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Research article

Laozi and the Myth of Progress in China

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Abstract

The Chinese myth of progress is one of the most comprehensive and systematic alternatives to its Western counterpart. It is particularly worth considering at a time when the West's progressive mythology is stagnating. Laozi played a special role in the creation of this alternative and his section 11 demonstrates an implicit form of the philosophy of technology elaborated by the Chinese progressivist reformers of the 19th century. In turn, the reformers' Daoist connotations help to reconstruct and validate the philosophy of technology in Laozi. Laozi studies have an additional explanatory strategy through Laozi's influence during a critical time for his civilization. This article uses Sinology methodologically, comparing ideas from Laozi and Chinese intellectuals of the 19th century to reconstruct and interpret new meanings in Laozi's philosophy. It considers the psychological-comparativist approach by Evgeny Torchinov and others, making it possible to connect their comparativist approach to the Daoist philosophy of technology for the sake of future existential analysis of the techno-human situation from Laozi's perspective. Laozi and other Daoist thinkers suggest existential strategies, even in a world where everything is mathematized. Berdyaev's "new heroism," about staying human in the age of machines, has an unexpected ally in Laozi and his tradition. Therefore, Laozi is vital for understanding the technological age.

Key words: Laozi; Technology; Heroism; Liang Qichao; Becoming

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Научная статья

Лао-цзы и миф прогресса в Китае

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Аннотация

Китайский миф прогресса – это, возможно, главная альтернатива мифу западному. Он особенно ценен, когда западная прогрессивная мифология стагнирует. Лао-цзы сыграл особую роль в создании этой альтернативы. 11 чжан из трактата Лао-цзы демонстрирует имплицитную форму философии техники, разработанную далее китайскими прогрессистами-реформаторами XIX века. В свою очередь, даосские коннотации реформаторов помогают реконструировать и обосновать эту философию техники. Исследователи Лао-цзы могут прибегнуть к дополнительной объясняющей стратегии, рассматривая влияние Лао-цзы в критическое для Китая время. Статья методологически полагается на синологию для реконструкции и интерпретации Лао-цзы в сравнении с идеями китайских интеллектуалов 19 века. Анализ построен вокруг психолого-компаративистского подхода Е. Торчинова и др., для возможности соединения компаративизма и даосской философии техники и экзистенциального анализа техно-человеческой ситуации в духе Лао-цзы. Лао-цзы и другие даосские мыслители предлагают экзистенциальные стратегии даже в мире, где все математизировано. Новый героизм Бердяева, помогающий остаться человеком в эру машин, нашел неожиданного союзника в лице Лао-цзы и его традиции. Таким образом, Лао-цзы остается актуальным в технологическую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: Лао-цзы; Технология; Героизм; Лян Цичао; Становление

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese myth of progress is probably the most comprehensive and systematic alternative to its Western counterpart. Time itself in China is reversed at the level of grammar and prepositions: the day after tomorrow in Chinese is *houtian* (后天) a sky behind me, while the day before tomorrow is *qiantian* (前天), the sky in front of me. In the West, the future is ahead of the subject, while in China it is the past that is ahead, because the past, unlike the future, is known and seen in the historical perspective, just as the space in front of a human subject can be physically seen. The Western myth of progress, even in this most basic grammatical category, changed in translation upon entering China before being further refracted. The millennia-old civilization served as the limit, the refractory lens, and the occasion to accept and re-think the myth of progress. When the Western myth of progress is stagnating, it is especially worth considering the Chinese alternative. It promises humanity a better future if in a different grammar. Moreover, the study of Laozi suggests an additional explanatory strategy because of Laozi's influence during a critical time for his civilization. To show this, the perspectives of Wei Yuan, Zheng Guanying, Liang Qichao and others are given below. They are very different figures. It makes the similarities between them and Laozi more significant. In older literature, Laozi is often referred to as Lao-tzu, Lao Tseu, or Laotse.

Remarkable work has been done by international scholars to address the philosophy of technology proposed by Laozi and other Daoists, regarding more reflective employment of technologies (Parkes, 2021), philosophical urbanism (Wenning, 2023) and comparative environmentalism (Abe et al., 2022; see Graham, 2021). The reception of the Western myth of progress and science in China has also received significant attention from different perspectives, including general cultural history (Elman, 2006), biography (Wang, 2022) and economics (Zhou, 2022). As the role of Laozi in the reception of the myth of progress has not been covered by recent scholarship, it will be considered below.

LAOZI AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE INSTRUMENTAL MODE

Laozi's view on technology follows the trend of his time, which was that of nostalgia. The great empire of Zhou was falling apart and the clashes of petty warlords were filling China with violence and instability. History in China is a narrative of decline from an ideal past, because the fundamentals of Chinese culture were established in the inter-dynastic period. Unlike the Confucians, who believed in having an enlightened ruler and aristocratic bureaucracy, the Daoists, like Laozi and Zhuangzi, placed their faith in the inner world of the individual. The ideal past of Daoism is different from that of Confucianism; it is pre-dynastic and pre-civilizational in nature. However, Chinese culture has a strong tendency towards balance, and pessimism is outweighed in Daoism with the possibility of independent individual perfection (Laozi, 6–8).¹ The Daoist

¹ It is customary to cite Laozi's work by referring not to a specific edition but to the numbered sections. In the following, the citations refer to the translation by M. Roberts (Laozi, 2001a), occasionally to the translation by Tkachenko (Laozi, 2001b).



attitude to technology is equally balanced, there is a hint about technology to handle technology. In fact, even the word “dao” (道) itself has a link to technology, because “the original meaning of “dao” was (...) later expanded to also indicate a method or a technique” (Chen, 2018, p. 113).

In section 11, Laozi speaks of the void, or of what-is-not (無 *wu*), and the relations the void has with different human inventions. Laozi provides one example for each of the basic categories of cultural objects: technology (wheel), art (chalice), and architecture (house). The chalice has four sides but works because of the void that lies between these, and the same can be said about houses. The spokes of the wheel meet in the wheel’s center, in the empty space where a chariot’s axle would connect to make the wheel usable. The void is germane to all three categories. In the natural world, there is a dialectics of being and nonbeing. According to Laozi, we are not void and should imitate water (Laozi, 8) rather than wheels or houses. Human beings are capable of bestowing criteria of usefulness, while wheels and chalices can only be used. In Laozi (2001), as Roberts comments, “[t]he sage observes but does not intervene or try to exploit the process” (p. 31) of the interactions of opposites, which complement each other as much as they conflict.

The technology in Laozi should exist but in a non-used state (“使有什伯之器而不用,” Laozi, 80). In Roberts’ translation (Laozi, 2001a), the lines are “make sure they have no use for tools / That do the work of tens or hundreds.” Tkachenko translates the same lines as “ships and wagons will be, but better out of use” (Laozi, 2001b). The “tool” here is *qi* (器), an instrument, vessel or utensil, a Chinese character deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and civilization, and thus carrying significant ambiguity (Hui, 2016, p. 99). The void is visually present in the character for *qi*, which is marked with the element *kou* (mouth, 口), repeated four times to surround the central element as if it were the doors and windows of a house.

The sage should have mastery over instruments as well as the sagacity never to use them. The sage should “occupy himself with what is ready-to-hand (*to chto pod rukoi*)” (Laozi, 72 in Laozi, 2001b). In section 8, the ideal state of the Daoist master is given. As Roberts translated section 8, “[p]erfect mastery works like water / [a] boon to every living creature”. As Roberts comments, “[t]he word translated ‘boon’ in line 2 is *li*, a primary term for the Mohists, who judge government policy by the standard of what is most useful to the people” (Laozi, 2001a, p. 46). Section 8 implicitly refers to the instrumental mode as a necessary way to approach technology (Laozi, 80). This mode is particularly significant, because it was echoed during the Chinese reception of modern science and technology in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As earlier sections of Laozi and later Daoist tradition teach us, we need to cultivate ourselves first and our tools second. Torchinov (2007), D’Ambrosio (2020) and others give a detailed account of the Daoist methodology of nourishing the inner self. It is a way to cultivate the “new heroism” Berdyaev (1933/2023) calls for and predicts.



LAOZI'S LEGACY IN THE CHINESE RECEPTION OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The first intensive contact between Europe and China happened during the Han and Roman empires. The periods of disorder that followed saw two corners of Eurasia disconnected, with the brief exception of the Mongolian empire, which enabled the introduction of a huge number of Chinese technologies to the West. Europe and China met again in the early years of the Qing period. Even after the Renaissance in the West and the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the Manchurian conquest in the East, the technological level of the two regions was comparable. Porcelain was “one of the most abundantly manufactured and widely circulated commodities in the early modern world” (Chen, 2022, p. 222), and only China then knew how to produce it. Western scholars tried to solve the mystery of chinaware. Francis Bacon suggested that porcelain came from cement buried in the earth (Elman, 2006, p. 78). However, the mystery endured until 1712, when Jesuit Father d’Entrecolles visited Jingdezhen, a city devoted entirely to ceramic production, a huge industrial center lit day and night to operate the kilns to produce chinaware. D’Entrecolles was able to share with the West a detailed account of the sloping dragon-shaped kilns used in Jingdezhen (Elman, 2006, p. 78).

Jesuits made an impressive career at the imperial court in China because their astronomy was better at predicting rare celestial events. Chinese dynasties traditionally categorized unpredicted events as omens that should affect the state policy (Torchinov, 2007, p. 67). This led to fewer unpredicted events, making it easier to govern China. This astronomical superiority of the West gave rise to interest in what was called “Western learning” (西学 *xixue*). Mei Wending, during Kangxi’s reign, traced Western learning to the alternative ancient Chinese cosmological model of “spherical heavens” (Elman, 2006 p. 42). This move recalls how Laozi’s followers invented the idea that Laozi journeyed to the West and founded Buddhism in India. This invented narrative helped and limited Chinese reception of Buddhism. The same form of nativization happened with Western learning.

The Chinese believed in a square earth under a circular sky, however, in the Han period, there were ideas about the world resembling an egg, with the earth as the yolk and the heavens as the sphere around it. Mei launched the trend of Westernization as the return of China to its origins, by suggesting that the latter model influenced the West. The “emphasis on unifying European and Chinese knowledge was a tactic that would continue until 1900” (Elman, 2006 p. 20). The Jesuits also wanted to present their knowledge as native to China, to gain a foothold in this new territory (Elman, 2006 p. 26). At the same time, the scholastic nature of Jesuit knowledge pushed China away from uniting new Western ideas and mechanical engineering, because “Jesuits (...) still accepted the Aristotelian notion of movement based on an object’s own elemental makeup” (Elman, 2006 p. 91).

The next stage began when the First Opium War heated up China’s intellectual climate (Elman, 2006 p. 101). One of the most prominent intellectuals, Wei Yuan, produced the slogan “to restrict the barbarians with their own hands” (“夷之长技以制夷



”), which gained popularity not only in China but also in Japan (Kobzev, 2002, p. 446). The subject of war and its instruments were despised in both Daoist and Confucianist segments of traditional Chinese thought. Wo Ren, another prominent intellectual, believed a country’s foundations were “etiquette and the support of the civilians, not diplomatic tactics and modern technologies (...), to defeat the foreigners, (...) we shall seek the scholar with good manners” (Zhou, 2022, p. 17). However, the instrumental mode noted in Laozi reappears. The ideal Chinese literati were supposed to master Western weapons in order to use them defensively to limit the West’s imperial ambition. These Western weapons and other instruments should be retained, dedicated to a very narrow focus, quite in the spirit of Laozi.

Another important slogan of the period is “Chinese teachings are for the foundations (*ti*), Western learning is for practical use (*yong*)” (“中学为体，西学为用”), formulated by Zheng Guanying (Kobzev, 2002, p. 444). The pair of *ti* and *yong* (体用) is related to Laozi through his ancient commentator Wang Bi (Tang, 2001, p. 26), who was definitely a follower of Laozi, albeit an original thinker in his own right (D’Ambrosio, 2022).

However, Wei Yuan and other reformists’ efforts had only limited success. To receive Western tools was not a technical but a polytechnic process, with numerous technologies intermingled with each other and the necessity of domestic developmental ability to adopt the West’s inventions. It generated purely economic problems: “[t]he technological switch toward steel and armored warships in Europe highlighted the difficulty of transporting iron and coal to make steel in coastal China” (Elman, 2006, p. 175). It was not enough to buy western technological tools and weapons and set them aside as Laozi teaches (*Laozi*, 80). China needed institutions to technologize itself.

LAOZI AND TECHNOLOGIZATION OF CHINA

The first wave of Westernization in China ended after the Second Opium and First Sino-Japanese wars. “A polity which functioned on the basis of symbolism, rather than managerial efficiency, was defeated during the Opium Wars by the British Empire” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2020, p. 297). It was a failure of the approach to technologies “understood merely as instruments” (Hui, 2016, p. 32). To truly acquire the Western tools, global reform was needed. Kan Youwei suggested imitating Peter the Great (Kobzev, 2002, p. 465). A new slogan, “seek wealth”, replaced the slogan “seek weapons”. Xue Fucheng required the building of trains, telegraph stations and other new inventions (Zhou, 2022, p. 32). At the same time, the traditional ways of governing China attracted attention as needing urgent reform.

As Chinese intellectuals began acquiring Western tools, they missed out on the mathematization of practical mechanics (Elman, 2006 p. 91). This started to change in the late 19th century. The process of mathematization encountered in China a fundamental problem: Chinese culture, unlike the West’s, viewed mathematics as merely a tool. The “literati had understood mathematics as a tool. With the introduction of advanced algebra and calculus after 1850, the Chinese began to view mathematics as a field of learning with its own principles” (Elman, 2006 p. 91).



The world of numbers in the European tradition is viewed as a purpose in itself. From Husserl to Spengler, Western intellectuals associated Westernness itself with the mathematical will to infinity. The symbolism of skyscrapers incorporates it physically (Sokolov, 2020, p. 273). Though China has a great mathematical tradition, and the ancient *Classic of Changes* influenced Leibniz's mathematical innovations (Palmquist, 2019, p. 3), Leibnizian calculus did not arrive in China through the Jesuits. Mathematization and mechanization are interdependent and deeply germane processes. In this sense, mechanization of Western humanity, to use Berdyaev's terminology, or its cyborgization, to use a more modern lexicon (Sokolov & Morina, 2021), began with Pythagoras's tetractys. Berdyaev (1933/2023) showed how mathematization damages the contemporary concept of time. Time disappears when it is not considered qualitatively, for example, in terms of day and night or childhood and maturity, but quantitatively, in terms of hours, minutes and seconds. As a result of the end of the existential dimension of time, claims Berdyaev, we have no time for eternity. However, it is hard to see how time is special in this regard, and why other sides of the human world are secure from mathematization, or why it is not mathematization but geometrization (Hui, 2016, p. 202) that is considered a dangerous procedure in this regard. In traditional China, in the spirit of Laozi and Daoism, mathematics was the art to demonstrate the beauty of the changes in the world that lacked fixed features, while in the West, since Euclid, mathematics has aimed to present the ideal eternal order underpinning the phenomenal world (Yuan, 2002, p. 519). Nietzsche criticizes the disregard of fleeting and phenomenal levels of existence in Platonism and its derivatives as life-hostile (*lebensfeindlich*) (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 83). Even though it is necessary to see not only antagonism towards Plato in Nietzsche but also influence (for example, as given in Branco, 2020), the life-hostile attitude is, at least partially, the result of Platonism and, speaking more generally, of the ontological status of mathematics in the West.

Mathematization got its first foothold in China in the late 19th century and the reaction was quick to follow. The global crisis of positivism found in China extremely fertile ground, as the connotations with Laozi resonated with new intensity. Berdyaev mentioned the revolt of Tolstoy against technology (1933 p. 20) and Tolstoy was accepted in China as a thinker first and a writer second (Wang, 2018, p. 65). There were complex and deep connections (密切的接触) between Tolstoy and Chinese anarchists of the early 20th century (Wang, 2018, p. 68). The Tolstoyan influence reached not only Anarchists but also Marxists, like Li Dazhao, who said that he was awakened by Tolstoy's thought as if it was “a blow by a Zen master's staff and a shout” (棒喝 *bang he*) (Wang, 2018, p. 70). Tolstoy also influenced conservatives, like Liang Qichao. In 1902, Liang put on the cover of the first issue of the journal *New Novel* (《新小说》) a portrait of Tolstoy (Wang, 2018, p. 65). In this regard, the close acquaintance of Tolstoy with Laozi (Azarov, 2021, p. 16) should have played a significant role. In China, Tolstoy is even called the “Russian Laozi” by such contemporary scholars as Xie Nandou (谢南斗) and Cao Haiyan (曹海艳).

In 1918-1919, Liang Qichao made a trip to the Paris Peace Conference. The technological horrors of the Great War shocked him deeply. Liang reported his



experience in “Record on Travel Impressions in Europe” (《欧游心影录》), where he claimed the Europeans were suffering from moral bankruptcy because of the First World War (Elman, 2006, p. 225) and were “placing their hopes in China when thinking of the threats arising from the material civilization” (Fröhlich, 2020, p. 18). Immediately following the “Record,” Liang (1999) wrote a commentary on Laozi. Not surprisingly, Liang sees a special practical dimension (“第三部门是说道的作用”) to the ancient Chinese philosopher (p. 3111). Daoism, rehabilitated by Liang as a “moderate” (se 嗇) outlook on progress and history, with naturalism (*ziranzhuyi* 自然主义) as China’s cornerstone, is contrasted with the ethical relativism of the First World War, where patriotism and humanism clashed (Liang, 1999, p. 3116). Liang believed that, following the war, the Europeans would be drawn to a more spiritual and peaceful Eastern civilization (Elman, 2006 p. 225), and that “Chinese culture could rescue humanity from the dominance of Western civilization” (Li, 2020, p. 126). Liang, just like Tolstoy, suggested a project of inner, or ethical, progress to replace the discredited idea of technological innovation.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese language holds a deep truth about historical existentiality. We move blindly through history, it is a backward movement, a moonwalk. We do not know the future, and to try and rush progress is as smart as running backwards.

In China, there were two main stages in which the myth of progress was received during the 19th-century. The first was purely instrumental and canonically germane to Laozi. The second was polytechnic and mixed with the anti-positivist revolt represented by such intellectuals as Liang Qichao and his group. The second stage also reveals the difference between Western and Chinese mathematical philosophy, with the latter being deeply indebted to Laozi and other Daoists. Liang Qichao was also deeply influenced by Laozi. With regards to Laozi studies, the 19th-century shows the instrumental mode in the implementation of technology, in particular the relevance of Laozi’s section 11.

At the same time, the presence in Laozi of a particular attitude towards technology allows access to the Daoist methodology of self-cultivation as a way of achieving the “new heroism” Berdyaev saw as necessary for our pan-technological age. Laozi and other Daoist thinkers suggest existential strategies, even in a world where everything is mathematized and the quantitative approach threatens to become universal.

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