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Time, and Again, and Forever: The Somatic Experience of Time in Daoist Philosophy and Religion

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Abstract

Rather than considering time from a comparative philosophical perspective, the essay discusses the lived experience of time in the *Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang*, a Daoist hagiography associated with the fourth century CE Daoist movement that came to be known as the Way of Highest Clarity. This interpretation reveals three modes of time as experienced by the Daoist practitioner: singular time; repeated time; and forever time. Unlike the Biblical concept of time, ordained by God and calculated by the rotation of the stars, the hagiography points towards a Daoist experience of time that is experienced somatically through the individual's metabolism.

Keywords

time – eternity – repetition – Daoism – Christianity – metabolism

1 Time, Creation and Creativity

The experience of time, inasmuch as it is the experience of both new things arising and old things passing away, is deeply related to ideas of creation and creativity. In the first biblical story of creation, commonly attributed to the priestly class, God creates the cosmos by a process of division, separating light from darkness and separating water from dry land. The Hebrew verb that is emphasized in this Priestly account of creation is *badal*, meaning to separate. It is used in the causative mood, giving the sense that God caused the various dimensions of the cosmos to be divided from each other. The use of this ritual

term emphasizes the notion that God's creative act is not chiefly that of procreation or "genesis" but rather separation, hierarchy, order, division, clarification and classification. That is to say, the main creative act of the first story of creation in the bible is not actually the creation of matter but rather the causation of division or separation.

This process of dividing day from night, land from water, humans from non-humans, and ultimately creation from creator is, in this account, a creative process that is decisively established by divine fiat. As a result, the calculation of times—the observation of the stars, the sun, and the moon—can be understood as in effect the deduction of the objective reality of time, an objectivity grounded in the divine process of creation *ex nihilo*. God separates out the form of things in the world, and, in doing so, creates time as objective reality that constitutes the world in which human beings experience life and death. Time and change are marks of creatureliness and finitude, of being other-than-God. As the theological program of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic world unfolded, it established the transcendence of time and change, the transcendence of the finitude of the created world as one of the supreme expressions of the religious quest. In the Book of Revelation (21:22) at the end of the Christian Bible, we note that in the New Jerusalem there is no temple and therefore no religion to mediate between the finite world of humankind and the infinite majesty of God. Instead, humans "will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 21:4). The mediating function of religion will no longer be necessary, and humans and God will be fully and intimately reconciled to each other immediately and therefore eternally. The Jewish-Christian-Islamic story is, from this perspective, a story about the ultimate collapsing of time and change into an eternal immediate in which God and his creation are reconciled to each other and are simultaneous in eternity.

There's no doubt that that in the Chinese philosophical world the experience of time and change is equally bound up with the idea of nature and creativity. But the process of creation is quite different from that in the first account in the Bible, and therefore the experience of time and change comes to be received differently, especially in the traditions of Daoist philosophy and religion.

If we turn to the *Daodejing*, we discover that the dominant motif of creation is not that of separation or hierarchy but that of reproduction or generation. The Dao is imaged as a mother who gives birth to the One, the One gives birth to the two, the two give birth to the three, and the three give birth to the ten thousand things. This recursive, recombinatory, fractal-like process depicts the emergence of the ten thousand things of the cosmos as the result of a fertile, agglutinative process in which the one pregnant with itself gives birth to an

even more pregnant two, and this process of gestation and birth continues irrepressibly until we have the flood of beings, processes, and events that constitute the known world. Creation is here imaged as a process of unstoppable fecundity rather than a process of clarification and separation.

From this key cosmological detail we arrive at a core motif that has dominated Daoist philosophy and religion throughout the ages. The basic condition of nature is that of transformation, or change. The Chinese term is *bianhua*. From this perspective, the basic condition of things is not to stay the same but to transform. And from this basic approach to nature, we can say that the experience of time, from the Chinese perspective, is precisely the experience of transformation of things. Without transformation there could be no time, and indeed we can say that the process of transformation of things in the world constitutes the experience of time.

The question that arises from this motif is where is this transformation produced? Why is it that things transform? The Daoist answer to this question is that ultimately the transformation of things is, ultimately, inherent within things themselves. The Chinese term for this is *ziran*, meaning spontaneity or self-generating power. That is to say, the process of time is not established by some external measure, as in the first account of creation in the book of Genesis. In that story, time was established objectively by divine command. Rather, from the Daoist perspective, time emerges in the spontaneous transformation of things.

This concept of spontaneous transformation (*ziran bianhua*) has been much commented upon within the realm of Daoist philosophical study. Here two points bear repeating. The first is that of Cheng Chung-ying, who writes: "One important aspect of *tzu-jan* (*ziran*) is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or conditioning by an external power" (Cheng 1986, 356). From this perspective, the key characteristic of spontaneity is that of autopoiesis, or self-generation.¹ That is to say, it is the internal vitality of a thing that constitutes its functioning

1 Autopoiesis is a term created by Maturana (1980, xvii) to refer to the way that biological systems function as self-referential, autonomous organizations. In this regard, the "life" of an organism is constituted by its ability to maintain its internal organization independently of its engagement with its environment. This idea was extended to social systems by the German theorist Niklas Luhmann (1995). As Luhmann writes, "What distinguishes autopoietic systems from machines and the closed systems of classical equilibrium thermodynamics is the recursivity of their operations: they 'not only produce and change their own structures' but 'everything that is used as a unit by the system is produced as a unit by the system itself'" (1995, xx).

as a thing independent of its environment or circumstances. A thing is truly alive, and truly a thing in itself, inasmuch as it possesses the capacity to spontaneously transform. When a thing succumbs to or depends upon its external circumstances or environment, it is no longer truly a thing in itself but rather an element of some other larger organism.

This leads to the second point, which is that the idea of spontaneity is the *opposite* of the idea commonly attributed to Daoism of “following nature,” where nature is understood as environment, rather than self. The point here is that to be “natural” or “spontaneous” in the Daoist sense requires that one does not depend upon or “follow” some reality external to the self (Lai 2007, 30). Though the Daoist term *ziran* came to be extended in modern Chinese to refer to the natural world (*ziranjie*) as a whole, its original sense in fact implies something of the opposite, the irreducibly particular vitality that constitutes a thing as a thing in itself, independent from its environment. If the nature of Dao is to “follow its own spontaneity,” it is hard to infer from this that Dao is in some sense synonymous with “nature” as an abstract metaphysical entity. The Way is thus to be experienced in the self-creating autonomous reality of one’s own vitality, and this means focusing on the body as a single organism that can maintain its own internal cohesion independent from its environing context. In other words, the Dao functions as an immanent and subjective vital power, rather than as a transcendent or metaphysical reality.

In contrast to the Biblical view of time as a function of divine creation, the Daoist view proposes that time be understood as subjective somatic experience. In the famous story of the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin, Lü falls asleep while cooking a pot of yellow millet. He then dreams that he ascends to power and becomes prime minister before falling from grace, being accused of crimes, and losing his wife, his children and his money. As he lies dying on the street, he wakes up just as the millet finishes cooking. The dream that had seemed to last eighteen years in fact had taken place in just a few minutes. This is a common leitmotiv in Daoist texts: time is not completely defined by the objective chronology of the rotation of the heavens, but it is also constituted internally through the subjective experience of the practitioner. In this sense, time emerges out of the interaction between the practitioner and his environment and is something that can be controlled and ideally slowed down.

2 Time and Hagiography

In order to understand the Daoist experience of time, therefore, it is helpful to move away from the rather abstract considerations of philosophical texts and

consider the way the experience of time is presented in the many hagiographies that Daoists preserved. Hagiographies are a vital element of Daoist literature because they preserve what practitioners thought was important about the Daoist experience and function as evidence that Daoist practice can be successful, especially when it comes to the idea that life can be extended and transformed and ultimately obtain immortality. The Way of Highest Clarity, a Daoist religious movement that originates in a set of texts revealed in the late fourth century CE, had developed a sophisticated hierarchy of immortality in which immortality was conferred, like a title, upon those whose practices were deemed meritorious or successful in some way. Of the many stories of Daoist immortals, I have focused here on the religious biography of Perfected Purple Yang, born Zhou Yishan in 80 BCE (trans. Miller 2008).

The hagiography relates how, as a young man, Zhou engages in works of private charity and shies away from dealings with traditional social circles. Instead, he recognizes a local artisan as someone with Daoist training, who goes on to be his first teacher. The artisan turns out to be named Su Lin, and in the Daoist hierarchy of immortality has been given the title Immortal of the Central Sacred Mountain (*Zhongyue xianren*). Su Lin then proceeds to narrate his own life story, in which he studied from a middle-rank immortal (*zhongxianren*) and got as far as learning the methods of becoming an earthly immortal (*dixianren* 地仙人). Su Lin's methods enabled him to acquire a long life, but not attain the high rank of becoming a flying immortal (*feixian*).

Zhou studies under Su Lin for five years, after which he is ready to embark on the second stage of his life, which involves touring around China's famous mountains meeting new teachers who will be able to take him further in his own Daoist practice. His quest begins at Mt. Song, the central of China's five sacred mountains, where he meets the Yellow Venerable Lord of the Center (*Zhongyang huanglao jun*), who questions him about the figures that he has encountered in his internal meditations and tells him that he will be able to achieve the high rank of Perfected Person once he is able to visualize Lord Wuying and the White Prime Lord (*Baiyuan jun*) in his internal meditations. Zhou sets off on an extended pilgrimage across twenty-four of China's famous mountains, in which he encounters a variety of teachers, methods and scriptures. Eventually, Zhou is successful in his encounters and enters into a final phase of practice where he meditates for ninety years before being presented with the most important scripture of the Way of Highest Clarity, known as the *Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* (*Dadong zhenjing*; DZ 6). He practices the instructions contained in the text for eleven years before finally ascending to heavens in a vision, whereupon he is granted the title Perfected Purple Yang. This marks his spiritual apotheosis, and the

biography concludes with a sermon preached by the newly ennobled Perfected Purple Yang.

In my 2008 book *The Way of Highest Clarity*, I analyzed this text (along with two others related to this Daoist movement) from the perspective of ideas of nature, vision, and revelation in medieval Chinese religion. What follows is an analysis from the perspective of the experience of time. I think this analysis can shed important light on Chinese understandings of longevity and immortality.

The framework that I have chosen for this analysis is captured in the title of my article: “Time, and Again, and Forever.” By these terms I hope to indicate three modalities of the religious experience of time that can be detected in this hagiography. The first of these refers to singular events or unique moments that have some one-off decisive effect upon the religious narrative. The second refers to repeated events or ritualized moments that through constant rehearsal accumulate to form a second kind of religious experience, one constituted by the experience of repetition. The third refers to the experience of immortality or transcendence, which constitutes the ultimate goal of the Daoist religious quest. Altogether these three modes of the experience of time combine to shape the narrative of the protagonist and give something of a clue to understanding Daoist approaches to time, transformation, and eternity.

3 Singular Time

The first of these three experiences we can understand as singular time, or one-off time, a constellation of events experienced as unique and transformative because of their singularity.

In the story of Zhou Ziyang, this kind of experience can be found in the initial encounter that set Zhou along the way to becoming a perfected being.

The Revelation of Su Lin

There was, moreover, a certain Huang Tai who lived in Chenliu. He had no wife or child, lived alone and was utterly without relatives. No one even knew where he came from. He usually wore raw hide pants and a worn-out hide coat. He was always selling straw sandals in Chenliu market.

Lord Zhou often walked incognito. When he was passing through the market, he noticed that Tai's clothes were raggedy and all in tatters. Whenever Lord Zhou had heard about the methods of immortality, he had been told that immortals' pupils were square; and although Huang Tai's external appearance was threadbare, his eyes were square and his face was bright. [Lord Zhou] secretly marveled at him and in his heart he was elated.

When he returned home, he sent someone to buy straw sandals [from Huang Tai] and through him placed [gifts of] gold, silver cash or silk among [Huang Tai's] things. He did things like this many times, not just the once. As a result, Huang Tai came to visit Lord Zhou. Lord Zhou bowed down in welcome and led him into his meditation chamber. In fact he was the Immortal of the Central Sacred Mountain. [Huang] Tai said:

I have heard that you love the Way, practice virtue in secret and think about subtle and wondrous [phenomena]. This genuinely moves me, which is why I am paying you a visit. I am Su Lin, with the courtesy title Child Mystery, the Immortal of the Central Sacred Mountain. I am originally from Wei, born in the last year of Duke Ling [544 BCE]. From a young age I loved the way and its power and I received instruction from Master Qin. He handed on to me Daoist arts of refining the body and eliminating disasters. (Trans. Miller 2008, 114)

The story of the strange encounter with a Daoist immortal is a common feature of many Daoist hagiographies. Here the singularity of the event is emphasized in the way that Huang Tai (Su Lin) is described in ways that set him apart from ordinary people: his unusual eyes, his disguised appearance, his extraordinary age (some 600 years at the time of the story) all mark him as being fundamentally strange or abnormal. This emphasis on abnormality is a common feature of esoteric Daoist stories. They are keen to emphasize that entry into the Daoist path is not something that is common, not something for everyone, and that few will have this opportunity. In contrast to the teachings of mass religions that emphasize the common features of human experience such as suffering, sin, or delusion, the esoteric Daoist studies emphasizes the rarity and uniqueness of the Daoist's encounter with the immortal being Su Lin. From this perspective, esoteric Daoism is grounded in the peculiarity or strangeness of its teachings. The revelation of Daoist teachings is not something that is made available to the masses but rather takes place in the uniqueness and singularity of the encounter between the master and the adept, the teacher and the disciple. While the normal experience of human beings is bound up with the routine activities and habits of life, the esoteric Daoist experience is forged in irregularity and strangeness. It is deliberately eccentric, mysterious, and abnormal.

In this sense we can see the operation of time grounded in the spontaneous transformation of states and events in multiple dimensions of experience as producing both regular patterns—days, months and years—and also peculiar combinations of circumstances forged unpredictably from the nexus of circumstances that are continuously arising and transforming. In this sense we can point towards an experience of time as individual and unpredictable

moments constituted in the flux of myriad interlocking circumstances. Such moments are singular, unrepeatable and uncontrollable.

One common way for conceptualizing such occurrences is to describe them as “by chance” (*ouran* in modern standard Chinese). When Buddhist notions of karma thoroughly inflected Chinese cosmology, the notion of chance became replaced by karmic predestination. That is to say such happy encounters were not simply random or for no reason but the outworking of karmic consequences in perhaps a long chain of causes and effects that perhaps remain mysterious to the individuals in question. The modern Chinese term for this is *yuanfen*, a kind of karmic allotment that people commonly invoke in unexpected encounters that prove to be surprisingly beneficial.

No such term is invoked in the Daoist hagiography in question. The doctrine of karma had not yet been absorbed into the Daoist worldview. In a cosmos that is constituted by myriad self-generating, self-transforming processes, the encounter in this Daoist hagiography is simply the product of the disposition of things. It is, if you will, an arrangement of circumstances and events that emerged so as to produce a single moment, a single, unrepeatable, moment in which knowledge could be transmitted and revelation could take place. As a result, our hero sets out on his spiritual quest to become a perfected being.

4 Repeated Time

The next kind of time or occasion that features in our story is that of repetition. Of course this is perhaps one of the most familiar features of ritual experience and meditative practice. In this case, the transformative effect is encountered not in the uniqueness and absurdity of the chance encounter but in the deliberate revisiting and rehearsal of experience. In this case the passing of time is something that is to be recaptured, re-embodied and reinforced through the habits of religious practice.

In our story, this kind of time can be seen in the main section of the text which describes the progress of our hero through 24 mountains of China. In each place he encounters a Daoist immortal, receives further teachings and makes progress along the way.

This section of the text is quite formulaic. Here is an example

Next he climbed Mt. Heming. He met Lord Yang'an and received the Scripture of the Elixir made from Liquid Gold and the Diagram of the Divine Nine Tripod Elixir.

Next he climbed Mt. Meng. He met Master Azure Essence and received the Commentaries written on Yellow Silk.

Next he climbed Mt. Luhun. He took the hidden entrance to the Yi stream grotto-chamber and met Li Zi'er. He received the *Eight Arts for being Concealed in the Earth*.

Next he climbed Mt. Rong. He met Zhao Boxuan and received the *Pure Sayings of the Three and Nine*. (Trans. Miller 2008, 140)

In this section of the text, the repeated formula serves to emphasize the accumulation of knowledge and power through these encounters. In each case, a new layer of knowledge is being given to our hero, building him up for the climactic events that will herald his transformation into a perfected being. Here, although each encounter is unique in that it occurs in a unique place with a unique teacher and involves a unique text, the formulaic telling of the story downplays the individual significance of each encounter. Instead the text emphasizes their repeated, ritualized nature. Once more he climbs and mountain, and once more and once more. The effect of such a telling is to reinforce upon the reader the continuous, relentless nature of the hero's quest to obtain Daoist teachings. It is not that the circumstances of the cosmos conspire to produce a rare and unique encounter that sets him on the path towards Daoist wisdom. Rather, it is the constant application of a learned formula, the desire to recapture the encounter that comes to the fore. This section of the text speaks to that mode of religious life that is encapsulated by ritual, by the repeated application of a formula, the power of which comes not from each moment's individuality, but from the deep etching of repeated moments into the individual's consciousness.

A further example of this kind of repetition can be found in Highest Clarity visualization texts in which the adept is counselled to engage in a specific practice at certain days and times. These religious practices thus depend not on the particular constellation of events that conspire to produce marvellous or strange encounters, but rather on the regular patterns of time and change that can be detected in the cyclical rhythms of the cosmos. A particular example of this can be found in the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*, a Highest Clarity visualization text (see also Miller 2008 for a complete translation). The text details nine methods of visualizing gods entering the various organs of the body, producing various colored energies with the effect of transfiguring the body of the adept into that of an immortal being. One example can be seen in the *Method of the Fourth Perfected*:

In the sixth month on the *jiachen* day and on your fate day and on the *wuyin* day, at the noon hours, the Five Spirits, the Imperial Lord and Supreme Unity combine into one great spirit which enters the liver. His title is the Lord of Azure Radiance, his courtesy title, the Lad of the Wheel

of Light. When this day comes, at noon you should enter your oratory, clasp your hands together on your knees, keep your breath enclosed, shut your eyes. Visualize inside yourself the Great Lord of Azure Radiance entering to sit in your liver. Make azure *qi* spit forth from his mouth to coil around your liver in nine layers. When this is done, clack your teeth nine times, swallow saliva nine times, then recite this prayer:

Great Lord of Azure Radiance,
 Come into my liver.
 Your body is wrapped in azure garb;
 Your head is covered with a jade-green cap.
 On your left you wear the [talismán of the] tiger emblem;
 On your right you carry the [talismán of the] dragon writ.
 Your courtesy title is “the Lad,”
 “Treasure of Perfection, Wheel of Light.”
 May azure *qi* gush forth from the mouth,
 To nourish my liver and guide my spirit.
 As my azure organ spontaneously regenerates,
 On high may I become a celestial immortal.
 O Supreme Unity protect my essence!
 Embrace my earth souls and gather up my heaven souls!
 O Lord, I respectfully beseech you: Grant that I may attain perfection.

When this is done, at midnight, when *qi* is being generated, repeat one more time. (Trans. Miller 2008, 140-41).

In this case the important thing to note is that the visualization ritual must be performed at specific times in the calendar, with reference to specific gods, specific organs of the body, specific colors, etc. The technique, in effect, depends for its effectiveness on knowing when all the various interlocking cycles of the cosmos and the body come together so as to unleash a moment of transformation. Such moments are not unique, chance encounters. Rather they are the product of regular, observable cycles of time that come together at certain times and places to facilitate transformation. The view of the cosmos here is something like a combination lock with many independent wheels that need to be aligned in order to become unlocked.

In both cases, that of the biography of Zhou Ziyang, and that of the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*, the transformative effect of each encounter is built up out of the repeated cycles of experience. Time transforms through

its being repeated and correlated with the multiple cyclical processes of the cosmos.

5 Forever Time

The final point I wish to make derives from the culmination of these various Daoist practices in which the adept is finally transformed into a perfected being.

In the case of the esoteric biography of Perfected Purple Yang, the moment of apotheosis is marked by a sermon in which the newly ennobled perfected being declares his mastery of the whole cosmos. He proclaims

The [part of] heaven [where there is] nothing is called space. The [part of] a mountain [where there is] nothing is called a grotto. The [part of] a human [body where there is] nothing is called a [grotto] chamber. The empty spaces in the mountains and organs of the body are called grotto courts. The empty spaces in human heads are called grotto chambers. This is how the perfected take up residence in the heavens, the mountains and human beings. When they enter the place of nothingness, a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai, and embrace the sixfold harmony [of the cosmos], yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain it. (Trans. Miller 2008, 152)

In this case the Daoist proclaims that the organs of his body, the caves of the mountains and the outer space of the heavens are all constituted by the same nothingness. By means of this nothingness the perfected being is able to simultaneously inhabit all realms of the cosmos, the earth and the body. From this “place of nothingness” a grain of rice could enfold a mountain, but heaven and earth would not be able to contain it. This cosmology defined by space rather than matter is typical of Daoist philosophy in which the origin of all things is understood as nonbeing or nonaction. Precisely because the nothing of the body is the same as the nothing of the earth and the nothing of the heavens, all three dimensions of the cosmos can be contained in each other.

This experience is described in the more temporal terms of death and resurrection in the closing section of the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*.

If you constantly practice the Way of the Nine Perfected the hundred spirits will bow down to you and the myriad ghosts will be at your service.

Even if you pass through the Great Yin [death], your body and bones will not decay and your five organs will spontaneously be regenerated. Count twenty-four years and then you will be reborn: you will be intelligent; you will be enlightened and awake. You will clearly remember the day of old when you entered the Great Yin. It will seem as though you slept but a single night. Joyously, you will already be outside your coffin. Brightly, you will already be sitting on the peaks of hills and mountains. This is [brought about by] the abstruse marvels of the Nine Perfected and the ultimate spirit of the Imperial Lord. (Trans. Miller 2008, 192)

In this case the experience of transcendence is not described in terms of embracing all the realms of the cosmos within one's body but rather as a transfigured experience of time. "Count twenty four years and you will be reborn . . . it will seem as though you slept but a single night." The perfected person's experience of time is not that of the ordinary human being. Like the Zhou Ziyang's ability to embrace the cosmos within his body, here the perfected experiences vast ages of time as a single night.

This then gives a clue as to the Daoist understanding of immortality. For those who manage to survive five or six hundred years, it is as though the passage of time has little effect upon their bodies. They appear younger than their years, and they count centuries as we might count years.

6 Somatic Time

Ultimately the Daoist experience of time, I believe, is about metabolism: the rate at which our bodies process our experience and encounters with the world around. Those with fast metabolisms die quickly. Those with slow metabolisms experience time at a different rate. For them forever is not such a long time as it is for us.

The Daoist experience of time in the end points us away from metaphysical understandings about the circular time, linear time, and the spontaneous emergence of change and transformation in the myriad processes of the cosmos. All this is important, but what truly counts is the way this is physiologically experienced, the way it transforms human bodies, and the effect that it has on the subjective experience of aging. The ultimate effects of time are thus to be measured not by the stars, the moon, and the sun, but by the lines etched upon the face, upon the heart, the liver, the spleen, and all the organs of our body. Time is not so much metaphysical but somatic.

The leitmotiv of Daoist practice can be summed up in this popular refrain: My fate lies within me and not within the heavens (see Schipper 2001). To put it another way: Time, and in particular the time of my death, is not ordained by the stars. It is a function of my somatic, embodied subjectivity. To understand time as something that humans produce within their bodies rather than something that happens to them externally is one of the major spiritual goals of the Daoist tradition. It demands a reorientation of perceptions, and a deeper engagement with the experience of the inner life of the body.

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