


Article

Laozi's Ecofeminist Ethos: Bridging Ancient Wisdom with Contemporary Gender and Environmental Justice

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Abstract: This paper delves into the convergence of Laozi's Daoist mysticism with the principles of ecofeminism, highlighting the potential for ancient wisdom to inform contemporary issues of gender and environmental justice. Through an examination of the *Dao De Jing*, we uncover insights into a holistic approach to social justice that integrates ecological sustainability and gender equality. Laozi's teachings, characterized by the principles of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, offer a foundational framework for understanding the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. By analyzing relevant passages and concepts from the *Dao De Jing*, this paper demonstrates how Daoist philosophy aligns with and enriches ecofeminist values, advocating for a society that honors the balance between humanity and nature and recognizes the integral role of women in achieving environmental and social harmony. This paper presents case studies that illustrate the practical application of Daoist principles in ecological feminist practices, shedding light on the successes and challenges of integrating ancient philosophical insights into modern activism. The fusion of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism provides a compelling vision for addressing the intertwined challenges of gender inequality and environmental degradation, suggesting pathways toward a more just, sustainable, and harmonious world. In doing so, it calls for a reimagined approach to social justice that is deeply informed by an understanding of ecological sustainability and gender equality as mutually reinforcing goals.

Keywords: Laozi; Daoist mysticism; ecofeminism; gender justice; environmental justice; *Dao De Jing*; harmony; sustainability



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1. Introduction

In recent years, the intersections of ancient wisdom and contemporary social justice movements have garnered increasing attention among scholars and activists alike. This convergence is particularly poignant in the dialogue between Laozi's Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, where ancient philosophical principles offer fresh insights into modern struggles against environmental degradation and gender injustice. The *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, serves as a cornerstone text for Daoism—a tradition steeped in the values of *Dao* (道), *Wu-wei* (wuwei 無為), and *Ziran* (ziran 自然). These principles, while ancient, resonate deeply with the aims and aspirations of ecofeminism, a movement that seeks to address the intertwined oppressions of gender and environmental injustice (Warren 1997).

Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, emerges from the critical insight that the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women are interconnected phenomena, both stemming from a patriarchal worldview that values domination over care, competition over cooperation, and extraction over sustainability (Shiva and Mies 2014). This perspective highlights the ways in which environmental degradation and gender inequality are not isolated issues but are deeply entangled within the fabric of societal norms and structures. Therefore, ecofeminism advocates for a holistic approach to social justice—one that simultaneously addresses the need for environmental preservation and the advancement of gender equality.

Laozi has been called “the earliest feminist thinker in human history” (Zhang and Zhang 2010). His Daoism, with its rich philosophical heritage, offers profound insights into the natural world and human existence; “It advocates the deconstruction of power through a feminist philosophy that seeks freedom in intimacy with nature” (Liu 2022). Central to Daoist thought is the concept of *Wu-wei*, or non-action, which advocates for a way of living that is in harmony with the natural rhythms and patterns of the *Dao*—the underlying principle that governs all existence (Feng 1947). Daoism has historically provided a unique philosophical stance characterized by principles such as *Wu-wei*. Daoism responded to the rigid moral structures of Confucianism, highlighting a path that emphasizes naturalness and spontaneity over structured moral imperatives (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 2013). This approach encourages a life of simplicity, spontaneity, and alignment with *Ziran*, or the self-arising nature of things. Through these teachings, Daoism promotes a worldview that respects the interconnectedness of all life and the value of maintaining balance within the cosmos. In such a world, nature is the highest value, “wherein love and compassion and caring for one another are generated” (Liu 2005).

The thesis of this paper posits that Laozi’s Daoist mysticism, as encapsulated in the *Dao De Jing*¹, provides a foundational framework for addressing contemporary ecological and gender-based injustices. Rawls said, “Justice is the first virtue of social systems” (Rawls 1971). Thomas Michael believes that Laozi constructed his view of justice around four concepts: Heaven and Earth (tiandi 天地), the constant *Dao* (changdao 常道), the *Dao* of humans (renzhidao 人之道), and the *Dao* of Heaven (tiandao 天道 or tianzhidao 天之道) (Michael 2023). Among these concepts, The *Dao* of humans is against nature and unjust, while Heaven and Earth, the constant *Dao*, and the *Dao* of Heaven follow nature and justice². Thus, from Laozi’s perspective, we can also say “Nature is the primary standard of justice.” By exploring the synergies between Daoist philosophy and ecofeminist values, this paper aims to uncover a holistic approach to social justice—one that is deeply informed by an understanding of ecological sustainability and gender equality as mutually reinforcing goals.

This paper first comprehensively outlines the core teachings of Laozi’s Daoism, with a special focus on the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*. This exploration will highlight how Daoist philosophy offers insights into living in harmony with the natural laws and principles, emphasizing the importance of balance, moderation, and respect for the intrinsic value of all forms of life. Next, this article delves into ecofeminism, tracing its theoretical roots and outlining its key principles and objectives. This section elucidates how ecofeminism challenges the dualistic thinking that separates nature from culture and men from women, instead advocating a perspective of understanding the world that recognizes the profound interconnection between the health of the Earth and the wellbeing of all of its inhabitants. The heart of this paper then examines the intersection of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, drawing parallels between the two perspectives in their critique of dominant paradigms and their vision for a more equitable and sustainable world. This analysis will demonstrate how the principles of Daoism can complement and deepen ecofeminist approaches to social justice, providing a rich philosophical foundation for re-envisioning the relationships between humans, other living beings, and the Earth. Furthermore, this paper will explore practical implications of this integrated approach, considering how insights from Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism can inform contemporary activism, policy-making, and everyday life practices aimed at achieving a more just and sustainable world. Through this discussion, this paper aims to illustrate the transformative potential of bringing together ancient wisdom and modern social justice movements in the quest for a better future. Lastly, this paper reiterates the thesis that Laozi’s Daoist mysticism offers valuable resources for ecofeminist efforts to combat ecological and gender injustices.

By embracing the holistic worldview proposed by Daoism and integrating it with ecofeminist values, this paper argues for a comprehensive approach to social justice that is capable of addressing the complex and interconnected challenges facing contemporary societies. Through this synthesis, we can aspire to create a world that honors the intercon-

nectedness of all life, fostering a more harmonious, equitable, and sustainable existence for generations to come.

2. Laozi's Daoist Mysticism: Concepts and Context

Laozi's Daoist mysticism, as encapsulated within the venerable text of the *Dao De Jing*, presents a profound and nuanced philosophy that has intrigued scholars, practitioners, and seekers of wisdom for centuries. At the heart of this mystical tradition are the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, which together form the bedrock of Daoist thought and spiritual practice. Laozi believed that all humans and all things originate from nature and, ultimately, return to it. He envisioned harmony among all things as a state of completeness, self-sufficiency, and simplicity. He stated "The *Dao* is great, the heaven is great, the earth is great, and king is also great. There are four greats in the world, and king is one of them" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 25). In Laozi's view, king should embody the laws of nature and ought to be the best among humans (Li 2008), which is why Laozi stated, "the king is also great," and humans are a part of nature, coexisting and thriving with all other beings without distinction of status or value; at the same time, humans are the spirits of all beings and should therefore bear the responsibility of "assisting the natural ways of all things" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 64) (Zhang 2008). In the process of "assisting the natural ways of all things", humans must heed Laozi's teachings "not to engage in reckless action" (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 64), but to comply with and aid nature, allowing all things to develop and grow naturally according to their own nature.

2.1. Exploration of Key Daoist Concepts: *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*

The *Dao*: The Way Beyond Words

The *Dao*, often translated as "The Way", stands as a profound principle in Daoism that transcends simple definition or categorization; it is one of the most important terms in Chinese thought and philosophy (Guo 2010). This summary distills the core translations from the *Dao De Jing* to emphasize their contributions to understanding Daoism's essence and their relevance to broader philosophical discourses.

Key translations of *Dao* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 1: "The *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal *Dao*." This opening sets the tone for the *Dao*'s ineffable nature.

Chapter 25: Describes the *Dao* as pre-existing the universe, embodying tranquility and permanence, thereby highlighting its role as the ultimate origin.

Chapter 32: Compares the *Dao* to a river or sea, illustrating its vast and guiding presence in the world.

The *Dao*'s portrayal across various chapters, such as Chapters 8, 18, 21, and 73, shows its application from governing principles to metaphysical descriptions, suggesting a versatile influence on both the practical and spiritual levels. Chapters such as 42 and 48 reveal the *Dao*'s foundational impact on creation and wisdom, implying a continuous cycle of learning and unlearning.

Laozi's frequent use of feminine terms like "mother", "female", and "maternity" to describe the *Dao* highlights its nurturing and generative qualities, aligning with ecofeminist perspectives that emphasize care and interdependence. Feng's interpretation of the *Dao* as akin to female genitalia and Xiao Bing and Ye Shuxian's views on female worship underscore the *Dao*'s role in fostering a culture of reproduction and respect for the feminine (Feng 1962; Xiao and Ye 1993). The *Dao De Jing*'s emphasis on *Wu-wei* and *Ziran* across various chapters (e.g., Chapters 40 and 57) advocates for a way of life that harmonizes action with spontaneity and ethical conduct, without forced efforts. The *Dao* is both the source and the driving force behind everything that exists, yet it remains beyond the grasp of language and conceptual thought (Wu and Wu 2009). It is not merely a path to be followed but the underlying reality of all that is. In Daoist mysticism, the *Dao* represents the ultimate reality, an unchanging and indescribable force that permeates the cosmos. It is both immanent, manifesting in every aspect of the natural world, and transcendent, existing beyond

the physical realm. This dual nature of the *Dao* challenges the dualistic thinking prevalent in many other philosophical and religious traditions, proposing instead a vision of unity and interconnectedness, in which the “female theory helps us to rebuild the harmonious relationship between man and man and between man and nature” (Gu 2017).

Wu-wei: The Art of Non-Action

Wu-wei, often translated as “non-action” or “inaction”, is a foundational concept in Daoism that emphasizes acting in harmony with the natural flow of the *Dao*. This summary presents a concise exploration of *Wu-wei*’s appearances in the *Dao De Jing* and its philosophical implications, structured to enhance readability and highlight its relevance to the thesis.

Key translations of *Wu-wei* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 2: Illustrates how sages lead by example, performing actions that are effortless and unspoken yet effective, embodying the principle of *Wu-wei*.

Chapter 3: Suggests that by adopting *Wu-wei*, societal and personal order is naturally achieved.

Chapter 10: Questions the possibility of governing with detachment and without intervention, reinforcing the *Wu-wei* approach to leadership.

Chapter 38: Distinguishes between higher and lower virtues, with the superior virtue acting through *Wu-wei*, devoid of overt effort or motive.

Chapter 43: Demonstrates how the softest approaches can overcome the hardest challenges through *Wu-wei*, signifying the power of gentleness and flexibility.

Chapter 48: Discusses the diminishing of active learning in favor of intuitive understanding, a core aspect of *Wu-wei*.

Chapter 57: Shows that natural transformation in people arises from the leader’s practice of *Wu-wei*, leading to self-governance and harmony.

Chapter 64: Encourages supporting the natural progression of events without force, highlighting *Wu-wei*’s role in fostering natural success.

Wu-wei is not about doing nothing but, rather, about doing what is naturally aligned with the *Dao*; it is an action guided by a deep understanding of and integration with the natural world, as opposed to forced or artificial efforts. This principle contrasts with Western notions of active intervention, offering a perspective that values spontaneity and intrinsic order over control and manipulation. *Wu-wei*’s advocacy for effortless action resonates with modern ecological and social movements that emphasize sustainability and reducing human impact. The concept promotes living in harmony with nature, aligning closely with principles of sustainability and ethical interaction within ecosystems (Xiong 1996). By embracing *Wu-wei*, individuals and societies can achieve their goals with minimal resistance and maximum efficiency. This practice encourages a return to simplicity and authenticity, fostering a deeper connection with the natural rhythms of life and the universe. *Wu-wei* thus provides a valuable framework for addressing contemporary challenges, from personal wellbeing to global sustainability, illustrating how ancient wisdom can inform modern practices.

Ziran: The Principle of Naturalness

Ziran, a pivotal concept in Daoism, is often translated as “naturalness” or “spontaneity” and is crucial for understanding Daoist philosophy’s emphasis on the intrinsic, self-arising nature of things. It is from this concept of *Ziran* that Laozi established his theory of Daoism (Wei 2018). This summary distills the core translations and contexts from the *Dao De Jing* to elucidate *Ziran*’s role and relevance in broader philosophical discourse. *Ziran* is associated with a range of meanings, including “naturalness”, “nature”, “self-doing”, “self-going”, “being free”, “spontaneous”, and “spontaneity” (Guo 2010; Liu 2016), underscoring its diverse implications in Daoist thought.

Key translations of *Ziran* in the *Dao De Jing*:

Chapter 17: Describes achievements happening so naturally that people feel that they occurred spontaneously.

Chapter 23: Advocates for minimal speech and following the natural way, emphasizing simplicity and authenticity.

Chapter 25: Illustrates the cascading order of adherence from humans to the Earth, and from Earth to the Heavens, culminating in all following the *Dao*, which itself adheres to the natural way.

Chapter 51: Reflects on the reverence for the *Dao* and virtue as inherently constant without being commanded.

Chapter 64: Portrays the sage who supports the natural progression of things without imposing actions, aligning with the spontaneous nature of *Ziran*.

Ziran relates to living in harmony with the *Dao*, suggesting that all phenomena evolve naturally in accordance with the *Dao*, without external force or manipulation; it embodies a state of uncontrived simplicity and authenticity, where actions arise from an innate understanding of what is appropriate in each moment. *Ziran* contrasts with Western notions of control and manipulation, advocating for a philosophy of freedom and natural progression; it challenges the dualistic approach of human versus nature, proposing a unified vision where actions are integrated with the natural order. The concept encourages a return to natural states, promoting actions driven not by desire or fear but by a deep alignment with what is inherently right, reflecting a trust in the natural wisdom of the universe. The concept of *Ziran* encourages a return to the natural state, where actions are taken not out of desire for gain or fear of loss, but from an innate understanding of what is inherently right and appropriate in each moment (Xing and Sims 2012). By embodying *Ziran*, individuals engage in life with a respect for the natural order, trusting life's processes, embracing change, and living in harmony with the cosmos. This approach not only fosters personal peace but also enhances collective wellbeing by reinforcing interconnectedness and mutual respect among all beings.

Interconnectedness of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*

The *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* form a trinity within Daoist philosophy, each concept intricately woven into the fabric of the others. The *Dao* embodies the underlying principle of the universe—the invisible source and order that governs all things—and is “the mechanism by which the ultimate meaning occurs” (Zhang 2022); it represents the natural flow and rhythm of existence, a vast and ever-changing dance of energy. *Wu-wei* is not about passivity but, rather, about acting in accordance with the *Dao*; it is about aligning oneself with the natural flow, responding with fluidity and adaptability rather than forceful intervention (Liu 1996). *Ziran* represents the effortless manifestation of the *Dao* in the world; it is the state of being where actions flow naturally, mirroring the inherent order of the universe.

Imagine the *Dao* as a vast ocean, with its currents and tides representing the natural order of existence. *Wu-wei* becomes the art of navigating these currents—not fighting against them, but using sails and rudder to move with grace and efficiency. The destination is not a rigid endpoint but, rather, a harmonious journey within the flow. *Ziran*, then, is the effortless movement of the sailboat itself—a perfect expression of the ocean's power channeled through the vessel's design. The boat does not need to force its way through the water; it simply moves in accordance with the natural forces at play.

This interconnectedness between the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* fosters a profound sense of harmony with the natural world. By understanding the *Dao*, we gain a deeper appreciation for the inherent order and beauty of the universe. By practicing *Wu-wei*, we learn to act in ways that complement this order, minimizing disruption and maximizing flow, and by cultivating *Ziran*, we strive to embody this naturalness in our own actions, becoming expressions of the *Dao* ourselves. The relationship among the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran* is dynamic, where each principle reinforces and deepens the significance of the others. Through the understanding of the *Dao*, one finds the motivation for *Wu-wei*, the practice of which naturally results in *Ziran*. This cyclical relationship reflects the very cycles and rhythms of the natural world that the *Dao* itself encapsulates. In living through *Wu-wei*, one aligns with the *Dao*, leading to actions and existence that are marked by *Ziran*. This

alignment not only fosters personal peace and fulfillment but also harmonizes individual actions with the larger order of the universe, promoting a balance that benefits not just the individual but the community and the natural world at large.

Laozi's mysticism, through the lens of these interrelated concepts, challenges us to reevaluate our approach to life and our interactions with the environment; it calls for a profound alignment with the *Dao*, achieved through the practice of *Wu-wei*, resulting in a life of *Ziran*. This philosophical approach views human existence not as separate from the natural order but as an integral part of it, where each individual's understanding and application of these principles can lead to a harmonious existence that echoes the fundamental truths of the universe. By embracing the *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, we not only cultivate a deeper connection with the world around us but also contribute to the sustaining and flourishing of the natural order.

2.2. Historical Context of Laozi's Teachings

The historical backdrop against which Laozi's teachings emerged was a period of immense social and political upheaval. The Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE) in China witnessed the decline of the Zhou Dynasty's centralized authority, leading to a power struggle among various warring states. This era of constant conflict and instability fueled a philosophical renaissance, as thinkers grappled with the question of how to restore order and harmony to a fractured society.

Challenging the Status Quo: A Reaction to Patriarchal Excess

Within this context, some scholars posit that Laozi's *Dao De Jing* emerged as a critique of the dominant social and political structures. The patriarchal system of the time, characterized by hierarchical power dynamics and with an emphasis on aggressive expansion, was seen as a contributing factor to the prevailing chaos. Laozi, according to this interpretation, sought to champion qualities traditionally associated with the feminine, such as compassion, *Wu-wei*, and gentleness, as antidotes to the societal ills of the time (Zhang 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge that evidence for a deliberate feminist undercurrent in the *Dao De Jing* is open to debate.

A Call for Harmony and Order Through Alignment with the *Dao*

The prevailing philosophical paradigm of the time was largely shaped by Confucianism, which emphasized social order achieved through strict hierarchies, moral codes, and adherence to rituals. In contrast, Laozi's teachings offered a vision of achieving peace and stability through aligning oneself with the *Dao*, the natural order of the universe. This philosophy, advocating for a return to a simpler, more natural way of life, stood in stark contrast to the rigid control and moralism advocated by other schools of thought (Liu 1996).

Beyond the Immediate: A Philosophical Legacy

Laozi's ideas, with their emphasis on inner harmony and balance over external control, were revolutionary for their time. They challenged the dominant Confucian perspective and resonated with those seeking alternative ways of understanding the world and navigating the complexities of life during a period of societal unrest (Shen and Qian 2012). The Daoist concepts of *Ziran* and *Wu-wei* offered a distinct approach to living and governing, emphasizing harmony with nature rather than active intervention and manipulation. This philosophy suggested that true peace and order could be attained through a deep understanding of the natural world's inherent rhythms and patterns (Shi 2000).

Daoism's Enduring Influence: A Legacy that Spans Millennia

Laozi's teachings transcended their immediate historical context to leave an indelible mark on Chinese culture for centuries to come. Daoist principles—particularly the emphasis on living in harmony with nature—have profoundly influenced Chinese aesthetics, ecological practices, and philosophical discourse. The *Dao De Jing* continues to be a source of inspiration and contemplation for scholars, artists, and political leaders who seek guidance from its enduring wisdom.

A Global Conversation: Daoism's Reach Beyond China

The Daoist mystical tradition has garnered international interest and respect, fostering cross-cultural philosophical and spiritual dialogues. The widespread translation of the *Dao De Jing* into numerous languages and its study across diverse cultures highlight the universality of its message. Laozi's emphasis on simplicity, peace, and harmony resonates with contemporary human quests for meaning and balance in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. In reassessing the broader cultural and historical impacts of Laozi's teachings, it becomes evident that Daoism offered revolutionary insights that transcended the immediate sociopolitical context of the Spring and Autumn period. The philosophical legacy of Laozi not only influenced subsequent dynastic eras but also resonated with later feminist and ecological movements, advocating for harmony, balance, and a holistic connection with the natural world.

Conclusion: A Tapestry Woven from History and Philosophy

Understanding the historical context of Laozi's teachings enriches our appreciation of Daoist mysticism. The turmoil of the Spring and Autumn period provided fertile ground for the emergence of Laozi's revolutionary ideas, which offered a compelling alternative to the established Confucian order. Unlike the Confucianist, the Daoist seeks to follow the *Dao* in harmony with and through nature. The mystical teaching of *Wu-wei*, or the ideal of creative quietude, forms the basis for a new Daoist way of life based on the contemplative practices of simplicity, spontaneity, and naturalness (Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes 2013). These core Daoist principles transcended the immediate concerns of their time to establish a timeless philosophy that continues to inspire individuals and communities seeking harmony and balance in their lives. By delving into the origins and impacts of Laozi's teachings, we gain a deeper appreciation for Daoism's enduring value. This offers a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of human existence, reminding us of the ancient quest for understanding and balance, and inviting us to explore a path of simplicity and naturalness that remains relevant even in the modern world.

3. Ecofeminism: Principles and Practices

Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, is “a meeting between feminism and ecology”, (Puleo 2017), representing a dynamic intersection within feminist and environmental movements that articulates a critical perspective on the relationship between the oppression of nature and the subjugation of women. This ideology emerges from the understanding that the environmental crisis and gender inequality are not separate issues but are intricately linked through the same systems of domination and exploitation. By examining the historical development and foundational ideas of ecofeminism, one can appreciate its significance in advocating for both environmental sustainability and gender equity.

3.1. Definition and History of Ecofeminism

The term “ecofeminism” itself was first coined in 1974 by the French feminist d'Eaubonne in her book “*Le Féminisme ou la Mort*” (Feminism or Death), where she called for women to lead a movement against the ecological destruction wrought by patriarchal societies. D'Eaubonne argued that the liberation of women and the salvation of the environment were deeply interconnected goals that could only be achieved through a radical restructuring of society (d'Eaubonne [1974] 2022). Ecofeminism is defined by its proponents as a movement that combines ecological concerns with feminist perspectives, highlighting the connection between the exploitation of natural resources and the oppression of women (Shiva and Mies 2014). This movement suggests that the same patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality also drive environmental degradation, positioning both women and nature as subordinate to male authority and control. The roots of ecofeminism can be traced back to the early environmental and feminist movements of the 1970s, which began to identify and challenge the interconnected systems of oppression affecting both women and the planet.

Historical Development

The development of ecofeminism as a philosophical and activist stance has been influenced by various feminist and environmental milestones. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ecofeminism gained momentum as activists and scholars began to more explicitly link the feminist critique of patriarchy with critical analyses of environmental degradation. Key events, such as the publication of Rachel Carson's *"Silent Spring"* in 1962, which exposed the dangers of pesticide use, and the emergence of the women's liberation movement, provided a backdrop for the ecological feminist movement to flourish (Rachel 1962). Ecological feminists pointed out that women—particularly those in marginalized communities—often bear the brunt of environmental degradation due to their closer ties to the natural world through roles in agriculture, family care, and as the primary gatherers of water and fuel in many traditional societies. This insight led to a broadening of the ecological feminist critique to include issues of racial and class injustice, making it a multifaceted movement that seeks to address a range of interconnected oppressions.

Core Themes and Ideas

Ecofeminism is based on the belief that the ideology behind modern society's exploitation of the environment is rooted in the same patriarchal structures that oppress women, with the current global crisis being a product of patriarchal culture (Salleh 1988). Warren noted that both the domination of nature by humans and the domination of women by men operate under a patriarchal culture-centered system, forming an oppressive conceptual framework characterized by three major features: (1) hierarchical thinking, which posits that higher ranks equate to higher value, while lower ranks equate to lower value; (2) binary opposition, which divides the world and everything in it into mutually exclusive and opposing aspects, X and Y, where one is valued over the other; and (3) logic of domination, holding that if X is of higher value than Y, then X's domination over Y is justified (Warren 1990). Based on this understanding, ecofeminism advocates for a world where ecological balance and gender equality are seen as inseparable goals, emphasizing the need for an environmental ethics that includes respect for women's rights and contributions. This perspective challenges the dualisms of man/nature and male/female, arguing instead for a holistic understanding of the interdependence between humans and the natural world (Val 1993). This movement also critiques the dominant scientific and economic paradigms that prioritize profit and growth over sustainability and equity, calling for alternative models of development that are inclusive and respectful of both human and non-human life. Through this lens, ecofeminism offers both a critique of existing systems and a vision for a more just and sustainable future.

In summary, the definition and historical development of ecofeminism reveal a movement deeply committed to addressing the intertwined destinies of women and the natural environment. By challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of environmental degradation and advocating for gender equity, ecofeminism represents a unique and vital perspective within both feminist and environmental discourses. Its evolution from a merging of feminist and environmental activism into a distinct philosophical stance highlights the importance of understanding and combating the interconnected systems of oppression that impact both the planet and its people.

3.2. Core Principles and How They Relate to Environmental and Gender Justice

Ecofeminism, with its integration of feminist and ecological concerns, is grounded in several core principles that illuminate its approach to achieving both environmental and gender justice. These principles not only critique the existing patriarchal and capitalist systems that lead to the degradation of the environment and the oppression of women (Giacomini 2020, p. 101), they also propose alternative ways of understanding and interacting with the world that foster sustainability, equity, and mutual respect among all forms of life.

Interconnectedness of Oppression

A foundational principle of ecofeminism is the belief in the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression, whether based on gender, race, class, or species. Ecological feminists argue that the mechanisms that marginalize women are intrinsically linked to those that

lead to environmental destruction. This perspective challenges the hierarchical dualisms—such as man/woman, culture/nature, or human/animal—that underpin patriarchal societies, suggesting instead that oppression is a multifaceted phenomenon that must be addressed in its entirety. By recognizing the interconnected nature of these systems of domination, ecofeminism seeks to dismantle them, advocating for a more equitable and just world ([Radford Ruether 2003](#)).

Ethics of Care

Central to ecological feminist thought is the ethics of care, which emphasizes empathy, compassion, and nurturing as essential components of an ethical relationship with both people and the environment ([Cross 2018](#)). This contrasts sharply with the more traditional environmental ethics, which often prioritizes rights-based and utilitarian approaches. The ethics of care advocates for personal responsibility and interconnectedness, urging individuals and societies to consider the impacts of their actions on others and the environment. This principle extends the notion of care beyond human relationships to include the more-than-human world, advocating for a form of environmental stewardship that is informed by care and mutual respect.

Holistic Worldview

Ecofeminism promotes a holistic understanding of the world that acknowledges the complex interdependencies between the natural environment and human societies; it critiques the reductionist and compartmentalized approaches of modern science and economics, which often ignore the intricate relationships that sustain life on Earth. Instead, ecofeminism embraces a worldview that recognizes the value of diversity, the importance of ecological balance, and the need for sustainable living practices that honor the Earth and all of its inhabitants. This holistic perspective is crucial for addressing the environmental and social challenges of our time in an integrated and comprehensive manner ([Mellor 2007](#)).

Sustainability and Regeneration

A commitment to sustainability and regeneration underpins the ecological feminist approach to environmental and gender justice. This principle involves rethinking our economic and social systems in ways that prioritize the long-term health of the planet over immediate profit and consumption. Ecological feminists advocate for renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular economies that mimic natural cycles of regeneration and minimize waste. By promoting practices that restore and rejuvenate the environment, ecofeminism contributes to the creation of a more sustainable and resilient world for future generations ([Meinzen-Dick et al. 2014](#)).

Solidarity and Alliance-Building

Finally, ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of solidarity and alliance-building among diverse movements fighting against oppression ([Giacomini 2020](#)). Recognizing that environmental and gender justice are part of a broader struggle for liberation, ecological feminists seek to forge alliances with indigenous rights activists, labor movements, anti-racist organizations, and other groups working towards a more equitable and just society. Through these collaborations, ecofeminism strengthens its capacity to challenge the dominant paradigms and practices that harm both people and the planet, highlighting the power of collective action in driving social change.

In summary, ecofeminism draws upon the theory of deep ecology, “conceptualizing human relations with nature as a form of domination” ([Giacomini 2020](#), p. 101). The core principles of this theory—the interconnectedness of oppression, the ethics of care, a holistic worldview, sustainability and regeneration, and solidarity and alliance-building—offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the intertwined issues of environmental degradation and gender inequality. By grounding its approach in these principles, ecofeminism provides valuable insights into how we might reimagine our relationships with the natural world and with one another, fostering a more just, sustainable, and compassionate society.

4. Intersection of Daoism and Ecofeminism

Daoism can provide a powerful philosophical framework for ecofeminism, as it inherently values the natural world and its principles of harmony and balance. Unlike Confucianism, which has more patriarchal overtones, Daoism offers a perspective that is potentially more aligned with ecofeminist ideals, emphasizing equality and interconnectedness among lifeforms (Amy 2022). In the *Dao De Jing*, the terms representing femininity, such as “mother (mu 母)”, “female (ci 雌)”, and “maternity (pin 牝)”, appear much more frequently and predominantly than those representing masculinity, such as “father (fu 父)”, “male (xiong 雄)”, and “paternity (mu 牡)”. For instance, the character for “mother” occurs seven times, whereas “father” appears only once; “female” is mentioned twice, while “male” appears just once; “maternity (pin 牝)” is noted five times, in contrast to “paternity (mu 牡)”, which appears twice. Moreover, in the *Dao De Jing*, these terms denoting femininity are always presented in a positive light. Clearly, Laozi showed a preference for the feminine, leading some scholars to regard him as an advocate of female supremacy (Zhu et al. 2022). The intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism presents a fascinating convergence of Eastern philosophy and Western feminist thought, each offering unique insights into the relationship between humanity and the natural world. This comparative analysis aims to explore the philosophical synergies and distinctions between Daoism and ecofeminism, highlighting how these two frameworks can inform and enhance one another in the pursuit of environmental sustainability and gender equity.

4.1. Comparative Analysis of Daoism and Ecofeminism

Philosophical Foundations

Daoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy, centers around the concepts of *Dao*, *Wu-wei*, and *Ziran*, advocating for a life in harmony with the natural order. This philosophy can offer a “critical diagnosis and treatment of modernity and the contemporary ecological crisis situation” (Nelson 2020, p. 6); it emphasizes the importance of following the spontaneous flow of the universe, suggesting that true wisdom lies in recognizing and aligning with the rhythms of nature. Chapter 57 of the *Dao De Jing* says, “When I practice *Wu-wei*, the people naturally transform; When I love tranquility, the people naturally become upright; When I am free from affairs, the people naturally become wealthy; When I am free from desires, the people naturally become simple.” This indicates that Laozi believed that true righteousness does not require forced intervention but naturally arises within the interactions and balance of Heaven, Earth, the universe, and humanity. This perspective challenges contemporary notions of justice, advocating for a method more in line with the rhythms and cycles of natural life. This encourages a deep respect for the natural world, seeing it not as a resource to be exploited but as a living, integral part of existence. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, emerges from a critique of the patriarchal structures that have led to both the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment; it posits that the ideologies driving the exploitation of nature are rooted in the same patriarchal systems that marginalize women. Ecofeminism advocates for an interconnected approach to social justice, emphasizing the importance of addressing environmental and gender issues as fundamentally linked challenges.

Synergies between Daoism and Ecofeminism

In Daoism, female is “not the power that is opposite to the male” (Liu 2022) but the symbol of nature, the source of all things, and even the representative of the best good. One of the key synergies between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their shared emphasis on interconnectedness and holistic understanding, and they also share “a similar view of the ethic of life that nature is One” (Li 2023). Both frameworks challenge the dualistic thinking that separates humans from nature and men from women, proposing instead a vision of unity and mutual dependence. Daoism’s concept of *Ziran* aligns with ecofeminism’s critique of the artificial division between culture and nature, suggesting a return to a more integrated, authentic way of living. The ethics of care central to ecological feminist thought also finds resonance in Daoist philosophy. From an ecological feminist perspective, Dao-

ism encompasses feminist values (Li 2023). Daoism's appreciation for the intrinsic worth of all living beings and the emphasis on living in harmony with the *Dao* reflect a form of care and respect for the environment that is deeply aligned with ecological feminist principles. This shared ethics of care fosters a compassionate engagement with the world, advocating for actions that nurture rather than harm.

In reevaluating Daoist texts, especially the gender discourse in the *Dao De Jing*, we find that the *Dao*, as the fundamental principle of the universe, generates all things, including both males and females. Daoism does not emphasize gender differences but, rather, stresses the fundamental equality of all beings. The *Dao* produces everything in Heaven and Earth without distinction between Yin and Yang or male and female, reflecting its essential stance on gender equality. The concepts of "Unity of Heaven and Man" and "Harmony between Yin and Yang" in the *Dao De Jing* further suggest that when society reaches a state of natural harmony, gender distinctions will blur, and people will no longer be differentiated based on gender but will instead reflect the unity of humanity with nature. In Daoist texts, particularly in interpretations from various dynasties, the concept of the *Dao* is often linked with nature and generative forces—attributes that are culturally associated with femininity. The portrayal of female traits in the *Dao De Jing* is not limited to biological roles, such as reproduction and nurturing, but also includes traits like gentleness and compliance, closely related to the notion of "valuing softness" (Zhu et al. 2022). From a Daoist perspective, softness is a form of strength; it informs a way of living in accordance with natural laws, emphasizes the political philosophy of governing through non-action, and achieves social harmony through gentle forces. This view not only highlights the high regard for women in the *Dao De Jing* but also reflects the complexity and depth of gender notions in ancient texts.

Additionally, the maternal qualities of the *Dao* can be further understood through the annotations of He Shangong, Wang Bi, Lu Xisheng, and Su Zhe on the phrase "the mother of all things" in the *Dao De Jing*. He (2015) remarked "The mother of all things refers to heaven and earth, which contain qi to give birth to all things, grow, mature, like a mother nurturing her child", illustrating the *Dao* as a nurturing mother to all beings. Wang's (2015) interpretation highlights "Once they have form and name, then they are nurtured and grown, sheltered and cherished, thus acting as their mother", emphasizing the maternal role of the *Dao* in the maturation process of all things. Lu (2015), from a more philosophical angle, explained "The so-called mother is the *Dao*; the child is the One. Lovingly nurturing its child involves feeding its spirit with desires; valuing nurturing its mother involves returning to the *Dao* through tranquility", indicating the *Dao* as not only the source of birth but also a haven and spiritual refuge. Su (2015) commented "Once it has a name, it spreads and becomes all things, and the things it nurtures are too numerous to count", illustrating the *Dao*'s formless vastness and power through the birthing of all things. These explanations deepen our understanding of the *Dao* as a generative force and philosophical foundation, reinforcing Daoist texts' advocacy for gender equality and natural harmony.

Distinctions between Daoism and Ecofeminism

In the *Dao De Jing*, in addition to the aforementioned characters related to feminism, such as "mother (*mu* 母)", "female (*ci* 雌)", and "maternity (*pin* 牝)", there are also words like "valley (*gu* 谷)", "stream (*xi* 谿)", and "abyss (*yuan* 淵)", among which representative sentences include the following:

Chapter 1: The nameless (無名) is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the named (有名) is the mother of all things.³

第一章：無名天地之始，有名萬物之母。

Chapter 4: The *Dao* is used but never filled, ever-inexhaustible; it is like the abyss (*yuan* 淵), seemingly the progenitor of all things.

第四章：道沖而用之，或不盈。淵兮，似萬物之宗。

Chapter 6: The valley (*gu* 谷) spirit never dies; it is called the mysterious maternity (*pin* 牝). The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth; it is continuous and seems to exist forever, and it can be used without being exhausted.

第六章：谷神不死是謂玄牝。玄牝之門是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

Chapter 10: When the world is in turmoil, can one be like the female (*ci* 雌) ?

第十章：天門開闔，能為雌乎？

Chapter 20: I alone am different from others, and I cherish the mother (*mu* 母) who raised me.

第二十章：我獨異於人，而貴食母。

Chapter 28: Know the male (*xiong* 雄), yet keep to the female (*ci* 雌), and be the valley (*xi* 谿) of the world. Being the valley (*xi* 谿) of the world, constant virtue will not depart, enabling a return to the state of the infant.

第二十八章：知其雄，守其雌，為天下谿。為天下谿，常德不離，復歸於嬰兒。

Chapter 52: The world has a beginning, which can be regarded as the mother (*mu* 母) of the world. Once you find her, you can know her children; once you know her children, return to uphold the mother, and you will be safe all your life.

第五十二章：天下有始，以為天下母。既得其母，以知其子；既知其子，復守其母，沒身不殆。

Chapter 61: A great country is like the lower part of a river—the confluence of the world, the maternity (*pin* 牝) of the world. The maternity (*pin* 牝) always overcomes the paternity (*mu* 牡) with tranquility, using tranquility as her lower position.

第六十一章：大國者下流，天下之交，天下之牝。牝常以靜勝牡，以靜為下。

From the aforementioned words of Laozi, it can be seen that a key resonance between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their mutual emphasis on interconnection and holistic understanding. Despite these synergies, there are also distinctions in the origins, emphases, and applications of Daoism and ecofeminism. Daoism's roots in ancient Chinese cosmology and its emphasis on mystical understanding and individual enlightenment offer a contrast to ecofeminism's more activist-oriented, critical approach to social structures and gender relations. Where Daoism seeks harmony through alignment with the *Dao* and the practice of *Wu-wei*, ecofeminism calls for active resistance against patriarchal and capitalist systems that perpetuate inequality and environmental destruction. Moreover, ecofeminism explicitly addresses the role of gender in the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women—a focus that is not inherently present in traditional Daoist texts. While Daoism advocates for a universal harmony and balance, ecofeminism emphasizes the need for social and political change to achieve gender equity and environmental justice.

In summary, the integrative potential of Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their ability to offer complementary perspectives on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. By blending Daoism's philosophical insights with ecofeminism's critique of patriarchal structures, an enriched framework emerges that advocates for environmental sustainability, gender equity, and a more profound respect for the interconnectedness of all life. This synthesis invites a reimagining of our place in the world, encouraging practices and ways of being that are sustainable, equitable, and aligned with the fundamental principles of both harmony and justice.

4.2. Discussion on Harmony, Natural Order, and Gender Equity

The intertwining of Daoism and ecofeminism offers a rich tapestry for exploring concepts such as harmony, natural order, and gender equity. These foundational elements serve not only as points of convergence but also as platforms for a deeper understanding of how these philosophies can inform and transform contemporary approaches to environmental and social issues.

Harmony and Natural Order

Harmony and natural order are central tenets of Daoism, which posits that living in accordance with the *Dao*, or "The Way", leads to a balanced and harmonious existence (Lee et al. 2009). This principle extends beyond the individual, suggesting that societies and

ecosystems thrive when they align with the natural rhythms and patterns of the universe (Cao and Xu 2012). Ecofeminism resonates with this notion of harmony but extends it to include the social realm, particularly in relation to gender relations. Ecological feminists argue that the patriarchal domination of women and nature disrupts the natural order, leading to environmental degradation and gender inequality. By advocating for a restoration of balance between humans and the natural world, ecofeminism seeks to reestablish a harmonious relationship that respects both ecological integrity and gender equity. The synergy between Daoism and ecofeminism lies in their mutual recognition of the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of maintaining balance within these relationships. Both philosophies challenge the exploitative and hierarchical structures that lead to disharmony, suggesting that true harmony is achieved through a respectful and reciprocal engagement with the natural world and with one another.

Natural Order and Gender Equity

The ecological feminist theologian Ivone (2003) pointed out that Christianity considers humans to be supernatural beings created by God and, thus, humans can dominate nature; furthermore, Christianity also sees women as immoral subjects compared to men, which is a typical dualism. In contrast to Christian culture, Daoism believes that the universe and everything in it were created by the *Dao* and are integral to the *Dao*. The concept of natural order in Daoism encompasses a holistic view of the universe, where every element has its place and purpose. This implies not a static or unchanging order but, rather, a dynamic equilibrium that adapts and evolves over time. Lai, after analyzing the *Dao De Jing*, pointed out that (1) feminine qualities and masculine vigor are not in opposition to one another but, rather, interdependent; and (2) feminine qualities and masculine vigor are not static and unchanging but, rather, dynamic and variable (Lai 2000). Daoism's embrace of change and impermanence offers a valuable perspective for addressing gender equity, suggesting that societal norms and roles are not fixed but can be transformed to reflect more equitable relationships. Ecofeminism brings to the forefront the idea that gender equity is an essential component of restoring natural order; it posits that the patriarchal disruption of natural processes is mirrored in the social oppression of women, and that addressing one requires addressing the other. In this way, ecofeminism and Daoism converge on the principle that gender equity and environmental sustainability are inseparable goals, each reinforcing the other. The discussion of harmony, natural order, and gender equity within the context of Daoism and ecofeminism opens up new avenues for envisioning a more just and sustainable world. As Zhuangzi (2010) said, "From the perspective of the *Dao*, all things are equal without distinction of high or low". This suggests that the principles of balance, reciprocity, and respect that underlie these philosophies can guide us toward solutions that honor the interconnectedness of all beings and promote the wellbeing of both the planet and its inhabitants.

In summary, the intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism illuminates the profound relationships between environmental sustainability, social justice, and gender equity. By drawing on the strengths of both philosophies, we can develop a more holistic approach to addressing the pressing challenges of our time. This integrated perspective emphasizes the necessity of harmony, the value of natural order, and the importance of gender equity as interconnected facets of a sustainable and equitable future.

5. Case Studies: Daoist Mysticism in Environmental and Gender Justice

We should more deeply integrate Daoist ecofeminism into current ecological debates and feminist movements, suggesting that these ancient teachings could offer valuable insights into creating more sustainable and equitable societies (Amy 2022). In the exploration of how Daoist mysticism intersects with ecofeminism, there are specific instances where Daoist principles have been applied to ecological feminist practices, offering insightful perspectives on environmental and gender justice. These case studies illuminate the practical application of Daoist philosophy in addressing contemporary issues, demonstrating the profound impact of integrating ancient wisdom with modern activism.

5.1. Analysis of Specific Instances Where Daoist Principles Have Been Applied to Ecological Feminist Practices

Case Study 1: Daoist Feminist Leadership in International Peace Activism

In the early–mid-20th century, the pioneering efforts of Jeannette Rankin in the United States highlighted a unique integration of Daoist principles and feminist values aimed at promoting international peace. As the first elected congresswoman in the U.S. and the only representative to oppose U.S. involvement in both World Wars, Rankin’s leadership style and ethical stance were deeply influenced by the Daoist ideals of harmony and *Wu-wei*, as well as by a profound commitment to feminist pacifism (Joshi 2023).

Rankin’s approach to leadership was characterized by a strong emphasis on empathy, peace, and the feminine virtues of compassion and modesty, reflecting core Daoist values. Her pacifist actions demonstrated a practical application of *Wu-wei*, where she effectively took non-aggressive stands that were both impactful and aligned with ecological feminist principles. By advocating for peace and opposing war, Rankin challenged patriarchal norms and contributed to a broader discourse on gender equity and ethical governance. Her leadership not only preserved ecological and human resources but also promoted a global feminist solidarity that was sensitive to the cultural nuances of both Eastern and Western perspectives. Her unique stance during critical moments in U.S. history illustrated how Daoist thought could be effectively applied to modern feminist movements, creating a foundation for enduring peace and cooperative international relations. Rankin’s legacy continues to inspire feminist peace leaders across the world, emphasizing the relevance of integrating Daoist philosophy with feminist approaches to achieve sustainable global harmony and justice.

This case study underscores the potential of Daoist feminist leadership to foster significant changes in international politics, promoting peace and gender equity through a commitment to non-violence and a deep respect for the interconnectedness of all beings—principles that are increasingly relevant in today’s globalized world.

Case Study 2: The Alex Wilson Community Garden and Sustainable Urban Planning

The Alex Wilson Community Garden (AWCG) in Toronto exemplifies the integration of Daoist and ecological feminist principles into sustainable urban development. Named after Alex Wilson, a landscape designer and community activist, the garden was established to honor his legacy of fostering harmonious relationships between people and the landscape. This case study illustrates how the garden’s creation reflects Wilson’s philosophy, which aligns with Daoist principles of living in harmony with nature and the ecological feminist focus on empowerment and community-centric development (Irvine et al. 1999).

The AWCG was inaugurated in June 1998 and encompasses 40 garden plots along with a naturalized area maintained by the community; its design and function serve as a practical application of sustainable land use, reflecting the garden’s commitment to ecological restoration and community involvement. This initiative not only promotes biodiversity through the use of native plant species but also enhances local food security and fosters social cohesion by involving diverse community members in the garden’s cultivation and upkeep. The planning process of the AWCG was notably participatory, involving Wilson’s colleagues, local residents, and city planning officials, using innovative planning tools that are uncommon in urban settings, such as conservation easements. This inclusive approach ensured that the garden was a collective endeavor, which is central to both Daoist and ecological feminist ideologies. The garden’s role in connecting the urban environment with natural processes showcases a living model of Daoist balance and ecological sustainability. Furthermore, the AWCG addresses key aspects of ecological feminism by empowering local residents, particularly through providing gardening opportunities to a nearby low-income housing complex and a drop-in center. In doing so, the garden contributes to addressing gender equity and enhancing the community’s capacity for self-reliance—key components of ecological feminist theory.

In sum, the Alex Wilson Community Garden serves as a vibrant example of how urban green spaces can effectively integrate ecological principles with community empowerment, resonating deeply with both Daoist and ecological feminist values. This case study highlights the potential for urban community gardens to act as catalysts for sustainable development, fostering environmental stewardship and social equity in densely populated urban areas.

Case Study 3: The Chipko Movement in India

The Chipko movement, a non-violent protest movement that emerged in the Himalayas in the 1970s, exemplifies how ecological feminist and Daoist principles can converge in environmental activism. While not explicitly based on Daoism, the movement's focus on protecting trees by embracing them (Chipko means "to hug" in Hindi) resonates with the Daoist emphasis on respecting the natural world (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 2019).

The Chipko movement relied on peaceful tactics, such as villagers embracing trees to prevent their felling. This aligns with the Daoist concept of *Wu-wei* by achieving environmental protection through passive resistance rather than aggressive confrontation. The movement's success in pressuring the Indian government to implement forest conservation policies demonstrates the effectiveness of non-violent action. Women in rural communities throughout the Himalayas played a leading role in the Chipko movement. Their actions challenged traditional patriarchal norms and highlighted the vital role that women play in protecting natural resources, aligning with ecological feminist values. The Chipko movement empowered local communities, giving them a voice in the management of their forests. This aligns with the Daoist ideal of living in harmony with nature by ensuring that human actions are guided by respect for the natural world's inherent value. The movement's success led to a shift towards more sustainable forestry practices in India.

The Chipko movement's integration of ecological feminist and Daoist principles demonstrates the power of non-violent action and community empowerment in achieving environmental protection; it highlights the importance of respecting nature and ensuring that women's voices are heard in environmental decision-making.

In summary, these case studies demonstrate the applicability and relevance of Daoist principles in ecological feminist practices. Whether through sustainable agriculture, grassroots environmental movements, or ecological feminist art, the integration of Daoism with ecofeminism offers innovative approaches to addressing environmental and gender justice. These examples highlight the potential for ancient wisdom to inform contemporary activism, providing valuable insights into how harmony, balance, and equity can be achieved in practice.

5.2. Examination of Successes and Challenges

The integration of Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices has both yielded notable successes and encountered significant challenges. These experiences offer valuable lessons on the potential and limits of applying ancient philosophical concepts to contemporary issues of environmental and gender justice.

Successes

One of the most evident successes of blending Daoist mysticism with ecological feminist practices is the promotion of sustainable living. Daoism's emphasis on living in harmony with nature and practicing *Wu-wei* has found resonance in ecological feminist efforts to reduce humans' impact on the environment. This has led to innovative approaches to agriculture, resource management, and community living that prioritize ecological balance and sustainability. Such practices not only help mitigate environmental degradation but also foster a sense of community and shared responsibility, which are crucial for long-term sustainability. Another significant achievement is the empowerment of marginalized groups—especially women—in environmental activism. By drawing on Daoist concepts of balance and harmony, ecological feminist movements have highlighted the importance of inclusive participation and the value of diverse perspectives in addressing environmen-

tal issues. This has facilitated the emergence of women-led initiatives that aim to restore natural landscapes, protect biodiversity, and advocate for environmental justice. These initiatives often challenge traditional power dynamics and offer alternative models of leadership and decision-making that are more collaborative and egalitarian.

Challenges

However, integrating Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices has not been without its challenges. One of the primary difficulties lies in bridging the gap between ancient philosophical concepts and the practical realities of modern environmental and gender issues (Xu 2003). While Daoism offers a profound understanding of the interdependence of all lifeforms and the importance of following natural rhythms, translating these ideas into concrete actions that effectively address systemic injustices can be complex. Additionally, the global nature of environmental degradation and gender inequality presents another layer of complexity. Daoist principles, with their roots in ancient Chinese culture and philosophy, may not always directly translate to diverse cultural contexts and contemporary global challenges. This has necessitated a creative adaptation of Daoist ideas to make them relevant and applicable to different settings and issues, which can sometimes dilute their essence or lead to misinterpretations. Moreover, the patriarchal structures that are deeply embedded in many societies pose a significant barrier to the full realization of ecological feminist goals informed by Daoist principles. Overcoming entrenched gender norms and practices that contribute to both environmental exploitation and gender inequality requires not only philosophical shifts but also systemic changes, which can be slow and met with resistance.

In summary, to overcome these challenges and build on the successes, it is crucial for practitioners of ecofeminism who are influenced by Daoist principles to engage in continuous dialogue and reflection. This involves critically examining how Daoist ideas can be most effectively translated into practices that promote environmental sustainability and gender equity in various cultural and social contexts; it also means fostering alliances with other movements and disciplines to enrich the ecological feminist approach with a diverse range of insights and strategies. Furthermore, there is a need for ongoing education and awareness-raising about the interconnectedness of environmental and gender justice issues. By highlighting the relevance of Daoist principles to these contemporary challenges, advocates can inspire broader engagement and action towards a more harmonious and equitable world.

6. The *Dao De Jing*'s Perspective on Gender and Environmental Justice

The *Dao De Jing*, attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, is a foundational text of Daoist philosophy that offers profound insights into the nature of existence, governance, and the art of living. While the text does not explicitly address modern concepts of gender and environmental justice, its teachings on harmony, balance, and the intrinsic value of all beings provide a rich framework for interpreting these issues. Laozi “put forward political propositions on the basis of deep understanding of the changes between the ancient and modern times contain demands for the principles of social justice such as equality and freedom” (Lv 2005). This section analyzes relevant passages from the *Dao De Jing* and reveals how Daoist principles contribute to the modern discussion of gender and environmental justice.

6.1. Analysis of Relevant Passages from the *Dao De Jing*

Harmony with Nature

The *Dao De Jing* frequently emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. For instance, in Chapter 25, Laozi wrote, “People follow the laws of the Earth, the Earth follows the laws of the Heaven, the Heaven follows the laws of *Dao*, and *Dao* follows the laws of Nature.” This passage highlights the interconnectedness of all things and the necessity of aligning human actions with the broader rhythms of the Earth and the cosmos. From a perspective of environmental justice, Laozi hopes that society,

by “removing selfishness and self-centeredness, takes the attitude and method of noncontention and inaction to accomplish everything, and learns the humility, softness, and inclusiveness of water to promote harmony” (Jeng et al. 2022). This teaching underscores the need for sustainable practices that respect the Earth’s limits and ensure the wellbeing of all of its inhabitants.

The Value of Softness and Flexibility

Laozi advocates for the virtues of softness and flexibility, often associating these qualities with water, which is capable of overcoming the hardest substances through persistence and gentleness. Chapter 78 states “Nothing in the world is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can surpass it in overcoming the hard and strong.” This passage can be interpreted as a critique of aggressive, exploitative approaches to the natural world and an endorsement of more gentle, sustainable methods. Additionally, the association of softness and flexibility with strength challenges traditional gender norms that equate masculinity with hardness and dominance, promoting a more inclusive understanding of strength and power.

The Concept of *Wu-wei*

Wu-wei, or non-action, is a central concept in the *Dao De Jing*, advocating for actions that are in harmony with the natural order and free from forced effort. Ames and Hall believe that this concept “...provide[s] a way of entertaining, of deferring to, and of investing oneself in an objectless world. Thus, in their governing of the people the sages are concerned with embodying and promoting the sort of acting, knowing, and desiring that does not depend on objects” (Ames and Hall 2003). Chapter 48 elaborates on this, stating “The study of knowledge increasing day by day; The study of *Dao* losing day by day”. This teaches the value of simplicity and letting go of unnecessary desires and actions, which can be applied to both environmental sustainability and the deconstruction of gender roles. By embracing *Wu-wei*, societies can move towards practices that are not only environmentally sustainable but also free from the rigid constraints of prescribed gender roles, allowing individuals to live more authentically.

Interconnectedness of All Beings

The *Dao De Jing* also speaks to the interconnectedness of all beings, suggesting a vision of the world where every entity is valued and respected. Chapter 13 advises, “Favor and disgrace make one fearful; The greatest misfortune is the self.” This can be interpreted as a call to transcend ego and recognize the inherent worth of all beings, regardless of their gender or species. Such a perspective is vital for fostering a culture of respect and equality that supports both gender equity and environmental justice (Joshi 2022).

In summary, while the *Dao De Jing* does not directly address gender and environmental justice, its teachings on harmony with nature, the value of softness and flexibility, the concept of *Wu-wei*, and the interconnectedness of all beings provide valuable insights for these contemporary issues. By interpreting Laozi’s teachings through the lens of gender and environmental justice, we can uncover new ways of thinking about and addressing the challenges facing our world today.

6.2. Interpretation of Laozi’s Teachings in the Context of Contemporary Issues

In interpreting Laozi’s teachings within the context of contemporary issues, it becomes apparent that Daoism offers profound insights into the challenges of gender and environmental justice that we face today. Through a closer examination, Laozi’s philosophies provide a valuable lens through which we can reevaluate our approach to these critical issues, advocating for a more harmonious and balanced way of living that resonates with ecological feminist principles.

Environmental Justice and Daoism

Laozi’s emphasis on living in accordance with the *Dao*, or the natural way, holds significant implications for contemporary environmental justice. In Chapter 30 of the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi said “Where the army goes, the thorns are full. After the great war, it will certainly become a barren year.” In a world grappling with climate change, pollution, and

biodiversity loss, the Daoist principle of harmony with nature challenges the prevailing exploitation of the Earth's resources. The concept of *Wu-wei* advocates for minimal interference and a gentle approach to our environment, suggesting that sustainability can be achieved by aligning human activities with the natural rhythms and cycles of the Earth. This perspective encourages a shift from aggressive resource extraction to sustainable practices that respect the limits of the natural world.

Gender Equity through Daoist Philosophy

While the *Dao De Jing* does not explicitly address gender issues, its teachings on balance, softness, and the strength of yielding offer a compelling framework for gender equity. In challenging the valorization of hard over soft and action over non-action, Daoism inherently questions the binary oppositions that underpin gender inequality. The Daoist appreciation for the *Yin* (feminine, dark, receptive, 陰) alongside the *Yang* (masculine, bright, active, 陽) emphasizes the importance of both forces in achieving balance and harmony. Laozi said, "All things carry *Yin* (陰) and embrace *Yang* (陽), they achieve harmony by combining these forces." Regarding Yin and Yang, Wei (2018) advocates that they should be reinterpreted within the context of ecofeminism, suggesting that this can promote a non-dualistic understanding of environmental and feminist issues. This reinterpretation aims to transcend traditional dichotomies and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment. Lv (1982) had long pointed out that, in the *Dao De Jing*, "the entire book favors women's rights over men's rights, vastly different from those later who valued men over women". Compared with Confucian thought, this perspective aligns with ecological feminist views that critique patriarchal structures for their role in both environmental degradation and the marginalization of women (Li 2011).

Daoism in Addressing Modern Challenges

Applying Daoist teachings to the context of contemporary issues requires a reimagining of how societies operate. In terms of environmental justice, this means adopting practices that are sustainable, promote biodiversity, and reduce harm to the planet. Daoist nature "refers to a free state that is manifested in all the myriad things, including humans. Daoist freedom therefore belongs not only to humans but also to the myriad things" (Liu 2022). For gender equity, this entails recognizing and valuing the contributions of all genders, dismantling patriarchal systems that restrict individual freedom, and fostering a culture that celebrates diversity and inclusivity.

Challenges in Integrating Daoist Philosophy

Integrating Daoist philosophy into contemporary activism and policymaking presents challenges, particularly in translating abstract concepts into concrete actions (Ma and Tsui 2015). Moreover, the global nature of today's environmental and gender issues requires adapting Daoist principles in ways that are culturally sensitive and applicable across diverse contexts. Despite these challenges, the potential for Daoism to inspire meaningful change in how we approach gender and environmental justice remains significant.

In summary, Laozi's teachings, as articulated in the *Dao De Jing*, offer valuable insights for addressing the interconnected issues of environmental degradation and gender inequality. By advocating for harmony with nature, balance between the feminine and masculine, and the interconnectedness of all beings, Daoism provides a philosophical foundation for ecofeminism and a pathway towards a more just and sustainable world. In embracing these principles, we can find guidance for navigating the complexities of contemporary issues and inspiration for creating a more equitable and harmonious society.

7. Future Directions: Integrating Daoism into Ecological Feminist Practices

Laozi was the first thinker to consciously recognize the fundamental flaws of a patriarchal society and attempt to remedy human society with female wisdom and qualities. It is precisely because he "emphasized and developed the virtues of femininity that he formed a philosophy with a distinct personality that is predominantly *Yin*" (Mou 1991). Therefore, the potential for integrating Daoist mysticism, represented by Laozi, into ecofeminist strategies is both profound and promising. As contemporary society grapples with the

dual crises of environmental degradation and gender inequality, the integration of Daoist principles offers a unique perspective that can enrich ecological feminist practices. This fusion not only brings a deep philosophical grounding to the movement but also provides practical approaches for fostering sustainability and gender equity.

7.1. Potential for Daoist Mysticism to Inform and Enhance Ecological Feminist Strategies

Philosophical Synergies

At the heart of both Daoism and ecofeminism is a profound respect for the natural world and a critical stance against the exploitative mechanisms that harm the environment and marginalize certain groups—especially women. Daoist mysticism, with its emphasis on harmony, balance, and the interconnectedness of all beings, aligns closely with ecological feminist values. On the one hand, it advocates for “knowing contentment and avoiding humiliation, knowing where to stop and avoiding danger,” (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 46) reminding us that “humanity should curb excessive desires and appropriately limit the consumption rate of natural resources to achieve sustainable development” (Hu 2010); on the other hand, it promotes a lifestyle in harmony with the natural rhythm, advocating for sustainable actions that align with the ecological processes that sustain life. The concept of *Wu-wei* is particularly relevant to ecological feminist strategies; it suggests a form of activism that is effective yet non-coercive, promoting change through alignment with natural and social forces rather than through domination or aggressive confrontation (Mason 2021). This approach encourages a reevaluation of how ecological feminists’ goals are pursued, emphasizing the power of gentle persistence and the strength found in vulnerability and cooperation.

Enhancing ecological feminist Practices

Integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices can enhance the movement in several ways. First, it can provide a broader philosophical foundation that deepens the movement’s understanding of the connections between human society and the natural world. By adopting a Daoist perspective, ecological feminists can develop strategies that are not only environmentally sound but also deeply rooted in an appreciation for the complexity and beauty of natural systems. Second, Daoism’s focus on simplicity and contentment with less can inspire ecological feminist practices that challenge consumerist culture and its contributions to environmental destruction. This perspective advocates for a minimalist lifestyle that reduces waste, conserves resources, and promotes a more sustainable relationship with the planet. Third, Daoism’s teachings on the dynamism of Yin and Yang can inform ecological feminist approaches to gender equity. By recognizing the value and necessity of both feminine and masculine qualities in achieving harmony, ecological feminists can advocate for a more inclusive society that values diversity and rejects rigid gender binaries.

In summary, the potential for Daoist mysticism to inform and enhance ecological feminist strategies is vast. By embracing the philosophical synergies between Daoism and ecofeminism, there is an opportunity to develop a more holistic, effective, and compassionate approach to addressing the intertwined challenges of environmental degradation and gender inequality. As Ames and Hall stated, “Compassion funds the concrete network of affective relationships that constitutes one in a particular nexus. Feeling each other is how we really know each other. All effective transactions are affective transactions, and require recourse to these invested relations.” (Ames and Hall 2003). As the movement looks to the future, integrating Daoist principles into ecological feminist practices can provide valuable insights and methods for creating a more just and sustainable world.

7.2. Suggestions for Future Research and Activism

The integration of Daoism into ecological feminist practices opens new avenues for future research and activism. By drawing from both philosophical traditions, there is an opportunity to create more holistic and effective strategies for addressing the intertwined

issues of gender inequality and environmental degradation. Below are several suggestions for future research and activism in this innovative field.

Interdisciplinary Research

Future research should focus on interdisciplinary studies that explore the confluence of Daoist philosophy and ecofeminism. Scholars of environmental science, gender studies, philosophy, and religious studies could collaborate to examine how Daoist concepts of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness can inform and enhance ecological feminist practices. Such research could involve case studies of communities or movements that have successfully integrated these principles into their environmental and gender justice efforts, providing valuable insights into best practices and strategies.

Cultivating Ecological Awareness

Activism informed by Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism should prioritize cultivating ecological awareness and a deep appreciation for the natural world. Workshops, educational programs, and public awareness campaigns could be developed to teach the principles of both traditions, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with nature and respecting the intrinsic value of all beings. These programs could focus on practical ways in which individuals and communities can reduce their environmental footprint and promote gender equity.

Policy Advocacy

Researchers and activists can work together to advocate for policies that reflect Daoist and ecological feminist values. This could involve promoting legislation that protects natural habitats, supports sustainable agriculture and energy production, and addresses gender disparities in access to resources and decision-making. Policy advocacy efforts should aim to influence both local and global policies, ensuring that environmental and gender justice are considered to be integral components of sustainable development.

Community-Based Initiatives

Future activism could also focus on developing community-based initiatives that integrate Daoist and ecological feminist principles. These initiatives could range from community gardens and reforestation projects that embody the Daoist respect for nature (Jiang 2019) to programs that empower women and promote gender equity within environmental movements. By grounding these initiatives in local cultures and communities, activists can ensure that they are relevant, sustainable, and capable of making a meaningful impact.

Building Alliances

Finally, building alliances with other movements and organizations that share similar goals is crucial for the success of integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices. By collaborating with indigenous rights activists, climate justice movements, and other gender equality initiatives, ecological feminists can create a powerful coalition capable of advocating for profound systemic change. These alliances can also facilitate the exchange of ideas, strategies, and resources, strengthening the movement and expanding its reach.

In summary, although Daoism is not a “direct theory of gender equality, it can challenge and amend the fundamental theoretical foundation of a patriarchal society from an ontological height” (Liu 2003). Thus, it is evident that the integration of Daoism into ecological feminist practices is ripe with potential. Through interdisciplinary research, cultivating ecological awareness, policy advocacy, community-based initiatives, and building alliances, activists and scholars can explore new ways to address the pressing challenges of our time. By embracing the wisdom of Daoist mysticism and the insights of ecofeminism, there is an opportunity to create a more just, sustainable, and harmonious world.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper presents a journey through the intersecting landscapes of Laozi’s Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism, revealing a rich tapestry of philosophical insights and practical implications for contemporary social justice movements. This exploration highlights the profound synergy between Daoist principles of harmony, *Wu-wei*,

and *Ziran* and the core values of ecofeminism, which champions the interconnectedness of gender and environmental justice. This synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern activism presents a compelling vision for addressing the dual crises of gender inequality and environmental degradation that plague our world today.

The analysis within this paper underscores the transformative potential that lies in integrating Daoist mysticism into ecological feminist practices. By drawing on Laozi's teachings, we can deepen our understanding of the complex relationships between humanity and the natural world, fostering approaches to social justice that are grounded in respect, balance, and interconnectedness. As Liu (2022) said, "Laozi established Daoism as a feminist philosophy, which would require gender equity as the center of his focus." This integration not only enriches the philosophical foundations of ecofeminism but also offers practical pathways for creating more sustainable and equitable communities. However, the journey towards fully realizing the potential of this integration is not without its challenges. As explored in this paper, bridging the gap between ancient philosophical concepts and the realities of modern social justice efforts requires creative interpretation, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to ongoing dialogue and collaboration. However, the rewards of this endeavor are clear: a more holistic and effective approach to combating the interlinked issues of environmental destruction and gender oppression.

Future research and activism in this field should continue to explore the fertile ground at the intersection of Daoism and ecofeminism. Interdisciplinary studies, community-based initiatives, policy advocacy, and the cultivation of ecological awareness and gender equity are crucial areas for development. By building alliances across movements and embracing the diversity of perspectives and strategies, the combined forces of Daoist mysticism and ecofeminism can offer powerful solutions to some of the most pressing challenges of our time. As we move forward, the wisdom of Laozi's Daoist mysticism, paired with the insights of ecofeminism, invites us to reimagine our relationships with the Earth and with one another. This paper advocates for a comprehensive approach to social justice—one that recognizes the inherent value of all beings and seeks to restore harmony and balance within the natural world and human societies. In doing so, we can aspire to create a future that honors the interconnectedness of life, fostering a more harmonious, equitable, and sustainable existence for generations to come.

The journey towards integrating Daoist mysticism with ecological feminist practices is an ongoing process of discovery, reflection, and action; it is a path that challenges us to think deeply, act compassionately, and live in a way that reflects our profound connections to the natural world and to one another. By embracing this path, we can work towards a world that truly embodies the principles of harmony, equity, and sustainability that are at the heart of both Daoist and ecological feminist philosophies. Finally, I would like to conclude this article with a passage from Laozi: "I have three treasures, which I hold and cherish: The first is compassion, the second is frugality, and the third is not daring to be ahead of the world." (*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 67). Laozi greatly praises the virtues of compassion, frugality, and humility represented by female culture. In the modern world, although the status of women is far higher than in the past era of imperial autocracy, overall, they still exist within a patriarchal society. I believe that, regardless of gender, if each of us could embody the compassion, frugality, and humility advocated by Laozi, this world would become even more beautiful and harmonious.

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Notes

- ¹ All translations are my own and rely on the work of Waley (2013). All translations from recent scholarly works in Chinese herein are also my own.
- ² *Dao De Jing* Chapter 77: The *Dao* of Heaven (tiandao 天道 or tianzhidao 天之道) is to take from those who have too much and give to those who have too little. The *Dao* of humans (renzhidao 人之道) is the opposite: it takes from those who have too little and gives to those who have too much.
- ³ Another common understanding is that “The Nothing (無) is named the beginning of Heaven and Earth, while the being (有) is named the mother of all things.”

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