

# Reading the Dao in British Chinese Writings

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**Abstract:** Many British Chinese writers share a similarity in writing as they all zeal to represent the Chinese traditional philosophies and values in their works, among which, the Dao is mostly quoted and delineated. This article looks into such recurrent representation of the Dao in British Chinese writings, questioning its purposes and its relation with the writers' politics of survival in diaspora. It finds out that British Chinese writers entangle their writing with the Daoist tenets "the yin yang principle," "the weak and soft conquers the strong and hard" and "returning again to innocence." Through the exploration of how these tenets have been represented and their connections with the identity problems the British Chinese shoulder, the article argues British Chinese writers' writing of the Dao stems from the writers' Chinese-British encounters when living in diaspora. On the one hand, the Dao, as a traditional Chinese philosophy, provides rich source materials for British Chinese writers to satisfy the western expectation on ethnic writing as well as to fulfil the writers' own needs of promoting the essence of Chinese culture to the west. On the other hand, the wisdom of the Dao often shows a good "way" for the British Chinese and guides them through their identity predicament when living in the margin as the long ignored "other."

**Key words:** the Dao; British Chinese; identity predicament; ethnic politics

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**标题:** 英国华人文学中“道”的书写与内涵

**内容摘要:** 英国华人文学从发源至今常见对中华传统哲学思想的书写与阐释, 其中, 着墨最多的是道家哲学。不管是早期的还是当代的英国华人作家都喜欢在作品中反复玩味道家哲学, 尤其是对“阴阳”、“柔弱胜刚强”、“复归于婴”等道家核心理念的再现。本论文检视英国华人文学对这三个道家核心理念的书写, 探询此类书写背后的历史文化根源和族裔生存策略。论文认为: “道”在英国华人文学作品中反复出现, 与这些作家作为少数族裔在英

国的离散境遇与族裔政治有密切的关联。一方面，作为中华文化的重要组成部分，道家思想为英国华人作家提供了丰富的写作素材，不仅使他们的写作顺应了西方对族裔文学的市场期待，而且满足了英国华人作家向西方展现中华璀璨文明的内心需求；另一方面，道家思想所包含的处世智慧，也成为英国华人应对边缘生存困境、舒缓身份焦虑的有力的精神武器。

**关键词：**“道”的书写；英国华人；身份困境；族裔政治

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Diasporic writing has often been regarded as production of cultural translation. For instance, Homi Bhabha treats Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* which was originally written in English as the pre-eminent example of cultural translation from East to West (Bhabha 228). This newly found sense was reinforced by a remark by Rushdie himself when he said himself and other diasporic postcolonial writers "are translated men" (Rushdie 16). In the English works by British Chinese writers<sup>1</sup>, either in novels or life writing, Chinese philosophies and traditional values have been massively quoted and represented, that in a sense they can be

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1 Here British Chinese writers refer to the ethnic writers of Chinese origin in Britain. Ever since the early 1930s, British Chinese writers have produced quite a number of acclaimed works and gained themselves international fame. Famous British Chinese writers include Han Suyin, Ling Shuhua (also Su Hua), Timothy Mo, Jung Chang, Hong Ying, Graham Chan, Tash Aw, Xiaolu Guo, Liu Hong, Xinran etc. Generally speaking, British Chinese writers live(d) in Britain, publish(ed) in English and hold a British passport. Yet the fact that most British Chinese writers are the first-generation immigrants and some of them travel very often between Britain and China (or even elsewhere, or in other words, live transnational lives) makes their final destination/identity uncertain. The language of British Chinese writings also bears a similar complexity. Basically, these writings were written and published in English, but there are some exceptions as some works published in English were first written in Chinese (like works by Hong Ying and Xinran). It should be noted that before writing some of these works have even been commissioned by the English publishers or arranged to be translated from Chinese into English for publication, whereas the original manuscripts in Chinese remain unpublished (like Xinran's *Miss Chopsticks* and *China Witness*). For more information of this field of literature, see my article "Defining British Chinese Literature and Its Connotations," *Jinan Journal* 11(2016): 17-22.

said being “translated,” and among which, the Dao<sup>1</sup> has been mostly rendered. Such “translation” turns out to harbour three dimensions. First, inter-lingual translation of the Dao. Some British Chinese writers translate the Daoist classics from Chinese to English into their literary writings. Examples can be found in Ling Shuhua’s<sup>2</sup> English memoir *Ancient Melodies* (1953) and Liu Hong’s novel *Startling Moon* (2001) as Ling translates chapters of the book *Zhuangzi* like “Basket Trap” and “Autumn Flood” in her memoir<sup>3</sup>, and Liu translates the whole episode of master Zhuangzi’s dreaming of a butterfly as a heading note for one chapter. Second, interpretation and explanation of the Dao. British Chinese writers like to write about the Dao and explain in their books the Daoist concepts recurrently. Third, weaving the Dao into the plot, the characterization, or even the narrative perspective of the works. Among the last two, the following three Daoist tenets are most represented: 1) the yin yang principle; 2) the weak and soft conquers the strong and hard; 3) returning again to innocence. Hence the following passages propose to trace the representation of these three tenets in the relevant texts, and by examining how they are “translated” and why they are “translated,” provide a close study of British Chinese writings and the writers’ politics of survival in diaspora.

One of the Daoist tenets being massively written about by the British Chinese is the yin yang principle. The yin yang concept first appeared in the ancient Chinese classic *I Ching* (also known as the *Book of Changes*) and was later absorbed into both Confucianism and Daoism. The major distinction of the yin yang principle between these two philosophies is that Daoism values the ignored yin while Confucianism stresses yang and the state of being neutral through proper rituals of the two. From a Daoist perspective, yin and yang are symbols representing the balance of opposites, like masculine and feminine, light and dark, negative and positive, etc. In *Dao De Jing*, Laozi believes yin and yang as fundamental elements for one thousand things, as quoted below:

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1 Also spelled as “Tao” in the early English translation. The Dao is the core essence of Daoism (also known Taoism) and widely known to refer to the passage or a way towards a status of remaining balanced or centered in the world. The classic texts of Daoism are *Dao De Jin* (also translated as *Tao Te Ching*) by Laozi (the great founder of Daoism, also translated as Lao-tzu) and *Zhuangzi*, the book named after Zhuangzi (also translated as Chuang Tzu), another representative philosopher of Daoism.

2 Also known as Su Hua as she used it as her name in her publications in English.

3 The writer also reminisces how she is charmed by the book of *Zhuangzi* and combines her experience and fondness of the Dao into this memoir of her childhood and China.

The Tao begot one.  
 One begot two.  
 Two begot three.  
 And three begot the ten thousand things.  
 The ten thousand things carry yin and embra[n]ce yang.  
 They achieve harmony by combining these forces. (Chapter 42)<sup>1</sup>

Zhuangzi then furthers this idea by saying that for humans the yin and yang are more than father and mother in the chapter of “Da Zong Shi” (The Vast Ancestral Teacher). As two sides to everything, these two polar opposites are not seen as incontestably separate or in conflict, but rather as interdependent and complementary. In other words, yin is equally important as yang and should not be ignored. Indeed, one grows out of the other, in a process of continuous change. Thus, they form the cycles of nature. Harmony is achieved when the two forces are equal, while confusion appears when one outweighs the other.

Yin and yang are enumerated widely in British Chinese writings. Liu Hong, Timothy Mo, Hong Ying and Ling Shuhua all like to play with this Daoist dualism. In Liu Hong’s novel *The Touch* (2005), among the very first words the little protagonist Juju learns in her childhood, are yin and yang. Her Laoye (grandfather) writes down the character “yin” pointing to the moon, and “yang,” the sun. As Laoye teaches her: “Yin is north of the water and east of a mountain. Yin is the underside of a leaf. Yin is water. Yin is a girl. Yang is south of the water and west of a mountain. Yang is the bright side of a leaf. Yang is fire and Yang is a man” (Liu, *The Touch* 64).

Laoye from time to time re-emphasizes the balance between yin and yang. The education of yin and yang is so common for the Chinese that it becomes their innate knowledge on nature and everything. As Liu writes in the same book: “heat, damp, yin, yang, balance, a hot or cold food, knowledge that was part of their everyday life, handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation” (15). Here Liu’s interpretation of yin and yang centres on the idea of following the nature, which is mainly a Daoist perspective.

Timothy Mo quotes yin and yang repeatedly in most of his works. In his first novel *The Monkey King* (1978), even the food decoration of Wallace’s office is arranged in balance of yin and yang: “Wicker cornucopias of fruit decorated the

1 The quotations of *Dao De Jing* in this article come from two versions of English translation. Chapter 10, 28, 42, 49, 55 are quoted from the Feng & English version; Chapter 20, 36, 43, 76, 78 are from the Red Pine version.

room: spiky pineapples, peaches, oranges, slim, fragrant bananas, sour Chinese pears, tight clusters of grapes. In his turn he chose to reciprocate with bottles of cognac and boxes of cigars: yang to yin” (Mo, *The Monkey King* 202).

In Mo’s second and Booker-shortlisted novel *Sour Sweet* (1982), the idea of yin and yang is more intensely expressed. When Red Cudgel, the senior head of a Chinese gang society in London personally trains the newly employed members Hung gar boxing, he declares: “Eye attack is yin attack. Hung gar is a yang style but even a hard style must have its soft aspect, as a soft style has its hard aspect. Eight-diagram, Sing Yee, they have a yang aspect too.” (Mo, *Sour Sweet* 126) Here, Mo interprets the idea of yin and yang through Chinese Kung Fu. But there is a sense of jest in his interpretation as he continues to write: “Iran Plank grinned broadly: ‘Yin more vicious than yang. I have great fear of yin’”(126). Mo continues to deliver a touch of irony when writing about the days when the protagonist Chen disappeared and his wife Lily repeatedly set Chen as an exemplar for their Son:

Overnight, Chen had become a secular saint, a household deity to rival god. Never so revered when physically available to his family, Chen was becoming a paragon of all the traditional yang-type virtues and not a few of those more usually thought to be under the influence of yin. He was far-sighted, strong, resolute, kind, magnanimous, and brave; he was also considerate, unselfish, sympathetic, tender, and gentle to his loved ones and especially his son, Man Kee. (282)

Here, Lily’s understanding on yin is limited and biased, and her understanding of this dualism mainly sheds lights on the codes of behavior, on what the Chinese believe to be appropriate for male and female respectively. The writer’s tone seems sarcastic for Lily is obviously lying and exaggerating about Chen’s characters. Unlike Liu Hong who introduces these dual concepts with great respect, Mo seems to be making a mockery out of them. Such a satire tone can be found in another place in the novel as Red Cudgel instructs the new members: “Note: your opponent’s penis lies in front of and protects his testicles. His yang can save him” (126). Mo’s attitude towards yin and yang is more clearly stated when he writes about these concepts at the beginning of the book:

Sweet after salty was dangerous for the system, so she had been taught; it could upset the whole balance of the dualistic or female and male principles, yin and yang. Lily was full of annoying but incontrovertible pieces of lore like this which she had picked up from her father who had been a part-time bone-

setter and Chinese boxer. (6)

Mo's tones and understanding on yin and yang imply his unstable and complicated attitudes towards traditional Chinese values, disclosing his inner anxieties over identity seeking and reconstructing in diaspora. The son of an English mother and a Cantonese father, Mo always feels great frustration when living in Britain. Forty years after he moved to England from Hong Kong, he still claimed that "I feel so much more at home in an Asian street: people smile, everybody's about my size — that was obviously nagging at me subliminally."<sup>1</sup> This is probably the reason Mo decided to spend more time in Asia rather than in Britain after he gained international fame in the 1980s with a pretty promising career prospect ahead of him. But in his writing, Mo shows paradoxical views towards this "home" culture. A clear trace of comparison of the two cultures and a critical thinking on the disadvantage of the home culture can be found. Far from being a devout worshipper of the Dao, Mo distastes some of its concepts. His interpretation of this dualism also bears weighty influence from Confucianism and indeed is a confusing mixture of the two, which reveals Mo's unfamiliarity with Chinese philosophy. Yet the way he takes pleasure in bringing in the Dao unfolds his anxiety as a diasporic writer to engage with this Chinese root yet from a rather detached or distant position.

Though these writers' account of yin and yang vary, they share a common feature in writing, that they are not only "translators" as authors, they translate their characters into cultural translators as well. They are just like the Pulitzer-winner Jhumpa Lahiri who admits that as a diasporic writer, almost all of her fictional personages are "translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive."<sup>2</sup>

The novel *K: The Art of Love* (2002) by Hong Ying also consists of cultural translators as characters. The protagonist K (also known as Lin), the boldest of the New Moon Society's woman authors, is also an expert in "the Daoist Art of Love" (Hong vii). The daughter of a mother who is "adept in the Daoist self-cultivation techniques" described in the erotic Daoist scripture *Jade Chamber Classic*, K is taught the legendary "Art of Love." In an illicit love affair with the young English intellectual, Julian Bell, who comes to China in the 1930s and has strong bonds

1 See Maya Jaggi, "Mixtures like Candied Napalm: Interview with Timothy Mo," *The Guardian* (October 7, 2000), June 27, 2013 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>.

2 See Harish Trivedi, "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation," In *Translation: Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*, eds. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2007) 285.

with the Bloomsbury group, K coaches him the lesson of yin and yang of sex. K learns from her mother about an imbalance between the sexes: “a man’s duct is too narrow to draw yin energy easily from a woman, whereas a woman can absorb the yang with all her inside parts” (104). Though attracting searing criticism for its erotic sketches, this novel is rather peculiar to capture the differences between the East and the West by introducing the foreign and mysterious Daoist art of love and the Chinese history of sex. The contrast of sex culture and history between the two countries becomes an epitome of the discrepancies of the two cultures.

On the whole, British Chinese writers’ representations of yin and yang are mostly based on Daoism because they centre on the principle to glorify the yin, and to follow the nature of the inter-changeable opposites so as to achieve harmony. As a result, they not only provide the unique and insightful Chinese wisdom to the west, but also bear rich ideological implications. Besides introducing the principles of what the Chinese follow when they behave, it signals the cravings shared by British Chinese writers for harmony, harmony between yin and yang, between man and the environment, between the marginalized and the centre, and between the east and the west, for it is harmony that forms the core essence of yin and yang, and it is towards a state of harmony that has remained a common objective among the Daoists for generations. More importantly, it matches the British-Chinese’s impulse as ethnic minority for attention on the long ignored “yin” and for the inversion of yin and yang, since the yin yang principle has always been associated with another dualistic concept, weak and strong, well representing the disparity of the people in diaspora and the mainstream, which will be discussed next.

Though yin and yang are very important concepts in Daoist thought, the Dao is not yin or yang. It is an unrestrained force that can respond to all things and in any direction. That is because everything changes into its opposite and beginning follows the end without cease. Among those inter-changeable dualities, weak and strong, or soft and hard, is another pair of important concept. In *Dao De Jing*, Laozi regards the weak and soft as strength and power as he observes the nature of water:

Nothing in the world is weaker than water  
but against the hard and the strong  
nothing excels it  
for nothing can change it  
the soft overcomes the hard  
the weak overcomes the strong (Chapter 78)  
the weakest thing in the world



excels the strongest thing in the world (Chapter 43)

Laozi insightfully sees through the appearance of things and expects the bright prospects of the weak and soft. Indeed, he believes that in order to become strong, being weak is a necessity in process. As he renders in the following chapters:

When people are born  
they are soft and supple  
when they perish  
they are hard and stiff  
when plants shoot forth  
they are soft and tender  
when they die  
they are withered and dry  
thus it is said  
the hard and strong are followers of death  
the soft and weak are followers of life  
when an army becomes hard it snaps  
the hard and strong dwell below  
the soft and weak dwell above (Chapter 76)

What you would shorten  
you should therefore lengthen  
what you would weaken  
you should therefore strengthen  
what you would topple  
you should therefore raise  
what you would take  
you should therefore give  
this is called hiding the light  
the weak conquering the strong (Chapter 36)

In many British Chinese novels, the idea of the weak and soft conquers the strong and hard is mirrored in their dominant plot development. Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, Hong Ying's *K: The Art of Love* and *The Concubine of Shanghai* (2011) are typical examples. *The Harmony Silk Factory* which won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award is a book about the



stories of a Chinese man in Malaya during WWII. Johnny Lim, formerly known as Lim Seng Chin, is a son of a couple of coolies who were transported to Malaya from Southern China by the British in the late 19th century. In Johnny's childhood, he leads a poor life as a small village peasant boy. When working at a British-run mine, he is bullied by the British Sirs and condemned by his fellow workers. Short, thin and weak as he is, he is beaten to a pulp by the angry workers. Yet lifeless as he is, when the strong British Sir No.2 comes up to insult him, Johnny fights back, leaving a stab wound in No.2's thigh that causes his death a year later. Also, though a poor and weak boy Johnny used to be, he miraculously turns out to be a business tycoon and a Communist leader by the Kinta Valley, and marries the prettiest and richest girl in the Valley. Certainly, Aw's craft in this novel goes far beyond such a story of the weak conquers the strong, as he creates an unusual historic canvas of Malaya under British colonization and Japanese invasion, and moreover Aw presents three different versions of Johnny's life from his son Jasper, his wife Snow and his British friend Peter, which make the narrative more beguiling and enchanting. But among the varying views and perspectives from these three narrators, Johnny's success as a legend of the weak conquers the strong is obvious.

In Mo's *Sour Sweet*, the heroine Lily, apparently weak and soft, and obedient to her husband all the time in managing family chores, is very apt at this traditional Chinese wisdom of being weak as a necessity in the process to achieve strength. Though abiding by the Chinese traditional value that man should be the head of the family while wife is always of an inferior status, Lily skilfully acts gently and obediently in order to win Chen's approval of what she determines. And she always did. Every night when Chen arrives home from work, he would be served a bowl of soup by Lily who prepares it as she feels "she would have failing in her wifely duties otherwise." Though Chen is not hungry at all, he drinks it "dutifully" and grunts "in his stolid way, not wishing to hurt her feelings but also careful not to let himself in for a bigger bowl in the future" (Mo, *Sour Sweet* 6).

Lily's softness and gentleness turn her to be more decisive and powerful in managing her man and the household. In persuading Chen to start a business of their own, Lily seldom gives Chen pressure. Instead she allows Chen to think about the situation himself and let him reconcile himself to it.

But Lily had not abandoned her long-cherished ambition. She, too, had decided on indirection as the best policy, although for different reasons. Chen had just happened to catch her in one of the passive phases of her campaign...At the moment he seemed so set against the idea there wasn't

much point in resisting him, thought Lily, following tactics evolved in people's war. (83-84)

The above episodes show that Lily is so much like water, which has enormous power as being discussed by Laozi for being weak and soft. As the story unfolds, Lily demonstrates her power much stronger than her husband's in managing the family business well and leads the family into a better life in diaspora.

The shared depiction of the weak and soft conquers the strong and hard brings to light not only British Chinese writers' indispensable concerns over the weak, but their aspiration of a brighter future for the weak. As marginalized minorities, British Chinese often find themselves in a weak position in society. Hence the narration of the weak and soft conquers the strong and hard reveals not only the British Chinese writers' highly valuation of such cheerful and tenacious Chinese philosophy, but their obsession and fantasy when living and writing in diaspora.

Extreme examples can be found in Hong Ying's *K: The Art of Love*. The two protagonists K and Julian meet in a time when Occidental and Oriental were disproportionately uneven in power. The Occidental culture, philosophy, and science and technology had been widely recognized as much more superior and advanced than those in China, and had caused the famous "Western learning" period. K herself is eager to learn the English language, English literature and culture. And Julian is possessed with an inward superiority when he newly arrives in China. Ostensibly, Julian is stronger, not only as a man from the West, but as a man with abundant free-style love affairs, when he encounters K, a conservative and respected wife to a famous Chinese intellectual in the backward China. But the writer dramatically displaces such disparities between the two characters by inverting Julian to passive defence in this relationship because of K's mastery of the Daoist sexual skills. The diasporic writer might feel relieved or even gain some dignity for finally working out such a solution that there is something that the Chinese was not inferior to. In other words, as a diasporic writer Hong Ying might not be satisfied with the predicament of the Chinese and the Chinese culture being weak. And she is eager to restore the glory of evenness or superiority with the help of the ancestral philosophies and canons. However, this is only poetic and imaginary self-encouragement which places more abashment and trauma in the encounters of the marginalized and the centre. But out of question, Laozi's philosophy is very inspiring and necessary, guiding these ethnic minorities how to react in difficulties, and more importantly, giving them a brighter prospect even though they are in a miserably forceless situation.

Another tenet being represented is the “idea of returning again to innocence.” The idea of returning again to innocence is another core concept in Daoist thought. Laozi highly values innocence and the state of being a baby or a child. He even savors this idea in five chapters of *Dao De Jing*, listed below.

Carrying body and soul and embracing the one,  
Can you avoid separation?  
Attending fully and becoming supple,  
Can you be as a newborn babe? (Chapter 10)

everyone is gay  
as if they were at the Great Sacrifice  
or climbing a tower in spring  
I sit here and make no sign  
like a child that doesn’t smile [...]  
everyone has a goal  
I alone am dumb and backward  
for I alone choose to differ  
preferring still my mother’s breast (Chapter 20)

Know the strength of man,  
But keep a woman’s care!  
Be the stream of the universe!  
Being the stream of the universe,  
Ever true and unswerving,  
Become as a little child once more. (Chapter 28)

The sage is shy and humble - to the world he seems confusing.  
Men look to him and listen.  
He behaves like a little child. (Chapter 49)  
He who is filled with Virtue is like a newborn child. (Chapter 55)

In these chapters, Laozi believes to behave like a child brings people strength and power, and brings them closer to the Dao. The sage distinguishes himself from all other people when they drown themselves in joy at external things since he sees into their illusory nature. As Su Che commented, “the sage clings to the Tao

and ignores everything else, just as an infant nurses only at its mother's breast."<sup>1</sup> Zhuangzi later goes further to clarify the strength of being innocent by emphasizing on its original purity, authenticity and internal focus. In "Geng Sang Chu"<sup>2</sup>, Zhuangzi interprets Laozi's perspective on innocence:

Can you be a little baby? The baby howls all day, yet its throat never gets hoarse — harmony at its height! The baby makes fist all day, yet its fingers never get cramped — virtue is all it holds to. The baby stares all day without blinking its eyes — it has no preferences in the world of externals. (Watson 253)

It is not difficult to relate reasons with such worship on child innocence by these two great founders of Daoism. Children are blessed with simplicity, hope as well as vitality. They are always optimistic, easy to learn new things and adaptive to new environment. Even to the dark sides of life, they can still capture the delight. Consequently, they are seldom disappointed, seldom hindered. By this way, they embrace the greatest strength instead, and harmonize with nature and man. Laozi and Zhuangzi's worship on innocence later gave great influence on Chinese literature, like the works by Tao Yuanming in the Jin Dynasty. It is believed that the appreciation of child innocence in literature by the later generations had often been put into "juxtaposition with idyll," as both of them are unpolluted or rarely polluted by education and civilization, and both of them can make readers feel "a sense of returning to rustic nature."<sup>3</sup> In the Ming Dynasty, Li Zhi proclaimed the famous literary theory of "innocent mind" as to preserve childlike innocence in literature instead of using literary works as a tool for feudal morality preaching. It applauded Daoist thought, and "became a statement for liberation in people's personality, way of thinking, and innovation in literature in the Ming Dynasty"<sup>4</sup> (Xu 106).

Such a tradition in writing is apparently preserved in British Chinese writings, with a recurring deployment of observing the world with an "innocent mind." It is conventionally achieved by the voice of a child narrator. Ling's *Ancient Melodies* and Liu's two novels *Startling Moon* and *The Touch* serve as good examples.

In *Ancient Melodies*, through the eyes of a little child, daughter of the Peking mayor, the daily life of a Chinese aristocratic family in the early 20th century is

1 See Red Pine, *Lao-tzu's Taoteching* (California: Mercury, 1996) 40.

2 "Geng Sang Chu" is from Chapter 23 in *The Book of Zhuang Zi*, translated by Burton Watson as *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*.

3 See Liu Shaojin. *Fu Gu Yu Fu Yuan Gu* (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2001) 198.

4 See Xu Sumin. *Li Zhi De Zhen Yu Qi* (Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing, 1998) 106.

narrated. A child's perspective creates an unbiased attitude in retelling the past and observes things with great fun, which is very different from the grown-ups. There is an episode in this book when Father's concubines Third Mother and Sixth Mother are having a serious fight and quarrel out of a storm of jealousy, madly degrading each other with disgusting words. "I" observe the scene with great enjoyment: "I was amused to see this extraordinary behavior; [...] Their actions reminded me of figures on the stage. They interested me." (Su 92) It seems to a child, family frailties are fun instead of shame. Similar examples can be found elsewhere, like another episode when "I" accidentally see a bloody decapitation scene of an anonymous young Red-coat Man in the street, "I" am very curious about it: "People followed and watched him earnestly; from time to time they shouted 'Bravo!' as one shouts to an actor in the theatre. What were they amused at? I could not catch the singer's words. Was the Red-coat Man a good actor?" (14)

A child's perspective of narration also turns the writer's ample explanations for the "strange" Chinese culture into something necessary and natural. Though I am not echoing here Shih Shu-mei's criticism on Ling for exoticizing China to cater to Western appetites as she writes for "the legibility and curiosity of Western audience" (Shih 218), I admit that it is the child voice the writer adopts that satisfies the Western audience's curiosity to the largest extent, as for them, the Chinese stories are brand new and full of "otherness," similar to the way children see the world.

Ling's being a cultural translator in her English writing was indeed greatly influenced by her favorite English writer Virginia Woolf. Long before her arriving at England in 1947, Ling had started corresponding with Woolf who had read Ling's *Ancient Melodies* chapter by chapter that Ling sent her through post. Woolf advocated the importance of authenticity and encouraged Ling to present an "authentic" China to the English readers.<sup>1</sup> Woolf's remarks and comments to some degree, represent the expectation from the Western mainstream to Ling, a Third World writer. A child's perspective satisfies such an expectation as it enhances the authenticity and reliability of the narrative, while on the other hand, fits into Ling's personal preference of Daoist aesthetics<sup>2</sup>.

Apart from the expectation from the mainstream and the writer's own aesthetic preference, the writer's need as a diasporic writer also affects her choice of such a

1 See Nigel Nicolson & Joanne Trautmann, eds. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol.6: 1936–1941 (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

2 Ling is one of the prominent members of the Beijing Group, whose members like Shen Congwen, Fei Ming and Wang Zengqi are noted for their preference in writing with Daoist aesthetics.

translation. At the time Ling wrote this book, the depicted Chineseness in English was stereotypically weak, backwards and barbarian. One of the writing objectives for Ling, as she declared to Woolf in her letter, was to “give English readers some picture of Chinese lives, some impression about Chinese who are as ordinary as any English people, some truth of life and sex which your people never have a chance to see but it [is] even seen by a child in the East.”<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Ling’s writing reveals the Chinese-English cultural encounters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and a diasporic writer’s strategies to bridge the chasm.

Liu Hong applies the same strategy particularly when narrating the dark sides of human nature. The voices of child narrators in her novels add to reinforce the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution besides the truth-effect. In *Startling Moon*, Taotao, the little girl feels puzzled and wronged by being scolded instead of being praised by her mother who drags her off the stage right after she sings the first line of some sad song, which is considered “politically incorrect.” She even becomes a laughing stock on the first day at school because her name “Taotao” (meaning peaches in Chinese) does not follow the mainstream naming politics during the Cultural Revolution:

She [the teacher] started taking the register. “Red Army, Patriotic, Red and Handsome, Small Soldier, China Blossom, Born in Beijing, Love the People, Peaches.” She looked up, and the whole class burst into laughter. I knew there was something wrong with my name. (Liu, *Startling Moon* 25)

The little protagonist’s life in the social turmoil is filled with things hard for her to understand. She is put into embarrassment repeatedly for reasons readers may find very ridiculous and unjustified. She is even used by an unpopular teacher, resulting in the sending-away to the countryside of her favorite teacher, for which she feels very regretful and sad. She even blames and despises her loving grandfather because he is a “class enemy” as he is a rightist and a Nationalist with overseas connections which has brought the whole family humiliation. However, being little and innocent, the child is yet full of hopes of becoming more mature, to see things properly, and to turn away from being misguided. Such a child’s narrative not only strengthens the reliability of the stories being told, but emphasizes strongly on the inhumanity of this negative history of China. Moreover, on the one side, it provides a great distance between the innocent and the brutal. On the other side, it absolves the little child’s responsibility for her misconduct, and instead brings the blames

1 See Patricia Oudek Laurence, *Virginia Woolf and the East* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1995) 19.

and criticism onto the adults and the social-political movements in China.

Both Ling's and Liu's narration of "innocent mind" meet with the Western expectation for an "authentic" China. Apart from this, it may disclose the British Chinese writers' anxiety in diaspora that drives them to associate themselves with a state of being "innocent." Under the pressure of cultural shocks and conflicts, it is very likely for British Chinese writers to turn to the Chinese wisdom of "behaving like a little child," or "becoming a little child once more," so as to learn to adapt to new environment and fit into the Western world more easily.

The above three notions are represented and appropriated recurrently by the British Chinese writers in their writing. As a result, such representation well presents the "otherness" of the Orient to the West, which makes it difficult to rescue the British Chinese writers from the criticism on their exoticizing the "otherness" in Said's "Orientalist" sense. In Hanif Kureishi's *Something to Tell You*, there is a conversation worth quoting:

"Your American accent is charming."

"Oh, don't say that. I've been trying to get rid of it and seem more Indian again, particularly since Indians have become so hip."

"Yes, there can't be one of them who hasn't written a novel." (200)

Kureishi here as a British Pakistani writer insightfully reveals the marginal minority's eagerness to make advantage of their ethnic background as ethnic politics in the Western multiculturalism, giving echoes to British Chinese writers' practice of writing the Dao. The reception of Hong Ying's works in the West also explains this. Hong Ying's works mentioned are originally written in Chinese. The major difference of her books being translated with her other books is the abundant cultural and historical connotations the former contain. The result that Hong Ying's translated books won popularity and applause in Britain indicates a strong readership on exotic culture and otherness among English readers. Therefore, in order to survive, British Chinese writers have to make use of their home culture. Here a further question arises — why is it the Dao being largely rendered when these writers have other Chinese cultural elements to choose?

For a long period of time, British Chinese had been labelled with the umbrella term of "Black British" and British Chinese writers often suffer from a lack of proper classification, being identified as a kind of "Black British writing."<sup>1</sup> Such a

1 See Annji Kinoshita-Bashforth, "Literature of Chinese American and British Chinese Writers: Immigration Policy, Citizenship, and Racialization" (unpublished doctoral dissertation of State University of New York, 2002) 247.



lack of understanding of the Chinese and the Chinese culture in Britain stimulates British readers' interest in acquiring the mysterious Orient on the one side, as well as Chinese writers' urge to introduce a "proper" Chineseness on the other. Besides being overlooked, the Chinese in Britain also experience racial discriminations, especially in the field of work. Research has shown that the Chinese (even the British-born generation) need better qualifications than white colleagues to get the same job, receive less pay, are more likely to be denied promotion to senior management, and are more likely to become unemployed.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as the well-known "model minority," Chinese in Britain are usually confined in work involving less competition with the whites such as catering and laundry.

Such a poor condition well explains British Chinese writers' fondness of the Dao, since Daoism has long been considered as the "other" way as it was practiced as an alternate to Confucianism, which had dominated the Chinese mainstream values for generations. Unlike Confucius, who canonizes learned scholars and officials for their proper behaviors and accomplished manners, Laozi and Zhuangzi appreciate everyday craftsmen and believe that with their background as woodcarvers, butchers or the like, these men obtain more creativity and strength to learn and live. The British Chinese are in a similar predicament as Daoism of being treated as the "other." Being the "other" in the host country, many British Chinese take jobs more of lower social status. Even for those who find themselves decent jobs, it is still tough to win social recognition and social membership. The Daoist respect for the weak and the "other" and its belief of obtaining status of being balanced as the "other" might become reassuring panacea for British Chinese diasporas.

Apart from what have been discussed above, the popularity of the *Dao De Jing* in the west is also a possible reason. As the canon of the Dao, *Dao De Jing* is the most translated classic next to the *Bible*. Hence, writing the Dao instead of other cultural elements conveys not only rich cultural symbols so as to represent the Asian and Chinese "other," but also provides a good formula to satisfy British Chinese's drive to commodify their books as western readers' acquaintance with the Dao makes established readership easier to achieve.

Therefore, from the above discussions, we can conclude that British Chinese writers' massive conduct of writing the Dao stems from the expectation and demand of the society they immigrant into. However, what they represent and how they delineate unveil their needs and anxieties as well as their experiences and

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1 See Gregor Benton & Edmund T. Gomez. *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

predicaments in diaspora. By writing the Dao, British Chinese writers are in fact drawing lines, lines of connection of ancestral wisdom and present predicament, of Oriental philosophies and literature, and, of the marginalized and the centre. It is a consequence of their struggles for understanding of what it means to be a Chinese in Britain, for achieving harmony between the marginalized and the centre, and for gaining recognition and acceptance in the West.

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