A Taoist Image of a Valley

Peimin Ni

Grand Valley State University

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A TAOIST IMAGE OF A VALLEY

Peimin Ni

"The superior virtue is to be like a valley."
—Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, 41

Grand Valley has many attractions to me: I have found wonderful colleagues to work with; I have had some very motivated students; and I find the winding driveway to be an interesting test and exercise for my sense of direction—after following a few curves, I often lose my sense of whether I am going toward east or west. But here I want to speak about another attraction to me: its name—Grand Valley. In Taoism, valley is an image of the ideal state of being. It is an image of the superior Te, which means true virtue, power, or proper function. This virtue or power or function is obtained by being one with the Tao—the ultimate reality and the proper way of life. In other words, to be one with the Tao is to obtain the virtue or power, and to obtain the virtue or power is to be like a valley. To me, Taoism is one of the most enlightening philosophies in the world, and that enlightening feature is displayed in part in its use of the valley image.

I.

A valley is an image of vacancy, emptiness, or nothingness. But this vacancy, emptiness, or nothingness is not a total void. A valley is a being that is defined by its space—the vacant part or the nothingness part. To a valley, the lack-of-being part is so essential that we can even say that it is its true being.

Looking at ordinary objects in the world, we will find that not just a room is defined by its space; a door is defined as being both an entrance and an exit. Actually everything is understood by what it is not. You can read the words printed here only because they are surrounded by the space unprinted. A most inspiring instruction I received from a calligraphy master is to conceive of calligraphy not as an art of writing, but an art of distributing space—an art of knowing what one should leave untouched. In art, as in other areas, being and non-being are also defined by each other, and without one, there will be no other. Sometimes the non-being is even more essential than the being. It seems that the use of something is always in the part that is beyond the being of the thing. The door is used when it is open and not used when it is closed—a closed door serves actually the function of a wall, maybe a decorated wall. Similarly, the function of the wall is not in its own being. A wall is used to close in or carve out space; without the space, the wall is useless. A computer is useful because it can store and process data, but the ability to store and process data is not its being. Its being is the physical structure. The ability is something known through being, displayed in being, but not itself a being. It is therefore more properly classified as non-being when I use the word.

I cannot list all the attractions Grand Valley has for me, but at least I hope I have listed some. However, we are talking about "nothingness" in this section. Let us search for light in the shades; pure light is the virtue of a shade. In this section, we search for light in the room for gaining an Enlightenment, not bothered by the twists and turns of the world and our life.

The image of valley in Taoism is particularly because of its use of "nothingness"—that is not exactly its non-being. The valley is a peak, is an image of the Tao. However, in English, "nothingness" is classified as nonexistent. But in English, "nothingness" is classified as nonexistent. But in English, "nothingness" is considered as a "something" in itself. In this section, we will discuss the image of valley in the world of philosophy, the image of valley in the world of life. Nothingness is not only the beginning of wisdom, but also the end. Nothingness is not only the beginning of wisdom, but also the end. Nothingness is the end, but also the beginning. Nothingness is the end, but also the beginning. Nothingness is the end, but also the beginning.

So let us try to understand with an open mind from deep philosophies. Let us forget from footnotes for passing grades. "Things gain by losing; requestId="null""

I have already mentioned that I am a philosophy major. Why can't one find one's own identity without reaching this valley philosophy? Why can't one find one's own identity without reaching this valley philosophy? Why can't one find one's own identity without reaching this valley philosophy? Why can't one find one's own identity without reaching this valley philosophy? Why can't one find one's own identity without reaching this valley philosophy?
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But this vacancy, that is defined by its lack-of-being part is

classified as non-being than as being (But, of course, I am not speaking of total void when I use the word “non-being”).

I cannot list all the possible examples to make my generalization conclusive. Well, at least I hope I have shown you that non-being is no less important than being. However, we are used to the language and the metaphysics of being, in which “nothingness” is considered a pure negation of being, as complete emptiness. When we search for light, we tend to forget that it is darkness that provides the contrast, the shades; pure lightness is just like pure darkness in which one won’t be able to see anything (Hegel). In gaining things we tend to forget what we lose—the space, the room for gaining, the purity of having nothing. Just look at how many people are bothered by the inability to quit something! It is vital for our understanding of the world and our life to gain an appreciation of nothingness, a valley-like state of being.

II.

The image of a valley is even more than just a contrast to being. I like it particularly because, in the case of a valley, as I stated before, the true being is exactly its non-being. Here lies the secret of the Taoist belief that a valley, not a peak, is an image of the ideal state of being. Had Grand Valley been named “Tip-top World University,” no Taoist would like it. Is it a philosopher’s eccentric claim? Well, be patient. Let me see if I can show you how this makes sense.

Nothingness is not vital for understanding being, just as a contrast. Neither is it just the function of a being that comes along with the being and is dependent upon the being. Nothingness is also a necessary condition for gaining. When I was little, my grandma taught me this philosophy: “If you always say to others ‘I know that already,’ then no one will teach you. Why should they teach you if you don’t want to be taught? No one knows everything. Only if you are moderate and if you are ready to learn, then others will teach you.” That was, as a matter of fact, my first lesson of philosophy, though at the time both my grandma and I did not know the term “philosophy”; my grandma was half-illiterate. Later, when I read Lao Tzu, I came to understand with astonishment that the words of my grandma are actually generated from deep philosophical traditions like Taoism. Her words can almost be taken as footnotes for passages like, “If you want to become full, let yourself be empty” (22). “Things gain by losing and lose by gaining” (42). That lesson my grandma taught me entails also the spirit of the Socratic philosophy—that wisdom lies in knowing one’s own ignorance and imperfection. It also provides answers to some questions that people started to ask in the remote past and are still asking up to the present: “Should we be open-minded?” (or to state the question in another tone—“Should we not trust ourselves?”) “Should we embrace multiculturalism?” (or again, put it in another tone—“Should we give-up our own identity?”). Here the answer suggested by this valley philosophy is quite simple (though the simplicity might be deceptive): Why can’t one find one’s own confidence in open-mindedness? Why can’t one find one’s own identity in being undogmatic? In other words, why can’t wisdom be knowing one’s own ignorance, or why can’t one’s being be one’s non-being? The
valley image is the answer. Lao Tzu says, the ancient masters of the Tao are "like a valley; they are vastly vacant" (15). I wonder whether Lao Tzu ever met Socrates, for what he says can be applied to Socrates so well! I also wonder whether my grandma had ever read Lao Tzu or Socrates, for even though she was half illiterate, what she said contains the spirit of both philosophies.

III.

It should not be understood that the "valley" philosophy requires people to absorb everything without being critical about what they are absorbing. It is suggesting that we first set our minds open, ready to admit our own insufficiency and not reject others without even allowing them to present themselves to us. It is the "I-reject-everything-that-I-don't-like" kind of mentality that the philosophy rejects. Without a valley-like mental disposition, we will not feel a need for self-reflection, and we will be blind to the things that will be valuable to us, and finally we will also be blind about the true value of the things we already have.

Once the mind is open like a valley, then we can let things from outside have interaction with what we already have in the mind, and let them mutually affect each other, much as water from the peaks nurtures organisms in the valley and the valley purifies the water. Here a confidence in the strength of the good, the true, and the beautiful is essential. If we believe that true gold is not afraid of fire, we will also believe that whatever can be destroyed by fire is not true gold. Resisting outside influence is itself a sign of weakness; and the weakness awaits eventually the interaction with the outside influence to be overcome. If the weakness is merely a lack of self-confidence, the interaction can prove the inner strength one actually has. If the weakness is actually a lack of strength, the interaction can provide the opportunity to obtain strength from outside sources. In either case, the interaction is necessary; and the valley is where this kind of interaction takes place.

It also should not be understood that the "valley" philosophy considers only taking, absorbing, and never providing. Besides the possibilities of gaining, interacting, a valley provides as well. "The relation between the Tao and the world is like the relation between the streams of the valley to the seas and the oceans" (32). The streams of the valley provide water for the seas and oceans, and without the streams from the valleys, there would be no seas and oceans. "The Tao is like an empty vessel, and its use is inexhaustible! Fathomless! Like the fountainhead of all things" (4). The valley is a vital part of a huge system. It is open to the whole system in taking and giving. It constantly provides, unselfishly and quietly, bit by bit, and never closes itself off from the world beyond. It does not claim loudly that it is acting under a sense of duty or obligation, with a vast vision of the whole environment or the whole universe. Yet it surely does not act for the sake of its own interest. Exactly because of this, it is able to gain the best interest of itself.
It is the "I-rejects-you rejects. Without a mutual interaction, and we will both be illiterate, what she spell.

Yet is the recommendation of the mingling of Western and Eastern wisdom, and the mutual absorbing of the East and West. It is the "I-rejects-you rejects. Without a mutual interaction, and we will both be illiterate, what she spell.

But, as David Hall points out, if either culture takes the other without critical reflection, the things taken can be "Trojan horses." It would be ideal if we could both learn from each other's pains as well as from each other's gains, and see the values as well as the problems associated with each culture. Otherwise, both sides "will be condemned by the mischievous demons of history to the sad, silly fate of falling under the spell of one another's rejected pasts."

To avoid "falling under the spell" requires that we do not simply reject ourselves and take the others, nor simply hold on to ourselves and reject the others. The world needs grand valleys for interaction to happen. Though the geological valley where Grand Valley is located is not really that "grand," we should be able to make Grand Valley itself a grand valley in another sense.

1 Hereafter, quotes from the Tao Te Ching will be marked by numbers in parentheses. The numbers indicate chapters where the quotes can be found. The translation of the quotes are a mixture from various sources, including Wing-tsit Chan's A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Lin Yutang's The Wisdom of Laotse (New York: Random House, 1948); Stephen Mitchell's translation of Tao Te Ching (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); and sometimes my own. The translation is, first of all, based on my own understanding of the Chinese original and secondly on the principle of revealing as clearly as possible the reference and the implication of the valley image in Taoism.


IV.

"Being the Valley of the world, your invariant Te (virtue, power) will be sufficient" (28). I am glad to see that Grand Valley is becoming a grand valley in the West. We are in the process of internationalization, opening ourselves to the outside world, to gain from outside sources, interact with other cultures, and contribute to the global civilization. Being a grand valley, Grand Valley creates an environment for its faculty, staff, and students to make their contributions to the school, gaining the best of the world through the school, and, at the same time, it is becoming a rich resource for the world beyond the school. For example, the new summer study abroad program in China is an opportunity for our students and faculty to learn about and from the Chinese culture, and also for us to provide influence to and help the Chinese. It is a process both of seeing the limitations of Western culture and of gaining a better appreciation of the Western tradition. The East and the West are often compared with the two hemispheres of the brain: each has its unique characteristics, advantages, and shortcomings. If they complement each other, the whole brain is perfect. If each disregards the other, both are retarded or crippled. If each gives up its own advantages and takes the other side's shortcomings, they will virtually destroy themselves.

The situation of today's world looks much as if the two hemispheres are looking for self-improvement by searching from the other side. While the West is almost inevitably drawn closer to the Eastern cultures, searching for wisdom to defeat some monsters that came together with modern technology—such as individualism, consumerism, and professionalism—the East is moving rapidly toward "modernization," a term to many Easterners meaning "westernization." But, as David Hall points out, if either culture takes the other without critical reflection, the things taken can be "Trojan horses." It would be ideal if we could both learn from each other's pains as well as from each other's gains, and see the values as well as the problems associated with each culture. Otherwise, both sides "will be condemned by the mischievous demons of history to the sad, silly fate of falling under the spell of one another's rejected pasts."