

CORONAVIRUS IS NOT AN ENEMY RATHER A COURIER: A PERSPECTIVE FROM CHINESE *DAO* THINKING

By Meijun Fan and Zhihe Wang

The worldwide COVID-19 is a tragedy, not only for the lives lost and for the ones suffering illness, but also for all of us in the world since we live in a same global village and are deeply interconnected. Additionally, it is a unique opportunity for us to help each other, to cooperate with each other, and to surmount together the ravages of disease and death. With this in mind, it is important to remember that COVID-19 is an ecological crisis and a transformational moment; it is an invitation for us to deeply rethink our relationship with nature and our relationship with others (other people, other countries, other cultures). Many philosophies and traditions have rich resources to make significant contributions to this rethinking. This paper offers a reflection on COVID-19 from a Chinese *Daoist* point of view.

Chinese *Daoist* Thinking

When we say “Chinese” in this article, we mainly refer to *Dao thinking* which is based on but not limit to *Daoism/Taoism*. According to Lu Xun, one of the most prominent modern Chinese writers, “All roots of Chinese culture lie in *Daoism*.”

Chinese thinking can be regarded as a form of *process-relational thinking* due to the deep convergences between Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy and Chinese culture. Whitehead, whose works are primary sources for contemporary process philosophy (also known as philosophy of organism) and constructive postmodernism, observes that his “philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate.”¹ We agree. When we read and study Whitehead’s philosophy, we hear something that feels deeply Chinese to us.

As a form of process-relational thinking, Chinese *Dao thinking* has been playing a vital part in Chinese mentality for centuries. “The value of *Dao* lies in its power to reconcile opposites on a higher level of consciousness.”² To use this power to reach a balanced way of living and a higher integration rather than going to the extreme is the essence of *Dao*.

Dao thinking pictures the universe as an organic whole and sees it as “a flowing process of which humans are an integral part and encourages them to dwell in harmony with the larger

¹ David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (eds.), Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 7.

² Roland Faber and Santiago Slabodsky, eds., *Living Traditions and Universal Conviviality: Prospects and Challenges for Peace in Multireligious Communities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xii.

whole.”³ In Roger Ames’s words, “At the core of the classical Chinese worldview is the cultivation of harmony.”⁴ Likewise, Whiteheadian philosophy conceives human beings as an organic component of *Wanwu* (the ten thousand things). For Whitehead, as for *Daoism*, humans seek harmony with the greater whole and find their satisfaction, their wholeness, in this harmony.

We wish that more Chinese knew about *Dao* thinking. Unfortunately, the process-relational tradition has been oppressed in China due to the Chinese “First Enlightenment. The First Enlightenment was embodied in the [New Culture Movement](#) and the [May Fourth Movement](#) in the early part of the 20th century. It copied the European enlightenment and was characterized by the total abandonment of Chinese tradition. In the 21st century, the harsh reality of the ecological crisis facing China challenged people to reconsider the value of Chinese tradition with the help of Whiteheadian process thought and constructive postmodernism. The Chinese government’s promotion of ecological civilization also has immensely fueled the resurgence of this tradition. In this spirit we offer the following observations.

Wisdom from *Daoism*

COVID-19 is not a mere public health crisis but an ecological crisis. Yet most people have conceived of COVID-19 only as a public health issue. They have placed the focus on improving detection means and inventing a vaccine as soon as possible. People are dying to find the remedy to coronavirus.

There is little doubt that all of these efforts should be appreciated, but the point is that no vaccine can be invented overnight. We are told by Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, that it may take eighteen months before a safe and effective coronavirus vaccine is available, and this is not certain either. (More recently Dr. Fauci has said he is cautiously optimistic that a vaccine will be available in the first half of 2021). Even if the vaccine is invented in this timeframe and works well, it may not work on mutations of the original coronavirus. According to *The Reykjavík Grapevine* in Iceland, an individual who tested positive for COVID-19 in Iceland has been infected by two strains of the virus simultaneously. The second strain is a mutation of the original novel coronavirus. It is thought the mutated second strain could be more malicious or infectious, because people infected by the dual-strain patient were only found to have the second strain. If this is the case, the virus could be mutating to become more infectious over time. “This is just one of the startling new

³ Jay McDaniel, “Comparing Whitehead and Chinese Thought,” <https://www.openhorizons.org/comparing-whitehead-and-chinese-thought.html> (accessed July 28, 2020).

⁴ Roger Ames, *Sun-tzu: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 62.

discoveries that have been uncovered from its analysis of the genetic sequences of 40 COVID-19 strains found in Iceland.”⁵

We will ignore the more fundamental causes of COVID-19 if we treat it only as a public health issue and not also as an ecological crisis. As Greta Thunberg said at the 24th meeting of the United Nations climate conference: “We can’t solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis.” Treating COVID-19 as a mere medical issue would make us exclusively rely on medical science and passively rely on medical doctors. If we regard COVID-19 as an ecological crisis, it requires a brand-new way of thinking, a comprehensive, organic thinking which treats COVID-19 as political, economic, philosophical, ethical, and psychological issue.

We recommend *Dao thinking*. According to *Dao* or process-relational thinking, everything is closely related to one another. The COVID-19 crisis is a result of many causes. This means that tackling COVID-19 should be carried out in a multi-faceted way. It requires everyone’s active participation; economists, educators, philosophers, government officials, and ordinary people all should take some responsibility. We should rethink our development model, our way of thinking, our way of living, our way of consumption, our way of production, our [dietary habits](#), and our education system, etc. All of them are related to the cause and cure of COVID-19.

Not an Enemy but a Courier

One place to begin is to recognize that the new corona virus is not an enemy but a courier. As a messenger, it reminds us that nature is crucial to human life and livelihood.

For those of us who adopt *Dao thinking*, nature is not “environment” external to human life. On the contrary, nature actually is part of our body; it constitutes ourselves; it is ourselves. We are nature; nature is us; we are one. In the famous words of Zhuangzi/Chuang-tzu, a defining figure in Chinese *Daoism*, “Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one.” (“天地与我并生,而万物与我为一”) Each human being is regarded by *Daoism* as a small universe which is closely related to the big universe.

The [Neijing tu](#) (*Chart of the Inner Warp*), a *Daoist* chart of the human body, clearly illustrates that the inner connection between the two universes and shows that the little universe--our body—is part of the big universe--the nature. Thus, there is no human/nature dualism in *Daoism*. Every breath we take clearly shows the intrinsic connection between ourselves and nature, between our little universe and the big universe. In Rod Giblett’s words, “Human bodies are co-extensive with and identical to natural environs, principally the bioregion in which one lives and works, which sustains one being.”⁶

⁵ Poppy Askham, “Patient Infected with Two Strains of COVID-19 in Iceland,” *Reykjavik Grapevine* (March 24, 2020), <https://grapevine.is/news/2020/03/24/patient-infected-with-two-strains-of-covid-19-in-iceland/>.

⁶ Rod Giblett, *Black Swan Lake: Life of a Wetland* (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 124.

From such a holistic perspective of oneness of nature and humans, *Daoism* pays much attention to the dependence of human beings on nature. It stresses that maintaining the harmony and peace of the whole natural world as the crucial prerequisites for the survival and development of humans. According to [Taipingjing](#) (“Scriptures of the Great Peace,” a *Daoist* text) “The fate of humans lies in the hands of heaven and earth. If human beings want to live safely, they must ensure the safety of heaven and earth first, then they can gain their own prosperity.” Likewise, “If heaven and earth are not in harmony, human beings cannot enjoy the natural span of their life.” This means that humans cannot survive without nature. You can survive without a BMW car or a diamond ring, but you cannot survive without air and water. The new corona virus draws us back to this common-sense notion. It makes us realize how invaluable nature is and that protecting nature is actually protecting ourselves.

In short, it is time to forsake the imperialist attitude to nature and put humans in the right place in the universe. It is time to realize that all creatures have irreplaceable worth and no one is expendable. It is time to pay respect to nature as our lifeblood. In John Cobb’s words, “Human beings have a kind of responsibility for the whole that no other creature has.” It is time to abandon the extractive economy based on exploiting nature, it is time to care for our bodies as being parts of nature. Practically speaking, this means the avoidance of junk food and nurturing the body with healthy, organic food by virtue of the homology of medicine and food. To *Daoism*, “The outside crises and dangers can only be overcome by transforming them within us, by purifying and reshaping them through the harmony of our body.”

The Need for a Second Enlightenment

The tiny Corona virus explodes the myth that the First Enlightenment is an adequate theoretical foundation for modernity and modernization—almost all modern systems such as the political system, economic system, education, medical system are out of order facing COVID-19’s lash. Their inefficiencies, incompetency, and disregard for life has caused a great deal of unnecessary loss and death and has made people reflect on the Western European origin of the First Enlightenment. This reminds us of Whitehead’s prediction: “The moment of dominance, prayed for, worked for, sacrificed for, by generations of the noblest spirits, marks a turning point where the blessing passes into the curse.”⁷

Although it brought many gifts—science, democracy, and an emphasis on the rights of individuals -- it also brought many liabilities from which the world now suffers, including a neglect of the value of Earth, a rejection of traditional wisdom (including the wisdom of rural peoples), an overemphasis on reason at the expense of intuition and beauty, extreme

⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 399.

individualism, and radical nationalism as an enlarged version of individualism. In order to create an ecological civilization, a more holistic enlightenment – a Second Enlightenment—is needed for our time. This Second Enlightenment can combine wisdom from both sources and encourage people from different parts of the world to discover a global spirit that unites us all. This global spirit will not swallow the many cultures of the world in a spirit of sameness. It will instead encourage people to understand their unique place in the broader human narrative. There is more wisdom in all the traditions than in any taken alone. We call this *complementary consciousness*.

If the First Enlightenment favored individualism, then the Second Enlightenment would appreciate a postmodern communitarianism which would create a bigger space for an individual's freedom. If the First Enlightenment was a solo, then the Second Enlightenment would be a symphony to which each culture would have an important role to play. If the core values of the first Enlightenment involved promoting individual freedom, then the second Enlightenment's would be about "respecting others." Here, "others" refers to nature, all [sentient beings](#) including virus, and all nations, cultures, and traditions. As a defining pioneer of the Second Enlightenment, Whitehead warned people of the "Gospel of uniformity." For him, "Other nations of different habits are not enemies: they are godsend. [People] require of their neighbours something sufficiently akin to be understood, something sufficiently different to provoke attention, and something great enough to command admiration."⁸

When we trace back the process of COVID-19's spread, we can see clearly that gospel of uniformity with arrogance played a destructive role in causing so much unnecessary loss and death. That is partly explain why the Western countries did not take defensive measures when China worked hard to tackle COVID-19. Of course, China had made some mistakes due to its various bureaucracy and formalisms when facing the sudden unexpected COVID-19. But as a nation believing *Dao thinking* whose way of life is based on compassion, respect, and love for all beings, China quickly recognized the changed situation, corrected its mistakes, and basically controlled the disease in two months by taking its advantage of its institutional strengths. The Western countries were so arrogant. They ignored the lesson of China and they lost a priceless two months bought for the whole world at great cost to human life and economy. Even now some Western leaders engage in blame shifting rather than taking responsibility for their own mistakes.

For Westerners of the First Enlightenment, competition not harmony is held in high regard. Only Western medicine and not alternative medicine is trusted. As Chinese *Dao thinkers* we have noticed how often people use such language as "fighting the disease" or "fighting the virus" when they talk about the new corona virus. This is a consequence of treating the new corona virus as an enemy.

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York, The Free Press, 1967) 2007.

If we regard the virus not as an enemy but as a messenger or as a sign that tells us there is something wrong with our systems and our bodies—imbalances in our systems in general and in our bodies in particular—then we approach the virus in a different way, even finding ways to co-exist with it.

Western medicine which relies on the germ theory of disease—and is good at killing germs—has its advantages. Yet, over-reliance on this has many problems as well. For example, the overuse of antibiotics has resulted in a great deal of adverse side effects. It is said that some infected patients in Wuhan died in the overuse of antibiotics. Chinese traditional medicine focuses more on enhancing the immunity of the whole system rather than killing germs.

It was a miracle that China was able to control the spread of corona virus in little more than two months. This is only in part due to the strength of Chinese institutions, the ability to exercise social control, and a compliant population. In our opinion, the [combination of Chinese traditional and Western medicine](#) based on the Second Enlightenment played an instrumental role in treating the new corona virus epidemic. A study shows that the highest cure rate and lowest [mortality rate](#) did not happen in rich cities such as Beijing and Shanghai who have a [developed economies](#) and advanced Western medicine systems, but rather happened in some “poor” provinces that are economically backward but have strong traditional Chinese medicine systems.

Take Haozhou City of Anhui Province as an example. It had no infections after March 5, 2020, and all 108 people infected in the city totally recovered—cure rate 100%, [mortality rate](#) zero. What is the secret of their success? The secret lies in comprehensive thinking, a *Daoist thinking* which integrated Western medicine and Chinese medicine to treat the infected patients. Haozhou City with a population of 6.56 million is famous for Chinese traditional. Based on *Dao thinking*, the Chinese doctors in Haozhou regard each patient as a different organic whole. They not only treated the infected patients with Chinese medicine by offering different prescriptions to different patients in accordance with their condition, but also provided some additional treatments with Haozhou characteristics such as practicing “Hua Tuo’s Wu Qin Xi” ([Five Animal Frolic](#)), [ear acupoint therapy](#), and Chinese medicinal diet in order to improve immune systems of the patients so that they could quickly recover their pulmonary function. If the judgment Dr. Dingyu Zhang, director of Jinyintang Hospital in Wuhan who treated 1,500 patients, is right that COVID-19 actually is a self-limiting disease and almost all of infected patients can be cured, then enhancing our immunity through presently available means rather than exclusively looking to the invention of the vaccine becomes extremely important. As an application of *Dao thinking*, *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic* (Huangdi Neijing, 黃帝內經) put prevention in the priority, according to which, “The best doctor treats un-occurred disease, the better treats occurring disease, the inferior treats occurred disease.” Regarding preventing COVID-19 and other diseases, no one is better than ourselves to undertake this task. In other words, we are our own doctor as well as the doctor of Earth. As Kristofer Schipper put it, “To regulate the

world, we have to cultivate ourselves, to tend our inner landscape.” As a lesson from the COVID-19, this cultivation of self rather than self-indulgence should be an important component of the Second Enlightenment.

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AN IMAGINED LETTER FROM COVID-19 TO HUMANS: STOP. JUST STOP

By Kristin Flyntz

Stop. Just stop.
It is no longer a request. It is a mandate.
We will help you.
We will bring the supersonic, high speed merry-go-round to a halt.
We will stop
the planes
the trains
the schools
the malls
the meetings
the frenetic, furied rush of illusions and “obligations” that keep you from hearing our
single and shared beating heart,
the way we breathe together, in unison.
Our obligation is to each other,
As it has always been, even if, even though, you have forgotten.