

**Loreta Poškaitė, *Estetinė būtis daoizme [Aesthetic Being in Daoism]*,  
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The author's doctoral dissertation "The Aesthetic Being of the Individual in Classical Confucianism and Daoism" submitted to the Culture, Philosophy and Arts Research Institute of Lithuania in 2000 was a well-executed comparative study. Although *The Aesthetic Being in Daoism*, this recently published monograph by Loreta Poškaitė, concentrates on Daoism, as the title itself prompts us, it is still combined with the scholar's comparative perspective.

The introduction briefly sets the scene on the term of *aesthetic being*. The author, who has proved to be fluent in both Daoism and Confucianism, is out to criticize one of the most firmly entrenched clichés of regarding Daoism as a basically aesthetic outlook in contrast to the basically ethical teaching of Confucianism. This cliché is almost inseparable from two other stereotypes: the identification of Daoism with the search for spiritual reality and with individualism, in contrast, respectively, to the earthliness of Confucianism and its social orientation. However, the Daoist relationship between nature (things) and people cannot be defined in dualist terms, and this accomplished volume, the fruit of several years of research, is dedicated to critical analysis and assessment of Daoism as a way of being a microcosm where opposites meet. The title of the book, therefore, justifies itself since the book speaks, in the metaphoric way, about aesthetic *being* and not just *aesthetics* of Daoism. It also permits the author a much broader – ontological and cosmological – perspective, which includes religious and ethical dimensions as well. On the other hand, the Chinese word for aesthetics – *meixue* – is nothing more than a Western neologism that came into use in the twentieth century and since then has been applied retrospectively to the entire tradition of the early Chinese thought. Poškaitė does a good job of showing that the concept of *aesthetic being* more adequately conveys the ideas of early (classical) Daoism and demonstrating the ethical content of Daoism, which serves as a connecting link to Confucianism. In fact, the author argues that the Daoists understood ethicality in a far broader sense than the Confucianists did. The main distinctive feature of Daoist ethics is that it does not provide a single method acceptable for everyone but suggests that each person seeks his/her own individual way in building up the relationship with other people and nature. Further, the concept of *aesthetic being* gives a better idea about the unity of sensory and super-sensory experience. A Daoist seeks to experience the world through a specific reality or thing (a depicted object) that contains another reality. This reality is an inexhaustible source of experiences, or the Dao.

Such cosmological model finds expression in the practical activity of artistic creation, or the *aesthetic being* in Poškaitė's interpretation.

The book, the first endeavour of such scope in the Lithuanian studies of Chinese aesthetics, is constructed in an efficient way developing from the analysis of cosmogonical and ethical aspects of Daoism towards discussion of their aesthetic manifestations.

Part 1, "The Origin and Goal of Aesthetic Being, the Dao", offers a detailed discussion of the history of the reception of Daoism in the West. The first Western interpreters tended to construe the meaning of the Dao in the terms of Christianity and to appreciate Daoism on the basis of only two texts, namely *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Further, the recent tendency to put emphasis on the practical aspects of Daoism threatens to vulgarise the sacred meaning of Dao. Discussing the cosmogonic aspects of Daoism, Poškaitė provides new insights into the relationship between the Dao and chaos and describes Daoist cosmogony as the "order in disorder", which is neither transcendental nor immanent, combining both existence and non-existence. In this connection, the author challenges the stereotypical association of the Dao with femininity as a narrowed approach, which contradicts the logic of Dao's all-embracing character. This logic is also revealed in the Daoist notion of return. Together with the idea of death it illustrates the principle of mutability, or transformation (*hua*) of polarities into one another.

Part 2, "The Way of Heaven and the Way of Human Being", is the author's discussion of many Daoist terms, and her cases are eloquently argued. Poškaitė explores the concepts of heavenliness and humanity, and analyses the possibility of unification of the individual with Heaven in the process of self-cultivation. This process of self-perfection is aimed at becoming the sage (*shengren*). However, Poškaitė demonstrates on the basis of the Daoist primary sources that a real "sage" never stops after reaching the pinnacle of wisdom but proceeds to help others, and "after achieving the holy returns to the human" thus harmonizing the way of Heaven and that of human being.

The author assesses that it is aspiration to foster the plenitude of vital powers (*de*) that makes the human body a form inseparable from the heart-mind (*xin*), the centre of human being. This results in the harmony of the "inner" (*nei*) and the "outer" (*wai*). On the other hand, the term of authenticity (*zhen*), as a characteristic of the authentic person (*zhen ren*), is meant to describe the inner reality, which does not necessarily correspond with the outer expression. In the author's interpretation, it is this concept of the *zhen* that has made the most significant impact on Daoist aesthetics.

I readily agree with the author's critique of the hermit tradition of Daoism, which has often been misinterpreted in the European thought as outward seclusion, or isolation. Poškaitė provides a tightly argued presentation, rooted as it is in first-hand fieldwork, of the hermitism as a state of mind, which does not exclude the existence of other people, but may rather be described as "being in the world without being in it", or "being at the centre and going two ways at once", as the *Zhuangzi* puts it. The stories about "carefree wandering" in Daoist texts reveal the individuality and freedom of those who wander and add arguments to the specific Daoist concept of a hermit. Poškaitė is consistent in interpreting the concept in the perspective of the coexistence and unity of the opposites.

Part 3, “The Conjoining of Nature and Human Creation in Art”, starts with a comprehensive analysis of the concept of vital energy (*qi*), which gives life to everything and everyone and links together people and things in the process. If the process is that of artistic creation, the artist, the work and the viewer become interconnected in it with the cosmos giving momentum to the whole idea.

The author spotlights yet another aspect of the Chinese worldview, called “situativity”, a strategically important principle since the age of *The Book of Changes (Yijing)*. In calligraphy and painting the concept of situativity reveals itself through manifestations of the energetic impulse (*shi*), the term originally used in Chinese military strategy and the logistic theory of government. This principle of situativity is no less important in music, especially in that produced by the *qin*, the Chinese zither. It is intriguing to note that Poškaitė is a professional player of *kanklės*, the Lithuanian zither, and her discussion of the role of music in Chinese and Daoist culture, the aspect often ignored in the research of Chinese aesthetics, is a solid contribution to the field of study. She concludes that the basic Daoist concept of being and non-being can also be witnessed in the Daoist theory of music and its idea of the highest emotion as non-emotion. Finally, the author states that a creation by human being cannot be distinguished from the one by nature, and, therefore, the divorce of nature and culture, two conflicting ideas in the Western dualism, never occurs in the Daoist thought.

Poškaitė constantly refers to the primary sources of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as well as *Huainanzi*, *Guanzi*, *Lushi Chunqiu*, and *The Book of Changes* in her book. Pp. 238–243 contain a detailed commentary on Ji Kang’s *Ode to the Qin (Qin Fu)*. Translating texts such as these requires a thorough grounding in the terminology, which is still to find its most adequate equivalents in Lithuanian, and Poškaitė has contributed to the project a great deal. The “linguistic etymological method” of the research is employed in an entertaining way of analysing pictographic symbols, the analysis being supplied with articulate illustrations. On the other hand, the author does not concentrate solely on the visual presentation of the world as reflected in Chinese pictographs, but also on the phonetic aspect of the Chinese language, the approach effective in highlighting the interconnection of things. The book is completed by a dictionary of Chinese terms, a list of references, an English summary, and an index of names. Incidentally, this reviewer suggests that the “dictionary” of Chinese terms would be more effective if also rearranged into an “index”.

It is difficult, within the scope of the current review, to do the monograph any real justice. In general, the book is useful both as a survey and as an analysis of the Daoist ontological, cosmological and aesthetic ideas, and is intended to appeal as much to those initiated and to those who wish to be initiated into Daoism. One might, however, notice that the past tense used throughout the book seldom gives way to the present, and manifestations of the Dao in modern Chinese “aesthetic being” are, save for a few exceptions, left outside the discussion. This minor factor, however, by no means diminishes the value of the book. Written in a lucid language with a rich block of quotations and illustrations, it can be read overnight or studied carefully whatever the intentions of a reader who opens the book.