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History of Rhetoric

Peaceful Protest as Daoist Rhetoric

Rhetoric outside of texts produced by Daoists often reflects one or more principles of the philosophy, even if not intentionally. Robert Eno writes, “There are a number of other texts that share many ideas with [Daoist books], but we are not sure whether we should actually refer to them as Daoist” due to the vague nature of Daoism (2). For example, peaceful protesters have often employed strategies that embody the teachings of Daoist rhetors. Thus, it proves useful to explore the ways in which non-violent protests illustrate the essential paradigm of noncontention in Daoist rhetoric. To address the inquiry, it is necessary to first provide context about Daoist rhetoric and the principle of noncontention. Then, an explanation of noncontention as paradox, another cornerstone of Daoism, will further illuminate its nature. The established understanding of noncontention will inform a discussion of peaceful protests as examples that underline its inherent paradox.

Daoism is a Chinese philosophy in which *Dao*, the source of the universe, is comprised of *Dao* (the Way) and *De* (virtue) (Lu). Laozi is considered to be the founder of Daoism, though his ideas are certainly not the only ones associated with the ideology (i.e. Zhuangzi, another major contributor). For the sake of simplicity and brevity, Laozi’s beliefs will be the primary reference, as recorded in his work the *Dao De Jing*. The

nature of Daoism is difficult to capture completely, since there never existed a formal group by the name of “Daoists” with teachers and students, as was the case with Confucians for example (Eno). According to Laozi, Daoism is for “exploring the intricate relationship between abstract and concrete entities, as well as between the speakable and the unspeakable” (Lu 220). Daoist rhetoric emphasizes the use of fewer words, namelessness, and especially paradoxes. Moreover, speech and writing should conform to nonaction, spontaneity, and noncontention, since speech and argumentation have limitations (Lu). Noncontention is aptly defined as the absence of contention, with contention classified as struggle in opposition or heated disagreement. Another principle which operates in tandem with noncontention is *wu wei*, which entails the use of non-action rhetorically; *wu wei* means “non-striving” and is a release from self-interest which follows the spontaneous, natural rhythms of the universe (Eno). The rhetoric is open to interpretation and involves the purposeful juxtaposition of contrasting ideas (i.e. strict plans vs. spontaneity, action vs. non-action, striving vs. effortless flexibility) to provoke the audience to greater depth of thought. If implemented effectively, *wu wei* awakens a more primitive, almost animal state of existence in alignment with nature (and therefore the *Dao*), that is inherently noncontentious. Non-action is also often a component of civil resistance, as is the utilization of rhetoric instead of violence.

Daoist rhetoric is not aggressive by nature. Unlike a vast number of other philosophical and religious works, it actively seeks to avoid agitation and dissension. Herein lies the principle of noncontention, which informed Laozi’s conviction that people do not require excessive policing to behave appropriately; he argued that a lack

of extreme regulatory action would effectuate societal self-rectification. According to Laozi, people must simply “[e]ngage in non-action (*wuwei*) and nothing will go unruled” (11). He saw extensive laws and punishments as a source of unnecessary friction in a community, since transformation of the self via non-action aligns with the natural way (*dao*) of the universe. In other words, there is an “overarching order to the cosmos, beyond the power of words to describe,” or the *Dao*, which counteracts the fact that human beings are inherently flawed and therefore resistant to this force (Eno 6). When awakened to this concept, people may restore themselves to the balance of natural order, free of contention. However, despite the value placed on the prevention of dispute, many Daoist texts challenge the views of their contemporaries – an apparent illumination of contention points. The primary target is Confucius; while the School of Dao possesses similarities to Confucianism, Daoist rhetoric portrays firm opposition of Confucian teachings. For example, in the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi rejects Confucius and Mozi’s set of new moral and cultural codes¹, supposedly guaranteed to establish social order and behavioral compliance. Laozi believed efforts such as these were actually responsible for moral decline and social disruption (Lu). In a sense, his argument for noncontention proves contentious to the agenda of his peers. Thus, the principle has a paradoxical nature.

Dong Zhongshu states that “When *dao* prevails, the world is devoid of corruption. Corruption rises when *dao* falls” (Liu and You 162), citing its nonaggressive practices as a solution to social problems. Therefore, peaceful protest embodies the Daoist ideal of noncontention and exemplifies the inherent paradox. Perhaps the most prominent example is the work of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi’s efforts to combat discrimination

against Indians in South Africa convinced him that non-violent actions were “the only moral way of conducting and resolving conflict,” naming the practice *satyagraha* (truth-force), in separation from passive resistance (Ash and Roberts 43). Gandhi preached nonviolence and cooperation as opposed to aggression and division. He embodied noncontention and nonaction in his refusals to eat, innocuous resistance to British rule, and his commitment to never directly speak ill of his oppressors. For instance, in 1943 Gandhi fasted for 21 days while imprisoned in response to false allegations of his responsibility for violence in the 1942 Quit India movement. The British knew the danger of letting people see Gandhi suffering in their hands while in prison, so they attempted to release him during the fast, which he refused until his demands were met (Pratt and Vernon). The fast was noncontentious in that it did not attack the opposition directly and embodies *wu wei* because to Gandhi it was the most natural (nonactive) response to his circumstances. It was effective because the British had nothing for which they could reasonably punish him, as well as the fear of uprisings from his supporters. Though his actions were always peaceful and clearly prioritized noncontention, Gandhi’s ideology was inherently a protest that ultimately facilitated India’s independence from Britain; he worked hard to distinguish his strategy from passive resistance, which he believed was a weapon for the weak (Ash and Roberts). Thus, his approach reflects the paradox of Daoist noncontention as being a form of resistance despite a lack of blunt hostility.

Another example is the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, prior to the massacre. Initiated by students, citizens across China sought to end the corruption within the Communist Party in favor of democracy; they advocated for freedoms of the press, speech, and association as well as input on free market reforms. The

demonstrators believed that a nonviolent approach would generate public attention in China and around the world, which would enable the spread of their ideas and mobilization of support (Ash and Roberts). The student protestors employed nonviolent tactics such as debates, song, poetry, speech, and display of banners; aggressive action was not taken until the military opened fire on the civilians. Although the Tiananmen resistance was not informed by Daoism – it was primarily influenced by Gandhi and Martin Luther King – the movement was noncontentious in its circumvention of aggression. In addition, the demonstrators believed that China's regime was capable of reform from within, which echoes Laozi's concept of self-regulation. As with the case of Gandhi, the peaceful actions were still resistance, since they demanded political reforms as well as control of corruption and inflation (Ash and Roberts). Consequently, the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square also reflect the noncontention paradox.

Gandhi's peaceful protests are recognized by the world as successful, given that India is now an independent nation (though it should be noted that Gandhi was ultimately assassinated), while the Tiananmen Square resistance ended in tragedy when government military forces intervened. This occurrence proves perplexing given that similar methods were utilized in each scenario, however the political circumstances greatly contributed to the results of each movement. For instance, the British Empire was in an incredibly unstable position after the Second World War; extreme resource depletion left the government overwhelmed and disorganized, which undermined its ability to exert dominance over the nation of India. Thus, India was essentially ripe for revolution already, though Gandhi's efforts were certainly integral to the movement. For instance, details of Gandhi's fasts were reported in Indian newspapers despite

restrictions imposed by the government, which allowed people across the nation to be engaged with the campaign (Pratt and Vernon). The political climate in 1989 China, on the other hand, was one of pure Communist rule, in which the government controlled all resources in addition to the military. Consequently, the people of China did not possess the same ability to parley with the government as the people of India in the late 1940s. One reason for the effectiveness/success of nonviolence is that governments have been willing to negotiate deals to avoid escalation to violent chaos (Roberts and Ash). With the Chinese government's dominance and military command, citizens were controlled with violence, which escalated the situation on the government's terms. The removal of the threat of chaos eliminated the possibility of civil discourse between the government and the people. Accordingly, the differences in apparent effectiveness between India and Tiananmen Square illustrate Roberts's explanation that,

“the tradition that sees [civil resistance] as progressively substituting the use of force places an excessive burden of expectation on civil resistance, which then fails to live up to the very high standard set for it. Moreover, actual cases of civil resistance show something more complex at work: a rich web of connections between civil resistance and other forms of power” (13).

The presence of external factors and powers greatly influences whether or not peaceful protest will succeed, as defined by expectant standards imposed upon the practice. The predominant perception of nonviolence as morally esteemed and productive certainly echoes the reverent portrayal of noncontention in Daoist rhetoric.

The actions and rhetoric of Gandhi and those involved in the Tiananmen Square protests embody the paradox of Daoist noncontention. While peaceful methods were employed in both contexts, they were also inherently in opposition to the political

circumstances of their times. The contradiction parallels that of Daoist writings, which advocate for an avoidance of dissension despite direct objection to Confucian teachings.

References

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