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# Celebrating the Feminine: Daoist Connections to Contemporary Feminism in China

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CELEBRATING THE FEMININE: DAOIST CONNECTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY  
FEMINISM IN CHINA

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## Abstract

Contemporary feminism and its emergence in the early 20th century may seem like a recent phenomenon; however, the idea of feminism has been evolving over the centuries and what may be called a “proto-feminism” could be found in one of China’s classical literary masterpieces, known as the *Daodejing*. Classical Chinese philosophy has influenced and helped shape what feminism is today in China. For this project, I analyzed the use of language in the *Daodejing* to demonstrate the feminine imagery throughout the text. Secondly, the characters having significance for feminist interpretations for the *Dao* and *Yin-Yang* were deconstructed and analyzed in order to go into more depth on the meaning. Thirdly, Confucianism and Daoism were compared in order to provide more context and to show how they differ from each other. Lastly, I will use contemporary feminist figures—such as Li Ruzhen, Qiu Jin, and the “Beijing Five”—as examples to show how Daoism was a precursor to and how it helped shape feminism into what it is today in China.

**Keywords:** Proto-feminism, Contemporary Feminism, Daoism, *Daodejing*, Feminine

## Introduction

Even though there has been much change—politically, economically, and socially—in China since the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), women today continue to face discrimination within a culture that still places value and emphasis on patriarchy and filial piety. Contemporary feminism and its emergence as early as the late 1800s may seem like a recent phenomenon; however, the idea of feminism has been evolving over the centuries and what may be called

“proto-feminism” could be found in one the classical literary masterpieces, known as the *Daodejing*.<sup>1</sup> Daoism is both a philosophy and religion and there have been various branches of Daoism throughout history, but this paper will focus more on the language used in the canonical text. There is evidence to suggest that the *Daodejing* is one of the few ways in which “proto-feminism” took root within Chinese civilization and evolved over the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Many religions and philosophies around the world have essentially been androcentric—the practice of placing a masculine perspective at the center of one’s culture, society, and history—and patriarchal.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, men have been portrayed as the dominant, more competent sex and women have been deemed as the weaker, less important sex. Daoist philosophy, as shown in the aforementioned text, advocated for gender equality. This idea was reinforced in the symbolism of *yin-yang* by illustrating the complementary, dualistic, interdependent, and equal natures of the male (*yang*) female (*yin*) elements. One would not exist without the other and both have been equally important in creating and sustaining life. If one of the components were missing, reality would not be complete. Additionally, neither element has been portrayed to be

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<sup>1</sup> “Proto” means “original” or “first” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/>) and “feminism” means “the advocacy of women’s rights/organized activity on the behalf of women’s rights and interests” and “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>), so the term “proto-feminism” is used to define a philosophical tradition or idea that anticipated the modern concept of feminism and “proto-feminist” for those espousing that tradition or idea who lived during a time period (before the 20th century) when the concept of feminism was still unknown (<http://www.definitions.net/definition/protofeminism>). This concept has evolved over the centuries and proto-feminism laid down the foundation for its modern counterpart. There have been prominent proto-feminists in both the Western countries and the Asia-Pacific region, such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Cavendish, Laozi, Wu Zetian, You Zhengxie...and so many more.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Wu Zetian, the only female emperor in China, demonstrated proto-feminism during her reign: gender equality in sexuality, in social status, in politics, and in leadership. For more information on her and her reign, see: Shan Sa. *Empress: A Novel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009., X.L. Woo. *Empress Wu The Great: Tang Dynasty China*. Baltimore: Algora Publishing, 2008. A type of feminism has long existed in China and it has slowly evolved over the centuries, but it has been gaining momentum since the early 20th century.

<sup>3</sup> While androcentric and patriarchal societies have been the global norm, there have been matrilineal societies in various countries, such as the Mosuo in China, the ancient civilization of the Sarmatians in Ukraine and Northern Russia, the Sworn Virgins of Albania, the Akan in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, and the Garo in India and Bangladesh, amongst others (<http://www.mapsofworld.com/around-the-world/matriarchy.html>).

more developed nor more superior than the other. Both have been of equal value and both have contained traces of the other within them. However, to make this clear, Daoism has by no means praised femininity and shunned masculinity. Daoism emphasizes gender equality by saying that the masculine and the feminine are equally significant and one could not be understood without the other. Only by interacting do the two complete a full circle and become one.

### **Methodology/Literature Review**

In this paper, I will analyze the language used in the *Daodejing* in order to give supporting examples of how feminine imagery was used throughout the text. This paper will look at Daoism through a philosophical and linguistic lens while also keeping in mind the religious and tantric aspects of Daoism, in order to have a more holistic view and understanding. All of these elements play an integral part in how this philosophy influenced and helped shape what feminism is today. Not only will I look at the *Daodejing*, I will also briefly compare Daoism and the evolution of Chinese philosophy to Confucianism and Western philosophy for more background information and to show how they differ from each other. Li Ruzhen's novel, *Flowers in the Mirror* (鏡花緣 *jinghuayuan*), published in 1827 during the Qing Dynasty, used quite a number of Daoist concepts and themes throughout his novel which later contributed to contemporary feminist thought. Along with Qiu Jin, the Mao Zedong-era, and, more recently, the "Beijing Five," I will use these contemporary figures and examples to show how Daoism was a precursor to and how it helped shape feminism into what it is today in China.

### **Comparing Confucianism and Daoism**

Confucianism is a humanistic, rationalistic philosophy that sees mankind as the source of all values and it emphasizes social hierarchy and strict adherence to rituals—as explained in *The*

*Analects of Confucius* (論語 *lunyu*)—which was probably useful when it came to effectively ruling and managing a kingdom since everyone had a specific role to fulfill and adhere to rituals or formalities that were befitting of their station or the situation at hand, such as the role of women and how they should behave themselves. In *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (2000), Ivanhoe states that “[Confucius] wanted people to use this knowledge and these practices to develop certain traits of character...[t]his required them to reflect deeply upon the meaning of the lessons they studied and the rituals they practiced, not only to *xue* 學 ‘learn’ but to *si* 思 ‘reflect’ as well.”<sup>4</sup> As stated in Book 2.15 of *The Analects of Confucius*, “The Master said: ‘Learning without due reflection leads to perplexity; reflection without learning leads to perilous circumstances.’”<sup>5</sup> This was also emphasized in a set of volumes written for women to study and chant often in order to fulfill their roles throughout the various stages of their life.

*The Norms Expected of Women, or The Rules of the Boudoir* (閨範四卷 *guifan sijuan*), is a four-volume set that explained the three obediences and four virtues (三從四德 *sancong side*) written sometime in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The three obediences were: obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to a son (usually the eldest) after becoming a widow. The four virtues included morality (得 *de*), physical charm (容 *rong*), propriety in speech (言 *yan*), and efficiency in needlework or diligent work (功

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<sup>4</sup> Philip. J. Ivanhoe. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 2.

<sup>5</sup> “子曰：‘學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆。’” Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 79.

*gong*). Women were to study and follow these at all times in order to be virtuous, obedient, and filial daughters, wives, mothers, and widows, according to traditional Confucian ethics.<sup>6</sup>

Each volume uses classical literature and philosophy in addition to using stories from various dynasties in China to give examples to the women on proper demeanor and how they should abide by the three obediences and four virtues. For example, the first volume emphasizes morality and how it is to be cultivated by studying the “Five Classics of Confucianism,” namely, *The Book of Changes* (易經 *yijing*), *The Book of History* (書經 *shujing*), *The Book of Songs* (詩經 *shijing*), *The Book of Rites* (禮記 *lijì*), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋 *chunqiu*).

The fourth volume explains how women should behave towards their female elders and friends, how to properly conduct ancestor worship, and how they should raise morally upright children. Exemplary behavior, proper decorum, and unwavering obedience were expected of women at every stage in life.<sup>7</sup>

Daoism, on the other hand, emerged with a hopeful, restorative message, which served as a soothing balm to heal the wounds that were inflicted upon the society during a time of instability and warfare (The Warring States Period 403-221 BCE) where major states sought to consolidate their power. Daoism served as an alternative to the Chinese social experience, such

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<sup>6</sup> Yingyin Mingke Guifan 影印明刻閩範：四卷 / [Ming] Lingling Lü Kun jianzhu [明] 寧陵呂坤叔簡註；[Ming] Xin'an Cheng Mengyang yubin [明] 新安程夢暘于賓；[Ming] She Yongning changji [明] 佘永寧常吉；[Ming] Wu Yunqing zhaoyijiao [明] 吳允清肇一校。民國16年[1927]。 (For more information, please visit: University of San Francisco's Ricci Institute Call Number: BJ1609.L85 1927, Silver Room).

<sup>7</sup> Reality and expectations are often quite different. Throughout Chinese history, women did have certain freedoms and some women actually had prominent roles in various areas. It is argued that the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) was the golden age for women in regards to the treatment of women during this time in comparison to preceding or following dynasties. Additionally, several women rose to power during this time, such as Empress Wu Zetian. However, for the most part, women still had to adhere to certain rules and women were not on equal footing with their male counterparts. Women did have freedom, power, and great achievements, but they still had to be careful and appear to be well within their boundaries (see for more information: Barbra Bennett Peterson, He Hong Fei, Wang Jiyu et al, eds. *Notable Women of China: Shang Dynasty to the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: M.E. Sharpe Publishers, Inc., 2000).

as being a more passive and yielding in all relationships in addition to the observation and emulation of nature; it focused more on a simple life and seeing nature as the ultimate source of values. This was a more naturalistic approach in comparison to Confucianism, which was a more humanistic and rationalistic philosophy that emphasized social hierarchy and rituals.

The *Daodejing* (道德經), also known as the *Laozi* (老子), is translated as “The Way of the *Dao*” or “The Classic of the Virtue of the *Dao*.” Laozi has been traditionally credited as the author, but his existence has been heavily debated throughout history and much of what is known about Laozi comes from the traditional “biography” written by the Grand Historian of the Han Dynasty, Sima Qian.<sup>8</sup> However, the text has been one of the most influential in and outside of China and the use of language in the classical text is quite important, but there is not one “correct” translation or “true” meaning since it is open to interpretation. The *Daodejing* encourages an open-minded understanding of the natural patterns of the world and how one can live and act in a naturally spontaneous, effortless manner like the *Dao*.

The classical Chinese text was written in poetic form, full of analogies and metaphors, and the meaning has often been complicated or ambiguous; which is mostly due to the fact that the spoken and literary languages in early and present-day China are two very distinct linguistic mediums and the *Daodejing* emerged out of a traditionally oral culture.<sup>9</sup>

### **Understanding the *Dao***

The *Dao* (道)—translated as “path” or “way”—is believed to be the naturally spontaneous way of human beings and of the universe, and it is the ultimate reality. To take the

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Coutinho. *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 3.



meaning a step further, the radical 辵 (*chuo*) literally means “(to) walk” and it could be loosely translated to mean “to move,” “step by step,” or “rhythm/movement.” The second part of the character 首 (*shou*) literally means “head,” but it could be loosely translated to mean “intelligent/intelligence” or “mind/mindful,” so 辵 + 首 = “intelligent or mindful rhythm and movement.”

The patterns of the *Dao* may be naturally spontaneous, but it is also rhythmic in the way it moves or flows. Additionally, the *Dao* is the fundamental source and preserver of all things. The *Dao* manifests itself in all things as well as being unchanging, even though it is the source of all changes. Furthermore, the *Dao* is ineffable; it can neither be named nor described because language and human thought are limited. The *Daodejing*, the principle text of Daoism, states in the first chapter that if the *Dao* could be named, then it is not the true *Dao* because to be eternal is to be nameless.<sup>10</sup> The conditioned cannot define the unconditioned. While reading the *Daodejing* one can see how the *Dao* is compared to the nature of water because water does not go against things, rather it just simply flows on unhindered due to its fluid and adaptable nature. This metaphor is one of the many that both Laozi and Zhuangzi, another historical figure in Daoism and the traditional author of a text by the same name, have used to try to describe the concept of *Dao*.

In addition to being another characteristic of the *Dao*, the concept of *wu-wei* (無為) is rather significant in Daoism. The first character 無 (*wu/mo*) means “nothing,” “without,” “not to have,” or “to lack” and 為 (*wei*) means “to act,” “to do,” “to act/serve as,” “to be/become,” or “to behave as.” With this in mind, *wu-wei* means “non-action,” or rather it is an unforced and

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<sup>10</sup> Ames and Hall, 77.

effortless action that proceeds freely and spontaneously from one's own nature. To illustrate this point, a fish's *wu-wei* is to swim and it would go against its very nature if it were to walk.

Furthermore, forced or unnatural action accomplishes nothing and goes against a person's very nature; however, if a person adopts the way of the *Dao* and follows the natural way of things, then they, too, will come to act in a natural way that is appropriate to the role that was given to them. According to Ames and Hall, this concept "...provide[s] a way of entertaining, of deferring to, and of investing oneself in an objectless world. Thus, in their governing of the people the sages are concerned with embodying and promoting the sort of acting, knowing, and desiring that does not depend on objects."<sup>11</sup> For instance, Chapter 37 in the *Daodejing* opens with, “道恆無名，侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。”<sup>12</sup> This verse is often translated as, “The Way [*Dao*] does nothing yet nothing is left undone;” which is similar to a verse in Chapter 48, “One does less and less until one does nothing. One does nothing yet nothing is left undone.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, *wu-wei* means to act in a natural and non-assertive manner and by acting in this way nothing is forced and premeditated, but much is accomplished.

### ***Ying-Yang* Polarity**

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) illustrates how these two elements are complementary, interdependent, and dualistic in the natural world and how they give rise to the other. Their duality is an indivisible whole and the fusion of these two elements brings the physical, phenomenal world into being. *Yin* and *yang* depict the discernment between

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<sup>11</sup> Ames and Hall, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ames and Hall, 134.

<sup>13</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 180 & 185.

right and wrong, morning and night, or male and female. As the *Daodejing* states, "...as soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful is beautiful, there is ugliness...as soon as everyone knows the able, there is ineptness..."<sup>14</sup> One could not be understood nor appreciated fully without the other and by understanding these elements, then one is able to understand the natural patterns and balance of nature.

To take the meaning further, let's take a look at the deconstruction and analysis of each character. For example, the radical for 陰 (*yin*) is 阝 (*fu*)—左耳 or "the left side" since this radical could be placed on the right side of the character and the meaning would be different—literally means "mound" and 隤 (*yin*) means "overcast," "cloudy," "shady," "the moon," and "month" (it is an old variant of 陰). The character represents the feminine or negative principle in nature, but it can also mean, for example, "shady," "dark," "the moon," "female," "implicit," and "female genitalia." The radical for 陽 (*yang*) is the same as the previous character, 阝 (*fu*), and 易 (*yi*) means "easy," "amicable," or "to change/exchange" (it is the same character used for the I Ching 易經, or *Book of Changes*). This represents the masculine or positive principle in nature, but other meanings include "sunny," "bright," "the sun," "male," "explicit," and "male genitalia." The original meaning of *yin* and *yang* was used to describe the "shady" and "sunny" sides of the mountain respectively, but this concept evolved and became more nuanced over the centuries.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ames and Hall, 80.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on *Yin-Yang*, see: Robin R. Wang. *YINYANG: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Furthermore, the symbolism of these two elements shows how men and women are, in fact, equal to one another and that one would not exist nor survive without the other. In many societies, *yang* and its development have been seen to be more valuable than the cultivation of *yin* since this element has been as the weaker, more inferior element; however, the women could be considered soft power and teacher to a new generation. For example, women in China were once allowed little to no education, voice, and freedom. They had to go through with arranged marriages and in order to achieve beauty—and a higher status—women from wealthy families and women from families who could afford the cost had to suffer the horrendous process of foot-binding. The only way women could gain status and to be considered attractive and marriageable was by obtaining perfect-sized bound feet, or “golden lilies,” and also by giving birth to sons.<sup>16</sup> If a woman gave birth to a daughter, she lost status and “worth” in her husband's household. A woman's main function in society was to be a virtuous, obedient, and caring daughter, wife, mother, and possibly a widow later in life. Mothers taught their daughters how to cook, clean, and embroidery amongst other tasks that were given to women at the time. The mothers also passed on oral histories, folklore, songs, and a secret women's script—known as *nüshu* (女書)—which was exclusively used amongst the women in Jiangyong County, Hunan. This script not only preserved songs, poems, stories, and histories of women, but it gave them a way to stay in

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on foot-binding and its history, see: Wang Ping. *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2002. and Dorothy Ko. *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

touch with their female relatives and friends, as well. This gave them a voice, however soft in their patriarchal society. This is what was meant by the teaching and passing on a culture.<sup>17</sup>

### **Feminine Imagery in the *Daodejing***

The *Daodejing*, as stated earlier, contains the concept of “proto-feminism” within its pages through the clever, poetic use of language, symbolism, and metaphors. The philosophy emphasizes non-assertive behavior, advocates for gender equality, and it celebrates the feminine, the resilient female, and the nurturing mother. This section will give examples of some of the feminine imagery and it will analyze the use of language in the canonical text.

Chapters 1, 20, and 25 uses the imagery of an ineffable and dualistic nurturing mother to explain that instead of “...finding their nourishment at the marble temple of learning, the Daoists remain contented at the mother’s breast, suckled on rich milk of immediate experience and unmediated feeling.”<sup>18</sup> Chapter 1 describes the ineffability and duality of the *Dao*, “...[t]he nameless (*wuming*) is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening (*wanwu*), [w]hile that which is named their mother.”<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of Chapter 20 (“...I alone differ from others, and value being nourished by the mother.”<sup>20</sup>) and the beginning of Chapter 25 (“...[o]ne can regard it as the mother of heaven and earth. I do not know its proper name; I have given it the style ‘the Way [*Dao*].’”<sup>21</sup>) the *Dao* is depicted as the mother of heaven and earth who has

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<sup>17</sup> For further information, see: 宮哲兵。“女書：世界唯一女性文字。Her Story: 她們的故事 (Nüshu: The World’s Only Women’s Script. Her Story: Their Stories).” 台北：婦女新知基金會出版部，中華民國八十年一月 (January 1992)。

<sup>18</sup> Ames and Hall, 106-107.

<sup>19</sup> Ames and Hall, 77 & 205.

<sup>20</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. 2nd ed (Indianapolis Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), 172.

<sup>21</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 175.

nourished all and has allowed those to have an infant-like mind; which means that the mind welcomes a vast sea of experience and unmediated feeling or judgment.

Chapters 6 and 28 has more illustrative feminine imagery, such as the correlation between female reproductive organs and the reproductive nature of *Dao*. According to Roger Ames and David Hall states in their book, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (1998), the main metaphors that are used as to define feminine traits and characteristics—softness, weakness, darkness, tranquility, and receptivity—are “water,” “the infant,” “the valley,” “the mother,” and “the source.”<sup>22</sup>

Chapter 6, for example, states “[t]he spirit of the valley never dies; She is called the ‘Enigmatic Female.’ The portal of the Enigmatic Female is called the root of Heaven and Earth. An unbroken, gossamer thread it seems to be there. But use will not unsettle it.”<sup>23</sup> Like other passages, this one celebrates the reproductive abilities, the mysteriousness of the female, and her accommodatingly dark emptiness, or vacant interior, which “the valley” alludes to.<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 28 uses the metaphors, “the canyon,” “the infant,” and “the valley,” much like the aforementioned chapter. This passage also makes a reference to the symbolism of *yin-yang*, “[k]now the male but preserve the female...[k]now the white but preserve the black...”<sup>25</sup> As stated in the “*Yin-Yang* Polarity” section, both elements are to be fully understood and one could not exist or survive without the other. The continuity between the polarities has been a prevalent theme throughout the *Daodejing*. Additionally, like Chapters 6, 32, 39, and 61, Chapter 28 used

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<sup>22</sup> Roger Ames and David Hall. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. (New York: SUNY, 1998), 91.

<sup>23</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 165-166.

<sup>24</sup> Ames and Hall. *Thinking from the Han*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 176.

the metaphors, “the canyon” and “the valley,” to express the inexhaustible fecundity of the *Dao* since it is the creator and preserver all things. All things originate and eventually return to this cosmic force. Lastly, the most effective way to cultivate the world is to invariably rely on the power of inclusivity, both *yin* and *yang* elements need to be present.<sup>26</sup> Again, the two, three, or more become one and complete a full circle by intermixing and by being interdependent.

As mentioned so far, the *Daodejing* is one of the few ways in which “proto-feminism” took root within Chinese culture and this concept, “proto-feminism,” has evolved over the centuries. It is argued that feminism is a relatively new phenomenon in China since it does not have a long history like feminism in Western countries; however, if Daoism was added into the discourse, then one could see that the tradition was the precursor to and how it helped shape feminism into what it is today in China. So far, we have looked at the use of language and examples of feminine imagery in the *Daodejing*, deconstructed and analyzed the characters of some key Daoist concepts, and we have compared Confucianism and Daoism to provide more context. Now, let’s look at contemporary feminism to see how exactly Daoism has influenced and helped shape feminism in China today.

### **Overview of Contemporary Feminism in China**

Feminism has been gaining momentum as early as the late 1800’s. It has been linked to socialism—encouraging women to actively participate in their country’s society and economy in order to advance the nation and successfully build up the economy—and class ties, or equality, such as granting women equal rights and freedoms. During this time, the traditional female

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<sup>26</sup> The tantric aspect of Daoism delves deeper into the reproductive natures on the *Dao* and *yin-yang* elements, which emphasizes their complementariness and interdependency. For further reading, see: Bruce Frantzis. *Taoist Sexual Meditation: Connecting Love, Energy, and Spirit*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012.

image was being challenged and femininity was redefined by forbidding the practice of foot-binding.<sup>27</sup> However, many male reformers, who advocated for a loyal, virtuous wife and a strong, healthy mother, were opposed to fully bestowing equal rights onto their female counterparts.<sup>28</sup> Women and feminists were not satisfied with this narrow view of women and there have been several prominent Chinese feminists who helped shaped and are continuing to mold feminism and what it means in China today, such as Li Ruzhen, Qiu Jin, and five women known as the “Beijing Five.”<sup>29</sup>

Li Ruzhen’s (formerly romanized as Li Ju-Chen) novel, *Flowers in the Mirror* (鏡花緣 *jinghuayuan*), written during the Qing Dynasty (1827), used quite a number of Daoist concepts and themes throughout his novel and it did contribute to contemporary feminist thought. His book is a satiric novel that also contains romance and allegorical symbolism. History, fantasy, and satire are interwoven together. The title is also symbolic, according to the translator and editor, Lin Taiyi, of the 1965 translation. On page 9 in the introduction, it is stated that “...the word ‘mirror’ [is] meant to convey the idea that life is just an illusion.”<sup>30</sup> For example, the reality was that Confucianism was considered the norm in China and as the character, Old Tuo, said in

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<sup>27</sup> The practice began during the Song Dynasty and it was officially banned in 1911, but foot-binding continued in the rural areas until around 1939 (Lucy Crossley. “Pictured: The Last Living Chinese Women with Bound Feet More Than 100 Years After the Centuries-old Symbol of Beauty and Status Was Banned” *Daily Mail*. 8 June 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2652228/PICTURED-The-living-Chinese-women-bound-feet-100-years-centuries-old-symbol-beauty-status-banned.html>).

<sup>28</sup> Fan Hong and J.A. Managan. “A Martyr for Modernity: Qiu Jin, Feminist, Warrior, and Revolutionary.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 18, no. 1 (2008), 28.

<sup>29</sup> Other people who contributed to contemporary feminism in China include Liang QiChao, reformist, scholar, journalist, and philosopher, (1873-1929) and He-Yin Zhen, an anarchist-feminist, (ca. 1884-1920). For more information, see: Rebecca Karl. “Feminism in Modern China.” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 6, no. 2 (2012): 235-255. DOI: 10.11080/17535654.2012.738873.

<sup>30</sup> Li Ju-Chen. *Flowers in the Mirror*. Translated and edited by Lin Tai-yi. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 9.



the beginning of Chapter 13, “The Country of Women,” “[w]hatever one is accustomed to always seems natural.”<sup>31</sup> This chapter entertains the possibility of a society where the women are portrayed as dominant and masculine, a Confucian society in reverse.

In the chapter, “The Country of Women,” the gender roles are reversed and the society is a matriarchal one. The men are portrayed as the submissive sex and they have to raise the children and maintain a clean, orderly home. In addition, the men have to take painstaking measures to appear attractive to their female counterparts; such as undergoing the excruciating process of foot-binding in order to obtain dainty “golden lilies,” plucking their eyebrows in the shape of a new moon, and spending hours on their hair, clothes, makeup, and jewelry. The women could wear trousers, hats, and manage the affairs outside the home. They are given the masculine pronouns and the men have the feminine ones. The book was quite radical for its time, especially this chapter since it completely reversed and contradicted the Confucian norms.

The understanding of Daoism in this novel stems from the religious aspect; however, in both Confucianism and Daoism, the religious and philosophical aspects overlap and it can be quite difficult to discern where philosophy ends and where religion begins, and vice versa, since they are neatly interwoven together. When I say that this novel emphasizes the religious aspect, I mean that the Daoist pantheon is one of the key elements in the novel and, like Lin Tai-yi said,

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<sup>31</sup> Li Ju-Chen, 107.

“...when the character Tang Ao speaks of ‘acquiring the [D]ao,’ it is shown that he must first do many ‘acts of charity.’”<sup>32</sup>

Qiu Jin came from a respectable family that paid careful to and allowed equal education to the education of their sons and daughters. According to Hong and Managan, her marriage was a seemingly happy one by traditional standards; however, she eventually grew bored and by 1902 she became influenced by the movements taking place in Hunan, the center of China’s reforms.<sup>33</sup> She eventually left her family to pursue the lifestyle of a revolutionary. Qiu Jin became a sting-willed feminist who stepped out of her traditional role as a “proper” Chinese woman by seeking “...to project a masculine image in order to acquire independence, equality, and power by transference.”<sup>34</sup> She rejected what was considered to be feminine by practicing military drills and occasionally dressing in men’s clothes. She stated, “[m]y aim is to dress like a man!...In China men are strong, and women are oppressed because they are supposed to be weak. I want somehow to have the mind of a man. If I first take on the appearance of a man then I believe my mind too will eventually become like that of a man.”<sup>35</sup> She was a woman who believed “...that through heroic deeds she might wash away the shame of her former subservience, demonstrate her patriotic [fervor] and illustrate her moral courage.”<sup>36</sup> Qui Jin believed wholeheartedly that in

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<sup>32</sup> Li Ju-Chen, 13. According to Russell Kirkland in his article, “Huang Ling-wei: A Taoist Priestess in T’ang” (1991), Huang Ling-wei, also known as “the Flower Maid,” (ca. 640-721 CE) was one of the few Taoist priestesses who achieved significant recognition for her charitable deeds that were carried out with a compassionate heart (“acquiring the *Dao*”); however, she was neglected by historians during this time period since she was not considered historically significant at the time (pg. 73). On the other hand, according to Catherine Despeaux and Livia Kohn (*Women in Daoism* 2003) the priestess “...attained magical powers and succeeded in ascending bodily to the immortals (pg. 124).”

<sup>33</sup> Hong and Managan, 32 & 34.

<sup>34</sup> Hong and Managan, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Hong and Managan, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Hong and Managan, 41.

order to become independent, women must fight for their rights to education and freedom. She practiced what she preached and in 1907 she started a journal called *Chinese Women's Journal* (中國女報 *zhongguo nübao*), in which she expressed her feminists ideals to enlighten women on how they have long been oppressed (foot-binding, polygamy, being confined to the inner chambers of the house, and exclusion from sports and education) and that they need not be subservient any longer.<sup>37</sup> The women had to unwrap the bindings on their feet, literally and figuratively, and challenge the gender roles in their Confucian culture. Qiu Jin wanted the women to understand this and she criticized the men for oppressing women and she criticized women because they accepted subjugation. In order to become more independent and empowered, women had to imagine a different social order and fight to make that a reality.<sup>38</sup> This was quite radical during this time and it was a defining moment for modern China, women, and feminists.

Qiu Jin later became a national heroine in China and she has been a symbol of women's rights and empowerment after her execution in 1907—where she dressed in women's clothes since she was dying for women's rights—due to a failed uprising against the Qing dynastic rulers. She staunchly believed in her morals and she was willing to risk her life for them. She left a strong imprint on contemporary feminism and a path for future generations. She has been portrayed in various forms of media, such as the documentary film “Autumn Gem: The True

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<sup>37</sup> Hong and Managan, 42.

<sup>38</sup> “If we want women to be free from men's oppression we must be independent. To be independent we must have education and learn to make a living...If women can support themselves, they will be equal to men. The whole country would not have a wasted person. The country would be strong again. Women's education is very popular in Japan. If any of you want to come here I will help you.” [Hong and Managan, 38, and 秋瑾。“秋瑾集 (Qiu Jin's Collected Works).” (北京：中華書局, 1960), 32]”

Story of China's First Feminist” (2009) and the Chinese/Hong Kong biographical film “The Woman Knight of Mirror Lake” (2011).<sup>39</sup> She is part of modern Chinese culture, discourse, and political iconography; however, her poetry and essays are often overlooked. Her exceptional educational background and revolutionary ideas are reflected in them.<sup>40</sup>

Another event that sparked debate about the discrimination of women in China was the arrest of five activists for women’s rights, known as the “Beijing Five.” These five women—Wei Tingting, Wang Man, Zheng Churan, Wu Rongrong, and Li Tingting—were imprisoned for thirty-seven days due to alleged charges of picking quarrels and provoking trouble.<sup>41</sup> However, the activists were planning to distribute stickers on buses in order to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transportation on May 8 (International Women’s Day), and they were arrested before they were able to begin staging their protest. Their arrest sparked heated debates around the world and it was condemned by renowned organizations and politicians, such as Amnesty International and Hilary Clinton. Other protests staged by the “Beijing Five” were Occupy Men’s Toilets in 2012 to bring focus on the unfair ratio of women’s public toilets to men’s and Bloody Brides in 2013 where the women dressed in wedding dresses with red paint smears resembling blood-stains to raise awareness on domestic violence, which has been a longstanding issue in China.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Qiu Jin’s sobriquet, or pen name, was Jianhu Nǚxia (鑑湖女俠), which translated to “Woman Knight of Mirror Lake.”

<sup>40</sup> For more information, see: 鲍家麟和刘晓艺。“侠女愁城:秋瑾的生平与诗词 (Life Experience and Poems of Qiu Jin).” 第1版。南京: 南京大学出版社, 2016。and 郭延礼和郭蓁。“中国文库·文学类:秋瑾诗文选注 (China’s Library of Literature: Selected Works of Qiu Jin).” 第1版。北京: 人民文学出版社, 2011。

<sup>41</sup> Ren Yuan. “Chinese Feminist: ‘If I Talk About Women’s Rights in China, People will Think I’m Sick.’” *The Telegraph*. 15 April 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11535311/Chinese-female-activist-Womens-rights-are-seen-as-a-sickness-here.html>

<sup>42</sup> Yuan.

The recent protests against gender inequality have become a relatively new phenomenon in China. More and more women have become aware of the gender inequality and discrimination that is still quite prominent throughout the various layers of their society. Even though it can be tricky waters to navigate, women and feminists have been coming together to voice these underlying issues. Additionally, feminists have been called derogatory names, cast in a negative light, and they have faced harassment, intimidation, and they have been subjected to pressure. Rather than quashing these protests, it has been fueling feminists in China to make sure that their voices could be heard. However, feminists may have to devise other ways in which to protest and bring awareness to these issues because the government has been cracking down hard on protestors. In a BBC News article written in 2015 by Martin Patience, “China’s Detained ‘Guerrilla Feminists,’” it was stated that “[s]ince coming to power two years ago, President Xi Jinping's government has locked up journalists, lawyers, NGO workers and activists of all stripes. He has warned against what he sees as Western ideas infiltrating China and threatening the ruling Communist Party's grip on power.”<sup>43</sup>

Feminism has long been under pressure and the recipient of negative backlash in China, especially in recent times, but it has also been gaining momentum. Even though it has been gaining momentum, women are still discriminated against throughout the various sectors of their society, such as teachers paying more attention to their male students because they are believed to be more competent than girls, universities openly excluding girls from certain majors (i.e., any engineering majors because women could not lift or operate heavy machinery and should not be away from home for too long) and national defense since, again, women are still viewed as the

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Patience. “China’s Detained ‘Guerrilla Feminists.’” *BBC News*. 3 April 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32166443>

weaker sex. Additionally, many job ads have openly excluded women or specified that they want a tall, slim, young, attractive woman working for them. For example, plane stewardesses in China should have all of these physical characteristics because they have to serve as the face of the airline. Once they become older and are no longer considered attractive by the standards of the airline, the women are given more menial tasks at the airport.

### **Conclusion**

It is argued that feminism is a relatively new phenomenon in China; however, there are “proto-feminist” concepts found within the *Daodejing*. The idea of feminism has been evolving over the centuries and all of the aforementioned elements play an integral part in how Daoism helped shape what feminism is today in China. The *Daodejing* has celebrated the femininity, fecundity, resiliency, and mysteriousness of the *Dao* and the text has illustrated that the *yin* element is as equally strong and as important as its *yang* counterpart. Daoism has long been challenging the patriarchal, Confucian society and providing an alternate way of living and thinking. For example, women such as Huang Ling-wei and Cao Wenyi were able to step out of their traditional role as women and have more freedoms, like being religious founders and leaders.

Secondly, the *yin-yang* elements are an intrinsic part of the reproductive nature of both the *Dao* and beings. These elements become one and complete a full circle through their interdependency and intermixing. There is masculinity in femininity and there is femininity in masculinity; however, the masculine has been portrayed as being more developed and competent. Daoism promotes a feminine consciousness and that the *yin* should be cultivated and understood. The feminine element and one’s own femininity is not a weakness. People like Li

Ruzhen, Qiu Jin, He-Yin-Zhen, and activists like the “Beijing Five” have understood this. Both women and feminists alike have been voicing their opinions on these underlying issues, and these types of protests have been gaining momentum as early as the late 1800’s in China.

Lastly, women and feminists today will have to come up with different strategies in which to protest and raise awareness of gender inequality and women’s rights. One way they could go about this is to bring in Daoism to show China’s citizens and government that there are “proto-feminists” concepts found within one of the oldest and most influential books compiled in ancient China, the *Daodejing*. This would probably spark a heated debate, but it would also raise feminine consciousness, or get people to start thinking in a different way, and provide the activists a more solid counterargument.

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