

Taoism and Subjective Wellbeing

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Abstract

Based on a review of Taoist teaching, this study investigated the relationship between Taoism and subjective wellbeing (SWB) within the theoretical framework of a revised homeostatic model of SWB. This model integrates the affective (homeostatically protected mood: content, happy and excited), cognitive (self-esteem, optimism and perceived control: primary control and secondary control) and experiential factors in relating to SWB. As Taoism teaches that authentic selfhood should be constituted in relation to Tao (Nature), it is followed that a flourishing Taoist life necessitates a self which has no bearing on the ego. Hence, two hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis was that compared with those without religious belief, the Taoists would have higher SWB, optimism, perceived control but lower self-esteem. The second hypothesis was that among the cognitive factors, optimism and perceived control would predict more significant SWB variance than self-esteem beyond the other homeostatic model factors. The results revealed that, except for optimism, no significant intergroup difference was found on cognitive factors and SWB. Besides, for the Taoists, it was found that primary control and optimism were able to predict more significant SWB variance than self-esteem, and that self-esteem and secondary control failed to make any independent contribution to SWB. Taken together, the hypotheses were partially supported. The results were discussed in terms of inappropriateness and non-specificity of the scales used in measuring secondary control and the necessity to explore the nature of esteem for the Taoists.

Keywords: Taoism; subjective wellbeing; a revised homeostatic model of subjective wellbeing; self-esteem; optimism; perceived control; primary control; secondary control

1. INTRODUCTION

Taoism is a religion indigenous to China. In the field of psychology of religion, few studies have been conducted on Taoism, particularly its relationship with subjective wellbeing (SWB). In this light, the Taoists claim that their religion brings happiness and promotes well-being (Hong Kong Taoist College, 2026; Lai, 2024a). Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between Taoism and SWB within the theoretical framework of a revised homeostatic model of SWB, which integrates the affective (content, happy and excited), cognitive (self-esteem, optimism and perceived control: primary control and secondary control) and experiential factors in relating to SWB (Lai & Cummins, 2013). To this end, the adherents of Taoism and people without religious belief were recruited as samples in Hong Kong. This allows for an intergroup comparison of their SWB and homeostatic model factors (self-esteem, optimism and perceived control) as well as the examination of how much SWB variance for the Taoists was explained by the homeostatic model factors. Besides, to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Taoism and SWB, a review of the basic teachings and doctrines of Taoism is presented in the following section. However, it is noteworthy, the discussion concerned makes no distinction between philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism.

The main tenet of Taoism is the belief in Tao. It is difficult to translate the exact meaning of Tao into English, but in the most general terms, it can be translated as the path or the way (e.g., Deng, 1996; Hartz, 1993; Lai, 2022, 2024a; Lopez, 1996; Loy, 1997; Ni, 1995; Robinet, 1997).

1.1 Tao and Cosmology

In the Taoist vision of cosmogenesis, Tao is the origin of the universe and source of all things (Ni, 1995; Robinet, 1997; Shin, 2001). However, it does not mean that Tao is a god or a supreme being. Instead, it is conceived as the void where cosmic energy is produced and out of which all reality emerges (Loy, 1997). Moreover, Tao is depicted as the metaphysical ultimate characterized as having no sound, no smell, no shape or vestige (Shin, 2001). The Taoists think that before anything existed, there was Tao; and when nothing exists any longer, Tao will still be (Lopez, 1996). The founder of Taoism, Laozi, has described Tao as "...there was something undefined, formless and inaudible. Coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. Silent and boundless, standing also without change. Keeping on revolving ceaselessly. It is worthy to be the Mother of World. I do not know its name; but I called it TAO" (Tao Te Ching, 2003, p.36).

Taoism teaches that Tao is associated with Nature, in that Tao models itself according to the Law of Nature and that Nature demonstrates Tao (Tao Te Ching, 2003). Hence, although Tao is unknowable in its essence, it is observable in its manifestation i.e., it lies behind the functioning and changes of the natural world (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997) such as the cycles of weather and seasons (Hartz, 1993). In this regard, Tao can be roughly stated to be the flow of the universe, or the force behind the natural order (Hartz, 1993). Also, Tao is believed to be the source of influence which keeps the universe balanced and ordered (Tao Te Ching, 2003).

In explaining the creation of all things, Laozi stated that "...the TAO produces One, One produces Two, Two produces Three, Three produces all creatures and things" (Tao Te Ching, 2003, p.64). One is understood as *qi*, a primal energy which cultivates all things (Loy, 1997), as well as the essential energy for the existence and action of everything (Tao Te Ching, 2003). From this One comes the balance of Two opposing but inseparable forces in the universe, yin and yang (Loy, 1997). Yang literally means 'the sunny side' of a hill (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). It represents the male principle manifesting in hardness and strength (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). Yin refers to the female principle expressing in softness and passivity (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). Yin means 'the shady side' of the hill, though it is yang's opposite, it cannot be separated from yang. Just as there can be no shadow without sun, there can be no yin without yang (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997).

The Taoists believe that these two forces complement each other (Loy, 1997). Virtually, it is the constant interaction of yin and yang governing the order or behaviour of all things (Robinet, 1997; Tao Te Ching, 2003). For example, the rhythmic cycles of nature: night and day, winter and summer, rain and sun, death and birth, are indeed the operation of these two opposing forces (Hartz, 1993). Hence, when yin and yang are equally present, the universe is balanced and ordered; when one is outweighed by the other, there is confusion and disarray (Ni, 1995; Tao Te Ching, 2003).

Yin and yang are also expressed in the Three forces of the universe: heaven, earth and humanity (Hartz, 1993). From these three forces come everything else (Hartz, 1993). Thus, Tao is the ultimate force that flows through every living and sentient object, as well as through the entire universe (Ni, 1995). In this respect, the Taoists' ultimate goal is to harmonize themselves with Tao to lead a happy life (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997).

1.2 Tao and Human

Taoism inspires a love of Nature (Loy, 1997). In terms of a way of life, Tao refers to the way of correspondence between man and the tendency or the course of the natural world (Hao, 2005). As such, it is reasoned that human life can only flourish when it is in accord with the nature of Tao (Tao Te Ching, 2003).

1.2.1 De

When applying Tao to human life, it is associated with the proper attitude, morality and lifestyle, namely 'De', which is basic to an ideal society (Tao Te Ching, 2003; Yip, 2006). De literally can be

expressed as virtue (Tao Te Ching, 2003). While Tao is considered as a 'way', De is the active living or cultivation of that 'way' (Tao Te Ching, 2003). As the Taoists' goal is to become one with Tao (Hartz, 1993; Loy 1997; Yip, 2006), the virtuous persons should act in accord with the Nature (Loy, 1997; Yip, 2006). In this light, people who have the highest virtue are like children, as they are full of unspoiled vigor and vitality, appear simple, and act without ulterior motive (Tao Te Ching, 2003).

In addition, Laozi stated that there are three basic virtues in Taoism named as the three treasures, viz., compassion, frugality and humility (Tao Te Ching, 2003). Compassion parallels familial and brotherly love. It is compared to loving others as people love themselves (Yip, 2006). Frugality literally means economy and restraint (Yip, 2006). People who prefer extravagance and extremity, but abandon frugality, are likely to experience inefficiency as they have no resources to help others (Tao Te Ching, 2003). Humility refers to the refusal to assert active authority (Yip, 2006). It bears the meaning of 'not dare to be the first in the world' (Yip, 2006). It is connected to a fear of death out of a love for life, as the Taoists think that people who want to be the first are more likely to expose themselves to the attack of the others (Yip, 2006).

1.2.2 Wu Wei

According to Laozi, human nature is born good, and nothing is needed to keep it that way except to be left alone (Hartz, 1993). Moreover, the nature of Tao is non-active, but all things will grow and transform naturally (Tao Te Ching, 2003). To this effect, Taoism advises that a life of non-purposive action helps reunite with Nature and then attains harmony in life (Ma, 2001). That is, as Tao operates impartially in the universe, so should mankind disavow assertive and purposive action (Yip, 2006). It does not, however, mean a life of total inactivity (Yip, 2006). Stated positively, it is a life expressing the essence of spontaneity (Hartz, 1993; Xu, 2006).

It is known that instrumentally rational action is characterized as thoughts preceding and orienting action. However, spontaneous action is not led by any pre-identified purposes nor bound by pre-existing rules or judgmental thoughts (Xu, 2006). As such, wu wei, a central concept in Taoism, is exceptionally relevant to spontaneity. Wu wei can be interpreted literally as ".... the kind of unpremeditated, non-deliberate, non-calculating, non-purposive action" (Ma, 2001, p.436).

In alignment with Tao, wu wei refers to action through inaction (Hartz, 1993; Yip, 2006). It is depicted that, in an active state of wu wei, people are perfecting the Tao nature and thereby free themselves from the confinements of body and mind (Loy, 1997). In this connection, people's actions and emotions pour forth freely without the intervention of their own will and subjectivity; thus, behaving in whatever natural way the circumstances oblige (Loy, 1997). Hence, in Taoism, happiness results from effortless involvement by simply laying one's trouble aside and letting Nature take its course (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). It is just like the practice of going against the stream not by struggling against it and thrashing about, but by floating and letting the stream do all the work (Lopez, 1996). In terms of leadership, wu wei advises a ruler to rule without ruling, just like as a laissez-faire government adopting the non-interference policy (Hartz, 1993).

1.3 Tao as a State of Mind

Taoism locates life's ultimate principle in Nature. Following from this, the Taoists embrace the philosophy that humans should keep their mind simple, pure, primitive and still, in a way analogous with Nature (Hao, 2005; Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997; Ma, 2001).

To follow Tao, people should purify their mind by tempering the will and detaching the emotions in association with the material world, as worldly desires drain people's energies and obstruct their minds in understanding (Loy, 1997). Thus, it is necessary for people to put aside concerns with externals, such as monetary rewards, fame and praise to restore their inner quietude and calmness (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). To this end, people ought to lead a simple life by curbing their wanton and selfish desires (Deng, 1996; Hartz, 1993; Lopez, 1996; Loy, 1997; Ni, 1995).

In fact, the Taoists think that, as Tao is the origin of all things, all abundance is provided by Tao (Ma, 2001; Deng, 1996). If people appreciate this, they will see that they are surrounded by happiness (Deng, 1996). To attain this kind of happiness, it is imperative for people to know what is enough (Deng, 1996; Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997; Tao Te Ching, 2003). Pragmatically, according to the Taoist teaching, life can be subsisted with minimal support from outside such as a bit of food and shelter. In fact, such a simple life is readily available from Nature (Deng, 1996). As such, the rich are not truly rich and happy if they feel they never have enough in life, but people are truly rich and happy if they feel they do have enough in life (Deng, 1996; Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997).

To bring inner peace, Taoism admonishes the followers to be as yielding and passive as water, in facing the mundane world (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997; Park, 2005a). Just like water, “....it is soft and weak, but can move earth and carve stone; it benefits all things and does not compete with them; it flows in places that others disdain” (Hartz, 1993, p. 63). In fact, to maintain yielding, passive and soft is an art of living attuned to Nature; thus, leading to happiness (Yip, 2006). Hence, Taoism counsels against being ambitious or competitive, since it is against Nature and disrupts harmony with Tao, which, consequently, brings failure (Yip, 2006). As Laozi admonished “...fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill; keep sharpening your life and it will blunt; chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench; care about people’s approval and you will be their prisoner....” (Hartz, 1993, p. 66). It is argued that, as a way of coming into greater harmony with Tao, people should step back from the stress of life to bring peace to their mind (Ma, 2001; Park, 2005b).

In addition, the concept of yin and yang, which demonstrates the relative unimportance of all things in the world, helps people to restore the purity and stillness of mind. Taoism posits that the forces of yin and yang symbolize the unity of Tao; yet they are in dynamic equilibrium and not permanently fixed (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). Following from this, the Taoists see the things as relative to one another. For example, a cloudy day is yin (dark) when compared to a sunny one; but it is yang (bright) when compared to night (Hartz, 1993). In facing the mundane world, the Taoists attempt to be like Nature itself; as in Nature, everything is constantly changing from yang to yin and back again (Loy, 1997). Hence, in life, there is no absolute good or bad, right or wrong, as everything is relative and may change in time (Hartz, 1993).

Indeed, no one can tell how things may turn out. That is, if one waits long enough, what appears to be good fortune may turn out to be a disaster, and what seems to be bad luck may become good luck (Yip, 2006). Success and failure, wealth and poverty, fame and obscurity all have equal drawbacks (Yip, 2006). Hence, it is beneficial for people to return to the original purity and simplicity of Tao, as well as to embrace Tao in their daily life (Yip, 2006). This can help them restore and maintain a mind of peace and stillness, which, in turn, not only affords them an unaffected pleasure beyond the material world, but also balances the disaffections brought about through material desires (Loy, 1997).

1.4 Tao as Purpose of Life

Taoism teaches that as the human is part of the universe, the physical body is viewed as a microcosm, i.e., a miniature model of the universe (Hartz, 1993; Robinet, 1997). This inspires people to adopt a lofty and affirmative view towards human life; and hence, to have a wish to live intently and happily as long as their life lasts (Hartz, 1993). In this regard, the first life purpose for the Taoists is the pursuit of good health and longevity (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). To lead a long and healthy life, the Taoists practice a variety of life-enhancing activities such as exercise, meditation, and healthful diet (Hartz, 1993). Moreover, to live a life concurring with the Taoist principles, self-discipline and self-control are warranted, such as reducing excessive material desires which are harmful to life (Hartz, 1993; Yip, 2006). It is thought that the longer people live, the greater their chance of achieving perfection in both their mind and body in accord with Tao. Once achieved, the perfect people will become immortal (Deng, 1996; Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). In this connection, the second life purpose of the Taoists is to pursue immortality and become “xian” (Loy, 1997).

“Xian” is a kind of supernatural existence (Loy, 1997). Taoism views human beings as part of Nature, in this analogy, for those people who can bring their lives into complete harmony with the natural laws and cycles of the universe, they are able to continue to exist so long as the universe exists (Hartz, 1993). As such, “xian” is an immortal who has achieved perfection in mind and body through devotion to Taoist practices and teachings (Loy, 1997), for instance, by means of alchemy and cumulative merit (practical moral behaviour that works for the benefit of others) (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). Such attainment of “xian” can be in both human and heavenly dimensions (Hartz, 1993). The Taoists pursue immortality in the present life with the hope that by the time of death, they will have been physically transformed (Hartz, 1993). That is, ideally, their immortal bodies will already be present within the shell of the mortal bodies that are visible to others (Hartz, 1993). Another form of immortality is that, after death, people’s spirit will depart from the physical bodies and then rise to the heaven (Hartz, 1993; Leung et al., 2007)

1.5 Tao and Supernatural Being

As Tao is the origin of the universe and source of all things, spiritual beings, similar with human beings, are the expression of Tao (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). In Taoism, the spiritual beings include both gods and demons. The Taoists believe that there are over three thousand gods, with each god supposed to be controlling on certain kinds of things in the universe (Leung et al., 2007). For instance, the Earth Deity serves as the guardian of fertility and the natural world; the Water God controls rain and water; the Deity of Destiny serves as a guardian of life and destiny; and the deities of the four regions, namely, the Northern Deity, the South Deity, the East Deity and West Deity, with each responsible for overseeing one of the regions (Hartz, 1993; Lai, 2022, 2024a). In addition, the Chinese ancestors and heroes who had great accomplishments in life may be, after death, elevated to the status of God and revered by people (Lai, 2022, 2024a; Leung et al., 2007).

The demons are believed to be spiritual beings causing life adversities to humans, such as severe drought and flooding, crops failing and famine, illness and pandemic (Hartz, 1993; Lai, 2022, 2024a). According to Taoist beliefs, demons are often the humans who died violently or meaninglessly and hence their souls could not found peace after death; or sometimes the “orphaned souls” who have no families to remember them. By causing troubles and sickness, they may seek attention and remembrance from humans (Hartz, 1993; Lai, 2022, 2024a).

1.6 Subjective Well-Being Homeostasis

SWB can be defined as the affective and cognitive evaluation people make about how happy and satisfied they are with their lives (Campbell, et al., 1976; Diener, 2000; Lai, 2021). Within psychology, cumulative studies support the view of SWB as relatively stable and moderately positive (e.g., Cummins, 2010; Cummins et al., 2009; Lai & Cummins, 2013; Lai et al., 2013). To explain the stable positivity of SWB as described, a revised homeostatic model of SWB is shown as follows:

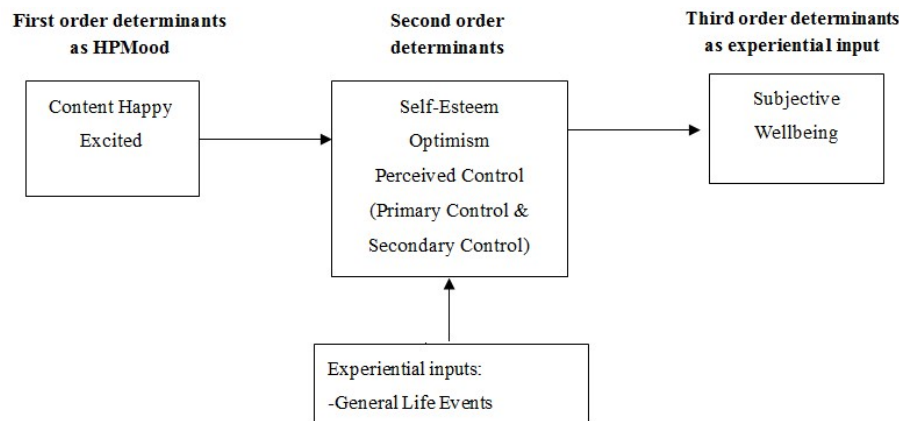


Figure 1. A Revised Homeostatic Model of Subjective Wellbeing (Lai & Cummins, 2013; Lai, 2015,

2021; Lai & Lee, 2025)

The affective factor of homeostatically protected mood (HPMood) is a construct evolved from Russell's conception of core affect (Russell, 2003). Similar to core affect, HPMood exists without reference to objects or events (Cummins, 2010). It is proposed as a genetically determined, constant positive affective background pervading many thought processes, but most especially those evaluative of personal and general characteristics. The archetypical form of such evaluative is 'How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?' It is found that the response to this item was heavily saturated with HPMood (Davern et al., 2007). Based on the above conceptualization and use of structural equation modelling, Davern et al. (2007) found HPMood to comprise three affects as: content, happy and excited. These scholars also proposed that HPMood is the basis of SWB set point and the positive mood defended by homeostasis. The domination of SWB by HPMood has also been confirmed by Blore et al. (2011) and Tomyn & Cummins (2011).

In the model, the three cognitive buffers of self-esteem, optimism and perceived control are not only strongly perfused with HPMood but also have a cognitive component responsible for adjusting each buffer to defend HPMood (Cummins, & Wooden, 2014; Lai & Cummins, 2013). That is, they interact intimately with momentary experience and assist in the process of defending HPMood against life experiences (Cummins & Nistico, 2002; Lai & Cummins, 2013).

With reference to the above Figure, the way Taoism affects SWB will be discussed in terms of perceived control, optimism and self-esteem.

1.6.1 Perceived Control. Perceived control refers to an individual's perceived ability to change a situation and overcome challenges to achieve a desired outcome (Weisz et al., 1984). According to Rothbaum et al. (1982), perceived control can be divided into primary and secondary control. While primary control involves actively changing the environment to fit the needs and desires of the self, secondary control involves changing one's own thoughts and feelings to fit with the world. Based on the review of Taoist teachings and doctrines, it is inferred that, for the devout Taoists, they will have high level of perceived control using primary control and secondary vicarious control (the attempt to associate or closely align oneself with powerful others like deities to share in their power)(Rothbaum et al., 1982), with a view to enhancing the quality of life. As such, the control techniques to be employed by the Taoists are analyzed as follows:

1.6.1.1 Morality, Attitude and Mind

Taoism teaches what kind of morality, attitude and mind people should have to live in prosperity (as discussed in section 1.2 Tao and Human and section 1.3 Tao as a State of Mind). In this relation, such a proper way of living can be achieved by means of primary control. That is, the Taoists can follow the Taoist teachings, such as practising the moral behaviours of de; managing affairs in accord with wu wei; and exercising self-discipline and self-control to curb the desires and purify the mind. Through such means, they are able to exert control over their quality of life.

1.6.1.2 Health, Longevity and Immortality

Good health, longevity and immortality are the life purposes that most people desire and strive for (as discussed in section 1.4 Tao as Purpose of Life). To this end, Taoism has provided various pragmatic means, practices and activities for people to follow to improve their mind and body. As such, it seems that the Taoists are able to achieve these life purposes by means of primary control. Some of these Taoist practices and activities are briefly depicted as follows:

Meditation

The practice of meditation helps control and preserve energy (Loy, 1997). As humans are part of Nature, they are born to possess primal energy which, in turn, gives rise to three basic elements of the human body – vitality, energy (qi) and spirit. It is supposed that people should preserve each of these

elements to maintain good health (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). Vitality is associated with creativity and basic body functions, including procreation (Hartz, 1993). Energy (qi) is the essence of life and is associated with movement and strength (Hartz, 1993). Spirit relates to consciousness, intellect and spirituality (Hartz, 1993). These three elements must be kept in harmony and balance to maintain good health, longevity and immortality (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). Among them, energy (qi) is especially important because of its influence on the other two.

In meditative practice, people initially empty their minds of all thoughts, desires and emotions, followed by guiding their inner energy smoothly throughout the entire body, which serves the function of cleansing and replenishing (Hartz, 1993). In addition, the Taoists believe that meditation helps cultivate wisdom (Loy, 1997). When meditating, people need to purify their mind; thus, enabling them to reach a state of mind characterized by stillness and calm (Loy, 1997). In turn, the will of Nature can be freely observed by the practitioners without any distraction, which may facilitate the realization of the nature of Tao within their own self-nature (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997). Hence, the practice of meditation allows the Taoists to be entirely linked up with Tao (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997), as well as to develop the perfect mind and body for achieving longevity and immortality.

Taiji

Like meditation, Taiji is an activity which allows people to control their energy (Hartz, 1993). Taiji exercise is a system of movement modeled on animals. If practiced in the long term, people may freely control the flow of energy within their body. In effect, it helps dispel physical tension, maintain inner peace, strengthen health, and, ultimately, to be in touch with Tao (Hartz, 1993).

Alchemy

Alchemy is an offshoot of the Taoist medical arts, including both external and internal alchemy, with the practice of each leading to the path of immortality (Robinet, 1997). For external alchemy, the alchemists aim to develop a formula for producing a golden potion, so-called 'elixir of life', the ingestion of which can help transform human qualities to be transcendent (Hartz, 1993; Robinet, 1997). To this end, the external alchemists experiment with various kinds of magical spells and all sorts of stuff like animals, vegetables and materials, in an attempt to work out a formula for producing this golden potion. Complementarily, it is essential to achieve total physical and spiritual harmony through cleansing all diseases and impurities inside the body, by means of meditation, diet, exercise, using herbs, and other special practices etc. Following this, the final step to achieve immortality is to swallow the alchemical golden potion (Hartz, 1993).

Internal alchemy is a process of physical and spiritual development for reaching immortality (Hartz, 1993; Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). This kind of physical and spiritual training is practiced in the form of meditation to energize and vitalize the three basic elements inside the body – vitality, energy and spirit, as well as to convert the normal aging process (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997). To this effect, when reaching the highest level of training, the practitioners can achieve physical detachment of spirit from body completely under the control of their mind; thus, reaching the state of immortality (Loy, 1997; Robinet, 1997).

In short, the above practices and activities developed in compliance with Tao, are believed by the Taoists, to be able to increase their control over quality of life, in a sense of enhancing their health, extending their life and to the point of immortality. These practices and activities are perceived as a kind of primary control, since by following them, the Taoists can shape the realities in synchrony with their life purposes.

1.6.1.3 Coping with Life Adversities

As regards secondary control, the devotional activities laid down in Taoism permit adherents to interact with the supernatural forces (deities) in the universe, thereby allowing them to vicariously associate with the deities and psychologically experience an enhanced control of the environment. Tao

can be manifested as the continuous interaction of different beings from heaven (deities), earth (demons) and humanity (Lai, 2022, 2024a; Leung et al., 2007). Hence, in coping with life adversities, rituals can be performed by humans to petition the deities for aid (Lai, 2022, 2024a; Leung et al., 2007). During the rituals, the deities such as the Heavenly Generals are invoked by the Taoist priests to exorcise the demons and protect the community from harm like drought, flooding, famine, and pandemic (Lai, 2022, 2024a; Leung et al., 2007). Moreover, the Taoists may hold the ancestor rites, or give reverence and offer to a specific deity, to ask for blessing on health and prosperity (Lai, 2022, 2024a; Leung et al., 2007). For example, the worshippers of a deity, namely Master Wong Tai Sin, believe that Master Wong has the power to heal and provide protection. Hence, the worshippers make offerings of incense, fruits and other items to petition for Master Wong's assistance. Some worshippers also practice divination, as a way of seeking guidance from Master Wong on matters such as health, relationships and business (Wong Tai Sin Temple, 2026). In view of the above, in facing life adversities such as traumas, illnesses and misfortunes which are out of control, the Taoists are not helpless or powerless. Rather, they can rely on and appeal to supernatural powers for assistance. In terms of the perceived control model by Rothbaum et al. (1982), this is a kind of secondary vicarious control, the practice of which may allow the Taoists to experience an enhanced control over the environment by associating with the supernatural powers (Lai, 2022, 2024a).

1.6.2 Optimism. It refers to the generalized expectation of positive experiences and outcomes throughout one's life (Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1992). In Taoism, an array of resources which serve the function of improving human living, including the practices for enhancing the quality of mind and body, the wisdom of Nature in coping effectively with the world, and the ways of establishing harmonious relationships with the supernatural forces, are readily available (refer to section 1.6.1). Hence, it is likely that the Taoists perceive the future to their advantage and for their pleasure.

1.6.3 Self-Esteem. It refers to the degree to which an individual experiences oneself as worthy and capable based on the evaluation of personal attributes (Rosenberg, 1979). In this light, Coopersmith (1981) described a good, positive self-image as occurring when people evaluate themselves with approval, regarding themselves as capable, significant, successful, and worthy. For instance, people obtain a feeling of worth based on their appearance, status, skills, financial resources, and accomplishments (Lai & Wong-Ip, 2023). However, the Taoist self, manifested in the morality, attitude and mind of the Taoists (section 1.6.1.1), is highly different from the self-oriented mentality of self-esteem. Some examples are cited. In Taoism, people should lead a virtuous life by practicing *de*, i.e., they need to be compassionate towards other people and love others as they love themselves; they should practice frugality so that they have resources to help others; and they ought to be humble and remain behind other people (Yip, 2006). All these virtues require an individual to take others as the first consideration for oneself. Moreover, the Taoists should disavow their self-centered judgment and adopt *wu wei* by acting spontaneously to what the circumstances oblige (Yip, 2006). Furthermore, the maintenance of a Taoist mind necessitates curbing the world and material desires and cultivating emptiness inwardly (Hartz, 1993). In following these arts of living, people can realize their true self and lead a harmony life. Hence, it seems that a flourishing Taoist life necessitates a Taoist self which has no bearing on the ego and is not dependent on self-esteem.

In sum, the SWB of Taoists seems to be intimately and positively related to perceived control and optimism but having no close relationship with self-esteem. Hence, it is hypothesized that, compared with those without religious belief, the Taoists will score higher in SWB, primary control, secondary control and optimism but lower in self-esteem. Additionally, it is hypothesized that for the Taoists, primary control, secondary control and optimism will predict more significant SWB variance than self-esteem beyond the other homeostatic model factors.

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

The participants, including both Taoists and those without religious belief, were recruited in Hong Kong. With direct recruitment, there were 145 Taoists who were the members of the Hong Kong Taoist Association and a Taoist monastery (Fung Ying Seen Koon), as well as the students attended the Taoist courses held by these two organizations. Also, using convenience sampling, 238 participants without religious belief were recruited. These 383 Chinese samples participated in a survey by completing a questionnaire. Regarding their demographic characteristics, both groups were slightly dominated by females. In terms of age, while the Taoists were dominated by the age group of 46-55 (34.48%) and 56-64 (20.69%), those without religious belief were dominated by the age group of 18-35 (27.31%) and 36-55 (49.58%). With respect to income distribution (high: \$20,001 & above; middle: \$15,000-20,000; low: \$14,999 or less) (Census and Statistics Department, 2016), the Taoists from high (41%) and low (39%) income group are comparable; however, for those without religious belief, while most are from high-income group (45%), the proportions for middle- and low-income group are quite equally distributed.

2.2. Measures

An 11-point end-defined scale was used for all items, for its advantages of response simplicity and scale sensitivity over 5 or 7-point Likert scales (Cummins, 2003). In the questionnaire, all the following scales are administered in both English and Chinese version, with the Chinese version adopted from Lai and Cummins (2013):

2.2.1 SWB. It was measured by the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) (International Wellbeing Group, 2013). The scale consists of eight items measuring satisfaction with domains as: standard of living, health, achievement, relationships, safety, community-connectedness, future security and spirituality-religion (optional item). The mean of the domain scores derived from PWI constitutes a measure of SWB. In the construction of PWI, Cummins (1995) combined the population means from 16 life satisfaction studies conducted in Western nations. Data were standardized to a statistic called the percentage of scale maximum (%SM) which converts scale scores into a range from 0 to 100. Using the mean values from each survey as data yielded a mean of 75 points and a standard deviation (SD) of 2.5. Hence, the normative SWB range is 70-80%SM. However, the inclusion of survey means from non-Western nations revealed that the mean of SWB was 70 (SD=5), thereby causing the normative range to expand downward, to 60-80%SM (Cummins, 1998). This downward expansion may be due to poverty and disadvantages in economically underdeveloped countries and/or the influence of cultural response bias especially in the Confucian-based cultural societies (Lai et al., 2013). In this study, the reliability coefficient for the current study was .88.

2.2.2 HPMood. It was measured by asking participants to indicate how each of the three affects (content, happy and excited) described their feelings when they thought about their life in general. The coefficient alpha of .85 was obtained in this study.

2.2.3 Experiential Input. General life events were measured by asking participants whether anything had happened recently that caused them to feel happier or sadder than normal. Participants were asked to respond to three categories of response: 'yes, happier'=3, 'no'=2 and 'yes, sadder'=1.

2.2.4 Perceived Control. A six-item scale was used as a measure of primary and secondary control. These six items were extracted from the perceived control scale of Chambers et al. (2003) which contains nine items scale, including a three-item measure of relinquished control. The coefficient alpha of .83 was obtained in this study.

2.2.5 Optimism. The Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) (Carver & Scheier, 2003) was used. LOT-R consists of six questions framed either in an optimistic or pessimistic fashion. This survey only used three optimistically framed questions. In this study, the reliability coefficients reported for this three-item scale was .79.

2.2.6 Self-Esteem. The ten-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979) was used. The coefficient alpha reported in this study was .78.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1: Compared with those without religious belief, the Taoists will score higher on SWB, primary control, secondary control and optimism but lower on self-esteem.

This hypothesis was tested by performing t-tests with results provided as follows:

Table 1. Comparison of Taoists and those without religious belief on variables

Groups	SWB		Primary Control		Secondary Control		Optimism		Self-Esteem	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Taoists	67.84	12.72	73.53	14.79	73.81	15.03	70.77	15.41	63.14	11.94
Without Religious Belief	65.61	12.51	74.29	13.21	71.45	16.38	66.91	16.81	61.93	12.41
t-test each column	t(327)=-1.49, p=.136		t(367)=0.50, p=.615		t(370)=-1.37, p=.171		t(359)=-2.16, p=.032		t(355)=-0.90, p=.369	

Note. SWB for the Taoists was the average of 8 life domains while that for those without religious belief was the average of 7 domains excluding spirituality-religion.

Except for optimism, no significant intergroup difference was found.

3.2 Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2: For the Taoists, primary control, secondary control and optimism will predict more significant SWB variance than self-esteem beyond the other homeostatic model factors.

Hierarchical multiple regression was performed with life events and HPMood entered in Model 1, and primary control, secondary control, optimism and self-esteem in Model 2. All assumptions are satisfied prior to the conduct of analysis. That is, the sample size was adequate for the number of independent variables, the values for variance inflation and tolerance were below 10 and above 0.10, indicating no problem with multicollinearity (Pallant, 2020). Besides, the results of the residuals scatterplot and normal probability plot reflected that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity of residuals were not violated. For comparison, the same analysis was done with those without religious belief. A summary of results is provided below:

Table 2. A Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Taoists and Those without Religious Belief

	Taoists				Without Religious Belief			
	β	$sr^2(\%)$	R^2	ΔR^2	β	$sr^2(\%)$	R^2	ΔR^2
<u>Model 1</u>								
-Life Events	0.01	-	0.48***		0.03	-	0.39***	
-HPMood	0.69***	0.47(47)			0.63***	0.39(39)		
<u>Model 2</u>								
-Life Events	0.12	-	0.66***	0.19***	0.10	-	0.52***	0.13***
-HPMood	0.48***	0.15(15)			0.33***	0.05(5)		
-Primary Control	0.37**	0.09(9)			0.18**	0.02(2)		
-Secondary Control	-0.11	-			0.04	-		
-Optimism	0.20*	0.02(2)			0.12	-		
-Self-Esteem	0.10	-			0.26***	0.05 (5)		
(SWB : DV)								

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

sr^2 : the proportion of unique variance accounted for.

Note. SWB for the Taoists was the average of 8 life domains while that for those without religious belief was the average of 7 domains excluding spirituality-religion.

In Model 2, except for secondary control having no independent contribution, primary control (9%) and optimism (2%) did predict more significant SWB variance for the Taoists than self-esteem. Compared with those without religious belief, Taoists' primary control and optimism explained more unique SWB variance, respectively, by 7% and 2%. Besides, self-esteem predicted 5% unique SWB variance for those without religious belief but none for the Taoists. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is partially supported.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings reflected that, except for optimism, there was no significant intergroup difference between Taoists and those without religious belief on SWB, primary control, secondary control and self-esteem. Despite this, Taoists' primary control and optimism were able to explain more significant SWB variance than self-esteem beyond the other homeostatic model factors. Hence, these findings, to a certain extent, are supportive of a positive linkage between Taoism and SWB, specifically for the effect of Taoist teaching and practice on primary control, optimism and self-esteem.

Regarding primary control, it has been argued in section 1.6.1.1 and 1.6.1.2 that the Taoists are provided with practical ways of enhancing wellbeing. In fact, these teachings seem to be all-encompassing to cover a code of behaviour for leading a Taoist life, the principles for developing a Taoist mind, and the means of serving the Taoist life purposes. Through practice, the Taoists may be able to shape their life compatible with goals and desires, as well as to exert some sort of control over their quality of life. Following from this, in terms of optimism, the Taoists are able to perceive the future to their advantage and for their pleasure.

Regarding secondary control, it is surprised to have the findings that there was no significant intergroup difference between Taoists and those without religious belief, and that Taoists' secondary control failed to contribute any SWB variance, given the widespread belief that vicarious association with the powerful others (deities) enable the religious adherents to experience an enhanced sense of strength and power (Rothbaum et al., 1982; Weisz, et al. 1984). This may perhaps be explained by the inappropriateness and non-specificity of the generic 3-item perceived control scale of Chambers et al. (2003) (when something bad happens to me, I remind myself something good may come of it; I remind myself I am better off than others; and I remind myself situation will improve if I am patient) to probe the vicarious techniques adopted by Taoists. Such an explanation is resonated with the view of Pargament (1997), in that a specific proximal measure of religion within a religious tradition will be

more robust than a generic distal measure. In fact, this notion has been empirically supported by the study of Lai (2021), as it is found that a generic measure of secondary control failed to probe the secondary control strategies of vicarious and interpretive control adopted by Christians. However, a Christian secondary control scale (comprising vicarious and interpretive control) which is tailored made for Christians is able to do so (Lai & Lee, 2025). As such, a more specifically designed control scale should be developed to measure the secondary control exercised by Taoists.

Concerning self-esteem, although the Taoists did not score significantly lower than those without religious belief, this variable failed to make any independent contribution in explaining Taoists' SWB. Such finding seems to lend credence to the proposition that a Taoist self has no bearing on the ego and that the SWB of Taoists is not dependent on self-esteem. In this context, given that self-esteem has been widely and empirically attested as a strong predictor of SWB (e.g., Duy & Yıldız, 2019; Kong et al., 2013; Lai & Cummins, 2013), the above finding in relation to the effect of Taoist teaching on self-esteem is fascinating. Nevertheless, to have a better understanding of the esteem of Taoists, it seems necessary to conduct an in-depth study of the nature of their esteem, such as whether there is an alternative source of felt worthiness, apart from self-esteem, in relating to their wellbeing. This is supported by the notion that religion is an important facet of human experience, as it offers teachings related to the purpose/meaning of life/life events, and thus, the religious adherents usually have a particular value system incorporating religious values, which is different from those without religious belief (Hadaway, 1978; Moberg, 1979). In this line, it is generally agreed that people's self-evaluation is affected by their own value system; hence, it is expected that the form of self-evaluation for religious adherents would be influenced by their acquired religious values, such that their personal self-esteem, to some extent, reflects self-esteem derived from religion (Lai 2021; Lai & Wong-Ip, 2023, Lai, 2024b). Just like the new construct of religious self-esteem proposed by Lai and Wong-Ip (2023) to account for a supplementary source of esteem for Christians, in addition to self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). In this analogy, the Taoists may similarly derive their sense of worthiness from evaluating themselves against the values, virtues, morality, and behavioral code of Taoist belief, and thus, it seems warranted to explore these sources of esteem for Taoists to see whether it is necessary to create a new construct and correspondingly a new scale for measurement purpose.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, the use of a homeostatic model rendered a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the SWB of Taoists, particularly in relation to the role and importance of the three cognitive factors (perceived control, optimism and self-esteem). However, given the limitation of this study is the use of convenience sampling and the relatively small sample size, a larger sample by means of systematic sampling method is required. Besides, to allow for a better understanding of the positive relationship between Taoism and wellbeing, future studies should be more focused on examining the relative contribution of each of the Taoist practices and activities to wellbeing. Let's say, the studies may be concerned with investigating how the practice of morality like de and wu wei, or the health and longevity practice like meditation, taiji and alchemy, relatively affects the Taoists' quality of life. Moreover, the inappropriateness and non-specificity of the existing scale in measuring Taoists' secondary control necessitates the development of a new one in understanding the control techniques used by Taoists. Furthermore, to have a comprehensive understanding of the nature of esteem for the Taoists, more investigation is warranted such as whether there is an alternative source of felt worthiness for the Taoists and its relationship with SWB. This may in turn necessitate the development of a new construct and, correspondingly, a new measurement instrument.

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