

The Taoist Way to Follow Nature: Analysis of Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking*

WANG Peng-fei, CHEN Si-yu

Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

Moment in Peking written by Chinese American writer Lin Yutang, follows the life of an extended upper-class Beijing family from the time of the Boxer uprising in 1900 to the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. It is both a depiction of the daily life of a Chinese family, and a chronicle of the political and social changes sweeping China during that period. This novel takes Taoism as the philosophical backdrop, and the concept of "Life passes like a dream" as the theme, revealing the struggles and vicissitudes of Yao Mulan and her father Yao Sian. It is a unique way for Lin Yutang to interpret the Taoism and the Taoist way to follow the nature.

Keywords: Lin Yutang, Taoism, nature, *Moment in Peking*

Lin Yutang (1895-1976), is a world-renowned writer, scholar, translator as well as a linguist. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature in 1940, 1950 and 1975. When he was young, he went to the United States and then to Germany for study. With his solid foundation in Chinese classics and a good command of English language, he wrote a number of great literary works both in Chinese and English, such as *My Country and My People* (1935), *The Importance of Living* (1937) and *Moment in Peking* (1939). Lin translated and introduced Confucius, Mencius, Laotse and Chuangtse philosophy and many ancient Chinese authors' works to American and European countries. And his own works have been translated into 21 languages. Up until now, most scholarship on Lin Yutang has focused on his translation strategies and cross-cultural communications. Less attention has paid to his spiritual pursuit of Taoism. This essay addresses Yutang's interest in Taoism and examines it in relation to his 1975 novel, *Moment in Peking*.

Lin Yutang and Taoism

Laotse, the founder of Taoism, proposed a core ideological system centered on "Tao". Through criticizing the social alienation of civilization, he deconstructed the human alienation caused by the constraints of "benevolence" and "manners" on Chinese social life to achieve the solicitude for individual life (Hong, 2007, p. 37). Both Laotse and Chuangtse, another founding father of Taoism, believed that "Tao" is the origin of all the creation in the universe and the law governing everything to be what they like. In his philosophic book *Tao Te Ching* (Chapter 42), he said: "Out of Tao, One is born; Out of One, Two is born; Out of Two, Three is born; Out

Wang Pengfei, Ph.D, Professor, Southwest Jiaotong University. Research areas: Comparative Literature, Chinese American Literature and Translation Studies.

CHEN Si-yu, MA, Lecturer, Southwest Jiaotong University

of Three, the universe is created” (Wen, 2013, p. 436). It means that Tao is unique and it contains two opposing principles called Yin and Yang in nature. Yin is feminine and negative and Yang is masculine and positive, which forms everything in a well-balanced and harmonious state. For the concept of “Tao models itself after Nature”, everything has its own “Tao”, therefore we can only conform to Tao, the law governs the universe. Lin Yutang provided his own definition of “Tao” in *The Wisdom of Laots*: “The Tao of the Taoist is the divine intelligence of the universe, the source of things, the life-giving principle; it informs and transforms all things; it is impersonal, impartial, and has little regard for individuals. It is imminent, formless, invisible, and eternal” (Lin, 2006, p. 45).

Yutang thought that as society grew more advanced and humans became more intelligent, their religious piety reduced drastically. In order to make life meaningful, he thought there should be a kind of religion for people to follow. And the right choice of religion is Taoism. He once said that if he was asked to announce his religious belief while living in foreign land, without hesitation, his belief must be “Taoism” which the locals had never heard about. Despite this focus on Daoism, Confucianism and Christianity also appealed to Lin. His father, Lin Zhicheng, was a pastor and a devout Christian, so Lin Yutang had a strong interest in Christianity in his early years and perceived the world accordingly. But later on, he came to believe that Christ was not born of a virgin, that God was not omnipotent, and that it was incorrect to think that people could only enter heaven if they believed in Jesus. He found spiritual comfort in Confucian culture which contains humanism and has faith in “Man on earth, Good at birth” and idea that education can perfect individuals. But the Taoist does not presume to tell us about God; he insists to the point of repetition that “Tao” cannot be named and the “Tao” which is named is not “Tao”. Above all, the important message of Taoism is the oneness and spirituality of the material universe: “Tao models itself after Nature”.

The writing of the novel *Moment in Peking* is motivated by Lin Yutang's pursuit of “Tao”. Lin Rusi, Yutang's daughter, once commented:

The value of this book does not lie in the vivid description of the people's personality, not in the scenery described as in the present, not in masterly psychological portray, but in it's conveying of the philosophical meaning. At first, opening the book, you feel like waters rushing out, and then you feel peaceful and quiet flow of the waters. The reader can experience the whole process of the weather changes: the hovering dark clouds, the roaring thundering, the wild storm and then the clear sky. Suddenly it dawned on the reader: ‘what is life? what is dream? To me, this is not merely a fiction but a book telling us the theme--- life passing like a dream (Lin, 2005, p. 3).

Obviously, Yutang's chief purpose in his book is to tell people what is life: life is just like a dream and life is to follow the nature.

Aloofness and Worldliness: Taoist Attitude towards Life in *Moment in Peking*

Lin Yutang's Taoism pursuit is clearly expressed in his description of the life experience of the protagonists in *Moment in Peking*. Yao Sian, the father and Yao Mulan, the daughter of Yao family have transcended from the secular life by practicing Taoism and incorporating it throughout up and downs in their lives physically and spiritually. During their life, what Yao Sian and Yao Mulan did and thought clearly expressed their Taoists attitudes towards life. In the story, when the Eight-Power Allied Forces marched upon Peking and Mrs. Yao urged the family to flee the disaster-stricken areas, Yao Sian thought people should comply with nature, obey their destiny. Thus, he told his wife it was better to peacefully accept what would happen to them and to stay

where they were than to make a move. He believed that men contrive, but the heaven decides; and at this critical moment, he was willing to take things as they came with no worry and panic. Later, when the Eight-Power Allied Forces invaded Peking city, his family had to leave from Peking, but all the belongings could not be taken away with them, he expressed an indifferent attitude toward the property. He said to Mulan that "How many hundred owners do you think like Chou bronzes have had in the last three thousand years? No one ever permanently owns a thing in the world. For the time being, I am their owner. A hundred years from now, who will be their owner" (Lin, 2005, p. 12). Mulan agreed with him and also realized that one's destiny was something determined by a kind of mysterious power in the universe. From this case, it is clear that what Yao Sian and his daughter pursued is just what the Taoists advocate: complying with nature, obeying the destiny.

Taoist idea to follow nature also reflected in his attitude toward the cultivation of children. In this story, Yao Sian is extremely enthusiastic about science because he regards science is the right means to detect the way of nature and he holds that the nature is always an impersonal and nameless, speechless spirit. So, in the story, Yao Sian always encouraged Mulan to learn the modern science which was not a common choice in Children's education for the most of the families at that time in China. In Yao Sian's mind, only one learns science can he or her hold the right way to follow the nature.

Taoist transcendental attitude toward life and death was also expressed in the story. Yao Tiren was the eldest son of Yao family and was extremely favored by Yao Sian's wife. When Tiren died, his mother was almost heart-broken, but it seemed nothing happened to Yao Sian and he even shed no tears like one of the Taoist founders Chuangtse who sang with beating basin when his wife died. It seems that he lived both in the world and yet out of it, half mortal and half immortal. After Tiren's death, Yao Sian lost his trust in the family, so he began to enjoy life and squander money in a reckless way and even bought Manchu prince's garden. Later, he left a letter to the family and went away to become a hermit, taking life, death and departure as something natural. He wanted to seek for the true essence of "Taoism" and the actual self in his exploration of entering the society and escaping from the society. It is hard for readers to know what Yao Sian has experienced and comprehended after leaving home, but we can catch a glimpse of it from Lin Yutang's other works: "Since life is a constant flux and change, rise and decay alternate like day and night, and reaching the prime of one's strength marks the beginning of decline" (Lin, 2005, p. 27). From here, it is clear that what the author wants to convey is that a true Taoist merely triumphs over death, because when people die, he is returning to the Tao. It can be understood that Lin Yutang's shaping of Yao Si'an's character is the author's own exploration of seeking balance and relief in the social order and the universe.

Similarly, in the story, Yao Sian's daughter, Yao Mulan's life has always obeyed the trajectory of fate and followed the law of "Tao". There is a description of Mulan's appearance in the story which reflected author's Taoist view of destiny. When Mulan got married, Lin Yutang wrote that "People who liked tall women thought her tall; People who liked short women thought her short; those who liked plump women thought her full-bodied, and those who liked thin women thought her slender. Such is the magic of perfect proportions. Yet she neither dieted, nor exercised. Nature just made her so (Lin, 2005, p. 182). At the wedding, she chose the carts based on the look of coachmen without a glimpse of the mules pulling the cart. Unfortunately, the mule was too emaciated to pull the cart so that the cart which she sat in left behind and finally got lost, which led to Mulan's separation from her family. A seemingly ordinary choice has changed Mulan's fate. Mulan peacefully accept the incident

and believed that this was something mysterious in the universe which changed her life. From Mulan's story, it is obvious that Mulan was deeply influenced by her father's Taoist view and believed in the power of nature and destiny. That's why when the family arranged the marriage for her, she did not struggle and did not resist either. She believed in Taoist pursuit of "quiet and inaction". In her mind, one's marriage was dominated by one's destiny which was determined by some magic force in the universe and personal struggle and choice would make no difference. So, in the story, she and Yuya, who she met for the first time since she was rescued by her family, were tied together by fate. After marriage, they lived care-free life with no regard of what happened in the outside world. Finally, she and her husband lived in seclusion with simple meals and plain dress like hermits.

In fact, Mulan had experienced all kinds of changes in her life, and she always reconciled herself to the situation and was calm and indifferent to the outside world. Whether as a wealthy woman in the elegant mountain in her early years or finally an ordinary country woman in a small village, she could live peacefully and quietly with no complaints, no fury and no panic.

Lin Yutang's Taoist Complex

The idea of Taoism pursuit is not only expressed in Lin Yutang's literary works, but also embodied in Lin Yutang's own life experience. Lin Yutang has always maintained a childlike innocence and believes in "govern by non-interference" which is the central idea of Taoism. This is reflected in his attitude towards the servants in his family. Lin's family hired some servants and Yutang was always kind and tolerable with them. In a traditional Chinese family, the masters usually treat the servants very strict and would not allow them much freedom to have their own choices but serving for the family whole-heartedly. However, Lin Yutang never treated the servants harshly. Even when the servants made mistakes, Yutang hardly made indiscreet remarks or sharp criticism to them. For example, one of his servants was always lazy and slack and he often bullied other servants into doing things for himself. One day he even had a secret meeting with a female servant in the master's bedroom when the master was out, which was thought immoral and offensive to the master. After knowing this, Yutang gave no punishments, no curse and no blames to him. In steady, he even helped him learning foreign languages when finding he was interested in learning foreign languages. Mrs. Lin was very dissatisfied with the servant and insisted to fire him, but Yutang decided to forgive him for he felt that it was always reasonable for Laotse's saying "govern by non-interference".

In his life, Lin Yutang had been pursuing a quiet and pastoral life which the Taoists advocate. He was indifferent to fame and fortune and did not want disturbance from the outside world. This Taoist quietism was reflected in his book *Lin Yutang's Self Account*: "I want a warm stove in winter and a bath room in summer. I want a family where I can remain who I am. I want a small garden plot covered not with grass but soil. Children can play there, water plants, and feed some fowls. I want some bamboo trees and some plum trees in the courtyard. I want a rainy summer and a bright winter. I want blue sky as seen in Peking. I want the freedom and the courage to be myself" (Lin, 2005, p. 72).

Lin Yutang's Taoist pursuit was also explained in the following works. In the 1930s, a time of turbulence in China, Lin Yutang wrote *My Country and My People*, in which he expounded Taoist thoughts, analyzed the great influence of Laotse and Chuangtse's philosophy on Chinese people's thinking about the meaning of life, and praised Chinese people's contentment. After settling in the United States, Lin Yutang, under the guidance of

Pearl S. Buck and her husband, wrote another great work, *The Importance of Living*. There are two chapters, *Find Thyself—Chuangtse* and *Cynicism, Wisdom, and Camouflage—Laotse*, specifically introducing Taoist theory. The whole book tells how Chinese people taste tea, drink wine, view mountains, play with water, see clouds, identify stones, grow flowers, keep birds, watch snow, listen to the rain, sing for the wind, and enjoy the moonlight. Taoist philosophy is also revealed in this kind of natural and unrestrained romantic life style of Chinese people. When writing *Moment in Peking*, Lin Yutang divided the book into three volumes and cited Chuangtse's quotations at the front of each volume. Lin Yutang said in his letter to a Chinese famous poet Yu Dafu: "The whole book is penetrated by the Taoist spirit, so it takes Chuangtse's philosophy as its guide and quotes Chuangtse's words in *On Leveling All Things* as its preface" (Lin, 2005, p. 66). In the book, the preface of the first chapter quoted from Chuangtse's *The Master*: "To Tao, the zenith is not high, nor the nadir low; no point in time is long ago, nor by the lapse of ages has it grown old" (Wang, 2014, p. 57). The preface of the second chapter cited from Chuangtse's *On Leveling All Things*: "Those who dream of the banquet, wake to lamentation and sorrow. Those who dream of lamentation and sorrow wake to join the hunt ... This is a paradox. Tomorrow a Sage may arise to explain it, but that tomorrow will not be until ten thousand generations have gone by. Yet you may meet him around the corner" (Wang, 2014, p. 12). The preface of the third chapter quoted from Chuangtse's *The Northern Travels of Knowledge*: "Therefore all things are an organic one. What we love is the mystery of life and what we hate is the corruption in death. But the corruptible in its turn becomes mysterious life, and this mysterious life once more becomes corruptible" (Wang, 2014, p. 216). Lin Yutang later published *The Wisdom of Laotse*, which directly introduced Taoism to the western society. In Lin Yutang's religion exploration record, *From Pagan to Christianity*, he wrote "The peak of Tao Mountain", telling the deep influence brought to him by Laotse and Chuangtse's philosophy.

Lin Yutang has always regarded nature from the standpoint of Taoism and has a reverence for nature. In his mind, the individual compared with the vast universe and mysterious nature is very small and insignificant just like a drop of water in the vast ocean and a small tree in the boundless forest. Therefore, as an individual, people should comply with nature and follow their own destiny as the Taoists proposed.

Although human being is small and insignificant in front of the vast universe, Lin Yutang did not feel sorry for it and nor did he hold a tragic feeling for human life. For Lin Yutang, what is most valuable is that he did not mean people should stop in front of the vast nature and live a decadent and negative life, instead, he encouraged people took a further step to hold a positive and happy outlook on life to dispel the tragic feeling of human beings when facing the universe. This well explains Lin Yutang's outlook on the world and people's life: Tao models itself after Nature, which means the power of Tao is unlimited. One should fully enjoy life on the premise of conforming to the way of Nature.

Conclusion

To sum up, from the description the chief characters in *Moment in Peking*, and also from his attitude towards life in his other works, it is clear that Lin Yutang spent his whole life studying Taoist culture, interpreting its truth and introducing it to the world. According to Lin Yutang, Taoism advocates people to return to nature, to be detached and to keep awe and curiosity for the mysterious nature. Therefore, people should comply with nature and follow their own destiny. From the description of the characters in *Moment in Peking*, Lin Yutang intends to

convey his Taoist points of view to the readers that people should live with Taoist wisdom: no matter what changes will happen to people, they should reconcile themselves to their situation, take things as they come and keep awe of the mysterious nature.

References

- Hong, X. P. (2007). Winding development of Daoism thought and its modern meaning: Perspective from the relationship of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. *Religious Studies*, 1, 37.
- Lin, R. S. (2005). On moment in Peking. *Collected Works of Lin Yutang I*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press.
- Lin, Y. T. (2005). *Lin Yutang's self account*. Zhengzhou: Elephant Press.
- Lin, Y. T. (2006). *The wisdom of Laotse*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press.
- Lin, R. S. (2005). On moment in Peking. *Collected Works of Lin Yutang I*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press.
- Lin, Y. T. (2005). *Moment in Peking*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Wang, Y. L. (2014). *Full interpretation of Chuangtse* (Ed.). Beijing: China Overseas Press.
- Wen, R. Y. (2013). *A complete collection of Tao Te Ching* (Ed.). Beijing: China Overseas Press.