

Zhuangzi's Political Philosophy

Opening a Feminist Political Space

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Abstract: This essay examines Zhuangzi's political philosophy from a feminist perspective, addressing fundamental questions in Zhuangzi's political thought and exploring its significance to the opening of a feminist political space. The first part investigates the alienation of humans in the *Zhuangzi*. I argue that Zhuangzi's critique of alienation is one of patriarchal oppression. The second part examines what constitutes good governance for Zhuangzi, i.e., non-action and letting the world be (*zaiyou* 在宥). I use the example of the Mosuo matriarchal society to illustrate Zhuangzi's ideal society free of oppression and dominance, wherein equality and freedom of the social members are realized through communitarian work. Due to its advocacy for equality and freedom of all beings, in the Conclusion I examine the significance of Zhuangzi's political philosophy to the opening of a feminist political space.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; political philosophy; alienation; non-action; feminism

When the springs dry up, the fish have to cluster together on the shore, blowing on each other to keep damp and spitting on each other to stay wet. But that is no match for forgetting all about one another in the rivers and lakes. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 6, Ziporyn 2020, 56)

This well-known story in the "Inner Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi* is often quoted nowadays by lovers when they bid each other goodbye in China.¹ However, obviously it was not what Zhuangzi intended to show his readers in the first place. With this short story, Zhuangzi² pictured what an ideal society is like and the alienated situation of the social members when it is lost. The fish swimming freely about in the rivers and lakes is a simile of a good society, wherein the dao is kept in the world and people are happy, free, and at ease. In contrast, the dry spring refers to the state in which the dao is lost, people are harmed, and their lives are endangered. They might want to care for each other, but their end is doomed.

Naturally, the following questions arise: What does keeping the dao in the world mean? How is a world with the dao being kept in it? Zhuangzi believes that good governance must be able to preserve people's original nature. So, what is a good way to govern a state according to the *Zhuangzi*? And, how is human nature distorted in a bad political regime? This essay investigates these fundamental

¹ The idiom drawn from Zhuangzi's story is that, rather than spitting on each other to stay wet—an image used in intimate relationships these days—it is better to forget each other in the rivers and lakes.

² I agree with the conventional view that the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* were composed by Zhuangzi, and the Outer and the Miscellaneous Chapters were written by his students. I sometimes use "Zhuangzi" to refer to the author of the Outer and the Miscellaneous Chapters only for convenience. I hope to have my readers' kind understanding on this matter.

questions in Zhuangzi's political philosophy from a feminist perspective. The connection between the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi and the matrilineal society is widely noted by scholars.³

In my view, Laozi intentionally created a female dao to develop his systematic critique of the Zhou Dynasty's ideologies. Zhuangzi followed Laozi and extended the critique to some of the earliest patriarchal rulers of ancient China. Following this tradition, I use the example of the Mosuo matriarchal society to illustrate Zhuangzi's ideal society free of oppression and domination. In the last part, I explore its significance to the opening of a feminist political space.⁴

Alienation: Critique of Patriarchal Ideology

A distinctive characteristic of Zhuangzi's political philosophy is that the *Zhuangzi* did not emphasize enriching the people or cultivating them as some other pre-Qin schools, such as Confucianism and Mohism, advocated. Rather, it maintains that an ideal society must be able to keep the spontaneous nature or naturalness (*ziran* 自然) of its members, referred to in the *Zhuangzi* as the original nature (*xing* 性) or the original heart-mind (*xin* 心). When this is accomplished, we can say that the dao is kept in the world. As Zhuangzi stated, "Those who are at ease with one another in the dao simply do nothing, and their life (or nature) is settled" (ch. 6; Chen 2009, 213).

Ziran is a central theme in Daoist texts. Literally, the term means "self-soing," "self-going," "naturalness," or "spontaneity." It first appears in the *Daodejing* and is also used in modern Chinese to translate the word "nature." Both Laozi and Zhuangzi emphasize the *ziran* of the myriad things and humans. The term carries the meaning of the nature of things, and also of human nature as spontaneous and free. According to Zhuangzi, it is only through the realization of one's original nature that freedom can be attained (see Liu 2016).

Political philosophers might ask why this is the case. Are not the enrichment and cultivation of the social members the golden standards for a good society? The Daoists did not reject the idea that society has a responsibility to enrich its social members under the principle of the equality of all, that in no way they should be impoverished by an oppressive regime—a condition that, unfortunately, still defines the reality of the societies East and West nowadays; they were against the "cultivation" of the populace because it more often than not serves as a means of disciplining people to uphold the dominance of the ruling class. (I will give further explanation regarding this view). The significant insight of Daoism is that a society grounded in universal equality and the well-being of the people cannot be achieved or sustained if the political system fails to preserve the original nature of its social members. Furthermore, under the rule of oppressive regimes, human nature is inevitably harmed and distorted. As the "Horse Hooves" chapter says:

Here are the horses, able to tramp over frost and snow with the hooves they have, to keep out the wind and cold with their coats. Chomping the grass and drinking the waters, prancing and jumping over the terrain – this is the genuine inborn nature of horses. Even if given fancy terraces and great halls, they would have no use for them. Then along comes Bo Le, saying, "I am good at managing horses!" He proceeds to brand them, shave them, clip them, bridle them, fetter them with crupper and martingale, pen them in stable and stall—until about a quarter of the horses have dropped dead. Then he starves them, patches them, trots them, gallops them, lines them up neck to neck or nose to tail, tormenting them with bit and rein in front and with whip and spur behind. By then over half of the horses have dropped dead. (ch. 9; Ziporyn 2020, 81)

Needless to say, the horses that are branded, bridled, fettered, starved, tormented, and whipped refer to the people who are disciplined and harnessed under patriarchal rule; Bo Le refers to the rulers who

³ See Liu 2003, 180; Needham 1956, 105, 151; Chan 1963, 13; Kaltenmark 1969, 58; Waley 1958, 57; Chen 1969, 401, 403; Ye 2004. In addition, Ren Jiyu provides a comprehensive description of the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal society in China (1998, 49-70).

⁴ Human nature, or the original nature or *xing* 性, plays a central role in Zhuangzi's philosophy. However, given the constraints of space, this essay cannot address the topic in depth and will leave it for future study.

have seized power and those who assist the rulers to rule over the people. The tools used to tame the horses refer to the ideologies and social institutions set up to enslave the people.

Zhuangzi's political critique targeted the Zhou narrative of humaneness or benevolence (*ren* 仁) and appropriateness (*yi* 義), advocated by Confucians and Mohists.⁵ Faced with the unceasing warfare of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the Confucian solution was to return to the Zhou system of rites and music, including also moral ideology. As Confucius himself claimed, "I follow the Zhou."

Despite Confucius's admiration of the dynasty, however, it was a society marked by an extremely rigorous hierarchy, the peak of China's patriarchy in the pre-Qin period. During the Zhou dynasty, the patriarchal clan system (*zongfa zhi* 宗法制) was systematically established, with the rule of primogeniture strictly enforced. Family property was inherited by the eldest son, and although other sons were also entitled to receive their shares, women were entirely excluded from inheritance rights. Women were also prohibited from participating in public and political affairs. The system rigorously ensured that women held neither power nor wealth. From the perspective of social relations, this system institutionalized the domination of the male head of the family over his wife (in fact, wives), children, and slaves. Within the royal lineage, the king's eldest legitimate son inherited the throne, while other sons were granted regional titles.

According to Ren Jiyu, "[The Zhou] used the patriarchal system as an organizational framework to establish a tightly structured pyramidal hierarchy from the King of Zhou to the feudal lords and ministers, completing the institutional and political apparatus of slavery" (1998, 92). The dynasty also established a comprehensive and stringent ideological system, which was vehemently criticized by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Its powerful control stifled creative thinking. Throughout the Western Zhou period, which lasted for almost 300 years, little evidence of philosophical thought can be found; the intellectual realm was inert, like a stagnant pool. It was not until the Spring and Autumn period that the flowering of freedom and creativity emerged.

Elsewhere, Zhuangzi compares the ideology to webbed toes and an extra finger branching off from the hand (ch. 8; Ziporyn 2020, 77). On the one hand, it is a sort of incompleteness in the sense that the inborn nature is harmed; on the other, precisely because of this incompleteness of one's true nature, one needs to fabricate ideologies such as humaneness and appropriateness to deceive and manipulate. It is then a redundancy, an extra, and a divergence. Humaneness and appropriateness, the ritual and music system are like knives, T-squares, ropes, and glues that are used to hack up and mutilate the original nature (2020, 79). Things then necessarily have to be put together with contrived words; people have to be tamed by oppressive social norms and institutions. Herein, Zhuangzi clearly sees through a fact, that is, those inhumane men who gorge themselves on wealth and rank and those humane men who worry about the world's troubles have all lost their original nature (2020, 78).

In my opinion, neither Confucians nor Mohists should be simply dismissed as the advocates of Zhou ideology. Both schools offer valuable resources and have made good contributions to society. Critiques of these traditions should be understood as directed toward specific political and historical encumbrances that certain ideas may carry. These schools are not inherently bound to such encumbrances and certainly have the capacity to transcend them in our time. For example, we are glad to see the development of Confucian feminism, which calls for gender equity; contemporary Confucian scholars are working on developing freedom from Confucianism (Li 2014); some Confucian scholars embrace respect for difference in the *Zhuangzi* (Huang 2011), and so on. These are promising developments in Confucianism made by contemporary Confucian scholars.

⁵ For a full analysis of alienation in the *Zhuangzi* see Bender 2023: "Alienation and Attunement in the *Zhuangzi*." See also Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, ch. 2, where he did an excellent job surveying core virtues in Confucianism and pointed out that they are used to guarantee order. By requiring the social members to squeeze themselves into names and become sincere role models, Moeller believes "the Confucian role model is arguably even more 'totalitarian' than its Legalist counterpart" (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, 48).

Nonetheless, it is well known that Zhuangzi had fun mocking sages and kings, as well as criticizing oppressive regimes.

While it is legitimate for Confucian scholars to argue that the Confucianism that Zhuangzi critiques may not perfectly reflect the original intent of Confucianism, this article focuses on the following questions: What did Zhuangzi's critiques of benevolence and appropriateness as well as of the music and ritual system aim at? And, by criticizing rather than following the dominant ideology of the Zhou dynasty, as Confucius himself claimed, what alternative theory of human nature and political philosophy was developed? I will examine Zhuangzi's critiques of the ideology of his time from a feminist perspective.

Another important insight of Zhuangzi is that alienation of human nature is not only an individual issue, but it always happens systematically. By "alienation" I mean the distortion and mutilation of the original nature, which is taken as human nature by Zhuangzi. That is to say, human alienation is not a psychological problem of the individual, like depression, where someone feels upset about the world and is depressed. On the contrary, Zhuangzi would say depression has its social context too. The chapter "Webbed Toes" (ch. 8; Ziporyn 2020, 79) gives us a picture of alienation throughout the whole patriarchal society, including the commoners (the petty man), the literati, the noble man, and the king who was at that time presumed to be a sage (*shengren* 聖人), i. e. the rulers.

All under heaven was alienated. Perhaps the king had first been alienated, his nature lost and distorted. This is why when he seized power in his hands, he went on to harm people's nature and that of the myriad things. The famous Robber Zhi certainly had lost and mutilated his inborn nature, but so too had the sages, who promoted ideologies to fish for fame and compliments. Isn't advocating ideologies proof of their alienation?

Next, I will clarify some common misunderstandings regarding Laozi and Zhuangzi's critiques of benevolence and appropriateness. We must understand that Laozi and Zhuangzi do not deny that a good government should be compassionate to the people, or else Laozi's advocacy of compassion would be incomprehensible (*Daodejing* 67). Their critiques targeted the moral and ritual system as the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

Zhuangzi not only criticized Confucianism and Mohism, but also many other schools. In fact, the construction of the ideology centered on benevolence and appropriateness has been in place since the Yellow Emperor, the recognized patriarch of Chinese patriarchal society. Almost all rulers since the Yellow Emperor have adopted benevolence and appropriateness as the pillars of their dominant ideology. For example, the *Wuji* 五紀 (Five Guidelines) found in the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, excavated texts dating to the Warring States period, recorded in detail the five virtues of rites (*li* 禮), appropriateness (*yi*), love (*ai* 愛), benevolence (*ren*), and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) in the name of Emperor Hou, which are assigned with the cardinal directions, the five phases, the twelve double-hours, the twelve months, and more, thus establishing a complex system encompassing heaven and humanity (Huang 2022, 285). This ideology was developed into an integrated moral and ritual system during the Zhou dynasty. Accordingly, the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rites of Zhou) underlines the six virtues of wisdom, benevolence, sagacity, appropriateness, royalty, and harmony.

It is this slavish morality under the ruling discourse that Laozi and Zhuangzi criticized. According to the early Daoists, it was only after the destruction of Dao and virtue that the rule of benevolence and appropriateness of the patriarchal kings and emperors was established. "The destruction of Dao and virtue to make benevolence and appropriateness is the fault of the sages" (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 9; Chen 2009, 270). Rather than the creators of order in the Confucian tradition, the sages or sage-kings in early Daoist texts are at times depicted as a kind of vandals. Not only did they destroy dao and de, but they also "benefit the world little and harm the world much" (ch. 10; Ziporyn 2020, 85).

Laozi firmly advocates abandoning sageliness (*Daodejing* 19); Zhuangzi believes that "once the sages die, great robbers no longer arise... But if the sages do not die, great robbers will never stop" (ch. 10; 2020, 85). From an ideological perspective, whoever serves the rule of the dominant (typically the ruler, his court, and his extended family) is defined as moral. Those who rebel against it can be

condemned as being not benevolent or not appropriate and punished. When original nature as *ziran* was destroyed and abandoned, the system of rites and music was set up to regulate the people, under which social members' behaviors are rigorously disciplined. Laozi vehemently attacked the moral and ritual system, using non-action as an antidote to the contamination of morality and the original nature of the people by ideology. It aims to free the people from these political contaminations and release them back to their original nature bestowed by the dao, also called simplicity (*supu* 素樸). The term "simplicity" implies that it is not contaminated by ideology.⁶ The original nature of simplicity has no allegiance to, nor is it subject to any ideology, but is natural, free, and lively.

In the chapter, "Webbed Toes," Zhuangzi tells us a story that reveals how ideological domination is imposed through education.

Goodie and Mealticket were herding sheep, and both of them lost their herds. Asked for the reason, Goodie said he was busy studying, while Mealticket said he was busy gambling. Though they devoted themselves to different goals, they were alike in losing their sheep. (ch. 8; Ziporyn 2020, 79)

With this short story, Zhuangzi skillfully points out the alienation of humans caused by education. In the story, it is not only Mealticket who was out gambling that lost his sheep, but also Goodie, who read diligently. In his usual humorous way, Zhuangzi elucidates that reading and studying can confuse and spoil a person, of course. Some people hurt their nature by reading, while others hurt their nature by seeking profit. For Zhuangzi, they are the same in hurting their original nature.

It would be ridiculous to believe that the goal of education is alienation. Nevertheless, education in patriarchal societies hasn't been able to avoid the fate of being associated with and submissive to the dominant power, thereby very often becoming an accomplice and a constructor of ideologies.

Mosuo Matrilineal Society

The Daoist theory of human alienation by education is difficult to grasp within the patriarchal context. To illustrate this point, I turn to the Mosuo matrilineal tribes, which maintain an exclusively oral tradition, with no formal writing system. The ideal world in the early Daoists' minds, as indicated in many places in the texts, is the ancient matriarchal civilization, a world where "The people know only of their mothers, but not of their fathers" (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 29; Chen 2009, 827). Unlike the male principle of heaven in the Zhou Dynasty, they created dao as the mother of all things, established a female principle for the world at the metaphysical level, and advocated that politics, morality, and other social practices be based on it (see Liu 2022). I visited several Mosuo villages in Yunnan province in China last summer. Studying the Mosuo matrilineal society will help us gain a deeper understanding of the Daoists' concerns.

A Mosuo man told me that the father's role is often missing in their world. As a child, he didn't know who his father was, but grew up with different mothers because in the Mosuo culture the mother and her sisters are all called "mothers" by the children of the family. The male role in the matrilineal family was that of an uncle. When he grew up and was told who his father was, he didn't feel an affinity as usually emphasized in patriarchy, and he remained close to his own matrilineal family.

However, nowadays, children are sent to school to be indoctrinated with patriarchal "morals" and "culture," and from an early age they learn about "father," "mother," "dad," and "mom". The Mosuo man lamented how their culture had been changed. It is a tradition of patriarchy to value the father more than the mother, even though this situation is changing nowadays. From there on, a whole series

⁶ Many believe that Laozi and Zhuangzi were opposed to civilization as such, instead of patriarchal ideologies. I argue that this is an arbitrary judgment shaped by a patriarchal framework. This view presupposes that only patriarchal societies qualify as civilizations, while matrilineal societies are deemed uncivilized. I will give a detailed analysis of this point through the example of the Mosuo matrilineal society.

of role building is familiar to feminism, a culture in which women are expected to be submissive, weak, and inferior, and men, set as the master, are expected to be dominant and strong. Every patriarchal society has voluminous classics to inculcate men's superiority over women. The dominant relationship is established through social institutions such as family, schooling, courts, etc., and other channels such as beliefs and collective prejudices, which are sedimented in social norms. And it is largely constructed and perpetuated through written texts.



A Mosuo matrilineal village near Lugu Lake in Yunnan
(Photograph by the author, August 2024)

Daoism opposes any oppression and alienation of humans, as well as the construction of hierarchical structures in political systems. And this is grounded in its profound understanding of human nature. Our true nature is beyond benevolence and appropriateness or any ideology that intends to rule over people, that always rolls in the mud of the dominant and the dominated, the oppressor and the oppressed. Our true nature does not favor the game of master and slave. For this reason, Daoism advocates non-knowing, as illustrated by Laozi's astounding claim, "Exterminate learning and there will be no worries" (*Daodejing* 19). And, "Learn not-learning, and return to what the multitude miss" (*Daodejing* 64). Through the practice of non-knowing, the free and spontaneous nature is regained.

It seems we did not have this unique yet crucial perspective on Zhuangzi's philosophy before feminism became full-fledged worldwide. Henceforth, a common misunderstanding of Zhuangzi is that he is against all civilizations, as if only patriarchy deserves to be called civilization, and a society free of domination and oppression is necessarily uncivilized. This understanding of civilization is a symptom of being alienated. In my opinion, feminism precisely offers an important perspective on Zhuangzi's philosophy, under which his critique of all patriarchal domination is no longer hastily equated with "opposition to civilization". Rather, it is motivated by an aspiration for a world of complete equality and freedom, grounded in the feminine principle. According to the *Zhuangzi*, good politics should follow the feminine principle and eliminate all forms of oppression.

What Constitutes Good Government?

Let's say we are all alienated unless we practice so hard that we've already achieved enlightenment. So, what constitutes a good government for Zhuangzi? How do we get there given the universal decline of human nature?

The way, as is well known, is non-action (*wuwei* 無為) first proposed by Laozi. However, the connotations of the governance of non-action are difficult to grasp. It can be easily interpreted as doing

nothing. It is also sometimes understood as the liberal principle of non-interference. Nevertheless, neither of these understandings is accurate.

Laozi compares good government to water (*Daodejing* 8), which benefits all myriad things but does not dominate them nor contend with them for profit. The "myriad things" here also refer to the people. Water benefiting the myriad things is certainly not doing nothing, but the way it does it is through non-action.

We have to admit that the connotations of non-action are profound and not easily grasped. Obviously, grasping is the wrong way to approach non-action. It is the opposite of constructing ideologies to rule the people. How it is done is revealed to the practitioner in practice. Therefore, for both Laozi and Zhuangzi non-action is first of all a practice, in which we can speak of the governance of non-action at all.

Fortunately, Laozi has left us with manifestations of good politics so that we are not completely at a loss, such as compassion, simplicity, not daring to take the lead in the state (*Daodejing* 67). Here Laozi means a leader of a state should not put him/herself first (*Daodejing* 66), not issue too many decrees restricting the people or tossing them around (*Daodejing* 58), a small state with a small population (*Daodejing* 80), and so on. Non-action is not doing nothing, but letting all actions happen in nonbeing (*wu* 無), and letting all beings accomplish themselves through non-action. Just like fertile soil naturally grows big and small trees, all kinds of flowers and plants flourish, birds and animals naturally gather, good politics work similarly. This is what Zhuangzi calls "letting the world be" (*zaiyou* 在宥; ch. 11).

For example, if there is a person who commits murder, what would the governance of non-action be like? Does it let the criminal get away with murder? Obviously, this is not what Laozi meant. Laozi first demands that we recognize how corrupt systems breed the conditions that compel such acts. If the person has an affluent life and society does not force people to do evil, what is the need for him to kill? A good political system keeps the population from having to commit crimes or being driven to suicide, in which case Bhutan is an excellent example with a minimum crime rate, not to mention some matriarchal tribes around the world.

Take another example of the environmental crisis that is now threatening the survival of humankind. Does non-action mean, then, that we should do nothing about it and wait for the demise of *Homo sapiens*? -- This is a slur on non-action. The measures that should be taken are obvious. The problem, from a Daoist perspective, is that power in our time no longer knows how to function. Today, politicians around the world seem to be excessively interested in enriching themselves and are largely numb to cooperating with other governments to address the environmental crisis. This shocking fact that puts humanity and the earth in extreme danger is a good example of Laozi's critique of ruling the people. That is to say, power in our time is desperately lost. It cares excessively about enforcing its domination, even if the price is the extinction of all sentient beings.

Laozi's analogy about water is echoed in the *Zhuangzi*. "Fish are at ease with each other in the water; so are humans in the dao" (ch. 6; Chen 2009, 213). Good politics is like water, where fish naturally thrive. Just as fish are free in the water, good politics must create an environment in which people are free and comfortable. Prosperity takes place naturally. Bad politics, on the contrary, makes people anxious; whether they are forced by poverty or are crushed by the ruling class, or they find themselves trapped in fierce competition with each other for the sake of survival, or the powerful demand loyalty and gratitude as if they were the sun, such that hypocrisy becomes rampant. In short, people's minds are defiled, and there is no peace for a moment in their hearts. (The sun never demands allegiance.)

For Zhuangzi, as for Laozi, the world cannot be managed or ruled to attain a good or ideal state. The good way to govern is to let the world be. Zhuangzi has a special term for this, *zaiyou*, combining the words for "let be" or "be there: and "make room" or "be lenient." As a way of governing it means creating a space where people can be at ease, free, peaceful, and happy by letting the world be. The chapter of this title has,

Letting the world be—I have heard of such things. But I have never heard of anyone actually governing other people, ordering them. You just let them be for fear that otherwise their inborn natures will get flooded away.

You just release them and give them room for fear that otherwise their intrinsic virtuosities (de 德) will get displaced (ch. 11; Ziporyn 2020, 89).

If people's original nature is well kept, then the world is naturally peaceful, and there is no need for ruling. If the original nature is lost, which is obviously the case given the patriarchal history, ruling the world is doomed to cause further decline and deterioration of society, thus it is doomed to fail. Unfortunately, this fact is not easily seen by rulers who have seized power with, and perhaps by their distorted nature, being trapped in their insatiable desire for delusional power or whatever is on their mind. We may well ask what those totalitarians throughout history have achieved—collapsed states, rivers of blood, and countless dead bodies for sure.

"Letting the world be" resonates with non-action and naturalness in Daoism, which underlines the non-coercive conduct of the government. It also implies care. It means creating a free space to let people be at ease and happy, their inborn nature being well kept, and taking care of this space. Both the creation and the maintenance of the free space need care. In this sense, any organizations or social institutions, media, and so on that help create such a free space, to provide care for social members, are already the heralds of a good government. Our society should protect them and make them grow.

Henry Thoreau once said, "The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling." (Thoreau, 2004, 6) "Letting the world be" presents to us a tender heart-mind. Because her heart-mind is tender, she can preserve her own inborn nature and thus the nature of others. Just as a flower needs daily care to grow and bloom, our society needs gentle care to flourish. A violent mind that seeks to rule the people or to satisfy its insatiable appetites will only cause suffering and infliction. We might well ask what kind of mind contemporary patriarchal governments bear. Matching this, Zhuangzi describes an ideal society:

For in those days, there were no paths or trails through the mountains, no boats or bridges over the ponds; all creatures lived together, merging their territories into one another, the birds and beasts multiplying to form herds and flocks, the grasses and trees growing thick and unhampered, so one could tie a cord to a bird or beast and take a stroll with it, or bend down a branch to peep into a bird's nest.

For in those days when the intrinsic virtues were fully realized, the people lived together with the birds and beasts, bunched together with all things. What did they know about "noble men" and "petty men"? So simpleminded, without understanding, their intrinsic virtuosities remained undivided and never left them. So simpleminded, not wanting anything in particular—that is what it means to be undyed and unhewn. Undyed and unhewn, the inborn nature of the people was realized. (ch. 9, Ziporyn 2020, 81-82)

Zhuangzi advocated the equality of all beings, and his ideal political system embodied this principle. Not only was there complete equality amongst people ("What did they know about sages and petty persons?"), but it also promoted the prosperity of all things. Zhuangzi abandoned the enlightened sage-king in Laozi's philosophy. He took a step further and gave us a communitarian world, in which there is not only a community between people but also a great community composed of humans, nature, and the myriad things. In my opinion, it resonates with Aldo Leopold, who calls for a land ethic in his book *A Sand County Almanac*, an ethic that "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold 1966, 239).

Back to Muoso Society

Zhuangzi expelled the sage-king from his political philosophy; as a result, his thought is often misinterpreted as chaotic anarchism or as lacking any political philosophy altogether. In this regard, the Mosuo society again offers us an excellent clarification. The Mosuo society maintains a kind of semi-communism—what I prefer to call "communitarianism"—in which property is jointly owned by the members of the matrilineal family, and the entire village helps each other with farm work. All people live within the matrilineal family, and there is no marriage. In the evening, a man may go to the house of the woman he likes—with her consent—and return to his family to work before breakfast. Children are

raised together by the matrilineal family. In their leisure time, they would light a bonfire, join hands, and sing and dance around the fire. The fascinating World of the Grand Union (datong *shijie* 大同世界) described by the *Zhouli* is easily realized in such a society,

A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained" (*Liji*, ch. 6; Legge 1885).

Care and happiness of its members are placed at the heart of the Mosuo matriarchal society. Every member of the matriarchal society, whether elderly, young, ill, or disabled, is taken care of. This is what the philosophers in patriarchal societies have aspired to, but it has not been and will not be able to be achieved under patriarchal structures. Yet it is easily realized in the matrilineal society. It is worth mentioning that Mosuo society also demonstrates a high degree of ecological awareness, which is a distinctive feature of matriarchal societies, in contrast to patriarchal societies that either enslave nature or distort it.

A common misunderstanding of matriarchal societies is that women there dominate men. This false assumption reveals how patriarchal thinking distorts our understanding of power. There is no domination in the Mosuo matriarchal society. As demonstrated above, property is jointly owned by the members of the matrilineal **family**, with women managing daily affairs while all major decisions are made communally (Zhou 2001).



An Ama (head of a Mosuo matriarchal family) weaving a traditional sash, at Gesa matriarchal village. Photograph by the author.

I do not think we should go back to the matrilineal society, which also has its limitations. However, I do think that it is a good elucidation of Daoist political philosophy. Meanwhile, clearly there are resources that we can draw on, which are important references for us to reflect on patriarchal politics. Our time should realize that it is meaningless to talk about equality without gender equality and freedom without women's liberation; that these ideas are not going to be achieved in patriarchy. To realize true freedom and equality, including that of all beings, we must work from the root, that is, to deconstruct patriarchy and build a world of gender equality.

Another common misunderstanding of Zhuangzi's philosophy is that it is often deemed individualistic. He did not believe that a certain "sage-king" would be able to accomplish a good political

system, which is but a myth fabricated by patriarchy. Rather, in a good society everyone's original nature is settled. This is necessarily a collective work done by a community as manifested by the Mosuo society. Therefore, I do not think that the image of fish swimming freely in the water in the *Zhuangzi* suggests that people should be indifferent to each other. Instead, only a community founded on the principles and practices of equality and freedom, where people support one another and their original nature is well preserved, can realize the goodness and beauty of society. If people lose their nature, then the realization of goodness and beauty, equality and freedom, and mutual support inevitably becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Conclusion: Opening a Feminist Political Space

Not long ago, I read a story about a woman in Shanghai who opened a bookstore that only sells books by female writers. This news inspired me. A bookstore that only sells women's books does not signify a gesture of resistance traditionally valued by feminism. Of course, there is no doubt that resistance plays an important role in changing the status quo and promoting social justice. But it goes further than resistance by constructing a different kind of space in a demeanor of care and concern, in which the ideas we pursue are embodied, that is to say, they are actualized in a physical space. This is what I mean by "a feminist political space," a term I use to denote a different expression of power, a feminist power space, wherein "power" is not understood in the traditional sense of "political domination," but as the realization of the feminist ideas of freedom and equality for all.

Regarding the theoretical dimension, despite critiques of Simone de Beauvoir by different feminist schools, I find that some of the fundamental problems she points out remain unsolved. In fact, they are not even clearly felt in our time. They are only silently pushed aside as public attention is directed elsewhere. Due to space constraints, this article will focus on one of these enduring concerns: female solidarity. She observes that under patriarchy women are segregated by social institutions such as family and marriage, as well as by divisions of race and class:

If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. ... Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another. (1956, 18)

Women, therefore, have never composed a separate group set up on its own account over against the male grouping. They have never entered into a direct and autonomous relation with the men. 'The reciprocal bond basic to marriage is not set up between men and women, but between men and men by means of women, who are only the principal occasion for it,' says Levi-Strauss. (1956, 96)

Surprisingly, what Simone de Beauvoir worried about has not fundamentally changed to this day despite the overall progress worldwide. To give just a few examples to illustrate the condition of women in our time: In the US, in June 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, officially ending the constitutional right to abortion. In Iran, on September 16, 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died after being severely beaten by Iran's religious morality police for not wearing her hijab in accordance with government standards.

In China, in November 2021, Huang Xueqin, a feminist activist pivotal to China's #MeToo movement, was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of "inciting subversion of state power." Also in China, the beginning of 2022 saw China shocked by a short video of a chained woman, a mother of eight (Koetse 2022). In the video posted on TikTok in January, she stood in a doorless shack, chained to the wall behind by her neck, with a lock around her neck. She lost most of her teeth, was apparently mentally ill, in light clothing in the cold winter. It turned out she is the wife of Dong Zhimin, a guy propagandized by the local government as a poor good father of eight. According to the villagers, the woman was trafficked at the age of 15, sold twice before the forced marriage with Dong. In the course

of the abuse, she became mentally ill. Her teeth were beaten off "in case she bit people." She had a son in 1999, then between 2011 and 2020, she gave birth to seven other children.

Feminists have observed that male power is dominant in almost all social spheres, and women as a whole are in an oppressed position as "the second sex". Men are united everywhere, while women stay in a divided, segregated, and atomic state. In many senses, women are still attached to men, and there is not a strong sense of solidarity among them. This is what is most shocking and sad when confronted with the state of women's subjugation.

A particular form of extreme oppression endured by women can last for unbelievably long periods, such as the thousand-year history of foot-binding for Chinese women. Had there been a generation of resolute resistance in those thousand years, even to the extreme of collective suicide, it would have been a fatal blow to the patriarchal dynasties, and the time that Chinese women had to endure such extreme cruelty would have been greatly shortened. But there was no collective resistance heard of in one thousand years; in one thousand years, almost all women endured a lifetime of torture in silence.

From an individual's point of view, if a woman's feet were crippled, how could she live a happy life, even if she was particularly lucky and married a farmer or an intellectual with a gentle and faithful character? What's political is always personal. This is why the opening of feminist power spaces is necessary. And individual success cannot be compared to what collective unity can achieve. As Beauvoir suggests, the success of Catherine the Great may have had little effect on a Russian peasant woman (Beauvoir 1956, 97).

During Empress Wu's reign, the status of women in China was more or less improved. Yet one woman's ascension to the pinnacle of power after a lot of hard work can't change the basic structure of patriarchal dynasties. And they are but a flash in the pan in the long history of patriarchy. This is why female solidarity is far more important than the success of individual women. Only when women unite through the establishment and proliferation of women's organizations and the opening of feminist power spaces can patriarchal society be systematically transformed. Until they unite, a woman does not know her power. Until women unite, according to Beauvoir, they cannot enter into a free relationship with men either.

Patriarchal oppression in our age takes on various forms, such as racism, colonialism, classism, gender oppression, and so on, and the objects of these oppressions do not necessarily overlap with each other. For example, while racial oppression is often experienced as a domestic issue, a person of color living in the West may nonetheless identify with white colonizers and not necessarily oppose colonialism directed at other nations. Another example is that while gender oppression in the Middle East is starkly visible, certain countries in the region and their populations have collectively become victims of colonialism. Under such circumstances, feminism bears the historical task of resisting both colonialism and domestic patriarchal domination. Today, patriarchy in both the East and the West appears increasingly authoritarian, further complicating the landscape. How do women in this situation break through barriers of class, race, religion, culture, and national identity to unite and create a feminist power space? This is the historical task that confronts women today.

I agree with Catharine MacKinnon that instead of wasting our energy in searching for sameness or difference with men, we should penetrate the essence of patriarchy as dominance (MacKinnon, 1987, 32). What I'd like to point out is that in the past, while feminist analysis of power has focused on criticizing patriarchy, it is now time to move forward and seek to create a feminist power space. Obviously, this space does not only belong to women, but of course also to men; it belongs to all who seek the realization of equality and freedom. It is a space meant to unite all who share these ideals in pursuit of a different kind of power.

I do not understand a feminist political space as one where power functions as it does in patriarchal politics. Rather, a feminist political space must open a new politics, and a new value system should be established in this process. For example, opening a bookstore selling books by female writers, setting up an online film discussion group to promote the awareness of gender equity, or a feminist group to meet up regularly, and so on—pretty much anything that one can create within one's capability. These are the things at hand, and the popular imagination is boundless. Of course, since I am using the term

“a feminist political space,” it also includes the accomplishment of feminist principles in the political arena.

Today, few would argue that women should be excluded from the public sphere; however, power in every field of social life is still tightly held in the hands of men. This is the very contradiction that we face in the public sphere. Women are to a large extent liberated from patriarchal family life. She is, like men, part of the labor force. However, what labor is allocated to her is still a question. She works, but men set the rules for her work; she speaks and acts, but her words and actions conform to men’s expectations; she plays by rules in games that men have been playing for thousands of years. She has not developed her own principles or a value system different from men’s. She has not been able to create her own language in which the world’s destiny is guarded.

People in our time must understand that the masculine way of thinking that has dominated most cultures for thousands of years is wrong: conquer, invasion, plunder, strife, massacres, oppression, and enslavement. It is this underlying masculine logic that has pushed humankind to the brink of extinction. Whether it is in politics, the economy, technology, or loving relationships, patriarchal power has perfected its unrelenting destruction. Our time needs an awakening to the significance of women’s values, which are often antithetical to patriarchal power and, precisely for this reason, are the remedy of a patriarchal world at the end of its rope.

This is where Daoist political philosophy can contribute. At this point, it is difficult to envision what a sweeping feminist politics will be like before it is fully developed. Still, there are principles that it can follow. Laozi and Zhuangzi created the female Dao to replace the male heaven of the Zhou dynasty, on which new politics and a new value system were founded. Inspired by Daoist political philosophy and the example of Mosuo society, below I outline several key principles that a feminist political space should follow.

Creativity should be life-giving and life-nurturing. In our time it is believed that creativity has nothing to do with nature, and it often manifests in the destruction of nature. This understanding of creativity is fatal to humanity itself, in which violence towards humans and nature is necessarily involved. According to Daoism, our original nature can only be preserved in nature. And nature is the female dao as the source of all creativity, without which no life would come into being in the first place. To speak of creativity in isolation from nature is ludicrous, like imagining a rootless tree. In our age, the contrast between rapid scientific and technological advancement and the massive destruction of nature signals a destiny that may already be beyond human control. A political space to realize the creativity that nourishes life is called for.

Feminist politics does not take nature as the other to be conquered and exploited, but anchors human life in nature, so that we will dwell close to nature, and our original nature will be well kept. A feminist political space seeks the settling and the realization of our original nature, and the nature of all beings.

A feminist political space advocates the equality and freedom of all beings, free of domination or hierarchical oppression. The great community of humankind, the earth, and all beings is to be formed. Grassroots participatory and communitarian democracy should be realized to replace the exploitative Capitalist democracy. The great community makes efforts to take care of each member. All lives are valued. Humans must understand that a good society takes care of its members instead of exploiting them. Also, feminist politics advocates non-action and naturalness as a new way of life.

Personally, I do not hold the illusion that high technology will save us from the environmental crisis. It is not difficult to become disillusioned if one pays attention to what high technology is being used for today. Green technology certainly needs to be developed. Nevertheless, in a time when our food, clothing, housing, and transportation have all become pollutants of the earth, if humankind believes that it can avoid the fate of extinction without changing its modern way of living, the result is likely to be that it will soon face that fate. Humans must recognize the value of a simple way of life, through which we would also be able to live more comfortably and at ease. Politics and economy that cause the destruction of nature and thus threaten the survival of humans cannot be called “progress”. By the same token, politics and economy of non-action and spontaneity should also not be blindly seen

as regression. A feminist political space is committed to making our planet a beautiful home to all beings.

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