

# Daoist Creativity through Interconnectedness and Relational Dynamics in Pedagogy

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Article abstract

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# Daoist Creativity through Interconnectedness and Relational Dynamics in Pedagogy

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*Reconceptualizing the notion of creativity is imperative for addressing today's multilayered social, ecological, and educational crises. This paper draws upon the Daoist philosophy of creativity, which connects rather than separates, to elaborate on the creative relational dynamics of a Daoist pedagogy. First, Western conceptions of creativity are briefly discussed to situate Daoist creativity relative to other scholarship. This discussion is followed by exploring three important aspects of Daoist creativity through interconnectedness: the self-creative process of the cosmos, the co-creativity of human creativity in spontaneity, and the virtuous pursuit of creative harmony. Conceptualizing Daoist creativity in these three aspects lays the foundation for the formulations of contemporary Daoist pedagogical dynamics. First, relational ontology underlies non-dualistic knowing and creative learning, which is infused with meditative sensitivity and incorporates aesthetic modes of thinking and associative thinking across boundaries. Second, creative personhood through integrating opposites and becoming attuned to the creative energy of life requires the personal cultivation of both the instructor and students while transforming teacher–student relationships. Third, a Daoist pedagogy of harmonizing creative tensions is envisioned through making connections across difference, diversifying texts, enacting pedagogical attunement, and harmonizing different modes of knowing and being.*

## Introduction

In a time of a global pandemic, urgent environmental concerns, social and political divisions, and educational crises, we have to re-examine conventional assumptions and find new ways through difficulties. As Peter Herschok (2012) points out, many challenges we face today are entangled predicaments that cannot be resolved by technical innovation, but require shifting relational dynamics. The Daoist approach to creativity, which connects rather than separates, provides us unique lessons for transforming today's relational dynamics in education. In Western religion, creation is a singular act; in modern Western scientific and technological advancement, creativity is marked by the radical newness of inventions, and the subjective creativity of Western individuality is perceived as singular. When referring to creativity, phrases like “cutting edge,” “new wave,” and “ground breaking” are commonly used to imply separation from the old or from others. However, in Daoism, creativity is deeply relational; humanity and nature are interconnected through the cosmic energy (*qi*) and *yin/yang* interactions.

Chinese scholars have advanced contemporary Neo-Daoism, which flourished in the 1990s in mainland China, to creatively address today's issues (Wang, 2021). However, as Lau, et al. (2004) argue, in Western studies of Chinese or Eastern traditions related to creativity, Confucianism and Buddhism have been privileged. Confucianism fits into the Western image of Chinese political, cultural, and individual conformity while Buddhism is a religion (albeit different from Western religions). Daoism as a philosophy is often sidelined and marginalized in philosophy of education (or often subsumed into Zen Buddhism), but it offers insights that are urgently needed for educators' ability to envision different

pathways. It presents a different – not necessarily better – approach and can be complementary to Western concepts of creativity (Wang, 2021). Since there is a lack of understanding of Daoism in Western education, this paper does not intend to compare or contrast Western and Daoist conceptions, but foregrounds the Daoist philosophy of creativity that heals the divides within humanity and between humanity and nature through dynamic interdependence. Further, it envisions shifting the relational dynamics of pedagogy beyond the mainstream pursuit of control to promote subjective, social, and ecological interconnectedness.

In today's global pandemic era, we can more easily see the importance of creative interdependence for dealing with social, environmental, and educational crises that have been produced, to a great degree, by neglecting the role of generative relationality. To meet the challenges and deal with the complexity of contemporary problems, the question is whether we can re-imagine creativity to support the mutual flourishing of humanity and the planet (Hershock, 2012). Such mutual flourishing can be nurtured in a classroom where the teacher leads students onto pathways of creativity that connect the self, the other, and the world. While “creative thinking” has been a catch phrase in education for decades, without questioning the concept of creativity that upholds novelty as breaking away from the norm, creativity is not necessarily virtuous.

This paper starts with a brief discussion of Western conceptions of creativity in order to situate Daoist creativity in the literature and then moves on to explore three essential elements of Daoist creativity through interconnectedness: self-creativity, co-creativity, and virtuous creativity. Next, Daoism-informed relational dynamics of pedagogy are elaborated through three lenses: engaging in non-dualistic knowing and creative learning, cultivating creative personhood through integrating opposites, and harmonizing creative tensions with diverse texts and pedagogical attunement.

## Western Concepts of Creativity

Concepts of creativity are historical, cultural, and multi-dimensional, and the contemporary meaning of creativity – bringing something new into the world – did not always exist. Although this paper does not intend to compare and contrast Daoist conceptions of creativity and Western conceptions of creativity, briefly discussing the concept of creativity in the Western context is helpful.

The notion of the “West” has evolved historically and has now become more complicated with the impact of West on the world through colonization, migration, and globalization. The “West” is not only geographical but also political, cultural, economic, and religious. For the purpose of this paper in foregrounding Daoism as a philosophy from China, the “West” refers to – as it is often understood – the majority of Europe, North America (particularly Canada and the US), and Australia and New Zealand, all of which have cultural roots in ancient Greco-Roman traditions and religious roots in Judeo-Christianity. It is also worthwhile to note that even though Daoism originated in China and has evolved for more than two thousand years, it has seldom existed as the dominant philosophy, and the past two centuries have further marginalized it due to Chinese revolutions and Western influence. Although embodied as a way of life in Chinese everyday practices, it has not influenced today's formal Chinese education in a substantial way. In this sense, both Chinese and Western education in the contemporary age can learn from understanding Daoist creativity, although this article speaks mainly to the West, as the Chinese situation requires a different contextualization.

It is beyond the scope of this article to interpret Western creativity, and, at the risk of reducing its complexity, I will only briefly touch upon several aspects. In the major Western religions, God the Creator created heaven, earth, and everything from nothingness – *creatio ex nihilo* – and humanity must follow God's will (Hall, 1982; Z. Liu, 2001). The Renaissance changed that belief to enable the emergence of artistic creativity that incorporated human free will and talents. As Weiner (2000) explains, “in ways never attained before in the West, individual creators were recognized and revered”

(p. 63). The role of the imagination has become important for creating art beyond the imitation of the divine or nature (Wang & Chen, 2021; Weiner, 2000). Although the human capacity for creating something new could not be godlike, the singularity and originality of creative acts have gradually become the distinguishing features of artists as creators.

Enlightenment thinkers considered imagination “an important helpmate to reason” (Weiner, 2000, p. 71) and the Romantic movement further associated creativity with spontaneous action and self-expression, and valorized artists’ ability to rebel against authority and challenge traditions. Modernity advanced the notion of individual creativity and radical newness, and further privileged a radical break with the past, the old, and the traditional. Scientific and technological creativity, which is different from artist creativity, and is supported by modern Western philosophy, follows the ideal of reason, which positions human beings as the actors who can change the world through instrumental rationalism, scientific experimentation, problem solving, and technological innovations. The dualism of mind and body, subject and object, self and other allows the objectification of the natural world by science and technology in new inventions to serve human interests. This “dualistic consciousness that categorically separates the self from the world and mind from matter” (Bai & Cohen, 2008, p. 37) also perceives the world “as a collection of discrete objects” (Loy, 1988, p. 36). Thus this concept of creativity in the modern subject increasingly separates the subject from others and supports the notion of the singular and autonomous individual who is the agent of scientific and social progress.

In the contemporary age, creativity studies began to emerge as an independent field in the 1950s, and the creative idea, product, method, process, and personality have been studied extensively. Many innovative techniques that promote creativity have been invented and the focus has expanded beyond artistic and scientific creativity into all disciplines and everyday life. Fundamentally, “An idea or product is creative to the extent that it is both novel and useful. A novel contribution is original or surprising, where a useful contribution fits in with the larger natural and cultural environment” (Simonton & Ting, 2010, p. 342). In general, contemporary concepts of creativity acknowledge that novelty and appropriateness are two essential elements, although other criteria have also been proposed (Klausen, 2010; Simonton & Ting, 2010). Klausen (2010) points out that there is a dilemma in using both for Western creativity: “Creativity is both about breaking with norms and complying with norms” (p. 355). Novelty has remained the more important criterion for Western artistic expression and scientific and technological innovation.

From this brief description, we can see that Western concepts of creativity have shifted from the religious sense of creation to human creativity in elevating human agency and initiative, but the idea that novelty is essential to human creativity has remained, marked by a sense of breaking away from the established way of doing things in order to bring something original into being. Certainly presenting this line as the mainstream story is a big brush that sidelines the internal differences within the West. In today’s postmodern age, the dualistic boundary between the subject and the object is already challenged by Western post-structuralist philosophy and new developments in the sciences such as chaos and complexity theory, which approach the emergence of creativity through the relational dynamics of local components (Wang, 2021). There are also models of creativity that emphasize communal inquiry and collaboration among diverse disciplines to infuse them with the role of relationality. However, new modes of post-structuralism, for example, deepen rather than soften the push for radical newness.

In his historical and cross-cultural study, Weiner (2000) argues that the notion of creativity originated in the West and became the model in contemporary global cultures. When discussing Chinese traditions, on the one hand, he acknowledges the influence of Daoism in shaping “a uniquely Chinese aesthetic” (p. 178) with the intimate relationship between word and image, which “had a distinctly different tone from the willful innovation and pursuit of novelty heightened in the West since the Renaissance” (p. 178). On the other hand, he does not think that Chinese aesthetic creativity can measure up to the Western standard of breaking away from tradition, and is skeptical as to whether Chinese creativity is ever fully possible without individual freedom and democracy.

Contemporary studies about creativity, even when conducted in China, use Western models and measures of creativity, which is problematic (Lau, Hui & Ng, 2004; Niu & Sternberg, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to discuss Daoist concepts of creativity on their own merits to explore what they can offer to contemporary education. It does not propose any new models or methods for creativity, as instrumental reason is not the Daoist orientation, but goes more deeply into fundamental philosophical principles of creativity in the unique aesthetic, meditative, co-creative, and intuitive modes of creativity. The central assumption of this paper is that the relational nature of Daoist creativity is particularly informative, as the world now suffers from relational crises.

## Daoist Creativity through Interconnectedness

If Western creativity is essentially marked by singularity and radical newness, Daoist creativity is characterized by intuitive spontaneity and relational harmony (although Western and Daoist creativity can be complementary, which is beyond the scope of this paper; see Wang, 2021). There are three important aspects of Daoist creativity. First, Daoist creativity is made possible through connectedness rather than separateness, being attuned to the cosmic self-generating process. In Daoism, creativity consists in recursively returning to *Dao*, and the creation of new things happens along the way. There are many different contemporary interpretations of what *Dao* means (Ames & Hall, 2003; Z. Liu, 2001; Xu, 2013), but it is generally agreed that *Dao* is both the creative source of the universe and embodied in everything and everybody. *Dao* is also perceived both as a noun – that from which the universe emerges – and as a verb, as in path-making out of *yin/yang* dynamic interactions (G. Liu, 2006; Yu, 2018; Wang, 2021). Human creativity is part of this path-making. Second, dynamic interconnectedness supports spontaneity in human creativity. The co-creativity of humans with nature and meditative connections with cosmic energy enables spontaneous and intuitive acts of bringing something new into existence (Z. Liu, 2001; Wang, 2010). Creative personal cultivation is a process of integrating the body, the mind, and the spirit as the cornerstone for nurturing compassion for others. Body/mind and self/other dualism must be transcended in the Daoist self (Wang, 2013; Culham & Lin, 2020). Creativity in Daoist personhood is achieved by becoming one with *Dao*, and it is through this union that new connections of the self emerge for spontaneous acts of creation. Third, creativity has a clear value-orientation of reaching harmony through balancing tensions and differences. Tensions and differences are a natural part of the dynamics of life, and creative harmonizing leads to new thoughts and products. Here I will briefly discuss these three aspects of Daoist creativity – the cosmic, human, and ethical – and will explore them more in detail in later sections on creative learning, creative personhood, and creative harmony in pedagogy.

### *The Self-Creative Process of the Cosmos*

Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing* is considered to be speaking about cosmic creativity:

*Dao* gives birth to the one, the one gives birth to the two, two gives birth to the three, and the three gives birth to the universe. The myriad things of the universe carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, and blending these vital breaths (*qi*) leads to harmony.

Thus cosmic creativity comes from *Dao*, the procession of one, two (*yin/yang*), and three (multiple) makes the embodiment of *Dao* in humanity and in myriad things possible, and the circulation of *qi* – breath or energy – brings the opposites of *yin* and *yang* together for achieving harmony within the individual existence. Moreover, it is a process in which something new is generated (Small, 2019), so the movement of *Dao* unfolds an ongoing circle of creation, and the creative tension lies at the heart of *yin/yang* dynamics, which gives birth to the multiple and the universe. Hu (2009) interprets three as the middle state of *yin* and *yang* that blends the two to reach the harmony of *qi*. Without this balancing act of the three, the self-

generating and self-transforming universe (Tu, 1985) would not unfold in an ongoing process of renewal. The self-creativity of the cosmos happens in the web of interconnectedness that blends *yin qi* and *yang qi* within an entity and between entities.

Creativity in Daoism exists in the process of harmonizing *yin* and *yang*, energies that must meet and interact in order to produce and transform life (G. Liu, 2016). When the balance of *yin qi* and *yang qi* cannot be reached, new life cannot be formed. This fundamental interdependent characteristic of *yin/yang* dynamics is also demonstrated in their interconverting capacity. When *yin* reaches an extreme degree, it becomes *yang*, and vice versa. But when the conversion happens, the contrasting energy is also converted, so the interplay between the two is never lost. Thus *yin/yang* dynamics are non-dualistic, as the two are mutually embedded in each other and interconvertible, making them different from Western dualism.

In this sense, the self-creative cosmos features the interdependence of everything in it because neither *yin* nor *yang* can dominate – the moment *yin* or *yang* is in total control it is converted into the other – but they must maintain dynamic interplay. David L. Hall (1982) argues that the Western tradition of *creatio ex nihilo* – creation from nothing – is about power relationships, “since the ‘creative’ element of the relation is completely in control of its ‘other’” (p. 249). Thus, the creator and the created are in a dualistic relation of domination and being dominated. By contrast, Daoist creativity is a result of relational dynamics through *yin/yang* interplay, rather than a singular act. While *Dao* generates and nurtures everything, it is non-possessive and does not control, so that the new can follow its own natural process. Chapter 51 of the *Dao De Jing* states, “It [*Dao*] gives birth to myriad things but does not own them, grows them but does not make a claim on them, and nurtures them but does not dominate them.” The non-controlling manner of *Dao* and the self-creativity of the cosmos go hand in hand.

### ***Human Creativity as Both Relational and Spontaneous***

The movement of *qi* connects humanity and the cosmos. Human creativity follows *the naturalistic principle* (in Chinese, *ziran*) to become one with *Dao*. As Ames and Hall (2003) point out, Daoist “creativity is both *self-creativity* and *co-creativity*” (p. 17), as the self-generating and self-transforming nature of the universe is also embedded in human creativity as spontaneity, while co-creativity emerges from the interconnectedness between humanity and *ziran*. Directly translated into English, *ziran* is “self-so” or “self-so-ness” (Lai, 2008), indicating being natural (as an adjective) or spontaneous, and the dynamic nature of the cosmos (as a noun). Here the naturalistic principle of the cosmos as self-transforming is not the same as nature. However, the natural world provides an embodied site for Daoists to become attuned to the rhythm of cosmic creativity. Literature, music, architecture, painting, and medicine that have been influenced by Daoism are all inspired by immersion into natural landscapes and patterns. Both explicit and implicit connections between humanity and nature are made through metaphors, analogies, fables, visualization, and imaginary dialogues in the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>1</sup>

Meditative, intuitive, imaginative, and aesthetic modes of creativity in Daoism all demonstrate a co-creative process in which spontaneity plays an important role. Meditations clear the ground for creativity, intuitions bring the whole imagery into focus, and aesthetics set creative harmony into motion. Without going into detailed descriptions of these modes, I would like to use a fable from the *Zhuangzi* to demonstrate how these modes come together in Daoist creativity. In the fable, a woodworker, Qing, made such an enchanting wooden stand for a set of bronze bells that everybody thought it was made by magic, not by an artisan. Qing explained the process:

When I am getting ready to make the stand, I dare not waste my energy. So first I fast to still my mind. After fasting for three days, I no longer have any thought about reputation or rewards.

<sup>1</sup> There are debates as to the actual existence of Laozi and Zhuangzi as historical figures. While the authorship of *Dao De Jing* is mostly attributed to Laozi, the authorship of *Zhuangzi* as a text is Zhuangzi as a person. Whenever possible, this paper refers to the names of the texts.

After fasting for five days, I no longer have any thought about blame or praise, skillfulness or clumsiness. After fasting for seven days, I suddenly forget that I have four limbs and a body. At that time, I have no thought of ruler or court; I am so concentrated that all the external distractions disappear. Only then do I enter the mountain forest and observe the heavenly nature of the trees until I find one of a perfect match. I can see a completed bell stand already in it. Only then do I begin to work; otherwise, I would not start. I allow the heavenly energy within me to match the heavenly energy in the natural shape of a tree – this is probably why wooden stands are thought to be made by a Fairy. (*Zhuangzi*, from chapter 19, “Understanding Life”)

Creating a wooden stand, Qing engaged in creativity through cultivating energy within himself in meditation and matching that energy with the energy of a tree. With well-cultivated creative energy within, Qing intuitively saw the imagery of the stand in a tree before he worked to create it. Through meditation – here “fasting” is about the fasting of the mind – Qing was able to transcend social expectations, external rewards, and the self altogether. With an empty mind, he connected the *qi* (energy) inside of him and the *qi* outside in the forests, and his *self*-creativity inside flowed out spontaneously in *co-creating* the wood craft with nature. Capturing the image was both a self-creative and co-creative process that involved meditative, intuitive, and artistic work. Artists as whole persons connecting with the spirit of nature to produce creative artifacts is a landmark of Daoist aesthetics (Averill, et al., 2001; Chang, 1963; Wang & Chen, 2021). It is an intuitive process in which the mind and the body are integrated and the self and the world momentarily become one to leap into creation. In contrast to contemporary discussions about the essential qualities of the creative personality, the creativity of personhood in Daoism is embedded in the person’s cultivated capacity for transcending external and internal constraints to be in creative union with nature, and at the moment of union, the person is able to “see” the image of creation.

As Hideki Yukawa (1973) points out, creativity needs the interplay between intuition and abstraction to become fruitful. It is import to note that in Daoism, intellectual thinking is not separate from aesthetic thinking, as the intellect is always part of aesthetic activity, while aesthetic intuition is also always part of intellectual thinking. Traditionally in China, before contemporary revolutions, an intellectual was necessarily an artist, and the Chinese ideographic language and close relationships between painting and calligraphy contributed to the integration of the intellectual and the aesthetic. Daoism has also been credited with advancing scientific thinking in China (Xu, 2013; Kuo, 1996), with its attention to the naturalistic principle, the organic whole, and cosmic patterns. Different from modern Western science, Daoism does not objectify the world; rather, it captures reality in its holistic nature. Thus, intellectual and poetic thinking are integrated in Daoism. For Zhonglin Liu (2001), the aesthetic mode of thinking should not merely be seen as belonging to literature and the arts, but should be considered as an independent mode of thinking that can be used in all situations and that has equal status with rational thinking. It is in the interplay between these two major modes of thinking that human creativity emerges.

### ***The Ethical Orientation of Creativity***

As mentioned earlier, appropriateness is an element in Western creativity, since a novel idea or out-of-box thinking may not be useful for effectively addressing the issue at hand. It can even be “malevolent” (Cropley, et al., 2008) by causing social harm. The usefulness or acceptability of a new idea or product that fits to the environment is often related to the context, so appropriateness implies a certain value (Behheto & Kauffman, 2014). In general, however, modern science is perceived as objective and value-neutral, and scientific and technological creativity is perceived as independent from value judgement. In Daoism, creativity has a much stronger value orientation, as virtue (*de*) is essential to *Dao*. There are different interpretations of what *de* means, and as Cline (2004) states, there are two contrasting perspectives. The first, that *de* is cosmic, is represented by Ames and Hall (2003), who argue that *de* is a particular embodiment of *Dao* in the specific individual thing or person, and thus beyond the human

concepts of morality and ethics. The second, that *de* is ethical, is represented by Philip J. Ivanhoe (1999), who believes it refers to human relationships. Actually, both meanings of *de* can be found throughout the *Dao De Jing*, and I think the specific understanding of its meaning can be contextualized to allow multiple aspects of *de* to co-exist and intertwine: because of its close relationship with *Dao*, *de* has cosmic connotations; at the same time, its cosmic embodiment in persons also has important ethical orientations.

As both cosmic and ethical, Daoist *de* is directed towards reaching harmony for regenerating the vitality of life (Z. Liu, 2001). Cosmic and human creativity are resonant with each other, and creativity moulds tensions into harmonious relationships to create and not to harm. The non-possessive nature of Daoist creativity in dissolving controlling mechanisms leads to a virtuous process in which creative harmony is beyond the constraints of regulative morality (such as Confucian morals). Inventing something new does not necessarily mean it can enrich life, and contemporary concerns with social harmony and ecological sustainability challenge us to reformulate creativity so as to form mutually beneficial relationships with others and the planet (Hall, 1982; Herschok, 2012; Wang, 2021). Daoist creation is marked by relational attunement that gives way to a spontaneous newness that enriches a shared life. As Ames and Hall (2003) point out, “Freedom [of creativity] is neither the absence of constraint nor some isolatable originality, but the full contribution of this achieved uniqueness to a shared community” (p. 21). The value orientation of Daoist creativity is made clear here: the uniqueness or originality of creation should contribute to a sustainable human and ecological community.

### Non-dualistic Knowing and Creative Learning

The nature of creativity in the classroom is related to but not the same as the direct experience of producing a creative idea or artifact. Addressing students’ aesthetic experiences, Uhrmacher (2009) points out that “the creative work does not need to be seen as new for the world, but new for the person undergoing the process” (p. 632). Students are creative when they generate new ideas and develop new awareness, even though they might not be new to others. Teachers can engage students’ learning and personal growth in creative ways that are highly relational, complex, multi-layered, and situated in each different context. Creative teaching does not necessarily lead to new products, but to new relational dynamics in which students engage in creative learning and transform their personhood. In this sense, the relational nature of Daoist creativity is compatible with pedagogical dynamics in which teacher, student, curriculum, and environment form interactive relationships to create and co-create meaningful educational experiences. In the following sections, I address creative learning, creative personhood, and creative tensions in pedagogical dynamics.

Daoist knowing does not separate the knower and the known in an objective way, although it does acknowledge reality as it is beyond human control. When human creativity is about attuning to the cosmic energy to release imagination and form new connections, the dualistic way of thinking that separates subject/object and mind/body, as well as self/other, is transcended. Non-dualistic knowing brings a virtuous aspect to creative learning that does not approach learning content as instrumental but rather acknowledges the necessity of forming transformative relationships with what is learned. Such a mode of knowing is in direct contrast with the prevalent educational expectations that students should master academic knowledge as fully as possible in order to control the world. There are four aspects of creative learning, guided by connected knowing.

First, creative learning is guided by relational ontology and must go beyond instrumental knowledge. The *Dao De Jing* states, “The pursuit of learning is to gain day by day; the pursuit of *Dao* is to lose day by day” (chapter 48). Here, the accumulation of instrumental knowledge and official ideas is counter-productive and must be emptied out so that one can become attuned to *Dao*. In the contemporary setting, education is often treated as an instrument for job seeking, for career development in a market-driven society, or for achieving a particular social reform agenda. However, instrumental knowing leads to fragmentation and the lack of intuitive understanding of the whole, and ultimately



results in the loss of the learner as the whole person whose capacity to know and create through relating is constrained by pre-determined, externally imposed goals. Daoist knowing is about attuning to the relational dynamics of life, and creative learning in a classroom is made possible through connected knowing, which generates new ideas through dynamic interactions. In my teacher education classes, I pay particular attention to creating pedagogical conditions for relational dynamics in students' learning, such as designing experiential projects that require students to interact with texts, with one another, and with nature or society, or incorporating various forms of contemplative learning to empty students' crowded minds and a "cluttered curriculum" (Smythe, 2020, p. 208). When relational co-creativity is introduced in teaching, students can have spontaneous discoveries and reach new understandings.

Second, creative learning is infused by a meditative sensibility that not only connects students and the external world but also cultivates Daoist virtues for living a harmonious life. It can lead to a learning environment that privileges non-competitive, free explorations and compassionate relationships. The role of silence, stillness, and contemplation is honoured in a Daoist pedagogy (Culham & Lin, 2020; Yu, 2018; Wang, 2014). The teacher must take the lead in cultivating a contemplative state of mind. David McLachlan Jeffrey (2019) describes how his meditative practice of "sitting and forgetting," following Zhuangzi's guidance, has been beneficial for him in losing "the fear-based, stifling anxieties that freeze all creativity," "the excessive ego-driven self-consciousness" and "the needless dualistic judgments" (p. 222). As the instructor in the classroom, his mindful orientation directly contributes to a class climate in which students share power with one another and with the instructor to co-create knowledge. In the contemporary mindfulness movement in education, instrumental rationales for improving learning performance are often used at schools, but the Daoist approach to meditation is not for increasing learning scores. Rather, it is for getting in touch with the creative interdependence of the cosmos to live in both freedom and harmony.

Third, creative learning incorporates aesthetic, poetic, and imaginative modes of thinking. Intuition, openness to ambiguity, insight into the interdependent whole, and embodied experiencing, which are important for the emergence of creativity, are all beyond the grasp of the intellect alone. While these modes can be embedded more visibly in the arts, they are also demonstrated in scientific and technological activities. As a parallel mode of thinking, the aesthetic mode is complementary to logical and analytic thinking, and both are essential for creativity. The aesthetic and imaginative modes are more difficult to assess and are often pushed out of the classroom in today's testing climate. However, if creativity loses one leg, it cannot survive. Aspects of learning that are beyond the intellect need to be infused into the curriculum and teaching at schools and colleges as an intertwined aspect of creative thinking. Beauregard (2020), a professor in sociology, introduces such an aesthetic mode – as well as meditation – into her classroom at the intersections between art, culture, and society. In her consciousness-centred approach to teaching, she approaches creativity as "intimacy" between the self and the world, or "the infinite beyond" (p. 153). Beauregard transforms the teaching of sociology into embodied, meditative, narrative, and reflective activities. Connecting students with relational and transcendent possibilities that are also immanent in the here and now, in a Daoist manner, requires the combination of experiential understanding and aesthetic or intuitive formulations.

Fourth, creative learning uses analogical and associative thinking to make connections across differences. Guoping Liu (2016) makes a distinction between analogical thinking, which is horizontal, and logical thinking, which is vertical. Horizontal associations among different phenomena do not seek the essences of separate entities, while vertical categorization makes clear distinctions for inductive or deductive reasoning. Associative thinking makes connections between different realms, such as between humanity and nature or among different disciplines, and allows room for unpredictability, uncertainty, and ambiguity. While developing logical thinking is an important aspect of learning in contemporary education, it is often over-emphasized to the degree of pushing analogical and associative thinking away. Students cannot engage in creative learning when they are not allowed to develop analogical thinking. When they have more opportunities to play with poetry, metaphors, fables, archetypal images, stories, or

symbols in the classroom, they are more likely to create connections across difference through connected knowing.

### Cultivating Creative Personhood in the Classroom

Connected knowing that does not objectify the world is enacted by Daoist personhood, which dissolves the mechanism for mastering the world and controlling others. Clarke (2000) uses the phrase “ecological self” to refer to Daoist personhood, which “seeks harmony within itself by pursuing harmony with the wider whole” (p. 98). According to Guoping Liu (2016), self-self, self-other, and humanity-nature harmonies “eventually return to self-self harmony. Only through inherent transcendence and advancement can the self reach *Dao*” (p. 251). Personal cultivation is central to all relationships, and in the context of pedagogy it necessarily includes the cultivation of both the instructor and the students. Creativity of personhood here is not about creating new products but about creating new connections within and without to integrate and transcend the self, a process which is fundamentally educational. Daoist philosophy is inherently a philosophy of education that asserts the primacy of personhood at the heart of education over instrumental thinking, which serves economic and political interests or the global market.

Integrating the opposite cosmic energies of *yin* and *yang* within the person is enabled by an interconnected worldview in which the body, the mind, and the spirit form an organic whole, and the self and the other are interdependent, situated in the web of life. A cultivated person must transcend the dualism of mind/body and self/other through questioning norms, cultivating aesthetic imagination, dwelling in nature, and practising meditation. When tensions and conflicts are experienced within a person, resolving issues does not depend on finding the one right path, but on improvising movements that loosen the ego attachment, so as to respect multiple directions and follow different paths at the same time. That is a teacher’s position in creative teaching: to discern diverse directions in the classroom while loosening the attachment to predetermined objectives in order to follow the multiple pathways of tapping into students’ potentialities. Because K–12 students are in the process of developing their ego strength, it serves them better if they develop their senses of the self not in a rigid way, but in an open-minded manner. The almost exclusive emphasis on the role of the intellect in US school education due to the past few decades of the standardization movement has been detrimental to students. The intellect needs to connect with the aesthetic, the emotional, and the spiritual for developing a creative personhood that has the capacity to understand and deal with the complex, interconnected, and entangled issues in the contemporary age.

Three treasures of personal cultivation in the *Dao De Jing* – compassion, frugality, and non-competition (chapter 67) – were associated with femininity and not valued during Laozi’s wartime period. They are not much valued in today’s US society either. Chapter 67 goes on to say, “Because of compassion, one can be courageous; because of frugality, one can be generous; and because of not being ahead of all, one can be the chief to lead.” Such Daoist dialectics indicate that valuing the nonconventional serves to push the rigid boundary of the official ideology in order to find the middle ground. To achieve inner harmony through the tensioned interactions between *yin*/feminine and *yang*/masculine, one must first give room to the important role of femininity that leads to sustainable strength. This teaching is contrary to today’s competitive educational climate in which students are expected to master the knowledge they learn and achieve excellence above others. The creativity of Daoist personhood cannot be achieved without going beyond the mentality of mastery and control that prevails in today’s official educational orientations. For both teachers and students, cultivating creative personhood means not only deconstructing instrumental control and various forms of aggression (direct and indirect, structural and cultural) in the content and process of education, but also seeking the positive influence of simplicity, gentleness, and compassion.

In the *Zhuangzi*, creativity of personhood places more emphasis on individual freedom, although this freedom is with – not against – the universe. It means not only questioning masculine control but also practicing meditations to transcend the ego boundary. The *Zhuangzi* provides detailed guidance for fasting the heart, quiet sitting and forgetting the self, and achieving tranquility in turbulence. It is a process of dissolving the constraints of norms, going beyond the categorical distinction between the self and the world, emptying out internally instrumental pursuits, reducing the desire for fame and possession, and eventually becoming united with *Dao* – individual consciousness becoming a part of cosmic consciousness to achieve freedom. Qing's creation of the wooden set mentioned above exemplifies such a process: Qing's freedom to create was achieved by becoming one with *Dao*. In the classroom, the teacher's inner creativity in harmonizing conflicting emotions can settle the unsettled through mindful awareness and interactions (Jeffrey, 2019; Jennings, 2015). One teacher's story of "entering the empty space" (Hunter, 2013, p. 15) is a good example here. John Hunter (2013) was in a panic in a chaotic pre-K classroom at the beginning of his teaching career. Only through letting go of his own anxiety and only when he "felt something inside" shift did he suddenly feel "very calm" and was able to gather youngsters' attention by simply and calmly saying: "Okay, folks, we are going to settle down now" (p. 21). The children all looked at him and quieted down. Hunter's ability to meditatively centre himself in the midst of chaos brought peace to the students. Teachers' personal cultivation that leads to new connections and new layers of the self is essential for creating pedagogical conditions in which students can flourish and cultivate their personhood.

Connectedness with the cosmic energy is often present in young children, who have higher sensitivity and attunement to their surroundings, situations, and natural rhythms; unfortunately, they grow up to receive a modern education that privileges order, procedures, and competitive individualism. Dwayne Huebner (1999) once said that the teacher's task is not so much about promoting creativity, as about removing artificial obstacles so that children's imagination and creativity can be released naturally. For older children and college students, experiential learning through human–nature companionship can be designed so that students experience connectedness and nurture selfhood at an advanced level of integration (Wang, 2018). As Culham and Lin (2020) point out, "Students should be given ample opportunities to observe nature's patterns and designs and gain an understanding of the laws governing nature" (p. 171). Nature provides patterns and offers inspirations for developing students' ecological self, and students can experience freedom through organic relationships, finding space for integrating different elements in their selfhood. Following the natural way is not easy, as it takes a lot of work to find one's path, particularly in the contemporary setting, where the natural way is subsumed by the high-speed human and technological highway.

Leading students into a space where they are willing to unlearn and self-educate for the creative transformation of personhood involves both "way-giving" and "way-making" (Yu, 2018, p. 91). Giving way to students' emergence invites their creative engagement with ideas, meanings, and their internal transformation in the making of their own pathways. The role of tacit understanding, embodied self-knowledge, and emotional resonance, as well as the role of silence, contemplation, and stillness are emphasized in students' personal cultivation. Cultivating the creativity of personhood means that the teacher is attentive to the whole person of the student and is able to discern what is unsaid or what is emerging in students and respond in such a way that the student's potential can be called into existence. It requires the teacher to release "the will to control" in traditional teaching (Yu, 2018, p. 5). Jeffrey (2021) approaches the Daoist teacher–student relationship as interdependent, one in which "there is no need for manipulation and obsessive control to fit predetermined outcomes in the classroom – for that only leads to frustration, as well as mental and physical exhaustion" (p. 243). Trying to control students and the classroom is also harmful to teachers, whose creativity is also suffocated. The transformation of teacher–student relationships is essential for cultivating the creativity of personhood that is made possible through relational dynamics.

## Harmonizing the Relational Dynamics of Daoist Pedagogy

Daoist relational dynamics are oriented towards reaching harmony with *qi* to create something new. Harmony as a term can be traced to resonance and mutual response in music (Z. Liu, 2001), to the culinary art of blending various ingredients to enhance one another “without losing their distinctive flavors” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 61), or to wine-making, “when different flavors are being mixed to enrich one another” (Li, 2008, p. 86) and mutually complete one another. Such mutual relationality also makes harmony “a process rather than a state; it is harmonization” (p. 85), which does not follow a pre-set procedure. Thus, creativity becomes a process of harmonizing different elements to generate newness out of tensions, contributing to mutually enriching relationality.

Different from the worldview of struggling against others in society to advance humanity and against the natural world to pursue limitless progress, Daoism seeks a creative harmony that is relational, dynamic, and sustainable, in which struggle might not be absent but is not privileged (Xu, 2013). A cultivated Daoist person can see through conflicts and contextualize them in such a way that the experiencing of tensions leads to a creative response that harmonizes opposite directions, rather than making both sides struggle against each other. A Daoist pedagogy of creative harmony moves through the relationship between and among teacher, student, subject matter, and the world to achieve a dynamic process in which tensions are transformed towards the mutual flourishing of all participants. In such a pedagogy, creative tensions, diversity of texts, pedagogical attunement, pedagogical conditions for harmonization, and the blending of different teaching modes are crucial elements for achieving transformative relational dynamics.

The work of Canadian scholar Ted T. Aoki (2005) – a pioneer in East/West dialogues in education – on pedagogies of bridging differences “by a bridge, which is not a bridge” (p. 228) is noteworthy here. He approaches creative tensions between differences as essential for an ongoing movement between and among the self, the other, and the intercultural/international world in education. Importantly, connections are made between differences that are not static but ever changing, so his non-bridge bridge is “harmonization” in a Daoist sense. Aoki (2005) is well known for his conceptualization of dwelling in the tensions of curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived, a dwelling that leads to generative possibilities and pedagogical vitality. Here the quest is not to get rid of tension, “for to be tensionless is to be dead like a limp violin string, but more so to seek appropriately attuned tension, such that the sound of the tensioned string resounds well” (p. 382). “Appropriately attuned tension” is an essential element of a Daoist pedagogy of creative harmony.

Diversity in texts or in diverse perspectives introduced through teaching – whether in the sense of textbooks, curriculum materials, or extracurricular activities – is important for laying the groundwork that makes it possible for students to experience the dynamics of creative harmony through interactions. While schoolteachers have limited opportunities to select textbooks, creative teachers introduce different materials into the classroom. College instructors often have more freedom to decide which textbooks they will use, and thus have opportunities to introduce multiple viewpoints directly into their teaching content. Here diversity is understood as ecological and sustainable, not as a market-driven, endless variety that splits the organic whole (Hershock, 2012), nor is it positioned as breaking away from the interconnectedness of life. Developing students’ capacity for relational weaving often means creating otherwise invisible novel connections across difference. The notion of ecological diversity being beneficial for the mutual growth of components needs to be introduced into contemporary education to welcome difference and incorporate attuned tensions among diverse texts and perspectives – including what students bring into the classroom from their diverse backgrounds. The current backlash against critical race theory in some US states and attempts to ban it in K–12 curriculum is an alarming example of political intolerance and suppression of diversity in education.

Creative teaching through attunement involves being aware of the whole situation and responding in such a manner that all components of the whole are brought together in harmony while at the same time attending to the specific student in a specific situation. Here, the teacher’s responses not only address

students' needs, but also attend to subject matter and the dynamic context of the classroom in subtle forms of communication. By getting in touch with the creative cosmic energy of harmony and infusing it into the process of teaching and educating, pedagogical attunement is not only embodied but also transcendent (Pinar, 2019). Attending to students' sensory experience, whether through sound (Aoki, 2005), bodily movement (Hwang, 2019), or unsaid gestures, makes teaching and learning a sense-making process. At the same time, by transcending the normalized beliefs and thoughts that constrain teachers' and students' free explorations and creativity, attunement strikes the key to reach a higher level of awareness and consciousness. The teacher's attunement inspires students' efforts to go beyond themselves while connecting curriculum with their lived experience. Pedagogical attunement enables students to co-create and create the new landscape through embodiment, contemplation, aesthetic sensitivity, and mindful awareness.

The *Dao De Jing* speaks about the "cosmic tendency towards harmony" (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 62), which invites the consideration of creating pedagogical conditions to fulfill this tendency. The class climate and the spirit of an academic community can do more for tapping into students' creative potential than direct instruction. Since creativity cannot be taught directly, it becomes crucial to craft pedagogical arrangements that are most conducive to students' individual and collaborative efforts to harmonize multiple forms of difference in their creative endeavours – their difference with texts, in peer relationships, and with the outside world. As Avraham Cohen (2015) points out,

Being in tune with the Dao in an educational environment means knowing in a substantial way what the context, content, and atmosphere of the environment are in the moment, each moment, with an awareness of what has been and what possibilities exist. (p. 2)

In creating an environment of creative harmony, teachers need to be aware of both the parts and the whole, at the same time and in the moment. And the Daoist position of non-imposition on the teacher's part and non-competition on the students' part (Jeffrey, 2021; Yu, 2018) are double-gestures towards co-creating relational and sustainable conditions in which tensions are not eliminated but serve as partners for the dynamic dance of pedagogy in harmonization.

In addition, a pedagogy of creative relational dynamics also means harmonizing different modes of knowing, being, and interbeing. It does not abandon traditional teaching modes but combines different modes in complementary ways for the best influence on students. Beauregard (2020) discusses her pedagogies as oriented by "the power of *relatedness* – particularly the relationship between subjective, objective, and transcendent ways of knowing" (p. 176). The modern objective mode of analysis through empirical data is still useful when it does not dominate relational modes of teaching and learning. However, non-dualistic modes of knowing, doing, and being, and the Daoist personal cultivation of going beyond the ego consciousness are urgently needed to provide balance for the lack of relational flow in most Western conceptions of creativity.

In short, Daoist creativity through interconnectedness suspends conventional pursuits of mastery and control, heals the divide within and without, and holds open generative possibilities of creation to welcome a newness that becomes a part of the web of life. Its modes of knowing, doing, and being, which connect rather than separate, offer profound lessons for us, as the crises of today are the crises of the relational in multiple dimensions. A Daoist creative pedagogy promises to lead younger generations onto the pathway of co-creative, relational, and sustainable creativity to dwell in difficulty and face the complexities of today's challenges. Understanding and enacting Daoist creativity is a timely educational endeavour.

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