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Female power through Daoism in the Tang Dynasty

Elvie Xiaobin Lin



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Abstract: This paper examines how female Daoists achieved ideological political power within the Confucian feudal society in the Tang Dynasty in ancient China. It compares the influence of the three core religions *Ru Shi Dao* to show the social background of the Tang Dynasty, serving as a basis for discussing women's empowerment. The paper demonstrates that Daoism played a significant role in helping women obtain the liberation of their physicality, step out of their nuclear family, and obtain social power. The paper employs Michael Mann's theory on sources of social power to understand the power structure in the Tang Dynasty. It examines classical texts on Confucianism and Daoism, as well as Chinese poems, providing both theoretical support to the social order of the Tang Dynasty and individual experience in the specific social environment.

Keywords: *Daoism, female power, Tang Dynasty, physicality, China*

Introduction

Daoism was the only dominant religion in China that had female leaders and prominent female priestesses in its history. As Daoist philosophy implies equity between the female and male parts in the Yin-Yang theory and aims for immortality through realizing humans' highest potential, it suggests humans can transcend their limited physicality (Lao-tzu 1993, 55). In ancient China, Daoism in the Tang Dynasty (618 CE to 907 A.D.) was distinctly ambivalent about gender (Cahill 2003, 252). Through examining the power of female Daoists and comparing the influence of different religions in the Tang Dynasty, we can argue that Daoism, as an ideology that liberates women's sexuality, was a vehicle that helped women obtain the liberation of their physicality and gain access to power within the Confucian canonical society which restricted women to their nuclear family. I will show this by examining classical Confucian and Daoist texts.

In this paper, I will use Michael Mann's theory on sources of social power, which presents an organized power structure as a lens through which we can understand the form of social power that Daoist holy women had. Mann (1993) suggests societies are constituted of sociospatial networks of power that intersect each other. He divides social power into four sources— ideological, economic, military, and political (11). Ideological power, for example, the power of religions, usually rises from a dominant philosophy in society because shared normative understandings are necessary for social cooperation to enhance collective powers (22). Ideological power gives rise to ideological organizations, such as Daoist temples and Confucian schools (23). Ideological power embodies mainly diffused power. According to Mann (1993), diffused power is a decentralized kind of power centered with unconscious and less spontaneous participants, spreading throughout a population in accordance with their self-evident common interests (8). In the Tang Dynasty, political power intersected and was closely interrelated with ideological power. Political power derives from the demand for institutionalized,

centralized, and territorialized regulation of different aspects of social relations (26). Compared to diffused power, authoritative power, as the main feature of the political power in the Tang Dynasty, comprises more “definite commands and conscious obedience” (8). We will see how these different kinds of power influenced each other and helped Daoist women obtain power.

The religious and social background of the Tang Dynasty – Ru Shi Dao and women’s social power

Ru Shi Dao is a general term that refers to three dominant religions or schools of philosophy in China. They stand for Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, respectively. In the Tang Dynasty, Confucianism, or *Ru* in Chinese, was the most dominant religion, and it determined the hierarchical structures of the Chinese patriarchy and imperium. Compared to Daoism and Buddhism, Confucianism went beyond being merely a religion and became a political, ethical, and educational system (Cahill 2003, 251-252). For example, the *Five Classics*, the most significant series of Confucian works in ancient China which laid the foundation for Confucianism, were required for university students in the Tang Dynasty to study (Guisso 1981,47-48). Therefore, following Confucianism was seen as the most correct and orthodox path for men to obtain political power in society.

As Confucianism determined the basic social order in the Tang Dynasty, its perception of women had a significant influence on women’s social power. Confucianism centers on order and harmony, which must be preserved in the social hierarchy. Therefore, *The Four Books and Five Classics*, the Confucian classics, aims to foster a sexual hierarchy by reinforcing existing stereotypes of women when touching upon the nature of women (Guisso 1981, 48). For instance, Mencius (2016), the most important Confucian philosopher after Confucius, described his view on the relations of humanity: “between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity” (Chapter 4). The target audience of this passage, and the Confucian classics in

general, was men. The relationships depicted here between father and son, friends, older and younger, were mostly positive and did not highlight the functional difference. However, the relationship between husband and wife was restricted based on a woman's social functions, implying that women were treated less humanely and as a second gender that functions differently from men. *Li Ji* (*Book of Rites*), another work in *Five Classics*, defines women by their subordinate roles in a more explicit way: "the woman follows (and obeys) the man; in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son" (Sheng et al. 2016). This paragraph concisely sums up the role of women in society throughout their lives: serving their husband, father, elder brother, and son was their main social responsibility and defined their social identity. Under Confucian canons, women were restricted to their nuclear family and had their identity and power confined by the men around them.

Buddhism, or *Shi* in Chinese, was another dominant religion in the Tang Dynasty. I will not talk about the Buddhist influence as I will be restricting my focus on the Confucian and Daoist influences on women's social power in this paper, since Daoism, compared to Buddhism, had a more dominant influence on enhancing women's ideological power in the Tang Dynasty. However, we can understand Daoism better by comparing its similarities with Buddhism. For instance, the two religions both aim for a transcendence of human physicality, though in different ways and for different purposes. Buddhism wants people to ignore the physical senses and focus on their inner spirit, whereas Daoism pursues immortality, so it looks for an actual, physical, and scientific transcendence of the limited human physicality (Anālayo 2019, 71; Cahill 2003, 252).

Now, let us look more closely into Daoism and the basis for some women to break through the Confucian social order in the Tang Dynasty. Daoism, a native religion in China, grew up in China during the first five centuries of the Common Era. By the Tang dynasty, Daoism had developed into an institutionalized religion patronized by the state and favored by the educated official classes. It also provided many of the great state, community, and

family rites alongside other religions, such as Buddhism (Cahill 2003, 252). The trend of combining Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into a single mainstream ideology in society provided a basis for Daoist women to break the monopoly of male leaders in ideological power. This trend was called “the fusion of three religions;” thus, the three religions were put into the general term *Ru Shi Dao* (Cai & Geng 2014, 42). In the Tang Dynasty, the literati and officialdom, who were generally males trained in Confucian schools and supporters of Confucianism, were fond of associating with Daoists and Buddhists and regarded highly of such associations (44). This is due to the great importance attached to Daoism by the Tang royal family. In the Tang Dynasty, the last name of the royal family was Li, the same last name of the founder of Daoism, Lao-tzu, whose proper name was Li Er. Thus, although Daoism seemed to conflict with the Confucian social order, it grounded the political legitimacy of the Tang royal family. Regarding Daoism as one of the state religions to prove the legitimacy of their regime, the royal family honored Lao-tzu as their kindred ancestor and took measures to improve the status of Daoists (Kohn & Kirkland 2000, 339). Daoism became widely accepted as a philosophy of life. This public recognition of Daoism gave many women space to adopt a new lifestyle.

As the fusion of three religions provided an essential foundation for female liberation, the Daoist practices directly influenced women’s choices and acquisition of power. The Daoist scriptures teach that all humans are capable of perfection and thus can achieve the ultimate goal— individual immortality. The physical body was regarded as the center of human thought and action. It puts obstacles toward immortality because of both the physical and social constraints assigned to it. The female body was mostly restricted to household life, so the Daoist holy women in the Tang Dynasty removed themselves from the body of society by refusing to enter household life (Cahill 1995, 215). Therefore, due to the fusion of three religions and the Daoist view on the physical body, Daoism managed to reduce the obstacles facing the female body within the Confucian social order.

Female transcendence and female power in Daoism

In this section, I will expand on how Daoism allowed women to gain ideological power in the Tang Dynasty. I will use female transcendence to refer to women's transcendence or liberation of their physical body from the Confucian social order. If I mention transcendence under the Daoist context, it refers to the Daoist ultimate goal of achieving immortality.

Before moving further, I want to make a few remarks to avoid some confusions that readers might have. This section aims to evaluate the Daoist influence on liberating women's physicality and helping women obtain greater social power. It should, however, be noted that increasing the accessibility and opportunities for social power through Daoism does not in any sense mean the acquisition of absolute freedom and especially free will. The focus of this paper is not on how Daoism helped women obtain absolute freedom but on how the liberation of some aspects of a woman's life, e.g., domesticity and sexuality, consequently lead women to gain social *power*. It is, of course, a very philosophically interesting topic to consider to what (limited) extent Daoism fosters women to develop a conscious mind in search of a truly free life and whether having such a conscious mind pursuing free will is necessary for women to obtain power. Now, let us get into the Daoist core values of the physical body and the Daoist hierarchy of paths to transcendence.

Daoism on woman's physicality

Daoism required physical disciplines to achieve liberation from mortality, which led to female liberation of their physicality. According to *Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City*, the collection of twenty-seven biographies of Daoist holy women, the Daoist Master Du Guangting defines the path to transcendence in terms of religious practices and deeds, which are done without expectation of rewards or recognition (Du & Cahill 2006, 34-40; Cahill 2003, 255). The first few stages of religious practices include fasting and sexual abstinence, which are followed by study and meditation; this finally leads to the desired outcomes, the most important of which is the ascent to heaven, where the Daoists enjoy their immortality. The

physical disciplines involved controlling the universal human needs of family, nutrition, and sexuality (Cahill 1995, 215). The Daoist notion of the body is assumed to enclose a womb, which nourishes an embryo with the potential for immortality. Thus, these religious practices highly involved the participation of the body and were believed to transform the Daoist adept's body into a permanent and indestructible one that would eventually ascend to heaven. Both male and female Daoists must nurture this potential to achieve individual immortality. Therefore, getting pregnant and giving birth to a child were considered obstacles to Daoist transcendence (Cahill 2003, 271).

While participating in these religious activities, Daoist holy women stayed away from the normal life cycle of a Chinese woman in the Tang Dynasty and thus stepped out of the Confucian gender roles. They practiced certain acts with their body that renounced the Confucian formalities and roles assigned to women. For example, Daoist holy women would wear uncommon clothing, usually different from the dressing codes of women following Confucianism. They refused to marry and bear children and instead pursued a youthful appearance when they grew older (Cahill 2003, 272-273). Each of these practices helped women liberate their bodies from the Confucian social order and even allowed some of them to gain ideological power in society, which will be seen in the following paragraphs.

Daoist women in power

The Tang Dynasty was the most prosperous and open society in Chinese feudal history, so the social climate encouraged women to pursue a more free, independent, and self-indulgent life. This social climate was one of the most important reasons why women in the Tang Dynasty were passionate about being a Daoist. There were examples of Daoist women who had more control over their own bodies and social activities. Being a Daoist allowed women to achieve transcendence of the cultural constructions of gender that resulted from their sexuality. Most women, especially aristocratic women, were not allowed to invite and meet outsiders, in particular male guests (Raphals 1998, 198). When they

became a Daoist, they were free to invite guests to their home. For instance, Li Ye, one of the four greatest female poets in the Tang Dynasty, became a Daoist when she was eleven. Her poems swept away the shyness of female writers, openly revealing her socializing with many literati and officialdom, who were mostly trained Confucian practitioners. She wrote in her poem *Letter to Zhu Fang*, in which Zhu Fang was an official in the Tang Dynasty, “after our separation there were infinite affections, in our meeting we gained a moment of happiness.” (Li 1967) In this verse, Li Ye directly manifests her affection to a man by plainly describing her private meeting with him and explicitly using the phrase “infinite affections.” Such a blunt self-revelation of a woman’s love for a man was regarded as disobeying women’s virtues based on the Confucian social order. However, being a Daoist woman, Li Ye was given the right to control her body and choose to have affairs with people according to her own will.

How these Daoist women went beyond liberating their bodies and eventually gained social power was closely connected to the political reason that the Tang royal family directly promoted Daoism. As discussed previously, the royal family took measures to improve the status of Daoists, and therefore, Daoist holy women, or high-ranking Daoist priestesses, enjoyed and possessed high social power and status. Most of them brought blessings and prestige to a temple through their charisma and practice, in some cases possessing great ideological power. Some Daoist female masters even had administrative tasks (Jiao 2013, 127). For example, Feng Xiang became the priestess and the master of the Wutong Daoist Temple. In this position, she had the power to build more Daoist temples to occupy more Daoist monastics who would follow her doctrines, and thus she gained greater ideological power. Xie Ziran, another Daoist master similar to Feng Xiang, influenced the prefectural governor Li Jian to promote Daoism and funded her to build the Jinqian Daoist Temple (127). We see that the authoritative political power of the Tang royal family was transformed into the diffused ideological power of Daoist leaders. This transformation, in particular, enhanced the social status and the power of Daoist holy women, which intersected the political institutions and indirectly utilized

political power to enhance the ideological power of these women. Women in the Tang Dynasty could step out of the orthodox social hierarchy by becoming a Daoist, as they had more potential opportunities to gain ideological power in society. After being a Daoist, women of low social class were qualified to make friends with people of high social status (Jiao 2013, 128). For example, they had much freedom to socialize with many literati and officialdom. The emperor could not summon an ordinary woman to the palace, but he could summon a Daoist priestess to the palace. Li Ye and Xue Tao are examples of this. When Li Ye was in her late years, she was summoned to the palace by the Emperor Daizong of Tang because of her literary talent (Qiu 2000, 24). Daoist women could also publicize their poems without worrying much about the Confucian social order. Xue Tao, another female Daoist and poet as reputable as Li Ye, wrote a poem that says, “Generals, please do not covet Qian’s steed. The top of the building can see the end of the border fortress” (Xue 1967). These two sentences, especially the first, demonstrate the generals’ shortsightedness and greed, which led to the war against the Qiang people, yet the generals were not powerful enough to resist. She conveyed her worries about the country and showed her criticisms of the military army and political decisions. Being a Daoist provided Xue Tao opportunities to socialize with feudal officials, so she was one of the few women in the Tang Dynasty who got to know about politics (Gu 2018, 34). Her reputation among middle- and upper-class men made her views heard and respected by people with greater voices. Hence, Li Ye and Xue Tao are examples of Daoist women gaining social status through diffused socialization with people in the political institutions, whose political power gave them voices to enhance their social power.

More direct examples that exemplify how practicing Daoism provides a female Daoist more ideological power are Princess Jinxian and Princess Yuzhen. Their decisions to be a Daoist caused many imperial maids and women in the imperial harem to pursue Daoism. Since the Tang royal family often set free the maids, some maids even gave up the high-salary job and the possible opportunities to be a member of the palace harem to

become a Daoist, though these benefits were the main reasons that their parents sent them to be a palace maid. This social climate also influenced many aristocratic and vulgar women, who chose to become a Daoist (Li 2016, 58-61). This domino effect helped increase the number of Daoist temples, Daoist works, and Daoist schools in the Tang Dynasty (61-65). We can see how the two princesses' political power led to the institutionalization of Daoist ideological power and how their political power was shifted to diffused ideological power in the state through their practice of Daoism, which encouraged more women to liberate their bodies and obtain more freedom.

Evaluation

Now, we can understand the main reasons and consequences behind why women in the Tang Dynasty actively chose to become a Daoist. Being a Daoist publicly endowed them with the right to transcend their sexuality and gain far-fetched reputations through socializing with influential figures in society. There are cases of giving rise to ideological institutions through political power through the practice of Daoism. However, from the above examples, we see that obtaining great ideological power was often inseparable from political power. The reason that the two princesses were seen to be the embodiment of the highest ideology was inseparable from the openness and the state power of the Tang royal family. This might be one of the main limitations of women obtaining ideological power through Daoism.

Conclusion

After examining the Daoist influence on women under the Confucian social order, we can conclude that Daoism provided women opportunities to liberate their bodies and obtain ideological power within the Confucian social order which restricted them to their orthodox gender roles. The Daoist core values on human physicality and its view on female transcendence coincide with several values discussed in the first-wave and second-wave

feminist movements in the Western World, in which women were encouraged to seek education, reject the cultural constructions of gender and stay away from their nuclear family. Therefore, a great topic of future research interest might be why the Daoist influence on female power in the Tang Dynasty was not powerful enough for a much greater number of women to break the restrictions that the social order placed on them and have a great leap toward true liberation.

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