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Daoism, Peace-building and Humanitarianism: Chinese origins of humanitarian action

Ashley South

Regional Centre for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Ashley South BIOGRAPHY

Dr Ashley South has over 20 years' experience as a scholar, author and consultant. He has worked with a wide range of academic institutions (including universities in Thailand, Myanmar, Australia and the UK) and international agencies (UNDP, WFP, UNHCR, WWF, and a number of multilateral and bilateral donors), primarily in relation to Myanmar, as well as Thailand, Laos and the Philippines.

Dr South has a PhD from the Australian National University and an MSc from SOAS (University of London). His doctorate focused on humanitarian doctrine, including in relation to forced migration in and from Myanmar. Dr South is currently a Senior Research Fellow at Chiang Mai University (Regional Centre for Sustainable Social Sciences and Development).

Dr South has published 11 peer–reviewed academic articles and five books (including two edited volumes), primarily about the political and humanitarian situation in Myanmar. In 2016 he gave a lecture on Myanmar politics at Yunnan University

Dr South is a Christian. For more than a decade, he has been practising Tai Chi Chuan, Qi-gong and Nei-gong. Although not a trained scholar of Chinese culture or religion, he has developed a profound interest in Daoism, as a philosophy and spiritual practise.

This paper contributes towards the conference theme:

Humanitarianism and traditional Chinese culture

- *(2) The origins of humanitarianism in traditional Chinese culture.*

With reference to Daoist literatures and studies, and practises, and comparison with some western traditions and theories.

- Also : *(6) Traditional Chinese culture and the construction of Red Cross culture with Chinese characteristics in contemporary China.*

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ABSTRACT

The ancient wisdom of Daoism can make significant contributions towards peace-building, conflict transformation, and the comparative study of humanitarian doctrines, including International Humanitarian Law.

Cultivation of the Dao is a core virtue of Chinese traditional culture. There are profound but underexplored connections between Daoism and peacebuilding, and humanitarian doctrine. The Yin-Yang symbol represents the dynamic unity of distinct yet interrelated forces. This is a recognition of difference, within a broader understanding of complementarity. Daoism recognizes the inevitability, and the need for management and transformation, of conflict and change. The classics of Daoist literature have much to say about warfare, both in principle and practice. Peace is a key concept and practice in Daoist philosophy - not a static harmony but rather a vibrant and living balance. This paper offers some tentative perspectives from which the Daoism-peacebuilding nexus might be explored, including an examination of Just War theory in the Daoist classics; a preliminary exploration of Daoist contributions to conflict prevention; an examination of Daoist alchemical practices and possible contributions towards conflict transformation; and some comments on Daoist contributions to Chinese peace-building doctrine. The article sketches a proposed agenda for research and practice. It will be of interest to students of China's extraordinary history of ideas, to scholars of Daoist philosophy and practice, to peacebuilding practitioners, theorists and historians, and policy-makers.

Keywords

Peacebuilding, Daoism, conflict transformation, Just War theory, International Humanitarian Law

[Sung Chien and Yin Wen] *accepted difference as given. They discoursed upon the nature of the heart and they sought a unity proceeding from the heart. By such concerns they sought to unite everyone in joyfulness and to harmonize all within the boundaries of the oceans. Their greatest desire was to see this achieved everywhere, by their efforts. They could face insults and not be disturbed; they struggled to save the people from warfare; they aimed to prevent aggression and to silence arms and thus to deliver future generations from violence. In pursuit of such ideals, they walked across the whole world, advising the high and teaching the low, and even though the world would not listen, they just continued even more strongly and would not give up. So it is said that high and low were tired of seeing them, but they never gave up putting themselves forward.*

The Book of Chuang Tzu (trans. Martin Palmer 2006)

Introduction

Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are regarded as the three intellectual, cultural and spiritual pillars of traditional Chinese culture (Cheng Yu 1999, p.1). There are profound but often underexplored connections and parallels between Daoism, peace-building and humanitarian doctrine.[1] This essay explores some of these resonances and outlines a provisional agenda for further research and practice.

The Yin-Yang symbol (the *Tai Chi* double-helix) represents the dynamic unity of distinct yet interrelated forces; the borders between yin and yang are fluid and, at certain points in cycles of energy, interchangeable.[2] This is a recognition of difference, within a broader understanding of complementarity. Yin-yang theory recognizes the inevitability of change and the need for skillful management and transformation of conflicts. Peace is a key concept in Daoist philosophy - not a static harmony but rather a vibrant and living balance. The classics of Daoist literature have much to say about warfare, both in principle and in practice.

The conduct of armed conflicts is the domain of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – or the 'law of war'. IHL is based on a number of treaties, in particular the Geneva Conventions (I-IV) of 1949, and Additional Protocols of 1977 (APs I and II) and 2005 (AP III) (ICRC 2023).[3] It distinguishes between international (including occupation) and domestic (Common Article 3) armed conflicts.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), custodian of the Geneva Conventions:

[1] An example of the 'plural integration' of (ancient) Chinese and (modern) Western political theory is provided by Alex Karmazin (2016).

[2] The ultimate reality of Dao is one (*wu-wei*), but there is little we can know or say about this; phenomenal reality begins with dualism (*tai chi*—the concept, not the martial art of Tai Chi Chuan) and proceeds toward multiplicity (the ten thousand things: *Dao De Ching*, chapters 1, 42).

[3] The ICRC (2023) identifies ten further international laws and conventions from 1925-2008, which supplement IHL. In addition, international customary law ("general practice accepted as law") is applicable to all states and, in non-international armed conflicts to non-state actors.

> "Warfare has always been subject to certain principles and customs. Therefore, it may be said that IHL has its roots in the rules of ancient civilizations and religions."

In addition to parallels with IHL (particularly Just War theory), there are striking similarities and interesting comparisons between the rich tradition of Daoist practices and philosophy (and political theory), and literatures and applications in the field of peace-building, as developed in the context of peace studies and international relations, and by aid agencies (non-governmental organizations, the UN etc).

Key Terms

Daoism (or "Taoism"[4]) is understood here as a spiritual philosophy and practice that also has a popular religious component (Watts & Huang 1975). I write as a Christian, with a strong interest in Daoism, and a modest practice of Tai Chi Chuan and Qi Gong-Ne Gong.

Daoism is one of the great cultural-philosophical and religious currents of China (and the Chinese diaspora). Unlike Christianity, Islam or Judaism ('religions of the book'), Daoism is not mono-theistic. There is no central set of orthodox revealed beliefs but rather a plethora of doctrines, documents and practices, stretching back into the prehistory of China for some five thousand years (Ibid. 1975). Unlike in many interpretations of monotheistic religions, there is no such thing as 'Daoist fundamentalism'. Indeed, it is arguable whether Daoism should even be regarded as a religion, at least in the Western sense. Belief in metaphysical concepts is not required; rather, this is an empirical path of practice and reflection (ibid. p.119).[5] Nevertheless, Daoist practitioners often avail themselves of mythic explanations and tropes, which predominate in the popular Daoist religion of temples and festivals. This exploratory essay focuses on Daoism as expressed in the classics, particularly The *Dao De Ching* and the writings of Chuang Tzu, and *The Art of War* (not an exclusively Daoist text).[6]

The earliest text of the *Dao De Ching* dates to around 500 BCE (Chuang Tzu 2006, p.xxvi; Watts & Huang 1975, p.xxii). Attributed to the great sage Lao Tzu, it was likely based on an ancient tradition of esoteric knowledge, passed on from teacher to students. This classic text of Daoism often employs seemingly obscure language and tropes to convey profound truths. But - already I have gone astray, as "The Dao that can be named is not eternal [or true] Dao" (Lao-Tsu 1989, verse 1). An exercise in defining and analyzing the Dao is preposterous. However, dialogues between Daoism, peacebuilding and IHL can be fruitful, or at least can do no harm.

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[4] Not being a linguist, I have adopted various transliterations (both the Pinyin and Wade-Giles systems), depending on the sources used.

[5] According to Watts, "the scientist and the mystic both make experiments in which what has been written is always subordinate to the observation of what is."

[6] It is a privilege to submit this paper in Binzhou, home of the author of the *Art of War* (Wudi County).

'Peace' is as an "essentially contested concept"[7], meaning different things to different actors – whether to a villager in a war zone, a refugee, a government - or rebel- soldier, to a businessperson looking to invest, to an NGO aid worker, or to an international diplomat.[8] Definitions of peace often include notions of tranquility and calm, requiring some degree of structural change in order to transform the drivers of violence and conflict. A more limited definition is of peace as the absence of violence: peace does not imply lack of conflict but, rather, the nonviolent management (and potential resolution) of differences.

For the purposes of this essay, 'peace-making' is taken as aiming to reduce and control levels of violence without necessarily addressing its root causes. 'Peace-building' goes beyond conflict management to address the underlying issues and inequalities that structure conflicts.[9] The focus of IHL is rather different, seeking to introduce restraint and the principles of humanity in situations where peace has broken down into armed conflict.

According to its custodian, the ICRC (2023), IHL is:

> "is a set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects people who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. IHL is also known as 'the law of war' … A distinction must be made between IHL, which regulates the conduct of parties engaged in an armed conflict (jus in bello), and public international law, as set out in the Charter of the United Nations, which regulates whether a state may lawfully resort to armed force against another state (jus ad bellum). The Charter prohibits such use of force with two exceptions: cases of self-defence against an armed attack, and when the use of armed force is authorized by the UN Security Council. IHL does not stipulate whether the commencement of an armed conflict was legitimate or not, but rather seeks to regulate the behaviour of parties once it has started."

In particular, the Geneva Conventions cover the protection and treatment of those who are not, or are no longer, directly participating in an international armed conflict. The wounded and sick in armed forces in the field and at sea or ship-wrecked (GC I & II); prisoners of war (GC III); and civilians (GC IV) are all "protected persons". The Geneva Conventions also include "Restrictions on the means of warfare – in particular weapons – and the methods of warfare, such as military tactics." Among the key operational elements are the distinction between

[7] "Essentially contested concepts" reveal different meanings, with different implications, for different actors; see Gallie (1962 pp.121–80). On different nations of peace from a multicultural perspective, see Dietrich et al (2011).
[8] On the historical development of different understandings and practices of peace, see Richmond (2007).
[9] In 2007, the UN secretary-general's Policy Committee defined peacebuilding as "a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and sustainable development" (*Peacebuilding and the United Nations*, UN Peacebuilding Support Office).

combatants and civilians, proportionality and use of force, and the principle of precaution.[10]

Article 1 common to the four Geneva Conventions states that implementation of IHL is primarily the responsibility of states. While "there are similarities between some of the rules of IHL and human rights law" (ICRC 2023), these two branches of international law are legally and conceptually separate: "human rights law – unlike IHL – applies during both armed conflict and peacetime, although some of its provisions can be derogated from during an armed conflict."

In addition to international law, the ICRC and other agencies have over the past several decades developed a set of principles for humanitarian action. Discussion of the 'humanitarian imperative', and Principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and independence are beyond the scope of this brief review.[11] Among these operational principles of the International Red Cross movement, neutrality is often contested - particularly in situations where there is clear justice or injustice on one side of a conflict. In such contexts, positions of 'humanitarian solidarity' – or even Humanitarian Resistance (Hugo Slim 2022) - may be more appropriate.

Peace-building, Theory and Practice

Peace-building activities generally involve a commitment to transformative action, on the understanding that conflict is caused not only by direct violence but also by underlying systems of structural violence. These terms were first developed in the 1970s by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who argued that peacebuilders must address the root causes of conflict by building capacities for conflict management/resolution and transformation among other strategies. Galtung (1996) developed an increasingly radical agenda, aimed at transforming unjust social and political structures, in order to build equitable peace.

Another key founder of peacebuilding as an academic enterprise, and field of practice, is another sociologist, John Paul Lederach. For Lederach, peace-building needs to engage both with political elites and with midranking and grassroots actors, including (but not limited to) NGOs and other civil society groups, and affected communities. This bottom-up, grassroots approach likewise recognizes the need for transformation, but is less politically radical than Galtung's. Lederach introduced the concept of 'conflict transformation', holding that conflict is a natural and normal part of life, and that such energies can be transformed in positive ways (in the personal, relational, structural and deep cultural dimensions).[12]

[10] See also ICRC (2018), which includes reflections on 'non-state armed groups'.
[11] See https://www.icrc.org/en/our-fundamental-principles. The Geneva Conventions are also relevant to humanitarian action. According to the ICRC (2023): "The rules of IHL strike a careful balance between humanitarian concerns and the military requirements of states and non-state parties to armed conflict." An ICRC video (*see link*) states that "The path to peace is far more likely when war has been fought within the limits of the law."
[12] In an echo of Tai Chi theory and practice, Lederach (2003) focuses on change as a circular, or spiral, process.

Over the past two decades, the field of peace-building has become diverse and somewhat professionalized – although not necessarily more successful.[13] This 'mainstreaming' of peace-building (or at least, of 'peace and conflict sensitivity') in terms of the liberal–capitalist agenda has attracted sometimes strident critics (Richmond 2007). International acknowledgment (or co-optation) of the peacebuilding agenda owes much to the advocacy of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, which defined post-conflict peacebuilding as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict." Among other findings from Myanmar and Mindanao is that peace-building (particularly at the intra- and inter-communal levels) is also possible *during* armed conflict (*in bello*), not just afterwards.[14]

Peacebuilding, IHL and Religion

There is broad scholarly agreement that religious ideas and practices can contribute positively toward peace-building (Dietrich et al 2011). There is also a good deal of historical and contemporary evidence indicating that religion can create, exacerbate and drive violent conflicts.

Scott Appleby (2000) argues that religious experience of the sacred can give rise to a range (or ambivalence) of responses, varying from extreme aggression to the profoundly non-violent. Religions can inspire, and religious leaders can engage in, both peace-building or warfare, and/or oscillate between the two. Appleby focuses on the spiritual, cultural-historical and other resources potentially and actually mobilised by religious peacebuilders engaged in conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation (the latter, usually requiring structural reform to achieve a 'positive peace').

A survey of the literature reveals little on the relationship between peace-making /-building (in its various manifestations and conceptualizations) and Daoism, beyond some discussion on the importance of understanding local contexts, and the valuable resource that religion in general can be toward resolving conflicts and building peace. For example, the excellent *Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies: A Cultural Perspective* explores the notion of "trans-rational peace," in which non-Western ideas and influences are deployed to extend and deepen the meaning and practice/experience of "peace", moving the concept toward a more spiritual dimension. Despite a passing reference to the Dao (ibid. p.13), the emphasis is on other religions and traditions.[15] Similarly, the Wikipedia discussion of religion and peacebuilding[16] includes sections on Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, and Buddhism[17], but nothing on Chinese religions or cultural traditions.

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[13] For an overview of peacebuilding theory and practice, see Jeong (2000).
[14] On the ICRC and peace, see *International Review of the Red Cross* special issue on *IHL & Peace* (ICRC 2024).
[15] On including Confucianism, see Yu (2011).
[16] "Religion and Peacebuilding," Wikipedia, at https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_and_peacebuilding
[17] Of the other major world religions, Buddhism has most in common with Daoism, both historically and in spiritual-philosophical terms. Buddhism spread from India to China in the first centuries CE

Although the peace studies literature occasionally references Daoism as a body of religion that can be mobilized to support peace-building, there are seemingly no case studies exploring these issues in depth. It is my assumption that some individuals, groups and networks *are* engaged in 'Daoist peacebuilding' - but this work appears not to be in the public domain. Daoism is an esoteric and sometimes obscure tradition. Nevertheless, it should be possible to develop a body of analysis and some guiding principles. As an initial contribution, this essay sketches some parameters of what the study of Daoism and peace-building might look like.

There are deep resonances between humanitarian concepts and practices developed primarily in western communities of theory and practice, and Chinese traditional culture and thought. Historically, the development of IHL is inextricably connected to Christian and Enlightenment thinking and values. However, since roughly the end of World War Two, the humanitarian world has taken a secular turn, in search of universal relevance. Such developments risk marginalizing currents of faith which have long nourished and guided the humanitarian enterprise.

Aid, Localization and Faith

While regional aid actors (e.g. China) have trended to reinforce state agency and capacity (Jacinta 2012), Western aid agencies often focus on eliciting local participation in development and relief activities, and supporting local capacities, or 'social capital'.[18] However, this language and intention of empowerment marks power dynamics, whereby agendas and values are largely determined by donors and aid agencies. This is apparent in conflict-affected parts of Myanmar, where western donors have sometimes required local actors to mask the faith-based nature of their work and cultural orientations, in order to fit secular norms and frameworks.

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and had a profound influence on the development of Chinese religious, spiritual, political and cultural practices (including the development of Chan, predecessor of Zen). In the present age, activist scholars such as Sulak Sivaraksa (1992) have developed philosophies of Buddhism and peace within a radical framework of spiritual and social transition. Adjarn Sulak distinguishes between "priestly" conservative aspects of religion and the visionary "prophetic" tradition, with its emphasis on universal love and altruism (57). In *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century* (2009), Sulak argues that the transformation of unjust social relations "requires personal and spiritual change first, or at least simultaneously. … Valuing the spiritual dimension gives voice to humanity's depth. All descriptions of religious experience come down to being less selfish" (p.89).

[18] In the tradition of De Tocqueville, Robert Putnam (2000) uses the term "social capital" to refer to "features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions." 'Social capital' here means functioning social groups, including interpersonal relationships, shared sense of identity and values/norms, trust and cooperation; social cohesion; resources and relationships. Strong social capital resources can lead to 'resilience' (another word beloved of NGOs) - the ability to cope with a crisis or to return to pre-crisis status quickly. For Putnam (p.171), trust is a key element of social capital, with community bonds relying on expectations of reciprocity, which can be conceived of as effectively functioning social groups, including interpersonal relationships, shared sense of identity and values, trust and cooperation; social cohesion; resources and relationships. Strong social capital resources generate resilience.

Faith-based identities are key to most communities' self-understandings (and, when not persuaded otherwise by western patrons, self-representations) - but are largely denied by the mainstream aid industry. This secularism is somewhat ironic, given western aid agencies' rhetoric of eliciting local participation and building social capital, in contexts where local resilience is deeply interconnected with religious identities and practices.

Local engagement often grows over time out of a communal identity - but international aid approaches (and donor demands) are usually based around shorter-timeframes, and tended to re-configure local initiatives in terms of apolitical technical projects, rather than organic (and ongoing) interventions. These constraints can seriously undermine western donors' ability to undertake protection work through their long-term and deep community relationships. International agencies and donors tend to 'projectize' organic local responses, by insisting that local initiatives conform to international (preconceived) frameworks of planning and implementation.

Faith- and identity-based networks can be pluralistic and open-ended in character, and contribute towards 'unity in diversity', and inclusion. In contrast with the trope of unity under a strong leader, which has characterised so much of Myanmar political culture and history[19], scholars such as Laphai Awng Li (previously at the Myanmar Institute of Theology) have drawn attention to Kachin indigenous kinship systems and conceptions of a networked society (and mutual self-help groups). Such configurations, including the famous Manao dance, are deeply inclusive, allowing for the incorporation of and respect for non-Kachin outsiders.[20]

Religion (membership of faith-based networks - which often overlap with ethno-linguistic communities) is a hugely important resource, deeply connected to individual and communal identities, which can be mobilised as key elements of social capital. Religion is perhaps best viewed as a 'field' - an essential element of identity and belonging for many (probably the great majority) of human communities – which can have positive or divisive/polarising and exclusivist aspects.

Complexity and Adaptation – emergence and the Dao

Complex Adaptive Systems are characterised by self-organisation and adaptive interactions, within which agents adapt and interact with other actors - leading to the emergence of structures, or 'states' of the system. In complex holistic systems (or symbiotic networks), adaptation demonstrates emergent properties, including self-organizing behaviour and hierarchies. Higher level sub-systems are dependent on, but reach beyond, component elements, which assemble in increasingly complex structures. These patterns of emergent hierarchical organisation are not arbitrary, but demonstrate recurring and variable themes or motifs (and related sub-systems).

[19] Matthew Walton, *Burmese Politics and the Pathology* of *National Unity* (2013).
[20] Lagai Zau Nan examines the concept of *Awmdawm* in Kachin political–theological discourse, as "a cry of an oppressed for justice and freedom": *'Awmdawm' (Freedom) as a Kachin Political-Theological Discourse*, in 'Political Theology' (2020).

Understanding complexity can contribute towards sustainable peace-building. For Cedric De Coning (2020),

> "complexity theory, applied to the social world, can offer insights about social behavior and relations that are highly relevant for peace and conflict studies … [Including] a theoretical framework helpful for understanding how complex social systems can prevent, manage, transform, or recover from violent conflict." Elsewhere (2018) he states that: "complex systems cope with challenges posed by changes in their environment through co-evolving together with their environment in a never-ending process of adaptation…. [a process] that the adaptive peacebuilding approach seeks to replicate and modulate. In the development field a similar approach, called adaptive management."

Rather than an overly defined and pre-planned 'blueprint approach' (critiqued by William Easterly 2007, and Ben Ramalingam 2013), dynamic conflict situations (such as in Myanmar) require Easterly's adaptive "searchers", who proceed by innovative trial and error. This approach identifies positive deviations - creative and innovative approaches to local relief, development and peace-building needs, which benefit from technical and financial assistance. This approach learns through supporting positive and innovative work, adopting successful adaptations (rather than the more traditional problem-solving approach to identifying and correcting weaknesses). Identifying and supporting positive deviance has the added advantage of attending to local and community adaptations, rather than sticking to top-down (blueprint) approaches.

An adaptive, systems-based approach to working with complexity identifies and fosters positive deviation. This empirically-informed, emergent approach to development and politics has much in common with the Daoist way (and Daoist ontology and cosmology: Chan Po-tuan 1986, Watts & Chung-liang Huang 1975). These similarities (and contrasts) merit further exploration.

Daoism, Peacebuilding and IHL

According to the classics, the sage cultivates 'virtue' (*te*): historically in Chinese culture, the quintessence of positive characteristics; a combination of refined personal traits and skillful abilities. The Daoist sage is characterized by an ability to identify phenomena, including potential conflicts, at an early stage of manifestation, making limited and strategic interventions in order to guide developments in a fruitful manner and direction rather than waiting until disaster has struck or fruit has already overripened. The cultivation of skillful perception regarding the deep causes, dynamics and unfolding of events may be likened to conflict sensitivity and analysis in the field of peace-building (including 'deep' work on the structural drivers of violence).[21] Only a careful and well-informed reading of contexts and conditions (at the local level in particular, but also

[21] Conflict sensitivity involves understanding the context and dynamics in which violence plays out and in which external interventions operate. See Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri (2016).

nationally and globally) can produce an analysis sufficiently attuned to the possibilities of emerging conflict. The Daoist approach fits well with peace-building theory and practice, understood as a multifaceted and flexible art rather than just a toolkit of techniques.

As a holistic philosophy, Daoism eschews monocausal explanations, working with complexity in a manner compatible with modern systems theory.[22] This includes identifying timely junctures for action and finding opportunities to reframe narratives.

Peace-building interventions must be carefully timed. There are times and places (perhaps the majority of possible occasions) in which action is unlikely to produce a successful outcome, and may expose would-be peace-builders or others to harm (including physical danger). Skillful interventions need to be timed and targeted, depending on the dynamics of conflict and peace. In some contexts, a realistic assessment may lead to the conclusion that no positive intervention is possible; rather, it is necessary to wait for the right circumstances and the best location. On occasion, it may be necessary to intervene with force, in order to prevent a conflict from escalating or abuses from taking place (see below).

Preventative diplomacy is based on principle that it is better to intervene early, in the early stages of a conflict, rather than wait until large-scale violence has attracted media and political attention, by which time violent conflicts are generally far more intractable, polarized and difficult to resolve.[23] The sage can be seen as an indigenous 'preventative diplomat' in the Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition.[24]

Daoism is sometimes called the "watercourse way."[25] Like water, the Dao flows through the courses of least resistance. Energy (*chi* or *qi*, in its various forms) can be dammed or pent-up, but this is unhealthy. Furthermore, Daoists understand that the application of direct force creates resistance, so a way around is found. Rather than encountering confrontation, energy can be led by the skillful sage (or politician), and directed toward more creative (or at least less violent) channels. Daoist techniques - including forms of meditation, Tai Chi Chuan and some other martial arts, *chi kung* (Daoist yoga), acupuncture, and *feng shui* and other energy-oriented practices - are tools for guiding or leading energy toward healthy dynamics (the unobstructed flow of *chi*). More advanced practices, including the

[22] Complex systems are characterized by self-organization, chaotic behavior, fat-tailed events (with relatively infrequent but often profound impacts), and adaptive interactions leading to "emergent" system characteristics (the whole being more than the sum of the parts); cf. Daoist concepts of nonlinearity. The principle of correspondence explains linkages between different levels in a complex system ("as above, so below"). It can be used to relate issues and developments at the micro-level to those at the macro, and vice versa. The project will explore pattern replication at different levels of a system in fractal science, and how such analysis can help to explain and act on patterns of conflict and potentials for peacebuilding.

[23] On the level of interpersonal relations (intersubjective psychology), disputes are better resolved after one or both parties' emotional force has been somewhat spent, rather than trying to engage head-on with a torrent of feeling during the height of arousal. In the words of my Tai Chi Chuan teacher Keith, "we empty behind the forcible opponent, letting that force spend itself; then very little effort is needed to lead the opponent" (or, if necessary, to send him or her tumbling).

[24] "To escalate conflict is easy, to de-escalate is rare": Mark Raudva, 9-12-2016 (personal communication).

[25] This phrase from Lao Tsu and is the title of Alan Watts's 1975 classic.

tradition and practice of alchemical meditation (*Neh-Dan*), and some internal martial arts (*soft* and internal forms of Tai Chi Chuan), go further, seeking to transform energies. In *Neh Dan* alchemy the practitioner refines basic (or base) impulses and energies into higher (purer) spiritual currents; the practitioner may ultimately transform pain and hatred into creative love. [26]

Daoist alchemy studies and practices the transformation of energies (e.g. from hatred to love, from pain to joy), and by extension the transformation of values, identities, and interests - changing hearts and minds.[27] The literature and practice focuses mostly on transformation at the personal (and interpersonal/ intersubjective, in the case of couples) levels; less well explored (or at least less explicit) in Daoist alchemy is the application to politics and social structures. However, this is a major concern of Daoist philosophical texts such as the *Dao De Ching*, which seeks to nurture society through wise leadership, the cultivation of virtue and the avoidance of distractions or desires.

Daoist approaches may have a parallel in Wolfgang Dietrich notions of "energetic peacebuilding," which go beyond - and, historically, precede - Western-dominated, moral-ethical and political approaches to peacebuilding; see Dietrich et al. (2011 pp.xxii, 598–99). The Daoist body of theory and practice (praxis), developed and elaborated over more than five thousand years in China (and, more recently, elsewhere) has long been applied to the management and transformation of violent conflicts (including symbolic and metaphorical references in ancient texts and ritual/religious practices). However, the 'Dao of peace-building' has not been widely articulated, or explicitly associated with theories and practices developed within the western-originated and -oriented field of peace-building.

Rather than suppressing conflict and imposing a particular view of 'peace', Daoist peace-building emphasizes the skillful, and often nonviolent, management of differences. Daoist approaches recognize and work with politics and contention, rather than seek to redefine contested sites and issues as technocratic problems.[28] As such, the sage identifies and works with underlying causes, rather than being distracted by surface phenomena. This would be in line with 'deep' approaches to peace-building (as per Galtung), seeking to address structures and cultures of violence, rather than surface-level attempts to stop fighting (simple peace-making).

The scope of this essay, and my limited expertise, preclude an examination of Daoist political philosophies. In passing, it should be observed that reflection on and adherence to the principle of *wu-wei* - understood as the primordial and undifferentiated ground of being - requires the state (the emperor) to indulge in minimal involvement in governance. The spiritual philosopher and popularizer of eastern religions Alan Watts, in his final book (*Tao: The Watercourse Way*), stated that the Daoist ruler should delegate authority and administrative duties to the

[26] Chan (1986); see also the multifarious works of Grandmaster Mantak Chia, for example *Healing Light of the Tao: Foundational Practices to Awaken Chi Energy* (2008).
[27] Thanks to Walter Kellenberger for this insight.
[28] James Ferguson, in *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (1990), argues that development assistance tends to depoliticize contentious issues by reframing them as amenable to technical solutions implemented by government in partnership with aid professionals, rather than as sites of political struggle, as is often the reality experienced by local communities.

lowest possible level of government- the principle of "subsidiarity" in (Western) federal constitutional theory (Watts & Huang 1975 p.78).[29]

Daoist philosophers are much exercised with the folly of ambition and political power. As Watts notes, "Lao-tzu [*Dao De Ching*, chapter 60] advises the ruler to govern a state as one cooks the small fish - that is, don't turn it so often in the pan that it disintegrates"; he sees the ideal state as village sized (Watts & Huang, 1975 p.79). This laissez-faire attitude to governance is quite (even neo-) liberal.

Such digressions point toward the comparative literature on Chinese and Western statecraft (Jacques, 2009). Returning to the subject of violence and its management, Watts writes that Daoism sees that:

> "the universe is a harmony or symbiosis of patterns which cannot exist each without the other. However, when it is looked at section by section we find conflict. (Watts & Huang 1975 pp.51–52).[30]

In part, Watts is claiming Daoist endorsement for the notion that some forms of violence may be inevitable, in order for ecological systems to be balanced. Failure to recognize this and act accordingly would block the natural development (or working out) of energies and potentially cause more harm than good (due to overflow of potentially violent energies). Watts invokes the Daoist principle of *hsiang sheng* ("mutual arising"): "[T]he Taoist view of nature was not sentimental … violence had sometimes to be used, but always with regret" (Ibid. p.82). Furthermore, evil and suffering can only be known because of their opposites (*Dao De Ching*, chapter 2).

The works and deeds of Confucius also have much to say and teach about peace-building. Qu Chunli's wonderful *Life of Confucius* provides many entertaining and instructive passages, including military strategies (pp.485-7) which might not be out of place in the *Art of War* (discussed see below), and an episode in which Confucius wisely settles a conflict between father and son during his service as chief justice of Lu State, c.500BC (1996 pp.208-12). On occasion the great sage misdirects his enemies through clever deception (p.269); shows flexibility in planning and strategy, rewarding his disciples' initiative (p.278); and several times demonstrates great care for the well-being of civilians (peasants, the people) and nature (e.g. p.406); he even persuaded warring vassal lords to call off a major military campaign (pp.407-410). Confucius also threaded the Nine Pearls! (p.388).[31]

The full scope (and potential) of Daoist and Confucian contributions to humanitarian principles, theory and practice are beyond range of this exploratory essay. The concluding remarks (see below), sketch an agenda for further research. The following section explores the relationship between Daoism and IHL in the context of Just War theory.

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[29] This principle holds that the central government should only perform tasks that cannot be undertaken at a more local, subsidiary level (UN Development Report, 1999).
[30] Citing the *Dao De Che*, verse 29.
[31] For a discussion of Confucian ethics of and in warfare, see also Yu (2011 pp.251–54).

Daoism and 'Just War'

What does Daoism have to say about the causes and conduct of armed conflict? The subject can be approached through an examination of "Just War theory", a doctrine of military ethics developed initially by Western medieval (and arguably earlier) theologians (Jeong 2000 pp.62–64). The doctrine seeks to ensure that wars are initiated and conducted in an ethically defensible manner. While the horror of war is acknowledged, Just War theory regards this as potentially the lesser of two evils under certain circumstances (i.e. in order to prevent even worse suffering such as massive human rights abuses) and thus becomes a rationale for interventionism. The doctrine consists of two criteria: *jus ad bellum* (righteous cause of war) and *jus in bello* (right conduct in war).

The criteria for just cause include: the primary reason for going to war must be 'just' (right intention, obviously debatable); that innocents are in imminent danger and can be helped by military intervention; that the injustice suffered by one party is significantly outweighed by the suffering of the other (comparative justice); that war is waged by a constituted (or competent) authority; the likelihood of a successful outcome outweighs the suffering caused; that force is used only after all peaceful and viable alternatives have been tried and exhausted, or assessed as unworkable (the principle of last resort); and that anticipated benefits are proportionate to the endeavor's expected evils or harms (the principle of proportionality). The criteria for just conduct in war include: that acts of war are directed toward enemy combatants and not at civilians (distinction); that combatants ensure any harm caused to civilians or their property is not excessive in relation to anticipated military advantages (the principle of proportionality[32]); that an action is intended to help in the defeat of the enemy (military necessity); that aggression is launched against a legitimate military objective; that the fair treatment of prisoners of war and civilians is ensured; and that combatants do not engage in such vile practices as rape, or use weapons of mass destruction.

There are precedents for most of these principles and practices in the Daoist Canon. The *Dao De Ching* (chapters 30–31) advises:

> "Counsel [the ruler] not to use force to conquer the universe
>
> For this would only cause resistance.
>
> Thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed.
>
> Lean years follow in the wake of a great war.
>
> […]
>
> Weapons are instruments of fear;
>
> They are not a wise man's tools.

[32] The Masters of Huainan on proportionality in war: "When the armies arrive at the suburbs, the commanders say to their troops: 'do not cut down trees, do not disturb graveyards, do not burn crops or destroy houses stores, do not take common people captive, and do not steal domestic animals.'": Cleary (1990, p.61).

> He uses them only when he has no choice …
>
> If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing; if you delight in killing you cannot fulfill yourself …
>
> That is why victory must be observed like a funeral.

The Art of War (attributed to Sun Tzu) is as a classic of Chinese traditional strategy and thought. Together with the *Dao De Ching* and the *I-Ching* (*Book of Changes*), it is probably the most frequently translated and widely quoted book of Chinese literature. *The Art of War* is also required reading for students at military Academies around the world.

In the introduction to his translation, Thomas Cleary (1991 p.xi). reflects that "in Sun Tzu's philosophy the efficiency of knowledge and strategy … [makes] conflict altogether unnecessary". For Sun Tzu, "The Superior militarist foils enemies' plots; next best is to ruin their alliances; next after that is to attack their Armed Forces; worse is to besiege their cities" (1991 p.xi). Cleary again: "*The Art of War* wars against war." Sun Tzu's Daoist general "infiltrates the enemy lines, uncovers the enemy's secrets, and changes the hearts of the enemy's troops" (xiv). Strategies of deception (e.g. chapter 2) are regarded as the utmost wisdom. (While secrecy may be antithetical to peace-practitioner ethics of transparency and openness, it is sometimes necessary to negotiations, including peace talks).

In introducing the alchemical *The Inner Teachings of Taoism* (Chan 1986 pp.vii–ix), Cleary provides a near characterization of Daoist Just War theory:

> "Taoism is not sentimental and has always recognized the reality of war. Rather than simply make moralistic pronouncements against war, Taoism approaches this problem realistically, using two basic strategies. The first of these is preventative, minimising the causes of war existing in the human psyche; the second is palliative, minimising the trauma of war when it actually does take place."

This is a striking pre–articulation of key elements of IHL. Reflecting on millennia of experience and principles, the Daoist masters of old recognized the importance of just cause and just conduct in recurrent armed conflicts.

As a classic of Chinese literature, *The Art of War* has attracted numerous commentaries, many of which have themselves achieved classic status. Among these, Sun Bin's *Art of War* states that "war must be pondered carefully. The man who takes pleasure in war will perish. … War is not a thing to be enjoyed" (Sun Bin 2003, chapter 2).[33]

The Art of War and its commentaries regard warfare as a great evil, often producing appalling suffering - particularly on the part of women and children, who have always constituted the majority of victims. Nevertheless, like much of

[33] Similarly, from chapter 31, "The Way and Its Power": "[T]he true gentleman … [uses weapons] only as a last resort, esteeming instead peace and tranquility. He sees no beauty in victory, to see beauty in victory is to rejoice in the killing of others."

the Daoist (and broader Chinese) canon, the approach is pragmatic: war may be terrible, and everything should be done to reduce suffering to a minimum. but sometimes armed conflict is the lesser of two evils. Refraining from war can allow injustice (up to and including mass atrocities) to prevail, potentially entailing far greater suffering than the limited ('collateral' - shudder) damage caused by a quick 'surgical strike' (another euphemism).

The *art* of war lies in achieving legitimate military-political objectives while causing minimal suffering. Sun Tzu's approach is in line with other forms of Daoist philosophy and practice, such as Tai Chi Chuan, a martial art of diverse schools and masters, which in some (mostly Yang) traditions uses softness and subtlety to deflect and defeat the force of an enemy.[34]

The Daoist approach to war pre-dates and includes much of Just War theory: combat must have a just cause, and be undertaken only as a last resort (*jus ad bellum*).[35] Daoist sages also advocated for right conduct within war, which should be undertaken in a way that minimizes suffering (*jus in bello*).

In the case of just cause, there remain important political questions regarding who determines this, and how. Most wars are unjust (both causally and in practice), and launched for less than honorable reasons. Nevertheless, a high threshold is required to argue that this would be the case for *all* conflicts. For example, World War II against Nazi Germany and fascist Japan is often held up as an example of a just war against evil tyranny.

Such issues are addressed in another of Cleary's wonderful translations. *The Book of Leadership and Strategy* - The *Huainanzi* - (Cleary ed. 1990) distills Daoist wisdom from two to three thousand years ago. In his introduction, Cleary argues that "warfare is one of the paradoxical symbols of ancient Taoism, being the epitome of conflict and violence but also representing a way of ending violence" (p.ix). Among the pithy statements recorded are that:

> "a degenerate society is characterised by expansion as imperialism… [K]illing innocent people … is not what armies are really for. A militia is supposed to put down violence, not cause violence." (pp.26–27)[36]

Furthermore, the "Sage's use of arms is like combing hair or thinning sprouts: a few are removed for the benefit of the many" (p.59).[37] Echoing *The Art of War*

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[34] "A force of four ounces deflects a thousand pounds"; see Wang (1985 p.37). Another important concept in Tai Chi Chuan is that if energy is resisted, it tends to push back. "The softest thing in the universe / Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe" (*Dao De Ching*, chapter 42; see also chapter 76). Thank you to Mark and our dear teacher John Kells for this insight.

[35] The Masters of Huainan on just cause: "Those who used arms in ancient times did not do so to expand their territory or obtain wealth. They did so for the survival and continuity of nations on the brink of destruction and extinction, to settle disorder in the world, and to get rid of what harmed the common people" (Cleary 1990 p.59; see also p.60).

[36] The Masters of Huainan also developed a theory of (or justification for) the state echoing that of Thomas Hobbes (Cleary 1990 p.4).

[37] An argument for liberal/humanitarian interventionism might be: "[W]hen they hear that a neighbouring nation oppresses its people, they [effective leaders] raise armies and go to the border, accusing that nation of injustice. … The coming of the armies is to oust the unjust and

(and Tai Chi Chuan practice), the Huainan masters argue that "the supreme attainment of a just military action is to finish its mission without fighting" (p.61) - an achievement that requires "unfashionable wisdom and an unfailing Way" (Tao) (p. 64). In their writings "On Peace," the Masters observe the importance of what modern-day humanitarians might call "resilience": "[I]f you are modest, frugal, and disciplined, that will produce wealth for you" (p.77).

Throughout this and other Daoist (and Buddhist) classics, wisdom – including protection from violence - is repeatedly stressed as coming from the elimination of desire and escape from attachments and anxieties (Ibid. pp.79–81). As noted above, the sage (or wise ruler) is characterized by sensitive attention to developing phenomena, so that problems can be headed off, or positive developments cultivated, before they reach the critical level: "refinement of attention means to consider problems before they arise, to prepare against calamities before they happen, to guard against faults" (p.106).[38] As noted above, these doctrines may be compared to notions of preventative diplomacy, or early warning of emerging conflict.[39]

Daoist and related classics clearly prefigure the notion of 'just war', both in terms of causes (*jus ad bellum*) and practices of combat (*jus in bello*). Leaving the final word to the Masters of Huainan: "So, the ambitious should not be lent convenient power; the foolish should not be given sharp instruments" (Cleary 1990 p.74).

Conflict Transformation

The conflict transformation approach can be explored through the two peace processes with which I am most familiar: Mindanao (southern Philippines) and the failed case of Myanmar.[40] In both countries, Ethnic Armed Organizations have long struggled for self-determination against states that are experienced by ethnic minority communities as culturally alien, and economically and politically dominant. Ethnic Armed Organizations in both contexts are characterized by complex combinations of 'greed' and 'grievance' factors but nevertheless enjoy significant (albeit contested) political legitimacy among the communities they seek to represent, on the basis of the grievances and political aspirations they articulate. In both contexts, Armed Organizations have faced significant challenges moving from insurgency to reinvent themselves as credible political actors and governance authorities. (The peace process between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front represents a rare example of a Muslim minority quite successfully pursuing its political objectives through structured dialogue.) In both contexts, peace processes underwent significant setbacks - following the January 2015

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restore the virtuous. … The conquering of the nation does not extend to its people; it removes the leadership and changes to government, honouring excellent knights" (p.61). However, a note of somewhat cynical realism is also apparent: "When large groups attack small groups, that is considered bellicose; but when large nations annex small nations, that is considered smart" (p.88).

[38] "Sages do things while they are still small and thus can overturn the great" (p.115); "The beginnings of fortune and calamity are subtle, so people are heedless of them. Only sages see the beginning and know the end" (p.117).

[39] As envisioned in UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali's 1992 *Agenda for Peace* (Jeong 2000 p.197); on early warning systems, see Jeong (2000 pp.202–3).

[40] For a comparative overview of these two conflicts and peace processes, see South and Joll (2016); on Myanmar in 2025, see South (2025 a & b).

Mamasapano clash on Mindanao, and the February 2021 coup in Myanmar (South 2025 a&b).

In the Philippines, there was a failure to translate a political settlement to decades of armed conflict into necessary enabling legislation. Lack of support for peace legislation among law-makers reflected the Filipino public's unfamiliarity with the Moro cause and an absence of understanding and sympathy for it. The history of Mindanao is not covered sufficiently in official history textbooks or the mainstream media, and Moro figures are mostly written out of historical narratives of the Filipino nationalist movement. Most Filipinos, particularly outside Mindanao, do not appreciate the historical injustice and struggle of the Moro people and the legitimacy and reasonableness of their political claims. The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region and a sustainable solution to the armed conflict will only be possible with a significant attitude change in the hearts and minds of the Filipino majority. (Another major prerequisite is good governance on the part of the Bangsamoro's ex-insurgent leaders.)

Similarly in Myanmar, as a consequence of decades of military rule, many people have little understanding of the history and situation of ethnic communities, particularly those in the conflict-affected regions. Most members of the *Bama* majority community have been denied opportunities to learn about the struggle and suffering of their ethnic brethren. Myanmar has already suffered intercommunal conflicts, with widespread discrimination and systematic state and military-led violence against the Muslim community, and airstrikes and other attacks on both civilians and combatants (in violation of the Geneva Conventions). In the context of a vicious war, there is potential for cynical and populist military politicians to mobilize prejudice against the 'other' in relation to the Muslim community, and also potentially in opposition to ethnic nationality demands for self-determination, including federalism. There is therefore a need to educate the majority community regarding the grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationality communities to preclude potential populist and divisive efforts to undermine a political settlement.

In both contexts, deep, equitable and lasting peace requires a transformation of individual and inter-communal relationships, including a reimagination of state-society relations and changes in basic attitude ('hearts and minds'). This type of peace-building will have to go beyond elite-level political negotiations, toward transformations of identity and interest and a rechanneling of psychosocial energies.

How would the sage add value in such contexts? Under propitious circumstances, he or she might advise the prince (whether a sovereign government, insurgent commander, community leader, or humanitarian diplomat). On other occasions, it may be appropriate to "let them fight it out" (Luttwak 1999). The sage might head up into the mountains and wander in the mists, leaving the world to its own devices. Ultimately, the sage follows his or her heart (*hsin*, or heart-mind), like Sung Chien and Yin Wen in *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (2006 p.300).

Daoism, Peace and Conflict: An Agenda for Research and Practice

There are numerous and striking pre–articulations of and precedents for peace-building doctrine and practice, and International Humanitarian Law, in the Daoist canon and millennia of diverse activities. I conclude this exploratory essay by offering thoughts towards developing a research agenda, to further explore peace-building theory and practice and humanitarian doctrine in relation to Daoist wisdom and ethics.

The approach sketched here is inter-faith and interdisciplinary, with relevance to scholars of area studies, religious studies and peace-building, to historians and political scientists, ecologists and climate campaigners, and humanitarian practitioners and theorists. The proposed project may be of particular interest to Chinese scholars, practitioners and policy makers.

The rise of China has seen renewed interest in the soft power embodied in five thousand years of cultural history and wisdom (Jacques 2009). The life and works of Confucius have long enriched and supported rather state-centric narratives and practices, including in the field of international engagement. The Daoist tradition has much to contribute towards and compliment a distinctly Chinese theory and practice of peace-building and humanitarian action. This is particularly relevant as China begins to engage more in the field of peace-building (e.g. in Myanmar).

A research agenda on Daoist theory and practice, peace-building and humanitarianism might include:

- Collecting concrete examples of Daoist peace-building (including activities and interventions that could be so characterized, without necessarily being framed explicitly in these terms). Such action research can be complemented by further textual studies, and historical, cultural and spiritual analysis. Promoting deeper understandings and connections between traditional Chinese thought and the humanitarian, conflict studies and peace-building worlds can include exploring parallels between Daoism (and Confucianism) and IHL. Further research might also map commonalities and contrasting understandings and practises of the principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality. Such a programme of study and reflection should engage with 'engaged' and other forms of Buddhism, as well as the Christian and other traditions.[41]
- Daoist literature and practices cultivate and express a deep connection to the natural world (Cleary 1990, Introduction; Miller 2020). The proposed research project conceptualizes the earth as a living being (or holistic system), often an object of violence. It will explore 'green Daoist' approaches to environmental sustainability, healing and justice.
- Environmentalism, climate action and social and political sciences come together in the study of complexity theory, and bottom–up community development. The proposed research project will further explore Daoist approaches to locally-led relief and development activities, and bottom up adaptive development.

[41] Including a survey on perceptions/understandings of IHL, among various communities and stakeholders in Myanmar and the southern Philippines, and in the Deep South of Thailand (including practitioners of Chinese religions, in northern Myanmar and on Mindanao, and in Pa(t)tani).

- Research on Daoist statecraft and peace-building includes Preventative Diplomacy, and somatic (energy-work) approaches to conflict transformation (Tai Chi Chuan theory and practice, the *I-Ching*). At heart, like all great faiths, Daoism is about the transformation of love. There is an urgent need to find ways of managing conflicts with compassion and justice during a time of violent readjustment and widespread geo-political upheavals.

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