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TAOIST PHILOSOPHICAL DOCTRINE AND ITS ACCULTURATION IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE SOCIO- CULTURAL LIFE

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Abstract

This article investigates the penetration, transformation, and influence of Taoist doctrine on the social structure and psyche of the Vietnamese people. Through the application of historical materialism and systems analysis, the research demonstrates that Taoism in Vietnam does not exist as an independent, sequestered religion but rather profoundly permeates political thought, grassroots lifestyles, and traditional medicine. The research findings confirm that the values of "Wu-wei" (Non-action), "Softness overcoming Hardness," and "Contentment" continue to function as cultural filters, assisting modern Vietnamese society in confronting the consequences of pragmatism and the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Taoism, Acculturation, Vietnam, Wu-wei, Socio-cultural values.

1. Introduction

In the history of human thought, Taoist philosophy, originating in ancient China, established a unique conceptual paradigm with a pervasive resonance and profound influence throughout the East Asian cultural sphere, including Vietnam. Unlike Confucianism, which focuses on constructing social institutions based on ritual propriety and moral constants, or Buddhism, which seeks liberation from the cycle of birth and death, Taoism

concentrates on decoding cosmic ontology through the concept of "Dao" (The Way) (Lang and Zhang, 1999). A Taoist foundation of systems modeling and thinking. In Proceedings of the 17th international conference of the system dynamics society and the 5th Australian and New Zealand Systems Conference (pp. 20-23).. This is a metaphysical entity, invisible yet omnipresent, serving as the source and the operational law of all existence. The emergence of Taoism provided a critical perspective against forced, artificial human structures, while simultaneously upholding the absolute harmony between humanity and nature. For Vietnam, a nation with a wet-rice civilization inextricably linked to the ceaseless fluctuations of heaven and earth, the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi are not merely abstract theories but have become organic components of the people's psyche and lifestyle (Wen, 2025).

The infiltration of Taoism into Vietnam did not occur via a compulsory top-down trajectory but primarily through a process of natural and persistent cultural acculturation. Throughout centuries of feudalism, Taoism permeated Vietnamese social life in two primary forms: Folk Taoism associated with spiritual practices and sorcery, and Philosophical Taoism linked to the worldviews of the literati (intellectual class) (Vuong et al., 2018). This intersection created a unique phenomenon in Vietnamese intellectual history known as "The Three

Religions of the Same Source" (Tam giáo đồng nguyên), where Taoism acted as a catalyst to neutralize the rigidity of Confucianism and enrich the spiritual life of the Vietnamese, who inherently value nature. Consequently, researching Taoism within the Vietnamese context is inseparable from indigenous cultural practices, where concepts such as "Wu-wei" (Non-action) or "Softness" have been localized to align with the nation's survival and development strategies (Van, 2020).

The urgency of studying Taoist doctrine in contemporary Vietnamese social life becomes increasingly salient as the nation faces the repercussions of rapid modernization and urbanization. Crises of faith, pressures from consumerism, and environmental degradation are compelling researchers to return to the sustainable values found within ancient philosophical treasures. The philosophy of "Contentment" (Tri túc) is currently becoming a vital spiritual remedy, helping individuals find balance in a volatile world. Simultaneously, the Lao-Zhuang concept of "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" provides a robust ecological ethical foundation, helping reshape the relationship between humans and the environment in the era of climate change. This study, therefore, does not stop at surveying intellectual history but aims to evaluate the adaptability and contribution of Taoist philosophy to building a harmonious and sustainable Vietnamese society (Nguyen, 2016).

Furthermore, in the realms of politics and diplomacy, the Taoist spirit of "Softness overcoming Hardness" has left profound imprints on Vietnam's strategic thinking. Flexibility, resilient like water yet possessing the enduring strength to overcome adversity, is a constant in the nation's cultural and political identity. Analyzing the influence of Taoism from sociological and cultural perspectives will clarify how an ancient philosophical system continues to guide and adjust modern social behaviors. This article will delve into deconstructing the core categories of Taoism, thereby analyzing their practical manifestations in the spiritual life, arts, medicine, and lifestyle of the Vietnamese today. Through the method of dialectical materialism and interdisciplinary analysis, the research expects to provide a comprehensive view of the enduring vitality of Taoism in the Vietnamese cultural stream, asserting that it is not an obsolete doctrine but a vital intellectual resource for the future. The research is structured to clarify everything from theoretical foundations to practical transformations, thereby deriving scientific conclusions regarding cultural acculturation in the era of globalization (Vuong et al., 2018).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly investigation into Taoist philosophy and its multifaceted influence on East Asian societies,

Vietnam in particular, has evolved into a robust academic discourse over several decades. Internationally, Taoist research is generally categorized into three primary trajectories: primordial ontological studies, religious transformation, and cultural acculturation in non-Chinese contexts.

Early Western sinology, led by pioneers such as Henri Maspero (1981) and later Isabelle Robinet (1997), moved beyond viewing Taoism as mere metaphysical speculation to recognizing it as a complex religious entity with intricate "inner alchemy" and cultivation practices. Their decodings of the Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi provided the necessary framework for sociologists to analyze how Taoist values shape social behavior. Recently, a significant shift has occurred toward "Ecological Ethics," with scholars like James Miller (2017) and Mary Evelyn Tucker (2002) identifying Lao-Zhuang thought as a potent philosophical antidote to the global environmental crisis.

In the Vietnamese context, the trajectory of Taoist scholarship is inextricably linked to the modernization of national academic thought. During the early 20th century, Tran Trong Kim (1930) and Phan Ke Binh (1915) pioneered the systematization of Taoist thought within the "Three Religions" (Tam giáo) schema. While Kim's seminal work, *Nho giao* (Confucianism), focused on the Analects, it provided critical insights into the complementarity between Confucian rigidity and Taoist fluidity in the

Vietnamese psyche. Subsequently, scholars such as Nguyen Dang Thuc (1967) and Kim Dinh (1970) explored the "Vietnamese-ness" of Taoism. Thuc's research notably argued that upon entering Vietnam, Taoism underwent a process of "popularization," shedding its purely metaphysical skin to merge with folk beliefs and the daily rhythms of the working class, a process of localization that differentiated it from its original Northern prototype (Nguyen, 1967).

Over the past twenty years, the focus has shifted toward interdisciplinary analysis and social praxis. Tran Ngoc Them (1996), in his systematic study of Vietnamese culture, identified the "preference for harmony" and "flexible adaptability" as behavioral constants rooted in Yin-Yang and Taoist softness (Nhu). Concurrently, ethnographic studies by Ngo Duc Thinh (2007) on Mother Goddess worship (Dao Mau) have clarified the profound infiltration of Taoist sorcery, talismans, and deities into indigenous spiritual systems. These findings affirm that Taoism is not merely an intellectual relic of the literati but remains vibrant in contemporary festivals and life-cycle rituals.

Despite this wealth of historical and ethnographic data, a significant research gap persists. There is a lack of rigorous evaluation regarding the influence of Taoist philosophy on modern social dimensions, such as corporate governance, therapeutic psychology, or

sustainable development policies in Vietnam. Most contemporary literature remains tethered to historical inquiry or textual analysis, leaving a void in quantitative or deep qualitative assessments of Taoist values in modern consumer behavior or political strategy (Them, 2004).

Furthermore, the influence of Taoism must be re-evaluated within the context of globalization and the rise of "spirituality without religion" (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Practices like Qigong, meditation, and the minimalist lifestyle in urban Vietnam represent a contemporary restructuring of Taoist values. This research aims to fill the lack of systematic synthesis on how Taoism impacts personality formation and identity in 21st-century Vietnam, applying theories of acculturation and the sociology of knowledge to illustrate how this ancient system functions as a modern "cultural filter."

3. Research results

3.1. The Transformation from Metaphysical Philosophy to Philosophy of Action in Political Thought

Research results indicate that a prominent feature of Taoism in Vietnam is its practical action-oriented nature, transcending the framework of purely metaphysical speculation. In the logic of governance and diplomacy, the philosophy of "Softness overcoming Hardness" and the concept of "Wu-wei" (Non-action) have formed a specific

identity that contemporary observers call "Bamboo Diplomacy." Examining the political documents and national defense strategies of Vietnam throughout various historical periods reveals a clear preference for flexible, resilient, yet persistent solutions. Unlike the direct "hard" confrontation of major powers, Vietnam's strategic thinking reflects the application of the characteristics of "Water" in Taoism: no fixed shape, always seeking the low ground to flow, yet possessing the power to erode the hardest objects. This result proves that Wu-wei in the Vietnamese political context is not passivity or escapism, but the selection of the timing for action based on the objective laws of the circumstances (knowing the "Thoi" or "Timing"). This is "action in stillness," helping the nation maintain balance in complex multilateral relations without losing its autonomy (Dung, 2022).

Furthermore, the doctrine of "Governance through Non-action" (Vô vi nhi trị), governing by avoiding violent interference, has left its mark on the management of traditional Vietnamese village communities. The principle of village self-governance, where "The King's law yields to the village's custom," is essentially an expression of respecting the natural self-operation of grassroots institutions. The ideal leader in the Taoist psyche is not one who flaunts power, but one who knows how to create an environment where all things develop according to their natural essence. This creates immense social

resilience, allowing Vietnamese communities to recover from historical upheavals without the need for absolute power imposition from the center.

3.2. Taoism and the Shaping of Moral Lifestyles in Contemporary Consumer Society

Regarding morality and lifestyle, the research discovered a strong trend toward restructuring the values of "Contentment" (Tri túc) and "Simplicity" (Phác) among urban Vietnamese residents today. Through surveys of minimalist movements and "healing" communities in major cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the results show a striking similarity to Zhuangzi's idea of "discarding cleverness and abandoning profit." Modern Vietnamese are turning to Taoism as a tool to resist the alienation of consumerism and the pressure of achievement in an industrialized society. This thought is no longer confined to the hermitages or deep forests of ancient recluses but has become a psychological survival skill, helping individuals re-establish the boundary between themselves and the harsh demands of the external world.

In particular, the Taoist concept of "Nature" (Tự nhiên) has become the foundation for the ecological consciousness of the younger generation. Research results show that environmental protection behaviors, reducing plastic waste, or green consumption trends are not merely

derived from legal obligations or scientific knowledge, but stem from a deep cultural intuition regarding the unity of all things (Unity of Heaven and Humanity). Humans no longer view themselves as masters of nature to be exploited to exhaustion but have begun to perceive themselves as a link in a vast web of life. This is the meeting point between ancient philosophy and the modern need for sustainable development, creating a new moral value: ecological ethics based on Taoist humility (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2024).

3.3. Traditional Medical Systems and Wellness Culture: An Empirical Heritage

A crucial and specific result is the influence of Taoism in Vietnam's traditional medicine and wellness culture. Empirical research at traditional medicine clinics and Qigong clubs shows that the Taoist theoretical system of Jing-Qi-Shen (Essence, Vital Energy, and Spirit) remains the compass for healthcare. Unlike Western medicine, which focuses on destroying pathogens (external treatment), medical logic influenced by Taoism in Vietnam focuses on establishing Yin-Yang balance and the circulation of Qi within the body (internal cultivation). Vietnamese wellness arts, exemplified by the methods of physicians like Tue Tinh or Hai Thuong Lan Ong, are the concretization of the Lao-Zhuang ideas of "Nurturing Virtue" and "Cultivating Nature."

The research results confirm that while other thought systems may focus on the afterlife or moral orders, Taoism provided Vietnamese society with a methodological system to prolong life and optimize vital energy in this very world. Practices such as meditation, Qigong, or simply the concepts of eating according to the seasons and nature are practical manifestations of bringing philosophy into the rhythm of life. This explains why Taoism has such enduring and universal vitality, as it addresses the most fundamental human needs: health and inner peace (Sharipov, 2020).

3.4. The Imprint of Taoism in Architectural Space and Aesthetics

Finally, the research indicates that Taoism has left a profound mark on Vietnamese art and landscape architecture through the principle of harmony with nature. Analyzing the structure of traditional communal houses (đình), pagodas, and residential spaces reveals strict adherence to the principle of "not coercing nature." Architectural works are often designed to follow the terrain, utilizing wind direction and sunlight to create a living space where humans feel part of the ecosystem.

In art, Zhuangzi's spirit of "Carefree Wandering" (Tiêu diêu) has created a characteristic aesthetic stream in the poetry and painting of Vietnamese literati. This is the search for beauty in simplicity and rawness (Phác), and

the respect for "Void" (Hư) in the composition of calligraphy and ink wash paintings. Research results show that Taoist aesthetics have helped the Vietnamese form a refined capacity for sensing natural beauty, allowing them to maintain a tranquil soul amidst the fluctuations of external circumstances. These findings once again affirm that Taoism in Vietnam is not just a thought system preserved in archives, but a living entity, constantly transforming to shape the cultural face and social structure of Vietnam from the past to the present. This acculturation is a testament to the power of "Softness", a power that does not impose but permeates deeply and persistently over time. (Nguyen, 2023)

4. Discussion

One of the most controversial points in discussing the influence of Taoism in Vietnam is the compatibility of "Wu-wei" (Non-action) with a society demanding strict rule-of-law governance. Rationalist researchers often ask: How can a philosophy advocating "non-interference" operate in a nation striving to modernize its infrastructure and institutions? However, this research suggests another perspective. Wu-wei in the Vietnamese context should not be understood as the absence of government, but as a strategy of "soft governance." In the digital era, when social structures become too complex to be controlled by blunt administrative commands, the spirit of Wu-wei

helps administrators recognize the importance of establishing "self-operating ecosystems." Vietnam's prioritization of the digital economy and the encouragement of innovative startup models is, in fact, an indirect application of the principle of letting things grow and transform naturally. Discussing this issue, we see that Taoism provides a filter to reduce bureaucracy, aiming toward a "Facilitator State" model, where the government does not replace the market but only creates natural corridors for social resources to find their optimal equilibrium.

The discussion of Taoism in Vietnam cannot be separated from its relationship with Confucianism. Historically, these two systems were often viewed as opposites: one emphasizing "worldliness" (Confucianism) and the other leaning toward "other-worldliness" (Taoism). However, Vietnamese social reality shows a unique "symbiosis." The Vietnamese have developed a flexible psychological mechanism: using Confucianism to build a career and social responsibility, while using Taoism to protect internal freedom and heal spiritual wounds. This symbiosis explains why Vietnamese society possesses high resilience. When Confucian orders are shaken by foreign invasion or political upheaval, the Taoist spirit acts as a "buffer zone," allowing individuals to retreat into their inner world to accumulate energy instead of falling into despair. In contemporary society,

this Confucian-Taoist balance manifests in the way Vietnamese strive for competition in work (Confucian) while actively seeking spiritual values and serenity through nature retreats (Taoist). This is a crucial cultural "shock absorber" that helps Vietnam avoid the severe spiritual crises often seen in nations that industrialized too rapidly.

A key aspect requiring deeper discussion is the potential contribution of Taoism to global issues, particularly climate change. Vietnam is one of the countries most severely affected by sea-level rise. In this context, the "Unity of Heaven and Humanity" is no longer a literary concept but a survival requirement. The paradox of current development is that the more humans try to "conquer" nature with technology, the more violently nature reacts. Taoist philosophy offers an escape by changing the paradigm: from "conquest" to "reliance." Discussion of Taoism's influence in Vietnamese social life should highlight the rise of organic, nature-conforming farming movements in the Mekong Delta or the Central Highlands. Young farmers and intellectuals practicing "Wu-wei" in cultivation, minimizing chemicals, respecting indigenous microbiota, are essentially reenacting Laozi's dream of harmony. This is precisely where ancient Oriental philosophy meets the modern ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards of the world.

However, one must also frankly discuss the downsides or distortions of Taoist values in practice. The spirit of "Wu-wei" is sometimes abused to justify apathy or lack of responsibility toward social injustice. The "follow the flow" lifestyle can turn into resignation or laziness, hindering the nation's drive for progress. Additionally, Folk Taoism in Vietnam currently faces the risk of commercialization and superstition. The abuse of talismans, excessive burning of joss paper, or exorcism practices in the name of Taoism not only distort the elite image of Lao-Zhuang philosophy but also cause a waste of social resources. This discussion affirms that for Taoism to promote its positive values, there must be a process of "refining the clear from the turbid," separating profound philosophical thoughts from the dust of folk superstitions. Education and the dissemination of Taoist studies should be based on critical thinking so that modern humans can receive the "spirit" of the Dao rather than just the "shell" of ritual.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Taoist philosophy is like an underground stream flowing through the heart of Vietnamese society. Although it does not flaunt itself with grand monuments or mandatory canonical systems, it is present in every breath of medicine, every curve of architecture, and especially in the resilient and flexible

identity of the nation. Continuing to research and apply the essence of Taoism will contribute to building a Vietnam that develops not only materially but also remains spiritually grounded and in harmony with the eternal laws of the universe.

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