This understanding of the flow of water in the physical environment is more than a conventional symbol. The fact that rulership is understood by analogy with the natural environment also functions as a reinforcement to this unusual argument. Since this inverted model of hierarchy is deemed to be a feature of nature it is

therefore, according to Daoist rhetoric, to be given extra consideration as an argument. This type of moral reasoning based on analogies with nature is particularly important in Chinese religious culture and partly explains the importance of Daoism and Confucianism for environmental ethics.

From the initial historical research that has already taken place we know that what we would today call environmental ethics was a small but certain concern of the Daoist religious movement known as the Way of the Celestial Masters. A recent analysis of the ethical code entitled the *180 Precepts of Lord Lao*, an ethical code adopted and transmitted by the Way of the Celestial Masters has revealed that environmental protection was an intrinsic part of the ethical framework by which leaders of this tradition sought to abide. The code contains specific injunctions against burning vegetation, felling trees, digging holes in the ground, drying up wetlands, hunting, polluting wells, bathing in rivers, disturbing wildlife and creating artificial lakes (Schipper 2001: 81-2).

To understand the historical context in which this code was adopted we must place ourselves in Sichuan province in the West of China about 2,000 years ago. This area of China was a key economic engine with large merchant towns, extensive exploitation of the land, a high population density and commerce with nomadic central Asian tribes. According to Kristofer Schipper, “neither classical nor medieval Daoism developed in primitive surroundings, but in places of highly developed culture” (2001: 83). However, although the way of the celestial masters thrived in this richly developed area, the leaders created their 24 parish centres (*zhi*) almost exclusively in mountain areas or natural reservations. The

one exception seems to be a parish centre situated in the provincial capital, Chengdu (Wang 1996; quoted in Schipper 2001: 83). My argument is that in order to understand these precepts it is necessary to place them in their social historical but also environmental context.

There is one specific element of this environmental context that I would like to highlight and that is the Dujiangyan irrigation project.

Dujiangyan

Dujiangyan is located just outside present-day Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. To the east begins the mountain area where many Daoist sites are located that leads towards the western edge of the Tibetan plateau. To the west lie the rich plains of the central Sichuan. The Dujiangyan irrigation project was begun in 267 BCE and completed in 256. It was designed as a water conservancy project to regulate the flow of the Minjiang river so as to prevent flooding downstream in times of heavy rainfall and to provide a constant flow of water for irrigation. The Minjiang river is separated into three main channels: One provides irrigation to 30,000 separate irrigation channels downstream; the second receives surplus water in times of flooding; the third provides water for the city of Dujiangyan. The project is significant from a water engineering perspective because it is the world's oldest irrigation project in use today that is not built around central dam, and celebrated its 2,260th birthday on April 4 of this year. Here is the report from Xinhua news agency.

The celebration, attended by over 10,000 people, including foreign diplomats, was kicked off around 10:50 a.m. with three ear-piercing gunshots, after which eight people in two groups carrying one pig and one goat threw the animals into the mainstream of the Minjiang River where the water irrigation facility is built.

After that, several young and strong workers, all in ancient Chinese costumes, jumped from the Baizhang Dam onto the sluice gate using sharp axes to cut off the bamboo ropes which tied three logs together for closing the river, and fastened a new rope to the logs, while another group of a dozen or so young men on the river bank all worked to pull the logs up.

Water immediately gushed out and flowed to irrigate the famous fertile Chengdu Plain, where the provincial capital is located.

At present, it irrigates 672,600 hectares of farmland and provides water for daily use and industrial purposes for people and enterprises in 50 large and medium-sized cities in the south-western province.

The water irrigation facility and nearby Mount Qingcheng were placed on the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2000.

My argument is that Mt Qingcheng, one of the most significant Daoist sites in China and the Dujiangyan irrigation project must be considered together as a single religious-economic-environmental complex. Dujiangyan is not simply an environmental project but a cultural relic (hence the ritual celebrations and the traditional costumes). Qingcheng shan is not simply a religious site but also implicated in the regional environment.

Firstly the irrigation project provides context for understanding the environmental precepts that were adopted by the celestial masters. The concern

for water, wetlands and the earth was not simply a theoretical or metaphysical concern for the celestial masters but was an economic and ecological concern. This concern was I think quite complex. On the one hand the wealth of Sichuan depended on the ability of engineering projects like Dujiangyan to regulate the flow of water in the environment. This is concordant with the classical Chinese ideal of the role of humans as the harmonizers of heaven and earth. Dujiangyan perhaps can be considered a concrete implementation of this ideal. Through environmental engineering humans can never tame or domesticate nature, but they can find a way of harnessing its power so as to provide health and wellbeing to human society. The religious sanction of environmental engineering can be seen in the fact that a temple was established at Dujiangyan in honour of Li Bing, its chief architect. On the other hand the fact that the celestial masters deliberately established their centres in mountain areas and not in the fertile plains suggests that this type of social-environmental-engineering must be balanced by a deference and respectful appreciation for nature that can be experienced in mountains because they are the places where this type of engineering cannot take place. They are in effect nature preserves, sanctuaries from engineering complexes such as Dujiangyan. Although such complexes may be considered necessary for human development, they are not, it seems, sufficient. By interpreting Qingcheng shan and Dujiangyan (natural mountain and environmental engineering) as part of a single complex religious-environmental complex, we can say that the celestial masters were attuned to the complexity of the symbolic and environmental value of water.

Prospects

Such complexity is revealed in the environmental crisis of present-day China and in particular in the phenomenon of eco-tourism. In December 2003, the Chinese government committed 10 billion yuan over five years to make Dujiangyan the no. 1 eco-tourism attraction in China. About 24 million yuan has been spent so far on environmental protection that has seen some two thousand egrets return to the top of Mount Qingcheng attracted by 99 Machilus trees some reportedly 1000 years old. The rapid development of this area as a tourist destination brings awareness of environmental issues but also potential harm. A recent plan to construct a new dam 23 metres tall and 1,200 metres wide across the river just upstream of the Dujiangyan project has attracted widespread criticism because of its implications for the cultural and environmental heritage of the area. The dam would be part of the Zipingpu hydroelectric project which aims to help reduce China's dependence on coal-fired electricity.

The Water Cycle

The confluence of Daoism and water can, finally be noted in a recent statement by the deputy director of China's environmental protection agency. In this statement he called for a "recycling" economy—one not predicated on exhausting the finite resources of the environment. Such an economy, he claimed, would be consonant with the "law of nature" which he connected in his statement to the Daoist notion of flowing and not contending with nature. This phrase reveals the basic Daoist worldview in which nature and vitality are fundamentally fluid—

liquid. Humans benefit from aligning themselves with the flow of the Dao, the flow of water-life. In Daoist cosmology the source of this liquid vitality is not some ultimate reality or transcendent Other but the Dao itself, the irrigation channel, the flowing of the fluids. This can only make sense if the Dao as the watercourse of life is understood as a water cycle—a vitality that is eternally replenished with itself. When the Daode jing expresses wonder at the fact that the Dao empties itself but is never empty, it is expressing awe at the continuous flow of water that irrigates the myriad creatures.