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Eric Loo

University of Wollongong, eloo@uow.edu.au

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A Daoist Perspective of Normative Media Practice



Profile Interview:

Shelton Gunaratne

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Humanocentric theory of communication? Eastern cosmological notion of *yin-yang*, Daoism and media responsibility? How is Eastern philosophy relevant to continual efforts in the academe to lift the standards of journalism? These questions are tackled in *The Dao of the Press: A Humanocentric Theory*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2005. **Eric Loo** spoke with author and media academic **Shelton Gunaratne** at the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention in Toronto in August 2004.

Loo: There are quite a few books in the market which have used the term “Dao” or “Daoism” to sell its argument. What is the critical message/s in your forthcoming book *Dao of the Press: A Humanocentric Theory*?

Gunaratne: Yes, the Library of Congress lists a large number of books whose titles begin with the phrase ‘*Tao of*’ or ‘*Dao of*’. Probably, the trend began with Mai-mai Sze’s *Tao of Painting* (1956) and R.G.H. Siu’s *Tao of Science: An Essay on Western Knowledge and Eastern Wisdom* (1957). Fritjof Capra’s *Tao of Physics* (1975) was what influenced me to choose the title of my book. Later, I came across Benjamin Hoff’s *Tao of Pooh* (1982) from which I borrowed a couple of interesting quotes. I wish I had access to Paul Solomon and Nicole du Pont’s 66-page *Tao of Communication* (1985) before I completed my manuscript. I confess that I wasn’t aware of the popularity of *Dao* for book titles until your question forced me to check the Library of Congress.

Although the *Dao* titles exist in abundance, I think that my choice of the title *Dao of the Press* is most appropriate because my book’s critical message centers on the onto-cosmology of Eastern philosophy, particularly of Daoism: the unity of all things, the unity of opposites (*yin-yang*), the illusory nature of space-time, the dynamism of the universe, etc. As Capra points out, this “perennial philosophy” provides a consistent philosophical background to contemporary scientific theories. The critical message I try to impart is the immediate need to apply the wisdom of the East to develop a humanocentric theory of communication outlets and free expression. Rather than waiting for the Occidental stamp of approval, Eastern scholars should engage in humanocentric theory building by methodically mining their indigenous literature.

This critical idea is not entirely new. Almost half-a-century ago, Ralph Gun Hoy Siu (1957) wrote that the respective methodologies of acquiring knowledge differed significantly between the East and the West. The scientific West adopted the positive method that emphasized *rational knowledge* (or rational truth) while the Daoist East adopted the negative method that emphasized super rational *no-knowledge* (or ideational truth) indigenous to all nature. No-knowledge concerned the understanding of non-being (*wu*), the undifferentiated whole. No-knowledge differed from *intuitive knowledge* (or sensate truth) in that the latter was limited to the human mind.

“*With rational knowledge, one is in tune with the rational man; with intuitive knowledge added, one is in tune with the total man; with no-knowledge added, one is in tune with nature.*” (Siu, 1957, p. 79).

Humanocentric theory building involves bringing together the rational man, the total man, and nature.

“*The positive and the negative strategies are not contradictory nor even distinctly separable. They are complementary facets of the one access to total knowledge.*” (Siu, 1957, p. 83)

Loo: What is the significant contribution of your book to what could be considered to be scattered debates on an “Asian” or “Eastern” model of journalism?

Gunaratne: I have examined the scattered debates on “Asian” or “Eastern” model of journalism in the overview of the book *Handbook of the Media in Asia* (2000), which I edited. The humanocentric theory of communication-outlets and free

expression, which I have presented in the *Dao of the Press*, posits that the political and communication-outlet systems both at the macro (global) and micro (local) levels are operationally coupled. Because of this coupling, the model of journalism pertinent to a system of communication-outlets will depend on the location of the associated political system along the libertarian-authoritarian continuum at a particular juncture.

Although my theory is heavily indebted to Asian or Eastern philosophy, it does not asseverate that a journalism congruent with the Daoist *wu-wei* (a.k.a. the Pooh way) is the only way. The model of journalism, whether it is the Pooh Way (see below) or any other way, emerges from the pattern of autopoiesis and the process of cognition within the dissipative structures we identify as people, nation-states, and the world. Cognition and autopoiesis represent what Daoists call the meeting of the *yin* and the *yang*. The *yin-yang* interactions will engender outcomes that reflect the rational, the sensate, and the ideational. Nature (*ziran*) is the composite of everything in space-time, including Western and Eastern (or Asian) values. One cannot study nature through Western positivism alone. The “perennial philosophy” of the East must play its complementary role.

The *Dao of the Press* is a theoretical explanation of the dynamic process that produces the varying philosophies of communication-outlet systems. It explains why a journalism based on Asian values may emerge in some nation-states. Although I see some virtues in a journalism that reflects the values of the axial-age Asian philosophies, I point out that those philosophies disapprove authoritarian governance.

Loo: The essence of Dao is in the art of *wuwei* (action through inaction), or in layman’s term, “going with the flow”. How does this apply to professional journalism, given the mediating function of journalists?

Gunaratne: Benjamin Hoff, the author of *The Dao of Pooh*, says *wuwei* is the Pooh Way. The literal meaning of *wuwei* is “without doing, causing, or making.” I like the way that Hoff defines its practical meaning: “without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort” or “no going against the nature of things.”

To relate *wuwei* to professional journalism, let me cite Hoff again. Hoff explains that we reach the level of *wuwei* when we learn to work with the natural laws operating around us. Because the natural world follows the principle of minimal effort, it does not make mistakes. Here’s the crux:

Mistakes are made—or imagined—by man, the creature with the overloaded Brain who separates himself from the supporting network of natural laws by interfering and trying too hard. (Hoff, 1982, p. 69)

Now, substitute the word *journalist* for *man* in the preceding quote, and that would be the most likely advice that Laozi or whoever was the author of *Daodejing* would have given to the modern journalist.

Western journalism identifies with “meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort,” the very opposite of *wuwei*. Western journalism regards news as a commodity, not as a social good. It is associated with individualism, Weber’s putative Protestant ethic, and ceaseless capital accumulation. Journalism in the non-West need not blindly follow the pitfalls of Western journalism. Diversity is essential for the survival of

a living systems like the world-system. *Dao* represents the unity of the diversity it engendered through its agents—*yin* and *yang*. In this cosmological sense, an Eastern journalism that identifies with *wuwei* is a good thing.

A *wuwei* journalism does not mean a passive journalism. The journalist can play a mediating role if he or she operates as a facilitator, not an obstructionist, to the natural flow of things. To quote Hoff again:

The efficiency of wuwei is like that of water following over and around the rocks in its path—not the mechanical straight-line approach that usually ends up short-cutting natural laws, but that evolves from an inner sensitivity to the natural rhythm of things. (Hoff, 1982, p. 68)

The best of development journalism will follow that natural path. Journalism will not have to face massive ethical problems if it follows the Pooh Way.

Lo: If the Pooh Way provides this natural path to right the “meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort” of Western journalism, who or what defines this “natural path”?

Gunaratne: To answer this question, one must make a distinction between the two related concepts *ziran* (roughly meaning “spontaneity”) and *wuwei* (roughly meaning “nonaction”). Liu (1998) argues that *ziran* is the cardinal and central value of Daoism whereas *wuwei* is the essential method to realize it in social life. In classical Chinese, the philosophical meaning of *ziran* is either natural or naturalness, spontaneous or spontaneity. Chapter 25 of *Daodejing* says that “*Dao* models itself after *ziran*.” Because *wuwei* is the principal method to actualize naturalness, Laozi discusses that concept too at great length. As Liu (1998) puts it: “*Wuwei* ... designates the way by which people and things can and should realize their own naturalness in the world” (p. 218).

Although the term *wuwei* appears 12 times in *Daodejing*, the meaning of *wuwei* remains vague “because it is not a simple word but a cluster of ideas formulated in the negative that describe the opposite of conventional or common values and methods” (Liu, 1998, p. 221). Traditional governance resorts to *youwei* (action) to control or meddle with the lives of the people. From the perspective of Daoism, *wuwei*, the inverted way of acting, is the best way to fulfill the purpose of *youwei* “for action can never realize its own aims” (Liu, p. 219) of achieving social harmony, etc.

To get back to your question about who defines the “natural path” or *ziran* for the practice of Pooh Way or *wuwei*, the answer is the individual (or the journalist) himself or herself. For *ziran* “indicates the condition when a thing is what it is by itself without any external impulse or interruption” (Liu, 1998, p. 221). Naturalness means that the esteem and honor of the *Dao* and its virtue come from nowhere and nobody.

Lo: Does this “natural path” that you advocate journalists should take mean simply going with the flow and be guided by their instinct and conscience?

Gunaratne: Laozi saw the sage, not the ruler or the people, as the primary agent of *wuwei*. In contemporary society, the journalist assumes the role of the sage, alongside the scholar and the pundit. The contemporary journalist lives in what McLuhan

describes as the Global Village. When we interpret Daoist philosophy in terms of the theory of living systems, as I have done in *The Dao of the Press*, we have to identify the journalist (or any other individual) as an autopoietic system, which is operationally closed but cognitively open to its environment. Autopoiesis or recursive self-making is congruent with the principle of *ziran* or naturalness. This principle can guide the Eastern journalist to adopt the appropriate course of inverted action or *wuwei* that minimizes “meddlesome, combative or egotistical” behavior so clearly evident in “60 Minutes” and similar news products of Western journalism.

The *ziran-wuwei* mode of journalism or the Pooh Way is indeed going with the flow guided by instinct and conscience related to quantum self:

The primary focus of the concept of naturalness, its emphasis on inner causes, is still central even today. “Inner causes” means voluntary decision-making, internal impulsion, personal motivation, and a continuous dynamism

Another important aspect of naturalness also still applies today—the emphasis on smooth transformation. (Liu, 1998, p. 223)

We can relate the Pooh Way to Goswami’s (2000) philosophy of monistic idealism, which posits consciousness as the ground of being. Whereas Newtonian science, as well as quantum physics, presumes consciousness to be an epiphenomenon of matter, Goswami sees matter (the universe) as an epiphenomenon of consciousness, which he identifies as a transcendent phenomenon (similar to the Dao, the Brahman, or God) that preceded space-time. Goswami distinguishes between *consciousness* (the whole) and *awareness* (associated with each individual’s self-reference). He says that consciousness transcends both matter and mind. Goswami draws on transpersonal psychology to explain our two-self nature: the *ego* (which adheres to classical logic and reasoning) and *quantum self* (which adheres to quantum logic and creativity). The *ego* is continuous, determined, linear, local, and personal; whereas *quantum self* is discontinuous, synchronistic, holistic, nonlocal, and transpersonal.

Western journalism emphasizes the ego. The Pooh Way, on the other hand, emphasizes the quantum self. The ego curtails free will because it is bound by social shackles—norms, laws, etc. The quantum self promotes free will and creativity because it encompasses the whole.

Loo: For a clearer picture, how then does one frame a story, according to the *ziran-wuwei* mode of journalism, in the following scenario: A profile interview with Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist group that seeks an independent state for ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka. The U. S. State Department has described LTTE as a foreign terrorist organization.

Gunaratne: I take it that framing means the process by which the media place reality into frames and highlight certain aspects of a news story to make them more noticeable. Entman (1993) says:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

The journalist who follows the Pooh Way will use his or her quantum self's logic and creativity to determine how to frame the profile of Prabhakaran. No single right or wrong ethical stance exists to make that determination. Zhuangzi mentions the story of Cook Ding who uses his knack, not a formula, to cut up oxen in perfect rhythm by "following things as they are" and therefore never confronting obstacles. From a Daoist standpoint, an experienced journalist, just like Cook Ding or bear Pooh, will attend to the total situation and respond. A journalist who is well integrated in his or her surroundings will find the perfect fit (*shi*), which requires the ability to adapt and change with the circumstances. The application of ego-based formulaic codes of ethics may produce conflict or friction resulting from trying to jam the square peg into the round hole (Fox, 1996).

Confronted with "framing" issues pertaining to terrorism, corruption, crime, and such other facets of human existence in what Buddhists call the *samsaric* cycle, the sage/journalist becomes one with the Dao (in Chinese cosmo-ontology) or the Brahman (in Hindu cosmo-ontology)—the underlying unity that embraces man, nature, and all that is in the universe (Fox, 1996). This state of *wuwei* enables the sage/journalist (or Zhuangzi's ideal person) to exercise his or her tolerance and ability to respond appropriately and efficaciously to any set of circumstances, not just the scenario sketched in the question. Naturalness or spontaneity (*ziran*), which defies an exact semantic definition, holds the key. *Ziran* is an aspect of Zhuangzi's contextual perspective ontology. It is a concept that Western journalism tied to Aristotle's substance ontology is unwilling and/or unable to accommodate. Li (1999) provides a thorough comparison of these two types of ontology.

Loo: How can journalists working in a highly regulated media environment, such as in Singapore or China, operate according to the Dao worldview?

Gunaratne: These governments do not follow Laozi's view that "the best rulers are those whose existence is merely known by the people" (Liu, 1998), p. 221). A highly regulated media environment reflects the rulers' excessive reliance on their ego. To quote from Chapter 57 of *Daodejing*:

The more superstitious restrictions in the land the poorer the people; the more the people are concerned with the administration the more benighted the state and the clans; the more craftiness is displayed the greater the number of novelties which arise. The more legislation there is the more thieves and robbers increase. (Laozi, 1905, p. 126)

This shows the libertarian streak of Daoism. The *ziran-wuwei* mode implies the independence of each individual's quantum self within the unity of the Dao. Laozi's dislike for legislation (laws and orders) "does not mean that he denies the need for laws in general" because laws "are necessary to maintain the natural order and social harmony of the modern world" (Liu, 1998, p. 224). The unacceptable laws are those that bring oppression to societies and provoke rebellion.

In the above context, a "highly regulated media environment" that benefits the rulers rather than the people impinges upon the principle of *ziran*. *Wuwei*, on the part of the sage or the journalist, does not mean "going with the flow" in the sense of accommodating the artificial barriers imposed by the rulers. It means paving the way to remove those artificial barriers to freedom within the harmony model. This

means avoiding the “meddlesome, combative, and egotistical” approach of Western journalism. The *wuwei* practitioner has to move away from ego to quantum self to derive creative ways of dismantling the artificial barriers and return to the natural flow.

Journalists who help maintain obstructionist laws and orders are not following the Pooh Way. The principal ethical guideline of the *wuwei* practitioner should be: “Would I do unto others (my opponents/my audience, etc.) what I wouldn’t like them to do unto me?”

Loo: This Golden Rule assumes that others share the same ethical values as the *wuwei* journalist. In reality our world is inhabited by the good, the bad and the ugly. How then does *wuwei* journalism with its Golden Rule and emphasis on social harmony apply when it comes to exposing the bad guys?

Gunaratne: Of course, we learn from quantum physics that the universe is in a constant state of flux because of the ceaseless interaction of the putative particles with their respective antiparticles. Laozi interconnected the Supreme Reality (Dao) with all beings through the harmony of *yin* and *yang*—similar to particle and antiparticle. This is what Zukav (1979) calls dancing Wu Li masters. If these antinomies cease to exist, the universe will reach thermodynamic equilibrium and come to a standstill. Thus, *wuwei* can never become the universal norm. It cannot exist without its antinomy. The interaction of these two opposites produces various shades in between that no one can compartmentalize into concrete categories because of what Buddhism identifies as *anicca* (impermanence).

Thus, we have to concede that the Pooh Way is not the only way. We have to see the virtues of Pooh in relation to the ways of his buddies—Rabbit, Tiger, and Eeyore. Kortman and Eckstein (2004) provide the personality descriptions of these four Disney characters: Winnie the Pooh (harmony-oriented), the supreme embodiment of *ziran-wuwei* way of life, is sensitive, caring, warm, and giving; Rabbit (production-oriented) is logical, systematic, organized, bossy, demanding, and perfectionistic; Tiger (connection-oriented) is spontaneous, playful, witty, fun-loving, and energetic but irresponsible and disruptive; Eeyore (status quo) enjoys being alone, likes independent activities, and shows profundity—a synthesis of learning and insight. These four, in a remarkable way, combines Eastern and Western thought.

Although Pooh is more like the East and Rabbit more like the West, one can see all of the four types in the Global Village. Singapore, for example, has adopted the Rabbit characteristics while not entirely discarding its Pooh legacy. Li (1999) points out that the three major Chinese religious-belief and value systems—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—have coexisted and complemented each other for more than 1,500 years. Therefore, Li argues, the Sinic society is able to adapt itself to different value systems more easily than the Occidental society. Because different value systems intermingle in the Global Village, the Pooh Way provides just one approach to journalism ethics and practice. The approaches pertinent to Rabbit, Tiger, Eeyore, and their various mutations will continue to complement the Pooh Way. If Pooh ignores the “baddies,” either Rabbit or Eeyore is unlikely to be so nice.

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SHELTON GUNARATNE, PhD, is Professor of Journalism at the Department of Mass Communications, Minnesota State University Moorhead. Email: gunarat@mnstate.edu