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Citation

JOSHI, Devin K..(2020). The other China model: Daoism, pluralism, and political liberalism. *Polity, 52(4)*, 551-583.
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The Other China Model: Daoism, Pluralism, and Political Liberalism

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While scholars often portray Chinese political thought and tradition as standing in opposition to Western notions of political liberalism, little consideration has been given to compatibility between liberalism and Daoism, a prominent religion and long-standing alternative school of thought among Chinese peoples. Addressing this gap in the literature, this study in comparative political thought compares Laozi's *Dao De Jing* with John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* to illustrate certain core political ideas in the *Dao De Jing* and their treatment in Mill's landmark text on political liberalism. Although the two texts diverge in terms of advocacy of popular representation, public contestation, and legal rights, both reject authoritarianism, uniformity, patriarchy, censorship, harm, violence, and wastefulness. A reasonable interpretation of these affinities is that a unique, indigenous, and non-Western model of liberalism existed in China via Laozi's thought for centuries before the advent of modern Western liberalism.

Keywords: China, comparative political thought, Daoism, Laozi, liberalism, John Stuart Mill

It is commonly believed that one of the last remaining obstacles to the global spread of liberal democracy is the persistence of worldviews that fundamentally conflict with liberalism.[1] In particular, scholars have claimed that Chinese culture is incompatible with Western political ideals and that the statist China model,

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A previous version of this article was presented at the 2018 General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research in Hamburg, Germany, under the title "Daoism and Political Liberalism: Two Birds of a Feather?" The author would like to thank Alexander Weiß, members of the ECPR Standing Group on Political Concepts, and *Polity*'s anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions for improving the article.

1. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Diego Von Vacano, "The Scope of Comparative Political Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 465–80; and Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 21.

Published online September 2, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1086/710461
Polity, volume 52, number 4 (October 2020), pp. 551–583. 0032-3497/2020/5204-0005$10.00.
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with supposed roots in Confucianism, sets forth a variety of precepts that challenge the desirability and feasibility of political liberalism and the freedom of individuals as a primary goal of governance.[2] Moreover, as Shaun Breslin contends, while "the idea of a China model" may be "more important as a symbol or a metaphor than as a distinct and coherent model," it has been used to "defend political inequality and the status quo in China" while also attracting considerable interest abroad.[3]

Nowadays, most scholars comparing traditional Chinese political thought to Western political thinking focus on Confucianism.[4] Chinese political thinking, however, embraces multiple perspectives, and one of its prominent alternative schools of thought is Daoism. Like Confucianism, Daoism has a long legacy stretching over two thousand years, and it has experienced a resurgence in membership, scholarship, and temple construction since the end of China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76).[5] Among Chinese religions, it is second only to Buddhism in numbers of clergy, and there are millions of followers of Daoism within mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.[6] Although less prominent in public intellectual discourse than Confucianism, the importance of Daoism as "the only native religion among all the

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2. See Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015); Suisheng Zhao, "The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 19 (2010): 419–36; David Elstein, "Why Early Confucianism Cannot Generate Democracy," *Dao* 9 (2010): 427–43; and Megan C. Thomas, "Orientalism and Comparative Political Theory," *Review of Politics* 72 (2010): 653–77.

3. Shaun Breslin, "The 'China Model' and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?" *International Affairs* 87 (2011): 1323–43, at 1328, 1341.

4. See, for instance, Fred Dallmayr, ed., *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), which contains multiple chapters on Confucianism and none on Daoism. Similarly, Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), contains four chapters on Confucianism but only one on Daoism.

5. John J. Clarke, *Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Vincent Goosaert and Fang Ling, "Temples and Daoists in Urban China since 1980," *China Perspectives* (2009): 32–41; Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press, 2001), and Der-Ruey Yang, "The Changing Economy of Temple Daoism in Shanghai," in *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*, ed. Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney (Boston: Brill, 2005), 113–48.

6. Chinese government surveys cited by Wenzel-Teuber have found 12 million people identifying as Daoists and over 100 million engaging in various Daoist practices in mainland China alone. See Katharina Wenzel-Teubler, "Volksrepublik China: Religionen und Kirchen. Statistischer Überblick 2011," *China Heute* 1 (2012): 26–38; and Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

religions in China"[7] makes it worthwhile as a subject to examine for those looking for answers to today's political problems in China, including whether liberalism is suitable for Chinese society.

In this article I examine the alternative *China Model* present in traditional Daoist thought and its compatibility with Western ideas of political liberalism by analyzing political ideas in the *Dao De Jing* (道德经; hereinafter *DDJ*) attributed to Laozi (老子) vis-à-vis how these ideas are treated in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.[8] Following Andrew March's guidelines, the *DDJ* and *On Liberty* were selected because of their positions as influential texts within their respective traditions.[9] Providing advice to current and prospective political leaders on how to govern effectively, the *DDJ*, which was first compiled during China's Warring States period (475–221 BCE), is by far the most influential Daoist text and an influential text on political thought in the East, holding a position there similar in stature to Machiavelli's *The Prince* in the West.[10] The aim of this exercise in comparative political thought is to "point to parallel sensitivities"[11] that may help to narrow the gap between Eastern and Western perspectives on freedom, and to reconsider whether political thought traditions in China and the West are really as far apart as the mainstream discourse contends.

While previous observers have noted that Laozi's thought appears to have *economically* or *socially* liberal qualities,[12] I offer a systematic assessment of whether Laozi also represents a Chinese variant of *political* liberalism. As discussed below,

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7. Cheng-Tian Kuo, *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2008), 60.

8. One of the world's most translated books, the *Dao De Jing* (DDJ) (in pinyin transliteration) is sometimes transliterated as the "Tao Te Ching."

9. Andrew F. March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?," *Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 531–65, at 556.

10. Jack Barbalet, "Market Relations as *Wuwei*: Daoist Concepts in Analysis of China's Post-1978 Market Economy," *Asian Studies Review* 35 (2011): 335–54, at 336. See also Isabelle Robinet, "The Diverse Interpretations of the *Laozi*," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, ed. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 127–60.

11. Mario Wenning, "Kant and Daoism on Nothingness," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (2011): 556–68, at 557.

12. Barbalet, "Market Relations" (see note 10 above); Clarke, *Tao of the West* (see note 5 above); John J. Clarke, "Taoist Politics: An Other Way?" in *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), 253–76; and Benjamin Schwartz, "The Thought of the *Tao-te-ching*," in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael Lafargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 189–228.

while the two traditions of Daoism and Western liberalism diverge in terms of advocacy of popular representation and legal rights, they both reject authoritarianism and seek to free humans from unwarranted restrictions imposed by the state, society, and linguistic conventions (e.g., dominant discourses). Moreover, Daoism offers a unique and arguably more expansive notion of liberty compared to many Western liberalisms, since it seeks to liberate not only men, but also women, people without property, people from other countries, and non-human species. Hence, the article concludes that an indigenous model of liberalism existed in China for centuries before the advent of Western liberalism.

Understanding Political Daoism

As Daniel Bell notes, "we need to understand China's political values not only because they influence China but also because they influence much of the rest of the world."[13] Doing so requires a historical perspective, since when it comes to the political ideologies that have shaped Chinese society, "the past . . . remains very much a part of China's present."[14] Yet whereas scholars have given much attention to the potential links between Western liberal thinking and Confucianism over the past few decades,[15] they have examined the possibly liberal political content of Daoism to a much lesser extent.

When it comes to liberal thought in China, Leigh Jenco has identified four chronological strands of liberalism (自由主义, *ziyou zhuyi*)[16] to have been influential in China: a) during late Imperial China (the Qing dynasty, 1644–1911), b) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, c) around the May 4th movement of 1919, and d) during the period after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).[17] Additionally,

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13. Daniel A. Bell, "Comparing Political Values in China and the West: What Can Be Learned and Why It Matters," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 93–110, at 94.

14. Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "Chinese Political Ideologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 644–60, at 645.

15. See, for example, Russell Arben Fox, "Confucian and Communitarian Responses to Liberal Democracy," *Review of Politics* 59 (1997): 561–92; Brooke A. Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way Toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 547–76; Tianjin Shi and Jie Lu, "The Shadow of Confucianism," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (2010): 123–30; and Nicholas Spina, Doh Chull Shin, and Dana Cha, "Confucianism and Democracy: A Review of the Opposing Conceptualizations," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12 (2011): 143–60.

16. In this article, I include Chinese characters along with pinyin transliteration for terms where the characters may not be easily discernible from pinyin.

17. Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "Chinese Liberalism," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir (London: SAGE, 2010), 164–66. William DeBary's work on late imperial China likewise

I argue that a liberal (or at least proto-liberal) way of thinking about governance in China emerged in the early Daoist writings of Laozi. Although scholars have not paid much attention to this legacy, Jenco notes that "the word for 'liberty' in Chinese, *zi you* (自由), literally translates as 'do-as-you-will,' evoking strong overtones of Daoist non-action beliefs."[18] Contempoary Daoist scholars within China have made this link as well. For instance, Li Gang has argued that "political Daoism" (道治, *daozhi*) is a "liberal idea, and behavior orientation model in ancient China; its idea of self-government by the people is another salient belief that the people are the foundation of a nation."[19]

In recent years, a number of Western scholars have also interpreted Daoism as espousing a relatively liberal, self-directed, and autonomous mode of governance.[20] Yet interpretations differ, in that scholars find Daoist texts variously supportive of theocratic, anarchic, libertarian, and hybrid models of government. First, students of the Daoist Canon (道藏, *daozang*) tend to see Daoist presciptions for governance as paternalistic and based on a set of moral precepts to guide political and social action, requiring exceptionally demanding talents, skills, and cultivated traits from "sage" (圣人, *shengren*) political leaders.[21] From this perspective, the ideal political system might resemble a theocracy in which a well-attuned sage ruler guides their community to live in harmony with the *dao* via their wise example and expert guidance.[22] The Scripture of Great Peace (太平经, *taipingjing*), for instance, envisions the emperor as a moral leader who serves as a pivotal mediator between nature and the masses, whereby "ordinary people being usually chaotic and ignorant should concentrate their will on managing agricultural affairs" as opposed to engaging in politics.[23] Others go even further to argue that Daoism actually advocates a manipulative form of government whereby a deceptive ruler pretends to be modest, inactive, and uninvolved in people's everyday affairs as a way of exercising

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identifies elements of liberalism in Chinese thought. See William T. DeBary, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

18. Jenco, "Chinese Liberalism," 164 (see previous note).

19. Gang Li, *Daozhi yu Ziyou* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005), 4.

20. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Clarke, *Tao of the West* (see note 5 above); Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community: The Ethical Dimension of Daoism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press, 2004). Livia Kohn, *Zhuangzi: Text and Context* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Three Pines Press, 2014).

21. Kohn, *Cosmos and Community* (see previous note).

22. Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture*, 101 (see note 5 above).

23. Kuo, *Religion and Democracy*, 59 (see note 7 above).

hidden forms of social control.[24] While such obscurantist interpretations may be conceivable on the basis of some of the later manuscripts associated with Daoism (especially those which began to emerge in the second century CE and which often fuse Daoism with Confucianism or Legalism), these later texts admittedly diverge from the classical Daoist texts of the Warring States period, which do not give much support to such an interpretation. As Edward Slingerland notes, non-Daoist thinkers such as Han Feizi were responsible for reducing *wu-wei* (non-action) "from a spiritual ideal to a mere administrative technique."[25] Similarly, in the West, the physiocratic theory of laissez-faire, which borrows the concept of *wu-wei* as a market principle, oversimplifies and distorts core dimensions of this concept, including the avoidance of excess.[26] Likewise, Seungho Moon makes the case that Daoism does not call for one to practice deceptive manipulation of others, but rather to "restrict his or her activities to what is needed and what is natural, not pursuing actions motivated by self-interest."[27]

In radical opposition to those seeing Daoist governance as a manipulative and top-down affair, other scholars have interpreted early Daoist texts as favoring anarchism.[28] As John Rapp puts it, the "Daoist utopian vision is meant to serve as an inspiration to reconstruct society from below in an anti-coercive fashion."[29] Likewise, Peter Zarrow finds early Daoism's emphasis on non-coercion "clearly in line with anarchist tendencies," while acknowledging that "very little exists in common" between Daoism and "modern Western anarchism, with its emphasis on

24. This interpretation is usually associated with the Realist (or Legalist) school associated with the classical Chinese thinker *Hanfeizi*, a school "concerned with the preservation of the power of the state through adherence to law and political expediency." See Benjamin Penny, "Introduction," in *Laozi Daodejing*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii–xxix, at xxiii. See also Christopher C. Rand, "Chinese Military Thought and Philosophical Taoism," *Monumenta Serica* 34 (1979): 171–218.

25. Edward Slingerland, "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-wei," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000): 293–327, at 297.

26. Barbalet, "Market Relations," 347 (see note 10 above).

27. Seungho Moon, "*Wuwei* (non-action) Philosophy and Actions: Rethinking 'Actions' in School Reform," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47 (2015): 455–73, at 460.

28. John A. Rapp, "Utopian, Anti-Utopian and Dystopian Ideas in Philosophical Daoism," *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 2 (2003): 211–31; Bryan W. Van Norden, "Method in the Madness of the Laozi," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, ed. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 187–210.

29. John A. Rapp, *Daoism and Anarchism: Critiques of State Autonomy in Ancient and Modern China* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 52.

revolution."[30] In his view, "not only did Daoism clearly reject authoritarianism and provide an image of a free society, but it also rooted this image in an understanding of the individual as developing properly—naturally—only if free."[31]

One perspective held among Confucian-inspired scholars is that Daoism as a school of thought rejects modernity altogether in favor of people living in a "small country with few inhabitants," a phrase appearing only once in the *DDJ*.[32] But strong anti-modernist interpretations of the *DDJ* share three major shortcomings. First, they often infer too much from a single isolated passage that appears nowhere else in the text.[33] Second, they fail to consider (in line with the general gist of the whole *DDJ*), that the "small state" ideal may perhaps be best read as a critique of authoritarian empire, expansionism, and the mindless adoption by the state of (new) technologies of control that may turn out to ultimately have higher costs than benefits to society—as opposed to a rejection of all forms of technology, public administration, or statehood.[34] Third, if one were to use such a passage to claim that the *DDJ* therefore has little relevance to modern society,[35] that interpretation would certainly also have to apply to other texts from its era, including those from the Confucian school. For example, Confucius famously argued that one should stop all public activities for three years in order to mourn a parent's death, but it would be too hasty to claim that texts from that school are irrelevant to today's society simply due to the fact that a modern economy may have difficulty functioning with or adjusting to such extended employee leaves.

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30. Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6, 8.

31. Ibid., 11.

32. This phrase appears in Ch. 80. By contrast, renowned sinologist Joseph Needham tended "to see the Daoist utopia through the lens of Marxist primitive communism rather than the libertarian individualism of certain nineteenth-century anarchists." See Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 108 (see note 5 above).

33. Tongdong Bai, "How to Rule without Taking Unnatural Actions (无为而治): A Comparative Study of the Political Philosophy of the Laozi," *Philosophy East & West* 59 (2009): 481–502, at 490.

34. As Zhongjiang Wang argues, Laozi's ideal is not a "small country with few people." Rather, this passage is "an exposition of the ways by which rulers and social leaders can be least involved and yet most efficient in managing people, society, and resources-no matter what size the state is." See Zhongjiang Wang, *Daoism Excavated: Cosmos and Humanity in Early Manuscripts*, trans. Livia Kohn (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Three Pines Press, 2015), 153.

35. See, for instance, D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1963). Similarly, Tongdong Bai argues, based on this passage, that "the romantic understanding of the peaceful primitive life in the *Laozi*" is "highly problematic"; see Bai, "How to Rule," 493 (see note 33 above).

What authors favoring an anarchic view correctly claim is that Daoism opposes coercion and imperialism. However, these analysts too often mistakenly conflate the anti-authoritarian sentiments of Laozi with anti-statism. Here it is important to make a distiction between the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, another prominent Daoist thinker whose writings emerged later (in the 4th to 3rd centuries BCE) during China's Warring States period. Zhuangzi is known, among other things, for vividly expressing his contempt for certain aspects of officialdom. However, whereas the work of Zhuangzi is often critical of government in general, the overriding focus of Laozi is on statecraft and the practices of good government.[36] Contesting the thesis that Laozi's thought is anarchic, there is now increasing consensus that Laozi sought only a *reduction* of excessive state interference instead of a *rejection* of the state as a whole.[37] Earlier claims associating Laozi with anarchy were premised on the notion that Laozi's advocacy of *wu-wei* meant that rulers were simply to do nothing, essentially implying the absence of any ruler, authority, or state. However, whereas anarchy is a system that is ruler-less and stateless, Laozi endorses both the state and rulers and "the Laozi is clearly a political treatise addressed to the ruler and providing him with a philosophy of governance."[38] Moreover, the Daoist sage ruler is not one who does nothing, but one who does nothing that goes against the *dao*.[39] As Aleksandar Stamatov argues, "the *Laozi* suggests a kind of interaction between the ruler and the ruled. It means that the ruler acts on the people but the people can also act on the ruler, and the actions of the ruler can be determined by the people."[40] Or to put it differently, "the top and the bottom are in a relation of mutual interaction, and this is not the anarchist ideal."[41]

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36. Clarke, "Taoist Politics" (see note 12 above); Russell Kirkland, "Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness: The Moral Teachings of the *Daode Jing*," in *Varieties of Ethical Reflection: New Directions for Ethics in a Global Context*, ed. Michael Barnhart (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), 21–48; and Alex Feldt, "Governing through the Dao: A Non-Anarchistic Interpretation of the Laozi," *Dao* 9 (2010): 323–37.

37. See Feldt, "Governing through the Dao" (see previous note); Aleksandar Stamatov, "The Laozi and Anarchism," *Asian Philosophy* 24 (2014): 260–78; and Wang, *Daoism Excavated* (see note 34 above).

38. Feldt, "Governing through the Dao," 327 (see note 36 above).

39. Stamatov, "The Laozi," 270, 275 (see note 37 above). As Alex Feldt points out, although "the ruler does not maintain an active hand in daily governance, he never absolves himself of the power to institute policy and structural changes necessary to facilitate society's accordance with the *dao* on a broader level." See Feldt, "Governing through the Dao," 324 (see note 36 above).

40. Stamatov, "The Laozi," 266 (see note 37 above).

41. Ibid., 271.

In fact, leading scholars have even contested the idea that anarchy is championed by Zhuangzi. Whereas statecraft and non-confrontational governance are heavily emphasized by Laozi, Zhuangzi champions playfulness and uselessness in his narratives. For instance, he exults the Peng bird and other figures "who are truly themselves, unconventional, eccentric,"[42] presumably because they are completely free from the rigidity and rules of society—in other words, because they live in anarchy. Nevertheless, Livia Kohn argues that while Zhuangzi may be anarchic in a linguistic sense, he is no political anarchist. As Kohn points out, while Zhuangzi was personally uninterested in working for the government and was disgusted by political maneuvering, the sage ruler envisioned by Zhuangzi (like that of Laozi) is one who takes action to support people's flourishing: "If a great sage were to govern the world, he would let people's minds be easy and open, to have them create their own teachings and change their customs as needed. He would support them in eliminating all mental negativity and help them progress in realizing their unique ambitions."[43]

In a related vein, the idea that the state should not dominate or excessively interfere with people's lives has led to comparisons between Daoism and libertarianism, especially since Daoism provides a justification for creating and supporting a government that is limited in scope.[44] But as Moon notes, the Daoist state and its ruler are not completely passive and indifferent to people's selfish desires. While Laozi may advocate a relatively gentle and non-abrasive approach to governance, his aim is to provide support to the population and curb people's aggression, desire, and dissatisfaction:

> Laozi put forward *wu-wei* (non-action) as a political idea, which means the rulers or the leaders must be generous with the people and make the minimum interference or intervention in people's lives; . . . *wu-wei* highlighted a sage leader's roles of governing the state with soft, minimal intervention, humility, and in a spontaneous manner, which is cultivating life and leadership in accordance with Tao . . . . Making people non-aggressive, content, and desire-free is a political strategy in Taoism that is different from Confucianism.[45]

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42. Kohn, *Zhuangzi*, 223 (see note 20 above).
43. Ibid., 64.
44. Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 256–57 (see note 5 above); see also Feldt, "Governing through the Dao" (see note 36 above).
45. Moon, "Wuwei," 457 (see note 27 above).

As Liu Xiaogan points out, "the agent of *wu-wei* in Laozi's theory is essentially the sage, or leader of society, who takes 'assisting' as the key principle of action instead of directly ordering, pushing, interfering, and interrupting."[46] Thus, Laozi's sages are probably not libertarian, as they work towards helping the people as opposed to just refraining from harming them. This inference is also consonant with the *DDJ*'s insistence that both sides in any pair of opposites (for example, male and female, light and dark, active and passive, strong and weak, state and society) have their own virtues and that one should not dogmatically champion any one side to the exclusion of the other.[47]

Taking these observations regarding limitations in theocratic, anarchic, and libertarian intepretations of the *DDJ* into consideration, I will now advance the argument that Laozi's thought can be fruitfully understood as a particular Chinese model or variety of liberalism, since many core ideas behind contemporary Western liberalisms appear compatible with Laozi's thought. As liberals are wont to argue, the goal of achieving a non-coercive social order can be achieved by transforming the state rather than eliminating or minimizing it. While Western liberals tend to advocate freedom above most other objectives, instead of taking an anti-statist view, they see the proper role of the state as advancing some combination of the following three freedoms: freedom from constraints and harm; autonomy, or the freedom to be an author of one's own life; and freedom of thought, belief, and conscience.[48] As discussed below, Laozi's thought seems to favor all three.[49]

Comparing Laozi and J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*

Espousing a holistic philosophy, Laozi's thought speaks to multiple dimensions of life, since it conceives the "*dao*" (道; often translated as "way") as "the unnameable source of generative vitality in a universe of constant transformation."[50]

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46. Xiaogan Liu, "Daoism: Laozi and Zhuangzi," in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, ed. Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–57, at 50.

47. Hansen, *A Daoist Theory* (see note 20 above).

48. Kazuo Seiyama, *Liberalism: Its Achievements and Failures* (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2010), 142–46.

49. As Feldt argues, in Laozi's vision "the state will attempt to operate in a manner that allows as much freedom as possible for the people." See Feldt, "Governing through the Dao," 335 (see note 36 above).

50. James Miller, "Daoism and Development," in *Handbook of Research on Development and Religion*, ed. Matthew Clarke (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2013), 113–123, at 113.

According to Wang Zhongjiang, the *dao* is "formless, imageless, nameless, simple, and subtle," and its "most beautiful virtue" is that it "does not exercise any form of manipulation or control over the myriad beings, but lets them develop and unfold as they will."[51] As Slingerland argues, "for the pre-Qin Confucians and Daoists, the culmination of knowledge is represented by an ability to move through the world and human society in a manner that is completely spontaneous and yet still fully in harmony with the normative order of the natural and human worlds—the *Dao* or 'Way.'"[52]

Nevertheless, scholars have offered differing interpretations of Laozi's thought due to the polysemic and protean nature of the *DDJ*. The first line of the *DDJ* contributes to such perplexity by stating "the Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao," a theme expounded upon in Chapter 21: "Dao is something elusive and vague! . . . Though elusive and vague, in it is the substance."[53] Making use of such passages, rival Confucians have maneuvered over the past two millennia to portray Laozi's thought as esoteric and obscure. Yet the historical record shows that "the fusion of politics and religion has been a strong tradition in Daoism,"[54] and many later Daoists inspired by Laozi's thought were important figures in the high politics of China during the Early Han (206 BCE–24 CE), Jin (266–420 CE), Wei (386–534 CE), and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties.[55]

Here I assess whether the spirit of Laozi's thought offers something akin to a Chinese model of liberalism. I begin by discussing five core political principles prominent in the *DDJ* and the treatment of each of these principles in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill's *On Liberty* is a classic pronouncement of Western political liberalism. As one scholar notes, it represents "the single most eloquenty, most significant, and most influential statement of the irreducible value of human individuality . . . . Insofar as liberalism in the modern world could be said to acknowledge one text as setting out its essential moral basis, several generations of readers have

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51. Wang, *Daoism Excavated*, 146, 151 (see note 34 above).

52. Slingerland, "Effortless Action," 295 (see note 25 above).

53. *DDJ* quotations in this article are taken from translations by Paul J. Lin, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1977) and Zhengkun Gu, *Laozi: Dao De Jing* (Beijing, China: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1995).

54. Yang, "The Changing Economy," 142 (see note 5 above).

55. Clarke, *Tao of the West* (see note 5 above); Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

concurred in according that primacy to *On Liberty*."[56] While no single spokesperson or text can encapsulate the diversity of the Western liberal tradition, *On Liberty* clarifies the three core concepts of liberal ideology: "for *liberty*, it is the notion of non-constraint; for *individualism*, the notion of the person as a separate entity possessing unique attributes and capable of choice; for *progress*, the notion of movement from less desirable to more desirable states."[57] Importantly, Mill also stands out as a thinker who operated at the intersection of different cross-currents of (traditional and revisionist) liberal thought while posessing a remarkable ability "to hold together conflicting elements in liberal thought."[58] Mill was also self-consciously a liberal contributing to liberal thought as a writer and practitioner. He was a member of Parliament for the Liberal party in nineteenth-century Britain, an era in which liberalism was ascendant (post-1815) and prior to liberalism's "historic compromise with democracy" (post-1880) and its later stress on "personal rights" (post-1945).[59]

As an exercise in comparative political thought,[60] this study takes a "contextualizing concepts"[61] approach by first identifying prominent politically oriented concepts in the *DDJ* and then comparing these concepts with their corresponding treatment in J. S. Mill's work in order to assess the presence of conceptual family resemblances.[62] The aim here is to overcome unconscious prejudices[63] and identify

56. Stefan Collini, "Introduction" in *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty with The Subjection of Women and Chapters of Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vii–xxvi, at vii.

57. Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1996), 145.

58. Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 88 (see note 1 above). This article's focus on J. S. Mill as one particular representative of Western liberalism does not intend to diminish the important contributions of other influential liberal thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Hill (T. H.) Green, or Richard Titmuss.

59. Ibid., 2, 11. By contrast, earlier thinkers who made significant contributions to liberal thinking like Adam Smith and John Locke can be seen to some degree as proto-liberals who lived prior to the post-Napoleonic era when liberalism finally emerged as an influential political practice and ideology.

60. On the field of comparative political thought, see Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent, "Introduction: The Study of Comparative Political Thought," in *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*, ed. Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–23; James Tully, "Deparochializing Political Theory and Beyond: A Dialogue Approach to Comparative Political Thought," *Journal of World Philosophies* 1 (2016): 51–74.

61. Adrian Little, "Contextualizing Concepts: The Methodology of Comparative Political Theory," *Review of Politics* 80 (2018): 87–113, at 89.

62. Melissa S. Williams and Mark E. Warren, "A Democratic Case for Comparative Political Theory," *Political Theory* 42 (2014): 26–57, at 55–56.

63. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 369, 414.

"*correlations* between concepts in different cases rather than direct translations."[64] This approach can be understood as "a kind of dialogue" that "opens up the possibility of widening our range of sympathies and multiplying the conceptual tools at our disposal."[65] Since the meaning one derives from a text always depends on one's own thought-world and the conversation into which the text is brought, this dialogue serves to illuminate liberal elements in Daoist thought while also potentially compelling us "to confront assumptions, limitations, and fractures" of the Western liberal tradition.[66]

While the foregoing analysis is primaily conventional in nature by privileging written texts, Jenco has demonstrated that practices of living communities themselves constitute political thinking, and that "political theory appears not only in places that self-consciously articulate it but also in an array of modes that celebrate, commemorate and transmit it."[67] Hence, since texts and practice often "exist in a complementary relationship," the comparative textual analysis that follows is supplemented by a few brief observations of "local experiences within a living tradition,"[68] namely reflections by scholars on political and ritual practices carried out by contemporary Daoist communities in the Republic of China on Taiwan.

In my analysis, I concentrate only on political themes reiterated in multiple chapters of the *DDJ* in order to avoid unduly over-weighting isolated passages or themes that appear only once in a text that itself may be a multi-authored compendium.[69] Lastly, my focus is on how Laozi's thought relates to the concept of "liberalism" and not the more complicated multi-conceptual cluster of "liberal democracy," since these are independent concepts; some regimes may be liberal but undemocratic or democratic but illiberal.[70] In the article's conclusion, however, I compare several

64. Little, "Contextualizing Concepts," 112 (see note 61 above).

65. Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 10, 13 (see note 5 above).

66. Ibid., 12.

67. Leigh Kathryn Jenco, "'What Does Heaven Ever Say?' A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007): 741–55, at 752.

68. Ibid., 753.

69. Kirkland, "Self-Fulfillment," 25 (see note 36 above). My analysis is based on the transmitted version of the DDJ over the past two millennia, as opposed to the more recently discovered but long-buried Mawangdui and Guodian texts. Studies of the latter include Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989); Edmund Ryden, *Laozi Daodejing: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Wang, *Daoism Excavated* (see note 34 above).

70. T. F. Rhoden, "The Liberal in Liberal Democracy," *Democratization* 22 (2015): 560–78.

aspects of Laozi's thought with what in recent years has been termed "democracy with Chinese characteristics."

Political Principles in Laozi's *Dao De Jing*

A core political principle prominent in Laozi's thought is its call for non-coercive means of governing society as expressed through the term *wu-wei* (無為), which is translated variously as "effortless non-calculative responsiveness,"[71] "effortless action,"[72] or "non-coerceive action."[73] While sometimes translated as non-action, *wu-wei* does not mean taking no action at all. Rather, "it describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless perfectly accord with the dictates of the situation at hand."[74] As Lesley Prince explains, "when one is fully connected with the ebb and flow of what is happening in the environment, then action can become spontaneously appropriate to the prevailing circumstances."[75]

Since Daoist rulers are expected to follow the way of nature (天之道, *tian zhi dao*), "which is invariably in a state of flux,"[76] this frequently requires political leaders to refrain from making hasty social interventions and to retreat into meditation (心斋, *xinzhai*), stillness (坐忘, *zuowang*), and reflection in order to discern or intuit nature's objectives before (or instead of) taking action. The imperative of *wu-wei* also means a ruler should avoid using coercion, violence, confrontation, strong compulsion, and excessive force to achieve their objectives.[77] As A. C. Graham notes, in order to practice *wu-wei* "the essential thing is not to interfere when things are already running by themselves."[78] Multiple passages of the *DDJ* reiterate this core principle of political rule, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

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71. Eric Sean Nelson, "Responding with Dao: Early Daoist Ethics and the Environment," *Philosophy East and West* 59 (2009): 294–316, at 296.

72. Slingerland, "Effortless Action," 293 (see note 25 above).

73. Roger T. Ames and David Hall, *Laozi Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

74. Slingerland, "Effortless Action," 300 (see note 25 above).

75. Lesley Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner: Tao and Leadership," *Leadership* 1 (2005): 105–126, at 117.

76. Shelton Gunaratne, *The Dao of the Press: A Humanocentric Theory* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2005), 26.

77. Li, *Daozhi yu Ziyou*, 5 (see note 18 above).

78. A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), 232.

> The Sage administers without action and instructs without words. He lets all things rise without dominating them, produces without attempting to possess, acts without asserting, achieves without taking credit.[79]

> One does things noncoercively and yet nothing goes undone.[80]

> To govern the world well, one must take *wu wei* as the principle. If one governs with too much action, one is not a worthy governor.[81]

Authoritarian styles of governance, by contrast, can be seen as the opposite of *wu-wei*, and Laozi repeatedly denounces political leaders who dominate every aspect of people's lives through excessive extractions, interventions, and prohibitions. For instance, the *DDJ* tells us that:

> To rule a large nation is as to cook a small fish, that is by not disturbing it.[82]

> Do not restrict their living quarters. Do not disturb their livelihood. Just because one does not annoy them, he will not be annoyed by them.[83]

> The people are starving because the man on top devours too much tax money, so they are starving.[84]

Instead Laozi advocates having a ruler who does not demand too much from the population (for example, in taxes, conformity, interventions, or prohibitions). This suggests the *DDJ* opposes governance methods by which rulers control the population through means of deliberate violence, manipulative propaganda, and crippling restrictions on permissible behavior. Berating rulers who excessively restrict the population's movements and activities, Laozi advocates a more hands-off approach, such that people may not even be aware of who the ruler is. In his view, "the best ruler is unknown to his subjects; Next comes the ruler loved and praised; Next comes the ruler being feared; Next comes the ruler disdained."[85]

Similarly, John Stuart Mill condemns authoritarianism and champions liberty in terms of "protection against the tyranny of the political rulers."[86] He likewise

79. *DDJ*, ch. 2 (see note 53 above).
80. Ibid., ch. 37. The Chinese characters here are 道常无为而无不为.
81. Ibid., ch. 48.
82. Ibid., ch. 60.
83. Ibid., ch. 72.
84. Ibid., ch. 75.
85. Ibid., ch. 17.
86. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* in *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty with the Subjection of Women and Chapters on Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1859]), 1–115, at 5.

advocates limits on the scope of government to prevent it from having excessive power and control over society.[87] Mill squarely rejects totalitarianism and micromanaging of other people's lives, believing that the liberty of individuals should include conscience and opinion, tastes and pursuits, and the freedom to unite.[88] According to Mill, "the only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it."[89] As a possible corollary to the idea of *wu-wei*, Mill expresses the conviction that "the only acceptable ground for interfering with an individual's activities is that they are likely to produce definite harm to some identifiable other person or persons."[90] Thus, both Mill and Laozi call for less state interference in people's lives and by implication a space for individuality and civil society to develop.

Simplicity, modesty, and contentment form a second political principle of Laozi as expressed by the term *zu* (足) (sufficiency, contentment). Rulers are to lead a simple, content, and non-extravagant life *without desire* (無欲, *wu yu*). By living without ego, greed, surplus, or excess, leaders can serve as role models for the population. In Laozi's thought, simplicity, frugality, and modesty are considered riches, whereas accumulation of excess and wastefulness are errant. As the *DDJ* warns, "No crime is greater than greediness; No disaster is greater than the lack of contentment; Thus, *the contentment of feeling content is an eternal contentment*."[91] For Laozi, the proper role of government is to make people's lives more secure without demanding too much in terms of prohibitions, taboos, levies, and conscriptions. Hence, simplicity is both a means and an end of good governance, and the quality of governance is heavily impacted by those at the top because they set the tone for the rest of society. If they are full of desires, so will be the masses.

This theme also occurs in a passage from Chapter 3 of the *DDJ*, which states that "the Daoist sage causes (*shi* 使) the masses to be without knowledge (cunning) or desires by keeping their hearts vacuous, filling their bellies, weakening their ambitions, and strengthening their bones."[92] While some argue this means that Laozi intends for the masses to be made ignorant and under-educated, such an interpretation clashes with the general message of the *DDJ*, which emphasizes balance,

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87. Ibid., 110.
88. Ibid., 15.
89. Ibid., 16.
90. Collini, "Introduction," xiv (see note 55 above).
91. *DDJ*, ch. 6 (see note 52 above). The characters for the phrase in italics are 知足之足常足矣; emphasis added.
92. Bai, "How to Rule," 484 (see note 33 above).

spontaneity, and being in harmony with nature. An interpretation that is perhaps more in line with the *DDJ*'s broader narrative is that rulers ought to place a high priority on making sure that their people are sufficiently nourished, fit, and healthy, and that this should should take precedence over saturating the population with propaganda and inciting them to desire luxuries. As Mario Wenning notes, the Daoist leader aims for each person in society "to follow a path of creative doing rather than to impose his or her will through instrumental action on the world."[93] Thus, rather than advocating a cruel leader or austere living, a primary objective of the text may be to express visceral opposition to the hypocrisy of contrived "virtues" and the problems of social indoctrination and elite manipulations that lead people (in Laozi's view) to be greedy, aggressive, materialistic, and violent—hence leading to war, chaos, and disruption.

Laozi remains convinced that when rulers are without desire, in contrast to the typical ruler of his (and perhaps our) era, there will be good governance and the masses will become simple and content. This theme appears in multiple passages:

> Discern plainness. Embrace simplicity. Reduce selfishness. Restrain desires.[94]
>
> The Sage abandons the excessive, the extravagant, and the extreme.[95]
>
> To be content is riches.[96]
>
> Nameless simplicity means being without desires. Being without desires and with tranquility, the world will keep peace by itself.[97]
>
> Overhoarding brings heavy loss. To know what is enough means to avoid disgrace.[98]
>
> The sage knows himself but does not praise himself; loves himself but does not honor himself.[99]

By contrast, simplicity and frugality are not major themes in Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill puts much greater emphasis on reducing harm to people than reducing their desires or consumption. However, Mill does note that "the superior worth of

92. Bai, "How to Rule," 484 (see note 33 above).
93. Wenning, "Kant and Daoism," 564 (see note 11 above).
94. *DDJ*, ch. 19 (see note 53 above).
95. Ibid., ch. 29.
96. Ibid., ch. 33.
97. Ibid., ch. 37.
98. Ibid., ch. 44.
99. Ibid., ch. 72.

simplicity of life, the enervating and demoralizing effect of the trammels and hypocrises of artificial society, are ideas which . . . at present are needing to be asserted as much as ever, and to be asserted by deeds, for words, on this subject, have nearly exhausted their power."[100] Thus, while seemingly not a top priority for Mill, he may have been sympathetic to this particular goal. For instance, Mill was clearly supportive of imposing taxes, licenses, and in certain cases restrictions (but generally not total prohibitions) on things that are harmful, which one can see as compatible with the Daoist idea of curbing desire (*wu yu*). As Mill states,

> It is hence the duty of the State to consider, in the imposition of taxes, what commodities the consumers can best spare . . . . Taxation, therefore, of stimulants, up to the point which produces the largest amount of revenue . . . is not only admissible, but to be approved of.[101]

Thus, the reduction of desire receives much stronger emphasis in the *DDJ* than in Mill's *On Liberty*, but where a sense of compatability does arise between the two thinkers is that both take as their units of analysis not only the freedom of the individual but also liberty in society as a whole, since the two are interlinked, thereby requiring both individuals and society to exercise some degree of self-restraint so that others can experience freedom as well.

A third core political principle of Laozi is pursuing peace and non-violence in domestic and international affairs. The *DDJ* repeatedly calls on leaders to minimize the use of force and to refrain from the use of armies and weapons as instruments of violence.[102] In Laozi's day, "due to wars and conquests, the rulers . . . had to rule directly over states that kept becoming larger and more populous, and the survival of these states depended upon their success in war," whereas for Daoists, the natural life is one where "human beings are born, mature, age, and die, but they are not killed in a conflict caused by greed."[103] In this context, Laozi resolutely championed nonviolence, seeing war as something best to avoid and only to be undertaken as a last resort.[104]

The *DDJ* also strongly opposes vicious and duplicitous rulers who incite violence and vice in the population: "When the people possess many sharp weapons,

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100. Mill, *On Liberty*, 101 (see note 86 above).

101. Ibid., 101.

102. Clarke, "Taoist Politics" (see note 12 above).

103. Bai, "How to Rule," 489, 484 (see note 33 above).

104. Ellen Y. Zhang, "Weapons are Nothing but Ominous Instruments: The Daodejing's View on War and Peace," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2002): 473–502.

the nation will become more chaotic. When the people possess much craftiness, trickery will flourish. When law and order become more conspicuous, there will be more robbers and thieves."[105] Here the *DDJ* is condemning the hypocrisy of rulers who promote law and order to keep the peace through harsh punishments while conversely denying people the necessary opportunities and conditions needed for meaningfully living—a strategy that Laozi sees as destined to backfire. This view is aired in multiple passages, such as:

> Those who aid the ruler with *Dao* do not use military force to conquer the world. Because this will invite retaliation. Where the army stays, briers and thorns grow. After a great war comes the year of adversity.[106]
>
> Weapons are the tools of evil, not the tools of the gentleman.[107]
>
> The state's sharp weapons cannot be shown to the people.[108]
>
> When a country goes counter to the *Dao*, warheads are stockpiled outside the cities.[109]

By contrast, peace in international and domestic affairs is not heavily emphasized in *On Liberty*, but Mill argues in a similar vein, and forcefully, that progress does not and should not come at the expense of order. Rather, he believed both must be pursued simultaneously, implying a rejection of violent conflicts and upheavals since they threaten order. In Mill's view, "Order, thus considered, is not an additional end to be reconciled with Progress, but a part and means of Progress itself. If a gain in one respect is purchased by a more than equivalent loss in the same or in any other, there is not Progress."[110] Mill similarly spoke out against the abuse of state power and "utterly repudiated any suggestion of a violent seizure of power."[111] Like the *DDJ*, Mill's conception of the ideal society was radically different from the status quo in his era, but he rejected violent revolutionary means to realize it. Instead, Mill believed the state ought to stop fraud, treachery, and force.[112] These ideas clearly resonate with those expressed in the *DDJ*.

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105. *DDJ*, ch. 57 (see note 53 above).
106. Ibid., ch. 30.
107. Ibid., ch. 31.
108. Ibid., ch. 36.
109. Ibid., ch. 46.
110. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958 [1861]), 22.
111. Collini, "Introduction," xxiv (see note 56 above).
112. Mill, *On Liberty*, 95 (see note 8 above).

A fourth core political principle in Laozi's thought is naturalness as expressed in the mantra that "the *dao* models itself on self-being."[113] Naturalness (自然, *zi ran*), which literally means so-of-itself, relates to people "following their inner natures" or "returning to nature."[114] This refers to each individual having their own unique "heaven-given inherent nature" and "being allowed to unfold freely into whoever they are" in a spontaneous manner, as opposed to rigidly following socially constructed norms.[115] It is the opposite of following artificial, man-made, socially contrived principles, and it designates liberation for all life forms from constricting social strictures. As Sharon Rowe explains, Daoism "mocks any point of view that accords humans privilege among nature's myriad creatures, suggesting that it is the height of folly to believe humans can control nature."[116] Instead of dominating other species, people should live in harmony with the natural environment.[117] This entails avoiding the use of unnecessary, wasteful, or destructive products and technologies and making sure the human population does not outgrow the resources needed to sustain itself. As Eric Nelson argues,

> Instead of ethical and social life being based on the domination of nature, in which it is transformed into an instrumental object of calculation and control . . . the Daodejing suggests that the ruler rules best without force and violence. Nature and society are not divided into unconnected opposites, and their mutuality implies that harming one equally harms the other.[118]

The Daoist principle of respecting nature likewise entails appreciating the value of females and feminine energies for achieving peace and harmony, as mentioned in the following passages:

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113. Wang, *Daoism Excavated*, 130 (see note 34 above).

114. Moon, "Wuwei," 458 (see note 27 above).

115. Wang, *Daoism Excavated*, 143, 135 (see note 34 above). As Liu Xiaogan notes, naturalness "is the highest principle and core value" of Laozi's philosophy, and is "embodied and promoted by Dao. The true meaning and message . . . . is that humans should put the principle of naturalness into practice and engage in natural harmony in their lives and with their surroundings. Natural harmony and natural order are valuable and desirable compared with either forced order or chaos." See Liu, "Daoism: Laozi and Zhuangzi," 49–50 (see note 46 above).

116. Sharon Rowe, "Returning to What Matters: Daoist Lessons for Ecofeminisms," *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* 11 (2002): 63–67, at 64.

117. The Daoist thinker Zhuangzi arguably goes even further than Laozi in his advocacy of bio-centrism or eco-centrism as opposed to anthropocentrism. See Kohn, *Zhuangzi*, 245 (see note 20 above).

118. Nelson, "Responding with Dao," 305 (see note 7 above).

> The Valley Spirit never dies. It is called the mystic female. The door of the mystic female is the root of heaven and earth.[119]
>
> When male and female combine, all things achieve harmony.[120]
>
> The female always conquers the male by serenity.[121]

In this respect, the *DDJ* not only expresses the idea that through the act of yielding the weak can overcome the strong,[122] it also sets itself apart from other texts of its era by not advocating and even subtly contesting patriarchy and gender hierarchy in encouraging leaders to take on feminine leadership qualities.[123]

Similarly, J. S. Mill was one of the few men publicly challenging patriarchy in his era by insisting "very vigorously that women should not suffer any legal penalties as a result of getting married (such as loss of control over their own property), and should not be excluded from any careers or offices. He also explicitly and unreservedly affirmed women's right to vote in all national and local elections."[124] While Mill was generally silent on society-nature relations, he did encourage humans to be free to give way to certain natural impulses and to spontaneity.[125] Mill also rejected the idea that "trees are a much finer thing when clipped into pollards, or cut out into figures of animals, than as nature made them."[126] Rather, he argued "it is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others" that human life "becomes rich, diversified, and animating."[127] And resembling the rythmic alternations of nature (between seasons, day and night, growth and decay, etc.) as expressed in the *DDJ*, Mill likewise advocated rythmic alternation and two-party balance within liberal democracy:

> In politics, again, it is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life . . . . Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the

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119. *DDJ*, ch. 6 (see note 53 above).
120. Ibid., ch. 42.
121. Ibid., ch. 61.
122. Graham, "Disputers," 229–30 (see note 78 above).
123. Kirkland, *Taoism*, 126–33 (see note 55 above); and Clarke, "Taoist Politics," 265–66 (see note 12 above).
124. Collini, "Introduction," xix (see note 56 above).
125. Mill, *On Liberty*, 58 (see note 86 above).
126. Ibid., 62.
127. Ibid., 63.

> opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity. Unless opinions favourable to democracy and to aristocracy, to property and to equality, to co-operation and to competition, to luxury and to abstinence, to sociality and individuality, to liberty and discipline, and all the other standing antagonisms of practical life, are expressed with equal freedom, and enforced and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both elements obtaining their due; one scale is sure to go up, and the other down.[128]

Finally, a fifth core political principle of Laozi is embracing discursive pluralism, a principle connected to Daoists' fundamental skepticism towards all forms of language.[129] Positing that the *myriad beings* (萬物, *wanwu*) each have their own nature, Laozi's thought also proposes an ontological pluralism which is readily observable in Laozi's "dialectical or paradoxical thinking, in which the unity and transformation of pairs of contradictions are a basic operating principle" as expressed through "the interdependence between opposite things and concepts."[130] This starting points leads us to acknowledge the partiality and contingency of all names, labels, concepts, and categories. As the *DDJ* expresses it, "The name that can be mentioned is not the eternal name."[131]

Conscious that words, language, and knowledge are always partial, relative, and open to interpretation, skepticism of language implies allowing space for plural and dissenting views that may challenge dominant discourses.[132] Laozi also seems to frown upon modes of governance that foster self-censorship: "When a country is in disorder, there are loyal ministers."[133] As John Clarke points out, Daoism exudes "an air of gentle toleration and a spirit of openness and compromise" that encourages "a questioning of moral fundamentalisms and totalizing perspectives" while fostering the "blossoming of a tolerant pluralism of values."[134] What Laozi is calling for is a release from being saddled with or befuddled by conventional notions of what is and should be—an idea that ties in directly with the aforementioned concept of *wu-wei*.

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128. Ibid., 48.
129. Hansen, *A Daoist Theory*, 203 (see note 20 above).
130. Liu, "Daoism: Laozi and Zhuangzi," 50 (see note 46 above); see also Wang, *Daoism Excavated*, 116 (see note 34 above).
131. *DDJ*, ch. 1 (see note 53 above).
132. Similarly, Zhuangzi "insists on multiple perspectives, and bemoans the limitations of culture and ordinary knowledge"; see Kohn, *Zhuangzi*, 224 (see note 20 above).
133. *DDJ*, ch. 18 (see note 53 above).
134. Clarke, "Taoist Politics," 270 (see note 12 above).

On this point one can see considerable convergence with the liberalism of Mill, who held a similar position in advocating for a pluralism of ideas, by arguing, "there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth, by being exaggerated into falsehood."[135] Just as Laozi asserts there are multiple ways of interpreting reality, Mill emphasized paying attention to more than one perspective: "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."[136]

Mill also heavily emphasized relativity, as did the *DDJ*. In Mill's view, popular opinions "are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth. They are a part of the truth; sometimes a greater, sometimes a smaller part, but exaggerated, distorted, and disjoined from the truths by which they ought to be accompanied and limited. Heretical opinions, on the other hand, are generally some of these suppressed and neglected truths."[137] In this respect, Mill's popular and heretical opinions resemble the ancient Chinese concepts of *yin* and *yang* (featured in the *DDJ*), each of which complements the other, but alone does not contain the whole story.[138] Here Mill noticeably places greater emphasis on discussion among different viewpoints to arrive at truths compared to Daoists, who are wont to see meditation, contemplation, and mysticism as primary routes to reach the deep truths of life. But Laozi's criticism of rectified language and advocacy for tolerance necessarily opens a space for pluralism as likewise advocated by Mill.

Reconciling Laozi's Thought and Mill's Liberalism

Both Laozi and John Stuart Mill saw their respective societies and states as overly aggressive, harmful, stifling, and conformist. They also sought to reduce unwarranted meddling and intrusion by the state into people's lives in order to allow them to live more naturally, spontaneously, and freely. Thus, I have identified a significant correlation between the two thinkers in terms of a desirable political *outcome*—that of humans being free, which can be succinctly described as *substantive* liberalism.

135. Mill, *On Liberty*, 53 (see note 86 above).

136. Ibid., 20.

137. Ibid., 47.

138. Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture*, 20 (see note 5 above); L. H. M. Ling, "Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist Dialectics and the 'China Threat,'" *Review of International Studies* 39 (2013): 549–68, at 560.

Interestingly, both thinkers also hint at the notion that self-cultivation is an ultimate purpose of human life. Yet for Laozi, the goal is to return to a state of being in harmony with nature, while for Mill the goal is to move forward and achieve progress, although both luminaries see an overweening, excessively domineering and interfering state as a primary obstacle to achieving these goals. While they do not share identical goals, to borrow John Rawls's term, there is a substantial "overlapping consensus" between them.[139]

Where divergence between Mill and Laozi is more pronounced is over which *procedures* will achieve greater liberty for humans from their rulers and social conventions. On this measure, Laozi calls for a highly cultivated sage ruler who practices *wu-wei*, whereas Mill calls for two things: popular representation as a source of collective intelligence to check government abuse and as a source of alternative ideas to be publicly contested; and legal rights that limit the state's powers to infringe on human liberties. I now consider whether these notions of rights and representation (i.e., *procedural* liberalism) can be commensurable with Laozi's thought.

While both Laozi and Western liberalism convey the message that people deserve protection from arbitrary powers of the state, a major difference between the two is that Western liberals commonly appeal to the legal concept of rights, a concept absent in the *DDJ*, which predated the development of global rights consciousness by over two millennia. Western liberals also tend to champion the rule of law concept, whereby states can only punish citizens through due procedures (including a right to appeal) if they have been found guilty of criminal behavior. At first glance, Laozi's emphasis on harmony appears to diverge from the more competitive, adversarial, and institutionalized orientation of Western liberalism. It also seems that Laozi would be opposed to hard and fast legal rights because of the indeterminacy of both language and *the way*. However, legal rights guaranteed to individuals that restrict the scope of state actions that might otherwise harm them or arbitrarily act against them are certainly compatible with Laozi's imperative of non-coercion in the same way that Western liberals champion non-interference by the state on personal matters, as reflected in Isaiah Berlin's discussion of negative liberty.[140]

Historically, Daoist communities have also promulgated and adhered to various rules designed to facilitate physical, social, and spiritual development.[141] Thus,

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139. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

140. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Isaiah Berlin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 121–54.

141. Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (see note 5 above); and Kohn, *Cosmos and Continuity* (see note 20 above).

Daoism as a religion and comprehensive school of thought is by no means inherently opposed to the presence of rules, legal rights, or institutionalized procedures to facilitate human development, as is likewise evident in the practices of Daoist communities, which at times have practiced strict taboos.[142] Furthermore, the *DDJ* and *On Liberty* both seek to achieve a balance between following rules and giving way to spontaneity, with a justification of the former being to engender the latter. As Mill notes, "in the conduct of human beings towards one another, it is necessary that general rules should for the most part be observed, in order that people may know what they have to expect; but in each person's own concerns, his individual spontaneity is entitled to free exercise."[143] For Mill, the law spells out each individual's rights and duties as each person living in society

> should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest. This conduct consists first, in not injuring the interests of one another; or rather certain interests, which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights; and secondly, in each person's bearing his share (to be fixed on some equitable principle) of the labors and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and molestation.[144]

Thus, Mill, and liberals more generally, believe in the necessity of legal rights to protect individuals from harm, but they also believe that only certain issues should fall under the "legitimate sphere of legal control."[145] As Michael Freeden argues:

> Consciously appending instrumental status to rights as servants of individuality and development . . . Mill shifted rights to a relatively peripheral and marginal position. Their inviolability was not central to a universal theory of political society; rather, their broad utility was proportionate to their role in fostering individuality.[146]

Thus, Mill perceived rights as only one of several possible means to achieve the ultimate end of liberty; other means include better education, limited and responsible government, competent and quality rulers, participation of the people in

142. John Blofeld, *Taoism: The Road to Immortality* (Boulder, Colo.: Shambala, 1978).
143. Mill, *On Liberty*, 77 (see note 86 above).
144. Ibid., 75.
145. Ibid., 12.
146. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 163 (see note 57 above).

government, people behaving rationally, and each individual's own self-development and self-cultivation.[147]

By contrast, any discussion of a judicial or legal apparatus and rights is absent from the *DDJ*. However, that does not automatically make it an anarchist or libertarian text; such an interpretation would miss other foundational elements of Laozi's thought. As Clarke points out, "the Taoist attitude was one which encouraged self-cultivation and self-fulfillment rather than a libertarian ideal of unfettered rational agency."[148] Moreover, the *DDJ* emphasizes compassion (慈, *ci*), implying empathy for other peoples and species.[149] Thus, while libertarians might embrace a state that promotes only negative liberty such that people are putatively free to do as they please, Daoism's emphasis on meeting basic needs, abstaining from desires such as "eating rich and fancy foods" or "accumulating too many things,"[150] and having freedom from threats to one's physical health implies a state committed to ensuring (even if not directly providing) both positive freedoms (for example, through public goods and services such as medicine and health care) as well as negative freedoms. This view is admittedly much more consonant with modern developmental liberalism—as espoused, for instance, by the capabilities approach[151]—than with neo-classical protective liberalism or a libertarian view, which advocates a minimal state.[152] As opposed to tolerating the economic inequality that is inevitably engendered by libertarian (including neo-liberal) approaches to statehood, Daoism actually seeks the opposite—"the curtailment of desire, the promotion of contentment and the notion that frugality generates riches all point in the direction of an egalitarian rather than an unequal economy."[153]

A second procedural issue on which Mill's liberalism appears to diverge from Laozi is the former's insistence upon popular representation. Laozi, like all classical Chinese political thinkers, assumes some form of elitist dictatorial or monarchical

147. Ibid., 141–68.

148. Clarke, "Taoist Politics," 262 (see note 12 above).

149. Zhang, "Weapons," 490 (see note 114 above).

150. Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture*, 23 (see note 20 above).

151. On the capabilities approach, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

152. Devin Joshi, "The Protective and Developmental Varieties of Liberal Democracy: A Difference in Kind or Degree?" *Democratization* 20 (2013): 187–214. It is important to note that J. S. Mill is a complex thinker who does not easily fit into any one camp within Western liberalism and that his writings predate the emergence of the capabilities approach, but given his later writings on socialism, he would likely lean more toward developmental liberalism than protective liberalism.

153. Barbalet, "Market Relations," 349 (see note 10 above).

rule as an inevitable feature of government.[154] Yet one should not forget that even Mill overwhelmingly concurs with the *DDJ* in viewing only elites as worthy of taking on the job of political leadership. Mill called for a representative parliament only as a means for the expression of public opinion to influence political leaders and to check executive authority, and not as a means for advancing radical or populist anti-elitism.[155]

Laozi's emphasis on sage leadership also might seem incompatible with political representation or institutions such as people's assemblies.[156] However, one should not assume that popular representation is incompatible with rule by sages or with skepticism toward social norms. First, at no point does the *DDJ* oppose electoral processes for selecting political leaders, nor does it ever call for rulers to be chosen on a hereditary basis or for future leaders to be hand-picked by current leaders. The key criteria for being worthy of political leadership are morality and competence (i.e., knowledge and practice of the *dao*), which suggests that anyone who tries could become a sage. Laozi's envisioned sage rulers are worthy of political leadership because they set a positive example by living simply, meditating, communicating clearly, observing and following nature, and not interfering in people's lives by saddling them with excessive demands and propaganda. At the same time, the sage is neither out of touch with nor above the people: "The sage often has no will. He takes the people's will as his own. What is good I treat with goodness. What is not good I also treat with goodness. Thus I obtain goodness."[157] One way for a society to possibly enjoy rule by such public-spirited sagely leaders might be through the process of elections.

More concrete support for the idea that Laozi's thought is compatible with electoral processes and a representative assembly stems from the practices of contemporary Daoist organizations in the Republic of China (Taiwan), which granted operational freedom to religious associations after it lifted martial law in 1987. Studying governance practices among Taiwanese Daoists since this change, Cheng-Tian Kuo observed elections to form a representative assembly and for selecting leaders to be standard practices: "Most Daoist temples in Taiwan are not governed by the clergy but by lay believers . . . . Lay believers are elected among themselves

154. Roger T. Ames, "Is Political Taoism Anarchism?" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10 (1983): 27–47; and Feldt, "Governing through the Dao" (see note 36 above).

155. Mill, *Considerations* (see note 110 above); Mill, *On Liberty* (see note 86 above).

156. For instance, Daoist hermetic practice as an intense expression of commitment to Daoist ideology suggests embracing a life completely free from the bounds of social limitations in favor of meditation and letting go of social indoctrination and desires.

157. *DDJ*, ch. 49 (see note 53 above).

into an assembly of representatives. A governing committee is established by a vote in the assembly . . . . A chairman is then elected by the committee members."[158] Likewise, the Daoist Association of the Republic of China follows "a democratic election system to elect its representatives from the local level to the national level."[159] The presence of elections and representative assemblies within these contemporary Daoist communities certainly suggests compatibility with political liberalism in terms of incorporating popular representation.

Another observation of Daoist communities in Taiwan is their heavy emphasis on practices and rituals designed to foster peace, health, longevity, and prosperity. Daoists engage in the recitation of scriptures for the purpose of gaining immortality (longevity) and to "guarantee the security and prosperity of the state."[160] Daoist *chiao* (醮, *jiao*) rituals likewise aim to enhance the health and prosperity of the community and its participants.[161] Thus, while such practices do not aim to achieve Mill's goal of progress per se, they do champion *prosperity*, which indicates a motivation and incentive to be integrated into larger-scale trade and economic activity (as opposed to pursing autarky), as well as an inclination toward governance arrangements that can deliver shared prosperity.[162]

To sum up, if there are major differences between Laozi's thought and Mill's liberalism, they stem from procedural rather than substantive issues. While it is possible that detractors will feel that Laozi fails to sufficiently meet the procedural criteria of Western liberalisms, it might also be the case that most Western variants of liberalism may be deficient on substantive grounds in meeting the standards of liberty put forth by Laozi. For instance, liberty can be conceptualized narrowly, as freedom from the state (negative freedom) for men with property or more broadly as including autonomy enabled by the state (positive freedom) and freedom by or from society for everyone, including women, people without property, people from other countries, and non-human species. Finally, the dialectical history of liberalism—the broadening of its scope and resistance against such broadening—has been driven by critiques issued by feminists (over freedom for women and freedom

158. Kuo, *Religion and Democracy*, 62 (see note 7 above).

159. Ibid., 64.

160. Michel Strickmann, "The Longest Taoist Scripture," *History of Religions* 17 (1978): 331–54, at 340.

161. Michael R. Saso, "The Taoist Tradition in Taiwan," *China Quarterly* 41 (1970): 83–102; and Kenneth Dean, "Field Notes on Two Taoist *Jiao* Observed in Zhangzhou in December 1985," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 2 (1986): 191–209.

162. While some Daoists may choose to live on remote mountaintops, the fact that many (in fact, most) Daoists live among the people also indicates an attitude of adaptability and being pragmatic; see Saso, "The Taoist Tradition" (see previous note).

from society), socialists and Marxists (over freedom for people without property), cosmopolitans and anti-colonialists (over freedom for people from other countries), and environmentalists (over freedom for non-human species).[163]

The relevant question is where Laozi's thought fits in. Unlike most Western liberalisms, Laozi does not make a distinction between a liberal public sphere and a private sphere, an anthrosphere and an ecosphere, or nationals/citizens and foreigners/aliens. Laozi is ostensibly concerned with freeing both humans and non-human species, both men and women, whether or not they own property or what country they live in. The liberty that Laozi espouses is not bound by nationalistic, sexist, speciesist, or classist limitations. And in that sense, Laozi's political thought can be seen as an exceptionally broad form of liberalism representing a thicker notion of freedom than that conceptualized by most conventional variants of Western liberalism, feminism, or cosmopolitanism which focus almost exclusively on humans.

A likely reason for Laozi's broader orientation toward freedom is that his thinking takes *tianxia* (天下, all under heaven, i.e. the world), rather than the nation-state, as its reference point and unit of analysis.[164] As Tingyang Zhao points out, the concept of *tianxia* establishes a "global perspective as opposed to local or national ones. Viewing the world as a whole is an epistemological principle first used by Laozi."[165] This shift in unit of analysis also has broad implications for how we think about liberty and the question of "whose liberty?"

> The advantage of the all-under-heaven worldwide theory comes from the very scope of its perspective, being above national interests, and inviting us to consider a much wider context, in which the most complicated of problems can be identified and solved . . . For instance, democracy, equality and liberty have been developed in western democratic society, but never extended to international society. This case of political inconsistency and intransitivity could greatly damage the reputation of democracy, equality and liberty.[166]

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163. See Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 3 (see note 1 above). Edmund Fawcett terms this "the struggle between liberalism for some and liberalism for all."

164. In recent years, Zhao Tingyang has revived and promoted the *tianxia* concept for making sense of global politics in today's world. For thinkers like Zhao, the *tianxia* utopia or ideal contains physical (land), psychological (mindset), and institutional (a world institution) components. See Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-Under-Heaven' (Tian Xia 天下)," *Social Identities* 12 (2006): 2–41; Tingyang Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-xia)," *Diogenes* 221 (2009): 5–18.

165. Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy," 9 (see previous note).

166. Ibid., 12; and Zhao, "Rethinking Empire," 33 (see note 64 above).

Compared to the nation-state, no person or lands on Earth can be excluded from *tianxia*, where the goal is to achieve harmony amongst peoples who "have the freedom to migrate to, and work in, any state they like."[167] In other words, social harmony is to encompass everyone and not be limited to any single country.[168]

Conclusion

As this study has illustrated, there is more than one Chinese model of governance, and if the underlying notion behind liberalism is "freeing people from unquestioned dogmas and oppressive political structures,"[169] then both Laozi and Mill proffer us bonafide models of liberalism. As discussed above, Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, the religion of Daoism's most influential text, envisions a political system that is non-authoritarian; nurtures the longevity of men, women, non-human species, and the environment; is peaceful and nonviolent; embraces pluralism in discourse; and encourages simplicity of lifestyle over indulgence in luxuries, extravagance, and wastefulness. Similarly, John Stuart Mill's treatise *On Liberty* embraces the goals of non-authoritarianism and pluralism in discourse while critiquing patriarchy, conformity, and wastefulness. Simply stated, both traditions share an overlapping consensus opposing social rigidity and brute imposition of one particular social standard over other ways of thinking and acting.

As Freeden observes, "liberalism's self-critical spirit is morphologically corroborated by the conscious readiness of liberals to entertain multiple rearrangements of their conceptual furniture to a far greater extent than would non-liberal ideologists. Skepticism, non-dogmatism, and tolerance are thus translated into a disposition for conceptual reconfiguration."[170] A comparable level of pluralism and openness is likewise observable in classical Daoist texts and contemporary Daoist religious practices, whereby "most Daoist temples also include deities of Buddhism and folk religions, while very few Buddhist temples worship Daoist deities."[171] Among traditional schools of Chinese thought, Daoism also proposes a more horizontal view of relationships and offers a firm challenge to blindly submitting to

167. Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy," 9 (see note 164 above).

168. Devin Joshi, "Does China's Recent 'Harmonious Society' Discourse Reflect a Shift towards Human Development?," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17 (2012): 169–87.

169. Fred Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory," in *Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 7–20 at 16.

170. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 177 (see note 57 above).

171. Kuo, *Religion and Democracy*, 58 (see note 7 above).

authority. For this reason, the orientation of Daoism towards human liberty has always traditionally been seen as a threat to authoritarian systems of rule.[172]

What is also evident here is that Laozi's thought as an early Chinese version of liberalism differs from what is sometimes labeled "democracy with Chinese characteristics."[173] Chinese peoples in Taiwan have embraced a version of liberal democracy influenced by Chinese thinkers such as Sun Yat-Sen,[174] and some Chinese citizens in mainland China have expressed positive attitudes towards liberal democracy in forums such as the Internet.[175] By contrast, deliberative democracy experiments in mainland China as a component of "democracy with Chinese characteristics"[176] for the most part represent only an illiberal form of consultative authoritarianism[177] reminiscent of strategies employed by developmental states elsewhere in Northeast and Southeast Asia.[178] As Baogang He notes, in mainland China longer-term trials of these experiments have thus far been confined

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172. Li, *Daozhi yu Ziyou* (see note 19 above).

173. Young Nam Cho, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics? A Critical Review from a Developmental State Perspective," *Issues and Studies* 45 (2009): 71–106, at 72; the Chinese phrase is 中国特色民主.

174. David Lorenzo points out how contemporary Taiwanese democracy is largely perceived as a liberal democracy, but also involves elements of competitive elitism and what he calls a "Chinese unitary model of democracy," which incorporates the ideas of a unified mass of "the people" who are separate from the elites whereby some of the latter play a paternalistic caretaker role for the population based on the ideas of *minben* (民本, government that aims to benefit the people) and *jiuwang* (救亡, belief in the necessity of having a powerful centralized state to protect the country from potential crises). See David J. Lorenzo, *Conceptions of Chinese Democracy: Reading Sun Yat-Sen, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Chiang Ching-Kuo* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 207.

175. Devin Joshi and Yizhe Xu, "What Do Chinese Really Think of Democracy and India?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 26 (2017): 385–402.

176. "Democracy with Chinese characteristics" is sometimes used to describe the combination of village-level elections in mainland China, elements of intraparty democracy within the Chinese Communist Party, consultative feedback mechanisms, and the state's efforts to adopt the rule of law. See Lorenzo, *Conceptions*, 197 (see note 174 above).

177. Baogang He, "Western Theories of Deliberative Democracy and the Chinese Practice of Complex Deliberative Governance," in *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*, ed. Ethan J. Leib and Baogang He (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 133–48; Cho, "Democracy" (see note 173 above); and Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, "Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development," *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2011): 269–89.

178. See Cho, "Democracy" (see note 173 above). As Garry Rodan argues, "state control over who can participate-and on what issues and how—offers the possibility of expanding political space while narrowing the substantive issues open to contest. . .participants may influence public policy and debate thereof, but not on terms set by the participants themselves." See Garry Rodan, *Participation without Democracy: Containing Conflict in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018), 37.

to only a few locations.[179] Moreover, no power is delegated to the people when invitation-only public hearings and nonbinding consultations take place within the context of previously set agendas, censorship, and centralized control. Rather, it appears such tactics aim to strengthen the ruling party's authoritarian control rather than to liberalize politics.[180]

In sum, the underlying intent, small scale, and limited impact of such reforms appears to be largely out of step with Laozi's vision of a society with few restrictions on discourse and with an emphasis on peace, living in harmony with nature, and minimizing desires. Governance in mainland China thus far in the twenty-first century has featured a degree of openness in the economic domain and even some forms of consultation and deliberation in public policy making, but this has been accompanied by many non-pluralist practices in other domains, including government censorship over media,[181] restrictions on civil society,[182] promotion of mass consumption,[183] repression of dissidents,[184] and environmental destruction that has harmed the health of humans and other species.[185]

To conclude, Daoist thought and the *DDJ* have been subject to selective appropriation throughout history. For example, Liu Junning argues:

> Indeed, what we now call Western-style liberalism has featured in China's own culture for millennia. We first see it with philosopher Laozi, the founder of Taoism. In the sixth century B.C. Laozi articulated a political philosophy that has come to be known as *wu wei*, or inaction. "Rule a big country as

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179. He, "Western Theories," 135 (see note 177 above).

180. Baogang He and Mark Warren describe it as "a regime strategy of channeling political conflict away from regime-level participation, such as multi-party competition, and into 'governance-level' participation, segmented into policy-focused, often administratively- or juridically-organized venues"; see He and Warren, "Authoritarian Deliberation," 270 (see note 177 above). Young Nam Cho has labeled it mere "window dressing for Chinese authoritarianism"; see Cho, "Democracy," 88 (see note 173 above).

181. Qiuqing Tai, "China's Media Censorship: A Dynamic and Diversified Regime," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 14 (2014): 185–210; and Jason Q. Ng, *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)* (New York: New Press, 2013).

182. Berthold Kuhn, "Changing Spaces for Civil Society Organizations in China," *Open Journal of Political Science* 8 (2018): 467–94; and Frank N. Pieke, "The Communist Party and Social Management in China," *China Information* 26 (2012): 149–65.

183. Nicholas R. Lardy, "China: Toward a Consumption-Driven Growth Path," in *Seeking Changes: The Economic Development in Contemporary China*, ed. Yanhui Zhou (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016), 85–111.

184. Lynette H. Ong, "Thugs and Outsourcing of State Repression in China," *China Journal* 80 (2018): 94–110.

185. Judith Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges, 2nd Edition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2016).

> you would fry a small fish," he said. That is, don't stir too much. "The more prohibitions there are, the poorer the people become," he wrote in his magnum opus, the *Daodejing*.[186]

Systematically testing this claim of liberalism's early emergence in China through a comparative reading of Laozi's *Dao De Jing* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, I found sufficient equivalences such that one could classify Laozi's thought as an early Chinese variant of liberalism. While such a view may be deemed unconventional or even heretical by dominant Western, Eurocentric, or Confucian lenses, such naming would certainly accord well with the spirit of Daoist thought, which is to encourage multiple interpretations of texts as opposed to rigidly insisting on only one correct reading.[187] Finally, what deserves emphasis here is that in the legacy of Laozi, China already has a highly developed indigenous tradition of liberal thought illustrating that at least certain elements of Chinese culture are compatible with pluralism and political liberalism.

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186. Junning Liu, "Don't Discount Chinese Liberalism: The Western Admirers of Authoritarianism Misunderstand Chinese Culture," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2011.

187. Roger T. Ames, "Review of 'A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation by Chad Hansen,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54 (1994): 553–61.