

Review

## Taoism as ethics, science as background: On the left hand of darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin

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**The Left Hand of Darkness by the modern American fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin is acknowledged as a classical work of science fiction literature. Although, it belongs to the science fiction genre, the essence of the novel lies in that it tries to interpret and understand the world from the perspective of Chinese Taoist ethics, while such scientific elements as the far-future setting, interplanetary travel and light-speed spaceship, only provide the background for Le Guin's thought experiment. The relationship between two sexes (androgyny), the relationship between man and nature (ecological consciousness) and the communication between different cultures are the focuses of this novel. From the perspectives of feminist theories and ecological criticism, this thesis tries to analyze its androgyny and ecological thoughts influenced by Taoism. From this analysis we can see that Le Guin has promoted the notion of harmony between Yin and Yang, that is, androgyny in the novel, to a higher level, and that the idea of "wei wu wei (not doing)" may point out an applicable way to alleviate the tense relation between man and nature.**

**Key words:** The left hand of darkness, taoism, androgyny, ecological consciousness.

### INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin is a well-known contemporary American writer of fantasy and science fiction. Up to now, she has published more than thirty novels and short stories collections, five literary critical collections, numerous poetry and several children's books. She also translated the Chinese classic, the Tao Te Ching by Lao Zi into English after 40 years' of research. The themes of her works feminism, ecological protection, utopian ideals, anarchism, racial issues and the coming-of-age of adolescents, are often fused with Chinese, or more precisely, Taoist philosophy, which gives her novels a very different flavor from those of other science fiction

writers. Her love for Taoism was inspired by her father, the brilliant anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber. In one of her interviews, Le Guin (1982: 45) recalls that:

*The old Paul Carus translation of the Tao Te Ching was always on the downstairs bookshelf when I was a kid, and I saw it in my father's hand a lot. ... He clearly got a great life long pleasure out of this book, and when you notice a parent doing something like this it's bound to have some effect on you. So when I was twelve years old I had a look at the thing and I reacted the same way my father had--I loved it. By the time I was in my teens I had*

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*thought about it quite a lot.*

From then on, Taoism became her lifelong love. There are many Western fiction writers who are interested in myths, philosophy and religions of Asian cultures, especially those of China and India, and who have constructed the plots and characters of their works in the light of the Eastern wisdom. But few writers have done better than Ursula K. Le Guin in thinking thoroughly about Chinese Taoism and integrating it into various aspects of her works. One of her most famous novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), is a typical example of the fusion of Taoism and science fiction. This novel won both Hugo and Nebula Awards because of its literary achievements and its insight into sexual issues, communication between different cultures, ecological thoughts and utopian society. On the basis of Taoist philosophy and from the perspectives of feminist criticism and ecological criticism, this paper tries to analyze how Le Guin interprets androgyny and ecological consciousness in a science-fictional language. The author of the paper concludes that Le Guin constructs her understanding of androgyny on the basis of Taoist concept: the harmony between yin and yang, and that she expresses her concerns with the ecological problem in the light of another Taoist idea: *wei wu wei* (not doing).

### **Integrity of Yin and Yang: A new horizon of Androgyny**

Androgyny is essentially a biological concept, meaning the co-existence of both male and female features in a single living creature. But it has unique meaning in human cultural history. There are gods who can bear children monosexually in most major myths of the world. God in Christianity first creates Adam according to his own image and then creates Eve by using a rib of Adam; in Greek myth, Zeus bears his son Dionysus by sewing him into his lap and Prometheus creates humans by using clay; Goddess Nv Wa in Chinese myth creates people also by using clay. These myths reflect human imagination and dreams on the origin of humans and the mystery of birth. All the gods mentioned are proto-types of androgyny. In the 20th century, the content of androgyny began to evolve and change. The first philosopher who did great contribution to the evolution is Carl Jung. Jung (1989:77) proposed that human beings have a tendency to androgyny both emotionally and psychologically, and describes androgyny with two Latin words: "anima" and "animus".

From then on, androgyny had a psychological meaning. In her ground-breaking work *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf (1931: 147) advocated that "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two (male and female) live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating". Since then, androgyny became a token for sexual equality and a powerful weapon for feminists against male

centrism. In the 21st century, a new phase of the feminist movement, post-feminism called by some scholars, was getting close to the truth of androgyny because it "rejects the essentialism inherent in much feminism", and is "more male-inclusive" (Clarke, 2010: 27). *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in 1969, when the feminist movement was in its second wave, the concept of the relationship between the two sexes Le Guin proposed in it obviously exceeded most of her contemporaries because she foresaw a new phase would come and found that the *tai ji* symbol of Taoism reflects perfectly the concept of androgyny: the complementarity and interchangeability of yin and yang, of male and female.

As for the initiation of the novel, Le Guin once said that "...one of the things I was trying to do in the book was to get away from stereotyped roles of manhood and womanhood. I did so by the 'simple' trick of making the characters both men and women" (Quoted in Freedman 2008: 49). And the best genre for such experiment is science fiction. The background and setting of the novel are typically science-fictional: In a faraway future, an envoy from human society, Genly Ai, goes alone to a faraway alien planet winter (or Gethen) on the mission of persuading the rulers of Karhide to join the Ekumen, an alliance of human colonial planets. The prime minister of Karhide, Therem Estraven, tries to help Genly Ai fulfill his mission, but Genly refuses Estraven's kindness and help because of his own fear and prejudice to the androgynous Gethenian. For Genly, the progress of his mission is the progress that he overcomes his cultural fear and sexual prejudice and accepts the essence of Gethenians: they are both men and women; they are humans. By giving such background to this thought experiment, Le Guin pushes the reader to reconsider those values, conventions, rules of our world: man and woman, trust and suspicion, fidelity and betrayal, self and other.

The most astonishing and incomparable fact of the novel is the androgynous humans. Gethenians appear to have sexual characteristics only in a specific period of each month "kemmer", that is, estrus. In the other time of the month, they are in "somer", an asexual state. An individual has the same possibility to become a male or a female in the period of "kemmer"; that is to say, the mother of several children can be the father of several more. Le Guin (2010: 100<sup>1</sup>) describes such unique phenomenon:

*The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be tied down to childbearing, implies that on one is quite so thoroughly tied down here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be-psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make.*

<sup>1</sup> All the direct quotations of the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* come from the version published by the Penguin Group, New York, 2010. The rest of such quotations are only marked with page numbers.

*Therefore, nobody here is quite as free as a free male anywhere else.*

One of the earliest reporters of the Ekumen observes with amazement that “There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on winter” (90). Le Guin’s real purpose is, possibly, for us readers to consider what is left without these so-called masculine or feminine features. In this androgynous world, there is no male-centered or female-centered authority discourse, and the traditional social structures of human ethics, values and families are totally subverted. This text is the boldest imagination of androgyny advocated by feminists such as Woolf, leading the reader to transcend the sexual limitations and to re-investigate the rationality of the patriarchy of human society which has been taken for granted as the law of nature.

Furthermore, the androgynous Gethenian is the best representation of the Taoist concept-the harmony of yin and yang. Le Guin uses the *tai ji* symbol to describe the androgynous Gethenians, reflecting her admiration of Taoist thought “Everything has a bright and dark side, co-existent in harmony” (Lao Zi, 2011: 49). At the end of the novel, after Genly Ai accepts Estraven’s friendship and trust begins to develop between them, Genly expresses his respect for Gethenians represented by Estraven by drawing a symbol of *tai ji*: “It is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of darkness....Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow” (287). This androgynous society which contains Taoist philosophy pushes forward the androgyny idea, because Le Guin’s thought is more diverse, including not only bold investigation of the relationship between men and women, but the quest of the relationship between men, man and nature, and different cultures. Thus, *The Left Hand of Darkness* transcends the ordinary science fiction.

The experiences of Genly Ai, also reflect Le Guin’s feminism. At first, Genly always treats Gethenians with sexual discrimination and sees them as the opposite of self and the other. The opposition between the two reveals the differences and conflicts between two sexes and two civilizations. But Estraven, out of pure love and trust for Genly, can overcome these differences, prejudice and conflicts, and help Genly break through the prison farm and complete the mission at the price of his own life. Genly realizes his shallowness and prejudice, accepts Estraven’s friendship finally. Recognizing that Gethenians are both male and female, Genly becomes peaceful. But the mutual love and trust between Estraven and Genly Ai are based on recognition and understanding of their differences, not eliminating these differences. Cummins (1993: 79) comments Genly like this:

*As his experiences enable him to break through the*

*barriers he has erected between himself and the Gethenians, he becomes more patient, accepting, capable of reciprocating love, less rationalist, less dependent on the certainty of his beliefs.*

Through Genly’s psychological progress, Le Guin expects that men and women, self and other, by eliminating conflicts and developing trust, can construct a relation based on equality, understanding, respect and love. Bernardo and Murphy (2006: 32) comments that, “*The Left Hand of Darkness* is an important book for both feminism and SF in offering explorations of the Other that challenge the reader to think of gender notions in a new light”.

### **Ecological consciousness of *The Left Hand of Darkness***

The ecologists think that most of literary works focus their attention only on humans and human society, concerned only human feelings and life, and neglect nature and ecological health. This phenomenon exposes the super narcissism of the human race. Therefore, they propose that, “Human should convert from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness, think that human are not masters of nature, but a member of the land community, and live or die with other members of nature” (Cheng 2006: 491). *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in the 1960s, when the ecological concepts were just budding and, though Le Guin didn’t claim that she was an ecologist, we can see her concerns with the relation between human and nature from the story frame and background of the novel. Though *The Left Hand of Darkness* is set in a faraway alien planet, it can be seen as a science-fictional metaphor and reflection of human society. Her ecological consciousness mostly derived from the Taoist thinking: *wei wu wei*, that is, not doing.

She thinks, faced with serious environmental disasters of the Earth, the proper way for us to take is to do as little as possible, not to disturb the rhythm and balance of Nature. As Sandra Lindow (2012: 249) points out, “Within the LeGuiniverse, the greatest suffering is caused by doing. Throughout her fiction, Le Guin’s concept of moral development is tightly knotted in the Taoist wisdom of not doing”. This value of hers is best reflected in her description of the religion and the way of living of Gethenians. By adapting her extensive knowledge and artistic sensitivity, Le Guin describes in detail the environmental features of the planet Gethen and the influences of natural environment on civilization. Gethen is extremely barren and cold, the most part of its surface covered with ice and snow. Except for the Gethenian race, there are no big mammals and little vegetation on the planet. Gethenian ecological system is simple and fragile, the resources of energy and food being scarce. This unique natural environment decides the history, religion, politics, culture and life style of Gethenians. For

instance, Gethenians are not in haste; they could make their vehicles go faster, but they do not. As a result, along in those four millennia the electric engine was developed, radios and power loom and power vehicles and farm machinery and all the rest began to be used, and a Machine Age got going, gradually, without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all. Winter hasn't achieved in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades. Neither has winter ever paid the price that Terra paid (105).

Comparing to them, Le Guin (52) says of the Earth people, "Terrans<sup>2</sup> tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress". Very obviously, Le Guin is being ironical and critical about human action of polluting and destroying the natural balance and ecological system. More importantly, this harsh natural environment gives birth to a special religion: the Handdara, which is invented by Le Guin according to her understanding of the Taoism. The followers of the Handdara hold in esteem such Taoist ideas as "inaction" and "passiveness", and think that "Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action" (75). This religion has no gods to worship, no fixed rituals and doctrines to follow, its ideological core being the Taoist philosophy: "The Tao always remains inactive, yet it acts upon everything in the world" (Lao Zi: 2007 171). In a conversation between Genly and Estraven about religion and philosophy, Genly says that many "dynamic, aggressive, ecology-breaking cultures" (251) tend to have the conclusion that singularity of man is his divinity. Estraven says the Handdarata "are less aware of the gap between men and beasts, being more occupied with the likeness, the links, the whole of which living things are a part" (251). It is the very reason why Le Guin praises the Taoism: atheism and mild tolerance to Man and Nature.

Influenced by their religious background, Gethenians have long learned to come to terms with and to live in harmony with nature. Looking themselves as part of their environment and try to integrate into it, Gethenians never struggle senselessly with nature and fate, never have blind faith in gods or kings, nor do they try to remould nature. They only try to keep their life pace with natural rhythm and bring it into correspondence with natural laws. Besides, Gethenians also know well how to make the best use of everything, but seldom waste anything. We can come to a conclusion that, on the planet Gethen, the three facts-- natural environment, religious belief and life style, are interdependent and interconnected. The Taoist thoughts are the essential spiritual bond that maintains this survival chain. Le Guin once said "...what I most detest in my own culture: people who want to control everything and to exploit for profit in the largest, most general sense of exploit and profit" (Quoted in Freedman: 45). In fact, not only American culture, the whole human

culture has damaged the ecological balance and biological diversity with its greed, selfishness and ignorance in the name of development and progress. As a result, the global natural environment is near the edge of collapse and all the species are threatened. The peaceful and natural life style of Gethenians is a mirror for human beings, an ideal relationship between man and nature Le Guin has been advocating and aspiring to. This sharp contrast between the two different development strategies reflects her concerns for the global ecology and her anxiety for the life and mental state of modern people.

The real purpose of the author may be that, by describing a life style influenced by the Taoist philosophy, Le Guin tries to find a probable way-out for the present ecological crisis: to learn from the Taoist philosophy and to treat our fellowmen and our nature with great tolerance, understanding and pity. Strictly speaking, however, Taoism alone can not solve the problem of protecting Earth's environment and keeping ecological balance, which need cooperation and efforts of all the society. However, changing our thoughts is the first step towards changing human life styles. Le Guin shows us a possible solution in a wise and calm manner, which, in the modern times full of ecological crisis, may be an advisable and effective way.

## CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of *The Left Hand of Darkness* lies in that Le Guin subtly fuses the Eastern wisdom Taoism into the modern Western literary genre, and raises her work to the point of perfect combination of form and content, of thought and aesthetics. From the angle of the complementarity of yin and yang of the Taoist philosophy, Le Guin invents an androgynous society and provides for us a science-fictional counterpart to think about the relationship between man and woman, and a way to refer to and draw lessons from it. Furthermore, ecological consciousness in the novel is also branded by the Taoist thought *wei wu wei* (not doing). Le Guin assumes that the advisable way for us to solve the problem of environmental crisis would be not to disturb the balance and interfere the rhythm of Nature. In all, *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates Le Guin's wish for better human relations and a better world. What she says in her famous essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" best expresses her assessment of the contemporary world and her real purpose of writing this novel: Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang and yin, (and the moralization of yang as good and yin as bad). Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, inter-dependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/ owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration

<sup>2</sup> Terrans, an term invented by Le Guin, referring to the future humans who come from the earth and inhabit on colonial planets of Ekumen. Actually it means "the Earth people". The word "Terra" means "the Earth."

and integrity (172). The goal of integration and integrity can not be achieved until the uniqueness and difference of every single thing is accepted and respected. That is, perhaps, what we readers could learn after reading *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

### Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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