

The Practical and Humanistic Implications of Being a Sage (*shengren*) in Daoism

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*The paper concentrates on the practical and humanistic aspects of the ideal of a sage (*shengren*) in Daoism, which reveal its paradoxicality or bi-directionality. The analysis is based of some stories from Zhuangzi, ideas from Laozi and teaching of Quanzhen school masters of the 20th century China. It is argued that the peculiarity of this ideal in Daoism stems from the idea of “mutual entailing of opposites” and the principle of reversibility (*fan*) as presented in Laozi and Zhuangzi and developed later into the practical view “to return into ordinary life after transcending divine life”, which is still living in the 20th century Daoism. Some reasons for its development and rebirth are indicated.*

One of the most significant changes in the comparative studies of Confucianism and Daoism in the recent decade seems to be the dissolution of the long-lived stereotypical treatment of those two Chinese schools as opposite and incongruent ones (of Confucianism as this-worldly, active, human-oriented, and Daoism as other-worldly, non-active, nature-oriented, for example). Today, they both are acknowledged as concentrated on the same topics, namely those of self-cultivation and self-transformation, and oriented to the body–mind practices, although their ways and tasks often differ. Accordingly, they both could be conceived as teachings about the ideal person, since man is treated as a potential rather than actual, a creative rather than created being both in Confucianism and in Daoism.¹ Moreover, they share the same ideal of the sage (*shengren*) which is the highest one in the Kongzi and Mengzi schools as well as in *Laozi*, and therefore this ideal has received the most scholarly attention. Some sinologists even tried to compare it with the person of ancient sages – rulers in the other cultures, and their charismatic sacral power as the embodiment of the universal idea of the primordial unity of human and divine realms.² *Shengren* of *Laozi*

¹ There are a good person (*shan ren*), benevolent person (*ren ren*), gentleman (*junzi*), sincere person (*chengren*), a sage (*shengren*) in Confucianism, and a great person (*da ren*), integral person (*quanren*), genuine person (*zhenren*), superlative person (*zhiren*), spiritual person (*shenren*), immortal (*xianren*), a sage (*shengren*) in Daoism.

² More about this see: T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University

was investigated mainly from the political point of view, since it is associated with Dao as the symbol of the “ruleless ruler” of the universe here. In a similar manner, his actions are ascribed to the realm of Heaven in *Zhuangzi*.

However, this ideal seems to me more complicated and richer in its meaning, especially as presented in *Zhuangzi* and developed after Han in the Daoist religious traditions. Here, I would like to re-examine the ethical and practical aspects of *shengren* in Daoism, as they are implied by the idea of “mutual entailing of opposites”³ and the principle of reversibility (*fan*) in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, which were developed later into the practical view “to return into ordinary life, after transcending divine life”. It is argued that the ideal of *shengren* seems to be the most evident embodiment of the paradoxical Daoist worldview and tasks, i. e. its keeping to the roots of Heaven and being in the human world at the same time, or being in the world without being in it instead of ignoring the human realm in preference to the realm of Heaven, as was usually supposed by many sinologists. This ideal sheds also more light on the ethical aspects of Daoism, which were ignored for a long time in Western sinology.⁴

At least three interconnected methodological problems of the analysis of *shengren* should be taken into consideration here as the possible foci of criticism of my essay. First, it is the problem of historical approach, since it would be not correct to regard it as some unchangeable entity or idea. Its meaning was transformed considerably from Han times onwards and was influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism. Second, the problem of “doctrinal” approach, or the possibility to extract some particular Daoist features of *shengren* as different from Confucian ones. This problem is already evident in *Zhuangzi* and its “outer” and “miscellaneous” chapters in particular, since they are products of many hands and schools. Third, the problem of conceptual consistency, which is also very problematic in *Zhuangzi*. To try to give a consistent definition of *shengren* here would be the same as to describe the virtue of benevolence (*ren*) in *Lunyu*, and sometimes it seems to me that *Zhuangzi* is talking about one ideal only named differently in different contexts and from different aspects, in order to confuse the reader who is concerned with the correct use of names.

The problems indicated above need more careful study than the present essay. Thus, my approach will be rather Confucianist in order to reveal some particular human aspects of Daoist self-cultivation, which connect or disconnect it with Confucianism.

of California Press, 1983; J. Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; . . . , “ . . . ”, in . . . , 1982.

³ This is the term used by R. Ames and D. L. Hall in their translation of “Daodejing” in Roger T. Ames, David L. Hall (trans.), *Daodejing. ‘Making This Life Significant’. A Philosophical Translation*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2003, 27.

⁴ The importance of ethics in Daoism has been recently demonstrated very well by L. Kohn. See her *Cosmos and Community. The Ethical Dimension of Daoism*, Cambridge (Mass.): Three Pines Press, 2004.

Chapter 15, “Ingrained Opinions” of *Zhuangzi*, opens with a description of a few kinds of people and their style of life and self-cultivation who aim at the perfection of the world. First, among them there are arrogant “scholars of mountain and valley” who try to be different from the common society, “leaving the world behind” and “engaging in lofty discussions and resentfully slandering others”.⁵ Next, there are the “moralists” who aim at “discoursing on humaneness, righteousness, loyalty, and trustworthiness”, thus being concerned with learning and bringing peace to the world through teaching and instruction. Yet next there are the “scholars of court” who are concerned with the means of governing, ‘discoursing on great merit and establishing great fame, observing the ceremonies for lord and subject, and rectifying those on high and those below’. They are followed by “the scholars of rivers and lakes” who prefer non-action, fishing, living leisurely, fleeing from the world and being idle. At last, there are the searchers for longevity who “bear strides and bird stretches [...], channel the vital breath [...], nourish the physical form so as to emulate the hoary age of Progenitor Peng”.⁶

All those persons are practitioners of Dao, but their ways of doing this seem to be one-sided and too demonstrative. The only person who is able to avoid such vice, or “be lofty without having ingrained opinions, cultivate himself without humaneness and righteousness, govern without merit or fame, be idle without rivers and lakes, and live long without channelling and flexions”⁷ is the sage. What makes him different from the others is his “placidity, mildness, quietude, indifference, emptiness, non-being and non-action”, which are the signs of his integrity as well as of Heaven. His action of non-action is simply responding to the stillness and movement of *yin* and *yang* and is not disturbed by anxiety and joy, likes and dislikes. Thus, the characteristics of *shengren* here remind us those of *Laozi*, with an emphasis on the purity and stillness of his mind and on guarding the spirit in the integrity. Nevertheless, do those features of *shengren* suggest his associativity or supra-sociality rather than a special kind of sociality? Or, to put it in other words, how should the sage cultivate such indifference to the things in dealing with the things and yet to preserve his universality?

The answer to this question could be found in another story from *Zhuangzi*, namely the dialogue between Yao and a border warden of the Hua kingdom. The latter, thinking that Yao was a sage, asked him for three blessings which were long life, wealth and many sons, but Yao declined all of them. The border warden was surprised why Yao did not desire such things which all men desire.

‘Many sons’, said Yao, ‘bring many fears. Wealth brings many affairs. Longevity brings many disgraces. These three blessings are of no use in nourishing virtue. Therefore, I decline them’.

⁵ For the English citations of “Zhuangzi” I use here the translation by Victor H. Mair. See Victor H. Mair (trans.), *Wandering on the Way*, With an Introduction and Commentary, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994, 144–45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷ *Ibid.*

‘At first’, said the border warden, ‘I thought you were a sage. But now I see you are a superior man. In giving birth to the myriads of people, heaven is certain to assign them their duties. If you were to have many sons, you would assign them their duties, so what is there to fear? If you were wealthy, you could share with others, so what affairs would there be?’⁸

As the sage, according to the border warden, is not affected by any tribulations, so no any disgrace would be dangerous to him.

This story could be interpreted in various ways, especially since it is ascribed by some sinologists to the type of “syncretic” and latest ones,⁹ in which some Confucian virtues, condemned in previous chapters, are treated in a more positive light here. However, it doesn’t seem to be simply a propagation of Confucian ideas. It implies an example of a real Daoist ideal, i. e. of *shengren*’s ability to comprise in his Dao all things, all opposites, or the Way of Heaven and of Man, without being attached to anyone of them. First of all, he is the one who is able to adapt to the circumstances and to act accordingly, including the resolution of human affairs and sympathy with people, without being involved in their anxieties. It means that Daoists are no less concerned with the realization of wisdom in real life, or the cultivation of the simplicity of life in its civilizationality rather than ignoring the human world and civilization. Such people were presented in the later literature (*Baopuzi*, *Guan Yinzi*) as talented, able ones or those who know how to act. They look sometimes foolish, sometimes intelligent or ignorant, but more often they look like masters, and because of this they are not recognisable by clever or common people. Clever men are concerned only with “higher” affairs and forget “low” ones, and common people are concerned only with “low” things, overlooking “higher” ones, whereas *shengren* is different from both in his ability to be imbued to the same degree with both the “upper” and the “low” things. In other words, he is able to look in both or all directions. In a similar manner *shengren* is presented in *Yijing* which influenced Daoism and Confucianism.

This ability of *shengren* to look in both directions actually implies the principle of the reversibility of Dao, later developed into the idea of “returning to the secular realm after transcending the sacral realm”. It points to the limitlessness or inexhaustibility of self-cultivation, which was described in practical terms as the advice “Don’t stop after you attain the top, but go further”, and became especially important in the 20th century Daoism. The full realization of this idea could be found in a unique story about the life and search for Dao of the contemporary Daoist master of the Quanzhen school, Wang Liping (born 1949), written by Chen Kaiguo and Zhen Shunchao.¹⁰ The most impressive and instructive seems to me the last precept given by two teachers of Wang Liping after he had finished his way of learning and had to start his way of a teacher.

⁸ *Zhuangzi*, Ch. 12, in Mair, 106–7.

⁹ Those are A. Graham and V. Maliavin, respectively.

¹⁰ This book was translated into Russian by the famous Russian sinologist V. Maliavin. See in his , 1997a.

They told that it is difficult to be intelligent as well as to be stupid, but it is much more difficult to return to stupidity on becoming more intelligent, or having learnt the things that are not understandable and acceptable by common people. Nevertheless, he should not in any way oppose himself to them or show his superiority. Instead, he should realize that everything and everybody has his own place in the world, and he must hide his secret knowledge in the midst of ordinary life and not to let anybody know or guess about it. Moreover, according to the teachers of Wang Liping, the ability to live together with one's relatives, in one's home and in the human world means a full realization of one's sincerity and following the natural way which could be treated as returning to the primordial simplicity and enjoying the heavenly genuineness. One should not aim to attain the upper realms if his knowledge has no limits.¹¹

This lesson could not be regarded only as an attempt to popularize Daoism in contemporary Chinese culture in the conditions of the loss of traditional values and involvement into the processes of globalization, or to adapt its secret wisdom to common thinking and thus making it more open for more people, which is indispensable for its survival. Rather, according to teachers of Wang, it is making use of a favourable moment or of changes of the world for a more universal dissemination of Dao in order to help people who are in need. It is, moreover, making use of the idea of Dao (and of *shengren*) as being intermingled with both the light and dust, as it was presented in *Laozi*.¹² This idea, unmasked in the light of practical wisdom, means that the main task for the Daoist self-cultivation is helping others through the cultivation of one's virtue (*de*) or wisdom. To put it in other words, we should help in improving others through the improvement of ourselves according to the Daoist principle of "mutual support", which was later reformulated into the common axiom "order your own personality and govern the empire" (*zhishen zhiguo*),¹³ which could be ascribed to Confucianism as well.

In this regard, the Daoist *shengren* is similar to the Confucian one. The influence of his virtue (*de*) is described by Kongzi as natural as that of wind.¹⁴ According to him, *shengren* is the one who integrates in himself the virtue of all under the Heaven (*Tianxia*) and is able to communicate it to others, thus being above other people like the polar star which stays in one place but makes the other stars go round it. However, the Daoist *shengren*, being superior in his power over others, nevertheless has to disappear in the crowd of people and to be like all of them, or to "take the heart of the people as his own".¹⁵ As Ames comments on such "immediacy" of sagacious thinking, it "lies in inspiring and transforming the ordinary and routine business of the common people rather than in some "I-know-not-what" altered state of consciousness."¹⁶

¹¹ Maliavin, 1997a, 222.

¹² *Laozi*, ch. 4.

¹³ I. Robinet, *Taoism. Growth of a Religion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 21.

¹⁴ *Lunyu*, 12.19.

¹⁵ *Laozi*, ch. 49.

¹⁶ Ames, Hall, 154.

The influence of Daoist *shengren* should be as imperceptible as no-influence, no-wind, because the wind seems too evident in its action. According to *Laozi*, any show of the virtue or even an intention to influence others is artificial. Consequently, as some sinologists note, many Daoist adepts (including the authors of the dialogue in *Zhuangzi* Ch. 12 cited above) have condemned the practice of escapism and living in reclusion as following not the genuine and integral Way.¹⁷ Of course, such a view could be taken as a sign of the process of interaction of Daoism and Confucianism, which became more active after Han, especially in the period of Six Dynasties, when the main models of reclusion were developed.

On the other hand, such an ideal of *shengren* as being involved simultaneously in self-cultivation and the realization of the order of the world could be conceived as the embodiment of a paradoxical coexistence of opposite orientations, namely concentration on oneself and participation in everything, or, to put it in Daoist terms, as the harmonization of the “inner” (*nei*) and the “outer” (*wai*). The Daoist could attain through his mastery of bodily and spiritual powers such an inner freedom which makes needless any outer dissociation from the human world and its affairs. Nevertheless, such person looks like an ordinary man in his words, actions and thoughts, but he is different from others in his no-talks, no-actions and no-thoughts, and because of this he could live in safety. As Maliavin has pointed out, he is neither involved into the ordinary life nor separated from it, i. e. he is like a mirror in the emptiness of his heart, which reflects all the things and is not in opposition to them.¹⁸

This is why the ideal of *shengren* is not limited by the political sphere only, but is aesthetical and ethical as well. This is why the name of *shengren* could be deservedly given also to the most talented artist who know how to act and unite in themselves the creativity of Heaven and man. Zhu Jinxuan, for example, called the ideal painter a sage because of his ability to find the room in himself for everything that could not be embraced by the Heaven and Earth.¹⁹

In conclusion, the Daoist ideal of *shengren* could be helpful in explaining a few things. It makes clear, first, why Indian Buddhism under the influence of Daoism took its most popular form in China as Chan Buddhism, with its ideal of Bodhisattva which requires not to transcend the world after attaining Enlightenment; second, why there were principled Confucianists rather than non-principled Daoists who suffered because of their personal persuasions, since their sense of self-respect and ambitions of a gentleman sometimes were not reconcilable with the realities of social life, and they had to give up the former or the latter one. In this regard, the ideal of a sage in Daoism

¹⁷ J. Berling, “Self and Whole in Chuang Tzu”, in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, ed. Donald J. Munro, Ann Arbor, 1985, 114–15; . . . , . . . , 1983, 71.

¹⁸ . . . , 1997a, 369.

¹⁹ . . . (. . .), . . . , 1997b, 175.

seems more realistic and practical than that of a gentleman (*junzi*) in Confucianism. Third, we realise why the various and subtle methods of Daoist self-cultivation have penetrated into the many realms of Chinese culture and life and thus extended in all directions the limits of man's perfection. The cultivation of virtue (*de*) in Daoism leads to a bi-directional rather than one-directional way, namely transcending the human world and attaining the heavenly world in order to become a Great Person (*da ren*) and then returning to the human world with the transformed heart–mind.

Thus, the criticism of the ordinary (more often Confucian) virtues and norms of life in Daoism could be understood not as the readiness to reject but to broaden them, which helped to broaden also the boundaries of Confucian culture. The look taken from the perspective of *shengren*, or the unity of heavenly and human ways, helps to treat in a more comprehensive way the phenomenon of culture itself as self-cultivation and self-creativity rather than the creation of conventional norms and embellishment of human nature. Such a treatment does away with the boundaries between “nature” and “culture”, or “naturalness” and “artificiality” as they are discussed and emphasized in the Western world, but it could not be adapted in the interpretation of Chinese (Daoist) culture in the same way.

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