

Taoist Thoughts in *To the Islands* by Randolph Stow

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Australian writer Randolph Stow was deeply influenced by Taoism which was represented in some of his works. Analyzing Taoist thoughts in *To the Islands* from the perspectives of inner self, social morality, and natural ethnic, the paper attempts to reveal how Stow embodies Chinese Taoism in his novels.

Keywords: Randolph Stow, *To the Islands*, Taoist thoughts, belief

Introduction

Randolph Stow, born in Western Australia, has enjoyed a long standing reputation as an Australian realistic writer. The publication of *To the Islands* instantly attracted public attention and won him the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 1958. Though Stow has never been to China, he has already read some works of Lin Yutang, a distinguished Chinese writer and the representative of New Taoist as well, and the Chinese Taoist classic *The Tao Te Ching* which, he admitted, provided him with a “satisfactory model of the world” (Goodwin, 1986, p. 239). So this paper attempts to explore the Taoism in his works via analyzing Taoist thoughts—especially those represented in *The Tao Te Ching*—from inner self, social morality, and natural ethnic. *To the Islands* reveals delicately the psychic reality and philosophical implications. Occurring in an Aboriginal mission station of Western Australia, it describes how elderly Stephen Heriot breaks his cognitive shackles, converts his belief to nature, and eventually comes to awakening. The other story line lies in the emotional entanglements between Heriot and the aborigine Rex.

Conversion to Nature

Heriot’s attitude towards nature is different from those in the parish before he leaves to the soul purifying journey. People there usually peep into secrets of nature, while Heriot often gazes at a tree with “tensity of concentration that belongs to his prayers” (Stow, 1975, pp. 18-19), as if nature is sacred and inviolable. Ironically, it is the faith of the elderly missionary that helps to engender the antagonism between human and nature. “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White, 1969, p. 10). Though the statement is controversial, it is undeniable that some descriptions in Genesis reflect the antithesis. So the essential reason of Heriot’s uncertainty to God lies in some Christian ideas inconsistent with the inherent feelings towards nature. Heriot finds that he resents his life and abominates everyone, and his compliance with mundane life and the mechanism of social restriction has forced him to deceive himself as a “philanthropist” which is opposite the essential fact—he is persistently a “misanthrope” (Stow, 1975, p. 75). Abnegation of the

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anthropocentrism is followed by his awareness that human beings are “just animals” (Stow, 1975, p. 189).

Taoism emphasizes on natural inaction, which means that everything must in accordance with natural principles. “Natural inaction is to terminate an individual in the transcendental and predetermined universality” (Chen, 2016, p. 32). Once walking alone and leaving himself blown by strong wind, he desires to tell the roaring gale that he loves it, and he has become its convert. The time Heriot shatters the crucifix marks his “failed faith” (Stow, 1975, p. 79).

Inner Self: Returning Again to the Babe

In *The Tao Te Ching*, “babe” is a significant element. The author Lao Tse describes that “I alone seem listless and still, my desires having as yet given no indication of their presence. I am like an infant which has not yet smiled” (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 38).

There are impressive descriptions of the protagonist’s infant-like state in the novel. In a valley, Heriot is bare just as an infant, silent, and still, sitting “like water-sculptured stones” (Stow, 1975, p. 127). The relation between stones and babes is confusing for their different properties. According to Lao Tse, a babe is not yet polluted by any mundane desire; that’s why noxious animals will not hurt it while being exposed to wild nature, and its erection of penis even occurs because the vital essence of nature congests in the tender body. Therefore, Lao Tse proposes that “when one gives undivided attention to the (vital) breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a (tender) babe” (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 22). So there is a sort of solid force, not only bestowed on stone but also hidden in child-like tenderness.

Heriot remains impervious, just silently recording external sounds and experiencing internal feelings instead of allowing any curiosity or horror that ignites intricate desires. He feels that “as simple as a child first come to light, and as bare” (Stow, 1975, p. 135). Returning to the babe, a pure but firm state of life is nearly equal to back to nature. Chuang Tse (2019a, n.p.), another prestigious philosopher of Taoism says that “The universe and I came into being together; I and everything therein are one”, proposing the fusion of man and nature. Suffering from the torments both physically and psychologically during the journey, Heriot attains the realm of unity with nature. The epiphany brings Heriot, when wind roars and lightening splits clouds, a feeling of harmonious rather than horror, and he finds “peace in its purpose, in the remote and unfathomable justice of its occasions” (Stow, 1975, p. 73). While lying on a rock, Heriot feels all pigments disappear from his body, and everything returns to the original nature, so he cries out that he has already vanished and no longer exists (Stow, 1975, p. 164).

Heriot achieves the spiritual distillation and from then on aspires to seclude from the mundane world. He is “a figure of a Chinese Taoist hermit” (Yang, 1995, p. 46). Heriot’s affection to nature indicates an immanent desire, a calling from prehistorical wilderness, and a destiny of “I and everything therein are one” as well. Helen Bond in the novel makes a penetrating evaluation of Heriot that “as long as we live here we can never be ourselves, unless our selves—break out, like Mr. Heriot’s” (Stow, 1975, p. 162). Returning to the babe spiritually is to make human being’s existence transparent, so to transform an individual’s communication pattern with the universe without any concept of “the other”.

Social Morality: Doing Nothing

Chuang Tse proposes that “if the Sages do not pop off, neither will the gangsters drop off” (2019b, n.p.). And there is a similar philosophy in *The Tao Te Ching*: Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the

way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 12). Either statement represents “Levelling on Things” which means that the gap of wealth results in voracity; likewise, gap of class causes discrimination, because if there is not the noble then the lowly is non-existent; because of the disparities, contradictions occur. So Taoism deduces that there would be no thieves or brigands without saints, because if you claim the moral high ground, then you at the same time announce the existence of those who are morally flawed. In *To the Islands*, Heriot realizes the philosophy.

Heriot once recalls that his wife sacrifices her own life gloriously, and that his silent contributions to the parish. However, he is instantly aware that he is attempting to admonish others by employing the secular moral regulations. Besides, Heriot still refuses to be a martyr when he suffers enormously from revilement for his abandon of previous belief. In regard to warfare, he states that “we don’t ever quite pay back the people we force to hurt them” (Stow, 1975, p. 94). Those who are instigated by some important figures who claim the moral high ground to join the war for so called justice or free do mare not compensated, because their minds are occupied by what they are forced to believe by those saints, but do not ever realize that they are actually operated by moral mechanism. In real life, the majority of people just like this “fierce crowd” (Stow, 1975, p. 81), live blindly, and employ what so called moral principles to denounce others.

Heriot finds it is futile to charge other person via dogmas, then he assorts to nature force in that he believes everything has its own course. “Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Tao. The law of the Tao is its being what it is” (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 47). So, all things must obey the unbreakable natural principle. Taoism holds that there is no morally right or wrong, because the moral standards are established by humans, so the most right thing is to follow the nature’s course. Besides, people should not judge others, for when they do so it means that they disobey the Tao. Lao Tse has brilliantly states that “I will do nothing (of purpose), and the people will be transformed of themselves” (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 105). In the novel, when Heriot finds himself claiming the moral high ground or being claimed by others, he awakens instantly and persists in not exalting a saint; and when he realizes that it’s futile to rule the Aboriginal parish by force, he leaves it; both of these reflect Heriot’s thoughts and actions of “doing nothing”.

Natural Ethnic: Treating the Creation Like Dogs of Grass

Lao Tse says that heaven and earth are not benevolent, they “deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with” (Lao Tse, 2008, p. 16). The statement means that nature handles everything like it handles straw-dogs without any distinction. So nature treats all things unselfishly, and they follow their own courses. In other words, no matter how things turn out, it’s the action of the thing itself. Equipped with the thoughts of equality of all things, Heriot becomes more easily to show empathy to nature.

When Heriot appreciates with Justin some jabirus frolic gaily and elegantly on lucid water, he claims that human beings could have be as happy as these jabirus, but lusting for too much makes us become different from them. Then he requests “not prey on anything”, and even has contempt for God because “what a malice must have gone into creating a world where people have to eat” (Stow, 1975, p. 171). As Heriot is enjoying a beautiful black jabiru, all of a sudden, Justins lays it and casts the corpse in front of the old man’s feet. Heriot sees “with ineffable sadness the claws of the brilliant yellow legs bent like dying hands” (Stow, 1975, p. 171). On one side, there is a carcass of python floating on lily pond, which makes Heriot feel that this death is “too sad to comment” (Stow, 1975, p. 172); on the other side, Justin wrings the neck of a turkey thumping on the grass and even shows it to Heriot proudly. The howl of a dingo arouses the aged missionary a feeling of

wistfulness, and the pity moves in him for he thinks they lament “their dingo hood as he his humanity” (Stow, 1975, p. 173). While Heriot is quietly immersed himself in the beauty of a wallaby, a gunshot from Justin is heard unexpectedly, the perfect animal leaps and falls back, and dies quivering on the flat rock (Stow, 1975, p. 196), then the old man closed his eyes. He wonders bitterly there should be anything having not been murdered yet, and all his sadness wakens “to find such filth feeding on such beauty” (Stow, 1975, p. 175).

Both Heriot and Justin regard these creatures as beauties, but their actions are poles apart, which may result from their difference of faiths. Some doctrines of Christianity acknowledge the binary opposition of man and nature, and even make its followers believe that to plunder nature for their own interests is by the will of God. However, the belief in Heriot’s twilight years is nature, and following the course of nature is a crux of Taoist thoughts. Taoism claims that the universe is created out of Tao, and Tao or nature treats all its creations equally.

Conclusion

To the Islands mainly narrates the protagonist Heriot’s convert process, and some Taoist thoughts, particularly relates to inner self, social morality, and nature. Randolph Stow fuses the Chinese Taoism masterly into his works, and his works also help disseminate the ecological thoughts of Taoism which claims to comply with the nature of everything, providing a solution for spiritual and environmental crisis for the time.

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