

New Light on Maslow's Discovery of Daoism: A Reaction Paper

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Abstract

This reaction paper traces Maslow's discovery of Daoism, which became a key element in his psychological system of creativity, growth, and interpersonal relations.

Keywords

Maslow, Daoism, Max Wertheimer

Published by the *American Psychologist* in 1969 and posthumously reprinted in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 2 years later, Maslow's essay on "humanistic biology" presented some of his last musings on a topic which he regarded as crucial for humanity (Hoffman, 1999). In this essay, he explicitly urged "all biologists, as I would urge all other people of goodwill, to put their talents into the service of these two Big Problems" (Maslow, 1969, p. 733): namely, "(how) to make the Good Person" (p. 732) and "(how) to make the Good Society . . . (by which) I mean ultimately one species, one world" (p. 732). Maslow asserted that potentially hundreds of research endeavors derived from these two overarching problems—and, quite significantly, he repeatedly alluded to Daoism as crucial to their solution. In this light, he wrote,

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What if the organism is seen as having “biological wisdom?” If we learn to give it greater trust as autonomous, self-governing, and self-choosing, then clearly we as scientists, not to mention physicians, teachers, or even parents, must shift our image over to a more Taoist one. (p. 730)

When did Maslow first become enamored with Daoism, and why did it appeal to him so greatly? As a young man, he was an ardent behaviorist and viewed John B. Watson’s reward–punishment paradigm for shaping children’s behavior as the key to societal improvement (Hoffman, 1999). It could well be argued that Watsonian behaviorism with its emphasis on external control was the *antithesis* of Daoism. In Maslow’s (1971) recollection, his experience of parenthood convinced him that behaviorism was badly incomplete—that every child enters the world with innate tendencies for personal growth, not as a blank slate. It seems no coincidence that soon after Maslow jettisoned behaviorism, he embraced Daoism for the rest of his life as the most important philosophical system for optimizing personality growth in others. As Hoffman and Compton (2022) noted, his published writings and private journals reveal a predilection for Daoism in optimizing a variety of interpersonal relations, including mentoring, teaching, re-envisioned counseling and psychotherapy, and even parenting.

But what precisely led him to Daoism? It has been known for several decades that Maslow in 1962 reported that the initial spark was a lecture on “Being and Doing” by the gestalt psychology cofounder Max Wertheimer at the New School for Social Research (Hardeman, 1979). It has likewise been known merely that the second, and perhaps more powerful, catalyst was a lecture in Wertheimer’s class by a Chinese student who presented on the legendary figure of Laozi, for afterward, Maslow began to read books on Eastern philosophy, including Daoism (Hoffman, 1999).

New historical and archival research by the author now provides a more detailed account about the latter influence. Specifically, the lecturer was a Chinese émigré named Gwan-Yuen Li: destined to be Wertheimer’s last doctoral student, as only a few months later he died of a heart attack. After attending Smith College between 1937 and 1939 (Smith College Special Collections, Class of 1939, Li, Gwan-Yuen), she enrolled at the New School for Social Research and sought to bring her Chinese cultural tradition to contemporary psychology (see, for example, Li, 1946). For this particular class, Gwan-Yuen Li had been invited by Wertheimer to highlight her dissertation work (Li, 1943), and she therefore most likely focused on its theme of *wu-wei* in the *Daoteching*, the ancient Chinese text attributed to Laozi.

Throughout her dissertation, Gwan-Yuen Li broadly argued that Daoism had been misinterpreted by modern European and British sinologists as a

path of withdrawal from the world, when actually it was neutral or even actively supportive in helping others grow to their inherent essence. More specifically, Gwan-Yuen Li (1943) contended that the Daoist concept of *wu-wei* did not mean “doing nothing” as typically mistranslated, but actually, “non-interference with the natural course of things” (p. 91). To buttress this viewpoint, Gwan-Yuen Li gave a variety of examples from the *Daoteching* relating to interpersonal relations. These included aspects of “Doing—Not Unrecommended & Even Recommended” as: “to nourish, to nurture, to harbor, to calm, to shelter, to further the natural course of things” (p. 85) as well as “to bless, to do for others, (and) to give to others” (p. 86). Contrawise, Li indicated that the *Daoteching* explicitly rejected such aspects as “to possess, to keep . . . to brag . . . to pride oneself, to push oneself forward . . . to seek honor for oneself . . . to deny oneself to others . . . to control (and) to fight” (pp. 86–87). Her dissertation concluded with a brief comparison of Laozi’s concept of *wu-wei* with gestalt psychology’s notion of understanding behavior as a totality rather than a “piecemeal” (p. 117) affair. From my perspective, and perhaps Maslow’s as well, this conclusion may have appeared somewhat forced or certainly under-developed.

Nevertheless, it seems evident that Li’s explication of Daoism as a philosophy for meaningful, effective helping relations through the central concept of *wu-wei* had a strong, lifelong impact on Maslow, and indirectly, on many others. His essay on “humanistic biology” makes this emphasis within Maslovian thought indisputably clear.

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